In the Shadow of Your Heart

by firedew

Summary

John and Teyla are expecting their first child together, but Pegasus isn't finished with them. Will they be able to face what’s coming? Will their relationship survive? Set after the events of "Finding My Way" in AU of Season 5.

Notes

So ... this isn't exactly a new fic. I've been working on it for about three years now. It's still a WIP for reasons of life and the occasional muse gone walkabout. But it hasn't been abandoned. I still add to it as often as I can, so don't be afraid to read because you're worried there won't be an ending. THERE WILL BE AN ENDING! Although I do have one other WIP in the same state, I've never NOT finished a story and I intend to keep my record clean.

On with the specs!

This is going to be a long fic with a lot of plot and overriding drama—primarily John/Teyla,
with a healthy dose of Ronon/Keller/OC.

As the sequel to my story "Finding My Way", it isn't absolutely necessary to read the other one first, but I do recommend it. Like the previous story, there will be cameos made by some of the canon episodes of the series, but they won't be the main storyline throughout, and being that this an AU, they'll be flip-flopped and twisted around to fit the new way things unfold. Chapter 1 starts us out with a tag to Broken Ties.

Warnings: Violence, torture, sex, and some language (although I try to stick with what we might've heard in the series).

And the obligatory disclaimer: I do not own Stargate. I do this for fun, not profit. Please don't sue me.

Enjoy!
For Colonel John Sheppard, landing the jumper in the bay was the easy part. He commanded the small craft with an ease that was practically innate and it responded as though it were a natural extension of himself. Getting Ronon from the floor to the waiting gurney, on the other hand, was more of a challenge. At least they had Major Lorne's team along for some extra muscle. As soon as he was laid out, Dr. Keller rushed in for triage.

"Doc, you'd better get a move on," he said. "We hit him with three stun blasts before he went down. I don't know how long he's gonna stay like this."

She tugged the wide collar of his shirt briskly from one side to the other, taking note of his injuries, which seemed mostly insignificant and par for the course with Ronon. The glaring exception was the fresh, raw feeding mark over his chest. "Let's get those restraints on and get him to the infirmary," she ordered. "We need to run tests as soon as possible to see how much of the Wraith enzyme is in his system."

She reached for the thick leather straps attached to the base of the gurney and took hold of Ronon's right hand.

There was a barely perceptible twitch, a movement that could have been easily explained away under other circumstances, but with Ronon, their resident lethal weapon, it was an indicator that set off alarm bells in John's head.

"Doc! Move!"

"Jennifer!" Mason shouted.

As John went for the stunner holstered against his thigh, Mason dove toward her. But for all their speed, Ronon was faster.

Propelled by a drug-induced edict to attack, his bearded face contorted savagely. He contracted his left arm and swung, hitting Dr. Keller square across the jaw with brutal force. Mason caught her inside his powerful arms and kept her unconscious body from crashing to the ground. Thinking fast, he pulled her out of the line of fire and covered her in a protective posture.

John raised the stunner to his best friend and fired, and for the first time since she left, he was glad Teyla was gone.

It was dusk on the Athosian's new homeworld. Teyla walked by herself, taking in the last gasps of the fiery cascade of color in the darkened sky and the cool autumn breeze blowing over her. A short distance away in the encampment, fires were being lit and she could hear the children still at play, enjoying the last light of the day before it was time for the evening meal and, inevitably, bed.

The last two weeks had not been easy. Everyone had known it would be difficult establishing a new home on a new planet with so few able-bodied adults left, but it was what they wanted. They could not return to New Athos. Too many ghosts of the past lingered for them there, and as much as they were welcomed by John's people, the Athosians had never felt like they were truly useful in Atlantis.
So Rodney had searched the Ancient database for a suitable place for them to resettle.

She yawned. Fatigue was starting early this evening, no doubt a result of her spending all day in the fields readying them for planting. She knew by now that it wouldn't be long before she could hardly keep her eyes open, so she adjusted her course and ambled to her tent. There would be no tea or stories around the campfire for her tonight. She was too tired and the morning promised to be another early one. There was still much work to be done.

Once inside, she readied herself for bed. Teyla pulled on a nightgown that had, at one point, fit loosely on her body. She rolled her eyes in frustration. The material had grown tight around her expanding midsection and it wouldn't be much longer before she was unable to wear it. First, it had been her pants. Now it seemed her sleepwear was following suit. If she kept growing at this rate, she would soon consider herself lucky to have any clothes at all.

She lowered herself to the bed and pulled the blankets over her. Unable to get comfortable, she rolled onto her other side and wrapped her legs around the blankets so they were exposed rather than underneath them. Trying once again to settle in, she rested against the pillow and closed her eyes.

A delicate nudge fluttered through her belly, a tiny beacon in the quiet of the night. Teyla's mouth curled upward. She had reached the halfway point in her pregnancy and, before leaving, Dr. Keller had told her to expect to feel movement soon. A few days ago, she had. She rubbed a hand over her stomach. "So you have decided it is time to wake, have you? It is late, little one. The day is done."

Despite the joy she took from each tiny kick, she couldn't help but feel a myriad of other emotions tainting the moment. She wished John were here to share this latest milestone with her, to celebrate their baby's life together. But, at the same time, she couldn't forget the things he had said.

"Damn it, Teyla! Don't do this!"

They had not parted on good terms. His last words to her still echoed in her ears. He hadn't come to the Gate to see her off and he still hadn't visited. She had considered returning to Atlantis herself once her own initial anger had subsided, but the camp was several miles away from the gate, too far to walk in a short time and she was needed here.

The radio they'd brought to the encampment had stayed silent. She'd received no word from him telling her when – or if – he planned on coming at all.

"Here you go."

"We have real ones here, you know."

"Not like this. Just hold still," Mason said softly. Carefully, he pressed the makeshift ice pack to Jennifer's face with his huge, rough hands. "There. Mess hall's finest. I can personally vouch for their effectiveness."

She winced at the initial contact. It was both painful and cold, but the ice soon did its job and started to numb her. Jennifer hadn't seen herself yet, but she hoped whatever swelling there was went away quickly.

Standing back with his hands in his pockets, Mason watched the tension in her face slowly release.
"So how do you like being the patient, for once?" he asked with a smirk.

Her legs swinging down from the infirmary bed, she looked up miserably. "It's not my favorite."

"That's alright. It doesn't really suit you," he said. "I think I prefer things the other way around, too."

She tried to smile, but her sore lip objected harshly. "How's Ronon?" she asked.

"He's awake," he replied, matter-of-factly. "He's pretty bad."

Jennifer nodded. Having just gone through this with Tyre, she didn't need to imagine what was happening. His teammate was likely strapped down to a bed, flailing around and shouting loud enough to rattle the walls. For now Ronon was enraged and out of his mind, but soon withdrawal would kick in and he would get horribly sick.

She slid off the bed. "I really need to get back to work. I should check in on him."

He blocked her path, though, pulling his hands from where they hid long enough to clamp them down on her shoulders. "I don't really think that's a good idea, Jennifer. Let someone else take care of Ronon."

"I'm fine, Mason. Really. I can handle this. You don't need to worry."

"I know you can," he said, "and I'll worry if I damn well feel like it. But that's not it."

She stopped trying to push her way past the big marine to hear him out. He pursed his lips and lowered his voice. "I don't think he should see you like this. He may not care right now, but trust me, he will. I sure as hell would, if I'd done that to you."

She was struck by his tone and the flash of intensity in the marine's blue eyes. Feeling slightly awkward, she tried to find her voice again. "Oh. I, uh ... didn't even think of that. Is it that bad?"

With the way her face ached, she didn't have any illusions that it looked good, but ...

Mason chuckled. "You've looked better."

That was the Sgt. Capshaw she was friends with. Brutally honest. "You have terrible bedside manner, you know that?"

"That's why I try and leave the doctor stuff to you," he said. "Don't sweat it, though. For my money, you're still the cutest doc in Atlantis."

Jennifer smiled and shook her head. The casual flirting was relatively new, but she enjoyed it. It was flattering and fun. It drew her away from her natural shyness without the added pressure that comes with a romantic relationship. "You shouldn't waste lines like that on me. Save them for someone who actually believes them."

"Got anyone in mind?" he joked, but when she actually looked like she was going to throw a name at him, he stopped her and adopted a more serious expression. "Don't even think about it, Jen. You know as well as I do there's no point. I'm not gonna last much longer around here."

"I don't think ever met anyone as pessimistic as you."

"With good reason." He gave her a slight push in the direction of the door.

"I haven't heard any complaints from you yet this round, so you'll forgive me if I choose to think the glass is half full," she said. "I'm looking forward to the day when you won't have to be my own
personal lab rat anymore."

"Of all of the crap I've had to deal with because of this," he said waving to his chest, "that's probably been my favorite. Now let's get the hell out of here before something else happens and somebody needs an actual doctor, because I don't think I'm ready for that yet."

Jennifer laughed. "No?"

"Ice packs are pretty much where my expertise ends."

She obediently moved toward the exit and he followed closely behind, sliding his hands back into his pockets.

Richard Woolsey, senior member of the IOA and recently appointed head of the Atlantis expedition, said, "Colonel, are you certain this is wise?"

From the gallery above, they looked down into the room where Ronon was using every ounce of his strength as leverage against the bed and the restraints keeping him hostage. More than once, he'd nearly flipped the entire thing over and the soldiers standing by had been forced to intervene.

"Yeah," Rodney echoed with a pained expression on his face. "I don't think he's really in the mood."

"Look, I'm not gonna stay long. If anything goes wrong, you two can call in the troops. But I'm going down there," John said. "He's not gonna do this alone."

Both of them seemed to accept his decision and John turned toward the doorway. "Try not to piss him off, okay?" McKay said, shaking his head in wary disapproval.

On his way out, John managed a half smile. "I'll do my best, Rodney."

When he strode through the doorway to the lower level, Ronon ceased his maniacal tirade and glared at him. His skin pale and dark circles surrounding his bloodshot eyes, Ronon looked like a vampire. Appropriate, considering it was the Wraith who made him that way. Being cautious, John stopped short of the bed and out of his friend's reach.

"How long are planning on keeping me prisoner?" Ronon growled.

"As long as it takes to clear your head."

He snorted. "I. Feel. Fine. You and the others can let me go."

"You may feel fine, but you look like hell," John said. "And things are gonna get a lot worse before they get better."

"I don't know what you and Woolsey want, but it's not gonna work. You either kill me or you let me go."

With each successive word out of his mouth, the Satedan's voice grew a touch more menacing and desperate.

"You know we can't do that."

"Get me out of here, Sheppard," he snarled. "You kill me or let me go. Those are your choices,
because if I have to get myself out of here, I won't stop until every last person in Atlantis is dead!"

"You're already feeling it, aren't you?" John asked him. "That high you're jonesing on is starting to slip away. We're gonna get you through this, Ronon. I promise."

"You kill me or let me go."

"Sorry, buddy. It's for your own good."

Ronon screamed at him and strained against the taut leather holding him in place. "You kill me or let me go!"

The colonel turned around and walked away.

"John Sheppard!" Ronon bellowed, testing the limits of his muscle against the restraints, causing the leather to bite through his wrists. "You are a coward! A miserable coward! No wonder Teyla took your baby and left!"

Ronon's parting words slipped through the door like a knife. John suddenly felt like he'd taken a hit and he couldn't breathe.
It took John hours, a meeting with Lorne, and a general immersion in his job to start to pull himself out of the pit again. At least with his work to distract him, he could pretend that his life was like it used to be. Sure, the business of Atlantis was always one adventure after another, but his personal life had been uncomplicated and simple, a far cry from the way things were now.

He spent extra time in his office that night. He read through the performance evaluations he'd been putting off for a while. Even after he finished perusing the latest mission reports from all the off-world teams, he stayed to rework the rotation schedules for the next month, searching for ways to maximize efficiency without hurting morale.

At one point, he took a look at the absurdly clear desk in front of him. It strongly resembled his father's desk at the house on Earth and a shudder ran up his spine. He'd turned into Woolsey's ideal version of himself. Pristine paperwork with all the I's dotted and the T's crossed. Flawless. All in a sad and futile attempt to avoid going home.

In a childish act of rebellion, he flicked his wrist and knocked over the cup he kept his pens and pencils in, scattering them all over the desk and floor. He took his carefully planned schedule and threw it in the wastebasket on his way out. It was something anyway. If nothing else, he could control what his desk looked like.

Restless, he bypassed the transporter entirely and started the long walk across the city toward his empty quarters.

Well past midnight, Jennifer marched to Mason's quarters in her pajamas. The hallways were clear of people, a fact she was thankful for. In a hurry, she didn't want to waste a second weaving her way through a crowd. Her rapid pace fell short of a run, but only technically.

She had been looking in her bedroom mirror, getting one last look at the damage before she went to bed. There was a nasty, purple bruise over her jawline and up across one cheek, but she'd been spared the fat lip she was afraid of and there was very little swelling. Mason's icepack had done its job. Maybe the ice from the mess hall was better than the packs she kept in the infirmary. With a faint smile on her lips, she'd mulled over the reason why. They were living in the lost city of Atlantis. It could've been a magical, Ancienty type of ice that held mysterious powers to heal. Or it could've had more to do with the fact that it was shaved ice and molded to the injury better than standard packs. She was surprised she'd never thought of it before.

But it had been the ice that made her think and then rethink.

She didn't bother with the bell outside his door. She banged on the metal doorway with a ferociousness that made her hand ache.

When he answered still in his uniform, she didn't think anything about the hour and that he should have been in bed by then. She stared straight into the friendly, charming smile he flashed her and demanded, "Show me your hands."

The smile fell, but he didn't move.
"Show me. Right now."

His jaw flexed and he slowly lifted them into the air. They hovered in front of her, shaking.

Her hopes fell. She had been praying the whole way there she was wrong. She'd wanted to see nothing and have him call her overprotective and paranoid. "How long? How long has it been this time?"

"A week," he admitted. He grasped her shoulder and pulled her inside.

"Why didn't you tell me?" As the door slid shut behind her, she shrugged her shoulders and slipped into her doctor shoes. "You know what? It doesn't matter right now. I'm gonna go back up to the lab and start putting together something else."

He shook his head. "Jennifer ..."

"We just need to try something in a different class, something with a chemical make-up your body hasn't developed a tolerance for," she said. Several of the ideas she and Carson had previously thought up and rejected for one reason or another reran through her head. "Or maybe a nerve block. I'm sure we could find some way around the paralytic effects. I'm gonna talk to Dr. Brown in botany again. I haven't seen anything reported yet, but you never know what may have shown up. Maybe they've got some plants we can use to manage the pain ..."

"Jennifer ..."

"And from now on, I'm gonna be watching you like a hawk. I can't have you pulling this tough guy crap on me anymore. If I have to do a blood draw every other day to get a straight answer, that's what I'm prepared to do. The second your levels start to change ..."

"Jennifer, stop."

"But ..."

"No!" he yelled. He bit his lower lip, checking himself.

"Mason," she said warily. Jennifer had gotten to know him pretty well since this seemingly endless saga started and she could tell when things were good. He was much freer with the jokes and his time, and there was a real change in the way he carried himself. Every time, the new drug treatments worked wonders and the persistent pain in his old injury went away. But his body inevitably adjusted. The pain meds worked less and less, and he would start to retreat.

She should've noticed if he'd been hiding this for a week. Either he was getting better at hiding it or she didn't want to see it. He was her friend. The idea that he was walking around, doing his job to the best of his ability with his chest on fire made her sick to her stomach.

"I'm tired, Jennifer," he said.

"Mason, I know it's late—"

He shook his head. "No. I mean I'm tired. I'm sick of the whole dance."

A horrible queasy feeling took up residence in her stomach. "I'm not done, Mason. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Do you?" Doubt and withheld anger oozed from his tone. "'Cause this is ... what? The fourth time?"
The fifth? I don't think I have it in me to do this anymore. Eventually, you're going to run out of brilliant ideas and I'm going to be stuck. I either walk around in too much pain to function," he paused, his body tense, "or I spend the rest of my short, miserable life a damn junkie. Either way, my career is over."

"We're not there yet."

His normally simmering voice neared a shout. "Spare me the pep talk, Jennifer. I've heard it all before. I am sick and tired of you doctors making promises you can't keep. Telling me I can have a normal life, when I can't. You're not the one who has to live with it! You're not the one who ..."

He came to a sudden stop and bit his tongue when he realized what he was doing. He turned away from her and stared at the floor, visibly reining in his temper.

"I didn't mean that," he said, clearly apologetic and tired. "I'm sorry, I just ... Just go, okay? I can't ..."

She took a deep breath and gathered herself. "Okay. I'm going, but I'm coming right back." His head snapped up, his face troubled. Before he could mount another argument, she continued. "You need sleep and you aren't going to get any when you're like this. I'm going to the infirmary to get some sedatives and I don't want you to move while I'm gone."

She watched as a familiar struggle overtook his features. It was always hard for her patients here in Atlantis to accept they needed help, that they weren't invincible. They were all soldiers involved in the most important discovery the planet Earth had ever seen. Mason, in particular, was a United States Marine, Special Forces trained, a war veteran, but he sometimes needed a medical assist just to go to sleep.

It took a while, but his burning desire to feel nothing eventually overrode his distaste and shame. He reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Okay," she said softly, but she wasn't done. "We're going to talk about this in the morning when you're feeling better. You can say whatever you want. I'm not letting you give up."

John sat down on the bed and unlaced his boots, taking them off of his throbbing feet. He kicked them out of the way and walked out of the bedroom. He was tired, but he didn't have any intention of sleeping in there. He spent his nights now on the couch in the living room, because he couldn't face the empty side of the bed. It was too hard. He would rather brave a stiff neck and an achy back than know he might reach for her in his sleep and find no one.

He had just gotten a beer out of the fridge and popped the lid off on the edge of the counter when he received a late-night visitor of his own.

"Hey," Rodney said. "I just left Ronon. Can I come in? I know it's late, but ..."

John stepped aside. "Come on in. You want a beer?"

"No, that's okay. I don't ..."

"Have a beer, McKay," the colonel ordered.
"Okay."

Glancing around, Rodney followed John into the kitchen and accepted the cold bottle he was handed. John and Teyla's quarters were decorated in an odd mix of items that, in lesser hands, would've screamed 'Athosian bachelor pad'. But somehow Teyla had managed to weave them together into something coherent and complementary.

"This is a nice place," Rodney said. "Have I told you that before? I'm thinking about talking to Woolsey about getting one for myself."

John smirked. Rodney wasn't one to be outdone by anyone at anything. It ate him up that Carter had denied him one of the larger-sized family quarters and it appeared he wasn't above making a run at Woolsey. "You'll get it."

"You think so?"

"Sure. You need the space for that ego of yours," the colonel quipped. "How's Ronon doing?"

"Sick. Really sick," McKay said with a grimace. "I mainly came by, though, to see if ... you were okay."

John took a drink from his bottle. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just . . ."

"What?"

Rodney inhaled deeply and shuffled his feet. "What Ronon said in there, is it true? Did you and Teyla . . . I only ask because it would actually explain a lot."

"Like what?" John asked. He'd thought he was doing a pretty good job keeping things tucked away, but if Rodney, of all people, had noticed he was off, then maybe he was way more screwed up than he thought.

"Like why you've been acting so . . ."

"McKay, you're a genius. Why don't you try finishing a sentence?"

"Distant. There. You've been acting like you've been on another planet lately. And I don't mean a planet . . . You know what I mean."

"Distant," John said, considering the word suspiciously. "That's not one of your words, Rodney. To you, distance is a measure from one point to another, not a behavior that applies to real people."

"Okay. Katie might've helped me with the word, but the rest of it was all me."

"Katie Brown?"

"We got back together," he said.

John raised his brow.

"There . . . may have been some groveling."

"May have been? Rodney, girls don't like it when they find out you were planning on proposing and then you don't."
"Okay, I got on my knees and begged to her to come back. I groveled. I confess. I suppose that means I've lost some man points or something?"

John smiled and shook his head to himself. Rodney's love life was healthier than his. It seemed wrong somehow, like the universe was having a laugh at his expense. He took another swig from his bottle. "Good for you, McKay. Really."

"So is it true?" Rodney asked again, circling back around to the original question.

John answered him as if it were another one of the baseless rumors that flew around the city, as if he'd said it a thousand times, instead of only having recited it in his head. "Teyla didn't leave me. She just left."

"Then, why did Ronon ..."

"Rodney," he said, getting frustrated. He didn't want to talk about Teyla. Not to Rodney, not to Ronon, not to anybody. "Because. He was trying to push me into doing something stupid."

"Yes, I deciphered his very subtle, crazy man code and figured out that much. But if it weren't true, how could he expect ..."

John clenched his jaw and glared at the pushy scientist. "Teyla and I had a huge fight right before she and the other Athosians left. Okay? I ..." he faltered, "I honestly don't know if she left me or not. There. Happy?"

"Oh." With that, Rodney deflated. Despite having doubts enough to ask the question in the first place, he seemed astonished at the answer. "But you two have had fights before."

John shook his head. "Not like this."

"What happened?"

"I was caught off guard with the whole 'leaving the city' thing and I didn't handle it too well," John admitted.

"But you knew the Athosians were leaving."

"I didn't know Teyla was planning on going with them."

"And you didn't want her to go?"

"No!" he said a little too harshly. "Yes. No. I didn't want her to go, but it wasn't about that. I didn't think she should be so far away from getting help. You know. Just in case."

"Just in case?" Rodney asked just before his eyes lit. "Oh."

John nodded.

"She's better now, isn't she? I thought Dr. Keller said she was fine."

"Yeah," he said. "She's fine."

"But you still didn't want her to go?"

John didn't know how to communicate what was bothering him. "You weren't there, Rodney. You didn't see it. You didn't have to watch it happen. You weren't the one trying to wake her up, waiting
for Keller and Beckett to get there." The more he spoke, the more John felt the same anger he'd
directed at Teyla resurface.

He had listened to her explain her plans. She'd told him that it would only be for a while, just until
things were set up and taken care of. She reminded him of her duty to her people and their need to be
united while they went through the recovery process. On some level he understood it, and had
circumstances been different, he might've been fine with her going. He would've missed her, but he
would've dealt with it. But that wasn't how things went.

 Barely a month after hearing his baby's heartbeat for the first time, John's nightmares had come true.
Throughout her first trimester, Teyla's morning sickness grew worse by the day and the anti-nausea
medication only did so much. She got to the point where she couldn't eat anything. As a result, she
got thinner. Weaker.

She had come to the control tower to see him, to talk to him. She could've radioed. She didn't have to
come, but he hadn't been around much. The Wraith in-fighting was in full swing and a few hive
ships had come to blows uncomfortably close to the city. Security was on constant alert, ready to
cloak the city and fight if it came down to it. One of the Athosian kids had wandered off and she was
hoping he could spare some men for a search, but she never got far enough to ask.

He had just come out of his office as she reached the landing at the top of the stairs. Seeing her, he
started to smile, but then he saw her face. He watched her skin turn ashen and her eyes close. In a
moment that seemed suspended in time, he shouted her name, alerting everyone else in the tower to
the urgency of her situation, and ran. He wasn't the only one who tried to reach her. Others had too,
some that were closer than he was. But it was too late.

 Then there she was, nineteen weeks along and standing in front of him telling him she was leaving.
Things were finally going the way they should. She had traded in her flat stomach for something
decidedly rounder, the morning sickness had cleared up, and her appetite was rapidly approaching
McKay's. He was just starting to relax again and she was going to another planet with no doctors
around. He lost it.

John exhaled. "Can we just … leave it alone?"

"It couldn't have been that bad."

John shook his head. "Trust me, McKay. It was bad. I said some things. Things I shouldn't have."

Rodney was uncharacteristically quiet for a moment. "You haven't talked to her at all?"

"Nope."

"So ... you're in some sort of holding pattern?"

"I don't know. I guess."

Rodney stewed uncomfortably in silence, woefully unprepared and in way over his head with this
advice stuff. He was probably wishing Katie was here about now, or Jennifer. Even Cadman harping
in his ear might've been welcome in this situation. "Well ... how are you supposed to know where
you stand, if you never actually talk to her?"

"I'm gonna talk to her, Rodney. I will. I just ... I can't just pick up and go. Not now. Not with Ronon ...
" While it sounded like the truth, John hated that it felt so much like a cop out.

"You've talked before," Rodney pointed out. "It shouldn't be too hard. She's still Teyla, even if she's
your girlfriend now or ... live-in love ... Baby mama?"

John shut his eyes and prayed for death. "Please stop."

"I'm only trying to help."

"I know that, but if you don't stop, I'm gonna be forced to shoot you."

"You wouldn't."

"I've done it before," he said. "I think I still remember how."

Rodney shook his head at John and spent the next few moments in thought. "What are you two anyway?"

John set his beer on the counter. "Okay, I'm getting my gun."

McKay threw up his hands. "Strictly a terminology question. I can't seem to find the right word is all. Nothing really seems to fit."

John sighed. He picked up his bottle and started drinking.

"Unless you're going to marry her. That at least would present a few more possibilities, vocabulary-wise."

Caught mid-swallow, Sheppard choked on his drink and flew into a coughing fit.

"I guess that's a no," McKay said.

It took him a minute, but John finally got his respiratory system in working order again. "Rodney, Teyla is currently living on another planet. Without me. I think the marriage talk can wait for a while. And if I decide to get married again—and that's a big if—you would be the last person I would tell."

"That's not true," he said. "Is it?"

John rolled his eyes. "Okay, maybe not the last person. I'd definitely tell you before I'd tell Sergeant Murphy."

Rodney thought and thought and came up blank. "Who?"

With a set of prepackaged syringes and a tiny bottle of medicine in hand, Jennifer turned her keys to lock the sliding door on the medicine locker. The night nurse gave her an acknowledging smile as she slipped the items into a small plastic bag and made a quick stop in her office. She flipped open Sgt. Capshaw's file and made a note on his chart regarding the latest developments. Mason's status as a chronic case kept his medical file on her desk most of the time and tonight was no exception.

Sitting directly next to Mason's thick brown file was Ronon's. In the three years since he came to the city, Ronon had built up quite the hefty file, too. Chuckling to herself, she briefly considered pulling Col. Sheppard's too, just to see how the three measured up to one another.

Curious, she peered inside Ronon's file and read Dr. Cole's orders, written an hour ago. After putting
up a hell of a fight, Ronon had finally gotten so sick he couldn't anymore. The doctor was finally able to get close enough to him to administer one of the most powerful sedatives they had in stock. She snapped the file closed and set it back on her desk.

Dr. Cole was a great doctor, but Jennifer wished Carson was there. Dr. Beckett spent more of his time offworld these days than he did in the city. Seeking to find his place again after over a year in captivity, he was doing a lot of clinical work in the towns and villages around Pegasus. Jennifer understood why he did it, but the Scot was the best doctor in two galaxies and Ronon deserved the best.

She walked across the upper gallery overlooking him. Ronon was asleep, thanks to the sedatives, but as was often the case with medicine induced sleep, it was restless. He still quivered and moaned from the torment his body was being put through. Every sound made Jennifer sad.

She'd seen him through a lot of situations. Gunshot wounds, stunner fire, broken bones, more stitches than she could ever count, but this was different. Normally, he was so big, intense and full of life. He was a force unto himself, like nothing in the galaxy could stop him. She could hardly get him stitched up before he was off again, going after the bad guys. He had a way of making her feel like her life, by comparison, was small. The Wraith had taken a strong, powerful man and stripped him of everything he believed in.

Mason was right. She should keep her distance from Ronon for a while, at least until the bruising lightened up and could be covered. Justified or not, this whole situation would be a devastating blow to his Satedan sense of honor. He didn't need a visual reminder of it to be thrown in his face.

"Hurry back, Ronon," she said quietly before she turned away.

She had someone waiting, someone she could actually help.

Teyla rested on her knees as she plugged the final sapling into its new home. Her morning had been spent moving from hole to hole, planting the young fruit trees they had brought with them. She pushed the pile of dirt around to cover the roots and sighed. Her back was aching.

Getting her legs and body properly balanced was getting more difficult all the time. After putting in more of an effort than she would've liked, she stood up. She arched her back, trying to work out the kinks, but stopped short when an intense pain shot up from her stomach. She winced and her right hand clutched her rock hard belly.

"Teyla, are you alright?" Halling asked to her left.

She massaged the area and wiped a bead of sweat from her brow with the other hand. "I am fine. I fear I may have stretched a bit too far."

Halling smiled. "I recall my wife doing the same thing often with Jinto, when she would stretch or twist or turn too quickly. She always said it was a good sign. That the child was growing quickly and needed more room to play. I am not certain I ever believed it, but it was nice to think so."

"I do not believe she would ever lie to you, Halling. She did not have the heart for it. I, for one, choose to believe her." Teyla turned her gaze back to the fledgling trees. "That is the last of them."
He nodded. "I will see that they are properly watered if you would like to rest."

She frowned. "I am not accustomed to having to rest so much, Halling. I am not suited to it. There must be something else I can do."

"Is it the rest you object to, Teyla? Or the quiet time where troubling thoughts have been known to run rampant?" he asked.

Teyla stared at him. He had known her far too long and knew her far too well. "I believe it is both. But I admit the quiet time is very difficult."

"You miss Colonel Sheppard. It is only natural."

She did miss him. She missed him terribly, but she wasn't certain how she would feel if he were to show up after all this time. She might kiss him or she might just as easily hit him with one of her bantos rods. She had not forgiven him for the things he had said, and with every passing day, she grew more upset that he hadn't come so they could begin to set things right.

"Halling, I need a task. Rest will have to wait for a little while longer."

The tall man surrendered to Teyla's determination. "I believe that Feylon and Jol were having a discussion about the fields. Perhaps you would care to join them?"

She grimaced. "I cannot think of anything I would enjoy less, but I will go. Thank you, Halling."

"You are always welcome, Teyla."

She could see Feylon and Jol arguing from where she stood. They were seated at a small table in front of the main tent, where the Athosians took their meals together. Feylon was one of the oldest of her people to survive. He was about sixty-five years of age and had strong opinions on nearly every subject that came his way, ranging from the Wraith all the way down to the spiced stew they had for dinner the night before. Jol was of a similar disposition but couldn't have disagreed more with Feylon if she tried, and she did. She also happened to be the one who made the spiced stew.

They had a diagram of the encampment and the surrounding areas on a map, spread out in front of them. Jol pointed at one particular area so hard Teyla was sure her finger would poke a hole in it at any moment.

"Do you have any idea how much work it would be to create irrigation to that area? This is a far better location. It is nearer to the river."

Feylon was quick to counter. "Yes, it is near the river. The Lanteans warned us that that area is prone to periodic flooding. It would be ideal for our crops if we solely wished to drown them, but since we have other intentions, we must look elsewhere."

"Know it all."

"What, may I ask, is the trouble?" Teyla interrupted.

"Teyla! Finally, a reasonable voice," Feylon said with relief.

Jol rolled her eyes. "We have been going over our data. As things stand, we fear the fields we currently have will not be enough to feed everyone through the winters on this world."

"They are longer than we knew on New Athos," Feylon agreed. "We must be prepared to keep more
"I have already made arrangements with the Lanteans and our other friends on other worlds to meet our needs for this coming winter, so there is no great urgency and therefore no need to argue," Teyla reminded them. "I hope we can discuss this with as little bloodshed as possible."

"Wise words," Feylon said. "You may as well put your cooking pot away, Jol. You will not be cracking my head with it today."

"The day is not yet over."

Teyla sighed and brought a chair over to sit with them while they figured out where the best place for the new field would be. They were finally able to come to a consensus and plans were made to break ground in the next few days.

Jol held up her hand as she finished some more figures. "We were not prepared to need the additional crops." She grimaced. "We aren't going to have enough seed to complete the planting."

"We do not have much to trade for extra seed, Teyla," Feylon pointed out. "We are not so well off as we once were."

"Then, it is fortunate that we have such good friends, is it not?" Teyla said.

Teyla sat back and sighed. Her stomach was still tight and the increasingly active baby had started to flip underneath her ribcage, leaving her slightly short of breath.

Jol noticed her discomfort. "Teyla, you should go and put your feet up. It is not good for the child to have you working so much."

"Teyla, you are doing fine. Plenty of work keeps the blood circulating," Feylon countered.

She didn't think she possessed the patience to take any more of their bickering. "I thank you both for your concern, but I do believe I am feeling quite tired all of a sudden. If you will excuse me?"

As Teyla walked toward her tent, Jol jabbed Feylon's shoulder. "She has enough to worry about without you burdening her further."

"Teyla is not some fragile flower. She is made of stronger stuff than most," he reminded her. He continued on with a note of respect for his leader. "She possesses the gift and has walked through much turmoil and been made all the stronger for it. However well intentioned, she does not need everyone around her treating her like an invalid."

Jol set her hand on top of Feylon's. "That child will be the first of the next generation of the Athosian people. While each new life is special, this one is more so, and we must safeguard its well-being at all costs."

"Don't worry, my friend," he answered. "We will. This child is doubly blessed, for we will also have all the might of Atlantis to aid us."
"Come along, Jinto," Halling said. They stepped away from the Stargate and, after a few moments, the active wormhole disappeared.

The village of the Kysonians was not far. He could already see smoke from the chimneys rising into the air. Like most of the peoples in Pegasus, they led simple lives. The Wraith had been as hard on them as any other world, but they took what they could salvage from every culling and kept on trying to make a decent life for themselves. They had been trading partners with the Athosians for generations. Teyla had been introduced to them by her mother and her mother before her. They had a peculiar penchant for formality in all things, which the Athosians did not share. Where the Athosians tried to keep things fair and simple, trades and purchases with the Kysonians often involved a lot of contracts and official declarations, and everything was always done within the proper chain of command. Halling believed Mr. Woolsey of Atlantis would enjoy this particular culture. They had much in common. They were a very honest people, though, and they often made the nuisance worth the effort.

Once they reached the center of the small town, they had only to seek out the Council Elder, Padrel, to make arrangements for the crop seeds they required. He, as the leader of the Kysonians, was the only one empowered to broker trade deals with other worlds. Padrel was a stout man of about seventy years with a full graying beard. He always met them with a cheerful disposition and a loud booming voice.

"Halling! It's been too long, my friend, too long!" Padrel said as he energetically shook his hand. "It's good to see you. And you, Jinto. You have grown, young man." He took a turn with the teenager's hand. "We had feared the Athosians lost."

Halling spoke in his calm, dignified manner. "We, indeed, lost many, but we survive."

"And Teyla?"

"Teyla is well. She sends her regrets she could not come herself. We are currently making a new home for our people."

"I see. I hope there is something we can do to assist you. Do you need men? We have many skilled hands that could be spared to help with anything you need."

"That is very generous of you, Padrel, and I thank you, but it is unnecessary. We have come to see if you can spare a few sacks of regros and tava bean seeds. We are preparing our fields and it seems that we require more than we have on hand."

Padrel stopped and thought for a moment. "I believe we can accommodate you. I would, of course, have to check the stores first."

"Of course," Halling said.

"Shall we?" Padrel asked. The town stores were in a large building adjacent to the main Council building, placed close by for the convenience of traders. "Incidentally, Halling, before you take your leave of us, remind me to check your proxy allowance. I believe it will be coming due again, soon."

The proxy allowance was the contract that made it possible for Halling to conduct trade for the Athosians with the Kysonians. In their culture, only the rightful leader was permitted to make trades on either side, in this case Padrel, as the Council Elder, for the Kysonians and Teyla Emmagan for
the Athosians. Every year since Teyla had been living in Atlantis, she'd had to return to Kyson to renew the contract for Halling to be allowed to trade on her behalf. Without a current signature, Teyla would have to appear in person to make any deals.

They crossed the main entrance of the storehouse and Padrel made a request from the clerk to see the inventory ledger. Halling and Jinto maintained a respectful distance, as was proper etiquette for the Kysonian people.

Halling had brought Jinto along on many such trips to many worlds, so his son could develop his skills in diplomacy and bargaining. He felt it more vital than ever that his son know exactly what to do in case something happened to him. With so few Athosians remaining, Jinto needed to be prepared to stand up for his people should it come to that.

While they waited, Jinto whispered to his father. "Why did you refuse the offer of help? We are in need of it."

"Our enemies have not forgotten us, son," Halling explained in a low voice. "We now have a responsibility to protect the location of our new home as the Lanteans do theirs. It is the only way to ensure that the Wraith or the Mast ... Michael or any others who would harm us are kept at bay. We cannot trust anyone to keep our secret for us. Times are too dangerous and people's minds are too easily persuaded."

Jinto nodded, a presence of thought apparent in his countenance beyond that of most boys of his age. So much that Halling could hardly think of him as a boy anymore. His son had witnessed his own people wither from malnutrition and perish around him from illness, seen his best friend murdered by Michael's abominations because he foolishly tried to fight, and watched his own father eventually join their ranks. Halling thought it a miracle Jinto still possessed his measure of teenage enthusiasm. Nevertheless, he had seen too much to truly be a boy ever again.

"Good news, my friend," Padrel exclaimed as he approached once again. "We have what you require."

"I am glad to hear it," Halling replied. "What would you have for payment? We do not have much, but we are willing to grant you any fair offer."

Padrel chuckled. "I know you are, my friend. We have done this too many times for me to doubt your word now." The man made a show of considering what to ask for, then said, "The friendship between the Athosians and the people of Atlantis is well known. Perhaps you would be willing to make a request of them on our behalf. In exchange, I am willing to make a gift of the seeds."

Halling and Jinto exchanged a puzzled look. They had no idea what the Kysonians would want with the Lanteans, neither were they a people in the habit of making gifts of things. It dirtied the bottom line. "May I ask what the request is?"

"I have heard troubling rumors of late. Recent travelers have been talking of a plague ravaging other worlds," Padrel revealed. "Stories of people dying in great numbers."

"A plague?" Jinto asked.

"Indeed. We have not been effected here, but we must not be caught unprepared and we understand the Lanteans are in possession of many wondrous medicines. I am asking you, my friend, if you would speak to them about granting some to my people."

Halling and Jinto glanced at each other, then Halling said, "Padrel, the Lanteans are generous, but I
"You are an honest man," Padrel said, "and acting in Teyla's name, I am satisfied you will keep your word and speak for us. Whatever the Lanteans decide, our business will be done."

Halling was stymied. The offer seemed too good to be true, but the Elder had never lied to them. His fear of this plague must be great, if he was willing to let the seed go with no guarantees at all. "I believe we have reached an accord, Padrel. The Athosian people will speak for you."

Padrel beamed. "Excellent! Now all that remains is the signing of the contracts."

Halling sighed. He should have suspected that even with the seeds being gifted to them, there would be many papers to be signed. The trio left the seed in the store for the time being. When everything was signed, Halling and Jinto would be issued a voucher and they would be permitted to return and retrieve what they needed.

Dr. Keller pored over the stack of files and textbooks on her desk. She had been at it for hours already and the sun was only now starting to light up the city. Her computer was running a search through every corner of the Ancient's medical database that the linguists had been able to decipher. Unfortunately, it was only a small portion. Impeding their progress were some symbols that they had no reference for and therefore no translation. Mostly, though, it was the sheer size of the database. It could take years before all the secrets of the Ancients were at their fingertips. In the meantime, they had to do continue to do things on their own.

She had contacted Carson about Mason's relapse and he was due back anytime. She would never admit it to Mason, but she was running out of ideas and she needed Beckett's input if she was going to come up with the next phase of treatment. Mason's drug tolerances had become extremely high over time, and in order to keep him comfortable, she was having to give him much larger doses of meds than would normally be recommended. She was keeping close tabs on him to minimize the risk, but overdosing was a real danger. Time was of the essence.

Jennifer looked up for her desk and growled in frustration. Her hair kept falling annoyingly in her face while she worked. Heaving a sigh, she put her pen between her teeth and opened up the drawer on her right for something to tie it back with. Her fingers were halfway through twisting things into place when she heard a familiar voice.

"Hello, luv."

Thrilled to hear the lilt of his accent, Jennifer smiled and lifted her head, bringing the right side of her face into full view. "Carson!"

The Scot's eyes went wide. "Dear Lord! What happened to you?"

Jennifer blanched. She almost forgot. She'd tried to fool herself into thinking her make-up was covering the dark marks across her jaw and cheek, but it really wasn't helping much at this stage. Maybe in a few more days, but at this point she may as well have waved a flag that said "Ronon was here".

"It's … a long story."
Dr. Beckett came around, sat on the corner of her desk, and folded his arms across his chest. "Then start talking, lass. I have a sneaking suspicion that I've missed a lot."

So Jennifer talked. First, she told him about the Athosians leaving the city, Teyla's simultaneous departure, and the rumors going around that her leaving wasn't just a coincidence of timing. She and the Colonel had split up. Carson was skeptical.

"Nobody who ever saw those two together could believe that," he said. "Not to mention, they've got that wee baby on the way. Don't you go listening to that nonsense."

Jennifer grinned, hoping he was right, but she'd seen the state Col. Sheppard had been in lately and she had her doubts. She moved on to Richard Woolsey and how things had changed under the new management. Then, she briefly touched on McKay and Katie Brown getting back together and Mason, before she started into the explanation of her face. She didn't get very far though.

While she was talking, she happened to glance past Carson into the main infirmary. Ronon walked in with Lt. Garrity, who had a trickle of blood dripping from his brow. She dove under her desk, sending her chair sliding backward and leaving Beckett looking incredibly bewildered.

"Uhh ... Jennifer?"

"Shhh!" She continued at a whisper, tempted to laugh at his amused expression but tempered by the situation. "Would you mind taking care of them? It's probably best that I stay here until they're gone."

"Under the desk?"

"Yes, Carson. Under the desk."

Beckett turned to see Ronon searching the room like hawk searches for its prey. The intensity written on his battle-hardened features spelled things out for him. "I take it that nasty bruise you're sporting is courtesy of our friend, Ronon?"

"Yes," Jennifer said, "but it was an accident."

"From the looks of it, you were lucky he didn't accidentally break your jaw."

"Carson, please. I'll explain, I promise. Could you please just take care of them?" she pleaded.

"Alright, luv. I'd do anything for you, I suppose."

"Thank you," she breathed as he stepped out of the office.

Five months in these quarters and the only thing John had ever made in it was coffee. Soon after they moved in, Teyla made a few attempts to christen the kitchen, but they soon abandoned the cooking idea. It wasn't for a lack of ability – on his part anyway – or a desire to. He was usually too busy to plan something, get ingredients from the mess hall and whip something up, and it hadn't been long before Teyla couldn't stomach the sight or smell of food in general. Blue jell-o was the only exception and for that alone Teyla made the trip to the mess three times a day.

He'd woken up that morning stiff, groaning, and not rested at all. He rolled off the couch and onto
his feet, beginning the routine he'd fallen into ever since Teyla left. He yawned and stretched, trying to work out the kinks. Then there had been the customary avoidance of looking at anything that reminded him of the woman he loved as he made his way to the bathroom, showered and got cleaned up. He tried to tell himself that it helped. But it didn't. Not a bit.

Once he'd gotten his uniform on, he ambled back into the kitchen to start the coffee. While he waited for that to get going, he grabbed his laptop and went through his inbox. There were the usual messages from different department heads. Wilcox, the new psychologist, had sent through another request that all military personnel make routine visits. Like that was gonna happen. McKay sent one demanding that Sgt. Haggerty be reassigned back to Earth. Grounds for complaint: being stupid enough to touch an experiment while it was running. Hmm. Rodney was probably overreacting a tad, but he'd have to have a talk with Haggerty.

To his surprise, there were even a few messages from Earth. Yesterday was the scheduled update from the SGC. He'd forgotten. He read down the handful of names. General Landry. Cam. Carter had dropped him a line from the Hammond by way of Cheyenne Mountain. There was a message from a lawyer, who was growing increasingly demanding that he sign transfer of ownership papers on the properties his dad had left him. Apparently, this guy hadn't gotten the memo that he was out of town. Then, there was Dave. They'd been writing back and forth fairly regularly, but things had dried up in the last few months. John opened the file.

… I've been spending a lot of time on a new project. It takes me away a lot. I spend most of my time in D.C. these days. The company's in good hands. Shelley's taken over the reins and is doing my job better than I did. I can't help myself sometimes, though. I still look over her shoulder more often than she'd probably like.

John got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. With careful sips, he read on.

I'll have to get you my new contact information as soon as I find myself an apartment out here, just in case you ever decide to come for a visit. Knowing you, I don't think I'll hold my breath, but the invitation stands.

Since John had returned from Earth, Dave hadn't mentioned a word about the big secret and he didn't really know what to make of it. For weeks, Dave had stubbornly refused to quit asking questions about his life and career despite his repeated refusal to answer. John had finally caved and left him a clue, but either Dave was in denial, he just didn't get it, or he was smart enough not to mention it on monitored channels. John didn't have any idea what was going on in his head.

… I got your list. The ring I think I can manage, but the baby stuff? You should've sent pictures, a diagram, and a sherpa. I don't know a thing about what constitutes a good crib from a bad one! And apparently there are a hundred different sizes of diapers and there's a window for every size. You go beyond the window and ... I don't know what happens, but it's bad. Seriously, John. I get that you and Teyla are a little far away from a mall, but take my advice—get your ass back here and take her shopping! Women have a natural instinct for this stuff that I DO NOT possess.

John looked around his quarters. There was a bedroom just off the kitchen that had no purpose yet. He and Teyla had tossed around a few ideas, but they were stuck somewhere between man cave and meditation room. On the other side of the living room was the master, where John and Teyla were, and the third room was right next to it. Without realizing he'd done anything, the light in the smaller room lit up. He tried to shut it off, but he couldn't seem to do it.

Traitor. Not even the city was gonna leave him alone.

He walked to the baby's room to do it the old fashioned way. There wasn't much in it yet, just a pile
of blankets folded up neatly in a corner and a box of toys made by some of the Athosians prior to their relocation. He crouched down and picked up a tiny model Jumper carved out of wood. John could tell it was done by one of the kids, but it was actually really good and they all knew he liked to fly. Twirling the little wooden jumper carefully in his hand, he wondered if his kid would like it as much as he did.

It had taken him awhile to get used to the idea of being a dad. The diapers and the crying had always been something he knew he'd figure out when the time came. Mostly, John had worried whether he'd be able to balance his career and raising a kid. He didn't want to be an absentee father. He'd had one of those and he didn't want his kid to have that kind of childhood. He didn't want to miss anything, but look how things had turned out. He wasn't fast enough to save Teyla from the fall that could've cost both of their lives. In a moment of anger and stupidity he'd driven her away, and now he stayed where he was, separated from the woman he loved more than anything and the child they'd made together, because he was too afraid to find out she might not want him anymore.

John sank to his knees, his throat starting to close. The sting of tears clawed their way to the surface and he tried to choke them back. Ronon was right, he was a coward. The baby wasn't even born yet and he was already a failure as a father. His son or daughter didn't deserve this. His baby deserved a better man for a father—someone who would fight for his family, not back off because things got hard.

"Colonel Sheppard?"

It took him a few seconds to put his pent up emotions back in the box where he'd been trying to keep them hidden and get the frog out of his throat long enough to answer Dr. Beckett on the comms.

"Carson? When did you get back?" John asked, his voice still not cooperating.

"Just now, Colonel. We need to have a little talk about Ronon."

John gently set the toy jumper back in the box and rose to his feet. "I'll be right down."

If the padded dummy in the gym could talk, it would've been screaming for mercy and its pleas would have fallen on deaf ears. With Tyre's sword singing as it ripped through the air, Ronon ferociously attacked the phantom wraith in front of him. John watched unnoticed from the doorway while his best friend worked himself into a lather, striking back at his enemies in the only way he could. He used every move he'd ever learned, whether from his Satedan battle training or from his years of running, to deal the dummy what would've been death blow after death blow.

Sweat pouring off his brow and the rage inside only increasing, Ronon gave a primal howl and drove the sword straight through the dummy's heart. John thought that might call an end to the bestial assault, but Ronon pulled the weapon and swung one more time. Fluff sprayed the room as the stuffed head flew toward the colonel's position.

His chest heaving, Ronon finally made eye contact with John.

"I think it's dead."

"Go away, Sheppard," Ronon growled.
"Can't. See, I've been getting reports of a crazy man loose in Atlantis and I was hoping you could help me track him down."

"Funny," Ronon said, not appreciating the joke.

John bent over and picked up the unfortunate head and tossed it to Ronon. "Keller tells me you've been sending a lot of bodies her way. Beckett just finished patching up the last one. I think you've blown your allotted number of sparring accidents for the month already and it's only been a few days. You may want to pace yourself."

"What do you want?"

"I'm just trying to figure out if I've got any men left," he said.

Ronon gave it some thought before replying, "Lorne. And Capshaw hasn't shown his face in here yet."

"Two," John folded his arms. "Can't wait to tell Woolsey Atlantis is being guarded by two good men."

"Four," Ronon said. "You're probably worth two."

"In that case, I suppose that makes the count fifteen," John said, taking the compliment and handing it right back. "There's you and I figure you're worth at least another ten. Fifteen doesn't sound so bad. I can work with that."

They were able to laugh a little. But when the smiles died, silence fell over them, the loudest silence either of them had ever heard, laced with the scent of guilt, grief, and perceived betrayal. "Sheppard ..." Ronon started.

"We're good, Ronon," the colonel assured him. "You don't have anything to be sorry about."

Ronon screwed his jaw. He couldn't have disagreed more. "How's Keller?"

"You haven't, uh ..."

"No."

John understood the Satedan's reluctance to face the young doctor perfectly. "She's fine, pal. No real harm done."

Ronon didn't buy John's assurances at all. He remembered every wretched second of his torture and the events that followed. He recalled opening his eyes from the stun blast to realize he was about to be trapped in those restraints, and he knew exactly how hard he'd hit her. It was a blow that would have brought down a man three times her size. There was no way she came out of it untouched and unaffected.

It wasn't as though he'd never raised his hand to a female. Ronon had fought women before. Teyla, Ara, and countless others—all warriors, capable of giving as good as they got, who wouldn't hesitate to strike back. But the sweet-tempered doc was a different breed. He no longer counted her among the weak. Despite her soft-hearted and naive manner, Jennifer had a kind of strength that continually surprised him. But she wasn't made for combat. She used her strengths to help others whenever and however she could and she didn't deserve the vicious attack he'd given her.

"Here," John said to him. While Ronon was distracted, he had fished out the bantos rods from his
gym bag. John threw him a set and took a couple for himself. "Let's see if we can't whittle down those numbers a bit more. Atlantis is pretty well protected. We've got a ZPM, the shield, and the drones. Fifteen's probably on the excessive side."

Ronon actually managed a half-smile. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

John shrugged. He took up a position in the center of the room and casually swung the weapons, loosening up his arms. "I'm willing to give it a shot. Maybe you're right. This is the better way to go, hiding out in the gym and avoiding having to look anyone in the eye."

"You aren't in any position to talk to me about looking people in the eye."

"Fair enough," John said. "I win – you stop taking apart the U.S. military single-handed and have a talk with Keller. You win – I'll get in a jumper and go see Teyla. Deal?"

Ronon nodded and squared himself opposite the colonel, preparing for a fight.

As he raised his weapons and braced himself, John looked as serious as Ronon felt. "Just remember. This is what it feels like to kick somebody's ass and mean it. What happened to you wasn't your fault and you didn't mean to hurt the doc. She knows that."

"You done?"

"You do realize that when you're done with me you're gonna have to take me to the infirmary anyway, right?" John added, seeing the bloodlust rising in Ronon's eyes.

"Yep," the Satedan mumbled. "Are you ready or not?"

John took a deep breath. "Ready."

"Mr. Woolsey, we have an unscheduled contact," Chuck said from his console in the Gateroom.

"Raise the shield," he ordered.

"Done."

Richard was still relatively new to the command of the Atlantis expedition and was still getting used to this side of the job, taking on unexpected and potentially dangerous situations. He earned his position because the IOA thought he was eminently qualified as an administrator and political negotiator. The fact that they thought he would toe the party line was merely a bonus.

Never able to be sure what was coming through the Gate, he wondered what hazard they would face today. Was it the first sign of an invasion? Would they be forced into battle? Lives could be lost, but they had to protect the city at all costs. How many good men and women would he have to send to their deaths?

"It's the Athosian IDC, sir."

"Ah," he said. He yanked on the bottom of his uniform, straightening it up. We'll save the invasion for another time, then. "Lower the shield, Chad."
"It's Chuck."

"Yes, yes. Chuck. If you would do the honors?"

The shimmering presence of the shield disappeared and, moments later, Halling and Jinto stepped through the event horizon carrying bags that appeared to be both full and heavy.

Carefully placing the bags on the ground, Halling greeted Woolsey as he descended the stairs. "Good day to you, Mr. Woolsey."

"Halling, it's nice to see you again so soon."

"I apologize for coming unannounced. We were trading on Kyson and they made an interesting request of us. We thought it best to speak with you about it as soon as possible."

Richared was intrigued. "You followed the security procedures we discussed?"

Halling nodded. "We traveled through several Stargates before arriving here, Mr. Woolsey. We were not followed."

"Excellent," Richard said. "If you'd like, you can leave your belongings here and we can discuss this request in the conference room."
"Was that really necessary?" John complained. He was limping toward the transporter under his own power, but every time he put weight on his knee, he was uncomfortably reminded of the rough landing that had twisted it in the first place.

"It's not that bad. And you're the one who wanted to go to the infirmary," Ronon said.

"So you could talk to the doc," the colonel reminded him. "You could've restrained yourself a little."

"You lost and you're still getting what you wanted. Quit whining."

"I'm not whining."

"Keep moving, McKay."

"Now that was just mean," John groused.

He glanced over at Ronon. Three days of withdrawal from the Wraith enzyme had done a number on him and then he'd spent the next several literally fighting his way back. It shouldn't have been physically possible, but Ronon seemed more tense and keyed up than ever.

"You don't have to go, Ronon," John said, offering him an out.

"It's gotta happen sometime, right?"

"I guess, but it doesn't have to be now. If you need more time ..."

"Just walk, Sheppard."

When they got there, Dr. Aileron was the only patient in the room. He must've fallen asleep outside, because the scientist bore a strong resemblance to a boiled lobster. He sat uncomfortably straight on the side of the bed, while Dr. Cole handed him a cream and explained the hows and whens of the medicine. Her face fell, though, when she saw the two men enter looking like they'd just come through a warzone.

"No, Ronon, not again," she exclaimed.

Sheppard put his hand up. "I'm the last one for a while. He promises. Don't you, Ronon?"

"Whatever," he muttered as he craned his neck around searching the infirmary.

"Pinky swear?" Dr. Cole asked the warrior.

"Huh?" Ronon said, distracted.

"Nevermind."

John cleared his throat. "Say, uh ... where's Keller?"

"She and Dr. Beckett got a call to meet with Mr. Woolsey. I'm happy to take a look, Colonel."

Great. He'd taken a beating to get Ronon down here and she wasn't even there. Without another word, Ronon spun around and walked out.
"You know what? It's feeling much better already," John said, following his friend's lead as he inched his way backward toward the doorway.

"Colonel ..."

"Really, Doc, it'll loosen up," he said with a polite smile, "A couple of ibuprofen and I'll be good to go. Thanks, anyway."

John turned and ran as fast as his knee would allow. Dr. Cole shook her head in his wake, wondering why it was that men who could stare a Wraith in the face and make jokes had such an aversion to getting a simple wound check.

"Ronon, wait up!" John called after him, adopting an odd, stilted hop to get the speed he needed. The Satedan wasn't wasting any time. He moved through the hallways like a man being chased by something other than his slightly impaired best friend. "C'mon, Ronon. Give me a break. I look ridiculous."

"Don't you have a jumper to catch?" Ronon said without slackening his pace.

"Yeah," John said. "I just need to run it past Woolsey first and I'm going. Look ... Can you slow down just for a second?"

He came to a halt.

Concerned, Sheppard asked, "Are you gonna be okay?"

Ronon pursed his lips. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but all that came out was, "Give my love to Teyla."

John was already on his way to the tower when Mr. Woolsey called. He wanted him and the rest of his team to come to the conference room for a debriefing. He was sorely tempted to tell the man where to shove his meeting. His team was officially off rotation. Not only did they have months of compounded time off owed to them, they needed it. Capshaw was on the questionable list, after Keller had informed John of his current status. Ronon was right there with him, still in recovery from his ordeal. And McKay ... well, McKay was always questionable.

As for himself, he had somewhere he needed to be. But, as always, John's sense of duty got the better of him and he decided to at least hear Woolsey out before he shot him down.

A few minutes later, John, with the rest of his team not far behind, walked through the slatted metal doorways of the conference room and he promptly froze. Keller and Beckett were already there, sitting around the large table next to Halling and Jinto.

His heart sped up as he fought the overwhelming urge to jump to conclusions. It wasn't a quick trip from the Athosian camp to the Gate. They wouldn't have come for a visit on a whim. Then Halling smiled and Jinto rushed to greet him, and John shook off the tinge of fear creeping in. He recovered in time to return some of the teenager's enthusiasm.

"Halling." Once Jinto had let go, John shook his hand, not really knowing what to say.
"Colonel," the Athosian answered. "Teyla is well."

John nodded, appreciating the confirmation. "Thanks," he said in a voice so low he barely heard himself.

To his side, Keller instantly leaned on her elbows and casually rested her cheek in her hand, suddenly entirely engrossed in Woolsey's chatter. John wasn't really sure why the theatrics until he caught sight of Ronon. The warrior's dark eyes were picking her apart.

Easy, Chewie.

John – as subtly as he could manage – elbowed Ronon and told him to sit gave Jinto a quick fist bump and a pat on the back before taking a seat between Jennifer and Rodney. Not wanting to prolong the agony, John figured he'd get the ball rolling while the last of them sat down. "I'm guessing you didn't bring us here to talk about the new menu for the mess hall."

"A topic well worth discussing, by the way," McKay pointed out.

"Next time, Dr. McKay," Woolsey said. "I assure you, we will get a list put together for the IOA's approval before the Daedalus' return trip. The reason I called you all here is that a request for medical supplies has been made by one of the Athosian's trading partners. The, uh ..." he bent over to double-check his notes, "... Kysonians."

Halling informed the group of the bargain that had been struck—the medicine in exchange for crop seeds that the Athosians needed.

"What kind of medicine?" John asked.

Jennifer fielded the question. "Vaccinations, antibiotics, that sort of thing. Pretty standard stuff."

"It's precisely the same sort of thing I do in my clinics," Carson said.

"Which is why," Woolsey said, "I don't see any reason why we should refuse."

McKay leaned back with a huff. "So we're delivery boys now. That's why we got called down here?"

"What Rodney means to say," John interrupted and directed the next word to the doctor, "politely, is that my team is on stand down at the moment. But if it's for the Athosians, I'm sure we would all, again he glared at Rodney, "be willing to help out."

"That's not what I meant to say at all."

"Yes, it is."

"Fine." McKay turned back to Halling and pasted on a dry smile. "We're thrilled."

"Glad to hear it, Dr. McKay," Mr. Woolsey said. "Dr. Keller will accompany you to help the Kysonian healers get set up and up to speed, and Halling and Jinto will be along to expedite the paperwork."

"Paperwork?" Mason asked.

Halling spoke up. "The Kysonians are a very ... fastidious people when it comes to transactions. I am hopeful that my presence will help us to avoid any legal entanglements."
"Sounds scary," Mason mumbled.

Halling chuckled. "Not remotely. They are good people."

Woolsey and Halling went on to explain to them the rumors of plague that had sparked the Kysonian interest in the medicine in the first place and their directive to gather what intel they could while they dropped off the cargo. If Rodney was less than enthusiastic about the mission before, the mention of the word 'plague' nearly sent him into full scale rebellion.

Carson tried to reason with him. "The Kysonians don't have the plague, Rodney, they just want to be prepared."

"I don't see you going along on this trip!"

"Somebody's got to hold down the fort here and I've been gone a long while," the doctor replied. "There's work to be done and it's high time I get caught up, don't ya think?"

"Is that it?" Ronon growled from his end of the table. Everyone turned to look at him. It was the first time he'd opened his mouth or taken his eyes away from Dr. Keller the entire meeting. It was obvious he'd lost all patience for McKay's histrionics and everything else.

Woolsey continued with an extra pinch of caution in his voice, wary of Ronon's fraying temper. "When you've finished on Kyson, you'll be escorting Halling and Jinto to the Athosian camp."

Halling said, "In gratitude for your assistance in this matter, I would like to extend an invitation for all of you to spend the remainder of your rest days with our people." Though addressing the entire group, the tall Athosian's gaze landed squarely on John. "You would be most welcome."

John tilted his head slightly to the side, astounded. One of the most polite men he'd ever met was twisting his arm. Not that it needed twisting.

Woolsey agreed. "Having gone over all your recent reports, I realize that it's been a while for all of you and I think it would do you all some good to spend some leisure time outside the base."

"Any objections?" John asked his team. Not even McKay, the dissenter, said a word. His team and the two doctors just stared pointedly back at him.

Everybody's a critic.

"That settles it then," he said. "Let's get going, people."

Jennifer felt him behind her long before she heard his footsteps. The way he was staring her down in the meeting made her feel like she was being separated from the herd and the hunt was on.

She had left the conference room without any fanfare and took her time moving through the hallways. She wasn't going to make it hard on him. Avoiding him was pointless now that they were going offworld together and would probably do more harm than good. If he was ready to talk about it and she stayed away, he might get the impression she was angry with him. Or scared of him. Which, if she was being honest with herself, he did a little. Not because of what happened, but just by being him.
"Doc," he said. His hand covered her shoulder. His grasp was firm, but she could've pulled away. She had the feeling he would let her, if that's what she wanted.

She gradually turned around, revealing the full extent of the damage to him. When she saw the hurt in his eyes, she wished she knew what to say to make it better. She wasn't used to seeing him so vulnerable. "Ronon, it's not so bad. Really. It'll be gone before you know it."

The Satedan didn't say anything. He stepped toward her and cupped her jaw with his hand. He moved in so close she felt his breath on her cheek as his thumb ran carefully over her bruised cheek. He inspected his handiwork with tenderness in his big, calloused hands and disgust on his face. The close scrutiny left her heart pounding and caught up in a sense of being very ... naked.

"I'm sorry," his gravel laden voice said with a heart-wrenching break.

"Ronon, you don't need to..."

"Yes, I do," he said. "Yes, I do." His eyes ran over her again. "I'm gonna make this up to you, I swear it."

She reached up, taking his hand and gently pushing it down. "It's alright, Ronon. It's over. You don't owe me anything."

He moved his unwavering examination of her face to study the floor with unnatural intensity.

She hated feeling so helpless to make a difference, but nothing she could say would help. He was going to have to work through this on his own.

"Ronon, I need to, um..." she tried.

"Right. The medical supplies," he responded.

"Yeah. Medical supplies," she muttered, trying to figure how to breathe again. "I'll see you at the Jumper later?"

He nodded.

"Okay."

Jol ranted while she stirred the pots she had on the grate above the open fire. "And then that rotten man had the gall to say—your water is boiling, by the way, dear—that the goat's milk would turn sour because the female had eaten too much. Can you believe such nonsense?"

Teyla sat nearby shucking some corn the Athosians brought with them from Atlantis. She had a pile of them ready and she quickly slid them into the scalding water. She returned to cleansing the remaining ears of their leaves and the stringy bits that were so hard to completely remove. "Why do you and Feylon continue with these constant arguments? Surely you must grow weary of it from time to time," she inquired when Jol stopped for air.

Jol held out a spoon with a tiny bit of broth in it. "Taste that. Too salty?"

"It tastes perfectly fine," she responded.
"Because, Teyla, it keeps things interesting," Jol said, answering her question. "How many times can one discuss the weather or crops or hunting? I'll give that old man one thing: he is never dull."

Feylon meandered toward the campfire. "She is right. It is a pity, though, I cannot return the compliment."

"I am not feeding you anymore, Feylon," Jol said. "If you wish to eat, you must learn to cook for yourself or die trying."

"It is fortunate for me, then, I learned to cook long before you swung your first pot, my friend," Feylon said. "Teyla, I came to tell you that we've received a communication from Atlantis."

Teyla sat up straighter in her seat and listened.

"Halling and Jinto are with the Lanteans. It seems they intend to return to Kyson shortly to complete the trade and then they will return."

"I see," Teyla said. She couldn't deny the bitter disappointment in her heart. She would never have believed John capable of staying away for so long. She felt like she perhaps she didn't know him as well as she'd believed.

"Jol, you will have several extra mouths to feed for the next few days, for they are bringing along guests," Feylon said next, observing a scowl forming on his leader's face. "Dr. Keller will be here and she has the intention of checking on her smallest patient. She will also be accompanied by Colonel Sheppard and his team."

"Oh, my," Jol said with a sigh. "I may need to make arrangements. If my memory serves me, those boys have healthy appetites."

"Yes," Teyla said quietly, lost in her own thoughts.

Feylon had hoped the news of the arrival of Teyla's Chosen would erase the burden she'd been carrying since they left the city of the Ancestors. But it hadn't helped. If anything, Teyla seemed more distressed.

Halling wasn't kidding about the paperwork. Soon after their arrival, they were met by Padrel, a man that reminded John very much of Santa Claus. They were given the rundown on the specifics of Kysonian trading practices before they left and they weren't exaggerated. Since the original deal was negotiated with the Athosians, Halling was permitted to sign the stack of papers involving transfer of ownership. John's right hand started to ache in sympathy for Halling after the twentieth signature.

During the hours that followed, John and his team started discreetly asking questions about this mysterious plague, while Jennifer got the cargo squared away. No one seemed to know any more than what they'd already been told. Plague. Lots of people dying, but no one had any firsthand knowledge or any facts they could pursue.

The colonel kept checking his watch and grew more anxious with every tick of the hands on the clock. He didn't know what lay ahead for him, but he knew that it was long past time he found out.
The jumper sailed through the Stargate like it had a thousand times before and sped over the miles of heavy forest between the Gate and the camp.

"You walked all that way?" Rodney asked Halling. "How long did it take?"

"At an easy pace, it is two days journey to the camp. Jinto and I were able to move quickly, though, and covered it in one. It is one of the benefits of moving in small numbers."

"Well, we're gonna be there in a few minutes," John called back to the rear.

Outside the window, the forest soon cleared and John lowered the puddlejumper's altitude to skim smoothly along the ground until they reached a safe distance from the camp. With the jumper on the ground, he lowered the rear hatch and shut down the Ancient systems. Halling and Jinto were the first off. They were eager to get the seed to its proper place. It would need to be planted soon if they were going to get it done before the first frosts began.

The rest of them stood just outside and took in the sights. They couldn't knock the Athosians' work ethic, that was for sure. In three weeks, they'd turned an empty strip of ground into a home. There was still a lot to be done. Construction had already begun on several permanent structures to be used during the winter as shelter when the temperatures inside their tents would be insufficient. They'd need to hurry to finish them in time. And there were piping plans, complete with water heaters from the city, that yet to be put into action. But overall the Athosians were well on their way.

With the landing of the jumper, activity around the camp ceased as everyone's attention shifted to their guests. John spotted Teyla right away. She could've been in the middle of a crowd of hundreds and he would've known it was her. Her copper-colored hair blew loose in the breeze and she raised her hand to swipe a loose strand out of her eyes. She was carrying a small box to an older man and smiled as she handed it off to him.

It was probably the murmurs of the people around her that drew her attention, but she turned to see the jumper and she stood still.

John squinted in the bright sunlight. He put his hand up to his brow for shade and grimaced. He nudged Rodney, who stood next to him. "Is it my imagination or does she look ..."

"Bigger?" the scientist guessed when John didn't finish.

Sheppard looked at the baby bump he hadn't seen in so long. McKay was right. She was bigger. He could tell even from this distance, which started to close as she began to walk toward them. When she left, her stomach had been about the size of a cantaloupe. Now it looked more like a soccer ball.

"Yeah," John said, "but I was actually gonna go with 'upset'."

"Yep," Ronon answered.

John sighed. He'd known this wasn't going to be easy, but knowing and seeing were two different things. He saw how tense she was and it didn't bode well for him. "Any suggestions?"

Rodney grimaced. "Turn around and go home."

Ronon's brow curled knowingly. "Duck and cover."
Mason gave him sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "Wear a cup."

"Thanks, guys. That's very helpful," John said sarcastically.

From the far side of the pack, Jennifer, the lone feminine voice said, "You could try having an open and honest conversation with her."

John's friends looked at her like that was the most ridiculous suggestion of them all.

"Oh! I know!" Rodney snapped into life. "Groveling! It works!"

John, Ronon, and Mason all looked back to Jennifer. She shrugged. "Okay, McKay's got a point there."

"Right," John said. He took a breath and headed down the ramp to meet Teyla.

"Uh, guys?" Mason said from behind him.

"What is it?"

John turned to his right where Capshaw was pointing. "You may want to brace yourselves. We're about to come under attack."

Approaching at rapid speeds was a very enthusiastic and rowdy group of kids.
New Beginnings

John wouldn't have exactly called it a clash of the titans, but before he knew it Ronon had two kids wrapped around his legs hanging on for dear life. Amid a sea of laughter, the other children took advantage of his seeming inability to properly move and teamed up to try and bring the big man down. With kids hanging from every limb and around his torso, Ronon shouted with a barely hidden grin to his amused teammates. "A little help here!"

"Sorry, buddy," John called, intercepting some enthusiastic hugs of his own. "You're on your own."

Trying to avoid the onslaught, Rodney had taken cover behind Jennifer, while Jennifer laughed at Ronon's predicament. She hadn't seen him smile like that in a long time.

The kids bore down on him and the Satedan started to wobble. To the kids, it was a goal on par with conquering Everest. When Ronon finally caved under the pressure and tumbled awkwardly to the ground, careful to avoid pinning little limbs along the way, a loud cheer erupted from the mob and six kids dog-piled on top.

"Masy! Masy!"

Sgt. Capshaw heard the little girl's tiny voice through the din and reached out to pick her up. He pulled the five-year-old up with a swing and held her in front of him with a thoughtful frown. "Say … I'm looking for someone. Maybe you know her?"

"Who?" she asked with wide-eyed curiosity.

"Well, she looks a lot like you. Pretty, dark hair, green eyes. She's about your age, but a little shorter than you. Her name's Setisse. Have you seen her?"

"Masy …" the girl said, "It's me. Can't you tell?"

Mason gave Setisse a big grin. "I thought that was you, but I wasn't sure. You've gotten so big."

"I grew," she said with a laugh.

"Good to know. I'll remember that next time, I promise."

From his position behind the doctor, Rodney said, "Masy?"

"Meredith." Capshaw tossed back at him. He wasn't about to be mocked over a nickname when the scientist had a less-than-masculine moniker of his own.

John managed to extricate himself by telling the kids to go tackle Ronon before he could get back up. Teyla had stopped to watch the show just like every other adult in the vicinity. With her attention on other things, he took the few seconds he had to admire her while he could. He doubted it would be long before the moment passed and the smile she wore faded again.

She was glowing. Cliché though it was, it was the truth. Maybe she was really happy here, with her people again without Atlantis to split her focus. Maybe it was her impending motherhood, although John couldn't recall any of the pregnant women he'd ever seen looking like Teyla did. He was sorely tempted to rip her dress off and take hours exploring her feminine curves that were in full bloom. It was possible he wasn't seeing things clearly where she was concerned. He hadn't seen her in a long time and, not only did he love her, it was his baby she was carrying. But Teyla was exceptional and
he thought anybody with eyes would see her exactly as he did.

As he feared, the moment passed too quickly. She locked her gaze on him again and her smile disappeared.

Teyla closed the small distance that remained between her and the jumper, and shooed the children away, promising them there would be time to play later. While Ronon picked himself up and dusted off, Teyla welcomed her friends. John couldn't pretend that it didn't sting when she didn't speak to him.

"It is good to see you all again. I have missed you," she said.

Jennifer caught her up in a warm embrace and smiled. "You're looking so good."

When the doctor released her grip, Teyla asked them how long they could stay.

"A few days. Maybe a little longer," John said. He had to say something, if only to break the ice between them. "We've got some downtime, so ..."

"I see." Her response was polite but cold. She addressed the rest of the group. "We have plenty of room."

"We brought our own tents," Ronon said.

"We didn't want to put anybody out," John explained.

She smiled, thin and strained. "Feel free to set up anywhere you like."

John wasn't going to be able to stick to small talk much longer with the air ripe with tension as it was. It didn't look like Teyla wanted to either, so he took charge. "Capshaw, why don't you and Ronon get started with the tents? Just right over there'll do." He pointed to the empty space between the large building still under construction and the jumper. "It's not far from the fire and we'll be able to keep an eye on the jumper, so none of these kids can sneak past us and take her for a joyride."

McKay scoffed, but John interrupted before he could point out the obvious reasons why that couldn't happen. "McKay, give the doc a hand with her equipment. Just set it up wherever she wants it, got it?"

Keller, knowing they were spending a few days with the Athosians, apparently hadn't wanted to be caught unprepared for anything. It didn't stop with allergy and cold medicine either. She had her emergency kit, an ultrasound machine and other pregnancy-related paraphernalia, and a mini pharmaceutical lab to keep Mason supplied and run blood tests. Basically, she was ready for the apocalypse. For Rodney, her over-packaging meant a lot of heavy lifting.

"What are you going to be doing?" McKay asked and Keller pinched his arm. "Ow!"

"Let's go, Rodney," the doctor said.

With the team making themselves scarce, John and Teyla were soon alone.

John was like a statue at first, unable to say anything of things that had been dwelling in his thoughts for nearly a month. Eventually, he just asked her if she wanted to take a walk. It was probably better they took this somewhere more private anyway, if he was reading her correctly.

They slowly moved away from the camp, in the general direction of the gate. It was windy. The
thick layer of leaves on the ground rattled with each step they took, creating enough noise to fill in the silence between them. He considered reaching out to take her hand, but was afraid she'd snatch it away so he left it alone. They walked for several minutes before he got up the courage to ask the simple question—"How are you?"

"I am fine, John." It was terse and unwelcoming.

"Teyla ..." he started. This wasn't going to be easy.

"John, don't." She abruptly stopped in her tracks. He was already a few paces away before he realized she wasn't with him anymore. "Can I assume since you have brought Dr. Keller that you won't be ... how did you put it? Dragging me back to Atlantis whether I am willing or not?"

Okay. She wasn't going to pull any punches. "Teyla, the things I said ... I didn't mean ..."

"What, John? You didn't mean what?" she said, raising her voice. "Tell me. Say it again. Tell me exactly what it was you didn't mean."

She waited for him to repeat what he had said to her in anger. When he refused, she filled in the blanks as harshly as she could without completely losing her composure. "That I was being irresponsible? Reckless. By helping my people, I was risking the life of our child? Which is it?"

Still smarting from the hurtful reminder of his mistakes, she continued. "Don't you dare think for one second, John Sheppard, that you care more about this child's safety than I do. I would never put our baby in harm's way!"

"Teyla, I know that. I'm sorry! I can't tell you how sorry I am," he said. "I didn't mean it and I wish to God I could take it all back, but I can't!"

She marched up to, her controlled mask slipping amid the roiling emotions on her face. "Where were you, John? Where have you been? Do you have any idea how long I have been waiting for you to show up?"

He knew the exact answer, down to the last second.

"I needed you."

"Teyla, I ..." John felt his throat catch and he couldn't find the words he needed. He hated himself for not following her that first day. He wanted to fix this, but if he couldn't forgive himself, how could he expect her to?

Her eyes began to glisten. "If it is so hard for you to be here, John, you should go."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Teyla ..."

"You did not come here for me or your child. You are only here because Halling brought you here. You would still be in Atlantis if not for ..."

He shook his head furiously at the accusation. "No. No, that's not true. I was coming, I swear to you."

"After all this time without a word?"

"Teyla, this wasn't easy for me," he said. "How was I supposed to face you after what happened?"

She glared at him with tears in her eyes. "You are supposed to be the man I love. Someone who I
can walk beside through the hard times, not someone who abandons me and his child when things are not easy!"

She started walking toward the camp without him. He caught up with her quickly and grabbed her by the arm. "Teyla, please," he quietly begged. "Don't walk away. You have no idea ..."

He had to convince her. If he lost her, he wouldn't come through it and be the same man ever again. "I don't know who I am anymore without you. I'm not really sure when it happened, but nothing about my life makes any sense with you gone. Please, Teyla ... don't go."

With tears streaming down her cheek, he could see the conflict in her eyes. She still loved him too, he was sure of it. But the hurt and the disappointment she'd suffered at his hands were so great John didn't know if their love for each other would be enough.

"Let me go," she said softly.

"No."

"John, please."

He didn't know what else to do. He pulled her in close so his body rested against hers and stifled the urge to moan. It had been so long since he felt her weight next to his. He hoped that she was as affected by it as he was, that it would be a more tangible reminder of the connection they shared. He tilted his head down, trembling slightly, and gently brushed his lips along hers. She was tentative, but she accepted the caress and moved with him as her tears wet his cheeks. Her mouth was heaven and his head swam as he tasted her luscious lips and delved inside to savor more.

Losing control to his passion for her, he pressed into her, his kiss starting to grow more urgent and needy. Teyla suddenly stiffened and pulled away.

"I cannot do this, John," she said, breathlessly. "Please ..."

"Teyla ..."

She spun away and resumed her journey to the campsite.

"Teyla, wait!" he called after her.

She didn't turn around. "I have waited long enough for you, John."

When Teyla returned alone and wiping tears from her eyes, the die-hard romantic in Jennifer took a hit. They hadn't been gone for that long, but apparently things couldn't have gone worse. She wanted to talk to Teyla, but for now her friend probably wanted space and she was willing to let it be. The doctor continued to set up her pint-sized infirmary, while the boys were finished up the first tent. Colonel Sheppard turned up a while later, went inside the jumper, and she could hear things getting tossed around.

Jennifer grabbed Ronon's arm as he passed by and indicated in his direction. Frowning, she said, "Maybe you should go check on him."

Ronon didn't seem to be a big fan of the idea, but when Jennifer added a small 'please,' he folded like
an over-sized card table. He lumbered to the powered-down spacecraft and found John inside pulling out extra blankets from the lower compartments, where their sleeping bags still sat.

"What are those for?" Ronon asked.

John moved with purpose, keeping his hands busy. "You're gonna need these. It's supposed to be cold the next few nights. Why don't you take a stack of those over to the tents? I think there are some pillows in there, too."

Ronon peered at the stack of blankets. "What about you? What are you gonna do?"

John threw a nod over his shoulder. "I've got a couple."

Two blankets sat in the pilot's chair in a rumpled mess. "You're sleeping in the jumper."

"Yep."

"It didn't go well, I guess?"

John didn't answer.

"What are you gonna do?" the Satedan asked, not talking anymore about the sleeping arrangements.

"I'm not leaving, Chewie," John replied. "I don't care how long it takes. Even if you have to go back to Atlantis without me, I'm not leaving without Teyla."

There wasn't a lot of daylight left, but as soon as the team finished setting up their digs for the next few days, they threw their hats into helping out. Mason and Ronon wound up playing the part of mules, strapped into old school plows to finish the new field while a group of Athosians got the seed out behind them. Col. Sheppard joined the construction effort on the larger community buildings. Swinging a hammer was unexpectedly therapeutic. Rodney met up with Feylon and, over the piping plans to the river, the two predictably began to debate every subject under the sun. Jol grinned from the fire at the two, while Jennifer did what she could to help get the evening meal prepared.

The sun dipped low on the horizon and everyone packed up for the day. Halling was bringing the last load of wooden beams to the new building when one of the leather lines he had surrounding them snapped. Ronon wasn't far and ran to give him a hand. Together they pulled the individual boards from the bundle and manually walked them to where they belonged. When they finished, Halling retrieved the broken strap from where it lay in the dirt.

"A clean break," the Athosian declared after careful study. He held it out for Ronon's inspection. The warrior ran it through his hands, bending it and snapping it back straight.

"Too bad. That's good quality," Ronon said. The leather was thick enough to lend it strength while still able to maintain malleability. It was hard to find both. It must've been some freak tear in the structure that had caused the fatal break.

"Indeed. I will not be able to replace it easily."

"Do you mind if I hang onto it?" Ronon asked.
"It is yours," Halling replied. "May I ask what you have in mind for it?"

"Not sure yet. Something," the Satedan said, thoughtfully.

Ronon took the strap to his tent and gave it a thorough cleaning while he considered his options. It seemed he'd made a decision when Halling saw him again on his way to clean up for dinner. Ronon had pinned one end of the leather to a tree stump and was using one of his razor sharp knives to cut it into long, thin, even strips.

Dinner with the Athosians was a lively one. It wasn't intentional, but one table had turned into a bit of a girls' club, while the men kept to their own corners. The children ate their dinners quickly and spent the rest of the mealtime burning off what remained of their nearly boundless energy.

Jennifer listened with rapt interest as a couple of the women asked not-so-subtly about the status of a few of the Lantean men. Obviously, Colonel Sheppard wasn't the only man in the city to catch the eye of an Athosian. She hadn't given it much thought before, but it made sense. There were a lot of great guys in Atlantis and they had just spent several months living together and getting to know each other and unfortunately Michael had seen to it that there weren't many Athosian men or women left to choose from.

Teyla sat and listened to the chit chat with mild interest, but her mind was clearly elsewhere. Jennifer noticed that she kept stealing glances over at a certain Colonel, who seemed to be a little out of sorts himself. He would respond when asked a direct question, but for the most part John kept his mouth as full as possible, thereby rendered mute. Jennifer felt it her duty as a friend to do some discreet meddling.

She scooted closer to Teyla. "We haven't really had a chance to talk. How have you been feeling? Appetite's still good, I see," she said, facetiously peering at Teyla's mostly untouched plate of food.

Teyla gave a small smile, knowing the doctor would not be accepting the usual 'I'm fine' routine. "Ordinarily, yes. I have been doing quite well."

"Something bothering you?" she asked innocently, to which Teyla shot her a withering look.

"I know you mean well, Jennifer, but … I am not ready to discuss it."

Jennifer understood and took the statement for what it meant. Leave it alone. She just had one more thing to say. "I know you may not want to hear it – and he may or may not want to admit it – but he misses you. And I think you miss him too."

Teyla cast another sidelong look at John, who was busy not listening to something Feylon said to him.

"Okay. I'm done. I promise," Jennifer said, throwing her arm around her friend's shoulders and giving her a squeeze.

Setisse ran in from outside, past the girls and to her chosen teddy bear, the big marine. She took his hand and pulled him away from his meal. "Masy, you have to come see! Uly caught a glitterfly!" she squealed as she tugged him to his feet. "Hurry!"

Jennifer glanced over to Teyla. "What's a glitterfly?"

"It is an insect similar to your ... firefly?" Jennifer gave a nod. "Dr. Cochran in xenobiology taught some of the children about them, and when we found a similar insect on this world, they wanted a similar name."
Jennifer nodded again and grinned, thinking about Mason's patient expression as he was led outside. "They're quite the pair, aren't they?"

That brought a much needed smile to Teyla's face. "Yes, indeed. She is quite smitten with him."

"Looks like the feeling's pretty mutual," the doctor mused.

"He was with us when my people were liberated," Teyla said. "It was a difficult time for everyone. Setisse's mother was among those lost and I believe Sgt. Capshaw found that to be something they had in common. He has been very helpful in her adjustment."

The corner of Jennifer's mouth ticked upward in thought. Mason never really talked about his past or home life. He liked to keep things simple. As simple as he could, anyway, underneath all the baggage.

She needed to check him again soon. He was coming due for another dose of meds.

"Teyla, I hate to cut this short, but duty calls," she said.

"Of course."

"We're still on for your ultrasound in the morning, right?"

"Perhaps we could move it to the afternoon? I promised Feylon I would mediate an issue he's been having with Rodney."

"Oh my," Jennifer said. "That should be fun."

Teyla smiled. "Believe it or not, I find I have been missing the sound of Rodney's voice."

"No!" Jennifer said, shocked. "You're kidding!"

"I am afraid not," Teyla admitted. She crooked her eyebrow and added, "I am starting to wonder if it is part of the many unusual cravings I have been having lately."

Jennifer laughed. "Okay, ultrasound in the afternoon. But don't you go getting stressed out because of McKay."

"I won't."

Dr. Keller steered herself through the crowd and outside to get a look at that glitterfly before she had to steal Mason away from his biggest fan.

"Teyla!" Feylon called to her from the corner of the room, surrounded by Ronon, John, and several others. "Come and join us. We have been discussing a feast."

Having already given up on her dinner, she rose and strolled over to see what he had in mind. She had trouble not getting drawn into John's hazel eyes, which were fixed on her. The shadow of a beard already formed along his jawline and his unkempt hair spilled slightly forward over his brow. She almost wished for a sign of that sly grin that always appeared when she least expected it. "What sort of feast?"
"No grand affair. Simply something to mark the end of the season and, of course, to celebrate the arrival of our friends," Feylon stated. "It would do us all good."

"Some of us more than others," she commented.

"Naturally, Teyla. It is unfortunate that you will not be able to partake of some Ruus wine with the rest of us."

"Indeed," Teyla said with a shrewd gaze. "Have you spoken to Jol about this? I imagine that you will all want to eat as well as drink."

Standing near the back of the huddle, Halling spoke out. "We have. She is willing."

"You should have seen it, Teyla," Feylon said in an animated fashion. "It bore shades of the miraculous. She agreed with no argument."

She smiled.

"Ronon, here, has even volunteered to catch us our dinner," Feylon said.

Teyla turned to her large friend. "I haven't been able to go hunting for anything besides Wraith in a while," he said, his rocky voice revealing how tired he was becoming.

"I do not want you to feel obligated, Ronon."

"It'll be fun," he said quietly.

Reassured he wasn't being taken advantage of, Teyla sighed. "Then, it seems you have little need of me. I'll leave the rest to you and simply enjoy the party."

Feylon chuckled. "And enjoy it you will!"

During the subsequent excited anticipation of the following evening, Teyla slipped away. She intended to return to her tent and meditate for a while before heading to bed. She wanted the time to quiet her emotions and center herself again. She felt split in two. On one side, her anger and frustration at John ate at her, but on the other ... she loved him. She hoped to gain a clearer perspective and not allow her heart to run away with her, one direction or another.

Though it was dark, she padded along through the crunching leaves without any hesitation. She crossed her arms over her chest, shielding herself from the chilly wind blowing through. It wouldn't be much longer before the first snow fell.

After only a few moments, she heard someone rapidly approaching from behind. She turned and saw John as he jogged toward her. He had to be getting cold. His t-shirt wasn't much for wind coverage. "John, you should get inside," she warned him.

He came to a stop at her side. "I was hoping I could at least walk you home first. If you don't mind."

"You are not dressed for this weather. You could catch cold."

He seemed surprised that she was genuinely concerned. "Would that bother you?"

"Of course, it would," she said, astonished he could even ask that.

He tucked his hands into his pockets and steeled himself against the breeze. "Then we'd better walk fast, huh?"
They went in silence. With the children now in bed, the wind and the vague noises of people talking inside were the only sounds to be heard. She led him to her tent and invited him inside to warm up before he returned.

Her tent wasn't a large one. It didn't need to be. She didn't have much with her and she'd learned as a child how to make do with what she had. Other than the blankets on her bed, all she possessed were a few books given to her by Elizabeth a long time ago and a few photos of her friends. And one of John tucked away under her pallet.

He scanned the room. "This is nice, Teyla. Cozy. Stays pretty warm in here." A shiver ran down his spine.

She didn't bother asking, because she knew him too well. She pulled one of the blankets off her bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. If asked, he would only refuse. "It keeps me comfortable. You have warmer clothing, I hope?"

"Yeah. I meant to pull on a sweater earlier, but we got so busy I didn't really need it anymore," John said, bunching his fists inside the material.

Nodding, Teyla sat down on her cot and removed her shoes. She took a moment and closed her eyes, letting her head fall back, appreciating the sensation of freedom for her aching feet.

"You're so beautiful, Teyla," John said softly. "I don't think I said that earlier, but I want you to know … I did notice."

"John ..." she started.

"You're not ready. I know." She didn't correct him and he knew he was on the right track. "I'm not going to push you. I know I screwed up, big time. Take whatever time you need to. I'm not going anywhere until you decide what you want me to do."

Teyla shook her head, disbelieving. "What about Atlantis?"

"I'm not leaving."

"John, you cannot ..."

"I mean it," he insisted. "You are the most important thing in my life. I damn near went crazy there without you and I can't go back without knowing you'll be there too."

He stood back up and lightly set down the blanket on the foot of the bed. "I'll see you in the morning, okay?" His eyes skated around the room uncertainly. "I … I love you, Teyla."

She looked at him, not without longing. But she was about to say goodnight when she got a hard kick in the side. Her hand instinctively flew to her stomach and she gasped.

"What was that?" he asked.

He was here, she realized. She could finally see the moment come to pass that she wished had happened weeks ago. "That was your child saying goodnight, John," she said softly.

She didn't know how to describe the expression on his face as his brows shot upward. "He ... She's ... The baby's kicking?"

She nodded.
He hesitated where he was. She could see he wanted to reach out and touch her, but he hesitated to do so, likely unsure he would be welcome.

With a heavy exhale, Teyla stood and took his hand, carefully placing it in the spot where their child danced inside her.

"Oh, Teyla," he whispered, feeling the nudges rise and fall under his fingers. "That's amazing."

Besides feeling his obvious joy in that moment, she took pleasure in feeling his touch on her once again.

She smiled, left breathless. "Yes, it is."
Early in the Morning

Before the sun made its appearance the next morning, Ronon was already armed with his stunner and a knife, cutting through the fog bank that still hung thick in the air.

The chill from the night previous hadn't gone. Ronon could see his breath in the pre-dawn light. He headed into his element, following a path parallel to the river. He didn't know this planet yet or the best places to find game, but the need for water was, for the most part, universal. He knew too well the precise weaknesses to exploit. He'd spent too many years as the prey, always on the run and never knowing when a hunter would get the better of him. They'd turned him into little better than a beast.

The woods were silent. Not even the birds had crept from their nests yet. He drifted along quietly until he found the ideal place. He checked the wind direction and then moved through the thick underbrush to crouch down. From this vantage point, nothing would get by him. He got low and still and waited.

After crouching motionless for an amount of time lost on him, Ronon's primed ears heard the faintest sounds of movement beyond the underbrush. With carefully measured slowness, he twisted his neck toward the noise and laid eyes on his quarry.

The animal had no idea he was there before he struck.

He draped the deer-like animal over his shoulders. It wasn't huge, but it was big enough to make everyone a good meal with some to spare.

They had nearly succeeded in breaking him this time. Capture. Torture. He'd stared into the eyes of the things he hated most and called them his friends. The Wraith had made him a faithful follower to the cause of humanity's destruction. Just another animal.

Under the lightening sky, Ronon hiked back to the camp listening to the hushed sounds of the forest, even quieter now after a kill. He wasn't the prey any longer, it seemed to remind him. He had Atlantis, he had purpose, and he could hunt the Wraith to the ends of the universe. He was the predator. Not a beast any longer but a man.

He just needed to remember that.

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Teyla looked down to find her arms and legs strapped to a table. The murmurs of disembodied voices reverberated in the shadows, too low and indistinct to place, as she searched her surroundings desperate for some clue as to where she was or how she had gotten there. Wherever it was, it was dark but somehow familiar and a hum behind it all somehow flowed through her.

Teyla's heart pounded in fear, and inside her womb, her child kicked frantically as though sensing her rising panic. She didn't know what was happening, but she had to break free. Teyla struggled against the bindings holding her captive.

"... natural incompatibility ..." A voice asserted itself from the rest. It belonged to a man, a young man by the sound of it.
Around her, the room began to come into focus. She was in a lab. It could have been any of Wraith design, but she had been in this one before. She knew she had. She continued pulling against her restraints, careful to avoid making any sounds that may alert whoever held her here.

"The changes have failed assimilate themselves."

"Then, they are of no further use to me."

Teyla startled at the answering utterance. She knew that voice. The last time she heard his discordant tones had been in this very lab.

But that wasn't possible. It was destroyed!

She renewed her desperate attempt to escape. The bindings started to give way.

"Kill them," he ordered. "Start again."

His footsteps echoed toward her. He was coming for her. She twisted and yanked wildly, and was rewarded for it when one arm snapped free. Her shaking hands went to work on her other arm. He would be there at any moment. Hands free, she attacked her leg bindings and was soon loose.

She jumped from the table as he threw open the doorway.

"Teyla!" he yelled.

Her eyes flew open as Teyla shot up in the bed, her lungs heaving. She clutched her blankets high up over her chest as it slowly dawned on her that she was safe in her tent. Deeply rattled, she tried to make sense of what she'd seen with little success.

She didn't know what to make of it. This wasn't just any other nightmare. It had been far too real. Her pregnancy had made her dreams of late had been very vivid, but they were usually of a far more pleasant nature. Many times, she had been loathe to wake from them. But even her hormone-fueled flights of fantasy were nothing compared to what she'd just undergone.

The baby was still highly active, pummeling Teyla's insides with impressive force for limbs yet so small. She exhaled deeply and responded. This much at least had been real. She massaged her swollen belly, attempting to soothe her child as best she could.

Her only wish at that moment was that John was there to do the same for her.

Mason cursed that he'd left his iPod in Atlantis. There was nothing more distracting than trying to workout to the tune of Rodney's snoring the next tent over. Ronon was already God knows where doing his thing. Sheppard had shot past him twenty minutes ago, getting his own pre-breakfast exercise by going for a run. People all around him were surfacing for the day, except the one person he wished would. But he supposed he could handle one annoyance this morning. He wasn't hurting.

That fact alone made doing push-ups outside in a hoodie and sweats almost seemed like fun. With his drug tolerance levels so high, it was a tricky business getting his dosages just right. Too little and it was like he hadn't taken anything. Too much and it could kill him. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he figured Jennifer had hit the bullseye last night because he felt really good.
"Morning, short stuff," he said to the quiet shadow who was politely waiting off to the side.

"Good morning, Masy."

"What's up?" he asked, trying to keep his count going as he spoke.

"Are you going to eat breakfast with me, today?"

"I don't know." He paused to take another breath. "Is that an invitation?"

"Yes," she replied with a shy grin.

"Let me just finish up here, okay? Just ..." he pushed himself off the ground again, "... a few more minutes."

Setisse chewed on her thumbnail, trying to contain her childish impatience. "Can I have a ride?"

He hung in the air for a moment. "You want to ride on my back?"

When she nodded in the affirmative, he thought about it for a second. Ordinarily, it'd be out of the question. His muscles would've been wailing under the pressure of his own body weight, let alone adding more to it.

"Sure. Why not?" he said. Today was different and he didn't get too many of those.

She climbed on and he kept count in his head, now with the little girl's giggles drowning out McKay's droning snores. It was a definite improvement.

As he nearly finished, Jennifer meandered toward them with a hot cup of tea in hand.

Mason did a few more push-ups and called it quits. "Okay, kiddo. That's it." He settled on his knees and gently sat up, and while he caught his breath, Setisse released her grip on his sweatshirt and slid off.

"That looked like fun," Jennifer said with a teasing grin.

He focused his gaze upward at the doctor standing closely over him, responding with an easy smirk. "Why? You want a ride now?"

Jennifer's eyes traveled along his body and raised her eyebrows at the unintended innuendo.

"Um ... that's not ... Can you just help me up and pretend I didn't say that?"

"I think I can manage that," she said, holding her hand out and smiling at his expense.

Once he was up and about, he took Setisse's hand and turned back to Jennifer. "We're gonna grab some food. Would you care to join us?"

"I would, but I'm supposed to meet Volma," she said with an apologetic smile to Setisse. "She wants to show me a few of the plants they've found here."


"Well, they may have some medicinal uses."

He shook his head, knowing there wasn't any point in arguing. "Alright. Maybe next time."
Around them, the Athosians were all staring past them. Curious as to what everyone was staring at, they spun around. Ronon was walking through the clearing with his kill slung over his shoulders, looking very Man vs. Wild.

"Looks like dinner's still on," Mason observed.

"Yeah," she said with a faraway tone. "I suppose so."

The afternoon sun had finally peeked out from behind the clouds and John's sweater was starting to feel too warm. But he had learned his lesson last night. It wasn't coming off.

"How's it coming over there, McKay?" he asked. John and several others were perched high on the support beams for the new roof, which was still largely just an open space. They were trying to get the base laid as quickly as possible, so they could get the weather-proofing done and get it all covered. Rodney nervously worked nearby and his fumbling wasn't helping to expedite matters.

"McKay, we'd like to get this roof finished before winter comes."

"Stop rushing me!" the scientist protested. "Do you want this done right or not?"

"It's a hammer and nails, Rodney. Just ready, aim, and fire. We're not asking you to hack the Pentagon."

"Please," McKay muttered. "I could hack the Pentagon by the time I was twelve."

"Then, what's the problem?" John asked.

"Do you see how high up we are? I really don't need you distracting me right now. I am working as fast as I can, alright?"

John smirked and looked down at the empty space beneath them. It was probably a good fifteen feet to ground, but after hanging by his arms from the dizzying heights of the control tower in Atlantis, the prospect of a fifteen foot fall didn't bother him so much.

"Just pick up the pace, okay?" John said. Letting his hammer swing free in his hand, he called down to the ground where a few more were completing work on the interior walls. "Jinto, would you mind handing me another board?"

Jinto, at seventeen, was already nearly as tall as his father and quite athletic. From the ground, he was able to stretch far enough for John to brace himself and lean over the edge to pull it up. The kid was gonna give Ronon a run for his money someday.

"Thanks," John said.

John cautiously walked the thin beams to place the board where it needed to go. Sliding it down, he reached into his pocket for a nail and crouched. "Where is Ronon, by the way?" he asked Rodney. "I haven't seen him in a while."

McKay murmured back just under an audible level.
"You're mumbling, Rodney."

"I said, 'That's because you've been too busy mooning over Teyla.'" John huffed, suppressing a wry chuckle as Rodney waved, offhand. "He's over working on ... whatever it is he's working on."

John let his hammer fly and hit the nail directly on its head, slamming it into place. The colonel turned in the direction Dr. McKay had pointed. From his high vantage point, he could see everything going on in the small camp and, sure enough, Ronon was hard at work with the salvaged leather. It was hard to tell from a distance, but he appeared to be weaving each individual strip in and out of the others. John wasn't aware braiding was in Ronon's skill set.

"What do you suppose he's making?"

"Now, how should I know?" Rodney answered, exasperated. Every time John opened his mouth, his trained focus on his task was blown to smithereens. "It could be anything. It's probably some sort of Satedan ceremonial garrote."

John shook his head. "Not really his style. Ronon tends to take a more direct approach."

"Strangulation seems pretty direct to me," McKay said. "Nothing really quite says 'die' like squeezing the life from someone."

"And how would you know?" In all the years he'd been traveling through the gate with Rodney and all the troubled they'd gotten into, the scientist still had an impressively low kill count. Not everyone was so lucky.

Probably sensing he may have stepped into something, Rodney's reply seemed uneasy. "It ... just seems like it would be."

The two fell into silence and concentrated on their work.

Even as the day wore on, Teyla found herself unable to shake the disturbing occurrence earlier in the morning. She hadn't spoken to John yet that day, but she found herself seeking his face out among the crowd. Making contact with him, even in such a small way, eased her and she began to feel her resentment toward him loosening its grip on her.

He was working very hard to give her people a hand and his efforts touched her. In his current position on the roof, she didn't need to struggle to find him. His black sweater was by no means tight on him, but it showed off the definition of the muscles underneath and Teyla felt the temperature suddenly start to rise.

"Teyla!" Crossing the camp, Jennifer came up behind her. "So are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"Your ultrasound." Jennifer's gaze followed hers and a small smile tugged at her lips as she spied John across the way. "Are you ready to take a look?"

"Yes," Teyla replied, snapping her gaze away from John and gathering herself again. "I believe so."

"Should we ... swing by and get Colonel Sheppard?"
Teyla turned to glance back at the roof, unsure. John had a right as the baby's father to be there. Not only that, he would be very upset if he missed it. From the tender, loving way he had reacted last night to the little movements inside her, she could no longer doubt his dedication to his child. His keeping away had been in response to her and her alone.

Teyla nodded in response to Jennifer's question and the pair walked to the small construction zone.

John was so focused on what he was doing, he didn't notice they had come. When Teyla called his name, he stiffened in surprise and very nearly lost his balance. His body lurched precariously off to one side. Only his quick reflexes and his strong arms salvaged what could have been a nasty fall.

He managed to right himself. Slightly embarrassed but trying look as cool as possible, he grinned sheepishly. "What's up, ladies?"

Unlike the little two-man tents his team slept in, Dr. Keller had set up most of her equipment inside a ten-man tent in order to act as a sort of clinic while they were here, keeping the medical equipment protected from the weather and giving Jennifer enough room to work. John walked in and looked around. In addition to the equipment from the city, she'd borrowed a spare cot from the Athosians and a couple of chairs. It looked like the infirmary in Atlantis gone native. "I like what you've done with the place, Doc."

The doctor blushed. "It's not too much? I mean, we're not here for long, but I thought it could do some good."

"It is lovely, Jennifer," Teyla said, looking around. She hadn't laid eyes on the city in nearly a month and she seemed very grateful for her efforts. While the Athosians were her people, this new planet wasn't her home. Atlantis was.

At least, John hoped.

Keller accepted the compliment with a smile. "Well, Teyla. If you'll just hop on the bed, we'll get this show on the road."

John held out his hand to Teyla, and after only a second of hesitation, she took it. Their eyes met at the contact and a spark of electricity passed through him. The corner of his mouth lifted as he braced himself. Her body growing more ungainly all the time, she used his weight to help ease herself down. While Teyla settled back, he took a seat next to the bed. Dr. Keller brought over her scanner and pad and rapidly patched the two machines in to work in tandem, while Teyla adjusted her clothing, nudging the waistband of her skirt lower to expose the length of her growing belly.

John felt his breath hitch in his chest. With her in a prone position and uncovered from the thick clothing, he got a view of her as he'd never seen before. Her body had changed so much while they'd been separated. She had softened, and while he loved the toned, athletic form she usually held, he had nothing but awe for how she looked now. The curves did something for him that he didn't dare show in front of Keller.

Also with the change in angle, came a whole new perspective on the baby's movements. Dr. Keller pulled out a tape measure and laid it vertically over Teyla's womb, slightly pressing down and taking a measurement to make sure it was the proper size for how far along she was. Under the flimsy tape measure, Teyla's skin jerked as a kick landed in protest.
"A lot of attitude already," Jennifer said with a grin. "Teyla, I have a feeling you're in for it with this one."

"That's probably my fault," John confessed.

Teyla smiled up at him. "That much I already knew."

She was so beautiful. How had he been able to stand being away from her for three weeks? Why had he cheated them both out of that time together?

"Here we go," Keller said, and John raised his head again. The doctor held the scanner over Teyla's stomach with one hand, while doing some calculations on the pad.

Teyla peered down her body. "What is it you are doing, Jennifer?"

Intent on her screen, Dr. Keller glanced up. "I'm just taking some more measurements, Teyla. Nothing to worry about."

"Of what?" John asked. At this point, when it had anything to do with his child, he'd developed a reflex that tended toward worry. They'd been through so much with this pregnancy already he found himself always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"The works. The baby's heart, liver, bones ..." Jennifer looked pleased. "I don't get to do this often enough."

"Doc, you do bone scans all the time."

"Yes, but somehow scanning for broken bones isn't nearly as much fun," she said, smiling. "I could get used to this. We really need more babies in Atlantis, Colonel."

Sheppard chuckled in amusement. "I'll run that thought past Woolsey at the next meeting. You can deal with the stroke when we're done."

"I have a feeling there is more to Mr. Woolsey than meets the eye," Teyla said. "He would, perhaps, be more understanding than you believe, John."

"You can tell him then. It'd probably sound like a much better idea coming from you, anyway."

"Okay, you two," Jennifer said, bringing that topic to a halt. After a few more flicks of her fingers, she sat back. "That's all done. Everything looks good. You have yourselves a healthy little baby."

John took Teyla's hand and squeezed. He was hugely relieved when she returned the gesture.

Teyla asked Jennifer, "Is there still no sign of damage?"

John kept his expression under control, but inside he withered. Ever since Teyla's accident, they'd monitored her and crossed their fingers. So far they seemed to have gotten lucky, but there was no assurance it would stay that way as Teyla's uterus continued to grow and change.

There had been times he'd thought Teyla was ignoring the risks because she tried to live her life the way she would have under normal circumstances. Among all the other things he regretted saying the day she left, he had also accused her of being in denial. But it was clear she hadn't forgotten and she was still just as concerned as he was. It was another glaring reminder how wrong he'd been and how much he must've hurt her.

"You're still looking good, Teyla," Jennifer assured her. "Of course, we're going to continue to keep
an eye out. But for now we're okay. Now," she continued, lightening the mood, "The fun stuff."

Dr. Keller unhooked the scanner from her pad and pushed a few buttons on the small computer. Smiling, she said, "I'll make some printouts of these when we get back to Atlantis for you to keep, but before I let you see these pictures I have to ask. Do you want to know the sex of your baby?"
The Athosian Feast

While Teyla sat up and straightened her clothing, John found the computer pad in his hands. Dr. Keller had said something about giving them time to look through the pictures alone, but he hadn't really been paying attention. The second the cool piece of equipment touched his fingertips, all he could think about was his child. Granted, it was a computer generated image. It wouldn't be the same as it meeting the baby in the flesh. But he was about to see his child's face.

The recently closed tent flap settled into place and John waited for Teyla to get comfortable before he scooted his chair in closer to her. He held the screen out so she could see."Are you ready?"

Normally a marvel of calm and stillness, Teyla pursed her lips, revealing her nervousness.

"Don't worry. It's just like all the other scans you've seen before and Keller said she took out the ones that would blow the big secret."

John had been more than a little eager to find out what they were having, but Teyla had asked not to know. Everything about this pregnancy had been so radically different than she'd ever imagined it would be. She'd spent half of it in and out of the infirmary, getting scans and playing a pincushion for Beckett and Keller. She needed something to be simple and more in line with Athosian traditions, even if it was only a small thing like having the sex of the baby remain a mystery. John couldn't deny her that and yielded to her motherly veto power without argument.

"I am not worried, John," Teyla said. "I just do not know what to expect. It is not everyday one lays eyes on their first child."

John nodded. "Well, we're not really seeing him yet. We won't until he's born. Just think of it more like a preview of coming attractions."

She looked at him quizzically. "Do you believe it to be a boy?"

"What do you mean?"

She smiled. "You said 'him'. Do you think it's a boy?"

"Did I?" he asked. "I don't really know. I suppose there's at least a 50/50 chance I'm right."

"Would you prefer having a boy over a girl?"

She tilted her head in honest curiosity as John considered the question. The prospect of a little boy certainly presented less of a mystery. He used to be one. He was sure in some ways he still was. Football, camping, video games, racing cars down the hallways. He'd probably be in sparring lessons with Teyla and Ronon as soon he was old enough to walk. He imagined there would be a few angry calls from Uncle Rodney, telling him to come get his son out of one experiment or another. John could see it all. But a girl ...

Most likely, a daughter who was part-Athosian meant a lot of tea parties in his future. And where there were girls, there were dolls. Lots of dolls. And the color pink. Scary. But he couldn't deny there was an appeal to having a little girl, soft, sweet, and curled up in his lap. A part of him melted and simultaneously his inner Papa Bear roared. Any daughter of Teyla's would be more than capable of taking care of herself. Hell, she'd probably come out swinging. But the mere thought of his little daughter in a sparring lesson with Ronon made him want to pummel the guy.
"I think either way we're headed for trouble," he told Teyla with a smirk.

His fingers danced over the keys to the pad and he brought up the pictures and video clips. They spent the next several minutes together committing every image to memory - the rapid fluttering of the heart and the eyes that remained closed on the world, down to every last finger and toe. For that short window of time, John and Teyla weren't at odds. They forgot all the hurt feelings and how complicated things were between them. They were simply proud parents getting a glimpse of their child.

Teyla leaned on him in order to get the best view she could. She was so close he could smell the soap on her skin and the shampoo in her hair. Unable to resist, he turned and placed a lingering kiss on her temple.

Although she didn't pull away from him right away, she did pull away. He tried to put on a brave face and pretend that it was okay, but it hurt. Horrendously. "What are we going to do, Teyla?" he whispered, referring to the difficult situation they found themselves in.

She took a deep breath and answered with a clear break in her tone. "I do not know."

He had told her that he wasn't going to push. He knew rushing her was liable to backfire, but he couldn't keep watching her from a distance and not be with her. She was in him, a part of him he couldn't let go of again. Seeing their child made it seem all the more imperative that he act. He had to put his family back together.

"You know what I want," he told her, setting aside the pad. "I want you. I want you back."

"John ..."

"Teyla, please hear me out." He took her hand. "I love you so much I can't see straight. I want to make this right. Tell me," he pleaded with her, "Please, just tell me what I have to do to make this right and I'll do it. Anything."

She shook her head, trying not to let her love for him blind her. "For nearly a month, I have waited for you with no word. Nothing. You did not even radio to ask if things were going well."

She stopped for a moment and cursed the tears that seemed to fall so easily these days, especially where John was concerned. "Whenever I look at you now, I see both the man I love and the man that deserted me wearing the same face. I want nothing more than to be able to see you as I once did, but what could you possibly do to make that go away? Perhaps you know of something, because I do not."

The bitter taste of defeat soured John's tongue. There was no excuse for what he'd allowed to happen and nothing he could do to ever make it right. Nothing would ever be good enough. All he could do was throw himself on the mercy of the court and pray for a stay of execution.

"Teyla, I can't undo the past. I've done things in my life I regret. Opportunities I missed. People I let slip through my fingers. There are a lot of things I would go back in a second and change, if I had the chance." He stared straight into her, willing her to hear the abject sincerity in his heart. "I hope you can believe that not coming after you was the worst mistake of my life and I know that. I'm asking you for another chance. Give me the chance to prove to you that I'm the man you fell in love with and not ... not that other guy."

She didn't give him an answer for what seemed like an eternity. He studied her, searching for some clue as to what she was thinking and he didn't like what he saw. He hoped for a flash of her brilliant
smile and a mad dash into each other's arms. But with every passing second it was looked more and more like a dead man's fantasy.

"I need more time, John. Can you allow me that?"

Dejected, he nodded. A frog firmly lodged in his throat. "Okay. I'll, um ... I'll get out of your hair." He stood up awkwardly, barely able to feel his legs. "I should ... probably be getting back anyway. We're trying to get the roof finished before the feast tonight."

"Be careful," she said in a small voice.

He took it for the basic gesture that it was. She still cared. He just didn't know if it was enough.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a mad dash. While a small army of people slaved to complete construction on the community building, Jol and her cadre of pint-sized helpers busily got ready to feed everyone. Ronon's contribution to the feast had already been slow roasting for hours and the smells permeating from it were making everyone's mouths water.

"They're doing that on purpose, you know," Rodney told his teammates as they all worked on the rooftop. He pointed to the fire pit where the savory smells originated. "It's no better than torture, if you ask me."

"It's motivation, Rodney. Just think of it that way," John said without lifting his head. He only paused for a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow. "The sooner we get done, the sooner you can eat."

"Like you aren't thinking the same thing."

John exhaled. "Actually, I'm not that hungry."

Ever since he returned to work, the Colonel had joined Ronon in stoic silence. McKay managed to pull a few words from him here and there, but it was an uphill battle. When Rodney was coerced into making this trip, he hoped as a consolation prize the spectacular amount of moping going on in Atlantis would finally come to an end. Well, that plan was rapidly joining the ranks of so many others. Sheppard was as miserable as ever and Teyla wasn't far behind. Ronon had barely said two words in the last two days.

"Keep moving, McKay," Ronon boomed from behind.

Five. Five words in two days.

Capshaw wasn't one for small talk, but he at least had the decency to perk up this morning. Jennifer was the one shining beacon of optimism in the bunch, Rodney included.

Oh yeah, this was going to be a fun party.
"Masy, what are these?" Setisse asked, pointing to her dinner plate with a wrinkled nose.

All around them, people were finishing up their meals and the first casks of Ruus wine were beginning to appear. McKay dove in with an enthusiasm Capshaw found surprising. At least he'd eaten enough for ten. Otherwise the scientist, who was a notorious lightweight, wouldn't last the hour.

With his own plate already empty, Mason looked down at the sliced orange vegetables the girl was pushing around with her fork. "Carrots."

"These are from your home, right? Um ... what's it called?"

"Earth," he said. "These carrots have traveled a long, long way just to get on that plate, so eat up. They're good for you."

She didn't look too convinced.

"If you eat your carrots, next time I visit I'll bring you a candy bar."

"Helia says we shouldn't eat candy. She says it's bad for our teeth. See?" the dark-haired girl said, opening her mouth and pointing at a row of little white pearls. Helia, the woman who had assumed the teacher role for the orphaned kids, was a typical Athosian. She was polite, well-meaning, and bright. She'd paid close attention in Atlantis and was very conscious of what the kids had picked up during their stay. However, given their general proximity to the nearest candy store, he didn't think the warnings about the dangers of candy were strictly warranted.

"Yeah, well ... Helia also tells you there must be balance in life. For everything taken, something is given. For all the bad, there is also good, right?"

"Yeesss."

He leaned in and pointed at her nose, giving her his best wise old man impression. "Candy bars may taste good, but they're bad for you. Carrots may taste bad, but they're good for you. So see? It all evens out. It doesn't get much more balanced than that. So eat your carrots, kid."

She giggled, stabbing her vegetables. "You're silly, Masy."

"Don't spread it around, okay?"

As Setisse finally began to nibble off her fork, Helia and a couple of other women started gathering up the children.

"You'd better hurry up. Looks like it's time for bed."

"I don't want to go to bed," she complained. "Do you have to go to bed too?"

"Soon enough," he said. He hadn't been to an Athosian blowout before, so he figured he'd take in the sights, but that would probably be it. With a fresh dose of pain meds coursing through his veins, drinking was off the table and exhaustion was already creeping in from the day's work. He didn't figure he'd stay too long.

"Get along, now," Mason said softly. "Helia's waiting for you and you need to get your sleep. I'll still be here in the morning."

"Promise?"
"I promise," he said.

Things didn't really get going until after the kids were in bed, but as soon as they did ... The Athosians were a hard working people and they'd been through a lot in the last year. All around him, people were drinking, laughing, dancing, and basically dedicating that same work ethic to having a good time. A trio of musicians in the corner strummed their instruments, keeping things lively and lighthearted.

It was good. They needed to blow off some steam. Already a fan of Athosian parties, John wished he was in the mood to join in, but he couldn't muster up half their enthusiasm and he was starting to feel out of place. Having been there for two hours, he felt like he'd done his duty in making an appearance and was seriously considering a strategic retreat.

Rodney, who was well on his way to plastered and growing unsteady on his feet, held out a glass to him. "Have a drink, Sheppard."

John smiled and held up the barely touched glass he already had. "I'm all set, McKay. Thanks."

"Come on," Rodney insisted. "I drank with you. You should have a drink with me."

Humoring the man, John took it and had a few gulps that proceeded to burn down his throat. The wine hadn't lost its kick.

When he set down the cup, Rodney asked, "That's it?"

"I think you've had enough for the both of us."

"You're no fun anymore. She's done a real number on you."

John nodded. "Maybe so."

"Love sucks, huh?"

As much as he could've agreed with the inebriated scientist, he couldn't bring himself to. He may be depressed as hell right now, but he still believed in love. He still held out hope that things would work out.

Rodney wobbled dangerously and John jumped off the log bench to grab him before he hit the floor.

"Okay, Rodney. Party's over."

John looped McKay's arm across his shoulders and encouraged him to walk. They were making progress toward the door of the newly completed venue when he heard Teyla from behind.

"I see Rodney has been enjoying the wine," she observed.

"Yeah. You'd think he would have learned his lesson last time, huh?"

McKay careened wildly around. John fought to keep his balance and Rodney upright while he protested. "Hey! I've only had two ... two ... or is it four ... oh crap, am I seeing double? Because if I had four, that means it was ... what's four times two?"
"Twelve," John said. It was a decent measure of how drunk he was to see how long it would take him to work that out. "Listen, I'm just gonna get him outta here and call it a night, myself."

"You are not coming back to the feast?" She may have only asked to be polite, but he dared to think that she actually looked a little disappointed.

"No ... no ... that's not right. Your math is off, Mensa ..." McKay said, hanging on him.

John met Teyla's eyes and tried not to look as pathetic as he felt. "I don't think so, Teyla. But you have some fun. You deserve it."

"Oh, look at that. The floor is spinning. Getting dizzy ... and sick." Rodney gulped and grew more frantic. "Getting sick."

"Okay, that's my cue," John said, starting forward. He was certain that the Athosians didn't intend their new building to get baptized quite like this. "Teyla ..." he turned back. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, John," she answered quietly.

Watching Sheppard haul Rodney away, Mason thought about calling it a night too. Ronon was usually good to hang out with, but his mood had been a game of Russian Roulette lately so Capshaw decided to leave him to the corner he’d holed himself up in. Being one of the few sober people in the room was getting weirder all the time too, as he kept getting suggestive glances from a petite brunette across the room. She was pretty, but it made him uncomfortable. He had to be at least twice her size, yet she made him feel like he was being sized up for a meal.

He stood up to go when Jennifer walked up and hooked her arm in his. "Leaving so soon?" she asked. She had a nearly-full glass in her hands, but she had an expression on her face that made him wonder if she wasn't a little tipsy.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm pretty tired." The other excuses aside, that part was true. He didn't think that doing some roofing would wear him out like this, but he was feeling an oppressive need to sleep.

She furrowed her brow and reached up, cupping her hands around his face to line it up with hers. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Would you quit it?" He pulled away from what he knew was a poor attempt at a pupil exam. "Can't I be tired anymore without you flying into doctor mode?"

She pursed her lips and he answered his own question, bitterly. "I suppose not, huh? That's what we are, right? Doctor and patient. We can't even have a conversation anymore without it being about me and my problems."

"I care about you and it's because I care that I worry about you," she replied. "Is that so bad?"

"Sometimes," he stated.

He exhaled. They were at a party and the last thing he wanted or had energy for was an argument. "Do you want to dance, Jen?"
Surprised, she studied him. "Do you dance?"

"Not really, but I promise not to step on your toes," he responded.

"That would be a first."

"Look, if you don't want to, I'll just ..."

Jennifer broke into a smile and took his hand. "It's a deal. Shall we?"

He led her to the dance floor, which was really a comfortable circle around the bonfire, took her hand and pulled her in. He took a few beats to find the rhythm and wrapped his arm around her waist. Jennifer rested her hands behind his neck, and they settled into a comfortable position.

After a minute of pleasant silence, Jennifer looked at him and said with a straight face, "You know, you were right. You can't dance."

He chuckled.

He led her around the dance floor, smooth and slow, taking advantage of the chance he was getting. The pain-free morning had lived up to its promise. He hadn't felt a twinge all day. As they swayed, he held her close without pain from the contact needling him. It was an opportunity that didn't come around often and he would've been a fool to pass it up.

He must've done something. Maybe he leaned on her a little too much or she noticed the sleepy glaze over his eyes, but she asked again, "Mason, are you sure you're okay?"

He tipped his head down toward her like he was going to confess a big secret to her and whispered, "You know, Jennifer, paranoia doesn't look that good on you."

She frowned in mock annoyance. "Thanks a lot, Mason."

Mason laughed.

From his solitary place in the room, Ronon emptied another glass of Ruus wine. Having grown accustomed to the harsh drink long ago, he was relatively untouched by its effects. Normally at a feast, he would've been much more enthusiastic about the festivities, but tonight he was laying his ghosts to rest. He drank to Tyre, the friend he had misjudged, who had died seeking redemption in bringing him home. Of all the former friends, Tyre was the lucky one. Ara and Rakai had never gotten that last chance to try and reclaim their honor and Ronon had to live knowing what he'd done.

Ronon looked up from the empty glass, sensing he was no longer alone. Teyla stood quietly nearby with her own glass in hand, only occasionally making eye contact, without any attempt to interrupt. She understood better than anyone that if she were welcome he would say. In the meantime, she was content to lend him her support at a distance.

"Teaching him to drink like a man already?" Ronon called to her, extending an unspoken invitation.

Teyla slowly moved forward. "It is only water. And I do not know if it is a boy or not."

His mouth pulled in a partial grin as she slid into the seat next to him. "I hadn't heard."
"You have been very busy today. I would be surprised if you had."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Teyla took his large hand in hers and he curled his fingers around her palms. With the Wraith and everything since, it was the first real human contact he'd had in a while. It was honest and uncomplicated. It comforted him.

"I deeply regret not being there for you, my friend," she said.

Ronon glanced over to her, mildly questioning.

"Jennifer saw fit to fill me in on some of the details."

Ronon nodded in comprehension. His ordeal was hard enough on him. He was glad at least one of his friends was spared the sight of the thing they'd turned him into. "It's better this way. I didn't want you there."

"It would have changed nothing," she assured him, touching his cheek. "You are and you will ever be the same man I would happily call my brother and, I hope, family to my child."

She pulled him into her arms and they shared a reunion of sorts. It was more than a hug, it was a bringing together of family and healing of spirits.

"It's too late," Ronon said in his trademark stony voice. "You couldn't get rid of me now, even if you wanted to."

Teyla smiled.

Shaking off the past, Ronon said, "Bet it was nice. Seeing your kid today."

"It was wonderful," she confirmed, her smile widening. "Do you ever think of having a family of your own? You have always seemed to be content as you are and you've never spoken of it before."

Ronon stole a glance at the dance floor, where Mason and Jennifer seemed comfortable in one another's arms. "Sometimes. Don't know if I'd be any good at it, though."

"Any woman of your choosing would be fortunate to have you," Teyla said, her gaze tracking his to the young doctor. "I can think of few in my acquaintance who would make a better father."

The Satedan winced inwardly at her words and tore his eyes away from Jennifer. His part in what was happening was one of the last things that continued to eat at him. He sat forward, propping his forearms against his knees. "It's my fault, you know?"

"What is?"

"Sheppard. It's my fault he wasn't here a long time ago."

Teyla stiffened. "Ronon, John is your friend. I understand your wanting to defend him."

"It's not that," he declared. "If I thought it wouldn't have made a difference, I'd kill him myself for doing that to you."

She looked at him skeptically. Okay, he probably wouldn't have killed his best friend, but he definitely would have put him in the infirmary for something far more serious than a twisted knee.
"Teyla, if he hadn't been out searching for me and watching out for me, things would've been different. He would've been here."

She wavered. "He never said anything about ..."

"Well, he probably doesn't see it that way. But that doesn't make it any less the truth." Ronon cast a sober gaze at her. "He wouldn't have lasted half as long without you."

He slung his long arm over her shoulders and pulled her in.

"I don't want to get in the middle of this. You know what's best for you." With the familiarity that comes with family, he gently set his hand on her belly. "But you have a family. You and I both know how hard that is to come by and that it's ... it's even harder to hang on to. Don't let go. Not because of me."

Teyla covered his hand with her own and squeezed. "I will consider what you say, Ronon, as long as you consider what I have to say. Do not ever doubt that you have family. No matter what happens, that will always be the case."

Her eyes shifted back in Jennifer's direction before she continued. "And if you feel yourself in want of something more, you should never be afraid to go after it. It is worth the effort. I know."

He knew that last comment was more for her own benefit than his, but it hit home all the same.

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Soon after their dance, Mason left the party. It was late, and after the early morning and working all afternoon, he could hardly keep his eyes open. Walking across the camp to his small tent, his limbs grew heavier and heavier, as though made of stone.

He sluggishly unzipped the tent and crawled inside. He didn't bother changing. The chill in the air made the prospect too unpleasant and he didn't have the energy to spare as it was. He laid on his back and his head hit the pillow. He exhaled slowly, and before he surrendered to the black, he vaguely thought that it had been a good day.

Jennifer spent a few more hours at the party, watching the Jol and Feylon show with Teyla. She found it entertaining under normal circumstances, but with the slight buzz she had going, it seemed downright hilarious.

The feast began to break up as more people called it a night and Teyla convinced her to do the same. Teyla walked with her to her tent and then kept going after saying goodnight.

"Where are you going?" Jennifer asked. Teyla's tent was in the other direction.

"I have something I need to tend to," Teyla said cryptically.

After a curious "okay", Jennifer entered her tent.
Waiting for her on her pillow was an intricately and beautifully braided leather bracelet. She'd seen women on other planets wearing things similar to it, but she'd never seen one quite like this. Integrated into the basic structure of the weave was a tribal looking pattern that Jennifer was reasonably sure she'd seen before.

Jennifer lifted it from where it rested and looked around, a silly thing to do really, because there was nowhere in the small tent for anyone to hide. But it didn't stop of her from looking for the man who had left it.

Disappointed he wasn't there, she slipped it over her wrist and got ready for bed.

Engrossed in a game of video golf and wrapped in blankets, John's feet restlessly danced along the floor, causing the pilot's seat to swivel. He had the Jumper's air vents open to keep oxygen flowing into the air-tight space, but the cold came in as well. Thank goodness for heaters. They kept the craft warm at least. As warm as metal and alien tech could be anyway.

There came a soft knock on the rear hatch, breaking John's concentration. Keeping the blankets tight around him, he set down the game and rose. A directed thought to the Ancient systems and the hatch lowered.

Teyla stood outside. She clutched at her coat, trying to keep the wind out. "Am I disturbing you?"


Teyla padded up the ramp. John commanded it to close again and turned up the power on the heaters. When Teyla left, he'd restore the settings back normal. For the time being, he wanted her to be comfortable.

"Welcome to Chez Sheppard. I'd get you something to drink, but the minibar's tapped out at the moment."

He tried not to think about what she had come to say, because he didn't think he'd like the answer. He asked her to sit down and she took up a place in the co-pilot's chair, carefully adjusting the long folds of her skirt.

"How was the feast?"

"I spoke with Ronon," she began. "He had some interesting things to say."

"Really?" he said in mild surprise. "'Cause he hasn't really been in a talking mood lately."

"That's to be expected, given the circumstances."

John nervously adjusted in his seat. "I guess I should just be glad you're still in one piece. There are a few guys in Atlantis who aren't so lucky."

"Ronon would never hurt me," she said pointedly.

"I ..." he faltered. "I know that." That makes one of us.

John waited for her to go on, but she seemed to be considering something very carefully. He
wondered what Ronon could've had to say to cause her to behave this way. "Teyla, why are you here?"

When she didn't answer, he felt his frustration rise. He got up and paced toward the rear of the jumper. He couldn't take this indecision as it was and having her in front of him and not being allowed to touch her was too much.

"Do you want to talk about what happened to Ronon? Because if you do, let's talk about it. Otherwise ..."

"No," she finally said. "I came to talk about our situation."

"I thought you wanted time," John responded.

Her eyes fell to her lap. "I did."

"Teyla, I can't do this. It ... it's too hard. I'm trying to give you the time you wanted."

"I think we have lost enough time," she said and his eyes snapped up to meet hers.

"What did you say?" For a moment, he thought his heart had run away with his ears.

Teyla stood up, decision clear on her face. "I said I think we have lost enough time."

John gulped, feeling like he needed to sit down. "Are you sure?"

"Our child needs a father."

He close his eyes and groaned. "Teyla, no matter what happens between us, our baby will have a father. Nothing's gonna change that. I don't want you to settle for something ... for being with me ... if it's not what you really want."

"I still love you, John," she said. Her composure was breaking down and tears were forming in her eyes. "I have tried not to. I have lied awake at night trying to convince myself that I didn't, but it seems that I do. I miss you. I miss you so much it hurts."

John moved his feet and took her in his arms. "I know exactly how you feel," he whispered in her ear. "I'm never going to let you feel that way again. I swear to God, Teyla. Never."

They stood wrapped together, letting their bodies say the things that were too difficult and too primitive to ever properly articulate, the shattered pieces of two people beginning the process of being whole again. John's lips searched hers out, this time secure in the knowledge that she wouldn't turn him away. When they met, he wasn't disappointed.

Teyla let herself go and returned his kiss with a passion she had been afraid to feel for him once again. Her love for him had caused her agonizing pain, but it was only capable of that because it was so devastatingly strong. Its raw power was the reason she was willing to have faith in him. As his lips enveloped hers and she felt a needful, searching stroke of his tongue against hers, every molecule in her being told her it was the right decision.

Teyla's hands caressed the sides of his face as his arms drifted to the small of her back and pulled her in until the laws of physics said no more. Their bodies, starved and aching for each other, tested their limits as best as they could. John found that she didn't fit as neatly against him as she used to. He gently pulled his lips from Teyla and looked down. His hand swept over her stomach, tenderly stroking it over the fabric that while weather appropriate, was hardly conducive to what he had in
"I think ..." he breathed before he attacked the sensitive flesh of her neck, "... we're going to have to make a few adjustments."

Teyla felt his intentions pressed hard against her thigh as he bombarded her senses. Clutching his back, she managed. "I am sure ... we can ... think of something."

She peeked out from beneath her heavily-lidded eyes and nuded him toward the pilot's chair. He yielded to her body and backed up as he continued to reacquaint himself with every line and curve of her neck. She closed her eyes and moaned when he hit that one spot that never failed to send a shiver down her spine. It had become a favorite of his and apparently that had not changed as he set his lips and tongue loose upon it. With concentrated effort, she pushed him back again, until his knees ran into the edge of the chair and he was forced to sit.

She reached down and started to undo his belt. She could feel his straining flesh inside his pants, aching to be free of its prison.

"Teyla," he said, his voice rocky and his eyes dark. "Did I ever tell you ... about what pilots like to do in cockpits?"

"Fly?" she said with a smile, knowing the true answer. His belt undone, she went to work on his zipper.

He rose just high enough to allow her room to push his pants down and he snaked his arm up the folds of her skirt. With one hand he held her by the hip, while the other got rid of her now unnecessary undergarments. A searching finger carefully reached for her center. Teyla's head lolled back at the intimate contact. She was wet, ready for him, and hotter than he remembered. He settle back into the chair, pulling her with him. She spread her legs around his waist, straddling him, while his hands ran up and down her skin. She held herself just above his impatient erection, feeling the same way. There would be time later for a long, slow reunion. She only wished to be one with him.

She slid down allowing him to enter her and watched with satisfaction the sheer pleasure wash over his face. He groaned loudly and his hands, that until then were pushing her skirts out of the way, retreated underneath and dug into her hips. She began to rock slowly against him. "Oh ... God, Teyla."

He opened his eyes and watched her above him. Her new figure didn't diminish her grace in any way. Every time she moved he was caught up in a wave of sensory overload. She was a bright spot in his vision and he leaned his upper body against hers. He would've given anything to have her naked, her breasts pressing up against his bare chest, but later. They could do all that later. Another slow shift of her hips over him had him panting against her neck.

"Teyla," he moaned, kissing her and pleading for her to increase the pace of the dance. She seemed content to remain at this delicious, torturously slow speed and he was being driven out of his mind in the most pleasurable way imaginable.

"Patience, John," she said, getting lost in her own enjoyment. "It is your turn to wait for me."

How could he argue with that? John moaned. Why would he want to? He clung to her as she rode him, milking him for every ounce of self-control he possessed. With one hand, he released her and reached for her core. The cry that ripped from her nearly did him in as her body tightened around him like a coil ready to spring. He grunted and gritted his teeth, hanging on by a thread. His fingers rubbed gently as she undulated against him. Her nails dug into his back. If he hadn't been still...
wearing a shirt, he was sure he'd have ten half-moon shaped wounds there in the morning. Their tempo remained the same, creeping and mind-blowing.

"John!" she screamed. Under John's skilled fingertips, Teyla's body tensed and she rested her forehead on his as she came with a powerful shudder. He latched onto her with his arms and thrust upward, riding her waves into an explosion all his own.

As their minds began to clear, John kissed her. He couldn't seem to stop. He was still inside her and sated for the moment, but he couldn't let her go. He felt alive again for the first time in a month and it was about way more than sex. It was about the two people in his arms. The woman he loved and the child resting between them.
Rude Awakening

With the change in venue, their clothes hadn't stood a chance. The bulky sweaters that stood in the way of their exploration of each other were quickly cast off and lay slung haphazardly in Teyla's tent. Her skirt, which both kept her warm and allowed room for her growing child, was deemed by John to be no longer needed. He had every intention of taking over those jobs for the rest of the night. Teyla wasn't feeling nearly as practically minded when she stripped him of his pants and had tossed them aside to join their fellows on the floor. They spent the night blissfully unaware of the ominous wind blowing and the nose-diving temperatures outside.

When the first flakes of snow began to fall, they were otherwise occupied. Whether they were in the throes of passion or resting peacefully against each other, they existed in their own world and in their own time.

Covered by the thick blankets on her bed and hovering somewhere between awareness and sleep, John lay on his left side with Teyla tucked in along his back. Her arm was draped over his side. While she slept, it hung relaxed across his ribs, but the feel of her hand moving drew John back from the pleasant exhaustion that kept his eyes shut. Her fingers softly and seductively trailed up and down his chest along the length of his torso. Unseen and without opening his lids, the corners of John's mouth turned up when she reached the end of the line, hesitated, and then ran her hand back up. He kept his breathing slow so as not to give away the fact that he was aware of her attentions, and growing significantly more aware with every passing second.

It was nearly dawn. People would be up and moving around the settlement soon and Teyla was playing a very dangerous game. The tent was in no way soundproof and at least while the camp slept they could enjoy themselves without too much fear of being overheard. With every pass she took, running her fingers through his chest hair and stirring his blood, she was essentially daring him. And John Sheppard wasn't one to back down from a challenge.

He opened his eyes and stared straight ahead. He allowed himself a deep breath, signalling that she was getting to him. Her wandering hand shifted its attentions onto his leg. Starting at his thigh just above the knee, it traveled north to his naked hip and back again, keeping to its teasing pattern. She would get so close, painfully close, and then move away. John's eyes blackened as his heart began to hammer in his chest.

"I thought you might've had enough," he spoke lowly into the air.

Her mouth sidled up to his ear. "I have been feeling a rather intense need lately for physical intimacy. It can be very ... distracting."

"And you'd like me to do something about it?"

He could practically hear the smile on her face. "If you can." She ran her hand up his leg again, brushing ever closer to his manhood. "It may be beyond even your capabilities."

"What makes you say that?" he asked with a grin, wondering where she was going with this.

"It is most likely due to the pregnancy and may not go away for some time."

He caught her hand as she was finally giving up the tease and reaching for him. Holding onto her wrist, he turned over to face her. In the dim light, he could see the spots he'd left on her body during their night of ecstasy. It may have been a primitive, cave man sort of attitude that prompted him to
brand her as his once again, but seeing her in all her naked, pregnant glory with his mark on her ... It was a hell of a turn on.

"Some time, huh? I think I can live with that."

Careful to avoid putting too much pressure on his child, John rolled her onto her back. Reaching down her thigh, he wrapped his hand under her knee and pulled her leg up and around his waist, surrounding him as he delved into a kiss.

He made love to her as though it was his mission to satisfy her insatiable need or die trying, and it felt like he nearly did. They both made a valiant effort to keep silent during the whole lingering, delicious process, but when her exquisite orgasm surrounded him at the same time his became too much for him to contain, they were both lost. With his breath moving in and out like a freight train, he slammed his mouth down on hers to try to stifle the loud groans coming unbidden from his throat and muffle her cries.

As their spent bodies came down from the surge of endorphins, the kiss born out of desperation became one of tenderness and deep satisfaction. A brush of lips, a tongue's caress. Propped up on one elbow to keep his weight from becoming too much, he took his other hand and surrounded her cheek and the nape of her neck. His lips massaged hers as her nails lightly scraped along his back, sending a surge of relaxing energy through his body.

"God, I love you," he whispered on a sigh.

The arm supporting most of his weight grew tired and he eventually had to roll away. Not for the first time that night, or morning as it was rapidly becoming, he pulled her into him and the couple fell asleep.

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When Jennifer woke up and stared up at the roof of her tent, she wondered why it looked like an elephant sat on it. She rolled off her cot to investigate, feeling the steady beat of a drum in her head as she went. Unzipping the tent door was a big mistake. The blinding white light of the snow in the morning sun nearly knocked her over. Her hand flew up and shielded her eyes, thought they were momentarily rendered useless.

Tylenol and a seeing-eye dog. That's what she needed. So much for Rodney's prediction of no snow until next week.

She slowly peeked through her fingers, and where her vision hadn't gone purple, she reached out with her free hand and knocked away the collection of snow on top of her tent. Having grown up in the winters of Wisconsin, Jennifer could tell the temperature wasn't quite right for the snowfall to stick. The bright sunlight would melt it all before day's end, but winter was on its way and this was just the opening salvo.

That done, Jennifer crept back into her tent and reached for her duffel. The bracelet Ronon had given her slid out from underneath her long sleeve, where it had retreated to in the night. In spite of her rude awakening this morning, she couldn't help but smile. Like everyone else around her, she had been curious as to what the warrior was up to with his salvaged leather strap, but she never imagined this. He had put a lot of work into it. Even if she hadn't seen him at it, the level of artistry the bracelet showcased would've said it all.
Once she was dressed and prepared for what awaited her outside, Jennifer walked across the camp. She must've slept in, because it appeared that most of the Athosians had already had their breakfast and were getting down to the chilly business of uncovering their tools and materials. Jol called to her from the waning fires in front of the newly completed building where it seemed everyone had gathered to eat. She was stirring what looked like a final batch of oatmeal.

"Dr. Keller, I am glad to see last night's festivities have not done you in."

"Not completely, anyway," Jennifer admitted, a nagging ache penetrating her skull.

The Athosian woman smoothed a stray hair back behind her ear and laughed. "You Lanteans. You and your friends must attend the feasts more often." She indicated inside the building. "It seems that Ronon is the only one among you with any stomach for them. I've not seen any of the rest so much as poke out their heads all morning."

"You haven't, huh?" Jennifer asked. "Ronon's still inside?"

Jol gave her a knowing glance. "He is. He was up quite early this morning helping out. I was finally forced to make him sit down and eat. A man like that needs good food to keep up his strength." She handed a distracted Jennifer a bowl of food. "Go. You will need it to take care of that headache."

Jennifer tilted her chin. "How did you know I have a headache?"

"It was inevitable, dear."

With a chuckle to acknowledge the woman's perceptive ways, Jennifer took her bowl and wandered inside. At one of the far tables, Ronon sat alone. One thing was for sure, the Satedan could work leather. The form it came in didn't seem to matter. The long, leather duster he wore suited him. She'd always thought so, but somehow it felt like she was seeing it again for the first time.

"Hi." It came out quieter than she thought it would, but it did the trick. Ronon looked up at her. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Ronon sat up straighter his chair. "Sure."

She sat down trying to think of what to say. It was funny. She had no problem talking to him most of the time. But, then, most of the time they were in the infirmary where she was in her element or they had Col. Sheppard and the others around to take the pressure off.

"Looked like you were having fun last night," he said before things got too awkward, fortunately for her.

She blushed slightly. Apparently, Jol wasn't the only who noticed that she'd cut loose a little. It wasn't something she did often. She never had. Teenage rebellion had been wasted on her and she took her duties in Atlantis far too seriously. But she wasn't sure whether her embarrassment stemmed from dropping her self-discipline long enough to let go or having it be seen by him. "Yeah, I did. I probably shouldn't have, but I thought ... you know ... we're here. Why not?"

"Nothing wrong with that." His brown eyes were fixed on her.

"Ronon," she started. "I wanted to thank you."

"For what?"

"For this." She twisted her wrist so that the bracelet shifted into view. "It's really ... it's amazing. I
had no idea you could do stuff like this."

Ronon shrugged his shoulders, nonchalant. "Don't do it very often."

"Where did you learn?"

"My, um ... my mother," he stated uncomfortably. She instantly felt bad about asking. Ronon had always been sensitive when it came to talking about his past and Sateda. Probably doubly so now, after everything he'd been through recently with his former comrades.

"She was an artisan. It was ... before I was old enough to join the guard. She'd make all kinds of jewelry, paintings, things like that. I'd help out in the shop after training."

Jennifer leaned on her elbow, listening intently. "I can't picture you working in a store."

He grinned sheepishly. "Well, I wasn't very good at it. Probably got into more trouble than I helped. Couldn't hold still."

She returned his smile, thinking of the many times Ronon had escaped her custody before he'd been released. "Now, that I can believe."

"I think she taught me just to keep me busy. It helped having something in my hands, you know?" Ronon paused for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "Haven't made anything like that in a while, though."

A hush fell between the two of them. Jennifer found herself playing with the gift, spinning it back and forth over her wrist. The bruise on her face was finally beginning to turn from a forbidding black to a healing shade of green, but it hadn't gone and she didn't want him doing things out of guilt. "I'm honored that you thought of me, Ronon, but I hope you didn't do this because of what happened. I meant what I said. You don't owe me anything and this is ... so, so nice. I really don't deserve it."

"I made it because I wanted to," he said. "I wanted you to have it."

She gradually nodded. "Thank you. It really is beautiful."

Ronon shifted in his seat anxiously. He cleared his throat. "When we get back to Atlantis, I could ... give you some sparring lessons. That way, the next time somebody goes after you, you can do something about it."

"Oh, I don't know, Ronon. I'm not really ..." Not being the most athletic person in the galaxy, she could already picture becoming one of Ronon's countless casualties of the gym.

"I'll take care of you. I promise," he said, answering her unexpressed worries as though he could read her mind.

She felt the redness returning to her cheeks. The sincerity rang true in his voice and she didn't have any doubt that he would.

"I'd like that."

"We cannot spend all day in bed, John," Teyla admonished him as he complained.
John was down on all fours, armed with only his pants and his dog tags. He was searching for his shirt that had somehow been misplaced in all the excitement. Teyla watched him appreciatively from above as she pulled on her own clothes. She smiled to herself, eyeing the faint crescents she had left on his bare back.

"Teyla, I'm on vacation ... Ah! There it is!" He fished his sweater out of from underneath a blanket that had also been tossed aside during the night. He yanked it over his head and maneuvered his arms the rest of the way in. He continued with a smirk, approaching her at the edge of the bed and letting his arms assist in making his point. "I'm on a friendly planet with no Wraith, no Genii, and no comms going off in my ear. I can't think of anything I'd rather do than stay in bed all day with you."

Teyla felt John's hand surreptitiously traveling under her skirt and she put a reluctant stop to its progress. "As wonderful as that sounds, there are things that need to be done today besides ..."

John lips started lightly rolling over her neck, making her lose focus for a moment.

"John ... we must come up for air eventually."

"Who says?" he murmured.

"I do."

John pulled away from his teasing and gave her a self-congratulatory grin. "Is that a dent I'm detecting in that imposing sex drive of yours? It is, isn't it?"

Teyla returned his playful smile and grudgingly admitted, "I am feeling most satisfied this morning."

"Thank God," John exclaimed with a quick peck on her lips. "Those were some of my best moves. If that didn't do the trick, I didn't have a plan B."

"I am very pleased with plan A," she said. "I may ask you to repeat it many times, if you are willing."

"Teyla, I'm the one trying to talk you back into bed, remember?"

A low, growl erupted from his stomach, issuing him a stern reminder that there are more important things in life than scratching that particular itch. He sighed, getting the message. "Are you hungry?"

She just raised her eyebrows at him.

"Right. Pregnant. Hungry. They're kind of a package deal, aren't they?" John shifted his focus and addressed Teyla's midsection. "I guess we've got to feed Mommy, kiddo." He looked around the tent floor with a studious frown. "Now. Shoes."

A few minutes later, they were both wearing shoes and were walking hand in hand when a scream cut through the chilled air. John spun around. Before he ran toward the desperate cries, he yelled, "Teyla, stay here!"

"John!"

"I mean it!"
Rodney set his bowl down next to them with a clatter that broke through the bubble they found themselves in. "How's the food today? You've barely eaten."

Gathering herself to answer his scrutiny, Jennifer pointed out his complete ineptitude at greeting other human beings. "Good morning to you too, Rodney, and the food is fine. Ronon and I were just talking, that's all."

"Oh, okay," McKay said. "I guess I got here just in time. Can you imagine what I'd be like if I'd missed breakfast? As it is, my blood sugar is wildly out of balance. Thank you, by the way," he directed at Ronon, "for letting me drink so much last night. My head is killing me."

While Ronon glowered at Rodney, Jennifer's brow furrowed. "Wait, wait. What time is it, anyway?"

Rodney glanced at his watch, set for Atlantis time. After approximating for the time difference in his head he said, "It's 10:30-ish. Why?"

Trying to appear casual, she shook her head. "Mason."

"What about him?" Ronon asked gruffly.

"He was supposed to meet up with me over half an hour ago."

"You two have been spending a lot of time together lately," McKay said, just before shoving a full spoon in his mouth.

"It's not what you think, Rodney." Jennifer eyed Ronon, who seemed to be getting tense.

"Are you sure?" he kept on as he chewed. "Because I think he has the hots for you and I think you ..."

"We're just friends. Besides, he's my patient."

"Please. Everybody's your patient at one time or another. It's one of the benefits of being one of the few real doctors in the entire galaxy. You'll always have plenty of business."

"Well, if you ask me business could stand to be a little slower," she said. She craned her neck around, searching for some sign of him. "Have you seen him this morning, McKay? At all?"

Across from her, Ronon went rigid and honed in on something.

"No, not yet," Rodney replied, not paying attention to the shift in mood. "He's probably still sleeping it off. I would be too, if I didn't have to eat regularly. I'm hypoglycemic. It's very important to ..."

"Mason wasn't drinking last night," Jennifer said sharply. "He knows better." All of a sudden, she had a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Quiet," Ronon barked. When the chatter ceased, they could hear it too. Behind all the noise, there was a high-pitched whine that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"What is that?" Rodney asked quietly. "It sounds like ..."

"Crying," Jennifer finished. Under her breath, she said, "Oh God!"

Without hesitation, she bolted from her chair and ran outside into the blinding snow. Ronon was on her heels, leaving Dr. McKay confounded and wondering what he had missed. He left his oh-so-important breakfast behind and followed behind as quickly as he could.
She tried to be patient. She really did. Helia had reminded her at breakfast that the Lanteans were here as their guests and it would be rude to disturb them while they rested. Setisse dutifully went about her chores. She fed the chickens and gathered the soiled clothing from the other children in need of a wash. But now she was bored. Everyone else was too busy to play, even Jinto.

She played with her dolls, Sherry and Cox. Their real names were Sheryl Greer and Dr. Wilcox. Sherry was an anthropologist who liked to talk and Cox was a psychologist who liked it better when Setisse talked. Setisse didn’t mind so much anymore, talking, although she still didn’t like to talk about her mommy. The toy versions were far less serious than their human counterparts, but they weren’t any fun this morning either. Setisse wanted Mason.

Mason had been the first person from Atlantis she’d ever talked to. He’d appeared in her prison cell and, like a story, helped to save her from the bad people who had stolen her mother away. He even put her on the Jumper that took her to safety in the great city of the Ancestors. He was a hero. He didn’t like it when she told him that, so she kept it a secret. Now, she only told him he was her friend. But inside, he was still her hero.

Careful to avoid Helia’s ever watchful eye, Setisse stole away toward the strange Lantean tents. She crept to each one in their turn, not entirely sure which one was the right one. One after another, she unzipped the doors just far enough to peek inside and every time there was no one inside. There were empty cots and half-full duffel bags. There were even a few Lantean devices and some weapons, but she didn’t even try to fiddle with them. She would be in enough trouble if she was caught here without permission as it was.

In the tent furthest away from the camp, she found him. He was still sleeping. Setisse held her breath for a moment and hesitated at the door, afraid to wake him. He looked so tired. What if he got mad? He’d never been cross with her before and she didn’t ever want him to be.

"Masy?" she whispered, staying outside. She called to him several times without so much as a twitch from him before she got braver. She really wanted to play.

Setisse unzipped the door the rest of the way and tiptoed inside. She reached tentatively for his right hand which hung loosely over the side of the cot. She touched him light like a bird and said softly, "Masy, I think breakfast might be over, but if you hurry you might still be able to get some. It’s oat mash. Jol puts honey in it. It’s really good, but it’s supposed to be a secret so you can’t tell her I told you. She might get mad."

She was sure that would have stirred him, but he remained exactly as he was.

"Masy?"

She studied the lines of his face and started to fidget, chewing on her sleeves like she knew she wasn’t supposed to.

"Masy?" she said uneasily.

Panic began to grip her young heart as she dared to touch his cheek. He wasn't moving. He wasn't moving at all.

"Masy, wake up," she begged him. "Please wake up."
The face of old Jasen flashed in her mind, in the black cell the morning he didn't wake up. And Gorella and Tomisin and Bensan and Spense. Jinto tried to make it so she couldn't see, but their faces were blue and still. They didn't get taken away, they got sick and then they didn't wake up.

"Masy..."

She saw the sinister blue tinge around Mason's lips and on his nails and she began to cry. The green in her eyes glistened like polished emeralds under the sheen of tears, racing their way down her cheeks.

Frantic, she screamed as loud as she could into the cold air. "Help! Someone help me! Masy, wake up!" Her tiny hands desperately gripped his shoulders and shook him as hard as she could. "Masy! Please, please get up! No, no, no ... you can't leave! Masy! Someone help! Help me, please!"

She had to get help. The Lanteans were here. They would know what to do. She kept screaming for help as she tore outside. The shifting of the darker lights in the tent to the staggering white nearly stole her sight, but there was a fast-moving shadow running straight for her. When she got closer, she could make out it was the Colonel. Teyla's colonel.

Before reaching him, she was already pleading for help. "Help! Colonel, help! I went to get Masy. I just wanted to play, but he won't wake up!" She slammed into his legs and he lifted her into his arms. Through her panic, she instantly felt safer when he spoke to her.

Taking her gently by the chin, he said quickly, "Okay, sweetie. I can't understand you. Look at me and tell me what's wrong."

She took a deep breath and tried to speak clearly even though the second she started, her chest began to spasm again. "Masy ... He won't ... he won't wake up! He's just ... laying there and he won't wake up!"

The colonel set her on her feet, took her by the arms, and told her very specifically, "I'm gonna go help Mason, but I need you to be brave for me, okay? Okay?"

Setisse nodded rapidly.

"I need you go find Dr. Keller, right now. Do you understand me?"

Setisse nodded again.

"Good girl. Now run."

She ran as fast as she could.
Goodbyes

John moved Mason from his side onto his back and rapidly pressed his index and middle fingers to his neck, searching for a pulse. He waited and noted the marine’s colorless pallor. Sheppard felt a faint push against his fingers and frowned. Mason was deathly still. John laid his ear to his chest, checking for the slightest sound.

Hearing nothing, Sheppard urged him firmly, "Come on, Capshaw. Give me something!"

As if he could hear his commanding officer's orders, Mason's chest gave a slight, labored rattle. The action was so insignificant that if John hadn't been directly on top of it, it might have gone by unnoticed. "Not good enough, Sergeant. You're gonna have to do better than that."

If Capshaw had been shot, John would've known exactly what to do. He and every other soldier in combat had some limited medical training. It was vital to be able to triage and patch an injury if you or someone you served with was wounded under fire. He'd put it to use more times than he cared to remember. It kept people alive long enough to get them the real help they needed, which was exactly what John had to do in this case. Although this was not a scenario he felt remotely equipped to handle, he had to keep Mason alive until Dr. Keller got there and he had every intention of doing so.

Capshaw's heart was still beating for the time being, so John concentrated on his air flow problem. Badgering him into breathing normally didn't seem like the best idea. Mason needed oxygen and the make-shift infirmary wasn't far. He could make a run for it. John despised the prospect of leaving his teammate alone while he slowly suffocated, but it didn't seem he had a choice.

Gearing up, he gave the marine a stiff pat on the arm. "I'll be right back. Just ... don't go anywhere."

John hurtled across the camp toward his goal. Once he arrived, John scanned the room and realized he had no idea where to look. Heartbeat counted the precious seconds ticking by as he tore through the doctor's equipment. She had a portable oxygen machine in here somewhere, he knew she did. Unfortunately, she also had everything else and he wasn't sure where she had it stashed. Without the luxury of time, John hurriedly began pulling the big, black bags Keller had brought. His hands dug through them furiously.

"Come on. Come on," he muttered, watching piles of things—bandages, ointments, sealed syringes, medical tape, gauze, medications by the dozens—slide across his arms. All of them useful in their own way, but none of them what he needed.

"John, what is going on?" Teyla questioned him from where she stood in the door.

His focus snapped from his goal to her. "I thought I told you to stay put."

"As you said yourself, there are no threats here. I have no need to hide. Now, tell me what is wrong."

He pursed his lips. Thump, thump, his heart reminded him. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. He didn't have time for this and she'd made her point. The only person in danger right now was Mason. "Capshaw's in trouble. Do you know where Keller keeps the portable oxygen?"

Teyla didn't hesitate. She got down on her knees and slid out a bag that was stored directly beneath the cot she had lain on just yesterday. "If Jennifer has arranged things as she does in the infirmary on Atlantis, this is where it should be."
After only a second of fishing through the contents, she pulled out a small, rectangular machine. "I believe this is it."

"Yeah," he said. In a second, he took it from Teyla and tucked it into the crook of his arm. She handed him a package containing the essential tubing and mask set that were stored with the machine.

"Go, John."

He sped back toward Mason's tent as fast as his legs could carry him. Worry dogged his stride the entire way. What if he hadn't been fast enough? He hoped he'd done the right thing by sending that kid after Keller, because oxygen alone wasn't going to be enough to bring Mason around and he didn't know what else to do.

"Why is it that when the screaming starts, we're always the ones running toward it?" McKay yelled, bringing up the rear. The scientist was doing an admirable job attempting to keep up, but Jennifer and Ronon continued to outpace him.

Jennifer didn't hear the comment. She had already spotted Setisse darting toward her with tears in her eyes, all but confirming what she feared. She'd seen the warning signs of an overdose last night and did nothing to stop it. He must've been gradually deteriorating all night.

She reached the little girl, got down on her knees, and questioned her quickly. "Is it Mason?"

Setisse verified her suspicions with a frenzied nod. The way her chin was screwed up, Jennifer doubted she would be able to say much so for expediency's sake, she stuck with things that could be answered with a yes or no. "Is he talking?"

She shook her head.

"Is he awake at all? Can he open his eyes?"

"No," Setisse cried, losing her effort at composure. Her words poured out, barely coherent. "The C-colonel ... he went there ... h-h-he said he would help."

"Colonel Sheppard's there?"

"Yes ..."

Jennifer nodded and pulled her into her arms, squeezing her tight as she blubbered into her shirt. "It's okay, Setisse. It's okay. You've done a great job."

At the girl's back, Ronon said, "What can I do?"

"I have to get to him now," Jennifer told him. Keeping her voice calm and her expression a plastic picture of calm control, she tried her best to communicate the urgency of the situation to Ronon without scaring the little girl further. "Rodney, would you see that she gets to someone who can take care of her? Helia. She can take her. Ronon, I need you to come with me."
The oxygen machine hummed next to John, pumping air through the mask and into Mason's system. What little it could, anyway. All the oxygen in the world wasn't going to help if Mason wasn't up to the task of breathing it in. Forced by her present condition to move much slower than she would have liked, Teyla caught up to him about the time he was seriously reconsidering the badgering plan.

Naturally, she asked him what had happened. She was already very aware of Mason's ongoing struggle to manage his pain issues. Teyla had been front and center during one of his toughest episodes, the one that had brought the full scope of his situation to light in the first place. John brought her up to speed with as much as he knew. She suggested trying something the Athosians often did. It was thought to aid in the healing process. She didn't know if it would help in this case, but he told her it wouldn't hurt to try. Anything was better than sitting around and watching him die.

She settled down on the bed next to Mason and lean over. She pulled the collar of his shirt taut to the side, exposing his left shoulder and collarbone. His good side, John noted. Capshaw's right shoulder was heavily scarred, running across his chest in a jagged, diagonal line all the way to his ribs on the other side - a souvenir from the Jaffa he'd never be able to shake. Teyla's fingers measured out about an inch below the collarbone and pressed deeply down.

"Pressure points?"

She nodded. "It opens the lungs. Hopefully, it will encourage him to breathe deeper."

"Let's hope so."

"Let us hope Dr. Keller arrives soon," she said.

It had only been minutes since their morning was unexpectedly shattered, but it felt like hours. John watched as Teyla worked. Every breath Mason took scared the hell out of him, because they were spaced so far apart. He worried that each one had been the last until another would come, looking slightly deeper than the pathetic attempts of earlier. Maybe Teyla was making a difference.

Sheppard nearly left her to it and went after Keller himself, when Jennifer showed up with an armful of supplies and Ronon right behind carrying more.

"Talk to me, Colonel," the doctor ordered, laying out what she'd brought with unnatural speed.

"His pulse is weak. He's barely breathing. We put on the oxygen, for all the good it did." She took her portable scanner from Ronon while he spoke and took in the readings. "You did the right thing, Colonel. That little bit probably kept him from going into full cardiac arrest," she said, interpreting what she was seeing.

Dr. Keller handed the scanner back to Ronon and went to work. With a helping hand from John, Teyla stood up and the pair stood out of the way.

"Ronon, lift his sleeve and hold that scanner right over his arm."

Jennifer held a saline bag and IV tubing in one hand and readied a needle at the crook of Mason's arm. "Now, if I can just find a vein ..." Jennifer mumbled to herself, studying the scanner monitor intently.

John looked down at his teammate's arm as Keller adjusted her aim. It was riddled with small, dotted scars where countless needles had been before. John had more than a few of those on his arms as well, but he'd never seen anything to compare with that. He'd been kept in the loop over the last six
The months of Mason's treatments, but he was getting a whole new perspective on how hard it all must be on him and not just physically. Capshaw wasn't one to talk about it, but from his point of view, John thought if he'd been pulling double duty as both soldier and guinea pig, he would've shot someone long ago.

Finding what she was searching for, Keller pushed the needle through his skin. Without missing another beat, she pulled out a tiny bottle of clear medicine and stuck a hypodermic needle through the top, filling it up.

"What is that?" John asked.

Jennifer didn't pause for a moment. "Naloxone hydrochloride. It's an antagonist to the meds Sgt. Capshaw has been on. His body's overloaded and the meds are depressing his respiratory system. He can't breathe properly and his heart can't compensate anymore. This should neutralize the active agents in his meds."

"So it's an antidote?"

"Basically," she answered. As she pushed the medicine into the IV, John had a bad feeling it wasn't going to be nearly that simple.

"How long will it take?" Ronon asked.

"We should start seeing results any minute now," the doctor said without taking her eyes off her patient. "Come on, Mason."

John felt Teyla squeeze his hand as they all waited anxiously for something to happen.

Progress came slowly, but it came. The stilted, creeping breaths gave way to something lethargic but smoother and more regular. Jennifer watched his heart rate steadily climb and let out a disappointed sigh, despite the improvement.

"He's going to need another dose, Colonel," she said, clearly unhappy with having to do so.

"What's the problem?" asked Ronon.

"I was hoping this would be enough. The more of this I give him, the worse it's going to be," she answered cryptically. "We should move him to the infirmary first. Once he wakes up, I'm going to need the room."

"Should we be talking about taking him back to Atlantis?" John asked with Teyla's hand still tucked into his.

"I don't know yet. I'm pretty well set up here, but it's a distinct possibility. I'd like to at least get him stabilized here first. Ultimately, it'll be up to him how this goes."

"Could you be more specific, Doc?"

"I'd rather not at the moment, Colonel," she said with a sidelong glance at Ronon.

"Dr. Keller, if one of my people is up a creek, I need to know," John insisted. "And if I need have my team start packing up, I need to know."

Jennifer bit her lower lip. "Colonel, the naloxone will save his life. But in doing so ... it's stripping his system of every shred of medication. Mason has an extremely high tolerance to this stuff and there
are going to be consequences to flushing it all out at once." She folded her arms sternly across her chest. "He's going to be in pain again, and he's going to get flung head first into withdrawal."

Ronon visibly blanched and turned his head.

"The naloxone will eventually wear off and most of the symptoms will dissipate with it, but ... there's no way to know how long it will take."

John clenched his jaw and nodded. His hand tightened around Teyla's. "Sounds to me like we need to start packing then. Ronon, let's get Capshaw squared away. Then we'll grab McKay and get it done."

Mason was aware long before he opened his eyes. He could feel the sweat permeating his skin, soaking into his shirt. His stomach was doing somersaults and fire branded its way along the path etched in his chest. He wanted to crawl back into the darkness and stay there, but his body had stopped listening to what he wanted a long time ago. He didn't know why he thought now would be any different.

His blue eyes, inflamed and red, flitted around the tent. His whereabouts didn't match up with his memory. He reached a quaking hand up and yanked away the oxygen mask covering his mouth and nose. In a flash, Jennifer appeared over him only to replace it right where it had been.

"Welcome back," she said.

"Jennifer ..."

"Just take it easy, Mason."

He didn't feel as though he had any choice in that matter. The slightest movement sent his stomach hurtling through an intestinal minefield. "It happened ... didn't it?" he asked through gritted teeth, muffled by the plastic mask.

She looked sad. "Yeah. I'm afraid so."

"Bad?"

She nodded. "You almost died."

Nausea overwhelmed him. He jerked the oxygen mask away and tossed it away. He rolled to the side, enduring the white hot pain stabbing through his chest, and vomited into a bucket, conveniently placed just below. His stomach heaved and spasmed as he smothered the overwhelming instinct to shout in pain. He felt Jennifer's hand on his back, her soft touch rubbing his skin. It felt so good, but he wished more than anything she wasn't there.

He wanted to be left alone. He didn't want anyone to see him like this, much less her.

When the torture session ceased, Mason returned to his back and felt unwanted tears escape and roll down his cheeks. He was so tired. So tired of all of it. He closed his eyes, wanting to simply disappear.

"Are you alright?" she asked softly.
Mason looked up at her, his features given to misery. "Maybe ... maybe, you should've just let me go."

Jennifer slammed her eyes shut in utter shock. After a second, she stammered, "You ... you don't mean that."

"Jen, I can't ..."

"I-I can't even ... That has to be ... the dumbest, most insensitive thing you have ever said."

"Maybe," he managed with a croak. He probably wasn't in the most rational or unbiased state at the moment, but he believed in confronting the truth of things, even when that truth was a hard one to face. "Maybe you don't want to admit that I have a point."

"No. What you have is nothing, Mason," she berated him. She exhaled and visibly composed herself. When she began again, her voice had dramatically softened. "I know you're hurting in just about every way a human being can hurt right now, but it isn't going to last forever."

"That's easy for you to say."

"I don't ever want to hear you talking like that again. If you'd seen that little girl's face, you'd be singing a different tune right now."

He stopped staring at the ceiling and faced her. "What are you talking about?"

"Setisse."

"What did you ..." He raised his voice and glared. "What did you do? What did you say to her?"

"She's the one that found you."

He lifted his leg and brought it down in a solid, fierce kick against the bed. "Damn it!"

He'd had a soft spot for that girl right from the beginning. When he and the others returned to Atlantis from their harrowing side trip on Earth, he'd gotten a call from Dr. Wilcox and hadn't hesitated to agree to his request.

A form of PTSD, he'd called it. The kid's mother had been hauled away by Michael and was never seen again. She'd seen people she knew die in front of her from things that could've easily been prevented - starvation, illnesses, infections. While Setisse had been in the thick of her imprisonment with the Athosians, she suppressed her reactions admirably and far beyond what anyone could've expected from a child her age. It wasn't until she reached the safety of Atlantis that the trauma of the ordeal came to the surface. She was having nightmares. She'd stopped speaking to everyone, even Jinto, who was like a big brother.

Mason had been asked to be a friendly face, a soft place for her to fall, and he'd been happy to help. Eager even. Something about her made everything else easier. Every time he managed to make her smile, it was like he'd found something that had been lost. He liked her. And, for some reason he couldn't fathom, she seemed to like him too.

"Is she okay?"

Jennifer sighed. "No, she's not."

"I need to see her," he asserted. He bore his body's protests and sat upright. "I need to tell her I'm
okay."

"You're not okay, Mason," Jennifer argued. She pushed against his shoulders attempting to get him to lie back down with no success. "Setisse is with Helia and we're getting ready to take you back to Atlantis."

"Oh no, you don't. You get her in here, Jennifer," he demanded.

The doctor dug in her heels. "Do you honestly think it will help her to see you like this?"

"With how she last saw me, it's a step up!" He pleaded with her. "Look, you can help me with this, I know you can. I can hold it together for a few minutes. If you'll just help me ... get cleaned up a little, I can make it right. Setisse has been through enough. I'm not going to be one more thing screwing her up."

"Alright," she said. "I'll do it. But only a few minutes. No more. Are we clear?"

He nodded. He finally acquiesced to her nudges and laid back down. He was feeling sick again and took a few deep breaths.

A few minutes was being optimistic, but he would have to manage.

After carrying a still-unconscious Mason into Keller's domain, they immediately set about breaking camp. John, Teyla, Ronon, and Rodney all worked together without a lot of discussion. Or any, for that matter. John watched while Ronon eyeballed the tent with a scowl. While John didn't know for a certainty what was going on in the Satedan's head, he could guess. He was just as concerned about Mason as Ronon was, but Ronon was closer to the marine on a personal level than he'd ever gotten. On top of that, Ronon had been to that hell himself and had a far better understanding of what Mason was going through than he ever could.

His arms loaded with Capshaw's cot and sleeping bag, John walked them to the jumper. He shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't accept that this was happening. Not now. Teyla followed closely behind him, carrying a couple of half-empty duffel bags. Once inside the Jumper where they'd finally managed to make peace with each other last night, he opened the storage pods in the sides and started putting things away.

"Here," he said, taking the duffels from her. Until then, they hadn't shared a word and the oppressive silence was getting to him. "I don't suppose it would make a difference if I asked you to pack your things and come with us?"

She looked at him with a deep chasm of regret on her face. "I cannot leave yet. My people need me."

John nodded. He wanted to be clear with her, but he didn't want to descend into another argument, so he kept things very cool and calm. "I still don't like it, Teyla. On that subject nothing's changed. I don't like the idea of you being here without a doctor around. I want you to come home with me."

"Soon, John. I promise," she said. "Winter is not far off and my people must make use of every hand and every second we have before the snows come in and we can no longer keep working."

"Teyla ..." John's need to be with her and with his child warred with his duty to his team. "I'm going
to stay behind."

"Sgt. Capshaw needs you to take him to Atlantis."

"I need to be here to take care of you. McKay can fly them back," he suggested, though the idea of leaving his team to deal with things on their own wasn't sitting well at all.

"No, no, no, no," Rodney said from the ramp. He held the folded remains of his tent in his arms. "McKay's not a pilot. McKay isn't flying anything."

"Why is McKay talking about himself in the third person?" John inquired. "You've flown a jumper through an asteroid belt, Rodney. Compared to that, this is nothing. All you'd have to do is fly her due southeast and line her up with the gate. Autopilot will take care of the rest."

"See, the straight line thing? I never did get the hang of that," Rodney argued as John took the tent from him and stowed it.

"Rodney, would you mind leaving us for a moment? I would like to speak with John alone, please," Teyla requested politely.

McKay quickly made himself scarce and she turned her attention onto him again.

"I know what you're gonna say, Teyla, but it's no use. I'm staying."

"You are going to Atlantis, John."

"And every moment you spent here, you would be waiting and wondering what was happening in the city," she said. "I know you, John. You can no more abandon your people than I can mine. It's part of who you are and a part of why I love you so much. I cannot hold you to a promise you could never keep."

He took her hand and pulled her close. "Teyla, you are my people. You and our baby. I belong where you are. It's my job to keep you safe."

"We are safe, John, as safe as we ever may be. The ultrasound says that I am fine and as long as I am careful there is no reason for us to fear right now."

He shook his head. He couldn't accept that. Things could change on a dime. They always did. If something happened while he was away from her, he'd never be able to forgive himself. "The only way I'm leaving this planet is if you come with me."

Teyla smiled, but it was tarnished by the sadness in her eyes. "I am the leader of this world, Colonel Sheppard. Do not force me to order you away."

"You wouldn't," he joked, but he was as emotionally jumbled as she was. Behind the grin, he was crushed knowing this was a battle he would lose.

"You cannot protect us from everything, John."

"I can try."

"I do not doubt that you would."

She buried her head against him. He held onto her tightly. Again, he was flooded with disbelief that
they were saying goodbye again so soon. Her lips reached up for his and kissed him deeply. "You may make me another promise, if you wish. One that is in your power to keep."

"Anything."

"Promise me to return as soon as you can."

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. "I thought you were going to ask for something hard."

"Colonel Sheppard is about ready to go. Teyla has her right outside," Dr. Keller said, helping him sit up. She ran a cold, damp washcloth over Mason's face and then quickly dried him off. She watched as he took some cleansing breaths, gathering his strength and willing the trembling in his hands to go away. He looked gray.

"Are you sure you're up for this?"

He nodded, probably unable to spare the energy for proper response.

"Okay," she said, still doubting how wise this was. It would do Setisse good to see that he hadn't died, that he was getting better. But Jennifer worried whether Mason would make it through this. She didn't think Setisse seeing him in that state would help anything.

The doctor slipped outside. She took one long look at the nervous little girl, who waited meek and quiet. "Okay, I think we're ready. Thanks, Teyla."

Jennifer knelt down to talk to Setisse. "Do you remember what we talked about?"

The five year-old said, "Yes."

"Mason's feeling much better, but he's still a little sick. So you have to be extra, extra gentle with him, okay?"

Satisfied for the moment, Dr. Keller led Setisse inside by the hand. Mason had been staring at the floor, but lifted his head as they entered.

He pasted on a smile and greeted the girl weakly. "Hey."

Setisse let go of Jennifer's hand and stood at Mason's knees. "Masy?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you still sick?" she asked anxiously.

"Yeah," he said apologetically. "But don't you worry. Dr. Keller, here, is going to fix me right up."

Tears welled up in Setisse's eyes and brimmed over in silvery streaks.

"Oh, hey ..." Mason said. "Don't do that, honey. Don't do that."

He reached out for her and Setisse, forgetting the advice Jennifer had supplied her with, dove into his arms and wrapped herself around his neck. Pain wrenched across Mason's features and his fists
balled up behind the girl's back. Jennifer nearly pulled her off of him. However, he recovered
quickly enough to wave her off and she stayed back.

"It's okay. It's okay," he whispered as she sobbed into him. "I'm sorry I scared you. I really am."

Jennifer watched the pair. Mason was so good with her she found herself envious. She rarely got to
see this side of him. As his doctor, she was in the unlucky position that, more often than not, she bore
witness to his worst moments. They were friends, but in some ways they were closer than most
friends ever got to be. She knew every personal detail about him there was to know and she was
typically the one on the front lines when he blew a fuse. Now she had the unenviable task of seeing
him through this as well.

Mason finally got Setisse to calm down enough to make eye contact with her again. "Look. I have to
go back to Atlantis for a while."

"Why?" Setisse asked, wiping her tears away.

"I have some things I need to take care of and then I have to get back to my job."

"You will come back, won't you?"

He managed a lackluster smile. "Yeah, I'm coming back. I still owe you that candy bar, remember?"

"I'll miss you."

"Back at ya," he said. He gave her a tentative yet heartfelt hug goodbye. "I mean it, no more
worrying. I'm gonna be fine. I'm gonna be just fine."

Dr. Keller led the little girl out to Teyla and said her own goodbyes to her friend. She missed having
Teyla around Atlantis. It was nice to have another woman around to talk to. She had a friendly
relationship with her staff, but at the end of the day they were exactly that - her staff - and there was a
certain professional distance to be maintained. And there were things she could never talk about with
the guys. Especially certain ones.

She quietly went inside. She needed to help Mason get settled in the Jumper. But as she entered, she
abruptly paused and stood still. She'd walked in on him wiping his eyes.

Knowing he'd been caught, Mason turned to her. "Jennifer, I'm asking you as a friend. For her sake
if not mine, please ... don't make a liar out of me."

The hint of despair and desperation in his voice was what really threw her. Even at his worst, Mason
would rather pick a fight than give up. That man wasn't the one sitting in front of her.

Jennifer started to wonder if he really meant what he'd said earlier about letting him die. To her
horror, somewhere in her heart, a small voice told her that he did.

"I won't," she whispered.
"It's a pretty hefty list, sir," Major Lorne informed him.

Sitting at his desk, John glanced over the list of volunteers.

"With this many hands, we could have the Athosians set up by sundown," the Major commented.

"Yeah," John said. The number of people who'd signed up to help out with the construction efforts surprised him. Days off were a hard thing to come by, and that so many were willing to give up their time to help out Teyla's people, it reminded him why he was so honored to be working with all of them.

"We'd also be making Atlantis a glorified ghost town," John pointed out. "Between the crews we've got setting up the new Alpha Site and this, there won't be anyone left to do the unimportant things. Keeping an eye on the Wraith, for example. When Woolsey signed off on this, I don't think that's what he had in mind."

Lorne chuckled and handed Col. Sheppard a second sheet from the stack he held in his lap. "I've taken the liberty of cutting things down already, sir." While John perused his 2IC's handiwork, Lorne explained. "I figured we could only fit so many in a jumper anyway, so I started grouping them into shifts according to what works best for everyone's schedules."

John bobbed his head in approval. "Nice work, Major. Somebody should really think about putting you in for a promotion."

"Interesting idea, sir," Lorne said. "Do you know who I could talk to about that?"

John shrugged, feigning ignorance. "I'll ask around and see what I can come up with."

The Major smirked. "Yes, sir."

John continued to scan through the names. Not surprisingly, he knew almost all of them. Having been here since the beginning, John knew almost everyone. Some better than others, obviously, but they all fell under his protection and he tried to at least learn everyone's names.

John stopped on a familiar one, buried among the dozens of other. "You too, Lorne?"

He watched as Evan squirmed in his chair. If he didn't know any better, he'd say his XO was starting to blush.

"Who is she?"

"Jessa," Lorne answered sheepishly.

John raised his eyebrows. "Shy Jessa?"

"She's not as shy as you might think."

"Five months without a word constitutes shy in my book, Major. But I guess she was just waiting for someone more interesting to talk to."

"Yes, sir."
John crooked his eyebrow and decided to let the friendly jab slide. It was actually good to know he wasn't the only with ulterior motives to help out the Athosians. While it certainly wasn't the sole reason he'd made these arrangements, he had to admit there was a big part of him that was doing it strictly for selfish reasons. The sooner the construction was finished at the Athosian settlement, the sooner Teyla would feel more comfortable about coming home. For that they needed extra hands, and as a generous side benefit, while the work was being done, he could be there for her. See her. Help her. They may not be able to be together in the full sense, the way he wanted, but anything was preferable to the distance. In the wake of their short coming together, John had finally gone back to sleeping in his own bed instead of haunting the couch, avoiding the disagreeable sensation of feeling like an overgrown pretzel in the morning. Still, he would sleep better when she was there with him, by his side where she belonged. Where she'd always belonged. Enticingly warm, soft, deliciously sweet, and lying close enough for him to reach out and pull her into his embrace.

"I'll contact Teyla and let her know the timetable we're looking at. I'd like to get the first group out in ..." John glanced at his watch and considered the Athosian equivalent. "Two hours. If you wouldn't mind coordinating the people on this end, Major? I have a stop to make and then I'll see that the Jumper's loaded and ready to move."

"Consider it done." Lorne stood to go. "How is Teyla, by the way? I meant to ask earlier, but with Capshaw and everything else it didn't really seem like the right time." Teyla had spent a few weeks on Lorne's team before she found out she was pregnant. Their time working together had been brief but harrowing, and their already easy friendship had grown closer.

"She's good. Really good," John said with a pensive smile and an aura of pride. "Baby's kicking up a storm."

"That's great, sir. I'm sure you'll be glad when she gets back," Lorne observed. "I can't imagine what it'd be like to have your, uh ... to have someone you care about expecting a baby and being so far away. Not easy, that's for sure."

"Yeah, well ..." John didn't know how to respond. Lorne had essentially summed it up. Not easy was probably the simplest way possible to describe how he felt.

Maj. Lorne excused himself to go about his task of people-herding. John had to get moving as well, but he found himself contemplating Evan's noticeable pause. Ever since his strange, angst-ridden conversation with Rodney, he hadn't really given McKay's rambling and semi-offensive vocabulary choices much thought. But apparently the physicist wasn't the only one with issues finding the right term to define his connection to Teyla.

Practically everything John thought of technically worked, but seemed to be a wrong fit. Girlfriend was accurate, but profoundly inadequate. Teyla was so much more to him than just another woman he'd been dating for a while. He thought of a laundry list of words that would also fit, but were either too shallow, too crass, too temporary, or too overused to be wasted on someone as special as her, the woman he adored and the mother of his child. They were all too ... something.

Not for the first time, one word stood out like a flashing, neon sign. He'd already given it serious thought and it was still very much present in his mind. But it wasn't the right time for that. He didn't harbor any doubts when it came to wanting to spend his life with Teyla and raising their child together. He cared for Teyla beyond anything he had the capacity to describe. She was what kept him breathing when it seemed nothing else was enough. She had become his life and he wanted to be that for her.

However, he did have something to prove. After what he'd already put her through, he had a lot to prove to Teyla and to himself that he was ready to be the kind of husband she needed, not the
physically and emotionally absent one he'd already been once. Teyla deserved better.

John exhaled and got to his feet. One step at a time, John. First, he needed to get her home. He took a final sip of coffee from the cup on his desk and made his way to the infirmary.

It had taken two days for the medication scrubbing the drugs from Mason's system to dissipate and take the accompanying withdrawal symptoms with it. John had been there to see him through it much as he could, but he'd had to leave on occasion to make sure his ideas were pushed forward and made a reality. McKay had done his fair share in lending support, but Ronon had a much harder time with it. It was a punch in the gut for the Satedan to witness from the other side something similar in many ways to what he'd just been through himself.

It was now Day Three since their unplanned return to the city and Dr. Keller was still monitoring his vitals. Sergeant Capshaw sat propped up in the bed, extending his arm out to Rachel Cohen, one of the more friendly nurses on Keller's staff. She also had a light touch with a needle that John and the other frequent fliers appreciated. She sat by his side working and benignly chatting with him. John could've told her not to bother. Mason wasn't listening. His eyes, sunken in and exhausted, blankly stared off into nothing. Blood destined for a centrifuge and scrutiny under a microscope ran from a thin tube in his arm into vial after vial, and he was completely detached from what was being done to him.

Sheppard hung back and waited for Rachel to finish before he approached.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

There was a beat of empty silence as Mason peeled his glazed stare back from whatever void he'd found and turned to face his CO. "Wanting out of here, sir."

"I can't say I blame you. There's not really much to look at in here, is there?"

"No, sir."

John sat down in the chair next to the bed. "Have they given you an idea of when you can go?"

Mason let out a bitter huff. "Probably as soon as they tattoo 'Property of Atlantis Infirmary' on my ass. Seeing as I've already got a tracking device, I figure that's the next logical step."

John gave a smirk. "Thinking about going AWOL?"

"Absolutely, sir. Don't think I'll get far without someone noticing, though. I am Lab Rat #1 around here."

"A pretty dubious title."

"You said it," Mason agreed with a nod.

Capshaw adjusted his position to sit taller and skillfully smothered a wince.

"How's the pain?" John asked.

"I'll live."

It wasn't what the marine said that made John look twice at him, but how he said it. In the days previous, Mason's tormented shouts had echoed through the infirmary and down the hall. John had been on hand to witness him being restrained - helped after an SO was flung to the ground - when,
feverish and desperate, Mason started thrashing around. John understood why Mason's answer sounded tired, but there was also a hint of ...

Disappointment.

John tried to hoist the anchor that had just dropped in his stomach. "Well, I need you out of here soon. We've got that Call of Duty tournament coming up and I can't have one of my wingmen drop out."

A small smile crept into the corners of Mason's mouth. "Did you hear? Radek's got this one."

"What?"

"Yeah, Chelios had to drop out so Zalenka offered to play host this go-round."

John nearly had to pick himself up off the floor, trying to picture the diminutive, intellectual scientist in on one of their more testosterone saturated guys nights. "Does he even own an Xbox?"

Mason shrugged. "Guess so. Santiago tells me he's a whiz at playing soldier."

John sobered a little at the idea of U.S. Military soldiers losing a war game to a Czech scientist. "When I get back, we may need to grab Ronon and put in some extra practice. Radek, Lorne, Santiago, doesn't matter. They're all going down this time."

"When you get back?"

"Yeah," John said, realizing he hadn't told him yet. "We've got some help organized to get the Athsians set for the winter. I'm gonna be spending a lot of time coming and going to help out for the next while."

Mason nodded, understanding John's need to be with his family. "Sorry I can't go with you, sir."

"You just get yourself squared away," John advised.

Before leaving for the Jumper bay, John dropped by Dr. Keller's office. The door was locked, but he heard voices inside so he gave it a few firm taps. Carson opened it up for him, and McKay, who was on a fantastic rant, didn't stop for air while John came in. The door was promptly closed again behind him.

"I'm not an M.D., Carson! Not only are you asking me to play in an area where even I have to admit I have no expertise, you want me to do it another language? Medical jargon that's only capable of being partially translated? Why can't you just wave one of those ... Go'auld healing devices over him like we did with Sheppard? I mean, there are plainly geographical issues and you'd need someone with the genetic marker to actually do it, but ..."

"Rodney!" Carson stopped him midstream. "The SGC already tried that when Sergeant Capshaw sustained his initial injury. It did a great deal to help, but there's only so much they're capable of fixing. Everything ya want to know is in the file."

"Oh." McKay sounded sheepish. "I suppose I should ... read it."

Jennifer wore her most patient, placating smile. "We came to you first because you're the best, Rodney. If you don't think you can do it," she paused with a long, purposeful glance to Beckett, "I'm sure Dr. Zalenka would be happy to help."
"Right," Carson added, raising his eyebrows. He continued on in a flattering vein. "We couldn't impose on ya, Rodney. Your time is far too valuable to waste on helping out a friend."

"And teammate," Jennifer finished.

"Oh, aye! Teammate," Carson said. He took Keller's hand-off and continued the assault on Rodney's well guarded sense of decency. "Someone who's watched your back for the last six months, risked his neck to bring ya home safe and sound."

"Remember when that tiger thing had you cornered in a tree and Mason had to be the bait to give you time to get away?" Jennifer reminded him.

"That was one of Sheppard's plans!" Rodney gestured emphatically toward John, who watched the whole conversation play out with amused interest.

"Well, it was Mason that came back limping," Jennifer rebutted.

Rodney scowled. "Fine! Enough with the moral tag teaming. I... I'll do my best. But don't go expecting miracles!"

"Of course, we will," Carson replied with a grin. His gaze shifted to John. "Now, what can we do for ya, Colonel?"

"I just wanted to see if we had a game plan for Capshaw in mind before I headed out, but now you've got me curious."

"We're working on some alternatives," Jennifer explained. "Carson and I have a few more traditional treatments we're trying to tweak to suit his needs, but it's pretty slow going. It's highly unlikely we'll ever be able to repair the muscle and nerve damage at the source of the problem, so our main focus is in finding a way to kill the pain."

"Yeah..." John waited for her to keep going. This was all old news to him.

"There are ways to do that. I mean, we could go in and sever the nerve endings along the injury site right now. But it would leave the entire area completely paralyzed and the damage in Mason's shoulder and chest is... it's quite extensive. He'd lose everything, his career, his functionality. He might be able to learn to live with the disability, but—"

John nodded and she pursed her lips.

"Unfortunately, Colonel, where we currently are, that's looking like the plan most likely to succeed. This is the primary reason Mason has been on pain meds for so long. For all their negatives, they at least allow him to live his life."

"So where does McKay fit in?" he asked.

Jennifer took in a deep breath and exhaled. "There are a number of Ancient devices we've been able to identify from the database that might work."

"Raging long shots, she meant to say," Rodney cut in.

"The problem is that the database is incomplete. It's full of symbols the linguists can't make heads or tails of, so what information we have is sketchy at best. Some of them, we aren't precisely sure what they do. Some appear to have been still in the experimental stages when the Ancients left Atlantis."
"So given Rodney's insane propensity for experiments ..." John steered her.

"... he's just generously agreed to start running practical tests on them," she finished.

Carson spoke. "If we can determine what these devices are doing from an engineering standpoint, we can then extrapolate the results we get to determine what effect they may have on the human body."

"Okay," John said with approval. There were plans and experiments and arm-twisting going on. Good to know. Especially the arm-twisting. Things were happening, but he couldn't help but point out the fly in the ointment. "All this sounds great. Really. But it also sounds very time consuming. What's Capshaw supposed to do in the meantime?"

Jennifer's face grew serious. "We're still working on that. Like I said, Colonel, we don't really have a lot of options."

John nodded. That part didn't sound so good.

"Keep me informed, will you?"

"Of course, Colonel," she assented.

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After that, the days ran by and blurred together. John lived a commuter's lifestyle, his two worlds separate but always demanding on his limited time. Every day when he landed in the Athosian camp, he came with a keen sense of purpose, determined to get as much work completed as possible in the amount of time had before he was forced to call it a day and return his people to Atlantis. When he re-entered the ancient city, the events of the day had inevitably been reported and turned into a stack on his desk needing to be tended to. It was all made worth his while, though, every time he descended the ramp of the jumper and laid eyes on Teyla. No matter how worn down he was getting or how much he had on his mind, the sight of her never failed to draw a smile.

John sent his shovel into the ground with a labored grunt. He and the other five guys with him were digging a lengthy but relatively shallow hole to lay down the piping to the river. It was taxing work, but at least they were getting to it before the ground froze and it was rendered effectively impossible. They'd been at it for a while though, and John's arms were feeling the strain. Even in the chilly air, his brow dripped with sweat and his men were all in a similar state.

A short time ago, this planet—Lairius, it was called, according to the Ancient database—had been an empty planet whose original inhabitants were culled into extinction over ten thousand years ago. It was in an isolated sector of the galaxy and there was no evidence the Wraith had returned since, which made this planet as safe as they could ever hope, so long as the Athosians kept their location a strict secret. Partially melted snowfall from the previous night, lay in patches across the ground. The race with a long winter was on, and if they were gonna get the Athosian set up to ride it out, they needed to hurry. Their goal was to complete construction on the two remaining larger buildings and get running water piped in from the nearby river.

"Martinez, how's it coming?" he shouted toward the nearest building.

"We're good, Colonel!"
Lt. Martinez and his cohorts were taking care of the plumbing on the occupied end of things as John and the rest continued in the direction of the river.

"Let's give it another ten and then we'll take a time out!" he yelled.

"Yes, sir!"

John hated that this was a rush job. He wished they had time to properly do the work. They could bring some bigger equipment through the Gate, scout out and dig a well, but with the changing of the season breathing down their necks, this would have to do. As he continued the repetitive chore, he lifted his head and peered out across the campsite searching for Teyla. It was hard to find time for the two of them when they were both so caught up in the business of getting things done, but John tried to at least connect with her during a quick meal or when he had a break.

He had other reasons for keeping one eye on her if he could. Besides the appealing view, he also had caught her trying to do things which, in his admittedly nervous and biased paternal mindset, he thought might be too much for her in her condition. Part of his zeal to finish the piping stemmed from his seeing her, on one his first visits, carrying buckets of water to and from the river. He kept watch so he could step in and do what she needed doing without fraying his nerves and in the process, trying not to aggravate hers.

John pinpointed Teyla as she was heading out on her own toward her tent and followed after her. By the time he got there, Teyla was already laying down. She rested on her side, her legs curled slightly and her hand resting on her growing belly.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She gave him a patient look. "I am fine, John. I am merely ..." She paused and took in a few elongated breaths, letting her eyes shut for a moment. "I am very tired."

"Is there anything you need? It's almost lunchtime. I could run and see if I can grab something from Jol without getting hit."

The recent influx of people had the feisty woman in an uproar lately. John had stressed to her that she didn't need to prepare food for everyone. They'd brought along plenty of MREs to avoid this very scenario, but she had intractably insisted that no friend to the Athosians was ever going to eat one of those abnormal, packaged creations on her watch. John wondered if Jol was beginning to regret that decision because she'd become pretty dicey to be around.

"That is alright, John. I will eat later."

As Teyla's eyes shut once more, John sat down on the bed next to her. His right hand cupped the side her face and his thumb lightly caressed her cheek. She was so exquisitely beautiful.

"Are you sure I can't do anything?" He was perfectly willing to defend against a flying ladle if it was for her.

She peeked out at him and smiled a little. "I would like it if you could lie with me for a while. Just until I fall asleep?"

"Sure."

Teyla scooted over to make more room and he sidled up against her, leaving his boots, caked with wet grass and mud, dangling off the side. He didn't like being as sweaty and dirty as he was and so close to her, but if she minded, she didn't say. John slid his left arm under her neck and his right arm
encircled her waist. As she rested her head, his hand stroked her abdomen and she serenely hummed her approval. He felt a subtle ripple under his tender touch and he grinned.

"It's naptime, baby," he directed his deep voice toward his active son or daughter below.

Without opening her eyes, Teyla smiled too, obviously relishing this rare moment of quiet between them. "I do not sleep the same without you, John."

"Me neither." He planted a few affectionate kisses in her hair. Pressed against him, he could feel the tightness in her back. He hated seeing her so tired she could hardly keep her eyes open.

He moved his right arm between them to massage her back and kept his voice low. "You don't need to work so hard, Teyla. We have loads of people. We'll pick up the slack. You should take it easy."

"I think, John, you would prefer it if I were to remain locked away in padded cell for the remainder of my pregnancy. Perhaps then you would be satisfied of my safety."

When he took a long moment to playfully consider the idea, she gave him a swift elbow to the ribs. They both laughed, and when that subsided, they let the silence of their temporary solitude sink back in. Soon, she moaned in appreciation of his movements and John nuzzled her neck, savoring her scent.

"I'm trying, Teyla," he said quietly. "I really am. But I can't help the way I feel."

"I understand your worries, John. I share them," she replied. "And if I felt for a moment that my being here would place our child in danger, I wouldn't hesitate to return to Atlantis."

Teyla took his hand in hers and replaced it in the spot where their little one kicked inside her. "This baby is a gift to me, John. When I lost my first child, I believed it would kill me. And then you were there. You, a man I have loved for so long, gave me the chance to be a mother. The chance to have the family I have always dreamed of finding but never dared hope that I would. It is a heavy burden to place on such small shoulders, and if I must do less than I am accustomed for a time in order to protect our family, then so be it. I am very mindful of what my body tells me I can handle, John. Please, know that I will do everything in my power to keep this child - our child - safe."

John adjusted his left arm underneath her head, gently encouraging her to move from her side to her back so he could see her properly. Their hands locked again on her belly.

"I know you will. But there's so much out there that we can't control. I—" A knot tightening around John's throat as he recalled that fateful day and the aftermath that had nearly severed their relationship. "I can't stop thinking about ... when you fell. I thought I'd lost you and the baby both in a split second. It replays over and over in my head. It happened so fast, Teyla ... and I couldn't stop it."

Teyla raised her hand to trace her fingers across his cheek. "John ..."

"I took it out on you and I'm so sorry for that. You have no idea how much I regret what I said and that I let you go. But you're wrong about one thing, sweetie. I didn't give you anything. You gave me the gift. This ..." His hand tightened around the tiny life they had created together. "This is something that I never thought I'd have, and that you're the one I get to have it with? Teyla, I ..."

John's words completely failed him, but it didn't matter. Teyla reached around his neck and brought him into a kiss, one in which he tried to communicate just how much she was cherished by him.

Even as her lips pulled back, her fingers continued their hypnotizing, soothing dance across his
cheek. "I love you, John, but we cannot dwell on what may come. As you said, we cannot control everything. All we can do is safeguard what we have to the best of our ability, and hope that whatever happens we are strong enough together to overcome it. We under currently under no threat from the Wraith or anyone else who would wish us harm, and my carrying water buckets, or assisting the work effort in what small ways I am still able, will not hurt our child. I hope you can find some measure of peace with that. More than anything, I pray our child will be born healthy and into the arms of two parents who love each other."

John nodded against her gentle fingertips. "I do, Teyla. I do love you. So much."

He reached down where she lay against him and kissed her one more time. "I'm sorry I'm ruining your nap."

A snicker found its way from Teyla. "I may yet manage one, John. After all, you are here. This may turn out to be the best nap I've had in quite some time."

Teyla settled back into his arms and John thought she might've been right. It was only minutes before her gentle breaths evened out and slowed. He hated to pull away from her, but he had to return to the others. He reminded himself that it was ultimately the best thing to be with her again in a real way. The faster he and the others finished, the more nights he could remain and hold her as long as he wanted.

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John scanned through Major Teldy's latest mission report from M86-245. Without lifting his eyes from what he was hurriedly reading, he took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. Setting the cup back down never to be touched again, he plowed his way through the paperwork Woolsey kept insisting was a necessary part of keeping Atlantis afloat. John was pretty sure it was some incredibly advanced Ancient tech keeping the city up, but to each his own, he supposed. Either way, he had to get as much done as he could before returning to Lairius or he'd never hear the end of it.

A tap at his door drew his attention. Dr. Keller stood in the entrance looking as tense as piano wire. This couldn't be good.

"Colonel, I know you're busy but ..."

"Have a seat." He motioned to the chair across from him.

Before sitting, Jennifer pulled the door closed behind her. She prefaced what she'd really come to talk about a polite question about his unofficial ongoing mission to Lairius.

"How are things coming with the Athosians?"

"We're getting there," he stated. "I'm hoping we can wrap this up in a few more days."

"Good," she said, her thoughts clearly somewhere else. "That's ... good."

He leaned back slightly in his chair, folded his arms over his chest and waited for her.

"We need to talk about Sgt. Capshaw," she said tightly.

"What about him?"
"You wanted me to keep you informed." She sighed. "He's refusing treatment. He won't let anyone near him."

Puzzled, John said, "That doesn't sound like him. What's going on?"

"I told you that Dr. Beckett and I are working as hard as we can to find a better, more permanent solution, but there's no way to know when or if we'll find something. In the meantime, I recommended that we try a new course of meds. I tried talking to him, but he ... he balked."

"Well," John started. "I can't say that I blame him, Doc. You've had him walking a tightrope with those things and he just fell off. In a pretty big way."

"And I completely understand why he would be reluctant to try again, Colonel," she insisted. "Believe me when I say, I'm more the aware how much of a toll this is taking on him. Carson, Rodney, and I aren't slowing down on the other options, but as of this moment it's the only way to get things back to being manageable. Without pain medication of some kind ..."

"He can't go out in the field. I know," John finished. He couldn't have Capshaw offworld in too much pain to do his job. It could get him or someone else killed.

"I really am trying to do the right thing by him. If Mason can't perform his duties, it's only a matter of time before he has to be sent home," she unnecessarily reminded him. "He doesn't want that. No matter what he's saying right now, he doesn't."

John pursed his lips. Capshaw had never really replaced Teyla, but he'd been on John's team for over six months. They'd been through a steady stream of strange Pegasus adventures since then and he'd managed to make his own place. They may not have started out on the best of footing, but the two men had eventually learned to be friends. John stared into the hard truth that if Mason was unable to pull his weight any longer, as his CO, John would be the one to have to make the call to send him home.

"What do you need from me?"

"Just talk to him. He'll listen to you," she told him with a hint of desperation in her tone. "I can't seem to get through to him anymore."

John shook his head. "Doc, it's not my place to be giving medical advice. That's your job. As it is, it sounds like he's made his decision."

"Well, it's the wrong one!" she blurted out.

Momentarily surprised by the strength of her reaction, John came back equally as strong.

"What is it you want me to do? Strap him down so you can shove a needle in his arm? Sergeant Capshaw has been living with this a long time. I hate to play devil's advocate here, but it seems to me he knows the consequences of his choices even better than you do. We may not like it, but we have to respect his right to make his own decisions. I know you two have gotten close, but you can't allow your personal feelings to influence your judgment."

She stared at him. "It's not my judgment I'm worried about."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She hesitated, but eventually went on quietly. "He ... said something on the planet, right after he woke up. His state of mind has me a little concerned. I think a few visits to Dr. Wilcox would be in
his best interests."

John frowned at the implications of what she was saying.

"I'll talk to him," he declared.

"And?"

"And ... if I think it's warranted, I'll send him to Wilcox," John said with a curt nod before he went on. "I wouldn't get too worried just yet, Doc. He probably just needs some time to get his head around things. The best thing you can do for Capshaw is find a solution to the problem. If he doesn't want anymore drug treatments, then I suggest you come up with something else. Fast."

After Keller left, John glanced at his watch. He was doing that a lot lately. He days lived and died by the schedule he kept. It was currently nudging him toward the Jumper bay, but he had another matter that needed attention first.

A transporter ride and a short walk found him at Mason's door. Mason was usually a very put together, almost idealized picture of a soldier. So when the door slid open revealing a disheveled, unshaven man looking an awful lot like Sgt. Capshaw, John was taken aback to say the least.

John took one look at him and said, "Trying out a new look?"

Mason glanced down at his plain white tee and loose jogging pants. "I suppose."

"Do you mind if I ..."

"Oh yeah. Sure."

Mason stepped aside and ushered him through the door before it slid shut behind them.

John had only been here a few times. He'd forgotten how spartan Mason liked to keep things. Not that he blamed him. John had kept his old quarters in much the same way before he moved in with Teyla. Mason had his laptop and a few photos next to the bed - a photo of Mason and his mom taken shortly before he joined the SGC, and a candid shot of the team and a few of his previous team led by Major Santiago. Beyond that, Mason's guitar sat alone in a corner and the TV, which was currently playing a DVD of John Wayne's True Grit rounded out the lot.

"You turn your radio off? I tried to contact you," John said, while Mason turned down the TV.

"Yes, sir. Sorry," he apologized.

"It's fine."

"I guess I figured with my being ... and you offworld it'd be okay," Mason explained. "Speaking of which, aren't you supposed to be ..."

John nodded. "I'm heading out when we're done here."

"Oh."

"Yeah," John said.

The two of them stood awkwardly, John because he was considering the best way to go about this, and Mason likely because his CO wasn't in the habit of paying social calls when he was meant to be somewhere else entirely.
"I got a visit from Dr. Keller," John began.

Comprehension immediately dawned on Mason. "I'll bet you did, sir."

"You know why I'm here?"

"Pretty sure. Jennifer and I have had a few loud discussions about it."

"You realize you're tying her hands? And maybe mine too?" John asked. "As it is, I'm gonna have to bench you. Indefinitely. Until this gets resolved one way or another, I'm really sorry but I can't use you."

"I realize that," Mason assured him. "And with all due respect, Jennifer's hands have been tied for a long time. She's just too damn stubborn to admit it."

"Well, there's a lot of that going on around here," John wryly pointed out.

"It can be contagious, sir," Mason admitted with a smile.

John hesitated before going on. "She suggested you might benefit from a talk with Dr. Wilcox."

From his expression, John could see he wasn't all that shocked to hear it.

"What do you think?"

Mason folded his arms, the flesh around his jaw noticeably tighter. "I think I'm tired and I think Jennifer means well. Sir, this isn't breaking any new ground for me. I've done this before. A lot. I've gone long stretches without meds. I'm fine."

John wasn't entirely satisfied, but he decided to let it be for now. Capshaw did seem off, but John was hoping he'd been right that the marine just needed a few more days to get himself sorted out. "Just take it easy and try to get some rest, Mason."

"I'd like that, sir. I really would," Capshaw said almost as though he was talking to himself.

The way he responded sounded like a normal response to his advice, but something about it smacked of something different, and John was left feeling less than sure that he'd done the right thing.

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John stood on top of yet another skeleton of an unfinished roof and briefly wondered if he should've gone into construction instead of the military. It certainly didn't hold the excitement of a Jumper or an F-302, but he certainly couldn't knock the view from up here.

It was the last roof for them. They'd finished the second of the three buildings two days ago and below Jol was still busy prepping food for them, but now she was making good use of the running water. All this work and going back and forth from place to place was so close to being finished, John could taste it. He could practically taste Teyla as well, spurred on at the idea of finally taking her back to the home they'd made together.

From the ground, Ronon handed up the next bundle of beams to be hammered into place. Then the action-starved warrior sprang upward, got a good grip on the beam John was balanced on, and climbed up like a monkey through a tree.
"There's a ladder over there," John pointed out to him.

Ronon crouched down and shot him a sly look before picking up a hammer of his own.

Ronon was unaware of the appreciative looks he was receiving from a few of the women on the ground, but John didn't miss them. "Looks like you've got a few admirers."

When Ronon didn't know what he was talking about, John indicated the twittering onlookers below. Ronon just uttered a disinterested, "Huh."

"Not your type?"

"Not really," Ronon grumbled.

John slammed a few nails home, thinking to himself. "You dating anyone?"

The Satedan glanced up. "No. Why?"

"Just curious. I haven't heard you talk about anyone, so I just wondered."

Ronon remained stoically silent as he bent again to his work.

"Got your eye on somebody?" John asked.

A barely, perceptible nod was all he got back.

"Anybody I know?"

Ronon's chin contorted in indecision. He eventually mumbled, "Jennifer's kind of different."

John's eyebrows went sky high. This was news to him. "Yeah? You and the doc?"

"It's not ..." Ronon said. "I haven't asked her yet."

"Ronon," John started uneasily. He didn't really think it was place to interfere, but he didn't want Ronon getting hurt. "I don't know, buddy. I think she might have something going with Capshaw. I don't know anything for sure. They just seem like they've been hanging out a lot and I've been getting that kind of a vibe ..."

"She says they're just friends."

"Oh. Okay." Still not convinced, John decided it was best to let it go. "If that's what she says, then that's what she says."

Ronon gave him a silencing look. Right. Talking was overrated.

They put their heads down and worked clear through lunchtime. John wasn't taking breaks any longer. With every hand now concentrating on the one remaining project to be finished, their pace sped up exponentially. The base for the roof was completed and they immediately applied the weather seal.

At one point, Jinto called up to him and told him that Teyla had been asking for him.

"I'll be right down," he called back.

Not exactly sure where Teyla was, Jol took a moment—a calm one, rare for her—to point him
toward Teyla's tent. As he ambled in that direction and thinking of the time, he figured Teyla had
needed another nap. Or he hoped that maybe she was putting her feet up and taking it easy as he'd
asked, but that seemed unlikely.

"Teyla?" he spoke out as he approached the tent.

He threw back the flap and paused. Teyla was sitting on her bed. There were two black bags sitting
open, partially full. John peered around the room and noticed the change in the interior. The few
belongings Teyla had brought to this planet with her were all packed. She was in the process of
folding up the first of the blankets on her bed when he had entered.

John felt an electric sense of excitement flood through him. "Teyla, does this mean ..."

She smiled at him. "I have spoken with Halling and made arrangements. And I thank you, John. My
people will be safe and comfortable this coming season because of what you've done here."

"Well, I didn't do it just for them," he admitted finally stepping inside. Canvas swished shut behind
him.

"I know," she said. "But I am no less grateful. It is time I returned to Atlantis, John. To be with you."

He stood still. He'd waited for so long to hear her say those words, he wasn't sure he wasn't
dreaming or something. "You're sure?

Her brow furrowed, clearly puzzled by his reaction. "Unless you would rather I stayed?"

"No!" he exclaimed, snapping out of his momentary lapse of brain function.

She laughed lightly. "It has been some time since I've been offworld with you, John. Is this how you
negotiate with every leader you come across now? You get what you desire and then talk them out
of it?"

He smirked. "It's not my best method. Do you know anybody good at negotiating? I guess I could
use some tips."

Teyla set the partially folded blanket on the bed and rose to stand against him. Her hands wandered
up and down his arms. She smiled at him, an air of seduction wafting between them. "I may have a
tip or two I would be willing to share."

Feeling a definite willingness to share popping up, John cleared his throat. "I'd like that, Teyla. The
sharing, I mean."

Teyla's hands abandoned his arms, slipping to the warmth beneath his shirt. She touched his skin.
Their eyes locked and slowly their lips drew together as though pulled by magnets.

Fueled by their joy at being able to return home in one another's arms, what began as a playful kiss
soon became a frenzied need. John's tongue danced with hers in a wild and passionate give and take,
while he grasped great handfuls of her skirt and lifted them upward. Teyla's hands were occupied as
well, working his belt loose and attacking the zipper keeping him contained.

A noise from outside broke through John's fevered mind. Between heaving breaths and kisses he
couldn't seem to stop despite himself, he muttered, "I really shouldn't ... be doing this. I'm ...
technically on duty and ..." he moaned as Teyla's questing hands encroached on his manhood and
rubbed. Struggling to maintain a thought, he managed, "I don't think the military commander of
Atlantis is ... aahhh ... supposed to be having quickies with world leaders."
Teyla continued her unfair persuasions and murmured in a silky voice, "We may stop if you wish."

"No ... no ..." he breathed. His eyes rolled into the back of his head. "We can't ..."

"I would hate to put you in an awkward position, John. Perhaps you are right. We should stop."

John gritted his teeth and backed her toward the bed. "Teyla, if I'm not inside you in about ten seconds, I'm gonna have a whole other awkward position to worry about."
A small part of Teyla's consciousness registered the sizzling sound of water coming from the next room. It was a sound she was quite familiar with. She luxuriated in the warmth and comfort of once again being in the bed she shared with John. It was a far cry from the one she had been sleeping on recently. As she slowly began to stir, she wondered if perhaps she hadn't been spoiled in her years of living in Atlantis. Upon her return, she'd eagerly discarded the bulky clothing that had been needed in the colder temperatures of Lairius. At six months pregnant, her body was growing increasingly cumbersome almost by the day, and in the temperature controlled environment inside the city, she was able to enjoy thinner fabrics that flowed off of her and made her condition seem like less of a burden.

Not that John had allowed her to enjoy them for long.

A satisfied smile emerged as she peeked out from behind her eyelids and glanced down at her naked form underneath the silky, soft sheets. Although not especially eager to move, she considered joining John in the hot shower, another extravagance that she had sorely missed. The decision was taken out of her hands, however, when she heard the water cease.

A few short minutes later, John came into view with a towel loosely knotted around his waist. Teyla lay still, secretly savoring his muscular chest with its generous sprinkling of hair that her fingers loved to play in. He let the towel drop and set it on top of the dresser, reaching for a fresh pair of underwear.

She remembered fondly the first time she awoke to John getting ready to leave for the day. In a hotel room on Earth, circumstances had been very different, but she'd felt no less sure that he was the sight she longed to wake to every morning. They had been friends, then. Friends who had just taken a small but significant step toward something more rarefied and full, but still just friends.

With a nostalgic glint in her eye, she recalled that his modesty had been a much higher priority to him back then.

John quickly slipped his dog tags back over his head and retrieved his pants. As he pulled them up into their proper place, he turned toward the bed and spotted her shamelessly admiring him.

With a goofy grin, he said, "You Athosians. You talk a good game about harmony and balance, and following the demands of your heart, but in the end you all enjoy a good peep show just like the rest of us."

Teyla laughed at his interesting observation.

"See anything you like?"
"Very much," she replied. "I believe there are few who wouldn't."

John answered with an unusual, almost bashful hint in his voice. "Well, this show's just for you."

"I am relieved to hear it," she said with a smile.

He came over and gave a quick peck on the lips. His freshly shaven face felt smooth and soft against her, and his aftershave had always made her a little weak in the knees. To her mild disappointment, he returned to the dresser for his shirt. His hands worked the buttons on his uniform as he informed her of what was on his agenda.

"I wish I had more time this morning — I already put on some water for your tea, by the way — but now that I'm working here full-time again, Woolsey's got a heap of so-called improvements he'd like to discuss. So, basically, breakfast is shot and you never know how lunch is gonna go around here. If it's not one thing, it's usually another."

Teyla tried not to look disappointed, but she could see from his reaction that she hadn't succeeded. A small, perhaps irrational, part of her had feared that after living so long on his own here he may have learned to live without her. She worried that she wouldn't have a place in his life. For a long time, she had tried to make herself believe he no longer had a place in hers. Was it such a stretch to believe that he may have done the same?

John gave her the briefest of looks. It may have only been an idea passing between the two of them, but she imagined that she could feel his lips grazing her cheek. It felt so real and intimate that it left her breathless. In the moment she questioned the strength of their connection, it was almost a force in and of itself, reassuring her that it was still there as strong as ever. For that instant, she felt him so keenly it was almost tangible.

"Teyla, are you okay?" his voice broke through.

Blinking away the heady experience, she reached through the fog to assure him. "Yes, John. I am fine."

"I was thinking while you were away. We never did get to properly christen the kitchen, did we?"

"What did you have in mind?" she asked.

John sat down on the bed next to her and began with his socks and combat boots. Teyla pushed herself up from her elbows, pulling the blankets up along with her. John leaned in and lightly brushed her cheek with his fingertips.

"I thought maybe I could cook us dinner. Just the two of us. We could dig in here, maybe watch a movie and make a night of it."

Teyla blinked, feeling an echoed resurgence of the intense feeling of a moment ago. "You can cook?"

"Well ... I'm no Bobby Flay, but I can whip us up a thing or two."

Breathing deep, Teyla smiled. "I'd like that."

"Good." His gorgeous face erupted in a wide closed-mouth grin. "It's a date."

He turned back to tying his shoes and Teyla rested her head on his shoulder. Although the feeling had passed, her head was still swimming.
"Got another e-mail from Dave," he told her.

She brought up her head with caution. She could see straight again. Exhaling, she asked, "How is he? It has been some time since I have heard any news of him."

"He's good," John reported. "At least it sounds that way. Says he's been working on something big, but he's keeping pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing. I think he's just trying to get back at me."

Teyla rolled her eyes. The dynamics between John and David were infinitely complex. They loved each other as brothers do, but they also always seemed to be at odds about one thing or another. From what she had observed in other sibling relationships, like Rodney and his sister, Jeannie, Teyla suspected that it was common. That, however, made it no less exasperating.

"Mainly, he wanted to get your opinion on the baby stuff and he asked for any last minute requests you had before he has to get it all delivered to Petersen."

Teyla wrinkled her forehead in thought. John had gotten his hands on a few catalogs for her to use for reference and she'd already made several selections before she'd left the city with her fellow Athosians. "I have already chosen a crib, a changing table, infant clothes ..."

"I got some toys," he added, smiling to himself. Then he frowned. "Diapers?"

"Yes, diapers," she confirmed with mild annoyance. Diapers were one of the few items John had had a firm opinion on. She tried to explain to him how cloth diapers worked and demonstrated how simple they were to fold and sanitize, but he had refused to budge. "Beyond that, I believe we have everything else we need for the nursery."

Fully dressed now and focused on her, his hand took to gently stroking her thigh. Even through the blanket, his soft touch managed to send a thrill up her spine.

"Well, take one last pass through the catalogs to be sure. We just need to get anything else to Dave on the next transmission. The Daedalus will be headed back this way soon and this'll probably be our last chance to get anything from Earth before the baby's born."

"I will."

John leaned in and gave her an amorous kiss. His lips slid across hers as though he was planning on resuming where they had left off last night, but before either of them got too involved and weak in the knees, he pulled back.

"Don't worry so much about just what we need. If you see something you want, even it's completely pointless and impractical, I want you to get it."

She smiled and cupped his cheek. He knew her so well. "I will see what I can do."

They sat together for a few more moments before John checked his watch and groaned. "I have to go."

"I will see you here for dinner?"

"Dinner," he confirmed. After stealing one last kiss, John sighed. "I missed this, Teyla."

"As did I," she said softly. "It is good to be home."

Soon after he left, the teapot on the stove whistled and Teyla, wrapped in a silky bathrobe, took her
morning tea onto the balcony. The morning sun had only just begun to shine, but it lit up the towers
in an awe inspiring feast of color, draped inside the rich hue of the ocean beyond. Being able to sit
outside in the wind and the salty ocean air knowing that her people were safe and comfortable held
for her a value beyond measure.

She had missed all this. But most of all, she had missed John.

Mason felt a large, unyielding hand clamp down around his foot. He reacted swiftly to the unsettling
sensation of being literally dragged out of sleep—a restless sleep, but sleep nonetheless. His eyes
flew open and he sat up as he was pulled out of bed, reaching for his attacker. But the burly Satedan
only doubled his efforts and Mason wasn't able to put a stop to his momentum. Hopelessly tangled in
his sheets, he met the floor with an emphatic thud.

"Ronon," he grunted, his mind and body reeling from the sudden shifting of gears. "You bastard."

"Morning."

Mason peered up as Ronon towered over him. At one time, it would've been an intimidating
experience. Ronon Dex was the nightmare of every new addition to the Atlantis expedition, but
Mason had left those days behind a while ago. In the wake of what was no doubt his friend's unique
way of bullying him out of his self-imposed isolation, all he could properly muster was halfhearted
annoyance.

Mason stretched his fingers across his face to rub his eyes. "How did you get in here, anyway?"

"You had McKay let me in so I could grab your gym bag about a month ago."

"And you felt the need to remind me to change my locks?" Fumbling, he extricated himself from the
blankets. "When did you get back?"

"Late last night," Ronon stated, holding his hand out. Mason grasped the proffered hand and picked
himself up off the floor.

"Mission accomplished?"

"Yep. Athosians are set and Teyla's back."

Mason nodded. "Good." He looked around the room trying to get a feel for the hour, but his inability
to sleep properly these days had screwed up his internal clock. "What time is it, anyway?"

"0700."

Mason groaned out loud. "Don't you ever sleep?"

Ronon shrugged. "I got bored."

"You got bored? Sleeping?" the marine asked incredulously.

"What? You never do that?"

"I'm pretty sure that's just you," Mason replied as he plopped back onto the bed.
He ran his hands through his thick, short blonde hair. He couldn't see the dark lines encircling his eyes, but he certainly felt them. Insidious pain still gnawed at his shoulder and across his chest. "So what brings you here? You wanna get an early breakfast or hang out or what?"

"Or what."

Mason shook his head, immediately knowing what Ronon was suggesting. "No. No way. Not unless you want me to wind up in a ball on the floor."

"You used to spar all the time without painkillers," Ronon pointed out.

"Yeah, well. There was a point to it then, and ... as weird as it sounds, it used to be easier."

The skin between Ronon's eyes bunched in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know if I can explain it." Mason peered thoughtfully at him. "You've been injured. You know how it feels. How much it hurts at first, but sometimes you have to keep moving through it and in time it starts to get easier."

Ronon nodded, knowing exactly what he meant.

"It never ends for me, you know?"

Ronon nodded again, this time more serious.

"It hurts all the time and it doesn't get better. It's constant, unrelenting. And lately ... worse," he stated. Mason released a groaning exhale and slumped against the back wall. "Maybe it hasn't gotten worse. Maybe it's all in my head. But before, back when nobody knew, at least I could still go offworld. I had to keep moving through it. I had to concentrate on keeping up the show for everybody. I don't have that anymore to distract me and it made a difference."

Ronon leaned on the wall next to Mason and glanced over. "The docs are gonna get you back. They always come through."

"Maybe. But I don't think I'm gonna hold my breath. One way or another, I need this to be finished. I can't keep getting on this psychotic merry-go-round, and if that means a one-way trip back to Earth, then that's what it means."

The friends sat in silence as Ronon frowned his disapproval. Mason could tell he was trying to think of the right thing to say to get him to buck up and get back into the grind. After all the crap Ronon had lived through, quitting was still never an option for him. It wasn't even a word in his vocabulary.

"There's always other things," the warrior said after a while.

"What?"

"Distractions. A reason to stick around."

Mason shot Ronon a quizzical look. Ronon had an expression on his face like he knew something that Capshaw didn't. "Ronon, what are you ..."

A shift in Ronon's demeanor gave Mason the push he needed to get it. "Oh." With a slightly embarrassed grin, he replied, "No. Not for me. Not for a long time anyway."

Mason didn't understand why Ronon actually looked surprised. It wasn't like he was some kind of Lothario walking around scooping up the babes of Atlantis.
"Not interested?"

Mason snorted. "It's not that." It definitely wasn't that. "It's complicated. I, um ... I just try not to start
things I can't finish. And that's kind of been the story of my life for a while now."

He exhaled. He was sick to death of talking about himself and his issues. "What about you, huh?
Anybody managed to turn your head yet?"

Being a friend of Ronon's wasn't always easy. Besides the early and abrupt wake-up calls, it also
wasn't the easiest thing on the ego when every female eye in any given room turned in his direction.
And the worst part of it was that Ronon was oblivious to all of it. So Mason was completely
astonished when Ronon stared at him and said with gravel in his voice, "Maybe. I think she might be
interested in someone else, though."

Mason shook his head. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. Whoever he is doesn't stand a chance."
He dealt a firm smack to Ronon's shoulder. "Besides, even if he does wind up with the girl, you can
always kick his ass."

Ronon turned his head toward him and looked him up and down. "Good point."

"We need to start tightening the screws, Colonel Sheppard. The science department is consistently
late filing reports. I can't get even get a meeting with Dr. McKay to discuss it with him. He's been
locked in his lab for days," Richard Woolsey said.

John sat across from him in the expedition leader's office, lacing his fingers together.

"The IOA is sending a representative aboard the Daedalus to observe our operations."

"You're kidding me," John groaned. He was getting used to Woolsey, but they last thing they needed
was another IOA stooge running around, especially one who didn't have a stake in Atlantis or in
Pegasus. "Is he one of the good guys or one of the bad guys?"

"I haven't been privy to many details on him, as of yet. I do know that he hasn't been on the scene for
very long, but has managed to impressed a lot of very important people."

"What does he want with us?" John asked.

"From what I can gather, he may have a large say in the kind of funding we may expect for the
foreseeable future."

"Great. So we have to dance for our supper now?"

"It's not nearly that simple, Colonel. We're waging a war. That kind of endeavor, along with our
humanitarian efforts throughout the galaxy, is expensive and the IOA feels it is time to justify the cost
we're asking the citizens of Earth to pay," Richard reasoned. "I'm hopeful now that your business
with the Athosians has concluded, you might be able to assist me in getting Atlantis prepared."

John screwed his jaw. He hated this part of the job, having to deal with the politicians who didn't
care about the people effected by their decisions. He had to defer to them, no matter how much he
may want to drop them on an uninhabited planet somewhere.
He smiled a little. Maybe he'd give this guy five minutes in a room with a Wraith and sit back watch how fast the funding came in.

Richard gave him a look suggesting he knew exactly what the colonel was thinking. "No, Colonel."

"What?" he asked innocently.

After Teyla finished her tea and took advantage of having access to a shower again, the baby and her stomach joined forces in a less-than-subtle campaign for a proper breakfast. Taking John's advise to heart about making her final choices for the nursery soon, Teyla took along the catalogs to peruse them while she ate. The mess hall was relatively quiet when she arrived. The majority of those assigned to the morning shift had already come and gone, and those not on-duty until later wouldn't filter in for a few more hours. Able to quickly get the food she wanted from the limited selections for the day, she found a seat and ate while she flipped through the pages, carefully studying the photos and descriptions provided.

She had just finished eating when a welcome shadow came up from behind. She practically felt him coming and he didn't even have to say a word in his sweet voice before she was beaming.

"Shopping for the wee baby, are ya?"

Teyla stood up and embraced Dr. Beckett, careful not to jar him into spilling the two cups of fresh coffee he was hanging onto. His arms came around her as much as their clumsy positioning allowed. "It's wonderful to see you, again, Carson."

"Likewise, luv."

"It has been far too long," she said.

"Ya won't get any argument from me on that, lass. Ye've grown quite a bit since the last time," he observed with a hint of humor.

They navigated their way out of each other's arms with caution and Teyla sighed. "You do not need to remind me," she sighed. "My clothing does so every day."

"Ya look lovely, darling."

"Thank you, Carson." Teyla turned back to the catalog on the table. "And to answer your question, yes. But I believe I have nearly finished. I was actually on my way to the infirmary to speak with Jennifer."

"Everything alright?"

"I am fine. I was merely hoping to catch up, if she has the time."

"I'm sure she'll make the time for ya, dear. She could likely use the break. I'm on my way to the infirmary myself, if ya wouldn't mind the company?"

Teyla smiled. "Of course not."

She gathered up her reading materials and they started down the hallway. Teyla hadn't seen Carson
in several months, much longer than it had been for everyone else. He had left Atlantis to run his
offworld clinics and hadn’t returned to the city until recently. But, despite all the time that had past,
the two picked up as though they’d never been apart. They exchanged stories about their separate
adventures as they walked.

When the pair entered the infirmary, Teyla found that Carson had not been exaggerating. Jennifer
was in a corner hunched over a microscope, peering at some samples and looking a bit frayed around
the edges. Jennifer greeted them with a sigh of relief, both at the sight of her friend and the coffee.

She took the cup in hand and hugged it like a long lost pet. "Bless you, Carson."

"From your lips to God's ears, Doctor," he answered his colleague. "I've got a bit of work to get
back to, so if you'll excuse me, ladies?"

With a parting smile to Carson, Teyla regarded Jennifer, who was still deeply involved in her coffee.
"Have you made any progress?" she asked.

Jennifer shook her head. "I'd love to be able to say yes, but ..."

Teyla pulled up a stool and sat at the lab table with her. "I wish there was something I could do to
help."

Jennifer’s lips turned upward in appreciation of the gesture, but a deep sadness had taken hold just
beneath that couldn’t be hidden. She sipped quietly at her cup, and after a few moments, Jennifer
visibly tried to shake off the bad feelings that had taken hold. "What's with the catalogs?" she asked
brightly. "I thought you were done."

Teyla glanced down and adopted a pensive air. "As did I. John has asked that I look them one last
time to be certain."

Jennifer gave her an understanding yet amused smile. "It's all a bit much, huh?"

"Very," Teyla said shortly. "I fail, for example, to see the importance of having a bottle warmer. Are
there not many ways of getting a bottle to correct temperature without such a device? And there is
also a device designed specifically to warm the wipes you use." She shook her head. "Sometimes, I
do not understand your world."

"If it helps, neither do I," Jennifer admitted.

Thinking of something, Teyla flipped to page 68 and held it out to Jennifer. "I confess, I do have a
desire for one of these." She pointed to a photo of a motorized infant swing. "I can imagine it being
useful in many instances."

Jennifer bobbed her head in adamant approval. "I used to love these when I babysat the kids in the
neighborhood, and a friend of mine from medical school, Heather King, swears by it. You should
absolutely get one."

"I will be certain to add it to the list, then," Teyla decided. "Perhaps John will be pleased to see that I
chose something."

"How are things between you and the Colonel these days?" Jennifer asked with an expression of
innocent curiosity, not doubt seizing on the subject and its potential for juiciness. "You look happy."

"I am very happy," Teyla assured her.
"Did you two get a chance to talk things out? I know our trip got cut short and you've both been so busy for the last two weeks, but please tell me you managed to squeeze in a little time for yourselves."

Teyla said with a wicked grin, "It is true there was not a lot of time, but I believe we did manage a little squeezing."

Jennifer nearly choked on her coffee. Trying to drink and laugh at the same time proved to be a huge challenge for her. Teyla tried not to laugh at her friend's predicament.

"And we did speak," she added, trying to bring Jennifer some ease.

"And?" the doctor got out, her voice still clearly compromised.

"I do not think things have been fully resolved, but we are ... agreeing to disagree?" Teyla wondered if she was saying the expression correctly.

Jennifer indicated that she had it right. "And you're okay with that?"

"I believe so. It is trying at times, but I do not think John will rest until this child is born and he knows that we are both safe. He is quite protective of me in my current condition."

The faint beginnings of an appreciative grin formed on Jennifer's lips. "That's not such a bad thing, Teyla. He's just looking out for you. After ..." She paused for a moment, knowing the sensitive nature of what she was about to bring up. "After your fall, while you were still unconscious ... I don't think I've ever seen the Colonel that rattled. He was really upset."

Teyla nodded sadly. The whole incident had left them both extraordinarily shaken. "I regret having put him through that. He is still quite effected by it."

"It wasn't your fault, Teyla. Bad things happen to good people. We all know that by now." With a deep sigh from the young doctor, Teyla saw her friend trying to weather the shift in the conversation. "But you two are good again. That's what matters right now."

"Yes. John and I are good," Teyla said, trying out the Earth phrase. Somehow it didn't quite roll off her tongue the way it did Jennifer's.

"So did any other topics of interest come up while you two were ... you know ... talking?" Jennifer asked.

Teyla took her curiosity and infectious enthusiasm in stride. "To what would you be referring?"

"Oh, anything." Jennifer was not a very good poker player.

"You mean the possibility of a marriage?"

"Well, since you brought it up ..." Jennifer quickly grinned.

A wide smile appeared on Teyla's face. "We have not had a direct discussion about it, but he has skirted the subject on more than one occasion."

"But you want to?"

"John occupies a very ... special and singular place in my heart."

Jennifer shook her head. "You never cease to amaze me, Teyla. I think that is the most indirect and
polite way of saying you want to get married that I've ever heard. I think if I found the guy I wanted to marry, you'd have to peel me off the ceiling."

Teyla giggled at very idea. "I look forward to that day, Jennifer. I will remember to bring a ladder."

Having finished her coffee successfully, Jennifer set aside her cup and leaned back in her chair. The worry that had lined her face earlier had begun to dissipate. It was astounding, the healing power of a simple conversation with a friend.

"Do you think you'd have an Athosian ceremony or an Earth one?" Jennifer asked, clearly not eager to return to her work. "Or a mix of both? That could be really cool."

"I do not know. John and I will discuss that when the time comes, I suppose."

"Would you want to get married before the baby's born?"

It seemed Jennifer's interest knew no bounds today. It was as though she were channeling all her concerns over her inability to help Sergeant Capshaw into something more pleasant. If this was the only way for Teyla to help, she was glad to do it.

"It is not uncommon among my people for there to be children prior to a bonding ceremony. Or marriage, as you say. Some couples do not choose to bond for a lifetime, and that is their choice. There are those who are not made for such things. But children are always treasured. No matter the circumstances, they are bound to us always."

"Do you think ... do you think that if things had been different, you might've ... bonded with Kanaan?"

Teyla's lips pulled into a small reflective smile. She appreciated Jennifer's reluctance to ask, but she had made peace with how those painful events had played out. She hadn't forgotten last year's tragic events, but she tried to look at it from the perspective that if they had not happened, she would not have the life she had now.

"I do not believe so. Kanaan and I were very close, childhood friends. I had always cared for him deeply, but in a very different manner than I do with John," Teyla said. "We were exploring the possibility of becoming more when he was killed. But my heart already belonged to John. I do not think I would have been able to settle for anything less than that. It would not have been fair to Kanaan or to myself. I believe that, while we may live and be happy with perhaps a number of people we meet in our lives, there is only one true love for each of us. John is mine."

Jennifer sat back looking awestruck and envious. "It must be great to feel so sure of something. I don't think I've been that sure of anything in my whole life. Ever."

"I was not always so. It did take John and I several years to even begin exploring our feelings for one another," Teyla reminded her. "Certainty takes time and trial."

Reality seemed to take hold of Jennifer again and a dark pall cast over her. "Trial. That's one thing around here that's never in short supply."

"Sadly, that is true."
Mason sat alone on his bed. Shaking, feeling the quaking of his muscles under torment, he stared coldly ahead at the free weights on the rack in front of him. He took a long pull from a beer he'd gotten out of the fridge. His constant companions for two years, the cast iron had come to fill both the roles of his best friend and his most bitter adversary. They called to him, telling him to get back at it, and in the week and a half since he was released from the infirmary, he'd given them the proverbial middle finger.

For a long time, he'd obeyed like a good soldier taking orders. He'd done his duty. He'd kept up with the rigorous conditioning to prevent muscle loss, the strict medical protocols, and the ceaseless poking and prodding. He'd listened to his superiors and his doctors as they told him it would be worth his while. And sometimes, he had to admit, they'd been exactly right. He held the beer to his lips, remembering the impressive things he'd seen and done, the people he was proud to be associated with since he'd cheated death the first time.

But then there were the days like this. Too many of them. Far too many. And those damned weights had the balls to sit there, waiting for him to get up and put them to work.

Tow the line. Keep your head down and forge ahead. Tomorrow will be better. Prosaic platitudes that had long ago lost any meaning for him.

He gulped down what was left of his beer, crushed the can, and tossed it toward the wastebasket in the corner. It bounced off the rim and landed on the floor. Mason wasn't much of a drinker before he'd been practically forbidden by the endless streams of medications and he wasn't one now. He'd had one because he was tired, another because he was angry, a third because he was bitter, and the last one because he could. But there wasn't really any point to it. It didn't help with the pain or make him feel any better. It certainly didn't give him another option besides going back to Earth, where nothing and no one waited for him and he had no future he cared to entertain.

As he sat there, the shaking getting markedly worse, the persistent call to get up resounded in his head. He heard Jennifer and Ronon and Beckett and Sheppard and everyone else telling him not to quit - advice he received knowing it came from a place of caring, but to him seemed almost cruel. Didn't they know how hard this was? To constantly be teased with the promise of a life and have it consistently torn away, to have it unfailingly thrown in his face that, in the end, he was alone in this and would end up that way as well?

He was the only one who had to carry this weight for the rest of his life. Long after he was gone, they would continue to fight the war for freedom in Pegasus, help the people of this galaxy, and do good while he faded into obscurity. Well, he wanted to be alone. He craved it as his body craved a fix that he despised. Friends, the tantalizing prospect of a future. Perhaps one with ...

He closed his eyes.

They were a burden he didn't think he could carry anymore.

Mason Capshaw, get up!

Furious and saddened at hearing the soft voice of his mother joining the others in their pitiless pushing and sounding so disappointed, he rose. Unaware of the tears escaping from his eyes, he raised the weights and began to stretch his abused body again, wanting the entire time to throw them through a window, into the afternoon sun and down the dizzying height of the tower.

But he didn't. A part of him wasn't quite ready to let go and he hated that it was dragging the rest of him along for the ride.
He looked straight into the long, dark tunnel in front of him and kept moving. He didn't hold out some misguided hope of a miracle being found. It was another thing in his life that there was no point to anymore, but he did it anyway.

It was pathetic.

He had become a man with no purpose. Lost. He kept moving solely because he didn't know what else to do.

"What happened in here?" John asked.

Rodney and his lab were way past their usual lived-in states of being. The physicist himself looked like he'd just pulled another one of his famous three day all-nighters, and the lab was littered with coffee cups, dinner trays, balled up pieces of paper containing rejected theories and ideas, and pencils that appeared to be thrown around at random. None of these things were particularly unusual, but this time there was the added accent of black scorch marks all over the table.

His concentration broken, Dr. McKay glanced at the table that at one time had been silver, but no more. "That was AD-368."

John sucked in a breath. "So that one's a no."

"Unless Capshaw wants his insides barbequed."

"I'm thinking not," John let the obvious slip in his dry way. "On the bright side, looks like you've come up with a way to cook a whole lotta steak in a short amount of time."

He eyeballed the mess of raw circuitry and naked electronics decorating the next table over. A spark of electricity flashed in front of him and he realized there was live current running through it. "Self-administering your shock treatments now?"

"Very funny."

"What's this one for?"

"AD-765," Rodney said succinctly. "I was just about to start that one."

Reflective of the disorder in the room, McKay was looking more out of sorts than normal. He'd been putting in long hours testing this Ancient tech, never knowing quite what to expect from them and his already sensitive nerves were frazzled. John moved toward the table to get a closer look.

Rodney jumped down his throat. "Don't touch anything!"

"I wasn't planning on it, McKay!" John exclaimed. "How much coffee have you had?"

Rodney rubbed his eyes. "Not enough apparently, and I'm pretty sure I'm running a fever."

"I could run down to the mess hall and get you a refreshing glass of orange juice," John kept a straight face when Rodney scowled at him. "It's loaded with Vitamin C. Great if you're getting sick."

"Did you come down here just to harass me or was there something you actually wanted?"
"I'm just checking to see if there's been any progress, that's all," John answered.

Rodney waved to again to the scene of the previous conflagration. "Well, consider yourself up to date."

"That sucks."

"Yeah," echoed the physicist. "How's he doing, by the way?"

John shrugged. "I don't know. I just got back last night."

McKay nodded. "I haven't gotten over to see him either. I've been ... extinguishing things." Rodney took a deep breath, calling for awareness and readying himself. He marched over to a box that John hadn't noticed before, next to the table that held all the live wires. With a pair of forceps similar to what was used in the infirmary, he pulled out a black, circular device about the size of a walnut.

"What's that do?"

"If you believe the advertising—which I strongly advise against—" Rodney started, carefully holding device AD-765 over the circuits, "it has the ability to harness electrical impulses."

John frowned, confused. "Capshaw isn't a computer or a light socket, Rodney."

"Well, in theory, it will work on bioelectrical output as well. After all, the nervous system is run on electricity—pretty low voltage, but it's the same principle. And that's basically what we're trying to do, right? Turn off the damaged section of his nervous system?"

Thoroughly unimpressed with both this device's potential for success and Rodney's grasp of medicine, John dripped sarcasm. "Oh, I can't wait to see how this turns out."

Clearly nervous, Rodney said, "Just ... stand back, okay. I nearly lost my eyebrows last time."

John wisely backed a good five feet away from the table and chewed his lower lip as Rodney's shaky hand guided the forceps and the experimental device to its destination.

"Easy, Rodney," he said, breaking the tense silence and nearly scaring Dr. McKay to death.

"Could you just—!"

"Sorry."

Rodney gingerly set the device on top of the circuits and, when he wasn't immediately and tragically incinerated, stepped back and waited. Nothing happened at first and the uneasy duo were nearly lulled into a sense that the device was a dud. That, of course, was when things started to happen.

Black tendrils formed from somewhere within the device - or from the device itself - at the epicenter of the action. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, they snaked along the wiring and circuitry like a living oil slick.

"Rodney ..." John said warily.

The tendrils grew bigger and longer by the second, weaving themselves into a complicated web covering the live wires. Rodney ran over to study the remote computer linkup he'd set up to monitor the experiment. "It's feeding off the loose current to grow."
"Are you telling me that thing's gonna keep getting bigger as long as the power's on?"

"I don't know! Maybe."

John watched as the mass of black spread. If it didn't stop, it would soon cover the whole table top. "Cut the power, McKay."

"Just wait a minute. I need to be sure of what I'm reading first."

"McKay!"

"It could be important!" Rodney feverishly typed into his computer and John saw his eyes darting from one side to the other, reading as fast as he could. As quickly as it had spread, the tendrils suddenly came to halt and settled into place. The sheen on the tendrils dimmed as the glossy black surface started to densify, like they were forming a second skin. The electronics had been completely enveloped by the mass.

"McKay? What just happened?"

Rodney looked up from his computer and stuttered. "Uh ... I'm not ... There's still power running through those conduits. I don't know why it stopped. Wait ..."

He went back to his readouts.

"What is it?"

"I've lost the secondary power cell."

John wanted to shake him just to see if a comprehensible answer would fall out. "What does that mean, Rodney? And so help me, if you—"

"There's still power feeding through the wires, it's just not getting funneled back out to the secondary power cell. It's ... trapped. There's nothing getting through."

"What? Like that thing is containing it?"

"For lack of a better term? Yeah," Rodney replied. They both stared at the forbidding sight in front of them. The mass had stopped growing at approximately three feet across. And by all accounts, it had stopped on its own.

"Turn the power off," John said.

"It's not growing anymore."

"Just do it, McKay!" John exclaimed. Then, he pitched his voice to reason with him. "This is an experiment, right? Let's just see what it does."

This time, he didn't get any argument out of the befuddled scientist. With the flick of a switch, the electricity fueling the whole experiment died. In moments, the tendrils began to shrink and dissolve, pulling away from the spare parts they had so easily swallowed minutes before. Their rapid reduction continued until nothing remained but the original walnut-shaped device.

"What does this mean?" John asked, stunned and starting to feel like he was repeating himself.
"I have no idea," Rodney said. "But I think I have a lot of work to do."

It was the end of long day. Jennifer had spent most of it in the med lab, getting nowhere and more frustrated with each passing hour. Teyla's visit had been the one bright spot in her day and the thing that kept her from wanting to pull her hair out. She'd looked at cellular regeneration, stem cell therapies, surgical options, more holistic routes, and when she'd finished with them, she started all over again. Her eyes had gotten so fatigued that at one point she could barely tell a muscle cell from a nerve cell.

She didn't want to admit to herself that maybe Mason had been right. That maybe there was nothing she could do. For all her work, she was no closer to an answer. Time was ticking away, and she'd entertained every idea she could think of. It wouldn't be long before Mr. Woolsey and Colonel Sheppard had to start discussing his return to Earth.

She knew she was walking toward trouble when she started toward Mason's quarters, but she had to buy more time. She had to convince him to let her. She couldn't just let him walk away from his life.

She knocked on the door, the sound echoing slightly in that metallic way that went straight through her teeth. It took longer than she expected, but eventually the door slid aside. Her breath hitched in her throat. He was bare-chested and his hair was in disarray. He looked her over and hung in the doorway with an odd sort of indifference, a resigned casualness that for an instant made her think he'd just been in the middle of something.

Embarrassment and awkwardness immediately set in. She doubted he would notice, though. They were practically her default. But along with them, a miniscule flare of jealously reared up and took her by surprise. She had no right to feel that way. None. His private life was none of her business.

"What do you want, Jennifer?" It was plain he wasn't happy to see her. Their last several conversations hadn't gone very well and he probably already knew exactly why she was here.

"I came to see how you were doing," she said, trying to keep her voice still. "So h-how are you doing? Are you okay?"

He stared into her long and hard. "Yeah."

They stood together in abrasive silence, the air around rife with tension, neither one of them ready to proceed with what promised to be difficult for both of them.

Mason eventually broke the stalemate. With a stiff exhale, he moved aside and indicated she should come in. She was profoundly relieved at the gesture and was even more so when she entered and found that he was, in fact, alone. The noise of running water came from the bathroom.

"I was just about to catch a shower," he said as he ambled around to meet her face-to-face again. "It's been a long day."

"But you're—"

He put up a hand to stop her, his face like stone. "It's been a long day."

Comprehending, Jennifer's eyes wandered to his chest where his huge, jagged scar was laid bare.
She'd seen it countless times, studied it in a very clinical way. From the mottled red, pink, and white hues, to its width and the areas he had the most trouble with, she knew them all by heart. It cut across his pectoral muscle on one side, then gradually - almost gracefully - curved underneath the line of the other one.

"I, uh, haven't seen you around," she said.

He responded with a clenched jaw. Any eye contact she managed, he immediately drifted away. "I've been here. You could've come by any time."

"I've been working." They stood apart, each waiting for the other, until she finally spoke out. "Can we please just talk about this?"

A derisive sound escaped his lips and he folded his arms. "I'm pretty sure we already have and I'm also sure I haven't changed my mind. I'm done with the drugs. I'm done with the needles. I am sick of this whole thing."

"So that's it? You don't care about what you may be sacrificing? What you may lose?"

"I'm not in the mood for this, Jennifer."

"Come on, Mason," she pushed. "There must be something here worth staying for. Worth fighting for."

Mason glared at her, his eyes boring into hers so deep that she felt it down to her toes. "I don't have anything to lose. Nothing."

Disappointed and hurt, she shook her head. "Keep telling yourself that if it makes it easier. In the end, all it makes you is a coward."

The moment the words slipped out of her mouth, she wanted to take them back. He was just about the farthest thing from a coward she could imagine.

Clearly angry, Mason rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, visibly tightening up. He pointed toward the bathroom. He voice was low and restrained. "I'm going to take that shower now, before I say something I regret. So unless you plan on joining me, you should seriously think about letting yourself out."

"Mason, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I just ... I'm worried about you. You're my friend and I don't want to lose you."

He abruptly stepped toward her and got in her face. "We. Are. Not. Friends. To you, I am a science project. In a week, two weeks, a month, I'm just going to be another medical file in your collection."

"Why are you saying this?" she asked him, feeling tears bubble up.

"Somebody has to."

"Well, I'm not going to," she said, digging in.

"Fine," he growled. "Do what you want. Bury your head in the sand. Just go back to your lab and leave me alone."

"This isn't you," she insisted.

"Oh, grow up, Jennifer! How long does something have to be right in front of your face before you'll
see it? I've been down this road. It doesn't end! I'm doing what's best for both of us. One day, you'll see that."

"What about Setisse? Is this what's best for her?" In his despair, he had probably forgotten about the little girl who had latched onto him with all her heart. "You promised her you'd be okay. You promised you'd be back."

Mason's face went stone cold, stunning her with how fast he shut down. "I never should've let that girl get so close."

She felt herself reaching for him. Her fingertips brushed his shoulder and he flinched like she'd scalded him with a hot iron. Hissing, he caught her hard by the wrist and yanked. "Don't! Don't touch me!"

"Mason—"

"Every single time you touch me, you make it worse! You're always talking about having hope in the future, meanwhile you're a living, breathing reminder of all the things I'll never have. It's you, you know? You're so—" He shouted out in frustration. "I can't do it anymore!"

Jennifer felt tears rolling down her cheeks.

His eyes came into focus on her face and he slowly released his grip on her wrist. His hands tore through his hair and he all but staggered back. "Go. Just ... go."

The wetness trickling down from her eyes threatened to become a waterfall.

Jennifer left quickly before the dam burst.

Usually the kitchen counter in their quarters lay empty, except for the coffee maker and a teapot resting nearby on the stove, but John had come home with his arms full of ingredients newly swiped from the mess hall. On the stove, a pot of water boiled noodles that he'd pulled out of a box, while John worked over a saucepan to the right, stirring a mixture of butter, garlic, cream, and a powdery sort of cheese known as Parmesan. Teyla hovered behind him and inhaled the aroma that was spreading through the air. "Mmm. It smells delicious, John."

"Well, it may not be the best food you'll ever eat, but there won't be any need to call the pizza delivery guy. Just wish I had some parsley."

"I am certain it will be fine meal," she said as she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She pulled his shirt just high enough for her to touch the skin of his hard stomach. "And may I say that I find this side of you very intriguing?"

He perked up at that and glanced over his shoulder wearing a self-satisfied smirk. "Say it all you want, sweetie. I still have to keep an eye on the food."

She rested her head on his back for a moment as they swayed together. She took in his masculine scent, reveling in his presence. "What can I do to help?"

"I'm cooking for you tonight, remember?"
"Don't be ridiculous, John. You have had a long day. I would like to help," she insisted.

John looked around. "There's not really much to do. I can throw together the salad in a minute. Maybe get out a couple of plates, forks, that sort of thing? This should be done soon."

Teyla reached into the cabinet and pulled out dishes for two. A moment later, a soft tap came at their door. They exchanged baffled glances.

"Are we expecting company?" Teyla asked, thinking John might have invited some of their friends over for dinner. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have minded, but she had been under the impression that this evening had been just for the two of them.

"I didn't do it," he said quickly, raising his hands in the air.

"Very well."

Teyla put the dishes aside and opened the door. She was shocked to see Jennifer on the other side, tear-stained and visibly upset.

"Jennifer? What is wrong?"

"I ..." she tried. "I-I couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

"Come in," Teyla said, gently taking her by the arm.

"Thank you."

When Dr. Keller started to lose her composure again, Teyla embraced her, trying to soothe her. John emerged from the kitchen, his brow wrinkled in concern. "What's going on?"

Jennifer startled at John's appearance and let go of Teyla, but the Athosian woman held onto her hand. The distraught doctor glanced rapidly around the room, her gaze immediately centering on the kitchen, and her lips fell open in remorse. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry, Colonel. I didn't ... I really, really didn't mean to intrude on your night."

"It is perfectly alright, Jennifer," Teyla responded.

Teyla was planning to ask her to sit down and find out what had occurred when she caught John staring at something. She tracked his scrutinizing gaze to a blotchy patch of angry, red skin on Jennifer's skin. There were finger-shaped definitions to it and it surrounded her entire wrist.

John lifted a finger and pointed to it. "What the hell happened?"

Jennifer brought her wrist up and appeared to go into shock. A strange expression on her face, she gave it a testing twist and was confounded when a sharp twinge came forth, eliciting a slight wince. She blinked several times in quick succession, and then as though she'd recovered her senses, her eyes flew to John.

"Oh, no. No, Colonel, he didn't mean it. It isn't that bad. I didn't even know ..."

"Who didn't mean what, Doc?" John pressed, growing more disturbed by the second.

"Jennifer, did someone hurt you?" Teyla asked, appalled.

Jennifer shook her head. "I shouldn't have come. It really wasn't what it looks like."
Teyla saw intense worry in Jennifer's face. She was clearly hesitant to talk about it now, but she had to know that John wasn't going to let it drop until he had answers.

Obviously reaching that conclusion, Jennifer closed her eyes and readied herself. "Mason and I just had an argument. Things got ... He just grabbed my wrist, Colonel, that's all. He didn't hurt me. I didn't even realize it was there until you pointed it out. Please. Don't ..."

"Capshaw did that?"

Deeply reluctant, Jennifer nodded.

As Teyla looked on, John gradually assumed a different posture. Straight. Commanding. Closed off. In that one move, he became less the man she lived with and had fathered her child and more the man she had worked with for years.

"Okay, I'm gonna go deal with this," he stated. "You two stay here."


"No," John said firmly. "This kind of stuff doesn't happen here. Not as long as I have anything to say about it. I'm gonna put a lid on it, right now."

The two women stood by as he marched out. Teyla pulled Jennifer to sit down on the couch and briefly went into the kitchen to turn things off and pull the pots off the stove. Even though John had said that the food was almost ready, Teyla didn't want to eat without him and she had no reckoning of how long he might be. She couldn't see him being back any time soon. With the small matters taken care of, she took her place next to Jennifer.

Teyla didn't have to push for answers any longer. Jennifer must have felt that the damage had already been done. She had come knocking on Teyla's door in want of a listening ear and the comforting shoulder of a dear friend and Teyla gave it gladly.

"I shouldn't have pushed him. He was upset, he was in pain, and he's been ... different lately. But I pushed and I pushed. I shouldn't have ..."

Jennifer sat berating herself, tears glimmering in her eyes once again. "I went there hoping to convince him to let me help him. I thought maybe I could get through to him, maybe he'd listen. I only made it worse. He told me I only make it worse. He said ... h-he said ..."

Teyla spread her arms around Jennifer and held her tight.

"He's pushing me away. He's pushing everybody away. Maybe it's selfish of me ... but I want him to stay."

With a sorrowful sniff, Jennifer took the end of her sleeve and wiped the drops from her eyes. "I don't know why I'm getting so upset about this. It's not like I haven't been through this before. I've had patients I couldn't help."

Teyla offered quietly. "Perhaps he has come to mean something more to you than your other patients?"

Jennifer mutely stared at her.
"Jennifer, do you care for him?"

"Of course, I do."

Teyla shook her head. "Do you care for him as you would for Carson or John or Rodney? Or is he different?"

Jennifer bit her lower lip. "I don't know."

John and Teyla's quarters were in a separate section of the city than the majority of the living quarters, but thanks to the transporter it still didn't take him long to reach Mason's room.

John's mind was spinning. He was pissed. Beyond pissed. This was hardly the first incident that had happened under his command. In an environment where they all lived on the edge of war and the unknown, tempers ran high and sometimes things got heated and taken too far. It was usually one soldier to another and put to bed quickly. He had no tolerance when it came to his men taking on civilians. And this ...

He never saw this coming.

Keller had said that she didn't even know it was there. He had the uncomfortable feeling that, had he stayed longer, she would've come to Capshaw's defense.

Capshaw had had a hard time of it lately, but that didn't mean anything right now. No one under his command would ever lay their hands on a woman like that. It was one thing, in a combat situation, to tangle with someone like Teyla or Teldy, Mehra or Cadman, or any of the other more than capable fighters. But Keller? John seriously doubted she could swat a fly without feeling guilty about it later.

It only cut deeper that Capshaw was a member of his team, someone who had watched his back and he'd watched Mason's in return. He trusted the man, yet he was starting to question if he ever really knew him at all.

John banged on the door and waited. He waited and waited. After several attempts, he waved his hand over the control panel on the off chance it was unlocked. Sure enough, the doors slid open.

The second Sheppard crossed the threshold, his indignation and the reaming he'd been geared up to dish out went right out the window. He had a feeling in his gut that something was terribly wrong.

"Sergeant?" he called.

John moved around the room. The sound of a shower running from the open bathroom drew him in that direction.

"Capshaw?"

John reached the entrance and stopped in his tracks.

"Oh my God," he muttered under his breath.

The floor of the bathroom was covered in glittering shards of glass, the sole remains of the mirror that once hung above the sink.
Mason sat against the wall with his knees bent, his right hand oozing blood.
The noise of the door skimming open made Teyla and Jennifer look up from the couch. John walked in with the straight, stoic bearing of the commander that he'd left with an hour ago. Only Teyla could see a difference. Gone was the stern anger that he'd set out with. In its place, a weight rested on his shoulders.

"John, is everything alright?"

"It's taken care of."

The two women rose. Jennifer eyes rested on John's hands and uniform. "Colonel," she said shakily, "tell me that's not blood."

His face was set in stone. "Carson can fill you in on the details."

Without another word, Jennifer raced to the door.

"Dr. Keller," John called after her.

She turned around.

"From this point forward, Capshaw is to be treated by Dr. Beckett. I don't care if he's got a case of the sniffles or if his arm's been cut off. For the time being, it's probably best you two aren't even in the same room. Am I understood?"

"I understand," she said simply and walked out.

Teyla could have told him that his orders were unnecessary. Jennifer had told her everything that Sgt. Capshaw had said to her - his feelings toward her, how being so close to her only made things harder for him to bear. Jennifer had already made up her own mind that she was the wrong person to be treating him. The only question remaining in Teyla's mind was if there wasn't more to it than that.

"She is not one of your men, John. You did not need to be so forceful with her."

"It's for her own good, Teyla," he said.

John lifted his hand to rub the shadowy growth along his chin. In knowing they were alone, she could see as the tension he carried in his jaw and shoulders gradually released, his armor slowly peeling away. He took a look at his hands, which were dotted with dried red spots, and went into the bathroom to clean them off. From where he left her, Teyla felt an ambient sense of unrest and disconsolation prodding at her.

When he emerged again a few minutes later, she watched him carefully. The way his shoulders sagged was a familiar sight on those nights when he felt the burden of command pressing down on him. She wanted to ask him what happened, why he had blood on his hands, but it wasn't the right
time. He would tell her when he was ready. She hoped, at any rate. Perhaps after their long separation, he would no longer wish to share that part of himself with her.

John's head snatched upward. Appearing unsure of himself, his eyes roved over her, regarding her as though he knew the errant thoughts that had been running through her head.

"C'mere," he said softly, and in answer, he draped his arms around her and pulled her to him.

Held tight and pressed full against his body, Teyla folded herself into him and brought her hand up to cup his cheek. He accepted the caress and leaned into it without hesitation. Locked in a mute embrace, Teyla took comfort in the warmth of his arms and John seemed to be taking shelter in her. It felt so good to be with him again, neither of them alone any longer. Anything else they may have said was already being passed along between the two of them in a manner too intimate and enigmatic to be explained.

Teyla felt something lightly touch her mind like the fingers of two hands entwining and her world vaguely started to spin. She thought she was imagining it until John let out a startled huff.

She gasped. "John, can you ..."

"... feel that? Yeah," he gulped. "Are you doing that?"

"I do not know." Her breath coming in a heavy rush, she closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder.

His strong arms tightened around her. "Hey, are you okay?"

The impression was withdrawing at its own leisurely pace. Teyla looked up at him and smiled in reassurance. "That was ... thrilling."

"You can say that again," he agreed.

"And overwhelming."

His brow furrowed, causing a wrinkle between his eyes she found quite appealing. "You sure you're alright? Maybe we ought to get you checked out."

"It is passing, John. I am perfectly fine. Better than fine."

"Well, at least one of us is," he disclosed. He was beginning to look a little light-headed himself. "I think I need to sit down."

They took refuge together on the couch and gathered themselves. After a minute or two, Teyla was feeling relatively normal again and John appeared to be recovering, as well.

"What was that?" he questioned.

Teyla shook her head, recalling the powerful feeling. "I am uncertain. I have had similar experiences before." Seeing John's desire for more answers, she added, "When connecting with Wraith. Only that is not nearly so pleasant. I have made connections to others as well, but nowhere nearly that strong."

"What others?"

She suppressed a grin at the jealous hint in John's tone. "My father. Kanaan. Those who also possessed the gift."
"People with the Wraith gene," he put together with a comprehending nod. "I don't have the Wraith gene, Teyla."

She gave him a patient smile. "But there is someone else here who does and also connects us to one another."

John eyes darted down to her stomach. His hand gingerly reached out to touch her. "You think the baby ..."

"Anything is possible."

"Why now? Teyla, you're six months pregnant. Wouldn't we have felt something like this before?"

"When would we have had the chance?" she asked. Until yesterday, they were still basically living separate lives on separate planets. "It is conceivable that our physical proximity coupled with our child's increasing maturity is the reason this has only begun now."

John exhaled. She could see that he was tired, and as amazing as this new experience was, it was a lot to take in and he hadn't been able to completely dismiss the turmoil he'd just waded through.

"Or," he said, casting a glance at the untouched plates still sitting on the table, "we're both just suffering from the early symptoms of starvation. I see you didn't eat."

With a wan smile, she indicated that he assumed correctly. "It was supposed to be our night, was it not?"

He pressed a soft kiss against her forehead. A determined expression settled in and he took her by the hand, leading her toward the abandoned kitchen.

"Night's not over yet, Teyla. C'mon. We may have to order a pizza after all, but let's see what we can salvage."

Jennifer marched into the infirmary looking for Carson. The whole way there, scenarios ran through her head as to why Colonel Sheppard had blood on his hands, ranging from the ridiculous to the extreme. A nasty papercut all the way to ...

She shook her head, chasing away thoughts that didn't belong there. She dealt in facts. There was no point in worrying when she didn't know that there was anything to worry about. That's what she tried to tell herself, anyway. But all her self-correcting and nervous energy came crashing to a halt as soon as she saw him.

In one of the more isolated beds, Carson leaned over Mason, carefully working on a hand that looked like it had been in the boxing ring with Edward Scissorhands. It was riddled with cuts of varying sizes and depths, but the worst of it was centered on his knuckles.

They were shredded.

Mason was heavily sedated, judging from the bags hanging from his IV pole and the way his head hung lolled off to one side. She blinked away the wetness that threatened in her eyes. She felt so helpless. He was at peace for a while, but he'd be right back confronting the full fury of his body
when the sedatives wore off.

Dr. Beckett adjusted the overhead lamp, lighting up the abused area, and reached for a pair of forceps. Jennifer's stomach turned as he plucked splintered fragments of glass from the soft tissue between his fingers.

A sharp intake of air rushed from her. She tried to cover it. Too late, however. Carson heard and swiveled around, tugging down the mask covering his face.

"Jennifer," he said seriously, "Ye're not meant to be here, darling. Colonel's orders."

"I know," she said, finding herself searching for more air. "I just, um ... I needed to know."

Dr. Beckett glanced at his sleeping patient and heaved a sigh. "I suppose it'll be fine. I doubt he'd know his own name if ya asked him right now. How are you, dear?"

"It's just a little sore," she said, glossing over the insignificant injury to her wrist. "What happened to him, Carson?"

"Lad put his fist through a mirror and made a jolly good effort at putting a hole in the wall as well," Carson said. "He's gonnae be fine, Jennifer. Nothing's broken. Just a quick clean up and ... a few dozen stitches and he'll be right as rain."

She eyeballed the hand and thought Carson's estimate had been a kind one. It would be, in the least, a few dozen.

Why had he done that to himself? Was he really that angry with her?

"Thanks, Carson. I'll just ... I'll go."

"Jennifer."

She looked back at her sweet colleague.

"He's agreed to resume a medication regimen, and he's going to start seeing Dr. Wilcox in the morning."

Jennifer blinked. Not daring to believe, she sputtered, "He what? How did you talk him into it?"

"I didn't, actually." Dr. Beckett related to her what had happened in Sgt. Capshaw's quarters. Colonel Sheppard's ultimatum. Everything. "As soon as that young man found out that he'd hurt ya, luv, there wasn't really any question whether he'd agree. He did it to keep ya safe."

Jennifer exhaled and straightened up, trying to let the comment roll off of her and not show how much it stuck. "I guess it doesn't really matter why he did it, does it? We've got time, now. We can keep looking for a cure."

"If ya say so, Doctor," Carson replied with a knowing smile.

Teyla stirred in his arms, bringing him back to the present. John was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. Their evening certainly hadn't gone the way he'd planned. He and Teyla had managed to have a nice
dinner, and all that really mattered was that she was here and they were together, but he found himself wishing that, for once, things could go the way they were supposed to. A simple quiet night with the woman he loved. That was all he wanted. Time to talk and not talk without the realities of their life tarnishing what could've been a great night.

Nestled against him, Teyla murmured softly into his chest and rolled onto her other side to face away from him. Once she'd gotten comfortable again, he relaxed his arms around her. Her pajamas, a golden-hued camisole and matching pair of bottoms, were ones she'd worn before she was pregnant and did nothing to hide her growing belly. John's left hand swept lightly over her exposed midsection. Teyla purred unconsciously at the gentle contact, and John indulged himself in a kiss to her shoulder.

Apparently the universe had decided it wasn't enough for him to be completely and utterly captivated by her every move, her every word. They had new avenues of closeness they could explore. Somehow, their little one could create a link that could grant him a window into her and allow him to see into her heart. Teyla had described it as thrilling. To him, that was a colossal understatement. He hadn't believed it possible that she could care for him as much he did for her, but he had seen it for himself. He wondered how much he deserved something that special.

The guilt he carried reared its ugly head. He was haunted by the look on Mason's face when he'd found him. John had seen that look before on men who had been tortured, disappearing into themselves in a vain attempt at escape.

He'd done the right thing. Carson had said so and Teyla had, too, when he finally told her what had gone on. Getting Capshaw back on pain medication was the kind thing to do and what was best for everyone. John wondered how kind was it really, when the effects were only temporary and they could wind up killing him. The visual of Mason half dead in his tent came roaring back and John closed his eyes, willing it all away.

He curled himself in tighter to Teyla's slumbering body. It was true that he'd had Jennifer and Rodney and everyone else's safety in mind, but in actuality he'd done it for her. John had imagined Teyla being the one in his vicinity when Mason was consumed by the pain and lashed out and the decision was made. It was selfish, and his actions made him an accomplice in his friend's torture. He'd manipulated and bullied Capshaw back onto the rack.

With his unborn baby asleep directly beneath his hand, John told himself that it had been worth it. As guilty as he felt, John knew he would do the same thing again and again.

He would pay any price, no matter how high. For them.

Mason awoke, his eyelids still heavy. Disoriented and wading through a thick fog veiled over his mind, he peered around. For a tense moment, he couldn't remember where he was or how he'd gotten there. His thoughts moved like molasses and he wondered why. He sluggishly brought his head around and his gaze landed on a dripping IV.

Mason closed his eyes. He was back here again.

"Beckett, come in. This is Sheppard … Carson, I need you in Sergeant Capshaw's quarters immediately. And bring along supplies … Just get down here."
He hadn't even known Col. Sheppard was there until he heard the call for help. Sitting in a crimson splattered mess, he'd been a world away. Sweating and quaking as agonizing pain threatened to swallow him whole, he was doing all he could to retreat. He couldn't see straight anymore. His control was in tatters, his grip on himself becoming tenuous.

He tried to get up, he remembered. Mindless, dizzy, he'd put his hand down and tried to get up, and looking at him in alarm, Sheppard yelled at him to sit his ass down. Shaky, he slumped back in an ungainly heap, and the next second, his CO had his hand wrapped up in a towel. It was only then that Mason had really seen the blood as it seeped through in ominous red.

"Is your hand broken?"

Mason's voice was barely recognizable, gritty and strained. "Don't know, sir."

"Can't you tell?"

Mason, like most other soldiers, had had his fair share of broken bones. It wasn't a feeling one tended to forget. But the flames of nightmarish pain licked and seared his body and his consciousness, numbing him to everything else.

"Honestly, sir, I can't even feel it."

Mason stared at the blood soaked towel and a strangled laugh emanated from his throat, almost manic in its tone. Sheppard stared at him, and Mason saw the disguised horror in his eyes as his laugh went on and eventually fell to pieces, descending rapidly into a chasm of tears and agonized sobs. Rather than spiral into that grim pit, he disconnected from the world, eyes open but unseeing while Sheppard swore quietly under his breath.

He didn't know how much time passed before Dr. Beckett stood over him and wrenched him from the walls he tried so hard to hide behind.

"I've got to have a look, son."

Logically, he knew that Carson was only trying to help, but all his compromised mind could process was that someone was going to touch him and he didn't think he could tolerate it. Before Mason even knew he'd done anything, he'd already recoiled from the doctor and braced himself against the wall. Trembling badly, he could hardly speak. "D-don't. Just … don't."

Sheppard's authoritative tone cut through. "Sergeant, let the man do his job."

Mason forced himself to focus, to bring himself beyond what his instincts screamed at him to do and submit. Beckett's cursory exam was swift, and the doctor took care to avoid any contact that wasn't strictly necessary. The specific details of the quick consultation between the two men standing over him barely registered. He clung to the hum of their voices; they were the only thing keeping him conscious.

"Colonel, he's made it perfectly clear he doesn't want them."

"We're way past what he wants, Carson. Push the meds."

Mason's flimsy hold on the real world came into focus once more. "No … c-can't …"

Sheppard's eyes fixed in on him. His CO crouched down next to him. "Why are you doing this to yourself, Capshaw? Just take the damn meds."
He met Sheppard's gaze as well as he could. "Damn things have almost ... killed me twice. Don't ... d-don't want to die like that. For ... nothing. Like ... I never existed."

Mason looked up at Sheppard's hard in his eyes had wavered, but only for a split second before he said, "Sergeant, I am responsible for the safety of every man, woman, and child in this city, and you've proven to me that, as you are, you're a danger to yourself and to others. We got lucky this time. Dr. Keller wasn't seriously hurt ..."

"What are ya talking about, Colonel?" Beckett interrupted.

"Capshaw assaulted Dr. Keller earlier."

All of a sudden, Mason couldn't breathe. His eyes darted frantically from side to side searching his memory for when he might have ...

No, he couldn't have. Not her.

Then he'd heard the crack of skin on skin, the violent sound of his hand slamming around her wrist, and he crumpled inside.

"Is she ... alright ... C-colonel?" he choked out. All the pain racking his body didn't matter to him anymore. Mason silently pleaded with him to tell him that he hadn't inadvertently hurt someone he cared about more than he had any right to.

"She's okay," Sheppard said. The colonel's attitude softened momentarily, less like his CO and more like his friend. "Capshaw, I know you didn't mean to. But I also know that you can't possibly stay in control when you're like this. You're a highly trained soldier, probably one of the best I've ever worked with. You're a part of my team, and God knows I want you to stick around. But sooner or later, someone is gonna get too close at the wrong moment, and they're going to get seriously hurt."

Mason was still reeling in horror at knowing he'd hurt Jennifer, when Sheppard stiffened up again. "Now, either you cooperate willingly, or I'll call in a team of men to hold you down while Dr. Beckett here takes care of business and you'll spend your final days in Atlantis under armed guard. But either way, what happened with Dr. Keller will be the end of it."

Mason opened his eyes again and stared at the IV pole at his bedside. Carefully timed drops of clear medication dripped into his lines and, from there, into his bloodstream.

He could stop it right now. He could reach down and rip the IV out of his arm and accept the Colonel's decision as to his future. But he knew he wouldn't. He pictured Jennifer's face and knew he couldn't take the risk.

He'd stick with the meds until they stopped working or killed him, whichever came first.

"I'll do it, sir ... I'll do anything ... "

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As always in Atlantis, the new day brought a new set of challenges. Woolsey continued his reign of organizational terror. In triplicate. Before John had even finished his coffee, McKay, Zalenka, Aileron and Tratovsky all descended on his office demanding that he do something about it. According to Rodney, all of Woolsey's new directives regarding reporting procedures and safety
protocols designed to increase general efficiency were "a ridiculous exercise in tail-chasing". In response to their bellyaching, John promptly told them to take it up with the expedition leader himself and, with a parting smile, kicked them out of his office.

He was ready to abandon his own paperwork when Chuck spoke through the comms. "Colonel Sheppard, Major Lorne's jumper is inbound."

"Glad to hear it," John responded shortly.

"Sir, they're reporting widespread systems malfunctions."

John sat up at that and headed straight for the Gateroom. "What's their status?" he asked upon arrival.

"We're about to find out, sir."

The Jumper sailed through the Gate with a sudden rush and that instantaneous halt that many in the tower found disconcerting. He'd always found it really cool, but he usually preferred being on the other side.

The Jumper hovered in place. Through the window, he could see the relief on Lorne's face.

"Major, what seems to be the trouble?"

"More like what isn't the trouble, Colonel. We lost just about every system. Attitude control, inertial dampeners, the drive pods, life support—"

"What happened?"

"You got me, sir. Everything was fine and then poof. Did I mention the lightning?"

"I must've missed that part."

"Well, we nearly got hit by a bolt of electricity inside the cockpit. We're lucky the systems came back online by themselves or we'd be toast about now, sir."

"Okay," John said. "Let's get her upstairs and see what's going on under the hood."

"Yes, sir."

As the malfunctioning jumper made the slow ascent into the Jumper Bay, John turned back to his earpiece with chagrin. "McKay, come in. This is Sheppard."

"What do you want?"

John smirked. Apparently, Rodney wasn't quite over his abrupt dismissal earlier. "I've got a mystery that needs solving. I need you and Radek in the Jumper Bay."

"So, when you need something I'm supposed to come running, but when I need something ..."

"... I kick you out of my office. I'm glad we understand each other. Jumper Bay, Rodney."

He could practically see McKay's lips tightening into thin lines as the cranky scientist replied, "Fine."

John fought to keep a straight face and turned to Chuck. "It's probably an isolated incident, but until we get things checked out and cleared, the rest of the Jumpers are grounded. Pass it on, would you?"
"Sure thing, Colonel," he said. "By the way, sir, the betting pool is getting anxious. Any word on whether it's a boy or a girl?"

"No," John replied, "and if you know what's good for you, you won't mention anything about that to Teyla." He didn't really care that half the people in the city had laid bets on everything from the sex of the baby to the birth date, height and weight. He'd thrown his hat into more than a few bets over the years, and it was good for morale. But he didn't think Teyla would be too comfortable with the idea.

Of course, she was probably already aware of it and had chosen to ignore it. For Chuck's sake, though, he thought 'better safe, than sorry' was the best way to go.

"Yes, sir. I mean ... No, sir."

Ronon Dex didn't often find himself in this situation. For a long time his world had been black and white. The only things that really mattered were his friends and exacting revenge on the Wraith. It was a simple life. When it came to the gray areas, he was quickly realizing he was woefully out of practice. He had come to the infirmary looking for Jennifer with the unusual and unsettling sensation of butterflies in his stomach. She was in her office on her computer doing who knew what. Whatever it was, she was intent on it and hadn't noticed his approach.

She chewed her lower lip when she was concentrating. He wondered if she realized that. And every so often she tucked her hair behind her ear, even though nothing was out of place. He liked it. He liked the faces she made when she got busy and that she pushed herself so hard she didn't have time to notice things like that. She reminded him of Melena sometimes. Soft, caring. Naive. But surprisingly determined.

A mournful twinge hit his chest. Melena's determination had also been her downfall. He'd had to watch her die right in front of him.

His recent ordeal with Tyre had brought back all kinds of memories, memories of how life had been before. Family, friends, love. Then, he'd lost everything. His dreams had died along with everyone he cared about. Somehow, seeing his old comrade fight and die to regain who he'd been had made Ronon think hard about what he wanted. Did he want his life stay simple, with nothing but friends and hunting Wraith to occupy his time?

It'd probably surprised him more than anybody else, when he realized the answer was no. He'd come a long way since he stopped running. The bond of family he had with his friends had been sealed in blood and he would never, _never_ stop hunting the Wraith, but his other dreams still lived somewhere inside him, hovering in the background, dreams of home and a family of his own. For years, he'd seen the way Sheppard and Teyla looked at each other, yet he'd never felt a pang of jealousy until now. They had something. Something special. And he wanted that, too.

He wasn't sure how to do this. Hell, Jennifer wasn't even from the same galaxy. The movies made starting up a courtship seem pretty easy, but might be some Earth custom he missed. Was he supposed to bring flowers or something? Flowers weren't really his thing. And that was assuming she was even interested. Despite all claims to the contrary from both Jennifer and Capshaw, Ronon wasn't convinced there weren't some deeper feelings between the two.
But he knew that Jennifer was the first person to make him sit up and take notice in a long time, and if he ever wanted to make any kind of change, he was gonna have to get back out there sometime.

The lights suddenly dimmed overhead, breaking his train of thought, then returned to normal levels. That was weird.

Jennifer lifted her head to look and suddenly sucked in a sharp breath as she saw him for the first time. "Oh, Ronon! You startled me!"

He stepped forward with his hands in his pockets. "Sorry."

She shook her head and let out a small laugh at herself. "No, it's fine. Really. I guess I can get a little buried in this stuff sometimes."

"Anything interesting?" he asked mostly to be polite. He'd never needed to know the whys and hows of medicine. It worked. That's all he really cared about.

"Interesting? Always. Useful? Not so much," she admitted with sigh. "But you never know what might turn up, right?"

After a momentary lapse in conversation, Jennifer gently probed, "Did you need me for something? You don't have another sparring casualty out there waiting for me, do you?"

He smiled. "Nope. Not this time." Then, gearing up he asked in a lower voice, "I, uh ... I actually wanted to talk to you about that. Sparring, I mean."

She just looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"I was thinking we might ... start up those lessons we talked about."

Realization swept over her face. "Oh, that's right. We did talk about that. It seems like so much has happened since then, it completely slipped my mind. I'm still not sure you want me to be swinging weapons around, though."

"That's why you take lessons. To learn."

She laughed softly. "If you're really willing to take the risk, then ... yeah. Sure."

Ronon stood up a little straighter, feeling like the hard part was out of the way. Jennifer reached for the cup of coffee sitting on her desk. As she sipped, he saw a slight but unquestionable wince.

"You okay?"

Setting it down, she gave an appeasing smile. "It's fine, Ronon. I'm just a little sore. It really isn't that big of a deal." Then her face suddenly clouded over. "This isn't about what happened last night, is it? Because, like I told Colonel Sheppard, it was an accident and the situation's been resolved. Mason isn't any more a threat to me than you are."

Ronon's stomach lurched. "No, that's not it."

He looked her over, searching for some sign that she'd been hurt, but he didn't see anything. Nevertheless, his temper was on the rise. He asked with a harsh growl, "Capshaw hurt you?"

Her eyes widened. "No, no, no ... Ronon ... I thought you knew."
"I'll talk to you later." Ronon hit the door frame as he spun around and charged out.

"Ronon, no! Please, wait!" he heard her call after him.

It didn't slow him down.

In his lab, Dr. McKay was hurriedly packing up his equipment when the lights rolled overhead. It took a few moments before they stabilized and lit up the room.

"McKay, come in," John spoke through his radio.

"Go ahead," he replied.

"Are you messing around with the power again? The lights are flickering."

Rodney scowled. Of course. Anything goes wrong around here, it's automatically Rodney's fault. "Yeah, I know. I'm getting reports from all over the place."

"Sounds an awful lot like what happened in that puddlejumper ..."

"It can't be. I completely isolated the jumper's core. Whatever was effecting it couldn't have gotten into the city's computers." He trailed off as the lights went in and out again.

Obviously seeing the same thing McKay was, John didn't speak again until the lights stabilized again. "Are you gonna tell me this is a coincidence?"

Rodney was about to come back with a biting retort when a flash from across the room grabbed his attention. He barely had time to yell before a death-dealing bolt of displacement energy leapt from the consoles along the wall, hitting his lab table first. Rodney ducked and threw up his hands as the force behind the impact hurtled his equipment into the air. The charge, having not been spent on the unfortunate table, ricocheted violently across the room and headed straight for the next largest conductor in the room—a doomed physicist.

Blinding white electricity arced toward him with ghastly speed and Rodney slammed his eyes shut.

Gasping heavily, nearly thirty seconds passed before he realized he was still breathing. He cautiously peeked through his eyelids and immediately sprang backward.

Ooooh, crap!

From the tabletop, the oily tendrils of AD-765 had grown to gargantuan proportions along the path of the devastating current. A swirling black mass had enveloped the entire wall.

At a dead run, John flew into the lab.

"Rodney, what happ—" He slammed to halt, the soles of his boots squeaking against floor and the whites of his eyes on display. "Rodney? What the hell happened in here?"

"I'm alive," the scientist squeaked, spiraling into shock.

"I see that," John said, his gaze glued to the wall. "Really. Great news. But what happened?"
"Oookay," John said, still paralyzed. "Rodney?"

"Yeah?"

"It ate your lab."

Rodney gulped. "I'm alive."

"Right."

Mason opened his door and barely had time to think before Ronon's fist collided with his jaw. Taken offguard, he staggered back but recovered quickly. He pressed the back of his left hand to the corner of his mouth to check if he was bleeding. Finding nothing, he set his eyes on the furious Satedan, who looked like he was ready to eat him for lunch.

Mason didn't blame him for a second.

He smirked. "Is that all you got? I gotta tell you, man, I've taken worse hits off McKay in line at the mess hall."

Ronon swung and the resulting blow made his head spin and nearly buckled his knees.

"That's more like it," he groaned. He dabbed at his lip again with his unbound hand. This time he came away with a streak of red. "I think I just figured out who it is you've got your eye on."

"You hurt her," Ronon growled.

"And don't you think for a second that I didn't want to belt you a few times after you did the same thing," Mason goaded him. "So, come on. Take your shots. I won't stop you."

The big marine could see he'd hit a nerve, but instead getting the beating he felt he deserved, Ronon reached out and took ahold of his weight rack. With a savage yell, he yanked it over, sending it face down on the floor and the weights tumbling wildly across the room.

With a disappointed grunt, Mason scowled. "I've been wanting to do that for years."

Ronon, lungs surging from adrenaline, cast him a blank stare. "What stopped you?"

"Hell if I know. Did it feel good?"

"Yep."

Mason rolled his eyes. "Figures."

"I never meant to hurt her," Ronon stated, his guilt over the incident plain.

"Neither did I," Mason said. "The way I see it, between the two of us, you're the lucky one. You got screwed over by the Wraith. I don't have that excuse."

Ronon nodded at his bandaged hand, asking without words.
Rueful, Mason shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn't much like the guy looking back at me in the mirror."

The ripe tension between the two men having died down to a static charge, Mason turned his back on Ronon and sat down on the bed.

"So what are we gonna do about it?" Ronon's rocky voice asked.

Mason waved it off. "Nothing to do. We're good."

"I meant ... this thing with Jennifer."

Richard Woolsey walked into the tower, looking like he'd been walking for quite a while.

"Where've you been?" John asked.

He frowned. "On the other side of the city. A transporter malfunctioned and sent me to the East Pier. I had to walk all the way back. I tried to radio you."

"Yeah, well. Communications are down," John explained. He had tried calling Teyla a hundred times with no success. He hoped she was okay.

Woolsey went on. "I was almost hit by a bolt of lightning."

"Join the club!" Rodney exclaimed from where he was speedily working on the city's computer terminal. "We've got power disruptions all over the city. The energy builds up in one area and then discharges in a high-voltage displacement current. Very erratic, and very lethal."

"We think whatever's wrong with the Jumper has infected Atlantis," Sheppard said.

McKay scowled. "It's one of several possibilities."

"Several?" John followed up incredulously.

"It's a possibility, alright? The point is we have no idea what's going on here. I've just gotta run a few diagnostics, narrow down the ..."

The lights in the control room died, bathing them all in darkness. The equipment went silent, as well as the personnel inhabiting the control tower.

John looked out the windows. Power had gone out all over the city. "That can't be good."

"Okay, okay," Woolsey started. "We need to organize some teams, fan out through the city, keep everyone calm until we figure out exactly what the ..."

A small beep from Rodney's computer brought the planning to a halt. John walked back over to the control terminal.

"The laptop just booted up," McKay said.

"It's probably just the battery," John observed.
"No, it's drawing power from the system."

Woolsey's brow scrunched up in question. "So everything's out except your computer?"

John and Woolsey stared at Rodney. "What am I? A magic eight ball? I'm just as confused as you are!"

Bringing the argument to an effective close, incomprehensible code began typing itself across Rodney's screen. The text altered itself over and over, but never made any sense, until it finally formed into the simple word "Help".

The men exchanged cautious and perplexed looks. Taking the initiative, Rodney leaned over and typed in, "Who are you?"

The pattern of garbled letters repeated itself. Waiting, John stood with his arms folded over his chest and prepared himself for whatever was coming. But no one was more surprised than he was when it ceased.

"Elizabeth Weir."

"I don't think this is a good idea, Teyla. Whoever's in there, it may not be Elizabeth."

Standing outside the closed door where, inside, a recently built replicator claiming to be their fallen friend sat, John was uneasy.

"And I will have you and the other guards watching at all times," Teyla reminded John, squeezing his hand. "But if that is Elizabeth ..."

"I know," John finished. They both wanted to believe that somehow Elizabeth wasn't dead. Teyla wanted to be able to speak with her friend again. So did John. But he also badly wanted to be able to release himself from some of his regret at having left her behind in the hands of the enemy. "Let's just keep this short, okay? If that really is her in there, we'll have time later to talk, okay?"

Teyla nodded. A nervous smile played at her lips. "Okay."

Without releasing his tight grip on her hand, John led the way. Inside, the two armed men gave him a curt nod. FRAN, or Elizabeth as she was claiming to be, looked up from the chair where she sat. John stayed between Teyla and Elizabeth as much as he could until he felt a patient but firm nudge from Teyla requesting that he step aside.

John saw the surprise in Elizabeth's face. Their entwined hands and the soccer ball hiding underneath Teyla's top didn't leave much room for interpretation.

"Teyla," she said in soft amazement.

"Dr. Weir," Teyla returned the greeting politely.

"A child?"

Teyla's arm protectively but fondly laid across her stomach. "Yes."
Elizabeth looked up from her chair at John, meeting his wary stare. "Can I assume that ..."

Teyla answered. "John is the father."

Despite the tension in the room, John liked the way that sounded. He looked into Elizabeth's eyes and in his posture confirmed what Teyla said, a primitive side of him hungry to claim the distinction. He and Teyla were in love. He was the father of that child and was proud to be.

Elizabeth cracked a smile. Although astonished, that she was pleased was apparent. "That's ... that's amazing. Congratulations. To both of you."

She stood up in the attitude of wanting to give Teyla a hug, but John and his men were not about to let that happen. Not with so many questions unanswered and so much suspicion on the table. Again, John set himself in between the two women as weapons were raised at their sides.

Teyla gripped his arm. "John, it is alright."

He glanced around to her, but didn't move. To Elizabeth, he laid it all out. "Look ... we all want to believe you are who you say you are ...

"I understand. You have to be cautious. But it is really is me, John. You just have to give me time. You'll see that—"

Elizabeth stared unseeing into the distance.

"Oh, no ..." she murmured.

John's grip on Teyla's hand clamped down. "What's wrong?"

"They've found me."

Things were tense. The Replicators were under lockdown in one of the science labs. They professed to be solely interested in creating human bodies for themselves, but Jennifer couldn't help but think something else was bound to go wrong. After all, the first thing they'd done when they'd arrived was threaten to sink the city if they didn't cooperate.

And Dr. Weir, back from the dead - again - in replicator form? Yeah, things were tense. She held herself at the ready in the infirmary, just in case.

The infirmary cleared of patients at this point, she sat at her desk perusing Rodney's files on AD-765. He'd managed to get some photos of the device's mammoth reaction to the lightning strike before the city's power outage caused it to return to its original, more diminutive form.

It was a mysterious little thing. All the information they had in the database said that it was designed to harness and contain aberrant electrical impulses, like some sort of patch. It wasn't designed for anything nearly as strong as the displacement current that had been flying unchecked through the city, but fortunately for Rodney, it seemed to be capable of more than even the Ancients had predicted. But there generally wasn't much to go on. According to the records, it was still in the experimental stages. There was no real data on it to speak of, short or long term, and it hadn't ever been tested on living subjects, even though it had been designed to work on the body's unique
"Good reading?" an affable baritone asked from the doorway. "Does the hero get to save the damsel in distress?"

She looked up at the laidback marine leaning in the frame. "Not this time."

"Too bad. I know you're a sucker for a happy ending."

"Yeah. But this isn't a fairy tale." She spun her computer around, allowing him to see the research she was browsing.

"No, it's not," he said, ignoring the research, looking only at her.

Jennifer shook her head at him. "Mason, Colonel Sheppard will throw you in a holding cell if he finds out you were here."

He didn't betray any reaction. His appealing features displaying only quiet consideration and poise, he lightly batted his bandaged hand against the door jamb until his eyes met hers once again. "Do you want me in a holding cell?"

"No," she said quietly.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did."

"I don't, okay?" she came back, stronger, surer this time. "I don't."

Traces of a smile crept onto his face. "Then, I'm good with taking the risk."

She didn't know what to say to that, so they fell into one of their loaded pauses. Usually, it was to avoid an argument, but sometimes it was to avoid saying things that maybe danced a little too close to the line they'd drawn for themselves in the beginning of their friendship. Mason started anxiously thumping his hand against the door again.

"Jen," he said. He was plainly trying to keep eye contact with her but struggling. His light blue eyes flitted from the floor to his shoes and then to her desktop. "I just ... I had to make sure. I had to see for myself you were okay. And to say ... I'm sorry."

In that moment, his blue eyes met hers and she was struck with a depth and intensity that she recognized. But only now did she understand the feelings behind it.

"Mason, I, um ..." she grasped for the right thing to say. The problem was she didn't know what she wanted to say and she cursed herself for the uncertainty that seemed prevalent to her psyche. "Mason, I never wanted to ..."

Suddenly, the lights went dead and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

"Mason?" For a moment, she was blind.

A quiet "shh" came from his direction.

Jennifer carefully maneuvered her way across the dark office to where he was, groping around until she caught his arm. "The replicators?" she whispered.

"Probably," came his hissed reply. Her pupils finally adjusted to the change in the light, and once satisfied she could see okay, he edged through the black infirmary toward the main entrance as
Jennifer tiptoed behind. He peered carefully out into the dark corridor. "I'm gonna go check it out. You got any guns in here?"

"Infirmary, not armory," she heard herself say. Funny. She'd said that exact thing to Ronon a while back. Maybe she should start thinking about keeping a stunner in her desk or something for emergencies.

Mason frowned and looked out again. "Would've been helpful, but I can make do without. I'll scout things out, find out what's going on."

"Mason, you can't go out there by yourself." Jennifer said, despite the fact that she had his file practically memorized and knew he likely could. "What are you gonna do if you run into trouble? Club the replicator over the head with your mummy hand?"

"I actually thought I'd use the whole arm, if it's all the same to you."

Jennifer fought an unexpected laugh, the pull of her cheeks nice under the circumstances. "Don't be an idiot. If something's gone wrong, Colonel Sheppard's got a bunch of guys on it already. Guys with guns."

"Don't remind me."

She heard the slight annoyance in his breathed response. He didn't like being sidelined any more than Ronon or the Colonel.

Their debate was interrupted by the sound of hurried footfalls pattering down the corridor. A single set from the sound of it. From what little ambient lighting remained, Jennifer made out a male replicator.

"Koracen," she nearly shrieked, forgetting herself for a moment.

Mason's arms were immediately around her, the uninjured hand covering her mouth and the other arm banded tightly around her waist. In a rush, he carried her away from the entrance to the nearest corner and hemmed her against the wall. He placed his body between hers and the entrance, the only way the replicator could come at them should he have heard her.

A stern, restrained "shh" came at her again from his lips.

They stood together, nerves on end and bodies on edge. Standing close, she felt his heat and the conditioning apparent in the definition of his muscles. It was hard to see in the darkness, but she could make out the outline of his profile inches from her, listening for the slightest sound of trouble.

He hadn't shaved in a few days, she thought, her eyes dwelling on his face instead of what was in the hallway. Not a naturally hairy guy, a few days of growth still didn't amount to much. She vaguely wondered what it felt like.

Hard to hear over the rapid thud of her own heart, the footsteps resumed. Uneven, cautious. Slowly, they drew further away.

After several heightened moments of bracing and incalculable silence, she whispered, "Is he ... Is he gone?"

Mason's head whipped around as the soft pat pat pat suddenly resumed in earnest. Jennifer inhaled sharply, and the next thing she knew his lips had descended on hers, cutting off all noise.
Her body stiffened in surprise. Without thinking, she tried to pull away and found herself briefly grappling with Mason as he desperately tried to keep her still. His bandaged hand locked in the small of her back, the other hand came to rest on her face, enveloping her cheek as he firmly held her to him, their lips sealed together.

His thumb began to move back and forth over her skin as if trying to calm her, coaxing her to stillness with startling gentleness as if to say she was safe with him. Nothing was going to happen. She slowly relaxed under his tender caresses, the strain gradually fleeing her body. Mason released a long breath as her lips softened, and his hot breath tickled her cheek. But she wasn't even tempted to laugh as his lips responded in kind, opening slightly then smoothly pressing in for more.

Soft. The scruff on his chin was prickly but also strangely, compellingly soft.

An eternity later, he broke away and left her side. He stealthily moved to the main doors to search for any sign of the runaway replicator. The way he started to relax she guessed that the coast was clear. Before striding back toward her, he gave a minute shake of the head as if to clear his thoughts.

"Next time, that should probably be plan A."

He stopped a comfortable distance in front of her. Jennifer rubbed her elbows, staying in place as if welded to the wall. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It got you quiet, didn't it?"

Shame and disappointment colored her cheeks. "Was that all it was? Good strategy?"

"Jennifer ..." he said with a non-committal groan.

"Why can't you talk to me?" she wondered aloud. "We used to talk. We used to have fun together. Are you still angry with me about last night?"

Mason's face took a serious turn, full of regret. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to apologize enough to you for what happened. For what I did. But I was never mad at you, Jennifer. I don't think I've ever been mad at you. At myself, at this twisted situation, at the unfairness of the universe, whatever you want to call it. I was mad at that, not you. I couldn't be sorrier for making you feel that way."

Jennifer reached for him as she had last night, but this time it wasn't met with a pain-fueled, emotionally charged reaction. He let her touch him and even seemed to enjoy it.

The lights around the city came on again overhead. Surrounded by the unclouded luminescence, Mason went rigid and backed away. She allowed him the escape and let him slide away from her grasp.

"I wish I could say I didn't mean everything I said, but there were some things ..." He paused, his jaw tense. "I can't be your friend, Jennifer. I don't want to be your friend. But I can't be anything else, either."

Jennifer felt that terrible sensation of a knot forming in her throat. "So that's it?"

"That's it."
Elizabeth stepped up to the gate. There wasn't any doubt in John's mind who it was standing in front of him. Only Elizabeth would be willing to make this kind of sacrifice for Atlantis.

"Haven't you done enough already?"

"John, listen to me. I had to bring them here. It was our only chance; our only way out. I didn't know that Koracen would cause this kind of trouble. I didn't think that anyone would get hurt."

"What did you think we were gonna do? Just give you a bunch of replicator bodies and send you on your way?"

"I truly believed we were no threat to you."

"You may still think that you're Elizabeth, but you're not."

He had seen the pain his words had caused, but even after she'd defended him from Koracen and shattered his body back into its base elements, he still wasn't entirely convinced it was her. It wasn't until they were in Woolsey's office that the truth hammered itself home.

Woolsey offered her and the others one last chance to create the human bodies they claimed to want. John had signed off on it with the condition that they beef up security. But to everyone's surprise, she'd refused. She wasn't willing to risk any more lives.

"It was good to see you again, John. You're happy. I can tell."

He hadn't known what to say. He never really did in these situations. Nothing ever seemed right or good enough. The only person he'd ever managed to get over that hurdle with was Teyla, and even then he still struggled with it. He got by mostly on luck with her. She knew him better than anyone, and most of the time she knew what he wanted to say better than he did.

"Tell Teyla, if you would, that I'm sorry."

He'd managed a stiff nod at that, at least.

"You have a beautiful family, John. I hope you have a good life."

With Teyla by his side in the Gateroom, he was impressed with a faint but distinct sadness that didn't belong to him, though it echoed his feelings perfectly. John looked at the event horizon and wished he could at least say a proper goodbye. But, again, he found that goodbye was too simple and wasn't good enough. So he watched Elizabeth step through the Gate and call the other Replicators to her. They had no idea she was setting them up, that all they would meet on the other side was the frigid vacuum of space.

The Stargate shut down, leaving the people of Atlantis to grieve for Elizabeth one last time. John took Teyla by the hand and walked her home in silence.
The instant he stepped from the wormhole, John was swallowed inside a freezing wall of water. His heart seemed to stop for a few beats and he couldn't breathe. His feet no longer underneath him and trying to remain calm, John opened his eyes trying to orient himself and figure out which way was up. It was nighttime on this planet, but fortunately the moon overhead shone through the dark water like a beacon. John kicked toward the light and broke the surface.

"Ronon!" he yelled. His head whipped in every direction, but he saw nothing but the top of the gate and water engulfing the entire valley. Ronon had been right behind him. He should've come up by now. "Ronon!"

A second later, having drifted a few yards away, Ronon roared upward, creating new waves as he came. "Sheppard!"

John exhaled in relief. "You had me worried for a second, Chewie."

"Sorry. Wasn't planning on going for a swim."

"Neither was I." As he spoke, cold seeped through his skin all the way down to his bones. John nodded toward the visible part of the gate. "We gotta get out of this water. See if you can climb up there. I'm gonna find the DHD and dial Atlantis."

Ronon, weighed down by his soaked leather clothes, swam toward the great silver arch of the Stargate while John's already quivering hands fumbled in his TAC vest for a flashlight. He was never so glad that most of his equipment was designed to be waterproof. With the flick of a switch, the little white light came to life. John swam out, approximating where the DHD was likely to be — a safe distance from the Gate, but, in this case, also under a hell of a lot of water. John took a few long preparatory breaths, then with a final deep inhale, dove.

With the temperature this cold, he couldn't afford to spend a lot of time swimming through the glacial runoff searching for the device. But for once luck was on his side. The DHD was almost precisely below him. Right on target, the little flashlight lit the way down.

Pressure shifted in his ears to adjust to the depth. Must be at least twenty feet down. Once the device was in reach, he placed the flashlight between his teeth to illuminate the buttons and dialed the city as quickly as he could. Under the frigid water, the normally already watery looking vortex opened in an explosion of light.

John pushed off the edge of the DHD, his lungs tightening vigorously in his chest, and kicked rapidly to propel him upward.
In the Gateroom, Teyla had stood with Mr. Woolsey to see off John and Ronon. It was a simple mission: find the errant Dr. Nichols and reprimand him for his tardiness in checking in from the research camp on M44-5YN.

"Want me to smack him around or anything?" John had jokingly offered.

Teyla had stifled a grin at Mr. Woolsey's deadpan reaction. "Just the reminder, please."

The two men marched through the Gate as they had countless times before and the Gate shut down behind them.

Teyla turned to Amelia. "Jennifer informed me it was your turn to host the next poker night. If it is not too much trouble, I was wondering if I might do it instead? I have missed much and would like the chance to make it up to everyone."

"That sounds great, actually." Amelia admitted with relief. "I wasn't looking forward to clean-up duty, anyhow. It's good to have you back, Teyla."

Teyla whispered a small thank you before Mr. Woolsey addressed her in his naturally formal demeanor.

"It will probably take them some time to get to the camp, and then more time for Dr. Nichols to get back to the Gate and report. If you'd care to, Teyla, we probably have time to get some breakfast and discuss the debriefing for the mission to Memas," Richard proposed.

Teyla had taken the last week to readjust to being in the city and to discuss with John and Mr. Woolsey where best she could contribute. With the discovery of her pregnancy, her offworld missions with Major Lorne's team had immediately ceased, and since that time, she had been wearing the mantle of the Athosian leader. But with her people settled and back under Halling's careful stewardship, and not one to sit idle for long, Teyla had needed to find a new function for herself.

Her extensive knowledge of the different peoples of the galaxy and personal contacts were to be put to more widespread use as diplomatic and trade counsel for Mr. Woolsey and the offworld teams interacting with the various cultures in their travels. Major Santiago's team was due for a mission to a notoriously reclusive people, and it was Teyla's job to make recommendations on how to best proceed in opening talks with them.

She was moderately surprised at Mr. Woolsey's offer to share a meal with her. To this point, every attempt she and the others had made to befriend him during their off-duty hours had been met with polite excuses. He was no doubt accustomed to keeping a strict professional distance when it came to his work, but that sort of thinking wouldn't do in Atlantis, where those you worked with were those you also spent your evenings with. The man probably felt very isolated in this alien environment. It was unique place and she wanted to help him become a part of it, to help him feel more at home.

"That would be lovely, Mr. Woolsey. Thank you." She smiled and took Richard's gentlemanly offer of an arm. They proceeded toward the mess hall.

Behind them, the Gate suddenly lit up.

"Unscheduled off-world activation," Amelia reported to them as they came back.

"Activate the shield," Woolsey ordered.

The shield's mosaic of color flashed over the Gate.
Amelia looked up from her station. "I'm not receiving an IDC."

Teyla held her breath as John's shaky voice chimed in over the intercom. "Atlantis, this is Sheppard. Do not lower the shield. The entire tower will be flooded."

"John, are you alright?" Teyla asked, her heart racing.

"Yeah, just cold and wet. The Stargate's under water. The entire valley's flooded. We need you to send a Jumper through so we can stay warm and dry until the water recedes."

Woolsey answered, "Will do, Colonel. Hold on."

"Holding on. Sheppard out."

John and Ronon lay across their silver lifeboat in their sodden clothing, shivering with cold.

"Why isn't the Gate shutting down?" Ronon asked from his prone position.

"Probably something to do with the water pressure. Thirty-eight minutes and it'll shut off by itself," John reasoned. The Colonel's chest rattled, and he let out a half-formed cough.

"You okay?"

John scowled. "You know that cold McKay's been nursing? I think he gave it to me."

"Great."

"Well, at least he's not here," John said. "Lucky for us, he's too in love with that Ancient lightning rod thingy to be bothered to come on a babysitting mission."

It was late afternoon Atlantis Time when they got back, but to John and Ronon, they'd just spent a long night in the back of a Puddlejumper. With blankets wrapped around them, they stepped through the Gate where Teyla and Woolsey were waiting.

She had taken one look at John and knew something was wrong. That he looked tired wasn't unusual or unexpected. What she didn't expect was the pale pallor of his skin and the slight cough he was doing his best to smother.

"Why didn't you return in the Jumper I sent you?" Mr. Woolsey inquired.

"I ordered the rescue party to continue the search for Nichols' team. There's a chance they're still alive."

Woolsey nodded. "Of course. I think you've just made a case for my proposal to send a MALP ahead of every single transit."
John grimaced. "Now there's no reason to overreact. Stuff happens, Woolsey. Besides, I don't think the IOA would be too thrilled about taking on the extra expense at this point. Do you?"

The forthcoming visit from the IOA had the man wound as tight as a drum. Finding Sheppard's argument hitting a little too close for his liking, the expedition leader acquiesced.

John blinked and in an unsteady voice stated, "I'm gonna go get checked out."

From nearby, Ronon caught his woozy demeanor and so did Teyla. "John?"

John's eyes tried to focus on Teyla and reached for her. He gripped her, feeling his world spinning out of control.

"John?" Teyla clung to him as his legs started to turn to jelly and his body began to sag. "John!" Rapidly disappearing behind a dark curtain, he could feel his weight dragging her down.

Another set of arms joined Teyla's and then the lights went out.


Jennifer fielded the complaint like a seasoned pro. "I didn't see anything on the scanner, but I'd like to keep you here for observation a while longer, Colonel."

"I'm fine."

Teyla, by his bedside, said, "You lost consciousness, John. Please allow Dr. Keller to do what she feels is necessary. If, indeed, it is simply a cold, then you will be permitted to leave soon enough."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, annoyed with her flawless logic and the fact that he loved her so much he could hardly begrudge her a few more hours of infirmary time. "How am I supposed to argue with that?"

"I suggest that you do not," she said sternly.

He didn't. From the way she was looking at him, he had the distinct impression that any attempt at escape would be met with a swift ass kicking—pregnant or not.

Dr. Keller left them alone, and Teyla sighed and leaned on her hand. John reached out and tenderly brushed her arm.

"Hey."

Teyla's brown eyes lifted up to meet his. It had been a week since that initial glimpse into her mind, and since then John had gotten a few more brief peaks into her. That powerful feeling wasn't around right now, however he didn't need it. He knew what was going on in her head.

They had never gotten used to things like this happening. They'd managed well enough when they were teammates and had to keep their true feelings under lock and key. But since their relationship had changed and they'd been allowed to show the worry that churned inside, every time one of them wound up in the infirmary, it was hard. Too hard.
"I'm sorry."

"You frightened me, John."

"I know, but I'm gonna be fine. I'm gonna be up and out of here in no time."

Teyla's frown softened. She exhaled and reached out to stroke the hair spilling over his forehead. "I know you will."

It was a bit like trying to hold a fine mist in the palm of her hand. No matter how she reached, Teyla couldn't quite touch the warm halo nestled in the back of her consciousness. It had taken a few more unexpected brushes with the curious feeling to even recognize its presence, but now that she had, she desperately wanted to make contact; to be open with her child, to let the little one know that they were loved and, perhaps, get a glimpse of their mind as she'd intermittently been allowed with John. She stretched out a spectral hand toward it once again and was again thwarted.

Sitting on top of her bed with her legs crossed in front of her, Teyla frowned. Without opening her eyes, she worked to recenter herself. It was taxing just making these attempts and the frustration she was feeling was only getting in the way. She hadn't had this much trouble linking her mind with another since the first time she'd connected with the hive collective of the Wraith. Her talents had grown by miles since that time, so her inability to do so simple a task as to reach her own child confounded her.

"Still having trouble?" John asked. She heard him moving around their bedroom, near the dresser.

With a heavy sigh, she realized her focus was irrevocably lost. But, frankly, she welcomed the distraction, especially when it came in the form of a gorgeous, rugged male specimen she cherished. John's ability to divert her at the times when she most needed it was uncanny.

She opened her eyes and a disappointed expression painted her face. "Is it that obvious?"

"Little bit."

He'd recovered remarkably fast from his cold. Two days later, it was as though nothing had ever happened. In fact, he was acting more free and refreshed than he had in some time, as though he'd let go of the heartache of losing Elizabeth, the responsibility he felt at his team fraying at the edges, and the pain of being apart from her. Since being released from the infirmary, nothing seemed to bother him.

He fastened his watch to his wrist, then settled down next to her, the mattress shifting slightly under his weight.

"I do not believe I have ever had such a hard time establishing a mental connection before," Teyla admitted.

"You're sure the baby has the Wraith gene?"

"I can sense it, John. This child possesses the Gift," Teyla confirmed. "But it is unlike any mind I have ever encountered. It is ... elusive. Strange."
John's crooked smirk appeared. "Don't mention that around McKay. Next thing you know, he'll be spouting off about how the baby's taking after me already."

His hand came to rest on her knee. "I wouldn't worry too much about it, Teyla. You've never done anything exactly like this before, and … well, the kiddo may just be too young for all this telepathic stuff."

Teyla accepted his reassurance, but she had her doubts. Each time they had accidentally forged a link, there was a vague sense of raw potential already residing inside her, waiting for her.

Her hand moved to stroke his. "You are probably right."

After a few moments, John adopted a funny expression.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You're killing me. You know that, right?" he said with a devilish flash of teeth.

Teyla responded with a placid smile and an angelic countenance. "I have no idea what you are referring to, John."

"You don't usually meditate in nothing but one of my t-shirts and your panties."

"Your shirt is quite comfortable and it is early, John. I have not yet felt the desire to dress for the day."

"Do you think it'd break your concentration if I came over there and … took them off?" he asked.

She spared him a grin and looked him over, freshly shaven and in his workout clothes. "Are you not supposed to go running with Ronon shortly?"

He glanced at his watch. "That's not for a whole ten minutes."

Teyla rolled her eyes and didn't bother to hide how underwhelming that sounded. "How romantic of you, John."

He mischievously bit his lower lip, and the muscle visible beneath his snug, white t-shirt made her stomach flip. Undeterred by her skepticism, his hands teased their way up her leg and snuck around her hips, playing at the black lace he found so distracting. She raised her hip slightly, allowing him to work them downward. The feel of his rough fingers up against her skin quashed any thought of protest.

His lips crushed against hers. His tongue slyly sought entrance into her mouth while his body edged hers down onto the mattress. One of his knees occupied itself by slowly spreading her legs.

Very aware of their time constraints and having no desire for Ronon to show up while they were in such a compromising position, Teyla was surprised that John seemed in no hurry to release his own unmistakeable arousal and shed his pants. With a tantalizing parting bite to her lower lip, his head lowered and disappeared down her body. Teyla's eyes widened. She didn't expect their rushed liaison to take this particular turn.

Her breath ragged in anticipation of his attentions, she whispered, "John, what are you doing?"

She heard a deep chuckle roll from him.

"If you don't know, I don't do this often enough."
"John." She gasped feeling his tongue against her soft, moist flesh below. "John … nnnh … what about … Ronon?"

"Ronon can fend for himself for a while," he murmured. "I'm busy."

He knew he'd asked for this. Pushed for it. Ronon thought every single person in the city should be able to defend themselves, even the civilians. But it still felt weird throwing punches at Jennifer. Granted, they were slow for him, highly controlled, and he could put a stop to them in an instant, but it brought back flashes of memory he'd rather forget.

"Arms up higher," he told her.

"I'm doing this wrong, aren't I?" Jennifer asked apprehensively.

Her fists balled up and arms braced to her sides, she looked about as rigid as a person could be without cracking. And they hadn't even gotten to the hard stuff yet. This was just lesson number one in Ronon's school of combat—blocking.

"You're doing fine." As he spoke, he demonstrated what to do with his own body. "Just relax. Stay loose. You get too tight, you won't be fast enough to counter and you're dead."

Her mouth pulled tight. "Thank you. Really. That makes me feel so much better."

Ronon threw a slow, easy tap to her arm to knock some of the stiffness out of her. "Get some of the tension out of your hands and let your arms do the work. Now, arms up."

Jennifer took a deep breath and did a little dance in place designed to help her relax. She obediently raised her arms. "You really do this for fun?"

"You don't think this is fun?" He struck again and Jennifer brought up her small arm to absorb the blow. "Good."

"Not really," she managed, biting her lip in anticipation of the next hit.

"Don't do that," he said quickly. "Not unless you want to bite through it."

She paled a little but stopped immediately stopped chewing her lip.

"What do you do for fun?" he asked, honestly curious but never losing his focus. He struck again and was again met with a quick reaction from the doctor.

"Well, there's, you know … watching movies with everybody, poker night …"

"What about when it's just you?" Ronon threw another punch and grinned at the speed of her response. Talking about something took her mind off the target in front of her and helped her loosen up, getting her better results. He decided to change it up and come at her from a different angle.

"Oh, I don't know …" she started, until she saw the change in his pattern and an arm coming from overhead instead from the side. She grimaced, but managed to get her arm up in time to cover and repel his attack.
"Good. Keep going," he encouraged her. "So what do you do?"

"Mostly, I read. Take a bubble bath. I've been know to …" she blocked him again, "… give myself a pedicure on special occasions."

"Pedicure?"

"Yeah," she paused, taking another blow and sending it back. She finished with a sheepish explanation. "I ... make my toenails look pretty."

Ronon dropped his attack and cocked his head, trying to imagine what that would look like."Hmm," he grunted. "And that's fun?"

She gave a little shrug. "Well, fun might be too strong a word, but it's relaxing. I can turn on some music and just turn my brain off for while."

Ronon sent his fists at her, this time in a more complicated combination. He gave a swift jab to the right, which she intercepted with ease, and followed it up with a pair of lefts and found himself thwarted when he went for her head. He even threw in a right cross for good measure and Jennifer seemed to be right on top of it.

The big warrior nodded in approval. She had stated her problem perfectly. If she could get out of her head and out of her own way, she could have some real potential. He didn't see her putting in the time and work it took to become really proficient, but she'd be able to defend herself, which was all he wanted anyway.

"That's enough for today."

"Really?" she asked. Her brow was starting to bead sweat and she was out of breath, but she seemed surprised they were done.

"What did you expect?"

"Well … more blood for starters."

"Next time," he stated soberly as they ambled toward their bags.

Then, when Jennifer turned whiter than usual, his bearded face contorted to a sly grin.

Her exasperation mixed heavily with relief. "And they say you have no sense of humor."

Ronon picked up her bag and handed it to her, then threw his over his shoulder.

He was rusty at this, at the whole process of starting up a courtship. A few frantic, meaningless encounters while he was on the run, strictly to ebb his needs, hardly qualified. Melena had been the first and the last. And he hadn't really been good at it then, either.

"Do you, maybe, wanna ... do something?"

"Something?"

"Yeah."

She smiled, genuinely intrigued and Ronon felt a little more ease. "What did you have in mind?"

"Wanna eat?" he suggested with a shrug.
Jennifer looked up at him. "I, um ... I actually made plans to meet Teyla. You wouldn't want to join us, would you?"

"Yeah, why not?" he agreed readily.

He was actually a little relieved to know that Teyla would be there. The more he thought about the idea of being alone with the doctor outside the gym, the more he thought maybe he wasn't quite ready for this.

"Ronon," Teyla greeted the tall Satedan. A tray of food already in front of her, she had been awaiting Jennifer's arrival to start eating. Then, much to her astonishment, she had emerged in the mess hall in Ronon's stoic company.

"You don't mind, do you?" Jennifer asked her. "Ronon and I just finished our first sparring lesson and I survived, so we're having a little celebratory lunch."

Teyla looked to Ronon to confirm what she'd heard. He nodded. "Yeah. She did good."

She tried to picture the cherubic Dr. Keller up against the imposing warrior—or a Wraith, for that matter. After witnessing Jennifer in action firsthand on New Athos, when her people had been discovered missing, the image didn't quite gel. "In that case, this is a cause for celebration. You are very welcome, Ronon."

Ronon gestured with his thumb toward the line. "I can get our food, if you want."

"Are you sure?" Jennifer asked.

"It's no problem."

"Okay." Jennifer offered him a smile, and he moved off to take his place at the back of the short line.

Jennifer took a seat across from the intrigued woman, appearing relieved to be able to rest for a moment.

"Since when did you develop an interest in learning to fight?" Teyla inquired in her diplomatic way. She had proposed to teach Jennifer on several occasions but had always been met with a dubious and firm denial.

"Ronon offered and ... after all that's happened recently, I realized that he's probably right. Things can get pretty crazy around this place, and I should at least learn the basics."

"You mean the incident with Sergeant Capshaw," Teyla surmised.

Jennifer let the comment slide by, plainly happier to avoid the subject altogether. "You seem surprised."

"I am impressed, Jennifer. I have always been of the opinion that everyone in Atlantis should learn the basics of self-defense. It is a hard place to be, this galaxy, and it will do you good to be prepared."

Teyla glanced over at her large friend, amassing his usual pile of food on one tray and a distinctly
smaller one on a second. "Ronon is not one to take many beginners under his tutelage," she subtly pointed out. "I believe Rodney was the last person he attempted it with and, in case you hadn't noticed, it did not go very well. He prefers working with the soldiers under John's command. Most of them arrive already with a solid foundation to build upon and are more suited to Ronon's … temperament. Many of the civilians that have come to me wanting to learn tend to find him too intimidating."

"I can definitely understand that," said Jennifer, with a huff. "I mean, I know Ronon. He's a great guy, but when he's all … wound up and ready to kill something … it's a little scary."

Teyla smiled, understanding her shy friend's trepidation. The Satedan's mammoth size, tattooed skin, his expert skills, and impressive strength would have been enough to stir fear in the hearts of many even without the savagery he'd honed at the hands of the Wraith. "In any case, congratulations on your first lesson. I am sure Ronon was very pleased with your performance."

"Ronon? Heck, I'm pleased. I half expected to be spending my lunch today warming a bed in the infirmary."

"I am sure that Ronon took great care to avoid any accidents with you, Jennifer."

"He did," she acknowledged. "He was really … nice. Kind of unexpected."

Teyla tipped her chin in agreement. "There are aspects to Ronon that I believe many would find unexpected."

"You're not kidding. Did I ever get a chance to show you the bracelet he made?"

"No, you have not."

"It's phenomenal. Really," Jennifer gushed. "I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful. I can't imagine why he'd want to give it to me, though. That's the kind of thing you give to someone you really care about."

"Would it surprise you to know that Ronon thinks of you fondly?" Teyla asked.

Knowing Ronon's interest in her friend, Teyla was curious to see what Jennifer had to say about him. She had wondered if the reason Jennifer couldn't find an answer to her question about Sergeant Capshaw, or perhaps a question about Ronon, was because the doctor had never allowed herself to look at either of them or anyone else in a romantic light.

"Ronon? We talk. Well, I talk while I stitch him up and he mostly just listens."

Teyla sighed. She admired Jennifer's dedication to her profession, but she was also of the opinion that keeping oneself and one's feelings separate from others for a period of years, away from one's home and family, was unrealistic. Feelings would crop up between those who interacted closely together. Relationships were bound to occur. Perhaps even marriages and children, if the love between the two people was strong enough. She and John were a prime example—although she had to admit, she'd had feelings for John since the moment she laid eyes on him. She hadn't needed the years they'd worked together to know that she wanted him to be by her side always.

Teyla sent her friend a pointed stare.

Jennifer stammered. "We're friends, I guess, but I seriously doubt he gives me too much thought."

Teyla glanced over at Ronon again. He was getting ready to rejoin them at the table. Jennifer
followed her gaze and met his eyes. To the doctor, he cracked a slight smile.

Jennifer turned rapidly to Teyla and said in a rushed whisper, "You don't think—? Why would he —? Have you seen him? Why would he even look twice at me? He could have his pick of girls around here. I just … I don't see why anyone would … I'm not exactly …"

"I think that you seriously undervalue yourself in the eyes of others, Jennifer." Teyla tried to put her at ease. "You need only to discover what it is that you want."

Jennifer looked worried. In a last desperate admission before the tray-laden warrior returned, she whispered, "I'm not good at this kind of thing, Teyla. I'm really not good at it. This is way over my head."

Ronon set the two trays of food down on the table as the girls lapsed into a painful and obvious silence. He scanned them suspiciously.

"What?"

"Nothing," Jennifer squeaked.

Teyla stepped in. "We were talking about how unusual it is for you to accept beginners in your sparring classes."

"Oh," he grunted, his dreads swinging to the side as he sat down next to Jennifer. "Haven't had many people ask. Figured they all decided it was safer to wait until you have your baby and get back to it."

Teyla watched him take a chunk out of a sandwich with vicious fervor.

"Very possible," Teyla said astutely, dipping her fork into her salad.

Rodney and John marched through the doorway of the mess hall, decidedly engrossed in conversation. For Teyla, it was a yet another pleasant surprise. John locked eyes with her and smirked. The glint in his eye displayed his clear enjoyment of the fast-paced interplay with the cranky physicist.

"Somebody was going to have to do it sometime and you've never exactly been opposed to human experimentation," John argued.

"It didn't have to be you, and it most certainly didn't have to be now," Rodney returned. "Anything could have happened. There are several critical tests I needed to run on that thing first to make sure it was safe."

John gestured emphatically with his hand, suggesting that McKay had just made his point for him. "See? I just saved you a ton of work and now you know it's safe. Seriously, you're glad I did it."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm kind of freaking out!"

"Whatever," John shrugged. The pair came to a stop next to where Teyla, Ronon, and Jennifer sat. "As long as you hold up your end of the deal."

"What's going on?" Jennifer asked, her inquisitive nature coming to the fore.

"Sheppard touched AD-765. Just reached out and touched it with his bare hands," Rodney said, like a tattling child.
John just rolled his eyes. "That's not exactly how it happened."

"How else would you describe it?" Rodney countered. "You stuck out your hand and—oh, yes—touched it!"

"You touched an experiment, Colonel?" Jennifer's soft concern bled through the chaos.

"I was trying to get him to take a break." John directed the dismissive comment at her and then returned his focus to Rodney. "You've hardly left the lab since the whole lightning incident and, frankly, you're starting to smell."

"I am not!"

"Ronon?"

Ronon barely looked up from his lunch. "I'm not saying a word."

"How terribly out of character of you," came Rodney's biting response to his non-defense.

John continued. "Not to mention, I think Katie's starting to forget why she agreed to start seeing you again. You need to take a day off and have a little fun. You made the bet. You lost. Get over it."

"I didn't think in a million years that you'd actually do it!"

"Which is exactly why you lost," John finished.

With the heat bleeding out of the argument and with it the fun, John leaned over Teyla to greet her properly. "Hi, sweetie." His hand descended on her stomach and gave it an adoring rub. "Hey, baby."

Teyla looked up at him, surprised at the caress. Despite the length of time they'd been together, John had never gotten comfortable showing his affection in public. In an environment where only their closest friends were around, he had been known to hold her hand and even risk the occasional discreet kiss. But they were not only among their friends at the moment. They were in the middle of the mess hall at lunchtime, which only made his next move all the more perplexing. Delicious but perplexing.

He leaned over and planted a kiss on her lips.

Teyla tried to enjoy it, but her eyes couldn't help but widen. As he pulled away and she scanned the looks on her friend's faces, she could tell she was not the only one taken aback.

"What was that?" Rodney asked bluntly.

John's mouth twisted in irritation. "That was what we human beings call a kiss, Rodney. You really do need to take that day off. Why don't you get some lunch and go home? Get laid or something."

"John!" Teyla exclaimed.

"What?" To Rodney, he replied, "We live together and she's pregnant. We've got a few pretty smart people around here. I think one or two of them have figured out by now that we've probably kissed a few times. Of course, I could see why you might get a little stumped."

"But you don't …" McKay started, then grimaced. "I think I'm getting a migraine."

John smirked. "It's a good thing you suddenly found yourself with a day off, then. Isn't it?"
In spite of his professed headache, Rodney appeared ready to send another verbal attack John's way, but he stopped before he uttered another syllable. John's hand abruptly stilled in the nape of her neck where he'd been stroking her. Teyla peered past Rodney to see that Sergeant Capshaw had entered the mess hall.

She was about to invite him to join the rest of them, but the sudden rigidity of nearly everyone at the table made her pause. Even Jennifer. Jennifer's hand subconsciously covered her lips and her fingers played at them as her eyes darted away and honed in on the tray of barely eaten food.

Without a word, just a simple nod of impassive acceptance, Mason turned and walked out.

Teyla looked around at her friends, and for the first time in a long time, didn't know what to think.

Teyla had never been a great lover of meetings, nevertheless she had come to accept them. They were important to get everyone working on the same page and the quickest way to inform those going offworld of their objectives and warn them of what they may encounter along the way. When she had still been on John's team, she had passed some of the time by sneaking covert glances at John, ignoring the excited flutter she'd gotten every time he cast her a look over his shoulder and smiled.

After transferring to Major Lorne's team, even though she and John had begun seeing each other, she found herself missing those small moments.

It seemed that with her new position in the city, meetings had again become an integral part of her day. Only now, the topics discussed held even less ability to grab her attention. She had become part of Atlantis' administration, which meant less to do and more to discuss. It was quite tedious at times.

As she again took her place at the conference table, Mr. Woolsey began a long-winded discourse to the various department heads, and the one boon was the profile of her lover in the chair next to her.

In the past, Teyla hadn't realized just how many of these sorts of meetings, in his position as military leader, John had been required to attend that she and the rest of the team had been exempt from—with the notable exception of Dr. McKay. But today she found herself grateful for his added responsibilities. It gave her the chance once again to sneak those glances at him and pretend for a short spell that they were the John and Teyla of over a year ago, caught in an intricate dance where they never quite touched, those stolen looks loaded with angst and immense promise.

Teyla secretly chided herself. She had no need to pretend when the evidence of their love for one another was gently prodding at her stomach, and she would be going home to him at the end of the day. She was a grown woman. She shouldn't get caught up in teenage fantasy when she was supposed to be concentrating on her duties. After all, John didn't seem to be paying her any particular attention. If he could maintain his sense of decorum and professional distance, she certainly could.

Teyla nearly inaudibly cleared her throat and refocused.

About ten minutes later, Mr. Woolsey and Dr. Tratovsky were embroiled in a heated debate over the geologist's departmental need for new equipment versus the ever pressing issue of keeping to a budget that everyone—especially the IOA—could live with. Teyla listened carefully to the points made by both men and was considering an attempt at mediating the exchange when she again found herself distracted. Underneath the large conference table, a hand had descended on her thigh.
John's attention appeared to be rapt on the debate, but the way he fondled the curve of her knee and up her leg gave testimony that his mind was otherwise engaged. Teyla worked to stifle her body's delighted reaction as well as her surprise. While he kept his actions out of plain sight, he wasn't close enough to hide the angle of his arm and the table only provided so much cover. If the other department heads were as disinterested in what was going on around them as they were, John's actions would not go unnoticed.

Teyla's hand rested on top of his, but the soft hint to cease only seemed to spur him on. His hand stroked the thin fabric of her dress and gradually moved higher and higher up her leg. Teyla turned her head to the side in attempt to hide her visceral reaction from the many faces surrounding her. Sparing her an indulgent glance, the sparkle in John's eyes told her that he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

His hand approached her center. Her hand, that had previously only suggested that he stop, clamped down and denied him the ability to move any further.

"John," she whispered.

He turned to her again and sent her a self-assured grin.

Confused and breathless, Teyla shook her head at him.

His hand slowly slid away and he folded his arms over his chest, looking very satisfied.

Teyla was bewildered. He had been quite affectionate today, which wasn't unusual for him. In the privacy of their quarters. Their impromptu lovemaking this morning was hurried, but the passion and vigor he'd shown was typical for him, especially since their reunion. But she had never expected these very public displays of affection and she didn't know what to make of it. Was he trying to compensate in some way for her long absence? Although not as stringent about it, like him, she had never felt truly comfortable sharing that aspect of their relationship with others. She didn't want him doing things he may feel ill at ease with in some misguided attempt to please her.

Once again, Teyla studied John's profile. She wished she had the insight of her connection with him at that moment and bemoaned her inability to create it.

"Oh, come on! Throw the flag, already!" John shouted at the television. Sitting next to him on the couch, Teyla adjusted to allow him more room to gesticulate his frustration at the taped football game.

He'd rationed his football viewing to last him until the Daedalus arrived with a new season of games to watch, and typically he and Teyla watched them with Rodney, Ronon, Lorne, and Mason. Tonight, it was just them. Katie had wanted to take advantage of Rodney's emergence from his lab. Lorne was currently offworld. Mason … Things had obviously not been resolved since the incident with Jennifer, if their behavior in the mess hall was any indication. And Ronon hadn't wanted to be what John called a third wheel, so he had made a polite but transparent excuse.

Teyla sighed, introspectively recounting the events of the day.

John's arm, which was slung around her shoulders, gave her an easy nudge. "Penny for your thoughts?"
Teyla blinked and looked at him. "Pardon?"

"Just wondering what's going on in there," he commented as he pressed pause on the remote. "You haven't yelled at the ref once, and trust me, there's been enough bad calls in this game to cause a minor stroke."

She offered him a dim smile. "I was considering something you said this morning. What you said regarding the baby taking after you," she added in response to his questioning expression.

"Oh, that? I was just joking around."

"I am starting to wonder if you might not have been more correct than you may have thought," she stated, sending her nails to work over her baby bump. It had been itching quite a lot.

"You think the ATA gene is what's throwing you off your game?" he guessed after a moment of pondering her thought process.

She bobbed her head. "Perhaps. I know I can reach our child. Every time we see into one another I feel this … presence growing stronger in my mind. I just do not know how. It seems I am only able to begin to make progress when I am with you. I was hoping that you could help me."

"Me?" he inquired doubtfully. "If you need a human light switch or a ride to the nearest Gate, I'm your man, but I'm not the one wearing the psychic pants in the family. You've got that pretty well covered."

"And yet I am failing," she said sadly. A quick learner all her life, her apparent inadequacy was getting to her. She wondered if it was somehow a reflection on her capacity as a mother, that she couldn't even tap into her bond with her own child.

"Hey," John said with love in his tone. His hand cupped around her cheek. "You aren't failing. You just need to …"

He paused, as though engaged in his familiar search for the right words, and Teyla waited without comment. John's difficulty expressing his emotions rarely bothered her anymore. His struggles were met with doting patience until he could say what he wanted. It wasn't often the most poetic language or the most eloquent, but he always spoke from his heart. That was what mattered to her.

A strange look passed over his masculine features, like something she had seen on him before. It only lasted an instant, but Teyla remembered seeing that same manner after a head injury had left his memory in a shambles for a short time. He looked lost.

"John?"

He startled out of whatever had taken hold of him and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. I, uh, guess I just lost my train of thought for a minute there."

His eyes darted back and forth in effort to bring him back to what they had been discussing. "Okay, um … yeah. Maybe we need to just approach this from a different angle," he began. "You have the Wraith gene. Your powers run along the same lines as the Wraith. You do things the same way. Now, I may not be a telepath, but I've had a Wraith queen or two digging around in my head. And, well, the Wraith are kind of a pushy bunch when it comes to this stuff."

Teyla's eyes narrowed.

"Don't look at me like that," he said with a smirk. "You asked for my help. This is what you get."
"I get referred to as 'pushy'?"

"Well, if the shoe fits."

Teyla gave him a playful but firm smack to the ribs.

John laughed. "My point is—if we assume you're right and the problem is the ATA gene, it may just be a … a style difference is all." His shoulder's hunched awkwardly. "I've also ... met ... an Ancient. Felt that sort of ... There's a pretty big difference between the two, that's all I'm saying."

Teyla chose to ignore his oblique reference to Chaya Sar. She had more pressing interests than being jealous of a woman who had passed through John's life both quickly and long ago. "You are saying I must learn to do things as you would."

John shrugged. "If I could, which I can't."

She shook her head, discouraged. "I do not know if that is possible."

John exhaled. "Well, what were you doing when the kiddo practically knocked us on our asses the first time?"

"I do not know," Teyla exclaimed. "I was not trying, then."

"Maybe that's it. Maybe you shouldn't try so hard," he suggested. "Look. When it comes to this sort of thing, I'm not … I don't know what it's like to be someone like you. You're special, Teyla. I'm not really sure what it is you have to do to connect, but when I …" He stopped. "Here."

The lights overhead grew brighter at his beckoning.

"Instead of pushing for it," he said, his fingers playing across her skin, "try just … putting it out there and see if what you want will come to you."

The brightness in the room dimmed to a mellow, soothing level, creating a more romantic ambiance.


"You have been quite persistent today, John. It is most unlike you," Teyla observed, warming to his caress and allowing the sensation to carry her away.

"Stop being the hottest woman I've ever laid eyes on, and I'll stop being so persistent."

John's lips nuzzled the delicate flesh of her neck. His tongue lightly grazed a path to the pulse point below her ear and kissed her deeply. Teyla let out a soft moan.

A polite knock at the door broke the spell they were in the process of weaving.

John groaned. "Ugh. I'll get it."

Teyla put a hand on his knee to keep him from getting up and stood. "I believe you should stay here and gather yourself before greeting any visitors, John."

He quickly glanced down where part of him was already at half mast. "You're probably right," he admitted with a sheepish grin.

Teyla returned the smile and wandered to the door. She waved her hand over the Ancient lock system, releasing the door, and it slid open readily.
Mason stood there fidgeting. He greeted her nervously, casting a searching look over her shoulder. "Hey, Teyla."

"Sergeant, it's nice to see you."

"Um … thanks." It was plain to see that John and the others were not the only ones still effected by what happened.

She asked, "Would you like to speak with John?"

"No, I, uh … I actually came to talk to you."

"Oh?"

He took a deep breath, presumably to steady himself. "It's kind of private." He pointed in the direction of the hallway. "Do you mind just talking out here really quick? I promise I'll make it short."

"Certainly." Teyla offered him an appeasing smile as she stepped outside. She had rarely seen the man so uncomfortable.

"I'm sure you heard I'm doing sessions with Wilcox," he started.

Teyla nodded. In addition to John's condition of continued pain management, he had also insisted that Sergeant Capshaw begin seeing the base psychologist. "I have."

"Okay, well … he suggested that I try … meditation to—you know—channel things. Keep things from getting to be too much."

"Indeed. Meditation can be quite effective in controlling pain as well as tempering emotions."

Mason cast another nervous glance toward the door. It was disconcerting to see the usually assertive man so unsettled. "I was kind of hoping that you could … teach me. I know you probably don't want anything to do with me, but … painkillers have never been all that reliable for me, and I need something else to help. I'm willing to try anything. Teyla, I … I can't lose it again."

"I would be happy to help if I can, Sergeant," she assured him. "We could meet tomorrow morning, perhaps?"

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely not." John's voice rumbled dangerously from the door.

Mason instantly stood up ramrod straight. "Sir."

John closed the short distance between her and Capshaw in an instant. Anger radiated off him in waves. "There's no way I'm letting you within ten yards of her."

"John, please," Teyla tried. Asking for her help had obviously been extremely difficult for Mason, and John's unremitting need to protect her was going to do far more harm than good. "This is not the time for you to—"

"Not happening!" John yelled. The incensed colonel put a harsh finger to Mason's chest, and the big marine blanched, his body recoiling fast. For a dreadful instant, Teyla was afraid Mason would react
badly to John's threatening posture and things would escalate.

"John! Stop it!"

"You stay away from my wife!"

"I'm gonna go," Mason said, his jaw cinched tighter than a drum. "Thanks anyway, Teyla."

As Capshaw back away, Teyla put herself between the two, taking John in hand while Mason left. Seething, Teyla dragged John inside.

"I don't want you anywhere near him. Do you understand?"

Teyla laid into him. "I have had enough of this, John! You cannot give me orders, and you cannot tell me who I am permitted to be around. Do you understand?"

"Teyla," he hissed. He was beginning to pace around the room like a caged animal.

"Sergeant Capshaw is your friend! He came to me for help and you attacked him!" At a complete loss to explain what just happened, her hands clutched at her forehead to circumvent her own rapidly spiraling temper. "What has come over you, John!?!"

With startling speed, the warm presence of her child's seemingly impregnable consciousness rushed to the fore of Teyla's mind, pressing in on her. As John fumed in front of her, bathing in his perception that Capshaw was a threat to her, it funneled through her like the blood coursing through her veins. It came in an instant and she saw the truth of John's earlier suggestion. She had not been trying to connect. She had merely posed the question and the answer came to her.

Teyla looked into John's eyes expecting to see anger wrapped up in a hazel cloak, but what she found was emptiness, a shadow bearing down on him. The man she knew was fading into the darkness, becoming almost transparent.

"John, there is something wrong with you."

His head jerked toward her. The blackness over him followed in perfect sync, shading him from her. "What are you talking about?"

"Can you not feel it?" Anxiety permeated the question.

"Feel what?" he asked impatiently.

Teyla took him by the hand and led him back to the doorway and into the hall. Whatever this shadow was, it was an imminent threat; she could sense it with every fiber of her being. "We must go to the infirmary. Now. Jennifer can do a scan ..."

John jerked away from her. "Teyla, there's nothing wrong with me!"

She turned to man she loved and tried one last time to convince him to come. If he did not agree, then she would resort to other means of getting him to the infirmary. She would protect John with her last breath, even if it was from himself.

"John, do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then, please—trust me now. You must come with me," she implored.
After a tense moment in silent deliberation, he reached out his hand and allowed her to lead him.

Teyla watched from the window as John was wheeled into post-op. Still under anesthetic from the surgery, he was completely unresponsive. She didn't think she would ever get used to seeing him that way; unconscious and unaware of how vulnerable he looked. Her aversion had first begun in a Puddlejumper five years ago, when they'd had to stop his heart to remove an Iratus bug from his throat—the first time John Sheppard had died. Of course, Dr. Beckett had managed to bring him back that day. John had always come back from the brink, but every time Teyla saw him like this, it was a cruel reminder that one day his luck may run out and he might not come back.

Jennifer, dressed in scrubs, came up beside her and beckoned Teyla to walk with her. The two friends moved back into the main infirmary where Ronon and Rodney waited impatiently.

"Carson and the nurses are just getting him squared away. You'll be able to see him soon," she let the group know.

"Did you get it?" Rodney asked.

Jennifer reassured him and Teyla. "It was a relatively small incision and we were able to remove the parasite fairly easily. He came through it just fine, and the xenobiology department now has a brand new specimen to study." Teyla took a seat with her friends as the doctor went on. "You know, he's really lucky you brought him in. His last scan was just two days ago and it was too small to be detected. At that rate of growth, too much longer and … I honestly don't think we would've been able to remove it."

"How did you know to bring him in?" Ronon spoke up. He hadn't spoken much throughout John's surgery. Teyla suspected he felt guilty for not having picked up on something being wrong earlier.

"Well, where the parasite had already spread, Colonel Sheppard would've been exhibiting symptoms," Jennifer suggested. "Mood swings, poor impulse control, possibly memory loss … Teyla spends more time with him than anyone. I'm sure she picked up on it."

Teyla shuddered. She had noticed John's odd behavior, but had dismissed it. Until his altercation with Sergeant Capshaw, it had seemed he was only having an off day. Had she not tapped into the baby's abilities when she did, John could have died. She gave her stomach a grateful rub.

"That explains why he touched 765!" Rodney exclaimed. "I knew he'd never do that! You realize this means that, technically, I didn't lose the bet?"

"Shut up, McKay," Ronon grumbled.

Teyla spent what little remained of the night and the next morning at John's side while he slept. Rodney and Ronon had brought her back breakfast from the mess hall and she even managed to get some sleep herself. Not that that part had been difficult. She was exhausted. Though she had overcome the staggering feeling that came with joining with her child, when it withdrew, she had
been completely drained. It had been a good thing she was already sitting down, because she didn't think her legs would have been up to the task of holding her after that.

It was nearing lunchtime. Rodney and Ronon heeded the call of their formidable appetites and left, promising again to bring her something back. They weren't going to have John wake up and getting upset that they hadn't been doing their part to take care of her. Although Teyla didn't need taking care of, she let them. It made them feel better to contribute in some small way. She also enjoyed the opportunity to spend some time in relative solitude with John, aside from the periodic checks from the medical staff.

From her chair, Teyla interlocked her fingers in his and closed her eyes. She could feel her child so close, having gained some sort of comprehension and stability now, she believed she could reach out and touch it.

"How's he doing?"

Teyla peered at Mason's furrowed brow as he stood on the other side of John's bed. "Sergeant. It is good of you to come."

His troubled eyes darted away from hers. "Well, I sorta live here these days," he said. Teyla glanced down at the fresh bandage over his hand and a smaller one in the crook of his arm. She nodded in understanding. "I heard he was still asleep, so I thought it'd be okay."

"Mason, I want to apologize for what occurred last night. John did not …"

"It's fine, Teyla. Really. I get it."

"No, it is not. John will wish to make his own apologies when he is feeling better, I am sure."

"Maybe," he said, looking around for an exit. "Look, I'm gonna … I'll see around, okay?"

"I would like to renew my offer to help, if you still wish it," she said before he could turn away.

"Forget about it," he stated unequivocally, then his expression softened into one of sincerity. "I appreciate you wanting to. It means a lot."

"You are most welcome, Sergeant. Anytime."

He cracked a smile. "How many times have I asked you to call me Mason?"

She returned his smile. "I will do better in the future, I promise."

John slept for another two hours before he began to stir. He slowly opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was Teyla, his beautiful Teyla. John raised his hand to touch the bandage surrounding his head. Okay, it wasn't as huge as it felt.

Detecting the motion next to her, Teyla's eyes popped open, remarkably aware for someone he'd thought was just asleep. "John?"

"Hey," his managed through his dry throat.
Teyla picked up a cup at her side and stretched the straw out for him to take a sip. The cool water ran down his esophagus and into the rest of his body. It felt like heaven.

With a slight cough, he attempted to talk again. "What … what time … is it?"

Teyla glanced around the room. "I am not entirely certain. It is afternoon."

John let a short huff. "I wish I could sleep this long … without the bug in my brain."

Teyla smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess." His head felt like a baby elephant sat on it.

"Is there anything you require?"

John realized belatedly that the silky skin of her hand was tucked in his. He gave it a tired squeeze. "Just you."

"That you have," she responded, beaming.

The tempting press of sleep called to him, but he didn't want to just yet. "You did it, Teyla. I knew you could." In answer to her puzzled look, he added, "The baby."

She grinned. "Yes."

"I don't care what you think. Baby takes after you. Not even born yet and saving Daddy's life."

A teardrop escaped his tired eye and ran down his temple. Teyla tenderly wiped it away. "You should rest, John."

"Wait," he said, pulling her hand from his side to rest on his chest. "Do you think … you could do it again?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"I know it sounds stupid considering I was standing right there, but … I missed it," he said sadly. Keller and Beckett had warned them both that his emotions might be a little off kilter at first, but as another tear slid down his face, he knew this regret permeating him was real. He had a few regrets about what'd happened over the last few days, but this one stood out from the rest. "The first time you make a real breakthrough and I missed it."

Teyla stroked his whiskered chin. "There will time for that later, John."

"Please, Teyla."

Concerned, she said, "I do not know if I should. I do not know what effect it will have on you or if you are strong enough yet."

With a smile, he tried to allay her fears. "We're already in the infirmary, with the best doctors anywhere on standby. What's the worst that could happen?"

She grinned at his attempt but plainly wasn't convinced. "Are you certain you want to do this now?"

John gently nodded. He would've put more emphasis on the gesture, but he was afraid any more would spark the migraine that he felt skulking in the background.
"Very well," she acquiesced.

Their entwined hands rested on his chest and tightened around one another. Teyla closed her eyes and took very carefully measured, even breaths. It only took a few moments for the invigorating sensation that he'd come to know starting spreading through him. It was far more defined and real to him that it had ever been before. He opened his eyes and looked at Teyla, feeling the same emotions reflecting off her. John wondered if this was anything like what she'd felt in her connections with her father and the others, or if this was something as unique to her as it was to him.

Teyla smiled at his errant thought, and her intangible reply reassured him that this was something truly special. She asked if he was alright, and he sent her a picture of sheer elation. She took a deep breath and John felt another wave drifting over him. This time it was more powerful as she dug deeper.

Teyla's more intricate thought patterns capered around the forefront of his mind, but he also began to feel someone else in the background. They weren't thoughts, per se. They were more like impressions. Curiosity. Contentment. Love. A wide smile erupted on his tired face, when he sensed sleepiness that wasn't his.

Teyla's own weariness eventually seeped in and John encouraged her to break the link. He couldn't have asked for anything more fulfilling than what he'd already seen.

But just before she let go, he saw something else.

His eyes widened a little and looked to Teyla, wondering if she'd seen it, too. With a joyful nod, she indicated that she had. A small laugh emerged from her.

"Come here," he said.

Teyla carefully insinuated herself onto the bed and gently curled up next to him. John, still riding the intoxicating feeling of bliss that had effectively dealt with his headache, rubbed her stomach as he started to chuckle out loud.

Jennifer came around the corner. "I thought I heard you two talking." The doctor paused, taking in the scene before her. "What's going on?"

Without taking her eyes off of John, Teyla said softly, "The baby …"

John, equally as captivated in her, finished with a smile. "It's a girl."
"Hey, you made it."

John's body jerked slightly, spooked by the sudden sounds coming from behind him, penetrating his deep sleep. "Yeah. How's he holding up?" Ronon said.

"Oh, he's a regular Superman," came McKay's oddly comforting brand of sarcasm. "He's gone and holed up with Lois Lane in their own private little Fortress of Solitude."

"Whatever that means."

Without opening his eyes, John knew where he was. The smell, the beeps and hums of monitors all around, the annoying pinch of an IV still taped into place on his arm—it all added up to the infirmary, where he'd been since his surgery a week ago. Teyla's body was nestled against his in the narrow hospital bed, her head pleasantly situated on the pillow in front of him. He could even smell the perfume of her shampoo.

"Well, what do you mean 'How's he holding up'? How would you be?" Rodney continued, his wry tone giving way to ear-piercing apprehension.

John began to stir. What were they going on about? He was fine. In fact, if his groggy mind wasn't playing tricks on him, he was hoping to get discharged today.

"What did Jennifer say about ..." Ronon asked. The warrior was plainly upset.

"It's too soon to tell," McKay answered dejectedly.

John forced his eyelids open. Had something happened? Trying not to wake Teyla, he carefully turned his head to peer over his shoulder and find out what was going on, but he saw no one. Not Ronon, not Rodney. Not even a nurse with a hell of a deep voice and a killer McKay impression. John blinked a few times in the low light surrounding him, trying to get his bleary eyes to focus, but it didn't bring him any more success. There was no one there.

John inhaled deeply and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't wait to be able to go home. Another day or two in here and he'd be dreaming about clowns dancing around in tutus—or even worse, McKay in a tutu. He shuddered.

John sidled back up to Teyla and tried to set the dream aside and go back to sleep, but it wasn't long before nature was knocking at his door, throwing the thought of slumber into the background again. He gingerly pulled away from Teyla, but his struggle to untangle his IV pole from the legs of the roll-away tray table managed to catch her attention.

"John?" she murmured, clearly only half awake. "Where are you going?"

"Just a quick pit stop. Go back to sleep, sweetie."

He heard a muffled reply and Teyla stilled again. Satisfied, John made the short walk across the darkened infirmary to the bathroom, annoyed at having to drag the metal pole along behind him but grateful he'd been allowed to wear a set of maroon scrubs instead of one of those privacy-be-damned hospital gowns. Nothing about those things had ever made sense to him. Wasn't recovery hard enough without adding insult to injury by making the patient hold the backs of those things closed to avoid giving the nurses an eyeful?
After having given his bladder a much needed emptying, John cleaned up at the sink and splashed a little water on his face. The fuzz making a comeback on his chin reminded him that he needed to shave, and the corner of his mouth perked up. If he got his discharge, maybe he'd ask Teyla for a repeat performance of the last time. Only this time, instead of in the infirmary, he could look up at her gorgeous face and watch her tender handling of a razor at home. Getting shaving cream all over the place was sounding like more and more fun all the time.

John tweaked the angle of his head in the mirror to try and get a peek at the incision site at the back of his right ear. It sat just below the hairline so it wasn't painfully obvious, but he could still see the trail of stitches running across the small area. John sighed a little in relief. He hated to cop to his vanity, but he'd honestly been relieved to hear that they hadn't shaved a huge chunk of his hair off. It was unruly, determined to defy military regs, and refused any pleas of cooperation, but it was his and he kinda liked it the way it was.

He reached for a paper towel and dried the remaining droplets of water from his face and hands and, with his metal companion in tow, walked out.

The infirmary was still mostly dark. John had no idea what time it was, but it was very early in the morning. It was typically a quiet time for the infirmary staff, with no more than a skeleton crew on duty, but his curiosity was piqued when he saw a bright light shining over a bed in the back corner of the infirmary. He heard people talking, apparently attempting to keep their voices low, because he couldn't make out what they were saying. Probably to keep from disturbing him and Teyla, the sole overnight guests at the moment.

As John made his way through the large room toward them, he heard a moan and Carson's Scottish brogue. "Prep a saline drip, would ya, Hannah?"

"No, I just need to ... get out of here. I'm fine," came a strangled voice.

"And next you're gonnae tell me that you're always this lovely shade of gray, as well. The fluids, Hannah," Carson reiterated.

"Yes, Doctor."

John came to the edge of the privacy curtain as the red-headed nurse rounded the corner. The two nearly bumped into each other. Hannah looked at him like she wanted to shoo him back to bed, but she bit her lip, thinking better of it, and left. Staring after her, he wondered what that was all about. He scooted a little closer to the curtain and peered around.

Carson was standing over a pale Capshaw, whose brow and shirt were soaked with sweat, shining a penlight in his eyes in spite of his ragged protests.

"I told you ..."

"I know, I know. You're fine," Beckett said with patience. He put the light back in his lab coat pocket and reached for a basin at the side of the bed. "When are ya lads gonnae figure out that saying it doesn't actually make it true?"

Mason hurriedly rolled to his side and Carson held up the basin as spasms began to rack his body. However, as John saw, the basin had been reduced to a mere formality. The marine was coming up dry.

Beckett gave Mason's shoulder a pat. "I'm sorry, son. It'll be over soon."

Hannah bustled past John, brushing his arm accidentally. Carrying everything she needed, she started
setting up an IV for Mason as his body slowly began to relax again. John didn't miss the surreptitious
glance the nurse gave to Carson indicating in his direction. The doctor looked at him and met his
gaze. His jaw tensed.

"I'm gonnae leave ya in Hannah's very capable hands for a moment, alright?" he said to Capshaw.
"There's something I need to see to."

Mason managed an uncaring nod.

Carson strode toward him and pulled him by the elbow. "And what do ya think you're doing out of
bed?"

"Man's allowed to go the bathroom, Doc," John defended himself.

"Well, you're bloody well moving in the wrong direction, Colonel," Carson scolded him at little
more than a whisper.

"I was just coming back when I—"

"—stuck your nose where it doesn't belong," Beckett finished.

"Geez, you're cranky this morning."

Carson swallowed the next thing coming out of his mouth, realizing that he was right. He heaved a
sigh and let go of John's arm. "My apologies, Colonel. You really shouldn't be out of bed at this
hour."

"Hey, when nature calls, you answer. Brain surgery or not," John said. Then, his mouth twisted
downward. "You gonna tell me what that was about? 'Cause, right now, I'm thinking it's not the flu."

Carson's lips pursed and he glanced back to where his patient was lying. "I suppose ya could think of
it as though morphine and oxycodone got together and had themselves an ill-tempered, illegitimate
child. That, I'm afraid to say, is a side effect." He continued on the wake of John's troubled
expression. "The first hour is usually the worst. We keep him monitored and make sure he's stable
until the nausea subsides and he normalizes. Don't worry, Colonel. Before long, he'll be out and
about again."

"How long's this been going on?" John asked, guilt prodding at him. He hoped that maybe this was a
new thing. That Mason hadn't been doing this for the last two weeks—ever since he'd pulled him off
that bathroom floor—on his own.

All Carson did was give him a look and John's meager but ultimately false hopes were dashed. He
closed his eyes and swore under his breath.

He already regretted what happened with Capshaw. He had the distinct impression that if Teyla
hadn't thrown herself in between the two of them, he might have even crossed the line and gone so
far as to punch him. Keller had said that the parasite had been stripping his control over his impulses
and emotional reactions, but John still felt responsible for his failure to keep a lid on his temper.

John shook his head, feeling like a complete jackass. After the incident with Dr. Keller, the tension
between the two men had been so thick you could cut it with a chainsaw. He should've known that
Capshaw wouldn't have come to his door looking for meditation lessons, or anything else for that
matter, without a damn good reason and now he had a better idea what that was.

Like Teyla had said, he was looking for help. To cope.
"I, um ... I need to ..." John tried to get out. "I owe him an apology, Carson."

"Uh, Colonel ... I don't think that's such a good idea. Sergeant Capshaw doesn't want anyone seeing him in that state. That's why we're going through this rubbish so confounded early. We've been doing it all week. He wanted to get in and out of here before you and Teyla woke up. It's probably best to leave him be for now."

"Yeah, you're probably right," John agreed quietly. He wouldn't want anyone around for that, either. "I'll just ..."

"Try and get some rest?" Carson completed, driving home to John his suggestion.

"Yeah," John nodded, deep in thought.

"Do ya need anything, Colonel? Your head feelin' alright?"

"Fine, Carson. Thanks."

Later in the morning, John lay on the bed impatiently bringing his fist down on the mattress, awaiting word on whether or not he could go. He'd already gotten dressed in his civvies, so when he got the go ahead he wouldn't have to waste any more time before leaving. If Keller came back saying he'd have to stick around another week, he was ready to bolt.

Teyla's briefing this morning had run a little long, but she had just radioed to tell him that she was on her way. She was just as eager for him to be home as he was. He imagined that being as pregnant as she was that spending her nights in a bed only meant for one wasn't all that comfortable, but she had insisted. Not that he'd put up much of a fight. He wanted her there. He wanted his daughter there.

His repetitive pounding ceased as he smiled to himself. He was still getting used to that. His was gonna have a little girl.

"Okay, Colonel," Jennifer said, casually strolling over to his bed.

John bolted up straight in the bed.

"We got the last of your test results back and I've looked over your new scans."

Feeling like he'd been left hanging, he asked in wary anticipation, "And?"

"You can go home," she declared.

"Thank God," John exclaimed. "Not that the service here hasn't been great as usual ..."

Jennifer let him off the hook with a smile. "But there's no place like home. I get it. You'll still need to take it easy and I want to see you back in here in a few days for a follow-up ..." She trailed off.

"What is it?"

"Actually, Colonel, your scans are pretty impressive considering."

"Thanks, Doc. I always try to give you my best side," John quipped, finding her comment a little
"Colonel, we had to cut into your skull and remove a parasite from your brain," she said, as if she had to remind him of the seriousness of what had happened. "Given the circumstances and your history, Dr. Beckett and I were concerned about edema, seizures, memory loss. Migraines, at the least. You have been sleeping a lot which is to be expected, but the only complaint we've gotten out of you is for a few minor headaches. Nothing a few Tylenol didn't take care of."

"Sorry?" John was confused. Was she happy at his speedy recovery or concerned?

Dr. Keller sighed and gave him a bolstering smile. She was glad he was bouncing back so quickly, but obviously at a loss to explain it. "According to your scan, the bone regrowth is also well ahead of schedule. You're healing at an amazing rate, Colonel."

"Well, I've had enough practice. Maybe I'm finally getting good at it."

It was a lame attempt at appeasing her. In actuality, John had realized days ago that he was flying ahead of the curve. He'd had enough surgeries to last him a few lifetimes. Despite the severity of the situation, his recuperation this time had been one of the easiest yet and he had a fair suspicion why.

"You sure you don't want to tell me how you knew the baby was a girl?" she probed. "I understand with her abilities how Teyla might've known, but you?"

John chuckled. Keller was a smart girl. "Intuition?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not buying that one for a second, Colonel."

Teyla arrived in the infirmary appearing anxious to hear the verdict and John stood up to greet her. He clasped her hand, thankful for her impeccable timing. Keller was going to have to wait for her explanation.

"Well?" Teyla asked.

"I'm free to go," he said. "Thanks again, Doc."

"My pleasure, Colonel," Jennifer answered, resigned that he was going to make his escape after all. "And Teyla?"

"Yes?"

"Make sure he doesn't overdo it."

Teyla smiled. "I will. Thank you, Jennifer."

John led Teyla out the door to freedom.

"Thanks for the rescue," John said.

"Rescue?"

"She was asking about the whole baby thing again."

Teyla sighed in exasperation. "Oh, John. Why do you not simply tell her? She only wishes to understand."

"Because the second I do, her and Beckett are gonna have a million questions and they'll want to run
more tests, and I've had more than enough of that for the time being," he stated as they made their way toward the nearest transporter. "Besides, I like having the two of you to myself."

"Telling Dr. Keller or Dr. Beckett will not change that."

"Maybe not," he said. But it wouldn't feel the same. He knew that much.

John tightened his grip on her hand and they stepped into the transporter. "You want to take a walk?"

She smiled. "If you'd like."

"Good. I've got to get some of the kinks out of my legs."

On the display board at the back of the transporter, he pressed the indicator for the East Pier. It was one his favorite parts of the city and relatively close to their quarters, but not too close. In a second, they were on the other side of Atlantis. John breathed in the salty sea air and felt the light breeze traveling across his face. A lock of Teyla's hair got caught in the wind. John smiled as he affectionately tucked the flyaway hair behind her ear for her. Continuing the fluid motion, his fingers traced the line of her jaw all the way down to the point of her chin before he reluctantly pulled his hand away.

He was adrift in the dark pools of her eyes as she said softly, "Thank you, John."

"You're welcome," he whispered.

They started along the pier. Gradually, John thoughts floated back to the things he had done while his judgment had been impaired and what he had seen early that morning. He grimaced. There were things he needed to make right, and not only with Capshaw.

"I, uh, need to talk to you, Teyla. About what happened when I was ..." he started. "I said some things. Did things ..."

"That you might call out of character?" she completed for him.

The weight John carried lightened somewhat, bolstered by her recollection of a conversation they'd had a long time ago. This situation wasn't so different from that one. She hadn't held it against him when he'd pinned her against the wall of the gym and roughly kissed her, and he didn't think she held his actions against him this time, either.

"Do you mean when you took an unnecessary risk by touching Rodney's experiment?" she continued. "Or were you perhaps referring to something else?"

John smirked. "I admit, feeling you up in the middle of a meeting probably wasn't the best idea I've ever had." He admired how the afternoon sun shone off her caramel skin. "But if you keep looking like that, I can't promise I'll never do it again."

"Like what?" she asked. She glanced down at her clothes as though making sure nothing had accidentally slipped out of place.

John slid his arm around her shoulders as they walked. "Beautiful." His voice rang with sincerity. "I was out of line, Teyla. Way out of line. With you and with Capshaw."

"Yes, you were, but you were also not yourself."
"Even so, I'm sorry."

John and Teyla continued their leisurely stroll over the pier. As the waves crashed against the city's platform, his eyes roamed over her freely. He noticed for the first time that she was moving differently to accommodate her ever-growing baby bump. Still as sexy as ever, her confident strut had morphed into a more relaxed sway. An upturned corner of his mouth betrayed his satisfaction. He couldn't wait for the waddle to appear. He couldn't wait to meet his daughter face to face. He couldn't wait for the first time they could walk the city as a family.

Before he'd come here—before her—the notion of having a real family of his own was always in the distant future. Someday. At some point. When he was ready to settle down. If he met the right person. For years, he'd let things stand in the way, even after he'd met the love of his life.

After Colonel Sumner's death, his position in the expedition had changed and he'd needed to focus on that and not on the captivating Athosian woman he'd just had a moment with. There was always later. She became part of his team and he'd conceded his feelings to the demands of protocol. And they worked seamlessly together, making it all the more important that he put any thoughts of taking their relationship to another level on the back burner. That he did a little too well. He grew comfortable with the status quo and convinced himself he was content just being her friend.

Then everything changed. He nearly lost her, and soon after, his father died. Both events in concert sent him a stark message that life won't wait forever. Opportunities were finite and, if passed, may never come around again. He needed her and as more than a friend, and the night of his father's wake, he took a chance and kissed her for real.

Walking with Teyla, his long put off future was right in front of him. He had a home. He had a woman he loved and a little girl on the way. Friends he could trust with his life and, more importantly, theirs. Only one thing was missing.

John came to a stop and gazed at her. "Teyla, there's something else."

"Yes?"

"While I was ... acting a little nuts," he began with a nervous shrug, "Well ... you may've heard me, um ..."

"What is it you want to say, John?" she asked serenely.

Her patience lent him courage. "I ... called you my wife."

A smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. "Yes, you did."

John exhaled. She had heard it. And she hadn't freaked out. Not a bad start.

"We haven't really talked much about ... marriage, have we?"

Teyla slowly shook her head. "No."

John felt his vocabulary shriveling up and blowing away in the wind. His brow wrinkled in frustration. "I'm not ... good at this, Teyla."

"Just say what lies in your heart, John."

"You make it sound so easy." He didn't know why this was so hard for him, but he was resolved. He was going to get through this. He had to try and explain.
"It's not because I haven't been thinking about it. I have, for a long time now. And it's not because I don't want to. I do. I just ..."

Teyla raised her hand and cupped his cheek.

"God," he murmured. The slightest touch of her skin and he was under her spell. He could practically hear her. He was hers and she was his. He didn't need to fear.

"When I was married before," he tried again, "Nancy ... she wanted the picket fence. A nice house, dog, 2.5 kids, and a husband who came home every night, not one who was usually halfway around the world running black ops into enemy territory. When she finally moved on, I couldn't really blame her—I wasn't there. I wasn't any kind of husband. I didn't even love her enough to fight for her. I just let her go."

John paused and gnawed his lip.

"I nearly let you go, Teyla, but it wasn't because I didn't love you. When you left, I thought ... I thought that maybe you'd decided that you didn't want me either. Lord knows, I would've deserved it."

"John ..." Teyla broke in.

"Wait. I need to get this out while I still can," he pleaded with her. "Teyla, I don't know if you want to marry me. I know I want to marry you. I want to spend my life with you. But I don't know if I know how to be a good husband and you deserve better than that. I'm still trying to figure that part out, and you're way too important for me to screw this up again."

John reached down and laid a soft kiss on her lips. "I don't know how the Athosians do marriage proposals, but on Earth they're usually a pretty big deal. If you're willing to wait, I'm going to ask you to be my wife, Teyla, and I want it to be special. Something to remember," he rolled his eyes, "not something we decided because I had a brain-sucking squatter in my head and couldn't keep my mouth shut."

Teyla leaned into him for another kiss. She lingered against him. "John?"

"Yeah?"

"I am glad you could not keep your mouth shut," she confessed. "I love you. And when the time comes that you are ready to ask, I will be waiting with my answer."

When John woke up, he was tucked cozily in his own bed and in his own sheets. For all the time he'd spent in the infirmary, there was no replacement for being able to lay down and rest in his quarters. His eyelids flickered open and his gaze landed on the nightstand on his side of the bed. A half-full glass of water sat next to a worn paperback copy of *The Art of War*, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which he'd read but kept out mostly to taunt McKay with, and a small stack of comic books. Just where he'd left them.

What was missing was Teyla. Last he remembered, she was lying next to him in bed. It was turning into a nightly thing for her to reach into herself and create a bridge for the three of them. Bedtime was the best time for it from a logistical standpoint, mainly because connecting to their child usually
left them completely exhausted. They took the opportunity to get close to each other and to say
goodnight to their little girl. Not that she understood their words, but they could tell she was aware of
them and had a basic sense of their familial bond and the love they had for her.

However, John didn't recall even getting that far last night. Still recovering, he'd fallen asleep almost
as soon as his head hit the pillow. He had a vague memory of the warm, tingling sensation inside him
and hearing Teyla's bewitching voice inside his head, saying, "Rest well, John."

John took a deep breath and rolled over, savoring the scent of her on his pillows and the way the
mattress conformed to his body. He stretched and moaned his contentment into the pillow.

"Teyla?" he muttered from where he was, feeling too good to move and risk spoiling it.

A few moments later, she appeared in the doorway of their bedroom carrying a cup of tea. "Ah, you
have awakened. I was beginning to wonder if you had not slipped into a coma," she said with a
wink. Teyla sidled down next to him.

He smirked. "Not quite."

"How are you feeling?"

He took a quick mental inventory. No headache. His stitches were itching, but he felt rested for the
first time in a week. "Good. Really good."

"I am glad to hear it."

John studied her and wondered what time it was, because she looked ready to go. "So what have
you got going on today, sweetie?"

"I have the summary on Filos I must drop off for Mr. Woolsey to peruse," she said.

"That the one with the quarry and those ..."

"Duriks," she finished.

"Right," he said with a grimace. As big as oxen and twice as muscular, John figured they came in
awfully handy hauling stone and whatever else it was they mined on that planet, but the rancid smell
of those things almost bowled him over.

"Once that is done, Ronon has asked that I sit in on his group lesson before lunch. He wishes to
teach them a few new holds and it is easier accomplished with two instructors."

John cocked a wary eyebrow.

Teyla frowned at him. "I will merely be demonstrating proper positioning, John. I will not be
engaging Ronon in a match."

"I didn't say anything," he said.

"You did not have to." With a sigh, Teyla continued. "After lunch, Ronon said he would be free to
hang out with you, if you would like?"

"Sure," John said with a shrug.

"I will let him know," she replied. "While he's here, I would appreciate it if you and he could set up
the card table and chairs in the living room."
"Oh, that's right. Ladies poker night."

Teyla nodded. "I had thought of canceling, but Jennifer assured me that you were satisfactorily improved, and after I requested to take over for Amelia, it didn't seem appropriate."

He smiled. "It's not a problem, Teyla. I can make myself scarce for a few hours. Besides, you need a little girl time. Play poker, talk about boys, paint your nails, have a pillow fight ..."

"What are you talking about, John?"

John cleared his throat, returning from the adolescent fantasy land his imagination had led him. "Nothing. You girls'll do your thing. The guys will do our thing."

Curious, Teyla asked, "What sorts of things?"

"Oh, you know. Beat our chests, slay our enemies, eat pizza, drink beer. Man stuff."

His matter of fact delivery amused her. "Man stuff." Then, she firmly stated. "No beer."

"No beer," he promised. "What about you? After lunch, what are you up to?"

At that, Teyla got quieter, unsure of his reaction. "I was planning to visit Sergeant Capshaw. I am hoping he will reconsider his position and allow me to assist him. I believe that meditation would be of no small benefit to him, and if I am able, I would like to begin right away."

While John mulled over the thoughts rolling through his head, he saw that Teyla was prepared to put up a fight if need be. He'd pushed her too far and her defensiveness was a byproduct he was responsible for. It was another thing he could add to his list of things to feel guilty about—especially after what he suspected she'd done for him, knowingly or not.

"Okay," he responded. "I'll, uh ... see you later, then. Before the wolves descend."

Teyla, clearly thrown by the ease at which he acquiesced, slowly nodded. "I should probably get going. Mr. Woolsey will be expecting me shortly."

"Teyla, wait," he called to her before she could leave him to his own devices. "I wanted to ask you something real quick."

"What is it?"

"It's nothing really. I'm just curious," he said. "This past week, when you've been ... connecting ..."

"Yes?"

"Have you been thinking about my getting better?"

Teyla's face turned as she grew perplexed at his question. "Of course, I have."

The tip of his mouth tugged upward. "I figured."

When he showed no sign of an explanation, Teyla asked, "John, what ..."

He reached out and pulled her toward him. He let his forehead lightly kiss hers.

"Thank you," he breathed.
He closed his eyes and caught her lips in a sensual embrace.

Even as Mason's door slid open, John still wasn't sure what he was going to say. But he'd had to come. If Teyla showed up here and he hadn't taken care of this, he knew how it would go. Teyla would come home disappointed and frustrated, and Capshaw will have let go of something that might actually be a big help to him.

The beleaguered marine answered and did the first part for him.

"I heard you busted out."

"Strictly sanctioned this time," John replied, pulling out a pathetic attempt at a smirk. "Apparently when you get better, they let you out."

Mason's face was as empty as the desert. "I wouldn't know."

Great, John. That's just great. Might as well've brought along a little salt and started pouring.

"Ugh ... Capshaw, I didn't ...

"Is there something I can do for you, sir?"

John decided, for both their sakes, the best thing would be to cut to the chase. "Teyla. She's gonna drop in on you later."

Mason exhaled and his jaw tightened. "Colonel, I told her not to ..."

"Don't fight her on it, okay?" John cut him off.

"Sir?"

Inside, John groaned. He may've been able to say what he wanted to Teyla, but he didn't know if he was capable of doing it again. "Capshaw, just take the meditation lessons. Do whatever it is you need to do. I shouldn't have railed on you like that and I shouldn't have interfered."

"Colonel." He shook his head. "You were only protecting what's yours."

John paused and then said grudgingly, "Teyla doesn't need protecting. But I'm trusting you, not to force her into needing to protect herself. If you even suspect that you're on the edge ..."

"I won't, sir," Mason asserted. "You can trust me."

John's expression remained solid, but he was sad things had come to this. "Listen, a bunch of us are gonna get together at Lorne's tonight. Around 20:00. It's not gonna be much—just food, probably some video games. Ronon'll probably wind up arm wrestling someone ..."

Mason snorted. "So the usual, then?"

"Pretty much," John responded. "You should come."

"Thanks for the offer. But I don't think so," he answered, seeming disheartened. He threw out a
smile trying to lighten the mood a little, but it faltered quickly. "I, um ... I'm due for another trip to the infirmary around then. I don't really think I'll be in the mood for a party."

John nodded. He tried not to let on that he knew what he was referring to. If Capshaw wanted to keep things under wraps, then that was how he'd play it. "Offer stands, if you change your mind."

Mason smiled. "Thanks."

John turned away.

"Colonel?"

"Yeah?" His head swiveled back around.

"It's good to see you up and around, sir."
Mason sat on the floor, his legs crossed in a modified Indian-style position, eyes closed and listening to Teyla guide him through each step. As she instructed, he tried to “allow each breath to cleanse and renew” him. He sought out the serenity that she seemed to embody.

Having gotten to know the Athosians when they'd been in the city, he'd been in awe of their ability to stay centered even in the wake of the unspeakable tragedy that they'd come through. Teyla, in particular, always held a restful countenance that he was envious of. He hadn't been able to find rest in ... a long, long time. Even now, in the tranquil environment he found himself in—the darkened gym, lit only by candlelight and the odor of incense wafting in the air—Mason was having trouble curbing the turbulent stream of emotions that poured through his mind and body, threatening to leave him broken and wrecked.

His sessions so far with Dr. Wilcox had been trying, to say the least. This wasn't his first rodeo. The military had very strict treatment protocols when it came to battle injuries, especially when a lot of physical therapy was involved and the doctors start throwing around the letters PTSD, as a potential stumbling block. So the middle-aged psychologist came as no surprise to him. He did what every other shrink had done in the past. He asked intensely personal questions that Mason would rather go ten rounds bare-fisted with a starving Wraith than answer.

How had he found the experience of his initial recovery and rehabilitation? How had his mother's passing so soon afterward made him feel? What was going through his mind when he was arguing with Dr. Keller? Mason had made an honest attempt to cooperate, but that same penchant for honesty refused to conceal the unqualified resentment he felt at the intrusion. It bled into his tone, his demeanor, and saturated his veins.

Then, the psychologist had hit him with the lowest blow yet.

"You've managed to defy the odds, Sergeant. According to your file, no one expected you to survive. But you not only recovered, you managed to requalify for active duty and now look where you are. It must make you proud to have come so far."

He'd nearly laughed in the doctor's face and was sorely tempted to let a choice four-letter word express his contempt. However well-meaning his assessment, it felt like a cheap shot to what little remained of Mason's dignity. In the infirmary, he was currently redefining the term frequent flyer, he was a marine stuck on the sidelines, he was barely on speaking terms with most of his team, and he'd hurt someone who hadn't deserved it—someone who'd refused to give up on him and managed to worm her way into his heart no matter how much he'd fought it. And her.

"Proud? What the hell is there to be proud of?"

Wilcox had held his straight, inscrutable expression while he rummaged through a pile of papers and pulled out the one he was searching for. He put on a pair of reading glasses and peered over the top of the black rims at him.

"I'm going to read you something, Sergeant, and I want you to tell me if it sounds familiar to you. 'Anxiety, sleep deprivation, seeks out isolation, frustration, anger, aggression toward others, loneliness, depression ...'"

"That come out of my file too?"
"... thoughts of suicide ..."

"Wait. What?!"

Dr. Wilcox rested his elbows on his desk. "No, this isn't from your file, and not all of these may apply to you. This is a list of the psychological effects often seen in patients battling chronic pain. While the particulars and the severity of your case are unique, my point is—what you're going through is common for people in your situation and we can work with it. If I can be frank, Sergeant?"

Mason nodded.

"I'm amazed you've lasted this long. You wanted to know what there is to be proud of? People injured as critically as you were don't just pick up and go on with their lives, but you did. Even while dealing with the ongoing physical aspect of your condition, you have a home, a job, friends. You've become a part of perhaps the single greatest venture in human history. Probably most impressive and infinitely more important, you still have the capacity to look beyond yourself. You still care about the people around you. For someone who's accomplished so much, there is absolutely no shame in reaching out for help."

Mason's eyes opened on the dark room. He threw his head back and a frustrated growl rent the air.

Keeping her poise next to him, Teyla's compassionate voice spoke. "It can take time. Do not get discouraged."

"Teyla, I ..." he stumbled, "I keep banging my head up against this brick wall and the only thing getting dented is me."

Teyla broke her flawless posture, which was a feat in and of itself given how much her stomach had grown. She scooted to position herself so she was facing him, their knees nearly touching.

Mason stared into her sincere gaze. It was wrenching to admit to her. No one really understood what this was like, but somehow he thought she might.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this."

Teyla gently took his hands in hers. The bandages had only recently been taken off his right hand and it was still brightly decorated with tracks of red gashes, future scars to add to his collection. She settled them into a relaxed, resting position on her knees.

"The mind is capable of great things. I have known that all my life, but I have recently been blessed to receive ... a further understanding of that truth. It may not be able to heal your wound, but if you allow it, it can ease your burden. You are of a strong mind, Mason. However, that does not mean you must carry everything alone. I am here to help you. I know you can do this."

He shot her a sideways look. Coming from anyone else, he would've been inclined to doubt it, but with Teyla ...

"What makes you so sure?"

"I just know," she said with a cryptic light in her eyes. With an encouraging smile, she added, "If nothing else, by merely being awake, you have achieved something that Ronon never has."

"Consciousness?" A low chuckle rumbled through him. "That's a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one. But it's something, I guess."
"Are you ready to try again?"

Mason shook the stiff muscles of his body loose, then resettled into position. He took a deep breath and gave her an affirming nod.

Teyla held fast to his hands, and with a voice of velvet, intended to soothe, she began to lead him again. She shut her eyes once again. "I want to you to think back to a time when you felt truly at peace. It will help you, in the beginning, to quiet your thoughts."

Unseen by her, his face fell. The last thing he wanted to do was take another stroll down memory lane as a foreboding sense of disquiet immediately descended into the pit of his stomach. Images and sensations screamed through him. The cold eyes of the hulking, armor clad Jaffa warrior just before firing. Being dragged through the dirt as he gasped for air. Being forced to listen to his chest sizzle because no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't pass out. The intensely bright lights over the surgical table in the SGC glaring down on him. A knock at his apartment door on base and his then-CO with a couple of MPs standing on the other side. The smell of the disinfectant that permeated the infirmary. The color red painting his vision, blinding him. Everywhere.

"Teyla, I can't ..." he whispered, his breath speeding well beyond the slow, languid pace he'd been going for.

"It will be alright," she murmured in response.

He latched onto her voice and his hands tightened around hers. She returned his grip with equal pressure, lending him her strength and support. With concentrated effort, his breathing returned to normal. He couldn't drive away the images that haunted him night and day, but he tried to move beyond them.

Slowly, gradually, they were replaced with new ones. They seeped in, brought forth out of the shadows unbidden, because he hadn't known where to begin looking for them.

Strawberries. A basketball leaving his arms, sailing straight toward the net. Ronon pulling him in a headlock during a friendly wrestling match. A soft hand running up his arm. Taking off one night as a teenager, driving into the mountains and camping out in the bed of his truck. Staring up at the stars nestled in the black night sky. His mom watering her plants, turning the garden hose on him and the uncommon sound of loud laughter coming from his own throat. Sitting on Sheppard's couch among his friends and hurling a throw pillow at McKay. Setisse's brilliant green eyes sparkled and her elfish giggle rang in his ears, bringing a real smile to his face. A kiss in the dark. His arms pulling her close, but not quite close enough. A little taste of her and the strawberry lip gloss she wore lingering, persisting on his lips afterward.

His mind more at ease, he allowed those images to fade as well. Calmer and with a firmer grasp of where he was trying to get now, he continued to breathe. He eased his grip on Teyla's hands. She was still with him, but he was starting down the path on his own. Mason felt the tension draining away. The constant pressure to perform and the unrelenting weight of his own expectations began to lessen. At some point, Teyla set his hands free and her pacifying instructions ceased, vanishing into the air like smoke in the wind. He and Teyla sat together in the still and quiet of the gym for a long time, the sound of their lungs filling in and out the only noise to be heard.

Then suddenly the silence came to an end, but not the way he'd expected. Teyla let out a startled cry and Mason's eyes flew open. She leaned forward, her weight on an arm braced off to the side as her free hand massaged the lower right corner of her back.

"You okay?"
"I am fine," she said with a expression of chagrin. "However, I believe that she has decided the session is finished."

Mason took a deliberate, discerning glance. "Kinda hard to find inner peace when you're taking kidney shots, huh?"

A grin appeared on Teyla's face. "Indeed."

He got to his feet and held out his hands. After taking a moment to get her legs beneath her, Teyla accepted his offer of help and he pulled her to her feet. Teyla walked around the room and blew out the candles.

"So it's a girl?" he asked, reaching for the light panel to illuminate the room.

"Yes."

Mason smiled to himself. "Nothing kicks a grown man's ass quite like a little girl." He wasn't a father, and chances were he never would be, but that was something he knew from experience. "She's gonna have the Colonel wrapped around her pinky finger from minute one. You sure Sheppard's up for it?"

"When the time comes, John will make an excellent father," Teyla said.

"Very diplomatic, but that doesn't answer the question," he pointed out with a smirk. "You think he's toast, too. Admit it."

Teyla betrayed nothing. The smile in her eyes did all the talking for her.

"It's about time," John gruffly greeted Ronon. "So much for hanging out." He'd been expecting his friend to show up an hour ago. He'd considered going for a run to kill some time and blow off some extra steam, but he was trying to be a good boy and he wasn't allowed to exert himself. He was bored. Acting like a mature adult really sucked sometimes.

"Sorry," came a grumbled apology. "Had to give Lorne a hand."

"Oh." His XO had probably put Ronon to good use as miniature beast of burden, hauling food for the guys night from the mess hall. "I guess we kinda sprang this whole thing on him last minute, didn't we?"

"He said to tell you that storage is almost out of beer."

Not good. Not that folks around the city drank a lot and the Daedalus was underway with a hold full of fresh supplies, but there definitely would be a lot of unhappy people wandering around if they ran out.

"Hmm. We may have to talk to Woolsey about giving the Athosians a call. A little extra Ruus wine to tide people over?" John pondered aloud.

"Maybe," Ronon responded. "But ..."

"But?"
"It's winter. They aren't gonna let it go easy," he pointed out. "That stuff ..."

"Almost as good as lighter fluid, inside and out. I know. I guess it's a good thing we know somebody on the inside," John quipped. As if he'd needed another perk to be sleeping with the alluring leader of the Athosians.

"Speaking of Teyla," he added with an artful glint in his eye, "You know what else is a good thing? You showing up when you did. I almost thought about considering putting up the ladies' card table myself."

Ronon's beard shifted. "Don't let me stop you."

"Well ... you're here now ... and Teyla is gonna be home soon ..." he went on innocently, wondering how far he could milk this before he would be forced into taking that run for survival's sake, "Plus, Keller said I really shouldn't be ...

Ronon let out a peeved growl. "Where is it?"

"Spare room."

John followed the huge warrior as he stalked into the empty bedroom next to the kitchen. Leaning folded up against the wall, the card table really wasn't much. It was bigger than your average four-seater, but recovery or not, John could've managed it easily. Only one of a few of its kind in Atlantis, it traveled around and lived with whoever was hosting the game. Banks and a few of her indentured lackeys (otherwise known as hapless marines and Chuck) had brought it and the matching chairs over after Teyla had co-opted the night from her, much to the Gate tech's relief.

"Thanks, pal. There's a cold beer in it for you," John said. "Apparently, it's a hot commodity these days."

"You know you could get the chairs."

"I could ..."

"Sheppard ...

"I'll get the chairs."

In a few minutes, they'd set up the table in the living room and Sheppard had liberated three chairs from the spare room and set them into place.

Ronon gestured at the setup and the curiously low number of chairs. "That enough?"

"I don't know. It kinda depends on what's going down around here - who's on duty, who's offworld," John replied. "Well, there's usually ... who? Teyla, the Doc, Teldy, Banks. I could possibly remember overhearing a conversation about bringing Katie in ...

"Mehra," Ronon added.

"Vega comes every once in a while. Marie. Is that it?"

Ronon shrugged.

"Better go with four," came John's perfunctory response.

While John went to retrieve one more chair from the spare room, Ronon ambled into the kitchen and
helped himself to the cold beer he was promised from the refrigeration unit.

"So how'd the sparring lessons go earlier?" John called to him, sliding the final chair into place.

Having returned to the living room, Ronon was caught mid-swallow. He gulped. "Fine."

John sat on the couch, where Ronon flopped down next to him. "You and Keller still doing private lessons?"

Ronon raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Yeah."

"And?"

"And what?" The warrior took another drink.

John gave him a pointed look.

Ronon glared at him.

"Apparently ... nothing." John exhaled, wishing for a second that he was allowed to join Ronon in a beer, if only to help him escape the icy temperatures suddenly emanating from the other end of the couch.

John filled in the blanks for himself. "You haven't really dated since ... have you?"

A heavy, gravel-filled 'No' came back at him.

John nodded in understanding. "Helluva big horse to try and get back on." When Ronon looked confused by the metaphor, he succinctly explained, "Dating again. It's hard."

Ronon asked, "How was it after you and—"

"Nancy?" John shook his head, reliving the leftovers from the end of his first marriage. "It didn't really help that she'd already moved in with somebody else, but ... It was weird. When you've been with someone for a long time, suddenly the idea of being with anybody new is a little ... scary."

Ronon stared blankly ahead.

John could guess at what was flying through his head. Memories of his world and the woman he loved, both lost. He tried to steer him away from getting too engrossed in the past. "Course, you know Keller. You're friends. That must make it a little easier."

Ronon snorted. " Didn't help you and Teyla much."

"Hey!" he feigned indignation. Privately, he was just thrilled to get a reaction out of him. John waved broadly around at his quarters. "Living together. Having a baby. And I plan on making an honest woman out of her, yet."

"Took you long enough."

"You're one to talk. How many years has it been for you?"

Ronon frowned and took another drink. "Too many."

John let out a sigh. "You know, buddy, Melena would want you to be happy. If it's with Keller, then great. If not, then at least you've gotten your feet wet."
After a few moments of silence, Ronon's head slowly turned toward him. "Since when are you good at this stuff?"

"It's easy when it's not you," John said seriously.

As the troubled Satedan's head bobbed, accepting his point, the door slid open and Teyla came in carrying a bag with the candles she used earlier inside. John rose and met her before she had gone too far.

"Hey, sweetie," he said, giving her a tiny peck on the cheek and taking the bag off her hands.

As John quickly deposited the bag in the closet, he overheard Teyla.

"Ronon, thank you for helping with that." She indicated the card table and chairs they'd pulled out. "I am sure John could have done it for himself, but—"

"It's fine, Teyla." It seemed Ronon still wasn't much in the mood to talk.

John sauntered back in and tried to filled the awkward pause. "So how did it go?"

"It was a challenge at first, but I believe he did well," she replied. "I will be meeting him again tomorrow."

"Okay." Ronon hit him with a questioning look, so he told him, "Teyla was meditating with Capshaw."

He nodded, but if it was physically or mathematically possible, his friend seemed to get quieter. His eyes searched for somewhere innocuous to land, but after a short time he gave up.

Ronon practically leaped off the couch and backed toward the door. "I think I'm gonna take off. Meet you at Lorne's?"

"Sure."

An abrupt exit later, John turned to Teyla. "He's gonna be okay. He's just got some girl trouble."

"Of that I am aware. And he is not the only one," Teyla informed him.

"What do you mean?"

"Ronon and Mason both care for Jennifer."

John rolled his eyes. "Well, I wish I could say I didn't see that one coming, but ..." He shook his head. Why was everything always so complicated? "So what do we do?"

"Why do you ask me?"

He sidled up to Teyla and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Well, in my experience, girls tend to be a little bit better at this stuff than guys."

She smirked, her finger tracing the neckline of his shirt and teasing the muscles underneath. "I think you would be surprised, John. And as far as our friends are concerned, I am afraid there is nothing we can do. They will simply have to work things out for themselves."

"Wait and see."
"Yes."

"I hate that plan," he grumbled.

"As do I," she said.

Teyla glanced over his shoulder at the card table examining his handiwork, and her face clouded over. "Um, John?"

"Yeah?"

"I believe I will be needing a few more chairs."

Teyla's cards were carefully positioned in her hands, revealing to no one the measly pair of sixes she held. Attempting to read her impenetrable mask and failing, Dusty nibbled the inside of her cheek trying to decide whether to call her bluff. She remained perfectly still, not even batting an eye at the pot full of handwritten IOU's. In and among the items at stake were a paperback copy of a book called *Pride and Prejudice* from Jennifer and an extra bottle of facial cleanser from Katie. Teyla would enjoy those. Teyla had little use for her own promise to get someone out of a workout with Ronon or the offer to put in a good word with the man of her choice, but she very much wanted to get her hands on the last of Dusty's chocolate supply.

It was tense standoff. It ended with a groan from Dusty as she tossed her hand onto the tabletop, and Teyla beamed as she claimed her winnings.

"Is there any point in me asking if anyone wants to play another hand?" Jennifer asked the group, while everyone handed her their cards and she formed them into a neat pile.

Marie excused herself from the party. It was getting late and she was doing an overnight tonight. The rest followed with a series of comments.

"I don't think so."

"Not a chance."

"With what?"

"Okay, whose bright idea was it to teach Teyla to play poker?" Dusty exclaimed, bemoaning the loss of her precious stash.

"I think we have Colonel Sheppard to thank for that one," Jennifer answered.

Teyla confirmed it. "John taught me very soon after I came to live in Atlantis."

Ann Teldy put in her two cents. "I don't know what he was thinking. You have the perfect poker face. You could clean out half the city."

"You are quite challenging to read, yourself," Teyla said, while Dusty eyed her with an irreverent expression.

"I have a pretty fair idea what he was thinking."
Teyla smiled and defended her lover as he was not here to defend himself. "He was introducing me to different aspects of your culture."

"Oh, that's so sweet! She honestly thinks that."

"Dusty." The Major tried to check her, although Ann had once described Dusty to Teyla as a police-trained German Shepherd; once she had latched her teeth onto something, short of a direct order, it was nearly impossible to get her to let it go.

While most of the women were accustomed to Dusty's outspoken, uncensored opinions on any subject, anytime, anywhere, Katie was still very new to this and stood up.

"Can I get anybody a refill?" the timid botanist asked. She received a couple of polite assents and a grateful 'thank you' from Teyla for her help.

The feisty sergeant, however, didn't miss a beat in defending her position to Teyla. "What? He definitely wasn't just spending time with you because he wanted to be Earth's ambassador to Athos."

Bringing the pitcher of lemonade over to the table, Katie braved a comment in her own unassuming way. "I just can't imagine Colonel Sheppard having ... that kind of motive. He's always so nice."

"True," Amelia Banks agreed. "They hadn't known each other very long, after all."

Dusty shrugged. "Okay, he probably wasn't actively trying to get in your pants. But don't doubt for a second that it never crossed his mind." With an emphatic wave toward Teyla's belly, she insisted, "You can't argue with Exhibit A."

"And it only took him four years to get there," Ann pointed out sarcastically.

"Eh, nobody's perfect."

Ann sighed and shook her head at her friend. "Everybody ignore her. She just broke up with Murphy."

"Oh, sorry, Dusty," Jennifer offered, while Mehra grabbed a few bite-sized jyra fruit from one of the small snack bowls scattered all over the table. "I thought you two were going great."

"You know," Dusty reflected, "every guy that comes through here is either married to his job or looking to nail anything with a pulse. No offense, Teyla," she added belatedly. There were two women in the room with men they were happily paired with. "And Katie, well ... don't even get me started on McKay."

Katie spoke up. "Now, I know that Rodney can be a little bit prickly sometimes, but he really is a good man."

"Indeed, he is," Teyla interjected, proud to see Katie standing her ground against Dusty's formidable personality. "Rodney is one of the most surprising people I have ever known."

"I'll have to take your word for it, I guess." Dusty released a frustrated sigh and continued. "Dating's just so complicated now, it doesn't seem worth it half the time. Don't you just wish sometimes you could go back? Back when it was the first guy and the first date, and all you had to worry about was who was paying and how your breath was because he just might kiss you at the end of the night?"

"Who was he?" Ann asked, her teammate's soft underbelly making a rare appearance.
"Jason Tambe. Seventeen years old and everything my parents wanted for me," Dusty said with a twinge of remorse. "I wanted him too, but not the rest. When I'm scrubbing off the Murphys in my life, I think about him sometimes." She gave Ann an easy elbow to the arm. "What about you? Love left behind? Your first?"

"I've never been in love. Not really," Ann said. "I was moderately obsessed with Geoff Kilgore when I was nineteen and was completely shocked when he asked me out. We dated for a little while. He and I..." she smiled inwards, "He was my first. We didn't last long, but while we did..."

Ann took a deep breath and handed the baton off to Amelia. Teyla listened closely to the heartfelt confession of her close friends.

"Peter Weston. He was my high school sweetheart. Looking back, it wasn't exactly the most fulfilling relationship ever - I'm not sure he even really knew me sometimes - but it seemed like it at the time," she mused.

"So when did you—" Dusty asked.

Amelia groaned at herself. "Prom night. Captain of the football team. I know it's such a cliché, but like I said, it was high school. Katie? What about you?"

The shy redhead sat up straighter in her seat. "Well, um..." she stammered for a moment, trying to gather her courage. "I was e-engaged once. It was right before I graduated from college."

"What was his name?"

"Allan. His name was Allan. He was a philosophy major."

Dusty chortled quietly. "I'll bet that never got old."

To Teyla's surprise, Katie actually laughed. "It did. It really did. That's why I broke it off with him."

"Damn right you did," Dusty congratulated her. Her eyes moved to next seat down. "Teyla."

Teyla grinned. "What do you wish to know? My first experience with a man or my first love?"

"Both."

"Yes."

Teyla smiled serenely. Reaching into her past no longer seemed to hold the pain that it once did, knowing that she had survived it and she had the family she was always meant for. "When I was an adolescent, nearly seventeen years, I was rather taken with a young man who lived in a village further inland than ours. His name was Rieson. He was a skilled hunter and I rarely saw him except when our paths would cross during a hunt."

Dusty leaned forward, her interest suddenly peaking. "Don't tell me you lost your virginity in the woods."

"We moved away from the rest of our parties one afternoon..." Teyla said through a sideways smile. "And in the middle of the day?" Ann added in mock surprise. "Scandalous, Teyla."

Teyla accepted their teasing lightly. "As for love, I believe my first and only love has been John. I once believed that I was in love with someone else, only to find out that it was merely a shadow of the real thing."
Dusty shifted her attention again, wringing her hands in anticipation. "Okay, Doc, you've gotta come up with something good to top that one. Boy in the hayloft? Some resident that dirtied up your scrubs? Spill."

Jennifer's cheeks immediately began to change color and she was mortified when it became obvious that everyone had noticed.

"There's not much to tell," Jennifer insisted. "Really. I haven't ... I haven't actually dated much at all. I mean, there was this one guy, Jared Michaels ... when I was a resident."

"What?" Ann sat up quickly.

Dusty was directly on her heels. "You're gorgeous, insanely smart, and blonde. Men love blondes. How is that possible?"

"Well, I- I graduated high school when I was fifteen," Jennifer explained. "I was already halfway through college before I stopped being jailbait. Most the guys I was in med school with saw me as some sort of mascot, not the girl they wanted take out. And once I started working, I was so busy trying to prove to myself and everyone else that I could be a really good doctor, there wasn't a lot of time for dating."

Most of the women sat in stunned silence. Dusty's mouth had gaped open, but she finally managed to close it.

"Ladies, I am officially declaring an emergency. We have to find you a man, asap."

Jennifer started protesting vehemently. "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no," she rattled off, but her voice was almost drowned out as the conversation shifted gears entirely. Ann, Dusty, and Amelia rapidly started talking amongst themselves and comparing notes.

"Dr. Hanson."

"Get serious, would you?" Dusty chided Amelia.

"Sorry, it was the first name I could come up with."

"What about Samuelson? The linguist? I'll bet he knows what to do with that tongue of his," Ann suggested.

Dusty shot him down equally as quickly. "Just got divorced. Rebounds never work."

Amelia tried again. "What about Lt. Davies? He seems like the right type. Smart, great pilot."

"He's kinda skinny," Dusty said, dubiously.

"We're not shopping for you."

"If they're not good enough for me, they're definitely not good enough for our girl."

Ann said, "Well, if you keep going this way, there's gonna be no one left except the Unattainables."

Katie, plainly curious, managed to get in a word. "Unattainables?"

Amelia started out with the air of a dignified educator, but her explanation rapidly dissolved into the rapid, matter-of-fact cadence of all girl talk. "Most of the time, anyone who falls under the Married or Hot, But Hopelessly Gay categories."
Ann picked it up. "There's also The Boss, The Best Friend's Ex—people you're better off not touching unless you're looking for trouble."

"And then there's the rare and mysterious Straight And Available, But Don't Date type," Dusty rounded out.

Amelia laughed. "Capshaw, right?"

Next to Teyla, Jennifer stiffened in her seat and a nearly inaudible "oh my God" escaped her lips. No one else seemed to have noticed it, however. Teyla reached under the table and took Jennifer's hand.

"Right?" Dusty agreed. "Totally hot. Definitely something going on under the hood, but ask him out and it's nothing but Rejectionville. And let's not forget the Holy Grail of the Unattainable—"

Simultaneously, Dusty, Amelia, and Ann, all said, "Ronon."

Jennifer paled enough to make Teyla think that perhaps the doctor's heart had stopped. Feeling her friend's utter humiliation, Teyla attempted to diffuse the frenzy of tired women facing an onrush of hormones.

"I believe Jennifer is perfectly capable of deciding for herself who she would like to spend her time with. Whom she chooses is none of our concern."

Knowing better than to attempt an argument, Dusty reluctantly nodded. "Okay, no fix ups. But seriously, Doc, you gotta get out there. Just ask somebody out. Have a little fun. Pickings are slim and you don't want to miss out."

"Has anybody else noticed that everybody seems to be pairing off lately?" Ann asked, stifling a yawn.

"It's nothing new," Amelia said. "People are just being more open about it since the Colonel ..." She cast a quick glance at Teyla. "Since he's started putting down roots here, it's like giving a seal of approval. Life here isn't like being on assignment at the SGC, where you can go home every night."

"Definitely not," Dusty said.

"A lot of us have clocked a few years in Atlantis now, and the ones who came with the first wave are more than four years in. Atlantis is our home, and at some point we have to live a little, right?" Amelia finished with a smile.

They all grinned in agreement. The energy level in the room started to die off a little and people began to consider calling it a night. Before they left, though, they all pitched in to help get the dishes cleaned up and decided whose honor it would be to host the next poker night a month from now—barring unforeseen circumstance, of course. Another fact of life in Atlantis was that plans were made to be broken. The mantle fell on Major Teldy and the others volunteered to go ahead and help her move the table and chairs out that night.

While Dusty and Ann broke down the card table, Amelia, Katie, and Jennifer pulled out the few remaining chairs from Teyla's spare room.

"Why do we have to talk about guys every time we get together?" Jennifer wondered aloud while they worked. "We're in the greatest, most mysterious city ever built. Why does it seem to return to men?"

"It's a biological joke. No matter how appallingly arrogant, annoying, dirty, or stupid men are, we
just can't help ourselves," Dusty theorized as they got the portable furniture moving. "But it's a two-way street. How much do you wanna bet they're talking about us right now?"

"Are the words 'sore' and 'thumb' ringing any bells for you, McKay? Get back here and get under cover."

"I've used up all my hand grenades. I was going after the, uh, gun over there." From his place on Evan's couch, Rodney waved his controller at the tv screen, trying to move his computerized counterpart back to where the others were hidden.

"We don't need another sub-machine gun. Ronon and Lorne have got enough ordinance between the two of them to keep the Germans on our six at bay." John explained the foursome's strategy next to him. "We're almost there. All we have to do is get across the square without being spotted and we can take this thing with just our sidearms."

"Well, call me crazy but I think the odds of succeeding improve with the big gun that shoots lots of bullets as opposed going with the little gun that only has six."

"He has a very good point," Radek said, watching the action of the video game from behind. "The probability of success—"

"—goes down every second we stand around here waiting for the bad guys to pick us off," John finished.

"Aim before you shoot," Ronon glowered at the physicist.

"If you go after that Thompson, you'll blow our position."

"I still think we should've played Monopoly."

Lorne groaned. "We could have, but you always insist on being the Bank and screwing around with mortgages. Who adds interest rates to Monopoly?"

"There's nothing wrong with making the game a little more challenging and, may I add, more true to life," McKay defended.

"Rodney, in real life mortgages aren't fun. But you wouldn't know that seeing as you've never actually had one," John taunted him.

"And you have?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have," John replied. Granted, his stint in that house had only lasted as long as his marriage, and when he considered realistically the actual amount of hours spent there, he really hadn't lived there much at all. "Besides, you complain every time someone else gets Park Place."

"It's prime real estate!"

"Uh, Colonel ... we've got tanks headed our way," Lorne broke in.

On the screen, the digitally animated tanks began firing on the square. Explosions bombarded the area.
"Great," Lorne muttered as he and Ronon moved away from the other two, toward the enemy.

Honing in on the mission at hand, John implored Rodney, "Will you just come on? We've got to end World War II."

"I hate to break it to you, but World War II ended 65 years ago," McKay spoke rapidly.

"64."

"I was rounding up."

"Are you coming?"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Rodney got his character into gear. "But if Hitler conquers Europe, it's on you. I hope you can live with that on your conscience."

Sheppard rolled his eyes. "I'll do my best."

John maneuvered his man through the wreckage of the town square, dodging a hail of bullets and artillery fire with Rodney's guy following closely behind. At the other end of the square, on the opposite side of the four-way split screen, Ronon and Lorne battled valiantly to hold off the enemy soldiers and tanks. They managed to bring a tank and the men driving it to a fiery end, before the game came to sudden and jarring stop.

"Yes, what?" Rodney yelled into his earpiece. The three soldiers, realizing that the physicist had just pushed pause in the middle of a pitched battle, stared up at him dumbfounded.

"You're kidding me!"

"I told you take that damn radio off!"

Ronon bellowed in irritation. "McKay!"

"If you had to work with the staggering amount of incompetent people that I do, you'd never take off your radio either," Rodney told them.

Then, into the comm unit, he said, "No, of course, I wasn't talking about you. Now, what is it?" He paused, listening to the scientist on the other end. In seconds, he condescendingly inquired, "Did you plug it in?"

"Oh, Rodney." Zelenka shook his head.

"Okay, fine! You plugged it in!" McKay said, getting an earful on the other side of the conversation as well. "Have you checked the cooling system? Okay. What about the, uh, failsafes?"

"The game, Rodney," John prodded him. "People all over Europe are waiting for us to kick Hitler's ass."

"Just!" McKay shushed him. "What about power regulation? Maybe you have a bad ..."

He halted mid-sentence and stood up. His eyes went wide. John and the others watched as Rodney dropped his controller and started mumbling to himself. To everyone's surprise, he stalked toward the door.

"McKay!"
"Where the hell are you going?"

Rodney paused and turned around with a smile on his face. "I am a genius!"

John looked at him sideways. "Oookayy."

"The Ancient device—765—I know what it does!"
Teyla opened her eyes and took a yawning, satisfied breath. In the incandescent morning light, she was gloriously comfortable and relaxed tucked in the sheets of the infirmary bed. She beamed at the sight that greeted her. John meandered up and down next to bed with a small bundle cradled against his chest, his head tilted slightly to the side, gently nuzzling his precious cargo. A small swatch of her daughter's dark hair peeked over his shoulder, around the white blanket she was swaddled in. Not wishing to break the spell of the moment yet without the will to be even this small distance away from either of them another second, Teyla softly spoke his name.

In keeping with the leisurely tempo of his walk, he gradually spun so she could see his face. She had never seen John so free, so unburdened. So happy.

He smiled. "Teyla, she's beautiful. You were amazing."

"Was I?" she asked. Her hands unconsciously moved over her now flat abdomen. She found it curious that she could not remember having given birth.

"Absolutely," he said with adoration. He carefully shifted the little girl and brought her to rest in his hands, so he could see her face. "Ten fingers, ten toes, and she looks just like you. She's perfect. You want to hold her?"

Teyla let out a quavering breath of excitement. Her long held anticipation at getting to take her child in her arms threatened to run away with her. "Please."

John, evidently wearing his mantle of new father proudly, settled down on the bed at her side and relinquished the newborn to her. Astoundingly light, it was one of the most pleasant feelings she had ever experienced. One of her fingers smoothed away the edge of the blanket. The baby's little fists were balled up and resting atop her stomach. She was asleep.

Teyla glanced over her shoulder to look behind her. She felt strange. Unsettled. Eerie. Like she was being watched.

"She is alright?" she questioned the man she loved.

"Of course. Why wouldn't she be?"

Teyla cast another searching eye around the room. "I do not know. I just have this feeling."

"Don't worry, sweetie," he comforted her, kissing her cheek. "You're just tired. Maybe you should try and get some more sleep."

"Perhaps," she said distractedly.

She leaned on John's shoulder and ran her finger down her young daughter's cheek. So soft. Almost unnaturally so in its pure, untouched state. Teyla wished she could preserve it just the way it was forever, but she knew all too soon life would have its way. With one hand supporting the back of her head and the other underneath her, Teyla raised her up to where the infant was nearly upright. The blessing would need to be performed; from mother to child, an Athosian tradition from the time of the Ancestors and passed through the generations.

A sound from behind caused Teyla to rapidly bring the baby back to her chest. She curled around her, her body shielding her. Something was there, biding its time. Something was coming.
"John," she said, hearing the fear in her own voice. "You must take her."

She set her daughter back in his arms, his confusion clear. "What's the matter?"

"Take her. You must get her away from here."

"Teyla, what..." 

"Please, John!" Her desperation spread through the room like ripples in a pond, growing and building as she felt whatever it was drawing nearer with every breath. "Go!"

Teyla's eyes shot open, air moving through her lungs in earnest. In the darkness of the early morning, she groped for a sense of what was real and what was merely shades of her nightmare. She clutched at her body and nearly cried for joy when she felt the firm roundness of her belly still there under her sleepwear, the heavy weight of it more real to her than anything else.

Everything was alright.

A torrent of emotions rushed through her. She was relieved and elated that the malevolent presence was gone, most likely just a figment of her hormonally influenced imagination. But at the same she found herself choking back a sob. Though her daughter was safe and would yet be hers, she felt keenly the sting of not being able to touch her or look at her.

Sprawled out on the other side of the bed, face down and with one arm hanging off the side, John slept soundly, a low rumbling in his chest. Some might've found the noise distracting, but she found comforting. Sliding along under the covers, she edged her way to him. Even in sleep he radiated strength, and it was exactly that strength she needed then. She rested her head on his back and draped her arm across his body. His body, its welcome heat, and his presence—not only physical, but the sense of him that grew in strength inside her mind by the day—renewed her, made her whole. She nestled against him and relaxed. With a silent prayer to the Ancestors to watch over them, she closed her eyes once again.

______________________________

Another day, the same as the last. Mason put one foot in front of the other, walking down the same old hallway toward the infirmary. Every day twice a day. He would do the same tomorrow. And the next day and the next. Maybe.

Things had gotten weird over the last several days. He kept mostly to himself, but the few people he had regular contact with were starting to act strange around him. Beckett's polite chatter during his appointments had gone from friendly to all business. The doctor came in, took care of him, and promptly went about his day. He felt like someone had turned up the heat in his meetings with Wilcox, too, like he was under some kind of microscope.

He was being evaluated. That was probably it. The timing was about right for it. With the next wave of recruits en route in the Daedalus along with the fresh supplies, reassessments were being done on nearly everyone to decide who was staying and who was rotating back to Earth. Despite the progress he'd made with treatment and in meditation with Teyla, Mason couldn't deny that he probably had prime candidate stamped on his forehead and nobody wanted to be the one to break it to him.

He rounded the corner moving along at a pretty good clip, with thoughts of what he would do if he was sent back playing in his head—trying not to think too much of the people he'd be leaving
behind, glad he had money put away because he didn't have a place of his own on Earth anymore, considering where he'd most likely be transferred for treatment and wondering whether it was time to just call a spade a spade and hand in his resignation. He was concentrating more on what was bothering him instead of the path ahead, and Mason abruptly found himself in an unexpected struggle with someone else who hadn't exactly been paying attention.

A gym bag hit the floor with a clatter as their arms grappled for purchase. Mason's eventually found their way around the woman's body, and before he saw her face, the way she felt against him and the scent on her blonde hair told him it was her.

"Jennifer!"
"Mason!"
"What are you doing out here?" he blurted out like a nervous teenager. He hadn't spoken to her since he'd kissed her, and at the moment, he was kicking himself for it. For that amazing kiss that he couldn't get out of his head.

He shouldn't have done it. He'd been tempted to kiss her from the day they met, but even then he'd known it wouldn't work between them. He had way too much baggage to be the kind of man she deserved, and he'd finally proven that once and for all when he'd grabbed her, when he'd hurt her. He'd gone to her office to apologize and finally cut things off for good, but he hadn't been able to resist the urge to taste her. Just once, he had to see what it would be like.

But now, with her so close, all he wanted was to do it again and again.

Jennifer bent over to retrieve her bag, but he beat her to it. As he handed it over, Mason felt the unmistakable shape and weight of bantos rods.

"I, uh ..." she began equally as awkwardly. "I'm on my way to the gym. Ronon and I ... we're sparring together."

Mason nodded tensely as a knot formed in his stomach. "Kinda early, isn't it?"

She looked away from him, avoiding his gaze. "Well, I have a ... meeting ... to get to in a little while and my shift later. It's the only time I really have."

"Right," he managed. He shoved the hurt he was feeling away. He didn't have any claim on her, and putting space between them was for the best. So why didn't it feel that way?

But also nagging at him was the lie in her eyes. She was hiding something from him, too. Mason didn't expect that. If he was getting shipped out soon, he'd thought she of all people would have the decency to tell him.

He tried not to sound too brusque, like he wasn't disappointed, angry, and getting eaten alive in envy of his friend. "You two have fun."

"Mason, wait," she implored as he stalked past her.

He turned, but continued pacing backward, away from her. "I've got somewhere to be, Jen. I'm ... really sorry I ran into you."

Mason swiveled back around and didn't look back.
Ronon expertly dodged another clumsy shot and his hand shot out, catching and holding the rods perfectly in place.

"Sorry," Jennifer said miserably.

"Don't be." His gruff tone wasn't as intimidating for her as it once would have been. He released the weapons and she lowered them to her sides. "When you swing, make it a part of your arm, part of your natural movement. If you think too much ..." he added with a crooked eyebrow, expecting her answer.

"... I'm dead. I know," she replied, feeling a smile creeping up.

Every time she felt her thoughts getting the better of her and distracting her, Ronon was already on top of it, ready to call her on it and bring her back into the moment. And this morning, it was exactly what she needed.

Already out of balance and under pressure, her brief encounter with Mason had thrown her completely off her axis. Considering the last time they'd spoken they'd kissed and then immediately ended their ill-defined friendship/relationship, she had no idea where they stood with one another and she had no idea what to say. But Mason's curt manner and abrupt exit made it perfectly clear what he wanted. He had no interest in being friends or anything else with her. Too much damage had been done for him to live with and she just needed to accept it.

Ronon's large hand surrounded her shoulder, fitting easily into his palm. "Hey, you okay?"

Jennifer let loose a heavy sigh. "Yeah."

Ronon responded with one of those expressions that made women all around the city melt. Despite his overt masculinity and tough exterior, he let her know that he wasn't convinced in the most surprisingly charming and... cute... way.

Not unaffected, she broke into a smile. "I'm okay. There's just ... a lot going on, you know?"

"You sure?" he pressed.

"Yes."

"You ready to go again?"

A quick bob of the head and they both settled into ready position. After a few short beats, Ronon took the lead—he always did. He set the pace and the tone. It was a crawl compared to the blinding and devastating maneuvers she'd seen him perform, but she was thankful that he was taking his time with her, allowing her to find her own rhythm and confidence in this venture that was still very new to her.

Ronon crossed his sticks and bore down on her in an attempt to entrap her weapons. She remembered the counter move that he'd taught her and pulled it off flawlessly, much to her own surprise.

He seemed pleased too. "Nice move."

He tested her a few more times before ceasing his assault. He hung back, waiting for her to come to
him, forcing her to go on the offensive. She hated when he did this. She was supremely uncomfortable with the idea at striking out at anyone without a real threat. Not to mention, this was precisely how she'd screwed things up just a few minutes earlier. If it was up to her, she'd just block all day. At least that way, there was very little chance of anyone getting hurt. Of course, she knew and Ronon knew that in a real fight, that strategy would only serve to get her killed.

Knowing that Ronon would continue to wait, Jennnifer screwed up her courage and swung. She thought she saw a grin flash across his features as he went to block her attack. How he enjoyed this so much she didn't think she would ever understand.

Their sticks clattered together over and over. She tried to match the strength of his blows, and even though he was taking it easy on her, she knew she would never be able to really present him with a challenge. But she tried, regardless. Her stubborn nature would permit no less.

Nearing the end of the session, he threw another wild card at her. With a move of lightning speed and intensity, Ronon sent one of her rods flying across the room, leaving her with only one weapon with which to defend herself. Behind her, he wrapped his long, muscle bound arms around her and crossed his stick, entrapping both her body and her weapon uncomfortably tight against him. He was testing her to see how she would respond, to know if she was developing more of an instinctive knack for finding her way out of a situation she hadn't encountered before.

"Go for the unexpected. Don't be afraid to fight dirty."

Giving heed to Ronon's advice in a previous session, Jennifer threw caution to the wind. Abandoning any thought of freeing her bantos rod, she used his vice-like grip as leverage to power a kick to his shin. She doubted that she'd really hurt him, but the momentum of her weight acting against him did managed to throw him off balance just enough to get him to loosen his grip and free her stick. Acting before she could think any further, she swung. Ronon saw the blow coming and ducked his head to the side, but not quickly enough. The flying bantos rod clipped him just over his eye.

Yet again proving to him what a giant marshmallow she was, she dropped any thought of finishing the match and covered her mouth in shock and abject remorse. "Oh my gosh! Ronon, I'm so sorry!"

He looked at her, completely surprised that she'd managed to nail him. And, dare she think— impressed? A bright grin cracked on his face.

Relieved that he wasn't mad or hurt or anything, Jennifer let the enormity of her accomplishment sink in. She'd hit the man most people around here considered untouchable, the biggest badass in the Pegasus galaxy, and she was still alive. She heard a frazzled laugh escape her. "Are you okay?"

His crooked smile firmly in place, he brushed a hand over the spot where she'd tagged him. He checked for blood, but found nothing. "Think I'll live. Maybe I should ask a doctor, though."

Now, that was an idea she felt at ease with. She gave him a quick but hardly professional cursory exam. Her fingers brushed his brow lightly, checking for a wince. She liked being able to touch him. Male skin under her bare hands, with no medical urgency or latex gloves getting in way. It felt really good, and Ronon didn't seem to mind that she was standing a lot closer than she normally did. Dusty's unsolicited advice nagged at her.

She blinked and declared, "I don't think there's any permanent damage done," but she forgot to pull her hand away.

Suddenly, the humor seemed to have gone out of the situation. Ronon eyed her carefully, but even a
romantic novice like Jennifer could feel the sparks. Nerves crept in on her and she brought her hand down.

She was dreadfully inexperienced at this. In school, her relative age to everyone else's had kept her from becoming an object of any serious attention, and then romance had taken a low priority next to building her career. It had never seemed worth the risk, to her career or to her fragile heart. But again, Dusty's words prodded at her.

She wanted to find love, but if she was ever to succeed, she'd have to try first. And here was this incredible, caring man that made her feel safe and, despite her dizzying lack of self confidence, seemed to like her.

"Jennifer," Ronon started. "Do you want to—"

"Would you go out with me, Ronon?" Jennifer spilled out. "Like on a date?"

He paused briefly and it sent her into a mental tizzy. What had she done? What was she thinking asking out the leatherclad, gorgeous, intense guy who was on every woman's wishlist from here to the Milky Way and was WAY out of her league? How would she ever look him in the face again? And, of course, she'd have to. A lot. He was one of the infirmary's most frequent visitors. Stupid, stupid, stupid ... Where was all that overthinking when she really needed it?

"Yeah," he said and a smile cropped up on his face. "That'd be good."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

God, Jennifer, he said yes. Shut up!

"Great," she said demurely, trying to not to act like a fool. She couldn't believe it. She actually did it.

John found himself stirring early that morning. The alarm clock wasn't due to go off for another twenty-five minutes, but sleep was already quickly becoming a thing of the past. With Teyla in his arms, he was content to simply lie there for the time being. After everything they'd been through together as friends and then as lovers, he didn't think he'd ever be able to take the privilege of sharing a bed with Teyla and getting to wake up next to her for granted. Just the little noises she made as she slept and the supple touch of her skin as she rested against him were all he needed. And what came next.

Teyla sleepily rolled her head toward him and as she opened her golden brown eyes on him, she smiled.

He smiled back. "Morning."

She raised her arms over her head and stretched her limbs, and in a very convenient—and he suspected, intentional—move, she twisted her body so that as she stretched she rubbed up against him. He let out a growl of appreciation and pulled her in, closing the narrow space between them.

"You sleep okay, last night?" he muttered into her neck. He had a vague recollection of her coming
to him in the night, but for some reason it stuck out to him.

"It was only a bad dream. I was not aware I woke you."

"You didn't. I just ... I thought I heard something, that's all," he tried to make clear, although it was in no way clear to him. He just remembered hearing her voice in his head, scared and pleading with him to go. More of those hyper-vivid dreams Dr. Keller said would probably happen. Whatever she'd dreamed of had terrified her, but John was glad she'd turned to him instead of getting up and spending half the night unable to relax. John glanced over to his nightstand at the red, digital numbers of his alarm clock. He moaned. "It's getting to be about that time."

Echoing his disappointment, Teyla wrapped her arms around his neck. "No. You cannot go yet."

"We both knew this day was coming."

"That does not mean I have to like it." She eyed him. "I rather enjoy having you here when I want you."

John lips played upward as Teyla began to work hers along the length of his neck. With a chuckle at her antics, he said, "I have to admit it has its perks, but you heard Keller. 'Cleared for duty.' Besides, wasn't it you who, just yesterday, said that if I didn't stop leaving my socks all over, you'd—"

Teyla's teasing came to a screeching halt. "You are right. You should go back to work."

"Maybe I don't want to."

John picked up Teyla's game where she'd left off, mirroring the extremely sensual moves she had performed on her own neck. His lips and tongue savored the slight salty taste of her against her natural, almost sweet smell. He delighted when she quivered under his touch. He gradually moved his lips lower and lower toward her tempting curves. His hands followed suit even further down, cupping her assets appreciatively.

"You could stay, I suppose," she said, soon followed by an encouraging hum. John's hands massaged up and down her back, slipping underneath the barrier of her nightgown. "Though you would have to explain to Mr. Woolsey the delay of your return. And Major Lorne."

"That conversation could get a little awkward. Plus McKay's called a special meeting. And there's this debriefing ..." he rambled, stopping only as her toes ran up and down the back of his leg, sending a thrill up his spine. "I probably should go," he stated with absolutely no conviction whatsoever. Aroused and under her thrall, as far as his body was concerned he wasn't going anywhere. For a while, anyway.

They'd played this game before. They both knew he was returning to duty, but it was fun to pretend for a while that they could stay in bed all day and worship each other. The tease was made all the more intense knowing there was clock ticking, and not just the one that was still set to go off. Once Teyla had the baby, their already meager alone time together would all but disappear. John was eager to make what time they had left count and so was Teyla, it seemed.

"I have a debriefing of my own in mind, John," Teyla whispered, slipping her hand behind his back and beneath his clothing. John laughed as she gently kneaded his behind like dough.

"I gotta tell you, Teyla. I'm starting to feel like I'm getting mixed signals."

"I apologize, John. Please allow me to make myself clear."
She yanked on his black panda printed t-shirt, slid it over his head, and reached for him. "Better?"

"Much," John got out before he brushed his lips against hers, helping himself to a tantalizing bite off her lower lip.

Without a lot of extra time to waste, John immediately disregarded Teyla's concern about his littering the bedroom with clothes. In this case, he didn't think she'd mind. He tossed her nightgown off the edge of the bed where it hit the floor without a sound. While her fingers were pushing at the waistband of his pajama pants, he stripped her of her remaining undergarments.

John's tongue trailed down her chest and drifted toward her deliciously ample breasts. He nipped and sucked at them, careful of their recent sensitivity. The only thought he could hold onto for long was his burning desire to give her pleasure and the last thing in the world he wanted to do was hurt her accidentally. The way her hands threaded in his hair and the soft, crooning noises above him suggested he was doing a fine job.

He did, however, notice the odd cadence of her breathing. If he were the egotistical type, he might've assumed she was being left breathless at his dazzling skill. He was good, but he wasn't that good.

"You okay?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes, I … I am merely having a difficult time … catching my breath …"

John lifted up and took her hand so she could sit up. After a few seconds, she seemed more comfortable and her respiration returned to normal.

"Thank you, John."
"You sure you're okay?"

"Yes," she said, clearly apologetic for interrupting their fun with the less entertaining realities of pregnancy. "I am afraid that I cannot lie on my back for very long anymore."

John tossed the unnecessary apology to the wind and ran his hand down her thigh to the crook of her knee. He smiled suggestively, letting her know under no uncertain terms that the fun was not over.

"We'll just have to see that you stay off your back, then, won't we?"

He quickly thought through the different possibilities, growing even harder and eager for her at some of them, but he didn't want her to have to do any of the work this morning. All he wanted was for her to relax and enjoy herself. Keeping his hand on her leg, he steered her back down on the mattress and encouraged her to lie on her side. Once she was settled and comfortable, he scooted in to mold his body to hers, entwining their legs together. John resumed their lovemaking with all the passion he'd held before the short interruption.

He got lost in her body, not leaving an inch untouched. He took his own pleasure at feeling Teyla writhing against him, begging for release. His unhurried pace was prodded when the alarm clock did finally sound. With an aggravated grunt, he pried himself from his love just long enough to shut the thing up and throw it across the room to land on the floor with their clothes. He was welcomed back into Teyla's arms and his fingers stroked her hot, wet center, preparing the rest of her to welcome him in. John brought her head to rest on his arm like a pillow as he maneuvered himself into place. With one of her legs slung over his hip and the other just doing it's best to stay out of the way, John slowly entered her.

As he moved inside her, John thought of how many times in the past he'd fantasized about being in this situation with her—making love to her, listening to her cry out his name in ecstasy, heavy with
his child. His.

No. This would never get old for him.

She clung to him fiercely as he ground against her.

"John," she mewed.

He slammed his eyes shut, willing himself to hold on. He'd nearly come at seeing her exquisite face calling to him, exuding a euphoric fervor he knew too well because he felt the very same for her.

"God, Teyla, you're so beautiful," he groaned, nearing his climax again. He buried himself in her, his cheeks nuzzling her neck as he drove on, wanting her to come with him. Teyla's body began tightening around him, driving him mad with bliss. John couldn't dam up his reaction much longer.

"Let go, baby. Let go," he implored her. His chest against hers created the most glorious friction, a perfect complement to the primordial, transcendent dance happening below. He felt Teyla's nails turn on the skin of his back, the only pain he'd ever happily and hungrily accepted. He watched her throw her head back as her orgasm overtook her and only in her screams of rapture did he allow himself the joy of completion. His hot seed spilled into her, moving with the rolling muscles inside her, seeking a target that he'd already hit. John's moans of pleasure intermingled with Teyla's as they began the slow descent to earth.

A rap on the door shattered their entrancement with one another. John hadn't even pulled out of her yet and reality was again asserting its annoying self.

"I'm gonna kill him. I mean it this time," he said in between labored breaths. Half an hour early to walk with him to the meeting and the impatient banging told him exactly who it was disturbing them.

Teyla had put two and two together, as well. "Perhaps if we ignore him, he will go away."

Another rapidfire set of knocks set John's teeth on edge. With a groan of vexation, he pulled away from her and hissed, "Teyla, I'm getting my gun and that's IT!"

"Dr. McKay, am I reading this correctly?" Richard Woolsey exclaimed.

And so it begins.

Sheppard gaped at him incredulously. "Rodney, this is same thing that nearly swallowed your entire lab and you want to put it in Capshaw's chest? People have been saying it was bound to happen for years, but I think you've finally lost it."

"I realize that it may sound a little unorthodox …" Rodney began.

"Trust me, Rodney. That isn't the word that I'd use to describe this," John fired back.

Rodney pursed his lips. He'd known this would be a hard sell when he, Carson, and Jennifer had decided it was time to assemble this little meeting, but for some reason John seemed particularly upset with him this morning.

From his place at the conference table, Woolsey pored over the provided notes. He put up a hand,
silencing the bickering for the moment. "Gentlemen, if you'll allow me a moment to catch up? The device in question—AD-765—was originally intended by the Ancients to work as a method of containing electrical surges in their damaged warships, and at some point in its creation, they integrated a biological compatibility. Am I with you so far?"

"Yes, that's right," Rodney confirmed. "According to what we've been able to translate from the database, the Ancients were considering the benefits of organic technology."

"Wraith envy?" John put in, looking over his own copy of the packet of notes, charts, and reams of lab results.

"Possibly. In the middle of a war, I would imagine there would be an upside to having a ship that could repair itself," McKay replied patronizingly.

John shot him a look that said he wasn't impressed by the attitude, but he seemed intrigued at the idea of self-repairing ships.

Carson continued on where he'd left off. "As far as we can tell, human physiology was meant to be a baseline for their research, merely the first step in the project."

"But the testing never got that far, isn't that correct? The project was abandoned and the Ancients returned to Earth before it was seen through?" Woolsey asked.

"Aye, that's correct."

"And what makes you think it could be of help to Sgt. Capshaw?" Richard inquired. "From what I understand, your own research has been almost exclusively on inorganic equipment."

McKay scowled, expressing his impatience at having to explain everything. While he knew that, once briefed, Sheppard would get it and see what they were trying to accomplish, he still had to convince Woolsey to sign off on it and he despised the tedium of the exercise. He'd been working night and day with Carson since his epiphany. Mason had been suffering long enough and he finally had the answer. At least, he hoped he did.

"Organic or not, with this particular device the difference is practically immaterial. The mechanics should translate either way. In simple terms, 765 acts similarly to your basic electrical diode." He was again annoyed to see he'd have to dumb it down a little more for a certain lawyer turned expedition leader. Rodney doubted he'd ever changed his own light bulbs, let alone had a decent grasp of electrical principles. "It's a small component in most electronics. It restricts the flow of electricity so it can only move in one direction."

Carson related Rodney's theory in medical terms. "In the human nervous system, our neurons create a small amount of electricity in order to carry signals through the body, into the brain, and back again. In Sergeant Capshaw's case, in addition to the injury to his muscular tissue, he has quite a large section of nerve cells that have been irreparably damaged and combined, they are both invariably sending pain signals to his brain. Now, AD-765 won't repair the muscle tissue, but what we believe it can do is follow the line of damaged cells, cap them off, and prevent any of the pain messages from ever reaching his brain."

"No pain?" John asked, seeing for the first time the real potential for a cure for his friend and teammate.

So far content to leave the talking to him and Beckett, Jennifer broke her silence. Knowing she would be taken seriously given her long running fight to find a cure for Mason and her status as
CMO, Rodney was confident her input would speed up the process.

"No pain," she confirmed, leaning on her elbows.

John grimaced and folded his arms over his chest, not quite ready to bite. "We've talked about options like this before and I seem to remember you saying something about him being left permanently paralyzed."

"In this case, it shouldn't be an issue, Colonel. The device would only stop the signals one way. His brain would still be able to communicate with his muscles, allowing him full mobility."

"Why am I sensing a 'but' coming on?"

Jennifer frowned. "Mason would most likely lose all feeling in the effected area. Good, bad, and indifferent."

"He'd still be able to function normally, though?" John asked seriously.

"It may take him a little getting used to, but yes," Jennifer confirmed, her eyes pleading with him. "That's the idea, anyway."

John stopped his questions to consider what he was being told.

Woolsey took the moment to address his own concerns. "As Col. Sheppard pointed out, how are we to know that we won't have a repeat of the incident that occurred when the Replicators flooded the city's mainframe?"

"This would be a clear case of size being an issue," John quipped, but listening intently for Rodney's answer.

"Yes, well ... since my, uh, narrow escape from death, I've been able to determine that the size of its ... reaction ... is directly proportional to the amount and type of current it's exposed to. 765 only grows large enough to do the job, then stops on its own. Yes, when it came into contact with the displacement current, it turned into ... into ..."

"Godzilla?"

McKay ignored John's comparison. "But we're only talking about 50-90 millivolts here."

"That's the approximate amount voltage used in the body's nervous system," Carson explained.

"I would still feel better about authorizing this if there were a way to know what would happen," Woolsey said.

"Well," Rodney began, "thanks to Sheppard's bonehead move when he was infected with the parasite ..."

"Hey!"

"... we at least know that the device has no discernible reaction to normal tissue. We've been able to handle it safely since then with no problems whatsoever."

"But we aren't talking about normal tissue, are we?" Richard pointed out. "Are you certain there's no way we can test this on something other than Dr. McKay's equipment?"

"Ya can't just create a bundle of nerve cells and hope for an accurate result," Carson jumped in.
Nerves cells are far too complex. We're talking electrical impulses, over 50 different kinds of neurotransmitters, chemical signals—each neuron works both individually and as part of a much larger collective. Even if I had the ability to grow a sample for testing, there's virtually no chance the device would respond to it as it would a working nervous system.

Richard continued his probe for answers. "And what happens something goes wrong? If the device fails? Looking at these photos, I can't imagine removing it would be an easy task."

Rodney, Carson, and Jennifer exchanged dour glances with one another. This was the fly in the ointment. Rodney spoke slowly, subdued. "Once in place, the only way we know of to deactivate 765 is to ... cut the power. All ... the power."

Woolsey took in the ominous news. John leaned forward in his chair and faced him as two friends concerned for another, needing for this to work, but sick with worry that it wouldn't. For the moment, they were the only two in the room. "Capshaw's not gonna like the sound of that, Rodney."

"It's the best I can do," McKay answered, genuinely sorry he couldn't do more, provide something better.

"I know."

Breaking into their talk, Richard inquired, "Have you discussed this idea with Sergeant Capshaw yet?"

"No," Jennifer said.

"We discussed it amongst ourselves," Rodney said.

"I said no," Jennifer stated unequivocally, her protectiveness on hyperdrive. "We aren't going to wave this possibility in his face until we knew whether it is, in fact, a possibility."

Woolsey nodded, accepting the wisdom in that decision. "Nevertheless, without knowing his position, this entire discussion may be moot. With the risks alone, he may opt not to ...

"He'll do it," Jennifer and John both said spontaneously and with perfect precision.

"Mr. Woolsey, he won't hesitate," Jennifer added as she and John shared a meaningful glance.

John gave Keller a short nod and his eyes flashed at Rodney. He was sold. This was probably the only real chance at a normal life Mason would ever see and he wouldn't be the one who stood in the way. Rodney turned his attention to Woolsey.

"I think everyone here knows that, I'm not the most ... grounded person in the universe ... exactly. I'm not an MD, and even to me this whole idea is borderline insane. But there aren't any other options. And ... the thing is it just might work. We just need you to let us try."

"You agree with Dr. McKay's assessment, Dr. Beckett?" Woolsey asked, getting a final opinion.

"Aye."

"Dr. Keller?"

"Obviously, there's no way to be one hundred percent sure, but yes. It's worth the risk."
The expedition leader went quiet. This wasn't a decision to be taken lightly or one he felt remotely qualified to make. A man's life was at stake either way.

"If Sergeant Capshaw is willing, I'm inclined to grant your request. Doctors, you have a go."

"This is a joke. This is some bad practical joke, isn't it?" Mason accused the quartet of doctors in front of him, but he really only had eyes for Jennifer.

Without words, he begged her to tell him something he could believe. They'd all shown up at his quarters, saw themselves in, and just dropped this on him. This wasn't happening. It was the start of really bad joke: two doctors, a shrink, and a physicist walk into a room ...

But Jennifer. She wouldn't do this to him, if it wasn't real.

"It's not a joke," Rodney pronounced.

Jennifer locked eyes with him. "It's true, Mason."

"This is what you've all been hiding," he muttered mostly to himself, ruminating on the fact that his long nightmare might be over. Or he could die. Or it might not work at all and nothing would change. Strangely, that last thing was what he was most afraid of.

"Assuming this works, it won't do anything to help your muscular condition. You'll still need to follow your physical therapy regimen," Carson reminded him.

"I also recommend that we continue to see each other on a regular basis," Wilcox said. "Teyla, as well. Once the primary stressor of your condition is removed, I'm sure you will make rapid progress, but this sort of long term stress doesn't clear up overnight."

Mason nodded, but didn't say anything.

Jennifer touched his arm, trying to gain his attention, to make sure he was really listening to what they were saying. He looked at her. The lie he saw earlier was gone. All that was left was the same caring that had always been there. "Odds are you won't be able to feel anything in that region, Mason. Nothing. You're going to have to be more careful. If you get hurt, you may not know it until you've done a lot more damage or ... it's too late."

"And I would most definitely avoid getting electrocuted, or just electricity in general," came McKay's words of wisdom. "That could definitely be bad."

A sudden laugh burst out of him. "Thanks for the advice, Rodney," he commented. He had meant it sarcastically, but it didn't come out that way. At the moment, he couldn't put down McKay's genuine, if not well thought out, concern.

Mason sank down on his bed and covered his face. The weights and the grueling workouts would have to stay, but he could live with that. If this crazy idea worked, he wouldn't able to feel any of it.

God. Not to feel.

Not to feel like he was being shredded from the inside out, not to be sick anymore from medication that would certainly kill him one day.
He could keep the career he loved, his home here in Atlantis, his friends. Maybe one day he could
even have a life beyond that. That alone was worth any risk they could throw at him.

"What's going on in there, Sergeant?" Dr. Wilcox inquired.

Mason peered up at him, his eyes glassy. "What are we waiting for?"

John watched what was happening from the gallery above the OR, while Teyla held tight to his
hand. Standing sentry closely behind him, Ronon had his arms folded over his chest. Santiago and
Lorne kept a respectful distance, and Woolsey and Dr. Wilcox kept one another company further
down. Rodney joined the group as soon as he had delivered 765 into Beckett's capable hands. There
was nothing for any of them to do but wait, and every last one of them hated waiting.

"Alright, my dear," a surgically masked and gloved Carson spoke to Jennifer over Mason's prone,
sleeping body. "Shall we proceed?"

The two took a few deep breaths and got to work.
Mason's surgery was never going to be one of those that lasted hours upon hours. Success or failure all really hinged on one thing—whether or not 765 did what it was supposed to; something they would know almost as soon as Carson laid the device on his chest. The scrub nurse spread a generous amount of Betadine across Capshaw's exposed and scarred skin while Beckett and Keller took care to see that the device itself was as sterile as possible. But even with the last bit of prep unfolding in front of them, for John and everyone else in the gallery, the wait already seemed interminable.

All of them, with the likely exception of Mr. Woolsey and Dr. Wilcox, were accustomed to walking into the unknown. Hell, they did it almost on a daily basis stepping through the Stargate. But sitting back while a good friend went through a medical procedure where no one, not even his caregivers, knew what would happen wasn't something they were prepared for.

Rodney paced back and forth in front of where John and Teyla stood. Ronon, with his "approach with caution" demeanor, tracked him as he strode anxiously across the enclosed space. John could only assume McKay was running through all the math and data one last time in his head before they passed the point of no return. To anyone else, Teyla would've seemed a model of calm concern, but John knew better. He felt it. Despite her enthusiasm this morning, the nightmare she was determined to play off still gnawed at her. Shades of whatever had terrified her poured into her worry for Mason, creating a potent mixture of emotions that bled into John's mind like a sieve.

He was in the middle of deciding what he should do about it when from the operating room below, he heard Carson say, "Alright. Here we go."

"Just place it right on top of the scarring. That should do it," Rodney instructed him over the intercom that piped into the operating room from the gallery above.

"Yes, thank you, Rodney."

Carson took his direction with patience. Rodney's meddling, after all, had little if anything to do with the fact that the scientist wasn't one to easily relinquish control and entrust his colleagues to do the leg work for him. It was a symptom of his nerves, something they all shared.

As the treating physician on the case, Carson took the lead while Jennifer waited in the wings in case she was needed. Not that he expected there would be much for either of them to do. AD-765 would dictate how this went. As much as they wished otherwise, they wouldn't have much say in the process or its outcome.
Beckett's gloved hands gently placed 765 just left of the rotator cuff of Mason's right shoulder and released. With the tremendously lower voltage of the human nervous system versus the displacement current it had responded to previously, the reaction was comparatively slothful to take hold, but soon enough the inky black tendrils appeared.

"We've got a response," he called into the air for the benefit of those above, all the while listening intently to the steady beeping of the heart and pressure monitors, the constant thrumming of his own pounding heart intermingling in between.

Once they began, the tiny arms of 765 swept along Mason's chest like a serpent across the desert sand. Beginning at the shoulder, they smoothly cut along the pectoral muscle and spread to over an inch wide as they swung along underneath the other and ending at the ribs. Miniscule curls as shiny and dark as obsidian crept outward along the edges where the scarring wasn't so neat, giving the appearance that Mason was awash in a sea of black flame. Then all apparent growth ceased.

Carson indicated to Hannah the portable scanner at the side of the table. "Let's get a scan here, quickly. We need to see what's happening."

With all the buildup of possible complications looming over his head, Beckett was left with a sense that things were going a little too smoothly to be trusted. Hannah set up the scanner and Dr. Beckett dissected the readouts.

In movements too minute to be seen with the naked eye, the scanner picked up waves coming from the Ancient device as those on the surface of a body of water. The activity was atypical to what they'd seen in their prior testing. At this point in their many experiments, 765 had stilled and morphed into a more solid yet pliable substance. Similar in texture to rubber, in chemistry the material was far more complex.

Without warning, the tendrils plunged downward, piercing Mason's skin, and sent his heart rate and blood pressure skyward. The monitors blared. Every muscle in Mason's body stiffened and began to quake, reeling from the full scale invasion it found itself under.

"Carson, he's convulsing!" Jennifer cried.

"Hannah! Succinylcholine, now!"

"What's happening, Dr. Beckett?" Mr. Woolsey demanded.

Busily keeping tabs on his patient, Carson emptied a syringe into Mason's IV line. "The device is following the damaged nerve endings into his body!"

Santiago, Mason's former team leader and friend, yelled down. "Why the hell is he shaking like that?"

"Sgt. Capshaw is heavily sedated, but the level of general anesthesia he's currently under is marginal at best!" Beckett swiftly explained.

John heard a collective gasp from everyone present. Behind him, Ronon snarled. Teyla's face was practiced, stoic and hard, but her horror needled at him, magnifying his own emotions. Witnessing Mason's body jerk under the stress, John could only imagine the scene were he awake. "Damn it,
Carson! Give him something for the pain!"

"Believe me, Colonel, I'd bloody love to! But any further pain blockers and paralytics we would ordinarily use would only deaden his nervous system, thereby destroying any chance of the device working!"

"Mason knew this might happen," Rodney said pensively. "We explained all this. The conditions, the risks ..."

"You knew about this?!" Ronon thundered.

"Why the hell didn't you or Beckett tell us?!" John shouted.

"What would you have said if we had?"

"I would have said to find another way!"

Rodney defended himself vehemently. "Do you honestly think we didn't go over every possibility?! Every scenario, every potential outcome?! Some other way? Any other way? Every one of us here knows that this was his last chance and this was the only viable option! Mason knew it and he chose to do it, anyway!"

Stop it, all of you! Teyla's thoughts screamed through the din. What's done is done! Arguing will help no one! Just stop!

With the alarms still blaring urgently below them, John and Rodney fell silent. Rodney had never carried burdens like this gracefully and it showed.

John, meanwhile, felt utterly and infuriatingly helpless.

There is nothing we can do, John.

Teyla, there's gotta be something.

He looked up and his eyes landed on hers. He saw cracks forming in her perfectly composed veneer and felt the worry writhing in her heart. Ignoring everyone else in the room, John pulled her to him and held her tightly.

It'll be over soon, Teyla. Everything's gonna be okay.

The muscle relaxant started to do its job and the convulsions began to abate, but as Beckett and Keller knew too well from watching the scanner's video feed, it wasn't over yet. The beeping from the heart monitor was still racing well beyond normal. The tendrils continued to spiderweb their way across the long branches of nerves deep inside his body.

"Heart rate?" he asked.

"195 bpm," Hannah promptly responded.

"Pressure?"
Carson muttered, "Och ... come on, son."

"It's going straight for his spine," Jennifer whispered to him. Over her mask, Carson thought he spied her eyes glistening.

765 kept moving, wrapping its oily fingers around Mason's spinal cord and traveled upward. In strictly mechanical terms, its response made a kind of sense. It was running the length of the 'malfuctioning wires' back to where all the circuitry converged - the spinal cord. From there, the pain messages would be fed straight into the thalamus. As Carson watched the grievous sight of the device spiraling up Mason's spine, he determined that 765 was, in essence, cutting out the middle man. If the signals couldn't penetrate the spine, they would never reach Mason's brain. It was an excellent response, really. If only they weren't having to go through a living person's tissue to do it!

This had to work or Carson didn't think he could live with himself for what he was allowing to happen, and short of killing him, he didn't know of any way he could stop it.

"Hannah, please have the Vecuronium and morphine on standby. The second this thing stops I want a drip going," he bristled. "We won't have any way of knowing when or if this cockamamie plan has worked until Sergeant Capshaw wakes up, and I'll be damned if he's in any more pain in the meantime."

"Yes, doctor."

Jennifer prodded him. "Carson, look!"

Just shy of encroaching on Mason's brain stem, the relentless push of the Ancient device was grinding to a halt. Hopeful that the worst was over, Carson and Jennifer both turned from the scanner's image to Mason's chest. Over the next minute or so, the almost liquid form of 765's arms slowly transformed and solidified. The stress that had been cut into every fiber of skin and muscle gradually trickled away. Mason's heart rate and blood pressure lowered and stabilized as the device remade itself.

"Hannah, I believe that's your cue," Carson said quickly. While the red-headed nurse proceeded with her orders, the Scot turned to Jennifer. Indicating the ever-present circular device that had started it all in the first place, Carson asked, "What do ya say we finish this?"

The final portion of the surgery was completed relatively quickly and, thankfully, with very little drama. Dr. Beckett implanted the device and Mason had been taken to post-op. As the hours ticked by, duty came knocking for most of them. Santiago, Lorne, Woolsey, and Dr. Wilcox were all called away, but left with promises to check in later. Jennifer and Carson busied themselves with various tasks around the infirmary, while keeping an unusually close eye on their patient's vital signs. Rodney paced, and when he wasn't pacing, he fidgeted. Ronon sat hunched over in a chair, his arms resting on his knees. John had settled into the chair next to Teyla. They all needed to hear some good news, that the ordeal Mason had been put through wasn't for nothing.

After a time, Teyla found herself leaning against the solid comfort of John's side. Her head lodged on his shoulder, seeking a soft place to rest. While John's hand absently settled on her leg, Teyla rubbed her protruding belly with easy strokes. She wasn't feeling well. She wasn't sick, but she had a
terrible, nagging ache in the pit of her stomach. And she was tired. Exceedingly tired.

She had lapsed into a nearly senseless state when John's low, deep voice roused her. His hand tightened on her leg to get her attention. "You know, Beckett said that he's given Capshaw enough drugs to have a bull staggering sideways, so it's still gonna be a while before he wakes up. Why don't you head home and catch a nap or something? I can call you if there's any news."

Shaking herself awake, Teyla took in a deep breath and sat up. "I am fine."

"So says the sleepyhead."

"I would prefer to be here."

"Teyla, you're tired. You didn't sleep that well last night, and you've been ..." He lowered his voice so that what he had to say would stay between the two of them, "... tapping into the baby's abilities."

"I did not intend to, John," she said. In an unspoken apology for losing her temper with him and Rodney earlier, she explained, "My emotions overwhelmed me for a moment."

"We got caught up in the heat of things too, Teyla. You didn't say anything we didn't deserve," he replied. "Look, it's been a helluva a rough few hours." John paused for a moment. "And you're seven months pregnant. It'd be ... weird if you didn't get a little ... emotional ... every once in a while."

Teyla couldn't help but let the whisper of a grin escape at the man she wanted to share her life with. His unease with dealing with emotions was infamous, but here he was, practically giving her permission to be irrational and unleash the near mania she occasionally felt. On him.

She tried to keep a straight face. "I am not certain you would survive it, John."

"I just mean you don't have to be so strong all the time. And I think I'd do okay." With a cock-eyed expression and a sly grin, he added, "I might have to start wearing a TAC vest to bed and I could have the Marines on standby just in case."

Teyla gave him a withering look and a lighthearted slap on the arm.

John chuckled. Without doing his typical checking of the room for unwanted attention, he leaned in and gave her a tender kiss on the cheek. Teyla closed her eyes and soaked in the small gesture of love he offered her that, not so long ago, he would have held in check. As his lips pulled back from her, she felt he deserved to know the other reason as to why she didn't want to go home yet.

"John, I ... I do not wish to sleep. Not without you near me."

His brows knit in troubled question. "This about last night?"

Teyla nodded slightly. How had he known it was still troubling her? Perhaps he'd picked up on it during her unintended connection with the baby earlier. As she was growing more accustomed and familiar with the process, it was becoming easier to lapse into it. She would need to show more restraint in the future. Not only was it draining physically, she had apparently gained the strength to bleed into someone else's consciousness as well. While she was blessed and desirous to share that kind of intimacy with John, she didn't wish to impose that on someone else unless absolutely necessary and certainly not without their express permission. Fortunately, as he was sufficiently preoccupied, Rodney had not put together what exactly had occurred. She wasn't in the frame of mind to begin answering all his penetrating and inevitable questions yet.
"What happened, Teyla? What's got you so tied up in knots?"

"It was so real, John," she confessed. "I have this dreadful feeling—cold, almost—that something is wrong."

"Something's wrong with the baby?"

"I do not believe so. I think I would sense it if she were unhealthy or injured in some way," she assured him. She didn't want him to be agitated by what was undoubtedly just a dream. "No. It was wonderful to begin with. You were holding our daughter and we were together. A family."

"Yeah?" He chanced a slight smile.

"Yes," she returned. His joyful anticipation at the upcoming birth of their baby was charming and completely captivating. She wished with all she had that the dream had ended there. "And then, there was something else. A presence. Something wanting to take our daughter away from us." She looked troubled. "I cannot seem to shake it, John."

He grew pensive, undoubtedly reaching for the right thing to say to comfort her.

"It was just a dream, Teyla," he said eventually. His strikingly handsome features grew harder, determined. He put his arm around her shoulders and brought her toward him. Teyla once again rested her head against his shoulder. John kissed her hair. "Nobody is gonna take our baby. Not as long as I'm still breathing."

Teyla squeezed his arm. "I, as well."

"Stay here then," he said. "I don't mind being your pillow. I just thought you might be more comfortable at home."

"I love you, John," she whispered as she settled in and closed her exhausted eyes.

"Right back at ya."

John went back to keeping his silent vigil alongside Ronon and Rodney as Teyla drifted off to sleep in her lover's arms. The sounds and smell of the infirmary having gotten nearly as familiar to her over the years as her own quarters, as long as she was with John, it was almost as though she was home. Teyla rested contentedly.

"Colonel Sheppard, come in," Banks stated in his ear.

Ronon and Rodney, also wearing their radios, picked up their heads at the call.

Teyla had been sleeping in his arms for over an hour. Since Ronon and Rodney were equally as tight-lipped as he was, the incessant open-frequency radio chatter had become background noise.

"This is Sheppard."

"Colonel, Major Teldy just reported in from offworld. Mr. Woolsey would like to see you immediately."
Great. "I'll be right down."

John sighed. He hated to wake Teyla up, but who knew what steaming pile of trouble Teldy had dug up planetside.

"I got her," Ronon rumbled. The big Satedan stood up from where he'd set up camp and ambled over, ready to assume his position at Teyla's side.

"Thanks, buddy. I'll get back as soon as I can," John said as he began to shift away from Teyla.

She woke briefly, but after he explained what was going on and Ronon sidled up to her, she quickly drifted off again. Ronon's long legs hooked the leg of a third chair and dragged it over. He put up his legs, looking to John like he was settling in for the long haul.

John scowled at him. The giant with huge muscles, who kicked his ass on a regular basis, was holding the woman he wanted to someday soon call his wife, and was a little too relaxed about it for his liking. Teyla and Ronon were practically brother and sister, but John couldn't help but feel a sudden urge to take her right back.

"Don't get too comfortable, Chewie," he warned.

Ronon raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

"And keep those eyes up," John added, gesturing with two fingers spaced at eye-width.

"Just go already."

John spun and left the infirmary stifling a smirk, but his return was both much faster and much more serious than he'd anticipated. Woolsey had gotten straight to the point and time was of the essence. Teyla stirred at his arrival, looking much more rested. He called Carson and Keller over to join the small group.

"What?" Ronon asked, seeing that something was up.

John arms were folded. "Looks like Teldy's found another one of Michael's labs."

A series of groans erupted, Rodney's a little more pronounced than the others. "Didn't we do this already?"

"Well, this one doesn't match any of the addresses we got from Nabel," John said. "So either Nabel was holding out on us ..."

"Or he didn't know about it. Or ..." Rodney reasoned.

"Or it's new," John concluded.

"Should've killed him when we had the chance," Ronon growled.

"When exactly would we've had time for that, huh?" Rodney barked. "When we were cornered by hybrids or when the planet surface was collapsing under our feet?"

John could see the instant worry in Teyla's eyes, and not wanting or needing another reminder of the chasm in his memory and his brutal near miss, he pushed the conversation on. "Regardless of what happened, this is the situation and we need to deal with it. We may have slowed Michael's plans down, but we all knew he wasn't gonna be stopped just because we trashed a bunch of his labs."
"So what do we do?" Ronon asked.

"Get geared up. We need to get what intel we can. Find out what he's up to," John turned to Carson. "Beckett, you too."

"Me?"

"You're our resident Michael expert. You spent two years with him. You'll probably have more luck than anyone deciphering whatever's down there."

"Colonel, in case you've forgotten, I have a patient who's yet to wake up from experimental surgery," Carson protested. "I can't just leave."

John nodded and cast a scrutinizing look at Jennifer. "I'm sure Dr. Keller can keep an eye on him," the comment as much a question as a statement.

Jennifer straightened up. "O-of course, Colonel."


The team scattered to change and arm themselves, leaving John alone with Teyla. "I will remain here. With any luck, Mason will wake soon and we will have good news to report when you return," she said with a faltering smile.

When it came to Michael and what had happened to him the last time they met, Teyla's brave face had taken a heavy hit and had never fully recovered.

"We'll be back soon," John promised. He assumed a more formal stance with her, an exaggeration reminiscent of their old dynamic. "And I'll look forward to that report."

She smiled at his attempt to cheer her up. "Understood, Colonel."

He was almost out the door when he heard her call after him.

"Be careful, John."

"I wish you'd told me we'd be doing so much walking," Rodney commented as the foursome trudged through the thick canopy of trees on yet another planet in Pegasus.

"Did I forget to mention that?" John asked innocently.

"Aye, you did," Carson responded. "You also forgot to mention the fact that we'd be rappelling down the side of a mountain. My legs are seizing up."

"I kinda thought that was the fun part," Ronon said from his place in the rear.

"Fun?" McKay interjected. "Where's a Jumper when you need one?"

"Too much forestation, Rodney. There'd be nowhere to land it. Just relax, kids," John advised. "We should be just about there."

On cue, Major Ann Teldy, at the head of her team, marched over the rise and spotted them.
"Colonel!"

The two teams converged on each other.

"Major," John greeted her. Looking around at everybody, John dispensed with the introductions quickly, "I think everybody knows each other, right? Major Teldy, Sergeant Mehra, Captain Vega, and Dr. Porter." He, then, waved to his own people. "Dr. McKay, Dr. Beckett, Ronon Dex."

Assuming an overtly friendly expression, Beckett stepped forward and extended his hand to Dr. Porter. The tall, fresh-faced brunette graciously shook it.

"Carson. Call me Carson," he said with a smile. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

She grinned shyly. "Alison."

John, Ronon, and Rodney all exchanged a knowing look. Impatient, Rodney wasn't above intruding. "Can we get on with it? I, for one, would like to get off this planet as soon as possible."

John took over. "Major, lead the way."

It was only a short walk to the entrance to the passageway that led underground.

"We were passing through the area when we picked up a low level energy signature," Dr. Porter explained with Carson listening intently, the others following behind. "We were able to triangulate and get a lock on the signal and then follow it down into these catacombs. It's a bit of a walk."

"What else is new?" Rodney bellyached.

After a few more minutes of walking through the tunnels, their path opened up into a room containing several Wraith computer consoles and several apparatuses along the walls. They were human-sized and reminded John very much of coffins.

"Stasis pods?" he asked.

"Possibly," Carson answered. "Although, they look a wee bit different from those I've seen Michael use before."

The hissing sound of air decompressing drew their attention to Mehra, who had just opened one.

"Hey, Sarge!" John said firmly.

"Sorry, Colonel," she replied. With a wave to the pod, she said, "Empty."

"Thank goodness for small favors," Rodney muttered as he attached himself to one of the consoles while Dr. Porter shadowed him.

"Careful, Rodney."

"I'm disabling the security protocols now," the busy scientist declared.

"Good. I'd hate to wind up with three tons of rubble falling on my head," John responded. Unable to resist taking a little dig at McKay, he went on, "Porter, check his work. Make sure he does it right."

He delighted for a second in Rodney's annoyed demeanor and scanned the room. It was creepy in here. "As soon as that's done, see what you can dig up on his research. In the meantime, Ronon, Teldy, Vega, let's get a better look around. Mehra ..."
She smiled expectantly.

"Keep an eye on them. Make sure they don't get into trouble."

Dusty's grin fell as he and the other three spread out to investigate the tunnel system.

Jennifer set her book down in her lap in surrender. She'd been reading and rereading the same paragraph over and over and still had no idea what it said. She looked to her side at her sleeping charge. Mason had dark circles under his eyes, giving him a more haggard appearance than a thirty-four year old should ever have. It was painful to look at, something so small that said so much. Heaven knew how long it had been since he'd really slept.

He's taking advantage, she told herself. That's why he's taking so long to wake up. It had nothing to do with what happened in the OR. The physical trauma. The shock.

For a fleeting moment, she wished that she hadn't insisted that Teyla go to the mess hall and get something to eat. Maybe if she had someone to talk to, she wouldn't be reliving what had happened. If only he'd wake up and give her a glimpse of those gray-blue eyes; turbulent yet still, like the eye of a storm, straightforward but at the same time always holding back. Everything would be okay, if he'd just wake up.

A scant shift of Mason's chin had Jennifer dropping her book to the floor and rising to her feet. She leaned over him. His eyelids peeked open, granting her a flash of color.

"Mason?"

After a long moment of unfocused staring, his eyes fixed on her and he blinked. He began to breathe deeper. As Mason regained consciousness, he turned his head to the side searching the room, trying to get his bearings. He didn't seem to pay any mind to the bandages across his chest or the sling temporarily immobilizing his arm.

In a slurred baritone, his lips formed the word, "Jennifer ..."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

He blinked a few more times, slowly.

"Drunk."

Jennifer caught herself mid-giggle. "You probably still have some drugs running through your system. After what happened during the surgery, Carson didn't want to take any chances."

"That bad, huh?" Gravel rumbled in his voice.

Relief flooded through her. Intellectually she had known the sedatives would've protected him from any cognitive recognition of what was transpiring, but it felt so much better to hear directly from him that he didn't remember.

"It was rough," she said simply. Then, with a clear note of sadness, she confessed, "It was ... it was really hard to watch, Mason."
The light in his eyes was dim, but he looked up at her with clear understanding. "Sometimes, it's all you can do."

She took a comfort in his words, but she wasn't going to give heed to the temptation to let him take care of her. He was the patient here and he needed her to be the strong one.

Jennifer quickly informed him of all the information he needed to know, although she wasn't sure it would all sink in at this point. "Your skin is still very inflamed and raw around the scarring. We've got the bandages on and some antibiotics going to prevent an infection, and we'll be keeping an eye out for any sign that your body's rejecting it. We, uh, implanted the device in the thoracic outlet beneath the ..."

Mason's left hand closed around her arm. "English, Jen. English."

She took a deep breath and smiled. "Right here."

Taking great care to avoid actually making contact, Jennifer reached for his shoulder and pointed out the small space between his clavicle and the first rib, currently under wraps.

"Jennifer," he said, his eyes appearing brighter but his voice slow, his features serious. "I need you to tell me something ... and be honest."

"What is it?"

"How ... does it look?"

Jennifer blinked. "What?"

"Well, if I'm gonna be living with this sucker in me for the rest of my life, I've gotta know," he claimed, his words stillslurred but an impish slant in his expression. "Maybe I need to be looking for a nice one-bedroom belltower somewhere. Think about a career change ..."

"Oh, shut up," she responded to his teasing.

She spied the eagle, globe, and anchor on his upper arm, something he'd told her that he'd gotten a year prior to leaving MARSOC to join the SGC. "You look ... kind of like you have a new tattoo. I doubt that will have any effect on your career plans," she said with a smile, though a few moments of silence allowed the mood to return to reality.

She tried to address the elephant in the room. "Mason ..."

"I can't feel anything, Jennifer. Nothing," he said staring intently at the ceiling. The absolute purity of his astonishment both touched her and saddened her. "I mean, I feel ... pretty weird. It's like being numb, only without the pins and needles. I can feel my hands, but my right arm almost seems like it's coming out of thin air." He paused and turned to look her in the eye. "Jen, I can't even feel myself breathing."

Trying to ease the fear she saw, she stated confidently, "Well, you are. I'm a doctor, I should know. You are definitely breathing."

He smirked a little. "Thanks."

"Anytime. I can't imagine what this must be like for you," she observed.

"It's ... scary."
Her heart lurched. "But good. Right?"

A tentative but entrancing smile found its way out. "Hell yeah."

Ronon stalked down the tunnels with his blaster at the ready. His instincts were hardwired for danger thanks to his years running, and they were shouting to him that something here was very wrong. As they systematically, explored, he listened to the others reporting their findings over the comms. So far it was a lot of nothing that Ronon mostly ignored.

After reaching a juncture where he thought the tunnels might end, Ronon was presented with yet another path to take. He growled to himself.

"Sheppard, these tunnels go for miles."

"Alright. Go ahead and double back. There are several large chambers up ahead. I'm gonna check 'em out. As soon as I'm done, I'll join you. Teldy? Vega? You good?"

"Like Ronon said, nothing but tunnels and tunnels and more tunnels," the Major chimed in. She seemed short on patience, too.

"Ditto," Vega said.

Teldy's voice came in again. "You know, there's a village about two klicks south of here. I wonder if these run underneath it."

"More than likely," Sheppard answered. "Probably worth checking it out. See what the locals might know."

Ronon made his way back toward the majority of their party. He made better time going back than he did coming out, relieved of the need to carefully inspect every nook and cranny. But even with that, he never relaxed his gun hand. After the horrific things of Michael's creation he'd seen and the lives taken by the booby traps left behind, he wasn't taking any chances.

He was nearly there when Sheppard spoke again in his ear. He sounded winded. "Beckett ... I'm gonna ... need you at my position."

"Is everything alright, Colonel?" The doctor's voice echoed clearly from the chamber just ahead.

"We've got bodies, Carson. A lot of bodies."

"Dead ... bodies?" Rodney squeaked.

"Really dead."
"Master, one of the subspace beacons has gone dark."

Michael, with his cropped, ghostly white hair and his features an amalgam of human and the Wraith he once was, stood at the command position on his cruiser. He accepted the computer tablet handed to him by one of his hybrid creations and studied the data.

"When did you get this?" he demanded, his dissonant voice echoing through the deck.

"Moments ago."

"It seems someone is nosing around in places they are not welcome," he mused. "Set a course for the nearest Stargate and ready a strike force."

"Do you wish to interrogate the intruders?"

He looked upon his lackey with all the entitlement and imperiousness of the Wraith. "In the whole of the galaxy, there is only one person of interest to me. Kill them all."

"Yes, Master."

John waited impatiently for Carson to finish getting the samples he needed, his mouth and nose covered by the scarf from his vest he'd folded and tied around his head. His focus remained firmly planted on the floor. He had absolutely no desire to see the horror show in front of him again. With the nearly airtight door open, it was bad enough he had to smell it. When he'd initially opened the door, John's stomach had nearly turned itself inside out at the putrid odor of twenty, maybe thirty, decomposing bodies left to rot.

"Alright, Colonel, I believe I've got what I need," Carson said as he hustled out of there, tucking his samples into his pack.

John pushed the heavy, metal door shut with all the force he could muster, only too happy to seal up the dead and return them to the darkness. He had a long, long, long shower in his future. He only wished he could scrub the image from his mind, as well.

"How long have they, uh ..." he ventured, pulling down his makeshift mask as they made time through the tunnels, getting back to the rest of their party.

Beckett appeared just as relieved as he was to be putting a little distance between them and the tomb behind them. "If I was to hazard a guess, taking into account the conditions here, I'd say two months, give or take. They all appear to have perished at approximately the same time."

"Any idea of what Michael was up to?"

"I'll have a better idea of what was done to those poor people in there as soon as we can get back to Atlantis and I can get these samples analyzed."

"Has Rodney or Porter managed to dig up any of his research off the computer yet?"
"It appears that before he left Michael erased a great deal of what was in the files," Carson related, clearly disheartened. As Michael's former prisoner, no one knew better than he did the malignant nature of Michael's bitterness toward Wraith and human alike. The gentle-natured doctor was driven to put a stop to the atrocities committed at his hands and the hands of his followers.

"Well, it doesn't look like whatever he was up to was a screaming success. He probably erased it and started over," John proposed.

Dr. Beckett expressed his doubts. "Colonel, in laboratory work ya never destroy test results. Even in failure, there are lessons to be learned."

"Then, whatever he's up to, he doesn't want anyone else finding out about it—us, the Genii, the Wraith, anybody with even the remote capability of doing something about it."

"Well, according to Rodney, nothing is ever truly erased. He's currently trying to hack into the mainframe and see if he can pick up a residual..." Carson fell into a stilted pause. He finally shrugged. "Och, who am I kidding? I can't recall exactly what he said, but in essence, it was very brusque, very pompous, and very..."

"...Rodney?" John proposed.

Carson snorted. "I was going to go with 'technical', but that works just as well. He's trying to get the files back, although why he couldn't just say so is beyond me."

"McKay's afraid that if he starts using the little words, his IQ will drop," John said, his expression unreadable.

"Aye," Beckett chuckled. "Dr. Porter, on the other hand, seems to be a little more..."

"...user friendly?" John teased.

Carson's mouth twisted. "Again, Colonel, not the phrase I would have chosen. But she is rather lovely, isn't she?"

"I hadn't really noticed," John said. "She seems nice enough. Maybe once we get home, you and Dr. Porter—"

"Alison," Carson murmured, adopting the look of a lovesick puppy.

"You and Alison could..."

"You think she might?"

John shrugged. "Never know until you ask. I would downplay the dead body talk, though, if I were you."

"Oh, aye," Carson wholeheartedly agreed. "That's a bit of a mood-killer if there ever was one."

"You can say that again."

John heard voices from up ahead echoing toward them and got back to the business at hand. "If they manage to salvage anything from the database, you let me know. I'm gonna take Ronon and Teldy to check out that village. Shouldn't take too long, but the second we get back, we're outta here."

"I can't say I fancy the idea of sticking around much either," Carson agreed.
High above the bunker, overlooking the village and the miles of dense vegetation beyond, the Stargate burst to life. A cadre of Michael's more fortunate victims stepped through, intent on completing the task their master had set forth. With single-minded purpose, they descended the treacherous slopes, hearing the call to kill playing over and over in their heads.

Their genetically enhanced speed and agility allowed them to eat up the distance between them and their prey with stunning ease. They would use the additional strength they had been bestowed to crush those who would stand in the way of Michael's great plans. They would not be stopped.

Sheppard, Teldy, and Ronon crossed through the forest at a brisk pace, spurred on by an unspoken, inappreciable need to get what they needed and leave. Their arrival only took it into overdrive.

The village was deserted. There weren't the usual noises of people going about their day—wagons rolling through the dirt streets, while small animals got underfoot, no kids at play while their parents worked and cooked and cleaned. There was only an abominable absence of sound.

The trio spread out around the town square, never leaving sight of the others. Teldy raised her P-90, prepared to defend herself if necessary. Ronon presented a nearly identical picture, but instead of having the sleek, killing machine of the U.S. Military, he carried his coveted blaster. It was, perhaps, not as polished as the sub-machine gun, but no less deadly when in the right hands and on the right setting. John reached for a LSD from where it was tucked in his vest and came to a stop next to the well in the center of the square. The small screen lit up and displayed the layout of the immediate area.

"Getting anything?" the Major asked.

Sheppard gave the device one last wave in every direction before answering, "Negative. There's no one." His eyes briefly fell on the dark chasm of the well. "How much do you want to bet we've already found them?"

"I'll think I'll pass on that one, sir," Teldy replied. "It's probably a pretty good bet."

Ronon said, "Some of them, anyway."

"Anybody Michael couldn't get his mitts on probably headed for the hills," John agreed. He bent over and snatched up a rock laying at his feet. He chucked into the well and waited as Ronon and Teldy fell back to his position. A long moment later, there was the unmistakeable clack of rock against rock.

"Dry," Ronon grumbled.

"Any takers on whether there's a tunnel running at the bottom of that?" John proposed. He looked around and made a wry face. "Thought not."

John pulled his P-90 and used the light on his scope to try to see into the black abyss. There wasn't
the usual debris of mud and half-grown plants you'd expect to see at the base of a dried up old well. Concrete.

"It'd be a handy place to come up and snatch some poor, unsuspecting towns-person," Teldy said, shaking her head. "God knows how many entrances to those tunnels there are. For all we know, he's got them running to other villages, too."

"Well, I for one have had enough of this," John said in a low voice. These people had never asked for any of this. Michael was a mistake, an experiment gone wrong, one he'd had a small part in creating. Every death, every life ruined at Michael's hands, was another failure on his part, and too many times he'd managed to slink away only to cause more damage.

With his jaw steeled, John promised himself that the next time they met, it would be the last.

"Let's gather the troops and get the hell out of here."

He was supposed to be resting. Taking it easy. Maybe catching up a few months worth sleepless nights. But instead, Mason was awake, trying to figure out if and how he worked now.

It was an act before—the jokes, the smiles. He really couldn't have cared less what he looked like, and the heartache and confusion he felt toward Jennifer hadn't mattered in the slightest.

Things were missing. Basic, fundamental things.

The pain was gone, but that wasn't where it ended. He could hear air moving in and out, but the continual rise and fall and that soothing feeling of the initial rush of air into his lungs was absent. If he listened hard, he could still hear the ever present drumming of his heart, but the sensation in his chest was gone, leaving him bereft of something that had been there since he was born, something he didn't realize he would miss. He hadn't counted on how wrong he would feel without it.

But Jennifer had been there to help him ward off the initial panic, and he was glad it was her and no one else.

After Jennifer told him that 765 had wrapped itself around his spinal cord, the first thing he'd done was wiggle his toes and stretch his legs under the blanket. He'd heaved a sigh of relief and Jennifer, having not noticed his movement, assumed he was still tired. She made an excuse of having a lot of paperwork waiting for her in her office and left him to himself in the hopes he would rest. He was partially grateful. He wanted some time alone with his body and with his thoughts, and to remind himself not to get too comfortable with the new order. There were still too many unanswered questions and no one knew how long—or if—this would last.

He spent a while flexing his hands. He tensed the muscles underneath the bandages, with, of course, no response if he'd relied solely on feeling, but Mason had physically peered down and seen the movement. He looked stealthily around the infirmary for an audience, and then briefly loosened the sling on his right arm to stretch and try things out a little further. The whole experience was weird. He kept waiting for something—a stab of pain from the incision, a burning sensation from all the inflammation Jennifer had told him about, a muscle cramp, anything. There was nothing. He looked down at his fingers and slowly curled them into a fist, just to feel something again, to make sure it was still there.
After a minute or two, Mason got the impression he was being watched. Nonchalant, he reached again to pull the Velcro strap tight. He glanced up, already prepared to defend himself to Jennifer, but swallowed those words when he saw who it was.

"Hey, Teyla. How long have you been there?"

Holding a tray of food from the mess hall, she wore a tentative smile, probably concerned that she'd interrupted something private. "Only a few moments. It is good to see you are awake."

He turned on a little charm to reassure her that he was glad to see her. "That for me? You shouldn't have."

"I brought it for Jennifer. She was insistent that I eat, and it seemed only fair that I insist in return."

He eyed the tray. "Just as well. I'm not a big fan of meatloaf." It was only then he realized that his stomach was still working and he was never happier to know that he was *starving*.

"Although, I'm not above a little jello," he hinted. It hadn't escaped his notice that there were two jello cups on the tray, instead of the typical one. Teyla had probably brought the extra for herself. Everybody knew about her cravings for the stuff since she'd gotten pregnant. "What do you think my chances are of snagging one of those?"

She gazed down at the blue dessert and stated slyly, "Unless you are willing to fight for it, I would have to say ... slim."

He jogged his bound right arm in her direction and grinned. "I'll arm wrestle you for it."

Teyla laughed.

"Come on," he entreated her. "Bringing jello into an infirmary is like bringing a t-bone into a kennel."

"Perhaps Dr. Keller wouldn't mind sharing hers with you," Teyla offered as a compromise.

"I won't tell, if you won't."

Smiling in approval, Teyla set the meal down on his sliding tray table. She took the jello cup and settled it into his mostly immobile right hand, while offering a spoon to his left.

"Let me take this to Jennifer." Teyla indicated the remainder of the food, with the exception of her jello cup which she had set off to the side. "I will return momentarily."

He stopped her before she could go. "Teyla," he started pensively, "Jennifer ... She told me I managed to pretty much scare the crap out of everybody."

"Indeed," she said. He could tell he had.

"I'm sorry. I was really hoping things wouldn't go that way."

She sighed. "You have only to tell me that it was worth the measures and there is nothing more for us to say."

Mason balked for a second, his thoughts turning in his head. She wanted him to tell her that the device had worked, that the debilitating effects of an injury he'd carried for the last two years of his life were nothing more than a distant memory. Well, he couldn't say that because he didn't know that for himself yet.
For now, all he could offer her was a smile and tell her that he wasn't in pain anymore. 

Unexpectedly, she leaned in and formally lowered her head toward him. Mason responded in kind, touching his forehead to hers.

"I am very happy for you, my friend," she said softly.

"Thanks, Teyla," he whispered.

"Oh, crap," Rodney let out.

A chill ran up Carson's spine.

Sergeant Mehra pounced on him. "What did you do, McKay?"

Rodney took a second to swallow and try to regain some moisture in his mouth. He gulped. "I'm getting multiple life signs closing in on our position."

Captain Vega stepped forward. "Well, the Colonel, Major Teldy, and Ronon are on their way back."

McKay glared at her. She just wasn't getting the point. "Yes, that would explain three of them, but what about the other...say...TWENTY?! Unless you've heard any communiques from Atlantis that I didn't, we have a really big problem!"

"How the hell did they find out we were here?" Vega blasted him right back.

"I'm working on it!" Rodney shouted, digging through the computer data.

Mehra and Vega exchanged a glance, and then, unruffled, Mehra tucked her P-90 into her shoulder and marched to cover the entrance. "Weapons at the ready, Doc," she ordered, chewing her gum.

Watching Alison reach for her gun, Carson apprehensively unbuckled his sidearm from its holster. Even if he'd had the desire, he hadn't shot a gun in a bloody long time.

"Oh, crap!" Rodney exclaimed again.

Beckett startled, his gun hand shaking. "Would ya stop doing that, Rodney? I could'a shot ya!"

"They're in the tunnel system, and there are more closing in on Sheppard and the others! In about two minutes, we're gonna be up to our eyeballs in bad guys!"

Mehra started barking orders. "McKay, get out your gun and come with me. Vega, Porter, Beckett, you hold our six." As she took to her radio, warning the rest of their party of the danger, Rodney rushed to the entrance and brought up his weapon.

"You see our people coming," Mehra said, "Don't. Shoot. Them."

"I've been running with Sheppard for years," Rodney nervously retorted, "I survived the siege. I think I can handle ..."

Mehra reached over and turned the safety off on his P-90. "You were saying?"
Mehra's matter-of-fact report came and reverberated through John's ears. "Colonel Sheppard, we've got enemy incoming. They're advancing on your position fast, so keep your eyes peeled."

He knew Dusty fairly well. She was tough as nails, had a "take no prisoners" attitude he'd learned to appreciate, and about as warm and fuzzy as a tarantula. But he could still hear the shades of something hidden in her voice, reminding him that she was still very human.

"They're in the tunnels, too, sir. We're surrounded."

In seconds, the echoes of P-90 fire shattered the eerie stillness that seemed to shroud the entire planet. John, Ronon, and Teldy tore through the underbrush at a dead run, charging up and down the hills separating them from their teams. Ronon led the way, streaking through the woods. He sliced through the terrain with a speed and lightness of foot that was uncanny for someone his size, his tied back dreads flapping behind in his wake. John could think of no one else he'd rather have at his side right now.

"There's too many of them!" Mehra shouted through the comms. The racket of weapons fire bled through the signal. "We have to fall back! Move it, McKay! Go, go, go!"

John's heart thundered in his ears as he pushed himself faster and faster, needing to reach the five people he'd left in those tunnels. He wasn't going to let them become Michael's next victims.

"Carson!" McKay's voice broke through the open channel.

There was a loud crack and a brutal scream from Mehra.

"Hang in there, Dusty! We're nearly there!" Teldy responded to John's right. Like someone had cracked a whip, Teldy found a new gear and sped on, closing on the Satedan whirlwind. John redoubled his stride, too. They had to get there.

Shadows moving in the corner of John's eyes caused him to jerk his head to the side.

"DOWN!" Ronon bellowed.

John swung his weapon around. Up ahead, Ronon dove, narrowly avoiding weapons fire from the cat-eyed hybrids stalking them. In a smooth, synchronous motion before he hit the ground, Ronon's blaster went off and hit its mark.

But the hybrid didn't go down.

The former humanly closed in on Ronon, and John hammered it with bullets. Major Teldy directed her fire at the numbers emerging around them, cutting them off from the tunnel entrance.

From the direction of the bunker, an explosion rocked the ground around them.

"Keep going," Dusty yelled as smoke filled the passageways. She'd managed to partially collapse the
tunnel between them and the hybrids with some of her C-4.

She pushed her people further underground, granted a momentary reprieve from the onslaught as the fire and smoke cleared. The sounds of enemy footsteps followed them back like cockroaches in the walls, along with the pounding reverberation of debris being chucked to the side. They weren't alone, and every path they tried was met with a new attack. Dusty had the unsettling feeling they were being herded like cattle to the slaughter.

"No, no, no," Rodney rattled off, seeing where they were being pushed. Up ahead were the large chambers Sheppard had investigated earlier. The ones with ...

"There are bodies in there!" McKay shouted.

Her spidey sense running like mad, Mehra lifted her gun toward the passage behind them. Striding backwards, she ran through the layout in her head for the thousandth time.

"We don't exactly have a lot of options here, McKay. We could try and seal ourselves up and wait for backup."

"We can't go in there," Dr. Beckett said, blood dripping from a nasty cut on his forehead.

Dusty's steely gaze took them both apart. She nodded to the enclosed space around them. "If we stay here, we'll die."

Porter spoke up, breathless but resolute. "Dusty, we're gonna die anyway."

Dr. McKay screwed up his jaw. With his P-90 already out of ammo, he pulled out his Beretta. "If that's where they take the dead, there's no way I'm going in there willingly."

Dusty heard herself laugh. "They're gonna have to drag your Canadian ass in there, huh? Who would've guessed Dr. Rodney McKay actually owns a set?"

"What?"

"Nothing," she shook her head as her thoughts turned mirthless. She had to give Katie a little more credit. She'd seen something in the scientist that Dusty had missed. It may have been buried deeper than the Mariana Trench, but it was there. Next poker night. Next time.

She exhaled and pushed the loose strands of her jet black hair behind her ears. If she wasn't gonna make it out of here, she sure as hell was gonna take as many of those hybrids as she could with her. As the others were reloading, she ordered, "Aim for right between the eyes. These guys may be tough, but a bullet to the head'll put their lights out pretty quick."

After getting a few nods of assent, she took one of her grenades and walk back toward the passage where they'd come from. Yanking the pin with her teeth, she threw it straight into the lion's den.

"Fire in the hole!"

Showing no emotion whatsoever, she spit the pin to the ground and ran for cover.

In the heat of battle, certain things are lost. You can no longer see anything but the thing trying to kill
John had lost track of Teldy during the fight. Ronon, too, but he could hear the Satedan's craven war cries not far off, though the sound of his blaster was nonexistent.

As victims of Michael's experiments, the hybrids could be taken to Atlantis and returned to their former state. They'd been able to fix Halling, after all. They could help these people, too. But as John's sidearm tore another hole into the man attacking him—a man appearing close to John's age, maybe with a family of his own out there somewhere—any moral or ethical debate became irrelevant. It was kill or be killed and John had too much to live for.

He pulled the trigger three more times, his thoughts focused on one thing alone.

_Teyla._

"I spoke with Halling yesterday. I suppose it comes as no surprise that Setisse was inquiring after you," Teyla said. "She has been quite unrelenting, apparently."

The side of Mason's mouth tilted in an understated grin. "She's a good kid."

"She will be happy to hear that you are feeling better," Teyla said before taking another bite of the jello she so craved. She'd already had two before leaving the mess hall, but they weren't enough sate her.

"Is she okay? After the way I left, I wasn't sure ...

Teyla smiled. "Children are amazing creatures. They are capable of processing so much more than we expect. According to Helia, she was quite upset for several days, but since then she has—"

Teyla stopped short. The lighthearted atmosphere drained away.

Mason frowned. He set his jello cup aside, watching her warily. "Teyla?"

The foreboding sense of warning from earlier returned with a vengeance and she was finding it hard to breathe.

She heard the rustling of sheets and felt Mason's strong hand clamp down on her arm. "Teyla, what is it?"

Pale and gasping for air, she thought she heard him.

_John!_

Teyla blinked, her vision turning grey.

"Jennifer!" Mason hollered over her toward Dr. Keller's office. Refusing to let go with his one good arm, the other struggled against the sling.

Jennifer ran to them and knelt down next to Teyla. "Mason, just sit back, and if you start tearing those sutures, so help me ...! Teyla, what's wrong?"
Teyla abruptly snapped out of whatever force it was that held her and immediately activated her radio. "Mr. Woolsey, this is Teyla." Her voice shook slightly.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Woolsey, I realize that this may sound strange, but I need you to contact Col. Sheppard immediately." she urged.

"Has something happened? Is your baby...?"

"My child is fine," Teyla cut him off. "But, if I am right, Col. Sheppard and the others are in great peril."

"I don't understand."

Desperation took root in her. "Mr. Woolsey, please! "Please, just dial the Stargate. I have reason to believe they are all in mortal danger. They need our help!"

"Mr. Woolsey," Jennifer broke in with a look on her face like she was starting to understand something. "I think you should listen to Teyla."

Teyla didn't know if Jennifer was backing her because she believed her or if she was simply trying to keep her from growing too frantic in her condition, but Teyla didn't care about her motives. She only cared about reaching John.

"Very well."

The perforated hybrid, instead of crumpling from his injuries like any normal human, only beset John further. It tackled him, pinned his arm to the ground and started slamming his gun hand downward. Sheppard tried to hang on as his face was kissed the dirt beneath, but he couldn't maintain his grip on his gun and it flew. Without missing a beat, John threw his elbow back, twisted his torso, and nailed the hybrid in the head. Gathering his body under him, he unsheathed his knife and plunged it into the hybrid's chest. In a last bid before it died, it swung its leg and swept John's legs out from underneath him, where a new taker was already taking his place.

John found himself staring up at the slitted eyes of a woman, as strong as any man he'd ever known, choking the life out him. Her nails dug into the sides of his neck. Her knees trapped his arms in place, preventing him from striking out at her.

"Rest assured, you have fought well. Your death will be an honorable one," she mewed in a voice that smacked of seduction. Apparently, no one had told her he wasn't into that sort of thing.

His lungs screamed as he gasped for air.

"Col. Sheppard, Atlantis base here. Colonel, what is your status?"

A thick tree branch crashed against the back of the woman's head, hitting her with deadly force. As she careened to the side, Ronon's tattooed arms came into John's view, then the rest of him.

Covered in blood spatters, the warrior swiftly slit the woman's throat and threw himself back into the fray.
"Colonel Sheppard?" Mr. Woolsey repeated, growing anxious.

"I've ... been ... better," he choked out. A hacking cough escaped before he could go on. "We need reinforcements here, asap. We're under attack. I repeat: we are under attack."

Ronon had apparently gotten his hands on his blaster, because his report was interrupted by a heavy barrage of stunner fire. Diving under the chaos and flash of weaponry, John went after the sidearm he'd lost moments ago.

"Ronon, Teldy, and I are cut off from the rest of our team. We have no idea what condition they're in."

"Jumpers are already standing by, Colonel. Sending them through immediately."

A hybrid leaped toward him. He brought his gun up in time and put it down in one shot. A trickle of blood flowed from the hole in its forehead.

"Sheppard!" Ronon roared.

John spun. Ronon was crouched down next to the ground. The colonel hadn't noticed a second ago, but there was blood streaming down from Ronon's thigh where his leathers had been sliced open. He was about to ask if he was alright, when he saw what he was kneeling over.

Major Teldy was down.

John rushed over to get a closer look.

"Damn it," he hissed, seeing the bruising all over her dirt-smeared face. Blood was coming out of her ears and pooling on her stomach. "Hurry it up!" he shouted into his comm link, scrambling through his vest for a pressure bandage. "We've got wounded!"

Ronon opened up his blaster on another hybrid and John instinctively ducked.

"Colonel, this Maj. Lorne. We're through the Gate. We've got a fix on your transmitter signals. Drones are ready to fire."

"Ronon, get down!" John yelled. He threw himself protectively over Teldy as he shouted into the radio. "Fire!"

The forest around them erupted.

Of the eight people on that planet, Major Teldy was the first to return home. She was picked up and whisked away to surgery, taking Dr. Keller and what seemed like half of the infirmary staff along with her. Teyla waited in the infirmary with Mason, hoping to get some news soon—from Jennifer on Ann's condition, from Mr. Woolsey about John and the others, when they would be coming home.

John and Ronon had remained behind after sending the first Jumper back with Ann. With reinforcements, they'd gone after the hybrids that had breached the tunnel system. Teyla had heard that they'd been successful, but the tunnel leading to Rodney, Carson, Dusty, and the others, had collapsed. They were currently trying to dig them out.
Mason offered her companionship on their watch and she took what solace she could from it, but she needed John. He had said that she didn't need to strong for him, that she could let him be her shelter. She had all but dismissed it at the time, but now ... Being in John's arms at home, knowing he was safe and sound, and letting him help to purge the pain and fraught emotions of the day seemed like the best idea in the world. But until that time, she needed to breathe and hang onto her control.

It was a several more hours before they were all home.

Almost all of them.

Teyla temporarily quit her seemingly neverending vigil in the infirmary to meet them in the Jumper Bay. Dr. Porter was first out with Carson at her heels. The gash on Carson's head aside, they were both filthy and their clothes were dotted with blood, but they otherwise appeared fine. Rodney was acting as a human crutch, aiding Ronon as he limped heavily off, because the stubborn Satedan refused to submit to the indignity of a wheelchair. Rodney put up an obligatory argument against it, but Teyla saw that his heart wasn't in it.

Dusty was off next. Teyla smiled in relief and tried to speak to her, but the Sergeant was either incapable of speaking or unwilling, most likely a combination of the two. She slid silently across the hangar, her head hung lower than normal without her usual fire and brash demeanor to bolster it up. Teyla saw a set of chains dangling from her hand and her throat tightened.

"I'll have to wait for the official reports to come in, but I think I'm gonna be putting Mehra, there, in for a commendation," John said from behind her.

Teyla twirled around, breathless, and threw her arms around him. He hugged her tightly to him and spoke into her neck. "McKay says she saved their bacon. I don't think he'd ever admit to it if you asked, but I think he was impressed." John picked up his head and looked her in the eyes, pausing long and hard. "Teyla, Vega didn't make it."

A tear sprang loose and rolled down her cheek. "I should have acted sooner."

"Teyla, you didn't know," he firmly asserted. "You're the only reason any of us are still here. You and the kiddo. This was not your fault. Don't forget that." He straightened up and brought his thumb around to wipe away the water from around her eyes. John tossed a glance back to where Dusty had disappeared. "How's Teldy doing?"

"I have not heard anything."

"Colonel, are you ready?" Major Lorne cut in reluctantly from the open hatch of the jumper.

Teyla glanced over John's shoulder. "What is going on?"

"Prisoner transfer," John said stoically. "Go ahead and head back to the infirmary. I'll meet you there soon."

At this point, she didn't feel like she wanted to leave John's side ever again, but she wasn't going to argue with him, especially given what he'd just been through. He was still covered in the dirt, sweat, and blood of the battlefield, and his duties were not yet done.

Before she left, she saw the unconscious body of a stunned hybrid being carried out.
A few of the scrub nurses gave Ronon a disapproving stare as they exited the operating room. Ronon knew he wasn't supposed to be there, and he felt weird, too. He'd traded in his torn and bloody leathers for hospital scrubs that didn't quite fit right, but it was his only option until he could get another set of clothes. At least they hid the bandages underneath.

Through the window, Jennifer stripped off her gloves and surgical gown and tossed them in the trash. Even beyond the mask, he could see the sadness in her eyes.

She untied the covering over her mouth and let it hang from her neck as she walked out.

When she saw him, she looked at him with unsustainable sternness. "Ronon, you should be in a bed. Did Dr. Cole—"

"Cleaned up, stitched up. She's fixing up Beckett now," he said, placating her.

She nodded, more emphatically than was necessary, and pointed toward the main infirmary where everyone else waited. "I have to, um ... I have to tell them."

He could see her choking up.

"This is stupid," she managed over the frog in her throat. "I didn't expect this. You'd think I would've learned to by now, but I didn't—" A glimmering drop of water pearled in her eye and she was quick to wipe it away.

"Our lives here … are so screwed up, you know that?" Without waiting for an answer, she went on through a rapidly thickening blanket of tears. "How is it we can get away with these ... insane ... stunts that, in any other setting, wouldn't stand a chance of succeeding, and then ... we send people out on a mission—a simple, intelligence gathering mission—and ... they don't come back? It doesn't make any sense."

Ronon grabbed her hand and pulled her into his massive embrace. Jennifer leaned in and wept against him.

"I know."
Casualties

Chapter Notes

There's a slight nod to Search and Rescue and tiny, tiny bit from Vegas in here. And the mood music for this chapter - "Rain" by Patty Griffin, "Forever" by Breaking Benjamin. Take it as you will.

John tucked in his blue dress shirt and closed the buttons on the sleeves, then repeated the process by fastening his top collar button. He slid his tie into place under his collar and began looping it into a knot around his neck. It felt like a noose.

He couldn't think of a single time in his career when wearing his dress uniform had been a pleasant experience. As an officer, he'd attended dozens of formal parties for the benefit of his superiors and visiting dignitaries. Overall, they were stuffy occasions where people dined on caviar, drank wine, and pretended to be more intelligent and more important than they actually were. Then, there were the disciplinary hearings—some where he was acting as a witness, and one after Afghanistan, in which he was the defendant.

John pulled his tie tight. That had been one of the last times he'd spoken to his dad. Patrick Sheppard had gotten wind that he was in trouble and sailed in with his high-priced civilian attorneys, determined to pull his butt out of the fire. John had sent him packing. He hadn't wanted to listen to yet another diatribe on how the Air Force had been a colossal mistake. He didn't want to owe him anything. And somehow it hadn't mattered that they'd long ago fallen into a pattern of cold distance. John still hadn't been able bear the idea of his father thinking that he was a screw-up. A disappointment.

Teyla wandered over and absently asked him to do the clasp at the back of her dress. She couldn't get the proper reach to do it herself, her stomach had grown so big. As he took his time with it, gently closing the material over Teyla's curves, he considered the possibility that he'd been too hard on his dad. Soon enough, he'd be a father himself. He'd have a tiny person of his own to look after and protect. He imagined if it were his child—his daughter—in the precarious position he'd been in, he would do the same thing.

It was too late. It was too late for John and his father to rectify their past, or in the very least for John to offer him a stilted yet sincere apology.

"There you go," he muttered to Teyla.

She offered him a weak smile, reflective of the somber mood prevalent both in their quarters and all over the city.

John went to the closet and pulled his stiff, blue coat off the hanger. It weighed heavily on him, today more so than most occasions. Loaded with medals denoting his rank, citations for his long term of service, and decorations for valor, it grew heavier every time he had to wear it to a funeral.

While Teyla finished pinning the forward pieces of her hair so they flowed along the side of her head and fell gracefully down the back, John set his coat on the bed. He walked up behind Teyla and peered over her shoulder in the mirror's reflection. Her face, adorned only in simple make-up, was
blank, her emotions locked safely behind a carefully constructed wall; a stark contrast to the picture last night.

He'd woken in the middle of the night to the soft sound of her crying. He'd gently pushed her hair away from her face and held her for what seemed like hours, feeling her heartache and guilt in keen bursts that rocked him to his core. He whispered to her over and over that it would be okay, along with a dozen other trite remarks that wouldn't help. He, regrettably, knew from experience, you don't lose two friends in the space of a few hours without taking it hard.

Peter Grodin, Dr. Hewston, Kate Heightmeyer. Her parents, Charin, Kanaan, and so many more of her people. Lieutenant Ford. Carson Beckett. Elizabeth. How many nights had she spent in her quarters, grieving for her lost friends and family, only letting her guard down in solitude? How many times when he should have been there with her? When he'd almost been permanently torn away from her, had she shed tears for him? Those thoughts running through his head, he'd bundled them both up under the soft sheets of their bed and wordlessly vowed to her that she would never be alone. Her tears were a load he would gladly carry for her if he could. And after a while, those same tears eventually abated and dried away.

In front of him, Teyla pushed her flowing hair to the side to make room for the necklace she held in her hands. Of Athosian make, it was a series of small, white beads arranged in a geometrical pattern, set on a string of leather.

"Let me get that for you," John said quietly.

She delicately placed the keepsake in his hands and lifted her hair. John brought it around the soft curve of her neck and, brushing his fingers lightly against her skin, tied the two ends of leather together. "Got it," John said, his voice low. "This is nice."

"It was a gift. From Charin." Her composure wavered slightly before she replaced it with a dim smile. "She gave it to me when I made the decision to live among your people. She said that, though I would see wondrous new things and make many new friends, I would always have those that came before."

As Teyla allowed her hair to fall back into place, his hands came to rest on her shoulders.

Through the mirror, she ensnared him within the dark pools of her eyes. "There have been so many, John. So many are gone now." Her gaze darted down to the counter and her body tensed. "Good people who deserved better."

John's expression darkened as he offered the only solace he could—the promise of justice. "We'll get him, Teyla. We'll make him pay for Vega, for Teldy. For your people and all the others."

Teyla turned and they came face to face. Her hand stroked his cheek. "I have faith in you, John. Michael will answer for his crimes," she affirmed. "But for now ..."

"It's time to go."

"Yes," she said, her lips drooping sadly.

John reached back and grabbed his coat. He slid his arms in and shrugged it into place. He pulled the sides in and Teyla took over the job of buttoning it up, her nimble fingers taking their time. As she finished, he caught her hands before she could pull them away. He leaned his forehead onto hers.

With others, it was an Athosian symbol of friendship. Between them, it was an act that had risen beyond that to become something more intimate, passionate, and vulnerable.
"I love you, Teyla."

"I love you, too."

Holding tight to one of her hands, John led her out and they started their journey toward the Gateroom.

"Easy, now," Carson reminded him, as Mason lifted his right arm from the sling.

Halfway ready to go, the remainder of Mason's dress uniform was laid out on his bed. It was miserable quirk of timing that the memorial service coincided with his release from the infirmary.

Mason glanced quickly downward, while Carson retrieved his long-sleeve shirt. The empty sling hung by the strap loosely around his neck. He batted it to the side and surveyed his bare chest. His bandages had been removed only a short while ago, so he was getting his inaugural look at the changes in his body.

Jennifer's description had been fairly accurate. He did look like he'd gotten a new tattoo. The tendrils of 765 cut across him like a ribbon of fire with black matte flames. The skin around it was still slightly red, giving it an added layer of color he hadn't expected. The raw surgical scar on his shoulder was the only thing that looked like anything resembling normal.

"The redness will fade in time." Carson interrupted his train of thought and held up the shirt behind him.

"You know, you don't have to do this. I could've managed on my own," Mason grumbled, his patience with being coddled wearing thin. Especially today. Things shouldn't have happened that way.

Carson rebuffed his protest. "Come on. Let's have it."

The marine stretched out his right arm and put it into the sleeve.


"You don't have to mother hen me so much either. It doesn't hurt."

"Which is precisely why ya need to be careful, Sergeant," the doctor chided him, bringing the shirt up over his shoulders so Mason could start buttoning it up. "Ya aren't hurting and ya should be. Your shoulder isn't ready for a lot of movement just yet, and personally I'd prefer it if you'd allow it to heal properly. It will take time to get accustomed to ..."

Mason scowled. "I know, I know. Take it slow. But, seriously, I can get it from here."

Carson hesitated before speaking again. "No one would blame ya if ya decided not to go, Sergeant. Ya still need to rest."

Mason tensed up, his jaw locking squarely into place. He put it to Carson in no uncertain terms. "I've rested long enough. I'm going."

He immediately felt guilty for having snapped at him. Beckett, after all, had actually been there when
Vega and Teldy were killed. It wasn't his fault Mason had been injured two years ago, and it wasn't the doctor's fault that he'd been sidelined when Michael had launched the deadly assault.

Carson viewed him with an expectant and frustratingly patient look.

"I saved Vega's life once. Did you know that?" Mason said, slow and quiet.

He shook his head. "Were ya close?"

"We saw each other around, talked a few times. She was pretty cool. She, uh, has a big family back home. Four brothers and a sister, I think." Mason exhaled, releasing some of the strain. "I guess one of those damned hybrids had her number, after all."

"Ya couldn'a saved her, lad. You being there wouldn't have made a bit of difference."

Mason frowned. "You don't know that."

"I do, son. I do."

Jennifer stared into her closet for the hundredth time, going over the inventory inside and still coming up empty. She had done everything else—hair, make-up. She'd put on a black pencil skirt and heels, but was no closer to making a decision about a shirt. She stood there in her bra, debating the options over and over in her head.

Black. It's a funeral. That was the obvious choice, wasn't it? But it was too depressing and most of the people there would be in their dress blues. Maybe she should change. She could wear her uniform. No, that would only remind her of when ...

Jennifer stiffened and closed her eyes. She had to stop. Her eyes were already puffy enough, and she'd only turn into a sniffling mess. Okay. She collected herself and started again. Maybe white. Too bright. A print? Why do they all have to be so freaking cheerful? Just color, then. But which one? Her eyes stopped on a dark maroon top and the image of blood flashed to the surface. Definitely not red.

She had to make a choice. He would be here soon. Jennifer bit her lip and reached in, letting her arm make the decision because clearly her mind wasn't up for the task.

The chosen garment turned out to be a navy chiffon blouse that had gotten pushed to the side during the 'too fancy versus not fancy enough' argument. Ann had liked it and it worked with the small hoop earrings she was wearing, a Christmas gift from Alicia. And it would blend in pretty well with the sea of blue that would be there.

Jennifer sighed and shoved away another wave of emotion.

The blouse was just shimmying over her body and into place when her doorbell buzzed. She waved her hand over the autolock. Behind it, Ronon stood tall and straight. In a simple gray shirt and his usual leather pants, he looked perfect. Rugged. Respectful. Thoroughly Satedan. It was him.

"Hey."

"Hi," she answered.
"Are ready to go or ... do you need another minute?" he asked.

Jennifer turned to the mirror behind her to quickly take stock and then met his concerned brown eyes in the reflection. "I think I'm about as ready as I'll ever be."

He paused and asked, "You sure?"

She nodded and put on a brave face. "Yeah."

Teyla stood throughout the memorial service in relative peace. The sorrow she felt at the loss of her friends had not subsided completely. Less than a week ago, Ann Teldy had been in her home playing cards, trying to find a match for Dr. Keller, and confessing that she'd never known true love. And Alicia ... She had a surprisingly wicked sense of humor and had ambitions of one day being the commander of one of the great Earth ships like the Daedalus or the Apollo. Every time a person had been snatched from her life too soon, there was always a gaping hole left behind. Teyla knew that in time—probably too soon and perhaps wrongly so—the dark chasm in her heart would heal and life would return to normal. But for now, at least, the storm had passed and she was numb. She was able to face saying goodbye to them the way she had been raised, with quiet solemnity and dignity.

Teyla watched on with Dr. Beckett nearby. Rodney, too, with Katie's arm laced through his. His face a stone wall, Mason took in the proceedings with his dress coat slung over the outside of his shoulders, leaving his arm free for his sling. And Jennifer listened in Ronon's company. Teyla's mouth had briefly crept upward when the two had arrived together and she saw that their fingers were loosely intertwined.

John had been asked to say a few words for his fallen comrades. His eyes mostly rested on the two coffins beside him, only occasionally rising to meet the gaze of the crowd. While his remarks weren't overly eloquent or florid, he held the room in the palm of his hand. He was someone who was reticent to reveal his true feelings to anyone. His feelings of responsibility, his devotion to his colleagues, his loyalty and friendship, and even love were normally kept carefully hidden away behind a casual demeanor and clever wisecracks. Or so he thought. Teyla knew differently. They all did. Unlike many leaders who could callously brush aside loss of life, John viewed Major Teldy and Captain Vega's deaths as a personal failure, as he did each time they all gathered for occasions such as these.

Though his address was short, she and everyone present knew he meant every word.

Mr. Woolsey took over after John returned to her side. His speech was that of a gifted orator, stirring, moving, and in the end a fitting final sendoff for her friends. The coffins were escorted through the Stargate, to be taken home and returned to their families.

Moments after the Gate shut down, everyone broke their straight stances and most left, needing to return to their duties. Dusty and Amelia, having watched the services from the back of the room, were among the first to make their exit.

Teyla's face clouded over. She was not the only one taking the tragic circumstances to heart.

Katie had seen it as well and whispered, "I'll just go and ..."

As the sweet-tempered botanist excused herself from Rodney and followed after them, Teyla felt
John's hand ran across her back, bringing her attention back to him. Around her, those that for both of them had become their family had noiselessly gravitated toward them and were all standing in a circle.

Reluctant to be the one to break the silence but equally as uncomfortable standing there with the weight of circumstance pervading the room, John spoke up. "Woolsey's called a full debrief for 15:00." Sheppard nodded in turn to each of the party expected to attend. "Beckett, McKay, Ronon, Dr. Keller, Teyla."

One by one, each of them acknowledged the low-key summons, except for Mason, who was more impossible to read than ever. Teyla thought she saw his eyes dart toward Jennifer and Ronon, then drop again, but his expression was unwavering.

"I gave him a Reader's Digest version of what happened, but, uh … we need to go over what we know now, so we can close the books on this and concentrate our efforts on Michael."

The group nodded in agreement.

"So," John finally added with a meaningful glance to his inner circle, "Take a few hours and …"

He trailed off at that point. They all understood the message.

Rodney broke the silence first. "I think I'll go find Katie and get some lunch. Anyone care to join us?"

He actually brought a few smiles to the group. No matter the situation, as long as Rodney McKay was leading with his stomach, things couldn't be that bad.

Carson declined the invitation. "Actually, I've got some things I need to go over in the lab, if we're to be in a briefing in a wee while."

"Jennifer? Ronon?"

Teyla focused on the pair.

"I'm really not that hungry," Jennifer said in explanation and Ronon didn't seem any more inclined. He appeared intent on keeping Jennifer company, wherever she decided to spend her time.

"D'you wanna go?" Ronon asked her with a nod toward the exit.

Jennifer answered with a slight smile. "Sure."

It was subtle, but Teyla noticed a small change in Mason's demeanor as they walked away together. He grew almost resolved. On what she couldn't be sure, but it must have been difficult for him to see that Jennifer had made her choice.

"Mason?" Rodney asked.

"Some other time," he said stiffly. He made as polite an exit as he could manage and left.

"Funny, I sorta thought he might be in a better mood, now that he's not … you know …" Rodney observed.

John rolled his eyes. "We're at a funeral, Rodney."

"Well, there's that, I suppose," he mumbled sheepishly. "What about you and Teyla? Lunch?"
John waffled and cleared his throat. "I, kind of, already made plans."

That drew Teyla's attention. "You have? What sort of plans?"

"You'll see."

Ronon and Jennifer wandered through the city, directionless and without purpose, although they avoided the dark hallways deeper in the bowels of Atlantis. For a while, they didn't say much and Ronon was okay with that. He was still getting used to having her hand in his. It was a small thing, but it had become somewhat foreign to him. Her silky smooth skin yielded against his hardened touch willingly, and no one was holding a weapon. It was an odd thing to have to adjust to, but it felt good. Satisfying.

They slowly migrated outside and into the bright, hot afternoon sun. The light bounced off her blonde waves, and Ronon gazed at Jennifer. For the briefest of instants, he expected to see a different face looking back at him.

She smiled repentantly. "I'm sorry, Ronon. This isn't what I would've picked for a first date. But, for what it's worth, thank you. For being there."

"No problem."

They walked along the lower tiers leading toward the South Pier. The wind took hold and the sweet doctor's long locks blew freely.

"I hate funerals," she said absently, then peered up at him, combing her hair down with her fingers. "I know that's a ridiculous thing to say. Nobody likes funerals. You have someone in your life and then poof. They're gone. But I really, really hate them."

She was talking to him, but her tone was lost in another place and time.

"Nobody knows what to do. Nobody knows what to say, because nothing can make it better. So it's ... quiet. Then, after a little while, it's too quiet. It makes me want to scream."

"So scream."

She let go of a meek smile and shook her head. "I couldn't."

Ronon's mouth curved sideways. "Why not?"

"It wouldn't be appropriate? I don't know. I guess I just can't see myself actually doing it. Funerals are supposed to be that way. Awkward. Sad. Mostly sad."

"On Sateda, after the funeral rites, there would be a three day celebration to pay homage to those who died with honor."

"What was that like?" she asked.

A small, reminiscent grin appeared on his bearded face. "Dancing. A lot of drinking, usually. Mostly, there were stories. Laughing."
"Sounds like fun."

"Yeah." His gaze shifted to the skyline as memories bombarded him. All the good times and the bad. The people he loved and the all the things that never were. They had all vanished. "Your people do things differently."

"Maybe," she answered thoughtfully. Her eyes brightened. "Though we might not be as different as you think. A lot of people, after they lose someone they care about, want to feel alive. To cut loose and do something crazy. Something they wouldn't ordinarily do."

He listened as she went on. It was easy paying attention to her when everything she said seemed so pure and genuine.

"During residency, I was on my ER rotation and we got this guy who's best friend had recently been killed in a car accident and he had just decided to take up mountain biking. I guess it was something his friend did, but he'd never done it before. Anyway, he took a bad spill and dislocated his shoulder. We got him fixed up and out of there, but ... I don't know. I guess I can relate.

She hesitated a moment. "I told you it's just me and my dad, right?"

He nodded.

With a vulnerability he found fascinating, she continued. "My mom passed away about five years ago. After her funeral, my dad was a mess. Of course, so was I. But I couldn't let it show. Not until later." She blinked away the wetness he saw forming in her eyes. "After I'd taken care of my dad and he finally went to sleep, I ... went out with a few friends and got completely wasted for the first time in my life."

He was surprised by a sudden giggle.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a bottle of Jack Daniels again without going cross-eyed. My friends practically had to pour me into bed."

"Did you feel alive?"

She grimaced. "For about four hours. Then, not so much."

Ronon chuckled low.

Jennifer pulled her hand out of his now easy and comfortable grasp. "Hang on one sec." She replaced her hand onto his tattooed forearm with a shy smile and bent over. She removed her black shoes, then let them hang in one hand while retaking his hand. "There. That's better."

"You okay?"

"Heels. Not really walking shoes," she said with a frown. "My feet are just hurting a little."

He nudged her toward the pier. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Just come on," he encouraged her.
When Mason got home, the first thing he did was dump his coat on the bed and unhook the sling from around his neck. His arm fell free and he gave it a few probing stretches. He kept expecting a knifing pain to run through his shoulder or some other pleading signal from his body that he wasn't ready, but of course, there was nothing. Nothing to stop him. Nothing that would even slow him down.

With grim determination, he set about taking off his dress blues and putting them back where they belonged. They were soon replaced on his body by a pair of loose shorts and a t-shirt. Mason rifled through his bathroom in the plastic bin of first aid supplies and medical bric-a-brac he'd collected over the years until he found the ace bandage. Taking the loose end in his right hand, he tucked in his arm and, with the left, proceeded to wrap the bandage tightly around and around his torso, literally tying his right arm down.

After patting down the Velcro edge, he tested his work, struggling against the binding. The infirmary issued sling, besides being irritating, wouldn't have been adequate. He couldn't afford to have any leeway. He couldn't tear his shoulder up now. When he couldn't budge, he got down on the ground. Mason put his knees up, his stormy blue eyes focused on the wall opposite him, cold and unseeing. He needed to get back to where he belonged—in the field, not the infirmary. No matter what Beckett thought, he knew he could've made a difference in whether Vega had lived or died. If he'd been where he was supposed to be, instead of ...

He crossed his left arm over, and imploring his muscles to perform as they used to, he propelled his upper body off the ground.

One … two … three …

She was with Ronon now; there wasn't any more question. And that was the way it should be. Ronon was the better man.

Eight … nine … ten ….

He'd made the call and he was going to stand by it. Even if she had wanted him …

Had she?

It didn't make a difference. She didn't need him or his baggage. By staying away, he was doing them both a favor.

Thirteen … fourteen … fifteen …

But then why did it feel like his chest was crushing in on itself? Why was he in agony in a place where all feeling was supposed to be a memory?

Why couldn't he breathe?

As John piloted the puddlejumper up and out of the Jumper bay, Teyla sat in the second seat. He had slung his dress coat over the back of the pilot's chair and undone his collar and tie. The neat and
polished uniform, while handsome on him, had never quite suited John. He was more at home in his BDU’s. More laid back and—Teyla grinned as she looked at his wayward, ungovernable hair—messier.

"Okay, Tower, we're clear. Closing the hangar bay doors," John reported over the comms.

"Roger that, Colonel. We'll see you in a few hours."

Once free, John set a course over the vast expanse of ocean. Teyla eyed the small brown basket nestled behind the pilot's seat.

"What made you think of doing this?" she asked.

John tilted his head her way. With a shrug, he said, "Well ... at first, I thought about making a really quick trip to see the Athosians. Maybe hanging out with your friends and getting a little of Jol's home cooking would do you some good and help you get your mind off things." He pressed a few buttons on the control console. "But then I realized she'd want to spend the whole time talking your ear off and they'd get upset when you had to leave so soon. Then, all of sudden, I'd be in trouble for taking you away again …" John paused his rambling to take a breath. "And, frankly, that woman's got a good arm!"

"Not the relaxing afternoon you had in mind?"

"Not even close," he said, laying one of those crooked smiles she adored on her, just before he turned serious again. "I just thought it'd be a good idea for both of us to get out of Atlantis. Just you and me. Even if it's just for a little while."

Teyla smiled in return. While it would have been wonderful to pay a visit to her people, she couldn't help but think of the truth of John's supposition. Such a short time with them would have meant a lot of animated conversations, attentions that her loved ones deserved, and an inevitable let down for all involved. Teyla had to admit that she wasn't up for that at the moment. She didn't have it in her at the moment to worry about anyone other than the man whom, last night, had loved her, comforted her, and held her in his embrace, and their little one inside her.

She craved the solitude.

"A picnic on the mainland sounds lovely, John."

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Ronon led Jennifer across the pier. Once they reached the edge, high above the ocean water surrounding them, he took her to the side of the massive floating city. He pointed out the ladder made of separate metal rungs built right into the wall and climbed down, beckoning her to follow him.

Jennifer watched him nimbly scale the narrow steps, the wind whipping around them in strong gusts, until he was out of sight. Abandoning her shoes at the top, she cautiously gripped onto the rungs and lowered herself. One step at a time and a hundred recitations of "don't look down" later, she felt Ronon's muscular arms touch her hips, guiding her descent to a small platform off to the side, just above water level. Perfect for soaking her aching feet.

Opaque panels, each about the size of a big-screen TV, lined the wall right next to where they were situated. Jennifer wondered what they were for. Part of the stardrive maybe? Whatever system they
were a part of, it was powered down, clearly unnecessary while Atlantis was at rest on the surface of the ocean.

"How did you find this place?" she asked, amazed. "This spot isn't exactly in the tourist's manual."

He shrugged. "I don't spend all my time in the gym."

She smiled. "Apparently not. I'd be willing to bet you've found a few things Rodney would give a month's worth of fruit cups to get a look at."

Ronon adopted a sly expression. "Maybe."

Jennifer sat down and slung her legs over the side, dipping her feet into the water.

"Better?"

"Oh my God, that feels so good," she practically moaned, the heat of the afternoon and the walking washing away. Through closed eyelids, she murmured to herself, "I almost wish I could jump in the rest of the way."

"What's stopping you?"

She jerked her eyes back up. She didn't think he'd actually heard her. "Oh, no. No, no, no. We've got that briefing in a little while … and I'm wearing …" She waved at her chiffon blouse and skirt. "No, I couldn't."

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow and a face full of mischief. Jennifer held her breath as the hulking warrior tugged on his shirt and threw it out of the way. Temporarily frozen, she allowed herself to be distracted by his sculpted musculature, which was beautifully accented by his tattoos. The only thing marring the picture were the myriad of bruises from that last mission, spread out over his torso in colors ranging from green to raw purples all the way to harsh black. But if Ronon was in any pain from his battle souvenirs—and he had to be—he didn't show it. He never did.

"What are you doing?" she managed.

Ronon stepped up to edge and stared down at her. "Something crazy."

He dove into the rippling sea.

Seconds later, he broke the surface again and paddled back toward her. His dreadlocks clung along his cheekbones and to his neck, and on impulse he threw them back, spraying her with water droplets. Jennifer drew in a sharp breath and stiffened in surprise.

"How's the water?" she inquired in feigned annoyance.

"Not bad," he responded in his gravelly voice. "You should try it."

"Ronon …"

"Doc …"

Jennifer chewed on her lower lip. She couldn't deny that a part of her was dying to. She wanted to break free, to shut down the voice in her head that constantly told her the million of reasons why not to do something and just do it, to shed the nervous, studious, shy girl and be someone else for a few minutes. Someone fun and impulsive, more like her other friends. More like the guy with her now, who was only trying to help her deal with a terrible loss. By seizing the moment.
She found her fingers playing along the waist of her blouse. She gripped the material tightly and hesitated. She caught Ronon's eyes. There was no judgment in them. No expectation. No pressure. If she chose to stay where she was, he'd be satisfied with swimming and talking to her while she stuck with safely soaking her feet. If she chose to join him ...

Who knew?

"If you tell anyone I did this ..." she threatened, the nerves in her voice glaringly apparent.

Jennifer pulled her navy blouse off, revealing the nude, lace bra underneath, and reached for the zipper of her skirt. As it slipped down her thighs and joined the rapidly growing pile of clothing on the platform, she was thankful that today hadn't turned out to be a thong day. A bra and panties were one thing. She might as well've been wearing a bikini, but a thong would've taken things into a whole new realm of uncomfortable.

She took a deep breath and dove.

The cold water shocked her body. She kicked out and hit the top as Ronon closed in on her.

"Ronon! It's freezing!" she sputtered, pushing her hair away from her eyes and, feeling strangely invigorated, sending a playfully indignant splash his way.

He grinned. "It's not so bad."

"You and I obviously have different definitions of 'not so bad'."

Beneath the surface, Ronon's powerful hand surrounded her arm and he dragged her through the water toward him. Treading water, he turned her so she was facing away from him, her back tucked in tight to his body.

"How's that?" he said, his lips close to her ear.

It may have been too soon for his natural heat to mingle with hers, but Jennifer's heart was beating loudly and her cheeks were warming by the second.

"Not hungry?" John asked.

He'd planned and packed enough food for him and either one Rodney McKay or one very pregnant Teyla. There wasn't a lot of difference these days.

Well ...

One was definitely hotter than the other. At the moment, Teyla was doing a great job of reminding him why his pants had always seemed a little bit too tight around her. In her chocolate brown, flowy dress, Teyla was lying half-prone on the blanket he'd brought, her partially eaten plate set aside, running her toes through the sand.

She smiled, a peaceful look on her angelic face for the first time all day. She reached out her hand for him.

"Come," she whispered.
John scooted closer and she placed his hand on her belly.

"Hey! Somebody's a fan of the spicy stuff," John quipped, feeling his baby girl flipping over and over.

He felt the warm, welcome impression of Teyla in his mind. *That's gotta be a little uncomfortable.*

_Not at all. I cannot think of anything more pleasant, right now._

In fact, after a morning shrouded in death, Teyla was feeling very much alive thanks to their daughter's happy feet, and it was contagious. His hand rolled in small peaks and valleys with the soft flesh of her stomach beneath her dress. John chuckled._She's gonna be a handful when she finally gets here._

_And you cannot wait._

John cast her a cock-eyed glance, his hazel eyes shining. *Are you reading my mind?*

*Yes.* Teyla's languorous smile widened.

*You're getting really good at this, Teyla.*

_As are you.* She squeezed his hand.

John got comfortable next to Teyla, and the couple sat together enjoying their daughter's acrobatics in silence. The roar of the ocean waves, the periodic chirping of birds nearby, the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees a little further inland—it really was a beautiful day. It was the kind of day where, if they had more time, they could take a walk and explore the mainland a little like they used to. Make love on the beach. With not a cloud in sight, they could spend the day together and, later, build a fire and campout under a brilliant blanket of stars in each other's arms without fear of the elements dampening the mood. It was a shame that it had started out on such a wrong note. He wished for a few fleeting minutes that they didn't have to go back.

Before long, the baby quieted and John conceded to reality. _"You know, Woolsey's awfully curious as to how you knew we were in trouble. After this meeting, you, me, and the baby ... this is probably it."_

Teyla met his gaze. _"There will be other moments, John, when it is just you and me."_

*_Promise?*_

*I promise,* she replied, a smile breaking out. He leaned into the feel of her fingers running along his cheek. _I cherish these times, John._

John stretched his head toward her and kissed her tenderly. _Me, too._

She sighed underneath him. _"At least with Dr. Keller and Dr. Beckett informed we may begin to learn more of what is happening between us to make this possible."_

*_Maybe,*_ he sulked.

Normally, he would have agreed with her, but in this case he knew all he needed to. He was connected to his little family in a way that was unique and transcendent. The science seemed immaterial. He'd lost his heart to Teyla, wholly and completely, and being able to see how much she loved and treasured him in return gave him more confidence in their relationship than any he'd ever
had. His ties with his mother had been severed when she was taken by cancer and Patrick Sheppard had never been the same, leading to the perpetual undercurrent of tension between the two of them and their eventual falling out. His marriage to Nancy wasn't exactly a shining example of matrimonial bliss, and despite their new start, his relationship with Dave was still a work in progress.

Teyla had been the one to wake him up from the stupor of his solitary existence and realize that he wanted those kinds of ties to people again, to be tied to her, and every time their mind's touched he was reminded why. She saw him through all his faults, his insecurities, the parts of him that he shielded with a rigid tenacity, and made him feel at home—and wanted. Maybe it was illogical, but now that he finally had it, he guarded that closeness jealously. It should be for them and them alone.

John gathered his legs underneath him. "C'mon."

He helped Teyla to her feet and they padded across the sand toward the ebbing waterline. They waded into the shallow water just deep enough for the water to flow back and forth over their feet, the mud and salt of the ocean massaging them as they walked.

"What will happen to Dusty and Dr. Porter now?" Teyla asked. Obviously, reality hadn't released its hold on Teyla either. They were both too bound to Atlantis and too responsible to be able to keep up any pretense for long.

"Temporary reassignment. Just until I can find someone to take over command," John responded. "And I'm sure that Wilcox is gonna be banging on my door soon. I can see Porter being open to talking about what happened, but Mehra ... He's probably gonna want me to corral her into a room and hogtie her for him."

"You would do no such thing."

"No, but ..." John shrugged and then trailed off.

Knowing he had something on his mind, Teyla pressed. "What is it?"

"It ... probably couldn't hurt, that's all. Talking about it."

Unused to hearing such a statement coming from him, Teyla shot him a perplexed look.

"What?"

"You have never been a great champion of sharing your personal thoughts with others, John."

John smirked. "I talk to you, don't I?"

"On occasion," she allowed him with a knowing look. *But there continue to be things you will admit to no one, not even to me.*

He lowered his head and watched the surf break over their toes.

"I was thinking during the memorial," he started cautiously, "how I'd feel if I lost half my team. Ronon, Capshaw, Rodney, you. If, suddenly, two of you were gone." He locked onto her caring brown eyes and swallowed around the lump forming in his throat. "I don't know what I'd do."

"I have not been on your team for some time, John," she pointed out with a tightening hold on his hand and a smile. She could see how hard that had been for him to say aloud.

"Teyla," he said softly, meaningfully, "As far as I'm concerned, you never left."
As John had expected for this debriefing, emotions ran high. Precisely the reason he hadn't wanted to do this today. Rodney, weirdly, was the ring leader of those ready to charge back into the fray, and Woolsey, ever the straight-laced and dispassionate thinker, was trying to keep order.

"You didn't see them! You weren't there!"

"I've read over Sgt. Mehra and Dr. Porter's reports. I believe I have a decent understanding of what occurred."

"Really?" Rodney rebutted skeptically and came back harshly. Too harshly. "Did you have to watch Vega get her skull caved in by one of those things?"

At that, Richard ducked his head, trying to maintain his cool deportment.

John attempted to take things down a notch, although the urge to take his own anger out on Michael was nearly overpowering. "What Rodney is trying to say, Mr. Woolsey, with all due respect, you haven't seen these things in action. Michael's out there right now creating an army of supersoldiers. He's had six months to recover from the setback we dealt him and it's obvious he's been busy."

"To seek his revenge on the Wraith."

"It is true Michael holds no love for the Wraith since he was cast out, but he has no use for the humans of this galaxy, either," Teyla pointed out. "Once he has dealt with the Wraith, he will not stop until he has killed or enslaved every last man, woman, and child."

Mr. Woolsey grimaced, probably realizing that his position wasn't getting across the table. He tried to clarify. "I recognize the need for expediency. It's clear that Michael poses a threat, and after the deaths of Major Teldy and Captain Vega, I understand your desire to run him to ground. But we can't proceed if we have nothing to go on. From what I gather, Dr. McKay, you weren't able to retrieve any new information from Michael's databanks?"

"I might've been able to, except the base computer was irreparably damaged during the fight."

Ronon verbally thrashed the riled up physicist. "You wouldn't be alive right now if Mehra hadn't done what she did."

"Believe me, I know that!" Rodney threw back. Then, suddenly his ire dissipated and he quietly added, "I just wish ..."

John stopped him. They'd all gone through how they might've done things differently a thousand times in their heads to no avail. Rodney, though awful at conveying it, was no exception. "We all do, Rodney."

Mr. Woolsey redirected the conversation, trying to bring things back on track. "What about the samples you took, Dr. Beckett? Have you been able to learn anything? If we don't have a way track him at this point, we might at least gain a certain insight into what he's planning."

"I'm still waiting on some test results, but from what I can tell, those people were being altered in a way similar to what we've seen before. Certain DNA sequences in their genetic code were being stripped and replaced with new coding."
"More hybrids?"

"Each of the samples I took indicated that those people had been infused with Wraith DNA, yes."

"Wait," John said, his brow furrowing. "You told me those people all died two months ago, right?"

"Approximately. That's correct," the doctor confirmed.

"How is that significant, Colonel?" Woolsey asked.

"Well, Michael already knows how to make these Wraith/human hybrids. He has for a long time. When you have a prize-winning recipe for biscuits, you don't start screwing around with the mix," Sheppard reasoned. "So, what's he trying to do?"

"Suped-up supersoldiers?" Rodney proposed. "Is it just me or is this just sounding better and better all the time?"

Dr. Beckett offered, "Well, from what I saw in the test subjects and taking into account the level of decomposition, there was massive cellular degeneration. Whatever Michael was experimenting with, there may a fundamental genetic incompatibility at play, here. He wasn't able to make it work."

Rodney's impressive capacity for sarcasm hit a new stride. "Oh, look. A silver lining. Do we, at least, have an idea of what creepy and disgusting characteristic he'll be using to pulverize us with next time?"

"Unfortunately, as a side effect of the degeneration, I'm having a difficult time isolating what exactly Michael was attempting to graft into their DNA."

"Of course," Rodney finished pompously.

"Okay, Dr. Beckett," Woolsey broke in. "It goes without saying, I'd like you to keep us informed as soon as find something out."

"Aye."

"Colonel, where do we stand with our guest down in the brig?"

John drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "We've taken a few runs at him. I was gonna head down again after we're done here. He's clearly been drinking the Kool-aid, but otherwise he's been pretty quiet. No names, no locations, potential targets, nothing. He seems pretty content knowing someday we'll all be licking Michael's boots."

"Well, presently, he also seems to be our best potential lead in locating Michael. I'm open to suggestions."

"I say we kill him," Ronon suggested.

"As tempting as that may sound, I don't think that would be the most prudent use for him," Richard commented wryly.

Until this point, Dr. Keller had kept quiet for the part. Her hair in a tight ponytail, she cast a sideways glance at Ronon. "As much as I hate to say it, that man down there is as much a victim as anyone else. We have the ability to make him the person he used to be and he deserves our help."

Woolsey nodded. "And we will, Dr. Keller. But from your own reports from six months ago, when you were able to cure Halling, he, and I quote, '... can no longer retain a useful frame of reference for
his memories as a hybrid. They have become disjointed scraps of images without true meaning.' If that remains true in this case—and we have no reason to believe it wouldn't—as soon as we treat that man, he will no longer be of any tactical use to us."

"So we're gonna leave him like that? He may have a home of his own out there somewhere. A family."

John stepped in. "Of course not, Doc, but we need that intel. We can't let Michael keep strip mining planets for people to fill out his ranks."

"What about Teyla?" Rodney blurted out.

John narrowed his eyes at the scientist. "What about Teyla?"

"Teyla could question him."

"What?" John said, angrily.

"Rodney, I—" Teyla tried.

But McKay bulled ahead to explain his position. "You did it with Halling. When we were prisoners, you used your Wraith telepathic whatsit and you got him to release us. Maybe you could do it again."

"She's seven months pregnant, McKay!" John shouted, seriously considering hopping the table and clobbering him.

"And the hybrid is under armed guard, locked in a fully powered Ancient shielded holding cell. She'd be perfectly safe."

"Halling also knew me," Teyla added, her reluctance to meet the hybrid prisoner face-to-face apparent. "A part of him still trusted in me and desired help. This man does not know who I am. Getting into his mind and breaking through the obstacles Michael has put into place would be extremely difficult."

"But you could do it?" Woolsey asked.

John regarded her intensely across the table.

"My ... abilities ... have grown as my pregnancy has progressed," Teyla admitted to others for the first time. "It is possible."

Teyla ...

If it is the only way, then I must try. You know this. Michael must be stopped.

Mr. Woolsey stated cautiously, "Teyla, given your condition, I can't ask you to do anything potentially dangerous, and I won't. But if you think you are capable of—"

"I will see what I can do, Mr. Woolsey," she said, her eyes never leaving John's.

"Good." He seemed pleased. Then he went on, more subdued. "Good. Teyla, Colonel Sheppard, I ... also think it's important that we, perhaps, have Dr. Keller run a few tests when you get the opportunity. Somehow, you were able to intuit that Col. Sheppard's team was in trouble from several thousand lightyears away. I can't help but wonder what else may be going on with your ... pregnancy ... that we might need to know about."
Barely above a whisper, John rumbled, "Teyla and I have already talked about it, Mr. Woolsey. You can run your tests."

As Teyla, John, and Ronon entered the room, the guards on duty snapped to attention. With only a few words from their CO, the two soldiers became again focused solely on their prisoner with the long stunners braced at their sides. Ronon hung back with the guards, his hand primed on the handle of his weapon.

The hybrid, a seasoned, tough looking male in his late forties, was crouched in the corner of the cell, staring at them all menacingly. In a single glance, Teyla knew this would be very different than her experience with Halling. Even when Halling was deep in the throes of combating Michael's hold over him, he had never been openly hostile with her. This creature, however, emanated hate through every pore. Like Golian, the process of his change had driven this man mad.

Teyla stepped toward the cell.

"I'm right behind you," came John's reassuring voice, though it was only the spearhead of his inner conflict. As a military man, John knew there was a good chance she would be successful, and in order to protect Atlantis and the rest of the people in Pegasus they needed any information they could get. But, as her chosen and as a father, he didn't want her or his child within a mile of one of Michael's abominations.

"I know."

The hybrid creature slowly rose from the corner and neared the bars. Behind her, Teyla felt John's tension grow. The prisoner's yellow, slitted eyes released the glare he'd held for his captors and widened. He inhaled deeply, an act that hadn't grown any less disturbing since the last time.

"You have come."

"You know me?" she questioned.

His eyes narrowed as he answered cryptically, "We know you."

He moved away from her, appearing to lose interest and busy himself in sizing up the men waiting to aid her if need be. But Teyla could sense his pretense. He was fascinated by her.

"Have you a name?"

His head snapped back to her for a second before resuming the charade. "Borash of Metak Tria."

"I am unfamiliar with your world."

"It matters not. It is no more. Those who would not serve the Master perished," his deep, waspy voice crooned. "As will you."

Teyla shut out her sorrow at learning of another people that had fallen prey to Michael's maniacal ambitions and concentrated on stopping him. She cleared her mind and sought out the sinister barricades of the one in front of her.

Borash smileed as though intoxicated at her entrance, and it took all Teyla's control not to recoil in
aborrence. The hybrids, being part Wraith as she was, also shared the Wraith's sense of need and purpose in the presence of a female—a Queen—and it was that need that made them more susceptible to her probing and influence.

Teyla traversed the edges of his mind, searching for the barrier and soon found it. It was thick and unyielding, where Halling's had presented a less daunting task. This one had willingly given himself over to Michael, unlike her dear friend who had fought tooth and nail against it, even after his transformation. Teyla pressed against the forbidding walls.

"You serve your Master. You wish to return to him?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?" she pushed.

Borash laughed at her mockingly. "You know nothing. You cannot hope to understand."

"Help me to understand," she teased as she continued to impress herself upon his consciousness.

"He will free us from our tormentors. He will make our enemies a footnote in annals of time, dust to be swept away and forgotten."

"Michael would destroy the Wraith?" she baited him.

"The Master has a great plan. We merely play a part."

"How could he hope to destroy the Wraith? The Wraith are neverending."

"I know the future."

A crack began to form and Teyla smiled.

"Tell me of this future," she said, pounding harder and harder against the wall.

The hybrid began to stare at her, growing confused and suspicious. "Until his might is assembled, the Wraith will die. Their need to feed is a weakness that will bring them to ruin."

"The Wraith infighting," John interjected. "You think they'll keep destroying each other over the human population shortage?"

Borash sneered at him. "You know nothing!"

Teyla mentally commanded the hybrid's attention, playing along the cracks to create a breach.

Ceding somewhat to her will, Borash went on. "The shortage grows with the plague. Those who are unworthy die. Those that live will bring death upon the Wraith."

Teyla looked to her lover. "John, the plague. Was there not talk of one?"

He nodded. "Awhile back, but we haven't heard anything since. I guess Michael's using the plague to further his plans." From inside, she could hear him seething in frustration. People everywhere were dying. "We need more Teyla. Anything you can get."

Already stretching the limits of her abilities alone, Teyla began to skim the surface of her daughter's latent potential to aid her. Even such a shallow connection would lend her a significant boost.
Teyla swung into Borash's mind as if wielding an axe, splintering pieces of Michael's hold like it was nothing. She pulled back for a moment, stunned at the ease in which she'd managed that. Thus far, Teyla had experienced things in congress with her daughter that she was astounded and overwhelmed by. What would her child be capable of one day?

A low, haunting chuckle came from inside the cell, echoing through the room.

Borash's murderous eyes turned toward her belly as he drew near the bars. "Great things. Beyond reckoning."

He screwed up his face and screamed, slamming his hands into the impenetrable force field and sending cascades of blue light shooting across the cell.

John's men tensed, ready to fire. Teyla heard Ronon's blaster powering up.

"Wait!" Teyla shouted at them. That thing had heard her. "What does Michael want with my child?" she demanded.

Michael's malice poured from his mouthpiece. "The child grows well. Our master will be pleased."

Funneling her fear, her concern, and her desire for vengeance against Michael on the creature, Teyla pummeled the barrier.

"What do you know of my child? Of me?!"

Borash's body drooped under the strain of the assault. "We know you, Teyla Emmagan of Athos. Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard. The Satedan dog, Specialist Ronon Dex," he ranted, clinging to his Master's propaganda tenaciously.

From his position, Ronon snarled.

His words dripping vitriol, Borash spat in Ronon's direction. "Servants of Atlantis, we know you all. Atlantis will fall and each of you, in your turn, will bow."

Borash gave a last defiant grin. "And the child? The child is OURS."

Teyla ...

John broke through in warning, but she could barely hear him. Her friends' murderer, the destroyer of her people knew about their baby. Her heart thundered as her every maternal instinct tore through her veins.

Teyla reached a spectral hand across the psychic barrier as though it had vanished into nothingness and squeezed.

Teyla ... John called to her. Her dread mounted in his ears and inside his head, and twisted into something fierce and deadly.

"Teyla!" he shouted out loud. "Don't!"

In the next instant, Borash's insane threats were cut off. Choking sounds hit the air as his knees
collided with the hard floor, slammed downward by an invisible force. Blood began streaming from the man's nose while Teyla stood as still as stone in front of him, hard and unwavering.

His men, aware something bad was happening but unsure what to do, aimed the massive Wraith stunners at Teyla.

"Sir?!"

"Don't you point those at her!" John shouted, as Ronon's blaster targeted Lieutenant Franks' head.

"Put. It. Down!" Ronon warned through his teeth.

John left it to Ronon to deal with the soldiers. He grabbed Teyla by the shoulders as firmly as he'd ever dared handle her before. Inside the cell, Borash flew backwards into the forcefield and remained there, almost as though he was pinned against it.

"Teyla, you have to stop!"

She pried her eyes away from the cell, gasping. Released from her stranglehold on him, Borash's taut body hit the ground with a thud.

"Check him!" John ordered the shocked guards. "What the hell were you thinking?" he flung at her.

"Michael ..." She groped for air, her hand clutching at her stomach. "He will take her, John! Our baby ..."

"That hybrid was our only chance to find him!"

She shook her head, her eyes growing cloudy. "John ..." she managed as she started to sink, the color draining from her face.

John arms fumbled to reach around her in time as her legs turned to rubber and gave out. He sank to his knees, following her body as she went down to cushion her fall.

"Get Keller down here now!" he shouted loud enough for anyone within half a mile to hear.

John's throat seized up. "Teyla ... Teyla, don't ... No. C'mon," he begged.

Her eyes rolled back and her lids closed. His hand reached around to caress her cheek with no response.

"No ... No! Teyla!"
"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," John whispered over and over in a rush, his lips lightly contacting Teyla's hair as he hugged her to him. Somewhere in the background of his hushed pleas, Lieutenant Franks took to his radio and called for immediate medical assistance. A terse acknowledgment from Dr. Keller soon followed, but it barely registered.

She just passed out. She's fine. She's gonna be fine.

"Don't do this, Teyla. Open your eyes." John's hand rubbed vigorously up and down her back, imploring her to move. "C'mon, Teyla."

"Sheppard," Ronon called out to him.

John pried his gaze away from Teyla. Crouched over the still form of the hybrid, Ronon looked back at John and shook his head. The prisoner was dead, and as upset as he'd been less than a minute ago, there wasn't a single molecule inside him capable of caring anymore. The one person he would willingly risk anything for—pain, torment, death, even love and the terrifying vulnerability that came along with it—was lying limp in his arms. Nothing else mattered. Nothing.

A faint whimper from his lap spun him back around. Ignoring the scene in the cell, John desperately scanned Teyla's face for some sign that she was regaining consciousness. He came away disappointed. She couldn't rouse herself, and all too aware of the treacherous passage of time, he couldn't wait any longer. He'd seen her like this before, unconscious and carrying the precious little girl they'd created together in her womb. He'd waited then, counting as the seconds ticked away for help to come, each one like the sounding of a drum, every passing breath heavy as though he was slowly being smothered, every heartbeat another second she could slip away and he would lose all that he had, all that he was. He couldn't—he wouldn't—sit here and wait again.

Cradling her head against his chest and supporting her back, John wrapped his other arm under Teyla's knees and lifted. He carefully readjusted her weight, hoisting her body back up in a short heave.

"I've got you, Teyla," he spoke to her softly. "I've got you."

As her swollen belly made contact with his torso and settled there, John heard another distant echoing of a drum. His baby was in there, helpless and tied to Teyla's well-being in every way. He had to hurry.

John pivoted and ran into the hallway.

"Sheppard to Dr. Keller."

"Keller, here."
"Forget about coming down here. Just get to the nearest transporter. Teyla and I are coming to you."

As she waited outside the transporter with her team and a gurney on standby, Jennifer wasn’t really sure what to expect. Lieutenant Franks’ open channel call for help hadn’t been big on details, but knowing Teyla had been interrogating the prisoner, she could only imagine the worst. Prior to his being cured, she’d seen Halling’s wild raving and the shocking level of violence he’d, fortunately, directed mostly toward himself in the final stages of his captivity. If the hybrid currently occupying the holding cell was anything like that and had somehow managed an escape, Jennifer shuddered to think of what might have happened.

So when the transporter door slid aside revealing a clean, bloodless Teyla wrapped securely in Colonel Sheppard's protective grasp, it was almost a relief. He swiftly stepped out and gently released Teyla onto the rolling stretcher. The nurses efficiently secured the sidebars as Jennifer moved in to do a rapid assessment of her condition.

"Teyla? Teyla, can you hear me?" Jennifer asked, her tone tight and controlled, but the way she tore her stethoscope from around her neck bespoke her worry. Even with the consolation of having no observable injuries, an unresponsive patient was never a good sign, most especially when there was a pregnancy at stake.

"Heart rate's a little low, but steady," the doctor stated. She replaced the stethoscope in a rushed swoop and pulled out her penlight, checking Teyla's pupils. "Equal and reactive. Teyla?" she tried again.

A slight dip of the head and a barely audible moan was all the answer she received, but even that meager reaction was welcome. With a nod from Dr. Keller, the highly experienced medical team strode ahead, pushing the gurney hurriedly back toward the infirmary. As she marched along, never moving more than a foot away from her patient, she began digging for more information.

"I don't see any obvious signs of trauma."

His attention still hopelessly intent on his family, John barely managed, "No, you wouldn't. She, um..."

Jennifer had nothing but sympathy for what he must have been feeling, but she had to get him to focus. "Colonel, I need to know what happened, so I know how best to help her."

Keeping up the rapid pace through the hallway, passing people and doorways like they were formless blurs, John tried to explain what he'd seen. Teyla using her abilities to break down the hybrid's defenses and glean valuable information. The prisoner's threats and what occurred in their wake.

"She attacked him," Jennifer surmised, "Channeling the baby's abilities."

"Yeah," John got out. "Then, she just collapsed."

The infirmary doors parted to allow them admittance.

"Did she hit her head?"
"No, I ... I got to her in time."

"Has anything like this ever happened before?" she pressed as the nurses wheeled Teyla into place at a monitoring station. John stayed right with them.

"No," John said firmly. "Nothing like this. She gets tired, but that's it."

"Okay, Colonel," Jennifer replied. To the nurses, she quickly but calmly ordered, "Let's get some O2 moving and prep an IV saline solution for Mom, and we need to get a fetal heart monitor and pressure transducer on Baby, right now."

"Is she gonna be okay, Doc?" he asked, his face becoming a practiced front, but as Jennifer looked up, those eyes—those expressive eyes—gave him away.

Jennifer stepped away from the bed and pulled the privacy curtain to give the nurses room to do their work, while she took John aside.

She tried her best to assuage his fears. "At this point, there's absolutely no reason to think Teyla won't recover fully and soon. As soon as we get her settled, we're gonna do some tests and we'll take her for a scan. We'll find out what's going on."

He nodded absently.

"I'd also like to get a scan of you, Colonel."

His head snapped up. "What? Why?"

"Whatever is happening between Teyla and the baby has also been affecting you. I never did buy that quick healing story, Colonel, and last I checked, it isn't possible for two people to be able to sense each other from two different planets," she said pointedly. "It may help us treat Teyla, it may not. But either way, the more we know the better."

"Okay."

"Dr. Keller?" Rachel peered out from behind the privacy curtain. "She's waking up."

As John stepped behind the curtain with Keller close behind, the nurses had only just managed to slip the hospital gown over Teyla's naked body. He didn't waste any time taking up residence in the chair adjacent to the bed. The oxygen mask covered most of her features, but John immediately locked onto the dark luster of Teyla's eyes peering up at him. His hand cupped the side of her face, his thumb gently stroking her cheek.

"Give her a minute, Colonel," Jennifer quietly advised. "She's probably still a bit disoriented."

Not quite finished carrying out Jennifer's orders, the nurses angled around John as they worked. They could've asked him to step aside, but he had the feeling they knew better than to try. Rachel went to work starting the IV, while Hannah briefly lifted Teyla's gown again and began carefully maneuvering two gray belts around her stomach. John might've found the way the red-headed nurse consciously worked to keep Teyla from being exposed during the process funny if he hadn't been so preoccupied. He'd seen, touched, and worshiped every bewitching inch of her body time and time
again, as evidenced by the pleasing swell of her belly. And he would again. As long as he lived, he'd show Teyla how special she was to him, but for now he simply needed her to be alright.

Teyla blinked sluggishly while Hannah completed her task. She pulled the straps surrounding her midsection tight into place, and as she slipped the gown back over Teyla's body, a rapid, pulsing sound emanated from the monitoring system on the other side of the bed. Stirred by the thrumming of their baby's heartbeat, Teyla started to perk up. With obvious effort, her fingers searched out his hand and clumsily closed around it.

"John," she murmured from behind the oxygen mask.

A ghost of a smile played on his lips at her voice. He whispered back a low, "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Very ... tired."

"I figured," he replied.

After getting a preliminary look at the pair of vital signs being reported, Keller came around behind him, her jaw set in concerned calculation. "Teyla, do you remember what happened?"

Her eyes wandered briefly as she visibly checked her memory. A small tilt of the head and her hand wandering down to cover her stomach indicated that she did. "Is he ..."

"He's dead," John said, hoping she'd be comforted that the maniac threatening their daughter was gone. "Beckett's gone down to take care of the body."

Teyla closed her eyes and John saw her fingertips tighten imperceptibly around her swollen abdomen.

"Teyla, are you in pain? Are you hurting anywhere?" Jennifer asked quickly, moving again.

Without any energy in reserve, Teyla could only manage to shake her head. Remembering for himself the draining effect of their early connections, John could only imagine the exhaustion permeating her bones after what she'd done in the brig. She was trying valiantly to remain alert, but failing.

"It's okay, Teyla," he said, touching her arm. "Just take it easy."

In less than a minute, Teyla was asleep.

"Colonel, I need to take her to get that scan," Jennifer urged him as she glanced back to the monitors, deciphering the series of peaks and valleys on the heart readout. But her attention seemed more focused on the slowly rising mark on the display underneath.

John nodded his consent and surrendered his position reluctantly after Rachel and Hannah reappeared and began unhooking the leads for Teyla's ride to the Ancient machine. He was sorely tempted to follow along behind, but he'd only get in the way and she'd be back in a little while. The scan was mostly a formality, so the doctor could get a look at the physical aspect of Teyla's expanding abilities like they'd already agreed.

Teyla just needed a good nap and she'd be back to normal.

That's what he told himself, anyway, when they peeled the curtain back and took her away.
As she disappeared around the corner, John ran his hands through his hair, tousling it roughly, and groaned out loud in an attempt to shake off some of the anxiety crawling inside him. It didn't help much. He stared regretfully at the now vacant area where Teyla's bed had been.

They should've stayed on the beach.

The technology they'd inherited from the Ancients never ceased to amaze. The colossal significance of the Stargates and the utter power integrated into the shields, the drones, and the warships they'd seen aside, this one piece of medical technology—the scanner—was already reporting findings that would ordinarily have taken days or even weeks to gather. The very same machine that had detected Teyla's pregnancy when the baby she carried was still only a rapidly reproducing cluster of cells was now showing Jennifer the changes the same child had wrought on Teyla's physiology in vibrant technicolor.

Despite her current resting state, Teyla's neural activity was off the charts, far beyond anything she'd seen before. High levels of cortisol, a side effect indicative of a massive adrenaline surge, were represented by a large purple section stretching throughout Teyla's body. Repeated scans revealed serotonin levels slowly rising to counteract the cortisol as she slept, but the sheer volume of the stress hormone explained why she'd passed out. Her blood pressure would have spiked and then dropped like a rock.

But Teyla had linked with other minds before, Wraith minds, and come through completely unscathed. Why on earth would a connection with her own child effect her body so adversely?

Jennifer huffed in dissatisfaction and drew her focus of the scans downward. Situations like this were what made obstetrics such a challenging field at times. There were two patients instead of one, occupying the same space, and when bad things happened to Mom, more often than not Baby wasn't far behind. Remaining objective was made practically impossible when both were practically members of her family.

"Dr. Keller," Rachel spoke up, "we have another one."

"I know. I see it, too," Jennifer confirmed. "Time?"

"Eight minutes."

Jennifer swore under her breath.

"What do you want to do?"

She wanted to make this situation disappear, that's what she wanted. Jennifer straightened. As a doctor, she had the ability and the know-how to make this right for them and she refused to let her friends down.

"Hannah, page Dr. Beckett. As soon as he's available, I'd like to get him in for a consult on these test results. And I'll need the genetic records we have on file for Colonel Sheppard and Teyla, as well as the amnio results for the baby from just after Teyla's accident."

"Yes, doctor."
"And Rachel," Jennifer added, "Prep a 10% solution of Magnesium sulfate. We need to break up these contractions before she gets into a pattern and we've got full blown labor on our hands. Let's get her settled back in somewhere more private and I'll inform the Colonel."

John had been pacing the infirmary floor in his black uniform, absentely twisting his watch around his wrist, for fifteen minutes before it occurred to him he probably looked like a panther in a cage. She was fine, he repeated to himself again. He needed to relax before Keller got it in her head to do her impersonation of a zookeeper and tranquilize him.

Sometimes he worried that he'd been permanently screwed up by the life he led, around every corner an unknown, always another battle to be fought and always another shoe waiting to drop. Most of the time, he handled it fine. He even got off on it. The rush and the excitement, all wrapped up in the chance to do good for people out there who couldn't stand for themselves? It was a hell of a life for someone with nothing to lose.

But he wasn't that guy anymore. He hadn't been since he and Teyla had admitted their feelings for each another and a very long, somewhat wet night that had resulted in a baby on the way.

Now, John had everything to lose, and as someone who'd lost everything before, there was nothing that scared him more.

The impression of someone behind him drew his attention and John turned, grateful for the distraction, any distraction. Rodney was waiting in the wings with seriousness deeply etched on his face.

"When did you get here?" John asked.

"Just now," he said pointing over his shoulder toward the infirmary doors. "I was in Woolsey's office going over how we could squeeze an extra five or six percent out of the, uh ..." He hesitated and started again. "That's not what's important right now, is it? Anyway, I heard the page for Jennifer. And Ronon ... he called and there was some yelling. Well, he grunted and I yelled and ..."

Rodney sighed as he gave up trying to explain and his rambling came to a halt. "I came as soon as I heard. Ronon'll be here soon."

Against all odds to the contrary, John actually felt himself begin to smile. "Thanks, Rodney."

He shrugged. "It's what we do, isn't it?"

John nodded.

"So, how is she?" the physicist ventured.

"She's asleep," John replied. It sounded so normal, like nothing had happened. She'd woken up and now she was resting.

"That's good. Sleeping's good," Rodney said encouragingly. "I assume Keller's doing a scan?"

"Yeah."

Rodney nodded rapidly. After a few seconds of pensive silence, he asked casually, "She's at ..."
what? Twenty-eight weeks? Twenty-nine?"

"Twenty-eight," John answered, casting him a questioning look.

"Okay, so Keller's done the gestational diabetes tests, checked for Rh incompatibility, and all that other stuff?"

"Yeah ..." John responded, dumbfounded. "How the hell do you know all this, McKay?"

"Me? Well ..." Rodney paused as if he'd just realized he'd said too much. Sheepishly, he mumbled, "When ... Jeannie heard that Teyla was pregnant, she sent me these ... books.

"She sent you books on pregnancy."

"I may have ... asked for them."

John arched his eyebrow.

"It's best to be informed about these things!" Rodney reacted defensively. "You've been reading some, I assume."

"Maybe," John allowed, however he reticently admitted it had been sporadic and he'd only read the parts up to where Teyla's pregnancy had progressed.

"Just don't eat before you read the chapters on labor and delivery," Rodney cautioned.

"McKay!"

"Fair warning, my friend. Avoid pictures, and you know how they taught you in grade school to visualize as you read? Well, take my advice, just ... don't."

John couldn't help himself. An unexpected rumbling started in his chest, and before he knew it, he was laughing. Rodney, who had been deadly earnest, suddenly broke and joined in.

A lot of people had asked over the years how he'd managed to not only keep from shooting McKay, but how they'd apparently become close friends. This was why.

"Thanks, McKay," he said, still chuckling. "I needed that."

Rodney's chest oscillated with muffled laughter.

But as John looked up and into the infirmary again, he saw Jennifer striding toward them wearing a somber expression.

His laughter died.

Next to him, Rodney followed suit.

"Colonel."

"What is it?"

Jennifer pressed her lips tightly together. "We should go into my office."

John shook his head furiously. He wasn't moving another inch unless it was toward Teyla. "What is it, Doc?"
As Keller delivered the news, John went numb, her words like white noise in his ears. He couldn't be hearing this. This wasn't happening. Feeling his world beginning to crack around him, he clung tenaciously to his sense of control.

At his side, a stunned Rodney reacted in his typical fashion. "This isn't because of what I just said, is it? You show me where it's written that warning a friend about labor falls under the category of famous last words!"

His body language stiff, John's leaden voice cut him off. "What do you mean she's having contractions? It's too early."

"At this stage in Teyla's pregnancy, it's not unusual to have periodic contractions. Considering everything that's gone on this past week, they're to be expected," the doctor explained.

She was trying to placate him. John wasn't in any state of mind to appreciate her effort. The mere scent of her holding back on him just pissed him off.

"But?"

"But ..." she took his lead, "these are getting too close together to be considered innocuous. John, we're going to do everything we can."

"She's not due for three months!" he shouted, that trapped animal inside dying to lash out.

Seeing the wide-eyed stricken look on Rodney's face and the way Jennifer was bravely shoring herself up for a tirade, John hurriedly searched the area for a sign of Teyla. He needed to see her before he bit someone's head off, someone who was only trying to help.

"Where is she?"

"She's being moved into the back, so you'll have plenty of space."

John marched away, not needing to hear another syllable.

In his wake, Rodney and Jennifer exchanged a look that spoke volumes. After a few seconds, Jennifer squeezed his forearm and followed after John.

Rodney tapped his earpiece as he watched her go, the uncomfortable knot of guilt twisting in his stomach for having been the one to suggest Teyla go down there in the first place.

"I don't know what's keeping you, Conan, but you'd better hurry it up," he said, stumbling over what came next. "The ... the baby's in trouble."

Teyla was tugged back toward the surface by the sounds of people milling around her. The occasional sharp, clipped remark suggested something was wrong, and then there were the distressing sensations of a body at war with itself.

She wanted to sleep. An overwhelming desire for the warm cloak of oblivion tried to drag her back down, while another part of her screamed at her to wake up!

"Teyla? Teyla, I need you to wake up for me."
Jennifer's voice reached down in a dizzying echo of her subconscious and Teyla felt a careful nudge on her shoulder.

"Magnesium sulfate is on board, Dr. Keller."

"Thank you, Rachel." Another shake. "You can do it, Teyla. Open your eyes."

She managed a brief glimpse of Dr. Keller and John before her eyes closed again. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. It came in short gasps as something clamped around her middle and squeezed. So tight.

A subdued moan escaped her lips, a pained lament from one too exhausted to move.

"They're getting stronger," she heard Jennifer say.

Teyla fought to open her eyes, her senses gradually emerging from the chasm. "What ..." she got out, barely able to form the word. After several attempts, Teyla managed to concentrate on the handsome face in front of her.

He was worried. She would have seen that had she been blindfolded.

"J-John ... what ... is happening?"

Jennifer came closer, usurping her focus. "Teyla, you're experiencing some contractions, most likely brought on by stress."

"It is too soon," she whispered, growing frantic at the idea of her daughter being born so long before her proper time. She couldn't lose another child.

"We're giving you medicine to stop the contractions, Teyla," Jennifer said in a calming tone. "We need to give it time to work."

"John?" Teyla's gaze shifted back to the father of her baby. Of anyone, he would know how scared she was.

"It's gonna be okay, Teyla," he said.

"Please, John, do not lie to me," she begged. She couldn't take it.

The suffocating pressure of the contraction was starting to subside. Teyla's breaths had begun to even out, but her heart was pounding.

"Hey," he commanded her attention in the most loving way possible, his hazel eyes mesmerizing. His rough hand stroked hers. "Do you remember when we started this? I said we were all gonna make it through this?"

She nodded quickly.

"I meant it. She's gonna be fine and so are you." He drove the statement home as though he was only beginning to believe it himself.

She could rely on his strength to carry her. The memory of his voice seemed to turn over and over in her mind. He'd said that last night when she'd been mourning the loss of her friends. She just didn't expect to test his resolve so soon.
Determined, Jennifer's hand came to rest on Teyla's shoulder once again. "In all honesty, we might be in for a long night, but we're not having a baby today, okay? Not if I have anything to say about it." Jennifer's posture shifted slightly. "The best thing you can do for your baby right now is to relax, but ... I'm sorry, Teyla, but I do need to check you. We need to make certain your cervix hasn't already begun to dilate."

Teyla closed her eyes and consented. It was all coming at her so fast. She wished she could dive back into unconsciousness or that John would simply pick her up and take her home. Anything to avoid playing out the events of many a nightmare.

At her feet, Jennifer was putting on a pair of latex gloves while the nurse began to shift the blanket upward, exposing her legs. Teyla's emotions rose along with it. This is was a common practice, done among her people as well, when childbirth was imminent and they needed to determine how far things had progressed. But knowing the necessity of it and having to experience it under these circumstances were two separate things. She wasn't used to feeling so defenseless and vulnerable, so powerless to affect her own destiny and the fate of those she loved.

Her eyes dampened and a tear streamed downward toward the soft pillow underneath.

John's hand tightened around hers and he scooted in close enough she could smell the remnants of his aftershave mingling with his natural scent. His eyes captured hers and held on for dear life.

Jennifer knelt at the base of the bed and looked back at them. "Colonel, you don't have to stay for this."

Teyla silently pleaded with him not to go. She didn't want to do this on her own.

"I'm not going anywhere," he responded, deep and resolute, speaking to Teyla alone.

"Okay," Jennifer accepted.

Teyla stayed latched onto John as Jennifer moved her legs to the side and accepted a lubricant from Rachel, coolly talking her through every step.

"John," Teyla whispered anxiously.

"Just look at me," he urged. "I've got you."

As Teyla felt Jennifer's touch, her fears for her daughter peaked and her strength dissolved. Tears flowing, she buried her face in John's willing shoulder.

Rodney was wrong. Labor—real labor, that was undoubtedly gooier but ended up with a healthy baby and a tired but happy mom—couldn't be worse than this. This was the worst kind of torture John could imagine. Watching silent tears fall from Teyla's eyes with every successive contraction as she stared blankly at the walls. Knowing that if Keller's magic serum didn't work, the little girl whose fledgling mind he'd seen and touched would be born sick. Helpless to do anything about it.

But he was driven to keep a lid on things. Teyla needed him, and if he could get her through this, they really could get through anything as long as they had each other.
Beckett had turned up a few minutes ago, and he and Dr. Keller were mulling over Teyla's test results in her office. Their muffled voices made for a fairly dull yet hypnotizing soundtrack to their worries.

Frustrated by the railing on the side of the bed and the space it forced between the two of them, John gently pushed the monitoring leads aside and crawled in next to Teyla. Keller had said that the best thing they could do was relax. Well, he knew he definitely felt more relaxed when he was in bed with Teyla, and he was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. Circling his arms around her, Teyla immediately snuggled against him and inhaled deeply.

Yep. Definitely mutual, he thought as he kissed her forehead and settled in.

Later, lost in a world of their own making behind the partially closed curtains, John startled when, from behind him, Rodney broke his long held silence.

"Hey, you made it."

"Yeah," Ronon answered, low and gruff, "How's he holding up?"

"Oh, he's a regular Superman." McKay's trademarked sarcasm sent chills of deja vu running down John's spine.

The infirmary. Teyla in his arms, in a bed too small for two.

He already knew what came next.

"He's gone and holed up with Lois Lane in their own private little Fortress of Solitude."

"... Fortress of Solitude..." John echoed in a hushed whisper.

"Whatever that means."

"Well, what you mean 'how's he holding up'?" Rodney exclaimed. "How would you be?"

"What did Jennifer say about..."

John mouthed the somber response at same time it passed McKay's lips. "It's too soon to tell."

Before, at this point, John had turned only to find an empty space, void of anyone who would've been speaking. This time, he rolled his neck to see his entire team a short but respectable distance away—McKay holding up the wall as he'd been earlier, Ronon now leaning against it too, and a sweaty Mason with his arm tied down.

The implications of this made hair on the back of John's neck stand on end.

"What took you guys so long, anyway?" McKay continued on.

"I went for a run," Capshaw said, his face all seriousness. "Wasn't wearing my radio. I was halfway across the city when Ronon caught up to me."

Ronon grumbled, the tension between the two men evident. "Had to have Banks track his transmitter."

"I already apologized. What more do you want from me?" Mason bristled.

"Start wearing your radio."
"Fine."

John heaved a sigh. "The family's all here," he breathed in Teyla's ear. Mom, Dad, and the three cranky uncles, all worried that baby was going to make too early of an appearance.

"Yes," she murmured softly with a hitch in her voice.

"You okay?" he asked.

"It is another."

"Just keep breathing," he answered, running his hand over her stomach and massaging her over the hospital gown as he eyed the dripping IV bag. Hopefully, the worst was over and the contractions would let up soon.

Teyla kept her air moving in measured time. "In the nursery, on top of the blankets, there are a few items of clothing for her I brought back with me from Lairius, and we may contact my people for anything else we may need."

"We're not doing this tonight, Teyla. It's not happening," he told her.

Teyla waited for the contraction to dissipate before speaking again. "I was not ready for this, John," she said, tired. "We have not even chosen a name for her yet."

He nuzzled her neck. "We will. We'll have the time."

"How can you be sure?"

"I don't know. I just am," he said. For the first time all evening, he actually believed it. "I know it like I knew the second I laid eyes on you ..."

Teyla gave him a smile for the first time since she'd lain so bewitchingly on the beach. "What did you know?"

"I knew I was in serious trouble," he responded, "That if I wasn't really careful, you could break my heart into a thousand pieces."

"If I was so dangerous, why did you choose me to be a member of your team?"

John's mouth formed a mischievous grin. "Couldn't help myself, I guess. I couldn't let you start going offworld with anyone else, could I? Long missions, all that danger and adrenaline. It tends to get the blood pumping."

He remembered very well the heavy thumping of his heart, the smell of gunpowder still hanging fresh in the air, being in such close proximity to her, he'd wanted nothing more than to taste her lips, wrestle her tongue and take her, whether on a bed in a village somewhere or just on the forest floor. If only he'd known that she'd felt the same way, the last four and a half years could've played out very differently.

Teyla chuckled. "Can you imagine if I had been asked to accompany Sergeant Bates' team instead?"

John narrowed his eyes at her. "I'd have shot him and taken you back for myself."

"Charming, John."

"That's assuming, of course, you didn't shoot him first."
With a perfectly straight face, Teyla said, "Very true. Though, perhaps, I would not have been so easy on him."

"That's my girl." John smiled as he saw a hint of fire returning to her eyes. Teyla was a fighter, and he was more certain than ever that their daughter wouldn't be born tonight. Her stunningly beautiful, strong-willed mother simply wouldn't allow it.

With that weight slowly lifting, John cast a glance toward the waiting team members as they milled around. John smirked. "Besides, if we need them, we've already three names we could use in a pinch."

Intrigued at his attempt to lighten the mood, she raised her eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Sure. Ronon's been campaigning pretty hard for his."

A smile broke out on Teyla's face.

"And there's always Masy. Or even better, Meredith."

"I do not know how Rodney would feel about that."

Using the same beaming expression he'd once used to declare proudly that he'd shot the cranky physicist in the leg, he said happily, "It'd kill him."
"You didn't have to come with me. If you wanted to stay …" Rodney trailed off and Mason kept his eyes on the mostly empty corridor ahead.

It was getting late. People all over the city were calling it a night, and they'd spent the entire time in the infirmary trapped in a bizarre imitation of a 1950's waiting room. Rodney shifted his attention between his coffee, his computer pad, and combing the latest issue of some scientific journal one apparently needed at least three doctorates to understand. Ronon tirelessly paced the infirmary floor, and Mason stood sentry. For hours on end, he'd barely moved from a small section of wall, his eyes trained on the floor, almost obsessively trying to focus on nothing. But that's where the similarities ended. None of the three men present were waiting to hear a tiny wail and those immortal words, "Congratulations, it's a …" They, in fact, were hoping for the opposite.

"Wouldn't have been very responsible of me, letting you face a potential hypoglycemic reaction all alone."

He didn't see the scowl on Rodney's face, but Mason could picture it with reasonable accuracy. "Why does no one take this seriously? I'm telling you, I get all sweaty and shaky. It isn't pretty."

"With the way you eat, it's just hard to imagine low blood sugar ever being a problem for you, that's all." He quickly glanced at the scientist treading along beside him. "Besides, you didn't have to come with me, either."

"Yeah … well …"

Mason rolled his eyes. Rodney couldn't have sounded guiltier if he'd stolen Woolsey's car. "Beckett put you up to it, didn't he?"

"Little bit, yeah."

Should've known. Carson had been eyeing his makeshift—and better—immobilization of his arm with clear disapproval. "Next time Beckett thinks I need a babysitter, tell him to go for someone hotter."

The two men let the exchange die. Even that puny excuse for a joke seemed wrong under the circumstances, and if they'd kept on, one or both of them might've wound up saying the one thing neither wanted to admit.

They were glad to be out of there.

Standing aside and hoping to hear nothing was driving them all nuts. On any other injury watch, the three teammates wouldn't have hesitated to surround the bed. The sterile confines of the infirmary would have filled with friendly chatter, sarcastic comments, and laughter. But this was different. There was an unspoken boundary that no one dared cross. As close as they all were, Sheppard and

Change

Chapter Notes

A special thank you to jeyla4ever and nacimynom for holding my hand and giving me a pat on the head when I really needed it. I hope you all enjoy.
Teyla were in a place all their own, someplace almost sacred where they couldn't follow. They needed each other above anything or anyone else, and they weren't about to infringe on that. It had been a relief when Beckett had finally concluded his dealings with the dead hybrid prisoner and set his sights on them.

They were headed to his quarters so he could put back on a proper sling, then they planned on taking care of Rodney's stomach and its idiosyncrasies, real or imagined. It was a job anyway. Mason could only count the floor tiles so many times and he didn't know how much longer he could pretend he wasn't noticing the way Ronon would look at Jennifer as she passed by.

He hit the transporter, and with a push of a button on the citywide display, they were instantaneously taken to the sector of Atlantis designated for personnel quarters.

Mason's quarters were close by, just at the end of the first hallway, but before he and Rodney even got that far, they heard raised voices echoing up from further down and around the corner. Mason picked up the pace, jogging toward the din as McKay followed closely behind.

They couldn't tell who or what had started it, but a livid Sgt. Mehra was verbally flaying a quartet of off-duty SO's. Franks, Chapel, Davies, and Marquetti.

Great.

They weren't bad guys. They'd earned their tickets to Atlantis like everyone else, but like a lot of guys, common sense tended to run thin when they ran in a pack. Sgt. Marquetti, in particular, Mason knew from experience.

"... and you keep her name out of your mouth or I swear I'll find me a needle and thread and I'll sew it shut!"

Amelia Banks had a firm grip on Dusty's forearm, beckoning her to leave before things escalated further, but the raven-haired she-devil was having none of it. Tony Marquetti, who topped out at slightly under six feet tall, was getting a face full Mehra, who was even shorter but absolutely ferocious.

"What's going on here?" Mason broke in.

Dusty's head whipped around. "Assisted suicide."

"We were just trying to have a conversation," Cpl. Davies claimed.

"Yeah," Marquetti said, "We were only trying to say how sorry we were that Teyla went and offed that hybrid. Probably cost us any chance we had to nail his boss for killing Teldy and Vega. Who knew she'd overreact?"

"Oh, any old brain dead gorilla, I'd imagine," Rodney spat.

Mason frowned. McKay having a decent poker face would've really been useful about now. With his excitable disposition already stretched to its limits, McKay was showing more hostility and nerve than might prove healthy.

"Banks, get her out of here," he said, "Before somebody calls security."

"We're already here," Chapel said. His smarmy grin served only to goad Dusty further. She looked ready to lunge.
Mason stepped directly into her path. "Let it go, Mehra!" The last thing they needed was somebody calling Lorne. After that, it was only a matter of time before Sheppard would have to be informed, and there was no way he was going to let that happen.

Dusty stopped short of letting another sour retort fly. She glared daggers at him, but in the face of Capshaw's unflinching challenge, she spun and stalked away.

Amelia looked up at him, flushed in relief. As she slowly backed away, she said softly, "Thank you."

Thrown by the unexpected gesture, Mason hesitated before nodding. "Go on. I'll deal with this." He glanced beside her. "McKay, go with her."

"What? I can't just ..."

"Don't. Argue. Go babysit someone else for a few minutes."

The scientist eventually seemed to get the message.

When Capshaw felt they'd gone, he turned back around and meeting him head on, ready and waiting, was Marquetti. Always the ring leader.

"What the hell's the matter with you? She just lost her team."

The dark featured marine didn't flinch. "Exactly! I figured she, of all people, would understand."

"You spent too much time in the desert."

"You'd know. You spent just as much time in the sauna as I did." Marquetti's face was a caricature of nostalgia. "Chasing down insurgents with your Special Forces pals. And then, of course, you got new orders and disappeared."

Mason shrugged. "Well, Colorado was a lot closer to home and I figured space is cold, so ..."

"Then, I show up here and you're too good to get together and talk about old times."

Yeah, old times. This guy and a different pack of cronies insinuate themselves at his team's table in the base's mess one night and he spends his downtime for the next four months watching Marquetti trying to pick up USO girls and listening to bad jokes. Loads of warm, fuzzy memories. "You were a jackass then. You're a jackass now."

Tony tipped his head. "Maybe. That never stopped us from having a few laughs, though. But then, you've been too good to talk to a lot of people lately."

A phantom itch broke out all along his chest, and Mason's stormy blue eyes clouded over. "Things change."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so." Marquetti scrutinized him and said, "I heard you got hurt a while back. Pretty bad, right? Something like that's bound to screw with your head."

Mason didn't hear concern. He was being asked to choose a side. "Take my advice. Keep your thoughts to yourself. And if I were you, I'd give Mehra a pretty wide berth for a few days or next time, I'll let her kick your ass."

Mason made to leave when he was called back tauntingly. "I get it. I do. Gotta stick up for your team, right?"
"You never knew when to shut up."

"And I never pegged you to be okay with crap like that going down in the brig," Tony confronted him. "Right under Sheppard's nose—the guy who's supposed to be looking out for us."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ronon putting a gun to Franks' head."

Mason ground his teeth and gazed at the lanky, young lieutenant, promoted too soon, who'd been hanging out quietly in the background but was now afraid to look him in the eye. Even if Franks had complained to a couple of his pals, which Capshaw doubted, he was too low on the food chain to ever say otherwise. "You were down there with him?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, I wouldn't get too excited about it. Ronon's had a gun to my head, too. It's not so bad."

"If Ronon were US military, he'd have been busted down and shipped out for pulling a stunt like that. But no one around here has ever been much for regs, have they?"

Mason rolled his eyes. Sure, a part of him could see Marquetti's side of it. He remembered what it was like to be out of the loop and just trying to do a job, but that's where his sympathy ran dry. Before ever coming to Atlantis, the new recruits typically received an off-the-record warning that Sheppard ran a different ship than most. His unorthodox style of command was lauded by some and condemned by others, but no one could deny his success record. Most who transferred in got with the program once they got to know Pegasus, the city, and the people they were serving with. He had. Some never did.

"People are dying out there, Capshaw," Tony went on. "Major Teldy and Captain Vega were just the tip of the iceberg and Teyla kills the only guy we got with key intel to offer. In custody. Using some freaky psychic powers nobody's bothered mentioning to us before. And when we try and put a stop to it, what do we get? A dressing down and a gun to the head!"

"What do you want, Tony? A court martial? Ronon doesn't exactly fall under the UCMJ and neither does Teyla. And in case you haven't noticed, we're not in Iraq anymore. This isn't the SGC. Hell, this isn't even the Milky Way. Out here, sometimes we have to play by a different set of rules or we die. If you can't handle that, I suggest you put in for a transfer."

The agitated marine was in no mood for the semi-friendly advice. His head shook in derision. "Sheppard's a rogue who managed to stumble into a plum position. I'll grant you, he may have done a decent job getting this expedition through its first year here, but he should've been relieved of his command a long time ago."

Mason's eyes narrowed, the gray storm clouds within turbulent. Tony may have thought he'd convince him to see things his way, but he had no idea how wrong he was. Colonel Sheppard had gone to bat for him long after any other CO would've written him off. Teyla, he owed even more. She'd never held a grudge against him for his initial attitude toward her relationship with Colonel Sheppard. She'd never been thrown by his aloofness or intimidated at his attempts to drive those he cared about away. And it was Teyla who, probably more than anyone, had helped him hang on when he felt his strength to keep going slipping. He didn't think she or anyone else would ever know how badly.

Except Jennifer. She knew.
A night full of listening to Teyla suffer through a curtain had him raw inside, and frustrated at being incapable of helping her in return, Mason's steel grip on his temper was bowing. Bitterly, he clung to sense. "Go home, Tony. Go back to Earth."

Marquetti's beaded black eyes pierced back at him. "You know something's wrong here just as much as I do. The colonel's lost his objectivity. He's lost sight of the mission."

"Sheppard, Teyla, Ronon. They belong here. You don't."

"He needs to put a leash on that junkyard dog of his, but he's too busy banging the local tail to notice!"

"Alright, THAT'S IT!" Rodney yelled from behind him. "Listen, you 'couldn't find my IQ if it was stamped on my forehead', Lou Ferrigno wannabe! Sheppard's saved our collective asses more times than an ignorant thug like you could count. And Teyla isn't just some …"

"McKay!" Mason hissed, torn back from the brink of weighing the importance of keeping the peace versus the satisfying crack of a broken nose. "I thought I told you to stick with Mehra."

"Oh, come on! You might as well have asked me to play footsie with a pit viper. Besides, I couldn't leave you here with these four goons."

Mason's jaw tightened. Now wasn't the time for Rodney to be dusting the cobwebs off his nobler side. Marquetti could never claim an overabundance of class or smarts, but make no mistake, he was an attack dog on a hair trigger.

"Isn't that sweet?" Tony jeered. "You've got yourself a bodyguard, Capshaw."

"Ah, the quick-witted retort worthy of the average three-year-old. How refreshing."

Tony wolfishly turned on his teammate and tried to push his way past him. Mason shoved back with his left arm while the other strained, tugging viciously against the bandage crippling him.

And Beckett was worried the shoulder wasn't stable enough.

"Why don't you leave the talking to the real men, McKay?"

"Intimidated? Between the four of you, you haven't got the brainpower to light a 100-watt light bulb."

"Rodney …" Capshaw tried again to warn him off.

"You're good with numbers, McKay. How'd you like to count your teeth?"

"My, isn't that original," Rodney fired back. "You might've gone with something less cliché like 'Hulk smash'. Bruce Banner, at least, was a nuclear physicist. What have you got? An advance degree in armpit scratching?"

Shit.

"Jennifer ..."
Beneath her, Teyla tensed. "Almost done, Teyla. Hang in there," Jennifer coaxed as her abdomen tightened around her. Lying carefully situated on her left side where Dr. Keller had recommended she stay, Teyla's leg was raised, her foot pressing squarely into Jennifer's shoulder as the doctor performed another internal exam. Though technically only in early labor, hours of battling contractions without an opportunity to recover from what had happened in the brig had left Teyla sore and spent. Jennifer felt trembling against her shoulder. Not the pronounced shakes of a woman about to deliver, but the subtle tremors of one growing very weak. "Feel free to push on me if you need to."

"I got it, Doc."

Continuing to press, Jennifer glanced up. Situated at Teyla's back, Colonel Sheppard scooted in further and wrapped an arm around her. Noticeably bothered by the examination process, John mostly avoided looking in Jennifer's direction, until he felt the same shaking travel the length of Teyla's overexerted body. Then, she couldn't have shaken his grim scrutiny if she'd wanted to.

He rested his chin against her bronze hair, his eyes shifting down once again. "You can do this, Teyla. Just a little bit longer."

As promised, Jennifer finished her check quickly, peeled off the latex glove, and tossed it into the wastebasket just below the bed. Carefully, she helped Teyla rest her leg back on the mattress, and Colonel Sheppard took over from there. One arm encircling her waist, he brought the other around and expertly flipped the blankets back into place. Once Teyla was safely tucked in, he wove his arms through hers and they rode out the rest of the contraction as one.

Jennifer studied the monitors at Teyla's bedside, but her vision kept getting drawn back to the couple. The two of them together were as natural as breathing. Where one left off, the other began. Two parts of a whole. She knew too well the problems they'd had in the past and could only imagine the hell they were going through now, but Jennifer still couldn't help the stirrings of envy in her heart.

When the tension in Teyla's body finally melted away, Colonel Sheppard relaxed his hold on her. Jennifer sat on the chair next to the bed, but before she could speak, he brushed aside Teyla's bangs in a barely-there sweep that demanded Jennifer pause to leave their brief respite unspoiled.

"Okay, Teyla," she said quietly. "It looks like you're still holding steady at a three."

"So what does that mean?" John asked, his intense gaze turning on her.

"It means we're still doing okay." Jennifer pointed toward the monitoring station. "It's been two hours since we upped Teyla's dosage and the last contraction was seventeen minutes ago, so they're spacing out." She looked back to Teyla, who was listening closely. "Stopping labor once it's started can be a long process, but I'm hopeful that we've managed to break up the momentum and things will get easier soon."

Teyla produced a shaky nod. "Thank you, Jennifer."

She met the flash of concern in John's eyes but returned her attention to Teyla, smiling. "You can thank me when you're headed home as big as when you came in. Now … how are feeling? Any nausea?"

Teyla shook her head.

"Is there anything you need? Can I get you another pillow or some more ice or …"
Again, she shook her head. "I need only, as you said, to return home as I am now."

"Of course," the doctor said. She tried to sound as encouraging as possible. "You're doing beautifully, Teyla."

Teyla's eyes darted away from her. "You will forgive me if I do not agree."

"I'll be back to check on you again soon, okay? You should really try and rest while you can."

Jennifer squeezed Teyla's hand.

When Jennifer stood up, she held out little hope that Teyla would take her advice. Babies born at twenty-eight weeks had a good survival rate, but typically required months of intensive care after the birth. In the face of such a wrenching ordeal, Jennifer didn't think she'd be able to sleep either.

"Colonel, could I talk to you just for a minute?"

Jennifer went ahead, pulling the curtain apart a few feet and waited outside for Colonel Sheppard to join her. Ronon's ceaseless marching came to an abrupt halt at her appearance. He kept his distance, perhaps sensing that she wasn't quite finished, but the hulking warrior searched her face for some sign of news.

For a few fleeting seconds, they were alone for the first time since their impromptu swim. Jennifer thought she could even still smell the briny scent of the sea in her hair. His well-muscled arms had been around her, his hot-blooded nature seeming to soak through his very pores blanketing her nearly naked skin, shielding her from the chill of the water. Yet, in spite of that, when the meager distance between the two of them had begun to dwindle, she'd started to shiver.

"Doc." Colonel Sheppard approached her, his lips tight, but his voice low enough to prevent them being overheard. "What's happening to her?"

"Colonel, she's in labor and she's exhausted. The rest we're still working on." Jennifer shook her head. The mystery of what caused this mess in the first place was one they had to solve. Even if they were to succeed in preventing a premature birth tonight, without a better idea of what happened, there was no way to know they wouldn't be back here tomorrow or the next day or next week. "Carson and I have a few theories."

"And?"

"And we need more information if we're going to make any sense of all this." She heaved a sigh. "Colonel, Teyla's brain is lit up like a Christmas tree. The level of synaptic activity happening is well beyond human norms. When we looked at your scans, the picture's pretty much identical, only not quite as widespread."

John's eyes narrowed. "What do you want to know?"

"You told us that you've been able to communicate directly to each other telepathically and somehow you were able to accelerate the healing process in recovering from your surgery. Is there anything else you can think of that we might need to know about?"

"Well …" he considered, "there was that thing on the planet. Teyla knew we were in trouble."

Jennifer nodded. "Carson thinks it may be a natural extension of your telepathic connection. You may have a link written right into the DNA you and Teyla share with the baby. If that's the case, you'd have a basic sense of each other no matter the distance, although I'm sure your ability to communicate would be hampered considerably. Under the circumstances, I wouldn't recommend
Teyla try that again, though."

She grimaced remembering how pale Teyla had looked, a precursor to her current condition. If only she'd pressed further for answers before.

But then, she had a thought.

"I'm curious, Colonel, did it have the same effect on you?"

"I was fighting for my life, Doc."

"Of course you were, Colonel. I just meant … when Teyla sensed you were in danger, she looked like she was about to pass out. And you told me that Teyla gets tired just about every time she taps into the baby's abilities. Is it the same for you?"

"Well …" He thought for a few moments. "At first, yeah. It was like getting caught in a wicked tailspin and an all-nighter in Vegas all jumbled up together, but …" He looked surprised. "Not anymore."

"At all?"

"No."

"But Teyla still does?"

He nodded. "Sometimes not as bad as others. Just talking to each other … it was getting easier all the time. It was really …" He paused, the subtle glint in his eyes giving way to sadness and regret. "Yeah, she still gets tired."

"Okay," she nodded. He was really beating himself up about this.

His brow wrinkled and he shifted his weight uncomfortably. "There's one other thing. I don't know if it means anything."

"Really, Colonel, the smallest detail might prove helpful."

After that he seemed to resign himself. "After the whole brain surgery business, I was here in the infirmary and I had this … dream. At least, I thought it was a dream. I heard a conversation. Voices, surround sound. I could've sworn it was real, but when I looked, no one was there."

"You were hallucinating while you were in recovery? Colonel, why didn't you say something?"

"Doc, I honestly thought it was a dream," he said. "And it was only the one time."

"So what makes you think it wasn't?"

He pointed to where Ronon waited, watching them like a hawk. "Earlier, I overheard Rodney and Ronon having the exact same conversation. Exactly. Word for word. Sarcasm, Superman references, all there." While Jennifer absorbed what he was saying, John asked, "You didn't see a … giant tumor or anything in my head while you were checking out my scans. Did you?"

Jennifer almost smiled. "As always, Colonel, your scans made for interesting reading, but no. No tumors."

"Just thought I'd check." He glanced back to the curtain behind him. "Anyway, that's it. There's nothing else."
He was anxious to get back to Teyla. It was understandable and Jennifer didn't want to keep him.
"Okay, Colonel. If you or Teyla need anything or if there's any change, Dr. Beckett and I will be …"

"… in your office. I know."

"And John?" He turned back around as he was already moving away. "It's going to be okay."

A stiff nod and he was gone.

Jennifer sighed. Easing the weight on Col. Sheppard's shoulders would take more than a verbal pat
on the hand. The best thing she could do now was to get back to work. With a measure of
improvement for Teyla and the baby, and armed with a little more information than before, Jennifer
was ready to tackle another brainstorming session with Carson.

But first, she had to talk to Ronon. He was waiting for her and she knew, if he had to, he would wait
all night and into tomorrow. She just wished she had better news for him.

Mason had to give McKay credit. He saw the punch coming and faced it like a man. Fortunately for
Rodney's face, Mason wasn't about to let Tony land one.

As Marquetti lunged past him, Mason used his shoulder like a battering ram. Aiming dead on for the
solar plexus, he slammed into Tony's chest with an emphatic thud. An astonished groan barely had
time to manifest. Mason snaked his free hand around Tony's neck and directed the mouthy marine's
head straight into the wall. While he was still stunned, Mason twisted Tony's elbow behind his back
and shoved it high, pinning him against the wall with the full force of Mason's body weight behind it.

The maneuver was quick and efficient. Fluid enough to bring a smile to any drill sergeant in the
service. Exactly what Mason needed. Even at his healthiest, he wouldn't have wanted to take on four
SO's one-handed, and after being out of action for so long, Mason's hand-to-hand skills were
probably rustier than he'd like. The faster he could put a stop to all of this the better.

Marquetti raged against his grip.

"Don't." Mason rumbled, increasing the pressure exponentially.

"Ugghh!"

"Hold still or I'll separate your damn shoulder." Mason almost hoped he wouldn't.

Panting heavily, Tony stopped struggling. "I could report you for this, Capshaw. I could file an
official complaint against you and your new friends."

"You could, but we both know you won't. You could go running straight to Woolsey or that
glorified accountant the IOA is sending here, but sooner or later you'd have to explain your part in
this. Attempted assault on a civilian. Getting your marbles handed to you by a guy with one good
arm."

Mason redoubled the pressure on Tony's arm for emphasis, but a part of him reveled in the strangled
yelp that followed. Tired to no end of having to keep it together all the time, it felt really good to be
able to take out his frustrations on somebody else, someone he could put the screws to without the
slightest attack of conscience. "And I'm sure they'll be standing in line to back you up when you explain how you were holding a stunner on a pregnant woman who's in the infirmary right now fighting to keep her baby."

"What the hell happened to you?" Marquetti asked angrily.

Mason growled in his ear. "You don't ever want to know. Now, get lost."

Mason let him go and after a few tense moments, the group walked away. Mason exhaled and shook his head to himself.

Coming up beside him, Rodney said, "I could've taken him. I took a lesson with Ronon. Once."

Mason casually glanced over at him. In defense of Sheppard and Teyla, he didn't doubt McKay would try. "Ever seen what happens to a Chihuahua when it tangles with a Doberman, Rodney?"

"I'm more of a cat person. But just to be clear, in this scenario, I would be the …"

"Chihuahua."

Rodney shrugged. "I realize it's not so impressive if you think about it, but I could've introduced that guy to a world of hurt before he slammed my face into the floor."

Mason smirked. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah, sure," Rodney said. His eyes suddenly shifted. "Or maybe … maybe we should head back to the infirmary."

"I thought you were hungry," Mason said, confused. Rodney was more fidgety now than he had been staring into the face of a certain beating.

"I am. It's just … you're, uh …"

"What?"

He pointed toward Mason's shoulder. "You're bleeding."

Mason glanced downward. A patch of bright red was slowly forming, staining his white t-shirt.

Rodney's voice dimmed to white noise in the background, an endless string of muffled sound echoing down from a tunnel. Something about how he shouldn't have done what he did. The hero complex being the most prevalent infectious disease on the station. Possible internal damage and getting Beckett.

In shock, Mason let him go on. When Rodney ran out of air, he'd tell him the surgical incision was barely bleeding. Most likely, he'd just blown a few stitches and he had the stuff to deal with it sitting in his quarters. Beckett's—and Jennifer's—focus was far better served taking care of Teyla.

But, for now, all Mason could do was watch, fascinated by the lack of pain.

It was really working.

Rodney stopped mid-sentence, looking utterly perturbed. "What on Earth are you smiling about?"
As soon as she neared him, Jennifer knew his irascible Satedan temperament had been set ablaze. She saw it in his eyes and the way he carried himself. He'd practically been climbing the walls all night. She didn't blame him, but she also didn't know why she was surprised.

"How is she?" he asked.

"She's showing signs of improvement, but …" she said reluctantly, "… she's got a ways to go."

An angry huff came down Ronon's nose. "Keeping that thing alive was a mistake. I could've ended it on the planet. I could've stopped this."

"It was the right thing to do," she said. So often tonight, she'd wondered herself if they'd done the right thing, but Ronon wasn't arguing from the easy position of hindsight. When it came to anything the Wraith had touched—and to Ronon, Michael would always be a Wraith—his automatic response was to kill. It was instinct, primal and frighteningly aggressive. The way he moved, discounting any nagging pain from his bruised and battered muscles, his fists clenched, Jennifer knew that even if the hybrid had survived Teyla's assault, it wouldn't have lived much longer anyway. Ronon would have killed him. A part of him might have even enjoyed it. Knowing his tragic history, she tried to put herself in his shoes, but she didn't think she could ever truly understand that sort of drive in a person.

"We could've given that man a chance at getting his life back," she maintained.

Ronon's mouth curled under the pressure of his stiff jaw. "That thing wasn't a man anymore. It was too far gone."

"We'll never know now," she said, wondering as the words passed her lips if she shouldn't have left well enough alone.

"He was never going to be fixed. He wasn't like Halling, Jennifer. He was never going to be normal and nothing you did would've made a difference," he said. "Maybe you could've fixed his body, but his mind was broken."

"What makes you so sure?"

He shook his head, his eyes smoldering like burning coals. "There are things. They get embedded way down deep and fester. And it doesn't matter how much time passes or how far you run, you can't escape it and you don't get over it. There's no coming back."

Jennifer didn't know what to say that. All she could think of was the magnitude of the burden he still carried, even after all this time being free. Ronon identified with the hybrid as much as he hated him, both having been used as fodder to fulfill someone else's ends, their lives irreparably damaged by the Wraith. "What if it had been someone you knew down there? What if it had been you? Wouldn't you want us to try everything to save you? To bring you back?"

Ronon's dark brown eyes penetrated her. "If it was me, I would hope my friends would care enough to kill me."

Watching John straightening the rumpled folds of his uniform, Teyla already felt far away.
He will welcome the chance to stretch his legs.

The muddled thought barely pierced the cloudy haze shrouding her. The curtain swayed hypnotically, her gaze becoming transfixed on the spot where he'd disappeared. Then, in the next instant, the small mattress was shifting as John settled back in behind her. With nothing more than a vague impression of John's conversation with the doctor, Teyla elevated her head, realizing she had allowed it to droop.

"Save your strength, Teyla."

It was the most soothing order that had ever come out of his mouth and one she was sorely tempted to follow. Absently, his middle finger moved back and forth, tracing a nonsensical pattern on the back of her hand, lulling her further. In truth, she could already feel the strength of the contractions ebbing. A sharp pain still flared across her abdomen with each one, but it was a natural consequence of having her little used stomach muscles suddenly being pressed into intense service. It would go away in time, now that the labor pains were coming further and further apart. But in spite of that welcome change, she couldn't rest easy no matter how badly her body needed it.

"John?"

"Yeah?"

Teyla wanted to curl up into a protective ball, remembering those deranged yellow eyes holding nothing but darkness and swirling chaos. Even the furthest reaches of Borash's consciousness had been cracked and broken. Killing him had perhaps been a courtesy, but courtesy had been the farthest thing from her mind. In silencing the threats to her daughter's safety, Teyla had nearly brought about the very thing she feared most. "I never meant for this to happen. You must believe me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I lost control. I was careless. I did not consider …" She paused, trying to stave off the glassy sheen bubbling up over her eyelids. "This is my fault."

His strong hand tightened around her upper arm, wanting her to turn so he could see her. John Sheppard, commander of the military contingent of the great city of Atlantis, fierce friend, a good man and the father of her child, wanted her to look him in the eye, and for the first time ever she was afraid to. What she might see terrified her.

This was precisely what John had feared would happen when she had left the city with her people and they had fought so terribly. Afterward, she had spent many a night resenting him for his concerns and the wedge it had driven between them. After all, she was a proven warrior and a leader. Simply because she was carrying a life inside her did not mean she needed a man to shield her and hold her hand through each insignificant event of everyday life.

Except her daughter's abilities would have manifested eventually, and if John had not come for her, their child's life might have become the price of her stubborn refusal to give heed to his doubts. The Athosian's new home was too far away from the Stargate to request aid quickly. Teyla would have given birth without him, without the powerful medicines Atlantis had to offer and their little one might already have perished by the time help could arrive. John had behaved badly, but in the end, he had been right.

But when he gently tilted up her chin, what she saw was John's grizzled jaw set firm. "You didn't ask for this. There's no way you could've known this would happen. None of the little stuff we've
done could've prepared us for this."

She shook her head, a stilted whisper passing her lips. "You do not understand."

"What don't I understand?" he asked. The obvious love in his voice made it that much harder to confess the rest of what was holding her mind hostage as her body was pleading for release. He pressed gently, "Tell me, Teyla. What is it?"

"My … abilities … are so much stronger than they once were. What I did, it was … easy." She glanced up at the bland ceiling hoping to find refuge, but she was soon drawn back to his concerned expression. "I cannot sense her, John. I do not know if she is alright. She is so small, so defenseless. What if, in my anger, I have somehow harmed her?"

"Oh, sweetie," he murmured, half groaning. "You could never hurt our daughter. Not even on accident." He hugged her tightly. "I'm no scientist, but you probably can't feel her because you're too drained to sustain a connection. Give it time. It'll come back. And Keller says that all the scans say the same thing. Yeah, she's not ready to meet the world just yet, but for where she is … Teyla, she's perfect."

John's lips brushed her hair.

_Just like her mother._

Teyla closed her eyes at the splendid clarity of his voice resonating in the confines of her mind. She didn't believe any sound could be so wonderful. A relieved tear streaked down her cheek. Around his waist, her grip on John tightened, grasping for the man she cherished, holding onto the dream of the family they would still have because he _had_ come for her. He had answered the call of their two hearts aching for one another and because of him, their baby's chances of remaining where she belonged continued to grow. And through it all, even though the opportunities were there, John had not left her.

"Thank you, John."

"For what?"

"For being here."

John laid a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I couldn't be anywhere else."

The accusations she had flung at him echoed in her head, that fateful day when he had returned to her after being so painfully absent. _"You are supposed to be the man I love. Someone who I can walk beside through the hard times, not someone who abandons me and his child when things are not easy!"_ With one look, she knew that the man beside her now was not the same man she had walked beside on that chilly day. Any lingering fears she may have still harbored deep inside vanished. She knew with absolute certainty that John would sooner die than abandon her. And she would sooner die than let him go.

Another kiss to her forehead and a low, "I love you," granted her permission to finally surrender as she needed so badly. She drifted off, trusting that he would watch over her when she could not.

John would take care of them both.
As Teyla grew heavier against him, John allowed himself to breathe. Maybe the numbers said they had a ways to go before they were in the clear, but he'd much rather take his cues from her. In all the years he'd known her, worked beside her, he'd always appreciated who Teyla was, but tonight, he'd gotten a glimpse of a new side to her. For the first time, John had seen her not just as a woman, but as a mother. Teyla had fought for their baby with grace in every breath, never giving up. If she was starting to relax enough to be able to fall asleep at all, they must've finally turned a corner.

Craning over for a better view, he studied her flawless features, searching for any signs of discomfort and recalling the things she'd said. How could she think he blamed her for what happened when he'd actually been thinking he had never been more in love with her? Being proficient at the game of self-appointed guilt, he understood the impulse to run over and over what could've been done differently. He could've put a bullet between the prisoner's eyes at the first threat and spared Teyla this ordeal, but he'd had a job to do. She didn't blame him for his inaction and it had shocked him to hear that she felt she needed forgiveness from him.

Being that big a factor in someone else's happiness was relatively new to him. Typically, he was out the door long before his opinion carried much weight in a relationship, even with his ex-wife. Not being cut out for the task of sharing her husband with the military, the long absences had left Nancy feeling like he didn't care, that she was alone, and when he was home and the inevitable arguments would start, that was all she wanted to focus on. Not that he felt most alive when he was sitting in the pilot's seat, that his tenure with the Air Force gave him a sense of purpose, allowing him to make a difference and it was something he was truly good at. They were married yet they lived separate lives, neither one being the high priority they should've been. Nancy meeting someone else had just been the final straw, and when the divorce papers had reached him, he hadn't been surprised.

But with Teyla, he knew he had the real thing, a partner who depended on him just as much as he depended on her, equals in every sense that mattered. John just hoped for Teyla's sake he'd been able to say the right thing. He wanted her to know how much he loved her, respected her, and that in his book there was nothing to forgive.

She seemed to be resting peacefully, giving John more confidence that the worst was over. The next contraction might bring her around again, but with any luck, it would be easy enough she could sleep through it.

His focus shifted toward Teyla's midsection. In a hushed voice, he said, "I know you probably can't hear me, not the way you normally can, but ... you're gonna be alright, kiddo. Just sit tight in there for a little while longer."

John knew it was probably a pointless gesture without an assist from Teyla, but he had to try anyway.

Mommy's got you and Daddy's here. I'm not going anywhere.

An ephemeral, warm touch nudged against his thoughts, and John couldn't help the surge of astonishment and relief that rushed through him. He reached for Teyla's belly. "Yeah, you're just fine, aren't you?"

The next hour was everything John could have hoped for. Uneventful. He moved back to his vacant chair, wanting to give Teyla enough room to be comfortable and he kept an eye on the monitors hovering at the side of the bed. As her next contraction came and went, he watched with bated breath until it passed, Teyla never having been disturbed. And by the time Keller swung by for her half hourly check-in (on the dot as always), there hadn't been another one.
"How's our mom doing?" she asked, studying the readouts and clearly pleased at the current state of affairs.

John had said simply, "Not quite ready to be a mom, I think."

The doctor had only smiled and offered a few more encouraging words before leaving him alone with Teyla again.

The change in the air was almost tangible. Even Chewie settled down, and after a while, he ventured over, bringing an effective end to the imaginary wall keeping his friends at bay. They didn't say much. It wasn't necessary as Ronon dragged in a second chair. Setting it down backward, he straddled it and hunched over, making himself comfortable.

Another contraction came and went with even less fanfare than the last. Dr. Keller's next appearance was nearly as brief, but John didn't miss the intriguing looks passing between the pair of them and how Ronon suddenly seemed to be sitting a lot straighter. His curiosity piqued, John wondered what those two had gotten up to after the memorial service. Sheppard tilted his head at his teammate after she'd gone, putting to him a mute question.

The equally wordless response was annoyingly vague, but short of making an old lady out of himself, John figured that was all the answer he was going to get. Regardless, it was fairly plain that Ronon had finally gotten off the bench.

Not long after, Rodney showed up with a mess hall tray tucked under his arm, but seeing that he and Ronon had closed ranks around Teyla, the food was all but forgotten. The high strung scientist unloaded a steady stream of anxious questions. "How is she? She's okay, isn't she? Carson said it would be fine if we took off for a little while. She didn't … did she? Because, I …"

John stopped him. "Relax, Rodney, Teyla's doing fine and so is the baby."

"Really?"

"It's not quite over yet, but Keller seems to think we're getting on some pretty solid ground."

"Well … good. If Jennifer says …" Rodney stammered, gesturing awkwardly with his free hand. "That's, that's good."

"Yeah," John replied. "So what's with the food, McKay? One dinner not enough for you anymore?"

Rodney startled. "Oh! No, I uh, brought this for you. I figured you might've … gotten hungry or … something." He offered the tray so swiftly that everything shifted, nearly dropping the sandwich, chips, and drink in his lap.

"Thanks, McKay," he said warily. "Are you okay?"

Rodney stood ramrod straight. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"You just seem a little tense. What took you so long, anyway?" Sheppard glanced at his watch. "Shouldn't have been any lines at this hour."

"No. We, uh … Mason and I, that is …"

John's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!"
"McKay …" John said expectantly. He was going to crack any second.

"He just doesn't want to tell you we raided the mess' storage," Capshaw said, swaggering up from behind. Noting Mason had not only put back on his sling but changed his clothes as well, John saw that he also came with cargo in tow, holding a good-sized cardboard box in front of him.

"Yes. Yes, that's precisely it. The uh…"

An inconspicuous flash of blue silenced the flustered physicist. His range of motion hampered, Mason carefully set the box down on the rolling table near Teyla's bed. John quickly read the label on the side. "You stole a case of jello?"

"For Teyla," Rodney said. "The blue kind. It's my favorite and I know she … likes it, too. And the Daedalus will be here soon. No one will ever know it's missing."

John felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. Rodney still sounded like he was carrying around a lot of guilt for a guy who'd just stolen jello, but he decided to just play along. Whatever was going on, they were trying to do something nice for Teyla, and as soon as she woke up, he was absolutely sure she would appreciate it.

"The SGC can take it out of my paycheck," Mason offered. Sheppard didn't doubt for a second he meant it. And if he wasn't too far off base, John was willing to bet "the heist" had been his idea from the start.

"Well …" John said, pretending to consider it. "What's a little petty larceny between friends?"

Not far from Jennifer's office, Ronon stood. She'd left the door open.

It had been two hours since Teyla's last contraction. She was awake, alert, and best of all, smiling. A pair of jello cups had already been polished off, but Jennifer had left the door open. Just in case.

She never quits.

She and Beckett were bouncing theories off one another, most of it using language Ronon was only marginally familiar with, still trying to make sense of what happened. Ancients. Wraith. It didn't mean much to him. Teyla and the baby were alright and the hybrid was dead. Beyond that, Ronon was happy to leave all the questions to someone else.

"It's the ATA gene. That's our x-factor," Jennifer said from inside.

Unseen, Ronon observed her working tirelessly, following her line of reasoning as Beckett's nodded along. Even though Teyla was in the clear, she wasn't slowing down. Jennifer gave her all to her patients. That he knew firsthand. She was so open and at times, even defiant when it came to the people entrusted to her care, but when it came to … other things … she was so different.

Swathed in the murky depths of the Lantean ocean, her soft skin had slid effortlessly against his. Stirred by—he didn't know—the chill of the water, his surprise she'd plunged in after him, being able to laugh in spite of the taste for revenge in his mouth that never seemed to go away, Ronon felt himself pulled toward her. His body was coming to life in long held, unbridled need. He wanted to give in to his desires, bury his hands in her hair, and drown himself in someone else. But as he
leaned in, he noticed the uncertainty on her face. She was shaking.

It could've been the cold. Even running hot as his people did, he felt it too, but the other possibility halted him.

"What is it?" she'd asked, her heart racing so fast he could feel it in his hands.

"Nothing. We should go."

She could've stopped him with a word, pulled him in, and they would've set about generating plenty of heat. But she didn't.

When Carson passed by going in search of coffee, Ronon stepped forward and rapped lightly on the office door. Jennifer glanced up from the thick file planted in front of her.

"Ronon, hey," she greeted. "Is everything …"

"Fine," he said.

So many times before, he'd thought how much she reminded him of Melena. The gentle, willing temperament. Stubborn. Determined. But Melena had never met the man he had become. To say his years running from the Wraith hadn't changed him would have been a lie of the worst kind. What would she think of him now?

"I just … wanted to say thank you. For what you did."

"I was just doing my job. Teyla did the hard part," she replied, a wan smile on her face.

Ronon shifted uncomfortably, remembering their conversation earlier, when he was barely in control of his unpredictable temper. He should apologize, but he couldn't. Not when all he was saying was the absolute truth. "You did good, Jennifer."

He turned to leave.

"Ronon?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we still on for sparring tomorrow afternoon?" she asked shyly.

He smiled. "Yeah."
Teyla watched as John and Sgt. Capshaw sized one another up, each trying to assess whether the other was bluffing. Having folded in the last round, her cards were neatly stacked on the rolling tray table hovering over the bed, acting as their playing surface. And Rodney, though apparently quite busy working on his computer tablet, was not as preoccupied as he seemed. He continued to glance up to the game in progress, trying to predict the winner for himself.

Back and forth, in an effortless and steady rhythm, Teyla rubbed her rounded stomach which was comfortably insulated underneath her white hospital gown and the medium-weighted blanket. She leaned back against her pillow, relaxed and content to wait for an end to the stalemate. In the supportive company of those she considered family, she had need for little else and it was not as though she was going anywhere. For the time being, she remained in the infirmary for observation. Twenty-four hours had turned into forty-eight, all thankfully quiet, and Jennifer had spoken to her about being able to return home soon, but Teyla would simply be trading one bed for another.

Bed rest. Two words that, any other time, might have tested the limits of her patience. When recovering from injury, Teyla had proven better at hiding it than John or Ronon, never giving in to the outright rebellion they had grown infamous for, but she didn't feel the need to remain active any less keenly than they did. Hard work was as much a part of her as the deep brown of her eyes or the rich tones of her skin, but for once, Teyla was ready to ‘put up her feet and take it easy’, as John would say.

"You've got nothing," Mason said, testing John, daring him to give away his strategy.

John barely batted an eye. "Keep talking. It won't change your cards."

Sitting closely on her right, John's gaze traveled down to where she instinctively stroked her midsection. She had been doing that a lot in the past days, she realized, but she couldn't help herself, needing a small touch here, another there, the reassurance of a tiny kick. Her friends came and went. Rodney had his duties to attend to. Mason had his physiotherapy. Ronon and Jennifer had taken several of their short breaks from the infirmary together. Only John had remained constant, watching her as she thirstily drank in each moment. He was the only one who understood, the only one who could.

With an upturned tick of his cheek, John's large hand spanned hers, his grasp firm yet unfailingly gentle. Without reservation, his thumb crossed in easy sweeps at her middle. For one thing in the previous two days Teyla was grateful. Somewhere in the middle of all this, they had truly become one.

Mason's lips curled at them. He exhaled and tossed his cards onto the tray tabl. "Okay, Colonel. Take it."

John smirked at his teammate and looked back to where his hand lay. "My lucky charm."

Teyla smiled.

"I can't believe you caved. That was blatant manipulation," Rodney criticized Mason from his seat, though the remark lacked his usual bite. Not even the fractious Head of Science was immune from the general timbre of relief filling the space around them.

"Sue me," Mason stated across the bed as he gathered up all the cards to be reshuffled. His sling was
making movement awkward, but his dexterity didn't seem any the worse for wear.

Rodney casually waved his hand. "For all you know, they're working together. Using their new superpowers."

"Hey," John protested. "I don't need a bag of tricks to beat him. Or you."

"You think so?" Rodney eagerly set his pad aside. "Because it'll take more than a sympathy play to sway me, my friend."

John's eyes narrowed playfully. "Bring it on, McKay."

His hand left her swollen belly and trailed down her forearm to squeeze her fingers, eliciting another smile. With the overriding concern about her condition, things had been very quiet lately with everyone walking on eggshells around them. Almost missing the familiar cadence of bickering, John's antagonistic yet good-humored challenge brought about a much needed sense of normalcy.

"What do you think, Teyla? You up for a little ass kicking?"

"I believe I will sit out this hand and leave the ass kicking to you, John."

His dark, beautiful features searched her face as he had many times recently. "You still feeling okay?" he asked softly.

Teyla gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. After all they'd been through, it would take some time before either of them could feel totally at ease again. "I am fine. I merely think it best to remain out of the line of fire."

Cautiously satisfied, John nodded.

With the three men centered in a virtual ring around her and the small table, Mason began dealing the cards. His eyes shifted briefly from what he was doing and settled on Teyla. "I thought Jen said you were getting discharged today."

"We are awaiting a few final test results from Drs. Keller and Beckett," she explained.

He bent his head knowingly. "It's funny how fast you can wind up in here, but getting out is never quite as simple."

"You know, I never understood why you guys are always in such a rush to leave. I sort of enjoy it here," Rodney commented, picking up his cards as they landed and meticulously placing them in order. Mason paused mid-toss and John's eyes zeroed in on him in an incredulous stare. "Would you stop looking at me like I'm the lunatic muttering to himself in the corner? I'm serious. Comfortable beds, meals get delivered directly to you, and if somebody shows up you don't want to talk to, you can pretend to be asleep."

"When was the last time you got hospitalized for anything worse than a jammed finger, McKay?" Mason asked, pitching another card his way. "Been a while?"

"Hey, don't underestimate how crippling a jammed finger can be in my profession. Makes typing excruciating. Really. You have no idea how much that hurts."

John's expression fell comically blank. Mason's cool demeanor went unfazed, but Teyla thought she could see the faintest traces of annoyance seeping into his jawline.
"I believe Mason may have some idea, Rodney," she reminded him.

Realization slowly dawned. "Oh. You know I didn't mean … that is … Okay, I know I'm not exactly a card-carrying member of the Invalid Club." He gestured toward her. "I mean, Teyla, you've got your …" Then, Mason. "And you, with the whole … and Sheppard had brain surgery. How am I supposed to compete with that?"

"It is not a competition," she offered.

"Everything's a competition," he answered quickly.

"And impaled. Don't forget impaled," John goaded him further. Teyla sighed. He so loved to tease Rodney and there could be no doubt he had a particular gift for it. For his sake and for the worried creases that had lined his eyes for days that were, in part due to Rodney, now fading into the background, Teyla decided to let them be.

"That one doesn't count. You don't even remember that."

"I remember the hospital stay afterward. Headaches, blinding pain, stitches beyond count, impromptu pop quizzes," John added with an accusatory glare, "I swear to God, McKay, I've been through interrogations with fewer questions."

Rodney scowled. "Fine. The point is, when you factor in the caveman, every single one of …" Suddenly, he started snapping his fingers toward Mason, his eyes alight with inspiration. "I've been shot before! Sheppard shot me and then, another time with an arrow. Right in the ass. Very painful." Rodney smiled. "See? I've paid my dues. I even still have the scar to prove it." He paused. "Well … I'm pretty sure I do. It's kind of hard to tell because of the uh … angle issue …"

An onerous frown descended on Mason's face as John bit his lip, already shaking with laughter.

"Oh, Rodney," Teyla murmured to herself, shielding her eyes.

"But Katie says it …"

"Stop. Right. There," Mason said. The marine shook his head, nearly speechless. Finally, with a dramatic exhale and an expertly extinguished grin, he pointed a stern finger at Rodney. "Never finish that story."

The sound of a polite "ahem" drew their attention toward the entrance of her room. "Oh, thank God," Mason muttered.

"What?" Rodney protested. John just clapped him on the shoulder and turned his attention to their guest.

Mr. Woolsey asked, "Have I come at a bad time? If I'm interrupting, I could come back later."

"Of course not, Mr. Woolsey. You are quite welcome," Teyla answered. With his busy schedule and after what happened, Teyla was surprised he would take the time to visit her in person, though judging from his demeanor, he didn't appear altogether certain he should have. Without knowing how much of their conversation he'd overheard, she found it hard to blame him.

"Just in time to save Rodney from himself," John said casually.

Richard took a few tentative steps inward and addressed Teyla. "Dr. Keller has been keeping me
apprised of your condition, but she thought it best that any personal visits wait until you had more time to recuperate." Richard made a quick, studious scan of her companions. "She seemed to think that anyone venturing in before then might expect to find themselves walking into a lion's den rather than an infirmary."

A comprehending smile crept up on her. It was true her friends had proven … difficult … for the medical staff to work around, but their behavior had cooled as her status had continued to improve. "Not to worry, Mr. Woolsey. I believe it is relatively safe."

"They keep us pretty well fed in here," John quipped. "Besides, the one you really have to watch out for is off sinking his teeth into a bunch of marines."

He nodded and responded wryly, "Good to know."

"Why don't you pull up a chair?" John said.

"I don't think that will be necessary, but thank you. I really only wanted to come down and pay my respects." He turned back to Teyla. "And, of course, to see you were doing better."

"I thank you for your concern, Mr. Woolsey. I am feeling well," she returned, touched by his sincerity, but somewhat troubled at the preoccupied frown he wore.

"Believe me, it's the least I can do. And please take all the time you need. Your duties can certainly wait until you've sufficiently recovered."

"That is very considerate of you." Teyla smiled and observed him thoughtfully. He clearly had something on his mind, but seemed unwilling to make any sort of intrusion. She wondered if his reticence was due to the circumstances that had brought her here or if it simply stemmed from his feeling of being an outsider. "Are you certain you would not care to join us?"

Predictably, Richard only reiterated his earlier statement. "I really should be going." He looked like he was ready to take his leave, when he paused and pulled his already impeccably straight uniform straighter. "Colonel, when you have a minute, I was hoping we could meet."

John raised his eyebrows curiously. "Once Keller gives us the all clear, my plans are strictly to take Teyla home. What did you have in mind?"

Another thick pause settled inside the small room as Mr. Woolsey regarded her in careful consideration. Unless she was very much mistaken, she believed she heard next the sound of another eggshell cracking. "Do not delay your business on my account, Mr. Woolsey. Whatever it is you wish to discuss, I assure you, if it is of importance to Atlantis, it is of equal importance to me."

He pursed his lips.

"Probably best not to argue with the pregnant woman," John commented.

Richard still didn't move to take the empty chair vacated by Ronon, but he did finally acquiesce. "Okay, Colonel. Major Lorne has been doing an admirable job filling in for you, but there are a few areas that require your attention." He cast another uncertain glance to Teyla. "I thought it important that you and I get together to discuss our next move. Statistically, the more time that passes, the less likely we are to catch up to Michael, and as it is … we have little enough to go on."

John's reaction was so slight no one but Teyla would ever have noticed. A momentary flash of his hazel eyes was the only outward sign of the sudden burst of paternal ire she felt emanating from him. Knowing the hardened planes of his body as well as she did her own, she saw him stiffen and
reached a steadying hand to his forearm. John had made it very clear to her that he didn't blame her for acting as she had. He had admitted that had she waited thirty seconds more, he might have done the deed himself, but it still galled him to think of Michael on the loose, creating more and more of those hateful, unhinged creatures and having designs of his own for their unborn daughter.

"With no other leads at the moment, I'd start by seeing if we can't run down something on this plague," John finally said, his voice practiced and even. "If Michael is behind it, Beckett might have run into it while he was being held prisoner. Could be he can work up a cure and, in the meantime, we may be able to track down someone who knows something."

Mr. Woolsey nodded in agreement. "Of course, it's easy enough to send teams through the Gate, but we have yet to encounter a single world that's been infected. Everything we know about the plague is based on nothing more than speculation and rumor."

"We keep deploying teams with orders to keep their eyes and ears open," John stated, intermittently drumming his thumb on his pant leg near his knee, the miniscule physical activity helping him to set aside his anger and pinpoint his focus on his duty. "And we should probably start with the Kysonians. They're the ones who mentioned the plague to us in the first place."

"They didn't have anything more substantial to tell us than anyone else, Colonel," Richard mentioned.

"And they could wind up singing us the same song, but it won't hurt to ask," John said, his hazel eyes catching the light as they fell on her. "A lot of things can change in a few months."

Teyla produced a commiserating smile. How well did they know it. "If you plan on questioning the Kysonian people again, I would suggest taking Halling with you," she said. "Padrel and his people are kind enough, but gaining their trust takes time. An Athosian presence may help you immensely. My people have an established trade relationship with them going back two generations and, in our previous arrangement, we have proven to them that in working together we can be relied upon."

John and Mr. Woolsey traded approving glances. "We'll have Lorne make a run to Lairius tomorrow morning. See if Halling's got any big plans for this weekend. Anyway, it'd probably be a good idea to see if he can remember anything else on Michael's operation we can use to our advantage."

Mason, who had been attentive but comfortably situated in his chair, sat up. "Sir? With your permission, I'd like to tag along with the Major."

Teyla studied him, having noted a distinct shift in his demeanor over the last few days. Sergeant Capshaw was still quite wary, akin to a young child dipping a toe into water for the first time, but she could also see within him an eagerness just waiting to be set free. In making his request, he appeared almost hopeful. Teyla could only think of one reason why.

John must have, as well. "It's just a short trip. A couple of hours at the most," he warned.

"I understand that, sir."

After a moment's consideration, John nodded. "You get Carson to sign off on it and you're good to go."

Mason tipped his head in return. "Thank you, Colonel."

John and Richard continued talking. Beyond Mr. Woolsey, Teyla spied Jennifer and Carson quietly conferring with one another as they padded slowly toward the open doorway. She adjusted herself within the sheets, feeling her heart quicken slightly. Something hidden beneath their professional
veneer made her uneasy.

"… checking in with our other offworld contacts," John said, his gaze tracking hers toward the doctors closing in. His jaw tightened as he cleared his throat and continued. "And in the meantime, Beckett's been setting up clinics all over the place. I'd recommend sending him and Keller out to get the lay of the land. The locals will probably be a little more forthcoming to them than they'd be to a bunch of armed soldiers anyway."

"Good idea," Mr. Woolsey said, preparing to take his leave. "I will inform Major Lorne and let you know when we're ready to proceed."

Jennifer and Carson saw themselves in and, with their entrance, Teyla's nagging sense of foreboding only grew. John's expression darkened, mirroring her own. On his guard, his voice lowered. "It's about time."

"Sorry, Colonel," Jennifer said. "We had some last minute details we had to go over before we wanted to …"

Dr. Beckett, never anything but genuine and caring, tried his best to diffuse the mounting tension. "How are ya feeling, luv?"

He had little idea how loaded a question that was. It wasn't often Teyla found her emotions skimming so close to the surface. Two days of heartache, turmoil, and the elation that had followed having her family's future pulled back from the brink, had her tiptoeing across a thin line. Unable to keep herself as composed as she would have ordinarily been able, her hand curled protectively around her stomach as she demanded, "What is wrong?"

The two doctors exchanged a serious glance and Jennifer exhaled heavily. "We need to talk."

For an exaggerated, agonizing instant, no one moved. John was left with only the loud whooshing sound of his blood rushing in his ears and a subdued echo of Teyla springing to life in the background of his mind. Since regaining her abilities, in the absence of answers, she had been very careful to avoid actively using them, but every once in a while, a small touch of her managed to slip through and traces of her thoughts and fears merged with his.

Experience told him this was about the time that visitors either left on their own, not wanting to be a part of what was about to go down, or were asked to leave while the doctors delivered the bad news.

Teyla was just fine. The baby was just fine. He could take them both home and do his best to help Teyla forget any of this ever happened. That's all John wanted to hear. He was man enough to admit it probably wasn't the healthiest approach, but he always thought there was something to be said for a decent case of denial. He would entertain anything as long as he didn't have to hear something was wrong with Teyla or his child - his little girl. That they hadn't just gone through hell only to come out on the other side to get clobbered.

John was relieved when Keller didn't ask anyone to go.

Mason got to his feet, wordlessly offering her his chair just to Teyla's left and directly across from John, and then found an empty spot next to Mr. Woolsey and Carson. Jennifer settled into place easily enough. Unlike a lot of doctors, she seemed to prefer to sit and talk with her patients rather
than lord over them like some demigod handing down judgment. Especially when the anxious patient in question was also her closest friend.

"Let me just start by saying that, as far as we can tell, the baby is perfectly healthy," Jennifer told Teyla, her tone denoting nothing but genuine caring. "Her vitals have been consistently strong and steady, and now that you've stabilized, there is no reason to think they won't stay that way."

"But you know what happened to her, don't you?" It took John a few seconds to recognize that the hoarse question had emerged from his own lips.

"We think so," Jennifer confirmed on her behalf as well as Carson's. "I wish we could say we were a hundred percent sure, but out here it seems like certainties are hard to come by."

The strain he was feeling tugged at his temples. "Okay."

He stole a long look at Teyla, lying in the bed by his side. Even in the stark white of her hospital gown and hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. His missing piece. In so many ways, the best part of him.

The warmth of Teyla's fingers trailed along his arm and reached for his hand. He grasped onto her, knowing what she meant to say. No matter what followed, they would weather it together.

"We understand," she answered softly.

Jennifer proceeded cautiously. "Alright, well … this could be hard to explain. The mental capabilities of the Wraith and the Ancients seem to have their own special place somewhere between the physical and the metaphysical. Trying to quantify them is … like playing a game of theoretical darts. Then, when you throw in a mixture of the two, it gets really …"

"Complicated," John finished for her.

"To say the least."

Carson stepped forward. "Your Wraith DNA makes you an extremely rare creature, Teyla. But for a few of your fellow Athsians, we've never managed to find any other humans carrying the trait. And even though the Ancients settled on Earth and did a certain amount of intermingling with the population, a natural expression of the ATA is also quite a difficult thing to find, particularly one of the strength of Colonel Sheppard's. The odds of a person carrying the ATA gene and another person carrying the Wraith gene even finding one another are too astronomical to figure. Believe me, I tried and it gave me a headache," he added with a wink.

For all the scrapes Beckett had pulled them through over the years, John already owed the man a lot, but he would forever be grateful to him for the smile he brought to Teyla's face.

"Suffice it say, Teyla, that wee one you're carrying is nothing short of a miracle. I don't know that the galaxy or perhaps even the universe will ever see the like of her again."

He crossed his arms over his chest and his awe grew more serious. "However, it does present us with a unique problem. With the baby in possession of both Wraith and Ancient genetic sequences, the residual effects were bound to be … a mite unpredictable."

"We started by compiling every scrap of data we have on both sides of the baby's genetic profile and comparing it to what we know so far about the abilities that have surfaced," Jennifer explained. "The Wraith, for example, we know can enter the minds of others, manipulate them to see things that aren't there, give up information they ordinarily wouldn't, force their subjects to kneel and perform other
tasks against their will." She looked to John, probably realizing he didn't need the big rundown on Wraith mind attacks, having been repeatedly questioned by Wraith queens in the past.

"My child possesses the abilities of the Wraith," Teyla said calmly, detached.

Keller nodded. "Some, at least."

"Many," Teyla corrected the doctor. Her knowledge of both the Wraith and her daughter was more intimate than Keller's, Beckett's, or anyone else's could ever be.

Near the doorway, unassuming and patient, Mr. Woolsey asked, "Dr. Beckett, you were the one who performed the autopsy on the hybrid. What was the cause of death?"

Reluctant, Carson said, "Massive cerebral hemorrhaging."

"And that would be something you perceive as being within the capabilities of a Wraith Queen?"


John's jaw clenched. He didn't want Teyla getting upset again over what had happened in the holding cells. Whichever side of the family tree killed the hybrid prisoner, stress was the last thing on Teyla's menu for the time being.

Sensing the topic shifting, Jennifer quickly steered it back, trying to keep it as brief and painless as possible. "On the flip side, from what you told me the other day, Colonel, and the other reports we've gathered since, it was fairly obvious that we've got some Ancient traits on display, as well. Between SGC records, Rodney's encounter with the ascension machine …"

To his right, McKay abruptly froze. John bet that brought back a few memories, having his own set of superpowers that nearly killed him.

"... and your own encounter with the people living in the Sanctuary …" Jennifer motioned to him.

Speaking of memories. Chagrined, John shifted awkwardly in his seat. Having Teer brought to mind with a very pregnant Teyla in the bed right next to him was probably the weirdest feeling ever. Probably the only thing that could top it would be his ex-wife showing up for coffee and a chat.

"There's a pretty lengthy list of documented abilities from those possessing the ATA gene as they evolved closer to ascension. Enhanced hearing, telepathy, telekinesis, healing, precognition, increased intelligence …" Jennifer listed off.

"Obviously, not all of them are active and running loose around Atlantis," Rodney replied smugly. "I haven't seen Sheppard down in my lab inventing any new math lately."

"Shut up, Rodney," John scowled.

Carson rolled his eyes. "The baby has undoubtedly inherited certain traits based on the inclination of her parents and random groupings in her gene pool, just as she would her eye color or her cheekbones. Although Colonel Sheppard's abilities remained dormant until very recently, his recovery times in the infirmary have always been on the quicker end of the spectrum and his uncanny instincts in heightened situations might suggest a latent proclivity toward foresight."

John shook his head. This sounds completely insane.

"Is it just me or does this sound completely insane?" Rodney asked.
He spun around to look at McKay. "Did you just …"

"What?"

His face stuck in a quizzical, sideways grimace, John chalked it up as having spent way too much time around McKay. "Nevermind."

"Wait, wait, wait. Go back a second," Mason finally spoke up. "You said 'as they evolved closer to ascension'. So … what? Baby Sheppard's just a hop, skip, and a jump away from a higher plane of existence?"

"Not at all," Jennifer responded. "From what we can gather from our tests, the baby's vital signs are entirely consistent with that of any other at her current stage of development. She's a perfectly normal little baby."

"Are we grading on a curve, now?" Rodney commented. At Teyla's stricken expression and not at all in the mood himself, John cuffed him across the back of his head. "Ow!"

"Knock it off."

"I was just trying to point out …"

"Don't."

Rodney's mouth coiled tight, chewing on his words like a sliver stuck between two molars. John knew that look. He was going to open his big mouth again, sooner or later. He couldn't help himself. Needing more, Teyla ignored him. "How is it possible that if she is perfectly normal, as you say, she is capable of so much? How is it she has such a profound effect on John and me?"

Jennifer's mouth quirked upward. "Okay, maybe perfectly normal isn't quite the right way to put it, but she is as human as you are. As for the rest …"

Her tongue briefly reached for daylight, grazing over her lips as she composed her thoughts. "If you were to take a strand of Wraith DNA and Ancient DNA, lay them next to each other and compare them, they're actually astonishingly similar in a lot of ways. They even complement each other in a few. Where the ATA gene is mostly only accessible when the physiology reaches a certain level, the Wraith side is much more aggressive, making up the difference. It acts like … a skeleton key of sorts. Those particular sequences in …" She smiled at Mason's earlier reference to their daughter, "Baby Sheppard's make-up have been unlocked by her Wraith half. It's more than likely also the reason Colonel Sheppard's abilities have been brought to the forefront and, in your case, Teyla, enhanced. She's able to open the door."

"Well, that explains that," John muttered, reaching for Teyla and cupping her neck, threading his fingers into the hair at the base of her neck. She leaned in and took a deep breath. As much as they used to wish to keep this between themselves, it was a relief to have some answers.

Trying to absorb everything that was coming at him, John's gaze roamed. While Capshaw seemed mildly impressed with the whole thing, Mr. Woolsey's pensive frown bothered John more than it should have. And Rodney was still gnawing on something.

"So, what happened?" he blurted out.

John glared at him in annoyance. He realized they still didn't know what went wrong to land Teyla and his child in the infirmary. It was an ominous cloud that had been hanging over their heads for
two straight days, but Rodney couldn't even give them a minute in peace. "McKay …"

He threw up his hands. "I know, I know! You can have Ronon hogtie me and lock me in a closet somewhere later, but something else is going on here or Teyla wouldn't be in that bed, and I want to know what happened just as much as you do."

Teyla's voice, quiet and on edge, stopped him. "John, please." She tipped her head back toward Jennifer, her eyes tracing the ceiling and her hand flitting over her stomach along the way. "What is it? What did you find?"

"It's going to be okay, Teyla, I promise," Keller said quickly. "But …"

Carson spoke up. "As much as it pains us all to hear it, Rodney is correct. We did find a problem. While it's true that the Wraith and ATA genes have several base pairs that seem to be working together, there are others that are clashing on a very primitive, very basic level. Physiologically, they appear to be incompatible."

"I do not understand. You told me …" Teyla's voice caught mid-sentence, "… she was fine."

Jennifer straightened in her chair and gently rubbed Teyla's shoulder. "Teyla, she is. Your daughter is fine. She really shouldn't be, but she is. We can't explain it. We could probably have a team of genetic specialists working on it for a year and never find a definitive answer as to why, but the baby is fine. It's you we're worried about."

Jennifer's eyes grew concerned and she released a heavy sigh. "There's really no good way to say this. Teyla, we think your Wraith DNA has marked the baby's ATA gene as foreign genetic material. Your going into premature labor … was an acute sign of rejection."

John absorbed what felt exactly like a kick to the gut, while Teyla's face remained heartbreakingly stoic. When he'd recovered his ability to breathe, he saw her trying desperately to shield herself behind her walls and pulled her into him. She buried herself in the crook of his neck, never making a sound, but a muffled sob hit his ears nonetheless.

His throat suddenly felt like lead. "How did this happen?"

Teyla turned her face outward, but remained within the comfort of his embrace. Jennifer looked at them with deep regret.

"Colonel, it's likely it's been happening since the beginning of Teyla's pregnancy," Carson said. "The early months of fetal development are the most important. The baby's body, vital functions, and all the major organ systems are being built. Now, the human body is highly adaptable, and somehow Teyla was able to make it through the hard part without losing the fetus …"

"You think this is why Teyla was so sick. Why she …" John bit his lip, wanting with every fiber of his being to forget the sight of Teyla falling down the stairs of the control tower, her prone body at the bottom limp and unresponsive. She could've lost the baby back then, but wouldn't have needed a fall to do it. She went through all that because of his little genetic contribution. Because he fathered her baby.

"Don't," she whispered, her fingers running the length of his collar, pulling him in closer. Teyla squeezed him tightly, her lips pressed against the forty-eight plus hours of growth along his jawline. "Do not think that way. It is not your fault."

The salt of tears stung his eyes and he slammed them shut.
Keller and Beckett left them to each other, giving them a few precious minutes where John and Teyla could shut them all out, to console and commiserate with the one they loved. Those present would never know what words passed between them or what feelings they shared, they only knew what they had always known. Separately they were formidable, but John and Teyla were far stronger together than they were apart. They had something special, to be envied and respected. Something that poets and composers only dreamed of capturing into verse. Something beyond circumstance, time, and distance. Eternal.

When they finally parted, John's hand swept across the skin of Teyla's cheek, the intimate promise of a kiss in his touch. Ready to face whatever came next, John scanned the room and caught Rodney examining a particular spot on the floor with unusual fascination. Jennifer suspiciously rubbed at the corner of her eye, while Mason …

John shook his head. The latest edition to his adopted family had a look John used to wear himself, one of longing deprived and love denied. With eyes only for the attractive doc, John hoped for his sake things would work out for the best. The alternative, he knew, was a pain the beleaguered sergeant had no remedy for and to live with it was unthinkable.

"Let's finish this," he finally said into the vacuum of sound, keeping Teyla as near as he could.

"Are ya certain?" Carson checked as the others snapped back to attention.

"Yes," Teyla replied next to him. They were both ready.

Between the two of them, Keller and Beckett covered the rest of the story.

Teyla's body managed to adjust after the hormones and intense construction phase of her first trimester eased off, allowing her to finally carry their child comfortably. But when the baby's abilities began to manifest, the ATA gene made alterations to her own physiology that her Wraith side couldn't tolerate. Her exhaustion after each attempt was explained, the strain on her body a continual war between two opposing factions. John's own initial exhaustion was a consequence of the synapses of his brain getting activated, but once that process was finished, genetically predisposed to these changes as a natural ATA carrier, his experiences of mind-numbing tiredness ceased.

He wished it could have been the same for Teyla.

Attacking the hybrid had only been the straw that broke the camel's back. Not killing him, but picking him up and throwing him against the grid. The telekinesis of the Ancients flooded her body, overwhelming her system, and in the interest of self-preservation, drove the Wraith inside of her to expel of the source of the alien gene.

"You believe the baby will be safe, so long as I am careful," Teyla surmised.

Jennifer nodded. "No more interplanetary S.O.S.'s. No more hybrids. And until I'm satisfied your body can handle it, I would advise keeping the telepathic communications to a minimum. I know you said you can't always control it, but try your best."

"Can she go home, Doc?" John asked.

"Yeah." Dr. Keller took Teyla's hand. "Straight to bed. Stay off your feet, the only exception for now being the occasional side trip to the bathroom. And we'll take it a little at a time." She smiled sweetly. "Somehow, I have a feeling you'll be back to normal before you know it, and when your due date rolls around, you'll have yourselves the cutest little girl Atlantis has ever seen."

"Not if she's winds up with Sheppard's hair." Rodney snorted.
A thunk sounded beneath the bed.

"Ow!"
As the light of the fading sun streamed in through the windows, bathing the room in red and casting its diminishing beams across her face, Teyla stirred. Her eyes opened swiftly, absent the pleasant fog that usually accompanied waking, completely unaware of ever having drifted off in the first place. She glanced around the room, taking in her surroundings as the warm familiarity of her own bed still sang the comforting lullaby that must have earlier drawn her in. The last thing she remembered was John disappearing into the kitchen to make her some tea, a metallic clang, and the sound of running water.

Her eyes lifted toward the nightstand as she shifted her elbow beneath her. A black mug rested among her other things near the edge, filled almost to the top, but its contents had long ago gone cold.

"J—" she began as she twisted her hips, rolling her ungainly figure to face the open doorway. The quiet, half-formed call died as it passed her lips, a serene smile taking its place.

Beside her, sitting up against the headboard, his head slumped forward while his legs were restfully stretched out across the bed, John was asleep. His beloved hand-held video golf game lay haphazardly beside his hip. It remained on yet long forgotten as a muted rumble from John's throat passed into the stillness of the evening. Carefully reaching to flip off the power switch, Teyla supposed it wasn't much of a surprise that they had both succumbed to sleep. The last few days had been trying to say the least.

He had been quiet most of the way to their quarters. At her back as he wheeled her away from the infirmary, Teyla imagined that he was preoccupied in much the same way as she—reevaluating the past with new eyes, weighing what her condition meant for the remainder of her pregnancy and for the safety of her child, considering the potential consequences they might yet face in the future. By the time Teyla had been carefully situated into the wheelchair and given her final instructions by Jennifer, her emotions were tumbling over one another in an ever-revolving heap. She leaned on the arm rest, her fingers curling naturally and falling over her eyes as she was carried down the long hallways of Atlantis. Though she had been in recovery for two days already, she still felt used, weary, and … overwhelmed.

Upon reaching their quarters, she had fully expected John would waste no time in wheeling her directly to the bedroom, where all that remained would be the simple matter of moving her from the chair to the bed. Quickly and efficiently, of course, as was probably best. After all they had been through, she could have expected no less. To deny that part of himself that longed to protect her would be to deny he was the man she loved. That said, no one was more surprised than she was when he stopped short, just outside the doors.

He came around to the front of her chair, squatted down, and pulled the releases that would allow him to push her foot rests to the side.

"John, what are you doing?" she asked, a husky quality to her voice revealing how worn she felt. Perhaps, she realized in retrospect, she had been more tired than she had originally thought.

"In my official capacity as Roommate, Daddy, and ranking CO on this base, I'm invoking my right to take care of you any way I see fit." His hazel eyes drifted up, focused and determined despite the veritable tornado of thought swirling behind them. Rising, his left arm looped beneath her knees while his right went into the curve of her back, encouraging her body forward. Teyla wrapped her arms around his neck as he scooped her up. "And right now, I'm taking you to bed."
She smiled sweetly at the romantic gesture. "I was not aware my presence in our bedroom had become a matter of military concern."

His gaze narrowed. "Humor me."

She did. Gladly. Rarely had she felt more secure than she did held tightly in his grasp, surrounded by the strength and pure essence of him as he carried her across the threshold and home.

He maneuvered slowly through their quarters and took great care when it came time to release her onto the bed, lingering longer than was necessary to make certain she wasn't jostled or jarred in any way. Dr. Keller was disinclined to think that something so simple as a false movement would spark a relapse, but John was obviously unwilling to take any chances. Before returning home, they had also been advised that should she begin experiencing labor pains once again, given how close they had already come to a premature birth, it was unlikely they would be able to stop it.

As soon as she was settled in and he'd made certain she was sufficiently comfortable, John straightened. "Now, for the time being, you're gonna be cooped up in here and you can't exactly spend all your time meditating, so I'm also appointing myself your entertainment director. Anything you want, anything you need, I'm your guy." His every movement restless, he cast a thumb over his shoulder in an offhand manner. "I can grab your sewing stuff and I'm going to get the TV hooked up in here so you can watch some movies, and I can …"

At the time, nothing had sounded more appealing than some peace and quiet.

"I think I will be fine for the time being," she'd responded, but John continued as though he hadn't heard her. Teyla didn't think he was aware of it, but he had begun pacing, his hand skating repeatedly across the scruff of his neck.

"Well, as soon as the Daedalus gets here with our stuff, I'm gonna get the crib set up and the nursery all squared away for when the baby comes. I won't be able to be here all the time, but until you're cleared to be up and around again, we can make sure that somebody's around just in case."

"John …"

"And I'm always just a radio call away. But if for any reason you can't reach me, call Ronon. He can get you and make sure …"

"John." He stopped abruptly and Teyla offered him a smile meant to soothe. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, Teyla. Just tell me … anything you want."

Hours later—apparently, as she had no real notion what time it was—Teyla watched him sleep. The day's revelations had been hard on him. On them both, truly. What amounted to an accident of biology had put her and her child's life at risk, and had set them both reeling, questioning everything they thought they had known. But while Teyla believed the greater part of her could learn to accept that her body's aversion to the Ancient gene her baby carried was a problem of natural origin and beyond her ability to predict or control, John, she knew, had taken it far more personally.

It had taken some persuading, but she finally convinced him to sit down with her for a few minutes. His disquiet was still crystal clear as his gaze darted from one thing to another, visibly searching for a distraction from the thoughts still simmering nearer to the surface than he was comfortable with. Finally, he'd reached across her to her nightstand and grabbed her book.

"This was part of your poker winnings at the last game, right?" he asked, absently thumbing through the pages.
She nodded. Mired in the turbulent events since, the game seemed to her a distant memory. "I have been meaning to read it, though perhaps it is fortunate that I have not. It seems I have more than enough time to spare now."

John flipped to the first page and read aloud. "'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.'" He paused, his expression wrinkling into a charming visage of distrust as he closed the book and studied its cover. "Okay, scratch that idea."

"Is something wrong?"

"This is a chick book."

"I am told it is wonderful," she commented curiously.

"You can stick a bunch of hot women in corsets and dial back the language a couple hundred years, but what you've got there is still a chick book," he claimed before handing it back to her. "There's not even a decent sword fight in that thing. No dueling pistols at dawn. Nothing."

Teyla glanced down at the book. "How could you know such a thing if you have not read it?"

"Saw the movie. Just another page in the 'what John Sheppard did to impress a girl' book of experiences never to be repeated."

"I take it the girl was not impressed?"

His lips did a sheepish little dance. "That I fell asleep halfway through it? Not really."

Teyla had smiled at that. She had grown oddly fond of John's intermittent snoring. It had taken its place among her favorite sounds of night such as the crickets in the forest or the sound of the wind on faraway leaves; almost a kind of music all its own. But she could imagine it would be quite disconcerting to a woman he was only newly courting. "I see."

"In my defense, it was five hours long."

"Though apparently not for you," she said pointedly.

He'd accepted the lighthearted teasing readily enough, granting her the fetching smirk she had rightfully earned. "You think it's so easy staying awake for a movie that long, maybe we should put you to the test. I'm sure there's a copy of the DVD floating around the city somewhere. We'll see who nods off first."

"I thought watching this movie was an experience never to be repeated."

"Well, a real man never turns down the chance to score points with his girl," he said, the sincere expression on his face belying his flippant tone. She smiled as he squeezed her arm and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek.

"A noble sacrifice, John," she stated softly, though she worried at the idea he felt he needed to score points with her.

"Just as long as you don't hold it against me if I go down first."

She laughed.

They'd talked for a little while longer about matters of little importance mostly, his eyes wandering
off every so often before returning to her and engaging in the conversation again. Finally, he'd made the offer of tea and Teyla hadn't the heart to refuse him. At any rate, a nice hot cup of tea had sounded almost heavenly.

Perhaps later, she thought wistfully as she glanced over her shoulder at the lonely cup of cold liquid. With a soft sigh, Teyla looked at him, adoring the relaxed contours of his face and the way his dark hair flipped over his forehead. Even in the absence of their telepathic connection, she felt she had a reasonable idea of the wrestling match behind John's distraction. With or without it, in good times and in bad, she knew him and the forces that drove him.

Every natural human instinct and everything he'd been taught in his personal connections and military training told him one thing—she was his responsibility. He'd always staunchly clung to that sense of duty to her, as her friend, later as her lover, and even more when he became father to her child. In the face of knowing he was, however indirectly, also responsible for her condition, John was devastated. He was thrown and trying to retain his footing against the dark voice inside himself, endlessly prodding him, telling him he had failed his family, that he wasn't good enough. That he wasn't deserving of her or the love and contentment he felt when he was with her.

His struggles saddened her, but his demons had always been a part of him, built over a lifetime and present long before he had ever met her. She only hoped he would remember the love they had built in the time since and trust in that to be his anchor, grounding him to her while they navigated this new path side by side.

Teyla reached out, not being able to resist the lure of his skin. Her fingers brushed lightly across his cheek. John had once told her that he was uncertain he knew how to be a good husband. She smiled, thinking the idea almost absurd considering the unquestioned caliber of the man before her. The way he had quite literally swept her off her feet. The devotion he showed in trying to meet her every need. How easy it was for him to make her smile, even when her heart was troubled. Whether John realized it or not, whenever it was eventually decided they would exchange vows, he was already her husband, her true companion. She couldn't imagine a time she could ever find him wanting.

"I love you, John Sheppard."

John's eyes suddenly peeked open, roused at the soft hum of her voice. He stretched his limbs and after a throaty and satisfied groan, took her by the wrist and brought her fingertips to his lips, kissing them tenderly. "Sorry. Didn't mean to pass out on you."

"It is of no consequence. I have only just awoken myself," she assured him. "In any case, and this may come as a surprise, but you too must sleep on occasion."

A lazy grin appeared. He released her and ran a sloppy hand through his hair. "I guess I haven't really slept much the last few nights, have I?" He squinted toward the windows and then glanced down at his watch. "Crap."

"What is it?"

"Woolsey," he muttered, sitting up and throwing his legs over the side of the bed. "He radioed after you fell asleep. He wants to meet up again in about twenty minutes."

"Finalizing the details on the new mission objectives?"

"More than likely. Either that or the Wraith are on their way to obliterate us all."

"What makes you say that?"
John shrugged. "Let's just say, I informed him that I wasn't too keen on the idea of going anywhere tonight …"

Hardly daring to imagine the words he had actually used to make his point, she finished, "… and he expressed that it was important enough to require your attention."

"Pretty much." John turned, his reluctance to leave plain, but his duties were such that they couldn't be ignored. "It shouldn't take too long and on my way back, I'll swing by the mess hall and grab us some dinner."

"That sounds sensible enough."

His expression hardened somewhat. "I meant to get somebody down here to hang out with you while I was gone."

Her hand slipped over his and tightened. "I will be fine for a while and when last I checked, my radio was in good working order. You are but a call away. Is that not what we discussed?"

"You promise you'll call if you need anything?" he asked with a resigned exhale.

"Of course." Teyla glanced over to her nightstand where her comm link sat and couldn't help the smile that crept up. Set aside, she picked up her book again. "I believe I will just get started on this while you're away. You made the movie sound so interesting, I would hate to delay our watching it together."

His brow arched innocently. "You know, I have other books. Got all kinds of bad guys, explosions …"

"I think this one will suffice." Teasingly, she perused the paperback's back cover. "If I remember correctly, Jennifer told me this author—Jane Austen—also has several others that are equally as captivating. Perhaps they have movies, as well?"

"Don't push it."

"Thirty seconds. Twenty-nine … twenty-eight … twenty-seven … Keep it steady."

The firm, commanding voice of Mason's PT coordinator sounded in a syncopated rhythm, half again to the deadened thud of his taped fists pounding against the gym's punching bag. Ignoring the comings and goings of other people around him, the SO in the corner lifting weights and the pair of geologists hitting the treadmill, the two pressure sensors attached to the center were his sole focus, his targets.

"… twenty-one … twenty …"

Operating well below what he was capable of, Mason had barely broken a sweat. The goal at this stage, of course, wasn't to push. He was just supposed to be maintaining his conditioning and relearning how to intuit the right amount of force with the wide gap in his nervous system. Left, right. Left, right. Methodical. Mechanical. An exercise in repetition he could have reproduced in his sleep.
Rimassa glanced down at his computer readouts, his expression unmoved as he continued to count down.

Maintaining his flawless precision, Capshaw rolled his shoulders, loosening up, and then knuckled down for the final seconds of his session. Taking advantage of the freedom to be able to stretch his wings and move unhindered, he powered home several more strikes, finding a zone and letting go.

Rimassa called time, slowly bobbing his head in approval. "Nice work. A little more than I was looking for today …"

"Just kicking the tires," Mason said, starting to pull away the athletic tape from his knuckles while his trainer peeled the sensors off the punching bag.

"Well, try and remember that for the moment we're looking for consistency, not KO's."

"Got it."

Sergeant Cahill, who'd just wrapped up a workout of his own, was packing up his gear a few feet away. Still slightly out of breath, he ran a towel over his forehead, mopping up the fountain of free-flowing sweat. "Not bad, Capshaw. Keep working on it, maybe someday they'll make you a Marine."

Mason's lips quirked to the side and he continued to work his hands free. "And you keep coming up with one-liners like that, you'll always have a promising career at Starbucks to fall back on."

"Hey, if it comes with decent tips and a lifetime supply of caffeine, I'm in. Night duty rotations suck." Looping his towel around his neck, the burly jarhead threw his gym bag over his shoulder. "Good to see you back, Capshaw. Hope you can still keep up."

As Cahill ambled toward the doorway, lifting the end of his towel to catch another stray bead of sweat, Mason set the first wad of tape on the bench and started on his other hand.

Behind him, his trainer gathered up his things and offered him a cautionary warning. "Don't let yourself get goaded into rushing your recovery, Sergeant."

"I know."

"Cahill may mean well, but he hasn't got a clue what you've been …"

"I know."

An abrupt flare of aggravation settled in the pit of Mason's stomach. There weren't many people in the city who knew his story and the true nature of what he'd been dealing with. Besides his team and the medical staff assigned to his case, there were probably less than a handful. With him not eager to talk about it, most people just assumed he had a recurring shoulder injury that periodically flared up and benched him. There were a few who'd noticed his regular visits to the base psychologist and were probably thinking he'd had one too many guns waved in his face. But Nick Rimassa, as his physical therapist, was one of the few who were in the loop, and the idea that anyone could think his past was something he would easily forget annoyed the hell out of him.

If anyone remembered the discipline it took to rehab an injury, he did. And this? An alien implant and a three-inch surgical scar? This was—quite literally—nothing.
With his stuff in hand, Rimassa sidled up to his shoulder. "I'm only saying, it's natural when you're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel to want to run toward it."

Mason rounded on him. "Do you see me running?"

"Ugh! That's just … !"

In the open archway of the gym, McKay's familiar caterwauling echoed into the room. Mason dropped his concrete stare and glanced over. Somehow, in transit, McKay and Cahill had bumped into each other, the marine's bag getting snagged behind him, so that Rodney was front and center to greet Cahill's soaking wet shirt as they passed.

"I believe it's fair to assume I speak for everyone when I say we'd appreciate it if, in your zeal to land Beefcake of the Month, you'd keep your doubtless case of dehydration to yourself."

Cahill craned his neck back to Mason, a raised eyebrow wordlessly asking for permission to shut his teammate up. Mason shook his head and, grudgingly, Cahill left it alone.

Meanwhile, Rodney seemed naively unaware the silent exchange had even taken place. "I've had nightmares about things less disgusting than that."

Capshaw exhaled. It was a good thing Cahill was one of the good guys.

As Rodney made his way over, Rimassa decided to let their discussion drop. "I'll be sure to have my notes in to Dr. Beckett before your eval, okay?"

"Yeah," he replied dismissively.

Rimassa followed Cahill out as he twisted the last of the protective wrapping away from his wrist and tossed it into his bag, with the one set off to the side trailing soon behind. He picked up his water bottle and took a long swig, the muscles of his arms charged and invigorated by the activity.

Rodney walked up and Mason lowered the bottle away from his lips. "You know, if you plan on making a habit of antagonizing people that are bigger than you, you might want to think about picking up a pair of gloves and getting in a workout yourself. I won't always be around to save your ass."

The incident seemed already forgotten as McKay's frenetically busy brain had already moved on. "What? That?"

Mason rolled his eyes and gave up. "You ready to go?"

"Other than the sudden irresistible urge to take a shower?"

"Good," Capshaw said without waiting for the rest of his response. He picked up his bag, stewing on Rimassa's concern.

Yeah, he wanted to be able to report for duty again. Yeah, he wanted Beckett to clear him to go offworld tomorrow.

But he wasn't running. He absolutely wasn't running.

"Let's eat."
John marched toward Woolsey's office with a strict sense of purpose evident in his quick, long strides. Get in there. Get the job done. Go home. A military attitude befitting someone in his position, but 'Colonel Sheppard' was supposed to be taking a backseat in favor of just plain 'John' for the moment. He had two more days off-shift to see to his family; to make sure that Teyla and his daughter were taken care of and to figure out the logistics of the kind of help she would need while she was on bed rest. Having to switch gears at a moment's notice wasn't exactly unheard of around here, but on this particular occasion, he found it more than a little annoying.

The arrangements were made, Woolsey had gotten his recommendations for the next phase of the search, and everything short of an emergency was supposed to be passed on to the XO. Based on the business-as-usual attitude of those manning the control tower as he bounded up the steps two at a time, John was fairly confident he could rule out the threat of imminent invasion or another disease outbreak. So he was left to wonder what was so important he had to be pulled away from his pregnant girlfriend only hours after her release from the infirmary.

He crossed the platform and Chuck, noticing him as he passed, stopped him just long enough to ask him to give Teyla his best. With a few words of agreement, John gazed over the technician's shoulder toward Woolsey's office. Through the transparent glass walls, he saw Keller and Beckett seated across the desk, appearing engaged in a pretty intense discussion with the expedition leader. John continued forward.

"No … no, I seriously doubt it. Not from what Teyla described to me." Keller's skeptical tone hit his ears as he drew closer. "She's just a baby."

"As much as I respect your abilities and opinion Dr. Keller, the intricacies of Wraith genetics is really more Dr. Beckett's forte. What do you think, doctor?"

"Well, that's not really nature's way, is it?" Carson commented. "In all likelihood, the baby would have to grow and develop into her abilities just as she would learn to walk and talk."

"Her abilities may not even manifest until later in life. Adolescence or even adulthood," Jennifer maintained.

Overhearing the topic of discussion, John's jaw clenched tight as he neared the office door.

"But you have no way to know for sure?" Woolsey asked, just before looking up. Judging from the deeply set frown that appeared, it was obvious he wasn't planning for John to have shown up when he did. In getting down here as fast as he had, John was probably a few minutes early.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded.

With his stately manner, Richard rose to his feet, while Jennifer and Carson both wore the awkward, regretful faces of a pair of kids caught between two feuding parents. "Doctors, would you mind giving us the room?"

The pair of them left with Woolsey right behind, closing the door after them. "Would you care to have a seat, Colonel?"

John's eyes flashed sharply.

"Or not."

Wisely, he gave John a moment as he was trying to hold himself back from seething outright. His
hand tensely on his hip, John growled, "I want an explanation, Mr. Woolsey, as to why you're poking your nose in and around my family without checking with me first."

"I assure you, Colonel, there wasn't any intention of keeping anything from you. This is precisely what I planned on discussing with you in our meeting."

"So let's discuss it. Right now."

Leaning stiffly on the corner of his desk, Woolsey appeared to brace himself. "Earlier today in the infirmary, when Drs. Keller and Beckett presented their findings, I … found I had a few other pressing questions that needed answering, but given the circumstances, I thought it best done away from Teyla."

John huffed. At least, he'd considered Teyla before going behind their backs.

"I had some concerns … about whether your daughter's apparent abilities are active in their own right or if it's only Teyla's Wraith DNA that enables her to access them. I am sure that, objectively, you can appreciate the implications of having those kinds of abilities in the hands of an infant incapable of controlling them. Teyla seems to have enough difficulty keeping them harnessed as things currently stand. Ensuring the safety of the people on this expedition would become practically impossible."

"And?" John threw back, unwilling to take the theory seriously. There was no way his little girl could be a danger to the population. That much he knew in his heart.

"And …" Richard shifted slightly, "… the doctors seem to think that the baby's abilities are in fact dormant for the time being. Without Teyla's interference, she … seems to be an average child."

John nodded, his eyes ice cold. "Well, now that that's settled, I think we're done here."

He turned his back and stalked toward the door.

"Colonel," Woolsey called. John paused, his back rigid against the black material of his uniform, not bothering to turn around. "There's more."

After a long several seconds of giving hard consideration to walking out on him, John acquiesced to the fact that he was better off knowing everything there was to know. But he still refused to sit. Just on principle.

He crossed his arms and waited.

It didn't take Woolsey long to realize that was the best he was going to get.

"We received word from Colonel Caldwell via remote dial in. The Daedalus has been forced to stop and make a few minor repairs to their hyperdrive systems, putting them a few days behind schedule. Colonel Caldwell estimates them to be in orbit over Atlantis in eight days time."

Not what he was expecting, Sheppard felt his tense stance soften marginally. "They run into trouble?"

"A simple malfunction caused an overload in one of the power manifolds. An isolated incident by all accounts and there were no reported injuries."

John shrugged off the incident. "Okay."
"I, uh, also took the opportunity to make a few discreet inquiries after our guest, the IOA representative."

"And how'd that go?" he asked, rapidly losing interest in the conversation.

Woolsey's expression clouded over. "It didn't. In fact, every person I've had occasion to talk to regarding the IOA's current interest in Atlantis has told me exactly nothing."

"I'm sure that's frustrating."

"You don't know the half of it, Colonel," Woolsey said, the politician in him coming to the forefront. "I have the uneasy feeling I'm being stonewalled and I don't know why. But it can't be good. It could be that more than Atlantis' budget concerns are in the balance."

The colonel's face darkened. "What do you think's really going on?"

Woolsey shook his head. "It's hard to predict. It very well may be that our entire operation is going to come under a microscope. My position, yours, every command decision in the past few months—there's no way to know."

"Look," John began, starting to feel a little guilty for being angry with the guy. "I know you haven't been around here that long, but we've done this dance before with IOA. Elizabeth and Carter both had to deal with them. They'll come in, talk a good game and make you second guess every call you've ever made. But in the end, they'll tuck their tails between their legs, run back to the Milky Way, and leave us to here to handle things like we always have."

"I don't think so. Not this time." Richard looked him in the eye for the first time. "This is what I wanted to speak with you about. This latest incident with Teyla and hybrid is likely to come under intense scrutiny and, as much as you and I may understand Teyla's motivations for doing what she did and the results, I don't think the IOA's view will be as tolerant."

As Woolsey went on, John's heart sped up.

"Sergeant Marquetti's after-incident report hardly paints events in a favorable light and Lt. Franks' runs along a similar vein. Ronon—surprise, surprise—has yet to file his paperwork, but somehow I don't think a three-word account consisting of 'the hybrid died' will be enough to sway anyone's opinion."

John shook his head, the ins and outs of politics grating on him. "They can't touch her. Teyla's not military. She's not bound by our rules."

"Like it or not, Colonel, depending on their interest, the IOA isn't going to split hairs on Teyla's status, especially given her relationship to you. They might even give the matter more weight simply to avoid any appearance of favoritism. As far as they're concerned, Teyla has lived in Atlantis for nearly five years and has agreed to abide by certain protocols. Should they want to push this …"

John's eyes shot up. "What?"

Woolsey withered a little beneath his harsh tone. "They may ask Teyla to vacate the city. They may request to the SGC that, based on a clear conflict of interest, you be relieved of your command."

"Slimy, miserable, paper-pushing IOA sons of …" Sheppard muttered aloud. Taking a beat, he glanced up at the former slimy, paper-pushing IOA rep in front of him. "No offense."

"None taken, Colonel. And I'm afraid that isn't all," he added with a grimace.
"That isn't enough?"

"The other reason I felt it necessary to follow up with Dr. Keller and Dr. Beckett. These abilities, they won't go unnoticed. They may find that the child poses too great a threat." He sighed and looked determined to finish. "Worst case scenario, if Dr. Keller is wrong and the baby is born with these abilities intact and active … in my experience, there are those on the committee who, I believe, would vote to have the child removed to Area 51 for further study."

John's jaw clamped down so hard it was painful. He turned away, a deep torrent of rage welling up, threatening to boil over in the mossy green of his eyes. Every time he felt like maybe the worst was past, there was always something else ready to step up and kick him in the teeth. The blood rushing in his ears, he barely heard Woolsey behind him and the compassion in his voice was lost entirely.

"I think the odds of that happening are extremely slim, but I thought you deserved to know what's at stake here."

John stared through the clear walls of the office. Unconsciously, his fingers stretched and balled into a fist, recalling the time he'd lost his temper and shattered an entire panel of those huge glass windows. He was turning into a bug at the time, but comparatively he'd felt way more levelheaded then than he did now.

Whatever the changes in his head had done to him, he felt a spark of something writhing just beneath the surface, a fire burning just beyond his reach. Almost a compulsion daring him to try, it felt as though if he just narrowed his focus a tiny bit more and hit the glass in just the right spot, he could do it again. Only this time, he wouldn't need the brute strength gifted by his transformation. This time, he could do it with a thought.

He slowly spun, stowing his hands in his pockets for safety's sake. Teetering on the edge of a knife, his words cut through the silence. "I, uh, appreciate your candor, Mr. Woolsey, so let me make myself equally clear. Atlantis is my home. My career, friends, family, they're all here. But I don't care if the orders come down from the IOA, the SGC, or the President himself—the day someone tries to take my daughter away from me is the day I walk Teyla through that Gate and I promise you, no one will ever see us again."

Mr. Woolsey blinked under the heavy gauntlet John had thrown at his feet. Even in his current state of mind, the serious consequences of what he'd said weren't lost on him, but John wasn't going to back down. If Woolsey reported him to his superiors, he could wind up in handcuffs, in front of another court martial. And with his extensive knowledge of highly classified state secrets, he would skip the all-expense-paid package to Leavenworth and spend the next twenty years warming a cell of his own in Area 51's basement.

But before that ever happened, he would make sure Teyla was safe and far away from here.

"Colonel Sheppard," Richard considered carefully, "I know you and I haven't always exactly seen eye to eye, but I'd like to think we've achieved a sort of working rapport. So, I hope you'll believe me when I say I honestly hope it won't come to that."

John's hard gaze wavered slightly, struck by his sincerity.

"Neither do I."
"Colonel," Mason said, his eyebrows reaching skyward in surprise. Sheppard strode up the ramp of the Jumper with a steel gray parka tucked under his arm, standard issue gear to shield them from the ongoing freezing weather on Lairius. "I thought Major Lorne was scheduled to do the flying this morning."

John tossed the coat onto the seat directly behind the pilot's chair, the Jumper's systems waking and coming alive around them. "Not to worry, Capshaw. I'll get you there and back again, safe and sound."

Not wasting any time, Sheppard began his pre-flight checks. Mason stowed his gear and took over the empty chair in the forward compartment while the colonel barely paid him any mind, his fingers expertly manipulating the controls and the HUD display flashing diagnostic data at a remarkable rate, even for Sheppard.

"I'm just surprised, that's all." After witnessing firsthand Sheppard's flat refusal to leave Teyla for over two days for anything other than basic hygiene, he wouldn't have thought anything short of a crowbar and a three-man team could have pried him away from her the day after she went home. Certainly not for a glorified courtesy call.

"I have some business of my own I need to take care of." John spared him a glance before returning his attention to his work. "Rodney's keeping an eye on Teyla, and Katie's there keeping an eye on Rodney. That way, I figure I've got all my bases covered."

Mason tipped his head in wry agreement. Rodney was in his CO's quarters pulling gofer duty for Teyla and to be there in case she went into labor, but Mason didn't envy Dr. Brown a bit. She had the much harder job; keeping McKay from inadvertently agitating Teyla, while simultaneously having to act as a buffer for Rodney's attention. Because if McKay ever stopped talking long enough to make the connection, to really let it sink in that he'd been left alone with not just plain old Teyla but a woman who could potentially have a baby at any time, they'd have a full blown panic attack on their hands. The woman was a saint.

Yet, inexplicably, she seemed genuinely happy with him.

Jealous of McKay, he grumbled to himself. Ronon … That probably wouldn't come as a shock to anyone, but McKay? It didn't get much lower than that.

The Jumper's rear hatch began to close and he breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe Rimassa had a point. Maybe he was running.

But after what happened last night …

He had to.

"… get my due in the scientific community. They're gonna see. Washed out shut-in … The second the Stargate program is declassified, those very same fawning sycophants are gonna be falling all
over themselves to get their limey paws on my work. And the Nobel prize? As good as mine."

Nearing the mess hall entrance, Mason smirked. He skirted around Dr. Martinez, who was on his way out. "Just remember to try and look humble during your acceptance speech."

"Well, naturally," McKay said as though it were the most unnatural thing in the world.

"I'm serious. Take the high road," Capshaw pressed as they filed into the crowded mess hall. "That way you can look down on everyone without straining your neck."

"Oh, har har."

Somewhere up ahead, they heard a woman's voice cutting through the din of human conversation. "Rodney!"

As soon as Mason laid eyes on Katie Brown, he knew his dinner plans had just changed.

McKay stammered, taken off-guard. "Katie, I thought you were …"

A hopeful smile painted her delicate features. "I was scheduled to be on duty for another couple of hours, but I finished a few things early and thought … why not try and catch you while you were here."

"Well … that-that's great," Rodney said.

"You're sure? I know you really don't like surprises."

"No, no! This is … great," he repeated. "It's just usually around here the surprises involve an alien invasion or some other scenario where I inevitably am forced to do the impossible at the last second or we all die in some horrible fashion. That kind of pressure tends to, um … put one off the whole idea of … surprises. Um … but this is … a different kind of thing really …"

Capshaw elbowed his teammate and McKay plastered on a long-overdue smile.

Mason rolled his eyes, floored at the staggering level of romantic ineptitude on display. He and Katie had been back together for months, yet McKay was still acting like a guy who'd never been on a date in his life. It was a wonder the couple had ever made it past second base.

But, in spite of that, the starry-eyed expression of Dr. Brown gave Mason an acute sense of his rapid descent into third wheeldom.

"Have a good time, you two," he said, lightly smacking Rodney's shoulder.

Katie's smile stretched timidly. "You don't mind?"

"Nah." With McKay's workaholic tendencies, he imagined it was hard enough for them to find a little time to themselves and Capshaw wasn't going to be the one to throw a wet towel on the tenderhearted woman's romantic hopes. "Besides, I'd only cramp Rodney's style. Such as it is."

"Very funny." The smug scientist took Katie's hand possessively. "I'd like to see you do better, Casanova."

Katie was already glowing as Mason edged away. "You got me there, McKay. Have a nice night."
So he found himself alone. Temporarily allowed free of the cumbersome sling, Mason procured himself a tray and glanced over the spread the kitchen staff had laid out. It was burger night, complete with all the fixings and tiny condiment packets. He grabbed what he wanted and carried his tray outside to the balcony. It wasn’t as crowded out there and it was a nice night, the last rays of the sun barely visible over the horizon. The stars were already out, twinkling brightly overhead.

As he sat down, it occurred to him that if Wilcox, the base psychologist, were here, he'd probably be giving him grief, telling him he was purposely isolating himself, falling into old patterns. But the truth was Mason had always preferred the quiet.

Growing up in a small town on the border of Colorado and Wyoming, there were the usual sounds of people during the day, but at night when everyone had gone home, nature reigned. The wind would whip down through the mountains and woods outside of town, while deer grazed and owls stalked their prey. There were some nights he'd watch TV and hear the mournful howl of a wolf carried in on the breeze.

His home life hadn't exactly been bustling with activity either. His father had never been in the picture, nothing more to him than a name on his birth certificate, and his mom supported him by working as a nurse at the local hospital. She’d tried hard to stick to the day shift when he was younger to be around for him, but as he grew, she started working graveyards more and more, leaving the nights to him. As a teenager, he'd taken advantage of the freedom a few times, whether it was sneaking out to do stupid things with the guys or sneaking in a girl to do … other things. Pretty typical stuff, but more often than not, he was satisfied being on his own, looking after himself.

He was used to the quiet. It was what he was best at and it didn't bother him at all.

Most of the time.

The wide expanse of ocean under the rapidly darkening sky and the city illuminated below made for an unforgettable view as he ate, but he couldn't seem to get comfortable. He stretched out, propping one leg up in one of the empty chairs across from the rectangular table. He nudged his tray a little further away to give himself some space, but it didn't help. He adjusted and readjusted, like it was his own skin that was the problem. Mason even found himself wishing for more of McKay's oafish attempts to charm Dr. Brown. Anything to drown out the incessant hum of his stream of consciousness, its current invariably carrying him the one direction he couldn't go.

It was his own fault, really. He should've known that spending the better part of the last couple of days hanging out in her domain with Teyla and Sheppard was begging for trouble. Ronon, on his own, he could handle, but bringing Jennifer into the picture … it hurt. So much more than he thought it would. He didn't want it to, but he couldn't help it. His heart kept beating for her even though he couldn't hear it anymore, his imagination filling in the gap with illusions of them together. Early sparring sessions when Ronon was probably pinning her supple, lithe little body to the ground, he thought bitterly, suddenly seized by an overwhelming desire to throw something. What they did when they went for walks during those times when they'd needed a break from the sterile environment of the infirmary. Mealtimes.

Mason put down his half-gone burger and rubbed at the back of his neck. It was pointless, driving himself crazy. He had his reasons for stepping away from Jennifer and they weren't any less valid now. It was … too late and too soon. Too much and, in the same moment, not nearly enough. He wasn't the man she wanted and he certainly wasn't the one she needed.

He was antsy. That's all it was. Too much time with nothing to keep him busy, except PT and the joys of self-reflection. Hopefully, that wouldn't last much longer. Physically, Mason almost felt
normal again; a new normal, but a good one. One he was starting to get used to. Dr. Wilcox seemed pretty convinced that he wasn't a ticking time bomb and could return to duty soon. All that was left was for his shoulder to finish healing and a signature from Beckett, and Mason could finally bury the last two-and-a-half years of his life and move on.

That's all he needed.

"Sergeant Capshaw, come in. This is Dr. Beckett."

Busily coating the salty tip of a french fry in ketchup, he perked up and reached to his earpiece. "This is Capshaw. Go ahead."

"I'm aware your appointment isn't for another hour yet, but I've finished my meeting a mite early. If you'd like, I could squeeze you in now, Sergeant."

He was already up and out of his seat. "On my way."

The Jumper hovered in place as Sheppard activated the ship's comm system. "Tower, this is Sheppard. We're ready whenever you are."

"Understood, Colonel," Banks answered. "Dialing the Gate now."

"Roger that."

The floor began to open beneath the small craft, and once the initial explosion of the Stargate's vortex cleared the room, he lowered the ship into position.

Mr. Woolsey stood just to the right of the active Gate, directly in John's line of sight, stoic and set.

"Nice of you to come and see us off, Mr. Woolsey, but you really didn't need to bother. We'll be back before you know it," John said, his voice determined. As this informal mission fell under his jurisdiction as military commander, John hadn't bothered to run his decision to pinch hit the piloting duties by him. But Woolsey was pretty astute for a lawyer, and after his less-than-politic reaction to last night's 'discussion', John hadn't left much of his thought process to the imagination. Woolsey had probably guessed his plans the minute he heard.

Mr. Woolsey reached for his earpiece. "Are you certain you're feeling up to this, Colonel?"

John could've laughed, except nothing about this was funny. What he was feeling now, last night in Woolsey's office, and later, when he went home. None of it. Fate was toying with his family's future with the IOA on one side and Michael on the other, pulling the strings and threatening to tear apart everything he held dear.

Woolsey's discreetly veiled offer of a final out fell on deaf ears. John was done playing. Maybe Woolsey thought he would've cooled off overnight. He had, in a way, but more than ever, he knew exactly what he was doing and who he was doing it for.

"Never felt better."

"In that case, Colonel ..." Woolsey began, then paused, a decision before him. John waited for the
order to cut the wormhole and override the Jumper's controls, grounding him. To confine him to quarters or to the brig. But then, Woolsey frown softened and, with a distinct note of understanding and concession in his voice, said, "Give the Athosians my sincerest regards."

John nodded slowly, gratefully. The painful ache in his jaw began to ease. "Will do."

"Hey, McKay!" John called, seeing him and Katie Brown up ahead in the corridor. They were moving in the opposite direction as he was; away from the mess hall, with their food in tow. Heat was still burning strong beneath his collar. If he'd taken even a second to put two and two together, John would've recognized the tell-tale signs of a date in progress and just kept walking, but he'd just left Woolsey's office and … well, he wasn't really thinking all that clearly.

Catching up to them, he immediately started in. "I need you to dig into the database and find me the darkest, muddiest hellhole of a planet we've got."

Rodney's forehead creased. "Um … why?"

"I thought I'd take our friendly neighborhood IOA rep on a sightseeing tour of Pegasus hot spots and leave him there. And the minute we get our hands on Michael, he'll have a little company. It'll be like Survivor – Pegasus." John pointed his finger. "Taranis, is it still …?"

"Molten sea of lava, ash cloud poisoning the atmosphere." The blatant question on the scientist's face was trumped only by his insatiable curiosity. "Sufficiently hot and hellhole-like, I should think."

"Sounds perfect."

"Yeah, except one minor hiccup. Somehow, I don't see you getting Caldwell on board with your diabolical scheme to bring bad reality television to a second unsuspecting galaxy. And you'll, most likely, lose the element of surprise at some point during the seven hundred and sixty years or so it takes to get there by Puddlejumper."

"Seven forty-five easy," John corrected. "Accounting for the occasional delay, seven fifty tops."

Rodney radiated sarcasm in abundance. "Oh, that's much better."

"Is everything alright, Col. Sheppard?" Katie broke in.

John answered with an airy huff, the current range of his vocabulary incapable of describing how not alright he was. Still, the question managed to snap him back to himself long enough for him to realize he was busting in on their good time.

"Don't tell me the whole pregnancy hormone thing is contagious," carped McKay.

John made a token attempt to blow the whole thing off. "Nothing, Rodney. It's nothing."

"And the, uh, not-so-spontaneous reenactment of Gilligan's Island?"

"For now, consider it Plan B."
"And Plan A is?"

"A work in progress." Sheppard pursed his lips, thick from too much time already spent in heavy contemplation. He could feel the tension written all over his face, but he couldn't seem to do much about it. "I'll get back to you when I figure it out."

Rodney's interest piqued, he wasn't quite ready to let the subject drop. "Well, according to Beckett, you can see the future now. Can't you just divine the answer with your genetically superior brain?"

John stiffened unexpectedly, surprising even himself.

"Rodney, I don't think this is the best time for that," Dr. Brown gently urged, noting that the half-joking comment had hit a nerve. "Maybe we should …"

"You know, it's not some parlor trick I can just turn on and off, McKay," he heard himself say, words spilling out like drops from a leaky faucet. "I can't control it. I have no idea what caused it in the first place. Right now, I couldn't even land an audition to become the next Carnac the Magnificent."

John's ire and indignation at the unseen threats that seemed to be coming at him from all sides plunged inward and turned on him viciously. An indignant finger pointed in Rodney's direction, his voice growing measured, precise, and bleak. "I've had a … a premonition … exactly once. And it didn't really help all that much, did it? There was no context to it, no way to know what it meant. But I heard you and Ronon talking. Part of me knew something bad was going to happen. I saw it, but I … didn't. Teyla, the baby …" John's hand oscillated angrily in the air, but what came out sounded subdued and remorseful. "I didn't see this coming, McKay. None of it."

Sheppard's mouth shut tight as he tried to wrangle his emotions back into their box. The IOA rep was on his way, toting a hidden agenda that could mean the end of his life as he knew it. An … amazing … but potentially dangerous quirk of genetics was holding his child's life hostage with the woman he loved caught in the middle, and Michael was there, too, ominously peering over his shoulder, biding his time for God knows what. In her present condition, Teyla was completely dependent on him. There was too much riding on his shoulders for him to come unraveled.

When his eyes flickered back up, he saw that any sense of mirth on Rodney's face was long gone. "Sheppard, what's going on? What happened?"

"Nothing. I … shouldn't have …" John didn't trust himself enough to be able to talk about it yet. The weight of his responsibilities coupled with too little sleep was recklessly loosening his tongue. He tipped his chin, took a beat, and started again. "I'm sorry, I … It's been a long day. Can we just forget it?"

"Look, John …"

"Just …" Sheppard bit his tongue, perilously close to snapping. "For now, okay?" He went on without waiting for any sign of acceptance. "I need to get home. Teyla's waiting for me."

And he couldn't let her see him like this.

Ducking his head as he moved away, John mumbled, "I'll see you later."
"Almost done, Doc?"

"I know this isn't the most exciting thing you've done today, but in case you haven't noticed, you have an alien device playing house all over your sensory net. Checking to make certain it's not spreading seems like a prudent use of a few minutes," Carson scolded him, adjusting the chilly metal probe over the exposed skin of Mason's back. "Just once more, now. Can you feel that there?"

"Yeah."

"Very good." The poking and prodding session over, Carson ambled over to retrieve his file and slipped the probe into his coat pocket. He took out a pen in its place and scribbled down a few notes. "There are a few null spots between the C2 and C4 vertebrae and the odd one or two in the upper right quadrant, but your back as a whole appears to remain largely unaffected."

"So what's the verdict?" Mason asked.

"You're as healthy as a horse," Beckett pronounced, peaking out over the top of the brown folder and folding it shut, his signature Scottish lilt wry. "Assuming, of course, that the horse in question is recuperating from experimental surgery."

"But am I catching a ride in the morning?"

Carson tucked the file under his arm and exhaled. "Aye, you're cleared to go. Your incision is healing rather nicely and, according to your trainer, your range of motion is well ahead of expectations. I don't see any reason to keep you. But I'm not quite ready to rubber stamp your return to active duty just yet."

"Fine, fine. Whatever."

Mason jumped off the hospital bed. He could deal with the whole 'one step at a time' thing, just as long as that first step was a big one right out the door, and not having to wear a sling anymore was an added bonus.

Carson smiled and shook his head at Mason hurriedly grabbing his shirt from off the nearby chair. He flung it out in front of him and jerked it back, creating a muffled pop as he straightened the tangled mess. "Give my love to Setisse."

"You got it," he replied, not bothering to look up.

"Carson, I'm taking o—"

Mason heard a quiet gasp and, his hand already halfway inside the sleeve, turned around to see Jennifer screeching to a halt as she rounded the curtain. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I, uh, thought you were finished already," she directed toward both of them. Her eyes widened at him, then, with the oncoming rush of pink in her cheeks, skirted back toward Beckett.

Momentarily paralyzed, Mason glanced down at his bare torso where 765 cut across him in a slate black ribbon, the muscular ridges of his abs below the dead zone buckling as soon as he saw her. He'd never been shy about his body and Lord knew Jennifer had seen it all before, but Capshaw was suddenly very aware he was partially naked.
"It's no problem," he said, starting to get the feeling back in his extremities enough to move.

"It's quite alright, Dr. Keller. We're finished here," Carson assured her while Mason set about pulling the black tee over his head, his dogtags jingling as they flopped in the rapid press of the material. "Are you finally calling it a night, then?"

"Yep. No more theories, patients, or last minute meetings." Mason heard the relief in her voice. After how hard she'd been working lately, she deserved some downtime. "I'm taking down my shingle for the night. I just wanted to let you know before I left that Dr. Daden was here."

"Glad to hear it, luv. I expect I'll be leaving myself, soon enough." Beckett glanced over at Capshaw sliding his shirt into place and casually waved his file. "I've just got a wee bit of paperwork to sort out first."

Mason angled his chin upward in an abbreviated nod. "Thanks again for that, Doc."

"It's my pleasure," Carson said, before excusing himself.

Mason stayed put, waiting for Jennifer to follow behind Beckett, but she stayed. Crossing her arms, she screwed on that shy, half-formed smile she held in reserve for when she was nervous. It seemed like an hour before she finally spoke.

"Can I ask how it went?"

He could feel the intensity with which he was eying her, but he couldn't bring himself to look away. "Doc says I'm getting better. I'm not ready to take on the bad guys yet, but I'm good enough for a quick run offworld."

The anxious smile grew slightly. "I'm glad to hear it."

The painful pause that came next bothered him a lot. It seemed like a slight in remembrance of the natural way they used to be around each other. They both knew they weren't supposed to be friends anymore, but neither knew how to be any different.

"Can I walk you out?" he asked, unable to stand the wall between them for much longer.

She looked honestly happy at the offer. "Sure."

Jennifer led the way with him close at her heels. Mason caught himself as he instinctively reached for the enticing curve in the small of her back, snatching his hand away at the last second, grateful she didn't seem to have noticed.

Trying to cover the slip, he said the first point of common interest that sprang to mind, and having passively watched her work for the last two days, that's where his train of thought headed. "So, um … do you really think Teyla's gonna be okay?"

Her head turned to glance back at him. A hesitant smile still graced her features. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so. She was able to carry the baby well enough before, in spite of the ATA gene being present, so it stands to reason she can again. Once she has enough time to recover, obviously."

Mason quietly agreed.

"She's going to have to shelve her new abilities for a while, but I don't see any reason why she shouldn't make it to her due date."
"What about after that?" he posed as they reached the hallway. He eased up to walk side by side. "What happens after the kid is born? Do you think it'll be permanent? Like SuperTeyla?"

She gave him a look like she couldn't believe what he was suggesting. "I don't think I could even take a guess at this point."
"It'd be kinda cool," he said, with an evocative waggle of his eyebrows as though Jennifer had a say in the matter.

"Sure, it would. And what woman doesn't go straight for the spandex after having a baby?"

Mason shrugged with a conciliatory smirk. "I wouldn't know."

Jennifer let out a light chuckle, and with the soft cadence of her laugh, Capshaw couldn't hold back one of his own. Being with her made everything else seem so easy, like their complex dynamic was the simplest thing in the world. Like he could forget.

Not even sure of where they were going, he followed her lead and they just went.

"I see you're finally giving yourself a night off."

She grinned proudly. "Yep. Now that Teyla is home safe and sound and all the rest of the dirty work is done, from this moment on, I am refusing to think about anything deeper than catching the grudge match going down between the geologists and the biology department tonight." He passed her an inquisitive glance. "Dr. Gallagher and Dr. Johannsen are finally gonna settle the score."

"Ah," he said, a mental image of the two scientists appearing in his memory. "The Nose vs. The Swedish Meatball."

She giggled. "You make Karaoke Night sound like the new bloodsport."

"Two guys with clashing egos working in front of a crowd? I'll bet you a week's pay there's blood before the third song."

"You're such an optimist."

"All I'm saying is that you'd better have a backup plan for this night of leisure of yours."

"I do, as a matter of fact. I'm gonna curl up with my little TV, a big blanket and a bowl of microwave popcorn, and watch a sappy movie. The sappier the better."

He kept walking, the calm domestic picture coalescing in his mind seamlessly.

"I may even break out the fuzzy slippers later," she added with a mischievous nudge.

Mason raised his brow, ignoring the thrill of the electric charge that raced its way up his arm where she'd touched him. His low baritone seemed a little raspier than normal as he asked, "The white ones or the pink ones with the little …"

Jennifer smiled coyly. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Mason laughed. "So you're planning on living it up, then."

"That's the plan," she said softly, blissfully.

He looked over at her, the golden sheen in her hair shining and bouncing under the corridor lights, thinking this is what it must feel like for a moth when it first lays eyes on a flame. He was going to
get burned and worse, she was, and he felt powerless to do anything about it. He saw himself reach out to take her hand, too late to turn back. His hand enveloped hers with ease, her much smaller frame feeling incredible inside his.

"Sounds like a good night, Jen. You should enjoy it."

Her big, hazel eyes peered up at him, so inviting and innocent. She had no idea … To her, he was reaching out in friendship. "Thanks, Mason."

He looked away, glancing ahead as they kept moving together. He realized they were headed in the direction of her quarters. Of course, they were. What kind of living it up happens while you're in your work clothes?

Still trying to hang onto a shred of his dignity, Capshaw let her hand loose and was about to make a polite excuse and let her get on with her night, when Ronon's lumbering shadow appeared, soon replaced with the man himself as he jogged up to them.

Ronon slowed and the two men exchanged measured glances.

"Hey," his friend said, his questioning stare never wavering from Mason. His penetrating eyes roved up and down, taking stock. "What's going on?"

He could probably smell the pheromones for crying out loud.

"Nothing. We were just talking," Mason said.

Ronon didn't have that tear-your-head-off hostility in his face, but he also didn't look convinced. "Talking?"

"Talking," Mason repeated.

Jennifer cut in, clearly glad to see him. "So does this mean you decided to take me up on my offer?"

"What could it hurt, right?" Ronon answered with a shrug.

"You'll love it, I promise," she said with a beaming grin.

An audible grunt ripped from his lungs, Mason feeling as though he'd just been kicked in the stomach. The whole time she'd been telling him about how great her night was going to be … and it was all about a date with Ronon.

"You know, Mason, you could come along," Jennifer said, her bright, naïve eyes looking up at him, seeing only her friend and pouring salt on an open wound. Even Ronon appeared to balk at the idea. "Chuck and Radek have practically turned this into a big numbers game on which department comes out with the win. I've got a few bucks on Johannsen."

He tried, but he felt like a fool who'd known he was walking into an ambush and allowed himself to be led anyway. If he was a better man, or at least more practiced at lying, maybe he could've done a better job at hiding the blinding surge of jealousy that hit him, but as it was he felt the emotion crowding his throat, only infuriating him further. "You two … have a lovely evening."

"Are you sure?"

"Just leave me alone," he hissed as he walked away.
"Honey, I'm home." His hands full, John walked inside, sending a thought to the door behind him. It slid shut obediently. "I got you some fruit, plenty of rabbit food, and a nice big, greasy burger to cancel it all out."

"That sounds fine, John," Teyla's voice carried in from the bedroom.

With one last heavy breath as he went, John took the pair of trays in to her.

She was still on the far side of the bed where he'd left her, except instead of being reclined across the mattress, Teyla was seated on the edge with her back to him, poised with her feet on the ground.

He quickly set down their dinner, not wanting to jump to conclusions. She probably just wanted to get a little blood moving and her radio was still well within reach if something was wrong. "You okay?"

Teyla peered over her shoulder and smiled. "Perfectly. Too well, perhaps. The baby is kicking and …" She sucked in, absorbing a tiny blow. The corners of her mouth curved upward once again, an endearingly shy expression gracing her features this time. "It is wonderful to feel her moving so strongly once again, but her timing leaves something to be desired."

"You've gotta go, huh?" he said, moving around the bed to place himself in front of her.

She nodded, slightly embarrassed, and scooted closer. "I thought I might be rather unsteady on my feet to begin with, so I wanted to wait until you returned. Would you mind?"

Not bothering further with words, his help never in question, Teyla reached out and caught his hands. John braced her as she put her full weight on her legs for the first time in nearly three days. The urge to pick her up and carry her to the bathroom leaped to the fore, but John held it in check. Until Keller said otherwise, times like these were the only chance Teyla had to walk around under her own steam, a challenge for someone as active as she was. He didn't want to take those few opportunities away from her.

John was glad she waited for him, though. She did seem a little shaky for the first few seconds, held tight in his grip, but soon enough, she was able to hold herself firm.

"You good?"

"Yes," she said, releasing one hand to push her hair back behind her. "Thank you."

While she was in the other room, John sat down and started dressing his food. It was a foregone conclusion that Teyla would ask him about his meeting with Woolsey and he wasn't sure what he was going to tell her. The entire way home, he'd been trying to erase the evidence from the lines in his face. He didn't want to upset Teyla and the last thing her overtaxed body needed was more to worry about. If the miniscule trembling as he held her told him anything, it was that she was still in a vulnerable place that only time and rest would heal. How the hell could he justify telling her that, if the IOA rep en route was as unscrupulous as some of the other esteemed members of the international committee, her child could wind up being ripped from her arms, when the odds of it happening were so slim and it might end up doing more harm than good?

But this was Teyla. The same woman who'd watched his back for years, stared into the face of almost certain death by his side and never flinched. She knew well the injustices of life and was capable of making the hard decisions when all other choice had fled. She was a powerful woman, a deadly
force embodied in feminine beauty and elegance. There was nothing Teyla couldn't handle or overcome.

Except losing a child, he reminded himself. That alone, above anything else in all of creation, he thought might destroy her, and he would fall right along with her. All the more reason why he was never going to let it happen.

Even after Teyla had ambled back and settled down on the bed, he didn't have a plan. She picked at her food, taking in a mouthful here and there, casting him a few furtive glances. She expected him to say something, anything. He tried a few times. He squared his shoulders and his lips would part, but nothing presented itself, so he would grab another quick bite to cover his uneasiness.

"I managed to read several chapters while you were gone," Teyla said, taking it upon herself to break the silence.

John swallowed. "Find anything good, yet?"

"Quite a bit. Though, I doubt you and I would share the same opinion on what is good and what is not in this case."

"Probably not." He scarfed down a couple of fries, avoiding her studious gaze.

Her mouth curled, entertaining thoughts far afield of the topic and letting the flimsy excuse for a conversation drop.

John placed his attention on his food, barely tasting it as it passed down his throat in heavy clumps, sitting like boulders in his stomach. Teyla's fork clinked against the plate as she tried to eat. Her appetite was turning sour along with his, he could tell.

"There are no hive ships on approach to the city, I assume?"

"No."

She set down her salad fork and took a few bites out of her burger before deciding she'd had all she could stomach. She pushed her tray away and John, following her lead, gave up the charade as well. He picked the trays off the bed and took them into the kitchen, out of the way. He stopped to get a glass of water and by the time he had come back, Teyla had settled fully against the headboard, though her eyes followed him, filled with questions and doubt.

As he sat down next to her, he watched her lids close briefly, then just as briefly, her exquisite features visibly blanched and pulled away from whatever it was she sought.

John reached across the bed to cover her hand. "Teyla?"

She lifted her faraway gaze from the mattress. "I am fine. I am. I am just … finding it difficult not knowing what it is that you are thinking. It would be so simple for me to …" A regretful, sad smile met him as she exhaled. "The temptation to link our minds is quite strong, but for our child's sake, I do not dare. It pains me to admit it, but I have my doubts that even so small an intrusion of the Ancestor's gifts would be tolerated by my body at this point."

John worked his jaw into a tense grimace.

"It was a comfort knowing I could simply reach out and you would be in here with me." Her fingers slid across her temple. "I suppose I was not prepared to lose that closeness with you so soon after having found it."
John's lips a straight line as his stomach broiled within, he reached out. His thumb retraced her finger's previous path. Teyla breathed in softly at his touch. "Maybe it's for the best. Believe me, Teyla, you don't want to hear what's going on in my head right now."

"What has happened? What did Mr. Woolsey have to say that has you so troubled you can scarcely speak?"

The concern and need in her face belted him in the gut. He didn't think he could lie to her. Even if he tried, she knew him so well he wasn't sure she wouldn't see right through him anyway, but more than that … he didn't want to lie to her. He shook his head and whispered, "I can't do this Teyla," all the while thinking he could. John could so easily picture himself opening up to her, telling her everything and having truth's blunt sword cut her to the quick.

"John, I know things have been difficult, but …" she said quietly, "do not shut me out. Please."

"You don't know what you're asking, Teyla."

"How can I when you say nothing?"

His resistance to her already tenuous, his voice came out low and harsh. "I'm trying to protect you."

Her left hand flew up to take hold of his shoulder. Not to caress but to command. "And who is it that protects you, John?"

No one. A sinister voice stirred in his head, a voice he'd heard and smothered so many times over the years, he barely recognized it as his own anymore. But it always persisted somewhere in the background, reminding him not to let anyone in too deep, because nothing - not torture, a bullet, or even a Wraith feeding - hurt more than loving someone and having them disappear.

Only a moron would open themselves up to that kind of pain. Or someone completely and hopelessly in love.

"I am not so far removed from you that I cannot see what is happening in front of my own eyes, John," Teyla said under her breath.

"And what's that?"

"You fear for me. You fear for our child," she replied curtly. "On top of all we have learned from Jennifer and Carson, whatever it is Mr. Woolsey said to you has only served to make it worse."

He didn't bat an eyelash.

"I was aware that something was bothering him earlier today in the infirmary, but my concerns laid elsewhere at the time. Obviously, he has shared his concerns with you and you have decided that it would be better for me to live in ignorance."

"I haven't decided anything." John heard the edge in his tone, his desire to take solace with her bleeding through his walls in permeating waves and damning his reasons for keeping silent to near oblivion. His throat was raw.

"You do not have to take on all of life's burdens by yourself, John. Just talk to me. Let me in."

"What do want to know, Teyla? That I'm pissed off? That I'm so frustrated I can barely see two feet in front me? That I don't think I've ever been more scared in my entire life?" His throat caught. "You don't want to hear that stuff, Teyla, and I don't want it for you!"
Teyla's deep brown eyes began to glisten, but the determination on her face didn't ebb. "I want to know, and as our baby's mother, I have that right. I have the right to know anything and everything concerning my child and anything that has the power to make the man I love - my chosen partner - feel as you do."

John wrestled with a growl caught in the hollow of his throat and choked it down. Why did she have to go and make a valid point, when it flew in the face of everything he was trying to do for her? Why couldn't she just let it go and let him keep her safe?

Because she loves you, stupid. She's just as stubborn as you are, and she knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you need her right now.

The skin surrounding his eyes went taut, pressure pounding his forehead. Feeling too conflicted to think, too at war with himself to even breathe, John put a hand up and hid his face inside the span of his palm.

"John." He felt the mattress give as she scooted in closer. A small hand ran down his shoulder the entire length of his arm to join with his free hand. Below, Teyla's fingers interwove with his, while above, she gently urged him to look at her. When he finally did, love swelled within her dark, almond eyes. Her arm encircled his neck, allowing him to bury himself in her warmth instead.

"You and I, we are one in all things, John Sheppard," she said quietly, her voice a whispered song in his ear. "We share our joys and our pleasures without hesitation, and they are, by far, the greatest moments I have ever experienced. But there is a balance in all things, which also means that what hurts you, hurts me. You cannot spare me that. It was already too late the moment you came home and I saw the look on your face."

He let out a short, anguished grunt in the soft curve of her neck. He should have known he never stood a chance. She could read him like a book, chapter and verse.

John lifted up and sat back in the vain hope that creating a little distance might help him think clearer. Maybe he couldn't avoid hurting her by opting to keep his mouth shut. She already knew something was very wrong and worrying herself back into the infirmary wouldn't do either of them any good. Not to mention, she would resent him for withholding information that she - he admitted to himself grudgingly - had the right to know. But he was certainly gonna do his best to make this easier on her. He needed to choose his words carefully.

He wet his lips and nodding absentely, he murmured, "Woolsey's worried."

Teyla straightened as well, listening intently.

"The IOA are holding their cards pretty close to the chest and he's pretty convinced something's up," John said.

"He believes they may have more on their agenda than what we have been led to believe," Teyla surmised.

John confirmed that for her and went on. "If this guy shows up and starts making it a priority to dig into everything that's gone on around here lately, reports about killing an enemy prisoner are going to throw up all kinds of red flags. Your new abilities, the baby …"

Teyla sighed. "I see."

"Do you?"
"I am not so foolish as to believe that there would be no consequences for my actions, John. I was sent in for an interrogation, and instead of getting the answers I was meant to, a man is dead. It is only right that I be held accountable for that."

"No. Teyla, I'm not talking about getting your wrists slapped. And, by the way, I happen to think going into premature labor is consequence enough, thanks." John exhaled heavily, tugging at his chin. "The baby, she's one-of-a-kind. She's unique and unlike anything the IOA or anyone else has ever seen before. And in the grand scheme of things, people—especially the kind of people they've got working for the IOA—don't tend to deal well with the unknown."

Teyla's fingers splayed protectively over her sizable bump, her face growing still and dark. "You believe they will be afraid of her. They will presume she is dangerous."

"Maybe," he said in a coarse whisper. "Honestly, I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. Depends on who's running the show, I guess. But I don't think we can afford to put anything past those guys."

John watched her turn away to peer out the windows into the night sky beyond. She didn't say anything for a while and he knew all too well the kinds of thoughts rushing through Teyla's head. The possibilities of what some people were capable of when, in their ignorance, they perceived a threat. About this time an hour ago, he was seriously thinking about remodeling Woolsey's office. The idea that anyone could think of his infant daughter as a danger infuriated him on a level he hardly knew existed before today, something totally innate and instinctive, primordial in its power over him.

He supposed this was what it felt like to really be a father. He could hardly imagine what Teyla, as a mother, was feeling.

For the moment, she was staring across the room. Unaware.

Almost in a trance.

"Teyla?"

Frenetic images came funneling across his vision, jarring in their intensity and making about as much sense as a lone whisper in a roaring sea of static. They slowed quickly allowing John to pick up hints of what he was seeing before they were gone again, a new image already coming and going in a rush. Running through a forest thick with trees. A night unnaturally bright. He glanced down at his hands. They weren't his.

"Teyla …"

Then, everything stopped. The swirling barrage slammed into focus on one moment. He was looking up at himself, staring into his own face. Teyla was looking up at him, a carefully swaddled bundle in her arms. Their enemies were swarming around them, closing in on them quickly. One was already here. Too close. Much too close.

He couldn't move. No, it wasn't her that couldn't move. Terrified, sore, and on the verge of tears, he … she gently pushed the small—very small—infant into his arms. "Take her. You have to take her, John. Run."

NO!

Cringing, John wrested his consciousness from Teyla's, refusing to watch any more. That hadn't happened yet. It wasn't going to!
In the bed, Teyla gasped, breathing like a sprinter after the hundred-yard dash. "I am … sorry. I did not …"

"Are you okay?" His gaze rolled over her, searching swiftly for any sign of pain or oncoming contractions.

She nodded quickly, her eyes wide and wet. She was shaking. "I am fine … I am fine."

"What … When was it?"

"I do not know."

John pulled her into his arms, hugging her so tightly he felt her heart thudding against his ribcage.

"It's okay, Teyla … s'okay … s'okay," he whispered quietly over and over again, laying desperate kisses on her forehead, wanting feverishly to make her feel safe again. "I'm gonna take care of this, I swear. No matter what I have to do, nothing is going to happen to her. Or you."
"Jumper One to the Athosian camp, this is Sheppard. Come in," the colonel repeated for the third time. The Jumper sailed over miles of white-tipped forest below. Mason zipped up his gray parka and checked his pockets as the radio finally crackled to life.

"Colonel Sheppard, my apologies for the delay," came Feylon's grizzled bass. "These old bones do not move as well as once they did."

Sheppard's shoulders began to relax, glad to get an answer. "Not a problem."

"We were not expecting to hear from you so soon. To what do we owe the honor?"

"Just dropping by for a friendly visit." Mason handed Sheppard his coat as the colonel intuitively cued the navigational display on the HUD. "We're headed your way. Should be touching down in just under four minutes."

"Understood, Colonel. We look forward to seeing you."

"Same here. Sheppard out."

They reached their destination right on schedule, and thanks to a handy combination of inertial dampeners, excellent piloting, and the thick blanket of snow cushioning the ground, they barely felt it when the Puddlejumper finally touched down outside the settlement.

Mason strode down the ramp with Sheppard right behind, the state of the Athosian's new home capturing his attention. It looked so different than the last time he was here, a trip cut short when an overdose nearly killed him and he'd had to be taken back to Atlantis. Previously, it had been in a state of flux with tents providing shelter, building materials in strategic piles all over the campsite, and fields in need of planting; the makings of a new, stronger community that had yet to see fruition. He'd been too sick to return with Colonel Sheppard and the volunteers to help finish the construction, so he hadn't seen all the progress they'd made since. Even in the dead of winter, he could see the Athosians had made this place a home.

Cooking fires, with their fine gray pillars of smoke dotting the sky, kept both pots and the hands of those working outdoors warm. One man chipped away at the crust of ice that had formed in the livestock's water trough overnight, while nearby, a quartet of older children busied themselves building a snow fort. They were soon beset by the "enemy", a trio of smaller kids led by their general, seventeen-year-old Jinto, pelting them with snowballs before being forced to retreat. The thick animal hide tents remained, providing them cover and getting splattered with snow, but most of the activity seemed to be centered around the three large permanent structures that had been raised, far better suited to keeping out the chill and damp of the elements.

Separating themselves from the rest, two cloaked figures walked toward them. After a few seconds, it was easy enough for Mason to identify Feylon's stilted gait, the winter winds obviously not agreeing with the older man's arthritis. It was harder to make out the one with him the way they were clutching at the sides of their cloak, but then a compact yet firm feminine hand reached out to offer Feylon support. It was a hand that could have only belonged to Jol, his adversary and near-constant companion. Confirming Mason's suspicions, her hood dropped away in sudden gust, revealing her weathered, heart-shaped face and the signature streak of gray within her nut brown hair.

"Colonel Sheppard," Jol greeted them both heartily as they drew near, catching them one at a time in
a snug embrace. "Sergeant Capshaw, my dear boy, your color has much improved from when last I
saw you. To this day, I have yet to see another so pale in all my life."

Mason didn't try to deny it, given how ill he'd been when he left, though he did suggest that his
current pallor was probably more the frigid cold turning his cheeks red than anything else.

Feylon was much more reserved, offering them both a simple handshake and a traditional greeting.
"It has been many days, Colonel."

"Too many," Sheppard answered, grasping his hand.

"Is it only the two of you?" Feylon inquired while Jol peered behind them, apparently searching for
stragglers.

"Teyla did not come with you?" she asked. Teyla's people knew her well enough to know that if she
were able she would've come along with them. Almost imperceptibly, Jol's grip tightened around
Feylon's arm in unexpressed worry.

Capshaw and Sheppard exchanged a quick look between them before the colonel explained. "We,
uh ... had kind of a close call with the baby." Jol's hand covered her mouth as Feylon's attitude
remained staid. "Teyla's alright," John added quickly, "She wanted to be here, but the Doc's got her
on bed rest for a while."

"I see," Feylon said, soberly. "It is fortunate Teyla has such friends as you, who are able to render
aid in such a circumstance, Colonel."

"We are indeed grateful," Jol said.

Sheppard's gaze dropped momentarily toward the ground. "Well, I'll be sure to pass that on to Dr.
Keller. She's the one who deserves the credit."

"Please. On all of our behalves," Jol insisted. She squeezed John's shoulder. "Come. It would not do
to keep you out in this weather for long."

The group soon fell into step, walking toward the main camp.

"Surely, this is not all you came to speak with us about, Colonel," Feylon said as they went.

Sheppard lips moved back in a tight, acknowledging grimace. "Actually, there are a few things I
need to discuss with Halling, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Not at all," said Feylon. "Halling and a few of the others left early this morning to cut some
additional firewood, but if you do not mind waiting, I am sure he can be fetched relatively soon.
They will not have gone far from the settlement."

"Sounds fine. We're not in any hurry."

"And as you wait, Sergeant, I believe there is someone here who would be most disappointed not to
see you while you are here." Jol regarded Mason with a knowing smile. He cast a searching glance
over at the melee going on at the unfinished snow fort.

"If you are seeking young Setisse, I believe I saw her drawing in the south building this morning. I
am sure she is still there, and it is as good a place as any to wait until Halling has returned from the
forest."
"That'd be great." Mason's hand slipped inside his pocket, checking one last time to make certain it was still there as they continued on.

It was strange for him to be back here again. When he'd said goodbye the last time, Mason had truly thought it would be the last. Holding Setisse while Jennifer tenderly watched over him, a part of him hoped and prayed he was wrong; the part of him that was able to look the weeping, traumatized little girl in the eye and tell her he was going to be fine, even though he hadn't been able to see any way he ever would. If it weren't for Jennifer, Beckett, and McKay, he wouldn't be here at all. Without Ancient Device 765 and its seemingly miraculous properties, his future had been, at best, non-existent. At worst, Mason feared he would've become a gaunt and raving spector, haunting a padded room in the clutches of a straightjacket.

So much had changed since the morning Setisse had found him OD'd and hanging onto life by his fingernails. He wasn't going to become just another person who had come into his smallest friend's life only to fade out and disappear. There was a bright white light at the end of the tunnel now that hadn't had been there before. It was sometimes blinding. His eyes were still having a hard time adjusting to the light, but at least Mason had the chance to make things right again.

For Setisse, anyway.

Mason's eyes flew open, startled awake by what he didn't know. His arm, previously flung crookedly over his head, came forward and yanked the ear phones out of his ears. Not hearing anything, he reached over and put his hand on the light control. Squinting in the sudden brightness, he checked his watch.

23:08. Not too late, but late enough apparently.

After taking off and leaving Jennifer and Ronon to their plans and nearly forty-five minutes of quality moping, he'd caught up with Santiago and Tyler in the rec room and played a few rounds of pool. With everything on Mason's mind and Tyler going through his latest break-up, all talk of girls and guys was off the table. He spent the evening with nothing but a few ex-teammates, a good game, and a beer.

It had been good to get out, but as soon as he got home, the quiet had started to bother him again. Losing patience with himself, he'd turned up his iPod and that was that. He'd fallen asleep at some point.

The unusual jingle made by the Ancient-style doorbell sounded again inside his quarters and Mason realized what it was that had woken him.

"Hang on a sec," he yelled at the door, deftly rolling up his ear phone cord and setting his iPod on the nightstand. With a throaty grunt, he rolled out of bed. Slightly drowsy, Mason leaned on the door jamb and waved the locks free, allowing the door to open.

"Jennifer."

He lazily craned his neck to check out the hallway beyond, halfway expecting Ronon to be hovering protectively somewhere nearby. But with the exception of the odd passerby, he didn't see anyone. Just Jennifer, playing with her hands and dressed like she'd just come from her big night out. The corners of her mouth were tight, her face introspective and determined.
"Hi."

"What do you want?" Mason quit his leisurely posture and folded his arms. Considering the lengths he'd already gone to try and put his restless mood aside with little success, he wasn't in any shape to handle Round Two.

His brusque tone hit its mark, Jennifer bending quietly to absorb the verbal blow. "You ... don't have to start with me, Mason. I didn't come here to fight."

"Then, what are you doing here?"

Jennifer looked up at him, a shudder under her breath. "I just wanted to say ... you win."

He paused. "What?"

"You win," she repeated, her voice a little stronger this time. "You said you didn't want to be friends and ... with how hard things were on you, I tried to respect your wishes." She swallowed. "I guess I was hoping that things might change after you got better, but you don't have to worry. I won't be bothering you anymore."

She spun and walked away, her flowing blonde waves bouncing behind her and leaving him floundering.

"Jennifer, wait," he choked out, his bare feet anchored to the floor.

What are you doing? She just gave you exactly what you wanted.

He should just let her go and leave it at that, but something in her eyes hit him just as she turned. Earlier, in giving into his desire to make things easier, he'd also given her a taste of hope that things could go back to the way they were. Snapping at her and storming away had only snatched that hope back and torn it in two. He'd really hurt her.

"Oh ... dammit ... Jennifer, wait!"

His legs kicked into gear, carrying him swiftly down the hall. To the soft padding of feet against floor, Mason's thoughts raced. What was he going to do? Talk her out of it? He couldn't do that, but he couldn't just let her leave like this either.

"Jennifer, hang on."

She stopped under the pressure of his hand hooking her elbow. Her cautious gaze lifted to take on his and Mason's heart sunk. Hundreds of unasked questions brimmed inside her eyes' soft halo, probably there since the first time he'd said goodbye. He frowned, his will already seizing up, vulnerable to everything he found extraordinary about her.

With longing stinging them to the tips, his fingers wrapped around the bare flesh of her arm.

"Just ... come back, okay? We can talk."

She gave him a clipped, fluttering nod of agreement and he released her arm. He and Jennifer walked the relatively short distance back to his quarters in silence, the metallic swish of his door opening and closing again the only sound to be heard. Deep in thought, considering all he wanted and all he needed to say, Mason forgot about being polite and asking her to sit. Jennifer just stood in the middle
His eyes wandered over her. Along with khakis and v-neck blouse, a brown leather bracelet hung around her wrist. The workmanship seemed familiar, the symbol woven inside the leather bands distinctly Satedan. "Nice bracelet," he finally said, stepping forward and taking her hand to get a closer look.

Jennifer looked down at it. "Ronon made it for me. When we were on Lairius."

Mason nodded, remembering him working on something, but he hadn't known what it had turned out to be. He fingered the thin strips Ronon had intricately worked into something unique and beautiful. It didn't mix with the hand holding it. His right hand was rough, calloused, and riddled with fading white slits, leftovers from a night he'd move heaven and Earth to erase.

"It's … nice," he said again, having a difficult time speaking at all.

"I like him," Jennifer said quietly. She lifted her eyes, taking his with her. "I like him a lot."

"Ronon's a good guy." He let her wrist go and backed up a pace. He turned his head a little to the side, finding the wall a much safer place to look.

"Is … Is he what's …"

"No," Mason answered quickly. "You can date whoever you want, Jennifer. I can't say it's easy seeing you with him, but … no. That's not it. Not all of it, anyway."

"I don't understand." He caught a teasing glimpse of moisture in her eyes. "If it's not Ronon, then … why can't we go back?"

"What is there to go back to, huh?" He flashed her rueful smile, wishing he'd never told her how he felt. Denial was sometimes far less complicated. "Chatting while you mix my medication? Watching late night movies together because I'm too sick to sleep?"

"Don't."

"What? You want me back crashing on your couch?" he said in a mocking voice. "Seriously, Jen, it's not worth it."

She shook her head, furiously spurning his last ditch attempt at denial. "Just stop it, okay? You can jerk me around all you want. You can ignore me for weeks and then, be … sweet and funny, and then act like we've never met before again. But I am not going to let you pretend that it wasn't more than that. Our friendship was never about me being your doctor and you being my patient." Jennifer took in a painful rush of air. "I care about you. I didn't want to lose you then, and I don't want to lose you now."

"You've already lost me, Jen. You just don't know it, yet. I'm not even …" He hunted for the right words to explain. He wasn't entirely sure he knew exactly what was going on in his head. "I'm … screwed up."

"You're better now. You can …" she caught herself, "We can move on."

"It's not that simple."

"What isn't?"
"I …" Mason clenched his teeth. Verbalizing what was bothering him so much seemed impossible. She deserved the truth, all of it, even if it wasn't what she wanted to hear. Even if all it did was hurt them both more. "When I got shot, I went down and I … don't think I ever got back up. Not really. I've been just … existing … ever since. Waiting for my body to catch up with the rest of me."

He looked up and saw Jennifer hanging on his every word, wanting to understand so badly what it was that was driving him away from her.

"There have been times when … I … I wished my team had left me there. I wanted to die."

Her eyes fell as she said softly, "I know."

Mason nodded. His deepest, most guarded secret and she was the only one who knew. Even at his lowest, he couldn't envision himself eating his own gun, but if someone else had pointed one at his heart and threatened to end him once and for all, he might not have stepped out of the way. He didn't know when she'd figured it out, but he had a feeling it was some time before his overdose, when he'd awoken on fire and in the grip of torturous nausea. He'd been slipping long before that.

"You wouldn't let me drown, Jen, and I'm more grateful for that than you'll ever know."

She smiled appreciatively, but it didn't last. He wasn't finished and she knew that, too. "But things have changed."

"Things have changed," he echoed. "Now that I'm not doped up or sick or in extreme pain anymore, I can look in the mirror and I see bits of the old me coming back. I feel different. It's … incredible, and it scares the hell out of me. I've changed so much I'm not sure who I'm supposed to be anymore."

Jennifer reached for his hand. "You'll figure it out."

"I know. I know it'll be okay and so much of that is because of you, Jennifer, but …" He hated himself for saying this out loud, even as he was selfishly relishing her gentle touch. "I need to go back to work. I need time to figure it all out and … I can't do that with you."

The words fell from his mouth like a lash across bare skin, Jennifer wincing as they landed, and Mason wanted nothing more than to take it back. He tightened his grip around her hand, squeezing and holding her firm. Shaky, she kept her composure. "I get it. I remind you of everything you want to forget."

Mason snaked his left arm around her neck and pulled her in close. He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "No," he said, regretfully. "That's not it at all."

Jennifer looked up into his eyes. "Then, why?"

He exhaled and answered with every ounce of … love … he had. God, when had he been so stupid as to fall in love? "You make me forget, Jennifer. About everything. I care about you so much that when I'm with you nothing else matters." Nothing. Not the past, not the future. Not even his recovery. Earlier, he'd nearly forgotten Ronon existed. Then when she was gone, it all flooded back and it hurt so much he couldn't breathe. "You could be a crutch for me. You and I could go back to being friends, and everything that happened between us could all just become like a bad dream."

"Would that be such a bad thing? Don't you deserve a fresh start?"

"It might feel like a clean slate, but it wouldn't be. Not really," he said. His expression darkened. "You can't just sweep things under the rug and hope they disappear. Things that happened between
you and I … I can't just forget. Not if I ever want to really get better."

She eyes darted from side to side, confused, so he reached down and brought her wrist up directly in front of her, displaying his former handiwork and the scars on his hand that had followed. It happened to be the same one holding Ronon's bracelet, like even now his friend was protecting her from him. "Do you remember this?"

"Yes," she answered at a whisper.

"But you don't care."

Jennifer's face grew tough. "No."

"I sure as hell do. It's seared into my brain. Someone might as well have taken a branding iron to it. I can't … I shouldn't be able to just forget about that and walk away like it never happened!" It came out gnarled, thunderous, and harsher than he had wanted. "I could've hurt you, Jennifer. Really hurt you."

"I don't believe that."

"You're too trusting."

"It wasn't your fault."

"It wasn't yours, either!"

A tear streaked down her cheek and Mason felt drawn to take her pain away. He hugged her close and tilted his head so that his mouth was almost level with her ear. "You didn't deserve that, Jen. I was out of control before you ever got here. You didn't do anything wrong. You could never deserve that."

Her arms encircled around his back, gripping him snuggly and molding them together. Mason sucked in deeply, unprepared for how overwhelming it would feel to be this close to her. Caught inside the heady sensation, the skin of his cheek and the tip of his nose caressed the softness of her temple, moving down to nuzzle her along the slope of her cheek. He could hear her breath growing faster, his hands beginning to run slowly down the length and curve of her back and leaning in with his jaw to get high on the sweet scent of her one last time.

They breathed as one, his eyes a navy fire as they scorched her skin with barely controlled want, his mouth defying sense as it crept toward hers, brushing her cheek as it went. His necked arched teasingly, threatening to carry him too far and make him forget again. Her heavily lidded eyes peered up at him, her lips slightly open, panting heavily in nervous anticipation of him binding them together in a kiss.

Damn you, he berated himself, stifling a moan. He wanted her so badly. He loved the little green flecks in her eyes and the sweet timbre of her voice. He loved her stubbornness and her soft heart. Even after all he'd told her about needing time to properly recover, even after promising Ronon that he wouldn't get in the way—if he knew she thought about him with the same raging, neverending fire as he did her, he wouldn't care about any of it. He'd run his pleading lips down to sample the salt and sweet of her neck, and back up to find out if she still wore that strawberry lip gloss that he could still taste in his dreams. He'd wrap his arms beneath the swell of her backside, carry her over to his bed, and try to make who and what he was become nothing more than a fevered moan on her lips. He would pour himself into her and let her drown out the haunted memories of his past.

He'd forget everything, even the fact he was still the same unstable jerk who'd already hurt her once.
Reluctantly, Mason backed away. An aching groan escaped as air rushed into the tight space he'd vacated, clearing his vision but strangling his voice. "Goodbye, Jennifer."

Speechless, a tear sped down her cheek leaving a watermark on her flushed complexion.

Mason reached out with his thumb and with a careful stroke, wiped it away. "That's what you really came to say, remember?"

Her lips parted as though she believed herself capable of arguing, but nothing came out. No more arguments. Just silence.

"Just say it," he prodded her. He tried again to persuade her to let go. She had to be the one to let go, because he wasn't sure he ever could. "Once you do … you can stop worrying. You can turn around and walk away with a clear conscience. Live your life." He attempted a smile as razor blades tore at his throat. "Don't look back."

She was crying. God, he wished she wouldn't cry. "Mason, I …"

"Don't, Jen. Just … don't. Just say goodbye."

She nodded, slowly, painfully. She finally understood. She was finally finding that strength he knew was there, and surrendering to what was ultimately best for both of them.

"Goodbye, Mason."

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"Masy!"

Caught with his mind light years away, Capshaw found his arms full, a whirling ball of fur-lined leather and legs attached to a tinkling pixie-like voice.

"Hey, kid," he said, returning the enthusiastic hug. Setisse's long, dark hair tickled his nose, but he didn't move to brush the errant hairs away, instead peeking over her shoulder at the scattered papers left in her tiny wake. "I brought something for you," he said.

She lifted her head and, setting her pint-sized body back on the ground, he pulled out a Snickers bar and crouched down to her level. "I promised, remember? You ate your carrots, so this is rightfully yours."

Shyly, she reached up and took it into her palm. "You promised to come back, too."

"And here I am," he said, gesturing broadly to the tables and warm furnishings around them.

"Does this mean you are all better, too?" she asked, hopefully chewing on her pinky.

A hot mist encroached around his eyes and he quickly wiped it away. Gulping down a sudden, hard lump in his throat, he smiled. "Close enough."
While John waited for Halling to arrive, he sat at one of the long tables nearest to the fireplace, not far from where Setisse was munching happily on a candy bar and showing Capshaw her latest drawings done with bits of leftover charcoal from the fire. The chill wasn't that bad. The relief crews he'd arranged from Atlantis had seen to it that the community building was comfortably insulated from the elements, but Jol had insisted.

"We get so few these days, but never let it be said that the Athosian people do not know how to treat a guest," she explained shortly before all but shoving a piping hot cup of tea in his hands.

"I'm not a guest, just a friend," he corrected her.

"All the more reason not to let you freeze, Colonel," she said with a wink.

It was nearing noon on this planet and Jol busied herself preparing the afternoon meal for her people. It was just as well. John liked the strong-willed woman a lot, but she wasn't one to mince words and he wasn't quite ready to deal with the reams of questions he could tell simmered on the tip of her tongue.

He cautiously sipped at his tea. One more conversation about all of this was probably all he could take. He couldn't tell Capshaw because, being military, they could arrest him as an accessory just for failing to report him, but he'd had a long talk with Ronon and Rodney late last night after Teyla had gone to sleep. They had been bad enough. He was glad to leave it to Halling to be the one to fill Jol in later.

He'd already said everything he had to say.

He and Teyla clung to each other for nearly two hours before John caught himself nodding off. Considering he'd scarcely slept more than two hours at a stretch since before the funeral, the day Teyla had first hit the floor, he wasn't all that surprised.

Sheppard got up and drew Teyla a bath. After doing a stint in the infirmary, there was nothing quite like being able to wash off the acrid mixture of angst, disinfectant, and the leftover aura of other people's well-meaning but unwelcome handling. He was also hopeful the hot water would do its part to help her relax. He wanted them both to get a good night's sleep, for once.

The large tub filled and, brimming with delicate, white bubbles, John helped her undress. Teyla was moving slowly, tiredly. He'd monitored her closely after her unforeseen glimpse of the future—or a future—ready to call Keller at a moment's notice, but thankfully, Teyla's sapped energy seemed to be the sole side effect. Knowing what he had in mind, she allowed him to manipulate her body without a single word of either approval or protest as he got her into the bathroom.

She slipped gracefully into the water, her blossoming curves taking his breath away. Her eyelids fluttered to a close as she immersed herself in the water, a deeply satisfied moan signaling her pleasure.

He propped his shoulder against the wall, leaning in the doorway. At least, he'd done something right today. "Let me know when you're ready to get out," he said softly, turning to give her some privacy.

"John," Teyla called after him. "Would you join me?"
His eyebrows rose at the sound of her voice. That was the first time she'd spoken in quite a while, being forced to experience a possible version of herself give up her child painful to process. It hadn't been an easy experience for either of them, and he had the feeling Teyla was primarily asking him in because she couldn't reconcile letting him out of her reach just yet.

"I don't know. If I get in there with you, we'd be leaving John Jr. in a pretty bad spot," he quipped, his eyes roving overtly over her slick, naked skin. All joking aside, even if it hadn't been near the top of the list of things they weren't allowed to do for a while, sex was the last thing on his mind, but he was going to do his best to try and lighten the mood.

He couldn't help but smile when he met with success and Teyla subtly grinned. "Perhaps you might consider it anyway? For me?"

Appearing as put upon as possible, John began to tug at his t-shirt. "I'm just gonna have to take a cold shower afterward."

She made a face that suggested she wasn't buying the martyr act.

He smirked, his clothes hitting the floor. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time I've taken a cold shower because of you. Probably won't be the last."

Raising his leg over the side, John climbed in behind her. Maneuvering himself into the water, his legs parted and stretched around Teyla while she wedged herself into the newly formed pocket. Her head rested against his chest, her hair pillowing across his shoulder. He pressed a kiss to her temple and she sighed contentedly, closing her eyes.

"Yes, that is much better."

John grinned. He reached out for the soap sitting on the edge of the tub. Working it into a lather, he ran it over Teyla's body, into the contours of her neck, over the soft rise of her breasts above the waterline. Happy in the quiet moments between them, John washed her everywhere he could reach without making her move. He, then, made his way downward with a wash cloth, lightly scrubbing her arms, the swell of her hard stomach and the hidden reaches below. He reveled in the soft sound of her breath catching as he worked, moving to massage her back next, unabashedly looping his left arm across her bosom to brace her, while his right hand pressed the cloth carefully along her spine.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Mmm … wonderful …" She tilted her head toward his center, peering quietly up at him. "You must do this more often."

John's head curled around her, hugging her neck and nuzzling his nose along her cheeks, breathing her in. He loved this woman so much, every square inch of her. "You know I'd do anything for you, don't you?" his low whisper soft in her ear. "I'd go to the ends of the universe for you, Teyla."

"As I would for you," she hummed as her hand ran along his thigh. "And farther."

He let the washcloth slip through his fingers and slide out of reach. His arm encircled her midsection, their future daughter. Their future, period. "No matter what happens, if it means leaving Atlantis and never looking back, I'm going to take care of you and the baby. I don't care what some vision says, I won't let anything get in the way of us being a family. A real family."

John wasn't about to go placing the facts of his family's future in the hands of a random flash that had proven far too unpredictable on every other occasion they'd had to meet someone with the ability. As far as he was concerned, and he was sure Teyla would agree, their future wasn't written yet. It was...
for them to make and he was going to make sure it turned out differently.

"It would be difficult to leave here," she said, her voice breaking slightly. "This city has become my home in so many ways. I had hoped to raise her here."

"I know. Me, too." John said sadly but resolute. "I've got to start putting together a few plans, just in case it comes to that. Hopefully, we'll never need them, but …"

"We must be prepared," she finished.

He kissed her cheek. "You deserve better than this, Teyla. After everything you've sacrificed to be here, everything you've done to help us … you deserve more."

"As long as I have you and our child, I have everything that I need."

John looked down at her, amazed. She made it seem so easy, picking up and moving on. Of course it was hard on her, the idea of having to leave behind her friends and the life she'd made here, but Teyla had done this before. More times than she could probably count thanks to the Wraith. And thanks to him.

"I'm sorry for getting you into this mess," he said, his thoughts years ago and a mile away as Teyla rolled over, lying across his lap, sloshing the hot water around as she moved. "You know, that very first day I sat in the Chair and it lit up, I thought … maybe I'd finally found my place." A nostalgic smile slipped free. "An insane place—and believe you me, Elizabeth had her hands full trying to talk me into this crazy mission—but, I thought maybe it was a place I could belong. That my ATA gene was my golden ticket to a better life. Someplace I could make a difference."

Her open gaze came even with his, listening attentively as he bared his thoughts more openly than he had in a long, long time. "It made you feel special."

"When you walk into a room that's been asleep for thousands of years, or touch something that won't listen to anyone else, and it responds as if it was there, waiting for you and only you the whole time …" John paused. That feeling still overwhelmed him with awe. "How could you not feel something with that?"

She smiled.

He shook his head to himself. "I never thought I'd say this, but for the first time, I look at you and I wish I could give it all back. You deserve a normal life, Teyla. A normal, trouble-free pregnancy that doesn't include the possibility of having to go on the lam to keep your child safe. A real home. Everything I can't give you. Me and my stupid genes."

John saw her move to comfort him and stopped her. He made her sit still in his lap and caressed her round stomach, that special place carrying the little life he loved so much and wanted so badly. His hazel eyes misted over in unexpressed regret while he rubbed back and forth across her belly.

"We might never be able to have another baby, Teyla. I … might never be able to give you another baby. Any pregnancy you have with me, the same genetic problem would be there. The ATA gene and Wraith gene would be at each other's throats and you would be the one to get caught in the crossfire. We might get lucky again, but … we could also wind up having a string of miscarriages." Something that would break his heart as well as hers. "And that's my fault."

He looked away and swallowed thickly, though his hands remained fixed and curled on his unborn child.
"I was not aware you had given thought to us having more children, John," she finally said, covering his occupied hands with her own.

He took in her radiance, her natural beauty. "I love you, Teyla. So much more than I ever thought was possible. How could I not?"

Teyla's eyes shone. "I confess I have had thoughts of adding to our family one day, as well." Her fingers lifted up to stroke his face with a warm flick of her thumb. "When I have been blessed with such a man, how could I not?"

John's mouth broke out in a smile, despite seeing the worry behind her eyes, and despite his fantasies of giving Teyla as many children as she ever wanted seeming more like the impossible dream than one man's meager hopes for the future.

At least he still had her, and he still had his daughter within his grasp.

"It did occur to me, however, that any future pregnancies might prove difficult," she admitted. "It is true we have knowledge that we did not have before that may help us to manage it better, but … it still hardly seems possible that my body could reject a child of its own making for the sake of such a small difference." Teyla grimaced. "I cannot help but wonder, if I had done things differently … perhaps if I were stronger …"

"Your strength is what's gotten her this far," he said, adoringly. "I've never met anyone who could even come close to you, Teyla."

Her face brightened at his approval and her hands left her stomach to ensnare his neck. He followed her, creating waves as his arms provided the perfect complement by embracing the small of her back and drawing her flush against him.

"If you are sure in that belief, John, then you must also believe our love and my strength may yet bear us another child, someday.." Teyla's lips brushed his cheek as she spoke. "I pray you are right, but if not … if having only this little girl to be a mother to is the price I must pay for having you in my life, then I will gladly pay it."

"You shouldn't have to."

"Nevertheless, I would. Regardless of your genetic heritage and mine, I would not trade this child for any other. She is special, and not because of any mystical abilities. Because she is yours."

John could barely breathe, his chest seemed already too full with love for this woman to be bothered with something as trivial as oxygen. "Carson called her a miracle."

"She is."

"So is her mother."

John sought Teyla's lips, catching them in a flourish of comfort and passion, soft, lingering, yet desperate in the need of their two hearts to connect and find home in each other. The luscious sweeps of their mouths against one another were in perfect harmony, John lacing his fingers through her hair and caressing her both with his body and his tongue. Her hand at the back of his neck pulled him in closer as the other traveled down the hardened muscle and hair beneath her heaving breasts, an enchanting sigh escaping between stolen gasps.

A part of him sentenced to being underwater made its full presence felt, hot and pressing hungrily against Teyla's glorious backside. John's mouth reluctantly parted from hers, his voice husky and
deep as they traded heated breaths. "Cold shower, here I come."

Teyla fell against him, quivering with laughter as he grinned and peppered her hair with much smaller tokens of affection than he might have liked, but for now they would have to do. She adjusted her position, falling back into the relaxed recline they'd been in previously. Her fingers immediately began affectionately tracing a path up and down his leg.

"Unngh … the things you do to me, sweetie."

"Should I apologize?" she asked, smiling proudly. The sight of her happy was more than he could've asked for.

He leaned in and pressed another kiss to her cheek, still feeling an exhilarating throbbing in his groin. "Don't you dare."

They lapsed into another drawn out silence, but unlike the one earlier, it wasn't an uncomfortable one spent with neither one sure of what to do. It was the opposite, filled with, maybe not relief in its truest sense, but a renewal of sorts. And, in that, they managed to find some relief. Teyla decided she wasn't the only one in need of a thorough scrubbing and John was more than willing to let her skilled and nimble fingers work him over. It was only when the water started to turn cold that they finally decided it was time to get out.

After a quick dry, he tied a towel around his waist and helped Teyla out of the water, a thick towel ready and waiting for her. He draped it around her, the large cloth swallowing her everywhere except around her middle. John was bending at the knees, preparing to pick her up when she placed a hand on his arm.

He looked at her, questioning the pensive stillness she suddenly found herself in.

"John, do you still plan on sending Major Lorne to speak with Halling in the morning?"

He blinked in surprise. "Yeah. We've got to get this Michael investigation going somewhere, and he and the Kysonians are still our best place to start. Why?"

She squeezed his forearm. "It should be you to fly the mission."

"Teyla, I can't leave you. Not after …"

"There are others here that can assist me, John. For now, it is more important that you go," she urged. "You need to be the one to speak with Halling. An opportunity like this is unlikely to present itself again before the Daedalus arrives."

John's face darkened, comprehending what she meant. "How much do you want me to tell him?"

"Colonel Sheppard, this is a pleasant surprise." Halling, garbed in a flowing leather coat and thick gloves, stretched his hand out in greeting.

John stood up quickly from the long wooden bench and took his hand. "Good to see you, too. Sorry for dropping in without calling first."
"Do not trouble yourself about it, Colonel. You are always welcome among our people."

"Thanks," he said. "That's good to hear."

Halling walked around to the other side of the table, shedding his gloves and the cheerfulness of their pleasantries as he went. His expression turned gray in the fire's light and he spoke with concern of the sincerest form. "I was told Teyla has had some trouble with the child. Is this true?"

John nodded. "She's okay. She's still pregnant, and according to every doctor we can get our hands on, the baby seems to be doing just fine."

"Well, that is welcome news, indeed," Halling said, a smile making a tentative comeback. "I am sure you were quite relieved yourself, Colonel."

"Yeah."

"My own familial love for Teyla aside, I cannot tell you how much her child has come to mean to our people."

A young girl, about twelve years old, came over with a cup of tea for Halling. Even seated, the older man towered over her, but he accepted the cup with a gentleness that many would have found unexpected had they not known him like John did. He took a grateful sip of the warming liquid, his fingers cradling the cup and greedily soaking in the heat.

"Having Teyla here with us while we were settling on this new world was a constant reminder that we, as a people, have a chance at a new beginning and a future. After being held captive for so long and our numbers so decimated, having such hope again was a tremendous blessing for us. There are few societies I know of that could have overcome such a deficit, but we have managed to do well thus far."

John managed a weak smile, not entirely sure how to respond to that. A lot of the time, he was so wrapped up in Atlantis and his life there that he forgot what an important role Teyla played here among her people, even in her absence. He should've realized that his daughter would have some role to play in that as well, but it honestly hadn't occurred to him.

Noticing the awkward turn, Halling placed his tea on the table. "I apologize, Colonel. There were other matters you wished to discuss, were there not?"

John shifted, glad to be getting down to business. "A few things actually. We, uh, had a run-in about a week ago with a squad of Michael's hybrids."

John gave Halling a few moments to let it sink in. Michael was bound to be a sensitive subject not only for what he had done to the Athosians as a whole, but also to Halling in particular. It had taken him quite a while to recover from the ordeal of being a subject of Michael's experiments.

"I see," the big man said quietly as he prepared himself, his shoulders sinking slightly. "Was anyone hurt?"

"We lost two good people, but most got home in one piece."

"I am sorry, Colonel," he offered sincerely, as though he'd played some part in the deaths of Major Teldy and Captain Vega.

"It wasn't your fault, Halling. We all knew Michael would rebuild his forces sometime."
Halling nodded in mute acknowledgment that he was correct. "How can I be of assistance to you?"

"Well, we managed to take one alive and brought it back to Atlantis for questioning. He didn't give us much. Mostly, he spouted off a lot of Michael's propaganda. The rest was … nonsense." John felt a twinge of guilt in whitewashing the incident with the prisoner, but it was better than painting him the entire sick picture.

"That is not surprising," Halling said. "Very few of Michael's subjects remained … intact, even prior to their alteration. The M—" He bit his tongue. "Michael was adamant that only the strongest and healthiest take their place among his acolytes. Most were tortured quite brutally. Those that survived … were offered up for the change, but many were driven mad long before that happened. In the end, Michael required only our subservience, not our sanity."

John scowled, having seen the barely visible lines of pain on his face growing deeper as he told his story. "I'm sorry for having to do this. It's probably the last thing you ever wanted to talk about."

"I thank you, Colonel, but I wish to help if I can," Halling came back quickly. "My memories of the time afterward are … muddled, but if it is at all possible, I want to try."

John nodded. "He did tell us that Michael is behind the spread of a plague, probably randomly contaminating planets as he moves. We've heard a few rumors to that effect and reports of mass casualties, but nothing solid. He said it would somehow help to cripple the Wraith. Do you remember anything like that? A starting point for us to look? A planet? A name?"

Halling's brow furrowed in heavy concentration, trying hard to access his memories of his time as one of Michael's minions, but eventually it broke. "I am sorry. There is a certain amount of familiarity, but … I cannot recall."

"That's okay, Halling. It was a long shot, anyway. Just had to ask."

He seemed to take some small comfort in that. "I understand."

"We were thinking of dropping in on the Kysonians again. We could always use your help with them if you're up for it," John suggested, lightly drumming the wooden table with the pads of his fingers. "Seems they'd heard a few rumors themselves a few months back. We thought we'd take a team a see if they had any new information to share, but given how … fussy … they were the last time we were there, I was hoping you'd be amenable to tagging along and smoothing things out for us."

"Yes. I could certainly do that." Halling smiled, genuinely happy to be able contribute something.

"Good," John said, the wide yet thin smile on his face feeling forced even to him. "Team leaves in three days."

"I will make the necessary preparations."

John nodded absently, his gaze wandering aimlessly away. Before long, he realized he was tapping his fingers louder than he had been previously and crossed his arms. A great beginning.

Halling eyed him. "Was there something else, Colonel?"

Sheppard attempted to use stealth to survey the open room one last time, ensuring a measure of privacy, but all it did was confound Halling further. To appease his curiosity, John said, "It's of a more personal nature. It's about Teyla. And the baby."
"Oh?"

"It's kind of a long story, but ... we've discovered recently that she has gifts. The baby."

John didn't know what he expected, but it certainly wasn't the beaming grin that appeared. "So Teyla is expecting a girl. I would like to offer my congratulations to you, Colonel."

"Thanks." The breathy reply was soon cleared away as John let out a lackluster cough.

Halling lifted the tea cup toward him in a sort of toast, although John was sure both of them would've preferred a bit of Ruus wine to the herbal concoction for the occasion. The father-to-be reciprocated as best he could.

"And she has managed to pass on her talent to her progeny. It is quite astounding you could know such a thing while the child is still in the womb," Halling added with interest.

John shook his head, being careful to tread lightly. "I'm not just talking about being able to sense the Wraith, Halling. There's more. A lot more."

"I see." Despite his answer, Sheppard was sure he didn't.

I do not keep secrets from my people, John, Teyla had informed him under no uncertain terms, but John was still wary of getting into too much detail on his daughter's abilities. For the time being. The Athosians had come a long way in their understanding of the kinds of 'magical' things possible in the universe just in the few years he'd known them, but John couldn't help but remember how Teyla had once described the feeling of being one among them who possessed the Gift. It sets one apart, she'd told him. John knew the Athosians weren't prone to blindly following in the footsteps of the past. They were better, smarter people than that, but he also didn't want to run the risk of his child becoming ostracized because of lingering superstitions.

"Look, Halling, I know that none of this is going to make much sense and when the time is right, I promise Teyla will explain everything, but for now, I need you to trust me."

Halling leaned back, appraising him carefully. "Very well."

John came forward onto his elbows, so he could speak in a lower tone without sacrificing Halling's ability to hear. "It's ... complicated and it's probably nothing, but there's someone from my planet coming to Atlantis, someone from the government, and it may not be safe for Teyla and the baby to stay there for a while."

"Teyla always has her home here, Colonel. If it is not safe for her in the city of the Ancestors, it is here she belongs."

"No, I—" He caught himself before he got too animated. "I can't bring her here. This would be the first place they'd come looking for us."

Halling's demeanor grew very serious, fully taking in that John wasn't just talking about taking Teyla on a day trip to a spa somewhere. He was talking about deserting his post, a criminal offense that would finally and officially obliterate his career, and in one bold stroke, he'd also be effectively cut off from ever returning to Earth. John doubted Halling understood the crime and punishment of it all, but as a former prisoner himself, he would know what it meant for John to never have the freedom to return home. John was confident his request would be taken with all due consideration.

"Teyla can't be moved easily right now, so planet hopping isn't really an option. I think I know where I can go to keep her safe until everything blows over and she can come back here to stay, but I
may need some outside support for a while—supplies, that kind of thing. Just until the baby’s born and Teyla has time to recuperate."

He searched Halling’s face for some sign of what was going through his head. With his hand partially covering his mouth, he was difficult to read.

"Like I said, this'll probably wind up being nothing and we can all go on with our lives as normal. Politics on Earth can get pretty convoluted and it's hard to know which way the pendulum is gonna swing. But, for Teyla's sake, I need to be ready for anything and I'm hoping I can count on your help."

Finally finished, John held his breath waiting for a response, but the wait was far shorter than could he ever have conceived. Halling reached across the table, his gargantuan hand clasping John's shoulder in friendship. "Colonel Sheppard, for Teyla and for all you have done for the Athosian people, you need not ask. Whatever you should need, we will provide."

A massive weight lifted from John's body and he found himself temporarily at a loss for words. "Thank you, Halling. Just … thank you."

"I could not in good conscience abandon you in your time of need, Colonel. You never gave up on our people. How could we possibly consider doing the same?"

"Sounds incredibly fair to me," John said, enjoying the moment and the gradual loosening of the muscles in his neck. Any tighter and he would've been in dire need of a masseuse.

He exhaled and relaxed his posture a little. "You know, Halling, since we're … talking things out, and I realize that I'm probably … pushing my luck a little bit, but there is one more thing."

Halling chuckled. "You do not waste time, Colonel Sheppard."

John smirked and shrugged. "Can't afford to."

"Then, let us not waste another moment."

John nodded and took a deep breath. "There's a tradition we have on my planet. I realize you probably do things a little differently here, but I still feel like I should, um …"

His features danced around the words that he'd rehearsed and were teetering on the tip of his tongue.

"I want to ask Teyla to marry me. To be my wife. I … can't imagine a day when she isn't there and I don't ever want to imagine a life where I'm not her husband. She's everything to me. She has been since the moment I met her."

Halling's face held a smile known only to someone who'd once had the same heart-wrenching, soul-shattering, life-altering kind of love he did. "Colonel, I am honored that you would choose to share this with me, but it is not for me to grant Teyla's hand."

"I know. I know it's Teyla's choice," John assured him. "It's just … I respect you, Halling. You and the rest of the Athosians are the closest thing Teyla has to family and … it would mean a lot to know I have your blessing."

Halling nodded regally. "Then rest easy, Colonel. You have it. And it will be our honor, the day the Athosian people can count you as one of our own, my friend."
Jennifer kept her head down, paying extraordinary attention to the labels on the small boxes of neuraminidase inhibitor she was loading into her bags. With what amounted to a bad case of the flu making the rounds on M33-985, she'd need plenty of it, along with the other medical supplies she'd packed just in case. Work had been her saving grace the past few days, and she was only too happy to continue that way even if it meant another trip offworld. In fact, if there was ever a time when she would welcome a good old fashioned epidemic, it was now.

Mason sauntered into the infirmary like someone would through their own living room. "Dr. Keller," he greeted her. Not Jennifer. Not Jen. Not even Doc. Dr. Keller. That's who she was now to him. They were polite acquaintances, nothing more. He barely glanced in her direction as he walked by, clearly on his way to see Carson.

"Sergeant," she said. She went back to work, hardly looking up as she set another container of medicine bottles inside the insulated black bag.

"Dr. Keller, can I give you a hand?" a soft feminine voice asked a few yards away.

She smiled affably. "No thanks, Marie. I've just about got it."

The nurse nodded and left her to herself.

One of the bags full, Jennifer zipped it shut and concentrated on the other one, not letting her gaze wander in the slightest. She didn't know what she was so afraid of. It wasn't like Mason would be able to see the dried tears in her eyes. Except he would. Somehow, he'd know. Three days later and he would know she'd spent that night sobbing into her pillow, reliving over and over again every word, every movement, every breath. He'd nearly kissed her again, and she had come extremely close to letting him. It had felt like walking out across a tightrope; toes curled, precariously balanced, and every instinct pushing her forward, telling her just to reach out and take her partner's hand. Only she couldn't, and even if she had, he would never have accepted it. Mason had made that perfectly clear.

Over two years of physical torment had come with a hefty price tag and he needed to concentrate on his recovery without his feelings for her muddling the process. As a doctor, she understood it and, as a friend, she would respect it. Given time, it would all blow over. He'd figure out what he needed to, and he would move on. Her pillow sopping wet, she'd finally promised herself that if she was still around when that happened she would be happy for him and wish him all the best. It was what a real friend would do.

Nevertheless, she'd spent the rest of the night wondering why she couldn't stop crying.

Jennifer let loose a breathy huff, chiding herself for allowing her thoughts to wander. She refused to think about it any further. Thankfully, she had somewhere else to be, other people to worry about. With a renewed focus, she was able to finish packing relatively quickly and went to the effort of
checking and double-checking everything.

She was finally closing the second large bag when Ronon arrived, ready to go. "You all set?" he asked in his gravel laden voice.

"I think so." Jennifer checked her watch. Their scheduled dial out wasn't for another twenty minutes, so there wasn't any great hurry, but she still wanted to get out of there. She picked up her black leather jacket from the tabletop and shrugged it on. In a quick swipe, she flipped her ponytail back out of the collar and zipped the jacket up. "Thanks again for coming, Ronon."

The tall Satedan shrugged. "I had the day off. Figured I might as well help out."

Jennifer smiled knowingly. They both knew his motives were not nearly that clear cut. His team hadn't seen a lot of action lately and he was probably itching to do something, anything as long it took him out of the city for a while. And she couldn't deny that looked forward to the chance to spend more time with him. They'd technically only gone out a few times, and while Jennifer was glad he seemed okay with taking things slow, she did enjoy his company. The obvious bonus of his toned, musclebound form aside, he had a rascal's sense of humor behind the gruff, laconic exterior he showed the world, and although he was reticent to talk about his past—he was much happier letting her do most of the talking—she felt like they were finally starting to really get to know one another.

She chuckled to herself. It was really strange to think she was dating the most intimidating man she'd ever met.

"Well, we should go," she said. Jennifer reached for the straps on the nearest black bag which was stuffed to the gills.

He did too, wrapping his hands around the handle on that bag as well as the other. "I got it."

"No, no. I can take one, at least," she protested without letting go.

He just looked her, his brow arching skeptically.

So my reputation for overpacking is well deserved, she thought with chagrin. "Really. I got it."

"You gonna wrestle me for it?"

"Maybe. Do you want it that bad?" she challenged.

Ronon's dark brown eyes fell playfully down on her. "Do you?"

Jennifer's mouth curled upward teasingly. "You wouldn't … "

"Try me," he said, his bearded grin matching hers.

God, I feel like an idiot schoolgirl. She smirked and shook her head at herself. Pulling her hand away from the bag, she relented. "Okay, fine. Take it. Happy?"

"Yup." With a smug smile, Ronon hoisted the two bags with apparently little effort, despite the obvious signs that they were, in fact, quite heavy.

She giggled. "Can we go now?"

"Lead the way."
Richard Woolsey sighed. Walking down the busy corridor toward the Jumper bay, the shoulder strap of his bag slipped and he shrugged it back into place. "I understand your concerns, Col. Sheppard. I admit I haven't had occasion to spend much time offworld, but a peaceful civilization with a keen eye for protocol sounds like an excellent place for me to get my feet wet, as it were."

"Oh, it'll probably be a match made in heaven," his second-in-command muttered.

"Besides, I'm not entirely inexperienced in negotiation and the fine art of asking questions, Colonel," Richard reminded him.

"And I'm not saying you shouldn't take the lead on this. The Kysonians aren't big fans of dealing with anyone but the head honcho, anyway. I'm just saying you might want to defer to Halling to start out with. They've known him for years, since he's been having to trade with them on Teyla's behalf, and he can get you pointed in the right direction. Keep you from getting into any trouble."

Richard frowned, but he didn't take Sheppard's insinuation personally. The man had a lot on his mind with the complex set of circumstances surrounding his private life: a rather interesting baby on the way, his lady love on bed rest, and the Daedalus due to arrive in less than a week. The two were maintaining an understanding of nondisclosure on that subject for the time being. Plausible deniability was not a commodity to be undervalued. But to look at him, no one would ever know there was a potentially life-altering problem on the way for the military leader. He was certainly taking his responsibilities very seriously this morning.

"Again, Colonel, I don't think a team of armed marines is the right way to introduce myself. It doesn't exactly paint a picture of mutual trust."

"You don't have to take a full team. Just Lorne and a couple of his guys … "

"I'll tell you what. If I'm not back in Atlantis by 0900 tomorrow morning, feel free to send as many marines as you see fit to retrieve us."

"Deal."

"Mr. Woolsey, Dr. Keller and Ronon have gated away safely. You are clear to depart as soon as you're ready," Chuck reported in his ear. It was never a guarantee, but apparently Gate traffic was flowing smoothly this morning. Of course, if there had been any emergency, he would have been notified immediately, but it nice to know he was leaving with everything running as it should.

They stopped at the base of the staircase leading up to where his ride was waiting to depart. "You're in command here until I get back, Colonel."

"Okay." Sheppard's face pulled into a petulant grimace, a typically reluctant response not often found in someone who'd risen to his level of authority. Then again, John Sheppard was not your typical man.

Richard started up the stairs and called over his shoulder, "Try not to blow her up while I'm gone."

"No promises," the colonel threw back.
Jennifer lowered her stethoscope from the little boy and turned to give his mother a sympathetic smile. She had been delivering the same news all morning. "He's got it, too."

Erran, a modest and practical woman, seemed concerned but resigned. Any mother with a son as old as Breto would be well seasoned in dealing with a sick child, but she still asked, "Will he be alright?"

Dr. Keller nodded. "His fever's mild, so plenty of rest, lots of fluids and he should be fine. I'm also gonna prescribe some medicine that should help. In the very least, it should keep it from getting any worse. And it might be a good idea for me to take a look at you, too, Erran. Just to be on safe side."

The woman nodded and glanced uncomfortably over her shoulder at Ronon, who was hanging back in the corner of the room. Draped in loose-fitting leather and slouching against the wall, he'd been helping where he could, but mostly all that job had entailed was carrying her bags and occasionally fishing something out for her. He looked bored.

"Um ... Ronon?" Jennifer began, an apology in her tone. "We could really use a few minutes here."

He straightened up from his relaxed position. "Okay."

"You must be hungry, sir, and there is a decent lunch to be had at the Farmer's Lantern," Erran suggested. "It is a humble place in the village square, but it is quite satisfying and they will treat you well."

Jennifer tried to ignore the gurgle in her stomach at the mention of food. She shouldn't have skimped on breakfast this morning. "That actually sounds really good. Ronon, why don't you go ahead and I'll meet you there as soon as we're done?"

"You sure?" He cocked his head to the side questioningly.

With her sketchy track record on offworld missions, Jennifer didn't blame him for being a little leery. It was probably another reason to add to the list of why he'd offered to come along in the first place. But she was in her element here and there had been nothing but friendly—albeit sick—faces all morning. What could possibly happen? "Positive. I'll be right behind you."

Ronon didn't look overly thrilled, but he let himself out anyway.

"Your guardian seems loathe to leave you alone," Erran commented.

Jennifer smiled, reaching around her neck for her stethoscope again. "That's just kind of how he is. But he's not my guardian. He's ... a friend."

"I see."

Erran's exam went smoothly with everything looking normal. It didn't look like she'd caught the flu from her son or from any of the other villagers that she'd come into contact with, but Jennifer offered her a flu shot anyway, just as a preventative measure. It didn't take much to convince her as caring for her son would've been infinitely harder if she were to get sick, too. All in all, the whole thing took about ten minutes. The young doctor left the house, lugging her bags, wishing all her patients were so easy.

As the wooden door closed behind her, Jennifer paused to get her bearings. She'd never had the best sense of direction in the world. On one of the few occasions her parents had taken her out camping, it had taken her three trips before she could find her way from the campsite to the bathroom and back.
again without getting turned around. Her dad used to tell her she could always look for the North Star and that would guide her wherever she needed to go. She'd never had the heart to tell him that, to her, one white speck of light in the sky looked exactly the same as the next. Luckily, figuring out which way to the village square was simpler than navigating the woods of Wisconsin. Most of the foot traffic seemed to be headed to her left, so that was the way she'd go, too. And, hey, if she got lost, at least this way she could ask somebody for directions. It would probably be as easy as saying, "Point me to the big guy."

She hadn't gone far when a deep, raspy voice called out from behind her, trying to get her attention. "Excuse me!"

Jennifer spun around. *Speaking of big guys …*

The large blonde strode toward her, seeming like he was in a hurry. "Excuse me, are you the doctor from Atlantis? There's been talk of one being in town."

"Yeah, that's me," she answered carefully. He didn't strike her as someone who had something to hide. He was probably just another villager with a sick loved one that needed attention, but there was something not quite right about him. He seemed … out of place. He was unshaven and, arrayed in hard-boiled black leather, he looked more like he was wearing armor than the homespun clothes the rest of the villagers wore.

There wasn't much between Erran's house and the edge of the village, Jennifer observed, biting her lip. She started to get nervous, realizing she couldn't tell where he'd come from. "Is there something I can … do for you?"

He smiled, an attempt to charm her or disarm her. She didn't know which it was meant to be, but she definitely didn't like it. She slowly started backward, silently cursing the bulky black bags that were slung over her hip on one side and her arm on the other. The man followed her. "You see, doctor, I … need you to come with me."

"I have someone waiting for me. Maybe you and I could meet up in an hour?" she suggested, practically tripping over her words as she continued to move away.

He kept pace with her, stepping with a casual ease that belied the danger she was beginning to read in his posture. "I don't think I can do that."

"Well, that's … that's too bad, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

Jennifer slipped the strap of one of the bags off her shoulder. "Maybe some other time."

"I'm sorry, doctor."

In a swift flurry of movement, she threw the bag at him and rid herself of the other. She ran down the street, her hair flying behind her and the muffled sound of dirt crunching under her boots. She tore around the corner of a stone house, hoping to heck she was headed in the right direction. A vegetable stand came into view in the distance. An old man stood behind it, bawling out a young child for snatching something.

She opened her mouth to scream, then her body slammed into a wall that hadn't been there a second ago. She reeled back when she realized it was her pursuer, stoic and formidable, blocking her path. "Ro—!"
His hand covered her mouth as he spun her around, facing away from him and any chance of rescue. Her radio was snatched from her ear. "Quiet. I'm not … "

Jennifer drove her elbow into his ribs. He doubled over with a pronounced grunt, but didn't lessen his hold on her. His arms, ripped and taut, came in on her like a vice, his body encasing her mercilessly as he dragged her away. He moved her with purpose, like a man experienced in this, someone to whom violence was a way of life. He took her toward the alien forest where there was no one she could run to for help.

His palm spanned tightly over her mouth, digging into her skin. Sparring lessons and Ronon's persistent instructions flooded her mind and spurred her into action. She threw back her head, hoping to hear a blunt crack and make him see stars enough to force him to loosen his hold on her. He anticipated the move and ducked back, allowing her to strike out at nothing but the air. But in doing so, he spread his stance. Jennifer surged backward. She couldn't have even measured up to half this guy's bulk, but she hoped it would be enough to throw him off balance. As he clung to her, he staggered back and she took the brief window to kick him as hard as she could.

He stifled a groan as her feet impacted his shin, but for a moment, his taxing grip faltered. Jennifer struggled, wriggling like a wild thing to break it entirely. He made an annoyed noise like she was merely a mosquito buzzing around his ear. Infuriated, she reached back to claw at him and felt the hard metal press of a gun in her side.

The distinct peel of stunner fire rang in her ears. Then nothing.
Ronon forged through the labyrinth of moss-covered trees, his eyes scouring the ground as the dirt revealed the story that had unfolded. From the size and width of the boot print, Ronon estimated the abductor be about his size. He moved like it, too; lumbering, heavy strides any child could have followed in the dark.

At first, he'd carried her, then Jennifer had been laid out on the ground while the man had knelt down to rifle through her medical bags, one of which was also missing. Written plainly in standard Atlantis tread, Jennifer had tried to run, but somehow the perpetrator had caught her. Ronon wasn't sure how as his tracks hadn't followed her at all. They had simply appeared in front of hers, halting her hurried flight. Then the two had started off again together. Jennifer walked beside him, her steps stumbling and uneven. That meant she was either hurt or bound. More than likely, both.

Ronon stretched his neck, angry at himself for having waited so long to go looking for her. He'd gone ahead and ordered lunch, figuring the doc would be a while. Jennifer's personable and relaxed manner with her patients went a long way in gaining the trust and respect of the locals; no easy task in a galaxy where no one could ever be certain of anything, not when even the most peaceful of days could be shattered by the unexpected whine of a Dart. Ronon respected the doctor's efforts to make her patients comfortable, but he should have known something was wrong when he'd polished off his stew and she still hadn't shown up.

He stalked through the woods, studying the information at his feet and edging along the path of footprints at a ground-covering but wary pace.

Sliding down a natural wash, he realized he was moving away from the man-made trail that ran through the sylvan terrain into the more isolated country away from the village. Other than his current quarry, the only regular traffic these grounds were used to seeing were the kind that skittered or slithered. Larger, three-toed hoof prints punctuated the game trail with others interspersed behind. Padded paws with claws deep enough to leave needle-like divots in the dirt.

*Non-retractable. Canine. Too small to be a real threat,* Ronon quickly assessed and moved on. Satisfied he was the only the predator of any immediate concern, he moved ahead, giving chase to the man who had taken Jennifer.

What started as minutes soon dragged on, becoming more than an hour, and adrenaline mounted in his system. Passing by, his arm caught a lash from the stray limb of a brush, and he barely felt the sting. He drank in the wild, uncultivated surroundings, making note of every detail through the eyes of one who'd survived alone in countless environments just like it.

Beyond the village, there was plenty of natural resources for someone to make do on. Wildlife for trappers. Cattairus leaves, berry bushes, wild lukino mushrooms—all edible, and the pulp at the base of cattairus trees naturally held onto a lot of moisture, handy when there wasn't a ready source of water nearby. All in all, this planet was easy pickings for anyone coming through the Gate wanting to avoid people; scavengers, castoffs from other planets, criminals banished from other societies
looking for new territory. Ronon exhaled a seething hiss thinking of Jennifer in the hands of one of the galaxy's bottom feeders, willing to take anything—property or human—for sale, trade, or simply to keep.

Anger crested in his stomach in rancid waves. The thought of the sweet doctor with her natural doe-eyed innocence being snatched from under his nose infuriated him until the forest seemed blanketed in primordial red.

The wind whipped through the swaying tree branches over his head while Ronon continued ahead. His consciousness deeply ingrained in his surroundings, he noticed the very moment the birds went quiet.

His eyes narrowed to dark brown slits, scanning the area as he sought cover and crouched down. His large hand crept up the cuff of his pants to catch the grip of the knife strapped to his leg.

His instincts possessing him, Ronon slowly turned and spied the shock of white against the mottled greens, browns, and grays of the woods. A Wraith with long silver hair broke the scenery at his far right, ignoring its immediate environment for the indicator on its wrist and heading directly into Ronon's path.

*Reckless. Arrogant.* Confidently, it strode deeper into the woodland, armed to the teeth, not knowing it was already dead.

He got to his feet, standing like a grand tower of primitive power. "Hey!"

The Wraith, with its pasty gray complexion reflecting dully under the alien sun, snapped its head toward him. Its slitted citrine eyes widened in astonishment it had been taken unaware. Then a superior, expectant grin appeared. *Stupid.*

Ronon bared his teeth in a wolfish smile. His knife blazed in a practiced, elegant arc, spinning in his palm and becoming a destructive new appendage as he pivoted to the side and struck in a devastating leap.

In a split second, he was on him. The Wraith hissed in shock as it rallied, its arms raising in an abbreviated instant. Its fists and legs crossed with Ronon's while the Satedan's bloodlust engulfed him in a raging inferno. His right fist pounded flesh while the left sliced away chunks of the Wraith's body armor. Ronon's muscles hammered on like iron pistons, perfectly conditioned to subdue and destroy.

The Wraith quickly knew it was outmatched, its counterattacks rapidly becoming more defensive and desperate. It caught Ronon across the skull in a wicked spiral, and his vision exploded in a burst of blinding white and red. However, the blow barely slowed him at all. A visceral roar shattered the woods, screaming Ronon's fury. He spun, his elbow flew, and slammed into the Wraith's pale frame, propelling it into the trunk of a nearby tree. His jaw set, Ronon snatched his opponent by the hair, looked into its demon heart, and wiped the memory of its smile right off its face.

As the body slid down to the ground, a flood of black flowing from its neck, Ronon lungs heaved and his heart pounded. Barely satiated, the beast inside him howled for more. It had been too quick, too easy. His temple throbbed. He knelt down to wipe his blade clean, smearing the Wraith's cold blood on the grass beside it and consecrating the grisly grave marker with a final token of his bitter hatred. Ronon spat on it.

With Wraith blood still blotting his hand, he ripped the tracking device from the creature's arm. It was a Hunter, and where there was one there would soon be more and more and more. They wouldn't
stop coming until they caught the runner they were after.

The runner that had taken Jennifer.

He fought the urge to charge after Jennifer at full tilt. Sense was beginning to take the place of feral madness. The knowledge that he was on the trail of a runner changed everything. The tracks themselves read differently now.

_No runner’s that stupid._

Any runner leaving tracks that obvious would be dead inside a week. He stared out at the horizon ahead, at the hills and valleys steeped in thick forest. In all likelihood, the path ahead was laden with traps designed to kill without hesitation or mercy.

Ronon abhorred his past and that he would probably never outrun it completely, but it called to him like a blasted siren’s song, swirling and forming around him, pushing him back into a mold of a life he had escaped.

As a runner, mercy and doubt were qualities reserved for the dead. If you intended to go on living, you became—he became—dangerous in a way that few humans could ever conceive of. You killed the Wraith in the name of survival, but you also did it knowing it was your hands wringing the lives away from everyone you came into contact with by association.

It was enough to drive someone mad.

When you live constantly with your back to a wall, you become the animal they want you to be. Little more than a monster drifting from planet to planet, leaving death and destruction in your wake.

That was the man dragging Jennifer away and was exactly why he had to follow her. He had to get her back.

It was also why he had to turn around and leave her.

The tracking signal told him Jennifer was a lot farther away than he’d originally thought, too much ground between them for him to cover quickly given the obstacles that would be standing in his way.

A gnarled growl ripped from his lips as Ronon spun on his heels and tore back toward the village. There were probably only a handful of Wraith pursuing the runner so far, but by the time the Darts came to cull, it would be too late.

An able pilot, Capt. Haywood landed the Jumper a short distance outside the Kysonian village while Mr. Woolsey peered out the window. Atlantis notwithstanding, he hadn't actually been to very many alien planets as of yet, but he couldn't help wondering if he hadn't somehow been transported by a time machine rather than a spaceship because the alien town ahead seemed to be taken directly from the late 19th century. A quaint farming community enjoying the springtime on the cusp of an industrial revolution. Richard imagined that had they been able to see them the sight of the Jumper touching down might have caused quite the public stir. But with the Jumper already cloaked, it touched down without anyone in the village being any the wiser.

"Shall I keep the meter running?" Haywood asked facetiously before powering down the craft. The
Air Force Captain's ruddy complexion was oddly suited to his wisecracking demeanor.

Richard answered with a wry stare, "I don't think that will be necessary. Though, I expect we'll likely be a while." As he prepared to exit, Woolsey sought out Halling for a confirmation and received it in the form of an expression worthy of someone facing a visit to the dentist. "We'll keep you updated on the timetable as we go, Captain."

"No skin off my nose." The pilot's mouth curved into a wide, closed-mouthed grin. He bent over and produced a thick paperback from somewhere near his feet and kicked back with a relaxed exhale. "Take your time, sir."

"I'll be sure to do that. I know how difficult it can be to tear oneself away from a good book."

"I could tell you were one of us, sir."

"Nevertheless, you will be prepared just in case anything … "

Haywood patted his sidearm affectionately as though it were a beloved pet. "I hear one girly scream and I'm all yours."

Richard frowned. It was a good thing Haywood's file was filled back-to-front with exemplary evaluations and praise for his courage under fire. Otherwise, he would be getting very nervous about now. "Yes, well … We'll check in soon."

"Have fun."

Halling led the way out of the rear compartment and down the ramp sporting a bemused smile.

"We'll be fine," Richard said, lending himself one final assurance as they started out.

"Indeed."

As they met the footpath the would lead them into the heart of the town, Richard ran through a pile of mental notes about the civilization he was about to encounter; their cultural do's and don't's and the sort of people they were, especially their leader, Padrel. Col. Sheppard had described him as "Pegasus' answer to Santa Claus—minus the elves, snow, and the eight tiny reindeer". Richard was fairly certain Sheppard was joking, but he had to admit the description painted a rather vivid image.

When they finally met up with Padrel in town square, he wasn't disappointed. His appearance certainly conjured up thoughts of Kris Kringle with his bright gray beard and round belly. But the jovial attitude he'd been told to expect was curiously absent. At first, Richard assumed it must have been his error, a miscommunication of some sort, but even Halling seemed somewhat surprised by Padrel's subdued manner.

"Halling, my friend." Padrel embraced the Athosian warmly. "It is always so good to see you."

"And you, as well," said Halling, looking past his shoulder to the spindly young man shadowing him.

Padrel noted his interest with a tight smile and a careless wave of the hand. "My aid, Lauros." He seemed eager to ignore him and get back to pleasantries. Lauros, a composed man of perhaps twenty years with hawkish features, seemed unfazed by his abruptly cold bearing. Padrel, however, had nothing but genuine fondness for Halling. "I hope the winter has been kind to your people?"

"We have had few better. We have been most fortunate."
"I am glad to hear it. Upon your last visit, I was concerned that with such a great loss of numbers you might not be able to prepare adequately. I am rarely so thrilled to find that I am wrong."

"While I wish I could say it was easily done, I must admit our friends from Atlantis helped us a great deal. We owe them much." Halling turned slightly to allow Richard into the discussion. "If I may—Padrel, Council Elder for the Kysonian people, I would like to introduce Richard Woolsey, leader of the people of Atlantis."

"Mr. Woolsey, it is an honor," he responded, catching Richard by the hand and shaking it. Padrel, a practiced diplomat, showed just the right amount of surprise to be appropriate, but Richard suspected he was less than happy to make his acquaintance.

"The honor is mine," Woolsey said.

"Col. Sheppard mentioned you in his previous visit. He was most complimentary."

Richard smiled, allowing some license for stretching the truth. He was sure his name had come up, but he doubted it was any more than a polite comment in passing. Col. Sheppard was hardly the gushing sort even if the object of discussion had managed to earn his respect, which Woolsey wasn't entirely sure that he had.

"Did you come seeking trade?"

"Only some information at this point and time, if you're amenable to that. I would certainly consider some arrangement in the future for more substantive items we may find a need for."

"Certainly. At your convenience, Mr. Woolsey."

"Thank you."

The three of them-four, including the intensely quiet Lauros-started to amble across the square. With a vibrant fountain flowing beautifully in the center, market stands selling crops, clothing, and other wares bustled with the business of the day. People went about their lives, presenting a picture of an idyllic society.

"I hope your people were able to make use of the medical supplies we sent," he said.

"We did. We were very glad to have them."

"So, can I assume you came into contact with the sickness you mentioned to Halling and my officers?"

It was only a hunch, but something wasn't quite right around here. The milling public seemed healthy enough, thriving even. But there was air of disquiet in the atmosphere, as though their fears of a deadly plague had come to pass but without the desolation and high body count he would have expected.

"Is this the information you came seeking? You wish to find out what more we have learned of the plague?" Padrel astutely asked.

"It is. My people have turned up some new facts about its origin, and we were hoping you might have heard something more to help us locate the one we believe is responsible."

Padrel stilled and the four of them came to a stop. He got very quiet, his eyes darting behind him to land on Lauros, who remained as silent as the grave. "We have been … lucky, so far. Our world has
been spared. But not all of our allies have been so fortunate. I have only one name I can give you. Bellerophon."

Richard took in the reference with interest. "Ah, the mythic hero with the winged steed. He performed many great deeds, but his pride overtook him and led to his downfall," he summarized.

Padrel regarded him with surprise. "Indeed, Mr. Woolsey. You know the story?"

"I first heard it when I was just a child. And when I read it again shortly before taking up my post in Atlantis, I admit to finding it … rather poetic."

The aged leader nodded, knowingly. "A cautionary tale. Only, in this case, it was not pride, the Gods, nor the Wraith who caused their downfall. It was the plague." With a pronounced droop to his shoulders, Padrel began to walk again. Woolsey and Halling followed, as did their dark shadow. "We have taken in refugees, but they have been so many that we are now being forced to turn them away. Displaced orphans, the elderly … My people are greatly troubled that we have been driven to such measures, but we simply cannot care for them all."

"Would you be willing to provide the address to Bellerophon? My people will want to go there and investigate."

Padrel paused, a question flickering across his features as though he were wondering if he should or not.

Halling, with his regal bearing, said, "I am familiar with this world, Mr. Woolsey. I will take you there if you wish."

"Thank you, Halling."

"Excellent," Padrel said, pasting on plastic smile before it once again became real. "Please take with you my sincere hope in your success at tracking down the mastermind behind this senseless devastation."

"I will. Thank you."

"You must join us for our evening meal, Mr. Woolsey. Then, perhaps, we can speak of happier things. You might tell us something of what is like to reside in the city of the Ancestors. It must be wondrous."

As puzzling as he found Padrel's demeanor at times, Richard found that he liked the portly stranger. There was something eminently charming about him and in the kindest possible way. "I'd be delighted."

It was shortly thereafter that Richard was finally introduced to the Kysonians' infamous strict adherence to formality. Halling explained that to begin a trade relationship with their people, there must first be an accord between both parties establish that each has the authority to carry on negotiations for their respective peoples. As the head of the Kysonian council, Padrel was the only one permitted to speak for his people. And, unless otherwise authorized, any and all trade with Atlantis could only be carried out by Richard Woolsey. It was meant as a safeguard on both sides to prevent any misunderstandings or double dealings.

"I am sure you understand for the need for such measures, Mr. Woolsey," Padrel said.

"Certainly."
"Our methods have occasionally been labeled as extreme, but they are not without merit," he added. "We live under the heel of the Wraith, and with the threat of a culling on every horizon and now this … dreadful disease, you can never know who will be left standing to meet the next day. The Wraith have no care for our daily lives or the things we must do to keep our society going, but we must." Padrel smiled at Halling. "Perhaps our ways may seem stringent to other peoples, but I assure you, it is only done to make the transition easier for those that must carry on."

"Well, I can certainly understand that, and I believe I can sympathize as well. I have a hard enough time explaining that very thing to my own staff," Woolsey said, the explanation making a lot of sense to him. "As one leader to another, let me assure you I take the survival of my own people no less seriously."

Padrel clapped him on the shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. "So few can understand the burden that we, as leaders, share. That inconveniences are sometimes necessary," he stopped and a fleeting look of regret passed over him, "and that sacrifices must at times be made. If she were here, I am sure Teyla would also agree."

"Of course."

Padrel's hand released him and he began to address Halling. "I am sorry that Teyla was yet again unable to join you, Halling. It has been far too long since she has visited us. I have missed her."

"She sends her deepest regrets, but circumstance would not allow her to attend herself."

Richard noticed Halling deliberately withholding the reason for Teyla's absence, but chose not to call attention to it. The situation with Teyla's pregnancy had gotten quite complicated with the nature of her biology and the threat that Michael presented. If she didn't want her condition commonly known, he wouldn't be the one to let the cat out of the bag.

Halling continued, "She also wished me to express that she intends to make amends to you in person as soon as she is able."

"And that is the best news I have heard all day," Padrel said, but for someone who claimed to be delighted, he seemed awfully reticent. "It is kind of her to offer to do so as she is kept so busy aiding Atlantis as well as seeing her own people through such difficult days. I would hate to put her to any trouble."

"She is very grateful for all your assistance of late, as are all of the Athosian people. Truly, we owe you a debt."

His appearance grew solemn. "You owe me no such thing, my friend. I … have only done what any other would have done in my place. There is no need to speak of it further."

Her patient had fallen asleep again, Jennifer noted with an empty sigh as the homemade doll slipped from Celise's unconscious grasp. Despite her efforts, if she didn't get better medicine than what she had with her - and soon - the little girl would keep going in and out until she simply didn't wake up.

Muscle sore and dejected, Jennifer bent over and picked up the limp toy. Made from a stuffed and sewn piece of burlap, with straw for hair and red rags for a dress, it was fairly crude, but it was the only possession the child had and she certainly seemed to love it. With the chill of night beginning to
waft in from outside, Jennifer glanced at the open mouth of the cave, wondering if the doll had belonged to Celise before her village was destroyed or if it had been crafted by the gruff, terse blonde she traveled with now.

*Kiryk*, she remembered. His name was Kiryk. He had never said so, but Celise had asked for him while he spent his time patrolling for Wraith and making them as small a target as possible. Funnily enough, in all the kidnapping, hiking, and Wraith killing, they had never gotten around to exchanging names.

Jennifer tucked the tiny doll under the girl's arm and pulled her blanket further up over her shoulders. Hugging her arms around each other, she wandered to the edge of the cave and peered outside.

Well, she'd done it again; she'd managed to take a basic goodwill mission and turn it into something she used to only imagine in her nightmares. She tried her best to put on a brave face, but all she really wanted was to go home, crawl under her covers, and wait for the sunrise.

Not that that had offered her any comfort lately either, she thought, feeling that persistent ache beneath her breast. For the past few days, if anything, she felt more alone than she had in years. Ever since …

Jennifer sniffed as she felt her eyes begin to water and clutched herself tighter. It was the wind playing with her sinuses, she told herself as she gazed out into the obscurity of the darkened trees. Stress, maybe. She just wasn't cut out for this stuff.

"How is she?" a deep voice murmured, a thick shadow appearing out of nowhere to stand beside her.

"Oh!" Jennifer gasped as she nearly jumped out of her skin. Realizing it was Kiryk, she heaved a sigh of relief. "You scared me."

He stared back at her, saying nothing. Hardly a surprise. He didn't seem to speak at all unless he needed to, and then it was short and to the point. Not unlike a certain other runner she knew.

She hoped Ronon had gone for help.

"I, um … I've debrided the wound, cleaned it as best I could, but she's not out of danger, not by a long shot," she said. "She needs a much stronger antibiotic regimen, not to mention the probability of a skin graft. I'd … like to take her to Atlantis. Our Infirmary can provide her with the proper care she needs."

His broad jaw settled into a frown. "I can't go to Atlantis."

Jennifer nodded. "I know. You're gonna have to trust me with her care."

He regarded her as if he was considering it. It was hard to tell, though, the way his face seemed cut from granite. There was a good man in there, she could tell, but whether he trusted her was another matter. She couldn't imagine Kiryk to be the type to trust easily.

"As long as you return her to me when she's healed," he finally said.

"Kiryk, you have to understand something: there's no guarantee she's gonna survive this. She's still very sick. But if she survives, being constantly hunted by the Wraith is no life for a child. You know that. If you really want her to live, you need to let her go."

She was asking a lot, she knew that. She didn't know how long Kiryk had been a runner, but he'd
probably been on his own a long time. He was probably pretty attached to her. It was obvious she was to him. Saying goodbye to Celise wouldn't be easy. However, as she'd been so recently reminded, sometimes letting go is the best thing for everyone.

Even if it didn't feel that way.

He glanced away and a weighty silence hovered between them. "She used to sing sometimes. She would hum to herself in the dark when she was suppose to be sleeping. She doesn't anymore."

Jennifer looked over at him, hearing an undercurrent of real emotion in his tone for the first time since he'd grabbed her. He seemed … sad. "Because of the Wraith?"

He lifted his eyes and the face of stone reemerged. "I told her to stop."

Kiryk suddenly jerked to his right. Brush rustled in the breeze, but he must have heard something she hadn't.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Without hesitation, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from the cave entrance. He forced her under the cover of the overgrown bushes and disappeared like a ghost. She crouched low, ready to make a break for it but keeping her eyes peeled for the danger that had gone bump in the night.

With her breath roaring in her ears, Jennifer's hand flew to her mouth as two skulking phantoms seemed to materialize out of the trees. *Wraith*. They were headed straight toward the cave entrance. It was hard to see in the dark, but the blue-green flash of Kiryk's teleportation device lit her surroundings. It was then that it seemed like all hell broke loose.

Kiryk slashed and tore at the Wraith as he jumped from one place to another using the device attached to his arm, filling the night with Wraith screams. Meanwhile, a commotion exploded deeper in the woods behind them. A savage, low-pitched snarl followed by more dissonant howls. Branches and foliage shuddered and pitched from the impact of bodies as though the nighttime breeze had become a thunderous gale. The snarling grew louder, more intense, crying out the song of the vicious.

The ring of steel shrieked from Kiryk's position and a disembodied head rolled past her knees, the lifeless yellow eyes of a Wraith staring up at her, locked in a putrid grimace. Jennifer recoiled, suppressing a terrified squeak only through sheer force of will. She frantically looked around for something she could use as a weapon, but short of ripping apart the shrub providing her hiding place, there was nothing. Not unless by some magical coincidence a dirt clod to the eyes turned out to be Wraith Kryptonite.

Hemmed in between a duel of man versus monster and … whatever it was out there … Jennifer was completely unarmed.

A choking sound crawled from someone's throat, liquid and horrid, and there was a loud thud, a body falling. Things abruptly went quiet, leaving Jennifer almost dizzy in the sudden void.

Kiryk's broad physique loomed over her and snatched at her arm. With his bloody sword in one hand, his chilly gaze was focused on the trees. "Come on, doctor. We've got to move."

Nodding frantically, Jennifer got up and ran along as he dragged her back toward the cave. "Get inside. Stay as far away from the entrance as you can and take c—"
With a harsh grunt, Kiryk's hand was wrenched from her arm as something large slammed into him. Sideswiped, Jennifer was flung to the ground along with his sword, knocked out of his grip and landing with a clang as it ricocheted off a nearby rock. Kiryk tumbled down the jagged embankment in a frenetic tangle of angry limbs.

Without time to think, Jennifer scrambled on her knees toward the sword. Her fingers screwed around the hilt and she raced after him, her feet negotiating the terrain solely on adrenaline and hope. She had no idea what she was doing, but she was going to do something.

Below, Kiryk and his opponent spun on each other, landing blow after blow. One instant, Kiryk seemed to have the upper hand and the next it was gone. A thick forearm twisted Kiryk's to a painful angle, a fist wheeling into his jaw. It was a man he fought, not some predatory animal, but chills barreled down Jennifer spine remembering the unnerving sounds that had come out of the dark.

Kiryk's hips bucked, and he wrapped his legs around the man's upper torso and flipped him with emphatic thrust. In an instant, they were both on their feet and knotted together again, moving too fast for her to follow in the dim light. Beneath the canopy of trees, the moonlight caught only flashes of movement, sinew and muscles grappling together in a dedicated thirst for victory.

The hollow crunch of flesh and bone accompanied the pronounced roars made from men swallowed in battle. They were too well-matched, neither of them giving an advantage long enough for the other to seize before it disappeared in the melee.

Like two lions at each other's throats.

Her eyes widened. Jennifer crashed to halt and screamed. "Ronon, STOP!"

It was as if neither had heard her. Ronon locked onto Kiryk's wrists in a blinding flash, and used his body weight to propel a fierce blow to the head, his elbow coming around to lay into his chin.

"Ronon, please! Stop!"

Kiryk caught Ronon's arm mid-strike and tossed it back. His hands came together like a battering ram to Ronon's chest. Again, Ronon was there to meet the attack and drive it back. With his hands trapped, Kiryk threw a knee at Ronon's leg, landing once in the thigh before Ronon was forced to release him to block the next one. With a yell, Ronon threw his right arm across in a wide sweep. Kiryk ducked back and for a heart-pounding instant, they were separated. Kiryk's hand reached, and Jennifer saw silver as he bounded straight for Ronon.

"No!"

Kiryk lurched to halt as an explosion of blue enveloped him, the pulse of Ronon's stunner echoing through the forest in a tidal wave of sound. Shocked, Jennifer couldn't move. A shadowy, malevolent smile the only bright thing on his face, Ronon fired again.

Kiryk fell in a leaden heap.

Jennifer gulped, groping for words. "You … you didn't … " She glanced down at the sword in her hand and dropped it like it had reared back and bitten her.

Ronon strode toward her, gun in hand and his expression set in that same impenetrable fortress she had seen in Kiryk. His clothes were splattered in Wraith blood. He captured her chin in his hand and examined her face. "Did he hurt you?"

Visibly shaking, she indicated that he hadn't. She looked over his shoulder at Kiryk's fallen body.
"Did you … kill him?"

His lips curled into a resentful frown. "Should have."

"No … no, you … "

"C'mon. We've gotta get out of here." Ronon took her by the hand and started to lead her away.

"No, you don't understand. He wasn't going to hurt me," she said, pulling against him. He didn't loosen his hold on her, and he definitely wasn't listening. She dug in her heels and yanked her hand free. "Ronon, stop! He didn't want to hurt me. He just needed me to help the girl."

He turned around with that animalistic posture in his shoulders, tense, ready to spring loose at a moment's notice, and she nearly stepped back a pace. People talked, and Jennifer had known a long time that Ronon's reputation in the gym and on the battlefield was a legitimate one. But this was a Ronon she had never seen before. With a keen eye on the periphery, he looked at her sideways.

"What girl?"

"She's about eight years old. Her village was destroyed after he spent the night there, and she's been traveling with him ever since."

"Where?"

Jennifer pointed toward the cave at the top of the rise. "She's injured. She has a very serious infection in her leg. We need to get her back to Atlantis."

He cast another sweeping glance over the horizon as though listening for the crickets, as if he could read the wind. Wariness in his stance, he looked back and nodded. "Okay, but we need to hurry."

This time when Ronon clasped her hand, she didn't fight it. They started up the steep incline and Jennifer was surprised by how treacherous it was. The rocky floor was little more than loose gravel interspersed with only the occasional patch of grass the anchor it. Her feet kept slipping as they reached for purchase enough to climb the hill without the ground shifting. It was a miracle she hadn't broken her neck, going down it at a near run.

With Ronon climbing ahead and acting as her support, she worked on keeping her feet underneath her while her mind started going over what she needed to do to be able to pack Celise safely to the Stargate, but it wasn't until they reached the top that she considered the little girl's companion.

Ronon hung back as if he was planning on keeping watch while she bundled up Celise. Jennifer stopped just short of the semi-concealed opening. "What about Kiryk?"

"What about him?"

"Well, how are we going to … " Jennifer paused. His hard expression bothered her. He didn't plan on going back for Kiryk at all.

Her head spinning, she peeked into the cave. Celise was still unconscious. Thank goodness for small favors. She'd been completely unaware of the deadly chaos raining down outside. Nevertheless, Jennifer took several steps along the shelf outward from the child's temporary haven, not wanting to be overheard. Ronon followed.

Once they were a short distance away, Jennifer confronted him. "You're leaving him?"

He didn't give her question a moment's pause. "Yup."
"But … I told you, he didn't hurt me. He just didn't know how to ask for help."

"Doesn't matter."

Jennifer was stunned at his apparent apathy. "You can't just … Ronon, we can't just leave him here like this."

"He'll slow us down." As if that was that, he turned and headed back to where they'd just come from.

The pressure of the long day and harrowing night had stripped her nerves to a fine thread, and when he showed her his back, she snapped. She was so sick of people walking away from her.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have shot him, then!" she hurled at him angrily.

Ronon pivoted around, his dark features molded into an even darker scowl. "He's lucky that's all I did. If he had hurt you, the Wraith would've had one less trophy to hunt."

"I can't believe you're being this way. He's just like you! How can you turn your back on him?"

Without taking his eyes off her, he reached around his back and pulled out a Wraith's armored cuff. He waved it in her face, showing her the tracking signal marking their position in a stark white dot, then threw it on the ground. "He'll bring the Wraith down on us! Every step we take, they'll know exactly where we are. He will get all of us killed."

"So we get a pass for abandoning him?"

Ronon glared at her. "If he's the person you think he is, he'd rather be left behind than have more people's blood on his hands."

"And we're supposed to live with the fact that we left someone at the mercy of the Wraith?" she asked.

"Yes," he said flatly. "No matter the cost, you live. And no one understands that better than a runner."

She shook her head. "I can't, Ronon. I can't live like that."

He exhaled in frustration and looked away. Something writhed inside him, stirred up by the Wraith, the memories of being one of their victims. She could see it a mile away.

"I'm sorry, Ronon. I know you're just doing what you think is best, but … if a man's life is the sacrifice I have to make to get home in one piece … I can't. Maybe that makes me an idiot, but … "

"Can you take out his transmitter?" he cut her off, gazing back at her.

She could see he already knew the answer and was trying to make his point. Of course, knowing how he'd been set free, she would have tried. And considering there was still a live tracking signal being broadcast, it was obvious that she'd failed.

"No," she said. "It's … not the same as yours. It's fused to his spine and his brain stem. If I try and remove it, it'll kill him."

"Then what else is there to talk about?"

"I won't leave him."
Ronon regarded her in mute stillness, holding his thoughts close at hand. *The strong, silent type.* Another thing she was getting sick of.

"At least, before, he could fight back," she said, hoping he was listening. If anyone could appreciate the desire to go down fighting, it was him. "Ronon, he's helpless."

Reflecting the near void of light surrounding them, his eyes gleamed black. They drew her in, swallowing her whole in heavy contemplation. He glanced at his toes, then back at her, and yet she still had no clue what he was thinking. "We have to go. More Wraith are coming."

She looked back at the littered trail of corpses behind her. "How do you know?"

"More Wraith are always coming."
"Morning," John said, ushering Rodney inside his quarters.

While Rodney muttered a 'Good morning' of his own, John busily fastened his watch to his wrist and strolled through the cavernous Great Room toward the kitchen, where his earpiece lay on the counter. Otherwise ready to report for his duty shift, he slipped it on and casually opened the refrigerator.

Rodney stayed glued to the doorway with his hands in his pockets, regarding the doorway to John's bedroom with healthy suspicion. Electronic music and computerized sound effects tapered in from inside where Teyla was camped on the bed, just out of sight.

"So is, um … everything still all quiet on the baby front?"

John stared at the contents of his fridge, tapping his fingers on the side of the door. Having the convenience of the Mess Hall, most of the food that came to their quarters didn't come to stay, so there wasn't much in there besides a carton of juice, half a turkey sandwich, a bottle of Tabasco sauce, and a six-pack. With no time to stop by the Mess for coffee and the only other option staring him in the face being a nice and spicy can of beer, John decided to help himself to a glass of orange juice.

"Relax, McKay. It's been four days and counting since there's been any action. Teyla's not going into labor."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure." John poured himself a glass and crossed back toward his anxious friend with his juice in hand. Coming to a stop, he took a sip. "The only reason I need you here is so she'll have some company, and so that she'll have someone here if she needs anything."

"Well … okay, I guess." Not seeming overly convinced, Rodney continued with his leery stare. Distractedly, he pulled a hand from his pocket and nudged John's arm in an offhand manner as if he'd just remembered something. "Oh, hey, Woolsey's back."

OJ sloshed precariously inside his glass, and John quickly steadied his hand to make sure he didn't spill juice all over his uniform. With an annoyed frown, he said, "Yeah, I know. He radioed in when he landed. Wants to have a quick debrief in his office."

"Sure, sure," McKay mumbled. Barely paying attention, Rodney pointed toward the bedroom where the music blared a rock and roll beat followed by a cacophony of digital shouts, crashes, and booms. In a hushed voice, he asked, "What is she doing?"

"Kicking some virtual ass." Rodney's forehead wrinkled. John motioned with the half-filled glass and clarified, "Playing video games."
Rodney's head spun around, his face slanted in cock-eyed disbelief. "Teyla? This I've got to see."

"Just don't get too close. She gets a little animated with the controller," John warned as he stole another drink. "She was getting pretty antsy, so I thought a little Dead or Alive was in order. And I've got Tekken and about twenty different versions of Mortal Kombat warming the bench for when she's finished with it. Figured she needed a new target for her frustrations."

"Don't tell me you two are fighting again."

John swallowed another gulp of chilled juice. "Nah." Far from it. In fact, he and Teyla were probably better than they ever had been.

With the upheaval currently rippling through their lives, it would have been so easy to let events come between them. As if it wasn't enough to be encumbered with worry about Teyla's recovery, Michael was still out there somewhere and the IOA rep was only four days away from finally making his appearance. Stress killed relationships every day, but his relationship with Teyla wasn't destined to be a casualty of circumstance. Of that, John had no doubt.

There were times when he and Teyla were too alike for their own good. In sheer stubbornness alone they were a match for the ages, but because they were both naturally adept at keeping people at a strategic distance, they had nearly cheated themselves out of the chance to be together. Getting past those protective boundaries had been the hardest part; learning to be truly open to one another. But now that they had found each other, had created a home and a family together, there was nothing that could tear them apart.

He loved her as she loved him: beautifully, painfully, and all-encompassing. She was his refuge, and he was her soft place to fall. Not only were he and Teyla happy, he thought with a hidden smile, John was finally ready to make a leap he never thought he'd make again. He wanted to make his relationship with her official, unambiguous, and forever. He wanted to get married.

Not that he was going to reveal that particular tidbit to Rodney. Bed rest or no, if McKay found out Teyla was getting married before she did, Teyla would kick his ass.

And, of course, there was the looming issue of whether they would be in any position to talk marriage after the IOA got finished with them.

John glanced back over to Rodney and explained the reason behind Teyla's frustration. "It's just with everything going on, she wants to help. I told her we had everything taken care of, but she's a little ... upset ... that she's stuck in bed."

Rodney's expression took on a whole new level of concern. "So how upset are we talking here? The 'occasional dirty look' upset or 'Get me my weapons chest' upset?"

John lowered his voice. "Let me just put it this way-I accidentally walked in on her meditating last night. I didn't mean to, but it was late and apparently she'd been having trouble concentrating as it was."

"And?"

"She threw a book at my head."

Rodney cringed. "Something small I hope."

"War and Peace."
"Ooohhhh."

"Yeah," John confirmed. "It was really aimed more at the door. My head just happened to be in the way."

"Still … that's one bumpy road to inner peace."

"Tell me about it."

John drained the last of his glass and went to put it in the sink. When he turned back around, he almost laughed out loud. Rodney was wide-eyed and nervous. All that was missing was a twitchy nose, a set of whiskers, and a fluffy tail and he would've been a trapped rabbit. In Teyla's very pregnant state, McKay was already paranoid and borderline frightened of being left alone with her as it was. But if she was mad and pregnant …

John muzzled the potent grin tugging at his cheeks. After a good night's sleep, Teyla—and her hormones—had actually cooled off quite a bit, but Rodney didn't really need to know that.

On his way to the bedroom to say goodbye to Teyla, John gave him an conciliatory slap on the back. "Good luck, buddy."

Rodney grabbed his arm and whispered, "Wait, wait, wait. You're really gonna leave me here with her?"

"I gotta go, McKay."

"No, really, I think I've got a … " He made a pathetic coughing sound. " … terrible cold coming on. I really shouldn't … "

"You'll be fine."

Rodney graduated to an amazingly healthy whine. "Well, can I at least go put on a vest or something?"

"Sorry. Woolsey's waiting." John entered the bedroom, his composure tap dancing on the head of a pin.

Sitting with her legs crossed on top of the covers, Teyla glanced up at him and paused the game. "What is so funny?" she asked, curious.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

She obviously didn't believe him, but didn't press him for more. She just smiled at him in that cool, knowing way that made his knees weak. She sat back, relaxed, and reclined back on her arms to make room for her stomach, accentuating the exquisite curvature of her pregnant body. She looked satisfied at simply admiring the twinkle in his eye.

"What have you done to Rodney?"

John's impassive smile wouldn't fool a blind man, let alone his beautiful and highly perceptive future wife. He put a hand down on the bed and leaned over her body, leaving only a sliver of space between them. "I'll call you in a little while. Kill lots of bad guys," he said lovingly, then kissed her.

"Goodbye, John," she said, her finger affectionately brushing his jaw as she stretched up to kiss him once more before he straightened. Her lips were so soft. "Before you go, would you mind doing
"something for me?"

"Whatever you need."

"Would you please tell Rodney to stop cowering in the living room? It is quite distracting."

A grin plastered itself all over his face. "Love you."

"I love you, too," she said.

As Teyla watched with bemused disapproval, John schooled his features into a mask of restrained terror and walked back out into the main room.

"She wants you to come in," he told Rodney, and as he walked past, he gestured with two fingers pointed toward his face and mouthed, "Don't look her in the eyes."

Rodney mouthed back, "Very funny!"

The door closed behind him, and John chuckled halfway down the hall.

He probably should have felt guilty for winding McKay up like that, but remorse didn't seem to be in the cards. With Teyla on the mend and plans already in place for their escape from Atlantis, John didn't have much else to do besides wait and carry on about his job. Hassling Rodney was a higher form of twiddling his thumbs; more of an art, but no less an exercise in keeping himself occupied. And the fact that Rodney made it so easy only made it all the more fun.

John was still wearing a small, satisfied grin when he reached Woolsey's office.

He poked his head inside the open doorway. Mr. Woolsey was on his computer, a hand propped up beneath his chin, deeply engrossed in whatever he was reading. A sheen of blue illuminated his face, the computer screen reflecting off the lenses of his glasses.

"Knock, knock," John announced himself.

Woolsey lifted his gaze. "Ah, Colonel. Come in." His hand dropped down to rest on the desktop as he uncoiled his posture. "I was just catching up on what I missed."

John took a seat across from him.

"I see you somehow managed to get Dr. Tratovsky to turn in his personnel evaluations. I've been after him to get those to me for over a week. How hard did you have to twist his arm?"

"Not hard," John said. "He started screaming after the first few seconds. Really took all the sport out of it."

Woolsey let out a brief huff of amusement, then caught John's eye with discerning stare as he moved on the the next item. "I also see that Dr. McKay has taken Jumper Four offline for repairs."

John paused a moment, coldly measuring the expedition Head, Woolsey hadn't said anything, but John was certain he knew exactly what he was up to. Woolsey claimed to be on his side, but he was a die-hard stickler for the law. When the chips were down, John wasn't yet sure how he was going to respond. He answered casually, "Yeah. The guidance system's a little screwy. Repairs shouldn't take more than three days. Four tops."

"Just in time for the Daedalus' arrival."
Secured one Puddlejumper, scrambled the Tower's command codes, preventing an override, and stuffed it with as many supplies as I could without drawing attention. Nope, that's pretty much it. John smiled. "Well, you were only gone a day. Imagine what I could have done with two."

"Imagine," Woolsey muttered with a wry lilt.

"So, how'd things go on your end?" John asked.

"Reasonably well, I think," Woolsey said. "Though it was rather strange in some ways."

John's eyes narrowed. "How so?"

Woolsey seemed to give the question some careful thought. "Nothing specific, really. There was just a strange atmosphere about the place. People seemed very … quiet. Padrel was the only one who spoke to us at any length, even at dinner. Not even his aide, who you would think would be proactive in that area, trying to help Padrel gather as much knowledge about us as possible. I know that's what I would do."

John cocked his head to the side. "What aide?"

"Lauros," he said. "Tall, thin, dark hair, beaklike nose."

"Doesn't ring a bell. I didn't think Padrel and the Council had aides. Of course, I wasn't exactly there for very long," John allowed. He was hardly an expert in Kysonian society. "You think something was wrong?"

Woolsey shook his head. "Not that I could see. Padrel did mention that there had been a recent influx of refugees, many of whom they had to turn away."

"It could be they're just afraid," John suggested. "If survivors of Michael's plague are turning up on their doorstep, they're probably worried that they're next."

"You're probably right. They were certainly afraid of something," Woolsey said. His tone suggested he wasn't completely convinced that was all it was, but whatever it was nagging him didn't seem important enough to warrant further discussion.

"Were they able to give you anything for us to go on?"

"Only a planet called Bellerophon. It's possible this is the planet the spread of the disease began."

John looked at him, surprised. "Greek myth guy? The guy who rode Pegasus?"

Woolsey smiled. "The very same, I believe. I took the liberty of refreshing my memory. As SG-1 found in the Milky Way, it wasn't uncommon for mythical figures on Earth to turn out to be based on an actual being. Usually Go'auld or Asgard."

"So Bellerophon was … what? An Ancient?"
"I don't believe so, but you may not be far off, Colonel. I found it rather interesting that Padrel was as familiar with the story as I was."

"Same story, two galaxies. What are the odds?" John said, following his reasoning.

"Precisely," Woolsey said. He clicked a few buttons on his laptop and spun it around to allow John to see. "I did a search in the Ancient database looking for more on the planet itself. It turns out that during the war with the Wraith, Bellerophon was the site of a major battle and a key loss for the Ancients. Losing that sector to the Wraith was the beginning of the end to the Ancients' bid to hold onto the galaxy.

Mr. Woolsey hesitated, a note of excitement in his expression. "Now … the story of Bellerophon is all about a mortal man who tamed Pegasus and went on to accomplish great deeds and become a hero. He grew proud and arrogant, so much so that he thought he deserved a place with the gods. As punishment for his hubris, the gods sent an insect to sting Pegasus. Pegasus threw him off, and he fell all the way back to earth. Sound familiar, Colonel?"

John nodded. "Sounds to me like the story is some Ancient's idea of a history lesson."

"An allegory. A metaphor. I think the man Bellerophon represents in the story the Ancients' rise as a people, accomplishing incredible feats-godlike even-and ultimately, in their pride, allowing the Wraith to come into being."

"And kick their asses all the way back to Earth," John added, pursing his lips. The story of Pegasus. Told in every junior high, and no one had any idea it was the tale of the downfall of the greatest race the stars had ever known. It was kind of sad.

"It brings new meaning to the phrase 'pride goeth before a fall', doesn't it?" Woolsey asked, solemnly.

"Yeah." John leaned into his chair and released a heavy exhale. "It sounds like Bellerophon would be the perfect place for Michael to cherry-pick to launch his first strike on humanity and the Wraith. He'd get off on the irony."

Woolsey nodded his agreement.

John stood up. "I'll see about getting a team together."

"There's no rush, Colonel. Whatever evidence is still on Bellerophon will still be there tomorrow," Woolsey said, halting him. "Apparently, the planet is dead."

"What do you mean?"

Woolsey looked at him seriously. "Over dinner, Padrel told me that a small group of stragglers came through from there. A few escaped, but … those that managed to survive the plague were wiped out by the Wraith."

John closed his eyes. "God," he whispered.

Mr. Woolsey's expression read like someone who'd had the very same reaction.

"It sounds like that was some dinner," John said, when the initial horror of all those deaths began to subside.

"Well, it wasn't all bad."
"No?"

The tight corners of Woolsey's mouth began to relax. "Halling and I were invited to attend the Festival of Flowers in four weeks. Apparently, it's a celebration of hope for a bountiful season and new life."

John snorted unexpectedly. "A fertility rite?"

"Yes, I believe so." The staid leader seemed to squirm in his seat.

"What kind of … fertility rite … are we talking about here?" John asked. For the second time that morning, he found himself trying not to laugh.

Mr. Woolsey didn't seem to appreciate the humor. "I was afraid to ask. But I wouldn't dream of hogging all the fun. You have been invited as well. Teyla, too. As the leader of the Athosian society and you, as my chosen proxy, apparently it's expected."

John's eyebrows reached skyward. "Really?" he said, clearing his throat.

Taking Teyla to what was bound to be a pretty interesting party sounded like a really good idea in theory. In practice, she was on bed rest. He didn't have any notion of where she would be in four weeks in terms of her recovery—or where they would be living by then, for that matter—only that she would be a month closer to delivering their baby. At over eight months pregnant, John wasn't too hopeful that attending an orgy would be on Teyla's list of things to do.

"Um … maybe next time," he tried to politely back out. "You know, what with the baby and all."

"Not to worry, Colonel. I didn't leave Padrel with the impression that you'd be able to attend," Woolsey said. "However, that leaves me in an awkward position. With Teyla unlikely to attend, Padrel refused to take no for an answer with Halling. Halling barely got a word in." He drummed his fingers on the desk, thinking out loud. "I'd hate to offend these people without good reason."

"It's still a month away. I'm sure we can come up with something extremely urgent for you to take care of at the last minute. That's what we do best."

Woolsey smiled. "I'm sure you can, Colonel."

With their conversation seeming finished, John headed for the door.

"Oh, Colonel?"

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"Has there been any word from Dr. Keller and Ronon as to when we can expect them back?"

"They checked in a couple of hours after they left yesterday. Keller said there were a lot of families needing attention, and they'd get back when they could."

"Nothing too serious, I hope?"

"Should be a piece of cake."

Woolsey nodded. "Very well. Carry on, Colonel."
Short night, Ronon thought, watching the sun come up by himself. His restless eyes took in the vibrant colors of sunrise. The brilliant array of yellows, pinks, and oranges smeared across the sky, the leavings of some unknowable celestial paintbrush. Yesterday, the awe-inspiring sight might have meant something to him. Tomorrow—if there was a tomorrow—maybe it would again. But not today. Today, it was nothing.

Perched on a small outcropping that gave him a better vantage point to oversee the remaining miles to the Stargate, he stood guard. He held his stunner in his hand and pulled out the power cell. It was fully charged before he left Atlantis, but there was no substitute for being sure.

He threw a brief glance over his shoulder. Huddled up against a tree behind him a short distance away, Jennifer slept, cradling the girl in her lap. Ronon was deaf to the desire that breathed in his ear, wanting to curl up with them in a warm cluster and rest. Sleep was a luxury he couldn't afford. After a brief inspection, he slid the power cell back into place, hearing a firm click as it locked into position.

The trek back had been exactly what he'd been afraid of: slow, hard. Cautious of every noise they made, no matter how insignificant, they barely spoke to one another. He led. She followed. They spent most of the night that way. The only time he heard Jennifer utter a full sentence was when the girl regained consciousness and, in a confusion fed by fever, started crying for the runner.

"Kiryk!" she sobbed. "Kiryk!"

"Shhhh … it's okay. It's okay, Celise," Jennifer repeated over and over in a comforting murmur. He'd turned around to see the doctor holding her snugly to her chest, her hand circling naturally over the little girl's back and letting the sway of her walk become smoother, more rhythmic, as a mother would soothe a baby. "It's okay," she'd said, catching Ronon's gaze before he turned away again, conveying a wordless hope that it wasn't all a lie.

If it had only been the two of them, they would have nearly reached the Stargate by now. But with Jennifer carrying the injured girl most of the night and him weighed down with his own load—slung limply and heavily over his shoulders—even he eventually had to bow to the need to stop.

Jennifer hadn't been asleep for very long, but it was good she was taking advantage of the short time they had to rest. They needed to get moving again. Soon.

He looked down at the runner laying face down at his feet, who was finally starting to show signs of waking up. A head twitch, fingers curling. Ronon crouched down, aloof and utterly fearless, the blood in his veins having gone from a turbulent, unbridled boil to bitter ice overnight. To the swirling ring of his stunner powering up, he pressed the blunt tip of the gun into the man's cheek and waited.

Finally, a set of dark marbled eyes peered up at him; completely aware and equally as fearless.

"It's set to kill," Ronon greeted him with a stern warning. The runner's dispassionate eyes skated to side, taking in the situation, then traveled back up. "Get up."

Without breaking their tense stare for an instant, the runner slowly moved, pushing himself to his feet while Ronon's gun followed along with calculated precision. He didn't behave like someone lined up squarely in someone else's sights, Ronon observed, mewling and whining to be spared with his hands shoved up over his head in surrender. He stood calmly. Guarded, but calm. This one was no coward.
"How did you find me?" the man asked.

"Wasn't hard."

His head tilted to the side, suspicious. "Tracking at night?"

Ronon smiled dangerously. He wasn't stupid, either. "Followed the Wraith through the woods. They found a few of your traps for me."

"Well, I'm glad they got put to good use."

"Pretty good work, by the way."

"I've had a lot of practice," said the stranger. "So you're the one the doctor was talking about. The one that used to be a runner."

Ronon didn't respond.

"How long?"

Ronon's eyes narrowed. He didn't want to talk about it, but found himself answering anyway. "Seven years. You?"

"Four. Five, maybe. Not really sure. Never thought I'd meet another one."

"Me neither."

The runner cast a dark glance over his shoulder to where the sleeping doctor and the girl were settled peacefully. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you just take them and go?"

Ronon's jaw screwed tight. "She wouldn't leave without you."

"Why not?" he asked, bewildered and angry in a way only another of his kind could discern.

Ronon drew in Jennifer's form, her arms keeping the child wrapped in her blanket, protective even in sleep. "She doesn't understand," he said, and he knew it to be the truth. She would never understand death as a way of life. It went against her every instinct. "She's better than us. She's kind and giving … She's innocent. She doesn't know what it means to do the things we do, and I wasn't gonna take that away from her."

The battle-hardened man tipped his head almost immeasurably. "Is she yours?"

Ronon looked at him, and slowly, he lowered his gun. "No."

Around them, a stiff morning breeze picked up, rustling limbs as if to wake them for the coming day. As if heeding some ethereal call, Ronon and his counterpart both stopped to listen. The trees whispered their secrets to one another, carrying them off to one then passing them on to another and another until the whispers became a chittering, shrill voice all their own, racing the wind. The environment changing with every passing instant, the air imparted its wisdom. All the while, Ronon and the man stood apart.

The runner's mouth contorted into a disconsolate frown, teeming with unspoken regret. "I've been here too long."

Ronon scowled at the sky, but stopped long enough to tell him, "The village is empty."
"You?" he asked, worried the Wraith had gotten there already.

Ronon nodded.

The man—Kiryk, Ronon mentally corrected—exhaled in relief.

Up until now, Ronon had preferred to think of him only in anonymous terms. 'The man.' 'The stranger.' As long as Kiryk remained a threat worthy of a swift and pitiless end or someone he would end up serving up to the Wraith, it was better that way. It was better that he kept being some obscure figure no one would miss. Ronon couldn't have guilt or sentimentality keep him from doing what needed to be done.

But … he was obviously stricken at the idea of another village having been culled because of him. He'd cared for that little girl after her life was razed to the ground. He hadn't harmed Jennifer, even though his considerable skill would have made it easy to overpower her. After years of solitary existence, a lesser man might have seen the gentle doctor as an opportunity, an object to be used.

In all likelihood, Kiryk would yet be the reason Ronon Dex finally fell to the Wraith, but he was a good man. Ronon could see that. He had earned his name, at least.

A speeding Dart pierced the horizon and passed screaming directly overhead. The two moved together, breaking into an all-out run toward Jennifer and Celise.

Jennifer was already up, awoken by the noise and scrabbling to her feet, but the girl was out cold. As she frantically tried to gather the child back into her arms, she sought out Ronon's eyes. "What do we do?"

"We've gotta go."

Ronon tossed Kiryk the stunner he'd removed from his thigh holster the previous night.

Coming around for a second pass, the Wraith craft banked steeply and swooped over their heads. The group scattered, Ronon pushing Jennifer from behind, driving her out of the way of the Wraith beam he was sure was coming. The Dart flew over, its ear-piercing shriek and the concussive force in its wake shaking the ground beneath them, but it never deployed a stun beam.

They fled toward the trees, hoping to find cover in the forest's canopy, while it wheeled around again and dove lower, and still there was no attempt made to capture them. That could only mean one thing: they were being herded. There were hunters on the ground, already closing in on their position, and they were being pushed straight to them.

As if reading his mind, Kiryk said, "I'll draw them off. Try to give you enough time to reach the Ring."

"Too late for that," Ronon growled. Flashes of movement splintered through the trees in every direction, except the way they had just come. His neck tore around, trying to get a bead on the enemy and their numbers. He shoved Jennifer behind him as the hunting party became visible; a team of drones and warrior Wraith headed straight for them at a breakneck pace. Too fast to hold them off for long.

Bloodlust gathered and coursed through Ronon like the churning white wash of a river refusing to be dammed any longer, and he fired, leaving a smoldering hole in the breastplate of a drone. He fired on another. And another.

Kiryk's weapon unleashed a second volley, echoing his in a synchronistic harmony of violence.
"You should've killed me," he said to Ronon with deadly focus.

Stunner blasts sheared past their heads as the Wraith returned fire, and Ronon smiled. "I know."
Run When You Can

Chapter Summary

"Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must; just never give up."

Chapter Notes

Graphic imagery ahead. Consider yourself warned.

"You should've killed me."

Caged behind Ronon as he blasted away at the Wraith, her arms and legs wailing from strain, Jennifer peered around his huge frame. A quiet smile form on his lips as he glanced at Kiryk. "I know."

The Dart continued to twirl and pitch above their heads. Its sinister screech was deafening. Stunner fire came back at them, crisscrossing through the trees. Jennifer's arms and legs wailed from strain as she did her best to shield Celise. She ducked the hail of blue bolts while Ronon hovered protectively over her and nudged her back the way they had just come, continuing to shoot. Wraith seemed to be everywhere, coming in on them too fast. She couldn't fathom what he found to smile about.

Some small fragment of her, not currently busy being scared out of her wits, hoped it was because he was glad he hadn't left Kiryk to die. That same sliver of awareness also hoped that act of mercy—one she had essentially blackmailed him into making—wouldn't wind up getting them all killed.

"Go!" Ronon suddenly bellowed at Kiryk.

Runners past and present shared a purposeful look. Kiryk touched the green button on his arm and disappeared.

Her eyes swelled in shock. The instant he was gone, Ronon crowded her, impelling her back with impunity. Jennifer tried to obey. Carrying Celise and almost dizzy from the flood of adrenaline pouring through her veins, she ran crouched and bent over as stunner blasts whizzed over her head. "Ronon?!"

"Run!" he yelled, directly behind her. He ceased fire, and his sizable hand rapidly descended onto her back. It burned hot; she felt his imprint through her clothing. His added inertia helped to push her legs faster and faster toward a nearby stand of trees that might offer them at least a little bit of cover. As the forceful pulse of his blaster died in the air, goosebumps cropped up all over her body. He was leaving himself vulnerable.

Dread thundered in her ears as she scrambled past the trees into the small copse. Ronon's hand fell away, and Jennifer stopped dead in her tracks. Cradling the unconscious girl, she spun around. It was only then she noticed that the Wraith salvo had ceased. Well, it hadn't so much ceased as it had switched directions.
About a hundred yards away, Kiryk had teleported to the other side of the enemy line, dividing the Wraith's attention and giving Ronon a chance to get her and Celise out of the open and into a more protected position.

"Stay here," Ronon barked.

Clutching his gun, he marched back out and placed himself between them and the pale mob of Hunters. As though he and Kiryk had planned this from the very beginning, he unleashed another barrage of fire. Red incendiary energy decorated the forest floor with smoking corpses as Ronon divided the Wraith yet again. Kiryk's granite jaw read of unforgiving death as he mowed them down as fast as he could before he was overwhelmed. Before she lost sight of him, his sword flashed in the burgeoning daylight.

Meanwhile, the Dart circled overhead like a marauding vulture waiting to pick their bones.

Jennifer caught her lower lip between her teeth as fear took an ugly hold, angry at herself for being so helpless. There were so many Wraith and all she could do was watch.

All muscle and wrath, Ronon fought with abandon. Drones buffeted him and knocked his blaster from his grip. He clawed at one, drawing it in front of him, intercepting a stunner blast meant for him, then rewarded it with a quick death by gripping its jaw and wrenching it to an sickening angle. Ronon let the body drop. It collided with the ground as he turned to meet the next Wraith that rushed in on them. Guttural, rasping shouts fell from his throat as he drove his fists into them. His arms corded, he drove home every strike with every ounce of power he possessed. Out of nowhere, a knife flashed in his clutches, spearing a warrior Wraith through the eye before he yanked it out, then shoving it under the chin of a drone encroaching on his left. He moved almost too fast for her to follow, with agility and brute strength; a devastating grace. In an instant, he was on another, then another. He kept them at bay, but had nowhere to go because he wouldn't leave her behind. Blood flying, bodies falling, Ronon's eyes gleamed in blissful hatred.

From what Jennifer knew of them, the Satedans lived hard, fought hard, and—where possible—died hard, and Ronon was nothing if not a proud son of his people.

Apart from him, a different set of eyes, cold and slitted, broke from the group and honed in on Jennifer; a pallid Wraith warrior just beyond Ronon's reach, bearing a crescent with a broken tip on its brow.

Oh no ... no, no, no, no ... Jennifer scrambled backward.

Correctly judging her to be a weaker opponent, it sprung at her and the unconscious child.

Oooooooohhh! Jennifer managed to set Celise down, but the Wraith was practically on top of her as she was still on her knees. Quaking inside, knowing that a feeding hand was moments from slamming down on her, she reached out for the closest thing at hand; a thick, gnarled tree branch about the length of her forearm. A clawed hand surrounded her arm and violently tossed her away from the thin cluster of trees. She slammed into the uncultivated terrain, the sssssshhhhiiiiieeetteett of ripping leather saying everything for her as sharp rocks pierced her back upon landing. Pain lanced upward and shot across her ribs.

The white-haired Wraith advanced on her imperiously, his hand curling in want, that repulsive slit staring down at her as though she were nothing more than today's Happy Meal. Terror drove her heart to speeds beyond its limit. Her back stung. She arched away from the ground and happened to glance up. She was shocked to find the knotted, rough texture of wood still held hard in her palm. The Hunter loomed over her and raised his hand.
With zero time to think, she drew back her knee and drove her boot squarely between the Wraith's legs. The Wraith doubled over with a screeching yowl, and Jennifer swung as hard as she could. The branch crashed into its head.

Scuttling to her feet, Jennifer retreated to get between the Wraith and Celise again. The Hunter very slowly arose. Blood wept down his face, a nasty gash gouged clean through his facial tattoo. Her eyes went as wide as saucers, shocked at the damage she'd done. Two squalid rows of sharp teeth seethed and hissed at her. Deeply, deeply pissed off, Jennifer observed with a shudder. Of course, she couldn't have been one hundred percent certain that move would work as … effectively … as it would with a human male, but it appeared her little experiment had been a staggering success.

*Crap.*

Sweat pasting her bangs to her forehead and a searing ache reaching across her back, Jennifer shakily held the branch out in front of her as if it would shield her from what was coming. "J-Just stay … right there," she said, trying to sound threatening and failing miserably. One thing was for sure, a month or two of sparring lessons wasn't going to get her out of this one.

It leaped again.

"Ronon!"

A split second of fear clutched his chest as her cry pierced the air. He'd let one get past him.

Pitiless, Ronon buried a knife deep in a drone's throat and spun his head around just in time to see Jennifer batt away a warrior's hand. Her features stretched and afraid, she blocked its follow through just like he'd taught her. She gnawed her lower lip and slapped it away again. Having managed to draw blood, Jennifer seemed to be holding her own so far, but she was too slow. Too inexperienced. She was relying almost exclusively on defense, a habit he'd tried to break her of and one the Wraith would soon figure out and exploit. She wasn't trained well enough.

Two Wraith closed in on him from the front, eager to take advantage of his momentary distraction, and another from behind. Ronon ignored them both. With his dark eyes on target, he snatched a knife from his hair and powered it home, skewering the Wraith's hand.

He was denied the sight of his victory, however. All he heard was the pained yell of the injured Wraith and another crack as Jennifer hit it again, for in that instant of distraction, a steel hand clamped around his extended right arm, pinning and pushing it high against his back. Foul breath touched his shoulder as tendons and ligaments shrieked from the strain. A new, almost manic determination gripped him. He had to get loose for Jennifer's sake.

He used it—and the body weight of the Wraith holding him—to propel his legs upward. Like a pair of thick tree trunks, he slammed them into the first comer's chest and sent it hurtling backward. Feet hit ground, and again Ronon surged. Savagely gritting his teeth, his legs coiled around the second attacker's neck and jerked. The thud of the dead body was lost in his ears. His arm screamed, but he didn't hear it either. He twisted his free arm around the rear of his captor's neck. A rough shout tore from him as he folded over and heaved the creature to the forest floor.

Relief pounded through his arm, and Ronon tried once again to reach Jennifer, only to find himself under attack. Those he hadn't killed rallied and beset him again, every single moment they kept him
apart from the doctor another second she didn't have. As he was surrounded again, a fleeting streak of tawny was the only proof he had it wasn't already too late; her hair whipping around as she dodged and weaved to avoid the Wraith who, even without a means to feed, would still enjoying watching the light slip from her eyes as she became nothing more than a shell of a life that was.

His fist flew. The entire span of his arm stretched wide, creating an impenetrable wall that gave him a moment's separation, an instant to shake free. Yet it wasn't enough. They sealed him in too quickly. He had thought the numbers were thinning, but it seemed like every Wraith on the planet had concentrated on him. Gathering like insects to a flame, they had decided the time had finally come- this was the day he died.

Another of his concealed weapons adorned his hand, and he sliced clean through a drone's mask. A fountain of black spewed from beneath while a separate stream followed the wicked arc of his blade outward. A vengeful smile blazed on his lips. **Come and get me.**

Then, as if stepping from a doorway in a sky full of seams, Kiryk burst into being right behind the cluster of Wraith and swung. His sword tore through gray flesh as the viridian vortex evaporated in a swoosh. With a bloodthirsty hiss, Ronon claimed another victory, slicing into that sweet spot between ribs before Kiryk could even withdraw his blade. A warrior, who thought himself unseen, plunged menacingly toward Kiryk. Ronon took that same knife and made him eat it.

"Go!" the Runner said with an urgent glance toward Jennifer's last position. Kiryk yanked his sword loose from a dead Wraith's chest and threw the razor-edged blade to Ronon. The Satedan behemoth didn't waste another moment. He caught it by the hilt and raced toward Jennifer at a dead run.

Badly outclassed, the doctor had lost the fight. She went down right before his eyes, and the Wraith with the maimed face and mangled hand knelt directly over her prone figure. **He wants to make her feel his wounds before he kills her,** Ronon realized angrily, willing his legs for more speed.

Too preoccupied with its victim to see death charging toward him, the Hunter backhanded her high across the cheek. Her head snapped to the side, absorbing the sharp impact. She cried out, a surprisingly small sound that sent every other thought in Ronon's head to oblivion. His hand tightened around the hilt, a berserker's rage coursing wildly inside. The cold steel spun in his hand, feet from them. He leaped.

Jennifer's soft, moist eyes saw him just before he struck. For a protracted instant, he loomed as a giant shadow over her and the unwitting Wraith on top of her. The sword gleamed in a crisp vertical line, pointed to a true and deadly angle. She saw it. She saw what he was about to do, and instead of screaming, she simply closed her eyes.

With all his might, Ronon drove the sword clear through its spine and the blade didn't stop until it protruded out the other side. The body immediately collapsed under his weight. Its momentum carried the body, the sword, and its salient tip straight down into her.

Jennifer's eyes flew open. Gasping, her pink lips were contorted and scared. But Ronon brought it up short.

Heaving with exertion and a fire in his belly, he caught it and held it off her. The body hung skewered between them. He lifted slightly and twisted the blade. The satisfying squish that followed was almost music to his ears. Using her elbows for leverage, Jennifer scooted free. Once her body was clear, she rolled over and crawled a short distance away on her hands and knees.

He issued a few terse words, telling her to get back to the girl. His unyielding gaze followed her as she got to her feet and moved toward the trees. He couldn't ask if she was alright. Not yet. Instead,
he pressed his foot down upon the Wraith's spine to unsheath the sword. She was shaky, pale, and her jacket was ripped up the back, but it would have to wait for later. Until the rest of the hunting party was dead, it wouldn't be safe, and the longer it took, the worse off they would be.

It didn't take long. With the fellow Runners working together, intent only to kill, the Wraith became the cattle to the slaughter. No mercy. No survivors. Not even the Dart survived, thanks to an oval-shaped grenade Ronon borrowed from one of the fallen. A simple twist of the wrist and a well-timed aim sent burning wreckage hurtling across the vast expanse of forest.

They picked through the remains, gathered weapons to rearm themselves, and left behind a bloody scene. A pile of carrion for the birds, if the birds would have it, Ronon thought with an overcast expression, sliding his favorite stunner back into its holster.

He found Jennifer huddled on the ground with Celise. The doctor held her close, rocking her as though the girl needed comfort, but there was no sign she had ever awoken. As Ronon stood back, Kiryk got to one knee next to them and laid his stout hand against Celise's diminutive face.

Jennifer quietly looked up at him. "She's getting worse. I-I lost our medical supplies when the Dart showed up." She seemed positively heartsick. "There's nothing I can do. Not unless we can get to Atlantis."

Kiryk nodded. His stoic presence signified he was all too aware of what needed to be done.

"They'll be guarding the Gate," Ronon said to him.

Kiryk turned to meet his gaze and stood. He shifted his arm and glanced at the alien tech bonded there. "I think I've got one more jump before it needs to recharge. Maybe two by the time I get there. I can get past them."

"But … you can't just leave," Jennifer said. She, very gently, laid Celise down in the grass. Seeing she intended to rise, Ronon extended his hand. "I had a lot of time to think last night, and I think I figured out a way to deactivate your tracking device."

"I thought you said removing it was impossible," Kiryk said.

"It is, but … I was thinking maybe we could short circuit it. Fry the transmitter so it can't broadcast your location."

Ronon was about to say something when he thought he heard the whine of another Dart in the distance. A renewed sense of urgency spurred them to speak quickly. "What would you need?"

Her eyes traveled anxiously back and forth between him and the skyline. "A defibrillator. That's it. The problem is, the only one I had is laying somewhere in the woods."

A dark frown grimace spread over Ronon's bearded face. Turning, he swiftly surveyed the territory they had covered in their hurried flight from the Wraith Dart. "I could go back for it."

"Not in time," Kiryk replied, his features impregnable. "More Wraith are already on their way. The best thing for me to do now is run."

"No, there has to be another way," Jennifer insisted. "Something else."

Ronon and Kiryk exchanged a heavy glance. Despite everything she'd just been through, Jennifer wasn't willing to give up. Ronon knew she could never accept that there were some battles that just couldn't be won. In the day that he'd known her, it was clear Kiryk had figured that out as well. If
Ronon were on his own, if there weren't other lives hanging in the balance, he would've risked retracing their steps and gone back for the defibrillator in a second. But he had Jennifer and a dying child depending on him, and the Wraith would only come back stronger the next time.

Kiryk was on his own. The fight here was done.

But that didn't mean it couldn't continue somewhere else.

Ronon crouched to the ground and drew into the dirt with his finger a series of symbols. "You know this world?"

Kiryk's eyes narrowed. "No."

"It's uninhabited and there are cliffs not far to the south that'll give you some pretty good cover. Make your way there. And stay out of the sun as much as you can. It'll make you sick."

Catching on quickly, Kiryk asked, "How will you find me once I'm there?"

"I got your tracking frequency off a Wraith locator beacon. Atlantis can use it to pinpoint your location."

Kiryk seemed good with the plan, and Ronon stood again. He gripped Kiryk's forearm, right arm to left arm, and the other man did likewise. "Stay alive."

Kiryk nodded soberly. "You, as well." They released and Kiryk stepped over to the spot where Celise lay on the ground. The Runner knelt down and reached a few feet to her side, where a little homemade doll had landed in the dirt. He lifted the edge of the blanket and tucked it tenderly inside.

Again, Ronon's attention was called toward to the horizon. The noise was getting louder. The wind began to pick up. His hand instinctively reached for the handle of his gun. "Gotta go," he warned.

Kiryk rapidly looked back and got up. "Doctor, take care of her," he said hurriedly. His legs moving with a palpable energy, were already primed for flight as he stepped away.

"I will. I promise," she called out. "We'll find you."

Kiryk gave one last nod and took off through the woods at a speed some men would find dizzying. Ronon watched him go and thought it was merely familiar.

"C'mon. We've got to get some distance between him and us," he told Jennifer. He had her slip Celise onto his back, so they could travel faster.

They walked for over an hour in silence, up and down the rolling landscape, under the shadow of trees and out in the open morning sun. Ronon led them on a meandering course that took them in the general direction of the Stargate, but not too close. As urgent as it was they reach Atlantis, they couldn't make a beeline for home until it was safe, not until Kiryk had cleared the way for them and led the Wraith somewhere else. He chose not to consider any other outcome.

Coming upon a crop of cattairus trees, they stopped. Jennifer took Celise from him and Ronon used a knife to hack into it, just above the root system. He peeled away layers of bark and came upon the mushy, beige pulp he was looking for. He dug out a handful, the gelatinous material oozing between his fingers, and handed it to Jennifer. "Squeeze it. Drink the juice," he instructed, then took some for himself. Droplets of stored water wet his parched lips and ran refreshingly down his throat. It had a woody flavor and was slightly gritty, but they needed the moisture if they were going to stay on their feet. Jennifer accepted another handful from him and opened the girl's mouth to it, too.
They stayed there for awhile. Tired. Resting. Mostly waiting.

"It's quiet," Jennifer finally said, glancing up at the sky. "I can't hear them anymore."

Ronon grunted an acknowledgment and shut his eyes for a second. The earlier tumult and cyclone of aggression had descended deep into the pit of his stomach and wallowed there, waiting to die. The beast was at rest, and he felt … apart from it all. Distant.

But the distance was a two-way street. He opened his eyes and exhaled slowly as he looked at Jennifer. They had barely spoken since last night, and it had only grown more pronounced since. True, the constant threat of Wraith hadn't exactly encouraged a lot of lively discussion, but this silence had weight. She sat slumped against the base of the tree, angled awkwardly to one side. She faced him, yet barely looked at him.

Guilt pricked at him as he realized she was favoring her back. He'd forgotten.

"Come here," he said, even as he scooted nearer. Jennifer sat up obediently, but didn't move. Ronon helped her shed her torn jacket and saw that the damage hadn't been confined to the tattered black leather. The shirt underneath was ripped in places, too, though not as bad. Rediscovering caution, his fingers crept under the hem of her shirt and lifted.

Jennifer suddenly pulled away. "I'm fine," she said, peering over her shoulder at him. Her big, oval eyes lied.

"You doctors should know better than to try a patient's tricks," he said. "Now, hold still."

She didn't protest further. Her head tipped forward and she hugged her arms to herself as he exposed her back.

He made a sucking noise through his teeth, greeted by raw, angry red flesh in a mottled pattern across her ribs. She was scraped and skinned in a few places, but the damage looked to be mostly internal. Ronon carefully placed his hands on her and pressed lightly to check for breaks. He was tender about the job, yet there was nothing sexual in the way that he touched her. Much like the way she treated her patients, it was a clinical and practical act. She trusted him. There she was, her torn flesh bared before him without a shred of fabric and she didn't flinch at his touch. She did wince a few times, but didn't pull away.

Yet there was a wall there that hadn't been there before today.

"I don't think anything's broken," he said, a tired rumble in his tone. He gently tugged her shirt into place.

"How did you do it, Ronon? How did you live this way for seven years?" she almost whispered, a tremble in her voice. He slowly brought her chin around to look at him, and this time, all he saw was sadness. Her eyes swam with unshed tears.

A deep frown settled on his face. "I didn't have another choice."
Crossroads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After his meeting with Woolsey, John spent most of the morning supervising drills and working with Lorne to make sure everything from the Armory all the way down to Supply was ready to withstand any amount of scrutiny. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have bothered. His work spoke for itself. Visiting brass could take him or leave him based on what he did every day, because the everyday was what mattered most around here. It was always the easy missions that seemed to go haywire, the nondescript room at the end of the hall that turned out to be housing something that would kill them all. If the higher-ups didn't think he was good enough for the command here as he was, then he didn't want it.

The IOA rep is probably gonna be more interested in bean counting and dissecting command decisions than anything military, he thought to himself as he went from department to department, poring over every detail. However, in this instance, he couldn't afford to take any chances. If it meant a safe future for Teyla and his baby girl here in Atlantis, he'd make sure every sconce in the city was ready for the white glove treatment.

Once his men had been given their orders, John retreated to his office to tackle the highest mountain of them all: the paperwork. He'd been steadily chipping away at it all week, so the pile was manageable, but it was still his least favorite part of the job.

Mission reports had all been filed but for a few exceptions which he'd have to follow up on soon. Lorne was still due to get the final inventory counts from the Armory back to him, but the duty roster for the SO's was complete and the offworld rotation schedule was finished for the next month, so John went about drawing up a tentative one for the next few. He signed off on the final round of personnel evaluations and transfer orders, then with a heavy sigh, leaned on his desk and pulled up the files for all the newbies coming aboard the Daedalus on his computer, which the SGC had relayed in the last transmission.

He scrolled through quickly. Words tumbled over each other as they raced down the screen. There were a lot of names to sift through; good people - among the best the U.S. military had to offer - but few of them people he would work closely with. He'd familiarize himself with most of them later. First, he had a harder task in front of him.

Major Teldy was dead. He harbored deep regret that it was even necessary, but her team needed a leader and it was past time he found her replacement.

Of all the qualified candidates, one stood out from the rest. An Air Force Major with a lot of talent and a proven track record. Combat veteran, Earth and otherwise. Bronze Star recipient. Martial arts expert. On special assignment, John also read with interest. But the thing that interested him most wasn't in the summary of her past assignments or the explanation of her current one. It was in the first few lines up at the top with the mundane details most CO's found irrelevant.

John took a long contemplative look, then closed the file.

Absorbed in thought, he drummed his fingers on the desk and was happily distracted when a light knock broke the silence; Capshaw's knuckle on the side of the open doorway. He casually held up a small stack of papers. "Can I come in?"
"Only if you leave those outside." More paperwork was all he needed.

"Sorry, sir. Orders. Lorne thought you might need these, and I was already headed this way … "


"Um … This is mine." Mason tucked that one into his palm as well.

After a concise study, John said, "You've been taking in some target practice."

"Requalifying." A satisfied smile wove into his expression. "My DM rating is as high as it's ever been."

"M-39 or HK?"

"M-39 all the way."

John smiled, not surprised. He was a Marine, after all. "The M-39's got a pretty good kick to it. You sure you're up for that?" he questioned in an assessing manner.

Mason stared him straight in the eye. "Not even a twinge."

"Glad to hear it." After his long struggle, Capshaw deserved to finally have things go his way, and John had to admit he'd never seen him looking better.

A master at hiding the severity of his condition, Capshaw had always appeared to be in top form. He'd been stationed in Atlantis for six months before John had even found out there was anything wrong, some of that time even spent as part of his team. But now that the alternating effects of agony and medication had ceased, John could see the difference. He looked healthier, less sallow. And more than that, that cadaverous look of defeat in his eyes was gone.

"Well, I'll just hang onto this then." John rooted around his desk and located a dense brown folder in the far left corner, partially buried. He slipped in Capshaw's marksmanship scores which he noted were about as high as they came. "It'll look good with your psych eval and your latest reports from Dr. Beckett."

"You've been keeping up with my file?"

John looked up, hearing astonishment in his voice. "It never leaves my desk."

His eyes traveled down and concentrated on the thick file. After a moment, he lifted his head and shelved the CO/Subordinate propriety for the moment. "Look, after everything that went down, I … thought I should keep closer tabs on you." With all his focus of late on Teyla, the fact was John hadn't been there for him. Keller had warned him that Capshaw was headed down a really treacherous road and he'd let it slide. He'd left him to deal with things on his own, and that was before the whole brain bug incident. He was partly to blame for how bad it got.

"I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay. That you weren't pushing yourself too hard to get back to duty."

An abstruse emotion rippled in Capshaw's placid posture before he glanced at his feet. "I appreciate that, sir. Really. But … "

"You were headed this way to plead your case for reinstatement, weren't you?"
"Yes, sir," he answered with a partial grin. With a sheepish smirk, John took the world's longest second to feel the tiniest bit foolish, then let it go with an exhale. "I'm ready, sir. If you've got my file, you know that," Mason finally said.

John pursed his lips and leaned back in his chair, adopting a pensive slouch. "And what does Beckett say?"

"You know Beckett. He'd keep us all bubble wrapped if he thought he could get away with it."

The colonel smiled to himself as he pictured Ronon covered in layers twenty feet thick. His eyebrow arched playfully. *Maybe the next time Ronon's under anesthesia …* It was an idea worthy of a killer practical joke, but he quickly shelved it for later. He wanted to give Mason's request the serious consideration it deserved.

The marine wasn't a person normally prone to making rash decisions, but John was concerned he might be jumping the gun for the wrong reasons. "Look, I know you've been out of commission for a while, Capshaw, but nobody here doubts your ability to do the job. You don't have anything to prove."

Mason's face pulled tight and his stance faltered.

Oh. Not a textbook case of leaping back on the horse then, John grasped. This was about a girl. A particular girl Ronon had been spending a lot of extra time with lately. John was at a total loss as to how to address that, and he never got the chance to bring it up.

McKay strolled into his office, shoulders hunched and scowl at the ready. His lips twitched as though he were busy rehashing a conversation in his head. Paying no mind to what he may have been interrupting, he parked himself next to Capshaw and ceased mumbling to himself long enough to acknowledge him with a preoccupied 'hey'.

"Um … McKay? What are you doing here?" John asked. The answer would doubtlessly end in eye-rolling of some kind. "Aren't you supposed to be with Teyla?"

"I'm supposed to be, yes," Rodney brewed, "But the helpless, bedridden woman you were so adamant that I had to stay with has gone and kicked me out."

John's lower lip caught in his teeth. At this point in their friendship, it was more out of morbid fascination than genuine curiosity, but … he had to ask. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing! The woman you're so enamored with is a nutcase, that's all. She said that I was …" The agitated physicist proceeded to talk so fast John couldn't catch a word of it. He glanced over at Mason, who shook his head, equally flummoxed. " … to which she finally said she preferred to be alone!"

"I'm sorry, McKay, she said what?"

"My voice is not grating!" he proclaimed. "It is powerful. Commanding. Robust, even. And I don't care what hellish combination of hormones is swirling around in that body of hers, I do not breathe too loud."

John tried not to smile. His features weren't inclined to cooperate. "Oh. That."

Rodney glared. "Oh … that?!" he repeated with acid on his tongue.

With everyone finally on the same page, Mason took Teyla's side. "Don't forget we've spent nights
"with you, McKay."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You snore."

"I have a deviated septum!"

John raised his hand. "At least you didn't encounter any unidentified flying objects," he said, recalling the flash of a book sailing at his head.

"Well, until Teyla gets this whole pregnancy thing out of her system, maybe you should consider reading less. Or at least keeping the projectiles out of arm's reach." Rodney huffed and folded his arms. "Either way, the next time you need a babysitter, call Rambo here, because I quit."

Mason smirked, not remotely intimidated. "Fine by me."

"You know, Rodney, maybe you should think about being less you," John suggested, right before the Tower's alarm system began blaring.

The humor in the situation abruptly tanked. Smiles fell, and the three men immediately filed out into the Main Control Room. John led the way at a jog.

"What have we got, Chuck?" He quickly covered the short distance from his office to stand over the tech's shoulder. The Gate Shield glittered in prismatic waves over the blue puddle of the event horizon.

"Unscheduled offworld activation, sir."

"We're still waiting on Ronon and Keller, and there's two teams offworld. Do you have an IDC?"

"I'm not getting any … Wait, I'm picking up a radio signal." Chuck's eyes fixed on the monitor, he raised a hand to his earpiece. "It's Ronon."

"Open a channel," John said. Fingers flashed over the keyboard and Chuck gave him a confirming nod.

The big man's raspy voice boomed over the comm system without delay. "Atlantis, drop the shield."

"Do it," John ordered before he tore down the stairs to meet him, Capshaw and Rodney on his heels. Before he reached the bottom, Ronon and Keller came through in a rush. Ronon's arms were full, carrying the limp figure of a little girl, and Keller had certainly looked better. "She needs to get to the infirmary," the disheveled woman said quickly.

Hurriedly, John motioned to the nearest SO, who took the sick child from Ronon. Keller gave him swift instructions to relay to the infirmary staff and told him she would follow shortly. John wasn't entirely sure she'd be able to. To put it politely, the doctor looked dead on her feet.

"What the hell happened?" John asked once the girl had been taken care of.

"Wraith," Ronon said.

"We, uh, crossed paths with a Runner. Things got a little … tense," Keller added. Her tired eyes wandered over John's shoulder to where Capshaw stood at his right flank. The marine said nothing, but the colonel knew buried concern when he saw it. Keller peered at him only briefly, then focused
"Pardon me for saying so, Doc, but judging by the look of things, that sounds like the understatement of the century," John commented.

"Wait a minute," Rodney said to Ronon, "I thought Runners were extremely rare - like only a few in the galaxy?"

"So?"

"Yeah, so, a few years ago we run into you and now another one? I mean, what are the odds of that?"

"I don't know, Rodney," John said. "Why don't you work on those calculations while the rest of us actually try to find out what's going on?"

"Well, hellooo, sarcasm. My, how we've missed you," sniped Rodney.

It was Dr. Keller who brought the conversation back to heel. "Colonel, he's in trouble."


Ronon nodded. "We need a strike team ready to move now. He's got Wraith on his tail. A lot of 'em." He paused. John read in his dark expression what it was he wasn't saying. The Runner didn't stand a chance without help.

"What about his tracking device? Were you able to disable it?" John asked Keller.

"I think I can, but unless we can get to him first … We can't let them kill him, Colonel."

"Okay, okay, I got it." John turned around and issued orders to the standby security team. "Alpha team, gear up and get ready to move on my signal. Have Major. Lorne report to Stargate Operations and tell Beckett to suit up." There was a succinct chorus of 'yes sir's and the Gateroom became of flurry of activity.

Keller immediately protested. "Colonel, I want to go with you." Ronon's face, if humanly possible, grew even darker.

John shook his head. "You're exhausted, Doc."

"You should stay here," Ronon told her.

Jennifer shot him a piercing look and quickly refuted it. "Colonel, I'm fine."

Despite her insistence, John preferred to err on the side of caution. He laid a hand on her shoulder and gently pulled her to the side. Low voices wouldn't carry far in the noise of military men mounting up for battle. "Why don't you let Carson handle this one? This isn't exactly the first Runner he's had to deal with."

"Colonel, Kiryk trusts me," she said. "I gave him my word that I would help him. I can't just back out now."

"Doc, I don't know what happened out there, but you don't need to do this."

"I do. I need to see this through, Colonel," she insisted. Jennifer's sincerity appealed to him almost as much as her determination. "Believe me, I'd like nothing better than a stiff drink and a massage right
now, but I can't go back to that infirmary without knowing I've done everything I can do for Kiryk. He and Ronon saved my life. I can't face that little girl … without knowing what I'm gonna say. She's very attached to him.

John frowned with his brow scrunched into a heavy line. It went against his better judgment, but he eventually relented. "Alright. Get what you need and be back here in five."

"Thank you, Colonel," she said before she trotted off in the direction of the transporter.

John rounded again to face the Gate. Sgt. Cahill tossed Ronon a vest, which the stalwart Satedan promptly threw on over his leathers. Another was thrown to him, and John deftly pulled it on over his uniform.

"Col. Sheppard?" Capshaw approached again, but not before casting another hard and swift glance in the direction Keller had gone. "Permission to tag along?" he asked, sending the message he had no intention of being left behind loud and clear.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

Capshaw gave a curt nod. "More than ready."

Carrying one of his own, Ronon walked up and handed John a fully loaded P-90. His stunner his typical weapon of choice, John figured the power cell was running low, and there certainly wasn't time for it to recharge right now. Must've been a hell of a fight. All the more reason for them to hurry.

Clipping his weapon to his vest, John addressed Capshaw. "You know I'm gonna catch hell from Beckett for this."

A minute smile tugged at Capshaw's lips. "You can take it, sir."

Eh, why not? Restoring Capshaw to active duty could turn out to be one of his final acts as CO. If he had to go, then he would be okay with that. "Well, what are you waiting for? Suit up."

"Yes, sir."

As he left to procure his equipment, John shouted to the room. "Let's move it, people! The Wraith aren't going to wait!"

"Wait, wait! What about me?" Rodney asked in his not-grating voice.

"I need you to stay here with Teyla. Let her know what's going on."

Rodney gaped at him. "You can't be serious." And when Rodney figured out he was completely serious, he whined. "C'mon! I was there when we rescued Ronon. Action, danger - I'm great at that … stuff."

Inside his boots, John bounced on his toes. His body revving up for a fight and his concentration needing to be elsewhere, John shot him down with a look.

Rodney's shoulders sank. "I hate you."
John would've been perfectly happy never to step foot on the planet surface again. No people or even animal life. Too bad they hadn't brought along Parrish; at least someone would've gotten a kick out of being here, even if that someone was a certifiable plant nut.

The ridiculously high solar radiation levels had rendered half their instruments useless, necessitating a foot patrol of the cliffs to the south while the rest of his men rode out the remaining daylight in the Jumper. While Ronon led them through empty gulley after empty gulley, getting far ahead of them at times, the main source of entertainment in the stifling atmosphere seemed to be jokes about their impending sterility. A few of the guys involved in the original mission caught some extra heat with claims they probably already were. Luckily, John had Teyla's gorgeous baby bump at home to testify that he was still fully capable in the man department. Eventually, he just told them all to pipe down and they trudged on.

Eventually, the black cloak of night had fallen, and they set up camp near the Stargate. There was no sign of Kiryk. Their instruments were dark and the Gate remained silent.

As John took a second to munch on a Power Bar, he inspected his surroundings. Those assigned to perimeter patrol meandered along the outer edges of the camp, while Ronon remained stationary at the tip nearest the Gate. He'd practically bitten the heads off Cahill and a few of the other marines who'd tried to strike up a friendly conversation to pass the time, so with eyes peeled to the dark, he kept watch alone. Across the small area they occupied, Keller was on her own, too. Her medical bag on the ground at her feet, she sat on a supply trunk with arms quietly folded around herself and her head down. Her body language virtually begged for solitude.

John respected his friends' desire for privacy, but their guarded behavior left him wondering again what the hell happened on M33-985. And he was sure he wasn't alone in that regard.

The third point in the triangle had taken up a nondescript position not far from the colonel. Although more at ease than the others, Capshaw hadn't been much more talkative. He'd performed his duties without fault, but it hadn't escaped John's notice that he never let the doctor wander beyond his eyeline. Even now, Capshaw kept watch over the entire camp, but from his vantage point, Keller was smack in the middle.

Gnawing on the last bits of his 'dinner', John ambled to his position. Mason glanced over, noting his approach. John lifted the flap of his front pocket and produced another Power Bar. "Hungry?"

"Sure. Thanks." Capshaw took it, nimbly shucked the wrapper, and bit into it. His eyes soon found Keller again, John observed. Knowing how he felt about her, John supposed he couldn't really help it. How often had he watched Teyla under the guise of keeping an eye out, when he really just couldn't take his eyes off her? More times than he'd ever admit.

"Sightseeing?" he asked casually. Jennifer tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Her hair, usually the color of new dawn, was painted a dusky blue in the dim moonlight. As happy and fulfilled with Teyla as he was, John wasn't blind. Keller was a beautiful woman.

Capshaw chewed in slow, measured bites. "Just waiting to see how long it is until she topples over." The corner of John's mouth quirked upward. If and when that happened, he was confident Capshaw would be right there to catch her. Mason lifted his chin to the right, indicating their gruff teammate nearly a hundred yards away, who had sunk to a wary crouch. "Ronon may not be too far behind."

"Yeah, trying to keep two steps ahead of the Wraith with a target on your back is a real bitch," John said. "It doesn't sound like they had an easy time of it, but Ronon's had worse."
"Yeah."

They lapsed into a ruminative silence, while Capshaw polished off the rest of the Power Bar. He stuffed the empty wrapper in his pocket, then with one arm folded neatly into the grip of his P-90 and the other slack, his quiescent gaze rested again on Jennifer. "She's hurt."

Nonplussed, John turned and studied the doctor again. "How do you know?"

"Just the way she's been moving. The way she's sitting. A little too straight. A little too stiff. It doesn't seem too bad."

"But you noticed." He'd probably noticed the second they stepped through the city's Gate.

Capshaw shrugged.

"You know, you could've said something. Kept her from leaving Atlantis."

"And that wouldn't have been hypocritical of me at all," Capshaw said with a sudden smile. It quickly fled. "Besides, she's got Ronon looking out for her. What does she need me for?" After a moment, Capshaw shifted and took a firmer hold of his weapon. Shoulders square, he glanced at John. "I think I'll just take a walk and check in with Cahill."

His face impassive, John nodded his approval. It was only after the sergeant had put some distance between them that he allowed some of the sympathy he felt show. Capshaw knew how to carry pain, that was for sure. Whether it was one kind or another.

John looked around the campsite once more. On the same desolate ground where he had shot Ford, then watched him run headlong into a Wraith beam, he watched his friends similarly off in their own separate corners. This wasn't how he wanted to leave things.

John was pragmatic enough to know that this might very well be his last mission. It actually would've been nice to have McKay along for the ride. And Teyla. Ford, wherever he is. It also would've been nice to go out with a win. And it would've been easier to face losing his home if he could only know that his friends would have each other to lean on after he and Teyla were gone. At this point, none of those seemed likely.

Letting go of old memories and wishful thinking, John strolled in Ronon's direction. He had come to the conclusion that Keller probably needed some girl talk about now. Another reason he missed having Teyla at his side. He was better equipped to handle the big guy. Risking Ronon's temper was safer than trying to navigate the ins and outs of the female psyche. It was just as well; he probably would've said the wrong thing anyway.

Ronon was still hunched near the ground when John sidled up to him. The worn down fighter looked up, but didn't rise. Sensing it was safe to proceed, John instead got down with him. "It's a nice place, this planet," he said, glancing up at the wide open sky. "The nights are warm. There aren't any bugs, and if we stick around for sunrise, we can all get a hell of a tan. I can see why you wanted to come back."

Ronon didn't respond. His expression made of iron, his attention remained on the Stargate. John hadn't expected any different.

"How long are we gonna wait, Chewie?"

Ronon glanced at him. "He'll be here."
"You told me he had a lot of Wraith after him. Do you really think-"

"He'll be here."

John pursed his lips, drew in a deep breath, and decided to let it go. If Kiryk wasn't here by
daybreak, he'd dial Atlantis and have Rodney start to re-calibrate the long range sensors to see if they
couldn't pick up a signal somewhere else. In the meantime, when it came to the other Runner, Ronon
might as well have been looking in a mirror. Objectivity was clearly out the window.

John focused on the darkness. Except for the creepy silence, at night the planet's surface actually
looked like any other world. Trees, bushes, grass. They even almost looked green, instead of the dry,
sun-scorched foliage it actually was. Almost fondly, he remembered trekking through it with Teyla
on SAR, and getting stunned for his trouble.

John lightly tapped Ronon's arm. "You know, I never did thank you for kidnapping me and Teyla."
The comment finally managed to get his attention. Ronon looked at him like he had just sprouted
another head; strangely curious.

"Tying us together like that, so we'd really have to work to get the ropes loose …" John went on in
an offhand manner. "That was the first time she grabbed my ass." He took fiendish satisfaction in
watching a smile develop. "Before she and I finally got together, that got me through a lot of lonely
nights."

Without looking at him, Ronon shook his head. "Glad I could help."

John smiled, equally glad he could distract Ronon from his thoughts. Even if it was just for a minute.
"Yeah, I guess that mission had its good points, too. McKay getting strung up by his foot … "

Ronon chuckled low and deep.

"And I met my best friend," John said, surprising himself with how strong the memories seemed. He
wasn't usually one to wax nostalgic, and reminiscing was better done over a couple of cold beers.
Alien hot houses not included. He supposed it was the finality of his situation hitting him. John
Sheppard had done a lot of difficult things in his life, but walking away from Atlantis would
undoubtedly be one of the hardest.

He found himself transfixed on the massive and majestic Stargate. "Chewie, I may not be around
much longer, but … if I've never said it before, I want you to know that it's been an honor serving
with you."

Ronon, with his dark and penetrative gaze, regarded him quietly. "You're not going anywhere,
Sheppard."

"No?"

"No."

John smirked. "Are you always so sure about everything?"

Ronon paused. Moments later, his eyes traced the ground, hooded and hiding away that haunted
stare John knew all too well; the sobering experience of the previous couple of days creeping back
in. His chin lowered, weighed down by fatigue he wouldn't acknowledge. "No."

John heaved a heavy sigh. "Look, buddy, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that being on the run
from the Wraith again might have stirred up some pretty heavy stuff for you. I don't really know what happened out there with you. With Keller. But ... I could probably guess."

Ronon's bearded mouth contorted into a grimace, practically confirming John's suspicions. Keller had probably gotten an up close and personal glimpse of Ronon as he used to be, and it wasn't sitting well with either of them. It made John wonder why Ronon, out of all the planets they'd explored, had chosen this one to come to. Maybe he was hoping he could be set free again.

"You're not that person anymore, Ronon," he said firmly. "He may live somewhere inside you, but he's not you. There's more to you - a lot more - and Keller knows that."

"She shouldn't have seen that," he grumbled quietly. "None of it."

"You couldn't help what happened. The doc's not exactly G.I. Jane, but she'll handle it."

Ronon shook his head. "She was scared."

John's chin turned into an understanding frown. "Who wouldn't be?"

In front of them, the Stargate revved to life and jerked them back to the present. John's head snapped up as chevrons lit in quick succession. One, two, three blazed with unfathomable energy before John and Ronon could even get to their feet. Four, five. Someone was dialing in fast. Six.

"We've got incoming!" John shouted behind him as his gun nestled into the cradle of his shoulder. Ronon had already drawn his weapon. Then the event horizon exploded into being with a dynamic kawoosh, the familiar look of crashing water swallowing everything in its path and then reversing to a mere rippling pond.

He didn't look back, but he heard his men forming up at his rear as per their previous orders. Capshaw appeared to his left, coldly looking through his sights. They converged until they had the Gate in a chokehold.

Long moments went by and nothing happened. The wormhole rippled peacefully, undisturbed. John's finger tensed over the trigger.

"Colonel?" Dr. Keller's anxious voice rang out close behind.

"Wait for it." He stared intently down the barrel. For Ronon, for Jennifer, and lastly for himself, he muttered under his breath, "C'mon, Kiryk. Come on … "

The next second, just before the Gate was primed to shut itself down, a man raced through. A big, tough-looking block of solid muscle and body armor that fit Kiryk's description perfectly.

"Hold your fire!" John ordered.

At the first sight of them, the Runner slammed to a halt on the platform, his balance wavering badly as his momentum tried to carry him onward. He blanched and, with ragged breaths, grabbed for his side. John saw blood.

"Doc!"

Jennifer was already way ahead of him, whirring past to help him. In nothing flat, she was wedged beneath his arm, assisting him as he attempted to move away from the Gate. That hadn't shut down, John observed with a hiss.
Kiryk’s legs began to buckle.

"Kiryk, you've gotta stay with me," Jennifer pleaded.

Stray stunner blasts emerged from the wormhole and pelted the ground next to the dais. Holding tight to Kiryk’s waist as fear marred her face, Jennifer tugged him forward. Ronon took off running toward her and insinuated himself under Kiryk’s other arm.

"Move, move, move!" John shouted.

The trio dramatically quickened just before the first Hunter stepped through directly behind the doctor. It was dead in an instant, a grisly third eye punched precisely between the other two. Capshaw’s gun barrel licked the night’s sky with smoke. Ronon, Kiryk, and Keller cleared the kill zone.

John gave the order to fire, and the company of Wraith that followed soon after joined it.

Jennifer had no notion of how long she waited before someone came and got her. The staff bustled around her, but it couldn’t have been long. Most of those loitering in the infirmary were waiting for their post-mission checkup. There were no injuries to speak of. *Except for Kiryk*, she thought with his blood on her hands, her back punishing her, and an exhaustion that she hadn’t felt since med school, if ever. Marie led her to an empty bed, and all she could think when she sat on the mattress was how odd it was that something so soft could sound so brittle. Like crumpling paper.

"Doctor, are you alright?" the nurse asked, her kind face appearing fuzzy to Jennifer.

"M'fine." She blinked heavily a few times. "Where's Carson?"

"He's taken your patient into surgery."

"Is he stable?" Stab wound. Not too deep, but … could’ve hit an artery … It was too dark. She hadn’t been able to see. Then she had to go and shock him. What kind of doctor does that?

"Dr. Keller, he's doing fine."

"I had to stop the signal," she said aloud.

A gentle hand touched hers. "I know. Why don't you lay back and let me get you cleaned up?"

She blinked again, but the smear of exhaustion didn't lift. "Kay."

Her head hit the pillow and that was that. The next thing she knew, another kind voice had joined Marie’s. They spoke in hushed tones.

"She didn't complain of anything."

"Oh, I'm certain o' that. Doctors always make the worst patients," Carson told her. "Let's have a Lortab ready for her when she wakes. A five ought to do her for starters. We can adjust from there."

"Yes, Doctor."
Jennifer's eyes flew open. She was still in bed, the privacy curtain drawn. The infirmary beyond had gone quiet. Unthinking, she rolled over and instantly regretted it. Her muscles had stiffened while she slept. Leaning heavily on her forearm, she let out a high-pitched yelp.

"Speak o' the devil," Carson said. A bemused smile broke out as he laid a hand carefully on her side to keep her from moving further. Not that she needed it. She'd gotten the message. "Just take it easy now, Jennifer. You haven't broken any ribs, but you've got some deep tissue bruising that needs some rest."

She quickly indicated she'd heard him, biting back another shriek. "How did you …"

"Ronon told us, shortly before he was ordered to bed himself," he explained with a clear note of annoyance. "We got those cuts cleaned up and took a quick scan to make certain there weren't any more surprises waiting. Now just lay back down."

She consciously tried to relax and settled awkwardly on her side. "Kiryk?"

"It took some o' my best work, but he's gonnae be fine, luv. It's a good thing he had you there for triage."

"He's lucky he survived triage," she said. Her voice felt scratchy. "I was sure I'd killed him, doing CPR on him in that kind of shape." Carson granted her a commiserating smile. Marie arrived bearing water and a paper cup containing a white pill. Jennifer took it and sipped from the straw. She closed her eyes. The water felt like cool silk in her dry throat. "What about Celise? How is she doing?"

Carson smiled. "Ah, that one is still a mite sleepy, but she's improving rather quickly. The little ones bounce back so much better than us old folk."

She smiled, but the movement was wan and empty. "Carson, right now, I feel like I'm a hundred."

In the last couple of days, she'd seen … things she couldn't fully reconcile within herself, experienced things she had never wanted to. In the thick of things, she remembered feeling completely paralyzed. She watched Ronon cut down Wraith one after another and saw him smile; a piece of him at home in the chaos, revelling in it. He was so different from the man she knew. Ronon was a fun-loving, caring man with a smile that could warm a blizzard, yet the one she saw today had sent chills hurtling through her.

A pang of sorrow twisted in her chest, and Jennifer suddenly found herself on the verge of tears. Her fingers lay cautiously over her stomach as she willed them away. She waited a moment before trusting her voice again. Carson stood patiently, content not to rush her. "I-I think I'm still a little tired." She hoped it was the painkiller kicking in.

"Aye, I think more rest is a good idea," he agreed. He squeezed her hand, as though he knew she needed it. "Before you try, though, there's someone who'd like to talk to you."

He released her hand and pulled aside the curtain. On the other side, Ronon stood slumped against the wall, one foot pushed up against it. As soon as the curtain disappeared, he straightened up, looking anxious in a uniquely relaxed way.

Jennifer looked up at Carson, questioningly.

"I said I ordered him to bed. I never said he actually went." Carson frowned at him, then said to her, "Bloody stubborn, that one."

Ronon's lips wrinkled, unfazed by his criticism.
"I'll leave you two to it, then." Carson issued one last order. "Don't be long."

Left alone, Jennifer and Ronon stared back forth at each other, apparently neither one of them knowing what to say. He shuffled closer to the bed, but that was it for over a minute. Maybe he hadn't gone to bed, but he changed his clothes, she noticed. She was glad; she didn't want to see Wraith blood again for a very long time.

"So how long do you have to stay?" he asked.

"I'll probably go home in the morning." She looked around at her home away from home. "This is really just a formality."

He bobbed his head. "I could … bring you breakfast or something."

"Ronon, you don't have to do that."

"You still need to eat."

"I'm really fine."

"I don't mind," he insisted, and she thought better of arguing any more. She really didn't have the energy.

"Okay." There was another lengthy pause where Jennifer looked engrossed with her bedsheets and Ronon kept shifting his weight from one foot to another. He couldn't hold still even now, safe in Atlantis. He was always here and there. In the gym, jogging with Col. Sheppard, going offworld, escaping the infirmary when the occasion arose … Was he always on the run?

She couldn't imagine he had always been this way. She'd asked him how he survived seven years of sheer hell, and he'd said he didn't have another choice. But he'd changed, too. No matter how much he might want to, he would never be able to truly rest. Whoever he'd been before Sateda fell, he was inexorably different.

"Ronon … thank you. For everything you did. For … not leaving him." She didn't realize until now how much of a sacrifice that was for him.

He stopped fidgeting. His arms fell to his sides. He held her gaze intently, and in a moment, he was Ronon Dex again. Not the Runner, just the man. He answered sincerely, "Thanks for not letting me."

Jennifer smiled, and soon he was gone.

Marie came back with a clean pair of scrubs and helped her change before she left for the final time. Back in bed, Jennifer shut her eyes again, sighed, and tried to drift off, a hare-brained and naive wish in her heart that she will have forgotten everything by morning. But sleep didn't come easily, even after the dull haze of the medicine leeched into her system. She tossed uncomfortably, alone with her new memories, her stomach aching on a level that surpassed the physical. It wouldn't stop. There was only a scratch on her belly, but it felt like a canyon.

The look of pure, unadulterated fury in Ronon's eyes as he came up behind the Wraith. The glint of Kiryk's sword almost blinding her and the steel tip shearing through body armor and flesh with barely any resistance. Then it came down and hit her. In her nightmare, the deadly tip cut through her like tissue paper while Ronon raged over her. She woke up, her heart pounding. Tears dripped soundlessly down her cheeks as she lifted the edge of her shirt to check once more.
THREE DAYS LATER

On his way to the Gateroom, John walked side by side with Rodney down the corridor, still tasting Teyla on his lips. As Rodney droned on about something or other, John's mind was with her.

They'd spent this morning nestled together on the bed they shared, knowing the Daedalus was due at any time. Fully dressed and prepared for anything, they only waited for the call to come. Until then, he wasn't going anywhere.

His fingers had traced down the line of her neck, from the tip of her chin into the tiny dip at the base and further down into the alluring hollow between her breasts. Teyla watched, her eyes soft, and melted into his every touch. They were both peculiarly calm, considering the date had finally arrived; the one that might change everything. It was something like the calm that descended just before walking into battle. Plans were set, and they were resolved. Very little was said, only felt. Whispers of emotions floated into his mind unbidden; faith, devotion, and unwavering love. He kissed the gentle curve, then moved his hands to trail along her arms, appreciating every inch of her creamy skin until he reached her hands and they intertwined.

He'd also made sure Teyla's beautiful belly received plenty of attention. As Teyla gently stroked his hair, he carefully laid his head down and listened to the sounds of a life he'd had a hand in creating with the woman he loved beyond reason. His child was safe in Teyla's womb, warm and cared for, and he was prepared to do what it took to see that it stayed that way. That they were a family. Forever. He had laughed, though, when a little foot commanded him to get off by abruptly bumping his cheek. "Daddy's already cramping her style," he'd told Teyla, mesmerized by her sweet smile.

When the time came to say goodbye, her arms had locked around his waist, his around her neck, he pressed his forehead to hers, connecting them in nearly every way possible. Her skin was so warm and inviting he never wanted to leave.

Even now, walking with Rodney, her velvet voice echoed effortlessly in his memory. "We are right beside you, John."

"I know," he'd whispered back. John smiled to himself recalling the kiss she gave him right after. For that alone, he would trade anything.

At his shoulder, Rodney finally stopped for air and resumed wringing his hands and glowering at every passerby as though they were to blame for all the IOA's underhanded crap.

"Don't get all worked up, Rodney. We're just meeting him at the Gate," John advised.

"I can't help it, okay?" He glanced over at John, mildly resentful that he wasn't giving everyone else the same treatment. "Why are you so calm? Shouldn't you be freaking out about now?"

It was a fair question, but John didn't bother trying to explain why finally meeting the mysterious
figure who had the power to change his fate didn't have him turned inside out, a loose cannon ready to blow. "That was Plan B, and it's always an option. But Plan A is looking pretty solid, so there's no reason to freak out yet, okay? Just play it cool."

"Cool?"

"Cool," John maintained.

Rodney's eyebrows scrunched heavily. "I can do cool. Cooooool … cool. Cool. Cool," he repeated over and over as though he were trying the term on for size. "Just to be clear, you aren't planning on shooting up the Gateroom or anything?"

John frowned. "Cooler than that, Rodney."

"I'm being cool!"

"If you say so." Unimpressed, John kept walking.

"Just give me a heads up or something so I can duck."

"Actually, I was thinking of using you as a human shield."

"What? When did this become part of the plan?"

"About five seconds ago when it became glaringly apparent you are incapable of playing it cool." John sighed. "Look-odds are, whoever this joker is, he's not gonna walk up and introduce himself as the guy who's here to ruin my life, so we're just gonna have to sit back and see how this is gonna play out. Just be patient and try to calm down."

"What if it's Coolidge?" he asked, stubbornly.

John gave up. "Then you can freak out."

The next few minutes they spent going over the escape plan one final time. It was pretty simple really. When John decided things with the IOA were no longer salvageable, he would give the signal. Ronon would get Teyla to the Jumper Bay, where John would meet them in "recently repaired" Jumper Four, which contained all their supplies. And Rodney would be in the Tower, keeping them from shutting down John's override code to the DHD long enough for him to fly away.

"But you think Woolsey knows? What if he decides to have you arrested?" Rodney asked, entirely too loudly. They got a funny look from Dr. Franklin, who happened to be passing at the time.

John shushed him. "I don't think he will, Rodney."

Rodney took down the decibels a notch or two. "You're sure about that?"

"Well, no," John admitted. "But he had the chance already to make a move. I think … maybe we can trust him."

"I hope you're right, because if I have to fly Teyla out of here myself, very bad things could happen."

John stopped walking and looked at him, surprised and … touched … at what he'd just said. John had never once asked Rodney to give up his position in Atlantis.

His friend turned around. "What?"
He shook his head. "Nothing."

Rodney seemed completely oblivious, and the two men fell back into step. Rodney continued on. They were nearly to the transporter. "I mean, with me flying the odds of her getting into a horrific Jumper crash increase exponentially. And she and I just aren't clicking lately, and I'm not so good at the survival stuff ... or babies or really any sort of ... " Thinking his point made, Rodney just finished with, "You should really try not to get caught."

"Thanks, Rodney," John said with a deadpan expression. "I'll keep that in mind."

They stopped again at the transporter door. Hesitant to go in, John and Rodney met eyes. "Well, I suppose all that's left is to just ... wish you good luck," the nervous scientist said. He extended his hand. "Good luck, Sheppard."

Humbly, John took it. "Thanks, Rodney. You, too."

A minute later, they strode into the Gateroom, past Banks at her station and Ronon, who was settled a level below against the wall opposite the Stargate. As he and Rodney traversed the stairs, John tipped his head. Ronon answered with one of his own, a silent assent that he was ready for anything.

Woolsey was waiting for them at the beam in point. "Gentlemen. An exciting day."

John came to a halt beside him. "Absolutely."

"You're not planning on any fireworks this morning, are you?" Woolsey asked, subtly edging closer.

John exchanged a questioning glance with Rodney. "Why does everyone think I'm just going to fly off the handle with this guy? Does my trigger finger look particularly itchy this morning or something?"

Around his dark-rimmed glasses, Woolsey seemed to peer down his nose. "I was just wondering if I might need to be prepared to suddenly take cover."

"Not suddenly, no." John's face adopted a skewed frown, mildly offended that they assumed his first impulse would be to shoot the guy on sight. *Ha. Shows what they know,* he mused. It was his second.

Woolsey motioned toward Ronon. "And Mr. Dex? Can I assume he has adopted a similar 'live and let live' philosophy on the current situation?"

Well, *that* he couldn't guarantee. Especially not with the mood Ronon had been in lately. John tried to reassure him as convincingly as possible. "Relax, Woolsey. Everything's under control."

"He's ready to beam, sir," Banks called down, interrupting Woolsey's frown.

"Tell the Daedalus that we're ready to receive him," the expedition head said.

They all turned, and John tried to keep his carriage relaxed, *not* intentionally putting his weight on the left to give him easier access to his thigh holster. Not at all.

"Here we go," Rodney muttered at his shoulder.

The Asgard beam and its brilliant flash of white filled the Gateroom. John briefly shifted his eyes to avoid having purple spots in his vision. Though when he turned back, he wasn't sure something wasn't very wrong with his eyes. Vision, breathing, being relaxed-all went out the window.
Gaping, Rodney leaned in. "Did I miss a memo or … six? When did he … ? Did we know he was coming?"

John swallowed. Shock had rendered his throat dry and frozen his feet into place.

The newcomer ambled up, briefcase in hand. Looking dapper in his Armani suit, David Sheppard seemed to have taken the three week trip between galaxies really well. He smiled politely at his younger brother.

"Hi, John."

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Okay, I'm sure some of you saw that coming. :-D I'd love to hear your thoughts as we finish up Tracker (with a healthy assist from Runner) and head into First Contact, where the part of Daniel Jackson will now be played by David Sheppard. Yeah, it's gonna be different.

Fun fact: I've already established that Mason was a member of MARSOC (U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command), but in this chapter I also let you know that Mason is a qualified DM, which stands for Designated Marksman. Or in less fancy terms, he's a sharpshooter. I chose not to get into it at the time, but for those of you who remember, in Ch. 13 of "Finding My Way", John left Mason in an abandoned house with Golian in his sights while Sheppard went out to get Teyla back. He was well aware that Mason was a sharpshooter. Golian's lucky he lasted as long as he did. :-(
Welcome to Atlantis

David Sheppard waited for some response from his brother, but John seemed glued to the floor. Next to him, Rodney McKay was similarly struck, mouth agape, eyes wide. Dave found himself thrown back to the Broadmill Hotel in Colorado Springs, right after John blurted out the news that he and Teyla were expecting a baby—the last time he'd seen the scientist wearing that particular expression. It was the face of a guy who'd just found out his best friend was having sex with his sister; pretty amusing, considering Rodney had been fully aware that John and Teyla were sleeping together beforehand.

Denial does funny things to a man.

It was interesting that the same level of abject shock apparently applied to unexpected visitors from out of town. In the periphery, he also spied Ronon standing along a back wall, more taciturn but no less taken aback.

Needless to say, he'd expected his arrival would come as a surprise. It had kind of been the point.

After several moments of strained silence, the man to John's left stepped forward. An academic sort of man with a widely receded hairline and an assiduous demeanor, this was undoubtedly …

"Richard Woolsey, Head of the Atlantis Expedition," he introduced himself with a firm handshake. Dave liked a good strong handshake; it told him a lot about the person standing across from him. While Mr. Woolsey was clearly perplexed by the others' reaction, he was committed to putting his best foot forward. "And you are?"

"David Sheppard. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Woolsey. I've heard a lot about you."

Mr. Woolsey quickly glanced toward John, then back. "Sheppard, as in …"

"My brother," John replied on his behalf, his tone somewhere between outrage and bewilderment. Almost as soon as he'd spoken, he turned and stalked away. His posture straight and tall in his suit, Dave exhaled. Sadly, he'd also expected this.

With studious apprehension, Mr. Woolsey watched him go. "My apologies, Mr. Sheppard, I wasn't aware you'd received the clearance necessary to be fully briefed about the Stargate program."

In the corner of the room, John started up a narrow staircase. He took two steps for every stride and stopped only to shoot him a shadowy glare that meant he was to follow.

"It's fine, Mr. Woolsey. You weren't the only one," Dave swiftly assured him. "If you'll excuse me a moment? It's good to see you again, Rodney." Rodney nodded oafishly and mumbled something he didn't hear. Dave had to move quickly to keep pace with John. "You, too, Ronon."

Prodded from his stupefied posture, Ronon threw him an awkward wave. "Yeah."

As he gave chase up the stairs, Dave couldn't help but wish he'd had more of a chance to admire the city around him. The introductory film and file photos he'd seen had done little to prepare him for the intangible feeling of great age and … wisdom … he sensed existed within those walls, a specialness that reflected the magnitude of the heritage left behind by the Ancients in their most prized city. Granted, he was still relatively new to the idea of aliens and civilizations that predate human history by millions of years, but he couldn't help but feel a broad sense of wonder at it all. He wondered if, after living here for five years, John still felt it as keenly.
Maybe John could show him around later, Dave hoped. Assuming, of course, his brother was still speaking to him.

He found John waiting inside what appeared to be the main conference room. He paced tensely on the other side of a large mahogany table, his jaw molded into an undeviating hard line as he did every time he was upset and was working out how to deal with it. As angry as John was, Dave was glad to see his recovery had gone well. He was physically strong, dynamic, and capable again, a far cry from how they'd come together the last time.

He slipped inside the partitioned doorway, and as though on command, the eight panels spun and seamlessly sealed the doorway on their own. Dave observed, fascinated. "Did you do that or was it the city's sensors?" John stopped long enough to turn around and look at him. "I've heard that Atlantis can do certain things on mental command."

A scowl prominent, John said, "You have to have the gene."

"… the gene," Dave echoed at the same time. "As it turns out, I do. Imagine my surprise when I found out you do, too. The strongest on record, as a matter of fact." John ignored that, so he set his briefcase down at his feet and continued. "You know, when you told me Ronon wasn't from around here, you weren't kidding. Teyla, either."

At the mention of Teyla's name, he seemed to get more rankled. Good. Maybe he'll snap out of it and start talking to me for once.

"I have to admit, at first, it was pretty weird to think that you had gotten involved with someone from another planet, let alone was having a baby with her, but …" 

"Alright, that's enough." John drew in a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly.

Dave folded his arms and waited, satisfied that John knew his comments weren't meant as an insult, but as a catalyst for a long overdue conversation. He wasn't lying; it had come as quite a shock to find out that Teyla wasn't from Earth, but Dave had had the chance to get to know her and he liked Teyla a lot. He could easily welcome her as part of the family. And it had quickly become obvious as he'd watched John with her that, regardless of her planet of origin, Teyla was the only woman his little brother had ever been truly happy with. As John's family—as his brother—that was all that mattered.

Standing behind it, John's hands gripped one of the high-backed seats around the table. Despite the noticeable effort he made to school his features, his knuckles were white. "You just couldn't back off, could you? You couldn't leave it alone."

"Come on, John. Did you honestly think you could walk away after dropping a bomb like 'I work in outer space' and everything would just go back to normal? Was I just supposed to go back to board meetings, Friday night cocktails, and Sunday brunches and forget the fact that the universe had suddenly gotten a lot smaller?"

"You're damn right," he snapped. "You haven't got the slightest idea of what goes on out here, and you had no business getting involved." He released the chair and began pacing again.

Dave's lips puckered as he tried to remember that this was John's home turf and he had a right to his feelings. However, he had no intention of letting him ride roughshod over him. "Look, John, I requested that my name be left out of official channels because I knew you wouldn't take kindly to my being here." John huffed in the affirmative. "But after fifteen years of living with your secrets, you can hardly blame me for wanting to keep one of my own."
Suddenly very still, John nodded to himself as if he'd just had every dismal expectation of his family reaffirmed. He spoke in a low, rough voice that Dave found almost heartbreaking. "So this was a revenge thing."

"Of course n—" He cut himself off, not wanting things to escalate further. "I know it goes against your nature to think so, but I wasn't trying to hurt you, John. I'm here to observe and make recommendations. It's a job, nothing more."

The tempestuous swell within John's hazel eyes crested again. "You didn't just pick up a new position at a small-time accounting firm, Dave. We're talking about the IOA! A pack of politicians who care more about the bottom line and coming away smelling like a rose than about what's actually happening out in the real world. They have zero respect for the people here or the sacrifices we've made. Do you have any idea what they'd do, if …!" He stopped suddenly and released a harsh breath. "How did you even get involved with them? They aren't really the types to put an ad out in the local paper."

Dave snorted. "Hardly. Jack made a few discreet introductions. I took it from there."

"Jack," John said tersely, then after a second to consider the name, surprise renewed itself. "O'Neill? Since when are you on a first name basis with General O'Neill?"

"Last year, you dying … Does that ring any bells for you?"

John eyes narrowed. "I was in a coma."

"Don't be a smartass."

"I guess I didn't realize that while I was on life support you were busy networking."

Dave was seized with an overwhelming desire to throttle someone. He'd almost forgotten how frustratingly stubborn John could be. "That's not fair. You know it wasn't like that."

"Do I? What are you getting out of this little arrangement?"

"What?"

"Are you going to stand there and tell me you went to all the trouble of charming your way into one of the best kept secrets in human history and you didn't find a way to use it to your advantage? Dad taught you better than that." John's tone was derisive, and he resented it.

"Fine, I admit it. Whether you like it or not, you happen to come from a family with a certain amount of influence, and when the opportunity came to both get what I wanted and benefit the family's legacy, I took it. I selfishly brokered a deal for Sheppard Industries to take over R&D of all offworld energy sources, thinking that with the resources we have at our disposal, we—our family—might be able to provide our planet a new, clean energy source. I'm a despicable excuse for a human being. It must feel so good to be so superior."

John's body language quieted, but Dave wasn't finished. "If you want to talk about what's really going on, fine. But let's not forget to take a good look in the mirror. You couldn't care less what happens with the company, you never have. You know what you're so upset about? You've always enjoyed keeping us at a distance. Me, Dad … God forbid we ever had a clue what you were doing or where you were. It gave you something to hold over us. We couldn't possibly understand you because we had no idea what was happening in your life. Well, now I know, John. Your secrets aren't secrets anymore, and you just can't handle me being so close."
He paused, suddenly tired. The years of estrangement and distance had taken their toll on him. He'd watched his father slowly fold under the emotional weight of having lost his son. Besides being his father, Dave had respected Patrick Sheppard as a man. If he hadn't been able to bear up against that burden, Dave knew he never could.

"I missed you, John. There's nothing more to it than that. I ... have for a long time. It felt like ... maybe I had finally gotten you back and then you were gone again. I missed my brother, okay? Before you came back here, it seemed like you wanted me to know what you were doing with your life, and ... I thought once you had a chance to get used to the idea of my being here, you might actually be happy about it." Dave bent over and picked up his briefcase. "Obviously, I was wrong."

He walked toward the closed partitions.

"Wait."

Dave halted and released a sigh, not only relieved that John had asked him back, but after laying all his feelings on the line like that, his dramatic exit was nearly ruined because he realized he had no idea how to open the doors.

He took a few moments to collect himself before turning back around. When he did, he saw John's expression had shifted. His gaze focused on the table, his face having softened immeasurably. He chewed his lower lip which, along with his permanently mussed hair, gave the impression of youthful vulnerability. He was wary, as was typical for him when emotions were laid bare and everything got too real. A family trait. Dave was the same way, though at this point, he had little to lose. He wanted his brother back.

John's eyes flickered upward, uncertain. "H-how long are you staying?"

"I'm scheduled to return with the Daedalus." That gave him six weeks in Atlantis. Would that be enough?

John gave a comprehending nod.

He looks like he's under a lot of pressure, Dave observed, but John usually ate pressure for breakfast. There was more going on with him than his sudden arrival. "John, are you okay?"

Born of nothing more than total silence, the answer was a resounding I don't know.

"Is Teyla ...?"

"Teyla's fine," he said abruptly.

Dave had little choice to accept his word, but his instincts told him not to drop it. The subject of Teyla was definitely a sore spot. He became defensive every time her name came up. "I still can't believe you're gonna be a dad. She's got to be getting pretty big now, right?"

Again John nodded. "She's still got a few months left."

"Well, I'm sorry I won't be able to stay long enough to meet my little nephew or niece, but I hope ..."

"Niece." Dave glanced up in time to see a smile pass over John's face. "It's a girl."

Dave found himself not knowing what to say. Brimming with a sudden elation, he grinned. "You're going to have a daughter?"
"Yeah."

Dave shook his head in partial disbelief. He tried to picture John with a pink bundle swaddled carefully in his arms, totally entranced with a tiny baby and her feminine smile. It was surprisingly easy. John had a certain gift when it came to women. "Congratulations, John. I mean that. You're a lucky man."

John seemed uncomfortable with the praise, but he accepted it nonetheless.

"In that case, I hope Teyla's okay with green," Dave said, recalling the items he'd brought along sitting in the Daedalus' hold. "The ladies in the sales department told me if you don't know the baby's gender, green's the way to go."

John smiled. "It's fine."

"With all due respect, I think I need the stamp of approval from the mom. Traditionally, I don't think dads have much say when it comes to the nursery stuff. Where is Teyla, by the way? I was hoping to see her."

John's face abruptly turned again. It seemed that Dave had inadvertently stumbled on what was bothering him. "She's in our quarters," he said, low and hesitant. "She's … on bed rest."

Dave was stunned. A pressing worry for his only family overtook all else. "Bed rest? I remember you telling me about Teyla's accident. Were there complications or …?"

"You could say that," he said, his response frustratingly vague.

"John, what happened?"

"Alright, everybody, eyes up front!" Mason barked at the latest batch of newbies. Having beamed down from orbit only moments ago, he gave them no time to gawk at their surroundings. The Daedalus was staggering groups only a few minutes apart, so he needed to get them rounded up and get the area clear.

This bunch was a group of scientists, his seventh group thus far, and he was hoping there weren't too many more. Though it had augmented slightly with every telling, he was tired of giving essentially the same speech over and over again. He'd almost rather have been downstairs with the colonel greeting their IOA guest of dishonor. He wondered how it was going. Good or bad, it probably beat traffic control.

"I am Marine Corps Sergeant Major Mason Capshaw," he began. With a commanding gait, he took a few leisurely strides forward and motioned to the stoic marine that followed closely behind. "Allow me to introduce you to Sgt. Glaucet. Consider him your tour guide, and please direct all questions to him. Now, your first stop today will be the infirmary. All incoming personnel, military and civilian, are required to submit a blood sample and undergo a cursory physical exam upon arrival. There are no exceptions. Fear of needles? You have nothing to worry about. Our doctors will have you completely desensitized in no time. Just saw the doc on the Daedalus? I'm sure they did a fine job, but you are not on the Daedalus anymore." That part had been added between the second and third groups when he had to explain to two future stomach ulcer cases the meaning of the word 'everyone'. "Rest assured, people, you have just entered a whole new world."
"Once you're finished in the infirmary, Sgt. Glaucet will show you around the base, give you a look at the city and each one of the many departments you will be working in concert with, and hand out your assignments for living quarters. While you're out there walking around and taking in the sights, you will remember the cardinal rules and make them a part of your daily lives."

Mason put his hand up high enough for all to see and extended a finger. "One - Do not drink the last of the coffee unless you intend on making another pot."

A few hushed giggles punctuated the silence. He raised another finger.

"Two - If Dr. McKay is on a tear, turn around and walk away. Three - P-90's are cool, but they are not toys. Four - Ronon takes his defense classes very seriously. Consider yourself warned."

Mason waited for the chuckles to die to make sure he had their full and complete attention. His gravely stoic expression impressed upon them the seriousness of the final rule.

"Most important, you do not go anywhere or touch anything that hasn't been cleared by security. Nothing. People around here have died for less."

An attentive hush dominated the room and he was satisfied he'd made his point. He glanced over to Sgt. Glaucet, who nodded his readiness. "There will be an official reception the day after tomorrow in the Tower's main concourse. But until then, be safe and get to know your new home. Welcome to Atlantis."

They slowly filed out, some of them intimidated to the point of hilarity, but most were already immersed in their surroundings, rubbernecking and releasing tiny gasps of awe at the most mundane things. Mason vaguely remembered his first day in the city, though he didn't remember it with the excitement and eagerness he saw so clearly in the new recruits. He was already wounded, the chinks in his armor already there. Atlantis had just been another posting to him, one made marginally more attractive by the sheer distance between him and anywhere else he'd ever been. He had never dreamed it would become home.

As the final stragglers passed out of view, he resumed his previous position without another word. Sgt. Milliken took up Glaucet's place at his rear as they both awaited the next transport beam. Mason thought of the glut of bodies he'd already sent to the infirmary and pitied the staff. The docs had this routine down by now, but all the extra people still made for a hectic day.

He wondered if they were still short a doctor.

With an impatient sigh, Mason snatched his thoughts away from that thorny trail. He hadn't seen Jennifer at all over the last few days and, frankly, it'd done wonders to help him clear his head. For once, neither of them had reason to be in the infirmary, so their paths hadn't had occasion to cross. Jennifer, he'd heard, had been resting in her quarters and he had finally received Carson's official seal of approval on his reinstatement. They weren't constantly thrown together, having to skirt around each other and pretend they were virtual strangers. He hadn't had to deal with the inevitable lurch that would seize his stomach every time he saw her. He didn't have the urge to betray his resolve tempting him at every harmless flutter of her eyelashes or turn of her full pink lips. It was a relief.

He wasn't stupid enough to think he would never see her again. As long as he was fit and they were both stationed here, there were still post-mission workups and the friends they had in common. But if he could maintain a distance, Mason was sure he could get over her. Love would devolve into something less, back into some form of friendship or perhaps into nothing at all. Then it wouldn't hurt to be near her. He would be able to see her and not want her, and maybe someday he wouldn't care.
"Hey, Capshaw?"

Mason pivoted to peer behind him and to his left. Amelia Banks had appeared in the arched entryway.

"What's up?" he asked, glancing over her as she crossed to meet him. Amelia had the figure of an athlete, but with the full uniform on no one would know it. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun, bestowing on her a severe look that didn't suit her. He'd seen her around during her off hours and had noticed she tended to keep her appearance softer, more open. He much preferred her that way.

"Col. Caldwell reports there are two more groups and then he'll start off-loading the cargo."

Mason bobbed his chin, pleased to hear it. "We'll have the supply sergeant standing by."

"Okay," she said automatically with a polished smile. Instead of making for the door to return to her post in the control room, she lingered a moment. She cast a furtive glance directly at him, nervously threading her fingers together. Mason's brow knitted, confused as to why she was all of a sudden acting so shy, but he didn't say anything. Finally she said quietly, "Um … I wanted to say thanks again. For saving our bacon with Marquetti and those other jerks. Dusty was just … really upset and possible disciplinary action wasn't really on her radar."

Understanding dawned. This was about that almost-brawl he and McKay broke up, right before McKay decided to start another one with that possessed tongue of his. Mason brushed it off.

"Marquetti was out of line."

"Still, I really appreciate you stepping in. You didn't have to."

"It was no big deal."

Amelia graced him again with that anxious smile. "I was wondering if I could … buy you a drink sometime. As a thank you."

For an instant, Mason went totally blank. He supposed that was better than looking at her like she was some kind of circus freak. He was completely blown away. "Sure, I ... guess." It just sort of came out.

Her smile grew. "Okay. I'll see you later, then?"

"Yeah." Mason locked his jaw in place in an attempt not to look too much like a dolt as she walked away, a relieved air in her step. A muffled snicker at his back suggested he hadn't been entirely successful.

He turned around to see Sgt. Milliken's face twisted with mirth. "Shut up," he muttered, and then craned around to glimpse the now empty doorway again.

What the hell was he doing? He wasn't … Well, he just couldn't. Banks was admittedly really easy on the eyes. She had the kind of features that seemed carved by a master sculptor; like every woman you've ever seen before, yet like no one you'll ever see again. Perfect. Almost too perfect. She had skin that seemed to invite someone else's touch. But …

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been out on a date. And suddenly, here he was with no medical excuse to say no and ridiculously available.

Crap.
"Heartbeat's right in range. We may have a slight case of the hiccups on our hands, but nothing too serious," Jennifer said, her hand slowly manipulating the scanner. "And I see she's nice and active."

Teyla barely heard her. Her thoughts absorbed elsewhere, she lay on the bed to allow Jennifer free access to her belly. With a pillow beneath her head, she reclined in a natural pose while her daughter squirmed inside her.

She has been moving quite a lot today, Teyla reflected, the baby tugging at her ribs and beckoning for more room further below. Jennifer rotated the monitor attached to the portable scanner so Teyla could see. The view of delicate limbs distracted her from dwelling on the empty bedroom doorway—which, judging from Jennifer's satisfied bearing had been her primary objective.

With a subtle, adoring touch, Teyla ran her finger over the screen, going over the image of her baby's curled leg, the petite nub of her knee, all the way to her precious toes. "I am sorry, Jennifer. I should be more attentive," she said, issuing a mute apology to her little one as well. "I was expecting to have heard from John by now."

"He's probably got a lot on his plate. He and Mr. Woolsey have been preparing for this visit for a while."

"I am sure you are right," Teyla tacitly agreed. She wanted to confide in Jennifer the reason for her preoccupation, but it was in the doctor's best interest to remain ignorant of their plans. Should the worst happen, she and Carson both would be obvious targets for questioning regarding their whereabouts. Who else would they trust with their child's wellbeing? Neither Teyla nor John could live with it if their friends had to accept any blame for their sudden disappearance.

She sought to put her worries aside. John would radio when he had a better bead on the situation. What was the Earth saying? No news is good news.

But if she had hoped to lose herself in relaxed conversation, she would have been sorely disappointed. As the exam continued, Jennifer remained genial and mindful, yet she possessed a distraction all her own. She preferred measurements to small talk, and when the topic briefly shifted to her recent injuries, she was quick to change the subject. Concerned that having to lean over the bed would aggravate her sore back, Teyla asked if she was comfortable. Jennifer replied with a cordial smile and went on to assure her that she'd leapt at the chance to make a house call rather than spend another afternoon in her room or face the hoard of incoming recruits. Anyway, Carson would have thrown her out even if she had tried. Her back was fine. She was fine, so fine she said it twice more before she returned to assessing Teyla's condition.

"How have you been feeling lately?" Jennifer went on to ask.

"Much better."

"Not so tired?"

"No."

"Any more unexpected activity?"

Teyla nodded. There had been a few instances of shared emotions with John - one this very morning,
in fact. But she didn't mention it. Of all the strange new abilities she was now privy to because of her link with her daughter, her emotional connection with John was the most difficult to control. She supposed the intrinsic emotional nature of human beings might be playing a part in it, her emotions so interwoven into the fabric of which she was made that they seemed almost passive until they slipped her grasp and melded with John's consciousness. She worried that her continual failure to restrain it was because, somewhere deep within her, she wanted that connection with him. No matter how her will or her conscious mind may have warned against it, her heart had the final say.

Fortunately, the side effects were small enough to be considered negligible. Not all of her abilities were so forgiving.

"Once," she admitted, thinking only of the disturbing vision she'd had little more than a week ago. It had plagued her thoughts nearly every moment since.

*Take her. You have to take her, John. Run.*

"But you came through it okay?" Jennifer asked with marked concern. "No contractions or discomfort?"

"No," Teyla said in a low voice. She didn't need to know how John had had to hold her for hours afterward.

Jennifer's lips screwed up into a pensive frown. "Just remember to call if you need me. Even if it turns out to be a false alarm, I'd rather have you on a monitor than not." Teyla agreed, and from there the remainder of the exam passed quickly. Jennifer was soon helping her to sit up. It was somewhat dismaying that her girth had grown to the point where simple movements had become a chore. Jennifer tried to console her. "You're thirty weeks pregnant, Teyla. Women in their third trimester aren't expected to do cartwheels."

"Nor are they expected to be able to roll, bend, or stand on their own two feet apparently," she said bitterly.

Jennifer smiled, but had the good sense not to carry it further. As Rodney had inauspiciously discovered, an ill mood was the one thing Teyla could manage with ease. She found herself of late getting annoyed at the simplest of things. The way John would forget to open the window or leave the curtains pulled only partway, blocking half of the sunlight for the majority of the day. How her bedspread puckered in one corner and refused to lay straight as a consequence. The way Rodney regarded her as though she were one of the naquidah generators set to overload. She found his jittery attitude around her quite taxing.

Which, of course, was only made worse by snapping at him, she knew too well. Ample time to meditate was not as calming as one would imagine.

"Well, I think we can do something about the 'standing' part pretty soon," Jennifer offered. Teyla glanced up at her as hope stirred. "Overall, I think you're recovering very nicely. Physically, you seem very close to the same level you were at during our last checkup, before you went into labor. Your neural activity is still extremely high, but as long as you're biochemically stable and you're able to stay in control of these abilities, I don't think it should be an issue. And, as far as Baby Sheppard goes, she's currently sitting in breach position, but she'll probably flip around a few times yet before you're ready to deliver. For now, she's a picture of what a healthy, happy fetus should be."

"So I might be able to resume some of my normal activities?"

Jennifer nodded. "A very light schedule to start with. I'd start with a few short walks, maybe once in
the morning and once in the evening, and gradually work up from there. But nothing too strenuous. Not until this baby's born. And I want to do another check in a few days to make sure before you do anything."

"Of course," Teyla replied, trying not to sound as eager as she felt. She couldn't have Jennifer thinking her first move would be to leap out of bed. She may have wanted to—desperately—but she had more sense than that. Teyla breathed and produced a tattered sense of calm. A few more days and she would taste freedom. More than ever, she hoped that she would be here in Atlantis to see it.

Jennifer began to pack away the scanner in her carrying case. "Have you and the colonel talked about names? We can't exactly keep calling her Baby Sheppard."

"It seems to have caught on with several people. Perhaps John and I should leave it simply for everyone's convenience," Teyla replied with mocking humor. She was not particularly fond of the nickname, but it would do for now. "We have discussed it, though it has been difficult to reach an agreement with the disparity of choices between our peoples. I am rather fond of Nyrea, but John is of the opinion it sounds like a brand of shampoo. And his suggestions thus far have been less than helpful. Chloe sounds quite unusual to me, and Kristien is the name of an herb on Trystiri used for seasoning fish. I realize that the spelling differs, but …"

"… you don't want your daughter's name to remind you of a seafood dinner."

Teyla sighed and slowly rubbed the crest of her swollen stomach. "It has not been as bad as all that, in truth. John has said it is ultimately my decision what to call her, and he will support whatever I decide. But I want him to be happy with my choice as well. She is, after all, his child just as much as she is mine. At this point there is only one name we have both agreed upon," she stated quietly, a wistful smile at her mouth. "Elizabeth."

No matter how many months had passed, Elizabeth's presence in the city had never seemed to diminish. Even with the memories of her devastating injuries, her subsequent loss to the Replicators, and much more recently, having had to stand by as she walked through the Stargate to her final rest, it was hard to think of her as being gone. Each time they had parted had been more terrible than the last.

Jennifer smiled as a hint of moisture welled up in her eyes. "I'm sure Dr. Weir would have liked that."

"She was a wonderful friend." Blinking back her own set of tears, Teyla drew in a shuddering breath. "Were it not for her, John would not have come here, and he and I would never have known each other. It seems … quite fitting."

Jennifer sniffed and quickly shook off the sadness of the moment. "So should I go ahead and put Elizabeth on Baby Sheppard's file?"

"Not yet, if you do not mind," Teyla said, feeling somewhat guilty as she did. Wouldn't any good mother know when she had come upon the name that was meant for her child? "While I am reasonably certain Elizabeth will bear a part of her name, I am not yet sure in what manner, and I would like the time to consider others." Charin came to mind, her boundless determination, the love she showed an orphaned girl, and of course her tuttle root soup. Or her mother's name, perhaps … How could she ever choose?

"Take your time, Teyla," Jennifer said with a modest understanding. "Lots of people wait unt—" She hesitated at the sound of the door opening in the main room.
"John?" Teyla immediately called out. Footsteps accompanied a thundering rush of disquiet in her chest, redoubled as she dreaded what was to come. The seconds spun on, persisting way beyond their normal due as she anticipated the face in her doorway.

"Ronon," Jennifer said in astonishment as he strode up and halted against the entrance. He gave the doctor a fleet glance, then his penetrating gaze lowered toward Teyla. Her breath arrested, caught in a moment's surety that all that she and John had planned for but hoped against had indeed come to pass. Ronon was here to take her from her home.

"Where is he?" she beseeched at a near whisper.

"I'm right here." A figure of a dark champion dressed all in black, John strode past Ronon and toward her, clearly having come through the door only a few paces behind the big Satedan. Rodney hovered behind Ronon, not inclined to come any closer. John settled a hip on the edge of the bed and an invisible balm draped over her, palpable, swift, and soothing, until she caught a trace of something else emanating from him. Confusion, mostly. Agitation. They seemed as real as a scent in the breeze, tainting his relief with a fetid wisp of doubt.

"John, what is it?" His brow steep, he glanced purposefully back at the doorway and another form approached. Teyla's mouth fell open.

"David!"
Teyla's reunion with David lasted mere minutes before John asked both he and Jennifer to give them some privacy, but those few minutes were filled with reams of questions, mostly on her part, beginning with John's statement, "Teyla, meet our friendly neighborhood IOA rep."

John was able to get an update on her condition from Jennifer, but the unexpected arrival of his elder brother dominated the discussion. Teyla listened to his tale in stunned disbelief as she reacquainted herself with this man she hadn't seen in almost eight months. He was as handsome as she recalled. His coloring was so similar to John's. And so tall. He was taller than John, who was already quite a height for her. But, as she was confined to a bed, David seemed a pillar of a man, neatly coiffed and carefully packaged to present just the right image.

Yet, for all her observations and discussion, the thing that diverted Teyla the most was the hug he gave her just before John ushered Jennifer and him from their bedroom. It was gentle, nothing extraordinary, except that the moment he touched her, her little one's exhaustive wiggling ceased. The babe within her settled down and Teyla immediately felt more at ease, as though a cord stretched inside her, held impossibly taut, was suddenly loosened. She could scarcely describe it, but it was certainly … pleasant.

"You seem happy to see him," John said, alighting again next to her as she sat on the edge of the bed. He leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees. Teyla's toes curled over the cushioned surface of the rug, the sounds of quiet chatter filtering in from the next room, and she realized she was indeed smiling.

"Should I be otherwise?"

He gave a noncommittal shrug. "I don't know."

"What is bothering you, John?"

There was a thick pause, and then his gaze flitted to the side to look at her. "He shouldn't be here. It's too dangerous. And the IOA … That's just …" He grew stern. "He shouldn't be here."

Teyla regarded him with thoughtful consideration. John could have any one of a dozen reasons for not wanting David to be here, perhaps all of them at once. But the answer to each came down to a single question. "John, I want to tell me truly-would you rather it had been someone else? Would Mr. Coolidge have been more to your liking? Or that Shen woman perhaps?"

"How do we know they aren't here in spirit? How do we know that Dave isn't just a walking, talking marionette for their latest agenda? You know how manipulative they can be."

"David is a capable man. I have serious doubts anyone could sway him from a course he deemed proper without considerable effort."

"Well, the IOA is nothing if not persistent."

"And if your brother is half as strong-willed as you, it would make no difference."

She reached out and ran her hand over his back. His muscles were stiff underneath her fingers, so she scooted closer and she pressed harder to try and work them loose. A short, appreciative grunt emerged from him and his eyes closed as her hands manipulated the body beneath his uniform. When he finally looked at her again, his tension seemed to have eased, if only by a small measure.
She hated to see him so burdened. He should not have to carry her future and their baby's all on his own. She wanted to be able to help him in a more substantial way.

"Something's not right, Teyla," he said in a low voice. "He's holding out on me."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know him. It was always the same with him and Dad. They never just laid it all out there. There was always something else, some advantage they kept tucked away for a rainy day, just long enough to throw it in your face. Plus, he always gets a little more pompous when he's lying."

Teyla gave him a reproachful frown. Now wasn't the time for old arguments and resentments. "Similar to you telling David that my condition is due to a simple genetic anomaly?"

He stared at her long and hard. "It's the truth."

"A version perhaps," she countered. "It was hardly the most forthright approach, John."

A formless expression of irritation trickled into the atmosphere as John's posture straightened. "What should I have said, Teyla?"

"He is going to find out sooner or later, and when he does, he will have no reason to trust you any further than you apparently trust him."

"Teyla, this isn't a game. I won't put you and the baby at risk …" He struggled within himself to find what he wanted to say. "… based on a hope that my brother is the person I want him to be. All I care about is keeping you safe."

John fell silent, and Teyla knew exactly what thoughts played behind his eyes. She needed no psychic link to know it was her own voice he heard, pleading and faltering beneath a dam of building tears.

Take her. You have to take her, John. Run.

Her memories of that vision undoubtedly had a keen ability to give her pause, but Teyla didn't want her life's choices to be ruled by it. The future was a construct of dreams, the fruit of one's own works, and reasonable prediction. It was not a constant. It may have already changed.

Even if a threat still remained, if the time came that Teyla was injured to the extent that she could not continue on and had to plead with John to take their child and go, the sketchy nature of their shared vision left them with no way to know when they would come to face it, only that it would not be until after their baby was born. And whatever enemy they had been hiding from, there was no guarantee it was their own people acting on orders from the IOA.

John would sacrifice the opportunity to finally lay his family's difficult past to rest, if he thought it might alter their course and spare her the pain of handing over her child, possibly never to see her again. She loved him for it, but she couldn't let him do that. She would not have them live their lives as slaves to a moment in time that was yet to be determined and, though he may have been momentarily blinded by the sudden turn of events, John wouldn't want that either.

Ignoring his implacable countenance, Teyla took his handsome face in her palms and kissed him. Unprepared for the tender brush of lips, he was stiff and hesitant, but soon his mouth softened against hers and Teyla felt the smooth slide of delicious response. John breathed deep, a hot rush of air tickling her cheek as he exhaled and pushed his lips closer, sweet and moist. His hands clasped her forearms, then traveled delicately up to embrace her shoulders and the nape of her neck, seeking her,
reaching for her, and holding on as though he never intended to let go.

Teyla's lips parted, inviting him as deep as he desired, and welcomed the succulent taste of him as he responded in kind. Her fingertips glided slowly behind his neck, stroking those tense muscles again, folding and kneading them until he stilled and moaned into her mouth.

John took a soft, teasing nibble of her lower lip, and then freed himself with an adoring peck. "That's not fair."

"I know," Teyla said with sage smirk and leaned in to graze cheek against cheek and nuzzle his skin. As she pulled away, her hands traced slowly down the line of his shirt over his chest. "I also know that you would do anything for us. But sitting here, waiting and guessing what the next move will be will profit us nothing. If you think he is hiding something from you, then you should confront him. Talk to him. Judge what you can from that." She hugged his waist, her eyes drinking him in. "Family is a gift. It should never be cast aside."

John's thumb caressed her cheek. "You are my family."

"As is he. David loves you, and whatever his responsibilities with the IOA, I do not believe he would ever do anything to bring us harm." With patient and gentle fingers, Teyla took his hand and guided it to her middle. "She senses him, John. She knows him already. She knows he is her family."

He looked at her quizzically, concern laced there as well.

Without any prompting, she indicated she was in no danger. Like a Wraith can sense those of its Hive, her child, in her own rudimentary way, recognized her uncle as one of her own. It was often difficult to put to words the impressions she sensed in her unborn baby, but Teyla realized what she felt was safe. Contented. She was far more inclined to trust her own feelings and her daughter's intuition than a vision.

"Talk to him, John. For her sake, if for no other."

John focused on her belly, his brow furrowed and his fingers stroking her carefully. "Okay," he nearly whispered.

The chime to the main door of their quarters rang. As John stood, Teyla quickly caught his wrist. "John, if you would help me, I would like to go out to the couch for a while."

"But …"

"Ronon will answer. Or Rodney, or Jennifer … It will take only a moment."

From the living room, Mason's voice drifted in to join the others. "Hey, where's the … whoa!"

John glanced through the bedroom door to peer distractedly at the growing group. He grimaced, and doubtlessly faced with the sergeant's perplexed expression, she knew he felt a responsibility to explain his brother's presence yet again. But Teyla was not going to spend that time all in the next room without her partner and lying in bed like an overstuffed lynox. Her home was growing crowded, and if she had to spend one more moment isolated and bedridden, she felt she would soon scream.

An acute flash of annoyance set against her teeth and the temperature of her smile plummeted to a frosty line. "John Sheppard, if you value your life, you will not take one step more until you have helped me up."
The abrupt turn of her icy countenance seemed to get his attention, and in seconds, Teyla was gently hauled to her feet. With one hand holding on carefully to John's arm, she straightened her spine with a grateful stretch, enjoying the weight on her feet and the renewed flow of blood throughout her extremities. Her smile swiftly thawed and a pleased moan crossed. "That is much better."

Before she was ready, he held tight to her hand and edged her toward the door, further from the bed. She took small, tentative steps, the whole time conscious that he was watching her warily, as though he was waiting for her next mood to strike. "What are you doing, John?"

"Getting you away from anything you can use a weapon."

A rakish smirk tugged at his mouth as Teyla shot him a withering look. "Really, John."

"You're scary, but I love you." He rewarded her with a kiss and linked his elbow more fully with hers. *Trying to curry favor for the future*, she suspected, while a wonderfully heated glow blossomed in her cheeks.

They walked arm in arm into the large living room and caught Mason and David shaking hands, Mason appearing as though he'd received just enough information from Ronon and Rodney to enlighten yet confuse him. Jennifer remained a few paces apart from them at Ronon's back. Teyla's gaze lingered on Jennifer. She almost seemed withered and pale, but in that selfsame instant, Ronon threw a glance over his shoulder toward her and she looked perfectly normal again. It was as though it had only been a trick of the light, so fast Teyla seriously questioned whether she had seen anything at all.

"So … that 'classified' thing?" Mason said, perplexed, the small space between his eyes wrinkled.

David grinned. "It didn't take."

"Apparently not," he replied before regaining his cool deportment. "Nice of you to drop by."

Upon seeing her, Jennifer rushed over to take Teyla's other hand. Beyond the first few steps she required to check her balance and make certain she was steady on her feet, Teyla didn't actually need the help. She permitted it because it made the others feel good to lend assistance and, with her short temper of late, it was the least she could do. *For now*, she allowed with a humble pinch of bemusement toward her recent behavior. She may very well change her mind at any moment.

The couch was large, enough to seat three easily or four more snugly, and was paired with a smaller one John often referred to as a 'loveseat'. The sight of many a movie night or sports gathering among their close friends, the fabric was velvety brown and quite plush. Teyla found it quite comfortable. She descended onto the cushion, coming to rest against the wool knit blanket that remained draped over its back. Ostensibly happy to segregate herself from the huddled group of men, Jennifer settled next to her while a series of muffled thuds and thunks resounded in the hallway outside their quarters.

"What's going on?" John asked Mason.

The sergeant turned on his hips and activated the door control. Outside, a small crew of busy marines armed with dollies were depositing box after box into the corridor. Some of them were rather large. "You see, sir, there was a suspicious amount of baby stuff hanging out with no one to claim it. I thought I'd take a chance and assume it belonged here."

"How many babies are you having?" Rodney asked John, staring incredulously at the sizable pile as it grew and grew. He looked to Jennifer, seeking her expert opinion.
"Just the one," Jennifer responded quickly. "This pregnancy certainly hasn't been short on surprises, but I can confirm that much."

Teyla certainly didn't remember requesting this much. Trying to maintain a practical mind on the matter, most of what she had asked for were small items, necessities: clothing, diapers, and the like. The only item of any real size she had requested was a crib. And there was also the baby swing. She had ordered that simply because she wanted it. "It does seem like rather a lot, John. Where did all this come from?"

John looked at her defensively. "Don't look at me. I may have gone a little overboard with my estimate of how many diapers we'd need to last us awhile, but-"

Jennifer snickered. "Colonel, I think you've got enough diapers here to last until she's three."

"Well, it's a good thing we've got the spare room, isn't it?" he said stubbornly. "Diapers and toys. That was all I was in charge of."

At that point, David took a tiny step forward. "I may have strayed from the list just a tad. See, I went looking for a crib and there was all this other stuff. Sheets, mattresses, bumpers. I didn't know a crib had to have a bumper. And then there are convertible cribs …"


"No, it sounds like the sales ladies saw you and your credit card coming," John added with a knowing look.

David shrugged. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Not buy the diamond deluxe package with all the extras."

"Fine. Next time, you do all the shopping."

"Why bother? I could have ten more kids and they'd still be set," John said.

Next to her, Jennifer made a quiet choking sound. "Um, Colonel, if you're planning on having ten more kids, you may want to discuss that with Teyla first."

"What do you think, Teyla? Do you want to have ten more kids with me?"

Momentarily hypnotized by the continuous shuffle of cardboard, Teyla snapped out of it at John's question. When she glanced up, she saw the bittersweet note of regret in his face hidden beneath his glib attitude. They were both aware they would be fortunate to have even one more baby together, let alone more. She shared that same regret, yet still she smiled. "I would be happy to, John."

He smiled in return, and Teyla had never seen him more handsome.

As he did every time she and John were openly affectionate, Rodney's behavior automatically grew more curmudgeonly. "If you ask me, you're both certifiably insane. Seriously, do you even have room for all of this?"

"I don't know, Rodney. I guess we'll just have to start putting everything together and find out," John said. He threw a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bedroom next door to their own. "Capshaw, why don't you have your guys take some of the bigger stuff into the nursery? Crib, changing table, dressers-that kind of thing. Have we got tools handy?"
"Yes, sir."

"Good."

Mason gave a curt nod and went outside. Ronon followed and they soon returned, packing the first big box between them.

Rodney lightly jabbed John with his elbow. "You should, uh, probably leave the crib to me. After all, I do have an advance degree in engineering and it'll be a miracle if that instruction manual is even in English."

John released an amused huff. "Go for it, McKay. While you're at it, take Dave. He's got some penance he needs to work off for buying all this stuff in the first place. Doc, you may want to go too. We don't want Rodney hurting himself."

"Oh, so funny," Rodney snidely called back.

While everyone else milled around getting things arranged, John slumped onto the arm of the couch with an exasperated sigh. "It's not too late to run," he proposed in a low voice, leaning over her while a dance of light hit his brilliant hazel eyes.

Teyla placed her hand on his thigh and he in turn wrapped his hand around her shoulders. She laid her head against him, resting against his hip as his thumb stroked gently up and down the fine curve of her neck. With a deep exhale, they savored a moment of unspoken agreement.

They were committed to seeing this through. They would not be running anywhere.

"Just hold that steady for one second, Chewie," John said. "Capshaw, can you hand me that Phillips?"

A pencil clenched between his teeth and a sheet of sandpaper in his hand, Capshaw stopped working on leveling out the top of the changing table long enough to reach into the toolbox near his knee. The screwdriver hit John's palm handle first, and he started to screw in the drawer fronts with Ronon lending a hand.

Open boxes, reams of bubble wrap, paper, and packing peanuts, lots and lots of wood slats and little baggies full of easily misplaced parts were strewn out all over the floor of the nursery, spilling into the living room where Teyla and Jennifer were busily making a mess of their own as they went through and organized the smaller boxes. Through the open doorway, John saw piles forming faster than a line at Disneyland. Green crib sheets and blankets swallowed the arms of the couch and end tables in more shades and patterns than he'd ever seen; light, dark, plain, polka dots, stripes. There some with cartoonish trees and birds sewn into them, some with a jungle theme, and a set with fluffy white bunnies hopping through a field.

And the girls haven't even gotten to the clothes yet. John wanted to let out a groan.

Simple. Was that so much to ask? He should have known when he asked Dave to handle getting what they needed on Earth that it would be anything but. Little had he known his brother had crossed over to the Dark Side.
McKay muttered aloud as he read from the crib manual. "'Attach the left and right brackets G-1, G-2 to spring frame E' … Where is that?"

Working around him, Dave tightened a metal bracket to the frame of the crib. John had promised Teyla he would talk to him, but he would gladly take manual labor for now. "How's it coming, McKay?" he asked, finishing the drawer front.

Rodney sifted through his assortment of plastic baggies. "Considering half the pieces are missing and the Allen wrenches don't fit, not bad."

"Well, we can't all be Bob the Builder." John grabbed the drawer handle and eyed the holes to line it up.

"Some of us have higher career aspirations than becoming a cartoon construction worker," he replied following a churlish huff. "Personally, I'd like to think of myself as more of a MacGyver.

Beside him, Ronon's brow furrowed while Mason released a deep chuckle. "Really? MacGyver?"

"What? I've been cobbling together last minute miracles for five years running now," McKay said, confident. "I may have better luck throwing the manual out altogether."

John's face turned uneasy and vaguely horrified, realizing he was actually serious. "McKay, my daughter is not sleeping in a bed held together by a paperclip, a piece of wire, and chewing gum."

He finished with the handle and slid the completed drawer in its slot. He clapped his hands together to wipe off the leftover grain and had to admit the deep red Mahogany stain on the furniture looked really good in here. Reaching for the next drawer, he peered back over his shoulder. "I'm just saying, at this rate, the baby's gonna be in college before you get that thing put together."

"You know, if Columbus had this many doubters, you'd all still think the Earth is flat."

John rolled his eyes and watched while Rodney picked up the headboard side and held it upside down. "If you're having trouble, we could always see if Radek can come down and give you a hand."

Rodney glared. "Need I remind you that when I was in the sixth grade—"

"You built a nuclear warhead," John finished. "We know."

"Seriously?" Dave asked.

"He never shuts up about it."

"It was non-functioning," Rodney qualified, sending John a pugnacious scowl.

"You can't rest on your laurels forever, Rodney," John goaded him. "Think of this as your greatest adventure yet."

"Building a crib?"

His response was pithy and accompanied a closed-mouth smile. "Yeah."

"And what is so great about building a crib?"

"It's not the crib, per se," John said, his smile turning a few threatening degrees. "It's what I'm gonna do to you if it collapses while my baby is in it."
Rodney gulped. "Oh. Well, when you put it that way ..."

"And then I'll let you have a nice long chat with Teyla."

"Alright, alright! I get the point!"

To John's satisfaction, Rodney seemed to take the job much more seriously after that. So much so that Dave wound up getting summarily dismissed to help Mason finish up the changing table because Rodney "couldn't concentrate with somebody hanging over his shoulder".

Another hour went by and the baby's room slowly started to come together. The completed dresser and changing table found their place next to each other along the wall, and a cleanup of the floor began while the teammates talked and joked around with each other. All except for Rodney, who was busy worrying his lower lip into shreds over the convertible base of the crib, which squeaked and squealed but lacked the ability to actually convert.

Dave fit into the dynamic with unanticipated ease. John would have almost preferred an awkward reintroduction to his team and to his life, given he was harboring serious reservations about the situation. What if he was being played? What Dave was sent here to dismantle the life John had built, unaware he was someone else's pawn? If that wasn't the case, then what was he hiding?

Ronon ribbed him about wrinkling his suit and Dave grinned, taking it in stride. It forced John to remember the days after he woke up in the hospital, his memory riddled with gaps, a patchwork of images and impressions. Along with Teyla and his team, Dave had been there to help talk him through some of things that didn't make sense.

A sudden tightness spread through the muscles of John's cheeks, jaw, and chest as he remembered being told—for the second time—that his father had passed away.

He eventually recalled going to the wake and almost everything else, but what was new was Dave's hand tight around his forearm as he lay in bed withdrawn in stolid disbelief, a hospital gown his only armor against his grief.

_I missed you, John._ Dave's statement only a little while ago resonated again in his mind. The fact was John had missed him, too. He wasn't used to feeling that way. And Teyla had the right of it when she asked if he'd rather the IOA had sent someone else. Dave beaming down from the Daedalus was probably the best thing that could have happened.

And, yet, worry churned in his gut, brisk and deep.

He decided to take a break and, after stopping to check on Teyla and the doc, he found himself on the balcony, high up above the East Pier, staring out at the ocean. He often went outside to think, as if a flurry of wind could whisper answers in his ear or a far away crest could wave its watery hand and frantically shout "Oh! Oh! I know what you should do!" Needless to say, it never quite happened that way, but John found it restful listening to sounds of the tide breaking against the city, the salt-scented breeze tousling his hair.

"Every time we're in a group together, I can always count on you to find the quietest corner."

"And I can always bet you're right in the middle of it."

Leaning on the railing, John looked behind him to see Dave strolling out toward him. His hands were in his pockets, the collar of his white shirt undone and sleeves rolled up from earlier. No matter where he was or what he was doing, Dave consistently moved as though he owned the place. "I get the feeling we didn't exactly finish our conversation earlier."
John turned away. "Yeah, you'd be right about that," he said into the air.

Dave fixed himself a place alongside him and assumed a nearly identical posture, peering out over Atlantis. There was a substantial interlude where neither spoke, Dave admiring the view and filling the time while John formulated his thoughts. "You've got a hell of a place here, John."

John said nothing. He looked across to the glossy towers, proud of his home but ever mindful of the threat he could smell on the horizon. When he eventually spoke, his voice was measured and precise. "I've been going over and over all this in my head, and no matter how many times I do, something just doesn't add up. You don't fit in this equation. Gen. O'Neill wasn't exactly a fan of you finding out as much about the Stargate program as you did. Why would he break protocol so you could get into it up to your neck? And what does the IOA want with you?"

"You don't trust the IOA."

"Not for a second," John answered with unvarnished contempt.

Dave hesitated and noted him carefully. Then, seemingly satisfied, he said, "Good. Like you said, they are a pack of politicians."

"What's going on, Dave?" John demanded, his tone harsh and low. "And don't give me any more of this whitewashed chairman-of-the-board crap. I want all of it. Now."

Dave's jaw wound around in a tight bend and he exhaled. "Gen. O'Neill and I kept in touch after you left Colorado. He let me know you had arrived safely back here. Of course, he didn't say where 'here' was. He had no idea you had basically already told me. Anyway, we got together a few times when he was in town. We went out to lunch, had a few drinks, and the subject of Atlantis or the Stargate program never came up."

"And then?"

"Then, one day, he showed up at my office—no phone call, no appointment—and suggested we go for a walk. We wound up boarding a plane to Washington and, on the flight over, I learned a lot."

John could easily imagine the conversation that had taken place. He remembered his first sit down with the General a little too well. Although, he doubted his brother's flight had included having to haul ass away from a runaway drone.

"And that's when we met with the President," Dave said succinctly.

John had to admit, he was startled. "The President?"

Dave confirmed it with a clipped nod. "A position with the International Oversight Advisory had recently come available and they needed someone who happened to fit my particular skill set."

"Such as?" John asked dubiously.

"I'm a neutral party, John. Apparently that's not something that comes around very often in political circles," he said with a note of condescension. "I'm not military, I don't have a political agenda, and I know what it takes to run a successful and thriving operation."

John took in what he suggesting. "Woolsey was right. There's more to going on in the IOA and with this visit than a budgetary debate."

Dave nodded seriously. "There's a lot of talk about the feasibility of continuing on with the Atlantis
expedition."

"Well, that's nothing new. The IOA has been talking about shutting us down practically from the moment we stepped through the Gate."

"But things are changing, John. The Lucian Alliance is growing everyday and the IOA's advisers are telling them it's only a matter of time before Earth's security is threatened. At this point, Earth hasn't got the power necessary to activate the Antarctic platform and our space fleet is divided between patrolling the Milky Way and supplementing the expedition here in Pegasus."

A rumble of frustration gripped John's throat. "If the Lucian Alliance decides to make a run for Earth, one ship or even two wouldn't make a bit of difference. You need us out here. The Ancients lived in Pegasus for a few million years, and we've barely scratched the surface of what they've left behind. We're Earth's best chance to get more ZPMs. And who knows what else we'll find? Possibly something even better, but we won't know unless we're allowed to try."

Dave appeared skeptical. "And how do you intend to do that with Wraith everywhere? There are a lot of people in the IOA that don't think it can be done."

John looked him square in the eye. "We've done just fine so far."

"Yes, you have," Dave said, a smile coming to light. "I've seen your record, John. Read your reports. They're …" He gave a respectful nod. "… very impressive."

John's gaze faltered slightly and he found himself again seeking out the crisp blue sight of ocean. Having his brother in the city—in his city—was weird enough. But seeing Dave look at him with a clear knowledge of what his career had entailed and what he had dedicated his life to? He wasn't used to it. It was unsettling.

Had Dave been right? Had shutting his family out become so much a part of him he preferred it that way?

Dave took it on himself to continue, probably sensing John's disquiet. "I don't want you to worry, John. I wasn't lying before; I'm not here to get in your way. I'm here strictly to observe, learn what I can, and make my recommendations to the IOA and, more so, to the President." He ducked his head and tension built. "But, if you're asking for full disclosure, I should probably also tell you that there are a lot of eyes on you."

"What do you mean?"

Dave's tongue traveled across his lips and quickly disappeared. "Gaining acceptance into the IOA wasn't easy. With the way you and your superiors have occasionally handled things, you haven't exactly earned yourself a lot of supporters. And … your relationship with Teyla, having a baby here … People are worried you're trying to turn Atlantis into a colony. To listen to them talk about it, you'd think autonomy was a dirty word."

John sighed. Among everything else, he couldn't seem to muster the energy to be indignant anymore. He simply said what he thought. "That may not be such a bad thing. There are a lot of people here who think of this place as home."

"And you?" Dave asked. There was a genuine desire to hear his answer apparent in his set features, and John was suddenly plagued with guilt at the thought of hurting him. So, again, he said nothing.

Nothing was enough.
A sad smile peeked at the curve of Dave's mouth. "I can't say I'm really surprised. After all, you haven't had much to tie you to Earth, have you?"

They fell silent, neither in the mood just now to rehash the more painful side of their shared past.

After a elongated spell, Dave suddenly chuckled. "It's a little ironic that our relationship—or rather lack of one—was the thing that finally bought me my acceptance into the IOA. I suppose they figured, if we were barely speaking, I wouldn't let your opinion affect mine. I might even lean the other way just to piss you off."

John's lips turned up, too. He released a small breath of air.

"I plan on being fair, John," Dave said. "The President wants unbiased and that's what I plan on giving him. What the rest of the IOA wants or doesn't want isn't my concern."

"And when Atlantis proves to be indispensable? Will you be able to deal with the fallout?"

Dave's eyebrows bent to a confident slant. "I was taught by the best."

John laughed softly and resumed his relaxed posture, his hands surrounding the rail. Inside, he heard Rodney and Mason trading words about something. "McKay's probably put something on backwards."

He wasn't too worried about it. Between Rodney's God complex and the threat of physical violence, there was no way the crib would wind up being anything less than perfect for his little girl. His ego couldn't take it.

He glanced at Dave, who was a lot more at ease beside him. The pompous attitude laid aside for the moment, John was convinced that he knew everything there was to know—when it came to the stuff that mattered to him, anyway.

"So who's been sitting chair at the company while you've been off getting your new hobby?" he asked. For most of their adult life, Sheppard Industries had been Dave's sole focus. It was hard to imagine the company without him or Patrick Sheppard marching down the hallways, shoes pounding the finished marble floors until long after all the other employees had returned home.

Dave was taken aback that he'd asked, John could tell, but he also seemed pleased. "You remember Shelley Pope? She was head of the finance division." John responded with a malformed noise and a quirk of the neck. For quite awhile, the names and faces of the company elite had been vague at best. Dave didn't pay his lack of recognition any attention. "When Dad's health forced him to start curtailing his hours, she stepped up and took over some of the contract negotiations and helped me out with interdepartmental management."

Understanding, John nodded, but he was fascinated by the abrupt change in Dave's body language. He started smiling for no real reason, his lips quirked to one side like a schoolboy with a crush.

"And how's that going?" John asked suggestively, his interest piqued.

"It's … good."

John knew he was on to something when his stately elder brother, the one who could thumb his nose at an acquisitions committee, almost blushed. "No, really. How's it going?"

Dave realized the jig was up and slowly started talking. "We, uh … We've worked together for God knows how long, but um … after I started spending most of my time in D.C., I don't know. Things changed. Back in July, I flew back for the weekend and she told me she kind of missed having me around."
He's gone, John thought, shaking his head at what he was hearing.

"Things have been … really good ever since."

"And the long distance thing?" John asked.

"So far it hasn't been a problem."

"Where does she think you are now?"

"Marrakesh. On a long overdue vacation."

John couldn't picture anyone who knew anything about Dave believing he would ever take that much time off. He tried again to picture this girl his brother was so obviously stuck on. Dave acted pretty certain that he knew her. That meant she'd been with the company a long time …

A face started to coalesce.

"Wait a minute. Shelley? Dark, wavy hair, kind of girl-next-door meets Sarah Jessica Parker?"

Dave nodded. "Yeah, that's her."

"Oh, man …" John dragged his hand over his mouth. "You're sleeping with Dad's assistant?!"

Dave burst out laughing. "John, she hasn't been Dad's assistant in years."

John didn't find it quite as funny. "Well, to me, she'll always be Cherry Bomb Girl."

"It was thirteen years ago, John. Let it go, already."

"You know, Charlotte yelled at me for an hour about leaving scorch marks on the hardwood floor. It took me two more hours to get it cleaned off."

"It's bad form to stiff your own welcome home party."

"I was tired. I had just gotten off a twelve hour flight, and you know as well as I do that party was more for him than for me. Besides, if Dad wanted me to come down that bad, he could've just asked. He didn't have to send in the infantry."

Dave shrugged. "You were late. Dad specifically told her to 'make an impression'."

"Well, mission accomplished. I hadn't hit the deck so hard since Basic. I'm surprised Dad didn't fire her."

"Dad laughed his ass off. He only wished he could've been there to see your face."

John found that very hard to believe. Most of his memories of his father depicted him either red-faced and shouting or darkly quiet, refusing to speak to him at all. "He did not."

Some of the levity fled. "Dad wasn't the ogre you remember, John. Not that he didn't have it in him … but there was the good stuff, too. Things with you were always a lot harder on him. You're just like her, you know?"

No, he didn't know. Some days he barely remembered what she looked like.

Dave reached around to his back pocket. John had noticed the square lump earlier, but had assumed
it was his wallet. Instead, he pulled out a blue velvet box. "Dad would've wanted you to have this."

John opened it, and it felt like a rock suddenly lodged in his throat, making it hard to breathe. Inside was a diamond ring. The center stone was cut round and surrounded by petals of smaller diamonds giving it the look of a flower surrounded by opaline leaves. Under the lights of Atlantis, the sheen was so brilliant John might have shaded his eyes. If he had pulled it free of the felt holding in place, he knew he'd find an inscription inside the band, reading "the beginning of forever".

"I …" John had a hard time finding his voice. "… told you to find a ring like Mom's."

Dave seemed to understand his difficulty. "What's more like Mom's ring than Mom's ring?"

"This is yours," he insisted. "You may want to give it to Cherry Bomb Girl."

He attempted to push the box into Dave's palm, only to have it firmly pressed back into his. "It's not really Shelley's style and … I think it may just be perfect for Teyla. Take it, John."

He did. But he didn't know what to say.

Behind them, within John's quarters, the sound of the door opening was heard. John turned around and saw Carson rush inside, lungs heaving as though he'd run all the way there. "What is it? What's the emergency?" he said urgently, almost tripping over his Scottish brogue.

John walked inside, deftly slipping the ring in his pocket as he went. He saw nothing but complete bewilderment in Teyla and Jennifer. They were clueless as to what was going on.

McKay barreled in from the nursery. "It's about time, Carson! I need a hand here. Capshaw's no help whatsoever and Ronon is about to re-enroll in the Satedan School of Anger Management. 'Hit it until it works.'"

"What the devil are ya talking about, Rodney?" the doctor said.

"The crib, of course! I need help."

Carson's face dropped so fast John had to duck his chin and cover his mouth to smother his laughter. "For God's sake, Rodney, I'm a doctor, not a bloody engineer! I've got an infirmary full of new personnel from the Daedalus and I've no time to—"

"Oh, quit whining and get in here." Rodney disappeared again.

Exasperation took over. Carson called after him, "Why don't ya just …"

"I'M. NOT. CALLING. ZELENKA!"

"Do you want to get some dinner?" Ronon asked, although he was pretty sure he already knew what she would say.

The door to Sheppard's quarters closed behind them as they meandered away, and Jennifer gave him that close-mouthed half smile he'd learned to expect right before a polite refusal. "I'm not really hungry. Maybe later."
Ronon drew in a breath through his nose and frowned. He was averse to accepting her answer, but there wasn't much he could do about it. During her short convalescence, he'd brought her trays of food, and when she'd grown tired of the sight of her quarters, he had sat with her in the mess. He spent his time eating and mutely observing while she made quiet small talk, commenting on some book she'd read or something she missed from Earth. She even laughed a little about a ludicrous rumor floating around that Dr. Tratovsky was a closet kleptomaniac, stealing geology department property to pad his budget for new equipment. All the while her food was only picked at, practically forgotten. From what he could tell, it had been days since she'd eaten a decent meal.

They'd just spent the last several hours getting the nursery together for Sheppard and Teyla. He'd hoped that after having gone back to work—light duty or not—and having the bustle of her friends around her, she'd feel better.

And she seemed to. For a while.

He'd seen her fold sheet after sheet into a concise little square, and navigating the maze of piles ready to be put away when the furniture was finished, she then helped Teyla fold and arrange all the baby clothes by size. Over McKay's frustrated murmurs, Ronon heard Teyla whisper quietly to Jennifer she didn't know what she was going to do with all of it and Jennifer smiled, simple and sweet. As the afternoon progressed, she seemed to shed the persistent aura of distraction, and the cooling tinge of fear and sadness went away for a while. She and Teyla put their heads together, talking and giggling between themselves as women did, and for what felt like the blink of an eye, Ronon didn't have to feel guilty for his part in what Jennifer was dealing with.

Their experience with the Wraith had left its mark, but he had scared her too. When he remembered the point of Kiryk's sword speeding along its deadly course straight toward Jennifer and the Wraith on top of her, he was at a loss as to why she was even still speaking to him. He'd give anything to be able to rewind the clock and scream at his raging self to stop, not to force her to see things that could never be unseen, not to make her witness a stain of human brutality that would be branded into her being forever.

He should have known when they started seeing each other that he would do this to her one day. He wanted to make her feel safe again, he just didn't know how. He wasn't sure he ever could.

"I think I'm gonna go to the infirmary and check on things," she said as they continued to walk alongside each other. "Carson's had his hands full with the new recruits all day, plus McKay duty, and we just got a whole bunch of new equipment in … He's been really great about running things, but he shouldn't have to worry about inventory and setting up the neonatal unit on top of all of that."

She released a heavy sigh. She probably knew he was less-than-curious on the subject, so she went on mostly to fill the silence.

"I doubt when this expedition was first formed that Dr. Weir ever imagined the day when we'd need to be equipped to deliver and care for newborns. I know Carson never thought we'd be putting in a requisition for an incubator, phototherapy lamps, and size three ET tubes. I mean, sure, we've helped out with a few deliveries here and there in the villages, a couple for the Athosians, but this is for one of our own. And don't think it's going to stop with Teyla." She said that last with an air of confidence, as if it were already a fact there were more honorary expedition members on the way, then shook her head ominously. "When I think we almost had a preemie on our hands and didn't have what we needed …"

Not liking where this was headed, Ronon caught her in the crook of the elbow and spun her so she looked at him. "Hey, you don't have to worry about that anymore. You have it now, and Teyla's
okay."

"Thank God."

"No. Thanks to you."

The sunken line of her mouth lifted some. Glad he could make her smile at all, he reached up and brushed the delicate pink corner with a curled finger. Her big, open eyes stared up at him and he placed a small, soft kiss on her lips. It wasn't their first, but close enough that it made little difference in his cautious approach or in the slight flush of her cheeks as he pulled away. Their first kiss had been a simple goodnight outside her door, brief yet teeming with possibilities. This one felt more like an apology.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She took a bite of her lower lip and quickly lowered her chin to avoid his gaze.

He wasn't sure what she was apologizing for, but again, he had to disagree. "No, I am."

He went with her to the infirmary. With the day's earlier crowd gone, the medical staff was in the process of cleaning up as they came in. Harried-looking orderlies stripped the empty exam tables of their paper coverlets and tossed them in the trash before spraying the flat surfaces with cleaner, while nurses finished with the stragglers and pushed away the flimsy mobile dividers they used to create more privacy in the crush of people.

"How did it go today?" Jennifer asked Marie, who looked like she'd been in a wrestling match with a snaggle-toothed raillor beast.

"Oh, the usual. The flirts, the hypochondriacs, the ones who completely ignore our existence."

"Each one of them more of a delight than the last." Rachel came over with a stack of charts in her hand and put them down on the table with a grunt. "I'm closing out the day with one 'I'm allergic to everything' and two offers for dinner. How'd you do, Marie?"

"No dinners, but I had four runny noses, two fainters, and one 'you remind me of my mother'."

Rachel giggled. "What did you do?"

"Gave him a rectal exam." Marie's delivery was so dry, Ronon almost heard the familiar snap of a rubber glove and felt his posterior flinch. The women, however, broke into laughter.

Uncomfortable, Ronon grunted, "Uhhh … is Kiryk awake?"

Rachel's snickers trailed off. "Should be. He may be a little out of it, though. Dr. Beckett slipped a little something extra into his IV earlier when he tried to go for a walk. Sounds a little like someone else I know."

He ignored her and addressed Jennifer. "I'll catch up with you later?"

She nodded. "Take your time."

Kiryk and Celise spent their first couple of days in Atlantis in the recovery ward; she had had surgery on her leg to clear out all the infected tissue and had since been fitted with a new skin graft, while Kiryk had a knife wound in his side. They had since been moved into main ward, though near the back to preserve some of their privacy, especially with the Daedalus' arrival imminent. That was where Ronon found Kiryk, sitting up in bed though his eyes were closed. A thick white cocoon of
bandages and gauze wrapped around his torso.

Knowing he wasn't asleep, Ronon called out a low "hey." The newly liberated runner's eyes opened immediately. Ronon noted the empty bed next to him. "Where is she?"

"Celise was getting bored, so Nurse Miller took her out to see some of the city," Kiryk said with a drowsy inflection.

"It's good she's getting better."

Kiryk sluggishly nodded. "We both are." His thanks was understood. There was no need to say it aloud.

Ronon retrieved a chair from the corner and slid it in next to the bed. "If you need to get up and move around, wait for the night shift. It's slower, and the nurses are more likely to bend the rules if you let them think they'll be able to keep a closer eye on you."

Intrigued, Kiryk glanced over Ronon's shoulder toward the exit. Whatever drugs Beckett had dosed him with may have been slowing his reaction time, but his wits were still intact. "I'll keep that in mind."

Ronon grinned to himself, pretty sure he would be getting a very angry radio call in the middle of the night when Kiryk took off. After all this time, the medical staff still complained just as loudly when he didn't just stay in bed like he was supposed to. It would be far worse for Kiryk until he had a few years of freedom under his belt, too.

Runners were conditioned to run. Standing still for long, even if grievously injured, meant being left vulnerable, so pain went ignored and they kept moving.

In short, they were a doctor's worst nightmare.

"Have you thought about what you're gonna do next?" Ronon asked.

"Mr. Woolsey contacted my homeworld," he said, an indolent grimace settling over his immovable chin. "It was culled recently. Many of the survivors have abandoned the planet in search of a new place to start over. I'm told …" he paused, a sense of disbelief taking hold for an instant, "... my sister was among them."

"You've got family then."

Kiryk dug his hands into the mattress and shifted his weight more to his left. His lips pulled into a tight grimace, suppressing a groan. "I don't know where she's gone, and I can't care for Celise and search for her as I am."

Ronon sat in reserved thought. He knew well the desire to chase after what was lost. It visited him still, twelve years later. "You could stay here. The people here can help you get back on your feet and, when you're ready, they'll help you look for your sister."

Kiryk's reaction suggested he'd been offered this before. "Mr. Woolsey suggested as much. Is that why you stayed?"

Ronon's eyes wandered around the room, taking in this small part of the city he now called his home. He answered, conscious to empty himself of his emotions. "Didn't have anything to go back to. The Wraith destroyed everything. The few of my people that survived are scattered."
Ronon shook his head. "Not anymore." His father died with the rest of the Ministry's Fist, trying to hold the barricades near the Capitol. He never found his mother's body; everyone in the area had been swept away in a culling beam. When he couldn't find her, he'd fought his way through the gauntlet of the siege, the pavement beneath his feet broken and bleeding mortal red, to reach the hospital and then ... In an instant of rebellious memory, he watched Melena die all over again. "You're lucky."

Kiryk bore a sympathetic expression. "You still miss them."

"Yeah." Ronon roughly scrubbed his beard over with his hand. "The people here took me in. They gave me the chance to do some good and kill Wraith. It's not a bad way to spend your time." The thought occurred that he liked the idea of having Kiryk around.

A smile passed Kiryk's lips. "It's a tempting offer."

"But ..."

"I have Celise to think about now. After all she's been through because of me, I owe her a home." He waited a long beat. "She's a good kid."

Ronon indicated with a subtle nod that he understood. Kiryk had let himself get attached to the girl, probably had come to love her in his own way. Now that he had the chance, he wanted to try and give back what he and the Wraith had stolen simply because he walked into her village one night.

"If that's what you want, you might want to consider staying with the Athosians until you decide you're ready to move on," he suggested in raspy tone. "The Athosians are good people. They've been our friends and our allies for a long time. They'll do right by you."

"I couldn't."

Ronon wasn't about to get tripped up by a misplaced reluctance to take handouts. "Look, they've been through hard times recently, too. They're starting over just like you, and an extra pair of strong hands would make a big difference." He went on. "There aren't many of them left, but there are kids Celise's age. The planet is safe. There's no threat of the Wraith."

At that, Kiryk's manner slowly crept towards possible acceptance.

"And we visit there pretty often," Ronon added—just in case it made a difference.

Kiryk's crooked smile made it seem like it did.

They talked for a while after that, until Kiryk's wound and the medication finally overtook him and he fell asleep. But Ronon stayed on, sitting, thinking. Celise eventually came back with Hannah pushing her along in a wheelchair, merrily clutching the little doll Jennifer had stubbornly kept tucked safely away all throughout their ordeal. Ronon gave the girl a friendly wave, and as Hannah got her settled back into bed, he decided he'd stayed long enough. Jennifer oughta be done by now.

With silent steps that contradicted his huge frame, he padded toward her office when he didn't see her anywhere else. She was at her desk quietly studying a sheet of paper, her hair pulled back in utilitarian ponytail, paying no mind to the world beyond her own tiny corner. She didn't notice him walk up.

With memories floating afresh in his mind, she reminded him again of Melena. He knew Jennifer
wasn't her, and he didn't expect her to be. He genuinely cared for Jennifer, for all she had to offer in her own right. But for the first time, Ronon began to wonder if that resemblance was part of the reason he felt drawn to her, why, when they had so little in common, the doctor had managed to catch his attention when no one else had. He had a new life now, with a new family and a new people. Was he fooling himself to think he had moved on? Was Melena's ghost the one last thread of home he couldn't let go of?

Meanwhile, Jennifer continued to be absorbed elsewhere. The room was a void where all sound or energy appeared to have fled. The activity in the main infirmary vanished. Although there was only an open doorway between her and a room full of people, she looked utterly alone. She held the paper in her hand, not even looking at it anymore, her eyes withdrawn into a hollow stare, the tips of her fingers skimming slowly back and forth over the surface of the print.

"Hey," he broke softly into her barren bubble. "Something wrong?"

She came back to life for him, her eyes darting across to meet his. It was almost as though she only then remembered to breathe. Her gaze dropped once again as she hurriedly laid the paper on the desk and smoothed it out so it lay flat. "No, not at all. It's … nothing."

He didn't believe her and she knew it.

"It's just Mason's official clearance. Um … Carson signed off on his return to active duty."

"That's good, right?"

"Yeah."

Despite her insistence he knew she was holding something back. Jennifer was a terrible liar, and the smile she wore was the saddest he'd ever seen. "You okay?"

The artificial smile only grew and she looked down, as if it had grown so phony she couldn't even deceive herself with it. When she met his eyes again, her face was only a blank slate. "I guess I've just gotten used to having him around."

Ronon regarded her quietly. "You hungry?" he asked, not knowing what else to say. Again, he knew the answer.

A flicker of emotion touched her voice, a joyless quaver she couldn't control. "I think I just want to go home."

Ronon slowly nodded.

He took her home.
As I went to write this chapter, I realized I'd run into a slight continuity issue. Bound to happen when there is a veritable mass of plot threads to keep up with, right? Anyway, this was more of a bonus chapter to fix that and buy me some time while I finished what I initially had planned. I also took the opportunity to re-earn my M rating. I didn't think anyone would mind. LOL

"How's it coming, Carson?"

John's eyes warily scanned the ruined landscape around him from the confines of a red hazmat suit. Standing over the doctor, he kept a useful grip on his P-90, but he doubted it would be needed. MS3-515, the planet designated Bellerophon in the Ancient database, may have been the subject for a myth on Earth that had survived for thousands of years, but the original hadn't fared nearly as well. The plague survivors hadn't even been able to finish burying all of their dead when the Wraith showed up.

Plague. Wraith. As if one wasn't enough. The Wraith hadn't culled them; they leveled them. Debris was everywhere, scorched and tinged with ash. He didn't even want to think of all bodies they'd found scattered, some of their faces frozen forever in fear.

The Kysonians' sources had it right.

Damn it.

"Eager to be gone, Colonel?" Carson asked. Positioned in what used to be the center of town, what could now be more accurately described as the gateway to Hell, the doctor was securing water samples he'd procured from the public well. A full science team, along with John's team and several other Marines conscripted into bodyguard duty, went about collecting more from the topsoil, the buildings (most specifically from the nearby hospital), and from the corpses.

"You could say that." Aside from the appalling devastation, John didn't fancy the idea of spending all day in a suit that by definition didn't breathe. It wasn't even midday here yet and his shirt was already damp with sweat. When the sun really started to beat down, he wasn't sure he'd smell any better than the air waiting outside and he had a date tonight who certainly wouldn't appreciate it.

"Worried about what your brother might be getting up to without you there to keep an eye on him?" Carson questioned with a mischievous glance.

John answered with a simpering glare. "Not really. It was either leave him there or bring him along, and I don't think Dave's quite ready for deadly alien viruses." Or planetary genocide.

"Not on his third day, at any rate. I can see how that might be rushing things a tad."

"We'll give him a week or two. He's supposed to be getting to know the city anyhow. Pegasus' finer attractions will have to wait," John replied, echoing his droll slant. "So how long before you know what we're dealing with?"
"That all depends on what sort of bug Michael used here." Carson sealed the hermetically sealed storage container and stood. "Though, if it is what I think it is, not long at all."

"You think you know already?"

"Aye."

John's mouth knit into a tight mass. He'd had his suspicions from the minute he'd heard the tale of Bellerophon's recent demise. Carson having his own seemed like a veritable confirmation. "The Hoffan virus. It fits the MO. What else would make the Wraith mad enough to exterminate an otherwise perfectly good buffet?"

"I wish I'd never heard of the damned thing."

"It was a good idea, Doc. Immunity from Wraith feeding was an idea worth pursuing, and when we found out what was happening, we practically begged the Hoffans not to use it," John reminded him. "They chose their own fate. This blood is on Michael's hands, not yours."

Beckett stood still a long moment, considering his words, and then the two began to walk toward the hospital, a three-story building made of charred grey cinder blocks and mortar. Huge sections of the outer walls had collapsed under a barrage of weapons fire, leaving the interior exposed and the exterior permanently scarred, but the foundation and support framework was reasonably intact. Enough for John to allow teams in and out, at least. He knew Carson would want to get his hands on every scrap of data the planet's doctors might have gathered during the outbreak.

"If it is indeed the Hoffan virus, Michael's altered it somehow," Carson finally said. "The original form had to be administered via injection. The microscopic substructure wasn't stable enough to retain its cohesion in a diluted state as it would have to be to infect people on a mass scale."

John nodded quietly. "Well, I doubt he had people lining up to get infected."

"It had to be introduced into the water supply. It would be the fastest way to infect the population as a whole," Carson stated.

"Wouldn't it be faster if the virus was airborne?"

Carson released a hissing breath. "Aye, that it would. But at least with water as the delivery system, we're talking about an infection rate of days. Should we manage to find a way to reverse the effects of the virus, days could mean the difference a dozen deaths and hundreds. On the other hand …" He halted his steps, his face ominous as he turned toward John. "If this virus has become airborne, we're talking about a spread of a few hours. If we're lucky. Dropped in the right area and with a fifty percent casualty rate, we could lose thousands before we ever know what's happening."

"You're right, it's gotta be the water supply," John said. If it was a choice between bad and worse, they'd take bad every time.

They resumed their original course. As John surveyed the wreckage of human existence in front of him, he tried really hard not to let it get to him. But not so deep down, he was pissed. "I don't suppose there's a chance any of this will actually help us locate Michael."

"Well, I could try to cross-reference the protein signature surrounding the virus particles to known planets within the database, but … well …"

"It's a long shot."
"At best, it would only tell us where the virus was synthesized."

"And with Michael constantly moving his operation around, the odds he's still hanging out in the same place are pretty lousy," John deduced. He hated it when he answered his own questions and the response still sucked.

"I wish I could tell ya otherwise, Colonel, but it's rather unlikely."

"It's alright, Doc. Just do what you can."

Sgt. Voss reminded Jennifer of one of those English Mastiffs; a wide cocky stance, broad chest, round face, and an eager if not somewhat dopey expression that made her want to pat him on the head and send him on his way. As it was, he was following her around like a lost puppy while she carried an armload of boxes to the meds locker.

"C'mon, Dr. Keller, we'll talk, we'll drink a little, and maybe afterward you can show me around this place. It'll be fun."

It was the same story when each new wave of personnel passed through. It was as if there was a PSA before all military transfers announcing a healthy civilian population ahead, ripe for the picking, and if you showed up to the inaugural mixer without a date, you were doomed to be a loser for the rest of the tour. That mentality occasionally proved to be a nuisance, but the expedition vets recognized they were just caught up in the excitement of the new posting. As long as everybody behaved themselves, they barely batted an eyelash at the phenomenon anymore.

"It does sound like fun, Sergeant, but …"

"Joey," he cut in with a smile.

To this point Jennifer had tried not to look at him; she didn't want any incidental eye contact to be misconstrued as encouragement, and she had an odd impression she'd look to find a lolling tongue and a excitedly wagging tail. However, his persistence left her little choice.

She glanced over and forced a smile. "Sergeant," she reiterated, hoping he'd take the hint.

No dice.

"What can I do to convince you?"

Jennifer sighed, her patience rapidly dwindling. She really didn't need this right now.

"Dr. Keller, Col. Sheppard and Dr. Beckett are back with the science team." Rachel traipsed past the them, her bouncy gait rushed and business-like. Giving Jennifer an inquisitive glance as she went by, she sailed straight for the supply closet and busily prepped for a bevy of post-mission checks.

With the clink of glass on glass and a renewed sense of urgency, Jennifer refocused on transferring all the tiny vials of medicines into locked storage. "Look, Sergeant, as you can see, I have work to do and I'm sure you have somewhere you need to be."

"But about tonight …"
"There is no tonight," she said abruptly. Jennifer lifted her eyes just in time to see him startle, surprised at her harsh refusal. She was callous and, for once, she didn't care. The nightmares and the constant ache in the pit of her stomach had finally stopped. They had slipped away sometime in the night and she had been left feeling strangely empty, like a piece of her had gone missing, but she didn't want them back.

She sealed her lips tightly together and tried, for his sake, to be polite. "I have a lot to do around here, Sergeant, so you should probably go. I'm sure you'll have better luck with someone else."

There was a long instant where he just stood there, mouth slightly ajar, looking like someone who knew they'd just missed a vital piece of the puzzle but had no idea what. "Dr. Keller, if I said something to upset you …"

"Of course not." Leave. Please leave.

"Okay," he finally said. Then came the awkward attempt at a graceful exit. "I'll just get out of your hair, I guess. Maybe I'll, uh … see you later."

He made his way toward the doors with the distinct bearing of puppy with his tail tucked between his legs.

She didn't need to be so short with him, her conscience whispered. She smothered it.

Ronon beat him to the entrance. Coming in rather than leaving, he stalked into the infirmary sweaty and scowling, fresh from security duty for the Bellerophon mission. Practically on his heels, a messy group of marines followed, equally sticky with perspiration. Without the cover of their vests, their clothes were ringed with dark spots, their bodies in pressing need of a shower as they grumbled and griped about the hazmat suits.

Bringing up the rear, Mason swaggered in alongside Rodney. His dark blonde hair was even darker with the damp and stuck out in every which direction where he'd obviously carded his fingers through it. Unlike the others, he wore an expression that spoke only quiet satisfaction. Was he in need of a shower? Definitely. But he was where he wanted to be, doing what he wanted to do.

Jennifer steeled herself and ignored him. The science team would be arriving any minute, along with Carson and Col. Sheppard, who were probably already on their way after apprising Mr. Woolsey of what they'd found.

The infirmary quickly adopting the tang of dirty gym socks, Ronon discounted Voss' presence at his immediate right and glanced over to her. Likely honing in on those mysterious and scarily accurate instincts, his gaze tracked back to where Voss had stopped to allow the group to pass. Ronon gave the discomfited sergeant a hard glare and predatorial grunt. The sergeant's eyes widened dramatically and he cut a path for the door, giving Ronon a wide berth as he went.

Ronon cracked a smile, pleased with himself. Jennifer wasn't so thrilled.

Things with Ronon had been strained ever since their return from M33-985. Well … It wasn't fair to say that. Ronon had been nothing but wonderful. The past week had been difficult for her, but he had taken on the task of taking care of her like it was his new mission in life. Did he think she hadn't noticed how he would conveniently drop by around mealtimes? Or how he was always prepared to steer her in another direction when he sensed her mood beginning to crumble? Now he was taking it upon himself to keep her clear of the riffraff. It was her fault things drifted into the realm of polite. How was she supposed to feel with a man like that having focused so much of his attention on her? As much as she liked him, Jennifer was more aware than ever that Ronon cast a long shadow.
"What did he want?" he asked as he plopped down on the bed nearest to her and assumed his customary slouch. All over the main ward, the marines-and Rodney-did the same.

"Nothing," she said, getting to work. He watched her face as she expertly donned a pair of latex gloves and tied a rubber strap around his thick upper arm, surrounding his bicep. Shrinking as he scrutinized her, she said the first thing that sprang to mind. "He's got a mild case of … tinea cruris."

Inwardly, she groaned at herself.

"What's that?" he asked, curious but vaguely disinterested. As long as Voss was gone, he didn't care.

"You don't want to know. Pump your fist, please."

Ronon's hand flexed and she bent over the instrument tray. Her eyes strayed for a moment as she searched for the hypodermic needle and vacuum tube. A few beds over, Rachel whispered something in Mason's ear. There was a flare of laughter in his eyes, and a nearly undetectable grin as those intense blue orbs landed on her.

She almost smiled back. She guessed it was kind of funny, pinning Voss with an entirely metaphorical case of jock itch. And only Mason would've understood the weird neural misfire that had made her think of it in the first place.

The mute and accidental exchange fanned sweet warmth into her willfully numb heart. It only lasted for a swollen instant before it was over; his smile was gone, his attention was drawn elsewhere, and he looked away. The resulting pang of emotion was excruciating.

Jennifer pushed it away and concentrated on taking Ronon's blood sample.

"How's Kiryk?" he asked while she worked.

"Fine. Just a few more days and he and Celise will be leaving."

"Yeah."

"I think living with the Athosians will be really good for them," she said.

Ronon nodded, ignoring the needle in his arm.

They fell into a reserved silence. Ronon wasn't one for small talk and Jennifer simply had nothing to say. There was no tension. It was very … polite.

When she finished, he bounded off the bed with a lackadaisical hop. He threw a thumb over his shoulder and asked in his rumbling way, "Do you want me to pick you up later or …?"

With the question left hanging in the air, a stone began to press on Jennifer's chest. "Ronon, about tonight—I know we were supposed to go together. Would you mind if we … didn't?" His discerning brown eyes on her, she added in a rush, "It's just that there's so much to do around here, and Carson's going to need me help analyze and test the viral samples. I-I honestly don't know when I'll be able to get away."

Her heart was pounding by the time she finished, hoping he wouldn't see right through her. She wasn't trying to blow him off, but the truth was she couldn't stand the idea of spending the evening in a crowded concourse mingling with people she didn't know and avoiding those she did. She longed for the solitude of her lab and the tedious, hour-crunching, mind-numbing process of analysis which, to her, sounded like a healing bath.
But he didn't appear to be moved one way or another by her rambling excuse. "I'm supposed to go. Sheppard's supposed to introduce me to somebody."

"Oh?" To her chagrin, her voice came out a higher pitch than normal. Why did she always have to be so nervous? "Do you know who?"

He shrugged. "Could be anybody, I guess."

The tips of her mouth tugged into a nervous smile. "Well … have fun, okay?"

Jennifer didn't know what she expected, but his response was characteristically succinct and, in his own way, excessively polite. His bearded features remained passive and he shrugged again. "Okay."

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A crinkle formed in the bridge of her nose as that smell greeted her once again. A moist cloak of steam was only just starting to permeate the bathroom, but his scent seemed magnified in the draft.

"Here." With one hand bracing open the shower door, Teyla held up a fresh bar of soap. Beneath the pouring stream, John swiped hot water from his eyes and took it. "I advise you to use it generously," she said.

"I don't smell that bad," he claimed, mildly affronted, even as he had already begun rapidly working up lather.

"I have met duriks that have smelled better."

His features pinched in a mockery of wounded pride. His hands scrubbed the soapy film up his arms. "So, according to your stunningly sensitive pregnant olfactory sense, I'm now rated below a snorting, drooling, bellowing, bile-inducing beast of burden."

"So it seems."

John pursed his lips, a charismatic smile lurking just behind his show of annoyance. "You try marinating in one of those suits for five hours straight in hundred degree heat."

A hand smeared soap over his chest, covering skin, hair, and muscle in a frothy white blanket, his nipples compacted into tight little buds. Teyla couldn't help letting her eyes wander over his body so casually displayed before her as he continued to wash himself, starting with his devastatingly handsome face, the strong, chiseled cut of his jaw, then trailing down over the hard planes of his upper body and the equally arousing slope of his abdomen to where his manhood seemed to have noticed her attention.

When she looked up, she found John had noticed as well. His hazel eyes simmered with a new heat, while steam curled around him and his lips pulled into a bemused grin.

Teyla lifted her chin proudly, her fingernails tapping lightly on the edge of the shower door. "Do not worry, John. You still have your looks."

He chuckled and she meant to leave him there, but as she maneuvered to close the thin, partially translucent door, he called her back. John stepped nearer, out of the spray. Water beaded in his hair and on his skin, trickling off him in elegant droplets.
His expression suddenly grew quite sober. He cocked his head slightly to the side. "Hey, um … Is that what you're wearing to the reception tonight?"

Teyla glanced down at herself. She was wearing nothing extraordinary; a simple grey skirt with a usable slit so as not to encumber her movement while fitted to accommodate her expanding figure. The top was more colorful, an abstract pattern of greens and blues held up by thin straps at the shoulder and cut to suit her form. They were light fabrics, smooth to the touch with a somewhat lustrous sheen, and quite comfortable, but more casual than she had in mind for the occasion. Puzzled, she said, "I had planned to change. Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "No reason."

Then, he clinched her wrists and Teyla found herself being dragged into the shower with him.

"John!" she shrieked in surprise. Hot water soaked into her clothing, molding in and around her toes as he held her flush against his naked body. "John, what are you doing?"

"I could use a hand getting scrubbed up, hitting those hard to reach places."

"And you require my assistance?"

"How else am I supposed to know if I meet your standards or not?" he said with unconcealed lust.

His finger looped through the strap on her left shoulder and she felt his lips on her neck. His mouth parted over her pulse point, his full lips hungrily caressed her skin, and the gentle hint of teeth sent tingles throughout her being. Her eyes fluttered shut as she gasped and clutched at his back. The clean perfume of soap mingled with the bare essence of male and old sweat. It wasn't entirely unpleasant, and the longer she breathed it in, the better it became. She felt her hair tie being tugged loose. Strands of hair cascaded over her shoulders only to be taken up again, this time by John's hand threading through it, holding her head while he pressed her back against the wall and moved to devour her lips.

"You sure you want to go to this thing tonight?" John said when he was forced to come up for air. His hands, however, were under no such obligation. Slick fingers slipped beneath her sodden skirt and ran up her leg, grazing her inner thigh.

He had her panting. "I have only just been released from bed rest, John. Are you so eager to have me back in your bed?"

"Who said anything about a bed?" Raspy and thick, his voice communicated his desires. "If I remember right, we've done some pretty spectacular things in the shower."

Teyla smiled as his other hand nudged aside her top to span her stomach. Indeed, a quick comparison of dates had all but confirmed they had conceived their baby in a shower. "I was much smaller then."

"I think the principle is the same," he said. "Unless it's been so long they've changed the rules on us."

Teyla's smile grew, an erotic passage of heat signaling to her how right he was. It had been several weeks since they had last made love. They had been getting along on touches and kisses that were, by and large, kept reasonably chaste in order to avoid temptation.

But, oh, how she craved him.

"We cannot spend all night here, John." Teyla's breath hitched as he shoved aside the second shoulder strap, causing her blouse to drop heavily as it was pelted with water and leaving her breasts
open to his gaze. "We have to go. It is …" her chest heaved as she was swallowed up in the darkness his eyes had adopted, "… David's official welcome to the city."

"We've met." He began to kiss the bow of her collarbone, his thumb brushing and teasing her nipples. She swallowed a gasp and his hand, taking that as an invitation for more, cupped her fully. Teyla tried desperately to hang on to her senses. It was quite difficult with John determined to shed her of them along her clothing and his obvious need hard and straining against her thigh. "There are also many more who will wish to meet the expedition leader and the military commander in whom they will be entrusting their lives and their safety for the foreseeable future."

"I've already met most of them."

"Military perhaps. But what of the scientists?"

"Who cares …" John murmured low in her ear. The whisper of his breath tickled her in a way that caused a moan to break free. It echoed inside the enclosed space, a passionate refrain she longed to continue. She wanted so badly to give in to these powerful and base urges, open herself to him, and experience what it meant to filled wholly and completely by the man she loved.

"I cannot, John," she whispered back, replete with regret. "I am sorry. You cannot know how much I want you, but I …"

He stilled, staring down at her while remaining so close they almost breathed as one. "You talked to Keller about it?" he asked quietly. There was tightness in his voice that was so strong she feared it would snap.

She nodded. "I am free to resume simple exercises, but nothing strenuous. It should only be for a little while longer, but Jennifer was diligent in spelling out what I am permitted and what I am not. She was … quite specific when it came to my sexual activities."

Amid the continual sound of water slapping against skin, John made a sound like he was clearing his throat. "What did she say?"

Teyla felt silly for being embarrassed about discussing this with him, but though they had shared in each other's bodies on more occasions than she could count, they had rarely had to speak so explicitly about it. "There can be no … penetration."

He groaned. Obviously, like her, his fantasy of this encounter had included quite a lot of penetration.

"I am able to do other things. Things I know you enjoy," she added with a seductive smile. John, she knew, would abide by whatever was safest for their baby. Still, she did not wish to disappoint him, so she would have to make certain he was well satisfied.

Teyla's hand traveled the hardened plane of his abdomen. John's eyes slammed down on her, his breath rapidly building as he realized what she intended to do, and for the first time since he had dragged her in here, he was under her influence and at her mercy. He appeared as though he was about to speak, but Teyla did not give him the opportunity. Her hand reached his hot, swollen member.

He inhaled dramatically, a startle of exquisite pleasure as she drew light, imaginary circles around the tip and over his shaft, over and over again and gradually increasing the pressure. "Teyla, what … about you?" he nearly growled.

Her deep and abiding feelings of love for him blossomed anew at his consideration, though it was
quite apparent he was wrapped up in an ever-intensifying torrent of sensation. "Perhaps later, after the reception. We will have all the time we may desire to see to each other's needs."

He let loose a hoarse chuckle as she worked her fingers, massaging him in just the right manner to curl his toes. "Great. Now that's all I'm gonna be thinking about all night."

Teyla smiled, cunningly sensual. "I am sure you'll be able to think of something else."

He was easy to guide and soon their positions were reversed with John against the wall and Teyla's back inside the shower's waterfall. She slipped her thumbs inside the waistband of her skirt and pulled it over her hips. It landed noiselessly in the water puddled at her feet. It took even less effort to rid herself of her top, all the while he looked at her adoringly through heavily lidded eyes.

She went to her knees.

As her lips touched him, John spiraled into a euphoric delirium. "Oh … God …"
"Ronon Dex?"

At the sound of his name, Ronon halted mid-stride. Until that moment, his sole focus had been to get to the reception, find Sheppard, and get a drink. He discharged an impatient breath and turned around. He was approached by a woman carrying a military jacket loosely at her side; tall, long brown hair, wearing Air Force blue. As soon as Ronon established he didn't know her, he stopped looking. There were a lot of people running around he didn't know yet. "Yeah?"

She stopped in front of him and exposed a flustered smile, her eyes traveling upward to meet his despite her height. "Wow. Cadman wasn't kidding when she told me you stood out. Laura Cadman. She's an explosives expert. She did a tour here a few—"

"I remember." He quickly peered over his shoulder toward the Tower's main concourse, where the timbre of countless voices drifted into the corridor.

She smiled again, this time less anxious and more centered. "Right. Of course you do. Sorry, I guess I just wasn't quite expecting …"

He turned back around and took in her calculating glance as her eyes ran the length of him. Born from a different mold than the rest, Ronon was used to his appearance taking the new recruits by surprise. If it wasn't his height, it was his build, the tattoos, the hair, or some combination of all three. He grumbled, "What?"

The corner of her mouth very carefully ticked upward. "Honestly … I thought you'd be taller."

Ronon's brow knit dramatically. That was a first.

"I've been told you're the resident defense teacher," the woman said, casually flipping her hair off one of her shoulders as she slipped on her jacket. The hint of skin bared around her shirt was a shock of cream and pale pink before it disappeared beneath the sleeves. "I was just wondering how soon I could get a slot in one of your classes."

"I don't do things like that. You want in, you show up," he said tersely. "There's usually plenty of room."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Oh? And why's that?"

"Most don't last that long," he said, purposefully blunt.

Her only reaction was another lift of her lips, clearly intrigued. Weird.

In an instant, he rectified his earlier disinterest and took in every physical detail his keen eyes could gather. She was tall. He guessed her to be around five foot ten. With her boots on, she was probably
just shy of six foot. She was slender, but like most of the women stationed in Atlantis, she was fit. Her arms were sleek and well-muscled. Legs, from what he could tell, were the same. Good. His gaze moved up. Beneath thick bangs the color of black coffee sweeping effortlessly over her forehead, her brown eyes shrewdly followed as he assessed her. Male or female, military or not, most showed signs of intimidation under his close and unforgiving scrutiny. She held her ground, confident and comfortable with herself.

But as he looked further, he could see little else beyond that face.

She had a defined yet graceful chin. Her nose tapered to a delicate point. Her high cheekbones curved gently along her face, creating two perfect apples with every little demure smile. Sweet. Not features that demanded a man's attention, just subtly asked. The kind of beauty that once might have made him look twice.

No. When he thought of how easily those features could be broken, all he could think was no.

"You might want to try Lt. Blalock," he said gruffly, "or one of the trainers up from the SGC. They're good and they'll keep you sharp."

"What?" Her features wrestled for cohesion as shock took over. "Wait … I don't think you understand. I—"

"My class isn't for you."

Ronon walked away and didn't look back.

It was originally Elizabeth's idea to throw a reception that would give everyone a chance to get to know one another outside of their various jobs. Stronger personal ties would boost morale and help hold them together, she'd said. John had agreed and after their harsh introduction to life in a new galaxy, they took a small portion from the provisions they'd brought from Earth to give the fledgling expedition a proper welcome. Since then, it had become tradition. With every influx of new blood in the city, through all the conflicts and the changing of the guard, they held a party.

As the latest additions milled around, talking, laughing and mingling with one another, John found he still expected Elizabeth to walk up to him with a pair of silver glasses full of champagne. He could almost hear her calm, reasoned voice, reminding him that things were better today than they had been yesterday. And she would have been right. They may not have a bead on Michael yet, but sooner or later they would, and John would make Michael pay. Bellerophon might prove to be that chance.

And he only had that chance because he wasn't busy scratching out a life for Teyla and their baby from the dirt of some alien world.

John couldn't quite shake the feeling that he needed to remain vigilant. Circumstances had a way of biting him in the ass, so he'd learned not to take anything for granted. But talking with Dave had managed to allay some of his most immediate concerns. His brother's priority seemed to be the President, which was a hundred times better than the IOA, and while Dave may not be entirely in his corner, he wasn't working against him either. John could live with that.

And, of course, there was Teyla. There was always Teyla.
Across the room, she smiled brightly in the course of a conversation with Dave, Rodney, Mason, and Woolsey. The pull of her full, shapely lips lit her face in a warm, content glow. John was enraptured. It wasn't only the encompassing satisfaction of what those lips had so recently done to him that struck him. A rush of vivid memory stirred more than just pleasant thoughts. Her hand splayed to grip his ass while the other massaged him below, her mouth doing things that nearly caused his knees to buckle. Some might consider what they'd done demeaning to women, that it was some way for men to assert power. He laughed to himself. Not the way Teyla did it.

Feeling it wise to extricate himself from his rapidly—and very publicly—building recollections, John gazed at her again. He only meant to say that she looked happy. Whether it was just because she was happy to be out again or the freedom of knowing they wouldn't be leaving, she was radiant. Her soft, elegant features along with her blossoming belly made her seem the very definition of feminine beauty. After his morning on Bellerophon he had hungered for her, his perfect embodiment of love and life itself. But he would never be complete without her, the woman who knew best how to keep him grounded and exactly how best to drive him insane. Soon, she would be his wife. The idea brought with it a thrill of anticipation. Teyla had been here since the very beginning, and now there was a ring burning a hole in his sock drawer meant just for her.

John carried a pair of champagne glasses himself now, though he couldn't help but wonder if Elizabeth had ever imagined how things would have changed since they started all this. He would never get used to her being gone.

He walked through the crowd to rejoin Teyla and the others. He handed her a glass. "I looked around for some sparkling cider, but all I could find was apple juice."

"That is fine, John," she answered. She took a sip and reentered the conversation. "What about you, Mr. Woolsey? I do not believe you have ever said."

John's eyes skated among the peanut gallery. "What did I miss?"

"David was inquiring about our first experiences of Stargate travel," Teyla said.

"Offworld, huh?" John took a taste of the champagne and regarded his brother. Like Woolsey, Dave was most at home in a three-piece suit. BDUs and alien surprise packages weren't really in his wheelhouse. "Anything interesting?"

"Lots," Dave said. "Mason's first assignment away from Earth was hunting down Goa'ulds."

"Ba'al clones, sir," Mason said. "Compared to four tours in the desert, it was a cakewalk." Mason, like the rest of the military personnel attending, was more casually dressed; standard uniform with the jacket.

Too bad his story didn't have a little more edge. Something that would nip Dave's apparent interest in Gate travel in the bud.

"I told them of my visit to the marketplace on Garavan when I reached five years. To see the Great Columns of Jirrus and the fire-eaters in the plaza square was quite an experience for one of my age," Teyla said. "And Mr. Woolsey was just starting to tell us about his."

More for Dave's benefit than John's, Woolsey said. "It's … not a story I'm in the habit of trotting out at parties, I assure you. A party of IOA dignitaries and I were touring a new Gamma base with SG-1 and …" He trailed off. "Let's just say there was … a rather bad infestation of insects. Carnivorous … as it turned out."
Now that's more like it, John thought.

"Well, you never can tell what you're going to find out there," he said.

Gesturing vaguely with his glass, Rodney muttered, "Why does it always have to be bugs, though? My first mission—besides discovering Atlantis, of course—we ran into that creepy Iratus bug thing."

"There was no we, Rodney. If I remember right, that thing was hanging off my neck," John said.

"Well, I was there. I saw it. I'm sorry if I had my hands full with that other minor glitch to properly lend you moral support."

John bestowed on him a caustic smirk.

"What about you, John?" Dave asked.

"Atlantis," he said with perfunctory disinterest. Then he added, "Wraith. Lots of Wraith," for dramatic flair.

Teyla pursed her lips in disapproval. Okay, there was that part in the middle where he met the love of his life. But when he thought of Dave traveling offworld, his stomach churned with all the malevolence of a rattlesnake. If he could discourage that idea with a few scary stories, then all the better.

"While it is true there is a certain gamble to be made when exploring other worlds, we must not forget that there are risks in all aspects of life, no matter where you are," Teyla said, scolding him in an indirect way. However, her high-minded reasoning combined with the satin texture of her voice almost had him panting for more. "The wonders to be seen are oftentimes worth taking the chance. The waterfalls of Kallis, for example, and the Pylorian mountains. And there are peoples of this galaxy the caliber of which I would stake against any other."

Quickly swallowing his drink, Rodney made a small noise of agreement. "You wouldn't believe the roast pork on M77-459. And the Athosians have this stuff called Ruus wine. Very tasty." That elicited a few scattered laughs. Leave it to McKay to boil down the merits of a civilization by the quality of the food.

For a few minutes the conversation continued without John. He listened to their points and watched his brother closely, his heart sinking a little more as the seconds ticked along, observing the seeds of curiosity budding into a pull to see all that was out there. Having Dave in Atlantis was concession enough, he couldn't have him going offworld. What would a boardroom kingpin know about staying alive when the deck was stacked against him? It was too much of a risk.

But John had to concede that sooner or later he might not have a choice. Dave—and by extension the President—needed to get a full picture of what it was they did, the value the expedition brought to the table. In order to protect Atlantis, a field trip for Dave might be necessary.

He would just have to find ways to minimize the danger.

"You know, Woolsey's been invited to this, uh … Festival of Flowers on Kyson. What with celebrating the spring and all, it's bound to be an interesting time and he could probably use a chaperone," John said, only partially in jest. Woolsey still hoped to bow out of the invitation gracefully, but even if they wound up attending, the image of Dave's face when he realized what sort of occasion he'd gotten himself into was too priceless to pass up.

At his side, Teyla rolled her eyes.
"As always, your concern is appreciated, Colonel." The cadence in Woolsey's tone grew more clipped. "But I think I'm capable of handling the Kysonian situation on my own." He winced at his own choice of words, and John almost chuckled aloud.

Dave sensed the unspoken joke in the air and sent a questioning glance toward Mason on his right. His only reply was to tilt his head and purl his eyebrows suggestively.

"Springtime in Pegasus can be … interesting." Rodney, who had been enjoying the buffet all night, munched on the remains of a cracker before continuing. "You could try and engage the locals in a conversation about household fungi and somehow it all comes back around to how bounteous the harvest will be and how fertile everything looks."

Dave lifted his chin. "Ah, I see."

"Until you have a peasant girl straddling your lap, anyway. Then the view tends to get a little … muddled," Rodney said.

While everyone else laughed, Teyla said, "The Festival of Flowers isn't quite the confluence of pleasure seekers Rodney describes, David. I have attended it myself on several occasions. The Kysonians are generally a reserved people. There is food, song, and dancing like many other festivities of its kind. It is only those who are willing and actively pursuing a new companionship that are so occupied."

"Population levels are always a concern around here," Woolsey said. "With the constant threat of the Wraith, there is a continual pressure to preserve society. As a result, you don't find a lot of the same conservatism you get on Earth. Different cultures have their own ways of going about it …"

John decided to skip the anthropology lesson and quickly scanned the room. It looked like Ronon had finally decided to make his appearance. The big warrior cut a wide path through the intermixing crowd, a rough frown clouding his expression. He passed on the champagne, opting for a beer instead, before he made his way toward the rest of them.

"Unless you wear the appropriate marker, you will not be propositioned in any way," John tuned back in to hear Teyla say, "In any event, the Kysonians are known to be discreet about such matters."

John grimaced, abruptly torn between Dave's far too amused expression, Ronon's fast-approaching and apparently grumpy mood, and the sudden pressing need to know how much of Teyla's knowledge about this particular Kysonian custom was firsthand.

He hated these parties.

Growing sullen, John dipped into his drink again. "What do you think, Chewie? Festival of Flowers, yea or nay?"

"No, thanks." Ronon practically dove into his tall clear glass, white froth effervescing within the dark brew. It looked like Ronon's first beer of the night wasn't going to be the last.

"I thought you and Keller were coming together."

"Things change. Where's this person I'm supposed to meet?"

John estimated that he had about ten seconds before Ronon took off and searched the room again. Teyla, almost as familiar with her file as John was by now, spotted her before he did and pointed her out. The tall, visibly annoyed woman headed straight for them.
He really hated these parties.

He smiled anyway. "Major. Nice to see you could make it."

She and Ronon shared a fleeting look, after which Ronon's scowl deepened and she merely put on a thin smile. "Sir, I apologize for being late."

"It's not a problem," John said. The undercurrent of tension pierced the group. "I'm … guessing you two have met?"

Ronon glared at him.

"Sir," the Major said, "It's my fault. I didn't get the chance to introduce myself."

John nodded. This was going just about as well as he could have hoped. "Well, allow me the honors, Major. Ronon, this is Major Caitlyn Everett. Major, Ronon Dex."

In a moderately helpful gesture of respect, the Major held out her hand. "Most people call me CJ. I've heard a lot about you."

Sporting a distrustful stare that never wavered, Ronon didn't move. Maj. Everett finally let her hand drop.

Teyla stepped in, thank God. "It is very nice to finally meet you, Major. I am Teyla Emmagen."

"Of course." Maj. Everett's smile lightened. "I've heard a lot about you as well, Ms. Emmagen. There are a lot of people at HQ who are very impressed with you."

"Please, call me Teyla."

The Major nodded. "I was hoping we'd get the chance to work together."

"Yeah, well, Teyla's classes have been put on hold for the time being. For … obvious reasons," John said with a tactful glance toward Teyla's belly.

Finally, a genuine smile graced the Major's features. "I'd heard you were expecting a baby, sir. Congratulations. To both of you."

"Thank you, Major," Teyla said. "Perhaps we may have another opportunity in the future."

"I'd like that."

As Major Teldy's replacement and the newest part of John's command staff, Mr. Woolsey had already made her acquaintance, but Dave, Mason, and Rodney all took their turn in the round of introductions. Maj. Everett had not been at all what John had expected upon meeting her for the first time. He'd anticipated someone brash and arrogant. Instead, she was polite and poised. He still wasn't sure how he felt about her being assigned to this mission, but so far she had made it easy on him. He didn't want to talk about it and neither did she.

"Major, I have a team in need of a leader and, from your file, I'd say it has your name all over it," John said once all the pleasantries had been exchanged.

She tipped her head. "Wherever you need me, sir. I'm at your disposal."

"Glad to hear it. It also needs a fourth. I'll have the files for all qualified personnel sent to you in the morning for you to look through."
"Yes, sir."

"Ronon …" John braced himself for anything. "Part of Maj. Everett's assignment here involves you."

His laconic friend's jaw was like caged steel.

Speaking plainly and openly, Maj. Everett took it upon herself to deliver the news. "I'm here on a joint assignment from the Air Force and Homeworld Security. I'm part of a foundation team for a new program designed to integrate offworld fighting techniques into the U. S. Military's standard program for defense."

"They already have people working with the Jaffa and the Caelish. Maj. Everett is here to add what you've got to the mix," John said.

With sharp eyes laid solely on her, Ronon was quiet. "So you're here to …"

"Learn," she said flatly. "There are thousands upon thousands of military combatants that you and Teyla will never get the chance to meet, and it's irresponsible to have our people walking into combat situations with unknown adversaries without every tool possible at their disposal to help them get home. I have four months to learn everything I can from you, so I can take it back to Earth and do exactly what you do here, only on a far larger scale."

"What if I say no?"

"Then say no."

For several extended moments, John got the distinct impression that he and the others didn't exist. There was silence as they waited for the proverbial scales to tip.

"Fine," Ronon eventually growled. "Tomorrow. 0700. I'm not waiting on you."

John was shocked to see Everett actually lean in. "I'll do my best to keep up."

John released a strained breath after she walked away. He peered at Ronon, a grimace etched deep. "If I were you, Chewie, I wouldn't stay up too late tonight. You're gonna want to be on your toes in the morning."

"Why?" Ronon said, although he was barely paying attention. He kept looking back to where Everett had disappeared, a portrait of the indescribable.

"Everett isn't just another pilot. She's been rated Expert in six different forms of martial arts. She was on tap to be an instructor at the Air Force Academy before she transferred to the SGC, and this integration initiative is right up her alley. She's armed, she's dangerous, and she's gonna be watching you like a hawk." Ronon's gaze finally wandered back, what he said had sunk in. John gave him a sympathetic smack on the elbow. "Keep those arms up, pal."

Almost forgotten, McKay suddenly spoke up. "Wait. Everett? As in … Colonel Everett?"

"She's his daughter," John quietly confirmed. He looked down to where Teyla's fingers had crept into his and squeezed.

Rodney, as the only other person in the group who remembered Dillon Everett, was dumbfounded. "Wow. Wonder how he took the news she was being assigned to Pegasus after … well, you know."

"I doubt he had much to say about it, Rodney," John said. "Colonel Everett died three years ago."
Ronon knew that Caitlyn, CJ, Maj. Everett—whoever she was—had noticed his approach. Yet she went on talking with a scientist, a portly guy in his forties with round-rimmed glasses. No worries about him being some secret weapon.

"Hey," he said, short, his voice as refined as sandpaper. He didn't take kindly to being ignored.

It was only then she glanced in his direction, her demeanor friendly and aloof, as smooth as a well-honed blade. "Changed your mind already? What's the problem? Threatened?"

She might have asked how he was enjoying the weather for all the weight she gave it. Ronon couldn't be sure whether he was more irritated at her or at himself for having underestimated her. "Not even close."

"So you're just naturally rude and dismissive." Nameless Scientist Guy seemed startled by the tone of the conversation, chirped something and left. Good riddance. She didn't seem to miss him either. "That's fine, you know," she continued, her cordial attitude impenetrable. "You wouldn't exactly be the first. Should I apologize now or should I wait a few days? Let you slam my ass into the mats a few times so you can … I don't know, feel like you've put me in my place or something."

Ronon didn't take his eyes off her. Her ass, wherever it wound up, didn't concern him. "I don't like surprises."

"Funny, because I've known you …" she checked her watch, "… almost an hour and you've done nothing but surprise me." The polite veneer lifted for an instant, and her gaze lowered to the ground as she exhaled. Her expression read disappointment, and to his added annoyance, it bothered him. "What do you want?"

She lifted her head and pushed her hair behind her ear. "Look, I get that for whatever reason you don't want anything to do with me, but I requested the appointment to Atlantis because there is something really special going on here. Soldiers back from their tours of duty in Atlantis have gone on to distinguish themselves in their new assignments, and there are a lot of them who say it's because of you and Teyla. What both of you have done here has saved lives. That's what I want. That's all I want. For now, big guy, that means you're stuck with me."

He stayed silent as he saw something so familiar alive in her eyes, something she in no way wanted him to see because her features were impassive, as barren as the desert. It didn't need a name; it was his old friend.

"What are you doing here?" he asked harshly.

Again, she refused to yield. "I just told you why I'm here."

"No. What are you really doing here?" Sanctioned by Sheppard's people or not, he wasn't going to be used as a means for revenge.

She laughed unexpectedly, the sound grim and mirthless. When it lost its polluted luster, she shook her head. "Col. Sheppard told you, didn't he?"

Ronon didn't answer.
Her eyes flashed, swift and cold, her quiet, rather finely made features turning on a knife. She left him with a hard and undeniable dismissal of her own. "I'll see you in the morning."

With anger thundering in his ears, Ronon watched her slip through a seam in the crowd. A roar clawed its way up his throat as he was engulfed by a consuming urge to hit something. Everett's gentle face hid a fighter, but stewing in frustration, he was blinded. All he could see was another Jennifer, another Melena, this time not fearing the Wraith but running headlong toward them. Well, Melena was dead and Jennifer was still trying to pick up the pieces. He couldn't do it again.

Time was he could've dealt with his temper by hurling a man over a table. Witting or not, a true Satedan embraced any challenge. He and that same man would have ended the night by sharing a drink. But that wasn't the way things were done here. At least, thanks to the load of fresh supplies, there was plenty to drink.

The beer from Earth lacked the bite he wanted, but the champagne was too sweet. He wanted something bitter and, for that, beer served well enough. He laid claim to a quiet corner and was well into his third when Jennifer showed up.

Her arm was looped through Beckett's as he led her into the hall. Dragged is more like it, he thought, his hunters' sight still too keen for his liking. It hadn't been her idea to come, that much was written all over her face. Jennifer was a puzzle that confounded him every day, but she had never been difficult to read. Her earlier excuses about having to run tests had been just that, it had been obvious from the first syllable. She hadn't wanted to come with Beckett any more than she'd wanted to come with him.

And what was worse, he had been relieved.

He downed his beer in a turgid wash.

She spent long minutes talking with the doc and a few of her other friends from the infirmary. All smiles and friendliness, her body was continuously angled toward the doors, a universal indicator for prey and human alike of someone desiring an escape. Only Jennifer was too polite to tell her friends as much and too self-conscious to just do what she really wanted. If she knew what she wanted. Ronon had his doubts. He was beginning to doubt he knew what he wanted.

But the one thing they seemed to agree on was that they both wanted space.

As Ronon watched on, Jennifer's gaze brushed his several times, but her awareness of his presence did nothing to break their unspoken impasse. Neither made a move toward the other. Jennifer continued with her friends. At one point she and Teyla waved at each other, an implied agreement passing between the two of them to meet up when time permitted. Ronon had another drink, mindful that the distance between Jennifer and him hadn't changed a thing; the breadth of the room was no wider than the gulf that had already grown. For now, at least, they respected it. Pretending it wasn't there didn't seem to be working, and Ronon had never been very good at pretending anyway.

Slowly, a pleasant buzz reached the tips of his fingers and began to chip away at the resentment seeping through him, although hostility still bred in his thoughts. What was Sheppard thinking, letting that woman on the base? She never should have set foot in this galaxy. Internally, he debated what to do about Maj. Everett and a dark sense of glee overtook him. She wanted to learn so bad? Fine. He'd take her to the Gateroom and shove her through the first wormhole home. That would be the best, most important lesson he could teach her. She would hate him for it, but Ronon was willing to live with it.

Not even the alcohol could stifle his blood from stirring for long, and it was in the midst of this that
he saw Jennifer being approached by that gnat who had bothered her earlier in the infirmary. He surveyed Sergeant Something-or-Other with a wicked stare. Finally, an excuse …

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Out of nowhere, Capshaw's thick paw snatched his forearm. Ronon spun on him, for an instant his aggression having found a new target. His face firm, Capshaw's posture shifted as if to warn him off. "Unless you want to spend the night in a cage, you don't want to start something in here."

Ronon glared, frustrated again. But after a tense moment, he relented and Capshaw released him. His attention immediately went back to Jennifer. She and the sergeant were talking, her voice lost in the hum of many others. It was apparent she didn't want his attention; her arms were folded tightly across her chest, her features immovable, but she spoke with him regardless.

"Voss is harmless." Ronon's gaze remained dead set as Capshaw eased up to him. "Jennifer can handle him."

Given how scattered and vulnerable she had been lately, Ronon was reluctant to believe it, and why should she have to bother when he was willing to protect her? But in front of him, she exchanged words with Sgt. Voss and he left minutes later without incident. Jennifer and Carson whispered to each other, Jennifer adopted a tired smile, and then they walked together to the buffet table.

"There. If you really feel like it, you can go kick his ass now," Mason said in a wry tone.

Ronon shot him a withering look before his eyes traveled back to Jennifer. "How did you know?"

"You don't crack jokes about a man's tool box if you're threatened by him." Ronon didn't get it, and Capshaw didn't elaborate. He just went on to say, "She's a lot tougher than you think. She's a lot tougher than she thinks."

With Capshaw's words hanging in the air, Ronon glanced back to see him silently taking her in too. Suddenly, he was reminded of them standing together a lot like this a week ago. When everything had changed. Kiryk had been rushed into surgery with Beckett barking out orders to his scrambling team, and Jennifer had been led away by Marie to take care of her wounds. Most of the ground team had been dismissed, but not entirely sure of Jennifer's condition, neither of them had left the infirmary. Both of them waited for news. It was only later, after Capshaw heard Jennifer's voice through the curtain as she talked with Beckett, that he finally slunk away.

Jennifer never knew he'd been there. And there had been several times in the days since when Ronon had wondered if her knowing would have made a difference for her.

Soon Capshaw exhaled and, without a sound, made to leave. A twinge of guilt and maybe a hint of sadness prodded Ronon in the gut. Though the two teammates had long moved past the days of avoidance and outright belligerence, their friendship had never quite gotten back to normal.

"Hey," he called out. Mason turned. "Want a drink?"

His teammate smirked. "You might want to take it easy, man. McKay gets a little tipsy, that's one thing. But if you go down, it'll be me on your legs, Sheppard taking the middle, and McKay holding up the hair."

Ronon chuckled, low and deep. "Not tonight. What do you say?"

"I would. I really would," he said. "But … I kind of have plans."

Ronon nodded.
"Maybe …" Mason said. "Maybe we could start sparring together again? I could use the tune-up. Assuming, of course, you have time after you're done with your new playmate."

Ronon and he met eyes, anger welling up again as his thoughts turned back to Maj. Everett. "She's going to get herself killed."

"Not if you have anything to say about it."

Mason nudged him in an offhand manner and made to leave again, and again Ronon couldn't resist calling him back. Jennifer's face haunted him and the way her voice cracked just speaking his friend's name. He couldn't shake it.

"Why'd you let her go, anyway?" Ronon asked. It had never sat well with him, Capshaw just stepping aside like that. He'd always been taught to fight for those you love and Ronon knew Capshaw was in love with her. He had never said it aloud, but it was there every minute of every day. And yet he had simply walked away.

Moments dragged on, then finally, with his hands in his pockets and eyes as clear as glass, Capshaw said, "I had to. If the woman you loved had the chance to be happy with someone better, wouldn't you?"

When he left this time, Ronon stayed still. Which was better: to be one of the walking wounded or to be a savage? The new and unwelcome thought pervaded the old and he scoffed at himself. How were you supposed to know which was which?

As a renewed thirst wound down his throat, Ronon soon began to wonder if Jennifer had indeed gotten the better of the two.

"If that lad's a day over twelve, then I'm the next James Bond," Carson mused as Sgt. Voss rejoined the pack, leaving Jennifer alone with her companion.

"He's not that young," she said in a hushed undertone.

"Jennifer, I don't even think he's reached puberty yet."

In spite of the tendrils of suppressed emotions worming around in her stomach, Jennifer couldn't stop a smile from forming. There wasn't another soul on the base that could've talked her into coming tonight, and that was mostly due to his unwillingness to take no for an answer. Though, there had also been a certain amount of charm involved.

After spending most of the day bent over lab equipment, Carson had finally had enough. "What do ya say we call it a night?" he'd said. "The welcome soiree has only been going for an hour or so. I'm willing to chance that there's a few drinks yet for a couple of overworked flunkies."

A cramp spanning her neck and rippling down the length of her back, Jennifer had been tired too. Nevertheless, she had said, "I'm gonna stay here and finish a few things."

"Jennifer, the database is already cycling through planets looking for protein matches. There's nothing more ya can do tonight."
She had argued further, but it turned out to be fruitless. He extinguished her protests by waggling a finger. "Jennifer, as your friend, colleague, and personal physician, I'm telling ya that it's in your best interest to come out of the dungeon and have a wee drink."

"You do realize that I could say the same thing to you any given day of the week?" she had said, bucking at his mildly authoritarian approach.

"Well, today it's my turn."

She had been at a loss to think of any excuse he would accept. How did she explain that the idea of a room full of people scared her? That she had finally reached some kind of … of emotional homeostasis, with everything balanced just right to get her through the day, and she was convinced the slightest tilt would send her toppling over a cliff. How did she tell him she would rather hide out among the microbes?

Carson had held out his hand, all cheek, adorable in his stubbornness. "Come on, luv. Drinks await."

Leery but knowing she had lost, Jennifer took it and he had led her here with a self-satisfied grin.

"Not that I'm disparaging your young admirer, mind you," Carson continued as they gradually moved toward the buffet table, following the natural flow of the room. "It just seems like they're getting younger all the time. Next thing ya know, they'll be sending them to us in their cradles. He seemed rather nice, though. What did he do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Being a man of some experience myself, I happen to recall what an apology looks like. What did he do?"

Without answering immediately, Jennifer chewed her lower lip. She had made such a mess of things. She'd handled Sgt. Voss' invitation so badly, he'd felt guilty enough to apologize again for bothering her. It was really sweet of him and it only served to make Jennifer feel worse.

An ever present feeling of being watched plucked at the hairs at the back of her neck, reminding her that Ronon stood across the venue not more than ten yards from her. Alone, when she should have been there with him. Her conscience overflowed with guilt, but the pristine floor might as well have been sprayed with splintered fragments of shrapnel and glass for all the effort she made to cross the paltry divide. She didn't know what was wrong with her. Ever since she and Ronon had come back, she felt like she'd had her legs torn out from underneath her and was struggling just to find vertical.

Or maybe it had started even before that …

Jennifer didn't know. All she knew was that she couldn't take that initial step toward him. Ronon was a force she simply couldn't handle right now.

"It was just a … misunderstanding," she finally said. "It was nothing really. And he's not my admirer."

Fifteen minutes, a completely arbitrary number, but Jennifer quickly convinced herself she could give it fifteen more minutes, and then she could excuse herself.

Once at the buffet table, Carson helped himself to the spread with enthusiasm—research and analysis left little time for pettier concerns like lunch—and was soon being chatted up by one of the new nurses, a spritely blonde whose fingernails were painted neon pink.
Jennifer wasn't hungry, but she ate anyway, picking at a bunch of luscious purple grapes as if it was an obligation and flicking her wrist every few minutes to check the time. Whenever she scanned the room, she was careful to skip over Ronon; his intense gaze gave off too much heat for the tattered vessel her heart had become. Teyla and Sheppard were busy making the rounds with Mr. Woolsey, introducing David Sheppard to many of the people he was going to be observing. Rodney and Zelenka were bickering. And Mason, she had only seen once. That had been enough.

As the clock neared her imaginary deadline to freedom, Jennifer was bumped from behind by someone in a rush. It was a slight knock, barely enough to check her.

"Oh God, Jennifer, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Suddenly face to face with Amelia Banks, her friend and poker night buddy, a shred of the tension in her body started to ease. "I'm fine. It's no big deal."

"There aren't any dents? I didn't spill anything?" Amelia checked her over and straightened Jennifer's uniform where she could.

Jennifer giggled at her atypically nervous manner. If someone were to compare the two of them, Jennifer would have been classified as the nervous one. Amelia was fun-loving, but reliably low-key. "I'm fine. Really. What's up?"

Amelia lips formed an exaggerated wince. "Oh, Chuck was late relieving me and I have a date." She reached across the buffet to capture a lonely champagne glass and immediately started in. "Liquid courage," she said between hurried sips.

"Wow. He must be something."

Amelia nodded. "I didn't think he'd even go out with me."

"What?" The idea of anyone turning Amelia down was ludicrous. She was beautiful. "Who wouldn't want to go out with you?"

"Well, he's turned down everybody else. I just naturally assumed I would be next on the list."

Jennifer blinked, an abrupt queasiness slithering in her stomach. Memories of the last poker game had seemed trivial until Ann and Alicia had died, practically forgotten. But after the funeral, she had replayed that night over and over in her head. Recalled conversations from that night suddenly returned. "Who … who is he?"

Amelia polished off the remaining champagne and made a small noise. "Jennifer, I really wish I could talk, but I am really late. Maybe later?"

Seemingly struck dumb, Jennifer only nodded and Amelia skittered through the crowd.

Some instinct warned her not to look. Surely her fifteen minutes were over. She should just thank Carson for bringing her, go home, and not give it a second thought. It couldn't be him. It couldn't be him. He …

It couldn't be him.

Jennifer looked.

Her long tresses brushed her shoulder as she rotated around. Ronon's dark eyes caught hers as they went by, but Jennifer didn't dwell on them. Her own eyes had already moved on, desperately seeking
someone else. There he was, so handsome in his casual clothes, with Amelia and her nervous smile. The two of them talked for a moment, playing out the awkward first moments of a date, and then Amelia pointed toward the balcony, probably suggesting that they go someplace a little quieter.


With it, something intangible inside Jennifer clicked into place.

She found Carson. Her stomach churning, she made her excuses and left.

Senseless, she passed through corridor after corridor, her feet heavy and indiscriminate in their direction. One place was just as good as another. Faces passed her by, but she ignored them all. Up and down different flights of stairs, all of them were lined with that same aged and carved rectangular paneling. They seemed to form into a singular path with no end.

And then, for no good reason, she just stopped.

The junction wasn't familiar at first, she was that numb, but recognition soon took root and Jennifer slid down the wall, curling around her knees. She wasn't far from the gym. Access to the footpath was just beyond that. It was popular with both the joggers and people who simply wanted to go out for a stroll. Full of unique sights and amazing vistas, the winding path took its followers in and out of the city's framework, up and around the city itself. Normally, the two combined made this a fairly high traffic area. But due to the hour and the gathering going on in the Tower, it was deserted.

"Sgt. Capshaw! Wait up!" Apparitions of a day long past gave her a clue as to why she'd chosen this place out of all the others she could have gone, when she would have certainly felt safer, more secure somewhere else. This was where she and Mason had first met over eighteen months ago. An anguished smile passed her lips as she remembered chasing after him, at that time a total stranger. "You and I were supposed to meet before you left the infirmary, Sergeant. You weren't supposed to just take off."

"You were busy, I was busy … I figured I'd save us both some time." Mason had been new to the city, but he was already a veteran when it came to doctors. He came to Atlantis with the cracks in his armor already formed, but Jennifer hadn't known him well enough then to recognize them for what they were. At that point, he was a name on a file, a chronic case that needed continual monitoring and upkeep.

"What is this?" she asked, holding up his chart, the standard one they used for all incoming personnel. Continuing to match his brisk pace, she read the words that had been carelessly jotted down at the bottom, so obviously in his handwriting. Marie's was much neater. "No. Yes. No. No … ."

"No, I never had any pain issues before and no family history of it either. Yes, I've had surgery; five times to be exact. No, I am not allergic to any medications. And no, I don't need my head examined, so the resident shrink can keep his relaxation exercises and his So You've Been Shot. Gee, That Sucks motivational pamphlets."

"Call me crazy, but that doesn't sound very motivational."

It was then he had looked at her fully and she had gotten her initial glimpse at the depths hidden in his blue eyes. "Not as pandering as the whole lemons into lemonade hook, though."

Already intrigued, she had said, "Sergeant, I just wanted to formally introduce myself since you and I will probably be seeing a lot of each other."
There was an empty beat and then a soft, "Oh. Sorry."

They shook hands. His had seemed so big around hers. "Jennifer Keller."

"Mason. Mason Capshaw."

"Nice to meet you, Mason."

Now, a tear built in Jennifer's eye and brimmed over to streak down her cheek, unheralded by either a whimper or a pained expression even though clarity continued to twist inside her like an assassin's knife. The ache of realization left her shattered, but strangely, she also felt whole again, a kind of oneness that could only be brought with understanding. It was as though her head was only just now catching up to what her heart, body, and soul had already known. Only now accepting what it, out of fear, had refused to entertain.

As a young prodigy, she would never have be taken seriously in her profession if she gave herself over to a relationship. She couldn't afford the distraction. And what would happen when it ended? Jennifer's nature guaranteed heartache and bruised emotions. Why put herself through that? Why would she want to open herself up to getting hurt? These thoughts had been her guide for years, setting her up for the fast track to medical greatness, yes, but hobbling her in the other facets of her life. However, eventually and perhaps inevitably, she had realized she was missing something. Her life, as it was, was a good one, but it was incomplete. Seeing Teyla and John find true happiness with each other had affected her. No matter what hardships they faced, even through near death and a separation, they still loved each other, had found their way back to each other and held on. Even for someone who had lived such a small, narrow life, Jennifer had come to know she wanted that, a love that would last forever.

Opening herself up to Ronon was supposed to have been a step in the right direction. But she was now confronted with the stark knowledge that she was too late. Her heart was already gone, given to Mason a long time ago, her feelings for him growing quietly and steadily from that first meeting in spite of her inability to acknowledge them. Her scattered feelings of late were a mixture of wanting—needing—his comfort, his presence, and mourning the fact that she would never have it, her heart already broken on the night they said goodbye.

On the floor Jennifer silently wept, occasionally wiping away her tears but mostly letting them fall. They would never leave her alone otherwise. He was moving on.

She couldn't have said how long she was there when he came and crouched down in front of her. Ronon's presence loomed over her, smelling of his natural woody scent combined with alcohol. His face was dark with concern, but filled with understanding. His hand reached out, unmindful of the damp streaks, and cupped her cheek.

"This … isn't going to work. Is it?" she asked, sniffing. Ronon had seen exactly what she had, and after the way she left the party and seeing her now, he could have no doubt why she was crying. The writing had been on the wall anyway. It was past time one of them said it.

"You're in love with someone else."

As she nodded, Jennifer's fingers took another pass to clear away the tears.

Ronon said nothing. He just looked at her, without the anger she'd been expecting, that she had more than earned. He gazed at her with eyes as one friend to another.

"I'm so sorry, Ronon."
In his way, his thoughtful silences made time seem insignificant. With a breath and a moment, Ronon could make a world of his own and Jennifer could only be caught up in his wake. He abandoned his crouch and got down next to her. His arm enveloped her shoulders and pulled her in close. She didn't expect forgiveness, but he was offering it regardless.

"A good man ought to know when it's time to step aside. I missed mine."

"You are a good man, Ronon. You're one of the best men I've ever known. If it wasn't for you …" There was no need to mention what they'd gone through together. It had been ever present thing between them with a life of its own. There was a fading scratch on Jennifer's stomach where a sword at his hands had come too close to tearing her apart. She hadn't told him how close he'd come. She never would. It didn't hurt anymore and the reality was that without Ronon's intervention she would be dead now. "I'm grateful," she said. She would forever be more conscious of the rage he carried with him, but she was grateful.

Ronon grunted a response, but it passed by, ultimately unimportant. What was important was how he squeezed her shoulders, accepting her gratitude for what it was worth. Jennifer nestled into him and, as they settled in the unusual spot, his head cradled hers. For a while, at least, they found the comfort they needed.

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When Woolsey turned to introduce Dave to yet another scientist, John took advantage of the brief lull in conversation to whisper in Teyla's ear. "Are you ready to go?"

While he certainly didn't mind calling it an early night, he didn't ask without reason. Although it was obvious Teyla had been enjoying herself, as the night had gone on, her enthusiasm had waned, preferring to listen more and leave the talking to Woolsey. More and more he had noticed her rubbing her stomach, and finally she had adopted a slow, relaxed sway. With Keller's instructions for her to continue to take it easy in mind, John thought it was time she put her feet up.

"I believe so," Teyla said, her hand taking another sweeping pass over her middle. Teyla wasn't used to standing for long periods anymore. She had to be getting uncomfortable.

John's arm draped across her back and his hand settled on her shoulder. "Is she behaving herself?"

"She has been very quiet."

"It's no wonder. Her mother's been rocking her to sleep," he said with a teasing lilt. Teyla lifted her gaze toward him and smiled. His fingers flexed around her shoulder in a few encouraging bursts. "C'mon, let's get you home."

"Just give me a few moments to say a proper goodnight."

John walked Teyla home with his arm around her waist, too preoccupied to recognize the open show of affection he normally held in reserve for when they were alone in their quarters.

"May I ask what you are thinking?" Teyla asked. Around them the sounds of the festivities had given way to a peaceful void.

John glanced at her, a smile in his eyes. "I was just wondering how into this Festival of Flowers you've gotten over the years."
Teyla laughed. "Surely, you were not pondering such a thing."

"I was."

"I thought perhaps you were inventing new and more elaborate ways to discourage David from traveling offworld. Arranging a small but highly unsettling Jumper malfunction perhaps?"

"Nah, not subtle enough."

She smiled. "Subtlety has not always been one of your strong suits." Then, Teyla took on an expression of quiet purpose, a look that conveyed an intimate knowledge of his inner workings. "Ronon will be fine, John. He is accustomed to having to adapt to change. The real question is: will you?"

John's face pulled into an indignant grimace. "Hey, I'm Mr. Adaptable. Did you notice how I didn't make Caldwell turn the Daedalus right around and take Dave home?"

"You know that is not what I meant."

John exhaled. She was right about that. After his rather tense introduction to Maj. Everett, Ronon had chosen the best spot in the room. It was mildly lit, ideal for avoiding unwanted attention, and with his back to the wall, Ronon could see nearly every corner of the large concourse. Whether the choice was subconscious or strategic John couldn't have said. Either way, his friend had been settled there for a while, apparently dedicated to getting himself plastered. John had been itching to join him, but he had other responsibilities. Not to mention, past experience told him that if Ronon wanted to drink alone, it was best to let him. At least, until he cooled off. There was generally less bloodshed that way.

He didn't blame Ronon for his reticence to take on Everett. He hadn't been in a great mood to start with, but hearing the details surrounding Col. Everett's death hadn't helped the situation at all.

"Why did you not tell us about Col. Everett, John?" Teyla asked with caring in her voice. When he had learned Maj. Everett was to be a part of his contingent, he had felt obligated to tell Teyla the truth. All of it. Teyla had not questioned him at the time, but he knew she would eventually.

"It was a long time ago, Teyla. Ronon was still new around here and didn't know him. You had just lost Charin. And … after what happened with Ford … it didn't seem like the thing to bring up at dinner."

"You should not have had to bear that alone."

*I'm trying to say ... I wish you had been there for me.* Col. Everett's confession had come back to haunt him the day the news reached John's inbox. "Whatever I went through, it was nothing compared to what it did to his family."

"I am sure that is true," Teyla said. "I cannot imagine such a thing. The Wraith do not leave survivors."

"They still don't."

A few hours later, John crawled into bed with her. Teyla had grown pensive and as he slid under the covers to form his body with hers, she embraced the contact, shifting and burrowing in along his front as close as was possible. John's arm surrounded her belly and a nudge from Teyla's mind imprinted in him a profound yet desperate sense of thankfulness.
She peered back, her hand moving to cover his. "You survived, John."

In an effort to save her from more memories and thoughts of what might have been his fate, he leaned in and kissed her.

John was awoken by the miniscule beep of his headset. Enjoying the warm press of bare skin on bare skin and the dim recollection of her pleasured cries and her fingers fisting his hair, he reluctantly rolled away from Teyla. Suffering from acute cottonmouth, he gave a quick grunt to clear his throat as he slipped on the earpiece. "This is Sheppard."

Chuck greeted him on the other end. Usually his late night wake-up calls were annoyingly chipper, but the gate tech spoke in earnest. "Sorry to wake you, Colonel, but you're needed in the Gateroom."

His dog tags jingling together, John sat up and reached for his underwear. "I'm on my way."

Upon his arrival, the Stargate was active and ablaze.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You ... have a message, sir." Chuck motioned uneasily at his computer console. "Mr. Woolsey is on his way now."

John's brow furrowed as Chuck brought up the video signal.

In a blink of state of the art technology came the familiar sight of gray-green skin, long white hair, and a tattoo like a sunburst over the left eye. "It has been a long time, John Sheppard."

John stared down at the computer screen, his jaw tight. "Todd."

Chapter End Notes

For the record, Ellie Goulding's "I Know You Care" is practically Jennifer's theme song. The moment I heard it, it was her voice and her story coming back at me. So, for any curious about my inspirations, there it is. Give it a listen.
The Return

Chapter Notes

For this installment, a quick reminder - in this AU, the Season Four arc played out somewhat differently than in the canon, starting with the fact that Teyla was not pregnant with Torren at the time (see previous story for details). So when reading this chapter, be aware that John and Todd haven't seen each other since teaming up to defeat the Replicators in Be All My Sins Remember'd. There is some stuff from The Kindred, Part 1 in here to help me account for the changes, but not much.

John led his team into the overgrown ruin with his P-90 at the ready. Broken down stone pillars had long since been swallowed by flora, covered in moss and the shriveled leavings of dead vines that hadn't gotten enough sun through the canopy of trees. Cracked stone formed walls along the moderate slope of the landscape, almost leading them along. The ruins were too sparse for a village. They were more likely the skeletal remains of an outpost or way station of some kind. Or it had been a few centuries ago, anyway. Rubble surrounded the shell of what was once probably a lookout tower. It was oriented in the direction of the Stargate, though John doubted anyone would be able to see it anymore. An entire forest had grown up between the two.

Not far off, a solitary figure with white hair clad in black body armor waited next to a stone monolith.

"Nice place for an ambush," John called out. As they closed the final distance, Ronon pulled ahead and took point, his blaster poised and his tanned leather duster sweeping behind him.

"The thought had not occurred to me," Todd said.

"Sure, it didn't. Ronon."

As Ronon neared, the Wraith lifted his arms and held his hands out to the side, palms open. "I am unarmed."

"Naturally, you won't mind if we check anyway," John said.

Todd regarded Ronon with disdain. "Naturally."

While Ronon searched Todd for weapons, John kept his eyes and ears peeled for signs of trouble, even wary of the slight breeze. Rodney hovered near his elbow with his tablet running a scan and, at John's four o'clock, Mason had already begun to scout the perimeter of the immediate area. "Where are your friends?" John asked.

"I did not think they would be of any great use," Todd said as Ronon patted him down with more force than was strictly necessary. "Each time we meet I seem to wind up a prisoner. I merely thought I might save us all some time." The impact of one of Ronon's hands jounced the Wraith enough to force him to steady himself. Todd's upper lip twitched in response, letting loose a throaty hiss and a hint of bared teeth in Ronon's direction. His pale yellow eyes traveled toward John. "Is this how you treat all who come to you with an offer of information?"
"Nope, it's pretty much just you."

The corner of Todd's mouth ticked upward to form a predatory smile as though he found a queer sort of honor in the distinction.

"He's clean." Ronon's tone was gruff and plainly disappointed. Sporting a staunch black stare, he backed toward John's position.

"McKay, are you reading anything we need to worry about?"

"You mean like a Hive ship floating about a mile over our heads?" Rodney tossed a cagey glance toward the heavens. "Not yet, but there's no telling how long that will last."

"Anything else that'll lead to us getting blown to kingdom come?"

Rodney sounded faintly distrustful of his own assessment. "Not that I can see."

John cast an investigative glance toward Mason, who took one last look around the immediate area and then, frowning, signaled the all clear. This was too easy and they all knew it. "You know, when we got finished with the Replicators and you didn't show up at the rendezvous point, I was kind of hoping you were dead," said John.

The Wraith chuckled, a gnarled rumbling sound. "I'm afraid I had other matters to attend to. But fear not, John Sheppard, there is always next time."

"It's good you keep a positive attitude, but we'll see if you survive this time first." John pulled on the charging handle of his P-90, causing the resonant metallic click of a round being chambered. "So, now that you've got us here, what do you want? And spare me the part where you try to convince me that you've got no bottom line, because I don't have all day and you're not really the type to give away something for free."

"Very well." Todd peered at each of the men in turn, almost catlike in the way he bent and stretched his neck, but with all the warmth of a spider. "Yet again, it seems someone has begun targeting human worlds."

"So, logically, you come running to us," Rodney snapped.

"It is something you have made your problem in the past. What cause would I have to assume this time would be any different? Unless, you had some part to play in it."

John ignored the accusation. Todd was obviously just trying to rile them up. "Let me guess: you ran across a spoiled batch of humans and some of your Wraith pals dropped dead."

Todd's eyes narrowed. "You are aware of this?"

"We've been checking into it," John answered with a sly smirk at having his theory all but confirmed. He'd suspected that Todd's sudden desire to meet might have something to do with Michael. The timing was a little too coincidental to be sheer happenstance. What were the odds Todd would show up around the same time they were investigating a widespread outbreak of a virus derived from the original Hoffan drug and the two had nothing to do with each other? But it was gratifying to find out he'd been on the right track.

The Wraith took another calculating glance at him. "Indeed, many of my fellow Wraith have fallen victim to this attack."
"Shame they didn't get more of you," Ronon said.

Todd's unappealing grin returned, a brief, menacing spark in his expression making it appear as if the imposing Wraith was wondering how Ronon would taste. John bet Ronon looked pretty appetizing to a Wraith, especially one who'd been forced to watch his diet lately. But as Ronon was the only one between them with a weapon in his hand, Todd could daydream all he wanted; one false move and he was dead. The only question was whether Ronon would beat John to it.

"What makes you think we can help?" Rodney asked pugnaciously. "I would think you'd be out looking for the guy responsible."

"If only it were that simple, Dr. McKay." From the irritation in Todd's bearing, John got the impression Todd had been trying to run down Michael and thus far had come up as empty as they had. "I have isolated the viral agent responsible and traced its origins. I am aware you had a hand in helping the Hoffans refine the original form of this virus. I require whatever research you possess in order that I may synthesize a cure."

John stifled the urge to laugh. "I think the better question here is: what makes you think we would want to help you? To be honest, the idea of a bunch of Wraith coming up with a fatal case of indigestion doesn't really bother me."

Todd glared at him. "The Replicators did enough harm to our already dwindling food supply. All of the existing Wraith factions have been adversely affected by this."

"Yeah, it's a shame. But it's not really our problem."

"From what we have been able to surmise," Todd reasoned, "this blow against us has been delivered at great cost to human lives. With my help, think of all those you might save."

"Only to be fed on later," said Ronon.

Unworried, Todd spun to meet his accusation with an imperious smile. "Wraith are not so indiscriminate with the lives we take. The continued loss of human lives at this rate would spell the end of Wraith and human alike."

While Ronon's hatred for the Wraith had never been in doubt, thanks to recent events, John was aware it had also never been closer to the surface. Ronon's expression burned with malice. "Only because you're murdering the survivors."

"They are poison."

Ronon stepped forward until they were almost nose to nose. "They're people."

"In this case, the two are no different," Todd said with a scornful sneer, holding his ground.

John intervened at the sound of Ronon's blaster cycling up. "Hang on, Ronon. Let's hear him out. He must be pretty desperate to come unarmed and without backup."

Todd released a quiet huff, clearly annoyed at the accuracy of John's statement, and John waited coolly for the Wraith to concede that the balance of power was in his favor for the time being. Todd's compliance wouldn't come easily, however. He would never trust his life to John's sense of goodwill. He had something up his sleeve, something compelling enough for him to believe that John wouldn't simply kill him this time.

After long moments, Todd said, "I had anticipated your reluctance. I will stipulate that the cure
would be for my hive - and my hive alone."

John's mouth pulled tightly at the corners. Mason continued to silently stalk the perimeter, anticipating the trouble they all knew was coming and had them all on edge. The sooner they wrapped this up and got back to Atlantis, the better. "And what are you offering in exchange?" John asked.

"In exchange for the information I require, I will give you the identity of the individual responsible for dispersing the plague."

This time John did laugh, short and final. "Nice try, but we're way ahead of you on that one." Clutching the grip of his weapon, John whirled and said to his teammates, "We're done here."

"John Sheppard, wait," Todd said with urgency.

Against his better judgment, John halted.

"I have something else which may be of interest to you."

John turned to face him, wearing an impatient scowl. "Let's hear it."

Todd held his steel gaze and then moved his hand to the underside of his upper right arm. He slipped something out from what appeared to be a hidden compartment in the dense material of his body armor. He turned whatever it was between his fingers and held it out for John to take. It was a yellow data chip with six sides, no bigger or wider than a quarter, yet Ronon seemed pretty pissed off he hadn't found it in his earlier search.

John held it up. "What's this?"

"My second offer," Todd said with a keen sense of purpose and a shrewd grin.

With cautious interest, John handed the translucent chip over to McKay. "Can you read it?"

Rodney laid it out on the face of his tablet, which he held so it lay flat in the crook of his arm. He positioned it precisely in the center of the monitor and pressed a series of keys. A program activated that scanned the surface of the chip, and after viewing the results, Rodney recalibrated his tablet to adjust to the given Wraith specs.

A digital image popped up on the side panel of the screen and Rodney's eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

"What is it, McKay?" John asked.

The scientist held out the tablet so he could see for himself. "It's a ZedPM."

Todd looked smug. "Do I have your attention now?"

Teyla's eyebrows knit in concentration as she read from the tablet Mr. Woolsey had given her, a tray of forgotten food lying on the mess hall table in front of her. She moved the screen with a touch of her index finger and diligently perused the mission briefs for the upcoming week, making notes where needed. There was a continuation of talks with the Filosians on the schedule, but Capt.
Thorne's team had been assigned to it rather than Maj. Santiago's, who had been the ones to open talks in the first place. She highlighted it and recommended Santiago's team be reassigned to continue what they had begun. Like the mines they were famed for, the Filosians were a rough, hard people, and if Maj. Santiago had managed to earn their consideration, it was best to take advantage of it while they could.

Teyla was so engrossed in the job at hand she only looked up from her reading when her stomach shifted. Nausea set in, subtle yet pervasive, reminding her that pregnancy and missed meals were not a desirable combination. She had already pushed the definition of breakfast time to its limits, and if she waited much longer to eat, her stomach was prepared to respond—with prejudice.

Teyla took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly to dampen the queasiness. Before her, she had a plate of scrambled eggs, a pair of sausage links, and a slice of buttered toast. She reached for the toast first, knowing the dryness of it would settle her stomach relatively quickly. After a few bites, she added a small portion of her eggs to the top and nibbled silently while her attention drifted back down to the tablet.

A few minutes later, Teyla noticed someone's approach out of the corner of her eye and glanced up. Caught with a mouthful, she was unable to greet David before he sat across from her. "I just heard that John left. To meet some Wraith?"

Teyla swallowed in a hurry and put down the remainder of her toast, concerned that he seemed upset. "Yes. He and the others left quite early this morning." It had been so early she only remembered a soft kiss in the dark and a whispered farewell.

"And that doesn't bother you?" he asked.

Teyla thought that an unusual question at first, then she further considered David's previous experience when it came to dealing with the demands of his brother's chosen profession. John rarely spoke of his former wife, but Teyla knew enough of their marriage to know that his career and the abrupt and often prolonged absences it entailed had been a pivotal issue between the two of them. During their most recent trip to Earth, David had mentioned receiving many tearful and angry phone calls from Nancy, confiding in him that she didn't know what to do anymore. She was tired of all the secrets and tired of being left alone. Teyla imagined it would have been quite frustrating for David to have no better idea of what John was doing than Nancy did, to witness his brother's marriage slowly crumble without the ability to change the outcome.

It was thoughtful of him to be concerned about her feelings.

"John is often called away at unusual hours. The planets we visit are quite commonly on a different orbit than Atlantis, so our departures must account for the time difference, and emergencies will occur irrespective of the hour," she said. She reached across the table and, with a reassuring smile, squeezed the top of his hand. "John goes where he is needed and it is important that he does so. He will return soon."

In mute defiance of her words, a niggling worry fluttered inside, mirroring David's continued worried frown. She hoped his return would be sooner rather than later.

"And what about this Wraith? John calls him Todd?"

"What about him?" she asked.

"Every report I've ever read about the Wraith says they aren't to be trusted even in the best of situations, but this one calls and John answers. Frankly …" David paused, his face pulled into a
mask of deep thought. "Frankly, I don't see how he can do that knowing this particular Wraith has fed on him."

Teyla lowered her eyes. When it came to Todd, she preferred to focus on the fact that Todd had restored John's life and not the horrific sight of him draining it away. The mere thought of John as one of the many shriveled corpses she had seen over the course of her lifetime, permanently contorted in a tortured pose, was almost enough to make her ill. "John does what he must," she said simply.

However, David didn't seem satisfied with her response. "But can he be trusted?"

Teyla thought carefully for a moment, finding it difficult to articulate the nature of Todd's current association with both John and Atlantis as a whole. "We … use him," she finally said. It was a mildly repugnant notion, but it befitted the situation. "And he uses us as he can to his own benefit. There have been instances when our goals have aligned and a truce has been made. But no, we cannot trust him. In that he is no different than any other Wraith."

David grew quiet, his posture stiff as his fingers lightly drummed the tabletop. Then, after a few stretched minutes, he looked over her scarcely touched meal and sighed. "I'm sorry, Teyla. I didn't mean to bother you with this. It's just …"

He didn't finish, but Teyla understood perfectly. He was concerned about John's safety as well. As two who cared deeply for John, they had that in common. That and the bond created by her unspoken commitment to John, cemented by the child she carried. They were family.

"How are you finding the city so far?" she asked in effort to sway the prevailing mood. Their lives were such that worry could consume all else if permitted and there was no sense in worrying just yet. "Has everyone been accommodating?"

David smiled a little. "Most, though I don't think Dr. Tratovsky likes me very much. I asked for the geology department's most recent inventory and got a cold stare worthy of Siberia."

Teyla laughed softly, picturing the spindly scientist's unkempt mane of gray hair and scrunched features glaring out from behind his glasses while he muttered in his native Russian. "He has been appealing to Mr. Woolsey about new equipment for nearly six months. There are those that say he has grown rather desperate over the matter."

"Interesting. I'll keep that in mind when I take a look at his reports." David scrubbed his chin in exaggerated thought and then dropped his hand with an understated chuckle. It was a pleasure to watch the troubled expression begin to melt away. David and John were certainly brothers; the two men shared the same engaging smile. "I hope I'll get the chance to look around the city more," David continued. "There's something about this place. I'm not really sure what it is."

"I believe John has a similar fascination. Sometimes when we are out walking together, he will simply stop and it is like he is listening to the city. He says, when it is quiet, it is almost as if Atlantis is talking to him."

"Do you think it is?"

Teyla smiled. "With the many things I have seen in the years I have lived here, I have learned that there is much I do not know and more I may never know. But anything is possible."

She passed a fond glance toward her lap and the swell of her stomach. Her daughter was perhaps the greatest mystery of her life. Perhaps, with her father's gene, her unborn daughter could already hear
what Teyla herself could not. Teyla hoped so. To be able to listen and begin to see inside the
makings of the renowned city would be a magical experience indeed, and she wished only a lifetime
of magic for her baby.

Starting to eat again, Teyla asked David if he had been able to explore some of what his ATA gene
allowed him in Atlantis. He replied by saying that Dr. Beckett was already eager to have him
undergo some tests. Teyla nodded along; doubtless, Carson would get his way as David's interest in
exploring his gene seemed keen as well. Teyla wondered if the strength of David's gene would
match John's.

They went on to discuss what she was working on for Mr. Woolsey and the intricate game of trade
they played with some of their allies. The Filosians, for example, had ore and heavy metals at their
disposal that were needed by the Cattans, who provided Atlantis with a portion of their crop to
sustain the expeditions need for fresh fruits and vegetables between supply shipments from Earth.
They were often the first thing they ran out of, because they had a much shorter storage period than
other foods and already spent a great portion of that time in the refrigeration unit on the Daedalus
while in transit. As a long standing feud between the Filosians and Cattans had both parties refusing
to sit down for talks, Teyla was hoping Atlantis would be able to facilitate a satisfactory exchange for
all.

David was impressed at the resourcefulness of the idea, and she admitted to him that engineering the
process had helped her feel that she could still be useful, since she was no longer physically able to
go on missions.

She was enjoying the conversation when a deep cold struck her heart.

She froze, eyes wide as she gasped, feeling it leech out to her fingertips and down to her toes, a
spreading glacier that threatened to swallow her in a prison of ice.

Across from her, David's attitude of ease suddenly shifted. "Teyla, are you alright?"

Certain he could see the discomfort on her face, Teyla tried to school her reaction as she realized she
had felt this sensation before countless times. Only …

"Yes. " She gazed at his dark features, breathless but rapidly regaining control. "John has returned."

His brow furrowed. "What? How do you know?"

Teyla swallowed and said calmly, "There is a Wraith in the city."
Only when his boots hit the ground in Atlantis again, Mason began to relax. Exploring old wrecks and ruins like the torn down former outpost they'd just left had never been his favorite missions. On top of that, meeting a Wraith in a place where the Wraith had once murdered everyone had made him feel as if he were walking over people's graves.

It gave him the creeps.

With Rodney directly behind him, Mason had been first through the Gate home. Todd followed flanked by Ronon, and Sheppard brought up the rear. A security team met them as they came through, a welcoming party in case their guest got any funny ideas. Mr. Woolsey was stationed out front with Maj. Lorne and Maj. Everett.

The new addition stood coolly, hips loose, her flowing dark hair pulled back as per regulation, and her expression poised. Almost too sanguine, all things considered. Her gaze was zeroed in on the Wraith.

"You made excellent time, sir," Maj. Lorne said as the wormhole shut down behind them.

Mr. Woolsey wore a staid frown. "Colonel, I see you've brought along a friend."

"Well, Todd had quite a story to tell. We didn't want you to miss out," said Sheppard.

"I look forward to hearing it. I am certain it'll be an interesting tale."

Sheppard inclined his chin and a pair of armed soldiers carrying a set of shackles approached the Wraith, who seemed occupied scoping out the room. From the ceiling to the floor, Todd's pale yellow eyes took in every bit of the scene.

"Lock him up tight and then escort him to a holding cell," Sheppard said to his men.

Thick metal cuffs clicked into place around Todd's wrists. An accompanying set of rings was secured around his ankles along with the heavy chains that bridged them together. As if seeing the place for the first time, Todd ignored the shackles in pursuit of his search. Visibly distracted, he adopted a deep sideways tilt of the head and a mildly grotesque visage that Mason could only interpret as startled.

What was he doing?

It almost looked like he was listening to something.

Mason focused on the sounds around him, but he didn't hear anything unusual.

Sheppard had apparently noticed the Wraith's odd shift in demeanor as well, as his manner grew even more guarded than before. "I'd hate to keep you away from your old room. Five-star accommodations all the way, just like you remember. We haven't changed a thing."

Todd's attention was clearly elsewhere. He stood eerily still. And then his cat-like gaze abruptly shifted to look at Sheppard. His gray lips tugged back in a slight grin and he responded in a low, resonating voice that made the hair on the back of Mason's neck stand on end. "Something has changed."
Mason watched as the muscle in Sheppard's jaw flexed. "Enjoy your cell." His CO turned and said in a restive tone to Mason and Ronon, "Take him. After that, report to the infirmary. Briefing in an hour."

Ronon nodded. Mason said a concise "Yes, sir." They'd all feel better once Todd was stashed safely behind an Ancient force field.

"Maj. Everett." Sheppard glanced across the room.

She sprang to attention. "Yes, sir?"

Sheppard all but disregarded her formality in favor of clipping his P-90 back onto his vest. "Why don't you go with them? While you're down there, they can show you how the cell controls work."

Mason caught Ronon's fierce scowl as Maj. Everett stepped up to join them. She gave the towering Satedan a pert, one-sided smile as if slyly daring him to object aloud. Her features were delicate yet projected a steel edge, likely honed from the experience of being a woman in a field choked with alpha males. Maj. Everett definitely wasn't one to be pushed around.

In the space of a moment, Ronon and Sheppard held a silent exchange. Ronon's dissatisfaction was plain. Sheppard overrode it; with a flick of his eyes toward Everett and Todd, he made his intentions clear. This was Maj. Everett's first encounter with a Wraith and he needed to know how she would react. If she wasn't able to handle it, it was better they find out here—under controlled conditions—than out in the field.

"Go," Sheppard said.

Ronon did. Grudgingly.

A pair of SO's took point as Mason, Ronon, and Maj. Everett moved into formation behind the prisoner. The group started toward the doors. Todd marched along without missing a beat, one foot in front of the other, still intent on whatever it was he was listening for. He kept on adjusting the angle of his head as if it would help. He reminded Mason of someone trying to identify a song being piped over the speakers in a noisy restaurant, able to hear just enough to capture the attention and make you realize you know it, but the surrounding chatter completely drowns out the melody. Of course, then you're annoyed and the only recourse is to hope the song changes or your food shows up.

Well, Todd didn't look annoyed yet. Good thing. His food wouldn't be coming for a while.

Mason overheard Maj. Everett talking to Ronon as he moved beside her. "You missed our session this morning." Her voice was the very soul of politeness, although a swift look in her direction revealed a taut smile on her lips.

Ronon didn't so much as look at her. "I was busy."

"So I see." She spared a chilly glance at the Wraith before reclaiming her nearly flawless composure. "You could have radioed," she said softly, "or left a message taped to the gym door telling me you weren't going to be there."

"I guess," Ronon said.

Inwardly, Mason groaned. Based on last night's "warm" introduction, it didn't come as a huge shock that Ronon and Everett weren't meshing very well, but he didn't want to be here for this. The only thing he wanted to think about was the mission. The job. Nothing else. No distractions.
"You know, you weren't the only one who had other things they could've been doing this morning," she said. "I waited for nearly forty-five minutes."

"Sorry," Ronon said.

Admirably, Maj. Everett kept her tone even. "I don't need you to be sorry, I need you to be where you say you're gonna be. I have a job to do and superiors I have to answer to. Next time you can't make a training session with me, have the decency to let me know."

"Fine," Ronon growled.

"Good."

Mason shook his head. It was going to be a long walk.

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"David?"

Dave Sheppard felt a touch to his arm just above the elbow. He peeled his distracted gaze back down to where Teyla waited with an expectant grimace.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Dave looked around and realized he had stopped in the middle of the corridor, where he and Teyla had been walking only moments before. "Yeah, I …" Wary, his eyes roved upward once more to examine the corridor ahead. "I just thought I heard …"

Something. Nothing. He wasn't sure either was true. And even as the thought crossed his mind, he realized how ridiculous that sounded. After a lifetime of relative normalcy, he'd just taken a three week voyage in a spaceship, of all things. Now he was walking through an alien city in a galaxy that he'd never heard of until eight months ago, and that was to say nothing of the Wraith—space vampires who fed on life rather than blood. And Teyla had said that one of them was now in their midst. Probably the very same one that once had fed on his little brother. No wonder his imagination was running wild.

"It's nothing," he said, finally returning his full attention to the woman by his side. "Anyway, I should probably be asking you that question."

Ever since they'd left the mess hall to meet up with John, Teyla had been fairly preoccupied, hardly saying a word. Stranger still, she kept crossing her arms as though she was cold and then dropping them back to her sides with feigned indifference.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked.

Since he didn't understand Teyla's unique ability to sense the presence of Wraith beyond what he'd read in her file, he trusted that she would know if anything was wrong. On the other hand, she was only just recovering from a complication with her pregnancy; a complication that John had said stemmed from a genetic problem between her Wraith DNA and the baby. If this Wraith's presence did anything to jeopardize Teyla's health or his niece and he didn't at least ask—incessantly, probably annoyingly—Dave would never forgive himself. And more than likely, neither would John.
Her left arm moved unconsciously to grasp the upper part of her right, only to slip down as before. "I am fine, David. I was simply … surprised," she said, attempting to explain away the fleeting look of shock that had briefly taken over in the mess hall.

"Is that what you'd tell John? You were surprised?"

Teyla donned an uneven smile as his tone made it clear he wasn't convinced. "Perhaps not." She sighed and glanced uneasily at the path ahead as they resumed walking. "It was … stronger than I anticipated. Stronger than I have ever felt from a Wraith."

"Ever? Is it this Todd character? Is he special or something?"

"Todd is devious and ambitious and certainly strong, but he is a Wraith like all the others."

"Then why do you suppose this time was different?"

"I have not encountered a Wraith in quite some time." She paused and then added hesitantly, "And circumstances have … changed … since I have become pregnant. I should have expected it."

The way Teyla now avoided his gaze bothered Dave, as if she was withholding something from him. He was about to press her for more when they rounded a corner and she came to an abrupt halt. Having kept a close pace to hers, Dave narrowly avoided bumping into her shoulder before he stopped.

Mason, Ronon, Maj. Everett, and a pair of marines stood before them.

Dave had seen photos of Wraith before, mostly file images taken of the dead after the siege in Atlantis, but they did little to prepare him for the real thing. The marriage of insectoid features into a humanoid face stunned him into silence. The Wraith – presumably the same one John had nicknamed Todd – had shocking white hair and ash grey skin that exhibited an almost waxy sheen under the corridor's overhead lights. A predatory air radiated in his body language. Todd's mouth pulled into a curious sneer, revealing a row of shark like teeth. For a second Dave knew what a minnow felt like.

The Wraith's yellow eyes stared directly at Teyla.

Frozen, Teyla began to breathe faster. A pale tint suffused her rich complexion as her expression locked. Silence consumed the corridor. Dave's heartbeat was a metronome of building tension as he observed her stiffen. A look of horror took root in her brown eyes as the hypnotic ferocity of Todd's gaze only deepened, boring into her.

Behind Todd, Ronon and Mason traded a strange look. Something was very wrong, but Dave didn't have the slightest notion what.

"Keep moving." Ronon's command cut the curtain of silence like a chainsaw. His blaster made a whirring noise as if it was revving to life, a barefaced warning to the Wraith. Mason circled around and placed himself between Teyla and Todd, his gun low but his hand coiled around the trigger.

Maj. Everett nodded to the other two men. They promptly lifted the noses of their weapons. "You heard him," she said. "Keep walking."

The Major took a step toward the Wraith. Ronon immediately reached out and touched her arm with impressive softness and control, considering his eyes never moved from his target. "Careful," he said.

She glanced down at his touch, a look of bewilderment present on her features for a microsecond
before it vanished. Dave's attention skated toward Todd's bound but uncovered hands, a clear and present danger, though the Wraith no longer seemed to know they were there.

Then Todd moved, not away as ordered but straight toward Teyla. A flurry of movement erupted, and Dave was stunned to find himself on the fringe of a standoff as five weapons snapped upward and took aim.

Correction—six.

In an instant, Teyla slipped her hand around the butt of Mason's sidearm and yanked it from his thigh holster. She moved up alongside Mason into the open, to the marine's clear disquiet.

"Teyla, don't," Mason said.

Fury and grit like Dave had never seen poured from Teyla as she lined the Wraith up in her sights. "Not. One. More. Step."

Todd stilled. He didn't move closer, but he didn't look like he was about to yield either. He might have been a prisoner, but for a moment Dave had the sense that they were the ones held captive.

His eyes narrowed to tenacious slits. Teyla inhaled sharply.

And then John was there, gun drawn, the barrel pressed viciously to the back of Todd's neck.

"Back off," John barked, his lungs heaving from exertion. Minutes before, the instant he had felt Teyla's fear he'd taken off running, leaving Rodney and Woolsey spluttering in his wake. He'd pushed himself to his limits as her emotions fluctuated in his mind, rising to borderline panic. "Don't make me regret not shooting you earlier."

John's protective instincts were aflame as he looked over Todd's shoulder to Teyla, who was exhaling rapidly, her gaze trapped as she struggled to maintain her aim.

Teyla? Teyla, talk to me.

He had to bear up to the returning call as her thoughts came back at him with screaming force. John suppressed a bone-chilling shudder. He felt the reflected pressure of Todd in her head, confused and searching as if mindlessly compelled. Reaching. Seeking an entrance. Teyla had barricaded her mind and the baby's, but she was struggling to maintain that level of control on her own. She couldn't use the baby's abilities to help her. Not only could that expose their daughter's vulnerable, developing mind to Todd, but the consequences, they knew, could be dire.

He is so cold, John. Teyla's arm started to waver. I do not know how long I can ... keep him out.

His jaw set, John kicked the backs of Todd's legs and forced him to his knees. John pushed the barrel of his Beretta hard against Todd's skull. "I don't know what game you're playing or how long it's been since you've fed, but I'm betting you won't recover from this. Now back off or I'm putting an end to all of this right now!"

Responding for the first time, Todd slowly rotated his head and brought it around so he could look at John out of the corner of his eye. "You are different, John Sheppard," he said, oddly nonchalant.
given the current number of bullets with his name on them.

John glared. "What are you talking about?"

He chuckled, a rumble of distant thunder that sent another chill down John's spine. "You have taken a mate."

Time stopped as John's thoughts raced, chasing the adrenaline surging through his veins. His finger hovered perilously above the trigger.

"Sir?" Maj. Everett said uncertainly.

John looked up. A few seconds passed and then he lowered his gun. "Get him out of here."

The SOs rushed in and pulled Todd to his feet. John watched on as Ronon, massive and angry, growled his own threats in Todd's ear. Across from John, Capshaw gently spoke a few words to Teyla, her gaze still focused on Todd. Gradually, her attention drifted toward the big marine and she released her weapon into his care. After holstering the gun, Capshaw grasped Teyla's shoulder in a quick, firm hold and then moved off to rejoin the prisoner escort. Teyla looked drained. And Dave …

God, Dave.

John hadn't even noticed his brother was there. What had all of that looked like to him?

His mind jumping from one stream to the next, John's stomach twisted as the knowledge that Todd had heard him sunk in. He'd heard him mentally communicating with Teyla.

Shit.

John didn't know what that meant for the time being, but any information in Todd's hands was information that would one day be used to his advantage. Maybe John should've put a few bullets through his brain, ZPM be damned.

As the clink of Todd's chains traveled down the corridor, echoing from farther and farther away, John returned to himself and strode toward Teyla and his brother. He threw an assessing glance Dave's way, taking in the stunned expression and face rife with questions. "John, what … what just happened?"

John shook his head. "Later, Dave. Okay?" Then all his attention went to Teyla. He wrapped his right hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in close. Teyla sank into his arms. "Are you alright?"

"I believe so," she said. Her head rested against his chest as tension funneled from her body in cumbersome gasps.

"I want you to come with me to the infirmary and let Keller check you out just to make sure."

Ordinarily Teyla might have objected, but not today. Not this time. Their baby couldn't afford another close call.

John stared gravely ahead. "I don't know how he found out or what he thinks he knows, but if he conned me into bringing him here so he could get to you, I'll—"

Teyla lifted her chin to look at him. "I do not think he knew. From what I could sense of him, I do
not think he expected to find me or the baby at all. I believe he sensed her and …" He saw her searching for the right words to describe the purpose for the driven, single-minded determination John had felt coming from his old rival. "I believe he was trying to investigate."

Investigate. And he'd come up with too much information already.

John tangled his fingers in her hair and kissed her forehead. *If he tries anything like that again, I'll kill him, I swear.*

Todd didn't give them any trouble the rest of the way. Once they arrived, he walked into the cell of his own volition and sat down on the cot at the far end, already back to ignoring them as the SOs activated the shield. It was hard for Mason to walk away without giving him a few good kicks to the gut, but it was just as well that he didn't. Cooler heads had prevailed. He would've had to wait in line behind Ronon anyway. And maybe Everett too.

Mason and Ronon waited as Maj. Everett took in the simple process of working the cell controls and then turned to leave, expecting her to follow. Thoughts of the upcoming mission had already begun to take priority in Mason's mind.

But Ronon and he paused in the doorway when they realized she hadn't.

Without a sound, her attention had been drawn studiously toward the Wraith, who merely stared back at her, uncaring and uninterested. She had folded her arms tightly across her middle and her eyes were somber. Despite her Teflon bearing, Mason saw that it was difficult for her to be there. He didn't have to imagine the hole left behind when you lost someone important to you. How you had to push their memory to the side and allow yourself to think of them fondly but only sparingly, because dwelling too long on them made the pain of their passing as fresh and as painful as the day it happened. The sweetness of happy memories in the heart permanently intermixed with grief and carried around in silence.

Losing a parent wasn't one of those things you ever got over. It had been two years for him. Three for her. And she was finally face to face with a representative of the alien species that had sucked most of the life out of her father. Whatever nightmarish figure she might have imagined, it now had a face and it had shown her first hand just how fast things with the Wraith could spin out of control, could end up getting someone killed. Someone just like her father.

Even Ronon seemed affected by the shadow cast by her grief. He had finally put his gun away and his posture softened, shedding some of his earlier brusqueness.

"You should go," Ronon said to her, his voice full and raspy in the thick silence.

Maj. Everett's eyes shifted to meet his. She hesitated a moment, a part of her clearly wanting to tell him to mind his own business. But something seemed to stop her. She nodded and left without another word.

Mason watched her disappear up the corridor, then addressed Todd. "Don't get too comfortable. Colonel Sheppard will want to talk to you again soon."

The Wraith deigned to lower his gaze. His piercing yellow eyes peered back at him. "I look forward to it."
Mason and Ronon were far away from Todd's cell before Mason spoke again. "You're sure you want to do this thing with Everett?"

"What thing?" his friend said gruffly.

"You're not exactly cutting her any breaks."

"Being soft on her won't help her, it'll get her killed," Ronon said, eyes forward, stubbornness the attitude of the day. Even though Ronon was about as emotionally open as a rock at the moment, Mason also sensed he felt something resembling guilt about it.

"Just be careful," Mason said. "There's a line. See that you don't cross it. It's bad enough she had to find out about all this the way she did …"

He trailed off for a second, imagining how events had probably played out according to what Sheppard had told them. A phone call. A long flight knowing that her father had returned from his assignment and was hospitalized but not knowing why, followed by a cold debriefing and a doctor leading her to her father's room. Apologies. Guarded statements about recovery, but nothing that would give back the thirty odd years she could have had with him. Col. Everett had gone away a strong, able commander and came back an old man.

Shock. Tears. And then so many more when, after six months of trying to live with it, her father couldn't cope any longer.

The Wraith hadn't killed Col. Everett, but they might as well have.

"Just be careful," he said again, not sure what else to say.

They started up a flight of stairs. A pensive frown crinkled Ronon's beard. "You should take your own advice," he grumbled.

Mason stopped short. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ronon paused a second before he continued to jog stolidly ahead. "Meet you in the infirmary."
"How's she doing, Doc?"

John glanced down at Teyla as she lay on the infirmary bed. While Jennifer expertly manipulated the scanner over her stomach, Teyla detected a not-so-subtle hint of anxiety in his eyes and squeezed his hand. The movement was pleasantly tactile, comforting in a way only to be found in another person's touch. But mostly …

She closed her eyes and a pair of slitted eyes peered back at her in the momentary darkness, ruthless and cunning. A shudder rippled down Teyla's spine as another chill spilled down on her like an ice bath.

Her eyes sprang open and she gazed up at John, her fingers laced snugly into his.

Warm. He was warm.

"So far everything seems normal, Colonel," Jennifer said, absorbed in her readings. "I'm not seeing much movement …"

"Is that bad?"

The doctor glanced up and her focused frown softened in response to John's earnest query. "No, not necessarily." She gave him a reassuring smile. "All babies have their active and inactive periods, and anyway, her vital signs look good. Teyla, just let me know if you don't feel any movement in the next hour or so, okay?"

Teyla nodded, encouraged that all signs indicated that her baby had come through Todd's assault unscathed. She had been reasonably certain that she had managed to hold him at bay. As he had gradually released his stranglehold on her mind, Todd's dissatisfaction had resounded deep within her consciousness, like a hiss too low for human ears. But when dealing with such a domineering force it was hard to be certain of anything.

Thank goodness John had come when he had. Her resistance had been crumbling. She could not have held on much longer.

"Dr. Keller?" Marie poked her head around the partially drawn curtain. "Ronon and Sergeant Capshaw are here for their post-mission screenings. Do you have a minute?"

Jennifer didn't answer right away. She gazed down at her data pad, before she took a deep breath and looked up again. "Dr. Daden's in the lab. Check with him, would you?"

"Sure."

After Marie had gone, it was a few more seconds before Jennifer moved again. She deactivated the mobile scanner and data pad and set them off to the side. "We should, um ... get a full scan just to make sure there aren't any hidden anomalies."

Teyla looked up at her. "Is that really necessary? I am sure everything is fine. Truly, I am already feeling much better." With all the tests she'd already undergone, a full scan seemed overly cautious
even for Jennifer.

She looked tired.

The doctor nodded. "I think so. Even if we disregard the unique nature of your pregnancy, we've never documented a case of Wraith mentokinesis on someone in your condition and—"

"Wait." John's features bunched to favor her with an odd look. "Wraith mento-what?"

"Mentokinesis. The ability to manipulate thoughts, mindsets, and upper brain functions of others."

John sounded unimpressed. "Sounds like Rodney's been naming things again."

A tiny smile formed at the corner of Jennifer's mouth. "It's a legitimate term, Colonel, and fairly consistent with what we know of the Wraith. Granted, I think before we discovered the Stargate it was mostly used in comic books …"

John snorted. "Quite a place we have here, isn't it?" He held out his hand and helped Teyla sit up.

"I'd just rather be safe than sorry," Jennifer continued as she adjusted her clothing.

"Dr. Keller?" Marie re-emerged around the curtain. "Sorry. Dr. Daden says he can't step away at the moment. Shall I tell them it could be a while?"

Again, Jennifer paused. She had been fairly withdrawn the last few weeks. Her ordeal with Kiryk and the Wraith hunters had certainly left its mark, but Teyla had begun to wonder if there wasn't something else troubling her. She had hoped they would have time to talk at the reception last night, but Jennifer had arrived late and left early, before they had gotten the chance.

Had something happened?

"No, I'll …" Jennifer murmured. "I'll take care of it." Marie nodded and went on her way, as Jennifer addressed the two of them. "If you'll excuse me a minute? I won't be long."

"Of course," Teyla said, watching with concern as Jennifer pushed the curtain open and headed across the infirmary.

Ronon sat slouched on one bed, a guarded scowl on his face as Jennifer approached. Mason was camped on another, his features calm and impregnable.

"You still cold?" John asked, drawing Teyla's attention back to him for the moment.

Her fingers raced along her arm with the desire to hug herself. The mere thought of Todd raised another spike of bitter cold beneath her skin. "The chill has not gone."

Nor would it, as long as he remained in the city.

"Yeah." John pursed his lips. "The baby's making it worse?"

Teyla nodded.

"I'd have them bring you a blanket if I thought it would help."

She smiled and tenderly touched his arm. "It is enough to me that you thought of it at all."

John made a noise belittling his sweet consideration.
Across the room, Jennifer worked on Ronon. The two of them exchanged a few words as she took his blood sample. Ronon pointedly glanced once or twice toward Mason, while Jennifer seemed to do everything but.

John turned to observe them a moment before returning his gaze back to her. "Well, until Todd once again cons, blasts, or otherwise slinks out of our lives, just think of palm trees, sandy beaches, mai tais … Maybe not mai tais. Rum and babies generally don't mix. But some other fruity thing that reminds you of a tropical getaway."

"The power of the mind. Is that the way of it?" she said with a weary smile. "I would have thought you'd had quite enough of that for one day."

John's mouth settled into a deep slant, not quite a scowl but not especially cheerful. His eyes skirted the rest of the room. Todd's presence was a distraction for all of them. "The sooner we get Todd out of Atlantis, the better."

"Are you certain he heard us communicating with one another?"

He stared blackly ahead. "I don't know how, but he did."

Teyla set her hand across her belly and took a long breath. "What do you suppose he wants?"

"I don't know. I feel like I'm caught up in a game of chess, but I can't see the board," John said. Their eyes met in a solemn gaze. "All the more reason to get him far, far away from here."

Teyla nodded her agreement. "How long?"

"If Woolsey and Caldwell sign off on the mission, probably tomorrow morning. If not, I don't see any reason not to toss his ass through the Gate the minute the briefing's over."

"Be careful."

John huffed deeply. "You don't need to tell me that."

Perhaps not. But as she noticed how his unseeing gaze grew increasingly intense, it felt more and more imperative that she did. "I know. It simply makes me feel better to do so."

His frown eased slightly. Then, his arm slid around her neck and nestled about her shoulders. "In that case, you can say it as much as you want."

Teyla leaned into his embrace and closed her eyes, where Todd continued to glare back at her. Behind his image, a soft hum had slowly been building in the back of her mind. She tried to shut both of them out. They were nothing more than an echo of Todd's invasion. But she kept tuning in to the sound like a melody she had never heard yet couldn't stop singing.

It was strangely soothing, almost hypnotic. And it was calling her to something.

Unprepared to face whatever that might be, she burrowed her cheek against the steady rise and fall of John's chest.

"Be careful, John."
"Do I get to kill him now?" Ronon asked, scowling as he plunked his arm out for Jennifer. After such a short trip offworld, the only thing that'd show up on his blood test would be the telltale markers of a hangover.

As she pulled on a new set of gloves, Jennifer gave him a quick, measured glance. "As far as I can tell, Todd didn't do anything to hurt Teyla or the baby."

"We shouldn't give him another chance to."

Jennifer's lips tensed as she knotted a rubber strap around his bicep and rolled his arm to face upward. "Maybe. But that's not up to me."

A needlestick. Ronon grunted his annoyance, even though it was no worse than a bug bite. He wasn't in the mood to take anything quietly. There was a Wraith in the city attacking his friends and promising trouble, an Air Force Major who seemed to have a talent for getting under his skin, the pretty doctor in front of him who had just ended things with him—though honestly that part had been mutual—and, with too much to drink and too little sleep, he had a pounding headache.

He'd snap and snarl as much as he wanted.

"Anything unusual to report?" Jennifer asked, staring absently into empty space as they waited for the small vial to fill up, the question dictated by procedure.

"No."

"'Kay," she mumbled.

Her face like glass, she gave the vial a quick flick with her fingers, then pulled it clear of the transfer tube. She set the vial aside and, cotton ball in hand, gently removed the needle.

"Hold this for a second." She pressed the cotton into the bend of his arm. Shooting her another scowl, he took over while she dexterously peeled the label with his name and ID number off a pre-printed sheet and adhered it to his blood sample.

Once she'd disposed of the needle and fastened a Band-aid over the site of the draw, she handed the sample off to Rachel, who took it back to the lab. Shedding her gloves, she told him to stay there and padded across the infirmary. She returned a minute later carrying a bottle of water and a thick white pill in a paper cup.

"Ibuprofen and water," she explained. "I figured after last night you might need it."

Ronon paused in the middle of taking them, his irritability tempered some by the memory of finding her in the corridor huddled against a wall, her face soaked with tears. Through an alcohol-induced haze, he remembered watching her for a few minutes from a distance, watching her finally shatter. He'd seen it happen before. He'd done it once himself. But he didn't know it could happen so quietly, just with harsh breaths and soft whimpers. It didn't seem right that that kind of pain could pour out of someone without leaving a smear of blood on the floor.

He could've been angry with her for letting him believe they had a chance at being something, something more than the friends they already were, but all he'd felt was relief that the truth was finally out in the open. And guilt, as he came to realize he was more invested in her as a friend than as a woman.

Jennifer was just Jennifer, and Melena's ghost was only that. A ghost.
"Yeah, thanks," he said slowly. "Sorry."

Annoyed at himself, he cast a look a few beds down where Capshaw was biding his time, occupying himself by chatting with Marie. Here, he had just warned Capshaw to be careful of her and he was the one acting like a brute. She deserved better. Jennifer shook her head, brushing off his apology. "That should help. Your results should be up in a few minutes and then you can go, okay?"

Ronon obediently swallowed back the pill and chased it with a quick drink. She gave him an approving smile, but the rest of her features were oddly still. She reminded him of the portraits that used to hang on the walls of his mother's shop, where she sold her jewelry, sculptures, and other art pieces. Jennifer was almost inanimate. And there was something else in the dip of her chin and in the darkness of her eyes. Like a piece of her was missing, left on the floor.

"D'you sleep okay?" he asked, his voice lower, more careful.

Her eyes shifted a little, torn between truth and a lie. That alone was enough to tell him she hadn't.

"You don't have to keep doing this, you know? This checking up on me," she said. "You don't owe me anything. I'm not your responsibility anymore, I just … If anything, it should be me asking you ..." She looked away, uncomfortable.

Ronon hunched forward on the edge of the bed, elbows to his knees, and regarded her seriously. "I'd ask anyway."

She inhaled deeply and let it go with a fluttering nod. A glimmer of a smile lit up her face before she stole a nervous glance over her shoulder toward Capshaw. "I'm fine. Really. There's just a lot going on. A lot that needs to be done."

Ronon stared hard at her as he called her bluff. Even that seemed too much for her.

"I have to … I have to go," she said, backing away.

"Jennifer." He caught her at the wrist. She stopped and he released her. He scrubbed his hand across his chin as he hunted for the right words. Ever since they'd returned from being hunted by the Wraith, he'd been watching out for her. Although things with Kiryk had ultimately worked out for the best, he blamed himself for putting her in that situation. He'd let her get taken in the first place and he'd made the call that led to all that followed.

It wasn't his place anymore. But after having watched out for her for so long, he still felt responsible for her. He didn't want to see her hurt again. He'd seen enough hurt to last him a lifetime.

"I'm still here. If you need me," he said with a half-hearted shrug. It didn't seem like enough, but he meant it.

She nodded and walked toward Mason. As she worked, she barely glanced at the marine. Mason's only response was a long look at her and kindred silence.

Yeah. Burying a broken heart was time-consuming work.
"Doc?"

Sheppard strode across the room. Teyla remained where she was, next to a medical bed behind him, standing proud. Her hand spanned her stomach and, as she and Ronon exchanged a look, her face turned to stone.

Something was up.

"Everything go okay, here?" Sheppard asked with an assessing glance between Capshaw and him.

"Fine," Ronon said.

"Business as usual." Capshaw's eyes flickered toward Jennifer as she pulled off her gloves and faced the Colonel.

"Assuming nothing gets flagged in their blood tests, they'll be all yours shortly," she said.

"Good," he said. "As soon as you're clear, you two head back down to the brig and keep an eye on Todd. Back up his escort when it's time to move him. We'll see you at the briefing. Doc ..."

A loaded pause swelled through the charged atmosphere as Sheppard's expression set into a determined mask.

"We need to talk. In private."

"A ZPM." Removing his gaze from the data pad at his fingertips, Col. Caldwell looked skeptically across the conference table at John.

"That's right, sir. One fully charged ZPM in exchange for everything we have on the original Hoffan drug," he said, his fingers laced together in front of him.

Gathered closely around, the expressions worn by Woolsey, Rodney, Carson and Keller covered nearly every shade of suspicion in the spectrum. And, at the far end of the table, Dave stared back at him, thumb tucked under his chin and a finger pressed pensively over his lips, a veritable blank page.

Woolsey's gaze turned to Rodney. "And have we been able to authenticate these readings?"

"The data signature is genuine," the scientist answered curtly. "Todd may be pulling a fast one, but in order for him to have gotten this scan, he had to have been in possession of a fully functional ZedPM. At one point, anyway."

"But there's no way of knowing when," Caldwell said. "For all we know, this could've been recovered years ago and long since depleted."

Rodney snorted. "I think we can safely presume its discovery was fairly recent. If the Wraith had access to a fully powered ZedPM for that amount of time, I sincerely doubt we'd still be around to argue about this."

"Did he happen to mention how this ZPM came into his possession?" Woolsey asked.

"For some strange reason, he didn't want to say," John replied. "But if you think about it—where's
the only planet we know for a fact he's been to that had a cache of ZPMs practically lying around?"

"We all assumed it was because the Replicators had been wiped out and there was nothing left to talk about," John said. "What if Todd and his Wraith buddies hung back to check out the souvenirs instead?"

Dubious, Caldwell squared his shoulders and glanced around the table. "The entire planet was collapsing in on itself. There wouldn't have been much time."

"Maybe just enough to grab a ZPM and jump to hyperspace," John said.

"Sticky-fingered worm." Rodney rubbed irritably at his ear.

That brought a slight smile to John's face. Rodney was just upset because he didn't think of it first. John supposed he'd been too preoccupied destroying the Asuran homeworld to factor in another heist like the one where they'd procured the ZPM currently powering the city.

Thoughts of Elizabeth and what they'd also sacrificed on that mission quickly set in and John's mood was soon as grave as before.

Dealing with Todd was deadly business, and there was something inside of John, singing like a finger being teased along the edge of a glass, that told him it was important he stay on his game. For Teyla. For everyone.

"And Todd believes he can use our research on the Hoffan drug to manufacture a cure for this plague?" Woolsey asked.

"Not the plague. The aftereffects of the virus," Rodney said.

"So he and his hive can eat without worrying whether their next meal will be their last." John tapped a thumb on the finished wood surface as he caught Dave's studious gaze. "Michael will still be able to infect all the worlds he wants. People will keep dying and so will the Wraith that feed on the survivors. Infected populations will continue to be wiped out, only exacerbating the Wraith's food supply problem ..."

"Bloody chaos," Carson said under his breath. " Murder! That's what it is."

"Michael is a problem that will be dealt with at the earliest opportunity, Dr. Beckett," Woolsey said. "However, we have another issue at hand. Are we even certain the virus we identified on Bellerophon is related to the Hoffan drug at all?"

"Oh, aye," Carson said. "I'd recognize the nasty wee beastie anywhere. It encodes the Hoffan compound that inhibits the chemical injected into the body by a feeding Wraith. Adverse symptoms start with respiratory difficulty and rapidly progress to organ shutdown. A fifty percent mortality rate, and Michael's managed to splice it into a virus, which is a much more efficient vehicle for mass infection." Carson paused and kneaded his temples. "It took the Hoffans generations to create the original compound, and only a few years later it has not only destroyed them but also God knows how many more civilizations."

Next to him, Jennifer sighed. "It appears the viral form has been refined to accelerate the lethal effect on a feeding Wraith and reduce the carrier mortality rate to about thirty percent. But when we're talking about densely populated areas, it's still …"
Woolsey frowned. "I understand, Doctor. I saw the images Colonel Sheppard's team brought back from Bellerophon, and I assure you they won't soon be forgotten. Now, the only question remaining would seem to be whether we take Todd up on his offer. Personally, one Hive in possession of a cure doesn't seem to make that much of a difference when we consider how many are out there, and I'm not sure we can afford to leave a fully charged ZPM in the hands of the Wraith. Any Wraith. Colonel Caldwell, your opinion?"

Caldwell peered out from beneath a stern brow. "I'm inclined to agree. The Wraith already have the numbers and enough of a technological advantage over us to make them a serious threat. A ZPM at their disposal could very well destroy any chance we may have to defeat them."

John nodded. "Which brings us to the next problem."

That very moment, the doors to the conference room opened. Ronon, Mason, and two SOs escorted in Todd.

"Speak of the devil," Rodney murmured.

As the Wraith prisoner entered the conference room, the amorphous sound Dave thought he'd imagined earlier in the corridor turned inward. Though to call it a sound was a stretch. It was more like a constant, fluid vibration that seemed to spring from within the walls of the city to flit along the inside of his skull.

Dave set down his pen next to an empty notepad. He'd thought to jot down notes and any thoughts that came to mind during the briefing, but once John had started, all he could do was listen. He casually tilted his head and pushed back and forth against his outer ear, in attempt to clear the sound. It didn't help. The odd thing, though, was that he didn't seem to be the only one having trouble. Rodney snatched the radio from his ear and inspected it with a scowl fit to make all machines quiver, while Dr. Beckett gave the impression of a man trying to stave off a headache. And John …

Todd was led to a seat and John watched him with an eagle eye. His posture remained relaxed, but as he reclined further back in his chair and coolly stretched his neck, Dave recognized the subtle hints in John's body language that indicated he was ignoring something.

Maybe he wasn't imagining things, after all.

Then again, no one else in the room looked bothered by anything. Other than the extremely dangerous alien in their midst, why would they be?

"Nice of you to join us." John glared across the table at Todd. Unflinching, the Wraith's pale piercing eyes stared back. A moment of silence bred tension unlike any Dave had known before today, and a cadaverous smirk appeared on Todd's face.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting, John Sheppard." Todd's mocking tone didn't bother Dave, the familiarity assumed in his brother's name did.

The Wraith cast a high-handed glance over the group. "Where is she?"

Several around the table traded guarded looks, but John's eyes, like daggers, never moved.
Todd tilted his head, his interest palpable. "Where is your mate?"

With a tick of his cheek, John's wintry exterior turned deadly. "She's not here. And if you think you're gonna get anywhere near her again, you've got another thing coming."

Todd displayed his annoyance with a low hiss and a flash of teeth, and Dave suppressed an involuntary shudder. What did he want with Teyla and what could've spurred the unprovoked attack on her in the corridor? It couldn't be simple curiosity. The Wraith treated the people of this galaxy like livestock and had been culling them for ten thousand years. Surely, they'd seen a pregnant woman before.

Teyla's eyes as this creature took hold of her mind replayed within his memory, her limbs quaking from the effort of keeping him out of her mind. His first encounter with a Wraith and Dave already understood why dealings with them, as a policy, were met with extreme caution.

Todd emitted an indistinct growl. "Shall we come to terms, then? Or are we to continue to waste valuable time in pointless discussion?"

"If the anticipation's too much for you, I'm sure there's something we can do about that," John replied. "Ronon?"

From where he stood, Ronon placed his palm on the handle of his blaster. "Got just the thing."

Todd made another noise and then …

"Gentlemen." Not the most obvious authority in the room, Mr. Woolsey redirected everyone's focus with surprising efficiency. Dave was impressed. "I believe, Colonel, you mentioned something about a problem."

John nodded. "As I was saying, there's a slight hitch. Turns out the ZPM Todd has so generously offered isn't exactly his to give anymore."

Mr. Woolsey and Colonel Caldwell glanced between themselves and the other members of John's team, waiting to be clued in.

"It was stolen," Mason said, matter-of-factly.

Rodney turned his malignant frown on Todd. "Hurts, doesn't it?"

If the scientist hoped for a reaction, he was sorely disappointed.

"How do you propose we take possession of the ZPM if we have no idea where it is?" Caldwell asked.

"Oh, we know where it is—or rather, where it will be," John said. His gaze once again moved to the Wraith. "Go on. Tell 'em."

Todd pushed his chin out, an unshakable display of dignity Dave didn't expect from someone in chains. "The increasing strain on our food supply has forced a great many Hives to move beyond their territories in search of populations rich enough to sustain them. Such actions are necessary, but often result in conflict with any Wraith faction that has already claimed the sector."

"Let's not sugarcoat it," Rodney said. "You rip each other to shreds."
A menacing grin slowly advanced across Todd's pale features. "Yes, Dr. McKay, we kill each other. Hunger burns in us. When the choice is survival or the fires, many Wraith would rather conquer than be consumed themselves. If the choice was starvation for you and your people, would you not destroy anyone standing in your way?"

Without waiting for a response, Todd's eyes shifted defiantly back to the head of the table. "My alliance currently occupies a small region of space in the northern quadrant of the galaxy. Recently, a rival Hive dropped out of hyperspace and culled one of our planets to extinction. Since then, they have been pushing further and further into our territory. Two others have joined it and our long range sensors have detected another headed toward our space."

"Why haven't you fought back?" Caldwell asked.

"We have, but my ships are spread out and it has taken time to rebuild our numbers since our attack on the Replicator homeworld," Todd said resentfully. "After our most recent encounter, one of my lieutenants took the Zero Point Module and offered it to the invaders as a token of his allegiance."

"He got a better offer," John said to Mr. Woolsey, who looked intrigued.

"Why? What do they have that you don't?" the expedition leader asked.

All eyes turned on him, including Todd's unsettling citrine orbs. His response was dark and bitter.

"A Queen. She seeks to add my ships to her own and claim all that I have built. With the Lantean Zero Point Module, she may very well succeed. And she knows it," he growled.

Dave narrowed his gaze and took closer scrutiny of the Wraith, bewildered by his hostility. Considering what he knew of Wrath as a species, his reaction didn't make sense.

Upon his hasty introduction to the Stargate Program, Dave had pored over the SGC's files, specifically those from Atlantis. It was important he be fully versed in all he might come across in order to be effective at his job, as well as it being a point of pride. They did important work here and he wasn't going to come in only to need his hand held.

Wraith were a Hive society, similar in many ways to ants or bees. The majority were male and of differing types—drones, workers, soldiers, and the leadership caste—all under a Queen, who was paramount in the hierarchy. Males were fiercely loyal to them and served with devotion. But Todd had nothing but contempt for this one. Dave wondered if that said more about the Queen or the level of Todd's ambition.

His stomach churned with fear at the thought of John being caught between the two.

"We're assuming she ever figures out how to use it," Rodney pointed out. "Interfacing Ancient tech with Wraith organic technology is tricky under the best of circumstances, and since the Wraith don't have me working for them, that should at least buy us some time."

"Enough time for us to make the rendezvous and steal back a ZPM, anyway," Mason said with a morbid grin.

Wait. Had he missed something?
Ronon ground his teeth. He didn't like this plan the first time he'd heard it. He liked it even less now.

"Todd's contacted the Queen and arranged a meeting to negotiate his surrender," Sheppard explained, getting down to business. Good. 'Bout time they got this over with.

Sheppard started talking. To Ronon's left, Jennifer's long blonde waves broadcast her movements like a signal flare as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Over the next few minutes, her fixed posture became increasingly closed off. Her attention wavered until her gaze nailed itself to the table.

Her behavior only made him more on edge.

"In five days, the Queen's Hive will be in orbit above M6X-198," McKay said, briefly taking over. "It's a gas giant on the fringe of the Straw Nebula. Uninhabited, of course, but there are two human worlds within striking distance from there to, uh … discourage Todd from standing her up."

Sheppard spoke again. "Given the deadline, Todd gated ahead in a Dart so we could chat as soon as possible, but by tomorrow morning his Hive will have caught up to him at M11-980, the planet where we met up. Todd's proposal," he said, with a dark glare, "is that, once we hand over our data on the Hoffan drug, my team and I go along to the rendezvous point aboard his ship. We allow ourselves to be beamed inside a Dart and trust that he'll let us out once he's reached the Dart Bay on the other side to retrieve the ZPM."

"It is the only way for you to get inside the Queen's Hive undetected," Todd responded angrily. "That's what you think, Nosferatu." Sheppard's eyes swung back to address Woolsey and Caldwell. "I propose we take a Jumper. The Dart Bay doors open to let Todd in and we shadow him under cloak. While Todd distracts the Queen, we locate the ZPM and follow him out once the mission's done." He paused again for Todd's benefit, radiating distrust. "From there, you go on your merry way and we await extraction from the Daedalus."

Rodney jumped in to address Caldwell. "Todd's Hive will have a big head start on you in terms of proximity to the meeting point, but with the efficiency of our hyperdrive, you should wind up only being about twelve hours behind us."

Todd's focus stayed locked on Sheppard. The devious smirk he wore only made him uglier. "And if the Queen is not swayed by my arguments? What then, John Sheppard? You and your team may find yourselves in the center of a battle."

"All the more reason to do things my way," Sheppard replied dangerously. "You and the Queen of the Damned can shoot each other to pieces for all I care. If we went along with your plan, we'd be stuck betting on you to win. In a Jumper, at least I have a chance to fly my team out of there."

Caldwell tipped his chin, showing vague approval at the idea. Woolsey wasn't as easy to read. He always considered everything with a resting frown until he made a decision one way or another. At the opposite end of the table, Dave Sheppard looked pretty much the same, except a poker face didn't have the same impact when the one giving it had gone white as a sheet.

"Mr. Sheppard. Any thoughts from the IOA?" Woolsey asked in careful consideration.

Ronon regarded him closely as Dave took a second to reply. A deep breath. A swallow to anchor his voice. "No. No, Mr. Woolsey, I wouldn't presume. Atlantis is your business. I'm only here to observe."

Huh. There's a first for everything.
Colonel Caldwell," Woolsey asked, "is the Daedalus ready to get underway?"

"We're completing some minor repairs. Shouldn't take more than a few hours."

"Good." The expedition head nodded to Sheppard. "Colonel Sheppard, you're clear to proceed. Tomorrow morning, you'll return to M11-980 and disembark with Todd's Hive."

Ronon exhaled. Fine. They wanted the ZPM, he'd help them get it. There was always a good chance he'd get to kill something before the mission was through. With any luck, Todd would get caught in the crossfire.

He threw Capshaw a swift nod. Capshaw motioned to the SOs waiting in the wings and Ronon slammed his hand down on Todd's shoulder. "Let's go. You're done."

Todd's body immediately coiled in resistance to his grip. "I do not believe I am," he said loudly, his barbed retort aimed at Woolsey and Sheppard. "I do not believe I have received any assurance regarding your part of the bargain. The data I require for the Zero Point Module—that is our agreement."

Mr. Woolsey exhaled through his nose. "And you'll receive it in due time. Doctors?"

"Oh, aye. We can have it … soonish." Beckett glanced at Jennifer, who offered nothing more specific. She was still staring at the table and Ronon's instincts started to tingle. "We'll download it and have it ready before ya go, Colonel."

"Encrypt the data," Woolsey said. "We'll pay on delivery."

"Unacceptable," Todd hissed suddenly. "I have the information or there is no agreement."

Sheppard leaned forward. "Relax. You'll get what you want, when we get what we want."

"And what guarantee do I have that you won't take your Zero Point Module and leave me with nothing?"

"About as much as I have that you aren't leading my people into a trap," Sheppard shot back. As swift as an arrow, he glanced at Jennifer and Ronon's gaze followed. She was now fully in tune with the proceedings, her hazel eyes wide with trepidation.

What the hell was going on?

Todd growled, baring his teeth. "I might've known dealings with you would be impossible, even when both sides stand so much to gain. You let paranoia cloud your judgment."

"From where we sit," Rodney said, "paranoia seems like a perfectly healthy place to be."

"A sentiment I would fully expect from the likes of you, Dr. McKay."

"Hey!"

Woolsey raised his voice over the din. "It seems to me that a certain amount of trust will be required on both sides of the discussion." He turned on Todd. "What if we release half of the data to you now and half when Colonel Sheppard's team is in possession of the ZPM?"

Todd bristled at the offer. "With what assurances that the information is genuine?"

"You can confirm on your ship before your departure."
"And the rest?" he pushed. "Falsified information will do my Hive no good against this plague and it is clear that our demise would fall directly into line with your desires."

John's eyes narrowed sharply. "After what you just did to Teyla, can you blame us?"

On Woolsey's right, Caldwell sighed and muttered, "We're getting nowhere."

"What if I go with them?" Jennifer blurted out from across the table. The room abruptly went quiet. Her chest heaved up and down with rising anxiety. She peered at Ronon and their eyes met, his shocked and hers brimming with disbelief that she'd actually spoken.

Jennifer gulped and pressed her lips together before opening her mouth again. "I'm Chief Medical Officer. Mine is one of two security codes required to access the data on the Hoffan drug, and I'm more familiar with it than nearly anyone in the galaxy."

Beckett stammered, but Jennifer didn't give him a chance to protest. She sat taller in her seat and took on Todd with an involuntary shake in her voice. "You need this data and we need that ZPM. If you're so worried the data we give you might be fake, I can be collateral. You can test it. If it's not what we say it is, you can take me instead."

Ronon stood paralyzed, torn between wanting to walk over there and shake some sense into her, and putting his blaster to good use and ending this discussion once and for all.

Todd was finally quiet. Like he was actually considering it, Ronon thought as he tried to tamp down a sudden flush of rage.

He rapidly scanned the faces around him. Dave Sheppard had managed to best Woolsey's famous pensive frown with one of his own. McKay was so bent out of shape not knowing what to say you'd think someone had ripped his tongue out. The only other one that reflected his pure outrage, however, was Capshaw. Hunched over the table, a fist clutched tightly in his other hand, Ronon recognized a fellow soldier ready to take the room apart at the slightest provocation.

But Sheppard didn't look surprised at all.

Ronon suddenly remembered Sheppard wanting to talk to Jennifer as he left the infirmary. He'd assumed it was about Teyla. Now he wasn't so sure.

Snapping out of his temporary stupor, Woolsey tried to gain control of the situation. "Are you … certain you've thought this through, Dr. Keller? I'm sure we can negotiate some way to—"

She nodded instantly. "I have, Mr. Woolsey." She paused and stole another glance toward Sheppard. "This mission is important and it seems like the simplest solution for everyone."

"You …" Capshaw's voice carried through the space, tense, words slipping from his mouth as if he was unable to keep quiet. "You don't have to do this."

Jennifer stilled, her eyes moist as she looked longingly back at him. "Yes, I do."

Woolsey exhaled. "Well … I suppose we could … Colonel Sheppard, what do you say to this?"

Sheppard drummed his fingers against the tabletop, making a show of considering it. "If she's willing, I don't see a problem. She'll be with us the entire trip there, and while we retrieve the ZPM, she can stay in the Jumper. With it cloaked, no one will find her and she can alert us if anything goes wrong."
"And, uh … Todd? Are the doctor's terms acceptable?" Woolsey posed.

Todd's eyes roamed over her, reading her with hungry intent. Ronon wanted to gut him.

"It is acceptable."

"Fine," Woolsey's tone had a heavy quality that suggested otherwise. "That's just … fine. Ronon?" He glanced up, thoroughly deflated by the turn of events. "You can see our guest back to his accommodations now."

"Hang on, Ronon."

Sheppard waved the SOs forward and told them to go ahead with moving Todd back to his cell. Ronon and Capshaw were needed here for another minute. The two men followed orders and the conference room was soon minus one Wraith.

Sheppard took in those remaining as though ready for the yelling to start. Trust McKay not to make him wait long.

"What the hell are you two up to?" he shouted, completely irrespective of Woolsey, Caldwell, and the IOA representative in the room.

Sheppard and Jennifer swapped a look. She released a trembling breath and shook her head.

Sheppard paced deliberately forward to grip the back of his chair. "I need the doc along. We need insurance. I'm taking along a canister of Carson's weaponized Iratus bug retrovirus. Once we're on board the Queen's Hive, we'll plant it in the ventilation system. If anything happens on the mission, if Todd tries something not according to plan, she'll be there to release the gas."

"My God," Beckett whispered.

"This is what a stroke feels like. Jeannie said it would happen one day and it finally has," McKay murmured. "Have you lost your mind?! Turn them human? We know it won't last and the last thing we need is a few hundred new Michaels running around!"

"We don't need it to last, Rodney. It'll take a few hours to complete the transformation. They'll be indisposed long enough for us to get the ZPM and destroy the Hive. Todd's Hive won't even know what's happening."

Ronon peered at Jennifer, who could hardly look at anyone.

Cautious, Woolsey cleared his throat. "Uh, Colonel? If Todd is to be negotiating with the Queen, won't he get infected as well?"

Sheppard stared briefly into empty space. A steel mask gradually replaced the face of the friendly officer Ronon knew, and his response was ice cold.

"Who cares?"

It took further discussion, but John's plan was finally accepted and the briefing adjourned. As his colleagues filed out of the conference room, John closed his eyes to escape the chorus of uncertainty
and disapproval that had been all over their faces.

He got it. This was a strictly military op, and taking the doctor along was an unnecessary risk. The last thing he wanted was to put Keller in harm's way, but he couldn't place his team squarely in Todd's clutches without a way to beat his endgame, which he still couldn't quite figure out.

Frustrated, he briefly massaged his temple, that persistent hum still buzzing in his ears and beneath his skin. Keller would be okay. He was confident he could keep her reasonably safe.

Ready to drag himself from his chair and leave, he glanced to the other end of the table where Dave still sat, studying him hard without uttering a word. He was like Dad that way. Always careful, patient. He knew when to bide his time and how to make someone squirm in the meantime.

Too bad for Dave that hadn't worked on him since he was a teenager.

"I don't have time for games, Dave," he said calmly. "Whatever you want to say, say it."

Little by little, Dave's boardroom facade peeled away, but John still wasn't sure who he'd be talking to when he decided to speak. The voice of the IOA, content to keep his criticisms behind closed doors for the time being? Or would he be the can-do-no-wrong apple of his father's eye? Neither would surprise him, but John found himself hoping he would just be his big brother.

Dave glanced at the table's pristine mahogany finish and exhaled. "Do you remember the time I was playing t-ball by myself in the front yard?"

John's forehead wrinkled at the unexpected question. "Oh yeah. I remember." The perpetrator behind John Sheppard's inaugural set of stitches had been none other than his nine year old older brother armed with a t-ball stand and a wooden bat. Five year old John had been standing behind the plate watching when Dave took a swing. The next thing he remembered, his head hurt and his brother was making crowd noises and shouting "And the crowd goes wild!" as he ran the bases. "Word of advice? You're not supposed to hear a thunk on the backswing."

"I told you to back up, but you kept scooting forward again."

"Six stitches, Dave."

Dave chuckled. "I'll never forget Mom's face when you went inside. All that blood, you covering your face. I thought I'd taken your eye out."

John smiled. Luckily, it hadn't been that bad. Thirty plus years later, he still had a scar just beneath his left eyebrow, but it had faded to the point he was pretty sure he was the only one who could see it.

"What brought that up?" John asked.

The laughter in Dave's expression died away and stoicism returned. "I was just wondering if I hit you too hard. John, you can't seriously be considering going on this mission."

John sighed. So that was it.

"There has to be some other way," his brother went on, the worry in his voice plain. "Five days alone on Wraith Hive ship, only to conduct a raid on another, more hostile one? It … it's insane! What kind of person does that?"

John ambled across the room and settled against the edge of the table next to him. "I do. My team
does. It's our job. We do it because someone has to."

All the years he'd been in the service and his family had never understood that. However, it meant a lot to him that Dave was trying.

"What is it with you and this Wraith, John?" Dave asked. "You know you can't trust him."

He nodded his head. "A ZPM is too valuable a commodity to pass on and Todd knows that. He knows we rely on ZPMs to power the city's core systems. He knows we can't afford to say no."

Dave stayed quiet for several moments, his features under tight control as he tried to come to terms with realities that John lived with every day. The Wraith were a threat. Missions were dangerous but unavoidable, or lives could be lost. At least he wasn't asking the one question his father had over and over again: Why does it have to be you?

"Just think of it this way," John said. "This is our chance to prove to you that Atlantis is still of use to Earth. If the IOA want a ZPM for the Antarctic Platform, then we'll get them one."

The corner of Dave's mouth turned at the thought, but his appearance remained staid.

"I'm coming back, Dave. You don't have to worry."

"How do you know?" Dave shook his head. His words had weight, his breath had purpose. "How did you know? In the hallway earlier with Todd and Teyla. No one radioed. No one called for help. You were just there. How did you know?"

John pursed his lips into a soft frown. The haunted look in Dave's eyes penetrated him to the core.

"There's something happening here, John, I can feel it. I'm just not sure what it is."

Conflicted, John turned away and stared at the wall. He wanted to trust Dave with what had happened to him since Teyla had gotten pregnant, the things his daughter was capable of, but he wasn't sure how Dave would react. One decision in John's life had already fractured their relationship. What would Dave do when he found out his little brother had changed more than he thought? When he found out his niece was more special than either of them could've imagined?

A few moments later, John reached out and grasped his brother's shoulder. "When I get back, we'll talk, okay?"

It was the right thing to do. If they were ever going to have a close relationship again, John had to trust him sometime.

Dave glanced across at him, hopeful, meeting his eyes with a flash of blue as deep as the ocean.

"Okay."

"Hey!"

Once everyone from the briefing had dispersed, Ronon hustled after Jennifer and caught her by the arm. He spun her around to face him.
"Ronon, don't," she said in a choked whisper.

When she wouldn't look at him, he yanked her closer. She wasn't going to avoid him. Not now. Not after everything they'd been through.

"What are you doing?" he asked in an urgent tone.

"I'm only doing what anyone else here would do in my place."

"You're not going on this mission," he said. "You don't belong out there."

"Believe me, you don't need to remind me. But it's too late and it's not your decision!"

She jerked her arm free and glared up at him. "Colonel Sheppard isn't forcing me to go; I agreed to it. You need a doctor there to make sure the virus is delivered safely, and as the department head, it's my responsibility."

She was afraid. That was painfully clear. Why was she doing this?

"You and I both know the only reason I was promoted to CMO is because the original Carson Beckett died. No one knows more about the Hoffan virus than Carson and planets are getting infected with it. If anything happens, Carson is the one most likely to find a way to treat it. Not me. He needs to be here, which means I'm the one that has to go. So please, please just leave it alone."

"Jennifer …"

"Let me do my job, Ronon," she begged. Moisture clouded her eyes. "I have to do my job."

Faster than he could think, she twirled and marched away. Dumbstruck, it took him a few seconds to sort out what had just happened, and when he did he shouted his frustration to the corridor.

He couldn't do this again. Not again.

He couldn't stand by and watch as she put her life in danger.

A little way behind him, the conference room doors swished open and Sheppard's voice carried into the hallway along with his brother's.

"Oh, hey, Chewie. What's up?"

Ronon peered over his shoulder, muscles taut and fists clenched at his side.

Sheppard's face immediately darkened in concern. Ronon thundered in response.

"This. Is a mistake."

Chapter End Notes

So, now you're all caught up with me. I guess I'd better start writing. ;-) 'Til next time, folks!
Peering Into Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

Nacimynom, alicesandra, and karasel all get Gold Stars for their hard work and general chit chat that helped to form this chapter. You’re always appreciated!

Selected dialogue from Common Ground makes an appearance. All rights and credit go to Ken Cuperus, the writer of that amazing episode.

And for reference:
- MCMAP - Marine Corps Martial Arts Program
- AFCP - Air Force Combatives Program
- SERE - Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape

It was the end of what seemed like a particularly long shift, and Major CJ Everett ambled away from Operations in the company of Major Lorne, toying with the thumb drive he'd just given her.

"Bunjes would be a good choice," he suggested. "Or Fuller, or Hawkes. There are some civilian applicants in there as well. Different skill sets, depending on what you’re looking for to round out your team."

"I'll keep that in mind." She gave the portable drive one last twirl through her fingers and then pocketed it for later. It looked like she had her bedtime reading for the night.

For most people, slipping into their pajamas and curling up with a good book was the most relaxing point of their day. CJ had given that up the day she became an officer. No matter where she'd been posted, there was always something to be studied or coordinated. Over time, her favorite moment of the day had become simply when she stepped inside her quarters, took down her hair, shook it loose, and combed her fingers through the tumbling waves. A quickly applied scalp massage sounded like heaven after today's briefing with Colonel Sheppard, an afternoon spent running drills along the pier, and a morning that …

The figure of the Wraith prisoner flashed vividly in her mind. She was tormented by the thought that a face like it had stared down at her father and stolen everything he had to live for. Nearly three years she'd worked to get to Atlantis, her sole aim to confront the beings that had destroyed her father. Three years. And she hadn't been ready. One look at that … thing … and her clumsily patched wound had been reopened, all her emotions shaken loose and laid out on display. She'd felt like a helpless little girl.

"Any, uh … Any specific skill set I should be targeting?" She made eye contact to refocus before her thoughts strayed any further.

Lorne jogged his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. "Well, we never really know what we'll run into on the other side of the Gate, so …"

"Use your best judgment and pray. Got it." CJ managed a modest smile, but she hoped to do better than that. After meeting Dr. Porter and Sergeant Mehra personally - a quiet "hi" and sad eyes from the doctor and a subdued "yo" from the marine - she felt she owed it to them and to the woman
whose shoes she'd been charged to fill.

They reached the transporter and stepped inside.

"Where are you headed?" Lorne asked.

"Quarters. Tier 13. You?"

"Mess hall. I was supposed to meet a few friends for dinner. Although, that was half an hour ago. I'll be lucky if they waited."

"I'm sure they did."

Lorne adopted a wry smirk. "You haven't met Dr. McKay yet, have you?"

She thought for a moment. "Briefly, I think. At the party last night. He's on the Colonel's team, right? Average-looking guy, kind of wired, talks really fast?"

"That's him."

"Hmm. He seemed … interesting."

"Just wait," he said. "It gets better."

He pressed a finger to the map on the wall and hit the indicator for the outer hub in the central subsection of the city—the tower that served as housing for most of the expedition. The doors opened and a new corridor waited on the other side.

"C'mon," Lorne said, "I'll walk you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that." She might be new around here, but the layout was self-explanatory. Her quarters were up two flights, the fourth door on the right. "I'm sure you can catch your friends if you hurry."

"Nah, it's no trouble," he insisted. "Where to?"

Okaaaay.

CJ liked Major Lorne. He took everything in stride and, unlike a lot of officers she'd met, didn't seem overly obsessed with advancement. She'd actually been introduced to him once at the SGC, during the expedition's brief return to Earth. Trying to dig her way out of the roughest period in her life, she'd only just been brought into the Stargate program after finally deciding to turn down the offer to be an instructor in the SERE program and the AFCP at the Air Force Academy—a position that had once meant she could have it all; career, love, and stability, all at the same time. It had been painful to let that dream go, but by that time, her fiancé had already walked away, and stability didn't mean as much with her father gone and her family broken.

CJ was sure she was just another face in the crowd to Major Lorne at the time and the acquaintance hadn't stuck, but he appeared to genuinely enjoy his job. She had noticed that about him even then.

She appreciated that he'd gone out of his way the last few days to make sure her transition into the base's military command staff went as smoothly as possible, but this was a little above and beyond.

Quietly suspicious of his motives, she pointed toward the stairwell.

He gestured with an open hand. "Lead the way, Major."
They started forward again. Lorne traversed the stairs with an effortless hop in his step.

"So, um … I've already got a scientist - Dr. Porter," she said, desperate to avoid an awkward silence. "Would Colonel Sheppard approve another civilian?"

"Rule of thumb for a four-person team is at least two military and one scientist. The remaining slot is usually left to the team leader's discretion, since we generally know who'll work the best with what we've already got. Colonel Sheppard trusts us to make the right call."

CJ glanced at him in surprise. "Usually unit assignments have to undergo three rounds of approval before anything gets rubber stamped."

"Well, we don't get green officers here. If Colonel Sheppard makes changes to team assignments, it's because he knows something we don't. Otherwise, he expects us to deal with any team issues that arise. And get all appropriate paperwork submitted, of course. On time."

That wasn't what she'd heard.

"I didn't think Colonel Sheppard was a stickler for paperwork."

Lorne chuckled. "He isn't. But have you met Mr. Woolsey?"

She laughed. It was nice to be able to again. She hadn't been able to for a long time without it feeling wrong. The only problem now was that she knew how fragile happiness could be, how quickly it could all get wiped away.

"How did the gene therapy go, by the way?" Lorne asked as they hit the landing and neared her doorway.

She exhaled and smiled at the gentle sense of relief it brought. "Good. The doctor said I can expect to be randomly accosted by scientists from now on."

"True story. Wish it wasn't," he said. "However, since you're now officially one of the few military pilots we have with the ATA gene, we need to get you in a Jumper soon to log some hours. That you're gonna love." She stopped in front of her room and the two faced one another. "Stackhouse is this month's flight supervisor for Jumper certification. I usually only oversee final assessments, but in your case, I'm happy to give you the rundown myself. Just let me know when you're free."

Okay. This extra attention was becoming too much.

"I don't think that'll be necessary, Major. I've studied the schematics, and from what I understand, the Jumpers are fairly easy to handle once you have down the basics. I've already taken up too much of your time as it is."

"I don't mind."

"Major …" An uncomfortable sensation settled in the pit of her stomach to couple with the persistent hum that been throbbing at the back of her head all day. At first, she'd thought the Wraith was playing tricks with her mind, but later she chalked it up to a simple headache. "Major, I don't mean to be rude, but what's this all about?"

She wasn't detecting any romantic interest, and Lorne didn't seem the "keep your friends close and your enemies closer" type. Her assignment here was only temporary. He had to know they weren't in competition with each other.
He pursed his lips and glanced past her at a pair of scientists walking in the opposite direction. When his gaze settled on her again, his carefree attitude had dampened and a steady frown had taken its place, making her nervous.

"Listen, Major … I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. I didn't know your father. I came to Atlantis with the first wave of reinforcements on the Daedalus, but … I saw him as he left."

CJ looked away.

"He was a good man and a capable leader. He and his men helped save a lot of lives during the Siege. I'm just sorry we couldn't save his."

CJ nodded, willing herself not to cry, and glanced up again.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said.

"No, it's fine." She quickly took another breath. "So does everyone know? About my father?"

First, Ronon. Now, Lorne. Who would it be next? Was her entire tour here going to be one endless parade of condolences after another? She couldn't imagine anything worse.

"I guess I should've known. Gossip on a military base spreads like wildfire."

Major Lorne's eyes went wide at that and he quickly held up a hand. "Hold up, Major. As far as I know, the only way anyone would know about your father is if they have access to your file, and by my count, there are only three people that do: Mr. Woolsey, Colonel Sheppard, and me. No one's going to turn your family into gossip."

She nodded again, somewhat mollified, and her gaze wandered the corridor.

She was overreacting. Of course, Lorne would know. He was second in command of the military contingent and his seniority made him her direct superior. Colonel Sheppard would know. In her estimation, a commander who didn't know who was serving under him wasn't much of a commander. And he knew her father. Several of the people here did, Colonel Sheppard's team in particular. She supposed it was natural he would tell them, especially Ronon. Sheppard would want his teammate to know the woman he was going to be working closely with for the next four months.

She huffed. She highly doubted Ronon would be telling anyone. In order to do that, he'd have to stop throwing his weight around long enough to carry on a civilized conversation. Fat chance of that happening.

"You okay?" Lorne asked, his features both hopeful and worried.

That wasn't the easiest question to answer anymore.

"Yeah, I just …" She paused and eventually released a sigh. "My father wasn't like that, you know? Before. He never would've … I don't want people thinking that's who he was. He didn't just give up. It was the Wraith." Her voice shrunk. "He wasn't the same afterward."

Before Lorne could respond, CJ's next door neighbor, a Marine sergeant appeared at the top of the stairs behind him, speaking into her comm and wearing a big smile. "Yeah, right. I got it. In a few, okay? Yeah, I'll hurry." She gave her radio a light tap and saw them up ahead. "Majors!" Sergeant Benson inclined her chin at Lorne first, then CJ.

"What's the news, Sergeant?" Lorne asked.
"Oh, Ronon and Capshaw are tearing it up in the gym. I wouldn't miss it, but I'm dying to get out of these clothes."

"Ronon?" CJ's interest was suddenly piqued.

Lorne responded first. "You know how it is before a big mission. They're just blowing off some steam. It's worth seeing, if you're interested."

"Oh, I'm interested," she swiftly replied. "What about your dinner?"

He shrugged. "It's waited this long. It can wait a little longer."

CJ found herself smiling once again, this time sly and a little smug at the opportunity that had just been handed to her. Ronon wouldn't be able to get out of this one. "Just hang on one second? I need to grab something from my quarters."

She ducked inside and rummaged through her things, eager to set her thoughts in a different direction.

Ronon, the big, gruff object of her primary assignment, was as good a target as any.

---

Across the table, Teyla observed with morbid fascination as Rodney dipped his dinner roll in gravy and bit a large piece out of it. His plate was piled high with pieces of chicken, mashed potatoes, and a wisp of green on the other side that she could only assume was Rodney's version of a salad, and he seemed intent on inhaling it all as fast as humanly possible. He wouldn't want to keep his second helping waiting.

Between the sight of Rodney gorging himself and the slow shift of the baby deep within her belly, Teyla started to feel queasy.

Radek, seated to his left, caught her eye knowingly and then returned to his own food. "You might want to think about slowing down, Rodney."

"Easy for you to say," Rodney muttered around a glob of bread, which he quickly swallowed down. "You're not looking at a week of power bars and MREs."

"You're going to get an upset stomach."

"Your concern has been duly noted, Mother."

"Rodney does this every time he knows he will be away from the city for an extended period. I have discussed it with him many times," Teyla said, happier to mediate their bickering than to dwell on the upcoming mission. However, the moment she finished, the steadily growing sound in her mind reasserted itself.

It had remained a quiet presence within her all day, yet somehow it had grown. The sonorous hum almost had its own voice now, whispers that danced through her consciousness like raindrops trickling over glass. There were no words she understood. Whatever inflections she heard came to her as splintered fragments of images never fully constructed. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced. Extraordinarily powerful, she sensed, but nothing like the crush of Todd's mind against
hers. It warmed her, in fact. It had gradually drawn off the forbidding chill of Todd's presence in the city and made it bearable.

For a time, she had worried perhaps it was more of her child's gifts seeping through the carefully placed walls she had separating them, which could be dangerous for both of them. But then she recognized nothing of her daughter in its wake.

There was nothing human about it.

"Fine," Radek said. His eyes narrowed at Rodney behind his glasses as he casually waved an empty fork at him. "But don't blame me when you're on Todd's Hive with indigestion and Ronon tries to kill you because you can't stop moaning. And not one word while we're in the lab either. That is non-negotiable."

"As if I'd give you the satisfaction."

"Are you working late tonight as well, Rodney?" Teyla asked as she tried to regain her bearings. She leaned in with her elbow to the tabletop and massaged her temple.

Oblivious to her struggle, Rodney continued to munch. "Have to. I've got to finish getting Yenta, here, up to speed." Radek rolled his eyes. "And I've got to invent a way to LoJack a Hive ship in less than twelve hours."

Of course, over the radio John had related to her what had been decided during the briefing. One of the conditions Mr. Woolsey had set before agreeing to John's plan was that the Daedalus needed some way to locate Todd's Hive, in case Todd decided to alter course and attempted to disappear with John and his team still inside.

"I was thinking perhaps we could adapt a Runner tracking beacon," Radek interjected, their hostilities apparently forgotten. "Kiryk's is still attached to his spine, but I think Dr. Beckett has Ronon's old one in storage."

Rodney cocked his chin in sudden consideration. "It's Wraith tech, so they wouldn't necessarily detect it until it's activated."

Radek nodded. "And when properly calibrated, it's detectable by our sensors over vast distances."

"My life is going to be in Caldwell's hands. He'd better have the Daedalus' sensors properly calibrated." Rodney idly twirled his fork in his mashed potatoes. "We keep it separate from their primary or auxiliary systems, it might take the Wraith a while to find it to disable it."

"Every second increases the Daedalus' chances of pinpointing your location."

"Hmm." Rodney pursed his lips. "Might be worth looking into, at least."

Teyla didn't hear Radek's response. His incensed grumblings in his native language were suddenly drowned out as the fragmented whispers found an instant of cohesion.

The image of two warring Hives blazed across her vision, a swarm of Darts buzzing around them as they pummeled each other across space. A hand grasped her shoulder from behind, wrenching her out of the path of an oncoming Dart.

Teyla jolted and spun her head around to see John standing above her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."
As her heart hammered away in her chest, she cobbled together a passable smile for the man she loved. "I must have gotten distracted."

"These two'll do that to you," he said, referring across the table. That sparked off another diatribe of indignation from Rodney, but John seemed distracted too. Rodney's words bounced harmlessly off him. John's contemplative hazel eyes did not even meet his. Instead, his gaze moved in a meandering path that ultimately led to her. He looked at her questioningly, as if searching for something he hoped she possessed.

Without preamble, another fountain of images rippled in front of her eyes. In jumbles and pieces, she saw planets and people in numbers untold, life and death, flowers and blood. Time swooped by like a great pendulum, and as if she was being plucked from one point and flung into another, she heard a woman scream and saw a man she'd never met. Hate and sadness in his eyes, Ronon lifted his blaster, and somewhere else, possessing only hate, John fired.

"He is not coming."

Teyla's voice sounded split. Two voices, one hers and one not, spoke in unison as she watched another figure in the distance. The images were starting to crumble and she couldn't see his face, but some instinct whispered that she knew him.

He stood in place, his head unmoving, a statue against the waning sunlight. He was alone. Broken. Wrong. Swaying from sheer exhaustion, the man staggered and fell to his knees. She wanted to cry out to him, but knew she couldn't. And then she was running, leaving him behind as familiar words chased her into the woods.

"Take her. You have to take her, John. Run."

Rodney's voice gradually registered through the white noise enveloping Teyla's mind. " … I'm now less that twelve hours away from going on a mission will undoubtedly end badly for all involved, and I've had the weirdest ringing in my ears ALL day," he sniped at Radek. "How am I supposed to know if I've done something wrong?"

"Well, what do you expect, Rodney?" Teyla was surprised to find herself the topic of discussion. Radek gestured vaguely at her plate. "It isn't easy watching you stuff yourself. It's a wonder you haven't made her sick."

She swallowed heavily, the taste of bile indeed heavy in the back of her throat, though not for the reason he might have believed. Teyla peered up and caught John massaging his forehead, the nailbeds of his fingers paling under the pressure. He didn't appear to have noticed the pair's exchange either.

John?

She only asked if he was well. If these visions were not being generated through her daughter's gifts, he couldn't have seen them as well. Could he?

He met her eyes and, after a second, answered with a subtle shake of his head. His hand on her shoulder slowly squeezed.

"I am …" She paused for a beat, inhaled deeply and then exhaled to gather her wits. "I am afraid I do not have much of an appetite at the moment. You may have mine if you wish, Rodney."

The mess hall staff typically made a spread of sandwiches and a selection of two soups available for those who didn't care for the day's main dishes. Teyla, truthfully, hadn't been terribly hungry earlier
either, so all she had was a bowl of tomato soup, a packet of crackers, and a sandwich.

Radek immediately chortled. "Yes, please, Rodney. Take it, so I can tell everyone you're now eating for two."

Rodney's face wrinkled and a scowl formed as he studied the remains on his tray. "Well, thank you very much. You've ruined my dinner now."

"I consider it a public service." Radek dug back into his own food with thinly disguised glee.

"So, um …" John finally took a seat next to Teyla. He scanned the table and cleared his throat. "So where is everybody? I thought we were all having dinner together."

Rodney and Radek traded an uneasy glance. Rodney was the one to speak. "See ... the thing is Ronon and Mason were here, looking all broody, and then one motions with his head and then the other nods, and then poof—they took off."

"They should be studied," Radek said. "Between the two of them, they've rendered the evolutionary concept of language completely moot."

John nodded and his mouth settled into an accepting frown. A reflection of guilt crept up in a corner of Teyla's consciousness. "I guess I should've expected that after the Keller business at the briefing."

"Speaking of Dr. Keller …" Radek mumbled under his breath.

"What?" John asked bluntly.

Teyla touched his arm. "She and Dr. Beckett radioed to say they could not make it. They are still working on a means to safely contain Dr. Beckett's virus that Jennifer might easily conceal from the Wraith. They sent their apologies."

John's shoulders sagged. "Right."

"Major Lorne just didn't show up," Rodney said bluntly.

John's tone moved from disappointment to annoyance. "Yes, thank you, Rodney, for pointing out I'm not the most popular guy on campus right now. But I knew about Lorne. He was still finishing up some stuff with Major Everett when I came down here."

"And David?" Teyla asked quietly. His guilt projected itself inside her so efficiently it slowly became hers.

"I knew about him, too." John exhaled. "This is all pretty new to him. He needed some time to think. Anyway, it's not like we ever did any big farewell dinners before. Why would it be any different now?"

Teyla looked at him, saddened by the resignation in his heart and voice. John and David had made strides in improving their relationship, but the fact remained that old wounds ran deep. New ones come and go, but if allowed to take root, they become part of who we are. Excising them once that happened took great strength and would only come with time.

"He will be there tomorrow, before you go," she said. "Let us have dinner, alright?"

John's features expressed doubt, but he nodded anyway. Rodney's extreme preparations aside, it was best that they had a good meal. Although what she had seen weighed heavily on her mind and
compounded with the weight of the child pressing on her belly to further destroy her appetite, Teyla decided to eat too.

Their friends would come around in their own time. Until then, she didn't want John to think he walked this road alone.

---

CJ didn't know what she expected when she followed Major Lorne to the gym, but it wasn't this. A crowd had gathered. People hollered from the sidelines. Money, a mixture of various national currencies and military scrip, was changing hands to a chorus of unintelligible shouts. She was surprised this many bodies could fit into what was a relatively small room.

"Was that a Gate tech I saw taking bets?" she asked, her voice raised so she could be heard through the din.

Lorne laughed. "Welcome to Thunderdome," he shouted, before they attempted to navigate through the mass of rapt spectators. He grabbed her hand along the way so they wouldn't get separated. CJ was skeptical the whole way. They had to be pretty hard up for entertainment if a simple sparring match could draw this kind of frenzied attention.

However, she quickly changed her mind.

They managed to wedge a space for themselves where they could see. At the epicenter, Ronon and Sergeant Capshaw were giving a show worth the fuss.

CJ reached for her camcorder and started filming.

She tried to follow the action through the vidscreen, but her eyes kept getting drawn upward to the frenetic clash of bodies taking place on the mats. Ronon threw a punch. Capshaw caught his wrist and forced the elbow up in a fast vertical lock. Then, he swept the back of Ronon's leg, flipping him backward over Capshaw's waiting knee. It was a textbook MCMAP maneuver, the martial arts combat training program for the Marine Corps. The move would ordinarily wind up with Ronon sprawled out on the floor, but in a stunning display of strength and agility, Ronon rooted his hands on either side of his head and pushed against the mat. Halting his unwieldy rearward trajectory, Ronon planted his right foot squarely in the center of Capshaw's chest, then hooked his neck and yanked.

Capshaw lurched wildly. While he fought to keep his feet underneath him, Ronon tucked his legs and somersaulted backward. He was on his feet in a flash and the two launched into each other again.

Impressive.

Her heart starting to thump loudly in response to all of the ambient adrenaline, CJ glanced down at her hands to make sure the camera was still lined up and then swiftly returned her gaze to the match itself. As she looked up, Capshaw opened up for an overhead strike. Ronon lifted his arm, meeting him halfway, and maneuvered in close to bombard Capshaw with a rapid series of body shots. With confounding ease, Capshaw drew his arm across his chest and unleashed a fierce backhand punch, whipping Ronon's head around, and shoved.

A student of the martial arts since she was eight years old, CJ couldn't help but analyze their
movements, and again the markers of Marine training leaped out at her. Economy of movement. Inflict damage, make space, and go for your weapon. Extremely effective in life-or-death battle scenarios, and regardless of the fact they were only fighting hand to hand, Capshaw was unusually proficient. Not your garden variety Marine, then. She pegged him as Special Forces, easy.

He clearly had his hands full with Ronon, however.

_One mind, any weapon._ That was the MCMAP philosophy.

Ronon, on the other hand, _was_ a weapon.

He was relentless. Whatever space Capshaw managed to create evaporated instantly. Blows were constant and varied, his movements round and fluid. Arms and legs flew at a screaming pace. He seemed to be testing Capshaw's reach, strength, speed, and he dodged a huge fist with deceptive ease as Capshaw bulled forward. Scrambling to keep up, CJ quickly adjusted the camera's aim to follow them, and then narrowed her eyes to examine his every move.

So this was how a Satedan fought. Ronon had a regimental style with a lot of similarities to Capoeira, Krav Maga, and Jiu-Jitsu. But in terms of pure technique, Ronon was … sloppy. Whatever discipline he possessed had been allowed to slip around the edges. Precision was often sacrificed for brute force, which could be an asset or a liability, depending on the circumstances.

He was impulsive. Unpredictable.

He was also formidable and highly adaptable.

A small smile graced her lips. She was starting to look forward to this assignment.

Then, Ronon threw a feint to Capshaw's ribs and instead nailed him with a mean left cross to the side of the head, completely altering the dynamic of the match.

The shocking thud rippled through the crowd. Pained moans were heard among the yelling. Even CJ gave a sympathetic wince as Capshaw tumbled to the mat. He silently clutched his head and sluggishly rolled to his side, apparently stunned.

Two bystanders—possibly some of Ronon's other specialized trainees—jumped in, ostensibly to give Capshaw more time to recover as Ronon closed in, but they didn't buy him much. In a second, Ronon had trapped the first taker by the arm and hurled him across the mats, while the other took a shot at him with a roundhouse kick anyone could've seen coming. Undaunted, Ronon caught him by the calf and flipped him ass over elbows.

The way to Capshaw clear again, Ronon stretched out his arm and motioned to someone in the crowd as he stalked forward.

"Oh, crap," Lorne muttered next to her.

"What?" she asked.

He didn't reply, only directed his voice urgently to the floor. "Capshaw, get up!"

A slender wooden rod was thrown out from the sidelines. Some from the crowd echoed Lorne's call to get up and others egged Ronon on. Ronon caught the rod and twirled it in his palm, his eyes on the prone Marine, standing over him like a lion over meat. Then, without warning, his leisurely posture vanished and he swung the rod in a wide arc.
"Mason!" someone shouted.

Another wooden rod landed in the flat of Capshaw’s hand as Ronon’s sped mercilessly toward him, and Capshaw unexpectedly came to life. He inverted the rod across his forearm and brought his arm over his body. The weapons crashed together and Capshaw’s absorbed the force of Ronon’s strike like a protective shield. He thrust his boot into Ronon’s stomach, and as Ronon rushed forward again, he spun out of the way and narrowly evaded the return strike that slammed into the mat.

The resulting *thwack* nearly left CJ breathless. "Is he always like this?"

"Who? Ronon? Pretty much. Whenever he gets a challenge." Lorne hissed through his teeth as Capshaw narrowly dodged another swing and clamored to his feet.

They attacked each other again. Wielding the rods, their momentum built and the weapons collided at ever increasing speeds. Cut, thrust, parry, cross, elbow, block, kick. Through sheer force of strength, Capshaw managed to knock Ronon back, once again creating space, although it was obvious this time he needed it. Despite his miraculous recovery, he was now struggling to keep up.

Ronon rushed him. Capshaw ducked a few swipes to the head, but Ronon seized Capshaw by the neck with his free hand and held him down as he dealt him another tough hit to the back of the legs.

"Ooooh!" the crowd moaned.

"Ah, damn it," Lorne said under his breath. "Mason's had it."

Capshaw retaliated, but true to Lorne's prediction, Ronon seized Capshaw's arm mid-stroke. He whirled his rod around to do a one eighty and brought it across Capshaw’s back in a long slashing motion. Capshaw grunted, and Ronon pulled him in by the collar and slashed him again across the chest. A killing blow. Finally, Ronon brought the tip of the rod to rest at the base of Capshaw's chin and pushed up.

"You're right," he said, his respiration hard, trading similar breaths with Capshaw as the Marine stared back at him. "You are rusty."

Sweaty, Capshaw rolled his eyes.

Ronon dismissed him with a shove, and just like that it was over.

Certain members of the crowd hooted and howled their appreciation, while others contented themselves to collecting their winnings. Excited chatter filled the gym, and CJ found herself similarly stirred up.

Ronon certainly had style.

She stopped the recording and hung the camcorder back around her wrist. When she looked up again, Lorne was eyeing her with a smirk. "Having second thoughts about squaring off with him, now?"

CJ smiled and let the question slide. If Lorne thought she'd get scared away by a demonstration, he couldn't be further off the mark.

If she could just get Ronon to engage with her …

It would be intense.
She thought about the rush of taking on someone with that raw nature and level of skill. The prospect thrilled her.

The trick, though, would be getting him to work with her without an argument.

She'd been duly warned about Ronon's past, his manners, and his straightforward, often brutal way of dealing with problems. Laura Cadman had been very helpful in that regard, at the SGC when her orders for Pegasus finally came through. Files only said so much, and CJ had wanted more than just a bare bones summary of a person, so she tracked down Cadman, who she'd heard had spent nearly a year in Atlantis. Laura was temporarily on loan to SG-12 and glad to help.

Many a lunch had been spent with CJ asking questions and Laura telling her stories. She'd mentioned the muscles. Those had been first and apparently a big selling point for her. CJ had to admit on seeing them for herself, they were certainly … memorable. Then came the story about his people and what the Wraith did to them—Laura's version gave more life to the Satedans than any files could've ever managed—and Ronon's rocky adjustment to living among people again, which had notably included a few fights, disobeying orders, and an incident where he'd nearly tortured a civilian scientist because he was a suspected bomber and Goa'uld spy.

But Laura had also mentioned that Ronon was tough, fair, and a good guy. To this point, CJ had a hard time believing he knew what the word fair meant, and the part about being a good guy was still up for debate.

Well …

Reluctant, CJ exhaled. She couldn't do anything about Ronon, but at least she could be fair. She had sort of ambushed him on her arrival.

"Shall I walk you back?" Lorne asked, almost forgotten in the ebbing tide of adrenaline.

CJ glanced through the milling clusters of people that hadn't yet filed out. Across the room, Ronon and Capshaw were talking seriously and getting a drink. "I think I'll hang out here for a few more minutes. Thanks for bringing me, though. It was educational."

Lorne followed her eyes and then chuckled. "Good luck, Major."

"Thanks. I may need it," she said.

Maybe she could give being civil another try.

Ronon took a long pull on a bottle of water. Next to him, Capshaw some water on his head and then scrubbed a hand over his face and through his hair, scattering water droplets everywhere.

Sergeant Cahill tossed them both towels before backing away to leave. "Nice showing, Capshaw. Ronon?" The dark-skinned Marine pointed at him. "Next time."

Ronon met him with a level stare. "We'll see." Sometime in the last year or so, the Marines had made a sport out of trying to beat him. Ronon didn't pay much attention to it. Whatever made them work harder. But if they wanted to win, they'd have to earn it.
Cahill took off. Ronon toweled off the sweat at the back of his neck. Capshaw did the same to his head, mussing his hair in every direction. He made a careless pass over his face and hissed through his teeth.

"You did that on purpose," he said, his eyes set in a determined glare. He gingerly prodded at his cheekbone with his fingers. "Nearly knocked me out, you know?"

Ronon shrugged. He hadn't meant to hit him that hard, but he'd be lying if he said it hadn't felt good. He'd needed the release. Besides, whether he'd had serious feelings for Jennifer or not, Ronon had still been dumped because she realized she was in love with Capshaw instead. It seemed like Capshaw owed him one.

"My fist slipped."

Capshaw snorted, his features contorted in pained disbelief. "Better hope next time my knee doesn't slip anywhere important."

Ronon's mouth twisted into a barely there smirk. Despite his sour tone, Ronon could tell his teammate felt better. Ronon did, too. Bruised and somewhat worse for wear, but energized. A thick, dark curtain had lifted, fury had stepped aside, and he could think clearly again.

He needed that.

Ronon wasn't one to plan too far ahead. He took life day by day, sometimes minute to minute, and right now when he looked into his future, all he saw were Wraith.

"Ugh." Capshaw pulled a face and craned his neck as if to orient himself and locate the exit. "I've gotta clean up and get some ice on this, or I'm gonna have some explaining to do in the morning."

His attention centered on Ronon again and the comment landed with a wry grin, but his smile quickly withered away. His gaze was restless.

"About that. Tomorrow," Ronon said. Neither of them had said a word about it, about what had driven them both here, but he had to say something. He had to do something.

Capshaw looked at him, shoulders tensed, as if he knew what was coming next. "What about it?"

"You know what," Ronon said. "Jennifer."

Capshaw didn't say anything for a few moments, a familiar twitch in his cheek, the skin drawn taut over his jaw. He glanced away. "We have our orders."

"And you don't have a problem with them?"

Capshaw hurled a brief glare his way. "What I think doesn't matter, you know that as well I do. The mission's set. There's nothing we can do about it."

"There might be." Ronon didn't want to beg, but he was almost willing to if it would keep Jennifer from making a mistake that could cost her life. "Talk to her. Get her to see reason."

Capshaw wasn't having it, though. Ronon could sense the conversation spiraling downhill as his teammate exhaled through his nose. "Me?" He huffed angrily. "Forget it. You talk to her."

"I did."

"Then, I don't see much point, do you?" Capshaw turned away, shaking his head. "You know, I
could count on one hand the number of times Jennifer's listened to me. What makes you think this
time would be any different?"

"Because it is," Ronon said quickly. He wouldn't tell Capshaw why. That wasn't his secret to tell.

Capshaw's eyes narrowed. "Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"No, you've been tossing cryptic bullshit at me and acting weird all day. It's time to explain to me
what the hell it all means."

Ronon grit his teeth in anticipation and lowered his voice. He needed Capshaw to understand that
whatever barriers he'd placed between Jennifer and him, Ronon wasn't one of them any longer.

"Jennifer needs someone to look out for her. Someone who cares about her."

Not getting the hint, Capshaw's expression slowly filled with blatant resentment. "Then, we've got
nothing more to talk about. Seems to me you've got that job covered."

"Someone she cares for equally," Ronon said before he could walk away.

Capshaw's face went blank and his body chillingly still.

"Why are you telling me this?" he finally asked, his tone low and cutting.

A booming fit of hysterical laughter erupted a few paces away, disrupting their exchange. Ronon
only looked away for a second, but by the time his focus shifted back, it was too late. Capshaw was
done.

"Forget it." He shook his head. "I don't care. Jennifer's a grown woman; she can make her own
choices. And none of them have anything to do with me. Are we clear?" A muttered "I'll see you in
the morning" nearly got buried in the surrounding chatter as Capshaw turned on his heel and strode
away.

Ronon flung his towel behind him in frustration.

"Everything alright?"

He glanced across the room, where the mass of onlookers had finally thinned to a few stragglers, to
see Major Everett walking toward him.

Great.

She moved with calculated ease as his gaze moved over her, a nonchalant sway in her hips. As if the
answer to her question wasn't obvious. Everything she did, her polite, contrived smiles and cool
comments all seemed designed to provoke him. It annoyed him how good she was at it.

Well, he wasn't going to let her get to him. Not this time.

Ignoring the question, he took another drink from his water bottle, content to make her wait. When
he was done, he fixed her with a casual stare. "Our next training session," he rumbled. "I can't make
it. You asked me to let you know."

"I heard." She tilted her head, her bangs shifting lightly across her brow. "You and the rest of your
team are taking on the Wraith. Thanks for telling me."
Ronon's brow furrowed slightly, thrown that she actually sounded sincere. His gaze locked on an object hanging from her wrist. "What's that?"

She tracked his gaze downward. "Oh, that's homework."

"Homework." He glanced over the camera with skepticism.

"You'd be surprised how much you can learn by observation, and since you're not going to be around for a while, I figured I might as well start somewhere. Until you manage to work me into your busy schedule, anyway."

Mischief was bright in her eyes. She was baiting him and almost appeared disappointed when he didn't take it.

"Huh," he said, disinterested.

He helped himself to another prolonged drink. She watched him with an interest somewhere between annoyance and amusement, which grew more annoyed the longer he drew it out. She let out a sigh and folded her arms. The final lagging group of spectators left, taking their conversation elsewhere. He emptied the bottle, gulping down the last of it with a satisfied exhale at the end.

"Finished?"

Ronon gave the bottle a shake. "Guess so."

"I'll bet that was refreshing."

"Yup."

Already bored of playing games, Ronon strolled over to the bench on the far wall. He snatched up the bantos rods and the long leather hide bag he used to carry his practice equipment. Wooden swords and knives clanked together as he shuffled them inside.

"Interesting weapons," the Major said. He glanced back at her and she indicated the rods with a tip of her chin. "They're usually used as a pair, am I right?"

Ronon paused and then gave a curt nod. She was smart, at least.

"On Earth, we have something similar in Kali stick fighting. Are they your weapon of choice?"

"Bantos, sword, staff, gun—doesn't matter. I use whatever I've got." He'd use whatever he could steal, scavenge, or make himself. And if there was still nothing, he'd use his bare hands.

Her mouth curled into a satisfied smile, as if his admission was some kind of victory. She could have it. Whatever she thought, it didn't make a difference. He still wasn't going to make it easy for her to chase after the Wraith, and she still wasn't getting what she wanted.

He slung the hide bag over his shoulder and went to retrieve the thrown towel from the floor. He shot her a smug smirk. "Enjoy your homework."

She turned her head slightly, letting the comment roll off of her. As he turned away, she said in an even tone, "Good luck with the mission, Specialist."

Ronon halted in his tracks.

For a brief instant, he was back on Sateda. Wraith were everywhere, explosions rocked the capital as
Hive ships bombarded the city from orbit, and blood ran in the streets.

He slowly turned around.

"That is your rank, isn't it, Specialist?" Major Everett used every inch of her porcelain features to her advantage. A mold of pure softness, with a hint of steel that sent a jolt through Ronon's abdomen.

"That was a long time ago."

She blinked, the rest of her face perfectly still. "You earned it, didn't you?"

A bright red swath of resentment flared up in his stomach, but he harnessed the impulse to let it loose. "Of course, I did."

She took another step closer and met his gaze head on. "Then, that rank is yours. As long as you live, no one can touch it."

He stared at her, long and hard. In his head, Marke Hartoren shouted orders and Ronon responded with the rest of his unit, running when he said run, getting down in the mud when he said down, and fighting for their people's survival when the Chieftain called them all to war.

"Fine. Major." Hardly realizing he'd spoken, his voice resonated firmly through the now empty gym. "Mats."

He slid his bag off his shoulder and set it on the ground. Another smile crept up on her face, another victory to add to her tally. Again, he didn't care. She slipped the camera off her wrist and laid it on the bench.

His conscience pricked at the back of his mind, but he ignored it. This was what she wanted, to learn Satedan warfare. If she didn't like what she got, then too bad.

She never saw him coming.

In an instant, his mammoth arms were wrapped around her sternum, her hair caught up in his face. A sharp gasp of surprise reached his ears. Held solidly in his control, flush against his body, she tucked and slammed her hips rearward. Her head snapped back looking to make contact, to break his nose and cause him to let go. He anticipated the maneuver and shut it down.

His right arm still latched around her like a vice, with his left Ronon caught her around the nape of the neck and clamped down, shoving her head forward and locking it into place against her chest. She grunted and rocked against him fighting his hold. He gripped her neck hard, repositioned his right arm, and shoved. She hit the mats rolling, with him right on top of her.

He rooted his legs on each side of her body to stop her momentum and kicked her onto her back. A pair of fierce eyes flashed up at him, but she was too late. He couldn't be stopped. A Wraith would never be stopped. He seized her by the shirt and wrenched it tight. He flexed the other hand and drove it home, palm open, right in the center of her chest.

His heart pounding wildly, he held her there, a flush in her cheeks and her eyes sealed with his. The overhead lights cavorted in their deep brown depths, holding him captive. Beneath his palm, the soft skin of her chest moved heavily up and down.

Ronon swallowed, wetting his throat, and then spoke the words that once been spoken to him, to everyone who joined the Guard.
"Lesson One: Learn fast."

Major Everett looked up at him and smiled—a real one this time.

Then, she screwed up her face and cried out as she swept his legs out from under him.

Ronon hit the ground with a loud groan.

Their legs were tangled up. Panting, Major Everett propped herself up onto her elbow. "Is that fast enough for you?"

She smiled again, subtle and sweet, and all Ronon could think was "yes".

Damn it.

Silently cursing himself, he balled up his fist and punched the floor.

"Doctor Weir, if you're receiving this, please respond."

A man in an old fashioned shirt, black vest, and jacket filled Dave's computer screen. The recording crackled with static. Horizontal lines flickered across the feed, striping the image. Long moments pass before he spoke again.

"I do know you're there, Doctor. The existence of Atlantis is no secret among the Genii. It would be pointless not to answer."

Another pause, a shorter one, and a woman answered offscreen. "This is Doctor Weir."

Wizened around the edges but dangerous, the man's mouth lifted into a cold smile. "Oh, good. I wanted to be certain you were there to see this."

He stepped aside and a knot turned in Dave's stomach. John was bound to a chair and gagged.

"What have you done to him?" Rodney's familiar voice chimed in, demanding answers.

"Nothing whatsoever, Doctor McKay."

"Okay, let me rephrase that: what are you planning to do?"

"It's quite simple," the man said. "I'd like to make a trade."

The playback continued, while Dave scanned quickly over the filename at the top of the screen.

SheppardJP/KolyaA/WDToddAug2506

He hadn't paid much attention to it when he clicked on the video file, but the designation marked the file as recorded on August 25th, 2006. That was just over two years ago. The man was Acastus Kolya. And this wasn't something Dave had ever expected to see.

"On my command authority, whatever he asks, don't do it!" John hastily shouted. He fought as a huge Genii soldier wrestled the gag back between his teeth and his forced silence rang loud in Dave's ears.
Kolya laughed.

After he and John had talked, Dave spent the rest of the afternoon and evening at work on his assignment, determining the current statuses on each department and analyzing success rates versus cost. It wasn't as simple as keeping an eye on the bottom line. The benefit of discovery couldn't always be measured, and Dave took his job very seriously.

Xenobiology had been his focus today, reading reports on alien creatures encountered in Pegasus. Parasites. Insects that produced massive amounts of energy proportionate to their size. A project studied in conjunction with Botany regarding a weasel-type creature that was genetically both plant and animal. Flying monkeys. A possible living link to the dinosaurs, which scientists believed had been brought to Pegasus millions of years ago when the Ancients initially settled here, and had continued to evolve after their extinction on Earth. Dave found it all fascinating, but his thoughts had kept turning toward the current situation and he wondered if Xenobiology had included the Pegasus Galaxy's apex predator in their notes.

Todd frightened him, especially his history with John. There was so much left out of reports, gaping holes left where people could only read between the lines. Dave had opened up Todd's file looking for any clue as to why John would agree to this cockamamie plan. He had come up empty.

Until he noticed a video file in Atlantis' database that hadn't been included in the SGC's official records.

"Turn him over to me, and Colonel Sheppard will be released immediately."

Dr. Weir didn't answer right away. "I'll need time to consider your offer."

Kolya smiled cruelly. He had a self-assurance about him, one unhindered by doubt. He wanted Ladon Radim and God help anyone who got in his way.

"Allow me to help expedite your decision."

The video panned across the room as Kolya turned away. Todd was led inside, shackled and chained. John kept his head straight, his eyes focused and chin down, as if he was preparing himself.

"Oh, my God," Dr. Weir murmured.

Despite knowing his brother had come out of this situation alive and relatively unhurt, Dave had a hard time watching.

"Sheppard could've left you to rot down in that hole when we last met, Kolya," Rodney exclaimed. "He does not deserve this."

"Let's be clear, Doctor McKay. No one does."

"Don't do this," Dr. Weir said.

The guards loosed Todd's right hand and took off a leather sheath which was strapped around his lower arm.

"Don't do it," she pleaded again.

Kolya spun once more toward the camera. "The choice is yours, Doctor Weir. Do we have an arrangement?" One of the guards yanked John's jacket open, exposing his upper chest.
There was no answer.

"Very well."

Dave's heart stood still as Todd looked down at John, and then slammed his hand onto John's chest. Dave choked against a rising siege of tears, seeing John go stiff, his head back, his eyes closed while his body shook in agony.

Abruptly, Dave reached out and clicked stop. He couldn't watch any more of that. It was bad enough to know from the reports that John had been fed on two more times after the first one.

And tomorrow he would be walking into a viper's nest of hundreds, if not thousands, of Wraith.

"Oh, John," he whispered. "What are getting yourself into?"
Staring at the Ceiling

Chapter Notes

To my loyal readers, I hope you like this one. And I hope you're still there ... *peers around the fandom* It's looking kinda slow out there in J/T land.

And credit definitely needs to go out to my friends for helping out with this chapter - Nacimynonom, whose red pen I have grown to love and fear in equal measure. Alicesandra, who doesn't even make me ask when I need help (but I do anyway). Kickstand75, the friend and beta who crosses all genres and fandoms, and is always ready with a kind word or a pic of a gorgeous guy to cheer me up when the characters don't cooperate. And Mysra, the best lil sis and cheerleader in the world. That's right, people. It takes a village.

In the darkness of her bedroom, Jennifer struggled with her sheets. They seemed to be locked in a philosophical disagreement with her pajamas as to which direction was better to lay in, succeeding only in making her feel claustrophobic. Jennifer hiked up her hip and indelicately rolled onto her side, yanking and straightening as she went.

Above her, the ceiling was a void of choking black, a bleak emptiness that was mirrored back at her.

Her stomach churned.

Movement in the corner of the room was accompanied by a deep, scratchy grunt. The roots of a cattairus tree spread across the floor like fingers reaching out, the trunk stretching to infinity along the wall and the branches lush and thick. Cool night air touched Jennifer's skin, and the chirping of insects crooned in the background. Ronon was sitting upright against the trunk, his arm slung over his knee. He lifted his chin a notch, and his watchful eyes found her in the dark. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she quietly assured him from the bed. "Just a little restless, I guess. Everything's fine." She burrowed into her pillow, closed her eyes, and tried again to relax.

The memory of yellow slitted eyes, foul, pointed teeth, and blood as black as night greeted her.

Ronon exhaled and stood up, moving stiffly from the tree. "Scoot over," he murmured drowsily. He laid down next to her. As his long arm banded around her waist, his warmth draped over her and permeated the loose-fitting tank she wore.

It wasn't hard to feel safe in Ronon's mammoth grasp. He was careful with her. He handled her as though she might break if he were to forget himself. Her nightmares might take one look at him and decide to haunt someone else for the night. She was certain he could feel her heart racing as he pulled at her waist, bringing her in against him.

"S'matter?"

As he adjusted his position behind her, she sensed the penetrating power of his gaze. "It's just a big day coming up, that's all."
His mouth near her cheek, he slipped his right hand beneath her shirt and splayed it protectively over her stomach. "Does it still hurt?"

When he touched her, the alarming image of a gaping wound, oozing and festering with infection, flashed in her mind.

For a moment, the ceiling had teeth.

"No," she said softly. The scratch had already faded. She hadn't even told him about it. She never would.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Suddenly, Jennifer was aware that it was a different face that nudged the skin of her cheek, a different voice low in her ear, a different hand that tenderly caressed her stomach. Her breath hitched. Her body responded to him instantly. Fingers gently pushed aside the soft fall of her hair as his lips trailed back and pressed lightly against the nape of her neck.

Pearling out from behind her eyelids, tears wet her cheeks.

She turned her face upward to meet the flesh in the crook of his neck, near his ear. She inhaled his scent, desperate to remember the faint musk of his masculinity: gun barrel grease, soap, sweat, and something else uniquely his. When would she ever get another chance? She huddled into his expansive frame, her backside fitting neatly against his muscled torso. His arms closed around her, sheltering her. He felt so good.

Saying goodbye to someone had never hurt so much.

"Where were you?" she whispered. "I waited for you."

"You didn't need me."

*What if I did? Would it have mattered?* The questions lingered in the air, unsaid. She craned her neck around to allow her to view his beautiful features, but she found precisely what she knew she would.

No one.

Alone in bed, her eyes opened. Her limbs twirled beneath the sheets as she rolled over, a fresh hole gouged in her stomach. The hollow space in her abdomen twisted in resignation both aching and familiar, and, with a heavy sigh, she wiped the tears from her face.

She felt around her nightstand until her fingers made contact with the grooved light switch built into the surface. She turned on the lights. Her headset lay where she'd left it, along with the glass of water she'd used to wash down a dose of doxepin. It was supposed to help her sleep. She was seized by a grim urge to laugh.

The promise of a full eight hours thwarted again. At this point, with little but the mission ahead, the very idea was a joke.

Jennifer checked her watch. It was the middle of the night, several hours yet before she was due to get woken up by the tinny bleep of her alarm.

She got up anyway.
Mason opened his eyes and stared blankly up at the grey ceiling. Cool night air streamed in from the open terrace. The mess hall was so quiet it had its own life, its own breath. Except for when the occasional sleepy scientist stumbled in for a shot of caffeine or a late night patrol passed by in the hallway, all was still. After leaving the gym, he'd taken a shower and come here for ice and a meal.

That was hours ago.

His dinner tray still lay on the table, empty wrappers and all. Rotating twenty minutes on and thirty minutes off, he was on his third ice pack, which was neatly draped over one side of his face. He reclined in his chair, one leg propped up in the chair next to him and his head lolled back to face the ceiling.

He wasn't sure why he was still here, except that he couldn't make himself move. The numbness in his face, the soreness of his arms. The remaining sting in the stripe across the back of his legs, and the occasional press of two fingers against his neck as he found the gentle, steady thrum of his heartbeat—they were the only color here that his mind could register, the only real signs of life in an otherwise deserted space. Cut away the noise, and he could settle. Become part of the environment, and he could disappear. Some would call it meditation, he supposed, but to him it was survival. It was that or let his thoughts rage.

Most people didn't know what it was like to have their emotions consume them to the point that there was barely anything left.

Mason couldn't go back there.

Earlier, he had easily taken the longest shower of his life. Fresh from the sparring match, his muscles had still been abuzz with anger and adrenaline. Hot water had spilled through his hair, down his face and over his shoulders. He had scrubbed his fingers through his scalp and blew out through his mouth, displacing a stream of water that ran down the bridge of his nose. Soap suds and froth had mapped the terrain of his body. The entire time his mind had run rampant.

Memories came in a flood, pouring over each other, each vying to see which would do the most damage, which were like pin pricks and which gutted him to the core. Like a herd of wild horses trampling him over, he relived the sparring match and Ronon asking him to talk to Jennifer, her face, scared but resolved, as she volunteered to be Todd's collateral, and Mason's own visions of putting his fist through Mr. Woolsey's conference table when he found out what was really going on behind the scenes. How resentful he was of Sheppard's plan, how frustrated he was with Jennifer's inexplicable willingness to needlessly risk her life. Ronon's image, though, bore the heavy brunt of his anger. For a while, Mason hated him. He hated him for letting it happen and for dragging him into it. He hated him for dumping the responsibility of Jennifer's decisions in his lap. He hated him for being with her at all.

Her face came to mind, along with all those times when they'd stayed up late talking and joking around with each other. He replayed the first time she'd smiled in just the right way, and he'd wondered what her lips would taste like. All the fights they'd gotten in over his condition. The worst recollections were her sad, desperate tears on that night—their last night—and the sizzle of the shower itself, which brought back images of broken glass and blood.

The night he'd hurt her. The night he'd bled like a pig, was sedated like a worm, and it had felt like justice.

It took a long time for Mason to pull himself free of all that, enough to drag himself out of the
shower. He'd made the walk to the mess hall and his training slowly took over. His breaths came strong and deep. All the mental discipline, channeling techniques, and professional detachment he'd learned over the years had come to his rescue, and it was over. The sole echo of his suppressed turmoil was a soft strain of "what if" lying beneath the surface.

What if he hadn't taken that staff blast two years ago? No matter how far he'd come and what changes had been made for the better, everything seemed to come down to that one moment.

If that had never happened, maybe things could've been different. Maybe that Mason, the untouched Mason, would've been able to talk to her, stopped her from doing something reckless. Maybe he would've told her how he felt about her a long time ago. Maybe he would've been with her tonight instead of alone, his arms around her as he kissed her and told her everything would be alright. He'd be home soon.

Maybe they would've still fought, but that Mason would never have hurt her. He wouldn't have forced her to say goodbye.

Maybe in some other reality, he would've been with her forever.

That "what if" would probably haunt him until the day he died.

But that Mason was different.

It was too late for him.

"Mason?"

Wrenched loose from his stream of consciousness, Mason startled at the sound of another voice. He lifted his head and caught the ice pack as it toppled from his face.

Amelia stood a few yards away in full uniform, hair pulled back, almost as surprised as he was. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." She indicated the ice pack with a tip of her chin. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he said with sluggish chagrin. The hour had taken a toll on his voice. "Ronon."

"Oh." Her lips pursed in a poorly stifled grin.

"Go ahead. Rub it in." Mason didn't think he would bruise, but he was probably scuffed up. His face felt like it had been hit with an anvil. His shower earlier had revealed a few spots on his ribs that were likely worse off, but Mason was okay with those. In the heat of the moment, Ronon had forgotten about AD-765 and that body shots were useless on him. He hadn't felt a thing. Mason had enjoyed making him pay for that mistake.

"No, no, I didn't mean—" Words tripped off her tongue, until she sighed and formed a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry. Again."

Mason shrugged it off. It wasn't a big deal.

Amelia strolled over to the coffee machine and filled up her thermos. As she screwed the lid back on, she looked over her shoulder at him. "What are you doing here so late? Aren't you leaving early to rendezvous with Todd's ship?"

"So they tell me." Mason wasn't sure if he smiled. Probably not, but, with effort, he scrounged up something to that effect. "What about you? What brings you here?"
Looking somewhat guilty, she glanced down at the thermos clutched in her hand. "I'm actually on duty. I needed a little pick-me-up, so Dr. Gelhart said she'd cover me for a few minutes."

A faint pink blush rose in her cheeks as she smiled again. It was beautiful.

Mason felt guilty for not caring.

"So …" she began awkwardly, approaching him with uneasy footsteps. "I ran into Marquetti on my way down here. Apparently, Major Lorne's pushed him to nights. And it looks like he may be getting transferred out."

Mason snorted at the news. "About time. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

"I didn't think you'd be too broken up about it," she said. "He made a few cracks about Dusty being teacher's pet, since she was put in for a commendation. He probably thinks she had something to do with it."

"Ignore him. I do."

She tilted her head and eyed him with inquisitive interest. "Does anything get to you?"

"Sure." Mason thought it was an oddly-timed question, considering the staggering amount of self-destructive shit threatening to tumble down on his head.

She didn't look like she believed him. "Oh, yeah? Like what?"

Mason's mind went blank, and he eventually shrugged. "I don't know. Politics. Social injustice. When people say 'supposably'."

Amelia laughed. "I guess I find it hard to imagine you getting upset about anything. You're always so …"

Curious, his gaze narrowed on her.

"Impervious, I guess," she finished, wringing her hands around the neck of the thermos. "It's like everything rolls off you."

If Mason hadn't been so tired, he might've scoffed. She had no idea. No idea, whatsoever.

His focus gravitated toward the table, and he pressed the corner of the homemade ice pack lightly to his cheek. The sudden silence didn't sit well between them. Amelia scanned the room, looking around as if hoping there was something else to see, some other person there to diffuse the tension. Then, she exhaled and unobtrusively took the seat across from him.

"I had fun last night at the reception," she said.

Mason looked at her. "I did, too." There hadn't been much to the evening—much less than he'd been dreading, anyway. They'd had a few drinks and talked. No expectations, no complications. It was easy, and Mason liked it.

"Good." She smiled shyly. "I was thinking, though. The truth is I don't know much about you. Other than the obvious, I mean."

She gave a nonspecific wave to their surroundings, and Mason understood her perfectly. Other than the fact that Amelia was from Las Vegas and he was from Laramie, Wyoming, their conversation last night had been geared primarily toward the present; the everyday of being in Atlantis, what they
did and what they'd like to do. He'd talked some about his sniper training and his role on the Colonel's team. Teyla had been Colonel Sheppard's in with the locals of Pegasus, a skilled diplomat, and a fierce fighter. Mason couldn't replace her, but he had other assets besides his muscle. Understanding that, Colonel Sheppard mostly used him as a spotter. Ronon scouted things out initially, and Mason kept watch while the others concentrated on the main objective. If necessary, he became their exit strategy, clearing their path by force when things got hot. Amelia had listened intently, fascinated by the team's working dynamic, and that was how he'd found out about her desire to move on from Systems Tech to join a Gate team. Apparently, Major Teldy had been helping her with her application shortly before she died.

Amelia's continued sorrow over the loss of her friend had been obvious in the catch of her voice. He had offered some muttered condolences, but, to him, Teldy and Vega's deaths had become another one of those "what ifs". What if he'd been there that day? Would two more people have come home, or would the body count have remained the same?

Overall, however, the party atmosphere had kept the conversation light, and Mason preferred things that way. He had barely resisted bailing on the whole thing, as it was. He wasn't prepared for more.

That was also why he now regarded her with extreme trepidation. "Well …" he started, "what do you want to know?"

"Well …" she echoed carefully. "How long have you been in the military?"

"Sixteen years."

"And that makes you …?"

"Thirty-four." A bewildered smirk formed on one side of Mason's mouth. "I joined up when I was eighteen."

Amelia's brows raised, showing interest. "And what made you get into the service? Is it the family business? Were you an Army brat?"

"Is this an interrogation?"

Her toe found the leg of the chair on which he was resting his foot and pushed, throwing him playfully off-balance. "Maybe."

"Maybe I should call a lawyer," he said warily, but her answering smile coaxed him into cooperation. He adjusted in his seat and settled in to reply. "Nah, it was nothing like that. Just a small town kid. There wasn't much money for college, and I didn't know what I wanted. The military seemed like the best option. Didn't know it would stick."

"Did you play any sports in high school?"

"Basketball."

"Mmm." Amelia sipped on her coffee. "What position?"

"Power forward."

"Were you any good?"

Good enough that, all of a sudden, he felt very weird about the athletic shorts and black t-shirt he was wearing. He probably looked like one of those sad sacks that were always trying to relive the
"Pretty good," he admitted slowly.

Amelia's eyes glimmered in amusement. "Oh. So you were that guy."

"What guy?" Mason didn't like where this was going.

"You know what guy. Every school has that guy."

"Don't you have a Tower to watch or something? I wasn't that guy."

Amelia took a breath, obviously studying him and letting this new information soak in. "Okay, maybe not. But you were friends with that guy."

Mason couldn't help it. A chuckle rumbled up from his chest, loud and deep. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Amelia laughed. Then movement in the periphery of Mason's vision drew his attention away from her.

Jennifer ambled into the mess hall from the hallway. Clearly exhausted, she raked her bangs off her forehead. The move splashed haphazard threads of blonde hair all over the place and revealed deep, dark channels beneath her eyes.

She looked up and froze in her tracks.

Steam curled from the top of Amelia's thermos as she turned and the interruption registered. "Jennifer, hey."

Jennifer's gaze rifled between the two of them and eventually stopped on Mason. An indefinable chasm of emotion imprinted on her features before being swept away. A desert took its place.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" she asked him.

Beneath the table, Mason clutched his ice pack tight. An intense spike of cold seeped into his fingers. "Shouldn't you?"

She swallowed hard. Her eyes glistened. "I, uh … I-I couldn't. I figured, since I was up, I might as well get some work done. I … I just came to get some …" She pointed toward the half-empty coffee pot, then glanced rapidly between him and Amelia. She took a quick breath and let it out. "You know what? I don't think I need any. I'll just …"

She turned away.

"Jennifer, what—" Amelia called out. "Jennifer, wait!"

It was too late. Jennifer was gone, a stark emptiness left in her wake.

Mason stared at the surface of the table, trying to keep his mind clear as his hard-built walls slowly started to crack.

"Well, that was weird." Amelia glanced his way. "I should probably go, too. If I don't get back, Dr. Gelhart will probably hack my e-mail and change my language settings to Sanskrit or something."

"Yeah," he said mechanically, blue eyes set.
"You should get some rest."

Mason nodded and that was it. If Amelia had any reaction to his cold sendoff, he didn't notice. By the time he looked up again, she'd made her way back to the Tower.

"Jennifer needs someone to look out for her. Someone who cares about her," Ronon's voice came back at him. "Someone she cares for equally."

Mason didn't dare think about what Ronon might've meant. He didn't trust himself or his reactions when it came to her. He couldn't face any more possibilities. If he let himself believe that one of those "what ifs" could actually come to be and it turned out not to be true, it would break him. Fully. Finally. He had teetered on the brink and knew the bleak view on the other side. He would shatter and there would be no coming back. Not this time.

He couldn't do this.

He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

Jennifer had Ronon to look out for her, he assured himself, even though his heart now had doubts.

Jennifer didn't need him. She never did.

Teyla remembered a conversation she had once with Carson, when he had attended his first Athosian wedding. The groom was a grandson of old Jasen and the bride was the youngest daughter of Charin's brother, the product of his second marriage. The girl was good-tempered, kind, and just out of her teenage years. Teyla had watched her grow up. The girl was a common sight around Charin's fire, learning as Teyla had at her revered aunt's feet. A crown of pale blue janeisa blossoms adorned the bride's hair, and during the ceremony, she blushed sweetly as she held tight to her Chosen's hand.

Later on, while enjoying the celebration with a cup full of Ruus wine and more than a little color in his own cheeks, Carson had explained that love is not merely a feeling; it is also a physiological response. High dopamine levels in the brain drive attraction, bringing a person single-minded focus, a craving for the other individual and an almost otherworldly awareness of the other. It was what enabled people to sense the one they loved across a crowded room and hardly see anyone else, or detect the slightest change in mood or body language. Then, a chemical called oxytocin creates a bond. It brings with it the sense of calm, peace, and stability one feels with a long-term partner. It ties them together. The person we love becomes a part of us, down to our bones, and makes us more than we are. The hearts of couples will actually synchronize with each other and literally beat as one.

Carson always was a bit of a romantic. However, his observations had never seemed more relevant as Teyla snuggled deeper into John's side. Although the hour was late, they were comfortably entwined on the couch in their quarters, a loosely woven blanket pulled over the top of them. His right arm was looped around her shoulders and her head nestled splendidly against his chest as the movie continued to play brightly on the television set.

The heroine was moving about Pemberley in awe of her surroundings. Fine art and grand furnishings decorated every room of the sprawling estate, the home itself resplendent and architecturally appealing, finer than any palace Teyla had ever seen.
"Of all this I might have been mistress," the woman onscreen expressed with regret, a man and his offer of marriage hastily rejected.

That regret resonated with Teyla, but only in the way that she knew what it meant to let the man she loved go. John was leaving in a few short hours, and she would no longer be able to hear the steady thump thump working beneath his ribcage or feel the unvaried rise and fall of his chest.

Despite her steadfast belief that he would return, she would worry until he did. The mysterious song lived in the back of her mind, an underground stream of sound that ebbed and flowed through the lower recesses of her consciousness. Her earlier visions were there, as well, replaying in her head like a whiff of smoke hidden in the trees, both a proclamation and a warning that her world was on fire.

By the time she saw the flames, it might be too late.

Carson's words, made in easier times, had been full of whimsy and hope for a bright future ahead, but Teyla knew them for the truth in any time. She loved John. She loved him with every cell in her body.

Teyla looked on her Chosen and smiled.

He was snoring.

She settled her head again to his chest and listened to the mild drone as it churned up from his throat. She ran her hand gently along his waist to burrow into the warmth beneath the hem of his shirt. She was glad he'd suggested they watch this movie tonight, although she suspected the idea stemmed more from his imminent departure than any real desire. She recognized the signs. He had been going through his checklist, tying up what loose ends he could before going on a dangerous mission, and keeping a silly promise to her about sitting through a five-hour film together was important to him.

She was simply grateful that they could spend what time they had left together.

Under his shirt, her fingers traced the defined ridges of his stomach in smooth crescent-shaped strokes. John let out a soft, sleepy hum of appreciation and his breaths resumed their heavy cadence. Teyla maintained the soothing pattern and dipped down to add a kiss to the mix, her lips pressed to a spot low on his abdomen. As much as she loved spending the night in his arms, she wanted to be nearer to him. Her body craved contact nearly as much as it craved oxygen. If she stayed close enough, perhaps she might leave a trace of herself behind. That way, he could take her with him. They would never have to be apart.

Unable to tear her lips away from the warmth of his skin, Teyla continued to kiss the area around his navel. Her advances were slow and measured; a push of lips, a light brush of tongue to get the taste of him as her hands kept up their gentle exploration. The movie played on in the background, and John gave a deep inhale. His muscles yielded deliciously beneath her ministrations as Teyla trailed a finger down his middle. His head rolled in her direction, his chin deep as if he were gazing down at her, though his eyes stayed closed. His hip thrust idly forward in unconscious response, the pulsing evidence of John's awareness of her growing by the moment.

"Teyla ..." he murmured. The stimulating tenor of nighttime grit was in his voice. His right arm moved from her shoulders and skimmed up and down her back in a sedate kneading motion.

Teyla kisses moved gradually upward, and his hand traveled up her neck to thread his fingers through her hair. She pulled the fabric of his shirt higher to expose his ribs, the underside of his pecs, and the generous sprinkling of chest hair. Two nipples peeked out from the edge of the material
looking needful of her attention, and Teyla gave it in her hot, wet mouth and the judicious administration of teeth. John groaned, his eyes still shut and his head reared back at the unexpected sensation. A hand quickly dislodged itself from her hair and gripped her just beneath the backside. Swift and strong, he lifted her further up his body and brought her to his lips.

As their mouths met, John crushed her against him. Responding to his awakening arousal, a potent surge of heat rushed to Teyla's core. She had to push gently away when the pressure against her middle became uncomfortable, but encouraging him to other areas instead, she shifted her hips languidly against his. John moaned into her mouth, and the sound drew out one of Teyla's own. She clutched him to her, opening to his tongue and its succulent caresses. She answered him in kind and nipped at his lower lip, so full and gorgeous. "John," she whispered before losing herself to the kiss.

He stirred even more at the sound of his name and stretched underneath her. "Mmmph," he groaned against her mouth, dramatically slowing the kiss down until he pulled away. He clumsily tugged at the hem of her nightshirt and, with her help, lifted it over her head. The garment slipped to the floor as she delved into his lips once again, addicted to his taste as she relieved him of his shirt as well.

Skin met skin, and it was almost a heavenly experience—her breasts to his body with their enlivened senses, heat shared with heat, and nothing between them. Her knee had gotten wedged in the tangle of their legs. John wrapped his arm around it and freed her, only to bring it higher still. Her leg slipped around his waist and her thigh pressed against his erection. He was ravenous in his kisses and gloriously hard.

He slipped a hand beneath her waistband. He pushed at her undergarments and cupped one of the rounded cheeks he found there. Teyla could think of nothing else but shedding the rest of their clothes and taking him inside her. John growled against her skin, a flare of animal need erupting from his consciousness to spill into hers. As his lips swept down her neck, her body nearly burst into flames as she imagined mercilessly riding him to oblivion.

As their lips worshiped each other, their hips joined the rhythm. John's hardness ground against her and Teyla enthusiastically pushed back. She groped at John's pants, caught up in a melodious torrent of need. Her hand found a gap and exploited it. His erection was velvet and soft against the tips of her fingers. They closed around his length.

"Ohhhh … God." John tore his lips away from hers for a moment, though she quickly drew him back into smaller kisses, shorter in duration but no less magnetic. "Wait, Teyla, wait."

She didn't want to wait. How many times did they need to learn that the only time was now? He would be gone in the morning. She was going to be left behind, and she wanted him.

She wanted him so badly.

_I know_. John's voice sounded out husky and deep inside her mind. It blended with the song in her head to make a perfect chord that cut through the very fiber of her being and enveloped her in warmth. If touching him bare was heaven, then there was no word to capture this new feeling that threatened to carry her away.

_Teyla, the baby …_

_John_. She found his gaze, caught up in a tumbling tide of sensation. John gasped and shuddered in her grasp, the sensations echoing out from her consciousness in powerful waves. _I need you_.

She wasn't whole without him. She needed to feel whole.
He groaned out loud, his eyes pinched shut and head thrown back.

She was beyond control. Every ounce of her ungoverned desire funneled through him, mingling with his and undermining his efforts to resist. John's experiences were hers as she felt the torment of her hands on his skin, the persuasiveness of her tongue and influence of her scent. There was a place in his mind where he already possessed her, where he was already taking her with heedless abandon, his back straining and muscles taut. The feel of her was real and present and reflecting back at her, all conjured from memories and his intentions for their future.

Yes. She wanted all of that, too. Panting, she tore helplessly at his clothes. Yes, John. Oh, please yes.

A strangled sound split from John's throat, almost pained as he finally surrendered. Like a dam had been breached, passion washed over her in a dizzying spray. His grasp on her tightened. His fingers dug into her flesh.

They went at each other, no longer burdened by restraint. They crawled over each other in turns, each trying to disrobe the other without giving up contact. Somehow, they tumbled to the floor, the blanket caught between their legs. Teyla frantically yanked again at John's pants. This time, he lifted his hips and the articles dropped away. A fleeting madness overtook her as she saw his manhood so exposed, her hunger reflected in the depths of his eyes.

In a swift movement, John lifted to his knees and maneuvered her against the side of the couch to face away from him. He tugged at her remaining clothes, which she kicked off onto the floor. Teyla gripped the couch cushion as his left hand steadied her hip. Reaching around, the fingers of his right hand found the moisture at her center. A few tantalizing strokes, a nudge at her knees, and Teyla felt the head of him just before he pushed inside.

Teyla cried out. Electricity moved through her. Her body began its descent into a more liquid form, her muscles surrendering and her mind melting into a sea of sensitivity and half-formed awareness. John thrust inside her, and it was all bliss and breathless relief.

His hips drove into her with impatient lust. Yet he was moderating his strokes, channeling his momentum to heighten her pleasure without overwhelming her. He fondled her. He kissed down her shoulder. Other than the sustained column pressure along her back, Teyla could almost forget she was heavily pregnant, together as they were. John made her feel like a woman, sleek and powerful, desired beyond words. Together, they fed off the frenzy of ardor that pooled together in their minds.

They were better this way. One.

If only it could always be so.

John finally reached a point where he had to back away from the cliff or topple over it. A war raged within him, yet he eased his thrusts. Not this way, Teyla heard, although his statement wasn't meant for her. His body demanded release, but he wanted to see her, to touch her and kiss her. He wanted more. He wanted her eyes, her lips, her skin. Her body. Her soul.

He was leaving. He already missed her, and he wanted more.

A bubble of sadness broke inside Teyla that nearly brought her to tears. She barely felt it as he slid out of her, but she was right there with him as he lay gently down on the floor and pulled her above him. She straddled his hips and their eyes met.

Seconds passed. They were frozen together as a melancholy weight drifted down between them. John's chest rose and fell beneath Teyla's fingertips. She could hear his heart.
Gazing up at her with his deep hazel eyes, John reached up and gently touched her.

He could hear hers, too.

Hers thundered loudly in a steady rhythm while his raced, fast and hard. Breathless and still, John held his hand directly over her heart. Locked together in that moment, John's heart gradually slowed and Teyla's softened. Then, it happened just as Carson said it could. A peaceful calm descended, and their hearts found a simultaneous rhythm.

Fiddling around behind her, John dragged the blanket off its precarious perch and gathered it around her hips.

He didn't want her to get cold, he said. The caring gleam in his eyes was the most dazzling thing Teyla had ever seen.

*I love you, John.*

John stared into her, caressing her cheek and tucking her hair behind her ear. His love radiated outward without need of words. He was glad he could do it this way, share himself with her, because it was pure. Unfiltered. There was no chance for him to screw it up because his meaning came through, untainted by whatever words he might've chosen in the uncertainty of the moment.

Teyla bent over him and their lips joined in a soft kiss.

Then, she moved.

She sank deep into the cradle of his pelvis and rolled her hips. John exhaled with a moan. His eyes disappeared under his lids as he succumbed to the renewed ripples of pleasure building between them. She arched her back. In this position, it was harder for her to ignore the changes her pregnancy had wrought on her body in its advanced stage, but peering through John's eyes, she knew that he saw none of it. She ground against his hardness and undulated above him, and he was enthralled by her.

With a grip on her hip, he moved with her. In the glorious push and pull of friction, he reached around to encompass her backside. The blanket was already slipping. She didn't need it. His heat surrounded her, filled her, even as his other hand journeyed up her ribcage. He traced a path of yearning along her skin, stretching until he reached the rise of her breast. She felt beautiful.

"Teyla …" John eked out a broken murmur, his control slipping. He bucked wildly underneath her and pulled her down to him. She ground hard against him. He caught a nipple in his mouth.

Bursts of color engulfed Teyla's vision and she gasped. Her peak burst within her and she was suddenly enveloped in blinding flashes of light. Galaxies swirled in perpetual motion. Millions of stars dotted the vast reaches of space. Soaring nebulas painted a desolate vacuum in brilliant hues. Hurting with her, John cried out, his grip clamped down so tight that she might bruise. His release tore through his teeth, coming on swift and hard. He pumped deep and their combined awareness went spiraling, the ties binding them to the images abruptly cut. Together they toppled through space and time, the universe swallowing them up until they landed firmly inside themselves and sank bonelessly to the floor.

Teyla trembled as the intensity of the sensations slowly abated. Breathing hard against her shoulder, John looped his arm around her neck.

"Holy …" Winded, he fell silent.
Also having trouble catching her breath, Teyla buried her nose in his neck. "Indeed."

"That was … definitely better than getting slugged in the ribs."

Teyla huffed a tired laugh against his skin as the sound from the movie slowly seeped back inside her awareness. The last time he'd fallen asleep during this movie, John's companion had not been very gracious about his … lapse of attention. John hadn't been optimistic about his chances of staying awake this time either, but he had been the one to fall asleep first.

Teyla dug her fist into his side.

"Ow!" he complained, though it was obviously exaggerated.

"Fair is fair," she hummed in his ear.

He chuckled and kissed her before he rolled to his side. There was some jostling, a little scooting, but then they settled into a more comfortable position, Teyla spooned up against John's body with his arm for a pillow. He pulled the blanket up again, this time to cover them both, and curled a knuckle delicately over her stomach. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No," Teyla replied with a satisfied purr. She wasn't worried. She hadn't felt this relaxed in a very long time. A pleasant ache had taken up residence deep in her abdomen, the simmering aftermath of their coupling all the more prominent in the wake of its previously long absence.

"Although, we probably should not mention this to Jennifer," she added. Jennifer had openly admitted to being extra cautious in her advice to Teyla—all in an effort to avoid further complications with her pregnancy, of course. But they weren't technically cleared to have intercourse just yet.

John grimaced, obviously less than eager to be on the receiving end of another one of Jennifer's lectures. "Probably not. Keller already knows more about my sex life than I ever planned on; there's no need to draw her a picture. But—"

He abruptly pulled his arm free and squirmed around to her midsection.

"No excitement while Daddy's gone. Okay, baby?" He pressed a light kiss to her belly. "You've got a good thing going where you're at. It's rent free, all you can eat. Stay right there, where it's warm and safe and Mommy can keep an eye on you."

Teyla ran her fingers through his hair, basking in the serenity of the moment. John turned his gaze on her, his eyes lidded and calm. "Don't worry. I'll be home soon."

Teyla nodded. If her visions could be trusted, she knew he would. She would see him again.

But for how long?

"Take her. You have to take her, John. Run."

Her expression wavered as the images she had seen of battles and blood invaded her mind. The broken man standing all alone. Her headlong flight through the trees. In front of her, something changed in John's features, and she wondered again if he had seen them, too. If he knew …

Teyla looked away and quickly pushed herself up. "I should wash."

She moved about gathering her clothes, feeling wide, ungainly, and a little foolish for the abrupt exit. It reminded her somewhat of the early days of her pregnancy, when they would make love and,
overheated, she would sometimes have to run off immediately after to throw up. John, perhaps wisely, made no attempt to stop her this time, either.

Once in the bathroom, she used a washcloth to clean off the residue of their lovemaking and splashed water over her face. Water droplets beaded and trickled down as Teyla breathed evenly in and out. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped at the sight of the woman reflected back at her.

Familiar dark brown eyes stared back at her in the mirror, but they seemed different. Her rather angular features had softened throughout her pregnancy, yet for a moment the lines of her face appeared even more obscured.

Teyla touched her cheek. Her skin was reassuringly smooth and solid, but somehow the act didn't match up with her reflection in the mirror. It was as if there two separate images of her and one was overlaid on the other, one of them was real and one of them not. One set of eyes shone with depth and emotion, and the other pair was flat and empty. Yet both of them were her.

"What is happening to me?" Teyla asked, strangely calm.

There was no answer. Notes of the alien song tiptoed across the landscape of her thoughts, jingling with each step. Her reflection merely watched her with a soft expression, almost innocent. Waiting. Expectant.

Immensely powerful.

Teyla looked away and splashed her face once again. She toweled off, rubbing the fibers deep into her skin. When she looked up again, only herself looked back. She should have been comforted by that. However, she knew she was not alone.

She did not think she was ever alone.

She dressed quickly and went out to rejoin John.

He had retrieved his pajama pants from the floor and put them back on. His t-shirt, on the other hand, was slung over the arm of the couch next to where he was lounging, elbow crooked, his head resting against his palm.

His jaw stretched into a wide yawn. "Uh huh," he said, apparently talking to himself. "So what kind of timetable are you looking at?"

As she drew nearer, he glanced up from the TV and pointed to his earpiece. He must have gotten a call while she was in the bathroom. "Can you do it? … Okay, okay. Far be it from me to ask a simple question … Yeah. That's great, Rodney … Okay. Tell Zelenka good work. You should head home and get some sleep … No. Now … Yeah, alright. Goodnight, McKay."

John signed off and took his earpiece out.

"What is it?" Teyla asked.

"He and Radek managed to adapt Ronon's old tracking device so we can attach it to Todd's Hive. The power source is depleted, so it'll have to draw its power from the Hive ship, but it's small enough that McKay doesn't think the Wraith will be able to detect it. Not in time to prevent the Daedalus from tracking our signal, anyway. Everything's on track. We should be good to go in the morning."

"I see." Teyla wasn't sure whether to be glad for that or not. Todd and his possible motivations
frightened her more than anything right now, but if the tracking device would help get John and their friends home, she supposed she should be.

John regarded her with an astute gaze. "Are you okay?"

Avoiding his stare, Teyla stooped to pick the blanket up from the floor and then plucked at the weave. She picked up two of the ends to start folding it.

After several moments, she glanced up. A frown had descended on John's face. Whatever hope he'd had of a peaceful night and an easy goodbye had now eroded away.

"Do you think I'm wrong, too? For bringing Keller in on the mission?"

Teyla sighed. It wasn't her intention for him to presume that she doubted him. She resumed folding, the edges of the blanket falling neatly into line. "John, I believe you are doing what you think is best to get your team and yourself home. It is what you have always done. Ronon and Mason have their own reasons for not wanting Jennifer involved; Rodney simply does not like discovering that you have already planned ten steps ahead of him."

The corner of his mouth quirked into a sideways smirk, and Teyla continued.

"They may not like the way your plan was presented or what may become necessary, but they do not doubt you, John. And neither do I."

He nodded silently, thoughtful as seconds passed away. "But?"

She laid the folded blanket on the far corner of the couch. Her throat felt tight and her limbs heavy. It seemed unfair to say, a needless burden to place on him when it changed nothing. She would only add to his concerns, and for no good reason.

Except that he was her Chosen, and in addition to owing the truth to one another, they could actually see into each other. He already knew something was bothering her.

"I only wish that I could go with you."

John's serious expression eased some. He reached out and took her wrist tenderly in his grasp. "C'mere."

Teyla slumped down next to him. John put his arm around her and kissed her temple. "You're always with me, Teyla. I don't need you geared up and armed to the teeth to know that. As much as I miss having you watch my back, right now I'm better off knowing you're here safe with the baby."

They had settled this issue long ago. Teyla had accepted the wisdom of curtailing her offworld activities, as far as missions went, until after the child was born. And even were she to resume active duty status immediately, she still wouldn't be going with John. She had been given a new assignment and a new team. It was the price she had paid when it came time to choose between being by his side on missions or being by his side in all things. Most days she was at peace with that decision.

She simply hated feeling so helpless.

It was always hard watching John leave, but with all that had happened—and what Teyla feared may yet happen—this time it was worse.

"You okay?" he asked again, low and soft next to her ear.
"Please, do not ask me that. Just come home."

"Teyla." His powerful inflection drew her attention to his face, strong and noble. "You have my word."

His eyes beckoned her forward and their foreheads touched, his word given and a promise sealed.

Meanwhile, an excited exclamation emanated from the television. "Mother! Here is a letter from my uncle Gardiner! Father is coming home today!"

"Does he bring Lydia?"

"No," Jane said to her mother. Her mother wailed and flopped back onto the bed. "He and my uncle have not yet discovered where she is. My uncle will continue his enquiries alone."

"Coming home without poor Lydia? Who will fight Wickham and make him marry her, if he comes away?!"

A mischievous grin formed on John's lips. "I don't know about you, but I have absolutely no idea what's going on."

Teyla pulled back, and he glanced at the television where Jane was doing her best to tend the bedridden and caterwauling Mrs. Bennet. "Oh, Jane, Jane, what is to become of us? Oh, oh, fetch my smelling salts! I feel my faintness coming upon me again! Oh dear, dear ..."

In the moment, Teyla found the woman's absurd hysterics exceedingly funny and started to giggle. John gave a deep belly laugh, which ended with a satisfied exhale. He looked tired but glad to have seen her smile.

"You should sleep, John," she said as she lightly caressed his shoulder, suddenly feeling guilty for indulging herself in his company this way. Had he not just all but ordered Rodney to go to bed? John needed to be at his best in the morning. It was selfish of her to keep him up after such a long day, with many others just like it looming on the immediate horizon.

He gave a long sigh and rubbed a hand over his scruff without even the appearance of readying himself for a fight. He truly was exhausted. "Are you sure?"

"We can finish this another time."

He nodded somewhat reluctantly, but ultimately they were in agreement. He stood up with a groan and, relaxation already settling into his muscles, helped her to her feet. Teyla went on ahead to their bedroom, while John put the DVD back in its case and turned off the television. Teyla peeled back the covers on the bed. In the living room, the overhead lights switched off one by one as John tread a path across their quarters. Even in his pajamas and divested of his shirt, it gave the impression of greatness.

A city bowed to his unspoken will.

Without warning, embers glowed in orange red sparks at his feet and burst into flames as he stepped. The room grew brighter and brighter, swirling with energy and heat. Vibrations coursed through Teyla's body, and John suddenly disappeared from her vision to walk inside the light. Fragmented whispers churned in her mind as the heat built and the light became a searing, raging whirlpool of fire. It swept over her, yet Teyla stood tall, curiously empty, somehow knowing it could not hurt her. She was safe. She could not be harmed by events already done.
She held her hand up to push back the flames, and it glowed in shimmering, iridescent blue.

Then everything sped up.

The universe spun, and Teyla was inundated with many of the same images she had seen before. Wraith Hives bombarded each other across space. Wreckage ignited and exploded outward, some of it burning to cinders in the atmosphere of the planet nearby. Darts swarmed down on defenseless villages and left them burning. It was the same everywhere. The reach of war spread across the galaxy. People fled under the shadow of sorrow and death with nowhere to run.

Ronon lifted his blaster, his features distorted by rage and sadness.

John raised his gun, cold and filled with hate.

And the broken man. He was there again in the distance, only this time he was already on his knees. Surrounded. Alone. And laughing. The sound of it was heartbreaking, full of despair and surrender. Bleeding and spent, he laughed like a man who was finished, yet had still managed to do something. Just one more thing. Knowing all along that it was his last thing.

Teyla screamed for him, but nothing came. Her vision had moved on, and the only voice she heard was her own, echoing in the forest.

"Take her. You have to take her, John. Run."

No.

No, Teyla, I'm not leaving you.

John's very present voice broke through the chaotic mass of distorted imagery. She blinked, suddenly aware of a pair of hands surrounding her upper arms, warm breath, and a pair of hazel eyes.

Teyla, look at me. Come back.

Her eyelids fluttered back and forth, and the real world came slowly back into focus. She felt oddly weightless as if she were floating. "John?"

"That's me," he said. "C'mon, sweetie, let's get you off your feet. Yeah, that's it."

Teyla's bottom found the bed and she sank freely into the soft mattress. Her gaze wandered, still lost in a miasma of images. Her eyes locked on the object that hung above the head of the bed, and for some reason she couldn't look away.

Then John was there in front of her. He pushed her hair back from her face and followed her eyes. "Teyla, what is it? What's the matter?"

Shaking inside, Teyla searched for her voice. When it came out, though, she hardly recognized it as her own. She sounded far away, as though part of her was still elsewhere.

"Do you … do you suppose it works?"

"What is it?" he asked. Like many things she had brought into their quarters from Athos, John likely took its presence for granted, assuming it was merely for decoration. In a slow, halting meter, Teyla started to explain.

The dreamwheel was an old Kaashi tradition, meant mostly for children. Made from the young, highly tensile branches of a coleigh tree, two branches were looped around each other and bound
into a circle to resemble the Ancestral Ring. Then, using simple rope or twine, they wove a web pattern over the center with a smaller circle in the middle to represent the eye of the Ancestors. According to legend, it created a focal point for thought. It could help a person to purge those thoughts they found most troubling and grant them good dreams.

"My father bought this one from an old Kaashi nomad several years before I was born. It was an impulse, a youthful notion that a gift for the headstrong daughter of Milyasa Emmagan would open her eyes to his affections," she related as her thoughts turned to the night her father had told her the story. With him at her bedside, Teyla had inherited her mother's gift on her sixth birthday.

"He felt like a fool for over a moon's turn, he said." Teyla glanced at John's face and managed a small smile. "My mother, Tegan, continued to ignore him. Then one day, he was passing by her tent and noticed the flap had been left open. It was winter and the tent was losing heat, so he peeked inside to see if either my mother or her parents were there, meaning to close it himself if he found them not at home. They were not. But he saw the dreamwheel he had purchased for my mother hanging neatly over her bed."

Tegan had come home soon after and found him there. Her hair sticking out wildly from her furs and flapping in the wind, she had hauled past him, yanked and tied the tent closed, and then stalked rapidly away again. But not before Teyla's father had seen the color rise in her cheeks. It was the first time in his entire life he had seen her proud mother blush.

Teyla attention's floated to the dreamwheel. She saw the Stargate it was meant to resemble. The intricate webs danced before her vision, almost spinning as they magnetically drew her gaze to the center point. To the eye of the Ancestors. She remembered being nestled snugly in her bed, the dreamwheel tucked carefully inside her little hands while her father's, seeming as mammoth as only a father's hands could be, cupped her face. As Teyla spoke, it was like he was here, talking to her once again, leading her along to a realization yet unseen.

"He said, 'I have never before or since seen such a beautiful shade of pink, except perhaps on the day of your birth, my child. You were this small, wriggling thing, your blood all gathered in your cheeks. Your first cries could be heard all over the camp.'" Teyla paused. "'Teyla Emmagan, the daughter of Tegan, announcing herself to the world.'"

John watched her, his brow creased into deep ridges. She looked back at him, the past, present, and future standing open before her like wide, gaping maw.

"Do you hear it, John?" she asked quietly, her voice detached and even, the alien song playing gently in her head. "Can you see them? All those people? Us? Did you see what is coming?"

He swallowed, the lump of his Adam's apple lurched in his throat, and he slowly nodded.

They were on a path. Nothing had changed. The pieces were still coming together, but when the time came, their daughter would not simply announce herself to the world. She would announce herself to the entire galaxy.

Hours later, as they lay together in bed, Teyla stared up at the ceiling and listened as the gentle humming voice spoke to her, though she could no longer understand the words.

The only voice she could understand was her own, that of her future self repeating in an ominous refrain—

"Take her. You have to take her, John. Run."
"Morning," John said.

As Rodney trundled in, grumbling and tired, John opened his locker and pulled out his vest. Rodney planted his butt on the bench. He reached down to finish tying up his boots as Ronon entered the room, followed by Capshaw a few moments later. John shrugged his vest into place and took a quick inventory of the pockets before zipping it shut.

No one spoke. Instead, they spent the next few minutes caught up in the weight of the morning, acting out what was by now a well-practiced routine. McKay fidgeted and fussed with his gear. Weapons were holstered. Clips snapped into place. Flashlights, matches, power bars and other incidentals found their way into empty pockets.

It was familiar, the sounds of his team preparing together somehow reassuring. They had been through a lot in the last few months, each of them with their own separate journey and the challenges that came with it.

John still had doubts. Lots of them. The kind that hijacked his dreams at night, filled his consciousness with the voices of the people he loved crying out in pain and left him feeling helpless to stop it. Maybe this time he was asking them for too much.

But they were all still here, and that meant the world to him.

Capshaw stowed his iPod in one of his breast pockets—he never went anywhere without it. McKay wouldn't leave home without an epi pen and a roll of antacids, and Ronon was probably hiding a kitchen's worth of steel somewhere on his person. Somehow. Some way. John had never quite figured out how he did it. Capshaw quickly kissed his hand and touched it to his rifle case, a gesture repeated so many times that John doubted he even thought about anymore. Then, he grabbed his sidearm and shut his locker with a pronounced clang.

Rodney hunched his shoulders against the noise and scowled. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Capshaw bent and looped the straps of his thigh holster around his leg, snapping them into place.

"Cranky this morning, McKay?" John said.

Tugging uncomfortably on his vest, Rodney shot him a look that needed no interpretation. "Gee, let me see. I spent half the night arguing the subtleties of radio frequency harmonics with Zelenka, a man who I'm now convinced doesn't care whether we ever come back. He simply wants to try out the chair in my office."

"It's not that comfortable," Ronon muttered from the bench perpendicular to his. "And it squeaks."

Rodney's mouth gaped open mid-tug. "When did you—What is wrong with this thing?"

John didn't have the heart to tell him that he needed to quit eating so damn much. Kevlar didn't exactly have a lot of give to it.

Rodney growled with frustration, then jumped back to his previous rant with impressively little pause. "Then, after I finally made it clear to that tiny Czechoslovakian muppet that the only thing big enough about him to fill my shoes was his ego, it took me forever to get to sleep, and then I kept
"having the weirdest dreams. It was my junior high production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* over and over and over again."

"What?"

"My parents' brilliant idea. Somehow, they got it into their heads that I needed to get out more."

Capshaw snorted, while Ronon lifted his brow. His blaster found home on his hip.

"Who'd you play?" John asked, incredulous.

"Tom Snout," Rodney replied. "Two weeks of dress rehearsals waiting around to say, 'I am a wall.' Thank you, Fort McMurray School District for dumbing down Shakespeare for the intellectually less fortunate. Needless to say, it wasn't exactly the engaging experience my parents were hoping for."

John shook his head, deciding this was one glimpse into the life and times of Rodney McKay that could safely be forgotten. "And this is what you were dreaming about? Doesn't sound that weird to me."

"Oh no?" Rodney countered. "What would you say if I told you that the faeries were being played by Wraith? Little Wraith queens, skipping around with flowers in their hair, life-sucking little woodland creatures, and Todd running around on cloven hooves playing the inept matchmaker."

John, Ronon, and Capshaw's faces all contorted in a similar look of disbelief as the scene slowly sank in. Todd. As Puck, the mischievous elf. "Okay, McKay, that's weird."

"See?" McKay went on getting geared up, vindicated, though a pained look was still present on his face. "Do you think I have time to drop by the infirmary? I really need to get my ears checked or something. They're starting to give me a headache."

"You're dreaming about Wraith quoting Shakespeare. You need more than your hearing examined."

It was a joke, but John was more cognizant of his friend's complaint than he seemed. His half-formed smile faded some as he briefly tuned back into it. The song, the warnings, the noise in his head. He could hear it. It was getting louder all the time, the visions getting clearer.

He had to make it stop. The thought was becoming an obsession as the sound of man's desolate laughter echoed inside him, tumbling inside a fountain of sounds and images that kept playing on repeat. Feelings of hate and murder burned through him like a poison, and then Teyla's tear-stained face briefly became real again in front of him. She repeated her desperate plea, the same one he could never shake, despite the fact that he told her "no" every time.

He had thought about telling his friends about some of the things he and Teyla had both seen, but what would he say? How would any of it make sense to them when John didn't even understand it all? And what would they say if he told them that loudest of all was the screaming?

That one sound, once just one among many, was like an avalanche this morning, the future barreling down on him.

The agonized scream of a woman he was now almost certain was Keller.

It was pain, an instant of loss and desperation and terror, and it was coming.

He had to stop it.
Maybe it was his fault … maybe he had already caused it …

It didn't matter. He had to stop it.

John pushed an extra clip for his M11 into the bellowed storage pocket along his calf, and just as he did, Dr. Keller appeared. Her quiet, anxious demeanor as she stood in the doorway nearly gutted him.

"Colonel," she said.

"Doc," he greeted her, emotionless. "Need to get suited up. Time to get this show on the road."

She nodded, her chin a few notches too low to project the confidence she was clearly going for. She was afraid. And it was all his fault.

With resolute steps, she made her way across the room and took an extra vest from the rack. Her eyes stayed low as she adjusted the straps to fit her frame. Which was all Rodney needed to do, John thought as he purposefully removed his focus from Keller and back onto the grumbling scientist, except that he was too damn stubborn.

"Is the gas ready to go?" John asked, back to business.

She gently bobbed her head. "Carson is loading it onto the Jumper as we speak."

"And you've familiarized yourself with the Hive schematics?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," John remarked. "Ronon, once we're on the queen's Hive, I want you to stick with the Doc. If I give the signal, you and Keller make time to the central chamber and deploy the retrovirus."

Ronon didn't respond. The lack of any grumbling, however, was as good as an affirmative in John's book. Meanwhile, Keller's posture set itself for an argument, likely one of the same arguments she'd made when he first presented the idea to her in her office. "Colonel, we can't just release the retrovirus. We could get infected, too. There's no way to predict—"

"That's why I had Lorne include hazmat suits along with our other gear on the Jumper," John interjected. "Don't worry, Doc. I've got us covered."

He truly believed it. He had gone over every possible scenario and made certain that they were prepared for every eventuality. He owed them that much. He owed it to Teyla and to their daughter. He knew that they were scared, but they were coming home. All of them.

John moved toward to door, anxious to get to the Jumper Bay and oversee the final prep. "Ronon, you and Capshaw head down to the brig and spring our guest from his cell as soon as you're done here. McKay, you and Keller meet us upstairs."

"I'm ready now, Colonel," she said, her vest packed with the basics. Somehow, her eyes looked softer and more vulnerable than ever.

Capshaw scowled as he watched the entire exchange, stress starting to radiate around him.

John shook his head. "I don't think so, Doc."

"What do you mean?"
As if illustrating the point, Capshaw primed his sidearm, clicked on the safety, and holstered it with steel precision.

Keller's eyes widened. She gulped. "Oh. Um, Colonel, I'm not … I haven't even touched a gun in …"

"I know you're not comfortable with it, Doc, but you're not walking out of this room without protection," John said. "This is a tense situation. We're not about to negotiate on your safety, you hear me?" Not for one second. "Even Carson carries a gun when he's offworld."

Jennifer hesitated but ultimately relented. "O-okay." She glanced toward the weapons locker, obviously at a loss.

No one moved for a moment. Capshaw's gaze raked her over. Clearly torn, his chest moved up and down. He flung a glance at Ronon, who, up until now, had been his usual cheery morning self.

Ronon slammed his locker shut. A visible ripple of tension hit everyone in the room. Except for Rodney, who was still messing around with his own vest as if he didn't already know the problem.

"You guys don't think I'm getting fat, do you?"

Ronon's eyes locked sharply on Rodney, but an instant later, his voice emerged surprisingly subdued. "Yes."

Without another word, he swiped his big leather duster from the bench and walked out.

He left behind an airless space. A place where John was suspended for a moment, knowing that there was much more going on than was being said. Then, Capshaw stepped around Jennifer with a thigh holster in hand.

"C'mon," he said quietly, careful as his hands encircled her leg. "Fasten that part around your belt. Yeah … Okay, hold still …"

The big marine took care of her, and only a complete idiot wouldn't have noticed the wave of relief that passed through Jennifer's body at Capshaw's proximity.

Love.

Dammit, he'd know it anywhere.

And shades of Rodney's dream tinkered at the back of his mind. Todd's voice, full in its deep, discordant resonance, drifted upward without the free-spirited, almost whimsical tone the line was meant to have. It was dark and ominous and would stay with John forever.

_Lord, what fools these mortals be._

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Richard Woolsey frowned as he perused the daily reports. When he was a boy, his mother would give him a gentle pinch on the cheek every time she caught him making that face. It didn't matter to her that he was trying to concentrate. His yelps of protest never seemed to hinder her. Every time, she had insisted, much to his consternation, that that expression made him look just like his Uncle Albert.
His mother's teasing comments horrified him. Uncle Albert was a sour, old bachelor they only saw a few times a year, who smelled of Brylcreem, scotch, and stale cigars, and unfailingly had little else for his nephew but a staunch look of disapproval.

For years afterward—long after a hushed and never legally recognized separation had prompted his mother to move back to Hartford, closer to her own parents, leaving him in Boston with his father—Richard had been self-conscious about it. He would be in the middle of intense passages and suddenly realize he was doing it again. He looked like Uncle Albert. All he needed was a starched old suit, a tumbler full of scotch, and great big hairy eyebrows.

At his desk, Richard sighed and rubbed a hand over his jaw until the mask of concentration began to loosen. He supposed he'd never quite broken himself of the habit. Frown lines were cut deep into his face at this point. He was forty years older and all he wanted was a tumbler full of scotch.

Who was he kidding? He was Uncle Albert.

His gaze returned to his reports. It was early yet, despite having given up sleep for the demands of responsibility hours ago. He still waited for several departments to check in, but anthropology, linguistics, astrophysics, and the infirmary had already filed their morning reports for the day and forwarded them to his tablet. Apparently, there were several cases of sleep disturbance and headache last night, the infirmary report read, Captains Haywood and Levine among them.

Dr. Kusanagi, Lieutenant Kelso, Sergeant Stackhouse …

Richard's frown returned as he continued on. Even Major Lorne and Dr. Beckett had reported difficulty sleeping. All natural ATA carriers, the notation stated. Richard was beginning to wonder if these sudden cases were something to be concerned about, but, further down, the cases were declared to be most likely stress-related. Patients had responded fine to a painkiller or sleep aid, and Drs. Beckett and Cole planned to keep a close eye on things for the next several days in case a pattern persisted. Signed, Dr. Jennifer Keller.

Richard's curiosity was piqued as he noticed the young doctor's signature on last night's medical logs. He hadn't realized Dr. Keller was even on duty last night. He supposed, however, her diagnosis made sense. They were all under a lot of stress, Richard included. He had made a decision and, as a result, lives now hung in the balance. The amount of energy expended second guessing himself and his decision was considerable, but he was learning to accept that whatever happened next, whether Todd kept his word or not, it was now out of his hands.

This was the burden of command. It was heavier than he ever could have imagined before coming here. But he could only hope that Colonel Sheppard's mission succeeded and everyone returned home safely.

A familiar noise arose outside his office through the open doorway, followed by a succinct message a few minutes later from Amelia Banks to report to Operations. He swiveled out of his office chair, straightened his uniform, and made his way across the catwalk.

Tension in the Control Room earlier had run high as last minute preparations for Colonel Sheppard's mission had been rushed to completion and, upstairs, Jumper One had been suitably outfitted with everything they might need for such a risky endeavor. However, it seemed the heightened agitation had finally eased into something closer resembling the usual routine. Morning personnel had reported for duty. They were working with the now weary night shift to coordinate communications, reports and requests from each department, and all scheduled check-ins from all teams currently offworld.

As he approached, the Stargate had just shut down, and Amelia conferred quietly with Chuck, who
was leaning across her station as she showed him something on her computer screen.

"Status report, Amelia."

The ever composed technician glanced up at the sound of Richard's address and responded. "Sir, Major Santiago just reported in from MS6-374. The science team reached the crater almost an hour ago, and readings show that the asteroid is emitting much higher radiation levels than expected. He's requested a medical team to set up for immediate decontamination."

"They aren't in any danger, are they?" The Major's team had gone equipped with hazmat suits to a planet where their aid had been requested by the village Chancellor. There should have been little reason to fear for their safety.

"The radiation levels aren't lethal, but they're approaching critical levels. Several of the locals are already showing symptoms of exposure. Major Santiago thinks they may need to evacuate them much sooner than anticipated."

Richard nodded, almost glad to be presented with a problem that didn't involve the Wraith. "See to it that Dr. Beckett is informed."

"On it," Chuck said, fastening his comm unit to his ear and sliding into his chair. Amelia gave him a grateful smile before returning her attention to Richard, the fatigue leftover from her long shift evident in her expression.

"When did the Major say we can expect the first wave?"

"He hopes to have the first group assembled and ready to go through the Gate within the hour. There are a number of them, though, putting up a lot of resistance. They don't want to leave their homes. They don't believe the asteroid is what's making them sick."

Richard frowned, feeling every one of those deeply etched lines in his skin. The last thing he wanted was for this situation to become violent. "Do we need to send reinforcements?"

Amelia shook her head. "Santiago thinks they can keep the situation under control."

"Hmm," Richard muttered. "Regardless, let's have a team ready to render assistance should the need arise."

"Yes, sir."

"Has there been any word from the Daedalus?"

Amelia peered up at him, her astute gaze taking him in. "They're ready to get underway as soon as Colonel Sheppard signals the go-ahead."

Richard nodded as heavy doubt lingered in his stomach. "And Colonel Sheppard is still on schedule to depart?"

"Yes, sir."

He set his hands on her station, leaning in, and took a breath.

Amelia face became uneasy. "Um ... sir?"

"Hmm?" he muttered quietly.
There was a noticeable pause before she replied. Biting her lip, she sent a pointed glance over his shoulder. "David Sheppard is outside. He's been there for a while."

Richard turned around and saw the silhouette of Colonel Sheppard's older brother through the countless panes of stained, colored glass that lined the walls of the Tower. David Sheppard hadn't gotten more sleep than anyone else last night.

"I see. Yes, well, um … As you were, Amelia. Thank you."

She nodded, her mouth closed in a soft smile.

Richard exhaled. Setting his shoulders, he tucked his tablet in the palm of his hand and crossed the platform along the walkway. The door slid open with the unobtrusive mechanical whirr Richard had quickly become accustomed to.

Outside, it was a quiet morning. The lights surrounding the city's towers were becoming more muted against the predawn sky. There was only a slow, winding breeze. It ribboned in gentle, wavering currents up and along the Tower. Beneath him, the Lantean ocean was calm.

David Sheppard stood straight and tall next to the railing as he approached, his shirt crisp, his tie snug around his neck—Richard's own preferred uniform. David sipped on a cup of coffee and grimaced.

"Is that from the mess hall or the lounge?"

A reply was slow in coming, and when it did, David's voice was low, unused. "I'm not sure. One of the technicians got it for me a little while ago."

"Probably not a promising situation in either case," Richard said. "In general, the quality of the coffee is hit or miss, and at this hour, it's likely the grounds were whatever was leftover from last night."

Dave looked down at his coffee with mild disgust. "They really don't like me, do they?"

Mr. Woolsey chuckled, and they lapsed into a comfortable silence, only broken by the waves crashing against the city down below.

"Around 4:00 this morning, one of our security patrols reported seeing the IOA representative in the gym," he said. "And then a little while later, I received another report saying you were spotted walking the hallways near the Southeast Pier."

David's posture suddenly grew stiff. His stony gaze finally broke from its fixed position, and their eyes met. "Couldn't sleep, that's all," he said, even though it was obvious there was more he wasn't saying.

"Well, not one of the more unusual things that have been spotted lurking inside the city, in my experience, but unexpected nonetheless."

"I guess I didn't realize it would cause such a stir."

Mr. Woolsey's natural frown gave way to a wry smirk. "You know, I've been attached to several government agencies over the years. The State Department, the NID, and so forth. And if there is anything I've learned, it's that when the IOA is involved in anything, people tend to be concerned."

The corner of David's mouth ticked up into a small smile. A small success. A drop in what Richard
knew was a very deep well. He took another sip of his coffee and scowled.

"You know," David said, "I haven't had a cigarette in ten years. I've been here less than a week, and I suddenly feel like I need one."

"I know the feeling," Richard replied. "I don't think I've gotten a full night's rest for the past six months—not since I was placed in command." From a desk on Earth, the prospect of heading up this expedition had been very ... neat. He was confident in himself and the direction Atlantis needed to take in order to achieve its fullest potential. The reality wasn't nearly as cut and dried.

"Are you sure it's the right thing letting them go?"

"I've learned to trust Colonel Sheppard's judgment in most things. We have our differences, but he offers a certain amount of experience and a valuable perspective that I can appreciate."

It wasn't an answer, and in response, David cocked his head, his eyebrows lifting skeptically. It was a move very reminiscent of his brother.

The truth was that Richard wasn't sure what the right answer was anymore. Before he was the one in charge, he had thought he would know what the right thing was. These things had always seemed so clear, so black and white. Even in the gray areas, there were rules, guidelines to follow.

Now, the only thing he knew for sure is that he didn't know a thing.

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