Warning - Diversion Ahead
by StarbucksSue

Summary

After six years in the Pegasus Galaxy Rodney McKay knew it was impossible to predict what would happen each time they stepped through the Stargate. But sometimes, the thing you didn't expect is what you really wanted after all.

Notes

With grateful thanks to my betas rabidfan and alexcat for their feedback and for picking up on my Englishisms and punctuation. The story has been tweaked since then so all mistakes are my own.

Please do pop over and view the wonderful artwork, it really is inspiring and beautifully done.

- Inspired by [Artwork for SGA Reversebang 2014 - Distant Thunder](http://danceswithgary) by danceswithgary

Rodney knew he was already running late as he hurried towards the gateroom. Ilaria was one of Atlantis’ best trading partners and the Ilarians had been delighted to welcome the Lanteans back to the Pegasus Galaxy. Tonight’s annual treaty feast was something Rodney had been looking forward to for several weeks.

Despite their earlier agreement over the modifications to ‘jumper three, Zelenka had made a couple of last minute suggestions. They were still arguing about it over the radio as Rodney was preparing to leave, hence the reason he was running late.
“Dial the gate.” He heard John call out as he entered the gateroom and inwardly cursed his Team Leader; he was still carrying both tablet and backpack in hand as he hadn’t yet had time to finish getting ready.

“I am very much looking forward to the feast on Ilaria,” Teyla commented as the event horizon settled and she and Ronon stepped towards the gate. “I am glad they invite us back each year for the harvest festival.”

“Food’s good,” Ronon replied with a grunt as they disappeared into the wormhole. John looked back at Rodney as he quickly shoved the tablet into his backpack.

“Come on, McKay.” John said impatiently. “If you don’t hurry up, the food will all be gone by the time we get there. I think Ronon’s hungry.”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming.” Rodney shrugged his backpack on quickly and hurried to catch up with John as they stepped through the ‘gate together.

Neither heard Ronon’s almost panicked shout of ‘Sheppard, no’ over the radio, nor saw the alarm on the faces of the gateroom personnel as the event horizon flickered a strange shade of purple just before the Stargate shut down.

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“Dammit,” John exclaimed as they stepped out of the Stargate, “this isn’t Ilaria!”

“And there’s no DHD,” Rodney replied, his face dropping in horror as he stared around the vicinity of the Stargate.

The ‘gate shut down behind them. The sudden silence sounded as loud and as ominous as a clanging cell door. They stood at the edge of the platform staring at the ‘gate, as if sheer willpower would get it to dial.

“What the hell, McKay?” John finally turned to Rodney with a look of anger on his face.

“Yes, yes, Colonel, of course I did it deliberately.” Rodney glared back at him, putting his hand up to his ear and switching off his comm.

“Rodney...”

“No, Sheppard, you don’t get to blame me for this. It's not as if there was a sign saying 'warning - diversion ahead' before we stepped through the 'gate,” Rodney snapped before continuing a little more calmly. “Ronon and Teyla stepped through first and we can only hope they made it to Ilaria safely. Something must have happened while we were being transported which has diverted us here. Wherever here is.” He gesticulated wildly before pulling out his life signs detector.

“Yeah, well, somehow I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” John replied sarcastically with a frown.

“Ha, ha. Yes, thank you for pointing that out, Colonel, I hadn’t noticed,” Rodney snarked back, looking up from the screen he’d been studying.

They both looked around in silence, taking in the deep twilight blue of the sky in the East fading to an almost lilac blue in the West, with the occasional puff of white cloud. The sun was low in the sky, refracted through the clouds and casting a golden light over what looked like early evening on the planet. It wasn’t unlike a balmy fall evening on Earth. The terrain itself was rough underfoot
but there were no hills. Rock formations, between five and twelve feet in height, sat like blemishes on the landscape. On the horizon were trees, indicating a possible forest. The soil itself looked almost terracotta in the late afternoon light with tough grasses and windblown shrubs struggling to grow in the arid soil. A large moon hovered overhead as it rose into the darkening sky.

“Was your comm on? Do you think they heard us before the gate shut down?” John asked quietly, looking around slowly.

“I’d forgotten to switch it off after talking to Radek so I hope so. It’s our only chance of being rescued. Let’s just hope we weren’t transported through time as well.” Rodney muttered in concern as he looked down again, assessing the readings.

“I don’t want to do that again,” John said with a shudder. “But I went to the correct destination just at the wrong time.”

“Hmm, yes, the same as what happened to SG1 a few years back,” Rodney replied, his expression glum. “A solar flare hit as they stepped through the Stargate and they were transported through time, rather than through space. The flare sent them back to Earth in 1969.”

“So the fact that we’ve actually arrived on another planet could mean that we’ve just been diverted to a different destination,” John asked cautiously.

“I don’t know if it always works like that but, from what I remember, that’s what happened to a couple of other gate teams.” Rodney went back to studying the LSD as John took a closer look around the base of the rocky platform they were standing on, sweeping the loose soil away with his foot in the hope of finding the remains of the DHD.

“So has this happened often in the Milky Way?” The question had been asked almost casually but Rodney knew John well enough to see through the façade to the concern below and maybe a little fear too. They were both painfully aware that they were ill-equipped for camping overnight, let alone for any longer.

“Not often, and I don’t think anyone has ever been transported through both space and time,” Rodney answered, squinting into the distance. “so those teams which are just diverted to a different destination have been able to dial straight back to Earth. Obviously, we don’t have that luxury.” He waved his arm around, indicating the bare ground and lack of DHD. “Just be thankful it wasn’t a space gate.” He finished before looking back down at the LSD.

“Oh, no, no, no. This isn’t good.” Rodney muttered suddenly, looking up from the screen and peering into the distance.

“What?” John looked at him with a mixture of alarm and impatience. “Wraith, toxic fumes, bugs?”

“What?” Rodney echoed him. “Oh no, nothing like that. The atmosphere is completely viable. The planet seems to be very similar to one of the drier continents on Earth. There’re no major life signs, at least nothing bigger than a large dog or goat. There is fresh water somewhere, in the direction of the forest. There’s also a faint energy reading in the same direction.” He frowned and shielded his eyes with his hand. “Look over there, beyond the trees. Is that a tower of some sort? It looks like Ancient design.”

“I think you could be right. So what’s the problem?” John asked impatiently, bringing Rodney back to the original issue.

“Right, yes. Well, I’m not sure whether the sky is supposed to be that color but the atmospheric
readings I’m getting are indicating that we may be in for a bad storm. We really need to find shelter.” Rodney turned to John anxiously. “You haven’t even got a jacket let alone anything else. Your sense of self-preservation is as woeful as ever.” He shook his head at John as he moved off.

“But…”

“Wait here, Colonel. When I get fifty yards away, call me on the radio. I’m pretty sure they will work but if we’re moving away from the ‘gate, we need to know for sure in case someone turns up to rescue us.”

He set off without looking back, instinctively understanding John’s hesitation and knowing that this test would reassure him. A few minutes later the radio crackled into life.

“McKay?”

“I read you, Sheppard, you’re coming through clearly.” Rodney consulted the LSD once again. “I think you better hurry and catch up, though, it looks like the storm’s getting closer.”

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The forest was further away than they’d initially thought and it took them the best part of an hour to reach the tree line, by which time they could clearly hear the sound of distant thunder. The clouds were rolling in and the sky was getting darker with each passing minute.

Rodney followed John into the forest, checking his LSD at regular intervals.

“Okay, if we follow this track it seems to be taking us in the direction of the energy reading, which might be the tower or could mean some other Ancient facility which could give us some shelter.” Rodney commented hopefully.

“If it’s safe. I’m not sure I really trust the Ancients, especially their abandoned projects,” John replied with a shiver, sneezing abruptly as he flicked on the light on his P90.

“See you’re cold already, have you even got your emergency blanket?” Rodney asked. “The temperature’s dropping quickly now and it could get much colder after dark.” He broke off as he had a sudden thought. “Oh no, you haven’t picked up that twenty four hour flu bug that Lorne and Parrish caught have you? You spent most of the day yesterday with Lorne going through the mission roster, he was full of germs and you’ve been sniffing ever since we arrived here.”

“I haven’t got flu,” John replied sharply with a sniff. “And the emergency blanket is a standard survival item in the tac vest, along with the basic first aid kit and water purification tablets. You should know that, McKay.” He stalked off along the track and Rodney rolled his eyes as he followed closely behind.

“There’s obviously plenty of wildlife, these tracks must have been made by animals and they’re well used.” Rodney commented a little while later. With the exception of the rumbling thunder, which was growing steadily closer, they’d been walking in silence for a while.

“Yeah, hopefully the Pegasus equivalent of rabbits.” John admitted, digging out his handkerchief and blowing his nose. “But at least lopi are something we know are safe to eat. There’s plenty of imu fruit too and I’ve seen several clumps of that cabbage-like aki that the Athosians grow.”

“At least the imu fruit is one that’s safe for me to eat.” Rodney huffed as he poked at the LSD. He tried not to think about the wonderful pie that the Atlantis’ cooks made from the small pear-shaped fruit. It tasted like a cross between a peach and an apricot and the pie went well with cream, custard
or ice cream.

A flash of pinkish blue lightning lit up the sky, soon followed by a loud crack of thunder. Within a few minutes, they could hear the pattering of gently falling rain on the tree canopy above.

“Do you think it’s much further or should we try and shelter under one of these bushes?” John queried, waving the flashlight from his P90 around.

“I really don’t know; the LSD is a sensor not a sat-nav.” Rodney waved it at John impatiently. “The rain isn’t penetrating the trees too badly at the moment, so why don’t we carry on for a bit?”

They carried on, walking in silence, both concentrating on not tripping over the tree roots which crossed the track at regular intervals. Eventually they came to a fork in the path.

“Which way now?” John asked, shining the light down each pathway in turn.

“Hmm, the left, I think. It’s getting difficult to tell, I think the storm’s affecting the readings there’s so much static in the air.” Rodney looked around and nodded to himself. “Come on.” He stepped forward, leading the way without thinking.

“Hey, wait.” John grabbed his arm.

“What is your problem, Sheppard?” Rodney snapped in exasperation. He was cold and damp and starting to feel hungry and wanted nothing more than to find somewhere to sit down out of the rain and have something to eat.

“I go first.” John snapped with another sneeze, pushing him roughly to one side and stalking off down the path, not waiting to see if Rodney was following.

Rodney sighed and followed quickly. John was a pretty laid back person most of the time but very occasionally, when things were out of his control, he lost patience with everyone and everything. Stuck on an unknown planet, with little food or supplies and no way of knowing if they were ever going to get home, was about as out of control as Rodney could imagine John ever feeling. Not to mention that Rodney was pretty sure that John had picked up Lorne’s flu bug.

Rodney climbed carefully over a tree trunk and realized that John had come to a stop a few yards ahead, his light panning over a small stone building to the side of the path. He pushed forward eagerly, stilling immediately when he sensed John glaring at him.

“Let me check it out first. You know the protocol.” John stepped slowly into the entrance to the building and Rodney moved forward so he could peer inside, not wanting to let John out of his sight.

“Well?” Rodney asked impatiently.

“It’s either a lobby or foyer of some sort leading to a larger building or just a small way station. It’s too dark to see without going outside and walking all the way round. It looks safe enough to shelter in though.” John replied, shining the light up to the ceiling.

“Okay, let’s rest and have something to eat. It will be easier to see what we’re doing in daylight anyway.” Rodney suggested. “Do you think it’s safe enough for a fire just outside the door if we can find enough dry wood. The overhang should shelter it enough from the rain.”

“That’s a good idea, buddy.” John agreed. “There should be plenty of dry kindling in the undergrowth.”
They quickly searched the area around the entrance and soon came up with enough dry branches, along with a few larger logs, which would keep the fire going for a while. Rodney also grabbed some of the imu fruit growing nearby, knowing that they had to make their meager supplies last as long as possible.

John soon got the fire alight while Rodney went through this backpack, collecting all the food items into one pile and all other supplies into another.

“Well, I’ve got two MREs and six power bars in my pack and another four power bars in my tac vest.” He informed John. “I’ve also got a spare pack of water purification tablets which may come in useful and my tin mug and extra coffee. Standard med kit, two epi-pens, glucose tablets, hand gun, spare ammo, knife, tablet and life signs detector. I’ve also got a bottle of Tylenol, hand lotion, tissues, wet wipes, a spare tee shirt, boxers and socks.” He’d carried the last few items ever since they visited P9X 442, when he’d tripped and fallen into a shallow stream and had to walk the four miles back to the gate soaking wet. He expected John to laugh or tease him at the memory but there was no reaction.

John sat down a moment later with a sigh and started searching through the pockets of his tac vest.

“I’ve got four power bars and a bar of chocolate.” He confessed, adding them to the pile. “Along with the standard med kit, two epi-pens, glucose tablets, P90, hand gun, spare ammo and two knives. Dammit, Rodney, we’re really not equipped for being stranded on an unknown planet.” He scrubbed his hand through his hair and glared at the small pile of food.

Rodney checked his watch.

“It’s almost nine Atlantis time,” he said in surprise, “no wonder I’m hungry.”

“Well, there’s not much more we can do tonight,” John said at last. “We might as well have something to eat and get some rest. Unfortunately, I didn’t each much lunchtime because I wanted a good appetite for the feast.”

“Me neither,” Rodney agreed. “What do you think? We crack an MRE and share one of the mains and sides with a couple of the imu fruit tonight. We can have the dessert and crackers for breakfast hopefully by then the storm might have passed over and we can see exactly what this place is.” He waved his arm over his shoulder at the building.

“Sounds like a plan.” John agreed, poking at the MREs. “Spaghetti or Beef Stew. No chicken?”

“All the chicken packs had the lemon poppy seed cake; those two had the chocolate brownies. Let’s have the spaghetti tonight.” Rodney decided. “We can always add extra vegetables to the stew another night to make it go further. What do you think the aki tastes like baked?”

“No, but it’s useful stuff to wrap other food in to bake in the embers of a fire.” John commented with a yawn before he sneezed several times in succession, shivering visibly.

Rodney reached into his backpack, throwing the pack of tissues and his spare tee shirt at John.

“Here, put this on. It’s one of the long-sleeved ones so should keep you a little warmer.” He opened the MRE, taking out the main and side and heating them before digging into the second MRE for the other spork.

“Thanks, Rodney.” John said softly with a sniff as he shrugged into the tee shirt after blowing his nose. “I think you may be right about me catching Lorne’s germs.”
“Hmm, perhaps you should take a couple of Tylenol as well once you’ve eaten.” Rodney suggested coming to sit beside John. He placed the food on the ground between them and handed John one of the sporks.

Silence fell as they concentrated on eating. All too soon the spaghetti was gone and Rodney picked up four of the imu fruit, passing two to John.

“I was really looking forward to my not-pork with the pink almost-potatoes and caramelized almost-carrots.” Rodney sighed, glancing sideways at John, smiling teasingly. “Was that actually an almost-smile on your face there?”

John looked over at him, a resigned grin on his face. He took a deep breath, running his hand through his hair, making it stick up even worse than usual.

“I’m sorry,” he replied softly. “I didn’t mean to snap at you earlier. I just feel so powerless to do anything. There’s no enemy to fight, no prison to try and break out of. We have very little food and water.” He finished his imu fruit and threw the core out into the forest. “I wasn’t ready for this. Ilaria is always so safe. After the few weeks we’ve had, I was really looking forward to being able to relax and enjoy the meal and entertainment without having to worry about anything for a change.”

Rodney inched closer, bumping John’s shoulder companionably. “Well, at the moment we’re both safe and healthy. We have another MRE main course, the deserts from both, half a dozen power bars and over a canteen and a half of water as well as a plentiful supply of imu fruit.” He gestured over to the various rabbit-tracks leading away from their shelter. “There are obviously animals and birds of some kind here so we’ll just have to go hunting and foraging and if we follow the tracks we’re bound to find water.”

John broke out in a laugh which quickly turned into a cough.

“Shouldn’t it be me with the survival training giving you the pep talk?” He asked softly with a relieved smile, after taking a sip of water from the canteen Rodney handed him.

“You’ve trained me well,” Rodney replied honestly. “One thing I’ve learned working with you over the past six years is that we support and encourage each other as necessary.” He shrugged, shaking out a couple of Tylenol from the bottle and handing them to John who swallowed them quickly with some more water. John still hadn’t moved away. If anything he was leaning into him slightly and Rodney could feel John shivering. In the flickering firelight, he could clearly see the exhaustion and flush of fever as John’s eyes closed.

To say that things hadn’t gone well over the past couple of months would be something of an understatement. They’d run into Wraith on two different planets and had been unlucky enough to encounter a group of rogue Genii on a formerly friendly planet. That had been closely followed by the elders of P9X-526 taking offence to John’s Ancient gene and locking him up for two days before Teyla could negotiate his freedom. In addition to that had been an offworld incident involving SGA3, resulting in the death of one of the new marines due to a misunderstanding which had led to both SGA1 and SGA2 having to storm in and rescue the rest of the team. John always took it personally when they lost anyone, as if he could save them all. Rodney also knew that, like himself, John would be continually wondering whether Ronon and Teyla had made it safely back to Atlantis.

They really were in need of some downtime and when they got back (Rodney was not going to even going to contemplate using the word if) he was determined to make sure they got at least a week off.
Realizing that John was close to falling asleep Rodney tidied up their rubbish and added some logs to the fire before quickly slipping outside to relieve himself. On returning to their shelter, he located both emergency blankets and shook them out.

“Come on, John. It’s time to get ready for bed,” he said softly, nudging John with his elbow. “Up you get.” John pulled himself to his feet with a groan, stumbling outside for a moment before returning and staring down at Rodney who was now sitting on one of the emergency blankets which was half under him and half behind his back to ward off the chill of the stone wall.

Rodney patted the ground between his legs.

“Come and sit down. We need to share body heat and try and get you warmed up.” It was going to be torture having John this close but Rodney knew it was necessary. He wasn’t quite sure when friendship and affection had turned into love. Maybe it had happened gradually, but somewhere in between leaving Earth and Jennifer behind and landing back on Lantea III four months ago, Rodney had realized he was in love with John.

It was obvious that John wasn’t feeling well as he dropped to sit between Rodney’s legs without protest. Rodney quickly wrapped the second blanket around them both, anchoring the ends behind his shoulders and wrapping his arms tightly around John, enjoying the feeling of having John in his arms. To his relief, John relaxed into the embrace and Rodney could feel the tremors reduce until John was no longer shivering.

“Sleep John, I’ll take first watch,” Rodney assured him softly as John fell into an uneasy sleep.

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It had been light for about half an hour when Rodney felt John beginning to stir. With the exception of a couple of times, when John had cried out and struggled against Rodney’s embrace, it had been a peaceful night. Rodney had dozed on and off, enough to feel rested but he hadn’t slept deeply. He was used to that though and could function perfectly well for a short period of time without deep sleep.

They hadn’t been disturbed by anything during the night. Rodney had seen a couple of the small lopi scavenging nearby but that was about it.

John pulled away from him, looking up with a sleepy, if slightly embarrassed grin.

“Thanks, Rodney,” he said softly, getting stiffly to his feet. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

“I dozed on and off; it was enough. The only wildlife I saw were the lopi,” he replied, stretching out his back, taking the hand John offered to help pull him to his feet. “It only stopped raining about two hours ago so it may be wet underfoot. How are you feeling this morning? You look brighter.”

“Yeah, I feel better too. I think I was out for the count the minute I closed my eyes and I don’t remember waking at all during the night.”

“You didn’t, although you were a bit restless a couple of times but you didn’t wake up and you settled as soon as I spoke to you.”

“I keep thinking of Ronon and Teyla and wondering whether they’re okay,” John confessed, turning to the entrance and looking out. “I just hate the not knowing; at least I know you’re safe.”

Rodney rested his hand on John’s arm.
“If it’s any consolation I’m pretty sure that they are, I’ve never known a wormhole send people to multiple destinations, they either send you to the destination you dialed or divert you because of some phenomenon like a solar flare. I would imagine they got to Ilaria safely and then dialed straight back to Atlantis when they realized we hadn’t come through. They’re probably safe on Atlantis, tearing their hair out and making complete nuisances of themselves with both Woolsey and Zelenka, at least Ronon will be.” Rodney replied with a soft chuckle.

“Well, I’m hoping you’re right.” John smiled sadly at him. “Come on, let’s have some breakfast and explore this place. If there’s nothing here, we can move on and try and find the tower.”

Rodney broke out their rations while John relit the fire. They heated up the water for the coffee as best they could by placing the mug in the edge of the fire, sharing the one mug between them to make it last.

“I’m going to take a quick look around this building.” Rodney waved his arm over his shoulder as he spoke. “I really don’t think there’s anything important here, there are no energy readings from it and looking from the outside, I think it really is just some kind of shelter. It may be that it was built as somewhere for people to rest on the journey between the Stargate and the tower or just as shelter while they were hunting,” Rodney surmised.

“Okay. I’m going to scout around see what I can find in the way of food or water.” John decided. “We’ll stay in radio contact though. I’m still not too sure about this place; it just seems too peaceful.”

“Don’t go too far away then,” Rodney frowned, “no wandering off to find water. If you see something that looks promising come back and get me. The last thing we need is to get split up.”

“I’m with you there,” John agreed as he smothered the fire and tidied up their meager breakfast items.

Rodney grabbed his LSD and checked the screen. The dots which represented himself and John were the only human readings within the vicinity so reassured for now, he wandered outside, examining the exterior of the building. As he’d thought, the exterior matched the interior, confirming it really was just a small shelter.

Having walked all the way around he went back inside, looking in more detail at the interior walls, ceiling and floor. There was nothing to indicate that it was anything other than plain stone. A little disappointed, but looking forward to moving on to the tower, he radioed John.

“SHEppard?”

“Hey, buddy.”

“I’m finished here; there really isn’t anything to see. Are you far?”

“No.” John replied walking back into view. He had half a dozen imu fruit in his arms and Rodney could see another couple in his pocket.

“Have you got room for these in your pack?”

“Yes. I’ve got the empty wrap from the MRI, they can go in there. At least if they get squashed they won’t make anything else sticky.”

“Good thinking.” John grinned as Rodney retrieved the empty wrapper.
They packed up their little camp and John double checked that the fire was fully extinguished before moving out.

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The morning sunlight was filtering through the trees as they started out on their journey. There was no evidence of the storm of the night before apart from the ground being slightly damp underfoot, but at least the tough grass kept the trail from being too muddy.

They chatted as they walked, pointing out sightings of the birds which flitted through the trees above them, or evidence of small animals having passed by recently. At one point, John stopped to cut off one of the aki plants which they knew were edible and a little later, Rodney spotted one of the small trees which fruited the small ala nuts which were rather like chestnuts, filling one of the side pockets of his backpack.

“Huh, at least we know we’re not going to starve,” Rodney commented as they came across a moki bush, which had small fruit rather like plums, “although I’m not too keen on going completely vegetarian.”

“When we stop this evening, I’ll set up some traps and see if I can catch one or two of the lopi. At least we can spit roast them over a fire.” John sighed. “We could really do with finding something we can use as a pot to heat water and cook in too.”

“Hmm, we also need to find water.” Rodney reminded him. “We’ve about half a canteen left now.”

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“Is this trail actually heading in the right direction or are we just deviating slightly to keep on the track?” John asked a couple of hours later as they stopped for a drink.

“No, no. I keep checking but it does seem to be heading in the direction of the tower. That’s if we could see it through the trees,” Rodney replied. “Maybe the Ancients had their own path through here and the animals just kept using it after they left,” he finished with a shrug.

“I guess that’s possible. Animals and humans do tend to use tracks which are already there if they’re heading in the right direction, rather than waste effort trying to create new ones,” John agreed. “I’ve seen it before.”

“So…” Rodney hesitated, pulled a face and then changed track. “I guess you’ve had survival training but didn’t you spend most of your career before Atlantis in the Middle East, so have you actually had much experience in this type of climate and environment?”

“Basic training tends to cover most environments.” John replied, scratching the back of his neck. “The Air Force gives extensive training in case we get shot down, or have to bail out, in the middle of nowhere. You either have to stay put until you’re rescued or make your way to safety on your own. You don’t get time to pack and you just have to make use of what’s around you.”

“Did that happen to you often?” Rodney asked softly. “I mean, I know you got shot down in Afghanistan but apart from that.”

John looked off into the distance.

“There was one other time.” He replied, not looking at Rodney. “I was flying a search and rescue mission and got shot down on the way back. I managed to get the chopper away from the area but
had to land it about five miles from our base. The radio was damaged so we couldn’t get a message back and had to make our way back ourselves on foot. Two of the four men we rescued were injured and couldn’t walk so it made the going difficult and slow but we still made it back that day so it wasn’t really the same as this.”

Rodney frowned, sensing that there was something John had left out.

“Did they both make it?” He asked with a sudden flash of understanding.

“No.” John sighed. “One was bleeding internally and just lost too much blood by the time we got back.” He dropped his head wearily.

“Hey, at least you got him home,” Rodney said gently, squeezing John’s arm in an effort to comfort.

“Yeah, that’s true. At least his family had a body to bury, so many don’t,” he replied regretfully. “Come on, let’s get back on our way otherwise we’re never going to get there.”

They continued on down the track chatting easily. About half an hour later, John spied several thick vines growing around one of the trees and cut them down, coiling them up to use later for his traps. Just as they were thinking of stopping for a lunch break, they heard the welcome sound of gently running water.

“Over here, it’s not far off the track,” John exclaimed, “and it looks really clear too.”

“The animal life hasn’t suffered from drinking it so either it’s okay, or they’ve adapted to any impurities in it.” Rodney replied cautiously, sitting on one of the rocks beside the small stream. John dipped the empty canteen into the water, filling it and adding a water purification tablet before screwing the cap back on.

Rodney pulled out two of the power bars and a couple of the imu fruit.

“We might as well stop here for lunch; it seems as good a place as any.”

John was still staring down into the stream.

“There are some small fish in here too, I wonder if I’d be able to catch any,” he mused.

“So, do you have experience tickling trout or were you thinking of making a fishing pole?” Rodney asked with a chuckle.

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of a fishing pole.” John replied with a wry grin. “These are pretty small fish though, I’m not sure I’d be able to catch them on a line without a hook.”

“Are they worth catching?” Rodney peered forward with a frown.

“If I can catch enough of them they’d bake nicely wrapped in the aki leaves.” John lay down on his stomach, his head over the stream as he watched the little fish.

“Hey, there’s a bigger one,” Rodney said quietly, coming to sit on the bank closer to John and pointing to the silvery fish swimming lazily upstream.

John’s hand was already hovering over the water and with one quick movement, he had the unsuspecting fish in his hand.

Rodney stared, his eyes wide with awe, as he watched John flip the wriggling fish until he had it by
the tail and hit the head hard on the nearby boulder.

“Kills it instantly that way, rather than leaving it to die slowly.” John explained. He placed the fish on the rock and looked back into the stream.

“Well, I’m impressed,” Rodney confessed, “I didn’t think you’d catch it.”

“It was probably just a fluke.” John chuckled. “I doubt I’ll be so lucky next time, but I’ll give it my best shot.” He dropped back to the ground, leaning out over the stream again. Rodney sat beside him, nibbling on a power bar.

A few minutes later, another fish swam into view. John was poised and ready but, unfortunately, the fish was further away and in stretching out, John almost slid into the water. Rodney quickly grabbed his tac vest and yanked him hard, the momentum knocked him onto his back with John on top of him. Both were laughing wildly.

“So that didn’t work so well,” John finally gasped when he was a little more composed, rolling to one side and pillowing his head on Rodney’s stomach. “I told you the first time was a fluke.”

“You’ve forgotten your health and safety,” Rodney admonished with a giggle. “Remember what they say about over-reaching.”

“Not going to forget it in a hurry.” John took a deep breath and then chuckled again. “Thank goodness you were sitting beside me; otherwise, I’d have taken a header into the stream and I really don’t want to be walking around wet. It’s not that warm.”

“No, no, it’s not. Remember the only spare clothes we have are boxers and a pair of socks. They wouldn’t keep you very warm either.” Rodney studied John’s profile, having to force himself to resist reaching out and stroking John’s hair. Eventually John moved and Rodney sat up and reached for the food.

John took the power bar and imu fruit Rodney handed him and they sat in companionable silence while they ate, finishing off with the last of the water from the second canteen which John then filled with water from the stream.

“Well I’m going to try catching another one.” John wriggled back down onto his stomach. “Then we can have one each for dinner tonight and save the MRE just in case we get a day when we can’t catch anything.”

Rodney came to sit beside him again; one hand resting lightly on John’s back just in case. They had to wait several minutes until another larger fish swam into view but this time there were no problems and John caught the fish easily, sitting back up and looking very pleased with himself.

“Yes, yes, you’re certainly the provider in this relationship, I just hope you’re the cook as well as I have no idea what to do with a whole fish. On the rare occasion when I’ve bought one, it’s been ready filleted.”

John grinned in amusement.

“Yes, Rodney, I know how to gut a fish and cook it. We’ll be feasting tonight!”

“Do you think there’s any of the potato substitutes on this planet, a baked potato would go well with the fish and cabbage.”

“Haven’t seen anything so far, but things like tuber and tuttle root tend to grow mostly in the open
I think.”

“Or is it just that we only see them grown in open fields.” Rodney suggested. “We ought to be on our way but how are we going to carry the fish?”

“The old fashioned way.” John replied, picking up a short branch and cutting off some more of the vine. He wrapped the vine around the fish tails and tied them to the branch.

“Oh, I’ve seen that on television, I didn’t think it really worked,” Rodney exclaimed. “I always thought that the fish tails would just crush and the twine, or vine in this case, would slip off.”

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The afternoon was uneventful as they continued on the path through the forest. Rodney even admitted to himself that it was quite pleasant to walk through the cool shade of the forest with the sunlight filtering through the tree canopy. They bantered good-naturedly as they walked and broke off every now and then to pick more fruit or nuts to add to their supply.

It was late afternoon when they noticed it clouding over. Shortly after that came the lightning, followed by the rumbling of thunder.

“Now, is that just coincidence or is this one of those climates which has a storm every afternoon?” John debated out loud. “I guess we should start looking for somewhere to shelter for the night if it’s going to rain like that again.”

“Apart from a few of the rock formations, there really hasn’t been any kind of shelter; even those we passed recently don’t really have much of an overhang to do much good. We’re going to get soaked, aren’t we?” Rodney commented glumly, his face dropping.

“Cheer up, McKay. A drop of rain isn’t going to kill us.”

“No, but the bronchitis and pneumonia we catch might do. You’re still recovering from that bug too; your immune system is probably pretty poor at the moment.”

“I’ll live, Rodney. I’ve had worse.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you have. But if we’re going to get out of this, we both need to be fit and healthy.”

“Yeah, I know.” John frowned as he suddenly stepped off the track a little way into the forest. “Hey, look. This might work as shelter. The way that stone is leaning over like that will protect us providing the rain is coming from behind.”

“Let’s call it a day then,” Rodney agreed. “This is the best we’re probably going to get and it’ll give you time to set up your traps before the rain comes.” He walked over to the rocks and put down his pack. “Look, is that tuber? We can have potato with our fish after all. I hope there are some smaller ones as those melon sized ones would take all night to bake.”

Rodney started gathering logs and kindling for a fire while John picked obvious tracks along which to set his traps. By the time he got back, Rodney had a good fire going and he’d halved two of the smaller tubers which were already baking in the embers at the edge of the fire wrapped in aki leaves. He’d also found a flattish stone and had laid out the fish on the outer leaves of the aki, ready for John to gut.

John set to work on cleaning and filleting the fish before wrapping them in aki leaves and placing
them with the tubers in the fire, adding some of the ala nuts for good measure.

While John was cleaning the fish, Rodney had a further scout around their camp, finding some of the aromatic herb Teyla called hofl which was a cross between peppermint and spearmint. Breaking some off, he crushed several leaves carefully to release the flavor and dropped them into the mug with some water, adding the mug to the collection of items heating gently at the edge of the fire.

While John kept an eye on the fire, Rodney puttered around setting up the camp. There wasn’t really much he could do but he set one of the blankets on the ground as far under the sloping stone as he could, tucking the pack into the corner and leaving the other blanket folded down the side where it could be reached easily.

After that he wandered around the camp, finding a larger flat stone that provided a flat base to put the leaves they were using as makeshift plates. He also found some more ala nuts and moki fruit which he quickly gathered, along with some more of the hofl, it was no substitute for coffee but at least provided a hot drink.

By the time he returned with his offerings, the rain was already beginning to patter against the leaves. The thunder was growing ever closer and lightning sent white streaks through the pinkish-purple sky.

“I think this is just about ready,” John said softly. “The tubers have softened up nicely and the fish is cooked all the way through. Are you ready to eat?”

“Definitely,” Rodney replied, “I think I’ve been ready for the past hour.”

John laughed as he quickly lifted the food out of the fire and onto the fresh aki leaves Rodney had laid on their table. He passed the mug over to Rodney and added a couple more logs to the fire before coming round under the shelter next to Rodney, sitting close so their arms bumped together whenever they moved them.

“Oh this is good!” Rodney exclaimed. “Most of the time I pretty much steer clear of fish as it’s usually served either with a lemon dressing or with a quarter of a fresh lemon to squeeze over, but simply baked like this, it really is very good.”

“Some butter on the tuber would’ve been nice but I guess you can’t have everything,” John sighed morosely.

“Cheer up, John. We’ve made it through another day. We have fresh water and plenty of food so we can’t complain,” Rodney said, setting to work on peeling the ala nuts. “Here, have some dessert.” He handed John two of the peeled nuts and a couple of the moki fruit.

“Thanks, Rodney,” John mumbled as he bit into a nut and Rodney looked around in surprise as he felt John lean in to him. He wasn’t really sure what was happening between them but he certainly wasn’t going to complain.

By the time they finished eating, the rain was coming down harder and they had to retreat back as far as they could in order not to get wet. They huddled against the rocks, with John sitting sideways on to Rodney with his legs bent over Rodney’s. It was cozy and comfortable and they found themselves taking guesses at what research the Ancients had been conducting in the tower and what they would find when they got there.

Eventually, long after dark, the thunder started dying down and the rain lessened enough for them
both to make use of the nearby bushes before settling in for the night.

There wasn’t room for them to lie down and still be under the shelter so, as they had the previous night, they slept sitting up. Rodney insisted on sitting behind John again so that he could share as much warmth as possible by wrapping himself around him. If he were being honest with himself, he enjoyed having the opportunity hold John. John put up a token protest but soon gave in, burrowing into Rodney’s warmth with a contented sigh.

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They slept better than Rodney expected and woke early to another sunny morning. John went out to check his traps while Rodney lit the fire and heated up some coffee and ala nuts, selecting the ripest of the imu and moki fruit to have with them.

“Hey, look. We caught two lopi, should be eating well again tonight.” John tied up the legs of the lopi ready for transport. Before long, breakfast had been eaten, the fire put out and they were on their way.

They followed the track as they had done the day before; it seemed to be following the stream now which made it easier to replenish their water supply. They also found a couple more plants they recognized. Inada leaves were used to sweeten dishes and although pie was obviously out of the question, stewed fruit was definitely a possibility. The other was ilt, the flowers of which were used for seasoning.

“You know, I think we should add grocery bags to the essential tac vest kit.” Rodney suggested as he added the newly sourced items to his pack. “This is actually getting quite heavy now.”

“Let me take it for a while, give your back a break.” John reached for the pack and swung it easily on his shoulders as they set off again along the narrow track.

They didn’t bother stopping for lunch, snacking on power bars and fruit as they walked.

Half way through the afternoon, they came across another small stone shelter, similar to the one they’d spent the first night in. Wary of another afternoon storm, they decided to stop there for the night, unpacking their food stores and quickly getting a fire going to spit roast the lopi while tubers baked in the embers of the fire.

The storm hit, as predicted, late afternoon. By that time they’d finished dinner, having shared one of the lopi between them, saving the other for the following day. This time, their thoughts turned to their team mates and friends on Atlantis, wondering what they were doing and whether they were still searching for them. Homesick and more than a little worried about the other half of their team, they cuddled close for comfort and once again Rodney wondered about this new tactile version of his best friend. Back on Atlantis, John would never reach out for comfort. He rarely touched people unless he was sparring and had a definite aversion to being touched, even by those closest to him. Rodney had often wondered if it was simply the fact that, having lost his mother at an early age, John was simply touch shy. Or whether it was the military mindset, with DADT so much a part of military life that John just wasn’t comfortable with the whole idea of touch.

Out here though, away from Atlantis and away from the military, he was showing a different side. Less military leader and more, well, human. Willing to show fear and what he would normally see as weakness, to admit to needing human touch and comfort. Whatever the reason, Rodney was more than willing to oblige.

This time, when they settled down to sleep, John made no protest at all at being held by Rodney.
They had the luxury of being able to lie down this time and straight away, John rolled into Rodney, snuggling close and using Rodney’s shoulder as a pillow. He fell asleep almost straight away.

Rodney smiled softly at the dark head on his shoulder, enjoying the closeness, before slipping easily into sleep.

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The following morning, they had only been walking for about an hour when they reached the edge of the forest. For the first time they could see the tower clearly, set in what looked to be a large field of wild grass.

“It’s smaller than it looks from a distance.” Rodney stopped and stared as they left the forest.

“Yeah, it did look as if it was going to be bigger but now we’re this close it’s more like the tower the botanists took over on the South Pier.” John agreed.

The tower looked to be twelve stories high. The base was about the size of a basketball court, tapering slightly from about half way up to a gently sloping roof, slightly rounded at one end. The tower itself was made of the same silvery metal as the Atlantis’ towers and there were large windows all the way up with the exception of the ground level.

“Okay, before we go any further, I’m going to set the traps, we can come back out again this evening to see if we’ve caught anything.” They’d been unlucky the night before, one of the traps hadn’t been triggered, the other had obviously caught something but it had managed to get away.

John set four traps this time, carefully showing Rodney how to set them before they set off for the tower.

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“I guess it’s too much to hope that they left the door unlocked.” John commented a little later as they stood at the foot of the tower.

“Huh, there’s a really odd reading coming from the building. Not just from an energy source inside but surrounding the tower completely.” Rodney commented. “Let’s see if we can get in. Is it locked?”

“Either locked or not working.” John replied glumly as the door stubbornly refused to react to his gene.

“Okay, let’s do this the old fashioned way.” Rodney took out his tablet and pried the cover off the entry panel, pulling out crystals and testing them in turn. “Yes, definitely something else going on here. These crystals are all working properly but…” He trailed off with a frown.

“But what?” John asked impatiently.

“Hm, that’s odd.” He pulled another cable out of his backpack, plugging one end of it into the tablet and connecting the other to the entry panel.

“Rodney?” Frustration laced through John’s voice and Rodney looked up in surprise.

“Oh, sorry. I think there’s some kind of energy field or…” He broke off staring down at the tablet. “Stasis field! They’ve captured the whole tower, or at least the lower levels, in a stasis field.”
“Still not sure I’d want to eat any food they left behind.” John chuckled as he stepped closer to Rodney, looking at the tablet. “So, can you get us in?”

“If I can shut off the stasis field. Ah that’s it.” There was a slight shimmer in the air as the field collapsed around the tower. He adjusted two of the crystals and looked at John. “There, try now.”

John waved his hand over the entry panel and, this time, the attempt was successful. Rodney stepped back, tucking the tablet back into his pack and remembering at the last minute to allow John to go first.

“Okay, now stay behind me. We don’t know what we’re going to find, there may even be Ancients left behind.”

“Well they’re not likely to be in any better condition than the old Elizabeth we found on Atlantis,” Rodney grumbled as he peered over John’s shoulder. “Hopefully we’ll find useful things like clean clothes, linens and hot showers.”

P90 at the ready, John stepped cautiously through the door with Rodney close on his heels. Lights came on as they entered, growing steadily brighter as they got further into the building.

The entrance led to a large, wide lobby, completely bare apart from a doorway on each side. John walked over to the door on the left, waving his hand over the entry panel before slowly stepping through.

“Well?” Rodney asked impatiently.

“I guess it’s some kind of reception or meeting room. Maybe somewhere to greet visitors so they don’t have to be taken further into the tower.” John surmised. “There’s not much in here.” He moved out of the doorway so Rodney could follow him in.

Rodney walked into the large, airy, room, taking in the sterility of the almost bare surroundings. Just a large conference table and chairs, a smaller table in the corner possibly to put refreshments. The room had one door at the far end which John was checking.

“It’s just a restroom, no other way out,” he remarked. “Definitely a self contained meeting room. It’s a good location. Come on; let’s check out the other side.”

The door on the opposite side led to a wide corridor which ran down the side of the tower to a sweeping stairway. Empty rooms led off the passage, possibly storage rooms, judging from the shelves lining the walls.

“There’s not much on this level,” John commented as they stood in the wide hallway at the base of the stairs. “Hopefully the next level will be a little more interesting.” He stared up for a moment before ascending. Rodney followed closely behind.

“I wonder why they haven’t got a transporter. Surely they didn’t carry everything up by hand?”

“Perhaps it’s just a security feature for the lower level just in case any of their guests had the Ancient gene,” John replied with a shrug. “What are the readings on the LSD, anything we need to look out for?”

“No life signs apart from our own.” Rodney assured him. “So if there’s anyone here they’re either sleeping Wraith or Ancients in independent stasis pods.”

“What about the energy readings?”
“I’m getting readings of a strong power source about half way up.” Rodney replied with a frown. “But there’s another energy spike up nearer the top of the tower.”

The stairs led to another large hallway, this one bright with daylight from the large windows running along the length of the room. One door led from the room and they headed over quickly. Unfortunately nothing happened when John ran his hand over the entrance panel.

“Okay, let me have a look,” Rodney sighed, pulling his tablet and cable out again. “Hmm, just seems to be an extra level of security. It’s probably just to make sure that only those with a legitimate reason to enter the tower can get in, not just those with the gene. Just give me a minute, I don’t think it’s anything too complicated.”

He was right; within a few minutes he stood back and disconnected the tablet. When John waved his hand over the panel, the door obediently slid open to reveal a passageway running along one side of the building.

The first door opened onto what at first looked like a store room but as they got further in, they realized it was a kitchen, similar to the one on Atlantis but on a smaller scale.

“Okay, this is looking good.” John exclaimed. “I think we’ve found the living areas.”

“Good timing. I’m getting hungry and it must be about time for dinner.” Rodney commented as they walked past the Ancient equivalent of refrigerators and ovens.

John laughed. “Well you’re in luck.” He grinned at Rodney. “I would say that this is definitely the mess.”

The large room beyond the serving counter was laid out in much the same way as the Atlantis mess, with about a dozen tables seating four or six people arranged around the room.

“This is more like it,” Rodney exclaimed, grinning broadly at John. “Look, we can actually eat off plates with proper cutlery. I was getting a bit fed up of that spork.”

“Okay, let’s stop and have a break. It’s a pity we have no bread, I could really go for a lopi sandwich with some of the tomato dressing right now,” John replied with a sigh.

Rodney looked up from where he was examining the contents of the cupboards.

“There’s isn’t much we can do about bread without any flour and I haven’t seen any kind of grain unless they were growing some further out. There isn’t any sign of them being self-supporting though so I’m guessing they just transported what provisions they needed from Atlantis, probably by Puddlejumper.” He pulled a couple of pans out of the cupboard and stood up.

“At least they left cooking utensils.” He gesticulated wildly with the pans. “We can cook properly tonight.”

“I enjoyed cooking over an open fire,” John objected as he struggled to turn on the faucet letting the water run clear. “The food was good.”

“Yes. Yes it was. I have to concede you’re pretty good at that. How are you with an oven?”

“I kind of know what I’m doing. I never really needed to feed myself; I’ve been in the Air Force since I was eighteen. I did spend time with our cook when I was a kid though, learned the basics.” John scrubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.
Rodney looked at him but decided not to comment. He put his pack on the counter and started unpacking the food while John tasted the water before filling two glasses and pulling out plates and a large dish. Rodney frowned.

“What’s the dish for?”

“Everyone needs a fruit bowl, Rodney.” John replied with a grin, placing the imu and moki fruits in the bowl. He turned and found a smaller dish for the ala nuts.

Rodney placed a couple of aki leaves on each plate, then unpacked the last of the lopi and divided it equally on the leaves, adding cooked tuber which he’d sliced thinly before rolling them up to form a wrap.

“It’s not a sandwich but it’s the closest I can do,” he said with satisfaction.

John’s lips quirked up into a grin.

“It looks good, buddy.” He agreed as they walked over to one of the tables by the window. “You know we could be a lot worse off.”

“Yes, I was thinking that myself,” Rodney agreed. “At least you and I, between us, have the skills to survive this. If nothing else, we may be able to get a message back to Atlantis, or even the Daedalus, it depends where in the galaxy we are.”

“Do you think the planet ever had a DHD or did the Ancients just rely on a Puddlejumper to get them through the ‘gate?’ John asked, taking a bite of his wrap. “I suppose planets that don’t have DHDs aren’t known amongst the traders on other worlds, it’s a good way to ensure you don’t get disturbed.”

“Yes. It’s a good point.” Rodney waved his wrap in the air as he spoke. “Whatever research they were doing here must have been important for them to risk building on a planet without a DHD.” He took another bite and continued. “We really need to find the labs and see what they were working on.”

“All in good time, Rodney,” John cautioned him. “We need to check out the place properly first just to be on the safe side. We also need to go back out and check the traps. If we leave them too long, anything we may have caught will probably break free of the vines.”

“Okay then. How about we finish exploring this level and then go back out and check the traps and pick up some more provisions?” Rodney suggested. “We’re okay for water now so unless you want to try catching any more fish, we don’t need to return to the stream.”

“Sounds like a plan,” John agreed, standing up and grabbing the empty plates. “Let’s get a move on so we can get back before the storm hits.”

The final room turned out to be a storage area, probably for more of the mess supplies. At the very end of the passage was a flight of stairs to the next level. Rodney looked up hopefully but turned back with a sigh.

“Come on then, let’s go and resupply.”

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By the time they returned to the tower, Rodney’s pack was full of various items of fruit and vegetables, along with a pocketful of ala nuts. Between them, they carried a long branch from
which hung two fish and four lopi.

They set the traps again before leaving and had just started to make their way back to the tower when they heard the now-familiar sound of distant thunder.

“No, it’s definitely not a coincidence,” John commented. “This is the third day running that there’s been a storm this time of the afternoon so it must be something to do with the climate.”

“At least we should be able to make it back to the tower before the rain starts,” Rodney replied. “In future we should do our food runs in the morning to avoid it.”

“Good idea,” John agreed. “The traps should really be checked morning and evening. Although if we come out again tomorrow morning and then leave them for a day and set them the following evening, it wouldn’t take long just to do that and we can be there and back before the storm hits.”

“Okay.” Rodney opened the main door and they made their way up the stairs, entering their new code into the security door at the top and dropping their supplies off in the mess.

“The food will keep for several days in the chillers so we should be okay with not hunting every day,” John commented as they unpacked. “There’s no worry about us getting scurvy.”

“We’re lacking in calcium though,” Rodney observed. “We could do with finding a stray cow or goat wandering around.”

“Not much chance of a cow but I wonder if there are any of those small pygmy goat like creatures that the Athosians have started breeding for milk. They seem to be pretty common around the galaxy.” John shrugged as he finished putting the fish and lopi in one of the chillers.

Rodney collected his tablet, cables and LSD and put them back in his pack.

“Come on, can we explore the next floor now?” He asked impatiently.

“Okay, buddy.” John laughed. “Let’s see what’s upstairs. I would imagine there should be some sleeping quarters nearby. I could really do with that hot shower.”

“Me too.” Rodney nodded as they made their way up to the next level.

There were no doors or locks at the top of the stairs and the layout was very similar to the level below with the passage running the length of the front windows and two doors off to one side.

The first door opened onto what looked like it would have been a recreation area. Comfortable seating was scattered around the room, grouped around low coffee tables. At one end of the room was a large screen, similar to the ones on Atlantis.

The second room was recognizably a laundry, albeit a much smaller version of the one on Atlantis with just two strange Ancient washer/dryers and both men grinned at one another at the thought of having clean clothes.

They made their way up the stairs to the third level. There were three doors leading from the corridor all of which were sleeping quarters. Generous sized studio apartments with a living area, sleeping area with large king sized bed and en-suite bathrooms.

“Wow, why haven’t we ever found quarters like these on Atlantis?” Rodney walked over to the closet. “Yes!” He exclaimed triumphantly. “Clean clothes, thank goodness for the stasis field! I think that shower is calling me.” He turned and grinned at John, taking in the amused smirk.
“You can smirk all you want, Sheppard. I really don’t care.” He pulled out various clothes until he found what he wanted, throwing some at John. “Here, these should be okay for you.”

He’d picked out the simplest of the clothing; it would do until they could get their own uniforms laundered anyway.

“There are plenty of towels in the bathroom,” Rodney called out. “The only thing missing is the shower gel and shampoo but I guess water will have to do for now.”

He started the shower straight away, reveling in the steaming hot water and stood under the spray for longer than he intended. When he came out, dressed in his borrowed clothes, he was surprised to find John sitting on the bed, still holding onto his clothes.

“Hey, are you going to get showered or what?” he asked John.

“Yeah, just still don’t like the idea of splitting up,” John replied, scratching the side of his head. “We haven’t properly cleared the place yet.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Rodney shrugged. “Right, I’ll wait here while you shower then we can drop our uniforms off at the laundry before we move on.”

Rodney flopped down on the bed while he waited for John, enjoying the softness of the mattress after days of sleeping on the ground. He must have dozed off as the next time he looked up John was sitting fully dressed on the bed next to him.

“You looked so peaceful I didn’t want to wake you up,” John said softly. “Do you want to give up for the day?”

“No, no. Let’s carry on and see how far we get.” Rodney gave a sleepy yawn. “There’s what? Twelve floors and this is the third, so we’re about a quarter of the way and we still haven’t found any labs or research areas.”

“Didn’t you say you thought there was an energy source somewhere on the lower levels?” John asked.

“Yes. I did.” Rodney brightened as he sat up enthusiastically, all traces of tiredness gone. “Let’s at least do a couple more floors before dinner; we’ve got a few more hours yet.”

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The next three floors were a repeat of the previous floor, with three bedrooms along the length of the corridor, making a total of twelve bedrooms altogether. They made their way up the stairs to the seventh level and Rodney groaned when he found that, yet again, the door required a security code to enter and not just the gene.

“Whatever were they doing here that needed so much security?” John asked in surprise.

“Well, I’d like to be able to tell you but until I can get this door open you’re just going to have to be patient.” Rodney replied, waving one arm in frustration.

“Okay.” John raised his arms in supplication and Rodney glared at him for a few seconds more before turning back to his tablet, muttering half to himself as he worked.

Eventually, the door slid open to reveal another corridor, this one running directly ahead along the side of the building, with another flight of stairs the opposite end. There was one door about a third
of the way along, it opened to John’s touch and he stepped through carefully with Rodney close behind.

“Wow! Just…wow.” Rodney shook his head in disbelief at the light, airy and well equipped lab. “I think this is what all that security was for. They must have been researching something valuable here.”

“I’m not even going to ask,” John replied with a smirk. “I can see we’re not going to get any further tonight. Anyway, this is probably as good a place to stop for the night as any.”

“Okay, okay.” Rodney looked at his watch. “Two hours from now? Then we can call it a day.” He grinned at John before making his way over to a familiar looking unit.

“I thought so,” he called over to John. “This is what’s giving off the energy reading.” He gesticulated enthusiastically as John walked over to him. “This can only be a ZedPM unit.” He pressed the button on the side of the unit and a half-full ZPM rose gracefully from its housing.

“Hey, look at that?” He turned to John triumphantly before replacing the ZPM and pressing the second button. Another ZPM rose from the unit, this one a light blue color instead of the familiar orange.

Rodney frowned and turned to John, who shrugged. Rodney quickly hooked his tablet up to the ZPM housing and scrolled through the data for several minutes before turning to John, a look of excitement and wonder on his face.

“It’s charging!” he exclaimed. “These two units have been powering this facility between them all this time. When one runs down the other takes over so the first one can charge back up,”

“Very cool.” John’s eyes sparkled as he caught Rodney’s gaze. “So why didn’t they do this on Atlantis? How many times could we have used a recharging ZPM?”

“Maybe it was very new technology and they hadn’t had time to integrate it with the older systems. Or they may have classed it as too much of a risk to have recharging ZedPMs on Atlantis in case it was taken over by hostiles, can you imagine the damage they could cause with Atlantis and an endless supply of ZedPM power?” Rodney mused. “Far better to have a facility somewhere safe where they could recharge the ZedPMs and then take them to wherever they needed them.”

“True.” John agreed with a nod. “That would explain the seemingly deserted planet and a gate with no DHD. Wraith wouldn’t bother to come to a planet where there’s no known population to cull and traders would stick to planets they already know for trading.”

Rodney sighed.

“Trust us to find all of this when we have no way of actually getting back to Atlantis and sharing it. I can just see Radek’s face if he ever saw this.” His face dropped, the thought of not being able to share his find with Radek really driving home their predicament.

“Cheer up, buddy,” John said softly. “With all this technology you may be able to find some way of getting a message to Atlantis. If anyone can do it, you can.”

“Yes,” Rodney agreed with a sad smile, “I’ll try. As long as I can make it clear that they need to bring a Puddlejumper, otherwise we’ll still be stuck, only with company.”

He turned back to the unit, replacing the charging ZPM in its housing before losing himself in his tablet as he studied the information from the unit’s database.
“Rodney? Come on, buddy, time to call it a night.” It was John’s hand giving his arm a gentle shake that brought Rodney back to the here and now.

“What, two hours can’t be up already?” Rodney’s stomach rumbled loudly in complaint at the lack of food and John grinned. “Okay, so maybe it is.” Rodney reluctantly entered a few commands into his tablet, disconnecting it from the database before really taking in his surroundings, blinking in surprise at the dark skies. “How long ago did it get dark? I didn’t even notice the lights coming on.”

“The lights were already on when we came in, but as it was still daylight you didn’t notice, even with the rain,” John replied. “Come on, I’m starving.”

As it was already late, John opted to pan fry one of the fish simply in a little water with some finely chopped vegetables. While the fish was cooking, he quartered some of the moki fruit and put them on to simmer in a little water with some crushed inada leaves.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to stewed fruit this much in my life.” Rodney stuck his nose over the pan as he gave the fruit a stir. “It’s a pity we haven’t got any vanilla ice cream.”

“Maybe when we find that goat.” John laughed as he turned the fish.

Rodney smiled, taking pleasure in the relaxed and happy demeanor of his friend. He wasn’t sure he had ever seen John this carefree, especially not in the recent months since returning to the Pegasus Galaxy.

In contrast, Rodney had never had it so easy. Eight months on Earth without having to run, shoot or fight for their lives had allowed permanent Atlantis scientists and engineers to spend all their time working on the city systems, along with personnel borrowed from the SGC and Area 51 for specific areas of work, so Atlantis herself was in better shape than she had been since the Ancients had left.

John now had an NCO to do his paperwork. Sergeant Warren had been a parting gift from Jack O’Neill when he announced the Expedition was returning to Pegasus, along with John’s promotion to full bird Colonel and Evan Lorne’s promotion to Lt. Colonel. But even with someone now officially doing his paperwork John had been run ragged with the events of the past few weeks so this enforced rest away from his duties was doing him the world of good. He looked better rested than Rodney had seen him in a very long time.

They were happy, Rodney was surprised to realize. Being stuck on a planet with no escape could have been a nightmare but they were actually enjoying it, and enjoying each other’s companionship. They had the freedom to be themselves, without the concerns of their respective duties and the only people they had to worry about were each other.

As John dished up the fish and they sat down to eat Rodney decided that maybe, even if he could get a message to Atlantis, he would make sure they had a little more time to themselves before they had to return, selfish as it may be.

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It was late when they finally finished eating and cleared away their dinner things so by mutual agreement they headed straight upstairs to the bedroom they had used earlier.
John followed Rodney through the door and then hesitated in the middle of the room, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

“John, come and sit down,” Rodney said softly with a sigh. “Look, forgive me if I’m wrong but I think I know what’s going on here,” he began, as John sat down next to him.

Rodney placed a hand on John’s arm.

“Look, we’ve spent a few days in each other’s company and I think we’ve grown even closer than we were before.” Rodney stopped and deliberated for a moment before plunging on. “I’ve been interested in you for some time now. I wasn’t sure how you felt but over the past few days I’ve got the impression that you’re interested in me too. That’s fine. Actually it’s more than fine. If you are interested that is.”

John looked up at him. Hope warring with fear.


“That’s okay, we can take it slow. Just curling up together was nice,” Rodney reassured him. “I enjoy holding you.” He smiled at softly at John.

“I enjoy being held,” John almost whispered, coloring slightly. “It’s nice to feel safe and protected. It’s been a long time since I felt like that,” he admitted, dropping his eyes to stare at the ground.

“Hey, I’m glad I make you feel that way.” Rodney rubbed John’s back gently, feeling the tension start to bleed away. “You know, you make me feel safe too, just by being here.” He slipped his arm around John’s shoulder and tugged him into a one armed hug. “Now, let’s get ready for bed. I am so looking forward to sleeping on a real mattress tonight.”

John smiled up at him in relief before standing and disappearing into the bathroom. A short time later, they were both curled up in the large bed, with Rodney lying on his back and John snuggled up to him, using Rodney’s shoulder as his pillow as he had done the previous nights.

Safe, secure and content, they both slept.

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They woke late the following morning. The combination of warmth combined with a decent mattress and being able to stretch out properly meant they were in no hurry to start the day.

It was Rodney who stirred first, hunger pulling him unwillingly from sleep. John mumbled drowsily, hanging on to Rodney to try and keep him in bed. Now that Rodney was awake, his bladder was making itself known and shushing John softly, he disentangled himself and climbed out of bed.

Once up, Rodney quickly showered and by the time he was done, John was awake and moving.

“So what’s the plan for today?” John asked as he wandered towards the bathroom. “Are we exploring more levels or do you need more time in the lab?”

“I can always come back to the lab.” The look on Rodney’s face was somewhat wistful. “But I really think we should explore the rest of the levels. We’re only halfway up and I really want to see what they had on the higher floors. With all the security features, it seems like the higher you go the more important it is.”
“So you’re hoping for a ZPM factory on the top floor!” John grinned affectionately, knowing Rodney way too well.

“I live in hope.” Rodney grinned sardonically. “There has to be one somewhere and it would be typical that we find one on a deserted planet that we can’t escape from. We’d be surrounded by ZedPMs with no need for them. Sounds like our luck, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” John huffed a laugh as he pulled on the clothes Rodney had laid out for him, fresh from the laundry.

They breakfasted quickly and made their way to the forest to empty the traps. This time they’d caught a further three lopi. They filled Rodney’s pack with more fruit and vegetables before returning to the tower to pack away their food and have a quick lunch before continuing with their exploration of the tower.

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“You know I really can’t believe that they didn’t build a transporter into this building,” Rodney puffed as they finally reached the eighth level.

“It makes sure the tower’s secure,” John replied staring out of the window at the surrounding countryside. “At least no-one could get in and out quickly, even if they did have security clearance.”

“Yes. I suppose that’s true,” Rodney agreed as they turned to the one door off the long corridor. “And with the next set of stairs always being at the opposite end of the hall, it means that it takes even longer to get in and out. I guess it would be difficult to run away with anything or steal any secrets.”

John nodded as he raised his P90 and opened the door carefully, clearing the room visually before allowing Rodney to enter.

“Another lab, very similar to the last one,” John observed. “No ZPMs though by the looks of it.” He turned to Rodney with a grin but Rodney just rolled his eyes, refusing to rise to the bait.

“Okay. So as tempting as it is to investigate this lab, I vote we move on to the next level,” Rodney suggested with a lingering look at the lab. “Come on, the sooner we clear the tower the happier you’ll be.”

He turned and walked out with John close on his heels. As much as he wished he could stay and lose himself in the Ancient databases, he knew that John was itching to finish checking the tower. Despite the fact that regular checks of the Life Signs Detector showed that they were the only living souls within range, he was well aware that both human and Wraith were able to hide under the radar whilst in stasis or hibernation. He was as anxious as John to ensure they had no nasty surprises.

Frustratingly, the ninth level had even more security and it took Rodney over half an hour to break the encryption on the door.

“Somehow I don’t think they meant the casual visitor to access this level,” Rodney huffed, taking a deep breath and mopping his brow theatrically. “This is complicated even for me.”

“You’re not saying that this has beaten you, are you?” John asked in amusement.

“No. Not at all.” Rodney frowned. “I’m getting there. It’s just that there are several layers of
encryption and the interface from the tablet isn’t quite an exact match, which doesn’t make it any
easier. It’s not impossible, but if I had more time to sequence the tablet better to the interface
they’re using here it would make things a little easier.”

John nodded understandingly and Rodney glared at him, knowing that John was humoring him.
However, ten minutes later he’d forgotten all about it as the doors finally slid open.

Rodney looked over at John triumphantly.

“There you go, told you I could do it.”

“I know. The impossible you can do, miracles take a little longer,” John quoted with a grin as he
stepped forward.

This corridor was wider than the others and they found that the one door led to a large apartment.
The main living area included a small kitchenette and study area, with a separate bedroom and
bathroom.

“Now this is what I call an apartment,” Rodney indicated enthusiastically as he inspected the
rooms. “We really do need to find some of these on Atlantis, preferably with a balcony too.”

“It would be cool,” John agreed as he wandered into the bathroom. “Hey, it even has a hot tub by
the look of it, that’d really help after a good workout.”

“Oh, yes. I definitely need one of those,” Rodney agreed. “And there’s room for two.” He wiggled
his eyebrows suggestively and saw the flush rise on John’s face. “Hey, it would be good. We really
will have to move up here and try it out tonight.” He beamed at John, then sobered up at the look
of apprehension on John’s face. “Hey, only if you’re comfortable with it, there’s no rush.”

John looked up at him.

“No. I think I’d like that,” he replied with a shy grin.

Rodney smiled and nodded.

“Okay then.”

He turned and made his way to the stairs up to the next level which led to another similar
apartment.

“Well, I guess this is where the important people lived,” Rodney commented after a cursory
inspection of the tenth floor. “I wonder why they needed so much security just for these
apartments.

“We haven’t got to the top yet,” John replied. “Maybe there’s something more important at the top.
Right now I’m thinking that maybe it’s time for dinner.”

“Good idea,” Rodney sighed. “Much as I’d like to carry on exploring my stomach’s been
complaining for the past ten minutes. After all there’s no rush, it’s not as if we’re on a deadline
here, we’ve got all the time in the world.”

They made their way back down to the mess where John quickly skinned two of the lopi and set
them to roast in one of the ovens while Rodney inexpertly peeled tubers and set them in a pan to
boil with a couple of the seasoning leaves.
While Rodney stewed up two mugs of hofl, John chopped several imu fruit and added them to a saucepan with a little water and inada leaves, setting them on a low heat to cook, before rescuing the tubers and draining them before adding them to the roasting dish with the lopi, turning them gently to coat them in the fat from the meat.

Taking their drinks, they sat in down at one of the tables and Rodney called up a game of chess on his tablet while they waited for their dinner to cook.

Three games of chess (one to John, two to Rodney), two plates of roast lopi and vegetables and two dishes of stewed imu fruit later and they were clearing up and making their way back up the stairs.

“Definitely good exercise after a big meal,” John said with a grin.

“I can see why the apartments near the top have small kitchen areas,” Rodney huffed. “I wouldn’t want to have to climb up and down every time I wanted a meal. It wastes so much time too.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” John smiled back at him. “All that time wasted climbing stairs when you could have your head in an Ancient database. There’s just no comparison.”

Rodney swatted him and then stopped to take a breather.

“You know we should have brought some food up with us for breakfast, then we wouldn’t have to go all the way back down in the morning. It’s not as if we set any traps we need to check.”

“That’s true,” John agreed. “Why don’t you carry on wandering up to the top and I’ll run back down and grab some food for the morning. Just don’t touch anything until I get back up there. Remember, we have radios so call me if there’s a problem.”

“Yes, yes. Right, as if there would be a problem with me climbing stairs,” Rodney blustered. “You’ll be there and back again by the time I get to the top.”

John laughed as he turned and ran back down the three flights of stairs they’d climbed. Rodney took a deep breath and started climbing again, determined to make it up to the eleventh level by the time John joined him again.

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It took a good ten minutes to reach the eleventh floor and Rodney was completely out of breath by the time he got there. There was minimal security between the tenth and eleventh floors and he’d just managed to crack the code to release the door when he heard John’s footsteps on the stairs behind him.

“That was good timing.” Rodney turned to John with a smile. “I’ve just got the door open.”

“More security?” John raised one eyebrow in disbelief.

“Yes. Whatever they were researching here was obviously important. With all these levels of security they were determined it wasn’t going to fall into the wrong hands.” Rodney confirmed. “Even amongst their own people, access was restricted.”

Rodney stopped and frowned, looking from the LSD to the equipment before him.

“Somewhere in here is a really strong energy source and…” his mouth dropped open in surprise.

“What? Rodney, wha…” John trailed off as he spotted what Rodney was staring at.
“ZPMs?” John questioned in a whisper.

Rodney just nodded, closing his mouth and walking across the room to a unit where, set into individual storage cells, sat four ZPMs, with space for more.

“Four ZedPMs.” Rodney whispered back. “They’re dormant at the moment so the energy isn’t coming from them but let’s see how far charged they are.”

He carefully lifted one of the units from its housing and connected it to his tablet.

“Fully charged!” He exclaimed, turning to John and knowing there was nothing he could do to wipe the silly smile off his face.

He tested another ZPM and then another, finding each one fully charged.

“What do you think this is?”

Rodney turned to see John staring into what looked to be some kind of manufacturing unit.

“Oh my God,” Rodney shook his head slightly in disbelief. “I know you were only joking before but I really do think we’ve found a ZedPM manufacturing plant. That’s where the other energy source is coming from. It’s turned right down for now and is almost at the end of its life but it can easily be swapped out for one of the full ones.

“So that’s what all the secrecy and security is about?” John asked.

“Yes.” Rodney turned to him in delight. “This whole facility is a ZedPM research and manufacturing plant. The rechargeable ZedPMs are one offs, simply here to safeguard the building and ensure that the energy to power the shield and security never runs out. There will always be access to fully charged ZedPMs for those with the knowledge of the facility and the clearance to gain access to them.”

“So if Atlantis itself falls into the wrong hands, it will eventually run out of power,” John clarified.

“Yes. Don’t you see? Atlantis can cause untold damage to the galaxy in the wrong hands, but it takes a lot of energy to power it. Without power, it’s useless as a weapon or as a starship.”

“This is really frustrating,” John said turning and staring at the wall of charged ZPMs. “All this power. Just think what we could do on Atlantis, all the systems we could run.”

“I know. Do you think I haven’t already thought of that?” Rodney sighed. “There are so many labs and systems; you don’t know the half of it.”

“We really will have to try and get back,” John responded softly.

Rodney looked over at him. If anything John had sounded disappointed and not for the first time, Rodney wondered if John really took enough leave away from his job. On Atlantis they never really had a holiday. They had the odd days off, although half the time they ended up doing something work related, but they rarely went back to Earth and even while they were on Earth, they’d spent most of their time working.

Once they did get back to Atlantis, Rodney knew he would have to make more effort to get John to leave the city for a few days every once in a while, simply to relax and unwind.

He turned back to the manufacturing unit and carefully connected his tablet. Before long text was
scrolling across the screen and he was soon lost in the excitement of the data before him.

“Hey, Rodney, McKay.” The voice became a little louder and a little more impatient and Rodney pulled away from the screen, shaking his head at the stiffness of his neck.

“What?” He stared up at John, suddenly taking in the darkness of the night sky outside the windows. “What’s the time?”

“It’s around ten,” John said with a yawn. “Time to call it a night, buddy.”

“Hmm, yes.” Rodney agreed reluctantly. “This was beginning to get interesting.”

“Beginning to!” John exclaimed. “Rodney you’ve been staring at that for almost four hours.”

“Huh.” Rodney raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I guess that’s why I’m feeling a little stiff.” He wriggled and stretched out his back as he disconnected the tablet from the unit.

“I think a nice soak in that hot tub might be a good idea.” He frowned. “It really is a shame we don’t have any soap or bubble bath.”

“Never mind, at least we can scrub each other’s backs.” John winked and then turned quickly, but not before Rodney saw him flush slightly.

Rodney smiled to himself. However bashful John was being he was obviously wanting this relationship between them and Rodney was determined to show him how good it could be.

***

Rodney turned on both taps and stripped to his boxers. While waiting for the tub to fill he soaked a hofl leaf before wrapping it around his forefinger and cleaning his teeth as best he could. They weren’t sure how much good it did their teeth but at least it left a nice minty freshness in the mouth, which, in the absence of a toothbrush and toothpaste, was the best they could do.

He wandered out into the main room of the apartment and found John half undressed in the kitchenette. John turned as Rodney walked in.

“You know this is a small version of the washer/dryer, we could have clean clothes as well. Was there any clothing in the bedroom?”

“I don’t know, to be honest, I didn’t look.” Rodney hid a smile as he turned into the bedroom. He hadn’t been planning on clothes tonight but if it made John feel better he’d find some.

“Yes, there’re some of those loose linen pants and shirts we wore the other day.” He called out to John, selecting two sets of clothing and walking back through to the main area. He finally found John stripped down to his boxers in the bathroom, cleaning his teeth.

Rodney tested the water and turned off the cold faucet, leaving the hot to run a little longer. He removed his boxers before turning to John.

“Okay, let’s have your boxers and I’ll start the laundry.”

John looked a little self-conscious before realizing that Rodney had already stripped. He removed his boxers quickly and handed them to Rodney, who disappeared to add them to the dirty laundry before setting the small machine to complete its wash/dry cycle. When he got back to the bathroom, John was just turning off the hot tap.
“Come on then,” Rodney said gently, sitting on the edge of the tub before sinking slowly into the hot water. “Hop in.” John slid into the water and Rodney pulled him until he was leaning back and using Rodney as a pillow. They both relaxed as the water bubbled around them.

They soaked for a while, enjoying the luxury of having time for themselves, chatting quietly or simply sitting in companionable silence. Eventually Rodney grabbed the washcloth and started running it experimentally over John’s body. John tensed at first but quickly relaxed at the soothing motions, allowing Rodney to clean and explore to his heart’s content. He tensed slightly under Rodney’s ministrations as Rodney finally reached his groin but lay back and widened his legs to give Rodney better access.

Rodney washed himself quickly and efficiently before turning John gently in his arms, cupping John’s face in his palms. He brushed his thumb softly across John’s lips before lowering his head for a kiss, relieved when John responded and didn’t pull away. The kiss was gentle, an exploration of tongues and lips before Rodney moved on, trailing soft gentle kisses over John’s neck and chest until he reached his nipples.

They were close enough that Rodney could feel John’s hardness bumping into his own and from the whimpers John was now making, he knew that John was feeling the same need and desire that he himself was feeling.

Rodney rose and pulled John up with him, stepping out of the pool and wrapping John in one of the large towels as he gently dried him. Quickly toweling himself down, he led John by the hand to the large bed, laying him down and proceeding to pepper John’s body with kisses again before returning to kiss his lips, this time with more passion and heat.

Stopping for just long enough to coat his hand with the lotion he’d left hopefully on the bed, Rodney reached down and wrapped it around both their erections. They were both achingly hard and John whimpered under him as the pleasure in his body increased at the touch, bucking up try and get some friction. He wrapped his arms around Rodney’s body and clung to him, holding him in place as they kissed. Rodney started moving his hand in a slow, steady pace and John groaned into the kiss. Rodney gradually increased his speed until John climaxed with a strangled cry of Rodney’s name, which tipped Rodney over the edge and he was coming, hot and messy, over John’s chest.

They lay quietly for a few moments as their breathing returned to normal before Rodney turned and kissed John softly before rising and retrieving the washcloth and towel from the bathroom and cleaning them both up. John was drowsing but smiled sleepily up at Rodney as he climbed into the bed, pulling the covers over them, before laying on his back so John could curl into him. It didn’t take long for either of them to fall asleep that night.

***

They slept late the next morning and stayed in bed even later as they took advantage of having a lazy morning make out session. It was almost lunch time before they made their way up to the top floor of the building.

The door opened quite simply to John’s gene and they grinned at each other before stepping through into one large room, or, to be more precise, a hangar. There was room to house two Puddlejumpers although there was only one present, but one was all they needed.

Rodney stood and watched as John walked slowly over and, hesitating for a moment, opened the rear hatch. He stopped and looked back fleetingly at Rodney before stepping inside.
Rodney took a deep breath and followed, dropping into the co-pilots seat, staring straight ahead but watching John out of the corner of his eye. Eventually John spoke.

“You know,” he broke off, clearing his throat before trying again. “You know, I don’t think I want to go back yet. I mean, I want to go back but I’m kind of enjoying this here, just me and you, exploring.” He explained.

“Me too,” Rodney replied softly. “I don’t think I’ve seen you this relaxed for, well, for as long as I’ve known you.”

John looked over at him in surprise.

“No, no, seriously,” Rodney continued quickly before John had a chance to speak. “You’re always in charge, even when we’re on leave. You always feel responsible for everyone, never letting yourself relax and letting other people take care of you.” He explained. “For some reason, and whether it was because of that bug you had the first couple of days, you’ve allowed yourself to relax and let me take care of you. It’s been nice, I’ve enjoyed it!” He finished gently.

John looked down, a little uncomfortable.

“I’m not used to letting other people look after me.” He confessed quietly. “The last person who looked after me was my mother.” He let the sentence trail off but Rodney knew how that one ended. Soon after returning to Pegasus they’d had a mission where they’d rescued five children ranging in age from four to twelve after their mother was killed in a Wraith attack. That night, over a few beers, John had told Rodney about his mother’s death. It was a confidence Rodney treasured as they didn’t come often.

“You know, I don’t think one more day’s going to hurt. So why don’t we wait until tomorrow, when it’s evening time on Atlantis, we can check in with Woolsey and let the techs take a note of the ‘gate address.”

John looked at him in surprise.

“You know that hadn’t even crossed my mind!” John replied with a rueful chuckle. “I envisioned gating back in the ‘jumper and bringing Radek and some of your other top people back with us. I hadn’t even stopped to think that we don’t even know what planet we’re on.”

Rodney laughed.

“No but Atlantis will be able to tell us when we dial in. We can let them know we’re okay and I can tell Woolsey which scientists I want and what equipment they need to bring and we can arrange to meet them at the ‘gate the following morning. That’ll give us another day and two nights on our own.” Rodney raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“I like your way of thinking,” John replied with a laugh.

“Ha, that’s why I’m the genius.” Rodney softened the comment with a broad smile. “So, how about we take a little flight around the planet before lunch?”

John’s face brightened and he closed the hatch with a boyish grin. Rodney couldn’t help smiling as the ‘jumper lifted up and out of the hatch in the roof. John engaged the cloak just in case and with a whoop of joy, which made Rodney laugh with pleasure, John took the little ship sweeping up and over the fields and forests below.
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