Square Peg, Round Hole

by sharkie335

Summary

When the Ori overrun Earth, some of the SGC evacuate to Atlantis, where they're just not fitting in. This causes serious issues.

Notes

Betaed by outsideth3box and sam_gamgee. This was written for Nanowrimo in 2006. Somehow I lost it and then forgot about it. I found it again when I was going through my documents folder. No, I don't know how I lost a 56,000 word story either. So this pretty much goes AU mid-season three. I wanted to get it posted now before I got involved in writing this year's Nano!
Chapter 1

Unscheduled Off-world Activation

John slouched down in his chair in Elizabeth's office. "So the latest recruits from the SGC seem to be settling in well. I have to hand it to General O'Neill - they sure seem to know how to pick them when it comes to sending soldiers to another galaxy."

Elizabeth smiled. "Well, I know your interactions with the SGC haven't all been positive, John, but they've been doing this a long time."

"Still, when they make a mistake, it's a biggie. Remember Everett?"

Grimacing a little, Elizabeth's voice gave away none of her distaste. "I'm sure he was the best soldier for the job. Just because we butted heads didn't make him a bad soldier, after all."

Shrugging one shoulder, John said, "If you say -"

Chuck cut in with the announcement, "Unscheduled off-world activation!"

"I don't have any teams out. Were you expecting someone, Elizabeth?"

"No, I wasn't." With a glance, the two of them moved out to the balcony. "Are we getting anything, Sergeant Campbell?"

"Radio transmission only, ma'am. Putting it on speakers now." A thump against the shield made them all wince. "Oh, man - Earth's IDC coming through now!"

"Quickly, lower the shield!" John could hear it now - the sounds of fighting. Explosions echoed through the radio, and he glanced down at the marines in the Gateroom. They all had their guns up and pointed at the Gate. "Earth, this is Atlantis. Come in!"

"Prepare... incoming... coming... now..." The transmission was garbled, barely understandable, but the flood of people coming through the Gate was unmistakable. John was proud of his marines. They held their position even as a tide of humanity swept through the Gate. "Earth, this is Atlantis. Come in!"

"Prepare... incoming... coming... now..." The transmission was garbled, barely understandable, but the flood of people coming through the Gate was unmistakable. John was proud of his marines. They held their position even as a tide of humanity swept through the Gate. A glance at them showed wounded being supported by others. Most were crying and screaming.

"Carson, to the control room now. Bring as many of your medical team as you can," Elizabeth sounded as shaken as he felt, but the soft command drew him back to what he needed to be doing.

Leaning over Chuck, he triggered the PA system. "All marines to the control room. I repeat, all marines to the control room. This is not a drill. Non-military personnel, report to your drill stations and wait for further instructions." Elizabeth glanced over with an expression of fear on her face, and John didn't even want to think what might have put it there.

"Holy mother of God," Carson arrived and took in the scene below him. People were still coming through the Gate in ones and twos. Several people had been carried in on stretchers, and the wounded probably outnumbered the whole. Without waiting for further instructions from John or Elizabeth, Carson went down the stairs, and John was happy to see that two of the arriving marines immediately attached themselves to him as a guard.

He really wasn't thinking about what all this might mean. It was too terrifying to contemplate.
"What the hell?" And there was Rodney, of course. Teyla and Ronon flanked him, and all three were armed.

"Rodney, get out of here. This isn't your duty station."

"No, but it's where you are," Rodney said mulishly. "Haven't we been through this, oh, a few dozen times? Team sticks together!"

"It's not safe here. We don't know what's happening -" he started, hotly. He wouldn't think too carefully about why he was so adamant about getting Rodney out of the line of fire. He just was.

"I'd say there was an attack somewhere and we're looking at refugees," Rodney said. "And from the uniforms, they're SGC personnel, which means they're from Earth, as they're the only place that can dial Atlantis."

He went suddenly pale as his own words sunk in. "Shit, there's been an attack at home, hasn't there? And they evacuated here? Isn't that leaping the frying pan and right into the fire?"

Teyla looked puzzled, and Ronon amused at Rodney, but when they turned to look at John, they both were serious. "Is he right? Has your planet been attacked?" Teyla asked.

"I don't know," John said, grimly. "But I'm going to find out." He started down the stairs, flanked by his team, just as the wormhole cut out.

"Hold on," Rodney said, turning and heading back to the control platform. He shoved Chuck bodily out of the way and checked something on one of the ubiquitous laptops that they used to translate Ancient to English. "The Gate was only open twenty-seven minutes. That's not right. We should have gotten at least eleven more minutes before it collapsed."

"Dial them back," John demanded tersely.

"Don't you think that we should find out what the hell is going on, first, Colonel?" Rodney sounded sure of himself as always, but his eyes gave him away. He was staring at the milling crowd in front of the Gate.

With a grimace, John decided that he was probably right. They could be dialing right into a combat situation, and they were already fighting two wars. They didn't have the resources to fight three.

But his gut was burning. He was leaving people to die, he just knew it. He couldn't think of any reason for Earth to have evacuated to Atlantis short of complete and utter disaster. Elizabeth shot him a sympathetic glance, as if she knew what he was thinking, but she didn't say anything, thank God. He didn't think that he could have borne it if she had.

Taking his silence as assent, Rodney got up from his chair and paused at the head of the stairs. Ronon had taken up position right behind him, and John spared a thought for how grateful he was that Ronon had joined their team. He didn't need to be told what to do, he just did it. And as Rodney was the most vulnerable member of the team, Ronon frequently took it upon himself to watch his back.

Suddenly, Rodney was flying down the stairs. It was so sudden that it took even Ronon a moment to react, then he was right behind Rodney as he plunged into the teeming mass of people. "Rodney, wait!" Teyla called, but he just turned a little and waved a hand at her before disappearing. John wanted to follow, desperately, but he knew he couldn't. Instead, he tracked Rodney by Ronon, who stood head and shoulders above everyone else.
What Just Happened?

By the time Rodney reappeared, John was livid. Why couldn't Rodney just do as he was told, for once? The anger drained away, though, when he reappeared being trailed by a shorter man, one that John recognized from his limited time at the SGC. "Doctor Lee?" he said, trying to make his voice as gentle as he could.

Doctor Lee was holding a folded cloth against a bleeding wound on his forehead, and he looked dirty and shaken. "Should you not be on your way to the infirmary?" Teyla asked, but Doctor Lee shook his head.

"There are much worse people down there, believe me," he said, pressing harder on the cloth. "And things at home are even worse."

"About that," Rodney said, obviously trying to keep his voice calm and gentle. He wasn't succeeding very well, given the way that Doctor Lee jumped and stared at him. "What the hell happened, Bill? Last we heard, the Supergate was closed. Who did this?"

"They must have reopened it," Doctor Lee said softly, eyes closing in something that looked a lot like grief.

"What? How?" Rodney demanded, but Teyla silenced him with a hand on his arm. "Doctor Lee? Any information you could give us would be most appreciated, as we try to decide what to do."

Elizabeth bracketed him on the other side, lending him obviously needed support. Doctor Lee didn't even seem to recognize her.

Doctor Lee took a moment to catch his breath. This time when his eyes opened, there was anger there that seemed out of place on the affable face. "It was the Ori. We knew they'd gotten the Supergate open, but before we could do anything about it, they were there, big as life and twice as ugly. They attacked Earth outright. SG-1 assembled - they were going to try and take out the lead ship, but we haven't heard from them in at least twenty-four hours."

Grief twisted the man's features, and John spared a thought to the fact that he knew that Doctor Lee frequently worked with Colonel Carter. It was possible they were still alive, but after twenty-four hours, he didn't give a lot for their chances either. At any rate, it sounded like they'd failed in their primary mission, whether they were still alive or not.

Lee calmed again. "General Landry ordered that we evacuate to the Alpha site."

"Um, Bill, don't know if you noticed, but this is Atlantis, not Earth's Alpha site. It's not like that's a mistake that is easily made - you would have had to wire the ZPM into place to get here." Rodney's hands were still, hanging stiffly at his side, and John spared a thought for what Rodney must be feeling right now - he had family that he cared about still on Earth.

"We tried! Two teams gated to the Alpha site but the Ori had already been there. There was nothing left - it was all gone!" Doctor Lee's face twisted, and John expected tears, but other than a half muffled sob, Lee had gone silent.

Uncomfortable, John and Ronon looked at each other. This was a disaster that no one could have predicted. This... this was not good.

When he began to speak again, Doctor Lee's voice was soft. "The Mountain was under direct attack
- the Ori were trying to get to the Gate, you see. Landry was down - wounded or dead, I don't know - and so one of the Gate team leaders, I'm not sure who, ordered us to get here. Me and a couple of other scientists ran to grab the ZPM, and we dropped it into place just as the Ori made it through the top of the Mountain. We grabbed what we could and ran through as soon as the Gate opened, and here we are."

The six of them were silent for a long moment, Rodney and John staring at each other. John had the feeling that Rodney could read his mind, knew exactly what he was thinking. Moreover, he didn't like it one bit, but John was right, dammit.

Turning away, John looked over the chaos below him in the Gateroom. He had to do something; he couldn't just stand by and watch. "Rodney, you stay here with Teyla and Elizabeth. Give her any help she needs. Ronon, you're with me."

Rodney grabbed him by the arm. "You're not going without us, Colonel. End of discussion."

John would have argued, but there wasn't time. "Fine, you stay with the puddlejumper." Rodney paused for a second, then gave a short, sharp nod.

Then they were racing for the jumper bay, even as John radioed Elizabeth to explain their plan. They knew they couldn't stop the Ori, but maybe they could save a few more people. They had to at least try. Elizabeth didn't sound happy about it, but she agreed. He could hear over the radio as Elizabeth ordered the marines to clear the area in front of the Gate, so that it could open safely.

Even as the jumper dropped into the Gateroom, Rodney was dialing. The Gate connected, and Rodney said, "Gate to the Midway Station is open. Go."

John grimaced. Operation They're All Going to Die was a go, then. The trip to the Midway Station took no time as usual, and John paused there, radioing back to Atlantis that they were all right. "Be careful, John. We can't afford to lose you, too," Elizabeth said. "Any of you."

Rodney and John exchanged a glance, then turned to face out the front shield. Rodney dialed Earth, connecting. "We can't move until we get confirmation that their shield is down, Colonel."

"I know, Rodney!" Even knowing didn't make it any easier, though, when the Gate connected and they could hear the sounds of fighting. No matter what John tried, though, he couldn't seem to raise anyone on the radio, and they didn't dare try to go through. The screams got louder and more disturbing, as if they were getting closer to the Gate, and then there were a series of explosions, one right after another. Suddenly, the Gate went dark. "Get them back," he demanded, but Rodney's hands were already busy on the controls.

Over and over he dialed, only to have the Gate die each time. Behind him, he could hear Teyla and Ronon shift, and a glance over his shoulder showed them looking uneasily at each other. Finally, Rodney lifted his hands off the control. "There's no answer, Colonel," he said, softly.

"Find a way, McKay," he insisted, knowing that he was being unreasonable, but not caring. There was no way that they were going to give up that easily.

"There is no way," Rodney said, gesturing at the quiescent Gate in front of them. "If the Earth Gate won't answer, the Earth Gate won't answer. I can't make it answer with my brain, no matter how smart I am."

John stared at him, silently willing him not to be saying what he thought Rodney was saying. Rodney didn't know to just shut up, though. "We have to face facts. One way or another, the Ori
have found a way to keep us away from Earth."

Unbidden, John remembered the conversation that he'd had with Rodney after a bad mission a few months earlier. *You should hope that a Gate never explodes. If it does, it's likely to take out the whole planet it's on.*

John had been unbelieving at the time. Now he found himself praying that he was wrong. "Please tell me that there's some other way for the Ori to have stopped the Gate from receiving other than blowing it up."

Rodney looked puzzled for a moment, then absolutely sick when he saw where John was going. Thankfully, he had an answer. "They could have just flipped it over. If the opening is up against a flat surface with no room to expand, it won't engage. It seems to be some sort of failsafe to keep you from going through a Gate and straight into a brick wall."

Nodding, John turned his attention back to the puddlejumper. He wasn't sure that he believed that the Ori wouldn't want to destroy Earth, but Rodney had given him a plausible alternative, and he was going to run with it.

He pointed at the controls. "Take us home, Rodney."

Rodney started to press controls, then paused. "You know we have to destroy the Midway Station, don't you?"

He'd been trying not to think about it, but Rodney was right, damn him. They couldn't afford to leave the Midway Station up and running - not if the only place that Earth humans were still free was in the Pegasus galaxy. "Don't worry about it. I've got it covered."

He stared at the controls so that he could avoid the look on Rodney's face, even though getting from the Midway Station to Atlantis didn't require anything in the way of steering. As soon as they were back in the Gateroom and the Gate had closed behind them, he ordered Rodney to dial the Midway Station back. He paused when the Gate formed and stabilized. If he did this, he was possibly cutting off the last bit of possibility of them getting back in contact with Earth.

But there really was no choice. Closing his eyes, he launched two drones. As soon as they were through the Gate, he said, "Close the Gate, now," to Rodney, trying hard to not sound as flat and dead as he felt.

"Yes, yes, I'm not a moron," Rodney said, hands busy on the controls. They all waited for a minute after Rodney closed the Gate, and then he tried to reopen it. And tried. And tried. "It worked," Rodney said, sounding very much like he was choking back tears. John didn't say anything at all. Instead, he directed the jumper back to its port in the bay. He opened the back door, and got up. Standing by the cargo door, he stared at Rodney, who was staring through the windshield. Swallowing down words that wouldn't mean much, anyway, he went back to the control room.

**Debriefings**

The scene in the control room was chaos. Carson's team had clearly transported the worst of the wounded down to the infirmary, but there were still what felt like hundreds of people milling around, many of them with minor wounds. There was a triage team that were cleaning them up and applying real bandages, but John still felt like he'd walked into the middle of a war zone.

And the only way out was through.
Calling together several of the marines who were standing guard, he set the task of sorting out the
refugees - wounded from whole, military from scientist. While they got started on that, he called
down to the infirmary to get a report.

"Oh, aye, they're a sorry lot," Carson said. "I've got two in surgery right now for what look like
gunshot wounds, but everyone else should be okay in a week or two. The biggest issue we're going
to have is that I've used up a lot of medical supplies and," there was a pause, like Carson was trying
to figure out how to ask this. "I don't suppose I should count on the Daedalus resupplying us any
time soon?

"No, I'm afraid not," John said softly, knowing how much Carson missed his mother and siblings.

There was silence on the other end of the radio, broken only by a soft gasp that could have been a
sob. Then Carson said, "I need to see to my patients, Colonel. Beckett out."

John stood there for a long time, staring into space. He got so lost in his thoughts that when he was
touched on the shoulder, he jumped, going for his sidearm. He only stopped when he saw that it was
Elizabeth. He grinned sheepishly at her. "Sorry. I'm a little jumpy."

"I can't blame you for that." She turned so that both of them were looking down over the Gateroom.
"This is bad, isn't it, John?"

"Yeah. Rodney tell you what we found?"

"He said you couldn't get through to Earth. That he thinks the Gate has been disabled somehow so
that we can't dial through."

John thought to himself that he was grateful that Rodney hadn't told Elizabeth the worst-case
scenario that he'd thought of. Bad enough that the two of them had thought it - no need to share it
with others. "We destroyed the Midway Station," he said instead.

"I know," she said softly. "It was the right thing to do."

He forced himself to turn and face her. "Even though I managed to completely cut us off from any
hope of coming to Earth's aid?"

"What aid could we possibly be? Not counting the people who arrived today, there's only three
hundred of us - and two-thirds of those are scientists."

John swallowed hard. Three hundred. No reinforcements. No supplies. No food. No bullets. They
were so screwed.

Elizabeth sighed. "We'll figure it out, John. Now, it looks like your men have the new people sorted,
so maybe we should go find out if we can discover anything else?"

Together, they made their way down the stairs, splitting to go to the two separate groups. Elizabeth
made a beeline for the group of scientists, many of whom were openly crying. There were fewer
wounded among their number, and John spared a thought that someone had done their job right.

Then he turned to face the military personnel. There seemed to be a pretty even mix of Air Force and
Marines, with more officers than enlisted. That fit in pretty well with what he knew of the SGC.
Each and every face that looked back at him seemed to be a hundred years old. There were no tears,
and significantly more injuries than among the civilians. "So, what happened? Who wants to start?"
When Ori Attack

The soldiers looked at each other, cautiously, then one stepped forward. "Captain?" John said encouragingly.

"Um, Garcia, sir. Michael Garcia."

"Okay, Captain Garcia. So what happened? We already know that the Ori attacked, but how did it get this bad?"

"We're not sure, sir. The Ori, they did something that messed up communications pretty bad. Phones were out, computers too. Made coordinating any sort of response almost impossible."

"Sounds like an EMP." At the blank look on Garcia's face, John sighed. Sometimes he forgot how much time he spent with the scientists. "Don't worry about it. Any idea of the level of damage that had been done?"

Captain Garcia shook his head, but a voice spoke up from the back. "I heard General Landry say that Washington, DC had been destroyed."

And another voice, "I heard the same for Moscow and Tokyo."

A major shoved her way to the front of the group. "Major Michelle Boucher, sir. The Daedalus was destroyed - I heard General O'Neill talking to Daniel Jackson. Blown right out of the sky."

Well, crap. There went any hope that maybe they'd been between galaxies and had escaped the Ori. "How certain are you?"

"Very, sir."

John sighed. He didn't think it was possible, but apparently his day could get worse. "Okay, how many of you were on Gate teams?"

About half the hands went up, which was better than John had dared hope for, after the day he'd had. At least they weren't all greenhorns, thank God. Of course, he expected that there were going to be some rank issues, as he could spot a few other lieutenant colonels, and he suspected that they'd held their rank longer than he'd had his. Still, as far as he could tell, no one actively outranked him, so that was good.

A glance over at Rodney and Elizabeth showed that they'd at least managed to calm down the crying scientists. He had to remember to tease Rodney about it later - that he'd actually had to show his sensitive side. He told the soldiers to grab a seat, and went to talk to Lorne.

"So how many total came through?"

"One hundred and twelve, sir," Lorne said, and right there was why John loved having Lorne as his XO. Lorne always had the information that he needed.

"A third of our population?" he boggled. He'd known it had seemed like a lot, but still, a hundred and twelve people. Out of six billion. Suddenly, John was very tired. All he wanted to do was go to his room and hide, let someone else deal with this. Unfortunately, there was no one else. He sighed. "Okay, sort out the walking wounded from the uninjured. Get some marines to escort the rest of the wounded down to the infirmary, and find places to sleep for the rest."

As Lorne moved off to start giving orders, he thought. He didn't even think they had enough bedding
for everyone, but there was no way that he was going to ask people to double up. Trying to be
discrete, he moved over to Elizabeth's side. "We need to find some place for these folks to crash.
They all look exhausted," and they did. Most of them looked as if they hadn't slept in days. "We've
got the space, thankfully, but do we have enough supplies?"

Elizabeth looked startled for a moment, then narrowed her eyes at him. "Teyla?" she called.

"Yes, Elizabeth?" Teyla had been working with Rodney to calm several of the most upset scientists,
but she broke off immediately at Elizabeth's call.

"Do you think the Athosians can provide blankets and such until we can figure something out?"

Teyla's face became distant, as if she was calculating. "I... believe so, Elizabeth. They are currently
in their summer season right now, so they should have a temporary surplus. Shall I go?"

John cut in. "Yes, please, Teyla. Take Ronon and, hmm, Stackhouse, I think. Tell him I said to take
a jumper. Whatever they can lend us would be good, and we'll start seeing about what we can do for
trade to pay them back." John wasn't going to let them take advantage of the Athosians again, no
matter what.

As if she could read John's mind, Teyla smiled. "It is fine, John. Be easy." Without waiting for a
response, she moved off, obviously in search of Stackhouse.

He watched her move away, and then turned his attention back to Elizabeth. "We need Rodney," he
said, and she nodded.

"He's busy right now. Go, do what needs to be done, and then we'll meet in two hours," she said.
"It'll take that long to figure out some basic plans."

We've Lost Everyone, Haven't We?

Rodney stood for a long minute, leaning his head against the wall at his back. The last of the civilians
had been led away by military escort to find a place to bed down, and he was completely exhausted.
He'd not had to deal with so many hysterical people, well, ever.

It made him inexplicably proud of his people all over again. Even when they thought that they were
going to have to destroy Atlantis, his science team hadn't broken down. They'd simply done what
needed to be done, and that was the end of it.

Then again, they weren't dealing with the possible loss of their entire home world, and dear God, let
no one else think of that possibility or they might just have to deal with more than mild hysteria.

Pushing off from the wall, he went in search of the one person who might be able to help him deal
with it, so that he could continue to appear strong for the others. A quick glance around the control
room showed no sign of the Colonel. He could radio, he supposed, but he didn't really want
everyone to know that he was looking for Sheppard for some reason.

He wasn't in the jumper bay or the mess, not that he really expected him in either place. He could
possibly be in his quarters, but somehow Rodney didn't think that was likely, even though it was late.

That left Sheppard's office, and Rodney wasn't even sure where it was, though he had a general idea.
Getting off the transporter showed only one room nearby that was lit up, though, and Rodney went
there, figuring that if it wasn't Sheppard, then it was probably Lorne, and he'd be able to tell Rodney
where to look.

Peeking through the door, he saw Sheppard sitting behind a desk, Lorne leaning against it. They seemed to be deep in conversation, and Rodney thought about leaving and coming back later, but just the thought of the walk to his quarters exhausted him. Instead, he knocked on the doorframe. Sheppard and Lorne looked up, and then Sheppard said something quietly to Lorne, who flashed Rodney a grin and then left the room.

"Come on in, Rodney. Everyone get all tucked in?"

"Yeah. No more tears for now, either. Thanks for sending Teyla to get blankets and stuff - they went a long way in getting everyone settled." Rodney sat in the chair in front of Sheppard's desk, slumped in exhaustion. It had already been a long day in the lab before all hell broke loose, and he suspected that as soon as he left John's office, he'd be needed again.

Sheppard came around the desk and leaned against the front edge, his arms crossed in front of him. "You hanging in there?"

Rodney shook his head. "It's a bit overwhelming, you know. The thought that even if they aren't dead, it's unlikely that we'll ever see Earth again, you know?" Rodney laughed, hating the way that it sounded. There was no humor in it, just exhaustion and desperation. "For the first time in five years, I'm speaking to Jeannie again, and now it looks like I may never see her again."

Sheppard's face twisted, and Rodney wondered why he'd come here for comfort. He knew that Sheppard wasn't the most emotionally open person on the station. In fact, just about, oh, everyone was better at emotional crap than him. But the fact remained that heart sore and hurting, the first person that Rodney had turned to was still Sheppard.

"When we came here, we didn't expect to be able to go home again," Sheppard said slowly. He couldn't seem to meet Rodney's eyes. "Or at least, I didn't. I thought this was a one-way mission, a death sentence, except long and drawn out."

"But we always knew that there was the possibility of going home. Earth was still there, just unreachable. We could go home if we just found a ZPM. Now, we can't get home even with the damn thing. We're knocking and no one is answering the door."

Rodney's eyes itched, but he refused to rub them, even as his vision blurred. He was not going to cry. He was not. Sheppard hadn't cried. Sheppard wouldn't cry if he were bleeding to death. If Sheppard could do it, so can Rodney.

Oh, Jeannie.

"I know what you mean," Sheppard said, the words sounding like they've been pulled out of him with a rusty hook. "I'm sorry, you know. I tried to get back there. You know I did."

"I know," Rodney said. "I was there. Still, it doesn't make it any easier, does it? Knowing that we've lost everyone?"

Sheppard's face was a study in fascination as he stared at Rodney's foot. He was silent for so long that Rodney started to wonder what he said wrong. Finally, Sheppard raised his head. He still wasn't meeting Rodney's eyes, instead looking at some point behind Rodney, but it was better than the staring thing he was doing before. Rodney opened his mouth to say something, anything, to break the rising tension, but Sheppard held up a hand.

"I, uh, I didn't lose everyone."
What? "What?" Now Rodney was just confused.

Sheppard bit his lip, then, his body tensing as if he was forcing the words out, he said, "I didn't lose everyone. I still have you... and Teyla and Ronon and Elizabeth, of course. You guys are my family."

Rodney was forced to blink rapidly at that. He knew that he thought of his team as family, but he hadn't known that John thought the same way. Before he'd fully recovered from that surprise, Sheppard threw him another, leaning forward and giving him a peck on the lips. The kiss was over so fast that Rodney thought at first that he'd imagined it, but when he brought his fingers up to his lips, he saw the panic in Sheppard's eyes, and knew that it had really happened.

He couldn't help thinking finally, but before he could move to return the kiss, perhaps deepen it this time, Sheppard had already slid past him and was on his way out the door. "I, um, I have to go," Sheppard said. "We're supposed to meet in Elizabeth's office in an hour. Meet you then?"

Sheppard didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he disappeared out the door. By the time Rodney had pried himself out of his chair and got to the hallway, Sheppard was already gone.

Now What?

The meeting in Elizabeth's office was a grim one. It wasn't crowded, like the science team meetings, nor was it loud, like the department head meetings. In fact, it looked like it wasn't just John having problems meeting peoples' eyes. Even Elizabeth couldn't do it.

John sank into his customary seat, taking advantage of Lorne's presence to put him between Rodney and himself. He excused it to himself as necessary. He needed to be able to consult with Lorne during the meeting, after all. He had to force himself to ignore the look of pain that crossed Rodney's face, though.

Elizabeth called the meeting to order while staring at the wall. Uncharacteristically, even Rodney shut up immediately. That made a knot twist in John's gut. "So, what have we got, people?"

She looked right at John, who looked to Lorne. "One hundred and twelve... refugees came through the Gate tonight. Sixty-eight of them were scientists, and forty-four were military personnel. They brought little with them, and approximately eighty of them were wounded in some way."

Carson spoke up then. "Of that eighty, about thirty-five were wounded severely enough to be taken immediately to the infirmary. Twenty-seven of those are still there, receiving a variety of treatments." Turning to look directly at Elizabeth, he continued, "We're strained to bursting, Elizabeth, and the staff is overwhelmed. We haven't had this many injured personnel before, and we don't have beds for them, quite simply."

Rodney's voice was flat when he said to John, "Any of your military personnel have medic training that we could press into service in the infirmary?"

Even before John turned his eyes to Lorne, Lorne was answering. "About ten or an even dozen. I'll get Doctor Beckett a full roster immediately. And even those marines with no training can serve as extra hands."

"I'm reluctant to assign them to the infirmary until we know we don't need them somewhere else," John said. "Ask those who have training to report to Carson after a full night's sleep."

Turning to Carson, he said, "You can do without them till morning, right?"
"Oh, aye. Frankly, just knowing that I'll have someone to use to relieve the nurses will be a great help."

Elizabeth looked marginally more relaxed, but it didn't last. "Next up are supplies. The Daedalus was just here, so we aren't short of supplies, yet, but we will be sooner rather than later. We've just added a third of our population, and I don't know how long we can stretch our food and medical supplies.

Terry Goode, their supply sergeant spoke up. "It's not just food and medical supplies, ma'am. It's everything - clothing, blankets, electronic equipment, shoes. Some of those things just won't stretch. I'm completely out of sheets and blankets, for instance." Here he turned to Teyla and showed some of that old southern charm. "I'll thank you, ma'am, for the Athosian contribution. I'll keep a bunch of people from a cold night, that's for sure."

She smiled and nodded gravely at him. "The Athosians are always happy to help the Atlanteans," she said.

John sighed. "Okay, we're back to the status we were at when we first got here, then. We don't have much choice, do we? We're going to have to form more Gate teams, send them out looking for allies."

"Which increases the possibility of us running into the Wraith," Rodney said. When John started to argue with him, though, Rodney shook his head. "No, no, you're right, we don't have a choice."

Still looking right at Rodney, John said, "I don't think we should send out the new people without help. We should probably break up some of our teams, send at least one experienced teammate with each group. Also, maybe the Athosians would like to help?"

At the suggestion of breaking up the teams, Rodney had looked shocked, then angry. Now he just looked... blank. Oh, that wasn't good - he'd completely misunderstood John. SGA-1 wasn't going to be broken up, not if John had anything to say about it.

Teyla said, "Some of the younger Athosians, certainly. I shall send word to Halling."

Now John forced his eyes away from Rodney. "Thank you, Teyla. We're going to owe you guys so big when things calm down."

Rodney cleared his throat and turned his attention to Elizabeth. "Most of the scientists who came through weren't on Gate teams, but there may be a few that'll be useful. Radek and I will start evaluating them in the morning." Radek nodded, still looking a little shell-shocked.

Elizabeth folded her hands in front of her. "I don't have to tell any of you that I've frequently prepared for worst case scenarios. But I think it's fair to say that I never expected something of this magnitude. I have every faith in all of you, and that we can get through this."

Taking that for the dismissal that it was, John stood. While Rodney was still fussing with his computer, he slipped out of the door and started to make his way to his room. He had to get some sleep, or he was going to be completely useless.

**First Freak Out**

The next few days were unbearably tense. Atlantis had never had to cope with an influx of people this great before, and it showed. Already, tava beans had made reappearance in the mess hall. John
had looked forward to never eating them again, and was just as disappointed as the rest of the First Wave to see them again.

Everywhere he turned, the refugee scientists were huddled into small little groups, looking positively terrified. He couldn't really blame them, he supposed, since most of them had never been off Earth before, and here they were, in a whole other galaxy. He wished he could ask Rodney how they were settling in, but he hadn't seen Rodney but a few minutes since that meeting in Elizabeth's office, and even then he was surrounded by a group of panicking scientists.

He hadn't even been called for light switch duty in days. He'd never admit it, but he actually was starting to miss it.

The new military personnel seemed to be having just as much trouble settling in as the civilians. They traveled in a pack, arriving in the mess together, going on runs together, in short they only seemed to be sleeping separately, and he wasn't so sure about that.

He finished his cup of coffee and studied the soldiers sitting in a tight huddle by the door. He knew that he was going to have to do something to break that up, and sooner rather than later, but right now he couldn't really blame them for seeking out comfort however they could. He just wished that he could.

"Colonel Sheppard to the control room!" came the panicked voice over the PA system.

Well, shit.

Setting down his empty mug, he headed off at a trot. Vaguely, he could hear the sounds of several of his marines falling in behind him. He didn't like this new habit of theirs of following him around like he was in danger in his own city, but like the other problems he could start see starting to form, he ignored it in favor of the problem right in front of him.

He skidded to a halt in the control room next to Elizabeth, who had her own marines, he was amused to note. She pointed him down at the space in front of the Gate.

One of the new people was down there, waving a P90 around. More frighteningly, she wasn't yelling, just pointing the gun at the two marines stationed in the Gateroom every time they took a step towards her.

He nodded at Elizabeth and whispered, "What does she want?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth answered. "She refused to tell us - said she'd only talk to you."

"Ah," John said. Taking four steps, he showed himself at the head of the stairs before the marines with him could stop him. "I'm here, Lieutenant. Now, let's put down the gun and talk about this, okay?"

He found himself flattened to the steps by one of the marines as a single gunshot was fired. The other marines had their guns up and pointed at her, but she didn't seem to see them. Pushing Simmons off of him, he rolled to a sitting position. "Lieutenant? I wouldn't suggest doing that again. Now, what seems to be the problem?"

Now that he looked more closely at her, he saw that she was crying hysterically, her face red and blotchy, and her eyes practically swollen shut. He didn't think she'd be able to hit the broad side of a barn right now, so he stood up. Peering at her uniform, he could just make out her name. "Lieutenant Salterfield, you need to stand down, and then we can talk about this, do you hear me?"
"You have to dial the Gate! I need to get back there!"

"Back where, Lieutenant?"

"Back to Earth!" She waved the gun again, and John was relieved to see that he wasn't the only one who ducked. "I left them! I shouldn't have left them behind. I need to get back."

He took two steps down the stairs. "Left who? We all lost people on Earth, Lieutenant, but there isn't any going back, at least for now."

"The rest of my team. I need to get to the rest of my team." But she was lowering the gun, and that was all that John really cared about. And besides, he could understand her reaction now. He'd been separated from his team, and the wrenching heartache never changed.

He risked coming further down the stairs, stopping so that he was only about ten feet away. "Lieutenant, you need to set down the gun. If I could get you home, I'd dial the Gate myself and take you, but we can't. I'm sorry."

"You're lying," she said suddenly, raising the gun and aiming straight at him. "Dial the Gate or I'll kill him," she said to the technician on duty.

John turned to look at him, and nodded. The poor technician, who was probably regretting trading shifts with Chuck, started to dial, and one by one, the chevrons lit up. When they got to the eighth, though, the whole thing died. "See, I told you that we can't," he began, reasonably.

"You're still lying, and you're leaving them to die," she screamed, her finger tightening on the trigger. He saw it and knew that he wasn't going to have time to duck. At this distance, she probably couldn't miss, even if she could barely see him.

Just then, light flashed red, and she collapsed, gun falling at her side. John finally dared a look to the side, where Ronon stood, gun still in his hand. "Tell me that was set to stun, Dex."

"It was set to stun, Sheppard," Ronon said, giving a small smile as if that was a silly question. Above him, he could hear Elizabeth calling for Carson and Heightmeyer, and below him, one of the marines had cautiously stepped closer to Salterfield, kicking her gun away and flipping her over on her stomach so that he could secure her hands behind her. He wished it wasn't necessary, but it really was.

A medical team came running into the Gateroom, and John stepped back to give them room to work. In a matter of moments, she was sedated, and being wheeled out of the room, but Carson paused to look meaningfully at John. John knew the meaning of that look - it was the "We can expect more of this, lad" look.

He sat down on the stairs, staring at the spot where Salterman had collapsed. Teyla came to sit next to him, and Ronon and Rodney stood in front of him, blocking his view. Looking up at Ronon, he said, "When did you get here?"

"About two minutes ago. Thought I'd give you the chance to talk her down first."

John rubbed a hand over his face, exhausted. "Good timing. That was closer than I'd like to think."

Elizabeth crouched down next to him on the other side. "Heightmayer's here, John. We should hear what she has to say."

Wearily, John nodded. He took Rodney's hand when it was offered to pull him to his feet. He
wanted nothing more than to move forward that foot separating them and lean into Rodney's sturdy body for a moment, but he couldn't. Instead, he pulled himself straight and dropped Rodney's hand, following Elizabeth up the stairs.

It was a smaller group in the conference room this time, but no less tense. "It's going to happen again," Heightmayer said. "I haven't had a chance to talk to the Lieutenant, obviously, but as you know, Gate teams are by necessity close. In some cases they're closer than family, and from what we've been able to ascertain, there wasn't a single team that made it through the Gate unscathed."

"Plus, they've all lost family, friends, their whole planet. And I shouldn't have to tell you that they aren't integrating well with the people who were already here. Especially the military personnel - they're sequestering themselves from the personnel who were already here, and that's leaving them no pressure valve. I expect them to explode again."

"What can we do to prevent it?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm not sure we can," Heightmayer answered, looking regretful. "We can reduce the risk, but we can't eliminate it entirely. Unfortunately, trying to break up the relationships that are forming among the... newcomers may do more damage than good. They're already coming to rely on each other, and treating the First Wave people as outsiders."

"It's a problem in the science section, as well," Rodney said. "There are rumblings that they shouldn't listen to us because our first loyalty was clearly not to Earth. How did one put it? Oh, yes, 'If you felt anything for Earth, you'd be trying to rescue them.' Forget that there are only about a hundred and fifty soldiers here, and all the world's armies couldn't save them."

The expression on Rodney's face was familiar - his disgust for morons coming through loud and clear. Even with the seriousness of the situation, John couldn't help smiling a little at it. Some things never changed.

Ronon spoke up for the first time. "If we don't break it up, we might be facing a coup. If they are seeing you as not supporting Earth, then they might not have any problem with overthrowing you."

John wanted to argue, but what Ronon was saying made far too much sense. Especially given the way that he'd seen the military personnel whispering together. It made the back of his neck itch, and he'd learned through time and blood to pay attention to that.

"Okay, so, I think we need to try to pair up the new guys with some of the First Wave people. Let them see that we're the good guys, here, and that there are problems that we're facing in this galaxy. I also think that we should insist that they each meet with you," John said to Heightmayer. "I know you can't tell us individual diagnoses, but you should be able to get a feeling if we're going to be facing a rebellion from within our own ranks."

Now he looked at Rodney. "I hate to say this, but each team with a new military leader? Needs one of your scientists, Rodney. SGC inculcates an overwhelming feeling of responsibility towards the scientists, and making them one of our guys might just give them that kick in the pants to see that there isn't an 'us or them' but just one big 'us', you know?"

Rodney was nodding reluctantly. He clearly didn't want to do it, but he didn't have much of a choice.

Heightmayer glanced at her watch. "I need to get to the infirmary," she said. "The Lieutenant should be waking up shortly and I should be there. I assume I can assure her that she's not going to be thrown in the brig," she said to John, giving him an encouraging smile.
"You assume right," he said.

"I also assume that I'm going to see you in the next day or two," she said. "You know the rules - if you've been shot at, it's one mandatory session with me."

Grimacing in distaste, John agreed to that as well. As busy as Heightmayer was going to be busy the next few days, maybe he could avoid her until she forgot.

Monkeys might fly out of his butt, too.

"Okay, so that's what we'll do," Elizabeth said, as they stood.

**Alone Again**

Elizabeth tried to stop Rodney before he could get out of the room, but Rodney said, "Not right now, Elizabeth," and managed to slide out right behind Sheppard. Taking his arm in a tight grip, he tugged Sheppard towards the transporter. He knew that Sheppard could pull away with little or no effort, but he didn't, clearly not wanting to make a scene.

Directing the transporter to a spot way out on the east pier, he pulled Sheppard out of the transporter and out on to one of the balconies. The view from here was amazing, and Rodney always loved it. He often came here just to think, and had never been interrupted, so it was as safe as any public place in Atlantis. And he didn't want to have this conversation in a private room.

Sheppard wouldn't look at him, like he knew what Rodney was thinking. Oh, well, they were going to talk about this whether or not Sheppard liked it. "Why did you kiss me?" he cut right to the chase.

"Um," Sheppard said, cleverly.

"You know, I've had many people try to shut me up. They've tried words. They've tried hitting me. But this is the first time someone has been so desperate to shut me up that they've kissed me!"

"Um," Sheppard repeated.

"But what I really want to know is if you meant it, because if you did, then you didn't give me enough time to respond, dammit."

"Um," Sheppard said, this time turning to look out over the water.

Frustrated by the continued lack of response, Rodney grabbed Sheppard by one shoulder and spun him so he was forced to look Rodney in the face. "'Um' - is that all you have to say?" he demanded.

"Um," Sheppard said one more time. Finally, though, he said something else. "It worked, didn't it? Distracted you from what you were so upset over, gave you something else to think about."

"You didn't answer my other question, Colonel. Did you mean it?"

Sheppard closed his eyes, as if the question physically pained him. As if he couldn't face the answer head on, which made no sense, since Sheppard had faced things much more dangerous than one middle-aged astrophysicist. Then it hit him.

"You've never kissed a man before, I bet."

Sheppard's eyes flew open, and he stared at Rodney like he was hoping that Rodney would just let it
drop. It infuriated Rodney, because didn’t Sheppard know him at all? Since when did Rodney let things drop?

Grabbing Sheppard by the front of his uniform shirt, he pushed and shoved until Sheppard's back hit the wall, forcing a harsh breath out from between his lips. Rodney paused for a moment. Was he actually going to do this? Yes, yes - he was.

Leaning in, he gave Sheppard time to dodge his mouth. Then he plastered his lips to Sheppard's, giving him a wet, thoroughly lewd kiss. When Sheppard's mouth opened on a gasp, Rodney slid his tongue into that teasing mouth, licking and biting at Sheppard's mouth till they were both groaning. One of his hands came up to tangle in Sheppard's hair, turning his head just enough to make the angle perfect.

His knee pressed in against the bulge in Sheppard's pants, feeling the burning hot brand of John's cock against his thigh. As if he couldn't control them, Sheppard's hips started to move, rubbing himself off against Rodney, and Rodney realized that this was rapidly going out of his control.

Releasing Sheppard, he stepped back, tugging his shirt down to cover his own erection. "That's how you kiss, Colonel," he said, rasped, really. Then, back straight, he walked away from Sheppard. The next move was his.

He got all the way to the transporter without Sheppard following him. Regretful that he hadn’t followed through with the implied desire in Sheppard's body, Rodney shook his head. Repressed military men - would he ever learn?

Pressing the screen to take him to the hallway by the labs, he turned around as the door closed. The last thing he saw was Sheppard staring at him.

**We Come in Peace (Shoot to Kill)**

"Unscheduled off-world activation," came the announcement, and John jumped. He didn't think he'd ever be able to hear those words again without a clench of fear in his gut.

"Who is it, Sergeant?" Elizabeth asked, stress on her face.

"Major Bartleman's IDC, ma'am."

"Lower the shield." The sergeant entered the appropriate commands, and the shield came down. Almost immediately, Bartleman's team came through, filthy dirty, three of the four limping, and Bartleman himself looking like he'd just gone thirty rounds with Ronon. The Gate shut down behind them.

"Major?" Elizabeth said, obviously suppressing a sigh.

"Sorry, ma'am. The planet's uninhabited by humans, but there were... really big dogs."

"Dogs, Major?" John put in. He couldn't help the little smile that tugged at his lips, remembering the planet of the dinosaurs.

"Really big, sir.

"Go get cleaned up, then report to the infirmary. We'll debrief in two hours."
"Yes, Sir." Bartleman saluted before following the rest of his team out of the Gateroom.

John leaned against the railing and looked at Elizabeth. She opened her mouth, and he held up one hand. "I know. I know. But remember how badly my team did at first? We came in as bad off almost as often."

"John, come in to my office. We shouldn't discuss this out here."

Well, shit. John really didn't want to have this conversation anywhere, much less in Elizabeth's office. Still, he knew better than to argue. Instead, he followed obediently enough, keeping silent until the door slid shut behind him. "I know, Elizabeth. But all I can do is keep sending them out and hope they get better."

"John, has a single team done well in the last week? One team led by one of the new people?"

Slouching down in his chair, John shook his head. "No, not really. They're not settling in well, but we knew that. It isn't helped by the fact that we didn't get one complete Gate team among them, so they're having to adjust to new people, and about a third of them had not actually been on Gate teams at all."

"Do you think any of them are going to jell? We can't keep risking people like this if it's avoidable."

Rubbing a hand over his face, John thought about it. There were pairs and even groups of three that seemed to be doing okay, but not one single full team. "I don't think so. But we can't just keep the new people back here, doing nothing. That's just going to ratchet up the possibility of a revolt even higher. We have to give them something to do."

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to rub her eye. "Maybe if we sent them to allies instead of uninhabited planets? Maybe they'll do better?"

"Or maybe they'll start another war." John shook his head before Elizabeth could respond. "No, no - you're right. It's worth a try, anyway."

John's radio went off. "Sheppard here."

"Colonel, where are you?" It was Rodney, and John couldn't control the wince. Well, shit. He hadn't talked to Rodney since that day on the balcony, and he still didn't know what he thought about that. But it had to be important if Rodney was calling on the radio.

"I'm in Elizabeth's office."

"Good. Stay there. I'll be there in five."

After explaining to Elizabeth what Rodney had said, they sat there staring at each other until Rodney knocked at the door. When the door opened, Rodney stormed in. John immediately stiffened in his seat. Whatever had set Rodney off, it wasn't going to be good.

"Do you know what those incompetents who call themselves scientists are saying?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell us," Elizabeth said, obviously doing her best to project 'calm and soothing'. John could have told her to save the effort, but he didn't have to. Rodney's words did that for him.

"They are talking about how someone with more 'seniority with the SGC' should be in charge. Not just of the science section, though that's bad enough, but they want you replaced, too, Sheppard."
Rodney threw his hands up and collapsed into one of the chairs. "Forget the fact that this galaxy is different than the Milky Way, with its own set of enemies, but also the fact that we've kept everyone alive for three years!"

"They also apparently think that Sheppard is some sort of maverick, who throws the equivalent of a temper tantrum when he's ordered to do something that he doesn't like. While there have been times that's true, none of this crew have earned the right to say stuff like that."

"Who did you hear this from, Rodney?" Elizabeth asked, stiff in her chair. John knew her well enough to know that she was very, very mad.

"One of my people who was assigned to a Gate team. Apparently, it's all Major Asshole and his little sidekicks could talk about."

Elizabeth visibly forced herself to relax. Leaning forward, she said, "What do you want me to do, Rodney? They're allowed to voice their opinions, even if we don't agree with them. Besides which, reacting to this will just drive it underground, where it can fester."

Rodney sighed. "I know that - really, I do. I just hate the fact that we're being attacked by our own people, or at least, people who should be our own. We're trying, can't they see that?"

John shook his head. "They can't see past their own grief, right now." Cautiously, he leaned forward and put his hand on Rodney's wrist. "You know that we're not going to let anyone replace you, right?"

Looking from John's hand to his face, Rodney's face was a careful blank. "I know, Colonel. I just thought it was important that you know what's being said."

Elizabeth cut in. "Oh, it is," she said. "Thank you for bringing to our attention. If you think of any way to deal with it, let us know, and we'll do the same, okay?"

Rodney nodded and stood up. "I need to get back to the labs before the monkeys destroy it. Watch your backs." With that, he was gone.

John rubbed his temples. "Well, shit."

"That about sums it up," Elizabeth said.

**Who Does He Think He's Kidding, Anyway?**

"I'm telling you that he's full of shit. I was with the SGC when that message came through about the fact that they were going to abandon Atlantis. They had to be bailed out by the SGC or they'd be sitting on some planet right now, probably having turned into savages. Not that that should really surprise anyone, since they let them wander the halls here."

John heard what was being said and ducked back out of sight before anyone noticed him. Maybe he'd hear something that could be used to break this stalemate.

"I heard from Stackhouse that he's a real badass, you know. Took out fifty soldiers who were trying to take over the city when they first got here."

"Oh, that's bullshit. He closed the shield. Any moron could have done that. That doesn't make him a badass."
"What about the Wraith? Anyone have more than word of mouth about them?"

"I saw what they did to Everett. Scary. He looked like he was ninety instead of in his fifties."

"Aw, they can't be that bad, if Sheppard's managed to beat them for three years. I'm telling you, his reputation here is inflated bullshit. It's like these 'human-form replicators'. More BS that some of us are buying because we're chickenshit. They're nothing like the Go'auld, or the Ori. Those were real enemies."

A new voice spoke up, and John had to grip his thigh from charging in at the words that this asshole had to say. "Have you seen the first contact team? Best team here, my ass. They've got a braggart for a team leader, a whining wimp for a scientist, and two barbarians. Not one decent soldier in the bunch."

He was ready to charge in there, freedom of speech be damned, when he heard a familiar voice. What the hell was Sergeant Bates doing in there? "You don't know a damn thing, sir."

The last voice came through again. "Watch your mouth, Sergeant."

Bates snorted. "Or what, Major? You'll bust me? Good luck with that, since no one here trusts you people as far as we can throw you. You don't know a damn thing, and you're unwilling to listen and learn, and it's going to get you killed. If we're lucky, it'll just be you. Unfortunately, given that you people are here, I doubt we'll be that lucky. Instead, I bet you'll just get someone else killed."

"Why you - "

"Shut up. All of you, just shut up. The Go'auld were scary. The Ori were scary. No one here denies that. But I'm telling you that the Wraith make the Go'auld look like a bunch of little girls in costume jewelry. The Wraith eat people. They see us as cattle. They wipe out entire planets so that they can have dinner."

Bates was clearly pissed, and John couldn't help but think that it was a good thing he was on Sheppard's side.

"If you're really, really lucky, you'll never meet one. If you do, you'd better pray that you're as good a soldier as those barbarians, or you'll die and we'll never know what happened to you. Moreover, we won't care, either."

"I'm done here."

There was the noise of a door opening and then closing. That same obnoxious voice came back. "I'm going to kick his ass."

"Major Castleman? What if he's right?" Now John had a name.

"He's not. He's full of shit." But Castleman didn't sound quite as sure of himself, and John chalked that up as a victory.

Even though he'd known from Rodney that this was the kind of thing being bandied about, hearing it firsthand still shook John up. He'd never wanted to be in charge. He'd never wanted to do anything but fly. But he was here now, and these were his people, and he'd be damned if someone was going to hurt them. If that meant watching this Major Castleman from now till Doomsdayday to make sure he didn't fuck up, then so be it.

He made a mental note that he should talk to Elizabeth about yanking the guy off of his Gate team - it was one thing to put people out there that didn't like him or Rodney. It was another thing entirely to know that they weren't taking the Wraith seriously, and Bates was right, that was going to get
someone killed.  

He looked up to realize that his feet had carried him to Rodney's lab. It was the first time he'd been here since they'd kissed on the balcony, and he was tempted to turn around and leave. But on the other hand, he and Rodney were friends, weren't they? Shouldn't he be able to talk to his friends about what was going on?  

He went in.  

**Mad Scientists**  

Rodney looked up just in time to see Doctor Corbin reaching for a piece of Ancient tech. Unfortunately, he recognized the piece, and it should have been in the "Don't touch" box. He raised his voice, trying to get her attention before she touched it, since she had the gene, "Hey, Corbin! Leave that a-" Too late, she'd already picked it up, and giving a startled cry, dropped it again.

Hurrying across the lab to make sure that she was okay, he said, "I tried to warn you. You get a burn?"

She held up a hand that showed what looked like a brand across her palm. "Shit. Go see Carson, tell him what happened and that I'm dealing with the tech that caused it." Nodding and clearly holding back tears, she did as she was told.

Zelenka came to stand next to Rodney, and Rodney pointed at the item in question. "Radek, can you put that in the 'Don't touch' box, and make sure that there's nothing else that's been taken out of it?"

Nodding, Zelenka pulled out a piece of the thick cloth that they used as an isolator, and picked it up. They never had figured out the purpose of something that gave second and third degree burns to anyone with the gene, but Rodney didn't much care. He was more interested in how it got out of the box in the first place. He watched as Zelenka carried the tech to the box, and opened it up. There was a gasp, and Zelenka said, "Zruinovat. Rodney, box is empty."

"What? No, it isn't." Rodney hurried across the lab to look in the box. "I put something in it last night!" But when he looked inside, it was indeed empty. And now Rodney was pissed off. He knew that none of his people would have gone in there, much less pulled everything out. Looking around the room, he tried to see who wouldn't meet his eyes. "Who did this? Who took the stuff that was in this box - stuff that had good reason to be off-limits - and put it out where anyone could touch it?"

All over the lab, heads were ducking low, and Miko looked about ready to cry. Then again, Miko always looked like she was about ready to cry. Then he noticed that one of the new people, Barrett, was glaring at him, mouth working as if he was working up the courage to say something. "Barrett?"

"How were we supposed to know? It's not like you tell us anything!"

In anger, Rodney grabbed the box and lifted it, so that Barrett could see clearly stenciled on the side, "DON'T TOUCH." "You mean, tell you by labeling the box so that none of you morons gets injured or blows up the city? Is that what you mean by telling you?"

"Who put you in charge, anyway? I've been with the SGC longer than you, and I know what I'm doing with Ancient tech, unlike you. Maybe I should be in charge!"

Dead silence followed Barrett's pronouncement. Rodney thought, irreverently, that he could hear a pin drop. None of the new people would look at him, whereas all of his people were staring at him,
practically pleading with him not to back down. Little worry of that. "Let me tell you something, Barrett. I'm the one who cares that my people can get injured by playing with tech they don't understand. I'm the one who was here when a nanovirus - developed by the Ancients that you revere so highly - killed four of my staff. I'm the one who figured out a way - with Colonel Sheppard - how to stop said virus.

"You want to know who put me in charge? That would be the same people at the SGC who decided you didn't know enough about Ancient technology to even be sent to Atlantis, much less to be in charge of the labs here.

"As of now, Barrett, you are banned from the lab. You can go sit in your room or the mess, or whatever you feel like doing, but you are not allowed here without my express permission and supervision, and trust me, that will be a long time in coming. Now, get out of my sight."

Barrett looked like he might actually argue for a minute, then made a harrumph noise and picked up his computer, making his way out of the lab. Rodney sighed and pinched his nose, trying to calm down before he had a stroke. "Everyone who has the gene, except for me, please leave the room while we attempt to round up all the tech that would be dangerous for you to handle. Everyone else, stay at your stations and just... work on something harmless for a little while, okay?"

All across the lab, various scientists were setting down projects and making their way out of the room. With Zelenka's help, Rodney went from desk to desk, checking for tech that belonged in the "Don't touch" box. By the time they finally finished, Rodney was fairly certain they'd found most - if not all - of it, and that no one else was going to have an easily prevented injury.

He radioed several of his staff, knowing that word would filter to the rest of them, for them to return. Then he turned around and realized that Sheppard was standing there, watching him.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Well, I left the room when you ordered the gene carriers out, so I've only been back since you said it was okay."

Rodney sighed. "You know what I meant. Did you see what happened?"

Sheppard nodded. "I saw enough, and I think you're right."

Ordinarily, Rodney would have preened at the praise, but this wasn't an ordinary day. He noticed that Sheppard had his hands in his pockets, and he was rocking on his heels, like he couldn't keep still. A closer look at his face revealed stress lines under his eyes and around his mouth, and Rodney realized that he might not be the only one who'd had a run in.

Grabbing Sheppard by the arm, he dragged him out of the lab and across the hall to a room with a balcony. Once there, he locked the balcony door and looked at Sheppard. "Okay, spill. What happened?"

Sheppard turned to look out over the water. "Do you think I'm faking it?"

"Huh? What? Faking what?" Rodney was confused, which was a feeling that he hated. He'd obviously missed something big.

"I overheard a bunch of the new guys talking about what a faker I am, about how I couldn't manage to hold off the Wraith during the siege, and had to be rescued." Sheppard's face was almost scarily blank, like he actually agreed with a bunch of morons.
"That's bullshit," said Rodney, bluntly. "I was here, remember? I saw you fly off with a nuclear bomb towards a hive ship and nearly get blown up. I saw you defend the city from Kolya. Those are not the actions of someone who's faking it."

Sheppard was clutching the railing so tightly that his knuckles were white, and Rodney wasn't sure what he could do to get through to the man. He sought some sort of resolution with words, as he always did. "These new people are morons, Colonel. You can't listen to anything they have to say, or you'll just go insane."

He kept a close eye on Sheppard's hands, waiting for a sign that he was getting through. Gradually, their grip relaxed, making Rodney breathe a bit easier, and he let some of that relief show in his voice. "Those of us who've been here know the risks that you've taken for us. Trust us when we say that we believe in you, okay?"

Finally, Sheppard turned to look at him, the muscles in his shoulders unfurling, his face relaxing. Rodney didn't know whether Sheppard was even aware of the fact that he was leaning into Rodney, but Rodney wasn't going to say no. Instead, he lifted his face and waited, wanting to see if Sheppard would make the first move.

He wasn't disappointed. Sheppard continued to lean in, until his lips touched Rodney's. There wasn't much to the kiss, just the dry brushing of lips, but it was enough to make Rodney moan. He opened his mouth in encouragement, and Sheppard slipped his tongue in, slowly, just a little way.

Rodney wanted nothing more than to touch, but he knew that he might scare Sheppard off if he did. So he kept his hands in tight fists at his sides, letting Sheppard move at his own pace. Sheppard didn't disappoint in this, either. His hands came up to frame Rodney's face, holding him steady as Sheppard went deeper with his kiss.

When Sheppard's body pressed up against his, Rodney couldn't resist rocking his hips, just a little. Just enough so that he could feel Sheppard's erection against his pelvis, hot and hard even through layers of cloth.

That was a mistake, as Sheppard backed off immediately, eyes a little wild. "I - I -" he stuttered.

Rodney held back the sigh that wanted to escape. "It's okay, Sheppard. I get it," and he turned to go back inside, except that Sheppard grabbed his arm.

"No, I really don't think you do, Rodney. I want this, I really do, but -"

"But you've never been with a guy; but you're afraid; but what, Colonel?"

"But until things settle down, it isn't safe for you. Can you... will you be patient, for me?"

He snorted. "I think that whether or not it's safe is my decision to make, but fine, I'll give you some time. Just don't take too much."

"I - okay."

This time, when Rodney turned to go inside, Sheppard didn't stop him.

**The Sticks Make Everything Better**

For a long time, John stared after Rodney's disappearing form. He hadn't lied - he *was* afraid that it
was too dangerous for Rodney for them to get involved, but it didn't help that he'd never had feelings like this for another man. He didn't like the sneaking suspicion that he had that he was just putting Rodney off because he was a coward.

Checking his watch, he realized that it was about time for his workout with Teyla. He sighed. She always seemed to know when he had something on his mind, and she worked him harder because of it. He just knew that if he went to meet her, he was asking to spend most of the lesson on his back, and not in the good, fun way.

Then again, if he didn't, she'd just seek him out to see what was wrong, and that would be even worse. He'd be forced to talk about his feelings, without even a workout to shield him from it.

With another sigh, he turned and headed to his room to pick up his equipment.

By the time he got to the gym, Teyla was already there. She was doing one of her katas, ignoring two of the new marines who were along one wall, sparring. John could tell from a single glance that they were paying more attention to her than they were to each other, which wasn't particularly good - he had no desire to have any of the men under his command see him get his ass kicked. At the same time, if it increased the amount of respect that Teyla got, it was all to the good, right? Right.

Dropping his bag on the bench, he smiled at Teyla, who seemed oblivious to their audience. He knew better, though.

Picking up her own sticks, she waited till John indicated that he was ready to start, and they began. It didn't take long - maybe five, ten minutes - before John was on his back, staring at the ceiling. Ow. That hurt.

"Colonel?"

"I'm fine, Teyla. Give me a moment." He caught his breath and then rolled to his feet. Bouncing twice to settle his weight, he rotated one of the sticks, and then she was on him. He focused on pushing everything away, on where her sticks were going to fall next, on ducking and blocking, and this time it took longer before he ended up down. She was smiling, however, and John grinned back.

He could hear the two marines whispering, and he could tell the gist of the conversation. It wasn't good - in their eyes, he was just a flyboy. The fact that Teyla could take him down was saying more about him being a wimp then it was saying about how good she was, and that wasn't the impression that he wanted to leave them with.

Catching Teyla's eye, he looked towards the two marines and then lifted an eyebrow in question. She laughed and nodded.

Raising his voice, he said, "So, boys, want to give Teyla a shot?" He turned to look directly at the two of them, who weren't even pretending to spar anymore. "If you're not too busy, that is."

The bigger of the two stepped forward. "I can do that."

"Okay," he checked the uniform, "Hightower, here you go." He tried to hand the man his sticks, but he shrugged them off.

"I don't need those." Hightower smirked. "I might hurt her with them."

John just shook his head and watched as Hightower stepped into the ring. He didn't hesitate, which John gave him credit for. His first swing, if it had actually landed, would have at least knocked the breath out of Teyla, if not knocking her out completely. Unfortunately for Hightower, Teyla wasn't
where he thought she was.

Teyla, not being stupid, led Hightower all over the ring. None of his shots landed, though one or two required her to use the sticks to block them. John couldn't help admiring him - he had some serious power. Too bad he didn't have the judgment to go with it, or he'd never have gotten into this position.

Hightower was starting to get frustrated over his lack of ability to stop Teyla, and that was making him careless. Which, of course, was exactly when Teyla stepped in, swinging once, twice, three times, and Hightower was on the ground, groaning and grabbing at his shoulder, where a particularly hard hit had landed.

John turned to look at the other man - McLellan - and saw that he was apparently flabbergasted by Teyla's win. "Want to give her a try, McLellan?"

"Uh, no, sir," the marine stammered out. "If she could take Hightower down that easily, I don't think much of my chances."

"Smart man. She's willing to give lessons in that style of fighting. You might want to consider signing up."

"Sir, yes, sir!" The marine saluted, then moved to the side of his friend, offering him a hand up. Together, they made their way out of the gym.

Teyla looked at him and raised an eyebrow. He sighed and stepped forward again. Time for his own beat down, even if he didn't deserve it quite so much. He stepped forward and brought his sticks up in defense.

This time he wasn't able to stop thinking, and Teyla knocked him down in a matter of moments. This time, though, she followed him down, her sticks at his throat, until she was straddling his chest, holding him down. He had the irreverent thought that it was a good thing that he really didn't see Teyla as a woman anymore, or this would be pretty compromising.

Before he could try to shove her off, or call uncle, she said, "John, you are not thinking. Or, perhaps, you are thinking too much about the wrong things. What is going on?"

"Nothing, Teyla."

She settled herself more firmly, making it clear that she wasn't going to move until he was honest, and he groaned. "Dammit. It's just, you know, things."

"Things?"

"The new people, and Earth, and all of that. More than I know how to deal with, really."

She just looked at him for a minute. "The new people are being difficult, yes. But I do not think that is the entire problem. Would you not be honest with me?"

He beat his head into the floor. Teyla in the mood to push was never a good thing, and John knew it. He should have just skipped today's lesson. "Well, maybe... there might be some other things going on right now. But I'm really not ready to talk about them."

"Is this about you and Doctor McKay?"

"What? No! There's nothing between Rodney and me. We're just friends, that's all."
Teyla looked disbelieving. "What is the saying? I think you protest too much?"

John struggled to get loose and failed. No matter how he twisted, Teyla just rode it out, and ended up still perched on his chest. "Fine. Fine. If I promise to tell you, will you let me up?"

She studied his face for a long moment, then rose up in an easy motion. "Talk."

"I think I might, possibly, maybe, have feelings for him. Feelings that go beyond friendship."

"And does he return these feelings?" Teyla went to sit on one of the benches, patting the seat next to her, and briefly John wondered who she'd been hanging out with.

"I think so?"

She looked at him. "Then you should act on them. Life is short here, and uncertain. You would not wish to lose it before it began, would you?"

John rubbed his face. "I can't, Teyla. Look, I know that Cadman explained Don't Ask, Don't Tell to you. It really hasn't mattered here, because I'm the officer in charge, and I wouldn't have listened to any complaints. I don't think it should matter who someone loves. But to the people who just came from Earth, it matters, and my control over them is tenuous enough as it is."

"Do you not think that you have enough support? Because I can tell you, John, that to the Atlanteans, you are more important than a regulation from another planet, and they would stand behind you."

"Thank you. But it's just not safe, especially for Rodney. My wants have to be balanced with his safety."

"Don't you think that that is a choice he should be allowed to make?"

"Teyla, I promise to think about it, but can't we just work out for now?"

"I think that perhaps it is time for us to call a halt for today, until you can get your mind more properly in the moment. Radio if you wish to try again later."

With that, Teyla swung her way off the bench and picked up her bag, making her way out of the gym. John stared after her until the door closed, and then went to gather his own things. Glancing at his watch, he decided that it was close enough to the end of the day to go back to his quarters and think about... several things.

**When the Runner Isn't Scared, You Should Be**

John woke to the sounds of someone banging on his door. He swore. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, but apparently had done so, because he was sprawled across his bed, still dressed. And he was sore from sleeping in an awkward position.

The banging came again, and John forced himself to his feet. "Hold your horses," he yelled, and the banging stopped. Crossing the five feet to the door seemed insurmountable, but he finally managed to do it, triggering the door for whoever had been his alarm clock at - five o'clock in the morning? Had to be Ronon.

The door slid open, revealing the far too awake Ronon. He grunted something resembling a greeting,
and Ronon grinned at him. "Forgot we were going to run this morning, Sheppard?"

"Go without me. I'm too sore to move." He was also foggy from disturbing dreams all night, but he wasn't going to mention that.

Ronon stepped just inside the door, which obediently shut behind him. He didn't say anything, just stared at John with his arms crossed on his chest. John tried to ignore it, but being stared at by Ronon was akin to being stared at by a very large cat. It made you want to react.

With a sigh, John started to stretch. Gradually, muscles warmed and relaxed, getting rid of some of the soreness, and making John feel much better. Gradually, the fog he was in started to lift, and he put more effort into the stretch. Running with Ronon was difficult at the best of times, and when he wasn't one hundred percent, it was worse.

When he finally thought he could run more than five feet without injuring himself, he nodded at Ronon, who opened the door. The two of them took off down the hall, making their way up to higher levels where there were fewer people. Though, even at this time of the morning, there were always people around. John privately thought that Atlantis combined the best things of small towns and big cities, and times like this he could really see it.

They ran in silence, feet clanging on the metal catwalk, breathing even and measured. Within about fifteen minutes, they came out on to the east pier, where he could just see the beginnings of the sunrise at the horizon. The sky was dark blue, fading to rose as he looked closer to the emerging sun, and he slowed to a walk in order to properly appreciate it.

Next to him, Ronon slowed as well, his eyes distant. Surprised, John turned to look at him, and Ronon shrugged, clearly embarrassed. "Didn't have a lot of time, before. Missed it."

"She told you?" John demanded, his voice breaking. He had no idea what Ronon thought of same-sex relationships to start with, never mind what Ronon would think of John being with Rodney, of all people.

"No one had to tell me anything, Sheppard," Ronon said with a roll of his eyes. Maybe he was spending too much time with Rodney. "It's obvious if you know where to look."

"Cute?" Okay, now John was offended. He hadn't been called cute since he was a gangly adolescent, and he wasn't going to start with it now. "We're not cute. Besides, you've met Rodney, right? He's like the epitome of not-cute."

Ronon chuckled. "Whatever you say, Sheppard." He started to run again, and John fell in behind him, his mind racing madly. This was just too much. Teyla thought they should be together. Ronon
thought they were cute. Too much.

His mind spun like a hamster on a wheel, and he didn't even notice that Ronon was taking them back by a different route until he looked up and saw that they were outside Rodney's lab. He stopped again and stared at the door, feeling like a cornered animal. "It's up to you," Ronon said, jogging backwards. "But you can guess what I'd say."

The hell of it was that John could, too. Ronon would tell him to seize the moment, because you never know when you're going to die, not in the Pegasus galaxy.

"Fine," he said, reaching out towards the lab door, and Ronon smiled and ran off.

Before John could open the door, though, he realized that there might not be anyone in there. It wasn't quite six am yet, after all, so he peered through the glass.

Most of the lights were out, except for the one at Rodney's desk. Rodney stood next to his computer, hands typing frantically, and John realized that he'd probably not been to bed yet. Besides which, John was all sweaty and he probably stank, not the kind of impression he really wanted to make.

Backing up from the door, he turned and ran down the hall. He'd talk to Rodney later.

We're Running Out of Everything

John had forgotten the meeting with Elizabeth that was scheduled for ten am, so when his radio chirped in his ear, he was reviewing inventories with Lorne. The numbers really didn't look good. They were going through ammo at an alarming rate, and while John didn't want to blame the new people, the fact was that the First Wave people knew how to make things last. They'd been through the whole thing where if they ran out, there wasn't any more.

"John? Are you coming?" came Elizabeth's voice through the radio. John checked the time and swore.

"We'll have to pick this up later," he said to Lorne. "Start brainstorming some solutions. I don't want to be caught with our pants down if there's another attack." Lorne nodded, and John left, headed for the conference room.

It was a dour group that was waiting for him. Elizabeth was already massaging her temples, and Rodney was midrant. " - can't do our jobs if I'm being actively sabotaged within the lab, Elizabeth. No, he's not coming back to the lab, and that's final. Due to him, one of my people - you know, one of the ones who is actually competent - is still in the infirmary with a second degree burn on her hand."

"I'm not saying that you have to trust him, or even like him, Rodney. But can't you find something for him to do? We can't afford to have people just sitting around."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "I never thought I'd miss Kavanaugh. Fine. Send him to me, and we'll see if he can handle working in the sewage plant. Just don't blame me if he backs up all the toilets."

Elizabeth nodded, then caught John's eye. "Okay, now that we're all here, we can get started."

John took his seat next to Rodney, and they both turned to Carson. "The situation in the infirmary is getting desperate, Elizabeth. We can make antibiotics and painkillers, but I can't make bandages, casts, such like that. We need to find a society that's advanced enough to trade for them. Most of our
current allies just aren't. They're good for food, but medical supplies?"

Sergeant Goode spoke up next, barely waiting for Carson to take a breath. "We're going to have to return the blankets and other things that we borrowed from the Athosians, and like Carson, I'm having problems with our current allies. With the Wraith taking so many, few have anything to spare." He looked right at John. "Some of the teams we have out there aren't helping - they're alienating previously friendly people. And it isn't all the new folks. We've put marines on teams who were never intended to leave Atlantis."

Wanting nothing more than to bury his face in hands, instead John took the bull by the horns. "We also need to find someone who we can trade with who can supply metals." Turning to look at Rodney, he said, "If I can get you the chemicals, can you get me someone who can make me gunpowder? We're going to have to figure out how to make ammo, at least for the handguns. The P90s - well, we've got some ammo, and then they're only going to be useful as clubs, unless we can find someone with the technology and time to make ammo of the right caliber and to the correct exacting specifications."

Elizabeth looked a little shocked. "We're that low?"

"Yeah. The Daedalus should have been here in the next couple of weeks to resupply us, but, well..." he shrugged.

There was silence around the table for a long moment before Elizabeth spoke. "So, it looks like we need to find some new allies." She was obviously trying to keep her tone light, but some of the desperation they all felt showed through in her eyes. Turning to look at Teyla, she said, "Do you have any suggestions?"

Teyla thought for a long moment before saying, "We could try the Erichians. They are technologically advanced from what I understand, and might be able to help with the ammunition needs. At minimum, we should be able to obtain medical supplies from them."

"It sounds like you have a mission," Elizabeth said. "Tomorrow at thirteen hundred hours, then."

The rest of the day passed in a blur as John and his team checked over equipment and Rodney made sure that the labs could be left unsupervised for a few days. John knew that he was pressing the point that Radek was his second, so that he didn't come home to a coup in the labs.

At thirteen hundred, they were gathered in the Gateroom. John had made the call the P90s were going to be saved for bigger missions, but his arm still felt bare from where he usually held the gun. Even Rodney looked naked without it.

The Gate opened, and with a glance at each other, the team walked through.

**All Dressed Up With No One to Kill**

The Gate opened out into a forest that kind of reminded John of the woods where he'd played as a kid. It wasn't old growth, but the area beneath the trees was relatively clear of underbrush, and there was a clear path.

"Teyla, you take point since you know something about these people. Ronon, you have our six."

With no more than that, they fell into formation and started to follow the path.

It didn't take long to find the outskirts of what was either a large town or a small city. The people
looked healthy and cheerful for the most part, dressed in bright colors and smiling as the team walked past. Rodney was buried in his scanner, as usual, and only looked up when John said, "McKay? Got anything?"

"Well, they don't have a ZPM, but they definitely have some sort of power source." They were coming up on a large building, obviously some sort of office building or town center, and Rodney's gaze was attracted to it. "Oh, that's pretty."

John had to agree. The building wasn't wood, or at least didn't appear to be, but John couldn't tell what it was made of. It was brightly painted in all shades of the rainbow, and even Teyla smiled when looking at it. "Should we find some leaders, guys?" John asked rhetorically.

The door opened before they could even get there, and three people stepped out. Unlike everyone else, they were dressed in outfits of black and white, which, among the bright colors, made them stand out like ravens among songbirds. "Welcome, travelers," the man on the right said.

"Hello," Teyla said. "I am Teyla Emmagen. With my friends, Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard, Doctor Rodney McKay, and Specialist Ronon Dex, I have come here through the ring of the Ancestors, seeking trade and alliance."

"Teyla, do you not recognize me?" the woman in the middle asked, a wide smile on her face. Studying her face carefully, it took a moment before a matching smile graced Teyla's face. "Rabih!"

"Yes!" The two women embraced, and John and Rodney exchanged a glance. They hadn't seen Teyla this exuberant in a long time.

When the embrace ended with a kiss on the cheek, Teyla turned to look at John. "Rabih and I were friends when she used to accompany trading parties from her people to mine. We have been friends for many years." Turning back to Rabih, she grinned openly. "I see that you are now part of the triumvirate - you have done very well for yourself!"

Rabih blushed prettily, and said, "You as well. You are no longer with the Athosians?"

"I have allied myself with the Atlanteans. We come in search of trade."

Her eyes grew wide, and Rabih stammered a bit. "You are from the city of the Ancestors? We had heard that it had returned and that people were living in it, but all we had was innuendo and rumor."

The other woman cleared her throat, and Rabih flushed. "I am most sorry, keeping you waiting out here on the steps like a common petitioner. Please, please, come inside to our meeting place, where we can discuss trade."

Teyla followed without looking back, and John and the others followed her after a moment. Rodney was engrossed in his tablet again, and as soon as they were seated around a large, round table, he looked up. "I see that you've got a large power source, about half a kilometer from here. Would it be possible to see it? I'd love to know what you're using to produce this level of power."

The man spoke up. "I am Patel, and of course we can arrange for that, Doctor. Are you a doctor of medicine?" He looked open and relaxed, curious.

"Do I look like I practice voodoo?" Rodney said, and John kicked him under the table. "Uh, no, I'm a doctor of astrophysics and mechanical engineering. Two separate degrees, mind."

"Engineering?" The other woman had seized on that. "Then perhaps... no, it would be too
presumptuous of me."

But now Patel and Rahib were looking hopefully at her. "Flirly, in order for negotiations to proceed, each side must know what the other wants," Rahib said, scoldingly. Then she turned her attention back to Rodney. "What we wish to ask is if you, perhaps, could look at our water filtration system? It is very old, and breaks down frequently. When it does, the whole city is without clean water for days at a time."

John grinned. This might be easier than he'd hoped. "I'm sure he can do that. If he can fix it, what can we trade for it?"

With that, they got down to the nitty gritty of what could be traded. The Erichians had about early twentieth century tech, and while that didn't mean new ammunition for the P90s, it did mean clothing, shoes, and medical supplies for Carson.

John was certainly satisfied with what they were agreeing to, although part of him thought that this was all just too easy. Then one of the scientists for the Erichians arrived, and Flirly said, "Doctor McKay, if you will follow Tamas, she will show you to our power plant, and then to the water filtration system."

Rodney stood immediately, followed a second later by John. He glared, but John glared right back. "Buddy system, remember. No one goes anywhere alone."

Giving a sniff, Rodney didn't argue, but he did pick up his pack and secured the tablet before swinging it on to his back. He completely ignored John, instead engaging in an animated conversation with Tamas.

It was only when John noticed that Rodney was tripping over his words, stuttering and stammering, that John realized that Tamas was a very beautiful woman, and from the sound of it, very smart, though a bit uneducated from Rodney's point of view. And while John knew that it was unfair of him to get in the middle of the two of them since he wasn't willing to move things further with Rodney, that didn't stop him from interrupting. "So, Tamas, what do you use as a power source?"

It was Tamas's turn to stammer out an answer. "Well, I mean, we, um, we use steam. It doesn't pollute the way that krol does, though some of the private homes use krol for heat."

Rodney glared at him, knowing exactly what John was doing, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. "Steam, huh? That's very interesting. Tell me more about it."

He tuned out Tamas's answer, not really caring, but watched Rodney's face instead. Rodney looked - ashamed? Aw, shit, that wasn't his intent. He smiled at Rodney, trying to telegraph, *Hey buddy, we're still good* but he didn't think he was getting through. Feeling a little sick to his stomach, he went back to paying attention to Tamas, who was smiling and still talking about the technology they used to power their homes.

He listened to her talk the entire walk, but once they got to the site, he did his best to fade into the background, letting Rodney take over the conversation. Unfortunately, it was too late, because Rodney was all business, asking brisk questions about how they heated the water and what they did with the waste. He wasn't even smiling, and John felt it like a blow all over again.

Once the tour of the power plant was finished, they made their way to the water processing plant, which was nearby. Rodney took one look at the equipment and showed real dismay. John couldn't blame him - even to his uneducated eyes, the plant looked ready to collapse around their ears. Pipes were corroded, leaking, in short doing everything but carry water. Even the air was full of water, hot
and humid.

They spent a lot more time in this plant as Rodney went over everything with a fine-toothed comb, trying to see the extent of the problems. By the time they finally left the factory, John was sodden through and through, and Rodney looked even worse off. Rodney waved Tamas off and pulled John to one side. "So, can you fix it?" John asked.

"Yeah, but... John, I'm going to have to stay here and oversee it, and the project could take weeks."

John didn't listen any further. "Then the answer is no. Let's see if there's something else they could negotiate for."

Rodney looked like he wanted to argue, but instead he clamped his mouth shut and followed John back to the city center, where Teyla and Ronon were waiting with the Triumvirate. "Doctor McKay?" Teyla asked.

He didn't look at John when he said, "It's doable, but I'd have to stay here with a few of my staff for a week or two. And I hope you have spare parts?" He looked at Rahib, who nodded excitedly.

"Yes, yes, of course we do. We are always having to replace parts that have broken, so we keep a ready supply on hand."

What the hell? John had already told him no, so why was Rodney even touching this? He opened his mouth to speak, but Rodney cut him off. "I'd have to stay here full time - it would waste too much time commuting back and forth from Atlantis to here."

John cut in. "Rodney, a word?" Without waiting for a response, he pulled Rodney to one side. Ronon and Teyla watched them curiously but made no move to follow. "I told you no."

"Colonel, we need this deal. Period. We don't have a choice. I'm sure that the Erichians will allow you to provide a guard, so I'll be perfectly safe."

"Do you really feel comfortable leaving Zelenka in charge in the lab for two weeks? What if one of the new people stages a coup while you're gone?"

Rodney actually looked uneasy, but no less determined. "I'm going to have to trust that you and Elizabeth will back him up so that doesn't happen." He reached out a gripping John's arm. "I don't want to do this anymore than you want me to, Sheppard. But I think maybe that having a break from each other will help as well. Give you time to think about what you want from me without me right there."

John winced. He still wasn't certain about this. Teyla interrupted then. "John? What is the problem?"

"I'm just not comfortable leaving Rodney here without us for two weeks, but I can't be gone from the city that long. Not as uncertain as everything is."

"Of course you cannot, but it is safe here. The Erichians have not been culled in generations - for some reason the Wraith do not come here - and Rahib is an old friend. She will look after Doctor McKay."

John sighed, looking from Teyla to Rodney and back again. He still had a bad feeling about this, but Rodney was right. They needed this deal, and maybe he did need some distance from Rodney to decide what he wanted. "Okay then."

"Thank you, John," Teyla said, laying a soft hand on his arm.
"Yeah, thanks," Rodney echoed, not meeting his eyes.

**We Need This Deal, Elizabeth**

As soon as they cleared the Gate back into Atlantis, Rodney broke off at a trot. "Off to the infirmary and then to the labs to see what the monkeys have been doing in my absence," he said over his shoulder. John thought about stopping him, but then decided that he and Teyla would be better for presenting this deal to Elizabeth.

So he waited for her to come down the stairs, and then walked with her to the infirmary, explaining the terms of the deal to her, with minor corrections from Elizabeth. She was understandably concerned about the fact that Rodney would be gone for two weeks. It would make work in the labs that much more difficult, plus even if the Erichians hadn't been culled in a long time, that just meant that they were due.

So John found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to defend a position that he wasn't sure he agreed with. "Elizabeth, it's a good deal. They seemed pretty up front about things, and there are no weapons involved, unless you count Rodney's tongue."

Rodney, who was one bed over getting blood drawn, looked up at that. "Oh, ha, ha, Colonel."

"It's true and you know it, McKay."

Jumping off the bed, Rodney came over and joined in the conversation for a moment. "Just because I rely on my words instead of a big gun doesn't make me any less than one of your soldiers, I'll have you know."

"I know," John said, and Rodney sniffed at him before rushing out of the infirmary, headed directly for the lab. John watched him go for a long moment before turning his attention back to Elizabeth and Teyla.

"It's not like we're going to leave him there alone, Elizabeth," John said. "He's planning on taking a few of his scientists, and I'm going to be assigning him a guard as well. He'll be under watch twenty-four/seven, so that he's as safe as he can be. Safe as he'd be here in Atlantis."

"That's not saying much," Elizabeth said, but she reluctantly agreed to let Rodney go.

John immediately headed for his office, calling Lorne to come meet him so that he could discuss how many and who to send as a guard. He was determined that nothing was going to happen to Rodney while he was gone.

He and Lorne were deep in conversation when there was a knock on the door. John looked up to see one of the new majors standing there. He couldn't imagine what the hell he wanted, but he was too polite to say that he was busy. Instead, he invited him in but didn't suggest he take a seat.

"Major... Hules, is it? What can I help you with?"

Hules looked upset and frustrated. "Sir, is it true that the scientists are going off world?"

"A few of them are, yes. Why?"

"Doctor McKay is planning on taking Doctor Cordero, isn't he?"
John ran over the mental roster of the scientists. He couldn't quite put a face to Cordero, which meant he was one of the new guys, but a few of them had fit in okay, so it was possible. "I don't know. Doctor McKay hasn't informed me of who he's taking yet. You have some objection about Cordero going?"

"No, sir! I don't object to her going, but I want to go with her, as her guard." And now John had a face to go with the name. Cordero was a young, pretty engineer, who'd been on a Gate team from Earth.

Looking hard at Hules, he said, "Why?"

"She was on my team at ho- back on Earth, and I just... she's never been off-world without me. I'd feel more comfortable if I were there."

John glanced at Lorne, who shrugged. "I haven't decided on who's going to be accompanying the scientists yet, but I'll certainly keep you in mind," he said, trying to be polite.

Hules looked at him, hard, then suddenly came to attention. "Sir, permission to speak freely?"

Oh, this couldn't be good. "Granted."

Hules looked at him again. "Sir, you're going to have to let us do some real work sometime. Keeping us to milk runs or back here on infinite standby is not reducing the amount of dislike among the Earthers. It's increasing it."

"If I could trust that your people would follow orders, Major, they wouldn't be on standby. Trust me, I've got enough work to keep another hundred marines busy, but to be honest, I don't feel that trust. I know what your people are saying about me and mine, and it doesn't fill me with peace and goodwill."

"Only some of us, sir. The rest of us want to fit in, want to be useful, but we've just lost our homes and everyone we care for. Do you really blame us for being a bit standoffish?"

John snorted. "A bit?"

"Well," Hules colored in embarrassment. "Most of us just want to be given jobs and space to do them."

Standing, John nodded. "I hear what you're saying, Major. Now hear what I'm saying to you. Tell your friends that if I give them a role in this, they'd better not fuck it up. And also tell them that my patience, contrary to what they seem to believe, is not infinite. They keep badmouthing the people that have done nothing but take them in, keep them fed and sheltered, and tried to make them part of their community, and they'll find themselves out on their asses, where I suspect it won't take them long to find out exactly how bad the Wraith are."

Hules nodded, looking abashed, which was more than John had hoped for. He quickly backed out of the room, and John turned to look at Lorne, who seemed impressed. "Nice job, sir. Did you mean it?"

"Oh, probably not. I doubt Elizabeth would let me throw them out. But it makes a nice threat, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." With that out of the way, they returned their attention to figuring out who to send. At the top of the list was Hules.
I Don't Like This, Have I Mentioned?

Rodney looked around his room. Having put the fear of God into his staff, he'd moved to his room to pack what he needed for the next two weeks. Thankfully, it was mostly uniforms, which were easy to pack. He wouldn't need civvies, and the equipment he'd need was being packed by Miko and Zelenka.

He thought about the team he'd picked. It was mostly First Wavers, as he could count on them to keep their heads under stress, but he had also picked a couple of engineers from among the new people - ones who had shown that they had more than two brain cells to rub together.

Only one thing left to do, and he triggered his radio. "Colonel Sheppard?"

"Yes, Rodney?"

"Can you come to my quarters? There's something I need to discuss with you before I leave."

"On my way. Sheppard out."

Rodney's hands were sweating, and he wiped them on his pants. He was nervous about being gone for two weeks, nervous about not being there to help if the newcomers decided to stage a coup. But more immediately, he was nervous about what he was going to say to Sheppard when he got there. This thing between them was so new, so fragile, and he didn't want to break it.

But he had to go. They were already starting to ration supplies, and Carson was walking around with a terminal case of the worries. Rodney knew that he was terrified of someone coming in from an away mission badly injured, because Carson felt they just didn't have the supplies they'd need.

His door chimed and he wiped his hands one more time before calling, "Come in."

Sheppard walked in, looking nervous and wary. It was all Rodney could do not to push him up against the wall and kiss that look away. Instead, he let the door close behind Sheppard and waited, impatiently, for Sheppard to start.

It didn't take long.

"I'm sending sixteen marines with you. They're in charge of your safety, so you listen to them. Okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'll obey their every command. I hope you're sending ones that have a bit of a clue, and are able to keep up with us? I expect that we'll be putting in twelve hour days to get this finished within the two week period."

Rodney's hands were shaking, and he tried to hide it by pressing them firmly against his thighs. That just attracted Sheppard's attention, and his eyes locked on them.

"Are you okay? You don't have to do this, you -"

"But I do, Colonel. I have to do this, because I'm the only one who can."

"I just... I wish..." Sheppard looked lost, like he wasn't sure what to say or how to say it, and Rodney couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand seeing that look on his face, or knowing that he had any part in putting it there.

So he carefully stepped forward, giving Sheppard enough time to duck away or make it clear that his
advances were unwanted. All Sheppard did was look hopeful, if a bit wary, and Rodney had to smile before closing the remaining distance and raising his lips to Sheppard's.

The kiss was gentle and chaste, no more than a vague promise of more to come, but the sound that Sheppard made was broken, and he wrapped his arms tightly around Rodney as if he was never going to let him go. And Rodney was more than content to let him hold him, to feel that touch as long as Sheppard was willing to give it.

This time, it was Sheppard who deepened the kiss, licking along the seam of Rodney's lips as if asking for admittance, and Rodney was more than happy to give it. Opening his mouth, he let Sheppard's tongue in to play, sliding his own alongside and tasting burnt coffee and stress, as well as the underlying taste that had to be all Sheppard.

Sheppard whimpered into his mouth and turned them, so that he could back Rodney into the wall. Rodney went willingly, and once there spread his legs so that Sheppard could stand between them. Hardness pressed against hardness, and Rodney couldn't hold back the groan that broke free of his throat. Pulling his lips away from Sheppard's may have been the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he wanted to taste him, wanted to nip at the skin on his neck and bite at his shoulder.

He was only vaguely aware of soft words being mumbled into his own neck. "Shhh, shh," he whispered. "It'll be okay. It'll all be alright."

His hands settled naturally on Sheppard's hips, encouraging them to roll against his own, putting pressure in the perfect place. As Rodney grew closer and closer, he whispered into Sheppard's hair, "I'm going to come if you keep doing that. Is that what you want?"

Sheppard whined high in his throat and pressed even harder against Rodney. Rodney took that as consent and started to really work his own hips, going after his own orgasm with single-minded intensity.

It was only moments before he was coming with a loud gasp. He moaned as Sheppard continued to move, as if he wasn't aware that Rodney had come.

The continued pressure against his oversensitive cock made Rodney groan, and Sheppard finally lifted his head to look at Rodney. Rodney asked, "Did you?"

Sheppard shook his head, looking desperate, and Rodney smiled. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you." He let his weakened knees give out and slid down the wall, hands already busy at Sheppard's fly, tugging his pants down as far as the thigh holster would let him.

He groaned, long and low, as Rodney leaned forward and took his cock into his mouth. The head of his cock was wet, and Rodney sucked away the precome eagerly before moving deeper on his cock.

Sheppard's legs were trembling under his hands, and he touched them soothingly, even as he worked to make Sheppard come as quickly as possible. He looked up at Sheppard through his lashes, and saw that he was staring down at Rodney, one hand crammed in his mouth to keep from being too loud.

Pulling off his cock with a slurp, Rodney said, "Don't. I want to hear you."

He took his hand out of his mouth and braced it on the wall as Rodney returned his attention to Sheppard's cock, sucking it deep and messy with no finesse.

Sheppard accompanied his efforts with groans and softly muttered words. "Please, Rodney. Please don't stop. So good, so good. Your mouth feels so good on me. Oh, suck me."
Rodney shifted one of his hands so that he could gently squeeze Sheppard's balls. The other moved over Sheppard's ass and down his crack, brushing one finger over his entrance, though he didn't make any effort to penetrate him.

Sheppard cried out, throwing his head back, his hips rocking madly as he fucked Rodney's mouth. "I'm gonna… I'm gonna… Rodney, please…"

Finding his entrance again, Rodney pressed harder, sliding the tip of one finger inside the clenching heat of Sheppard's body. That was what it took, because Sheppard began to pump his completion into Rodney's willing mouth.

Rodney swallowed around Sheppard's cock, drinking his come and nursing him through the aftershocks. Only when he finally stopped twitching, did Rodney release his cock, tugging his pants back up and buckling them for him.

His knees gave out, and he sat down hard on the floor, facing Rodney who was still on his knees. "Christ, Rodney," he said. "That was… There are no words."

"Oh, I can think of a few," Rodney said with a smile on his face, "but I won't worry about it right now. Do you think you could stand? Kneeling like this isn't doing my knees any favors."

It took a minute, but Sheppard eventually pulled himself to his feet, hauling up Rodney after him. With a grin, Rodney leaned in to kiss Sheppard, stupidly happy when Sheppard didn't duck away.

But he didn't respond, either, which made Rodney pull back and frown, "Sheppard?"

"We shouldn't have done this. I'm sorry."

"Shouldn't have done what? Kissed? Have sex up against a wall? What? You're going to have to be more specific."

Sheppard shook his head. "None of it. We shouldn't have done any of it. It's too dangerous for you if we get caught."

"That's my choice to make, remember? And I don't think it's too dangerous at all."

"I have to go," Sheppard adjusted his pants again, and then the door opened. Rodney wanted to physically stop Sheppard, but that would be impossible. Instead, he let him go, saying as Sheppard rushed away, "This isn't over. We'll talk about it when I get back!"

With a sigh, he leaned back against the wall. His pants were wet and sticky, and he grimaced in distaste. He hadn't come in his pants since he'd been a horny teenager, and now look at him. All it took was a look from Sheppard, maybe a touch, and he was hard and aching.

He wasn't going to let this end like this. But first, he needed to get cleaned up, and then he had a mission that he needed to attend to. When he got back, though, he and Sheppard were going to have a long talk.

We're Off to Be the Wizard

John was waiting in the jumper bay as the scientists carried in piece after piece of equipment. He'd thought about not being here, about hiding in his office until they'd left, but realized that that would look suspicious. Everyone knew that he and Rodney were friends, good friends, and not being here
to see him off would be wrong.

Besides which, he wasn't going to get to see Rodney for two weeks. He wasn't quite sure how well he was going to do with that. He kept deciding that he was going to end this - whatever it was - with Rodney, and then the next time they were alone, he'd let it go to the next level.

Unbidden, his mind went back to that afternoon in Rodney's quarters. He couldn't believe that Rodney had gone down on him like that, like it meant everything in the whole world to him. The image of Rodney on his knees was one that was going to be burned into the back of his eyelids for a long, long time. He'd been beautiful down there, mouth full of John's cock, lashes thick on his cheeks as he peeked up at John through lowered lids.

The sound of Rodney's voice made him jump, and he straightened up from where he was leaning against the side of the jumper. "Hey, McKay!" he called. "You leaving anything in the lab or are you taking it all?"

There was a pause, as Rodney clearly tried to decide how to respond, and John couldn't help narrowing his eyes and attempting to telegraph that he needed to act normal. Thankfully, Rodney got the message, and he was clearly a better actor than John had given him credit for. "Ha, ha, Colonel. Very funny."

He came to lean next to John, and John couldn't help but flinch and pull away at how close Rodney was. Rodney's eyes closed, and he looked hurt for a split second before clearly deciding that this was neither the time nor the place for this conversation. John thanked God that Rodney had apparently developed a sense of discretion.

"Colonel, is it really necessary to take sixteen marines with us? The Erichians are harmless, and besides, they want our help. If they do something to me, obviously, they aren't going to get it, so it's perfectly safe."

"It's necessary because I say it is, Rodney. The marines are going to be working four six-hour shifts, with five on duty for each day shift and three for each night. You guys are to share rooms so that it's only necessary to guard two rooms, you hear me?"

Rodney sighed, but before he could launch into another round of complaints, John continued, "And you're not going to use your guard as pack mules other than unloading and loading the jumpers. When you're actually working in the plant, the Erichians can provide hands. They are there to guard you, and they can't do that if they've put down their guns to move a piece of equipment.

The marines started to gather, and Rodney's eyes grew wide. "You pulled out the P90s? I thought we were low on ammunition?"

"I need them to be efficient. They can't do that if all I gave them were handguns. You just worry about doing your job and let them do theirs, okay, Rodney?"

Eyes still wide, Rodney nodded. "I see we're taking a bunch of the new guys with us."

"Yeah, they're the ones that have field experience. Thought that it was time to let them see what it's like in the Pegasus galaxy, and this should be a milk run."

"Okay. That makes sense, I suppose." The last of the scientists scurried aboard the second jumper, and Rodney turned to look at John. "Sheppard -"

John dodged away from the reaching hand, and said, "Not here, okay? We'll talk when you get back." Rodney was quiet, but he nodded, turning to go aboard the first jumper. "Hey, McKay?"
Rodney turned to look at him. "Be careful out there, okay?"

"I always am, Sheppard."

Rodney climbed aboard, and John could see him bully his way into the shotgun seat through the windshield. It made sense, since Rodney was the only one who knew where they were going, but it was still funny.

Giving him a thumbs up through the windshield, the jumper dropped through the floor to the Gateroom, and John could hear the sounds of the Gate opening. He waited till the second jumper dropped and then closed his eyes. "Be careful, Rodney," he said out loud, not even worrying that someone might hear him. It was too important.

"Elizabeth to Colonel Sheppard."

He sighed. Just because Rodney was gone didn't mean that the work stopped. "Sheppard here. What can I do for you, Elizabeth?"

"We had a meeting scheduled ten minutes ago? I know you were busy giving last minute orders, but perhaps you can join us now?"

"On my way." He squared his shoulders. Like Rodney, he had work to do.

All That Was Left Was The Dead And Dying

The smell hit them like a tidal wave as they came through the Gate. Captain Cruz looked like she was trying hard not to gag, and Nash started throwing up almost immediately. Yesti glanced over at Doctor Damgaard and had to give her a touch of respect, since she wasn't being sick.

"What is that smell?" Cruz demanded.

Unfortunately, it was one that Yesti knew all too well. "They have been culled. Let us go." He turned to walk up the path to the Rodth, only to be stopped by Nash. Thankfully he wasn't puking anymore.

"Where are you going?"

"There may be survivors in need of aid," Yesti said, trying not to be overly sarcastic. So far, though, this team had done nothing to earn his respect. Shrugging out of Nash's grip, he continued up the path, not caring if they followed or not.

He could hear them behind him, talking softly, and a glance back showed them to be green, but moving.

The small village came into view. The first body was there, in the path. It was small, a child, and Yesti closed his eyes for a moment, wishing her soul into the care of the Ancestors.

"What the hell?" That was Captain Cruz.

"Have you not been told what the Wraith do to those that they cull, Captain?" Yesti asked. He knew that they had been, as he had tried to explain himself. He also knew that they had not been believed.

"You've got to be kidding. You mean they're all like that?"

"Most likely." The child's soul appeased, Yesti stepped past her empty shell and entered the village proper. He was aware that the team was following silently in his footsteps. As he didn't expect to
find anyone alive, that was probably for the best.

This had once been a thriving village. Now it was a ghost town. He only found a dozen or so bodies - most of the rest had probably been taken to the ship - but he prayed for those he found.

At the third child he found, Doctor Daamgard made a small sound of distress. "They don't even spare the children?"

"Why should they, Martina?" Nash asked. "They're probably a fucking delicacy to the animals that did this."

Yesti glanced at him. "Yes, we believe that to be the case. They certainly have more life force than an adult."

Doctor Daamgard turned to face the wall, but not before Yesti saw the tear sliding down her cheek. Yesti couldn't help but be fiercely glad. Maybe this would get through where nothing else had seemed to.

"There is nothing we can do here," he said as they left the last house. "We should return to Atlantis and notify my people. They will come and give the bodies an honorable burial."

Cruz nodded. "Yeah, okay." She didn't say anything else, but the look on her face spoke volumes.

**Oh, You Have Got to Be Kidding Me**

Rodney relaxed into the bed, trying to let the stress out of his shoulders. While, yes, he was mostly directing other people, he still was doing his fair share of lifting and carrying to get the right pieces to the right places. In the week and a half that they'd been gone, he'd practically redone the entire water plant, but the good news was that they were almost done. Another day, or two at the most, and he could go back to Atlantis.

And not a moment too soon. He'd not been in on the reports back to Atlantis, but he'd pumped Bates for as much information as he could get. It finally sounded like things were settling down at home, with the new people no longer pushing for a change in leadership. From what Bates had said, one or two of the new teams had come across the remains of a culling, and that had frightened them enough to finally pay attention to what the First-Wavers had been saying all along.

But Rodney found himself missing Sheppard even more than he'd expected. And he'd expected a lot. He missed just hanging out with the man, never mind the kisses and the naughty touching.

When he finally got back to Atlantis, they were going to talk, regardless of what Sheppard thought of it. Then, if Rodney had his way, they were going to fall down in a bed and not come up for air for two days. He felt want burning in his gut, and he thought about the look that would be on Sheppard's face when he offered to turn over for him. It had been a long time since he'd been fucked, but for Sheppard he was more than willing.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Rodney hurriedly sat up, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "Come in?"

It was one of the new people - Cordero. "Doctor McKay?"

"Yes, yes, what is it, Cordero?"

"Rahib is here. She says that her people have told her how close we are to finishing, and she wants to invite us back to the Town Center for a celebratory dinner."
Rodney's first thought was to say no, for himself, if not his team. They'd all been putting in twelve-hour days, trying to get this done, and the last thing any of them needed was to be forced into staying up late and making nice with politicos into the far reaches of the morning.

But the hopeful look on Cordero's face made him reconsider that idea. Obviously, at least one member of his team wanted to schmooze. With a sigh, he climbed to his feet. "Who's on watch?"

"Hules, Daven and Sanchez." Great, all new guys. They were even more resistant to taking orders from a civilian than Bates.

"I'm not splitting the team up. See who else wants to go. If at least half do, we'll go. Otherwise, forget it."

Cordero sketched a salute, and Rodney snorted as she disappeared, probably to the little living room the Erichians had set up for them. Everyone else had still been in there when Rodney had given up and gone to bed, after all.

Glancing at his watch, he realized that it wasn't that late, after all - only about the equivalent of seven or so, local time. It just felt later because they were getting up so early. With a sigh, he went into the little bathroom to wash his face and get cleaned up. By the time he got back out, Simpson and Cordero were waiting for him, practically bouncing in place, and with a pang Rodney realized how young they were, and how infrequently they got to go off-world. This was exciting for them, and he resigned himself to a long evening.

Gathering up all the scientists, he went to deal with Hules. He actually contemplated waking Bates, but realized the futility of that, and instead marched right up to Hules, who was standing at one end of the hallway. "We've been invited to the Town Center, Hules. Let's go."

"What? No!"

"I don't recall asking you. The Erichians have been nothing but nice to us, and they'd like to spend a little time with us that doesn't involve grunting over heavy pipes. Now, we can go with or without a military escort, but if we go without, Sheppard will have your head."

Hules looked pissed off, but he didn't argue, clearly realizing that he was outnumbered by the eight scientists arrayed in front of him. Catching the eye of Daven, he said, "Get Sanchez, and let Sergeant Bates know that we're going to be escorting the scientists to a dinner. Then let's go." Turning back to Rodney, he said, "We'll go, but you'll wait for the rest of your escort to be ready before we leave."

Rodney knew he looked annoyed, but he really couldn't help it. He didn't want to go in the first place, and now he was being held up by a couple of marines. Thunking his head back against the wall, he waited impatiently for the three marines to get themselves situated, and then let Hules lead the way to the Town Center, where they were greeted by Rahib and Patel. "My apologies, Doctor McKay, but Flirly had a meeting that she had to attend to. If you and your scientists would follow me, I'll show you to the dinner?"

Nodding curtly, Rodney followed Rahib inside. There was something going on, but he didn't know the woman well enough to be able to tell what it was. And besides, it could have been just the soldier's paranoia rubbing off on him. Rahib was an old friend of Teyla's. Of course, Sora had been one as well.

Inside the banquet hall, the spread was impressive, and there were a fair number of Erichians there as well. Rodney relaxed minutely as he was led to the food, and told that as the leader of the scientists, of course he got to serve himself first. Having someone acknowledge his rank after days of yelling
back and forth with the team made him relax, and he looked over the food.

Some of it was strange, and he decided to leave it for the other people to try first, but enough of it was familiar - Pegasus Galaxy standbys - that he was able to pick and choose. Pretty soon he had a full plate, and he went to sit down next to one of the walls so he could eat.

Rahib joined him after only a few minutes, and they made desultory small talk as Rodney ate. He started to feel a little dizzy as he finished off his food, and leaning forward, he set his plate on the table. "Doctor, are you alright?" Rahib asked, smiling like a shark - all teeth.

"I don't feel so well," he answered, trying to stand and failing. Looking around the room, he realized that all of his people looked pale and shocky, and that the military personnel were starting to look panicked as they made their way from person to person, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Do not worry, Doctor. We have someone who will make you feel, well, if not better, then more familiar." She went to a door that Rodney hadn't noticed, and let in a stream of people that he didn't recognize.

And one he did just before he passed out.

Kolya.

**So We Meet Again**

When Rodney's eyes opened, he was in a crowded cell. All of the other scientists were there, and several of them were still unconscious. There were three that were awake, and ignoring the pounding in his head, Rodney crawled across the floor to where they were whispering together "Are you all right?" he asked, noticing that none of them looked injured.

"I have a hell of a headache," Rodriguez said, "But other than that I'm all right. Who was that man? After you passed out, he started laughing, and then I don't remember anything until we woke up here."

"*That* was Kolya," Rodney spat, angry all over again. Bad enough that the son of a bitch had gotten away after kidnapping Sheppard, but now he was kidnapping Rodney? Didn't the bastard ever learn?

"Kolya?" Simpson's voice was smaller than Rodney could ever remember it being. Pulling himself to his feet, he turned around and moved to the front of the cell. "Kolya. What do you want? Actually, it doesn't really matter what you want. The answer is no. No, we won't help you. No, Atlantis won't give in to your demands. Just, no."
"We'll see about that, Doctor."

"If we wouldn't give in when you were torturing Sheppard, what makes you think that we're going to give in just because it's me? Even you can't be that stupid."

Kolya's face tightened, and he stared hard at Rodney, who felt his bravado slipping away. Glancing back into the cell, he saw that a few more of his people were waking up, and that hardened his resolve. They were all going to get out of this alive.

"I brought you here because I need your help, Doctor. Yours, and that of your team, in order to take my rightful place back among the Genii."

Rodney sighed and let his posture slump. "Oh, Lord. Not your damn nuclear program again. Don't you people ever learn? There are other ways to fight than with nuclear weapons."

"Of course, Doctor. And you know so many of them, don't you? No, you will assist my people in building several nuclear devices. If you and your people cooperate, this will all be - well, not pleasant, but at least tolerable, for all involved. If you don't cooperate," his eyes drifted down to Rodney's left arm, and Rodney had to resist the urge to grab it. "Well, let's just say that your visit could be very painful."

With that, Kolya turned and walked away. As soon as he was gone, Rodney sagged to the ground, gripping his head, which was pounding. He could vaguely hear the sounds of one of the other people in the cell crawling over to join him. "Doctor McKay? Are you all right?"

"Simpson, we're being held prisoner by an insane man. I think that entitles you to call me by my first name." Raising his voice a little, ignoring the way that it made his head hurt even worse, he said, "That applies to all of you. Now, who's still out?"

There were only two holdouts. Everyone else was awake, though everyone had a headache. Probably from the drugs, Rodney thought.

Gathering everyone together in one corner of the cell, he held a rapid-fire conference about what they had with them, hoping against hope that they hadn't been searched while they slept. Except that apparently Kolya had learned, and they didn't even have pocket lint. Several of the new scientists looked decidedly green about the gills, and Rodney found himself having to reassure them that Sheppard wouldn't stop looking for them.

They didn't look reassured, and Rodney finally gave up, realizing that the only way they were going to believe would be to see Sheppard coming through the door. For himself, he had to believe or he was just going to lose it, and that wouldn't be pretty.

He was still trying to think of a plan when Kolya returned. Rodney hastily stood and moved to the front of the cell, motioning for everyone else to stay down and back. As much as it scared him, he had to keep Kolya's attention on him, and away from everyone else if they were going to get out of this safely. "I already told you no, Kolya. Go wait for the rest of my team, why don't you?"

"They will not find you, Doctor. Don't you think this bravado is a bit much?"

"Won't find us, hmm? The same way you didn't think that we'd find you when you had Sheppard? If I recall correctly, we did, and we killed a bunch of your men at the time. Can't have many of those left, now, can you?"

Kolya looked angry with that, and Rodney had to swallow hard. Why the fuck had he brought that up? Not smart, dammit. "Yes, and I owe you for that. However, you won't be found. We aren't on
any planet that has known Genii ties. There is nothing to link you to this place, so Sheppard won't think to look here. We are perfectly safe. You, on the other hand..."

"And here comes the threats. What's wrong, Kolya? Can't find anyone intelligent enough to do your dirty work without using them?"

Kolya just smiled, and it scared Rodney right down to his shoes. He made a motion directed at someone out of sight, and several of his goons stepped forward. "Take the women," he said, still smiling.

Rodney was immensely proud of his scientists. Without a word, they rearranged themselves so that the female scientists were in the deepest corner of the cell, with the men arrayed outside them. He knew that the guard would get through, but hopefully not without some painful reminders of why it was a bad idea to take on engineers.

Then the goons were inside the cell, and he was too busy trying to remember every lesson that Teyla and Ronon had ever taught him to think about it anymore. It was only when one of the guards bashed his gun into Rodney's gut that he stopped fighting and went down. By the time he'd caught his breath and climbed back to his feet, they'd gotten their hands on the women and were dragging them out of the cell. He managed to get a hold of Cordero, and there was a moment when there was a tug of war with her as the rope, but the goon was bigger and stronger than Rodney, and he tugged her out of his grasp.

The cell door clanged shut, and Rodney silently cursed his focus. He should have tried to get out instead of fighting. Something to remember for next time, perhaps. In the meantime, "Kolya! You hurt them and I'll kill you myself! Leave them alone! Kolya!"

Kolya just gave a little wave and strolled away, following the goons who were dragging the women. He was glad to see that they were still kicking and struggling, even though Rodney knew it wouldn't do any good. Rodney had to swallow down nausea at what Kolya had planned for them. Throwing up wouldn't do any good.

Rodney looked around at the men littering the cell, gasping and groaning, and bit his lip. Oh, this wasn't good. *Hurry up, Sheppard,* he thought. *I don't know what to do.*

**Where the Hell Have They Been Taken?**

"Unscheduled off-world activation."

John sat up straight. "The only team out is Rodney's, and Bates isn't due to report for another seven hours. What the hell?" he said to Elizabeth before jumping up and rushing out to the command area. 
"Report."

"It's Sergeant Bates' IDC, sir. Shield is down, but they're not coming through."

"Put 'em on radio."

"Sergeant?"

"They've been taken, sir. I don't know by who, but they've all been taken!"

"Whoa, slow up a minute. Who's been taken?"
He could hear Bates take a deep breath. "All of the scientists, including Doctor McKay, sir. They went to a dinner, and when they hadn't returned by shift change, we went looking. The guards were stunned - they're just starting to wake up now - and they don't know where the scientists have gone."

"What about the Erichians?" John's hands opened and closed on his thighs as he tried to figure out what to do.

"If they know, they're not talking," Bates said.

"Okay - get your men together and wait for me. I'm going to get a team and we'll be coming through in about twenty. You got that?"

Bates sounded a lot calmer when he said, "Yes, sir. Twenty minutes, sir. Bates out." With that, the wormhole disappeared, and John turned to meet Elizabeth's eyes.

She frowned and nodded. "Go."

He was already radioing orders as he ran for the ready room and yanked on his vest. He swore that when (when, when, not if, when) he got Rodney back, he was going to chain Rodney to his side so that he couldn't be taken again.

By the time he got to the jumper bay, Teyla, Ronon and the team of twenty marines were already there. It was going to be a tight fit in one jumper, but John wasn't about to risk a fourth when he didn't know what had happened to the first two.

They squeezed into the jumper, and John took the controls. Within a minute, they were headed through the Gate. On the other side, they were met by Bates and his men, most of whom looked shocked. The few First-Wavers that with them looked quietly angry, and they were all staring daggers at the three men sitting to one side of the Gate. John landed, and the marines he'd brought poured out.

John headed for the three marines still sitting in isolation, Teyla and Ronon following. "What the hell happened? Report!"

Hules pulled himself to his feet. "I'm sorry, sir. It's my fault. I should never have allowed them to attend the dinner with only three guards as an escort."

"No, you shouldn't have, but that's neither here or there. Tell me what happened."

Nodding sharply at the rebuke, Hules said, "They were invited to a 'thank you' dinner at the Town Center. A few minutes after everyone started eating, I noticed that several of the scientists were pale and shocky looking. We were headed to them to see what was wrong when Rahib opened another door into the room, and there were men flooding it. Doctor McKay was one of the last to pass out, but he didn't say anything. Then we were hit with energy blasters, and I woke up to Sergeant Bates shaking me."

John couldn't stop himselfand spun on Teyla. "I thought Rahib was your friend!" he spat.

Teyla looked shaken. "I thought she was as well, Colonel. We should talk to her before we leap to conclusions, but if she is behind this..." Teyla's voice trailed off, but the threat was implicit. Ronon didn't say anything, but the anger on his face was clear.

John ground out, "Okay, let's go to town, men. Remember, we don't think that the people here have anything to do with this, so keep your weapons down unless I tell you otherwise." He met each marine's eyes until he was sure that they all understood, then led the way towards the town.
It wasn't long before he got passed by several marines who obviously took it upon themselves to take point. He was used to it, though, because whenever he did missions with them, they did the same thing. He knew better than to object.

They arrived at the Town Center in a few minutes, and Flirly met them at the doors. "Colonel Sheppard. How... pleasant to see you again," she said, sounding anything but pleased. "We were expecting you."

Teyla stepped forward. "You know why we are here, Flirly. Where are our people?"

"Taken where they can be useful to the people of this galaxy. Why should the Atlanteans be the only ones to benefit from their knowledge, when they know so many more ways to fight the Wraith than we do?"

"Hey, we've always been willing to help others," John said. "That's why they've been here for the last two weeks, remember? Helping you?"

"Yes, at a great cost to the Erichians, that we can barely afford to pay."

"So you'd rather start a war than pay your debts," Ronon growled, and Flirly blanched momentarily. John wondered just who had been filling the Erichians with tales about how the Atlanteans treated their enemies.

Flirly pulled herself up to her full height, and John broke. "You know what? I don't care what you have to say. I want to see Rahib, right now."

"She will not talk to those who pollute the City of the Ancestors."

John growled and then said, "Men? Find her. Try not injure anyone, but don't worry about destroying anything you find inside."

"Yes, sir," chorused the marines, and then they were moving past Flirly and into the building. Before long, sounds of smashing and tearing were echoing through the building, and Flirly was clearly becoming more and more upset.

"You know, if Rahib had just come out when we asked for her, this could have been prevented," John said. "Of course, if you hadn't arranged for the kidnapping of my people, it could have been prevented as well."

There were sounds of screaming, coming closer, and then Hules came out the door, carrying Rahib over one shoulder. She was the source of screaming, and she was kicking him in the stomach and pounding on his back. Hules looked like she was an annoying fly. "Here she is, sir," he said, setting her on her feet. The rest of the marines poured out of the building, and John nodded at Teyla. This was up to her.

"Rahib. I believed we were friends. Obviously, I was mistaken. What has happened to my people?"

"Your people? Your people are the Athosians, or have you forgotten?" Rahib spat.

"The Athosians and the Atlanteans are allies, Rahib. I have watched at the Atlanteans have destroyed hive ships, fixed shields, fixed your own water plant. And yet you betrayed them. Who did you sell them to, Rahib?"

Rahib continued to look as if she wasn't going to answer. Ronon growled and stepped forward, spinning his pistol and then setting it against Rahib's temple. John hesitated, and then sighed,
knowing that he couldn't allow this. Before he could say anything to Ronon, though, she broke. "It was Kolya and the Genii. They said that if they could have Doctor McKay, they would be able to resurrect their nuclear program, which was our best hope for taking the fight to the Wraith."

John winced. Why did it always have to be Kolya? "No, we were your best bet. We've destroyed at least eight hive ships. How many have the Genii destroyed? Oh, yes, none." Now Rahib was blanching as well, and John thought to himself that they really needed to do something to correct the spin that the Atlanteans were getting. Turning to eye Teyla and Ronon, he asked, "Do you think we're going to get any more information here?"

Teyla shook her head silently. Ronon wasn't so simply satisfied, though. "I think we should destroy their water plant. Why should they benefit from McKay's hard work?"

It was rather shaming that John actually had to think about it. "No. We'll just make sure that word gets out about how the Erichians treat their potential allies. Maybe it will get back to the Wraith."

Without a further word to Rahib or Flirly, he turned his back and conferred with Bates about getting all three jumpers back to Atlantis. The marines split up to go to their assigned craft, and John turned to head back to the jumper they'd left by the Gate.

Halfway there, he was stopped by Patel, who was obviously ignoring the way that he was surrounded by marines who were itching for a reason to shoot someone. "Lieutenant Colonel Sheppard, please believe me when I say that not all Erichians support Flirly and Rahib's actions. I argued against it, but was outvoted."

"Not so against it that you could have warned my people, were you?"

Patel hung his head in shame. "Yes, I should have warned them, but I hoped right up to the last that Flirly and Rahib wouldn't go through with it. Obviously my hope was misplaced. Just please, don't blame the people for the cowardly actions of their leaders."

John didn't know what to say. They couldn't afford another outright war, as tempting as it was, so he turned to Teyla, who was better at diplomacy than he was. She said, "If the Erichians do not wish to be blamed for the disappearance of Doctor McKay and his team, perhaps they should consider electing leaders who will not do the same thing. Perhaps they will also consider paying their debts."

Nodding his head sharply at Teyla's words, Patel backed away from John. As much as John wanted bloodshed to soothe his conscience about Rodney, Patel had done nothing to deserve it, nor had the average town person. So he waved at the marines to get them moving again, and headed back to the jumper and then back to Atlantis.

Time to see what they could do to find Rodney.

I'm Not Ready to Back Down

In the cell, there was only the sound of the scientists all panting hard, several of them groaning at relatively minor injuries. Just glancing around the cell showed an assortment of blackened eyes and split lips, and Rodney wasn't the only one clutching at his gut. Rodney knew that he should get up and check on them, make sure that there weren't any worse injuries, but he couldn't force himself to his feet.

Then the screaming started.
It was all Rodney could do not to weep. He didn't know what could be done to the others to make them scream like that, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. All he knew was if he could get his hands on Kolya, the man was dead.

From the sound of it, several of the men were crying - softly, but still crying, and that just strengthened Rodney's resolve. He couldn't let his people get hurt when he could prevent it. But he wasn't going to do anything as long as Kolya was torturing people under his command.

He remembered a conversation with Sheppard after the storm. Sheppard had told him that everyone breaks under torture. It was simply a matter of degree. Not if, but when. There was no shame in breaking, and listening to the women screaming and crying was torture. Rodney was fairly certain that even Sheppard would agree.

Besides, he had to protect his people, and sitting by and letting them get hurt was failing at his job. He didn't take failure very well.

Decision made, he hauled himself back to his feet and went to stand at the front of the cell. "Kolya!" he screamed, trying to be heard.

It only took a moment for Kolya to reappear, and Rodney swallowed hard. "Leave them alone, Kolya. Bring them back, and I'll help you. But just me. The rest of my team stays here, together."

"Making demands, Doctor? I hardly think you're in a position to do so." Kolya scratched his chin. "But I believe that it's a reasonable start, and I'm a reasonable man." Picking up his radio, he spoke into it, a single word. "Stop."

Almost immediately, the screaming stopped, though they could still hear crying. "They will stay under guard until you prove your good faith. Then they will be returned to the cell, but I wouldn't count on it being fast. Now," two goons appeared, unlocking the cell and standing outside, pointing their guns at Rodney, who raised his hands and slipped out the door, "we have work for you."

As Rodney walked, one guard in front and one behind, he slowly lowered his arms. The guard didn't say anything, so Rodney wrapped them around himself and hugged himself tight. He could do this. All he had to do was stall until Sheppard got there. That's all he had to do.

He was led into a small room filled with primitive electronics and various technicians who were fiddling with devices they probably didn't even begin to understand. With a silent sigh, Rodney set to work. Relatively quickly, he realized that what Kolya had wasn't even as advanced as what the Genii had given them during the siege. This wasn't going to be hard, it was going to be impossible. Besides which, the lack of shielding was appalling.

"What the hell are you people playing at?" he demanded without thinking. "You might not care that you remove yourselves from the gene pool, but I do!"

"Shut up, Doctor, and make yourself useful. My people know the risks, and are willing to take them." Kolya still looked pleasant enough, but Rodney wasn't buying it.

"They're willing to take the risks. How nice for them. They're willing to let their mouths and kidneys bleed. They're willing to risk permanent sterility and internal bleeding. They're willing to risk gastrointestinal destruction and -" Kolya slapped him without ever losing the smile on his face.

"Yes, Doctor, they're willing to risk all of that." A look around the lab showed that most of its occupants were staring at Rodney in fear, whether because of his words, or because he'd brought Kolya with them, he wasn't sure. He suspected that it was some amalgam of both. At least, if he was
one of them, that's why he'd be afraid.

But he just clamped his mouth shut and got to work, looking over the various projects that were at different levels of completion. Picking the one that looked closest to being done, he shooed the tech away and sat down in front of it, studying the wiring of the makeshift bomb. "What the hell? What were you thinking?" he said. The sad part was that the tech was close, so close in fact that he could have conceivably blown up the lab, thus preventing this whole situation, but Rodney was bound and determined to do as much damage to Kolya's little program as he could.

So he undid some of the wiring, twisting it and turning it back on itself. At the same time, he insisted that the shielding for the nuclear materials be beefed up, because if he was going to sit in front of it for an extended period of time, he wasn't going to risk leukemia or worse.

He continued to undo all the progress that had been done on the bomb until Kolya returned to see his progress. With a glare that he didn't even have to work to turn up, he said, "Your people are incompetent buffoons who are going to die of radiation poisoning before they ever manage to create a working bomb. Your equipment is obsolete, and probably was at the turn of last century. And you expect actual progress in one day? Ha!"

Kolya stared at him, like he was trying to see through Rodney to the truth. Rodney just focused on what he'd found, and the safety of his people. That was the important part. So when Kolya finally blinked, Rodney said, "At any rate, you've gotten all the work out of me that is going to happen today. It's been a big day, what with the kidnapping and the drugging, so I suggest that you take me back to the cell so I can check on my people. And I suggest that you feed us, or I'll be useless within a day anyway."

When Kolya nodded at the two soldiers who'd stayed in the room the whole day, Rodney added, "If anyone touches that bomb, I won't be responsible for it blowing up. It's at a very sensitive point in its building process, so I suggest that all you ham-handed halfwits keep your hands to yourselves."

Then he followed the two soldiers out and back to the cell.

The female scientists hadn't been returned, but it looked as if the men had received some basic medical care - he could see ice packs, and everyone was sitting up and talking quietly. He didn’t struggle as he was led into the cell, and the two guards locked the door and retreated out of sight. Rodney hurried over to where everyone was sitting in a small group.

"Is everyone okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," one of the men said - Costa - said. "They haven't brought Simpson or Cordero or Watson back, but we haven't heard any more screaming. And they fed us a little while ago."

"Okay," Rodney said. "I'm working on one of their projects. Going to see what I can do to keep us safe and together. Everyone just needs to remember that Sheppard is out there, looking for us, and he's going to find us, right? Don't have any doubts about that."

One by one, he met their eyes and held them until they nodded. They could do this. They could hold together until Sheppard got there, and then Rodney was going to go back to Atlantis and never leave again. Just then, a woman in a dirty shift walked up to the cell, carrying a tray that she slid under the bars. "This is for you, Doctor McKay."

Rodney nodded and went over to pick up the tray. There was tava bean stew, a chunk of bread and cup of water. Sighing, he sat down on the floor to eat what he was given. He hated tava beans, but they were better than starving, he supposed.
Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

A Fly On the Wall

Hules leaned silently against the wall of the conference room. The yelling just kept getting louder, and every time he thought that he could duck out, someone would turn and shoot another question at him.

Right now, it was Colonel Sheppard and Doctor Weir going head to head, and for the first time Hules could see why the Atlanteans thought that Colonel Sheppard was such a bad ass.

"I'm telling you that we need more information! Going off half-cocked is just going to get people killed, John. We can't afford to lose someone on something that might turn into a wild goose chase!"

Colonel Sheppard looked like he should have steam coming out of his ears. "And if Kolya has another pet Wraith? Then what? We just let him eat McKay?"

Doctor Weir looked as if she'd been slapped. "We didn't let him do that to you! We were doing everything we could to find you, but you knew that we couldn't just give in to his demands - your own orders demanded that we not give in!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Sheppard's voice suddenly dropped, becoming ragged and desperate. "But this is Rodney. We can't just do nothing!"

"We're not doing nothing, John. I've got a call into Ladon, and we're going to see if he can help us find where he might have taken them."

"Ladon - like he's really going to be much help. It's not like he managed to accomplish all that much before - and this time Kolya knows that we're going to go running right to him. Kolya's smart. He's not going to have gone anywhere that Ladon can find this time!"

"So what do you suggest?" Doctor Weir demanded, looking frazzled and harried.

"I know that we didn't find out everything that Rahib knows. We need to go back there and make her tell us where Kolya went from Erich. At least that would give us a starting point!"

"I could make her talk." That was the big alien - Ronon, he thought. Hules shuddered slightly. God knew that when faced with Ronon, he'd probably spill everything that he'd ever known.

But Doctor Weir was already shaking her head. "We're not torturing the leader of another people just because she's done something we disagree with. Absolutely not."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Colonel Sheppard spun in place and punched the wall behind him. Hules couldn't blame him. He had kinda wanted to punch something since Cordero had been taken, and they hadn't worked together as long as Colonel Sheppard and Doctor McKay had.

"John!" Doctor Weir exclaimed. "Getting this upset isn't accomplishing anything. You need to calm down before you hurt yourself."

Colonel Sheppard just ignored her, spinning on Hules instead. "You, did Kolya say anything before his men stunned you? Anything at all? Think, man!"

Hules concentrated hard. Cordero had looked ill and dizzy, and he'd been on his way to her side
when suddenly men were flooding the room. One man in particular had picked his way among the collapsing scientists and had grabbed McKay by the hair, lifting his head and laughing. Then he said... then he said... "Something about the nuclear program. Building one, or rebuilding it, or something. Honestly, sir, that's all I remember. After he said that, I got hit with one of those stunner things, and then I woke up to Bates slapping my face."

Sheppard looked more than a little relieved at that. "Okay, he wants McKay to redo their nuclear program. In that case, he's not going to hurt him too badly, because he needs him." He turned to Doctor Z-something, visibly dismissing Hules from his attention. "Is there a way to scan for nuclear material at a distance?"

But the doctor was already shaking his head. "Not at a planetary level. Stars give off radiation, too. Would confuse scanners."

"Goddamn it!" Colonel Sheppard wasn't moving, his hands clenched in fists at his sides, panting hard enough that Hules was worried that he was going to stress himself into a heart attack. "There's got to be something that we can use."

Ronon lifted his head and looked at Colonel Sheppard. "Why can't we find McKay the way you found me when the Wraith had me?"

The little wire-haired Czech raised his head at that. "Yes! Subdermal transmitters have been modified to give signal into subspace." Then he shook it, "But no, we have no network in place to trace it. Was Rodney's pet project, but is not finished yet."

Colonel Sheppard started to laugh, and everyone looked nervously at him. The doctor even edged away from him. Then, between chuckles, Sheppard managed to get out, "We should do what Rodney would do."

"And what would that be, John?" Doctor Weir asked gently.

"Hack the Wraith network and use it to find Rodney. After this, the signal's going to have to be changed, anyway, so if the Wraith pick it up, who cares?"

For the first time, Weir looked excited, glancing at the doctor. "Could we do that?"

Doctor Z started to shake his head, then nodded. "Yes, I think so. Would not want to do it from here, but could do it from another planet. Rodney should have left protocols in place for getting into Wraith systems."

Colonel Sheppard said, "Finally, we're getting somewhere. Let's get started!"

I Don't Know Where I'm Going To

It was taking too long. It had been hours, and Zelenka still wouldn't say anything beyond, "Not yet, Colonel."

John found himself in the gym, attacking the heavy bag like it had personally offended him. He knew that he was going to regret this later when he could barely move, but right now he didn't care. He had to do something with the truly toxic level of anger he was feeling or it was going to poison him.

He beat the bag until his hands were numb and his eyes were stinging from the sweat dripping in
them. Even then, he only paused long enough to shake feeling back into them and wipe some of the sweat away before he resumed, punching with no sense of rhythm or grace, just a pure desire to hurt something.

He hadn't even realized that the door to the gym had opened until someone's hand landed on his shoulder. Without thinking, he spun in place and lashed out before he even saw who was there. His punch was sloppy, a right hook that should have missed by all rights, but it landed perfectly on the guy's jaw.

"Oh, shit." He grabbed the guy to keep him on his feet, holding him up. When the guy finally looked up at him, it was Hules. Well, wasn't that the shit topping on a crap day? "Sorry," he said gruffly, only barely meaning it. He honestly hadn't meant to deck the guy, but he had to admit that it felt damn good.

"No problem," Hules said, waving him off. He worked his jaw for a moment, and then leveled a look at him that was equal parts frustrated and pained. "Do you think we can call it even now, or do I need to keep avoiding you to keep from getting killed?"

"I'm not going to kill you," John said, going over and picking up a towel to mop off his face. Dropping it on top of his bag, he turned to look at Hules. "Do you really blame me for being upset?"

"No, sir, I don't. But - permission to speak freely?"

John sighed. "Granted."

Hules met his eyes dead on as he said, "Sir, it wasn't our fault that they were taken. Cordero is my scientist - do you think that I'm any less upset than you were? Blaming me - or the men with me - is pointless. They'll be home soon."

The man had a point. John didn't want to admit it, though, and turned his back on Hules, staring at the wall. He could feel the muscle in his jaw jumping from how hard he was clenching his teeth, and he tried to force himself to relax before he broke a tooth. He tried, really, he did, to keep the words behind his teeth, where they could do no harm.

All at once, they were pouring out of him, and he was yelling, advancing on Hules. "I know that. I know we'll get them back, and I'll be so glad you get your scientist back - I'm sure you'll be very happy together. But the reality is that this isn't the first time that Rodney's been taken, it won't be the last." John paused for a breath then spat, "And if your people would get your heads out of your asses and see that there is no us or them, this would be a lot easier."

Hules reacted as if he'd been slapped. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"You telling me that it was an accident, that three people who were new to Atlantis were working together? If just one of the military in the room had been First Wave, he would have recognized Kolya, which would have meant we would have a better idea of who'd taken them sooner."

"But -" Hules stuttered.

"But nothing. I'm tired of this, Major. Last time I checked, we were all adults, here. But it's hard to tell that when the newcomers refuse to work with us, refuse to cooperate, refuse to socialize. We've done everything we can to make you welcome, and it gets thrown back in our face. So, yes, when you screw up, and my scientist gets hurt because of it, I'm going to be rather upset." John forced his voice level and backed away from Hules before he could level another punch. "Take what I'm saying and think about it. Then, if I'm wrong, you come find me. But if I'm right - and I'm willing to
wager that I am - then you get together with your little cronies and you decide what you want to do about it."

Without waiting for a response from Hules, he grabbed his bag and stormed out of the gym, headed for his quarters. He needed to cool off before he did something else he regretted.

**Your Face Is a Mess**

Rodney woke up sore and stiff from a night spent sleeping on the floor. At least there didn't seem to be any mice or rats in here, which was a relief. At the same time, concrete floors weren't exactly good for his back.

There was a small sink and toilet in the corner, and he went to do the best he could to clean up, given that there was no soap or towels or anything else civilized. It took a minute to figure out how to flush the toilet, but at least it worked.

Slipping out of the alcove, he realized that he'd woken up a few of the other men in the cell, and he grimaced. It would have been better for them to sleep as long as they could. At least in their sleep, there was some relief from what was happening.

He sat down next to one of the awake scientists. "Hey. Sleep okay?" The other man stretched and made a pained face. "Yeah, let's not even talk about my back."

More and more of the men were waking up, and Rodney raised his voice a little. "Okay, today I'm going to try to keep us all together, okay? You guys up for a little work in a lab? At least it would be familiar."

The men were nodding, but someone asked, "What about Simpson, Cordero and Watson?"

"Them too. Let's see if we can get a big party going, okay? Hopefully, Sheppard will be here today."

A hated voice rang out, "That would be a foolish thing to hope for," Kolya said. "There is no way that he's going to find you, at least not until I'm ready for him to find you. And that won't be until our nuclear project is off the ground."

Rodney levered himself off the ground, ignoring the way that his back burned and protested. "You know, Kolya, I really have to say that I thought you were smarter than this. You didn't think we could find you last time, yet we did. And we managed to save Colonel Sheppard. What makes you think that he's not going to find you this time?"

"Because he doesn't have you, of course. Colonel Sheppard is very resourceful, yes, but he's not as intelligent as you let people think. And by your own words, there's no one on Atlantis who can do what you do, so therefore, they won't have anyone who can find you."

"That is... painfully logical. Of course, you're counting on me being *right* about being the smartest man in Atlantis. I might not be."

"I hope for your sake, Doctor, that you are. You see, I'm tired of watching you and your people walk away from me. I'm more likely to kill you than let you get away again."

Several guards stepped into view before Rodney could react to that. "Now, I believe that you have some work to do. You may bring a few of your scientists with you, if you wish, since you found our technicians so incompetent."

Rodney brought himself to his full height. "I need them all, of course. I also need the three you took
yesterday."

Kolya smirked. "We shall see. It will depend entirely on how much progress you make today. I know that you're capable of finishing a nuclear weapon in hours. You should be able to finish the ones in the labs in a matter of days, since there's less urgency. I am generous, after all."

"Yeah, you keep thinking that," Rodney said, as he turned to face the men in the cell. "Okay, guys, let's go. Chop chop!"

With assorted grunts and groans, the men got to their feet with various amounts of grace, and soon there was a line to use what facilities there were. When Rodney turned to see how Kolya was taking the delay, he realized that the man was nowhere to be seen. There were just a bunch of his goons, and they didn't look particularly patient.

Feeling remarkably like the yappy dog that his neighbor in Colorado had had, he tried to get them to move faster, not wanting to risk the goons losing what little patience they had. Within a few minutes, he had them lined up and ready to go, though they were all showing the lack of coffee in their slow movements and their snappish comments.

The goons surrounded them and led them to the lab, which was abandoned. Either the techs had taken him at his word about radiation poisoning, or Kolya had believed him that they were incompetent.

Whatever the reason, he moved around the room, evaluating different projects and assigning them to members of his team. The soldiers were still in the room, so he didn't dare tell them to sabotage as much as they could. All he could hope was that as the day progressed, he'd find a way to get the message across.

Returning his attention to the bomb he'd been working on the day before, he tried to focus on making sure that it was so messed up that the tech would never be able to figure out what he'd done to it. When he was done, he hoped to be able to use the thing as a very large paperweight.

And all the while, he worried about what to do when Sheppard showed up. If Kolya meant what he said about killing Rodney before letting him go, then they were so screwed. He eyed the guards and wondered what they'd do if they got rushed by all the scientists.

Then he looked at the scientists and rethought that. With the exception of him, they were mostly a weedy bunch. Some of them might be deceptively strong, like Sheppard himself, but bulk would count more in a rush attack than slender strength.

Of course, he could always threaten to throw the not-really-a-bomb at them. That might actually scare them enough to buy some space. Nodding to himself, he decided that was what he'd do if he had to.

His people were getting out of this, even if it killed him.

Okay, Let's Give This a Try

Zelenka fine-tuned the equipment one more time, as John stood by feeling helpless. It had been two days. God only knew what Kolya had done to Rodney in that time. But they were going to get him back. They were. John refused to think that after all of this, they might just be getting a body to bury.

Rodney had never been very good at keeping his mouth shut, after all. It would be far too easy for
him to piss Kolya off to the point that he forgot that he was useful.

His hands shook, and he stuck them in his pockets so no one could see. He thanked God that they were on the same team, and so far everyone had chalked up his reaction to Rodney being taken to that fact, because if they knew the reality that some very unprofessional feelings were making him react like this. Well. It probably wouldn't be pretty.

But to himself, he could admit the truth. He had to, because living a lie for this long was enough to make him sick. The reality was that when they got Rodney back (when, when, not if, when) then he was going to get Rodney alone and kiss him hard and long, and not going to stop till he'd made Rodney come. Multiple times, if possible.

If they were lucky, he wouldn't do it in the Gateroom.

Zelenka broke into his concentration. "Colonel? Is ready."

"Okay, so show me," he said. He'd be damned if he'd give anyone a chance to get a shot at another scientist. He was going to a carefully selected planet to hack the Wraith network, and he was only taking Ronon and Teyla.

"I still think it would be better if I went. Less time taken if there's a problem."

"No go, Doc. Come on. You know that Rodney thinks I'm pretty smart for a flyboy."

Zelenka stopped and stared at him, absent-mindedly shoving his glasses up with one finger. "This is true. He thinks you are not quite as moronic as some. It doesn't mean that you are capable of hacking Wraith code."

"True. But I'm sure you got it right, and I won't have to. So show me what you've got."

Zelenka sighed and bent over the laptop. "You will need to run this program," he said, pointing at an icon on the desktop. It was clearly labeled, "Wraith hacker." "Then you will need to wait patiently - could take a few minutes, could take a few hours. It depends on if there is a Wraith ship close to where Rodney and others are being held."

John nodded. "Is there a way to tell if the Wraith have detected our attempt?"

"Yes. If signal cuts out suddenly, then you have been detected. Is deliberate programming. If the signal comes back with specific tags, means that Wraith are trying to trace the signal back. Will automatically terminate program."

"Do we re-run the program if that happens?"

"No, you hope it does not. Once detected, it is no longer safe to run program, and we will have to come up with another way to find Rodney."

John's gut clenched. "So this is a one shot deal, then?"

"It is indeed, Colonel. I hope for all our sakes that it works."

"I do too."

Picking up the laptop, John had a moment of thinking that it was awfully light for something that held all of his hopes. Then he slid it into a case and turned to go. Except that Zelenka had laid a hand on his arm. "Colonel? Bring him home to us. We need him."
"I need him. "Will do. Wish us luck."

"Good luck. All of you."

John nodded at Zelenka and stepped out of the lab, carrying the computer like it was priceless. To him, it was. He barely noticed when Teyla and Ronon fell in behind him on his way to the Gateroom, except for the way that the muscles in his back suddenly relaxed. They were going to find him. They were.

As soon as they got to the Gateroom, John looked up at the control area. Elizabeth was there, her face looking pinched and tired, and John felt guilty. He knew that he hadn't helped the situation with his demand to do something, anything, right now.

But now wasn't the time for apologizing. Instead, he nodded at her, and she said, clearly enough for John to hear, "Dial the Gate."

He'd been tempted to argue that they should do this on Erich, since it had a good chance of bringing a hive ship down on whatever planet they used. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, not really. Just because their leaders were assholes, it didn't mean that the people deserved to be culled.

Instead they went to a carefully selected abandoned planet. It had been culled to extinction long before, and more importantly, it was fairly central in the galaxy, which increased their chances of finding Rodney quickly.

Setting up the computer on a flat rock, John booted it up, and waited impatiently. As soon as the screen came into view, he selected the program and told the computer to run it. The program came up obediently, and then there was nothing to do but wait.

Ronon took out a knife and started to sharpen it. Teyla started to do some stretches. John paced, glancing at the computer every few steps.

"Colonel, you will exhaust yourself before he is found. It is best that you sit, do you not think?"
Damn Teyla for being the voice of reason.

"I don't need to sit. I'm fine."

"You're not fine," Ronon's voice was gruff. "None of us are. Do us all a favor and sit before you drive us crazy."

John found himself grinding his teeth in an effort to keep from arguing with them. But they were Rodney's friends as well, and they probably weren't taking this much better than John was. Forcing his jaw to relax, he sat down on the ground in front of the computer, watching it closely.

"Doctor Zelenka said that it may take several hours, did he not?"

John nodded, then forced himself to look away from the computer. "What am I supposed to do while it runs?"

"Perhaps you should start planning how we are to extract Rodney and his team?"

Yeah, planning. He could do planning. He closed his eyes and started to think about how many marines he could fit in a jumper, and how many pilots he had. The only way that he could think of to take Kolya if he'd stuck true to form was with overwhelming force, since the son of a bitch was probably under...
"Colonel!"

Teyla's cry and the near simultaneous beeping of the computer brought him out of his contemplation. Opening his eyes, he looked eagerly at the screen, fingers crossed that it had the results, and that it wasn't telling him that it had had to cancel the program.

"Got him!"

John jumped to his feet, and ran to the DHD, forgetting the computer in his rush. Then he remembered and turned to pick it up, shut it off, but Ronon had beaten him to it. "Go, Sheppard."

Dialing Atlantis only took a matter of moments, and then they were through the Gate. "Got him," he yelled, and Elizabeth's head popped up from next to the Gate tech's chair. "Where?"

"PX5 Y56." John was practically dancing, he was so excited. They had a location. They could go get Rodney.

"Got it," the Gate tech announced.

"How many marines are you taking?"

"Two jumpers, twenty marines, fully armed. I want them to pull out the rocket launchers for this, Elizabeth. If Kolya holds true to form, he'll be underground and we might have to blast open some doors between us and them."

She was already agreeing, and for the first time, John noticed how many marines were in the Gateroom. Then he looked at faces and realized that they were the marines who'd been on Erich when Rodney and his team had been kidnapped. He looked from face to face and saw only hope and determination. "Hules?" he asked.

"We want to go, sir. We didn't manage to stop this Kolya from taking them, and we want to be responsible for taking them back."

John looked past him to the other marines, who all seemed as certain as Hules did, regardless of whether they were new or First Wave. Then he glanced back at Teyla and Ronon, and up at Elizabeth. All three of them nodded at him. It seemed like a good thing, so he said, "Of course, Hules. Meet in the jumper in ten."

"Sir! Yes, Sir!" and then Hules turned to Bates, who was arranging who was bringing which weapon.

"Okay, that's sixteen. Me, Teyla, and Ronon, that's nineteen. Stackhouse as a second pilot, that's twenty. And it still leaves room for Rodney's team when we find them." John knew he was talking to himself, but it was easier than making the decision and then having to explain it to Elizabeth. Plan laid out in his head as clearly as if he'd drawn it on a white board, John looked up at Elizabeth and said, "Permission requested?"

"Granted," she said. "Bring him home."

"Will do."

What a Big Bang You've Got
The third day, Rodney was actually the last to wake. Exhaustion would have that effect, he supposed. He'd spent the day before moving from project to project, cajoling and nagging at people that they weren't doing it right, that didn't they know that doing this would have that effect? At the same time, his hands had been busy messing up wiring, resetting C4 so it wouldn't go off, and generally making a mess of Kolya's little nuclear factory.

He'd never been prouder of his people, because every single one of them had caught on to what he was doing, and had contributed their own missteps to the process. When they got out of here, even if Kolya and his people survived, they'd never be able to make any of the projects in the lab work.

Now he just had to decide what to do about today. Last night, he'd demanded the return of his missing scientists, and Kolya had laughed in his face. It was clear that Kolya was holding them for good behavior on the part of the scientists, and Rodney had to admit, it was working. He didn't want to think what would happen to them if Kolya caught on to his little deception.

Stretching, he decided to worry about it later. Right now, he needed to pry himself off this concrete floor and wait for Kolya or his goons to take them back to the lab.

The sound of women's voices got him up faster than he thought possible, so he was standing by the time the cell door was unlocked and Simpson, Cordero and Watson were unceremoniously shoved inside. They looked a little shell shocked, but all their parts seemed to be intact, so Rodney was willing to call that a victory. Simpson stumbled, and Rodney jumped forward to try and catch her.

He miscalculated the distance between them, and she slammed into him, practically knocking him to the floor. He just barely managed to recover and keep them both on their feet. "You okay?" he asked her.

Her answer shocked him. "We're fine. That bastard didn't touch us."

"But - screaming?" Rodney said. "We heard you."

"It was a recording, Rodney. We're fine, I promise you." Simpson seemed to actually think about her answer then. "Well, not fine, since we're still prisoners, and they haven't really been feeding us, but they didn't hurt us."

Now Rodney just felt dumb. Why hadn't he thought of a recording? Had he given in too easily? Some of his thoughts must have shown on his face, because Simpson's face grew grave. "Whatever you did? It saved us from actual torture. Those... miscreants made it all too clear that they were looking forward to it not working. I think the plan was to rough us up, if not... worse." And Simpson looked distinctly ill.

Rodney couldn't let her focus on what might have happened - since it hadn't. Instead, he clapped his hands together and gathered everyone in by line of sight. "Okay, boys and girls. Ready for another fun day in the lab?"

He only got a muted response, but he figured that was about as good as it was going to get. After all, it had been three days since they'd been taken, and they were all operating on restricted food and little sleep. He rounded everyone up, and they waited for the goons to open the cell door.

As soon as they got to the lab, the men who'd been there the day before went directly to their assigned projects. Cordero attached herself to Rodriguez, which made sense since they were both in the group that had come from Earth. Simpson and Watson simply stood and observed for a long moment, but Rodney was content to let them. He was just damn glad to have them back, and in one piece.
He had no real way to track time here, since they were underground and they weren't being stopped for meals. If there was anything resembling a clock in here, Rodney hadn't been able to figure it out. So when one of the goons slipped out of the door, it took him a moment to react to the fact that they'd been left with only one guard.

Then a sudden booming noise caught his attention, and he looked over at the man still by the door. He was holding his gun firmly - no chance of getting it away from him - but his attention seemed to be more on what was going on outside the door than what the scientists were doing. And why shouldn't he? They were scientists - hardly dangerous.

But Rodney had been on a Gate team for the last three years, and he was desperate. He knew that if that was Sheppard, Kolya could show up at any moment. Rodney knew enough to know that he'd meant what he'd said about killing them before letting them go. So Rodney did the only thing he could think of.

He picked up the wrench from the table in front of him, and he rushed the guard, swinging madly. The guard's gun came up, but before he could pull the trigger, Rodney managed to land the wrench on his arm. He very clearly heard the snap of bone breaking, but he didn't hesitate, bringing the wrench up and around so that he could hit the guy in the head.

The man toppled, and Rodney dropped the wrench, grabbing for his gun. He took a second to make sure that he knew how to fire the damn thing, and then looked up. The other scientists in the room were all staring at him. "Well?" he said. "Are we going to meet Colonel Sheppard or what?"

They all dropped whatever they'd been working on, and Rodney was amused to note that several of them armed themselves with whatever tools they could find. Good. Even if Sheppard was blowing his way in from the outside, god only knew how many guards they were going to have to get through to meet up with him.

He paused next to the door, listening carefully. He definitely heard another explosion, and he suspected that he was hearing gunfire. Good. He didn't hear anyone outside the door. Even better.

"Stay behind me," he said to the room at large, then opened the door and peeked out. No one was in the hall, and there weren't any convenient "exit" signs, so he picked a direction opposite that of the cell, and started walking, hugging the wall as best as he could.

When they came to a stairway, he went up, checking behind him repeatedly to make sure that he hadn't lost anyone. The sounds of gunfire were getting louder, and he could hear the distinctive whine of Ronon's pistol. When they reached the door at the top of the stairs, he crouched down as low as he could get before opening it, hoping that if anyone was right outside the door, god only knew how many guards they were going to have to get through to meet up with him.

No bullets came through the opening, and he breathed a sigh of relief before leaning a little ways out and taking a look. He saw the back of a TAC vest and nearly fainted with relief. They were facing the other way, shooting down a long hallway, and now he could see the red flashes from Ronon, and the sound of gunfire was deafening.

Rodney wondered what to do. He didn't want to startle whoever it was, because that was a good way to get shot, but hanging out in the stairway didn't seem to be a good idea either. Finally, he turned around and whispered to Simpson, "Give me that," pointing at the tool she was holding in her hand. When she handed it over, he threw it, as hard as he could, against the far wall.

The two men at the back of the group - guys he didn't recognize - spun in place, guns up and ready.
Rodney took a deep breath and stepped out in the hallway, hands above his head. "Looking for us?"

Before he could say anything else, Sheppard was there, hands on his shoulders, shaking him. "Are you all right? Where are the others?"

Rodney gestured at the stairway, and the rest of the scientists crept out slowly, cautiously. "What say we get out of here, Colonel?"

"I'd say that sounds like a winner of a plan," Sheppard said. "Let's go."

Then a voice that Rodney never wanted to hear again spoke up from behind him. "I told you that I'm not letting you go, Doctor."

Sheppard growled, "Kolya," and lifted his gun, pointing it past Rodney into the dark space at the other end of the hallway. "Haven't you figured it out yet? We're always going to beat you. And this time, I'm not letting you get away."

"That's fine, Colonel." Kolya's voice sounded a little too self-satisfied, and Rodney started to turn, to see what the hell he had up his sleeve. Except that two gunshots rang out almost simultaneously, and then Rodney was on his back, gasping for air.

He didn't hurt, that was the weird part. It just felt like someone had knocked all the air out of him, and he couldn't quite catch his breath. Sheppard dropped to his knees next to Rodney and pressed on his chest, and, oh, yeah, now it hurt.

"Sheppard," he whispered. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Rodney. You hear me? Nothing at all. Unless you don't hold on, in which case I'm going to make you very sorry indeed." Sheppard turned his head and snapped out, "Bates. Hules. Go fetch a stretcher. The rest of you, keep them off of us."

Rodney lost the thread of the conversation then. All he knew was that there was an awful lot of yelling going on, and someone was driving all the air from his lungs. He needed to catch a deep breath, just one, and he'd be fine. But he couldn't get that one deep breath.

He was picked up and placed on a stretcher, and he could see Ronon carrying his feet. Oh, that was good - keep the feet elevated in case of shock. Sheppard was still by his side, talking. "Hey, stay with me, Rodney. We still need to have that talk, damn you. Don't you duck out on me."

"Not going anywhere," Rodney gasped out, but he was lying, because where he was going, it was very, very dark.

The last thing he heard was Sheppard's voice. "Rodney. Rodney!"

**Breathe Under Water**

Kolya had died too fast, damn him. For hurting Rodney, he should have been made to suffer.

John led the way to the jumpers, not worrying about cleaning out the viper's pit of mercenaries he left behind. Instead, his men shot anyone who got between them and the jumpers. As soon as everyone was on board, and Bates had checked to make sure that they hadn't accidentally lost anyone, John had them in the air.
He wanted to be in the back, wanted to be the one trying to hold the blood inside Rodney, but there wasn't anyone else on the jumper capable of flying it at the speeds they needed to go. He knew that he was flying recklessly, trying to nurse just a little more speed out of the jumper. "Come on, baby," he murmured, hands busy on the controls.

As if the jumper knew what he wanted, he got an extra kick of speed out of her, and within moments they were within sight of the Gate. One of the marines dialed Atlantis and put in their IDC, and Elizabeth started to say, "The shield's -"

John cut her off. "Get a med team to the jumper bay! Rodney's been shot!"

"Underst-" And then they were going through the Gate.

As soon as they were parked in bay, John was out of his chair and kneeling next to Rodney on the floor. Teyla had a large pad pressed firmly against Rodney's chest, and the spreading red stain on the surface made John swallow hard. Raising his head, he yelled out the back of the jumper, "Where is my med team?"

Within seconds he could hear the squeaking of the gurney rolling across the jumper bay floor. Carson didn't stop at the cargo door. Instead, he rolled the damn thing right in and next to Rodney. "Teyla?" he asked. His voice was gentle, and John just wanted to shake him, wanted to scream Don't be gentle - just fix him!

"He is still breathing, Doctor, but the wound is... badly placed, I believe."

"We'll see, lass. Now," Carson gathered John and Ronon in by eye, and the three of them picked up Rodney and placed him on the gurney. Without anything further, Carson was gone, his team pushing Rodney at a dead run while Carson yelled out orders.

John collapsed like his strings had been cut, landing on his ass and staring at his hands that were covered with Rodney's blood. Looking up, he realized with dawning horror that there was blood all over the controls. He had to fight down a rebellious stomach that wanted nothing more than to hurl every meal that he had eaten for the last week.

Teyla's touch was gentle. "John? We should go give our report to Elizabeth."

"Right, right," he said, but he didn't move for a long moment. Only when he thought he could handle this without losing it did he stand up. The jumper bay swung crazily around him, and he swallowed hard, holding on to the bench in front of him for support. When he thought he wasn't going to fall, he let go. "Let's go talk to her."

Except that Elizabeth radioed while they were on the way to her office. She was already on her way to the infirmary, and they changed direction to go meet her. They could debrief there as easily as her office, anyway.

The area outside the infirmary was crowded with scientists. John wanted nothing more than to shove through them and find out what was going on with Rodney, but when he saw Zelenka he slowed down. Zelenka was responsible for the fact that they'd found Rodney at all.

Zelenka seemed to be staring at John's hands, which were still covered in drying blood. He wanted to fold them up and hide them in his pockets, but he didn't. Forgetting that Rodney had been wounded wouldn't be so simple or so easy. "Is true then?" Zelenka asked.

"Is what true, Doctor Z?"
"You brought Rodney back, but wounded?" Zelenka was wringing his hands, and John very nearly reached out to stop the restless motion.

"Yeah. Carson's with him now." John couldn't help the way that his eyes drifted past Zelenka to the doors of the infirmary. "I'm just about to go in and find out what's going on."

"Yes," Zelenka said. "It is good that he is back. Now that Carson has him, things will be well." Zelenka reached out and grabbed John by the arm. "You did good, Colonel, bringing him home."

John couldn't say anything past the choking sensation in his throat, but he nodded at Zelenka. Ignoring everyone else, he slipped through the quiet crowd, aided and abetted by Ronon and Teyla. The infirmary door slid open, and he took a deep breath before going inside.

There was quiet chaos in the infirmary. Carson was nowhere to be seen. Instead, his nurses raced madly to and fro, issuing instructions to each other. After John nearly got run over by one excited nurse, he looked around for Elizabeth, who was standing in the informal waiting area. The team went to join her. "What's happening?" John asked.

"Carson took him straight to surgery," Elizabeth answered, voice tight with strain. "No one's come out to tell me anything yet."

John nodded and sat down in one of the chairs, leaning forward on his elbows and letting his hands dangle between his thighs. Teyla perched on the chair next to him, and Ronon silently stood behind the two of them. He didn't say anything, knowing that Elizabeth would ask, sooner or later.

For a long time, there were just the sounds of the infirmary around them, and John had actually started to drift away when she finally did ask. "How did he get shot, John?"

Lifting his head, John stared at her. "I don't really know. We were making headway in getting in - we'd had to blow a couple of doors, but nothing that we didn't expect. I knew that we were in the right place from the amount of resistance, but I had no idea how far we were going to have to go to find them. Then all of a sudden the scientists were there. Rodney must have busted them out of where ever they were being held, and led them to meet up with us."

Elizabeth looked proud. "That's our Rodney."

"Yeah. Well, we met up, and then Kolya appeared out of nowhere, it seemed. Made some crack about not letting go, and then he shot Rodney. I shot him at almost the same time, and if I'd been a little faster, then Rodney would be just fine."

John rubbed his face, glaring at Elizabeth when she looked like she was going to argue with him. Elizabeth clamped her mouth shut, and John took a deep breath before continuing. "So, we grabbed Rodney, loaded up the jumpers, and came home as fast as we could."

Elizabeth nodded, probably realizing that that was all she was going to get out of John until they knew how Rodney was. John knew that she'd be after a more complete report later, but she could get it from Teyla or Ronon. He didn't have the heart right now. The whole situation just made him want to throw up.

He shifted in his chair, trying to get comfortable and failing. He found his attention drawn to his hands again and again, to the drying stains of blood. He should really wash his hands soon, but he was afraid to move, afraid that he'd miss some important piece of information.

Teyla, as always, seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "John, there is a sink there," she pointed across the room. "Should you not wash yourself? When Rodney comes out of surgery, he is
not going to want to see his blood on your hands."

John couldn't help feeling that he shouldn't wash them - that Rodney's blood was on his hands, since he hadn't been better, faster, than Kolya. But Teyla was right, he should clean up, and if he used the infirmary sink, then he was right there if someone came out with any news. Crossing the room, he scrubbed his hands, only stopping when the stinging told him that he'd probably removed the top layer of skin as well.

Then it was back to the uncomfortable chair, to wait and to hope and to pray.

At about the three-hour mark, Doctor Biro came out of the OR. She looked sweaty, and there was blood all over the front of her scrubs. John was out of his chair and across the room in a flash. "Doctor?"

"Carson's still in there, Colonel. He sent me out here to tell you that it's going to be at least another hour, possibly two. The bullet managed to hit Doctor McKay in the lung, but somehow - and don't ask me how - it didn't nick any arteries or large veins. He's looking at a long recovery period, but if he makes it through the surgery, he's got a pretty good chance."

John let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Thank you, Doctor Biro. I appreciate the update."

"You should go and get some rest, Colonel. Like I said, it's going to be a while yet, and then he's going to be in recovery for several hours before any of you can see him."

"Thanks again, Doctor." John turned to go back to the chair, but found his way blocked by Ronon. "Go, rest. We'll keep watch."

"I need to be here," John said.

But Elizabeth was there too. "Don't make me make it an order, John. You've barely slept since Rodney was taken. Go get a few hours sleep, and we'll make sure to wake you when he's in recovery."

He looked from face to face, wanting to argue, but even Teyla seemed determined to get him out of the infirmary. With a sigh, he turned and left, passing by the much-diminished crowd of scientists still outside the door. He knew that Biro had probably told them the same thing that she'd told him.

He thought about going to his room, but his feet carried him to Rodney's room instead. Overriding the lock on the door was a simple matter of sweet-talking Atlantis, and then he was in.

Rodney'd been gone long enough that the room smelled of disuse. There wasn't dust everywhere, but the bed was made, and there was a small pile of dirty clothes in the corner, like he hadn't had time to do laundry before he left.

Not thinking about why he'd gone to Rodney's room instead of his own, he climbed into the bed. The pillow still smelled faintly of Rodney, and he closed his eyes, hoping against hope that when he woke up everything would be all right.

They Think That Your Early Ending Was All Wrong

Carson looked like he was about two seconds from stumbling from fatigue when he came out of the
operating room. Elizabeth stood smoothly, pasting a smile on a face that wanted to demand answers. "Carson?"

Stripping off the bloody clothes he was wearing, Carson shoved them into a laundry hamper, then turned to face her. "The damage is repaired and he's breathing on his own. How much actual damage was done... we won't know that for a while. He should live, but there are so many possibilities right now, I can't begin to tell you.

"He's in recovery. In about an hour, we'll bring him in here, and then he can have visitors. No more than one at a time until he wakes, and even then I'd like to keep the chaos down. Could you make sure that his team understands that? I'm assuming that they'll want to be the ones to sit with him."

Elizabeth nodded. "We managed to get John off for a nap about two hours ago. I'll wake him - he's taking this a lot harder than I expected him to, even given his 'no man left behind' mentality."

"Oh, aye, he is. There's something going on there. I just don't know what it is." Carson collapsed into a chair, and rubbed a hand over his face, looking gray-faced with exhaustion. Elizabeth moved forward, resting one hand on his shoulder.

"You did good, Carson. It sounds like he was badly hurt."

Carson rested his hand on top of Elizabeth's for a moment. "Aye, but not the worst I've seen since we got here, thank God. Now, I'm going to go lie down in my office for just a bit, so that when they go to move him out here I can be there. You should call the Colonel and tell him that Rodney's out of surgery."

She nodded, then watched as Carson stumbled to his office. Carson was right - there was something going on there, and it bothered her that she couldn't figure out what it was. Maybe if she'd had more time to think about it, she'd be able to put her finger on it. In the meantime, she had a call to make.

"Colonel Sheppard?"

It took a moment to get a response. "Yes? Is Rodney out of surgery?"

"Yes, he is. You've got about an hour before you're able to see him."

"Understood. Sheppard out."

Elizabeth went back into the waiting area, where Teyla and Ronon were sitting. She couldn't help thinking how lucky Rodney was that he had such good friends, especially right now. He was really going to need them as he recovered from being shot.

Ronon straightened from his slouch and looked at her. "He done in surgery?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes. Carson says he has a long road ahead of him, but he should be all right."

He nodded, and she directed her attention to Teyla, who looked relieved. "Have you notified the Colonel yet? I believe that he would want to know as soon as possible."

And here was the opening that Elizabeth was looking for. "Yes, I have. Though I have to admit that John seems to be taking this harder than I would have expected. Is there something that I should know about?"

Teyla seemed to be picking her words carefully as she answered. "I believe that the Colonel has... strong feelings for Doctor McKay. I am not completely certain what those feelings are, but I am sure
that they are private, and best not spoken about."

Feeling a little like she'd been slapped, Elizabeth had to work hard not to physically recoil. For Teyla, that was the equivalent of being told to shut up. "I see. Well, he should be on his way down. I need to go back to the conference room and debrief the other scientists who were with Rodney."

Teyla nodded and smiled, and Elizabeth could almost taste the words that she wasn't speaking. As she moved off, she was already radioing the scientists to assemble, but she couldn't forget Teyla's words. "Strong feelings" indeed.

**Third Hand Grace**

Teyla forced herself to be calm when John came into the infirmary as if he was being chased. His hair was wet, as if he'd just taken a shower, and he was looking around frantically. Obviously not spotting what he was seeking, he turned towards the waiting area. Upon seeing Ronon and herself, he walked over slowly, and sank down into what Teyla thought of as his chair. It was sad that they had spent enough time here to have their own chairs.

She leaned forward and rested one hand on John's knee. "Did you have a good rest?"

"Yeah, I guess." He looked around the room again, and then burst out with, "Where is he?"

"Doctor Beckett said it would be at least another hour, John. Be patient."

He rubbed his hands over his face, and Teyla could read the lines of tension and stress in his shoulders. She wished that she knew some words to erase them, but there really were not any. All she could do was reassure him that Rodney was going to be all right. "He said that he should be fine, John. It will be a long time in recovery for him, though, I am afraid."

He nodded, and opened his mouth to speak, but then the squeaking of gurney wheels brought his head up and he turned to stare as Rodney was wheeled out of recovery. She expected them to transfer him from one bed to another, but they did not. Seeing the sheer number of machines that were connected to him, she believed she understood why.

She watched as John stood, and then wavered on his feet, as if he was not sure if he wanted to approach. She stood as well and took his arm in a firm grasp, squeezing it gently. "Go. He needs you."

John gave a sharp nod, then moved across the infirmary floor, hooking a chair as he walked past and settling at Rodney's head. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, and stared at the floor, not moving.

When hands settled on her shoulders, she was startled. "You should go rest, Teyla," Ronon said. "You as well." She was not going to leave John alone to deal with his grief and pain.

"I'm going to keep watch over them," Ronon said, jerking his chin towards the two of them. "I'm afraid that he might do something stupid."

There was no need to ask who "he" was - Rodney would be lying in a hospital bed for a long time, and incapable of doing anything stupid. "I am afraid, also," she said, relaxing slightly. "He feels... very strongly. I do not believe that this is a familiar circumstance for him."
"No, it's not," Ronon agreed. "We'll just have to keep an eye on them, make sure that the wrong people don't see anything. But in the meantime, I'll take watch. You go rest. We'll switch in a few hours."

She wished to argue, wished to stay and watch as well, but knew that it would be pointless. Ronon, when determined, was very much like the irresistible force that Doctor Zelenka spoke of sometimes. Besides which, she was tired and she still had Rodney's blood on her. She wished heartily for a shower, and a few minutes to spend in meditation over the events of today.

Studying Ronon's eyes closely, she nodded at him when she saw only awareness of the fact that they must protect John and Rodney, even from themselves, if necessary. "I believe I will go rest for a few hours. Call me if there is any change?"

"Will do," Ronon said, settling into John's abandoned chair, eyes already locked on the tableau across from him. Without a further word, Teyla turned and left.

**Something More Than Nothing**

The first time he heard it, he didn't react. He was still mostly asleep, and sitting in one place for so long hadn't done much to wake him up. But the sound repeated, and he jerked awake and aware, looking around the infirmary before focusing in on Rodney's face.

Rodney was blinking sleepily, the tip of his tongue poking at lips that were dry and cracked. John nearly knocked his chair over, he jumped to his feet so fast, and he had to stop and catch it before it could hit the floor. "Rodney," he said, softly, trying not to make him jump. "Want some ice?"

Eyes still unfocused, Rodney nodded, and John spooned a few ice chips into his mouth. When Rodney started to look a little more aware, John backed away from the bed. "I should call Carson," he said, knowing that he wanted nothing more than to shake Rodney, demand that he not do that again, but that wasn't going to happen.

Instead, he pressed the call button. It was only a matter of seconds before Carson and one of the nurses arrived. John moved even further back, but Rodney's eyes never left his, and he couldn't bring himself to look away. He'd been so afraid that he'd never see this again.

He stayed out of Carson's way as they fussed with Rodney's IV and oxygen, but once they finished, he moved in close again. "Carson?"

"He'll be fine, laddie. I've even got a few things that'll accelerate his healing, now that he's awake, but they'll have to wait until I'm sure that there's no infection. If you could do what you can to keep him calm and quiet, I'd appreciate it."

John nodded, taking his seat again. This time, though, his eyes didn't leave Rodney's face. It took him a second to realize that one of Rodney's hands was creeping across the bed, towards John, and with a quick glance around to make sure that no one was watching, he took it in his own.

It was cold, which surprised John. He knew how much heat Rodney normally gave off, his sturdy and strong body like a furnace, but he guessed that it might have something to do with the saline that still dripped into Rodney's veins. He chuffed it lightly, trying to warm it, and was rewarded with a small smile.

"Hurting?" he asked quietly.
"Not really," Rodney answered, voice soft and thick with sleep. "Carson brought out the good stuff."

"Good. You deserve it," John said. "Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake."

Rodney nodded and closed his eyes, but John didn't let go of his hand. Not for a long time.

You Show Them What It's All About

Rodney was bored. He'd been in the infirmary for four days, and while he was feeling better, Carson still wouldn't release him, not even to go straight to his room. Rodney knew that he was being cautious, that they weren't completely certain about the Ancient healing devices that they were using, but Rodney felt enough better that it didn't stop him from complaining about being confined mostly to his bed.

Carson wouldn't even let him have his laptop.

He was at least allowed visitors, and Rodney had been pleasantly surprised by the number that he received. Almost every member of the science team had come by to wish him well, and Zelenka had spent hours with him, going over how they'd found Rodney in the first place, and how they could improve it.

Some protocols were going to have to be changed, and some codes, simply as a reaction to a member of the senior staff being taken, even if Kolya hadn't asked any questions, and was now dead. That was a fact that Rodney had trouble wrapping his head around, even if he'd been there at the time. Kolya had been a nightmare of his for so long, to imagine that he was dead now was just too much to take in.

Movement at the door attracted his attention, and he looked over, to see Hules standing there. When he realized that he had Rodney's attention, Hules stiffened but came into the screened off area at Rodney's wave. "I came to apologize, sir."

Rodney was confused for all of thirty seconds. Then he realized why Hules was apologizing, and he shook his head. "Not your fault, Hules. You guys did nothing wrong."

"Sir -" Hules started, and Rodney shook his head even harder.

"Don't want to hear it. I'm just glad that Kolya didn't kill our escort. That would have been messy."

Hules seemed to relax slightly, which let Rodney relax as well. "Cordero told me what you did - how you kept them all together, and how you got them out. I also wanted to say thank you, sir. I don't know what we would have done if we hadn't been able to get you guys back."

Now Rodney was just embarrassed. He really hadn't done that much. He just wished that he'd been able to get everyone out sooner. But he knew that he couldn't say that to Hules. Instead he just nodded and said, "You're welcome. I'm glad everyone is home safely."

The sounds of someone clearing their throat at the doorway caused both men to look up. John was standing there, staring at Hules. Hules went rigid again, then excused himself in a choked voice and rushed away.

"What was he doing in here?" John demanded.

Rodney immediately got defensive, even though he didn't mean to. "He was just here apologizing
and saying thank you. You know, for keeping everyone safe while we waited to be rescued?"

"If he'd done his job, you wouldn't have needed to be rescued." John looked livid.

Rodney wasn't sure where this anger was coming from. John had been taken out from beneath his own team, so surely he couldn't be blaming Hules that Rodney and his team had been taken? But he was sure acting like he was. "Colonel?" Rodney said softly. "He didn't do anything wrong, and we're all fine."

"You weren't fine, Rodney! You got shot! That is not fine!" John's fists were opening and closing, like he was waiting for something to present itself for punching.

Rodney didn't know what to do with this anger. Neither did John, apparently, because immediately after his outburst, he turned white and practically fled the room, leaving Rodney staring after him and wondering what the hell he'd done.

A Place Where You Can Let It Go

John didn't know where he was going. He just knew that he needed to get away from Rodney before he said something that he couldn't take back. Without conscious volition, he found himself on one of the balconies that surrounded the infirmary. He leaned his head back against the wall, breathing the salt air deep and watching the waves. He didn't want to think anymore.

That was how Teyla found him a few minutes later. She didn't say anything, just mirrored his position, staring out over the water. Finally, John broke. "Did Rodney send you?"

"He might have mentioned that you were upset, yes. But he did not send me. That was entirely my own choice, I assure you." Teyla's eyes were closed and she looked relaxed, at ease in a way that John envied.

Nodding, John closed his own eyes, letting the silence soothe him. When he thought that he had his thoughts organized, he said, "I don't know what I'm doing."

"With what, John?" Teyla's voice was incredibly gentle.

"With anything." John opened his eyes, staring sightlessly at the water. "I'm so angry, and there's no one here who deserves it, so I end up just swallowing it back. Then it comes out at Rodney, who deserves it least of all."

She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. John knew he was being a dick to Rodney. He just didn't know how to stop. "And let's not even talk about the new guys. Some of them are doing a pretty good job of integrating - like Hules - but most of them are still pulling away. I don't know what we're going to do about them. At least from what Zelenka has said, it's not really an issue in the science departments anymore, with one or two exceptions. They were really impressed with the way that Rodney held them together and got them out."

John couldn't help it. His voice had grown strained at the last few words, and as always, Teyla was perceptive enough to realize that that indicated a problem. "John? Is there a reason that Rodney saving his people upsets you?"

"He shouldn't have had to, Teyla. I should have gotten there sooner. I should have kept them from being taken in the first place! But I couldn't keep him safe."
"Life is not safe anywhere. It is not possible for you to keep Rodney safe every moment of every day. All you can do is cherish the time you do have together. Do not let fear keep you apart."

Slowly, John slid down the wall, until he was sitting with his knees in front of him, his arms draped over his legs. Burying his face and speaking softly, he said, "I still don't know about that. I don't know anything anymore."

Teyla knelt next to him, one hand coming to rest on the back of his neck. "You are not a coward, John Sheppard. Face it head on, and follow where your heart leads. I believe in this case it will not steer you wrong."

He took a deep breath, wishing that it was that easy. His ex-wife had always yelled at him for being emotionally distant, and he could hear her words echoing in his head. Do you even know what you want? Would it kill you to let me in on it?

But he couldn't bring himself to say that to Teyla, so he just left his head buried in his arms. She stroked over his hair soothingly, and he let himself get lost in that gentle touch. He got so distracted that when the balcony door opened, he barely reacted. Rodney's voice brought his head up, though. "Is he okay?"

"I believe he is confused, Rodney. I also believe that the two of you should talk." Teyla stopped petting him and rose gracefully to her feet. John lowered his head back down, staring at the metal of the balcony as Teyla and Rodney exchanged soft words. Then the balcony door open and shut again, and he and Rodney were alone.

"Should you be out of bed?" John asked without raising his head.

"Carson knows I'm here, yes. He made me bring a nurse, who's inside the room, and I've only got an hour before he comes looking. Good thing for sound proof doors, huh?"

John nodded, and then shut up. He could hear Rodney sigh, and then Rodney's toes came into view. "Colonel -"

"Why don't you call me John?" John interrupted, not wanting to know what Rodney was going to say. He knew he'd screwed up. He didn't need to hear it from Rodney. Besides, the man had sucked his cock - the least he could do would be call John by his name.

"Because you've never asked me to?" Rodney sighed again. "John," he paused, clearly waiting for some kind of reaction, but when he didn't get one, he continued. "Look, I don't know what you're feeling, or what you want, or anything, because we've never talked about it. And as much as I'd like to continue with the non-talking, I'm in no shape to get down on my knees right now."

That brought John's head up, and damn, Rodney looked terrible. He had dark bruises under his eyes, like he hadn't been sleeping, and his skin was tight and pale. Rodney brought up the hand that John wasn't holding, and ran his fingers through his hair, gently turning John's face so that he was

In The Path of a Speeding Train

Rodney couldn't help thinking that it was John who looked terrible. He had dark bruises under his eyes, like he hadn't been sleeping, and his skin was tight and pale. Rodney brought up the hand that John wasn't holding, and ran his fingers through his hair, gently turning John's face so that he was
looking at Rodney. "John, do you have any idea what you want?"

John's eyes were darting about madly, looking anywhere but at Rodney. Rodney barely paused, knowing that he wasn't going to get an answer from John. Instead he drew on his own courage, and proceeded to lay himself bare. "I want you, John. I want all of you - I want to kiss you, and suck you, and let you fuck me. I want to teach you how good it can be with me."

John's breathing quickened, and he was finally looking at him. Rodney took advantage to say, "More than that, though, I want you to know that you can tell me anything, ask me anything, and know that if it's in my power I'll give it to you. You're the most important person in my life."

The sound of John swallowing was audible. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. Rodney didn't say anything. He'd already said everything that he could. It was in John's hands now.

"I -" John swallowed again, with a sharp sounding click. "I want that too, Rodney. God, I want all of that, so much." John made a broken sound and turned a little, so he could bury his face in Rodney's shoulder. Rodney continued to stroke John's hair, softly. He knew how hard it was for John to admit that he needed someone - anyone - and so he could be patient about getting more than that.

Eventually, though, he tired, and he had to say, "John, I need -"

John raised his head so quickly his neck cracked, and said, "I'm sorry. You need to be in bed. You were only shot four days ago. You shouldn't be up and walking around."

"Actually, Carson wants me to walk, get my strength back. Ancient devices really do accelerate healing, after all, but I do need to sit down. Do you think we could take this inside?"

Nodding eagerly, John led the way back into the room, where a bored looking nurse was looking at a PDA. John got Rodney settled on one of the chairs in the room, and then looked at her. "If I promise not to leave him alone, do you think we could have some privacy?"

She turned to study Rodney's face, and he concentrated on looking as cooperative as he knew how. She glanced at her watch and then said, "He's got thirty five minutes before Doctor Beckett sends out search parties. He needs to be back in the infirmary before then."

Rodney nodded, and John said, "I'll have him back before that, I promise." Then he gave her the pout, even though Rodney could have told him that it didn't work on the nurses. They were all apparently androids or something, with an unholy resistance to the John Sheppard Pout. This one seemed to have a weakness for it, however, and giggled before agreeing and withdrawing from the room. Alone, Rodney found himself unable to meet John's eyes, no matter how much he wanted to. He'd laid himself open on the balcony, and he felt flayed, with salt rubbed in for good measure.

John took that away, though, crouching down directly in front of him, and placing one hand on Rodney's cheek. Without saying anything, he leaned in, slowly, telegraphing with every line of his being that he wanted to kiss Rodney. Funnily enough, Rodney was fine with that, leaning forward into the kiss.

This kiss wasn't a fight, or a distraction. It was soft and gentle, a promise contained in John's lips, and Rodney wanted to fall into it, wanted it to last forever. He opened his mouth, just a little, inviting John's tongue in to play. It did without any hesitation, sliding along Rodney's tongue, sliding slickly along his teeth and against his soft palate. Then it retreated into John's mouth, and Rodney followed it back, letting his tongue twist lewdly against John's.
When they finally had to stop kissing in order to breathe, they were both panting hard, and a glance down showed Rodney that John was hard, his cock a thick line held against his thigh by his BDUs. He couldn't help but grin at that, even though they didn't have time for him to do anything about it. Or, wait. He glanced at his watch. "We've got twenty-five minutes before I have to be back in Carson's clutches. Want some help with that?"

In answer, John turned to look at the door, and Rodney could hear the distinctive click of the lock shooting home. Then John turned back, and shifted so that he was kneeling in front of Rodney. Rodney had to catch his breath, because this was one of his favorite fantasies - John Sheppard on his knees.

John grinned up at him, as if he knew what Rodney was thinking. "I was thinking, actually, that I might try blowing you." Then he hesitated, as if he thought Rodney might object.

"I want to try," John said, looking into Rodney's eyes, and Rodney nodded. He wasn't going to argue.

This time, John's hands didn't shake as tugged his scrub pants down enough to free Rodney's cock, which was already half-hard. John looked up at him beneath lowered lashes and leaned forward, licking up the side of Rodney's cock. Rodney went fully hard so fast it hurt. "Oh, God," he said, leaning back in the chair and closing his eyes. The tongue went away, and Rodney opened them again. "John?"

"Watch me, Rodney," John said. Then he took the head of Rodney's cock in his mouth, and Rodney yelped. "If I watch, I'm not going to last long," he warned.

John gave him a cheeky grin, releasing his cock again. "What's wrong with that?"

Before Rodney could formulate an answer, John had sucked the head back in and was moving over the top couple of inches. He didn't try to take the whole thing in, which was fine with Rodney, since he'd never found his partners choking to be a turn on.

But he did bring his other hand up, and started to slowly jack Rodney off in time to his mouth. Rodney wanted to close his eyes, wanted to revel in the feeling of a mouth on his cock for the first time in far too long, but he didn't. Instead he watched, reaching out to touch the side of John's face. "Wanted you for so long," he whispered.

John looked up at him, and started to move faster, taking just a little more. Rodney rested one hand in his hair, and said, "Oh, God, that's so good. Your mouth feels so good on me." John started to run his tongue around the head, and the additional stimulation pushed Rodney closer to the edge. "Christ! I'm close. Might want to stop,"

When John shook his head no, he managed to drag his teeth lightly across the head of Rodney's cock, and that additional stimulation was all he needed. With a deep groan, he let his orgasm wash through him. It was powerful and seemed to last forever and Rodney never wanted it to end.
But it finally did, and he whimpered a little at the sensation of John's mouth still on his oversensitive cock. John had clearly tried to swallow, but hadn't succeeded terribly well - come had leaked out the corners of his mouth and was dripping onto his chin, making John look like one of those "Got Milk?" commercials, and Rodney smiled at that. Pulling John up, he licked his chin with little cat licks, cleaning him up and making him moan.

When he reached for John's cock, though, John stopped him firmly. "John?" he asked.

"I didn't do it so that you'd get me off. I did it because you're," he mumbled something too soft for Rodney to hear.

"What was that?"

John took a deep breath and blushed, as if he knew what he was about to say was girly. "I said you're beautiful when you come."

Now it was Rodney's turn to blush, and he did, deeply. "Um," he said, cleverly.

Grinning at him, John looked at his watch. "I need to get you back to Carson before he sends out the posse," he said, sounding regretful. He stood up, looking at Rodney, who was sure he looked thoroughly debauched. "That's a good look for you," John said. "I'm going to have to make sure that you look like that more often."

Rodney returned the grin and held up one hand for John to take and pull him to his feet. Once he was standing, it took him a moment to rearrange his clothing to look presentable. He glanced at John and saw that he was still hard, and he couldn't resist. He ran one hand over the bulge even as he leaned forward for another kiss, tasting himself on John's tongue.

John moaned and leaned into the kiss for a moment, then pulled away. "It will be very embarrassing if Carson catches us, so I need to get you back."

Reluctantly, Rodney agreed. He didn't want to admit how tired he was from the walk and the conversation, as well as the unexpected blowjob, but he found himself leaning on John as they walked back to the infirmary. He was grateful to get back into bed. John leaned against the wall as Carson bustled over, taking his pulse and his blood pressure.

"You look good, laddie. A few more days here, and some walking every day, and you'll soon be discharged back to your own quarters."

"And not a moment too soon," Rodney grouched, looking up to see what John thought of that.

John gave him a blinding smile, and then said to Carson, "So, I should be back tomorrow afternoon to take him for a walk?"

"Oh, would you, Colonel?" Carson looked grateful, and Rodney had to keep from growling. He hadn't been that bad a patient!

With a casual salute, John left the infirmary. Unable to stop smiling, Rodney leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Things were going good.

Everything Is Not As It's Sold

John checked his watch again. He had twenty minutes before he had to be in the infirmary to walk
Rodney back to his quarters. The high point of his last three days had been the "walks" with Rodney, which had ended up with them finding private rooms and making out.

He was really looking forward to taking Rodney to his room, when he wasn't going to have to return him to the infirmary in a given amount of time.

Just as he was about to leave the control room, though, the Gate activated. He turned to look at Chuck, even though he knew that there weren't any teams out. Chuck started to announce an unscheduled activation, but saw John's glare and stopped.

Elizabeth came out of her office and leaned over him. "Any word on who it is?"

"It's the Erichians, ma'am. They're asking for Colonel Sheppard."

Saying goodbye to the afternoon he had planned, John climbed the steps to the control room. "Put them on speaker."

"Colonel Sheppard?"

The voice was male and familiar. John didn't really care - after their last experience with the Erichians he wanted nothing more to do with them. But Elizabeth was glaring at him, making it clear that John was to be polite. "Yes, Patel?"

"Would it be possible to meet? I would understand if you do not trust us, but I think you would be most interested in what I have to say."

John and Elizabeth locked eyes, and he tried to convince her silently to cut the connection.

She didn't listen. Instead, she spoke, "Patel? This is Doctor Elizabeth Weir, the leader of the Atlantis expedition. As you can surely understand, we're reluctant to come to your planet. Can you think of somewhere else we can meet?"

Patel sounded relieved. "Of course, Doctor Weir. Most understandable. I would be willing to come to you, or to any planet that you care to name. The Erichians owe a great debt to the Atlanteans, after all."

She started to speak again, and John cut her off. "I'm sure you understand that we need to discuss this. We will dial you back in a few minutes."

"Understood." The connection cut, and Elizabeth turned on him, clearly upset, but she was too much the diplomat to get into it in the Gateroom. "My office. Now."

He didn't say anything, just gesturing for her to precede him into the office. As soon as the door closed, she said, "What the hell was that, John? It's my job to negotiate."

"You were going to let him through the Gate. Don't tell me you weren't." John was glaring back just as hard. "You're in charge of the mission, but I'm in charge of security, and he is not coming here."

He didn't even pause before adding, "Nor are we giving him the address for the Alpha site. If you want to meet with him, that's fine, but we'll do it on a world that I pick."

She looked like she was going to argue, but John just silently glared. She eventually gave in, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Fine. Pick a planet. Please make sure that it's uninhabited. I don't want to bring a third party into this."
John was already on the radio when he left Elizabeth's office, summoning two teams to the Gateroom, as well as Ronon and Teyla. As he waited impatiently for them to assemble, he radioed Carson to let him know that he wouldn’t be there to pick up Rodney, but he didn't say why.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised when Rodney showed up in the Gateroom, dressed and fastening the thigh holster for his gun. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Going with you." Rodney's voice was firm, even though he looked terrified.

"I don't think so. The only place you're going is back to bed." John folded his arms across his chest. "You are not giving these people another chance at you."

But Rodney didn't argue, the way he was supposed to. In fact, he completely ignored John, going over to talk to Ronon and Teyla. A few moments later, Teyla came over to talk to John. "He needs to go, Colonel."

"He doesn't, and I'm not taking him."

Teyla took him by the shoulder and led him to the corner where no one could overhear them. "John, he feels he needs to confront the Erichians on his own. Will you not allow him the dignity to do this?"

"Oh, that's a low blow," he said, but he could see her point. "Fine, but he stays with you and Ronon. First sign of trouble and you get him out, you hear me?"

"I understand and agree completely, Colonel." Teyla bowed her head and rejoined Ronon and Rodney, who were talking softly. John stared after them, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. This whole meet was a bad idea.

"Dial PC5-907," he said to Chuck, picking a planet that they knew had been picked clean by the Wraith. It would be macabre, but at least they wouldn't have an indigenous population to worry about. As soon as the Gate was open, the two teams went through, followed by Elizabeth and the rest of John's team. He hung back until the last of them had gone through, and then joined them.

The marines, most of whom had been with him for a year or longer, didn't need orders to find their positions, covering the Gate so that no one could come through and surprise them. Even though the planet was uninhabited as far as they knew, several of them ranged farther out, so that they wouldn't have to worry about someone coming up behind them.

Once everyone was in place, he dialed the Erichians back. As soon as the wormhole connected, he radioed for Patel, who answered immediately. He must have been right next to the Gate, waiting for John to call back. Giving him the coordinates, he then faded back out of the cross fire, waiting for Patel to come through.

The Gate shut down. Within seconds, it was being dialed from outside, and John got his hand on his gun as it opened. Patel came through, alone, and stood on the top step until the Gate had shut down again. "Colonel Sheppard? Doctor Weir?"

Elizabeth stepped forward. "I'm Doctor Weir. You must be Patel?"

"Yes. I am here to negotiate the payment for fixing our water processing plant."

John stepped forward, knowing that he was projecting aggression, but unable to stop himself. "We already did that, and your previous payment left something to be desired."
As if he expected John's response, Patel just nodded. "I regret what happened to your people, Colonel Sheppard. I trust that they were recovered from the rogue Genii?"

"No thanks to your people."

"John!" Elizabeth scolded, then turned to Patel. "Yes, they were recovered, thank you. My understanding that the water processing plant was mostly repaired when our people were taken. What needs to be fixed?"

"Nothing. We were able to complete the repairs that your people started, thanks to the plans that Doctor McKay left behind."

Now Elizabeth looked confused. "Then what's left to negotiate?"

"There has been a coup among my people, Doctor Weir. The citizens of Erich were not pleased that our leaders met such generosity with treachery. It is felt that it makes us no better than the Wraith. Therefore, the triumvirate has been deposed, and I have been delegated by the new government to meet with you and discuss how we should pay for the repairs that needed to be done."

Some of the tension went out of Elizabeth's shoulders, and even John, who couldn't shake the feeling that this was too good to be true, relaxed a little. Patel certainly sounded as if he meant every word. Stepping forward again, he caught Elizabeth's eye and nodded towards Rodney, who was standing firm but pale between Teyla and Ronon.

She nodded back. "We're more than pleased that the Erichians are willing to pay their debt to us. But I believe before any further negotiations are possible, an apology is owed to Doctor McKay, who was badly wounded by the Genii."

"You are absolutely correct, Doctor Weir." Patel stepped forward, ignoring the way that the marines tightened their hold on their guns. "Doctor McKay, I heartily apologize for the damage caused by the irresponsible path that my people chose, and regret any injury that occurred. I hope that you see fit to accept my apology?"

Rodney nodded, uncharacteristically still. "Apology accepted."

John kept his eyes on Patel, but shifted around so that he was behind Rodney, laying one comforting hand on his shoulder. He could feel the small tremors of muscles held too tight, and he squeezed gently, trying to give reassurance.

He wasn't really paying attention to the words being exchanged by Elizabeth and Patel. They were speaking softly and at this distance he would have really had to work to hear them anyway. Without taking his eyes off the pair, he said to Rodney, "You doing okay, buddy? Need to sit down for a while?"

"I'm fine, Colonel," Rodney said. "Knowing that my hard work is going to pay off helps."

John nodded, keeping his hand on Rodney's shoulder. When the tremors began to grow in strength, he nodded at Ronon, who took Rodney by the arm and tugged, gently and firmly. "Come on, McKay. Let's go sit on the stairs."

It spoke of Rodney's exhaustion that he didn't object, just following docilely in Ronon's wake. John watched until Ronon had Rodney sitting on the stairs that led to the Gate. Then, even though he wanted nothing more than to go sit with them until they could go back to Atlantis, he went to join the conversation detailing exactly what the Erichians would be paying, and how it would be delivered.
Rodney was ready to go home long before the negotiations ended. He was bone-deep tired, weary, and still nervous that this was going to prove some sort of trap. The only reassurance that he had was this time his team was with him. Kind of silly to be reassured by that, when some of the worst things that ever happened to him had happened while he was with them, but still, it helped.

Every so often, John would look up, catch Rodney's eyes and nod slightly, or raise an eyebrow in a silent question. Rodney couldn't help feeling warmed by his obvious concern, though he did worry what the marines would think of it if they noticed.

Eventually, the negotiations ended, and from the expression on Elizabeth's face, they were more than satisfactory. She looked more than a little like the cat that had gotten into the cream, and Rodney had to smile. Ronon gave him a hand up off the stairs, and stood next to him, looking menacing, as Patel walked past. As the Gate dialed, he breathed a silent sigh of relief that everything had gone well.

Patel went through the Gate, and it shut down without incident. Almost immediately, John was at his side, one arm looped around his waist. "Teyla, dial the Gate," he called, and Rodney let himself have a moment of weakness, leaning into John before standing straight and taking his weight back. "I'm fine, Colonel."

"Sure you are," John said, voice pitched for Rodney's ears only. "Forgive me if I feel better getting you home and back to your quarters."

Rodney thought nothing sounded better. As soon as the Gate had stabilized, John was leading the way up the stairs, and back to Atlantis.

Elizabeth followed hard on their heels, and said, "That went well. Shall we debrief?"

Even Rodney caught John's glare. "Not right now," was all he said. "I'm going to take Rodney to his quarters and make sure that he stays there."

"Not so fast, laddie," Carson said from behind them. "He shouldn't have been off world at all, and I want to see him in the infirmary before he goes anywhere. Then, assuming he hasn't set back his recovery with this damn stupid stunt, then I might send him to his quarters."

As much as Rodney wanted to be with John right now, he knew that he wasn't going to escape Carson's clutches for an hour or more, so he said, "Colonel - go debrief with Doctor Weir and I'll radio you when I'm ready to go. Is that all right with you?"

John studied his face, and Rodney tried hard not to show his disappointment at putting off their private time yet again. Eventually, John gave in and turned to follow Elizabeth. Rodney turned to face Carson. "Lead on, you vampire. I know you just want blood from me."

Carson chuckled. "Aye, that's it. I just live to stick needles in your arm. Let's go," and he gestured at the wheelchair next to him that Rodney hadn't even noticed.

"Oh, come on, Carson," he said. "I'm fine. I understand that you don't trust the Ancient stuff, but even you have to admit that it worked. I don't need the damn wheelchair." But Carson's face was implacable, and finally Rodney just gave in, rather than continuing to argue and making it take even longer.

He felt stupid, being wheeled to the infirmary when there was nothing wrong, but by the time they
got there, he was drifting. Apparently he'd been more tired than he'd thought.

Getting out of the chair and up on the table took more energy than he really possessed. Finally, he was up, and Carson proceeded to take blood - what felt like half the blood in Rodney's body. He carried the tubes off as Rodney hissed, "Vampire," then returned.

"Okay, then, while that runs, let's take a look." Rodney lifted off his shirt, wincing a little as raising his arms pulled on the scar on his chest. To his, admittedly untrained, eye, it looked fine, if a little red. Carson poked and prodded at it, making hmmm-ing noises as he did. Then he guided Rodney back so that he was lying down, and went to fetch the Ancient MRI device, wheeling it over and positioning it above Rodney's chest.

Unlike the equivalent Earth device, the Ancient version was quick and silent, and within minutes Rodney was sitting up, pulling his shirt back on as Carson looked over the results. He felt fine, so if Carson tried to keep him overnight again, he was going to be in for a battle.

Carson made more noises as he evaluated the films, and as he finally set them down, one of the nurses came with the print-outs of his blood results. It seemed like forever while Carson looked at those as well. Just as Rodney was getting ready to demand that Carson tell him what the hell was going on, Carson looked at him with a big smile. "Well, it seems your little impromptu field trip didn't cause you any harm. I don't see any reason that you can't go back to your quarters, but you are not to go to the labs for at least three days. Your quarters and the mess and that's it. And I'd feel better if you had someone to walk with you between the mess and your quarters."

Rodney was already nodding and slipping off the gurney. "Yes, yes, I'll make sure that the Colonel, Ronon or Teyla hold my hand when I cross the street as well. Can I go to my quarters now?"

"Just as soon as the Colonel gets here to walk you there."

Rodney started to argue, but John spoke up from behind Carson. "I'm here. Is he cleared to go?"

"Yes, take him," Carson said. "I expect to see you back here in the morning for a check, laddie."

Rodney waved at Carson over his shoulder as he headed out of the infirmary. He wasn't giving Carson a chance to change his mind.

He and John kept a carefully measured distance between them as they walked down the corridor. Rodney wanted to reach out, wanted to touch, but he didn't dare. He was going to follow John's lead if it killed him.

As soon as the door slid shut behind them, John was right there, in Rodney's personal space, running his hands over Rodney's body as if he was trying to convince himself that Rodney really was all right. Rodney did his best to stay relaxed, let John do what he needed to do, but Christ, it felt good to be touched like that.

Then one of John's hands cupped Rodney's ass, and the other stroked through his hair, turning his head slightly so that John could kiss him soft and gentle. When John broke the kiss, Rodney couldn't stop the small broken noise that he made. "John?"

John rested his forehead on Rodney's neck, and he was breathing hard. Rodney brought his hands up and stroked softly over his back, trying to reassure him. After a minute, John lifted his head. "You are never allowed to get hurt or kidnapped again," he said.

Rodney chuckled. "You either. Think we could get the rest of the Pegasus galaxy to sign off on that?"
"I think we should work on it." But John was smiling, and Rodney counted that as a win. Standing really was getting exhausting, though.

"Do you think we could sit down?" he asked, hoping that John wouldn't think that Rodney was trying to push him away.

John flashed him a grin and led him over to the bed, guiding him into sitting on the edge. Then he dropped to his knees, reaching down to untie Rodney's shoes. "You don't have to do that," Rodney said, feeling a little embarrassed. John just ignored him, easing both shoes and socks off, and setting them aside. Then he stood and proceeded to kick his own boots off.

"I think it's time for a nap," John said, pulling Rodney back to his feet and undoing his pants, letting them slip down over his hips. Rodney stepped out of them, and slid up the bed, clad in t-shirt and boxers.

He looked hopefully up at John. "You're going to join me, right?"

"That's the plan," John said, kicking off his own pants and sliding into the bed next to Rodney. It was a tight fit for two grown men, but Rodney didn't care. John was there, was letting Rodney curl around him and rest his head on John's chest.

You've Got The Lock and Key

John couldn't believe how good this felt, how right. Rodney had fallen asleep within minutes, leaving John awake to contemplate what was happening. Rodney was a warm, comforting weight on his chest, and he decided that he wasn't going to let old attitudes and rules run his life anymore. For better or worse, Earth wasn't in the picture right now, and John could have this.

He was still scared, though he'd never admit it out loud. He was afraid that he didn't know what he was doing, that he'd hurt Rodney in the same way that he'd hurt his ex-wife. But then he had to smile to himself. Rodney would never tolerate that kind of behavior from John. He'd call John on it when it happened, rather than let the hurt build up till it was insurmountable.

And in the privacy of his own head, John had to admit that he cared more about Rodney than he'd ever cared about his ex-wife.

That decided, he let his own eyes sag shut. The city could do without him for a few hours while he stayed to make sure that Rodney got some badly needed rest. He never actually fell asleep, but he allowed himself to doze.

When Rodney started to twitch and whimper in his sleep, John's eyes snapped open. Shaking Rodney gently, he said, "Rodney, wake up. It's just a dream." It took a few minutes to wake Rodney out of the dream that he was trapped in, but the results were entirely worth it, because Rodney wrapped himself even tighter around John and kissed him.

This kiss was every bit as gentle as the last had been, but there was a definite note of need and lust buried in there. When Rodney's tongue swiped across John's lips, John opened his mouth and groaned into Rodney's mouth. He was getting hard, and he surreptitiously moved his hips away from Rodney, not wanting him to feel as if he had to do something about it.

Except that Rodney followed with his own, and then John could feel how hard Rodney was against his thigh. "God," he whispered, turning so that they could press their cocks together. "Feels good."
Rodney lifted his head, a blinding smile on his face. "I could make it feel better?"

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Rodney sat up, yanking his t-shirt over his head. When John didn't immediately follow suit, Rodney glared at him. "Well, what are you waiting for? I think it's about time that we were actually naked together, don't you?"

John laughed and sat up so that he could pull his own shirt off. Without waiting for Rodney to say anything, he stood up and dropped his boxers, standing naked in front of Rodney for the first time. He had to resist the urge to cross his arms over his chest, especially once he realized that Rodney was staring. But the look in Rodney's eyes wasn't avarice or greed. It was desire and caring, and it made John relax and get back in the bed.

Rodney had squirmed out of his own boxers, and at the first press of cock to cock, John hissed. It felt better than it had any right to, and when Rodney started to rock his hips, John had to clutch at Rodney to maintain some of his self-control. Then Rodney stopped. John groaned and rocked his own hips. "Please, Rodney, don't stop."

But Rodney just ducked his head, a blush coming up high over his cheeks. "I want you to fuck me."

*That* made John come to a shuddering halt. "What?"

"I think I was perfectly clear."

"But, I've never... I haven't..." John stuttered out.

Rodney's blush didn't go away, but he was smiling. "It's okay. I have and I'll walk you through it."

"Um, okay." John was a little nervous, but he thought to himself that he could do this if Rodney wanted. Besides, it had been a long time since he'd gotten to fuck someone, and his dick was in enthusiastic agreement.

Rodney knelt up and reached for the nightstand, pulling out a tube of lubricant. Then he laid down on his stomach and spread his legs slightly. "You're going to need to stretch me a little. It's been a long time."

"How do I -" John asked, holding the tube and sitting up. Rodney had the *best* ass.

"Slick up a couple of fingers and slide one into me. You'll be able to tell when I'm ready for another." Nodding, even though Rodney couldn't see him, he did as he was told. The way that Rodney was laying, his cheeks spread a little, and John could just barely see his entrance.

When he pressed a finger against that shadowed opening, Rodney took a deep breath and let it out slowly. As he breathed out, John slid the finger in. Inside, Rodney was smooth and tight, so close that John didn't know how his dick was going to fit. Leaning forward, he kissed Rodney's shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Rodney's voice was tight, but not from pain. John smiled against his skin, and Rodney said, "Yes, yes, I can hear you grinning. Start to move a little, okay?"

Slowly, John began to move his finger in and out, feeling around as he did. When he brushed over a soft bump, Rodney cried out softly. "Yeah, right there."
Curious, John rubbed over that spot again and again, until Rodney's ass wasn't quite so tight, and he was squirming underneath John. "I'm ready for two, John," Rodney said, panting.

"But what if I'm not ready yet?" John asked playfully, sliding his finger out and adding more slick. This time, he didn't hesitate, pressing two fingers in deep and right to that spot, making Rodney cry out in a hoarse voice. "Good?"

"God, yes. Just a little more and then I want your cock," Rodney said.

John scissored his fingers, spreading Rodney open, and stretching the ring of muscle so that he wouldn't hurt him when he finally got inside. When he reached deep and pressed on that spot again, Rodney said, "Okay, I'm ready. Now, John."

Pulling his fingers out of Rodney, John slicked up his cock, then looked down. "How do you want to do this?" he asked.

"Like this," Rodney said, rolling onto his side. "Nice and slow."

John slid down so that he was lying against Rodney's back. Rodney pulled his top leg up towards his chest, and John could feel the little hole with his fingers. Carefully, he lined up his cock and pushed gently.

He slipped through the ring of muscle, and Rodney gasped. Afraid that he'd hurt him, he froze. "Rodney?"

"Just give me a second," Rodney said. "You're bigger than a couple of fingers."

It was hard to keep from moving. Rodney was tight and hot inside, and he wanted to push and shove until he was buried all the way inside. But he didn't want to hurt Rodney, so he forced his hips to still. Finally, Rodney reached back and wrapped one hand around John's hip. "Okay. Just go slow."

John nodded, and started to press inside. Rodney was taking deep breaths, and some of the unbearable pressure loosened around his cock. Finally, he was all the way inside, surrounded by slick heat. "Rodney? Tell me when I can move."

"It's okay, John," Rodney said. Some of the tension had disappeared from his voice, and John took him at his word, starting to move slowly in and out.

The position they were in was great for closeness, because John was able to wrap one arm around Rodney's chest and hold him tight as he moved. It wasn't as good for leverage or speed, forcing John to go slow.

He rocked inside Rodney, moving only a few inches either way. Closing his eyes, he buried his face in Rodney's hair, which was starting to grow damp with sweat. With every press in, Rodney made soft moaning noises, noises that John was already becoming addicted to. He loosened his grip on Rodney's chest, allowing his hand to roam over Rodney's body, touching his nipples and his stomach, reaching between his legs to feel his hard cock.

When he stroked a finger over Rodney's balls, Rodney gasped and tightened around him. "Touch me," Rodney whispered.

John was more than happy to comply, wrapping his hand around Rodney's cock and stroking in time to the strokes that seemed to be moving even deeper inside him. Rodney's hand tightened where it rested on John's hip, encouraging him to move even faster.
He was panting like a bellows, trying to maintain control until Rodney came, wanting to feel him. "You close?" he asked, and Rodney nodded.

"Yeah," he said, voice saturated with pleasure. John groaned at the sounds, wanting more.

"Give it to me," he said. "Want to feel you come for me."

As if he'd been waiting for permission, Rodney started to make small, breathless "oh" sounds - sounds that John was familiar with. "That's it," he said, harshly, right in Rodney's ear. "Let it go."

With a long drawn-out groan, Rodney came, shooting over his fist. His ass tightened, clenching in a rhythm that John could feel. His hips jerked, fucking into Rodney as fast and as hard as the position allowed. It didn't take much for John's orgasm to wash over him, carrying him along as he emptied himself out inside Rodney.

He wrapped his arm around Rodney's chest again, ignoring the fact that it was covered in come. Burying his face in Rodney's neck, he panted harshly, trying to get his breathing back under control, trying to still his swirling thoughts before he said something he'd regret later.

Eventually he slid out of Rodney, both of them groaning at the sensation. Rodney turned around in his arms, kissing him gently. "That was..." he trailed off.

John nodded. "Yeah, it was." He couldn't help making a face at the sensation of Rodney sticking to him. "And now I need to get a washcloth or something."

"Uh, yeah." Rodney's eyes were falling shut again, and John contemplated staying right where he was. But he didn't really feel like having to peel himself off Rodney when they woke, so he slowly slipped his arms free of Rodney and went to the bathroom to fetch a washcloth. He wiped himself down, and then took it out to clean Rodney up.

Rodney barely moved as John wiped him down. Tossing the washcloth over towards the bathroom, he hesitated, trying to decide what to do.

One of Rodney's eyes cracked open. "What are you waiting for? Get down here."

Smiling, John slid back into the bed, wrapping himself around Rodney and letting his eyes shut. He could afford a few minutes for a nap.

**Fuel To The Fire**

Hules hurried to the lower levels where the rest of the military from Earth were gathered. He didn't really want to be there, but someone had to be the voice of reason. If Castleman got his way, then there were going to be deaths - deaths that Hules could prevent.

He slipped into the back of the room. Castleman was at the front of the room, ranting. "Sheppard is nothing more than a maverick. He should never have been given control of any base, much less Atlantis. Hell, he's only here because he has the gene, and because Weir liked his ass.

"Well, I've got the gene, and so do most of you. And we didn't earn our rank by fucking the Head of the Expedition."

Castleman paused, and Hules tried to inject some logic into the argument. "Do you have any proof that he's fucking Weir? Even if I believed that he would do that, I doubt she would be that
unprofessional."

"We've all seen the way that she looks at him, Hules. You think they're not fucking?"

Hules didn't say what he was thinking, which was that if there was anyone Sheppard was fucking, it was McKay. But he had to say something. "Have you thought about the fact that Sheppard has the loyalty of everyone who was stationed here? He earned that respect. Don't you think that we should give him a chance to prove them right or wrong?"

Castleman sniffed the air. "Is that guilt I smell, Hules? You let Sheppard's little buddy get kidnapped, and now you're feeling bad? Is that it?"

He could feel the flush rise on his cheeks. "What you're talking about is mutiny, Major. Sheppard has done nothing."

"That's right. He's done nothing to rescue our planet from the Ori. He made one half-assed attempt to get there and then blew up the Midway Station. And we only have his word that they couldn't get through."

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" Hules threw up his hands in frustration. "There were four of them in one of the little puddlejumpers and you wanted them to take on the Ori? All of the world's militaries working together couldn't beat them!"

Looking at the rest of the men in the room, he met as many people's eyes as he could. "Sheppard is a good commander. If you got your heads out of your asses, you'd see that. I'm not going to be party to mutiny." He was gratified to see that a few of the people in the room seemed to be listening. Giving Castleman a frosty glare, he turned and left.

He wandered the halls, trying to decide what to do. He wanted to believe that Castleman wouldn't carry through with what he was suggesting. After all, he'd known Castleman since he came to the SGC, and he'd always been a good man, if a little by the book. But he'd sounded serious, sounded like he really was trying to persuade the other soldiers to take on a group of marines who were fanatically loyal to Sheppard, and Hules couldn't see any way that this was going to end well.

But if he went to Sheppard, then he was ratting out his friends. How could he do that?

Sighing, he looked up to realize that his feet had carried him to the labs. He could hear the hum of excited voices, and the occasional sound of banging, and suddenly, he knew what he could do. Opening the door, he looked in on controlled chaos, with Doctor McKay in the center of it, directing it the way a conductor would direct an orchestra. He watched from the sidelines, trying to pick a good time to interrupt.

He ultimately didn't have to, because McKay noticed him before he'd stepped any further into the room. Setting down the device that he'd been disassembling, he made his way across the room to Hules, who was suddenly nervous.

McKay didn't help, because as soon as he was close enough, he demanded, "Well, what is it?"

Hules opened his mouth, only to shut it again. McKay looked annoyed for a moment, then grabbed Hules by the arm and dragged him out of the room and into the hallway. Voice a little softer, he said, "What's the problem?"

"I - I think there's going to be a mutiny," Hules said. "The other guys were talking, and I'd just chalk it up to big words, but Castleman sounded serious. I just... I thought you should know, you know?"
"Okay..." McKay said, dragging the word out. "Why are you bringing this to me instead of Doctor Weir or Colonel Sheppard?"

Hules didn't say anything. There really wasn't anything he could say - McKay was right. He should have gone to Weir or Sheppard. McKay looked thoughtful, then nodded sharply. "I'll take care of it, Major. Don't worry about it."

"Should I tell Colonel Sheppard?" Hules asked, hoping against hope that the answer was no.

"I don't think so," Doctor McKay said. "I think this would be better handled if we don't get him involved." McKay's eyes sharpened and he focused all of his considerable attention on Hules. "You did right bringing this to me. Now, I suggest that you put some distance between you and your buddies from Earth. You wouldn't want to get caught in the crossfire."

Chains From Your Mind

Rodney knew that Zelenka would be able to tell he was angry. That was just fine. He wasn't going to be able to do this without his help anyway. He returned to his desk, picking up the Ancient toy that he'd been playing with.

As he predicted, Zelenka was by his side within moment. "Everything is going well, is it not?"

"It is," Rodney agreed, tired of the game, but knowing that he had to play it out if he didn't want word to get back to Castleman before they could deal with this problem before someone got hurt.

"Perhaps we should talk in your office about plans for upcoming projects?" Zelenka asked.

"Sounds good to me," Rodney said, sliding off his work stool and making his way to the inner office. He noticed several of the scientists looking up, and he barked out, "Do you need more work to do? The sewers probably could stand some maintenance." He was gratified to see every set of eyes immediately drop back to the work in front of them.

Zelenka shut the door and asked, "What is it? I have not seen you this pale before when you are not wounded."

Rodney spilled out the whole story, telling him everything that Hules had told him and everything that he suspected. He finished with, "We have to keep this from turning into a full-blown mutiny. Colonel Sheppard will never forgive himself if he has to hurt someone to maintain control."

He wasn't surprised by Zelenka's immediate agreement. They bent their heads together to make plans.

It quickly became apparent that they weren't going to be able to do this by themselves. They were going to have to bring other people into the plan. Zelenka suggested Simpson, but Rodney shook his head. "I have a better idea." Opening the door, he called out, "Cordero. In here, please?"

He was taking a calculated risk in bringing in one of the newcomers, but Cordero had proven to be adaptable. Plus, she worked with Hules and presumably trusted him. And by having one of the newcomers on his side, he lessened the probability of this blowing up in his face.

It took a lot less time than he expected to explain the situation to her. Well, she was one of the brighter scientists, so perhaps he really shouldn't be surprised. She immediately agreed that something had to be done, and said, "You folks took us in, and while I don't know Colonel
Sheppard, you've earned my loyalty - you saved all of our lives when Kolya had us. I'm not going to stand by and do nothing while idiots try to take over."

"Thank you," Rodney said, touched. He was pleased that he'd managed to earn her respect and good will.

Together, the three of them bent over a map of the city and made plans.

Ultimately, they locked most of the new soldiers out of the city systems, especially the ones that required the gene. Doors wouldn't open for them, water wouldn't turn on. The sewage would back up into their quarters, and their quarters only.

Rodney even made a special trip to the chair to have a little conversation with Atlantis, making it clear to the city's AI that these people were out to damage John, her favorite son. He then had to persuade Atlantis that they didn't want them damaged, because if they were, Elizabeth would have problems with it.

Atlantis, for her part, seemed ready to cooperate in any way she could. Rodney suspected that they'd be getting lots of little shocks and such. Nothing that would damage them, nothing that would seem like an attack. But the point wasn't to attack them. The point was to make it clear that they couldn't function in the city without the city's cooperation, which they didn't have.

Zelenka came up with the bright idea of reducing the temperature in their quarters, as well, so while they were locked in, they'd be freezing while they waited for someone from the science to come let them out.

Rodney had already decided to assign that to Smythe. Mostly because he'd take forever to actually get anything unlocked.

He just hoped that it would work.

**Too Long (And?) Too Far From Home**

Rodney tucked the last of the circuits back into place. If that didn't convince Castleman that he couldn't control Atlantis, nothing would. He dusted off his hands, sighing. He really hoped that it worked, because John didn't deserve to have assholes trying to remove him. Not after all the times that John had fought and bled and almost died to protect Atlantis and her people.

Now, all that was left was to deal with the fallout, and at this time of day, that would happen in the mess hall. Several of them - especially Castleman - had been locked in their quarters for twenty-four hours, so they should be starving. Rodney knew for a fact that John was there, because he'd just radioed that he wanted to meet Rodney for dinner, and maybe a game of chess afterwards. Rodney only hoped that chess was a euphemism for something else - and that John would still be interested after the new people flooded the mess.

Standing, he stretched out his back, and then cleaned up his tools, carrying them with him to the mess. John was at the team table, and Rodney filled a tray before going to join them. Spooning up some of the tava bean mixture on his tray, he sighed again. "Tava bean surprise, again. You'd think that after all this time, they'd realize that no one is surprised."

Ronon and Teyla both chuckled. John looked up, but he didn't laugh. Instead, his eyes seemed to be drifting over the people coming in and leaving the room. "Anyone notice that it's been quiet today?"
Somehow Rodney isn’t surprised when Teyla and Ronon exchanged a glance and then got up to leave. He’d always known that he was going to be the one to have to explain what he’d done to John, but he was hoping to see if it worked first.

He was saved from the need to talk by the sudden influx of new people, who were falling on the food like they were starving. John was alternating between watching them and looking at Rodney, and Rodney shook his head, hoping that John would realize that he just didn't want to talk about it here. He would have preferred to discuss it in privacy, where if John got mad there would be no public witnesses.

Before he could say anything, though, the new people started to find seats, and Rodney noticed that except for a few holdouts - like Castleman – they were sitting at tables that were already occupied by first-wavers. For the first time since they arrived, they were making an effort to intermingle. He could hear just enough to know that they were asking about the malfunctions. The old guard wouldn't tell them anything besides the fact that it happened occasionally, and that pissing off McKay would only make it last longer.

Hopefully, the message was getting through.

When he looked back at John, John was staring, his eyes suspiciously soft. He didn't say anything, though. He just picked up his fork and started to eat, asking Rodney about what they were working on in the labs.

Eating was fast and perfunctory. Then John stood and picked up his tray. "Still up for that game of chess?"

"Yes." Rodney picked up his own tray and followed him to the trashcan so that he could dump it. He could feel eyes on the back of his neck, and when he turned around, he met Castleman's glare full on. He smiled at the man, knowing that it would infuriate him, and then turned back to John, who'd watched the whole thing. "Well, come along. I'm so going to beat you this time."

"Not hardly." The two of them walked down the hall together, keeping a careful distance between them. As soon as the door shut behind them, John spun to face Rodney. "What did you do?"

Rodney contemplated going for innocent for about three seconds. There was no way that John would buy that he hadn't done anything. Instead, he said, "Nothing that didn't need doing. No one got hurt and maybe the problem will go away."

"Did you see the way that Castleman was looking at you?" John asked. "He's pissed at you, and he's dangerous. Rodney -"

"Oh, stop it. I have faith that you'll protect me. Besides, don't we have better things we could be doing?"

John looked reluctant, like he wanted to keep arguing, so Rodney did the only thing he could think of to shut him up. He grabbed John by the arms, and tugged him in for a kiss. He couldn't help the smile, though, because he couldn't help remembering that this whole thing had started when John had kissed him to shut him up.

He kept up the gentle pressure until John melted under the assault, tension flowing out of his muscles, and he started to return the kiss. When John opened his mouth for Rodney, he took the invitation and slid his tongue into John's mouth, tasting the tava beans they'd had for dinner, and something that was pure John.
When John whimpered into his mouth, he let his hands slide down his back to John's ass, pulling him in tight and rocking their hips together. Rodney could feel John's cock, a hard line that pressed against his own, and the heat made him groan.

"Please, Rodney," John murmured into Rodney's mouth.

Rodney smiled at him and slowly slid to his knees. "Shh," he said, his face pressed against John's stomach. "I've got you."

John's hands were in his hair, massaging his scalp, but not pulling or directing. But when Rodney looked up John's body to his face, he saw open need and desire there.

He tried to hide the way that his hands shook as he lifted them to undo John's belt and pants. As they grew loose, they slipped down off John's hips, bunching around his calves and ankles. His cock, hard and thick, was pointing right at Rodney.

What else could Rodney do but take it into his mouth? He wrapped one hand around the base and sucked the head of it into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the lip of it before focusing his attention on the spot where all the nerves came together at the back.

John moaned softly, his hand alternately bunching and smoothing Rodney's hair. "Oh, God," he said, softly, reverently.

Rodney pulled back with a popping sound. "Good?"

"Yeah. Don't stop."

But the cold of the metal floor of Rodney's quarters was getting to Rodney, even through his uniform pants, and making his knees ache. So instead, he turned his attention to John's boots, unlacing and loosening them before encouraging John to step out of the whole mess. While he was doing that, John tugged his t-shirt up and off, leaving him completely naked in front of Rodney.

As if it made him uncomfortable, John wrapped his arms around his chest, closing his eyes. A flush was rising in his cheeks, and if he didn't think that it would embarrass John even further, Rodney would have said something.

As it was, Rodney stood up and tugged John's arms down, pulling him for a tight hug. They held each other for a few moments, and then John pulled back. "This is a little unbalanced, don't you think?"

Rodney looked down at his clothes and then back at John, giving him a cheeky grin. "I don't see a problem with it."

"Oh, you -" John started to push Rodney back towards the bed, pulling up his shirt at the same time. Rodney didn't struggle, and when he sat on the side of the bed, he didn't wait for John to help undo his shoes, instead bending over to unlace them himself.

Within a few moments, he was naked, and John was pushing him back on the bed. Rodney went willingly, and then tugged on John till he was straddling Rodney's chest, his cock inches from Rodney's mouth. "Want to fuck my face?" he asked. John's eyes fluttered shut and he moaned. "I'll take that as a yes, then."

He wrapped his hands around John's hips and tugged him forward till John's cock rested on his lower lip.

Then he opened his mouth and waited.
It didn't take John long to get the message, and he started to slowly thrust in and out of Rodney's mouth, going a little deeper on each stroke. Rodney worked his tongue around as much of John's cock as he could take, licking and sucking. He was gratified to hear John start to make soft noises, moans and whimpers, and what sounded like pleas for more.

His hands were still wrapped around John's hips, so it didn't take much to let one hand slip back and brush down John's crack, not searching out his entrance, not yet, but making the offer clear.

John thrust forward suddenly, and then pushed back into Rodney's hand, as if he couldn't decide which way he wanted to go. Wanting to help him make a decision, Rodney did it again, this time letting his fingers trace over the entrance to John's body.

Whining high in his chest, John said, "Christ, yes."

With his mouth occupied and John straddling his chest, Rodney couldn't wet his fingers the way he wanted to. So, he only pushed a little ways in, just to the first knuckle.

John gave a long, keening cry, hips rocking madly, and began to come. Rodney swallowed quickly, trying to make sure that none of it escaped. Even after he stopped coming, Rodney continued to lick and suck until John's cock started to go a little soft and he pulled back and away, eventually sitting next to Rodney on the bed.

Rodney couldn't hold back. He needed to come, and now. His hand dropped to his own neglected cock, and he started to jerk off with fast, hard strokes. Except that John grabbed his hand and stopped him. "No, Rodney."

"Oh, God," Rodney said. "I need to come, John. Please let me come."

Replacing Rodney's hand with his own, John started to touch him with long, even strokes. Rodney wanted to watch, wanted to see every moment of him being touched like this, but his orgasm was barreling down on him, and his eyes squeezed shut. He was panting harshly, and when John leaned down to kiss him, it pushed him off the edge, and Rodney flew.

He only came back to himself when John was wiping him off with a t-shirt from the floor. Rodney made a face, but didn't object. Instead, he pulled on John until he was lying half on top of Rodney. Allowing John to pillow himself on Rodney's upper arm, he waited till John was looking away before asking, "You liked that, huh?"

"Um, yeah," John said, and Rodney could feel the blush heating his skin. "I might have, possibly, experimented a little when I was alone last night."

"Oh?" Rodney thought he knew what that meant, but he didn't want to assume. Instead he just left it hang there, for John to fill in the gaps, or not, depending on his comfort level.

John drew random patterns on Rodney's stomach, clearly struggling with how to answer. Just as Rodney was about to tell him that it was fine, that he didn't need to say anything, John said, "Yeah, I, um, I played with my ass a little while I was jerking off. It felt better than I thought."

Rodney's breath hitched, and his cock gave a hopeful little twitch. Telling it to stay calm, he tried make sure that he kept his voice even as he said, "How many fingers?"

His voice was soft when he said, "Two. Couldn't get them very deep, though."

"Yes, that would be a problem," Rodney said. "The next time I blow you, would you like me to do that? Slick up my fingers and slide them deep inside you? Find that hotspot that feels so good?"
Rodney wanted to do it *right now*, and was having a hard time convincing his body that he wasn't twenty years old anymore.

John's voice was even softer. "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

Rodney couldn't help it, he had to kiss John now. Pulling his face up, he gave him the wettest, dirtiest kiss he could. "I'll do that, John. I'll make you feel so good."

Making a soft sound, John wrapped himself more firmly around Rodney. "First, though, I need a nap," John said, and Rodney had to agree.

**Who Cares What A Fool Believes?**

It was hard to let John go back to his own quarters. Rodney wanted nothing more than to pull him back into the bed, wear him out so that he was too tired to leave, but he knew that John was worried about getting caught. Earth, with its regulations, wasn't an issue anymore, but there was still Castleman and the few allies he still had left.

So Rodney watched through slitted eyes as John dressed quietly. As he sat on the edge of the bed to lace up his boots, Rodney wrapped himself around John, not saying anything but letting John feel that he wanted him to stay. When John finished, he leaned down and kissed Rodney. "See you at breakfast?"

"Yeah," Rodney said, his voice rough. "I'll see you then."

John let himself out of Rodney's quarters, and with a sigh, Rodney made himself comfortable, his eyes already falling shut. Morning would be here soon enough.

When he went to breakfast, he was mildly surprised that John hadn't beaten him to the mess. He loaded up his tray, and went to the team table, where Teyla and Ronon were already sitting. Looking around the room while he drank his first cup of coffee, he noticed with relief that the new people were *finally* integrating with the people who'd already been on Atlantis. There was still a noticeable divide between the scientists and the soldiers, but that was always there except for where being on a team crossed those lines.

But he also noticed that Castleman wasn't in the room, and neither were the three or four people who'd still been sitting with him the day before. And John still wasn't in the mess hall.

Shaking off a suspicion that he didn't want to be having, he turned his attention to his breakfast. "So, have you seen Colonel Sheppard this morning?" he asked Ronon and Teyla. Sue him, it was a legitimate question. It wasn't like he was being a girl about meeting him or anything.

Teyla and Ronon exchanged a glance, and then Teyla shook her head. "No, I have not seen him. This is most unusual, as he is usually one of the first people in the mess in the morning."

"Huh," Rodney said, scooping up some ersatz egg.

"We thought he was with you," Ronon said. Then, he winked at Rodney, and Rodney could feel the blush heating up his face as he spit eggs all over the table.

Ronon chuckled, obviously pleased with himself. "Why would you think that? We're just friends. Very good friends, obviously, but still, just friends."
"Right," Ronon said, looking as if he didn't believe Rodney in the slightest. "We know, McKay."

This time it was coffee that went all over the table. Teyla looked faintly disgusted, but she said, "Yes, it is no secret to the two of us. We wish you well, of course."

"Of course," Rodney said weakly.

He was saved from any more conversation about John's and his relationship, by his radio. It was Elizabeth. "Rodney, could you please come to the control room?"

"On my way," he said, getting up and dumping his tray. With one last look at Teyla and Ronon, he rushed out of the room and headed to the control room.

He walked into barely controlled chaos. Techs were rushing around, trying to get computers to function, and Rodney started to rush. "What's the situation?"

"The Colonel's missing," Elizabeth said, with no preliminaries.

"Has anyone checked his quarters? Maybe he just overslept." Rodney wasn't going to panic. He wasn't. "We should be able to find him by the transmitter if he isn't there."

"That's how we know he's missing," Elizabeth said. "All of our computers suddenly locked up, taking us to the transmitter signal page. We're one short, and using the life signs detector tells us that we're actually short four people."

Rodney's stomach dropped to his shoes. "Any idea who else is missing?"


"Has the Gate been activated? That would be the most reasonable explanation." Rodney crossed his fingers that the answer was no. He had no idea where they were if they hadn't left Atlantis, but if they were out somewhere in the galaxy…

"The Gate hasn't been activated since yesterday afternoon," Chuck said, and Rodney nodded at him.

"And there are no jumpers missing," Elizabeth said, cutting off his next question.

"Okay." Rodney pushed one of the techs away from her computer. "Let me see what I can find."

Twenty minutes later, he hadn't found anything more that what Elizabeth had said. There was no sign of John or Castleman. He and Zelenka stared at each other and Rodney could see when he got the same idea that Rodney had. Without a word, he sprinted for the teleporter, Zelenka only a step behind.

"Rodney?" Elizabeth radioed him as he stepped in.

He waited until he arrived at his destination before radioing back. "I'm at the chair, Elizabeth. Give us a minute."

"Understood," she said.

With a hopeful look at Zelenka, he sat down, the chair immediately reclining under him. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Then he thought, as loudly as he could, Atlantis!

The city's AI responded with a mental tone that implied a question. In a messy tangle of detail, he dumped the whole story out - John was missing, John was in trouble. Were there any parts of the city
where *this* - a mental image of the transmitter - would not work?

The AI was obviously trying to process everything that he'd told her and asked her, and Rodney waited impatiently. It was all he could do not to fidget nervously, but he didn't want to distract her.

Finally, she brought up a map of the city above him, and there were three areas that were highlighted. It carried with it the feeling that these areas were shielded for research purposes, but were not currently in use.

Thanking the AI, Rodney jumped out of the chair. Radioing Elizabeth, he gave her the location of the three shielded areas, then said, "Elizabeth, we're nearest the largest area. Send me a team and we'll go in there at the same time that you have teams hit the other two sections. We'll find them."

There was a long pause, and then Elizabeth said, "Rodney, wouldn't it be better to send in someone other than you?"

"He's the leader of my team, Elizabeth. I'm going in, with or without back up."

There was a pause, and then she finally said, "Understood. A team is on its way to you. Hold tight until I give the order."

"Understood," Rodney said, tightly. Within minutes, there was a team of marines, one of whom mutely handed over his P90 when Rodney demanded it. Then he paced nervously, waiting for the go order.

When it came, he led the way to the isolated lab, praying the whole way that John would be there, and that he'd be uninjured.

One of the marines waved him back, and made him wait as they opened the door and slipped inside. The lights came up automatically, and Rodney stepped into… an empty lab. He wasn't there. Shit.

Then shouting by one of the marines came over the radio. Before Rodney could figure out what he was saying, there was the distinctive sound of Ronon's gun being fired. Without waiting for the rest of the marines, he spun in place and started to run to one of the other labs.

He got there just in time to see Lorne cutting John out of the ropes that tied him to the chair he was sitting in. The two members of Castleman's little cadre sat dazed and confused, and Castleman himself was down, right next to the chair.

Ronon was there, still holding his gun on the other two. Rodney sidled up next to him. "Is he dead?"

Answering without looking away, Ronon said, "Yes. He was holding a gun on Sheppard."

Rodney nodded, turning to look carefully at John. He looked like he'd been beaten up pretty effectively, but he was breathing and conscious, and that was good news as far as Rodney was concerned.

Carson came flying into the room, followed by members of his team who were pushing a gurney. Two of the marines helped John move from the chair, and he settled himself like his ribs hurt. Rodney wanted to move forward, to check for himself that John was okay, but he hung back, not wanting to risk behaving in an inappropriate way.

It didn't matter, because McGee chose that minute to start yelling. "He's a fag! He's sleeping with McKay! Don't you people even care? He dishonors the uniform he wears!"
Ronon stepped forward threateningly, and McGee shut up, but the damage had been done. Rodney could see the marines exchanging glances. Oh, shit. He stepped forward as well, trying to think of something, anything, to undo the this, but unable to think of a single word.

It didn't matter, because now Ronon was staring at him, and he found himself completely unable to deny it, even if it was going to cause problems. He wasn't going to deny John, no matter what. If John chose to deny him that was up to him.

Instead, he followed silently as Carson’s team pushed John out of the room. From behind him, he could hear McGee continue to yell, and the sound of flesh on flesh. Grimly hoping that Ronon had chosen to shut him up physically, he continued on to the infirmary, where he was shunted off to the waiting area.

He waited impatiently, listening to the quiet sounds of Carson's and John's voices, as well as the occasional pained exclamation. After a few minutes, Ronon and Teyla joined him, and the three of them stood there, staring at one another.

When Carson came out to join them, Rodney had to force himself to hang back, and let Teyla take the lead in the conversation. He was so focused on getting to John that he really didn't hear what was being said. Instead, he stared hard at the curtain like he'd be able to move it with his mind.

He definitely heard Carson say it was okay for them to go back, though, and he was through the curtain and by John's bed like a shot. Only some sense of self-preservation kept him from kissing John's forehead, which was as bruised as the rest of him. Instead, he said, "Malingering again?"

"Yeah. Can't get enough of the infirmary food," John said with a grin.

Rodney found himself at a loss for words, just staring at John, who was whole and healthy, if not completely undamaged. He only looked up when Elizabeth walked in.

**Looking Like a Hero**

Elizabeth couldn't help wincing at John's appearance. He had two black eyes, abrasions on one cheek, and was sitting unnaturally straight, like his ribs were broken and had been taped.

He was still the first to notice her come into the room, and he nodded at her. "Elizabeth," he said, and his voice was raspy, as if his throat was raw. She didn't want to think why that would be the case, but one man was dead and two others were in the brig. She needed to find out why.

"What happened, John?"

She was surprised to see John look at Rodney. She was even more surprised to see Rodney nod. Curious, she wanted to ask what that was all about, but it wasn't any of her business.

John looked at her. "I left Rodney's room about 2 am. Castleman, McGee, and Gleason grabbed me and dragged me off to the lower levels. They were trying to 'persuade' me to step down as military commander. Said that if I did it willingly, they wouldn't start a mutiny to replace both of us.

"Needless to say, I told them where to shove it."

"They weren't pleased by that." Rodney leaned forward and rested one hand on John's shoulder. Elizabeth couldn't help frowning at that. She'd never seen them so physically demonstrative before.

She'd leave it alone, for the moment. There were more important issues. "Did they threaten anything besides mutiny?"
"Well, yeah. After they worked me over for a while, Gleason pointed out that it was breakfast time and that people were going to notice I was missing after a while. They stepped away for a minute - I guess to discuss things - and when they came back, Castleman pulled out the gun he'd used to get me down there in the first place."

John shifted uncomfortably. Rodney's hand never moved. What was that all about?

"Anyway, they told me that if I wouldn't step down, they'd just remove me the old-fashioned way. They figured they'd toss my body off the pier and that no one would catch them. I think when Ronon came in, he scared the piss out of them."

John turned to look at Ronon. "Did I mention that was good shooting, by the way? Cause if I didn't, I should have."

Ronon grinned. "Just broke you in as my commander. Couldn't let assholes kill you."

He turned back to face Elizabeth, and she could see how he hid a wince. "Anyway, Ronon came in like the wrath of God, or something out of a comic book, and Castleman thought that turning the gun on me was the smartest thing he could do.

"Ronon shot him. End of story."

Elizabeth took a moment to think about what he said. She had a nagging question that needed to be asked. "Why were you coming out of Rodney's quarters so late?"

John and Rodney exchanged a glance, and then both of them just silently stared at her. It took a second, but the penny finally dropped. "Oh. Oh!" They didn't say anything at all, and her brain was spinning in place. She couldn't think of anything to say.

Rodney spoke up when it became uncomfortable. "Is this going to be a problem, Elizabeth? We can continue to try and keep it quiet, if you want."

Ronon and Teyla were already shaking their heads. "McGee and Gleason made a lot of noise about where they found John. It is already a subject of much gossip," Teyla said.

All the blood drained out of John's face, not that Elizabeth could really blame him. This had the potential to be very bad.

But Ronon said, "It's not going to be a problem. The marines were gossiping, but they thought it was good thing. Most everyone likes you, Sheppard. They don't care who you fuck."

Elizabeth could feel herself blushing, and Rodney and John were pretty red as well. She wondered if this was the first time they'd talked about it with anyone.

But she decided that if the marines didn't care, she wasn't going to. She was just grateful that the marines that were sent to Atlantis, and those that had been in the SGC for the most part, were an open-minded bunch.

She took John's hand in hers, and squeezed it lightly. "I'm glad you got off with nothing more than a few bruises and banged-up ribs, John. We need you."

John was still blushing, but that was okay. She could tease him about it later. For now, she'd leave John and Rodney alone. Gathering up Teyla and Ronon, she led them out of the room.

Once they were out of earshot, she said, with all due seriousness, "You're sure that this isn't going to
cause a problem for the two of them?"

Ronon shrugged. "Word's still getting around. Won't know for a few days if there's going to be a problem, but I suggest that anyone have a problem with it, they should be forced to tangle with McKay. He's pretty protective of Sheppard."

Elizabeth had noticed the same thing, so she just nodded. "I don't suppose there's anything we can do to quash these rumors, is there?"

"If we do, that will simply provide more fuel for the fire, will it not?" asked Teyla. "I believe we should do nothing, and see how public opinion works out over the next few days."

She really didn't like it - she felt that they needed to be doing something to control the spin - but she couldn't think of what, so she agreed.

Turning to go back to her office, she noticed Teyla and Ronon heading back behind the curtain again, and for a moment she envied them, and the team's closeness. She had nothing like that, and it was frustrating. She suddenly missed Simon with a sharpness she hadn't felt in a long time.

But that was in the past, and it was time for them - for all of them - to look towards the future.

Calling Bates to her office, she tried to figure out what to do with McGee and Gleason. They couldn't afford to leave them in the brig forever, but it really wasn't safe to let them out yet, either, given the anger that was palpable in the city.

Bates met her there, and before she said anything, told her, "They're secure, ma'am. At this point, we're more protecting them from the other soldiers than punishing them."

"I know. What do you suggest we do long-term? We can't afford to leave them there for long."

"Well, we should leave them there until things calm down. Then I think we should assign them someone who sticks to them like glue until they either prove that they can accept reality, or that they can't, in which case, I guess we can send them somewhere else."

"Yes, but where?"

"No idea, ma'am, but I don't think we need to worry about it." Bates gave her something of a feral grin. "With Castleman gone, I think we'll find that they'll decide it's in their best interest to learn to get along."

Elizabeth wondered about the grin, but decided that she didn't really want to know. "Okay. That sounds like a plan, then. We'll do that."

He nodded and excused himself, leaving Elizabeth to stare into space and wonder when her life had become a soap opera.

**Ride With Your Eyes Open Wide**

John fought the urge to cling to Rodney's hand. He'd gone from being fond of Rodney to sleeping with him, and now he'd just come out of the closet - a closet that he'd not even been aware he'd been in.

As if he knew what was going through John's head, Rodney squeezed his shoulder before dropping his hand. "You okay?" he whispered.
"I think so," John said. "I've just, I've never…" In frustration, John threw up his hands, only to hiss as his abused ribs objected. "Ouch."

"Don't do that," Ronon said as he stepped back in. "It hurts."

" Noticed that, thank you," John said, grinning.

They laughed and joked for a while, and John almost forgot about the pain in his ribs after a while. He hadn't lost his team when it came out that he slept with Rodney, and yeah, it could be said that both Teyla and Ronon had practically shoved him into Rodney's arms, he'd still been afraid that when confronted with the reality, they'd leave.

They'd stayed.

And John was happier than he'd been in a long time.

Eventually, the painkillers that Carson had been pumping through his IV caught up with him, and he found his eyes sagging shut, no matter how hard he tried to keep them open. He could hear the whispers among the three of them, and then the warmth of Rodney's hand disappeared.

Footsteps, receding, and he was going to open his eyes and see what was going on. He was. In just a moment…

John woke up alone and disoriented. For a long moment, he couldn't remember why he was in the infirmary, and then it all came flooding back.

He was actually glad that he was by himself, because it gave him a moment to mourn the fact that the situation had come to this with Castleman. He was sure that he'd been a good man on Earth, a good soldier. He just couldn't adapt to life out here in Pegasus.

Staring at the ceiling was good for letting him reflect on what had happened, and so he did, ignoring the sounds of the infirmary going on beyond the curtain.

It was only a moment or two before Carson came bustling in, and John had to grin at the way that he fussed. "I'm not that badly hurt," he said.

"I'll be the judge of that, laddie," Carson said, adjusting the IV and fussing with one of the monitors.

"Really, Carson, I'm fine. I just want to go back to my own quarters." And he did. He wanted to sleep without drugs, and relax in his own bed for a while and then he wanted to go find Rodney and makes sure everything was copasetic between them. He doubted getting laid was on the agenda anytime for the next few days, though. Broken ribs would do that.

Carson snorted. "I'll tell you what, Colonel. You stay and eat lunch, and I'll contemplate sending you back to your quarters this afternoon."

Knowing that that was the best deal he was going to get out of the man, he agreed, reluctantly. Carson waved at one of the nurses, who brought out a tray that was loaded down with most of his favorite Pegasus foods.

He raised an eyebrow at her, and she giggled and backed away. She fucking giggled. There was something seriously wrong with this picture. "Carson, something you want to tell me?"

"Ah, well," Carson stuttered. "Let's just say that there are some rumors making their way around the city, and apparently my nurses find it cute."
"Cute?" He and Rodney were cute? There must be something in the water. Or maybe the food - he eyed the sandwich suspiciously.

"Apparently so," and now Carson sounded sour about the whole thing. It was something of a relief to hear.

"You don't have a problem with it, do you?" John could have smacked himself in the face for asking, but if Carson was going to have a problem - it was best to know.

"Nay, laddie. No problem with it, except that Cadman and I have broken up again. It's kind of frustrating to see other people happy when I'm not, you know?" Carson was jealous of him and Rodney. Definitely something in the food.

"At any rate, Colonel, eat up. Then you're free to go to your quarters, as long as someone takes you there."

"Thanks, Carson." John tried to make sure that his appreciation for more than the early release was evident in his voice. From the way Carson blushed and stammered, it worked.

When it came time for John to be released, he was a little surprised to see Ronon instead of Rodney. Ronon just shrugged and said, "Busy in the lab, I guess. I'm supposed to take you to your quarters and then go check in with him." John couldn't help the smile. It was nice to have someone concerned about him.

**Tell Me With Your Eyes**

He felt a little less relieved three days later when he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Rodney. Both Teyla and Ronon were keeping him company, eating with him in the mess and going on Carson-mandated walks, but neither of them would say anything about Rodney beyond the fact that he was busy working on some project in the lab.

John was starting to really worry. What if everyone knowing was scaring Rodney? He couldn't deny that he was still worried a little himself, but almost everyone he'd seen had simply smiled at him and given him no reason to think that there were many people who objected. The few who didn't smile at him, didn't seem to object loudly. It was more like they just didn't care, and John was fine with that.

As they walked around the edge of the east pier, he wondered what Rodney was working on that was keeping him so busy. He decided that after this walk, he was going to go find out.

He let Ronon escort him back to his room, and sat down on his bed to wait. Counting to five hundred to make sure that Ronon was well away before he left the room, since he still was supposed to be mostly on bed rest, he pulled on his boots and left.

It was only a five-minute walk to the lab, and when the door opened, John went in, expecting to see an excited Rodney, surrounded by equally excited scientists. The reality was very different.

Rodney looked terrible, with dark circles under his eyes and a downturned mouth. John came to a stuttering halt just inside the door and looked.

There were no excited scientists. The few people in the room were moving slowly and carefully, like they were afraid to disturb Rodney, and John started to really worry. Something terrible had happened, that must be it.

Approaching slowly, he tried to make a little noise so that Rodney would look up and see him. The last thing he wanted to do was startle the man. It didn't work, though, and he was standing at
Rodney's elbow before he even reacted to John's presence.

His eyes grew wide, and then darted around, like he was looking for an escape route. Just as they fell on Zelenka, he shut his laptop and announced to the lab at large that it was lunchtime. Within moments, the room was empty other than Rodney and John.

"What's wrong?" he asked, cutting off the excuse that he could already see forming on Rodney's lips.

Rodney shook his head, and lowered his face so that all John could see was the profile. "Rodney? Talk to me, buddy."

When Rodney looked up, the fear on his face was something to behold. But his voice was even when he said, "I just thought I'd give you some space to come to a decision."

"What decision?" John was confused.

"Whether you wanted to continue this," Rodney moved his hand between John and himself, making it clear what "this" he was referring to.

John blinked. "Are you stupid?" Rodney looked shocked and hurt for a second, but John didn't stop. "It's either that or you've sustained some sort of brain damage in the last few days, because you seem to think that I'm worried about what someone else thinks of us.

"And besides, apparently most of them find us cute, anyway, so there's no need to worry about that."

Rodney's mouth moved soundlessly for a few moments, then he said, "But you aren't even gay. Functionally bisexual, maybe. Sex with me doesn't make you gay. And I don't want you to ruin your reputation for me."

John stared at Rodney like he was going to grow another head. He didn't know what to address first.

"First off, what's the difference - gay or bi? I don't care about whether I find other men attractive. I care that I find you attractive.

"And second of all, I don't care about my rep, which you've always thought more of than there was in reality. I... care about you. That's all there is to it. If you don't feel the same way about me, then I can't do anything about that, but it doesn't change how I feel."

Rodney didn't move or react for a long moment, and John was already kicking himself for being too open when suddenly he had Rodney's arms wrapped around him, hugging him tight. "I didn't know, John. I swear I didn't realize. I'm sorry."

John returned the hug, feeling an overpowering sense of relief. He kissed Rodney's ear, then his neck, before burying his face in the space between neck and shoulder. Just smelling Rodney there was intense, like it had been weeks instead of days. Suddenly, he needed Rodney, needed him with an intensity that shocked him. "Come back to my room," he said.

Already nodding before the sentence was finished, Rodney set about shutting down his computer while John waited impatiently.

A Warm Safe Place

This time, they kept a carefully measured distance between them as they walked to John's room
because Rodney was afraid that if he touched John he'd not be able to stop. He kept looking at John out of the corner of his eye, unable to be really believe that they were here together.

He owed Ronon and Teyla big for keeping John away as long as they did. It had been hard to be without him, but he didn't think that John would have told him anything without being pushed like that, leaving Rodney in limbo.

As soon as the door to John's room slid shut behind them, John was pushing Rodney against it. His face was buried back in Rodney's neck, and he said, "How could you believe that I didn't want this? That I didn't care?"

Rodney had no answer for him. All he could do was run his hands soothingly up and down John's back. But John didn't want to be soothed from the way that he started to grind against Rodney's hip.

Gasping at the feel of John's hard cock pressing against him, Rodney let his hands drift down over John's ass, pulling him up tight. John immediately started a broken litany of, "Yes, yes, yes. Anything, Rodney, anything."

It almost took more willpower than Rodney had to push John back a step, but before he could object, Rodney was stripping out of his shirt, and toeing off his shoes. John nodded and joined in the rush to get naked, beating Rodney by only a few seconds.

Naked John was a sight to see, and Rodney studied him for a long moment. Long, lean muscles that defied description were covered with a fine hair, and Rodney itched to touch it. And his cock was drool-worthy, standing up tall and proud.

Rodney gave into temptation and dropped to his knees, grabbing John by the hips and pulling him closer so that he could get his mouth on John's cock. The head was already wet, and he licked the precome away before sucking the head in.

John groaned and his hands waved about for a moment before one landed on Rodney's shoulder and the other on his head. John didn't make any effort to control the blowjob, though Rodney would have let him. Instead, he let Rodney go at his own pace, taking more on every downward stroke.

Rodney didn't stop taking more until his nose was buried in John's pubic hair, and then he sucked and licked and did everything he could to make John feel good. He wanted to make John come, wanted to feel and taste it.

Except that John was pushing him away, pulling him off his cock, and taking a step back. When Rodney looked up, trying to figure out what was going on, John was breathing hard, and looked absolutely wrecked. "Stop, Rodney," he said.

"Um, why?" Rodney asked, already shuffling forward on his knees, trying to get close enough to take John's cock again.

"I don't want to come in your mouth," John said, turning his body slightly so that his cock was still out of reach.

"You don't?"

"No." And John took the three steps necessary to get to the bed, where he went down on all fours. "I want you to fuck me."

Rodney had to grab his dick, because otherwise he was going to stand there and come all over himself like a horny teenager. He stepped close to the bed and let one hand hover over John's back,
not quite touching. Not quite sure he had the right to touch. "Are you sure?"

John turned to look over his shoulder at Rodney. "No? But I want to try."

All Rodney could do was nod dumbly. He hadn't thought that John would be ready for that for a long time, if ever. But if John was going to volunteer for it, Rodney certainly wasn't going to turn him down. Besides, he knew he could make it good for John, so good.

Before he could overthink things, he climbed on the bed behind John, kneeling between his legs. Rodney could see John tightening up in what he'd probably deny was fear. "Shh," he whispered. "It's going to feel good, I promise." Then he studied John for a moment before touching. Minute shivers shook John's slender frame, and Rodney wanted to soothe them away.

Leaning forward to hug John, while at the same time keeping his dick away from John's ass was difficult, but entirely worth it, because as soon as Rodney wrapped his arms around John's waist, he relaxed. Rodney squeezed a little, and then released him. "Put your head down on the bed, John. And you have to promise to tell me if I do something you don't like."

Obeying, John nodded. "I promise."

The position he was in spread John's muscular cheeks a little, giving Rodney a clear view of his hole. Before John could tense back up, Rodney gently spread his cheeks a little further and then licked up the crevice, from John's balls to the top of his ass.

John gasped and came up off the bed. "What the -"

Rodney pressed on his shoulder, urging him back down. "It's fine. Just relax."

"Easy for you to say. You don't have someone licking your ass." Rodney chuckled and licked again. John shut up and shuddered, obviously trying to focus on the sensation.

"That's it," Rodney whispered against John's skin. He shifted position, moving lower on the bed, and then targeted the small hole, licking around it and over it. He didn't try to penetrate, just stimulated all the nerves around the edge. He kept it up, silently giving thanks for all the talking he did. It meant that his tongue wasn't going to get tired quite as soon.

John gradually relaxed under him. Rodney only changed what he was doing when John's breath started to hitch. Spreading John a little wider, he pressed the point of his tongue against John's hole, pushing in just a little ways. He didn't try to force his way past the ring of muscle. Instead, he kept the pressure steady until it relaxed, letting him slide a little way in.

Groaning, John reached back and laid his hands over Rodney's, holding himself open. Rodney had to close his eyes against the sheer hotness of what he was seeing. Keeping his eyes closed, he continued to tongue fuck John, tasting clean male sweat, until John was relaxed and wet. Only then did he stop.

When he pulled away, John whimpered. "Don't stop," he whispered. "Want you so bad."

"Christ! I want you too, but I have to get you ready," Rodney whispered back, leaning past John to snatch the lube off the nightstand. When his cock brushed against John's ass, he jumped, and Rodney had to choke back a giggle.

Realizing that laughing at John wasn't the way to go, he focused on slicking two fingers. Pressing the pad of his middle finger against John's opening, he pressed gently.
John was so relaxed that he opened right up for Rodney, letting him push in slowly. When he'd gotten as deep as his second knuckle, he paused, but John didn't give any indication that he was uncomfortable. In fact, he pressed back slightly, so Rodney pushed in the rest of the way, and then let his finger rest there for a moment.

He was going to wait until John relaxed around him, but John turned around and looked over his shoulder at him. "Fuck, Rodney. Move!"

Making no effort to find John's prostate at first, he simply slid his finger a little ways out and then back in. John moaned and relaxed into the bed as Rodney moved. As he became less tight around Rodney's finger, he slid it out far enough to add a second one. That got John's attention, and he came up off the bed a little way, hissing.

"John?"

"It - It burns a little."

"Should I keep going?" Rodney asked.

"I - I don't know?" John sounded very uncertain, and Rodney nodded to himself. He remembered being in John's position, not knowing that it was going to get a lot better.

So Rodney started to pull his fingers back, but he pressed hard on John's prostate as he did. It had the desired effect. "God, don't stop!"

"You sure?" So Rodney couldn't help gloating a little.

"Rodney." It was a growl this time, and Rodney chuckled. But he also slid his fingers back in, rhythmically massaging over that spot until John was writhing under him, pressing back hard into his hand. "More."

He pulled his fingers all the way out, hurriedly slicking three fingers and slowly pushing back in with them. This time he didn't tease, going right back to John's prostate and working it over as well as he could. John was still tight, but not unbearably so. He finger fucked John for a long time, his other hand rubbing over his back and sides, trying to keep him relaxed.

He only stopped when John grabbed his wrist, forcing him to stop moving. "Please, Rodney?"

John's voice was small, nervous.

"Are you sure, John? We don't have to if you don't want to. You don't have to ever if you don't want to. You could fuck me instead," Rodney babbled.

"I'm sure. Unless you don't want to?"

Rodney nodded even though John couldn't see him, and knelt up. He slid his fingers out of John, making him moan, and then had to manage to slick his cock without coming, even though he desperately wanted to.

When his cock glistened with lube, he wrapped his hands around John's hips and snubbed the head of his cock up against John's hole. John stammered out, "Is that?"

"Yeah," Rodney said.

"It feels bigger," John whispered.
Rodney was getting ready to tell John that no, they really didn't have to do this, when John started to push backwards. As the head of his cock popped through the ring of muscle, Rodney yelped.

Inside, John was all heat and squeezing tightness, and Rodney started reciting prime numbers in his head to keep from coming. "Rodney, please," John whimpered, and that got his attention back where it belonged.

Slowly, he pressed inside, pausing every few centimeters to give John a chance to adjust to the invasion. Finally, John said, "Rodney," in an annoyed tone of voice and pressed back hard and fast, taking the rest of Rodney's cock in one thrust.

Buried to the hilt in John's ass, Rodney clutched at his hips, knowing that he was probably going to leave bruises but not really caring. Carefully, he pulled back and then gave an experimental thrust, loving the sounds that John was making.

Releasing John's hips was hard, but Rodney wrapped his arms around John's chest and lifted, pulling John up so that he was kneeling in Rodney's lap. It pressed Rodney even deeper, and they both groaned at the sensation.

"You okay?" he asked, hoping that the answer was yes, because he really didn't want to stop.

"You have to ask?" John said, leaning further back into Rodney's embrace and turning his head so that he could reach Rodney's lips. They kissed as Rodney guided John into a slow, rolling rhythm. Rodney's hands drifted over John's body, one of them going to find and play with a nipple, the other falling to John's cock.

"Yeah," John whimpered as Rodney started to stroke him. His cock was wet with precome, and Rodney slicked the thick fluid over John's cock before starting to jerk him in earnest. John started to move faster, his ass tight around Rodney's cock, and Rodney couldn't help the small breathy moans that were escaping on every stroke.

"So close, Rodney. Just a little more," John said, and Rodney took that as the encouragement it was, moving his hand a little faster, a little rougher.

"Gonna come for me, John? Gonna spill all over my hand?" Rodney didn't quite know where the words were coming from, but from the sounds John was making, they were the right thing to say. Eager to get more of those sounds, Rodney dropped his other hand from John's nipple to his balls, squeezing them gently in their tight sac.

With a harsh cry, John started to come, his ass clenching tight around Rodney's dick, his cock twitching and shooting in his hand. "Oh, oh, oh, god."

Rodney bit his lip and rode out John's orgasm, trying not to come just yet. He didn't know if he was ever going to get to do this again, and he didn't want to waste the chance.

As John twitched through the aftershocks, Rodney carefully lowered him back to the bed, so he was lying on his stomach. Propping himself up on his elbows, he started to really move, long, deep thrusts that ratcheted up the tension starting to build in his spine.

"Yeah," John murmured, boneless and sated below him. "Give it to me, Rodney. Want you to come in me."

Spurred on by John's words, Rodney gave an inarticulate cry and started to move faster. Finally, with one last groan, every nerve in his body started to fire as he came for what felt like forever, emptying himself into John's body.
It was hard to get enough coordination to pull free of John's body and roll to one side, but somehow Rodney finally managed it. John turned his head so that he could blink sleepily at him, and Rodney could feel the goofy smile that seemed to have taken up residence on his face and seemed like it never wanted to go.

"You think Elizabeth would let us share quarters?" John asked after a long silence. "I don't want to have to worry about one of us having to get up in the middle of the night to go their own quarters."

After John's experience a few days ago, Rodney couldn't really blame him. But. "Do you think it's safe? I'm sure there are people who are living in a hazy place of denial, and this would force them to see something they may not want to."

John rolled to his side, and then shifted again so he was sitting up on the edge of the bed. Rodney was privately amused at John's little wince as his ass came down with more force than was prudent, but he was careful to hide it. He did have to ask, though, "Are you sore?"

"A little," John admitted. "Feels good, though. Lets me know you were there, and that's a nice feeling." Then John smiled. "Your cock is much better than my fingers, by the way."

Okay, Rodney had to smile at that, but from the matching grin on John's face, he didn't blame him. Then John grew serious again. "You know what one of the marines said to me this morning?"

"What?" Rodney's gut clenched and he found himself making plans to go and kick some marine ass if necessary. He wasn't letting anyone within the city hurt John again.

"Congratulations." The smile never wavered on John's face, and it took a second for what he said to sink in.

"Wait, you mean -"

"I have the marines' blessing for being with you, yes. There may be one or two who have a problem with it, but I don't really care about them. I want to be with you, and as long as you want that too, then we're good."

John's eyes spoke eloquently about the fact that John was laying himself bare, here, and Rodney picked his words carefully. "I don't know why you want to be with me. I'm not the greatest person to be around, especially when I'm tired or upset. But if you want me at your side, I'll be there."

"And if anyone doesn't like it, they can kiss my ass."

Leaning down, John kissed Rodney. It started as a bare brush of lips, but soon became something more. A vow, a covenant, all this and more. Rodney read in it the things that John hadn't said, the things he might never say. It was all there in the kiss, though, and he was satisfied.
One Year Later…

Chapter Summary

It’s a year later after the events of Square Peg, Round Hole, and Hules and Cordero are getting ready to have a baby.

Chapter Notes

I did the timestamp meme and danceswithgary asked for a year after Square Peg, Round Hole. I have no idea why I decided to write about some of the original characters, but that’s who decided to talk to me!

A lot can happen in a year.

It had taken some time, but the new residents of Atlantis eventually settled in, once they were no longer being incited to mutiny. There were still little bumps and misunderstandings, but for the most part life flowed smoothly.

Well, as smoothly as life in Pegasus ever got, anyway.

Robert Hules smiled to himself as the door slid open to the room he shared with Catherine Cordero. He’d been half in love with her when they’d just been teammates on Earth. Here in Atlantis, there’d been no reason not to let that love find expression. He’d asked her out on a date after the rescue mission to get the scientists back from Kolya, and she’d said yes.

Now she was expecting their first, and he was getting more nervous by the day. She was sitting on the couch when he went in, and while he’d never say it, he thought she looked ready to pop. “Hey, love,” he said, bending down to give her a kiss.

She grinned. “Hey, sweetie.” Then she squirmed uncomfortably.

“Junior still using your bladder as a trampoline?” he asked sympathetically.

“Yeah. I swear he’s going to be a gymnast when he grows up,” she said, one hand pressed to the side of her belly. “Help me up, would you?”

He nodded, and gripped her arm, tugging her upright. Catherine got a strange look on her face and said, “Oh,” softly. And then, “I think we might want to go to the infirmary.”

He had thought that he’d panic when it was time, but all he felt was a sense of finally. He triggered his radio, and said, “This is Hules. Catherine and I are coming to the infirmary.”

“Is everything okay?” Beckett asked.

Looking at Catherine, he raised one eyebrow. In response, she wrapped an arm around her belly. “I’m fine, but we may want to hurry.”
“I think she’s in labor, Doctor Beckett.”

“Ah, yes. It’s about that time, isn’t it? We’ll be ready for you.”

“Thanks, doc,” he said, sliding his arm under Catherine’s and leading her to the door. They walked slowly, but steadily, and he thought he’d done a pretty good job of holding it together. So he was surprised when Colonel Sheppard jogged into view. “So, on your way to the infirmary?” he asked.

Robert blinked. “Yes, sir. How did you know?”

Sheppard just grinned. “I have my ways.” Then he turned to Catherine. “May I take your other arm, Doctor?”

She smiled, though it was laced with pain, and held it out for him. With the two of them supporting her, they got to the infirmary a bit faster, where Doctor Beckett was waiting. He took Colonel Sheppard’s place and led Catherine behind the curtain, giving her a gown to change into. Once she was changed, he called Robert to help him get her up on one of the exam tables. “Okay, my dear, let me just take a quick look to see where we are?”

She nodded, and Robert started to step back so that Beckett could pull the curtain, only to be waved inside its boundaries. “You might as well stay with her, lad,” he said.

Robert tried to focus on Catherine’s face and not what the doctor was doing. It was hard, though, because it made Catherine gasp and tense up.

“Five centimeters already. That’s very good,” Beckett said. “Do you think you can walk, Catherine? It will help speed the labor.”

“Yes. It isn’t too bad so far.” With Beckett’s help, Robert got her down, and the two of them started to walk slowly, pacing the confines of the infirmary. He was surprised to see that Colonel Sheppard was sitting in the waiting area, and that he’d been joined by Doctors Weir and McKay.

On their next round, he guided Catherine over to where they were waiting. “Sirs and ma’am?” he said, making the words a question.

“This is the first baby being born in Atlantis in ten thousand years,” Doctor McKay said. “Like we’d be anywhere else?”

“Rodney,” Elizabeth said reprovingly. Then she looked at Robert and Catherine. “Just consider us here for moral support, Major and Doctor.”

“Um, okay,” Robert said, but Catherine tugged on his arm, and they resumed their slow trek around and around.

Every so often, Doctor Beckett would have Catherine get back up on the exam table to check her progress, which was steady. She was moving slower now, panting heavily, and occasionally freezing in obvious pain.

Robert hovered uncertainly at her elbow, when she suddenly said, “Oh,” and the bottom of her gown was soaking wet. Beckett and one of the nurses converged on where they were standing, already talking in reassuring tones. “Your water broke. That’s a very good sign,” Beckett said. “Let’s get you back up on a table, now.”

From there, things seemed to speed up impossibly fast. Beckett was ordering Catherine to push, and she did, crying out loudly with each one. “Come on. You’re doing well,” he said. “Just a couple
more big ones.”

Catherine bore down, her grip on Robert’s hand making the bones creak, and as she shouted, Beckett said, “Good, there’s the head. Give me one more, love,” and as she did, Robert glanced down to see Beckett holding the tiniest baby Robert had ever seen.

He got a little wobbly on his feet, but he managed not to pass out as Beckett clamped the umbilical cord and placed the baby on Catherine’s stomach. “She’s a perfect wee lass,” he said, smiling.

“You hear that, love? You win - we have a Meredith after all,” Robert said, not really minding. If it hadn’t been for McKay, he might never have gotten Catherine back.

Beckett and the nurses were doing some arcane things to Catherine, but he stayed focused on her face and the baby, who was demonstrating that she had some pretty impressive lung capacity. One of the nurses came to the head of the bed, and helped Catherine slide up and then get the baby into position to nurse.

It took a few false starts, but eventually the baby latched on, and Catherine closed her eyes, cuddling Meredith close. “Love, I’ll be right back,” Robert whispered, brushing a kiss over her sweaty forehead. She nodded, eyes still closed, and he had to kiss her one more time before he turned to go to the waiting room.

The small group had grown, and he was surprised to see many of the physicists, as well as more than a few of the military waiting. “It’s a girl,” he said, proud enough to burst.

Cheers erupted, and only quieted when Doctor Weir said, loudly, “This is still the infirmary, people.”

There were happy mutterings, and Robert saw more than one person exchanging slips of paper. He wasn’t really surprised that there had been a betting pool - he just wondered what exactly they’d been betting on, besides the date.

“What did you name her?” Sheppard asked, and silence descended suddenly as everyone waited to hear the answer.

“Meredith,” he said, looking at McKay. “Thank you for saving Catherine,” he said formally, even though he’d already said it more than once.

As McKay sputtered and choked, he looked to Colonel Sheppard. “I would be honored if you would agree to be her godfather,” he said. “You and McKay made this possible.”

Sheppard looked serious for a moment, and then broke out into a wide smile. “No, it’s me who is honored,” he said. Grabbing Robert by the hand, he shook it vigorously. “Congratulations on little Meredith.”

As Robert looked out over the people still settling up wagers, he knew that this would be home for him and his for the rest of his life.

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