Decision Point

by esteefee

Summary

esteefee: *starts to write a story where Rodney stays on Earth and John goes back to Pegasus*
esteefee: hmmm, I'm on 15K+ words, and John still refuses to leave Earth. I don't understa—
Narrator: esteefee did, in fact, understand.

Notes

Beta and cheerleading by em-kellesvig. Many thanks to my brain-twin!

This story is dedicated to cannon-fannon!

Many thanks to Eff at the Just Write discord group for the brilliant suggestion, and the crew at the sprints (KM, Jilly, DP, Ateana, LH, Rogue53 for leading the sprints, and anyone else I've missed) for the encouragement.

Now with front cover by esteefee and back cover by StarWatcher!

See the end of the work for more notes.
John wasn't used to Rodney letting him down, so it took him a while to understand the gist of what he was trying to say.

"It's not a matter of materials even, although obviously that's a tremendous problem. Even if we had the supplies, we'd have to machine all the parts! The drive itself suffered critical damage—Carson is no natural pilot—"

"But you and Zelenka created the wormhole thing—"

Rodney blew out a completely exasperated snort. "Sure. Get her out of atmosphere and to safe distance from Earth first. Then we could easily engage the wormhole drive. But I don't have any massive trebuchets handy, do you? Apparently, the landing was anything but smooth. The star drive is offline. It will continue to be offline until I can repair the crucial components, but I don't have the relevant composites, and I can't just make them appear out of nowhere—"

Rodney looked at him pleadingly, and for the first time since the time John avoided thinking about because it still made him feel a little queasy—Rodney staring at him and asking him to say goodbye—John realized Rodney wasn't going to be able to get them out of this. They were Earth-bound.

Atlantis wasn't going home.
It would've helped if Rodney were a tiny bit more miserable about it, but he was too busy working on the possibility of declassification. Hell, John wished anyone seemed more miserable about it other than Ronon and Teyla, who gathered with John each night in Teyla's room to drink weird tea and go over the same old, weary complaints, banging their heads against the same walls. Without Atlantis in Pegasus, Woolsey had no pull for resources. John had no forward base of operations. The IOA wasn't going to be sending the Hammond out there anytime soon, what with the other BC-304s still undergoing repairs from their last battles with the Wraith.

John entertained the thought of stealing a jumper and high-tailing it through the gate with just Ronon and Teyla and a cargo hold filled with food and ordnance.

"I talked to Woolsey today," Ronon said, palm curved around a beer.

"Yeah?"

Teyla's head lifted. She was knitting something, poorly; she'd always been a terrible knitter, but with Torren light-years away, John understood why she'd taken it up again.

"He says the SGC would be willing to let us bring up Atlantis' gate long enough to dial an address home using the control crystal. We don't even need the IOA's approval. If we want to go back, all we need to do is give them the word. Colonel Carter will make it happen when she gets back here on the Hammond. They need to send Todd back, anyway." Ronon made a face at that. "So, we're going home, John."

John swallowed harshly, his stomach knotting. He'd lose them both at once. Forever. His eyes burned.

"Yeah. I get it," he said in a cracking, ugly voice—he coughed to clear his throat, felt Ronon grip his wrist, saw Teyla lean in close, and suddenly they were sitting with their heads pressed together in a three-way hug. John tried to record the sensation of Teyla's hair, the grip of her small, strong hand on his arm; Ronon's scent: hair oil and leather and that cologne he found on P6L-932 that somehow, improbably, smelled like Polo. Ronon's arms went around John and Teyla; somehow, he hauled them both toward him and up, Teyla laughing breathlessly and John letting out a sound he'd deny under torture was a squeak of outrage.

"Where will you go?" he said when Ronon put them down and John had reset his spine.

Ronon shared a look with Teyla, who said, "Ronon will join me on M21-977 with the Athosians."

John nodded. Councilor Mara had welcomed the Athosians to Olvania with open arms, being political savvy beyond her years.

"C'mon," John said. "First, we talk to Lorne. 'Cause I'm not letting you guys go anywhere without a fuckton of C-4, grenade launchers, and missiles."

John missed a meeting or two while getting supplies together for Ronon and Teyla's departure, but it hadn't escaped him there was a buzz in the air, a lot of excitement over something more than their resident Pegasans leaving. He did hear about Carter's promotion to general from Lorne, but John's usual source of rumors was Rodney, and Rodney was off doing the couples thing with Jennifer. When Rodney wasn't running back and forth to briefings with the SGC and the newly rebuilt Area 51, the couple were taking the jetty to San Francisco for some real-live, adult-like dating, which, though it smarted, also filled John with a certain amount of amusement at the image—Rodney duded up in a suit and having to go to swanky restaurants and be polite to wait-staff.
John was bummed he didn't get to hear the complaints about it afterward. He missed the cranky bastard. He said as much, not in so many words, but Ronon heard him mumble it as they were counting off frag grenades into packing crates one afternoon in the armory. It turned out Ronon had the latest news.

"He isn't spending much time on Atlantis. I heard Jennifer say something about maybe getting a house in a town called Nevada and just transporting here sometimes. You think that's what he wants?"

That must've been what the buzz was about. Rodney and Jennifer were leaving Atlantis. John almost lost his count, but he finished up and then bowed his head for a second. "I guess so. I'll find out when he talks to me." Rodney usually did get what he wanted, even if he wasn't always truthful to himself on what that was. John remembered when Rodney tried to propose marriage to Katie Brown with a diamond so small it wasn't visible to the naked eye. He'd ended up hyperventilating himself into an imaginary alien plague.

John liked Jennifer, though. It was good to see Rodney with someone who tested his limits, who didn't just fold for his bullshit. Someone who made him compromise on the stuff she wanted for herself, because otherwise, it was a done deal Rodney would railroad his way into being alone again. But it was hard to tell how happy Rodney really was now. Especially when John never got to see him anymore.

"Come on, let's finish this up. We have that mandatory staff meeting today, and if I don't show, Woolsey said he'll order the marines to dunk me in the ocean."

Ronon chuckled, sounding interested.

"What?" John punched him in the arm. "You're supposed to be on my side."

Rodney was there at staff, along with Jennifer and pretty much everyone. Among the other administrative details, Woolsey announced leave and changes in assignment, including Rodney and Jennifer's. John got a sinking feeling when he heard how many civilians were transferring off Atlantis, either to work from the new Area 51 or the SGC, or even from home locations.

Being back on Earth was changing everything.

John exchanged looks with Teyla and Ronon, who didn't seem nearly as shocked as he was.

He knew what was coming next. There was no need for a battalion of 300 marines on what was basically a semi-staffed research station in U.S. waters, despite its top-secret nature. He'd probably be getting a communication from the Air Force soonest.

John looked over at Rodney, who was staring avidly at his tablet. Eventually, he must have felt John's eyes burning into the side of his head, because he looked up. Rodney's face twisted in some unknown emotion—John couldn't make it out. Something between guilt and anxiety.

After the meeting, John waited until Rodney and Jennifer parted at the junction of the corridor and then he smoothly moved in and shuffled Rodney onto an empty balcony before he knew what was happening.

"What the hell, Sheppard? I was going somewhere, you know," Rodney said. The look flashed across Rodney's face again—definitely guilty, John decided.

"Just need a quick word, buddy."
"Fine." McKay crossed his arms and jutted his chin. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, I just think it's funny how Woolsey announced you and Jennifer are moving off Atlantis, and here you haven't said word one to me about it." It was damned hard to keep the hurt from his voice, and John knew he'd failed when Rodney winced.

"Excuse me! But things have been a little hectic, needless to say. Once we decided, it suddenly threw a lot of things in motion. Securing the financing, finding a realtor, firing the realtor—"

Jesus, this was really happening. "You're already shopping?"

"Yes, and, oh, my God, Sheppard, you have no idea how many complete ninnies I've been dealing with this past month." Rodney's hands poked and clawed as if to describe a prizefight between a chicken and T-Rex.

"Sorry to hear it."

"Yes, well, um. Sorry. Again." Rodney faltered and peered at him. "I've been thinking about it for a while, you know. I...I'd hate to leave her." He ran his hand along the balcony and flicked a sideways glance John's way. "There's a lot of things I'd miss. But I have enough research to last me two lifetimes, and I haven't had any time to just settle in and go through it to start writing, what with the constant threat of death and all. And once Jennifer started talking about her amazing opportunity near Area 51—"

John winced a little at the memory of the last time Rodney got stuck at Area 51 and called him constantly to bitch about it.

"You do think I'm ready to settle down?" Rodney said anxiously. "I am, you know. I mean, this isn't like last time, with Katie." More confidently, he repeated, "I am. Ready. At least, for this step."

John took a deep breath and clasped his hands behind his back. "I'm sure you are, buddy. I'm, you know, happy for you. You got the gal. And...we'll keep in touch." John winced.

"Yes, yes. Of course!" That same anxious look flashed over Rodney's face. "And...you think I'm doing the right thing?" Rodney gazed at him earnestly. Seriously, someday he was going to kill John with that expression, like all he wanted was for John to approve of him and his decisions.

"Well, yeah. It's what you both want, right? Settling down in the good ol' Milky Way."

"Right. Right," Rodney nodded as if trying to convince himself, and John's heart sank. But there wasn't a hell of a lot he could do but offer a beer when it all fell to shit.

What else were friends for?

On a cold and foggy Wednesday, pretty much the entire expedition gathered in the gate room to send off Teyla Emmagan and Ronon Dex and to boot Todd the Wraith back to Pegasus where he belonged. There was a hell of a lot of saluting, crying, and gift giving.

The team had met the night before for their private farewell. So, John's heart was already a frozen lump in his chest as he watched Laura Cadman offer Teyla a backpack full of what he knew was enough stolen military-grade detonators and C-4 to level half a city, in addition to a clear plastic bag full of colorful yarn, before hugging her hard enough to make her wince. Ronon clapped Major Lorne on both cheeks and then handed him what John knew to be one of his favorite knives. Lorne looked totally flabbergasted and accepted it with a forearm grasp.
Then Ronon turned and touched foreheads with Amelia Banks.

John had to look away and swipe a hand down his face.

"Colonel Carter is coordinating the shutdown of all SGC gate operations," said a voice at his elbow, and John turned to acknowledge Rodney with a nod. "I'm sure she'll do a good job," Rodney said grudgingly.

"She's General Carter now," John said, smiling a little at the constipated expression that pinched Rodney's eyebrows at the news.

Zelenka rushed in with a case on wheels. "Am I too late?"

"No, of course not," Rodney said. "Did you include my transformer?"

"Of course," Zelenka said. "Do you take me for an idiot?"

"Every other day," Rodney said, but without his usual snap.

"What's that?" John said.

"It's a couple of miniaturized cloak and shield emitters," Rodney said.


"Zelenka's idea," Rodney said, waving his hand, and John stared, a little surprised. "What?" Rodney said. "It's a fairly decent design. But without my transformer, none of that energy would be used or stored properly."

"Yes, yes," Zelenka said with an eye roll. "Shall we go and present it before they travel to a different galaxy?"

John went with them and watched, heart heavy, as Teyla's eyes filled with tears of gratitude at the gift, as Ronon lifted Zelenka in a bear hug that had the small scientist flailing, his glasses almost flying off his head. Rodney was the next to get crushed, but he just ducked his head and pulled Teyla in with him, the three of them communing together in a silent farewell.

John looked down at his boots, trying his damnedest to keep his composure. It was all coming so clear now. In just a few short weeks, Rodney would be taking off as well, then Zelenka, leaving him alone with Lorne, a platoon of marines, and a small group of tier two scientists.

There was a good chance they'd redeploy John next and leave Lorne in charge of the platoon. Atlantis was only a hop away from Travis and AMC command here. They didn't need both a light bird and a major on base. Hell, they might finally give Lorne the promotion John had put him up for.

"Look, I'd be the last one to tell someone not to be a grouch, but this is Ronon and Teyla's going away party, and you don't want them to think you're angry at them for leaving." Rodney poked him with an unpleasantly pointy finger.

"Ow," John said, and forced a grin on his face as he and Rodney went over to join the group clustered around the gate. "You file that thing down with a pencil sharpener, or what?"

"Reliugously," Rodney said dryly. And then John faced Ronon, who turned at his approach—Ronon always seemed to know where John was. Just like John always knew where Ronon was when they were in the field. Christ, John was going to miss that. So Goddamned much.
"Ronon," John said, and only half his name made it past John's throat. Ronon's eyes were already red and teary as they met John's, or maybe that was from the prodigious amount of alcohol they'd all drunk the night before at the real going away party. Ronon reached out and pulled John in and pounded his back, hard, before squeezing him tight. Really damned tight.

John welcomed the pain. Anything to distract him from the way his heart was shriveling in his chest.

"This isn't the last time we'll meet," Ronon said gruffly in his ear. "You have to believe that."

"I know, Ronon." And thank God, Ronon did, too, and didn't say goodbye, because John couldn't take that. They slapped each other's backs and pulled away, and then John turned to Teyla, who was watching them, a watery smile on her face.

John stepped forward and bowed his head, meeting her forehead touch. But it wasn't enough, and he wrapped his arms around her shoulders; felt her do the same, until they were cocooned together, breathing each other's breath.

"Ever since I've known you, John Sheppard, you've challenged me to believe in the impossible, so this time I challenge you to do the same for me."

John nodded, their heads moving together.

"This is not goodbye," she said.

"Not a chance," he said, his voice low with promise. "We know how to reach you."

They stood that way for a long moment; John didn't want to let go; that was the honest truth, but then Rodney tapped his shoulder, saying, "I don't mean to be a spoilsport, but Sam's ready. The SGC gate is down, and we only have a short window, here."

And then John had to let go. He watched Lorne whistle, and some marines shuffled forward lugging cases of P90s and boxes of rounds to add to the cargo. Teyla gathered her things and stepped up outside the splash zone as Chuck dialed the alpha location where they planned to dump Todd. The Wraith shuffled in, trussed up in irons and escorted by six marines, heavily armed. They marched him up to the puddle and didn't allow him a backward glance before nudging him through.

One of the marines, Sergeant Chang, threw a small bag after him. John assumed there was a key in there. Although, maybe not.

"Get lost, creep," John said under this breath.

Zelenka and McKay lined up the cargo dollies that were daisy-chained to follow each other through the gate, with Ronon holding the remote control. Amelia stood to the side, her eyes red but her expression resolved.

"Good travels," John said, raising his hand in the Satedan gesture of farewell. Ronon echoed it, his face grim, and a chorus of farewells echoed through the gate room. Teyla turned one last time and waved before stepping through the event horizon. Then Ronon grabbed the handle of the shield emitter case and set off behind the train of dollies.

He didn't pause walking through the gate, and the puddle of blue slipped away after him, taking its light with it.

"Well, hell," John said under his breath and heard Radek mutter something in Czech. Rodney had already disappeared up the stairs, his hand on his ear; talking to Carter, John guessed.
The rest of the crowd dispersed in sad little clumps, and John went back to his quarters to have a beer.

On his bed rested a Wraith tooth necklace and a poorly knitted sweater.

John drank his beer. And if it tasted a little salty, no one was there to see.

The assault began at noon. John was in the mess hall going over his personnel reduction plan per the recent request from the SGC, and the sidebar hints from General Carter made it clear John better start thinking about where he wanted to be deployed next. John had a fresh turkey sandwich in one hand—even after almost a year, every turkey sandwich was a gift—and was tapping his track pad with the other, when Rodney sat down and splashed some printouts on the table between them.

"What's that?" John said, then went back to cursing the Marine Corps input form software that apparently hadn't changed since the early 1980s.

"Houses," Rodney said gloomily. "Jennifer says I have to pick, since I'm the one who's so picky, and she's narrowed it down this far, but it's a big decision! I mean this is where I'm going to spend the rest of my life, in essence."

John ignored the sinking sensation in his gut and focused on the pictures.

"How am I supposed to just settle—this one has the gray slate, which I prefer, but this one has the laundry in the garage, which is far more preferable than next to the kitchen. Who wants to listen to a washing machine? But you should see the size of the bathtub in this one! Miniscule. How am I supposed to do any serious cogitation in a tub the size of my thumb?"

"How, indeed?" John murmured, biting his lip.

"Take this seriously!"

"Oh, I am."

"You're my friend," Rodney said plaintively, and John straightened. "And you've been through this yourself, so you're supposed to help me."

"So, what am I looking at here?" John said, staring down at the glossy photos.

"Well, this one is nearer the school, which—okay. Yes, admittedly, we have to think about that. Eventually, in the far future," Rodney said, sounding like someone just asked him to sign up for life insurance.

John looked down and swallowed. They all looked kind of nightmarish—five-bedroom McMansions with bland wall-to-wall carpeting. Of course, after Atlantis, anything else would look pretty dismal.

"Hey, this one has an outdoor jacuzzi," John said, holding up a photo. "You can do a lot of thinking in there. And it has gray tile on the roof. And it's close to McCarran Airport for your flights in."

"What?" Rodney snatched it out of his hand. "Oh. Right. But Jennifer said this one is too far from the school."

"Well, there's nothing that says you two can't get another place when the kids get old enough for school. Plenty of people do that, and that's a ways off."

"Right." Rodney pointed two fingers at him, picking up steam. "Right! Perfect. I knew you'd have
"the solution." Rodney beamed at him.

"There you go. Now can I please get back to my sandwich?"

"Yes, yes," Rodney said indulgently. "I'm aware of your obsession with turkey day."

John hid his expression behind a big bite of crusty roll, spicy mustard, and roasted turkey.

The next day, it was pets.

"She wants a dog. A dog!" Rodney moaned. "Says she wants it for protection. And I know we can't be toting P-90s around a Vegas suburb, but do we really need a slobbery dog?"

"Dogs are cool," John muttered into his cereal.

"I heard that."

John thought of the picture Rodney had in his quarters. "And let me guess: you want a cat."

Rodney smiled. "That's right. Another tiger, perhaps, like Mr. Babbage McFurface."

John bit the inside of his cheek. "Well, why can't you have both?"

"Oh, right—can you imagine the chaos! Either the dog will eat the cat, or the cat will scratch the dog's eyes out."

"Not if you raise 'em together," John said, pushing away his empty bowl and reaching for his coffee. "From when they're small. Put 'em in the same bed. They should be okay."

"Would that work?"

"Yeah." John took a slow breath. "That's what Nancy and I did."

"Oh?" Rodney's eyes widened like a kid's.

John sipped his coffee and looked away. "She got 'em both in the divorce." Damn it, he still missed Fred, but it wasn't like John could have taken the mutt on deployment.

"Sorry," Rodney said awkwardly, and John grunted. "But thanks for the advice. I'll take it back to management," Rodney joked.

"Great. Can I get back to this now?" John nodded at his spreadsheet.

"What're you working on?"

"Nothing. Work."

"Well, whatever it is has your eyebrows trying to mate with each other."

"It's this software. It's hurting my head." John resisted only slightly as Rodney tugged his laptop out of his hands. "But really, the problem is I'm trying to get a small platoon to secure the same area a battalion used to."

Rodney stopped poking and looked up. "But why are you trying to do that? Why not just shrink the area?"
"I know you know the majority of our uninhabited areas is monitored by those cool motion detectors that we set up."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"The interior perimeter is our central tower—those sensors are mapped to the subcutaneous transponders, instead, on all levels. But we're shrinking our occupancy to only the core levels, operations and the two levels above and below. We need to go back to plain motion sensors for all those levels, and there aren't any available to be moved to—"

"Oh my God. Why didn't you come to me?" Rodney yanked John's laptop closer and started typing maniacally. "Of course the system is adaptable—I wrote it! I can transform the existing sensors to any mode you want. In fact, they can be dual—subcu in the morning and motion sensors in the evening. Just tell me what you want and where you want it!"

"Oh."

"Yes, 'oh'! Honestly." Rodney finished typing and clicking then spun the laptop toward him, showing him a 3-D layout of the central tower. "Now point and grunt, if you please."

John grinned. "Thanks, Rodney."

"Don't mention it."

Jennifer dropped a couple of Tootsie Pops next to John's computer.

"What're these for?"

"You know what," she said, sitting down across from him and resting her chin on her palm. "Thanks."

John felt his face heat. "Hey, I like dogs, too."

"Not just that. He's not...panicking anymore. Which is great, because now I can focus on my own panic."

John closed his laptop and rested his arms on it. "What've you got to panic about?"

"Oh, nothing major: just starting a competitive new position in a few weeks as chief resident of emergency medicine at the best hospital in Las Vegas. Everyone will be expecting the girl prodigy who's been absent from the stage for the past 2 years to fail miserably, of course. Who does she think she is?"

"Speaking as someone who's had the chief resident's fingers in his guts, I think she's pretty awesome," John said.

Jennifer ducked her head and shoved her hair behind her ear. "And, of course, Rodney and I will be living together in a house, with a pool and two pets, and probably drive each other crazy within a week."

"Hey. You'll do fine." John paused, then reached out and awkwardly patted her arm. "Just remember to hide the PowerBars before bedtime. Trust me on this: I used to sleep in a tent with the guy, and you do not want to experience his PowerBar farts."

Her nose screwed up. "Oh, my God! Is that what that is?"
John nodded earnestly before opening up his laptop. He had to pump up the text size a little—he’d been doing that more and more since the SGC had hit him so hard with all this paperwork. His head was killing him.

"Colonel, do I need to drag you down to the infirmary before I leave?"

"What? No. What for?"

"You're squinting."

"It's all this damned paperwork."

"I think it's your vision."

"What?" John's gut dropped. "No way. I'm a pilot! I have perfect vision."

Jennifer smiled indulgently. "You're forty-two, colonel. Some loss of close vision acuity is typical around this age." She paused at his dismayed expression. "It doesn't mean you'll lose your flight status, John."

"It better not," he said.

"So, I can expect to see you down at the infirmary? Dr. Bagdai will be happy to see you any time before she's redeployed on Friday."

"Yeah, yeah," John said, then shooed away her grinning mug so he could get some work done.

Losing his 20/10 vision would be just another blow in a long line of them. It was making him just a little tired.

Maybe tomorrow he'd skip lunch.

He got glasses, which he kept in the pocket of his uniform blouse and forgot to wear ninety percent of the time. But when he did, it happened to be when he was alone in his quarters.

They sure helped, though.

He wondered what Teyla would say about them. Just how badly Ronon would tease the old man.

The night before the big move-out, the marines had a bash to say goodbye to the personnel who were being redeployed. John, Evan, and the other senior officers turned a blind eye to the kegs they saw wheeled down the corridors in the course of the afternoon.

But John made sure to stop in and talk to folks, to Sergeant Ocampo, whose idea of good cuisine started and ended with ketchup and hash; to Corporal Wolf, who once dragged John out of line of fire, getting hit herself by a Genii ricochet, and later asked John to send her Bronze Star with Valor to her mom, because, "Maybe now she'll forgive me for joining up, sir."

He shared a shot of some terrible kind of hooch with the quartermaster—where Staff Sergeant Mogotsi got his booze from, John never asked and Mogotsi never told, but this yellow stuff in particular was rank as hell, and John could swear Mogotsi was putting one over on him. Just in case, John made sure Lorne drank a shot, too.

And then John got chivvied into standing on a table to give a speech. He stumbled through some words, tongue-tied as usual, then broke down and said, "You guys are the best damn fighting force
in any galaxy, ever."

"Ooo-rah," they shouted.

Figuring he'd quit while he was ahead, John started to climb down and almost took a tumble when Captain Minehart gave him a slap on the ass. Lt. Ho hauled him up and pushed another beer in his hand, Dr. Bagdai ruffled his hair—why did they always go for the hair?—and then John's back was pounded so hard he was pretty sure he got a bone bruise or two.

Goddamn it, he was going to miss his people.

"She wants to carpool."

John sighed and dropped his burger back on his tray. It was a good burger, too—still hot, perfectly grilled, and made of good Angus beef. Cook was having a blast with the fact they hadn't cottoned on to reducing his food budget yet.

"Nothing wrong with carpooling," John said. "You get to spend more time together that way."

"But my schedule—you know how I get immersed sometimes."

_Sometimes_? John raised his eyebrows.

"I can't just drop everything because the next JANET shuttle is leaving," Rodney expostulated. "I would just catch a later one, except then I'd have Jennifer waiting for me at the airport, so I'd look like a jerk."

John shook his head. "So, take a cab occasionally."

"But with two cars, I wouldn't have to—"

"What would Jeannie say about you guys having two cars?"

Rodney hung his head. "She'd bite my head off then make me go hug the nearest tree."

"There ya go." John picked up his burger. It was still warm, too. "Better yet, get a bicycle. It's only twelve miles to the airport from your house. And Nevada is flat as a pancake."

"Funny."

John shrugged. "The ride would take twenty minutes. Remember: you won't have Ronon to haul your ass out of bed for PT anymore." The reminder made them both wince, and John's mood dropped.

"Not the worst idea you've had," Rodney conceded.

Soon Rodney and Jennifer would be gone. Carson was visiting his mother already and kept talking about staying rather than reassigning to the SGC. And Woolsey was making noises about his skills possibly being useful with the Lucian Alliance situation.

"Want the rest of my fries?" John said, and Rodney nodded and ate them in silence.

John imagined eating lunch every day alone, without Rodney, in an empty Atlantis, and—no. No. John finally gave room to the idea percolating in the back of his head. He'd left people behind in Pegasus, people vulnerable to the Wraith, and at a time when they should be striking hardest. If the
Wraith were desperate enough to send a ship to the Milky Way, just how hard had the Replicators, the mean Asgard, Atlantis and the Coalition, and not to mention infighting among the Wraith themselves worn down their numbers? More than Earth realized, that was for sure.

And if one Wraith sect had done it, what was stopping another from finding a ZPM and coming to Earth? With no warning from Todd this time and no preparation, Earth would be caught on her heels.

Earth still needed a forward base. And John should be the one to make sure it happened. Pegasus was all he had left of home and family, not this husk of an abandoned city. And he wasn't going to stay here to be redeployed away from his city to some gamma site in the Milky Way to fight a bunch of smugglers and pirates, the way Carter was hinting.

"What are you frowning about," Rodney asked him.

"Just thinking."

"Well, nothing good ever comes of that particular configuration of eyebrows," Rodney said, waving his fork. "So you'd better tell me about it so I can fix it."

"This isn't something you can fix," John said slowly. Saying it hurt because Rodney was his go-to guy for fix-its. For everything, in fact. But John was on his own, now. "Listen. I'm...I've got to go."

John shoved his trash onto his tray and stood up. "Good luck with the carpool situation."

"It's not a situation," Rodney yelled behind him, but John was already halfway to the door.

It felt good to have a mission again.

John took a shortcut and copied the proposal of an old Milky Way gamma site, except he pared down the scientist contingent, added more ops and signals intelligence, and doubled the marines. The purpose of the new base would be to support intelligence at the edge of the Pegasus Galaxy and monitor for any outbound Wraith ships.

Zelenka had long ago chatted John up about a subspace network monitoring approach using cloaked drone technology but embedding long-range sensors. According to Zelenka, the drones already had native intercommunications that were undetectable by the Wraith. And the Expedition had the ability to manufacture as many drones as they wished since they discovered the site on M8L-569. Sure, they'd had to negotiate with the folks who'd previously discovered it and used the base occasionally as a Wraith refuge for their infant population, but the cost in diapers, sippy cups, and onesies was relatively cheap in comparison. Plus, Carson always insisted on doing pediatric check-ups.

Hell, maybe he could convince Zelenka to go back out to Pegasus, too, instead of staying on Atlantis. Radek kind of had a thing for Councilor Mara, and he'd have to visit the Ancient city on M21-977 a bunch of times to get the supply line established. Not to mention return visits for repairs.

John grinned and kept typing.

The promotion to full bird was unexpected. Well, John kind of expected it—it had been more than three years since he hit Lieutenant Colonel, and there was that time he saved the Earth from deadly, life-sucking aliens and all, but it was still a surprise because he was never careful enough about making the brass happy. Now he was almost the brass himself.

General Carter wanted to have a big ceremony at the SGC and invite a ton of people, but without
Ronon and Teyla there, hell, with the war still not won, it felt like a reward he hadn't earned yet. And Elizabeth was gone. He remembered the last time he got promoted, how he'd gone around all puffed up, and her indulgent smiles.

But the promotion did mean he'd have some weight to throw behind his proposal, so he was damned glad of the timing. He told Sam he'd rather do it sooner and have it done.

"This means a lot," he said to Sam in her office after she read out the special order and pinned on his silver eagles. "Especially coming from you, General." She'd always had his back. Full bird. He'd made it. And it had only taken a full-scale world invasion. Take that, Colonel Osterland.

"I'm sorry it took them so long," she said regretfully, giving him a punch in the arm. "But you know this is for what's ahead, right? Have you been thinking about your deployment options?"

"Of course, ma'am," John said. He made a show of rubbing his arm. "Speaking of which, I just emailed you a proposal for submission to the IOC. I hope you'll give it some serious consideration. We have a big hole in our defenses right now."

Sam sat down behind her desk and nodded to him to sit down. "Is this about the Wraith?" She pulled her keyboard over.

"Oh, yeah." He waited while she pulled up his proposal and scanned through it. After a while, she looked over at him, her blue eyes sharp and assessing.

"I was kind of expecting something like this," she said, a little rueful. "But not quite so detailed and..." She tapped her fingers on the desk, hesitating.

"Smart?" he offered. "If it helps, Radek supplied the tech on the drones."

Sam winced. "Sorry, I'm not trying to imply you aren't up to the challenge, here. I've seen you in action, John."

John frowned. If he couldn't get General Carter's support, the whole plan would be shit-canned. "But?"

She waved her hand. "No, no, that's all. Just that I wanted to help. I didn't want you to think I was surprised by this or anything. You can do this. I like what I've read so far; I'll go over it and help you tighten it up before we present it."

"Together?" Oh, hell, yeah. "Fantastic. I'll set up a meeting with your XO."

"That would be great." She stood up, and he hastily got to his feet. "And congratulations again, Colonel Sheppard."

She offered her hand, and he shook it, his face burning a little. Definitely a surprise.

"So now you're a colonel, Colonel."

"Yup." John stuck his orange in his pocket with a sigh and started in on his oatmeal instead. "Look on the bright side: you won't have to remember to call me something different."

"Har-har," Rodney said, taking the seat opposite with a disgruntled look. "I would remember."
John stared at him in disbelief. "It took you three months last time. I was starting to think you were gaslighting me."

One side of Rodney's mouth lifted in slight smirk.

"See!" John said, pointing. "Right there. I knew it, you little shit."

"Oh, come on! You were so proud of yourselves, you and Ellis and Carter and Caldwell with the, "Hello, Colonel! Why, hello, Colonel! How you doing, Colonels?" Rodney's voice turned musical, and John laughed.

"Fine. It is awesome, though." Full bird, he thought to himself again. Man, if his father were alive, he'd shit a brick.

"Congratulations. I guess," Rodney said. "Although I'm not sure what you'll do with such a fancy rank here on Atlantis."

John ate a big spoonful of oatmeal to avoid the question. He wanted to tell Rodney; God, he wanted to, but he had to step down off his addiction somehow. It had to start now.

"Maybe they'll reassign you," Rodney said, a question in his voice.

John shrugged and kept chewing, feeling like a jerk. His second meeting with General Carter had gone well. They'd tightened up his proposal and added some terrific details on the sensor network, drone manufacturing specs, and their plans to work with the Coalition's intelligence community. Sam was confident the IOA would accept the proposal; apparently, some key players were pretty damned shaken up by the Wraith's almost-invasion and didn't like the blind spot at their backs.

"If you were at the SGC, we'd probably run into each other a lot more often," Rodney said in what he probably figured was a casual way.

"Yeah," John mumbled around his last spoonful of oatmeal, then swiped his lips with his napkin and stood up. "Look, I'm kind of late with some paperwork that's going into the IOA today. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Jennifer and I are leaving tomorrow," Rodney said, looking hurt.

"I know, buddy. We've got the party tonight, remember? I'm supplying the booze, Radek's got the eats."

"Great. Budweiser and bratwurst. I can't wait."

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The party was a serious downer. Miko brought tiny bean cakes shaped like ZPMs and held them on a tray in her lap; her huge brown eyes wobbled with tears when John offered to put them out on the table. Chuck got drunk on Canadian whiskey and started singing 'O Canada' off key when John asked him what his plans were now that Atlantis' gate was non-operational. John couldn't tell anyone what he, himself, was up to because the IOC was still reviewing his plan, so he held a bottle to his lips and kept drinking and smiling.

Rodney and Jennifer's smiles looked a little more plastic each time someone asked them when they were going to get married. Which happened a lot. Rodney started eyeing John desperately, like he did when the townspeople wanted to kidnap him to work on their sewers, but John had to make himself hang back. He didn't want Rodney asking him anymore awkward questions.
They weren't a team anymore. John had to get it through his thick skull.

Finally, the party began to break up, and John cleaned up the bottles and plates and napkins while everyone drifted out with soggy farewells.

"That was...well, I'd almost say fun, but I'm going to go with unusual," Jennifer said, still munching on a bean cake. "Atlantis was already starting to feel like the end of a party, and now this was like the party in the parking lot after the party."

"Yeah," John said, something thick stuck in this throat. He took a last swig of warm beer and then tossed the bottle into the recycling bin. "Hope you kids had fun anyway."

"Sure," she said, her warm eyes crinkling. "Thanks for the shindig."

"No problem," he started to say, and then she stepped close and hugged him, her lips grazing his cheek. His arms wavered then settled around her, and he patted her back. "No problem," he said again as they parted. "Wanted to give you guys the right kind of sendoff."

"Oh, great. Now you're trying your wiles on Jennifer," Rodney said behind him, and John turned slowly, back relaxing into a slouch.

"Well, you know me—I'm a real sucker for the smart, pretty ones," John said.

"I'm sure," Rodney said, a little too sourly by the expression on Jennifer's face. He'd better watch out for that, John thought, turning away. Jealousy could kill a relationship dead; John should know from his own marriage. What distance hadn't damaged, accusations had. The classified nature of John's missions made everything he told Nancy sound like a lie, and she'd gone from joking that John had a different gal—or guy—on every base, to downright accusing after a while. Then John had started to wonder if her jealousy didn't mean she was messing around herself. Accusations turned to arguments turned to bitterness. John still felt a churning in his stomach whenever he thought of her and Gil or Grant or whatever the fuck his name was, because had she ever really loved John? He still loved her. Or maybe he just loved the thought of her and the way it had felt knowing someone was willing to say the words. No one ever had since.

"John? You need some help with those?" Jennifer said at his elbow. "I won't ask if your shoulder is bothering you again—"

"It's fine; I've got it," he said, picking up the leftover case of beer. "Could you get the cake? In fact, do you guys want the extra cake?" He grinned when Jennifer shook her head.

"I don't think it will keep on the plane. But thanks for the offer."

"Can you believe they're not offering to beam us to Nevada?" Rodney grumbled, grabbing the two half-empty bottles of Canadian whiskey without prompting. "Where is this going?"

"The sheet cake's going to the kitchen. The booze is going to my room."

"Well, I'll take this to the kitchen and meet you back at our quarters," Jennifer said, giving Rodney a buss on the mouth. She came at John next, and they danced their burdens awkwardly before he tilted to the side and offered his cheek. She pressed her lips there briefly, saying, "I hope I'll see you again soon."

John swallowed back his reply, saying instead, "Sure hope so. Good luck at the new hospital, Chief."
She grinned saucily. Swooping a little frosting onto one finger, she popped it into her mouth before taking the cake and heading toward the mess.

John cocked his head at Rodney and they went back to his quarters.

"So..." Rodney said, looking around as John stacked the beers in his fridge.

"What?" He took the whiskey bottles and put them on the top shelf of his closet.

"Nothing, I just...I'm curious as to why you haven't put in for a transfer of your own to the SGC."

John raised his eyebrows. "Did you think I would? Last time, they put me on a gate team with a bunch of newbies. I ended up picking bark out of my ass."

"But you don't intend to stay here," Rodney said, disbelieving. "Floating in the middle of the Pacific with Major Lorne for company?"

"I like Lorne," John said. "He doesn't try to cheat at chess like some people."

"What? I told you! I knocked them over reaching for my Coke. I was just setting them right again."

"Uh-huh." John smirked.

Rodney rolled his eyes. "I just thought, you know—Peterson has regular flights to Nellis. I don't know how often you'd be able to come out from Atlantis." He shrugged awkwardly, looking down.

"Aw, buddy. You gonna ask me to a barbecue?" John's chest hurt.

"I'll have you know I'm quite a good griller. My father was terrible at it. He had no idea how to properly start up the briquettes."

John couldn't help grinning. "That a fact?"

"He'd practically smother them in lighter fluid."

"Gross."

"I know!"

"Well, let me know when you've got the Weber set up." Feeling like a dirty, no good liar, John nudged Rodney toward the door.

"See if I don't," Rodney said, pausing at the doorway. He cleared his throat. "I guess this is goodbye. Of course, you'll see us off, but..."

John couldn't take the forlorn look on Rodney's face and lunged forward suddenly to pull him into a hug, almost trapping his arms at his sides. John rested the side of his face against Rodney's hair. Rodney flailed his arms and clutched at John's waist.

It only lasted a moment, but John's pulse beat heavily just the same.

"Okay, okay," Rodney said as he pulled back. "I guess that saves us from having to embarrass ourselves in front of the marines."

"That was the plan," John said, his voice rough. "See you tomorrow."
"Bright and early." The door slid open behind Rodney and he stepped back.

John nodded, and then Rodney was gone.

John didn't do goodbyes. He'd had a few too many of them, and not a lot by choice, starting with his mom, who, when he was six, waved a careless hand and skedaddled for parts unknown, and continuing with his wife, who found someone who talked more and flew away less. Then there was his father, who basically disowned him for not living his life the way old dad wanted him to.

Other people had left him in more permanent ways: Dexter Fowler, Mitch Richmond, Ken Holland, Peter Grodin, the first Carson Beckett, Elizabeth Weir...

So, standing on the dock with a crowd of well-wishers and watching his best friend walk up dragging his rolling suitcase containing, probably, his first-, second-, and third-favorite laptops, was pretty damned painful.

"So," Rodney said, rolling to a stop in front of him.

"Got everything?"

"Yes. I think so. Everything else was sent ahead, with the exception of my laptops." Rodney gestured toward the case.

John suppressed a smile.

"Rodney," Jennifer said, running up with a pack in one hand. "Did you get the—no, of course not. Where's the thing?"

"The thi—oh, right. Yes. I did. Of course, I did," Rodney said, sounding indignant. He bent over and unsnapped a side pocket of his case to pull out a large, thick envelope. He shoved it at John without any grace whatsoever. "Here. This is for you."

Reluctantly, John shoved his finger under the flap and opened it. It was a Hallmark card with a dopey guy on the front. It said, 'I'm really going to miss doing your work for you.' Only Rodney had scratched out 'work' and inserted 'thinking.'

"Hah," John said. "Thanks."

"Open it!" Rodney said impatiently. Jennifer grinned, motioning.

John opened it. A plane ticket slid out into his hand. Inside the card, it read, "Guest room is open and grill's ready when you are." It was signed by both Jennifer and Dr. Rodney McKay, PhD, PhD.

"The ticket is open-ended," Rodney said.

John swallowed. "Thanks, guys. This is terrific."

Jennifer made a move to hug him but John backed away. "Nuh-uh. We did this already last night."

She laughed and raised her hands in surrender. "All right."

"Travel safe, you two." John caught Rodney's eyes. "Be good."

Rodney started to say something then cleared his throat. "You—I should be saying that to you, really. Statistically, you're the one who..."
"Wait, wait!" A shout rang out, and Radek came running up. "You are a nincompoop. Didn't I say to wait in the lab for me to give my goodbyes?"

"Well, excuse me if I didn't want to miss the ferry," Rodney said without bite.

"Here. This is for you. I know how you get underground. Always you complain of getting an ice cream headache from the HVAC." Radek stuffed a fleece hat into Rodney's hands. "And for you, Jennifer..." Radek dipped his head. "A housewarming present. Open it when you arrive." He handed her a small box that looked pretty heavy, from the expression on Jennifer's face.

"Thanks, Radek," she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks," Rodney said gruffly, shaking Radek's hand. "I'm only an hour and a half away, you know. So if you get into any trouble, it's not like I can't just hop over to give you an expert hand. Also, of course, I have the fat encrypted connection I set up to the database and servers so I can always hop online to assis—"

"You will be the first person for me to call," Radek said. "After my nagging mother. And my cousin, Kryštof, who raises polecats." He made a face. "So, you see, it will be a while."

"Oh, ha-ha," Rodney said, but John noticed his eyes were way too soft.

Director Woolsey stepped forward from the perimeter. "Thank you for everything you've done," Woolsey said, very formal, offering his hand first to Jennifer, then to Rodney.

"Thank you, Richard," Jennifer said.

"Yes. I'd say it was a pleasure but it was a haunted ride of terror for the most part," Rodney said, and shook Woolsey's hand.

The doors at the other end of the dock opened, and some more people came out, heading toward them and the ferry. It looked like some of Woolsey's bean counters heading back to San Francisco.

"You guys should climb aboard," John said. "If you want seats on the bow."

"Good idea, I get seasick so easily. Well," Rodney rubbed his hands together, saying, "I guess this is it. This feels a little bit like the end of the Lord of the Rings."

John shook his head. "I'll miss you most of all, Nerdo. So," he paused. "Just, you know...bye." He ducked his head and stepped back to lift Rodney's suitcase before he could say or do something stupid like grab Rodney, or shake him; kiss him, maybe, or hold on. Just hold on.

"Thanks," Rodney said as John handed up Jennifer's bag, and then folks were crowding by John and Radek and climbing aboard the small ferry, and before John knew it, they'd cast off and everyone was yelling goodbye and waving. Fuck. There they went.

"It is sad," Radek said, taking off his glasses to wipe his eyes unashamedly. John envied him.

"Yeah." John watched for as long as he thought he could get away with, then turned to go back inside. Radek followed him.

"Listen—I've been meaning to talk to you," John said. "It's about the probe drones you designed, Radek..." He started to fill Radek in and watched his eyes go wide.

The other send-offs were equally painful. Woolsey insisted on a formal dinner, and then slipped
quietly away in the morning. Shortly after, a whole passel of scientists, doctors, and nurses departed in a giant wave for parts unknown.

John knew it would be bad, but he hadn't figured just how bleak it would be sitting in the mess hall with no one but Lorne and some deflated looking scientists for company. Two tables over, the marines were goofing it up, but no self-respecting jarhead would hang out with their COs, and especially not with their Air Force COs, no matter how many Wraith they'd wasted together. So John, Lorne, Miko, Radek, Dr. Biro, and Fiona Simpson pretty much ate every meal together. It was friendly but not full of yuks. Dr. Biro talked a lot about her Wraith organ samples. Lorne and Miko both had a thing for specialized pen nibs. Radek and Fiona flirted. It was subtle, but John was pretty sure no one could be that interested in pigeon breeds.

John and Lorne talked about flying. The puddlejumpers were still functioning but no one could fly them without filing a flight plan in US air space. And they couldn't file a flight plan without revealing the nature of the craft. So they talked about flying straight up into atmo, about the possibility of visiting planets in the solar system, of visiting their favorites.

"Saturn's rings up close," Lorne said. "I want to paint 'em."

"I've got to check out Jupiter's moons." He'd dreamed of it as a kid, of visiting Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto. Io was chock full of volcanoes. Not dead and dusty like Earth's moon. Earth's moon didn't even have a name.

John and Lorne both sighed. Lorne said eagerly. "We can still do it. Just need clearance directly above Atlantis. Maybe the Navy can file for a Temporary Flight Restriction."

John gave him a look. "Sam already did, figuring it would be a good idea since the Navy has warned ships away from the area. But the IOA is worried that approaching another federal agency would draw too much attention."

"Seems pretty stupid."

"Your IOA at work."

So, no more flying. No pestering Rodney or sparring with Ronon or conversations with Teyla on the nature of command responsibility over bark-tasting tea. No more beating Rodney at chess or Ronon trying to pass off fake Satedan traditions or Teyla telling meandering jokes that never had any freaking punch line. No more unplugging Rodney's monitor so he had to crawl under his desk, incidentally letting John ogle his ass.

That last one was a particular favorite of John's. Especially since Rodney was sure Radek was the one doing it as a prank, so John got the added pleasure of Rodney ranting to him, red-faced, about what a childish, unimaginative bastard Radek was.

The first email came from Rodney, in which he complained about a) the weather; b) the weather; and c) his allergies, which were exacerbated by the weather.

There was also a lot in there about the carpeting of the new house being drab and dust mite-infested and requiring immediate replacement, and that he and Jennifer could really use John as a referee, because her taste was abysmal but Rodney's wasn't much better. They just didn't have the same crappy taste.

"You're on your own there, buddy," John wrote. "I don't do carpets or windows."

And then, apparently, Rodney had new subordinates to break in and tenderize to a meaty pulp,
which took a lot of energy, and he just didn't have the same oomph he used to; Rodney wasn't sure if it was the heat or the altitude. Or perhaps it was the giant new turbine spinning behind him and sapping his will to live.

It's like working in a wind tunnel, only it's nuclear. It's a nuclear wind tunnel, Rodney wrote. And the loud thumping noises are not at all reassuring.

John wrote back, R.I.P: your 'nads.

He was sure Rodney was bitching just to be bitching; that was his gig, after all. But John hoped he was happy. Only one of them should be a miserable son of a bitch.

A secure cell phone arrived for John in the mail from the SGC, and then a whole lot of conference calls and face-to-face meetings started up. First with Sam, and then between him and the quartermaster and also his new XO, Maj. Kayla Cole.

Kay was achingly young and fresh-faced like Ford; but unlike Ford, she was an unending smart-ass.

"Are you sure you're gonna want me tagging along on your date, sir?" she said when she heard about the mission to scope out M21-977 as a possible site for their base. "I read the AAR; seems like you left things pretty friendly between you and Councilor Mara. Though this is some seriously long-distance relationship."

"We didn't—she wasn't—we never had a 'thing', Lieutenant," John said. "Long-distance or otherwise. She's just a nice...ally."

"If you say so, sir."

John rolled his eyes and left to go talk to Lorne, who, though also mocking, was more subtle.

"Don't know if this is going to come as a surprise or not, Colonel, but there's not much need for us both on Atlantis at this time."

"I kind of figured when they promoted me, John." Lorne smiled.

"And congratulations again, Colonel."

"You, too, Colonel." They both grinned stupidly at each other before Lorne said. "So, what's the plan? They deploying you back to the SGC until Atlantis gets fixed up?" Most of Atlantis' crew still had a stubborn belief that Atlantis would get repaired and return to Pegasus where she belonged.

Hell, John still believed it himself, most days.

"I'm going back to Pegasus to set up a gamma site."

A quick flash of envy passed over Lorne's face. "Good news."

"Yeah. We need eyes on the Wraith."

"That's no lie. What can I do to help, sir?"

John clapped Lorne on the shoulder. "Funny you should ask, Colonel...it's time you took over Atlantis operations."

The proud grin that overtook Lorne's face more than made up for losing such a fine XO.
Rodney must have spies all over the place because he not only found out John had a phone now, he got the phone number within a day.

"There. That's better," Rodney said as soon as he called. "Buffoons. They gave you a blackberry. That's so 2005."

"This phone has a keyboard."

Rodney sighed heavily in his ear. "Yes, I know you've never held anything smarter than a rotary phone—"

"Hey!"

"Up to your ear, if you'll let me finish. It's time to enter the new age and let me text you pictures of my cat."

"Your cat?" John's phone buzzed and he pulled it away to look at it. An instant later, a dialog box popped up, and he clicked "Okay" to look at a cream-colored puffball with blue eyes. "Cute. It looks like a tribble."

"It's not a tr—her name is Grace," Rodney said with great dignity.

"Did Jennifer get her dog?"

"Yes, yes, Groucho."

John's phone buzzed again. This time it was a gorgeous tan and brown German shepherd puppy, long limbs bent protectively around the puffball. "Aw. They like each other."

"Well, they certainly seem to get along better than Jennifer and me right now."


"We argue about everything," Rodney said glumly. "She's entirely unreasonable."

"Right, it's just her. Oh, look at that, I have another call."

"You do not."

"Sure do."

Except lying always caught up with him, because two minutes later the phone really did ring again. This time it was Jennifer.

"Hi, John. Hope I'm not bothering you," she chirped.

"Of course not," he said as he pushed away the schematics for the possible base site.

"How are things going on Atlantis?"

"Oh, you know. We're still floating."

She laughed a little, sounding distracted.

"What can I do for you, Jennifer?"
"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I wouldn't bug you, but you know him best, and he's driving me to
distraction—that's what my mom would say about my dad, and I really get it now, I do, because he's
so...ahhhh! I can't think! He's not happy with anything. If it's not the food, it's the smell of the dog, or
the nap of the carpet, or the color of the walls, or, I don't know, the taste of the air!"

"Hey, hey," John said. "Look, that's just Rodney being Rodney. He has sensitivities. You're a
doctor, for Pete's sake. You can't take it personal, you know that."

"But I do, since it was my job that brought us here and so he didn't get his top choice at the SGC—"

"Jennifer. He's a grown-up adult." John swallowed. "If he didn't want to be there, he wouldn't be
there. Just let the small stuff slide off your back until he settles down. If he wants to change
something about the house, you guys talk it out like I told you, right?" Jesus, when did he become
couples counselor to the stars? How was that fair?

"All right. I'll try. He just makes me so mad all the time. I didn't make him come out here!
I told him I
wanted to see how things were long distance. And maybe that would have been a good idea," she
laughed jaggedly, "because turns out close quarters is a real trial."

Okay, now, this stuff, he really didn't want to hear. "Look at the time."

She laughed again, brighter this time. "Sorry. Thanks, John."

"Don't mention it. Seriously."

"I won't."

He hung up and stared into space for at least a minute before going back to his specs.

In the end, it was as easy as co-presenting to the IOC with a brigadier general and a top scientist by
his side. Zelenka talked fast and pushed his glasses up his nose, using his laser pointer to great effect
to outline how their net of sensor drones would feed them intelligence on Wraith movements. Sam
looked stern and commanding as she outlined the need for a forward base, briefing everyone on the
Wraith, with visuals, uncaring whether their audience had eaten breakfast or not. All John had to do
was give the low-down on the personnel and resources required and back it up with numbers.

Then the three of them sat back and took questions. There were fewer than they'd expected. Only
one guy, a marshal of the British Royal Air Force, had a concern about the master DHD crystal they
were taking back to Pegasus for communications.

"Doesn't that mean, if it falls into enemy hands, they have a direct route to the gate here on Earth?"
Bellamy said. "And you with a paltry crew to defend it?"

"If I may," Radek said, nodding to Sam and John, "I can answer. Sir, I have here a replica of the
crystal, made of the same compound. The crystal matrix, once broken, cannot be restored, for it
consists of a microscopic lattice of millions of connections, like the nerves running through your
body, you see..." Radek snapped the crystal in half. "It breaks as easily as this, and Earth's gate is
protected. We have two such crystals and know how to grow more. But the enemy does not have the
incredibly complex pattern; it is like the universe's most complicated key."

Radek sat back down.

"Obviously, in any foothold situation, we would simply destroy the crystal, Marshal," John said.
"We'd have dedicated personnel responsible for making it happen, a shift of trained officers patterned
after the nuclear football protocol. And any break in communication from us would trigger an investigation by the SGC. But hopefully, we would have transmitted the particulars of the attack and any threat to Earth before destroying the crystal, preparing you in advance." John could see Sam's smirk out of the corner of his eye.

"Thank you, Colonel," Marshal Bellamy said.


"Nope." Carter grinned. "We're definitely getting our new forward base. And I've heard rumbles of them—oh, hello, Director Woolsey."

"Richard!" John held out his hand. "Good to see you."

"Good to see you, too, Colonel." He shook John's hand and nodded to Carter. "General. I thought I would come upstairs and see how it went."

"So, they looped you in," Carter said. "I heard you were interested in taking the admin role. It's going well, thanks."

"So, we're getting the band back together?" John smiled. "Cool."

"As I understand it, despite it being a military base, you left an administrative role for handling the scientific contractors and for coordinating the diplomatic efforts with the intelligence community."

"Yup. I just didn't think I could get you for it."

"Well, color me interested, Colonel. You've done an outstanding job with your proposal."

John felt his face heat; he shrugged and gestured toward Zelenka, who was heading toward them with three coffees wedged in his hands. "I just had the idea. Doc Zelenka and the general were the smarts."

Carter made an outraged sound and Woolsey raised an eyebrow. "Mmm-hmm. Hello, Dr. Zelenka. It's good to see you."

"Ah, Director Woolsey." Zelenka handed John his coffee, offering the second one to Carter. "Will you be joining our merry band? For it seems we cannot stand to be parted from the danger and intrigue of Pegasus."

John grinned. "Me, I'm going back for the fake meat sandwiches they make out of tava beans."

"I seem to recall you had plenty of complaints about the fake turkey," Carter said. "You once asked me to order Stephen to make an extra run just for deli meat."

"Eh. Tavurkey grows on you after a while."

They shared a laugh, interrupted by the Under-Secretary of the IOC poking her head outside and gesturing at them.

"That's our cue. Thanks for the coffee, Doc. After you." John nodded to Woolsey and went back in.

The proposal was approved with some amendments; to John's utter surprise, the USAF planned to give them a dedicated BC-304 instead of the Al'kesh they'd originally requested for transporting the drones. John eyed in disbelief the IOC's further proposal of upping the number of international
military personnel and the request to add more civilian aides. He shared a disbelieving look with Zelenka. They also wanted to add more naquadah generators and shield emitters, both for the security of the base and as possible trade items with "high level intelligence contacts." The new personnel, hardware, and the fact the IOC had started to treat Pegasus contacts with such respect was a sure sign they were all panicking about the Wraith a lot more than they were saying. John could get behind that. He’d been freaking out ever since he met his first Wraith queen.

Zelenka shook John's hand excitedly and babbled something about securing Miko before she took that offer from Oxford.

"Well, I'm not sure how that could have gone better," John said to General Carter after Zelenka took off, and Sam grinned impishly.

"I might have primed the pump a little with General O'Neill's help," she said, adding more seriously, "I know what you're facing out there. You can count on the SGC's support, John. I want you to know that."

It took a moment for John to find his voice. "Thanks, Sam. It means a lot."

Woolsey joined them a moment later from wherever he'd been lurking. "Dr. Zelenka almost ran me over as I left the elevator. I take it from his excitement the meeting went well?"

"You could say that," John said lazily. "We're getting our base and a bonus ship."

Woolsey raised his eyebrows. "Do tell. That changes the complexion of things."

"It sure does. I'm getting all sorts of ideas."

"If you're thinking an alliance with the Travelers is now a possibility..."

John pointed. "Exactly that."

"I'll leave you two to conspire," Carter said, and she gave John a pat on the arm. "Congratulations again, John."

"Thanks for everything, General."

Sam's lips quirked in a smile. "Never gets old hearing that."

"I'll bet it doesn't."

John and Radek packed up and got beamed back to Atlantis—another sure sign the brass held them in favor right now. It sure was a new experience.

"Did you get through to Dr. Kusanagi?"

"I did, thank goodness. No one is better with onboard computer systems, except maybe for McKay."

John's heart gave a hollow thump. He would be leaving Rodney behind. Except Rodney had already left, and John could no longer pretend the situation was only temporary. He had to regain something of what he'd lost, because Atlantis wasn't a home anymore. It hadn't been for some time.

"See you later, Radek. Good job in there."

"And you as well, Colonel."
John nodded his thanks and went back to his quarters to begin planning. They only had three months to pull together the personnel and equipment necessary for the new base.

He'd barely settled behind his desk before an email popped in his box from General O'Neill: their new, shiny ship was one that was already being outfitted. John balked a little when he discovered it was being christened *The Phoenix*. But he'd never been a pessimist, and the future was already here and loads better than the crappy timeline that almost was—Teyla, Ronon, Jennifer, and Sam were alive, and Michael was long dead beneath the waves.

But now that the operation had been approved, John had a task that couldn't be put off any longer. He pulled the open-ended ticket from his top drawer and made the call.

"Thank God, you're here. Please, please, take him somewhere and sedate him," Jennifer said, dragging John by the arm toward the baggage claim. "I have plenty of good drugs."

"Hah," John said. "That bad?"

"He won't shut up. If he's not bitching about the declassification goons pushing back, he's kvetching about the house. Nothing satisfies him. My dad threatened to drive him out into Death Valley and leave him there—not to his face!" She laughed uneasily. "My dad likes Rodney, I swear. He's just a little overprotective."

"Uh-huh. So you want me to..."

"Take him off my hands? For the day? You're always so good at calming him down."

"I'm...? Right. So you're handing me a cranky McKay."

Jennifer dimpled. "I'll have dinner waiting when you guys get back. Big, juicy ribs and ice-cold beer."

"Ribs?" See, the real problem was how much he liked Jennifer.

"Of course. What do you take me for?"

"A sucker. I can eat my weight in ribs."

"I know. I remember the rodeo on P11-815."

"P11-851."

"Damn it!" She punched him in the arm just as the sliding doors opened and they stepped out into the Nevada heat. "Your memory is amazing."

"Finally. What took you guys so long?" Rodney stood there in all his tropical shirt-clad glory, his pale thighs poking out of a pair of cargo shorts. John was struck momentarily by the vivid reality of him, in all his ridiculous, pink-faced glory. The temptation to step up and hug the crap out of him was painfully strong, like a heavy bar weighing on John's chest.

Fortunately, Rodney opened his mouth. "I can't believe you two. Do you realize the heat I'm contending with? Plus, the parking control officer has been dogging my heels every two minutes, even though I told her plainly you were just inside the baggage claim area. I even showed her your texts! But no! They want to just brush me along. I'm a taxpayer! I'm a legal resident of this rattlesnake-infested state!"
"Hello to you, too," John said, stepping forward to slap Rodney on the shoulder. "Pop the trunk for me?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Hello. Took you long enough to come visit." Rodney pressed the remote and popped open the trunk of the honest-to-God minivan behind him. It was a crap shade of aquamarine, as if to add to the insult. John stutter-stepped before slinging his bag in the back and climbing in the sliding side door.

Bench seats. Oh joy.

"Hello to you, too," John said as Rodney and Jennifer got in the front. "I like the shirt. It's very...festive."

"Mock away," Rodney replied. "You'll be drowning in your own sweat in that black shirt."

"I like black. It reflects my soul."

Jennifer snorted. Rodney rolled his eyes at John in the rear-view mirror. Everything was suddenly completely right in John's universe. And he had two whole days before he had to come clean he was going to Pegasus. One last dream before reveille.

They asked John how things were going on Atlantis, and he kept his answers vague, not wanting to tell them how dusty and abandoned the old girl was, her halls empty and dim, how he could feel her energy dying without people to light her with purpose.

"So," he said after they'd been on the road for a while, John purposely keeping his mouth off Rodney's driving skills, "when do I finally get to see this famous house?"

"Oh, the house, the house. Don't get him started," Jennifer said.

"Too late! It's a disaster. Only the indoor hot tub is working; the other is a swamp of despair. I swear to God, there are alligators, John. Or maybe piranha. We should put one of those wooden signs up: If You Like Your Toes, Do Not Dip In."

"That's number one on his list," Jennifer interjected. "Never mind that the dishwasher doesn't work. We're cleaning one plate at a time."

"All I need is my coffee cup, anyway," Rodney said airily. "And I can just rinse that."

"And we order in, mostly. Neither of us cooks worth a damn, and I'm too busy at the ER to clean up or to egg Rodney into cleaning up. We're a mess. Sorry if you end up eating out of containers the whole time you're here."

"Not like I'm used to anything else," John said. "Don't worry about me. This is supposed to be a fun visit."

"Having you around is fun? You're nothing but trouble."

"If you're finished flirting with my girlfriend," Rodney said acidly, "we're here." He pulled them into a paved driveway, long and wide and curving up to a broad, tan house with white columns framing a pair of tall doors. It looked ponderous and shiny and a little inelegant. A lot like Rodney, actually. Just a bit overbearing and gauche and too damned lovable.

John smiled to himself as he got out of the car.
"What're you grinning about?"

"Nothing. Nice place," John said, hauling his duffle out of the trunk. "Hey, is that a lawn tractor? Nice."

Rodney sniffed. "Not that I ever get to ride it. We have a very nice landscaper, Mahalia. She's an undergrad in architecture at UNLV." Jennifer unlocked the front door, which had a knocker shaped like an eagle.

"You have an architect mowing your lawn. Somehow I'm not surprised." John followed Jennifer inside and down into a sunken living room area. He dropped his duffle bag in front of one of the overstuffed couches there and sat down. "Nice digs." Propping his feet up on his bag, he lay back. A ball of fluff came to nuzzle his fingers, followed by a bouncing, ungainly pup with big paws. John wrestled him to the floor, and Groucho gave a bark of excitement and dashed away.

Rodney crossed his arms and stared down at John. "Can I get you anything, your royal highness?"

"A beer would be nice. It was an ugly flight. The kid sitting behind me kept dropping his dinosaur on my head."

"He probably thought your hair was a primordial jungle."

John scored the point with a finger. "Beeeer."

Jennifer sounded remorseful. "I don't think we have any."

"What, no cheap beer? I'm seriously hurt." John rested his hand on his chest. "It's like you don't know me at all."

"This isn't Atlantis," Rodney said, and it stung a little to hear him say it so derisively. "We can just go buy some at the corner store if we want."

"What a great idea," Jennifer said, giving John a significant look. "Better yet, find a bar instead and give me time to tidy up."

"Sounds good. Let's find a bar and hang out a little."

This time, John kept his eyes off the road and on Rodney. Being this close to him after so long was like touching a live wire. Rodney was right there, quick hands, round shoulders, atrocious shirt and all. John licked his lips.

"What? What're you staring at?" Rodney said, and John turned away.

"Nothing. You look like...it suits you. Nevada."

"Yeah, well, don't let these good looks fool you. This place is a hell pit. The heat would stun a scorpion, but the A/C dries out my skin and sinuses. My subordinates couldn't find their asses with both hands targeted via homing beacons. And the house—I just can't get it right. If it's not the lawn going to crab grass, it's the nap of the carpet or the weird clicking sound in the bedroom I cannot track down no matter what instrumentation I use. I have no idea what's causing it. It's either the smoke detector going wonky or a death beetle in the wall, take your pick." Rodney flicked on his indicator and set them on a four-lane highway surrounded by assorted diners, laundry mats, doughnut shops, auto stores, and florists on either side of the road. "Ah, the modern conveniences," Rodney said wryly.
"Just take us to the nearest bar."

"The nearest bar is called The Cockpit," Rodney said. "I'm not sure that's exactly what you're after at this moment. I might be wrong, of course." In addition to the expected sarcasm, there was a faint edge of something in Rodney's voice John didn't want to identify. They didn't talk about this stuff for good reason. Having quickies with random guys was more Rodney's thing, or used to be. That wasn't John's thing.

John, well. John just sucked at romance in general; falling in love with people who weren't into him was a great example.

"Am I wrong?" Rodney broke into his musings.

Now, that sounded more like Rodney's usual envy over John's mythical popularity that only Rodney believed in.

"What I want," John said, "is a beer," giving him a challenging look, and Rodney raised his chin in response.

"Fine. Just don't bellyache if the drinks are overpriced."

They were, a little, but the place was clean and the bar stocked some excellent drafts, and it had been a good long while since John had a fresh beer on tap, so he forked over the cash without complaint.

The place was almost empty, it being early yet, so they had their pick of seating. Rodney found them a booth in the corner and took the opposite bench, surreptitiously flipping open one of the SGC's anti-spy devices and setting it next to the salt shaker, an incongruous sight.

John took a deep sip of his beer and made a happy sound.

Rodney snorted. "Honestly," he said. "I should have installed a tap for you and your marines a long time ago. It would have earned me more points than any other, uh, hardware."

"Are you talking about the time you hooked up the big Ancient display on the observation deck to a gaming console? Because that beat everything as far as the marines were concerned."

"And you?" Rodney's voice had dropped, so John had difficulty hearing it over the music and the murmur of the light afternoon crowd.

He leaned over and said, "Me? I have this thing for warships."

He timed it perfectly. Rodney snorted out his beer, foam bubbling from his lips, while John laughed at him.

"You are so predictable! It's ridiculously Pavlovian."

"What can I say?" Christ, John was going to miss this. "I can't help it." His voice went a little rough, and Rodney shot him a look from underneath his ridiculously long lashes.

Dangerous. This was dangerous. What the hell was John doing? He sat back and said casually, "Maybe I can help out with your house issues."

"I'm not sure the house is the problem. Maybe I just miss Atlantis." Rodney's voice was heavy.

John swallowed. "Atlantis isn't the same anymore, anyway." He took another sip of his beer to ease the ache in his throat. "Nothing is the same."
"Well, this is a fun outing. Let's do it again sometime."

"Sorry to be a downer."

"What is it with you, anyway? You've been giving me Old Yeller face ever since you arrived."

"Old Yeller face?" John shook his head.

"You're not usually like this. And I say this as a man who completely disregards the condition of other people. But you're not your usual self-satisfied, smug self."

"Gee, thanks, Rodney." John spun his pint glass. "I told you— Atlantis isn't the same. We're running on a skeleton crew; it's like living on a desert island."

"Only with two dozen marines."

"And Colonel Lorne." John tapped the table, his heart beating fast. "So...Radek and I decided to work up a plan, with Carter's help. We submitted it to the IOC a while back, and they went for it."

"What type of plan?" Rodney said suspiciously.

And, hell, John wasn't supposed to do this so soon. He'd barely held out an hour. "We're going back to Pegasus. We're taking a BC-304 and a ton of naquadah generators and we're setting up a gamma site to coordinate intel with the Travelers, and we're going to start generating a passel of special drones to do surveillance around all the occupied planets of Pegasus. We're going to fight back. And kick ass." John finished off his beer and set his glass down before daring to look up at Rodney's stunned face.

There were a few long seconds of blissful, shocked silence before Rodney exploded.

"You're going to what? What on Earth—no, forgive me—what in the vast unknowable reaches of intergalactic space makes you imagine you can take on the Wraith with nothing but a single ship, a bunch of, what...surveillance drones, and the feeble mental workings of a vodka-soused, frazzle-headed, glorified plumber!"

John coughed. "Uh. We're taking Miko, too. And Carson wanted to tag along, so..."

"Oh, my God. You bunch of ninnies. You'll get yourselves all killed without me, you realize that? What in blazes are you thinking trying to do something like this without my help? This is crazy talk!"

John was starting to get a little peeved. "Not according to Carter, O'Neill, and the IOA. And, hey, I like to think we're competent adults, here, so—"

"Yes, of course; I'm sure you can do your own laundry, but this is Pegasus. Do I have to remind you, it tried to turn you into a walking bug? That in trying to survive the Wraith, you, personally, are responsible for no less than three nuclear explosions in the last five years?"

"Oh, so says Mr. I Blow Up Whole Solar Systems." John seethed.

"Well. That was an accident."

"That makes it all right, I guess."

"And we're back to that. You'll never forgive me for it, I guess." Rodney's face crumpled.

"Hey, hey, what? No, Rodney..." John reached out and nudged Rodney's hand with his own.
"Where did that come from?"

"You're leaving me. Not because of that, obviously. I'm just being stupid."

"A little bit," John said, poking gentle fun. "You left first, anyway."

"I did, didn't I?" Rodney said. "Wonder why it doesn't feel that way."

"Because you're the one that left." Crap, John wished he hadn't said that part out loud, but it was done. Rodney gave him a considering look.

"I don't want you to go."

"I have to." John looked down. "There's nothing left here. I'm sorry, but it's this or fight space pirates."

"Doesn't that sound like more fun than the Wraith?"

John gave Rodney a patient look.


John had to reach for his beer.

"God!" Rodney said. "I still can't believe Radek didn't say anything to me. That fink."

"The word 'classified' means nothing to you, does it?"

Rodney glared. "Of course it does! But I'm...I'm—"

John winced. "You're not stationed on Atlantis anymore, Rodney."

Rodney dropped his eyes, his lower lip pouting out.

John added hastily, "But as soon as I could, I got an exemption so I could tell you. You can even review the specifications; I brought them with me."

"Great. Just super." Rodney sighed heavily and finished up his own beer. "We'd better get back. Jenn has a big dinner planned in your honor. Which means lots of dishes to wash beforehand, or we're eating out of containers again, because the dishwasher is still on the fritz."

"Say, wasn't one of your degrees in mechanical engineering?" John waved his thanks to the bartender as they passed.

The bartender winked outrageously, and Rodney groaned, "See? Everywhere we go!"

John waited until they stepped outside to say, "How do you know he wasn't winking at you?"

The stuttered denial was cute, but the blush was even cuter. Plus, Rodney was so thrown he let John drive them back to the house and only complained a little about rising insurance premium rates and idiot Colonels who thought they were NASCAR drivers.

John volunteered to wash dishes in order to let Rodney break the big news to Jennifer while she ordered dinner. For one thing, it gave Rodney the chance to let off some steam about John leaving for Pegasus. For another, it gave John some time to work on the dishwasher.
For all that Rodney was a genius in many things, he hadn't seemed to notice how important the broken dishwasher was to Jennifer. She might joke about it, but it obviously bothered her that a problem Rodney could solve in his sleep was still an issue months later. John tried to bring it up during the car ride home but ran against the obstinate wall of superiority Rodney liked to throw up at times: "The problem is so much more complicated than you can possibly comprehend, Sheppard."

Except it was a freaking GE dishwasher, not an Ancient transporter.

John hunted down Rodney's extensive toolkit and got to work. Jennifer had mentioned it wouldn't drain properly. That sounded like either a clog in the drain path, or the drain pump needed replacing. When John opened up the toolbox, he discovered Rodney had already purchased a new drain pump. It sat there waiting like a guilty secret.

John got to work. By the time Rodney had stopped ranting in the other room and Jennifer had finished her reasonable, soothing replies, John had his feet up and the dishwasher was completing its cycle.

"Do I hear the dishwasher?" Jennifer said, coming in with a broad smile on her pretty face.

"Yeah. Rodney got the part in so I thought I'd swap it out."

"Thank you so much, John! Rodney, you didn't tell me you'd figured it out!" Jennifer turned just as Rodney came in.

"Yes."

John got to work. By the time Rodney had stopped ranting in the other room and Jennifer had finished her reasonable, soothing replies, John had his feet up and the dishwasher was completing its cycle.

"Thank you both so much!" Jennifer gave Rodney a huge hug and a sweet kiss, then swooped down on John before he could move and hugged his shoulders. "You'll be missed, John." She tried to pat down his hair. He could've told her it was a waste of time.

"Thanks, but I—I have to do this. I can't leave us undefended."

"I get it."

"I got it."

"I left unfinished business out there, myself." She brightened up a moment later. "So, listen: dinner's on me. We got too busy talking but I'll put in the order now. You two go relax. John, Rodney is obsessed with the new Tomb Raider. I can't imagine why," she said drolly.

"Sounds like fun," John said, kicking to his feet and following Rodney out into the den.

"What is with you fixing up the dishwasher?" Rodney said, rounding on John. "Are you trying to make me look bad?"

"What? No, I wouldn't do that. It just seemed like you were putting it off for some reason."

"Oh, was I?"

John crossed his arms. "You know you were. How come?"

"I wasn't! I just diagnosed it and got the part!"

"There was dust all over it."

Rodney's chin got a stubborn edge. "It's a dusty toolbox."
"Right. So, no reason you were punishing Jennifer for anything. Like not being home enough to rub your dick or something?"

"Don't be crude."

"Buddy, I'm getting tired of playing marriage counselor. And in a few months I'm not going to be around, anyway."

"Don't remind me," Rodney said, turning to plop down on the overstuffed sofa. "I can't believe you're leaving. And that you betrayed me with that Czech bastard."

"Yeah, sorry about that, but you were busy picking out shag."

Rodney grimaced at him. "Give me the specs on these special surveillance stealth drones. I don't like the idea of you out there without adequate defenses. I'll improve the design."

The automatic assumption he could was just so very Rodney. John smiled. "You'll have to sign the NDA," he warned.

"Oh no. Not another NDA." Rodney waved his hand. "Send it along. I'll make some time to help tighten up the specs."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot." John's chest hurt. "But make some time for Jennifer, too. Because if you guys don't get your shit straight, it's going to fall apart on you."

"I know. I know. I'm failing again." Rodney gave him an agonized look.

God, John couldn't take it. "Don't think of it that way. You guys are in this together, okay? She's not the enemy."

But when Jennifer got paged back to the hospital in the middle of dinner, the grim expression on Rodney's face told another story.

Jennifer had an afternoon shift on Sunday, so they went out for brunch on Sunday to say goodbye before John's flight out.

"You'd better be careful over there," Jennifer said. "And we'll expect a proof of life once a week with each databurst."

"You got it." John countered Rodney's grab for his last slice of bacon with a strategic fork jab. They clashed for a moment before John snatched the bacon with his other hand and took a big honking bite. "Mmm," he said, and Rodney scowled.

"Rude."

"Hey, I gotta eat Earth bacon while I can."

"We both know Pegasus fakon is tastier, anyway."

"And nitrate free," Jennifer said. "I know the marines still wish we could start up a supply line."

"Once the Wraith are toast," John vowed.

Rodney made a face, but John still believed it was possible. It had to be.
They finished breakfast and got back on the road in plenty of time to make his flight.

"Thanks for breakfast and for the hospitality," John said as they pulled up to his airline. "You guys don't have to get out."

"Don't be stupid," Rodney said roughly. "They can stick their parking tickets up their wazoos."

John choked. "Now there's a word you don't hear that often."

"Unless you're me," Jennifer said, unbuckling and joining John on the sidewalk. She patted him on the chest. "You have everything? Ticket? ID?"

"Yeah. Got it all right here." John held a hand over the pocket of his duffle bag. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and he looped an arm around her shoulders to give her a hug.

Rodney came around the front of the car and joined them, and suddenly John realized this was it. He might never see Rodney McKay again. Stepping away from Jennifer, John reached out blindly and captured Rodney in a raw embrace, all too aware he might be giving too much away, but helpless to stop himself. The black of space between the galaxies awaited him, and the Wraith beyond, and if this was it, he was going to remember this—Rodney's sturdy body and strong arms, the scent of coffee, red Sharpies, and Rodney's favorite fabric softener, and the sound of his voice as he croaked out a faint protest when John squeezed him a little too hard.

"Sorry," John said, stepping back. "Gonna miss you, buddy." He wasn't sure if he'd covered okay or not, but neither Rodney nor Jennifer said a word; they just returned his wave as John raised a hand in farewell and stepped through the sliding doors.

No more looking back.

Over the next weeks, John stuck to a brutal schedule to prepare for the deployment. Maybe a little of his urgency was to divert his misery over leaving the people he cared about, but truthfully, there was too damned much to do, and if it weren't for Lt. Cole's razor-sharp attention to details and scary skill with Excel spreadsheets, the new expedition would be doomed before it began.

John gave up pretending not to be The Man and temporarily took over the main office. The central location was useful, but it was still just inaccessible enough that people had to be determined to interrupt him. Which Kayla was, often enough that she caught him wearing his glasses the second week.

To her credit, beyond a perfectly arched eyebrow and a smirk that would rival Teyla's best, she didn't say a word, but Lorne had something to say at lunch about "Too much paperwork sure can ruin a pilot's vision, don't you think, Colonel?"

"Fuck you most sincerely, Colonel," John responded, taking another bite of his sandwich.

"I'm just saying, all those hours behind a desk can make guy a far-sighted."

"You want to see 'em, is that it? Would that shut you up?"

"Oh, yeah. That would do it."

"Well, tough shit," John said, and dumped his crust on his plate before standing up. "Maybe you can pay your spy for a picture."
Lorne's laughter followed him out of the mess.

John was going through a stack of transfer forms as high as his elbow when his phone rang. The caller ID was Jennifer's, and he wavered for a ring before picking up.

"Hey, Jenn."

"John. How're you doing?"

"All right." John leaned back. "Just processing my hundredth AF458."

"Are you wearing your glasses?"

"Yes. And you'd better be glad you're not on speaker, wise-ass. What can I do you for?"

Jennifer cleared her throat. John sighed.

"What's he done this time?"

"He won't come out of his study! He's been in there for the past two weeks living on Cheetos and Red Bulls."

"Well, you know how he gets when he's working on a paper."

"This isn't work!" Jennifer took a slow breath and said, more calmly. "It's your fault, you know. He's obsessed with the idea you're going to kamikaze a Wraith hive the first moment you're back in Pegasus."

"Oh." John scratched his jaw. "I guess it is my fault. He asked me for some specs and I gave them to him. Just...ride it out. Maybe lay some kibble outside his door and see if that works."

Jennifer snorted. "He'll come out eventually, I suppose. It would help if you called more. I know you're busy, but..."

"Yeah." John swallowed and said hastily. "How've you been doing?"

"Good! I love my job." She sounded really happy. "I eventually kicked all the dick-swingers in the balls and now I've got the ER running like clockwork."

"Funny how that happens. I'm proud of you, Jenn. Not that I—" John smacked himself in the forehead. "That sounded condescending, sorry."

Jennifer laughed. "Nah. I'm blushing. Thanks, John."

John's desk phone lit up. "Listen, I have to get back to work. Don't worry about Rodney. He goes down a rabbit hole sometimes but he'll come out soon enough."

"Yeah. I guess I'll have to get used to it. Later, John."

John hung up and got back to work, a worry nagging at the back of his mind.

John didn't have time to breathe these days. It was less than two months before departure. He finished handing off Atlantis operations to Lorne and started spending more time outfitting The Phoenix and memorizing the specifications of his new ship. It started to dawn on him he was going
to command this ship. He was going to be a starship captain.

"Captain Kirk!" The memory made John smile with a painful stab of nostalgia. He looked at the phone, but shook his head. There was no looking back.

A week later, Cole stepped onto the Phoenix's bridge with a clipboard in hand.

"Colonel Talhouni, Colonel Sheppard, Director Woolsey has arrived on board."

"Thanks, Cole. You got his office set up like I asked?" John knew Woolsey wouldn't be happy without his office supplies.

"Yes, sir. And the humidor is waiting on his desk." She made a face.

"Don't worry, Major. He won't be smoking on board."

"Thank goodness. Nothing worse than a stinky cigar."

"Show him to his office and deliver his gear to his quarters, then tell him I'd like to see him once he's settled in."

"Will do, sir."

John went back to his office to dig through old AARs. Woolsey showed up a little while later, escorted in by Cole.

"Director Woolsey."

"Richard, please. Or Dick."


"Very nice. Very nice, indeed. Thanks for the cigar box, although Major Cole made it very clear there was to be no smoking aboard due to safety concerns."

John turned to hide his expression. "She's a very conscientious officer."

"I'm sure," Woolsey said dryly. "So. Rumor has it the new power source might be able to cut our time in hyperspace."

"The engineers are working on it."

"And to think it used to take six weeks to cross the Atlantic." Woolsey produced a small box and held it out. "A gift for you." John took it and opened it. It held an expensive-looking pen. "For signing important papers," Woolsey said. "I have a feeling you have more than a few of them to put ink to in these final six weeks."

"I do. Thanks, Richard." John closed the box and set it on his desk.

"I also have the analysis you requested on M21-977 and the governing body there. The locals call it Olvania."

"Yeah, that's it: Olvania. I can never remember. When was the last time we talked to Councilors Mara and Eldred?"

"It's been almost two years. Hopefully, the Wraith haven't attacked in that time, since there was no
"But now, Zelenka might have the solution with the Mark IV naquadah generators."

"Actually, I passed Dr. Zelenka in the corridor. Apparently, Dr. McKay has chipped in with the solution."

"Really?" John hid his surprise. "That's...great. We intend to offer it to the Olvanians in conjunction with the usual trade items. They don't engage in much trade, as their gate is far distant from the Tower and that town's agricultural center. Hopefully, they'll be game in allowing us to use the gate for our gamma site. We'll also grant trader permits and GDOs for access to the gate so they can establish commerce with other planets if they wish to. We hope to engage with trade with them and the Athosians now living on the planet."

"Excellent. I hope they accept."

"Yeah, well—we still have three other back-up planets under consideration. M7G-677, the one with the Logan's Run kids, that's choice number two. They're agrarian but strongly self-governing, have a good relationship with the old expedition, and their gate is distant from the colonies and not in use by the inhabitants. Pick number three is P3W-517, the Ascension planet. The gate is annexable since the power supply to the dilation field ran out a while ago. There are structures and fields available, but no agrarian community."

"All three are sound prospects. Your fourth?"

"M8L-569, the drone moon. It's not really preferred, since we don't want to draw attention to it. But we do want to protect the base as a resource, so we'll have to build up its defenses, anyway."

"All right. First stop will be Olvania, I take it. I'll start drafting a contact agenda."

"Terrific. Make yourself comfortable, Richard, and let Major Cole know if you need any help with anything."

"I will. Thanks, Colonel. I look forward to embarking on this new endeavor with you." Woolsey held out hand, and John shook it.

Six weeks, and still way too much to do. John went back to his quarters and started sifting through his email. A message popped up from Rodney that had him radioing Zelenka.

"Radek, did you see this email just in from Rodney?"

"I did not. Is he causing more trouble today? Impressive."

"Doesn't look like trouble to me... Come to my office so we can discuss."

"I'm on my way."

John re-read the email while he waited.

To: jsheppard@us.af.mil
From: mckay@a51.sgc.gov
Subject: Drone Spec

Sheppard: I used your public key to encrypt this document, so you damned well better still be on the same laptop I gave you, otherwise you can't read it. Call me if you can't. Ha, you won't be able to read this to know.
I'll call you anyway, because Jenn is mad I haven't left the jacuzzi today, and I need to explain the eureka thing.

Okay, so, you'll see when you read the specs I have added a very important feature—VERY IMPORTANT—in addition to miniaturizing the cloak emitter even further to make room for it. This might be a game-changer in Pegasus. If you can set up your network around the occupied planets as planned, well... Zelenka should plotz.

RM++

John opened up the specification and accompanying diagrams and had just puzzled out the device snuggled in next to the cloaking device when Radek came charging into his office without knocking.

"Kurva! This man is brilliant! Every time he does something like this I forgive him being such a kokot."

"Is this what I think it is?" John wasn't sure but it sure seemed like——

"It is a homing device, yes." Zelenka shook his head in amazement. "Rodney has turned the drones into stealth mines that will home in on the Wraith ships' drive signatures."

"Holy shit." John's heart gave a crazy thump. "That would change everything."

"Yes. If we do as planned and seed the orbits of as many occupied worlds as we can——"

"Using Woolsey's contacts within the Coalition——"

"And with the assistance of your friend Larrin and the other Travelers to lay the mines——"

"We can turn all the feeding grounds into Wraith killing grounds. They'll never get near any people to cull them."

They shared a look.

"I have to call Rodney," Radek said. "We must make some improvements and finalize this specification and the alterations to the drone manufacturing device before I leave."

"You do that; I'll talk to Woolsey about how we can coordinate with the Travelers and the Coalition."

To: rmckay@a51.sgc.gov
From: jsheppard@us.af.mil
Subject: Re: Drone Spec

You maniac. Always saving my ass. Thanks.

This is amazing. This changes everything. I got no other words.

js

Rodney descended on The Phoenix's engineering crew like the Lord of Hosts, causing a whole bunch of bowing and scraping and whining. Lots of whining. John sat back and watched, experiencing a painful déjà vu despite the different setting, the hum of engines being tested, and the cramped, low ceiling of the upper deck overhead.
It was still so familiar: Rodney’s irritable demands for "Aren’t you finished with that induction value, Dr. Khatri? Do I have to do everything myself?"

"It’s not as simple as measuring a piece of copper," Khatri said under his breath. "These are crystal matrices and the conversion rate depends on—"

"Yes, I am aware, since I designed the LCR meter to do the reading," McKay said, coming up behind the man and apparently startling the bejesus out of him.

John covered a laugh.

Rodney snapped his fingers. "Now, if you don’t have the value, could I at least get the reading?" He slid a glance over at John. John realized at least part of this was for his benefit, and he grinned outright.

"Aw, give the guy a break, Rodney," John drawled as Khatri fumbled with a calculator. "Not everyone can calculate logarithms on the fly."

"I’ll buy him a slide rule," Rodney said dryly.

"Here!" Khatri said, shoving a slip of paper at Rodney, who glanced at it briefly before handing it over to John.

John raised an eyebrow and looked over the calculation. The logarithmic conversion looked right, even if the impedance was impressively low.

"I know," Rodney said in answer to his look. "These crystals are truly remarkable. If they were a little easier to replicate and a little less fragile, I’d be pushing to revolutionize the electronics industry. But right now I have enough on my plate."

"But you came out here to help us get launched, anyway." John slouched against the doorway, suddenly feeling the weight of the new expedition on his shoulders. God, they were leaving for Pegasus without Rodney. It seemed impossible.

"Well, I could hardly let you leave orbit without giving your engines and systems a once-over. This is your first starship command, after all." Rodney’s cheeks were a little pink, but John decided to let it go.

"Thanks, Rodney."

"Hmph."

"We’re going to miss you out there," John said, his voice a little rough, and that was it, that was the full limit of what he would dare to say or lay on Rodney, so he turned toward the crystal tray Rodney had pulled out for inspection. "But rumor has it you’ve increased our engine efficiency using the new power source so our time in hyperspace has been cut in half."

"Ha! Rumors exaggerate, as always. The trip should take about ten days." Rodney looked a heartbeat away from buffing his nails.

"Holy crap. That’s amazing, Rodney."

"It is, isn’t it? Ellis and Caldwell are demanding the same thing."

"But you powered up my baby first. Thanks, McKay."
"Yes, well. It's a good ship." Rodney turned toward the tray and used his light wand for a final adjustment before closing it up. "It deserves the best."

John swallowed thickly around words he couldn't possibly say. He settled instead for, "She's not Atlantis, but she'll do."

"Especially with what Zelenka and I have planned for the drones. Be on time for the meeting at two p.m."

"You mean fourteen hundred."

"Oh, shut up."

"What is our biggest problem with the Wraith?" Rodney said to the assembled group.

"Besides the mass murder and the poor fashion choices?"

Rodney ignored John and waved a hand at the large monitor he'd been fussing with for the past twenty minutes. A familiar diagram appeared. John identified the reddish clusters of Wraith hive ships and the arcing pattern of travel crisscrossing haphazardly between planets. It looked like a someone had dropped a plate of angel-haired pasta over a star map.

"The problem, Colonel Smartmouth, is we can't predict where they will strike next. We have minimal forces to bring to bear, and we need to have some sort of warning to protect fragile populations, let alone to fight back. But that's where Zelenka's drone network comes in, and where, if we play our cards right, we can successfully strike back at the Wraith without risk."

John's breathing picked up.

"I like the sound of that," Caldwell said, adding to the approving murmurs. "But how?"

"Starting with the planets targeted most often for culling, we mine the occupied planets with cloaked drones that act as both an early warning system and a defense. Cloaked, so their little trick of flinging a bunch of asteroids at the planet won't work—the drones will be programmed to evade any non-threats and simply drop back into place and await the targets with the correct signatures."

"Cloaked! Can that be done?" Caldwell said.

"Yes, with the recent advancements Zelenka has made in miniaturizing cloaking technology. It's not sufficient to make them invisible to the naked eye, but certainly in space, at their size; and they will be indiscernible to instruments, which is the important thing."

"But don't Ancient drones need to be guided by a chair or a ship?" Ellis said.

"Not if we program them to seek out the telltale energy signature of Wraith hive and cruiser sublight and hyperdrive engines. They are completely unique—put out radiation that is altogether different from Travelers' and Ancient ships. And the Wraith ships can be destroyed before they ever release a dart."

Despite having read about it in Rodney's email beforehand, hearing Rodney say it out loud made John stare at Rodney's flushed face, at the gleaming blue of his eyes, and feel real hope for the first time. His other reactions he put aside as totally inappropriate, but, Jesus. Rodney McKay, bringing the solutions whenever John needed them.
"So, a Wraith hive comes out of hyperspace and approaches an occupied planet, and a bunch of these drones immediately fly out to meet it?" John said.

"While two signal drones are busy notifying the planet of the attack." Rodney raised one palm. "I know what you're thinking—" John very much doubted he did. "—but we're not leaving any security holes, here. The red telephone, as it were, will be a closed system that simply lights up when the drone sends the bat signal. At the slightest tampering, it will self-destruct. It's a black box. We're not trusting in government officials to protect the device, although you'd think they would."

"So, you plan to spread these drones around every inhabited planet," Caldwell said disbelievingly.

"Not every one. Just the ones we know through the intelligence network the Wraith are attacking. And not us alone, Colonel," Woolsey said. "That's where the Coalition comes in. With the help of the Travelers and the other populations with spaceflight, yes."

"And how many of those are there?"

"More than you'd think," John said. "I'm only worried about the Wraith response. Their best strength is communication; as soon as a couple of hives get blown up by our stealth drones, they'll cotton on pretty quick. What's to stop them from doing something to disguise the signature of their drives once they figure out the score?"

"I...ah. Well, hmm." Rodney stared at him intently before snapped his fingers. "We'll simply have to make the drones take a signature update. But! It will have to be within a reasonable range, to avoid the Wraith attempting to hijack the drones to use against our own ships. That will have to be hardcoded for security, along with a self-destruct code we can signal if necessary. We'll use a rolling code—similar to the algorithm used by key fobs, actually. With a high bit of encryption, the technology is practically unbreakable."

"And if they do?"

Rodney shrugged. "They still can't find the drones to do anything with them, but if they did, each drone would have a different code. It would be like stealing a car—it doesn't get you the remote, and even if it did, that remote wouldn't get you another car's remote."

"Okay. So, we can control the drones remotely, blow them up if necessary, retarget them to a certain degree, but not to a completely different type of ship." John rubbed his hands together.

"Right."

Caldwell took over. "What if the Wraith come up with a completely new kind of ship?"

"We'll just manufacture new drones. But I hope they'll be in pretty poor shape by then." Rodney rocked back and forth, looking smug.

John kept his expression blank at the inadvertent 'we.' "I think we have a plan," he said.

"Amazing job, Rodney," John said as he walked Rodney to the mess for a terrible cup of ship's coffee before Rodney's scheduled beam-out.

"Thank you, yes, I know. But thanks." Rodney face was still flushed with success. "I had to, you know? I'm sorry, but I couldn't let it rest." He rubbed his hands together.

"You might just have won the war against the Wraith, so don't apologize, if that's what you're
John wrapped a quick arm around Rodney's shoulders and gave him a fast squeeze before releasing him. He was warm, and he leaned into John as they walked toward the mess.

John straightened and cleared his throat. "How're things going?" he said, trying to keep it light.

Rodney, as always, saw right through him. "She's pissed as hell at me. She says I'm too obsessed and not paying enough attention to 'cultivating our relationship.' Whatever that means. And then she goes off and does a double shift at the ER out of spite; I mean, seriously? Who is she to talk? What how the hell am I supposed to cultivate our relationship? What a pile of manure. In fact!" Rodney snapped his fingers. "Maybe manure would help! It has cultivating agents."

"Rodney..."

"No, I'm sorry, John. But ever since we left Atlantis, nothing is working like it did. We're like two broken pieces that don't fit."

John winced and looked down at his coffee. As oblivious as Rodney was, John had a feeling Jennifer knew what the delta was. But if their relationship needed John in the middle, they were SOL. He was leaving.

God, he really was leaving. He looked up again at Rodney's anxious expression, at the sharp dent between his eyebrows and the downward slant of his mouth, and John badly wanted to reach out. How many other chances would he get?

"Sometimes you've just got to keep trying," John said, his voice rough. "Till the edges wear away, I guess."

"Lies, lies. He was leaving, and Rodney would be alone again. Like after Katie, but John wouldn’t be there with a sympathy six-pack and a shoulder bump. And even if Rodney never, ever turned his way; even if Rodney had no problem getting with Gall or Grodin or that repulsive barkeep from M6D-498 with the food in his beard, but somehow found John fell under the bar, John would never hold it against him or let it touch their friendship."

That wasn't what friends did.

"Yeah, I guess," Rodney said. "I just thought it would be different. I got the gal. It should be easy."

John tried to hold back a snort.

"Oh, laugh it up. I'm sure this is the part where you say nothing worth having is easy? Tra-la-la." Rodney spun his finger in the air.

"Nah. I'm sure some things are easy. Some relationships, on the other hand..." John let it trail off.

"You've just got to want it enough to practice."

"Right, right. Want it." Rodney looked down into his coffee before chugging it back. He glanced over at the coffee machine, but John checked the viewport and caught his hand.

"We're almost in position over North America."

"So soon?" Rodney's lips tightened. "Well, on that note—"

"Right. Rodney, thanks. Thanks for everything. We're going to be all right, thanks to you." They walked over to the beaming station.

"You'd better be." Rodney shook a finger at him. "I've invested a lot in your wellbeing."
John grinned, touched. "Don't I know it."

If Rodney's return smile was less caustic than usual, John didn't call him on it. He wanted to hug Rodney again, but that wasn't in the cards this time. The airman at the controls waved Rodney over to the marked off spot, and John offered his hand.

Rodney look down, pausing a moment before taking it and shaking it briefly.

"Well. I suppose it's back to the dry heat and the even more scorching looks of my girlfriend." Rodney hugged his laptop case and stepped back.

"Take care," John said, and with a flash, Rodney was gone.

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John kept beaming back and forth between Atlantis and the Phoenix in the final weeks of preparation. He wrapped up all his affairs on Atlantis and did the hail and farewell with Lorne, who, since he was already stationed on Atlantis, organized something of a talent show with the marines, many of them getting up on the stage to dramatize some of John's most embarrassing moments in Pegasus.

So what if he tended to be a little foggy before he had his morning coffee? That was no reason for Sgt. Zhao to re-enact the time John walked into the transporter door so hard he needed his nose reset.

John had his revenge, though, by offering Lorne the ceremonial Country Captain Chicken MRE that had been carried to Pegasus and back, through various missions and soggy campaigns, ambushes, and stints in alien jail cells. It remained crumpled and uneaten, buried in the bottom right pocket of John's tattered tac vest until this very occasion, when John hauled it out and declared that in order to take command of Atlantis, Lorne was required to eat a first-year MRE to prove his worthiness.

"Thank you so much, Sir," Lorne said dryly, barely hesitating before cracking that disgusting old thing open and chowing down, the marines yelling and laughing their oorahs in support.

John was seriously impressed. Evan was a good sport.

Afterward, John went to say goodbye to the city, to drift his fingers over the walls and watch the colors glow and change in a gentle farewell, and the hollow in his guts ached like famine, cold and empty.

He tapped his radio. "Phoenix, this is Colonel Sheppard, authentication code Delta Seven Alpha Beta Niner. Beam me up."

They had six days left before takeoff. A misnomer, really: since they were already in orbit, but there was no word for "Time to beam down everyone who isn't coming with us and kick on the sublight engines." They should just call it 'beam down' and be done with it.

John was doing rounds with his tablet, updating the final checks. It was hard sleeping at night—he'd start in on his mental checklist, only to hit the bottom and start around at the top again, anxious he'd forgotten something along the way. So, having the tablet in front of him with the marks in green made him feel more secure about the whole thing, even if Cole thought he was a control freak and a bastard CO who wouldn't hand off responsibilities.

Still, if he hadn't made the rounds in Engineering himself, he might not have discovered McKay had beamed back aboard without notifying him.

"What the hell, Rodney? What are you doing back on board?"
"Oh, hi, uh, Sheppard." Rodney slid out from under the console and brushed off his hands. "I was just making some adjustments to the long-distance sensor array. I believe I've increased the amplification by three percent and an additional eighteen degrees in beam width. Quite remarkable. I don't think anyone thought to take in account the new transducers when recomputing the new array vectors. They just used the old numbers, can you believe it!"

John stared. Rodney looked a little pink-faced.

"So you thought you'd beam up and check on our sensor array? Couldn't you just email Doc Z or Kusanagi?"

"Well, of course, but you know what they say: if you want something done right..." Rodney's face was now fully flushed up to his ears.

John backed off. "Well, thanks, Rodney. Good of you. You want to grab some coffee?"

"Oh, I don't know. Looks like you have some duties of your own."


"Oh, sir, may I, please?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm handing over the document." John closed the doc just as Cole opened it for writing. Boy, was she eager. "Okay, how about some bad coffee?"

"Sounds terrific." Rodney sounded like he was being taken to the vet.

"What's up?" John put one hand on Rodney's waist, lightly guiding him toward the mess. "You sound down in the dumps."

"You're going to give me the third degree."

"No, I'm not." But he was damn well going to contact Jennifer as soon as he was free. Something wasn't right. "You don't have to make excuses to me. You want to fix up my ship, you go right ahead and do it. We have six whole days to get her square."

Rodney gave him a shifty-eyed look. "Six days. Right. Well, I thought once we finished the sensor array, I'd take a look at the Asgard beam. Do you remember when I beamed you in from that improbable range using your radio signal? It really was remarkable we got you intact—"

"It was? I don't remember Hermiod saying that."

“Well...I'd like to improve on that, of course..."

Email wasn't cutting it, so a couple of days later, John had Cole hook him up with a radio relay so he could call Jennifer directly. Not that she was any more forthcoming than Rodney.

"He didn't talk to you?"

"About what? He's wandering around like a lost pixie fixing parts of the ship that don't need fixing. And he keeps saying it's more important than some stupid Nobel prize he'll never even win, which I know is a lie. He wants a Nobel so bad he can taste it."

"Maybe not anymore," Jennifer said quietly.
"What? When did that change?"

She sighed static in his ear. "A lot of things have changed without me noticing. I was a little too busy. And I think maybe I preferred it that way...oh, I don't know! I had this idea of what I wanted, like a dream. And it turned out I was wrong after all. Maybe the Nobel was like that for Rodney. The house, and declassification and the Nobel, when all he really wanted was something else."

John's heartbeat skipped faster. "What the hell, Jennifer, you're upset. Maybe you guys are going through a rough patch, but you've worked so hard on this—"

She laughed. "John, you're so sweet. You've been great, really. Please don't make this harder. Just...talk to him. Okay? I'm all right. I'm really happy here. I already told you. My job is amazing. I'm doing fantastic. But...I have to go."

"All right, I guess. Take care. Talk to you later."

"You'll be out of range," she said. "But be safe where you're going, all right? I'll be thinking of you."

The radio clicked, and John tapped it off in a daze, then left his office and went back to the bridge to sit in his chair and sink into thought.

Four days left.

Rodney was avoiding him; John had too much shit to do to nail him down, and too many people after him for this and that, and needing him to sign off on it all or they couldn't leave the solar system. Lt. Cole was no Yeoman Rand; Kayla actually expected John to read the shit he signed. The checklist in John's head got longer and longer, and his catnaps shorter and shorter. As crunch time neared, John found he was still trying to track Rodney down three hours before beam down.

Finally, John found Rodney in Auxiliary Control and started to tug him out from beneath the console.

"Hey! Let me get in this last screw!"

"Well, hurry it up, Casanova. I need to talk to you."

Rodney's reply to his joke was muffled and less than complimentary. John grinned to himself and sat on the edge of the console to wait.

"You know, there is a chair. Designed primarily for sitting on and less likely to cause damage to the controls," Rodney said caustically as he wiggled out from under the console. John hopped off and offered a hand to pull him to his feet.

"What were you doing under there, anyway? I've been trying to track you down for three days."

Rodney affected nonchalance. "I was busy hardening the operating systems of the ship's computer consoles and security checkpoints. The final step was tightening down the physical systems of auxiliary controls."

"Wow. Rodney..." John swallowed down the lump in his throat. "You've really gone above and beyond. Don't think I don't know—"

Rodney waved him to silence. "Please. This is all a necessary part of maintaining—"

"—what you're up to with all this."
"—the systems of any complex—"

"You're definitely worried about all of us being out there—"

"—apparatus."

"—without you."

Rodney gave John a wide-eyed look and turned back to the console, which he rebooted by pounding the keys a little too vehemently. "You'll, um, be fine. I know you'll be fine. You have the back-up crystal and you can use it to connect the jumper's DHD to any gate in the Pegasus system, so you can land on a planet and evacuate the ship at any time and come back to Earth. Woolsey's base team has their own DHD and chip and self-destruct. And the drones, of course, are as well-designed as a genius of my intellect—"

"And Zelenka's."

"And Zelenka's can possible manage." Rodney hunched his shoulders. "You'll be fine."

"We will be." John gripped Rodney's shoulder and squeezed gently. "Don't worry, buddy. I'll say 'hi' to Teyla and steal Ronon's dessert for you."

Rodney relaxed a little under his hand and leaned back against him. Something in John's chest, some organ that really couldn't afford it, did a complete barrel roll. John stepped away just as Rodney turned around.

"So..." John said, offering his hand. Rodney hesitated a moment before grabbing it and pulling him into a brief hug then releasing him almost violently.

John rocked back and smiled uncertainly. "I guess I'll be seeing you in email."

Rodney laughed nervously. "Right. Because if I'm stuck dealing with the dregs of the SGC, I at least deserve reading the latest of your misadventures in Pegasus. And don't leave anything out!" Rodney pointed at him. "I want details from every embarrassing welcome ceremony and drunken harvest party."

"You got it." God, John didn't want to leave him, but he looked at his watch. "Less than two hours to beam down."

"Is that what we're calling it now?"

"Yup," John said blithely, and shoved him toward the door. "Go pack up."

As the time to debark drew near, John worried he wouldn't get to see Rodney off. Radek urgently requested he sign off on a personnel change he barely had time to read the summary on before emailing it back. Quartermaster discovered a discrepancy and some final emergency rations had to be beamed on board and stowed. Then General Carter insisted on screening in a hail and farewell speech, as Colonel Talhouni, the interim commander while the Phoenix was being outfitted, relinquished command to John. Talhouni left the bridge to beam off. John tried to be gracious and not look at his watch. There were only a few minutes left before beam-out.

But General Carter had some words she wanted to say to John, and after all she'd done for him, he couldn't cut her off. He owed her big.

"Be careful out there," Carter said. "I know with the help of the people of Pegasus, you and this
amazing crew will do great things. Just take it one small step at a time. You can't solve a galaxy's worth of problems in a day. And always remember: we've got your backs."

"Right," John said through a tight throat. "Thanks for all the brilliant...everything you've done to make it happen. Your faith in me means a lot."

Carter smiled wryly as she nodded acknowledgement and signed off.

"Sir, all the temporary personnel have beamed off," Major Jarratt said. "Course to Pegasus planet M21-977 laid in."

John closed his eyes in disappointment. "Thanks, Jarratt." John pointed to the comm sergeant, Balingit, who opened the ship-wide channel.

John cleared his throat and said, "All personnel: secure to posts for shift to sublight. Last chance if your destination is not the Pegasus Galaxy, where we aim to make a difference. Thank you for taking this leap. Next stop, M21-977." His heart was in his throat as he gave the go ahead to Jarratt and he watched the Earth drop away in the viewscreen. He might never see her again, but she sure was a pretty planet.

Before they left the solar system, Caldwell sent them a last goodbye from the Daedalus, now back on defense of Earth and lurking just outside of Saturn.

"Clear skies and tailwinds, Sheppard," Caldwell said.

"Thanks, Stephen. Be careful out there in the black."

And then John gave the go ahead for the jump to hyperspace, and they were on their way.

John wasn't sulking in his quarters. He was the captain of a starship heading for another galaxy. He'd had a busy couple of days, and he needed a nap. A perfectly legitimate nap.

A soft knock sounded on his door, and he ignored it. Couldn't they tell his head was stuffed under his pillow?

The knock sounded again, this time more like a rude pounding.

John wanted to yell 'go away,' but he wasn't sure if that was the proper deportment for starship captains. He'd have to catch up on his Star Trek.

"Come," he said, and swung his feet to the floor, pulling down his shirt.

Rodney McKay walked into his quarters.

"What the fuck?" John said, possibly a little loudly.

"What? You signed off on my transfer. I have to say, I expected you to come stomping by my quarters making a big hullabaloo—"

_Hullabaloo?_ John mouthed.

"...A lot sooner than this." Rodney finished and crossed his arms, looking uncertain.

"I thought you were gone. I thought you beamed down." John winced at the lost tone in his voice, but it seemed to draw Rodney closer.
"Well, that's because you're a nincompoop. I specifically asked Radek to ask you if it was all right for me to...butt into your crew."

"Oh." The paperwork. The summary just said onboarding new engineering crew, shifting roles within department. Radek, that sneaky bastard. "He wasn't very specific."

Rodney hesitated. "So...you don't..."

"No, no! That's great. God, that's terrific." John couldn't breathe suddenly. "You're coming with me—I mean us. It's amazing. But...wait. What about—"

"Jennifer and I figured it out a while ago." Rodney smiled tentatively.

John grinned outright. "I was going to say, what about Tribble?"

Rodney rolled his eyes. "Grace and Groucho belong together. Jennifer and I..." He bit his lip. "We weren't a good match. Apparently, not without you in the middle."

"Me." Heat ran up John's neck. "I was just helping out." He stepped closer.

"Right, right," Rodney said, waving his hands. "Except, then you left. And I had to follow you." His voice went tight. "I discovered I didn't want you to leave." John admitted softly, "I didn't want you to go either. I never...but you kept coming back." John realized.

"Yes," Rodney said nervously, "so, here we are." God, how did Rodney get so close? His lips were right there. If John wanted to, he could reach out with his hands and cradle Rodney's face and kiss his pouting lower lip just like that. Just like that, Rodney tilted his head with a soft moan and put his hands over John's wrists and kissed him back, tongue flickering over John's like a promise.

John leaned his forehead against Rodney's. "I missed you," he whispered, hoping Rodney would get it, how it was killing him slowly, how badly wanted Rodney to be happy, but he couldn't, just couldn't stick around to watch it fall apart, not with nothing left to keep him from saying something he shouldn't.

"Are we going to have sex now? I think sex would be good," Rodney said, and John's head spun.

"I didn't even think you..." God, John's face was so hot. "Never mind." He started to go for another kiss, but Rodney shoved him a little.

"You're dense. Also, you could have had anybody." Rodney's lower lip puffed out. "How was I supposed to know you liked my fine ass? Zelenka had to set me straight the third time I beamed aboard for no reason. He told me whom I should blame for unplugging my monitor all those times."

"Oh, that." John rubbed his mouth sheepishly.

"Yes, that." Rodney grinned a tiny grin. "Also, it occurred to me you don't spend hours patiently talking about feelings and giving relationship advice to just anyone."

"Hey! That's not true. I tried to give Ronon relationship advice once."

Rodney raised an amused eyebrow.

"Once," John repeated. "He told me to bug off."
"Right..."

"Right." John smiled.

"Now shut up and kiss me again." Rodney paused and then said, "Please?" as if John wouldn't. As if John didn't want to, desperately.

"Hell, yeah." With a sharp grin, John dragged Rodney down to his bunk and kissed him again, and again, running his hands over Rodney's jumpsuit. His crew! Rodney was on his crew. John's heart fit to burst. "I have to learn to read my staff memos," he said, then pulled the long zipper all the way down to Rodney's crotch and palmed his hardening dick.

"Oh," Rodney groaned softly.

"You like that?"

"Very much, yes. Don't waste your breath on stupid questions."

John chuckled darkly and pulled the sleeves down off Rodney's arms to get at him. "Nice mouth. Especially when I'm about to give you a blow job."

"Sorry. Sincerest apologies," Rodney said breathlessly, twisting out of his jumpsuit and kicking off his shoes. He was left in ridiculous boxers and a T-shirt. John stared down at him.

"What?" Rodney said, his hands drifting down to close over his stomach.

"I just...I can't believe this is happening," John said. He put his hand on Rodney's chest and ran it down over Rodney's belly then put his heel on Rodney's cock and rubbed a little, just to see him squirm. "I can't believe you're in my bunk."

"Well, I am," Rodney said, still shifting his hips. "And it's not very comfortable. Please tell me we can get larger quarters as a couple."

John blushed and then laughed. "Yeah. I think we can swing that. I am the captain, after all."

"Captain Kirk," Rodney muttered, "you're mine now. No more looking at other people." He was still wiggling against John's hand.

"I promise," John said breathlessly. He couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed the waistband of Rodney's "Your eyes can deceive you; don't trust them" Jedi boxers and eased them over his hips and off so he could get at Rodney's gorgeous, plum-red cock.

"Now, please note: I'm very sensit—ahhh..." Rodney sighed as John sucked round the head, get it nice and wet before licking down the salty shaft.

John nudged his legs apart and Rodney complied, spreading them eagerly for John's exploratory fingers. Maybe next time John would get to fuck his soft, eager hole that opened up so prettily for John's finger, but John had zero supplies on hand. He hoped Carson had remembered to stock up.

"Damn it," Rodney gasped, when John pulled his finger away.

"Next time," John said, and took him deeper into his throat, testing the edge. Too long since he'd done this, and he'd lost the knack, but he looked forward to taking Rodney's thick cock all the way down. Anything for Rodney, for the sounds he started making as John picked up the rhythm, sucking him sloppily and nudging him behind his balls.
"Oh, God," Rodney said weakly as he started to come, so deep down John's throat he didn't even taste it. Another next time. John eased him through it, moving up next to him with relief. His knees were killing him.

Rodney turned his head. "That was...Jesus."

"I like your dick," John said, a little dopey on sex hormones or something. No other explanation for his mouth taking off on him.

"Thanks." Rodney shifted so he was on his side. "I assume yours is that huge lump digging at me."

John did a Vanna White along his zipper. He was so hard he might pop just from the vibration. Especially with the way Rodney had decided to ease the zipper down like the slowest strip tease ever.

"Please," John said, gritting his teeth.

"Now those are nice manners." Rodney reached the bottom and didn't bother with any pleasantries, just pushed down the waistband of John's boxers and took his cock into his dexterous fingers, the fingers John had been fantasizing about since about forever.

John might've let out a small sound.

"You're really ready to go," Rodney said analytically, looking down at John's dick like it was a hyperdrive crystal. "Let me just see here," Rodney said, a phrase John had heard a thousand times, and John felt his dick jump in Rodney's hand, under his keen observation, even before Rodney rubbed the edge of his thumb hard just under the crown of John's cock, a single point of precise pleasure that vibrated through John's groin.

He arched his back with a stifled holler and came all over his shirt.

"Huh," Rodney said. "That was interesting."

"Jesus Christ," John said, his muscles trembling.

Rodney petted his leg and then helped him get out of his T-shirt and jumpsuit. "Here. Clean up. It's time for a nap."

"What? But I have to—"

"Yes, yes, I know—you're a starship captain, blah blah. But it's 0200, and you need rest if you're going to find us new quarters and reorganize Engineering tomorrow. I'm taking over. Radek and Miko want to be reassigned to the contingent that reconfigures Traveler ships with the drone dispersal mechanisms. Which means they have to take over the drone team immediately. Those people are way too overwhelmed, anyway."

John's head was too stupid from coming to discuss work. He finished cleaning up with his T-shirt and chucked his boots in the corner. "So, tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." Rodney yawned and yanked the bedsheets and blanket up to cover them both. "We might also discuss the fact the Olvanian Tower has a working star drive, with parts we could trade for."

John froze. Atlantis. They could get Atlantis back. His brain whirled with what the addition of Atlantis could do for his plans.
"You're something else, you know that, McKay?"

"Well. I...I'm glad you think so," Rodney curled up next to John and put his head on John's shoulder like it was the most natural thing in the world. John let his arm rest on Rodney's waist, careful in his disbelief. He had everything in his hands.

"I didn't want to leave you," John said, almost in a whisper. "You were the only thing left keeping me on Earth."

"Then it's a good thing I figured it out in time," Rodney said, finally sounding smug and happy, just as John always wanted him to sound. John held him just a little bit tighter.

Beneath them, John could feel the ship humming, pulling them onward toward Teyla and Ronon and home.

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June 15, 2019
San Francisco, CA

End Notes

Thanks to StarWatcher for the back cover!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!