East of the Sun, West of the Moon, Chapter One

by dossier
Ok nugget, kick the tires, light the fires, 
select Zone 5, tag the bogey 
but don't get in a furball. 
Don't boresight, check six, 
bingo to Mom — Got it? 
[http://www.tailhook.org/AVSLANG.htm](http://www.tailhook.org/AVSLANG.htm)

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Day One

John looks at the tiny screen of the F-302, which shorts and rolls a few times. He waits it out until the targeting viewer comes back online. The rogue virus ship is in the center of the screen, and he has a lock. He fires and tracks the AMRAAM that heads on course, until it suddenly and inexplicably veers off screen and into the sun's corona, missing the target altogether.

John swears softly, and dives after the infected F-302. "Rodney!"

"What just happened? Are you crazy?" Rodney has been holding it together, but his voice edges into a higher register as he takes in John's heading.

"Listen up, I think the virus managed to worm into the active guidance system on the Slammers."

Rodney swears, "Oh, Christ."

The hangar bay was open to vacuum, no way to land, fix the problem and go back out. "Daedalus, the first missile failed to reach its target. I've got one more, and this time I'm going to try to ram it down its throat." Maybe he could initiate the internal radar sensors on the missile if he got close enough. The rogue F-302 seriously reminds John of his particularly tenacious ex-wife.

The reply is broken, but John picks out "..stood... careful..." from the static.

"Sheppard! Bad idea! We've probably already gotten enough radiation to make my hair fall out!" Rodney's hysteria is reaching full-blown proportions.

John coolly ignores the impending breakdown behind him; their very survival depends on this working. "Sorry, Rodney, we have to do this. Just a few more seconds."

"Sheppard, every minute longer we're out here, playing in the sunlight, we're increasing our chances of not surviving this stunt. Have you ever seen anyone who's had too much radiation?"

"Yes, Rodney I have." John distinctly recalls having this conversation on Atlantis. John flips the 302 over, dives on the z-axis and twists in a way that wouldn't be possible in anything John has flown before—including a 'jumper. He thinks 'sweet' just before firing his last missile from a direction that he hopes will catch the rogue off guard. That, more than anything John says, shuts Rodney up.

When it fails to acquire its target and goes the same way as the first, John turns back towards the Daedalus. "This is Sheppard, the mission was no joy, I repeat, no joy. Returning to base."

John lands smoothly in the airless hangar bay and noses the craft as close to the inner door as
possible. "Flight, we're home. Any idea how we're going to get out of here?"

"We're working on it. It was worth a try, John." Elizabeth's voice over the radio is sick with disappointment.

John is interrupted before he can apologize for failing to destroy the target. "Brace for impact!"

Klaxons begin to wail, and the Daedalus is hit, shuddering and groaning. John and Rodney are helpless, trapped in their F-302, listening to the damage reports overlapping one another and coming in fast and furious. The hyper-drive is damaged, Hermiod is down, life support systems are offline—status unknown, and crewmen are trying to close bulkhead doors manually to prevent the affected sections from venting their atmosphere out into space.

"This is bad, really bad." Rodney is talking to himself at this point. "I can't do anything out here, mechanical engineering isn't like astrophysics, and I need hands-on, visuals to work with."

Suddenly the sub-light engines are running, John can tell, because he can feel the heavy throbbing through his seat. He can't stand it anymore, he has to know. "What the hell's going on up there?" he shouts into the radio.

Colonel Caldwell gives him a terse sit rep. "The rogue took out our hyper-drive engines, we've sustained serious damage to the life support systems. We've got sub-light engines for the moment, so we're going to try to land on the closest planet so we can effect some repairs."

"Huh," is all Rodney has to say.

John goes tense at the sudden lack of vibration when the sub-light engines go offline again without warning. The ship's intercom is blaring an alarm telling all hands to secure for impact, and Caldwell barks at John over the radio. "Sheppard, take off, get out of there. You're not secured for landing."

"Roger that." He'd jammed the nose of the F-302 in as close to the door as possible, which wasn't the ideal position for a quick getaway. As John turns the craft around, the jet engines are probably damaging everything in his wake, but he can't worry about that right now.

Finally John gets them free, and he takes off. He circles around the Daedalus and assumes the standard fighter escort position, just off her port bow.

Neither John nor Rodney is talking about it; they're both still hoping that the sub-light engines can be restarted and the impending landing can be controlled to some degree. John watches the tiny planet in question as it swiftly grows larger and larger. It's striped in wide swaths of red and green bands surrounding the tiny white poles, and if it weren't for those, he'd say it looked remarkably like Mars. He wonders if the Daedalus has had a chance to determine whether or not they were even going to be able to breathe down there. The green gives John some reassurance that it will be okay.

They lose sight of the Daedalus momentarily as they pass through the wispy clouds at extreme altitude, and the Daedalus' velocity increases geometrically as she falls towards the planet, creating a thin, blue contrail. The heat flare around the Daedalus flashes up in sheets of blue, and all hope of avoiding a crash dies as she arrows towards the red equator.

From his vantage point in the air, the crash is spectacular in the burnished purple light of a sunset. The trajectory is low and long, and there is a brief flash of fire around the ship that flames up blue and red and hot, until Daedalus' high velocity quenches the fire, pushing the air away as it reaches
the ground.

The huge ship skips and skids along the ground, leaving behind her a long, dark gouge as spectacular sprays of sand are thrown up around her, along with pieces of the ship that fly off and litter the trail behind her. It seems as if she takes forever to come to stuttering halt, but when John looks at his watch, it has really been only a couple of minutes. He does a slow fly-by of the smoking ship, through the rapidly clearing clouds of dust that obscure the site, judging if he can see the hangar well enough to make the landing, or if he should even try, considering the smoldering, cherry red hull.

John checks his fuel monitor, and it's edging towards the red bars at the bottom end; he decides to land anywhere he can, for if he doesn't they'll crash and burn, too. The dissipating dust cloud reveals that the port hanger bay is buried in sand, and though the right is nominally free, the Daedalus is tilted down at the stern. John could make it—he's done crazier things in aircraft—but because Rodney's in the back seat, he doesn't take the chance.

The sand billows around them, and the 302 does its own hop and skip when John lands a couple of hundred yards away from the Daedalus. They sit for a moment while John takes in the situation; there is a scent of fear-quickened sweat and high-octane fuel in the cockpit, and John can hear the faint patter and hiss of sand landing on the canopy as the dust clears. The temperature in the cockpit is rising fast, and rapidly reaching uncomfortable levels.

The gravity feels higher than normal, but John can't tell if the sick feeling he has in his gut is that or distress. He clamps down on the nausea, promises himself the time to freak out later. He tries to raise the bridge on the radio, but he doesn't get an answer. He undoes his seat restraints to turn around and check on Rodney. "You okay?"

Rodney's eyes are huge and focused on the broken ship. "We are so fucked."

"Yeah. Come on, let's get out of here." John keeps his voice even and light, not even allowing a hint of his horror to bleed through.

"Wait! What if the atmosphere's not viable?" Rodney's voice quavers, he's not nearly as successful at maintaining calm, never been good at hiding his fear.

"Well, pretty soon, we're not going to have any air in here either and if the air out there is bad, then we might as well get it over with quick." John pops the canopy, but he'll never admit to McKay that he's holding his breath.

He takes an exploratory sniff. The air is so hot and dry that it burns the inside of his nose, but not enough to kill the overwhelming, burnt, acrid odor of Daedalus. John can feel the dehydration setting in, the heat has him sweating instantly, and the sunlight is blindingly, brilliantly white. John takes a deep breath, even though it feels like it's searing his lungs, despite the foul smell of the crashed ship. "We're good. You can breathe now, Rodney."

He hears an explosive breath as Rodney noisily sucks in the arid, dusty air and immediately begins coughing and swearing, "Jesus," at the smell.

Ignoring his own hypocrisy, John allows himself a grim smirk at Rodney holding his breath.

Exiting the craft without a ladder takes some care, but it's possible under normal circumstances, though the extra gravity makes this particular exit problematical. "Make sure you stand where it's marked in yellow, don't stand on the wing any further out. Then slide off, like this." John sits down and slides off the trailing edge of the wing. He falls faster than expected, and his landing is
awkward and painful. "Piece of cake." He stands up, trying to dust off his hands and pants for a moment before giving it up as a lost cause.

"Sure, if you're some sort of gymnastic monkey," Rodney grumbles. He sits down and turns around to slide off from his stomach, making an ungainly landing in the sand. "Christ, I feel like I've gained fifty pounds." He lies there, looking up into the violet-colored sky.

John shades his eyes with a hand and takes a look around. A sea of sand surrounds them, but there is a distant mountain range already dim with the coming dusk. The sky is definitely purple, and the nascent sunset is painted in glorious shades of violet and lavender. "Nice hopping."

"Very funny." Rodney's tone is sarcastic, but when John sneaks a glance over at Rodney, his tiny crooked smile morphs into a grimace. "Do you suppose they're all dead?"

John shrugs, "Doubt it, radio's probably just damaged from the landing."

"Crash. Not landing." Rodney replies absently; his attention is glued to the Daedalus.

"Right."

By unspoken agreement, they walk the length of the Daedalus to do a visual inspection of the apparent structural damage, in spite of heavy gravity that saps their strength and the hot, dry, dusty air that has Rodney still coughing. There are heat stress fractures, impact fractures, and a sick twist in the still hot hull that is burned with streaks of blue and black.

"Blue." Rodney almost reaches out to touch it, but yanks his hand back.

"What?"

"Blue. There were blue flames, which in a normal oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere reentry would cause red, or orange flares. The blue flames indicate to me that there's something in the atmosphere, and since we're not choking on hydrocarbons—that smell is probably the Daedalus—that leaves me with the suspicion that there's something in the atmosphere. I could guess what that might be, but it would be pure speculation. I have to admit though, I'm already speculating."

"Oh." John cuts off Rodney's science lesson, he's far too miserable to have to deal it with at the moment. He doesn't have to see the other side of the ship; it probably looks the same as this one. John heads for the airlock, but the door is too hot to handle and probably jammed as well. He walks to the open hangar, and stands there contemplating the angle and the probability of being able to land.

Rodney reaches out towards the metal rungs, but jerks his hand back. "It'll take days for the hull to cool down enough to touch."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I don't want to leave the 302 out here, either. Come on."

John gives Rodney a boost up onto the wing, and then Rodney pulls him up. The engines kick up a new cloud of sand, but he's got a good mental image of the target area, and there is plenty of room to land. John angles the F-302 gently into the hangar.

The inner door to the ship's corridors will only open a little more than half way. John easily slides in sideways, but Rodney has to squeeze through. The klaxon is still blaring and people are running through the hallways, their panic stark in the red emergency lighting.

John and Rodney make their way to the bridge where a thin haze of smoke hangs in the air, and an
acrid odor of burnt electronics burns their eyes and throats. Colonel Caldwell is trying to direct the chaos while conferring with his XO, Major Randall.

John gets his attention. "Colonel Caldwell."

Caldwell gives them a tight nod. "Sheppard, good to see you made it. What happened out there?"

"The missile wouldn't acquire the target, sir, I think the guidance systems were affected by the virus, too. They certainly acted that way."

Caldwell shakes his head in disgust. "It was a commendable effort, Sheppard." John's still mortified over his failure, but it could be worse—they could be hanging in space, suffocating and waiting for the Wraith to show up for dinner.

Caldwell turns to Rodney, "Dr. McKay, they could probably use your assistance in engineering."

"Going." John guiltily watches Rodney exit the bridge; he's not moving at top speed, and he's listing a little to the left. He hadn't intended on taking Rodney along on a suicide run, it just ended up that way.

"Sheppard." Caldwell interrupts John's worry for Rodney, and hands him a data pad. "Round up the pilots and get me damage reports on the '302s and the hangar bays."

He doesn't have to tell Caldwell just how bad the external damage is, Caldwell is already operating under the assumption they are shipwrecked. Even the slightest fracture would make the Daedalus leak atmosphere like a sieve, and she had already sustained damage before the crash.

Not having to say the words out loud at this moment is a minor blessing.

John commandeers Major Lorne, who was slated to be his XO on Atlantis, to inventory the starboard hanger, and then heads downhill to the port side. They haven't spent much time socializing on board, figuring Atlantis was just a couple of weeks away. It looks like that they'll have plenty of time to get to know each other now.

They are here to stay.

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Caldwell begins the briefing many hours later. "Let's start with the good news. Obviously the atmosphere is breathable; Major Randall reports that recirculating the air on board isn't a power issue due to multiple hull breaches. The water reclamation system is working, but the pumps have been shut down until they can track down and repair a number of leaks. We have all of the supplies that were intended for Atlantis, along with the Daedalus' regular stores. There are at least ten Naquada generators on board, but conservation should be one of our top priorities.

"The bad news is the sensor array is down, and the sub-light engines are damaged, though it's possible they can be repaired to recharge the ship's batteries. We were able to quickly contain the leaks in the fuel storage tanks, but the lowest levels are off limits until that can be cleaned up. Dr. Sodeburg, what's the situation in the infirmary?"

Sodeburg looks gray with fatigue and grief, as he pushes a data tablet across the table to Caldwell. "That's the casualty list; twenty so far, including eight civilians. There are eighteen more with serious injuries, evenly divided among the crew and passengers. We're doing our best, but several of them could go at any time. Another seventy or so minor injuries. They keep trickling in and Doctors Beckett and Cole have it under control for the moment. Most of the passengers are
experiencing panic attacks, though the crew members that are occupied seem to be faring a little better. Hermiod took a massive knock to the head in the crash, and Dr. McKay's in the infirmary with a bit of sunburn, vomiting and complaining about nausea. Colonel Sheppard, how do you feel?"

Dr. Sodeburg's litany is sobering. "I'm fine," John says quietly. The extra weight is taking its toll though, and he's exhausted; they all are.

Sodeburg gives him a brief, appraising glance, "It's possible that McKay's more sensitive to the radiation, and he was already compromised due to the coolant leak."

Caldwell nods as he grimly scans the data tablet. "Thank you, Doctor. Colonel Sheppard?"

"Out of sixteen F-302s in inventory, we're down to six that are immediately operable. The rest are either stuck in the port hangar, a total loss, or can be relegated as hangar queens—spare parts. Of course, there is still one out there. Sir, we need to go after it and shut it down, or we're going to have a worse problem on our hands."

"Agreed. Put together a flight plan and keep me apprised. Anything else?"

Elizabeth's voice quavers slightly as she broaches the topic of actually being shipwrecked. "We have no idea how long we're going to be here, or if the SGC will be able to mount a rescue, considering the situation there. We need to get a comprehensive list of the talents and skills of everyone on board, the types of things that aren't on their service jackets or CVs. We should also do a little exploration of our surroundings."

John takes that task. "Lorne and I can do a aerial survey in the morning."

Caldwell brings the briefing to an end quickly. "Dr. Weir, you're in charge of the crew inventory, I'm sure that you're aware that they are going to need some hand holding. Dr. Sodeburg, I'll arrange for a burial detail to report to you as soon as it's possible to leave the ship. We'll meet again tomorrow at the same time."

John leaves the briefing and heads straight for the infirmary. It's crazy with nurses and medics running in and out, every bed and gurney is full, and those not lucky enough to at least get a chair, like Rodney, are huddled in frightened clumps as they wait their turn for attention.

John kneels beside Rodney; he's slumped over and a blanket's been tucked in around him, a cannula stuffed up his nose, wires trailing out of his grimy t-shirt, and he looks rather green around the gills. Rodney opens one eye and scoots to sit up.

"God, Rodney, I'm sorry, I had no idea."

"Me neither, until I threw up inside a console and passed out. It sort of snuck up on me. Hermiod's in a snit—it was his work station."

John tries to get a visual image in his head of the Asgard's expression as his equipment was sullied, but he can't do it. "I can imagine," he lies. "How is the naked one?"

"Astoundingly resilient. Novak is playing nursemaid, nagging him to rest. Hermiod is pissed. Well, more pissed than usual."

"How are you?" John solemnly studies Rodney.

"I feel terrible, but it's not all bad, Dr. Cole is hot." Rodney looks scared but he's obviously trying
to gain some semblance of normality as he gives John a weak smirk.

John can't quite bring himself to witty repartee after Dr. Sodeburg's sobering report.

"I heard that." The doctor in question appears next to them and gives Rodney a faint glare. "Let's get these off of you." She reaches inside Rodney's shirt to unclip the leads to the monitor and then closes the valve on the oxygen.

Rodney wrestles the cannula off over his head and hands it to her. "Oh yeah, I think she just teletransports—I never hear her coming."

John holds out his hand to her and introduces himself. "John Sheppard. Pleased to meet you."

Dr. Cole takes his hand and gives it a firm shake. "Paige Cole—likewise." She glances at McKay then Sheppard. "I've released McKay to his quarters, I need the room. Can I trust you to see him there safely?"

Rodney snickers faintly, "I guess your reputation precedes you."

John ignores the smart-ass comment. "Sure, I can do that."

"Thank you, Colonel."

John makes sure that McKay face-plants onto his bed facing uphill and then heads off to his own quarters.

**Day Two**

The events of the day weigh heavily on John and he doesn't sleep well or long. John flops around in his bunk, trying to find the best position so that he's not sleeping with his head downhill, or rolling out of the damn thing. John has a new, sudden sympathy for pregnant women: sudden weight gain, swollen ankles, and the general feeling of being exhausted to the point where it's impossible to sleep.

He lies awake, wrestling with guilt. He feels personally responsible for the almost unbelievable fact that they're shipwrecked on a planet in the Pegasus galaxy. He replays the encounter with the rogue over and over, trying to figure out where he went wrong, what he could've done to prevent this disaster, but the equipment failure was out of his control.

John is already awake when Major Randall comes around to pass out the water-rationing reminder, so he skips the shower and heads to the commissary. It probably didn't work, anyway.

There are a few wary, haggard souls there, with either nowhere else to go, or no wish to be alone. John recognizes a couple of them; Rodney had pointed them out early in the journey from Earth, dividing them into either idiots foisted upon him, or not stupid, but likely to crack under the stress all the same.

At the time John had simply wondered if Rodney had been talking out his ass, but now... he sees that Rodney was right on the money. They eye John warily, and he nods at them pleasantly as he gets some breakfast.

The galley master is used to running a twenty/four seven operation, and so there are sweet rolls, sausage and eggs already out in warming trays. He can hear the sound of clattering pans in the galley. The stomachs of the crew don't know from shipwrecked, and life goes on.
John goes through the nearly empty serving line, and surreptitiously looks around for a table as far from the unhappy scientists as possible. He doesn't even realize that he's made a critical error with the coffee cup until he sets his tray down, and the coffee sloshes over the top. He swears softly and picks up the cup and nearly burns his mouth as he takes a few drinks to reduce the level so it won't spill. He ignores the mean snickers from the peanut gallery as he retrieves some serviettes to sop up the mess.

All annoyances and burned mouth aside, it's still a thrill to eat chicken eggs, pork sausage, coffee and real cream, and he tucks in with relish. The SGC feeds its personnel well when they can, and it's an attitude that John can get behind. 'At least until it runs out' is a familiar refrain in the lexicon of the few Atlantis regulars; the rest are in for a shock as the fresh food supplies begin to peter out.

He's just sipping the last of the cooled coffee, half an eye on the table in the corner, when Lorne joins him. "Morning, Major."

Lorne is about to make the same mistake he had and he snakes a hand out to pick up the cup just as Lorne puts his tray down.

"Oh, of course. Thank you, Colonel." Lorne looks still tired, and there is a worried shadow in his eyes. He takes the cup from John and sips it slowly.

"Not exactly what you expected, is it?"

"Gate teams have been going missing and personnel have been getting stranded at the SGC for years." Lorne is trying to sound confidant, but the shadow in his eyes gives him away. He picks up his fork and begins to eat slowly.

"We spent a long time thinking that we were never going to get home, I guess it's not so difficult for us." John instantly realizes how that sounds, us and them. "No offense, Major."

"None taken, sir." He pauses to take a bite and swallow. "I understand the Slammers active guidance systems were corrupted by the virus."

"Yeah, we didn't think about that. I figure we could just eliminate the guidance system, fire them on infrared radar instead, and be done with it."

"It will take some skill, and an overpowering force. How many do you want to send up?"

"Betty's still got one missile left," John stops when he sees the strange look that Lorne gives him. "Long story. Anyway, by my count, the rogue still has one missile left, so when the first group goes up, there is a chance it could take out one of us."

"If we take the entire complement at once, then we'll have a better chance of a kill on the first try."

John nods. "Sounds like a plan. You, me, Hobeck, Faraj, Reinholt and Levenson." He stands up, and Lorne begins to stand as well. "Sit, finish your breakfast. I'll go start cleaning up the armaments, and you corral the pilots when you're done."

"Will do, sir." Lorne gives Sheppard a quick salute, and rather than return the gesture, John just nods and leaves the commissary to file a flight plan before heading to the hangar bay.

There is a guard on the still-open door; the Daedalus is listing badly, and none of the exterior doors will slide open or closed. They'll have to find some way to secure these doors or else to post a permanent guard rotation to prevent any unwanted wildlife or visitors crawling in.
It's still hours before dawn, and the hangar is dark and chilly. John walks to the open end, and stands there a moment, looking at the night sky. The stars are very dim, they are on the far edge of the Pegasus galaxy, but mostly they're obscured by a brilliantly colored aurorae. The lights shift and twist on a vast array of colors. He stands there in awe for a moment, before shaking himself out of his reverie.

John flips the light on and shrugs into a pair of coveralls for the warmth. Starting with the aircraft closest to him, he grabs a ladder and a screwdriver and begins his task; remove the shielding, pull the tiny guidance system module out, reinstall the shielding and then move onto the next.

John has only finished two missiles when Lorne, and all of the pilots join him. Soon, they have the six F-302's ready to launch. Out of curiosity, he tries his radio again, and, to his relief, Caldwell answers him immediately. "Colonel, we're ready to do some hunting. I'm taking up all six for the initial attempt. Randall has the flight plan."

"Very good, Sheppard. Stay in touch."

John climbs in and starts his preflight. A radio check confirms that his attack force is ready. The landing signal officer waves them out into the pre-dawn dark, and, one after the other, the 302s take the tricky exit.

The inertial dampeners cancel out the extra gravity, but John hears the engines overworking to compensate. They rocket through the thin shell of atmosphere and into space.

John hopes that the rogue F-302 won't stay hidden for long. "This is Foxtrot Alpha. Spread out, and break radio silence only when you sight the objective."

His reply is a short of chorus of double clicks, signaling an affirmative. They are in pursuit mode.

The target is quickly sighted. "This is Foxtrot Foxtrot. I've got the target in range."

The wing breaks formation to surround the rogue on the x-, y- and z- axis to prevent it from finding an opening to escape. John issues the command to fire, and several of the missiles hit the target, which explodes in an immensely satisfying way as each pilot veers off in a pre-arranged 90-degree turn on their own x-axis to prevent collisions. They are back in standard formation within moments and John clicks over to the command channel. "Caldwell, this is Sheppard, the target is destroyed."

"Good work, Sheppard. Proceed with Dr. Weir's aerial survey."

"Affirmative." Too bad it hadn't been that easy yesterday. John switches his radio to broadcast and lays out the plan to the formation. "Good work. Dr. Weir wants an aerial survey, so let's take a few minutes to get the lay of the land on the way back. Standard mapping formation, lay it out in grids."

The Daedalus had belly-flopped in the center of a strip of desert between two mountain ranges. The desert runs for miles to the north and John only sees desert, desert, and more desert, but Reinholt gets the coordinates of a settlement of some kind in the eastern range, and Hobeck sees one in the west. Levenson reports a canyon two klicks to the south and another mountain range to the extreme far south.

Lorne reports that there is literally nothing near the equator on the opposite side of the planet, no settlements as far as he can see. Hobeck and Faraj have the two poles, both of which appear to be surrounded by shallow seas with nearby forested regions, of which large sections are on fire. They all report various small settlements scattered in the mountains and the plains in a vaguely elliptical
zone centering on the desert where the *Daedalus* lays.

The sighting of two nearby villages, and the confirmation that the planet is suitable for long-term habitation is encouraging. Sunrise begins just after John has landed, and the craft are secured. Standing on the edge of the hangar deck, he reaches out to check the temperature of the exterior hull; cooler but still too hot to be climbing out of the ship.

He marks the time of sunrise on his watch. Night was only ten hours long. The planet is much smaller than Earth or Lantea, and much closer to the sun. Mars is what the place reminds him of, and he can't shake the feeling that Dejah Thoris is going to come strolling around the corner.

John grins to himself and thinks of Rodney. He'll want to hear that. John goes to check on him in his cabin, knocking on the open door once he arrives.

"Glad to see you're up. How do you feel?"

Rodney turns to fix a baleful glare at John. "Better, now that I'm not dying of radiation poisoning, thank you very much."

John shrugs with only a slight tilt of his shoulders. He's already apologized once; Rodney won't thank him for blathering on about it. "You want to get something to eat?"

"I was just on my way down." Rodney doesn't bend down to put on his boots, just shoves his feet into them, leaving them untied.

They walk through the dim, cool corridors, and few people are about. John doesn't know whether the lights are low to preserve the appearance of night, or if they're conserving power. Rodney interrupts his reverie. "So, tell me what's been going on."

"Well, the rogue 302 is finally out of commission. Elizabeth is doing some social experimenting on the crew, and we found two villages; one on either side of us."

"Wait, social experiment?"

"She's taking a survey to find out what talents everyone is hiding."

"Oh well, yes. That makes sense." Rodney doesn't mention Betty; he already knows that it was left transmitting a signal to the Wraith for far too long.

The commissary is far busier now, but the pervasive, sullen atmosphere is still hanging over the room. John doesn't feel too guilty about the second cup of coffee while he sits with Rodney.

"Trying to keep your girlish figure?" Predictably, Rodney has already figured out the problem with liquids and the angle of the ship.

John kind of wishes he'd been there, for the pure, entertainment value. "I had breakfast a couple of hours ago."

Atypically, Rodney doesn't manage to eat much, and, after pushing the rest of it around for few minutes, he gets up and dumbs it out. "I suppose I've got a lot of things to do today." He sounds lackluster and depressed, but then who doesn't? They're *shipwrecked*.

The bridge is nearly empty, save for a few technicians repairing the electronics, and they find Elizabeth in the conference room.
"Rodney, I'm glad to see that you're feeling better." Elizabeth tries for a reassuring smile, but fails miserably.

"I don't know about better, but I am upright and mobile." Rodney shrugs and throws himself into a chair.

Elizabeth admonishes him, "Take it easy, Rodney. I don't want you overextending yourself into a relapse."

Rodney doesn't reply, but his mouth is set in an unhappy twist. John knows that Rodney will come through for them—he always has—but in the end it will be a futile effort, it won't change their situation.

"John, Colonel Caldwell tells me that you've found two villages."

"Hobeck and Reinholt saw them, I was approaching from the north, and all I saw was desert. It got pretty uncomfortable out there yesterday."

"Not to mention the extra weight I seem to have put on overnight," Elizabeth says dryly.

"Yeah." John supposes that they could have found a more miserable place to crash, but not likely.

Elizabeth changes the subject in a fake, bright voice. "Colonel Caldwell says that as soon as the replacement array is up, we can begin putting out a distress signal."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Rodney asks in a suspicious tone.

"What do you mean, Rodney?" Elizabeth tips her head and pins him with an incredulous look. A distress signal was the first, obvious thing to do.

"We know the Wraith AI was transmitting a signal, a Hive ship is probably on its way here even as we speak. A distress beacon is just going to wave a red flag and say 'hi, here we are'." Rodney waves his hands in the air to illustrate his point. "It'll be weeks before Atlantis decides we're missing, and months until the SGC can send another ship to look for us."

"Good point. We should deploy all of the Mark IVs to the hangar bay now."

John raises his eyebrow at that. When did Elizabeth put herself in direct military line of command?

"I think we need to determine if the planet has a gate, and get the hell out of here if we can. When the new array goes up, it should be easy to determine if there's any Naquadah on the planet. I can tie the sensors into the '302s to extend its range."

Elizabeth nods. "Very well, you know what to do."

Rodney stands up, "I'm on it." He leaves the conference room, but he's only walking, not at his normal near run.

Elizabeth gives John a worried look. "Keep an eye on him."

John shrugs and gets up to follow Rodney. There are worse things than scientist-sitting, and he would've been doing it anyway.

~*~

During the wait for the hull to sufficiently cool down so they can climb down the side of the ship,
John learns to deal with the ship's angle to gravity.

Mostly it's an annoyance: remembering to fill a cup only two-thirds full or catching the odd implement as it rolls off a table. Walking in the lateral corridors is an exercise in balance, because of the tilt of the ship. The transverse corridors are more strictly uphill and downhill, and John starts to avoid certain ladder hatches, because it feels like he's climbing upside down.

The real problem is with the bunks. He helps Major Randall deal with a rash of requests for reassignment of quarters, because the inhabitants are rolling out of the offending beds.

It takes three more days for the hull to cool down, but the time isn't wasted. John tries to figure out a way to access the F-302s in the port hangar, but the door is permanently jammed shut. It will have to be cut open with a torch after they dig it out of the sand, but the engineering staff laughs his idea; they don't have any thing capable of cutting though the trinium-reinforced hull.

Rodney is still listless, but working alongside the crews that are busy repairing the sub-light engines and other critical systems.

Luckily the upper access hatches aren't jammed closed, and the sensor array goes up without a hitch. The array, even with the F-302's extending its range, doesn't find any trace of Naquadah, or other power source above the low-level background radiation the planet seems to be bathed in. It does detect high levels of several fairly rare elements, some of which are only found in laboratories on Earth. Their presence explains the fires near the poles. While not particularly flammable in and of itself, Lutetium burns very hotly when ignited, allowing fires to rage out of control.

John laughs at Rodney when he geeks out over a mineral, because it doesn't add up to a hill of beans unless they can get off this god-forsaken rock.

~*~

The conference room has become the war room, and Dr. Beckett shows up after he gets the initial report on the sensor data. "I'm concerned about the long term effects of the background radiation, though the ship's hull does still provide some protection even in the condition it's in. I'm going to recommend that we spend as little time outside as possible, at least until Dr. Sodeburg and I have a chance to study the data."

John and Rodney manage to share an incredulous look at the overly cautious request—they've been cooped up in the ship for five days, and there are people living on the planet, but Caldwell frowns and agrees. "I'll send out an all-ship bulletin to ask that every one stay in the ship when possible."

Carson nods and leaves them to their meeting.

John clears his throat and puts forth the harebrained scheme he's been contemplating for the last couple of days. "The hyperspace engines on the 302s were proven unstable for long range jumps, but it's theoretically possible to make it to Atlantis if done in a series of short jumps. We could modify one of them to allow for extended range and plot a course that would allow it to make stops along the way."

Rodney soundly berates him. "Are you kidding me? That's a deathtrap, not a rescue mission!"

"But the question is, will it work?" Elizabeth is grasping at whatever straws of hope she can.

Rodney muses for a moment. "Possibly; I did rewrite the protocols for O'Neill to send the gate a few million miles away." John smirks and Rodney rolls right over it. "But it was a completely uncontrolled jump that had a bomb at the end! It would be a miracle if this worked."
"I'd say we're due for a miracle, Rodney," John says dryly.

That stops Rodney short for a second, and the thoughtful expression on his face grows into something else. "I always wanted to get my hands on one of them, but they stopped all research on that part of the 302. Why the manufacturer continued to put the hyper-drive engine on them, I don't know."

John lobs the answer out unthinkingly. "It's cheaper than redesigning them and changing the manufacturing specs."

"Yeah. I'll check with Hermiod and look into the possibility." Rodney grabs his laptop and leaves at low power.

Elizabeth stares at him levelly across from the table, and John can see that she's suddenly shifted her attitude, perhaps figured out John's ulterior motive. "It's a suicide mission, John. When is that going to stop being your best idea?" A pencil is wedged in between a well-used notepad and a half empty cup of cold coffee, to keep it from rolling off the table.

He really doesn't have an answer for that. "Rodney will make it work, Elizabeth."

"Rodney's not well. He shouldn't be out in that heat."

"So, we'll work during the night when it's cool."

She sighs and shakes her head. "It's both a terrible and a good idea. We'll see."

Colonel Caldwell follows John out of the conference room. "We can't afford to go off half cocked, Sheppard. We're stuck here with an extremely limited number of 302s, with a hive ship probably on the way. We'll need those resources sooner than later."

"Colonel, with all due respect, one 302 isn't going to make that much of a difference against a Hive ship." The look on Caldwell's face is angry, and John figures this is still about being passed over for command of Atlantis.

Caldwell snaps, "What do you hope to accomplish with this maneuver?"

John isn't going to give Caldwell the satisfaction of arguing with him; he's not the one looking for a confrontation. "I think if it works, we'll contact Atlantis and advise them what the situation is, Teyla will contact the SGC, and send out our SOS for us. If it fails, we'll know that at least we tried something."

"And let me guess, Colonel, you intend to volunteer for this mission?"

"I had considered that, yes."

Caldwell shouts at him in a furious rage. "This is the reason that the SGC wanted you out of Atlantis, Sheppard. It was only Dr. Weir's threats that got you promoted to retain command of Atlantis. If you do not want to justify every argument against you even being on this ship, then you will find another volunteer. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes sir." John is stunned. That explains Elizabeth's smirk and cryptic remark before the whole mess had begun. He'd known something had happened back at the SGC, but he hadn't suspected that it was Elizabeth's blackmailing that had allowed him to return to Atlantis.

"My apologies, that was uncalled for." Caldwell wipes a hand over his face and takes deep breath.
"I'll consider it, Sheppard. Keep me informed."

He's left standing in the corridor with a few curious onlookers when Caldwell turns and walks away. John resolutely turns the other direction and heads downhill. He appreciates that Elizabeth thought she was being loyal, and that he was the only person she wanted for the job, but it was a rotten way to climb rank, and a rotten way to find out.

Never once had he traded on his father's name, even when it could have saved him a hell of a lot of trouble and misery, and he'd always been proud that he could say that his accomplishments – and failures – were his own. Until now, he thinks bitterly.

**Days Six– Seven**

Rodney's work on the Jump To Atlantis project is largely theoretical in the beginning, but after Hermiod's vetted the improvements to the hyper-drive, Rodney insists that John look over the ship designs.

John looks at the work and completely blows his slacker cover by pointing out a mistake in an aerodynamic calculation, at which point he holes up with Rodney in a lab to work on the plans.

~*~

It's been eight days since the crash landing, and when Rodney crashes for the day, John takes a break. He climbs out of the ship through the emergency repair hatch and sits atop the *Daedalus*, shivering in the early morning chill. The aurora is at full strength, and he watches as it slowly disappears in first flush of the morning.

The marines are out near the bow, still digging graves. No one was cruel enough to make them work during the day, and now they're working fast to make the best of the little chilly night left to them.

John thinks briefly of Atlantis' tiny graveyard on the mainland; it's a shame that a cemetery is often the first mark of a new colony and they'll have their own graveyard here, too, filled with twenty people who died because he had failed. Shipwrecked, because he failed. That it was an unforeseen complication, and that they had been rushed into hiding in the 302 when the hangar was vented, is barely a consolation for the idea that he hadn't managed to take the rogue out.

He sits and watches them until it's nearly full dawn. A movement on the horizon catches his eye, a group of people standing on the ridge to the east of the *Daedalus*.

They're wearing sand-colored clothing that's hard to pick out in the burgeoning light, and then they fade away behind the dune. John wonders if they were a figment of his imagination.

He reports seeing them to Caldwell anyway, "Sir, I just saw a some folks out on the desert, they might be watching us."

"Interesting." Caldwell notes it in the log, and pins John with a hard look. "I haven't seen any request for volunteers for the Jump, Sheppard."

John isn't certain that his presence here even matters, but he keeps his doubts and anger to himself and sends out the request for volunteers, as ordered.

There are three volunteers within hours. Lieutenants Kyle Swenson, Cory Hobeck and James Faraj are the uniform epitome of the best of the best; perfect 0-3 razor cuts, perfect posture and John can almost smell their earnestness and dedication. The SGC doesn't skimp on lieutenants.
Day Nine

In the evening Rodney's looking only a little better, but he brushes off Sheppard's inquiry, and they get to work.

The pilots assist in the modifications and they prove to be smart enough that McKay only yells at them occasionally, though it could be that he's still suffering from mild radiation poisoning, the extra gravity or the fact that Hermiod is there, kibbutzing underneath McKay's elbow.

They re-engineer external oxygen tanks that will double the length of time a pilot has air, and add an extra CO2 scrubber that will extend that time even farther.

As a precaution, Dr. Cole helps modify the flight suit for waste evacuation, though it was never intended for long-term wear. She's as short and perfunctory as she was in the infirmary, but the flight suit is as well designed as it can be on short notice. Over the modified suit, she adds a bright red radiation suit from the Atlantis stores, based on Rodney's recent experience. She chuckles humorlessly. "It's probably overkill."

They finally hold the mass funeral at dawn. Nearly everyone on board climbs out of the ship, and gathers in a loose crowd around the mounds of sand, marked with twenty-two stainless steel crosses, bolted together out of ships stores. There are a few tears, but mostly dry-eyed shock still pervades the Daedalus' complement.

Caldwell says a few kind words, and at that moment, John sees the other side of the Colonel. He might not have personally known every single one of the poor folks buried out here, but he's taking each of their deaths as his own, personal loss.

Day Ten

Lieutenant Kyle Swenson wins—or loses, depending on your perspective—the short game of Roshambo and takes off just after dusk with a little fanfare and a cheer. Elizabeth thanks him for his bravery and Caldwell gives him the typical SGC send off. "God speed, Lieutenant."

Sheppard runs to the end of the hangar bay to watch him disappear in the fading lavender light, but there is nothing to see but a pink contrail heading towards space. "Good luck, kid."

He scans the western horizon, and there is someone on the ridge—just a single person, standing watch from the high dune in the distance. John reports the sighting to Elizabeth and Colonel Caldwell, "We need to go meet the new neighbors. They're watching us."
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,

**Day Eleven - Twelve**

The discussion of exactly how to go about meeting the local inhabitants is long and vociferous. They hash out whether they should just wait and let them come to the *Daedalus*, as they are watching the ship every dawn and dusk, or if they should go and visit a settlement. When the final consensus is not to wait, Elizabeth insists on going, even though first contact was always out of her purview in Atlantis.

There is also the argument about which village to visit first, or whether they should do them simultaneously in order to prevent any perception of preference. If they send concurrent envoys, Elizabeth can't be in two places at the same time and she's definite about going, if not to both then at least to one.

John can tell, when he meets Caldwell's eyes, that he wants to acquiesce to Elizabeth's demand, because there really isn't anything else for her to do on the *Daedalus*. By that standard, John is all for her going and he knows that Elizabeth's got the chops for negotiating; she'd pulled off arguing crazed Genii out of unfinished nukes after all, but the last year has shown him that while first contact can go either way, it's usually downhill pretty fast. Plus it's going to be a long, hard walk across open desert, because the argument about using the 302s to take a short hop across the desert, and the concomitant waste of precious resources has already been settled. There is a finite amount of fuel on board, and there might be Hive ships on the way.

John's ire at Caldwell has cooled in the last few days, and he's making an effort at maintaining a cordial working relationship—the *Daedalus* is only so big, and they don't have any way to truly escape one another. He nods almost imperceptibly, but Caldwell gets both of the messages implicit in that gesture, and they each back off from their arguments and let Elizabeth make the decision.

The hastily drawn coordinates map for the planet places the west village slightly closer, so that's where they're headed. The plan is to travel as far as they can by night; it's about two hours until dusk. Elizabeth is wearing a light pack with food, water and a basic emergency kit, but Major Lorne, Lieutenant Cadman and Sergeant Rogers are all carrying the heavier packs with the rest of the gear. John is shrugging a heavy pack onto his back when Caldwell arrives at the hangar bay.

"Communications says the hand-held radios should work as far as the village, barring any unforeseen circumstances, so keep in touch."

"Thank you, Colonel. I'm sure we'll be fine," Elizabeth says firmly.

Caldwell glances at John, who replies with a quick lift of his brow.

"And just as a precaution, I have the 302s on standby for an extraction if the situation becomes dire."

John mentally rolls his eyes, but acknowledges Caldwell. "Sounds like a..." Rodney interrupts him, when he squeezes through the hanger bay door.

"Major, I have something for you."

Lorne turns around and looks at Rodney. "Me?"
Rodney has the grace to blush slightly. "Sorry. Sheppard, take this."

"A life signs detector? Where did you get that?" John takes it and automatically checks the display, then tucks it into his vest pocket.

"I took it with me to the SGC. I wanted to... well never mind what I wanted. I thought it might be prudent for you to have with you. We never go on missions without one."

"You wanna change your mind and go with?"

"Even if Dr. Cole would approve it, I'm not really all that fond of trudging through sand."

"Maybe next time, then?" John gives Rodney an evil smirk.

"Right." Rodney looks like he wants to say be careful, good luck, but he turns to Elizabeth instead. "Don't get yourself killed; we need you."

"Thank you, Rodney. I'll try and not get killed." To her credit Elizabeth says it with a straight face, without a trace of amusement. "Take it easy while we're gone."

John sees through Rodney's sarcasm; he looks miserable, as if he really does want to go. "We'll be fine. Hike over there, say hi to the nice villagers and hike back."

Rodney huffs, "Like that's ever worked before," and turns to leave.

John shakes his head. "Okay folks, we need to get this show on the road."

Lorne, Cadman and Rogers head out toward the edge of the hanger bay. Caldwell touches John on the arm to halt him. "Be careful."

"Yes sir, will do." John follows his temporary team out, but Elizabeth is talking with Caldwell in a low voice. He waits for her at the lip; she'll need help getting down even with the light pack she's wearing.

She joins him just a couple of moments later; whatever Caldwell had to say, it wasn't very much. "Shall we?"

"Let's go." Despite the backpack, Elizabeth easily climbs down and out to where the Major is waiting for her. John makes sure she's on the ground before making his way down.

John looks back up at the hangar. "I'm thinking we need a ladder if we're going to do this too many more times."

"Good idea, Colonel. You're in charge of that," Elizabeth orders smartly.

He grins and slides his sunglasses on before looking to the west to get his bearings. "Major, you take point, Cadman and Rogers, you've got the six."

Elizabeth pulls a boonie out of a pocket, jams it on her head and they begin their trek.

John had forgotten how miserable the desert is as a hiking venue. It's searingly hot and the sun is in their eyes. Elizabeth keeps her head down to block her eyes from the light and doesn't talk much. The others are a little too far away for comfortable conversation. He almost misses the constant pissing and moaning that Rodney would subject him to, because usually there was also an interesting conversation sprinkled between the invectives and hyperbole.
He can hear Cadman and Rogers chatting in low enough voices that he can't make out what they're saying. Lorne has his head up, and he's scanning the horizon, but there's nothing but sand and sun in every direction.

After two hours of making sure Elizabeth is hydrated and switching positions to keep it interesting, it's almost dark. They're in a valley, but on the last dune crest, John sees a small group of people at the top of the next hill.

John calls out a halt to his team. "Major, did you see them?"

"Yes sir, sure did." Lorne takes off his hat and wipes the sweat off of his face with it, leaving streaks in the dust. When he takes off his sunglasses to wipe his eyes, he looks like a demented raccoon.

Elizabeth sinks down into the sand, sighing as she goes. "I'll never ever denigrate Rodney's complaints again."

John smiles slightly, but he doesn't say he misses them. "Take a load off. We'll rest here for a few." He taps the ear piece, "Daedalus, this is Sheppard, come in."

The Daedalus' radio tech responds crisply. "Sheppard, this is Daedalus, we read you five by five."

John wonders briefly who else they think would be responding to his call. "We may be about to make first contact, there's a group of locals on the next dune."

The next voice is Colonel Caldwell's. "Understood. How do you want to proceed?"

He glances over to Major Lorne, who gives him a shrug and a careless look as he bites into a power bar. John responds, "We'll proceed as planned, sir. If we meet them now or at the village, it won't make any difference."

"Very well. We'll continue monitoring communications, Caldwell out."

Cadman and Rogers are splitting an MRE and Elizabeth has her canteen in hand. "I don't think I've ever been as happy to see a sunset," she says, almost to herself.

John crouches down next to her. "Are you okay, Elizabeth? Seriously. Because if you're not, we should turn around and go back—I think we're only about a quarter of the way there."

"I think so. It's the sun. It'll be dark soon."

John studies her, since she sounds a little loopy. "Don't let pride get in the way. If you need to stop, just say so. If you need to pee, take Cadman, I don't want you wandering around alone, especially now."

Elizabeth gives John an appraising stare, and he just stares right back at her. She never sees this part of him, because it was so rarely necessary on Atlantis. He's there to make sure she gets taken care of, and making sure that an angry native does not pick her off while she's taking a whiz is part of that job. "Thanks, John, I'll do that."

"Eat something while we rest and drink lots of water." John almost reaches out to pat her on the back, but instead stands abruptly and walks over to Cadman and Rogers.

"Cadman, if Elizabeth makes a pit stop, go with her. I don't want her wandering alone with our new friends up on that ridge."
"Yes sir."

He briefly considers telling Cadman to knock it off with the 'sirs', but it would be like telling her not to breathe. John looks over the group, again wishing that Rodney were with them if only for someone to talk to. He sits down at a point that's equidistant from all of them and pulls out a power bar. Rogers and Lorne pointedly keep their backs to Cadman and Elizabeth as they trudge off in a vain attempt to find a private place in the wide open stretch of desert.

Despite what he'd told Caldwell, John knows there is a choice to be made. Continue on, and meet possible unfriendlies in the dark, or camp out over night, and deal with them in the morning, which would leave them traveling over open desert in the daytime. They didn't have enough water to extend this sojourn beyond a day or so, and John thinks it unlikely that the people waiting for them over the hill will wait all night.

The thin, pale pink slice of the first moon gives the desert a peculiar glow, which brightens as the aurora begins to overtake the moon and dim starlight. When Elizabeth and Cadman return, John isn't in any hurry to start back up, but everyone quietly packs up their trash in preparation to move on. The temperature is dropping rapidly and jackets are coming out of the packs.

The moonlight and sheets of coruscating aurora means they don't have to wear night vision goggles merely to navigate, though everyone but Elizabeth already has them slung around their necks. John moves to the front and takes over point; Lorne falls back to walk next to Elizabeth and John can hear them chatting briefly about the mesmerizing night sky.

There isn't a sign of anyone when they top the ridge. John scans the path ahead through the goggles; nocturnal wildlife abounds, slithering, hopping and running out of their path as John's boots scuffle the sand. It's a good sign; it means there's water somewhere if they have to go so far as to dig a well. John thinks about other deserts he's known and wonders what this one would look like when there's a rainfall.

And so the night goes. Radio checks to make sure they're on the right track, frequent but brief rest stops in deference to Elizabeth, who's never had to run for miles with a hundred pounds strapped to her back. John's many years out of the Academy, but he's had a lot of experience in the last year with that sort of thing. Adrenaline helps, he thinks acidly.

They reach the outskirts of the village well before dawn. There's a high, white, stone wall around the settlement, and the gate is firmly closed, so they fall back and settle in to wait for the dawn. Despite having walked all night, no one wants to sleep, so they wait together in the dark.

**Day Thirteen**

The gates open just as the sky is lightening to the east, and a voice raised in song carries out over the walls. John immediately thinks *muezzin*; the high-pitched prayer sends a shiver down his back and raises the hair on the back of his neck from too many days spent in Kandahar. He glances over at Elizabeth, who is slack-jawed in rapt attention.

When the prayer is ended, she says in an awed voice, "It's in Ancient."

That doesn't really set John's mind at ease. "Well, let's go meet the natives—though I doubt they're really native if they pray in Ancient."

Just inside the gate is a market, already full with the bustle of folks trying to get their business done before the heat of the day.
The town is almost pretty. White stone buildings with colorful canopies over the doorways, and the streets are well paved and clean. The problem is with the people.

The villagers stop and stare at them with what can only be suspicion as they try to make contact, but no one speaks to or approaches them as they pass by. John's team wears their game face, smiling pleasantly, saying 'hi there', and nodding as they walk through the market.

It's a little more crowded than most of the places he's visited in Pegasus, but definitely in the medium range between hostile and indifferent. "Usually someone wants to come and introduce themselves as the leader. I guess they don't get very much outside trade."

"Or perhaps they just don't see strangers very often," Elizabeth muses.

"Still, you'd think they would be more curious. We're probably stranger than most." John shakes his head and waves at a child across the plaza; he's slightly relieved to get a wave in return, before the child is yanked indoors.

"I don't recognize any of the language." Elizabeth isn't asking a question, but Major Lorne answers anyway.

"No Stargate."

She shakes her head. "It's too hot, I'm not thinking clearly."

They stop when the market place trails into the town center. There's a small fountain in the center where men and women are filling up large double-handled glass pitchers, or lounging on it while a few children are playing nearby.

The people here give them the same vaguely hostile looks and ignore John's greetings when he briefly catches someone's eyes and introduces himself.

Elizabeth remarks, "The architecture looks familiar--see the shape of the paving stones? They look like some of the decorative features on Atlantis."

"Okay, so they do their morning prayers in Ancient, and they've got the decorating gene. We're still not making contact here. What do you want to do?" John is nominally in charge, but he knows that it's Elizabeth's show.

"We really can't start back until nightfall. Let's wander around some more," she answers in a distracted manner, drinking in the sights and sounds of the town.

John easily agrees. "Sure, but if we can't find anyone to talk to pretty soon, we'll need to find a place to rest, before we start back tonight."

"Agreed."

No one is chasing them off, so they wander around the town for a while longer, but they never get a positive reaction from any of the inhabitants.

They've come full circle. The road they're walking on leads them right back to the market place, and John takes that as a sign that they are done. The sun is high in the sky now, the foot traffic in the market place has slowed to a trickle, and the hustle of the early morning is tamped down under the blinding heat.

"We don't have any idea when they close the gates, and if it's all the same to you, I don't wanna be
stuck here over night."

Elizabeth is visibly wilting with exhaustion from the trek, and the heat and discouragement. She only nods.

No one looks particularly peppy or fresh as a daisy. Major Lorne pipes up, "Let's go back to the fountain and fill up the canteens. Maybe swiping some of their water will get us noticed."

"Or killed," John says wryly. "Let's give it a shot." The fountain is deserted in the hot midday sun. They fill up their canteens, and just in case it isn't drinking water, toss in purification tablets, and in case it is drinking water, John forgoes dunking his head into it. They leave the walled town without comment, while Lorne checks in with the Daedalus.

There's still a tiny bit of shade under the western side of the wall, but they'll have to move to the east side after the sun passes the zenith. They rest in fits and starts, chasing the shade until dusk, when they begin the long walk back to their ship in defeat.

**Day Fourteen**

The engineering crew has managed to get a common shower area supplied with water, and after two weeks of sponging off, John is extremely grateful to finally get a real shower. There is a squeegee propped up in the corner of the shower, because the water now puddles in the corner. John dutifully swooshes the water towards the drain, thinking that this was going to be pain in the ass for the foreseeable future.

He manages to sleep for the entire day and at dusk, they meet in the war room to debrief. Caldwell is already there, and Elizabeth and Rodney trail in shortly after John.

Elizabeth starts talking even before she sits down, a measure of her frustration. "I don't get it. They've been watching us for days, yet when we show up, no one even acknowledged that we were there." She's sunburned, and her nose will start peeling soon.

John offers a suggestion, "Maybe we need to go hang out on the ridge and meet the folks that are interested in us. It's obvious they're the only ones."

Rodney stabs at his PDA. "I wish that some of the people we've run into in the past would've ignored us. Good job on not getting killed or inciting a riot, though."

"Thanks, Rodney." John shoots him a sideways glare that Rodney ignores completely.

"We've been keeping track of the sightings. Every dawn, someone is watching from the east, and, at dusk, there's someone on the west." Caldwell doesn't sound happy about being spied upon.

"We should go and meet them," Rodney says in a musing tone, like John hadn't just said it.

"We?"

"Well, eventually Dr. Cole will let me escape her clutches."

"You must be bored, or sicker than we thought." He's teasing Rodney, but secretly pleased that Rodney misses going on missions.

"John, I think you might be right, perhaps this is not spying, but an invitation to meet on neutral ground. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. If the pattern holds, there should be someone on the eastern ridge in the morning."
"Would've saved us a hell of a walk." John is only half teasing; there was a reason he'd joined the Air Force and not the Army.

Caldwell's eyes are merry, and John is pretty sure that he's thinking the same thing. John gives him a small smile in return. All disagreements and disappointments over the naming of the Atlantis' military commander aside, Caldwell's not a bad guy, and there are bridges to be built, not only with the locals.

Rodney starts grumbling, "You would think that with all the walking we do, the SGC would bother to give us some transportation. Hell, sometimes I wish we had even just a bicycle!"

John gives Rodney a sharp nod. "Logistics, Rodney—even a bicycle needs spare parts. Our feet don't need replacing, not often any anyway. Shoes are usually the easiest equipment to replace."

Caldwell adds, "In most military deployments, the troops can buy personal stuff locally, motorbikes, stereos and computers, the like. I guess in the ten years of the program they figured out that the only reliable transport is your feet."

"And you wouldn't want to scare off all the nice villagers, Rodney," Elizabeth teases.

"But I'm not wrong when I say that a jeep or an ATV would be very handy right about now."

John shakes his head; a puddlejumper would be pretty handy right about now. "Not gonna disagree with that."

Elizabeth steers the meeting back on course, "Colonel Caldwell, how are the repairs going? Did anything interesting happen while we were gone?"

Consulting his data pad, Caldwell says bitterly, "Even though we won't ever get this wreck airborne again, Dr. McKay and the crew are working on getting the sub-light engines back online. Life support is separate, though some other ancillary systems, like communications, are currently running off the batteries, which are charged from the sub-lights. They should be ready to test the engines some time today, and if it goes well, I'll set up a schedule to recharge the batteries, or if not, tie them into a generator. The water reclamation system is holding up, but eventually we're going to have to locate some fresh water."

"There was a fountain in the village, so we know there's water, but we'll probably have to dig a well."

"Have you ever dug a well, Colonel?" Rodney scoffs.

John shoots back with a mildly annoyed, "As a matter of fact, I have."

Elizabeth gives John a sly look. "Good, then you'll be in charge of that, too."

"Oh, you are so helping me with that, McKay." John is mildly outraged that he's unwittingly fallen into the accidental trap.

Caldwell continues as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Food isn't a problem, and won't be for quite some time, but again, it's a finite resource."

"With the lack of interest on the locals' part, that might end up being a big problem. We can't exactly start a garden out here, even if we have a well."

"If we're forced to relocate in the future, we'll take that into consideration. We should stay put for
the foreseeable future." Elizabeth says it simply. They're not there yet, but it might happen.

"In case we get rescued?" Rodney inquires.

Caldwell answers, "In case the Wraith come. We might be down, but our best defense is still here with the ship."

"How are the weapons systems?" John asks.

Rodney sighs. "Like everything thing else, tied into the sub-light engines."

Elizabeth asks, "Colonel Caldwell, have we heard from Lieutenant Swenson?"

"No, and we didn't really expect to. Because of the radiation, and the planet's magnetic field, our communication range is dramatically reduced, and his first scheduled hop was outside of that. If we hear from him, it's bad news."

"The only way we'll ever know that he got through is when we get rescued." The note of complaint in Rodney's voice is clear.

"If we get rescued, Dr. McKay. That stunt has only a slim chance of working. It's likely that he exploded somewhere in deep space," Caldwell says calmly.

The soft huff of Rodney's sigh is the only sound at the table. They all know that it was a long shot.

Caldwell gives that idea a moment of silence, and then goes on with his briefing. "Inventory controls are in place, and I'd like to ask everyone to voluntarily provide a list of their personal effects, down to the last sock. We might have the one thing we desperately need sitting in someone's cabin."

"I think that's a wise strategy. I'd like to institute a weekly 'town' meeting as a way to help assuage the concerns and fears every one has, and I'm sure there are rumors already circulating about our failed first contact. All of us deserve to know what's happening."

"Dr. Weir, I don't want to burst your bubble, but this situation calls for more discipline, not less. Our safety demands that the chain of command stay in place."

"My objective is to enhance communications and reassure our people, Colonel. I'm not staging a coup, though at some point we're may have to reconsider the organizational structure."

"When that time comes, we'll both know it."

They stare intently at one another for a moment.

"Just because the civilian population is in the minority, you can't expect us to fall in line and be good little soldiers." Rodney crosses his arms and gives Caldwell a glare for good measure.

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm reluctant to go so far as setting up a democracy right away. We need to maintain a familiar structure—most of our population is military, and that leaves them with certain expectations. Town meetings are great, we need to every person to feel like they have a say..."

Elizabeth interrupts him, "You mean know they have a say, Colonel."

Caldwell tips his head slightly in acknowledgment. "But, we need to balance that with familiarity. The military contingent expects the civilians to be outside the chain of command, no one is going
to conscript you, Dr. McKay. Balance and familiarity, those are going to keep the bulk of our people feeling safe, and the civilians need to know that there is a place for them, as well." The look on his face says, 'Did I make myself clear?'

"Of course, Colonel; maintain the status quo in the short term, but have an eye on the long term as well."

"As always, Doctor, you have me at a disadvantage." Caldwell smiles briefly, and Elizabeth returns it.

"I doubt that, Colonel. To that end, I think we should devise a work rotation for the civilians, so that everyone is occupied."

Caldwell nods. "You've done the homework on the people skills we have on board. Work with Sheppard and Randall on that."

John nods. "We still need to try and dig out the port hangar."

"Oh, great, I can just see all of the physicists happily digging ditches."

John shrugs. "It needs to be done and they need something to do. Or cross training, too, even if it's only how to properly sharpen a knife or mend torn clothing. Arrange PT for everyone."

"Perhaps circulate the list of the things people can do. Set some terms for bartering those skills," Rodney adds.

This is all old hat to the Atlantis crew; they've spent the last year in isolation, though admittedly with far more to work with and less time to do it in. Caldwell knows this, and he's willing to take their advice to a certain degree.

"I'm sure we all have things to think about. Perhaps we'd like to continue this tomorrow?" Elizabeth stands and reflexively so do John and Caldwell, and a little belatedly, Rodney.

As he walks out of the conference room, Caldwell is next to John. "Colonel, you'll see to meeting the locals in the morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." With that, Colonel Caldwell speeds up to catch Elizabeth as she heads towards the mess.

John slows down, and asks Rodney, "Are you hungry?"

"I ate beforehand. I didn't think I could take a meeting on an empty stomach."

"Yeah. I'll eat later." John never sees it coming when it's him, but it's very obvious that Caldwell is pursuing Elizabeth in his own fashion, and John's willing to give him the space for it. "You holding out on any DVDs?"

Rodney grins. "Come on, I'll show you."

**Day Fifteen**

John's circadian rhythms are solidly on the night-as-day schedule. After spending half the night watching movies with Rodney, he goes to the gym and gets in a workout and then finally makes it
to the mess for a meal.

Lorne is there, eating alone, and John approaches the table with his tray. "Mind if I join you, Major?"

"No, sir. Please do."

"Thanks." John attacks the steak and fries, eating methodically until he's half way through, one hand on the tray to keep it from slipping off the table. "So, I'm going up to the eastern ridge in a while, see if we can't make contact with the locals."

"You want some company?"

"You've read my mind, Major."

"I've been thinking, Colonel."

"Hmm. Dangerous."

Lorne's got a slow smile that spreads across his face like the sun rising. "Sure. It seems to me that we really have two sets of locals. We've never seen anyone actually crossing our valley to get to the other town."

Nodding, John agrees. "They get to their respective look-outs and then, no farther."

"Yeah, so it seems to me that we can't necessarily equate our experience with one to the other."

"That sounds reasonable. What do you think about our little failure?"

"Completely different than anything I've ever seen. Back on Earth, usually when we'd roll into town, it was always a big deal. Even at the SGC, we'd get at least get some face time before the shit hit the fan, but I guess the Tau'ri reputation preceded us."

"Back at Atlantis, we've had people hide from us, not even Teyla could flush them out, though usually anyone who walks through the gate in Pegasus is vetted immediately for good or bad. I can't get over just being ignored."

"Stings the ego."

John points at Lorne with his fork. "Exactly. And it's weird."

"I guess in a few hours we'll find out if everyone is like that."

"Yeah. Need to put together a couple of Marines for back up, after breakfast." John knows that he really needs to get down to brass tacks with the two platoons that were to be assigned to Atlantis, but he'll do it person by person. "I want to be out there before sunrise. Damn, we need some better way of keeping track of time here." The bridge crew has a conversion program running, but running to the bridge to check it is an inconvenience at best.

Lorne grimaces. "Yeah. I'll check with Olander, see who's up."

"That's the Staff Sergeant?"

There's that slow smile again. "Colonel, all due respect sir, but you have got to get on the ball. Having an Air Force officer as their military commander was bad enough for them, but stopping in to say hi isn't what the Marines are looking for." John gives Lorne an appraising look, and he starts
"to backpedal, "No disrespect intended, sir."

"None taken, Major. I'd much rather you speak your mind than have me try and guess what you're thinking. You're my XO, and I'm relying on you to keep me out of trouble."

Lorne gins. "From what I hear, that may be an impossible task, sir."

John chuckles. "Probably. Things aren't going to change fast, but they are going to change. You don't have to 'sir' me all the time, especially when we're not in company."

Lorne nods. "All right then. Sheppard."

"Better. Let's go talk to some Marines."

**Day Sixteen**

The air is still chilly in the pre-dawn hour, and they're sliding into tactical vests and clipping on P90's when Rodney joins them in the hangar bay.

"You coming, McKay?" John asks. He keeps his voice light and faintly disinterested in deference to the two Marines and his XO that are nearby.

"I thought I might." He starts to pull on a vest and slides his precious life signs detector into a pocket, his PDA in another. "Someone has to be the voice of reason in this outfit."

"And that's you?" John asks a little disbelievingly. Rodney is anything but. Brilliant and sarcastic, yes, but reasonable would never be an adjective he'd assign to McKay.

Rodney leans towards Sheppard. "I have to get out of here, Sheppard—even just for a little while. Even if it means subjecting myself to enormous amounts of fatal radiation. I just..."

John interrupts him with a mild, "Okay by me."
John turns to the face the team. "To recap for McKay's benefit, we're going to go hang out on the ridge for a little while and see if we can get these people to talk to us."

Elizabeth enters the hangar bay and everyone turns towards her as she says, "You were going to go without me?"

John sighs internally. "Of course not, Dr. Weir. The more the merrier. Grab a vest and let's go."

Elizabeth puts on a vest and heads towards the lip of the hangar bay, walking with Rodney. Despite their reception yesterday, John's sense of danger is nudging him. He raises a hand, makes a clenching fist, and the Marines stop immediately. He turns around. "Everyone look sharp and stick to those two like burrs."

Lorne, Alvarez and Timmons nod. John should have expected this and planned for more backup accordingly, but he's still on the wrong side of the leadership learning curve, even after a whole year of seat-of-his-pants command. "Okay, head out." As they climb out, John switches to a private channel. "Caldwell, this is Sheppard."

"Go Sheppard."

"We're just on our way out, and I've got Dr. Weir and McKay tagging along. Get Sergeant Olander to send me a couple more guys and have them stay back, but available."
"Will do, Sheppard. I'll have them contact you on this frequency."

"Roger that."

John makes the climb down the side of the ship once again, and they all walk towards the eastern ridge in loose group, McKay and Elizabeth at the center with the military circled around them. "Lorne, we have got to get a better method of egress."

"Yes sir. I'll get started on that today."

Delegation is definitely one of the perquisites of being in command. "Olander's sending two more of his guys to join us, they'll check in on channel six, but I want them to stay at the far rear. I don't want to intimidate these people, so have Alvarez and Timmons make their way to the six; you and I will take point."

Lorne nods, and speeds up to catch the two marines. It's only a few minutes later when Cadman pings him on channel six. "Cadman here. I've got Sergeant Lu, and we're tracking about five hundred yards back."

"Roger that. Stay out of sight and monitor the open channel in case we need back up."

"Yes sir."

They haven't been waiting long when they sight the small group of locals approaching them in the dim light. One of them waves an arm in greeting and John raises his arm in return. "This is more like it."

Elizabeth smiles indulgently. "We should have tried this first."

"The major's got a theory about that. He thinks we have two different population groups, maybe these guys are just friendlier."

"I hadn't considered that. What gave him the idea?"

"The fact that we haven't tracked anyone crossing our little section of desert."

Elizabeth looks annoyed that no one bothered to inform her of this piece of information, and possibly that she hadn't thought to ask. "Perhaps they take a route we can't see."

"No one takes the long way around in the desert, Elizabeth. We're smack down in between the two."

The small group of people in flowing robes is getting close enough that they can hear them talking excitedly.

As they approach in the growing dawn, John catalogs them. They are all shorter than the average crew member of the Daedalus, but that population is probably skewed to taller individuals. They're wearing a variety of loose clothing, in shades of white, tan and brown, except for one fellow who's wearing a royal blue hat under a white hood, and the rest are wearing dun-colored head scarves.

Blue Hat, John mentally dubs him, appears to be their leader. Their features are thin and fine, and they are all clean-shaven. Blue Hat, who's rounder and heavier than his companions, has interesting eyes, they're a hazel that's nearly gray, and John's unaccountably reminded of the girl on the front of the National Geographic.
They bow slightly and speak their greetings, and even though it's complete gibberish, it sounds friendly enough.

Elizabeth gives them a small bow in return and says, "Hello, I'm so pleased to meet you."

An expression of confusion spreads among the locals; they really didn't meet many strangers if they honestly expected them to speak the local patois. The head guy tries again, but he uses Ancient this time, in a far more formal manner than before.

Elizabeth grins, and replies very slowly, stumbling over some of the words; they had only a small amount of video with Jack O'Neill speaking Ancient and there was a whole language that they didn't know how to pronounce. There had been so little time to focus on spoken language; translation of Atlantean scientific text had been their priority.

At her words, every one of them drops to their knees and lay their foreheads on the sand, their arms pulled back to meet their ankles. Blue Hat is at the apex of the group, and the rest fall into neat ranks behind him to create a chevron shape. All of them are murmuring in what can only be Ancient.

"Well, that's unexpected," Rodney says in a curious voice. "Elizabeth, here."

She turns her head and sees that Rodney is offering his PDA. When she sees what's on the display, she scolds him. "Rodney, you've been holding out on me."

A look of sharp pain crosses Rodney's face. "It's, uh, something Peter was working on in his spare time. Before. It's not done, I was..."

"Thank you Rodney." She smiles apologetically, understanding what Rodney didn't really say.

Elizabeth gets to her knees and mirrors the obeisance after laying the PDA between her and Blue Hat. John makes a gesture for the rest his group to take a step back. They crouch in the sand and Elizabeth kneels just as long as the villagers.

Eventually the prayer session, or whatever, comes to a close and they all sit up, nearly as one. John smiles and nods, and Blue Hat smiles back at him.

Elizabeth picks up Rodney's PDA from the sand and John glances over to see how he's handling the cavalier treatment of his personal equipment. Rodney looks unhappy, but surprisingly he's not complaining.

Blue Hat takes the PDA from her, and studies it carefully. He hands it back to her and says something. Elizabeth shuffles a little closer and shows him how to scroll the screen and points to it. "Docui." She points to herself, "Elizabeth."

Blue Hat nods furiously. He repeats the word and points to himself, "Anbur," signaling that he understands perfectly.

Elizabeth scrolls through the PDA again and making sure that Anbur is watching, laboriously asks if she can come to visit his town. He smiles widely and makes a gesture back towards the east, then nods furiously, obviously excited by the prospect.

Elizabeth holds up two fingers, "Two diei."

Anbur stands up and speaks freely to his retinue in the first language they'd heard. John is guessing that he's telling them to expect visitors in a couple of days. Anbur touches the PDA and points to
his village again, and Elizabeth nods. "I'll make sure to bring it."

"Wait, Elizabeth, give this to him." Rodney unzips his vest and pulls out one of the useless, Ancient tschotchkes from his pocket.

"Just how much stuff did you take back to the SGC, Rodney?"

"Just a few things, examples mostly. I'd forgotten it was in my jacket pocket."

John flexes his eyebrows in response, and Rodney ignores him in favor of stepping forward to watch as Anbur takes the device.

When it dimly lights up, Rodney grins triumphantly. "Yes, I thought so. Not particularly strong, but he definitely has the gene."

Anbur laughs out loud and tries to hand it back to Rodney. He raises his hands, "No, you keep it. It's really hard to make it stay off, and I don't think we want to reveal that much to them yet."

"Good idea, Rodney, though if they have any higher level of Ancient tech, it's going to be hard to avoid." Elizabeth wraps Anbur's hand around the toy and gently pushes his hand back.

Anbur does the formal bow again and Elizabeth replies in kind. With a wave, Anbur and his compatriots turn and head home.

John hears Lorne checking in with the Daedalus, so he waits until Anbur's group is a good distance away, before he turns to follow Elizabeth.

Cadman and Lu are waiting about half way down the slope, and Elizabeth stops. "John?"

"Just in case. I wasn't really expecting to have the two top civilians from Atlantis with us."

"Getting cautious in your old age?"

He gives her an opaque look and shakes his head. "That's not like you, Elizabeth."

"Must be the heat." She looks up, but it's just now warming up from the evening chill.

"Right. Come on, let's get out of the sun."
Days Sixteen - Nineteen

The *Daedalus* goes into a giddy, concerned whirlwind of activity to get Elizabeth ready for her visit to Anbur's village.

Rodney scrounges up a loose PDA, loads Peter's translation program onto it and makes sure there are several fresh batteries to go with it, before giving it to Elizabeth. There are a couple of the crew who are annoyed as hell that they can't use their PDAs, but Rodney steamrolls over their objections with the hard fact that this mission might mean eating and not dying in the near future. He doesn't tell them that his was the first 'spare'.

John spends time with each person that Olander has chosen for the mission, feeling easier once he is sure they understand that the villagers are people and aliens, too. He realizes that he shouldn't have worried; all of them had been seasoned members back at the SGC. The only Marine he specifically requests to go along is Lieutenant Cadman.

Caldwell goes into a subtle funk, snapping and growling at people, but it's not too different from his regular snarl.

Carson puts together a medical emergency kit, and Dr. Cole tries to persuade him that the portable defibrillator is unnecessary, but she loses that battle. Most of the kit is for daily medical care, sunscreen, analgesics, antacids, and muscle relaxers.

Elizabeth is nearly beside herself with excitement. She doesn't sleep at all during the hot day and instead spends hours with the PDA to familiarize herself with the program.

In line with her declaration to keep the crew informed, Elizabeth announces a town hall meeting to take place at just before dusk the day before their departure. The entire crew and passenger manifest, some two hundred and thirty people, gather together in the starboard hangar bay. The 302s have been pushed to the side; those that arrive early find seats among the crates and toolboxes. The rest are forced to stand in the searing heat of the late afternoon. Though this is the only place on the entire ship that's large enough to hold everyone on board, it's still a tight squeeze, and there's a definite odor of stale sweat in the air. The bright light of the open doors leaves faces shadowed and grim.

There is a tension in the air, though they've been keeping it together as much as you can when you've been shipwrecked on a planet without a gate, and the dark current of fear and doubt in the room is almost palpable.

Elizabeth insists that John and Rodney stand with her and Colonel Caldwell. Rodney seems to take this as his due, but John is not exactly sure what part he has to play in her agenda here. Caldwell is the ranking officer, as well as ship's captain, and though John isn't really part of the ship's chain of command, she's adamant that it's important. John knows that Elizabeth is loyal to a fault, and so he's willing to play along.

The lights are on, the crowd is milling about and speaking with each other in low voices, when Elizabeth nods and climbs up onto a box.

"I would like to thank all of you for coming this evening, and I hope that this meeting will aid us in moving forward together."
"We're all scared, and I can't tell you what the future holds for us, only that we have to hold on together, and make the best of what we have here and now. We have each other, and from personal experience, that's our best, most important resource. I'm proud of each and every one of you, for your professionalism and dedication.

"As you probably already know, Lieutenant Swenson volunteered to attempt to reach Atlantis in a modified 302. It's possible that we may never know if he succeeds, but his courage and determination are not in question. Please keep him in your thoughts and prayers.

"While it's true that our initial attempt to establish a relationship with the native peoples of this planet ended in failure, I made successful contact yesterday with one of the inhabitants of the village to the east. The language barrier is thick, but thanks to Dr. McKay we have a tool through which we can learn to communicate with them.

"To that end, tomorrow night we're going to go to their village and cement into place the friendly relations that were established, and continue to build the bridge between our peoples.

"Now, since this is a 'town' meeting, if any of you have questions, we'll do our best to answer them. If you have any suggestions, we'll take those into consideration and try to act on them. Anyone?"

An unidentified voice from the back of the crowd shouts, "Dr. Weir, why are you running the meeting and not Colonel Caldwell?"

Caldwell answers that one and his tone is absent of his capitulation to necessity. "Dr. Weir is uniquely qualified to run a colony, should it come to that. We've fallen into a position where the current military structure may not be viable in the future. Anyone who has a concern that is not directly related to the chain of command or official Daedalus business should feel free to consult with Dr. Weir." There are a few murmurs in the crowd, but no one raises any further objection.

Elizabeth fields many more shouted questions: food and if they plan to implement rationing; medical supplies; what are the chances for a rescue; what were the people like; what was the village like, and more, which she answers or passes onto the appropriate authority.

When it appears that there are no more questions, Elizabeth closes the meeting. "Before I depart tomorrow, I'll post the results of my personnel survey in the mess. Look it over, and keep it in mind when you need something done, or if you have a project in mind. Again, thank you for your time, and have a good evening."

Elizabeth's plan works to some extent, there is a slight reduction of the tension in the room, but it does nothing to ease the haunted fear that's still shadowing most of the crew and passengers. The crowd slowly disperses and Elizabeth's smiling as a few people come up to speak with her and shake her hand, but John still feels like a fifth wheel. Off to her side, McKay is talking with Caldwell about some detail about ship repair, so John drifts towards the open end of the hangar bay. In defiance of Beckett's recommendation, there are a handful of people sitting on the lip, watching a few of the Marines out in the sand toss a football back and forth. Others are just standing around, but several people are watching the western horizon with a peculiar intensity.

John climbs down Lorne's makeshift ladder to see what they're looking at, even though he suspects what it is. A figure is standing at the peak of the ridge, limned by the last of the sunset. On impulse he raises his arm in a wave and surprisingly gets a reaction--a wave in return, though the figure doesn't move any closer. John turns his head to call out to Lorne, but when he looks back towards the setting sun, the person is gone.

Lorne reaches his side. "Sheppard."
"Sorry, Major. I got a wave out of today's watcher, but he's gone now."

"That's interesting. I wish we knew what their damage is."

John shrugs and turns away. He'll tell Elizabeth about it later. "They'll be back. Let's play some football." Beckett couldn't really expect them to stay inside all of the time.

Day Twenty

The eastern town doesn't seem that different from its counterpart in the west; it's laid out in a similar fashion, with the market place near the gate and a fountain in the central plaza. It's neat and free of debris if more than a little dusty. The buildings of white stone are one or two stories tall, but stairs carved down into the ground suggest that the first floors may be underground. There are a few stragglily trees on the street, but glimpses over stone walls reveal gardens contained within the courtyards.

The main market area is swarming with throngs of people, more than in the other town. There are heavy, wooden carts piled with foodstuffs, pulled by large shaggy buffalo-ish dray animals that snort and honk, and small pack animals resembling donkeys with heavy packs on their backs.

They thread through the crowds making eye contact, and, in return, people wave and smile, and the shopkeepers call out to them. Everyone seems to dress similarly, short capes or long robes over baggy trousers or simple shifts, and all the clothing appears to sport rich, intricate embroidery, and is designed to protect the wearer from the sun.

The main road leads them to the fountain, where Anbur meets them with a large retinue trailing behind him. They all bow at the waist then fold to their knees in a brief genuflection. Elizabeth follows suit, but John isn't that flexible, so he opts to just bow a little. His Marines look at each other, but they follow his lead. It's a little surreal, seeing three Marines in desert camouflage armed to the teeth, bowing at the natives.

Anbur looks pleased and makes a little gesture with his hands and Elizabeth pulls the PDA out of her vest and hands it to him with a smile. He gives a loud belly laugh and he's speaking quickly in the unknown dialect, pulling on Elizabeth's arm. She shoots a smile at John and they obediently follow Anbur to a large building much taller than those around it, perhaps four or five stories, surrounded by a low stone wall. John falls back and surreptitiously activates his headset and reports their status back to the Daedalus.

It's not a home, it's not a library, and it's not a school, but something like all three together. John immediately begins to prowl around the large room, doing recon under the disguise of curiosity.

Delicate screens of brass filigree worked into familiar Ancient designs divide parts of the large airy space, and low, familiar looking sofas form pit groups. Lanterns covered in the same filigree cast pretty blue light and shadows, and there is art everywhere. Statues of stone and metal stand on tables and on the floor, and one particular screen creates an alcove with a huge, towering statue of a man wearing an antiquated form of the same clothing that they've seen everyone wearing. The statue has a solemn face, but there's warmth and humor there, too. As art it's exquisitely done, though the meditating students arrayed at its base speak to another purpose altogether.

One of Anbur's men gently pulls John away, pointing at the statue. "Qaral."

John repeats the word, assuming that it's probably a name, "Qaral," and allows himself to be

"Qaral."

John repeats the word, assuming that it's probably a name, "Qaral," and allows himself to be
dragged over to the meeting.

Elizabeth and Anbur are seated on one of the couchettes, having a slow tortuous conversation about quarters and dinner, sounding out words and teaching each other Ancient and English phrases for we have place to sleep, and there is food.

Despite the unfamiliarity of the setting, the dynamic is familiar; hurry up and wait. John slouches back into the settee, keeps an ear on the conversation and gets comfortable as he can while still wearing the P90. He's feeling conflicted about this, good manners would dictate that he leave his weapons at the door in the same way that one might remove one's cap, but Anbur's people are still strangers with an unknown agenda. He's been fooled before, and he isn't planning on appreciably letting his guard down. Cadman, Lu and Timmons are sitting nearby, and they look as uncomfortable as John feels.

There's a bizarre multitude of languages being thrown out. Anbur is learning English while he's teaching Elizabeth the local patois as well as improving her Ancient. John would never admit it, but he's picked up a smattering of Ancient, and hearing Anbur speak the words gives them meaning, a context that had previously eluded him.

He's also getting the drift of the other language. It's clear that Ancient is their religious 'high' language, and daily business is conducted in what John is coming to think of as the 'low' language. It'll take him some time to get fluent enough to wander around town and meet people.

John might as well get something out of the trip. If they are going to be here for a while, they need to be able to get along with the neighbors, and that means speaking the language.

Another aide approaches Anbur, and they hold a brief conversation. Anbur explains to Elizabeth, slowly and in Ancient, and then repeats in English. "We have room."

John uncurls and stands up, and the Marines nearly jump out of their seats. It's been a long night, and they're all tired and edgy. Elizabeth smiles at their eagerness, though she too looks a little worn around the edges.

Anbur leads them upstairs to a room that's clearly a student dormitory that's been hastily evacuated to provide room for guests.

It's a plain room, long and narrow with a large bathing facility at the far end of the room. Six beds line the walls, with an ornate trunk at the foot and a desk situated to the side of each bed. The walls are whitewashed, and broad windows are cut into the thick stone. The glass windows are cranked wide open, and the two sets of shutters are open to allow the bright light and a small breeze to spill into the room.

"Elizabeth, you're going to bunk in here with us?" John poses it as a question but there is only one answer he expects.

"I don't see why not, there's plenty of room." She doesn't look at all concerned about blurring the line between leader and follower, and John appreciates that. He really doesn't want to have to make a scene if Anbur tries to separate Elizabeth into another room. Maybe in a few days he'll feel a little more comfortable, but right now it's still too new, and he feels jittery.

John chooses one of the beds closest to the door, and Timmons gets the one on the other side of the room, with Lu next to him. Elizabeth and Cadman take the beds nearest the bathroom.

All of the packs are dumped on the spare bed, and Anbur waits politely by the door as they settle in
and arrange themselves. A few minutes later, several teenagers arrive bearing a portable table, chairs and a heavy tray laden with food and drink.

Elizabeth thanks him in Ancient, and he replies in English. "Refresh. Rest. Safe." Anbur motions to them to sit and partake and gives them a slight bow as he leaves the room.

The teenagers stand at the door and gawk at the strangers, until Anbur returns with a soft curse and a light cuff to shoo the kids away. It's comforting to know that teenagers are the same across two galaxies. John chuckles as he inspects the tray of food. "So you and Anbur seem to be picking up the language pretty quickly."

Elizabeth motions to the Marines who are lounging on their beds. "Come on, have a bite to eat." There is a shuffle of chairs and soon everyone is grazing the food, Ethiopian style.

"Dr. Grodin's database is invaluable, it's taken months off the learning curve, and I don't know what we would have done if they didn't speak any Ancient."

"I'm curious to know how they know Ancient, and who this Qaral guy is."

"Qaral?"

"Oh, there's a statue behind one of screens who I think was introduced as 'Qaral'. There were a few people praying around it."

"Did they seem upset that you went in there?"

"Not really, the guy just pulled me away. I have to admit that they are doing their best to put us at ease." He pauses to chew on a bite of the unleavened bread. "It's like they were surprised to find out that we're strangers, but don't act surprised that we are strangers."

Elizabeth quirks an eyebrow at John with a questioning look.

"Okay, that didn't make sense even to me. Must be the sun." John gives Elizabeth a cocky smirk.

"They were surprised when we were strangers, but not that we were aliens and know a little Ancient."

"Yeah, that works."

The conversation grinds to a halt as they eat. It's obvious to John that Elizabeth is mentally working on a problem, but even so, when she speaks, he gets a small jolt of surprise.

"So, now that we're all here I think I should lay out some ground rules." The Marines stop eating and look at Elizabeth with perfect attention.

"First, you should call me Elizabeth; I think we might be here for a while. Second, I'm sure that you three have first names--I'm going to find out what they are, and I'm going to use them. Third, I need all of you to do your best to learn as much as you can and report even the smallest detail to me - like that statue. Lieutenant, why don't we start with you?"

John nods at the Marines and gives them a look that says 'humor her'; he'll take Elizabeth aside later and explain that the Marines would probably gouge their own eyes out before they'd offer her any disrespect by the familiarity of addressing her by her first name.

Cadman swallows her bite hurriedly. "Laura. I like to blow things up, and I've been known to tap-
dance."

That gets a laugh, and the faint tension in the air disappears.

Sergeant Lu goes next. "Chin, Lu Chin. I gave up professional golf to join the Marines."

"And last but not least, me. My mother must've been dropping acid, because Valentine Timmons is my name. Just call me Val."

John grins. "Or was she a Heinlein fan."

Val gives Sheppard a startled look, as if he's reevaluating him. "Sir, I seriously doubt that."

Elizabeth beams with pleasure. "Val, Chin, Laura. Now that we all know each other a little better, does anyone speak a second language?"

Chin smiles, "Cantonese, actually. English is my second language."

"I think you might be learning a third and fourth here."

"Yes, ma'am, after you learn English and Chinese, it's all downhill from there."

"Laura? How about you?"

"Four years of high school Spanish, but I've forgotten most of it."

"I've found that I always remember more than I thought I did, but the experience should come in handy."

Val didn't need to be asked. "Twelve years of Latin—I went to a Catholic school, and it was a required subject."

"Have you been able to pick up anything by just listening in?"

"It sounds a little familiar, and I can guess at what it might mean, but not really, no."

"I believe that you're going to be joining Chin in learning a few new languages."

Val smiled. "Yes ma'am. I'd like that."

"John, how about you?"

John soft-pedals his answer. "I can order a beer and find the bathroom in a handful, but I picked up more than a little Farsi."

"I'm sure that you must also have learned a little Ancient, even if only by osmosis." Elizabeth favors John with a sly smile.

John shifts uncomfortably and avoids Elizabeth's eyes. "Maybe some."

She lets him off the hook. "I'm really looking forward to knowing more about these people."

John muses about their two vastly dissimilar experiences. "I wonder why they seem so friendly while the other village was so indifferent—cold."

"Perhaps Anbur will be able to explain that—or at least his interpretation of it."
"I have a bad feeling about it; I don't want to get caught in the middle of something where we have no idea what's going on," John says.

Elizabeth reassures him, "We'll just have to wait and see."

**Days Twenty-One - Forty-Two**

After a couple of days of meeting with Anbur in the lounge, he invites them to stay longer, and offers to allow them to take regular classes with the students. Elizabeth readily agrees, they have nothing but time.

Colonel Caldwell isn't so sanguine about the plan, but he doesn't overly object, because it presents an opportunity to ingratiate the Expedition with the local population.

They spend a several of weeks learning Ancient along with other students. The **Ludahsediat** is a religious school, and excerpts from the **Avaxqaral**, painted onto thick soft paper with tiny brushes, serve as classroom materials and religious texts. Anbur is not at all reticent to explain that the **Avaxqaral** is a machine left to them by Qaral, the Ancient that had seeded the planet at the time they evacuated the Pegasus galaxy. John thinks Rodney would probably commit murder to get his hands on an Ancient database with skilled human translators.

Elizabeth and Val pick up the Ancient most quickly and move up in the classes, until they are with the oldest students. Chin isn't far behind them, but Laura and John are still sitting with the younger students.

John is learning **Peragro** from the kids in the class and teaching them English in return. The Ancient is fine, and he's sure that Elizabeth is in heaven learning it, but her agenda is still skewed towards what it will mean if they return to Atlantis.

He's trying to stop thinking in terms of when.

Their carefully adjusted diurnal schedule is rearranged to meet that of the school. Very early morning is reserved for language classes, and at dawn the class stops as the **qerato** calls the faithful to meet the day, curled down to the floor in prayer. After prayer, they breakfast and then have a few hours of free time to wander around and explore the town, meeting people. At midday they have another meal, and then it's classes of math or science, followed by a rest period in the hottest part of the day.

When the evening call to prayer is through, everyone gathers in the salon with the statue. It's an elective evening gathering, which is conducted exclusively in Ancient for learned discussion on a variety of topics—science, politics, math, or any subject one cares to bring up. It feels like an odd confluence of formal and casual; they lounge around on the sofas and nibble on the trays of snacks like it's a cocktail party, but the language and actual conversation is generally reserved and academic.

John prefers to wander around the town of N'vellesem and explore the territory. It's incredible what the aurora does to the town, the shifting light plays off the white buildings, transforming them into a gorgeous, glowing canvas of colored light.

He soon discovers a public drinking establishment, where the patrons greet him like he's a long lost hero and invite him in for a drink. He has a little of the common tongue under his belt, and John learned long ago that it's not always about the words, which he usually fails at anyway. They buy
him rounds of a strong, sweet tea and short glasses of a fiery liquor they call *ekal*, which he appreciates since he hasn't got a single *lamnat*, the local coinage, on him.

He mostly sticks to the tea and listens while they talk. It's too fast, and he doesn't understand, but that's fine. The patrons are an even mix of men, and women, who don't appear to be barflies or prostitutes. He asks a few questions in slow halting Peragro, and that amuses them. They answer slowly, as if speaking to a child, but John isn't offended. He doesn't always get the explanation, but it doesn't matter. He's here to interact, make a few friends, and he succeeds; that he picks up more phrases and memorizes a few faces is just the icing on the cake.

Sometimes when he goes to the public teahouse, he'll take Cadman or Lu or Timmons, and on one memorable occasion Elizabeth. She has a far better command of Ancient than Peragro; when she uses Ancient to ask a question every one of them falls to their knees and hugs the floor, which really wasn't her intention. John advises her, "Stick to Peragro, Elizabeth."

John checks in daily with the *Daedalus*, though nothing interesting is happening there, and Rodney calls a few times to rant about John having all the fun. It would be interesting to see Rodney at the teahouse and John thinks that they'll be coming back again.

~*~

Between John and Anbur, they've each picked up a smattering of languages, and John finds that Anbur's a pretty interesting guy. He has an atrocious, almost juvenile sense of humor and he always laughs at his own jokes, which John finds amusing. Anbur is also a schoolteacher at heart; he loves answering questions and has a deep thirst for knowledge.

Anbur shows John his favorite hobby, an aviary of sorts, with a handful of small raptor-type birds. They're not hooded or leashed, and Anbur uses the birds to start a conversation, asking John all sorts of questions about the *Daedalus*, their people and customs. John knows that Anbur is using John as a sounding board to compare and contrast whatever Elizabeth has explained. He also knows that under that genial smile lies a quick, sharp intellect; he's probably building a very thorough account of the crew of the *Daedalus*.

In return, Anbur is willing to answer almost any question John has. He hedges the answer when John's curious that Elizabeth doesn't seem to go to a classroom any more, but is off doing 'special studies'; Elizabeth had been close-mouthed on the subject. John figures that out of all of them, Elizabeth is probably the smartest, and it doesn't surprise him at all that she 'graduated' in a matter of weeks.

Anbur tries to explain the difference between the Peragroilla and the Qaroptimat—the main sects of the two towns, but it's a vast and complicated answer, and John tries to not let his eyes glaze over. If ever he wished that Teyla were here, it would be now. He cuts himself off from that train of thought, no sense in indulging in self-torture.

John does get a better sense of the social geography from his conversations with Anbur. The town they're in, N'vellesem, is mainly composed of the sect Peragroilla, though not exclusively, and they tend to interpret their religious text, the *Avaxqaral*, the Voice of Qaral, more literally than the followers of Qaroptimatia—the other main sect.

The town to the west of the *Daedalus* is Ayse, but they are mostly Qaroptimat, whose followers generally rely upon the 'religious' leader's interpretations of the *Avaxqaral*. Peragroilla and Qaroptimat aren't exactly just religions or tribes, and yet they are.

It's a bad habit, and despite a lifetime of being exposed to foreign cultures, John knows that he's
trying to shoehorn the nuances of an alien culture into his somewhat privileged American point of view. A year in the Pegasus galaxy has worn the edges off of that tendency, but he figures if the shoe fits, it works for him.

**Day Forty-Three**

They're taking advantage of the *Ludahsediat*'s day off, wandering around N'vellesem. Anbur had given them a handful of the tiny, but surprisingly heavy, silver-colored *lamnat* coins to share and sent them out to shop. The market is busy in the hot morning sun, the tables of wares outside shops are loaded with food, clothing, glassware, and almost anything that can be traded or sold is available. John has explored the town a little bit in the few weeks they've been here, but the market is where all the action is.

Elizabeth is wandering around with Cadman, and ostensibly John is keeping an eye on them, but it's more like asynchronous orbits. He runs into them every few minutes, though he's always aware of what shop they've gone into, and that Timmons and Chin are staying within shouting distance. They are still walking around with their P90s, John's not so far gone that he's ready to give them up, even though the town seems friendly and accommodating.

John stops in front of a music shop where the proprietor's band is giving an impromptu sidewalk concert. The flute recorder things have an odd atonal sound, though the drums are pretty much like any other, a shallow brass bowl with some hide stretched over it. There are a couple of string type instruments too, plucked and bowed, and all of them together make for a harsh, but still compelling, sound.

It's loud enough that John can't hear when the *Daedalus* calls him on the radio. "Hang on, let me find someplace I can hear you." John quickly jogs to a quieter spot. "Okay, sorry. I'm reading you now."

"Colonel, I'm patching you through to Dr. McKay."

"Standing by." John hears static and then a click and open frequency. "Rodney, what's going on?"

Rodney sounds breathless and excited. "Colonel, we have a visitor. Came running into the volleyball court."

"You have a volleyball court?" John grins to himself as he winds Rodney up a little.

Rodney snaps crossly, "Pay attention, please. I've exhausted my command of conversational Ancient. How much have you learned of the other language?"

"I can order a beer and find the bathroom."

"Naturally. Well, you need to expand on that a little here. I'm going to try to give her the radio. Her name's Shaaziya."

"Sure, I can try, but I'll go back to the school and find Anbur. Elizabeth is at the market with Cadman, and I'm on guard duty."

"Who? What?" Rodney sounds distracted.

"Lieutenant Cadman and Elizabeth are shopping. Hang on." Sheppard calls out, "Timmons! Stick with Dr. Weir and Cadman; I'm going back to the school. Okay, Rodney."
"Shopping? With what?"

"Anbur gave us a little money and shoved us out the door."

"Great. I'm stuck here with the morons, and you're out shopping."

"I'll take you shopping, Rodney. So, are you going to put her on, or not?"

"Right."

John hears Rodney trying to explain the radio to someone, and then only back ground noise before there is a rustling sound. Caldwell comes on the frequency, "Colonel Sheppard, she has the radio, please initiate contact."

He has no earthly idea what to say, and even less idea of how to say it in Peragro. "My name is John Sheppard. Who are you?" He's totally not prepared for the fast rush of a strange dialect; admittedly he's still learning, but he can only pick out a word here and there—he hadn't minimized his comprehension of Peragro to McKay by much. "I am almost there, slow down."

He does manage to get where she's from, Ayse. Shaaziya has a great voice for the radio. The language is kind of musical, and he stops trying to understand and just listens to the fascinating rise and fall of her voice as he waits for Anbur to excuse himself from the classroom.

He's smiling and not at all upset to have been pulled out of class. "Colonel Sheppard, what can I help?"

"Anbur, please translate." Sheppard hands him the radio and ear piece, "Put this on, like this. Her name is Shaaziya and she's from Ayse. I don't understand."

Anbur takes the radio with an immensely pleased expression. Fortunately, Anbur has a far better talent for languages, and he's obviously familiar with her dialect, because they launch into a fast conversation that John doesn't follow at all. Anbur's face grows grim, and he takes the radio off, handing it back to Sheppard and gesturing. "Find Elizabeth, great danger."

John takes off running, shouting into the radio. "Timmons, Cadman, report your position. Where's Elizabeth?" Anbur is right behind him.

Laura comes back with "We're at the cloth merchant."

"Stop what ever you're doing and get her back to the school. Now."

"Roger, we're on our way."

"Timmons, where are you?"

"I've got them in sight, sir. Heading towards the school, Cadman is taking the shortcut just behind the pottery shop."

John heads off to the left to intercept them at the end of the small alleyway a few hundred yards away, and he's got Elizabeth and Cadman in sight. "Anbur, what is going on?"

"The Abnepa of the Qaroptimatia is very unhappy you are studying with us. Elizabeth is target for nixat, to make example because of studying Avaxqaral."

Damn it, John knew he should have worried more about what Elizabeth was doing on her 'special project'.

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Just as Anbur's words are spoken, John sees it happen in slow motion; a dart strikes Elizabeth in
the neck, and she crumples down to the ground. Timmons is quickest on the shot, and he takes
down the assassin, who makes no attempt to escape. John puts on a short burst of speed to make it
to Elizabeth's still form.

He should've expected this. Nothing ever happens without having some effect; he just didn't expect
it to be attempted murder. John reports to the *Daedalus*, "Elizabeth is down, we need medical
assistance immediately."

Caldwell replies crisply, "*I'll have one of the doctors in a 302 ASAP.*"

Anbur pulls the dart out of her and throws it down in disgust. "*Must get rememdium, quickly.*" He
easily picks Elizabeth up and rushes through the gathering crowd.

They've been through this before, and John picks up the dart for safekeeping. "Cadman, wait
outside the gates for the 302. Someone pick up that guy and follow us," John is still shouting
orders as he follows Anbur, who's holding Elizabeth limp in his arms.
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,

Day Forty-Three

Anbur simply crashes through the front door of the *rememdium*, bellowing "*Neela!*" loudly. A tiny old woman scurries into the foyer almost instantly, takes in the situation and begins firing questions as she leads them into the back room. John has been in the infirmary in Atlantis so many times, he doesn't even have to know the doctor's actual questions; he just gives her the dart.

The room is dim and close; there is barely room enough for the low bed. She points and Anbur lays Elizabeth down gently, then steps to the side. The *rememdium* squats next to Elizabeth and begins to examine the wound low on her neck, then starts scrabbling around Elizabeth's shirt with its unfamiliar zipper.

John's face is flushing hot and red, but he steps around Anbur to unzip her shirt and lift Elizabeth up slightly to strip it off over her head. He gets a brief smile of thanks as he gives her room to work. The old woman places her hand over Elizabeth's chest, just above the heart. Elizabeth's breath is stuttering, short uneven breaths.

John looks away from the old woman's walnut-dark hand, lying so intimately on Elizabeth, as she chants, almost singing, but he can't see anything happening. "Anbur, what's going on?"

"*Neela is healer.*" Anbur says simply, though it doesn't really answer the question. "Gift of Qaral."

That might be a better answer. John thinks back to the catechisms he's learned over the last three weeks. Qaral was the Ancient who had transplanted the population here, along with his native wife and son, and then disappeared in a flash of light. Mentally, he digs back further into the SGC mission reports for the rest of the information on Ancient healing. "Okay," is all he says.

He checks that Timmons is watching over the injured assassin in the front room before stepping outside into the brilliant, hot street.

"*Daedalus*, this is Sheppard."

"*Go ahead, Sheppard.*" Caldwell sounds like he's strung too tightly, and is about to snap.

"What's the ETA on the doctor?"

"*Dr. Cole left three minutes ago.*"

"Lieutenant Cadman is waiting for them outside the town's west gate."

"I'll pass that on."

"Anbur's taken Elizabeth to the local healer and she's working on her now. I don't know her status yet. Do you still have Shaaziya with you?" John is hoping that Caldwell didn't immediately throw her into the brig as thanks for her warning, however untimely it was.

"*Dr. McKay has her in the conference room, keeping her entertained with an MRE, and she doesn't seem particularly anxious to leave.*"

"I need to ask her a few questions, but I'll have to check on the logistics from this end." John can hear the high whine of the 302 in the distance, and everyone in the street is excitedly rushing
towards the gate. "Dr. Cole is here, I'll report in as soon as we know anything."

"Very good Colonel, Daedalus out."

John keys the radio to get Cadman. "Lieutenant, report."

"We're just inside the gates, sir."

"The rememdium is about two blocks to the north of the fountain, the second street on the left." He pauses to think before he continues; they desperately need the goodwill of N'vvellesem, but he has to balance that with Elizabeth's life. With some regret, he orders Cadman, "Do what you have to do to get through the crowd, Lieutenant."

"Roger that, sir. Doesn't seem to be a problem, they're not impeding our progress."

That relieves John as he goes back in to check on Elizabeth. She's still unconscious, and Neela has her hands wrapped around Elizabeth's head, fingers threading through her dark hair, thumbs stroking her cheeks. Neela is still chanting, and Anbur is kneeling at Elizabeth's feet, singing along with Neela; his voice echoes hers in a lower octave.

Going back outside, John waves in the Lieutenant and Dr. Cole; the curious crowd is following them at a respectful distance. John's admiration for them goes up a notch or two.

"Dr. Cole, she's in here."

"Colonel."

"Cadman, stand watch, we don't need the whole village in here." He pulls Dr. Cole into the house. "First, their rememdium, or doctor, might have some Ancient healing gene, are you familiar with that?"

"I've read the pertinent mission files."

John wonders about the raw info dump he'd struggled with for so long. "She may or may not be helping, I don't want to disrupt her if she is."

"Understood, Colonel."

One of them had figured out the rest of the zips; Elizabeth's slacks are open and shoved down, and now Neela's hands are stroking long swaths underneath her underpants, up to her ribs and then back down again.

Anbur is still kneeling, but he's silent now, his lips moving with words of prayer. John crouches down beside Anbur, and speaks to him in a low voice. "Anbur, our rememdium is here, Dr. Cole. Can she examine Elizabeth?"

"Yes. Neela finish quick."

And at that, Neela stops, rearranges Elizabeth's remaining clothing and pulls a light blanket up to her neck. She and Anbur hold a conversation that's so fast John can't follow it, but Anbur gives him the gist of it when they are through. "The poison is strong."

John nods as Anbur pulls him out of the room. Dr. Cole brushes past them, pulling out her stethoscope and kneeling at the low bed to start a physical examination, which oddly takes the same route as Neela's: heart beat, examine the eyes, palpitate the lymph glands under her jaw and
then checking for distension of the belly. Elizabeth is still gasping for air, though not as heavily as she was a few minutes earlier. Cole yanks the stethoscope off and snaps, "I need her in the infirmary, like ten minutes ago."

John shoves Elizabeth's shirt into his pocket and carefully picks her up, while Anbur tucks the blanket around her as they turn to go. Neela is at the door and John thanks her as they sweep out of the room.

"Cadman, give the pilot a heads up, we're on our way out."

They're walking at a fast clip, and the crowd easily parts for them. "Lieutenant, make sure that Neela knows the assassin needs looking after, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Yes Sir."

It's not far, nothing in the small town is very distant, and they soon have Cole in the back seat of the 302 with Elizabeth on her lap, and Lieutenant Faraj is closing the canopy. John shoves the crowd back, away from the hot blast of the engines.

Even with Harrier take-off capabilities, the sand is a problematic runway. Huge, billowing clouds of hot sand and dust are thrown up, scouring everyone in range. John doesn't have to order anyone back; they are running inside the city gates.

John and Anbur watch until they're in the air and are fully away. It hasn't even been twenty minutes. John turns to Anbur. "I must speak to the assassin and Shaaziya, can you return to Daedalus with us?"

"Yes, I will come."

~*~

John gets a little refresher course in history before they start with the assassin from the west. "They are the same but do not believe as same. Qaroptimat follow Son of Qaral as rightful leader after Wilan's death. They wait for blood of Quaralyn to return, blood of Ancestors very important. We follow Doctus as Wilan's chosen, and do not wait for Quaralyn."

John nods, this is all ground he's covered in beginner's theology.

"Qaroptimat believe only the Abnepa or Idon may study Qaral's words, but they have only fragmented remembrance, their Vaxqaralyn. There was much blood spilled for many years, but now steady peace for many hundred generations."

"So we've upset the balance, and they're trying to rectify the situation." John flashes back the evening that Elizabeth had wowed the crowd at the teahouse. Elizabeth's theory that they must travel across the desert out of sight was right on the money; how else would the Qaroptimat know she was studying the Avaxqaral, and how did Shaaziya gain that intelligence?

"Hmm. Just so."

The prisoner is awake and sullen, but Nail answers Anbur's questions; a holy man of knowledge is not to be ignored, regardless of sect. John's supposition turns out to be correct; Elizabeth had been targeted because she was directly studying the Avaxqaral. The rest of them were known to be taking only children's classes from paper transcripts and hand crafted books.

John reports the intelligence to Caldwell and gets a status report on Elizabeth—no change—before
they return to the school to gather their belongings. Night is falling rapidly and John is anxious to get back to the Daedalus. He leaves the prisoner in the hands of the N'vellesem with a request that they be able to ask him further questions.

"We are not like Qaroptimat, he will be safe." Anbur looks a little put out that John brings up the possibility of capital punishment.

"I'm sorry, I just had to know." With that, they set out across the moonlit desert. Anbur's retinue is vastly reduced from his original contingent; only Baariq, Dara and Iqbal of the Idon accompany them.

~*~

They're only a few hours into the hike to the Daedalus when John's radio crackles to life, and the comm tech is calling. "Colonel Sheppard, this is Daedalus."

"Sheppard here."

Caldwell answers him. "We have a situation, Colonel. The Daedalus is surrounded by Habibs on the ground. They are armed and presumed dangerous—and we don't have any idea of what their problem is."

"Understood." John bristles at the probably unintended slur. Caldwell isn't that much older, but it's these little things that remind John they're of two separate generations of soldiers. He steadies his voice. "Anbur and a couple of his friends are with us. Can we take them?"

"Possibly, but I'm reluctant to engage and escalate, especially with unarmed civilians under your care."

"I agree. What do you suggest?"

"Hermiod and Dr. McKay are trying to get the Asgard beam working, but we don't have time for any testing."

"Uh, that's not very reassuring."

Rodney interrupts. "It'll be fine, Colonel. Go, Novak." There's a bright, blinding flash that lights up the night sky and Rodney is there in the flesh, looking smug. "And I'll prove it to you." He nods at Anbur and the Idon, who look completely flabbergasted. He taps his radio, "Novak, lock onto my transmitter. There's," he pauses to count, "eight others. You got 'em? Great." He turns to John. "Don't get used to this, Sheppard, Caldwell says it's mission critical only—it takes too much power."

John takes a moment to introduce Rodney. "Anbur, this is Dr. Rodney McKay, our chief scientist. Rodney, this is Anbur, Baariq, Dara and Iqbal. They're sort of the rulers and religious leaders of the Peragroilla of N'vellesem. Anbur's the one that saved Elizabeth."

"Oh, well. Thank you, really. Pleased to meet you. Now, we need to form a small group, but for God's sake don't any one touch each other."

If Rodney's so certain that he'd risk coming out here, who is John to question? He pulls the awed Idon into a small area. "Don't touch, stay apart, okay? We're going to take a little trip." He points at Rodney, who's arranging Cadman, Chin and Brown as an illustration, instructing them to form another ring around the Idon.
"Yes, Sheppard, we understand." Anbur says in a shaky voice, turning to his companions, passing on the instructions.

John and Rodney take their places in the formation. "Do your magic, McKay."

Rodney grins and taps his radio. "Novak, nine to beam aboard at your discretion."

John rolls his eyes and before he can comment, they're in the ring room aboard the Daedalus. "Jesus, Rodney, how long have you been waiting to say that?"

Rodney laughs, "Actually, I didn't even think about it." He kicks a little of the sand they'd brought with them. "Huh, I guess we need to work on that."

They turn around and their guests are on their knees, foreheads to the ground, praying.

Rodney is pulling them up as he chastises them, "Oh, no. No. Don't do that. It's just not dignified!"

"We have never seen such power. There are the tales of the very old transcribed many years after landfall which describe such things." Anbur says it dreamily, as he looks around the ring room. During John's stay in N'vellesem, Anbur has treated all of them with a friendly respect, but now there's a little more reverence in his tone.

John isn't sure he likes it.

He looks away as he radios Caldwell. "We're all aboard, Colonel. Safe and sound."

"Very well, Colonel, please bring your guests to the conference room immediately."

"Yes, sir. Come on, let's go meet the boss."

John and Rodney herd the Idon to the conference room, giving them a mini-tour on the way. They are politely impressed with the Daedalus, despite the uneven floors and her broken state.

Once they arrive at the conference room, John gets his first look at their mysterious benefactor. She has a handsome face, despite the slightly hawkish nose, with pale green eyes, which widen at the sight of Anbur and his retinue. She slides easily from her chair onto her knees, curling in, so that her nose touches her knees with her hands over her eyes.

Anbur speaks to her in a sharp tone of voice, and it looks like she almost flows to her feet, though her eyes are still downcast as she replies.

The conversation continues between them. John isn't nearly good enough to follow it, and he uses the time to watch Rodney. It's a little disheartening to see the expression on Rodney's face; even though he doesn't have any way to communicate with her, John can see that Rodney's already well and truly smitten.

Shaaziya elaborately answers all of their questions, and then Anbur gives them the lowdown.

"Zuhair, the Abnepa of the Qaroptimat, heard of Elizabeth from spies. Has declared nixat."

John tilts his head slightly as he thinks about that. "I'm pretty sure I know what that means, but maybe you can be a little more specific."

"They may openly attack, and you are not safe from deception. Those of your people who study Avaxqaral are forfeit, unclean."
Caldwell interjects a question. "What about Shaaziya, is she in danger, because of what she's done?"

Anbur studies Shaaziya for a moment. He asks her another question, and she shakes her head as she replies, which brings a smile to Anbur's face. "Shaaziya lal Q'yn is in no danger of retribution. Her presence is of no consequence to those who wait. I leave for you decide if she is dangerous."

"Great." John, Rodney and Caldwell each glance at the other, but it's apparent that his meaning is unclear to all of them. John turns back to Anbur. "What does that mean for your people? That you've allowed this to happen?"

"We have means to discuss the matter. This has happened before, do not worry."

John hates that they're responsible for breaking a thousand year old armistice. "Anbur, did you know this would happen? If you let Elizabeth into the database?"

Anbur looks John in the eye, those startling gray eyes hiding nothing. "We do not worship the blood, or wait for the Quaralyn, but as a learned man, how can I ignore such a sign?"

Rodney makes a sarcastic, scoffing sound. "What the hell is a Quaralyn?"

Anbur doesn't take offense at Rodney's denigrating tone, but answers mildly, "The son of Qaral promised to return after his death. The Qarooptimat wait for him."

John should have expected this—how often did an alien space ship crash land on your planet, and said aliens hand over a device that proclaims that they are messengers of your god? "I know this hard to believe, but we aren't who you think we are—we're just like you."

It's going to be impossible to conceal forever the fact that there are ATA gene carriers on board, and in the interest of not having this come back and bite him on the ass later, John decides to lay all of their cards out on the table. "Rodney, do you have any more of those Ancient gadgets?"

"A couple. You don't mean to..."

Colonel Caldwell cuts him off. "Sheppard, do you think that's a wise decision?"

"Yes, I do. We can't sustain a secret of this magnitude for very long, and I think in the interest good relations, we have to be completely honest."

"What would Dr. Weir say?"

"I'm pretty sure she'd back me up on this." Actually, John isn't at all sure. She'd mentioned that this might come up at their initial parlay with Anbur, but they've butted heads over policy more than once in the last year. He intends to take advantage of her absence, especially since she was the one who got them into this mess. Rodney gives him a 'you've got to be kidding' look, but disappears to retrieve a device.

Caldwell doesn't appear to buying it either, though he doesn't prevent John from explaining to Anbur the events of the last year: Stargates and distant Galaxies and the Ancients retreating from the Wraith and Pegasus, and the fact that some of them are also very distant descendants of the Ancestors.

Anbur nods "This is same, the history of Dominat. Qaral must not leave the archepat in city of Ancestors, could no longer protect. Many legends of living with the Ancestors before Dominat."
John recalls his school lessons; they use term *archepat* to describe their ancestors, to differentiate them from the Ancestors. He thinks that it's pretty amazing that they have such clear records, and it's almost incomprehensible to know that they understand their history so far back into the distant past.

Rodney returns and lays the tschotchke on the table between Anbur and John. Anbur's eyes flicker over to Shaaziya. Though she wasn't capable of following John's story, she will definitely get the full effect of the demonstration. He gives Shaaziya an order, and she stands immediately. "Doctor, please take her."

"What!" Rodney's not used to Anbur's grasp of English, and John translates.

"Rodney, you need to take Shaaziya out of here. Anbur doesn't want her to see this. I agree."

"Oh, right. Well, wait for me, I want to be here." Rodney points at one of the Marines standing guard outside the room. "You, Marine person, come with me."

John glances at Caldwell. "Actually, in the interest of full disclosure, I think we need every one on board with the gene in here."

"I concur." Caldwell calls the OD to round them up while Rodney guides Shaaziya out of the room.

They wait a few minutes, and soon Dr. Beckett, Major Lorne, and the other handful of the ATA enabled staff are assembled. Rodney returns from stashing Shaaziya in the mess.

"Anbur. These people all carry what you call the blood of the Ancestors. Very few of us have this, we call it a gene."

"As it is for us."

"Okay. Here goes." John picks up the small device and thinks 'on'; it glows, and there's a small sound, like the refrain from a song. He smiles and asks, "Music box?"

Rodney grins back. "I think so, we really aren't sure."

"Cool." He turns it off and hands it to Rodney who repeats the procedure, though the light and sound are slightly fainter. He hands it off to Beckett who's wearing a faintly queasy expression as he activates it. The device is passed down the line, giving away the relative strength of every individual's ATA gene, until it finally comes back to John. He hands it to Anbur, and it glows dimly, but does not emit sound. Anbur hands it to Baariq, but stays dark. Iqbal and Dara have the gene, but not even as strong as Anbur.

"We are like you, Anbur. We are not to be worshiped, and we aren't Qaral's messengers. It's a coincidence."

"Hmm, very powerful. The fates do not like coincidence." Anbur huddles together with his *Idon*, and after an extended argument, turns to John. "I see your truth and this may be in your favor with Zuhair. This is very powerful knowledge, you must decide who you may trust. Baariq and Dara say it will be difficult to hide. Iqbal cannot agree to the hiding; it is the way of the Qarooptimat, and is not our way. We will not hide for you, but we will not speak for you."

Rodney asks, "What does he mean by that?"

"I think they aren't going to go around telling everyone, but we're on our own if we intend to keep..."
Anbur nods accordingly, and John doesn't like the way that Anbur's looking at him, as if he's reevaluating him from the ground up.

"That's likely the best offer we're going to get, Sheppard." Caldwell dismisses the assembled gene carriers, "Thank you, that will be all for now." He pins John with a serious look. "Colonel, please have the OD assign temporary quarters, I'm sure our guests would like to rest."

Which is colonel-speak for a private 'discussion' in the near future. John only hopes it's after he checks on Elizabeth and a nap. He has Olander assign a female guard for Shaaziya so Rodney can get some rest, and makes sure that Shaaziya knows it's mainly for her protection, though she is restricted to the few public areas of the ship. Anbur and his *Idon* are also given an escort, and are similarly restricted.

John stops at the infirmary to check on Elizabeth and finds Caldwell already there. Might as well kill two birds with one stone, and he approaches the foot of her bed. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Caldwell stands and puts himself in John's space, just like a drill instructor, not quite chest to chest. "Colonel Sheppard, while I appreciate the fact that you've had some experience with these people, I do not like to be backed into a corner by one of your unilateral decisions. This isn't a colony yet, and I hope that you can remember that there is still a chain of command." His voice is low and he speaks quietly, but there's no doubt about who he thinks is in charge.

John refuses to be intimidated; he's had it out with the best that the Air Force can throw at him. John is aching to slouch down with an insolent look, but it wouldn't accomplish anything other than pissing off Caldwell and exacerbating the situation. "Colonel, did you disagree with anything that I said or my course of action?"

"Not necessarily, but with our main diplomat out of the picture, I take exception to your seat of the pants diplomacy. It hasn't always worked out for you."

He's got a point, and John knows that the last year has only reinforced his natural tendency to take the initiative as he sees fit. Elizabeth has called him on more than once. John nods, "Yes, sir. I'll make every attempt to take this into consideration in the future."

Caldwell steps back a little. "Thank you, Colonel. If you have a moment later, please inquire if Anbur would consider aiding us in parleying with whoever it is that's outside the ship."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to help."

Caldwell nods and leaves the infirmary.

John takes a breath, drags a chair over to Elizabeth's bedside and sits down, just for a little while. She's on a respirator, still pale and unconscious, but the machines attached to her beep at a reassuring pace. He touches her hand briefly, and it's freezing. He risks picking it up because she's not awake, and chafes it lightly, before he rearranges her blanket a little so it covers her hands.

What a mess, and it'd been going so well. This is what he gets for letting his guard down, even a little. Elizabeth's diplomatic nature was both a source of comfort and a sore spot; but she wasn't available to consult, and honestly, Caldwell might have command of the *Daedalus*, might have coveted Sheppard's appointment to Atlantis, but he hasn't ever had to deal with the insanity of the Pegasus galaxy, though now he might have to learn to take up the slack if Elizabeth doesn't pull through. John's not sure how well he and Caldwell will cooperate, and he's not looking forward to
It's not long before Rodney joins him, pulling up his own chair. "Sheppard. You look like hell."

"Thanks." John frowns at him, but quickly gives it up. "Oh, hey, I brought you a present." John digs into his pocket for the little lamnat coins that Anbur had given them. "Here. I didn't have a chance to buy you anything."

Rodney takes the coins and inspects them carefully, hefting them in his palm as if to judge their weight, and rubbing his thumb over the smooth, almost soapy, surface. "Huh. I'll have to run them through the scanner, but this looks like Yttrium, or even Lutetium. The sensor array picked up huge deposits of them--we're pretty sure that's why the gravity is so high." Rodney clenches his hand around the coins and frowns at Elizabeth. "I'm just sorry that Shaaz didn't show up sooner, we could've nipped it in the bud."

John gives Rodney the inscrutable eyebrow, but this time it's obvious what he means.

"Well, it's a long name, and she's always correcting my pronunciation, and well, you know."

"It's fine, Rodney, but I wouldn't get too attached to her. I know she came here to warn us, but we can't just keep her here, and we can't just let her go. We just don't know."

"Yes, I know that, but that isn't a reason to treat her like a criminal."

"I'm not treating her like a criminal. I don't think anyone will try to harm her, I'm just not taking any chances. I don't need any more grief on my hands right now."

Rodney's voice takes on an uncharacteristic tone of compassion. "Really, Sheppard, I understand. I'm just frustrated with the communication gap."

"Yeah. I don't think I ever really grasped how much easier life was with the 'gates."

Carson sticks his head out of the infirmary office. "I thought I heard your dulcet voices."

John wonders how much Carson overheard of his conversation with Caldwell. "How is she, Carson?"

"The poison appears to be chemically similar to cobra venom, it's attacking the acetylcholine receptor sites in her diaphragm, but we've no antivenin for it. By the time we develop one, her system will already have broken down the poison. All we can do keep her ventilated and hydrated, until she's breathing on her own."

Rodney casts a worried glance at the still form on the bed. "But she'll be fine, right?"

"I think so, Rodney; her urine and blood work is showing an increase in the by-products, and thanks to the healer's immediate attention, she never stopped breathing."

"Are we talking brain damage, Doc?" John shivers involuntarily at the idea of dealing with an invalid Elizabeth, slack-jawed and insensible, on top of all the other problems of being stranded.

"Once it's all broken down and flushed out of her system, she should be fine. I've no reason to think there are permanent consequences, but I think a discussion with their healer might be in order."

"I dunno, Neela's pretty old to walk that far, and I think I'd rather have you here."

"This is ridiculous, we're on an Asgard hybrid ship." Rodney storms out of the infirmary, looking
John and Carson just look at each other and shrug.

"How long will it be?"

"It should be a few days on the respirator. When she regains consciousness, we'll see if she's up to breathing on her own. Meanwhile, Colonel, you should get some rest and not in that chair."

"Right, I'll do that." John makes no move to get up, and Carson gives him a firm look. "Oh. I guess I'll check in later."

"You do that, Colonel."

John walks to his cabin, taking a detour by the guest cabins to check in with the Marines in the hallway. "Everything all right here?"

"Yes sir, I think they've all conked out. Not a peep."

"Thanks." John has got to get the hang of talking to the Marines, he sounds so lame. Hartley obviously agrees; he's trying hard not to smirk at John.

In his cabin, John strips and takes a quick shower, then falls into bed. The worry, exhaustion and frustration war with each other for a few minutes, but he eventually falls asleep.

**Days Forty-Four - Forty-Five**

John's awakened out of deep sleep by the klaxon, and a call for all hands on deck over the ship's loudspeakers. He can feel the engines vibrating as he throws on whatever is closest to hand while calling the bridge. "This is Sheppard, what's going on?"

"We've just detected a Wraith ship in orbit, sir. The sensors weren't able to get a reading any sooner."

"Tell Caldwell I'm on my way to the hangar bay." Sheppard cranks down the last knot in his boot and takes off running. The ship is on high alert, and the crew is running from station to station, looking serious and grim and yelling at the lurking civilians to get out of the way.

The hangar is already a hive of activity. The pilots are running preflight, the ground crew is inspecting the armaments and everyone has their assignment well in hand. A few armed Marines are still standing guard, stationed at the open edge of the hangar bay to keep an eye on the Qaroptimat forces outside the ship. The bright sunlight is a shock; John expected it to be dark. He hasn't been asleep for very long, no wonder he still feels exhausted.

Within a few minutes of the alarm the LSO is waving the F-302s out of the hangar, the thundering jet engines throwing out hot blue flames. The Qaroptimat heave themselves to the ground in shock as the jets fly out into the bright sky.

There were more pilots than 302s on-board, and so John wistfully watches the third one take off before he leaves to go to the bridge.

"Rodney, where are you?"

"Busy in the control room, what?"
Do you need any help?"

"Uh, no?" Rodney kills the discussion when he turns his radio off.

John hits the bridge and finds a place to stand out of the way. They've got the limited sensor readings on the screen, and the darts are screaming out of the Wraith ship. It doesn't look large enough to be a Hive, possibly only a cruiser, but still deadly enough. The out-numbered 302s begin to engage the Wraith darts.

Caldwell stabs the panel on his chair. "McKay! When will the Asgard beam be back online?"

The tech manning communications barks out, "McKay says they're ready to beam the Mark IV out, sir."

Caldwell responds, "At his discretion, Lieutenant. Order the 302s out of the blast range, but continue to engage."

The bridge tech pushes some buttons, and the screen highlights the nuclear warheads shimmering into existence.

McKay's voice comes over the loudspeakers, "It's in position and ready to detonate."

The forward view screen has the relative position of their forces marked in green, and the blast range is a big red circle around the cruiser, like a digital bullseye. Caldwell orders the pilots to evacuate the detonation range; he's cool and collected amidst the fury of technicians and bridge crew working frantically on equipment that's sub-par because of the dust constantly sifting through the fractures in the hull.

When the last of the white 302 dots exits the target area, Caldwell orders, "Initiate detonation."

The dot that represents the nuke blossoms outward like a perverse, deadly flower and then fades to leave behind scattered fragments of radioactive chatter.

The problem is obvious to John. There are a large number of darts still heading towards Dominat, and without a Stargate for them to disappear through, the situation remains grim.

The on-screen display is not lost on Caldwell, either. "Bring the rail guns to bear, let's try to get them out of the air before they land."

'Land war in Asia' briefly, giddily crosses John's mind, and then he's gone, running towards the armory.

"Olander, this is Sheppard, come in."

"Go, Colonel."

"What's the status on the ground troops, Sergeant?"

"I'm about to shove them out the door."

"I'm on my way."

The corridor to the armory is barely controlled chaos. Marines are picking up weapons, ammunition and tactical vests in swift, sure order and running down the tilted halls towards the only exit, the hangar bay. "This is Sheppard—clear the decks in the hangar, the Marines are coming through!"
"Roger that, we're ready for 'em."

John picks up his equipment and heads out. "Bridge, status!"

"They're hitting the atmosphere now."

"Keep me advised."

In the hangar bay, the Marines aren't even bothering with the ladder, but leaping off over the edge into the sand below and then rolling away to clear the landing area for the next wave. "Oh, fuck," and then John is sailing in free fall.

He rolls a few times on landing, and he might have twisted his ankle, but he ignores the pain and hauls ass out from under the Daedalus and into the open sand.

There isn't any sign of the Qaroptimat, they must've bugged out after the 302s took off. John puts on his sunglasses and takes position in the sand, far enough away from the ship to have a clear shot at the bright, lavender sky.

They've brought down Wraith darts like this before; he just hopes that they've drawn the darts to them as the main threat, and that they don't head for N'vellesem, or Ayse even. There hasn't ever been a Wraith culling in their recorded history. Qaral chose Dominat well.

The rail guns begin to fire, tracers trailing blue fire against the purple sky, and darts begin to fall from the sky. Sheppard and a platoon of Marines, seventy men and women in all, fire on those that make it through 302s defense line and the rail guns' barrage.

It goes on for hours, until dusk. The supply officer has crew members running replacement ammunition to the Marines, along with water while the comm tech gives Sheppard a running total of Wraith darts still in the air.

They manage to obliterate the bulk of the darts, and fortunately the culling beams were not in evidence; food is not the Wraith's main objective for the attack.

Any Wraith left standing is bad news, and it's possible that a few have escaped; they could have landed anywhere on the planet. That means that as night falls, they are out on the desert, tracking down downed darts to verify that the occupants have been dispatched.

The night vision goggles give them a measure of equality against the Wraith that appear to be able to see in any light.

It's only as the eastern sky begins to lighten when Sheppard calls back the Marines from their search and destroy mission. Every dart that was within walking range has been double checked, and they're just going to have to find a way to get farther out.

There's nothing more that John would like to do other than get some sleep, but that's not possible. He heads immediately for the bridge and finds that Rodney is already there.

"Ah, Colonel. You're just in time."

"Tell me you have some good news."

"Hermiod and I were tweaking the Asgard beaming protocol when the Wraith showed up. We should be able to beam strike teams at least in line of sight distance now, and get you in range of more Wraith darts."
"How many are there?"

Rodney's good humor disappears. "Maybe fifty."

John resists sighing. "How close are they to either of the towns?"

Caldwell points to the view screen. "They appear to be on heading towards them with all due speed."

"Where do you want the teams for beam out?"

"Any where in the ship will work, but the ring room gives us a better target site."

"I'll call you when the teams are assembled. Can you send them from one wraith signal to another?"

"Essentially." Rodney jerks his head to the side, meaning that John really doesn't need to know the exact particulars.

Caldwell looks up from the data pad that Randall hands him. "We'll keep the 302s in the air, the ground forces will go where the pilots don't have a clear shot."

John really misses flying.

~*~

It's a crush in the corridor outside the ring room, and every one of the assembled soldiers looks tired but determined.

"Heads up! Fire teams of four, you'll be beamed to a distance of a hundred yards of a Wraith life sign. There is no way to know if you'll be in sight of the target, so watch your backs. We'll target those closest to the population centers; the 302s have the targets in open territory. Collateral casualties are to be avoided, but use your judgment." John nods at the first group, headed by Major Lorne, and they crouch back to back on the ring platform. John advises McKay, "Team One is ready."

The four Marines disappear in a flash of white light. The next four take their place and disappear in their turn, again and again until there's only the last four. John steps into position, and gives the order. "Ready."
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,

Day Forty-Five - Forty-Seven

It takes almost two days. There are some losses in N'vellesem and Ayse, two Marines are killed, and one 302 is lost in the battle. The Marines dig two more graves, and they double their efforts on digging out the port side hangar. John is sure that they'll find some way to extract the precious, trapped 302s.

The Wraith coming here for the first time is going to cause some fallout among the citizens of Dominat, but Anbur reassures John that tragedy is the 'Will of Qaral', and drops the matter.

The Asgard beam is limited by the fact that they are on the ground: it can't beam them through the planet to the other side, but it isn't necessary; before Anbur leaves to return to N'vellesem, he explains the odd pattern of populations that had been bugging John, why they seem to only use a small portion of the planet. No one lives in the forested zones because of the uncontrollable, dangerous fires, and the huge desert sea on the other side is too dry and empty.

The *Daedalus*' scanners are limited as well; the data is incomplete because of radiation and magnetic interference, so they don't know if there are Wraith present in the far distant towns.

However, the Wraith didn't use their usual cull/destroy tactics, but had generally seemed to concentrate their efforts on the area surrounding the *Daedalus*: they are after the hyper-drive and information about the better feeding grounds of Earth. John considers that it could have been worse; the entire population—including them—could have been annihilated.

The discussion of how to approach the problem has Rodney disappearing into a workroom of the *Daedalus* with Hermiod and Novak, specifically charging John to baby-sit Shaaziya. With the *Daedalus* no longer surrounded by the Qaroptimat forces, there's no reason to keep her on board, but she's willing to learn and doesn't appear to be anxious to return home.

John kind of likes Shaaziya and he's amused that he got picked for babysitting duty. He teaches her a few English words for things around the ship and makes a little headway with figuring out some the Qaroptimat dialect, which turns out to be vaguely similar to Peragro.

He lets her shadow him when he visits Elizabeth, but there hasn't been any change. The respirator makes her chest rise and fall with a sighing shush-shush sound, and the EKG beeps reassuringly, but Elizabeth is still pale and unmoving. Shaaziya stands back, looking around the infirmary with unconcealed amazement.

It's late evening by the time John is bored with babysitting, so he tracks Rodney down in the lab with Shaaziya in tow. There's no mistaking the look in McKay's eyes when he sees her and he laughs delightedly when she says "Hello, Rodney," in English.

"So, Rodney, whatcha you doing?" John has no reason to be jealous, yet he finds himself feeling unaccountably annoyed at Rodney's moon-eyed expression. He lets his glance slide off Hermiod, who merely gives him a slit-eyed glare. Hermiod's still annoyed by John's naked alien crack.

He doesn't get an answer because the moment that Shaaziya sees Hermiod, she gives a little scream and runs from the room. "Oh crap," John mutters.

They run out after her together and catch up to her when she stops just down the corridor. Rodney
croons nonsense to her while patting her hand. He orders John, "Make her understand."

John's eyes grow wide with disbelief. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me! I can barely get lunch,
bathroom and sleep across, and you want me to explain benevolent aliens who really aren't gods?
And how did you get Caldwell to agree to let her stay, anyway?"

Rodney glares at John like this is his fault. Maybe it is, he hadn't even considered what Shaaziya's
reaction might be upon meeting Hermiod. "I, uh, asked. Nicely. I think it shocked him so badly he
didn't know what else to say." Rodney pauses for a moment, thinking. "It worked remarkably
well," he says wonderingly.

Shaking his head, John tries to explain Hermiod to Shaaziya, but he just doesn't have the words.

"Please, Colonel, allow me." John whips around; he hadn't even heard the sneaky little grey.
"Anbur and I had some very enlightening discussions while you were away."

Huh. John makes a 'be my guest' gesture and Rodney soothes Shaaziya, while Hermiod fluently
explains his presence on the Daedalus to Shaaziya in what's very likely perfect Qaroptimat.

Shaaziya doesn't sound convinced, she's firing questions at him and Hermiod is defending against
her volley, until they apparently come to some understanding.

Hermiod gives them a look that's distinctly supercilious. "If you require any further translation, or
would like me to attempt to teach you the language, I'm available at any time." He turns and pads
back to the lab, his gait as awkward as ever.

Perhaps Hermiod's feeling as useless as John, but he didn't think that people with brains that big
ever got bored; though on the ground, Hermiod's regular job is out the air lock. Metaphorically
speaking, "Hermiod."

He stops and turns with the usual, faintly condescending look.

"I think we're going to take Shaaziya to the mess. Would you like to join us?"

Hermiod dips his head in acknowledgment and walks back to them. "Thank you for the invitation,
Colonel."

John knows life in the Pegasus galaxy is weird, but there are levels to the weirdness and he doesn't
know if this is the first or ninth.

They get a few stares when they enter the mess, but everyone looks away when John gives them
the 'I'm a Colonel' glare. He has to look away and not laugh when Hermiod climbs into a hard
backed chair, his feet swinging free. Shaaziya takes the seat just across from Hermiod. John tells
himself to buck up and sits next to the naked alien. Rodney slides into place next to Shaaziya, with
a tray of coffee and water, all three quarters full.

Rodney passes the water to Hermiod and coffee to the rest. "So where were we? Oh, yes. We're
building a relay satellite. It'd be a lot simpler if it was just scanning and radio, but I'm sure we can
relay the beaming technology, too."

John smiles, but Rodney's attention is on Shaaziya. He drops the smile and stuffs his jealousy
down and away; he and Rodney have been nearly joined at the hip since the Expedition arrived on
at Atlantis. "Cool. How long?"

Rodney is still smiling when he looks back at John. "Trials are tomorrow, we're tracking down an
anomaly in the re-materialization circuit. We used all the spare parts to repair the console, so I have to patch up the old parts for the satellite."

"Uh, that's kind of frightening." John gives Rodney a bug-eyed look that he'd been beamed around by recycled parts.

"Oh, please. The only reason we used the spare parts was expediency, not because the parts were irreparable. You got back from the desert, I think you might remember that."

"Yeah, just a little."

That gets John a good-natured eye roll. "I thought you might. Your sunburn seems to be better."

John waves away his concern. "It's fine."

"Anyway, Carson's already promised me one of his future ATA mice. We'll have someone waiting a little way from the ship and send the mouse through the satellite. Mouse has been promised a full physical post-beaming. If it works, we'll send it up with a 302."

"The mouse?" John asks mildly.

"Idiot," Rodney smiles affectionately. "Anyway, I'll have to do another round of testing when the satellite is in orbit; I don't know how the radiation in the atmosphere is going to affect the signal over distance."

"I, for one, hope that it works out, it would save a whole lot of wear and tear on the feet, not to mention time."

"Yes, well, they say that laziness is the mother of invention. I usually prefer to think it's intelligence."

John gives Rodney a sage nod. "Right."

"Really, I think Dr. Cole is being far too cautious. I'm the best choice to study the database, but I'm not cleared to walk across the desert, even at night."

John quirks his eyebrows at Rodney. "So, it's not laziness, it's conceit. What about the power requirements?"

"The opportunity to study an Ancient database with people who understand and use it daily has immensely important implications for our work on Atlantis. I think Colonel Caldwell is being over cautious in his power consumption figures," Rodney says in an airy way, his hands flailing.

For the moment, John doesn't bring up the Qaroptimat's objection to general study of the Avaxqaral. "You still believe that we're going to get rescued?"

"Eventually, when the SGC has a spare ship to send to Atlantis, they'll come looking for us, whether or not Swenson gets to Atlantis. The satellite will let us extend our scanners so we don't have to continuously send a wraith-attracting distress signal. With the satellite, our chances of getting found increase dramatically."

"You are amazing as always." John means it, really, but he hides the meaning with a twist of sarcasm in his tone.

Rodney glances at Hermiod nervously. "It was a group effort."
John swears that Hermiod's expression is a smile.

"Colonel, I have been considering Lieutenant Swenson's journey. Perhaps it would have been more effective to make a short jump to a planet with a gate, instead of trying to travel all the way to Atlantis?"

He knows that he's got a stunned expression on his face, because Rodney's got the same look on his face as he says, "Why didn't we think of that then?"

"I must confess, at the time, Dr. McKay and I were still not well, and not thinking clearly."

John asks solicitously, "So you're feeling better?"

"I am quite recovered." Hermiod sounds conciliatory, which is a strange sound.

"That's good." He's starting to understand why Novak is alternately afraid of and besotted with Hermiod; under that snotty attitude is a person that could be pretty interesting to talk to, something he learned early on with McKay. No wonder Rodney's been regularly holed up with them.

John is glad that Rodney's found his place in their nascent colony; he just wishes that he wasn't turning into a Marine security officer by default. "Should we campaign to send another 302? We're down to four. Do we even have a gate map?"

"The Daedalus has all of the known Pegasus dialing coordinates stored in the computers."

Rodney looks a little dazed. "I was so intent on Atlantis, I didn't even think of it."

"Dr. McKay, do not 'beat yourself up', as Novak would say. We have no guarantee that the modified hyperspace protocols on Swenson's vessel have worked."

"Yes, true—but still."

"I must return to the laboratory. McKay, please bring Shaaziya, and I will teach her your language as we work. Good day, Colonel." Hermiod slides out of his chair and heads out of the mess.

They watch him leave the dining room, and after he's turned the corner, McKay laughs shortly, more of a snort. "I guess he's forgiven you."

"And I didn't even apologize."

John cuts off Rodney's response with a raised hand, Carson is on the radio. "Colonel, Elizabeth is beginning to wake up."

"Thanks, Doc." He says to the radio, and then lifts his eyes to Rodney. "Elizabeth is waking up." They leave their coffee on the table and Rodney is tugging on Shaaziya's arm in lieu of an explanation that she wouldn't understand anyway.

"Sheppard, I think I'll take Hermiod up on his offer, drop her off at the lab. Elizabeth isn't going to appreciate a crowd."

John agrees with a jerk of his head and he almost flies to the infirmary. Colonel Caldwell is already at Elizabeth's bedside, Carson and Dr. Cole on the other side, checking the monitors and taking her pulse and listening to her chest with a stethoscope.

He stands a few feet away from the foot of the bed, watching as they remove the ventilator tube from the respirator and check to see if she can breath on her own.
Elizabeth takes a few gagging breaths and that's enough--they hurriedly tip her head back and slide the tube out of her throat, talking her through it. Carson puts a nasal cannula on her and adjusts the oxygen flow while Cole sprays her throat with something. John watches in horror and is gagging in sympathy. Another reason he joined the Air Force.

"Welcome back." Caldwell smiles a little nervously, and touches her hand gently; his attention is completely on her.

Elizabeth tries to reply, but only manages a little croak. She looks terrified and the dark smudges under her eyes make her look pale and washed out as she tracks on Carson as he soothes her with a hand to her arm and a gentle voice.

"Aye, now you probably won't be able to speak for a while, the ventilator does terrible things to the larynx."

Elizabeth takes a shaky breath and sighs. Her large expressive eyes say just how frustrated she is. Rodney blasts into the infirmary. "How is she?!" He loudly asks the room at large. "What did I miss?" he asks John in a lower voice.

John replies in a whisper. "They just took her off the respirator and she can't talk yet."

"Ah. That's good, off the respirator is good."

"I kinda wish I had missed it."

"Ugly?"

"Ever see anyone vomit up a plastic tube?"

"Uh, no. Not really. Why are we whispering?"

Caldwell looks up, and sees Sheppard and McKay lurking against the wall. "Colonel, why don't you brief Dr. Weir?"

John nods, and takes Caldwell's vacated chair.

Caldwell addresses Beckett, "Doctor, keep me informed. I'll be on the bridge."

"I'll do that, Colonel."

"Thank you." Caldwell leaves the infirmary without a backwards glance.

Rodney drags another chair over next to Elizabeth's bed, and John prompts him, "Rodney, why don't you start at the beginning?"

As they briefly piece together the story, Elizabeth's eyes begin to droop, and then starts nods off right about when John's explaining the rememdium.

Carson checks her pulse again; hand on her wrist, despite the constant beep of the machine behind him. "Don't take it personally, she's still suffering some respiratory distress." He cranks up the oxygen a little. "You're welcome to stay, though she'll fade in and out for a while."

**Day Forty-Eight**

In order to allow her throat and larynx to heal, Elizabeth has strict orders to not talk; she uses
whatever computer or pad and pencil is at hand to communicate. She never says if her agreement with John's ATA disclosure to the *Idon* is to merely keep the peace. John stops in several times to keep her updated on the progress of the satellite Rodney's building. The initial inanimate trials were encouraging, and Hermiod and Rodney deem it ready for the mouse trial in short order.

John volunteers to go long and wait for the mouse. Carson insists on accompanying him and they walk a few hundred yards away from the evening games being played under the lovely night sky, far enough to provide a clear target.

"Colonel, I'm going to send through an inanimate object first."

"Roger that, Rodney. We're ready."

"Here goes."

With a flash, Rodney's PDA appears on the sand. "It's here. Hang on." John picks it up, thumbing the power and scrolling through a few screens. "It works fine."

"Yes, well. Do you think I would use it if I didn't trust this completely?"

"Never in a million years."

"I'm going to send over the cage first, then Atom." With that the empty cage appears, and a moment later, the mouse inside the cage, though he falls a few inches to the bottom of the cage. Atom doesn't move, just sits quivering and allows Carson to easily capture him.

"I think he's got a wee bit of shock, but he's all here. I'll just take him in and run a few tests." Carson wanders back to the ship petting and talking to the mouse.

He wonders how Carson can treat his lab rats with such affection, knowing that they'll probably meet with some sticky demise at his own hands. John picks up the cage, then thinks a moment and puts it back down. "Rodney, Carson has Atom, can you take the cage back?"

"Excellent idea. Stand back, you're not in any danger of getting scooped up, but better safe than sorry."

He moves to what could be construed as a safe distance away. "Go."

The cage disappears, and John begins his short walk back to the hangar bay, as he listens to Rodney natters away on the radio. "Well, dependent on Carson's results, I'd say that we're ready to move to the next step, and then we'll launch."

"Sounds good to me. Need to put together an external release system of some kind."

"Sounds like that's just right up your alley, Colonel. Have fun and let me know when it's ready."

"I'll do that. So who's the lucky victim?"

"Ah, we haven't exactly got that finalized. We'll probably ask for a volunteer, lately that seems to be the way things work."

John can hear the nervousness in Rodney's voice. "Rodney?"

"Let's not discuss this over the radio, Colonel."

This turns out to be a very complicated argument with the usual suspects in the conference room,
over just which section of the ship's complement to ask for volunteers. They don't want to lose any more Marines, and the scientists, while essentially jobless in the big picture of their exile, were all classified as precious resources, and yet they don't want the 'volunteer' to feel like they are the most useless person on board.

Shaaziya surprises them all. She has been Rodney's shadow for the last week, and no one realizes that she understands that much of their discussion. "I will go."

"What!" Rodney looks horrified at her suggestion.

"I am best choice." Shaaziya's eyes have a mulish expression, and her arms are crossed. Clearly, she's been spending too much time with McKay.

God help him, John shouldn't go there, but...it does make sense. Her offer to aid them is a way for her to ingratiate herself to them in general, but the part of him that's jealous of her speaks. "I think she's got a point, Rodney. If you're willing to send Shaaziya here through, then you must have complete confidence in the satellite," he says in the most innocuous, non-combative tone of voice that he can muster. "Either that, or we just have a random drawing. It might be your lucky day, you might win the lottery."

Despite his mild tone, John's comment gets him a shocked look from every one at the table, including Shaaziya, even though he just backed her up.

Rodney's eyes narrow, and he gives John a venomous glare that lets him know that he really, really hates him right now. "Carson, what about Atom?" he spits out.

Carson speaks in a soothing conciliatory tone, trying to keep the briefing from erupting into something ugly. "Scans, X-rays and blood tests are all within normal ranges. He's fine, I'd say it worked beautifully."

Now Rodney is wearing his determined face, mouth turned down at one corner, lips set in a tight line. "Fine, then let's do it. No time like the present. Colonel, would you mind terribly being at the other end? Carson?"

"Of course, Rodney." Carson briefly shoots a frown at John, and the meeting seems to be over. The conference room empties with more alacrity than normal.

John could have, should've just said 'she's right', but something had driven him to make the spiteful comment. He's going to regret this for a long time, and he's not sure that Rodney will ever forgive him, or if he even should.

Rodney turns to go with a strangely triumphant look, and that worries him, but Rodney escapes before John can collar and question him. Knowing that he's just fucked things up, possibly beyond repair with his stupid jealousy, John takes the hike to the same spot outside the ship and sits down in the sand.

The sunset is spectacular as it always is, vast sheets of every shade of purple imaginable, tinged with gold. He should've waited for Carson, but he just needed a few minutes to himself to ponder his self-inflicted state of affairs.

Rodney has a girlfriend, and while John hasn't resorted to actual cockblocking, it's a close thing. Cadman's making advances towards Carson, Caldwell is openly courting Elizabeth and she seems receptive to his advances. For all that he's the military commander of Atlantis, it means nothing here on Dominat, and he's just alienated the one person that he could call his best friend.
He's maintained a firm distance from everyone but Rodney. The teahouse in N'vellesem was John at his best since Afghanistan; camaraderie with little to no conversation, and everyone went home at the end of the night feeling amused.

Soon, Carson is huffing his way across the sand towards his position. John expects him to lay into him with both barrels over his behavior in the conference room, but Carson merely offers him a hand up and a pat on the shoulder. "Aye, Rodney. I'm here. Give it go."

There isn't a response and the flash of light reveals... Rodney, chin tilted up defiantly and arms crossed over his chest. "Yes, you're right, Carson, it works beautifully."

Carson's doesn't look as dumbfounded as John feels, and there's obviously a conspiracy at work here. "What the hell?"

"Well, Sheppard, if we were looking to make a statement about the technology and its apparent safety, who better than I to make the test run?"

John's completely chagrined. He had been this close to offering to be the guinea pig as a gesture of reconciliation, but of course, McKay has beat him to the punch.

Carson doesn't even get the chance to pull out his stethoscope before Rodney activates his radio. "Hermiod, I'm ready to return," and disappears instantly.

"Fuck." That's all he has to say. John walks back to the ship, with Carson at his elbow offering silent support.

**Day Forty-Nine - Fifty**

John avoids Rodney and Shaaziya and anyone else he can conceivably get away with dodging. He modifies one of the missile clamps on a 302 to hold the satellite for launch, and emails McKay that it's ready.

Later in the day, he gets a return email advising that the satellite's been attached to the craft in question, along with the preferred coordinates for release into a geostationary orbit that will achieve the dual aims of extending the sensor arrays' range into deep space and allow immediate access to points beyond the nearby environs.

John is in the hangar bay doing his initial flight prep, when Major Lorne joins him and puts on a flight suit. "Thought I'd go with you."

"Sure, sounds good."

Lorne clears the hangar bay of off duty personnel. They work together, speaking only when the job requires it and eventually they climb in and start the start the preflight. Caldwell gives them a go, and they rocket out of the hangar bay.

John wishes, not for the first time, that air time in the craft wasn't so severely limited due to fuel concerns, because he dearly misses soaring into the open, deep blue, uh, purple sky. If he takes a little extra time in escaping the atmosphere, well Lorne's not going to report him and no one on the *Daedalus* mentions it.

After flathatting the *Daedalus*, John points the nose of the craft towards the given coordinates and altitude.
"Daedalus, this is Foxtrot Alpha. How's my aim?"

To his complete surprise, Rodney answers. "Perfect as always, Sheppard. You're in position."

"Roger that. Lorne, you want to do the honors?"

"Yes sir. Releasing the clamp in three, two, one, now."

John executes a precise aileron roll on the y-axis, up and away from the satellite. "Satellite is away."

This time it's the regular comm tech, "Roger that, Foxtrot Alpha. We're receiving telemetry, five by five."

"Returning to base. Foxtrot Alpha, over and out." John brings the 302 to as low a speed as possible, in order to maximize his airtime. "Well, that was a nice distraction."

"I'm just sorry it wasn't longer, sir."

"Lorne, what did I tell you about that?"

"Sorry, sir. It's the plane, causes me to fall back into bad habits."

John can't see Lorne, but he can hear the smile. "You're forgiven."

Lorne sounds dryly amused. "Thank you... sir."

John snorts, and takes the tricky landing in the hangar bay. He's through sulking. Rodney seems to have offered his verbal sword in a Homerian apology, and now John needs to fall on it in an act of honest contrition.

They pack away the 302 and their flight suits, and Lorne throws a sloppy salute in farewell, and heads towards the mouth of the hangar bay. John turns towards the control room.

Rodney, Shaaziya, Hermiod and Novak are shoulder-to-shoulder, peering at a console. Elizabeth and Caldwell are standing at one side, looking on with unfeigned interest.

Shaaziya is wearing a shapeless, uniform overall that's zipped all the way up to the top, and the sleeves are a little too long, but they're not rolled up. She's smiling at Rodney while he explains to her what they're looking at, with minor corrections in Qaroptimat by Hermiod. Novak is making adjustments at the console. It's almost a tranquil, domestic scene and John is reluctant to throw it into discord. He turns to leave, but it's Hermiod that calls him back.

"Colonel. We are examining the data from the satellite, and are preparing for the next phase."

John eases back into the room, coming to rest a few feet away. He's suddenly the focus of every person in the room, and he's desperately regretting his decision to come here, though no one seems to be giving him the evil eye. "Uh, that's good. When?"

"Right now. Carson's waiting outside, and I'm about to initialize the beam and send the cage out to him."

Rodney has never wasted time before when there was an experiment or project, so John isn't sure why he's faintly surprised. "You want me to go out and wait with Carson?"

"Not necessary, Colonel. Okay, Carson?"
"Aye, Rodney. Hurry it up, it's fucking blistering out here."

John is definitely shocked to hear Carson swearing, but he knows how vicious the midday sun is. "You heard the man."

"Going." Rodney punches a few buttons to send the cage away and checks in. "How does it look?"

"It looks fine."

"Put the mouse in the ring. All right--I have him." A few more buttons, and another check. "Carson?"

"Oh." The dismay in Carson's voice is all the answer that they need. "He's dead, Rodney."

Rodney has so few failures that he takes the news particularly hard. "Damn it! I was sure we'd compensated for the magnetic and radiation interference! I'm so sorry, Carson."

Carson chides him, "It was just a mouse. I told you not to name him. I'll let you know the results of the necropsy when I've the results."

Rodney takes a deep breath and sits down in an empty chair. "Colonel Caldwell, we know the telemetry works, and we've got extended sensor data, so I can at report that the power expenditure wasn't a total waste."

"It was worth the expense, Dr. McKay," Caldwell says.

John offers, "And we can still beam over to N'vellesem without the satellite."

Rodney gives John a grateful smile. "That's true."

Elizabeth whispers hoarsely, "Good job anyway, Rodney. Let's meet this evening and discuss our options, and put a few plans into action." She gives Rodney's shoulder a squeeze and a little shake before leaving. Caldwell nods and predictably trots out behind her.

Suddenly, the implications of the dead mouse hit John all at once. "Rodney. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, I know. It was stupid of me to take the bait, but well. I'm sure it's the really bizarre magnetosphere."

John can't take in the horror of the disaster that he'd nearly caused with his spiteful and petty remarks. All of his blood seems to rush to his feet and he feels like he's going to pass out. Faint. Whatever. He slides down the wall he's leaning against and puts his head between his knees. "Christ."

Rodney and Shaaziya rush over to John, and Novak is calling the infirmary. "Man down in the control room, I have a man down!"

"Jesus, no, no, I'm fine. Call the dogs off."

Rodney hurriedly taps the radio in his ear. "This is Dr. McKay, belay that last. We're fine. We're all fine here." He shoots an accusing glare at Novak. "I bet you've always wanted to do that."

Elizabeth rushes back into the control room. "What happened?" she croaks.

Rodney glosses over John's panic attack. "Nothing. Sheppard forgot to eat lunch and Novak panicked."
Novak looks a little sheepish for her outburst and shrugs. "Uh, sorry. Got a little carried away."

Rodney puts his hand on John's shoulder. "Don't ever put Novak on a team, Sheppard. We'd have a catastrophe every ten minutes."

John takes a breath, and then chuckles. "I'll take that under advisement, but you're probably right."

"I usually am. You okay now?" Rodney's voice sounds warm and close. John looks up and they are all looking at him with identical concerned expressions.

"I'm okay, or I will be. Shaaziya, I apologize. What I said was uncalled for, and I was wrong."

She smiles easily. "It was nothing, Sheppard."

Rodney nudges her with his elbow. "Shaz, the man never apologizes."

"Ah. Apology accepted."

Elizabeth still has a worried look. "John, are you sure you don't want to go to the infirmary?"

"Well I do, but only to check on Carson."

Rodney frowns. "Yeah, come on." He stands and gives John room to get off the floor. "I'm not sure if I want to view an autopsy before or after lunch."

"Didn't say I was going to watch."

"What is an autopsy?" Shaaziya asks curiously.

John smirks at Rodney as he leaves, "Oh, that one's all yours."

Elizabeth falls in beside John. "That was a very honest apology, John."

"I meant it."

She lets the conversation drop as Rodney and Shaaziya catch up. Shaaziya looks faintly ill.

Rodney asks, "Uh, we aren't really going to watch, right?"

"You can if you want, me--I'll pass."

"Right."

They end up hanging about in the corridor until Carson joins them. "It's inconclusive, but there are a few tests that are still running."

Rodney asks, "Inconclusive, how? What do you mean?"

"I believe it was simple heart failure. It might not be the radiation, but just stress related."

"Huh."

"I heard a call for medics to the control room, what happened?"

John waves off the discussion. "Nothing, Doc. Just—nothing."

Carson claps his hands together. "If you say so, John. So, who's up for lunch?"
East of the Sun, West of the Moon,

Day Fifty

Lunch is interrupted by an urgent call from the bridge. "Sirs, new sensor data indicates what could be Wraith still on the ground."

There are at least seven Wraith still out there, well out of walking distance, and with the dead mouse on Carson's autopsy table, that means that it's an air support mission. Two teams crowd into the last four F302s, and divide up the targets between them; the first one done takes the last objective.

John takes one 302 with Cadman behind him, and Lorne takes the stick in the other with Timmons. Somewhere in the back of John's mind, this particular group has become John's default team on Dominat. They're familiar with each other and work well together, but John feels an ache of guilt when he thinks about Ford and Teyla.

If John is also feeling slightly guilty that he's glad for this mission, it's only because it's Wraith that's giving him an opportunity to get out and fly; to do something useful.

John wishes that the craft had a trunk; it would make it so convenient to pack all of the extra weaponry, ammunition and C4 that he'd really like to take. It would be nice to have a four seater. Hell, what he'd really rather have is a 'jumper, but a sweet Pave Low would do for this mission, and he'd even settle for an old, lumbering Jolly Green Giant. The F-302 is fun and deadly, but it isn't his ideal for an all-purpose transport craft.

They take off, and this time there's no joy riding. The plan is to get to the first target, take care of the problem and move onto the next. John calculates the distance/fuel ratios, but it's more likely that they'll have to return for ammunition than fuel, especially if it goes FUBAR.

The first two are easy; the targets are still inexplicably in open desert and are quickly dispatched with a pair of AMRAAMs. When they land near the next village, John is expecting mass confusion; he's afraid that they'll have to shoot through a panicked crowd.

It's a relief that the village seems to be nearly deserted, though the LSD shows the locals are mostly hiding in the low mud brick buildings; there are only a few dots moving about on the screen. As they prowl through the wide and dusty dirt roads, in search of the Wraith, there is evidence that a lot of these folks had tried, and failed, to mount a defense. Their dry husks are lying in the street, with long, wicked looking knives still in their hands.

John watches as Lorne pulls the weapon out of the hands of a dead body, and looks at it closely. It's beautiful, with an ornate handle and a razor sharp cutting edge covered in still-tacky Wraith gore. Lorne nods at the mummified man lying on the ground. "Looks like he did some damage."

"I doubt he managed to dispatch it," John snorts.

Lorne gives him a rueful grin. "Right. Maybe they'll let us take one of these back with us."

"Yeah, maybe. We'll pick it up on the way back. It's too fucking hot, and we're already carrying a full load," he says. They're weighted down with ammunition and water, Cadman and Timmons are packing a SMAW and shells, and the higher gravity make their burdens even heavier.
They spread out, walking down the center of the main road, P90s out and prepared, and John is holding the LSD in the hand that's propping up the weapon's muzzle.

He easily finds the Wraith, because it's the only other sign that's doing a door-to-door search, like the town is its own personal cafeteria line. It's bad news, since a newly fed Wraith is harder to kill than a hungry one.

John's language lessons come in handy because he advises the occasional villager that crosses their path to go and hide as they double time it to the target. He must get the words close enough to right, or his voice carries the order, because they scurry out of the way and disappear.

He signals the team to spread out and surround the suspected position of the Wraith. Cadman is across the street, crouching down behind a low wall, with the SMAW on her shoulder, loaded with a high-explosive dual-purpose round. Timmons is carrying the extra shells to reload the rocket launcher, so he's right beside her, alert with his P90 held high and prepared to fire. Lorne is in the narrow alley behind the dwelling, crossing over and coming onto the main street opposite John's position. Even though it's very late afternoon, the sun is still beating down on them, and John feels like he's about to float away on a pool of his own sweat. He can see that the rest of his team's faces are shining and wet in the bright sun. There isn't time to mess with the canteen; the target could appear at any second, and they have to be ready.

The street is quiet except for the screams and roaring inside the house. John's instinct is to burst in and prevent any further feeding, but fighting in close quarters with a Wraith is a bad way to reach old age. Instead, he tries to ignore the sound of his worst nightmares and focus on the next house down, and the one next to it and the one next to it: the ones that won't be serving up victims if they're successful.

It doesn't take long. The drone exits the house still roaring, looking powerful and deadly, and then turns towards Lorne on its quest for overindulgence. John has his P90 set full automatic, and he lets loose a chattering barrage that doesn't stop. The Wraith isn't even hurt, and as it starts to turn toward John. Lorne and Timmons begin firing so that the creature is caught in a triangulation of their weapons fire.

That's Cadman's cue. She stands up, sights, and scores a direct hit when she fires the missile. The HEDP is designed to take out light armored vehicles and concrete barriers, and the Wraith is propelled backwards into the house as the shell explodes.

The explosion bursts the building open, spewing out ballistic bits of brick, furniture, people and wraith parts. Cadman takes a flying rock to the side of her head, and Timmons drops behind the wall to check on her.

People begin to pop their heads out of the houses to see what's going on. John yells at them to stay put while he and Lorne advance inside the house slowly, weapons sighted.

'Inside' is only a couple of remaining stumps of the mud brick walls, and a few small fires are burning, blue and bright. They take a moment to stomp on them; any fire in an environment like this is as deadly as a Wraith. Nothing else remains, just the shattered jumble of someone's former home.

They continue on through to the back, searching for visual verification that the wraith is definitely dead. Lorne stumbles across part of the armored carapace and nudges it with his boot. "Sheppard, what the hell is this?"

The self-destruct mechanism is intact and blinking away. "Fuck! That's a bomb!"
Lorne's eyes instantly grow wide, and they simultaneously drop to the ground and tuck into a roll as it explodes, shrapnel skewering their backs.

The tactical vest's chicken plates mostly protect them, but there are places the vests don't cover. John rolls to his side, and a hand to the back of his neck comes away bloody. There are a few more pieces of shrapnel in his legs and ass, but he's mobile and conscious, so he weakly gets to his knees and crawls over to check on Lorne who was closest to the self-destruct.

Lorne has a nasty head wound that is slowly seeping blood around the embedded shrapnel. "Lorne, buddy, come on." He doesn't respond to John's attempt to rouse him. John keys his radio.
"Timmons, Lorne's down. Go roust out a few of the residents and say the word rememgium. Got that?"

"Yes sir, rememgium. Got it."

"If they have one, we're in the courtyard behind the house."

John can hear Timmons in the distance, yelling and pounding on doors. He uses all of the field bandages they're both carrying to try and stem the bleeding. He leaves the piece of shrapnel in place—it'll bleed like a motherfucker if he yanks it out. He takes the risk of moving Lorne, half-dragging, half-carrying his inert body. "Buddy, you have got to go on a diet if I'm going to be carrying your ass around."

He leans against the remains of a wall where there's a little shade, and pulls Lorne up against his chest, John can feel blood dripping down his neck, soaking the back of his t-shirt, and Lorne's blood is dripping down his front. He can't hear Timmons anymore; he's either moved out of range, or help is on the way, and John can only hope that it's the latter.

He taps his radio again. "Cadman, come in, you awake?"

"M'hr shr."

"How you doin'?"

"Th'nk brk m'jw."

"Christ. Can you walk?"

"Shr."

"We're behind the house, I need field dressings—you got any left?"

"Y'shr. 'n m'wy."

John pulls out his canteen and takes a deep drink, then leans his head back on the wall as he closes his eyes. "John Allan Sheppard, you are one stupid fly boy." If he wasn't waking up the wraith or losing team members, he was going out half-assed and half-prepared on a Wraith hunt. OTS never prepared him for leading land assaults, and his on-the-ground training of the last year was a bell curve too high to beat. If it wasn't the Wraith eating his people, they were suffering from self-inflicted collateral damage from their own offensives.

Cadman and Timmons show up at the same time, with a fairly large crowd of scared looking people following them, all talking at the same time and at high speed. John can make out a few words here and there. A middle-aged woman, wearing a scarlet hat kneels next to him and introduces herself as Maisa.
John stretches his vocabulary to the absolute maximum explaining to her that the Wraith was gone, they'd stopped it, but his friend was badly hurt. He isn't even sure that they'll understand the Peragro.

Maisa replies, but he doesn't quite comprehend, he's dizzy and lightheaded with heat and blood loss. He shakes his head—that was a mistake—and answers her with *don't understand.*

She gives him a small, sad smile and instructs several men who move to pick up Lorne, while Timmons gives John a hand up.

"Colonel, you're bleeding."

"Yeah. Cadman, you got that bandage?"

"Y'shr." He takes the bandage and fumbles it open, but Timmons takes it from him.

"Lean down a little, sir."

John bends at the waist and rests his hands on his knees, letting Timmons press it gently into place and tie the ends off neatly around his throat. It hurts like hell, but John just grits his teeth as he flinches slightly.

Maisa is still standing there when John straightens up. She takes in the state of Sheppard and Cadman, and bids them to follow her with a wave. She obviously understands the situation far better than he understands her.

John stumbles over a rock, and Timmons is there, sliding under his arm and wrapping an arm around his waist. "Come on, sir. We'll get you there."

The *rememdium* is on the far side of the town. The men that are carrying Lorne have rushed ahead, but Maisa keeps pace with Sheppard.

Once at the *rememdium*, Maisa cuts through the crowd easily, leading them into the building, pointing at a low sofa. Cadman takes the chair next to the door. John tries to push through to check on Lorne, but Maisa stops him with a hand to his shoulder. *"Wait."* She tries to guide him over to the sofa, but he's bloody and filthy on the exact side that he normally sits on and he's reluctant to soil the furniture. John leans on the wall for support as he starts to peel out of his vest and shirt, while Timmons make sure he doesn't just keel over.

Maisa puts her head into the back room, speaking swiftly, and if John ever heard an order that was definitely one. A young man quickly appears from the back, carrying a bundle under one arm, and a large carved wooden tray with various glasses, bottles, jars and neatly folded cloths. He sets it down before unrolling the blanket with snap and draping it over the sofa. He speaks in a soft quiet voice that carries far too much authority for his young face, but John gets that he's a *rememdium* and his name is Laith.

John sighs and bids goodbye to the last shred of his modesty as he unbuckles the thigh holster and his pants, carefully sliding them down before laying face down. He's grateful for the first aid, he really is, but he just doesn't want to know who's removing his boots and pulling the pants the rest of the way off in company. John rests his face in his arm and closes his eyes as the young man starts to unwrap the bandage around his neck.

"Timmons."

"Sir?"
"I think we'll be okay here. Go back to the 302 and give Caldwell a sit-rep. See if they can walk you through patching the mobile radios through the 302. Advise that we're not gonna make our next objective."

"What should I say about Major Lorne?"

He raises his head up and finds Maisa; she's looking at Cadman's face, which is swelling fast and turning an ugly shade of blackish purple. "Maisa. Rememedium? Yes?"

"Yes." She nods, never taking her eyes off Cadman's injury.

He slumps back down onto his arm. "At the moment he's getting first aid, we'll know more in a little while."

"Yes sir. I'll be back before you know it."

"Pace yourself, we're not under attack. Don't die of dehydration."

"Will do, sir."

Laith tugs the chain with John's dog tags out of the way and begins to work on the wound. John can feel the hard carapace shards as Laith pulls them out, and the sting of the sweet smelling unguent as he cleans the wounds. When the hands clasp John's neck, he goes stock-still. It's a sharp sensation, like the tingle of a nine-volt battery to the tongue, only hotter, and it mingles with the pain. Laith is murmuring in Ancient, John recognizes the sound from when Neela was laying hands on Elizabeth.

Soon it's almost too much for him to bear, and John shifts uncomfortably. Laith's hand lifts from his neck, and the relief is almost as agonizing, until he firmly slides his hand down John's back, checking for injuries—John can feel the heat in the hand. When it reaches the waistband of his boxers, Laith warns him with a tap tap, and then he's sliding them down.

It doesn't matter that this is a trained professional, John can feel his face flushing, and he prays that Maisa and Cadman's attention is elsewhere, but there wasn't anything that was going to convince him to look and check. There are some things you should never know about your commanding officer, and his hairy ass is one of them.

The *rememedium* repeats the process on his backside, and now John's face is well and truly blazing, because it's the most erotic feeling he's had since Chaya and John's glad that he won't have to roll over any time soon. He'd only made vague, intellectual connections about the Gift of Qaral, but suddenly he understands intimately that this is proof of the Ancestor's blood, a direct relationship between these people and the Ancients.

Laith slides his boxers back up and treats the last wound on his calf, then pulls the blanket from the back of the sofa over him. John wraps it around him, and sits up when Laith hands him a glass of water. He touches the back of his neck to find that it's still a wound, but not bleeding and remarkably pain free. He'll check the others later.

Cadman's starting to look glassy-eyed. John realizes that her injury prevents her from drinking anything. He stands, wearing the blanket like a toga. "Cadman, come lay down before you pass out, and I have to pick you up."

"Y'shr."

The *rememedium* guides her so that she's flat on her back with her feet over the arm, and the injured
side of her face is away from the back of the sofa.

John feels bad that she had to wait to last. As he begins to dress, there is a knock on the door. Maisa and Laith look up in surprise, but John quickly yanks his bloody, filthy t-shirt over his head before pulling the door open to find Timmons, looking hot and sweaty. Maisa smiles, and Laith returns his attention to Cadman.

John peers past Timmons into the now dark street, to see an orderly crowd of people standing behind Timmons. "Come in. I gather there's no need to stand on ceremony, everyone looked surprised when you knocked."

"Oh. The radios are patched through, and Colonel Caldwell wants you to report as soon as you're able."

John takes Cadman's chair and pulls his boots on, cranking the laces down tight. "I was just about to look in on the Major." He leans down and picks up his thigh holster, strapping it on with quick, efficient motions. When he straightens, Maisa is standing at the door to the back room, where John presumes Lorne is being treated.

He follows her back into the large, dim room. Another older healer is introduced as Haitham, and John can tell that this is probably Laith's father who's kneeling next to Lorne, holding his head and softly chanting in Ancient.

Lorne is still unconscious, his skin is pasty and covered in sweat, and he's shivering and trembling. John isn't a doctor, but he knows this is a very bad sign. He nods to Maisa, and steps out of the room. He picks up his vest, and yanks the ear piece out of the pocket as he slides it on. "Daedalus, this is Sheppard."

He can hear the static humming from the radiation, and there's a slight delay as the signal travels to the satellite and back down again.

"...ay again...king up." There's a crackle and then the humming noise.

John takes it outside and tries again. "This is Sheppard, over."

"Reading ...by tw.. say ag..."

He comes to a decision, faith healing is a marvelous, wondrous thing, but it doesn't look like its really helping Lorne very much and there's no time to call for a doctor from the Daedalus, who will probably request an immediate evacuation, anyway. He goes back inside. "Cadman, Timmons. I'm going to take Lorne to the Daedalus, and ferry another pilot back. I'm sorry to leave you without any way to really communicate, but Maisa seems to have it figured out."

"I'm sure we'll be fine here, sir." Timmons says for the both of them. Laith is leaning into Cadman's forehead, and his hands are cupping her jaws in manner that suggests the Athosian greeting. She nods minutely.

"You'll be okay?"

Cadman makes an 'mmm' sound, which John is going to have to assume is a yes. "Yeah, okay, a couple of hours tops. Timmons, make sure the ear's secure."

"The SMAW and the last HDEP are already on board. I picked up one of their knives, too. They seemed pretty willing to let me have it."
"Good man. Now I just have to convince Haitham to let me take Lorne."

Timmons raises an eyebrow indicating John's chances.

If explaining the wraith was difficult, making Maisa understand that Lorne needs to go to their *remendum* immediately is complicated fusion of words and gestures, but he gets the idea across.

Maisa conveys to Haitham the gist of the conversation, and it's frightening how quickly he agrees. Timmons supplies another field dressing to protect Lorne's injury, and Haitham calls in the men still waiting outside by the door. The nervous crowd is still waiting for news and explanations, and John hopes that they've earned enough credit to be in their favor without an immediate explanation.

At Maisa's instruction, they don't even bother to take Lorne from the bed; six villagers simply pick up it up and head outside. Timmons leads the way and the odd looking convoy follow him through the dark, narrow, dusty streets. It takes all eight of them to carefully manhandle Lorne into the second seat of the aircraft. Everyone is talking excitedly and touching the 302, and John warns them to stay back. Timmons gently pulls them away as John takes off.

He tries the ship's radio, and this time the signal's clear. His portable must have been damaged when he ducked the self-destruct. "Daedalus, this is Sheppard."

"*Reading you loud and clear, Colonel.*"

"I'm inbound with wounded."

"*Copy that, Colonel.*"

He stays in constant radio contact with the comm tech through out the flight, advising Carson of Lorne's condition and getting the skinny on the other team's progress and the teeth-grinding news of their flawless successes.

Beckett and Sodeburg are running towards the craft as he trips the wire. The ground crew is swarming over the wings, and sure hands pull Lorne out and down and Sodeburg disappears with him into the ship. Beckett latches on to the fact that John was also injured and chivvies him to the infirmary.

Hobeck and Faraj are waiting to return for Timmons and Cadman. "Hold that thought, Lieutenant, I'll be right back."

"Not a problem, sir."

John makes for the infirmary at a quick lope. When he arrives, nurses make a grab for his hand and begin to insert an IV as they push him onto an infirmary bed. "Beckett! I don't have time for this!"

Carson raises his head. "You have time if I say so. Tell me what happened and strip."

John knows this is a battle he won't win. He's pulling his shirt off as Rodney skids into the infirmary, looking red and flustered, his hair in complete disarray. "Sheppard! What happened?"

Carson returns and stops him with a hand. "We were just getting to that, Rodney." He pulls John's head down to inspect the wound on the back of his neck.

"Their *remendum* did the laying on of hands thing, Lorne was either too much, or it was going to take too long. My injuries weren't too bad, it seemed to work."
"What was that like?"

There's no way that John's going to give anyone a full detailing of that experience, ever. "It was strange, hot and tingly."

Rodney gives Carson a triumphant look. "All medicine is voodoo magic, anyway."

Carson lets John sit back up. "Well, it looks like it's healing fine." He picks up John's shirt and turns it over in his hands. "Looks like you lost a lot of blood, Colonel." He picks up a vacutainer and threads a needle onto it in preparation to take a blood sample.

"He lost a lot a blood, and you're going to take more? That doesn't even make sense," Rodney says incredulously.

Carson only gives Rodney an annoyed look.

John didn't think he lost that much blood. "Most of that is Lorne's. You can't keep me. I'm the only pilot that can even halfway begin to communicate with those people."

"Aye, but I can." Carson pulls the needle out of his arm and instructs, "Press down here," and leans over to the wall and hits the button on the intra-ship comm system. "Colonel Caldwell, Dr. Weir, please come to the infirmary."

"Rodney, we have got to find a better way of getting around this damn planet."

Rodney gives him a supremely annoyed glare. "I know that, Colonel, what do you think I've been doing? Playing tiddlywinks with Hermiod?"

"You bellowed, Carson?" Elizabeth is still croaky, and probably will be for weeks, but she sounds slightly stronger.

"Colonel Sheppard's got a wee bit of a dilemma."

Colonel Caldwell joins them. "What can I do for you, Dr. Beckett?"

Carson nods at John, who decides that he might as well get the whole briefing out of the way now, though he wishes he weren't half naked. He starts at the very beginning, and goes through the whole story again, ending with "So, I had to leave Cadman and Timmons. Laith was looking at her when I left, but we've got an entire village that's probably about one step away from riot and pitchforks over the Wraith. Carson wants to keep me here, but we don't have another pilot that has any chance of communicating with them."

"I'm not certain how much blood the Colonel's lost and I'd prefer to keep him here for observation, not gallivanting about the planet."

"I could go, and see what I can do." Elizabeth offers, but Carson frowns and shoots down the idea.

"I'm not particularly thrilled with the idea of you going either, Elizabeth. I don't want to risk you losing your voice altogether."

John murmurs mostly to himself, "Plus, it would mean sending out another 302." It's important, but the limited fuel reserves have to be considered of paramount importance.

"I have a solution. Send Shaaziya. She's perfectly capable of communicating with them." Rodney's chin is tilted in a dangerous way, and his arms are crossed, telltale signs that he's prepared verbally
assault anyone within range, if necessary.

"No offense, Rodney, but do we really want to take that step, to have her pose as the public spokesperson for the *Daedalus*?" Elizabeth whispers.

"Oh, please," he says truculently. "She's learned more English than either of you have learned Peragro. Having an indigenous liaison is practically SOP for any invading foreign force."

John backs the idea completely. "Despite the fact that we're not invading, I think Rodney's right. She's sharp and personable and not likely to fall into any of the cultural land mines that I would. It says that we're willing to work with them, and that's always a plus."

"Colonel Caldwell? Is this a precedent that we want to set?" Elizabeth deferring to Caldwell is just wrong in John's book.

Caldwell thinks it over for moment. "I have to hold to Beckett's assessment of you and Sheppard. If he's grounded, he can't go. You are barely recuperated, and I'm sure that Hermiod isn't a good third choice. I think the situation calls for it. We have an obligation to those people, but we can't meet it if we can't communicate. Sheppard's as much admitted that he's out of his league with this. We can simply ask her to help us out in this particular instance. If she will."

Elizabeth nods firmly, even though she's just been shot down. "Okay, if she would like to help in this instance, Rodney, we will discuss a permanent arrangement in depth at the first opportunity."

Caldwell nods at John. "I'll contact your team to see if it's a problem if there's a delay." Caldwell turns to Carson, "I want to have a full debriefing as soon as Sheppard's ready, doctor."

"I'll be through with him in a tick."

"Very good," Caldwell says just as he's about to leave the infirmary.

"I hope you feel better soon, John." Elizabeth smiles at him.

John complains, "I don't feel bad!"

"I'm sure you don't. Rodney, I'd like to speak with Shaaziya as soon as possible." She tips her head and leaves as well.

John asks curiously. "Where is Shaaziya, anyway, Rodney? She's almost been your shadow ever since she arrived."

"Uh, well she's... Resting, resting in her quarters."

The dime drops for John. He gives Rodney the eyebrows of doom, and a smirk. "Well, better go 'wake' her up. I've got people on the ground out there."

"Right, I'll just go do that, then." Rodney backs up and then makes his getaway from the infirmary with uncommon speed.

Carson and John share an amused look, confirming John's suspicion. 'That dog', he thinks.
"No, you can't see him right now. Dr. Sodeburg is doing a bit of exploratory surgery at the moment, before the major goes in for the MRI. It'll be at least an hour or two. Go take a shower, and, for god's sake, please get something to eat and drink lots of fluids. Otherwise I'll be forced to strap you down with an IV."

With that warning from Carson, John makes his escape from the infirmary to the hangar bay.

Caldwell has assigned Levenson to take Shaaziya, and detailed Faraj to take the second seat intending Shaaziya to sit on Faraj's lap, thus saving the huge expenditure of resources by not sending a second 302.

They did need allies, and while this particular town was too far away to be truly useful, in the long run it was best to be a good neighbor. Their conduct in this situation would no doubt eventually spread through other towns and villages where it would make a difference.

John sees Rodney slink into the hangar, and he can't resist. He saunters over to where Rodney is lurking.

"So...," he drawls evenly.

Rodney flushes the most amazing shade of red. "I'm not talking about this."

"Does Elizabeth know?"

"What part of I'm not talking about this didn't you understand, Sheppard?"

"I'm just saying. Conflict of interest, possible cultural repercussions, and hey, did you at least meet her folks?"

This gets him Rodney's death glare, complete with chin thrust up in the air, his mouth twisted into a lopsided frown. "You're a fine one to talk."

John just shrugs.

"She says that she's estranged from her father, and, well, to be honest, I didn't quite understand the whole situation—not that it's any of your business."

"Hey, I'm your friend, friends talk about these things, right?"

"That's. That's. I don't even know."

"You're welcome. I'm pretty sure everyone knows that she's your girlfriend, Rodney, but I think Elizabeth should know that it's serious. If it is."

Turning his head away, either to avoid John's eyes or to see if Shaaziya and Elizabeth are there yet, Rodney mumbles something almost under his breath.

John's pretty sure he knows what he said but feels driven to make Rodney admit it out loud. "What was that?"
Rodney looks him straight in the eye this time. His expression is one that John's very familiar with, a peculiar combination of terrified and elated. "God, Sheppard, I think it is."

John's been through this before, so he knows how to school his face to hide his reaction. Buddies that he'd served with, saving each other's lives and sharing horrific and wonderful moments, who then finally meet their dream girl, and it's never the same again. Their priorities shift, focus changes, and John suddenly turns into the single guy they want to fix up, so they'll all be in the same boat. Just because it's not a new scenario doesn't make it sting any less. "It's okay Rodney. I get it."

Elizabeth and Shaaziya finally enter the hangar bay, and Shaaziya's back in her own clothing. Rodney gives John a helpless look and takes off, his course designed to meet them half way.

John picks his way through the crowd to find Lieutenant Levenson.

Levenson cuts a sharp salute. "Sir."

"I hear you've drawn the lucky straw to take our liaison pro-tem out."

"Yes sir, that's the plan."

"I imagine this'll be pretty scary for her, first plane ride in a souped-up fighter jet."

"Yee-haw!" Levenson grins.

John can't help but grin too. "See here's the thing, don't scare her so bad that she goes home and starts a war over it. That would be bad."

"I understand sir. I'll fly like my little old grandma drives."

"That's the spirit. Good luck, and be safe."

"Thank you, sir."

His largely ceremonial duties dispensed, John hangs back from where Shaaziya is getting her final briefing from Elizabeth.

Shaaziya's calm, but John can see that she's trembling slightly, although he can't gauge her reaction to know if she's excited or terrified. Rodney doesn't even get a hug goodbye, before Levenson's graciously handing her up into the plane and making sure that she's comfortably wedged in on Faraj's lap. John's never thought of McKay as a particularly restrained person, but the man kept secrets for a living for a very long time, even though he can't lie to save his life. McKay's been barely able to contain himself around Shaaziya, but at the moment he's the very model of self-control.

The crowd moves back and the jet engines fire up, and then the 302 is out into the purple dawn.

John starts to follow Rodney; he doesn't even need to be told that there's going to be a briefing, but Elizabeth stops him.

"We'll hold off and debrief after everyone's home, John."

John glances at Rodney. He has the air of a student that's been called to the Principal's office, and he avoids looking at John.

"Okey-dokey. I'll just be in my quarters."
A shake of his shoulder wakes John out of a deep sleep. He sits up immediately swinging his feet to the floor. Carson steps back, looking worried. "We couldn't reach on the radio, and you didn't respond to the call on the tannoy. Are you all right?"

John wipes a hand over his face, and then scratches his chest. "I guess."

Carson takes a hold of his chin and peers into his eyes, then pressing his fingers at the pulse point of John's wrist. After a moment, he says. "You don't normally sleep that heavily. Taking in fluids?"

"Yeah, but I could murder a steak right about now."

"Hmm. Lay down, Colonel. I'd like to check your other injuries." Carson makes a twirling motion with his finger.

John lies down, recalling that feeling as Carson pulls down the elastic, and presses around each of the wounds on his backside, and then moves to the one on his calf. "They look fine, nearly healed, and no infection. I'll advise Steven and Elizabeth to push the briefing back until you've murdered a steak, doctor's orders. If we have one left."

"Thanks, Carson."

"Aye, and then I want you in the infirmary after you've eaten. Your blood tests came back, and your electrolytes were alarmingly low, among other oddities. The heavy sleep could be related to the treatment you received—are you still tired?"

John cracks his neck with a twist of his head as he considers his state. "Actually, I am."

"Good, you can sleep through the IV then. See you in a few."

John realizes that he'd literally fallen into bed. He's still wearing the torn and bloody boxers and desperately needs a shower.

Clean and dressed, he walks to the mess hall. Rodney and Shaaziya are sitting by the dark windows, the remains of a meal spread out between them. John picks up whatever the meal du jour is—alas not steak—and Rodney waves him over.

"Hey, how did it go?" John eats steadily as Shaaziya talks, until he's down to an empty plate.

"Many are dead, and all are frightened that another will come. Maisa is grateful you stopped wraith. She was also impressed that you speak some Peragro, is not easy to learn."

Figures, he thinks. We get the hardest language on the planet to learn first.

"If it is permitted she would like you to return, so they may thank you and your fellows."

Rodney interjects, "Speaking of fellows, Cadman's jaw is going to be fine. Laith managed to glue it together enough so that Carson doesn't have to wire it shut. Lorne's in an induced coma, but Sodeburg thinks that he should be okay, although we won't really know until he's awake."

John knows that he really needs to go back to sleep if his first question to Carson wasn't about his team. He pushes back the empty plate and looks up at Shaaziya. "How was the plane ride?"

She laughs and claps her hands together and then sweeps them wide, disturbingly Rodney-like. "I was flying, like a bird! Very fast bird. I would like to do that again, when I am not so scared. The
flight back was best; Raul said it was a 'barrel roll'. I did not want to come down again."

"I know what you mean." John smiles at her, suddenly he has a connection to her that wasn't there before. If John could manage it, he'd fly her to every town on the damn planet, but without a renewable source of fuel, joyrides are out of the question. Damn, but he misses the jumpers!

He stretches his hour to the maximum, and arrives at the infirmary only a few minutes late. He checks on the unconscious Lorne, who's lying on his side, and Cadman is long gone. Carson reassures him that she's already had an IV of electrolytes and has been sent to her quarters. He then proceeds to puncture and prod John, verbally and physically, before attaching the IV bag. "Get some rest, Colonel."

The Daedalus infirmary is smaller than the one on Atlantis and all gunmetal gray; there's nothing to really look at. Lorne's monitors are beeping, but other than that it's quiet. For few minutes John wishes he'd brought his new book, but the lack of sleep in the last week is catching up to him, and he fades out.

Day Fifty-Two - Fifty-Four

John wakes up suddenly and all at once takes in his situation. Someone's removed his boots and pulled a blanket over him, and the IV shunt is gone. There's a small bandage taped over the site on the back of his hand. There must be something that the Gift of Qaral did to him, because even at his most exhausted, normally he'd never have slept through something like that. The lights were dimmed; between the twenty-hour days and sleeping like a rock, he's completely and totally unable to tell what time it is, and his watch is useless; he'd neglected to check the time against dawn or dusk.

Now he feels better than he has in weeks, sharper, energized and awake. He folds the blanket, gathers his boots and sits in the chair next to Lorne to tie them on.

The Major looks marginally better, he's got a little color in his face, but he remains unnaturally still. John sits there for a little while, until Dr. Cole sees him when she pokes her head out of the office. She joins him with, "How are you feeling, Colonel?"

"Better, thanks. Much better."

"We're seeing signs of sleep deprivation among the crew, the day's too short, and these people are used to working 18 hour days. Those missing four hours are having a huge effect."

John just nods. He's spent the last year with twenty-eight hour days, and that makes it even harder to adjust. 'What time is it?"

"Does anyone really know what time it is?" she quips.

John grins, "I didn't realize you were quite that old, Dr. Cole."

"Please, I have listened to the radio once or twice. It's about midday. Well, let me do a quick wound check, and then I'll let you go."

John obediently lowers his head, and she pokes and prods at his neck. "It's amazing, really. This is healing with a supernatural speed, and I daresay you won't even have a scar." She lets go of his head, and he looks up. "I assume the others are the same?" She gives him a frank, appraising look.

The tips of John's ears redden, but he replies evenly. "Beckett said they were almost healed, no
infection."

"Well, I'll spare you the indignity, then. If you start to have any problems, please don't delay coming in. We were lucky; we have no idea what the bacteria on this planet are like."

"Thanks, I'll do that, Dr. Cole."

"Call me Paige, please. Off you go then, or stay if you like; I think they pushed the briefing back until this evening." Dr. Cole dismisses herself with a nod, and after checking on Lorne's readings, goes back into the office.

John sits with the Major for a few more minutes, but decides that he really has to get up and move around. He's feeling antsy, like he's about to explode out of his skin.

He wanders over to Olander's office to check in. He goes to the bridge, and there are only a few techs on duty. He wanders by the galley, and it's moderately full, sunlight's pouring in through the window, and those tables are empty. Deciding to pass on food at the moment, he takes the hike down to the hangar bay, which is virtually deserted in the blasting heat.

The small gym is nearly full, and none of the treadmills are free, so John decides to hell with it and starts to run through the corridors to burn off this jittery feeling, dodging around the startled people in the busy corridors.

He runs the length of the ship fore and aft on every deck, which takes him the best part of two hours. It's not like Atlantis where there was room to run for hours and never see another person. John briefly wonders why Rodney's not going insane with claustrophobia; John's feeling cramped and unhappy, and if it weren't a zillion degrees outside, he'd go run in the desert.

The irony of not wanting to march to and from N'vellesem and yet missing the opportunity to run freely isn't wasted on John. Right now, he'd happily take that march.

He finishes his run, cleans up and takes his book to the small galley, which is now nearly empty. John grabs a sandwich and some water and takes them out to the hangar bay. The heat is almost unbearable, but the wide-open vista of the desert, stretching out to the horizon, is far preferable to sitting inside.

John had left War & Peace back on Atlantis, but realizing that eventually he was going to finish it, he'd picked up Crime & Punishment as well as The Gulag Archipelago. He had a theme going, and he was sticking to it. He could possibly spend the rest of his life with these books. John mourns the fact that he might not ever get back to Atlantis, but the unfinished War & Peace is the least of those concerns.

He eats his sandwich, thoroughly chewing and measuring the bites, stretching out the meal. He reads his self-allotted pages slowly, and after considering the words, re-reading the pages again.

It's late afternoon, the sun near setting, and people are beginning to climb down the ladder when John finally closes the book. He watches them for a while but doesn't join them as the briefing will start soon.

Rodney startles him, "Ah, Sheppard, there you are."

"Yep, here I am. What's going on?"

"Actually, nothing. It's kind of refreshing, as a change. Dostoevsky?"
John shrugs and deflects the conversation. "Why aren't you going crazy with claustrophobia?"

"I've spent almost my entire adult life in a lab or classroom--this isn't very much different. It's mostly knowing that I can leave whenever I want."

"I can see that. How's the transporter?"

Rodney grins, the 'you're a geek' left unsaid. "Inanimate objects, no problem, but I killed two more mice, so short of retrieving the satellite, it'll probably have to remain that way."

"Still useful, won't have to to slog back and forth with trade goods. We can use the regular beam for line of sight, right?"

"Yes, that's true." Rodney glances over at John. "Are you pondering what I'm pondering?"

"I think so, but where are we going to find a duck and a hose at this hour?" John smirks.

Rodney rolls his eyes at John, but he's grinning. "Come on, let's go torture ourselves by listening to Elizabeth and Steven belaboring the point for hours on end."

~*~

It's a very long briefing intended to bring everyone up to date.

John gives a blow-by-blow account of the three Wraith that they did manage to take off the map, what happened, and why it went wrong. He also describes in vague terms the healing treatments they received.

Lieutenant Klingenschmitt provides a concise narrative of his team's activities. They took out three by AMMRRAM and dispatched one Wraith prior to its entering a village, but the proximity required them to address the matter on the ground. They deployed the HDEP and returned to base. He absolutely does not smirk, for which John is entirely too grateful.

Carson gives a precise, if somewhat edited for confidentiality, version of the injuries sustained by Sheppard's team, and their current medical situation. Lorne's been upgraded to serious, and they are maintaining the medically induced coma, until the swelling is reduced. He declares that Sheppard and Cadman are provisionally fit for light duty but requests that he'd really like to confer and study with one of the native healers, on the theory of their craft.

Rodney goes through the technical details of the satellite, its failures and limitations as well as what it does do successfully--allow them to monitor and scan the nearby space for Wraith or rescuers.

Shaaziya describes the meeting she had with Maisa, and that the citizens of Tobat were extremely grateful for the assistance; the wraith had been terrorizing them for two days, and many had lost their lives. Haitham was sorry that he couldn't do more for the Lorne; Maisa extended an invitation to return at any time, because the villagers would like to thank them properly.

Caldwell gives details of the total fuel and ammunition used, and the current figures on what they have left, which sounds like a lot, but it's absolutely irreplaceable, and they have no guarantees that another Wraith ship won't come check them out. All nonessential flight is prohibited and he's raising the bar for what will be considered essential.

John shares a moue of disappointment with Shaaziya.
Elizabeth's voice is a little better. "Thank you, everyone. Carson's expressed his interest in talking with a healer, and circumstances prevent us from returning to Tobat. I'm sure that we could arrange an outing to N'vellesem to speak with Neela. I would also like to return, and Rodney's made it more than clear that he would like to study the database. Our concern is that this may initiate another incident. Shaaziya, what are your thoughts on that?"

John interrupts Shaaziya. "Sorry, Rodney, the Avaxqaral is out of the question. We absolutely cannot afford to have you under nixat as well."

"There may be a way. I have heard the story of your treatment when you went to Ayse, and it is true that my village does not like strangers. I would introduce you to the Abnepa, and he may give his blessing to you. No more assassin."

John considers how likely that really is, knowing what he does. "If I knew that we weren't going to be attacked immediately, I would go to Ayse, to see if this can be settled peacefully. Is there a healer in Ayse?"

Shaaziya gives Carson an apologetic look. "No, Zainab was burned long ago."

Carson shakes his head slightly. "No matter, I can wait to go to see Neela."

"I would like very much for Dr. McKay to accompany us," Shaaziya says, and it's odd that she refers to him by his title, that must be Elizabeth's suggestion. Rodney looks discomfited, but John thinks that the thought of meeting Shaaziya's father is the probable cause of the expression. He wonders if his little chat with Rodney prompted this move.

"I would like to go as well. I think it's important that we meet and discuss their concerns."

"If we use the Asgard beam to send us there, we'll need to wait until the sub-lights are on; the battery isn't capable of providing the necessary power. Colonel Caldwell allowed me to test the satellite, but in light of our effort to conserve fuel... I know it's not perfect, but there it is."

"Our current fuel stores for the sub-light will last slightly less than two years on the schedule we've implemented to charge the batteries. If we have another Wraith attack, we will have to use the engines to power our defense, and that shortens the estimated time to depletion." Caldwell doesn't have to add that it's very likely the Wraith will be back.

Elizabeth adds, "Conservation is an excellent concept, but we also need to determine ways to supplant technology with more old fashioned skills. We have two years to learn to live like the local population." It's a pronouncement and a timetable. "Any suggestions on how to accomplish that?"

"The easiest way is to integrate ourselves into the existing population. We could set up a whole new town for ourselves, but that's not going to happen in two years."

"We will have to inquire of Anbur, and check with the Qarooptimat to see if they would allow this. I believe that Anbur would agree."

John adds, "But that puts a whole lot of strain on their infrastructure. They might not be able to take all of us in; that was the Manarian's initial objection when we were looking for refuge from the storm."

"I agree. We'll just have to inquire and proceed with negotiations. When is the next scheduled engine start?"
"Not for another month, at least." Caldwell sounds firm on keeping to the timetable.

John shrugs. "I don't mind the trek. I'd rather not just hang around waiting." John is looking forward to getting out and moving.

"It is not a long journey, I have made it many times." Shaaziya glances over at Rodney. He sighs. "Fine, we can go now, and walk."

"Shaaziya, is there any reason to delay our departure?"

"I do not believe so."

Carson pipes up. "I'd like you to wait a day or two, I'm still monitoring Colonel Sheppard. Aye, I think he's probably fine, but I'd like to see more normalized test results, before he goes hiking across the desert where I can't get at him."

"Keep us advised, and we'll schedule our departure based on your advice."

**Day Fifty-Five**

It only takes a day or so to make the arrangements to depart for Ayse, and Carson releases John for the journey with a sigh.

Shaaziya dons the clothing she'd arrived in and enough food and water for several days is packed, despite Shaaziya's insistence that they will be received and well treated.

Rodney's manfully holding back his usual tirade about walking and the waste of time; all he has is time, there's no choice and he might be trying to impress Shaaz, who sets a quick pace. They walk in pairs, Shaaziya unerringly in the lead, with Rodney at her elbow, Elizabeth following behind and John a few steps away from her. Rogers and Alvarez are staggered at the rear.

John eventually takes pity on Elizabeth and Rodney, neither of whom allow their pride to be the one that cries uncle. "Whoa, Shaaziya. I could use a break."

"My apology, I did not realize." Shaaziya stops and easily kneels in the sand. Elizabeth collapses to the ground in a controlled fall, whispering, "Thank you."

The first moon is nowhere to be found, the second moon is already sinking low on the horizon, but desert is lit with the shifting rainbow of the aurora. Rodney's face is red from exertion even though it's quite chilly, a typical desert night.

Everyone is pulling out their canteens and as they rest, Elizabeth takes the opportunity to ask, "Shaaziya, tell me about Qaroptimat, and how it differs from Peragroilla." John knows what Elizabeth is doing, they had independently received an explanation from Anbur.

There's doubt in her voice. "I believed completely in everything the Abnepa taught, but now I see things outside his teachings. I was afraid to know that he is wrong."

"I broke tradition and left the temple before my training was complete, because Zuhair could not answer my questions. When I came to see the star that fell from the sky, and roared in the desert, Zuhair listened to my stories of the strange building that had suddenly appeared, and that there were men in it. I came to watch many times. I heard the quiet words that there was nixat, because the ones who traveled to N'vellesem had seen the Avaxqaral, when we have never had it. I could
not let my father start war, break the peace of a hundred lifetimes."

John and Elizabeth share a shocked look in the dim light--Shaaziya's father was the one that declared nixat against Elizabeth?

Elizabeth's voice doesn't reveal her surprise, and she says evenly. "I'm sorry, Shaaziya, I didn't know. This must be very difficult for you."

"Perhaps. Initiates must leave the temple for one anam; I only left before my time. Zuhair will say I am, precocious?"

Rodney answers the question in her voice, "Yes, that's the word. So when you return to the temple, what will happen?"

"I return as a visitor. I must not stay. If I understand and wish to become Abnepa, it will be at the end of annum. Come, let us go now."

They pick themselves up out of the sand, and trudge on through the night, though at a slightly slower pace than before.

The reception at Ayse isn't very different than their first trip; most people still give them menacing looks, and it isn't hard to remember that they are under nixat. However, Shaaziya's inundated by greetings and well wishers, hugs from girlfriends, and respectful greetings from men and boys. The old women chastise her and give sly looks at John and Rodney, who are standing near enough to Shaaziya to be meaningful; Timmons and Alvarez are standing back a little, keeping an eye on the group as whole.

Shaaziya talks excitedly to her friends for a moment before clapping her hands and moving on. The entourage they've gathered trails after them in the street, and soon they are at the temple gates. "You must go through Arch of Qaralyn alone."

"I wonder if it's like airport security." Rodney's pulling a scanner from his pocket and John wonders about how much stuff he'd really taken to Earth. "Low level power, I wonder how they're generating it, we might be able to copy it."

"The blood of Qaralyn will not be hidden." Shaaziya says it like a prayer.

John steps back a little farther, drawing Elizabeth with him. "So, here's our chance to make a big splash."

"You were right, we weren't going to be able to hide it."

"I guess the difference is recognizing the gene or worshipping it."

"Shaaziya doesn't know, does she?"

"Rodney took her to the mess while we had the rest of the meeting."

Elizabeth pulls Rodney aside. "Does Shaaziya know that you and John have the gene?"

"Oh please! That's completely unfair! Like I would tell her, after John made such a production of me getting her out of the room. I've worked in top secret facilities, Elizabeth."

"That's not what I said, she's lived aboard for almost a month, and it's possible she found out some other way. You are the one that's spent the most time with her."
"I locked up all the goodies after the meeting, and there's no other Ancient tech on the Daedalus. She can't possibly know."

John thinks of asking him what her reaction will be when the gate lights up, but Rodney's normally not the best judge of character, and now that he's intimately involved, he's definitely got a conflict of interest going. Though John would never say that out loud, or at least not until it was absolutely necessary. "Well, I think it's only fair that we give her some warning, since we're about to be outed anyway."

"I agree."

Shaaziya looks like she doesn't quite believe their explanation that they might have the Blood of Qaralyn, but nods anyway.

Rodney's the first to go through the gate, the gentle bong and flash of light steals his attention, and he's concentrating on the readings. "It's definitely Ancient." He follows the reading to the inside wall, and begins investigating. Shaaziya is completely floored by the fact that Rodney has the gene.

The arch is dark and silent as Elizabeth walks through.

Shaaziya gets a curious look on her face when she gets a faint light and a gentle sound as she passes under the arch, and Elizabeth and John are the only ones that see her confusion. Rodney is completely oblivious as he studies a section of the wall next to arch.

Shaaziya walks back and forth under the arch a few times, getting the same result every time.

Elizabeth asks in a kindly voice, "Shaaziya, has this ever happened to you before?"

"No never. I am one of the many that do not carry the Blood."

Elizabeth and John stare at each other across the short distance with matching 'oh, shit' expressions.

John walks through the gate, and it's like Disneyland at night. The arch flares brightly, and the previously gentle bong is loud and insistent. Every head in the vicinity swivels towards him, and John suddenly finds that the paving stones are really interesting, and hey look, knees.

The strength of the arch's reaction to John has the attention of the temple elders, who begin pouring out into the courtyard.

It's when they see Elizabeth that all hell breaks loose.

One of the temple elders yells at the top of his lungs and the crowd rushes toward Elizabeth at top speed with knives drawn, similar to the one that they had picked up in Tobat.

Shaaziya is screaming at the top of her lungs; she looks shocked at the confrontation. Timmons and Alvarez run through the gate, P90's firing above the crowd as John roughly grabs Elizabeth, thinking, 'oh, this was a really bad idea!' when a knife intended for Elizabeth strikes him instead, embedding itself down to the hilt. It was a lucky shot in the side, between the ribs and under his arm, and it hurts like a motherfucker.

Yeah. This was a really, really bad idea. It was a perfect hit, and John has to sort of admire the skill and strength that it takes to inflict the sort of damage he's taken. He falls to his knees, gasping for breath, and it's not that the pandemonium has really ended, it's worse than ever, but it's that John stops hearing it.
Rodney gets into his face, he's shouting, but John can't really hear it over the pain that's radiating out from his chest, overriding any other external stimuli. His skewered heart is failing, still trying to pump blood but the knife hilt prevents it from pouring onto the ground. No, instead it's filling up in his lungs and chest cavity, and things are getting light and floaty fast. John's world tilts as Rodney leans him into his lap, hands scrabbling uselessly at the knife that is solidly embedded in John's side.

John is sure there's some kind of commotion going on around him, but he's really not paying attention. He knows this feeling, he's had it before, but it's so slow this time—not a swift jolt to the heart, but a sluggish, oozing, petering out.

John tries to say something, but he can't get a breath, the wicked pain is stealing it away. He coughs up a brilliant, scarlet froth instead, and the last thing he sees is the look of utter horror on Rodney's face.
Day Fifty-Eight

John wakes up.

For an instant that doesn't seem too unusual, but then the memory of the look on Rodney's face just before John died in his arms slams into him. He lies there for a moment, breathing raggedly, trying to remember after, but it's no good; he was dead. Could a rememdium have healed him quickly enough to counteract the fatal injury? No, Shaaziya had said Ayse didn't have a healer.

If this is the afterlife, it isn't one he'd have pictured, so maybe he didn't actually die. The bed is soft, and the linen sheets and coverings are sun-bleached and finely woven, but it's just a regular bed.

John stretches his arms out and finds that he's dressed in a long white shift, with chevrons that he was used to seeing in Atlantis, embroidered in white.

He sits up, looking around with a curious dread pressing down on him, and he pushes it back. The small room has a large window at one end, spilling brilliant sunlight through the filigreed brass shutters that create a latticework of sun, and shade and color that spills across the worn carpet on the floor. The whitewashed walls are plain and bare, and his uniform is neatly folded on a chair by the door, with his boots below.

He stands experimentally and when that's successful, strips off the robe and looks at his side. There's not a mark on him, the knife wound is completely gone, no scar, or even a dimple where it should have been. He feels the back of his neck and the faint remnant of the shrapnel cut is gone. He twists around to check his ass, but he's never really been that flexible, so he resorts to running his fingers over the place where the gash had been. He leans down, and the backs of his legs are clear. Even the various scars from the past are gone; faint thin scars that crisscrossed his left arm from a run-in with his grandmother's rose bushes are gone. A puckered scar from a bullet on his thigh is completely erased and the skin is smooth. The traced line of his appendectomy surgery is missing, too.

John raises a hand to his nose, and the faint bump isn't there; his nose hadn't been perfectly straight since that game against Fremont in '78. "What the hell?" He realizes that he's about to seriously lose control and he can't do that—he doesn't even know where he is. John stands naked in the center of the room, breathing heavily through his nose, until he can push the terror back, down, scrunch it up and toss it away.

Three steps take him to the chair and he begins to dress. Everything is clean, not a trace of blood on them, and the t-shirt has been repaired; fine, even stitches close the tear made by the knife. He can feel the small lump of the mending when puts his arm down. His sidearm is missing, but the thigh holster is there, and he straps it on for comfort. He checks his watch. It stopped at 09:00, but he buckles it on just the same. The door isn't locked, so he opens it.

There's a guard outside. John nonchalantly slides out into the corridor. The guard stands and points down the hall, and John shrugs and heads in the direction indicated.

At the far end of the hallway is an open door and the guard steers John into what's clearly a sitting room or lounge. Rodney and Shaaziya are sitting together, heads bent over a heavy book. John takes two steps inside the door and hangs there uncertainly. "Hey guys, what's going on?" He hates
that there's a trace of a quaver in his voice and he swallows thickly.

He takes in the tableau in single snapshots, it's too much to assimilate all at once: Shaaziya's eyes snap towards him, her mouth open, then Rodney standing with his fists clenched, striding towards him, Shaaziya's sharp, bright cry of fear slicing through him like another knife.

Rodney stops in the middle of the room, torn between John and Shaaziya's keening cries, looking back and forth between them. She hasn't moved; her eyes are wide and she's panting with fright. "Shaaziya?" As John says her name, she falls to the ground, eyes covered and forehead to her knees, and she begins to pray under her breath in a high, anxious tone.

John can't hear what she's saying, only that her voice is high and wobbly, like she's crying. He has no idea what is going on, but her reaction to him even being in the room is causing his own incipient panic to ratchet farther up.

John turns to Rodney, who's still fettered by indecision in the middle of the room. "Rodney, what the hell happened?" It doesn't matter how ruthlessly John tries to smother it, his voice is shaky and weak.

That breaks Rodney loose, and he gets in John's face, so close that he can smell Rodney's sour breath and see the fear jagged and ugly in his eyes. "What happened? You died in my arms, and then one of Zuhair's men dragged your body away, and it's been three fucking days, and we've been locked up in here, and no one would tell us anything except that they're going to execute Elizabeth." Rodney gives him a sharp jab in the chest. "You tell me what happened!"

John can't help it, he takes a step backwards, away from Rodney's fury, and Rodney follows him. "I don't know, Rodney! I woke up a few minutes ago in a room down the hall, good as new, and I mean really new."

This distracts Rodney, and he pins John with that peculiar, intense gaze that's usually reserved for new and exciting technology. "What, what do you mean?"

"No scars. Not even the ones I had before. Look at this." John lifts his t-shirt, and points to his side. "There's nothing there." The surprise softens Rodney's voice into curiosity.

John's angered by this, and his voice softens. "I know that, Rodney! What is going on?"

Rodney's staring at John's unblemished skin, shaking his head and backing away. "Oh. Of course. I should have known it would be you."

He gives Rodney a questioning look, but he turns away from John with his mouth set in a hard frown. He goes to Shaaziya, kneels down beside her and puts his hand on her back, rubbing back and forth to try and calm her down. "Hey, hey, what's this all about? Come on now; it's just Sheppard."

John watches them for a moment, wanting to grab Rodney up off the floor and make him explain. He's got to get out of here and figure out what hell has happened in the last few days. The guard is still at the door, watching the scene with a cool, dispassionate calm. Either he has no idea that John was struck down dead, (unlikely, considering the bedlam that had erupted in the temple courtyard.) or he knows something that they don't. John's probably not going to wring it out of him with his pidgin Qaroptimat, and his translator is in the middle of a nervous break down.

There is one word that everyone who's involved will recognize though. John gets in his face and growls, "Elizabeth."
The calm, collected face of the guard doesn't even twitch as he nods.

"Rodney. Rodney! He's going to take us to see Elizabeth."

Rodney looks up at him. "She thinks you're their Hidden One. The reincarnation of Quaralyn." Unexpectedly, the look on Rodney's face isn't one of disbelief.

"That's ridiculous," John snaps. Was it possible?

Rodney ignores John's outburst, and he leans back over Shaaziya. "Come on, sweetheart, get up."

She allows him to pull her to a sitting position, and he wipes her cheeks with a brush of his fingertips. "That's better. Come on, stand up." Rodney gets to his feet and gives her a hand up, and then he hugs her, speaking softly into her hair as he presses a kiss to the side of her face.

Rodney releases her but keeps her hand in his and sighs as he turns to John. "Okay, let's go."

They follow the guard, down the corridor and several flights of stone stairs. It's not obvious where the light is coming from, but it's not dark. At the bottom of the stairs, the guard unlocks a door. John uses the distraction to ask Rodney, "What about Rogers and Alvarez?"

"I don't know. They could be anywhere. No one will tell us anything."

The guard locks the door behind them and leads them down yet another oddly lit corridor. John's starting to have his doubts about Shaaziya's role in all of this. Sure, she was obviously shocked by John's reappearance, and according to Rodney's assertion, her relationship with Zuhair is questionable at best; but it doesn't necessarily negate the possibility of colluding in some plot of Zuhair's. She may have had orders to bring them to Ayse from the very beginning.

It doesn't make sense, though. Shaaziya warned them of the first assassination attempt, sounded naively honest when she thought that talking to the Abnepa would solve their problem, and the look on her face as the attack began was one of fear and confusion. He doesn't have any proof one way or the other, but he's going to keep an open mind.

Their guard greets Elizabeth's guard with a shout. They argue back and forth for a minute, until Elizabeth's guard gives them a look that plainly says 'it's your life,' like Elizabeth was some hardened criminal. He opens the door, and they sweep past him before he can change his mind.

"John! You're all right!" she starts toward him to give him a hug, but stops short of actually touching him. John flinches slightly at the thump of the door closing behind them.

John gives her a small smile. "Yeah, I feel fine. Do you know what's going on?"

"No, actually I don't. I was hoping you could tell me."

"Apparently you're going on trial tomorrow, and they plan to execute you afterwards." Rodney snorts, "Trial."

"Oh, is that all?" Elizabeth shoots back with an acid tone.

"I'm sure they'll serve lunch afterwards, but I have no idea if you'll enjoy it or not, seeing as how you're going to be dead!"

"I hope it doesn't come to that. Shaaziya, can you..." Elizabeth stops as she finally looks at her. "Shaaziya, what's the matter? We'll be fine, we've had worse scrapes than this."
Shaaziya doesn't answer Elizabeth. Her face is turned down, but even so John can see that she's white as a sheet and trembling.

Rodney clears his throat. "It's Sheppard. Well, I don't know that you saw, you were already being carted away, but he. He, well uhm, sort of died."

"What do you mean, 'sort of died'?" Elizabeth frowns as she takes in the information.

"I mean, skewered through by a knife, coughing up a lung, dead! Expired!" Rodney is yelling now and his hands are flailing in the air.

Elizabeth turns to John; her eyes are wide with surprise. "Really?"

The walk to the jail cell's given John a chance to regain some perspective. They're in a bind and he can't afford to be distracted by his own panic and distress, because Elizabeth is in mortal peril. Again. He casually answers, "Apparently."

"I, well. Ah, that's extraordinary!" Elizabeth eyebrows climb high and she looks at John with the same assessing look that Rodney had given him earlier.

Rodney agrees, "Tell me about it. I spent the last two days trying to scrub his blood off of me, trying to forget the look on his face."

She says doubtfully, "Is it possible that they have a rememdium after all?" Elizabeth glances at Sheppard with a calculating look and then at Rodney. They share a significant glance, but neither one wants to be the one to say it.

"Possible, but I doubt it. I don't think there was anything anyone could've done."

"Well, right now, I don't think we should worry about it. I'm fine," John lowers his voice in case the guards are listening in, "but we do have to figure out how to get you out of here. Did you see what happened to Rogers or Alvarez?"

"I didn't even know that you'd been injured. They picked me up and carried me down here, and I've not had a single visitor since. Rodney, where have you been?"

"We've been under house arrest, on the third floor. No one told us anything, either."

John glances at Shaaziya. "There's only one person that can tell us anything, and that's Zuhair."

Elizabeth swallows hard. "I doubt he'll come to see me, and even if he did, I'm probably not the best emissary in this case. You'll have to talk to him."

"Okay, I'm going to go find Zuhair and see if we can't come to some agreement that doesn't involve you getting executed."

"Alright. Let me know what you can. Thank you, John."

"Sure. Well be back."

John bangs on the door with the side of his fist. "Hey, we want out!" He can hear the locks turning as he watches Rodney give Elizabeth a graceless pat on the shoulder.

The door opens and they leave Elizabeth alone in her cell, with a death threat hanging over her head.
The guard allows them to go to Zuhair's office, but his door is locked, and no one is answering it. John can hear people talking inside, but shouting and banging on the door proves futile. "Shaaz, what's going on?"

She still refuses to look at John, but at least she answers him. "They are preparing for tomorrow, purifying and praying. They will do this, until it is time."

"So, no chance of getting in there?"

"I do not believe so."

"Ask the guard if he knows where my men are."

She asks the guard in sharp querulous words, and he replies with a deference that surprises John.

"They were released immediately after Elizabeth was captured."

John and Rodney exchange relieved glances. Well, that was something.

"They were given a message, that to interfere would be to cause immediate death to all that are still alive."

Rodney asks, "Shaz, was it written? Verbal? Why didn't he tell us this the last two hundred times we asked?"

She queries the guard at length. "Yes, it was written. He only answers, because the Quaralyn wished to know."

Rodney glares at him, but John ignores him, and stares at the guard directly. "Ask him to get my radio, I want to have it."

The guard nods at her request, and scurries off to get the radio. "Now, that's more like it." John turns and smiles at Rodney.

Rodney rolls his eyes, "You're going to be insufferable."

"Hey, like you wouldn't do the same."

The guard hands him his radio, and John thanks him as he puts the ear piece on. "Let's not do this in the hallway."

They return to the room where John had found Rodney and Shaaz. She gives the guard an order, and he disappears. "Daedalus, this is Sheppard, come in."

"This is Caldwell, what the hell is going on over there? Rogers said he thought you were dead, and I've got both platoons armed and camped outside the city."

"That's good to know. You might have them hold off until we can be in a position to protect Elizabeth—the rumor is that were supposed to all be killed if you attack."

"Hermiod translated the message for me. What are your intentions?"

"Can you get a lock on Elizabeth?"
"No, there's some interference, we're not reading any of you."

"The buildings must have some natural shielding, I doubt that they're advanced enough to do this on purpose." Rodney sighs. "I thought they were just being cheap and not running the sub-lights."

John gives him the 'oh, is that it' look. "Shaaziya, where do you think they'll have the trial?"

"The Judgment hall, across the courtyard."

"Are there any tunnels? Underground passages?"

She smiles slightly, but her eyes are still averted. "No, the guilty must walk among the accusers."

"Colonel, you need to be prepared to beam Elizabeth away the minute you get a lock on her sub-cu. I have it on good authority that she'll be outside the building that's probably blocking the signal. Keep monitoring, I don't know if they'll try to pull a fast one and take her out ahead of schedule."

"What about the rest of you?"

"Yeah, take Rodney too, just in case. There'll be too many to pick Shaaziya out of the crowd, and I have a feeling that I'm not in any danger. I'm going to need her, in any case."

"Very well Colonel. You only have to make it outside the city gates, our forces are already in position."

Rodney looks mutinous and determined. "I should stay with you, you'll need back up."

"Thanks, but I'd much rather have you out of danger as soon as possible. Like I said, I doubt that she and I will be in any danger."

John asks through Shaaziya for the guard to return the rest of their gear, and he complies with the same alacrity he's shown in the last few minutes. John considers trying to blaze their way out, but there are too many locked doors and guards between Elizabeth and freedom, and there are other considerations to take into account.

It's already dark when the guard returns, bearing a tray of food and drink. John's not very hungry, he's too anxious to eat. Rodney's reaction to stress is to eat, and he quickly plows through the meal. Shaaziya nibbles, but clearly she's eating only out of duty.

John's been thinking. He leaves Rodney to the tray and gets the guard to take him back to Elizabeth. He obliquely advises Elizabeth of the plan, and verifies that her transmitter hasn't been removed. He stays for a while to keep her company, but neither one has very much to say.

When he returns to the lounge, the lights are dimmed, Rodney's arm is around Shaaziya's shoulder as she leans against his chest, though neither one is sleeping, just sitting together in the half-light.

John sits in a chair, and puts his feet up on the low table, arms crossed over his chest.

They quietly wait until dawn, reflecting on mayhem, and murder and mysteries.

**Day Fifty-Nine**

The guard brings them breakfast, but even Rodney's too keyed up to eat. John checks the magazine in his P90 and snaps it to his vest, checks his sidearm to make sure it has a full clip. Rodney follows suit, checking the clip and safety with smooth, confidant motions and sliding it home into
his thigh holster. Rodney locks his gaze on John's, and they're thinking the same thing: hoping this won't come to a firefight, but preparing for one all the same.

They walk to the entrance, but before leaving the building, John contacts the Caldwell. "This is Sheppard, come in Daedalus."

"Colonel, I need a sit-rep."

"We're about to walk out of the building. Elizabeth's not here yet, and I don't want to tip my hand. Can you get a lock on Rodney?" John waves Rodney out to the top of the stairs and follows him out.

There's a slight pause, "We have him."

"Good, make sure that you beam her and Rodney away at the same time."

"Colonel, are you outside the building?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Were not picking up your signal at all."

Huh. He hadn't even bothered to check that, because the plan hadn't called for it. John is briefly grateful that the building is shielded, that they hadn't beamed everyone else away, leaving him behind because they thought he was dead. "Roger that, Colonel, I'll explain later. I'll contact you when Elizabeth is on her way outside."

"Sergeant Olander is on channel three, standing by for your orders."

John checks with the Sergeant, and advises him to be prepared to rush the temple if the beam out plan fails.

From their vantage point at the top of the stairs, they watch the congregation swell. The Arch is busy, and John can hear it sounding off as people trail through single file. John's curious about the prevalence of the ATA in the crowd; Anbur had made it clear that it was fairly uncommon, as had Shaaziya. He's starting to get a clearer picture of the split between the two, and he wonders how many other sub sects there are across Dominat.

It's obvious that a lot of these people were in attendance at the fiasco a few days ago. John's getting some uneasy looks and people are talking to each other and pointing at him. John smiles and nods, but that only elevates the concern they're showing.

When the crowd turns into a sea of people filling up the courtyard and sloshing out of the Arch, Zuhair and his Abnepa make their entrance. He stares at John's little group standing off to the side, but John's not going to be scared away from his position.

Zuhair begins to address the crowd, and Shaaziya translates for them in a low voice. John listens to her as he watches the crowd, Zuhair and his Abnepa.

Zuhair's speech is filled with rhetoric and philosophical lambasting of the Peragroilla for allowing the uninitiated and apostate nusqua to view freely that which should be prohibited to them. He portrays Elizabeth as an archfiend bent on destroying their way of life, and the entire city that fell from the sky as the primum mobile, the reason that the ancient enemy came to punish them, when they had never come before.
It goes on for some time, and a lot of it's not wrong, just twisted, and some of the historical references to the holy wars of the past go over John's head. Zuhair's invective is getting more creative, and it seems to be whipping the crowd into a writhing frenzy.

If Elizabeth has to walk through that crush, she won't even make it half way across the courtyard; they'll probably rip her limb from limb or stone her to death, before she makes to the Judgment Hall. John's praying that the Daedalus can get a lock on her as promised. If they can't, it's going get ugly fast, with terrible consequences for their future if they have to blaze their way out in a firefight.

When Zuhair has the crowd at its zenith of madness, he makes a sign, and Elizabeth is dragged out. She's heavily chained hand and foot; it's difficult for her to walk, and the men at her sides are half carrying her, but her head is held up high, with a defiant expression on her face.

John turns slightly away from the crowd and signals the Daedalus, "Now would be great."

He takes a deep breath that he didn't realize that he was holding when Elizabeth and Rodney disappear in what must appear to the Ayse as a lightning strike, and the crowd freezes in shock and awe.

John isn't given a chance to exercise his less-than-adequate oratory skills, because Shaaziya immediately steps in front of Zuhair and speaks to the silent, frozen crowd. He's pretty sure that he knows what she's saying, because some of the crowd, the ones that had recognized John earlier, fall to their knees in obeisance. She continues until the mass of people parts, leaving an open path to the courtyard. She turns and smiles, eyes cast down. "Come, we leave now."

They walk down the stairs, and John's willing Zuhair to know when he's lost the battle and not launch an attack from behind. As Shaaziya passes under the Arch of Qaralyn, it gives the same faint, gentle reaction.

When John passes through, it goes crazy. The light and sound are a hundred times stronger than before; almost deafening every one and blinding anyone whose eyes aren't turned aside. Ears ringing, John turns to look behind him. Anyone who wasn't already pressing their forehead to the ground falls down and performs the ritual genuflection.

John looks across the courtyard to the temple stairs and Zuhair's is the only one left standing, a calculating look on his face. Their eyes meet, but he's nodding slightly, accepting his defeat.

It's not far to the city gates. The people in the town who didn't see what happened are wearing the vaguely hostile expression that John expects, and no one attempts to stop them from leaving. He taps his radio, "Daedalus, this is Sheppard. We're out of the compound and almost to the gates."

"Good to hear, Sheppard." Rodney's voice is a relief. "Engineering is getting Elizabeth out of the manacles."

"That's great, Rodney."

"Since we're running the sub-lights, we're going to beam you guys back. No point in walking if you don't have to."

"Thanks, I wasn't looking forward to hiking back in the daylight."

"Let me know when you're ready, and I'll bring you home."
The corridor outside the ring room is busy with returning Marines and crew standing around and gawking. Rumor flies at hyper-speed here; so many have little to do with their time that the boredom drives them to glom onto the least bit of excitement. John's about to turn towards the conference room when a hand falls on his shoulder; he turns and comes face to face with Carson, a concerned expression on his face. "No you don't, Colonel. I heard something very disturbing, and the only place you're going is the infirmary."

"I'm fine, Doc. Really. I need to..."

"Elizabeth's already there, and Steven's with her, aye and Rodney and Shaaziya, too."

John gives in, handing his P90 and tac vest to the nearest marine before following Carson. He's beginning to really hate the infirmary, it seems like all he ever does is cool his heels there when he's fine.

Carson hands him a set of green scrubs to change into. "I plan to run every single test and scan I have at my disposal, so you'd best get comfortable, Colonel."

He strips in the lavatory, and realizing that it's been days, takes a quick shower before putting on the scrubs. He takes a more thorough inventory of the changes as he cleans. On the wrist that normally sports a wristband, the hair isn't rubbed away from the constant wear. His skin seems to glide over muscle, as if the fat underneath has been melted away, and the tiny love handles he'd secretly despaired over are gone. Well, that's a plus. He takes a close look in the mirror, the scar on his neck from the Iratus bug is gone, and yes, his nose is straight again and the tiny crow's feet around his eyes and his gray hairs are missing, too. Not that he really misses them.

Clean and attired, John takes the bed next to Elizabeth. She's hooked up to an IV and eating lunch, and Caldwell is sprawled comfortably in the chair next to her.

John takes a breath, but Caldwell interrupts him. "Save it Sheppard. We'll talk about all of this later." He sounds tired, and John thinks that he's probably worn a deep path on the deck of the bridge during the last four days.

"Okay." John watches the scene that's playing out a few beds away. Carson's drawing blood from Shaaziya, and Rodney is hovering. He'd forgotten about that little problem until the Arch reminded him when Shaaziya left the temple. She's sitting with her back to him, but he can see the interplay of expressions on Rodney's face. He looks terribly pleased with himself; Carson's smiling as he gently teases Rodney.

He'd thought that Rodney would be completely ape-shit insane about the possibility of impending fatherhood, but he guesses that they've had a few days to talk about it while he'd been, well what ever he'd been. John knows, though he's shying away from the idea.

John has to admit to himself that the scene a few beds away is kind of sweet. Rodney's remarkably transparent; there are very few things that don't show on the surface and an air of loneliness had always drifted about him as he threw himself into his work. Now he looks happy, glowing with a level of serene bliss—not ZPM happy with all the manic excitement that entails.

He's glad for Rodney in a lot of ways, but if they ever get rescued--well, there's heartbreak on the horizon.

Carson gives Shaaziya a pat on the shoulder, before he hands the samples to a nurse and threads his way through the beds towards John.
"So, John, I hear you've had a pretty exciting weekend."

"That's one way of putting it."

"Before I go mad with the testing, tell me what your physical symptoms are?"

"Besides the fact that I'm not dead?"

"Aye, I can see that, lad."

"I don't have any scars, not old ones or new ones. There's no trace of the knife wound." John lifts his left arm and points to his ribs, "And I can't feel where my nose was broken. My gray hair is gone."

Carson takes John's face in one hand and turns it back and forth while palpating the nose, feeling for the lump. "I don't see any sign of it. But other than that you feel fine?" He says this last with a hint of sarcasm.

John chuckles. "Yeah, I feel fine."

"Hmm, interesting. Any memory gaps, other than the last couple of days?"

"Well, there's that weekend in Bangkok, but I couldn't remember that before."

Carson smiles, "I have one or two of those, myself. You look a little thinner in the face." He lifts John's arm up and gently pinches the underside, and then lifts the scrub top to do the same where the love handles used to be. "Definite fat loss, I'll wager your body mass index is down considerably, but that could just be from running back and forth across the desert. You've been under a great deal of stress, both could account for the loss."

Carson's hands move upwards to gently pull his eyelids apart, leaning in to get a closer look. "The sclera is perfectly normal, which is to say unusual. There's a certain amount of discoloration that occurs as we age. Open wide."

The tongue depressor comes out and Carson peers down John's throat. "That's very interesting." He turns away to pull the privacy curtains, "Hop on the scale, I'll be going over ye with a fine-toothed comb." He looks over to Rodney, who's watching with unabashed curiosity. "Go on, Rodney. He doesn't need you peering over my shoulder."

Rodney rolls his eyes and manages a vaguely contrite look at the same time. John thinks that's amazing.

Elizabeth's IV is empty, and Carson takes a moment to let her go with the usual warnings, leaving the infirmary empty except for the two of them.

Then John spends the next few hours getting prodded, poked, weighed, scanned, x-rayed and punctured. He gives up a urine sample and suffers through the indignity of a prostate exam. He's never been so thoroughly touched in his entire life.

Carson snaps off the latex gloves and tosses them into the trash. "I wasn't able to get a feces sample, when was the last time you had a decent meal?"

John colors in a faint rush of embarrassment. "Before I left for Ayse. I was too keyed up to eat yesterday, and before that, well. You know."
Carson gives him a look of pure exasperation. "And I wonder why you're thinner. Get dressed and have a seat—you're going to eat right here in front of my eyes, so I can see every bite."

"Come on, Carson, I'm perfectly capable of going down to the mess hall."

"Sure you are, but the question is, would you make it there? Or would you get distracted and pulled away? No, no question about it, you're staying right here."

"That only happens when there's a crisis, Carson, you know that. Why don't you come with me?"

"Because I have about a hundred tests to run and results to compile. Sit. Call Rodney if you want some company."

John thinks about that and decides he'll forgo the pleasure. It would be nice, but he's already tired of dealing with Shaaziy'a's averted face. "Nah, that's fine, I'm sure he's busy."

Carson nods thoughtfully and leaves John to get dressed while he orders up the required meal.

John retrieves his uniform from the washroom and decides that it's a little too ripe, so he stays in the scrubs.

When he returns to his bed and the airman delivers two trays to John, he snaps. "Carson, for God's sake, I can't eat all of this!"

Carson sticks his head out of the office. "Yes, I know, be there in a moment."

He joins John a few moments later, sitting down and pulling his tray close. "So, tell me all about what happened."

Day Sixty

Carson calls John back to the infirmary, and gets the missing sample. "Come in and have a seat. I want to go over what I've found so far." He looks tired, as if he'd stayed awake all day. "Did you sleep well? No disturbing dreams, or nightmares?"

John drapes himself over the side chair as Carson retrieves the data, disguising the fact that he's nervous. "Not really. I ran the decks, read for a while, watched a few movies. I wasn't sleepy."

Carson frowns. "Describe how you felt."

"Really awake, energetic. Honestly, I haven't felt this great in a long time."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me. If it weren't so bloody painful, I'd be tempted to do a bone marrow aspiration—but it's not necessary."

"Thanks, and I'll pass."

Carson looks up from the screen, smiling. "Aye, it would only be to assuage my curiosity, and despite Rodney's assertions, I'm not that cruel. So, here's what I've found, and some of it's quite surprising."

Carson goes through the results of each test, detailing what's changed. John's got his tonsils and appendix back, there's no indication of where he'd broken his arm when he jumped off the roof at age ten, or of the various other broken bones and ribs that John's accrued in a lifetime in the service, and in the Pegasus galaxy. His BMI is down more than three days can account for, but
Carson's already considered that.

"What does all of this mean?"

"It's like you have a brand new body. There's no sign of decay in the nuclei, or abnormal morphology in the lamin-A or aging wrinkles in the mitochondria, but the removed organs mysteriously reappearing, aye-thats a big one."

John knows what this is leading up to, but he just wants to hear it out loud. "And the conclusion?"

Carson sighs. "I think its a strong indicator for ascension and descension—though no one witnessed anything of the sort. Chaya's exam records are back on Atlantis, and the *Daedalus* just doesn't hold too much in the way of medical research on the subject. The facts as they are merely support that its a strong possibility."

"I thought you might say that." John thinks that Zuhair might have some answers about what had happened, but they aren't talking to him at the moment. "I noticed that their ATA detector seemed to react more strongly afterwards."

"It's possible, but I can't lay my hands on data for comparison, but from memory it does seem as if you have more active ATA genes." Carson pauses and studies John. "You know that I'm required to give Elizabeth and Caldwell a report. The question is, are you really John Sheppard?"

It hadn't occurred to John that his actual existence was being questioned. "I'm still me, Doc."

"The genetic profile suggests that, yes, but I lack any definitive comparison and certain sections seem to fall outside the parameters of normal. The ATA gene, for example. You're you, you're just more you, I think."

"So what are you going to tell them?"

"A guarded yes, based on the fact that I simply don't have all the information at hand, and I'm making comparisons from memory. This is just the physical construct, John, a person is more than just a body."


"We'll do our best to keep this private, but certain people are probably going to put two and two together—if he hasn't already—when he gets his head out of the clouds."

"I just hope it stays there a while."

"To be honest, I haven't even run her test yet. Yours was a far more interesting case."

John slaps his hands on his knees and stands. "Thanks, Carson."

"You're welcome, John. If you continue to have trouble sleeping, come and see me. And eat."

"Yes, mum. You too." John gives Carson a smirk as he leaves the infirmary.
Colonel Caldwell's response to the fiasco is to heighten security. No one is to leave the ship alone at any time or go any further than one hundred yards. All expeditions to Ayse or N'vellesem have been denied in advance, which leaves John stuck on the Daedalus.

Life on-board settles into an uneasy routine. People buzz through the corridors, handling whatever make-work or research can be thrown at them, but they're beginning to resent the lock down. The only exception to the rule is those who volunteer to continue to excavate the port side hangar.

John notes the ambivalent feelings about his change; even with Carson's assurances, there is whispered gossip about him, some wonder if he's really who he says he is. And it's not that they don't trust him, per se, there's just a question and although no one doubts the answer to his face—the uncertainty is in their eyes when they think he's not looking, the curious glances, or the way that almost everyone goes out of their way to not touch him.

The Marines and Daedalus crew members aren't quite as thrown by the extraordinary turn of events, it's the civilians with too little to do that are main culprits in whispering ugly rumors. They begin to go out of their way to avoid him altogether, which suits John just fine.

He doesn't want to deal with any of the rumor and innuendo, so John runs. He's given up running in the ship, seeing people twist and contort to avoid contact hurts more than he'll ever give them the satisfaction of seeing.

John breaks Caldwell's sanctions and runs alone in the desert, sometimes north past the little graveyard that could have been his final resting place, occasionally towards N'vellesem, but never to the west, towards Ayse.

South leads to jagged hills, and rocks, and the shifting sand turns to hard, gravelly scrabble, perfect for running. John doesn't push Caldwell about the ban, and Caldwell doesn't call him on the running, because the only good thing to come out of the fiasco is a little peace. The scanners are still vigilant for Wraith-sign, but the other inhabitants of Dominat have left them alone for weeks.

John visits Evan occasionally, trying to time his visits for when he's not surrounded by other visitors, though it proves to be difficult as the affable Major is quite popular and well liked. After Lorne's released from the infirmary, it's almost impossible for John to find a moment when Evan's alone, and he just lets it go. The Major doesn't need his company.

It's equally difficult to catch Rodney alone; he and Shaaziya are thoroughly besotted with one another, and John wouldn't dream of asking Rodney to lose Shaaziya for a few hours. The change in her attitude whenever John is around is getting tiresome, and it makes him angry.

John's just a little angry with Elizabeth, too. She'd taken unilateral action and studied Dominat's most sacred texts despite the possibility of the consequences, and John's the one that paid the price for her decision. He goes out of his way to avoid socializing with her, but it's hardly noticed, she and Caldwell are spending more time together than might be construed as completely necessary for the two de facto leaders of their shipwrecked colony.

Détente all around.
Out of boredom, John thinks it's probably time to think about digging a well, and despite the fact that he'd told Rodney that he'd dug one, he's never located one himself. John's black Irish grandmother had dowsed it with a twisted coat hangar. He's already got enough trouble on board; he's not going to resort to improbable medieval witchcraft and add to his woes.

John checks Elizabeth's list on the mess hall door, but no one's mentioned finding or digging wells as a skill. Rodney could probably offer some interesting solution but John doesn't want to deal with Shaaziya. Hermiod is one of the few on board whose attitude hasn't been affected by his debacle in Ayse, so John consults with him; he's probably got an ace or two up his nonexistent sleeve. Hermiod easily finds a way to scan both the stars and the sand.

They locate a couple of possibilities, though none of them are particularly convenient. John's not looking forward to digging that deep to find that the water's not drinkable, which is the point of the whole exercise.

"Can't we just beam it out, when the engines are on?"

Hermiod gets a gleam in his eyes. "It is not a long term solution, but we may certainly test if it is potable in this manner."

"That's perfect. I'll have Caldwell add it to the list." Since the sub-lights are only run once a month, if a project requires extra power, it has to be added it to 'The List', and Elizabeth and Caldwell prioritize the requests based on their relative necessity.

John doesn't have very many people to turn to at the moment and Hermiod is a refreshing change from his isolation. "So, Hermiod, what have you been doing to keep busy?"

"Ah, that is an interesting question. I have been compiling the data gathered from the sensor readings."

"Oh, what have you come up with?"

"This planet has a wealth of mineralogical oddities. The gravity indicates there is a large percentage of an extremely heavy metal in the core, and we have located large deposits of Yttrium and Lutetium on or near the surface. I intend to obtain samples to determine the exact composition of the mantle, in conjunction with obtaining your water samples."

"Lutetium? Isn't that man made? Won't the Yttrium poison the water?"

"Perhaps on Earth the purest forms are created, but the planet appears duplicate the laboratory conditions and the inhabitants of this planet do not appear to have been affected by their presence."

"I guess that's good to know."

Hermiod gives John a long, flat stare. "Very good to know."

~*~

John pokes around the workshops, store rooms and computer databases, but the Daedalus isn't equipped for well-digging and John's engineering skills are slanted towards fast, powerful and airborne; a well is none of those things. John's pretty sure he knows where he can get the information and assistance he needs, but that avenue's been barred to him. It'll be a couple of weeks before the batteries are slated for recharge and the boredom is really killing him.

Deciding that détente isn't all that it's cracked up to be, John tracks Elizabeth down in the officer's
mess one evening. She's watching the glorious sunset through the window, and he slides into a chair across from her.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Just going over some notes for the next town meeting."

"How's that going?"

"It's difficult, I don't want to crush their hopes of getting rescued, but we have a boatload of people that are bored stiff. Any plans we make towards integration might threaten the precarious peace, and Steven's reluctant to attempt to reengage."

"Uh huh. Yeah, about that."

Elizabeth's holding back a smile, but her eyes are laughing. "Yes?"

John leans forward, his voice earnest and pleading. "I could really use some help from someone who's dug a well, and I was thinking of heading over to N'vellesem, check in with our old buddy Anbur."

"I wondered how long it was going to take. I certainly don't have any objection, Steven's the one you'll have to convince. I haven't been able to."

He sighs, unsurprised that Elizabeth knows him well enough to expect this. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Did you expect anything else?"

"No, not really." John stands and leans on the chair as he pushes it under the table. "See you later."

Caldwell haunts the bridge like Faulkenburg, with nowhere to go on the seas of sand. He's wearing away a few more microns off the deck, when John approaches him. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sheppard, what can I do for you?"

"Let's take a walk."

Caldwell gives John a curious look, but follows him off the bridge.

John leads him to the conference room, and motions for him to sit. Shutting the door, John sits down across from him. "It's about the well. It's more than just the well, but I'll get to that in a minute. I have to go to N'vellesem, and consult with Anbur to see if I can get some local help."

"Do you think that's really wise, Colonel? Considering the trouble the last trip caused?"

"See that's the thing. If we're permanently stranded here, we can't afford to shut out possible allies, until we're forced to crawl to them on bended knee. We never got to the point where we figured out if there's anything that we have that they could use, and that's critical intelligence we can only get by engaging them in a dialog." John doesn't like the smirk that Caldwell's giving him.

"I understand your point, Sheppard, but my primary goal is to keep us safe." The smirk disappears, and is replaced with a challenging look. "I would think that you, of all people, would identify with that."
The entire crew is trapped and it's only a matter of time before someone starts wielding a knife to cut their way out of the web and John is always up to a challenge. "I do, but here's the thing, eventually being kept prisoner is going to cause someone to snap and go crazy. We can't afford to stay shut in and not take the risk."

Caldwell outright smiles at him. "You've been talking with Elizabeth."

"Well, I did find out what her position was, but no, we haven't been developing secret strategies."

"You've almost got her speech down word for word."

"We've been doing this for a while now, it isn't really new. You win some, you lose some, she'd retreat and I'd force an advance. I think that Anbur's proven himself to be someone that we can work with, and we have to pursue that possibility."

"Exactly what do you propose?"

"Just a short jaunt into town, say hi to Anbur and see if he knows of anyone that might be willing to help dig a well. If there is, then we find out what we can trade for it."

"I'll consider it, Sheppard. That's all I'm willing to do at the moment."

"Fair enough. Thank you."

Caldwell nods and returns to the bridge, and John's left with his frustration as company.

**Day Eighty-Nine**

The next day, John's surprised when Major Lorne joins him in the hangar bay, as he prepares for his run. "What's up? How are you feeling?"

"If I stay inside this ship one more day, I'm going to pull a Charles Whitfield." Lorne looks grim, still pale from many weeks of recovery, and his brutally short hair only serves to heighten the impression of someone on the edge of something dark.

He has to ask; only because Carson would kill him if he took Lorne out for a run, and it killed the Major after all that had been done to get him well again. "You cleared by medical?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Let's go."

They take the route to the south through the canyons, and John lets Lorne set the pace. Neither of them makes any conversation, and that's fine with John. He's glad to have the company and pleased to discover that Lorne's just as willing to thumb his nose at authority.

Lorne keeps up the pace, but he starts to look peaked and white around the eyes with the effort. John takes pity on him, turning around even though he's barely broken a sweat. "Baby steps, Lorne."

He stops and leans over, hands on his knees and breathing heavily. "Yeah."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sounds good to me."
Day Ninety - Ninety-Three

The next morning, it's Lorne and Cadman. The day after that it's Alvarez and Timmons too, and the day after that it seems like nearly a whole damn platoon. John's secretly buoyed by this, though he'd never show it to anyone that was looking. He knows that they're just looking for an excuse to get off the ship, but it could be a sign of acceptance. He's trying not to read too much into it.

John lets Olander hustle them into formation behind him and takes off at double time pace for a long, hard run.

This is the day that everything changes, again. When the company is RTB, there's three locals waiting outside on the south side of the ship. John spots them, and raises his hand in a clenched fist, and the Marines instantly come to a halt. All of them have a sidearm, and there's a whole more of 'us' than 'them', so John's not too worried. "Stay here, wait for my signal, I'll go check out what they want. Lorne?"

Lorne threads his way through the company to join him, and they set off at a walk. As they close the distance, John can see that one of them is Anbur; his bright blue hat is unmistakable.

And Zuhair.

He tamps down his anger and, if he were to admit it to himself, fear as they approach the ship. John greets Anbur in Peragro, but Anbur takes pity on him and replies in English.

"John, pleasure to see you. I am glad you are well."

"Doing great." He shoots a no-thanks-to-you look at Zuhair, before returning his attention to Anbur. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"We only arrived." Anbur glances at Lorne, and John smoothly takes up the introductions.

"Major Lorne, this is Anbur from N'vellesem and Zuhair, of Ayse. I'm afraid I don't know him." John points at the third man.

"That is Tazim, of the Kadiani. Major Lorne." Anbur gives Lorne a little bow, and Lorne returns it without taking his eyes off of Zuhair.

Okay, so Kadiani, that's interesting, and partially answers one of John's questions, if it isn't the name of a town. "What can I do for you?"

"We come with invitation. The season for viat is upon us, you must journey and heal."

John shakes his head slightly. "Might have a problem with that." He turns and signals Olander to bring the Marines forward. "Sergeant, send a couple of guys in to get Caldwell and Weir to the hangar, and warn them that Anbur, Zuhair and Tazim are here to talk."

While Olander is sorting it out, John turns to the delegation, "Let's go inside." John motions towards the ladder and Anbur scrambles up after Lorne and the Marines, with Zuhair and Tazim following him. John is last up. The Marines on guard duty in the hangar give the ensemble a wary look, but stay alert and prepared from their positions.

As they wait for a few minutes for Caldwell and Elizabeth to join them, John keeps a peripheral eye on Zuhair as he coolly takes in the hangar and openly watches Tazim, who seems genuinely excited and in awe to be aboard the Daedalus.
Tazim is short, thin and wiry, with dark eyes and a wide smile half full of rotten teeth. Under an impressive nose. On his head is a plaid scarf knotted into place; his finely woven white shirt and baggy trousers are covered with a long, black, hooded cape that sweeps his feet. He's smiling and chattering away to Anbur and Zuhair. Zuhair is only listening with half an ear, but Anbur is replying with gusto and animation.

Caldwell and Elizabeth arrive with an escort of six Marines; his expression is dark and forbidding, and, to her credit, Elizabeth doesn't appear to be the least bit intimidated by the presence of Zuhair. Rodney and an unhappy looking Shaaziya trail in behind them, and Rodney is glued to her side.

Anbur meets Elizabeth halfway across the hangar deck with a deep bow and a brief embrace, taking her hand to lead her over to Zuhair and Tazim. John shakes his head at Caldwell, who looks ready to blow a gasket.

"Elizabeth, my friend Tazim of the Kadiani from Zadiyeh. Am afraid you know Zuhair of less pleasant times."

Elizabeth nods at Zuhair curtly, but gives Tazim a short bow, and greets him Ancient. This delights Tazim, and they have a short conversation, while Anbur looks at them fondly. Zuhair is impassive, and John recognizes the mask for what it is.

"Perhaps we should find a more comfortable venue?" Elizabeth doesn't look at Steven or John as she leads the way towards the conference room.

John stops Caldwell at the hangar door. "I'm going to change."

Caldwell nods and peels off after Elizabeth.

John turns to Lorne. "If you want, meet me at the conference room in a few, this should be interesting."

"Will do, sir."

After a very cursory shower, John finds Lorne already waiting for him, grinning as he opens the conference room door.

Anbur and Tazim smile broadly, Caldwell and Zuhair are scowling at each other, Elizabeth's back is to the door; he really must speak to her about that.

There are only two empty seats, one between Anbur and Caldwell and the other between Elizabeth and Shaaziya. He knows that he's probably making some arcane political statement in the seating arrangement, but John doesn't have the strength or mental energy to deal with Shaaziya and her averted eyes, so he leaves that one for Lorne and sits next to Anbur.

Anbur clasps a hand on John's shoulder and gives it a slight squeeze. It surprises John, but the fact that Anbur isn't widely skirting his airspace leaves John feeling relieved.

Anbur looks around the table. "Now we begin. Much has happened, yes?"

"You could put it that way," John drawls.

"Very bad, but is past. There is much talk between us," Anbur waves his hand at Zuhair and Tazim, "and others. We are chosen to delegate, because Shepherd must take the viat." The conversation drags a little, because Anbur translates for Zuhair and Tazim. They agree to this with various degrees of enthusiasm, Tazim is eager, and Zuhair reluctant.
"What is this 'viat', and why must John do it?" Elizabeth's in full formal negotiating mode, her hands clasped together on the table as she leans slightly towards the delegation.

"The viat is journey, to holy shrine that all share. It is a time of peace and healing between peoples and self. It is necessary for the Quaralyn."

John's knows what Anbur's referring to, based on what Shaaziya had said back in Ayse, but he doesn't know if Rodney had divulged that particular information.

Elizabeth quirks her head to the side and asks, "Quaralyn?"

"Ah." Anbur discusses this with Elizabeth in Ancient, and John meets Rodney's eyes over the table and nods. Rodney is very good at secrets when he isn't being threatened with a knife.

Elizabeth provides a brief summary of the conversation. "Anbur says this is a doctrine that the Peragroilla reject, but the Qaroptimatia and the Zadiyeh hold as a basic tenant, that the Quaralyn is the return of the son of Qaral to human form. Not that I think you're the Second Coming, but even we have questions about what happened--"

John's interested in taking the trip, but it's the religious baggage he has a problem with. "Well, I kind of reject that philosophy myself."

Anbur lays his hand on John's arm. "You must not. I doubt but I can see." Anbur stops in frustration, and waves at Elizabeth.

"This is huge, John, very huge. Anbur believes this is an opportunity for us to leverage our way into their society, not as nusquam, but as an accepted faction."

"So, it's time to 'take one for the team'?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"What happens when they find out that I'm just John Sheppard, popcorn colonel, fly boy?" John's sort of resigned to the fact that he's not going to win this one, but he has to at least give the impression of a struggle for his own sanity.

"That's the marvelous thing about faith." Elizabeth smiles, and it's awful, a bright, shark-like smile full of potential exploitation.

John leans back into his chair and frowns. "I'm not sure I like this side of you, Elizabeth."

Until now, Caldwell's been watching and listening intently with a dyspeptic expression. "For what it's worth, I agree with Elizabeth. We've been given an advantage, and we have to use it."

It's when Shaaziya looks him straight in the eye, with an expression of completely unguarded hope that John accepts defeat. "It is too late, it has already happened, whether you accept it or not."

"I have a question." Caldwell's still angry, which has pretty common lately. "What about this nixat that Zuhair declared? According to all reports, he seemed pretty intractable on the subject."

Elizabeth boldly asks Zuhair directly in Ancient; her tone of voice is mild, but there's a challenging look in her eyes.

Zuhair responds in kind. He speaks at length, his voice flat and toneless, his mask of indifference still firmly in place.
Elizabeth translates as he speaks. "He says the nixat has been rescinded, under pressure from the Council of Patern. Terms are that nusquam—that's us—cannot view the database directly, except under certain conditions." Elizabeth colors slightly, and Anbur nods once when she glances over at him. "But I'll go over that in more detail later. Anyone who meets these conditions is free to study. This is a compromise between the Peragroilla and Qaroptimat, the Kadiani are neutral on the subject."

"What's the problem with the database?" Lorne asks.

"It goes back to the beginnings of Dominat—it's a very complicated, but the high point is that Peragroilla believe that all are free to study and learn from it directly, but Qaroptimat hold that only Qaraly, Qaral's son, was authorized to dispense the knowledge, and only the initiated may study and teach from his translation."

Anbur adds, "Many wars, much killing for long time, but we held peace for a hundred lifetimes. Cost too high to start again."

"This agreement is a codicil to that treaty, and Zuhair apologizes for his unilateral action."

Elizabeth pauses as if she has something to add to that, but decides against it.

Caldwell snorts. "I don't think it's going to be that easy, once that ball gets rolling it's difficult to stop. I'm still not satisfied that we're not under fire."

John disagrees, "I'm not sure the ball ever really got rolling, outside of a few people. When we were in Ayse, most of the people simply ignored us and none of them made any threatening moves—other than Zuhair and his group."

"Just so. There was talk after monsters fell from sky. That your people brought plague to us, a punishment for Elizabeth. You fought them and won, that is known, and many grateful people. All were shocked when John was killed and returned from the dead; there was much fear and vengeance was expected, your great power is known."

John asks the question that's been simmering on the back burner for weeks. "Anbur, ask Zuhair if there were any witnesses to what happened to me."

"This has been questioned, none have spoken. Your body was set aside for one day according to custom. When they returned for the burning, you were as you are now."

John's only reply is a quick shrug of his eyebrows.

"This is the reason for taking viat. Progress has been made, and must continue to glue relations of your people to ours."

When Anbur put it that way, there was only one answer. John looks at Colonel Caldwell and he nods, though he doesn't look thrilled with the prospect despite his agreement. "I'll go, but I'm not going to be any damn religious leader."

Anbur gives his shoulder another of those warm squeezes. "You only accept—they believe."

"So can I take anyone, or do I have to do this alone?"

"No, not alone at all. Viat is time for family, for friends. Everyone is welcome."

Elizabeth gets down to the brass tacks. "When does this start, and how long can we expect to be gone?"
John's not surprised that Elizabeth intends to go, but Caldwell looks taken aback.

Anbur smiles. "Many will begin in ten days; that is best. Some rush and be done in twenty. I think twice that?"

"It's not like we have anywhere else to go." Elizabeth smiles at Anbur, and he laughs.

"Wherever you go, there you are." John says it barely under his breath, but Rodney catches it.

"Careful, Sheppard, your roots are showing. I'd like to go."

John nods thoughtfully. "I'd like that."

"I think it's an excellent opportunity. I'd like to make the offer to whoever wants the a chance to join you, John."

Caldwell jumps in. "I'd prefer that we set a figure on that group, Dr. Weir. We have no idea what they're going to encounter, and I think it'd be a better idea to have a carefully selected group."

Anbur stands up. "We will leave and allow discussion freely. Only requirement none must carry weapons, except small knife for cooking."

"What happens if the Wraith return?" Rodney asks suspiciously.

"Will of Qaral." Zuhair and Tazim nod solemnly when Anbur translates.

John chuckles. "That'll cut down the RSVP list."

"We'll have a strategy in place before you leave, Colonel." Caldwell meets John's eyes as they stand, and John knows that he's already making contingency plans.

Day Ninety-Five - One Hundred-Three

There are a lot of the Daedalus crew who think it might be fun to get out, but most are dissuaded by the idea of an extended walk across the desert and back. It comes down to John, Rodney, Shaaziya, Elizabeth, Paige Cole, Lorne, Cadman, Timmons, and Chin. Rodney's harassing the guys in the machine shop as they assemble what's essentially a solar powered wagon.

Elizabeth grills Shaaziya on what to expect, and John makes his plans accordingly. Without weapons, their main concern is feeding ten people, and Rodney or Elizabeth dropping dead of heat exhaustion—hence Dr. Cole—since they've been ill and or sedentary since Landing Day (no one wanted to call it Crash Day). John implements a forced regimen for them, walking and running in the daylight hours, increasing the time by large increments each day.

The rest of the crew is just pleased that Caldwell loosens the security restrictions, and they're free to explore the environs again. Some enterprising soul has lifted a camera intended for Atlantis, and the crew goes crazy taking pictures of the desert and the bizarre purple sky.

It begins a few days before they're scheduled to leave. John and his running gang find small groups of colorfully dressed people, praying in the sand beside the ship, when they return from their run. When the viator catch sight of John, they whisper among themselves and prostrate a little more fully.

"John?" Elizabeth's got just enough energy left to throw a quirked eyebrow at him.
"Damn, Sheppard. I hope you use your powers for good, not evil." Lorne slaps him on the back and heads up the ladder.

"Shut up, it's not funny." John starts up the ladder after him.

Rodney wheezes as he climbs up. "Oh, I beg to differ, it's hilarious. John Sheppard, religious icon."

Lorne grins and wipes away a nonexistent tear. "Oh, Little John's all grown up!" They all laugh or merely smile depending on how exhausted they are, and John puts on his most aggrieved expression.

He welcomes the humorous teasing, though. "I have no idea how they plan to get anywhere if they have to do that every time they see me."

Cadman yells up from the bottom of the ladder. "Maybe they'll put you in a disguise—unveil the secret weapon at the holy shrine. Maybe you'll have to make a speech! Better start brushing up your Ancient, sir."

John's more than a little mortified at the idea. "Damn it, you don't think..."

Lorne's still smiling, though a little more sympathetically. "Dunno, wouldn't put it past them."

"What the hell have I got myself into?"

Elizabeth aborts a move to pat him on the shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about it; what'd Anbur say? 'You accept, they believe?' I don't think they care what you think. Just don't start taking your press too seriously, John."

John shakes his head. "Yeah, right. No chance of that."

Lorne snickers. "See you later."

"Later."

While everyone else heads towards cool showers and horizontal surfaces, John watches the pilgrims as he considers once again, the weirdness of the Pegasus galaxy.

**Day One Hundred-Three**

Rodney's supervising the Marines he's co-opted into hauling the wagon off the hangar bay. With the normal offloading crane on the port side buried deep in the sand, he's rigged a makeshift pulley to lower it down to the sand for a trial run.

It's an ugly thing, but as Rodney points out, function over form, and he's only had a few days to cobble it together. It's ingenious, a flat bed to distribute the weight, and upright staves to lash on the cargo. The solar panel lies on top of the load attached to the small battery powered engine on the front. In case the mechanics crap out, there's also a pull handle, and the tires from a hangar queen provide traction even in the sand.

It's fun to play with. There's a remote control, and John watches with amusement as Rodney piles people on board to check the load limitations. Cadman manages to coax Rodney onto it, and as she ramps it up to a surprising top speed, John nearly wets himself laughing as Rodney screams for her to stop.

When she takes pity on him and brings the cart to a halt, John worries for a second that Rodney's
about to launch an attack, but he's grinning when he rolls off into the sand.

**Day One Hundred-Four**

Anbur appears at the ship, accompanied by all of the *Ludahsediat's* older students, the three *Idon*—Baariq, Dara and Iqbal, and a pack of the draft animals that resemble a cross between a donkey and a camel, loaded to capacity with bundles and barrels.

Fortunately, none of the students seem particularly excited about John's status as Quaralyn; they know him from his school days and that gives him a small measure of relief as he greets Anbur with a hand shake. "Anbur, how are you?"

"I am well. Are you prepared?"

"As much as we'll ever be, I guess."

"Good! I have bought for you three mesla, very sturdy. Carry your burden for the *viat*."

John had had his doubts about Rodney's wagon and the terrain; so having an alternative is attractive. "Thanks, that'll be great. What do we feed them?"

"All is prepared. I am your benefactor, yes? Those that have been before care for those who are new. Custom to feed those that journey along the way."

"Okay, sounds good." John starts recalculating his provisions list.

"I have brought map for Colonel, he is staying?"

"Yeah, he's staying."

"Is sad, but next year, hmm?"

John's still vaguely holding out hope for a rescue, but he keeps that to himself. "Yeah, next time," he says as he nods. "So, who's up for a tour?"

Anbur hollers out instructions and some of the kids stake out the mesla in the ship's shade, and they all clamber aboard the Daedalus. John leads them inside, and the scene is surreal and chaotic. Anbur heads off to find Caldwell, and John is left to play tour guide.

He shanghais Cadman, Lorne and Timmons and divides the tour into smaller, more manageable groups. John takes Lorne and they head upwards, talking about the ship. He's pretty sure they don't really understand his lecture, but the students are still interested and appreciative.

Elizabeth finds him at the hatch, letting the kids climb out topsides. "Hey. I heard we had guests."

"Yeah, kind of surprised me, too."

"It's a good idea, I'm glad we've been given the opportunity to reciprocate Anbur's generosity. I've arranged for dinner with the galley staff. I think we'll probably do something on the hangar deck."

Elizabeth's brittle smile is pasted on, and she has the frantic air of a new housewife whose husband's just told her that not just the boss, but also the whole damned board of directors, are coming for dinner, and all she has in the pantry are three cans of pork and beans.

"I was thinking we'd let them camp out in the hangar tonight, so they could say they slept in a space ship." John pauses, looking at her. "It's a kid thing. It'll be alright, Elizabeth."
Elizabeth gives out a short, strangled laugh. "I know, but I feel like we have to impress on them that we're not just some penniless itinerants with nothing to offer."

"I'm pretty sure Anbur knows that already. He'll appreciate the gesture."

"Yes, I understand that, but I fear that what we have to give them in return for food and shelter may be too esoteric and intangible." She watches the chaos around them, chattering kids of all ages climbing up and down the ladder and yelling at each other through the hatch. "You don't think they'll hurt themselves up there?"

He's glad for the change of topic, because in a way they are 'penniless itinerants', and he's sure Elizabeth doesn't want to hear his theories on social integration. "Nah. Lorne's up there to make sure they don't jump off."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Are they likely to?"

John just smiles.

"Ah, I see. Well. It'll probably be a couple of hours."

"We'll be there."

Dinner was just the usual fare, with the last of the fresh food bulked out with reconstituted dry stores. The food service crew takes the whole thing in stride; serving tables are set up buffet style, and the entire crew and the Peragroilla viator picnic in the lazy heat of the late afternoon. After a few quick conversations and calculations, Elizabeth urges Anbur to also invite the few pilgrims that have arrived to join them.

After dinner, the Marines start up the usual game and corral the students into playing. Some of the kids run to explore the growing hole on the port side, and John's reminded of a huge family reunion. The language barrier doesn't seem to be a problem, and every one appears to be enjoying the break in the stifling monotony. The students are beside themselves with excitement, though they make lousy volleyball players.

John finds Rodney sitting on the edge of the hangar bay, watching Shaaziya learning to serve. "Looks like she's having fun. Why aren't you out there?"

Rodney scoffs. "Right. Why aren't you? This should be right up your alley."

"This is about high school isn't it?" John and Rodney share a small sad smile over the lost Aidan Ford.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." Rodney says in a prim voice.

"Come on, McKay, let's go play some volley ball." John prods at Rodney until he relents, and they join the game in progress. The court is crowded, and Rodney rarely even has a chance at the ball, but no one cares or is counting.

Eventually it's too dark to play and they're planning for an early morning departure, so the improvised affair comes to a dragging halt. The Idon see to the students and their bedding, and the Daedalus settles back into routine.
It's very early, when John is awakened by a knock on the door to his quarters. It's been a month
since he stopped taking the radio to bed. He sits up bolt awake instantly, and pads over to open the
door, revealing Corporal Frostman.

Frostman steps over the threshold as John starts hunting for his pants. "There's another group that's
joined the Peragro, sir."

John scrubs a hand across his face. "They're not hostile I take it?"

"No sir, they just started to camp out on the west side. I thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you, Corporal. Did you send someone to Dr. Weir or Colonel Caldwell?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Okay. Don't bother, I'll check on it, no sense in all of us getting out of bed."

"Yes sir." Frostman snaps a sharp salute, as if he hadn't just watched his commanding officer zip
his fly.

"Let's go." John's taken to going barefoot on-board to save wear and tear on his boots, but he grabs
his sidearm and straps it on as a matter of habit that he's not willing to change.

The new arrivals number only ten or so. They've simply staked out their few mesla, and are already
nested into the sand, wrapped in their robes and apparently asleep by the time John climbs down
the ladder to check out the situation.

The viator that have been stopping at the Daedalus for the last couple of days have all been very
peaceful and respectful so far, and John's willing to return the favor and not wake them up. He
hadn't needed to get out of bed for this, but he's glad that Frostman's first thought had been him, not
Caldwell.

John's not sure what being the Quaralyn is going to entail, but he's not willing to be shut out of his
only foothold on the Daedalus, because of a little thing like dying and not staying dead; he's been
there, done that. He's still working on how he's going to hold that together as the second coming of
Qaral's son, or whatever he is.

He claps a hand on Frostman's shoulder. "Good job, Corporal. Let me know if anything else
happens."

"Will do, sir. Good night."

"'Night, Frostman."

John pads on dusty feet back to his quarters, puts his weapon away and falls haphazardly back onto
the bed.

~*~
It's not even dawn when John's up and meeting the band of *viator* that had arrived in the night. It turns out to be Tazim, and a few other Zadiyeh who will travel with them. John and Anbur join them as they make the sweet tea that John learned to like in the N'vellesem tavern over small fires of dried mesla dung. They're breakfasting on the hard flat bread he didn't like so much—it was too much like the crappy wheat bread flats that came in the MREs and tasted like cardboard.

After breakfast, the rest of John's group are up and about, and they begin to pack their belongings onto the smelly, shaggy meslas, which have cantankerous dispositions, but by all accounts, are well suited to the environment.

Rodney's applying another layer of sunscreen, and he's got a smear of zinc oxide on his nose and under his eyes. Tazim is vastly interested, watching the process. He asks in perfectly understandable Peragro, "*what is he doing?"*

John explains that Rodney's got a problem with the sun, and Tazim nods and holds up a finger before he rushes away to dig into his belongings on a mesla that keeps trying to sidle away from him. John and Rodney shrug at each other.

A few minutes later, he's back, gesturing at the boonie that's jammed onto Rodney's head and pointing at the black and white plaid cloth in his hand. John questions Tazim before turning to Rodney, "He wants to trade for your hat."

"But I need it, I'm going to fry to a crisp!"

"Do us both a favor and just go with it, Rodney."

Rodney sighs heavily as he pulls off the brain sponge and gives it to Tazim.

Tazim takes it and drops it to the ground as he shakes out the checked cloth and floats it over Rodney's head, and then deftly ties it on in complicated knots, similar to his own.

Rodney touches it and then pulls it more firmly down on his head. "Okay, so this is cool."

Tazim shows him how to tuck the long edge up so that his face is covered, and then surprises both of them with "Yes?"

Rodney grins. "Yes!"

"Come on, Ned." John takes a slow spin and sees that everyone is ready and waiting, or saying their farewells. He's surprised to catch Caldwell hugging Elizabeth good-bye.

He's even more surprised when Caldwell sees him and waves them over. "Colonel?"

Elizabeth yanks the end of Rodney's scarf gently. "Looking good there, McKay."

"Tazim thought it would be useful, and I'm sure that I cut quite the figure of sartorial splendor." Rodney strikes a pose and holds it, and gets a laugh for his effort.

Caldwell's smiling and shaking his head. "Good luck, Sheppard. You've got everything you need?"

"I think we're set. Rodney, you got all the toys you wanted to bring?"

Rodney gives him a flat look. "I have all of the tools I think might be necessary, yes. Along with a thousand power bars."

John grins. "Now we know why you needed the cart. Yep, we've got food, water and the *necessary*
"I'm still highly uncomfortable with the idea that you're going unarmed."

"Well, if the Wraith come, you'll send out the rescue squad. We've got our radios, and you know where we're going. Anbur and Tazim seem to think we'll be fine otherwise."

Caldwell shakes John's hand and then Rodney's. "Be safe, and take care. Let us know how you're doing."

"Scheduled radio checks at dusk." John hesitates and then goes for broke. "Got it, Dad. We'll have the car back in the garage in a few weeks."

Caldwell gives him a wry look, but he takes the kidding in good humor. "Thanks, Sheppard. We'll talk to you tonight, then."

"Alright kids, we've got the car keys, let's gas it up and go." John turns and joins Anbur, with Rodney and Elizabeth right behind him.

"And we begin." Anbur whistles, and they move out towards the west in a procession of ones and twos. He starts the pace slowly and some of the younger students race up and down the line, visiting with their classmates and chattering. John and Elizabeth walk side by side, Rodney's fallen back to where Shaaziya is leading one of the mesla.

After an hour or so of determinedly not thinking about traveling westward, John says out of the blue, "You know, we have nine people."

"What do you mean?"

He gives her an expectant look, "The Nine, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth bumps him with her shoulder. "And you call Rodney the geek."

"I'm just sayin'. Let's hope that we don't find Shelob along the way."

Elizabeth laughs, "Ex vestri labiae ut deus audite." from your lips to god's hearing

Anbur slows a little, until he's next to Elizabeth. "Indeed. What is Shelob?"

"It's from a story, a giant spider, very nasty."

"We have many stories to tell one another."

"Yeah, but I'd probably better stick with Nightmare on Elm Street."

Anbur nods. "Ut sulem suus mos." to each his custom

John nudges Elizabeth, but she shakes her head. "No, I think I'll let you figure it out on your own. You need the practice."

"Yes, practice, very good." Anbur falls into the role of teacher and begins to put John through his paces, drilling him on declensions and tenses until, he calls a halt for rest.

John takes the opportunity to walk down the line and check on everyone, nodding at familiar faces and waving at Tazim. Paige is sitting with her eyes closed near Lorne and Cadman, who're sharing a canteen and sitting with their backs to the cart. "Every one okay?"
Lorne favors John with a slow smile. "It's a grape. We should do this every day. Oh, wait we have."

John smiles and nods then moves on to find Rodney munching on a power bar next to Shaaziya who's already asleep in the sand, their heads in the shade of a mesla. He gives Rodney's foot a nudge. "How're you doing?"

"M'fine. Hot, tired, sweaty, how did you think I was doing?"

"That's about right, actually. It's not too late to back out."

"No, I don't think so, Sheppard. I wouldn't miss this for the world." Rodney sneers the last sarcastically, but John knows that he really wouldn't; Rodney's been out in the field too long to be happy with only puttering around in the lab. Plus, there's the whole thing with living up to Shaaziya's expectations.

"Well, drink up." Rodney lifts his canteen in his other hand, and John leaves him to it.

Timmons and Chin are pulling up the rear and hauling on the leads of their recalcitrant mesla. "You okay with those things?"

Timmons answers far too cheerfully for the heat. "Sure, we're just getting acquainted. I'll have them eating out of my hand before you know it." Chin gives him a dark stare.

Cadman snorts. "Yeah, just wait 'til Hollywood here gets a good look at those teeth. I doubt he'll put his hand anywhere near 'em."

"Bad?" John questions.

Chin slaps the mesla closest to him "This one's already tried to take a bite out of my ass." He turns around and sure enough, there's a tear in the backside of his BDU's.

"You want to trade out, just ask."

"Nah, we're fine. Lu's just bitching." Timmons gives the Sergeant a little shove.

"Okay, take a load off, and drink up."

"Will do, sir."

Duty dispensed, John flops down in the sand and pulls out his canteen. It's just barely to the hottest part of the day, but John can't tell if it's just that he's more used to the heat now, or if it's just not as hot. "Anbur, is there a change of seasons?"

"Hmm?"

"Does it get cooler for part of the year?"

"Ah, the rains will come, perhaps before we return?"

"That's good to know." John makes a mental note to mention that to Caldwell at the evening radio check, thinks about the position of the *Daedalus* and the rock formation to the south. "Bad floods?"

"Some anam very bad. Rarely they come not."

"We're in a bad place, aren't we?"
"Just so."

He definitely needs to warn Caldwell, although they can't do anything except batten down the hatches and pray like hell.

They linger in the sand for a while longer until Anbur stands, and slowly every one rises and prepares to walk. "We will rest again for longer next time."

The hot sun is sucking the will out of everyone, and no one is making an effort to talk. John falls into the zone, one foot in front of the other, blinking the sweat from his eyes. The only sounds are the shush-shush of the brisk wind blowing across the tops of the dunes, and the noise of their feet as they trudge along, people breathing regularly.

It's a good place to stop thinking, concentrate only on movement and the desert. John thinks 'poisonous' when he spots snake tracks winding down the leeward slopes of the dunes, though it's only a guess, based on past experience.

The afternoon rest finally comes. A handful of large, open tents go up with ease, and a few folks are starting to brew tea over small, elaborate burners worked in familiar etching and designs.

Others are napping in the shade, while Baariq and Dara gather students for a lesson; *viat* is no reason to call a halt to learning. John does his rounds again to make sure that everyone is okay. Timmons is sound asleep under the shade of the cart; Cadman and Chin are leaning over the shoulders of their fellow students from N'vellesem in the front row. Rodney's nearby and listening in, while Shaaziya and Elizabeth are resting in the back of the tent. John skirts around the students and finds a shady spot near Rodney, then murmurs along in English as the lesson is read aloud.

"You're pretty good at this, Sheppard. I didn't expect that."

John starts, "Nobody expects..."

"The Spanish Inquisition!" Rodney finishes. "No really. You learned a lot in N'vellesem."

"Guess so. It was kind of sink or swim. Anbur found it easier to learn English."

Rodney flicks him on the back of the head. "Just take the compliment, Sheppard. It's not like I pass them out indiscriminately."

"Yeah, you must be ready to pop, I haven't heard you tear up anyone in weeks."

"Huh. Not much point in it, is there?"

"You mean people are suddenly not stupid?"

"There's no pressure, it doesn't really matter any more, does it?"

"Bored?"

"To tears some days. I'm rebuilding some of my papers from scratch, so it's actually pretty nice to just think theoretically for change, and not have someone die if I don't pull an answer out of my ass."

John grins from behind his shades. "Oh, is that where you keep them?"

"Yes, yes. Where all crappy ideas come from."

Rodney snorts.
"They saved our asses a few times."

"You wonder what they're doing in Atlantis?"

"Nope," John says in a bald-faced lie.

"Yeah, me either. I'd go insane thinking of the mess that Zelenka is making."

John shoots Rodney a 'yeah, right' look from behind his shades, but they let their lies drop. He goes back to following the lesson, translating the words for Rodney.

Long after the lesson is complete, Tazim finds them laying side by side on a heavy felt carpet in the shade. He says the only English word he's learned so far, "Yes?" When John sits up, Tazim launches into the rest of his sentence in Peragro.

John pokes Rodney before he stands. "Hey, he wants us to have lunch with him."

"Do I have to move?"

"Probably."

Grumbling, Rodney gets up and checks that Shaaziya is still asleep, and then they trail after Tazim to his tent. Tazim introduces them to the few of the Zadiyeh that are waiting, and begins to serve the meal himself.

John guesses that it's a big deal, and thanks Tazim in Peragro and instructs Rodney, "Say ze'omlat kavela." He tastes the food first, even though he's pretty sure that these people have never heard of citrus fruit.

Rodney parrots the words back perfectly, and after John gives him the okay, Tazim takes pleasure in Rodney's obvious relish of the food. It's a rice-like dish with meat and rich spices, and a tiny cup of the ekal, the liquor that's like drinking fire.

"Be careful of that, it'll kick your ass."

Rodney sips it carefully, and then sets it aside. "Uhm, right, I think I'll pass. I'll never get anywhere if I'm falling down drunk."

John tosses his back and swallows with a grimace. "Lightweight."

"You want mine?"

"Not a chance."

Allmas, a small, chewy nut, follows the rice-like dish, and it's so sweet that John's throat actually spasms as he tries to swallow it. Tazim hands him the ever-present tea to wash it down. "Thanks", he gasps.

Rodney looks uncertain, and John warns him, "Don't eat it all at once—you'll probably go into insulin shock."

He nibbles on it, and nods. "It's good, I like it."

John tells Tazim, and he laughs loudly before popping one into his mouth and vigorously chewing it. Tazim explains that it's local to Zadiyeh and is a highly prized holiday treat everywhere else. He pulls them into conversation, mostly questions about where they're from, and is it true that it's the
city of Qaral.

John mostly acts as translator for Rodney, who has quite a lot to say about Atlantis. Tazim's fascinated by Rodney's descriptions, and John sometimes lacks the words, but Rodney's hands tell the story when John can't, in between tiny sips of the ekal and tea. They spend the afternoon resting and chatting, teaching each other words and phrases. John likes Tazim. He's not as formal as Anbur, and he wields his wit like a sharp knife.

He's all about rumor and scuttlebutt, too; John gets to hear some of the rumors that have made their way to Zadiyeh, and Tazim gives him the opportunity for a rebuttal. The thing is, sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction, and John feels like he just has to let the rumors stand on their own.

After a few hours, the sun is nearly to the horizon, and Tazim tells them that it will soon be time to leave. John and Rodney thank Tazim again for his hospitality, and drag themselves out into the fading light. Rodney goes to look for Shaaziya and to grab a jacket for the coming evening.

Everyone seems more energetic than they'd been a few hours before. Tents are being drawn, squeaking mesla are being watered as packs are tightened on again, people are shouting over the din. John stops and takes it in. The sun in his eyes limns the mountaintops to the west in a haloed silhouette; the sunset paints the scene in hazy colors of purple, and bronze and magenta.

Suddenly John feels the vast historical significance of this ritual; that these people have been taking this route, this journey for longer than Earth's been civilized. Ancient was a concept that he'd never truly appreciated, even on Atlantis, for the city might be ten thousand years old, but it was also brilliantly new, and clever and interesting. These people—or their ancestors—had literally walked on Atlantis, among the Ancients themselves, eons ago, and they were a direct, living link to his city on the sea.

A fierce, sharp pain of homesickness strikes him as he watches the scene through a film of tears. Sure, he's missed Atlantis, worried about those that were left behind on their own. He'd been anxious to return when he was stuck in the misery of complicated negotiations in the SGC and in the boredom of weeks of subspace travel. He's felt lost, and unaccountable, and guilty and confused since the crash, and, until this moment, he's avoided really thinking about what he's lost. Now, maybe he can think about that, because he's been given something that might fill that void, a place he'd have never chosen, but it could be someplace he could call home.

John stands there just breathing; afraid to break the tenuous spell and afraid that he's permanently lost in it, until Elizabeth approaches him.

"John? They're almost ready to go."

He swallows hard to clear the lump in his throat, and keeps his face turned away from her. "Yeah, I'll be right there." He's not himself—boy, is he not himself.

"I'll have Major Lorne do the radio check," and then she leaves him to regain his equilibrium. He surreptitiously wipes his eyes under his sunglasses, and drags his hand across his thighs to hide away the evidence. When the column starts to move in the dim, chill starlight, John takes a deep breath and resumes his place.

**Day One Hundred-Six**

It's easier to travel at night, and the pace quickens, as everyone is rested and eager to stay warm with exertion. Rodney takes great glee in the scientific explanation of the aurora, and Anbur peppers Rodney with questions for hours, translating for Iqbal and Dara.
John doesn't understand this planet at all. These people are bright and intelligent, have a good knowledge of math and some science, have sharply maintained political skills, and yet they don't appear to have developed, or retained, any appreciable level of technology. Judging only by two towns is statistically unsound, but they don't seem to have very large populations, either. He listens to Rodney wowing the crowd as he mulls over the dichotomous nature of Dominat.

They don't stop again until they reach the gates of Ayse at dawn. The gates are closed, and like before, most simply sleep nested in the sand with their robes pulled in around them, huddled together, or with a smelly mesla for warmth.

John finds that his eyes keep sliding back to the gate, remembering in vivid detail the bloom of pain, feeling that sharp blade slicing into him and the terror of drowning in his own blood, the last glimpse of Rodney hovering over him, his own horror mirrored in those blue eyes. He's been ignoring it, shying away it. He'd been dead once before, but he'd returned as his same, essential self. Returning from the dead this time was far scarier. He'd died and come back as something else. He didn't want to be someone's Frankenstein's monster, hated that it set him apart.

When Lorne finds him and hands him a blanket; John forces himself to walk away, to shove back the memories and ignore them again. He trails after the Major; they've been so scattered all day that he probably needs to hang out with them, pretending that the feeling he would never call fear, rumbling in him deep and low, doesn't exist.

He positions himself with his back to the town and eyes to the sky, and while his team nestles in around him, John watches over them as they sleep.

~*~

The qerato's voice, calling the worthy to prayer, to rise up and meet the dawn, sends a shiver down John's spine, leaving him ill at ease and troubled. Rodney avoids meeting John's eyes, and his shoulders are round and taut with apprehension. Elizabeth looks as uncomfortable as he feels, but Shaaziya—she's humming along and smiling. She's not heard the qerato for many days; for her it's a joy and comfort.

John stuffs his blanket into the pack of one of the mesla, he's about to have that long-awaited freak out, and all he knows is that he can't do it here, in front of them. "I need to go talk to Anbur," he says stiffly as he quickly walks away. He wishes that he could walk away from the qerato, away from the sight of the now open gates and the town of Ayse brilliantly lit by the fast rising sun.

He's shaking by the time he finds Anbur flapping the dust from his robes. "Greetings of the day to you, John."

"Morning. Uh, do you have a minute, I mean can I talk to you?"

"Yes, what help can I give you?"

"I don't think I can do this."

"The viat?" Anbur gives him a curious look.

"No, that's fine, I just. Anbur, I died. I was murdered there," he points toward the city and yells, "I can't do this!" It's not really the horrific murder, but John can't voice his other fear out loud, not yet.

Anbur nods sadly, and he lays his arm across John's shoulder, gripping his arm. "Come, walk. Tell me," he says in a soft voice as he leads John away from the throng of waking people.
It's a measure of John's distress that he accepts Anbur's embrace, and he shakily spills out the details of his last visit to Ayse in Peragro and English as Anbur encourages him. He finally runs down with a whisper, "How can I go back?" John wants to be that guy again, the light colonel with the laconic demeanor, the easy going pilot with a lazy grin—he does not want to be whatever he is now.

Turning John, Anbur grasps both of his arms, staring at John with those sharp gray eyes, and he can't look away. "This is why the viat. You lead the viat, healing for not only your people, is for you. No hiding, is difficult to heal, learn to live is pain, but there is pleasure, hmm? Pass the pain and embrace all that comes. Forgive them and forgive yourself, you cannot go back and you cannot stand still. Only forward."

John's shivering in the still, cool air. "I think you just told me to buck up." He puts on a sardonic smile, "It was a joke."

Anbur shakes his head. "I do not have words for your need, John. Perhaps there are none, your pain is great and old, but you have strength. If you cannot do this now, it will only wait for you, hmm?"

"We call it putting off the inevitable." John takes a deep breath, "So, going forward."

"Yes, you have many to stand at your side, some with troubles also. Ego steti vobis. 'I stand with you."

"Ego steti vobis. Right."

"You are okay?"

"No, but I will be."

"Come, we will eat, and you will see."

Anbur maintains his hold on John's arm, until they return to where John's team is camped out. John kneels down in the sand and accepts the peanut butter sandwich Elizabeth hands to him. She begins to make another for Anbur and asks in a deceptively mild voice, "So what's the plan for today?"

John swallows. "I think I have to go into town. You and Rodney should too, probably."

Rodney gives him a look filled with uncertainty. "Really? Shaaziya's already gone in, and I uh..."

"Yeah, think so." John doesn't look up from the sandwich in his hand, tearing another bite off the edge.

"Well, I'm going with you," Lorne says, and John looks up, and the rest of them are nodding, looking serious.

Anbur grasps John's shoulder and squeezes it as if to say 'I told you so.' "Tonight we leave, but we may go to Ayse as we wish today."

Elizabeth hands Anbur his sandwich. "We should go right after breakfast, and rest this afternoon."

John just nods. "Do we have anything to drink? This peanut butter is killing me here."

"Tazim brought us some tea."

"That'd be great," he says. He thinks 'I'd rather have some ekal,' but the tea is hot and sweet, and its warmth spreads through him. "This is a hundred times better than that Athosian bark stuff we had
to drink."

There's short, surprised pause at the mention, and then Rodney gets it. "God, yes. It's almost better than coffee."

Anbur waves his sandwich. "I like your coffee very much."

"Rodney lives on it." Elizabeth quirks an eyebrow at Rodney, who ignores her ribbing.

"Hmm, maybe not so much. This is interesting, but difficult to eat."

"Mom used to tell me it would stick to my ribs," Lorne ventures.

Cadman laughs, "And everything else, too. I hope that's the last of it because I hate peanut butter."

"But you ate two of them!" Rodney sounds incredulous.

She gives him a playful shove. "Duh, McKay, so did you—it's what's for breakfast."

Elizabeth apologizes, "I'm sorry, Laura, but I think we've packed at least a couple more jars."

Rodney snaps his fingers. "Hey! I bet we could trade it to Tazim for some of that rice stuff."

John listens quietly as they discuss the trade possibilities, gathering strength from those that stand with him. He washes a second sandwich down with tea as they talk, and when he's ready he stands up. "Let's do this. Is our stuff going to be okay out here, Anbur?"

Anbur whistles loudly and waves at Sabat, one of the older students from Elizabeth's class. He dredges up few lammincia and presses it into her hands, whereupon she climbs up onto the cart grinning and kicking her heels against the side. "Sabat will stay until you return."

Everyone who had studied in N'vellesem knows her well; Sabat's aptitude in class was exceeded only by her skill as the class clown, often landing her in trouble. John gives her a quick smile and proceeds to kick himself that he hadn't thought of that as they walk towards the gates of Ayse.

The town hasn't changed. The people shopping in the market ignore them as before, but those few that bother to watch as they walk through take note of Idon of the N'vellesem, and their outright rudeness is abated. The fountain is crowded in the cooler morning sun, and again only a few children are seen amongst the adults.

Paige has been virtually silent until now, taking in the experience. "Anbur, please don't take offense, but I'm surprised at the lack of obvious disease, and the low number of children. You said that you brought all of the children from school?"

"Yes, all but the smallest."

"That's not very many."

"Rememdium heal the sick, but only some children born each anam. This is reason for our peace."

She nods. "Is it a low conception rate or a high spontaneous abortion rate?"

Anbur gives her a blank look, and Elizabeth explains her question in Ancient. "Hmm, yes, many with child, but perhaps half born at time? Has always been this way on Dominat."

"I understand." Paige glances at Rodney, who's staring at her with a stricken expression. "I have a
"It's the higher gravity. Or the ambient radiation, oh! The high concentration of heavy metals—ten thousand years evolution-wise, I would have thought some adjustment..."

She firmly interrupts Rodney, "I'd like very much to speak with the *rememdium* before we leave today."

Anbur gives her a confused look. "So sad, Zainab was burned years ago, none to take her place here. Neela travels, but she is old."

No one comments, because they now *know* that there's no way a *rememdium* could've healed John.

John wonders if N'vellesem could someday soon be in the same position as Ayse, if this is a cycle, or if Dominat is about to have a serious medical crisis. He thinks about Laith in Tobat, and if he might be willing to relocate, or if Maisa would firmly hold onto her replacement *rememdium*, considering Haitham's age.

Paige speaks quietly to Anbur and then pulls John and Elizabeth aside to walk well behind the rest of the team. Anbur keeps Rodney moving and out of the conversation. "I'm recommending that Shaaziya go back to the *Daedalus*, and I should go back with her," she says in a low voice that won't carry forward.

"I not disagreeing, but I'm sure that Carson's perfectly capable of dealing with this."

"To be frank Elizabeth, Carson's a geneticist, and I'll be consulting with him in that regard, but I've been doing Shaaziya's OB check ups, and I seriously doubt that she'd allow him that liberty."

John can't entirely erase the plaintive tone of his voice. "Rodney'll insist on going with you."

Paige pins John down with a level stare. "That's entirely up to Dr. McKay, but I personally think she may need his support sooner than later."

"That bad?"

"I have no idea, Colonel, which is why we need to return to the ship. There's no way you want to deal with the risks and consequences of a spontaneous abortion while traveling on foot without access to advanced medical facilities."

"Do you think she'll go?" Elizabeth asks.

"I'm positive. This child is incredibly important to her, and she's gotten it into her head that it's more than just her baby."

John says slowly, "She may be right."

"What are you saying?"

"We already know that her child has the ATA gene; didn't Rodney tell you?" John doesn't look at Paige; his gaze is drawn to the archway. He swallows down the sick feeling as he sees the courtyard beyond.

"No, what are you talking about?"

John points up at the imposing gateway to the temple. "This, the Arch of Qaralyn."
"Color me confused, but what's this got to do with anything?" Paige crosses her arms and gives John a challenging look.

Anbur is gently guiding Rodney towards the Arch, while Rodney keeps looking over his shoulder at John. He gives Rodney a quick thumbs-up. "Just watch." Anbur breaks the rules with impunity and ushers Rodney through the Arch, it flashes brightly and the bell-like gong sounds.

"Wow." Paige eyes the Arch with a quizzical look on her face.

"It's Ancient tech. Whether or not it was originally intended to be a gene detector, that's how they're using it. The ATA gene is pretty important to the Qaroptimat."

"And?"

Elizabeth answers. "Shaaziya swears that she doesn't have the gene, and yet now she lights the Arch. It's how we figured out she was pregnant to begin with."

"Interesting. You saw it?"

"John, as well. Rodney was too busy futzing with the scanner to notice."

"Very interesting. Shaaziya didn't tell me any of this. I wonder why she was so secretive."

They watch as the rest of the team enters the temple courtyard; Lorne lights the arch as brightly as Anbur and Rodney combined.

"I wouldn't know." John stands stock still for a moment, as he considers crossing under the Arch. Shaaziya wasn't the only one with a secret. If he walks through, he'll give his away; there are too many here that saw the Arch's before effect, and none that have seen the after effect. Elizabeth and Paige take their turn under the silent arch, leaving John alone outside the temple walls.

"Well, here goes nothing." John saunters through as if he doesn't care, and when the Arch nearly explodes with light and sound, his face slides into a calculatedly innocent 'Did I do that?' expression.

No one moves or speaks; the strength of the Arch's reaction effectively stuns everyone in the vicinity into stillness. The Arch has called the temple's Abnepa out, John sees them gathering at the top of the stairs; Shaaziya's standing with them. They begin their descent as Rodney recovers from the shock. "Sheppard, what the hell just happened?"

John just shrugs. "You got me, Rodney."

"I thought Carson was being particularly cryptic when he said that you were just more you, so this is what he meant..."

John turns away as his team begins babbling to one another. Anbur touches John very lightly on the shoulder. "Now I understand, Zuhair too willing to give away the nixat. This is some of your fear, yes?"
John pitches his voice low. "Yeah." He is not looking at the flagstones, not looking for evidence of the moment he changed.

"Very frightening. Too much to know."

"Yeah, that's about right."

"You accept, they believe—very good advice I give to you."

"If it was only that easy."

Zuhair reaches them, stops a few short steps away from John and then folds to his knees, holding the obeisance for a long count. Every Qaroptimat in the vicinity does likewise, including Shaaziya.

The act of deference makes John terribly uncomfortable and it's as if he can sense the wave of devotion shimmering around him. John's about to shiver out of his skin, it feels like he's covered in ants. The sensation fades to a vague itch as they stand, but he can feel the potential in the air.

John thought he'd known what Zuhair's mask was concealing on board the Daedalus, but now that it's gone, it reveals only a scary devotion. "Exspectata recipero templum hospitium, John Shepherd." Zuhair welcomes him with a low bow, but he doesn't avoid John's eyes like Shaaziya does.

"Morning." John's reluctant to say more, afraid he'll scream and rant and rave, 'What have you done to me!' but the only threat here is to his sanity.

Zuhair turns to Elizabeth, "Dr. Weir, exspectata."

Anbur steps in smoothly and deals with Zuhair, while John exchanges a dumbfounded look with Elizabeth and Rodney. He's sort of wondering when the ax is going to fall, but Zuhair's visible sincerity is hard to put aside.

"Come, we will rest. A meal will be served." Anbur lays a hand on John's back, holding it there as they walk across the broad plaza.

John misses the comforting weight of his sidearm more than ever, but he deliberately follows Zuhair. As he passes by, John watches Rodney greet Shaaziya with a furtive kiss as they hug and fall in behind John as they walk towards the temple stairs.

Zuhair leads them to his private study, bids them to sit, rest and be comfortable, and then leaves the room. As John slides into the room almost sideways, he glances at the door he'd ineffectively banged on. He feels like a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs, and he knows he has got to get a grip.

The room is nothing like he expected. It's not a large room; the walls are plain, and whitewashed and a faded, old threadbare carpet covers the floor. The windows bear the familiar filigreed shutters, filtering the sun into patterned shadows across the room. Heavy books, bound in leather, are stacked on every flat surface, and thick sheets of soft paper, pots of ink and brushes are on a table that serves as a desk.

Surprisingly, Tazim is already there. The team finds places to sit among the low sofas, chairs and tables, and there are a few large pillows on the floor for lounging. A corner of the room is screened from view, but John's pretty sure he knows what's behind it, a statue of Qaral, or probably his son, Qaralyn. He does not go look at it. John sits in a chair near Tazim and watches his team. They look as uncomfortable as he feels, though his ants-all-over feeling is now a low, ebbing pulse that throbs
Tazim pours a glass of tea from a battered pot of chased brass, and John recognizes it, Tazim's own from lunch yesterday. Tazim sips from the glass and then offers it to John. He takes it, grateful for the reassuring gesture as Tazim begins to pour and pass out tea for everyone. It's obvious to John that this get-together was engineered from the beginning. No one wants to break the silence, and they drink Tazim's tea in the cool, quiet morning.

They don't wait very long; soon Zuhair bustles into the room, followed by servers bearing large trays heaped with steaming food. John's itchy feeling ramps up again. Damp towels are provided for their hands as the trays are placed on the tables, and then the servers collect the towels and bow their way out of the room backwards.

John ruthlessly pushes the sensation out of his mind; he cannot live like this. Instead he concentrates on the meal. It's similar to those they'd had in N'vellesem, huge wheels of flat bread heaped with stewed meats and vegetables, and one of them is Tazim's spicy rice.

Tazim deftly tears a piece of the bread from the edge and scoops a bite with it, transporting it to his mouth without spilling so much as a drop. Anbur does the same with the second tray of stew, and Zuhair repeats it with the third and last. John gets the message, if there's going to be a betrayal, it won't be from poisoned food and drink. All of John's people are looking to him for their cue, and he tips his head towards the food, reaching for the nearest tray.

He's not so coordinated as Tazim, never got the hang of not spilling, so John holds one hand underneath to catch the drips. Everyone digs in at that point, despite the peanut butter sandwiches.

Rodney's the one that can't contain himself, "Oh god, real food. Ze'omlat kavela, thank you."

Tazim beams at Rodney's pleasure, and remarks on it.

John translates almost automatically, "He says basically, that our pleasure is his, and that is thanks enough."

"Is this what you were going on about yesterday?" Elizabeth asks.

"Yes, I could live on this. I might even consider learning how to make it."

"Whoa, McKay, you're ruining my image of you, stop!" Cadman grins at him as she pops a bite into her mouth.

Elizabeth fully breaks the ice and speaks to Zuhair, and he tentatively smiles in return. It's Shaaaziya's smile, or it's rather that she has Zuhair's smile. Conversations begin to buzz in a multitude of languages, everyone intent on trying to ignore the vast hurts of the recent past.

They're still there though, in the background like the proverbial pink elephant. It's a deep, festering wound in John's soul and a single meal isn't going to engender the kind of forgiveness he'll require to absolve Zuhair of his crime. John's not sure what will be enough, or what form it might take. He can only get through each minute as it comes.

A thread of conversation pulls John out of his thoughts. "...about the students, Baariq and Dara?"

"They enjoy the same. Many in Ayse will take in viator and provide them with food, as custom."

"That means we've left Sabat out there without lunch? We should bring some of this to her."

Elizabeth switches to Ancient and informs Zuhair of the quandary and he assures her that no one
has been left hungry.

The servers come to remove the trays and leave in their place a small tray of the chokingly sweet allmas nuts. John passes and says "Too sweet," when Tazim eyes him.

He watches as Anbur passes them up, but Zuhair greedily snags two and eats them with the same relish as Tazim. John figures it's the equivalent of fruitcake—you like it or you don't. His team tries them out, and they're pretty evenly divided into the two groups.

The conversation goes on in fits and starts, but John's not paying attention. He's physically and emotionally exhausted and he has no desire to try and rest under this particular roof, and he's not sure that he could rest in this place. He's horrified by the idea that Zuhair will put him in the room that he'd awakened in last time.

John stands up abruptly. "I need to go and check up on Sabat. Ze'omlat kavela, thank you for the meal, it was very nice."

Anbur fixes him with an appraising look. "I will stay, watch. They are safe."

"I was hoping that you'd say that. Look, I appreciate everything, Anbur," John's voice goes ragged and unsteady, "but I've just about had all of the healing that I can take right now."

"Just so." Anbur tips his head slightly towards the door.

Lorne gets up from his pillow on the floor. "I think I'll go with the Colonel." He bows to their hosts and thanks them with a flair that surprises John.

"Are you alright?" Elizabeth asks. He can hear the uncertainty in her voice. John looks around and sees various expressions of surprise and concern.

He hates that he's so transparent; his normal Joe Cool guise is in tatters, leaving him feeling naked and defenseless. He pulls the remaining shreds together with an, "I'm fine," and leaves his team behind.

Lorne's right behind him, coming abreast as John pauses at the top of the temple stairs. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

He glances at Lorne before sliding on his sunglasses. The formality surprises John; he thought they'd gotten past it. John says, "Sure," even though he knows that Lorne's about to read him the riot act for bailing. God knows he deserves it.

"Everyone on the Daedalus was really afraid of you when you came back, because you acted like nothing had happened. They weren't sure that you were human, because if it had been them? They'd be terrified."

John's hiding behind his sunglasses, and all he says is, "Huh," as he starts down the stairs. He'd thought that he'd been reassuring, trying to behave as normally as possible; that no one wanted to see a commanding officer have a melt down, but once again he's proven wrong.

The midday sun is vicious, the flagstones of the courtyard are reflecting the light and heat and it's going to be a bitch to find a shady place to sleep. John stops short of the Qaralyn Arch. "You don't have to come with me."

"I know."
"Thanks, though."

Lorne tries out his phrase. "Ze'omlat kavela."

John bumps his shoulder. "The food is blessed?"

"You're kidding me."

"Nope." John walks under the arch, signaling to one and all that the Quaralyn has left the temple.

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True to Zuhair's word, there's already a water jug and an empty plate next to Sabat as she studies in the shade of a tent. John tells her she can go now, but she declines. He shrugs and drops down onto the rug beside her. Lorne sits on her other side, and John falls asleep to the sound of lessons being recited aloud.

John drags awake in the late afternoon. Sabat is gone, but Lorne is still there, looking over a practice book. John sits up and scrubs a hand over his hair and face.

Lorne looks at him closely. "Hey. Feel better?"

"Yeah." He thinks about it for a moment. "Definitely."

Lorne tosses an MRE at him, and John catches it. "It was McKay's turn to cook."

John smiles as he tears the top off the bag and pours out the contents onto the carpet. "I wonder what we'll do when Rodney trades it all away."

"Probably say thank you."

"Yeah. Where is everyone?"

"McKay's still at the temple with Shaaziya, the rest are around here somewhere. They showed up about an hour ago."

"Why is he still there?"

"Rumor has it that he had a big row with Shaaziya, and that he'll catch up later." Lorne's knowing look adds the unsaid 'after a round of wild makeup sex.'

"I see." John's not hungry. He shoves everything back into the MRE bag and stands up. "We should start packing up."

"Anbur said we're not leaving until late, there's a send off party in the works for tonight. If we want to take a bath, he'll make the arrangements. I know I could use one."

"You didn't have to stay, you know."

Lorne gives him a wide smile. "Sure I did. Don't worry about it," he holds up a lesson book, "Sabat scrounged up the Peragro version of Dick and Jane, and she got me all the way through their alphabet."

"Cool. Check in yet?" John looks around the camp, thinking that it'll be dark soon.

"Elizabeth took care of it." Lorne is eying him carefully.
John's starting to feel seriously coddled. He briefly considers calling again anyway, but decides that it's not immediately critical. "Next time, we need to make sure that Caldwell knows that the rains are coming, and the Daedalus is sitting in a riverbed."

"Crap. What time frame are we looking at?"

"Anbur was a little vague, couple of weeks, or maybe a couple of months. I don't think there's anything they can do about it, but being prepared is better than nothing."

"Yeah, okay. I'll remember that."

John glances up at the sky. "Anyway, I guess we should find Anbur and see about that bath."

"Best idea I've heard all day."

They pick up fresh clothing, and Anbur leads them back into town, not to the temple but to a public bathhouse, and after paying a few lammincia to the attendant for the towels and soap, leaves them to their ablutions.

John's avoiding the sunset today, so they scrub clean with the pungent soft soap under an interesting, shower-like affair, and then lounge in the hot, faintly sulphuric water for what seems like hours. The day's sleep, and the bath leave John feeling almost normal again.

It's fully dark when they emerge from the bathhouse. Neither of the moons, Zieba or Aila, has shown its face, and the stars are brighter than John has ever seen them on Dominat, though they are still a dim wash of light across the sky underneath the twisting sheets of color that seem brighter than ever.

John can hear the cacophony of a party in full swing floating in from the desert, and as they pass through the gates of Ayse, John shuddering minutely with relief, the sound resolves into music and laughter.

The small mesla dung fires burn bright, blue and hot, and it seems like all of Ayse is at the camp. John thinks it's good to know that they aren't sour and standoffish all of the time.

"Looks like quite the party," Lorne remarks.

"Yeah, who knew they had it in them?"

Lorne gives his head a shake in the dim light. "Not me, sir."

John shakes his head, "Just give it a rest and call me John." He didn't feel very comfortable with the courtesies due his rank out here in the desert, not with the uncertainty roiling in his gut.

"Sure, John. Nice to meet you." Evan flashes John a wide grin that's barely visible in the dim starlight.

John chuckles, "Fair enough. Evan."

Flasks are being passed around the spectators, probably more ekal, while a large number of people are dancing among the fires. The music's provided by a handful of students on borrowed instruments, and Timmons has a harmonica cupped in his hands, doing a creditable job of catching the tune.

Anbur has Elizabeth on her feet, and he's teaching her the complicated steps to the dance in
progress, but she's having a hard time keeping up. The band keeps upping the tempo and laughing when Elizabeth glares at them.

Someone's provided a number of chairs and carpets, but John just chooses a patch of sand on the outskirts to watch. Lorne sits next to him for a few minutes, until Sabat swings by and steals him away for a dance. Lorne humors her, like an uncle with a favored niece, and he shoots John a sheepish grin as she drags him off.

Cadman and Lu are doing their own thing, a perverted version of the hora and laughing about it, probably because neither of them actually know the dance. Shaaziya has Rodney doing an energetic, if somewhat graceless, version of what Anbur is trying to teach Elizabeth, and John smiles at the way Rodney's throwing himself into it.

John's not anxious to draw any attention to himself, doesn't want to ruin his relaxed glow with the creepy-crawly sensation when people worship him, because how stupid and insane is that?

If he thinks back, if this had been a regular mission with his regular team from Atlantis, he would've been in the thick of it—dancing with the pretty girls and talking with their hosts and possibly even drinking a little so as to not disappoint whoever he was trying to impress into trading or an alliance. Rodney would be the one sulking by the fire, muttering about a waste of time, or any number of his other voluminous complaints while John cajoled him into playing nice with the natives.

This feeling of wanting to hide, to avoid confrontation or engagement, is new, and he doesn't like it. He always has a bit of reserve, but generally he's a pretty outgoing guy. He resents the role that he's been thrust into and hates feeling off base and uncertain.

John eventually gets chilled from sitting so far from the fire and retrieves his jacket from the cart, fending off invitations to drink or dance. A cool wind is blowing down from the mountains, and John sits in the lee of the tent and waits for the festivities to be over.

It's late when the Ayse begin to pack up their chairs and extinguish fires, and the viator prepare to continue on their journey. Some of the townspeople wait to see them off, waving and yelling. Paige and Shaaziya are in that group, and John lets his glance slide away as Rodney gives Shaaziya a definitely not-public good bye kiss. John had completely forgotten that they were staying behind, and that lapse stings; he wonders if they'll walk back, who will escort them or if Caldwell will allow the use of precious resources to come and pick them up in a 302.

Zuhair is at the front with Anbur, Tazim and Elizabeth, so John's straggling at the end of the line, waiting for Rodney. He catches up and reassures John that Zuhair's ordered an escort for them back to the Daedalus, and as they begin their journey west, sticks close by John for the rest of the night.

There was a time, not so very long ago that John had wished for Rodney's company, and the way he could fill the silence. He knows that he's the one that pulled away, forcing the distance between them, telling himself that Rodney needed the time with Shaaziya during the first rush of passion. He feels a little betrayed by Rodney abandoning him for his one true love, and now that she's not here, John's the fall back, and it's irrational, but it pisses him off.

John's hasn't completely divorced himself from reality; he can hear that Rodney's sick and aching with worry, but he just doesn't want to hear about it right now, so he doesn't answer except in grunts and the occasional 'uh-huh'.

Ayse is at the edge of the mountains, and to the west there are tall, rocky canyons that seem to
grow straight up out of the sand. They thread their way through red arroyos turned black by the shadows cast by Aila's pale light.

The cart engine suddenly whines down and goes silent as they are squeezing through a narrow spot one at a time.

John and his team stand on either end of the cart, and Rodney climbs over the back to kneel down in front of it, pulling the housing off and poking around, checking connections with a tiny flashlight. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" He stands up and gives a tire a vicious kick.

"Didn't plan on traveling at night?"

"No, I did, but the batteries are dead, because the charger shorted out. This should've been good for at least ten hours!"

"Can you fix it?"

"In the dark, without tools or spare parts?"

"Right." John picks up the handle and pulls, but it takes all of them, pushing and shoving and pulling, to heave the heavy cart out of the narrow passage.

It's one thing to carry a pack and walk, but John simply couldn't see dragging the cart for another hour or two, much less ten or fourteen days. "Sorry, Rodney, we're going to have to do this the old fashioned way."

"No, I'm sorry that it didn't work better."

"Good idea, though." John glances up and sees that the rest of the viator is pulling away. "Cadman, take a quick hike up front, tell Elizabeth we have a problem."

Cadman's already off at a quick jog. "You got it, sir."

"We'll leave it here, pack up every thing we can and leave the rest. We can pick it up on the way back, or have Caldwell send someone out for it." John starts to unpack the cart as he orders Timmons, "Drag those mesla over here."

Timmons brings the mesla, while Lu pitches in with John and Rodney, sorting their stuff into 'gotta have' and 'maybe' piles. Cadman returns with Anbur and Elizabeth.

"Ah, I see." Anbur calls out instructions to Basim and Muaz to bring more mesla and begins to pack in the extra stuff.

It only takes an hour to rearrange and redistribute their belongings, and drag the cart to a wider spot in the trail. The absence of the electric motor's low hum is shocking; John hadn't realized that it was that noisy.

The high canyon walls whisper their passage, breathy echoes bouncing back and forth as they slowly thread their way through, until it's finally too dark to see.

Both Aila and Zieba have set for the night, and the aurora's light doesn't quite reach down into the bottom, so they stop in the shadows of the high canyon walls. They huddle together with the mesla for warmth and wait for morning.

Day One Hundred-Seven
The lowland canyons at the edge of the desert give way to broad, rock-strewn paths in the foothills of the mountains.

John is still riding the wave of his freak-out in Ayse. He didn't want this; he didn't ask to be the Quaralyn. His somber mood leaves him taciturn and short, and Rodney tries several conversational gambits in an effort to draw John out, but John doesn't take the bait.

By midday, Rodney is tired of John's failure to communicate, so he's at the front with Elizabeth. She's in full diplomatic mode, wisely using the time with Zuhair to forge a mutually beneficial relationship. Tazim's fascinated with Elizabeth, and her short-sleeved shirt.

Behind him, Sabat is doing her best to flirt with Evan, who is doing his best to be charming and yet still keep her at arm's length without hurting her feelings.

Cadman, Lu and Timmons are taking pictures and horsing around with each other and the kids, who obviously idolize them. John can hear them cracking jokes and joshing each other. The students are still absolutely thrilled to be out on the road, and the endless walking hasn't yet put a dent in their boundless energy.

After a short rest stop, John ends up near the center of the viator, behind Rodney and Evan.

"I would guess that Sabat is only a year or two younger than Shaaziya."

Lorne gives Rodney a disgusted look, "McKay, you are such a cradle robber!"

McKay reddens. "Shaaziya is over twenty, that's what she told me."

"Whatever lets you sleep at night—oh, wait. Right," Lorne snickers.

John can see Rodney's neck flush with embarrassment as he insists, "Even if you recalculate her age into Earth years, she's still an adult at the age of consent. Besides, she was afraid I thought she was too old."

"Huh. Recalculate the years? I musta missed that memo, how do you figure that?"

"The satellite—using sensor array, we calculated the sidereal year. It's just two hundred sixty point two sixty five days..." Rodney trails off into explaining the formula, and John tunes it out.

God, even Rodney was starting to acclimatize and had formed a relationship. John looks to the front of their convoy as they head into a bend in the trail; Elizabeth is up front, doing her best to schmooze with Zuhair and fend off Tazim's admittedly charming advances.

He looks back, and Cadman, Lu and Timmons are coaxing the mesla along, chatting with the kids who have attached themselves to the Marines. In fact, everyone is occupied in conversation. Except him.

John just pulls into himself a little more, trudging along with his head down.

Day One Hundred-Eight

The narrow trail begins to wind upwards, and John notes that the hard climb has cut down on the conversation; no one has extra breath to waste on talking. They walk steadily with few breaks, until darkness falls. The narrow path opens up on a small meadow spotted with tiny purple flowers and a shallow brook running through it. The air is sweet with the scent of flowers, and the mesla grumble and snatch at the tough, grayish grass, shaking their heads at the clouds of vicious insects that
swarm around them and sting their noses.

The bugs seem to be mostly attracted to the mesla, though everyone is slapping and swearing at the sharp bites when they are attacked. Anbur decides they'll stop for the night, and when John gives Anbur a dubious look, reassures him that the insects will disappear after dark.

John gets out his jacket and yanks the collar up close around his neck, even though it's still too warm.

They've got a bit of room to spread out, and John throws himself into helping set up camp for the evening, raising the tents with their odd, folding tent poles, and refilling canteens and water barrels from the tiny trickle of a stream. The mesla are relieved of their burdens and staked out a good distance from the camp, and there is the clatter and clink of pans and glass as fires are started, and a meal is assembled.

Elizabeth tosses in an armful of MREs and power bars as a treat for those who aren't familiar with them, and a godsend to those of the Expedition. The steady diet of rich, fatty stews of grain and dried meat has had them reaching for the Pepto-Bismol tablets, and occasionally frantically looking for a quiet place to relieve themselves.

To John's utter relief, Anbur's prediction is born out, and the flies disappear as soon as it's dark. The night sky in the mountains, though clearer than the desert, still sports only a dim wash of stars, and the aurora is more vivid than ever. Rodney had explained the reason for this in one of his long, drawn out science lessons on the trail, but John had tuned him out, and he wasn't going to go back and ask for the explanation.

Duty dispensed, John sits by the tiny blue fire. It's cold enough that he considers retrieving his sleeping bag and wrapping up in that, too.

The camp chatters and rustles around him, while he stares at the incredible display in the heavens, eating when Anbur thrusts a bowl into his hands with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

After dinner, Lorne has the first-aid kit open, passing out Tylenol, calamine lotion, antibiotic ointment and Band-Aids and making sure that Rodney and Elizabeth's blistered feet are clean and dry, and that no one else requires first aid. John takes a couple of bandages when offered, but he doesn't feel like injecting himself into the cozy, domestic scene.

It has only taken four days for the Expedition and the locals to bond together through the common experience, changing from two disparate groups with vastly differing customs into a cohesive family group, but John doesn't feel particularly sociable. Lorne doesn't seem to mind that John's not very talkative, and sits next to him with his bowl.

He's still mulling over his various experiences in Ayse, but especially the last one. The itchy ant feeling has almost completely dissipated, and his freak out has eased down a few notches, but the episode has left him feeling uneasy and wary.

**Day One Hundred-Nine - One Hundred-Twelve**

John falls into the rhythm of the journey. Walk all day and, at night, either camp out, or take advantage of the facilities offered by the next village. The village is so small that it doesn't even have a name, and John is pleased to discover that the villagers don't seem to give him the dreaded itchy feeling.
The *viator* still have to camp out, but they are treated kindly; offered food and water in return for news and gossip.

They leave the nameless, wide spot in the road behind and continue their journey upwards, towards the sky and the tall, forbidding peaks that loom over them.

**Day One Hundred-Thirteen**

He didn't think he'd slept very well, the effects of the high, thin air disturbing his rest, but upon awaking, John discovers that it has snowed overnight; just a light layer that quickly disappears in the hot sun, but the melt-water makes the narrow path slippery and treacherous. The *viator* trudge grimly upward, and the thinner air at the high altitude has them struggling to breathe.

John has sunburns on his sunburns, and his feet are blistered raw and sore, his thighs and calves are straining and complaining at the constantly upward journey. He looks into the far distance above, and they are still miles and miles away from the top of the pass.

Basim, the youngest student, is already suffering from altitude sickness, and a mesla's pack is redistributed so that he can ride. Timmons walks next to Basim, to keep him upright, and Cadman hovers close, exhorting him to drink more water.

One good thing about the extreme exertion is that it has shut Rodney up. John appreciates that he's the smartest man in the galaxy, but dear god, is there nothing he won't pontificate upon?

He is worried about Rodney though, he's red in the face from more than the multiple sunburns he's sustained despite his sunblock, and John can hear him wheezing heavily while doggedly putting one foot in front of the other.

They are all in the same condition, even Anbur. John is pissed that Anbur had made light of the difficulty of the mountain passage, but Anbur probably hadn't wanted to scare them off, though if he'd known ahead of time he would have made room for an oxygen tank.

Late that night they finally reach the village of Akhlatan, and the town's people throw open their doors. Basim is hustled off to be cared for, though the town has no healer, they are familiar with the mountain sickness and have ways to deal with it.

The opportunity to bathe in the chilly stream is welcome by everyone. John is surprised when Sabat strips down among the men without hesitation and wades into the shallow, freezing water. Elizabeth and Cadman shrug at each other and follow Sabat's lead. John carefully turns his back to shuck off his clothing. He thinks it's too cold for anything but a quick wash, but the boys play in it, splashing and fighting. Surprisingly, Zuhair is in the thick of the mock battle, grinning and laughing.

Dinner is simple but festive. The food is plain and precious bottles of *ekal* are brought out to share. Lorne puts the last jar of peanut butter out and encourages everyone to try it, and when the last bit is scraped from the bottom of the canister, he and Cadman cheer and do a complicated version of a high five.

John's dogged refusal to talk leaves everyone, especially Rodney, confused and upset. John knows it's a problem, but he's struggling to deal with the fact that the rumor of his resurrection has preceded them; indeed it seems that hardly a single person on the planet hasn't heard. The villagers, all of them, want something from him. Usually it's just to stand near him and, appallingly, to breathe the same air while he eats.
Some of them are worse than others, and his creepy-crawly feeling flares when they breathlessly adore the Quaralyn, to John's ever increasing agitation. Sabat, Lorne and Elizabeth do their best to run interference against the attentions of the more insistent devotees, and John is quietly, deeply grateful.

Under Anbur's unhappy watch, John withdraws further and further away, pulling in as he struggles with his unwanted, undeserved, notoriety.

Day One Hundred-Fifteen

The days and nights begin to meld together: struggle along the path worn down into the rocks and dirt from the passage of man and beast over the untold thousands of anam, camp out at night, or partake of the hospitality offered by the villages that are strung out along their path, like beads on an unseen string.

They are well past the tree line, and as they cling to the narrow trail carved into the broad white cliffs, the panorama that spreads out below is breathtaking.

The pass over the mountains is still many days ahead of them, and John doesn't look forward to it, just keeps putting one foot in front of the other. Anbur maintains a slow pace, not only to allow them to acclimatize to the altitude, but because this particular passage is dangerous.

They travel in single file, stretched out along the rutted pathway, almost brushing against the cliff wall, away from the crumbling edge of the deep cliff to the left. The flies are back; there must be more of those purple flowers nearby.

John is behind a mesla that's led by Muaz, when the mesla suddenly shies away from a biting fly and squeaks loudly, stumbling over the loose rocks near the crumbling edge that begins to break away under its weight.

Muaz tries to rein the creature in, away from the disintegrating rim of the trail, but it's instantly obvious to John what is about to happen. He grabs onto Muaz and holds him tightly, and yanks the lead out of his hand just as the struggling mesla gives a last terrified squeak and plunges over the edge, falling into the deep ravine below. John carefully peers over the edge, but the poor thing has already disappeared from view, though he can hear its body crashing down the slope, bouncing off trees and rocks.

Everyone stops, and questions are being shouted out, passed down the line from one person to the next. John holds the trembling boy close and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Master Anbur will be so angry with me!" Muaz starts to cry, and shudder.

"No, you're safe—that's what matters." John shouts out, "It was a mesla, we lost a mesla!"

John hopes that they reach a stopping point soon, because now he's shaking with how close it had been, that they could have lost more than a mesla.

Lorne puts a hand on John's shoulder pushes him up against the inside wall and hands him a canteen, then deftly extracts Muaz from John's tight grasp. "Here, are you okay?"

"Son of a bitch, that was close." John turns the canteen up and drinks, trying to remember what that mesla was carrying. "I'm okay." John passes the word up the line that everyone is okay, and that they're ready to start moving again.
Everyone hugs the wall a little closer, as they begin to move.

**Day One Hundred-Sixteen - One Hundred-Eighteen**

The pass over the mountains is visible now, and they continue their steady progress at a snail's pace. Most of them have slowly acclimatized to the altitude, but Rodney and Elizabeth, already at risk because of their various respiratory issues of the last few months, are exhibiting symptoms of respiratory distress, headaches and fatigue.

Anbur stops when they reach a suitable camping spot, and brews a strong tisane from the bag of herbs that the Ahklatani homeopath had given him. They've all been taking a little of the medicine at morning and at night in their regular tea, but the concoction that he makes them drink now is thick and bitter. He insists that Rodney and Elizabeth chew on the strained leaves.

Elizabeth looks white as a sheet, but Rodney is red in the face from the small capillaries that have broken along his cheeks and nose. They are both coughing, though neither has reached the point of producing any fluid, the worst sign of altitude sickness, because it means that there's actual damage to the lungs, and serious medical intervention is required. John doesn't want to let it get to that point.

He kneels in front of Elizabeth, as she nibbles the soggy herbs. "There isn't anywhere for a 302 to land. We should turn around and go back, Elizabeth."

"No, we need to do this, you need to do this. We'll go on."

"If I have to go on, that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to. You and Rodney could go back to the last village, and wait. I'm sure they'd be fine with it, and I'll send Cadman with you."

"I'd rather try and go on. It's important that we complete the pilgrimage, it's not just a healing journey for you, but a rite of passage for all of us." She holds up the empty cup. "This does seem to help."

John shakes his head. "Well, it was worth a shot."

"I appreciate the thought, John. Thank you."

While they've only ever broken into the regular first aid kit, Paige had left her medical kit behind. "Lorne, figure out where Cole's emergency kit is, we must have something in there." He knows it's here somewhere; they'd done a pretty thorough inventory after the mesla went over the cliff.

"I'm on it." John and Evan dig through the packs of four or five mesla before Evan unearths the aluminum case. He brings it to John and they dig through it, looking for anything that will help.

Rodney rolls over and glares at them. "Injectable steroids, Sheppard. That's what you're looking for. And Acetazolamide, though we should have been taking that for a while for it to really work properly, it should help."

"If you knew that, why didn't you say anything sooner?" Of all the times for Rodney to lose his natural state of hypochondria.

Rodney just shrugs and resolutely puts his head down, chewing vigorously. John wonders if it's because Rodney has something to prove to Zuhair, trying to impress Shaaziya's father. He slowly shakes his head at the new, and improved Rodney's back.
In the morning, Rodney and Elizabeth both swear that they're good to go. They both seem okay, if a little high. It's kind of funny, but John inquires about the nature of the trail ahead, and Anbur thinks it will be fine, no more precipitous ledges. They decide to go ahead; the pass over the mountains is just a day or two away.
Day One Hundred-Twenty

They arrive at the small hamlet of Halavasan in the early afternoon. Though its barely a few streets carved into the side of the mountain, it's swarming with a second group of partying viator, who buzz and whisper that the Quaralyn is among their ranks as they settle down for the night, too tired and exhausted to stay up and socialize.

Despite the minimal contact, the other viator give John the worst case of the itchy ants he's experienced so far, and everyone but him heaves a sigh of relief when Anbur declares they will stay for an extra day.

Feeling vaguely uneasy, he asks Anbur what it will be like at their destination.

"Many people from many places come together at this time, perhaps a thousand? Time for meeting old friends, making new friends, doing business."

This doesn't reassure John; he should have realized this sooner. If he's getting this feeling with only thirty or so devotees worshiping him, what is it going to be like with a thousand or more people?

Whatever progress he's made at struggling his way out of his funk vanishes into the thin air, and he slips away from the village. He desperately needs some alone time to fathom what all of this means.

~*~

John's sitting alone at the fire long after the camp is quiet and most everyone else has sacked out. He's staring up at the mesmerizing aurora; it looks close enough to reach out and touch.

He startles a little when Anbur sits down next to him and says simply, "John, I am sorry."

"For what?" John looks at him. His afternoon apart hasn't really solved anything. He's finally come to the frightening realization of how huge this is, the thing that he's become. He's the fucking Quaralyn.

"Too soon for you I think. Opportunity was too great to ignore. I hoped to build Dr. Weir's bridge, but you are paying the cost."

"I dunno, some days are better than others. For what it's worth, I don't think you were wrong—if this is going to help us in the long run, then I can deal with it." John shrugs. "Not much I can do about it, anyway."

"So this is what is meant, take one for the team?"

"Yep."

Anbur nods. "I wish you peace, John. You hold apart, even from those that you should not. Allow them to carry your burden with you."

Rodney was never his confidante, and he's got his own set of issues he's dealing with; John's not sure that he really has anyone he can unload all of this onto. Suddenly, it's all too much to bear; John takes a deep breath through his nose, and exhales hard as he tosses the stick away. "I just. I
don't have the words. I can't say it, or explain." He absently touches his chest, giving away so much with that tiny gesture. He crosses his arms and tucks his traitorous hands away, pulling his knees up close to his chest breathing deeply and evenly, as he tries to regain even the smallest scraps of equilibrium.

Anbur gently lays his hand on John's back, rubbing in small aimless circles. "Yes, too much, I think."

They sit together quietly, the sounds of night washing over and around them, until the fire dies down to ashy embers. Anbur stands and stretches. "Go and sleep. We will talk again in the morning. Is easier, hmm?"

John clears his throat but makes no move to get up. "Sure. Good night, Anbur."

It's hours later when John goes to find his sleeping bag, which is missing from where he'd stashed it. He quietly searches around for it, and finds that Evan and Rodney have scrunched it between them. It's a sign that Anbur has probably had a powwow with them while he was out wandering and thinking.

John's just tired and upset enough that he gives in, doesn't snatch it up and stalk away. It's difficult, but he manages to shimmy into it without waking up either of them.

Or so he thought. When he rolls onto his side, Rodney's awake and intently watching him in the faint moonlight, his face alive with vivid flashes of colored light.

"I'm not even going to ask if you're okay, because you're patently not 'fine', haven't been for weeks, but all you'll do is lie about it." Rodney whispers.

"Go to sleep, Rodney." John rolls over towards Evan, who is either truly asleep or doing a great impression.

"Fine. I'll do that." Rodney makes a big production of flouncing around in his sleeping bag, and when he's done, he's almost spooned together behind John.

John freezes. "Rodney, the hell?"

"Body heat. Shut up and go to sleep."

To be fair, it is cold, but John waits until Rodney's softly snoring before he relaxes and snuggles a fraction closer into the comfort.

**Day One Hundred Twenty-One**

When John wakes up, Evan's huddled in close, too; the temperature has dropped again. It's not yet dawn, and John's not getting out without waking them up, so he resigns himself and goes back to sleep, pulling the sleeping bag a little farther over his head.

The second time he awakens, it's to the bright light of midmorning. Rodney's gone, but Evan is sitting on his rolled up sleeping bag, sipping hot tea. "Hey."

John rubs his eyes with one hand as he sits nestled in his sleeping bag, "Morning."

"Turned a little cold last night. Anbur says it'll warm up though."

"Mmm." John isn't quite coherent; he still feels worn out and achy from the two weeks of climbing
and walking. He glances around to see that the rest of the camp is up and moving around restlessly. Rodney's coming back with two glasses of tea.

"Here." Rodney thrusts one of the glasses towards John.

"What's going on?" John doesn't mean the tea; with his free hand he makes a circular motion. Just as Evan says, "Nothing", Rodney says, "This is about you not being fine."

John opens his mouth, but Rodney interrupts him before he can make a sound.

"Don't even. You've been freaked out ever since Ayse; do you think we're blind? Elizabeth's worried, and Anbur is about to call the whole thing off, turn around and go home."

"That's why we're hanging out here today," Evan adds. He looks John in the eye, but John can't tell if he's disappointed or not.

"He can't do that, what about everyone else?" Despite his fragile state of mind, he knows that Elizabeth had been correct in her assessment of how important it is that they complete this pilgrimage.

"Baariq and Tazim will take the kids on to wherever it is that we're going, but if you don't snap out of this funk, it's over, because we're not going to let you drag your ass back to the Daedalus alone." Rodney looks conflicted, as if he's anxious to return to Shaaziya but just as anxious to finish the viat. "He said we could try again next year."

They are so close, and John's not looking forward to repeating the experiences of the trip up here any time soon. "Jesus, it's not that bad. I'm okay! What is it with everyone suddenly? I didn't turn into a wilting flower when I was fucking resurrected!" John's shouting now, shoving the sleeping bag away, reaching for his boots and finding a place to put down the glass all at the same time.

"Whoa, whoa! Give me that, you're gonna break it." Evan grabs for the tea glass, and Rodney drags the other boot out from under the sleeping bag.

John extricates himself and shoves his feet into the boots without bothering to tie them. As he storms away, Evan calls out to him, "Hey!"

John turns and catches the tossed jacket with his face. Evan and Rodney are grinning, and John suddenly realizes that they've wound him up on purpose. "When I get back, I'm going to kick your ass."

"Sure, Sheppard. You can try." Evan rolls his eyes at Rodney.

John jams his arms into the sleeves, shrugging into the jacket and pulling it close around him as he dodges some of the viator, who are leaving. Anbur and Elizabeth are sitting outside a tent, in the sun but out of the wind.

Elizabeth gives him a bright smile. "Good morning, John. Sleep well?"

"Fine," he snaps. "What's this I hear that you're going to send us back to the Daedalus?"

Anbur looks up at him, "Is a possibility; I am concerned." He has a solemn look on his face, without a single trace of mirth.

"It's not a possibility as far as I'm concerned. So I'm a little upset, big deal. Look, you said this was
important, not just for us, so I want you to know that I'll get over the bug up my ass."

"Okay."

"That's it? Okay?" The fight goes out of John.

"Yes. Tomorrow we will continue viat. Is perhaps only another three days to Makhuqat? It will be only more of same, hmm?"

"Good." John stalks away, angry that he's just been played. He's never been a terribly introspective person, but things have changed for him over and over again, forcing him to dig a little deeper each time. He figures that by now, he's in the Marianas Trench.

Rodney and Evan catch up and fall in beside him. "Still going to kick my ass?" Evan asks in an all too cheery tone.

"Probably. When you're asleep, so, you know—don't." John replies darkly.

"Come on, Sheppard. It's guaranteed to work every time. You mope until you get mad, and then you do something about it."

John eyes Rodney.

"What, just because I generally ignore people's feelings doesn't mean that I don't know they have them. It's like any good experiment: observation to develop a hypothesis, and then use the hypothesis to quantitatively predict the results of new observations."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. Don't say I'm wrong, because I'm not."

John swivels his glare to Evan, "What do you think?"

Evan answers carefully. "I'm not sure what he just said, but I guess you needed a kick in the pants."

"Maybe I was already mad, did you think about that?"

"Please, I've seen you angry, and you weren't, that was you, moping." Rodney doesn't tell him to get over it, but drops a bomb instead. "Anbur's got a ZedPM."

"What?" They've been on the planet for months, and the surprises just keep rolling in.

"Yeah, I didn't pick it up, maybe it's completely drained, but still, a ZedPM."

"Why does he have it?"

"Something to do with Makhuqat, part of the viat. I couldn't get him to tell me anything more. Patience, my ass."

John can imagine how that conversation went. "How did you figure out he's got one?"

"Saw it when I was watching them put up his tent last night, keeps it rolled up in it and stores it inside when the tent's up."

~*~
Anbur refuses to answer any questions about the ZPM. He gives them a small mysterious smile and shoos them away, leaving Rodney rather furious. John steers him away from the camp and towards the little town.

Rodney seethes, "What does he think I'm going to do? Contaminate his precious holy icon? Break it?"

John’s pretty annoyed with Anbur too, for being the one that probably set him up this morning, but he realizes that it was his way of finding out how important this journey was to John.

He’d understood political importance of this trip on an intellectual level, had resigned himself to it early on, but John's surprised to find that it's become personally important, as well. Sure, no one wants to be sent home for being a crybaby (or lack of crying; John's still not clear what reaction Anbur's expecting from him), and sure, having a goal and attaining it is second nature to him, but the possibility, the hope of some personal reconciliation has taken hold of John. He trusts Anbur enough to accept that when it's all over, the viat will have some significant meaning.

"I dunno, Rodney. What would you do if you got your hands on it? Run your life signs detector all over it?"

Rodney huffs at that, "It's the principle. I'm a scientist and a ZedPM has been my Holy Grail for the last year."

John smiles. "Listen to yourself—you're on a religious trek, and you're complaining that someone has a relic they won't let you play with? Forget about it, it's probably dead." In the back of his mind though, he's recalling the database in N'vellesem, and the odd light in the corridors under the temple at Ayse.

Rodney's glaring at him when Cadman catches up to them. "Sir, we're going to take a hike, heard there were some ruins up there." She points up the side of the mountain.

Rodney's glare turns into his 'you're insane' look. "We've been on a forced march for two weeks, so when we get a day off you go hiking?"

John doesn't think that it had been anything like a forced march, but he agrees with Rodney, though he's slightly more polite. "Have fun?"

She shrugs. "Lorne? Up for a run up the mountainside?"

Evan smiles, the one that John would classify as his 'make nice with the crazy natives' smile. "Uh, no, I'll pass."

"Suit yourself, sir." Laura mutters something that sounds a lot like 'chair force' under her breath as she turns away.

John retaliates with 'ground pounder' and when he looks at Evan, they break out laughing. "Run up a mountainside?"

They reach the town, and spend a while poking around. The other group of viator are gone, and now the town seems almost deserted. There’s an old woman baking khabez on a flat stone, and it looks like she's been at it a while, from the tall stack of flat bread next to her. She offers up the one that's just come off the stone to John as she entreats him, "Come sit for a moment."

She's wearing a purple hat that's similar in style to Anbur's, and John pauses, and the only feeling that he gets from her is a warm, honeyed glow, and that intrigues him. He thanks her in Peragro
and joins her across from the baking stone. Evan and Rodney sit down beside him, giving her their thanks as the three of them tear into the crisp, steamy bread.

"You speak Peragro." she asks as she pats a fresh ball of dough onto the stone.

John swallows quickly. "I do, A little. It's not very good."

"A little is enough." She smiles, showing a wide lack of teeth. "I am known as Qahira."

"I'm John Sheppard, this is Rodney McKay and Evan Lorne." John points at them as he speaks. "Guys, this is Qahira."

They wave a little and greet her as they munch on the khabez.

"I was born in N'vellesem, but it has been many years since my last visit." Qahira pokes at the bread on the stone.

John's not exactly sure what to say so he nods and translates for Evan and Rodney. "Says she's from N'vellesem."

Evan asks, "Why did she come to Halavasan?" and John repeats his question.

"I came on viat, same as you, and fell in love. What other reason should there be? Perhaps you will do the same."

John smiles at this. "I don't think so, but Rodney's got a girl friend already. Him? Who knows?"

"Who knows, yes, this is right." Qahira deftly flips the khabez over, using her fingertips. "You have such pretty teeth, were they like this before you became the Quaralyn?"

John chuckles, she reminds him of his crazy Aunt Ella. "Yes, I look very much like I did before."

"That is good, I'm glad the Quaralyn is handsome. It would be shame if he were an ugly old man."

Rodney pokes John. "What are you two talking about?"

"My teeth."

"Figures. Hey, ask her about where we're going." Anbur's been close-mouthed about their destination, and it's been eating Rodney alive.

"He wants to know about our destination."

"Makhuqat? Except for the temple, it's nothing but a pile of rocks."

"So why there? Why does everyone go there?"

Qahira seems to think about that for a moment as she flips the flat bread off the stone and onto the waiting pile, and then pats down another ball of dough on the hot stone. "It is the tradition. Most people only go once, but the devout travel every anam."

"She says it's a temple, and a pile of rocks, and mostly folks only go once."

John watches as Rodney nods slowly, like he's adding data to the hypothesis in his head. He's about to ask 'what?' when Qahira asks him the sixty four thousand dollar question.
"What is it like to be the Quaralyn?" Her head is tipped to the side, keeping an eye on both John and the bread.

John has to consider his answer, but he still comes up blank. "It's difficult to say. I guess strange is the only word I have."

"It is said, 'For he who is Quaralyn will know the devotion of his followers.'"

"Huh, where does it say that?"

Qahira flips the bread over. "The Vaxqaralyn. I studied the ways of the Qaroptimat at Ludahsediat in N'villesem. Is it true?"

"I guess that's what it is. I don't like it."

"Is difficult to be adored. As a young woman I had to learn to be adored by my husband. You must learn to be adored. Once you give in, it can be very rewarding," Qahira gave John a sly smile. "But perhaps not the same way."

That makes John laugh out loud. "Hopefully not the same."

Rodney and Evan are looking at John as if he's lost his mind. "What did she say?"

"Nothing, I'll tell you later."

Qahira tests the bread, pulls it off the stone and wraps it and several other large, flat loaves in a separate cloth and hands the package to John. "For your meal, and now, I must go and feed my adoring husband."

"Ze'omlat kavela, Qahira." John stands and helps her to her feet, and she takes advantage of the opportunity and pats his face. "So pretty," she says, ambling off.

"What was that all about?" Rodney asks.

"She was just flirting with me."

Rodney rolls his eyes. "Of course she was."

Evan gives him a playful punch on the arm. "If you're going to pull, you should shoot for someone a little younger."

"It's like a compulsion, Evan, and there's no accounting for taste." Rodney shakes his head.

John ignores them. "Let's take these back and have some lunch."

A large pot of thick, spicy stew is simmering on the fire, and Qahira's gift of fresh bread is well received. John grabs a bowl and tears off a piece, and moves a little ways off from the fire, and soon, Rodney and Evan sit next to him.

John thinks about calling them on their tactics, telling them to knock it off, that he doesn't need babysitting, but it is comforting. He decides to allow himself to accept it.

Rodney is eating fast and methodically, head down, and not talking, a sign that he's thinking hard and fast.

John lets him ruminate for a while as they eat, but eventually curiosity gets the best of him.
"Whatcha thinking about, Rodney?"

"The ZedPM, what else?"

John gives him a shrug of the eyebrows.

"What did Qahira say exactly about Makhuqat?"

"That it was a pile of rocks, most people only go once but there are some who go every year. Why?"

"Just trying to figure out why someone would trek across the desert with it."

"What if it's just something they do?"

"What if it's not?"

"Well, we don't know that, do we? Doesn't look like Anbur's going to tell us, and we'll get there eventually."

"We're only about three days out," Evan adds.

"So, we'll find out soon enough."

"Yeah, three days."

"Try not to let it tear you up."

"Look who's talking, Mr. Mope-For-A-Week."

Amazingly, John's rescued from a conversation he doesn't want to have by an unlikely hero—Sabat. "Come, we race the mesla."

"Okay, this I have to see."

"Give me your bowl, I'll take care of 'em and be there in a minute." Evan reaches out and plucks the bowl from John's hand.

Sabat looks faintly disappointed, but chivvies John and Rodney up and over to the open field, looking over her shoulder to make sure that Evan is following along.

Most of the town and all of Anbur's viat are gathered around the lea, and there's a seething mass of the mesla at the other end. Baariq appears to be the race master and he waves John over. John gives Elizabeth the evil eye when she gives him a little push, before loping across the short field.

The mesla know something is up, and they aren't happy about it. They're pulling at their leads and squeaking in annoyance, but the designated mesla wranglers for the race are yanking on the leads and lining them up.

Baariq assigns John one at center post. John recognizes it as Donna, the one that's prone to biting. Dara gives him a leg up, and then hands him the lead, holding onto the halter. John tries to find a comfortable position, but it's just too bony. John's got a bad feeling about this, although he doesn't have too long to worry about it.

Apparently horse racing is the same in any galaxy; Baariq starts the race with a downward slash of a white cloth. Dara gives Donna a hard slap on her furry hindquarters, and she jounces off after the
John nearly falls off; there's no saddle; the odd gait is miserable to ride, and her sharp spine is as awful as he thought it would be. Donna's a little short, and John's got to pull his legs up to keep them from dragging the ground. He bounces along trying to give her a kick in the flanks, but his legs are too long, and he nearly causes himself to fall off. He's not the only one having some trouble; Gadon is still back at the starting line kicking and screaming at his mesla as it calmly grabs a tuft of the tough, grayish turf.

Fortunately, the course is short. John finishes the race by falling off just as Donna crosses the line. Everyone is laughing and smiling, but Elizabeth and Rodney are holding each other up, helpless with laughter, and Evan smiles evilly as he holds up a camera and grabs Donna's lead as she trots by. He pulls something out of his pocket and gives it to her, deftly avoiding the teeth.

John hauls himself up off the ground, and hollers to Baariq. 'We go again?'

Baariq is laughing so hard he can barely answer. "Yes, again," he huffs between bouts of hilarity.

"Good." John limps over to Evan and takes the camera. "You're up," he says in his best command voice. John leans over and whispers into to Evan's ear. "Then Rodney and Elizabeth."

This cracks Evan up, and he gleefully drags Donna to the starting line. He actually does pretty well, coming in second to Suha, the youngest and smallest. He leaps off Donna with a flourish.

John eyes him suspiciously. "You've done this before."

"Not with mesla, obviously."

"Obviously.

John hands the camera to Elizabeth, grabs Rodney and drags him to the starting line. "Oh, nononono, I can't do this, I've never been on a horse. Not that these are horses, but the same principle..."

"Sure you can, Rodney!" John and Evan haul Rodney into place, and he does his best to look terrified, but his smile is giving him away. Donna tries to take a piece out of Evan but he swings out of the way just in time.

Baariq starts the race, and John gives Donna a firm whack to get her started.

It's the funniest thing that he's seen in a long time. Rodney is yelling and screaming at the top of his lungs, holding on for dear life as Donna trots lazily across the field. She's easily dead last, and the only reason that she's moving forward at all is that Elizabeth is holding out an allmas as encouragement.

"Come on, McKay, give her a kick!"

Rodney flails around trying to urge Donna onwards, but she's not going to take any more, and in a move that would make donkeys in any galaxy proud, bucks Rodney off her back and runs towards the treat.

Rodney lies still on the ground and John rushes over to check on him. "Rodney, you okay, buddy?"

He opens one eye and gives John the ultimate death glare. "Why, yes, I'm fine," Rodney's sarcasm is in full bloom. "I was just humiliated by a smelly pack animal, and I'm lying on the ground
wondering if I've broken anything, if I'll ever be able to walk again, or if I'm going to have to live out the rest of my days as a cripple in Halavasan. Why wouldn't I be fine?" Evan and Elizabeth join them during Rodney's tirade.

"Besides the humiliation."

"I know why they don't ride the mesla."

John snickers and holds out a hand to Rodney, and pulls him to his feet. "Ya think?"

"Yes, Sheppard, really."

~*~

That evening another caravan of viator arrives in Halavasan, and there's more of the usual evening festivities. John's burden isn't so heavy, and he lets himself enjoy the party this time, partly to assuage Anbur's concern, though mostly because he doesn't get the itchy ants feeling from these people, it's more like Qahira's warm glow. He doesn't know what the difference is, or why the students from the Ludahsediät don't even register. He concedes that maybe that they knew him before, whereas the others only see him as Quaralyn.

Day One Hundred Twenty-Two - One Hundred Twenty-Three

The extra day's rest leaves John energized and recharged, despite the lingering hangover from too much ekal. He'd decided to retreat to his fall back position of laconic disregard of any meaning that might be construed from the events of the previous night.

Rodney and Evan are willing to let his recent behavior slide; they spent the next three days of walking with good-humored conversation and arguing. Evan's not a geek, and he shakes his head in disbelief over the range of topics that John and Rodney choose to discuss.

The steep trail heads almost straight down, and by the end of the second day down from Halavasan, John's toes are bruised from the force of the downhill walk. When he peels out of his boots by the fireside to check, it looks like he might lose a toenail.

Day One Hundred Twenty-Four

Anbur catches John after the last rest stop as they begin the final leg of the journey and guides John to the front of the caravan. Tazim and Zuhair fall back to give them some privacy. "You enjoyed yourself very greatly the last night in Halavasan, I think."

It's been a couple of days, and John has gained some perspective. "Yes, yes, I did."

"What was the cause of this difference?"

John doesn't answer immediately, and Anbur is willing to wait as they pick their way down the side of the mountain. The trail from Halavasan to Makhuqat is downhill, and the irony of that isn't lost on John. "Did I ever tell you about what happened in Ayse? When we stopped there?"

"Some, perhaps, but not all, I think."

John nods as he pauses to gather his thoughts. "At lunch in Zuhair's temple, and maybe a little before, I got this feeling, like itchy ants," He hasn't seen any ants here, so he starts again. "Okay, it was a feeling that I was getting from the Qaroptimat, a very uncomfortable feeling. It was worst
when they would worship me, but it was there the whole time. My skin would crawl with the
vibration in the air."

Frowning, Anbur prods him. "And so?"

"Well, it disappeared when we left, but it came back when we'd stop in a village."

Anbur just nods.

"Then, in Halavasan, I noticed that I would get a different feeling from some people, it was warm
and glowy—a very nice feeling. Qahira was the one where I noticed it most."

"Hmm, I see." Anbur gives John an appraising look. "Who does not give you these 'feelings'?"

"The nusquam, of course. You and the rest of the viator from the school."

This time it's Anbur who's silent. He doesn't speak again until the trail is nearly flat again and
there's a sharp turn ahead. Anbur turns around, and Rodney's right there. The excitement is rolling
off of him in waves. "Patience, Dr. McKay."

Rodney flaps his hands in the air. "Whatever."

Anbur smiles and then nods as he begins to recite a passage from the Avaxqaral, It's one that every
one knows, it's the first one taught to children as their first prayer.

Everyone that knows the passage joins in, and John recites it under his breath.

Once they've made the turn in the trail, a broad, flat plateau stretches out ahead, filled with people
and tents and mesla. A fine layer of dust hangs in the air with so many feet on the ground, and it's
noisy; a babbling cacophony of squeaking meslas and people talking and shouting, all the
languages melding together into a common tongue.

At the center of this is a building, tall and white and built of stone, obviously not only ancient, but
Ancient—it's not exactly the central spire of Atlantis, but close, very close.
East of the Sun, West of the Moon

Day One Hundred Twenty-Four

John's homesickness flares up when he sees the building. He's nearly nauseous with the heartache of missing Teyla, and Ford, and the others they left behind—even the city herself. Rodney's at his elbow, and John gives him a sideways glance, it's obvious that he feels the same way. Elizabeth is the only other one in their party that would share this emotion, but she's farther back. John tugs Rodney's elbow, and they step aside to wait for her to catch up.

The look on her face as she rounds the bend is priceless. "Oh!" she says, as her face lights up.

"It's amazing, isn't it?"

The three of them stand, just looking at it from afar, until the last of the caravan passes, and they tag along at the end.

The various encampments are laid out along a grid, with wide paths between the tents, and the occasional, vague, tumble-down outlines of buildings, the remnants of an old settlement.

They wind through the crowd, and along the way the people watch John curiously. The viator that had passed them at Halavasan had spread the news of his imminent arrival. A few that recognize him kneel in the sand, and, as he passes by, John can feel the vibrations, although, at present, it's the warm, sweet feeling that he thinks he could get to like a lot.

"That's just something that I don't think I'll ever get used to, Sheppard." Rodney waves his hand at the people genuflecting to John.

"It's kind of embarrassing, actually." John shrugs a little. "I don't think it has very much to do with me, to tell you the truth." He's afraid to tell them exactly how it feels; that they'll think he's begun to believe his own press and stage an intervention.

"I suspect that it's going to get worse as the news spreads," Elizabeth remarks quietly.

"Probably." John's saved from the rest of that conversation as the caravan stops, and the routine of unpacking and putting up tents begins.

They're camped right at the foot of the building, so the mesla are hobbled and left free to roam the plateau, which is bounded by the mountains to their back, the stream from Halavasan to the south and steep inclines to the east.

After a sharing a brief meal with their immediate neighbors, Anbur pulls out the mysterious package that's been driving Rodney crazy. Iqbal and Dara stand to join him, and Anbur turns to Rodney. "Dr. McKay?"

Rodney's up like a flash to gather up his instruments, and Anbur nods at John. "You must come; no one will question a guest of the Quaralyn in the House of Makhuqat."

There's remarkably little ceremony. No one is paying any attention to them as Anbur waves his hand across the sensor, and they enter the building.

John's not exactly sure what he expected from the appearance of the exterior, but the interior seems to be an exact duplicate of the corridors of Atlantis, minus the glass windows to the sea. John's
pinged by something quasi-sentient, similar to the request for instructions he gets from the puddle
jumpers as they walk through the corridors. "Are you getting that, Rodney?"

Rodney's concentration is on his scanner. "What's that?" He asks.

"It feels like a puddle jumper."

"Yeah, I think this is a spaceship."

"Yes, Dr. McKay, this is the ship that brought our people to this world."

John thinks about the legend of Qaral, and how he disappeared in a flash of light. He'd incorrectly
assumed that was a metaphor for getting beamed up.

Anbur is talking softly to Dara and Iqbal in Ancient as they approach a door, and Dara and Iqbal
practice opening and closing it in turn. The room is similar in appearance to the power station in
Atlantis, with a roughly triangular pedestal in the center.

The Idon gather around a console to one side, and Anbur is issuing instructions. Dara presses a few
keys, and another ZPM slides out. Iqbal takes it, but Rodney interrupts him. "May I?"

"Please investigate as you wish, Dr. McKay," Anbur says, and Iqbal hands him the device.

"It's not like ours; the power signature is different. Could be because it's fully charged... Anbur.
This is recharging the ZedPM?"

Dara is sliding the one Anbur brought with them into the empty slot on the console. "Yes, Dr.
McKay. We bring Qaral's Power to Makhuqat on the fifth anam to prepare it for use. Makhuqat
requires power as well, and so we provide for him."

Rodney hands the ZPM back to Iqbal and pulls his laptop out and plugs it into the console, then
crawls underneath to remove the panel to attach more leads to the laptop. "Okay let's fire this up,
and see what we've got."

At the confused look on Anbur's face, John says dryly, "Go ahead, he's just watching." Anbur
continues to instruct Dara as he pushes the translucent keys.

The five of them are huddled around the console, and Rodney's watching both Dara and his laptop.
"It's very slow, like a trickle charger. Comparing the power frequencies, I'd say that it probably
takes a couple of years for the cycle to complete."

"The Avaxqaral is less in its appetites than Makhuqat, we return with his leavings."

"Ah. The database, of course, rotating the batteries on a fifteen year cycle, unless there are more?"
Rodney moves about the compartment, lighting up consoles, tapping out queries. "The whole
building is one giant collector for solar and radiation power."

"Makhuqat's home took many years to build."

John's curious. "Why is the database so far from the ship?"

Anbur shrugs. "The first war of Ascension, after Wilan. Doctus was his Chosen; Qaralyn argued it
was his right as son of Qaral."

It's enough of a non-answer that John's about to ask for a clarification, but Anbur interrupts his next
question. "You and Dr. McKay must go to see the rest of Makhuqat."
John's willing to let his question go in favor of a tour. "C'mon McKay."

Rodney taps a few last keys on the laptop, checks the console that it's attached to, and turns around.

~*~

The entire ship is thickly coated in dust, and their footprints obscure the faint trail of past explorations as they wander through the corridors, poking their heads into workrooms and labs. The fine grit has worked down under the keys in the control room, and though the monitors work, the displays are distorted with static.

The feeling of familiarity is strong, and the welcoming, mental ping is steady in John's head as they investigate the bare, crew's quarters, the occupant's furnishings and belongings long gone.

The engine room is filthy with sand; there are tiny piles underneath an overhead hatch that's not sealed shut. The positive results from a display have Rodney giving John a meaningful look. John raises his eyebrows and nods slightly.

Leaving the engine room, they find the small bay with four puddle jumpers huddled together. John releases the rear hatch with a rush of stale air and sits in the pilot's chair. The heads up display pops up almost before he can ask, with a grid that shows the relative position of Makhuqat, and temple overhead.

John's almost overcome by the need for flight, and another hot rush of homesickness. At that, the display changes to a star chart with coordinates, navigational headings and a course marked in red. Atlantis.

It would take months in a puddle jumper, if not years, though it would be journey of only a day or two for Makhuqat.

John forces the display to snap off, and he jerks out of the chair and leaves the puddle jumper. The answer is right there; they have the solution to their problem, but it would tear apart the entire fabric of Dominat. In a few short months, he's become familiar with the tenuous balance between the people and their communities, though John suspects that their presence has upset the equilibrium anyway.

Rodney closes the 'jumper's hatch and catches up; John is almost running to get out, to get away from the possibility. Anbur knew, the tracks in the dust were aged and faint, but he must've explored Makhuqat, and he knew.

Maybe it was an invitation to take what they needed; as Quaralyn, no one would question his actions, they would kneel and murmur 'Will of Qaral' as he flew away with their precious relic and the source of power for their mostly holy text.

Makhuqat is ten thousand years old, and has been buried for most of that time; it's a distinct possibility that the ship's in the same state as the Daedalus. It would have to be unburied, the temple above torn down and reduced to dust, which would also rend asunder the point of contact for the many, scattered communities. The single source of advanced power on the entire planet would be destroyed, and Dominat would lose the most important link to their past as the last ZPM died.

John stops suddenly a few feet short of the recharging room, and grabs Rodney by the shoulders. "You absolutely cannot tell anyone about this, about Makhuqat," he says in a fierce, low voice. "Sheppard, we can go home."
"Maybe, but think—what will happen here, when we're gone? Do you think Shaaziya's just going to pick up and go, leaving everything she's known behind? Are you willing to destroy an entire civilization? Because I've done that, Rodney; I don't think I can do it again."

Rodney's face falls and his mouth twists into a grim slant.

"That's what I thought. This is not ours. Our need does not outweigh the cost to these people."

"But, the puddlejumpers—we could use them."

"God, yes, I know. But they're obviously a secret—how do we extract them without the existence of the ship becoming common knowledge? What will it do to every person on the Daedalus, knowing that this is right here? We just have to think first."

"So you're what, making a unilateral decision for every person on this planet?"

"It's not that simple."

Rodney frowns and pulls out of John's grasp. "Well, you're wrong."

"Rodney," he cries in anguish. John feels heavy with the weight of the power to change the course of civilization just within his grasp.

~*~

"What about the ZPM, Rodney?" Elizabeth asks over the fire at dinner.

"I can't believe that we walked through the mountains to watch a ridiculous ritual with a useless piece of junk."

Elizabeth frowns at the insult, but it's purely a McKayism. "Rodney," she says, more than a hint of reproach in her voice.

John offers Rodney a tiny smile of mollification, but Rodney's not looking at him.

Anbur puts on a good act of annoyance. "Dr. McKay, you are nusqua and do not understand."

He stands abruptly and pins John with an angry glare. "Yes, you're right, I just don't get it. At all. Good night."

As they watch him leave, Elizabeth apologizes. "Anbur, I'm so sorry, please forgive Rodney for his bluntness."

"It is his way." Anbur catches John's eye with a brief speculative glance.

John nods once, saying nothing. It could go either way with McKay, and only time would tell.

**Day One Hundred Twenty-Five**

The next day is difficult. Rodney's avoiding him, and so John takes Cadman up on the offer of a hike with her usual posse, and Evan joins them as well. No one mentions last night's disagreement with McKay, and for that, John is grateful.

They spend the day exploring the edges of the plateau and the trails that lead up and down from the site. They also gather a sizable group of children that follow them around, and eventually they
organize them into a game that's a combination of hide-and-seek and tag.

When they return to camp, Rodney's nowhere to be found. John picks at dinner and lurks near Anbur's tent until he's alone.

"I have to ask," he says in a low voice. "Why did you show me Makhuqat?"

"It is important, yes?" For the first time in their acquaintance Anbur's uncomfortable and uncertain, and that makes John feel uneasy.

"Yeah, I get that."

"As leader of Peragroilla, I must not believe, but as a man, very conflicted. I do not want to admit we have been wrong for fourteen thousand anam, and yet cannot ignore what I see."

John feels his anchor slipping. If Anbur, who had told him so firmly to 'accept and not believe', is having a crisis of faith, where does that leave him?

"I'm still just John Sheppard." He has to whisper, if he raises his voice, he's afraid it might be a scream.

"Just so, but there is more, hmm? If you are Quaralyn, then you must know all."

"But what am I supposed to do with this knowledge?"

"I cannot tell you. Is for you to decide." Anbur's face has no trace of his normal geniality or mirth, only a look of exquisite sorrow that pierces John like a knife to the heart.

John closes his eyes and takes a handful of deep breaths in an effort to stave off the mother of all panic attacks, and he feels Anbur's arm across his back, pulling him into a comforting embrace.

He didn't ask for this. When he'd raised the rifle at Colonel Sumner, he'd had at least some idea of the consequences. This, he had no inkling, no choice at all, and he's barely figured out how to deal with simply being different, much less how to handle the fate of an entire planet. "I don't think I can do this, Anbur."

"I am sorry, John."

**Day One Hundred Twenty-Six**

The next morning, John's up and out early. He's lost in thought as he prowls through the tent town. A handful of fellow *viator* are awake, freshening cook fires and making tea. They nod at him in greeting; some smile and others are solemn, but he barely sees them. He's exhausted, sleep has evaded him completely, and his eyes are gritty, burning with unshed tears. He doesn't have any more idea of what to do now than he had last night, when Anbur had slammed him with the anvil of responsibility.

John looks up when Rodney calls out to him, huffing down the street at a slight jog.

"Rodney." John greets him cautiously, not certain of exactly where they stand, and he definitely doesn't want to get into it with him right now.

"I need you to escort me to Makhuqat, I mean Anbur said I could go back but not alone, and that you had to go with me. He wouldn't. I think he thinks that we need to make up. I'm still mad, very upset, but we wouldn't let that get in the way of a little exploration and-"

John cracks a faint smile and holds up his hand. "Whoa, McKay. No need to apologize."
Rodney gives him an indignant look. "It wasn't really an apology, I just hoped that we could look beyond our disagreement."

He wasn't mad at Rodney, couldn't imagine what it would take for Rodney to really piss him off, but what Rodney wanted was part of the burden that Anbur had laid at his feet; a burden that John was reluctant to pick up. "Yeah. So what's up?"

"We need to determine the complete status of Makhuqat, appearances can be deceiving, so there's no sense in arguing over a course of action if it's not even possible."

There's a tiny flare of hope that the problem will suddenly become a moot point. "Makes sense. What did Anbur say about that?"

"We didn't actually talk about it."

No surprise there. John bites his lower lip absently as he looks at the tents around him, thinking. He desperately wants to go back inside the ship, wants to find out that Makhuqat is a wreck just like every other space ship on the planet. Desperately wants get in and break away, and fly home. "Yeah. Give me a few to catch up with every one first."

John and Rodney make as discreet an exit as possible after breakfast; John had been unwilling to discuss their plans in the open. Once they're inside the Ancient spaceship, he asks, "So what did you want to do?"

Rodney nods down the corridor. "The bridge first. I want to try to access the ship logs, and you can go through those while I look at various components, and figure out where to start first."

"You know those logs are probably in Ancient."

Rodney just gives John a flat stare and hands him a data pad. "Then all that schooling will come in handy, won't it?"

John shrugs his eyebrows in return. Someone one must have been talking, or rather Rodney grilled someone to death. Their viat is crammed with students and teachers; it could have been anyone.

The problem with mechanical logs is that they don't know when to quit. A human would have long ago stopped bothering to type in the equivalent of 'condition same', but the automatic logging function just kept going. It takes John what seems like hours to scroll back to the beginning, and thank God the Ancient's data storage formats are incredibly complex, because the log starts from the day the ship was activated.

John settles in to read, grateful for the distraction from his circular thoughts.

Rodney methodically takes a turn at every station, figuring out what each one does, occasionally backtracking or darting over to another console. He talks to himself, and John listens in what he likes to think of as Rodney-mode: blah blah blah, DANGER blah blah, replying when necessary and occasionally reading an entry aloud to Rodney.

The Makhuqat had been a very old ship, on the verge of an Ancient scrap heap when Qaral had commandeered it for the relocation. Every event was carefully detailed in a combination of automatic logging functions and human entries—Wraith battles and exploration expeditions, crew related incidents. John downloads what he can about the Wraith and a few of the exploration notes to the data pad, because he's still hoping that the SGC will swoop in and that they'll get off this rock, take him away from the whole mess.
Rodney drops an MRE in John's lap and sits down next to him. "You about done?"

John looks at him. "There's fifteen thousand years of entries, Rodney."

"Well, I guess you're ready for a break? You've been sitting there for almost seven hours."

John stands and stretches. He hadn't realized that it had been that long. He inspects the MRE and goes for the crackers and peanut butter. "It'll take years to go through all of this. What did you find?"

Rodney answers casually. "I don't know if it's space-worthy, but it will definitely fly except for the fact that it's buried under a building, which could be a problem. If it were up to me, we would at least take a test run."

"Rodney." John's absolutely torn; he'd love to get out of here and go home, but was a ride home in a used space ship worth the irreparable damage to the entirety of Dominat?

"I see your point, I really do—but my point is that we're meant for bigger things than just wasting away here. The whole galaxy is in danger, Atlantis is still the gateway to Earth, sure we left it hidden, but that's only going to fool the Wraith for so long—make that two galaxies in danger—so if we were to weigh the cost of languishing here on this backwater against all of that, I don't see that there's any other choice."

"Yeah," John replied tightly. He doesn't feel certain enough of his voice to continue. Rodney's played the guilt card, and John hates that Rodney knows him so well. There has to be some way to balance the needs of Dominat against that of the entire galaxy—of two galaxies.

They can't just take off and go now; there are people literally camped right on top of Makhuqat, not to mention a huge structure over the top of it. They'd have to come back after the viat season was over. "Do you think that two people could handle the ship?"

It was hard to look at Rodney, the anticipatory gleam in his eyes was almost blinding. "I can do better than that; the chair is basically the emergency control room. All of the essential controls are tied in to it. I press this, and it's all up to you." He taps the key, and then looks John in the eyes. "We should check it out."

John swallows thickly; his throat is tight, and there's a bloom of pressure in his chest. He looks away from Rodney. "We should."

There's a world of difference between accidentally starting a galactic culling with a single gunshot and purposefully contemplating steps to create a planet-wide disaster.

~*~

When John emerges from Makhuqat, the familiar buzz of devotion is so intense that he nearly stumbles back down the stairs. Rodney grabs him by the arm and steadies him. "You okay? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'll explain later."

It's dark and the tent city is lit with thousands of blue cooking fires. The parties they'd had on their journey pale in comparison to the revelries in progress all round them. It seems like everyone is on the move, visiting other camps and catching up with old friends.

Their campsite is packed with people drinking ekal and tea, talking, and laughing and watching the
dancers around the fire. John's already feeling a little high, but he accepts a glass of ekal anyway and throws it back, letting go of the hard knot of worry in his stomach, letting go of all the concern and uncertainty that he's carrying, has always carried with him, and falls into the absolute joy that's washing over him.

The feeling is impossible to contain; he feels like he's bursting out of his skin and simply cannot remain stationary. John throws himself into the crowd that's dancing by the fire, automatically matching the complicated steps, losing himself in the ecstasy of motion.

**Day One Hundred Twenty-Seven**

When John awakens, it's to a pounding headache, a sour taste in his mouth and an extremely delicate stomach. The sun is not yet up, and the camp is quiet in the dim, pre-dawn light. He covers his eyes with an arm. He doesn't remember how much he had to drink, though he imagines it was a lot. Most of the night is lost in a haze of alcohol and devotional buzz, and he hurts all over. Dancing yourself into oblivion uses different muscles than hiking for weeks; as he extricates himself from the sleeping bag, he feels like he's been run over by a truck. A pair of feet appear next to him, and he peeks out from under his arm.

Evan is standing over him with a grim look, tea glass in one hand and a canteen in the other. "You had a good time last night."

"Did I?" John sits up, accepts the canteen and drinks most of it down in one go.

"It certainly looked like it." Evan hands John a couple of Tylenol and the tea. "This should help. The Daedalus called a few minutes ago, and the rains have finally started. We should go back soon, maybe even tonight. Anbur says if we push hard we can be back in a week."

"Crap." He knew this was coming; it was only a matter of when. John thinks of Makhuqat, and how easy it would be to fly back in a few minutes, but the reasons that they didn't just take off yesterday are still valid this morning; there's too many people and getting there almost immediately wouldn't make any difference, anyway.

"That's about the size of it. Caldwell said only the lowest level was flooded so far. Oh, Anbur said there was someone who wants to say hi to you."

John doubts that's exactly what Anbur said. "Give me a minute, and I'll be right there." He puts on his boots and carefully walks to the latrines, quietly accepting the bowing and scraping people as he passes by them. John has a sudden, weird sympathy for rock stars.

When he returns to the central area of their camp, John discovers that Maisa is sitting at the fire chatting with Anbur, Elizabeth and Evan. The rest of their crew is probably still sleeping off the ekal. His Peragro has improved tremendously since the disaster at Tobat, and he greets her.

"Welcome, Maisa." To her credit she remains sitting and merely nods deeply, rather than throwing herself in the sand.

"Good day to the Quaralyn." To her credit she remains sitting and merely nods deeply, rather than throwing herself in the sand.

"Just Sheppard. I apologize that I was prevented from returning to Tobat myself."

"No matter, we are all grateful to you for ridding us of the monster." She shakes her head slightly and glances at Anbur, who is watching with undisguised interest.
John sighs internally. He might get a rush from the devotions of the adoring masses, but his state of being is a huge obstacle between him and most individuals, except for those who had known him before that dreadful day in the temple courtyard at Ayse; he'd hoped that Maisa would remember who he actually was: the fly boy that marched with trouble on the ground. He gives her a flirty grin and sits down by the fire, while inquiring after the few people in Tobat that he remembered.

"Haitham is at home, his wife is near to term though Laith is here. He will want to see you." She instructs Diwan, one of the schoolboys that is lingering near the fire, where to find her camp and to bring back the rememdium.

That reminds John of his long forgotten scheme. "Would Laith consider coming to N'vellesem? Our rememdium is very old, and Ayse has none."

Elizabeth looks shocked at the way John phrases his request, the easy way he's co-opted the role of leader. To be honest, so is he. John takes a sideways glance at Anbur to get his reaction, but Anbur has a wide grin. He nods at John to continue.

"It is the will of the Quaralyn." Maisa covers her face with both hands and bows her head, causing John to flash back to Shaaziya in the parlor in Ayse's temple.

"No. It is only a request. Not an order."

At that Maisa gives him a look, as if it couldn't possibly be within the realms of reality for Laith to refuse a request from the Quaralyn. John gives it up as a lost cause and shrugs.

If possible, Anbur's smile is even wider, nearly splitting his face. John's vaguely understood that he's been shepherded towards this point, this role, by Anbur since the meeting on the Daedalus, but everything suddenly crystallizes in this moment. John tips his head at Anbur, acknowledging the role, and the power that comes with it. He carefully doesn't look at Elizabeth.

Diwan and Laith break the moment, and John introduces the rememdium. "Everyone, this is Laith, one of the healers from Tobat, Laith, I'd like you to meet Elizabeth Weir, our leader, Evan Lorne, you remember him, he was the one with the head wound."

"I am pleased to see you doing so well, Evan Lorne. My father and I were most concerned for you."

Evan shakes Laith's hand, and John translates for him, "Thank you, I'm not sure that I'd be here without you and your father."

"It is our pleasure." Laith lifts a hand. "May I?"

Evan looks surprised, but agrees, "Uh, sure."

Laith cups the back of Evan's head with his left hand, his right along Evan's jaw and closes his eyes. Evan begins to fidget and squirm slightly, and John keeps his eyes front and center, he knows intimately exactly what this is doing to Evan, doesn't need or want to check the results.

The minutes seem to stretch out, thick and syrupy, but it's an illusion. Laith drops his hands, and Evan sighs in relief.

John doesn't translate what Laith says; it's too much like doctor-patient confidentiality. He'll tell Evan later when they're alone, but it's probably not necessary.

Evan grins widely, "Wow, thank you."
Laith smiles back and bows slightly, before he turns to John. "And now you?"

"Somebody go wake up Cadman, don't want her to miss her post-mission check up." Evan chuckles as he leaves to drag her out of her sleeping bag. "Go ahead." Laith stands in front of him, one hand on the back of his neck, and the other resting just on top of the curve of his ass. The near-embrace, and the low grip feel shockingly intimate in this open space with other people watching. John gives Elizabeth a wry look, a lift of his brow and a half smile, and then drops his face to hide his reaction.

It's the same remembered feeling, hot hands tingling and teasing him through his clothing. His face begins to flush with the memory, but Laith drops his hands quickly. "Forgive me, I did not know," Laith whispers quietly in his ear.

He whips his head up and pins Laith with a firm look. "Didn't know what?"

Laith is surprised at the question, "You truly do not know?"

"If I did, would I be asking?" John's just a little angry and a lot frustrated, every time he turns around, there's someone who knows a secret that he doesn't, and it's usually about him.

"We speak of this later," Laith says firmly, nodding towards the small crowd, just as Evan arrives with the Lieutenant in tow. Her eyes are wide with surprise that John would be open enough to allow this intimacy here, but she doesn't say anything.

John can feel the tips of his ears burn as he recalls her watching, probably avidly, him getting his hairy ass fondled and healed. "Cadman, you remember Laith, from Tobat?"

"Sure. Good to see you again." She stands in front of Laith, up close, and he takes her face in both hands. Their eyes are closed, and Cadman is faintly smirking.

Laith holds on for only a moment. "You have healed very well."

"I didn't have to have my jaw wired shut for months, so thank you for that."

They smile at each other, neither stepping back from the bubble of personal space, until Maisa clears her throat. "Laith, the Quaralyn requests that you join him in N'vellesem, for Neela is old, and Zainab is burned."

He doesn't hesitate, just flows to his knees and presses his forehead into the sand at John's feet. "It is done."

John's eyebrows nearly reach his hairline in surprise. "We, uh, we're leaving, returning to the Daedalus today."

Laith stands up and gives John an appraising look. "Then I must go prepare for my departure. I will return shortly."

"And I will go to hasten his preparations and compose a message for his father. It was a pleasure to meet our vir again; thank you for your courage." With that Maisa whirls off in a flurry of robes.

John wants to call after her, that they weren't heroes in any sense of the word, they were just doing what had to be done, and they'd actually done a piss-poor job of it, but she's already gone.

~*~
Laith re-appears, followed by a single, decrepit-looking mesla with his few belongings piled on; his arrival goes almost unnoticed in the commotion of dividing up the mesla and sorting out who's returning now or staying, packing up tents and packs and eating a hurried meal. Anbur insists on traveling with them as guide; Zuhair and Tazim, along with the Idon and the rest of their motley viator will stay with the students at Makhuqat and then take them home.

They can't travel through the treacherous mountain passes at night, but plan to get as far as possible while it's still daylight. Sheppard checks in with Caldwell as they set camp for the night, and the water is still rising, now two levels are flooded, including the precious fuel tanks.

**Day One Hundred Twenty-Eight - One Hundred Forty-Four**

Rodney and Elizabeth have acclimatized to the high altitude, and without the school kids they manage to maintain a brisk pace on the journey home. It's mostly downhill, stopping to rest only at night, when it's too dangerous to walk in the dark, and up and moving before dawn every day. The reports from the Daedalus are more frightening every day, especially when Caldwell grimly reports that their graveyard is gone. The flood has washed the rotting corpses out of their resting place, and they're floating downstream or hanging up in the wreck of the Daedalus as if this final indignity couldn't drag them away.

They've spent weeks traveling by foot, and by now even Rodney is well conditioned enough to take the punishing march without complaint. Their concern for their compatriots, and their dismay over the plight of the beleaguered Daedalus, spurs them to greater speed.

John uses their aggressive pace, and the futility of rushing back, to forget about his problems for a while, concentrating on moving as fast as possible. He'd thought that things couldn't get any worse, but once again, he's been proven wrong.
Day One Hundred Forty-Four

The broad, desert valley between Ayse and N'vellesem is completely transformed by the rainfall. The barren sand is covered in grass that is growing so fast you can almost see it; the air is thick and sweet with the scent of the masses of blooms that carpet the ground. All around them are the pesky flies, and flocks of small, brown birds swoop in to catch them. The desert animals that had been so scarce and shy before ignore them as the various rodents and reptiles run rampant across the fields, eating and mating; too busy to pay attention to the raptors soaring overhead, taking in their share of the ephemeral bounty. The mesla are more stubborn than ever, they want to stop and graze, and it requires constant attention to keep them moving.

It's incredibly beautiful, but John's too tired and focused on getting to the ship to pay too much attention. Cadman has the digital camera out, and John briefly wonders how many batteries and flash cards she'd managed to bring with her.

No one says a word as they reach the crest of the last dune, and pause to catch their first glance of the Daedalus. The force of the flood has turned it around, now lying east to west, tilted at a crazy angle and half-submerged in the middle of a purple lake.

John already knows the exact condition of both ship and crew. He's had regular updates from Caldwell as they force marched across the mountains and desert, but seeing it is a visceral punch in the gut.

There are tents and tarp-covered 302s planted in neat rows along the water's shore, and he can see a few people scurrying around, looking uncannily like the mice and hares in the verdant fields. The funeral pyre on the far shore for those bodies that have been recovered is still smoking, rising up and away in the brisk wind.

He knows his presence here wouldn't have made a bit of difference, and yet he still feels a small knot of guilt for having taken off on the viat. Seeing the Daedalus further wrecked, and knowing that maybe there is a way out of this, is a torturous hope of the very worst kind.

John can't allow himself to think about that idea, not yet. "C'mon," he says, but the mesla are completely intractable, and no amount of slapping, tugging or pushing will get them to stop eating and move again.

Anbur advises John, "Leave them. They will follow at their own pace."

"Good enough for me." John takes off down the hill at a fast clip, stumbling a little as his foot catches on an unseen vine. He's been walking across sand and rock since they crashed; abundant verdure now seems strange and alien. Fortunately, either no one noticed, or they're being unaccountably polite. Right, they didn't see it.

John thinks it's mildly ironic that they've left one tent city for another. The camp is crazy, with people gathering around them as they approach. The Daedalus hid people well, and the only time he's seen most of them at once had been at Elizabeth's town hall meetings. Cadman, Timmons and Lu disappear with the Marines, Evan drifts off in the company of the 302 pilots, Caldwell and Elizabeth head towards whatever tent is the makeshift HQ, and Rodney and Shaaziya are enjoying a rather bracing reunion, his hand resting on her belly.
John stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Laith and Anbur at the center of the hubbub for a moment, and then half-turns towards Laith with his best impassive face, "Let me show you around, while I figure it out." He starts towards the Daedalus and the lake. He asks Anbur, "Does this happen every time?"

"Yes, but never so deep."

"You can see where the ship plowed through when we crashed," he says, pointing to the south. In the intervening months the deep trench had filled in with blowing sand, but the water had found it again. The far shore is teeming with speckled, brown birds hunting in the shallow water, and, looking down, John can see the surface of the water rippling with thousands of squirming insect larvae and tadpole-like things darting around underneath. Laith kneels down in the shallows and captures one, poking at it curiously.

It's definitely the cool season; the temperature's mild compared to the intense burning heat he's almost become accustomed to. "How long will it stay?"

Anbur shrugs. "It is usually a matter of days, but this is too much, I do not know."

"Huh." John locates an unused tent stake and drives it down into the wet sand at the shoreline.

The light is changing; dusk is close at hand. The evening breeze plays with the water, bringing up tiny waves that lap gently at the shore. It's a remarkable sight, so much open water, the blooming hills and the comparatively vast amounts of wildlife where just weeks ago there was only a scorched, dry desert.

John turns his attention to the Daedalus. The bow is a few yards from shore and Evan's ladder is lashed on to it. He wades into the hip-deep water, manfully ignoring the fact that there have been rotting corpses floating in it and climbs to the top, walking along the length of the ship to take in the view.

It's still too surreal to comprehend just how much this is going to change the lives of the shipwrecked crew; they'd clung to the ship, trying to maintain some semblance of familiarity in the face of catastrophe, but to no avail. John knew that eventually they were going to have to assimilate into the indigenous population—a slow, orderly infiltration, but he'd imagined that time was years into the future.

In the distance, John can see their abandoned mesla slowly grazing their way towards the ship. Caldwell and Elizabeth are at the shore, talking to Anbur and Laith, but they're too far away for him to hear their conversation. Rodney and Shaaziya are conspicuously absent among the new arrivals that are wandering towards the lake. The rest of the Daedalus' crew are meandering about the tent town with lazy intent, or sitting and watching the coming sunset. It's a population at loose ends, scientists and engineers without tools or equipment, just waiting for the future to drag them into a semi-primitive state where their skills will be essentially irrelevant.

John's burning dilemma is thrown into sharper focus by this revelation. Taking Makuqat's theoretical space-worthiness into account, he possibly has the means to solve their problem, but he's straddling the divide between the needs of a couple of hundred nusquam and the ten-thousand year old beliefs and culture of an entire planet; that he's seen as the reincarnation of a revered leader, given the power to irrevocably shift the hard-won balance on Dominat, doesn't give him any confidence.

He'd made a similar decision before, though without any knowledge of its full impact, and he doesn't know if he can take action with the full, conscious understanding of the consequences;
especially now that, in many ways, he's become the embodiment of those ancient beliefs.

As a cadet, the Air Force had drilled into him the standards of duty, service, and honor, and more than once he'd been burned by the reality of the dichotomy in the practical applications of obedience to duty and personal honor. He knows Rodney would laugh his ass off, but sometimes John wishes he could be someone who could just stop thinking and let another make the decisions, but he hasn't been that guy in a long time.

Caldwell's making his way up the ladder, followed by Elizabeth, Anbur and Laith. John's halfway to the hatch, and he waits for them to catch up.

"...It's going be virtually impossible to live aboard even after the water subsides. The engine room is probably a complete loss. The batteries are still dry, but we have no way to recharge them. We'll have to reserve power for emergencies until the naquadah generators can be interfaced in the bypass."

Elizabeth is nodding, and Anbur quietly translating Caldwell's conversation for Laith.

John suddenly realizes there's one person conspicuous by his absence. "Where's Hermiod?"

Caldwell greets John with a nod. "He's still aboard, manning the scanning and communications station. Said the heat and humidity isn't a problem for him, and he doesn't care if it's dark until we get power restored."

"Okay. I don't understand, once we get the generators in, we can run life support."

"I can tell you've never had a house that flooded. The muck that'll be left behind when the water's gone will be impossible to completely clean out. The spores from the mold are possibly toxic, according to the good doctors. It was their suggestion we vacate—there isn't any way to throw open the doors, and the recirculation would just contaminate the upper levels, too."

John doesn't take offense; it's true that he's never had the misfortune of a flood and Atlantis' dark, dank lower levels had never proved an issue. "Not to mention the yaw and lateral pitch, it's got to be listing at least forty degrees to the port stern. We were lucky when it crashed that it wasn't worse."

Evan's climbing topside and joining them now, though the rest of the crew assembled on the shorelines stays put. "Looks pretty bad."

Elizabeth glances at Evan, her eyes are shadowed and her mouth is set in a thin frown. "Yes, yes it is."

Anbur speaks softly in the falling dark. "You must come to N'vellesem."

"Thank you, Anbur. We were afraid to ask before, thinking that so many would be a burden," says Elizabeth.

"No, we are fewer now, there are places, homes of families who have gone to the Ancestors. You have protected us from the Wraith, it is our duty now to comfort you."

John glances at Caldwell; it's difficult to fully see his expression before the full rising of Zieba, the mother moon, but he doesn't imagine the tears that glint in the dim starlight.

Caldwell runs a hand over his face, but his voice is steady. "So be it."
Day One Hundred Forty-Five - One Hundred Sixty-Six

It's a logistical nightmare, is what it is.

Though the port hangar is no longer buried, the MALPS intended for Atlantis are still trapped behind the jammed door, and everything in the hangar is flooded. Once the lake subsides, they can blast the doors open and then reevaluate that option, but in the meantime, Rodney and the engineers cobble together a few carts, like the one they'd abandoned in the mountain pass after Ayse, to carry a limited amount of equipment. A couple of the naquadah generators are scheduled to go on the first trip, but the rest of their capacity is filled by committee approval based on the absolute necessity. The fat, overfed mesla are pressed back into duty, and a platoon of Marines are conscripted to carry the packs that are too heavy for the civilians.

The *Daedalus*, despite her current predicament, still scans the skies and space for Wraith and rescue. They need people to stay aboard to repair and rehabilitate as much of those necessary functions as possible: tie the naquadah generators in to bypass the drowned engines, siphon water out of the fuel tanks for their remaining 302s, and handle the thousands of other issues and tasks.

To that end, crews are set to remain on board for thirty days, and then relief crews will rotate in from N'vellesem. The 302's are inextricably tied to the *Daedalus*, and the pilots are divvied up into shifts, as are the medical staff and marines. Each rotation will be in charge of returning the carts to the *Daedalus* and the crews standing down are to pack up the next round of necessities that will turn N'vellesem into home.

John often catches Rodney staring at him thoughtfully. He steadfastly doesn't think about how simple, how easy this would be if they had just *one* of the 'jumpers from *Makhuqat*, but even in the wake of this latest disaster, he's not ready to make that momentous decision.

Elizabeth has gone ahead with Anbur and Laith to organize housing. Rodney elects to stay behind with the first crew to oversee the installation of the naquadah generators. Caldwell will stay with the ship and oversee the other repair crews, and Dr. Sodeburg draws the short straw from the medical staff. John is designated the officer in charge in N'vellesem and is tasked with leading the first convoy across to N'vellesem.

Two weeks into the commotion of arranging, packing and organizing, the rest of the *viator* return from *Makhuqat*. Zuhair and Tazim unload their belongings and offer the use of their mesla, which are gratefully assigned to some of the slightly-less-necessary, but-would-be-great-to-have paraphernalia.

Timmons makes an offhand remark about 'Daedalus Lake', and the name sticks. The stake John planted is now a few feet from the shore, the green hills are starting to brown in the rising heat, and the flowers are long gone. Winter, it seems, is an extremely short-lived season.

~*~

John's convoy departs at dusk to crawl their way across the nearly dead meadow under the bright, watchful eye of the daughter moon Aila, peering down at them through a curtain of light.

After the *viat*, this journey from *Daedalus* to N'vellesem feels easy compared to those early, hot slogs across the desert. It's a matter of hours, not days or weeks, and their pace is fixed by the speed of the electric carts and the mesla.

Day One Hundred Sixty-Seven
The eastern horizon is lightening up, turning the sky a pearly, gray-lavender when John catches brief snatches of the qerato, calling everyone to morning prayer on the rising wind. They've made pretty good time, considering the speed of the carts, and they must be closer than he thought. At the top of the next rolling dune, he's surprised at the how far away N'vellesem is; a pretty white town nestled at the foothills of the mountains. John has a strong urge to pick up speed and hurry, but he forces himself to maintain the steady pace.

Elizabeth is waiting for the convoy at the city gates. The section of town that they've been given to use is in the northeast quadrant of N'vellesem, perhaps a twenty-minute walk from the fountain in the square.

Anbur hadn't been exaggerating when he told them there was space available; their new quarters are two streets of abandoned homes that run parallel to the city wall. As N'vellesem's population had declined over the last century, the inhabitants had moved towards the center of town, abandoning entire neighborhoods.

As they walk down the empty street, Elizabeth points out the smallest house near the middle of the block. "I thought that one would be a good headquarters. I think we'll still need a central operations building, and there's room for an infirmary."

John nods. Not that they need a defensible position, but he automatically evaluates the two streets' suitability as a compound; it's part of his duties, but also a necessary habit that has become an ingrained response due to his time in the Pegasus galaxy. It will have to do. "How are we going to handle the housing assignments?"

"I made a tentative list, but everyone is free to migrate as their tastes and roommate compatibility dictate."

He pokes his head into the closest building, "It's a lot cleaner than I expected."

"The townsfolk pitched in to clean, make some repairs, and brought in cast off furnishings, but there's still a long way to go before the homes are more than just inhabitable."

The gesture is appreciated, and it gives them a much better start than John had expected when they were considering their options after crashing into the planet.

It feels comfortable and familiar, working with Elizabeth to set up a community. Everyone is drafted to some chore; clean and paint, or assist the technicians and engineers in setting up the naquadah generator in the headquarters and wire it for electricity. They make plans to eventually strip the Daedalus of all non-essential wiring to provide power to the entire neighborhood, and possibly to other parts of town as repayment for taking them in.

**Day One Hundred Seventy-Seven**

John's taking a break, half napping in the afternoon shade of the courtyard, when he senses someone sit down next to him. He cracks an eye open and is surprised to see Laith settling down beside him. "Hey."

"Greetings of the day, Shepherd."

"And to you. How are you settling in?"

"I miss my home, but it is to be expected."
"I know what you mean."

"I come here today, to speak of that which we did not discuss in Makhuqat."

John straightens up. "Okay. What is it?" It's been incredibly peaceful just doing whatever chore's assigned to him, and he's been busy enough that he hasn't had to think about things.

"I have learned much, though it be rumor only. First, I would like it very if you would tell me of your time in Ayse."

John grimaces and rubs a hand over his gritty neck. He would kill for an honest-to-god shower.

"It is important that I understand completely," Laith reassures him in a gentle tone. "Otherwise I would not cause you this difficulty."

"All right." Laith hasn't given John any reason to mistrust him, and outside of the Daedalus command staff, no one has ever asked him straight out for details. It's kind of a relief to tell Laith the whole sordid story, the ways that he'd changed, and even the sensations that he'd experienced during the viat.

All the while, Laith is nodding with a solemn expression, taking it in without question. John ends the story in Makhuqat, where he'd finally come to some acceptance of whatever this whole Quaralyn thing is, "So Anbur was right; I just have to accept. It is everyone else who believes."

"Perhaps it is best that you are under the protection of the Peragroilla, the Qaroptimat and Kadiani are more fervent in their beliefs, and you would be, perhaps, forced into service as godhead."

"Amen to that." John shudders, he can well imagine how things could've ended if they hadn't escaped from Ayse.

"But I also think the Peragroilla do not urge you to fully explore what you have become. It is this which I must speak of."

"Speak plainly, Laith. I am tired of riddles and puzzles," John snaps.

"Very well. I have laid my hands upon you twice. The first, you were merely an injured man, and I did for you what I could. The second, I discovered that you have great powers, healing of others is only the smallest of these."

John frowns. "What?"

"How do you think that we know who is to be trained as a healer? One so gifted can sense the potential in another, even in one so small as a newborn infant."

"Huh. I hadn't thought about it at all."

"But now you know. You are stronger than my father, Neela, or any other that I have touched. This is a very great gift, but you have a responsibility to learn to control and use it."

"Crap." John is getting sick of finding another pothole to stumble into.

"I ask that you learn to control these powers within you, for remaining untrained is always dangerous for the gifted."

"How?"
"Without outlet, this will eat you from the inside, burning ever brighter, until you are consumed."

"Is that a wife's tale, a story to frighten children?" John asks waspishly.

Laith laughs, an infectious sort of laugh that has John smiling. "No, it is well-documented in the Avaxqaral. I am sure that Anbur is merely biding his time, until you are prepared to hear, but I do not think he truly understands your extreme potential."

John thinks back to the first few weeks after the escape from the temple, and feeling like he was about to burst out of his skin, the thrum and hum of something unidentifiable running through him like a wild current. It's not gone, it never went away, he only learned to ignore and sublimate the sensation. He lays his forehead on arms propped across his knees, and breathes deeply. Will this never end? Why him? Why didn't he just die like any other good soldier on the battlefield?

Laith lays a hand on his shoulder, but it's cool and gentle. "When you are ready." The hand is withdrawn, and John hears the swish of robes on the sandy flagstones as Laith retreats.

**Day One Hundred Seventy-Eight - Two Hundred Twenty-Seven**

The first teams rotate in and out in a flurry as the latest residents of N'villesem familiarize themselves and settle into their new homes.

Some of the residents with the necessary language skills and no business on the Daedalus, find minimal employment in the shops, or apprentice themselves in the local trades, though most work on the plans for improvements to N'villesem and their neighborhood.

Everyone is occupied for the moment, but once the Quarter is complete, or they get bored with the rote of daily labor, they'll be unhappy and possibly up to trouble. John makes a mental note of the likely suspects and urges Elizabeth to find ways to keep them entertained.

John falls into the daily patterns of the locals. Up well before dawn, work on what ever chore needs to be done until the hottest part of the afternoon and then nap until the evening, which is reserved for conversation and discussion through out the town.

Those that work are invited to the salons of the homes of their employers; the Ludahsediat is open for those that wish to join in, or there are the far more informal gatherings by the cool rush of the fountain and in the teahouse that John favors.

He uses the flow of people coming and going from the Quarter for these evenings out as cover to meet with Laith in secret, to assuage Laith's obvious concern. John spends futile hours attempting to get in touch with his inner healer. John's not a fool; he knows that if anyone figures out what he's trying to do, it will reopen the gap between him and the crew of the Daedalus, senior officer or not. He's not convinced that Laith is right, but he doesn't actually have that much to do in the evenings. Rodney's still at the ship, and John's other usual suspects for hanging out with are all caught up in the evening's affairs.

Not every evening is taken up with lessons, though. Occasionally John talks Laith into giving it a rest, so they can hang out in the teahouse, talking and drinking ekal with the locals. Evan joins them occasionally, when he's in town and not otherwise engaged for the evening.

**Day Two Hundred Twenty-Eight**

Rodney finally rotates in and proclaims that he's staying in town, until after their child is born.
Camping out has become too uncomfortable for Shaaziya, and he's not leaving her. The Daedalus' infirmary is better equipped, but N'vellesem is a cleaner, healthier environment. Cole works some deal with Beckett and Sodeburg to remain in town with Shaaziya, as she's reached a critical point in her confinement.

John's glad that Rodney's in town to relieve the monotony of the day's work. The best part is the rare circumstance when he talks Rodney into going to the teahouse one night, along with Laith. John couldn't pay for better entertainment.

Case in point.

After three glasses of ekal in quick succession, Rodney blurts out, "I think I have to ask Shaaziya to marry me. I mean, I want to, despite whatever might happen later, and there's an obvious deadline, but I don't know what I have to do, talk to her father? I don't care, Zuhair still scares the crap out of me."

"I think you're asking the wrong guy." John turns to Laith, "Hey. You're living with some girl, she's going to have a baby—what's the right way to ask if you should get married?"

Rodney yelps, "Sheppard!"

Laith just laughs. "You are already married. No need to ask!"

The look on Rodney's face is priceless. "Did he just say what I thought he said?"

"If you think he said you're already married, then yep." John throws back his glass of ekal and gives him an evil grin.

"How can I be married and not know it?" Rodney looks totally bewildered.

"Life's a bitch, McKay, although it does cut way down on the premarital sex problem. I guess I'm off the hook for the bachelor party, then?"

Rodney just glowers at John as he stands up. "Well, I guess I have to go talk to my wife about informed consent."

John hollers at Rodney's retreating back. "Yeah, though you probably should've had that conversation a few months ago!" He considers ordering another round, but decides against it. The ekal in town seems weaker, less potent than Tazim's, or else he's building up immunity to it. It's late, dawn is coming in a few hours, and tomorrow they're hanging power cables. He bids a good evening to Laith and follows Rodney home.

**Day Two Hundred Twenty-Nine**

Rodney's nowhere to be seen the next day. Normally he would be in the thick of it, but no one's seen or heard from him all day. John works through until the afternoon break, but when he stops by Rodney and Shaaziya's quarters, they're not at home. John catches Ted Collins, one of their physicist flat mates, in the common room. "Hey, have you seen Rodney, or Shaaziya?"

"Oh, I think he took her to the infirmary late last night; she wasn't feeling well. Might still be there. I haven't seen them."

"Thanks anyway." John's out the door before Collins can say anything else. It was probably counterproductive to be annoyed with the guy. Very few of the Daedalus crew knew about the
peculiar instability of pregnancy here on Dominat. John is still annoyed on Rodney's behalf that Collins didn't seem concerned.

Then again, if Rodney hadn't freaked out and caused a scene, maybe it isn't that serious.

The rooms assigned as an infirmary in the headquarters building are on the first floor. The door is open, and John sticks his head inside.

Rodney and his wife lay spooned together, his hand resting protectively across her swelling belly. John makes an immediate retreat, leaning against the wall outside the room, out of sight. It was almost too intimate, too sweet to bear.

It's just his luck that Paige opens the door directly across the hall. "John?"

"Rodney wasn't... I mean I didn't see him this morning, I was, uhm, concerned? I mean, I remember what you said."

"That's very kind of you. I think we're okay for now, Rodney was just being cautious. I wanted to keep an eye on her, and he didn't want to leave her alone."

"That's good. Well, I guess I'd better, uhm, get back to it."

Paige smiles at his verbal flailing. "I'll be sure and tell them you stopped by."

"Please don't. I'll tell him myself, later."

"Sure, John—you do that." She's grinning outright as he bolts for the exit.

Day Two Hundred Fifty-Nine

A few days after the third rotation, John stops in to see Anbur.

"Ah, John. Very nice, thank you for visiting. Everything is going well?"

"It's fine, great actually. We're doing okay. Thank you again."

"It is good. We benefit from your presence. I hear many English words now. What can I do for you today?"

John had noticed the trend, too, and thought it's an excellent sign that they are melding together for good or bad. "Nothing, I just wanted to stop in and say hello."

"Good! Very glad, please come anytime. Are your people preparing for tomorrow?"

"What is tomorrow?"

"It is one anam from your Landing Day?"

"Oh, I don't think anyone realizes that." John didn't think anyone, regardless of how well they were integrating, would want to commemorate that particular day. "I'll remind Elizabeth, see what she says."

"Perhaps you would like to join us? You have come to us, and we have much to celebrate, yes?"

John supposes that from their perspective, there should be a party of some kind. "I guess I'd better go give everyone a heads up."
As expected, only a few people feel like joining in the street party that has taken over the fountain square. All of the *viator*, and a small number of others, go with John, and they stay most of the night, drinking and dancing and conversing with their new neighbors.

**Day Two Hundred Sixty-One - Three Hundred Fifteen**

Though the annual rains in the desert are far lighter this *anam* than last, the crews rotating between the *Daedalus* and N'vellesem still grumble about the awful conditions aboard the ship. When they come in from the ship for the first time, they are glad to be in the town for about a week, until they realize how boring it is. One enterprising crewman manages to sneak in a portable television, which Elizabeth promptly commandeers for HQ. After that incident, on any given night, there's always a crowd gathered to watch the same DVDs they've seen over and over again, rather than get out and mingle with the rest of N'vellesem. John doesn't like it, but he lets it go, because everyone deals with being crashed in their own way.

The days seem to fly by more quickly with Rodney around to shake up the dull business of building a power grid for the Quarter. The houses in the compound are powered one by one, as more and more material is stripped from the *Daedalus* and brought to N'vellesem.

Rodney and Shaaziya are in the infirmary once or twice a week, and John's nearly quit panicking when it happens.

John's pretty sure that Laith is mistaken about the 'powers' that lay dormant inside him; he doesn't feel any different, and he's no closer to tapping into it than he was when they started the venture. The upside is that he's now able to completely ignore the embarrassment he'd experienced in Tobat, when Laith healed him.

**Day Three Hundred Sixteen**

Elizabeth arranges a community dinner when Colonel Caldwell finally comes to the Quarter. His face and arms are darkly tanned, but the top of his head is still pale when he's caught without his ever-present cap. It's a little ridiculous looking, but it doesn't mar his bearing or attitude.

John carefully relinquishes his duties as senior officer, when Caldwell firmly states that he'll go back the *Daedalus* only as necessary.

**Day Three Hundred Seventeen**

John is on his way into the infirmary to check up Rodney and Shaaziya, who were absent at dinner. Rodney hadn't shown up for work in the morning, either, causing him concern, but the sound of Caldwell shouting in the office brings him up short.

"I can't believe that you're even contemplating this, Elizabeth! What happens when Zuhair finds out? What happens if an assassin doesn't fail this time?"

"Anbur has assured me that won't happen, I'll be under his protection, not just a student, or an interloper."

"And how does he plan to do that? Why didn't he offer you this protection before?"

"Well, it was just a little early in our relationship to ask me to marry him!"

John decides that he really doesn't want to hear the rest of this conversation. Elizabeth has become
quite chummy with Anbur since their move to N'vellesem, but he hadn't realized their relationship has reached the point of marriage. He quietly slips past the open door and heads towards the infirmary. Shaking his head to dispel that idea, he knocks lightly on the open door to the infirmary.

Rodney and Shaaziya are awake. She's reclined against a huge mound of pillows that he's fussing with as he looks up at the sound. "Sheppard, come in."

John wanders into the room and stands at the foot of her bed. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"I feel very tired. The medicine makes me feel very unwell." Shaaziya does look tired; there are dark rings under her eyes.

This is why John only ever made strafing runs at the infirmary when one of his team, or the marines, or the scientists, for that matter, were bedridden; he just doesn't quite know what to say. He throws out a platitude, "I hope you get to feeling better. If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"Thank you, Quaralyn." Shaaziya glances over at Rodney, who glances at John and then frowns and shrugs a little.

Shaaziya nods, her eyes averted. "There is a thing I need you to do for me, for us."

"Sure, what is it?" He's pleased that she's at least speaking to him normally, even if she won't quite meet his eyes. John's expecting to be asked to do some menial chore, when Shaaziya asks, "Someone must go to Zuhair, and bring him to me. My time is nearly upon us; I do not know how much longer Dr. Cole can keep the child inside me, and Zuhair must be present."

He really wasn't expecting that he'd be asked to go to Ayse, though Shaaziya looks concerned, as if this were really important. He shakes his head in chagrin, but says, "Sure. I can do that."

Rodney apologizes, "I would go, but I just can't leave her here like this, what if something were to happen while I was gone?"

"I get it, Rodney. Yeah, I'll go."

"Soon, it must be soon." Shaaziya looks so pitiful, pale as she sags back onto the pillows, her hand resting protectively on her rounded stomach.

John thinks about it. It's already late afternoon, but really all he has to do is throw a couple of things in a knapsack. "Okay, I'll go tonight. Is there anything in particular that I need to say to him?"

Shaaziya smiles, her relief just as obvious as her concern of a few moments ago. "Say to him that my confinement is nearly at an end. He will understand."

"Okay, I guess I'd better go, and uh, then go."

"Thank you, Shepherd." Shaaziya covers her eyes with her hand, and attempts to bow in the bed, but she's too big and too well propped up to make it a broad gesture.

"I guess I'll see you in a couple of days, then." John turns to leave, and Rodney's out of his chair following John out the door.

"Colonel!!"
John stops in the hallway, and Rodney catches up. "I appreciate this, I know it's not the easiest thing in the world to go traipsing across the desert, but it's really important to her, so thank you."

"You're welcome, Rodney. So what's the deal?"

"It's like communion and baptism sort of rolled together, and traditional for the father of the mother to be present, and a couple of other weird religious customs all thrown in there."

John smiles at Rodney's blatant dismissal of conventions as he tries to reinforce their significance. "Okay, that helps."

"Seriously, thank you."

"Really, it's not a problem."

"Okay, I guess I'll see you when you get back."

John waves Rodney off. The argument between Caldwell and Elizabeth is either over or they've moved it to another venue; there's no sign of them as he passes the open door to the office.

John goes to see Laith, to tell him he was going to be gone for a few days. He's still sharing house with Neela, and John forgets and knocks on the door. Sheepishly, he enters immediately to find Neela sipping tea in the kitchen.

"Greetings, Shepherd. What brings you here so early?"

"Good day to you, too. I have to walk to Ayse tonight, and I wanted to tell Laith that I won't meet him for some days."

"Perhaps you would like company on your journey?"

John turns around and Laith is standing at the door. "Hey. You want to come with me?"

"Since Ayse has no healer, I was planning to journey there soon. I can go tonight as easily as another time."

"Okay, that's great. I'd like that."

"Very well." Laith crosses the room to kneel in front of Neela and takes her hands. "Blessed Mother, I will return in the passing of days. Be well." He kisses the palms of both of her hands, not as a lover, but with the gravity and solemnity of a ritual.

Neela closes her eyes and places her right hand on Laith's bowed head, and they hold the pose for a moment. John can feel something passing between them, just for a moment, but it's there, he gets it.

Neela takes her hand away and Laith stands. "I will go prepare for the journey, and return shortly." He brushes past Sheppard with a friendly bump of shoulders and disappears into the back of the house.

"Come child, what are you waiting for?" Neela gives him an expectant look.

John slowly crosses the room and falls to his knees before her, echoing Laith's position. He looks up at Neela, she's smiling as she holds her hands out, palm up. He takes her hands, one in each of his, they're thin, and the skin's dry and wrinkled.

He contemplates her hands as he holds them. There's a power here; he's seen them hold and heal
Elizabeth, traveling over her skin and body with such intimacy and compassion, that it was overwhelming. John's so grateful for that, he's swamped with feelings of tenderness and affection for this old woman who wields the power of life and death in her ancient hands. John carefully presses his lips to each palm, and then closes his eyes. Neela places her right hand on the top of John's head, and he can feel her power flow into him.

He looks up; her eyes are wide with surprise. "Forgive me, Quaralyn, I did not know."

John gently touches her cheek. "There is nothing to forgive, blessed mother. I understand now."

Neela gives him a cheeky smile. "And I understand. I thought you and Laith were merely lovers, hiding away from the world. I see that I was mistaken."

John's face flushes, he hadn't even thought of how it might look to others if he had been discovered, disappearing for hours at night with Laith. Neela slaps him gently on the shoulder. "Off the floor, you foolish boy."

He stands and moves away quickly, he can feel his ears still burning. He gives Neela a sheepish grin, and she laughs at his embarrassment. "Sit. There's tea enough for two, and Laith will be done soon enough."

She pours a glass of tea, steaming and fragrant, and John accepts the distraction gratefully. He wonders how many others have the same impression about him and Laith. Obviously he's going to have to work on his skills of deception, because it seems that he's losing his touch.

"You should have told me. Laith is well skilled, but I do not believe he has what you seek."

John is compelled to be honest with her, he owed her nothing less for the insight he's received today. "I was afraid, I didn't want anyone to know if I failed."

"It is that which causes you to fail. All of those with the healing touch know of this from infancy, you must relearn how to be fearless like a child." She pins him with a piercing glare, and John squirms under her appraisal. "You will succeed, Shepherd. Do not fear your success."

"I'll remember that."

To John's great relief, she changes the subject. "Why do you travel to Ayse?"

"Shaaziya has asked for her father, but Rodney cannot go. I go in his place to ask Zuhair to come to N'vellesem."

"Your doctor has done well, I have never seen one so afflicted hold the child within her so long. Zuhair will be pleased."

"I hope so."

"You mustn't fear Zuhair, for it is by his will that you were given this gift."

This shocks John. "You mean he did this to me? How?"

"No, child. Only that by his will you were struck down. It is Qaral that has given you this gift."

He supposes that's one way to look at it, though he wishes Zuhair hadn't done him any favors.

Laith returns to the kitchen, "I am prepared."
Neela wishes them a safe journey as they head back towards the Quarter. After Neela's remark, John reconsiders his intention to take only Laith to Ayse. He'd like to have someone at his back on the return, and a chaperone couldn't hurt. Paige snags Laith for some consultation, and John finds Evan in the dining room, where he's painting a mural of some of their adventures on the viat on the wall. "Whoa, nice. Didn't know you could paint."

"Mmm hmm. Since I was a kid." Evan glances up at him, and then turns back to the wall, adding a detail to the spire of the House of Makhuqat.

John casually leans against the door frame, hands in his pockets. "I was gonna ask if you wanted to get out of here and go to Ayse, but I can see you're busy."

Evan stands up and starts to clean his brushes. "I think there's something about a long journey, great danger and long odds of success, but I don't know if that's exactly right. More like long journey, hot sun, and what are we waiting for? But what the hell, why not? Sure."

John snickers. "Great. Laith's coming too, he's got some patients to see, or something. I figure we'd leave in a few hours?"

"Okay, let me pack it up, and I'll be ready."

"Sure. We'll meet back here."

"Okay, later."

John grabs a radio from the charger in the supply room, and then moseys down Main Street toward his quarters to pack. The street had a long, impossible to pronounce name in Peragro, but someone had slapped together a signpost and renamed it in a fit of linguistic frustration.

Rodney is waiting for him in the shade of the cool porch. "At last. Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you."

"Just gathering up my posse for the quick jaunt over to Ayse," John says sarcastically. "Why?"

"Oh, right. Well, I uh, wanted to give Zuhair this. As a present." Rodney hands him a small, exquisitely wrapped package.

John examines it, gives it a shake, wondering who had donated the Victoria's Secret tissue paper, and why the hell they'd had it. John's nearly writhing with glee over the cultural irony of it all, but he doesn't laugh out loud. "Nice. What is it?"

"It's one of the little ancient toys from Atlantis."

John raises an eyebrow; Rodney must have a case of those things. "I'm sure he'll like it. Oh, hey. I didn't see Elizabeth—make sure you tell her what's going on." More like he didn't want to find her.

Rodney rolls his eyes. "After that row, I can't imagine why not." He steps out into the sun, and then turns back. "Be careful, have a good trip."

**Day Three Hundred Eighteen**

The vegetation from the winter rains is completely gone, not even a stray tuft of grass is left on the shifting sand. They pass the *Daedalus* in the night, the huge edifice casting dark shadows on the sand in the bright moonlight of both Zieba and Aila. The standing water is gone, but John's so accustomed to the bone-dry air, that he can almost taste the left over humidity, smell the sharp
dampness of the sand.

They reach Ayse just before the sun reaches its zenith. The city gates are open, and as before, the drowsy bazaar is nearly empty in the midday sun. The few people that are out and about recognize John, and respectfully greet him.

The low buzz of devotion is back, but now John knows what it is: pure power, clean and almost refreshing, given to him freely. He's not afraid of it any more, it just is.

The temple arch sounds out their entrance to the courtyard, and John's suddenly wary and alert as they cross the broad plaza and climb the wide steps to the temple. Zuhair meets them at the door. "Shepherd, you grace us by your presence."

John might be comfortable with the feelings, but he's definitely not comfortable with the niceties. "Uhm. Nice to see you, too, Zuhair."

"Come, you are tired, and need of refreshment." Zuhair smiles at them, and John can't detect any trace of animosity or subterfuge. He's spent weeks with Zuhair in close proximity, but the temple and the fateful courtyard have John's internal alert system ratcheted up to DEFCON 4.

They follow Zuhair up to the same study in which Rodney and Shaaziya had camped out. It hasn't changed. John recognizes the Abnep that Zuhair signals to fetch food and drink.

"Please, be seated. Muntasir will return refreshments."

"Thanks." They shoulder off their packs and sit. "Zuhair, you remember Laith? He's the healer from Tobat, now in N'vellesem."

"I did not chance to meet you in Makhuqat, though you are most welcome in Ayse, Healer."

Laith dips his head down and hold it for a moment. "I come in aid of the sick and weary, and I thank you for your hospitality."

Zuhair matches Laith's gesture. "Those in need will come to you."

"I also come with a gift." John rummages around in his pack for the package, and hands it to Zuhair. "Dr. McKay sends you his greetings, and Shaaziya requests that you come to her; the end of her confinement draws near."

"I was curious to see if she would still hold to the old ways, with a nusqua as the father of her child."

"She was most insistent. You can open that now, if you like."

"Of course. This paper is very fine, I have never seen any so thin or beautifully colored."

John sneaks a glance at Evan. He recognizes the paper, and he's nearly apoplectic with the effort of not laughing out loud. John wags an eyebrow at him, and grins.

Evan puts his face in his hands and breathes deeply.

Zuhair figures out the tape—for God's sake, where did Rodney find Scotch tape—and pulls out the tiny music box, which begins immediately to tinkle out its odd, twelve-tone song, pulsing with aqua and amber lights. "Oh," he breathes softly. "It is most beautiful."

They listen to it for a minute or two, until Muntasir arrives with two servers trailing behind him.
Hot, moist towels are passed out, and the trays are arranged on the low table, and then the servants back out of the room, eyes averted.

John's just not ever going to get used to that, ever,

"Please, eat. Muntasir, the Quaralyn tells me my daughter is to give birth soon," Zuhair says as he pulls a strip off the flat bread.

Muntasir stops pouring the hot tea into the glasses, and looks at Zuhair, "She has not lost the child?"

John swallows quickly. "No, our rememdium has prevented that, so far."

"That is most amazing." Muntasir is obviously impressed.

A smile is playing at the edges of Zuhair's mouth. "Yes, it is. I have been invited to N'vellesem."

Muntasir raises an eyebrow, as he says dryly, "It must be a very great day, indeed."

Oh, hell. John exchanges an alarmed look with Evan, wondering what horrible faux pas he's just committed. This is why no one should ever send him on a diplomatic mission on his own.

They manage to finish the meal without Sheppard putting his foot in it any further. Muntasir and Zuhair ogle and play with the wrapping paper and the tschotchke equally, while discussing what Laith will require for his practice in Ayse.

Zuhair leaves them in the care of Muntasir, who settles them into rooms for resting, saying he must prepare for the journey.

John flops onto the bed. He's tired but not particularly sleepy. He decides it would be better to warn Elizabeth closer to evening. If he's causing some sort of religious incident, she'll probably want to know in advance.

He punches the pillow into submission and forces himself to relax, eventually falling to a light sleep.

~*~

John bolts up right at the sound, and for a moment he's flashing back to that moment, in that room. The peculiar quality of late afternoon light in Ayse is casting familiar shadows onto the worn carpet through the window grill. The white washed walls and shabby furniture are similar, but John's still dressed in his own clothing.

Evan's standing in the open door, "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

John runs a hand across his face and through his hair. "No, it's all right. This place still kind of gives me the creeps."

"I can imagine." Evan plunks himself down in the chair.

"So, what's up?"

"Nothing. I was thinking about going to the market, take a walk. Maybe take a bath."

"Yeah, not much else to do here. Sounds good. I just need to check in with Elizabeth, I didn't think it was that big of a deal."
"Yeah, I overheard Muntasir, apparently where Zuhair goes, so does his retinue. There's Muntasir and another guy, and a handful of servants."

"Great. We can clear out, let them have our place. Timmons and Lu probably won't mind—much."

"Yeah, good idea."

John gets the radio out and raises the *Daedalus*, and the comm tech on duty patches him through to Elizabeth in N'vellesem.

"*John, what's wrong? Where are you?*" Funny how a few months without constant radio contact can change a person's attitudes.

"Well, I sort of walked over to Ayse. I didn't see you when I left, so I told Rodney to tell you." John is going to *kill* Rodney. They've been safe and living like regular people long enough that the hard lessons are being forgotten.

"Ayse? No, he didn't mention it, but I've been occupied. What are you doing there?"

"Shaaziya said she had to have her father there, when the baby comes. I got the impression from Zuhair that it was a big deal. You might want to check with Anbur, find out how badly I messed up."

"Ah, I see." He can just hear ' *Oh, John* ' in the tone of her voice.

"Yeah, sorry. He's bringing two of his guys, and some servants. They can have our place, so you'll need to have the guys clear out our gear."

"Well, I'm sure that it will be fine, one way or the other."

"Thanks, Elizabeth."

"You're welcome. We'll take care of it. And try not to get into any more trouble, hmm?"

"Right. Sheppard out." He turns the radio off and jams it back into his rucksack. "Let's go find a drink and a bath."
Day Three Hundred-Nineteen

John and Evan's offer to clear out and give Zuhair their house is appreciated, but Shaaziya insists that Zuhair and his complement stay in their house, so Rodney's scientist roommates are evicted and relocated.

John finds it incredibly odd to have Zuhair hanging around the Quarter. For one thing, one of Zuhair's servants is actually a qerato, who insists upon singing the Qaroptimat litanies at dawn and dusk. Dissonant and harsh sounding, it clashes with N'vellesem's qerato's now familiar chant.

He discovers that the population of N'vellesem isn't as homogeneous as they'd believed; a small contingent of Qaroptimatia is flushed from the woodwork, and they tend to come and pray and worship with Zuhair.

John's not certain how he missed them. He should have been a tuning fork, or a dowser, feeling their devotions as he wandered about N'vellesem. When asked, Anbur launches into an explanation.

"Before viat, when Elizabeth was sick, Iqbal said he could not agree to hiding your gifts of Qaral?"
"Vaguely."
"Qaroptimat who hide their faith for protection are known to us as latenter; is part of their way. Peragroilla do not hide, that is why we could not agree to hide you."

"Ah. Thanks." Though it makes John feel better about what he gets from those who don't hide, they've crashed the small space of peace that he's carved out for himself in N'vellesem. He takes it as a challenge and generally manages to stay out of their way.

Shaaziya is happier than he's seen her in some time; she exudes an indefinable peace, though it comes to pass that Zuhair's stay is not as long as Dr. Cole would have liked.

Day Three Hundred Twenty-Two

John's working in the storeroom, storing tools and doing inventory. He's not worried about theft, per se, but they have a finite number of screwdrivers, pliers and other manufactured implements, and it's easy for someone to stuff that kind of thing in their pocket and forget about it.

He looks up as Elizabeth enters the room. "Elizabeth, what's up?"
"Shaaziya's in labor."

Elizabeth gives him a concerned look when John nods and goes back to sorting the pliers. "Okay."

She says in an insistent tone of voice, "Dr. Cole said the dose of magnesium sulfate she'd have to give her to stop it would be harmful, possibly deadly to the baby, so it's time,"

John cuts her off. "I said okay, Elizabeth. What do you want me to do about it?"
"Nothing. I just thought a little concern for your friend might be in order." Elizabeth's lips are
"Look, I'll finish up here and go hang around the infirmary door in a while. There's nothing else I can do. Me being there now or in thirty minutes, getting upset, or angry or happy, isn't going to change things."

"Fine." Her reply is sharp enough to cut glass as she spits it out.

John throws down the pliers, slams the lid shut on the toolbox as he turns to her and shouts, "Jesus, Elizabeth, what's the deal here? What do you want from me?" Tears are crowding in her eyes; she's trembling slightly, and her arms are crossed, hands clenching her elbows. She's not angry, but upset. "I'm sorry. Just... please stop crying."

She lifts a hand to wipe her eyes. "Yes, nothing to cry about. Everything will be fine," she says, adding an extra sharp twist of sarcasm.

"I'm sure that Cole will do everything she can for Shaaziya and the baby, and we just have to accept that. How's Rodney?"

Elizabeth chokes out a small laugh. "About like me, with a little manic thrown in."

John offers her a genuine smile as he takes a step towards the door. "Yeah, I can imagine. I'll be there in a few."

"Okay. Thanks, John."

He shakes his head at her back as she leaves. He wonders why Elizabeth felt the need to find him, and where the hell is Caldwell?

~*~

Fortunately, the infirmary door is closed when John drags a chair into the hallway to sit next to Elizabeth and wait. She lays her hand on top of his, and he relents, turning it over and squeezing it gently. She should have just told him that she wanted reassurance. They sit like that for a few hours, giving out updates as the crew stops in to check on the progress.

Eventually, Carson pokes his head out. "John, Zuhair's insisting that we fetch Neela."

"I can do that."

"Quickly now, there's a good lad." Carson abruptly closes the door.

John gives Elizabeth a surprised lift of his brow and disentangles his hand as he stands. "Back in a few."

John feels leaden from waiting, and Elizabeth's uncharacteristic outburst. He hadn't even realized that he was susceptible to the emotional resonance of his people; he'd thought it was restricted to faith or devotion of the indigents. He runs to expel his pent up energy, to override and wipe out that peculiar feeling.

Neela comes as requested, and John returns to the hallway. Caldwell's in the chair next to Elizabeth, saving John from having to snub her; he just couldn't bear to touch her right now. She doesn't seem to be taking much comfort from Caldwell's presence, though; they're obviously still fighting. John just leans against the wall, angled so that he doesn't have to meet her eyes.
Eventually he slides down to the floor, head resting on his arms crossed over his knees. John's done this before, waited for a friend's wife to give birth, but this time, it's quiet, no moaning or yelling.

They wait for hours, the room behind the closed door eerie and silent.

It's very late when Carson joins them in the hall. "John, Rodney's asking for you." The look on his face immediately says 'bad news', so John girds himself for the worst.

The atmosphere in the room is tense. Paige is standing back with her arms crossed and Shaaziya and Zuhair have matching stony expressions. Neela is sitting beside Shaaziya, with her eyes closed and her hand on Shaaziya's belly.

Rodney's openly crying over the tiny scrap in his arms, as he pets and fusses with her minuscule arms and blanket. He looks up at John with an expression of such grief and anguish that it tears through John. Rodney's broadcasting such powerful emotions that they throw John off balance, and tears spring to his eyes in instant empathy.

"She's having a hard time breathing. It was too soon and combined with the drugs...," he says raggedly.

John's seen Rodney through tragedy and terror, but he's never heard the sound of utter defeat in his voice.

"Here, you're her godfather, you probably need to hold her at least once, while she's..." Rodney swallows back his misery. "Well, here."

John accepts the precious, pathetic bundle with trepidation. He cradles her carefully, with her head on the palm of his hand, stroking her thin, damp skin gently with his thumb. The beat of blood in her temple is sluggish; her breaths are uneven and shallow.

He glances up to find Zuhair giving him an expectant look. Neela opens her eyes and just nods once. John closes his eyes, and bites his lip. He's never successfully tapped into the power that Laith insists is there, but remembers the intimate feeling of power flowing into him, Laith's healing touch and Neela's blessing.

He suddenly realizes that's the key, he's never really wanted to do this before, preferring to lock down, push away the pain of tenderness, avoid connecting to another human with such intimacy.

John slows his breaths, shallower and shallower, until they match those of Rodney's baby, concentrating on her need, and his excess of some indefinable force that's been prickling under his skin for months.

He's suddenly, wholly aware of how much power is within him, and the awful possibility that he could swamp her with it. He thinks of a faucet with a faulty washer, dripping slowly, one drop at a time, letting it trickle into her through the hot palm of his hand, his thumb gently stroking her temple.

John feels her stuttering breaths, sees the fragility within her lungs. He imagines repointing a brick wall, repairing the mortar, shoring them until her breathing evens into gentle regular breaths.

He opens his eyes and looks at the tiny miracle balanced on his hand. Her eyes are open and she's staring at him, taking in the brand new world, soaking up what she sees without understanding what it is.

God, he's never really understood the true meaning of childish innocence, but it's right there in her
eyes. John's voice is thick with transcendental joy, spilling out of him, manifesting in tears he doesn't bother to wipe away. He croaks, "Hello, Rania. Welcome to the world." He has no idea of why he calls her that, only that the flash of inspiration felt right.

John carefully puts Rania in her mother's arms and escapes. He's so open, all of his walls, his armor and shields are cracked open, all blasted away. He can't bear to be seen; he feels exposed and naked. He barely registers the shocked expressions as he leaves the room, whips past those waiting in the hall, out of the city, out into the desert—the mountains are too close, too cramped, he needs the wide open spaces because the thinks he might just explode with the force of what's inside him.

He runs. The sand is glowing in a riot of colors from the reflected aurora, and the pale pink light of Zieba and Aila, high overhead. He runs until his heart is hammering in his chest, and he's gasping for air.

He trips over his tired feet and face plants in the sand. Rolling onto his back, he scrapes the sand from his eyes and mouth, where it clings to the sweat and tears. He lies there, watching as the moons sink toward the horizon, and the aurora fades into the first glimmerings of dawn, trying to put himself back together, one shard after another, but he's too broken. He knows that he can pretend he's not, but he feels like he'll never be whole again, and that—more than anything—is what scares him the most.

Day Three Hundred Twenty-Three

John lies there in the sand of the desert for hours, his mind roaming, thinking back on every mistake he's ever made, every failure that has caused heartache for anyone who's ever been associated with him: his disappointed father, desperate for John to succeed and make something of himself; Holland, who had died upon the brink of rescue; waking the Wraith and causing a scourge across the entire galaxy; having to look Sumner in the eyes as he shot him dead; failing to take out the rogue 302 on the first try so that the Daedalus was stranded on Dominat; Kyle Swenson, a good kid with a good heart and he's gone, because John didn't take a stand against Caldwell, and worst of all, they're still stuck here, because John couldn't take the pressure of making a difficult decision.

As the searingly hot sun beats down on him, John thinks about getting up, but it seems like too much trouble. He's lethargic, exhausted and thirsty, and now more than any other time, he's run himself into the ground because he couldn't take to the air.

He wonders if this is it, if he's done now; the entire reason he's been returned from the dead is to save a single infant from certain death. He wonders what it meant, storing up and hoarding the devotion of so many to expend it so simply. He recognizes that dynamic immediately; he's merely a transformer station, taking in power in one form and releasing it another.

The sun is high now, merciless and intense, and even if none of it means anything, he's not quite willing to let go that easily. John rolls to his hands and knees, pushing himself into a kneeling position.

The hot wind has erased his tracks and John realizes that he has no idea where he is. He'd blindly run from N'vellesem in the dark, and there are no landmarks in the vast, featureless desert of shifting sand. He manages to get to his feet, and thinks east, at least east. The sand in his eyes scratches as he blinks, and when they begin to water, the tears sting his abused eyes.

He must be farther gone than he realized and he's hallucinating, because that can't be Rodney. The figure trudging through the sand shivers and wavers in the heat shimmering off the desert, though
he never disappears. John falls back to the ground in sheer, stark relief; he's never been so glad to see his friend.

He can hear the crackle of the radio in the distance, and Rodney talking into it. "Yeah, I found him. Probably, I can't tell, he's just sitting there. I'll let you know when I know."

John watches through gritty, burning eyes as Rodney approaches, putting away the life signs detector, boonie jammed on his head, and probably the last of his zinc oxide smeared across his nose. "Idiot," is all he says as he lands in the sand next to John and hands him a canteen.

He struggles with the cap, until Rodney takes it away and returns it to him open. John drinks all of it down in swift gulps, feeling the warm water travel down his gullet and curl in his stomach.

Rodney takes John's chin in one hand, and holds him still as he pours water over his face, washing away the sand that's crusted and dried in his eyes. He carefully brushes Johns closed eyes with his thumb, pushing the sand away. "I have more," he says as he pulls out a bandanna and wets it, draping it over John's neck.

"Yeah, thanks." John takes the second canteen and drinks more slowly as he mops his face and neck. Rodney pulls his pack off and digs through it and then hands John a cloth wrapped packet; John's hands tremble as he unwraps a pile of allmas nuts; Rodney's Dominat answer to the power bar. John gives Rodney a weak, tired grin.

"Heh, just eat."

John chews a few of the wrenchingly sweet nuts, but it's too much and he vomits all of it in the sand. "Sorry, I'm sorry," he whimpers.

Rodney just shoves sand over the mess. "Right now, you could throw up on me, and I wouldn't care." He hands John a third, open canteen, "Drink slowly." He pulls out the radio. "This is McKay. Uh huh, I don't think he's going anywhere soon. Right, will do." He shoves the radio back in a pocket, digs through the backpack again and pulls out one of the little lean-tos they'd used on the viat. "Couldn't bring the supports, so we'll have to make do." He stands and shakes it out over them, shading the two of them from the sun.

John's painfully aware that he's in trouble. His sunburned skin feels dry and cracked, he's dizzy with nausea and self-loathing, that Rodney had to come rescue him from his own idiocy. Even though it makes him queasy, he forces himself to sip the warm water and nibble on the allmas. It's a while before he gets the nerve to ask, "How's the baby?"

Rodney smiles, and his face lights up with pride and joy. "Rania is, well, it's a... Thank you. It was the best and worst day ever—and we've had a lot of those. Had I not seen it for myself, I would've counted it as voodoo, and I'm still not certain that it wasn't. But you saved my life—my daughter, Sheppard—and then forced me out in the desert to save yours. Again."

John knows this peeved/relieved tone, and he's grateful that Rodney's not asking all the questions that John can't answer. "You don't have to call her that, you know."

"Oh no. It was made quite clear to me that I do. Not that I mind, it's a very pretty name, but it's the Quaralyn's prerogative, apparently."

John grimaces, "Uh, I didn't realize."

"Sheppard, she's alive because of you—if you called her Dogshit, I wouldn't care. Well, maybe I would."
John chuckles. "If I'd done that, you'd have probably left me out in the desert."

"No, I'd be out here to kick your ass." Rodney unexpectedly touches John's face. "You're not sweating. Do you feel lightheaded? Dizzy? When was the last time you peed? Christ." He's back on the radio, "McKay here, get me Carson. Then Paige, I don't care, Elizabeth, he's got heat stroke." Rodney pins him with a glare. "Well, go on, can you pee? Can you even stand up to pee? If you say you're fine, I will take you down. Not that it would take much."

John returns the glare with interest, but crawls out of the shade and manages to urinate a weak, dribbling stream. He judges the height and angle of the sun. Couple more hours to sundown. He hadn't realized how long he'd lain in a daze, out in the sun.

Back under the shelter, he asks, "How long did it take you to find me?"

"Nearly six hours. Keep drinking; short of an IV it's all we can do. Hopefully Evan will find us soon. He's got more water."

It's already dusk before Evan shows up, and they start the long walk back to N'vellesem, John carefully propped in between the two of them.

**Day Three Hundred Twenty-Four - Three Hundred Thirty-One**

The days after Rania's birth are a tribulation. Carson keeps him in the infirmary for a couple of days, and by the time he's released, the rumors of what had happened are flying thick and fast. John's used to being watched. People have always let their eyes linger on him, but the return of the open staring and the whispers is difficult to take. His shattered defenses make him excruciatingly aware of the ugly, emotional currents swirling around him, and they leave him uneasy and feeling sick.

There's a definite divide among the Quarter, between the seasoned SGC personnel, who've seen and done extraordinary things, and those who were slated as new recruits for Atlantis. The latter are generally bitter and unhappy that they've left Earth for an adventure in the City of The Ancients, but were marooned en route in a hellhole. After the viat, and during the few months of their inhabitation of The Quarter, the gap between the two had lessened and been slightly smoothed over, but this incident has broken it wide open again. His cover of being one of them has been completely blown. He's not, and hasn't been for a while, even though he's still just John Sheppard.

He can't quite reconcile those two things, so John does what he's always done best. He retreats; spending afternoons with Rania, while Rodney and Shaaziya rest and recuperate, and evenings with Laith, lately returned from Ayse. John's capabilities grow by leaps and bounds every day.

The tension among the work crew is unbearable, so he just stops showing up.

The third day of his strike, Elizabeth knocks on his door. "John, we need to talk."

"Elizabeth." He mentally sighs as he puts his book aside. "Come in, have a seat."

She perches on the edge of the chair, hands folded in her lap.

"What can I do for you?"

"Let me start by saying that I'm sorry."

"Okay." John wonders if Elizabeth really understands what she put into motion so long ago, with
her decision to study the *Avaxqaral*.

"I haven't managed this very well, but I'm working on it. We were away so long, and then busy with surviving, that I haven't taken the time deal with the larger, overall issues."

He's truly curious. "Okay. What's the big picture?"

"You're still one of us, Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard, and I think that fact is being overlooked, gotten lost. I can't even imagine what you've gone through, but we have a responsibility to make sure that you have our respect. Your position as the Quaralyn demands that we respect that, for if we don't, we lose the respect of everyone else on this planet."

So she *doesn't* really get it. "Whoa, Elizabeth—"

"No, let me finish. You're also the victim here, and blaming you is tantamount to blaming a rape victim for culpability. That's what's going on, and I intend to put an end to it."

"Huh." John hadn't thought about it in exactly those terms, but he has a secret that Elizabeth doesn't know, and that *does* make him guilty. Guilty as hell, and that trumps all of Elizabeth's assumed culpability on his behalf.

"I also don't care about the work crew. It's basically make work, to give everyone a goal and to keep them occupied. I do care that you're hiding away, and avoiding dealing with people. It gives the appearance that you're accepting the blame that some seem to want to assign to you. Don't be their scapegoat."

John looks away; he's conflicted, wants to put all of this on her cavalier decision, but he *is* accepting the blame; he deserves it, though she doesn't understand why, and he can't tell her. They're both angry and upset, and it's upsetting the fragile balance he's finally struck. He can't look at her, lest he shatter once more.

"I think, and Anbur agrees, that you should go back to the *Ludahsediat*."

He thinks about that for a moment, recalling those few weeks of almost blissful, settled peace amid the chaos of being shipwrecked. "I could do that."

"Good. You begin tomorrow, class starts early."

John chuckles wanly. "Yeah, I remember."

**Day Three Hundred Thirty-Two - Three Hundred Forty Five**

'Class' turns out to be unfettered access to the *Avaxqaral*. John discovers that as Anbur's 'wife', Elizabeth can study the database without fear of repercussions; it's strictly a business relationship, though they are obviously great friends.

He and Elizabeth spend days combing through the database, finding subjects that interest them, or in John's case, that could have strategic value. John also gets the data tablet from Rodney and downloads the ship's logs from *Makhuqat* into a hidden section of the database that only he has access to. There are still many thousands of years of data to vet.

It's quiet and comfortable. Anbur spends time every day answering questions and discussing what they've learned, and Elizabeth is sworn to secrecy about John's facility with Ancient, though it's hardly a secret anymore.
John's still putting himself back together; he's not sure that he'll ever be the same, for various values of sameness. He's already changed, but this brief measure of peace gives him the space he needs. He can feel the edges of his broken shell, the changes within himself, and he knows that it's only a matter of time, before he peels away the flaking crust to complete his transformation.

When he tires of sitting and reading, he slips into the back of a class, or takes a walk. N'vellesem isn't Atlantis, never will be, but there's a sense of home and acceptance here that he's grateful for as he walks through the market, returning the sunny smiles and greetings of his fellow townspeople.

**Day Three Hundred Forty-Five**

One afternoon, after 'class' is released for the day, John's browsing the few shops still open for the afternoon. He hears his name being shouted from across the bazaar and he jogs to meet Evan halfway. "What's going on?"

"Wraith, sir. Hive ship's in orbit, and the darts are coming."

His decision is made in an instant; he has no other choice. The few 302s left have a limited supply of fuel that hasn't been contaminated by the flood, and the *Daedalus* is still under repairs. "Come on." They take off at a dead run.

The scene at Headquarters is chaos. Virtually everyone is crowded around the building, jamming the doorways with worried expressions as they babble their fear to their companions.

John roughly shoves his way through the mob, not caring who's in his way. Evan is right behind him, like a ship behind a cutter in an ice flow. The office is even more packed, filled with marines and off duty pilots trying to get beamed over to the *Daedalus*.

Rodney, Elizabeth and Caldwell are at the heart of it, sorting through people and assigning them priority.

"Rodney, you have to get me to that ship." John ignores Caldwell and Elizabeth's questions, intently focusing on Rodney.

He shakes his head. "Can't beam you that far, Colonel, you know that."

"Then get me to the *Daedalus*." John wills Rodney to understand the plan without blowing it wide open.

Rodney gets it, and he nods nervously, "Yeah, good plan."

"I'm going with you, sir." Evan's right at John's shoulder, with a firm, serious expression on his face.

John gives him a questioning look.

"Sir, it was obvious that something happened in Makhuqat, and whatever it is that you're about to do, you probably can't do it alone."

He's right, and John knows it. He could probably use an entire crew, but he's already planning on taking one of the 302s out of the immediate battle, and they have none to spare. "Yeah, come on."


"Wraith, sir. Hive ship's in orbit, and the darts are coming."
John and Evan step into the ring, and Rodney thumbs his radio. "Hermiod, go."

The room dissolves and resolves into the ring room aboard the *Daedalus*. Evan's already moving. "There's a hangar queen they put back together that'll fly, but just barely."

They run out of the ring room and slide down ladders in access hatches, nearly skidding off the end of the hangar bay in a controlled fall. One 302 is already in the air, streaking toward space.

Evan points to a broken down craft at the edge of the makeshift runway, and the LSO yells, "Sir! There's no missiles on this one!"

"Yeah, that's fine—won't need 'em." The ground crew pulls over scaffolding to the craft, and they climb aboard. Evan takes second seat, and John does a quick preflight as he starts the craft, noting which systems are down, and that there's barely enough fuel to get them where they're going. "Radar's out, so we're gonna fly blind."

The flagman signals that they're clear, and John pours on the gas. It rolls sluggishly in the soft sand, and he can barely see for the billowing, dirty clouds of dust they're kicking up.

John pulls up the nose and fires the afterburners to get them in the air. He stays at low altitude, relying on VFR, hoping to stay out of the way of any firefights that could prevent them from getting to their destination.

He might get lost on the ground, but in the air John knows exactly where they're going. He adjusts his heading as they cross over the mountain range, keeping an eye out for landmarks.

Compared to weeks of journeying on foot, they arrive at *Makhuqat* in the blink of an eye. John lands the 302 at the edge of the plateau, and there's a few, last *viator* hanging around the temple.

He yells at them to head for Halavasan, that the building is about to explode as they make for the door to the temple. He doesn't wait to see if they're running; they'll get the message once things start to rock and roll.

The door slides open easily, and John can hear the mental chorus of the 'jumpers 'welcome, welcome' as they swerve towards the control room.

"Holy crap, Sheppard. I knew something was up, but what the hell is this?"

John's already stationed at the main control panel, starting the engines that grumble after ten thousand years of immobility. "It's Qaral's ship, the one that brought their ancestors here. Take this panel, engine levels and power. There's a spare ZPM if it looks bad."

Evan takes control of the monitor. "No wonder McKay was pissed at you. Will it fly?"

"We think so, the systems checked out, but there's really only one way to find out." He's pretty sure that the temple isn't directly on top of the ship, and that all they have to do is escape out from underneath hundreds of tons of sand and earth and rocks.

*Makhuqat* shudders and groans, and the pitch of the engine's whine screams higher and higher as they struggle to free the ship from its underground prison. "The temperature around the hull is heating up, the engine exhaust is melting the sand, but that makes it more fluid. I just hope that it doesn't melt the hull."

Finally, they explode free in a massive burst of flaming glass and air, the temple sinking and falling over into the crater of melting sand. John finds the intra-ship communications system and
turns it on. "Take over here. Thrusters, altitude, attitude, roll, pitch and yaw," he says as he points out the controls. "I'm going to the chair, see if we can take that fucker out."

Evan calls out as John reaches the chair room. "We can't break atmo, there's a hull breach."

John races to the engine room, and manages to close the open hatch. "What's the reading now?"

"No good, we're still venting."

"See if you can close off the bulkheads, seal off those sections, I'm going back to the chair."

John sits down and reclines back, but he gets the answer before Evan finds the controls. "It's no good, the hull's leaking like a sieve. Just keep us breathing, Lorne."

"Yes sir, leveling off."

As John connects to the ship's defense systems, a holographic display shimmers into view overhead. It's many orders higher than a gun slaved to a helmet, but it doesn't take John long to take control and begin loosing the drones towards the hive ship, and the darts that are swarming the planet.

The Hive is shielded, obviously word had gotten out that there is resistance from the herd on Dominat. John concentrates on wielding an overpowering force against the enemy ship.

Evan advises him in a clipped, business-like voice. "We've got three bogey's headed our way."

"I've got them." John's eyes are fixed on the holograph above him. "See if you can hail the Daedalus, I don't want them to mistake us for enemy combatants."

"Where is, oh. Daedalus, this is Major Lorne aboard the Makhuqat, our position is, crap what does that say?"

The radio tech replies, completely bewildered. "This is Daedalus, Major Lorne, we have something on radar. What is that?"

"Roger, Long story, but that's our vessel. Advising that we're unable to gain altitude above uh, wait- yeah, seven kilometers. Will maintain this course for four minutes, then initiate grid pattern Delta Zero."

"Roger that. We'll tell our boys to stay out of your way. Daedalus out."

Evan leaves the comm open to the chatter channel, and then executes a ninety-degree turn to starboard right on schedule. They can hear Caldwell's insistent hailing, bellowing questions that they don't have time to answer.

John concentrates on the Hive, but spares attention to take down any dart stupid enough to tangle with the drones. Eventually the Hive explodes in a very satisfying manner, and he directs his full concentration on the darts, which are going down in flames, right and left.

After all the visible darts are dispatched, Evan swings into an orbital pattern to search for strays. A couple of darts have already landed, and while John destroys the darts, they track the coordinates for a search and destroy mission when they ascertain that there are Wraith on the ground.

John joins Evan in the control room. "Daedalus, this is Sheppard."

"Daedalus here. Go Colonel."
"Sending coordinates to you of possible Wraith incursions. What's the complement of Marines on-site?"

"Data is coming in now. Olander and two fire teams are here and ready to deploy, sir."

"Good, clear the decks. We'll land in ten, and have Olander get them ready to scramble. Is Hobeck back yet?"

"I'm tracking Foxtrot Alpha, landing in six minutes."

"Tell him to not get too comfortable, and to meet me at the Makhuqat when we land."

"Roger that. Foxtrot Alpha, the party is not over. Stand by for Colonel Sheppard as he lands."

"Is Dr. McKay on-board?"

"No sir, he's still at headquarters."

"Patch me through, please."

"Yes sir."

John hears the crackle of abused electronics and the comm tech clearing the channel. "Sheppard!"

"McKay, I need another jumper pilot, and two more Marine fire teams."

"It worked?"

"Yeah, but we sort of broke the ship. You up to ferrying Marines?"

"Yes, but..."

"Great, I'll pick everyone up outside the gate in thirty. Get moving, McKay. Sheppard out." John cuts off Rodney's squawk. "Okay, so how do we land this thing?"

Evan gives John a sideways glance, and then his eyes flicker back to the board.

"Just kidding, Major. Sort of."

They manage to put the Makhuqat in the LZ several hundred yards from the Daedalus with a mere, jarring thump. John meets Olander and Hobeck halfway to the Daedalus. He tasks Olander with making sure that each of the puddlejumpers is stocked with extra ammunition and weapons and then drags the pilot back to Makhuqat. "Come on Lieutenant, time to get a quick flying lesson."

John gives Hobeck and Lorne a quick run down of the puddlejumper controls, instructs them to stay with the 'jumpers, and then sends them on their way with four-man teams that are armed to the teeth.

He takes one of the last two puddlejumpers on the short hop to N'vellesem, landing smoothly just outside the main gate to the town. John lowers the hatch; McKay's first up the ramp, and he immediately takes the copilot seat, followed closely by eight Marines who squeeze into the back. John raises the hatch and takes off, speeding back to the Daedalus.

"Okay, what do you mean, you 'sort of broke the ship'?"

"It was buried for centuries, Rodney. It was hard to break loose."
"We thought that might happen."

"Yeah. I downloaded the coordinates in your 'jumper to where your team's going. You just need to fly them there, don't get in their way. Stay in the jumper with the hatch closed."

"I'm just the taxi driver." Rodney sounds unaccountably happy about flying marines into hand-to-hand battle with Wraith. John glances at him, and Rodney's grinning. "Puddlejumpers."

"Damn straight." John can't help but grin, too: he's flying.

They land between the two ships. John chivvies Rodney and his team off to the other puddlejumper, and helps Olander and the Marines to load the materiel in the back. He takes off again, checking in with the other 'jumpers to make sure they're copacetic.

Once they've reached their objective, John grabs the remote from the cubby that opens with a thought, suits up and heads out after his team.

Dusk is falling fast, but fortunately this Wraith is easy to track without a life signs detector. They just have to follow the path of his victims, John counts six already. This guy is going to be a bitch to kill.

Fortunately, their tactics work this time without any serious injuries, making sure that its self-destruct goes off before they check out the destroyed house. John takes a moment to verify with the residents that this was the only Wraith in town, before heading off to their next objective.

The puddlejumper sensors find a lot more downed Wraith than they'd figured on, and so it goes, all night.

**Day Three Hundred Forty-Seven**

By dawn the next day, the puddlejumpers are circling the entire planet in a coordinated search pattern, but no more Wraith are found. John is elated, he's flying, and they have successfully fended off a Wraith attack, all without injury or loss.

Hobeck, Lorne and their teams are already on the ground when John lands. They greet John's team with laughter and backslapping, and a cheer goes up as Rodney lands with all the grace of a goony bird.

Rodney's team pours out of the 'jumper, and the Marines head for the ready room aboard the *Daedalus*.

"I'm going to check on Rodney, see what the hold up is." John points a thumb in the direction of the 'jumper.

"Sure. Catch you later." Evan gives Cory another pat on the shoulder and leaves it there, pushing him towards the *Daedalus*.

The interior of the 'jumper is still cool, the lights are off and Rodney is sitting in the pilot's chair, hands on the controls as he stares at the HUD, scrolling through pages of data and schematics.

John slouches next to him, swinging around to face Rodney. "What's up?"

"I was just thinking about Atlantis. Wondering how they're doing, if Swenson ever made it there."

It's better to not think about Atlantis; better to not think of all the disasters that could befall their
city on the sea, or the heavy cost of losing Daedalus and her precious cargo of people and supplies. "Yeah."

Rodney quickly shuts down the HUD, and leaves the ship. John follows him out, closing the hatch behind them.

~*~

"I'm extremely disappointed by your unilateral decision to keep the Makhuqat a secret, that you didn't trust us to be able to reach a reasonable accommodation and consensus in the matter."

Elizabeth's hands are clenched together on the table. Caldwell is beside her, the first sign of their solidarity that John's seen since Caldwell's arrival in N'vellesem.

The door opens behind John and Rodney throws himself into the chair next to him, openly daring them to throw him out with a truculent glare.

Caldwell gives him a frosty look. "Dr. McKay, as much as I'm sure we'd appreciate your point of view, this is none of your business."

"The hell it's not. I was there; I agreed that it would be our dirty little secret."

"Very well, Doctor. Perhaps you can explain; Colonel Sheppard hasn't been particularly forthcoming."

Rodney gives John an incredulous look. "No, of course he hasn't."

John gives Rodney a vague lift of a shoulder. There's nothing that he can say that's going to change their minds; he'd seen this coming, no matter how he handled it. They probably have every right to doubt his judgment.

"Do you have any idea of who Sheppard is?" Rodney's question is almost conversational as he leans forward in his chair towards Caldwell.

"I had thought that he was a valued member of our expedition, an Air Force officer with certain expectations of loyalty and duty." Caldwell pins John with a cool stare, and John knows, he knows, he's pissing off Caldwell as he returns the stare without flinching.

As if he can't bear to remain still, Rodney almost leaps out of his chair, arms waving. "No! I was right, you don't have a clue, even though all of this has happened right under your nose!"

John growls in a low voice. "Rodney, I don't think you're helping."

"What? You think that I'm just going to let you sit there and take this? Let them accuse you and not say a word in your own defense? No, this is wrong." Rodney stops and leans over the table, hands flat and voice low. "You were all for exploiting John, insisting that it was to your advantage for him to go to Makhuqat, pretend and playact as your tool in manipulating the beliefs of these people. Well, guess what—that plan backfired. The viat was hell for him, for all of us; we had to watch him suffering, absolutely miserable the entire time. Elizabeth, I can't believe that you'd conveniently forget that, as you sit here piously raking him over the coals for doing exactly what you expected: become the Quaralyn, and everything that entails."

Elizabeth eyes are cast down, hands still and tightly clasped together. Caldwell is staring at Rodney, his face twisted in a sour, furious expression. "Perhaps if the Colonel had seen fit to inform us of the ship's existence Doctor, we wouldn't be here having this discussion."
Rodney nearly implodes with the effort to contain his fury. "Oh, what?! Now you're suggesting that we had the right to destroy a religious monument, steal the power source for their single most important historical artifact? The basis of every religious conviction? Wreak havoc with an entire planet's delicately balanced peace, just because we were a little *homesick*? That any technology is ours for the taking, because we understand it better? How *American* of you—its no wonder he couldn't tell you!"

Elizabeth hotly defends her position, "We don't know that, Rodney. I don't know, because we were never given the opportunity to have that discussion!"

"I can't believe this, you two can't even decide what you're mad about; how the hell were you going to make a decision for all of Dominat?" He shakes his head in pure disbelief, and then stomps to the door.

Rodney turns back to Elizabeth. "It wasn't your discussion to have, Elizabeth. John is the *second coming* to these people, and *that* gives him the right to make that decision." Rodney leaves the door open when he walks out.

John figures that's as good a sign as any, and he leaves without looking back.
Day Three Hundred Fifty

John is treated with scorn, open fury and dark looks from people who believe that they could have gone home; the malevolent emotions feel like a dagger to his heart. He gets it; Jesus, he gets it. He feels bitter and guilty when anyone that shows him the least bit of solidarity is treated to the same lingering, dirty looks and ill treatment.

Elizabeth seems to have forgotten her inspiring speech about victims, and the rumors and gossip flow unchecked. John's never assaulted outright, but the antagonizing snubs and shoulder checks from certain disaffected individuals increase, until Shaaziya is nearly knocked down, Rania in her arms, as they're leaving Headquarters.

John catches her before she stumbles down the stair. "Are you alright?"

Shaaziya, trembling with fear, only shakes her head.

John makes sure that she gets home without any further incidents, but he's angry, more furious than he's ever been. Something has got to give, and it's becoming more obvious to him exactly what that something is—him.

It's late when Rodney finds John at the teahouse many hours later. His face is white with fury and his mouth is a tight slash. He scrapes the chair hard across the stone floor, and plunks down into it, arms crossed.

John waves at Fakih for another glass for Rodney. He's had more than a couple of short glasses of ekal, and he's starting to buzz. "I take it that you heard?"

"Yes. Shaazziya's terrified, and I'm about two seconds from overloading the naquadah generator. She wants to go home, Sheppard."

John gives Rodney a solemn look. "That's probably the best thing to do."

"What are you going to do?" Rodney accepts the tiny glass from the barkeep and takes a sip.

"Something along those lines. I haven't exactly decided, yet."

"I know that it's not your favorite place, and God, I don't really like it much either, but if you wanted to come..."

"Thanks Rodney. I'll think about it." John recalls Laith's warning about the Qaroptimat, and he gives a little shudder. No, Ayse was not where he wanted to end up.

"So. I was hoping that I could, since it's a long walk and we have the baby, if we could you know, get a lift?"

"Of course, Rodney." John is horrified that Rodney thought he had to ask for a ride. "When did you want to leave?"

Rodney thrusts his chin up defiantly, as if he's expecting an argument, "Now. We're done here."

"Okay." John tosses back the last shot. "Let's go."
"I'm too angry right now to talk to her, but Elizabeth will need to know we've bugged out."

"I'll make sure she gets the message."

~*~

It's childish, but John can't think of any better way to impress upon the expedition that they didn't have a superior claim to the uncovered technology of Makhuqat, simply because they were accustomed to having it.

He and Rodney move the puddlejumpers to the south of the city, outside the wall, and cloak them. John pockets all the remote controls, until he can decide what to do with them, or his point is made. He helps gather up the few things that they intend to take with them. When they're done, John takes a last look around the room before they slip out into the night and fly away.

John takes the long way, detouring to Halavasan to show Rodney the crater that Makhuqat left. The new slag around the edges shines brightly in the moonlight, the aurora reflects the sharp shards of glass. The deep hole is partially filled with the broken remains of the temple wall that fell in when the foundation flew away. John squats down and picks up a piece of glass, tosses it in. It shatters on landing, the sound weak in the distance. "Damn big hole."

"Nearly two hundred feet."

"Yep." John knows he's delaying the inevitable. Rodney's not really going to be that far away—it shouldn't be any different than the months they'd been separated after the flood, but this is permanent. John feels desperately afraid that he's about to be cut loose from his mooring. Even during the brief time that he'd been distant and avoiding Rodney, he'd still been there. They've been companions through all of their travails since coming to the Pegasus Galaxy, and Rodney is staunch and reassuring in his own unique manner.

Eventually they hear Rania fussing in the puddlejumper. John reluctantly stands and bumps shoulders with Rodney. "We should probably get this over with."

Rodney's eyes glint in Aila's pale light. "You know that if it was just me, I would've stayed."

"I know. Don't worry about it; I'll be fine."

Rodney chuckles, a thick, wet sound. "Right."

"Come on, Shaaziya probably thinks we fell in."

Rania's really crying when they walk up the ramp; deep, heart-wrenching and inconsolable sobs that Shaaziya can't comfort. Rodney immediately sits next to them, slipping his arm behind Shaaziya, and petting Rania.

John automatically reaches for Rania, and Shaaziya hands her off with the particular despair of a new mother unable to soothe her child. He cradles Rania close to his chest, a hand on the back of her head, whispering nonsense as he buries his nose in her fluffy hair. "It's alright, shh."

He stands there clutching Rania with his eyes closed as his bitter tears dampen and mat her hair. She quiets down, but the hiccupping sobs continue unabated. He hears a rustle, the chair squeaks and the jumper powers up. He looks up at Shaaziya, and she nods.
John wipes his eyes on his sleeve, before he takes the second chair in case Rodney needs directions to take them home. As he sits, he's still clutching Rania close to his chest.

**Day Three Hundred Fifty-One**

John steals back into N'vellesem as the eastern sky is beginning to pale, the coming dawn turning the sky behind the Ayse Mountains a dark violet.

Evan is still asleep when John begins to pack quietly. There isn't much, mostly clothing, a few books and his trainers, and it all goes into the knapsack.

"Whatcha doing?"

John startles and whips around. "I thought you were asleep. I was trying not to wake you."

"Yeah, I got that." Evan scrubs a hand over his eyes as he swings his feet out of bed.

John dumps his backpack on the floor and sits on his bed facing Evan. "I took Rodney and his family to Ayse."

"Doesn't surprise me. Flintoff got a thumping for that, by the way."

"No, don't—"

"Wasn't me—some of the Marines thought he needed a serious lesson in courtesy. I just heard about it."

John takes a deep breath, as he captures a lip with his teeth, worrying at it as he considers his explanation. "That's why," he waves in the direction of his pack, "This. I can't let it devolve into a riot, and I can't figure out any way to deal with it, other than getting out."

"John, there's got to be some other way..."

"It's been coming for a long time, Evan. This was just the icing on the cake."

"Yeah. Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd head over to Neela's for a few days. Talk things over with Anbur."

"You want some company?"

"Nah." It's one thing to voluntarily go into exile from exile, but John doesn't think it's fair to ask Evan to do the same, even though he isn't going very far away, yet.

John fully intends to skulk out of the Quarter under the cover of darkness, and dawn is fast approaching. "Well, I'd better go."

Evan stands up as John grabs his pack and heads for the door. "John." They shake hands, and Evan draws him in for a half hug. "Good luck. Don't be a stranger."

"You too."

John drops his pack by the open door and greets Neela and Laith. They're in the kitchen, the stout teapot still steaming and steeping as he slides into a chair.

Neela pours a glass of tea and slides it over to him. "You are here very early, Shepherd."
"About that." John toys with his glass, avoiding their eyes. "I wanted," he pauses to re-frame what he needs to say. He looks up, searching their faces for any sign of pity as he continues, "I would like to ask if I could stay here, for a measure of days. The situation in the Quarter is very bad. I had to take Dr. McKay and his family away to Ayse last night."

Neela smiles widely. "Yes, but you must study, learn the ways of healing."

John had known since Rania's birth that he was headed in this direction; otherwise he would have gone to Anbur, or old Fakih at the teahouse. "Okay."

~*~

From his vantage point across the street, John watches Elizabeth leave the Ludahsediat amid the few day students. He waits until she's turned the corner and disappears before he strolls in to find Anbur.

"Hey."

Anbur's still in the classroom, his desk buried with piles of thick, rough paper. "John, please come in."

"I guess Elizabeth told you?" John drags a student chair over and sits in front of Anbur.

"It was mentioned." Anbur watches John, those startling gray eyes taking in everything.

"I came to bring you these." John puts the four remotes on the desk. "They're for the little ships—we call them puddlejumpers. I left them on the south side, outside the city, but you can't see them, they're invisible."

Anbur studies him a few moments, before leaning back in his chair. "Why do you bring me these?"

"You're a fair man, Anbur, and you've been a good friend. These are not ours; they belong to everyone. You should do with them as you see fit."

"So I am your middleman? Neutral party?"

"If you like."

"Hhhm." Anbur picks up on of the remotes and studies it closely. "I should like to see one of these invisible ships." He laughs loudly at his own joke, and John smiles.

"We can do that."

"Very well, let us not wait a moment longer."

As they walk, Anbur picks up the conversation. "Elizabeth is concerned about your, and Dr. McKay's, disappearance."

"There was an incident yesterday, Shaaziya was nearly pushed down. She was badly frightened, and wanted to go home."

"And you?"

"I'm bunking in with Laith. It was time I learned more about this thing, this power."

"It will not remain a secret that you are there, word will spread."
"I didn't expect that it would." John stops; he can see where the wind has pushed the sand against the jumper's landing gear, leaving oddly shaped, low drifts. He takes one of the remotes and shows it to Anbur. "There's only one button, but you just have to think about what you want to happen. Like this."

He points the remote and one of the jumpers shimmers into existence.

Anbur grins widely as John hands him the control. He points it like a sword, eyes squinting in the brilliant afternoon. The 'jumper disappears in a wrinkle of light, and Anbur laughs with delight. "I have studied the Avaxqaral my entire life, I have visited Makhuqat every anam, but this remote, I have never found."

"They were hidden, you had to know it was there to get it. It was probably so common, the Ancients never thought to mention it. We've—we used to run into that a lot on Atlantis. Do it again, and think 'open'."

John leads Anbur up the ramp and into the cloaked jumper, sits at the controls. "Have a seat, and I'll take you out for a spin."

The hatch closes as John takes the ship up, veering away from the city before rocketing towards space. The HUD pops up, and John slightly adjusts his heading.

Anbur watches the view out of the front windshield with rapt attention, leaning forward as if he wants to press his nose against it. Aila is closest at this time of day, so John heads for the small moon to do a quick orbit before heading back to Dominat. As the planet quickly fills the view, Anbur breathes a prayer.

John lets the vista speak for itself. They fly over the vast deserts, craggy mountains, and broad plains of green. There are towns dotting the landscape along the mountains and rivers. He'd understood in only the most superficial way that Dominat had a rich variety of scenery; he'd only seen the desert and the Western mountains for himself.

After they land, John swivels in his seat to face Anbur. "Pretty cool, huh?"

His expression is completely flabbergasted. "I have no words. In a matter of hours, you have given true meaning to my study of the Ancestors, my entire life's work." Anbur's hand caresses the control panel.

"You could learn to fly it, you know—you have the gene."

"I would be forever in your debt, Quaralyn."

**Day Three Hundred Fifty-Eight**

Even though he remembers only vague rudiments of biology, John discovers that he's far too educated to innately heal in the same way as Neela or Laith, and not well educated enough to do otherwise. After the database is a bust, he borrows a book on basic medicine from Carson, via Anbur.

He spends evenings reading by a guttering lamp, days practicing beside Neela or Laith. He runs in the desert in the early morning, stopping by the southern wall where the puddlejumpers have remained parked for a week, still cloaked, and the sand has begun to cling to them, revealing their outlines.
John ruefully brushes a bit of the sand off before returning to the rememdium.

Anbur is sitting at the table with Neela, waiting for him. "Blessed day to you, Quaralyn."

"Good morning." John grabs a glass and the water pitcher and sits at the table, gulping it down swiftly before pouring another. He drinks the second one more sedately. "Sorry. What brings you here so early?"

"Ah, do not apologize. It is the matter of the little ships. The Idon have reached a decision."

Here it is, the moment of truth that John's been dreading. "Oh?"

"We cannot make such a decision without consulting the other leaders, and at first it was a difficult thing to decide, they are scattered far and wide, and such conferences only take place during viat, when we are all gathered in one place."

John grins, "I see."

"Yes, it was very funny, arguing about the best way to gather the Patern to talk of flying machines. We are not accustomed to thinking of such things."

"So, you want to go and pick them up?"

"Yes. If these 'puddlejumpers' are a resource for all of Dominat as you say, then we must include all in the decision. We must also discuss the House of Makhuqat. Yes. there is much to talk about."

"Neela, may I be excused from lessons today?" John quirks a smile at her; she'd made it clear from the beginning, that Quaralyn or not, he was only an apprentice, and she insisted on a level of decorum that would have been appropriate in boot camp.

"As you will."

"Thank you, Neela. How many people are we talking about?"

"There are nine, including yourself."

"One should do it then. Let me go clean up a bit, and I'll be right with you." John excuses himself and takes the stairs two at a time. He washes down at the basin, swearing at the chilly water when he dunks his head in the deep bowl. He dresses in the least ratty of his Atlantis uniforms, and then presents himself in the kitchen, with damp hair and a grin on his face.

Neela gives him a still-warm khabez filled with roasted meslat, fragrant with kalah and bazin. "Do not think that you will escape today's lessons altogether."

"Of course not." He lifts her right hand and kisses her palm, sharing the slightest trickle of power with her.

"Very good. Journey safely, Quaralyn."

John eats quickly while they walk to the puddlejumpers, licking his fingers clean just as they sit at the control panel. "Okay, where to?"

"Ayse, Halavasan, Tobat first, then we will make our way back through Jasrah, Gadon and Zadiyeh."

"Zadiyeh, that's Tazim? Who's at Jasrah and Gadon?"
"Hmm, Tazim, yes. At Jasrah it is Fatih and Yusrah is in Gadon."

"I'll keep us at very low altitude, and you can give me directions? Or do you want to try?"

"Perhaps another day. I am content to watch."

~*~

In Ayse, John spends a very few minutes getting caught up with Rodney while Anbur talks to Zuhair. The visit is too short, and he leaves with the image of a very bored McKay.

After picking up Qahira in Halavasan, and Maisa in Tobat, John almost skims the earth while Anbur points out landmarks as they whip past, revealing the speed at which they're traveling. The passengers are on the edge of their seats, peering around the bulkhead to watch the view screen, chatting among themselves.

John can't pay attention to them; he's completely focused on maintaining the tight altitude over unfamiliar terrain.

The hard baked, flat ground begins to rise and swell, the tall, thick grass waves in his wake, and a herd of haltar scatter and run madly away from the puddlejumper.

John tops the rise of the land, and the valley below is lush and green. Anbur directs him to follow the river, and he keeps just above the trees clustered along its banks, their limp fronds trailing in the water. As they pass over a thundering waterfall, the city of Gadon appears, spreading away from the river, the ominous smoke over the forest on the other bank a warning to stay away.

A curious crowd gathers as he circles the intended landing zone near the city center. John has to pull up to avoid squashing the children that are dashing across the plaza. He finds a park that's not too far away as an alternate LZ.

The smell of humidity assaults him as they disembark. He can feel his skin soak up the moisture, and he breathes in the exotic atmosphere, the smell of ever-present smoke in the air.

The streets of Gadon are narrow and crooked, the houses low and constructed of wood and turf. The Patern chat with the crowd of people following them; John can't make out most of the conversation, the dialect is different from Peragro or Qaroptimat, so he just lets it wash over him as he watches the people. They tend towards leather in dress, and they're not so deeply tanned, but it's obvious that they're from the same original stock as the people he already knows.

Anbur points out their destination as they turn a corner. It's only slightly larger than the rest of the buildings, set back from the street on a well-kept lawn dotted with flowering gardens behind a low fence.

John starts to fall back, to allow the Patern go ahead of him, but Anbur grips his elbow and keeps John with him. They approach a young woman waiting to greet them from the veranda that stretches across the front of the low temple.

Anbur introduces John to Yusrah in Ancient and then launches into his request. John studies her; she can't be more than thirty, (Earth years, that is,) and her dark hair is pulled up into complicated ringlets that fall past her shoulders to frame her almost too sharp face. She's dressed very plainly in leather trousers and a chamois singlet belted at her waist.

Not once do her pale eyes stray, or look at Anbur as he talks, though she turns her head to face whoever is speaking; John realizes that she's blind, though her eyes are clear. He almost itches with
the need to lay his hands upon her and, if possible, heal her. It's purely hubris, surely many have
tried before, and obviously they've failed.

Yusrah calls out to one of her Idon, and directs him to have her things packed and to follow them to
the park as she lifts her hand.

Anbur nods towards Yusrah, and John puts his hand in hers. She takes it, and slides her grasp up
his arm to his elbow as he leads her back to the 'jumper. She asks him in Ancient, "So, you are the
mysterious stranger who has become the Quaralyn. The viat returned from Makhuqat with many
stories of your folk."

John nods and then realizes his mistake with a shake of his head. He stifles the urge to laugh at
himself. "Um, I imagine that we are very strange indeed."

"But not as strange the others who fell from the sky."

"No. The Wraith are pretty strange." They've been his nightmare for almost two years now,
strange doesn't even begin to cover it.

"Though we were not so misfortunate, we grieve for those afflicted by the... Wraith." She says it as
if she's sampling an odd word, rolling it across her tongue. "It is said that your kind brought the
Wraith to Dominat."

"Yes, that is true. They attacked us and caused our ship to crash, and then followed us here."

"It is the Will of Qaral, though most unfortunate for us all."

"Yes, it is."

"I should like to hear you speak in your language."

John chuckles, that's a first. "Well, I'm not really sure what to say—the quick red fox jumped over
the lazy brown dog?"

"Hmm, it's not very pretty."

"Not generally no, it's very complicated, but sometimes it can be pretty."

He guides her up the short ramp, and she lets go of him, touching the benches and bulkheads,
gently sniffing the air in the jumper, before sitting down. "Thank you, Quaralyn. This is very
interesting."

"You're welcome." The rest of the party boards and John takes off as they get settled.

The flight to Jasrah is not long. The river splits again and again, turning into long, amethyst lakes.
Jasrah is not dissimilar to Gadon, with the exception of long, flat skiffs crowded around the long
docks that extend from the shore far into the lake. Zuhair remains behind to sit with Yusrah, and
Fatih is summoned from his temple. The air is rife with the sound of water birds, and a breeze
blows off the lake, ruffling John's hair. John's suddenly homesick for the lake house of his youth as
he breathes in the thick smell of fish and vegetation.

Fatih is ancient, by far the oldest of all the Patern. At first he tries to send a proxy, claiming he's far
too crippled to journey far, but the others convince him that it is merely a short walk. Fatih walks
with a cane that's finely carved with familiar script, and upon reaching the puddlejumper, eyes it
with suspicion. "How does it fly?"
John shrugs. "I don't know if I can explain it, but it does fly."

"I want to see it."

"Okay." He takes the 'jumper up a few hundred feet, circles around once, and then lands. He opens the hatch, and apparently the demonstration was effective, Fatih sits for the flight to Zadiyeh, perched high on the mountaintop in the ranges to the south of N'vellesem.

Tazim is delighted to see them. "My old friend! You look very recovered from the viat. How is your ship? Are you settled and happy?"

"Ship's a disaster. We're settled, but I can't say we're all that happy."

"That is too bad, must be very difficult. This is the little ship, makhuqat'an?"

"Huh. This is it."

"It is all very exciting, no?" Tazim crowds into the back of the puddlejumper, greeting everyone and chattering nonstop.

The western horizon is beginning to deepen towards mauve, and John's stomach growls. It's been a long day; his meslat sandwich a distant memory. He lifts off, and Anbur directs him home.

**Day Three Hundred Sixty-Two**

Diwan, carrying a package, summons John to the Ludahsediat four days later. "Master Anbur says you must wear these before the Council of Patern. Very important, and you must come now."

John shakes out the clothing. There's a fine white under tunic, loose pants and a long robe-like coat with a hood, made of finely embroidered scarlet cloth. "I don't know. It's awfully...bright," he says doubtfully.

"But you must! Master Anbur says."

"If Anbur says, then I guess I have to, huh?"

"It is very beautiful." Diwan touches the jacket and runs his fingertips across the silken thread worked into the fabric at the sleeves, around the collar and the edge of the hood.

John shrugs and cleans up a little, before shrugging into the new finery. "I feel like a hippy. All I need are some love beads."

"What is that?"

"They're, oh never mind. I'm ready."

~*~

The Patern are casually arranged around Anbur's office, and Elizabeth and Caldwell are standing near the door. Anbur is watching him closely, and John schools his face to not betray a single expression. "Elizabeth, Colonel."

Caldwell gives John a doubtful once over, but doesn't meet his eyes or speak. Elizabeth nods and looks away quickly. They're still wearing expedition uniforms, which are slightly frayed and sweat-stained. He understands now why Anbur wanted him in the fancy duds; it makes a
statement, and sets him apart from them.

As the eldest, Fatih clears his throat and speaks. "We have spent many days arguing of the fate of the makhuqat'an." His expression hardens. "We have also discussed for many hours the Wraith, and the danger that you have brought to our world.

"The destruction of the House of Makhuqat, and the gifts it has given us are the Will of Qaral. It will take many years, but as Quaralyn, it is yours to see it rebuilt as you decide."

John nods. He destroyed it; he can accept that it should be his responsibility to restore the building, if possible.

"The makhuqat'an are another matter. The Quaralyn has given to us the responsibility for their dispensation, and we have decided thus." Fatih points at John. "One is to be given to Shepherd, for he has much to do, and so that he may travel freely among the people. They will need his presence and guidance." John can barely contain his excitement, and Anbur smiles at him freely.

"Two we will allow the nusquam to use, for even though they have brought us the Wraith, they have also shown us that their intentions are true. You have offered a great defense and prevented awful tragedy. May you continue to be our salvation from such things."

Elizabeth lets out a tiny sigh of relief. John knows that it's going to make a huge difference to them, ease some of the discord among the crews that are tired of the long walk to the Daedalus.

"Three and Four will remain at the disposal of this Council. There is a great change upon our peoples, and we must learn new ways to deal with the upheaval. What say you, Quaralyn?"

"That is fair. Thank you."

"And the nusquam?"

"We agree, and thank you for your consideration. The council is most generous and wise." Elizabeth bows, but Caldwell only tips his head.

John bristles almost imperceptibly at his discourtesy to the Council. It shows how little Caldwell understands or cares that they live as well as they do by the sufferance of these leaders. John suddenly realizes how much his perception of them has changed.

Fatih holds out a remote and motions Elizabeth forward. She takes it, and is dismissed. "That is all, you may go."

John turns to follow Elizabeth and Caldwell out, but Anbur calls him back. "John, a moment?"

"Sure." He ambles over, grinning widely. Someone has been paying attention, and there are deep pockets in his robe, his hands are jammed into them.

"This one is yours."

John takes the remote and shakes Anbur's hand. "Thank you, it was more than I had hoped for."

"I do not know why you would think so. It was obvious to us that it must be."

John's only reply is a quick lift of his brow. He looks around the room, the Patern are still talking to each other, not paying attention to them. "Who's going to get the other two jumpers—do I need to give them flying lessons?"
"Yusrah has no need for flying. Fatih and Maisa do not possess the gene, and Tazim is content to walk, he would not like to be cooped up in a little box. Qahira would like to learn once, to say that she has flown a *makhuqat'an*, but does not want the responsibility should the Wraith come."

That leaves Anbur and Zuhair, and John has a little flare of hope, that perhaps Rodney won't be so isolated. "What about their people? The 'jumper's are a pretty useful tool."

"And also a very potent symbol; none should like to give that power to any other, for fear of losing their own. We have been settled in our ways for thousands of *anam*, and while change is coming, it is best to let it happen slowly, hmm?"

"Okay," he replies slowly. It wasn't the reaction he was expecting, but it made sense. "When do they want to go home?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps the next day. Tonight we rest. Perhaps you would join us for a meal?"

**Day Three Hundred Ninety-Two**

"*There is little more I can teach you, Quaralyn. The power you possess will overcome any lack of finesse, and that you will learn through practice.*"

"*I'm through? I had thought it might take longer.*"

Neela laughs. "*Longer? Before coming here, you took many months of Laith's time in learning to overcome your fear. That was your most difficult hurdle; my task was simple.*"

John wouldn't say it was simple, or easy, but the last month does seem brief, in retrospect. "*Thank you, Neela, for the gift of your time.*"

"*It was a pleasure. And I think there are many things that you must go and do now, do not linger upon the doorstep of an old woman.*"

John takes her hands and kisses the palm of each with a little swell of affection. "*It was my pleasure, as well.*"

**Day Three Hundred Ninety-Six**

*Makhuqat's* crater is more impressive in the bright daylight; it's deep as expected and lined with glittering glass and tumbled stone.

Evan ventures a solution. "I dunno, maybe you could just park the ship down in the hole and build a roof over it."

Rodney gives him a disbelieving look. "Great, let's just put their single best technological tool in the bottom of a future lake bed, shall we?"

They glare at each other behind John's back, which he ignores. "You think it'll turn into a lake?"

"It's a hole in the ground, and lined with glass and it does rain. I'm not a geologist—why didn't you bring Petrov? He'd probably be thrilled to get out of town."

"That's not a bad idea." It would, he thought, be a nice gesture of solidarity and build a bridge between the expedition and Dominat. "Come on, we need to move *Makhuqat* back here, the rains will be coming soon."
The House of Makhuqat was more than a building; it was an intricate piece of technology far beyond the current abilities of any one on Dominat, save the nusquam.

John hasn't approached Elizabeth or Caldwell directly, but has allowed Anbur and Rodney to negotiate for the use of the scientists languishing in the Quarter; predictably, they are all eager to do something useful—or what they consider useful. John just smirks.

Rodney bitches and pisses about John shanghaiing him to figure out how it worked, but he cheerfully shows up every day with a boatload of engineers to oversee the dismantling of the remaining temple walls in order to scavenge parts and possibly manufacture replacements for what's been destroyed. John's thrilled that Rodney has at least this to occupy his mind, and glad that he's got Rodney on the job—no one else could figure it out.

Zuhair invokes the right of marriage on Rodney's behalf, and, at last, Rodney's wallowing in joy as he digs through the database, with his father-in-law and wife by his side, searching for any technical details on the solar-radiation collectors.

John's main contribution is vetting the final design, pointing out that the new stones could be moved from the quarry to the site by makhuqat'an, and occasionally playing referee between the scientists, traditional architects and stone masons as they hammer out the plans for the new House. So much of his time is spent in overseeing the rebuilding of the temple that John's given in to necessity and moved to Halavasan.

John makes a few forays out into Dominat, mainly to keep the Patern apprised of the progress on rebuilding the House of Makhuqat, and Yusrah and Fatih send John home with the makhuqat'an filled with meat, fish and grain to supply the ever growing assembly.

Many of the Marines volunteer to relocate temporarily to the site, to take down the old building and help to construct the replacement, and John enjoys their company. They're entirely respectful and glad to be doing something productive, and they get along well with the native craftsmen who've moved to Makhuqat as well. Anyone who shows up on viat is immediately put to work, and they cheerfully pitch in where they can, cooking, fetching or any other task they're given.

Day Six Hundred Sixteen

As he dresses, John can hear the puddlejumpers whine overhead; they're a little early. He's got to eventually find some local equivalent to running shoes; the sole of one has separated and flaps as he runs headlong down the narrow trail to where he keeps the makhuqat'an.

Everyone is standing around the ramps of the three 'jumpers. Evan's doing his best to translate between the Marines, engineers and scientists of the expedition, and the stonemasons from N'vellesem, Ayse and Zadiyeh. Hobeck, Faraj, Cadman and Timmons are listening with matching expressions of bemusement as they stand in the jumper next to crates of C4.

Today is the big day. Now it's time to start quarrying the stones for the walls. He'll check in on them and be available for consultations, but John intends to stand back and let the experts do their job.

"Hey, how's it going?" John shakes Evan's hand, waves to the Marines and greets the stonemasons with "Ze'omlat Det."

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but Neela passed on a message, asking if you could come to
N'vellesem. Seems like a lot of people are catching whatever it is that has Beckett and Cole up to their elbows in patients."

There's no question. John knows what his duty is, and he'll go immediately, but the exciting stuff is going on here, and he's disappointed that he'll miss it. Cadman and Timmons speak Peragro with as much facility as John, and Evan is fast catching up, so he's not worried that they'll blow anyone up. "I guess I'll leave you to it, then. I probably won't have a chance to check the logs until late, if at all, but I'll leave the flight recorder running just in case."

"Yeah, one thing—I think Sabat might have caught it, she, uh, spends a lot of time in the Quarter."

John nods. "I'll make sure I look in on her, or send for her."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

"Don't worry about it, I'll take care of her." John's glad that Evan has finally succumbed to Sabat's steady campaign, though his affection for her was never really in question. "You guys have fun and be careful. Cadman's been briefed by Petrov on the mineral content of the rock, but it's still dangerous."

"It's okay, John, we have it under control here. Good luck."

"You too, I'll check in."

"Later, Sheppard."

John knows when he's being dismissed, and he boards the makhuqat'an and heads for N'vellesem.

~*~

When John arrives, the rememdium's house is in an uproar. Neela chivies Laith off to rest, and sets John to work in his place. She lays her hand on his as she monitors John's progress with a few of the easy cases, before leaving him to work on his own.

Laila from the school kitchens is there, keeping the healers hydrated and fed, and managing the flow of patients that never seems to end. John asks her to send one of the students to track down Sabat and have her come in for a check-up.

Neela takes a rest after Laith, and Laila passes John the patients with more and more advanced symptoms. He learns from each one, applying the lessons to the next. Sabat comes in, and she's barely ill. John works on her for a few minutes, and urges her to stay home for a few days.

**Day Six Hundred Seventeen**

John's not even sure how long they've been at it; it could have been days, when Laila ushers in Carson along with a bite to eat and a glass of sweet, strong tea. John's famished, and he immediately starts in on the fragrant stew, gulping down the scalding tea. "Hey, Carson, what's going on?"

"I came to ask a favor of you."

"Sure, have a seat; what can I do for you? How's things in the Quarter?" John has a moment of dissonance, thinking that their roles are about to be reversed, with Carson as his patient.

"We're mostly keeping up, but I believe that I've found ground zero for the epidemic."
"Really? Who?"

"Hermiod. I've just come from the *Daedalus*. He thought it was a symptom of something else, didn't think to mention it. I didn't know, until Novak called me out this morning."

"No shit?"

"Aye. It's taken months to jump transspecies, which is why the SARS seems to be so virulent—no one has any defense against it."

"You said he thought it was something else?"

"Yes. The reason the Hermiod's insisted on holing up in the *Daedalus* is that it gives him a bit of protection from the ambient radiation; his little cloned body is just too sensitive to this particular form of radiation."

John feels horrible, he's barely thought of Hermiod, and how it must be for him. While he's been out exploring and learning about their new world, Hermiod had been cooped up in the wrecked vessel, claiming that he was the one perfectly suited to maintaining their sky watch. "What can I do?"

"If you could see your way clear to go to him, maybe you'll be able to do something for him. I'm out of options, there's nothing I can do."

"I'll try, but this," John holds out his hands palms up, "is, well—I don't know. Sympathetic?"

"It's bloody well magic, from what I can see."

~*~

John hasn't been inside the *Daedalus* since his return from the *viat*. The corridors are dark and difficult to traverse because of the sharp angle at which she's resting. There's a dank, foul odor in the air, and John tries to breath through his mouth as much a possible. Carson's flashlight bounces off the bulkheads and deck, revealing a few tracks in the dust that has collected on the decks and bulkheads.

"The poor thing was still at his station when I arrived. I moved him to the infirmary for a bit of comfort."

The lights are on in the infirmary, spilling out into the corridor and casting shadows across the corners. Lindsay Novak is sitting in a chair pulled close to the bed, talking and hiccupping quietly. Hermiod is curled up on his side in a nest of sheets and blankets, and to his dismay, John discovers that *Hermiod* is the source of the awful smell. John gives Carson a look of horror and draws him back into the dark corridor. He whispers, "What is that smell? How can no one have noticed this?"

"Radiation—it's been rotting him away all this time, though it's probably just gotten to this point in the last few weeks. The crews have been reduced in size since we have the jumpers and they tend to work solely from the bridge. Kleinman and Novak are the only two Hermiod hasn't managed to scare off completely. Dave's last shift was two weeks ago, and Lindsay just arrived this morning. It's likely that the rest thought the odor was just the ship in general."

John recalls his own initial reaction to the alien, and wonders how much of that was just him, and how much was his response to Hermiod's superior attitude and standoffish behavior. He shakes his head as he walks away. John can't afford to wallow in guilt and fury over the debacle at the moment, but he plans on melting down later. He takes a deep breath and enters the infirmary.
"Colonel Sheppard, thank god you're here, it's awful, I can't believe..."

"Dr. Novak, could you give me a few minutes here?"

She scrambles out of the chair. "Oh! Sure, of course, I'll just go, do something." She hiccups as leaves.

"Hey, Hermiod? You awake?" John picks up the chair and moves it closer to the bed.

Hermiod opens his huge, black eyes and blinks once to clear runny fluid away. "John Sheppard. I am awake." He struggles to sit up, but John lays a hand on his thin, cool shoulder and gently holds him down.

"It's alright, you don't have to get up. I just came to see you. You're not doing so good, I hear."

Hermiod doesn't resist, and closes his eyes again. "I am sorry. I have never been 'sick' before, and thought the symptoms were only a matter of the radiation."

"But why didn't you tell anyone about the radiation?"

"There was no point in adding to anyone's burdens, and I had no desire to be pitied."

"That's... logical."

"Naturally."

John's still struggling to rectify his own tendency to pull away, and his almost terrifying intimate connection with people; the healing, and the way he draws strength and comfort from them. "If you were home, with your own people, would you do the same thing?"

Hermiod snorts and replies acidly, "If I were among my own, I would not be sick; my consciousness would be stored, until I could transfer into a new body. It has been so for more millennia than you can possibly imagine."

"So no Asgard has ever... passed on?"

"Many were lost in battle with the Replicators, and more were lost when we could not power the containers with their consciousnesses. But not—like this."

John vividly remembers dying, the sudden realization that this was going to be it, but he can't imagine knowing for months in advance, living with the understanding. "It's pretty scary," he says as Hermiod sighs.

"Yes."

John is astonished by the world of wearied pain in that single word. "I'd like to try and help you."

"You may try." There's no mistaking the resignation in his voice.

John curls his hand over Hermiod's tiny ribcage, ignoring the suppurating sores on his skin, and slowly sinks into him. His technique is mostly visualizing an ailment, and how it contrasts from normal, but Hermiod is so different, that John's assaulted by a dizzy sense of synthetic cubism. He has no comparison to know what's wrong with the picture. He withdraws slowly, but leaves his hand where it is, as a gesture of comfort. "I'm sorry."

"I did not expect success."
"I can stay, if you want."

"I find that prospect... appealing. Would you aid me to complete one, last task?"

"Of course, Hermiod. What do you want me to do?"

**Day Six Hundred Nineteen**

Hermiod's death strikes John *hard*, because it was completely senseless. They could've tied a couple of the naquadah generators into the *Daedalus*' shields, and he would have had years more. They wouldn't have missed those generators at all. Hermiod had known this, and he'd kept the information to himself, because, in the end, what was a handful of years to a being that had lived, in one form or another, for untold millennia?

John lets Novak cry on his shoulder for a while, before asking if there's a way to automate the scanning and transmit the data to N'vellesem; she sniffs and hiccups as she scrubs at the damp spot on his robe and thinks.

"Yes, that's possible," she says in a wobbly voice.

Novak gets rest of the small crew to work on the project, and John makes sure that Carson is already planning to quarantine the ship before gathering up the things that he needs.

He has to go as far as Gadon to get a sufficient quantity of wood, and he hops over the North Sea to get a small quantity of the soft, silvery Lutetium to take back for Hermiod's funeral pyre. John checks with Novak to make sure that his plan will work; he doesn't want to trust just a regular fire to thoroughly incinerate the deadly disease in Hermiod's small corpse, nor does he want to contaminate the *makhuqat'an* by carrying him off into space.

John wraps a small amount of pliable C4 around the lump of volatile metal, guessing at how much it will take to ignite the Lutetium; it will burn, and burn hot, but he doesn't have a convenient lightning strike at hand.

The initial explosion is huge and messy, but the hot, blue fire is started, and John carefully adds Hermiod and the wood to the flames. He sits in the hot sun, tending the fire, until Hermiod is nothing but a pile of smoking ash.

**Day Six Hundred Twenty Five**

John grimly pitches in, stripping the last of the usable goods from the *Daedalus*, and piling them outside for the *nusquam* to ferry back at their leisure. When Novak's crew has the signal set, and the Quarter is picking it up on the radio, he gives all of them a quick check up to make sure that they're not going to reinfect the town.

It's been days, and when he calls Elizabeth to update her on the situation, he's still shaking at the total *waste*.

John dumps all of his anger onto her. Part of him is still furious that she'd blithely set him on this course, used him and then had the gall to call him onto the carpet when he stopped being her tool. He pours out every bit of acrimonious hurt and blame, never letting her get a word in his furious diatribe.

He gets it all out of his system, lets it all go. He's needed to do this for a long time, and though he knows that Elizabeth was blameless for Hermiod's circumstances and death, fair or not, she was a
convenient scapegoat.

John stops at Halavasan to gather up some clean clothes, and to check on the week's progress at Makhuqat. He watches as a 'jumper lands, and the stone it carries is rolled neatly into place. Between the newly quarried stones and the dismantled pieces, the quick skill of the stonemasons have the short wall already completed with the first row of smooth, white stones, and another crew is reattaching the remains of the solar technology that recharges Makhuqat's ZPM's.

John does a quick check of every one at both the site and the quarry; some of the scientists and engineers are living in the Quarter, and he wants to make sure that no one's carrying or spreading the SARS.

Rodney had claimed that he needed a day at home with his family, and he wasn't on site. John gives Faraj a thumbs-up as the 'jumper rises into the air, before he takes off towards Ayse.

The broad, flat courtyard is a perfect landing zone, and by now every one knows to stay away as the makhuqat'an lands. John runs up the temple stairs. Landing inside the Arch of Qaralyn allows him to bypass it, and not make such a fuss and racket upon arrival.

He startles Muntasir as he takes the stairs two at a time. "Quaralyn!" He bows lows as he asks, "How may I serve you?"

John shakes his head. "I am looking for Dr. McKay."

"Ah, he is in his office just now."

"Thank you." John takes the stairs up to the third floor, and taps lightly on the door.

"What!" Rodney yells.

John opens the door, "Is that any way to greet the Quaralyn?"

"Sheppard. Get in here and close the door. I swear, I tell them I'm not to be disturbed, and what happens? It's a parade ground!"

"No, really! Tell me how you feel, McKay—don't bottle it up." John sprawls on the sofa.

Rodney gives John a crooked grin. "So, what can I do for you?"

"It's more like what I have for you." John sits up and digs a data pad out of his deep pocket, turning it over in hands. "I don't think it's common knowledge. Carson knows of course, but." John takes a deep breath. "Hermiod was not—well, it's the radiation. He was dying of radiation poisoning, and he got sick. The mold and mildew from the flood, well it mutated, and he caught some respiratory thing."

"Oh no."

"Yeah. There wasn't anything Carson or I could do for him except be there."

"Oh God, Hermiod's dead?" Rodney puts his face in his hands, elbows propped on the table.

Rodney treats almost every one poorly, and the smarter they are, the more adversarial he gets. John's seen it over and over, but he also sees that Rodney respects those other big brains, and Hermiod, his brain was definitely something that McKay respected, despite their sniping and snarking. "He left something for you." John leans over and pushes it onto the table.
Rodney wipes his face with his hands, sniffs quietly and swallows as he picks up the data pad. He turns it on and scrolls through it, his jaw dropping until he's open mouthed with shock. "Do you know what this is?"

John nods. "I helped him put it together."

"It's the key to everything he's had locked away on that workstation of his."

"Yeah. He said if anyone could use it, it would be you."

"Christ."

"There's a problem, though."

"What?"

"Hermiod's respiratory thing finally jumped over, and people are catching it. There have been a few deaths, so they put the scanners on automatic and routed an alarm back to the Quarter. The *Daedalus* has been quarantined, off limits for the foreseeable future."

Rodney throws the data pad down and leans back in his chair, elbow on the arm, and he rubs his forehead as he slumps down, looking at the data pad on the desk. "So, you're telling me that I have the key to everything, and I can't go get it?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Rodney."

"Not your fault, Sheppard, though I have been known to shoot the occasional messenger." He sits up, sliding the data pad into a drawer and locking it. "I'll just have to deal with it later." Rodney looks at the clock on the shelf. "It's nearly dinner time; you want to stay?"

"Love to."

As usual, they eat at the low table in the study. John's tickling Rania and laughing when she giggles.

"Sheppard, you're going to make her throw up, stop."

"But she likes it!" John sits her upright on his lap as Shaaziya breezes in.

"Quaralyn." She sits in the chair next to Rodney, and he takes her hand and gives it a little kiss.

"You know, I used to be Sheppard. I know it's complicated, but when we're here—just us, could I not be the Quaralyn?"

Rodney gives her the look that says 'I told you'.

"I will try. Sheppard." She gives him a faint smile.

The servants enter the study, and after things are arranged, they start to back out of the room, nearly crawling.

John's through, he can't take any more of the bowing and scraping. He's never liked it, and the ire has been building for months, and. "Stop."

Every one of them halts instantly, their eyes cast down. "*Here is how it is going to be from now on. You are going to stand up.*" When they shift their glances looking to see if the others are doing it,
John says, "I mean it. Stand up."

They stand up as one. "Okay, now look at me."

It takes a moment for them to obey but they do. "I appreciate that you think you're offering me some great honor, but it's not necessary. In the future, you will walk in and out of here upright, and you will not bow or abase yourselves in front of me. Understand?"

They nod wordlessly. "Okay then."

When they leave, they're backing out and bowing low.

John sighs. "I guess that's going to take some reinforcement."

**Day Six Hundred Twenty-Eight - Eight Hundred Seventy-One**

After a few days in Ayse of making sure that the epidemic hasn't spread, John takes off and heads out in his *makhuqat'an*, on a trip that's part epidemic containment and part Grand Tour. He falls into a routine that he follows for a full *anam*; he'll stay in a place for a handful of days, healing when needed and getting acquainted with the people and landscapes. He appreciates that there's always someone thrilled to feed him or provide him with a bed.

Occasionally he'll camp out in the *makhuqat'an*, sleeping bag arranged so that he can see the stars in the sky, especially if someone providing him with a bed means that they intend to go without.

He stops in Ayse to visit with Rodney, Rania and Shaaziya for a day or two, and then back to his cottage in Halavasan to spend some time working at the Temple, and sleep in his own bed, where there's always clean linens and freshly prepared food waiting for him. After a day or two, he takes off again, the draw of the land and people too strong to ignore.

There's nothing he needs that isn't given to him freely, and in return John learns what he has to give is valuable to everyone, though he's never so far gone that he believes himself. He discovers that while the Qaroptimat are unique in the depth of their devotions, he's sensitive to the sympathetic vibrations of *everyone*.

It puts his misery in the Quarter into context, and he understands that eventually he'll have to learn to deal with it, because the people from the Quarter are still his people - that single, taut thread that ties his past and his future together.

John still feels weak and shattered when he even thinks of returning to the Quarter though, so he puts it out of his mind, and revels in both his duty and his freedom.
Day Eight Hundred Seventy-Two

John hovers over the courtyard, he can see Rania through the windshield, quivering with excitement by the temple doors, until he gently lands the 'jumper. He chuckles as she scoots down on her bottom, and he meets her at the foot of the stairs.

He swings her high in the air as she laughs, "Fly me!" and then pulls her close for a hug and a kiss. She wraps her arms around his neck and clings to his side with her stubby little legs. "How's my best girl?" John can't resist tickling her, just to hear that giggle, as he starts up the stairs.

"No, no! Fly me!" Rania urgently points to the jumper behind them.

"I've created a monster," he whispers in her ear. "Later, zahra'an. Got to talk to your papa first."

"Papa not here."

"Where did your papa go?"

Shaaziya meets them at door, acknowledges the Quaralyn with a small nod. "Zuhair and Rodney went to N'vellesem this morning, to check some data from the Avaxqaral."

John smiles and gives Shaaziya a light hug. "Hi. You look good. How are you?"

A faint smile plays around her mouth. "I am very well."

"Oh, really?"

"Rodney is quite proud of himself: the Qaralyn Arch lights with this one, too. I had to 'kick him out of the house', as he says, to get some peace."

Rania tips his head using a fistful of his long hair as John laughs. "That's wonderful news, Shaaziya, congratulations."

Shaaziya bows very slightly, "Thank you. Come, I just sent to have a meal prepared," she says as she draws John into the cool, dim corridor.

"Thanks, that sounds fine." Rania tugs at the thin beaded chain underneath the collar of his scarlet robe, and John pulls his dog tags out for her to play with as he carries her up to the sitting room.

John shifts Rania around to his lap as he slouches down onto the sofa. Shaaziya takes the chair next to him. "You must tell me, how does the construction go?"

"The main construction is almost complete; the roof is all that's left. Qahira and Tazim are planning to have the stones inscribed with the story of Makhuqat, all the way back to the beginning. It'll look fantastic."

"It sounds very fitting."

"And usable. I know we haven't seen the end of the Wraith, but when they come back, Makhuqat will be ready. How are things here?"
"Father is insufferably pleased with himself. Rodney has finally taught him to fly the makhuqat'an. They argued at breakfast about who was to pilot today."

John grins, he can just imagine Rodney trying to shout down the irascible Zuhair and losing.

Lunch arrives, and Rania crawls off the sofa to allow John to stand as the servants bow low. He lets the warmth of their sincere devotion wash over him. John offers the expected blessing, "Ze'omlat kavela."

"Za'omlat Nat, Quaralyn," they intone in return as they depart.

At least they're not crawling backwards; that had been a difficult habit to break. John tears a strip of the khabez and scoops up a bit of stew and hands it to Rania. They eat quietly, John and Shaaziya handing off small bites to the child.

When they've eaten their fill, John pours glasses of hot, sweet tea and leans back into the sofa. Rania crawls into Shaaziya's lap and pats her breast.

John studies his tea as they get situated, Shaaziya stroking Rania's dark, fluffy hair. "Do you want to go to N'vellesem with me this afternoon? Rodney said he had something he wanted to run by me, but I'd just arrived in Gadon, and there were some folks I needed to see."

Shaaziya gives John a knowing look when he mentions Gadon, but she doesn't press for details, and his gaze is still focused on the tea. "I think that we would like that very much. I promise to not tell Rodney that you let her fly."

John snickers. "What he doesn't know won't kill him, right?"

"He gets quite irritated. 'Babies are not meant to fly', he yells."

"That baby was meant to fly, and one of these days, I might actually let her have the controls."

"Please do not tell my husband, I do not want to raise my children by myself."

John winks at her. "Our little secret."

Shaaziya lifts Rania to her shoulder as she stands up, patting her gently on the back as she snores, completely limp. "This one will sleep through it today."

~*~

John parks the 'jumper next to Rodney's, just outside the N'vellesem gate, and ushers Shaaziya out with a delicate touch to her elbow.

N'vellesem is as lovely as ever. The clean, white flagstones in the plaza are nearly blinding in the hot sun, the rich colors and textures of the wares spilling out of the shops are pleasing to the eye. The sound of the fountain offers the ear a gentle counterpoint to the rise and fall of melodic voices as they haggle and chat. There's a faint, spicy scent of fragrant yalah and mekht hanging in the air as he passes the teahouse, old Fakih's distilling a new batch of ekal.

Although John's finally become accustomed to the open adulation that greets him wherever he goes on Dominat, the comfortable greetings and casual acceptance he receives in N'vellesem settles him and speaks to him of home.

He makes a mental note to stop in and pay his respects to Neela, and visit Laith as they pass the
alleyway to the *rememdium's* home. John pauses and bows slightly in front of the statue of Qaral, before heading downstairs to the *Avaxqaral*. The lights are dimmed in the cool room, Rodney's head bent next to Zuhair's over the display.

John calls out to him, "Hey, look who I found."

As always, the completely besotted look on Rodney's face as he sees Rania and Shaaziya gives John a sweet measure of joy. How can he not love them as dearly as his very own, when Rodney's utter devotion sings through him?

John basks in Shaaziya's own contentment and smoldering ardor as Rodney takes Rania from her with a tender kiss, snuggling his sleepy daughter close.

Underneath, John feels Zuhair's powerful devotion, and he has to shake away the dazed feeling. He grasps Zuhair's hand, and briefly touches Rodney's arm. "So, what did you guys find?"

"I finally got the cross-reference interface for Makhuqat's logs with the database to work."

"That's great, Rodney. What are we going to do with it?" John is eternally grateful to Zuhair and Anbur. Rodney's completely fulfilled with meaningful work, surrounded by his family who adore and support each other in turn.

"Yes, yes, it's all data mining and theory, but being able to pinpoint something in the database with any accuracy is a victory. More to the point, I think we located the collector schematics."

"Rodney, that's great! Good job, both of you."

Rodney's eyes flicker over to John, and then away, and he fidgets.

"So what's really up?"

"Uhm, Elizabeth was here, she asked if you were still, uh."

"Mad?" John asks.

"That's not the word she used, but yes. Furious with her."

He has to think about that. It's been an *anam* since Hermiod died, the last time he'd spoken to her on the radio. Elizabeth had still been bitter about John's defection from N'vellesem, and John was shattered by their callous treatment of Hermiod and himself, but that was a long time ago. "I'm not furious."

"The reason she asked, uh, well. She needs a favor."

Zuhair glowers when he catches John's eye. He's still touchy about the arrangement between Anbur and Elizabeth that gave her access to the *Avaxqaral*, even though it fell squarely within the bounds of *Mediat*.

"Okay, I'll bite. What?"

"It's Steven, actually. He's not well, quite sick."

John gives Rodney an ironical lift of his brow. He's still touchy about the arrangement between Anbur and Elizabeth that gave her access to the *Avaxqaral*, even though it fell squarely within the bounds of *Mediat*.

"Okay, I'll bite. What?"

"It's Steven, actually. He's not well, quite sick."

John gives Rodney an ironical lift of his brow. He hasn't spoken to the Colonel since turning his back and walking out of the office after the last Wraith battle. "I see."

Rodney shifts nervously, as he looks John in the eyes. "I told her I'd pass on the message, that's
John shoves his hands into the pockets of his black robe, and rocks back on his heels. "Fakih's got a new batch of ekal; smelled it on the way over. You want to meet me there in a couple of hours? Zuhair, can I buy you a drink?"

"That would be very fine indeed, Shepherd."

Rodney confers with Shaaziya with a few glances. "Sounds great."

"Okay then, I guess I'm off to the Quarter."

Rodney's relief is obvious, his face can't hide a thing.

John knows he's made the right decision, and that in many ways, Rodney's a better man than he is—he's mostly forgiven Elizabeth and maintains regular, cordial contact with the Quarter, keeping John updated on their comings and goings. It was time he crossed Rodney's carefully maintained bridge.

~*~

The infirmary door is open, and the scene is a familiar one. Elizabeth is sitting in a chair, her foot up on the edge of the Colonel's bed with her head propped on her hand. Caldwell's bathed in sweat and trembling with the effort of his raspy breathing. Carson sees John and joins him in the hallway, gently closing the door behind him. "Good to see you, John, you're looking fine and fit," he says quietly.

"Thanks, you've lost some weight."

"Aye, it's all the clean living. You've come to see the Colonel?"

"Rodney told me."

"I have to admit I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"I was in the neighborhood. How long has he been sick?"

"At least several weeks that I know of. He went to check on the Daedalus against all advice, and he's been hiding the symptoms. The problem is, what drugs I hadn't used up, I threw out months ago; they were all past expiration."

"You did warn them to stay away."

"That I did. You want to have a go at it, then?"

"Yeah. Is anyone else sick?"

"Most of them aren't too stubborn to see Neela, or Laith."

John chuckles humorlessly. "I can't imagine that he'll be any happier to see me."

Carson shakes his head. "At this point, his only other alternative is dying. Come on."

Elizabeth is standing next to the bed when Carson opens the door. "John," she says carefully.

He nods. "Elizabeth." He shrugs off his robe and lays it over the back of her chair. "I need you to
leave."

She frowns and looks down at Steven, but doesn't move. She folds her arms across her chest. "I'd rather stay."

"I'm about to get really intimate, touchy-feely with your boyfriend, and I really don't want you watching."

Carson intervenes. "Let's go, love, let the man do his work," his hand is on her back as he moves her out of the way. "We'll wait out in the hallway."

"Thanks, Carson."

John sits on the bed next to Caldwell, who doesn't wake up, and begins to unbutton his shirt. "I guess I can call you Steven. Considering." He pushes the shirt aside, exposing his torso, and begins his work at the neck.

He closes his eyes as he concentrates. John can feel the rough beard under his palms, and then the flat nipples and wiry chest hair as he strokes downward. John keeps his hands moving in firm strokes.

John can see the infection; see where it's festering in Steven's lungs and the swollen, overstressed lymph nodes. When he lifts Steven's arms above his head, John can smell the stale odor of fever sweat, the way it changes as he smooths his hand across the armpits and down his sides, where the skin is soft and silky.

He visualizes a broken dam, scum and algae spilling out, leaving behind fresh, clean running water. John presses both hands to the sternum for a moment, before pushing down, down to his groin, again holding both hands still for only a moment over the pelvic bones.

John wrests Steven onto his front, before starting again at the neck, stroking and pushing on his back as he imagines the infection floating downstream. He concentrates on strengthening the lymphatic system, before putting his hands flat over the small of the back; holding them there until the heat is almost unbearable, willing the kidneys into overdrive to flush away the dying infection.

The Colonel won't be particularly happy that he's wet the bed, but John notes the clean, fresh sweat forming on Steven's back with satisfaction.

John cracks the door. "Carson? I could use your help." He holds up a finger as Elizabeth tries to follow him in.

Carson smells the urine as soon as he approaches the bed. "That'll make him cranky."

"Unfortunate side effect. Let's move him over to the clean bed. You might want to consider a catheter if he doesn't wake up soon, his kidneys are going to work overtime."

"Aye, that I can do."

They strip off the wet clothing and manhandle him over to the clean bed. Carson sets to work stripping the linens, while John pours a basin of water and wipes Steven clean. When he's through, John briefly lays a hand on Steven's chest to check how he's progressing before tugging a clean sheet over him. "He'll need a lot of water to flush his system out, so don't give him aspirin, or anything, even though his temperature's slightly elevated. The worst of it's over, but it will take a day or two for him to get through the rest of it on his own."
Carson slumps down into the chair. "Thank you, John. I don't know what it would do to Elizabeth if we were to lose Steven. Not that it's the only reason not to see him pass on, but she relies on him so heavily now."

John hears what Carson didn't say, 'since you left'. "Are you certain Elizabeth hasn't caught it?"

"There's no sign of it."

"I should at least check—we really don't want another epidemic."

"I agree. I'll call her in. Do you need me to leave?"

"No, I won't need to be quite so, uh, personal."

Carson flashes a grin at John's discomfort, and then opens the door. "Elizabeth, you may come in now."

"How is he?" she asks as she rushes towards the bed. She lays her hand on Steven's forehead, and tenderly touches his neck. "He's still got a fever."

"Yeah. He'll have one for the next day or two; it's okay."

Elizabeth relinquishes her hold on Steven and faces John. Her eyes are wide with relief and remorse. "Thank you, John. I know I didn't have any right to ask..."

"It's part of what I am now, people are sick, I fix 'em. Doesn't matter who they are."

"About that, I do honestly owe you an apology."

"Not necessary. " John replies in a tight voice. His hands are clenched together behind his back; he can feel the tension across his shoulders. He takes a slow, even breath and tries to relax. He's had time to reflect in the last anam, and he doesn't need or want her apology; he's as guilty as Elizabeth for their cocked-up relationship.

"No, it's obvious that it is. You and Rodney were right. I did use you as a pawn, we desperately needed to make a place for ourselves here, and at the time, that was the most expedient course of action."

"If you'll recall, Elizabeth, I agreed to do it."

"True, but neither of us knew what that was going to mean. I didn't see or understand the ramifications of your journey—for me the viat was a lark, a chance to get to know the people, and forge relationships."

"I think it worked pretty well. " John doesn't think it's a coincidence that the few people that traveled with them on the viat are mostly the best integrated.

"I agree. But I didn't see all of it, not even after Rania. I simply marked it as one more weird thing from Pegasus. " Elizabeth's gaze is curious and expectant.

John just shrugs. "I get that."

Elizabeth sighs in exasperation. "I needed to know, John. I needed you to tell me what was going on. Not get it second hand from Rodney after the fact, not from you stealing a 302 and going cowboy in your usual fashion. If I'd had an inkling of what was truly happening, I would have at least tried to understand."
It was annoying that Elizabeth thought that he'd have been capable of opening up to her to reveal his most personal hurts; it wasn't like he'd ever given her any expectations in that in the past. "Maybe. To tell you the truth, I was kind of still working it out."

"I've often thought that over this last year. Regardless, I am sorry."

"I can accept that, but I can't apologize—I am what I am."

"And I can accept that. I hope that we can move forward from this."

Elizabeth, a diplomat to the end. John shrugs again, "We can try."

"Good." She says it as if it was all settled; perhaps it is, for her. She turns to check on Steven again.

John thinks he might have to work at it, but he's relieved that at least she appeared to be willing to understand. He tips his head a little as he looks at her, and he unconsciously rubs his palms together. "There's one more thing."

She turns her head to look at him. "What's that, John?"

"You know Caldwell was contagious. If I might, uh, take a look at you?"

"Oh. What do I need to do?" Elizabeth flushes, the color blooming on her cheeks and the tiny exposed vee of her chest.

"Just stand there." John steps in close to her. There's a faint remnant of flowery perfume, but underneath he can smell the sour odor of toxins in her sweat. He closes his eyes as he touches her chest and he can feel the swell of her breasts against his hand. She shivers slightly from the heat as he sends a questing wisp of power into her lungs. Yes, there it is, an infection just beginning to grow.

He unerringly places his hand on her jaw. Thank God she still favored the expedition t-shirts and slacks. "I'm just going to," he whispers as he slides his hand under her shirt. She shudders, and he can feel the goose bumps under his hand as he slides it into position on her back. He smiles slightly, and bumps into the clasp of her bra as slides his hand higher. "This is in the way," he whispers a warning as he deftly unhooks it with one hand. He feeds a strong pulse of power into her as he firmly strokes down her back three or four times.

John can feel her starting to sag and he gently guides Elizabeth to sit on the bed. He steps back after extricating his hand from under her shirt. There's a red palm print low on her jaw and neck, and she's slack and disheveled. He remembers exactly how she's feeling. "You'll be fine."

She startles at his comment, her hazel eyes wide with amazement, and begins to put herself back together. John turns to Carson to give her a little privacy. "You'll let me know if you need anything else?"

"Yes, we've got a few more other holdouts. I'll take a look at them, and if there's any sign, I'll quarantine them until I can reach you."

John knows that Carson would dearly love to be able heal with a touch, and that vague feeling of jealousy is a wedge between them, driving them apart, but Carson doesn't understand the cost that John unwittingly paid in exchange for the power.

"Okay, I'll stay in town a few days. You can catch me at Neela's, and I'll check in before I leave."
He picks up his robe and leaves; he hadn't realized how difficult it would be to simply be in the same room with their resentment tangling with curiosity and fading affection. He's never been more certain that he'd made the right decision, grateful that he's escaped.

**Day Eight Hundred Seventy Three**

After a long hard run in the desert, John has a lazy breakfast with Neela and Laith before she shoos them out of the *remendium*. Laith's subtly heading for the market, and John willingly follows him. He's given himself an unexpected holiday by promising Carson he'd stay in town, and other than a visit to Anbur, he has no plans.

John doesn't believe it when he sees it, but there it is right in front of him, a display of Expedition style clothing made from bright local cloth. The sample is heavily embroidered, but not in the traditional style—it's all recognizable Earth symbols and motifs.

Corporal Frostman steps outside the shop with a dress on a hanger as they're inspecting the jacket. "Oh, Colonel Sheppard. Welcome to Frosty's Fine Fashions!" He's wearing a particular garish rendition of the uniform done in stripes.

"Frostman, this is great. I though you hated that name?"

Laith waves at Frostman and wanders over to a stack of cloth samples.

"I do. Timmons started it as a joke, but then I couldn't shake it, so I gave in."

"Do you make all of this yourself?"

"Nah, I hired a couple of girls, they make all of it. I gave them my old uniform to take apart and they figured it out. I did design this though." He holds up what could be a medieval prom dress. "Cadman said she wanted it when I was done with it. These are all just samples, we tailor everything to fit."

"Very enterprising. How's it working out?"

"Pretty well, I've only been open a month or so, but everyone swears they're going to come in. Mostly the local people have been snapping them up like hotcakes. Labib—the landlord—thought it was a great idea, and we worked out an agreement, he gets a percentage instead of rent, and of course the ladies work for a percentage. I won't make much, but it's been fun. I like it."

"It's a great idea, Frostman. I hope it works out for you."

Laith rejoins John and Frostman. "This is all very beautiful, but strange to see your clothing in our textiles."

John adds, "It is strange, but kinda cool, too."

"Yeah, I'm trying to get the best of both worlds, you know? Would you like to order something?" There's a hopeful note in Frostman's voice, and John's between a rock and a hard place. He wants to encourage Frostman, support his fledgling business, but he can't figure out a nice way to decline. He can't buy anything; John doesn't carry money, hasn't had cash since his tiny pittance from Anbur ran out three *anam* ago. The things he needs are provided for him as gifts, he never asks for anything.

"Maybe tomorrow, we were just on our way to visit Anbur, he's expecting us."
Laith gives him a surprised look, and John elbows him with a 'shut up' look.

Frostman doesn't see the exchange; he's hanging the dress on a string tied to the wall. "That'd be great. It'd be like a walking billboard!"

John chuckles. "Oh yeah, just like that." The possibility of an arrangement is there, but he's just boxed himself in with the prevarication, though the haggling and negotiations can take days in the marketplace. Frostman will figure that out on his own. "So, good luck—I'll try and stop in tomorrow?"

"Thank you, Colonel. I'll see you then."

Laith waits until they're out of earshot before inquiring, "Why did you lie to him?"

"The culture that we're from, it's very different. There's no bargaining, and those who live on charity are usually seen as, well. Charity cases. It's hard to explain; Frostman expects a price for his goods, I can't just go and ask for something and not pay him."

"I don't understand. As healers, are we not repaid for our skills, and as Quaralyn, is it not our duty to see that you are cared for?"

"It's just that those are gifts, and I can live with that, but I'm not going to assume it's mine, by right."

"So you would rather the Quaralyn be kept behind a counter, grubbing for lamnats? Is that not demeaning to us all?"

John understands what Laith is saying, that it would be an insult to every person on the planet, if he were required to eke out a living; it is their duty to see that he's free to perform his duties, and while largely ceremonial, he does have responsibilities. "Not where we're from. An honest day's work is almost always seen as a better thing than living on handouts, so Frostman might see it that way."

"I will have to pretend to understand, but you would be doing him a great service, to wear his clothing for all to see."

"Yeah, we might work something out. Let's go see Anbur so I'm not a complete liar."

**Day Eight Hundred Seventy-Six**

John's been loafing around N'vellesem for three days, and he hasn't heard a peep from Carson. Rather than go and visit the Quarter himself, he chose a random child playing in the street to go and tell Carson that he was going to take off, and they could catch him on the radio on his way over to visit Yusrah in Gadon.

He's just powered up the jumper, when he hears the one thing he given up on, never truly expected to hear.

"This is Colonel Davidson of the Odyssey, calling anyone aboard the Daedalus, I repeat Daedalus, come in. We have you on our scanners."
Day Eight Hundred Seventy-Six

John's hands are trembling as he touches the radio control. "This is Colonel John Sheppard, I read you five by five. Good to hear your voice sir."

"Same here; we'd given the Daedalus up for lost, Colonel. What's the situation on the ground?"

"Inhabitants here are mostly harmless, and we've been living in one of their towns since we abandoned the Daedalus. It's a really long story, sir."

"I understand. I have a landing party ready to beam down to your coordinates."

Suddenly there's a storm of voices on the radio; someone at headquarters is babbling away and calling for rescue right now, and Hobeck checks in to report that they're returning to N'vellesem ASAP. "Clear the channel, clear the channel! Hobeck, stop in at Ayse and get Dr. McKay on your way in."

"Yes sir, will do. Hobeck out."

"Sorry, I guess you can tell they're pretty excited to hear from you, Colonel Davidson."

"Not a problem, Sheppard. They're on their way."

John powers down the jumper as the Odyssey team appears in a beam of light right in front of him. "God, is that...?" He runs out to meet them, shouting, "Colonel Carter!"

Every P-90 is instantly trained on him, and John stops and raises his hands. Carter gapes at him for a second, "Holy Hannah, John Sheppard?"

He hadn't considered how he might look. The knee length jacket of tooled haltar leather, his hair long enough to tie back, and he's so darkly tanned on his hands, that his face must be, too. He doesn't actually know; he hasn't looked in a mirror since the Incident in Ayse, so long ago. "That's me. Lieutenant Colonel John Allan Sheppard. I'm just going to pull out my tags, so don't do anything hasty."

Carter's already broken the formation, and is heading towards him. "Lower your weapons. God, Sheppard, I can't believe it."

He takes her hand, and she pulls him into a swift hug. "I'm kind of having a hard time believing it myself."

"Where is everyone? How are they?"

"Well, mostly they're all in town, and they're probably about to riot. Come on, before they burn the place down."

John leads them through the heavy gates, past the fountain, and into the main plaza. The sleek black uniforms of Carter's team are conspicuous, and heads pop out of doors and windows. The children playing in the plaza scamper around them, shouting questions and following them to the Quarter.
John tries to talk in between answering the shouted questions as they walk up the main thoroughfare, until the crowd rushing out of the Quarter swamps them in a flurry of yells and handshakes; and is dour Petrov actually dancing?

The crowd parts as Elizabeth walks through them, tears running down her face. "Colonel Carter, my God, Sam Carter." She latches onto Carter and hugs her tightly, sniffling on her shoulder; Sam smiles as she pats Elizabeth on the back.

Finally Elizabeth releases her and wipes her hands across her face. One of the SFs hands her a pristine, unopened packet of Kleenex, which causes Elizabeth to cry even more.

John lets Elizabeth lead the procession away from him towards the Quarter; he feels swamped by the overwhelming buzz of joy and relief.

Rodney will be landing soon, anyway, and so John goes back to the fountain to wait for him. Anbur meets him halfway. "I heard there are new nisquam?"

"Yes. I don't know how they found us, but they are here."

Anbur looks away from John. "Ah, and here is Dr. McKay."

Rodney's in full Abnep regalia, looking not at all dignified as he rushes ahead of Shaaziya, who's trying to keep pace with Rania toddling beside her. Hobeck is respectfully at her side. "Sheppard, Hobeck asked the Odyssey's in orbit?"

John acknowledges Hobeck with a nod, and has a ready smile for Shaaziya and Rania. "Yep, and your old pal Sam Carter's here."

"Samantha Carter? What is she doing here?"

"I don't know yet. We hadn't got that far when we were mobbed at the Quarter."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

"I was waiting for you, McKay. Anbur, would you like to join us?"

"I should like that very much." Anbur fall in beside Rodney as he hurries along.

"I wonder how they found us. This is absolutely incredible, I can't believe it!"

John lets Rodney talk to thin air as he stoops to pick up Rania. "Hello, sweetheart." He blows a little raspberry on her neck and she giggles loudly.

"Papa very excited."

"Yes he is, zahra'an. Rodney's going to meet an old friend that he hasn't seen in a very long time." John shares a troubled look with Shaaziya, who doesn't seem excited in the least.

Every single person in the Quarter is swarming around the Headquarters. John's hyper aware of the people around him, and they are nearly at a flash point of excitement. He lets Rodney break through the crowd as he pushes Shaaziya slightly ahead of him. Anbur puts an arm around her so that she's protected as they push through to the door.

There's some muttering, and more than one ugly comment as they pass by, but Evan's on the stair, yelling at the mob, "Move back, let them through!" John grabs Evan and pulls him inside.
The hallway is slightly better, Carter's SFs are keeping the gawkers back, and they get into the office without incident.

Carter stands up as they troop in, shutting out the noise with the closing of the door. "McKay!"

John surveys the room as Rodney picks up their conversation as if it hadn't been years since they'd spoken. Caldwell is next to Elizabeth, still pale and sweaty, but smiling happily. John thinks he should smile more; it's a warm, friendly look that suits him well.

John's attention returns to Rodney just as he's making the introductions. "So, Sam, I'd like you to meet my wife, Shaaziya lal Q'yn, and my daughter, Rania McKay lal Q'yn. Shaaz, this is Colonel Doctor Samantha Carter."

John grins at Carter's disbelieving look, and waves Rania's hand for her, she's nearly burrowing into his coat in a sudden bout of shyness. Carter offers her hand to Shaaziya, and says fervently, "You have no idea how pleased I am to meet you."

Shaaziya looks somber as she takes Carter's hand, "It is my pleasure, Colonel Carter."

Rodney's staring at Carter with an idiotic grin on his face, so John takes over the introductions. "Colonel, this is Patern Anbur lal Kamil'an, Master Idon of the Peragroilla, and the Council of Patern."

Anbur clasps Sam's hand in his. "Welcome to N'vellesem, Colonel Carter."

"Thank you, it's my pleasure to be here. Please have a seat." She glances over at Weir and Caldwell as she takes her chair.

Evan motions Anbur to sit, and retrieves a chair for Shaaziya before taking his position at John's side. He tweaks Rania's nose, and she hides her face again.

"I think we're all curious to know how you found us," Elizabeth asks the burning question that they've all been waiting patiently to ask: 'why didn't you find us sooner?'

John watches Carter as she talks; she's noticing the division between the two groups in the room. "First, Atlantis is fine. We've had regular reports from them and they're doing okay. We were able to resume sending ships to Pegasus six months ago." Carter looks at Elizabeth and then John. "The IOA installed Shen Xiaoyi as the civilian director, and Colonel Alfred Reynolds as the chief military officer. To be honest, when the Daedalus disappeared, the SGC was embroiled in a war with the Ori, a faction of Ascended Ancients who draw their power from their worshippers, and there were no resources to spare for a search." Carter looks confused when every head in the room swivels to look at John, and he instantly goes tense and wary.

He shakes his head slightly. "Go on," and she continues.

"We were able to successfully neutralize the threat to the Milky Way, and I was appointed to head the science department on Atlantis. For the last six months Apollo and Odyssey would drop out of hyperspace and check the planets along their course. We did find your message buoy, but it pointed to a different heading, so we've been searching the wrong part of the Pegasus."

Elizabeth gives Carter a wan smile. "Better late than never."

"And I am so, so sorry it took us this long. One of the first joint projects between Atlantis and the SGC is to create a gate bridge, gather gates from uninhabited planets, and place them in the interplanetary void between the two galaxies, making it possible to gate in either direction without
a ZPM. The *Odyssey* was on course to survey a nearby solar system when we picked up your scanners."

"That's brilliant, Carter!"

"Thanks, McKay, I could use your help."

"Of course you could."

Carter glares at McKay, but lets the old argument drop. "We know that you were fighting a Wraith virus, but what happened?"

Colonel Caldwell answers the question. "The virus was designed as an AI, to take over our nav and comm systems, and Dr. McKay convinced me to drop out of hyperspace. We were unsuccessful in purging it completely; it had escaped into the memory of an F-302 that was able to shut down nav and engine controls. We were unable to destroy the 302, had sustained some damage and we'd planned to land to affect some repairs. The virus managed to shut down the engines on approach."

"The buoy must have auto-dropped when the *Daedalus* came out of hyperspace."

"And we didn't have enough control to drop another."

Carter nods. "Any losses?"

"Twenty-two at that time. A few more since, and a few near misses." Caldwell's eyes don't even flicker toward John.

John deftly redirects the conversation. "What about the Wraith?"

"They're still out there, but generally embroiled in a civil war. Teyla and Zelenka managed to keep Atlantis a secret by being extremely cautious. They did a great job for Atlantis."

John breathes a little easier; the civil war explains why the Wraith aren't attacking Dominat more often. "Hermiod is gone, died an *anam* ago from radiation poisoning and a respiratory infection. That's why there's no one aboard the *Daedalus*, there was an epidemic and was it quarantined. We lost a few more from that."

Sam shakes her head. "All the Asgard are gone—their cloning process was failing, and they destroyed their planet to keep their knowledge from falling into the hands of the Priors."

Rodney admits, "Hermiod's bequest to me was the key to the Asgard data on the *Daedalus*, it's just that it's quarantined, and I thought I had years to deal with it."

"Thor was in the process of doing the same, but he beamed away before we could finish." Carter and McKay share a look that's both sad and excited.

"We can figure out a way to protect you from the SARS, Rodney." John's hoping that McKay will understand without going into details right here and now.

"I had thought of that, but we got so involved with the construction, and the *Avaxqaral*, I put it off."

Carter looks around the table for an explanation. "*Avaxqaral*?"

"There's an Ancient database here, in almost perfect condition, and Anbur has graciously permitted us to study it." Elizabeth smiles at Anbur, and he gives her a small bow with his head.
Caldwell's obvious tired of playing catch up, and doesn't want to discuss Elizabeth's arrangement. "We can all submit after-action reports to fill in the details, but I think the real question is, when can we leave?"

"I'll have to clear it with Colonel Davidson, since you've had an epidemic. He'll want the Med division to run some tests, but I would say as soon as you're ready."

John clears his throat. "I have another question, Colonel. Is it possible that one of those gates can be put here on Dominat?"

"I don't believe that's a problem, Colonel. We don't have any Pegasus gates on board, but I can earmark the first one for placement here."

"Then I'm staying until the gate's in place."

The reaction to John's firm statement is mixed. Anbur's incredibly pleased, Shaaziya is hopeful, Carter is confused, and Elizabeth and Caldwell look chagrined that John's putting himself forth as a hostage for a gate.

Rodney surprises everyone by announcing, "I'll stay, too. There's a major project that requires my expertise, the 'gate will need a shield, and my wife and I have some pretty major decisions to discuss." There's no way that Carter and the Odyssey will fly away and leave McKay behind.

"I understand. I'll contact the Odyssey, and we'll beam up anyone that wants to leave at Davidson's command."

Elizabeth stands up and says in a bright, excited voice, "I had better go inform the rest of the Quarter and advise them arrangements are being made."

"I'll be back soon; I just need to report in." Carter taps her radio headset. "Odyssey, this is Carter. I'm ready to beam up."

~*~

Even though his subcutaneous transmitter's been gone a long time, John doesn't trust that Davidson won't order him picked up against his will, or by accident, so John heads off to Makhuqat to give them the news and to make arrangements to have them transported back to the Quarter if there's anything they need to wrap up there; otherwise he'll make sure that the Odyssey knows where to pick them up.

The excitement there is muted. The marines are thrilled that contact's been made, but the locals are not so thrilled to know that all the nusquam are leaving, with the building still incomplete. John reassures them that at least, he and Dr. McKay are staying, until the House of Makhuqat is rebuilt.

He returns to N'vellesem with a handful of folks that need to clear up a few things and lodges at the Ludahsediat. Any one that wants to say goodbye to him will know where to find him.

**Day Eight Hundred Seventy-Eight**

Evan shows up a couple of days later. "Most of the Quarter is beaming up tomorrow, but a lot of us are staying. I'm sure that they could finish the temple on their own, but we promised to rebuild it, and we'll stay until it's done."

"Thank you, that's more than I expected." John's incredibly proud of his people, and grateful.
They've been loyal to him, and could've chosen to walk away tomorrow, but instead they're staying until the bitter end. "And there's Sabat."

"Yeah, we talked it over, and I don't think we were quite as enamored with each other as we thought. It's been great, but not great enough to tear her away, or for me to stay."

"I guess that's good, that you figured that out now, not later."

"Yeah. What about you?"

"I owe it to Atlantis to go back and try."

Evan nods wisely at what John's not saying; they're not even breathing the possibility. "I wanted to see if we could talk you into hauling rock. We're going to put the construction into overdrive after the *Odyssey* leaves."

"Sure, just let me see if there's anything McKay needs, and I'll be out there tomorrow."

"Great, the help will be appreciated. See you tomorrow."

John's not very surprised by the fact that the only other person to seek him out is Elizabeth.

She gets right to the point as she steps into the *Avaxqaral*. "The events of the last few years have been extraordinary, and reports on the things which happened here are going to be flying thick and fast once we get back to Atlantis. I can't suppress any pertinent information, and I won't lie if asked directly."

"Okay, I can accept that."

"I think, and Steven agrees, that it would be in your best interest to make sure that you are as forthcoming as possible. It will look much worse for you if it appears that you're trying to hide something. It might even be too late, I don't know."

"Things have been crazy around the Quarter, I'm sure that no one's given me a second thought now that they're getting out of here."

"True, but once on Atlantis, tongues are going to wag, and there may be an investigation. Staying behind won't look good, John."

"I think that's a given, but I need to stay. There's the construction, and I need to give them some time to let go." John thinks, *and I need the time to let go, too.*

"I hope to see you on Atlantis, but we don't have any way of knowing. Thank you, and good luck, John."

"You too, Elizabeth."

She gives him a sad smile as she turns and leaves. In the years of their acquaintance, they'd spent more time as combatants than as friends, and it was difficult to remember that bond. It was hard to think back to that brief year on Atlantis, at all.

Carter appears later in the day. "Elizabeth said you wanted to see me?"

"Not in so many words, actually, but now that you're here, I guess we do need to talk." John judges the heat and the time of day, and factors in whether or not Carter would appreciate a walk in the desert. He decides not. "Come on, I want to show you around a little, we can do that and talk at the
same time. This might take a while."

Carter advises the **Odyssey** that she's going to be out of pocket, and John takes her on a slow cross-country trip to Gadon, landing beside the river above the falls. "Let's walk, it's really nice here in the evening." He leads her towards the stony path alongside the river before he begins. "I have a story to tell you, and you might not like it. I'll try and answer all of your questions, but even I don't know everything. No one does.

"It starts when I was murdered in Ayse, some months after we'd crashed."

Carter's shocked expression is priceless, but she doesn't interrupt John.

"There were plenty of witnesses that will testify that I was truly dead, I literally died in McKay's lap. But there are no witnesses to what happened afterwards. I woke up few days later, alone in the room where they had put my body to wait for the burning, just like new."

"And you don't have any memory of the time in between, but you did have your full memory on returning?"

"That's true."

"I don't want to seem callous, but something like this has happened before."

"I know, Dr. Jackson. So, a little history lesson."

John's never been one to say two words where one would suffice, but he figures in this case, that it's better to offer an explanation instead of a defense. He tells her the whole story, starting with how Dominat was originally settled, all the way up to and including the circumstances around his departure from the Quarter and the intervening year.

Night's long since fallen, and they're sitting on a ledge hanging over the waterfall. The aurora is at its most scintillating brilliance this far north, and the sky is alive with vast sheets of light and color, that shift through every part of the electromagnetic spectrum. Pegasus is a wash of faint light in the sky, and below them, Gadon is alight with lamps twinkling the distance as John concludes his report. "So, my job in the last year, I guess, has been rebuilding the House of Makhuqat, healing people and visiting places around the planet."

"I had wondered about the tension, between you, Dr. Weir and Colonel Caldwell. Tell me, what do you see yourself doing a year from now?"

"I'm still John Sheppard, pilot and Air Force officer. I was given a job to do here, and I've done it to the best of my ability. I'm capable of returning to Atlantis and doing whatever job I'm given there, also to the best of my ability."

"The SGC is still pretty spooked over the Ori; that you display some traits in common with them is going to be difficult to whitewash."

"That's one of my concerns, that when this gets all over Atlantis I'll be automatically pegged as one of them—I'm not. No Ancient or Ori has ever contacted me; I've never followed any dogma laid out for me by some higher power. I've never believed that I was the Chosen One, but I had to respect the responsibility of the power invested in the position, because they thought I was. That's the reason I left the Quarter; I couldn't allow Elizabeth to use me as a weapon against Dominat; it was clear to me that we had differing agendas, and she saw me as her tool of choice."

"Are there any other manifestations of this power?"
"I can see, smell and hear better than I used to. I have a faster metabolism, but that's the norm here."

"I can relate to some parts of your story. After I was host to Jolinar, there were some who that thought I was a threat to national security. Mostly a tool of a politician, but still, the distinction was more than implicit."

"There's a certain sector that has a lot of hard feelings towards me—another reason I had to leave—because they thought that I had betrayed them. Maybe I did in a way, but there's no way to go back and change what happened."

"I'm under the impression that most are planning to return to Earth."

"Politically speaking, that's probably even worse; they'll have the ear of whoever is in charge, and I can't offer any defense if I'm not there, but I don't want to go back to Earth." John honestly hopes that a way could be found to successfully return to Atlantis; he was satisfied with his life here, but the city on the sea is still his first, best home. Earth was not an option under any circumstances.

"If you can provide me with a written statement, before the *Odyssey* departs, I promise that I'll do my best to make sure it gets seen by the right people, before they have a chance to debrief anyone else."

"Thank you, Colonel. That's really all I can ask."

**Day Eight Hundred Seventy-Nine**

In the pale purple light of dawn, John's waiting with his completed report near the designated beam out point, watching as everyone who's going begins to drift around Main Street in loose, anxious clumps. Most are going empty handed.

Carson and Paige come out of Headquarters carrying several bags each. Carson spots John and waves him over. "I heard you're staying until the gate is in."

"Yep, I've got a few things to take care of. What'cha got in the bags?"

"We've been studying the local flora, and we think that some of them have inherent medicinal properties, but we haven't had the tools to do more than theorize and observe."

Paige adds, "We're hoping to cadge some lab space and a botanist in Atlantis to study them; it's too bad we didn't have a botanist on hand."

"That would've been useful." John's sorry that events played out the way they did, for if the *Odyssey* hadn't arrived, he would've hooked them up with Quds in Jasrah or Zarin in Gadon. The two 'scientists', or as close as they come on Dominat, would have loved to have someone to lecture at; they'd tried to give John more than a few lessons in agriculture.

Teams of *Odyssey* crew members arrive to facilitate the transfer to the ship. "Well, I think that's our bus." Carson sets his bags down and gives John a rough hug. "I'll see you in Atlantis, I hope?"

"Of course. Take care, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Paige puts her hand out, and John gives her a brief embrace. "If I haven't said it before, thank you."

"You're welcome, John." They pick up their bags and join the lines that are being organized.
John's starting to think that he's missed his window of opportunity, when Carter finally appears in a flash of transporter light. He saunters over, trying to not look worried. "Good morning."

"Sorry." Just as she says that, Rodney beams down from the Odyssey, juggling a laptop and spare batteries. "He wanted to get a head start on the gate bridge calculations, and we got caught up in the details for the gate shield."

Rodney sees them after he's got the equipment corralled. "Sheppard!"

"McKay. How's it going?"

"Great, actually. I was right. After studying the shield generator aboard the Odyssey, I'm sure we can put the Daedalus' to use, but I've got some more work to do, fill in the details and build a power interface for a naquadah generator."

"McKay also narrowed down the list to a few likely sites to harvest gates from, so we're confident it'll only be matter of weeks, not months, before we come back with a gate."

"Back in the thick of it again, huh, McKay?" Out of all of the shipwrecked, John had felt the worst for Rodney in the beginning; he knew what he was missing out on, understood the dire threats they'd faced, and the joy of discovery on Atlantis. Now, the sad dichotomy is that he and Rodney have the most to lose by being rescued.

"It's like waking up out of a coma. They've made some important improvements to the B303's, and I've got some catching up to do."

"Naturally." John hopes that he gets the opportunity to be there and witness McKay's rebirth as the keystone to the potential explosion of knowledge that's coming from the things they'd learned here.

"Well, I need to go. Things to do, and Shaaziya's waiting."

"Later, McKay. Just let me know when you want to go to the Daedalus."

"Sure. Well, Carter, if I don't see you before," Rodney twirls his finger in the air, "then good luck, eh?"

Carter gives McKay a squeeze around the shoulder. "You too. We'll be back."

Rodney trundles off towards his old house on Main, skirting the lines and waving at people, and stopping here and there to chat and say goodbye, for now.

John turns back to Carter and hands her the data pad. "Everything I told you is in there, along with some other stuff I'd skipped over. The details of Swenson's intended course are there, I'd appreciate it if you'd keep a look out for him, just in case."

"Of course, I'll do what I can, John."

"I know, Sam, and thanks again."

**Day Eight Hundred Eighty-One - Eight Hundred Ninety-Five**

John spends the days at the quarry hauling stones in the 'jumper, returning in the evenings to N'vellesem to give Rodney a check up. He's putting off saying goodbye to anyone on Dominat, though his impending departure is already causing some distress through out N'vellesem and Ayse. John won't be able to delay the task of saying good-bye for much longer.
John delivers the stones and masons to build the platform where the new gate will stand. By necessity the Stargate will sit in the courtyard of the Ludahsediat. They've explained the gate system to Shaaziya and the others, but it's a completely foreign concept; the usual reaction is, "It is the Will of the Quaralyn", as if it's some magic that he's created.

The idea of trying to raise a gene-enabled child on Atlantis is Rodney's nightmare, but neither does he want to permanently separate their family. He's absolutely confident that he's indispensable enough that any argument about bringing his family to Atlantis will be null and void. If it isn't, he will make it so.

Shaaziya's spending much of her time in Ayse, with Zuhair. She's torn between Rodney's utter devotion and her wildly varying experiences with the Expedition; she's terrified by the thought of being so far away from home, but she'd rather go with Rodney than be left behind.

**Day Eight Hundred Ninety-Nine**

The *Odyssey* arrives before the *Daedalus'* shield generator is in place, and Rodney still has to modify the interface he's designed for the *Avaxqaral*, not to mention getting the temple ready to hook up *Makhuqat*.

Carter takes a quick inventory of what they'll need and gathers a team of volunteers to stay and get the gate system in working order, and Rodney oversees both projects. Colonel Davidson agrees to return if they're not in Atlantis in three weeks.

John's in that place between two worlds again. He stays in N'vellesem near the *Odyssey* crew, immersing himself the familiar Earth culture and the hope and dreams of the future, but he's also mourning his impending departure. He genuinely likes the people of Dominat, treasures his nearly symbiotic relationship with them as a whole and their complete acceptance of him as a person, beyond his iconic status.

**Day Nine Hundred Twelve**

Rodney finally announces that they're ready to test. The gate sits atop the glittering white stone dais; a long, slightly raised plaza lies on top of the courtyard delineating the dangerous splash zone.

Every one gathers for the trial. Curious town folk lurk about the courtyard. Temple construction is halted so the pilots and builders can come and watch. Anbur and the *Idon* let classes out for the day, and the students are taking advantage of the holiday, chattering and roughhousing among the crowd. The Council of Patern are present, even ancient Fatih, to bear witness to the dawn of a new era for their people and planet.

John stands with Shaaziya, Rania firmly in his arms, the Patern arrayed to either side of him as Rodney slowly dials the gate address for Atlantis. It's done slowly, not because he doesn't remember it, but because he realizes this is a truly momentous occasion.

They watch the chevrons light and spin around the gate, almost invisible in the dazzling sunlight. There's a moment of drawn breath as the event horizon swirls out of the gate, and as it lazily settles into the shimmering event horizon, the crowd erupts into bedlam. The remnants of the expedition and the *Odyssey*'s crew whistle and cheers, while others shout and yell in surprise.

Rodney keys the radio. "Atlantis, this is Dr. Rodney McKay."

"*Atlantis reads you loud and clear, Dr. McKay. Congratulations.*"
"Thank you, though I never had any doubt. I'm going to send through our test subject."

"Proceed with the test, we've lowered our shield."

A tiny, unhappy looking meslat is dragged up the platform, and unceremoniously shoved through the gate. Almost instantly the radio chirps, "What the hell is that?"

"Common livestock. More importantly is it okay?"

"If by okay you mean shitting in fear all over the gate room, then yeah—it's okay."

Rodney and John grin at each other and laugh, wet mesla shit is nasty.

Carter pulls out her data pad. "Atlantis, I'm sending the gate address. Dial us back in ten. Okay, McKay, let's get ready."

Rodney goes to oversee Sabat in the control room, a former classroom above the Avaxqaral, and in sight of the gate. The wormhole forms again, and when he reports that the shield should be active there's no discernable effect until there's a pulse of light and the puddle shivers slightly. Carter informs Atlantis, "Our shield is holding."

"Great, lower it, and we'll send you back your livestock. Director Shen is pretty anxious to get it out of here."

"Roger. McKay, did you copy that?"

"Shield's down."

"Copy, it's on its way."

The meslat stumbles onto the platform, making that odd squeaky bleat and glaring balefully at the crowd, which laughs as it leaps off the platform and runs away, students chasing after it. Carter advises, "Atlantis, this concludes the test. We'll return shortly."

"We'll see you then."

Rodney returns out of breath and dials Atlantis again.

Carter sends through her IDC and then hands the device to Rodney and steps through the gate, followed by the Odyssey crew.

The crowd dissipates a little, and Anbur, whose usually genial mien is serious, turns to John. "And so, we are coming to end, now."

"Not for a while. We have some time."

"But not as much as before, hmm?"

Day Nine Hundred Thirteen - Nine Hundred Thirty-Nine

John carefully divides his time between Makhuqat and taking his leave of Dominat: The dry dusty plains of Tobat, the jade green dampness of Jasrah and Gadon, the tiny jewel of Zadiyeh, perched atop Wilan's Peak, and the tiny mountain towns stretching along the route of the viat, like pearls on a string.
Odyssey swings by on her way out of the galaxy to check on them, and John reports that they're not quite there yet, that it will be some time, before they're ready to leave. It takes another month, even working almost around the clock; the House of Makhuqat looks like the monkey house, with people swarming over it, working feverishly to finish it.

The farewells get progressively more tearful, until John's down to the handful of people that will be the most painful to leave.

The last stone of Makhuqat's Temple is put into place with a flourish, and with much ceremony and many blessings, John and Evan retrieve the ship and park him inside, safe from the depredations of weather and ready to defend the planet. Rodney spends a few days getting the correct connections made and testing the trickle down charger before deeming it in working order.

It takes a couple of trips to return the Marine platoon to N'vellesem to prepare for leaving Dominat; they're hanging around the Quarter just waiting until John is ready.

Neela avows that he will return, that Dominat is in his blood, and John reassures her that he intends to visit whenever possible. She looks askance at that as he kisses the palms of her hands one last time. She lays her hand on his head, stroking his hair. "It is fate that brought you to us; may fate be as kind to us again."

Laith mourns that he's now too spoiled by John's friendship to return to his old friends in Tobat. John gives him the remote to the makhuqat'an; there are many places without a healer, and Laith will need to take his place.

When he can no longer delay, John dresses in his old expedition uniform, and runs a hand over his newly shorn hair. All of it feels alien and strange; the pants feel constricting, and his head feels naked.

Rodney and Shaaziya are waiting for him outside the house in the Quarter, the Marines and pilots that stayed are arrayed behind them. John leans to take one of the McKays' trunks, but Frostman gets there first.

They walk slowly through the town, taking the familiar route towards the Ludahsediat, passing the fountain before arriving at the school.

Anbur is waiting at the Stargate in front of the plaza. The courtyard is packed, and people are hanging out of the windows that overlook the Stargate, watching as the Quaralyn goes to the stars again.

Anbur's had many roles in John's life in the more than three anam they've had together; partly father to a man that desperately needed guidance, partly mentor and teacher in the strange life he'd been dropped into, partly goad and manipulator when Anbur had an agenda to execute, but throughout, there's been a true affection and understanding between them, even as they exchanged roles as weapon and wielder.

Anbur's smiling, but John sees more than a trace of sadness in the lined face and the startling grey eyes that have always seen more than John knew was there. "It has been very exciting since you fell from the sky, yes?"

John laughs, a strangled, wet sound. "I guess you could put it that way." Anbur squeezes John's shoulder, and holds him tight.

"I will miss you, John Sheppard. Now go, before you make an old man cry."
He's at a loss to explain to Anbur the complexity of his emotions; John's not always good with words, usually allowing his actions to stand on their own. And there's rarely been a need for words between them; Anbur had an uncanny knack of understanding the answer, before John even knew what the question was.

John kneels before Anbur, folding himself close to the ground, his hands covering his eyes as his forehead touches the dusty stones. He stays there a moment, knowing that every eye is upon him, watching him as he abases himself before his friend and father.

Anbur's eyes are suspiciously damp when John stands up. Rodney dials the gate, and sends the IDC and waits. They are all waiting for John to lead them through, and when John turns his back and walks through the gate, the people in the courtyard kneel as one.
Day One

The gate room feels cold and dark in comparison with the brilliant, oppressive heat of daytime on Dominat. Atlantis' near-Earth gravity feels too light, as if John might simply float away.

Both of those first impressions immediately pale before the staggering mental onslaught of _Atlantis_. For a moment, he's deaf and blind to everything but a wild barrage of flickering images and scrolling data screens and status reports on thousands of unknown systems that he can't immediately process. Finally, he remembers how to reach out and manipulate Ancient technology, and he commands it to STOP.

When Evan bumps into him from behind, John mentally shakes himself and steps out of the way for the rest of the returning team, the marines falling into neat ranks at attention. Shaaziya's staring open-mouthed at the gate room, and Rodney's talking at her about Atlantis, while Rania squirms in his arms to get down and explore. John looks over the ensemble with a critical eye; with the exception of Shaaziya and Rania, they all look shabby in their old, baggy uniforms. Every one of them has been pared down, dark and hardened by Dominat's sun.

A woman in a chic, gray-skirted suit and a colonel in Atlantis uniform are walking down the stairs towards them. Director Shen greets him with a cool smile, but keeps her hands clasped behind her back. "Welcome back to Atlantis. I am Director Shen Xiaoyi and this is Colonel Reynolds, Chief Military Officer of Atlantis."

John doesn't get any emotional reading from her; he's concentrating on keeping previously unknown automatic update function to stay off, so it's all down to regular body language. He gives her his meet-the-natives smile. "Thank you, it's really strange to be here. Colonel, pleased to meet you, sir."

Reynolds smile is genuine and welcoming, "I've heard a lot about you, Colonel Sheppard. Glad to finally meet the man behind the legend."

He isn't quite sure how to take that and elbows Rodney in the side when he snickers.

Rodney grins and steps forward to shake hands with both of them. "Dr. Rodney McKay. This is my wife Shaaziya lal Q'yn, and my daughter Rania McKay lal Q'yn."

"Dr. McKay, Ms. Q'yn, my pleasure." Shaaziya gives Shen a shallow bow as Rodney pumps Shen's hand vigorously.

"God, it's good to be back, at last."

As Rodney takes a breath to continue, John introduces the rest of his people. "This is Major Evan Lorne."

Reynolds nods at Lorne. "Actually we've met; we worked together a few times in the SGC. Glad you finally made it, Major."

Evan pops off a smart salute, "Yes sir, thank you. It's very good to be here."

"And Lieutenants Hobeck, Faraj, and Cadman. And the rest of the Company." John finishes with a
wave towards the formation.

Colonel Reynolds goes to greet his new people, and Shen returns her attention to Sheppard. "We will begin the debriefings tomorrow morning, and while I'm sure that you would all like to spend a little time to get settled in, I must ask that you first go to the infirmary."

"Of course." John knows the standard operating procedure, and under the circumstances, he wouldn't allow himself to skip it, either.

"I must apologize in advance, I am sure that you understand our position, Colonel Sheppard, but until we are assured that you are not a threat, there will be a small detail assigned to you."

John nods. It could have been much worse; they could have immediately thrown him in the brig.

"Colonel Reynolds will see you to the infirmary and assign quarters. We will debrief in the conference room at nine o'clock." Shen nods before walking away.

Rodney leans towards John and says in a low voice, "Is it me, or does it seem a little chilly here?"

"Yes. Yes it does."

~*~

With more than seventy people waiting for a check up, the infirmary is in total chaos. The entire medical staff is on hand, drawing blood, doing cursory physical examinations and updating inoculations. The line is out the door, but John's sitting on a bed when a pretty doctor introduces herself. She flashes her dimples at him disarmingly as she reaches out to shake John's hand.

"Jennifer Keller."

"John Sheppard." Coming clean early has seemed to work so far, so he gets it out of the way. "I should warn you, there might be some... disturbing results, if you're going to compare this to anything."

"Yes, I've heard." Keller is nodding as she begins the visual examination, poking at his ears and shining the penlight in his eyes. "Why don't you hit me with it."

"I'll have an appendix and tonsils where I didn't have them before. Bones that were broken won't show any sign of it. All identifying scars and marks are missing." John hits the highlights, but he's sure that there are other, more arcane medical things he doesn't remember.

"I would classify that as disturbing." Dr. Keller looks curious, not at all disturbed.

"You'll want to do a full DNA work up, because other than my appearance, there isn't any other way to identify me." John keeps a tight rein on his frustration, the unhappiness that wells up. He thought that he'd put all of that behind him, but he'd only pushed it away. "And that might even be a little off."

"Alright then, open wide." She scrapes a sample from the inside of his mouth, and caps the swab in a bottle. "What's a scan going to reveal?"

"I don't know--the Daedalus didn't have one of those. You'll probably want to talk to Dr. Beckett."

Dr. Keller calls Carson over from the exam he's giving and they talk over his head for a few minutes, before Keller hands John a pair of scrubs. "Get comfortable Colonel, it's going to be a
"Yeah, I thought so."

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John's ravenous by the time Dr. Keller allows him to escape her clutches in the early morning hours. Rodney had escaped fairly early, and the long trail of Marines had finally all been taken care of while John was still undergoing every test Keller had at her disposal.

His assigned guard is trailing him at a reasonable distance, and John appreciates the discretion, wondering at the fact that it's only a one-man detail. The commissary's closed, but there's always something available, and John snags four sandwiches, a couple of pieces of fruit and three bottles of water, then goes to sit on the balcony outside. The SF stations himself just inside the door, discreet, but there all the same.

It's as beautiful as he remembers. The sky is full of stars, far more than in the Dominat sky, and the huge moon has already set, so the ocean glitters in the starlight. The scent of seawater, and the wet feel of the atmosphere are both familiar and strange.

He can't see the rest of the city from here, and he has a powerful urge to get in a puddlejumper. John squashes the impulse. He's pretty sure that everything is off limits, though he hasn't been told very much of anything, except for the room assignment passed on to him by Reynolds.

John closes his eyes and relaxes the iron control he's been exerting since he arrived, allowing a little of Atlantis to bleed through. He searches for a balance between being fully aware of the internal interface and completely shut down, like the Kármán Line, an arbitrary line drawn in the graduated boundary between sky and space.

His watch stopped working years ago; he's not even sure if it was Dominat, or him that had caused it to go on the fritz. He's heard stories of people struck by lightning who can't wear a watch. Still, the faint rime of light on the far horizon is John's clue that it's probably time to find his room.

There's a basic kit, and a couple of uniforms in the standard utilitarian quarters, as well as a few boxes of his old stuff. A new laptop is on the desk, and a small stack of neatly folded linens is on the narrow bed.

Back in the days when they were completely cut off from Earth, when John was in charge, there wasn't any way to return belongings to the SGC. It had become a tradition to clean out the room of someone who was lost by allowing friends to take one item each as a remembrance, as well as being a crafty way of recycling during a time of dire need.

John wonders who had come to his room, solemn and orderly, to choose among his few belongings. How long had Teyla waited, before declaring that they weren't coming back? Or had she never given up hope, and this had been stored away ever since they were lost, waiting for his return?

He unpacks the boxes, makes the bed, powers up the laptop and briefly checks what's on it. Unsurprisingly, it's a standalone, and equally unsurprising are the thousands of reports.

John takes a long shower. The miracle of unlimited hot water had been a nice discovery when they'd first arrived, but after two years on Dominat, it's a glorious, marvelous luxury. He forces himself to get out when he's pink and wrinkled, and carefully shaves with a new razor. He discards the old uniform that's little more than rags and slowly dresses in the crisp, new clothes. Socks.
Antiperspirant. John understands Elizabeth's tears over a simple packet of Kleenex; he's feeling a little weepy as he puts away the Quaralyn and puts on John Sheppard, Air Force pilot, before he heads out to catch some breakfast prior to the debriefing.

Day Two

Teyla is sitting with Zelenka when John arrives at the mess hall. They slowly approach one another, eyes glued to each other, and for John, it's like a drink of water in the desert sun. Teyla draws him down, and John reaches for her, goes willingly into the Athsosian embrace. He's bubbling over with the indescribable joy of just being here, breathing in her sweet breath and the feeling of her strong shoulders under his hands. "God, Teyla, I missed you."

"And I have missed you, John. It has been too many days."

"Are you alright?" John can't help but pet Teyla's shoulders, stroking and squeezing them. She feels warm, and he revels in her joy, bubbling up and out of her.

"Since the Odyssey passed on the news of finding the Daedalus, I have been... smug. I knew that you were not completely lost, but we heard no rumor, or found any trace of you on any planet that we searched.

"We were a long ways off."

"I heard."

"Suppose we've made enough of a spectacle?" John glances at her through his lashes and gives her a silly smirk.

Teyla leans back, her hands still on his shoulders and she gives him a swift, tight hug before letting go.

John looks up to see Dr. Zelenka and a few other faces he recognizes, waiting to welcome him back and shake his hand with a slap on the back, and then, behind them, more unfamiliar people crowding in to meet him.

He grins at all of them. God, he'd missed Atlantis! John feels the sweet and mellow waves of affection and good will rolling off of all them.

The scene is repeated when Rodney arrives with his family in tow. John can see the shocked looks when he picks Rania up, resting her on his hip in the crook of one arm and introduces her around, as Rodney's introducing Shaaziya. Rania curiously pets the back of his head, since there's no long hair to pull. "You ready for some breakfast, zahra'an?"

"Yes!" she crows.

John's barely seated with a tray, when Rodney points to his watch. "Sheppard, briefing in ten."

He hurriedly eats as much as he can before he has to abandon the rest of it, still hungry. Shaaziya takes Rania, and Rodney leaves his family in Teyla's capable hands as they head to the conference room.

~*~

Shen Xiaoyi is already there, with Colonel Reynolds to one side, and, unexpectedly, Daniel Jackson to the other. "Please have a seat." She waits patiently for Rodney to power up his laptop
and get settled before beginning. John sits next to Rodney across the table from Shen, nodding at Colonel Reynolds and Dr. Jackson.

"Colonel Sheppard, Dr. McKay, allow me to again welcome you back to Atlantis. Your presence was sorely missed, and I hope that we can find some way to reintegrate you into the community, once a few issues have been cleared up."

The tone of Shen's voice has John instantly going to alert status, even though he was expecting a fight. He's getting nothing from Shen, but Colonel Reynolds is calm, and Dr. Jackson is throwing off a lot of curiosity tinged with unhappy vibes, but John can't tell why, or who they're directed at.

John watches surreptitiously as Rodney leans back in his chair, arms crossed, and his chin lifted slightly. "Okay, let's hear it." He's uncharacteristically cool and collected.

"Let us start with you, Dr. McKay. Your situation is not as problematical as Colonel Sheppard's. Colonel Carter and Dr. Zelenka are both quite anxious to have you back on the science team, though I am afraid that your intention to keep your family here on Atlantis poses a problem."

Rodney doesn't answer, though he gives Shen his, 'you are too stupid to live,' glare.

Shen ignores it, and continues. "Atlantis is not a suitable environment for children; from your own reports, an Athosian child caused the release of the alien entity, which could have had terrible consequences for all of you. In fact, that incident was one of the reasons that the Athosians moved to the mainland, am I correct?"

John is now openly watching McKay. It's true that Jinto had accidentally let loose the shadow thing, but the reason they had moved was the suspicion of espionage over Teyla's necklace. Shen is retconning, remaking history to suit her needs, and it makes John very wary of her and her motives for doing so. Rodney still just stares at Shen, though now his jaw is clenching and unclenching with the effort of containing his ire.

"However, Atlantis is now more thoroughly surveyed, and in consideration of your past contributions to the Atlantis mission, I am willing to agree to a probationary period of thirty days while we both assess the situation."

Shen's taken aback when Rodney simply smiles with a triumphant look and answers calmly, "That sounds fine. Thank you."

Dr. Jackson's eyebrows crawl up to meet his hairline in surprise. Was this really the same Rodney McKay from Antarctica, who'd blistered everyone within shouting range over the smallest mistakes?

John doesn't smile, but he's laughing at Shen just the same. She has no idea of what she's in store for.

She continues on, though she looks puzzled by McKay's response. "And so we come to you, Colonel Sheppard. The medical report, your own report and the implications contained in them leave the IOA and the SGC with grave reservations."

"I understand that, ma'am."

"The fact that you chose to remain behind on Dominat, rather than return immediately is also an issue."

"It was our fault that Dominat was exposed to the Wraith, ma'am. I had to make sure that they were
at least nominally protected; I felt like it was my duty, and the least we could do."

"I see. And how do you feel about your duty to Dominat now?"

"I've put it all behind me. I'm ready to move forward and focus on my duties and responsibilities here."

Shen gives John a slightly skeptical look as she continues. "The expedition members that returned some time ago were questioned quite thoroughly, and, through their own admission, the picture they painted is skewed as you did not maintain close contact with them for over a year."

John nods, relieved that at least she recognizes the inherent bias of the Quarter. A 'year' isn't quite the right time frame, but he doesn't correct her.

"The personnel that returned with you yesterday will also be interviewed at some length; their responses and opinions given the same weight. It will be some time before our picture of you is completed, Colonel."

"Yes ma'am."

"The SGC has also voiced concerns that you may not be willing to accept anything less than the full command of Atlantis.

"I believe that my report states that I'm willing to do whatever job that I'm given here. I fully stand by that statement."

"That decision is Colonel Reynolds', pursuant to the additional requirement that you satisfactorily complete an interview with both Dr. Jackson and Dr. Heightmeyer. The detail assigned to you will remain until this process is complete."

"That sounds fair."

"We will meet again, once I have had an opportunity to review their initial assessments." Director Shen stands and swiftly leaves the conference room, as if she can barely stand to be in the same room with John.

John and Rodney exchange surprised glances as Colonel Reynolds stands. "Colonel, we'll talk in a few days. Dr. McKay." He nods pleasantly, and follows Shen out the door.

Rodney nods at the Colonel's back. "Well, that went well." Rodney's almost successful in not rolling his eyes. 'I'm off to see all the new and insane ways Zelenka and Carter have managed to screw things up. Dr. Jackson, good to see you again," he says as he packs up his laptop.

"And you too, Dr. McKay."

John gives Dr. Jackson an interested flick of the eyebrow as Rodney powers out of the conference room. This is their carnival; he's just along for the rides.

Daniel returns the gesture with a smile. "So, let's not do this here."

"Fine by me, Dr. Jackson."

"Daniel, please."

"Alright, Daniel."
The guard is trailing behind them a few feet, and John is watching the people they pass in the corridors. There seems to be more people than when he was here last, and he gets a vague feeling of dissatisfaction and unhappiness from them. He figures that the tight reins of the IOA are chafing. "What kind of personnel turnover do they have these days?"

"That's difficult to say; quite a few people left when the Odyssey made contact, and many of their replacements have only been here a few months."

"Huh. I'd forgotten that."

"Here we are." Daniel waves his hand over the door sensor, and waves John into the temporary quarters. "Make yourself comfortable, you want a cup of coffee?"

What John really wants is a turkey sandwich, but he says, "Sure, sounds great. Black is fine." The room is larger than his, and there's a table and chairs to one side of the room that face the balcony. The doors are open and the fresh, cool breeze carries in the salty smell of the ocean.

John sits at the table, and Daniel hands him a cup before pulling his chair out and sitting down across from him. Daniel gives him a warm smile. "How are you settling in, everything okay?"

The warmth and curiosity in Daniel's voice eases some of the tension that John's been carrying since the briefing began. "You wouldn't believe how fantastic it was to have a shower."

Daniel laughs a little. "I understand completely, trust me. Why don't you tell me a little bit about your experiences on Dominat?"

"What do you want to hear?" John's got three anam worth of stories to tell, and it's difficult to know where to begin. Daniel's exuding waves of warm, curious excitement, but with the sheen of that same, oily discomfort from the conference room floating on top.

"Anything. The people you knew, the culture, the environment."

John shrugs a little, and begins with a story about Anbur. The conversation goes on for hours, Daniel asking questions and prompting him, until John's stomach begins to audibly growl and churn. The unending supply of hot, bitter coffee leaves him queasy, and with a dire need to relive himself. "Sorry. Do you mind if I, uh, use the head?"

"No, Not at all." Daniel sticks his head out the door and asks the guard to have a couple of trays sent in while John uses the facilities.

"I'm sorry, you should have said something. I tend to, ah, get wrapped up in things."

"It's okay." John figures that it's up to him to get the discussion on track. "So what about these Priors, and the Ori?"

"Before I answer that, let me ask you a question. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine."

Daniel laughs again, "I was told you might say that. Are you still able to sense the emotional resonance of the people around you?"

"Yeah. Except for Director Shen, but people can, I dunno, lock down their emotions, so that's not really unusual."
"It wasn't my idea, but an anti-Prior device has been running throughout Atlantis since your arrival. It's the only real Prior test we have."

John shakes his head. "That's what it was."

"What was what?"

"You, I could tell that there was something bothering you, but I couldn't figure out what it was. You don't like the idea of the device."

"No, but I could see where Shen was going with the idea, that if you were a threat, then it was better to be safe than sorry. And on those grounds I couldn't necessarily disagree."

"Yeah, I get that." So that was the real reason for the seemingly light security; Shen is counting on the device to protect her--too bad it's based on a fallacious premise.

Daniel says casually, "The thing is, I'm pretty sure that the device wouldn't have any effect on the Ori."

"You think I'm an Ori?" The idea shocks John; that hadn't occurred to him.

"Me? No, but the Priors didn't actually use any of the power of devotion themselves, it was all directed at the Ori, and you've stated that you felt like you were a transformer for the power that you received. That is what's causing the concern."

"But I don't—didn't use the power, either. Why don't you think I'm one of them?"

"Call it a gut feeling; plus, when I compare my personal experience with Adria and some of the ascended beings with the way that you talk about Dominat, they are quite dissimilar. From what you've said, the religion on Dominat sounds almost secular--it's basically several cults of personality, and the Ancients are not really seen as gods, per se. I'm not seeing the same level of fanaticism."

"They could be a little fanatical, though mostly it was over how to interpret and use the Avaxqaral."

"I have to admit that I'm quite jealous, it must have been a fantastic opportunity."

"I always saw it as just a tool. I wasn't that interested by the database here on Atlantis, either--which is much larger. I know that McKay and Weir found it pretty fascinating."

"Elizabeth has done some great work with the Atlantis database since she came back."

"She's still here?"

"Yes, though it's hard to drag her out of the labs. She led me to believe that you might have a better working knowledge of Ancient as a spoken language."

John twitches his head as he shrugs. "Possibly. Most of the Council meetings, and my dealing with the Patern were conducted in Ancient; they all knew each other's dialects, but Ancient was like, neutral ground."

"If you don't mind, I'd like very much to work with you as well."

John looks away and bites his lip absently. He's not suffering under any illusions that a place will automatically be made for him on Atlantis based simply on his past accomplishments. If he can use
his fluency to his advantage, that's one more niche he can carve out for himself. "We can do that, sure."

A knock on the door signals the arrival of lunch, and the conversation moves away from business. John relaxes almost completely. Jackson seems like an honest, upfront person, who's truly interested in John's experiences, able to see beyond the possible threat that they represent.

By the time that Daniel's through with him, John's hoarse and bleary. Lunch was too many hours ago, and the lightheaded feeling hasn't dissipated. The dining hall is mostly empty, and John eats slowly as he lets Atlantis bleed through into his consciousness. He searches for Shen's anti-Prior device and finds it in the interface. He experiments with it a little, and has Atlantis stop broadcasting. He's relieved to find that he doesn't notice any immediate difference in the way he feels. He turns it back on to cover his tracks and pushes the worry out of his mind. He is not an Ori.

~*~

John's guard confirms that Teyla's quarters haven't changed, and he swings by in the off chance that she's in.

She opens the door and smiles widely when she sees John. "Come in, John. I hoped that we would get an opportunity to 'catch up'."

Teyla sits cross-legged on the bed, and John sprawls in the comfortable chair near her. "Tell me how you've been, Teyla; was it bad?"

"On the contrary, Dr. Zelenka and I worked very well together. We made the decision to maintain the illusion that Atlantis was gone, and so supplies were always an issue, as we only traded with a very few planets. The mainland now has a thriving agribusiness."

"That's a relief, I always wondered how you were getting along; I kept imagining that Atlantis was destroyed, or in trouble."

"No, with the cloak and some strategically placed debris, they soon stopped coming to investigate, and we concentrated on more thoroughly studying Atlantis."

"Shen mentioned that in the briefing this morning."

"Even after three years, I still find the city of the Ancestors quite marvelous."

"Yeah, it's really great, better than great, to be back."

"Please, tell me of your time on Dominat. The rumors and gossip have been quite lively since the Odyssey returned."

John tells her stories of his time on Dominat--downplaying the worst of the conflicts and focusing on the oddities of the planet and people--for a few hours, until Teyla finally begs off. "I have an off-world mission in the morning, but I would like very much to hear more of these stories."

"Oh, I didn't realize. Sure, I'd like that."

"It would also please me, if you would care to begin to retrain with the bantos?"

"I would -- just let me know when. It's not like I have very much to do."
"Very well, John. I will see you on my return."

**Day Three**

After a night of tossing and turning, John gives up trying to sleep in the early hours and goes for a run. He keeps the pace slow enough so that his guard can keep up, because John's learned that he can run *fast*. The physical exertion, the smell of sweat and the sound of boots pounding in time together are all familiar, old friends. He takes the stairs two at a time, winding his way up the central spire.

The sensation of barely skimming the ground is new, though. The gravity still feels too light, and while John understands intellectually that it's a bad idea, he's struck with an urge to simply fly down the stairs.

He stands on the edge of the East Pier, watching as hint of shell pink at the horizon fades into the pale blue of morning. Williamson doesn't keep his distance from John like the last two guards, but stands right next to him. "That sure is pretty."

"Yes. Yes it is." John shoots Williamson a grin. "Have you been on Atlantis long?"

"Just a few months. Haven't had a chance to see much of the city, yet. The Colonel's been keeping us pretty busy."

"He seems like a nice guy."

"Colonel Reynolds is great, I served with him a couple of times at the SGC, and he's the best."

There was a time, it seems eons ago, that the Marines on Atlantis said that about John, and it's been too long since John could say that about any of his commanding officers. "Then I'm looking forward to serving with him." John turns away from the sparkling blue water.

~*~

**Breakfast is a scene repeated from yesterday, with people greeting John and shaking his hand.** Elizabeth appears and John waves her over. He stands as she approaches and sits down after her. "Elizabeth. Glad to see you're still here. Jackson told me you'd stayed."

"I missed you yesterday; you'd already gone to your briefing. How was it?"

"Chilly. But I spent the rest of the day with Dr. Jackson, and that was quite enlightening." John lowers his voice, even though there's no one within earshot. "Did you know that they suspected I was an Ori?"

Elizabeth nods. "Yes, I did. I tried to tell her that that was a ridiculous assumption to make, but it didn't seem to make a difference. Their experience with the Ori has the entire IOA suspicious and apprehensive."

"They've got an anti-Prior device channeled through Atlantis." John shakes his head.

"They can't make up their minds?" Elizabeth says it with a slight, wry smile, and John chuckles.

"Something like that."

"I'm sure that this, too, shall pass. Things always have a way of working out the way that they're supposed to."
John grimaces. "A little too passive for me, I plan to fight for it. And thanks for the advice, you know, back on Dominat. You and Caldwell were right." John doesn't miss her sadness; it's on her face and he can feel it. "What's up with the Colonel?"

"He went back to Earth with the full intention of retiring. I haven't heard from him."

He knows how that feels, to be left behind when circumstances change, and John's done the leaving a few times, too. "I'm sorry."

"It was just too much. I think it broke him."

Caldwell had tried so hard to not change, thought he was projecting the image of the firm, unruffled commander to reassure his people, but in the end it was his rigidity that prevented him from bending to circumstance. "Yeah," John says softly.

John notices the time on Elizabeth's watch. "I hate to eat and run, but it's Kate's turn today."

Elizabeth looks up, her wide, hazel eyes glinting in the soft morning light streaming through the windows. "Good luck, John."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll catch up with you later. Where are you working?"

"Level 8, 3 east."

"Okay."

~*~

Kate Heightmeyer is ready and waiting for John when he waves his hand over the sensor on her door. "John, come in."

John knows this is another hoop he has to jump through, though, after yesterday's extended conference with Daniel, he's hoping it won't be a drawn-out, wrenching session. "Kate, glad to see you're still around."

"I'm very relieved that you're back. I have an admission to make. I'm thankful every single day that I elected not to return to Earth, and then I feel terribly guilty about it."

John chuckles. "I kinda wish I hadn't gone either."

"I can't even begin to contemplate how you feel. I'd like to start by just talking about anything that you'd like to talk about."

"Okay, let me ask you a question--where are you going to draw the line between patient confidentiality and whatever report that Shen wants?"

Kate gives John a disappointed look and sighs. "I know that the first year here, the group dynamic felt very much like family--or even closer--and that led to a certain laxity in that quarter. I can assure you that that is no longer the case. I plan on only giving Director Shen the report that she asked for."

"Even if you think I'm danger to everyone?"

"Do you think of yourself as a dangerous person?"

"I don't think so, but it was made clear to me that she does."
"If I agree to share with you the details of my report to her, would that make you more likely to share?"

"Probably not, no. You wouldn't edit it based on my opinion, which would go against the spirit of the report."

"If you were one of your men, and you had sent him here, because you thought he was a threat, what would you want me to do?"

"I'd send him here because I trust your professional judgment, but I wouldn't want any details beyond yes, no, and is it treatable. This isn't something that anyone can change. I'm just curious about the level of detail that you're planning on revealing."

"Just the usual--high level diagnosis, and a broad discussion of any changes, if warranted. You've read my reports."

John takes a deep breath. "Okay."

Kate tips her head and looks at John like she knows what he's thinking. Maybe she can, or she figures the talking portion of the session was over, because she says, "Alright. Why don't we start with the Revised NEO and then move on to the Eysenck, you've taken both of them before."

Personality Inventories, oh what fun. The thing is, when he'd taken the tests that she's referring to, he'd been a brash, young Captain and hadn't really taken them seriously. Hell, now that he thinks back, John's a little surprised that they even let him take the stick of a Cessna, much less multi-million dollar helicopters and jets.

Regardless of the previous results, and his arguments about confidentiality, John honestly answers all of the questions.

The windows are open to the sound and smell of the sea, the room is light and airy and the furniture's comfortable. John takes his time to complete the two tests, and then they settle down to talk for another hour.

John's famished and starting feel a little queasy. The second time she has to repeat a question, Kate takes pity on him. "Come back tomorrow, John. We can finish this up in the afternoon."

"Thank you," John says with more relief than he intended.

"You're welcome, and thank you. I appreciate your candor."

John shrugs a shoulder slightly. "Have a good afternoon."

~*~

John snags a piece of fruit before heading off into the land of soft sciences. His shadow has changed and is now a pleasant enough Marine labeled Rice, and apparently word has gotten out that John's not going to put the whammy on them, because like Williamson, Rice isn't trailing him by a few feet.

Elizabeth is in a meeting when he finds her lab, so John wanders over to the physics lab.

Carter is out on the Odyssey, and Zelenka is at the center of a whirlwind of activity in the main lab. "Hey, how's it going?"
"Very well, Rodney has just sent us his first report, and there is much to do. Very exciting."

"Oh, where is McKay?"

"He is in 12 east. Says that he cannot work with so many people talking."

John gives Zelenka a quick lift of the brow. "Huh."

"Yes. In exchange for this information, I do not care if he works from his quarters in slippers."

John grins. "Later, Doc."

Zelenka waves him off, his eyes never leaving the monitor screen, hands flying over the keyboard.

John finds 12E and Rodney, feet up on the desk, with Shaaziya next to him as they work on a report. Rania is playing under the desk, with a few 'toys' that have been quickly scrounged or donated. "Now I get it."

"Sheppard, come in and pull up a chair. Shaaz and I are just going over some of the data correlations on the ZPM-Lite and the collectors."

John drags a chair over to Rodney's other side, and straddles it, his arms resting on the back. He looks around the room, coffee pot in the corner, the remains of lunch trays on the counter, and a cot with a sleeping bag shoved into the corner. "Pretty sweet set up."

"It's working out very well. We like it." Rodney gives Shaaziya a soft look and a brief kiss on the cheek. "It has the added advantage of being suddenly and inexplicably disconnected from the security camera network."

John gives Rodney a knowing grin.

"What? My quarters don't have a security camera--I view this as an extension of my personal space."

Shaking his head, John leans around Rodney and asks Shaaziya, "How are you feeling?"

Shaaziya gives John that faint, mysterious smile. "Very much better than with Rania, not so sick."

"Keller wants to do an ultrasound soon. She and Paige have been comparing notes, like this," Rodney waves a hand at Shaaziya's middle, "is some kind of experiment," Rodney says with disgust.

"It's exciting, that's all. Hey, let me ask you a question--does the gravity difference still feel funny to you?"

Rodney shakes his head. "No, it's a relief actually, and a great way to lose a few pounds."

"Shaaz?"

"It is very interesting, I feel as if I might float away some times, but it is not... weird."

"Yeah, me too, except that I think it is weird. I almost wanted to jump down a flight of stairs this morning."

Rodney pierces him with a glare. "Restrain yourself; it would be such an ignominious death, to break your neck after all that you've been through."
"I said I wanted to, not that I actually did it." John makes a face at Rodney.

Rodney changes the subject. "So how are the interrogations going?"

"Not too bad. Did you know they have an anti-Prior device running?"

"No! I can't believe that they would do that, they don't have any information for long term exposure on fetal development!" Shaaziya gives John a worried look as Rodney jumps out of his chair. John stops him as he takes a breath to rant farther.

"Relax. I'm pretty sure that Jackson's going to give Shen the okay to turn it off soon." John pauses, and briefly bites his lip. "I can check, to make sure, if you want."

Shaaziya gives John a grateful--if somewhat concerned--look as she recalls the time John made sure she was clear of the SARS in Ayse. "Thank you, Quaralyn."

John raises his hand. "Not here, don't even breathe the word. Think it all you like--just don't say it. Okay?"

She nods. "Of course... John."

"Better." John kneels in front of her and lightly rubs his palms together before placing his hands on her slightly rounded tummy. His power feels weaker to him, and he has to push hard to be able to see the child within her. "Hello, sweetheart," he murmurs. He withdraws slowly, and leans back heavily, sweat forming on his face. "I don't see any problems." John looks up at Shaaziya, "Do you want to know, boy or girl?"

"I would like to know. Rodney?"

"Yes, yes, fine, let's derail the betting pool."

John laughs, he hadn't even thought of that. "It's a girl. She looks fine, and you're doing great."

"And her name, John?" Shaaziya looks down on him with utter adoration and says his name the same way that she says 'Quaralyn'.

John smiles; you can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of her. "Muna." He feels thoroughly exhausted by wielding his power, and Shaaziya's devotion isn't recharging him, not like it used to. John thinks that it's odd that he had to push so hard to get it to work, and he leaves with a small knot of worry in his chest.
Day Four

John's morning run with Williamson is a little more sedate than yesterday's wild flight, though he still feels as if he could just float off. He's still wrung out from checking on Muna, and another restless night hasn't helped. John tests his hypothesis, and he can still sense Williamson's emotional state, though the feeling is fainter than it was the day before.

People in the breakfast mess are becoming accustomed to him; there are a few waves and greetings, and John's thankful for the break. He tastes his food, and it seems bland. John gives it all a thorough application of salt and pepper, nodding to himself. Better—the salt was what he really wanted.

He waits for Rodney and Shaaziya to show up, and takes Rania so they can eat. He plays and chats with her until they're done. Testing himself again, John is relieved to feel the warm and familiar devotion of Shaaziya and Rodney.

Rania crawls into Shaaziya's lap and pats her chest, and pouts when she's denied, but is easily distracted by a piece of bacon.

Rodney talks all the way through breakfast, but John's listening in Rodney-mode as he ponders the evidence that his power seems to be fading and exactly how he feels about that.

~*~

John's agenda for the day includes meeting with Colonel Reynolds, the last of the required 'interviews,' and he's looking forward to it. He hasn't seen the Colonel since the first briefing, but the conversations with the various details assigned to him leave him hopeful that everything will work out fine.

John checks in with the quartermaster and requisitions a new watch, then checks to see if there any running shoes are available before knocking on Reynolds' open door. "Colonel."

"Sheppard, have a seat, please. How are you holding up?"

"Pretty well. I'm just glad that I'm even getting the chance to be here, sir."

"I think I smelled General O'Neill's touch when the SGC's orders came in; they were pretty specific that you were to be given every opportunity to prove yourself."

"I hope that I can live up to those expectations, considering."

"What's the consideration?" Colonel Reynolds leans forward in his chair.

John takes a deep breath. "I don't know how much you know about the circumstances around my promotion and duty assignment to Atlantis, sir."

"Just that it raised a few brows. Scuttlebutt was that you were on your way out."

"I thought so too, no one was more surprised than me when I got the word to the contrary. I found out later that it all came down to Dr. Weir. Caldwell said that she blackmailed Command into giving me Atlantis." John tries his best to school his face into the impassive mask he used so often,
but it's difficult to shut down his emotions.

Reynolds looks at John for a moment. "That must have been a really impressive moment, getting Landry to back down."

"I can appreciate her loyalty to me, and that she thought it was important enough to fight them, but..."

"But it was a lousy way to move up the ranks."

"Yes sir. My thoughts exactly."

"And?"

"I wanted you to know how important it is that I've been given the opportunity to prove myself, and earn what I've been given."

"Very well, Colonel. I don't think we'll have any problems at all."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'd like to start integrating you into the command structure right away, rather than wait any longer. I imagine it'll be a few more days before you can put an off-world team together, but keep that in mind. I'll make sure that you have the time to catch up on the AARs, but you'll start PT with a squad in the morning, oh-seven-hundred. We'll ease you back into it."

John stands and shakes Reynolds' hand. "Thank you again, Colonel Reynolds."

"Welcome back to Atlantis, Sheppard."

John breezes out of Reynolds' office in high spirits. An off-world team, a clean start and a commanding officer that's willing to overlook the past is just awesome.

Williamson picks him up out side the squad room. "Good news, sir?"

"The best."

"Congratulations, sir."

John gives Williamson a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Okay then, how about some lunch?"

"I'm on duty, but don't let that stop you, sir."

"Fair enough."

John grabs a sandwich and, on second thoughts, snags a second one and takes them out to the balcony, just in time to see a jumper head towards the mainland. He's got a chance now, and it'll only be a matter of time, before he's flying again.

The sun is shining; the sky is the right color, and the lightness John feels is almost too much to bear. For the first time in years, he's completely happy, he knows where he's going and his future is bright.

John grabs a third sandwich and bunch of grapes on his way to see Kate. Life is really good.

~*~
John feels like celebrating and so when Teyla's team returns early, safe, secure and uninjured, he cajoles Rodney into knocking off the report writing. They commandeer the lounge and sort through the DVDs. Radek shows up with the beer, and they sit through the movie Rodney chooses as being the least crippling to Rania's intellect. Shaaziya's wide-eyed with awe at the movie, and Teyla and Radek are getting cozy on one end of the couch. Rodney's throwing popcorn at the ridiculous movie, while Rania is sacked out across John's lap, completely limp.

John's getting some emotional resonance from them, but it seems subdued, and it confirms that his powers are definitely fading. Still, they seem happy, and John's still ecstatic over his success with his completed interviews, so he decides that if this is the way of it, then so be it.

**Day Five**

For the first time since he's arrived back on Atlantis, John doesn't toss and turn, though he still feels tired when he wakes. He's already awake when the alarm on his watch goes off. Dressing quickly, he ties on his new running shoes and heads for the squad room.

Major Lorne is there with the squad of eight that's warming up. "Colonel Sheppard." John expected the formality, they were back in the game, but he's relieved to see Evan's smile.

John's grins widely in return. "Major. What's the plan for today?"

"Thought we'd run. You ready, sir?"

"No, give me a minute." John's never been one to warm up very much, but considering the way he feels, he figures he'd better get the blood moving. He follows the squad in their stretching routine, until Lorne hustles them out the door.

John easily falls into formation, though he hasn't formally trained in years, and the scene is giving him flashbacks to basic training. The pace starts off easy, but by the time they're flat out running, John's having to work hard to keep up, and his effort is obvious, because Evan keeps shooting him worried glances, though he doesn't lessen the pace.

John still feels disconnected, too light, and to his complete mortification, because of the pace and his increasing tiredness, he stumbles. The marine next to him makes a move to catch him, but fortunately John doesn't actually fall down.

John's exhausted when they finally return to the squad room. He would worry about it, except for the fact that it has to be that the unnatural power he had on Dominat is fading. John figures he just has to regain his normal strength, and resolves to eat before PT from now on.

He waves tiredly at Evan and heads back to his room to clean up before breakfast and the second debriefing with Shen.

John's the first to arrive at the conference room, and he double checks his watch. With some dismay, he notes that it's still showing the same time as when he last checked it in the mess hall.

He's messing with his watch when Daniel arrives with a coffee cup in hand. "Good morning, John."

"Morning, Daniel." John gives up on the watch and stands up when Colonel Reynolds walks in. Director Shen isn't far behind him.

They all sit after Shen, and she begins the meeting immediately. "The reports from Colonel Reynolds, Doctors Jackson and Heightmeyer leave me with no recourse but to accept their
recommendations—you should be allowed to return to duty in Atlantis."

John gives her a minute nod. He wasn't thrilled with the way that she phrased that; there's more, and he's just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Jackson and Reynolds are both smiling, though.

"Colonel Reynolds, I would ask that Colonel Sheppard only be given light duty status."

"That's not a problem."

"Thank you. Colonel Sheppard, it is the uniform nature of the reports that gives me pause. I cannot be certain that some persuasion has not been applied, and that is the basis for my official objection to your reinstatement. The SGC has overruled me on scientific grounds, but we would all agree that you do not fit the mold for a Prior."

John can't believe it; she still thinks he's an Ori? He considers telling her that his power is fading, but she'd probably get the bright idea that the device was working—despite Jackson's assurance that it would have no effect on an Ori.

"Also, I must insist that you continue seeing Dr. Heightmeyer in consideration of your travails of the last two years."

John nods again, but remains silent.

"Dr. McKay has requested your assistance, as Dr. Weir is quite busy, and he requires some translation services. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes." John's curious what Rodney's up to; he hadn't mentioned any of this yesterday, but then McKay's insights are always mercurial and strike lightning fast.

"Very well. Colonel Sheppard, all of this is provisional. I will reconsider the probationary nature of your presence here again in thirty days. I would ask that you not consort with any of those returned from Dominat until their interviews are completed." Shen stands and leaves without a backward glance or farewell.

Everyone in the room sits frozen, they all know the security cameras are there, and no one wants to be recorded saying anything that might be considered collusion.

John stands. "Colonel Reynolds, I'll just go see what McKay wants?"

Reynolds nods. "Send Corporal Williamson in, and I'll have the detail stand down. Just show up for PT and make sure you get caught up on the paperwork."

"Thank you, sir." John nods at each of them before escaping the conference room.

He's on light duty, tasked to read over action reports and occasionally help McKay out in the lab. John has to laugh at that. Shaaziya's had years of temple training and possibly has a better grasp of English than he does. He's left with hours of free time to catch up on his old life in Atlantis. He should be thrilled.

But the carrot of an off-world team has been pulled out of his grasp, and there's no flight duty even in sight, and the Director of Atlantis thinks he's a fucking Ori.

Still, it's more than he expected, and with his differences fading, the situation should resolve itself. Eventually he'll just be John Sheppard again, light Colonel and aging pilot.
He'll have to be patient, that's all.

John stops by the mess hall and picks up a snack on his way to McKay's lab to see what Rodney was really thinking.

~*~

"You want me to surf the database?"

Rodney gives him the double snap point. "Exactly. Between what we know of the ZedPML and this interface, we can effectively search Atlantis' database for information on the construction of the real ZedPM's.

"Okay, but why me? Why not just get the monkeys in the labs to do this?"

"Because this is it, the crown jewel, the ultimate brass ring in my proof that I'm so critically important that Rania won't make a difference. If any hint of this gets out before I'm ready to bludgeon Shen with my vast intellect and supreme importance, there can't be so much as a whisper of what we're looking for, until we find it. The problem is that this database is huge, and I'm getting millions of results. You know more Ancient than I do, and I have to sort out the chaff and chatter."

"What about Shaaziya?"

"She'll be working on it too, but I can only mask the activity from this room, and I can't keep them locked up in here all day every day, and between the three of us, this will go much faster."

"No, I meant is she happy? Does she want to stay on Atlantis that badly?"

"We don't have any other options, Sheppard. One of us is going to have to suffer if we don't want to be separated; I can't take her to Earth, and, frankly, I can't waste my intellect on a civilization that's reverting back to bear skins and stone knives. Shaaz knows that Atlantis is our only middle ground, and we don't intend to let Shen throw us out. Plus, she'll be able to go home and visit. I just have to permanently wedge the door open."

John had seen this fight coming a long time ago, but, at the time, Rodney didn't have the necessary weapons at his disposal, and he's the one that handed Rodney the knife that he's wielding with surgical precision. It's a battle that he'd like to see McKay win, and not just because he belongs on Atlantis. "So, show me what you want me to do."

~*~

Bleary eyed and dizzy, John stumbles into the mess hall. Night had fallen at some point, but he has no idea of the actual time, except that it's well after dinner, and he's sick of the power bars that Rodney has stashed in the lab. John grabs a few sandwiches, and heads to his room. Earlier in the day he had briefly thought of catching up with Teyla and a sparring session, but the way he feels, she'd kick his ass to the far north pier.

**Day Six**

He doesn't sleep well, because he's afraid to oversleep and miss PT, but when he wakes John's pretty sure it's early enough that he'll have time for breakfast. The food is even blander than it has been, so he passes on the fruit, doubles the bacon and salts the eggs.
John decides that he absolutely has to get some sleep, Rodney's project be damned. He finishes breakfast and heads down to the squad room.

Evan is there, but none of the squad they'd run with yesterday. "Sheppard."

"Morning. What's up, Lorne?"

"I thought that it might be better if we didn't run with an audience." Evan meets John's eye with a level gaze and crosses his arms.

John's being coddled, and he hates being coddled. Lorne knows that. "I won't have any problem keeping up today."

"Just the same, I'd like to make sure that my CO doesn't fall flat on his face in front of the rank and file."

John shrugs. "Fine. Let's go." He does better than yesterday in the first half, but by the time they are on their way back, he's sideswiped by a sudden bout of lethargy and dizziness. The feeling of being too light on his feet causes John to trip, and only the wall that he crashes into keeps him from breaking his face on the floor.

Evan stops and turns around. "Sheppard! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just let me catch my breath." John sags against the wall, head down and clutching his knees. He hit the wall pretty hard and he'll have a hell of a bruise on his shoulder and hip. Sweat is pouring into his eyes, and he wipes his face dry with the collar of his t-shirt.

"Infirmary?" John shakes his head and looks up when Evan touches his shoulder. Evan is leaning down, peering at him closely. "You don't look so hot, are you sure?"

"Yes. I just haven't been sleeping very well, that's all."

Evan gives him a doubtful look, but doesn't press the issue. "Alright. We're done for today, take it easy and get some rest. We'll take it at a slower pace tomorrow."

"Yeah, maybe I just need to work back up to it."

Evan gives John a disbelieving look. John knows that Evan remembers exactly what his stamina was like on Dominat; with a few exceptions, he was almost unstoppable. "Right. I'll check on you after my shift is over, okay? You need help getting back to your quarters?"

"No, I'll be fine. Thanks, Lorne." John puts some steel into his spine as he walks away.

John showers after drinking several glasses of water and then falls into bed. He's too tired to keep Atlantis' interface subsumed, and he falls asleep to flickering data screens and sub-vocal status reports.

~*~

The door chime wakes John out of a deep sleep. He drags on some clothes before opening the door to find Major Lorne. "Major. What time is it?"

"Nearly sixteen hundred hours. I guess I don't have to ask if you got some rest."

"I can't believe I slept all day."
"Actually, sir, I made a few subtle inquiries. Some of the Marines are reporting trouble adjusting to the time difference between Dominat and Atlantis."

"But not you?"

"No sir, I haven't noticed it. I probably don't have as much on my mind as you do, though."

"Possibly." It might be the anti-Prior device; it might be the fact that he's losing his powers, the simple fact of gate lag, that he's been too excited by being on Atlantis, the worry about Shen's motivations and intentions, or even that he's constantly having to lock out Atlantis from his mind—or all of them combined. Whatever it is, something has to give, and this time it's not going to be him.

"Oh, yeah. Here." Evan dangles a radio headset in front of John. "Colonel Reynolds meant to give it to you this morning, I told him that I'd make sure you got it."

"You didn't tell him?"

"No, I said you had an appointment."

"Okay, thanks." The last thing John wants is for Reynolds to regret his decision, on top of everything else.

"The Apollo arrived a few hours ago, there's supposed to be honest to god barbecue in the mess tonight."

John has no idea why barbecue triggers the idea, or else it's that he's finally awake. "That sounds absolutely fantastic, but can I meet you there in a couple of hours? There are some things I need to check on first."

"Sure. Take it easy, Sheppard," Evan warns before the door closes behind him.

Rodney's interface is remarkable and clever, but John's got the real thing in his head. He settles back onto the bed and allows the interface to spring fully into his mind, actively working to find a way to make it do what he wants.

John could kick himself. He has the ultimate time keeping device at his disposal, and he locates and fixes Atlantis' clock so that he can easily access it, sets a two hour timer and then gets busy setting up Atlantis as his own, personal, search function.

~*~

When the mental alarm goes off, the day's sleep plus finally wrangling his mental connection with Atlantis into something workable has John feeling refreshed and excited.

He'll have to figure out some way to 'stumble' over the information that Rodney's looking for; John knows that no one, not even Rodney, must know about his mental interface with Atlantis. To most of the people on Atlantis, the fact that John was the reincarnation of the Quaralyn is simply outside their realm of understanding, but being able to wield the entirety of Atlantis with his mind... This connection to Atlantis would appear to be far more dangerous and frightening.

John delves into his old, casual clothing, and when he has to put on a belt to keep his jeans from slipping off, he resolves to request some personal items to be shipped to him from Earth.

Dinner in the mess has the air of a party. It's wonderful to sink his teeth into honest-to-god cow
flesh instead of meslat or some other stringy, Pegasus bovine equivalent. Rodney, Shaaziya, Teyla and Radek join Evan and John, and even Elizabeth is drawn out of the lab. Teyla's curiosity about Dominat has Shaaziya and Elizabeth swapping stories, Evan and Rodney chime in with snarky asides, and to John's relief they skim over some of the more painful parts of their adventure.

John just leans back and enjoys the company, occasionally keeping tabs on the progress of his search, and at this moment, he thinks it's almost perfect.
Lorne's strategy for dealing with Sheppard's infirmity has them down to a light jog. John feels slightly humiliated by this, but he honestly can't dredge up the energy for more. "Lorne, I've been thinking," John says between pants.

Evan smirks, but doesn't shoot off the expected comeback.

"I think this would work better if we do it in the evening, rather than first thing in the morning."

"Are you saying you have morning sickness?" Evan's half joking, half aghast.

John rolls his eyes, though he considers that it might be a sympathetic effect from Shaaziya. "No. I just seem to have more energy later in the day."

Lorne gives him a funny look. "We're friends right? Outside the command structure?"

"Absolutely."

"And since we're friends, and you're worrying me, you'd tell me if there was anything... hinky going on, right?"

John takes a deep sigh. "I'm losing it. I'm going back to the way I was before, I think."

Evan's eyes widen in surprise. "No shit?"

"Yeah, no shit. It seems to be fading, I have to work harder at it, and it just about knocked me on my ass when I tried to check Shaaziya a few days ago."

"So is this a good thing?" Evan asks tentatively.

"I guess. It was useful, but here it's just freaky."

"Okay. I don't get it - kind of never really did, but okay. Maybe we should just give you a few days, to recuperate?"

"No, let's just adjust the schedule and see how that goes."

"Alright, tomorrow night, then. Get some rest, Sheppard, you look like you could use it."

The verbal admission has John considering how he feels about the situation. He decides 'conflicted' is the best description. It's set him apart, made him into someone that a younger version of himself wouldn't have recognized, but it was also something that he'd come to accept. Life as the Quaralyn was nice sometimes, if he's honest with himself, being the center of attention. It was also gratifying to know that he was useful.

He'll just have to make sure that he becomes as indispensable as Rodney. He doesn't know how yet, but there's very little John Sheppard can't accomplish if he puts his mind to it.

~*~

John spends a couple of hours in bed trying to read reports, but then he gives up and takes a nap.
After lunch he reports to McKay, and to make up for missing the day before, stays late. Atlantis doesn't quite have the answer he's looking for yet, and so he makes the afternoon's work at least look productive, though he takes his laptop and skims the military reports from Atlantis during the lulls.

Teyla and Zelenka have spent the past eighteen months doing their best to hide and not engage with the Wraith, the Genii or anyone except Athos' most trusted trading partners, and instead have focused on the exploration of Atlantis. He quickly skims through the off-world reports, they're all variations of 'escorted trading mission. Nothing happened.' It's a stance that Reynolds hasn't modified very much, though with the Wraith engaged in a civil war, the off-world teams are beginning to poke their heads out more often, if only to gather intelligence on the war.

The two years of reports from the Science departments on their discoveries in Atlantis, and the SGC reports on the war with the Ori are far more interesting and will take more concentration, but at least he can report to Reynolds that he's accomplishing something.

At dinner, John tries to cut back on the alarming amounts of food that he's consuming. He figures that feeling hungry all the time is merely a habit he's formed on Dominat. Teyla finds him in the mess, and John eagerly agrees to a bout of sparring.

~*~

John's several years out of practice, his back is smarting where Teyla easily got through his guard, and his wrist is already bruised and swelling. He wipes the sweat out of his eyes and resumes the ready position, sticks high as they circle one another.

"I believe that you are not concentrating."

"I'm concentrating, alright." He's trying to keep Teyla in focus, she keeps blurring as a wave of dizziness hits him. Maybe he needs to lay off the salt, too.

They're not sparring at anything like Teyla's regular lightning strike speed, and John feels humored. He advances on her in a flurry, but doesn't land a single hit.

John lands on the mat with a thud when Teyla gets in a good thwack behind his knees. "Ow."

Teyla gives him her most serene smile. "You are not injured."

"Only my pride."

"You will recover." She lends him a hand up and then takes her stance. "Again."

When John finally cries uncle a half hour later, he retreats to his room to nurse his humiliation and bruises. His sound thrashing, and the increasing weariness have him tossing and turning. After a few hours of insomnia, he takes his laptop to the mess where he's much less likely to fall asleep reading, and makes a sizable dent in the backlog of AARs.

**Day Eight**

Since he doesn't have a running appointment with Lorne, John sleeps late. He wakes up to the realization that the thrum of tingling power under his skin is almost gone. He feels empty and lonely without feedback from the people around him.

It's a depressing thought. He'd spent a lot of time railing against fate and wishing that the problem
would just go away, and now that it's disappearing, John distantly wishes that he had it back.

His jeans are still too baggy, and John gives up the idea of trying to reduce the amount of food he's eating. He piles a tray with all his favorites, but half way through, it leaves him feeling nauseated, lightheaded, and the pain of his still aching wrist and back adds to his general malaise.

John elects to lie down rather than rushing to McKay's lair, and he allows the Atlantis interface to surface fully as a distraction.

He gets a nibble, and is tracking down the information when Atlantis pings him with a request for authorization on a list of Rodney's searches. Rodney's found the information many times over; a couple of the requests even date back to McKay's original tenure as CSO.

John hopes this works. He authorizes all of them wholesale, and when the log shows they're all clear, he hauls ass to the lab.

Rodney's already concentrating on the old search requests that are reappearing with the information he desperately needs to be able to stay on Atlantis.

"Whatcha doing, Rodney?" John can't help the tiny smirk as he leans in the doorway.

"It worked! It's here, schematics, details on how to charge the subspace field, lists of raw materials, and the location of the production facility." He looks up at John, and the look on his face is one of complete awe and total avarice. "It's on Dominat."

That sends a chill down John's spine. He straightens up and steps inside the lab, locking the door behind him. "Rodney," he says in a flat, warning tone.

"I know, I know! It's fantastic!"

John takes a moment to wet his lips, his mouth is dry and his heart is trying to escape into his throat. He can't believe that he's here again, making the same inescapable choices, for good or bad. "Rodney, no. I mean you can't let them have this information yet. Give them some more breadcrumbs, until we can figure this out."

"You can't be serious! This is the single most vitally important discovery we've made yet! What, didn't you learn the lesson last time you wanted to suppress information?"

John goes cold. "I believe that if you recall the facts correctly, Dr. McKay, it was that delay, and the subsequent events that led to the information you have on the ZPM-Lites. If we'd excavated Makhuqat and left, Shaaziya would probably still be on Dominat, without gate access, and your daughter would probably be dead."

Rodney's face goes blank while he considers the alternate time line, the one erased when he'd agreed to keep Sheppard's dirty little secret.

John adds more gently, "I'm not saying never—I understand how important this is. I just don't trust Shen."

Rodney's mouth makes an unhappy twist. "Like you didn't trust Elizabeth or Caldwell."

"Was I completely, totally, one hundred percent wrong?"

He frowns and looks away from John "No," he says quietly.
"Rodney, trust me. This is only extending your plan of incrementally revealing your brilliance a little farther. Just give Shen enough to get her decision on your side, and then we can take all the time we need to figure the best way to handle this for everyone. Give Shen everything now? I'm afraid that you'll end up with nothing."

John waits for Rodney, he's got to see how this could affect everything: the balance of power on Atlantis, the socio-political structure on Dominat, their former home and the people that they'd come to know. Dominat would suffer the brunt of the IOA's greed. The SGC has the power to just go and take what they want, and as useful as Makhuqat had been, he was no match for the combined forces of all of the Asgard enhanced B303's at the disposal of the IOA and SGC.

Rodney takes a deep breath and rubs a hand across his forehead. "Fine. God help me, Sheppard, yes."

"Okay. I promise you, Rodney, there are ZPMs in your future... our future."

John unlocks the door and leaves Rodney to ponder the situation, and he goes to find Lorne for their afternoon workout. He could use the distraction from knowing that he's skirting perilously close to something like treason.

He barely makes it through the run, deeply winded, dizzy with exhaustion and feeling far too light in his trainers.

"Sir, in all good conscience, you really need to have this checked out. If it's true that your powers are fading, it doesn't look like they're getting replaced with anything."

"If it's not better in a day or two, I'll turn myself in." There are too many complications, including his argument with Rodney, and right now his new condition is the least of his worries.

"I'm holding you to that."

"Thanks, Lorne." Evan means well, but the timing couldn't be worse. For the first time since his arrival on Atlantis, John's not hungry.

**Day Nine**

It's 'Sunday, a recently instituted practice that John thoroughly approves of; John hasn't even been here two weeks, and already he desperately needs a day off. He's sore and tired from Lorne's very minor workout, and the morning wooziness is worse than ever. Possibly skipping dinner wasn't the best idea he's had, but he ruthlessly pushes the nausea away; he's sick and tired of feeling sick and tired.

Rodney and Shaaziya are already at breakfast. Rania's standing on the chair next to Shaaziya, who's eating one-handed, with her daughter firmly clenched in the other.

John piles his tray high and snags the saltshaker before taking a deep breath and going to face Rodney. He's got a fifty-fifty chance of being completely rebuffed. Rodney hadn't appreciated being backed into a corner the first time, and John doubts that he'll like it any better the second time.

John slides in across from Rodney, who meets his eyes with a serious look and nods once. With a feeling of utter relief, he picks up Rania and puts her in his lap. She immediately steals a piece of bacon and John just smiles at her indulgently. "Thief."
She grins at him, and her small mouth is perfectly Rodney. "I like bacon."

"Yeah, me too, zahra'an." John squeezes her sides a little, just to get her to giggle.

Rodney just stares at John's tray. "Hungry, Sheppard?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." John proceeds to salt every thing on his tray without tasting it, he already knows from almost all the meals he's had on Atlantis that it'll all taste bland and innocuous.

"What are you doing?" Rodney sounds horrified.

John looks up and studies McKay. "I'm eating, McKay." He's barely getting any reading from Rodney or Shaaziya at all. He's figured that their devotional buzz would be the last ones to fade completely. Maybe now he can get back to being normal, but there's something niggling in the back of his mind, and he can't quite put his finger on what it is. He gives Rodney a cheeky grin to cover up his momentary lapse in attention.

"No, with the salt."

"Oh. The food's kind of plain, it needs something. Salt sounds good."

"I agree, John. The food here is terrible." Shaaziya has a dreamy expression, as if she's remembering smoky roasted meslat, crusted with yalah, or chewy khabez slathered with piquant mesla yogurt spiced with bazin. John's mouth waters with the mere idea.

"I miss it too, but you're going to give yourself a heart attack. And don't let Rania eat any of that, it'll kill her."

"Sodium as a cause of heart attacks is a fallacy, McKay," though John pulls Rania's plate within her reaching distance. "Eat your own food, sweetheart, Papa insists."

"Just don't kill yourself with sodium poisoning. Once or twice was plenty."

John gives Rodney a quick lift of his brow. "Thanks, McKay."

Rodney gives John a lopsided grin. "You're welcome."

So, they're shooting for normal; John can do normal like nobody's business. "So what're your plans for today?" He takes a bite of the scrambled eggs and considers reaching for the salt again, but decides that he can live without it, if only to avoid Rodney's lecturing.

Shaaziya give Rodney an amused smile. "I believe that we are just going to 'hang out'."

"There's a ton of movies in the lounge, but we saw the only one that's really age-appropriate, so that's out of the question. Shaaziya wants to see the mainland, so I thought we might hitch a ride over and take a picnic."

"Sounds great." John spies Teyla and waves her over.

Teyla takes the chair next to Rodney and waves at Rania. "Good morning."

"We're thinking of going to the mainland, today, would you like to go?" Rodney glances at Teyla as he drains the last of his coffee.

"That is a fine idea, Rodney. How are you feeling today, John?" Teyla's smirk is just too much.
John gives her a fake look of hostility, "I demand a rematch."

"Very well, a rematch you shall have. When is the 'jumper scheduled to leave, Rodney?"

"Rumor's in a couple of hours."

John shoots a meaningful look at Shaaziya. "Rania will want to 'fly'."

Shaaziya chuckles and Rodney glares at John, "You are completely insane."

"It's the moral equivalent of letting the kid put their hands on the steering wheel, McKay."

"There's a reason why that was outlawed."

John laughs, it's too funny. "The 'jumpers don't even have seat belts."

"I know," Rodney says mournfully.

"So what do you think, Teyla? Can we do both?"

"Yes, that would be fine. If you're finished, we can begin now." Teyla looks at John's tray; he's been methodically demolishing the mound of food. "Unless you need time to digest?"

John puts Rania back on her chair. "Nope, I'm good." He stands up carefully to avoid the head rush.

"Very well." Teyla nods at Shaaziya. "We will meet you at the 'jumper bay."

~*~

John isn't stupid; he knows that he has problems with physical exertion, but his determination to ignore and overcome the problem means pushing past the pain. He's sweating profusely, panting heavily, and the double vision is back, making Teyla a damn difficult target to hit.

She circles John. "I am most concerned. You do not appear to be improving at all; perhaps you are even worse today than at the beginning."

"No need to add insult to injury, Teyla." John does his best to advance on her, but she's just too fast, and the same sore wrist gets another painful whack. "Ow."

"Perhaps we should stop for the day." She lowers her sticks slightly and John goes for the perceived advantage and ends up tripping himself.

He goes down hard. "You might have a point there," he says as he blacks out completely.

~*~

"We meet again, Colonel Sheppard." Dr. Keller as she strolls to his bedside.

"Uh huh. It's a bad habit I'm trying to break."

"Not very successfully, I might say."

"No, not really."

"So, symptoms?"
John ruefully reels off the list, and it sounds pitiful, even to him.

"Well, let me take a few blood samples, and we'll get an IV started." She hands him the ubiquitous scrubs. "You know the drill."

~*~

John's cooling his heels, wishing he could escape for some lunch, when Rodney powers into the infirmary, Teyla trailing behind with Rania holding her hand. "I told you to lay off the salt."

"Sure, Doctor McKay. What school did that medical license come from again?"

"The school of hard knocks and hypochondria."

"No kidding."

Teyla hefts Rania up on the bed next to John and he puts his arm around her and kisses the top of her head.

"How are you feeling?" Teyla slides her hand down John's arm and then ruffles Rania's hair with a smile.

"About the same." John shrugs at Teyla's concerned look.

Rodney's his persistent self. "Seriously, what's going on?"

"I dunno. She took some blood, took a scan and here we are." John spies Carson and nods at him. "I think we're about to find out."

"Rodney, Teyla would you mind giving us a few moments alone?" Carson's tone brooks no arguments. Rodney takes Rania with a 'you will tell me everything' look at John, and Carson sighs, "I don't know why we even pretend to have patient confidentiality."

"What's the bad news? You're looking pretty grim."

"John, if I hadn't seen the workup we did two weeks ago, based on your symptoms alone, I would say that you have Addison's disease."

"And that's bad?"

"Yes, if you actually had it. That's the thing—if it were Addison's, there's no way that you could have developed these symptoms so quickly to the point of crisis, it's a long-term chronic condition. Though the results of your blood work are all over the place; high potassium, low blood sugar, sodium and hormone deficiencies."

John interrupts the laundry list, "Wait, that's not possible, I've been eating a ton of salt."

"Aye, you're probably craving it like mad. How's your appetite?"

"I feel like I'm constantly starving."

"That's extremely odd. How's your sex drive?"

John blushes right up to the tips of his ears. "Uhm, low gear?"

"And how does that compare against Dominat?"
"I never had any issues, if that's what you mean."

"It'll do, for now. Do you feel stressed out?"

"A little, yeah." John pauses and looks around the infirmary. No one is near by or paying him the slightest bit of attention. He leans forward and in a low voice that won't carry, "I'm losing it, Carson. The devotional buzz, the healing touch—all of it's going away. I feel disconnected and empty—too light."

Carson leans back and stares at John. "Bloody hell, John you should've said something," he replies in the same low voice.

John shrugs slightly. "I thought I was just going back to normal."

Carson shakes his head, "I'm not sure that's actually possible."

That niggling thought in the back of his minds springs forward, and he suddenly remembers Laith's warning. John takes a shaky breath and says in a normal voice, "Tell me the bottom line here, Doc."

"I don't want to treat you for something you don't have. Most of symptoms fit, except for the fact that your adrenal glands appear normal on the scans. There's no degradation of the adrenal cortex, and the ACTH levels are normal."

"So what are we going to do?"

"First, we are going to repeat the entire workup and compare the results to the one you had when you arrived."

John sighs and falls back against his pillow, sighing dramatically.

"Second, I want you in here every day, and Dr. Keller will monitor your ACTH and Cortisol levels, aye and a Chem 20 and hormone panel. I am going back to Dominat to gather up my notes and files from the Daedalus. Should have done ages ago." John opens his mouth and Carson holds up his hand. "No, you are most emphatically not cleared for off-world travel. I don't want you having a crisis and me without medical facilities."

John huffs out a deep sigh. Dominat isn't off-world in his books; he lived there for two years. "Alright, but I'd like McKay to go with you. There's something I'd like him to check on, and I'm sure Shaaziya would like a short visit, too."

Carson stares at John, as if he can tell that there's more going on than what John's telling him. "That would be fine, I'm sure that I could use his help."

"Thanks, Carson."

"I'll have Keller release you in a few hours, but there's still some metabolic functions we need to retest. After that, don't push yourself. You're already on light duty, and there's no reason to change that."

John sighs and resigns himself to spending his day off in the infirmary, though by no means alone.

Evan comes in frowning. "Sheppard, I knew I should've made you go to the infirmary at the first sign of this problem."
"It wouldn't have made any difference. They still don't know what the problem is." John's afraid he knows what the problem is, what the solution is, but he's finally back on Atlantis and he's clinging to that with everything he has.

"Yes, but if I had, then Colonel Reynolds wouldn't have chewed me out," Evan says with a wry grin.

John winces slightly, "Sorry."

Evan waves off the apology. "It's fine, as a matter of fact. I'm leaving in the morning with Teyla's team; sort of a get-my-feet-wet mission."

"From what I've read, no one's done more than dip their toes in the pool for a long time." John briefly wonders about that, and the fact that they'd had so many problems the first year; he'd let his guilt over awakening the Wraith drive him into taking risks and leading the team into dangerous situations. Maybe it wasn't Pegasus in general, maybe it was him.

"Yeah. Though it seems to have worked." The look on Evan's face tells John that he's read all the same reports and come to a similar conclusion. John shrugs slightly; he did the best he could with what he had at the time.

Evan sees Colonel Reynolds walking into Keller's office. "Well, I guess I'd better be going. I'll catch you in a few days when we get back. Take care of yourself, Sheppard."

"Thanks, and you too. Have fun."

Evan escapes before Reynolds finishes with Dr. Keller, but John doesn't have to wait long, before Reynolds is standing next to his bed. "I hear you're having some trouble, Sheppard."

"Yes, sir. I thought I was just having trouble acclimatizing back to Atlantis."

Reynolds cocks his head and studies Sheppard for a moment. "I could accept that, except that it appears that you're the only one that's having these particular problems."

"It does seem that way, sir."

"Look, I've worked at Area 51 and the SGC for a lot of years and seen some pretty nasty things happen to people that didn't deserve it."

John's guilt over manipulating Rodney and engineering events to best serve a foreign party rises up in his throat, and he does his best to swallow it down.

"In the past, the SGC has always taken care of our own, but things are different now. The IOA has a lot of say about how things operate around here, but me—I'm old school. I want you to know that as far as I'm concerned, your actions on that planet are irrelevant. I meant it when I said we were starting from scratch."

"I appreciate that, Colonel."

"Sheppard, I just want you to know that whichever way this shakes out, I'll do my best for you." Reynolds gives John's shoulder a friendly squeeze before leaving John gasping with the horror of what he's doing, and knowing that Reynolds has to be thinking of returning him to Earth.

He's mostly recovered his balance and made a decision by the time that Teyla and Rania come back to visit for a while. They chat about inconsequential things; Teyla is doing her best to keep up
When Rodney and Shaaziya show up, John does a visual sweep of the room; it's nearly empty, and Dr. Keller is in the lab next door. "Rodney, did you hear that Carson's going back to Dominat?"

"Yes, he asked me to come along; said he needed my help."

John wets his lips slightly with the tip of his tongue and then begins to speak in fast Qaroptimat; if Rodney doesn't get it, Shaaziya will, and there are few others who would be able to translate it if they should review the security tapes. "When I get out of here, we need to talk—privately."

"Okay."

They don't stay for very much longer, and John's left to wrestle with his conscience, torn between two sets of duties and loyalties, and worried by the vague intimation that they might send him to the SGC. For years he'd longed to serve with someone like Reynolds and now that he's here with that opportunity on Atlantis, he holds close the irrational optimism that he can stay here.

That he's merely delaying the 'discovery' of the ZPM information is a small comfort, against the idea that he's betraying all that is just within his grasp, and he steadfastly ignores the idea that he might not have a choice in the matter.

Keller releases him an hour later. "I don't have anything to treat, Colonel, so I'm going to let you go for the moment. No physical exertion, and tomorrow we'll do another round of tests. Be prepared to stay if it looks like you need another IV. Come back if you feel like fainting." She hands him a blister pack of meds. "Compazine for the nausea. One every six hours, and let me know if we need to up the dosage or switch medications."

"Thanks, Doc."

"I'm just sorry that there isn't any more that we can do. I hope that Carson finds something."

John doesn't want to call Rodney on the radio and bring unwanted attention to the fact that they're about to go off the security cameras. There's very little that's changed since their last discussion, but John's paranoia is in full bloom.

Rodney's lab is empty, but John finds him in their quarters. The door opens automatically when John waves his hand over the sensor chime.

"Sheppard, come on in, have a seat if you can find one." The smallest of the trunks that had come with them from Dominat is open on the floor, and they're sorting through stacks of clothing and personal items piled on the bed. John takes the desk chair and sits in it backwards, arms folded across the back.

"We'll only be gone a day or two, but women are the same across both galaxies—I think we're missing the kitchen sink, Shaaz." 

John chuckles at the furious look of exasperation Shaaziya gives Rodney. "We did not leave anything behind, and I am not going to be seen begging."

"Yes, yes, fine. Whatever. Take everything. So, Sheppard, what did you want to talk about—as if I couldn't guess."

John glances around the room, before looking Rodney straight in the eye. "I think I made a mistake when I told you to withhold the information on the ZPM stuff. I don't know how to feel about this.
Before, we weren't going to get rescued any time soon—if at all—and I had to make some drastic decisions with that in mind. This is different."

"You're having second thoughts, because you've been returned to the fold, into the loving arms of the military."

John grimaces at Rodney figuring out what the problem is. "If you want to put it that way."

"For what it's worth, Sheppard, I don't think you were wrong. You just reminded me that it's been a long time since I had to deal with jealous colleagues."

"I still don't trust Shen. I don't think Reynolds does, either."

"It's kind of sad. The isolation of our first year on Atlantis cut down on the usual academic backbiting, but now it's everywhere in the science department. Everyone except Carter feels like they have to justify their job to the IOA."

"I didn't realize." John hasn't spent too much time in the labs; his perspective and information's been coming from Daniel and the military.

"Don't worry about it. I'll catch up with Anbur and Zuhair and give them a heads up, so at least they understand the importance of what I've discovered."

John lets go of the breath he didn't even realize he'd been holding. "Okay. That's great, Rodney. Thanks." No one, not even Rodney, knew the full extent of John's culpability in the matter, and that Rodney's willing to take on Shen, the IOA and the SGC combined doesn't surprise John at all. He shifts uncomfortably, he should have confessed to them days ago. "There's some thing else. I've lost almost all of the characteristics of the Quaralyn."

Rodney sits up and pins John with a sharp look. "What do you mean?"

"The power's going away, and that's why I'm sick. I can't feel any emotions from anyone, not even Shaaziya. Every day I feel a little weaker."

Shaaziya looks horrified at the prospect and gasps, "John," in the voice that implies 'Quaralyn'.

Rodney's oddly sympathetic. "Did it start immediately? Is it related to the anti-prior device?"

John's suddenly trapped. He hasn't admitted to Rodney of his capability of manipulating Atlantis to that extent, can't warn him off the subject. Damn it! He knew this was going to bite him on the ass. "I dunno, I don't think so. It's not supposed to make them sick—just stop their power. It would have stopped all at once if it was the device that was causing this."

"Hhhm. Right." Rodney crosses him arm and frowns. "I don't know whether to tell you congratulations, or give you my condolences."

"That's where I'm at, too."

"Well, let's hope that losing them isn't as horrible as it was when you gained them."

Even though it hasn't exactly been a picnic since his return to Atlantis in that regard, compared to the shattering experiences on Dominat, it could've been a lot worse. "Yeah. That'd be great."

Day Ten
John's standing on the walkway above the departure level, watching the chaos below. Carson's group is scheduled to leave immediately after Teyla's team, and John has no idea how Carson's managed to avoid having a military escort, doesn't think he wants to know.

Teyla gives John a smile, and Evan gives John a thumbs-up. John really wants to get back into the swing of taking a team off world, exploring and feeling useful. He smiles and returns the gesture before they walk through the wormhole.

When Dominat is finally dialed, and the wormhole is established, Carson quickly strides through but Rodney pauses and turns to look at John.

It's tearing John up, the feeling that Atlantis isn't exactly the same as it was before. The dark undercurrent of tension, and Shen's suspicions are marring John's expectations, and he's surprised to find that he misses Elizabeth's easy authority, and the camaraderie they'd shared.

Rodney's going home, and the fact that John's actually jealous of that is just as shocking to him.

The event horizon snaps closed, and John turns to go to Rodney's lab. His light duty assignment and basically seconded to Rodney is the perfect cover for John to hide out there. He's curious about the reports that Rodney's already given to Shen, wants to know what's been revealed.

Fortunately Rodney's well versed in playing academic games with opponents—it's all really high level stuff, theories and propositions, with the vague subtext that Atlantis is the source of the information, which leaves John slightly relieved. He can't protect Dominat from Atlantis in his current position, but he has a feeling that the closer he is to the problem the better.

Later in the afternoon, Keller only says that the test results are the same: not good. Now that he knows there's something physically wrong with him, John's definitely feeling out of sorts. Before, he could ignore the symptoms or rationalize them. The upside is, he's not tempted to balk at 'take it easy'.

With Teyla, Lorne, Rodney, Shaaziya and Rania out of the city, it's much cooler and impersonal. John spends a little time with Elizabeth and Daniel in the lab, until he's too exhausted to sit up.

Daniel makes sure that he gets to his room, and when John closes his eyes, the internal interface is there, and he just lets it wash over him, cold and impersonal data distracting him from his increasing misery.

Day Thirteen

Two days later the Compazine stops working, and John can barely drag himself to the infirmary. When he promptly vomits on her shoes, Dr. Keller silently hands him a set of scrubs. He puts them on and falls into a deep sleep even as the nurse is inserting an IV.

~*~

John feels absolutely wretched. He's curled up on the bed, huddled under a pile of blankets, trying un SUCCESSFULLY to nap when Carson and Rodney finally return from Dominat. He doesn't even have the energy to raise his head when Rodney sits in the chair, and ducks his head down into John's line of sight. "You look terrible."

"Thanks, I feel terrible. What's going on?"

"I'm not sure. Carson stumbled across something, and insisted we had to come back, like
yesterday."

John's always been able to tell when Rodney's lying about something. Keeping a secret isn't exactly the same as a lie; it's not personal, and for all of his prickly mannerisms, it's the worry that's always written on his face. "Liar."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Did you talk to Anbur?"

"He's here, and Neela, too. They came back with us. Shen's got them stashed in the conference room."

"Why? What's going on?" John can't help the whine that's in his voice, he's just not up to hiding it. He hardens his voice, "Spill, McKay."

Rodney's apology is exceptionally sincere. "I'm sorry, John. They think you have to go back to Dominat, permanently. Shen isn't willing to let you go, and they're here to negotiate."

The suspicions that he's avoided confronting are born into fact. John swallows, and closes his eyes. He can't bear to see the sympathetic look on Rodney's face again. "I think I'm dying, Rodney."

"It's not going to come to that. We're doing everything we can to prevent it." Rodney tenderly lays his hand on the mound of blankets covering John. "Just... hang in there."

"I want to go home, Rodney." John knows that he could simply will himself away, it would be so easy to let go, and he's grateful that Rodney's there, anchoring him in place. He lets the darkness take Atlantis away, fading to black.
East of the Sun, West of the Moon

Day Nine Hundred Fifty-Eight

It's like a dream of drowning, except in reverse. The blackness begins to fade into gray, and he feels himself rising slowly, like a diver decompressing in mid ocean. The silence gradually gives way to voices and sounds tumbling over him, half heard, before they're gone.

The steady thump of a heart beat, and shu-shush sound of blood pumping through his body overtakes the voices, until he's poised upon the moment of awakening.

Atlantis is gone from his mind, but the honeyed, thick, hot feeling of power is back, thrumming underneath the sound of heart and blood, and John carefully reasserts himself to the feeling of bone and muscle and gristle.

He blinks. The lights are low, and for an instant, he wonders where he is. Neela's face leans into his line of sight, peering down at him with her wide grin full of bad teeth, "I said you would be back."

The only thing that John can think is, 'Thank God', as he struggles to sit up. John looks down to see that he's still wearing the scrubs from Atlantis' infirmary. He wonders why he's lying on the floor as he looks around the room, the carpet is rolled up against the plain, whitewashed walls, the filigreed shutters cast delicate shadows on the stone floor, and it's so typical that it's hard to place exactly where he is.

Neela helps him with a glass of tea, lukewarm but still sweet and delicious as he drinks it down. "Next time, do not stay away for so long." She keeps her hand on him, constantly touching him, and the gentle trickle of power is comforting.

John swallows thickly, and Neela hands him another glass of tea. He thought he'd been so close to regaining his old life, but John wants to be alive more than he wants Atlantis. Even though this time there's a Stargate, and the makhugat'an, the feeling of being exiled still stings. John tells himself to buck up—it could be worse, he could be dead. "Yeah."

"How are you feeling?"

"Better." John's doesn't want to try and stand up, afraid that he'll fall over like a newborn meslat. "Where are Anbur and Zuhair?"

"They went to pick up the rest of the Council."

"Anbur's flying?"

"Laith. They should arrive soon. Come, you must stand. There are many people who want to see you, and you must see them."

Neela's main prescription is to allow him to sit in a chair on the deeply shaded porch of the Ludahsediat, while she sits beside him, her hand on his shoulder feeding him slow, hot trickles of healing. It's mid-afternoon, and heat is shimmering in the air, but the courtyard is packed with people, shifting, murmuring and spilling out into the street beyond the low retaining wall.

John greets and speaks with every person that approaches him. For the most part they are content
to simply be there, and he feels their devotion tickling at him. It's not much more than the feeling he had at low ebb on Atlantis, but Neela reassures him, "It will return, but slowly. Do not be so impatient."

Throughout the afternoon, Laila brings fresh pitchers of water and the occasional snack. The deep gnawing hunger inside of John is slowly abating, and he quickly regains a sense of balance. He feels rooted again, not only by the heavier gravity, but also by the sense of power flowing through him again, however weakly.

Dusk is fast approaching and the lavender sky darkening to a dusty mauve when Anbur and Zuhair return with the Council of Patern, Laith, and his father, Haitham, trailing behind them. The visitors in the courtyard part easily and begin dispersing as Anbur greets John with a brief embrace, leaving a hand on his back.

"My friend, it is good to see you recovering."

"Yeah, I feel much better." Physically anyway, he mentally added. Now that he's not in immediate danger of expiring, his still-divided loyalties and permanent exile are weighing on him heavily.

"I cannot say that I am sorry for your return, but I do grieve with you for your loss of Atlantis. Such a wondrous place."

John just nods as the rest of the Patern catch up. He acknowledges them in turn as they head into the school.

"The Council requires your presence. Are you able to meet at this time?" Anbur scrutinizes John carefully, looking for any sign that he's too unwell for this duty.

John glances at Neela. "Am I well enough for a meeting?"

"No. Tomorrow will be soon enough, Anbur."

"Ah, it is no matter. We will eat and rest, and you must tell us of your adventures upon Atlantis."

He doesn't think that reading reports and getting whacked on by Teyla will make for a very exciting story, but real food sounds like an excellent idea.

~*~

John rests for a few hours, and Laith takes Neela's place at John side, always keeping a hand on John. Laith pushes harder than Neela, and John can feel the familiar, hot tingling sensation of his hand.

It's no longer embarrassing, and John's learned to separate the feelings; now it's comforting, and fulfilling in a way that goes far beyond sexuality.

John and the Patern dine with the rest of the school, rather than engage in a formal meal, and the loud chattering of the student body is a welcome change from the near silence of Atlantis. Yusrah is on his right, acting very protectively, and Laith is on his left, and if he'd let him, he'd be holding John's hand. As it is, Laith's constantly touching John on his shoulder, his arm, his thigh.

Yusrah is unknowingly mimicking Laith as she reaches out and touches John, as if to reassure herself that he's really there, and he hasn't disappeared in a flash of unseen light. John catches Neela's eye, and she laughs at him when he blushes.
John tries to ignore that he's being man-handled and tells a few stories about Atlantis, the ocean that surrounds it, that there's only one large moon, and about the people that he knows there. He's never really spoken at length about Atlantis; it was too painful to recall, before the *Odyssey*, and now he has to learn to put it behind him.

Tazim is particularly interested in how Elizabeth is doing, and is fascinated by the stories of Teyla, and the fact that she was able to best the Quaralyn in battle. John tries to explain, but to no avail, he's already let the cat out of the bag.

Neela brings John's participation in the dinner to a close after he yawns once. Haitham, Laith and Neela haggle over the rotation schedule; she feels it's critical that they watch over John and keep him balanced while he sleeps.

Laith takes the first watch. This time he does take John's hand, and he's tired enough that he falls asleep in the middle of Laith's story about his few adventures in the *makhuqat'an*.

**Day Nine Hundred Fifty-Nine**

John awakens in the early morning, startled by the fact that Neela's snuggled up behind John in the bed. He shakes his head as he extricates himself without waking her; she has to be exhausted, too.

He does a quick wash in cool water and digs around the room, locating some fresh clothing. John feels a little better, not nearly so direly ill, but he knows that he's a long way from being himself again. He leaves Neela sleeping and pads down to the kitchen.

Laila is already there, and preparations for breakfast are well underway. She sits him down at the table with hot, sweet tea, a plate of fresh khabez, and a pot of soft, tangy cheese to tide him over, until breakfast is properly served.

He's taking his first bite when Laith pokes his head into the kitchen. "There, I have found you."

"I didn't know I was lost." John pushes the food over as Laith sits across from him.

"How are you this morning?" Laith slathers cheese over the bread and thanks Laila when she brings him a glass of tea to wash it down with.

"Much better." John lifts his glass slightly towards Laith, "Thank you.

"I am glad for that. I have never seen Neela or Anbur so furious as when they stepped through the *orbis* with your body."

John shudders to imagine that he was close enough to being dead that he'd been a body. "Do you know what happened?"

"Only that the Lanteans were stubborn and nearly allowed you to die."

He avoids Laith's gaze, and he allows John the illusion of privacy as John considers the strong feeling that he could've given up, that he nearly wanted to. He suddenly remembers that Rodney told him that Shen hadn't wanted John to return to Dominat, and he puts it all together. John's momentarily angry that she'd been willing to allow him to die, but then he recalls that he hadn't trusted Shen and she hadn't trusted him either. He briefly wonders if it would've ever been possible for him to work with her.

It's all sand in the wind, though, and there's no point in getting worked up over it. He wonders how
Rodney is, what they're all doing right now. It's probably evening, and he hopes that they're not mistakenly mourning him. He should probably dial in and let them know he's fine.

They finish off the khabez without further conversation, the clatter and clanging and shouting of the kitchen staff masking their silence.

~*~

John's burst of early morning energy is slowly wearing away; leaving him weary, gnawing over the unfinished business he's left behind on Atlantis. He seeks out Anbur, who's alone in his classroom, his students farmed out to other instructors or given the day off.

"Ah, John. I hope that you are much recovered. Very upsetting."

"That's kind of why I wanted to talk to you. Tell me what happened."

"Director Shen is very difficult, yes?"

"I think she's just afraid of me. There was a war with people who worshiped Ascended beings that had some similarity to me."

"Dr. McKay explained some, yes. He was the one to break the argument between us. For that she did not allow him to return with you, even for visit."

John asks, "What did he say?"

"That Dominat is the answer to the problem with the ZPM, and if you were to die, then we would be unlikely to share. I gave weight to his argument, that if you died, for us it was the Will of Qaral, but also the end to any discussion."

"I bet she liked that."

"Dr. McKay said she looked like she was sucking a lemon."

John laughs at that. "I can imagine."

"The Council awaits to meet with you, we would like your guidance on these matters, as it is still very confusing to us."

"Well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. I left Atlantis with a lot of unfinished business hanging over my head, and right now I feel uncomfortable leaning one way or the other."

Anbur nods. "Hmm, yes. Not like when you left us at all."

John hears the hurt in Anbur's voice, and he has another twinge of guilt that he caused the pain, and that it was all for naught. "Exactly."

"We can wait, it is no matter. You are still not well, and perhaps a few more days rest, yes?"

John sighs softly in relief. "Yes, a few more days, and I will decide on a course of action—for the Council and for myself."

Anbur gives John a sly look. "Yusrah was most concerned when I told her that you had returned very ill."

John manages to not blush or laugh hysterically with the embarrassment that his flirtation is now...
common knowledge. "Oh, really?"
"Yes. Perhaps I should look to arrange a hand fasting?"

John backpedals fast. "Oh, no. No. It's fine, we're friends, and she was worried. That's all."
Anbur laughs at John, "If you say so."

John stands up and waves his hand towards the door. "I guess I'd better go, uh, lie down or something."

~*~

It's late in the day when Neela rousts John out of his nap. "*Come, you have a visitor from the circle."

John sits up and groggily wipes a hand over his face. "What?"
"*You have a visitor, very fine figure of a man, too."
"*Neela, just how old are you?"
"*Old enough to appreciate young men. *Come now, he is waiting below."

John runs his hands through his short hair and laughs helplessly as he trots down the stairs to the common room on the first floor. He stops short when he sees Colonel Reynolds standing in front of the statue of Qaral. "That's the Ancient that brought the people to Dominat."

"I was going to say that it looks like you, Sheppard. I'm relieved to see you looking so well."

John glances at the statue and doesn't think it looks like him at all. "No thanks to Director Shen, I hear," he says darkly.

Reynolds has the grace to look embarrassed. "True. As I understand, it was her opinion that it wouldn't be prudent to have you out running around the galaxy, until it was pointed out to her, that you apparently can't survive off Dominat."

"Apparently."
"In part, that's why I'm here. I told you that I'd make sure that you were taken care of, no matter what. I admit, I was thinking of the SGC at the time, but... Considering the circumstances, if you'll accept it, I have separation papers for a medical discharge."

John has to sit down, before he falls over in relief. "Really?"

Reynolds sits down across from him and begins to pull papers out of a satchel. "You've got your twenty in, Sheppard, and as much as I regret not having the opportunity to serve with you, it's probably the best option for everyone involved."

He stares at the papers in Reynolds' hands for a few moments, and then, "Why this? Why not just boot me out?"

Reynolds smiles, a wide toothy grin. "There's two ways to look at it. My way, which is that you didn't ask for this, it was unforeseeable, and you were injured on TDY, or the IOA's perspective."

"Which is?" John prompts.
"That they needed to make sure that you're not alienated any more than you have been already, such as court martial and dishonorable discharge."

John's jaw drops. "Is this a bribe?"

"Only if you look at it in a particular light. I'd much rather you consider that's it's the least we owe you for your service."

The best part of the entire scenario is that he'd be free to move forward on Dominat's behalf and not feel like he was betraying one set of masters. The generous retirement pay would be nearly useless to John, sitting in a bank on Earth, but if they wanted to soften him up, he wasn't going to say no. Plus, if he pisses them off, and they rescind the retirement pay, it won't cause him any undue suffering. "Alright. I think that's a more than equitable solution to both of our problems."

"I hoped that you'd see it that way." Reynolds slides a pen and the stack of forms across the table.

John reads through the long, boring legalese that lawyers love so much, and it's all standard boilerplate discharge papers. John's hand shakes as he signs the papers. "Thank you, Colonel."

Reynolds hands him back half of the papers, "This is your copy. Once I transmit these to Earth, they'll push the paperwork through in three or four days. Oh, here. Dr. McKay asked me to give you this." Reynolds hands over an envelope, stuffed fat and barely sealed.

John tears it open, and it's another set of legal papers assigning McKay power of attorney, with a scribbled note attached. 'Just in case they really go through with it. RIM, PhD, PhD, PhD.'

Only Rodney. John chuckles over the signature and with relief that Rodney's fine.

There's another letter attached, written in beautifully scripted Qaroptimat that Shaaziya had at least penned, if not actually composed. John folds it and puts it in his pocket. He signs the rest, stuffs them back into the envelope and returns it to Reynolds.

"I took the liberty of bringing your personal belongings from your quarters on Atlantis with me, the young lady in the control room said she would take care of them."

"Sabat. I'll catch up with her later, thank you. I hope it wasn't too much trouble." Being forced to retire is one thing, and yes, he wanted the stuff, but to John it felt faintly like being kicked to the curb.

"Not at all, Major Lorne did most of the work." Reynolds shoves everything to his satchel. "Now that we have that all taken care of, one last item."

"Okay," John says carefully.

"The SGC and the IOA would like to open up negotiations with the leaders of Dominat, for use of the ZPM manufactory."

The old one-two punch, and while John isn't surprised by that, he is surprised at the level of information that Rodney had had to divulge in order to get John home. "We can certainly discuss it," he says in a guarded tone.

"Good. As soon as the representatives arrive from Earth, we'll advise and set up more specific arrangements." Reynolds stands up and they shake hands. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Sheppard."
That appellation, more than anything, strikes it home to John that he's a free man; it's gone, over and done with, finito. John Sheppard: former Lieutenant Colonel, fly-boy no more. "Yeah, thanks," John says in a daze.

After Reynolds is gone, John goes back upstairs, takes his dog tags off, folds them inside the discharge papers and carefully stows them away. He feels naked without them, but that too will pass, like so many other things.

He takes deep breath, and sits on the bed. True to Sabat's word, there's a small stack of cardboard boxes in the corner, looking woefully out of place, but he really doesn't have any place to unpack them. He stares at them for a while, reflecting on how pathetic it was that his entire life could be crammed into a handful of boxes.

Shaking off the moodiness, John remembers the letter and pulls it out. As expected it's really from Rodney:

Sheppard,

I'm sorry that I wasn't able to return to Dominat with you to explain all of this in person, and more importantly, verify the fact that you were really still alive. All of us had our doubts, even Carson, but Neela assured me that it was not too late. Anbur dialed in and gave us the good news late yesterday; it was very tense here for a while.

As you've probably already discovered, I had to pull out the really big lever to get Shen to budge. I know that you wanted to wait, until you had a better idea of how to handle it, but I truly believed Anbur when he said that all negotiations were off if you died. I didn't want to lose that opportunity, though the critical point to remember is that I didn't want you to die. Now that Reynolds' is giving you your walking papers, I'm comfortable knowing that you're there to handle it, and that you'll do what's best for Dominat—and hopefully Atlantis, too.

The news that there might be a way to build our own ZPM has raised spirits here tremendously. We're all really just in a daze. The records in the database are very specific, and I've attached a bit of background information on the following page. Please do not go off and try and find the site; one, it's possibly dangerous, and, two, I want to be there.

I believe that Shen is feeling the backlash of her stubbornness. I have a feeling that she won't last long on Atlantis; her intractability and fear have proven her unsuitable for the position, and I'm certainly going to personally hammer home that point to anyone that will listen and perhaps even a few who won't.

In regards to your finances—assuming that you signed the POA—I'll look over the options the Air Force has on offer, they're probably incredibly safe, and compare that with the open market. It'll take months to correspond with Earth, so whatever it is, it'll be very long term.

I'd better bring it to a close so Evan can get this to Reynolds, before he leaves.

Take care, and good job on not dying.

RM

Too much has happened in too short a time, and it's almost impossible to comprehend all of it. He feels whip-lashed and exhausted, and, despite having slept most of the day already, he falls back on the bed and escapes reality for just a little while longer.
Day Nine Hundred Sixty

In the morning, John's feeling more balanced, willing to accept circumstances and move on. He arranges to meet with the Council later in the day, and is energetic enough after breakfast to go for a walk around town, though Neela insists that Laith accompany him. It's their usual sort of walk, browsing the market vendors in the brilliant, white sunlight, except for the small crowd that is constantly swarming around them.

Three anam past, when he was prowling around this same courtyard, a P90 strapped to his chest, heartsick over the Daedalus' crash and losing Atlantis, he would never have believed that he could find another place where he was so patently accepted.

John doesn't mind the crowd; no, he loves the crowd. The low, warm buzz eases his heartache and fills him up in exchange for a few words, a smile and the occasional child held up for a blessing. Maybe he's simply getting better. Two days ago he was still in shock, but now... Now, he's floating on a sea of bliss generated by love—all of these people belong to him, and he belongs to them.

The realization that he would never be thrown out, ejected, rejected or separated from these people, from this affection, that this is home in a way like no other place has ever been, is a heady, thrilling thought.

Dizzy with the revelation, and the love and devotion that are flowing all around him, John falters and stumbles. Hands reach out to steady him and hold him up. John knows he's grinning like an idiot, but he needed this so badly, he's always needed it, and now he has it, forever.

Laith takes the stumble as a sign that their excursion is over. He takes John's arm and gently pushes through the crowd to return to the Ludahsediat. John doesn't resist, even though he wants to stay longer, because he knows that this will always be here.

~*~

The Patern meet in Anbur's office in the early afternoon, the windows shuttered against the heat of the day, which still seeps into the room. There's a fine haze of dust in the air, swirling in motes through the light leaking around the edges.

They are arrayed around the room, draped into chairs and couches as they watch John pace nervously. "I am not certain of what to say, there is so much to consider."

Anbur gives him an opening. "Then let us start from the beginning."

John takes a deep breath. "Dominat, long before Qaral brought the people here, was the place where the Ancestors made their power sources, very much like Makhuqat's Power of Qaral, but more powerful, because of the unique properties caused by the combination of distance from the sun and rare minerals in the ground. These are the same things that cause the fires to burn in the north and the colors in the night sky. It is in everything you eat and in the air that you breathe."

John looks around to make sure that they're all following the explanation; he's barely got a handle on it himself—Shaaziya had been translating Rodney-speak.

"Once the Ancients decided to leave this galaxy, they abandoned the planet and removed the Stargate. Qaral chose this planet for you because light in the night sky also acts like a shield, and you would be as safe as possible from the Wraith."

"The city of the Ancestors uses this power source, but it is very old and very difficult to create. The production is science beyond what those on Atlantis can understand."
"Now, because of the information from the Avaxqaral, Dr. McKay was able to locate the instructions to these ZPM's. Dominat is the source of the material, and the place where they are made. It is very, very important to them." That the Avaxqaral is the source isn't strictly true, but that's one secret that he's still keeping. Although in a roundabout way, it could be construed as the truth.

Zuhair adds, "And so we must consider what we want in return."

"Yes, but we must also discuss if anything we ask for will be enough. It is very dangerous, and even with Dr. McKay in charge of the project, it is possible that the entire planet could be destroyed—at any time and without warning."

John looks at each of them, trying to calculate if they understand the risk. Qahira says in a soft voice, "Then it is the Will of Qaral. If it is our time, then it must be." All of the Patern bow their heads and murmur, "Qaral's will," under their breath.

He doesn't know if he'll ever reach this level of peace with fate, or if he can live knowing that there's a time bomb on the far side of the planet. The thing is, he knows how much Dominat needs, and the Patern for all of their life wisdom, don't have an inkling of what is even possible with the kind of bargaining power they have. "So, you are agreed, that we should see what they can offer us in return?"

The seven Patern glance around the room, nodding in assent at each other and John sighs deeply. He'll just have to learn to deal with it.

John moves onto the next scenario that he'd though of in his fit of paranoia back on Atlantis. "Okay, but here's another possibility. The people of Earth are very powerful; they have defeated many foes and built space ships like the Daedalus. If we ask for too much, they may try to take what they want by force. Makhuqat is no match for them."

"Do you truly believe that they would do this?" Anbur tips his head to the side as he considers Caldwell and Weir's attitude over the Makhuqat incident.

"I don't know. It has happened before."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Ask for everything, but be willing to negotiate."

"And you will do this, negotiate on our behalf? I believe you are well suited to this task."

John watches the dust eddying in the sharp, tiny beams of light as he thinks about his karma. He'd known that eventually it would come down to this. "I will, if it is the desire of the Council."

Not one of them dissents, and John's left with the gargantuan task of balancing the needs of the planet against everything that they can gain—or lose.

**Day Nine Hundred Sixty-One - Nine Hundred Seventy-Eight**

Neela is satisfied that he's not going to keel over in a light breeze, and John gets to work. He spends a few days hammering out a list of things that he'd like to get in return for allowing McKay the opportunity to blow up the planet, and giving the Patern a good idea of the scope of the things that Dominat needs to thrive, and to pull them out of the downward spiral of decay.
John thinks about logistics, and realizes that they will be coming here, as he has no intentions of falling into a relapse during the negotiations.

He consults with Anbur and Zuhair for a suitable place to hold a conference, and they all agree upon a house just outside the Quarter that can be quickly gutted and remodeled to his specifications.

Once the conference site is chosen, the houses in the Quarter are slated for cleaning in preparation for visitors. John squirrels away the forged tools, equipment and one spare naquadah generator for the nonexistent rainy day, and the rest of the stuff that had been left by the former residents is distributed to anyone who wants it. John has no idea how many people will be coming, but he has an idea for offering the Quarter as permanent housing for the future science, medical and military teams he hopes that he can lure to Dominat.

Once they have an agreed upon list of demands, and the remodeling is underway, John and Laith take Haitham and the Patern to their homes, and set out on a short holiday.

This is mostly to blow off some steam, but it also gives John an opportunity to let his people get some face time. Though he was only gone for twenty-six days, his departure had been intended as permanent, and they need the reassurance that he's not leaving again.

The season of viat is beginning, and they stay in Halavasan for a week. John gives tours of Makhuqat and he's amused to find that they are usually standing room only. Very few people outside the Patern, the Idon and the Abnepa are even aware that such marvels exist, and he gets a huge kick out of proudly revealing the treasure of their heritage to them.

After Halavasan, they meander through various towns, stopping for a day or two to offer Laith as healer, or to just enjoy the hospitality.

Near the end of their journey, they camp out near the violet lakes of Jasrah and John teaches Laith to swim in the clear, purple water. Hamza, an old fisherman, takes them out with his son and daughter on the long flat skiff, and they spend a day hauling in heavy nets of fat, wriggling fish in exchange for dinner with his family. The hard work leaves John overly tired and sunburned, but he's glad for the work and the distraction.

The happy chaos of family, the warmth and joy of a home filled with memories and mementos and the feeling of being tied to the land and water is so attractive to John in that moment. It's almost enough just to be there, but he's also envious. He's been an itinerant traveler for too long.

At the end of the evening, Laith insists on taking the controls of the makhugat'an and taking John back to N'velleseem, and John's just exhausted enough that he doesn't fight being chauffeured home.

**Day Nine Hundred Seventy-Nine**

John feels great the next day, in spite of the lingering sunburn that pulls the skin tightly across his nose and cheeks and the protesting ache in his back. He slopes into the kitchen, and even though it's late morning, cadges a meslat sandwich from Laila before tracking down Anbur.

"Ah, John. You are rested and refreshed?"

"I feel great. A little sore and tired, but great."

"There was a message received for you while you were away, it is in the computer in the control room."
"Okay, I'll go and get it in a few, but I wanted to run something by you. If these negotiations work out the way we want them to, I'm going to need to be in N'vellesem a lot. Not that I don't appreciate your hospitality, but I think it's time for me to find some kind of permanent housing of my own."

"Qahira's cottage is too far away, yes?"

"Yeah, plus it was like renting." John chuckles at Anbur's confused expression. "It wasn't really mine, I was just borrowing it. And not that the Quarter wasn't fine, but there are too many bad memories that I don't want to be reminded of."

"You wish for something new?"

"Not necessarily, just somewhere I can call home. I've been a guest of someone or another since Landing Day."

Anbur gives him an evil grin, "Big house, for many wives and children?"

John's not willing to admit to that yearning just yet, not even to himself. "Oh God, no. Please stop with the matchmaking, I'm scared that I'll wake up accidentally married, like Rodney." He grins, because even now, the idea is still hilarious.

Anbur laughs out loud. "It is very funny. Maybe only room for one wife at time? Much less trouble, I think. I will find a suitable **domicile** for the Quaralyn."

He hadn't thought of that. John shakes his head, "Whatever, Anbur."

John leaves Anbur laughing at him and heads down to the gate room. Sabat isn't there, and he doesn't know the name of the young man on duty. He calls up the encoded message on the little control panel scrounged from the **Daedalus**.

It's a long chatty note from Rodney, with a few stories filled with glee over how pissed Shen is that Rodney's stock in both the SGC and the IOA is rising. Shaaziya's doing fine, and is no longer sick every morning, and Rania continually wants to know where is Uncle John. Rodney allows how life on Atlantis is boring and quiet without John, but they are managing.

Rodney's real scoop is that the two representatives that are on their way are none other than Jack O'Neill and Richard Woolsey, and they should be arriving in a couple of weeks. He doesn't know when the rest of the delegation will be decided upon, and if he can run another gate 'test', he'll let John know.

John quickly converts the time difference in his head, and reckons they've got sixteen days left. He closes the message and saves it in case he wants to reread it, and thanks the tech on duty. He makes a note to have Rodney get him a PDA or a data tablet. The gap between the rough paper and tiny brushes of Dominat, and the information technology of Earth or Atlantis seems too wide to bridge, there's not even the simplest ink jet printer attached to the new control room.

With the possible date in mind, John trots over to the Quarter. The houses are clean and ready, and the remodeling on the new conference center will easily be completed on time. The small room is missing most of its interior walls, and inside is a table of polished stone so large that the room will have to be finished around it. It's made of the same granite with which they'd rebuilt the House of Makuqat; John approves completely, it's a nice nod to the local craftsmen and also quite beautiful.

John mentally looks over the room, and realizes that as the main negotiator, he'll need to make a similar statement. The scarlet robes are too worn, and the rest of the clothing he's been given, while stylish, has been made for comfort.
There's no way that he's going to go to Anbur again today, not after the discussion over a house. John sucks it up and goes to see the ladies at Frostman's shop. The worst they can say is no.

Izdihar and Suha are suitably thrilled to have John in their clutches, and he smirks at their blatant flirting. They try and foist onto him some of the more bizarre, mishmash designs that Frostman had hallucinated, but John is firm about what he wants, and they haggle over the terms. They'll make exactly what John wants, but in exchange, they insist that he also be given one of their 'originals'.

John shakes his head and gives in; a little free advertising would give them a hand, and it certainly won't kill him to wear it. He chooses one of the least eye-popping designs; a near perfect replica of the Expedition uniform in a soft, black material, but inexplicably embroidered with hearts, clubs, diamond and spades.

He laughs at himself as he considers actually wearing that instead of his first choice. Rodney will get a kick out of it, anyway.

**Day Nine Hundred Eighty - Nine Hundred Ninety-Six**

Time weighs heavily on John. He mulls over flying to a few places he and Laith missed, Gadon in particular, but even that attractive possibility doesn't override his creeping aversion to the nomadic lifestyle he's led for so long.

The only place John would really like to go, is to check out the site, but Rodney insisted that he not go, that it was even likely to be perfectly hidden. It had never appeared on any scan or flyover.

Instead, John remains in N'vellesem, obsessively rereading his notes and adding things to his wish list as he thinks of them, in an attempt to mentally gear up for the treaty conference. This is so far out of his skill set, that it's not even amusing. He writes them out in order of preference, developing a meeting agenda of sorts, in case he's actually allowed to run the meeting. He should be in charge, they are the supplicants, and he has what they need.

He checks in with Izdihar and Suha for a fitting, and his extravagant compliments aren't even hyperbole, it's exactly what he had in mind. He checks on the progress of the conference center, even pitching in with the craftsmen when he thinks he's going to lose his mind.

Finally, Anbur gives him a list of homes to approve or reject. John has too few other things to do, and he takes his time inspecting and debating on the various merits of each of them.

Despite what John had told Anbur, he chooses a house on the southeast side that's far too large for just one person. If John were talking to a realtor, they'd classify it as a fixer-upper; it's been vacant for a generation but all John can see is the possibilities. Three stories made of the ubiquitous white stone, with the first completely underground, and a large courtyard in the back surrounded by high walls.

The plantings in the courtyard are mostly dead, except for one straggly tree that's barely hanging on, the glass in a few windows is broken, and all of the filigree brass shutters are tarnished almost black. It desperately requires some extermination of the creatures that have moved in, along with cleaning up the thick layer of sand and dust on every surface.

It's perfect.

John gathers together the tools and equipment he's scrounged and throws himself into doing household repairs during the early morning hours when it's cooler.
In the hot afternoons, John returns to the Ludahsediat to rest and comb through his notes, or check on the conference house. In the evening he joins Anbur for the salon, to gather suggestions and problems that need addressing, either as the Quaralyn, or via the possible largesse from the treaty.

One or two nights a week, John takes a break from the serious business at the Ludahsediat to visit with his old friends at Fakih's teahouse, sipping ekal and tea, gossiping and swapping jokes and stories.

Upon his return to the house every day, some unknown benefactor has swept and cleaned; the floors and walls are scrubbed until they shine. New furnishings mysteriously appear overnight, or a window has been glazed here and there, and notably, one day the brass shutters gleam brightly in the morning sun.

John accepts these housewarming gifts with equanimity; it's not only that that the Quaralyn is moving in, but this is traditionally how every new household begins.

By the time that Rodney sends another message on the sly, warning him of the imminent arrival of the Apollo at Atlantis, John's ready to move into his house. He's beyond ready for a little privacy; living at the Ludahsediat with forty or fifty students and almost as many Idon and support staff is grating on him.

**Day Nine Hundred Ninety-Six**

John drafts a couple of students to help carry his boxes from Atlantis to the house. It's still only a matter of a few minutes to put them away. The few books look lonely on the wide shelf, and the garments hang far apart in the closet, but he stands in the middle of the room, with his hands on his hips, smiling with the satisfaction that this is his.

He wants to do nothing more than plunk down onto the bed and read, but the upcoming treaty is looming in the near future, and he feels like he should be doing something constructive.

John's indecision over giving in to his personal wants is interrupted by a voice calling up the stairwell. He bounds down the stairs to find Izdihar looking curiously around the room. "Hi."

"Ah, Shepherd, here are the clothes, we finished them this morning."

"You didn't need to bring them to me, I could have picked them up," he chides her gently. John takes the pieces from her one by one and holds them up with a shake. Duplicates of the scarlet and black outfits, and a knee length straight cut jacket with a short, stiff collar and loose trousers made of finely woven material that's been bleached nearly white by the sun. The embroidery is gorgeous; prayers and blessings in stylized Ancient run down the placket in a wide swath, echoing the aurora in the night sky, a rainbow of every possible color.

The expedition uniform would be a sad reminder of the past, except for the whimsical stitching, but John resolves to hold up his end of the bargain, regardless of the memories it will invoke.

Izdihar's arms aren't empty, and she holds them out. "These are for you, a gift."

John takes them, a long white shift suitable for sleeping, and more amazingly, three black Hanes t-shirts and a pair of running shorts. "Where did you get these?"

"Frostman left us many things, but these I do not think we could sell to anyone else. They are yours." She hands John the last item, a pair of woven leather shoes, beautifully tooled with tiny beaded designs that mirror those on the white jacket. "Ziaul-Haq came to visit us, and thought..."
perhaps you would have need of them."

"Yes, I will go and thank him. They are exactly what I needed." The sandals would be far more appropriate and comfortable than the patent leather loafers that he'd intended to wear. "Thank you, Izdihar, I appreciate the hard work you and Suha have done, everything is just what I wanted, and done very well."

"It was our pleasure to be of service. It was a great relief to us when you returned, and these tokens are the least of our appreciation." Izdihar gives him a shallow bow, barely a nod.

"I'm glad to be back." John fidgets for a moment, but gives into the impulse. "Would you like to see the house?"

Izdihar gives him a cheeky grin, "Of course I would, why do you think I delivered?"

John snickers, "Of course. Well, come on."

He proudly shows off the house, though, except for the first floor, it's still mostly empty rooms. Izdihar flirts with him and makes leading comments and suggestions. John curbs his tendency to flirt right back; he thinks that she'd probably move in with the slightest provocation.

He doesn't want to be rude though, and he allows her to linger, until she realizes that Suha will be furious that she's been gone from the shop for so long. John sighs in relief as she runs out the door and up the stairs.

As John puts away the t-shirts, still in their plastic wrap, he makes a note to go and see what stores are left aboard the Daedalus. If he can't use them, there are plenty of people who might like to have some of them.

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Late that evening as the gathering in the salon of the Ludahsediat is winding down, John suddenly realizes that he's been reacting and not taking an active stance in regards to Atlantis. John pulls Anbur aside, "I need your help. I want to send an official invitation to Atlantis, for the negotiations."

"That is a fine idea. How do you intend to deliver this invitation?"

John muses over the possibility of delivering the invitation in person, but discards the idea immediately; he simply doesn't want to reopen any old wounds, though some day he'll go and visit.

He doesn't have the skill necessary to craft a handwritten document with the tiny brushes, and though Anbur would be pleased to write it out, John thinks that he needs to show at least some level of technical expertise, so he settles on a transmitted message.

John spends a couple of hours on the text of the invitation with Anbur kibbutzing over his shoulder, and then borrows the console from the on-duty tech to type it up. It feels surreal, strange to dial the Atlantis address, knowing that he's not dialing home, but contacting a foreign entity.

Its mid morning on Atlantis, and John speaks briefly with Chuck as he sends the message through. The Apollo is due in system later in the day, and Chuck will advise when the envoy's schedule is set.
Day Nine Hundred Ninety-Seven

The official reply from Atlantis is short: they expect to arrive the next day, at precisely ten o'clock in the morning. Fortunately the missive has a Lantean time stamp with which to calculate the difference. Unfortunately the time difference will put their arrival at the most blistering hot part of the day.

John commandeers Laith to assist in retrieving the Patern and sends him off to Zadiyeh. They were still adamant that John is their primary negotiator, but they all wanted to be present for the event, curious about the nusquam coming to Dominat.

He's got a little time; it's only midday, and John takes the time to stop in the baths at Ayse and to advise Zuhair of the arrival time. Clean but jittery, John goes to pick up Qahira, Maisa, Fatih and Yusrah, who's ushered into the second pilot seat by a smirking Maisa. Thankfully, his passengers are solemn and quiet, because John doesn't think his nerves could take any conversation.

It's late when they arrive back in N'vellesem, and John gratefully turns them over to Anbur and then retreats to his home. For the first time since his return to Dominat, John tosses and turns, getting precious little sleep. He just doesn't have any idea of what to expect, and his regard for Elizabeth and her calm demeanor during tough negotiations hitches upward a notch.

Day Nine Hundred Ninety-Eight

John gives up on sleep and arrives early in the morning to find the Patern once again arranged in Anbur's office, discussing the latest gossip and chattering away like any group of old friends.

He shouldn't be angry at the easy, casual way that they've dismissed the negative aspects of the deal, but the horrendous possibility of the worst case scenario is eating at John from the inside out, and he'd like to feel that he isn't the only one that's worried about it.

Briefly, he wonders if he has time to nip over Fakih's for a few quick drinks, but instead he paces in the hallway, his palms clammy, and his pulse hammering in his throat.

The worst part is he doesn't have any idea of who will accompany O'Neill and Woolsey. Both sides were playing their cards close to their chest, and he doesn't have an opportunity to look for a tell. General O'Neill he could probably handle, but he doesn't know Woolsey at all.

The hours drag by, and John finds that he's lurking nearer and nearer to the control room. The white pavilion in the courtyard is shimmering in the heat, and the 'gate wavers like a mirage.

When the 'gate begins to spin, and John sees Diwan take off from the control like a shot to warn the Patern, he walks out to the end of the safe zone and waits.

The council arrives and stands behind him in a row just as the event horizon forms and settles in the orbis. John glances once at Anbur for reassurance, before the treaty party arrives. He shakes himself out of the automatic parade rest; instead clasping his hands together in front of him, resisting the urge to wipe his hands dry on his pale suit.

John starts breathing again when Rodney is first through the gate, with a small dufflebag hanging off of his shoulder. He moves off the platform and heads towards John as O'Neill, flanked by Sam
Carter and Daniel Jackson, arrives. They're dressed in standard desert BDUs and carrying heavy backpacks. Immediately behind them are Elizabeth and a balding man in a dark suit. This must be Woolsey, he thinks, noticing that he's the only one carrying an actual valise. Four Marines are last to step onto the platform, before the wormhole snaps closed. John recognizes Williams and Rice, and the other two, with the Union Jack on their uniform, are vaguely familiar, though only from his short visit on Atlantis. John briefly touches Rodney's shoulder as he steps forward to shake hands with O'Neill first, "Welcome to N'vellesem, General."

"Sheppard. This here is Richard Woolsey, IOA, and I guess you already know everyone else." O'Neill's grasp is firm, and there's no censure in his eyes so John relaxes minutely.

"Yes, sir. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Woolsey." John gets a feeling of wariness from Woolsey, though he has a pleasant demeanor and a firm grasp. He greets Daniel and Carter with a brief smile and a handshake and nods to Elizabeth and Rodney, who are standing a few feet away; they don't need to be introduced to the Council.

John turns towards the Patern arranged behind him. "This is the Council of the Patern, the ruling body of Dominat."

He introduces everyone individually to the council. Anbur and Zuhair greet them in perfect English and offer to shake hands. Yusrah and Tazim are slightly less fluent, and John translates for Fatih, Maisa and Qahira. John watches as Anbur approaches the four Marines and welcomes them to Dominat, and asks their names. They're surprised, but polite and pleasant as they introduce themselves. Kwisarkton and Rhodes are the two he hadn't known by name. John smiles and nods at them, before turning back to the diplomatic envoy.

It takes a few minutes to get through all of the introductions and Woolsey's scalp is already beginning to sweat. John suggests, "Why don't we get out of the sun?" O'Neill tips his head forward, and John leads the group to the control room.

John's not embarrassed by the makeshift gate room, but he's painfully aware of how the small room, with its cobbled together DHD and minimal communications panel, compares to Atlantis' spacious departure lounge, or even the dull, utilitarian gate room at the SGC.

Rather than make them trek in the hot sun to the Quarter, John delays by allowing Anbur to take over with a short tour of the Ludahsediat, ending in the main lounge. The four marines station themselves around the room, and though their arms are resting on their P90's they appear to be relaxed and alert.

Anbur waves the rest of the envoy to the couches and chairs, "Please, make yourselves comfortable, feel free to investigate." He sends a student off to have refreshments brought in and scolds the students passing through when they linger and gawk. "We are very pleased to have the opportunity to welcome you to Dominat."

John drapes himself over a chair next to Rodney after everyone is seated. "Tonight we can show you around and possibly go find the site after it cools off a little, and then tomorrow we can get down to business if necessary."

"I am very anxious to see this marvel, very exciting, yes? Dr. Jackson, John has said that you are learning to speak our language?"

The Patern are eager to engage their visitors; Zuhair and Yusrah aid Maisa, Qahira and Fatih in translating the stilted conversations, and Anbur is presiding over it all like a proud parent.

His input doesn't seem to be immediately necessary, so John leans toward Rodney. "Hey, good to
see you," he says in a low voice.

Rodney lightly socks John on the shoulder. "That's for not telling me sooner; what did you think I was going to do—turn you in?"

John shoots Rodney a dark, sarcastic look. "I told you as soon as I was sure."

"Fine, fine, yes, keep all the facts to yourself. If I'd known what the problem was, I could've figured it out sooner, and I wouldn't have nearly had a heart attack when they finally dragged you off."

"Yeah, sorry. So how are things on Atlantis?"

"Tense. Shen's really pissed that she wasn't included on the guest list."

"I probably would've sent her back if she'd come. What's Woolsey like?"

"Hard ass but not entirely stupid. He's a bureaucrat, what do you want me to say?"

"I'm a little out of my depth, here, that's all."

"All they can do is say no, Sheppard, and they aren't going to."

"That's what I'm counting on."

"Oh, here. I brought you a present." Rodney digs into his bag and hands John a PDA.

"Great, thanks! I was going to ask if you could get me one."

"I put some pictures of the kid on there for you. I'll figure out some way to hook the charger up to the control room or something."

"Nah, I'm about to figure out how to wire up the naquadah generator at the house," John says in a distracted way, as he fiddles with the hand held.

Rodney's eyebrows go up in surprise. "The house?"

John looks up and grins. "Oh, yeah. I got my own place now."

"That was fast. Where is it?"

"'Bout fifteen minutes from here, on the southeast side. I'm sure we can sneak in a tour tonight."

Rodney's eye light up when the refreshments arrive. "The house?"

John looks up and grins. "Oh, yeah. I got my own place now."

"That was fast. Where is it?"

"'Bout fifteen minutes from here, on the southeast side. I'm sure we can sneak in a tour tonight."

Rodney's eye light up when the refreshments arrive. "Oh, yes. Of course." He dives in like he hasn't eaten in the four weeks he's been gone.

They graze over the tray of various tidbits that have been arranged on the low table. There's fresh, warm khabez and spicy cheese; thin, sweet yoghurt for dipping; small mounds of shredded meslat, fragrant with bazin and kalah; and a tiny dish of allmas nuts and a tall, thin teapot made of chased glass.

It's fairly typical; Anbur's not going all out to impress their guests, but rather putting out what they have as if to say, 'this is who we are'.

John thinks about the irony of how out of place they look, that it was once him, lounging uncomfortably in the same room with the blue lamps and the filigreed brass screens. Now he's at
home, and his former countrymen are the strangers. He pours a glass of tea and sips it as he watches them.

Daniel's brushing up on his Ancient with Yusrah and Maisa, his tea glass precariously hanging from his fingertips as he leans forward. Anbur looks perfectly delighted at how fast Daniel is taking it in.

O'Neill is watching Daniel in action with a smirk, as if he's storing up the experience. John realizes with a jerk of familiarity that this is, or was, O'Neill's version of normality: off-world with his team, and watching as Daniel engaged the natives. That used to be him and Teyla, but it's something that will never happen again.

Elizabeth looks slightly uncomfortable with her hands wrapped around her tea as if she's warming them, and she's not really engaging in the conversation. Fatih has a sour look in his face, but that's par for the course for him.

Tazim is excitedly chatting with Carter, who's grinning widely at his version of flirting. Woolsey is just watching like John, and when their eyes meet, John nods.

Rodney's catching up with Zuhair, inquiring about Ayse and showing him pictures of Rania and Atlantis. The look on Zuhair's face is priceless, a wild cross between envy and awe, and sadness that his daughter has moved beyond his reach.

They remain there until late afternoon when the worst of the heat has passed, and dusk is approaching. John brings the conversation around to business. "It's probably cool enough to get you settled and give you a tour."

O'Neill jumps up, eager to move things along. "Lead on, Sheppard."

"Yes, sir." John pauses, and tips his head towards the Marines advancing on the door, "I should warn you that we will definitely attract a crowd, but it's nothing to be concerned about. They'll just be curious." John resists the impulse to shutter his expression as O'Neill searches his face.

Finding whatever he was looking for, O'Neill turns to the Marines, "At ease, gentlemen."

Anbur confers briefly with the other Patern and then turns to John, "We will stay; you have no need of our advice in this matter."

John nods at him with a smile and turns to Woolsey. "Mr. Woolsey, you'll want a head-cover. We can get you something if you need it. Sun block if you have it, all of you. We spent a lot of time with sunburns."

"I have one." Woolsey dredges around in his valise and comes up with a boonie which he pulls down tight on his head.

John gives them a moment to get situated and then heads out onto the shaded porch. There's a crowd all right; probably every person in N'vellesem is gathered in front of the Ludahsediat, packed in the front courtyard or milling about in the street beyond. It never ceases to amaze John, how quickly rumors and news travels by word of mouth.

He takes point and wades unconcerned into the crowd that easily makes way as they make slow but orderly progress through the town. He plays tour guide, pointing out landmarks and answering questions.

As they arrive at the Main Street sign, John stops and turns to O'Neill. "These two streets are what
we called the Quarter, and it extends all the way to the city's wall. That," he points to the
conference center on the corner, "is where we'll meet in the evenings when it's cooler. You've got
plenty of room to spread out—Elizabeth, would you take care of getting everyone arranged?"

Elizabeth looks vaguely unhappy at returning to the scene of the lowest point in her career, but she
agrees, "Of course, John."

"Nothing's changed—we just cleaned up a little. I'll wait here while you drop your things off, and
then we'll go find the site."

They peel off to inspect their lodgings, while John patiently answers the questions about the
nusquam from the cluster of people that had followed them from the Ludahsediat.

A few minutes later John looks behind him and sees O'Neill standing there just watching. O'Neill
makes a rolling gesture with his hand, and he turns back to his people. It makes him a little
uncomfortable, knowing that he's being watched and possibly judged, but John knows that he
would do the same thing if he were in O'Neill's place.

It's only a matter of moments, before the rest of the nusquam rejoin O'Neill, and John deftly brings
his conversation to an end. He comes up short when he does a quick head count and asks, "Where's
Daniel and Elizabeth?"

O'Neill points his thumb over his shoulder. "They're going to stay; Daniel said something about
talking or exploring, or something. I left Williams and Rice with them."

John considers telling him that the guards aren't necessary, but shrugs. "That's fine; we'll be able to
take one 'jumper." He turns and leads them back through the city and out of the massive gates to
where the 'jumpers are parked.

John looks over the assembly, and considers the seating arrangements as he opens the hatch.
"Rodney, I'm assuming that you have some idea of where we're going?"

"It's near the south Pole, somewhere in the green zone on the other side of the planet. I've got the
Alteran's coordinates for it, and I can upload them into the 'jumper."

That puts Rodney behind the pilot's seat. "Okay. General, why don't you take second seat?" John
points to the fourth seat in the front, "Colonel, you'll probably want to sit there."

That leaves Woolsey in the back with Kwisarkton and Rhodes, the two marines still attached to
their party, but it can't be helped; John's not going to put O'Neill in the back, and Carter will want to
confer with McKay.

Night falls rapidly as John powers up the jumper, runs through a quick preflight, and initiates the
HUD while he waits for Rodney to feed in the coordinates. "How's it going back there, McKay?"

Rodney doesn't look up from his data tablet, "Just a moment, Colonel."

John chuckles and leans back in his chair with his hands locked behind his head. Rodney is a man
of habit. "Sure, take your time." He glances at O'Neill when the HUD flashes up a new screen with
their destination pinpointed in red.

He takes off, streaking towards the sky. It doesn't take any concentration to control the
makhuqat'an, so John leans back slightly and glances at O'Neill again. He knows that there's a
conversation due between them, but John's uncertain what he would say if he were to start it, or if
O'Neill would care to have an audience.
There's a tension in the air that John can't quite pin down. Carter and McKay are comfortable together, that's familiar, and O'Neill doesn't feel too worried; maybe it's Woolsey's wariness floating in the background. The murmured technical discussion between Carter and McKay fills in the silence as they speed towards the site of the ZPM plant.

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John slows down as he approaches the red dot on the HUD. "I don't see anything, McKay." He circles the area, but the entrance isn't visible.

"No, otherwise it would have been found by scans or visual flyovers. We're right on top of it, Sheppard." O'Neill and Carter watch the exchange with matching bemused expressions, as if they're at a tennis match. Woolsey and the Marines are leaning forward from the benches in the back, trying to see what is going on.

He parks the 'jumper so that the forward lights point towards the face of a small cliff. "Well then, I guess we'll just have to go look for it." John considers asking Woolsey to stay in the 'jumper, but his attitude suggests that he's there as an observer, so if he wants in on the exploration, that's fine by him.

Everyone trails out after McKay, who's already walking up and down the face of the cliff with his hand held scanner. "Ah, here we are." Rodney runs his hands down and across a small area and pries off a cover that's disguised as part of the rock face. He pokes at the revealed control panel, but steps aside when he fails to open it. "Sheppard?"

John reaches for the control panel, and the door creaks aside in a shower of sound of sand and dirt. He stands to the side, and waves in Kwisarkton and Rhodes. They're here; they might as well do their job.

John allows McKay and Carter to go in first when the marines call out, "Clear." The lights come on weakly when McKay enters the room and more brightly when John and O'Neill walk in with Woolsey trailing behind them. Kwisarkton stations herself at the door as they enter.

They're standing on a platform hanging over an abyss so wide and deep that John can almost imagine that there's mist forming in the far distance. The only visible feature on the platform is a single, slender pedestal in the center, and a few feet beyond that, the edge, bordered with stanchions and a thin wire, glowing faintly blue, is strung between them.

He joins everyone at the railing, but the lights over the platform aren't strong enough to pierce the utter darkness beyond. Rhodes has a flash light out, but it's too puny to pierce the darkness. "Well, I gotta say, this isn't what I was expecting," John says.

O'Neill and Carter share a glance, and they shrug as Carter explains, "We've seen a few places that aren't too dissimilar, but yes—this is pretty fantastic."

Rodney peers cautiously over the edge once and immediately moves back. "I'm going to go see what I can get out of that console."

McKay crawls underneath the pedestal as Carter fires up the laptop and simultaneously hands him the leads. Woolsey is in the middle of the room, uncertain of where to stand. O'Neill is walking the perimeter of the platform and Rhodes follows O'Neill.

John is edging in to see what's on the console and peering closely over Carter's shoulder, when she
turns her head and grins in his face. "Hi."

He backs up a little, "Oh, sorry."

Carter waves him back in,"No, it's fine, c'mon. We'll probably need your help anyway. Try initializing the control panel."

John puts his hand on the control panel. He hasn't even issued a mental command as the platform dissolves around him and then resolves into a room that could be any one of the labs on Atlantis, except now the control pedestal is a few feet in front of him.

A disembodied voice asks in an archaic form of Ancient, "State your name and business."

"John Sheppard. We've come to investigate the zero point module factory."

"What is your authorization?" The voice is flat and business-like, without inflection or emotion.

John shrugs slightly and goes for broke. "I am the Quaralyn."

"Verify identity."

Oh, great. Figuring it's the only thing in the room, he steps forward and initializes the control console, just as he had the other one, back where ever McKay is.

"Identity confirmed. Welcome, John Sheppard."

He shakes his head, wondering how it had verified his identity, as the room dissolves again, leaving him standing at the control panel with everyone staring at him. "Huh. That was interesting."

Rodney leans over him, "What happened, are you alright? You just zoned out! What did you do?"

John shoots Rodney a dark look. "I didn't do anything, Rodney." He stares at the control panel. "For a second I thought I had been beamed away, but…"

Kwisarkton interrupts John with a shout, "Sir! There's a door that wasn't here a minute ago."

Rodney and Carter move as one towards the door.

O'Neill gives Sheppard a curious look. "Looks like you did something."

Carter calls out over her shoulder, "Doesn't appear to have any control mechanism. We can't open it from here."

John looks down at the pedestal, considering it for a moment before placing his hand on it and asking for permission to enter. The door glides open silently, lights coming on in the room beyond it.

Rodney goes back for the laptop while everyone tries to edge into the room. John and O'Neill easily walk in, leaving Carter, Woolsey and Rhodes standing at the door.

O'Neill turns around, "Carter, what are you waiting for?"

"I can't, sir. There's a force field." Carter puts her hand up and pushes on thin air, but she can't move her hand into the room.

"Security?"
"Very likely."

"Rhodes, take Kwisarkton's position," O'Neill orders the marine.

"Yes sir." Rhodes disappears from the door, leaving Carter and Woolsey standing there watching from the outside.

"Excuse me, ATA enabled coming through." Rodney pushes through the force field easily, Kwisarkton following him in, while Carter glares at his back. "Well, let's see what we have here."

The walls are lined with twenty horizontal stasis pods, and there's a set of controls and a screen over each one. O'Neill and Kwisarkton explore the room thoroughly, pacing up and down the length of it.

John asks, "What do you suppose these are for?" as Rodney plugs the laptop into the pod closest to the door.

"Whatever they are, they're ATA controlled," he says, putting his hand on it and initializing the panel.

The screen flashes on, and data in Ancient begins to scroll across the screen. It's moving fast, but repeats twice more, before flashing on a single screen. "Sheppard, check the translation on this. Says it's ready. I think they're virtual reality pods."

John leans over Rodney's laptop and squints, as he studies the display. "I suppose you could translate it that way."

"What else would it mean?"

"I don't know. It's not really a phrase that I've run across before, but it could also mean literally, 'enter alternate space'."

"There's only one way to find out." Rodney hands John the laptop and begins to heave himself into the pod.

O'Neill barks out, "Hey!"

Rodney stops and looks at O'Neill. "I'm the best qualified to investigate whatever is going on here."

"Yes, and no one else can get you out if something goes wrong. We'll go." O'Neill nods at John and Kwisarkton.

"Fine, be my guest," Rodney grouches as he hops off the pod table. "But they're keyed to your ATA; you'll each have to initialize your own pod."

Woolsey speaks up for the first time. "Is that wise, sending the both of you at the same time? What if there's an accident? I don't want to have to return to Earth and tell the President that I lost the two main negotiators."

"Woolsey, no offense, but if this is the way in, we're never going to get a ZPM if we don't go. You want one, right?"

"Yes of course, but both of you?"

"I don't think either of us is going to let the other go alone. We'll be fine."
John reaches out to initialize the next pod, and chuckles, "Don't worry, Rodney. We'll bring you back a souvenir."

"Yes, please, mock my pain."

O'Neil touches a pod control and rolls his eyes as he watches Kwisarkton gingerly reach out for her control panel, but it doesn't initialize. "Try another one, Corporal." She tries several more, but none respond to her.

"Remove all your weapons and give them to me," Carter suggests. They watch as Kwisarkton disarms, and hands the weapons out the door.

When the pod initializes for her, John gives Carter the thumbs up. "Good call."

Carter grins. "Ten years in the field, Sheppard."

John rolls his eyes, but it does sting a little; his chance to build up that kind of field career had been cut short—though in the Pegasus galaxy, it's unlikely that he would've had that long. He situates himself in the stasis pod, and looks to the left to see O'Neil and Kwisarkton in position. "Okay, Rodney, now what?"

He points to a key on the pad above him. "That one's labeled enter and the one next to it is exit. I'll pull you out in ten minutes."

"Works for me." John reaches up and pushes the button, and everything around him dissolves in a flash of light.

~*~

When his retinas recover, John finds himself alone in the room, the hatch to the pod already open. He gets out and walks around the room waiting for a minute or two, but O'Neil and Kwisarkton don't appear in their pods.

John stares at the empty pod beds for a moment, before investigating. He's still wearing the same clothes that he had on, and the room is identical to the one he just left. He walks out the door, and the platform is the same, sans control pedestal, but the dark, cavernous space is now brightly lit.

He walks to the edge and looks over. As far as he can see into the hazy distance, the floor of the cavern is filled with monstrously huge pieces of equipment, tall enough for the tops of them to be at eye level. The platform here has an additional feature to the side, another platform with a freestanding door frame containing a mesh gate, but he can't see anything supporting it when he leans over to look.

Deciding that it's probably been five minutes, John climbs back into the hatch and presses the exit button, squeezing his eyes tightly closed.

When he reappears in the departure chamber, the hatch reopens automatically and Rodney is hunched over his keyboard typing furiously and O'Neil and Kwisarkton are standing next to his pod. "Hi. What happened to you guys?"

"Decided we'd better wait and see. You disappeared."

"Sheppard, this is incredible, you were right. That's not virtual reality, that's a subspace generator! Where did you go, what happened?"
John climbs out and sits on the end of the pod. "It looks just like this on the other side, but that," he points toward the door, "is where the factory is. It's just as huge, but there are all kinds of machines and things down there, I think there's an elevator of some sort, too."

"How do you feel, any side effects?"

"Nope. I feel fine."

"Like that's a surprise," Rodney mutters. "What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Carter, Woolsey—get comfortable, we'll be back."

Woolsey looks concerned and Carter looks like someone just ran over her dog as the four of them climb back into the subspace pods to go investigate the factory.

~*~

They crawl out of their pods, and they look over the edge at the awe-inspiring size of the cavern and equipment. "It makes perfect sense to use a subspace pocket—any industrial accident won't destroy the planet," Rodney says.

"Let's go check it out." John eagerly opens the mesh gate, and O'Neill, McKay and Kwisarkton join him. He closes the gate, and the platform begins to silently, slowly descend to the factory floor.

The machines seem even larger from this perspective and looking up is akin to standing in the canyons of New York City. The main control room is underneath the platform, and is many times the size of Atlantis' gate room, filled with dark display screens and arrays of control panels. John, O'Neill and Kwisarkton leave Rodney puttering around the control room downloading data, while they break up and explore the catacombs of rooms behind it. Living quarters, common rooms and other rooms of indeterminate use, all empty and clean, not a speck of dust anywhere.

They meet back in the control room and then spend several hours wandering around the factory floor, Rodney going into ever increasing paroxysms of ecstatic joy as he runs from block to block, checking the status panels and read outs on the various machines, trying to determine what they might do without actually turning anything on.

O'Neill stands with his hands in his pocket, looking vaguely bored. "So, McKay. Bottom line it for me."

"Obviously, it can't be operated by only twenty people, the pods are probably like a subway; Sheppard's pod reset to 'ready' once he was gone. As far as I can tell, we'll need to have at least a hundred ATA capable people in here."

"There's definitely room for that many back there." John tips his head back towards the control room.

"Yes, right. Fortunately, the process itself looks mostly automated, so we can probably train anyone with a modicum of sense to operate them."

O'Neill asks, "How long do you think it'll take to get it up and running?"

"Depends on whether or not we can find enough scientists and engineers with the gene for discovery and implementation. We don't even know how long it will take to build a ZPM—it could be decades."
"I guess that puts Beckett's ATA research back on the front burner," John drawls.

O'Neill claps John on the shoulder. "Looks like we'll need to start those negotiations."

"Yeah." John's feeling slightly dazed; all of this had been here the whole time they'd been grubbing around, eking out a minimal living like semi-medieval peasants.

Rodney insists, "I'll need a couple of days. I want to get more people in here to investigate and to put together the report on it. Maybe even a week."

"No problem, McKay, whatever you want." The fact that the entire factory is presumably contained against industrial accidents is a huge weight off of his shoulders, and while initiating a shift change might be a pain in the ass, it does prevent the SGC from just taking what they want. John makes a note to find out how strong the ATA has to be in order to initiate the entrance.

There aren't any visible controls on the elevator; so it's activated by either ATA or pressure sensors. Rodney's face is a study in maniacal glee, and he babbles in nearly incomprehensible techno geek the entire way up into the subspace pods and he's still talking even as the hatch on his pod opens up.

Carter and Woolsey get up off the floor where they'd been sitting, and start to talk at the same time, "How was it?" "We were starting to get worried." Carter turns her head slightly and rolls her eyes, but Woolsey is smiling like a kid in a candy store.

"Carter, it's fantastic, truly incredible. The subspace bubble acts like a clean room, and it looks like we could turn it on tomorrow..."

John just tunes him out as they exit the room, wondering about the logistics of transporting that many people to and from the site, or if they'll choose to come by ship and beam down. John mentally adds an upgrade to Rodney's experimental satellite as a possibility. They'll have to move the 'gate as well. It was fine for low traffic, but not to have literally hundreds and hundreds of people traipsing through the Ludahsediat.

O'Neill is answering Woolsey's rapid fire questions as they drift out of the anteroom after McKay and Carter. John glances back to make sure he's alone before he touches the control pedestal and reinitiates the security field.

The other place reforms around him, and the voice greets him. "Welcome, John Sheppard."

"I have a few questions, can you answer them?"

"Please state your query."

"Who has access to this place?"

The voice begins to drone off a list of names, probably long dead Ancients.

"No, sorry. Let me rephrase the question. What is the qualification for authorization?"

"Genetic pattern recognition is the basis for qualification."

"Is it possible to change the basis?"

"No. The nature of the facility requires this genetic pattern."

John thinks about it for a few minutes. "Status on power levels."
"Power is holding at the optimum level for full operation."

"Projected power use at current levels?"

"Alternate space at current consumption will remain stable for two thousand seven hundred seventy one revolutions of this planet around the native star."

All right, at least it wasn't going to run out of power, anytime soon. He'd have to come back later; he had too many questions, and the rest of the group was probably wondering what he was doing. "Thanks. Exit?"

Reality reforms around John, and sure enough, O'Neill is standing there watching him. "Just wanted to see if I could turn out the lights."

O'Neill tips his head to the side slightly and asks, "And?"

"Not necessary. There seems to be plenty of power."

"Good to know. Anything else?"

John's still slightly paranoid about the whole enterprise, and he resists the urge to treat O'Neill as if he's still a commanding officer. Eventually, there will have to be full disclosure of what John's found, but it's late, and he still doesn't have all of the answers. "Not really. We should go."

Their return to N'vellesem is relaxed in comparison to the outbound flight. McKay and Carter are flinging around ten dollar words, and O'Neill is slouched in his chair. John thinks that he's just shy of putting his feet up on the console. "General, I was thinking we could go ahead and start our talks and get the preliminaries out of the way, while they get their report together."

O'Neill spins his seat around so he's facing the back. "Hey, Woolsey!"

Mr. Woolsey carefully stands up and clutches at the bulkhead, unsteady on his feet. "General?"

"You got any objections to getting this show on the road, while they," he waves his hand at McKay and Carter, "get their act together?"

"I'd like to go back to Atlantis and report to the President and the IOA, but I don't see any reason to delay any further."

"Well, Sheppard, it sounds like that's the plan."

**Day Nine Hundred Ninety-Nine**

The next day is quiet. John gives a full accounting of their discoveries to the Council, and though they listen carefully, and they're politely amazed, they don't really have any context for what the discovery fully means—not for Dominat, Earth or Atlantis.

Zuhair offers to start the conference with a formal state dinner in Ayse, and John tentatively agrees, he'll have to catch O'Neill and Woolsey when they return from Atlantis; they left in the early morning to report to Earth.

John is waiting for them when they return. He's surprised when Shaaziya follows them out of the event horizon, holding Rania's hand. He smiles and nods at her, as he greets O'Neill and Woolsey. "Welcome back. Everything go okay?"
O'Neill is smiling broadly, and it makes him look years younger. "Pretty good."

Woolsey scoffs as he shakes John's hand. "It was a very productive meeting. The President is quite excited, as you might imagine."

"I can just imagine." At least the President and the IOA understand the momentous value of yesterday's discovery. "Patern Zuhair's issued an invitation for a dinner in Ayse tonight, if that's all right?"

"Fine by me. Woolsey?"

"Yes, of course. This should be interesting," Woolsey says with a bright smile.

John gives Woolsey a narrow look, trying to decide if he's being facetious. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

"No, no offense, meant Mr. Sheppard, it's just that I don't get to go off world very often. I'm looking forward to it."

"None taken," John replies graciously. "We'll meet at the Ludahsedi around dusk."

O'Neill claps a hand to Sheppard's back as he brushes past him. "We'll see you then."

John wonders if he's really prepared to run with the big dogs as he kisses Shaaziya on the cheek and ruffles Rania's hair, grinning at her. "Hi, this is a surprise."

"When I heard the news, I knew that I would not see my husband again for weeks. General O'Neill was kind enough to override Director Shen's prohibition."

John's insulted and annoyed that Shen would hold Rodney's family hostage, and that Rodney hadn't mentioned it, though they hadn't really had a private moment for Rodney to pour out his grievances. "Well, you're here now," he says as he escorts her to the exit, an idea forming in the back of his mind.

~*~

McKay and Carter are still holed up in the conference room when John goes to drag them out. A naquadah generator is humming away in the corner, and converters, cables and power cords are strung across the table to a small bank of networked laptops. It's obvious that neither one of them has slept, and John briefly wonders if he should have given them more warning.

He leans in the doorway and drawls, "Pack it up, guys. Zuhair's invited everyone to Ayse for dinner. Shaaziya and Rania are here, Rodney."

"Really?" Rodney gives John a torn look, but begins to shut down the laptops. John plans to chat with Rodney later.

Carter stands up and stretches. "God, I'm starving."

John teases her, "Did McKay keep you chained up in here all night?"

"Please, that is so unfair. Carter could've quit any time she wanted to."

"Not a chance, McKay. It's bad enough that I was left standing in the ante-room, no way am I going to let you hoard this, too."
John shakes his head. "How much longer are you two going to need?"

"At least another day, for even the most preliminary report."

John really wants to go back and get some answers, like, how did the AI or computer, or whatever it was, know who he was? But it had been impossible to extricate himself from the Council. "That works for me, take your time. Oh, Carter, there's mineral baths there, so if you want to indulge, we'll have some time to check them out if we leave soon."

~*~

The excursion to Ayse serves several purposes in John's mind. One, it's an opportunity to socialize, though the tension of two opposing forces still hums in the background. Two, as the first salvo in the negotiations, it will emphasize the cultural underpinnings and dire technological needs of Dominat. Reading reports is fine, but there's nothing like actually experiencing it firsthand. Three, it's almost like a media event. The people of N'vellesem are curious, but their adoration of the Quaralyyn is far more subdued in comparison to the Qaroptimat.

The Arch of Quaralyyn reveals the strength of John's ATA, and the nearly abject obeisance of both the servants and the people in the street underscores the true nature of John's position, especially to Mr. Woolsey.

John's not so far gone that he believes; he has a position and the power to go with it, but all it really means is that he has a chance to make things better, and as recent events have forcibly reminded him, he's nothing without the people and the planet.

Zuhair, unlike Anbur, goes all out for the dinner; ekal flows freely, and huge platters of exotic food are served, one after the other. On all previous visits, meals had been served casually, family style, in the lounge. This particular dinner is served in the formal environs of the Hall of Judgment. John ignores the fact that Elizabeth's near brush with the place still makes him feel slightly queasy.

Conversation is all over the place, though every one skirts around the subject of the ZPM factory and the negotiations over it. Mostly, it's stories prompted by questions about Earth or Atlantis, and they stay gathered around the long table until late.

When the evening is finally drawing to a close, John counts it as a success.

John escorts the visitors to the Quarter and makes sure that they are all in their houses before taking a slightly circuitous route back out to the makhuqat'an. He only feels slightly guilty about going back without Rodney, but he figures that McKay will get all the time he wants at the site later. It's just that he'd like to be able to do this without anyone breathing over his shoulder, like O'Neill, for instance. John thinks he has the advantage, and he damn well wants to keep it that way.

He parks the 'jumper a few hundred feet away and cloaks it, and then enters the anteroom and immediately goes to the control console and activates it.

"Welcome John Sheppard."

"I've got a few more questions."

"State your request."

John spends a few frustrating hours figuring out how to ask the right questions and comes up with a few hard facts. That the room with the voice is another security feature—a virtual reality; that the voice is only a verbal interface to the computer at the complex, and that he can bypass it, if
necessary; that the gene is definitely required for entry and operation, and that the restrictions placed on the *Avaxqaral* aren't just some native, quasi-religious, political agenda, it's actually tied into the system at the site, and it behaves as a prescreening process—sorting out those with the gene and not, and maintaining a list of pre-qualified individuals.

He locks the place down tight with a mental command after bypassing the voice-activated system and keys it to reopen by his command only. Paranoia has always served him well, and John doesn't see any reason to change that.

**Day One Thousand**

Dawn's light is just beginning to creep over the horizon when John makes it back to N'vellesem. He stops at the house and changes before sitting down and looking over his list as he transfers the handwritten notes into the PDA and rearranging his priorities, again. John fully expects the conference to start in earnest that evening, and he wants to be as prepared as possible.

John thinks he understands O'Neill. They have a lot in common, military pilot, a certain disregard for convention when it suits them, but obviously O'Neill is smarter than John—he never faced a court martial.

Carter and Jackson are a somewhat familiar to him personally, and their roles are more obvious. Carter's the hard science advisor, possibly here to keep McKay on track; and Jackson is the friendly face, meant to disarm and distract.

Woolsey is the real unknown factor. The truth is, John's crap at diplomatic stuff, and he just isn't sure of what to make of him. 'Not entirely stupid', as Rodney put it, but that could mean anything from almost brilliant to merely crafty. Woolsey had done all right at the dinner, playing the diplomatic guest role to the hilt.

However, all of this is conjecture—all John can do is sit down with them face to face, with his list, and see what happens.

~*~

The door the to Rodney's house in the Quarter is open, so John calls out a hello as he walks in. He's taken aback when O'Neill is in the living room, playing with Rania. "General."

Rania spots John and nearly leaps out of O'Neill's arms as she hollers, "Uncle John!" jumping down and running to him. He picks her up and holds her high above his head, kicking and giggling. "Hello, sweetheart!" He tucks her onto his lap and sits in the chair across from O'Neill.

"Sheppard. Come on in, no need to stand on ceremony, apparently," O'Neill says dryly.

"No, sir." Rania begins to dig around his collar, and John catches her hand. "No, kiddo, it's not there anymore." He glances at O'Neill, who's watching with unabashed curiosity.

"Where's Shaaziya?" John asks.

O'Neill nods towards the bedroom. "Napping."

"Ah."

The awkward silence stretches between them, John's not exactly sure what to say to O'Neill, who's still watching him.
O'Neill breaks the impasse. "I think I owe you an apology."

That surprises John. "You do?"

"Twice, actually. For urging you to join the expedition in the first place, and then for backing Liz up on your promotion."

That gives John a little swell of relief, that his promotion hadn't been universally rammed down the collective throats of Command. "Not necessary, sir. I agreed to go in the first place, and I really wanted to go back—the rest was sheer, dumb, bad luck."

"For what it's worth, I agreed with her. You seem to be adjusting here pretty well, though."

John shrugs slightly. "No choice, really. I'm stuck here, and I figure that I might as well make the best of it. Same as on Atlantis."

"I dunno. I didn't adjust so well when I was stranded, once."

Once again, John regrets being thrown in at the last minute and never really having the chance to study all of the mission reports from the SGC—there were literally hundreds of thousands of them. "What happened?"

"Gate got buried in lava with me on the wrong side. Spent a little more than three months waiting to be rescued. I'd just about given up, before they found a way to get through the gate."

Three months wouldn't have made any difference to John, they'd have no idea that McKay's Holy Grail was buried here, and Rodney would be single and child free, but Elizabeth would still be in charge on Atlantis. "Yeah." He's rescued from thinking about what might have been by Shaaziya entering the room. She looks tired, though Rodney had said that she was past the stage of sleeping constantly.

"John, what a pleasant surprise." Thank God, now it won't look quite so secretive; he really hadn't planned on having this conversation with an audience. "Shaaziya, I'd like to have you at the meeting table, can you arrange for someone to watch Rania?" Unlike the other times he's used the tactic in the past, it feels vaguely unsettling to use it on front of O'Neill, but it can't be helped.

"Yes, but why?"

"I'll explain later, okay?"

Shaaziya bows slightly, "Of course."

John glances at the angle of shadows on the floor, puts Rania down and stands up. "It's getting late, and I still have a few things to arrange, sorry I can't stay longer."

Shaaziya looks slightly crestfallen. "It is no matter. I will see you later?"

"Of course." John nods at O'Neill. "General," he says as he makes a quick exit.

John stops at the conference House to make sure that he doesn't need to disentangle the hardware, but McKay and Carter had packed up thoroughly. He checks the kitchen, but no one is there yet. He's halfway to the Ludahsediat when he meets Laila with a trail of students behind her, bearing trays, and pots and sacks. "Oh, good. I was just coming to find you."
Do not worry, Quaralyn, all will be in readiness.

Okay, thank you.

John hurries to the house. Tonight will be all about making a statement. He shaves twice for good measure, and runs his hands through his hair; it's already long enough that the impossible cowlicks are weighted down. He chooses the new scarlet robe, and as he's slipping into the sandals, he wishes for the first time that he had a full-length mirror to check the effect.

He slips the PDA into his pocket and heads to the Ludahsediat to meet the Patern, wishing he'd had more time to chat with Shaaziya, and his nascent plan to make her Dominat's official charge d'affaire on Atlantis. She's as well educated as they come on Dominat, has already proven herself an able liaison and capable of learning quickly. That she's also a stab at Shen is just gravy.

'Take that, Shen, and I hope you choke on it', he thinks darkly.

~*~

John leads the procession of Patern to the Conference House, and O'Neill and Woolsey are waiting outside with Daniel and Elizabeth standing beside them. Shaaziya is there, just to the other side of the door. John gestures towards the open door, "After you."

They settle down at the table, John at the center of one side, with Shaaziya to his left and Anbur to his right. O'Neill sits across from him, with Woolsey on one side and Daniel to the other. Elizabeth chooses a seat at the end, near Fatih, Maisa and Qahira. Yusrah, Tazim and Zuhair fill in the empty spots closest to John.

Anbur begins with a short prayer in Ancient, pausing after each line so that Elizabeth can translate. John recites it along with the rest of the Council, watching O'Neill and Woolsey. Their heads are bowed in respect, and Daniel's doing his best to keep up with the invocation.

When Anbur finishes, John starts the negotiations.
East of the Sun, West of the Moon, Epilogue

Day Nine Thousand, Six Hundred Thirty

John's waiting for the McKay's at the foot of the Stargate plaza with most of his children, all of their mothers had elected to stay at the house. It's always an occasion when Rodney and Shaaziya come to visit, but this time there's an especially festive air of anticipation: they're returning home to Dominat after Rodney's retirement.

The three oldest of his children with Yusrah are gossiping about college; Sukina is terrifying Haidar with horror stories from Harvard, and Kemal is egging her on. She's not being mean or vicious, just a little teasing; she knows that Haidar's inherited lack of sight has him already a little fearful of navigating the campus alone.

Qadir and Zohoor, the next set of siblings, both with Aliya's dark brown eyes, are supposed to be watching their younger sisters, but the three-anam old twins are running figure eights around John and the gate platform, while the boys are eavesdropping on Sukina winding up Haidar.

Just as the gate begins to spin, John manages to snag Zaima's arm, and where Zaima goes, so does Zahra. "Su! A little help, please?"

"Sure, Pop."

John rolls his eyes and thinks that higher education on Earth was a mistake. Sukina grabs the twins around their waists and hauls them off, kicking and squealing, just as the splash from the wormhole settles, and a couple of bags land on the dais. Qadir dares Zohoor "do it!" and of course, Zohoor takes the bait, as always, dashing up the stairs to slap the event horizon, just as Rodney comes through.

The kids fall about laughing as Rodney splutters and makes a grab for Zohoor. The twelve-anam old boy is far quicker than McKay though, and he easily escapes by leaping off the edge of the platform with a gleeful shout.

Rodney yells, "Hello to you too! You have to sleep sometime you know."

Shaaziya arrives, ushering in Peter and Little John. Rania is close behind with her son, Baz, in her arms.

Peter and John take a quick look at Rodney and each other before jumping down and chasing after Zohoor.

John jogs up the stairs, and takes Baz from Rania in exchange for a kiss on the cheek. "Hello, zahra'an. Good to see you. Where's Raul?"

"Hello, Uncle John. He was delayed at the Pentagon, but he assures me he'll arrive tomorrow."

John tucks Baz to the side as he gives Shaaziya a hug. "I am so glad you're here."

Shaaz returns John's embrace. "As am I, Atlantis has been wonderful, but it was time to come home."

"And where's Muna?"
Rodney shakes John's hand and sighs, "She's her father's daughter. She said she'd come through with Raul, there's a dissertation defense she wants to attend, to see if they're as mean as I am."

John chortles. "Not likely. At least there will still be a Dr. McKay in Atlantis."

Rodney has an inordinately pleased expression on his face. "She's getting there."

Shaaziya does a quick head count, "I don't see Hamza, is he not well?"

"No, he's fine, but he said he'd rather stay home and help Dima with Laila. So, where's all your stuff?" John looks around at the four carryalls on the platform.

"Oh, the Han-Xiangzi is going to drop the rest of it off; this is all we'll need until then. Hell, we probably won't even be here when it arrives."

"Dima can look out for it; she and Yusrah are going to sit this viat out and stay home with the little ones."

Rodney asks curiously, "Is Aliya coming?"

John knows that Rodney's never quite understood his serial monogamy, or how he manages to maintain cordial and friendly relations with his two previous wives, not to mention all their other spouses, so he chides him gently. "Of course, it's Zohoor's first viat; she wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Peter and Jack are looking forward to it as well." Shaaziya gives John an amused smile.

John gives her a quick flick of the eyebrow in surprise, "Jack?"

She gives John a wise nod, "Yes, fourteen year old boys are not called 'little' anything, or so I was so informed."

"Yeah, I hated that too. So, shall we?" John whistles and waves, and three of the older boys saunter over to play mesla. Peter shakes John's hand, as Haidar and Kemal graciously submit to a hug from Shaaziya then shake Rodney's hand before grabbing the bags.

John shakes his head as Kemal takes Haidar's hand and leads him to the edge of the platform; together they leap off with a whoop like their younger brothers. Rania flashes John a grin before jumping down with Peter to visit with her 'cousins'.

John watches their children fondly as they gather to catch up in at least three languages.

"It never ceases to amaze me, Sheppard. How do you keep track of all of them?" Rodney's giving the children a decidedly avuncular look, he's as fond of John's as John is of Rodney's children; they've often sent their kids back and forth to the other for vacation, schooling and internships.

John laughs and gives Rodney his standard answer whenever he's asked about juggling nine children and three wives, "It's easy--by the color of their eyes." John heads towards the city gates, knowing that Sukina and Rania will shepherd the rest of kids along as soon as they're ready to come home. "Have you decided on Ayse or N'vellesem?"

Shaaziya answers with certainty, "N'vellesem. It will be very easy to visit Father, and I am too old to live under his roof."

Rodney snorts. "Don't make me any older than I am, please." John reaches out and pats the
decidedly rounder middle, and Rodney slaps his hand away. "That'll cost you a quarter, Sheppard."

"I'll have to owe it to you, haven't seen a quarter in thirty-six anam."

"I think by now your Buddha debt is almost four hundred dollars." Rodney gives John a mellow ghost of his death glare, "Why do you do that?"

John laughs, "Because it bugs the shit out of you."

Rodney sniffs and lifts his chin in an old familiar gesture. "Twenty-five years and you still act like you're twelve. No wonder you get along with the kids so well."

"Yep. So you ready for the trek to Halavasan?"

"I assure you, the spare tire is not indicative of my general health--I can still keep up."

"That's good. I plan to keep you guys around for a long time." John grabs Rodney around the shoulders and gives him a loud, wet, comical kiss on the temple. "I'm so glad you came home."

Rodney lightly punches John on the arm. He's smiling, but his eyes are glinting slightly in the bright sunlight. "Yeah, it's good to be home."

~ Finis ~

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