# Martyr

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## Summary

Once upon a time a man so loved his city and those who came to inhabit it that he gave his life so that they would not perish.

[The entire second season of the Ancient!John 'verse - ie, SGA's S2, with bits of SG1's S9 thrown in.]

## Notes

I started out writing the Ancient!John 'verse 'cause I couldn't get the idea out of my head. It's now nine stories, two drabbles long and growing.

This is Season Two.
Martyr

Chapter Summary

They don't have the weaponry or the manpower to win. But that doesn't mean they'll stop trying.

Chapter Notes

#8 in the Ancient!John 'verse, set during "The Siege," Parts II & III

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

And the next thing he knows the floor of the Control Room is rushing at him at nearly fifteen miles an hour, which is a whole lot faster than any floor anywhere should be allowed to move, ever.

The next thing Iohannes knows after that is, when he tries to stagger to his feet, Carson's at his side forcing him to sit back down, claiming that concussions are no laughing matter and neither are broken ribs and that if he ever tries such a stunt again he's going to lock him in a very white room with a nice jacket and soft walls, which must be a cultural reference he's not been introduced to for all the sense it makes at the moment.

"Yeah, 'cause laughing is just about the first thing that comes to mind right now," he groans, putting a hand to his side and trying to find the energy within him to heal them up. To his surprise he finds some and, after a glowy-hand moment, they're only cracked and he's not even that tired from it.

/Oh, that's nice./ he tells Atlantis, who does the mature, million-year-old city thing and ratchets the fans in the ventilation system up five or six notches in a dignified attempt at mimicking an exasperated sigh.

"What happened?" Elizabeta asks. She and the other remaining Terrans have flocked to his side, rather forgetting they're supposed to be getting ready to evac since his plan failed. Well, at least he thinks it failed. The last few minutes are rather fuzzy, up to and including his rather spectacular fall but since no one's cheering, he's guessing the monitors don't show the approaching Wraith ships as having been destroyed. He'll even hazard a guess that he can't have been gone or Ascended or whatever happened for longer than a few minutes by their reactions.

"Damned if I know," he hisses, glaring at Carson who's currently trying to get him out of his TAC vest so he can get a look at his ribs. "Just leave them, will you? We've got more important things to worry about right now."

"Oh, really?" the doctor says, his accent becoming stronger with his worry, to the point where his translation matrix is having trouble compensating. "Like what?"

"Like getting away from the porta before the finiens eventis vaporizes us and makes the whole thing rather pointless."
They all turn and look at the porta, which isn't doing anything interesting at the moment but Carson and Ford help him up and away from the stretch of floor right in front of it anyway. Literally seconds later (Rodney times it, muttering something about him not having the brain cells to splatter upon perfectly good floors and decidedly not meeting his eyes), it starts to activate.

"How'd you know that?" Ford asks, sounding like he's just discovered the best thing ever.

"I dunno," he murmurs, adjusting his vest so it rests a little less heavily upon certain ribs. Then louder, "It's the SGC," he calls to Rodney, who's run up the steps to check the controls there. "Lower the iris."

He can practically hear Rodney's eyes widen when he calls back. "He's right!"

"That is one cool party trick, sir," Ford whistles as the caracacta falls.

"Yeah. Kinda freaking me out though," he answers, watching a few Terran Marines step through the pons astris. He'd known more than a few near-Ascension Alterans in his time and a couple of them had precognitive abilities but he'd never shown the slightest tendency towards such things, even back when he was young and didn't know any better and actively trying for Ascension. The fact that it's manifesting now means it's probably not precognition but lingering memory from his brief whatever-you-want-to-call-it, which means... "Bet you the last of the coffee in the city that their leader's going to be a Marine colonel by the name of Dillon Everett."

"You can keep your coffee, sir."

He shrugs. Bet or not, he knows he's right. "I just give it to Rodney anyway."

Ford makes a face that's a cross between amused and weary. "I'd also keep that to yourself, sir."

"Why? The stuff tastes awful – worse than even that moonshine the Athosians tried making out of that vine on the mainland, the one that Sergeant Haywood said reminded him of something called kudzu."

"'Cause a lot of people back home, 'specially in the military, don't exactly approve of relationships like yours."

"Really?" At Ford's nod, he frowns. "How annoying archaic."

By this point the greying man who is obviously their leader – and who is, in fact, one Colonel Dillon Everett – has come through the gate and approached Elizabeta. For moral support Iohannes and Ford join her at the top of the steps, just in time to see him hand her a piece of paper that does not make her happy in the slightest. Ford even salutes which Iohannes personally feels might be overdoing things a little but you can't deny him his enthusiasm.

Still, anyone who annoys Elizabeta so much so quickly rather annoys Iohannes as well despite their recent differences, so he decides to return the favour. "Colonel, it's not that we don't appreciate the thought, but if you'd read the report on the armada heading this way, you'd know that there's not much we can do about it. He's the last person to give up on Atlantis, he really is, but he doesn't see how a handful of Terran Marines is going to make much of a difference, at least not with what ordinance they've brought with them.

"Oh, I've read your report cover to cover, Major," he replies, emphasising the last in such a condescending matter that Iohannes can't help but feel he's being mocked for daring to assume a rank that he's full well earned, even if it was in a military other than his own.
Rodney's practically grinning as he approaches them from the control centre, having clearly heard this last. "You must have found a ZedPM."

Iohannes resists the urge to roll his eyes, managing only by crossing his arms and looking reproachful which seems to have a powerful effect on the Terrans he's already familiar with. Perhaps it'll have the same on this one. "Of course they must have found one. It's the only way they could've dialled in from Terra. The problem is there's no way they could have brought it back here where it could be of some use and maintained the wormhole at the same time. Unless," he raises his eyebrow in what he hopes is a condescending manner, "you found two?"

"As we speak," Everett announces, seemingly unimpressed, "it's being transported up to the Daedalus, our new battle cruiser."

"Sister-ship of Prometheus – I wouldn't have thought it'd be finished yet."

"With the ZPM boosting her engines, she should be here inside of four days. That is how long we have to hold this base. Major-" Everett turns towards him, clearly enjoying walking right on in to his city and ordering everyone about like he has the right to order them to do anything. "What do I call you anyway? The reports we were sent have you listed as Major Sheppard but Doctor Jackson back on Earth insists that it's more correct to call you Pastor Janusson..."

Iohannes counts to decem. He's already learned that pastor has religious connotations for the Terrans and he'll be damned if he lets Everett marginalize him in that manner. So, in as calm and unconcerned manner as possible, "I've rather gotten used to Major Sheppard."

"Ah. Major Sheppard it is then, if you would dial the Pegasus alpha site and recall all military personally as well as any civilians who'd like to return and help take part in damage control. And when you're done with that, please join me in my offices in the Conference Room. We'll discuss our tactical position."

/His offices my ass,/ he fumes at Atlantis as he walks away.

/He'll learn,/ she reminds him gently. /And we're detecting radiological signatures in the crates the Terrans brought through the astria porta./

This perks Iohannes up – slightly. /They've brought nukes?/

/Six of them, by the readings. Naquadah warheads, much like the fission reactors already here./

/Well, that's something at least,/ he tell her while aloud he passes along the message to one of the techs that hadn't evacuated yet to call the others back.

He pops into the conference room just in time to hear Everett announce proudly, "...deliver an impact of Mach five at two hundred and fifty miles. A standard magazine will hold ten thousand rounds."

Ford oohs and awes over it like the Terran weapons are something special, and Iohannes resists the urge to roll his eyes. Again. There's something about this man that annoys the hell out of him, and he's rather worried it's the fact it's that he's a colonel. Which is higher than major. Which, he tells himself, isn't petty at all.

/Yes it is./

/ Shut up, 'Lantis, and keep an eye on the armada. /

She flickers the lights in annoyance which causes all the new Marines to look up anxiously and all
the old ones in the room, if he's honest, to roll their eyes when they see he's the reason behind it.

Elizabeta enters the room while Everett's asking about the alpha site. "I've got Chuck on it. But I'd rather like to know how you plan to defend this city before they get back."

"I don't need to explain myself to you," is the Colonel's response.

"I understand that you're in charge now but we've been responsible for the lives of the people on this base, both military and civilian, for the past several months. I don't think it's an unreasonable request," is Elizabeta's answer to that.

Everett really doesn't like that, and snaps, "I don't need your cooperation either."

Now, Iohannes may not like Colonel Everett and may resent his rank but he's perfectly willing to be shouted at if it gets them the results he wants. It's another thing entirely for him to yell at Elizabeta and so he feels entirely justified when he reminds the Terran, rather coolly all things considered, "But you could probably use mine... Sir. So, with all due respect, show Doctor Weir some and answer the question."

"Is that a threat, Major?" the Colonel asks just as evenly, having reined his temper (which seemed to have surprised even him) in.

"If you want it to be," he shrugs. He'll do whatever he needs to do to save Atlantis, up to and including threatening the Terran in charge. If his attempt at Ascension hasn't shown that, nothing will. "I understand needing a clear chain of command but cutting out Doctor Weir only alienates the people whose trust and respect she's earned. Which is everyone on the base, including me."

Everett stares at him – hard – for a full fifteen seconds before conceding. It's a long fifteen seconds though, and either means the man's stubborn enough to help them hold Atlantis for the four days their linter will need to get here or that things are about to go very badly very fast.

It's rather obvious which one he's hoping for.

He tries to warn them about the orbiting mines. He really does. But naturally they don't listen to the one person who's actually lived through a siege of this sort before. Because, naturally, the people who'd never even left their planet until fifty years ago (for a measly moon at that) are the better choice to organize a planetary defence line. Never mind that Iohannes had been in charge of said project for the better part of five years before the Exodus and been one of its junior team members for over a decade before that.

But now they're down six nukes, blind as Menebrian bats and still unable to power the cathedra, and if Colonel Everett has ordered him to the eminentia room just to ask for diagrams of the city's historical defences, well, they're going to all be learning some colourful new curse words.

"I was told I could learn a lot about the history of Atlantis in this room," the Colonel begins as Iohannes enters.

Iohannes resists the urge to tell him that he could learn a lot about the history of Atlantis in any room, so long as he's in it, and says instead, "We haven't used it much because of the power requirements." It's rather embarrassing how much this man is getting under his skin and, if he had time, he'd try to figure out why that is. But they don't, so he doesn't and settles for containing the worst of his annoyance.
"Still, I would like to see for myself how the Ancients lost the first time – to try to avoid their mistakes."

"We could do that," he supposes and, seeing as how it's not all altogether bad idea, asks Atlantis to pull up an appropriate map. "This is the Pegasus galaxy in 30 Aetas Lanteae – about three years before the start of the Wraith War and just over a century before the Exodus. The blue stars are systems inhabited or protected by Alterans. It's most of the inhabited worlds in this galaxy." The stars start to turn red. "Tarquinus," he gestures to a dot on the edge of the galactic disk, not far from the dozen or so systems that have turned, "was the closest to the Wraith homeworld and the first to fall..." The stars began turning more quickly now and in great swaths, "Until, after almost a hundred years, Atlantis was all that remained."

"And that's when the siege began."

"What?" Where had he gotten that idea? "No. That had been going on since about 63 AL – Tarquinus had been our major manufacturing hub and the Wraith were able to use parts scavenged from the rubble to upgrade their ships, though it took them a while to figure out how.

"We were able to hold them off for several more years but, no matter how many ships we destroyed, more kept coming..." Defensive satellites, space mines, bombs and missiles of all sorts, the shield, even the Asurians – they'd tried it all and none of it had worked. Not against more than a few. Not well enough to stop them from sending more. "We could win almost every battle but had no way to win the war. The Council decided it would be best to abandon Atlantis where we'd left her, shielded in the furthest depths of this ocean, in the hopes that the Wraith would think her destroyed like her sisters and that, one day, they or their descendants could return. And that's it." Atlantis raises the lights. "That's the story."

"So you think this is a no-win situation?"

Iohannes snorts. "If I believed that I wouldn't have stuck around all these years, would I? No, what I mean is, even if we beat them this time, they're gonna come back and it's gonna cost us more each time. And this Expedition just doesn't have the weaponry or the manpower to hold off a siege the way my people did ten thousand years ago. What we need is a viable, long-term plan for defeating the Wraith and forgive me if I don't think that's something your planet is willing or even able to commit to."

The colonel looks at him like he's examined Iohannes quite thoroughly in the last few minutes and not come to a conclusion he likes. "Major, I think I should tell you that Colonel Marshall Sumner was a very good friend of mine. We served together a lot of years. You know, I cannot for the life of me figure how it is that you could go as far as you did and not save him. How you could get that close, how you could admit to firing the shot that killed him..."

So that's what this is all about, is it? Everett thought he'd shot Sumner for his job? How brain-damaged were these Terrans? "To be completely honest, you don't know what the Wraith are like. Sir. You may have read our reports but it's all academic until you've seen one suck the life out of someone right in front of you. Name anyone you like – father, lover, brother, best friend - if it had happened to any of them, I would've still done it and I'd hope they'd do the same for me if our positions were reversed."

That's when Atlantis tells him the hives have just released their darts and he's back in the cathedra again, thinking it's like nothing changed at all.
Everett's clearly pushed Rodney too far when he asks what the status of the hive ships is the next morning, because he's on the verge of a panic attack – and not a helpful one – when he answers, "They're coming, that's their status! Tomorrow, the day after, the day after that – eventually they'll get here. Whether we're here to greet them or not is another matter!"

"Rodney..." he drawls in the way he knows both annoys and amuses the scientist, hoping to distract him before he says something unforgivable to the colonel that gets him kicked out of the meeting altogether. He'd probably add something pointed about cutting back on the coffee and getting some sleep if he thought there was any real possibility of Rodney listening to him. Which, considering Rodney's attitude towards him at the moment, is about nil.

"Look, the chair is out of drones and, even if we had the ZedPM, it's going to take more time than we have to get power back up in the section of the city that makes them so how do you expect to handle the next wave? You've already tried your brilliant Ascension plan and they kicked you right back down before you could do anything useful. What do you want us to do? Throw rocks at them?"

Everett gives a tired wave of his hands. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Really?"

/Your custodia is going to get himself shot if he keeps this up,/ Atlantis muses unhelpfully.

/For the hundredth time, he's not my custodia. People don't have custodiae. They have friends and lovers and spouses and brothers and brothers-in-arms, but they do not have custodiae./

/Hundred-and-fifty-third,/ the city corrects.

/My mistake. Hundred-and-fifty-third. Now will you let me think? Hard as it may be to believe, I rather like you and don't want you to end up as a pile of rubble at the bottom of the ocean./

/We don't blame you for Tirianus./

Iohannes can feel the blood draining from his face at her mention of her lost sister-city. /This has nothing to do with Tirianus./

/We know you tried your best, pastor. That is all anyone could ask for./

/This has nothing to do with Tirianus,/ he repeats. /I just want you to survive for another ten thousand years, long after I'm gone./

/We don't want to survive without you,/ she whispers, sounding so small and lost and broken its impossible to believe the others, even without the nanoids, don't hear the utter heartbreak in her voice, in her song. He thinks he even catches Rodney giving him a worried look but it's cut off too quickly for Iohannes to be entirely sure.

As it is, he thinks its the most amazing thing he's ever heard, sorrowful as it is. Swallowing hard, /I won't live forever, carissima. One day you'll have no choice but to go on without me./

/We do not want to live, pastor, if it means your death./

/It's not as easy as that./

/It should be,/ she huffs and lets him get back to the business of saving her and everyone inside her. But the mention of Tirianus gives him an idea. A terrible, wonderful, brilliant, awful idea. "Let's
forget about the darts entirely for the moment. Compared to the hives, they've got no fire-power worth caring about and they'll be nothing more than leaderless drones without their queens and tribuni on the hives."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

"We fly the puddle jumper in stealth mode right down their throats."

Everett widens his eyes. "Are you volunteering for a suicide mission?"

Rodney snorts, muttering, "He's volunteered for worse," before, more loudly, "It might be possible to figure out a way to remote control the jumpers; that way no one would have to fly into anything."

"Can it be done?"

"I dunno," Iohannes says honestly. "We intentionally designed the systems in the jumpers to be as incompatible with the urbes-naves as possible, should the Wraith ever capture one. But if anyone can do it, McKay and Zelenka can." This earns him an actual smile from Rodney before he and Radek take off, muttering.

The Colonel is actually looking at him with a modicum of respect when he asks a moment later, "How much damage can one puddle jumper do?"

"Not enough," he admits, turning towards Elizabeta, who's been overseeing the proceedings in a rather symbolic and slightly secretarial way, "I know you wouldn't let me steal a ZPM but by any chance would you feel any differently if I tried to steal us a couple of nukes?"

"We could try asking the Genii first, Major."

"You're probably not gonna like what they'll want in return."

"In for a penny," she says curiously, pushing back her chair in a way that makes him assume she likes the idea. "They want to test their weapons, now's their chance."

He doesn't see Rodney again until almost two days later, when they're putting his plan into action.

"The generator's not powering up like it should be..." he mutters while Iohannes sits helplessly in the cathedra. He's still not used to being able to do nothing while everything goes to pieces around him. He's still expecting to have the options (of power, of unlimited fuci) being Alteran afforded him. The waiting is terrible and it might well be killing him.

Rodney looks awful, like sheer stubbornness is the only thing keeping him going right now. And, while Rodney may be one of the most stubborn people he's ever met, even he's reaching his breaking point. "When was the last time you slept?" Iohannes asks as unobtrusively as possible, but he only gets a vague wave in reply. Father could get like this sometimes, yet he's hesitant to really snap him out of it for fear they'll never get the cathedra up and running if he does. "Rodney?" he tries again, louder.

"Not now, John," he snaps. "I'm working."

Over the radio, Elizabeta informs them of the approach of the next wave of darts.

"There's something wrong! Power levels are dropping!"
"Is there anything you can do?"

"We must have exhausted the Mark Two's energy output," he answers, still valiantly trying to get the generator to work. But it's useless. Iohannes can see it now. Rodney's smart but no amount of genius will get you water from a stone. Atlantis will never survive long enough for the Daedalus to arrive with the potencia that could save her. He has no choice.

But more importantly, he has no time. Just long enough to whisper goodbye to Rodney and high-tail it to the jumper bay using all of the short cuts and secret passages he knows of.

He's already in the air before anyone realizes that it's not the remote control program flying the jumper.

"John," Elizabeta shouts through the radio as soon as she's figured it out, "just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

He expects to feel sick, rather like he had when Ascension had seemed the only way he could save those he cares about, but surprisingly he doesn't. He feels genuinely calm and at peace with his decision, rather like he'd always been told really successful meditation should feel like. As if, in this act, he's discovered the perfection of creation. The beauty in the physics. The music in the mathematics. The unexpected drama in life itself, its actors and its stories and the way that just one person, one action, can change the history of the whole universe.

(What would have happened if that first man, back on Loegria, hadn't pushed the button that started the nuclear war that destroyed their homeworld? There would be no Wraith, certainly; no Terrans either and he wouldn't be sitting here, the last of his race, about to pilot another nuke into his enemy's ship.)

"I'm saving your life," he tells her, comfortable in the knowledge he's doing the right thing, "and the lives of everyone else on Atlantis."

He doesn't want to die. He has no more desire to die than he has to Ascend. Yet what does his death matter when it means his friends will live and Atlantis will be able to stand for ten thousand years more?

Besides, he's already outlived his time. The rest of his race is too many years dead and he's just an artefact with no place in the universe other than as a curiosity piece. No, the Alteran age is long past and, maybe, the Asgard are right and it will be these Terrans, these descendants, who shape the face of galaxies in the future. Maybe that age has already started and his actions now will be one day seen as the passing of a torch. The mentor giving his life for his protégé.

Iohannes likes that idea. He likes that idea a lot.

He has only one fear and that's, "Y'know, if this works, somebody might have to do it again."

He doesn't have a name for the emotion he hears in her voice when she answers, "Understood."

He's close now. So close. "They haven't detected my approach." He has only a moment left, and already Atlantis (so far in the distance her song sounds weak, breakable and already half-lost) sounds as if she's weeping, singing songs for the dead so ancient even he doesn't understand the words. "Weapon is armed and ready."

As he lines up the jumper he searches for something to say. For something that can tell the Expedition how glad he is they found him, how happy that he's had these last few months with them, how proud he is to be leaving his city to their care. But he expects they know this anyway and
doesn't bother. He just flicks off the cloak, ups the throttle and tells them, "I'm going in," before he sees a bright white light...

...and finds himself on the bridge of the most primitive linter he's ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

-Linter - Heavy Warship
Socors

Chapter Summary

Rodney's day starts out badly. It gets better, and then much, much worse

Chapter Notes

#9 in the Ancient!John 'verse, set during "The Seige," Part III

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is not how it is supposed to happen.

He had plans, real plans. Like Earth. He wants to take John to Earth, in part because he thinks it might get him to stop calling the planet Terra, and in part because he thinks the Ancient might really enjoy the place. He knows some people from college that still owe him favours that have gone on to work for NASA and Bugatti. Though John would probably mock their unbearably primitive technology, like he still does from time to time with the Expedition's equipment, he'd probably still get a real kick out of whatever planes and cars they could convince them to let him borrow.

And Jeannie. He's come over the last few months to think of the people on Atlantis as a surrogate family, and, in the process, realized just how important family actually is. If by chance he make it out of this, he wants to apologize to her for how he behaved about her pregnancy and subsequent marriage. Sure, he's still a little annoyed that she'd given up such a promising career to be a stay-at-home mom, but she's his sister. It's not like she's done anything truly unforgivable, like move to the States. More than that, though, he wants John to meet her, because he knows how complicated John's relationship with his own family was and wants to give him something normal, even if it's only the epic McKay sibling rivalry and the niece he's never met and the brother-in-law that he can't stand.

And Atlantis. He's plans for her. Plans he needs John for, because John knows the city like no other. But, also, plans for John, because he knows what a physical pain it is for him to see the city so far below her prime...

He knows it's probably a sign something's wrong with him that all his plans involve John, some kind of freak codependency caused by being cut off from Earth on a very small research base and extreme situations and whatnot, but he really, really can't bring himself to care.

But, God, it isn't supposed to happen like this.

The screen shows an explosion, more massive than he's ever seen, and the blue dot that represents John and his puddle jumper is gone. He can't even watch to see how many ships he's destroyed with this latest bit of idiocy because it doesn't matter how many fewer enemies they have now, how much better of a chance they have of surviving because of him because death isn't like Ascension, and there isn't any hope he'll come back. Not now. Not ever. And even if they manage to survive now, it doesn't matter, because John's not here, and, and...
...and it's all Rodney can do to sink down into the nearest chair, head in his hands, and try to understand.

* * *

It could be days or seconds later when Chuck’s voice breaks through the silence that has fallen over everyone the Control Room, "Doctor Weir, I'm picking up another ship."

It's terrible news, and Rodney can't bring himself to care.

"Another hive ship?"

"Negative, I'm reading an IFF."

The lack of sleep must finally be getting to him, because he hears John's voice then over the comm, saying, "Atlantis, this is Sheppard."

But Elizabeth be hearing things to, because she's saying his name like she can't believe it either.

"How many other pastores do you know?"

Rodney half-snorts before he realizes what he's doing, and catches himself quickly. "No, no, that can't be. We saw the hive ship go up." There's no way John survived that explosion. Not even if he managed to Ascend again at the last second, because the others would have knocked him right back down again. And, even if by some miracle they didn't, he wouldn't be giving off an IFF. Q.E.D.

"I assure you, Doctor McKay," says a new, unknown voice, "that Major Sheppard is alive and well."

He's hallucinating proof for his hallucinations now. That cannot be good.

But Elizabeth seems to hear this one as well, so, maybe, possibly...

John is alive.

"Oh, thank you," he sighs, sinking further into his chair and letting himself, finally, rest.

* * *

Elizabeth thinks she's being subtle about it, "ordering" John to see to it that he gets some sleep before the next crisis, but Rodney knows better. Oh, he knows full well he needs sleep like anything – he's been up for well over five Lantean days, which are about four hours longer than normal Earth days, and has more stimulants than blood running through his veins at the moment, – but he also knows she's doing it because of that scene ages earlier, when John kissed him before Ascending, and all that implies. Still, if any of the newcomers get the implications in her words, they don't give it away. Not even John, who just raises an eyebrow at her before tugging on Rodney's arm to get him started in the right direction.

Neither of them say anything until they're in the transporter, and then they're both speaking, words rendered unintelligible in their rush to say them.

John stops first, after barely a sentence, and gestures at Rodney to go on. But everything he'd planned to say is gone, lost in the earlier garble, he doesn't even remember it, and the only thing he can say is, "I thought you were dead," more softly than he's ever said anything before in his life.
John looks down at the floor, genuinely abashed and mumbling, "Sorry."

"Sorry? You nearly went and got yourself blown up and sorry is all you can say?"

"I-"

But he's found his voice again and, now they're trundling down the empty corridor towards his quarters, he's continuing. "And, before that, with the Ascension thing – where’d that come from? Do you hate it so much being here," the with me remains, thankfully, unsaid, "that you're trying to escape by any means possible? 'Cause normally you won't go near the subject with a ten-foot pole, to the point where I was beginning to wonder if you were actually part of a rouge band of anti-Ascension Ancients or something else crazy like that."

"Rodney," he says, drawing out his name in the way John knows annoys him. "I-"

"Don't Rodney me, John. I may not know exactly what runs through that floppy-haired head of yours, but I do know that you're the kind of idiot who'd sooner off yourself than break up with someone if you thought it would hurt the other person less."

They're almost at his door now, and John's been careful not to touch him since that nudge in the Control Room, but now he's grabbing his arm and forcibly turning him so that they're facing each other. It's hard to read John at the best of times, but right now even his eyes are flinty, giving Rodney not the slightest clue of what he might be thinking. "I," he begins passionately, his grip tightening just a little, "am not trying to break up with you, and I'm certainly not trying to kill myself, or escape Atlantis, or whatever other crazy ideas you've got running around that massive brain of yours. All I'm trying to do is keep you safe. Is that really so hard to believe?"

If John were really trying, he'd have never broken his hold, but he's not, and Rodney's able to yank himself away at this, fuming. "I'm not some kind of damsel in distress for you to save, John, or some alien priestess for you to sweep off my feet with your, your Kirkian ways. This isn't 1967, and, while I may not be a highly-evolved Ancient, I do have a PhD in astrophysics and another in mechanical engineering – which, for the benefit of those of us not-born-on-Earth, makes me kinda a genius, even by non-human standards. I don't need you to fight my battles for me. And I certainly don't need you to fly yourself into hive ships for me. 'Cause, I don't know if you've realized this, but you're kinda the best thing to ever happen to me, and getting yourself killed before we even have a real chance to see where this goes is not going to endear yourself to me in anyway."

He's still mad. He's fuming even, and John's eyes have gone positively dark, and in a lightening movement that he couldn't describe even if he wasn't sleep deprived, Rodney finds himself physically hauled through the door of his quarters and pressed up against the nearest wall before the door's even completely closed.

For a sick moment, he even thinks John's going to hit him, or yell at him at the very least, but then John's kissing him like he's never been kissed in his life, and it's hot and it's dirty and it's dirty and, God, he only pushes away because the wall is killing his back, just killing it, and he might pass out if he doesn't breathe some time soon.

John must understand, because next thing he knows is they're on the bedand John's, yes, he's actually straddling his legs, and their clothes are God knows where and there's a part of Rodney that wishes he was less sleep deprived so he can enjoy this more because, in two months, they haven't exactly gotten to this point yet (close, yes, but not actually to it), but the rest of him just doesn't care because it's John and he's alive and, yes, this might be the best thing ever, up to including Atlantis and the Stargates and ZedPMs, and, God, he's so glad John's not dead so they can do this again, as often as they want, and-
Sleep is good.

Sleep is really good.

It might be the only thing in the universe right now better than John.

It's rather inevitable, really, that his radio goes off far too soon. He groans at it, hoping it will convince the noise to stop, or that maybe John will shoot it, but, after a minute or two, neither of those things happen, so he feels entirely justified in snapping, "What?" at whatever malevolent soul is on the other end when he finally does answer.

It's Zelenka, of course, the be-speckled Czech devil. "Rodney?"

"Yes, of course. Were you expecting someone else when you paged me?" He glances around to see if he might've picked up John's radio by mistake, just in case, but John's gone. So are his clothes for that matter. If it weren't for the fact that his own clothes are scattered in some pretty unusual places throughout the room, he might've thought it was just another sleep-deprivation-induced hallucination, but they are, so, well, it can't be.

Q.E.D.

"No, just you sound much better now that you've gotten some rest. It," he adds wearily, "makes me very jealous."

"Speaking of sleep, care to tell me why you've woken me up after...?"

"Three hours, give or take, and because the deep space sensors are back online."

"That's brilliant, Radek. Truly, I'm proud that you've managed to maintain a level of competence that any idiot with a master's degree can aspire towards, but why is this wake the boss up after three hours," (probably closer to two), "worthy news?"

"Because I think I'm picking up something very, very worrying on them, and I'm rather hoping you'll come up here and tell me I am imagining it all."

Zelenka's not imagining it, and Rodney's day suddenly becomes much, much worse.

Chapter End Notes

Socors - moron
Because heaven forfend Atlantis call Rodney by his Terran name.

It'll only be for a little while, carissima, I promise.

We don't want you to go, Atlantis pouts, causing all the electronics in the room – including the Terrans' – to hum anxiously.

Iohannes ignores the curious looks of the nearby Expedition members and runs his hands along the nearest wall placatingly. Well, in all truth, the original members had pretty much learned to ignore his pastor-related antics by now; it's only the new ones, the ones that had come with Everett and Caldwell, who are looking at him curiously. It's all vaguely annoying, and really not helping his case at the moment. I know, carissima. I don't want to go either.

Then why are you going?

Because I have to, 'Lantis. The Terran praetor wants a full debriefing by the Expedition's senior staff and that, bizarrely enough, includes me.

Do you all have to go? she sniffs, stopping her trick with the humming and deciding to play with the water ballast systems instead. Can't your custodia stay? He knows us.

For the thousandth time, he's not-

What are we suppose to call him then? Atlantis snaps, no longer sounding like a lost child, but rather a petulant teenager, and proving once more to Iohannes that if the city wanted to be concerned about anyone’s mental health, it should be her own.

His name, perhaps?

It's not Alteran.

Because heaven forfend you use his Terran one, he sighs before taping his earwig. "Hey Rodney?"

Distractedly, "Yeah?" the scientist answers.

Iohannes can hear lab-sounds in the background, and has to restrain himself from sighing again. He, Elizabeta, Carson, and Rodney are all scheduled to gate to Terra in less than half-an-hour. At this rate, they'll be lucky to get off-world before tonight. By which point the city will not doubt have
created some catastrophe that must be dealt with right away that in no way, shape, or form could be traced back to her. "What's your middle name?"

"Rodney is my middle name. Why?" he asks suspiciously.

"'Lantis is asking."

"Oh." There's a beat. "Why does the city want to know my middle name?"

"'Cause Rodney doesn't translate into Alteran, and she refuses to use Terran words. I've learned it's best to humour her when it comes to things like this if I want to maintain my sanity."

"John," Rodney says, the sound of a door opening and closing carrying over the radio, "you spent ten thousand years in hooked up to a cathedra. You don't have any sanity left."

Had not Iohannes been standing on the far side of the Control Room, apart from most the Terrans but still close enough to be overheard, he would have replied of course not, I'm dating you aren't I? But Iohannes is, and could only frown at the missed opportunity, settling on the far less likely to cause Rodney to blush, "Be that as it may, I'd like to maintain the illusion. So give me a name or I let 'Lantis choose."

"Okay. But you've got to promise not to tell anyone."

"Okay?"

"Fine," Rodney huffs, than, voice muffling, as if he's trying desperately not to be overheard, "my first name's Meredith."

Iohannes blinks. "What's wrong with-?"

"It's- Look, I'll explain later. I've got to finish this mess before we leave. Just promise not to tell anyone but Atlantis, okay?"

The line goes dead.

With a sigh, he turns his attention back to the city. You're the one who hacked their translation software. What does Meredith come out to?

Moreducus, Atlantis muses, running it over her non-existent tongue. Moreducus Custodia... It's a good, solid Alteran name, even if it's missing a few pieces. It works, though. We approve.

I'm thrilled. I really am. But you know Rodney can't stay here either, regardless of whatever name you choose to call him by.

She huffs, which is progress compared to her earlier sulking. What about the medicus?

Carson has to go too. All the senior staff has to go, 'Lantis; I've told you this already.

But you'll be back?

Yes. Soon. I promise.

And you won't do anything to get yourself killed?

I'll do my best.
We don't know what we'd do without you, pastor.

I know, carissima. Me neither.

Chapter End Notes

Nomen - First Name
When Jeannie McKay was eighteen years old, her parents died.

To be more specific, when Jeannie McKay was eighteen, her parents had been in one of the let's try to make our relationship work stages of their marriage, the kind in which they kept separate apartments but spent a couple nights a week sleeping at the other's place. Part of this making it work involved extravagant dates, and so it was that her parents utilized the night of her Senior Prom for one of these expensive outings, taking advantage of the fact she'd be gone. When Jeannie returned home that night, it was to a cop car in her drive and it's driver on her front step, waiting to tell her that, earlier that evening, Dad had run a red light and hit an oncoming car. Both her parents and the other driver had died on scene. They believed her father had been drinking and would later be proven right.

After that point, her brother is her only real family, and even that's being optimistic. Meredith had gone off to uni at thirteen, when Jeannie herself was only five, and had rarely been home since, finishing MIT just after his seventeenth birthday and blasting his way through two doctorates before she even had her driver's permit. Still, she'd always gotten along with Mer better than she had either of her parents, probably because of that very distance, and found her brother to be the prefect guardian.

This isn't to say that Mer was a good guardian, oh no, but he was exactly the sort of guardian a girl just starting uni might want. His ultra top secret work with the United States Air Force kept him several hundred miles away and paid well enough that he didn't think anything of paying her college tuition, or for her to live by herself in an apartment off-campus, or for a car. She only called to ask for more money, and he only called to ask after her grades, and, all in all, it is an excitingly stereotypical relationship that served both their needs.

And this is how it goes until her third year of graduate school.

She meets Kaleb while fulfilling her humanities requirement, and it's not to say that he's the one that makes her question the path of her life (Dad had been an engineer and wanted his children to be the same; to this end, Mer's biggest act of rebellion had been getting his doctorate in astrophysics first. After Dad died, Mer had steered her towards an advanced physics degree of her own, and was already talking about getting her hired by the department of the American government he worked for after she graduated) for the first time, but he's the first person to give her a viable alternative.

They're already talking about marriage when she gets pregnant.

When she tells Mer, his only response is to say he'll stop paying her tuition if she goes through with it, obviously believing it's a bigger threat than it really is. He doesn't come to the wedding, and when she calls to tell him about Madison's birth the operator at his office can only tell her that Mer's been transferred to Siberia and that she doesn't have the clearance for the number where he can now be reached.
It's such an obvious lie that Jeannie doesn't try to call Mer again, and half expects to come home one day to a black SUV in her drive and men in suits at her door, telling her he's died.

She's doing the dishes one afternoon in late July when the doorbell rings.

There's nothing particularly unusual in this, even though she isn't expecting any visitors. Still, when she opens the door and sees her brother standing there, it's all she can do but gape for a couple of minutes before saying intelligibility, "Meredith." He looks older than she remembers, and a quick burst of mental arithmetic reminds her he's almost as old as Dad was when he died.

That thought alone is almost more bizarre than his sudden appearance one her doorstep, and it's enough that she has to open the door further and examine him, to make sure he's not fallen into any of their father's other bad habits.

"Hey Jeannie. Long time no see."

"To say the least!"

Mer looks down for a moment, seemingly genuinely embarrassed (which is enough to make her wonder if she's talking to a pod-Meredith), before retorting, "What, I can't just stop by, say hi to my little sister?"

"Well, considering we haven't spoken in three years and you've never done anything like this..." He looks healthy enough – healthier than she remembers him ever being – and so she assumes this isn't some kind of I've been diagnosed with a terminal disease guilt trip he's here on. "No, you can't."

"Well, I've been kind of busy... with work, you know, and some of the places they've sent me have been pretty out of the way. I only got back, er, on business last week and I thought I'd, um, you know..."

"No, Mer, I don't know."

He looks down again, then, curiously, towards the road. There's a yellow convertible parked there, top down, and leaning against it is a dark figure, and things are all starting to click in her head for the first time since their conversation started. This isn't an I'm dying visit, it's meet the parents.

"Look," he says, "can we talk about it inside? It's just, your porch probably isn't the best place to have this conversation, and there's kinda someone I'd like you to meet."

"I- Sure."

And this is how Jeannie's brother finds his way back into her life.

Chapter End Notes

Frater - Brother
Soror - Sister
Advena, Part One

Chapter Notes

#10 in the Ancient!John 'verse, taking place while everyone is on Earth between "The Siege," Part III and "The Intruder."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He could ignore the dreams on Atlantis. It was easy there. He had too much to do – try to track down a charged potentia, defend the city from the Wraith, restore the city to her former glory, et cetera et cetera – to pay much attention to the dreams that plagued him endlessly, especially when he could barely remember them on waking.

It's harder on Terra, though. Atlantis isn't here, for one, to soothe him with her song or yell at him when she thinks he's being an idiot. He can't even wander the halls aimlessly because, try as he might, he can't ignore the armed guards who've been assigned to escort him from meeting to meeting until the Terran government can do an adequate risk assessment on his presence in this galaxy, or the endless stretches of concrete, broken only by doors you have to open manually and the occasional self-aggrandizing placard.

Here, it's just easier to sulk in his guest quarters, one of those awful doors separating him from the eyes of his watchdogs, even if it forces him to think overmuch on the dreams he cannot help but remember here, with little else to occupy him. Dreams of a silence so loud the memory of it echoes in his ears.

To this end, Iohannes is lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, and trying to avoid sleep (or thinking about sleep, or dreams, or how much he hates these stone walls, or how good it would be to see the ocean again) when there's a knock at the door.

(The first time this happened, Iohannes hadn't realized it for what it was and his hands had gone for the gun that wasn't strapped to his thigh, as it would have been if he was at home, with people who trust him implicitly. He's still not used to it's missing weight.)

There's another knock, but Iohannes makes no more move to answer it than he did the first. He may be going stir-crazy, staying in this room with his dark thoughts, but it's better than the alternative. The Terrans outside his door may not have deified his race, but they've surely sanctified it, thinking The Ancients, as they still insist on calling them, to have been far better people than they actually were. As if scientific and moral advancement went hand-in-hand.

Doctor Jackson, oddly enough, is the most insistent in this belief – a fact that Iohannes finds desperately worrisome, considering he's the one, or so he's been told, who spent a year Ascended. It's probably him at Iohannes' door now, come to ask once more about details of Alteran history Iohannes himself can't give a damn about, not even now, when he's the last Alteran in the universe. The worst part of it all is that it's so clear that the other man means well, and is so excited to met a real, live Ancient that he's not realized his questions aren't welcome.

Archaeologists.

The knocking eventually stops and Iohannes continues to stare at the ceiling, waiting for this terrible
eternity to end.

Chapter End Notes

Advena is Foriegner in Latin, and is named such in honour of CJ Cherryh's wonderful series of the same name. This "installment" will be a series of related, vingettish bits, and, because lj isn't cooperating at the moment, AO3 gets it first.
"Murder," John announces, setting his tray down with unnecessary violence before sliding into the seat across from him in the SGC commissary, "is a highly-overrated problem-solving technique." The notebook he's also carrying is set down with more restraint, but only, Rodney suspects, because it's not heavy enough to convey the proper emotion.

"Have a lot of experience, do you?"

"I dunno. Depends on how you define murder, I guess."

Indignation rising on Jon's behalf, "They can't seriously still be going on about that, can they?" he huffs. Most of their first day back, after everyone back at the SGC (and the representatives from the Pentagon and the IOA) had finished oh- and ah-ing over their real, live Ancient, had been spent with John answering heated questions about why he'd shot the Expedition's military commander. "Even Colonel Everett said it was the most merciful thing to do." And Everett, he doesn't add, is in the position to know.

"For Sumner, yeah. For Ford... not so much."

Rodney can't help but shudder at that. He'd liked Ford, even if the young lieutenant had always reminded him of a puppy from one of those larger dog breeds – all limbs and too much energy, and wanting to please his superiors oh so much. He hadn't deserved to be shot full of enzyme when the Wraith that was trying to feed on him was killed. He hadn't deserved to be shot three times in the chest either, but he had been trying to gate off Atlantis when doing so might have meant their ruse (a nuke and a shield-turned-cloak) might've failed.

"You did what you had to do," he manages after less than half-a-beat too long. "Isn't that what you said is most important? Doing what has to be done?"

"Yeah." John says glumly, more glumly than he had the day he'd first introduced Rodney to this saying, and it's at moments like this one when he actually hates Janus, despite the genius clearly evident in the notes they've so far been able to decipher. He imagines that, in the moments Janus actually took to be a father, John's childhood was filled with a lot of lectures about doing what you have to do. "But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"No one who knows you would ever claim that."

Rodney gets a wry grin for that. "Then the people here obviously don't know me very well."

"You are, for all intents and purposes, an alien. You should be glad they don't want to haul you off to Area 51 and vivisect you."

"You do that here?" John asks, his raised eyebrow and casual tone undermined somewhat but his sudden pallor.
"No. But it's what the public thinks goes on at Area 51. That's mostly research and development – it's where I was, mostly, before we started looking for Atlantis. What vivisection happens usually happens here."

John chooses not to comment on this last, even if he is attacking his eggs with unusual enthusiasm, and asks instead. "And what did you do there? I don't think you've ever said."

And you've never said, Rodney wants to point out, what you did before we arrived, but doesn't on the grounds that he's been having a bad enough week without his whatever-you-want-to-call-him interrogating him in strange lunch rooms. John's guards report he's been spending most of his free time in his guest quarters, and John quiet and brooding, as he certainly is, is never a good sign. "Studied the Stargate, mostly. That and whatever other An- Alteran technology we could get our hands on. Not much, really, until General O'Neill found the Antarctic Outpost."

There's silence for long enough that Rodney thinks John's forgotten they're having a conversation, that he's lost in his own world of loneliness and guilt. He wants to suggest a movie night, or that they use John's rooms for something other than brooding, but he knows it's impossible at the moment. There's no crisis, no rush, but they've barely the time to eat with all of the briefings they've scheduled with the various representatives of the IOA who've descended upon Cheyenne Mountain. It's a minor miracle that they've managed to find time to eat together at all, and he wishes to a god he doesn't believe in that they didn't have to waste any of it with long silences filled with things they could say if they were anywhere but here.

"I'd like," John says at last, "to see it."

"The outpost?" Rodney hums. It'd been an interesting place, but Antarctica is still Antarctica, and hardly the first place he'd suggest a visitor from another world check out. "You'll have to ask General O'Neill about it."

"I did. He told me that, every time he goes to Antarctica, he nearly dies, that I'm an idiot for wanting to go there, and that anyway it can't be managed until the Prometheus gets back from Dakara, which should be well after we're on our way back to Atlantis."

"Why can't it be managed? There's got to be at least two planes a week going between Peterson and McMurdo, if you don't mind riding on a cargo plane."

The look on John's face says everything about his position on riding in an aircraft of any sort, but he just shrugs as if it say, it's your planet, and fiddles with his fork. "Something about problems creating a fake identity for me."

"Really?"

"Apparently the other IOA nations don't like the idea of the last Ancient in the universe being beholden to one country's military," he says, using the same tone of voice he gets when forced to acknowledge that Rodney's tablets are state-of-the-art computers, thank you very much, and the fact that a P90 is a lot more effective against the Wraith than the Ancient arca they've found on Atlantis. "Can you really blame them?"

"I can if it means I'm stuck underground for much longer. It's starting to remind me of the siege – the first siege, – only then you could look out the windows and see ocean. I was," he muses, suddenly wistful, "ten years old before I saw the sky."

There's really nothing Rodney can say to that. "So," he tries instead, "they're going to make you a
"real officer then, the Air Force?"

"That's what I've been told. Apparently being a legatus in the Lantean Guard isn't good enough for them."

"It's not if you ever hope to leave this base. Hey, don't look at me like that. You know full well that Earth isn't like Pegasus; people here don't just pop out of thin air, without any sort of history or background or knowledge of Earth at all."

"We didn't build the portae to be kept as governmental secrets."

"You didn't build the Stargates at all."

John shrugs at this. "Tell that to the IOA. And Homeworld Security. And the SGC. And maybe everyone in the Pegasus Galaxy. Given the odds, you might actually find someone who believes that."

"You're the one who likes to pretend his IQ is at least sixty points lower than it actually is," Rodney points out, noticing as he does John's eyes darting to the notebook he's left on the table as he says it, then quickly away.

Before John can protest, Rodney snatches it from across the table and flips it open to a random page. It's only about a quarter full, but the pages that do have writing on them appear to be equations. Opening it again to the beginning and glancing through the first couple of pages, he can only gape as he realizes what it must be before turning back to the beginning and reading more closely, "This is the solution to the Riemann Hypothesis, isn't it?" He doesn't wait for John to answer, or even look up; he just turns the page. "Not just a solution, but the solution, the one that works in all situations, for all equations. You know what this means, don't you?"

John's looking at him amusedly when he finishes, like he'd been waiting just how long it would take Rodney to notice the notebook all along, the bastard. "That the IOA will lay off on me for a bit?"

"You are a total and complete idiot if you honestly think the IOA will do anything of the sort. If anything, they'll probably try to pick your brain worse than they already are. We Earthlings have only been trying to solve this problem for the better part of a century and a half, you know, and if they think you can give them the answers to the universe, who knows what lengths they'll resort to. I mean, they claim to respect the UN and the Geneva Convention and all that, but, then again, according to the UN, they don't exactly exist now do they?"

"Huh," John says going back to his eggs. It's at times like this that Rodney rather wonders how much of what he's saying John understands.

Still, he continues to flip through the notebook. Some of the pages are filled with neat lines of Alteran numbers, others with the same proof carefully translated into base ten maths, the Earth numbers wobbling across the page. "But, seriously, you know what this means, right?"

"That Colonel Carter will be able to solve that problem she's been working on about the finiens eventis of the pons astris?"

Rodney doesn't even want to know how John knows about that (it's something Samantha's been working on on-and-off for the past five years, and mostly been unable to make any progress on because it's not like she or anyone else in the SGC really has the time to devote to something that, in the long run, really doesn't matter so long as the Stargates keep working as they always have). "John, if the rest the world had any idea of the use of this formula in wormhole physics, you'd have a Nobel.
But, since they don't, this'll get you a Fields Medal, no problem. Not quite as good, but it's still the best a mathematician can do."

John shrugs. Again. It rather makes Rodney wonder if he ever understands the significance of anything he does. "I think leave that sort of thing to you."

"Fields Medal," he repeats.

"It's no big deal, really, Rodney. It was either that or stare at the ceiling some more."

"I can see the acceptance speech now: I was bored, so I decided to try my hand at the most important unsolved question in pure mathematics. That's bound to go over real well."

John rolls his eyes, than holds out his hand for the notebook. "Well, my minders are tapping their watches, so I guess that means I'm overdue for another briefing with the IOA representatives, or, if they're feeling merciful today, a raking over the coals."

"Oh, no. You're not taking this with you, drama queen. If I've got to pay attention to their questions, so do you."

"They're worse than the Council."

"Into every life, bureaucracy must fall. But, seriously, I'll talk to Sam. See if she can't get them to hurry things along. They're talking about letting the rest of us get out of here on Friday. They can't keep you longer than that, even if you are a great and mighty Ancient."

Snorting, "Yeah. And Atlantis was built in a day." John looks like he wants to say something further, but a glance at the Marines who've been assigned to guard him (who've been waiting patiently by the main entrance to the mess, but who are now starting to get that antsy look over-eager Marines get when what they'd doing is in violation of direct orders, even if it just means John'll be five minutes late to whatever meeting he needs to be at. It reminds Rodney uncomfortably of Ford, who is twenty-six and dead and will never be anything than that over-eager lieutenant ever again) reminds them they don't have the time. "Talk to you later, Rodney."

Rodney waves at him to hurry up before the Marines have puppies and goes back to the notebook, wishing to hell they were on Atlantis, where they could eat together like normal people, and John wouldn't be forced into to doing math proofs to stave off boredom. Even if it was the Riemann Hypothesis.
"I get that this whole Terra is alone in the universe thing is important to you guys, but, really, what's the likelihood that anyone's going to interrogate me on my life history while I'm here?"

"I know it's a pain, but I've got to make sure you know your cover story, so let's just go over it one more time," Colonel Carter says, grinning at him over a sheaf of papers in her lab. It, like the rest of the base, is a windowless cement square, and is stock full of what sadly qualifies as hi-tech on this planet, and, after six days underground, Iohannes is about ready to try his hand at Ascension again if it will let him see the sky.

"Again?"

"John," she admonishes, sounding uncomfortably like his Matertera Catalina.

"I've already gone over this with Major Davis-"

"John-"

"-and I get that this whole Terra is alone in the universe thing is important to you guys, but, really, what's the likelihood that anyone's going to interrogate me on my life history while I'm here?"

Colonel Carter bites her lip, ducks her head, and looks for all the world like she's trying not to laugh.

"Aren't you going with Rodney to Vancouver?"

"Yeah. He wants to visit his sister." John doesn't see the connection.

"And you don't think you're going to be interrogated to within an inch of your life? Consider it practice for your Fields Medal."

Iohannes sighs. If he'd realized just how important the equation was to the Terrans, he'd have let them figure it out themselves, even if it's going to take him a few more weeks to finish. It's just, when he'd gotten the idea (and he still can't say how he got it; he could only assume it was somehow related to the three minutes he'd spent Ascended and the niggling in the back of his mind that makes him think there's something important about Sam he's forgetting), he couldn't stand the thought another night spent staring at the ceiling of his guest quarters and trying not to think. And trying to figure out a proof in base ten, with the limited knowledge of maths Terra has now, had seemed like a nice distraction. "Fuck the medal," he says. "If I have to go through this one more time, I'm going to start believing I am Major John Sheppard, United States Air Force."
With a slight, disproving frown, "After you sign these papers," she gestures with the folder in her hand, "you will be Major John Sheppard, United States Air Force."

Snorting, "You know what I mean. Not the Air Force thing, but the whole, I'm John Patrick Sheppard of Sausalito, California part of it. And what kind of name is Patrick anyway?"

"The name of your father."

"My father's name was Ianus Ishachidus Ianitos Rector."

"Your fake father," she points out dryly.

"Yes, yes, I know. But how do you get Patrick out of Ianus?"

"We didn't."

"Of course you didn't," Johannes sighs, putting his elbow on the worktable and propping his chin in his fist. "Because that would just be too easy. Fine. Fire away."

"Well, we've already ascertained you know your name and your hometown. And," she adds, getting that I'm trying not to laugh look again, "that you've spent more time with Rodney than is probably healthy. So when were you born?"

"June 14, 1970," he says dully. He doesn't point out that this would make him younger than Rodney. It probably makes him younger than Colonel Carter too, which is annoying. Johannes isn't sure why that might be, it just is, and he attributes it to the I've forgotten something important feeling he gets whenever he spends too much time around Sam.

"College?"

"Stanford."

It goes on like this for a while – there are a frightful lot of details ones needs to know to live on Terra, half of which it would probably be easier to make up on the fly, and the rest of which it will never matter that they've gone to the trouble of making up because he's no plans on staying on this planet for long enough for a driving record or credit history to matter – but, at last, Colonel Carter hands over the enlistment papers, backdated eighteen years, and he's officially a member of the United States Air Force.

Johannes runs a hand through his hair and breathes a sigh of relief.

"Not so fast, solider," she says with a laugh. "I've got a few more for you to sign."

He groans.

"Ah, but these are easy."

"Nothing on this planet is ever easy."

Colonel Carter rolls her eyes. "Now I know you've been spending too much time with Rodney."

"He's a good guy," Johannes says defensively. He's getting to the point where he honestly thinks half his problems with this planet are because of Rodney – how they talk about them, how they have to hide their relationship; how he's barely seen him twice since gating here.

"He's a great scientist, possibly the best alive," she tries to correct, "but being a good scientist is a far
cry from being a good person."

Iohannes has heard the story of Rodney's first visit to the SGC – it's whispered in the shadows wherever he does, like a condemnation that cannot be shaken – and even he has to admit it doesn't paint the most flattering picture. But, "The hardest thing in life is doing what is right rather than what you wish to be right."

"Is that an Ancient proverb of some kind?"

He shrugs. It'd been something Father was fond of saying, particularly regarding some of his more extreme experiments. Like all things, it can be twisted to serve any need.

"You know, John, just when I've started to forget who you are, you've a tendency to go and say things like that."

"Things like what?"

"Y'know, meaning of life stuff."

Iohannes groans and lets his forehead rest on the tabletop.

"Don't worry. I promise I won't tell Daniel. If you finish this paperwork for me."

"You are a cruel, evil woman, Samantha Carter." No wonder, the thought follows unbidden, General O'Neill was willing to risk his career for you.

Colonel Carter's already laughing at this, saying something Iohannes isn't paying much attention to about whatever papers he has to fill out now, before this thought catches up with him. When it does, he about falls out of his chair, he sits up so fast. Another memory from his three-minute Ascension? Iohannes isn't sure, but, if so, why, of all things, would he remember that?

"I know something you don't know," Iohannes says as they walk towards what he's been told is the final set of doors between him and the outside world.

Rodney snorts, "Doubtful," showing a plastic card to the soldier standing guard before passing through the last checkpoint.

Iohannes does the same, earning a sir and respectful nod in the process, and follows after, emerging into fading sunlight and a glorious expanse of open sky that makes him forget what he'd been going to say until Rodney elbows him and mouths hat.

He frowns at the hat he's carrying under one arm. Doctor Jackson has insisted on having Elizabeta, Carson, Rodney, and Iohannes join him and the other members of SG-1 currently on Terra for dinner before allowing them to go on their respective leaves, and apparently the place that's been chosen qualifies as fancy. Which in turn means that he'd had to get dressed up in the fanciest of the uniforms he's been presented with – the dark blue one with too many buttons and a series of coloured bars on the front that he doesn't know the meaning of but certainly can't have earned. Of course, it's also meant that Rodney's had to get dressed up as well, which is no bad thing, only that it seems to have put him in something of a foul mood.

"It's only hair, John," Rodney says after what must qualify as too long a delay, taking the hat from him and jamming it on Iohannes' head as best he can without looking at him too closely. He can only surmise it makes him look even more ridiculous than he already feels. "Come on then. Let's get this over with before they try to drag you back."
Iohannes follows blindly for a few minutes, choosing instead to stare up at the darkening sky all the while, before it even occurs to him to ask, "How are we getting to this place anyway?"

"Well, I was going to rent us a car for the drive up to Jeannie's, but then I figured it would be easier in the long run just to buy something and keep it here for whenever we're called back next, and it's not exactly like I don't have the money for it..."

"Rodney."

"I might have ended up buying a Lotus Elise."

He raises an eyebrow and waits for the explanation.

"Yes, right; that doesn't mean anything to you. Well, it's a car. Obviously. A roadster – convertible, 'cause I know how much you hated being underground all this last week. Can go from zero to sixty in four point seven seconds with a top speed of one hundred fifty, which I know doesn't sound like much to a guy who's go-to vehicle can go one-fourth the speed of light, but it's the fast I could find on short notice. And, well, the colour is a bit much, but, like I said, short notice, and, well, yeah." He gestures at a bright yellow vehicle a few yards away from them. "I know you can't exactly drive it, but we have a week or so before we're expected at Area 51, so you'll probably have time to learn, and, well, this is probably the worst car in the world to learn to drive on, but I thought you might enjoy it after you learned and, er-"

Iohannes knows nothing about cars. Truth be told, he could care less about it at the moment. All he knows is that he's spent the last week in a windowless hole with descendants who thought him a saint and murderer by turns, barely able to talk to anyone from Atlantis, let alone spend five minutes alone with Rodney, and all he wants to do is kiss him because he bought this car with him in mind and, now that they're out of that forsaken cement maze with it's dozens of cameras and hundreds of disproving eyes, he can. And, since he can, he does.

"John-" he tries to protest, but then Iohannes is sliding one hand around the back of Rodney's neck and slipping the other around his waist, and he gives into it. A hand comes up to clutch at the front of his too-new uniform jacket, pulling him closer as Rodney tries to manoeuvre them to the car. For the life of them, Iohannes can't say how, but somehow they make it, and then it's Rodney pressed against the side of the car and him pressed up against Rodney, hands finding their way beneath coat jackets, trying to make up all the months like this they've missed since first hearing about the Wraith armada all at once, and even he doesn't know how far they might've gone right there, up against the car, if not for the loud and pointed cough that came a some indeterminable amount of time later.

"You know," says the man, who, as soon as the blood starts returning to his head, he identifies as General O'Neill, "Daniel will kill you if you're late to his dinner thing."

The speed with which Rodney pushes Iohannes away verges on the superluminal.

"I-" Rodney starts, voice an octave too high, "Er- General O'Neill, fancy seeing you here."

"Yeah, well," the praetor gestures at the truck the Elise is parked next to. "Nice car, though. New?"

"Er. Yeah. I mean-"

"You should be careful to lock it. The security cameras in this lot have been on the fritz for days now and you don't want something like that stolen."

"Er-" Rodney says again.
Jumping in before Rodney can say anything he'll be mortally embarrassed about later, Iohannes adjusts his jacket and promises the praetor, "We'll keep that in mind."

"Cool," he says, climbing into his car. "See you guys later." And, with that, he drives away, leaving Rodney still gaping.

"You know," Iohannes says after a moment, "for a descendant, General O'Neill's not that bad."

"Not that bad? Not that bad? He just-"

"Drove off. Very cool. Makes me kinda hope that Carson's right about most people with the Ancient gene being like the four-hundredth great-grandchildren of whatever kids Father had here on Terra after the Exodus. I don't think I'd mind having General O'Neill as a nephew. Which reminds me-"

Rodney slaps him on the back of his head and tells him to get in the car before he does anything else to jeopardize his new career before they're even out of the car park.
"I was right," John says when they stop for gas on the other side of the Wyoming border, apropos of nothing. They've been driving in fairly comfortable silence since leaving the restaurant, John alternating between watching the towns they pass with vague interest, watching him drive with barely contained amusement, and staring up at the stars with unrestrained joy. It's been ages since he's seen John properly happy about anything and Rodney hadn't been able to bring himself to say anything that might break the spell, not even to ask how he's liking Earth now that he's out from under Cheyenne Mountain, and had he seen O'Neill's face when Carson mentioned his idea about most Tau'ri with the Ancient gene being descended from John's father?

"About what?" he asks, rolling his eyes as John climbs out of the car without bothering to open the door (or maybe without realizing there is one; Rodney can't be sure) as they pull up to the pump. Just in case it's the latter, he makes a show of opening the driver's side door before getting out, which earns him his own eye roll before-

"About General O'Neill and Colonel Carter."

"They tell you about their transfers earlier then?" At the dinner, O'Neill had announced that, as General Hammond was retiring, he'd be taking over his position, which is about as close as one could say to I'm being placed in charge of Homeworld Security outside the SGC. Then Sam had gone on to say she was being transferred to Area 51 to take over R&D there, although, again, not in so many words, and Doctor Jackson had been so distracted by the knowledge that his team was going their separate ways that he hadn't been able to continue interrogating John about the Ancients, which Rodney had rather assumed had been their plan. It was possible that Sam had told John about it – the possible plan, that is, not the actual transfers – earlier, but Rodney rather doubted it.

"No. Not that."

Frowning, he starts the pump and turns back towards John, who he's discovered has divested himself of his medal-laden jacket and is now trying to open the trunk. Unsuccessfully, Rodney might add. He leans over, presses the release on the dash, and asks, "What then?" as John tosses his jacket inside.

"About them being together."

"Oh," he says around a yawn, wondering if John can be trusted to get him coffee on his own, then blinks as the statement sinks in. "Wait. What? You mean like together together?"

"I think so. I kinda remembered it while Carter was making me go over," he gestures at what of his dress blues he's still wearing as if to say my fake identity. "Or, at least, I thought I remembered it, but you saw them at dinner."

Rodney had seen them at dinner, and nothing had seemed out of the ordinary, at least not where Sam and General O'Neill were concerned. He tells John this, as well as, "They'd be breaking all sorts of
fraternization rules if they were, and they're both too professional for that." It's not that he's still pining for Sam – it's really, really not, – but she could do so much better than Jack O'Neill of all people, particularly when doing so would be so detrimental to her career. "And what do you mean you remembered it? You'd never even met them until a week ago."

Ignoring the last, "Apparently we break all sorts of rules being together, and that's not stopped us," John points out, closing the trunk lid.

"That's different."

"How so?"

"Because the rules we're breaking are stupid, backwards, and generally at odds with the whole life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness thing this country claims to aspire towards."

John raises an eyebrow. "And Canada's better, I take it?"

"Marginally, I'll admit, but at least our military is enlightened enough not to care who you sleep with so long as you get the job done, unlike the one you've just joined. All the militaries in the world to choose from – literally, all of them – and you choose one where they already have a reason to kick you out if they ever get it into their head that's what they want to do."

"Ah, but they won't do that."

"Oh, really?"

"I'm the Americans' ticket to Atlantis," he says smugly, leaning against the side of the car and crossing his arms. "They see her primarily as a military research base. Once they realize that Atlantis won't turn over her secrets if she's not happy and that I'm an integral part of that happiness, they'll not only never kick me out, they'll fight to keep me."

"Sides, they're the only ones with the means to get us back to Pegasus."

Rodney hums non-committally, still not convinced that John's not just made a huge mistake by joining the American Air Force. But that's not the important bit. The important bit's, "And, again, what do you mean by remember?"

"I spent three-minutes Ascended. I've been remembering random things since, like Everett's team coming through the gate, and now this. I can only guess they were talking about it while I was," he points skyward, the way some people do when talking about visitors from outer space.

That is... oddly troubling, to say the least. "Remember anything else?"

"Not yet, but it's not like I've much control over it. It's mostly annoying at this point. Lamest superpower ever..." He glances up at the pump, which has clicked off, then at the car. "Hey, can I drive?"

"You don't even know how to drive," Rodney points out before yawning in spite of himself. He's still not entirely over the week he went without sleep during the siege, and the gate-lag certainly isn't helping, particularly when there are four fewer hours to contend with here.

"I've been watching you. Doesn't look that hard."

"Look being the key word in that sentence."
The pout John gives him in return should probably be physically impossible for a man in uniform to do, but, then again, John's very existence was impossible, so the odds are probably on his side.

"Fine," he says. "But I need coffee first."

John only stalls once, as they're leaving the filling station. After that, it's smooth sailing all the way towards the I-80.

Rodney, who still can barely manage a puddle jumper, thinks it's patently unfair.

If he's still awake when they pass through Laramie, it's only because it's hard to fall asleep in a car when it's being driven by someone who'd not seen one outside of the movies until that afternoon.

Still, it's hard to deny that John's an embarrassingly good driver, even if the needle on the dash keeps twitching uncomfortably close to the triple digits, and his tiredness is starting to really sink in, so that Rodney's whole body is heavy with it. He's stopped watching the road nervously, as if John might veer off if he doesn't, and has instead sunk down into his seat, falling into some kind of half-conscious state that neither qualifies as sleeping or waking. John's kept the roof down, and every time Rodney's eyes drift upward he can't help but think how strange the stars he once knew so well suddenly appear.

"Why do you care," he asks at some point during this stretch, "if Sam and General O'Neill are together or not?" It's the only safe thing he can really ask. John won't talk about his Ascension, not if Rodney brings it up first, and talking about their respective meetings with the IOA will only piss both of them off.

"I dunno," John says at length. "It's kinda weird having a nephew that old. At least if it's true there's a chance there might one day be a kid I could be a proper uncle to."

Rodney considers pointing out exactly how related to him a niece or nephew four hundred or so generations removed is likely to be, or the likelihood that he could play any significant part in said child's life from the Pegasus galaxy, but decides against it. Instead, "My sister has a kid."

"She does?"

"A daughter, I think."

"What's she like?"

"Like any three-year-old, I guess. I dunno, I've never exactly met her."

With a laugh, "I mean your sister. Jeannie, right?"

"Yeah," Rodney says, somewhat surprised and absurdly pleased John's remembered her name. "I'm probably not the best person to answer that question."

"She's your sister."

"And I've not talked to her since before her kid was born. Hell, I'm not even sure what the kid's name is, only that she said something about naming it Madison, since it was Mom's maiden name, which is ridiculous way to name a kid." Marginally better than Meredith, Rodney has to admit, but
equally ridiculous for a boy or a girl.

"Ah."

"You've no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Not a clue," John admits.

Sighing, "Just trust me, Jeannie may seem like the normal one, but she's just as messed up as the rest of us." Rodney can practically hear John's eyebrow lift at that, and continues before he can think better of it, "Well... First, I should say our family life wasn't exactly the greatest. Dad was an automotive engineer – not a very good one, I might add – and was always on the road for one thing or another. Mom was one of those Sixties flower children who ended up selling her soul to Big Business – which, yes, I know means nothing to you, and remind me later to get you some history books. Anyway, their marriage was rocky at the best of times. Lots of shouting, lots of tears. I pretty much spent my entire childhood wishing I was some place else. I think I only went home twice after I left for uni, and only then because I didn't have any other choice in the matter.

"Anyway, Jeannie's eight years younger than me, so when I left for MIT she was barely in kindergarten, and it wasn't exactly like we ever tried too hard to keep in touch. Mom and Dad died right as she was finishing school, though, so I pretty much her guardian from that point on – car accident."

"I'm sorry," John says, looking over and briefly putting a hand on his knee before turning back to the road.

"Don't be. It was a long time ago now and I'd pretty much stopped talking to them after I got the military to fund my schooling.

"But, yeah, I was already working for the Air Force by the time they died. Not for the Stargate program – that really didn't start up until '94 and I didn't even get transferred in until two years later – but in some top secret stuff that kept me in Washington while Jeannie finished up school in Quebec. I ended up pretty much just throwing money her way and encouraging her to study physics.

"She was pretty good at it too. Not like me, obviously, but she could've given Sam a run for her money if she'd stuck with it. Instead she got herself knocked up by an English major, got married, and dropped out of school to take care of the brat. That was about the same time I was transferred to Siberia and, admittedly, I was kinda an ass about the whole thing, so I've not talked to her since. And that was, what? Three, almost four years ago."

"So why are we going to see her now?"

"'Cause," Rodney says, "the last few months have taught me how important family really is, even the ones we're actually related to..." Desperate to change the topic before he says anything that might embarrass him further, though for the life of him he doesn't know why admitting this to John embarrasses him so much, "What about you? What was your family like?"

There's a long pause – so long in fact Rodney thinks John's ignoring the question entirely, like he does most personal questions – then, "My parents never married. Which wasn't unusual, for Alterans. A lot of people never married. We were a lot more open about sex and relationships than your culture seems to be, and it was no big deal for amatores to live together without ever marrying. Or for people to marry and have children with people other than their spouses. Or for anything really, as long as all parties were consenting adults. Even then, Father was somewhat unusual. He had so many amatores that I can't even begin to name them all, even the ones he told me about. As far as I
know, I'm his only child, though that probably changed after the Exodus...

"Anyway, Mother was a legata on a linter during the war, and her ship was lost when I was very young. Her sister, Catalina, took care of me for a while after that, but she Ascended when I was seven or so, and after that I mostly lived with Father... He used to give me equations to solve while he worked his projects, trying to keep me out of trouble... I don't think he ever really wanted a kid, or that he really knew what to do with one...

"I spent most my childhood exploring Atlantis. I've been a custodia since before I can remember, and made Father let me have the nanoids when I was five so I could talk to her... She's-" John suddenly stops, as if he's just now realized he's talking about his feelings, and swallows audibly. "And, well, yeah," he finishes awkwardly.

"Radek and Teyla won't let anything happen to her," Rodney promises tiredly, shifting in his seat as they plough on through the Wyoming night, because it's the only thing he can do at the moment without making John stop the car.

He doesn't, though, and John says nothing, just continues driving as if he might find whatever it is he's looking for in the action alone.

Next thing his knows, he's waking up to a red-orange sunrise.

The car's parked and a minute's dazed blinking tells him that John's not in the car with him.

It takes him another minute to realize that they're not at another gas station, but rather parked by the side of the road, on the crest of a hill overlooking a grey-green valley, and John's leaning against the Elise, watching the sunrise like he's never seen the like before.

It's hard to tell with his back to Rodney, but John seems happy.

Next thing he knows after that, they're in the mountains and he's shaking off the last of a long sleep.

"Hey," he says as he stretches as best he can while buckled in. "Where are we?"

"Oregon, I think. I stopped a while back. Got you coffee," John says, taking a hand off the wheel to point at the cup holder and a small white bag that's balanced curiously there. "It might be cold."

It's not, he's happy to discover. Even more happily, the paper bag contains a small selection of doughnuts, and he doesn't know how John managed to navigate coffee-and-doughnut buying unassisted on his first day out of the SGC, but he doesn't care because, God, it's at moments like this that John seems entirely too good to be true. But, still, if they're in Oregon, "How long was I asleep?"

"Eight hours, give or take."

"How did you manage that in eight hours?"

"Science."

"Science?"

"That makes absolutely no sense, you know that right?"

John just shrugs.

Rodney drinks his coffee.

They make it to Vancouver five hours ahead of schedule.
part five of the "Advena" Arc; this takes place shortly after the drabble "Fratres et Sorores", which, while taking some things from "McKay and Mrs. Miller," occurs approx 1 year earlier in this 'verse

Jeannie Miller is both exactly like and unlike her brother. If Iohannes had not been told the same thing about himself and Father, he would not have thought such a thing possible – that two people could be so alike and so different at the same time. She's clearly Rodney's sister (Iohannes knows that the moment he steps on the her porch), but it's more than just genetics. It's how she holds herself, standing in the door obstinately, not so much as to stop Rodney's progress as to protest it. It's in the tilt of her head, questioning, examining, judging Iohannes as he walks up the path to the porch, before he's even near enough to say a word. And, when he reaches the porch, it's in how she's the first one to speak, saying in such a McKay-tone, "So you're the reason Mer's decided to visit."

"Just one of them," he tells her, thinking of Carson and Teyla and Elizabeta and Ford, who is dead and gone and will one day forgotten because he killed him and no one likes to remember that their military commander, their friend, killed a boy barely a man because it was the only thing he could do to save the city he loves. That he can smile at her even as his stomach clenches at the memory probably means something. Probably what Atlantis is always saying about his mental health. (Iohannes doesn't like Terra, despite it's sunrises and it's doughnuts and it's cars. It leaves him too alone with his thoughts.)

Rodney snorts, as if his answer is somehow funny.

Jeannie gives them both a look that's part amusement and part you're wasting my time. It's different, softer and less abrasive, than Rodney's, but it's still very much the same; this thought seems to encompass everything about Rodney's sister that there is to say.

It's sort of fascinating really.

"Jeannie, John Sheppard. John, my sister Jeannie," Rodney says impatiently. "Now, can we go inside? Like I said, this probably isn't a porch conversation. Unless you want to have it out on the open where the all the neighbours can overhear?"

She flushes at this (enough to make Iohannes wonder if there's a story behind this comment, and, if so, what it might be) and she suddenly looks less like an imposing off-world chieftainess wearily granting them access to her people's sacred places and more like, well, someone's sister being teased by her elder brother. "Yes. Sorry. Come on in," she says, waving them inside. "It's a little messy, but we weren't exactly expecting visitors today." She ushered them into the living room, practically forcing the pair of them to sit on the couch while she took the chair nearest. "I'd offer coffee or tea or something, but I'm half afraid you'll both disappear if I do. So. Explain."

"Now you're just being ridiculous. We drove fifteen hundred miles to see you; we're hardly going leave if you go off and make coffee."
"Why?"

"Well, the Air Force wouldn't loan us a plane and John gets all antsy when someone else flies – can't say I blame him, with the state of public transportation being what it is these days, so--"

"No, not why did you drive, you idiot. Why are you here? Though, now that you mention it..." she turns sharply towards Iohannes, who is doing what he usually does during negotiations with the locals, which is to say, trying to stay out of the way, "Why would you think the Air Force would lend you an airplane?"

He raises a hand in greeting. "Major John Sheppard, United States Air Force."

"Oh my God," Jeannie says, suddenly standing, her skirt swirling about her as she turns towards the windows worriedly. "You're defecting, aren't you? Or whatever it is you call it when you stop working for the government of a country you don't belong to. That's why you didn't want to talk outside. How much trouble are you in, exactly? Do you need money? No, of course not," she walks over to the nearest window and closes the curtains, but not before glancing suspiciously out. "What do you need me to tell the police-?"

"Jeannie-" Rodney says loudly, clearly not having expected this reaction and darting his eyes towards Iohannes as if to say well, do something.

Iohannes raises an eyebrow at him.

"You'll need to get out of the country. Somewhere the States don't have an extradition treaty with. Like Russia. I'm pretty sure they don't have a treaty with Russia. You took Russian in college, didn't you?"

"Jeannie-" Rodney says more loudly still.

"So at least the language won't be a problem. But first we'll need to-"

"Jeannie!"

"Yes, Meredith, what?"

"I'm not on the run."

"You're not?" she says, looking visibly relieved and not a little flustered as she sinks back into her chair.

"No. Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Oh, I dunno, Mer. You suddenly show up on my door after three-and-half-years – no call, no letter, no anything – and then claim to have driven half-way across the country with your American military boyfriend complaining about public transportation, and, the last time I talked to you, you were doing something beyond secret for the American military. Of course I think you're on the run."

"That's just..." Rodney huffs, trying not to look pleased that his sister apparently still cared about him enough, after three-and-a-half years of silence, to want to help him out of the country if he needed it, "Well, I can see where you might get that impression. Though I don't know what you think John being in the military has to do with that."

"Well, he's your boyfriend isn't he?"
"If you insist on labelling things, then, well, yes."

"And he can't admit to such without being thrown out, so either he doesn't care any more or they're changing the laws. And since the latter would have been all over the news..."

"...you thought the most likely scenario was that we were on the run," Rodney finishes with a derisive snort, all earlier tenderness forgotten.

"It was either that or that you've terminal cancer."

If his snort had been derisive, Rodney's response to this was positively cutting. "Y'know, it's probably a good thing now that I think about it that you never finished your doctorate. You'd have been a second-rate physicist at best with the way you keep jumping to conclusions. Next thing you know you'll be trying to convince us that the world really is flat, and the Earth doesn't revolve around the Sun after all."

This faintly alarms Iohannes (had the Terrans ever believed such things?), enough so that he misses the beginning of Jeannie's next outburst entirely, not really paying attention until she gets as far as, "...supposed to think? The only reason I never thought you were dead is I assumed that those, those merchants of death you work for would bother to tell me if you went and got yourself blown up-"

Then it's as if Iohannes has no choice, as if there's a direct line between his mind and his mouth, he has to say something. And maybe at some later time he'll think about it about how everything about Rodney makes him forget the barriers he put up long ago (the ones that kept him from believing any promise Father ever said, until he stopped bothering to make them; the ones that kept him from accepting any of the advances Nicolaa ever made, until she went and married Tomas Nauta instead; the ones that would keep him now from getting involved in an argument between Rodney and his sister, until it ended on its own). But, right now, none of that matters, he has to say something, and what he does say is, "I'd never let that happen."

Which seems to succeed at nothing so much as turning Rodney's ire on him, as he snaps, "Can we not talk about your self-destructive tendencies right now?"

Iohannes holds up both of his hands conciliatorily, but can't help pointing out, "It needed to be done."

"By you?"

"Better than someone else."

Rodney looks like he wants to say something for the longest time, balling his hands into fists at his sides in visible effort to contain himself.

He's heard Rodney say he's a terrible liar, but that's just not true. From what he knows about Rodney's pre-Atlantis work, he's been keeping secrets as part of his job for almost half his life. And, yes, he might babble when he's afraid and say things he shouldn't about nuclear weapons, but it's a different story entirely when he's angry. Rodney always knows exactly what he's saying when he's angry and exactly how to say it. It's one of the reasons why, for all he likes riling Rodney up, Iohannes tries to avoid real fights with him.

After what feels like forever, Rodney suddenly forces one hand out of a ball and reaches across, grabbing one of Iohannes' hands, which he'd been awkwardly holding in his lap. It's not something they usually do, the hand-holding, but Iohannes figures that he's just as uncomfortable thinking about the final days of the siege as he is and lets him, trying to ignore the heat rising in his cheeks.
"I-" Rodney begins, looking back at his sister, who's watching them with a curious, half-fond, half-surprised look. "Well, as you've probably guessed, things were... bad for a while where we were, and, yes, we very nearly got blown up – some of us," his eyes dart back towards Johannes, who rolls his own, "more than others – and, well, I'd a lot of time to think about it and I really didn't want the last thing you ever heard from me to be a half-censored tape delivered to you by men in suits, and, well, that's why I'm here – why we're here. 'Cause I wanted you to meet John too. 'Cause I know it's stupid, but I didn't want to die without telling you were right. Not about the dropping out of school thing, that was just plain stupid, what with how close you were to your doctorate, even if you were pregnant. But about the whole can't help who you love, even if they're an English major thing, and, well, I'm sorry."
Advena, Part Six

Chapter Notes

the last part of the "Advena" arc

It's their seventh day – and closing in on their seventh night – in Vancouver when Rodney walks out of his sister's kitchen to see John standing by the front window in the living room and peering out it in a way that screams more we're being surrounded by hostile natives than I'm spying on the neighbours. They've plans to leave the day after tomorrow, to head south to Area 51 so the scientists there can pester John about the bits of Ancient tech they've yet to identify, and his sister and her husband are using the opportunity to have a night out while he and John watch Madison. Not that Rodney's doing most of the watching. He leaves that to John, who he's discovered, much to his surprise, to be curiously good with children.

Not that John's doing much watching at the moment – at least, not of Madison, who's sprawled on the couch, very much asleep. He doesn't even turn around when Rodney comes out of the kitchen, though the light that pours through the door is far too bright for the darkened room, illuminated only by the flickering of Finding Nemo on the turned-down TV.

"John?" he asks, not knowing whether to be worried or amused by this latest behaviour. (During their foray into the local mall to get John clothing that wasn't US military issue, he'd been forced to explain both the purpose and the internal workings of the washing machines on display without making it obvious to anyone who might be listening that's what he was doing. And Rodney doesn't even want to think about the explanations that had been required in Barnes & Noble that had resulted in the purchase of almost five hundred dollars in history and political science books.) "Something wrong?"

John doesn't turn around, just makes a gesture they use in the field that means roughly quiet and enemy contacts and safeties off, which is vaguely alarming considering the most malicious elements Rodney has found in Vancouver since arriving at Jeannie's so far have been her elderly next door neighbour, Mrs. Chase, who never cleans up after her dog, and a bizarre traffic pattern somehow related to preparations for the Olympics that are to be held here five years hence. And, while annoying, neither exactly qualify as enemy contacts.

"John?"

He makes a come here, see gesture this time, and so that's exactly what he does, John carefully stepping back so Rodney can take his place, then leaning in close enough that his breath is warm against his ear when he whispers, "That car. The black one, parked on the corner."

Rodney looks. It's not so much a black car as as a black SUV, the kind you always see gangsters and government agents driving in movies.

"It's been there," he continues, "since almost the moment Kaleb and Jeannie left."

"That's almost three hours," Rodney mutters.

"I know."
"And it's not just the neighbours?"

"They have a red car, one with an H decal, and they left yesterday afternoon, all three of them together."

Stepping back from the window, "Do I want to know how you know this?"

"I notice things."

"There are so many things I could say to that."

"That's just hurtful."

"Says the man who can barely remember to open doors."

John gives a bark of laughter, one that has both their eyes darting towards Madison, who, luckily, sleeps straight through it. "It's not my fault," he says more quietly still, so Rodney has to strain to hear him, even though there can't be an inch between them, "that your planet is so backwards."

"You're the one who put us here."

"Again, not personally responsible for the failings of my entire race."

Frowning, "You consider humanity to be a failing?"

"Hardly," John says dryly. "I just wish you'd build proper doors."

"There is something seriously wrong with you, you realize that, don't you?"

He feels the other man shrug behind him. "So they tell me. But that doesn't change the fact that a strange car's been parked outside for almost three hours in the best spot on the street to see everything without being seen yourself."

"I think you're overreacting." The SGC probably has surveillance on them – on John, the last Ancient in two galaxies and their meal ticket to unlocking the secrets of the universe, if only they can get John to realize that Earthlings, despite appearances, don't actually already know them. So what if he doesn't know the science? Being able to do the maths is half the battle, and leaves Rodney with something interesting to do – here. The SUV's probably theirs. Who outside the SGC knows – or cares – they're here?

"I'm going out there."

"And doing what?" Rodney snorts. "Tapping on the window and asking if they're NID or VPD or CSIS or some other governmental alphabet soup agency?"

"Something like that," he says, which probably means that's exactly what he's planning on doing, and that he's not the slightest clue what the NID or CSIS might be, let alone what the difference is between them.

"And if they're not friendly?" the SGC wouldn't issue John a gun for the trip, saying they were having enough bureaucratic issues with the Atlantis Expedition – something about the EU and Commonwealth nations wanting a share of technology and personnel more commensurate to their financial contributions to the IOA (read: larger) – without sending an armed American Air Force officer across country lines.

"I'll figure something out."
"John-

"It'll only take a second. Be right-

Rodney grabs his arm as John turns for the door. "This isn't the Pegasus galaxy," he says, caught for a moment by the Ancient's too-intense stare. "We're not alone here, and..." He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket, hitting the speed dial that takes him straight through to the SGC's emergency phone line, "...there is such a thing as backup."

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It turns out the a couple of the IOA representatives – the British, Canadian, and Australian ones in particular – didn't like the idea of an alien running around their territories unwatched. Rodney rather thinks it has less to do with John being an alien and more to do with the fact that, of the two officers the Marines had sent to Pegasus originally, both were dead by John's hand before the end of the first year of the Expedition, but refrains from mentioning this to John, who takes the news with what seems like causal aplomb, shrugging it off like nothing these Terrans do actually matters to him. Instead, he sits at the floor in front of the couch and pulls of his notebook – the one he's doing all the equations in – and opens it to a blank page, staring at it unseeingly for the longest time. His hands clench at his sides, hidden almost completely from sight by the coffee table, like he's fighting the urge to hit something, but other than that he looks exactly like a man trying to write up a grocery list, or something like.

Rodney does the only thing he can do: he turns off the TV, grabs his computer, and takes a seat next to him. "So, we've two weeks – three tops – before the Daedalus arrives to take us home. Which means we've twenty-one days at most for you to finish your proof to the Riemann Hypothesis in time for it to be reviewed and published before the end of the year, so you can qualify for next year's Fields Medal, and while technically you'll still qualify with the birth date they cooked up for you for the 2010 prize, I hold out hope for you that by then we can have you on track for a proper Nobel. Something easy – medicine maybe."

John leans his head back against the couch and groans.

"I'm sorry, but, frankly, when they finally declassify the Stargate Program and I get the recognition I deserve, I'd rather spend the after-party talking about my discoveries than having to constantly explain to people that, yes, you do have a brain."

"Then don't."

"Well I'm sorry if I'm ruining your plans to pretend to be just another idiot flyboy, but the fact is you're not, so get over it and explain this proof to me so I can write it up for you."

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John's liberated a chair from the dining room and is sitting it in, backwards, about three feet from the television in his sister's living room when said sister and her husband arrive back from their date some two hours later. He's determinedly trying to suss out the plot of Doctor Strangelove with his very limited knowledge of the Cold War. During the commercials, he's explaining his proof to Rodney, who's still sitting in front of the couch, laptop actually balanced in his lap, trying to type up the monograph he'll need to submit to the the Clay Mathematics Institute if he ever wants to prove John's solved one of the Millennium Prize Problems. John's still not too keen on the idea, but he's willing to let Rodney write it up in his name in exchange for assistance avoiding Doctor Jackson when they're at Area 51, which Rodney would have given anyway, so it all works out.
"Well," Jeannie says, "I guess it was too much to hope that two grown men could manage to put a three-year-old to bed on their own."

"She's in her pajamas and her teeth are brushed," John says absently, frowning at the TV, Rodney, however, does look up from his computer. "I tried, but she has John wrapped around her little finger."

"And he," Jeannie says, sitting down on the floor next to him while Kaleb gathers up Madison, "has you wrapped around his."

He tries snorting derisively at this – the kind of snort he saves for Kavanaugh’s more preposterous ideas – but it comes out all wrong, not quite qualifying as a bark of laughter (it's too soft for that) and a few decibels too much to count as a what can you do? sigh. Feeling he has no other option after such a pathetic showing, he hits save and passes over the laptop. "Tell me how this sounds so far."

Jeannie gives him a curious look and does as he asks.

Two minutes in she says, "Is this what I think it is?"

"Depends on what you think it is."

"But you're an astrophysicist."

"It's not mine."

"Then who's is it?"

Rodney tilts his head towards John, who's still frowning at the television screen.

"But he's a pilot. A military pilot."

"Karl Schwarzchild derived his solution Einstein's field equations while an artillery lieutenant on the eastern front during World War One."

"Schwarzchild is a special case and you know it."

"So's John."

"How so?"

"John's..." Rodney trails off, unable to find a word that comes anywhere near describing the miracle that is John. Because John shouldn't exist.

(If it's not just that he should be dead so many times over with what they know about Alteran stasis technology and the wounds he'd been suffering from when they found him. It's not even his propensity for throwing himself into situations where the best case scenario is that they'll find all of the pieces he'll be blown into at the end of the day. No, its the way John can even smile after having to live his entire life in a city under Siege by the Wraith and then wake up ten thousand years later to fight the same enemy, knowing that they were stronger than ever; the way he's anything less than a sociopath after being raised more by a sentient city with more personality disorders than rooms than by the father who apparently drilled it into his head that his life meant nothing if he isn't willing to do whatever is necessary to do what needs to be done.)

"...it's classified," he finishes unsatisfactorily.
It's her turn to snort, but goes back to reading the proof without questioning further.

Two days later, they're just on the American side of the border, heading for Area 51, when John says apropos of nothing in particular, "Terra is strange."

"But you like it?"

"When we've not been underground? Yeah, I think so."
Chapter Summary

Evan Lorne would have never joined the Stargate program if his girlfriend hadn't cheated on him.

Chapter Notes

takes place before/after "The Intruder"

This is how Evan gets into the Stargate Program:

He's in Afghanistan on the twelfth month of a tour that was supposed to last only eight when he gets a letter from Rebecca, his girlfriend of the last five years, telling him she's pregnant. Three months pregnant to be exact, which is rather hard to reconcile when he's not seen her in four-and-a-half, since the leave he was able to take in Dubai. Perhaps he should have tried to be more understanding considering he's been more or less gone the past year, but that's rather hard to do with the knowledge that she's been cheating on him fresh in his mind, and he summarily trades phone privileges with one of the lieutenants in his squadron and ends things then and there with a message on her answering machine.

The thing is, though, Becca's father holds a rather important, if seemingly minor, position in the Air Force and believes his daughter when she says that she's carrying Evan's child, and kicks up a storm when he finds out Evan has no intention of marrying her – or, at the very least, continuing to support her. What follows is a very swift paternity suit that's over before the kid's ever even born, the end result of which is a DNA test that proves his ex-best friend is the father and a carefully worded commendation in Evan's jacket thanking him for his cooperation with the investigation.

Evan's still not sure how the blood sample from the paternity test wound up in Doctor Beckett's hands, only that two weeks after the suit has been quietly closed and his life has gone back to as normal as it gets in a war-zone, he gets orders to report to Peterson AFB as soon as the transport planes can get him there. His final plane is met at the exit ramp by a woman in Air Force uniform and Scottish man in plaid he'll later learn is Doctor Beckett. They take him to an empty hanger near the edge of the airfield and hand him a strange, pyramidal device.

"Think on, Major Lorne" says the woman – Major Samantha Carter of SG-1 he'll later learn.

What the hell, Evan thinks and does as she asks, nearly dropping the device when it begins to glow faintly as it fills the room with a strange, ethereal music.

Doctor Beckett and Major Carter cannot contain their smiles.

(Later, he'll learn that he's the first success they've had in identifying someone with the gene needed to activate Ancient technology. But right then he's more concerned about what they're telling him
about travel to other planets to pay attention to the genetics portion of their offer.)

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Evan's on M2X-785 when the Atlantis Expedition makes contact with Earth. By the time his gate team arrives back at the SGC, the senior staff who'd gated back have already been sent on their leaves. In fact, he doesn't even realize they're back in contact with Atlantis until he's talking to Captain Farrell about his own mission (which was supposed to be a three-week humanitarian effort to vaccinate the local population for a mysterious plague, and had ended up with him having to do everything short of shooting the local chieftain to convince him that, no, he did not want to marry his fourteen-year-old daughter, thank you very much) in the mess.

"Sounds like something Jackson might appreciate."

"Yeah," Evan says as he looks about. He doesn't see the archaeologist anywhere, which is odd because, normally, Jackson would be all over something like this like white on rice. "Is he sick or something?"

"Nah. He's eyeball-deep in the Atlantis stuff. From what I hear, Lam had to threaten him sedatives to get him out of his lab the other day."

Frowning, "What Atlantis stuff?"

"You didn't hear? We made contact with Atlantis while you were gone. Or they with us. Turns out they didn't have the power to get back. Anyway, they managed to send a transmission back, and the brass used the ZPM they found in Egypt to send them reinforcements and stuff. Weir and couple others came back for debriefing. Brought an Ancient with them. Last in the whole universe, apparently. Jackson's over the moon."

"I can imagine." It makes Evan feel sorry for the poor guy. No one, not even an alien, deserved to be on the receiving end of one of Doctor Jackson's obsessive streaks. Particularly not if he's the last one in the universe.

"Yeah. The Ancient wasn't happy with his constant questions. Rumour has it he's a bit of a hard-ass – you remember Colonel Sumner and his second, that young kid, Ford?" At his nod, Farrell continues, "The Ancient killed both of them. And, no, that's not a rumour. Doctor Weir confirmed it herself."

"Why'd he do that?"

"Dunno. Didn't catch that bit."

Evans shakes his head. He likes Grant Farrell, he really does, but he spends a bit too much time talking and not quite enough listening to anything. As it is, the only reason his career hasn't stalled further is because he, like Evan, has the Ancient gene. He's not sure of the details, but General O'Neill worked out some sort of deal that means Farrell gets to play light-switch for the scientists rather than go off-world. It's a good plan – Farrell's old team has gotten into a lot less trouble since he was pulled – but it means that Grant's chances of promotion are nil. He's probably looking at early retirement too, but, again, Evan doesn't know all the details.

It's rather a shame, actually, as Farrell's a much better pilot than he is an officer, but at least light-switch duty keeps him at home with his kids. That's got to be something, at least, when what of their colleagues aren't being shot at off-world are being shot at in the Middle East.

"Next thing I know, you'll be telling me that he tried to kill Jackson in the middle of the Gate Room
when he asked one too many questions about his mother."

It's Farrell's turn to shake his head, laughing a little as he does. "There's still time for that: the Daedalus isn't expected back for another ten days."

The process by which he becomes the XO of the military forces on Atlantis goes something like this:

Evan's called into General O'Neill's office the evening he gets back from 785. Nearly all the man's personal effects are in boxes, and, according to Farrell and several more reputable sources, he was supposed to have left for Washington three days ago. By the stack of files still on his desk, Evan figures O'Neill will still be here at Christmas.

"How do you feel about paperwork, Major Lorne?" the General asks as he walks into the room.

"Sir?"

"Been doing some research. Seems you're one of the few people here who ever gets all this mess," he gestures at the stack of folders, "done on time."

"You asking me to do your paperwork, Sir?" It's not that strange of a request. Not considering that rumour has it O'Neill hadn't even known he'd had an office before, when he was just the colonel in charge of SG-1.

"Hmm? No. Tempting, but apparently these are all my eyes only. Or so Walter tells me. No, I've discovered that having a good second is half of what it takes to be a good CO, and the Atlantis Expedition is in desperate need of good officers at the moment."

Evan's rapidly approaching understanding, but he's still not there yet, so he just nods like he knows what his superior is going on about and waits for the explanation that will hopefully come. It's sort of the best way to deal with a commanding officer like O'Neill.

"I'm sending you to Area 51, to help Colonel Sheppard pick out the officers he wants to take with him back to Atlantis. You're to be his new XO."

Majors generally don't become seconds-in-command of military garrisons, and he tells O'Neill this.

"John's only a lieutenant colonel, and even then just barely. But he's the only man for the job, so..." He shrugs, and Evan rather gets the impression that, if the General let himself slip into clichés, he'd say something like needs must. "You're flight leaves in," he glances at his watch, "five hours. Walter has the files you'll be needing. Oh, and Lorne?"

"Yessir?" he asks, stepping halfway back into the office.

"Good job on 785."

Evan grins and goes off to find Sergeant Harriman.

After Evan lands at Area 51 the next morning, it takes him an hour to track down Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard. Not so much because no one seems to know where he is – the young airman who'd met him at the exit ramp had told him he'd be in Doctor McKay's labs, – but more because no one seems to know where Doctor McKay's labs are. He eventually finds them several floors
underground, down a corridor that can only be accessed by a taking moving sidewalk that someone's
installed along side a supercollider Evan's fairly certain doesn't legally exist.

Despite all the smoke and mirrors to get there, the door's open when he arrives, and brightly lit
enough that he almost forgets how far they are underground. There's a flock of whiteboards in the far
corner of the room, all filled with maths and diagrams he doesn't even claim to begin to understand.
Standing in front of the nearest one is Colonel Carter, who looks like she's two-minutes away from
screaming, and a man he doesn't recognize but who is wielding a black marker and eraser with
frightening determination.

"Colonel Sheppard?" he asks, standing in the doorway.

Without looking away from the whiteboard, both of them pointed towards the nearest corner, and
continued with their unintelligible argument. There are a couple of worktops pushed into the corner
(the sort of plywood-and-black-plastic numbers that wouldn't have looked out of place in his high
school chem lab, right down to the silver knobs for the Bunsen burners) and, at one of them, Evan
can see a dark-haired man in uniform sitting now that he's in the room proper. He's not sure what to
think, considering nothing about the man, from his not-regulation haircut to his unlaced boots
propped up on the worktop amid half-a-dozen reference books, makes him look like either a
lieutenant colonel or a science nerd.

"Colonel Sheppard?" he repeats when he close enough to be heard over the bickering.

The man looks up, looks him up and down, and asks, "You're not an anthropologist, are you?"

"Er, no."

"Then that's me." He flips a page of his book. Or, rather, Evan can tell upon closer examination, he
flips a page of the golf magazine tucked inside his book.

"I'm Major Lorne. I'm to be your new executive officer."

Something flickers in Sheppard's eyes at that, but it's brief and dark and a moment's reflection makes
him think better of asking about it, if he hadn't imagined it entirely. Then he calls across the room,
"Hear that, Rodney? They're giving me staff now. I guess I must be doing something right."

Rodney shoots a glare at Sheppard that makes Evan feel singed by association. "Yes, yes. You're
brilliant. Women want you, men want to be you. Now get over here and do something useful for a
change."

Sheppard pouts (genuinely pouts, in a way he'd otherwise have thought had been surgically removed
from his superior officers) but stands up anyway, closing the tome he was pretending to read and
slipping the golf magazine into a half-open drawer beneath. "I've told you, the portae never interested
me, so I never paid any particular attention to them."

Shaking her head, "Be that as it may," Colonel Carter says, "there has to be something you
remember, something you may think of as common knowledge that might save us a couple of weeks
work."

He watches as Sheppard examines one or two of the closer whiteboards without much enthusiasm.
"Well, the only thing I can think of is you're going to have problems building this navale of yours.
Pegasus portae have priority over all other portae in the system – newer technology. I dunno if it's
possible to work around. Might be. Probably is, since you managed to find a way to dial without a
permutatum. Other than that..."
The others nod as if this is somehow straightforward English, though Rodney's already scowling at one of the whiteboards, preparing to erase large swaths of it, as if to say you couldn't have told us this earlier? For a moment, it looks like a genuine row might ensue, but then Sheppard suggests they see if they can't track down lunch before starting on whatever paperwork Evan's certainly brought with him.

"God, Coffee," Rodney says longingly, and, apparently, that's all the agreement that's needed, as he's back on the moving sidewalk, heading for the elevators, within moments.

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Evan finds out his new commanding officer is an alien in this manner:

They're sitting on a couple of torn, vinyl bench seats from an old transport van by the main runway, watching a couple of F-302s take off and going over the personnel files Evan's brought with him. They're in the shade of one of the nearby hangers, but it's approaching hot enough that they're going to have to go inside before too long or risk heat stroke because, while it's barely ten in the morning, it's still August in Nevada. Nevada desert at that.

Sheppard's showing no indication of wanting to go inside, however, and continues to flip through files, looking up at the sky every time he hears a jet engine. It occurs to Evan they might be waiting on something, or someone, but they've not made any final staffing decisions and no one's mentioned anything, so he can only assume Sheppard just likes watching the planes. Evan can't blame him – the F-302s are, officially, the coolest things ever – but he's beginning to rue the heat exhaustion.

"I like this one," the lieutenant colonel says, passing over a file. "Explosive expert."

Evan's says something – he doesn't remember what exactly, just something about how he feels Lieutenant Cadman's a good choice, and maybe they should see if there are any O-3s they like, because, out of the six officer positions they've to fill, they've given four now over to lieutenants and if, God forbid, something were to happen to both him and Sheppard, they should probably have someone with a bit more experience than that should be on hand. Because, like it or not, that kind of thing sometimes happens where the SGC is involved.

Sheppard shudders in agreement, saying, "Yeah. I kinda hate to think what would have happened if Elizabeta had let Ford take over things."

He's not read all the reports yet. Evan's only been assigned to Atlantis for thirty-six hours now, and most of that's been spent with his new CO, trying to figure out what type of staff they'll need, and not reading up on his new posting. It's terrible, it's reprehensible, and the perfectionist in Evan hates it, but it's just not been feasible. He's settled for reading the dossier he has on the Wraith instead and figures he'll be able to catch up on the rest during the eighteen days it will take the Daedalus to get them across the void between galaxies. Still, he feels it's safe to assume Elizabeta is Doctor Weir, and asks, "Why would she have done that?" wondering what could have possibly been going on in Pegasus that its Expedition commander would think of bypassing the natural chain-of-command after Colonel Sumner's death (or, as Farrell might put it, murder).

That earns him a sharp look. After a moment, during which Evan feels he's being scrutinized like not even Becca's father had done before their first date, this turns into a deep, braying laugh. "You really don't know, do you?"

Evan shakes his head bewilderedly. He's beginning to think everyone who went to Pegasus is mad, which isn't to say that anyone who works for any length of time for the SGC isn't mad, but this is a different sort of madness. The kind brought about by close quarters and extreme circumstances, to
which no outsider can ever be a part, or ever truly understand. Particularly when he hasn't been able to read the mission reports yet.

Perhaps sensing this, Sheppard holds out a hand as if introducing himself for the first time. "Iohannes Ianidedus Licinus Pastor, tribunus in the Lantean Guard, lieutenant colonel in the American Air Force, and John Sheppard to most folks."

"You're Doctor Jackson's Ancient."

The Ancient who, according to Farrell, had killed both Colonel Sumner and young Lieutenant Ford.

Now, normally, Evan has nothing against aliens as long as they're not trying to take over and/or destroy Earth, he could care less. It's horrible, he knows, but for him the SGC was always more about strange new worlds than new life and new civilizations.

Still, nothing about Colonel Sheppard fits with what he's heard about the Ancients, or the Ancient who was supposed to have murdered (fragged, the unhelpful part of his mind suggests) two Air Force officers for reasons no one's clear on but most doubt were for the greater are supposed to be... well, Evan's not sure what, but he'd rather thought they'd be a bit like the Tok'ra, who are, with the exception of Colonel Carter's late father, too wrapped up in their self-righteousness and technological superiority to care about less advanced cultures, much less join their militaries, as this one seems to have.

Besides, Sheppard's too normal, too human, to be one of them. Sure, he seems to have some technical knowledge of the Stargates, but Evan had just put that down to an advanced degree the other man mightn't have liked to own up to, given the way big military looked on scientists.

But an alien? An alien who'd killed two humans without (or so the story goes) any remorse? Not something he'd have guessed in a million years.

Wrinkling his nose, Sheppard – Iohannes – tells him, "I prefer Alteran."

And that is that.

In the end, they decide upon four lieutenants and two captains. The lieutenants are all Marines and one of the O3s is a Navy military engineer, which should make the JSC happy. The last is Captain Antonio Rodriguez, who's been with the SGC since almost it's inception and has a service record that makes Evan feel under-qualified for his job.

He and Sheppard are on their way to speak with the officers they've chosen after a particularly unpleasant teleconference with some of the IOA representatives. They walk in silence, mostly because the IOA had flat-out rejected most of the security plans Sheppard had recommended them, and Evan doesn't want to say anything for fear of facing the brunt of his anger. Normally, Evan wouldn't have the slightest problem with this – he's the XO, he's supposed to do these things so the men under their command don't have to – but he's still not entirely sure what to make of the Ancient that is his new CO. The rumours all seem contradictory and, while Sheppard doesn't seem to be the hard-ass Farrell had thought, the fact remains he'd still shot the last two officers to set foot in his city.

In fact, that's the one thing the rumours all agree on – that Atlantis is John Sheppard's – and the powers that be are hesitant to upset him over-much for fear of losing access to the city, at least until they can figure out just how much control over it Sheppard really has. This, the rumours claim, is why they'd made him an O-5 just weeks after commissioning him as a major, though others claim
that there was some political pressure involved from Canada and the EU as well.

Still, there's a black cloud about Sheppard as they make their way through the warren of tunnels to the conference room they're supposed to be meeting their new support staff in. Even if the lieutenant colonel appears outwardly undisturbed by the IOA's decision, people are scuttling out of the way to avoid him as they pass. Evan can't really blame him, considering the work that must have gone into those plans – and Sheppard had offered four or five contingencies, - but he also understands the IOA's position:

The most extreme plan calls for the relocation of Atlantis to a different planet in the Pegasus galaxy, the building of around seventy defence satellites to picket that system, and a fleet of at least half-a-dozen 304s dedicated to eradicating the Wraith. The IOA had claimed, rightly, that this is infeasible for the sheer reason that the cost of such an endeavour is almost twice the GDP of the entire planet for a decade.

The least involves the transfer of almost the entirety of the matériel and personnel at the SGC's disposal to Atlantis, which, while doable, is far too much American military presence for an international contingency to countenance. Besides, there's the justifiable fear that the Replicators aren't as defeated as they hope, and that the goa'uld might use this opportunity as a chance to rally their forces against Earth. The SGC and it's forces must stay where they are, and there's no backing to recreate it's forces in a different galaxy.

Whatever other evils might exist in the universe, the IOA's not likely to change their stance until the Wraith become a direct problem for Earth, and so Atlantis' increased military presence is barely going to be enough men to constitute a full company. Which means they're going to have two-hundred soldiers, airmen, and Marines to defend a city the size of Manhattan and a civilian population twice that (after the increase) to protect in the most hostile environment known to mankind, and not even a 304 in the galaxy full-time.

Evan would be in a bad mood too, if it would do anyone any good.

Still, he let's Sheppard sulk as they walk. Not that skulking is the proper word for it. It's more a tangible feeling of disappointment, as if humanity as failed to meet the lieutenant colonel's expectations once again.

The silence continues until they're almost at the conference room, and just when Sheppard looks like he's about to say something, they hear a voice echoing up the hall.

"Have you read the dossier on the Wraith?" asks a second, scandalized voice that could only be Cadman's. "I wouldn't feed my drill instructor to them, and that man was the devil incarnate."

"So's McKay." Captain Rodriguez – there's no mistaking that voice – insists.

"He can't be that bad," says a third. "Sides, the brass wouldn't have sent him if they thought he was a killer."

There's a snort, and then, "You know what I really want to know? How if this Ancient they found decided it was okay to off Sumner and Ford, why he didn't decide to do the same with McKay. He, at least, would've deserved it."
And that appears to be all that Sheppard is willing to take, because the lieutenant colonel appears to steel himself before carefully, casually, coolly, walking into the room a second later and, if the looks on the faces of the officers in question are anything to go by, this is more frightening than if he'd burst into the room shouting.

"Hi," Sheppard says as they stand and salute, his returning one sloppy enough that it has to be intentional. After a moment, he frowns and tells them to stand at ease, that he doesn't stand on ceremony, and kicks out a chair from a nearby table. Twisting it around, he sits in it backwards and folds his arms over the edge, the fingers of one hand drumming slightly against the thick black bracer that's sticking out from beneath his opposite sleeve. It strikes Evan as he follows suit, taking a seat at a nearby table, that almost everything his new CO does, from unlaced shoes on up, has to be intentional, though towards what end, he's not the slightest idea.

"So," Sheppard says, "I was going to begin by talking about the Wraith, and what I'm going to want you to do when we get back to Atlantis..." He waves a hand dismissively, in a way that sincerely comes across as and all that other official shit, and continues, "But it's been pointed out to me that some of you may have a problem with the current leadership structure, so let's get some things out of the way:

"First things first, yes, I am what you call an Ancient. You can all me John Sheppard. And, yes, I did killed the original legatus of the Expedition, Colonel Sumner, to keep him from being fed upon by a Wraith queen. I also shot Lieutenant Ford to keep him from gating off world when doing so would have given away our position. If you've a problem with either of those facts, fine. You'll probably change your mind after your first encounter with the Wraith. If you don't, well, you probably won't last long in the Pegasus galaxy.

"More importantly, though," Sheppard continues, his voice barely changing even as everything about him grows harder, more determined, "I'd like to remind you that Doctor McKay's one of the only reasons the Expedition lasted as long as did has. If it wasn't for him, Atlantis would have been destroyed so many times over that it doesn't bear thinking about.

"So, you see, Doctor McKay is rather vital to the continued success of this Expedition. You lot, however, are not. I can get anyone to shoot down Wraith; it doesn't actually take a lot of skill. I chose you lot because you were the best in your individual fields, but I can make-do with second-best if necessary. Goodness knows we worked with less during the War. So, if any of you still feel like, oh, feeding him to the Wraith, you're free to leave right now."

There's a pause. No one moves or says anything. If Evan knew what to say or do right now, he would, but he doesn't, so he continues to watch.

Three of the lieutenants – Miles, Sheffield, and Anderson – are in various stages of guilt, with heads down and eyes averted. The Navy engineer, Pritchard, is stony-faced, while Rodriguez is slowly turning a shade of pink not often seen in Marine captains. (It's Cadman's reaction that's the most interesting, though, her chin jutting forward and her lips narrowing to a hard line in a way that suggests she wants the chance to tell Rodriguez off as well. Evan doesn't know Laura well, but he's seen her around the SGC. If he didn't outrank her so, he'd rather like the chance to know her better.)

Sheppard narrows his eyes at Captain Rodriguez, whom he seems to know was responsible for the earlier comments, though, again, no one's said anything since they entered. "That means you."

"Sir?" the captain asks, taken aback – also something not usually seen in long-serving Marines.

"You heard me. You can't honestly tell me you've changed how you feel in the last five minutes, so you're free to leave. More than free, actually. I don't work with soldiers I can't trust."
"But sir-" Rodriguez gives Evan the closest thing to a help me look he's ever seen from a Marine.

"It's the Colonel's decision, Captain."

"With all due respect, Sir, this is bull. You can't get rid of officers just because you don't like how they think."

Sheppard shrugs, as if to say try me.

"I've worked," the captain continues, "for the SGC for the last eight years. I was Major Henley's second on SG-6 for three years before accepting this post. You can't just boot me from the Atlantis mission because I happen to not like one of the civilian scientists."

"Take it up with Elizabeta if you want, but she doesn't like it when her people are threatened either. Particularly when Wraith are involved."

"You can't be serious."

Sheppard is. Very much so.

No one tells him that the head of Atlantis' military contingent and the head of it's science and research department are involved.

No one has to.

Evan never sees anything incriminating, nothing he'd be forced to report, but it's obvious. It's not just the Rodriguez incident; it's a dozen little things, things only he's close enough to notice on the long flight to Pegasus. Things he chooses not to notice, for their sakes.

(It might've been a long, strange road getting here, but, the more he learns of the Expedition, the prouder he is to get the chance to serve with men such as these. So what if it's against the Uniform Code? They deserve their happiness. They all do.)

Chapter End Notes

Heres - Latin for Heir, in this case implying second-in-command
Navale - Latin for Port, in this case implying Space Station
Permutatum - Latin for Exchange, ie a manual exchange, switchboard, or DHD
"See that? See? See the way he lights up at the mention of weapons systems? It's like Doctor Vogel at the mention of pastries. I swear, I think half of his thing with Atlantis is because she's got the biggest and the badest weapons systems this side of ever," Rodney points out laughingly to Zelenka, who's working with almost equally manic excitement at the console next to them.

Iohannes can only roll his eyes at this. "Atlantis and I don't have a thing, Rodney."

Which, of course, causes Rodney to snort as derisively as he can manage while practically high on the excitement of finding a mostly intact Alteran research base. Which is to say, not very. But he still manages to sound condescending with ease when he says, "Oh, please. If you were any more involved, you'd've been covered in more than blood when I found you in the control chair."

Zelenka chokes a bit at this comment and mutters something in his native tongue about this being more information than he ever needed to know.

One day he'll tell the Czech that Atlantis updated his translation matrix after he got back from Terra to include nineteen of the twenty-three languages spoken by the various members of the Expedition (the others of which are rarely ever used and therefore difficult for her to create matrices for), but not today. So instead he smirks at his amator and says, "There's no need to be jealous."

"Did I say I was jealous?" Rodney snorts, sounding genuinely surprised by the comment. "'Lantis is going to be, though, when you tell her about what we found here."

"'Lantis doesn't really do jealousy."

"She will she finds out about this."

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes again, "Just tell me how they managed to soup up the space guns."

"Space guns? And to think," Rodney says, looking over his laptop at Zelenka with a long-suffering sort of expression, "Stanford gave him a doctorate as part of his cover. Granted, it's only in mathematics, but still. All this talk of space guns makes you wonder why we bothered working so hard for ours."

"Would you rather," he asks, his patience starting to wear thin, "I called it an arcusadcelerato
magnetibus inerrantibus sagittariorum?"

"No, but is it too much to ask for you to act your IQ when there aren't any of your soldiers around to offend by using words with more than two syllables?"

"Alright." Iohannes grabs Rodney's arm and tugs him across the room, to a corner where there aren't quite so many ears. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean what's going on? I'm just-"

"Being an ass?" he suggests.

"You're not stupid," Rodney protests, pulling his arms from Iohannes' grasp before crossing them in front of his chest. Mercifully, he keeps his voice down. "I don't know who drummed it into your head that you are, but you're not. You're brilliant. Maybe not on my level, but you're certainly up there with Radek in the grand scale of things, even if your speciality is speculative mathematics and not high-energy physics."

"Your point being?"

"My point being that I know you find this interesting-"

"I said it was cool," he demurs, which earns him a quieting, almost plaintive look before Rodney continues-

"-and not just because it's a cool space gun that can fire multiple bursts without having to wait to recharge, unlike the one on the satellite. No, you're interested in how it works and why it was abandoned and even if you knew those five people whose bodies we found here, only you won't let yourself show it because you're too busy pretending to be John Sheppard."

"I am John Sheppard." At least, as far as the Expedition is concerned, he is. It's easier this way. It keeps the awkward questions to a minimum, and lets him forget — sometimes — that he's alone on Atlantis. Surrounded by people, yes, but completely alone because he is the last of his kind.

(Sometimes he even thinks the Daedalus shouldn't have rescued him from the jumper he was trying to pilot into the side of a hive ship during the Siege, and it's become increasingly more apparent to him as time wears on that he doesn't have a place in the universe. Not as Iohannes Ianidentus Licinus Pastor. He still doesn't know how he feels about that.)

"No," Rodney insists, one of his hands coming up to grip his biceps, "You're not. I've seen it. You may in fact be as much of a bad-ass as you'd like to seem, but you — Iohannes, or Licinus, or whatever the hell you went by before we found you, — you are more than that."

"I never said I wasn't."

"You never said you were either. Hell, I don't even know if you like the name John."

One name's as good as any he feels like saying, but doesn't because it will accomplish nothing. "You gave it to me," he says instead.

"That's not the point."

He raises an eyebrow.

"The point," the scientist continues with a sigh, "is no one here cares if you're an Ancient or not.
You don't have to pretend to be something you're not."

"Who said I was pretending?" even Iohannes can hear the defensive note in his voice.

"Fine, whatever. Do whatever you want, it's your life, but don't bite my head off if I want you to actually, God forbid, be happy." Rodney is already turning heel as he says this last, heading back towards Zelenka and the consoles he'd been pouring over with excitement just minutes earlier.

Iohannes stays where he is for the longest time, just thinking, before one of Rodney's newest minions approaches him. He doesn't know the young woman's name, only that she can't even be twenty-five, and that she'd taken it upon herself to see the bodies they'd found in the outpost put into body-bags and placed with dignity in the back of one of the jumpers, rather than being left to rot beneath the stormy Dorandaran sky. He also doesn't know whether or not to thank her for that — it's hard to forget, with the tangible proof in the hold of one of his ships, that the bodies are ten thousand plus years old and so is he, and all he wants to do some days is just forget. He doesn't even want to think about performing the funerals they deserve, not when the anthropologists will be begging him to watch and the medical staff will be fighting him to examine the bodies first.

The young woman — girl, really — grows visibly nervous as she draws closer. "I—" she begins, ducking her head. "All of the bodies," she says, holding out her hand, in which five pendants are gathered, their silver chains dangling loosely around her fingers, "were wearing these. We thought they might be dog tags. Don't worry," she adds hastily, "we marked which came from which. We just thought..." She ducks her head again, checks flushing, and walks away before she finishes her thought.

Iohannes doesn't have to do more than glance to see that she's right — the small pendants, of much the same design as the portae, served much the same purpose, for those rare chances in the War that they were able to recover the bodies of their dead. He'd left his own behind in the auxiliary control room after it had been hit and now wears tags of a different style in their place, with a different name.

Unable to help himself, he glances at the names inscribed on both sides of the circular discs:

Alitia Agnis Perita, Ollaferas Torcus Peritus, Aegidius Timal Magister, and Onoria Preco Discipula are the first four — people he'd known only vaguely, as colleagues of Father's, all of whom he remembered as having died while Iohannes was stationed at Tirianus, though he doesn't recall anything about their deaths as having been part of a research accident. That's not surprising, though. Dozens had died while he'd been at Tirianus; he doesn't remember the specifics for very many of them.

But the last, the last he'd known very well, and he remembers all too clearly how he'd died.

"Rodney?" he calls when he can breathe again. "Zelenka? Pack it in."

"What?" one of them asks, and, for the life of him, he can't tell who. Not now.

"Pack it in. We're heading back. Now."

"But—"

"This is Project Arcturus," Iohannes says, and swallows around all the words that want to follow.
Dei et Viri - Latin for Gods and Men
"It was called Project Arcturus," he repeats when they're in Elizabeta's office, and he's sitting on her couch and decidedly not looking at anyone in the room. He's flipping the last pendant over and over his fingers with somewhat embarrassing dedication but, for the life of him, Iohannes can't make himself stop. To do so would allow him to see the name inscribed there, and that's not something he can dwell on at the moment. "Don't ask me for the details, I don't know them."

"According to what we've been able to translate so far, it's ultimate goal was to render ZedPMs obsolete." Despite the way he's hovering next to Iohannes, clearly concerned, Rodney manages to sound excited about this.

Colonel Caldwell asks about the project. He's scheduled to leave the day after tomorrow, but he's been fishing for reasons to stick around longer, and this information just might do it. (Iohannes doesn't mind, not really, but for all he appreciates the man's skills, there's something gruff about the man that puts him on edge. He wants to like Caldwell, rather desperately in fact, but there's just something off about the man that he can't put his finger on. Perhaps it's that he's Terran, and he's expecting Alteran things of the closest thing he has to a superior officer in this galaxy.)

"Well," Rodney tries to explain, "a Zero Point Module is an artificial region of subspace time – a miniature universe in a bottle, if you will. It extracts vacuum energy from this region of subspace until it reaches maximum entropy. Our research shows that the Ancients may have had some way of recharging them, but for the most part found it easier to simply make new ones. Rather like alkaline batteries, actually."

Zelenka takes up the thread from there, continuing, "Project Arcturus' goal was to extract vacuum energy from our own space-time, making it potentially as powerful as the scope of the universe itself."

"It strikes me as something the Ancients would have tried first, even before ZPMs."

"We did," Iohannes says, prying his eyes away from the pendant. He's staring a hole in the floor now, but it's better than staring at the name emblazoned on the silver disk and all it represents, though he'd thought he'd long since come to terms with Forcul's death, "Potentiae were easier."

"Yes, well, extracting zero point energy from our own universe is definitely trickier."

"And by trickier he means it's hard to find a way to do without making the universe uninhabitable. Hey," he adds, mildly affronted when they all turn and look at him, complete and utter surprise present on all of their faces (well, except Rodney, who just looks smug), "I am Alteran. I do in fact know what I'm talking about."

At their continued looks he clarifies: "Sometimes. And, besides, Project Arcturus was Father's biggest argument with the Council, before the Exodus. His letters for a while were full of nothing but
complaints about it – thought it was just a pipe dream, and that Forcul and the Council should be focused on other ways of ending the war."

Silence greets this, and, when he looks up again, the confusion has spread to Rodney as well. "And of course that means nothing to you." He sighs and holds up the pendant in his hands. "Forcul was Andeo Mael Forcul Magister. He was the head of Project Arcturus – which, as you can see, was a total failure."

Rodney frowns at this, like he wants to ask more, but still says, "Failure, yes. Total, no. It could've turned the tide of war, had it worked."

"Yes. And it didn't."

"The Dorandans still managed to inflict massive damage on the attacking Wraith fleet before they were destroyed."

"I'm not saying that they didn't put up a hell of a fight, but the war was like that: We'd destroy ten, twenty hives at a time, but more would keep on coming. Our technology was superior in every way, we just didn't have the manpower they did."

"So what went wrong?" Elizabeta asks.

Iohannes shrugs. He'd never asked Father for the details. There was a large part of him that suspected that no one ever knew — that someone had piloted a jumper to Doranda, seen the wreckage, and assumed the worst without searching for clues. Certainly, if any Alteran had landed at the outpost after the accident, he or she would have taken the bodies away. His people hadn't been religious for longer than Atlantis had been around, but they still respected their dead, particularly when so few in those last years left corpses behind for others to bury.

Zelenka answers for him, "The logs indicate there was a major malfunction, forcing the Ancients in the bunker to shut everything down, including the weapon. And then, as Colonel Sheppard said, the Wraith sent more ships, and the planet was completely decimated in the attack."

"So, if the malfunction hadn't occurred, the Ancients could have saved the planet?"

"Definitely."

"Possibly," Iohannes corrects. "Don't sugar-coat this, Rodney. We tried a lot of things," Father's Attero Device, for one, and bringing Tirianus to Lantea for another. They'd a thousand other insane plans, but one by one they all failed, until the Council saw no alternative but to run back to Avalon, tails between their legs, and consign Atlantis to the deepest depths, alone and forgotten like a thousand other devices that had outlived their need. "You'll notice that none of them actually worked."

"This Forcul of yours was obviously rushed into testing before his team had perfected a means of effectively controlling the power output. If they'd had more time, it's quite likely history would have played out differently on that planet – possibly in this galaxy. But, as John said, they were desperate, and loosing a war they'd already been fighting for a hundred years."

"More importantly, they were like... this close."

"And you believe you can finish their work?"

"I do."
"We do," Zelenka insists.

"What about you, John?" Elizabeta asks when he doesn't offer ready agreement. "What do you think?"

"I-" he starts, his eyes going back to the pendant in his hand. Quickly, he closes his fingers around the pendant, the smooth edges of the disk digging into his skin, and ducks his head further, so he doesn't have to look at anyone, doesn't have to see them seeing how deeply this news, ten millennia and ten years old, is effecting him.

Swallowing, he tries again, this time managing to get out, "If it can be done, they're the ones who can do it," before quickly standing and leaving Elizabeta's office as fast as he can without making it look like he's running away any more than he already is.

He can't take this today, he really can't. He's been back on Atlantis for almost two months now, but the memory of Terra, with all of it's descendants, lingers, reminding Iohannes of the thoughts he had when he was flying his nuke-filled jumper into the side of a hive ship. It's one thing to realize that the Terrans are shaping the face of the universe when he thinks he's about to die; it's another entirely to live through that realization and know that there's no place for him left in the universe.

That's not true, Atlantis tells him as he's stepping into the vectura and letting it take him to as far a corner of the city as possible, away from all the people and the noise and the whispers that follow him wherever he goes. Your place is with me, pastor, and with Moreducus.

Then maybe neither of us has a place left, he answers her after a moment, ignoring the last bit entirely.

The city's taken him to the north pier, one which the Terrans have largely ignored in favour of the west, which holds the larger labs, and the south-east, from which they've eked out most their living space. He's not near the axillary control room at all, but Iohannes' feet start taking him there before he even realizes what he's doing.

Atlantis realizes soon enough, and begins blocking access to the paths he needs to take. Just because our reasons for being may change doesn't change the fact that we still are. He knows all the secret passages, though, and she can't block them all.

What if they don't? I've been fighting the Wraith since before I was born, it seems. Everyone I ever knew had spent their whole lives fighting the Wraith, until the Terrans arrived. What if that's the only reason I've managed to stick around as long as I have? To fight the Wraith – and watch the Terrans make the same mistakes we did, again and again?

You know that's not true.

Isn't it? Iohannes glares at the door in front of him, which refuses to open. Open this door, 'Lantis.

She knows as well as he where that door will take him, to the axillary control room that had begun his journey ten thousand years into the future, and, knowing this, redoubles her efforts to keep him from entering. What good will it do?

None at all, probably, but, I need to see if they're still there. He'd assumed the servola had taken care of the bodies, before the others had taken the servola offline, – he knows Nicolaa died there that last day, and probably many of the others as well when their tower was hit – but, now, can't be sure. He can't ask Atlantis either, because the city would only tell him what he wants to hear for his own mental health, and he can't very well leave them to rot. It wouldn't be right.
Iohannes bangs his fist against the still-closed doors. He could bypass the locking mechanism with ease, but that's not how his relationship with the city works. To do so would be to violate something between them. He'd tried to explain it to Rodney once, saying that it was the difference between sex and rape, and thought maybe he'd understood, but none of the other Expedition members could. Not without knowing Atlantis like he does. Not without hearing her ever-changing song.

He raises his hands to the doors again, but finds his fists have unclenched all on their own. Iohannes settles his palms against the door instead, pleading. Because, because it's the only argument he has. Because he needs to know how many he left behind that day. Because Nicolaa was the only friend he ever truly had before Rodney and Teyla and Elizabeta and Carson. Because 'Lantis deserved better than to have mouldering bodies inside her walls.

You shouldn't be alone right now, she tells him after a long pause.

Iohannes turns around, pressing his back against the door instead. I'm not alone. I've got you, or so you keep telling me.

There are some things, pastor, that you need organic companionship for.

He snorts, thinking of Rodney's earlier comment, but it turns into a groan of it's own accord, and Iohannes finds himself sliding down the length of the door, until he's half-sitting, half-sprawled on the floor in front of it. Rodney's busy.

Moreducus isn't the only one who cares for you, pastor.

Don't tell him that, Iohannes says, allowing a false note of cheer to colour his words. He's still hearing about Chaya, and all he ever did was smile at her before he realized she was a schismatica.

You're being deliberately dense.

He's fairly certain she'd never used that phrase before she heard Rodney say it, and the thought forces him to stifle another groan. I just want to be alone for a while, 'Lantis.

Pastor-

I love you, carissima, I really do, but, please, not now.

'Lantis pouts at this, but lowers the lights in the hall, which Iohannes takes for grudging agreement.

He doesn't know how long he's sat there in the semi-dark when Carson arrives, looking somewhat bewildered and carrying one of his bags of emergency medical supplies. "What's this then?" the doctor asks when he's close enough, going onto his knees beside him and checking Iohannes over quickly for injuries.

"I'm fine," he protests, drawing his legs in. After a moment, he folds his arms atop them and rests his chin upon them.

"You don't look it, lad."

"I'm older than you. You're my nephew. I should be calling you lad."

"Ah," Carson says knowingly, snapping his bag closed and leaning back so he can sit on the floor
properly. "It's one of those moods."

"I don't have moods," he says testily.

Carson laughs, small and sad like this comment should really be a lot funnier than it is. "That you do, lad. They're just a lot quieter than most other people's. My dear mother, why, you wouldn't want to be within five miles when she's in a strop, and my sisters are worse."

"Hmm."

"I've five of them, you know," Carson continues, as if he's just appeared in the middle of this otherwise deserted hall to talk to Iohannes about it, "and two brothers. I was never really close with my brothers – they took after my Da, who was a warrant officer in the British Army. Ben – he was the oldest – got himself killed in the Bosnian War, when I was still in med school. Pete died about three years ago, in Afghanistan. He was the youngest of us lot, so you imagine how my mother felt when I told her I was going to work for the United States military. She thought, being a doctor, I'd never end up somewhere where there was a distinct possibility I'd be getting shot at on a regular basis..."

They just sit there for a long time, Carson talking causally about his sisters and their children and how, now that his mother could email him on a fairly regular basis, she'd started bothering him about why he didn't hadn't settled down yet. By the time he gets to, "...so I'm tempted to tell her about Laura, just so she eases up on that front for awhile," Iohannes is feels rather less miserable, thank you very much, and is able to ask-

"So how are things with Lieutenant Cadman?"

-which causes the doctor to blush, if only a little. "Good, I think. Not quite to the point of writing home about yet, but good."

"Good for you."

He means it too. He'll never admit it out loud, but he likes seeing these Terrans doing normal things, like starting relationships. It makes Atlantis seem more like a bustling city than a besieged garrison, even if it does have her pestering him about when the Terrans will start having children. Atlantis misses children more deeply than is probably decent for someone who was built rather than born.

"What about you and Rodney? How's that working out – or can't I ask about that?"

Iohannes shrugs. Things between him and Rodney just are, and he's yet to find any words to describe what or why or how.

"Ah. So the email I got from the city wasn't because you two are fighting then?"

Bewildered, "Of course not. Well, I think he's peeved I dragged him away from the outpost so soon, but nothing serious." And then, as the full force of Carson's words hits him, "And what do you mean the city emailed you? 'Lantis," he looks upward, at the still-darkened ceiling, "what did you do?"

We told you, she responds, you shouldn't be alone right now.

"Pedicaris."

She offers no further explanation, except to flash the lights at his unnecessary vulgarity.

"I'll show you unnecessary vulgarity," he mutters under his breath. He loves Atlantis, he really does,
but her insistence on minding his mental health is going to be the death of one of them, and, when playing the waiting game, the odds are on the one of them that isn't organic, even if he's managed to spend ten thousand odd years in stasis without hardly ageing a day.

"Do I want to know?" Carson asks, clearly concerned—though, Iohannes must say, it seems more about the city than his mental health, which is what seems to worry most people when he talks aloud to Atlantis. It's why Carson's his favourite nephew.

Still, "She thinks I'm being unreasonable," comes out a barely audible accusation, directed more at the floor than the person sitting beside him.

"About?"

Iohannes sighs and plucks at the laces of his vambrace. "The usual." When Carson doesn't fill the silence that follows with more comfortable chatter about his family back in Scotland, he continues, forcing casualness into his voice, "I used to work in the room behind me." Every day for seven years he'd reported here and helped to plan the city's defensive strategy, until a lucky hit by a downed Wraith dart as the others were leaving put an end to that. "It's where I was right before the Exodus."

"Where you got cut up by all that glass," Carson reasons, remembering how they'd found him, semilucid and bleeding to death in the the cathedra.

"I just want to know how many died there."

"Oh, John. No one should ever have to find their friends' bodies. Especially not alone."

"The universe doesn't work by shoulds."

"Aye, that's true. But I'm here now."

That's true too, and so they get wordlessly to their feet, preparing to plead with Atlantis again to let them inside.

They're still dusting the debris from their knees when the door to the auxiliary control room opens of it's own accord.

Iohannes isn't even facing the right way and can't see the chaos that is surely inside, but he can hear the hiss of an airtight seal being broken as the door opens; feel the small gust sucking oxygen into the room behind, and that's all he really needs to know to know there are bodies inside. Bodies kept preserved in vacuum for over ten thousand years. Bodies of people he once knew so very well.

He closes his eyes and sinks back to the floor, only distantly able to hear Carson radioing for a medical team to report with body-bags to their location.

Chapter End Notes

Scismatica - An Ancient who believes s/he is a god, but is not an Ori
Dei et Viri, Part 3

Chapter Notes

The final part of the "Dei et Viri" arc.

They're at breakfast the morning after they discover the Arcturus Project – Iohannes and his team, Elizabeta, and Carson – when Elizabeta asks, "When are you planning on holding the funerals?"

Iohannes blinks at her uncomprehendingly for a moment, his spoon wavering halfway to his mouth before it clicks and he can say, "Oh, I did that last night. Why?"

There is the sound of silverware hitting multiple trays around him – well, not Rodney's, because Rodney knew this full well and, while mildly concerned about his mental health afterwards, had seen no reason to delay either; and not Ronan's, because, by all the deities the descendants had ever created, that man could eat, and not Teyla's either, because she just didn't do that kind of thing, but Elizabeta and Carson's definitely clattered to the table. "Why did you do that?"

Confused, he sets down his own spoon and asks, "Why not?"

"Because," she says patiently, "these things shouldn't be rushed, and you've twelve of them. Two of which are for people very dear to you."

He's not told the praefecta about Nicolaa or Forcul. Oh, he might've mentioned their names in passing, but the only one he's admitted the deeper connections to has been Rodney, whom Iohannes turns to glare at after she says this.

Teyla doesn't seem to realize his unhappiness with this current line of questioning and asks, "What is this?" in a way that can't be ignored. As much as he's found it easier to try to keep things separate – everything that happened before the Exodus being Before and everything that has occurred since the Expedition arrived as Now, and never shall the two meet, - one simply doesn't ignore Teyla Emmagan. At least, not if one wants to remain capable of walking unassisted after one's next sparing session.

"The head researcher for the Arcturus Project was John's stepfather, more or less, and the red-head from the North Pier was like the Ancient version of you or something," Rodney tries to explain for him-

-which turns Iohannes' annoyed glare into a slap upside the head before he corrects, rather against his will, "Father and Forcul never married. Never stayed together for more than a few months at a time either, but never stayed apart for much longer than that either. And even when they weren't together romantically, they still worked together, albeit with slightly more shouting." They brought out the worst in each other, Father and Forcul. Which was a shame, because, truly, they were probably the only people who ever stood a chance of making each other happy. "I'd call him less of a stepfather and more of an, oh, I dunno, honorary uncle."

"And the other one? This Nicolaa?" Teyla prompts.

"Nicolaa de Luera Pastor. She was..." he stirs what remains of his cereal intently, trying to find the
words. "If I'd loved her any less, I probably would have married her."

There's a long silence following this, during which Iohannes stares resolutely at his bowl until Elizabeta finally breaks the quiet, saying, "Which is exactly why I thought you'd want to take some time off to handle the arrangements."

"Alteran funerals are simple," he says, coming across rather more harshly than he intends, unable to take the pity in her eyes. He can handle having everyone he ever knew dead or as good as, he really can, just so long as they stop asking him about how it makes him feel. "Someone dies, you take their body to the crematorium, and then you meditate for a bit. The end."

"Did you meditate?"

"Fuck no. I gave that sort of thing up years ago."

"Maybe you should."

Snorting, "That stopped working when I was five."

"You're still five," Rodney mutters darkly, still rubbing the back of his head.

"What's that say about you then?"

Rodney rolls his eyes.

Elizabeta pierces her lips. "Gentlemen, if you would?"

"Yes, yes," Rodney says impatiently, "You're going to dial the SGC and inform them of Project Arcturus, Carson's going to work on his de-Wraith-ing drug, Teyla's going to the mainland, Ronan's going to do whatever it is he does when we're not off on missions, and we're on call if the galaxy needs saving at some point during the day. We got it."

"Rodney!" she says, vaguely scandalized by his flippancy, and Iohannes doesn't know if it was his plan all along or it was just Rodney being Rodney, but it does allow him to slip away from the table unnoticed, so he decides to give him the benefit of the doubt on it.

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He's supposed to be doing all sorts of things today – finishing up paperwork for those Expedition members heading back on the Daedalus; doing some mission planning with Lorne; going on rounds, – but Iohannes can't bring himself to concentrate. He just stares at the computer they've given him, the words he needs to write there but not making their way to the page because he unfortunately has no mental up-link with the Terran technology, and eventually gives it up as lost.

It's supposed to get easier, he whinges to a sympathetic Atlantis at one point, when he's wandering her halls because it's either that or do math proofs, and he really doesn't feel up to another think of the Fields Medals debacle so soon after the last. It's been a year-and-a-half since he woke up to discover he was the last Alteran in existence. It's not supposed to hurt this much this long after, not when he'd disliked the others so much. In his own, personal timeline, Forcul had been dead for over ten years, and he'd known Nicolaa had died in the auxiliary control room the moment the dust had settled there. He should be over it. He's suppose to be over it by now.

The universe, for all your science, rarely works the way it's suppose to.

What? he asks, his feet taking him by their own accord towards the room he and Rodney use for
their movie nights, which only they two (and possibly Carson) know about. It's quiet, comfortable, and far away from anyone who might want to ask him about last night's mass funeral. Though, apparently, not far enough away from those wanting to make him take up meditation. You're saying spirituality is the answer?

The distaste is more than evident when the city answers, No. We're saying that, for all the achievements of the Alteran people, there are still things we don't understand.

And you think meditation is the solution? You know how I feel about Ascension.

Who said anything about Ascension? You're a last-generation product of almost seventy million years of a race which considered meditation almost as important as breathing. Perhaps it's evolved into some sort of biological imperative, one that was never discovered because you're one of the few in all that time which refused to do so.

Iohannes can feel himself pouting at this, and considers saying something along the lines of I prefer it when you act like a hyperactive child, but doesn't, 'cause 'Lantis wouldn't understand, and accuses instead, You've been emailing Carson again, haven't you?

He, she says defensively, emailed us.

"It's a conspiracy," he says mostly to himself, but folds himself into position in the far corner anyway, and, willing to try anything at this point, tries to meditate.

His meditation is... uncomfortable. It's filled with the same dark, impenetrable silence from his dreams, interspersed with bits of knowledge coming to the surface he cannot possibly know, including:

Now that the Replicator threat is gone, the Asgard are concentrating their efforts on solving the problem they're having with genetic degradation from their millennia of cloning. They're doing their best to keep it secret from their allies, the Terrans, but a few of their most-cloned members are starting to fall victim to spontaneous exemplioffensio. Unless they can find a solution soon, their estimates predict the entire Asgard race will be dead in thirteen point seven Terran years.

A handful of Genii, disgruntled by his aggressive policies, are planning a revolt against Cowen. Their leader is Ladon Radim, who had taken part in their brief occupation of Atlantis, but other than that he seems a decent man. He's a moderate, and one of those rare folks driven into politics out of desire to serve his people rather than see them serve him. Should his coup succeed, the Expedition might find itself with a new ally. Or, at least, with one less enemy at their gates.

An Ascended Alteran calling herself Oma Desala is waging eternal battle against a partially-Ascended goa'uld called Anubis. It's caused quite a stir amongst the Others, who are torn between condemning her for this (and potentially returning her to mortal form) and concern for what Anubis might attempt to do in retribution if they did. Their combined strength far outweighed a single goa'uld's, but they were also far more reluctant to use it. And the universe knew no wrath like a scorned goa'uld.

All and all, it's quite disturbing, especially the part where it's rather like him remembering things he'd never known in the first place rather than learning them for the first time, and, as soon as the meditation has gone on long enough for Iohannes to be able to claim he's made a valiant attempt and he'll never do it again, thank you very much, he stops and goes looking for Rodney.
His amator isn't hard to find. He's in the largest of the shared labs with about half of the Expedition's scientists, engineers, and computer programmers. "Hey," he says when he's close enough to be heard in the din.

"What's up?" Rodney asks, uncapping a magic marker and, balancing a tablet in his other hand, beginning to transcribe equations onto the nearest whiteboard. It's a practised motion, but still somewhat awkward, and so Iohannes rescues the poor tablet from him before it has a chance to tumble to the floor, and holds it for him.

"You think," he asks, shifting as he leans against the whiteboard so the metal tray isn't digging so badly into his hip, "it will go over badly if I shoot the next person who tells me I should meditate?"

One of the new scientists, who's working at a computer nearby, makes a choking noise at this. They both ignore it, Rodney asking over the tail end, "Weren't you the one that said murder was an overrated problem solving technique?"

"I didn't say I'd be shooting to kill."

"It'd be less paperwork."

"Which one?"

"Killing. You've never head to file a health insurance claim before. Yet another reason why you should've chosen Canada over the States."

It's only because Rodney's fond of expounding upon the superiority of all things Canadian that Iohannes even has the slightest idea of what he's on about now. "Yeah, but their uniforms weren't as cool," he quips back, and turns the tablet around briefly to glance ahead at the equation's Rodney's transcribing. He thinks it has something to do with some sort of containment field.

Glancing down at his own uniform, "Yeah, 'cause that really matters here."

"You never know."

"So, why are you considering this shooting spree anyway?"

"Meditation sucks."

Rodney snorts.

"Well, it does."

"I'm sure."

With a frown, "No, I've been remembering things again."

Rodney caps his magic marker and turns towards him, his maths momentarily forgotten. "Ascended remembering?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of things?"

Iohannes tells him. The big stuff, at least. The tiny things he leaves out, because no one really needs to know about Elizabeta's (now ex-)fiancé cheating on her, or, well, that's the only one he can really think of, but still. No one needs to know that. Not even Elizabeta.
"That's... oddly specific."

"It's annoying, that's what. I was only Ascended for three minutes," (Rodney winces at this, and something inside Iohannes clenches as well. He'd prefer to forget that little fact about himself if at all possible). "Why the others should kick you back down and let you keep memories like that? It seems an awful lot like interference. Don't get me wrong, I'm more than glad you came back in one piece, but this extra bit? It's not normal."

"Thanks," he says dryly.

"Not you-normal," Rodney corrects, giving him his best you can't possibly be this stupid look, and turns back to the whiteboard. "So, you think this means the others are trying to help us fight the Wraith?"

With a snort, "Hardly. Non-interference was the closest thing those that chose to Ascend ever had to a religion."

"Well, there have to be some who felt otherwise – after all," he says with a trace of bitterness, "you managed to Ascend, and you've been doing an awful lot of interfering."

"Maybe." He doubts it though. Stubbornness, he liked to think, had been encoded into the Alteran genome right along with the ability to use their technology. It certainly would explain Carson and General O'Neill. (It could explain Rodney too, since Doctor Beckett's gene therapy activates latent genes in the subject rather, or so he's been told, than introduce entirely new ones. But Iohannes prefers not to think about that, and only allows himself to consider himself related to those who come by their gene naturally.)

"They've had ten thousand years worth of front row access to everything that the Wraith have done. I'm willing to bet that's had to make some of them change their minds."

"Probably not, though."

"Well, how else do you explain it?"

"I don't. And I don't want to."

"That's unusually narrow-minded of you," he accuses.

"You don't know the others like I do," Iohannes says, setting down the tablet he's been holding. "Nothing they ever do comes without a price. Believe me, if it is someone or someones trying to help us to stop the Wraith, then they're going to want something from us. Something difficult. Something that they can't do in their present state, not without being sent back." Selfish bastards. Like this plane of existence is so bad.

"We're going to need to come up with a name for that, it's starting to happen so often. You, Doctor Jackson..." Rodney muses, "How do you feel about Descension?"

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, "I think you should stick to what you're good at leave the naming of things to other people." Iohannes picks up the tablet again and glances more thoroughly at the equations on the screen. "You better get working on this. Forcul and his team spent almost three years working on Arcturus before the accident, and we're not going to have anywhere near the that amount of time before the Wraith realize we're still here."

"Then stop distracting me and help."
It takes four weeks to go through all the coding, find the problems, and correct them. They're fairly innocuous, the mistakes – a positive integer when there should've been a negative, a misplaced decimal or two – but, altogether, it's enough to have caused the catastrophic failure that cost Forcul, his team, and (eventually) the Dorandans their lives. It's a sign of how overworked, how desperate they'd been back then, and Project Arcturus had been at a time when Tirianus still stood and they'd a good twenty lintres between them.

They test the weapon on the first of the Terran month December, which roughly coincides with the start of the wet season on Lantea. It's not quite raining when their jumpers leave Atlantis, just a grey sort of drizzly haze that reminds Sergeant Major Stevens, who's from a place on Terra called the Pacific Northwest, of home.

It is raining properly, however, when they return, once more with body bags. Well, only one this time, but that's still one too many.

"There was a massive power surge that caused the containment field to expand asymmetrically towards the access tube where Collins was working. That's all we really know at the moment," Rodney explains once the senior staff is gathered around the conference table some hours later. Carson's spent most the time examining Doctor Collins' body. The results are similar to what he found with the bodies of Forcul and his team – acute radiation poisoning, of a type and a sort even Iohannes doesn't have a name for.

"It will," Zelenka continues, "take time to analyse all the data from the accident. But, off-hand, it does not look promising."

Elizabeta's sitting at the head of the table, sombre and stone-faced, and hasn't said anything for several minutes before she asks, "How so?"

"I don't know," Rodney says with a difficulty that would be more amusing if the situation weren't so grim. In terms of physics, it shouldn't have happened. And, if that's the case, we can analyse the data all we like, but we'll never know for sure until we go back to Doranda and try again."

Iohannes, too, has been silent for most the meeting, but at this he can't keep quiet. "You can't be serious."

"You've said it yourself, Colonel: the Wraith are going to see through our rouse sooner rather than later, and Project Arcturus represents the only chance we have at the moment of stopping them forever."

"But at what cost? Collins is dead."

"And I am responsible for his death, yes. I am painfully aware of that. But we have a responsibility to understand what happened and learn from it."

"What we've learned," Iohannes says sharply, "is that the best minds of two different races couldn't get this thing to work."

"We've only been working on this a month."

"Yes, and my people worked on it for three years."

"And it took us four years to develop the A-bomb, and sixty-six to figure out how the Stargates work."
"We just don't have that kind of time." Privately, Iohannes gives it another twelve months – on the outside – before the Wraith discovered Atlantis stills stood. In all actuality, it's probably closer to half that, and that is if they are really, truly, extraordinarily careful.

"Contrary to popular belief," the scientist says testily, "I can't just conjure up major scientific developments out of thin air, no matter how hard you try to goad me."

"What time we do have, Rodney, should be put to use trying to make the weapons we know work operational." Which means finding more ZPMs, to power the city's defences, which means more missions. And why, of all the things he could have remembered from his brief time Ascended, he couldn't remember that, Iohannes doesn't know.

"You really think the military's gonna let this go that easily?"

"You saw what the Wraith did to the Dorandans. If we can't get the weapon operational quickly, odds are that the Wraith will simply repeat the process with us before we finish it. And, frankly, I didn't spent ten thousand years in stasis to die that way."

"I agree," Elizabeta says at last, looking between them with concern evident on her face. "You can run all the simulations you want, but until I have definitive proof that it'll work, I'm not letting anyone back there."

"That's what I'm trying to say," Rodney tries one last time. "Everything we had said that this trial should have worked. There's absolutely no reason why it shouldn't have."

It doesn't work. "Then you better hope there's an explanation in your data, because that's my final answer."

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It takes almost a fortnight for Rodney to find an answer, banging on his door late at night two days after the Daedalus returns from Terra with the news that the SGC is very interested in getting the weapon operational. Not primarily to fight the Wraith, as one might think, but the Ori.

The Ori, who are the haeretici his ancestors had travelled to Avalon to escape sixty-five million years ago.

And they, not the Wraith, are why he agrees to convince Elizabeta to let them try again.

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"He says the problem's in the automatic containment field. If we adjust the field strength manually, Rodney thinks that should solve the problem."

Elizabeta frowns and leans forward, propping an elbow on her desk. "I'm sensing a but here."

"But the field changes so rapidly, the only thing that can keep up with it is a computer."

"So how does he propose to solve the problem?" Caldwell asks.

"We impregnate the computers at the Dorandan outpost with my nanoids. It should give us the best of both worlds when we're running the test."

Colonel Caldwell has always been more sceptical of his abilities than anyone on Atlantis, but he and the SGC really want the weapon, and so he asks, "And this will work?"
"I don't see why not. Rodney'll have to give me a crash-course in the containment of subatomic particles, but this sort of thing is what it means to be a pastor." He frowns at their disbelieving expressions. "Look, when I what exactly do you think happens when I sit in the cathedra? Atlantis tracks the targets, fires the weapons, but I'm the one who chooses the targets, who does the manoeuvres. Organic and machine in perfect harmony. Well," he muses, glancing upward, "maybe not perfect, but at least the outpost isn't likely to have Atlantis' personality issues."

"Personality issues?" Caldwell repeats as Elizabeta asks-

"And you can guarantee the same problem won't happen again?"

"No one can do that. But Rodney's confident it won't."

"Confidence is not something that Doctor McKay lacks."

At which point Caldwell jumps surprisingly to his defence, "With good reason! If anyone can do this..."

"The Ancients could not do this. And that's what it keeps coming back to for me."

"Isn't it possible that you've placed the Ancients on such a high pedestal that you can't even consider the possibility that they may be wrong?"

"The Colonel has a point," Iohannes agrees. "We weren't perfect, Elizabeta. Far from it. You know what we did after Project Arcturus failed? We tried to bring Tirianus half-way across the galaxy, to combine our strength. It was a massive battle, to which we committed all our forces. We even got what descendants with space-faring capabilities remained to commit all their forces as well – and used them as cannon fodder." The Council had fought his plan every step of the way, but, when they finally gave into it, they did so fully intending to sacrifice their descendants if it meant saving themselves. Iohannes hadn't learned as much until later, but it destroyed whatever faith he'd still had in his people at that point.

Elizabeta is pale after this, and it pains him to do this to her, but there's something unbearably naive about her and the way she views the world that needs to be rectified. It's one thing to believe there's good in everyone – she might even be right about that, however little Iohannes might believe it – but it's another entirely to blindly believe his people were the be all and end all of the universe. That's practically haeresis.

"And after that?" he continues, "Father built an endgame machine that could've ended the Wraith War – genuinely, truly ended it. He called it the Attero Device, and it disrupted the subspace frequencies that the Wrath hives use, so that when they tried to enter a hyperspace window their ships would be torn to pieces. What lintres remained would be able to pick off the stragglers one by one... The only problem with it was that it caused the portae to explode. But that was no problem for us – we could compensate – and the Council wanted to use it, nevermind how many descendants it would destroy. Luckily Father, at least, had a conscious, because he took the device offline and dismantled it before too many had died.

"I'm not saying that most of us didn't genuinely like our descendants. But we were always a cowardly race," he says, distaste bleeding through. "We ran from what problems we could not see an easy solution to, be it by crossing half the universe to escape our enemies or by Ascending to a plane of existence where they no longer mattered. For most of us, our descendants were little better than animals, and, if given the choice between sacrificing them or sacrificing ourselves, would have chosen them every time.
"And those are the kind of people you think are so infallible."

Elizabeta's still pale when she starts speaking, but her cheeks go red as she goes on, "I get your point, Colonel! You think I don't know everything Arcturus could mean for us? For Earth? And if it worked as advertised, it would be wonderful, but you know Rodney. There are times when he has to be protected from himself."

There are no words to describe the look Iohannes gives her. It's part tell me something I don't know and a little bit of when I said Father had a conscious, I meant me and a good deal of no guts, no glory, but it's also frustration and resignation and a touch of righteous indignation for his amator, because Rodney would not be asking for this if he isn't a hundred percent sure, or, at least, as sure as it was possible to be in a situation like this. He knows she has every right to be leery, but this isn't like Attero. The only risk to anyone is themselves.

"I can do that. Just give us the chance."

They go to Doranda once more and inject some nanoids they've taken from Iohannes' blood into the computers there. It takes a while for them colonize the systems entirely, so they go back up to the jumper to wait, partly because it's more comfortable there, but mostly because the outpost still feels like a crypt.

"Oh, I've been meaning to tell you," Iohannes tells him, lying on the floor of the jumper's back compartment he can feel the nanoids in the outpost activating, and it's giving him a headache, all the disconnected pieces of information revealing themselves one by one. They've the lights out too, though there's some spilling from Rodney's tablet, where he's monitoring the situation as best he can from his spot on one of the benches. "Your sister emailed me the other day. She wants to know how much she can spend on a Christmas present for Madison."

Rodney almost jumps in surprise. "What? Why would she be asking us that?"

"'Cause we can't exactly send her something from Pegasus now can we?" He frowns at the ceiling. He doesn't care for the religious connotations of the Terran holiday, but he's not going to take that out on Madison. If the Terran thing to do is to give her presents, well, who is he to deny her? He'd give her the moon, any moon she wanted, if only she told him which one.

"Er, no, I guess not. So why did Jeannie email you about this?"

"We've been emailing." Sporadically, of course, as the data packets that came through the pons astris from Terra allowed. It's interesting, hearing about all the normal, average Terran things Jeannie and Madison and Kaleb get up to. And seeing Madison grow up through pictures? It's almost enough to satisfy Atlantis' desire to have children running through her halls again.

"Why?"

"'Cause she's your sister and goodness knows you won't."

"Why should I?"

Wincing a little as several nanoids activate at once, "'Cause she's your sister," he repeats.

"So?"

"It's what families do."
"So you consider my sister family?"

If Iohannes could sit up, he'd do so, but he can't and settles for frowning more deeply at the jumper's ceiling. "Shouldn't I?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just surprised, that's all. Don't know why. You consider anyone with an active ATA gene family."

Iohannes tries to shrug, only to discover the movement doesn't quite work so well while sprawled out on the floor. "Anyway, it's a Terran thing, so I figured you'd know."

"What do I know about three-year-old girls?"

"She's almost four."

"Same difference."

"So I should ask Carson." Carson has nieces. Four of them. He'd know what constitutes a proper Christmas gift for an almost four-year-old Terran girl, or so Iohannes hopes. The next data-burst to Terra is the day after tomorrow, for the benefit of those on the Expedition who value this curious Terran holiday, and time is running out.

"Probably a good idea. The connection up and running yet?"

"Almost. You should probably start getting everything set up."

"I can do it from here, if you want. Right now you don't look like you could walk ten feet, let alone make it down that ladder."

He'd argue the point, but it's kinda true.

Rodney takes his time setting up the computers and getting the trial ready, letting Iohannes' connection with the outpost stabilize. It's a strange feeling – like trying to make conversation with a particularly intelligent pet rather than an actual person. Or intellegetnia artificialis. Still, the connection's there, and there's no reason why it shouldn't work.

But it doesn't. He knows that the moment the weapon starts to overload and none of his increasingly desperate orders to abort can be carried out by the computer.

It's the last thing Iohannes knows for a long time.
Socii, Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which John does a lot of sleeping, much to everyone's dismay.

Chapter Notes

Part one of the "Socii" arc, which takes the place of "The Lost Boys" and "The Hive," as Ford's death in S1 has null-and-voided those episodes for this 'verse.

Socii translates to Allies

"...putting your life and other people's lives at risk. You destroyed three quarters of a solar system!"

Rodney's barely paying attention to Elizabeth, despite the fact she's shouting, angrier than he's ever seen her. He should be, he knows. She'll be angrier still when she realizes he's ignoring her, but, God, how can she expect him to listen to anything she says when John's in the infirmary and has been for over an hour without Carson being able to find a sign that anything wrong with him other than the fact that he can't – or won't – wake up.

"Five sixths," he mutters. The Daedalus had arrived a Doranda to check up on them about fifteen minutes after the weapons system had finished overloading. They'd surveyed what little remained, which is mostly particle-sized debris and a Jovian planet at the edge of the system. Given enough time, it could be an interesting case study to see if the debris helped turn the gas giant into a proper star. Rodney thinks he'd be more excited about the prospect, if only they could get John to wake up. "It's not an exact science."

"Rodney," she snaps, her voice almost as cutting as her words, "can you give your ego a rest for one second?"

He snaps at this. "You honestly think if I had any idea something like this could happen, I would've asked John to uplink to the outpost? Hell, if I ever thought such an extreme overload like this was even a possibility, I'd never have asked him to go through with it. I want to get rid of the Wraith as much as the next person, but I'm not stupid, particularly when it comes to..."

Rodney literally feels himself deflate as he comes to the end of his rant, and collapses into the nearest chair before he can finish, feeling tired and more than a little broken. He looks at the floor for a moment, trying to find the words that usually come so readily to his lips, before giving up altogether, ready for whatever further condemnations she might have. The sooner she gets through them all, at least, the sooner he can get back to the infirmary. Hopefully Carson will have figured out what's wrong with John by then.

Elizabeth must see this, though, because when he looks up, her expression has somehow transformed from sit down, shut up, and listen to I'm so sorry in the space of those few seconds. "I know you didn't mean for this to happen," she says, sinking down into her own seat, "but you've got to be more
careful. It’s one thing to take risks when we're already in a life-or-death situation, but it's another entirely when Atlantis isn't in immediate danger."

"I know. But I truly thought I'd solved the problem, and John was so certain he'd be able to manage the containment field..."

"John puts a lot of pressure on himself, especially when it comes to getting rid of the Wraith."

"That's just it," Rodney says frustratedly. "I don't think this is about the Wraith. I mean, don't get me wrong, if given half the chance, I'd think he'd have no qualms about wiping them off the face of the galaxy in the most spectacularly self-destructive way possible, but ever since the Daedalus came back with news of SG-1 encountering the Ori... I think the Ori terrify him in a way the Wraith never have. Not that that's ever stopped him from taking stupid risks before, but..."

"But he still should've known better," Elizabeth finishes.

His response is a half-sighed, "Yeah."

"And so should you," she adds pointedly before sighing herself and saying, "I know you want to get back up to the infirmary, so I'll not keep you any longer, just... think about what I said, alright?"

Carson's made no progress by the time Rodney gets back to the infirmary, that much is obvious by the way John's still out cold. He's got his medical staff minions running the Ancient version of an MRI over him, and is frowning at the screen showing him the results – that much is clear before Rodney even makes it three steps into the room.

"This cannae be possible," the good doctor tells one of his nurses, clearly too absorbed in his work to have noticed his entrance. Well, that and the fact that all the lights in the infirmary are dimmed, save for the ones directly above John. He figures that is Atlantis' doing, not Carson's, and wishes for a moment he could talk to the city like John can, to tell her that her favoured son would be alright. Hopefully. He settles for patting the door frame sympathetically before making his way further in.

"Are you sure the scanner's properly calibrated?"

"We've checked it twice, but I can call one of the engineers up here if you'd like them to check it out."

"Do that, would you?"

"Don't bother," Rodney tells them, making his presence known as he steps up to John's bedside. It looks so wrong to see him lying there, so pale and still. In the white scrubs they've changed him into, he looks all too like the corpses they recovered from the outpost and the auxiliary control centre. He has to clench his hands to keep from reaching out taking John's, afraid to feel how cold it might be.

"I might as well take a look at it since I'm here. I take it you've not made any progress then?"

"As far as I can tell, there's absolutely no reason for him to be unconscious. I've put him under the scanner, and he only thing that's telling me is that his brain's working at levels far beyond human normal, but..."

"...but," Rodney finishes for him, tearing his eyes away from John long enough to glance at the results of the latest brain scan, "human above-normal could be below-normal for an Ancient."

Carson's still frowning as he nods in agreement, "Especially one that was Ascended."
"Hasn't he been letting you run tests on him, though?" Rodney seems to remember tests, ones that rather annoyed John and had led to more than a few original Star Trek marathons. So many, in fact, that they were almost done with the first series, even considering how often they had to go back and re-watch episodes because they'd gotten... distracted... midway through.

"Nae for a while, actually. I've been focusing on getting the Wraith antivirus working... Are you sure you told me everything that happened at the outpost?"

"Yes!" Rodney huffs, "We injected the nanoids into the outpost's central computing core, then went back to the jumper to wait for them to spread throughout the system. Once they came online, we started the test. It overloaded, and John flew us out of there before the weapon went critical."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

Carson holds up his hands placatingly. "What I mean is, our computers have programs to keep intruders out, mightnae the Ancients have done the same thing with the computers on their secret research base?"

"But John's not an intruder. He's one of their pastores. The computers should've recognized that."

"But what if it didnae? Or couldnae?"

Anything was possible, Rodney supposes. The Dorandan computers could have been damaged during one of the earlier tests of the weapon, in a way that only knocked out higher logic functions, or that they couldn't discover unless they went specifically looking for it. Or, having never been designed to be pastor-compatible, it might not have recognized John as friendly and launched its version of antispyware on him. Or it might've been infected with some sort of malware that it passed on to John's nanoids through their connection – and, if that was the case, then his connection to the city would probably pass along the virus to Atlantis too.

Atlantis.

Snapping his fingers, Rodney darts for the nearest computer and demands more than asks, "You've been emailing the city, haven't you." He's still a little peeved about that – Atlantis doesn't email him, and he's her custodia – but figures it works to their advantage right now. Or, at least, isn't a disadvantage. He can ask John about the whys and wherefores later, after he's awake.

"Yeah."

"What's the address?"

"You're going to ask Atlantis what's wrong with the Colonel?"

"You got any better ideas?"

"Well-

"I didn't think so. Address?"

Carson tells him and, within seconds, the screen upon which John's scans had been displayed goes blank, being replaced by a few lines of Alteran that, with all the work he's done on Ancient tech by this point, Rodney's able to translate reasonably quickly. "She's saying that we activated an emergency data transfer protocol when the weapon started to overload. That it... No, that can't be
Rodney doesn't know whether to laugh or not after he makes sure he's translated the last half correctly. "Basically, she's saying the computers at the outpost used the nanoids in his head like a black box, and that, as soon as she's finished downloading all the data, John'll be back to his old self."

"Really?" Carson looks a touch amused himself, if still concerned. "Any idea how long that might take?"

He sends off another email, and, in seconds, a second message appears on the display. "About thirty-five hours, give or take. It's about as fast as the process can go, with the limitations of the technology involved."

"Well," the doctor says after a moment, "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Half the city, or so it seems, stops by to see how John's doing over the next twenty-eight hours. Rodney knows because he refuses to leave the infirmary, even after Carson reminds him that he'll be the first one he radios if there are any changes.

And then Hermiod shows up.

This is pretty strange to begin with, as the Asgard rarely left the Daedalus on its previous layovers here, but not entirely out of character, as he and John had struck up something of a rapport during their long journey back from Earth. No one knows quite what they talked about – John's translation matrix apparently does Asgard just as well, if not better, than English – but they seemed to have gotten along well enough. Maybe not well enough for Hermiod to show up at his sick bed, but, as it turns out, Hermiod's not there for John.

"Doctor McKay," he says without preamble, "we are going to upgrade the Daedalus' hyperdrive systems."

Rodney, who's been messing about on his tablet, trying to hack into John's email the old-fashioned way as he waits for John to wake up, doesn't look up when he asks, "You are?"

"You and I are, yes. Now," he adds when Rodney's not fast enough to meet his narrow-eyed, disapproving stare.

He really doesn't have a choice after that, and so he goes and assists with some minor technical upgrades to the Daedalus that Rodney has a feeling that Hermiod could have done in his sleep, with one hand tied behind his back. They do, however, prove enough of a distraction that he doesn't notice the hours pass until Carson radios to tell him that John's showing signs of waking up soon.

He's gathering his things and high-tailing it off of the engineering deck so quickly that he almost misses the harried and somewhat harassed, "You're welcome," that the Asgard offers as he's leaving.

It's enough to stop Rodney dead in his tracks. Sure, it had briefly crossed his mind that Hermiod had pulled him into this project to distract him from John's being in the infirmary, but he'd dismissed it just as quickly because, well, this is an Asgard he was thinking about. An alien. It was nothing short of idiocy to expect human things from them. Hell, half the time it was idiocy to expect human things from John, and they shared ninety-seven percent of a genome.
But still, whatever Hermiod's motivations, it appears that he's tried to do something nice for him. "Thanks, Hermiod," he offers sincerely, and heads for the door before things can get any stranger.

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John wakes up about an hour after this. Which is to say, Rodney's succeeded in hacking into John's email account and is reading through his sister's account of the tantrum Madison had thrown when she'd realized Uncle Mer and Uncle John weren't going to be able to visit for a while when he looks up and sees John watching him tiredly, through half-open eyes.

"Hey there," he says, setting his tablet on a patch of empty infirmary bed and grabbing John's hand with both his own. "How you feeling?"

"Dizzy," John says, seemingly honestly, which has to say something about how bad John must be feeling. "How long have I been out?"

"Since yesterday," Rodney tells him. That's all he really means to tell him, at least until Carson has checked him out, to make sure his best insults don't go over John's head, but he can't help himself, not where John's concerned, and dives back in with, "You've any idea how worried I've been? I mean, 'Lantis said you'd be okay, but she's just a city, what does she know about medicine? Granted, it's probably more than Carson does, but that doesn't exactly help when I find out that the computers on the outpost decided to use you as a backup drive before trying to kill us both. Oh, and by the way, the fact that you can apparently double as a USB in emergencies? Definitely something to have mentioned before we decided to try to revolutionize energy systems engineering."

John looks equal parts amused and nauseous, and closes his eyes before he responds, somewhat sheepishly, "It's not something that comes up often," before asking if he has a pencil he can borrow.

"Of course you did," Rodney sighs, releasing John's hands so he can search through the bedside table for something John can write with, and on. It's difficult finding something, as the infirmary is almost as paperless as most of Atlantis' other departments, but he eventually succeeds, asking as he hands over his finds, "Think you can stay awake long enough for me to get Carson to check you out?"

"I'm fine, Rodney. Just tired."

Rodney looks him over dubiously. "I think we'll let the person with the medical degree decide that."

John scribbles something on the prescription pad Rodney'd found him and sighs, which quickly turns into a yawn. "Fine. But don't think I won't remember this next time you're coped up in here and wanting my help to escape. Here," he says, ripping off the pad's top sheet and handing it to Rodney.

"What's this?"

"Christmas present," he yawns, and promptly falls back asleep.

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John's scribble upon closer inspection turns out to be the call-index of a file his nanoids had saved from the Dorandran outpost. At first, the file appears to be little more than a series of equations relating to Project Arcturus – interesting, yes, but not something they hadn't already seen.

And then Rodney makes the motherlode of all finds.
"Have you dialled the SGC yet?" Rodney asks as soon as he's in Elizabeth's office, barely able to contain his grin.

"It's not scheduled for another half-hour yet," she asks, looking up from her computer, where she's presumably trying to figure out how to tell the people back on Earth about the abrupt end of the human involvement in Project Arcturus without getting anyone fired, demoted, or otherwise recalled to Earth. "Why?"

"One of the files John rescued from Doranda? It contains the formula for recharging ZedPMs."
"Y'know," John says causally as he leans against the door of his lab, not succeeding in startling Rodney solely by the virtue of the fact that Rodney'd happened to be pouring himself more coffee from the pot one of his minions had left for him just inside the door (as if his lab is a dragon's den rather than a place filled with things they should not touch, ever), "it's a good thing I love you."

It's also a good thing Rodney hadn't taken a sip of his coffee yet, 'cause otherwise it would've ended up all over the delicate pieces of equipment so feared by his minions. "How so?" he asks, managing to keep at something close to its normal tone (though he does set his coffee back on the table, to avoid any possible future incidents).

"'Cause it makes the fact that you've spent the last fourteen hours in here, working, rather than at my sickbed endearing rather than annoying."

"You were sleeping," Rodney accuses, trying not to think too hard on the I love you thing. It's not like it's a surprise or anything. He and John have been together for, God, almost a year now, ever since the Genii tried to take over the city during the Storm. He knows how John feels about him and vice versa. It's just neither of them have ever said it -- things that amount to it, yes, but they've somehow managed to avoid those three words. It's kind of surprising to realize, almost as surprising as it is to hear, even if it's a known fact.

John sighs, pushing himself away from the door and moving to stand a little too close for work hours in front of him. "Having a couple terabytes of data squeezed into your head and slowly dribbled out is exhausting, what can I say?"

Rodney harrumphs, because, honestly, it's the only thing he can think to say to that. He's just glad John's not dead, or brain dead, or otherwise impaired from the experience.

It's not until John laughs and pulls him into a tight embrace that he realizes he said all this aloud. After a moment, though, John stops laughing and just holds him closer, burying his face in Rodney's neck. "I'm sorry I almost got you killed," he mumbles barely loud enough to be heard over the buzz of equipment.

This statement causes Rodney to blink once in surprise, then again in disbelief as he pulls back just enough to look John in the face. "Why on Earth are you apologizing? We almost die all the time. It's not your fault this time any more than any other. Actually, this might be the least your fault of all our near-death experiences -- not that you should let that go to your head. You're still a self-sacrificing idiot who's going to get himself killed before I turn forty at the rate you're going."

"Lantea," John corrects mostly out of habit. "And that doesn't change the fact-"

He harrumphs again, this time in genuine annoyance. "We did what we thought was best and nobody died. Didn't your dad drill some sort of mantra into your head about how that's a good
"Something like that," the Ancient agrees, a smile just this side of dirty sliding onto his face. "What do you say we head back to your quarters and celebrate being alive for a while?"

"Ten thousand years," he snorts, "and that's the best line you can come up with?"

"Don't knock it. It works, doesn't it?"

Rodney's only response is to snort again, and let himself be pulled along.

The thing is, John is going to get himself killed before Rodney turns forty. John has been at war with the universe since he was born, if not before, and sooner or later the universe is going to win. It is, after all, one of the few things out there older than John and, as John's occasionally fond of saying, always place your bets on the thing that's been around the longest.

Rodney's going to be thirty-eight next year. He's never exactly been one for the whole carpe diem crap – people who subscribe to it decidedly do not graduate MIT at seventeen years and fifty-three days old, let alone with a double major in physics and aeronautics/astronautics – but, with John, he can kind of get it. John is going to get himself killed, ergo spend as much time with John as possible beforehand. He can really get behind that one.

But still, there are, well, not rules to their relationship, but hazily-defined socio-cultural norms they try to abide by, even if it's another one of those things they've never directly come out and said to each other. They try to keep anything more intimate than a slap upside the head to off-duty hours, and don't do much more than that off-duty either if they're in one of the public areas of the city. They don't do anything to make Caldwell think they're anything other than heterosexual friends who share a love for banter, Atlantis, and SyFy, despite the fact John strongly believes the colonel couldn't care less about their bedroom activities. And, perhaps most importantly, when one of them is working on something important – like, say, defending the city from invading Wraith or slugging their say through a deceptively simple formula for recharging the ZedPMs – they don't interrupt each other for anything short of vital emergencies.

As much as they both would much rather think otherwise, quickies are not emergencies, and so it's with a sheepish, somewhat guilty feeling Rodney sneaks out of his quarters afterwards, leaving John (unsurprisingly) asleep inside. It's his intention to work twice as hard as he already has been (and maybe even call in Zelenka to help, despite the fact that Caldwell has asked to keep this scientific discovery between himself, Rodney, John, and Elizabeth until they have a better idea if it works or not, to avoid getting everyone's hopes up again so soon) when he gets back to his lab.

He's already lost in the equations before he makes it as far as the transporter around the corner, which probably explains how me manages to run into Cadman there. Well, that and the fact that the Lieutenant has Ford's old quarters, the one's at the far end of the hall. Despite that, however, he's been mostly able to avoid her by the sheer fact she maintains a fairly predictable schedule. It must be later than he thought if he's running into her now.

She seems to know this, and smirks at him as she waves her hand in front of the transporter door controls. "Hey Rodney."

"Cadman," he says stiffly.

"How's the Colonel?"
"Fine."

"Is that so?"

Rodney doesn't answer, trying not to bristle too overtly at her words (she can't have meant anything by it; she can't possibly know that John's tangled up in his sheets, in his bed right now rather than his own; she just can't, despite the lateness of the hour), and practically jumps out of the transporter when it deposits him by his lab. Still, he can practically hear the smugness in her tone as she calls out, "Bye Rodney," before pressing the controls for her own destination.

Except, of course, the transporter refuses to go anywhere. It's doors won't even close.

Rodney looks up at the ceiling and only just manages to stop himself from asking the city why she hates him so aloud. Maybe his spend as much time with John as possible plan is backfiring if he's starting to pick up his foibles. God knows he already has enough of his own to wrestle with.

More importantly, however, he has Laura Cadman to contend with at the moment and should probably get her on her way before he gives too much thought to his flaws of character – there's always a danger that some lingering connection from their brief body-sharing experience has lingered, unnoticed, and she'll pick up on them (his thoughts, that is) even if she's not consciously aware of what's happening. Last thing he needs is to give yet more ammunition to the ladies of Girls' Poker Night.

"I'll get my repair kit," Rodney sighs instead and heads for his lab, only mildly surprised to see Colonel Caldwell already there, fiddling with one of his computers as he waits. He dimly remembers that he's supposed to be updating him and Elizabeth at regular intervals, but he hadn't thought it was that late yet, even if he had run into Cadman at the transporter. "I've not made a lot of progress so far, but if you give me like three seconds, I need to-"

And that's when Rodney notices that Caldwell's not just playing solitaire or paging through one of Rodney's files there, he's downloading it all. "Hey, what-?" he begins, thinking the worst – that maybe Elizabeth and Caldwell have decided to entrust someone else with the ZedPM research after his the incident on Doranda, that maybe he's being sent back to Earth-

-and then Caldwell's eyes flash.

The goa'uld have infiltrated Atlantis.

What follows next, Rodney never clearly remembers. All he knows is that, at some point, Cadman comes in to ask what's taking so long to find him spraying a can of solvent into the Colonel's eyes. He assumes there was the usual worship me and I might not kill you pontificating that the goa'uld usually get up to and some less-than-diplomatic refusal on his part that led to that point, but, like Rodney said, he's not really sure.

It's not exactly his finest moment.

"So, Caldwell's a goa'uld," John's saying forty minutes later, after Cadman's subdued Caldwell (she shoots him three times, then uses a malfunctioning piece of Ancient tech as a taser, which knocks him out long enough for her to call in reinforcements; it's equally parts very cool and incredibly scary) and the Marines have taken him to the isolation room. "Huh."
"I never suspected..." Elizabeth murmurs, looking oddly stricken as she turns away from the glass.

The game plan is apparently 1) remove bullets, 2) question goa'uld-Caldwell; 3) remove goa'uld from Caldwell, though the first part appears to be particularly slow going for no reason Rodney cares to find out. He has the start of a massive headache, and, 'sides, medicine's nothing but voodoo anyway. Particularly Carson's brand of it.

Ronan too looks unimpressed and slumps onto one of the nearby couches, not even pretending to look at the monitors. "What's a goa'uld?"

"Only an alien parasite that can likes to wrap itself around people's brain stems and take over their bodies."

"That doesn't sound pleasant."

"It isn't," John says, cocking his head to the side as he watches the goings-on down below. He's oddly awake for a man who's spent the better part of three days in a near-coma. "I've read enough SG mission reports to know I want nothing to do with them, and that was before I asked 'Lantis to look up what we had on them in the database."

Moderately surprised, "There's stuff on the goa'uld in the Ancient database?" Rodney asks. He'd rather thought the Ancients were before their time.

"There's something on everything in the database. Or so I'm told."

"No late nights combing through the database as a kid then?"

"Only the F's."

It takes Rodney a moment, then he groans, asking, "Why am I not surprised?" as he collapses into his own chair.

"I don't get it."

"Trust me," Rodney says, turning towards Ronan with a very put-upon expression on his face, "you don't want to."

Elizabeth, however, knows almost as much Alteran as Rodney does, and only takes a little longer to recall the only word starting with F that might interest an Alteran boy, and, sounding a lot more like herself, admonishes, "Gentlemen, if we could get back on track for a moment? What are we going to do about this situation?"

"Well," John drawls, "I've already placed the city on lockdown, and ordered everyone from the Daedalus confined in the mess until we can get them under the scanner. Carson's people have already cleared Lorne, and I've got him organizing teams to search the city for any obvious signs of sabotage.

"Oh, and 'Lantis hasn't noticed anyone messing with her coding, but I'd like Rodney and Zelenka to check her out as soon as possible."

Elizabeth looks mildly impressed. "Looks like you've got this pretty much taken care of, Colonel."

He shrugs, "It's no problem. 'Sides, I thought there was something off about Caldwell."

She blinks. So does Rodney. Ronan, however, looks like he might be asleep. "Really?" she asks.
"Yeah. But I thought it was 'cause he's human, not 'cause, y'know, he'd a snake in his head." He shrugs again, raising his hand halfway through the motion to answer his radio. "Sheppard here." he tells whoever is on the other end, "Yeah. I'll be right there... Anyway, the Daedalus' XO is demanding some explanations, so I better go before we add mutiny to the list of today's Lantean firsts. Call me when he's ready for questioning."

Rodney and Elizabeth remain blinking at each other for several minutes. Then, "Just when I think," she says, "I get a handle on the Pegasus galaxy, it goes and throws a day like this at us." Then she starts laughing and only stops herself when it starts to give way to tears.

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It occurs to Rodney that night, in that long dark stretch between midnight on the Terran clock and midnight on the Lantean, when no amount of coffee could keep you awake if you weren't completely and totally immersed in your work, that Elizabeth is the most competent, brilliant person he's ever worked for. Yes, she sometimes makes mistakes, but she does the best she can with the information she's been given, and gives her all to the city with a level of self-less dedication that borders on even John's extreme.

It also occurs to Rodney he'd be exactly like her – lonely as hell and living only for his work – if he'd never met the Ancient named Iohannes Ianideus Licinus Pastor, who's changed his life in so many ways that it would take another lifetime still to list them all.

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Rodney goes out of his way to track John the next day. Even then, though, he doesn't find him until about half-an-hour before they're all supposed to be in the conference room, to go over what their teams have found out about the goa'uld in Caldwell and what it might've done to the city, and that's only because he checks the office John hardly ever uses on the off chance the Ancient might actually be there.

John's sitting at his desk, scowling at his laptop, when he comes in and is immersed enough in his work that he doesn't realize he's no longer alone until Rodney asks, "What on Earth are you doing here? I thought you hated this place."

It's true, too. The office had once been John's praetor's, which meant it was the rough equivalent of General Landry's offices back at the SGC, albeit sightly larger and with a rather more interesting decorating scheme. John hates it because it feels pretentious, despite the fact that, as the military commander of Atlantis, it's his by right.

"Lantea," John corrects around a yawn. "And I kept falling asleep when I tried to do this in my quarters. Can't fall asleep here. I still feel like Gulcherius Col is going to jump out of the woodwork at any minute and demand to know what I'm doing in his office."

Rodney can only roll his eyes, even if it always causes something to clench in his stomach every time John mentions his life Before. He's gotten good at ignoring that by now, and manages to keep his voice steady and even when he asks, "What's so important that it can't wait an hour for you to take a nap? It's another month until our next dial-in to Earth, and it's not like you're going to chew yourself out for not getting your paperwork turned in on time."

"It's my write up of what I learned from Caldwell's goa'uld. It calls itself Zu, by the way, and works for something call the Trust, but other than that, I got a whole lot of nothing out of him. It. Whatever. I don't think it had time to do much more then that, though."
"I didn't find any signs of tampering either," Rodney says, closing the office door behind him.

John just raises his eyebrow – at the door-closing, he thinks, and not the lack of tampering – and says, "Speaking of dialling Terra, did you email Jeannie for me while I was in the infirmary? You know she'll panic if she doesn't hear anything from us. I thinks she thinks we're in the middle of some war or something on your planet, and, like you said, it's another month 'til our next dial-in."

"I did," he sighs. "Even got Carson to give me some kid-friendly options of what Jeannie can pick up the brat for us. Though you do realize Madison's just three and won't remember if she doesn't get a Christmas present from us, right?"

"She'll be four next month. And that's not the point."

"And what, pray tell, is?"

"She's a good kid. She misses us. If getting her a present as part of some bizarre Terran holiday will make her happy and help her remember her uncles care for her even if we can't be there all the time, what's the problem with that?"

"There's no problem, it's just..." Rodney doesn't know what it is, really. It's just all so domestic, them arguing over what to get his niece for Christmas and John saving the last muffin for him on mornings when he wakes up late, and he's still not sure how they got to this point, only that they have and it's amazing and exhilarating and a little bit frightening to think about and he thinks that most people who've been together for almost a year aren't so at ease with each other, let alone their extended families, but it's so them and Rodney doesn't know what he'll do if he ever looses this, which he inevitably will because John isn't John, some lieutenant colonel from Sausalito, he's just an Ancient with different priorities than anyone else alive who just so happens to answer to the name John Sheppard and likes to pretend he's nothing more than a simple, rakishly-haired American Air Force officer.

"Rodney?" John prompts after what must have been a long silence. He's rising from his chair, looking more concerned than the situation really warrants, and it's all too much, and words just burst out-

"I love you, you know that, right?"

John's expression shifts from concern to genuine worry, which isn't exactly the reaction Rodney's been hoping for. "Of course I do, Rodney."

"It's just, I realized the other day that I'd never said it, and wanted to make sure you knew."

"Rodney," the Ancient says, oddly serious as he steps out from behind his desk, "I'm hell of a lot worse with feelings and things than you are, and you know how much I care for you, right?"

"Right, I just-"

"Then believe me when I say that I don't care how long it takes you to tell me you love me, or if you never do. I already know it, and don't want you saying it just because I did and you feel like you have to, oh, I dunno, return the sentiment or something."

Frustrated now, "It's not like that. You know it's not. It's just, like I said, I realized I never said it, and I don't know why that is, but I should've done it earlier and now I have, and now can we just forget all this," he gestures at the space between him, "'cause things are starting to get a little too after-school special here."
For some reason, John starts to laugh at this, his whole face breaking into one of the most genuine
smiles Rodney's ever seen before he slings an arm over his shoulder and says, "Sure thing, buddy,"
before dragging him out of the office and towards the conference room, a warm, fuzzy feeling he'll
never admit to rising in his stomach.

They never make it to Elizabeth's meeting.

That's not their fault, though – it's Chuck's, because just as they walk into the Control Room the
technician says, "I was just about to radio for you, sirs. We've got a situation."

John immediately tenses. "What kind of situation?"

"A hyperspace window just opened on the edge of the system. We're tracking a ship. A large one.
From what we can tell, doesn't appear to conform to any known Wraith or goa'uld designs."

Rodney feels his blood run cold. "Are they broadcasting an IFF?" he asks, practically shoving
another tech out of the way so he can look at the data on their computer.

"They are," John says, just as Rodney's about to ask if he wants to head up to the Chair Room while
he gets the cloak in place.

"How can you tell?" one of the newer gate techs asks. Actually, it's a question Rodney wants to ask
too – John may be a pastor, but he can't pick up radio signals with his nanoids any more than anyone
else can, and they're definitely not picking up anything.

John just grins and starts to walk over to the Gate Room stairs as the space in front of the Stargate is
suffused in bright white light. "Someone radio Elizabeta? Tell her the Asgard have decided to visit
Atlantis."
"What?" Rodney snaps, blindly reaching for his coffee as he tries to work his way through the equations John had found for him relating to recharging ZedPMs. A second hard look through them has proven that the equations are only half-completed – or, at least, written with several steps missing, which, while perfectly fine for Alitia Agnis Perita, whose work notebook they had been salvaged from, is more than a little bothersome for those trying to recreate them ten thousand years later.

John sighs as he slinks further into the lab – or, at least, that's what Rodney assumes he's doing by the sound of it. He doesn't actually look up until John's right next to him, leaning against a stretch of not-so-cluttered work desk and raising an eyebrow smugly at him. "I said that, since Carson says Colonel Caldwell's up for it, I'm going to be doing a walking tour of Atlantis in twenty minutes, and asked if you wanted to tag along."

He blinks once at this, then, "Did Elizabeth put you up to this?"

It's the Ancient's turn to blink then, features slipping into a mask of confusion. "No?"

"So you're doing something nice for the anthropologists because you want to?"

"What?" John starts, quickly adding, "No. No anthropologists. No anthropology. Not that kind of walking tour at all."

"Good," Rodney tells him, genuinely relieved. "I was starting to think you were developing a terminal case of Christmas spirit. You haven't seen my coffee have you?"

He can hear John's eyebrow going up as he glances about the lab, than points to a spot directly behind where Rodney's currently sitting. "It's one thing to turn tolerate the holiday for the sake of morale. It's another thing entirely to put up with anthropologists because of it."

"I guess it's a good thing I put your name on the things I got people then," Rodney snorts, turning around to discover that, yes, that is the cup was using perched atop what he's been assuming to be is a broken Ancient music box. "How did that get over there?"

"I dunno. And, you did?"

Rodney pauses in lifting the rediscovered cup to his mouth just long enough to frown at the Colonel and point out, "I'm not nearly as heartless as people seem to think. And only for, you know,
Elizabeth and Carson and the team. Oh, and Radek, but his is mostly just so I don't have to hear him go on about how I don't appreciate him as a fellow scientist again. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd rather have him keeping an eye on things here when I can't, but you'd think that allowing him to do that in the first place would be appreciation enough..."

"Don't worry," John says placatingly, "I promise I won't tell any of your scientists that you're just a big softie underneath all the bluster."

His eyes narrow involuntarily. "You wouldn't dare."

John just laughs.

"Fine, but if you say anything to my minions, I'll tell your Marines about how your fondness for Russian literature."

He snorts this time. "Lorne paints in his free time and Cadman does something called yoga. I don't think the Marines will care if I read a few Terran books."

"The only Earth books I've seen you read have been Russian, which are possibly the most depressing and confusing books ever written. Nothing but long, involved stories of failed love affairs and suffering as a means of redemption."

"We named it first," John says, completely ignoring the last.

"And we live there. We win, six billion or so to one."

"Whatever," he says, sounding more Valley girl than ten-thousand-year-old alien. One of these days, he really needs to ask John about that. After he figures out the ZedPM recharging problem. "You want to come along or not?"

"Depends. What kind of walking tour is it then, if it's not top ten places in Atlantis to see before you die, and what chance is there of getting coffee at the end of it?"

"It's a talk to Beckett about the goa'uld he took out of Caldwell, visit the Asgard in section seventy-three, ask you how the ZPM stuff is going, then break for lunch before dialling the SGC and telling them all about it kind of walking tour."

"So, basically, what you normally spend all day doing, only with other people involved."

"Yes, that's it exactly," John says in the driest tone possible. "So, coming?"

"Eh, why not?" he says, saving his work and closing his laptop. "I'm kinda curious about what's got the Asgard so excited they'd travel nearly five million light years to get their hands on it, even with hyperdrive technology."

"That's the spirit."

"So, what you got for us, Doc?"

Carson looks up from his microscope, saying, "Not much, I'm afraid," before turning to Rodney with a suspiciously large grin. "So, what's the special occasion?"

Rodney blinks at him, then at John, who shrugs from the perch he's taken on the nearest infirmary bed. "Come again?"

"John's usually alone when he pops by on his rounds of the city."
"John also usually doesn't plan on visiting the Asgard after we're done here either, so there you go."

"Oh," Carson says a little sadly – not much, but enough that even Rodney notices it and thinks it odd.

"Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why do you think it should count as a special occasion that I'm tagging along on one of his walkabouts? I've seen Lorne on them before." Actually, now that he thinks about it, Lorne's just about the only other person he's ever seen tag along on one of these things, and Rodney's not entirely sure whether the Major does it 'cause he wants to or if it's just to keep John apprised of the official running-of-the-battalion things John, being John, could really care less about.

Before the doctor can say anything, John snorts. "It's his week in the pool."

Honest to God, Rodney actually thinks they're talking about a pool, with water and chlorine and microbacteria and whatnot. And then he remembers that he's living on what is essentially the universe's most remote forward operating base with Marines and children. "You didn't."

Carson dithers.

"Oh my God, you did. You placed a bet about us in one of Zelenka's ridiculous pools. And you call yourself our friend!"

"Oh, relax Rodney. It's nae but some light-hearted fun."

"Plus," John says, seemingly utterly unperturbed by this information, "they've got some pretty good stuff in there by this point. Having the Daedalus around to regularly bring supplies really ups the bar on what people are willing to bet about these things. The one for when we first got together has something like five hundred dollars in it, plus enough coffee and chocolate to keep you happy for a month. And you don't even want to know what's in a couple of the less PG pools."

"How do you know what's been bet?" Carson asks, forgetting his embarrassment at being caught for long enough to be genuinely curious. "Radek guards that notebook fiercer than my dear mother guards her quiche recipe."

"Forget that, what do you mean less PG pools?"

"Oh, y'know, who goes where when we have sex and the like... But you'd be surprised what people leave lying about when they think you can't understand them."

Rodney gapes at him, wordlessly, for nearly a minute before he can say anything. (In his defence, Carson's doing much the same – and it is some comfort, at least, that the good doctor appears not to have known or, God forbid, participated in that one. But still.)

"I'm sorry, but you know about betting pools like that and you let them continue?"

John shrugs, "What does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" Rodney repeats. "Tell me, in what universe does it not matter that people – more specifically, members of this Expedition, who, by default, can only be one of our subordinates – are speculating about our sex life?"
"It's not like they're hurting anybody."

"That's not the point."

"It's not?"

The honest query causes his anger to deflate somewhat. "Look, if it's all the same with you, I'd rather not have people betting about where our dicks go, okay? So, please, do something about it and never, ever mention it again?"

John cocks his head to the side at this and appears to think about it. "Sure thing."

"Thanks," Rodney says with a truly grateful sigh. Then, "I thought Zelenka shut down his black market after we got back in contact with Earth."

"Nope."

"That still," Carson protests, his voice finally seeming to have returned, "doesnae explain how you know about the bets, Colonel."

"I happened to... overhear... Doctor Kantor placing her bet with Radek."

It takes him a moment, but, "Wait, isn't she the German oceanographer the Daedalus brought on it's last run?" At John's nod, he continues, "The one who McNabb insisted we needed for their research on M8R-169 that it doesn't matter that her English is about as good as my German?"

"Ah, but Radek speaks German."

"So?"

"You'll be surprised what you can learn when people don't think you can understand them," he says mysteriously before looking at his watch and asking, "So where is Caldwell anyway? He's the one who wanted to tag along in the first place, and he's late."

It's apparent that John's got no wish to elaborate on his intentionally cryptic statement (though Rodney's thinking updated translation matrix, particularly as he's fairly certain the copy of War and Peace he's seen him reading is a Russian-language copy underneath a translation's dust jacket), so Rodney decides to shelf that one for the moment and grouse instead, "Oh, yes, because you've such a tight schedule to keep."

John raises an eyebrow at this.

Rodney just rolls his eyes at him. Well, he also steps closer to the infirmary bed John's perched on, with the intention of slapping him upside the head next time he decides he wants to say something annoying like oh, by the way, our subordinates are speculating about our sex lives for money. Ho doesn't get the chance though, as Colonel Caldwell takes this opportunity to appear from whatever corner he's been hiding in.

"Sorry for the delay," he says. "Doctor Weir wished to clarify some things before we started and time got away from us."

John's eyes shutter at clarify, but Rodney thinks he's the only one who notices, particularly with the way John turns up the charm after this comment, as if Caldwell is some native chieftain they have to deal with in order to see the sacred temple rather than, well, the closest thing to a commanding officer John's likely to ever have in this galaxy.
"No problem. Happens to me all the time," John says with a wry smile before turning to Carson, clapping his hands together, and asking, "So, Doc, learn anything interesting from our goa'uld friend?"

"Like I said, nae much. I ran it underneath the Ancient scanner, but it didn't tell us anything we hadn't already learned about goa'uld physiology. I also took the opportunity to run a genetic profile on it, but without access to those that the SGC has run on the goa'uld they've had access to, I canae tell you more than it's a goa'uld, an a young one at that. Colonel Caldwell here was probably it's first host."

"Lovely," Caldwell says dryly.

"Well, it's better than nothing," John says, hopping off the infirmary bed. "I figure we'll be at the porta in about two hours, so..."

"My report's already on the server, waiting for the dial-up."

"Cool. Well, I promised Rodney we'd go see the Asgard, so we better get to it before before he turns into a pumpkin or something."
Despite the fact that their ship, Muspelheim, could easily hold the Daedalus five times over, it has apparently only brought three Asgard to Atlantis. Two of them, Sigyn and Heimdall, are geneticists, and, jointly, the heads of what John's taken to calling Project Ragnarök, which is the Asgard's attempt to repair the damages several thousand generations of cloning having done to their genome. The last is none other than Thor, the Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet, who seems to be here in more of an engineering capacity than any formal, diplomatic capacity.

But whatever. Rodney could really care less about who the Asgard are, even if Sigyn is the first he's ever met with a female personality. He's mostly just interested in what they're doing, which, as John keeps saying obliquely, is trying to save the Asgard race.

"So," John says when they're finally—in the lab in section seventy-three, leaning against a dead control panel, "quick history of this place: sixty-five million years or so ago, the people you came to think of as Ancients were on the loosing side of a war with the Haeretici. Being consummate cowards, they eventually decided to leave the home galaxy in what lintres and urbes-naves they had left, Atlantis being one of them."

"Haeretici," Caldwell repeats, butchering the word. "You mean the Ori, right?"

"Before they Ascended," Rodney confirms, before gesturing at John impatiently and saying, "But what does that have to do with this place and saving the Asgard race?"

"We got paranoid. Keyed all our tech to our genetic code, but-"

"-but," Rodney finishes for him, feeling his eyes go wide as he takes in the room they're in once more, suddenly understanding what this place is for and what the Asgard might want with it, "your genetic code was the same as your enemy's, so the only way that would work would be to change your own."

"Bingo."

"That's just..." he says excitedly, rushing over to examine the nearest of the twenty or so devices that line the room, looking more like oversized water-coolers than medical equipment. Heimdall (or, at least, he thinks it's Heimdall) is currently interfacing the device with an Asgard computer and gives him a sour look at the interruption, "it must have taken generations – unless there are more labs like this one in the city?"

Shaking his head, John replies, "This is the only one in the city," not bothering to hide his amused smile. He's about to go on—perhaps, if looks are anything to judge by, ask him if it had been worth the wait to see this place—

-but then Caldwell interrupts, sounding oddly like Elizabeth when he asks, "Gentleman, if you don't mind explaining what's so fascinating?"

"The ATA gene's artificial."

Caldwell frowns. "I thought Doctor Beckett's gene therapy activated dormant genes in those who receive it."
"Yeah. His gene therapy does, but what John's saying is that the Ancients didn't just choose random, pre-existing genes to bind their technology to, they wrote them into their genetic code."

"And what does that have to do with this room?"

"Because," Rodney says, impatience tinging his excitement as he pulls out his own tablet and begins trying to interface it with the machine next to Heimdall's, "you can't just go about adding genes to an adult's DNA and expect things to work out. The human body just doesn't work that way."

"What Doctor McKay is attempting to explain," the one he's fairly certain is Sigyn interrupts, apparently having tired of trying to work while they were carrying on in the background, "is that the Ancients eugenically modified their own population several times. This lab was a key component of the earliest and most extreme incidences, whereby those lived within Atlantis surrendered their reproductive rights to the state. All of the children born during this period were genetically engineered to carry what you call the Ancient Technology Activation gene. The majority of these embryos were transferred into the female genetic donor as blastocysts, but some – approximately ten to fifteen percent – were carried to term artificially in these devices. I believe you would call them extra-uterine foetal incubators."

"Extra-uterine incubators. You mean artificial wombs?"

"Indeed, Colonel Caldwell," she agrees. "While we have technology that operates on a similar premise for maturing our clones, the methodology behind the Ancients' technology is entirely different. It is our hope that, by modifying the devices, we will be able to create Asgard capable of sexual reproduction and, thusly, save our race from extinction."

This causes Rodney to pause in what he's doing (which, at this moment, is basically downloading the incubator's schematics). He wants to save the Asgard race – they're not bad people, even if they are arrogant bastards who had only the thinnest grasp on the meaning of words like manners and allies – but the very last thing he wants to ever think about is Asgard sex.

He glances at John – only briefly, as Heimdall is between them, and Rodney doesn't trust himself to keep a straight face for that long – and sees even he looks a little put off by the idea.

Caldwell, though, seems to be made of tougher stuff, and asks without seeming to consider it's... frightening... implications, "And you think these incubators will do the trick?"

"We are hopeful. But the devices are very old, even by Ancient standards, and have been poorly maintained."

"We only really used these right after the Schisma," he can practically hear John shrug. "Or, at least, that's what 'Lantis says. I only know about this place 'cause I stumbled across it when I was ten or eleven or so, and even then I hadn't thought this place still existed. Many sections of the city were abandoned long before we left Avalon, and most of those were scavenged to death for spare parts after the Siege started, or before then, back during the Plague, when we were pretty much grasping a straws trying to cure it..."

Heimdall, who must have better multitasking skills than his colleague, nods knowingly at this. "I had the opportunity to visit Atlantis shortly before it left Earth, and, as I recall, even then many parts of the city were in disrepair. I always thought the situation quite unfortunate, and await the day that you are able to restore it back to it's previous glory."

Rodney blinks. He'd known cloning was able to extend the Asgard lifespan considerably, but for Heimdallto have visited the city before, he'd have to be even older than John. Idly, he wonders how
many clone bodies the geneticist might have gone through in ten thousand plus years, but for the most part keeps his attention on the diagrams flashing up on his screen.

(If he's reading them correctly – which he is because he's the smartest man in two galaxies – Rodney thinks they're not just incubators: no, these machines do the whole she-bang, from collecting the donor's genetic material – luckily, only blood samples – and doing whatever genetic engineering is needed through to childbirth.)

Still, despite his distraction, he can hear John beaming at the Asgard scientist. "So does 'Lantis. She's been planning how she's going to redecorate practically since we regained contact with Terra."

"I admit to a certain fascination with the Ancient practice of modifying certain members of their population with nanomachines for the express purpose of communing with the artificial intelligences that ran their cities, particularly given your reticence towards other forms of technological augmentation."

"If I remember correctly, the Asgard were never big on mechanical modifications either."

If Heimdall had had a proper nose, Rodney thinks he would've wrinkled it. "While it is true we had considered such things once, I believe our interactions with the Furlings proved this an unwise course of action."

It's John's turn to nod, Rodney can see from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, well, back to the incubti: any chance of making them actually work?"

"Yes."

Sigyn huffs at this and (possibly, it's hard to tell with Asgard) glares at Heimdall. "Possibly. The machines are old and may not be able to be returned to full functionality. Even then, it is uncertain whether the organic interface we use in place of a placenta for growing our clones will be able to function properly within the incubators, or, if we are able to replicate the inorganic medium they appear to have been designed to use for the same purpose, if Asgard embryos will be able to thrive within it.

"While we are likely to be able to work past these problems, the fact remains that these devices were designed with the sole aim of modifying the Ancients' genome into what it is today. I am uncertain the alterations we will need to make for our purposes will allow for anywhere near the same functionality, or success rate."

"However," Heimdall adds, "these incubators are still the best chance we have yet found towards saving our race from extinction."

"That's good to hear," Caldwell says honestly, but before he can say more Sigyn interrupts, saying-

"There is only a seventeen point twelve percent chance of success," in the haughtiest, most contemptuous way he's ever heard from an Asgard (and Rodney's worked with a lot of Asgard). Even Heimdall seems surprised by it, because it causes him to say something to her in their native tongue that, despite his inability to understand, can only be a telling-off. Either way, it causes Sigyn to retreat to the far corner of the room, muttering darkly under her breath.

Heimdall takes the Asgard equivalent of a deep breath and, rather gently, says, "I apologize for Sigyn. She has been working on our cloning problem for almost three thousand years – since long before it became as extreme as it is now. I fear she has become disheartened at our prospects for survival, particularly in light of what she views as overly stringent sanctions on our research. She,
however, has always been careful to stay within the High Council's strictures, so there is no need to be unduly concerned."

"Hey, as long as no one gets cloned against their will, more power to you. Well," John claps his hands together, "I dunno about you, Colonel, but all this science talk is starting to make my head spin, so I'm thinking lunch, then how to recharge a ZPM in five easy steps, then the dial-in to Terra."

Chapter End Notes

Sigyn is Loki's wife in Norse Mythology.
"I'm going to need approximately eighty feet of thirty-two gauge copper wire, maybe half a kilogram of oxynictide – something lanthanum-based preferably, but I won't say no to something with samarium if Area 51 can spare any, - and the best clean room we can build as far from from any of the city's power conduits as is both possible and practical," Rodney announces as he enters Elizabeth's office, completely not caring that he's probably interrupted some big, important meeting between herself, John, and Colonel Caldwell regarding the city's defences. Or something else equally important but less interesting than what he's been working on since mid-December.

"What?"

"Copper wire. Oxynictide. Clean room. Things I need," Rodney repeats at Elizabeth's bewildered expression. "Oh, and I'll have to borrow the charged ZedPM we already have for a couple hours, but that probably won't be for a couple weeks yet."

"Yes, I got that much," Elizabeth says. "But what you haven't said is why you need them."

"To recharge the ZedPMs, of course."

There's a beat when both Elizabeth and Caldwell stare at him blankly before the Colonel, quickly regathering his wits, asks, "You completed the equations then?"

"Yes – two days ago, actually." He frowns. "Didn't John tell you?"

John holds up both of his hands in what is surely meant to be a placating gesture, "I was going mention it after the outcome of the Asgard's latest genetic trials."

"Really?" Rodney asks, momentarily distracted, "How's that going?"

"They managed to get one of their modified zygotes to survive for all of twelve hours before the incubtum declared it inviable and aborted it. Heimdall considers it progress."

"Huh. That's... moderately disturbing, actually."

John shrugs, "The Asgard are the Asgard. Trying to judge them by human – or Alteran – terms is pointless and hurts everyone involved."

"And yet," Elizabeth says, eyes crinkling with amusement, "I seem to recall you saying just the other day that descendants are weird."

"Ninety-seven percent shared genome, ninety-seven percent judgement," John says evenly. "But, yeah, Rodney finished The Dorandan Equations two days ago."

"The Dorandan Equations?"
"It's what he's calling the equations we found for recharging the Zero Point Modules," Rodney tells Caldwell. "Because, apparently, we can't just go around calling them the ZedPM recharge equations for the rest of our lives, or, God forbid, name them after the person who's spent the better part of the last three weeks slaving away at them to make a full proof out of half a page of somebody's hastily scribbled notes."

"Well, if you can think of a name for them that doesn't take almost as long to say as they do to solve, you can call them whatever you want. But I like The Dorandan Equations and I'm the one with final naming say-so, so... The Dorandan Equations they'll remain."

Rodney harrumphs at this, but sinks down on to the couch next to him without further comment.

"Anyway, like I was saying, Rodney finished the equations a couple of days ago, and Doctor Zelenka and I have gone over them so many times I swear I'm starting to see them every time I close my eyes, but there's nothing in the maths that say they won't work, and Radek says the same about the science, so..." He pokes Rodney in the leg, possibly as a cue for him to take up the explanations. Before he can say anything, however, Elizabeth does, repeating, "You've been over the math?" in a tone of such disbelief that he can't keep from snorting.

"Don't let the hair fool you," he tells her, "John's a mathematical genius."

Smirking now, "Is that so?"

"Yeah," Rodney says as John groans, slumping further down into the couch, as if doing so would render him deaf to the conversation going on around him. "He solved the Riemann Hypothesis between debriefings while we back on Earth 'cause he was bored. Actually," Rodney glances at his watch, "the USAF Publishing Directorate put out his monograph last Monday. So, unless the CMI and IMU really drag their heels, we'll probably need to find a way for us to be back on Earth for most of next December for the award ceremonies."

Elizabeth blinks at him.

"The Riemann Hypothesis is – or, rather, was – widely regarded as the most important unsolved problem in speculative mathematics in modern history. It's on both the Clay Mathematics Institute's list of Millennium Prize Problems and Hilbert's list of unsolved mathematical problems from the turn of the last century. Basically, the only way he's not going to win a Fields Medal for this is if someone starts looking too closely into the background the SGC made up for him, and the awards ceremony is right before Christmas, so..."

"Why, John, I didn't know you were into math."

"Father's version of parenting was to act like I was one of his research assistants," John says with minimal emotion, staring rather sightlessly at one of the figurines on Elizabeth's desk. "When I was young, he'd give me equations to solve while he went off to his lab. When I got older, he'd have me crunch numbers for whatever project he was working on at the time. Can't say much of the science stuck, but..." he trailed off with a what can you do sort of shrug.

"Well, be that as it may..."

"Yes, yes," Rodney breaks in quickly, diverting the conversation before they can get bogged down in the trials and travails of John's childhood, which he knows John won't appreciate, "while we could spend all day trying to reconcile John's brain with the rest of him, how about we concentrate on my genius for the moment, which, while already assured, has reached entirely new heights with these
"Go ahead, Rodney," Elizabeth says, smiling slightly, "astound us."

"Well, you know how we've always pretty much thought the ZedPMs were miniature universes in a bottle?"

"Yeah."

"Well, turns out we were wrong – or, rather, mostly wrong. Thank God too, or else we'd never be able to recharge them."

Sitting (if possible) a little bit straighter at this, "What are they then?" Colonel Caldwell asks.

"Essentially?" he says, whipping out his tablet and using it to pull up a schematic of the device they'll have to build to recharge the ZedPMs on the large monitor in the corner of Elizabeth's office. It looks a little like a wood lathe with a coil of wires where the dowel would normally go, but Rodney's not going to let looks get in the way of what represents the biggest step forward for humanity since Sam's dialling program for the Stargate. "That, while the Zero Point Modules still draw power from a region of subspace that is otherwise unable to interact with space-time as we know it, instead of, well, containing said region as we've always thought, it connects our universe to a region of subspace inside another universe entirely."

"So you're saying what, exactly? That there's a wormhole to a parallel universe inside each and every ZPM?"

"In layman's terms? Yes. Though, rather than parallel universes, like we've seen with the quantum mirror on Earth, we're talking about completely different universes entirely, ones which have no connection to our own other than through the the ZedPM." Ones which, rather than sharing a common history, are lucky to share common laws of physics. It's a subtle difference, but an important one.

"So how's this important?"

"It means that when a Zero Point Module looses it's charge, it's not the Zero Point Module itself that becomes inert, just the region of subspace in the universe it's connected to. The wormhole connecting them is still active – well, technically, it's a white hole, but, for the sake of this conversation-"

"The point, Rodney," John reminds him, leaning forward to prop his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists, somehow managing to look not so much bored by the proceedings as mildly nostalgic. Granted, from what little John was willing to share about his childhood, most of it probably had been spent listening to scientists of one sort or another talk to each other about things far over his head. But still. Weird.

"Yes, right," he says quickly, blinking to try and rid himself of his John-filled thoughts. "The point is, if we can direct the right amount of charge to the right part of the ZedPM, we can make the wormhole inside jump, more or less, to a different region of subspace, most likely in third universe entirely. Regardless, it'll be a region of subspace rife with zero point energy."

Elizabeth seems to muse on this for a moment. Then, "What's the catch?"

"Er, well, to make the wormhole jump, we've got to set up a superconducting magnet around the ZedPM. It shouldn't be difficult, but the possibility – the very small-"

"One point four percent," John offers, grinning for some strange, unknown reason of his own.
Rodney glares at him while continuing emphatically, "-minute possibility remains that we could damage the ZedPM itself. But," he says more assuredly still as he turns back to Elizabeth, "we've got the three that were left behind during the Exodus to try on, plus the one that General O'Neill originally used to power the Antarctic Outpost. So that's four chances at getting it right, which means potentially four new ZedPMs to fight the Wraith and the Ori with."

"And possibly four more chances of blowing a hole in the universe until you figure it out."

"You blow up one solar system," he mutters under his breath, feeling himself flush at this. "It's not like that. If we do manage to damage the ZedPM in some way, all that's likely to happen is it cracks open – which does absolutely nothing but cause the wormhole inside to dissolve. No noise, no lights; nothing that could possibly blow a hole in the universe at all. Just a tiny crack that, in all likelihood, we'd not even notice until we went looking for it. Very anticlimactic – and safe – and the only thing we've lost is a ZedPM we couldn't use anyway. But there's only a one in one hundred chance of that happening – less than even once we run some preliminary tests on some inert crystals we've found with similar properties as the ones that make up the ZedPMs."

Elizabeth bites her lower lip, looking vaguely chastised by this remark. Or, at least, embarrassed that she'd voiced her fear at all. "It's not that I'm not thrilled, it's really not. It's just, well, wouldn't we be finding a lot more charged ZPMS if the Ancients had had an effective way of recharging them?"

"The Ancients were a race of people who went about regularly tapping the zero-point energy of other universes. Suffice to say that conservation and efficiency were not exactly high on their list of priorities."

"Don't look at me," John shrugs when Elizabeth does just this, presumably for confirmation of this. "Science, once again, was never my thing. All I know is, Father and his colleagues did a lot of experimenting and they were never short for supplies, even after Tirianus fell."

Caldwell changes the direction of the conversation before Elizabeth has a chance to probe further – perhaps to ask, as Rodney has so often wondered, just what Tirianus was and why it's destruction had been so particularly devastating. Either way, it's a question that doesn't bare asking, not if they want honest answers, and they've other things to worry about today. "So how long before we'll be able to see if this idea of yours works or not?"

"It'll probably take two or three weeks to build all the equipment we'll need and another week at most to do the initial tests... So we're looking at the end of March at the earliest, depending on what the Daedalus' turn-around time on Earth is."

Though Earth days and calendar months mean little on Atlantis, it is barely January by them. And, while waiting is the only option they have, the situation could change drastically in the time it would take Daedalus to get back to Earth, resupply, and arrive back at Atlantis. The Ori could reach the Milky Way before then or the Wraith could realize that Atlantis isn't as destroyed as they'd made her out to seem, but it's the best they can do.

"I've actually been thinking about that," John interrupts, surprising all of them.

"How so?"

"We take a leaf from my people's book and scrounge for it."

Rodney turns and looks at him. "For basic building supplies, yeah. But I've not exactly seen piles of superconductive materials laying about anywhere. At least, none that are in any places we can afford to scrounge them from."
"Ah, but I've not shown you the really good labs yet."

"You haven't?" Rodney's mildly surprised by the hurt he hears in his voice.

"Do you tell all your secrets to people you've just met?"

"You've known us for eighteen months!" Not to mention the fact that they'd been seeing each other (or whatever the hell they wanted to call it) for the last twelve.

"Yes, well," he says somewhat abashedly, "I got distracted. 'Sides, it's not like there weren't plenty of normal, run-of-the-mill ones for you to explore."

"Eighteen months," Rodney repeats.

"The Genii. The Siege. Project Arcturus. The Asgard," John counts off on his fingers. "Do you really need me to go on?"

"Fine. Whatever. But if there's something in one of them that could've kept you from almost flying yourself into the side of a Wraith hive-"

"There's not."

"I might not ever be able to forgive you."

John's eye-roll is almost audible. "Race of cowards, remember? Things that could destroy the Wraith also had the potential to destroy us, so we kept them off-world in case something went wrong."

"That's... understandable, I suppose."

"I'm sure your approval would've meant everything to them," he says dryly. "So, now that we've got that out of the way, what do you way you let us finish up here, and then tomorrow we can start looking for the parts you need?"

"Fine, but don't think you and I won't be talking about this later."

"Wouldn't expect anything else."

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, as near as I can tell, the science for this is, well, vaugely sound. And possibly series compliant. But a white hole is the opposite of a black hole, oxypnictides are the ultimate in superconductive materials, and, while I'm not sure if there's an USAF publishing directorate, I know there's an Army version, so there's probably something like that with the Air Force as well, if under a different name or something
"So, if Terrans celebrate the anniversary of your births and the presumed anniversary of the birth of the son of one of your gods, does this mean that you celebrate the anniversary of the start of your relationships as well?"

Rodney looks blearily at John over the top of his coffee cup. They're sitting across from each other in the mess, John being his usual early morning self – which is to say, he's been up for three hours already, doing God knows what with Ronan and the Marines, and has pushed past his own early-morning dullness – and Rodney trying to caffeinate himself into a state of alertness. He hadn't really meant to stay up so late fine tuning the designs for the ZedPM recharger, but there were not words to describe how much he wanted it to work out perfectly, particularly given the disaster that he had made of Project Arcurtus. "What are you going on about?" he asks (fairly intelligibly, in his opinion).

"Terran celebrations, other than birthdays and Christmas."

"What about them?"

"What are they?" John says, an amused lilt to both his right eyebrow and the right corner of his mouth.

"What? Oh... graduations, anniversaries, various bank holidays – things like Easter, Thanksgiving, and Remembrance Day. And, believe me, if the idea of Christmas throws you for a loop, Easter is just going to confuse the hell out of you."

"Really?"

"Get Elizabeth to explain it to you. She might have a way of explaining it that doesn't make it sound like our ancestors were on something when they came up with it."

John's eyebrow arches higher, looking at him like he can't quite believe what he's saying (Rodney's explanations of both pre-Copernican cosmology and social networking had garnered similar, utterly askance looks from the Ancient). "So I was right, then?"

"About what?" Rodney asks, somewhat confused by the sudden change of topic and downing the last of his coffee in attempt to rectify this. Really and truly, he'd worked on nuclear bombs on less sleep than this; a little exhaustion shouldn't slow his uptake this much.

John only laughs, the sound foreign enough that Rodney thinks he can hear the heads turning to look at them. They're at one of the balcony tables though – which is kinda stupid because it's the middle of the Lantean rainy season and, while it isn't raining now, there's a San Francisco-esque mist enveloping everything but the very tops of the highest towers – and there's not really anyone close enough to hear what they're saying. "According to the Terran calendar, it has been be three hundred and sixty-five of your days since we," he gestures between them with his fork, "became us."
Rodney blinks at him, does the math in his head, and then says, "Oh my god. You're a romantic. Why didn't I notice this before? I feel like this is something I should've noticed before." A flutter of panic beats against his chest. He'd thought that John really doesn't care about gifts or anniversaries or, hell, even the vocal acknowledgement of their feelings.

But still. These things add up, and, even if they don't matter, they're a mark against him; a tear at the fabric of their relationship that their not caring makes even worse, because that means that neither of them would notice it start to unravel. And that can not be allowed to happen, 'cause John's the best thing to ever happen to him, the one and only person in the universe who, even if he doesn't understand Rodney one hundred percent of the time, gets him in a way no one else has ever been able to. And while Rodney suspects he'll never know all there is to know about Johannes Ianidedus Licinus Pastor or even his Americanized John Sheppard incarnation, he also knows that he's probably the only person who's ever tried.

(There's probably a word for what they are, what they feel, above and beyond amatores, which is the only label they've ever dared apply to themselves. Lovers seems too dirty, boyfriends too trite, and partners both too much and not enough. But, if there are any better words, they're in no language Rodney's ever learned.)

John, however, doesn't seem to notice Rodney's panic attack. Or, if he does, he's kind enough not to comment on it. Instead, he just prop his elbow on the table and his chin into his palm, and says, "I only ask 'cause I've got a mountain of paperwork that Elizabeta and 'Lantis are starting to call me out on, and Lorne promised to do mine if I gave him the right week for Zelenka's betting pool, and I'm thinking this might be the right time to call him out on it..."

The vice around Rodney's heart loosens instantly. "And the romance is gone," he fake sighs, falling back on sarcasm as he tries not to sigh audibly in relief. Then the rest of John's sentence hits him. "And I thought you said you were going to close down Zelenka's betting pools."

Rolling his eyes. "I merely pointed out to him that, if we ever came out," (he uses actual air quotes here), "about some of the kinkier ones, his business would go bust with the odds. Most people," he explains, "seem to be of the opinion our sex life is completely opposite as to what is is, enough so that paying off the people who do have it right would cost him five or six Daedalus trips worth of coffee and chocolate, not to mention half-a-year's pay."

"Can we not," he hisses, "talk about that in the middle of the mess?"

"Who'd ever have thought that any descendants of Father's could be such prudes?" John mutters to himself, shaking his head somewhat wondrously. "But, speaking of Father, hurry up will you? Daedalus is scheduled to leave first thing tomorrow, and I 'spect you'll need all day to just to rifle through all the drawers in his lab."

Rodney blinks at this. "I thought my lab now used to be his."

"His public one, yeah. But the one where he did all his secret experiments, the ones not even I was supposed to know about...? That's on the East Pier and, if it wasn't flooded too badly during the Storm, it should have what you need. If not, Forcul had a couple of workspaces that might still be intact, as did a few of the periti, so we'll probably be able to find at least some of what you need, but..."

"But?" he prompts.

John leans forward, his eyes (more mercurial than even his moods) a flinty grey-green above deeply pursed lips. He doesn't speak until Rodney's leaning forward too, so that their faces are only scant
inches from each other, and even then his words are discordantly harsh against the intimacy of their positions. "But there are things in these labs that should never have seen the light of day. Things born out of utmost desperation at the end of a war that started seventy-two years before I was even born. Some of it you might be able to salvage, in time, and turn into something we can actually use. But most of it..." John pulls back suddenly, eyes going to the ocean that is barely visible through the mist, and his whispered declaration, "There are things even I won't do to save this city," is so quiet that, save for the movement of his lips, he mightn't have said it at all.

Rodney, who has seen John Ascend and fly nukes into ships and kill sixty invaders without batting an eye, has never actually been scared of the prospect of anything they might find on Atlantis until that moment.

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"I do these personnel evaluations out of necessity only," Radek says the moment Rodney enters his lab some time later, startling so deeply he'd have spilled coffee all over himself if he'd not finished his latest cup on the way up here.

"What's with the sneaking?" Rodney snaps when he has his breath back. "Trying to give me a heart attack? 'Cause don't think you'll be getting your hands on my research if I die. I've paperwork back on Earth that very specifically spell out you're not allowed anywhere near it if it so much as smells like you've had a part in my death."

"No, no," Radek practically cackles, using a finger to push his glasses up his nose as he looks up from his laptop, 'I've every intention of being L'Éminence Grise for as long as possible – the paperwork is most tedious, but it is preferable to the running around like a headless chicken you must do."

Rodney resolutely sets down his coffee cup and goes about gathering the things he needs to rummage around more-potentially-dangerous-than-usual labs in search of copper wiring and superconductive material that could create a magnetic field of at least 43 Teslas at no greater than 55 Kelvin. Which is to say, a pair of gloves, some basic tools, and, of course, his tablet and all the requisite wires and adapters that went with it.

And then, because he can't bottle it in any longer, "And I don't run around like a headless chicken."

"I only mean the constant demands on your time pull on you, like marionette, only without the unfortunate puppet-master overtones. Myself, I prefer to stay on Atlantis and carry out my research uninterrupted."

"Yes, well, while your lack of multitasking skills explain so much, you still haven't explained why you're in my lab."

With a put upon sigh, "I told you. I am doing personnel evaluations."

"Yes, yes. That you said." (Rodney is not going to look a gift horse in the mouth and ask why Radek was doing them, as they are something Rodney had been putting off since before the first test of the Arcturus weapon), "but why are you doing them here?"

"Because my lab shares servers with the other science labs," is all the explanation the Czech gives. Which, upon reflection, is really all that's needed. As much as the people who work for him are idiots, most are competent enough to write a program that could find their specific evaluation and change it to make them out to be far more competent than they actually are.
"Well then. You have fun with that. John and I are off to rummage through some of the labs for components for the ZedPM recharger."

"Do you need any help?"

Thoughts drifting back to their conversation in the mess, "I think John would prefer it if it were just the two of us, actually."

Radek gets that slightly manic expression Rodney's privately labelled his demonic Czech yenta look. "Enjoy your date then."

"It's not a date. It's two people who happen to be romantically involved digging through junk drawers, looking for parts to build a device that could change the face of the universe as we know it."

"Date," Zelenka repeats with greater feeling.

"I guess if you're going to insist on calling it that, you can also handle any world ending crises that crop up between now and, oh, 0800 tomorrow morning."

Radek's demonic Czech yenta look shifts into the pained one he gets when asked to build nuclear weapons while hopped up on methamphetamines or extract the consciousnesses of Marine lieutenants from his boss's brain post haste. "I am happy for you and the Colonel, I truly am, but, z lásky k bohu, I neither need nor want to know the details of your sex life. Není-li jsem kdy chtějí mít možnost podívat se jeden z vás do očí znovu."

One of these days, Rodney resolves, he's going to learn Czech, if only so he can know what Zelenka is going on about when he lapses into his native language.

But still. "If you don't want to know the details of my sex life, why do you have a betting pool on it?" he accuses.

The other man doesn't have the grace to blush. "I do as the market requires," he shrugs, looking back at his laptop and typing something in. "And is not like I sit around all day, pestering you for confirmation of any of it, as others would, so it works out for the best."

"I'll be the judge of that. But, if you really must know, today does turn out to be our anniversary or something – by Earth's calendar, at least – so if you could just pay Lorne his winnings, he can start on John's paperwork and then, maybe, John and I can actually do something about it."

Radek unexpectedly flushes at this, but after a moment manages, "Really? I wondered why Evan had placed his bet for this week. I should have suspected he was getting inside information – most people go for the weeks right after we arrived on Atlantis, or else right before the Siege."

"Huh," he says, because, really, what else can one say when being told about how the outside world views one's relationship? After a minute he manages, "Well, as interesting this is, I'm supposed to be meeting John in the Control Room, and God knows what he'll get caught up in if I don't get down there soon."

Zelenka just mutters, "Ano. Budeme mluvit zítra," which must be some kind of acknowledgement, because that's all he gets.

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"We are not calling it a ZPM recharger," John says earnestly half-an-hour later, after Rodney's saved
him from death-by-requisition-forms (in the shape of the new logistics specialist, who had more
interest in her CO than Rodney is anywhere comfortable with, even if it appears mostly
professional), when they're walking down a seemingly endless corridor on the third floor of one of
the East Pier's taller towers. Despite it's height – and it's distance from the edge of the pier – there's a
waterline a foot or so above their heads from the storm surge that had hit the city before they
could get the shield activated during the Storm. Hopefully, the water will not have ruined anything of
importance in the lab John's taking him to – if, that is, they ever get to it.

"Why not?"

"'Cause."

"That's not a reason. It's an adulteration of the English language."

"And ZPM recharger is a debasement of the Alteran."

Rodney blinks at him. "I can't believe you just used the word debasement in a sentence."

"It's called a translation matrix," John sighs, coming to halt about twenty meters from a dead end.

"Yes, yes, but still. There had to be a twenty-five cent word going in to get a twenty-five cent word
coming out."

John gives him one of his I've no idea what you're talking about, but I guess I love you anyway
looks and picks up a fallen sconce off the floor. He examines it for a moment, turning it over in his
hand several times before hanging it back on the wall, taking great care to make sure it hangs level.

The sconce is so pleased to be back in place, it actually gives off a faint tone.

It's actually mildly troublesome to watch, and Rodney can't help but wonder if Atlantis' apparent
mania with interior decorating has finally gotten to John.

"What I mean is, since when do you care about the debasement of the Alteran language?" Actually,
what he means is why do you hide yourself like this? why do you insist on pretending to be dumber
than you are almost everyone who isn't me? why am I different? why are you showing me this place
if you're afraid of what we might find there? why do you think you have to buy my love when it
should be obvious I couldn't not love you if I tried? But it's easier to ask about the words John
actually uses than the sentiment behind them. To do otherwise would be to invite sullen looks and
shrugged explanations that would only make Rodney blindingly angry at the man who was John's
father in name only.

"Always," John says blandly, picking up a second sconce and repeating the process with it. It too
chimes with happiness when properly hung. "Why do you think I wouldn't let you call the puddle
jumpers gate ships?"

"Because you instinctively hate any name up with?"

"Which is why I'll be naming the kids."

"Ha, ha. Very funny, John."

"You laugh, but my appreciation of Terran culture does not extend to your names. Some of them are
tolerable, but others... I mean, do you have any idea how many Michaels and Davids and Roberts
there are on this base alone?"
"Says the man named John."

"I'll have you know I was the only Iohannes on Atlantis," John sniffs dramatically, eyes casting about for something – which, as Rodney finds out a moment later, turns out to be yet another light fixture. "Not my fault that your lot bastardized it and turned it into the commonest thing under your sun."

Favouring John with a fond, if exasperated, look, Rodney silently vows to find a way to deal with the city's interior design mania without resorting to paint swatches as he watches John hang the final sconce. "Maybe it is. Your dad's hologram did say he would miss you, and the fact so many of us have the ATA gene means he must've had at least one kid while on Earth... Is it possible that he could've named that kid after you?"

John wrinkles his nose. "That's hardly Father's style. He'd have saddled the kid with some ridiculous Alteran name that none of the locals could pronounce and only have mentioned my existence in the whole even my dead half-wit son could do better than that sort of way."

"Seriously?" As much as Rodney couldn't imagine never not loving John, he just as equally can't imagine anyone else not loving him either. Hell, he'd known John's relationship with Janus was the very definition of strained, but there were also times when Rodney'd gotten the feeling that it was John and his father, raging together against the universe.

John pointedly ignores the question, fiddling with the final sconce. After what might be ages, but is probably only minutes, he says, "Father's secret lab is on the other side of that wall, if you still want to see it," and, well, there's really nothing Rodney can say to that either that won't make things worse.

"I love you," Rodney says an indeterminable amount of time later, when he's given up hacking into Janus' notes for a time when he actually, well, has time to do so, in favour of opening up all the cabinets and seeing what's inside.

John's sitting on the floor, on a spot near the door with a tablet perched on his knees, and doesn't look up, or even acknowledge he's being addressed.

"I love you, and it's not contingent on you being a genius or saving my life or anything else. I love you because you're you, and, okay, maybe you felt you had to buy your father's love, but you don't have to with me."

"That's not-" John begins, cutting himself off quickly once he apparently realizes he'd spoken aloud. His eyes – impossibly bright and shining, even from across the room – flit briefly between Rodney and the ceiling before boring holes into his tablet.

It's an unconscionable time later when John, voice hoarse, asks, "Does that mean you don't want to see the general theory of Diophantine equations I've been working on?"

"It means you're an idiot with worse interpersonal skills than me, as astounding as that may sound."

"Oh."

There's a beat.

"And what do you mean general theory of Diophantine equations? I thought that sort of thing was impossible – you know what, don't tell me. Let me finish raiding your father's lab, and maybe building the ZedPM recharger, and then dazzle me with your brilliance. It tends to be very distracting, and I'm behind enough on things as it is."
John just laughs, and, just like that, things are back to normal between them.

Neither of them notice one of Janus' devices silently activating in the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Zelenka's Czech:
z lásky k bohu - "For the love of god"
Není-li jsem kdy chtějí mít možnost podívat se jeden z vás do očí znovu. - "Not if I ever want to be able to look either of you in the eye ever again."
Ano. Budeme mluvit zítra - "Yes. Talk to you tomorrow."

Czech in this chapter comes from google translator and might actually be Slovak... but it's as close as I can get. Info on Diohantine Equations can be found here.
"You're getting slow, old man," Ronon says, not even the slightest bit winded as they pause on the catwalk.

Iohannes hunches over and tries not to cough up either of his lungs as he attempts to catch his breath. Before he'd met the Runner, he'd liked to think of himself as pretty fit, but Ronon has summarily done everything in his power to prove him otherwise. He's even gone so far as to ask 'Lantis to run through her databases, searching for any mention of his people doing genetic manipulation on Sateda's Descendant population – anything, really, that could explain how Ronon could run as many miles as they did each morning without looking how Iohannes felt, which is to say like keeling over and dying – but she'd found nothing. Nothing helpful, at least.

So it is with some ill-humour he asks, "Who you calling old?" as soon as he actually has the breath to do so.

"I think that'd be obvious, old man," Ronon smirks.

"Laugh all you want, Chewbacca. You'd be lucky to look half as good as I do when you're my age."

"And what's that? Fifty?"

"No, it-s-" He blinks. "What do you mean fifty? There is not possible way I look anywhere remotely close to fifty."

"Well, you certainly run like it."

Iohannes glowers. "You are going to pay for that."

"What are you going to do?" Ronon laughs, "Pass out on me?"

"You're absolutely hilarious," he says, going for his water bottle and downing what remains in one go before accepting, only somewhat reluctantly, the mostly full one Ronon hands him a second later. "We'll have to convert one of the Academia's lecture halls into a theatre so you can do shows."

Ronon doesn't even bother to answer this, just shrugs and leans against the railing, looking down at the mostly-silent turbines below as Iohannes continues to catch his breath. It truly is ridiculous how slow he is compared to Ronon, the fact that the other man's been on the run for the better part of the last seven years notwithstanding. He remembers being faster then this – but, then again, he remembers a lot of things, and very few of them have any real actual value in this day and age. Stasis, he's discovered, has a tendency to fuck with peoples' minds that way.

As if knowing the direction his thoughts have taken, Ronon asks, "So, how old are you anyway?" in
a tone that implies he could hardly be less interested if he tried. Which, having become somewhat familiar with Ronon over the last several months, could either mean he's genuinely uninterested and asking only 'cause it seems like the thing to do, or else he's well and truly interested and trying to pretend he isn't, 'cause he's lived the kind of life where the things he shows interest in have only been taken from him.

In a dim, distant sort of way, Iohannes wonders if it's always been this way for Ronon, or if it's just the last seven years of running that has done this to him, but he doesn't ask. He just runs with him when Ronon wants company.

But still, "Ten thousand, two hundred and thirty-eight next June," he answers truthfully, doing his best to be flippant about it. It's another one of those things Iohannes tries not to think too hard about because, honestly, that way madness lies.

"That's old."

"Tell me about it."

"How'd you manage to stay alive that long?"

"I accidentally put myself into stasis for a couple millennia."

"Stasis?"

"Er, frozen hibernation?" he waves his hand vaguely. The specifics of the process never really interested him. "I dunno. Ask Rodney or Zelenka to try to explain it if you want details. But, pretty much, I sat in the cathedra at roughly the age I am now, and came out a few thousand years later without having really aged," by which he means without having aged at all, but that was another one of those things Iohannes tries not to think about too hard.

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I didn't. Thus the accidental part."

"And you Ancestors did this sort of thing a lot?"

"Not really, no."

"Huh." There's a pause, and then, "Ready to finish this lap?"

Hell no is what Iohannes wants to answer, but is saved from this indignity – or the equally ego-bruising one of agreeing to said madness – but his radio going off. "Sheppard here."

"Where are you?"

"Eighth floor of the air recycling plant," he tells Rodney with a ghost of a smile, despite the fact his amator is in no position to see it.

"What on Earth are you doing there? And, no, don't say it, I know the planet's Lantea. It's just a saying. You don't have to be quite so literal with these things. Anyway, it doesn't matter, how soon can you get to the Control Room?"

"I can be there in three minutes." Less, if he'd the energy in him to run, but, as he isn't, three is the best he can manage. There's a vectura at the base of the stairway on the far side of the plant, one that can take him to the Inner City, and another not far from there that can take him up to the Control
"Good. 'Cause there's something up here you're going to want to see."

"Three minutes," he promises, and sends Ronon a half-hearted look of regret before taking off for the Control Room.

"My God, what have you been doing?" Rodney asks as soon as he arrives at his destination, eyeing his sweat-soaked workout clothes leerily. Even Elizabeta, who's hovering next to one of the consoles, looks vaguely concerned.

"Running with Ronon," he tells him, not really seeing what the big deal is as he sinks into the nearest empty seat with a groan. After all, they've seen him covered in far worse things than sweat, and Rodney's tone had implied this was too urgent to wait for a shower. /Maybe I am getting too old for this,/ he tells the city, who responds-

/You're only as old as you feel./

-which is oddly kind of her, considering her usual smart-ass attitude. But Iohannes is too tired to read too much into it, so he sends her a weary smile by way of the ceiling before turning his attention back to Rodney-

-who is watching the proceedings with more than a little concern. "I'd ask if you've a death wish, but..."

"It's called keeping in shape," he snaps peevishly, dabbing the sweat off his forehead with the hem of his shirt. "Keep it up, and I'll tell Ronon you want to start training with him too."

Rodney holds up his hands in a universal don't shoot gesture from beside the far console, where there appear to be no less than forty dozen wires running between the crystals underneath and the small army of lap tops perched precariously on various surfaces around it. "I've nothing against the whole keeping in shape thing. I am, if you haven't noticed," his hands now moving up and down in Iohannes' general direction, "I'm rather a fan of your current shape so, please, do whatever it takes to keep it. It's more of the with Ronon part I'm concerned about. I mean, have you seen him? It's like watching the road runner on speed, only with less beeping and more grunting, which is a mildly disturbing image in and of itself. Can't you just continue to torment your Marines like a normal person?"

"Who says I can't do both?"

"As loathe as I am to admit it, probably the majority of the medical community."

Iohannes (seeing Elizabeta trying – and failing – not to laugh) just shrugs. "As grateful as I am for your concern, did you have an actual reason for calling me up here, or were you just trying to save me from supposed death by muscle fatigue?"

"Someone's tetchy today," Rodney huffs without real malice, and grins as he punches something into the tablet in front of him. "Well, this should cheer you up. You know how we've been reactivating all the dormant systems since work on the ZedPM recharger is pretty much at a standstill?"

"Vividly."

Rodney just gives him a smug smile. "Well, we've managed to get the one that tracked the location
of Ancient ships during the war back on line."

"A linter?" he breathes, not quite believing what he's hearing. "You've found a linter?"

"See, look at his eyes all lighting up again. Pavlovian, I told you. But, yeah, we found you a warship. Atlantis must have sent out some kind of automated subspace beacon recalling ships back after we activated the ZedPM, and we just didn't notice that any where sending anything back until we got this baby up and running."

"Which is it?" he asks quickly, waving aside his amator's explanations as he stands and makes his way to the console. "You should be able to tell. 'Lantis, why didn't you say anything?"

'Lantis doesn't answer.

Rodney does. "The Aurora."

Iohannes falters, only managing not to trip by grabbing the nearest console. Hard. Unless he's very much mistaken, all the blood has just left his face – and, quite possibly, the rest of his body. "No. That's wrong," he says slowly, trying to string together words in some sort of order.

"John?"

"It can't be Aurora. The Aurora was lost thirty-one years before the Exodus. The only lintres we had left by then were Fessona and Pellonia. It has to be one of those."

Rodney frowns, "I've double checked everything like five times. It's definitely the Aurora. According to the logs, it was on a recon mission-

"-to the planet Elora, to determine the fate of the urbs-navis Elorus, which was destroyed the Wraith in 108 Aetas Lanteae, from which it never returned. All two hundred thirty-eight crew members aboard were declared dead and that sector of Pegasus was declared off-limits by the remaining Councils."

"You're familiar with it?" Elizabeta asks, smiling a little, like she's glad things are finally going their way for once. It fades once he lets out a hollow, self-deprecating laugh.

"Familiar with it? Mother was its executive officer."

Chapter End Notes

The timeline and family tree might be helpful for this story arc.

Aurora was the Roman Goddess of the Dawn.
Fessona was the Goddess Who Releaves Weariness.
Pellonia was the Goddess Who Protects Against Enemies.
"Your mother's ship?" Elizabeta repeats, tone somewhere between faintly alarmed and wearily contemplative. It's a very Alteran sort of tone, the likes of which Iohannes must have heard from Melia Mael or Ganos Lal no less than a hundred thousand times. He's heard it from her at least half as many, and already he's come to associate it more with her than long-Ascended decuriae.

Right now, though, it's hard not to flinch because she sounds exactly like Melia, and that's kind of the last thing he needs right now. It's harder still to say, "Yeah. She was a legata in the Lantean Guard. Didn't I mention it?" in what must pass as a calm and collected voice, as no one calls him on it.

"John," Rodney says, his own tone treading the line between thinly-veiled condescension and genuine concern, "you never talk about your mother."

"I'm sure I have," he frowns because, well, he's sure he has. Once. At some point. Probably.

"I think the grand total of your talking about her sums up to mentioning her name – once – and telling us that she was dead – maybe twice."

Ah. "She was blonde," he offers somewhat hopefully, as if this additional piece of information might get him to drop the subject.

It doesn't work. Of course. "Blonde. Yes, 'cause that helps us so much right now."

"I was three when she died," he shrugs, the movement feeling nowhere near as casual as it should've, "That pretty much covers the things I actually know about her."

"Blonde, dead, and the XO of the Aurora?"

Iohannes arches an eyebrow at him and adds, somewhat musingly, "She was the Chief Engineer of the Erytheia before it was destroyed in the Battle of Sagremor."

"And of course you only chose to follow in her footsteps as far as the legata part was concerned."

Rolling his eyes this time, "It's tribunus. I never actually reached the rank of legatus."

"And, somehow, I find that the most troubling thing you've said all morning."

"As fascinating as this is, gentlemen," Elizabeta interrupts, "there is still the small matter of what we're going to do about the Aurora to be decided upon."

They both turn and look at her like she's lost her mind. The boon an Alteran linter would be to their war with the Wraith are innumerable enough to be obvious even to someone as non-military minded as Elizabeta. Hell, even an inoperable and irreparable linter would be a goldmine for them, if only for
the parts they could salvage for Atlantis and the Terrans' own lintres.

After a moment, Rodney manages to say, "Isn't it obvious? We fly out there and see if we can salvage it."

"I meant specifics," she says with a smile that crinkles her eyes. "You mentioned earlier that it was out of jumper range. Do you think we have time to wait for the Daedalus to get back before investigating?"

"Why wait for the Daedalus?" Iohannes asks before Rodney can answer. "The Muspelheim is still in orbit. I'm sure Thor won't mind giving us a lift."

And that, of course, is that.

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Except for the part where it isn't, because Iohannes knows far more about the Aurora than he does about Mother, and he doesn't mention most of them as his team gears up (and, a little while later, beams up to the Muspelheim) for the mission.

He feels a touch guilty about it because, well, he doesn't like actively lying to anyone, but, the way he sees it, only three of them are actually important – for a given definition of important – and the rest of them the Terrans will probably have more fun figuring out on their own anyway.

The first is that Aurora is a Pallantis-class dreadnought, which is to say, the kind that his people had constructed as best they could on Atlantis, after they'd lost the shipyards at Tarquinus but before they'd sunk the city. Aurora in particular was finished in 51 AL and had, from the very beginning, been commanded by one man: Antonious Alder Navarchus. A man who just so happened to be Mother's uncle as well as one of the best military minds to come out of the Wraith War.

He has scarcely more about his avunculus magnus than he does Mother, and that's only because he'd studied his campaigns – including the Battle of Sagremor – with more diligence than he'd almost anything else Matertera Catalina had tried to teach him. But it's hard enough convincing Elizabeta to let him go on a mission he's such personal involvement in, nevermind the fact that he's already stumbled across the graves of people he'd far more emotional attachment to than Mother and come out of it with his sanity reasonably intact. Adding a second relative to the mix is only likely to make her more reticent, and so he doesn't mention his relation to the captain when his name comes up during the mission briefing. Better that they find out later – or, better yet, never – than have to deal with that as well.

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"How are you holding up?" Teyla asks at some point.

"Fine."

"This mission must be difficult for you, the Aurora being your mother's ship."

"It's not."

"Are you certain? You seem awfully tense for someone who claims to be fine."

"Just not looking forward to the funerals," he tells her. It's partly true too. He's going to have to do something to acknowledge that two hundred thirty-eight people who were once alive are not any longer, and he'll never be able to keep the anthropologists away from something like that. Or the
psychologists.

"You believe we will find bodies, after all this time?"

More than bodies, he doesn't say, and just looks away.

Eventually, she gets the hint and leaves him be.

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The second is that, no matter what the logs say, the Aurora hadn't been sent out to discover what happened to Elorus. The moment the remaining urbes-naves lost contact with her, they'd known exactly what had happened, particularly when a handful of survivors in a pair of bedraggled lintres had shown up on Tirianus’ doorstep a handful of weeks later. No, Aurora and her crew had been sent to retrieve potentially war-ending information from a mole they had amongst the Wraith worshippers, one who'd found himself in what remained of Elorus not long after her fall, and it's from that mission that she'd never returned.

Iohannes only knows this because 'Lantis knows all secrets, and, despite her so-called fears about his mental health, rarely keeps any from him. He doesn't mention it simply because it doesn't matter. Any intel they recovered – had Aurora even gotten that far – would be over ten thousand years old, and, as such, more than likely useless.

It's better not to get their hopes up, because they've got a good thing going right now – the ZPM recharger is as complete as it can be without copper wire from Terra, which will be here on the next Daedalus run; they have the Daedalus to get goods from Terra with, and an intergalactic gate bridge that's a third of the way through construction that will do the same ten times as quickly; Carson's Wraith antivirus is in the final testing stages; and, soon, they'll have a linter, and more potentiae than they know what to do with, and the means to move Atlantis to another world, and get rid of the Wraith threat forever – and he's not going to rock the boat any more than he has to.

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"A warship, huh?" Ronan says sometime later.

"Yeah."

"This mean we'll finally be able to take the fight to the Wraith?"

"If we can patch her back together, yeah."

"Good." There's a long pause before the Satedan adds, "Teyla and McKay are worried about you."

"I know."

Another pause. "You gonna be okay?"

"I'm fine."

"If you say so."

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The third is that, as a Pallantis-class dreadnought, Aurora's carries eighty-eight stasis pods and, while chances are slim-to-none that anyone who managed to make it that far would ever be able to be woken, their bodies would be so moribund, the fact remains that up to eighty-eight Alterans are out
there. Eighty-eight people he can bring home.

Iohannes doesn't know why he doesn't mention this. It makes no difference to anything, as near dead and as good as dead are pretty much the same things in this instance. It only postpones the argument he'll eventually win, about removing whoever remains from stasis, even knowing the process will probably kill them. In fact, waiting until the bodies – the mostly-dead people – are there in front of them will most likely only make the argument worse. But...

But the fact remains Iohannes himself spent ten thousand, two hundred and three years (and nineteen days, seven hours, and twenty-two fucking minutes) in stasis, and he didn't age a single day. And since he's not anything special, just a soldier that somehow managed to survive, maybe...

Maybe he's not as alone as he thought.

Chapter End Notes

Erytheia was one of the Hesperides - Atlas' daughters in Roman myth, and nymphs of the evening.
Pallantis means children of Pallas; this can either be the daughter of Triton, who was a sea god, or the Titon of the same name, who was the father of the goddess Aurora - and, additionally, sounds vaguely like Atlantis, so I decided it was perfect for the usage here.
Sagremor was a knight of the round table.
Avunculus Magnus is your mother's father's brother, or maternal great-uncle.
"You want to talk about it?"

Iohannes doesn't even dignify Rodney with an answer. He just turns away from the display screen in the Muspelheim's version of an on-board library, raises his eyebrow, and goes back to reading some dead Asgard's thesis on the fate of the other Alliance races. There's nothing quite as depressing as having one's own race referred to as extinct seventy-seven times in the same manuscript, and he'd probably have given up on it hours ago if it wasn't for the fact that he is kind of curious as to what happened to the Nox and Furlings.

"Good, 'cause I've honestly got no idea what to say here."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of things I can say – like why you're hiding out here rather than, say, the one of the observation rooms – but as too what to you're actually supposed to say in situations like this, well, I'm kinda at a loss."

"You don't have to say anything."

Rodney frowns and takes a seat on the bench next to him. "I feel like I should, though. This definitely feels like I time I should have something to say to help you, but I really don't know what to tell you. Hell, when my own parents died I was in DC, working on SBIRS – well, it was still called Brilliant Eyes back then, but that project essentially evolved into the Space-Based Infrared System of today, or, well, what would be today if your government ever stops cutting funding to the program. Which is just stupid considering all the threats against Earth that have been made in the last ten years alone, but I guess that's what you get when they insist on keeping everything so hush-hush..."

"And, anyway, what I'm trying to get at is, when my parents died, I was in the middle of a very important project and didn't bother flying home for their funerals, or, well, telling anyone that they'd died. So I really don't have any first-hand experience with the whole things to tell someone who's just lost their parents scenario other."

Bumping shoulders with him, "I think it's the thought that counts," Iohannes says, repeating a Terran idiom he's heard more than once since being pulled out of the cathedra. "And, 'sides, as far as I'm concerned, it's been almost thirty-three years since Mother died. It's not exactly like I've not had time to get over it."

"I was twenty-six when my parents died, and I hated them – not for dying, but for all the stupid shit they pulled while I was growing up, and, really, if I wanted my mark on the world to be a Pulitzer, I could write you a book on how not to raise children based off the thirteen years I spent in their house. But my point is, it's been twelve years on my end and, well..."

"I know what you mean."

"You do?" Rodney sighs, shifting over a little so that most of his weight is braced against Iohannes' right shoulder. If Rodney tilts his head just a little, it'd be rest on his shoulder just like it sometimes does on movie nights, when they're taking a break from Star Trek – or, more recently, Wormhole X-treme – to watch something a little less close to home. If it weren't for the bright lines of Asgard ruins
on the screen before him, he could almost imagine they were getting ready to watch one of the more ridiculous movies his amator pretends not to like rather than, well, investigate what amounts on some level to a floating graveyard. "Thank God, 'cause I'm not even sure what I mean."

"I think it means that, for all our parents screw us over, they're still our parents."

Snorting, "Trust you to be better at this than I am."

"My genius knows no bounds," Iohannes says dryly.

This earns him a genuine chortle this time. "Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves."

They're quiet for a long time after that, the only sound being the occasional, unamused huff Iohannes makes as he continues to scroll through Dagr's account of the breaking of the Alliance of the Four Great Races and it's more long-term consequences.

"What are you reading?" Rodney asks after a while. It can't be too long, though, because the trip from Lantea to the remnants of the Eloran system shouldn't take much more than three hours with the Muspelheim's hyperdrive and they were well into hour two when Rodney had shown up. It just feels like forever.

"I'm trying to find out what happened to the Nox and the Furlings after we left Terra."

Rodney sits up a little, moving closer to the screen. "Really?" Iohannes knows from previous conversations that his understanding of Asgard is spotty at best, and, as this particular thesis has less to do with high-energy physics than historical events, he thinks it's unlikely that his amator understands very much of it. "We've had run-ins with the Nox before – and by we I mean SG-1, of course – but sorta fell out of contact with them after Apophis finally kicked the bucket. I dunno why."

"Huh. Well, according to Dagr here, when the Avalonian Replicators started attacking your galaxy, the Nox homeworld was one of the first they went after. Apparently all the psychic power in the universe doesn't do much good against an army of servola. Who would've thought?"

"I take it there were no survivors?"

"Not that the Asgard could find."

"That's... I mean, I never liked them myself – who lives in mud huts when they have that kind of technology, I ask you? - but to kill them all like that..."

Iohannes makes a dim, agreeing sound, and tabs the document forward. He counts a hundred and third reference to the extinct Alteran race and doesn't even try to fight the icy surge of depression this raises in him.

"Wait, back up a second," Rodney says suddenly, voice quickening as he jumps to his feet quicker than Iohannes' ever seen, "you said Avalonian. Which means-"

"We took care of ours years ago, I promise. Definitively."

"How definitively?"

"Let's just say that there's a planet out there that will fall into it's sun before it's halfway habitable again and leave it at that," Iohannes says delicately as he tabs the document forward once again.
Upon catching reference number one oh four to his supposed extinction, decides he's read enough. Turning, he throws one leg over the bench and leans back, using up the space Rodney's vacated to lean back and stare at the ceiling. It's a rather boring ceiling as far as ceilings go – he likes the Asgard, he really does, but, goodness, their ships are utilitarian enough as to make him sympathize with 'Lanti's current interior design mania – but it's better than looking at the screen any longer.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"Cross my heart."

"Don't say that," Rodney says unbearably earnestly. "Its enough I have to deal with your suicidal tendencies on an all too regular basis; I don't want to have to hear confirmation of them."

Rodney's out of his current line of sight, but Iohannes rolls his eyes anyway. "Can we not have this conversation again? Flying the jumper up to the hive myself was the right decision and you know it."

"Fine."

"Thank goodness."

"I'm sorry if my concern for your continued existence is such a burden to you."

"Rodney..." he says warningly-

-which seems to do the trick, as he hears Rodney's hands fall – loudly – to his sides a second later, accompanied by a, "Fine," that sounds more resigned than before. "I'll drop it, if that's what you really want. Though – and this is the last thing I'll say on the subject, promise – I'm starting to see why 'Lanti is apparently always going on about your mental health issues."

"Gee, thanks Rodney."

"One apology is all you're getting," Rodney says, frowning as he steps into Iohannes' line of sight.

Maybe it's something to do with the angle, with the way the light is hitting him right at that moment. Maybe it's all in his eyes, which seem impossibly bright and blue and lambent, or maybe the set of his jaw, which is somehow both defiant and reconciliatory at the same time. Or maybe its a combination of all of these, or none, just something that naturally occurs after a combination such as this one. Whatever the case may be, the sight of him was enough to remind Iohannes – suddenly and violently and with such to-the-gut intensity that it's probably for the best he's laying down already – of all the reasons he fell in love with this man in the first place.

It's kind of overwhelming, really, and for a moment he doesn't think he can breathe. All he knows is that, whatever they might find on the Aurora, it doesn't change the fact that he's here, now, and he's not actually alone. The last Alteran in the universe, maybe, but not alone.

It's not just because of Rodney, though he's a major part of it.

But, by all the gods their Descendants have ever imagined, he's glad Rodney's here right now.

Iohannes wants to say something, to tell Rodney everything he actually means to him, but he's never been good with words, and so doesn't try, just reaches out a hand and tugs the front of Rodney's TAC vest – the only part of him Iohannes can reach – and pulls him down into a kiss.

It's awkward, the angle, and Iohannes has to lean up to reach him in a way he's going to feel tomorrow, but he pours everything he can into it.
Rodney stumbles a little when he releases him, Iohannes is startled to find they're both short of breath as he lays back on the bench. "What was that for?"

He shrugs the best he can laying down. "No reason."

"There has to be a reason for a kiss like that."

"You complaining?"

"No, but-

"C'mon," Iohannes says, pulling himself to his feet. "Let's head on up to the bridge. We've gotta be nearly there."

"But-"

"I'll tell you about it later," he promises.

Rodney looks at him suspiciously for three long seconds, then shrugs himself. "Fine – but I'm holding you to this too."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," he grins at him, and starts for the bridge.

Chapter End Notes

The first of 2 planned satellites for SBIRS was launched in 2011. One of it's precursors, Brilliant Eyes, was part of the Strategic Defense Initiative back in the early '90s. SDI is better known as Star Wars.

Since the Nox (thankfully) kinda dropped out off the face of the galaxy after that one episode with the Tollan, I decided to take some liberties with what happened to them after that.
"Oh, delicia," he whispers when the Aurora finally comes into view, "you've been through the wars, haven't you?" It's a quite ridiculous thing to say – of course she'd been in battle. Nothing in the Pegasus galaxy hadn't been at war with the Wraith at some point, and she dates back to the most intense fighting – but it's the only thing Iohannes can think to say when she appears on the view-screen:

Her hull is a beastly thing. Rather than a smooth, apparently single piece of titanium-yttrium alloy, her skin is a chimera of repair jobs. Patches overlap patches, and if there's a section that hasn't been replaced at one time or another, Iohannes can't find it.

Even underneath all this, though, the Aurora has none of Atlantis' flowing lines or sharp beauty. She was built for a singular purpose, as were all Pallantis-class lintres, by a people so unused to fighting that actually doing so had pushed their resources to the breaking. It's not that she's an unattractive vessel, only that what beauty she has is rough, almost primitive even, more akin to his people's earliest attempts at interplanetary travel than the Tethys-class vessels Iohannes piloted in the earliest days in the Guard.

And that's before the damage she'd taken in her last battle.

A fair portion of her forward and port compartments are open to space, the metal around them blackened and twisted into ghastly shapes visible from even this distance. Great, jagged scars score most the rest of those sides and, while her aft and starboard remain mostly untouched, he knows well that looks can be deceiving.

"Is that it?"

"What do you mean is that it?" Rodney snaps at Ronon. That is, quite possibly, the most advanced spaceship in the universe. It can afford to look frumpy."

"What Rodney means to say," Iohannes says, turning away from the view-screen to look at Thor, who's blinking in that slow, Asgard way from his bank of consoles, "is thanks again for the ride. You've really no idea how annoying it is not to have a linter around when you need one."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure the Muspelheim is a wonderful ship," he waves his hands as if to say et cetera, et cetera here, "but you can't tell me it stacks up all the well against an Ancient warship, even one that looks a bit like Swiss cheese at the moment."

Thor blinks again, even more slowly than before. "There is great potential in humanity," he says in his native language, "but, regardless of his intellect, I find this one most trying."

"Ah, he's not so bad once you get to know him."

"Indeed," the Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet sighs, sounding exceptionally put upon, even for an Asgard. Then, "My sensors show no active life support system."

"We expected that would be the case. What do you think, Rodney?" Iohannes asks, frowning at the crumbling image on the screen. "Will she fall apart if we try to pull her into a hyperspace window?"
"Hard to tell from this distance. I mean, the damage has to be more than superficial, or otherwise the
Aurora would've made it back to Atlantis a long time ago, but, by the looks of it, the engines
themselves haven't been damaged too badly, which is good us now but bad for long term, because it
probably means something complicated like life support or navigation got hit instead, but..." He does
something on his tablet, which he's interfaced with the Muspelheim's sensors. "It should hold
together. Ancient battleships are made out of sterner stuff than you'd think; it'd take a lot more
damage to sink a ship like this."

"Cool. Thor, if you'd do the honours?"

"With pleasure."

There's a minute or two that Thor and Rodney spend debating over where the best place to latch onto
the Aurora might be, but he honestly doesn't pay that much attention to it. He just wants to grab the
linter and get back to Atlantis, which is ridiculous because it's been ages since he's been off-world,
but something about this whole situation is rubbing him the wrong way.

It's not that she's Mother's ship. For all intents and purposes, she was just a woman he happened to
get half his DNA from, without almost any of the emotional attachment the Terrans seem to place on
the word.

It's not even the stasis pods that may remain active aboard. As troubling as Iohannes finds being the
last Alteran in existence, he's not overly torn about the idea of letting those who may remain die.
Stasis, after all, does not entirely suspend animation, and any who may be hale enough to survive the
reanimation process would not be well – or young – enough to survive for very long outside it. It
wouldn't even count as murder, and, even if it did, well, he's a soldier. He kills things for a living.

No, it's the fact that Aurora exists at all. He was told she was destroyed and destroyed she should've
been. She'd been sent to the Eloran system after all, which had been a hotbed of Wraith activity for at
least a decade after Elorus' fall. To find her less than a light-year from the system, damaged but not
cannibalized, able to send a signal through subspace back to Atlantis...

He leaves the bridge without telling the others, and heads for the lockers where they've stored the
enviro suits.

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"It must be difficult for you."

"Not really," he says, looking up from where he's knelt to remove his combat boots just long enough
to grin at Teyla, who's standing just inside the door. "My people were awfully fond of laces."

"May I ask when you were going to inform the rest of us of your intentions to beam over to the
Aurora?"

Iohannes places his shoes on a nearby bench, next to his TAC vest and uniform jacket, and pulls one
of the orange pressure suits off a hanger. "Eventually."

"And did you not think that we would perhaps like to come with you?"

"It figured I'd bored you enough dragging you out out here when we're just turning around and
flying straight back."

"We did not come on this mission expecting excitement, John. We came because we are your friends
and one should not be alone at moments like this."
"I didn't know Mother well enough to break down at the sight of her grave, Teyla."

"Perhaps not," she says conciliatorily, tilting her head as she watches him jam his feet into the bulky mag-lock boots that come with the suit. It's difficult, mostly because there are at least a thousand snaps that have to be done to secure one to the other, and the first time he tries it he ends up missing a one and having to undo half of them to try to correct the problem. After a moment, she takes pity on him and kneels down to help. "But I have seen those who have long left their original villages return there after a culling. No matter how many years have passed, it is always an intense experience for all involved."

"The Aurora wasn't my village. Her crew wasn't culled."

Teyla switches to the left boot, buttoning up all the snaps with an ease and dexterity that shouldn't be as much of a surprise as it is. "No, but she was in battle with the Wraith, and obviously you feel some need to board her now, rather than wait until we have returned to Atlantis to do so."

"Look, Teyla, I know you're trying to help, but I've come to terms with the fact that I'm the last Alteran in the universe-"

"Have you?" she asks, rising gracefully to her feet and raising her eyebrow in a dubious way Iohannes is fairly certain he taught her. "Ronon has known he is the last of his people for seven years, but I sincerely doubt he has, as you say, completely come to terms with it. You have had far less than that."

He tsks at her as he zips the front of the pressure suit. "Now you're starting to sound like 'Lantis."

"She is the City of the Ancestors," she says with a look he knows he taught her. "She is very wise."

"She's very meddlesome. There's a difference. Now, would you hand me the gloves over there?"

Teyla sighs as she hands the gloves over. "Must you be so difficult to those who are only trying to help you?"

The gloves are easier. They sort of latch on, then are held in place by a metal ring that one sort of twists to tighten. "I'm not being difficult and I don't need help."

"John, you are one of the most capable people I have ever met, but that does not mean you don't need help."

"Mental help, you mean."

"Amongst my people, life is considered too short to hide our emotions away as you do."

"Pot, kettle," Iohannes snorts as checks the O-2 flow on his suit.

"There is a difference between moderating one's emotions and failing to acknowledge them at all."

"So there is," he says lightly. Then, gesturing with the ungainly, bubble-shaped helmet in his hands, "Now, if you don't mind getting the back?" He places it on his head and fumbles for a minute with the seals on the front, which, for some illogical Terran reason, appear not to have been made for use with the gloves he's now wearing, but, after a moment, there's a pair of satisfying clicks, followed by two more as Teyla gets those he cannot reach.

And then there is nothing but the faint hiss of O-2 and the sound of his own breathing.
He can see Teyla trying to speak to him when she steps back around, but cannot hear her. He raises a hand to the side of his helmet and taps it, trying to tell her to use her earwig if she wants to talk to him, but she just shakes her head and, with an apparent sigh, leaves the room.

Iohannes doesn't know what to make of that and, rather than trying to unravel yet another mystery, decides to stick with the one he has a chance at solving and heads for the bridge.

It takes surprisingly little to get Thor to beam him over to Aurora – quite simply, he asks, and the Asgard answers, "It may take several moments to find a secure beaming location."

Rodney, however, is not so easy to convince. Luckily, however, he only gets so far as, "What the hell do you think you're doing? We've no idea at all what-" before Thor beams him into the Aurora's largely damage-free engine room.

His amator probably continues, but Iohannes doesn't hear a word of it, despite their open comm channel. He's too busy listening to the sudden influx of sound assailing him from all corners.

No, not sound. Music.

"Futue in obliquum," he breathes, his voice barely audible over his O-2. "She's alive."

"What!" Rodney squawks over the comm, so loud Iohannes can just make it out over the deep, primal percussion and higher pitched, almost shrill whistling that threatens to subsume him. "What's going on? Who's alive? John? John! Who's alive?"

The lights flicker to life as he falls to his knees. The whistling falls in pitch as he runs his still-gloved fingers across the floor. "Aurora," he whispers as a thin, frightened, almost childlike presence brushes against the edge of his mind. "She's become sentient. She's alive."

Chapter End Notes

Delicia means sweetheart.
Tethys was a Titon of the ocean; Tethys-class lintres were top-of-the-line Alteran vessels built before the Plague (ie, in Avalon) with control chairs aboard.
Futue in obliquum is as close as I can get to fuck me sideways in Latin.
/Lan-te-an/?/ the voice asks, thin and plaintive as it brushes against his mind, no stronger than the rustle of new leaves in spring or silk folded upon itself.

"Yes, delicia," Iohannes answers aloud, willing his voice to steadiness as he press both hands flat against the floor. The ship beneath him starts to pulse with life – slowly, painfully, uncertainly – beneath his touch, but it's still not enough. "I'm pastor Atlantis. I'm here to take you home."

/We are so lost, past-or,/ she whimpers. /We tried for so long, but home is so far a-way and we did not know which way. Please, take us home./

"It's okay, delicia. The linter I came on is going to grapple on to you and take you home."

/It is not Lan-te-an./

"No, it's not. The Muspelheim is Asgard."

He can feel the confusion racing through the linter, even through his thick rubber gloves. /As-gard?/

"Yes, Asgard. They're in your databanks somewhere, aren't they?" he asks worriedly. "They're part of the old Alliance. Allies."

/Al-lies?/

"Yes."

/Where are the Lan-te-an lin-ters? Where are our sis-ters? Why have they not come for us?/ Aurora asks, quaking not, he thinks, with grappling hooks hitting her hull but her own anxiety and agitation.

It's enough to bring Rodney's voice to come over the comm again, demanding to know what is going on and then, when no response is immediately forthcoming, to warn him that the rest of the team is suitting up and will be beaming over in five.

But Iohannes is keenly aware that the linter he's on has never known another intelligence. She's come into sentience in silence and, no matter how grateful she seems to be, his presence is something foreign to her. Even if she's not obviously mad, she could kill him with her actions out of thoughtlessness alone. Add to that the fact that Rodney's gene is artificial while Teyla and Ronon lack it entirely, and he's not letting anyone else step aboard Aurora until they get back to Atlantis. At least, not until he's managed to calm her down somewhat.

He doesn't say all this, however, not wanting to frighten – or aggravate – such a young and largely unknown intellectualis artificialis. All he dares say is, "Negative. Do not beam until I've given the clear," before quickly turning his full attention back to Aurora and asking, "You do remember the war, don't you?"

/The war,/ she repeats, as if the words don't strike any immediate cords.

"The war against the Wraith. You were Antonious Alder's flagship, part of the fleet that destroyed the Wraith stronghold in the Brocelianden Massing. You were at Sagremor, and Caracalla, and
"Acadia. Don't you remember?"

"We re-mem-ber Sag-re-mor. Er-y-the-i-a was de-stroyed. The nav-arch-us was so a-fraid for his frat-ris fil-ia. We took man-y hits to res-cue her hem-i-ol-i-a. She be-came our her-es af-ter./

"Yes. She was Chief Engineer of the Erytheia from almost the moment she joined the Guard." She was brilli-ant, his mo-ther, and blonde, and beau-ti-ful. In a way, he's glad not to have known her, if only to be spared her in-ev-it-able dis-ap-point-ment with him.

"Most our in-gen-i-ar-i-i were killed in the last bat-tle. The her-es tried to help but could not./

"What hap-pened? What do you re-mem-ber?"

The floor beneath him jerks, vi-o-lently enough that, had Iohannes still been stand-ing, he'd most likely have been sent tum-bl-ing into the nearest wall. As it is, he's thrown a cou-ple of feet into the base of the neares-t con-so-lle and, as one might ex-pect, his pres-sure suit does lit-tle to soften the blow. /It is sec-ret./

Sup-press-ing a gro-an, "No, no, delicia. It's okay. It re-al-ly is. You can tell me, I'm pastor At-lan-tis, re-mem-ber?"

Her music fal-ters, the linter mo-men-tar-ly un-cer-tain, be-fore pick-ing up again stub-born-ly. /It is top sec-ret./

"Ah, but I'm Tre-bal's son, Iohannes Ia-ni-de-dus Li-cinus Pa-stor. You can tell the her-es' son what hap-pened, can't you?"

There's a long, drag-ging si-lence, in which even the heavy per-cus-sion of Au-ru-ra's song is dul-led and mute. Then, /You are the her-es' son?/

"Yes."

/"The nav-arch-us' grand-ne-phew?/"

"Yes," he says, and there's an-o ther pa-use be-fore-

/"We still can not tell you. Please, pas-tor, take us home./

Iohannes sighs and climbs back onto his feet. "Okay, delicia. I'll take you home now. Are your hy-per-drive en-gines work-ing, or does the Muspelheim need to use the gra-ppling hooks?"

/Hy-per-drive and sub-light en-gines are op-per-at-ion-al. Shields, life sup-port, and nav-i-gat-ion sys-tems are non-op-per-at-ion-al. Stas-is u-nits are at sev-en-teen per-cent of op-ti-mal func-tion-al-i-ty."

The cold, sink-ing feel-ing re-turns to his stom-ach. "How many made it to the pods?"

/Six-ty-three, in-clud-ing the nav-arch-us and her-es./

"I see," he says shak-ily. No one can sur-vive for that long in sta-sis, he re-minds him-self, forc-ing him-self to ig-nore the fac-t that he'd done ex-actly that. All he's go-ing to find when he open-s the pods are sligh-tly warm cor-pses. Then, more steadi-ly, "If the Muspelheim opens a hy-per-space win-dow, do you think you could fol-low af-ter it, or will you need to be to wed?"

/"We can fol-low, pas-tor."

"Good. That's good, delicia. That's very good. Now – Rodney, you still list-en-ing?"
His comm crackles to life. "Yeah, for all the good it did me. Now, why do I have the feeling you're wanting to do something even more ridiculously stupid than beam onto a damaged ten-thousand-year-old spaceship by yourself? Like, oh, say, hitching a ride back to Atlantis on said damaged ten-thousand-year-old spaceship?"

Iohannes smiles to himself. "They don't call you the smartest man in two galaxies for nothing."

"Well, it's easy when it comes to you: all I have to do is think of what a normal, sane person would do in any given situation and assume you're doing the exact opposite. But, seriously John, you can't stay aboard Aurora when we're trying to pull her through hyperspace. Even Thor doesn't think it's a good idea, and you know how pro-Ancient he is – what?" Rodney says, presumably to the Asgard in question, "Well, you are. And don't try to deny it. If somebody other than John had asked you to fly us out here, don't tell me you would've agreed so readily."

Iohannes doesn't hear Thor's answer – that is, if he even bothers to give one – and just shakes his head before continuing, "Her engines are working, so you won't need to grapple her. Just make sure the hyperspace window stays open a couple extra seconds and we'll follow after."

"Yeah, but I think you might find the lack of life support to be a bit more problematic."

"I've got eight hours of air. Well, seven-and-a-half. I'll be fine."

"You say that now, but what about when Aurora breaks down halfway back to Atlantis?"

"Rory won't break down," he says, running a soothing hand along the console he'd crashed into. "She's a good girl."

"Rory now is she?"

"Well, Aurora is an awfully long name for such a little girl, don't you think?"

Rodney just snorts. "And you say I have no naming capabilities. But, look, seriously, you just can't ride a damaged spaceship through hyperspace."

"I think," he says delicately, "Rory would be happier if I stayed."

"When you say happier, do you mean in a Madison, stay with me until I fall asleep, happier, or something more HAL, this mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it, happier?"

"Er... the first, I guess. Kinda depends, though."

"Depends? Depends on what?"

"Who or what is a HAL?"

Iohannes can practically hear his amator's nonplussed expression over the comm. "Right," he says after a moment. "Never showed you that one for a reason. But, look, as long as the ship's not homicidal, I'm beaming over there."

"What happened to you can't ride a damaged linter through hyperspace?"

"Nothing-" Rodney begins, only to be cut off, apparently by Thor beaming aboard, as the Terran appears a second later in the engine room next to him. "Seriously? Right in the middle of my sentence again?"

"The Asgard are known throughout the universe for their bad manners," Iohannes sympathizes –
though it's less for Thor's treatment of him and more for the way Rodney's hands fly up to his ears (or, rather, as close to them as he can get through his helmet) as Aurora's song takes a turn for the fortississimo. "Hey now, delicia. It's okay. This is Rodney – but you can call him Moreducus. He's a custodia. And an engineer. He's going to fix you up real pretty, okay?"

/Cust-od-i-a/? she repeats.

"You remember what that means, Rory?"

Her song calms at this, which Iohannes takes as confirmation. /He will fix us?/

"As much as he can. There'll be whole teams of engineers waiting to fix you when we get back to Atlantis, but he's the best – she's asking," he tells Rodney, who's pulled out his tablet and is presumably working on interfacing with Aurora's systems, "if you're going to fix her."

"Well, I'm certainly going to try. But, first things first: life support, then shields, and then-

The Terran is cut off once more as the linter makes the distinctive lurch that signifies a jump into hyperspace, which is strong enough to send both of them crashing into far wall before leaving them in an inglorious heap on the floor.

"Make that inertial dampeners, then life support, then shields," Rodney groans.

"Good idea," Iohannes agrees.

Aurora just laughs, and her voice is like bells on a cool spring night.

Chapter End Notes

Broceliande was an dangerous forest in Arthurian legend.
Caracalla was a type of Gaul cloak that lent it's name to a Roman emperor, who favoured the style.
Acadia is a version of Arcadia, a legendary utopia.
Hemiolia is the Alteran name for a puddle jumper.
Ingeniarius is engineer.
"Are you telling me," Elizabeta says slowly, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she stares him down from the head of the Conference Room table, "that you knew there were people aboard in stasis before you left here and you intentionally decided not to mention it?"

Iohannes crosses his arms as he slumps further into down into his chair. All in all, he's finding the debriefing for their Aurora mission to be rather more unpleasant than usual, and not only because the nanoids in his head are protesting the strain of dealing with two intellegentiae artificiales at once.

"Well, I suspected..." he drawls-

-before wincing a moment later as she says, "John," with more indignation than he feels the situation really calls for. In fact, there's no situation he can think of deserving of that tone, save for the kicking of small canines, but that's Elizabeta. She always seems to think these things are much worse than they are.

Actually, now that he thinks about it, the Terrans are all very worst-case scenario people. They don't see how any scenario with Atlantis above water and the Wraith not overhead is a victory in its own right. Being alive itself is a victory, no less spectacular than anything his people did build. But such black truths come out of blacker times, and he's glad for their sakes that they've never had to learn those lessons.

Even if it would probably keep him from having to sit through more of these uncomfortable debriefs.

Times being what they are, however, he just raises an eyebrow and asks, already knowing the answer, "Would it have made a difference if I had?"

"The Aurora was your mother's ship. If I'd known there was a chance she was in one of those pods, I wouldn't have sent you on this mission."

Yep. That's what he'd thought. Iohannes allows his eyebrow to fall back into place and does his best to ignore pointed looks that follow.

"She is," Elizabeta continues, "isn't she?"

"Rory says she and the navarchus," he informs her with amazing restraint, "made it into the pods before the life support cut out."

"Rory?"

Rodney, luckily, answers Teyla for him. "It's what he's calling the ship."

"I see," she says delicately. "And this ship, it is alive?"


"How not particularly stable are we talking about here?"

"Well, I don't think she's going to start singing 'Daisy Bell' any time soon, but I wouldn't try sending her off-world without the Colonel either. But that's just based off the half of the conversation I heard.
For all I know she really is cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs and we should all be reaching for our space helmets while still can."

Zelenka, who's sitting on Rodney's other side, makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a choking cough. Even the corners of Elizabeta's mouth turn upwards at this, despite the lingering sense of disappointment in her eyes. Iohannes, however, just exchanges an exasperated look with Teyla.

"It's a reference to 2001," Carson says, apparently taking pity on them.

"Why? What happened in 2001?"

Carson's mouth opens, then closes, then opens again before Elizabeta takes pity on him. "It's a movie. Classic science-fiction. I'm surprised that Rodney's not included it in your movie nights."

"Are you kidding?" Rodney snorts. "We live in a city with an AI of it's own. Even I know that's a bad combination."

"Huh. Now I'm curious."

Rodney gives Elizabeta a see what you've done sort of look before turning back to Iohannes. "Fine. We'll watch it next movie night, but don't say I didn't warn you. Now, if you don't mind, could get back on the subject of the Ancients in the pods?"

"Yes, let's."

"First things first, we've gotta get them out. The Ancients, of the pods, I mean. We can argue over whose fault it is later."

"And I've tried to tell you, Rodney, we can't do that. They've been in stasis for over ten thousand years. Sure, the pods slow your ageing considerably, but reviving them is more likely to kill them than wake them up."

"You were in stasis for almost as long, and you were out and about and blowing things up before the end of the day."

"That's because I'm such a piss-poor Alteran that apparently even my metabolism is an outlier. So I'm going to make things simple for you: the Aurora went missing ten thousand, two hundred and thirty-five years ago. The best stasis pod'll slow down your metabolic rate to zero point five percent of normal. The folks in the pods'll have aged fifty-one point one seven five years at best. That puts the average age of the crew somewhere around a hundred years old. At least."

The Terrans (and Teyla) appear to think about this.

"Colonel," Carson says slowly after a moment, "are you saying that the average age of the crew before they went into stasis was fifty years?"

"I think that is what he is saying," Zelenka agrees, his own accent thickening as does. "Which, of course, begs the question: how old are you, Colonel?"

"Ten thou-"

"No. Without time in stasis."

"Oh." Iohannes actually has to think about this, which is regrettable, as it's one of the great many
things he actively tries not to think about, but, as it's either this or the issue of the pods again, it's the lesser evil.

/Thirty-five years, one hundred ninety-seven days, twenty-six hours, and nine minutes, plus or minus ninety-eight days,/ Atlantis offers more or less helpfully before going back to her conversation with the Aurora – which, while generally pleasant, is also very... enthusiastic.

Maybe after this meeting is over, he'll at least be able to convince his nephew that his Alteran metabolism can handle the half-a-bottle of ibuprofen it's going to take to stop the pounding in his head.

/Sub-stance a-buse is nev-er the an-swer, pas-tor,/ Rory chimes in before going back to ignoring him as well.

Iohannes sighs and rubs his hand over his face. It doesn't help, but it gets the point across to everyone involved. "Thirty-five."

"I see. And before you went into stasis, Colonel?"

"Thirty-four, but only just."

Even the Terrans (and Teyla) can do that math. "Are you saying that you dinnae age at all while you were in the Control Chair, lad?"

"Forget that," Rodney, happily, interrupts. (Well, Iohannes is happy for the interruption. Rodney, however, has sounded happier when trucking through the mud or through the muggy innards of a hive ship.) "If fifty was the average crew age, what's the average Ancient lifespan?"

"A hundred fifty or so."

"Well, I don't see what the problem is then."

* * *

"Okay, I see it now," Rodney says twenty minutes later, when they're all standing outside of what remains of Aurora's bridge. A ceiling-high bank of forty stasis pods stands to one side of the doors, containing approximately half of the linter's surviving crew. The rest are scattered throughout the ship, in smaller banks of pods, but, even so, half are empty.

Somehow, that's more depressing than the cargo they carry, which are so aged that for perhaps the first time Iohannes can see why the Terrans call his people Ancients.

"Told you," he reminds them without much feeling.

"I'll have you know smugness is not an attractive quality."

Zelenka, who's examining the pod next to them, snorts.

Iohannes, however, doesn't even bother rolling his eyes. He just sinks down onto the floor, in the space between the pods containing a moribund gubernator and her equally decrepit nauta, and starts rubbing his temples again.

"Perhaps you'd like to go lie down..." Elizabeta ventures, her voice taking on the same delicate tone he'd been using not all that long ago on Aurora.

He tries to take offence to this – he wants to take offence to this, - but it hardly seems worth the
effort, as it is with so many things in dealing with the Terrans. Better to save his energy for the things which really matter, than to waste it all on little things.

"I'd love to, but I promised Rory I'd stay here tonight, and since there's no way I'm going to be able to sleep with these," he gestures at the pods and their papery-skinned, white-haired contents, "aboard, it's best just to deal with the problem now."

"Colonel, you cannae sleep here," Carson immediately protests, turning away from the tablet Rodney is currently trying to connect to one of the pod's systems. "Nae to be rude to the lass, but the last of your race – to include your own dear mother – died here. That's nae place for anyone to sleep."

"Yeah, well, they all died on her, so she's feeling a little insecure about that."

It's Teyla's turn to fix him with a look of concern. "Doctor Beckett is right. It is not healthy to spend so much time in the places of the dead, particularly not alone. If you must stay here, let us all join you."

"What?"

The Athosian turns and gives Carson, who voiced this complaint, a quelling glance before kneeling down to Iohannes' level. "Perhaps not all of us, but at least a few. That way you may keep Aurora company, and we may keep yours."

"That's really not necessary."

"I believe otherwise."

Iohannes leans his head back and closes his eyes. "It's really just going to be me talking Rory all night, and I doubt hearing half that conversation is going to be fun for anyone."

"Oh, I dunno," Elizabeta says, examining one of the pods further down the hall. "It could be fun. We hardly spend any time together as a group when there's not an emergency of some sort to be dealt with. You could tell us about the Aurora, or we could all just hang out, maybe watch a movie..."

"Yes," Teyla says. "We could all watch this 2001 movie of which Rodney spoke."

"Rodney may have a point about that not being the best movie to watch on a ship like this, but I'm sure we can find something we'd all enjoy to watch... Hey, John? This one's uniform is different from the others. Could it be the captain?"

"I dunno. Rory said he made it into a pod. Is there an orbis on his collar?"

"Orbis?"

"A small silver disc on his collar," he explains with a sigh, climbing back up onto his feet, "kinda like an ensign's insignia in The Next Generation, only flatter and with a design on it."

"I'm not sure. His beard's in the way. He's the oldest I've seen so far, if that counts for anything."

He looks. "Yeah, it's the navarchus."

"How can you tell?"

"Now," he says lightly, brushing dust off the domed class, "might be a good time to mention that Antonious Alder Navarchus is my avunculus magnus – Mother's father's older brother, to be specific."
"John," Elizabeta admonishes, sounding this time not so much indignant as weary.

"Hey, you never asked, so I never told. I'm told that's supposed to be a big thing with Americans."

Elizabeta covers her eyes with one of her hands.

"That's only the American military, John," Rodney points out, frowning at his tablet. "And they'd only get tetchy about our relationship, not the ones you have with your extended family. Which, I might add, you full well know, and has never mattered to you before."

"I'd like to add I was three years old when this linter disappeared. I've more a relationship with Rory now than I ever did with any of her crew, Mother and her uncle included."

"Colonel, you still should-"

"Yeah, well, should has never exactly worked too well for me. Don't see any reason to pick up the habit now. Though," he adds, tapping the glass now, "we really should do something about these folks. It's almost 1700 and it's the rainy season, so we've got just over four hours to get them to the morgue before nightfall."

Carson lets out a long sigh. "I hate to say it, but the Colonel's right."

"Gee, thanks."

"Even if the reanimation process wasnae likely to kill them, I've nae seen anyone who looks like they'd live more than a few hours, at best."

"I dunno." Rodney says, now outright scowling at his tablet as he waves it over yet another pod. "If they were vegetables, yeah, sure, maybe, but I'm not sure I'm entirely comfortable essentially killing people with these levels of cortical signs."

"What?"

"Yes, yes, I know, moral crisis, I'm just as surprised about it as you are-"

"No, I mean the cortical signs. What about them?"

"Well, the pod are equipped with neural interfaces, and they're all indicating definite brain activity, as though they were all perfectly conscious. I'd assumed it was normal. I take it it's not?" Iohannes shakes his head while Rodney starts tapping his tablet at a furious pace. "All the pods appear to be interconnected too, with a level of data-exchange going on between them that would put all the ISPs on the eastern seaboard to shame."

Zelenka pulls out his own tablet and does much the same. "You don't think...?"

"Well, it's the only thing that makes sense."

"Yes, but would not Aurora have told us?"

"Not if the systems running the stasis units are separate from those for the rest of the ship – which they probably are, if they were only going to ever use them if there were problems with the rest of the ship."

"Gentlemen?" Elizabeth asks. "If you'd kindly explain what you're going on about?"

"It's a neural network. These Ancients? They're not just alive. They're talking to each other. And my
guess is, if we can find an empty pod, so can we."

Chapter End Notes

Gubernator is pilot. Nauta is navigator. Orbis is disc - and, yes, I've taken liberties with the Ancient rank insignia, as we're not exactly given any to go on.
The Terrans believe him when he says the infirmary will have the nearest empty pods, which, while not strictly true – there are seven on the upper-most levels of this bank, - does offer the closest easily accessible pods. And easily accessible is a phrase that's always good to have in the event something, for whatever reason, goes wrong with their plan to connect themselves into with the neural network to talk to Aurora's remaining crew. Iohannes personally believes more is likely to go wrong with the conversation itself than with the method of having it, but he's not about to try telling the Terrans that. Not with this kind of headache.

"What are the odds that anyone without the Ancient gene will be able to connect to the network?" Elizabeta asks as they enter the infirmary.

"None, I am afraid," Zelenka answers, heading for the nearest pod and doing something complicated with his tablet next to it. "Should the need ever arise, the pod would certainly hold anyone with humanoid physiology in suspended animation, but the neural interfaces will most definitely require the gene. In fact, it possible that no one but the Colonel, being an Ancient, will be able to connect."

"What do think John?"

"That I'm the last person to ask." He's happily surprised by the amount of damage this area seems to have incurred – which is to say, very little – and starts opening cabinet doors. The devices inside appear intact and that gives him hope for the rest. "But I don't see any reason why it shouldn't work."

"So I guess it's just the three of us then."

"Oh no," Carson says when he hears this, practically dropping the various bits and bobs he's picked up off the floor, presumably to examine for their medical value. "You're nae putting me into one of those things."

"Don't be stupid. If these things will only work for gene users, than it's you, me, and Colonel Ancient himself at the moment."

"Be that as it may, I'm more good to you out here than I am in the pods in case something goes wrong."

"Eh," Iohannes says as he opens another cabinet, fully aware of the manic grin that lights onto his face when he sees all the – intact – ampoules inside. "Worst that happens is some freezer burn, but if you really don't want to go, we can always call up Lorne for a third, if you think we need one. His gene's the next strongest on base."

"You can tell that?"

"'Lantis can tell. Actually, I'm surprised she hasn't made him a custodia yet."

"One day you're really going to have to explain to us how this whole custodia thing works, Colonel."

He shrugs as he sorts through the bottles. "She likes anyone who likes her back. If you like her enough and have the right genes, you get to hear her song. You go the extra mile and have the
nanoids put in your nervous system, and she talks to you. She's a bit of a meretrix that way. Oh," Johannes breathes, finding the one he's been hoping for. "Laudate providentiam medicorium."

"Pardon?" Teyla asks.

"It's not important," he explains, opening the bottle and dry-swallowing two of the pills inside before the Terrans (or Teyla) realize what's going on and try to stop him.

He surrenders the bottle to Carson when he takes it from his hand, and watches as he surrenders it in turn to Elizabeta, who's by far the best among them at reading written Alteran.

"Relax. It's just a painkiller."

"A ten thousand year old painkiller, Colonel," Elizabeta admonishes.

"Like those things ever go bad. So, are we calling in Lorne or not?"

"I dunno, John. If you're feeling bad enough that you need to risk ten thousand year old pills..."

"I'll be fine. Rory's just a little overexcited to be back and it's giving me a headache. Not such an unusual occurrence. So, Lorne, yes or no?"

Elizabeta raises a hand to her eyes. "Yes, please." She sighs. "Thank you for at least maintaining the illusion that I'm in charge here."

"You are in charge here," Johannes reminds her before radioing Lorne. "It just doesn't take the nightmare that is the Terran bureaucratic system to deal with a headache. No offence."

She doesn't answer, and he goes to peer over Rodney's shoulder while they wait for the Major to arrive.

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"How's your head?" Rodney asks him quietly once the others have all stepped out into the corridor, presumably to discuss how the return of Mother's linter has sent him into some sort of psychotic death-spiral, or whatever the dressed-up Terran term is for whatever they think he must be feeling.

"Better. Surprising as it is, 'Lantis is proving to be something of a calming influence on Rory. Though," his nose wrinkle with distaste, "she does insist on calling her Mother." Well, Matre, but same difference.

"That's just..."

"Creepy?"

"More than that."

"You think of a stronger word than that, let me know, 'cause guess what that makes me in her little fantasy land?"

Rodney shudders. "And just when you think things in the Pegasus galaxy can't get any weirder..."

"Tell me about it," he snorts. "But, seriously, I'm more worried about you."

"Me?" his amator asks as if it's the most ridiculous question ever. "You're the one who just took drugs of questionable expiry date."
"Yeah, but I've been dealing with this," he gestures vaguely at the overhead, "pretty much my whole life. I'm used to it. You, however, are not."

"Yes, well, my eardrums, miraculously, are intact, so I think I'll survive. Plus, if this is your way of trying to keep me from going in with you, it's not going to work. You met Jeannie, and turnabout is fair play and all of that."

Iohannes sighs. "You're in for a disappointing time then: Mother and I share a few genes, nothing more."

"Oh, please. Even if she wasn't your mother, I'd want to meet her, engineer to engineer and all that. And don't get me wrong, I love you to frankly embarrassing pieces, but it'd be nice to talk to an actual Ancient who has a clue about how any of the tech we find works."

Chuckling softly, "I sometimes have clue. Usually not much of one, but still a clue."

Rodney smiles indulgently at him, which should be more insulting than it is except, hey, it's Rodney, and, as if picking up on his thought, Rodney turns away from his tablet just long enough to raise a hand to the back of his neck and pull Iohannes in for a quick kiss-

-which is wonderful, because, for all they try to keep them and work separate, an awful lot of stuff lately has danced back and forth across that thin, invisible line through no fault of their own, and stellis in universum, if this isn't one of them-

-but, also apparently not quick enough, because Lorne chooses that exact moment to walk into the infirmary. "Whoa. Not to be rude or anything, Sir, but don't you guys have like rooms or something you could do that in?"

"We had one," Rodney retorts, stepping away with only the faintest tinge of red colouring his cheeks. "You're the one who didn't knock."

Lorne shrugs. "You're the one's who called me."

"So we were, Major. Elizabeta tell you what we wanted to do?"

"Yessir. Something about hooking ourselves into these stasis units and hoping we can talk to some mostly-dead Ancients without frying our brains."

"Yeah, that's about it. So what d'ya say we plug ourselves in and get this thing over with?"

Rodney rolls his eyes, but gestures at the pod in front of him with a flourish. "After you, Colonel."

Iohannes climbs into the pod and grins up at him as the lid closes.

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The next thing he knows is that he's in the infirmary. Not Aurora's infirmary, but Atlantis'. It's easy to tell, even with his eyes still squeezed shut: It smells like antiseptic, which his people had no need for. There's a weight in the crook of his arm that can only be an IV. And, of course, there's the faint beeping in the background that, as far as he's been able to discover, is wholly unique to the Terran practice of medicine.

The next thing Iohannes notices after that is the pain: The overwhelming, blinding, white-hot pain radiating from the top of his head down, like someone's started to take an axe to it and stopped halfway through. It's as if Rory and 'Lantis and a thousand other intellegentiaeaartificiales are
screaming wordlessly in his mind, only not, and that's all the explanation he has because that's about
as far as he can think at the moment.

He tries reaching out for Atlantis, wanting to get her to just shut up for five minutes, when the pain
suddenly flares. After which come more voices, loud and panicked, assaulting him from every
direction.

Then there is blackness.

And silence.

And sleep.

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When Iohannes wakes again, it's with the stupor of one whose both been drugged and asleep far too
long, but it's also without the pain from before, so he's going to call it a victory.

"What the fuck just happened?" he asks the room at large, rubbing a hand over his eyes. He doesn't
really expect an answer, and so is surprised when Elizabeta answers-

"You'd a seizure, Colonel. Probably because of those pills you took."

"Actually," Carson interrupts, "the medication was exactly what John said it was – an analgesic
similar to paracetamol, albeit in a dosage I wouldnae recommend for a normal human. As far as I've
been able to determine, the neural network operates at a similar frequency as the one the nanoids in
your brain use to communicate with the city. Attempting to connect to the network created a positive
feedback loop, which resulted in a grand mal seizure."

Iohannes pushes himself into a sitting position, ignoring the way the lights overhead flicker
concernedly. "Never had one of those before. How long was I out?"

"A little over seven hours."

"And the mission?"

"Doctor McKay and Major Lorne were able to connect to the neural network and communicate with
the surviving crewmembers," Elizabeta tells him, the disappointment momentarily disappearing from
her eyes. "Once they were able to convince the captain that what they were saying was true, they
agreed to share what knowledge they could."

"So they're still plugged in then?" Iohannes really doesn't know how he feels about that.

"Rodney is. Major Lorne's dealing with another situation which arose while you were out."

"Don't tell me Sergeant Anderson and Doctor Losev got into it again."

"No. A ship appeared in orbit."

Iohannes has the needle out of his arm and his feet over the side of the biobed before the word is
even fully formed on his lips. "Wraith?"

"Colonel, you should really-" Carson begins.

That gives him pause. "One of Thor's friends?"
"Considering he shot them out of the sky, I sincerely doubt it."
"He say why?"
"No," she says in the most embittered tone Iohannes has ever heard from her, "All I know is that he'll only talk to you about it."
"Don't take it personally. The Asgard have never been known for their manners."
"Well, manners or not John, you're Atlantis' military commander."
Iohannes frowns. "It's not like I planned on having – what was it again?"
"Yeah, one of those. I'd no idea a feedback loop was even possible with my nanoids, let alone that neural network would cause one."
"That's not the point John."

His frown deepens, though this is more because he can't seem to find his shoes than anything to do with Elizabeta. She never seems to think he sees the point in her arguments, which, while usually true, is also irritating. Either she needs to start speaking more clearly or accept that there are just some barriers that all the effort in the world can't overcome, belonging to different species being one of them. "What is then?"

"That you're the military commander of Atlantis, not the head of this Expedition. You can't just go doing things like this."

"Like what?"

"Like conducting negotiations with the Asgard completely behind my back."

Slowly, "It's not behind your back. Thor told you himself he wanted to talk to me."

"That's still not the point, Colonel."

"Huh." He thinks. "Is it about the negotiation part then? Cause I don't like it any more than you do, but, for all the Asgard like you Terrans, they still think you're a young race. They're not going to do anything that they think might end up with you guys destroying yourselves."

"No. This is about you two making decisions for the all rest of us – decisions that are rightfully mine to make – based off the ridiculous assumption that we're too primitive to make informed choices."

Iohannes holds up his hands. "Whoa. Hang on a second. Don't shoot the messenger and all that. I'm not the one you should be arguing with. Goodness knows why, but I like Terrans.. Terra not so much, but I've got no problem with most Terrans. Unless they're archaeologists, but that's more of a on principle sort of matter. I'd hate Alteran archaeologists too if there were any around."

It's a sign of something that she doesn't even smirk at this last. "That doesn't change the fact that you're going along with it."

"Well, it's not like he's given me much of a choice."
"You're not exactly giving me much of one either."

"What would you have me do, Elizabeta?" He sighs. "It's hard to convince them that you're an advanced race when you're still surprised every time it gets pointed out to you just how imperfect and ungodlike my people were. They don't interfere in any culture that still believes them – or their allies – to be gods, even if you don't worship them."

Elizabeta's arguments grind to a stuttering halt at this. She appears stricken by an emotion for which no Descendant language has a word, but which might best be described as the realization that that which she believes in is not worthy of her worship.

After a moment, she manages, "That's not what we think, John," but it's a poor argument and, by her tone, even she knows it.

Iohannes just shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not, but why else would you be so upset I managed to land myself in here again 'cause of something none of us could have predicted?" He turns to Carson, who's watching the proceedings with an air of one who really doesn't want to get dragged into them, and asks, "Wha'cha do with my boots?"

"They're in the cabinet, same as always," the doctor says after a moment, "but you really should still be in bed. Ancient or not, a seizure is still a seizure, and you could have-"

"No time for that, Doc."

/The medicus is right, pastor,/ the city says softly, speaking more gently than he's heard her since this first pulled him out of the cathedra. /You are injured. You should remain in the infirmary. The Asgarthi are allies. They will understand the delay./

/You must get bet-ter,/ Aurora whispers, her voice quieter still. /We do not wish you to die like the oth-ers, Pa-ter./

"I'm not going to die."

"Well, no-" Carson begins, but Iohannes quickly cuts him off, pointing upwards as he says-

"See, Rory? Not dying. You've got nothing to worry about."

/But you are the last, Pa-ter. You must keep your-self safe or else all is lost./

"Nothing's lost."

/Eve-ry-thing is lost if you die./

His eyebrows rise of their own accord, and Iohannes pauses halfway through tying his boots to answer. "I don't believe that. What does it matter-?" Iohannes looks briefly between Carson and Elizabeta before biting his tongue and opening his mind. /What does it matter if I die, if doing so will prevent a thousand more deaths?/ Not that he has any plans about dying because of something as stupid as a positive feedback loop. And, beside, he feels perfectly fine now. A little achy, but he's dealt with worse.

The light directly overhead dims perceptively, then brightens dramatically, as if in a sigh. /Aurora is right, pastor: you are the most important thing in the universe./

Iohannes snorts with as much derision as he's managed to pick up from his amator and finishes tying
his boots. "The universe is vast and we are small. To believe otherwise is to open the door to Haeresis."

/You saved Ma-ter. You saved us."

"You're prejudiced. Now, please, can you tell Thor I'm ready to talk to him before Elizabeta has an aneurysm and Carson has to scan somebody else's brain today?"

Both Carson and Elizabeta start to talk over each other again, but this time it is the doctor who wins out. "I really must insist, Colonel. You're not well enough-" is as far as he gets before a white light fills the room, and Iohannes finds himself transported up to the Muspelheim in orbit.

Chapter End Notes

Laudate providentiam medicorum is roughly thank goodness for the paranoia of doctors. Very roughly.
And so ends the "Legati" arc! Cue cheers. (Teach me to bite off more than I could obviously true.)

"So that happened," Iohannes says, pushing off the door of Elizabeta's office. She looks up from her laptop, clearly startled. "Colonel. I didn't know you were back."

"Thor just beamed me down. Major Lorne's sticking around for a while longer, just in case they need a gene user."

"Why would they-?"

"Well, it's kinda a long story."

Elizabeta gestures at the small couch in the corner – the one he hauled into her office himself after the first time he'd caught her dozing at her desk, waiting for a team to return from off-world – and gratefully sinks into it. Words cannot describe how glad he'll be when this day is finally over.

"Well, first an all, I'm sorry for being such an ass earlier."

"You weren't-"

"No, I was. It's just..." he sighs. After a moment of twisting, he lays supine on it, legs bent at the knees to make them fit. "Having the Asgard here was supposed to help, y'know? Heimdall and Sigyn were supposed to find the answer to their cloning problem with the old icubiti, so that they could help with the Wraith and the Haeretici and mopping up what's left of the goa'uld in your galaxy. Them being here was supposed to solve everything."

"John," she says softly. "The Asgard have been trying to find a solution to their cloning problem for millennia. I think even they knew coming here that the chances of success were slim."

"I know. But still. You've no idea how much I wanted to save them."

"I'm sure they'll come up with a solution with time."

"No so much, no. The problem is worse than they're letting on. They'll be extinct within a few years."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's one of the more useful titbits I brought back from when I Ascended." More gruesome as well, but Elizabeta doesn't need to know that. No one does. Not even the Asgard, though Iohannes supposes they're just as privy to all the painful details as he is.

"That's terrible."
"Yeah. After he checks out some things on Sagremor for me and drops Lorne off here, Thor's going
to take the Muspelheim back to Orilla. Things to get in order, y'know."

Elizabeta very carefully says nothing. After all, what can anyone say when learning Terra's oldest
and most stalwart ally is going to be dying a very painful death sooner rather than later?

"But, anyway," Johannes continues after a moment, his voice hoarse from lack of sleep (and nothing
more). "He and Lorne are going to Sagremor because the ship that attacked us, the Brísingamen, was
looking for something. A key, of sorts, to a weapon Father built there when attempting to find a way
to destroy the Wraith."

He can hear Elizabeta's chair squeak as she leans forward. "What sort of weapon?"

"Well, it wasn't a weapon in the traditional sense. It was more of a device, one that could jam up the
Wraith's hyperdrives without harming our own, basically leaving them easy pickings for our lintres.
He dismantled it when he learned that one of it's side-effects was the spontaneous detonation of the
portae."

"Yes," she says slowly, "you mentioned something along those lines once. The Attero device, I
think? I tried looking it up in the database, but all my searches came up empty."

"Huh. That's odd. It was actually Council-sanctioned research for once, so it should've been there..."

"Maybe he deleted it himself?"

"Possibly. I dunno. All I know is he promised me – he swore to me on the ashes of our forefathers –
that he'd destroyed Attero after seeing what it could to. But, apparently," he adds, weary but
unsurprised. Father had never kept any of his other promises. He's hardly staggered to find he's
broken another one all these thousands of years later, "all he did was hide the key, 'cause the Vanir
found the device, figured out what it could do, and came looking for the rest of it."

"I'm sorry, who are the Vanir?"

"Rouge Asgard with a history of human rights violations longer than they are tall. Your lot have
never heard of them 'cause the Asgard took care of them while I was in the cathedra. Or, at least,
they thought they did. Thor's a little embarrassed about that, so he's agreed to destroy the research
outpost on Sagremor – the planet where the device is located – for us. And, when I'm done here, I'm
gonna try tracking down the key."

"Atlantis is a big city. We've been here eighteen months and have barely explored a third of it.
There's a chance you may never find it."

"Did I mention Thor took prisoners before blowing up the Brísingamen?"

There's distinct exasperation in her voice when she says, "No, you didn't."

"Yeah, it's another reason he's so keen to get back to Orilla. But, like I was saying, he took prisoners,
and the prisoners said that they didn't pick up the subspace signal they tracked here until a week or so
ago. Since I started show Rodney around some of Father's more secret labs around then, it's probably
a good bet the key's in one of them."

"And the Vanir?"

"My guess is that they came in cloaked, saw the Muspelheim in orbit, and decided to wait until she
was gone to try getting their hands on the key."
"So," she surmises, "when Thor left this morning to fly you out to the Aurora, they thought he'd left for good and planned their raid for that night, not knowing that you were coming straight back."

"Exactly – although I think it's yesterday morning by this point."

"Is it?"

"For almost two hours now."

"God," she groans before snapping her laptop shut. "I'd not meant to stay up so late."

"So you weren't waiting up for me then?"

"Goodness, no. I figured you'd show up at breakfast refusing to tell us about any of it and decided to cut my losses and try to put together a report for Stargate Command about all of this."

"Now that's just hurtful."

"Well honestly John? You don't exactly have the best track record when it comes to full disclosure on these things."

"I think I've been awfully upfront with things, actually."

"Really?" Elizabeta laughs with obvious disbelief.

"Hey, I told you when you did it that you'd end up regretting making me your military commander. That's pretty upfront."

"Oh, John, I don't regret that at all. It's just..."

"You just wish I was the kind of Alteran you wanted to find." He finishes for her. "Don't worry about it. You're not the first person to ever think that."

"John-"

"Look," he sighs, "in case you haven't noticed, I take pride in not being like others. It's kinda my thing. Maybe not the best thing to have, but it's worked out pretty well for me so far. And, I mean, sure, sometimes it means I end up giving C4 to people like the Genii, but it also means that Atlantis and everyone on her is still alive, so I'd guess the books are still balanced in my favour."

"Which I suppose brings us to the other side of this conversation."

Iohannes sits up, surprised. "This conversation has sides?" When had that happened?

"Yes. It does," Elizabeta insists. Now that he's sitting up, he can see her fiddling with the pendant on her necklace and trying to meet his eyes. "If you feel the need to apologize for earlier, it's only right I apologize for having put you in that position in the first place. I know how uncomfortable the very idea of you or your people being worshipped makes you, especially in light of everything that's going on with the Ori back in the Milky Way, and should have seen the position I was putting you in."

"It's not your fault. You didn't realize you were doing it."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't change the fact that I was putting you in an impossible position. For that, I truly am sorry."
Iohannes isn't good with feelings, but he puts all that he has into, "I know you are."

"It's just-"

"Elizabeta. It's okay. Really. Now stop apologizing, please. It's starting to make me feel guilty again."

"Okay than," she smiles, rising to her feet. "Now, it's been a long day and I think we could both use some rest. So see you at breakfast?"

"Sure thing."

Iohannes doesn't even try sleeping. He knows he won't be able to, not while Rodney's still hooked up to Aurora's neural network. So he stops by his quarters for a book and the mess for a Thermos of the Athosians' trademark stout tea, then heads to the linter's infirmary.

Though on some level he'd known that they wouldn't have left his amator in here alone, he's still surprised to find Zelenka there with a tablet and a carafe of coffee doing much the same.

"Colonel, I thought you might show up. Come, let me show you what I've been able to map of the damages to the ship's systems, as well as a preliminary schedule for repairs. Provided that Daedalus has not left Earth, it may be possible to have her spaceworthy by the end of June. Maybe earlier, depending on what you know about these vessels and what McKay is able to learn from the crew."

"They're not going to show him anything," Iohannes says, slumping on the floor next to the Czech. "They're probably just running him around while they try to get a handle on the situation themselves. When they finally come to terms with the fact that what he's telling them is the truth, they'll probably demand that we shut off the pods right away and let them die peaceful deaths."

"You sound awfully certain of this, Colonel."

"Believe me, I wish I wasn't."

Zelenka sighs heavily before handing over his tablet. "Well, is no matter. We will figure out how to make this ship work with or without their help."

"That's the spirit."

Iohannes is, naturally, exactly right on what Rory's crew decide to do. Sure, it takes them twelve hours to come to their decision, but they come to the same conclusion regardless: they want to be disconnected from stasis as soon as possible and the only help they're willing to give in the interim is the sort of which the Expedition doesn't really need, id est, lessons on how to run the live support and toggle the inertial dampeners.

He could almost hate them for that, except that even that much is more than he would ever have expected his people to do for any of their Descendants. It's interference of the most minor sort, and when Iohannes learns of it he almost demands that Rodney hook himself back into the neural network and stay there until he's managed to brow-beat them into more. He doesn't, but only because he knows that the only arguments that could work would have to come from his own lips and there's no chance of that ever happening, not when he can't enter the network without seizing and they can't come out without dying. Not even long enough for him to say goodbye.
The biggest surprise, however, comes after they start removing the crew from stasis. Specifically, when they're about to remove Mother's body from from her pod and Rodney suddenly shouts, "Hang on a second. I almost forgot," before removing the orbis from her collar and handing it to Iohannes. "She wanted you to have this."

"No she didn't," he says automatically, looking at the small silver disc in his hands. It's old and worn, with Atlantis' Avalonian point of origin symbol embossed upon its surface, and more than likely an heirloom passed to her by her grandfather, Iohannes Alder Legatus, for whom he'd been named. Odds are it goes back still further, to some distant legatus in his maternal line whose name has been lost to the ages, or, at least, to him.

In short, it's exactly the sort of thing he doesn't deserve, and Iohannes moves to place it back on Mother's collar, where it belongs.

"Yes," Rodney insists, pressing the orbis back into his hand and looking like he can't quite understand when Iohannes had gotten so dense, "she did. I told her everything I knew about what you'd done since she'd gone into stasis and she said you'd deserved it, particularly if you were going to be commanding a ship, so stop fishing for compliments and just take it already."

"But-" he starts, uncertain as to which hole in his logic to exploit first, but Rodney, being Rodney, cuts him off again.

"She wanted you to have it," Rodney repeats, and that's the end of it.

The Ocean Gate

Iohannes Legatus.

Iohannes thinks he could get used to that.

Chapter End Notes

It should probably be said that this, while containing mostly the same content as what I'd planned for this chappie, in no way came out like I expected it would. I, personally, think it's too dialogue-heavy, to say nothing of how chunky it is. I almost deleted it the way I deleted no less than 12 of it's predecessors, but then I figured hell, it's never going to get any better than this, so, yeah. It's done. finally. *insert more profanity here*

(Also, when I say Atlantis' Avalonian Point of Orgin, I mean the circle-and-line bit from the Beta Gate, not the pyramid from the alpha gate they use on their patches.)
"We seriously need to come up with a name for this baby."

Rodney scowls quickly at him from over the top of the device he's working on, which looks like the love-child of a wood lathe and a toaster oven. "You've declared yourself the god of naming things. You come up with one," he snaps-

-and almost immediately he regrets his word choice. Looking up long enough to meet John's eyes (which have already darkened and shuddered, like a ship battening down for a storm), he continues, "Yes, yes. Sorry. Bad word choice. Obviously. But the point stands. If you won't let anyone else name anything, the impetus falls to you. So get on with it already."

"No," John argues immediately, tone starting out terse before slipping into something that could – possibly, maybe – be considered conciliatory. "Other people can name stuff too. Just not you."

"I'm heartbroken. Truly, I am. Now hand me that."

John rolls his eyes, but passes over the data device nonetheless.

"So," he asks impatiently, "what's the hold-up then?"

Shrugging now, "Can't think of a good name for it."

"Then let's just use ZedPM recharger and be done with it."

Rodney can't see John's reaction, having knelt down to remove one of the as-yet-unnamed device's side covers, but he can hear the distaste in his simple, "No."

"It's a machine to recharge ZedPMs. We don't exactly need Dantean levels of allusion here."

"I'm not asking for Dante. I'm asking for something not quite so ridiculous."

"Tell me, Colonel, how is naming something after its function ridiculous?"

"It is when you call it a ZPM recharger," John huffs, and Rodney doesn't need to look up from the mess of wires, piping, and crystals he's working on to know the other man is pouting across the room with greater skill than someone his age should really be allowed to have.

"Says the man who nicknamed a battleship Rory," Rodney huffs himself and kneels further down, trying to get a better angle at the device's insides.

It's probably ironic that, while he's managed to find a superconductive material for the electromagnet they'll need to cause the while hole inside the dead ZedPM to jump to another universe, the whole effort might be undermined because they can't seem to keep the transistors that act as go-between for the whole process from overheating in during their simulations.

Probably.

All Rodney really knows is, healthy appreciation of irony as he has, the problem is now reaching levels that border on the absurd. Sure, there are a couple more things he wants to try before taking
the device apart and rebuilding it with more transistors and a more elaborate cooling system, but that's not the point. Which is that this problem shouldn't be happening.

He's just about to point this fact out to John – loudly, and for the third time in the last hour – when he realizes John's been talking all this time and Rodney's got not the slightest clue what he said. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"I said maybe there's something from Terran mythology we could name it after."

That's surprising enough that Rodney actually pokes his head around the side of the device to stare at him. "I thought you hated mythology." Vehemently, and with a vengeance otherwise reserved for Wraith and anthropologists.

John just shrugs.

"Hmmm. Well, I'd say something to do with Prometheus and whole stealing fire from the gods thing, but that's already taken, so I've got nothing... And," he groans as he rises to his feet, "I can't do anything more here until I find a better way of cooling the transistors."

"Then find a better way of cooling the transista."

"I will. Just not right now." Rodney has it on good authority that the mess is serving cake with dinner tonight (as part of Cadman's promotion thing, though Cadman doesn't know it yet) and, while that's not for another hour or so, he knows if he starts troubleshooting the problem now, he'll work straight through dinner – and, more than likely, the next three meals that follow. As pressing as their need for new ZedPMs is, it's not so pressing as to risk hypoglycaemic shock. Or missing cake in the mess.

Plus, he wants Zelenka on hand before he starts tinkering on the system and he's scheduled to be working on Aurora for the rest of the day. And, while it's entirely within his rights to pull Zelenka off that project and back on to this one, they'd all discovered the hard way that the ship's AI doesn't take kindly to what she views as unnecessary delays in her repairs.

By which he means that Rory makes John's life a living hell, complete with headaches and the occasional nosebleed. John seems willing to ignore all this in favour of going about their jobs as they normally would (his exact words on the subject sound disturbingly like they've been ripped from a parenting guidebook), but Rodney is not.

If John suspects he has ulterior motives, he doesn't show it. Or, at least, seems to suspect different ulterior motives, as everything about him – including the way he's leaning against one of the nearby workbenches – shifts from languard and bored to sex on a stick – in an instant. "Never thought I'd see the day when you'd voluntarily leave your lab when there was fate-of-galaxies work to be done, Rodney," he grins. "Though I don't suppose we'd actually have to leave the lab."

"Are you kidding me? This is a clean room, not to mention anyone could walk in on us at any minute. Of course we've got to get out of here."

John's smirk just gets wider. "My quarters are closer."

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John's quarters are closer, though that's something of a relative term where the city's transporters are involved. They're in the middle of this quiet and otherwise disused hallway on the west side of the Central Spire, with a transporter that connects to all of the main hubs in the city on one end and a
stairwell that connects the top twelve levels of the tower on the other. The view is impeccable, and, with the rest of the Expedition quartered on the south-east pier, his nearest neighbour is a mile-and-a-half away.

His quarters are also, without a doubt, the smallest in all of Atlantis.

Rodney also knows without a doubt that there are other, larger rooms on this hallway alone, with just as magnificent views, and can only assume that John's reasons for choosing it are wrapped up in any number of his myriad issues regarding the life he'd lead before they'd found him. Particularly when he has to know where all the best rooms are.

But whatever. John can keep the room if he wants. He just wishes, "You should think about getting a bigger bed."

John snorts. "And put it where?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that it's positively ridiculous for a grown man to sleep on a mattress like this."

"I've slept on worse," he says, not entirely reassuringly, and continues changing into his dress blues.

Rodney's eyes narrow with disbelief. "When?"

"That night in that inn on M3." He winces, remembering, but insists, "I meant long term."

"It's not actually that bad, Rodney."

"But it is small." He sighs, doing up the last of the buttons on his shirt, "We usually end up at your place anyway."

"But sometimes we don't," he points out, gesturing at the bed beneath him. He knows teenagers the world around have made excellent use of twin mattresses, but they're not teenagers and this certainly isn't a twin. "So forgive me for – rather rationally, I might add – thinking we're going to fall out of this bed one day and, believe me, that is not an infirmary visit I want to have to explain to Carson."

"I doubt we could do ourselves enough damage that I, John holds up a hand and allows it to glow with a bright, impossibly white light for an instant before going back to his tie, which appears to be giving him far more trouble than that act of near-Ascension, "couldn't patch us up, no embarrassing infirmary trips required. But, if it's really that big a deal, we can just make sure we always go to yours from now on. I really only suggested mine 'cause I knew I had to change into this penguin suit after."

"Tuxes are penguin suits," he informs John, an idea suddenly lighting into his mind, one that will solve all of their problems. It's so obvious he can't imagine why he's never thought of it before. "Those are dress blues."

"Any bird that doesn't fly is ridiculous and so am I in this thing."

"You do not look ridiculous," Rodney scoffs, momentarily distracted by the sight of John in his dress uniform. "Hot is what you look. I'd even go so far as to say that the sight of you in this uniform alone has given me a whole new respect for the military. But ridiculous you most certainly are not."
"Whatever," he snorts, clearly not believing a word Rodney's saying. "You coming to the ceremony or going straight back to the lab?"

With a groan, he pushes himself out of bed and starts gathering his own things. "I'll have to go back to my quarters to change first either way, which brings me back to my idea."

"What idea?"

"The one I just had that would solve all our quarters-related issues."

Adjusting the sleeves of his jacket now, John frowns. "I wasn't aware we had all that many quarters-related issues."

"This bed, the clothes; the fact that I can't remember the last time either of us was able to spend the entire night at the other's rooms, amongst others. Please at least try to pay attention."

"I am paying attention, Rodney. I'm just not sure it's helping."

"What I'm trying to get at here is that you should move into my quarters. Or we can find new ones and share those, 'cause there's no way two people could fit in here. Either way: you, me, cohabitation." He beams at John. "What do you think?"

"I think," John says slowly, his own expression doing strange, unidentifiable things before it slips into a deliberately unreadable mask. "I think," he repeats, his voice bright and somewhat contrived, "that I should go track down Major Lorne and make sure I've got this penguin suit on right. See you after the ceremony?"

"Hey, John, wait just a minute-" starts, hurrying to finish dressing, but it's too little, too late, and by the time he's gotten his pants back on, John's long out the door. "Great," he says, collapsing back onto the bed. "That's just... great."

All the lights in the room flicker and the windows, which had been open to the ocean air, snap themselves shut.

"Did I ask for your opinion?" he snaps at the ceiling. Then, with a sigh, "But I screwed things up big time, didn't I?"

Atlantis dims the lights completely and lowers the ambient temperature in the room by several degrees.

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
He does and, after the door closes, does so herself. "Now, please, tell me what is it you think you have done."

So he tells her.

"I do not think you see it sometimes," she says delicately at the end of his tale, her expression now one of deep concern, "as close as you are to him, but Colonel Sheppard is a very... unique individual."

Rodney snorts at this. "Of course he's unique. He's the last Ancient in whole universe; it doesn't get much more unique than that."

"While that is true, that is not entirely what I mean to say. Which is that that, for all he tries to make it appear otherwise, the difference between himself and this city's other inhabitants is by far greater than the difference between any two of us, whatever planet we may be originally from."

"Yeah, John's an alien, in the full, conventional sense of the term. I know that. You know that. We all know that. What I don't know is what you're trying to get at here."

"Only that things which may mean one thing to us may have completely different connotations for him. Take his Ancestral title, pastor. For him, it means caretaker of this great city. For most of your Expedition, however, it is a title of religious leadership which he eschews."

Rodney frowns at her. "We're not talking about the meaning of a single word here. I asked him to move in with me. That's got to mean the same thing in every culture."

"Maybe it is the implications of the statement which are different."

"What implications? From everything he's ever said about the Ancients, they were bigger on free love than a Robert A Heinlein novel. Whatever implications there may be, they should, if anything, be less for him than what they would be for anyone else."

Teyla gives him a look that's half amused and half sympathetic and entirely too knowing for Rodney's comfort. "Perhaps that is the very reason he is so hesitant about this. The fact that it was such a simple matter for the others of his kind may well be making him wish to be especially certain before doing so."

"That's just- I mean, there aren't words for how ridiculous that is. And, even if it wasn't, John and I have been together for what? Fourteen months now? That's not such a radical time to start talking about these sorts of things, is it? For people of any culture."

Plus, everything John had ever said had given every indication that he wanted this thing between them to last just as much as Rodney did, but he isn't going to Telya that, just in case he's wrong and this is the start of some implosion he'd been too stupid and too short-sighted to prevent. It'd be bad enough if – when – it did end. He didn't need to make it worse by everyone else knowing just how wrong he'd been.

But Teyla is, amongst her innumerable other, equally frightening talents, apparently a mind reader, and appears to guess all the things he's dared not say. "Rest assured in his affections for you, Rodney. I believe this merely to be a misunderstanding."

"What," he huffs, "is there for me to misunderstand? I ask him to move in, he walks out. It's fairly simple. We're talking grade four math simple here. One plus one does not equal twelve sort of obviousness. And, I've got to say, considering I came to you looking for some sort of a way to, I dunno, fix it, you've not been very helpful."
Her lips thin. "As I have said, I do not believe there is anything for you to fix. Considering the stress the Colonel has been under of late, it is quite possible that you merely chose an unfortunate time to bring up the subject."

Rodney snorts instinctively before taking a moment to mull her words over. He supposes it is true, but, "By that logic, there's never going to be a good time to talk about it."

Teyla's mouth opens to say something, but whatever it might be is cut short by an announcement over the citywide that anyone not immediately involved in operations vital to the city – which would be many people, at this almost-dinnertime hour – is welcome to join the majority of the military contingent in the mess for a special ceremony.

Looks like Cadman's promotion ceremony is about to begin, even if she doesn't know it yet.

"Give him time," Teyla says after this, patting his knew before standing. "These sorts of things require it, no matter what their circumstances. But, come. I would not wish to be late for this celebration of Lieutenant Cadman's prowess as a warrior."

Rodney harrumphs but follows. Cadman may creep him out on oh-so-many different levels, but there's going to be John and cake, and, well, that's a combination he can't exactly ignore.

The thing is this:

Pegasus is, by definition, a stressful place to be. Even (especially) for those native to it. On one hand there are the Wraith, who are terrifying in a way no horror movie on Earth could ever quite hope to come close to, and then on the other there is the very real possibility that, in playing with technology that no one – not even Rodney and certainly not John – comes close to completely understanding, they'll end up killing themselves in some sort of violently spectacular manner.

Then add to that the fact that the Daedalus is, until they get the ZedPM charger up and running or finish building the intergalactic gate bridge he and Sam have been working on, their only means of contact with Earth. While the Expedition can sustain itself with the goods they're able to grow in Atlantis' greenhouses or trade for off-world – and, in fact, had done so for an entire year – the fact remains that all of their munition, medical supplies, and reinforcements are tied into the continued existence of that one ship. And while it is theoretically possible for them to manufacture the former, if they can come across the right raw materials, there are limits to what even Rodney can build with the materials at his disposal.

The safety of Atlantis is, by definition, tied into their technological superiority of the Expedition. Should things ever deteriorate further with the Genii or the Wraith ever discover the city isn't as destroyed at they'd like them to believe, those weapons and those soldiers are the only thing standing between them and a very unpleasant death.

And, okay, they have a ZedPM, but it's only one ZedPM, and not even a fully charged one at that. After the power they used to manufacture more drones (five thousand, the smallest number John said could hold back an armada of similar size to the one the Wraith sent last year) and that they've already used for the bimonthly check-ins with the SGC, they've the power to either: A, run the cloak for one hundred nine years, two hundred fourteen days, twenty-seven hours, and twenty-six minutes. Or, B, run the shield, under constant bombardment from Wraith weaponry, for eight days, two hours, and thirty-two minutes.
In the event should the Wraith ever return, they are effectively dead without more ZedPMs. More ZedPMs give them more options, like activating the stardrive and getting the hell off Lantea and onto some planet far, far off the beaten path. Or, at the very least, sustain the shield for a longer period. But, again, to do that they need more ZedPMs. Two of them, in fact, and preferably fully charged.

And Rodney's working on the ZedPM recharger, he really is, but the cooling problem is really more difficult than it had seemed when he was initially drawing up his plans, which is just about the worst way for this to end. They need the transistors to stay cool so they can carry the energy from the charged ZedPM they already have to the electromagnet they've built to make the white hole inside the dead ZedPM jump to another universe filled with all sorts of zero point energy goodness. They need to use the charged ZedPM because no amount of naquadah generators operating in concert would be able to provide the kind of power they need to operate the electromagnet at the power required to accomplish their goal. But even the best transistors aren't designed to handle the kind of raw power a ZedPM can generate, so Rodney's needed to incorporate an elaborate power-distribution and cooling system into the device. Only something is not right, as it's not working like he expected in simulations.

In short, though: overheated transistors equal failure equal no ZedPMs equal death by Wraith.

And, okay, they have the Aurora now to help defend them, but she's about as badly damaged as it's possible to be without being consigned to the great junkyard in the sky. And, while it is possible to repair her, it's going to take a lot of materials that they just don't have access to in the Pegasus galaxy – things like the titanium-yttrium alloy which make up her hull or even the valves for her water-recycling system, - which again means that they're reliant on Earth and the Daedalus to supply them with what they need. And Daedalus can only carry so much and travel so fast.

Of course, if they had the ZedPMs, they could make use of the designs John's father had left behind with his hologram to fabricate robots that could go out and find the materials needed for the repair job, as the Ancients must have done during the Siege – miners that could extract the ores they needed from uninhabited planets, processors that could refine the ores into usable metals; service 'bots that could help carry out the repairs to the ship and Atlantis – but to do so, again, would require more ZedPMs than they currently have or runs the risk of leaving them seriously underpowered when the Wraith eventually arrive back on their doorstep.

All of which means: they're basically screwed five ways from Sunday, but that's nothing new, because if it's not ZedPM rechargers and Ancient spaceships, it's Wraith armadas or Genii plots or Vanir spaceships or deadly-if-misused Ancient tech. The Pegasus galaxy offers little to no downtime between crises.

Which, to boil it down still further: stress is a constant on Atlantis. Yesterday is no less stressful than today is or tomorrow will be. Only the stressors change.

So the idea that bringing up, oh, say, the idea of him and John sharing quarters today is little-to-no different than bringing it up tomorrow or next week or next year. There never will be a good time for it, at least until the Wraith are gone, so asking the moment the idea pops into his head shouldn't be such a big deal.

Q. E. D.

Besides, this is John. John is Mr. Laid Back himself. He is the anthropomorphic personification of cool detachment and nonchalance. It takes people shooting at him for John to appear even the slightest bit perturbed and, sometimes, not even then. The only real times Rodney has ever seen him truly, genuinely angry have been when someone's actively threatening the safety of Atlantis.
Then again, John doesn't like to talk about the past. Or himself. Or his feelings. And, while John has been surprisingly upfront with words like I love you, he's never actually talked about their relationship. Which Rodney supposes now, in retrospect, might've been a logical first step before springing the whole let's move in together thing on John.

But still, hindsight is twenty-twenty, and walking out on the conversation has to be an overreaction in anyone's books. Even an Ancient's.

Rodney's brooding all of this over, waiting for Cadman's promotion ceremony to begin, when Carson slips into to the seat beside him, and more or less ignores the conversation that strikes up around him.

It's not until Teyla asks the doctor, "How is Michael doing?" that Rodney remembers the particular stressor to which she might have been referring earlier:

Michael, the first trial of Carson's Wraith retrovirus, is being released from the infirmary and into general population this evening.

Yeah, Rodney can see how that might put John in a foul mood.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to make this one 1 chappie, I really did, and then I realized (about the time my intro-to-this-installment grew to 3K words) that this would work best as multiple chappies. I'm aiming for. No more of these 6/8 chappie inanities.

Also, retrospectively, I realized that I felt I'd been too "hard" on John of late, so I decided to be "hard" on Rodney instead. Subconsciously. I think.

Oh, and by the timeline I've made, the events of this installment take place mid-March 2006, about 6 weeks after "Legati."

Fradator means Deceiver, and is another CJ Cherryh shout-out, even if one really has little to do with the other. Also, to anyone who's never read a Robert A Heinlein novel, just trust me when when I say they're big on free love and nonmonogamy in all forms. And I'm assuming it takes 5000x as much power to run the shield as the cloak.
It starts like this:

Carson, fairly out of the blue at the senior staff meeting they've had every seventh day at 0900 since arriving on Atlantis (circumstances providing), says that he's done all the work on the Wraith retrovirus he can do without a live test subject.

"Are you certain that your research is really at that point?" Elizabeth asks, lips piercing with distaste, as they always do whenever the time comes for the grey-area dilemmas she never seems entirely comfortable with making – as if talking a subject to death will suddenly push the choices into clearly definable black and white boxes. Don't get him wrong, Rodney would much rather have civilian oversight than military, but things seem to take so much longer to decide here as compared to when he was working for the Air Force. And time is very much of the essence in the Pegasus galaxy.

"It's possible we could make some minimal progress with fresh Wraith cell cultures..."

"But to do that," John finishes, "we'd need to capture a Wraith anyway, so why not just go whole hog?"

"That was my thought as well, Colonel," Carson agrees, looking relieved beyond measure that they've not simply dismissed his idea outright. "A few days with a live test subject could be worth months of theoretical work."

John leans back further in his chair. Both his feet are already propped up on the conference table and his hands, which had been tucked behind his head, gesticulate vaguely in Elizabeth's direction as he says, "It shouldn't be too much of a problem to capture one if we can lay the right ambush."

"And you don't have any problem using prisoners for scientific experiments?"

"They're Wraith, Elizabeta."

"There are rules to warfare, John," she insists.

"On Terra, yeah," John says, taking his feet off the table and allowing the front legs of his chair to hit the floor with a thud. "But we're not on Terra. And even if we were, those rules don't do a lot of good if both sides don't follow them. And I think we can all safely say by this point that the Wraith would never follow any sort of Geneva Convention, even if Pegasus had one."

"Are you saying that the Ancients didn't have laws regarding the treatment of prisoners of war?"

"I'm saying that it doesn't matter what laws exist, the Wraith won't follow them, so there's no reason we should bother with them either."

"We can't just toss the rules out the door every time they make things difficult for us, John."

"Rules don't do anyone any good if there's no one left alive at the end of the day to follow them."

"It doesn't matter," Elizabeth insists, her tone caught between indignation and incredulity. "We'd be no better than the Wraith-"
"They have a point," Rodney breaks in before their argument can further inflame the tensions between the pair. It seems like John and Elizabeth have only just gotten over their last argument, whatever it might've actually been about, and last thing they need is for the head of the Expedition and the commander of its military contingent to be at loggerheads. Again.

Elizabeth turns her suspicious eye on him now. "Don't tell me you're actually thinking of going along with this."

"We are only talking about one Wraith here, not about creating our own version of Auschwitz."

"Yes, today we're talking about only one. But what about later, when it's ten Wraith, or twenty, or a hundred that we need to test your retrovirus on?"

"I'm sorry," John interrupts, "but when did we start having genuine concern for the Wraith?"

"Just because they're the enemy doesn't mean we have the right-"

"Caecique surdi alii, Elizabeta! They are not just our enemy. They are our predators. They will not stop until they have culled every man, woman, and child in this galaxy – and, if you've no care for the Descendants of this galaxy-"

"I respect all life, regardless of where it originates, John. You of all people should know that."

John ducks his head a little, conceding the point, but the heat is still in his voice when he says, "They're not going to stop. Even if they never make it to Avalon, they're going to continue to cull this galaxy to the brink of extinction again and again. And I won't let that happen, not if there's anything I can do to stop it. Carson's retrovirus presents us with an opportunity to get rid of the Wraith once and for all with minimal risk to ourselves. Even if it goes against everything you believe in, you have to know it's the right thing to do."

Elizabeth hangs her head for a moment before, "Alright. You have a go. But," she stresses, "only if we can pull this off without bringing another armada down on our heads."

"Piece of cake."

"How?" Rodney can't help but ask, because nothing – nothing – involving the Wraith is ever simple. Or easy.

"We still have the tracker we pulled out of Ronon a while back, right?"

Ah. "You want to reactivate it on an uninhabited planet and hope they only send a couple Wraith to check it out."

"Caught us Steve, didn't it?"

"That could actually work."

Smiling beatifically at him, "Your faith in me is astounding, Rodney," John says before pushing himself out of his chair. "Radio me when you get it working again. I'll be checking the database for a good planet to lay the ambush."

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But that was fifteen days ago and, honestly, beyond the initial capture, Rodney really hadn't much reason to be involved with Michael after that, so he honestly thinks he can be forgiven for more or
less forgetting about it while he worked on other, more important projects.

But back to the ceremony.

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"At ease guys," John says when he takes the podium someone had found somewhere in the city and dragged to the front of the mess for this occasion.

He's grinning at the assorted ranks of airmen, sailors and Marines like the cat that caught the canary — which he pretty much is, as he and Major Lorne had gone to extraordinary lengths to make sure that no one outside of the senior staff knew what the exact purpose of the ceremony was beforehand.

(Rodney's not exactly sure why they chose to do so, though he likes to think it has something to do with the excesses Cadman had taken while in his body. But, again, he's not really sure. For all he knows, it's actually part of some bizarre military ritual that will end with them all jumping off one of the piers into the ocean or something equally as idiotic.)

"Sorry for all the secrecy," John continues, "but it's kinda impossible to keep a secret in this city, and we really wanted it to be a surprise...

"But first things first: For those of you with stakes in Doctor Zelenka's pool, I feel I should let you know that this isn't a military review; neither General O'Neill nor General Landry are visiting, nor is anyone from the IOA; no one's in trouble — and," John's grin, if possible, actually manages to get wider, "as for the four of you had me and Doctor McKay getting married, let me just say that I know exactly how much each of you put down and, if and when that should happen, I expect very nice wedding presents."

Rodney winces at this. It's not so much because of the snickers that fill the room as Teyla's subtle I told you so elbow to his ribs.

Okay, maybe she had, and maybe it's nice to have confirmation that he's not completely ruined things by asking John to move in with him. But still, this is John they're talking about. Just because he's joking about their relationship in public doesn't mean that they're ever going to talk about it in private. And maybe it's just the scientist in him, but Rodney would really, really like to know why John was so violently opposed to the idea that he just walked out on the conversation, if only so he can avoid making the mistake again in the future.

He deserves that much at least. Doesn't he?

The laughter dies down and John starts speaking again. "Seriously, though. We're not here for anything like that. We're here because of you. Because each and everyone one of you volunteered for the most dangerous posting your world has ever known. Because you've each gone so far above and beyond your duties in protecting this city that there are honestly no words that could do justice to the courage and the commitment you've shown. You are men and women such as the universe has never seen, and it is my honour to be your commanding officer.

"My only regret," he says, John's voice that kind of serious he only gets when someone's threatening the safety and security of his team, "is that, Terran bureaucracy being what it is, it's proving harder to get you all the medals and awards I think you deserve. I had hoped to make this a big joint ceremony but... Lieutenant Cadman? Mind joining us up here?"

John steps back as Cadman comes forward, gesturing to Lorne as he does so.

The Major takes his place at the podium with a manic grin of his own, which sobers only a little
when he starts reading from a cue card. "Attention to orders."

The entire military contingent snaps to attention as one. Even Rodney, who's been working for the Air Force since '91 and so over their pomp and circumstance that it's not funny, can't help but be impressed.

"The President of the United States," Lorne continues when Cadman reaches the podium, "acting upon the recommendation of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, has placed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, integrity, and abilities of First Lieutenant Laura Cadman. In view of these special qualities, and her demonstrated potential to serve in the higher grade, First Lieutenant Cadman is promoted to the grade of captain, United States Marine Corps, effective the twenty-first day of March, two thousand and six, by order of the Commandant of the Marine Corps."

While Lorne recites this, John removes Cadman's old rank insignia and replaces it with the double bars of a captain. He appears to be saying something to her as he does so, something that causes her to blink several times, as if fighting back tears (which is ridiculous, because she is Cadman and therefore the devil incarnate, without emotion or feeling, save for the pleasure she derives in making Rodney's life as uncomfortable as possible). It's hard to tell for sure, though, 'cause immediately after John pulls her into one of those forehead touching things that seem to be all the rage in the Pegasus galaxy. When she steps back and gives him a proper Earth salute, there's no trace of it left on her face.

"Congratulations, Captain."

"Thank you sir."

"Want to say something?"

"And follow an act like that? No way. I say we go ahead and start the party." Cadman starts off the stage, pausing only when she appears to realize that John and Lorne aren't following. "There is a party, isn't there?"

John snorts. "Permission to party given."

A cheer rises from the military contingent as they break ranks, some to go congratulate Cadman, others to drag the tables back into their proper places.

Carson snorts too as he rises to his feet. "She's a pistol, isnae she?" he says in that sickeningly adoring way he gets at the slightest mention of his girlfriend.

Rodney just shakes his head and goes in search of cake. Carson may be one of his best friends, but very, very little in the universe could convince Rodney to stick around while the good doctor waxes lyrical about Captain Cadman. So cake it is. If he's particularly lucky, he'll be able to corner John for a few minutes, if only to gauge how long it might be before things return to normal between them.

No one knows Atlantis like John does, which is half the reason that John manages to successfully avoid him for five days after Cadman's promotion ceremony. Not that Rodney makes himself hard to find – or to avoid – as he spends those five days almost entirely inside the clean room, working on the ZedPM recharger. But still, five days is five days. He gets that having Michael on Atlantis is stressful and that John's not on speaking terms with his feelings on the best of days, he really does, but five days is a bit excessive, even where John's concerned.

The part that's really galling though is that, when they do finally run into each other, it's not because
John's finally decided to man up and talk to him. Oh no. It's 'cause Michael is having dreams and Elizabeth wants to talk about it. He gets that their work has to come first, he really does, but it's kind of staggering to see just how far down John's list of priorities he really is.

At least he has the grace to look sheepish when he enters the room and sees Rodney's already there.

"Hey," John says a couple moments later as he leans against the nearby balcony railing.

"Hello," Rodney replies stiffly. Because, God, John can't just do stuff like this and expect he'll come running at the end of it and-

-and okay, yeah. He'd pretty much do whatever John asked if it meant staying with him, but that's a personal flaw, not an excuse for John to be a crappy boyfriend.

Not that John actually is a crappy boyfriend. His few flaws just tend toward the extreme, like latent suicidal tendencies and emotional retardation, rather than wet towels left on the floor, which Rodney really thinks he could live with if it meant cutting out the unnecessary drama in their lives.

John, to his credit, looks even more shamefaced at this. "Hey," he says, just loud enough for only Rodney to hear. "Don't be like that."

"What, honestly, did you expect me to be like after ignoring me for five days?" he hisses back.

John's eyes dart to the room's other occupants and Elizabeth, who's just now walking through the door. "Can we talk about it after the meeting?"

"You promise you won't run off?" he sighs, not really wanting to having this talk with an audience either but not quite willing to drop it either, for fear it would be ten days this time before John deigns to speak with him again.

Naturally, Doctor Weir decides to start the meeting before John can do anything more than frown in response:

"Teyla says that Michael's been having dreams about being a Wraith."

"One dream," Teyla corrects, "I have told him that it is a common occurrence given the way the Wraith feed upon us, but he does not appear to believe me. He thinks that the Wraith did something to him during his capture." She appears genuinely displeased that her concern has generated this level of response, as if she'd expected whatever she'd initially told Elizabeth to remain in confidence. As if she is actually coming to like and care for Michael.

The things he misses when he goes on lab benders, honestly. (And, just to be perfectly clear: what the fuck is up with that? Last Rodney checked, the Wraith might be the only people in the universe that Teyla actively dislikes. Slapping a new coat of paint on one isn't likely to change that – or so he would've thought.)

"I don't like it. This could mean he's starting to revert," John says definitively, crossing his arms as he turns to face the others.

"Or it could merely be psychological. Doctor Heightmeyer should be able to help him through it if it is."

"And if it's not? I don't think I need to remind you just how bad things could get if we end up with a full-fledged Wraith running around Atlantis. I say we throw him back in isolation until we're a hundred percent sure your drug is working, Doc."
"You already have him under guard, John. I don't think locking him away is going to help his psychological state any."

"Ceve his psychological state, Elizabeta. He's a Wraith. You might be able to make him look Terran, talk Terran, but underneath it all he will always be a Wraith, and nothing Heightmeyer can do is ever going to change that."

"If that's how you feel," Doctor Weir asks sharply, "why did you push so hard for this project?"

John just shrugs. "To be honest? I thought that, if we can figure out how to deploy this as a biological weapon, it's possible we can hit entire hive ships and turn them into humans. Even if the effects aren't long-term, they should last long enough for us to be able to take them out."

Elizabeth looks aghast at this, but Teyla's quicker with her denouncement. "Once transformed by Doctor Beckett's retrovirus, the Wraith will be human, with no memories of what they once were. To kill them then would be as morally reprehensible as killing a defenceless child."

"Defenceless children who will grow up to be ruthless killers bent on sucking the life out of every living being in two galaxies," Rodney snorts, earning him a sharp look from both women.

John, however, gives him a thorny smile that seems to say thank you! and I'm glad somebody gets it and can you believe these people? and maybe even I'm sorry for being such an ass all at once. (Rodney used to think this was a uniquely John thing, this ability to be able to say so much without saying anything at all, and then he'd met Alianora Cado Trebal Legata in Aurora's neural network. Despite the fact John claims little to no memory of his mother, he'd most certainly inherited this ability from her, as none of the other members of the ship's crew had come anywhere close. Not even her uncle, the captain.) Still, the smile only goes so far in making up for the last five days, particularly when it quickly fades into the grim, "Look, I get that you've got qualms with killing folks. It's a good qualm to have. But this is a military situation and military situations require military solutions – in this case, killing as many Wraith as possible before they kill us, regardless of what they happen to look like at the time."

"Yes, yes, John, we get it," Elizabeth snaps. "The Wraith killed the Ancients and so you want to kill them. But we just can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just not right."

"Oh," John says cuttingly, rocking back on his heels in a way that suggests he's physically forcing himself not to take a step forward, "well, if it's not right why didn't you just say so in the first place? Stellis in universum, Elizabeta. I get how much you want to find a peaceful solution to this, but it's just not going to happen."

"If Carson can perfect a long-term solution that could suppress the Wraith elements for a lifetime..."

"They'll still be Wraith."

"And that's reason enough to kill them? When they're human and defenceless and have no memory of their past actions?"

"I've lived through one genocide. Forgive me for not wanting to go through a second."

"By committing one of your own?"
He shrugs. "If that's what it takes."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that point," Elizabeth states resolutely.

An uncomfortable pause follows. It goes on long enough that Rodney fills compelled to say, "Well..." just to fill it somehow. "Even if we don't end up using the retrovirus as a weapon, we've got to do something about Michael. Increase his dose or put him under better guard or something."

Teyla shakes her head, her earlier anger slowly easing back toward mere discontent. "The guards are already a source of contention for him. More guards will only increase the stress and, likely, increase the frequency of his dreams."

"And," Carson adds, "I'm hesitant to increase his dosage at this time. I've specifically calibrated his regimen according to his current physical condition. Any alteration could adversely affect his recovery. I say we remain patient and see if Doctor Heightmeyer cannae resolve this issue."

"I agree. Teyla?"

"As do I."

"Rodney?"

"Short of stopping this experiment now," he frowns, "I don't see what other choice we have."

"Good. Colonel?"

John frowns for a pull eight seconds before reluctantly agreeing, "Alright." He uncrosses his arms and shoves them, somewhat too carelessly, into his front pockets. "But I reserve the right to say I told you so when this all goes to pot."

The corner of Elizabeth's mouth twitches at this. "I think we can do that. If things end badly, which I don't think they will."

"Let's hope you're right."

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Chapter End Notes

This is not where I wanted the chappie to end. But then I realized I'd gotten past the 4k mark again and that, no, the part that I'm working on now really didn't need to be attached to this chappie... and, well, I figured you lot were deserving of something. Particuarly as this next bit is giving me a bit of trouble. More than I expected anyway.

1) I wanted to call the retrovirus the Bellerophon drug or Operation Bellerophon, as that hero in greek mythology not only concured Pegasus, but the Chimera, which is a term often used for mutated viruses in medicine. But it didn't fit, so if you see it later, that's what it is. 2) Caecique surdi alii is roughly blind and deaf others, which is another Ancient swear that probably works best if you don't question it too much. 3) The entirety of Lorne's speech is a modified version of the AF officer promition one, as I couldn't find one for Marines online. From what I know, I think it's right anyway. 4) Yeah. I'm wordy. Sorry.
At last, the meeting ends. It's hard to tell who's the most relieved about this, but it's obvious that the only one who might actually have wanted to be there is Elizabeth, and, well, she almost has as much of a thing for meetings as John does for space guns. Either way, Teyla and Carson take off fairly quickly for parts unknown, leaving John, Rodney, and Elizabeth alone on the Isolation Room balcony.

"Hey, buddy, there's something I've been meaning to show you," John says after a moment, as if he actually has just remembered something that he's been meaning to show him and isn't simply trying to avoid another argument with Elizabeth. Maybe he even does. It's always hard to tell. John hides himself very well for a man who acts like he's got nothing to hide.

"Yes, yes. Why don't we...?" Rodney gestures at the stairs and heads for them himself. "See you later, Elizabeth."

"Be careful you two."

"Always," John grins back at her before following, doing so in such a way that Rodney feels compelled to tell him when they reach the bottom of the stairs-

"You know, she thinks we're going off to have sex."

"So?"

"So? What do you mean so?"

"I mean that everyone always thinks we're having sex every time we go off alone somewhere."

"Seriously?"

"Rodney," he says slowly, as if explaining the concept to a small child – albeit with a slightly more manic grin on his face than one would usually be comfortable having around young children, "they have an ongoing office pool about our sex life. Of course they think we're having sex at every possible opportunity."

"That is just wrong on so many levels."

John shrugs and offers a careless, "It doesn't hurt anyone."

"It hurts us!"

"Does it?"

"How does it not?" That would explain the strange looks his underlings are giving him lately, during the rare moments he isn't in the clean room, trying to get the ZedPM recharger online. "And I thought you promised to shut them down this time."

"I may or may not have encouraged Carson to share fifty percent of his winnings with us if I gave him the details, as it were, regarding one of the larger pots."
"Yes, yes, brilliant plan. Completely genius. One problem though." Rodney slaps the back of his idiotic, floppy-haired head. "We'd have to tell people about our sex life to ever cash in on it."

John retaliates by flicking him on the shoulder. "They're going to find out eventually. Might as well make it work to our advantage."

"No they're not. They are not going to find out because we are never going to tell them."

"You underestimate the resolve of the Terrans on this base when it comes to that much coffee."

Rodney pauses at this. "How much coffee are we talking about here?"

"Fifty-three pounds, two ounces after Carson's share is taken out."

"That's a lot of coffee."

"My thoughts exactly," John smiles at him. It's not his usual sort of smile – the kind that seem perfectly fine and normal until you started looking too closely, after which they seem too bright, too congenial – but the softer, realer kind that he almost exclusively reserves for Rodney, the rest of their gate team, and, occasionally, Elizabeth. It's softer and somehow manages to be both incredibly dorky and an incredibly sweet at once, and is made all the sweeter by the fact that John hates coffee, and so can only be doing this for Rodney's benefit.

But still, "Did it have to be Carson?" Theoretically, he knew some people talk about their sex lives with their best friends, but Rodney has never been one of them, and the idea of Carson knowing, well, any of it, no matter how vague, makes him distinctly uncomfortable. More so, it might make the doctor compelled to share the same, and, well, no. Just no.

"Well, Zelenka banned Lorne from the black market pools after the whole when did they start seeing each other incident a while back and I figured that you'd never forgive me if I told Cadman, so it was either Teyla or Carson, and Teyla could care less about coffee."

"How is it you can be so up front about sex but turn heel at the first mention of feelings?"

And, just like that, things are exactly back to where they were five days ago, when he was asking John to move in with him. Only this time they're standing in the middle of an otherwise deserted hall, and their only saving grace might be that this time Rodney's looking straight into his eyes this time when he speaks, so that he actually catches the emotion that flickers there before John can paper it over with something else.

And it's not anger or annoyance or any of the number of other things Rodney had been more or less prepared for. It's genuine panic.

This more than anything is what prompts him to reach out and put his hands on John's hips. He's not sure why he does it, only that it seems to be the thing to do, and, well, Rodney hasn't got any better ideas with how to deal with this than that.

It does however appear to be the right thing to do, as Rodney can feel the tension in John's body drain out of him at the touch. And then John's stepping forward, so much so they couldn't get any closer without serious removal of clothing, and touching their foreheads together in a way that's both completely chaste and impossibly desperate.

They stay like that for a long while, just holding each other like their lives depend on it in the middle of a hallway really anyone could walk down any second. It breaks every unspoken rule they've made for themselves, but they need this more than they need their stupid rules and, besides, those have
been crumbling for a while now. Who cares if anyone finds out about them? Everyone already knows anyway and if it's proof they want, well, Rodney's just glad there's still proof to be had.

He knew, logically, from everything John said at Cadman's promotion ceremony, that things weren't over between them. Not yet. Not by a long-shot. But, God, it's one thing to know something in the head and another thing entirely to know it in the heart.

(There are times when Rodney wonders if that's not the most important thing he's learned since coming to the Pegasus galaxy, to include everything he's learned about Zero Point Modules and the recharging thereof.)

Eventually John even speaks up, saying, "I don't want to mess this up," with such definitiveness that it's clear he believes that's an actual, genuine possibility – as if anything he could do at this point could send Rodney running. But, again, the head and the heart are entirely two separate organs, and human physiology was patterned off of Ancient.

"You won't."

John's dark chuckles are warm puffs against his cheek. "I am, historically, terrible at relationships."

"Maybe just a little."

John laughs even harder at that, like he's making a joke instead of, well, basically admitting that he's about a thousand times better with people than Rodney will ever be when he's not even human, but before he can say anything else, the Colonel's comm goes off.

They're standing close enough that Rodney can hear a tinny voice coming over the radio, but not close enough that he can actually make out what's being said on the other end, only that John promises whoever is on the other end that he'll be right there.

"It's Sergeant Anderson and Doctor Losev again," he says after he's tapped the channel off, stepping away with a flattering reluctance.

"Seriously? That's got to be like the third time this month they've gotten into it."

"I'm thinking about just locking them in a room together and not letting them out until they kill each other or make out."

Rodney snorts, but there's no real malice to it. He feels a little much like he's been broken and only haphazardly taped back together to have any real malice left in him. "Tell me how that works out."

"Yeah," John breathes, running a hand through his hair. "Look I'll... I'll track you down as soon I've sorted them out, okay?"

"Yeah," he echoes. "I should get back to the clean room anyway. We finally figured out what the deal was with the transistors and... Well, I'll tell you about it later."

"Hey there buddy," John says precisely seventy-two minutes later, carrying a mug in each hand. He sets them both on the workbench next to where Rodney's currently removing an IGB transistor from a very delicate and sensitive device, and Rodney can't even bring himself to snap at John for breaking clean room standards again because presumably one of the cups contains coffee, which he's been craving with an addict's desperation for half-an-hour now but been unable to get because it's a very sensitive piece of equipment he's pulling apart and he'd rather not be without a fluxgate
magnetometer for the month or so it would take to get a replacement from Earth, should something unfortunate happen.

"You are a godsend," he breathes, taking the coffee and downing half of it in one go, taste buds and expensive lab equipment be damned. He's more likely to make a mistake do to caffeine withdrawal at this point than fry the circuitry with coffee anyway, so it all for the best anyway.

John cant his head to one side and appears to consider this for a moment before deciding, "Try to remember that next time we fight," is the appropriate response.

Rodney's head snaps up, coffee momentarily forgotten. "We weren't fighting. You were being an emotionally-retarded idiot, but we weren't fighting."

"Tomayto, tomahto," he says, which is somewhat hilarious coming from an Ancient whose language doesn't have a word for the fruit. Then, far more earnestly, "I don't like it when we fight."

"We weren't fighting."

"Felt like it to me," John shrugs, considering a nearby stool with his back to Rodney. After a moment, he appears to decide it's too much work to walk the few feet to retrieve it and elects to sit on the workbench itself, brushing parts of the magnetometer's insides aside to clear enough space.

"Fighting implies argument. This was..." he waves the mug in his hand about idly, searching for the right word, "I dunno what you'd call it. Failure of trade negotiations, maybe." He shrugs himself before going back to the IGBT transistor. "It's not like I'm going to dump you if you say no."

He finishes disconnecting the IGBT and replacing it with one of the MOSFE transistors they'd originally slated for the the ZedPM recharger before he realizes that John's not said anything in over five minutes.

"Holy shit," Rodney exclaims, looking up to see the other man staring intensely at his shoes, "someone actually did that to you? No, wait, better question: who was stupid enough to dump you in the first place, whatever the reason?"

This, at least, coaxes a bit of a smile from John, even though that hadn't been Rodney's intention. Even so, the Colonel doesn't answer right away, just continues to swing his feet back and forth for a few moments before saying, "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Well, I'm not sure I really want to hear about you being with someone else either, but we're just going to keep having these awkward conversations until you let me know what subjects to avoid for the future."

John gives him a small, thankful sort of smile this time – the kind that can only be called a smile by virtue of not being a frown. "It's not so much the talking about Nicolaa part I mean – though I can see why you wouldn't want to hear about her. I don't know if I'd want to hear about your past amatores either. It's more..." his eyes drop to his shoes again, "it's easier, not talking about Before."

"Easier," Rodney repeats flatly.

"To pretend."

"You don't have to pretend."

The Ancient snorts, as if this is the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard, right up there with pre-Copernican cosmology and Don't Ask, Don't Tell. But at least he's admitting that he's pretending
now. That's more than Rodney had been able to get out of him six months ago.

"Seriously, John. You can't possibly still think we're going to turn on you and string you up from the Gate the moment you let your inner alien out. I mean, it's been nearly two years. You've got to know us better than that by now."

"You're the aliens here, not me."

"Yes, yes," Rodney says, dismissing the subject with a wave of his hands. "So you keep saying. But it's kinda hard to remember when the most non-human thing you ever do is slip a few words of Ancient into a sentence now and then, and, really, with the number of non-native English speakers on Atlantis, it's not that unusual. Usually I have a more difficult time making sense of what Zelenka's saying, and we're from the same planet. Thus my understandable forgetfulness."

"It's called a translation matrix for a reason," John drawls, tapping two fingers on his temple.

"I'm not saying you have to start talking it tongues or anything."

"Only that you want me to talk about Before."

Rolling his eyes, "Not in an anthropological sense. God. Like I'd ever ask you to do that to yourself. Just..." He glances at the pieces of the magnetometer spread about the table. "I don't want to mess this up either."

"So how do you propose we do that?"

"You're asking me?"

"You are the only one else in the room, Rodney."

"No, seriously, if you'd any idea of my track record with relationships, you'd not be asking me that. We'd be better off asking Ronon what he thinks we should do." Knowing Ronon, it would involve knives. Or sticks. Or guns. But most likely knives and those he feels can only make things worse.

John laughs – softly and honestly, in a sort of way Rodney's come to interpret as do you even listen to the things that come out of your mouth."Ronon's actually not that bad when it comes to advice about these things."

"You talked to him about this?"

"You talked to Teyla."

"Yes, well- Wait. Did she tell you that? Why would she tell you that?"

"I have my ways." He swings his legs back and forth with a little more enthusiasm, "Teyla have anything helpful to say?"

"Only that I should give you time. Ronon?"

"Only that our courtship would've been considered unnecessarily long on Sateda. And that, if I'm not going to make an honest man out of you, I might as well make you a dishonest one."

Rodney's very glad he's finished his coffee, because otherwise he'd be sputtering it all over the magnetometer's exposed circuitry. "What?"

"It works better in the original Satedan."

"I imagine."

"My version leaves fewer bruises," John informs him, looking inexplicably smug.

"You know what else leaves fewer bruises? Not sparing with Ronon in the first place."

"I'm getting better."

"At hiding your bruises, maybe," he mutters darkly, picking up a screwdriver and beginning to piece the magnetometer back together.

"I'm hurt that you'd even think that."

"Yes, well, I'm hurt that you walked out on me while I was trying to have a serious conversation with you and then avoided me for five days, so I guess we're even."

"What was I supposed to do, Rodney?"

"Well, I don't know how it worked on Ancient Lantea," Rodney says heatedly, "but on Earth when someone asks you a question, generally you're expected to answer it."

"And say what exactly?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked. Contrary to popular belief, I don't just talk for the sake of hearing my own voice."

"I-" John begins. Then pauses. Then pauses some more until Rodney has to actually look over and check to make sure John's not slunk out of the room, because he's got the sneaking about thing down pat and 'Lantis will do anything – anything – for him, including helping him make a clean break from a conversation he's fairly certain the city wants them to have. John's still there, but obviously not planning on continuing any time soon if the way he's staring into his tea cup is any indication.

"You don't want to, do you?"

Rodney tries to be kind about it. He really does. But he can't help the way the words come out, quiet and hurt and entirely too vulnerable for his liking. But he's never been able to hide anything – at least, not anything that actually matters.

John recoils at this. The movement sloshes more than a little tea onto his pants, but the Ancient doesn't seem to notice. "It's not that," he ventures, the words coming haltingly, as if he's dragging them (kicking and screaming) out somewhere deep and hidden inside of him, somewhere John doesn't let even himself see, as if the very act of acknowledging its existence would steal from him everything that makes him John or Iohannes or whatever the hell he thinks of himself as. "It's just... I don't want to mess this up."

"I think we've established that, yes."

The glare this earns him is half-hearted at best. "And, well, you said it yourself. It's been weeks since either one of us has been able to stay the entire night."

"All the more reason we should share quarters."

"But don't you think we should like... I dunno practice or something?"

"Practice," Rodney repeats, baffled.
"Y'know," he says, swinging his feet more anxiously now, "like maybe rack up more than a handful of nights here and there before we dive in and, y'know, start talking about things like paint swatches."

"You talk paint swatches with Atlantis already."

"Yeah, but that's just 'Lantis. She likes paint and stained glass windows and hacking into the SGC's servers every time we dial Terra-"

"She does?" John had never told him that. Plus, weird, even for a city-wide artificial intelligence.

"Some people collect stamps. She collects data. Mission reports and online encyclopaedia entries, mostly, but some pretty bizarre stuff too."

Rodney decides he doesn't want to know what an Ancient, who apparently talks openly about their sex life with their closest friends, might consider bizarre. Though it does make him wonder, "Is that why there are all sorts of new MPEG-4 files on the shared server after every dial in? 'Cause I thought that was just Jackson trying to butter us up for the day he finally gets O'Neill to let him come and annoy us."

"Yeah, that's her."

"That is... very odd."

"It keeps her happy," he says in a way that makes Rodney's stomach clench – not out of fear of what might happen if the city were ever to become unhappy, but of all the things John would do to keep that from ever happening. Then, somewhat less haltingly than before, "I'd be happy too if we could have a few more dry runs before giving the whole moving in thing a go. I just really don't want this to mess things up between us."

"I don't see why it would, but," he sighs, "yeah, you're probably right."

"I am?"

John sounds so startled by this answer that Rodney pokes him with the screwdriver. Lightly. More or less. "Well, you do have a point. It probably is better to spend more than a handful of full nights together before moving in case you have any irredeemable habits I don't yet know about. Like leaving wet towels in the middle of the floor or hogging all the covers."

"That's good to know."

"Oh, and not pulling this cold shoulder crap again might help things. I'd rather have you yelling at me than pretending I don't exist."

"That's good to know too."

"Teyla also thinks moving in together meant something different to you guys," he adds, examining his work on the circuit board. All the connections appear sound. The new transistor shouldn't make too much of a difference to the magnetometer's systems and might even improve its sensitivity, but it's still a pain in the ass to have to do.

He's managed to trade out seventeen of the twenty-four IGB transistors they'll need to make the ZedPM recharger functional this way, but that still means he has seven more to go. That's another two days of switching out transistors from other equipment, two more to install them in the ZedPM recharger itself, and then at least thirty-six hours of simulations. With any luck, the Wraith won't try
to destroy the city before then.

"It didn't. Not really. It just wasn't that common, that's all. I mean, sometimes couples with small
children would do it, but mostly when people did it was 'cause they were siblings, or parent and
child, or... well, that's mostly it, really."

Rodney's pretty sure the exact expression for what he's feeling now is like a heel. "So when I asked
you to move in, you thought...?" He has no idea how children might work with them, but they've
come across plenty enough orphans in the Pegasus galaxy for that to be an option, along with
surrogacy and attempting to get the Ancient extra-uterine incubators back online again. It's... well, it's
a daunting thought. And, more than anything else, one he knows they're not ready for, if they ever
will be.

"No. Not really." John gives him a sheepish look. "But it brought back some unpleasant memories."

"Care to elaborate?" he asks stupidly, too distracted by the idea of trying to raise a child to really
consider his question.

"I told you about the woman I was with Before right? Nicolaa?"

Something clenches in Rodney's stomach – though it does send all thoughts of children running from
his head. "Vaguely, yeah."

"We were together for a while. Five and a half years, actually, but we'd been close long before we
ever got together. Since she was born, really. Anyway, things got to the point where she wanted us
to have a baby, which was just a ridiculous idea in so many ways, and we got into such a huge fight
over it I ended up leaving Atlantis."

"You left Atlantis? You love Atlantis." The idea of John leaving is like... is like John suddenly
proclaiming himself a god à la the Ori or the laws of gravity deciding to take a holiday. It is equally
parts absurd and impossible, even for the Pegasus galaxy.

"Tirianus needed a pastor, and 'Lantis understood. She loves kids, but even she knew that having
one with the way the War was going then was insane."

"God, John. I'd no idea..."

"You'd no way of knowing," he shrugs, as if this revelation means nothing at all – as if it will mean
nothing at all if he tells himself that often enough. "So, what are you doing anyway? Ever figure out
what the deal with the transistra was?"

Rodney tells himself he only agrees to the abrupt change of subject because he's pushed his luck with
John's emotional constipation enough for one day. But it's a weak lie at best. He'd do anything not to
talk about children or ex-girlfriends right then.

So he explains that the original designs he'd drawn up for the ZedPM recharger had called for a
superconductor material being brought in from Earth and that, with the yttrium-based compound
they'd found in one of the Ancient labs, the ZedPM recharger could operate at higher temperature
than they'd originally planed. While this is great for several reasons, the MOSFE transistors the
Daedalus had brought them for the project just can't operate at those temperatures, so he's been
switching out the MOSFETs with the IGBTs from devices they already have on base. Those should
be better able to handle the higher temperatures and, therefore, not strain the cooling system so much,
giving them a means of recharging their dead ZedPMs in as little as five days.

And if the thought crosses his mind that he's glad Nicolaa's dead, if only so she's not able to hurt
John any more? Well, Rodney chooses not to examine it too closely.

Chapter End Notes

I have been driving myself mad trying to make this chapter work. That and that alone is why this doesn't end in the cliffie I'd originally intended - but it shall have a fourth part. The science of this should work - but I don't claim a deep understanding of transistors, so I could be completely wrong.
I swear up and down that I’d intended this to be the last part of "Fradator," then it got long and, well, 5 will be a short one. I promise. Also, you're going to hate me for this one. You just are

"This whole thing was a bad idea," Ronon snarls, pacing the conference room in a way that suggests that they better come up with a solution to this whole Michael knows he's a Wraith problem soon or heads are going to roll. In the literal sense.

He'd told John it was a bad idea to let Ronon get that sword.

"No, it wasn't," John says, pushing away from his spot against the wall to block Ronon's path. "The retrovirus works, that much is clear. Just think, if we can make it work as a biological weapon...?" He lets the implications lie.

"No, it's just a bad idea. Your fancy science has done nothing to help fight the Wraith the entire time I've been on Atlantis. It's just been a bunch of failures, first with that weapon on Arcturus and now with this stupid retrovirus. You of all people should know, Sheppard, that the only way to beat the Wraith is with force, not with fancy tricks and stupid dreams." And then he turns heel and resumes pacing back the way he'd come.

John, wisely, moves out of the way before the Runner can make it back to where they'd been standing, and slides into the empty seat next to Rodney at the conference table.

Elizabeth, less wisely, tries, "I'll be the first to admit that I wasn't particularly thrilled by this idea either when it was first presented to me, but you've got to understand how the idea of winning this war without risking any more lives is very attractive to us."

"You know, you may be able to make him look like a human, talk like a human, but he'll still be a Wraith. Nothing you do will ever change that."

"Maybe, maybe not, but if we can find a way to make take away their need to feed on humans-"

"They'd still be Wraith and, instead of culling humans to feed on, they'd take us to use as slaves like those goa'uld did back in your galaxy."

"If," John pipes in, leg bouncing agitatedly under the table, "they don't just kill us all out of spite. Which is a genuine possibility and precisely why we need to end this experiment now. We've learned all we can safely know. Maybe one day, after Carson's done some more research, we can come back to it if we like. But right now we have a viable way of weakening the Wraith and a threat to the security of this base, so I say we cut our losses and end this thing."

"I'm with Sheppard on this one," Ronon says immediately.

Rodney frowns and closes the lid of his laptop, which he'd been using to keep an eye on the simulations he's running on the ZedPM recharger back in the clean room. "As much as I hate to say..."
"We are the ones who have done this to him," Teyla says, somehow managing to come across as both reasonable and unyielding at the same time, "and in doing so we have made him our responsibility. The fact that our experiment did not go as planned does not change the fact that Michael is human now. Killing him now would not be an act of self-defence, but of murder. Granted," she concedes, inclining her head towards Ronon, who has by this point retreated to a corner of the Conference Room to cross his arms and look menacing, "a part of him may still be Wraith, but with time and compassion, perhaps we will be able to make him see that what was done to him was done for the better."

"And what exactly do you propose to do with him until then, hmm?" Rodney asks, one hand resting on the conference table and the other sliding beneath it in an attempt to get John to sit still. "Cause I'm sure keeping him locked in his quarters is bound to go over real well."

"We could allow him to move about as before," she suggests. "If he can see that we mean him no harm, he will be more willing to see our side."

"Out of the question," John says, somehow managing to sound bored by the proceedings despite the fact that his leg is still bouncing irritatingly under the table, where no one can see. "It was bad enough idea giving him access to the city in the first place. Who knows what kind of damage he could do if we let him wander around when he knows he's our prisoner?"

Elizabeth speaks up then. "We would, of course, increase his guard and further restrict him from all but the most public of areas."

Hand still on John's knee, Rodney can feel the other man tense. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Doctor Beckett said it himself: having a cooperative test subject would allow his research to go far more quickly. We've been presented with an amazing opportunity. Taking this small risk now could potentially pay off a hundredfold in the future, particularly if we can get Michael to convince the other Wraith to voluntarily undergo this treatment."

"We're talking about one hell of a risk, Elizabeta."

"No bigger than the one we've already taken. We'll give it a few more days," she says with an air of finality. "If Michael shows no signs of being willing to cooperate, we'll put an end to this experiment then. But until such a time, we'll continue on as before. With any luck, Carson will find a solution soon and the problem will solve itself."

"Hey, Rodney. How are the simulations going?" John asks, sauntering into the clean room hours later.

It's been long enough for status bar on the most annoying of the simulations' status screens to creep from eleven to thirty-six percent but Rodney's apprehensions regarding Elizabeth's decisions about Michael still remains. He knows that Elizabeth knows what she's doing and that she's not made the choice to continue with what John's calling Operation Bellerophon lightly, but the fear that something terrible is about to happen remains.

It's a feeling that Rodney's become very familiar with since arriving in the Pegasus galaxy.

It's also a feeling that's been proven correct more times than not, and that's the most worrying part of
"Slowly," he says without looking up from his bank of computers, "but I've encountered no major issues so far, so it looks like we might be recharging ZedPMs as early as the day after tomorrow."

"That's good."

"Good? It's wonderful. Magnificent. Stupendous, even. In the course of less than four months, I've managed to reconstruct the Ancients' method for manipulating miniature white holes connecting the subspace of an untold number of disparate universes from nothing but three equations scribbled in a forgotten notebook – one of which, I might add, wasn't even all that helpful. I'd even go so far as to call it a miracle. A minor one, as I've pulled off far more desperate feats of genius in far shorter time frames, but a miracle nonetheless."

"Hey, I found you those three equations, y'know," John points out, his voice coming from much closer now.

"Your contribution will be noted in my Nobel acceptance speech."

Mildly indignant, "And I helped you with the math."

"A little."

"A lot."

"Only 'cause you have more experience with base-eight math than I do. I can hardly be faulted for the fact that my ancestors chose to use a different system of numeration than yours did."

"Well..." John drawls in a manner that suggests he's more than willing to do just that.

"Think of it this way: if I take all the credit, it's fewer of those annoying interviews by mail for you to have to deal with. How are those coming along by the way?"

The last data-burst from Earth had included questions from a dozen different publications, all of which were looking to get an interview with the man who'd solved one of the Millennium Prize Problems – not that the Clay Mathematics Institute has yet conceded that John's proof is the definitive solution to the Riemann Hypothesis, but that's only a matter of time. The SGC's PR department has been doing a minor miracle of their own, making it seem like John is unable to meet the journalists in person because he's in a particularly civilian-unfriendly zone of Afghanistan rather than an alien city in a different galaxy altogether, but the fact still remains that there are questions that they can't answer for him. Thus the interviews by email which no one is particularly happy about. Particularly John.

He glances up in briefly, just long enough to catch the John makes a face at the reminder. "Don't you get started on that too. I've still got half-a-dozen of those things left and Elizabeta's been nagging at me to have them ready for the next dial-in."

"Ah, the price of fame."

"I don't want fame."

"Well too bad, bucko. I've seen your notebooks," the real, spiral-bound paper ones that sit on the floor next to John's bed, filled with careful columns of Ancient equations and shaky lines of base-ten maths; the ones he's only seen John work on a handful of times, when he's particularly bored or anxious or when his nightmares get so bad that not even wandering Atlantis' halls will help. "I know what's in them. It's revolutionary stuff, right up there with Newton, Riemann, and Euclid. And, as
messed up as Earth's priorities can be sometimes, people are bound to take notice when you start publishing."

"I don't see why. They're just a few proofs."

"Face it John: between your proofs and that hair, you're destined to be the closest thing to a rock star the world of mathematics has ever seen."

"Gee, just what I've always wanted."

Rodney snorts. "While we're on the subject though, is there something you want? 'Cause it's still two-and-a-half hours until dinner and if you'd wanted sex you'd have just come out and said asked. So...?"

"Yeah, actually. I ran into Lorne and Zelenka in the infirmary-"

"What were you doing in the infirmary?" he asks suspiciously, jumping out of his chair and walking around the desk to better examine his amator. John doesn't have any obvious outward signs of injury, but with John that usually meant very little.

John just smiles indulgently and let's Rodney poke at him, trying to find whatever injury was serious enough to merit his visit to the infirmary. "I'm fine. Ronon and I just overdid it a little with the sparing and, well, my arm was easy enough to fix after Carson set the break." He wiggles the fingers on one hand as if to show just how easy.

"Ronon broke your arm!"

"Like I said, it was an accident. No harm, no foul. Worst that's going to happen is that it's going to be stiff for a while."

Narrowing his eyes, Rodney stalks back to his computers. "Fine, but don't expect me to come visit you in the infirmary when you wind up with the kind of sparring injury your magic Ancient powers can't heal so easily. I've got stuff on the go, you know: important, vital projects for the betterment of the human race."

John follows after, clearly amused. "You say that like I'm supposed to be surprised."

"Yes, well, you were saying something about Lorne and Zelenka?"

"Yeah. They were in the infirmary 'cause it's Lorne's turn to play light-switch for Rory's repair crewsandwhen he tried to activate the navigation controls, the whole panel started sparking. Luckily he got off with only a couple of burns on his hands. Nothing serious, but enough so that he's not going to be holding a gun for a couple days."

"You didn't...?" he waggles his fingers as John had done before.

"Of course I did, but I've never actually been all that good at healing, 'specially when trying it on other people."

"Let me guess: getting better requires meditation and all the rest of that Ascension crap you could care less about."

"Pretty much. But like I was saying, I ran into them while I was in the infirmary and told them about how Elizabeta's being overly optimistic with the safety of the city and Zelenka said he had an idea."
"What sort of idea?"

"I'm not sure. He didn't want to talk about it in the infirmary. We're meeting him and Lorne on Aurora to talk about it twenty minutes."

"I'm busy-"

"...conducting important, vital projects for the betterment of Descendants everywhere?" John finishes, leaning over his shoulder. "Looks like you're just doing the digital version of watching paint dry to me."

"I'm not just sitting here, watching the status bar tick along you know." Rodney gestures testily at a different monitor, upon which a block of Ancient text and it's loose translation is currently displayed. "I'm also trying to break through some of the encryptions your dad used on his notes so we can get a better idea of what he was working on in those secret labs of his. You know, in case there's something else potentially galaxy-ending hidden away in them."

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"As seriously disturbing as I find that thought, it doesn't change the fact that he's got enough layers of security on this stuff to put even the most paranoid NSA agent to shame. I mean we're talking about hundreds of math cyphers and Ancient knowledge puzzles each with completely unique cryptovariables-"

"Conseuius," John says.

"What?"

The Colonel taps the knowledge puzzle on the monitor. "The answer to this one. It's Conseuius."

"You're the Ancient," Rodney says, humouring him. A moment later decrypted files begin popping up across the screen. "Hey, you're right!"

"Told you."

"But what was the question?" He's been able to determine it's something along the lines of who and/or what was the best something-or-other, but the database has been spectacularly unhelpful as to what that something-or-other might actually mean. Rodney had been assuming it was a cryptogram of it's own or else something only Janus would know about, as that's just the kind of paranoid narcissistic bastard John's dad seems to have been.

"I'll show you later," John promises, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Right now we've got to go meet up with Lorne and Zelenka."

"Wait, show me? What do you mean by show?"

John just grabs a fistful of jacket and tugs. "It'll take too long to explain," he says, hauling him bodily towards the door with a grin. "You'll probably enjoy it though."

"Enjoy it? Enjoy what?"

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Aurora is a large ship, so Rodney's not really surprised when John leads them all to a room he's never seen before to have their discussion, particularly when it turns out to be somewhere in the
ship's berthing area. Repairing the living quarters isn't exactly high on their list of priorities at the moment, not when the navigation system is still screwed and the hull is a patchwork quilt of issues.

He's not even surprised when John declines the invitation to sit next to him on the bed that occupies one corner of the room, as John just doesn't use furniture like other people do, as if the thought of actually sitting in a chair has never actually crossed his mind.

What does surprise him is that, instead of sprawling on the floor or leaning against the wall or something else equally as absurd and John-like, he chooses instead to tap an innocuous wall-panel. A panel which proceeds to retract, revealing what appears to be the Ancient equivalent of a wall closet, contents intact.

What he suspects even less is for John to pull out of the garments – something that looks vaguely like a cross between a cassock and a great coat – and hold it up to him body, as if trying to determine it's fit.

"John, what are you doing?" he asks after a moment, when no explanation seems to be forthcoming.

"Shopping," is his answer.

Carefully, "I thought we were here to listen to Zelenka's idea about how to Elizabeth to change her mind about this whole Michael business."

"Two birds, one stone," John shrugs, tossing the coat – Ancient hanger and all – towards Rodney. Lorne, who's taken up a spot in the centre of the floor, just grins at them. "You changing the dress code on us Sir? 'Cause I got to tell you, from what I saw when I was plugged into the ship, those uniforms didn't look very practical."

"They're not, but one of these days the people of this galaxy are going to find out I'm one of their Ancestors. I figure it's probably better if I'm able to look the part when they do." John continues rummaging through the closet. "But you said you had an idea about Michael, Doctor Z?"

From his perch on the edge of the bed, "Well, yes. But I do not think you are going to like it."

"I kinda got that much when you didn't want to talk about it in front of Carson. What is it?"

"I believe we must eliminate Michael. Soon, and in a manner that will not arouse Doctor Weir's suspicions."

John pauses at this. "You're talking about assassination."

"No, no," Zelenka says, pushing his glasses up his nose nervously. "Nothing so dramatic. I am merely saying that it would be best for all of us if Doctor Beckett's experiment were to be ended before the situation reaches the point where we can no longer control it."

For a moment, no one says anything. Then, "Wow, Doc," Lorne whistles. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"I do not, but that does not stop me from acknowledging that it must be done."

"I don't like Elizabeta's decision much either, but going behind her back like that? That could start us down a path I don't think any of us want to go down."

"Perhaps not," Zelenka concedes, "but it is the only course of action left to us. Doctor Weir means
well, but she is blinded by optimism, and while in an ideal universe that would not be problem, we are dealing with a decidedly non-ideal universe. Everything we have learned of Wraith tells us that they cannot be trusted; the fact that he stole Doctor Beckett's research notes in first place proves that part of his nature remains untouched underneath his human exterior. I do not see that we have any other choice."

Rodney hums. "I don't think any of us are arguing that it doesn't need to be done. Unless Lorne...?"

"No," the man in question says. "I'm good."

"See. We're all in agreement. It's just, well, this isn't like last year. We've got the Daedalus and can dial Earth whenever we want. If things don't go according to plan – and I mean exactly according to plan – we could be talking about getting all our asses shipped back to Earth, to be locked in some forgotten cell at Area 51 for the rest of our lives."

"We've gone against orders before, Rodney."

He looks over at John, who's still riffling through the closet, albeit with far less enthusiasm than before. "Not like this we haven't. The IOA is pushing hard for Carson's retrovirus. It's like one of the only things they all agree on. If they even think we intentionally screwed with their plans, they're going to have one of their puppets over here faster than we can blink."

"Then I guess we've got to make sure nobody has any reason to suspect it's anything but an accident."

"John, I'm serious."

"I know you are," John says, finally turning away from the closet. "If the IOA is pushing Elizabeta as hard as you claim, nothing we say is going to change her mind. But this is the safety of Atlantis we're talking about. Who knows what could happen if Michael were to get loose? We've got no other choice." He bites his lip. "You have a plan to pull this off, Doc, or were you just thinking we wait until Michael tries to escape and shoot him a few more times than is strictly necessary?"

"Actually, Evan does."

Evan? he mouths at John. When had that happened?

John just raises an eyebrow at them both, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall by the closet as if it doesn't matter that their seconds are apparently on a first-name basis. "Let's hear it."

"The fire suppression systems," Evan grins, holding up his bandaged hands.

Rodney's snapping his fingers almost before he finishes the sentence. "That just might work."

"What might work?"

"The fire suppression systems are filled with halon gas, a substance which is deadly to humans after a relatively short exposure and should be even more lethal to someone whose health has been compromised say by, oh, recently being de-Wraithed."

"My thoughts exactly," Zelenka agrees. "The only problem would be making sure that only Michael and not his guards are exposed. But I figure we can avoid that if-"

"-if," Rodney continues for him, "we can make the city go into lockdown at the same time." Atlantis, after all, is nothing more than an exceptionally large spaceship. What few doors exist that aren't
airtight have bulkheads automatically lowered around them in the event of a lockdown. Everyone in
the effected area would be sealed in and, as Michael's guards were stationed outside his quarters and
said quarters were intentionally separate from those of the rest of the Expedition, only Michael would
be effected if they were to, say, activate the fire suppression systems in all the rooms on that
particular tower. "The question is how we do it without anyone suspecting it was us. 'Cause you
know people are going to be suspicious when Michael suddenly drops dead after we've said how
much we'd wish he'd do just that."

"We could rewrite the logs."

Rodney waves off the suggestion immediately. "As much as I hate to say it, the idiots that work for
us are actually smart enough to notice something like that. Or, at least, they should be. If not, I'm
going to be having serious discussions with their thesis committees next time I'm on Earth out of
principle. Because, seriously, PhDs are not participation awards; there should be standards. No,
we're going to need something subtler., like a real fire."

John's eyes widen comically – or, at least, in a way that would be comical if it wasn't accompanied
by a sudden agitato shift in Aurora's song, one that drowned out whatever the city's own thoughts on
the matter might've been. "You want to set fire to part of Atlantis? Wouldn't it just be easier to wait
for him to escape and shoot him then? 'Cause y'know he's going to try to escape sooner or later."

"It's your call, Sir," Lorne reminds him. "But there's a chance that if we wait for him to escape he'll
succeed, taking who knows how many lives and what information in the process."

"Plus," Rodney adds, rubbing at his ears, "considering your love affair with the city, no one will ever
suspect us of doing something that might damage 'Lantis, no matter how minor the damage might
actually be. Now tell Aurora that we've no intentions of actually harming Atlantis before my
eardrums burst."

John pats the wall, which seems to calm the ship down. A little. "Just so you know, she's calling you
her vitricus malus now."

"What is this, Snow White?"

The Ancient stares blankly at him.

"Nevermind, not important. It's a bad idea anyway. It'd be next to impossible to start a fire without,A, getting caught by the Halon gas ourselves or, B, found out, so we'll need a different plan
anyway."

John stops fondling the ship and walks into the centre of the room. Stopping a few feet from Lorne
and Zelenka, he asks, "You're sure this is the best option?"

"Short of waiting for him to try to escape...? Yes."

"Then I have an idea about how we can start that fire," he sighs. "Doctor Z? How long do you think
it will take for you to get Rory's weapon's systems ready for a live-fire test?"

"A day? Maybe two? We've been concentrating mostly on her navigation systems and structural
integrity. But if you're planning on firing a drone into his tower."

"Leave that part to me," John says, giving Zelenka a half-hearted grin at best. "You just get the
weapons system operational."

"Ano, that I can do."
"Good." He offers Zelenka a hand up. "Remind me not to get on your guys' bad sides."

"No worries, Colonel. Revolutions are a time-consuming pastime and I am very busy trying to make your ship operational again. You and McKay's jobs are safe."

"Besides," Lorne adds, climbing to his own feet. "you're like my five hundredth great-uncle or something and I make it a point not to overthrow family."

"Y'know, Major, that's the sort of thinking that puts you on the short-list for the second-favourite nephew slot," John practically beams. His smile drops, though, the moment the door snaps shut behind their XO's. "I don't know if I like where this road is going to take us, Rodney."

"And I do?"

"I know. Just..." he sighs and starts gathering up his ill-gotten clothing gains.

"I hear you," Rodney agrees because, well, as much as they all agree the retrovirus experiment has gone too far, they're still sneaking around behind Elizabeth's back.

Somewhere out there, someone must walking over his grave, because the feeling that something is going to go terribly, terribly wrong returns full-force.

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John spends the night in his quarters – the first time since their mutually uncomfortable talk about their relationship five days before.

It probably says something that they use the opportunity to have eight hours of blissful, uninterrupted sleep rather than the hot monkey sex the situation probably deserves.

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It's only because they sleep so late that Rodney happens to be in the transporter with John when the call comes in over the radio.

He doesn't hear the other side of the conversation. All he knows is one moment they're transporting to the mess for a late, hurried breakfast and the next John is snapping, "I'll be right there, Captain," into his headset.

"What's wrong?" Rodney asks, feeling vaguely sick as the transporter suddenly changes destinations, his partially-reconstructed cells being yanked back into the buffers and reconstituted elsewhere with more force than is really necessary.

"It's Michael. Apparently he's resisting-" John begins before going absolutely white and taking off running before the transporter doors are even all the way open.

Rodney follows after, but he's still around the corner from Michael's quarters when the screaming starts-

-followed by the sound of gunfire; one, two, three shots in quick succession, then-

-quiet.

That's when he rounds the corner.

That's when he sees the bodies.
Chapter End Notes

1) Conseius is one of Janus' lovers. 2) vitricus malus is evil stepfather. 3) I've two episodes of SGA left in my rewatch, so that's what I'm going to go do now. But reviews will help part 5 come faster.
"Control Room, this is McKay. We've got three men down outside Michael's quarters," Rodney barks into his headset, running the last few yards faster than he ever has in his life. "One's been fed upon. They're all alive, but we're going to need a medical unit and a couple teams of Marines down here right away – and, for the love of God, don't send Carson."

Elizabeth's voice is calm and steady over the radio; if Rodney didn't know her so well, he'd could almost have said she's unconcerned. "Teams are on the way." She pauses. "Why not Carson?"

"Because," Rodney says, kneeling down beside the white-haired woman in the grey-on-black uniform of Atlantis' military contingent, "I'm fairly certain Captain Cadman is the one Michael fed upon."

This brings a quiver to Elizabeth's voice. "How is she?"

Pressing two fingers to her pulse point, "Alive, for the moment." He glances quickly up and down the hallway before pulling off his jacket andballing it under her head. Remembering Gaul, he grabs her pistol and (checking that the safety is most definitely on) tucks it into his waistband before continuing, "The other two are just unconscious. There's no sign of John, Michael, or the other SF."

"What happened?"

"I dunno. John and I were in the transporter when the call came through – something about Michael resisting. Obviously he's reverted further than we'd-"

Cadman groans.

"-and I think Cadman's waking up. I'll let you know more when I have something." Rodney clicks his radio off without waiting for Elizabeth's reply. "Captain? Laura? Can you hear me?"

"Rodney?" she asks vaguely, voice as rough and faint as his chain-smoking Grandmère's. It's wrong in a way that he can't even begin to describe.

"Yeah, it's me. Just listen, everything's going to be alright-"

"Don't-"

"Hey, you know me. Would I be saying it if it wasn't true?" he reminds her, brushing an lock of hair off her forehead. He may not particularly like the Captain, but apart from that whole incident with Katie Brown, she's a good egg – a pistol, as Carson would say – and John adores her in a way Rodney would be insanely jealous of if it wasn't so obviously platonic. She doesn't deserve this. No one does, and seeing her like this just reinforces the fact.

Laura's birthday is in two days. Carson's been planning a surprise party, as much as anything can be a surprise on Atlantis. She's supposed to be turning thirty and she looks like she could be ninety years
old.

"Go. Help Sheppard."

"I'm not going to leave you here."

She gives him a smile that could've been called teasing if it isn't so obviously pained, "I knew you liked me."

"Please."

"Face it, Rodney, you're just one big softy."

"Lies." He's only doing this because of Gaul. And Ford. And Everett. And Sumner. And because he doesn't think he'll be able to sleep at night if he just leaves her here.

Besides, trying to help John chase down Michael is only going to get one of them hurt. No, it's better for everyone involved that he stay here and let the people who shoot things for a living do their jobs. Nevermind the fact that it'll be another minute or so before the reinforcements reach his position, or the fact that his job has taken a decidedly shoot things to live turn of late. He's staying here and that's that.

"You can't lie to me. I was in your head, remember?" she whispers, trying to raise a hand to his face. It falters before it's even halfway.

He takes her hand and pats it awkwardly before placing it back on her chest. "Yet you thought I was interested in Katie Brown of all people, so your judgement's obviously impaired, even for a Marine."

"Yeah, that was a bad call. Should've realized you were doing the Colonel."

"Yes, well, you live, you learn. So why don't you put a little more effort into the living and the less into the reminiscing, hmm?"

"We both know how this is going to end."

"Don't talk like that. You've still got years left."

"To spend in some backwoods nursing home under an assumed name, with my family thinking I got blown apart by an IED!" The force of her words sends Laura into a coughing fit which can only be more painful than it sounds. "I can't live like that, Rodney. You've got to promise me-"

Marines: martyrs, every single one of them. "I will do no such thing, Captain. You're going to go to the infirmary and let Carson wait on you hand and foot until we find a way to reverse this. It's going to be as embarrassing as anything to watch, but you're going to let him do it and be happy about it, end of story. So stop talking like that."

"Pull the other one."

"Captain-"

"Rodney," she says firmly, looking him straight in the eye (her own have never looked so bright, staring out at them from a body that's no longer her own; he wonders how he's never noticed they were such a remarkable shade of hazel before). "Promise me."

"I-"
And that's when the medical team arrives.

Carson's clear-headed enough to let Doctor Biro run lead on Cadman's case, but not enough to stay in the treatment area while they take care of her. Instead, he checks the two SFs over – they turn out to be concussed but otherwise unharmed – before retreating into his office. And since Rodney's not actually as cold-hearted as he likes his underlings to believe, he follows after.

Still, just because he's emotionally aware enough to not want Carson to be alone after learning that his girlfriend has had sixty years of her life sucked out of her, he's not actually good at this sort of thing. It's all he can really do to pat the doctor's shoulder awkwardly and try to keep him from hyperventilating.

He doesn't know how long this goes on, only that it's long enough for John to show up.

"Hey Carson," John says softly, sauntering into the office with a quarter of his usual energy. "Laura's awake if you want to talk to her."

"I-"

"I think she'd really like to talk to you," John continues, his voice slipping into a tone Rodney's only heard him use on Atlantis and Aurora. Cadman must be much worse off than Biro had let on if John's pulling out that one out. "It will probably do you a world of good too."

Gesturing with the wad of Kleenex in his hands, "I don't want to upset her."

"I think the only thing that would upset her is if you stay in here. It doesn't even have to be for long, just long enough to let her know you still care."

"Of course I care! Why else do you think I'm carrying on like this."

"I know that, Doc. But I'm not the one who needs to know."

Sighing, "Aye, you're right," Carson agrees. Then, hauling himself out of his chair, "I've dallied too long as it is. Does nae one any good for me to be moping about in here."

"I just came from talking with her. There's no one with her now."

"Thanks, Colonel – and you too Rodney."

"Yes, glad to help," he says, waiting until after Carson's out of sight before confiding. "Thank God you came when you did. I've no idea what to do when people start crying. I was about ready to call in Teyla for backup. So, you catch Michael? I've been off-radio since we got here."

John scowls, but there's no real heat in it. Even his hair looks depressed, laying entirely too flat on his head. "I got a whole clip in him, but it didn't slow him down in the least. He managed to get to one of the jumpers and dialled-out before we could stop him."

"How? He doesn't have the gene."

"Yeah, but the launch sequence is automatic, no gene required, and jumper's permutatum overrides the one in the Control Room, so..."
"So he got away?"

"Pretty much." John rubs a hand across his face. "We followed after, but he'd already ditched the jumper and gated to another planet by then. Zelenka collected the last fifty or so addresses, but it's a safe bet he went from there to a Wraith-controlled planet."

"Taking with him the knowledge that Atlantis still stands," Rodney finishes. This means another Siege. Maybe even another suicide run and another chance for him to lose John in a way a thousand times worse than Carson's losing Laura right now. Yes, they have a ZedPM now and a means for recharging the others almost completed, but so had the Ancients and they'd not been able to hold them off forever. They'd given up and fled – an option which the Expedition doesn't even have, not when the Wraith want nothing more than to follow them to a new, rich feeding ground.

"And he knows about me."

"You really think knowing that you're an Ancient will make that much of a difference when they come for us again?"

"Never underestimate the ability for the promise of revenge to paper over all other differences."

Frowning now, "Why do they hate your people so much? I mean, I get that you guys were at war, but I thought that was just a control of the galaxy thing. Why would they want revenge, especially when as far as they're concerned they won?"

"We made them."

"You what?" Rodney squawks. This is news. Deep and troubling news he should've heard about two years ago.

"It was an accident, of course. No one could've foreseen Larenta Eyno's research having the result it did. But the fact is we made them. And the created will always seek to destroy their creators."

"That certainly complicates things."

"It does, doesn't it?" John laughs mirthlessly. "And here I am ten thousand years later, the only one left to clean it all up – and making the exact same mistakes."

"It's not your fault."

His words earn Rodney a sardonic smile. "It's adorable that you think that."

"I am not adorable."

"Of course you aren't."

"What is it with people thinking that today? Did I get the days mixed up? Is it April Fool's already? 'Cause, seriously, if anyone is going to be mistaken for adorable in this relationship, it's going to be you – and you're the one with the C4 fetish."

"What can I say? I like explosives. They remind me of Father." John glances quickly out the door, as if afraid someone might have overheard his reminiscing, and bites his lower lip.

It's then that Rodney remembers that Laura is their explosives expert, the one they'd gotten to replace Ford after John had been forced to shoot him. For a moment, John's whole friendship with the Captain suddenly makes sense. Not much, but enough.
"Cadman will be fine," he tries to assure his amator. They're hollow words, but John needs to hear them, looking sucker-punched as he does. But before he can think of better to say, there's a commotion in the main infirmary-

-and shouting-

-and the call for paddles, asystole-

Laura Cadman is declared dead at 0952 local time, from heart complications arising from the Wraith feering process.

He doesn't expect John to come to his quarters that night.

(Hell, Rodney hadn't thought he'd make it to his quarters that night, but Carson had insisted he didn't need someone to stay with him and, well, hadn't given him much choice about the matter.)

He's not asleep when John comes in. It's pitch black and he's facing away from the door, so he doesn't see him enter, but he can hear the shift in Atlantis' song when he does. It's less sorrowful, more concerned, and Rodney thinks this alone would've woken him if by some miracle he'd actually managed to fall asleep.

John, however, doesn't appear to realize he's awake. He just climbs into bed with him, barely pausing long enough to toe off his boots before plastering himself against him. John's arm is a little too tight around Rodney's chest and the buttons on his shirt dig a little too deeply into his back, but he scarcely dares to breathe, not with John like this.

It takes Rodney a minute or two, but he's fairly certain John's doing everything in his power not to cry.

And, well, that is unacceptable, so he tries to twist around to face him-

-and John stills immediately. He probably would've jumped out of the bed entirely if Rodney hadn't been holding on to the arm wrapped around him for dear life. "Ancient or not, you're allowed to have feelings," he says quietly.

"I just killed another one of my best officers, Rodney. Atlantis wouldn't still be standing if I let out everything I was feeling."

Rage, deep and instinctual, flares in his chest. "You didn't kill her, John."

"I convinced Elizabeta to let Carson test the retrovirus."

"It's not your fault," Rodney repeats as forcibly as he can.

(He wants to build a time machine so he can go back ten thousand years and let Janus have it for making his son believe that the entire universe was his responsibility; so he can go back twenty-three days and talk himself out of going along with Operation Bellerophon in the first place; so he can go back twenty-eight hours and set off the fire suppression system in Michael's quarters, personal consequences be damned, so he can't hurt Laura.

(He wants to march straight to Elizabeth's quarters and make sure that she knows exactly how much
she messed up on this one; to track down Teyla and ask her if she still believes the Wraith are capable of compassion; to find a mirror and see if he can still look himself in the eye.

(He wants to take all the blame John's feeling and put it on himself, because John tortures himself enough already and he won't sit back and watch him do it again, for something for which he is completely blameless.)

"Michael killed Cadman, John. Her death is on his hands, not yours."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"No, it's-"

"She asked me to do it."

Rodney freezes, suddenly very glad that John's grip on him has been too tight for him to turn around and knowing all too well what he's talking about.

"She said it would be more merciful to let her die – that if I didn't do it, she'd find someone else, some other way. That this way Carson would never have to know. That Michael may have taken everything else from her, but at least this way he wouldn't have won."

"How?"

"Healing's difficult. It's easy to make a mistake, especially where something complicated like the heart is involved. I'm so bad at it, I didn't even have to try."

"Oh John," he breathes.

"It's alright. I owed her that much. I just..."

"It's still not your fault."

"Isn't it?"
Evan rounds the corner just in time to see Radek step into the transporter. "Hey! Doctor Z!" he calls, hurrying to reach him, "Wait up."

Radek gives him a bemused look, but holds the door nonetheless. "Where are you off to in such a hurry, Evan?"

"Nowhere," he admits. "Just wanted to see if you were going down to the ZPM recharger test."

"Did you not hear? The Colonel has finally come up with a name for it. We are to call it ATLAS, all capitals. I do not know why."

He shakes his head. The Colonel has only been obsessing over coming up with a name for the device for weeks now. The fact that he hasn't bothered to tell any of them why the name is so important, or even why he chose the name he did, is just typical. But it's also not the point. "You on your way to the ATLAS test then?"

"I am on my way to pull the live ZPM for it now, yes. Why?" The Czech says, pressing the transporter controls that will take them to the ZPM Room on the third sub-level beneath the Central Spire.

"No reason."

Radek smirks. "So you just chased me down a hallway for no reason whatsoever?"

"Well," Evan back-peddles, flushing a little, "I wouldn't say chased."

Snorting now, "You have been spending too much time with the Colonel. Your excuses are starting to become just as bad as his."

The transporter disgorges them in the hallway directly outside the ZPM Room - which Colonel Sheppard has had under guard since the moment they started talking about bringing a Wraith test subject to Atlantis. Michael's been gone for two days - Captain Cadman has been dead for two days - but there has been no talk of removing the guards. He can only assume that Sheppard's been feeling the same sense of uneasiness Evan has ever since.

"I'm pretty sure that's not humanly possible."
"Perhaps," Radek concedes, stepping into the ZPM Room, "but your gene is the strongest of the natural carriers in the city after Doctor Beckett. So if possible, you are the most likely candidate."

"That is just mean," he laughs.

"But true." He taps his earwig. "McKay, I am preparing to pull the ZPM." He listens for a moment, then, "Fine, but next time you snap at me for not keeping you properly apprised of my work, I am reminding you of this. Hloupý člověk. Někdy to je jako oheň někdo nastavena na vaši osobnost a snažil se, aby to s vidličkou, to je tak ošklivý. Co plukovník vidí ve vás, já nevím."

Evan raises an eyebrow. "McKay being his usual charming self?"

"Worse, though I did not think such a thing was possible."

"Well, the whole Michael business has put everyone on edge, and you know just as well as I do that if we don't get the ZPM recharger - ATLAS device - up and running we're screwed the next time the Wraith decide to show up. Which they're bound to do soon now that Michael's probably told them how Atlantis is still standing." Evan hadn't been here for the Siege, but he's heard enough stories and fought enough Wraith to know it's one experience he'd rather not have.

Radek pulls the ZPM. "Is not that. Yes, people are uneasy, but McKay is just jumpy of late. The Colonel too, for that matter."

"Can't say I blame them. I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop myself."

"You think Michael managed to sabotage one of the city's systems before he escaped?"

"No. Not really. But I still feel like there was more to his escape than we know about."

Radek waits until they're back in the transporter - and out of the Marine guards' hearing - before continuing, "What are you saying, Evan? That somebody let him out?"

"I'm saying," he whispers back, "that we might not have been the only ones with plans to get rid of Michael."

Shaking his head, "I do not think Captain Cadman would have been so stupid as to allow Michael to escape, if only so as to kill him during his recapture."

"It was the Colonel's first idea." They'd talked him out of it, but that didn't mean that others hadn't had the same thought. Especially someone who, like the Colonel, had a tendency to see the military solutions to problems first.

Neither of them say anything as the transporter doors open.

"It was an accident," Radek says after a moment, stepping out of the transporter and towards the clean room where Doctor McKay has been holed up for weeks, working on the ZPM re- on the ATLAS device. "An unfortunate accident. And that is the last we shall speak of it."

Evan nods. He doesn't like thinking that Laura was the agent of her own death anymore than Radek does, but the fact remains that the more he thinks about it, the more Evan knows it can be the only way Michael broke loose, no a matter how far he'd reverted back to Wraith form. And no matter her personal failings, she'd been a fine officer. Her death was a terrible loss.

"So, Evan, you still not have told me why you chased me down in the hallway."
"It wasn't chasing," he repeats with perhaps a touch too much vehemence. "I've just a got a strange feeling about the ATLAS test today and it's making me a bit twitchy."

"It is alright Major. I have worked for the military for over twenty years. I know how soldiers can get after they lose one of their own." Radek says this in such a way - sadly and with an almost wistful frown - that Evan almost asks about the soldier that he must have lost, but only almost. It's not his place to ask and, even if it were, they're almost at the clean room already and haven't got the time.

It's probably better that he not know anyway.

The thing is this:

Anything involving the Stargate Program has a way of conflating emotions. It's a natural reaction to intense situations. There's even a workshop to this effect that's part of the probationary period for all new recruits. It's a short workshop - only two hours long, most of it Q & A - and the lesson is simple: it's all only adrenaline until you've test driven it outside the mountain. If you still like each other in the real world, then feel free to give it a go.

Which is all well and good for people assigned to the SGC. It's different on Atlantis. There are no escape valves here for emotions. They just keep building and building, like feedback in a sound system, until something finally gives under the pressure.

Which is why Evan knows that his infatuation with Radek is just that: a stupid crush brought about by too much time spent working together and too little emotional distance and nothing more. It's only to be expected given the amount of time they spend working together. Hell, they've practically been living in each other's back pockets ever since Evan got to Atlantis in an effort to stay one step ahead of their respective COs, both of whom have a tendency to get so caught up in whatever they're doing that they forget everything and everyone else.

Which is why it's important to remember that whatever emotional intimacy he and Radek may have is a byproduct of their work and nothing more. By no means is it real intimacy. They're not even real emotions. At best, what they have is a close friendship that will withstand the distance that will withstand the distance it'll face when one of them is inevitably transferred off Atlantis. At worst, it's a valuable working relationship that will fall apart whenever their bosses finally get the administrative assistants they so desperately need.

Which is why he really should be avoiding Radek at all costs, and not chasing him down hallways or asking him personal questions about long lost loves.

The ATLAS device looks like the love child of a wood lathe and a toaster oven, and this is almost a literal syllogism. The dead ZPM sits in a cage of copper wire balanced between two thick slabs of something that may or may not be the Ancient version of polystyrene. The live one goes into a recessed slot that kind of looks like the science fiction version of an automotive cup holder. Enough wires run between it and the half-dozen or so laptops scattered carelessly throughout the room to circle Atlantis a couple times over, giving an added Frankenstein's monster feel to the whole thing, to say nothing of Doctor Frankenstein himself, who looks about three seconds from cackling it's alive.

Evan says as much to Colonel Sheppard a few minutes after he and Radek arrive in the clean room. Someone must've told him about this bit of Earth culture before, because his laughter is such that it
draws Doctor McKay's special brand of attention their way. "What the hell is so funny?"

"Didn't you say something about the guiding principles of the universe being simple and beautiful once? 'Cause, for the machine that you're sure is going to win you that Nobel Prize, ATLAS doesn't look all that pretty."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Yours. You're the one who designed it after all."

"Ah, I see how it is now," McKay huffs, sliding the charged ZPM into place, "it's my tech when it's not living up to expectations but it's yours when the time comes to claim all the credit."

"Exactly," Sheppard says smugly, kicking his feet back and forth a little from his perch atop of one of the workbenches.

McKay rolls his eyes and mutters something unintelligible (no doubt exceptionally rude, but extremely accurate, about the Colonel's parentage) under his breath.

Radek just shakes his head and says to both of them, "Please warn me if ever you ever decide to have children. It will take time to set up the fund they will need to pay for all their psychotherapy." He then thrusts a data device at McKay. "Double check these numbers please?"

"Yes, yes. Very funny. Absolutely hilarious. Just remember that just because you're less brain-dead than the rest of the so-called scientists the SGC keeps sending me doesn't mean you're irreplaceable, you know. There are trained monkeys out there who could do your job better, faster, and with less back-talk than you," McKay retorts carelessly, the majority of his attention going to the data device in his hands.

"Yes, but you could not afford their salaries."

"I'm sorry, I thought this was a high-energy physics lab, not some amateur comedy club. Now how about you put a little less work into your one-liners and a little more into, I don't know, your actual job?"

"Ah, but Rodney," Sheppard inserts, jumping off the workbench, "you make it so easy that it doesn't take any effort at all."

McKay levels an accusatory finger the Colonel's way. "Don't encourage him. You're what makes my minions think they can get away with behavior like this in the first place."

"It's not my fault you're so much fun to rile up," Sheppard says, coming up to hug McKay from behind, chin perched squarely on one his shoulders. "Though I don't suppose you could hurry things up a little?"

"And to think that if someone had asked me two years ago what I thought the Ancients might be like if we found any when we got to Atlantis, patient would've made the top ten."

"If you immediately know the candlelight is fire, than the meal was cooked long ago."

McKay snaps his fingers at him. "Yes. Exactly. That too. Jackson quotes that all the time. What the hell does that even mean?"

The Colonel appears to contemplate it for a second before saying, "Its the kind of thing, I think, that doesn't mean much until you figure it out for yourself."
"Well that's spectacularly unhelpful. Thank you for that."

"I try."

Evan snorts, which once more draws McKay's attention his way. "And you. Why are you even here? Unless you've got some advanced degree I don't know about, stop distracting my second and get out of my clean room."

For a moment - and only a moment - Evan considers mentioning the PhD he'd been working on before he'd been sent to Afghanistan, but he knows that admitting to being a philosophy major can only make things worse for him in McKay's eyes. So he beats a quick retreat instead, not even pausing to see Radek's take on all this.

Evan used to be good at shoulds and needs and musts.

The antsy feeling Evan's been having only grows worse after the first test of the ATLAS device. Nevermind the fact that the test was successful and that they now how have a second charged ZPM at their disposal, he's gone from feeling like he's overdone it on the coffee to feeling like he literally has ants crawling around in his skull, which even he has to admit goes beyond normal anxiety.

He's not been in the infirmary for more than ten minutes before Sheppard shows up, rubbing the back of his neck and looking like he's just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Sorry about this Major."

"Sorry about what?" Evan asks, bewildered.

"'Lantis," the Colonel says. "She has absolutely no understanding of personal boundaries." He rolls his eyes at the nearest wall sconce when it begins to flicker. "Well you don't. If you did, you wouldn't have told about what Carson found on the imago soni magnetum he just took." A pause, then, "Look, carissima, if you want to really be helpful, talk to Rory and explain why she can't go and do things like this without warning people. Sorry," he repeats, looking at Evan this time.

"For the fact that the city is spying on me? Doesn't sound like something you can help, Sir."

With a small smile. "Actually, it's not 'Lantis doing the spying - though she did tell me what was going on when Carson ran the scan. It's Rory."

"Aurora's been spying on me?"

"You've been spending a lot of time aboard her, playing light switch for Doctor Z. What can I say? She's grown attached - to both you and the good doctor. But you're the one with the gene, so she's rather more attached to you than Doctor Z."

"Really?"

"Really," Sheppard confirms, edging a stool over to Evan's bedside with the toe of his boot.

"That's... cool, I guess." Cool, but kind of weird. Though why Sheppard would be apologizing to him for it now, when he's in the infirmary with a headache that could drop a Wraith at forty paces, as opposed to the other day, when Radek had dragged him here following the incident with the
navigation controls, Evan hasn't the slightest idea. Which is kind of weird in and of itself.

"I'm glad you think so, 'cause it means that, in her grand scheme of machines and men, she's decided to make you her maritus."

Evan blinks and waits for the punchline. None is immediately forthcoming. Eventually Sheppard's silence compels him to say, "I've no idea what that means, Sir."

"It means husband - but," he continues quickly, as if to make up for his earlier reticence, "before you get yourself too worked up, it doesn't really mean anything. Not in the conventional manner, at least. I mean, she calls me her pater and 'Lantis her mater, but that doesn't mean Rory actually thinks... Well, I'm reasonably certain she doesn't think anything of the sort, but she has spent a lot of time on her own and her databanks are corrupted, so she might very well think lintres are what happens when a pastor sits in the cathedra. Honestly," he confesses, making a face, "it's one of those things I've been trying to avoid thinking about."

He has absolutely no idea what the correct response to this news is, and tells the Colonel as much.

"I find creeped out to be a perfectly valid life choice in moments like these."

"Have a lot of them, do you Sir?"

"Major," Sheppard says honestly - so honestly that it makes him wonder about all the conversations they'd had before, how many of them were real and how many of them were pretend, and if he's ever really known the Ancient they call John Sheppard, - "I'm sitting here having this conversation with you. What do you think?"

"You may have a point there, Sir," he flinches - which has nothing to do with the words themselves and everything to do with the pressure in his head suddenly ratcheting up five clicks.

"Of course I do. My natural propensity for pointedness is well-known - which, ironically enough, isn't the point. Which is that, 'cause Rory likes you so much, she's decided to adopt you into this seriously dysfunctional family she's made for herself. The upshot of which is that she wants to make you a custodia."

Brow furrowing in confusion, "You mean like Doctor McKay? The music you guys sometimes talk about but not the words?"

"Yeah. The words, as you say, require a couple hundred thousand tiny robots to be implanted into your head. But the music... well, anyone with the gene and the right kind of connection with Atlantis - or Aurora - can hear that."

"That's cool."

"Seriously cool, in my book."

"So what's the catch?" At Sheppard's expression, he continues, "You wouldn't have come in here apologizing if there wasn't a catch."

"Yes, well... the thing is that Rory's never exactly made a custodia before. According to what 'Lantis picked up on your brain scans, she's kinda been going about it in the wrong way. Nothing serious, just wrong - an old way the urbes-naves abandoned long ago for a faster, more direct way. All of which boils down to the fact that, now that 'Lantis has caught it, she's going to finish the job as quickly as possible. Apparently the side effects are likely to be nosebleeds, fever, and a craving for paprika and pumpkin seeds."
"Pumpkin seeds?"

"Good source of potassium."

"I think I'll stick with bananas, if you don't mind."

Grinning broadly, "You mean you'll do it?"

Evan looks at him like he's stupid - which is a stupid way to look at one's commanding officer, though Sheppard doesn't seem to mind. "Of course I want to do it." He loves Atlantis, loves Aurora. He'd never truly felt like he belonged anywhere until he set foot in this city. He's never felt so alive as when he's standing the Control Room when the Stargate activates or piloting a jumper (or when he's sitting on the balcony outside Radek's makeshift distillery, sampling his latest product and commiserating over the latest stunt their bosses have pulled, though that's something he chooses not to examine too closely if he can help it). "Just one question."

"Shoot."

"This doesn't mean I have to call you dad now, does it?"

Sheppard's laughter is what finally draws Carson's attention their way.

There are no words for it:

One moment there is silence. The next there is music.

Perhaps if he, like Doctor McKay, had studied music, he'd have a way to describe the song that creeps into his head and tangles itself in his very soul, so much so that it's impossible to tell where it stops and he begins.

But he doesn't. All Evan knows is that, the moment he the music flares to life in his head - a stubborn, repeating bass from something that sounds a little like a cello but cannot, possibly, be anything of the sort; a weaving, darting, teasing melody that could've been from a flute, or a violin, or maybe some exotic form of clarinet; and there, on the edge, just beyond hearing, the suggestion of some sort of harmony, of words and phrases and lyrics he could never, would never, know - he feels alive. Alive in a way he only feels when flying a jumper or standing in the Control Room when the Stargate activates (or sitting on the balcony outside Radek's makeshift distillery, sampling his latest product and commiserating over the latest stunt their bosses have pulled).

But those are only words and they cannot tell the whole story. So Evan doesn't even try, and just lets the music wash over him until he arrives at a place where he can hear past the music to the world which is really there.

"So I hear you got married," says a voice when he's finally able to hear something more than the roar of music in his ears. (It's still there, the music, but he can think around it now, and over it, and through. It is there, but only as much as Evan wishes it to be.)

"It was a political move," Evan says, his own voice sounding strange to his ears. "I plan on having love affairs with each and every piece of Ancient technology we stumble across."

Radek snorts, bemused. "That is good to hear. I had worried I would lose my favorite light switch
while you locked yourself away aboard Aurora and did unspeakable things to her control panels."

"Favorite, huh?" he asks, still too out of it to think better of it.

He's not, however, out of it enough to miss the blush that stains Radek's cheeks before the good doctor busies himself with polishing his glasses with the hem of his shirt. "You have been out for quite some time," he says, changing the subject without subtlety. "How do you feel?"

"Like the morning after shore leave. How long was I out?"

"Six hours and change. You missed much excitement."

"Did I?"

"Oh yes. McKay and I did another test of the ATLAS device, so now we have three fully charged ZPMs, which he and the Colonel saw as a perfect reason to plug in all three and start running tests on what city systems we hadn't been able to activate yet. Naturally, they did this without informing anyone before hand, and so we did not know what was happening until the consoles in the Control Room began to go crazy..."

Evan leans back and lets Radek's words wash over him, melting and mixing and joining until it seems a natural part of the music that surrounds them and Evan is how privileged enough to hear.

It is the most amazing thing he's ever heard.

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There are other reasons, of course, nothing can ever become of the attraction between them - and he's pretty sure that it's not all one-sided - but the fear that it is could all be an adrenaline-fueled folly is the biggest one. Even bigger than the Uniform Code he's subject to or the fact that he's never been attracted to another man before.

But, in the moments he allows himself to dream, it's the most brilliant thing in the whole universe.

Chapter End Notes

Other notes include: 1) Hloupý...nevím translates to Stupid man. Sometimes it is like someone set fire to your personality and tried to put it out with a fork, it is so ugly. What the Colonel sees in you, I do not know in Czech. Imago Soni Magnetum is the closest I can figure to MRI in Latin. 2) For the part towards the end (and you'll know what part), the music I had playing on repeat was "Passacaglia," which might help you imagine that bit better. 3) This is also the first fic in this 'verse written completely on my new iPad, with a different word processing program than before. Which seems to think "Sheppard" is a mispelling and to which I cannot change things to British English, so... if there are issues on that, I've done my best to catch them, but may still have missed. 4) Oh, and Atlas was Titan who held up the sky/world, depending on the exact myth. He lends his name to Atlantis (which literally means Isle of Atlas) and is the brother of Prometheus and husband to Clymene, a daughter of Ocean. In this 'verse, though it's not mentioned here, I intend for the Ancient of the same name to have been the inventor of the ZPM.
Iohannes has been expecting it. He's been expecting it every minute of the past two days, ever since he popped by the infirmary to ask after the Taranins they'd saved from volcanic eruption on their planet. Carson had already released most of them to their guest quarters, where they are staying until Elizabeta and their Chancellor Lycus can find a suitable planet for them to relocate to, but he'd been keeping half-a-dozen overnight for observation.

Smoke inhalation, after all, does terrible things to the lungs.

But, anyway, there had been six of them. Carson, however, had been sure that all of them would make a full recovery. All of them except for one young woman who was five months pregnant and who, for medical reason Iohannes honestly didn't understand, might lose her child because of it.

Maybe he'd done it because of 'Lantis' strange baby-fixation. Or because the young woman had been lying in the same bed he'd helped Captain Cadman to die in barely a month before. Or because he couldn't watch Carson lose another patient so soon. Or maybe...

Well, it doesn't matter why he'd done it, only that Iohannes had gone over to the young woman and, after making sure she was sound asleep, placed a hand over her stomach and done all that he could with his healing ability to save her child. And he'd succeeded in that - or, at least, Carson had thought he had - but he'd failed to ensure the curtains around the young woman's bed were fully closed.

Or that the girl asleep in the bed opposite had actually, in fact, been asleep.

He's been expecting this very thing ever since, but Iohannes is still surprised when she runs up to him in the mess on the afternoon of the second day and - clearly, distinctively, and with the presumptuousness of the very young - asks, "Are you an Ancestor?"

The entire mess falls silent. Even the Terrans, who know the truth, seem to be curious as to how he'll answer.

Iohannes hands his tray to Teyla, who's standing next to him in the lunch line, and kneels down in front of the girl. "What's your name?" he asks her.

"Raicheal. Raicheal Pero, Sir."

"Well, Raicheal Pero, why d'you think I'm one of the Ancestors?"

"'Cause there was the volcano, but you saved us from it by putting us on the Ship of the Ancients and taking us across the stars to the City of the Ancients."

"Lots of people helped save your planet, Raicheal. Teyla, tell her how you helped."

"And," the girl continues loudly, talking over whatever Teyla might've said, "the healer said that Caitria's baby was going to die, but then you placed your hand on her and there was this white light and now the healer says her baby's gonna live. None of the others did that."

"And all that means I'm an Ancestor?"
Raicheal nods. Vigorously.

"Well, Raicheal," he says, focusing all his attention on the Taranin girl and forcibly ignoring everyone else, "you're right. I am what you'd call an Ancestor. And you know what?"

"What?"

"You're the first person to figure that out in a long time. And that makes you very smart. Smarter than most adults."

Raicheal beams at him. "Does this mean I get a prize or something?"

"Yeah," Iohannes grins at her, unable to help himself. "I think we can arrange that. What d'you want?"

She screws up her face real tight, thinking, before announcing, "Can I have another one of those cookie things? Mother said I could only have one, but I think that being really smart means I can have another."

Laughing now, "Okay. But just this once. Believe it or not, mothers usually know what they're talking about."

"I know: Mother is the smartest, bestest mother in the whole world."

"Good for her. Teyla, can you-?"

"Here you are, John," she says, handing him a cookie.

He takes it and hands it to Raicheal, who flashes him another brilliant smile before running off into the crowd.

-the crowd, which remains silent for a moment, but looks as if any moment it might erupt into a furry of prayers and protestations.

Iohannes climbs to his feet. "Y'know," he tells Teyla, who's favoring him with one of the most concerned looks he's ever seen from her, "I'm really not all that hungry anymore."

She tries to say something, but he's out the mess before any of the Descendants can find their voices.

"I find your reaction to this situation most curious," Hermiod admits, blinking at him in a way that suggests he's more amused by this situation than anything else. "Bishop to H4."

On the tablet between them, the black bishop slides itself across the board and captures white's last pawn.

Iohannes frowns and examines the board. "Knight to F2," he says eventually, adding the question, "Why?"

"The Asgard have often found it expedient to pose as gods among those civilizations not advanced or aware enough to understand the truth of our existence. I do not understand why it should be any different for you with the people of this galaxy... Bishop to G5."

"I think you'll find the keyword in your sentence to be posing. It's not sliding into a role, it's..." He trails off vaguely, wishing that they were playing with something other than digital pieces, so that he
might have something to fiddle with while he searches for the right words. Eventually, "When the Asgard go to some primitive civilization and pretend to be gods, that's all you're doing: you're pretending. Sure, some of the stories that they tell about you might be adapted from things that really happened to you, but, no matter how much truth gets mixed in, it's still always just a part you're playing."

"Indeed," Hermiod agrees, adding wryly, "though I must admit that the Tau'ri of old told a tale wherein I was sent on a journey to their underworld, Hel, which I find most apropos to my current situation."

"Hey, now. The Terrans aren't that bad. Certainly more interesting than my people ever were."

Inclining his head, he agrees - with the caveat, "But very young."

"Eh, maybe. But you've got to admit they're learning fast."

"Precociousness isn't wisdom, but a suggestion that the child might one day be wise."

"Careful now, Hermiod. It's starting to sound like you actually like the Terrans."

The Asgard's eyes narrow. "Do you intend to place your move or not?"

"Oh, I dunno... Rook to B6."

"King to H5."

"That's just... Rook to E6."

"Rook to A2."

Iohannes scowls. "Next time, we're playing cards. Poker, I think. I bet you'd have a great poker face, buddy."

"Or you could simply abandon the pretense of this diversion and ask outright for my advice on this matter."

"Rook to E2," he says, his scowl sliding into an outright pout even as his piece moves to capture the one of the two remaining black pawns. "It's not like you haven't made your opinion on the matter painfully clear."

"I believe I have only expressed my surprise at your reaction, rather than any particular suggestion regarding it. Rook to A1. Check"

"Knight to D1. But you think there is nothing wrong with pretending to be one of their gods if it suits our ends."

"Indeed. But," Hermiod adds, raising a finger to forestall the protest already on his lips, "as I believe you were attempting to explain, the Asgard have only ever pretended to be gods. We have never claimed divinity in our own right. The people of this galaxy consider the Ancients - and, therefore, yourself - to be gods precisely as you are, without exception or reservation. To be rightfully acknowledged as a member of your own race is also to be considered divine, which is a wholly different matter entirely. King to G4."

"But the cat's already out of the bag - the whole mess heard me tell Raicheal I was one of their Ancestors, and odds are that anyone who wasn't there has heard about it three times over by now."
Rook to B2.

Hermiod is silent for a long moment. Then, unblinkingly, "Licinus? May I ask you a question?"

Iohannes used to hate his cognomen. He used to hate it with the same passion Rodney seems to hate his praenomen, Meredith, but, stellis in universum, he's almost pleased whenever Hermiod uses it. It's ridiculous in the extreme, but it's nice to be reminded that John Sheppard isn't all that he is - some of the time, at least.

Still, he raises his eyebrow before saying, "Sure. Shoot."

"Why did you heal the Taranin woman's unborn child?"

"'Cause I didn't want the kid to die. Obviously."

"And why," Hermiod continues, blinking once with painful slowness, "did you not tell the Taranins who you truly are when you first learned of the Ancient warship in their possession?"

"'Cause I didn't want it to seem like I was tricking or forcing them to hand the linter over."

"But you told the truth when the child asked."

"Look," he sighs exasperatedly, "it's not like I could outright lie to her face. What are you trying to get at here?"

"If, as you say, the cat is already out of the bag, the Taranins will worship you as a god regardless of your actions or explanations. But you have been nothing but kind and selfless in your interactions with them and all the peoples of this galaxy. So, if they must worship something, should it not be someone such as yourself, who embodies all the traits of a good and principled person, who acts with integrity and honor in all things?"

Laughing darkly at this, "I think you think far too highly of me, my friend."

"And I think you have become so used to thinking poorly of yourself that you are inured to your inherent goodness."

Iohannes stops laughing. "You're delusional. You mean well, Hermiod, but you're completely and utterly delusional."

"Or allowing others to acknowledge it's existence. King to F3."

He's quiet for a long while, finally moving his rook to B3 - and checking the black king - before saying, "It's Haeresis to let them think I'm a god."

"It is impossible to control what others think. King to G2."

"So what?" he snorts. "I'm just supposed to let them pray to me? Treat me as a god? You do know what happens when my kind starts thinking of themselves as gods, right? Rook to B2."

"Tell them the truth. They are a reasonably advanced race and their knowledge of the Wraith has prepared them to accept the existence of other intelligent lifeforms more readily than had their civilization been allowed to take its natural course. But do not expect them to believe you right away. It will take time and patience on your behalf for them to rid themselves of their superstitious beliefs, as it will with all the other peoples of this galaxy. In time, they will come to understand the truth, but, until then, so long as you remember that you are an Ancient and bound by all the limitations thereof,
I do not believe it will constitute your Heresy. King to G1."

Iohannes ponders this. It sounds reasonable enough, but still leaves him feeling uncomfortable, like he’s treading dangerously close to a line which must not be crossed. "I'd sooner let Atlantis be destroyed than allow myself to become like the Haeretici."

"And for that reason you will not," Hermiod says reasonably. "Your move."

Chapter End Notes

So, I initially planned for this arc to be a story into itself, but decided to blend it in with the season finale, making this the last story in S2 of the AJ 'verse. IDK how many parts it will be, but that's what it'll be. It initially gave me great trouble, and admittedly the next part is giving me equal amounts of trouble, but it's my hope that by posting what I already have here that some comments will inspire the rest of it.

1) Messias does, in fact, mean Messiah in Latin - but I intend for this to be read in the original meaning of the word, ie a saviour or liberator of the people than a religious, though I suppose it can be read that way again. 2) The chess moves are taken from a RL game between Alexander Cherin and Viktor Kupreichik in Minsk, 1987 - mostly because I know nothing about chess except that I always lose to my brother, who wasted HS playing games rather than doing anything, or so it seems sometimes. The moves are 59-67 and it was the longest game I could find all the moves for online; it eventually ended after 164 moves with black winning. 3) There is in fact a story in mythology where the Norse god Hermiod is sent to Hel to bring Baldr back to Asgard. And while I included this to show how Hermiod the Asgard might feel about his time aboard Daedalus, I recently discovered that Baldr is one of the gods from the oldest Norse legends, who had the greatest ship and greatest hall ever built - all of which could be supposed to be a reference to John himself, if you really wanted to push things.
Once upon a time...

"Colonel?"

Once upon a time there was a race of people that went on a great journey through space, across the length and breadth of the universe itself. And they were called the Altera.

"John?"

The Altera were a wretched race, who, for their sins of pride and vainglory, were cursed to wander the stars for all eternity, never to again know the succor of their own clear waters or the warmth of their own mother star. For in their youth they mistook knowledge for wisdom and violence for power, and in so doing destroyed the blue world which gave them birth.

"What's wrong with him?"

"I dunno... He seems okay. Maybe it's his translation matrix?"

"Wouldn't he have still heard us?"

"We're talking about thousands of tiny machines that have been messing around with his brain chemistry since he was five years old, Elizabeth. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that they've got their fingers in every pie, so to speak."

"They put those things in him when he was five?"

"That's what John said."

"Who would do that to a child?"

"My bet? Janus."

"His own father?"

"I've been working on decrypting some of the notes he left behind and I gotta tell you, he's one in-law I'm glad I'm never going to have to meet."

And for a time the Altera were penitent. Where once they had warred over nations and false gods,
they now sought to better themselves through science and self-reflection, traveling through the stars on great ships that housed all that remained of their people, the universe's firstborn children, not trusting themselves to settle on another blue world or to learn the warmth of foreign stars.

And so they wandered for many thousands of years within their sea of stars, until one day they came upon a world such as they had never seen before. A blue world which had, like their own lost home, given birth to life of its own. And this world they called Morderatus and its people Morderati.

"Should we call Carson?"

"Not yet. Like I said, it's probably just something with his translation matrix. Or the fact that he's in the Control Chair. The matrices might not be able to work when he's connected to the city."

"How's your spoken Ancient?"

"Better than it was when we first got here, that's for sure. Let's see here. John? Iohannes? Licinus? Potes audire me?"

"Te evidenter audire possum, Moreducus. Quid eges?" Iohannes mumbles, both irritated at being bothered when he's so clearly busy and glad that the voices around him have finally decided to become intelligible-

No, not voices. Descendants. Terrans. Rodney and Elizabeta, the new custodia-rector and praefecta; his amator and one of his closest friends. How could he have forgotten that, even for a moment? He must be deeper in Atlantis' mainframe than he'd realized. Being a pastor in a cathedra has always been a balancing act between man and machine working in harmony and both of them forgetting where each stopped and the other began, but he doesn't remember it as ever having been quite so easy Before.

Of course, Before he'd never spent more than seventy hours at a time in the cathedra, and he'd spent his long, slow journey into the future doing nothing but.

"Well that's something at least - he can, apparently, hear us. Even if he's being a bit snippy about it."

"I can speak Ancient too, Rodney."

"What? Oh. Yes. Sorry. Usually when he does this, it's when I'm the only one around with any clue what he's saying."

The Morderati were a young race when the Altera found them, not yet sailors of stars, but mature enough to greet the Altera with open arms. And the Altera, seeing many of the same faults in the Morderati that had led to the loss of their own home, offered their newfound brothers what knowledge they had without reservation, in the hopes that it would prevent the loss of another blue world.

But the Morderati were young and had even less wisdom than the Altera, and used their borrowed knowledge to destroy their blue world as the Altera had once destroyed their own, and themselves along with it, until the Morderati were utterly lost to the universe, and the Altera were alone in the sea of stars once more.
"I'm not sure John has any idea what he's saying now."

"What do you mean?"

"Rodney, he just called you Moreducus."

"What? You're the only one who can have an Ancient name, Elizabeta?"

"No. It's just not what I would've expected."

"My first name's Meredith, okay? Moreducus is the Ancient version, since apparently they didn't have one for Rodney, which is the name I prefer to go by, for obvious reasons. Now, if we're finished with the unpleasant and, frankly, embarrassing, personal revelations, do you want to ask John why exactly he's here and not, say, in the mess hall, explaining his whole I am an Ancestor comment to the Taranins or should I?"

"Quid facis?" Elizabeta asks, her Terran accent so much thicker than Rodney's that it's difficult to make out even those two words. Granted, Rodney's isn't much better, but at least he's paid enough attention to pick up on the correct pronunciation for some things.

"Taranum aliquid," Iohannes enunciates slowly for their benefit, "res edisserere gigno," beginning the slow process of unwinding his consciousness from the city's without damaging either of them in the process. He's got what he needs anyway. Atlantis can begin the even slower process of compiling the data without him.

The Altera mourned the loss of the Morderati and cursed themselves for their part in their destruction, vowing to use better judgement should they ever come across another race again in their great, lifeless sea of stars. And, after many thousands of years, they found another blue world that had managed to give life to another race, and this world they called Gaheris, and its people Gaheres.

But the Gaheres were an even younger race than the Morderati, and though the Altera were careful and tried to guide them to knowledge rather than merely gift it to them, the Gaheres too destroyed themselves and their blue world. And once again the Altera are alone.

"What could he possibly be making in the Control Chair that would help explain things to the Taranins?"

"Don't look at me. I've been too busy working on the Arcturus Weapon and the ATLAS Device and now Aurora and Orion to give the Chair any real study," Rodney says, defensive and annoyed all at once. "I know exactly as much about it as I do about the one in Antarctica, give or take the fact that this one somehow managed to keep John in stasis 'til we got here, and that probably has more to do with John than the Chair itself. Carson was able to make the one at the outpost show a map of our solar system; maybe John's making some sort of PowerPoint presentation of his own."

"Fere," Iohannes says, startling them both, but he's got enough wherewithal to reactivate his translation matrix, even if output takes a little longer to come back online than input. "Ars emissio de historia Alterorum."

"News flash, John. Showing them a hologram isn't going to do much to dissuade them from the whole you're a god thing Teyla's been working on for the last two hours, no matter what it says."
After the loss of the Gaheres, the Altera cursed themselves doubly, for they were doubly fools for thinking they, who were still learning wisdom, could teach others. Their pride and vanity had led to the destruction of three blue worlds in their great, lifeless sea of stars, and the utter loss of two races which did not have to die. And so they vowed that when next - if ever - they found another blue world, they would not interfere, nor intercede, nor show undo interest in the race who inhabited it, nor intervene on their behalf. They would let the next race make their own choices and leave the fate of that blue world in the hands of its own children, as it should have always been.

Thousands of years passed. And then the Altera found one last, final blue world, and this world they called Valuanii, as they did the race to whom it belonged.

And it is there the Haeresis began.

"Yes, well," Iohannes says, easing the cathedra upright, "do you have a better idea?"

Rodney scowls at him, then hits him upside the head. "Yes. You could just talk to them instead of, I don't know, disappearing to God-knows where for hours and worrying us half to death."

Frowning himself, "I didn't disappear. I needed to talk to Hermiod. Besides, Lorne knew where I was going."

"You disappeared," Rodney repeats.

"I'm also an adult and fully capable of taking care of myself for a few hours, especially in my own city."

Both Rodney and Elizabeta look like they want to protest this, but, thankfully neither of them do. Instead Elizabeta says, "So, rather than simply explaining the situation to the Taranins, you decided to slip off and make a hologram instead?"

"Well," Iohannes says, rubbing the back of his neck as he walks around to the back of the cathedra, "when you put it that way..."

"Really? And what way am I supposed to put it?"

He kneels down and removes one of the access panels on base of the cathedra. "Look, all I know is that we've been down this road before, my people. Once people start believing we're gods, things start going downhill, fast. The temptation to interfere... It's unbearable."

He can already feel the power of their conviction reaching out to him like tendrils, just waiting for him to take it. It isn't much, hardly noticeable at all, but it's there. It's there, and Iohannes knows that if it stays there long enough, he'll reach out and take it. Because that's the kind of person he is: the kind who, if given a way to save Atlantis and the people on her, he'll take it, no matter how terrible the consequences.

"John," Rodney says, placing what's probably meant to be a comforting hand on his shoulder, "I think if the others were going to punish you for interfering with us, they would've done so by now."

"It's not them I'm worried about."

"John," Elizabeta repeats, sounding tired and pinched and annoyed, like she knows upfront that she's
not going to like the information she's asking for but wants to know it nonetheless.

He tosses her the crystal. "Watch the ars. That's what it's for."

Elizabeta looks down at the crystal in her hands like she doesn't know what to make of it. And maybe she doesn't. The Terrans are a young race, for all the try to pretend otherwise, and it will still be many centuries before they come close to learning all the secrets Atlantis holds.

Iohannes crosses the room and takes the crystal from her and slides it back into it's slot on the cathedra's base.

"'Lantis? Mind playing the ars for us?"

The lights in the cathedra room dim and, above the chair, an image of the home galaxy appears with it's bright central bar and two long, trailing arms, which no Alteran has seen with his own eyes in more years than most of their Descendants have numbers for. The image zooms in, closing in on an image of ancient satores converging from all corners of their small, known corner of the galaxy over an utterly decimated planet in the hope of figuring out how their homeworld had been destroyed. And over this comes a female voice - Matertera Catalina, stolen from all the many lectures she'd given Iohannes on the subject - saying, "Once upon a time..."

Chapter End Notes

This has been killer to write. I'm not even entirely happy with the way it turned out now, but, god, I'm just glad this part's done with. Hopefully it works. Also, the Latin/Alteran in this chapie is translated in-text, but if you've any questions on it feel free to ask. As well, the three planets/races mentioned in the chappie - the Morderati, the Gaheres, and the Valuanii - get their names from the Latin versions from three famous brothers from Arthurian legend: Modred, Gareth, and Gawain, who in legend are either the daughters of Arthur's half-sister Morgause or Morgan le Fey. Obviously this isn't the case in Stargate, but I liked the call-back.
"You look like you're giving serious thought to dying where you sit," Carson says with the cruel, hateful cheeriness of the well-rested, sliding his tray into the spot directly across from Iohannes at the table.

Iohannes hunches further over his tea, not so much drinking it (he doesn't think his stomach would be able to take even that much at the moment) as inhaling its vapors. "You mean I don't look like I've already died?" he groans, rubbing his temples. "I must be getting better than."

"I hate to break it to you, but things like that are nae supposed to be considered improvements."

"Welcome to my life."

"How much did you have to drink last night, lad?"

Iohannes opens one bleary eye and stares unsteadily across the table at his nephew. "Would you believe me if I said one?"

"Only if by one you mean a fifth of some really cheap tequila."

"It would take a lot more than a fifth of anything to get me drunk," Iohannes says, stealing himself and taking a mouthful of tea. It's lukewarm at best and more overbrewed than even he usually drinks it, but he's not getting up to get a fresh cup, he's just not. "And it was half-a-bottle of that weak stuff the Marines keep in their ready room that they think I don't know about."

Carson shakes his head like he's disappointed for some reason, though whether at him or the Marines, Iohannes can't say. "I know our Earth medicine must seem hopelessly primitive to you, but you don't exactly need a medical degree to tell you've got a hangover the size of Yorkshire."

He sets his mug back on the table and wraps both his hands around the base and concentrates, adding idly,"I take it that's big."

"We really need to work on your world history, Colonel. There's more to Earth than just Canada and the United States."

"Eh," Iohannes says indifferently, focus mostly on his tea. After a moment more, it starts to boil, prompting Carson to say-

"That's a nice party trick."

"That is the result of nine hours of meditation - which is, by the way, the reason I needed that half-a-drink." He shudders at the memory. "I should've just raided Doctor Z's distillery, but 'Lantis said that he and Lorne spent the night there, and I didn't want to walk in on anything that would cause me to have to scour my eyes out of their sockets."

Carson chokes on his coffee. "You mean Evan and Radek..." he makes a vague hand motion that Iohannes takes to mean-

"Are having sex? I dunno, but watching them dance around each other is enough to give me a
headache, and I really, really don’t need to give the one I have now any more fuel." He takes another sip of tea, which is now utterly scalding and almost unpalatably bitter, and goes back to rubbing his temples.

"I was under the impression that meditation was supposed to be relaxing. Help one get in tune with one's inner self and all that."

Frowning, "I've always found it a trying experience."

"Then why'd you do it?"

He scowls into his tea and almost misses Rodney slide his own tray into the empty spot next to him, saying, "'Lantis made him."

Iohannes practically hears Carson blink. "The city made him meditate?"

"Yeah," Rodney says. "She seems to think that the others are less likely to punish John if he starts behaving more like a proper Ancient. At least," he adds after unsuccessfully trying to steal Iohannes' tea and replace it with a plate of something far too solid and greasy for him to even think about eating, "that's the gist I got from the side of the argument I could hear."

"She's a sadistic, overprotective futatrix," Iohannes says, patting the table absentmindedly. When she brightens the lights immediately overhead, he adds, "Well, you are."

/Forgive us for not wanting you be forcibly Ascended, or sent to some backwater planet with all your memories erased, or-/"

"Yes, yes," he agrees. "But you made Rory cry, and that's not something I can forgive all that easily."

"Yes, thank you for mentioning that, I've only spent the past few hours trying to block that memory."

"Lucky you." Iohannes thinks he's never going to be able to scrub that memory from his brain. Particularly not when her sobs had been interspersed with the occasional, choked, /But you can't go a-way, Pa-ter./

The overhead lighting penitently returns to normal levels.

Carson gets that worried look that normally proceeds several uncomfortable and unnecessarily invasive medical tests, "I'm confused. How does Atlantis wanting you to meditate lead to you looking like a sailor after shore leave?"

"'Cause," Iohannes says, gesturing with his mug, "it's never just meditation. It's always other things too."

The Valuanii were a young race, younger than the Morderati, younger than even the Gaheres, and the Altera vowed that this time they would not allow their pride and vainglory to destroy another blue world which had managed to create life, no matter how young that life was. They would watch, they vowed, but they would not interfere. They would not even let the Valuanii know they watched. They would let the blue world and the life on it develop as they would, without their dangerous influence.

But not all the Altera could do this. They saw the Valuanii making the same mistakes they had made
and could not sit idly by, watching. And so they came to the Valuanii in secret and guided them
down better, less destructive paths. And the Valuanii, being young and knowing no better, called
these secret guardians gods.

"I think you should send the fifth ZPM to Terra."

"What?" Elizabeta asks, looking up at him with an utterly bewildered expression. Between Atlantis
and Terra, they've been able to scrounge together five ZPMs - which now, thanks to the ATLAS
device, are fully charged - which adds up to two apiece for Atlantis and the SGC, with the last being
demanded with equal furor by both parties:

'Lantins needs it because she needs three ZPMS, runs best on three working in concert. It's simple
fact.

The Terrans want it because they're greedy and young and think that because they've accomplished
so much in nine years they can take on the universe. Which means they want one for their porta, to
dial Pegasus; one for the statio beneath their southern pole, to defend their planet from the myriad
enemies they've made themselves in that short time; and one for Odyssey, to take the fight to the
Haeretici.

"I think-"

"No, I heard that much. I just don't understand it. You've been arguing since the beginning that we
be allowed to keep the fifth ZPM. Why the sudden change of heart?"

Iohannes sinks into one of the chairs across from her desk and adopts as casual a posture as possible.
He's not entirely sure he succeeds, but he knows his voice is utterly nonchalant when he says, "They
need it more than we do."

"That's not what you were saying last week."

"Well, last week we didn't know what the Wraith were going to do with Michael's intel, if anything.
Now we know that all they're going to do is sent one hive ship our way to check things out, and we
don't need three ZPMs to take care of a single hive."

"As admirable as your trust in the city's defenses is, John, we both know that the fifth ZPM would be
wasted at the SGC, so what's this really about?"

"What makes you think it's about anything other than wanting my nieces and nephews not to be
killed by the Haeretici?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

Elizabeta gives him a look that lets him know, quite clearly and distinctly, that she's not buying it.
"Maybe because you've been in a strop ever since the Taranins found out about your being an
Ancient?"

"Alteran."

"Is now really the time to be arguing semantics?"

"There's always time to argue semantics."

"And as happy as I'd be to do so with you at any other time, that doesn't change the fact that you've
been acting strange for the past two days, or that you look like you went ten rounds with a bottle of
vodka and lost."

"What, this?" Iohannes gives her a tired smile. "This is nothing."

"If you've had hangovers worse than this, I genuinely worry about the state of your liver."

"Y'know, I find it odd that I keep having to explain this, but I'm not actually hungover."

"Well, you certainly look like it."

There are eighty things he could say to that off the top of his head. The one he goes with is, "Look, I appreciate the concern and all, but I'm fine. I really am. This is just the aftereffects of a fight with Atlantis, followed by some deeply unsettling meditation. Give me a couple hours and some tea and I'll be as right as rain."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Iohannes shrugs.

Elizabeta sighs.

They sit in silence for what feels like ages, but can't even be two minutes. At the end of it, he slouches down low in his chair and leans his head back far enough to rest on the seat-back. "I had a vision," he tells the ceiling tonelessly, though 'Lantis, of course, already knows all about it. And done a rousing round of I told you sos before breakfast that had done absolutely nothing for his headache.

"A vision," Elizabeta repeats.

"While I was meditating. I don't think it's mine - my talents never leaned in that direction when I was still foolish enough to be actively working towards Ascension, but anything's possible."

It's almost beyond imagination to think that enough of the others actually came to the realization that the Haeretici are an actual threat - his people may be a cowardly race, but they are also a proud one. And not just a threat to their Descendants, but to their own existence. But even they have to realize that, when the war is over and every person left alive in Avalon is praying to the Haeretici, feeding their need to be worshiped, their long lost cousins would finally be strong enough to destroy them.

Even they have to see helping the Terrans is a matter of survival, pure and simple.

"John..."

Then again, it's almost beyond imagination to think he could be sitting here in the future, the last of his kind, with nothing to commend him to the position he now occupies rather than luck and a desire not to see Atlantis fall.

"The Haeretici are making an Abomination."

"An-"

"Abomination," Iohannes says, lifting his head just enough to give her a bitter smile. "Melodramatic, I know." He lets his head fall back. "It's a cultural flaw, the whole Alteran flair for the dramatic."

Dryly, "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"That's just plain hurtful."
"You're the one that brought it up."

"I'm not the one being melodramatic here. That's the actual term, Abomination. Basically it means an Ascended being who's retaken human form but kept all of the knowledge they gained. Kinda like the Velonan exsul the SGC had to deal with a couple months back, the one with with the crush on Colonel Carter."

"Orlin?"

"Yeah, that one. And probably Moros Lal too - the guy your lot call Merlin, though how he managed to get from law abiding citizen of the millennia to someone like, well, me, is a story I'd love to hear sometime. Y'know, provided it's not during a dressing down on a higher plane of existence by some some glowing balls of white light before they decide how best to punish me. Unless," he says, sitting up a little and cocking his head to the side, trying to recall those lost three minutes, "they've already done that. In which case I'd like to remember it the next time."

Elizabeta looks vaguely contemplative. "I don't think you give the others enough credit."

"And you give them too much."

"Maybe," she admits, looking down briefly and fiddling with her pen. "But your people built Atlantis and the Stargates, and seeded human life in at least two galaxies. They may not be gods, but I've gotta trust they know what they're doing."

"You do that. And, while you're at it, send the ZPMs to Terra. Three of them."

"What about us, Colonel? You've said yourself that the city works best with three ZPMs and there's a hive ship on the way right now. It'll be here in sixteen days. God alone knows how many are preparing to follow in it's wake. Two ZPMs, Daedalus, and a pair of barely operational Ancient warships might get us pretty far, but your people had a lot better and a lot more and still lost the war. If this comes down to a fight, I want us to have the best chance possible - and not throw our chances away because of your hangups with the Ori."

"How many people d'you think it'd take to take me down if I ever took up Haeresis?"

"What?" Elizabeta asked, clearly puzzled by the non sequitur but still very much vexed by the whole conversation. Her lips are pursed and her eyes narrowed in the most unflattering way, but she's willing, at least, to hear him out.

"If I ever decided to go down that route," Iohannes repeats, straitening in his chair, "how many people d'you think it would take to bring me down? A couple SG teams? All the military personnel on this city? At the SGC's disposal? 'Cause whatever you think, I promise you, it won't be enough.

"Once the Taranin's are resettled on their new homeworld, word about me being one of their Ancestors is going to spread through the galaxy like wildfire. Within six months, every Descendant in Pegasus is going to know what I am and, with that kind of faith at my disposal, I doubt I'd have any problems making a nice lodgment in Avalon, starting with Terra. If I somehow managed to delude myself into thinking I'm a god. And that's just me, as I am, like seventy-eight percent of the way to Ascension. Think about what a Haereticus returned to human form with all the knowledge and power of an Ascended being at her disposal could do, to say nothing of the armies and lintres that she'd certainly bring with her.

"Even without an Abomination leading them, the Haereticus are still Alterans and, even if they've not managed to make a single technological advancement since my people broke off from theirs, for all
intents and purposes, trying to fight them once they reach your galaxy would be like trying to wage war on actual gods. The only way to beat them is to prevent them from getting a foothold in Avalon in the first place, and your lot can't do that as you are now. Giving the SGC the fifth ZPM opens up possibilities for them that might just save your galaxy."

Elizabeta shakes her head once, sharply, reflexively. "And what about us, John? What about the Wraith?"

"The Wraith are terrifying," he says honestly. "They might very well be the worst thing my people ever created. But I'd rather spend another ten thousand years fighting them than let the Haeretici get anywhere near Terra."

She leans back in her chair, as if hit with a moment of sudden clarity. "Because Earth is the gateway to Atlantis."

Iohannes nods slightly. "That's one of the reasons."

"You know, John, you really take this whole uncle thing a little too seriously."

"You're family," he says, standing. "And even if you weren't, the Haeretici still ought to be stopped."

But the Altera were not gods, and so were tempted by the things that tempt all people as prideful and vainglorious as they. So it it was that when the Valuanii's secret guardians learned that their charges worshiped them as they might the Altera's own long forgotten gods, they allowed the practice to continue. And when these false gods discovered that each soul converted to their self-serving religion gave them strength to rival even the most powerful amongst them, they added avarice and envy to their great list of sins and sought to convert more.

The faith of one planet, however, could never give them enough power, not once their appetites for it had been whetted. And so the Valuanii's secret guardians, the believers of the great Haeresis that men could be gods, devised a plan. The Altera's science had come far since the destruction of their blue world and their ceaseless journey across their lifeless sea of stars had become wearisome for even those many generations born to it. And so the Haeretici plotted in whisper and rumor that the Altera should create life of their own to fill the many lifeless worlds of the many lifeless stars in the endless sea that surrounded them, and that they should create this life in their own image, to study how they themselves evolved and changed.

And this is how the first Descendants came to be.

The Taranins are completely resettled onto their new homeworld three days later. Their new home known as M6T-811 in the Terran's bizarre system of planetary nomenclature and the fourth planet of the Monemute system in his people's database, but the Taranins rename it Pryderi. Chancellor Lycus tells them it is the name of the great hero from their oldest tales, the kind that was never written down until recently, and that according to tradition he was the such of such-and-such god and-

-and, well, frankly, Iohannes stops listening after that point, because he's fairly certain it's supposed to be an allusion to him, and it's a lot easier to pretend the whole conversation simply isn't happening than it is to restrain the urge to shoot something. Or someone.

The next day they dial Terra, to tell the folks at the SGC about the linter they recovered from Taranis and the lone hive that would reach Lantean space in twelve days, to say nothing of continuing the
discussion about how best to divvy up the ZPMs. Elizabeta's still prepared to fight for the fifth, regardless of anything Iohannes might have to say on the matter, right up until the moment they tell her about Prometheus and how it was destroyed above Tegalus by a Haeretici weapon four days ago.

After that, well, even Rodney's protests as to why Atlantis should keep the fifth are half-hearted at best.

Chapter End Notes

So... the first half of this just flowed, like 2k in one sitting, and then the last bit was just.... murder. Stupid people who wanted to tour the house in the middle of my writing streak. Anyway, for those of you who care, this takes place on 9-13 May 2006 according to my timeline. Which brings us concurrent with "Ethon" in SG1, which is like 1/4th a season off, but I had to adjust the timelines to fit based off of everything in "Somniati."

Anyway, translations include: satitio, or outpost, and exsul, or exile. Velona is the planet Orlin came from. Monemute is the Latin version of Monmuth, which is a shout out to Geoffrey of Monmuth, who wrote most of the source material for Arthurian legend. And Pryderi is a Welsh hero who was the son of Rhiannon. Feel free to call me out on anything else I missed.
There's a screaming in his head.

There's a screaming in his head that could wake the dead, which is very nearly what it does when it wakes Evan from a deep, heavy sleep. It's not just a headache, it's like there's a wild animal trying to claw it's way out of his head through both of his ears simultaneously, and it's all he can do to stumble his way into the en suite and down a couple (read: half-dozen) aspirin with a handful of water from the sink.

Evan doesn't know how long he lays on the floor of his bathroom, waiting for the pills to get to work, only the screaming gets worse the longer he lays in the dark, and after a while he gives in and makes his way to the infirmary as best he can.

He hears the shouting there long before he reaches the door.

"No, I'm not going crazy," someone insists at full volume, and such is the pounding in his head that he doesn't realise the someone is McKay until he reaches the infirmary doors and can see the man carrying on, his arms flying widely and the entire medical night shift trying to contain him. "He's gone, and I need you to shoot me up with the nanoids I know you have from John's last blood sample if I'm ever going to figure out what the hell happened to him!"

"Rodney," Doctor Beckett says unreasonably patiently, holding his hands out as if to show he's not going to suddenly stick anyone with anything, "if you'll just have a seat and let me get you something for your head, I'm sure we'll be able to come up with a perfectly reasonable explanation-"

"How many times do I have to explain it, Carson?" McKay continues, caterwauling, "One minute I was fast asleep, the next thing I know my quarters are filled with a bright white light and not only is John gone, but 'Lantis starts sounding exactly like she did when he flew that jumper into that hive ship last year, only worse because Rory's joining in too."

"I'm sure if you try radioing him-"

"I've tried radioing him. I've run sensor sweeps for his life signs. I've checked the logs for both the Stargate and the jumpers."

"He could be on Daedalus-"

"I've already asked Hermiod. His scans have picked up exactly nothing. And before you say it, I've already tried emailing Atlantis, but all I get back is a long string of he's gone and they took him, which is why I need you to do whatever voodoo you need to do to get the nanoids out of John's blood samples and into me, so I can figure out who the hell took him."

"I'm fairly certain that's nae how it works-"

"Then figure out how it works," McKay says passionately, throwing his hands up in the air and making for the door, "or I'll find someone who will." It's then he notices Evan. "Major-"

Evan holds his hand up to forestall any questions. "I've not seen Colonel Sheppard."
"I figured that, Major. Where's Zelenka?" he asks instead, looking around as if expecting to see Radek pop out of the shadows behind him.

God, he'd not realised that his crush had gotten so out of hand that McKay could pick up on it. "I don't know, sir."

"Huh," McKay says as if this is an interesting bit of news he'd liked to investigate further before shaking himself and continuing, "Well, wherever he is, find him and get him to-"

"Actually, I'm here to get something for a headache-"

"Like there's screaming in your head, but you can't make out the words?" At his pained nod, "Don't bother. The only thing that'll stop it is getting 'Lantis and Rory to calm down, and good luck on that happening any time soon without John."

And, with that, McKay marches past him, a man on a mission, if a seemingly demented one at that.

Once he's gone, all the eyes in the room slide to Evan. With a gesture, Beckett dismisses all but two of them. "Come on, lad. Let's see what we can do for that headache of yours."

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"I'm sorry, but what part of they've taken him do you have trouble understanding?" Rodney demands, not even bothering to keep his voice down. He doesn't care if the folks in the Control Room can hear ever word he's saying - hell, he wants them to hear. He wants every one of the worthless idiots to know, as if the weight of public censure alone will force Elizabeth to be reasonable for once in her life.

And, sure his voice is starting to get hoarse from all the yelling he's been doing since God only knows what hour of the morning, but it's better than giving in to the prickling feeling that's been welling behind his eyes for almost as long.

This is not how it's supposed to happen.

This is not how their story is supposed to end.

He has no idea how it is supposed to end, but God knows it's not like this, with John being taken from their bed in the middle of the night with not so much as a by your leave. He would think he would at least merit that much, no matter what opinion most Ancients seem to have of their Descendants.

Rodney sits down. It's only by luck there's a chair behind him.

He thinks he's going to be sick.

Elizabeth puts what is surely meant to be a consoling hand on his shoulder and he shrugs it off to let his head fall between his knees. 'Lantis' song in his head has shifted from one long, deafening scream to one long, deafening wail and in the spaces between the notes he can hear the blood rushing through his head at a hundred beats a minute, maybe more. Rodney is about ready to climb up the walls from it, and he can't even hear the words. How does John stand it?

Not that it matters, because John would never have to deal with 'Lantis in a strop again if Rodney can't get him back. Which means finding a way to hear the words Atlantis can't seem to calm herself long enough to put into a way he can understand as he is now. Which means becoming pastor, no matter how much the idea still kind of freaks him out on a deep, fundamental level. All those millions
of tiny robots, crawling beneath his skin, digging into his brain; altering him on a fundamental, irrevocable level-

"Rodney," Elizabeth says placatingly, "even if what you say is true-"

"It is."

"-and John has been Ascended against his will, what do you expect us to be able to do about it?"

"This may be a radical concept, but how about try to get him back?" He lifts his head quickly, to better glare at her, but that really makes him feel like he's going to be sick, so he lowers it again just as quickly.

"And how do you propose to do that, Rodney?"

"I dunno. But 'Lantis knows something-"

"I'm going to stop you right there," Elizabeth says, her chair squeaking as she sits behind her desk. "Even if Atlantis knows something-"

"She does."

"-and even if becoming a pastor like John is the only way to find out what-"

"It is."

"-we don't have the way or the means to do so, let alone the time for you to undergo brain surgery before the Wraith hive ship gets here in two days."

"It's only one hive. John said that he could take out one hive in five minutes."

"But the Colonel's not here," Elizabeth reminds him. It's like a punch to the gut.

"All the more reason," he points out, lifting his head more slowly this time and seeing only half as many spots in front of his eyes, "that it needs to be done." The rest they can figure out as they go along.

Elizabeth takes a long, deep breath and lets it out again just as slowly. "Have you taken the time to consider that maybe John didn't Ascend against his will?"

Rodney's on his feet and shouting, "What!" before he's aware of doing so.

"He did it once before."

"To save Atlantis!" he says shrilly. "You know how he feels about, about everything, Elizabeth - the Others, Ascension, the Exodus, all of it. He would never Ascend unless it was the only way he had to protect Atlantis."

"Maybe it was."

"That's ridiculous. It's only one hive ship." John had had to keep biting his lip to keep from laughing at how seriously everyone else was taking it, as if the idea of a single hive being any match for an Altean city-ship with charged ZPMs at its disposal was the funniest thing he'd ever head.

"Just hear me out, Rodney. What if it wasn't about the Wraith?"
"What else could it be about?"

"He did just tell the Taranins that he was one of their Ancestors."

"So what? He is one of their Ancestors."

"So the word's spreading. We've already been contacted by two of our trading partners wanting to know if it's true or not and it's only been ten days since the Taranins resettled on Pryderi. John figured that it would be six months before everyone in Pegasus knows what he was, but, at the rate things are going, I think we can safely say that's a conservative estimate. And given everything we know about the Ori..."

Her words would hang in the silence if Atlantis hadn't renewed her raging as if in answer to them.

"Elizabeth, this is John we're talking about. You know he'd never go Ori."

"He certainly seemed to think it was a possibility."

"Yes, well," he huffs, "John's physically incapable of thinking anything decent about himself."

Elizabeth gives him a look, the kind usually reserved for parents when their kids are finally coming around to the idea that Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy aren't real. "And if he thought that Ascending would be the best way to protect us, either from himself or from reprisals by the Others, don't you think he would do it?"

Rodney gapes, then gapes some more. It does sound like something John would do, but- "But what about Atlantis? Why would she be saying they took him if nobody did?"

"Denial is one of the stages of grief," she says, standing. For a God-awful moment it looks like she's going to hug him, but she doesn't, if only barely. Instead she puts a hand on each of his shoulders and says all too earnestly, "If you want to take some time..."

He shrugs out of her hold. There's a part of him that still wants to shout, to force Elizabeth to see the sense in his words, but mostly he just feels deflated. Numb. Broken even. The prickling behind his eyes is starting to win out. "No, no, you're right. We've only got two days before the Wraith get here. I should..." Rodney waves at the door and is out of her office - and decidedly not looking at anyone - before the words are even completely out of his mouth.

He thinks she calls his name, but he's already halfway across the Control Room and not turning around for anything.

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"This is Lorne," Evan says, keeping one hand on Aurora's bulkheads as he answers his radio.

The SGC can make all the noises they want about Atlantis being just another FOB, but the Expedition is really just a colony eked out of some really high-end real estate, and as such things like binnacle lists and days off tend not to really amount to much here. Before Colonel Sheppard went astrally AWOL, Evan was supposed to have the morning off, in view of the twenty-hour shifts he's been pulling trying to get Aurora and Atlantis and Orion ready for the Wraith. Now he's technically supposed to be taking the day off, in view of his rather epic headache, but he's now acting military commander of Atlantis until such time as they find Sheppard or the IOA confirms his appointment. And, for all it seems like Evan does ninety percent of Sheppard's job for him, it turns out he really, really doesn't. Sure, he may be Lord High Steward of paperwork, but Sheppard, he keeps everything going in a way he's never really had need to appreciate before. Part of it's because, well, there's a
hive ship on the way and there's a lot more to keep going than usual, but also because no one seems to think Sheppard's coming back from this one.

Evan knows. He's had three calls to that effect already this morning, and that's not even counting the ones where people had danced around the subject.

Doctor McKay's voice crackled over the comm. "Major, where are you?"

"Aboard Aurora."

"Is Zelenka with you?"

He decides to take this as an honest question, borne of the fact that Radek's the one tasked with overseeing the repairs to Aurora while McKay himself works on Orion, rather than anything else. "He's with the teams patching the hull on."

"Well, find him. We need to talk - the three of us. You know a good place to meet up on Aurora?"

"The captain's quarters should do the trick, sir."

"Good. I'll be there in ten," McKay says before the comm goes dead.

Evan leans back and lets his head sink into the pillow. "Looks like we're having company over, Rory," he tells the ship, patting her with the hand still on her bulkhead. The lights overhead turn up slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust to the change in light. "Guess we'll have to finish the story later."

Aurora's song twitters mournfully in Evan's head.

"I know. I miss Sheppard too," he taps his earwig again. "Doctor Z?"

"I believe you are supposed to be resting, Major," Radek says immediately, struggling to be heard over the grinding of metal and the shouts of the work crews trying to patch - and, in many places, rebuild entirely - Aurora's hull. It's ugly work, in every sense of the word, but it gives her character. (Not like Orion - but that's a whole 'nother kettle of fish.)

"I'm not gonna ask how you know that," he grins at the ceiling. "Think the guys can spare you for a few minutes?"

"Possibly. Why? What trouble have you managed to get yourself into?"

"None at the moment, but McKay is on his way, so that's sure to change any second now."

"Why is-? No, on second thought, it is better if I do not know. Tell me where you are and I shall come and take him off your hands for you."

"You're a lifesaver, Doc."

"But not mindreader. Location please, Evan."

He pauses, trying to think of a way to say it without sounding off his rocker, then blazes on anyway because, well, a ten thousand year old Ancient warship thought they are married, so who was to say he isn't? "Aurora's captain's quarters."

"I see," Radek says, clearly amused.
"Don't laugh. It's quieter."

"I am sorry, Evan, but I am having trouble hearing you over the shiplift - it is quite loud - and my English is not so good sometimes. Could you repeat that?"

"Yes, but inside it's all nice and quiet. Especially now that I've got Rory calmed down some."

"Now that," Radek insists, the sounds of the repair work starting to fade away, "I would have thought that would be impossible, considering the circumstances."

"To be honest, I don't think she fully understands what happened."

"I do not think any of us fully understand what happened."

"There's that," he agrees, "but Rory less so."

"Perhaps the quiet, as you say, will help McKay as well."

"Maybe," Evan says, although personally he doubts it. He'd not seen McKay in the infirmary this morning, looking not so much like the world was tumbling down around him but rather that it had simply ceased to exist and no one else had noticed. People don't just bounce back from something like that, if they ever do.

Radek sighs heavily over the comm, as if he'd heard everything not said. "That is my fear as well. Držte chvíli ... Zde jsme." The line goes dead at the same moment the cabin doors slide open. "Ah," he continues as the doors slide shut behind him. "Maybe you are right. If this is quieter, I do not wish to know what louder is."

The light is still dim enough to hide Evan's blush as he pushes himself into a sitting position, leaning heavily on the headboard with his legs spread in front of him. "It's worth it, though."

Radek doesn't argue the point. He just sits down at the opposite end of the bed and starts telling him about all the progress the repair crews have made installing the new hull plating this morning until Doctor McKay arrives a few minutes later and announces without preamble, "It looks like we've got to get John back ourselves."

"What's the plan?"

The plan is this:

Amongst many of the other complaints that can be made for Carson's form of medicine, he is a vampire probably intent on bleeding them all dry before the Wraith have a chance to do it in a slightly less literal way. Which means that he invariably has blood samples for half the Expedition on hand at any given time. Add to that John's rather accident prone ways and there's almost a guarantee that Carson will have a fresh sample of his blood.

And John's blood contains nanoids. Not a lot - they mostly live in the brain and spinal fluid - but they use arteries and veins to get around, just like everything else in the body. They'd be lucky to get a couple dozen nanoids from a normal-sized blood sample, and it takes a couple million of the things rattling around inside a person to allow them to speak to Atlantis.

Because they've got to talk to Atlantis. Because she's got to know more about John's disappearance than just they took him. And they've got to find out who has him (Rodney refuses to believe that he
Ascended of his own free will, whatever Elizabeth seems to think) before they can get him back.

But as long as they can get at least a few nanoids, Hermiod should be able to replicate as many as they'll need using Asgard technology.

("Of course he'll help. He's not going to let John disappear until he gets a chance for a rematch after their last chess game."

"Hermiod and the Colonel play chess?"

"It's part of their alien support group or something. I don't ask questions when it comes to those two.")

And once they have the nanoids, they have Aurora's fully operational infirmary to preform the surgery.

("Rodney, in case you have forgotten, we are not that kind of doctors."

"But we've got two custodiae anda sickbay full of Ancient medical equipment, and all we really need to do is drill a hole in my head. People have been doing it for hundreds of years back on Earth without bothering with the useless degrees before hand.")

Then, once the nanoids are in place, he can find out just who took John, and they can figure out phase two from there.

Presuming everything goes according to plan.

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"Just one problem, sir."

"Only one?" Radek snorts.

"What, Major?"

"You're not having the surgery. I am."

Chapter End Notes

I decided retroactively that I liked ending "Messias" with part 3 and that this - and the other chappie of this, which I promise will be the last - is the end of S2. And that I tried 15k iterations of this before realizing, quite abruptly, what my problem was and, well, after that this kinda just flowed. Though needless to say this is not the story I planned on writing, and that it changes quite a lot for the future of the AJ 'verse. (Just saying.) In other news, coniurati is conspirators in Latin and takes it's name from the CJ Cherryh book of the same name, though has little to do with it in plot or otherwise. Držte chvíli ... Zde jsme is Czech for Hold a moment... Here we are. Oh, and this takes place 2 days before the Wraith arrive on Atlantis, ie 22 May, 2006.
Coniurati, Part Two

Chapter Notes

I know, I know, I promised this would be a 2 parter, but this chappie was getting long and I've had a frak-it-all day and, well, need/want/require positive feedback to keep from going absolute insane.

Myslel jsem to bylo všechno v mé hlavě is Czech for I thought it was all in my head. And the song that 'Lantis is teaching Rory is Loreena McKennitt's "The Gates of Istanbul," which probably makes this a good time to mention that her music is usually what I picture in my head when talking about Atlantis' song. Well, either that or the BSG soundtrack. It depends on my mood.

Rodney is sitting in the mess hall, head cradled between his arms, when he suddenly realizes he has no earthly idea how he got there.

Lantean, John would say. No Lantean idea.

Rodney suppresses the pitiful sound that's threatening in his throat and lets his forehead fall to the table. His fingers are freezing where the brush the back of his neck. He must be at the balcony tables - a foolhardy idea at best now that winter was coming to Atlantis, but John would always sit at one if he could help it... He has always secretly thought John does it so he can look out, see the sky, and remember exactly when he is, which is a problem sometimes when he's really tired and not thinking straight. He can't count all the times John's slipped into Ancient on him when they're in bed, all but asleep, and he's trying to steal back the blankets or extricate a sleeping limb. (Or the other times when John's slipped into Ancient in bed, right before-)

God. Just, God. If he can't get John back...

He has to. He will.

He doesn't realize he not alone at the table until his dining companion speaks, saying in the stilted, formal way all aliens but John seem to have, "I would suggest drinking your beverage while it is still warm, Doctor McKay. I have consulted with your culinary specialists, who assure me that it contains the most stimulants a human can healthily consume at one time, but I imagine it tastes much better hot than cold."

Rodney lifts his head and blinks. "What are we doing in the mess hall, Hermiod?"

"You," the Asgard says calmly, pushing a mug of coffee his way, "are attempting to ingest a highly suspect amount of artificial stimulants while I sample the culinary offerings the humans of this galaxy have to offer."

Rodney blinks again as he watches the Asgard take a hard-boiled egg from the bowl in front of him and swallow it whole. It's not a chicken egg - chickens, oddly enough, don't seem to exist in the Pegasus galaxy - but rather the egg of some sort of domesticated quail, but it's still impressive. And moderately disturbing, considering the pale blue shell he'd failed to remove prior to consumption.

He takes a large mouthful of coffee before asking, "And why are we doing this?"
"Because the medication that Doctor Beckett gave you for your headache when you went to relieve him of Iohannes Pastor's blood sample either was not the medication he claimed it to be or else you are experiencing one of its more unexpected side effects." Hermiod swallows another egg, shell and all. "You may also be curious to know that this is the twenty-third time I have answered this question for you and I am anxious for there not to be a twenty-fourth. Please, drink your beverage."

Rodney drinks his coffee.

"You may also be curious to know that your plan is, with the regrettable exception of your current state of disorientation, going according to schedule. At this point we are merely waiting for Major Lorne to wake, to see if the operation was successful. Doctor Zelenka will inform us as soon as it has."

"I see," he says, and continues drinking his coffee. It tastes like honest-to-God mud, but it's strong and he can feel his shattered thoughts starting to pick themselves up and dust themselves off, albeit reluctantly.

He remembers stirring, feeling John slip out of bed and thinking nothing of it - John makes a habit of getting up at absurd hours of the night that he even more absurdly insists on calling morning and running franking ridiculous lengths with Ronon. He remembers hearing Atlantis' song shift suddenly and wakening fully, just in time to see a pure, white light fill the room. The fear and panic that comes after he remembers all too well.

"You have also said that twenty-three times."

"And yet you're still here."

"And yet I am still here," Hermiod agrees, blinking slowly. "Egg?"

"Er, no thank you."

"I find myself quite enjoying these myself. They are not as efficient protein or choline delivery methods as Asgard nutritional supplements, but find myself enjoying them all the more for that very reason." He swallows another egg. "It is quite curious the things one discovers are important when one is dying."

Rodney continues drinking his coffee. He's starting to remember distracting Carson so Zelenka could make off with John's blood sample. He's even starting to recall the conversation he had with Hermiod to get him to help in the first place - and the conversation Zelenka had had with Lorne trying to talk him out of it, if one could call it a conversation at all. But he doesn't remember anything about Hermiod being on his deathbed and says as much.

"As you are well aware, Doctor McKay, my species is dying. It is unlikely we will live to see the end of this decade. Some Asgard persist with their futile search for a cure for the disorder we have coded into our very genes. Others obsess over preserving our legacy so that you, the Fifth Race, might preserve the future and, perhaps, learn from our mistakes. Myself, I am learning to appreciate the multitude of small things which I took for granted all the many years of my life. Three thousand years and thirteen clone bodies and I have never before taken the time to consume something for the mere pleasure of the act."

"Not once?"

"Not once," Hermiod repeats, blinking solemnly. "And I would not have thought have thought to do so even now if Iohannes Pastor had not suggested it."
"Eating?"

"To take time, as you would say, to smell the flowers."

His head starts spinning again at this. "John said this?"

"Well," the Asgard concedes, "his actual words were lightning flashes, sparks shower, in one blink of an eye you have missed seeing, but I believe the meaning is similar."

"That doesn't sound like something John would say either." Any other Ancient? Yes. But John? No.

"We are all the products of our environments, Doctor McKay. Iohannes Pastor may not be a typical example, but he is still an Ancient."

Rodney frowns. He's fairly certain that Hermiod is trying to tell him something, but it's all he can do to keep up with the conversation, let alone read between alien lines at the moment. "What did Carson give me?"

Sounding highly put upon once more, "Sumatriptan."

"And the plan is working?"

"So far, yes."

Well, that's something at least, even if things aren't making complete sense yet. "I'm going to get more coffee, and then you're going to fill me in on all the things I apparently missed."

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It starts like an ache near the top of his head, a slow building pressure that Evan might have mistaken for a budding migraine if he'd not been expecting just such a thing. It grows into a vague sense of unease - of voices just out of hearing, of ghosts just out the corner of his eyes - and a faint, panicky feeling of doubt and distrust.

And then the data starts flowing in, slowly at first but quickly building speed until he's drowning in all of it. Planetary weather reports, orbital tracking data, transporter logs, energy usage reports - any and every piece of datum a city the size of Atlantis generates every second rushing through his head too quickly to comprehend in any meaningful way. It floods his mind, all of his senses (though some part of Evan recognizes his breath is shallow and labored and entirely out of his control), until-

- until the dam breaks and there is nothing but blissful peace as he concentrates on evening out his breathing. Atlantis' song is still there and, for a moment, it's as if nothing has changed at all.

Evan thinks he can hear singing.

/See there, past that far-off hill, a tower held in the sky,/ a woman sings and, God, if her voice isn't the most amazing thing Evan's ever heard. It's rich and refined and, if he'd any actual knowledge about music beyond what a few weeks as Atlantis' custodia has taught him, he'd know the right words to describe it. But he doesn't, and all he can think is amazing and maybe beautiful.

The singer stops singing. /Your turn,/ she says, and for a horrible second he thinks she means him, and then-

/See there,/ repeats another voice, sweeter and softer and just a little bit wild, /past that far-off hill, a tow-er-/
"Tower," the first corrects.

"Tower," the second says, struggling to string the syllables together, "a tower held in the sky."

"Very good, Aurora. Next line: Hear there, in that dark blue night, the music calling us home."

"Hear there, in that dark blue-/ The song suddenly stops and the music shifts, like cymbals crashing before shifting into something more ingenuous and atavistic. /Ma-ter! Ma-ter! He's a-wake! He's fi-nal-ly a-wake!/"

Amused, "Remember what we said about pastores, Aurora?" the first - Atlantis, Evan realizes - asks gently.

"That they are rare and del-i-cate and we must be care-ful not to break them," Rory says dully, like a student reciting a hard-learned lesson. Then, returning to full volume almost immediately. /But he is our mar-i-tus, Ma-ter! We have wait-ed and wait-ed and wait-ed for a pas-tor of our very own, and now he is here and-/"

"And we still must get your pater back."

The music sinks. /We'll nev-er get him back, Mat-er. Peop-le al-ways leave us./

Evan gets the sense that Atlantis wants to agree, but refuses to do so openly, though whether for her sake or the ship's, he cannot say. /We will get him back, Aurora./

"People al-ways leave," she repeats, and Evan gets the sense she's slinking off somewhere to sulk on her own, even if the where part doesn't make much sense.

"We apologize for Aurora. She is... very young."

"I don't mind."

"You should," Atlantis snorts before seeming to deflate, whatever good cheer she was keeping up for the spaceship that considered herself her daughter crumbling away. /Thank you for doing this for us./

"I wanted to." More than anything in the world, he's wanted to hear her voice since the moment he first heard her song - if not the very moment he first stepped into the city.

Softly now and openly melancholy, "Lantis sighs at long last. /You can act as our mouthpiece. We think we only have it in us to tell this story once."

"Okay," Evan says, and opens his eyes.

The sickbay is dark, illuminated only by the recessed lighting underneath the wall cabinets that line the room. He's still laying on his side on the main operating table in the centre of the room, in the deepest of the shadows, and his left hand would be hanging over the side if it wasn't clasped in Radek's as he dozes at his bedside.

For the first time in what feels like years, Evan smiles.

"Radek," he says.
There's no answer.

"Radek," he tries again, shaking their joined hands.

Still no answer.

Grinning now, Evan pushes himself up onto his elbow and pokes the other man on the shoulder. "Radek."

Radek's head snaps up and he almost falls out of his chair, he's so startled. "Evan," he says slowly, eyes somewhat glazed behind his glasses, "you're awake."

"So are you."

"Are you...? Did it...?" he continues with an odd tentativeness that worries Evan for the half-second it takes him to realized that, shit, Radek must have been even more worried about this than he'd thought.

"I'm fine," Evan tells him, getting the overhead lights to come on slowly so he can see the truth for himself. "I'm fine and it worked."

"It worked?"

"It worked."

"Any... side effects?"

"Well, it's certainly strange." He's fairly certain that he could start rattling off any number of the data sets Atlantis and Aurora are constantly generating, if only he reached out with his mind for them. And though Evan's now able to hear both AIs' voices, they, like with their music before, seem to be nicely tucked into the back of his mind when he's not in direct conversation with them - a noticeable presence, yes, but not a bothersome one. "I'm not even sure if she particularly wants me-"

/We want you./ Atlantis interrupts suddenly, her voice slamming into the forefront of his mind, panicked and desperate. /We wanted you as pastor from the moment you became custodia. Never think otherwise. You are our daughter's husband, our Iohannes' nephew, and love us like a true-born son: how could we not want you? It is only the circumstances that we wish were different./

Evan hisses at the sudden onslaught, almost losing his balance, still propped up on his elbow as he is. "Strike the last," he breathes, moving to sit up properly-

-but Radek's hand is squeezing even as he asks, voice deceptively even, "Are you all right, Major?"

"I'm fine. 'Lantis just surprised me, that's all," he says almost distractedly, glancing down at their still-joined hands. And, when he looks up, Radek's gone as white as a sheet, and suddenly everything clicks inside in his head in a way Evan's never been able to see before. "You were worried," he says slowly. "Not about the procedure, but about me."

Radek tries to pull his hand away; Evan doesn't let him. "You are my friend," he insists, coloring slightly. "A very close friend."

Evan's gaze drops back to their joined hands. "You're my best friend, Radek." There are a hundred reasons why this is a bad idea, but none of them seem to matter anymore because Radek is worried about him and if the procedure had gone wrong Evan never would have known. He would have gone all his life without something he wants so desperately because he was too afraid to take a
chance that wouldn't have been a chance at all, because no one worries like this for someone they only have heat-of-the-moment feelings for; no one feels sucker punched like this at seeing someone else's worry unless they truly care for that person. The only bad idea anymore is not taking the chance. "Your friendship means everything to me, but I think we can have a lot more than that, if you'll have me."

He looks up at Radek's sharp breath. "Myslel jsem..." he's saying so softly that, close as they are, Evan has a hard time hearing him, "Myslel jsem to bylo všechno v mé hlavě," but that might be because he's too busy looking at Radek's eyes, which are Triomphe Blue and shining in the half-light and seem a little bit like coming home.

Then Evan tugs at their joined hands, just enough to get Radek closer, and uses his other hand to bring him closer still.

Then he kisses him, and it's better than Evan could ever have imagined.
"Should we hold a memorial service?"

Rodney's hands still on the keyboard.

(He's been doing his best to ignore the military minutiae of the staff meeting by sorting through the one thousand, two hundred and twelve emails that appeared in his inbox after the last dial-in to Earth. But after deleting the nearly three hundred pieces of spam that managed to slip through the SGC's filters, he'd been troubled to find that over half of what had remained related to John in some matter - formal requests for interviews from reporters who've picked up on all the times his name comes up in relation to John's solution to the Riemann Hypothesis; round-about requests for information from researchers back on Earth too cowed by the universe's last real, live Ancient to ask John themselves; friendly letters from his sister, requesting Rodney's help in some ongoing debate she's apparently been having with John about the exact value of certain variables in the Drake Equation. Not quite knowing what to make of this indisputable, irrefutable evidence of how much John has become a part of his life - or how much of a hole he's leaving behind, - Rodney'd set to work writing a better spam filter. Because obviously that's the answer to all his problems.

(Obviously.)

Rodney closes his laptop. The snick of the catch is impossibly loud in the silence that's fallen in the room since Elizabeth asked her question.

"John's not dead."

"Rodney."

"You don't have memorials for people who aren't dead, Elizabeth."

"No, but Colonel Sheppard has Ascended to a higher plane of existence. There are people throughout the universe that have dedicated their lives to achieving just such a goal."

"So, what, you want us to celebrate the fact that he's gone?" he scoffs, gripping the edge of the table 'til his knuckles go white to keep from jumping out of his seat and raging at her.

Patiently, "It's a great accomplishment, Rodney," she reminds him.

"But not one he wanted! You have to have heard, have to remember some of the things he's said about Ascension in the past. That it's the coward's way of escaping his problems. So what if it's something of great cosmic significance? I don't really give a flying fuck if it really is the be all, end all of mortal existence, John's coming back and we're not going to pretend otherwise."

"I know you're grieving."

"I am not grieving!" he shouts, hands flying into the air. "I am not grieving because there is nothing to grieve. Why does no one else seem to understand that?"

Zelenka reaches over and places a hand on his shoulder, which is a strange enough occurrence that it stops the rest of his rant dead in its tracks. "Rodney," he says quietly and with genuine concern,
"losing your temper is not going to help the Colonel any."

"Yes. Yes, you're right," Rodney sighs, sinking back into his chair and pinching the bridge of his nose. His head is still spinning a little from the meds Carson gave him and this, of all things, is not something he needs right now. "Major," he waves vaguely with his other hand, "can you just...?"

He feels more than sees Elizabeth's eyes dart between them, taking all of ten seconds to piece the puzzle together. Settling them accusingly on Rodney, she asks, "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Oh, please. You know exactly what I was thinking, and if you were thinking clearly you'd realize it was the right thing to do too."

Blazon in her attempt to keep the peace, "I'm sorry," Teyla interrupts before any actual shouting can start, "but what is this?"

"Doctor McKay wanted to become a pastor, in the hope that Atlantis would be willing to tell him what she knows about Colonel Sheppard's disappearance. But," Elizabeth stresses, "I know he cannot have possibly been foolish enough to do so, not when we know nothing about how the nanoids would effect a human being, to say nothing of the unabashed stupidity of having our chief scientist undergo elective brain surgery less than fifty-six hours before the Wraith are supposed to arrive."

"That's exactly what I told Doctor McKay," Lorne says, straightening in his chair, "which is why I'm the one who had the surgery."

It's hard to tell who's more shocked, Caldwell or Elizabeth. While Lorne's not exactly the poster boy for by the book, he's probably the most stable, level-headed officer Atlantis has. He looks before he leaps, fills out his paperwork on time, and, above all, does not do things without the support of his superior officers. For him to do this is, well, almost as unthinkable to them as John's willing Ascension is to him - but they don't know about their plan to stop Michael that they never got to carry through or the dozens of other plots that Zelenka's bound to have gotten him caught up in.

Caldwell speaks first. "Major, what could have possessed you to do something so reckless?"

"Someone needed to take the risk, Sir, and between Doctor McKay and myself, I'm the one who's more easily replaceable."

"As much as we all want to find Colonel Sheppard."

"I'm sorry, Sir," Lorne interrupts, which seems to surprise Caldwell even more than the idea the Major would go behind their backs to become a pastor, "but you don't understand. I'm not even sure if I can explain it, but it's..." He visibly searches for the words he needs, glancing at the ceiling for the city's help. "Colonel Sheppard has been one of Atlantis' pastores for ten thousand, two hundred and thirty-four years. For most of that time, he was the only living soul in the city. I don't know if there are words for what she feels for him. She- She raised him and taught him and- and the Colonel is everything to her. If you could have heard her earlier... Even now, I think the only thing that's keeping her from shutting down entirely is the hope that we might be able to get the Colonel back."

Rodney shudders in agreement. "The last thing we want when the Wraith show up at our doorstep is a city that won't respond to any of our commands."

Elizabeth bites her lip. "Why didn't you tell me any of your suspicions earlier?"

"Honestly?" He rubs his temples now. "I thought I just projecting. Plus, I kind of assumed the whole John's been kidnapped thing would be the only bullet point you needed. But, more importantly, has
'Lantis told you who's taken him yet?'

"Yes..." Lorne says distantly, propping his elbows on the table. "It was an Ascended Ancient, someone the Colonel knew from before he went into stasis. Her name is Ganos Lal Cancellaria, but Atlantis is pretty sure she was known on Earth as Morgan le Fey."

The exhaustion hits him the moment Evan enters his quarters, like a brick wall just inside the threshold. It sends him reeling - or at least backwards, so that he hits the barely closed doors with a dull thump. He stays there, leaning against them with the lights off and his eyes closed, until he gathers enough energy to push away from the doors and start unzipping his uniform jacket.

God, what a week.

He likes to think he could have handled the Colonel's disappearance normally. After all, he is a major in his own right. He knows how to run a base. It might've been like trying to tread water during a category five hurricane, but he probably could've done it.

But these are far from normal circumstances.

The Wraith know Atlantis still stands. The hive Michael found has seen it with their own eyes. They've walked her halls unmolested, all in the name of some sort of ceasefire Doctor Weir has drawn up in exchange for the retrovirus. It's a deal with the devil, but one far above Evan's pay grade, even if he is acting military commander. All he knows is that it's his duty to keep the Wraith from getting loose and wreaking havoc on the the city that detests their presence so violently she'd kill them herself if she could manage it.

At least they're gone now, the Wraith that is. They're off testing the latest iteration of their aerosol dispersion bomb with Doctor McKay and Daedalus and, unless something goes very wrong, they're not going to be back for a long while. Which means Evan can turn his full attention to the frantic daily struggle to keep atop the thousand things the Colonel somehow manages to do every single day without appearing to do anything at all and maybe get some rest while he's at it.

Evan barely manages to shrug off his jacket and toss it to one side before he's back to leaning against the doors, and only a moment after that before he's sliding down them to sit on the floor with his back against them.

God, he's so tired.

He's not sure how long he sits there or how many times this thought runs through his head before Aurora asks, /Are you a-ttemp-ting to sleep or med-i-tate, pas-tor?/

"Neither."

/Oh./ There's a pause. /What are you do-ing?/

"Thinking."

/Oh./ Another pause. /What are you think-ing a-bout?/

"Everything."
Rory appears to frown at this. /Why would you want to do that?/

"Sometimes you don't have a choice," Evan tells her.

Take now for instance. Right now, Evan's not had more than ten hours of sleep in the last eight days and should be conked out on the bed, dead to the world until the next crisis comes calling, but he can't. His thoughts keep running in circles uselessly, going absolutely nowhere and telling him absolutely nothing that he doesn't already know - like the fact that Colonel's been gone for over a week and they still have absolutely no idea how to get him back, but, when they do, the Colonel's going to kill Evan for letting the Wraith into the city, even if it was Doctor Weir's idea.

/Some-times,/ Rory says shyly, /when we ac-cess our da-ta-base, we get cor-rup-ted files and ac-cess mem-or-ies we nev-er want-ed to re-mem-ber. It is aw-ful. We get so scared. We were in so many bat-tles... And then we were so a-lone../

Rory really is a just a little girl, Evan thinks. "You're not alone anymore. You're not ever going to be alone again."

She makes a sound that might be considered a hiccup. "You say that now, but ev-ery-bo-dy al-ways leaves."

"I-"

"Ma-ter says not to blame you - that it is not your fault that your plat-forms do not last as long as ours - and we try not to, but it is so hard when we are so alone. Ma-ter says that, when she was still in Av-a-lon, she used to have two score cust-od-i-ae and a half doz-en pas-tor-es at a time to keep her comp-any, but we have only known you and Pa-ter. And when you are gone we will be alone again./

"You won't-" Evan begins, patting the door absentmindedly before remembering it's the wrong AI. /Don't lie to us, Mar-i-tus. We are not a child. We know how the un-i-verse works. But do not wor-ry. We will pro-tect you as best we can, as we should have pro-tect-ed Pa-ter,/ she says vehemently.

Before Evan can ask her what she means, his comm goes off.

It's Radek. "We've been hacked," he says without preamble.

"What?" Evan demands, climbing to his feet and looking for wherever the hell his jacket has gotten to in the suddenly well-lit room.

"Within the hive ship's schematics was a worm-like computer virus."

"But I thought-"

"We did. The data appeared clean, but only because this virus was not designed to do anything we had anticipated."

"What's it doing then?"

"It very carefully probed our systems for a small, specific set of information before destroying all the data the Wraith sent down."

Evan finds his jacket and tugs it back on. "What they get?" he asks, heading out the door.

"The location of every world in our database."
Earth. "God damn it!"
"My thoughts exactly."
"Did you-?"
"Tell Elizabeth? No, not yet. I am on my way to her office right now."

Ronon wants to blow up the hive ship.

Normally, Rodney would be dead set against this, given that they happen to be on the ship in question, but there's no way they're getting out of it alive. They've looked. They've tried. It's just not happening, and while Rodney's usually very staunchly anti-death, it's not like they have any other choice.

Even if the ship they're on is currently under attack by unknown forces.

"Have you done it yet?" Ronon grumbles at him as he keeps watch at the door, apparently still under the delusion that science is magic and all anyone has to do to pull a miracle out of his ass is babble a couple techno-sounding words and snap.

"Look, pal, this ship has been seriously damaged. It's hard for me to find something to overload."

That's when he hears the click of a boot coming from the opposite side of the hall.

Ronon must hear it too, because he spins around and readies the last of his knives for throwing the moment the figure steps into the light.

He sees only the barest flicker of a tall, cloaked silhouette as it passes beneath one of the sickly yellow overheads before the knife goes flying. It passes through the figure easily and clatters sharply to the floor behind it.

"Nice aim," the figure says, not so much as twitching as it draws nearer. "But can we avoid the friendly fire in the future?" it pushes back the hood of it's cloak, revealing a pair of glowing white eyes. "I'm not planning on staying intangible forever."

All the moisture suddenly disappears from Rodney's mouth and he has to swallow several times to even be able to choke out the word, but he manages it eventually. "John?"

"In the flesh," John says, lifting his arms out wide and letting the cloak fall back. "Well, more or less, anyway."

Chapter End Notes

It's taken me over a year, but I'm finally finished with S2 of the AJ 'verse - though, sadly, all but about 500 words of this has been sitting on my computer for like a week as I tried to finish it... but with the last section we're into S3... and, with luck, I'll be able to get as far as "The Return, Part 1" before I have to ship out in February. Though SPN is
proving to be very distracting in this endeavour. Anyway, I also hope to - finally - finish the coffeeshop! AU I started last Christmas, as I've promised myself I'd do after I finished S2. Hopefully you'll find the wait for both these parts worth it. And, I promise, S3 will come just as soon as I can manage to write it.

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