In the City of Seven Walls

by auburn

Summary

Gilded cages are still cages. Sheppard and McKay turn to each other to survive a life in slavery and afterward.
"Just tell me they're not going to make us into eunuchs," McKay whispered.

Sheppard didn't lift his head, but his gaze slid toward McKay. He mouthed, 'Don't talk,' but it was already too late. The biggest guard's whip snapped out, laying another stripe over McKay's back. They were already kneeling on in the dirt and the blow made McKay fall forward onto his hands.

"Silence!"

McKay screamed just once, just enough to satisfy the guard.

The slave factor in charge of their group grunted, stopping the guard before he could swing the lash again. No use marking up the merchandise too much.

Sheppard curled his fingers into tight fists, resisting the urge to leap up and wrap his chains around the guard's neck and strangle him. Ronon had already been clubbed into unconsciousness for losing his temper. He didn't know where Ronon was now—he had been dragged off like so much offal—anymore than he knew where Teyla had been taken after she was sold. She could be on another world by now, taken through the stargate again, while Ronon's body rotted in a pit.

Sold.

He couldn't really accept the idea these people thought they could make him and his team into slaves, but it was happening.

They'd walked right into it. Rather, they'd walked through the stargate right into an ambush, been stunned and dropped before they even had time to look around, and woke stripped of everything, even their clothes, and in chains. Several brutal lessons later, they'd been loaded into a cart and brought through the stargate to market like so many cabbages. They didn't even know the gate address of this world. The slave trade in Pegasus flourished underground, the markets springing up on deserted worlds according to some whispered schedule, before disappearing again to reappear months later somewhere else. There were always buyers, worlds where the Wraith had culled and laborers were needed or skilled workers or breeders to re-establish the population, and the remaining powers weren't too picky how they obtained the people they needed.

They were already three days overdue to check in, but Sheppard worried that any rescue would walk into the same roach trap his team had. If they didn't, they would have no chance of tracking them through the stargates. The slavers knew what they were doing.

Meanwhile, all he could do was stay quiet and hope he and Rodney were kept together until one of them could think of some way to escape.

He gritted his teeth while two more potential buyers looked at both of them. One fingered a raw red welt on his shoulder, sending a spike of pain through him.

"New or just incorrigible?"

"Both," the factor replied.

"They're old to be cut."

Sheppard hid a flinch.
"No use as breeding stock then," the factor replied.

Sheppard knew he did not want to be put out to stud, fathering kids who would be raised in slavery, but if the alternative was being gelded….

"Too much trouble," the man said and moved on.

"They are," McKay hissed. "Oh, God, they are."

Sheppard knew the guard was watching, just waiting for him to answer McKay. He already had a feel for the way the bastard thought: this guard enjoyed making them suffer and set up opportunities to punish them for transgressions. The factor didn't care enough to stop him, unless it appeared it would cost him. The guard was letting McKay get away with talking this time to tempt Sheppard into doing the same. Then it would be the lash again.

Instead of answering, Sheppard shifted on his knees until his bare calf brushed against McKay's. He didn't know what he could say anyway.

The market, what Sheppard had glimpsed from the cart before they were off-loaded, had the feel of a feedlot crossed with a traveling carnival. Most of the slaves were in temporary pens, but a few sellers had tents and displayed the goods where buyers could examine them closely.

A line of sweat trickled down his back, stinging the welts. He tried to shut everything out but the feel of the sun burning his shoulders and the back of his bowed head, the feel of McKay's hairy leg against his own, and the sound of him breathing.

The soft swish of skirts almost made him look up when they paused in front of him. He managed to keep his eyes down, taking in the sandaled feet peeking from beneath a turquoise skirt before him. Gold rings glinted on neat toes with nails painted a deep cobalt blue.

"Hara?" the factor asked, sounding smarmy and uncertain at the same time. The guard echoed him, rusty and slow, forcing respect into his voice. "Hara."

Sheppard held still as the woman walked around him, so close the silk skirt wisped against his elbow once.

A hand, also be-ringed, and painted with patterns, lifted Sheppard's chin, so that he blinked into the sun-backed silhouette of this potential purchaser. As his eyes cleared, he saw liquid black eyes outlined in red, an elegant roman nose and lips stained burgundy. Her fingers balanced his chin, shifting once to assess the roughness of his beard.

"This one," she said.

"Hara, these are untrained slaves—" the factor protested.

"And unbroken," she interrupted. "I have need of such."

"Very well," the factor said. "The price—"

Another woman, rounder and shorter than the first, stepped forward, green skirts whispering as she moved. She shoved a bag of coins into the factor's hands. When he opened his mouth to say something else, one of the four armed men accompanying the women, obviously bodyguards, shook his head and grinned ferally. The factor subsided.

Sheppard's new—Jesus!—owner lifted her hand, bringing his chin up further. "Up," she said,
addressing him for the first time.

Taking a chance, he tipped his head toward McKay and said—begged, "Please."

McKay still had his head down. His hands were clenched on his thighs. The pink flush of a sunburn colored the back of his neck and his otherwise pale shoulders. Where the whip marks didn't line the skin in angry, infected-looking red.

She—Sheppard thought Hara must be a title—paused. Sheppard saw her gaze take in the way his leg pressed against McKay's.

"This one, too," she declared. "The price is enough for both of them."

Sheppard grabbed McKay's arm and drew him unsteadily to his feet as he rose himself.

Their chains clinked as they followed the woman and her retinue through the market to the stargate and through the wormhole into a busy, seemingly pre-industrial city of sienna and rose stone. Pale dust coated their bare feet and ankles. Sheppard limped next to Rodney, taking quick looks around. The stargate here opened on a plaza surrounded by market stalls. It reminded him of a souk, the air filled with calls from merchants, the bleating of animals, music, and bells from the towers of the palace that dominated the city. The people wore colorful, loose robes and had dark hair. A depressing number of them were followed by barefoot slaves who obviously weren't native. A thousand smells warred and mixed in the air, manure and spices and sweat, dust, wool, smoke, perfume, rotting fruit and fresh flowers, one second sickening, the next vibrant with life as the wind shifted.

Their path took them to the high, red, fortress walls of the palace that dominated the city and inside, voices calling that the Haralim returned, gates and doors opening before them.
The Haralim

The palace existed within a fortress, massive and meant to repel even the Wraith. Within the palace existed the Seven-Walled City. As the fortress and the palace belonged to the Rale, the Seven-Walled City belonged to the Haralim, his sister and first wife.

It swallowed them.

At first it meant nothing to McKay that they belonged to the Haralim herself. To Sheppard it just meant their escape would be that much harder. But they tried at the first opportunity. They tried and failed. They made it past five of the walls before they were caught, which impressed the guards who caught them enough to give them an extra beating.

The Haralim was waiting when they were dragged back, bruised and dirty, manacled again after only a day free of the heavy bonds.

McKay wanted to yell at her, to shout that they weren't slaves, no one could do this to them, that he had to get back to Atlantis and find a way to save the city and then, hey, maybe the entire Pegasus galaxy when he had five free minutes to devote to beating the Wraith. He wanted to kill the bastards that bloodied Sheppard's mouth when they were caught, used a club on his ribs, wanted to threaten vile and grandiloquent revenge on the Haralim and all the Selketi. Self-preservation squeezed his throat shut on any words and he was horrified to realize he'd already absorbed the first lesson of their slavery.

He would be silent rather than risk the whip.

Sheppard hadn't accepted it yet. While the guards pushed them both to their knees on the cool tile before the Haralim, Sheppard slurried irreverent, smart-alec remarks.

"Bow," one of the guards demanded. A heavy hand on the back of McKay's head forced him down until his face was mashed against the floor. The blue tile was cool and almost soothing against his nose and cheek. He wished he could stay there and not look up, but he heard Sheppard curse and another scuffle, punctuated with the thunk of chains hitting flesh.

He had to turn his head and look.

Four guards had Sheppard pinned face down to the floor. One of them crouched with a knee on Sheppard's back. Sheppard was still fighting, bucking against them with more desperation than technique, and McKay realized that he just couldn't stop. For Sheppard, if he stopped fighting, it would be giving in; he wouldn't be Sheppard after that.

His gaze caught Sheppard's good eye—the other was swollen shut—for an endless interval. He could see so much. Sheppard didn't expect McKay to fight—didn't want him to—this wasn't about escape now, it was a fight to keep something whole inside him.

It terrified McKay, because he thought it would get Sheppard killed.

He managed to kick at his own guard and throw himself against the legs of one of the men holding Sheppard down. He didn't stop to think about it. He just did it, knowing as well as Sheppard did that it only a gesture.
He did it anyway.

He kept fighting, trying with awkward blows to pull even one of them off Sheppard.

Somewhere in the struggle, Sheppard flipped over. McKay's elbow smashed into a guard's nose, making him cry out. Sheppard managed to use his chains as weapons.

It wasn't enough.

The bright, leaf-shape of spear point came to rest against the base of Sheppard's throat. Sheppard went still other than the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in hard pants. McKay froze as the blade just split Sheppard's skin, staring in stomach-heaving fright at the trickle of red that oozed down the side of Sheppard's neck. He was practically limp as two guards pulled him away.

"Hara, we should make examples of them," the guard holding the spear to Sheppard's throat said.

"No."

She wore green silk and gold bracelets covered her forearms. They rang against each other as she approached.

"Hara—"

"Untrained," she said. She touched Sheppard's shoulder with one sandaled toe-tip. "Any other owner would have you whipped bloody and raw in the center courtyard for running. For the guards you killed, you would be killed, too."

Sheppard lifted his head, forcing the spear point deeper. "Don't let me stop you."

"Don't—Sheppard, don't, it's not worth it," McKay whispered. "Fuck live free or die."

Sheppard gave him a sidelong look that managed to say, 'Yes, it is,' despite the damage to his face.

The Haralim crouched in a pool of skirt next to Sheppard's head. Her fingers were darker than his skin. She trailed them over his brow, then his cheekbone, and down to his jaw, which she grasped cruelly.

"Still, I bought you for a purpose you have yet to serve and serve it you will."

She looked up and nodded to another slave, older and wrinkled, dressed in loose cotton trousers and a vest. A fringe of gray hair circled the man's balding skull.

"Te'i'ayas, bring me the medicinals."

McKay caught his breath, suddenly apprehensive. It wasn't the word or the way she said it: it was Te'i'ayas' reaction, the flinch in the older man's brown eyes. He hurried away, his bare feet slapping on the tiles.

The Haralim released Sheppard's chin and traced a fingertip over his split lips.

"You must be punished."
"Great," Sheppard said and his voice cracked a little high.

The Haralim smiled.

Tei'ayas returned with a inlaid wooden box. He presented it to the Haralim on both hands, sinking down on his knees before her.

She opened it with a key brought from among the necklaces around her neck and drew out a vial of amber liquid. The light from a high window gleamed through contents the color of honey.

Even the guards looked sick.

"Hold him still," she told the guards. She opened the vial, knelt again, and brought it to Sheppard's stubbornly closed lips. "This is called moa. It is a poison."

"Poison!" McKay sputtered and received another blow to the side of his head.

The Haralim eyed him sidelong. "In sufficient doses. This will not kill you."

"What will it do?" McKay demanded so that Sheppard wouldn't have to open his mouth.

She smiled. "Punish him." She dug the fingers of her other hand into the hinge of Sheppard's jaw. "Drink it. It will leave you unmarked."

"Don't—" McKay said as the Haralim added, "Or I will take the noisy one back to the market and sell him."

Sheppard open his mouth and drank. The movement of his Adam's apple made the spear point still at his throat dig in again.

The Haralim rose.

"Take them back to their room and lock them in," she commanded before walking away. "Remove the chains. They won't be necessary."

"Vai, Hara," the guards chorused.

McKay got to his feet on his own, but Sheppard stumbled and sank back to his knees. One of the biggest guards, bigger than Ronon, bigger than Teal'c back at the SGC, slung Sheppard over his shoulder, carrying him like a sack of grain.

As McKay staggered into the room—cell, McKay thought—thanks to a hard push, the big guard dropped Sheppard's limp body onto the single bed. "Give him water," the guard said in a voice too low for anyone else to hear as he passed McKay. He unlocked the manacles from Sheppard's wrists and ankles, taking them with him, while his even less talkative partner removed McKay's chains.

The door shut with the heavy clunk, followed by the clunk and click of the lock turning. It was a plain room, with nothing but the bed, a window set high on one wall, some sort of chemical lamps, glass balls holding faintly glowing blue gel, and a washroom beyond an open doorway offset behind a carved wooden screen. Stone walls, tiled floor, and the bed, which at least had blankets.

McKay rubbed his wrists nervously.
"Not exactly home sweet home."

Sheppard, lying in a sprawl on the bed, groaned.

McKay made it over to the bed and crouched there. Sheppard was already sweating, glassy-eyed and pale. He groaned again.

"Colonel?"

Sheppard flinched and clutched his hands over his ears.

McKay reached for his shoulder. When his fingers brushed Sheppard's skin, he convulsed, crying out.

McKay snatched his hand back. "I'm sorry, what, what is it doing to you?" Sheppard's skin had been burning like a man with a deadly fever.

Sheppard didn't manage to answer. He curled into a fetal ball and began rocking.

McKay remembered the guard's advice. He ducked into the washroom and found it had running water and even a drinking glass. He filled it and came back to Sheppard on the bed. Sheppard drank the water with a little coaxing. Then McKay perched on the edge of the bed as near to him as he could without touching, where Sheppard could see him, and waited.

Sheppard wasn't speaking, just breathing in gusting inhalations and exhalations through his nose, his jaw clenched. McKay figured he had to be hurting bad. Sheppard usually joked through anything, even getting shot, until he passed out.

Except Sheppard never passed out. He began screaming.
The hard, high, animal whine at the back of his throat belonged to him, even when Sheppard couldn't scream anymore. It rode every agonizing breath as the rest of his reality whited out, the pain so pure it overwhelmed everything, consumed his body, his thoughts, even his name. Nothing else was real.

An endless time later, he started to hear himself. He couldn't stop the sound. Every nerve in his body felt exposed, frozen and seared, flaring messages to his already overloaded brain. The first flood lasted beyond any enduring, beyond sanity, so pure he thought he'd die and welcomed the escape.

Noise hurt, touch, light, the water someone trickled past his lips, it was all acid on raw nerves, third degree burns over his entire body, barbed knives turning into bone, too many Gs crushing him internally.

He gasped for air and twisted mindlessly, trying to claw out of his own skin, barely registering that hands held him down sometimes and braced him later as he heaved bile and blood past his already raw throat. It was worse than coming back from the retrovirus, worse than anything ever. He wanted to black-out and he couldn't, even hours later when he hung in Rodney's arms, muscles still randomly twitching and seizing, like he'd been hit by a taser over and over.

The pain slowly retreated after that, but he felt afraid to move, afraid it would explode out of his muscles and bones again. He was cold and sweating at the same time, too miserably weak to shift if he'd wanted to and he didn't, Rodney's bulk and warmth were a comforting anchor.

He let the warmth settle into him, let it slide him into the respite of sleep gratefully.

McKay's voice woke him, rising and half-panicked, as his body was jostled and carelessly jerked upright. "Leave him alone!"

Sheppard cracked open his eyelids, braced for the light to shove a needle into his brain. He felt like he'd been beaten with Teyla's sticks, only distant and disconnected. His head was muzzy and the morning light was too bright, but didn't produce the agony he anticipated.

"Hey! Stop it, stop—"

The sound of a blow on flesh made Sheppard turn his head too fast, nearly sending him to his knees. A big hand locked on his biceps yanked him back up. He blinked, trying to see through the flaring halo around McKay's head, the guard that had just—what, backhanded him?—back lit by a window full of light. McKay had his hand to his mouth, his jaw set, glaring at the guard.

Sheppard swayed and the guard—the other guard, there were two of them, he finally figured out—actually steadied him. After a second, the world stopped tilting and his vision cleared.

"Bastard," McKay growled. Just like every time, there was a look in his eyes, like he just couldn't comprehend why anyone used violence—against him—when they could use their brains.

"Hey, don't—" Sheppard tried to say as McKay snatched at the first guard's arm. He was in no shape to get between the guy and McKay. His voice failed on the second word, too raw and worn to even sound like himself, but it drew McKay's attention.
"Colonel, are you—"

The big guard planted a hand against McKay's chest and shoved him back.

"The Haralim has commanded his presence. Be silent."

Sheppard almost laughed. Silence was not one of McKay's skills. But he saw the way McKay pressed his lips together. McKay's gaze met his. He could read the panic and worry there like a book he'd memorized. His voice was still AWOL, so he gave a little shrug accompanied by open hands, a 'what can you do?' gesture.

"You stay here."

McKay still looked mutinous, but backed away until his legs hit the rumpled bed. He sat down, still glaring.

Sheppard stumbled as his guard pulled him out of the room, still looking back at McKay, trying to tell him to just go along quietly until Sheppard could think of something to get them out of this. Even if his first plan hadn't worked out.

His escort stayed close on both sides as they walked. The one holding his arm offered an unobtrusive bit of support Sheppard was grateful for until his knees stopped threatening to buckle. He tried to keep track of the twists and turns of the halls they walked through, but his head kept going airy and out-of-focus. All he got was a blur of brilliant colors and intricate patterns interspersed with grilled over windows and stretches of golden-brown stone.
Submission

She was waiting in a green-shaded room. He couldn't suppress a shiver, seeing her stretched languorously over a lounge. The room felt like an aquarium, green and yellow tiles under his feet, tiny mosaic tiles on the walls in a random ripple of blue shading into green, lighter and lighter by layers toward the ceiling. One side of the room opened in a series of arches onto a colonnade and a lush garden. Curtains of nearly transparent gauze stirred with every passing movement or breath of air.

She wasn't alone. A dozen women were draped on couches and pillows and rugs strewn around the room, their murmuring like the lap of waves. He longed for the real thing, the sea salt tang of Atlantis' waters rocking his city on the ocean's cradle. Selket smelled of dust and sand and spice.

Some of the women looked up, their dark eyes sharp and speculative, watching as Sheppard was frog-marched into the Haralim's presence. Their voices rose like birds', speaking a language he didn't recognize, one that owed little to the trade tongue of stargate travelers. Insular, like this place and these people. It was lilting and liquid and Sheppard suspected it would be difficult to learn.

He didn't plan on being around long enough to try.

The hand still on his arm urged him down without being brutal about it. He went down to his knees because it was easier than fighting when he had the strength of an anorexic mosquito. He wanted to sneak a look and see the guard to his side. Just to mark him as a someone who had a little decency, even in the circumstances.

A child, a girl he thought, knelt beside the Haralim's lounge. Smooth dark hair fell down her back, over a white gauze shift, the ends tickling the soles of her bare feet. Her bare feet, the soles paler than the burnished darkness of her skin, and Sheppard had to swallow hard, because he'd already got it: bare feet equaled slave on Selket.

The Haralim wore gold-embroidered, green silk slippers with sharp toes. All the women wore skirts that showed their feet. Their shod feet. He swallowed again, thinking it probably started with just making it harder for a slave to run, but was a cultural thing now. His mind replayed the old Earth saying, barefoot and pregnant, because wasn't that the same thing, too?

The cool tiles made his knees ache. He tried not to think about being naked, on display, before all these women and that little girl. It wasn't like bodies were bad or even that he had any choice. Not like he was looking his best either, since he still felt achy and nauseous and had spent the night screaming and sweating. Psych games. Nudity in the company of those clothed resulted in a feeling of vulnerability. Just as deliberate as the bare feet and he couldn't let it get to him.

The Haralim sat up a little, tucking her feet to the side. Bracelets slid down her arms.

"So, you see, you survived the moa." She had a deep, rich voice that made even trade tongue sound lyrical. A voice like a red wine.

He started to answer, then pressed his mouth shut. Her lips curved into a smile. "Are you a quick learner?" she asked. "Have you learned your lesson?"

"Sure," he rasped out, wincing at the roughness of his voice and the hot sandpaper tightening in his throat.
The Haralim snapped a manicured hand at the little girl. "Bint, water," she commanded. The child obediently trotted to the side of the room, retrieving a tray with a pitcher and glasses. Water condensed on the side of the blue glass. The little girl set the tray neatly on the low table next to the lounge. With concentrated care, she poured water into one of the glasses. She brought the glass to Sheppard and offered it tentatively.

He took it, moving slowly, not looking at the child or anything but the glass. It was damp and slick under his fingertips. He wanted to gulp down the contents desperately, suddenly so thirsty he couldn't even swallow.

"Drink," the Haralim told him.

Sheppard struggled between doing what he wanted to do and refusing because she'd commanded it, just on principle. He could smell the water, feel the condensation soaking into his skin. His mouth felt like it had been stuffed full of paper, his lips so dry they would split if he spoke.

"Drink it," the Haralim said, her tone gone steely. The girl shivered.

Sheppard lifted the glass and drank, forcing himself to sip slowly. He let the first mouthful just rest in his mouth for a breath, before swallowing. The cool water soothed his dry tongue and painful throat, feeling so good he wanted to moan. His eyes fell shut as he savored each sip until the glass was empty. He opened his eyes again as he licked a stray drop from his lip.

The Haralim was watching him. So were several of the other women, so predatory he nearly flinched. He hid the reaction by handing the glass back to the little girl along with a smile for a thank you.

"Enough," the Haralim said suddenly. She turned her attention to the whispering women. "All of you. Out." She pointed to a door at the other end of the room. "Go."

Laughter and giggling and knowing looks were the response as the women, gauze and linen sliding over smooth arms and legs, gathered themselves and drifted out of the room. Some paused to survey John once more before going, whispering to each other as they passed out the door, their voices rising and falling away as they went.

"Bint," the Haralim said. "Go into the garden. At ninth bell, you may go help in the kitchens."

The girl returned the glass to its tray and trotted out to the colonnade, disappearing past a vine-covered column.

Only the two guards remained.

The Haralim rose and paced over to Sheppard. He lifted his face and met her eyes.

"Proud, so very proud, aren't you?" she said.

"Not really."

"Yes," she insisted and trailed one finger over his neck, unerringly finding the scar where the Iratus bug had fed on him and left the nerves dead, but somehow more sensitive everywhere around it. Sheppard shuddered at the sensation. "A soldier and a fighter, I think, yes?"
He didn't answer.

She smiled anyway and bent closer. "You survived the moa. I'm sure you think that you could survive it again. But would you want to if you knew you would have to endure it every night? Every night."

Her lips were stained with something almost purple, he noticed. They had a perfect bow to them, just the kind of mouth he always noticed, the kind he liked to kiss. Her eyes weren't really black. There were tiny amber spokes near the pupil. She was so close he could count the fine horizontal lines etched under her eyes, the crow's feet concealed beneath a line of kohl. She smelled something like orange blossoms, only a heavier scent, heady, with an undertone of musk.

The guard on his left made a small, involuntary sound. Sheppard tried to breathe steadily. He didn't want to give away how much that did frighten him. The pain had been beyond endurance. One dose and he'd wanted to die while it was at its worst. If he knew it was coming back again and again and again without end… Even now his muscles twitched and flinched at the prospect.

"In time you would die," she said. He felt her breath close upon his cheek.

"Maybe," he admitted. He'd probably want to.

"And your… friend?"

Sheppard felt his expression freeze, but he knew his eyes gave him away. McKay? McKay couldn't—he swallowed—he couldn't let McKay go through that. Not once, not ever, and what had he done when he asked this woman to take them both? She knew it, she knew it all, had read it in just a touch back in the market.

"What is he?" the Haralim asked.

"A scientist," he answered. "He's a scientist."

"A scientist?" she said thoughtfully. "A scholar?"

Sheppard nodded once.

"Shall I put him to work in the library?" She leaned closer. "Shall I keep him close?"

Sheppard didn't have a clue what to say, how to divert her from McKay. Jesus, he'd fucked up. He'd underestimated this place and this woman drastically. He swallowed. "I—"

"If you ever try to escape again, the scholar will be dosed with moa every day until you are captured; if you take him with you, then he will suffer for every day that passes for each of you before you are recaptured."

Sheppard closed his eyes. Oh, God. The memory of the moa was still too clear, of his own screaming, he could barely imagine enduring it again himself. He couldn't let McKay be subjected to it. Not even once, once was too much, not when he knew… He swallowed, his throat dry again. No escape plan was foolproof. A chance he could take for himself, but not for McKay.

"I understand."
There was a ringing in his head, a bell tolling. He couldn't think of any way out of this.

The Haralim brushed her fingers over his eyelids and Sheppard shivered. "Sh," she murmured. "We are not so cruel."

Sheppard couldn't answer. Her fingers were tracing along his temples.

"Open your eyes."

He obeyed.

"Good," she said softly. "You will have your scholar and I will have you." She stepped back, still smiling, pleased at winning. "I have looked for just such a one as you for a very long time."

Sheppard didn't know what else to do, so he bowed his head. He couldn't look into her eyes any longer. Her heard her chuckle and then her hand was in his hair, petting him. The first wave of despair crested over him and he floundered, shaking under her touch.

"What are you called?" the Haralim asked. "You and your scholar."

He licked his lip, then replied, "John Sheppard, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF. Doctor Rodney McKay, PhD."

"Those names are too long," the Haralim declared. "Slaves have only one name."

"Sheppard," he whispered. He could at least keep their names. Somehow keeping their surnames would keep it all at a distance. "I'm Sheppard. He's, he's McKay."

She laughed.

"No. You are John. Nothing more."

His breath caught. God, she saw through him, she seemed to know everything he was thinking. Her hand swept through is hair again, soothing and horrible at the same time.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"John."

Her fingers came to rest on his neck, on the knob of his spine.

"Freka. Take him to the baths, have him washed, then make sure he is fed, before turning him over to the trainers."

"Vai, Hara."

Freka, John filed away. Freka was the one who had helped hold him up.

The Haralim pressed her fingers down, against John's skin. "Please us," she said, "and you will be returned to your Ro'ney."
"Yes," he made himself promise. *Us.* Please *us.* She hadn't spoken of herself in plural before. Had she? What did it mean?

"*Vai,* Hara," Freka growled, cuffing John's head lightly.

"Yes, Hara," John repeated.

"Go," she told them. "Take him away."

John's legs were half-asleep. He staggered as Freka and the other guard pulled him to his feet. He felt numb and off-balance, dazed and cold with fear of what 'training' would entail. As he stumbled between the two men, the Haralim called out casually, "Seif, you will make sure that the other one, Ro'ney, is fed and understands his cooperation is guarantee for John's well-being and return."

"*Vai,* Hara."

Outside the green room, Freka said, "The Haralim has not chosen a bedroom slave before; you are honored."

John laughed. "Yeah, honored."

"Please her and the Rale and your life can be good here, outlander," Seif offered. He gave John's other arm a little shake, sending John reeling into Freka, who was a head taller and caught him easily. "Fail and there is always the *moa.*"

"Seif!"

"If you value the other outlander, you will remember," Seif said. He sounded pleased by the prospect. "No one escapes the Seven Walls."

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Four bells past midnight, the perfume of dew and a thousand tiny night-blooming *cho* flowers scenting the air under the indigo dark, a harsh voice woke him. "Ro'ney. Up!"

Rodney fumbled and lit a lamp, pouring in too much catalyst, so that the light flared sudden and too bright. It made him blink stupidly.

Two blurred figures in the doorway resolved into familiarity and Rodney gasped. Freka's hand locked round John Sheppard's elbow, holding and steadying him. Rodney scrambled to his feet, swamped by a confused riot of relief, anger, worry and delight. The tiles were cold under his feet and a scatter of forgotten parchments rustled, sliding from atop the bed to the floor.

"You'll probably want to clean him up," Freka said and then left John swaying in the middle of the room.

Rodney approached John the way he would have a wounded animal.

"Sheppard?" he said in a low voice. John flinched. "John," he tried again and this time got a response, a shudder that ran through John's body and the stained, ripped silks shrouding it. Rodney could smell the mingled scents of perfume, blood and sex from where he stood. He kept his movements slow, taking in the changes, absorbing everything.
The tips of John's hair were dyed scarlet. He was leaner than before, somehow looking smoothed and polished under the scratches and welts Rodney glimpsed wherever the silks were thin or rent. His lips were red, a smear of rouge spread from one corner, mingling into the dark line of a tear track drawn down from the kohl around his eyes. Those eyes were black, pupils blown from whatever drug still coursed through him, making his limbs tremble and his breath hitch in and out too fast.

"John," he said softly and ventured a touch, his hand on John's arm, slick silk under his palm and skin burning feverish hot. "Oh God."

Something must have got through the drug. John turned his head, his blind gaze finally finding Rodney.

"Oh God," he repeated as John slid down to his knees in a movement too graceful to be anything other than practiced.

Rodney dropped down too, kneeling, and caught John's shoulders before he could fold into a bow. "No, no, no," he repeated and, "Don't," and tried to find Sheppard somewhere in this painted stranger's face. Afraid, sick with it, for he found no recognition there.

He felt his heartbeat in his throat, his knees protesting bare skin against unforgiving tile, his back tensed into an ache running from the base of his skull to his coccyx. He felt John tremble under his hands. It required a patience he had not understood he possessed not to shake John, but he feared the result might break more than the brittle silence.

Between two breaths, as a bird sang its greeting to the sun, the muscle and bone beneath his hands tensed into rigidity then relaxed. The gray, secret light that ran before the dawn reminded Rodney that five bells would ring soon. John panted harshly, pulling his arms around himself, all the while with his head bowed.

"McKay," he rasped out. It was the first time Rodney had heard any name for himself beyond Ro'ney in six months.

"Yeah, me," he managed to say.

"McKay," John repeated. "You're all right?"

Rodney bit back the bitter words. He wasn't and could never be all right in this place after six months wondering and worrying, he was a slave here, but he could see that truth would not help. He'd suffered two lashings since arriving in the city for speaking when silence would have kept him safe. He could hold his tongue now. Desperate to know more than Freka and Seif would tell him, he had learned to listen carefully and, now, he heard clearly the desperation in John's tone; John needed him to be all right.

"I'm better off than you," he said acerbically. "Think we could get off the floor now? I've got better ways of spending my time and you need to wash up."

John looked at him, eyebrows drawing together in an expression Rodney recognized, equal parts amusement and irritation. His mouth lifted at one corner, a pale ghost of John's smirk, but welcome, so very welcome in this place, in the dawning day. "Really?" he drawled. "Saving the city?"

"You're kidding, right?" Rodney exclaimed. John's arms were still wrapped around his torso. "You
are. This city? Please." He decided the best way to deal with John was to ignore everything John didn't want to address. "Come on." He rose, with one hand pressed to the small of his back, and offered John his hand.

John hesitated before taking Rodney's hand, his palm smooth, and Rodney saw his wrist raw, seeping blood between a crust of scabs. God, God, he thought and kept that too to himself, holding the hand in his carefully, drawing John to his feet, ignoring the short cry that John couldn't stifle, out of kindness.

So too, he did not address the bruises revealed in the bath, upon the pale skin of John's hips, the scratches scored down John's back, or the reddened mark of sharp teeth over the knob of his spine. John looked away and would not meet his eyes when Rodney offered a warmed, wet washcloth only to still, staring, at the dried blood that had run down between John's legs. He helped John sink down into the bath and stumbled from the room, biting his lip.

He dressed quickly, anger bleeding through into jerky movement and a button torn from his shirt and left on the floor amid loose parchment, and left through the main room and out into the corridor, his feet silent on the floor as he made his way to the kitchens.

Tein, the cook, was already there, broad face flushed and shining from the ovens' heat, the muscles in her forearms flexing as she worked the dough before her. A dozen other cooks stood at the sturdy tables, doing the same. The scent of baking bread filled the room. "Ro'ney," she greeted him. "Come to steal an early meal?" She smiled; she found his appetite pleasing and his insults rolled off her without pricking her temper. The eiff coiled around her neck trilled in response to the movement of her throat. Rodney suppressed a grimace.

He had grown used to them, but the first time he saw one of the legless insects drawn out of a gilded wicker ball, he'd shuddered and nearly thrown up. The eiff were harmless pets, though, and even useful. The crystals they produced were mashed into a sweet paste that when boiled down was as smooth as sugar syrup, only eiff syrup made you sleep. The raw crystals were a mild soporific and the refined forms had the interesting effect of suppressing emotion attached to memory. Rodney still didn't like the eiff, but he didn't yelp and run for the door when he saw one, either. Not even Tein's, which had been in her family for three generations, and grown to a python-like length.

"No," he said swiftly. "I mean, yes, something, but Tein-ve, I need some of the salve you brought me...before." The head cook had pressed a small, earthenware pot into his hands after Macha had him lashed for handling the Ancient devices in the Rale's collection, before Macha realized Rodney could activate many of them. To leave no marks, Tein had whispered.

Tein's gaze sharpened, examining him, uncombed, unshaven, unharmed. "Ro'ney-ve? You have not been—"

"My friend, Freka brought him back," Rodney blurted.

Tein's eyes widened. "The Haralim's chosen?"

"Ointment, antibiotic, bandages, the salve," Rodney said. He swallowed. "Something...for pain."

Tein lifted her hands away from the dough before her and gestured one of the other cooks to take her place. A cloud of flour flew from her hands as she slapped them against her apron, hanging in the air of the kitchen.
She caught another cook by the shoulder. "Jehmen, fix a tray for Ro'ney-ve and a second for….

"John," Rodney said.

Tein nodded, while Jehmen hurried away. Rodney followed Tein to a cupboard near the chill boxes, taking the tray she handed him and holding it as Tein brought out the items he needed for John. Finally, she added a pot of refined *eiff* syrup. He looked at it doubtfully. "*Eiff*?"

"A spoonful in tea," she directed him, "to let him sleep. No more, Ro'ney-ve."

Rodney accepted the little pot, gave a jerky nod and hurried out of the kitchens. *Eiff* was the Selketi word for ease. John might need it. In the corridor, he passed a guard and slipped to the side, dipping his head.

John remained slumped in the water when Rodney returned, cheek resting against the tub's edge, eyes closed. Rodney looked at him, at the knob of a narrow wrist balanced on one bent, bony knee, long fingers trailing into the water. He walked quietly and set the tray with Tein's tinctures and ointments down.

"I'm back," he announced. John's eyes blinked open and his gaze followed Rodney, painfully bright. Rodney found the soap and brought it to the tub, and then he busied himself finding towels. "While you've been… Well. Whatever. I have been engaged in cataloging the contents of an Ancient database."

"Cool," John croaked.

"It's damaged, some of the data is corrupted, but I've been making some progress," Rodney explained. He paused then brought the towels to sit beside the tub. He tested the water. It had begun to cool. "Here, let me—" At least the city had hot and cold running water. He used a carved lever and added more hot water to the tub. John shifted and moaned softly.

Rodney tested the water again. "Better?"

John nodded. His eyes were almost closed, the shadow of his lashes an irregular flutter over his cheeks. "Just sit there, okay?" Rodney said. He picked up the washcloth John had abandoned, wetted it and began wiping the kohl and rouge from John's face. John swallowed hard and went still. "Is this—"

"Anything," John said, his voice empty as the blank expression Rodney's washcloth was revealing. "It doesn't matter."

It matters, Rodney wanted to insist.

"Just tell me what to do," John continued, "and I'll do it."

"You're worse at taking orders than I am," Rodney said. "Really, Colonel, don't try to fool me. It's a wonder you made it to your current rank—"

"Of slave," John snapped. He looked angry and, then, in an eye blink, just tired. Rodney paused, horrified and angry himself.

"You're not a slave unless you accept it," he replied.
John didn't answer.

Rodney finished washing his face silently and, because John made no move to do anything himself, continued washing his back and then his chest, his arms and his hands. The painted patterns on his palms barely faded with the application of soap. Rodney had begun to learn some of the Selket written language. He recognized glyphs worked into the patterns, if not all the nuances of their meanings. He traced one absently with a fingertip, trying to remember if it meant 'life' or 'breath'.

John shivered and pulled his hand away.

"Sorry," Rodney apologized. Embarrassment burned through him for the way he had let himself become distracted and had been touching John, when every touch and every painted line had to be reminders.

"The trainers and handlers have something that removes it," John said, curling his hand closed. "So they can paint something new. It wears off in a few days, anyway."

He handed John the washcloth. "Maybe you'd better do this."

"Yeah."

Rodney hurried out of the washroom, his face hot, and then stared at the single bed. The sheet and duvet were tangled, half on the floor. Five bells were ringing and a soft rose light threw filigreed shadow over one corner. One bed. He already knew from Freka that everyone had assumed he and John were lovers when they arrived, but he didn't know what John thought.

Soft footsteps and the slightest clatter of china came from the end of the room concealed by the corner it turned. Rodney peered around and discovered Jehmen and one of the servers laying out a meal for two on the low table in the middle of the room. The dishes were all covered. The server hurried out while Jehmen fiddled with a brazier, lighting it and setting a silver-chased tea urn.

Jehmen was stalling, looking around, waiting to glimpse John, Rodney realized.

"If you're done, leave," he snapped.


Rodney looked pointedly at Jehmen's bare feet. "Try showing the courtesy you'd want yourself," he said.

With an affronted flounce, Jehmen left.

Rodney turned back and quietly made the bed.

A soft curse from the washroom brought him back there. John was wrapped in one of the towels, one hand on the wall, bracing himself. His arm was shaking. His head didn't lift when Rodney slid his shoulder under John's arm and half-carried him to the bench where he had left the tray of medicaments.

"Thanks," John whispered.
Rodney nodded. He opened the pot with the ointment Tein had provided and dabbed some of blueish, sour-smelling contents onto John's raw wrist. "Carson would have salivated over this stuff," he said. "It seems to kill any infection and even has some anti-viral qualities." John sucked in a harsh breath. Rodney gentled his fingers. "Damn it," he whispered. He followed the antiseptic with the salve. "This stuff is amazing. It doesn't help the pain, but there are no scars—"

"Yeah," John said, his voice rough, "the trainers had that, too."

"Oh."

Rodney finished with John's wrist and dealt with the other one, wrapping both in gauzy bandages, then moved around to treat the deep scratches on his back. The muscles under John's skin shifted under Rodney's hands. He waited until a little of the tension had released then squeezed John's shoulder once.

"So, are you here for good or is this just a…prove the leverage is still alive visit?" Rodney asked while he worked. He pushed the towel away and calmly rubbed liniment into the bruises blooming under John's skin. Fingers didn't leave marks like that unless that had been the intention. Rodney knew John didn't bruise easily.

"I…don't know." John's knuckles turned white.

"I kept asking."

John winced and flinched through the rest of Rodney's ministrations. Neither of them spoke of the damage he tended.

"Look," Rodney said afterward, nervous and awkward, "there's food in the outer room. And tea." He touched the bottle of eiff syrup. "If you need something to sleep."

John shuddered and shook his head. "No. No, no more drugs." His voice cracked and Rodney jerked his gaze up from the bottle to John's face. It was too open, too desperate. He wanted to look away and he wanted to tell John he would take care of him and things would be okay. He couldn't do any of those things.

He could wrap an arm around John's waist, ignore how suddenly aware he was of John's skin, clean and still moist, and help him out of the washroom to the bed. John crawled between the sheets and curled onto his side, his back to Rodney. Rodney wanted to linger and just watch him a little longer, but the lengthening shadows on the floor told him sixth bell approached.

"I have to get to the library," he said at last.

John's shoulders stiffened. "Okay," he whispered.

"I want—I wish I didn't, but Macha is—"

"It's okay."

It wasn't, but Rodney couldn't change anything. If he displeased Macha or anyone, they could take John away from him again. He retreated to the washroom to prepare for the day, and, afterward, ate swiftly: paratha with spiced oil, tea, a sweet fruit like peaches diced and mixed in the Selket version
of yogurt. A generous portion of that and several other dishes remained. He hoped John would avail himself of it.

As sixth bell rang through the city, Rodney walked back into the inner part of the room, to the side of the bed John faced. John's eyes were closed. He knelt and pressed his forehead to John's, closing his own eyes. When he opened them and pulled back, John was staring at him. He could see the darker rim of green ringing the irises and the golden brown around John's pupils. He was so close he could see the tiny lines that framed John's eyes, graven by years of laughter and squinting against the sun, and even a few ghostly freckles on the bridge of John's nose.

"I haven't given up, so you can't," Rodney stated. "You'll come up with some half-witted plan to get us out of here and I'll figure out how to make it work and we'll find Ronon and Teyla—"

"We'll never find them," John said. His gaze went dull. "And no one will ever find us."

Rodney gaped at him, the food he'd had earlier rising up his throat until his mouth flooded with bile. He swallowed convulsively. "No."

John nodded.

"You can't know—"

"Ronon's probably dead. You saw what happened to him," John whispered. The memory seemed seared into him, so that he saw it again, and not Rodney. "He doesn't know how to quit."

Rodney swallowed again. "Teyla?"

"I don't know… She could have been sold to someone worse."

"Worse than this?" Rodney demanded.

John swallowed hard, his throat working, and his voice, when he spoke, was almost too soft to hear. "There's worse. In training. Dullah showed me… I think. I don't remember… the drugs mess everything up… Just. I remember that."

"Training?"

John shut his eyes.

"Fuck them, we'll find a way out," Rodney swore.

"I don't know," John replied without opening his eyes. "I don't know, Rodney."

~*~

Rodney botched two different translations out of sheer distraction, nearly snapped at Macha four different times, did snap at Piele, his scribe, and found nothing—nothing—that would help them escape, that day.

John was gone when he stumbled back into his rooms at the seventeenth bell. Rodney stood and stared at the empty, neatly made bed and recited every obscenity he'd ever known, in English, then French, Russian, Czech, Athosian and Selketi.
The only sign that John had been there was the tray of earthenware pots with Tein's medicines.

Rodney clutched one in his hand and breathed through the impulse to throw it at the wall, setting it back down with sharp clack.

He had stopped the lamps and had gone to bed, even sunk into a half-sleep of exhaustion, when the sound of soft bells brought him fully awake. The silhouette in front of one window made his breath catch.

"Rodney?"

Rodney sat up and scrubbed at his face with the heels of his hands. "Jesus."

John glided closer, close enough that the moonlight showed Rodney the frown and uncertainty on his face.

"Are you okay?" Rodney asked. "Do you need—"

"Yes," John said, "no, he left for Hunet, I don't—Do you want me here?" The tumble of words spilled into the shadows between them, staining it with desperation. Rodney filed away He left for Hunet A great many men had left with the Rale's household to show the flag in Hunet, but only one would touch the Haralim's chosen. John stood just out of reach, one wrong word away from flight. "I could go back."

Go back. Rodney was afraid to ask where.

"No, no, stay, are you crazy? Of course, I want you here." Rodney patted the bed. "Just, you know, don't hover over there." John had crossed the rest of the room and settled on the edge before Rodney could take another breath. The bells tinkled when he moved. Close, this time all Rodney could detect was the scent of soap and a hint of sweat.

The damn ankle bells sounded again.

"Do those come off?" Rodney demanded.

"Yes," John replied. He was still and wary.

"Then get them off and get in the bed," Rodney told him. "We can talk in the morning."

John fumbled in the dark and then the ankle bells chimed, almost in protest, as they dropped to the floor, and John crawled between the sheets silently.

"I'm sorry," John whispered. His hand found Rodney's arm, fingers closing over the muscle. "I need…Just this." His breath hitched. "Please."

"It's okay," Rodney murmured, sliding closer so that their elbows and arms were in contact. "I need it, too."
They didn't talk in the morning. Rodney displayed a delicacy that John hadn't expected and didn't press for anything beyond what John offered. Rodney poured tea into two cups. John folded his legs and sat upon the floor before the low table and shared the simple fare before them, the sun warm between his shoulder blades.

From that morning, if John did not share the Haralim's bed, he slept in Rodney's rooms, returning there no matter how late. John's clothing, gauze, silk, and leather—costumes, he thought of them—stayed in a black-and-red lacquered wardrobe that appeared one day without explanation. When Rodney woke, John rose with him and ate, letting his friend's voice wash over him, familiar and comforting, and tried to respond the way he would have before, and drowsed when Rodney had gone, through somnolent hours until the sun's zenith. In the afternoons he went to the handlers, to Lisha, to be prepared, dressed and painted for the Haralim. After that, he went either to the Haralim's rooms to wait or to kneel at her feet like another pet wherever she held court for the day.

Those were the worst days, in many ways, when he both relied on and had to fight the careful conditioning Dullah and Lisha had subjected him to for three drugged months. To remain still and expressionless, without betraying either the humiliation and contempt he felt for the Haralim's court of twittering ladies or, worse, his traitorous body's reaction to simply being in her presence.

He was ever aware of her. Rich scent seemed to smoke from her pores and fill his every breath, while manicured nails sharp as razors often played with his hair or delicately stroked the tip of an ear, until he shivered and his breath hitched despite himself. Dullah and the trainers had been thorough. Heat rushed through him at the very thought of her and the thousand and nine variations of the ways he might please her, the endless ways she might please herself with him. He would close his eyes and she would laugh and that too resonated through his flesh, so that he shuddered with each peal and turned his face blindly into her her hand. Then he would kiss her fingers and taste her skin and his own blood. Only when he was trembling with need would she abandon her game.

There were other games. The Haralim might spend a day on a single game of roes, calling on a guard or Hara Besma to take the third side. The golden glyphs on the pyramidal dies seemed to burn his skin with the lingering warmth of her hands. He concentrated on remembering that a clever game pleased her as well.

All his concentration, all his poise, all his self, washed away in a rush of desire when the Rale joined his sister-wife.

Walls of heavy stone radiated the chill of the desert nights through the drowsy afternoons, while the Haralim's household occupied itself. Besma sat close enough to speak softly with the Haralim. Bint knelt between the two women, holding up an elaborately decorated gold coffer that held the Haralim's favorite sugared confectures. John knelt on the Haralim's other side, leaning his cheek against the carved arm of her chair. The Haralim's fingers rested lightly, absently, on the bare nape of his neck. He let his eyes half-close.

Boots on stone snapped his attention to the doors at the end of the salon. He looked without moving, a trick that served him well in this place, though he had perfected it as a rebellious teenager enduring his father's lectures. Two guards opened the doors with deep bows as the Rale strode in, followed by
the Haralim's guard commander, Idris, his own bodyguards, and Tulem, his aide-de-camp. The soft voices of the ladies disappeared.

"Enough," the Rale told Tulem.

"Vai, Rae."

"Go, visit your wives."

"Ah, I know who it is who wants to visit his wives," Tulem laughed and then left, while the Rale crossed the room to stand before the Haralim.

He stopped so close John could have reached forward and touched one red leather boot. John locked his fingers into the gold manacles on his wrists instead. He drew in the scent the Rale brought with him: pale rose-red dirt dusted over the boots, dry winds, and something that was indefinably outside, that was freedom.

"Djemet, my husband," the Haralim greeted him. The hand that had rested on John's neck rose, beckoning the Rale closer. The rings upon her fingers, gold and jeweled, ruby, jade, amber and amethyst, glittered; the colors swam before John's eyes until he remembered to breathe.

"Sister," the Rale returned her greeting. He took the hand she offered him and kissed her palm and then the inside of her wrist. She sighed under a breath that came quicker. "You are well?"

"Very well," the Haralim replied. She stroked John's hair. Her voice was smoky, filled with a secret pleasure. John shivered at her tone, so hungry and full of promise. They might send him away and spend their night alone or they might play with him until the sun burned over the horizon again. He didn't even know which he wished for anymore. He hated the way he responded to both of them, even if it made it easier in some ways. The Haralim must have felt that faint quiver, for her fingers stroked over his nape absently, the way she might have soothed a cat. John didn't let himself push into the touch, but he wanted to.

"My beautiful Zuleika." The Rale leaned forward and down, and fitted his lips to the Haralim's, kissing her, mouth open, with no care to the presence of anyone else in the room. He braced one hand on the chair arm next to John's face. John could count the dark hairs on the back of the Rale's hand, see the small, pale scar on one knuckle, the carved signet on his smallest finger, a ripple in the nail of his index finger as though it had been smashed once and never grown smooth and straight again. The urge to lean just an inch closer and set his lips to the back of that hand made John's heart beat too fast.

He wanted to squeeze his thighs together, but training kept him still. Training kept him aching and swollen with too much sensation just from being so close to them both.

John squeezed his eyes shut. A rougher than normal thumb rubbed over his cheekbone and he snapped them open. The Rale smiled at him. John gazed into his eyes, feeling like he was floating in a warm haze, thought fragmenting with each stroke of the thumb on his face. Sensation shrank to that point of contact and the hazel eyes holding his. He could hear himself panting and helplessly shifted his hips, seeking some relief, only to whimper as the thin, loose silk of his pants slipped over the head of his erection, too light and smooth to provide the friction he craved.

"It has been two cycles." The words weren't for John, were addressed to the Haralim, but John still listened and watched through his eyelashes. He was so attuned to the Haralim, he knew without
having heard it spoken before: she had conceived. He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted his own blood. Two months gone and the Rale had been been in Hunet three months.

The Rale's hand dropped onto John's shoulder, hard and hot through the silk John wore. He shuddered. "Send them all away, Zuleika," the Rale said. "All but your Chosen." His hand smoothed up to cup John's jaw and lift his face. John blinked at him, dizzy and half sick with too many swirling emotions.

The Haralim clapped. "All of you! Go!"

Hara Besma gathered her shawl and rose. She smiled at Idris as she swished past him, pausing to disentangle a silver tassel from the braid on his sleeve. Rings flashed on dark fingers that lingered a moment longer than necessary on Idris' arm. The other ladies and their servants disappeared ahead of her. Only Idris and the bodyguards remained, all well trained to watch without seeing.

The Rale ran his thumb over John's lips. John forgot everything but staring up and that softest pressure upon his lower lip. Again, the seductive caress traced his mouth, syrup slow. John's lips parted and the Rale smiled. The trainer's lessons moved him to respond reflexively, to want, and he did, heat uncurling deep in his groin.

"Bint," the Haralim said, dragging John's attention back to the room with the sea-green tiles, the guards, and the girl who knelt on the other side of the Haralim's chair, making him feel dizzy and sick. He'd forgotten Bint was present. Even so, even so, training held; he gave nothing away, flicking his tongue against the pad of the Rale's thumb as he slid his gaze to the side. "Fetch me the jade box," the Haralim instructed, so that John's breath caught, "then take yourself to the kitchens. Instruct Cook to prepare my husband's favorites and send them to my private rooms. You may stay in the kitchens or the gardens and you may tell Cook to give you a sweet."

"Vai, Hara." She bowed low, forehead to the floor, before the Rale. "Rae."

"Obey the Haralim," he said when she remained bent before him, then added, "Pretty child," as Bint sped gracefully from the room. In the months John had dwelled within the city, Bint had grown inches, coming into a coltish grace that promised to become aching beauty. His stomach twisted at the Rale's comment.

"Peta's child," the Haralim replied, a thread of steel underlying her tone. "Djemet...."

His fingers were still warm against John's cheek. John turned his face into them, pressing closer, hoping to distract him. "I would not dally with a slave of your Household, Zuleika," the Rale murmured pleasantly. He patted John's cheek. "Without your permission."

One of the guards smothered a cough; John's face went hot with humiliation.

"I have missed you, Djemet," the Haralim said. Lustrous dark eyes considered John and the Rale. "I give you leave to use my Chosen."

Later, there would be the jade box, the cup and the dranzi, the carved ivory toys, the slick oils and supple leather restraints John had come to expect. Later, the drug would make even pain sublime and he would be lost, while the guards watched, and the Rale made the child the Haralim carried his by taking John. Until then, the Rale stood with his booted feet on either side of John's bent knees and there was his hand, pressing against John's neck.
John brought his hands up to the Rale's hips and slowly began unfastening his belt. His hands were steady.

Later, he loved them both, thrilled and joyous to please them, and he did not care that his body betrayed him over and over again.

His skin still hummed when the Haralim dismissed him from her bed. The sheets still caressed him and the drift of cool night air from the window, even the tiles smooth beneath his feet. He bit back a whimper of need sparked just by the weight of the silks he drew back on. He could barely remember his name when the Rale chuckled. He wanted to crawl back in the bed between them, to drown in sleek skin and knowing hands.

He swayed with each step, too much sensation flooding his senses, aching need building everywhere. The corridor outside the Haralim's rooms stretched infinitely, the mosaics brilliant by lamplight, the colors sending spikes and waves of pleasure through him. The reds and the golds slipped and wrapped around him, the greens were still and wet, the blues hurt. He stumbled against the wall and rubbed his palm over it, feeling the colors lick at his skin. Each tiny piece of tile kissed him. It was too much, too much *dranzi*, and he couldn't think clearly enough to find his way anywhere. He was going to press against the wall and rub and rub until he came.

"Damned to the Wraith," someone said, pulling John around by his shoulder. John blinked at an almost familiar face. Freka. "What are you—? *Dranzi*. Come on then, Dullah will know what to do for you."

John moaned and closed his eyes. Freka's voice ran all over him like a brush of fur. He wanted to twist himself into it. He wanted…Dullah? No, he thought hazily. Not the trainers. "Rodney," he made himself say.

Freka laughed and John shivered, wishing he wouldn't do that, wouldn't speak, wouldn't put that guiding hand on his shoulder, because it all aroused him and he was afraid they wouldn't reach Rodney's quarters before he was ready to beg Freka or anyone to help him come. Just enough of the edge had worn from the drug that he could hate that more than he'd ever hated anything. He was miserable and hard when Freka led him inside the L-shaped room Rodney shared with him.

Rodney was bent over the low table, slowly feeding strips of parchment covered with his distinctive script, intricate equations that must have taken hours to work, into the tea brazier. Acrid smoke stung at the back of John's throat. Rodney's shoulders were rounded, his head lowered, and all his attention bent to the work he was destroying. John went across the room and sank down beside him. He couldn't stop himself from leaning in, resting his face against the Rodney's back. Body heat soaked through Rodney's shirt into his cheek. He pushed back and forth like a cat and hummed.

Rodney jerked and turned. "Jesus, you're late this time. What are you—" John stared at him, bereft of contact again, uncertain what Rodney saw, unable to summon any words. He plucked at a tassel on the pillow under his knees. The silver thread that made it scratched against the pads of his fingers. Rodney swallowed. "Again?"

The bruises and the aches were winning through the *dranzi*. John knew he would hurt the next day. It was still strong enough to make him gasp when Rodney touched his face just below his eye. He nodded. "Please," he whispered, unsure what he was asking for. "Please, Rodney."

"John," Rodney protested. "It's the drug."
John's breath hitched.

"Make it me again."

Rodney took John's hand, turned it over, and traced his finger over the pattern Lisha had painted there. John's eyes fell half-shut. He wouldn't touch himself. It didn't matter; Rodney's fingers on his palm were as exquisite as a mouth, sizzling his nerves into overload. He shuddered and came in a hard pulse that was as much pain as pleasure.

Rodney kept hold of his hand, squeezing it, as John folded over and rested his forehead in the hollow between Rodney's neck and shoulder. His breath whistled out in a whimper and Rodney pulled him closer. John twitched. The last dose of dranzi was already fading and instead of feeling good, Rodney's fingers hurt when they brushed against the bite marks on his shoulder blades. He couldn't stop himself shaking, gasping wet, helpless sounds against Rodney's neck as he tried to crawl in closer to Rodney, to some kind of anchor. Words kept escaping him, incoherent and half-sobbed. *Don't want to, can't, shouldn't feel like that, anything, anything, why...why with him?*

"Dranzi makes everything feel good," Rodney murmured.

John squeezed his eyes shut. The dranzi always came later.

"It's still rape," Rodney said quietly.

John shook his head, unwilling to even look at Rodney or explain that most of the time all it took was a word, a look, a casual touch to arouse him and make him want sex with the Haralim, that just being in the room with the Rale made him swell into readiness. Rodney closed his hand over John's nape, just the way the Rale did, and a wild shudder of heat flashed through him. He clutched at Rodney and mouthed his neck, licking at the taut tendon desperately. He was hard again and rocked himself into Rodney's hip mindlessly, until he remembered he was supposed to please his partner and wriggled his hand between them. Rodney froze under his attention. John tentatively stroked, but Rodney wasn't hard. John stilled, then tore himself away from Rodney. Panic whited out everything else.

He came to shoved in the corner between the wardrobe and the garden window, curled into a fetal ball, hiding his face in his hands. Light seeped through his fingers, incandescent white and yellow and orange pouring through skin and flesh. His breath sawed in and out fast and shallow and his muscles quivered, stiff and too tense. He was rocking himself, scraping his back against the wall and bumping his shoulder against the wardrobe's side.

His eyes shut again, he let his hands fall away, stopping his motion with his back against the wall and his head resting there. A hot stripe of sunlight fell over his foot. When it moved up to his ankle, he made himself open his eyes.

Rodney sat on the floor, just far enough away he couldn't touch. A bruise marred his cheek bone. Red, just darkening into purple and green. John guessed he'd put it there and felt sick enough to close his eyes again while he fought down a wave of nausea.

"Back with me?" Rodney said when John opened his eyes the second time.

John licked his lips and then nodded.

The light haloed Rodney. Every eyelash, every seam on the white cotton shirt he wore, including a
triangular tear over his chest, the stubble on his cheeks, the intense blue of his eyes... John saw it all.

"Please don't do that again."

"I'll go back to the training barracks," John said, dull and flat. There wasn't enough eiff syrup in the city to make this stop hurting.

"What?" Rodney frowned. "Are you—you're an idiot. Don't scare me like this again, okay? You freaked out, you've been out of it for hours. Jesus, John. I didn't know if you were having a drug flashback or if that bastard gave you an overdose. I was scared to even touch you."

"I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say, so he repeated it. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Rodney stared at him intently.

"God, John it isn't your fault."

It was. It was, John thought, it was, because he wanted it. They'd trained him to want it, but the underlying inclination had to have been there. Like a flaw this place had magnified until it was splitting him open and all he could see were the secrets he'd locked inside himself.

"Listen to me," Rodney said. He spoke slowly, not like he was talking to a stupid child, but like he needed John to hear him and believe him. "Can I say no?"

John gazed back at him, horrified. "Of course, you can say no."

"I didn't even have to say no, did I?" Rodney waved at him, while his mouth twisted to the side. "That's why you're trying to fuse your spine into the wall."

John waited, guessing Rodney had more to say and was rewarded by Rodney's decisive nod. "Whatever you want, whatever it feels like, John, good or bad: can you say no?"

John couldn't answer.

Rodney stood up with a sigh and rubbed the small of his back. "I'm too old to sit around on cold floors all night. Ouch." He extended his hand to John. "Come on. Hot water awaits us. And, frankly, you smell like a Turkish whorehouse."

"What do you know about Turkish whorehouses?" John asked, struggling to act normally again.

Rodney snorted a little huff of air out and wiggled his fingers. John took his hand and let himself be drawn to his feet. It galled to admit, but he was too old to spend the night on a cold floor, either, and he hurt enough wish for a painkiller.

"I'm a man of surprising facets," Rodney said. He tugged on John's hand.

John would have let go, but Rodney didn't and led him into the washroom.

Steam rose from the water Rodney started filling the tub. He watched it, watched the precious water tumble from the water spouts, until Rodney squeezed his hand, and then looked up. Rodney looked concerned again.
"No," John said, answering Rodney's question belatedly.

Rodney nodded. John began undressing, grimacing when his pants stuck to his groin and not appreciating Rodney's chuckle. Rodney's question stayed in the back of his mind through the rest of the day, until he repeated the answer and found some comfort in it.
The Rule of Three Women

Kitchen gossip was the best.

Rodney was convinced of this.

Mid-meal he took with Macha and Piele and the other librarians at a wooden trestle table cleared of parchments and scrolls, slates, crystals, discs and pile after pile of books, some with spines wider than his hand from heel to fingertip, some no thicker than three slips of tissue. The Rale's library contained every variety of information storage known to Pegasus, gathered from more worlds than Rodney had visited. He still missed his laptop.

Macha talked.

"Adif. Oh, Adif, they called him the Lion's Claw," Macha told them all enthusiastically. The rest of the librarians listened, along with Rodney. Macha flicked one of her many gray braids back over her shoulder and leaned forward. The silver bracelets on her wrists clinked against the tabletop. Macha was something of a historian and loved to talk. Her favorite subject was the Rales and their wives. "He united our planet."

Read subjugated the secondary continent with brutal dispatch, Rodney thought. Adif sounded like a three way cross between Ivan the Terrible, Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. After nine centuries, he had assumed mythic proportions for the Selketi.

"Adif murdered his sister's husband and their sons," one of the other librarians muttered when Macha was busy, later. "Then he married her."

So it was a tradition, the Rale marrying his sisters. Kept it all in the family and if a sister-wife was not faithful, any child was still a descendant of Adif. No competition from rival branches of the family on Selket. Their family tree had no pesky branches, just a smooth trunk with all the limbs lopped off. If a Rale had any brothers, they were put to death once an heir was sired. It was still rather like a lion taking over a pride on the veldt, but the Selketi had no problem with it.

Piele, Rodney's scribe, twitched when Macha talked about the succession wars before Adif. Rodney didn't blame him, but he wondered what it was like wherever Piele came from. He didn't ask, as there was something wrong with Piele's vocal cords that kept him quieter than Rodney—and Rodney had learned silence. He was afraid to ask whether the Selketi did the damage or if Piele was born this way. Piele was like Rodney: a luxury item, not Selketi, taken from some other world. A cold, dark world, probably, for he was pale, gray-eyed and miserable on all but the coolest days, his spidersilk hair matted to his skull with perspiration.

Rodney tried to remember to be kind to Piele, who was even more alone than he was, and huddled over his work, and stayed in the shadows, flinching from everything.

Rodney at least had John some of the time.

"Keder Rale is living on borrowed time."

Two of the librarians were talking in low voices, pretending to catalogue the scrolls Piele transcribed from Rodney's dictation, really gossiping. Instead of television, the Selketi had palace gossip. Maybe it was different outside Seven Walls, outside the fortress surrounding the Haralim's palace, outside in
the city or the countryside or on Hune, the second continent. There was no way to know. Slaves weren't allowed to wander. Rodney stayed bent over the console displaying the parts of the database he had managed to access. The Ancient words scrolled down a hologram screen while the nib of Piele's pen scratched over parchment; the contrast made Rodney's head ache. Rodney paused the display while he tried to make sense of what he was reading and then half his attention was again caught by the murmur of voices. Every snatch of information was something that might be the key to surviving. His fingers went still on console as he realized he had stopped thinking escape and substituted survive.

"The Haralim is with child."

The Rale's brother wasn't the only one on borrowed time. John wouldn't talk about what happened in the Haralim's bedroom, but his body was easy to read. Rodney knew she wasn't the only one using John. He just didn't know what that meant. Was John safer or in more danger? Was the Rale complicit in the Haralim's plans? What would happen when a new heir was born?

Rodney pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing through the panic he felt crawling up his throat. Piele coughed and Rodney opened his eyes, noticing how he was squinting over his work.

"Add to your lamp," Rodney told him, because this part of the library was kept dim to facilitate reading the half-powered hologram screen. The generator, hidden behind a folding silk screen painted with a scene from one of Adif's battles, hummed in the background. The Selket kept their technology hidden. At first, Rodney thought they were hiding from the Wraith, but it was aesthetics: the Selketi considered technology a necessary ugliness and preferred the 'old ways'. The richer the Selketi, the more tasteful their abode, the less obvious technology appeared. Piele obediently added another drop of catalyst to the lamp globe, sparking a brighter reaction from the chemicals inside.

"The Rale," Macha said reverently over another mid-meal. "Our Rale." They had all been the Rale, since Adif Rale. This one was Djemet. "Djemet, son of Hamat, son of Fazel, son of Raben, son of Barat," Macha recited to Rodney, on and on, all the way back to Maríd, son of Adif and Harat, his sister. "Wishes to learn all the secrets of the Ancestors. You are privileged to serve him." Rodney nodded and ate another piece of meat from the bowl before him. "Fortunate," Macha repeated, "he is not like Hamat Rale."

Rodney heard about Hamat Rale in the kitchens.

Rodney preferred the kitchens, on the nights John was gone, and sitting on a stool, eating with the cooks and the servers. He preferred their honesty and sly jokes to the librarians' departmental bickering and the wrong-headed scholars he itched to lambaste for their sheer stupidity. He would have, but he didn't relish the prospect of another whipping, nor helping anyone who was part of this place.

"I was a washer when Hamat was Rale," Tein explains him. Her head came to Rodney's shoulders, dark hair streaked gray and chopped brutally short. It didn't matter because Rodney was usually seated, listening to her as she bustled and bossed around the kitchen. She had a faint lilt to her voice. The only other Selketi Rodney had heard sound the same was Freka, who it turned out was Hunese. "We used to work all night to get the bloodstains and other filth from the sheets and rugs." She stopped setting out spices on the board before her and rolled her eyes. "And that wasn't as bad as the seamstresses' job, trying to repair or make new clothes for his 'favorites' over night."

"I think you make this stuff up," Jehmen commented, passing behind Tein to snatch a pot of some ground-up green paste used in a marinade. He batted long, black lashes at Rodney and swished his
narrow hips as he returned to the trays where he was assisting another cook prepare meat for the next day's meal. "She wants to scare you because you're an offworlder."

"You are an impertinent, ungrateful wretch, Jehmen Dar," Tein commented.

"But so pretty at it," Jehmen laughed and twirled dramatically.

"You won't be so pretty if I set you to washing pots with Sosa's crew for a month."

The undercook working with Jehmen cuffed the back of his head lightly and Rodney had to look away, reminded of John suddenly. He stared at the wall of gas-fired ovens until he had shoved the memories of other times down ruthlessly. "Are the gages working?" he asked, pretending that had been the reason to stare so long.

"They are," Tein replied. "We haven't lost a loaf of bread since you repaired the ovens."

"That's good," Rodney said and everyone ignored the uneven sound of his voice.

"Before Djemet the Ralimas ruled," Tein told him as a distraction.

"The Ralimas?"

"Hamat's widows."

"One of them was the Rale's mother?"

Tein nodded. "Mihri. Such green eyes she had." She gave Rodney a considering look. "She was an offworlder, like you and your friend."

"A slave?" Rodney asked. These were the things he needed to know. Was there any way out of slavery on Selket? Any way John and he might be freed from the Haralim's household?

"Until Hamat made her his second wife after Jazan." Jazan was Hamat's Haralim according to Macha's lectures. Zuleika was her daughter, so Djemet was her half-brother. Djemet was two years younger than his first sister-wife, a couple of years older than his half-siblings Zoyan and Keder—*their* mother was Galina. Rodney bit his lip. It was worse than memorizing Biblical begats, but all the intricacies of Seven Walls politics lay squarely within the bounds of who was related and how. Mihri might have risen from slave to wife to tripartite ruler, yet none of that had let her leave Selket or even the City of Seven Walls. The Rale wasn't going to marry John even if the Haralim produced a son. Or free him, unless it was something like freeing John's head from his neck. If that happened… There wouldn't be any point to getting up or translating the database or finding a way out for himself. John meant more than any of the things Rodney had once considered important. Rodney wouldn't kill himself if John died; he just wouldn't really live, he'd discovered how much a part of him John was during the months when they'd been separated.

"But even that was not enough for Mihri," Tein added. "Not for Mihri, not for Jazan, not for Galina." She had told the story before. The words were smooth like river stones, tumbled against each other until all the edges had been washed away. She picked up a fillet knife, the slim blade a flash of silver. Sharp. Up, down, up, down. "They killed him in his own bed. They tied him down and used his own knives, the ones he liked to use on them."

It made Rodney shudder. He did his best to hide it. Pinched his lips together and looked scornful.
There were mornings when John flinched wildly from his touch, but there had never been any cuts, no whiplashes scribed into John's back or anything that looked deliberately sadistic. He looked down at the table, staring as Tein set the fillet knife back on the butcher table. Tein's eyes were small and dark, raisins in a broad pudding face, and they saw too much, had from the first night when she showed up in his room after the servers brought back the third meal he couldn't keep down because of the pain in his back from a whipping. Her mouth pinched then, too.

Her hands flew up, fingers splayed like splatter as she finished the tale, the other cooks chorusing with her: "The ceiling was red with blood."

The kitchen staff all laughed as Tein grumbled over trying to clean the ceiling afterward, but Rodney knew she was warning him. Rales had died. So had their wives and those loyal to them. Luxury items were always disposable.

His next free hour, Rodney padded through unfamiliar corridors to the training barracks and asked for Dullah. "Teach me," he asked. The last time he saw the slave trainer, he was half-unconscious from a whipping. His memories weren't fond, which Dullah could guess, so the request startled him. Rodney stuffed down the satisfaction he felt at that. He wanted to know how to prepare John for the Haralim, to save him at least from one set of strangers' hands. Needed to know what they did to John so that he could help him fight it or at least live with it.

He would never learn all the tricks and skills the trainers had, but after a month of spending all his free time watching and listening to one of them — Lisha, the one who took care of John—Rodney learned enough to take over that task.

"I can do that," he said to John on a morning when the bells rang the hours while the dawn was still colorless and dim and the winter sun would not throw its pale lemon light through their window until late. He brought out a tray with pots and jars and brushes meant for the task. John stared and finally licked his lower lip nervously. "You won't have to go back to the barracks this way. Lisha showed me what to do. It's not like it's rocket science, John, don't look at me like that, like it's weird—because I know it's weird, but I thought this would be better."

"Yeah," John replied softly. "I—It's—Thanks."

Rodney tried to talk the first time, but it was too awkward and everything he said trailed away, smothered in John's silence, in the awful way he was still and compliant as the slaves in the barracks.

Rodney slipped out of the library at mid-meal and ate in the kitchens. The food was better anyway and he just didn't think he could listen to Macha sing the Rale's praises one more time. With his typical luck, the kitchen was filled with servers, all teenage girls, all twittering and cooing over the romance of it, that the Rale and the Haralim were in love, that Djemet never slept with anyone but Zuleika, that they were having a baby. One of them said, "I hope the baby has the Rale's eyes." Rodney choked on a chunk of fruit and ended spitting it on the floor, horrified and angry and humiliated.

No one said anything, so once his embarrassment had faded—by lunch of the next day—Rodney went back to the kitchens.

Tein tried to teach Rodney to carve vegetables into tiny flowers and fish meant to float on the top of soup. After three days of mutilating root vegetables, Rodney set his knife down and grimaced. "I've never been much of an artist," he mumbled.
Tein glanced at his unrecognizable efforts and snorted. She scooped up the bowl and dumped the contents into a pot. "You'll be eating it," she said. Next, she put another bowl in front of him and a basket of tubers. "Peel."

"Now that I can do."

Late that night, Tein did feed him the stew made from the less attractive leavings of the meal prepared for the Haralim and her coterie. Rodney imagined John eating the carved fish that Tein showed him, detailed down to the scales and fins. He bit into a pale orange chunk, crisp as water chestnut and sighed. John wouldn't be eating at the table. He would be kneeling beside the Haralim's chair and whatever he had would come from her hand. That thought made the stew go stale and unpalatable. John was here, unable to escape, because he wouldn't risk Rodney's life again. He was trapped and Rodney knew it was slowly eroding the things John thought made him who he was.

"Keep a bowl of this aside for John," he asked Tein. She nodded. "Thanks."

After the servers had brought back all the dishes, mostly empty—Tein noted which were not—she sat down opposite Rodney at the butcher table with a pot of lavender-colored tea and two warmed cups, pouring for one for him and then for herself. Only a faint dip to her shoulders, a slight down turn to her mouth, gave away her exhaustion. She opened the cage she kept her eiff in and let it coil, trilling, around her arm, feeding it fresh moa leaves absently from a shallow bowl. Eiff ate nothing but moa. Little pots of it were everywhere in the city, except in the room Rodney shared with John. Even the scent of the leaves, distinct as fresh basil and feathers, made John sweat and pale.

"Hamat was mad," she confided. The undercooks were lethargically directing the apprentices in the clean up of the day's dishes and the preparation for the morning. In a palace the size of the City of Seven Walls, the kitchens were never empty, never quite still; there was always work. "No one was safe from him."

Rodney turned the cup in his hand, watching the liquid swirl in it. He had noticed only recently that Coriolis force sent things spinning counter-clockwise on Selket and only then thought how everything turned clockwise on Atlantis. The memory had been a painful jab, the way every memory of Atlantis seemed to be now. He had begun to believe he wouldn't ever see his city again. The possibility even existed that Atlantis was gone, victim of some catastrophe in his and John's absence.

A book on property law had revealed his and John's position. Most slaves belonged to the Haralim or the Rale's households, and were passed on with the title, but they'd been bought offworld and belonged to Zuleika. Only she could sell them or give them away and if she died without an heir they would be freed. Not that that had happened in the history of Selket; the Rale dynasty had endured unbroken since Adif. He'd tell John about it later since it was all academic. Zuleika Rale was young and vital and with child.

He glanced up.

Tein traced a pattern over her forearm and Rodney's gaze sharpened, seeing the faintest lines of old scars carved into her flesh. "Do you know why they killed him?"

"Not from here, remember?" Rodney snapped, still staring with mesmerized horror at the scars. Taking into account Selket's slightly longer than Earth normal year, the date of Hamat Rale's death and Tein's present age, she could only have been twelve or thirteen...He knew there were girls who had sex that young on Earth and historically had been married and even pregnant, but it still made something lurch in him, some voice in his head yell wrong wrong wrong and that wasn't even taking
into account that what Hamat had done had left scars. Physical scars.

"He instructed Jazan to bring Zuleika to his rooms that night."

Zuleika, Rodney thought through a numb haze. The Haralim. Hamat's daughter, who would have been nine then.

"God damn it," he muttered.

Tein nodded and waved Sosa, the older man in charge of the dish washing crew, over. "Tell Ro'ney-ve about Hamat's guards."

Sosa grinned, exposing remarkably white teeth. "That's a good story."

"Try to keep it short, I'm feeling a little nauseated here," Rodney said.

Tein's mouth curled up in a half-smile on one side. Sosa leaned over the table, his reddened hands splayed on it. Behind him sounded the chink and ring of dishes moving from soapy water to rinse and then to racks once they were dried. "Bijah Hidal was Hamat's Vizier. While the wives dealt with Hamat, Bijah had every guard loyal to Hamat killed. The kitchens were humid with steam and Sosa's teeth gleamed in a face shiny and red with sweat. "The morning the Rule of Three Women began, there were a thousand heads on the ramparts of the Fortress. They say he did it for Galina, because Hamat would have killed him and her if they were caught in an affair."

Rodney sucked in a breath. He'd seen the ivory gleam of the skulls still there as he and John walked into the Fortress behind the Haralim that first day. Serving girls might giggle and sigh over the romance of it all, but they sighed over tales of a Haralim's Chosen giving himself into slavery to stay with his lover and Rodney knew the sad truth of that tale. He did not care to be reminded that most folktales ended in some sort of tragedy, not when he was caught in one. He had never believed in happily ever after.

He bid Tein and Sosa both good night and accepted the covered pot of soup and another with bread to take back to his rooms for John. It was hours later before John returned, but he ate after he bathed and before he crawled into bed with Rodney. Rodney didn't roll over to face him but quietly told him the things he had learned during the day. He was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, at the moonlight shadows etched in blue on black. Sometime while he spoke, John's fingers wrapped lightly around his wrist and stayed there. His breath was damp and warm on Rodney's shoulder when he muttered, "Christ," at the description of Hamat's death and its reasons.

"Is he like that?" Rodney asked. In the dark, not looking at John, he could ask.

The fingers around his wrist tightened. "No." A hoarse, unamused chuckle followed and puffs of breath against Rodney's bare skin. "He's pissed."

"What?"

John paused and sighed. "That I'm necessary."

"For how long?"

John's shrug rippled through the bed and they both pretended to sleep. Rodney watched the shadows slide across the ceiling, until the sharp edges dissolved in the dull grays of dawn. It was harder and
harder to imagine life outside the Seven Walls. It still hurt when Rodney made himself remember he and John weren't the people this place was shaping them into being. Worse when he started seeing the ways they were becoming part of this life and less and less the men who had served Atlantis. Talking about the past didn't help either of them now: they were left with only two things to believe, either Atlantis couldn't find them or they had been written off. John accepted the latter. He'd always considered himself expendable. And Rodney was still and always pessimistic enough to believe the former. Neither offered them hope or comfort.

He used a quiet moment, while Macha was lecturing one of the other librarians about leaving lamps on and wasting chemicals, to poke through some of the newer books until he found one with what he wanted and took it back to the room with the Ancient console and database. He paged through The Rharalimat while Piele fetched parchment, reading between the lines with the dry recitations of dates and deaths. The Ralimas ruled for eighteen years after Hamat's death; Djemet was twenty-five when he assumed power. The book didn't say how that came about, but Rodney wasn't really surprised to read that the Ralimas all died on the same date or that Bijah Hidal, unofficially exiled to Hunet during their reign, succumbed to a 'fever' the next day. He merely wondered if Bijah's ceiling was red.

John joined him in the kitchen that night, along with the Haralim's other favorite slave. When he did talk, John sometimes mentioned the little girl. He liked children—unlike Rodney—and had befriended Bint with that easy charm Rodney remembered from as far back as Antarctica. Bint wasn't terribly annoying, Rodney had to admit. For a child.

They'd both come from the Haralim's receiving rooms and were still in embroidered and spangled finery. The bells at John's ankles chimed and semi-precious beads gleamed with color in the net of gold covering Bint's dark hair.

"You're early," Rodney commented.

"The Haralim retired early," John said.

Bint flashed a white smile up at him, her slim hand still held in John's. "We played roes all afternoon and I won." John smiled back down at her.

"What did you win?" Tein asked, carefully drying her hands before resting one on Bint's head.

"My choice of desserts," Bint answered with satisfaction.

"After you've eaten your real meal," Tein said.

Rodney watched Bint pout a little and didn't blame her. He'd always considered that dessert should come first, too. Why not eat the best part when you were hungriest and would enjoy it most?

John jumped as Jehmen swished by him, looking at him in a prissy, wide-eyed way that had Rodney grinning despite himself. "Did he just pinch me?" John whispered.

"Probably."

"The Haralim has good taste, even if the eiff is too big for its cage," Jehmen said wickedly.

John's mouth dropped open while Tein and several others within hearing sniggered. Rodney threw a lime-colored turnip thing at Jehmen's head. It hit with a thunk. John was still looking confused and
shocked. Rodney patted his arm. "He just meant you're a little on the old side—"

"I'm not old."

"Older than most bed—" Rodney stopped, then deliberately said the most distracting thing he could think of: "Anyway, he wasn't commenting on your trouser snake."

John blinked at him then burst out laughing. Bint climbed up on the stool next to Rodney and John leaned against the table in the old, boneless way.

"Here," Tein said, setting down plates in front of the three of them. Rodney noticed several dishes he simply refused to eat placed in front of John.

"That's marinated eyeballs," he pointed out in the spirit of friendship and not experiencing John spitting one out and onto him.

John nudged the dish over to Bint. "Here, I'm sure they're good for you," he said with a smile. The smile didn't fool Bint. She pushed the dish right back at John.

"Even a ten-year-old girl isn't going to fall for that," Rodney chuckled. John leaned into him, nudging his shoulder into Rodney's, warm and solidly there and at ease. In Atlantis, Rodney might have shrugged John away, irritated and impatient with the infringement on his personal space, but not here, not now.

Tein brought out a selection of desserts, all fit for the Haralim herself, and let Bint choose which she wanted while prattling about whatever gossip she had heard. It was surprisingly interesting stuff, things John never mentioned, but then people didn't see Bint or ignored her: they all watched John.

"Tulem Nabil has divorced his first wife."

John ate some of the whipped, creamy thing that smelled of spices and possibly citrus. Rodney concentrated on Tein's version of baklava, created for him from his descriptions. Tein's version was better than the real thing, honey-sweet and rich, the pastry paper-thin and made from nut flour, the color like a wheat field in the last hour of the sunlight. "Tulem's the Rale's secretary," John mentioned when he had swallowed.

Bint dived into her dessert and went on talking between mouthfuls. "She was sleeping with Hara Lalin, but that's not why he's put her out," she said. "She helped her brother embezzle Tulem's money! He's had to sell his grandfather's estate in Babhun to pay his taxes and her bride-price."

"God, some things are universal," Rodney muttered and felt John's shoulders jerk as he laughed hard enough he had to set his spoon down with a clink against his half-empty dish.

"Rae Kimal broke his leg and three ribs trying to climb the seventh wall," Bint told them, grinning with glee. "He was drunk, of course."

"Of course," John murmured dryly.

"And I saw Hara Besma meet with Commander Idris in the Blue Garden again." Bint finished her dessert and looked hopefully at Rodney's. "They're having an affair." He pulled the plate closer and glared. With a sigh, John pushed his over to her. She dove into it enthusiastically.
"That child is going to have a stomach ache tonight," Tein observed.

"Not our problem," Rodney replied, setting his hand on John's arm. Tein chortled and two of the serving girls, who had been mooning discreetly over John from the other end of the kitchen, giggled.

"You can look, but don't touch," Jehmen told them. "Right?" He hoisted himself onto a counter and regarded John and Rodney with the cocked head and bright eyes of a crow watching a worm.

Rodney ignored him and savored another bite of dessert. For one blissful instant, with John beside him, he felt almost happy.

Bint's voice interrupted that.

"—Seif cornered me in the Long Hall yesterday. He stuck his hand up my shift." Bint stopped and looked around the kitchen. Everyone was staring. Tein's fingers closed convulsively over her forearms, over her faded scars. Jehmen's mouth had fallen open. Sosa stood with a plate dripping suds onto the stone floor in his hands. Beside Rodney, John didn't even breathe.

"Seif," Tein repeated.

Rodney felt sick. Seif was one of the guards that had 'handled' John and him from the first day and beat the hell out of them both after their escape attempt. He'd enjoyed it, too. It had been obvious in his expression. Luckily, he usually worked with Freka, who kept him in line.

"I'll kill him," John said softly.

Tein held her hand up. "No, you will not."

Two of the serving girls were at the table now, ignoring Rodney and John, fierce in their own way, sweeping Bint away with them, full of soft chatter and softer questions; before they were done, they would know everything Seif had done or said.

Tein was already busy at the butcher table. It looked suspiciously like she was making candy. Rodney watched in disbelief. Candy? She was making candy when they had just found out that one of the guards, a Selketi they couldn't touch, was molesting Bint? Beside him, John was quivering with anger and that frightened Rodney, too. This was the man he knew in Atlantis, the one with a ruthless streak under the charm and an insane loyalty to those he called his own, but if John did anything to Seif… Rodney shuddered at the probable consequences.

Tein stopped in the middle of her task and fetched a bottle from her medicaments cabinet. The bottle was yellow glass and the contents were murky and colorless as she poured a spoonful into the candy mix. John went still next to him.

"You won't eat these," Tein instructed Rodney as she finished preparing the sweets. "They're Seif's favorite, I've heard."

Five days later Seif was dead.

*Kemahet*, Macha mentioned, was a common medicine used to induce abortions. A droplet was enough and there was no taste to it. Some people thought the Haralim lost her first child due to a plot by Keder, that she was given the drug. Of course, that tale was not true; the Haralim's first child was born and buried only days before the end of the *Rharalimat*. Other stories said Jazan murdered her
daughter's first born—whether to maintain the Ralimas' rule or to hide that it was deformed. Whatever the truth of that, no one spoke it and no one spoke Seif's name again, either.

Rodney didn't look at Tein the same way after that, but he still took his meals in the kitchens when he could.
The cup, like the liquor, was kept in the jade coffer.

The cup held two sips. *Dranzi* never tasted the same twice, it tasted like nothingness. The liquor was thick as honey, cold in John's mouth, even when he warmed it in his hand before drinking. The cup was glazed white, the liquor was peridot green. It smelled of mint. John had grown familiar with it during his training. He hated it. His body loved it.

The glyph inside the cup was 'submit'.

John did, with as much grace as he could muster. To kneel with supple grace, and wait in perfect stillness, was the first lesson and the last that Dullah had drilled into him. He'd never been good at waiting. Too impatient. He'd always wanted to fly, to follow his thoughts, to leave the dull ground behind. Flight was all in the moment for him and eventually he'd learned to accept the moment he lived in now. He listened to the bells, until the sound was a still emptiness in his mind, and he was in it. Otherwise, he would have fought or run from what he knew the night would hold.

He'd been Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard of Atlantis and Earth, once, but now he wasn't. Now he simply was the Haralim's Chosen, and no more. The fear that he could never be anything else again shuddered through him every time he realized he didn't need the cup any longer.

The Haralim lifted the silk away from him and he followed its hem with his gaze, the dazzle of a gilt charm reflecting the long gold light of the afternoon. Black traceries of shadow lay over the floor, cast by the intricately decorated grills over the windows. The floor itself was a mosaic, a single Selketi word: desire. John knelt in its center.

She let the silk fall in a pool of red. "*Come.*"

"*Vai, Hara.*" Even the words were scribed into him now, part of his breath and bone beside whatever Rodney had written on his flesh, the patterns Rodney traced as if they could ward John against hurt.

John followed her to the bed, in the bedroom redolent of incense.

The Rale was there, half hidden in the shadows, darker than John, paler than the Haralim, sprawled in a heavy, claw-footed chair.

John sank to his knees again and pressed his forehead to the rug covering the floor. He shuddered once, feeling his whole body flush with want, with the need to please. This was what he was in this place: the Haralim's gift to her husband-brother. He could barely breathe as he listened to the clink of the rings Djemet always stripped off before touching him. This was what Rodney couldn't save him from, from himself, from this terrible want.

Words dissolved on his tongue. The taste of nothingness, the sound of bells, every caress learned in the time between cup and cup, such was all that was left in the hollow where he used to be. He forgot himself as Djemet drew him to the bed.

He was opened and burned, crying out face-down, bruised and forced even as he offered no resistance. That was what the Rale wanted. A hand at the back of his neck, harsh, pressed him down into the sheets that bunch in John's fists. Always this first. He gave into it, lost himself in the rhythm, the sensations. Filled, taken, pinned under the other man's weight, fucked breathless and
gasping between spikes of pain and brighter pleasure when the Rale raised his hips and thrust over and over again, chest hot against John's back.

He could come from just that now; it left him humiliated and hungry, desperate for more and more.

"Mine," Djemet growled into John's neck, all hot breath and teeth, harsh and breathless in the moment before he jerked and climaxed.

Djemet and Zuleika tangled together in the aftermath, Zuleika laughing and whispering obscenities and endearments in her husband's ear, "He is yours and what he gives me is yours," while John lay spent amid soiled sheets the color of forests, watching bared skin through hazed eyes, sinuous contortions, hearing murmurs not meant for him, while the hours passed, before Zuleika brought out the jade coffer and they turned their attention back to him.

Djemet was lean and long as his sister, younger, child of an offworld slave according to what Rodney had told him. When John's mind wasn't hazed with drugs, he could study the other man, notice things like a puckered red scar running up the inside of his thigh to his balls. It looked ugly and must have been painful. It looked like the reason Zuleika had needed a bed slave, one that shared Djemet's, rare among the Selketi, coloring.

There were secrets inside secrets in the Seven Walled City. That scar was a secret John kept. He hadn't described it to Rodney or what he thought it meant. He thought Rodney had figured out enough from the timing, though. John curled onto his side and watched them make love, until their voices rose in completion. He thought of plots and heirs, assassins and cuckoos. The Rale needed an heir and Zuleika meant to give him one.

Then there was the cup, smooth porcelain held to his lips, the scent of mint bringing him to erection before he swallowed. They both touched him, hands sure and possessive, bringing him to the brink, making him beg, breaking him to their pleasure. They smiled and kissed, they teased him to desperation, while dusk dyed the room blue and turquoise, and they bore him down on the bed, laughing. He ached and twisted, shaking, helpless, needing, and they bound him with silken cords wrapped around the golden manacles, around his ankles, his knees, his thighs, until he was spread wide, stretched and displayed and taken beyond himself.

Every shiver, every shudder, and the bells chimed, giving him away; his body rang to each touch.

The Haralim sank onto him and John bucked upward, wild, while the Rale twisted three fingers deep inside him, making him gasp. Sparks burned through his nerves, lighted behind his eyes, and his muscles drew taut. Zuleika ground down, her hands flattened over his chest, sharp nails drawing John's blood, tightening internal muscles around him, her white teeth flashing. He curled his hands, bound high over his head, into fists, pushing up into her heat, down onto the Rale's merciless fingers, rhythm lost, out of control. Stared into the Rale's black-fringed eyes—hazel eyes, his eyes—watching his own reflection in them as he came.

They treated him like a pet afterward. Djemet untied him, then ignored him, while Zuleika sprawled across the bed, her fingers over her rounding belly, her head upon Djemet's thigh, long black hair a tangled curtain across his groin. Djemet stroked a finger over her throat and she murmured to him in Selketi, words that belonged only between them.

John slid from the bed, trying to exit discreetly. He knew they were done with him for the night. His legs buckled under him and he clutched for support as he went down, pulling at one of the sheets inadvertently. Djemet looked up from stroking his hand through Zuleika's tangled, sweaty hair.
John knew he wasn't supposed to see this, to understand this. His breath caught, then Djemet
gestured for him to go.

He bowed his head, gathered the silk pants and the veil, and backed out of the bedroom, his limbs
still trembling.
Confection

An insistent drum pattern repeated beneath everything else, the deepest beats echoing into the palace's floors, the highest like the crack of bones. Melodies coiled around the steady slap of hands, braided through the whistle of horns, adorned with the chime of cymbals and a shushing rhythm from something like a maraca. John's nerves twanged to the sound of the strings and he flinched sometimes, when the hybrid sitar-bagpipe wailed like a skinned cat.

He could ignore the music. It was harder to ignore the conversations. He'd learned Selketi during his training and couldn't tune them out. The dining hall was a creation of deceptive artifice. The walls were decorated with a mosaic portrayal of the Ancestor Zuleika was named after—repulsing the Wraith from Selket with balls of blue fire around her hands—no knowing if she had been ascended or just had some nifty weapons. That wasn't the room's little trick. He'd been in rooms that allowed you to hear a conversation at one end uncannily clearly at the other through a fluke of construction; the Haralim's hall surpassed that. Hidden controls in the arm of her chair changed baffles in the ceiling and let her listen in to whichever table she chose.

"—putting in new vines along the south slope."

"That will mean opening another warehouse in Benara, unless you mean to ship directly to the markets—"

It went on and on for hours and most of what anyone was saying was excruciatingly boring. The servers swayed among the low tables with studied grace, bare feet sure on the floor, trays never wavering as they knelt, no matter what liberties the Selketi gathered to partake of the Haralim's entertainment took with them. They were very generous with the wine, but they would be. The Haralim was gathering intelligence and wanted to loose her guests' tongues.

"The prices are better in Hunet."

"But the shipping costs for fresh produce are prohibitive and the intercontinental tariff takes another bite out of the profit margin."

John occupied himself locating and identifying which diners the Haralim was listening to and found these easily enough: two scions of the merchantry, heavy heads bent toward each other, and a rae considering investing a substantial chunk of household monies with them.

The musicians behind the carved, wooden screen at the far end of the hall were probably weary after hours of performing. John was exhausted just from kneeling by the Haralim's chair all evening, keeping his back straight and his face expressionless. His knees and thighs and even his neck all ached. He was thirsty.

"Not as bad as with the offworld products," one of the merchants aid. "Have you seen the textiles Rae Ghisla brought through the gate, though?"

"The filmy stuff?" the rae replied. "I can't imagine what use it could be—"

"It's tougher than leather, has to be cut with acid."

On the other side of the Haralim's chair, Bint knelt too, but she'd tipped over until her head rested against the arm of the Haralim's chair, and a surreptitious glance proved that her eyes were closed,
too. Lucky Bint. John couldn't sleep while essentially on display, even if the Haralim would have tolerated that behavior from him. For an instant, he thought she was stroking Bint's hair, then noticed her fingers on the baffle controls. The acoustics changed and suddenly the words from another table were clearly audible.

"Is that Hara Lalin? Paint me surprised she received an invitation."

"Isn't her uncle the minister of ports?"

Two women speaking and John identified them by the way they were staring at Hara Lalin. Lalin, who was as beautiful a woman as John had ever seen, was oblivious, busily flirting with her table companions, a white-haired scholar-poet and a young army captain. Both appeared enchanted with her, but she had the talent to appear just as enchanted with them.

"Tulem's seated with the Rale, though, and his wife isn't here at all. None of the Madras are."

"Not like the Bijals."

"Hara Besma should be more discreet."

"It's isn't Besma who should be discreet, it's Idris. His family is a cadet branch of the Madras."

John switched his attention to a nearer table, studying the interaction between Besma and Idris. Bint was right, they were involved; it showed in every glance and aborted touch, in the way she leaned toward him. Idris was better at maintaining a poker face.

The music wavered into higher dissonant notes that floated over the stream of sound. He wondered if this was the group that had played for the Haralim before, when Rodney had been an utter idiot and let her see he had talents beyond the library. He wondered when this evening would be over. The sheer boredom was killing him. He didn't care who was sleeping with whose wife or how many new vineyards could be planted in the foothills of the Lalo Mountains, nor who was in disgrace or who, like Besma, had the Haralim or the Rale's favor. No one spoke to him; no one even saw him as anything more than a pet, something that couldn’t be expected or encouraged to think. The only attention paid to John here meant hot eyes and straying hands; such attention he could do without.

"—Rae Keder."

"It's been over a hundred years, hasn't it? Since they used the ambo in the city center?"

"They've even cleaned out the sewers under Adif's Square. I think the Rale means to use it; why else bring Keder back from Hunet?"

The Haralim drummed her jewel-decorated nails on the chair arm. She didn't like the topic the latest victims of her eavesdropping were sharing.

"Do you think Keder knows?"

"He had to know when the Rale came to Hunet."

"Why else would anyone want to go to Hunet?" the younger man laughed.

The Haralim brushed her hand over her waist. The draperies of silk wrapped round her hid the
thickening evidence of her pregnancy. John fought the impulse to stare at her hand. That was… He stared at the mosaic on the wall, that showed the Wraith burning in a blue flame.

Fingers brushed over his shoulder. He looked up.

"Your Ro'ney pleases my husband," she said. Her mouth curled into a smile. What pleased Djemet generally pleased her. Pregnancy was softening her features, even her temper, but nothing softened Zuleika's eyes.

John wanted to snap, You mean your Rodney. You own us both, after all. He didn't. Don't make waves, fly under the radar when you can, smile and lie and swallow all the bitterness; that's what he told himself. That's how he got by. He didn't speak at all, because she hadn't told him that he could. She stroked his cheek, then offered him one of the sweet, sugar-powdered pieces of fruit Hara Besma brought her regularly. He took it delicately, closing his teeth on the candy, and his lips over her fingertips sensually. He chewed and swallowed and tried to hide how little he liked that particular confection.

She could read him, though.

"Perhaps I shall give the rest to Bint."

John caught his breath and nodded minutely, thankfully. He really didn't like the confections, but Bint adored them. The fruit, grown on the second continent, reminded him of a dried pear, but faintly sour. It had made Rodney's lips swell and gave him red hives the one time he tried it. John had sat up all night, listening to Rodney breathe, afraid of all the things he couldn't do if Rodney stopped.

The Haralim clapped her hands together. Once.

The music stopped, the conversations, even the clink of flatware on china. All eyes were on her. Even the Rale, who sat at his own end of the table, watched Zuleika. Down the table, Hara Besma stilled with a blown-glass goblet in her ringed hand, dark gaze flickering toward Idris briefly. Light through the wine cast a red stain over the tabletop.

"A demonstration," the Haralim announced. "A marvel of the Ancestors brought to us, a gift of my husband." She gestured to one of the side-doors. The gold-embroidered silk of her green sleeve slid back from her wrist, catching at last on bracelets she wore, gold too, glittering by lamp light, bright and smooth against tea-colored skin. She snapped her fingers.

The Selketi used metal taps on the heels and toes of their shoes. They clacked sharply against the marble floors. The four guards who wheeled the piece of Ancient machinery into the middle of the room made enough noise to cover the low voices of those watching. Enough to cover the scuff of bare feet as Rodney followed them in.

John thought he could feel the Rale watching him.

Someone had dressed Rodney all in blue-green, fine stuff, and his hands and feet were painted; not the patterns John wore, but Selketi glyphs that identified him as a belonging of the Haralim. Despite everything, he held his head up and stared back at those watching him. His lips were pressed together, thinned bleak, one corner of his mouth sliding down, and a frown crossed his features when he finally saw John.

John kept his own face blank.
"Ro'ney," the Haralim said. "Show my guests this wonder."

Rodney huffed out a breath. John could read his lips as he muttered under his breath, 'Wonder, hah. It's a tourist's guide book.' He could even hear the sarcastic inflection in his head.

The device had the typical look of most Ancient technology: a bronze-gray alloy, angular, corners smoothed, all twisted, long lines. A single opal-pale half-sphere dominated the center of a triangle that stood waist high. Crystal keys were arranged on each side. Rodney's fingers played over the keys, as deft as they'd been while working on a damaged jumper or any of Atlantis' systems. It made John blink hard. Sometimes it was hard to believe in Atlantis, that it hadn't been a dream, that he'd hadn't always been here, yet it still seemed more real than his memories of Earth.

Light spun up and expanded from the half-sphere, filling most of the room. Stars and planets and stargates turned above them. In the center of the room, a projection of an Ancient formed as Rodney pressed another key. Slim and smiling, dressed in the ubiquitous white and beige they'd favored, she gestured to a green world and a stargate, the open wormhole glowing pale blue, the ripples of light chasing themselves across the walls of the dinner hall. Even the holograph of the stargate made John ache; it had been so long since he stepped through one, since the Haralim purchased Rodney and himself and brought them from the slave market, on whatever world that had been, to Selket. The woman in the holograph began speaking in Ancient and John suddenly understood Rodney's remark. The Ancestors' marvel was a holographic tour guide selling a sightseeing tour through the Pegasus galaxy, pre-Wraith. Six days, sixteen stargates, and an overnight stay in the beautiful city of —

Then the holograph displayed Atlantis and John had to close his eyes, his breath hitching audibly, because he wanted to go home.

*Atlantis.*

How could he have forgotten it, any of it?

Whatever joy Rodney had taken from making the holographic displays work was stripped away from his face too, when John looked. He looked stricken, staring at the holographic vision of their city turning in the air above. An impatient cough from somewhere in the room startled him into motion again. He tapped another key sequence and the display switched to another city, another planet, a place like cobwebs woven between trees ancient and skyscraper high. He cycled the display through a dozen other worlds, vistas of a great natural wonders and cities that had long ago been destroyed by the Wraith. Gate addresses that John and Rodney would have both been lobbying to visit in another time, even knowing they'd likely find no more than ruins.

The display blinked out and John couldn't look at Rodney anymore. He bowed his head. It was no use. There was no escape and no rescue, no one alive to carry the truth of what had happened to them back to Atlantis. He'd thought...But it was more expedient to write them off as a loss. Rodney was certainly someone Atlantis needed, but John knew how it worked, and two Earth humans and two Pegasus natives were an acceptable loss, compared to the sort of search it would have taken to find them. Elizabeth would have pushed for an effort, but she was a realist, too. Sooner or later, she'd had put through a report in the weekly databurst that SGA-1 were MIA. By now, life had gone without them.

John felt lightheaded and brittle, as though his limbs were made of papier mâché, and he was hollowed out inside. He was never going to see Atlantis again. There was no escape. All this time, he'd been fooling himself, telling himself he was biding his time, looking for the loophole, the perfect
chance...and that was the trap. He'd fallen for it, just the way he could not guess how many others had. John ached. That was where Rodney belonged, not playing court magician to bored, semi-literate alien aristocrats. Right now, Rodney was in the Rale's favor, but how long could that last? He'd adapted amazingly well, but it was all wrong, seeing him muffle his intelligence and even the arrogance that could be so damn irritating. John had made his choice to keep Rodney safe when the Haralim threatened them both, but they weren't really safe, it was security on sufferance. How long would that sufferance last once she had what she wanted from him? He'd be an awkward reminder; hell, a dangerous loose end, once the heir was born. He thought she might be, in her own way, almost fond of him, but that wouldn't stop her doing what she considered necessary. What would happen to Rodney then? He'd had no problem with possibly dying in an escape attempt himself, but risking Rodney had been different, he thought. He should have offered Rodney the choice, instead of accepting the Haralim's devil's bargain. He'd failed Rodney without even realizing it. No matter the danger, he should have been working on an escape plan, he should have focused on that, not just survival.

He let out his breath. The last hologram flickered out, the Haralim's hand tightened on John's shoulder. The dinner went on, while John watched. He'd been in other hopeless situations. He'd got out. Or Rodney had saved them. The key was never giving up, never giving in to the despair. He'd been wallowing in it for months now, too stunned and shocked at his situation, or flat-out drugged stupid, to think clearly. Even with the Wraith bearing down on Atlantis, even with the Wraith beaming into the city, he hadn't felt like this. This was a hole so deep he couldn't find the sky or any light to find his way out. And the worst moments were the ones when he found it bearable, when he knew he'd begun to accept it. He had to fight that, despite the weight pulling him down, or he would drown here, in incense and pleasure and easy forgetfulness.

The Selketi went offworld, they used their gate for trade, there had to be a way to escape. He couldn't give up yet. He owed it to Rodney, who was still trying, even more than to himself.

He couldn't allow himself to think about what would happen if they did escape, either: of what he would leave behind, Zuleika's hand on her belly.

Rae Kimal staggered to his feet and lifted his goblet. "To the Haralim and an heir!"

John flinched. The heir, the baby, God, his...Only not, except genetically. The Haralim's child would be raised Selketi, raised to rule or marry and never question the rules which meant power for a few and slavery for others. A Rale, not a Sheppard. Thinking about it made things twist inside his chest. Could he make some difference if he stayed? Providing the Rale didn't have him disposed of? And if he did, if he gave up on escape, what about Rodney? He had a responsibility, damn it, that he couldn't disregard for a possibility.

He didn't fool himself that if they managed an escape there would be any chance of returning and taking the child. If that was even something he wanted or thought would be wise. What would be he do with a baby? Pawn it off on an Athosian family and visit when he could or send it back to Earth to be fostered out or adopted? If Earth hadn't succumbed to the Ori or some other threat between the last news from there and now. Atlantis hadn't been a place for children even when the Ancients built it; for all its wonders, they'd never found a nursery, a school or playground. Wherever the Ancients had raised their children, it hadn't been in the city. Liking kids wasn't the same as being competent to raise them.

"Vai, vai, vai," the other guests shouted, stamping their feet in a clatter that served as applause. Each of them poured a mouthful of wine onto their plates then drank deeply. Half-way across the room, Rae Keder poured the entire contents of his goblet away, red splashing over the edges of his plate.
No one acknowledged his gesture, though many noted it.

A soft whisper from someone caught John's attention. "I'd take the poison, if it were me. The Rale will behead him if he doesn't."

That was what every other brother superseded by an heir had done for the last four generations. Unless someone had done them the kindness without waiting for a decision. It left a bitter taste in John's mouth, wondering how the Rales and their wives, generation after generation, had second sons with the knowledge—the intention—that they die when the next Rale's heir was born.

Keder was no better than Djemet, but he wasn't just taking the easy way out, either. He wasn't bowing to the inevitable. John watched him, surreptitiously, the rest of the evening. Both their fates were suspended, time trickling away from a nine month hourglass. He felt sick, all his instincts rebelling, when he considered allying himself with Keder and what it would involve. There were only a few things John could offer in exchange for Keder's aid, after all. Access and betrayal.

The music began again at some unseen prompt. Rodney followed the guards out of the dining hall, casting one last look at John. John caught his breath. He didn't really believe they could escape, but he couldn't tell Rodney that. The Haralim stroked his cheek. John leaned into her touch without thought, then clenched his fingers around red silk. There had to be something that was still his choice.

Keder, then, no matter how risky it would be.
A puddle of silk like a pool of blood.

Rodney set the lamp on the low table, next to the copper bowl holding oil and flower petals. The perfume permeated the room. The copper glowed warm, beaten by hand into its shallow shape. It was the only warmth in the room, where the windows gathered the morning light inside and transformed it into blue shadows as the afternoon wound into dusk.

He pressed his hand to his back once, feeling the ache of bending over Ancient texts and equipment in the Rale's library hour after hour. Macha wanted more. The Rale wanted more. More toys, bits of Ancient tech made to work again. More translations of the text, data that was so far beyond the Selketi's present technology that their language didn't contain even terms for what Rodney was finding. The irony was killing him. Atlantis had had this in the database, too, but they'd never deciphered the Ancients' filing system enough to find it among the glut of information. But this database was so damaged, he'd decided to concentrate on what wasn't corrupted and found weapons development and physics, the mathematics of the universe as the Ancients had understood it. As he was beginning to understand it. The irony was going to kill him; yes, because it was so utterly useless to him now.

He wasn't willing to give this to the Selketi. He'd become a poet, translating ZPM physics and mathematics into Selketi passion poetry, the secrets of nearly limitless power encoded into odes and sonnets and limericks dirty enough to make Catullus blush. Piele didn't read Ancient, none of them did, not enough to understand the lies he was feeding them. And in the mornings he painted the secrets of the Ancients onto the flesh of their descendant, engraving them into his memory.

He didn't know if John paid enough attention to the decorations to recognize equations hidden within the patterns. John pulled himself so far inside to endure that Rodney questioned whether he ever looked at himself anymore.

His eyes burned. It was so futile.

"Damn it," he said out loud.

Now this.

He picked up the cool silk from the floor and folded it in half and then again and again, his hands moving without conscious thought, and finally laid it aside, helpless to delay or deny any longer.

Their room was an ell-shape. Though they had no doors, the turn hid the bed from where Rodney stood.

He lit a second lamp, opening the lid of the bowl holding the inert gel and activating it with a drop of catalyst from the bottle of lighter that nestled in a niche at its base, then carried it around the corner. He had found the lamps fascinating when they first arrived. The gel glowed until the chemicals were exhausted or a second catalyst was added, stopping the reaction. The bottle of stopper sat next to the lighter catalyst. The lamps themselves were works of art, hand-blown glass, tinted and stained, each one different.
The Selketi forwent so much technology it was easy to believe they weren't sophisticated, but the lamps and the library gave the lie to that, as did the stunner fields that guarded the palace walls and the weapons meant to defend the fortress that surrounded the city.

John sat on the floor, his head tilted back against the wall, his arms resting on his bent knees, hands dangling loose. Gold glinted at his wrists.

He turned his head just enough to watch Rodney hang the lamp from a hook high on the wall, but he didn't speak.

Rodney joined him just as silently, sinking down to sit beside him, shoulder to shoulder. He wanted to ask if it was bad this time, but John never wanted to answer, so he didn't. He could judge by the way John breathed, steady and slow, the half-lowered eyelids, the open hands, that it wasn't the worst. Either that or John didn't care anymore. Rodney didn't know how to deal with that, if it was true.

The kohl smeared around John's eyes left him looking bruised. Rodney wanted to wash it away, wash everything away, the smell of incense and sex clinging to John's skin, the memory of all of this, or the memory of who they were. Forgetting made it more bearable. He thought of the eiff syrup. It was more tempting every day.

He wanted to forget what it meant when John stood in the garden, his head tipped up, eyes on the wide, wide sky.

A soft shuff of sound—bare feet—from the other end of the room accompanied the scents of a tray full of food arriving. John opened his eyes.

A shiver ran through John, exhaustion and the chill floor taking their toll. He drew his knee to his chest and grasped one foot. The bells at his ankle chimed, once, and he silenced them with his hand. He slipped the rings off his toes, then the belled anklet. Then the other foot. Like the silk, John left the ornaments where he dropped them. The wrist manacles clanged against each other.

They were only decorative. John could take them off any time.

He pushed up and walked away from Rodney into the bathing room. The sound of water served as a counterpoint as Rodney gathered the pieces of gold up and returned them to their place. He walked back to the front part of the room, found a pillow and set it on the rug, sitting down before the low table, the copper bowl, the lamp, the tray filled with dishes of succulent delicacies. Tein always sent them the best the kitchens could offer, but he didn't have much appetite. He never did when John wouldn't talk at all.

John joined him as he was lifting the lid from a chafing dish. He bent and inhaled—meat and spices—his hand, still painted, resting on the bare nape of Rodney's neck, just over the knob at the top of his spine. When he exhaled, his breath gusted over Rodney's temple. Rodney bowed his head just a little and John didn't lift his hand away. He settled himself next to Rodney, so close their knees and thighs pressed against each other.

The lamp threw a single pool of light in the otherwise dark room. It lit Rodney's hands as he poured sweet tea into handleless cups. A wisp of steam diffused from the surface of the tea. It smelled like nothing from anywhere Rodney remembered.
John accepted the cup with a tiny grimace and sipped. A single trickle of water slid from his damp hair down to his collarbone. Rodney watched it slip down past a reddening bruise from a mouth too large to be the Haralim's. He wished the bastard would just leave John alone, now that they had what they had wanted from him. She was pregnant; did they have to go on using him?

John's breathing hitched, but then he looked away, eyelashes lowered, everything but the pulse at his neck hidden behind the studied mask of serenity the trainers had taught him. His hand fell away from Rodney's neck.

It felt cold without the warm weight of it there.

Rodney drank his tea.

He wanted to say: This isn't who you are.

He was afraid it was. He just didn't want to be the man who took advantage of that.

On the days when their duties left them free, Rodney read from scrolls Macha let him take from the library or scrawled formulae on thick paper cadged from Piele, using brushes and ink meant to paint John's hands and feet. John sat with him, mostly silent, one hand always in contact. That dependence scared Rodney. He'd never been the one taking care of someone before, never fooled himself he would be any good at it.

He never asked John not to touch him, but he never reciprocated any of John's wordless overtures. He kept his touches resolutely platonic, locking up the desire that he'd never guessed he could feel toward another man. It was the situation, their utter isolation among aliens, it was the drugs, the knowledge of what John did with the Haralim and the Rale, it was frustration and physical need—it wasn't Rodney. It wasn't John; he told himself that. It hadn't been once. He couldn't let himself believe in John's consent.

Once a day, John danced. At first, the guards had come and watched, and later Dullah and Lisha had peered through the screen at the doorway. Even later, the other slaves came and even the women that made up the Haralim's court. Hara Besma. Hara Zoyan. Hara Lalin. All any of them saw were the slow, graceful movements, the open hands and closed eyes.

They saw John dance.

Rodney saw Teyla and her sticks, her still poise and fluid control, a meditation in flesh and bone, a shadow that matched each movement of each ghostly kata.

John danced to remember.

Rodney watched and grieved for their dead teammates, for the past that felt farther and farther away from them every day. He missed his life, the pressure and the wonder. He'd become a performing monkey, making Ancient junk light up to entertain the Selketi. The glimpse of Atlantis had left him depressed and weary, the way watching John's slow motion katas did.

John picked at the meal in front of them. He didn't touch Rodney again, but his gaze was sharper than usual. "Rodney," he said once, but then nothing more, looking down at his painted hands instead, frowning at the fading patterns, maybe seeing the equations hidden within them.

~*~
The bed they shared every night was wide, so soft their weight brought their bodies together when they slept. The calls of the night birds in the garden aviary beyond the open windows held the silence at bay when Rodney woke with John tangled around him, pressing against him, hard and too still to be asleep. John was waiting for Rodney's reaction.

This was different. He didn't think this was *dranzi*. That wore off swiftly, every time John has returned still dosed. And if it was conditioning that had taught John to want this…The want was still real. He turned toward John, held his face with his hands, found his mouth with his.

The kiss was lush and heated and slow. Soft, almost dry, lips pressed chastely against his, then John opened his mouth eagerly. There was a hot, swollen split inside his lower lip that Rodney licked carefully until John moaned. John's tongue did things that had Rodney wanting so much he couldn't breathe, couldn't help wondering how John learned to kiss and kiss and kiss, until he remembered with a jolt. Trained. He started to pull away.

John's hands slipped away from his back and his side. He was so perfectly pliant, yielding even to rejection like a willow, that Rodney wanted to hurt him. The impulse came and went before he could act, before it could be translated into the physical, but it left Rodney feeling tainted by his own thoughts.

The darkness hid John's expression. There was only a glisten of light reflecting from his open eyes.

Rodney started to disentangle them, meaning to leave the bed. His chest hurt. John's leg was hooked behind his knee and suddenly tightened. John's hands cupped his face, one sliding around to the back of his neck again, pulling him back, pulling him down.

John kissed him desperately, urgently, like it was the last kiss he would ever know, bruising Rodney's lips, stealing his air, taking what he needed without an ounce of submission. This kiss wasn't studied, wasn't skilled, but it was all John. He didn't let go until Rodney responded, until they were moving together and lost in each other and Rodney couldn't think of anything that mattered except John: John's mouth and his painted hands and his long body writhing beneath him.

Like flying.

Until morning.

He dozed afterward, half-sprawled over John, and didn't really wake when John left the bed. He snapped awake without warning later, sweltering under a blanket that had been pulled up over his shoulders. He rolled onto his back and blinked stupidly at the barely visible outlines of the room. He'd had sex with John. His muscles were all still pleasantly limp; all the tension he normally carried absent for once. Rodney thought it had been good. It had been for him. John not being still in the bed might mean it hadn't been—for him. That was an appalling thought. He shouldn't have gone along with it. A panicked litany of regret and worry began cycling through his brain. What if John regretted it? What if John hadn't been consenting, if it had been the damned conditioning kicking in, and now he hated Rodney for taking advantage? Rodney scrubbed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes. He had to find John and talk to him, try to undo whatever damage he'd done last night.

He unpeeled the soiled sheets that were twisted around him and sat up. Another bleary blink and he identified the shadow at the window.

John.
He leaned against the stone sill and stared out the window, arms folded over his chest, already dressed. It looked like he’d been awake for hours.

Rodney opened his mouth. He didn't know what to say. He snapped it shut when John twisted and looked at him with narrowed eyes. It was a look he hadn't seen on John's face in too long, but Rodney had never wanted it leveled at him. He took an involuntary step back.

John frowned at him, then his mouth quirked up at one corner. "It's a little late for me to freak out now, Rodney."

"Oh, you never know, under the circumstances, it's never too late. And if you don't feel like it, I'm always willing to step up and panic for both us," Rodney blurted. He fumbled the sheet around him in a fit of ridiculous modesty and slowly approached John.

John unfolded his arms and rolled his shoulders. This close, the faint lines around his eyes gave away the tension he was hiding otherwise. "Rodney."

"I'm so—"

"That was me."


"I've learned some new tricks." His expression hardened briefly into bitterness. "And turned them."

"John—"

"There was something." He held up his hand. "Before here."

Rodney waited, but that seemed to be all John was going to say, which considering it was John, had been a lot. Really, though, he didn't want to have this conversation, either, so that was good. "Yeah," he said. Because there was, there always was, the thing between them that neither of them would ever push, because there was just so much to lose. "Okay." The things that had seemed insurmountable meant nothing anymore.

John smiled and cuffed Rodney's shoulder lightly. "So, do you have a plan?" The feel of that casual brush of his hand over Rodney's bare skin lingered.

"What?" Rodney huffed, spinning and following him as John made his way to the front room. The sheet dragged and tangled around his feet.

"A plan, a strategy, a genius idea to get us to the gate and out of here," John said. "We've been here too damn long. Face it, no one's getting us out of here. We're going to have to do it ourselves."

"No," Rodney told him, feeling tired and hopeless. They didn't even have their IDCs anymore. No radios. They couldn't just dial Atlantis and run through the event horizon to safety. They would have to try to get to some neutral planet where they could disappear before any pursuit followed them through.

John turned and just looked at him. Rodney held one hand up. "John, do you really think I wouldn't have told you?"
"Sometimes you need a little push—"

"Believe me, seeing you—I have enough push for a orbital fucking rocket; I just don't have any ideas." He swallowed, hating the disappointment that flashed across John's face, before the calm mask descended again. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," John said. He rubbed his hand over his wrist, where the manacles rested when he wore them. "Really."

"Really?" His voice cracked on the first syllable. He didn't see how John could say that, but he wanted to believe.

John nodded. "I've got a plan. I just, kind of, hoped you'd have a better idea." He faked a smile; Rodney saw through it. John hadn't wanted to go with whatever plan he had. That was beyond not good and right into stomach-emptying fear, because a plan that John Sheppard considered risky was usually Rodney's definition of suicide. "But this will probably work. Unless it gets us both killed."

"Oh, so…like all your plans." He tried to make it sound like a joke.

"I really don't want to get you killed," John said seriously.

Rodney took a chance and touched his arm. "Good. I feel the same way." He let his fingers stay. "About you, that is, too. I don't want you to get me killed, of course, but also, not with the you getting you killed thing." He swallowed. "In case you didn't know."

"Jesus, Rodney," John said, his voice gone rough and uneven. "I know."

Rodney ran his hand up John's arm, matching it with his other, resting them on his shoulders. The sheet slid down to puddle around his feet. John's hands mirrored his, closing on his shoulders lightly. For a moment he considered kissing him, but John was already dipping his head until they were touching foreheads. They stood quietly and Rodney closed his eyes, absorbing the way their breath mingled, letting go of something, if only of his doubts that John knew what he was doing. If John didn't, it wouldn't make much difference, because John didn't back down. Nothing was any more bearable, but nothing could make this place that.

His stomach chose that moment to grumble audibly and he could hear the smile curl through John's voice when he asked, without shifting, "You want to raid the kitchens?"

Rodney sighed. His eyes snapped open when John began chuckling. "What?" he demanded. He didn't think being hungry was that funny.

John was still touching foreheads with him, but looking down. "Pants first, then food, okay?" John choked out, still chuckling.

"Bath first," Rodney grumbled, trying to maintain some dignity, suddenly aware that he was sticky and itchy, as well as naked. He left the sheet where it lay and stalked back to the washroom. John trailed after him into the bedroom, coming to stop before Rodney reached the next doorway.

John was lounging on the remade bed when Rodney came out fifteen minutes later. They dropped the old sheets in the laundry rooms and then slipped into the kitchens without speaking much. Armed with hard rolls and fruit that wouldn't put Rodney into an allergic reaction, they dodged patrolling guards on the way back to their rooms, and ate there.
Mouth full of bread, Rodney mumbled, "So what's your plan?"

"You're not going to like it." John sat down the piece of fruit he'd been holding and told him. He was right. Rodney didn't like it.
They were in the Blue Garden, where Idris met with Besma, where John came to do his *katas* some afternoons, shaded by the broad leaves of the *cho* trees. The blue stones were set into the garden's wall, in a mosaic that mimicked rippling water under the dappled, flickering shade. John came there whenever he could, for the breath of memory it evoked, so different from arid Selket, for the illusion of an ocean.

Keder might have come to watch him as others had, before the others had grown bored and left to entertain themselves elsewhere. He might have. John hoped not.

When John came to a stand-still and turned his gaze to the empty sky, Keder stepped from one of the arched doorways. The click of a heel on stone made John turn, though he'd been aware of his watcher throughout his practice. Teyla would not have approved, but each movement after that, each extension and turn, dip and sway, had been a performance. He knelt with slow, deliberate grace. Keder approached as closely as Djemet or Zuleika would and touched him with the same sense of entitlement. Heavy, heady scent rose from the embroidered cloth that brushed John's cheek. The toes of Keder's boots were capped in chased silver.

Keder was silent long enough that John worried about a knife to the throat, imagined his blood soaking dark into the moss: the Haralim's Chosen sprawled in the garden, dead. If Keder thought no farther than to spite his brother and sister….

"What would you give to walk through the Ancestor's Ring?" He fingered John's hair as he spoke. John stilled, not even breathing. The urge to jerk away actually made him happy. The training helped him keep his hands open upon his thighs, palms up. It didn't make him react to Keder the way he did to Zuleika and Djemet. And Rodney. At least he still had that much control; when he arched his neck, pressing up into Keder's hand, it was an act of calculation. *Each breath must be an invitation and a seduction.* Dullah's lesson as he arranged John's body in the proper line of the forty-fourth kneeling form repeated in his mind.

The gurgle of a small fountain, where dusty-colored birds came to drink and bath, obscured their voices.

"What would you give?" Keder asked. His hand still rested on John's head. It slipped down to cup his jaw as John turned enough to look him in the eyes.

"Why don't you ask what would I do?" he asked.

Keder smiled.

John twisted just enough to display the line of his neck, stretching, and looked up, eyes half-lidded. Keder's sharp-drawn breath was all he needed to know that Dullah would have been pleased by the effect. He licked his lower lip.

"Would you kill my brother?" Keder asked. His hand tightened on John's jaw. His eyes were dark where Djemet's were lighter. Djemet was always rough at first, too, as though it proved something. John didn't flinch.

"I want to go through the Ring, not die," John murmured.
"Kemahet," Keder said.

John shuddered.

"I know the cook keeps it, I know your scholar frequents the kitchens, as I know why Zuleika chose you."

"So you did it?" Rodney asked as John slid into the bed beside him. He kept his back turned. John pressed his face against Rodney's back. His hair was still wet from the bath. The wet tickle was a contrast to the damp heat of John's breath against his skin. John slipped closer, wordless again, his hand coming to rest on Rodney's hip. Tremors shuddered through that hand. A harshly in-drawn breath made Rodney start to roll over.

John curled tighter into his back. Rodney could feel the shaking spread through him.

"I did it," John whispered.

He bolted off the bed and back into the washroom. Rodney stayed where he was, staring at the moon shadows on the wall, listening to the sounds of John vomiting and then the rush of water as he drew another bath.

~*~

John would draw too much attention in the kitchens, Rodney insisted.

"Then we'll use that," John insisted, so that three nights later when he faltered into their rooms, silks shredded and skin bruised, Rodney didn't hustle him into the washroom, but caught his elbow and guided him to the kitchens. John sucked in a pained breath when Rodney's arm around his waist slipped and pressed into his flank. The ankle bells sounded with every step on the cold floor and once one of Idris' patrols stopped at the end of a hall and watched them silently. The guards didn't stop them however and they arrived in the kitchens after two more turns and a staircase.

Everyone gasped and fluttered around John. Jehmen stared, eyes wide and dark, suddenly seeing the other side of the easy life he aspired to live.

Tein went straight to the medicaments cabinet and opened it with her key. Rodney followed and stood at her shoulder, cataloging everything on the shelves, tiny bottles and pots and one he recognized: clear glass and murky contents.

Sosa brought a warm, wet rag and dabbed at the blood trickling from John's split lip. John leaned away without ever lifting his gaze from the tiled floor. When he swayed, Jehmen jumped forward to catch his arm and steady him. John jerked at the unexpected touch, lurching back against a table, his elbow hitting a pot. The pot slid off and hit the floor, the lid coming off in a clatter and pale green sauce splattering over dark brown-and-red-patterned tiles. Spots of it flew up and stained Jehmen and Sosa's trousers.

Tein turned, as distracted as the others, while John twitched away from hands reaching for him and others bent to clean the mess, and Rodney snatched the full bottle of kemahet. It went into a pocket even as he dodged the sauce on the floor and went to John. "Sorry, so sorry," Rodney murmured. Maybe Sosa or Tein thought he meant the scene. He didn't. His apology was for John, because he knew how much John hated this, being on display, being weak or out of control in front of anyone. If the kitchens had ever been really empty he might have tried his hand at picking the cabinet's lock,
but instead John had been required to make a spectacle of himself. It had worked. But John wouldn't look up.

Tein gave him the salve that stopped scarring and another one, along with a vial of eiff. "Let him sleep, if he is not required by the Haralim," she said.

Rodney slipped his arm back around John and guided him out. "I could have done it myself," he hissed into John's ear.

John stiffened. "Yeah, but this way no one will ever suspect you—Tein-ve and everyone was right there. They'd testify that you couldn't have taken anything if they were asked. Even under torture. They'd believe it." His voice is so soft Rodney can barely hear the roughness. The Haralim wasn't touching him anymore, but the Rale was, taking out frustrations that could never be spoken of out loud on John's flesh, sometimes every night.

"My nerves are shot, just shot to shreds," Rodney complained. "Did you knock that pot on the floor deliberately? Because a little warning might have been nice. I nearly died of cardiac arrest." He went on complaining and John relaxed little by little, letting Rodney pull him closer, even winding his arm around Rodney's waist too.

~*~

Bint wasn't the only child in the palace, but she was the only one John saw regularly. He tended to indulge her so much as he could. The Haralim treated her as something between servant and family and he'd slowly gathered Bint was the only child of the wet nurse who had cared for Zuleika and the Rale during their childhoods.

The musicians were behind the screen, a trio with drums, a stringed instrument and a syrinx. A woman accompanied them them with voice and castanets. John listened as she sang of a hunter who went out with his companion, describing all that he saw, from the mountains to the sky and all the animals, saying that in each he saw beauty that reminded him of his beloved, and so he could slay nothing. In typical Selketi fashion, the hunter's companion slew him with a knife from behind, leaving him for the plains predators to feast on, while returning to wed the hunter's beloved.

Playing roes with Bint and the Haralim took more effort than he had anticipated. Three-sided chess with an element of chance that could and did overthrow the cleverest strategies was how he described it to Rodney, but there were subtleties to it, reflections of Selketi attitudes, that the comparison didn't convey. The dice were four-sided, offering a player three choices with each roll, but each choice meant the other players could duplicate that move if they wished. It was a game of denial and shifting alliances. At first, Bint had regularly allied with the Haralim to beat John, but he'd become much better, applying insights from his training, bending and flowing around the mental attacks symbolized on the roes' board, letting Bint's offense rush forward until she was over-extended.

Watching the Haralim play taught him just how subtle she could be. All of her strategies contained layer on layer, knots and traps, tricks and feints.

She was ruthless as well.

"My Hara, my family is in need of your influence."

Hara Besma had succeeded in separating the Haralim from the rest of the ladies and paid no attention to John, Bint, or even Freka, who was playing with them while keeping a gentle eye on the Haralim.
There was always a guard in any public room with the Haralim now. John rubbed his thumb over the
die, studying the disposition of his pieces and his opponents' on the board. Bint bounced impatiently
but didn't speak—silence was part of roes. Freka's mouth turned up in an indulgent smile even as he
scanned the room diligently.

"My influence?" the Haralim asked.

"Secretary Nabil's new taxes will ruin our business in Babhun."

"The ministration of the exchequer is not mine to command," the Haralim replied. "My husband — "

"Yes, the Rale," Besma said. "If you would persuade him to instruct Nabil to excuse the Bijal's
interests this year...we would be very grateful." John slid his gaze toward them, watching Besma
turn a heavy, jewel-encrusted bracelet on her wrist. Cabochon rubies the size of his thumb caught the
light, reflecting it onto the gold, tinting it pink. Besma's fingernail caught in the bracelet's catch and it
opened. She closed it around the Haralim's wrist an instant after. "A gift, my Hara."

John tossed the die into the center of the board, hoping it would land on a triangle of green jade
rather than the black or white. Like Freka, he was distracted. Half his attention was always on the
Haralim.

Besma's hands clenched on her skirts as the Haralim removed the heavy bracelet and locked it back
around her wrist. "I cannot accept a gift your family cannot afford," the Haralim said.

"There's nothing you will do?" Besma asked, so low no one else would hear. Two slaves and a
guard did not count, of course. Nevertheless, Freka was watching her intently. Besma's knuckles had
turned white.

Bint drummed her fingers. The die had landed on Freka's black triangle, which gave him the choice
of three different sorts of moves represented by the glyphs displayed. Then John and Bint would
have the opportunity to execute the same move as Freka.

"There is nothing I can do," the Haralim stated.

Besma bowed her head. "So be it."

Freka picked up a piece on the board and moved carelessly. John followed, taking two of Bint's
pieces and one of Freka's. Bint made a small noise of frustration, finding no piece of hers left that
could perform the move Freka had chosen. The Haralim laughed, then stroked Bint's head.

Besma's eyes narrowed before she bowed and backed away. John flicked a look at Freka, who was
still watching her. He wasn't the only one who thought Idris' lover was angrier than she'd let herself
show.

~*~

They were cutting it close again. John didn't have morning duties, but he needed Rodney's help
preparing if he didn't want to resort to the handlers and Rodney had to be in the library before Macha
arrived. John went quiet when they began the prep, drawing into himself, and Rodney wanted to put
that off as long as he could.

He didn't care if he was late. Not when John was spread across their bed, filigreed shadows traced
over his limbs, given over to Rodney like a gift. The Haralim and the Rale didn't see him like this:
wide-eyed and soft-mouthed, languid with pleasure while he let Rodney touch him until they were both content. They would never see John panting and twisting into Rodney's hands or his mouth because he wanted to be there. Whatever words they wrested from him were lies. They had only the pretense, no matter how much dranzi they used on him.

"Just let me," Rodney murmured from where he knelt between John's legs.

"You don't have to," John said. He said it every time, as though he'd forgotten that anything in bed could be about his need.

He stoked his palm along John's calf, down to his ankle and the vulnerable jut of bone so close under paper-fine skin. There was no prickle of hair on John's legs, none left on his chest or arms or face. Lisha had shown him the thick yellow paste that they applied to anywhere they didn't want hair, and warned that if left on long enough, it burned the skin to an angry red. The hair didn't come back for months — if ever. A pale band had been impressed in the skin just over his ankle from the belled fetters John always wore for the Haralim, like the indentation left by a ring. Rodney's fingers found it and he smiled at the way John sighed, his toes flexing with pleasure.

"No one's forcing me," he added and left the rest of it unspoken. He traced his hand back up, urging John to part his legs farther. John craned his head and watched as Rodney touched the dark hair at his groin. "I'm glad they left you this.

John laughed breathlessly, letting his head fall back, all long, lean lines, "Yeah." He shifted and Rodney watched, fascinated, as his cock thickened and flushed with no more than the stroke of his finger along the shaft. "Jesus."

He'd never given cocksucking more than the cursory thought that he liked it done to him. He liked doing it too. Watching John lick his lips reminded him of how it felt when they were stretched around his cock, the way John smiled at him afterward. John's blowjobs left him wrung out and floating, yet he liked giving them to John even more than getting them. He didn't have thirty-seven techniques, but John didn't seem to care. It was something that wasn't part of John's duty to the Haralim or the Rale; no one gave John what Rodney did and that held its own secret satisfaction. John came apart for him like Rodney was the one with all the expertise. It sent a thrill through Rodney every time that ended with him jacking himself and coming right after John.

John made a tiny noise. The tip of his cock was wet. Rodney bent forward and took the head in his mouth. The muscles under his hands twitched, but John held still. A soft, hitching sound caught at the back of his throat and that made Rodney take him deeper. He tried one of the tricks John used on him and then did it again when John's hips came off the bed.

The morning sun, heavy at the horizon, turned the west wall apricot and salmon. John was all ivory and shadow, except the glint of the navel ring. The sixth bell rang through the palace. John murmured desperate nonsense and pulsed in Rodney's mouth. He came with his eyes open, transparent and unguarded. Rodney swallowed and concentrated on not touching himself, not coming just from the picture John made.

"I should—"

John had already hooked a leg around Rodney's and pulled him down, rolling until Rodney was the one on his back. He straddled Rodney's hips, dipped his head and breathed hot and moist on one nipple, until Rodney forgot about Macha's temper.
"Oh," Rodney murmured when John finally stopped teasing.

John slithered down the bed, dislodging the top sheet to the floor with a whisper, and took Rodney's cock in his mouth, using all those things he'd been taught and wringing Rodney's orgasm from him.

~*~

He'd never focused on the *katas* Teyla wanted him to practice while they were in Atlantis. He'd gone through the motions without absorbing what she meant him to learn. He'd thought she could teach him to fight the way she and Ronon did, but that wasn't the way of it. Teyla taught him the forms, but he had to learn himself, something he hadn't been willing to do then.

Standing still in the Blue Garden, he drew in a single breath, smiling in his mind, hearing her:

"*Breathe, John. Breathe.*" The air smelled of water. He inhaled using his abdomen, until his lungs were filled, imagining he could sense the rush of oxygen reaching his head, then spiraling out to his arms and legs, then exhaled through his mouth, pushing all the tension out with it Teyla had made a sound as she exhaled that reminded him of Monica Seles and made him laugh and annoyed her. Even now he expelled the air silently. That worked for him until the kata became more forceful. Then maintaining control and expelling the air from his diaphragm meant making some noise.

He concentrated on his breathing until it filled his mind, exhaling pain and resentment and worry along with carbon dioxide, until his lungs were filled, imagining he could sense the rush of oxygen reaching his head, then spiraling out to his arms and legs, then exhaled through his mouth, pushing all the tension out with it Teyla had made a sound as she exhaled that reminded him of Monica Seles and made him laugh and annoyed her. Even now he expelled the air silently. That worked for him until the kata became more forceful. Then maintaining control and expelling the air from his diaphragm meant making some noise.

Dullah and Lisha and the courtesans of the Fifth House of Flowers had given him no choice but to learn his body, to know the play of muscle and tendon, bone and skin, balance and motion, from fingertip to toe. The drugs they fed him sometimes made it impossible to think beyond the now of his body, of sensation, and their lessons had taken him far beyond what he'd thought of as sex. Duty to the Haralim went beyond bed work. He was always 'on' in her presence or the Rale's, always performing.

This was easier now he wasn't always dosed up on *dranzi* or some of the other drugs they'd used during training, the psychotropics and hypnotics. At least *dranzi* didn't have any lingering side effects. Or none that he was aware of, he admitted. It seemed to metabolize fast and flush out faster if he drank enough water and kept moving. But he couldn't do *katas* while it buzzed through his veins, couldn't concentrate without something outside to ground him.

In some part of him, he'd thought he would learn to do what they wanted of him and hold onto himself, dissociated from his body and without pleasure. Dullah had broken him of that misapprehension early on. Each day in the training barracks and the flower houses began with exercises that centered the self in flesh. The courtesans made every movement a meditation, their entire lives lived as art, their bodies the perfected into living prayers. They didn't move through life, they danced and John had to learn that dance. They were repeated and repeated until they were graven in muscle memory. It was strangely like learning to fly. He'd always had an awareness, a natural talent that made whatever he flew part of himself, wings or rotors, that had translated into the intuitive and reflexive skill set the jumpers called for, and the only way he could think of the training he had received was learning to fly his body.

The Selketi didn't call them *katas*, didn't associate them with any fighting style, but John realized they did have something in common with all that Teyla had tried to show him.
He had a far better memory than most. Not eidetic, but close enough if he was paying attention and he had paid attention to Teyla—he just hadn't understood at the time. He remembered every word, every tiny shift of Teyla's body as she'd demonstrated each exercise and pattern. He had began doing the katas again once Dullah let him move in with Rodney, when he had private moments, to release some of the anger simmering through him. Head strikes, chest strikes, groin… picturing the slave factor, one of the guards, Dullah, even the Haralim. It burned off some of the energy he'd spent doing things in Atlantis. After a while, though, he found himself doing them to calm himself, to recover his control, to honor Teyla for offering to teach him at all.

To remember her.

To remember himself as he'd been.

The katas came smoothly now, like water flowing, the Selketi exercises mingling with the unarmed combat he'd learned in the military and with Teyla's art. He had found the spirit in it now. He liked to go fast, liked things he could be good at immediately, but there was nothing for him but patience in the palace, and the lessons sank bone-deep in mind and body.

He wished he could tell her, that though she wasn't here, she was still saving his life.

Stripped to a pair of loose cotton pants, he moved in sun and shadow, sinking deep inside himself. The green moss the Selketi kept manicured and watered like a lawn, even in the dry as dust climate, gave under the soles of his feet. It was all balance. Speed, but beginning so slowly that the whip-quick movements at the end didn't feel any faster than the beginning and his breath barely picked up. The shifting blue walls of the garden became the shifting blue waters of Atlantis, the flicker of the morning light through the cho leaves gave way in memory to the training room. His hands were open, but he summoned the memory of the sticks: mass, momentum, inertia, the crack and the jar that vibrated through fingers and wrists up the bones of his arms. Foot work, he remembered, and he centered himself the way Teyla had told him, "Become your body not just your arms."

Fast and slow, quicksilver, push and give way, practicing until each movement was perfect, until it was a dance partnered with gravity and endurance, and the sky was pale and blue and he was almost, oh, almost flying in it again. When he slowed and slowed and slowed until he was still and cooled down and earthbound, his mind was clear and his body hummed, completely and utterly his.

There was something ironic in spending so many years in the military, with its PT, and then training with Teyla and Ronon, going on missions, yet finding himself in the best shape of his life while living as a bed slave to an alien. Rodney got the joke, at least, the same joke that traced physics equations on John's skin and whispered zero point poetry while they fucked.

Not as ironic as figuring out that he wanted it, liked it, all of it, with Rodney. Or that if they did succeed in escaping he would have to give it up. He didn't believe they could go back and be who they were. Rodney really was brilliant: he would find a way to function again, but John knew himself and the situation. He was compromised, damaged, and whatever place he'd held had already been filled. No one would want him back in Atlantis, not when they understood how much he had been changed. Rodney, though, Rodney would still be able to find a place, make a new one if nothing else. He belonged in Atlantis even more than John had.

Getting Rodney back to Atlantis, no matter what happened to him afterward, would be his last act as Lieutenant Colonel Sheppard.

~*~
Rodney rationed himself. He didn't leave the library every day to watch John in the Blue Garden. Twice every small moon he allowed himself the indulgence. This day the serenity he usually experienced watching John practice felt tainted. The tiny weight of the kemahet in his pocket couldn't be ignored.

There was a cold knot in his belly. Nothing could undo it.

Not the slow dance of movement engraved in air, though John's calm sometimes seeped into Rodney's body, synching his breathing with John's when he watched. Not the texts he'd found days before detailing the basic scientific philosophy of the Ancients. He'd always known he could understand their science if he could grasp how they thought and now he had a Rosetta stone.

Not with the kemahet in his pocket. Failure, betrayal, even bad luck, and they would both die.

He stood just inside the arched doorway into the garden, in the shade, where he always came to watch. There was nothing untoward in his presence. Nothing for the always watching eyes of the palace to remark upon. Rodney's heart still stuttered in his chest, too fast, too uneven, like he'd been mainlining speed again, like it would beat its way out of him.

The stone behind him was cool through his shirt and vest and the tiles were damp where water had seeped from the moss. He could feel the moisture in the air through his skin, so different than anywhere else in the palace.

John moved in a spiral, every movement spinning off a perfect still point, like solar systems and galaxies, cometary orbits, and all eyes turned to him, to that center of gravity. Some days Rodney thought that John would spin until he was pure energy. If he ever danced the perfect kata he would ascend.

But he couldn't. John couldn't ascend any more than he could escape, not while invisible chains bound him to the material and the physical world, the world of physics, Rodney's world, Rodney.

The guilt soured his soul some days.

The tap of a shoe on stone alerted him to another presence, perfumed, warm and female.

Rodney turned and recognized her. The dark eyes were very like the Haralim's, the dark hair and tea-stained skin typical of all the Selketi, but her mouth was like her brother's, pursed and discontent.

"Hara," he murmured, bowing his head and stepping back as she passed, so close the silk of her robes brushed him, and she took his place to watch John. Zoyan didn't acknowledge him or dismiss him, so Rodney stayed. The fall of her sleeve slid over his hand and slender fingers locked trap-tight around his hand.

"Give it to me," she murmured.

He fumbled and passed the vial of poison over.

She watched in silence, though her lips parted more than once, until John slowed, all the energy he'd seemed to fling out to the corners of the garden pulling back into him, until he stood still, looking into the sky. Then she left in a shimmer of turquoise silk, only her scent, heavy as musk and roses, lingering in the doorway.
Rodney waited until she had gone, then entered the garden, gathering up the discarded bits of John's clothing and handing him a thin robe to wear to the baths.

John inhaled when Rodney leaned close and his nostrils flared, drawing in Zoyan's perfume.

"No turning back now," Rodney murmured.

John caught his hands and laced their fingers together.

~*~

John ignored the way the librarians and scribes watched him as he padded through the labyrinthine stacks. He didn't have to ask his way, because he could feel it under his skin, the almost siren call of Ancient tech. It filled an emptiness in him he hadn't been aware of until then.

He recognized Piele from the slave barracks, when he'd slept among the other slaves, before he'd been moved in with Rodney.

Around the corner of a case holding scrolls sealed with red wax, he found Rodney perched on a three-legged stool, bent too close to a flickering screen. He was reading out the dimly illuminated text to Piele, who inked it onto parchment in something that had to be shorthand. No one could transcribe as fast as Rodney talked. The alcove with the wall that contained the database was screened and shadowy, probably to help Rodney read without the glare of reflected light. John felt a little spurt of sympathy for Piele, working in the dark.

Rodney flicked a glance at him. "Here, touch this," he said and placed John's hand on one of the activation pads. The screen flared brighter then reverted. "So it does work, there just isn't enough power."

"You're going to go blind." He kept his hand in Rodney's, turning it until they were palm to palm.

"No, but I am going to have a paralyzing headache and my spine is never going to be the same." Rodney pulled his hand loose and slipped his finger along a crystal face. The text on the screen obligingly scrolled down. Without looking away, he asked, "Why are you here?"

John settled down to the floor and leaned against Rodney's leg. "He went offworld this morning."

Rodney didn't ask who he meant.

He let his head rest against Rodney's thigh. Vaguely, he realized it was the same position he took with the Haralim. He closed his eyes, not caring.

"John?"

"He wouldn't let her go through the Ring," he answered, keeping his voice soft enough even Piele wouldn't hear. "Because of the heir."

"And what? She sent you to me…?"

"She was sick this morning, and then she started crying after he left, before throwing things."

Rodney began petting him. "Sounds like fun."
"There was glass all over the floor and Bint cut up her feet. She told us both to get out before we got blood all over everything."

The petting stopped and John pushed his head up into Rodney's hand. "Don't stop."

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." He opened his eyes and looked up into Rodney's worried gaze. "I'm fine."

Rodney studied him before accepting that. "So what does he go offworld for?"

John shrugged. "Trade, politics, buying slaves, buying this kind of thing." He gestured at the database that was all that survived of an Ancient outpost that had predated the fortress and the palace of Seven Walls, along with the Selketi nation-state, by millennia. There were other pieces of technology, most of it small and human portable, scattered on the shelves around them.

"Yes, yes, he collects," Rodney said. His mouth turned down. "Too bad he can't tell something working from a piece of dead junk."

John didn't care and closed his eyes again. He let himself relax and drift while Rodney dictated to Piele. He was content.
Falter

John fetched a pitcher of chilled juice and crystal glasses. Hours stretched behind and before him, caught in the thick and lingering heat of the afternoon. The Haralim's temper had snapped once, banishing the musicians, banishing most of the women as well, claiming their noise gave her a headache. A petulant frown still distorted her features. John tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. He'd taken off the ankle bells and wrapped chains around his ankles in their place after midday.

The Rale had returned from the trading mission ahead of schedule, which had pleased her for a few hours, but even he seemed cowed by her temper. Now he was spending his day in her rooms, going over expenses with Tulem Nabil. Morning had been spent consulting between the three of them, allocating taxes paid into the exchequer to maintenance on the fortress, funds for the guards and the army, and payments to Baratha for the battery packs that the stunners used. Zuleika had listened to the reports from those in charge of the palace's workings. Faces that were familiar now: Dullah, Tein, Idris, Tei'ayas, Ghelet of housekeeping, Fasan the senior gardener, Macha, Laska the city water engineer.

John's eyes had glazed somewhere between the need for forty barrels of soap for the palace laundry and Fasan's request for flowering plants from Hunet for the aviary. He'd only kept himself from yawning by converting Selketi small and long moons into Lantean time periods and then Earth weeks and months.

He knelt and offered the tray to Zuleika first. She gestured carelessly and Hara Besma poured for them both. John rose and took the tray to the Rale and Tulem, silently sinking down to the side of the table where they had papers spread. The Rale poured for himself and Tulem, then gestured John away. John went, vaguely disappointed that his presence hadn't been acknowledged. When he realized he was putting something extra into his walk, nausea had him tasting bile at the back of his throat. His fingers trembled, light flashing off the gold on his nails, as he set the tray down on a sideboard.

"John," she called.

He schooled his face into a smile and returned to her side. "Vai, hara," he murmured.

She leaned forward and caught one finger under his chin, tipping his face up. "Open," she commanded. Obediently, he parted his lips and accepted the candied fruit she proffered next. She watched him, a faint cruel twist to her lips, as he held it in his mouth the sour-acrid-sweet taste burning his tongue. Then she laughed. "Swallow it, John, and I won't make you eat anymore."

The Rale glanced up from his work. John made himself swallow, the fruit a hard knot in his throat that threatened to choke him. Besma made an odd noise, but Zuleika laughed again. "He hates these." She picked up another from the box open before her and ate it, white teeth slicing the piece in two, chewing and savoring each half, then licking the dusting of sugar off her fingers.

"Then stop wasting them on him," the Rale called with a small snort.

"I like watching him try to pretend."

"Barbarian," Besma observed, watching John with a curious expression.

Zuleika snapped her fingers. "Bint. Bint." She scooped a handful of the candies out and placed them
in Bint's hands. "She loves them."

Bint had already tucked one candy into her cheek and smiled. "Thank you, hara."

Zuleika smiled back and picked one more candy from the box, then shoved it toward Bint. "Take them all, little one. Too many disagree with me lately." She patted her rounded stomach with pleasure. The bad mood of the morning and last week had apparently dissolved. Relieved, John relaxed a little. Bint grinned and began gorging herself on the favored treat.

A sound of surprise and excitement slipped from Zuleika. John realized with a jolt of shock that she was feeling the baby move. Her hand twitched in reaction to a kick from inside.

John sat back a little, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Stupid, stupid, he thought. He hadn't let himself believe the child inside was real, until this moment, and the smile that softened Djemet Rale's features as he looked at Zuleika hurt him. Everything hurt. He could justify Zuleika's death: she'd bought them, kept them prisoner. But the baby inside her... It was Selketi law that would make any slave of Zuleika's the property of any child who survived her.

The nauseated feeling came back. He was swallowing it when Bint jerked forward, her arm sweeping the confection box to the floor. The crystal glasses tumbled to the floor as she fell across the low table. One shattered and the other tumbled and rolled. She heaved, blood-laced vomit spewing onto the lacquered surface, while her arms and legs twitched wildly.

Zuleika and Besma jerked back, alarm and disgust coloring their exclamations. Besma pulled up her skirts. Zuleika pushed herself back in her chair, lifting her feet. "Bint?" she exclaimed and then, "Idris, in here now!"

The table turned over with Bint half sprawled over it, hands and feet beating with bruising force against anything she could reach. Scarlet spilled between her lips. John pulled her off the table and onto her side. Gasping, drowning sounds escaped her as she convulsed. He'd thought she'd bitten her tongue at first but there was too much blood for that, blood everywhere. She was bleeding from her eyes and nose, the hot spatter soaking through his pants. He was trying to clear her airway when she stiffened and thrashed a final time. Life drained from still warm flesh under his hands; he could feel it slip away.

Helpless, he pulled the body up into his arms and curled over her, shaking from the shock of how fast it had been. Strands of her long, black hair caught in the manacles on his wrists.

John looked up despite himself at the sound of someone else retching. Zuleika had fallen from her chair, doubled over and crouched on the floor. He glimpsed Besma's face, the flicker of apprehension and triumph there and wondered how Keder had got to her. She'd poisoned the candied fruit — just like Tein-ve had poisoned the candies meant for Seif. It occurred to him that he'd eaten one too.

The Rale pushed Besma away and knelt beside Zuleika. His gaze took in everything: Besma, Tulem, John, Bint. The candies on the floor, the spilled pool of blood and vomit. "Zuleika?" he murmured.

Idris and five guards stepped cautiously into the hall. The Rale gestured. "Good, get in here."

"Djemet," Zuleika gasped.

"What—?" one of the younger guards blurted. Freka hushed him and took a place just behind Idris.
Zuleika levered herself up enough to glare at Besma. She spat and then hissed, "Traitor."

The Rale turned a narrowed-eyed look to Besma, who stumbled back. "No, no," she said. She faced Idris, plaintive and wild. Her lips quivered and she held out one hand toward the guard captain.


"Arrest her," the Rale commanded.

Besma glanced around wildly. "You're wrong. Hara, I wouldn't — " She backed another step away. The heel of her shoe clacked against tile.

"Liar!" Zuleika screamed.

Besma spun on her heel and bolted toward the doorway into the gardens. John wondered where she thought she could run. Unless she had help waiting, there was no escape from the city or the fortress surrounding it. The guards hesitated a breath, before Idris gestured to them to pursue her. Zuleika dropped her head and choked again. John lowered Bint's limp body to the floor. His stomach cramped. The sharp scent of vomit and blood made it worse.

The guards weren't moving fast enough for the Rale. He surged to his feet and crossed the room in swift strides to catch Besma's shoulder and swing her around. When she tried to break free, he backhanded her before shoving her into the arms of the guards.

The room settled into something close to silence.

Zuleika crouched on hands and knees, retching onto an exquisite rug, her back arched and taut. Long hair tangled and fell into the blood-tinged bile coming up.

Besma hung between two guards, dull-eyed, her lower lip swelling, blood dribbling down her chin. Djemet's rings, that he always took off to touch Zuleika and John, had split her lip open.

On the floor, the delicately carved box with the confections sat, broken and gaping, the rest of the candied fruit spilling onto the tiles. A piece sat just beyond Bint's still hand. John couldn't look away, couldn't clear her gagging cries from his mind, couldn't stop seeing her heels drum on the rug Zuleika was presently staining. A cloying, metallic taste filled his mouth and he had to bend over and spit convulsively.

Djemet stood before Besma. His face had set into an emotionless mask, but he fairly vibrated with rage.

"Idris," he snapped.

"Rae," the head of the guard replied. John's gaze flicked to his hands, which flexed on the hilt of a knife.

Zuleika gagged again and John snapped his head toward her. She was holding herself up with one hand now, while the other pressed against the swell of the child inside her. He moved, meaning to go to her, but Djemet's hand shot up. "Hold."

John stilled. Then he broke and said, "You have doctors. She needs help."
"Be silent," Idris snarled at him.

Djemet narrowed his eyes. His gaze focused on one of the guards crowded into the doorway. "You. Go. Return with the palace physician. Now!"

The guard turned and ran.

Zuleika gagged and moaned, then cried out, "Ancestors, Djemet…help me."

Djemet flinched and turned toward her for a moment, "Endure a moment more," he told her. His expression went harsh as he looked back at Besma. "You did not plan this by yourself. Who is part of this plot?"

"No one," Besma snapped. Her chin came up and glared at Zuleika. "You would destroy my clan and she would do nothing to stop you."

Djemet laughed without a hint of humor. "You haven't the will to do this on your own. Do not lie to me."

"You'll never know."

Djemet raised his hand and Besma spat at him. He hit her again, this time with intent and purpose, and only the guards kept Besma on her feet. "Was it my brother?" he demanded. "Tell me!"

John stared and swallowed. Besma wouldn't hold out long. She wasn't trained to withstand interrogation. If Djemet's arm grew tired, he could order the use of moa. That would break her. Maybe even the threat would. He still remembered the acid-fire purity of the agony the drug inflicted. It made him shudder. Moa would break anyone. When Besma's will gave away, she would give away everything.

Everyone.

Bint was dead.

Rodney would die.

He would too, in all probability, not that it mattered.

He turned his head and looked at Zuleika again. She might die yet. If she didn't, she might still miscarry the child.

Zuleika had slumped down and was curled on her side, panting. "Djemet," she whimpered.

Djemet spared her a glance, then looked at John. "Go to her."

John scrambled over to her immediately. He felt twitchy and uncoordinated, but he shifted Zuleika as gently as possible away from the mess, snagged a velvet-covered pillow from the low chaise where Besma had been seated, and tucked it under her cheek. His head spun when he got to his feet, but he ignored it and retrieved the pitcher of water and another glass. He snatched a silk shawl from the back of Zuleika's chair, wet a corner and used it to wipe her face before offering her a sip of water.
Concentrating on Zuleika was better than looking up or listening as the Rale questioned Besma. He could block out the sound of fists meeting flesh, but not the snap of bone and her scream.

Zuleika curled up and sobbed, whispering something that made John frown, not understanding. "Not again, not again, oh, please, Ancestors, don't take this one away from me." She pulled her legs up and whimpered and he got it. She thought she was miscarrying.

He didn't know. Maybe she was. The best he could do was steady her, stroke her shoulder, and wait for the physician. It seemed to take forever as the Rale methodically broke Besma with nothing more than his hands.

If the Haralim died, her slaves would be freed.

John didn't know what he wanted any longer. Not this, he thought, not this way.

"Keder! It was Keder!" Besma wailed. "You were supposed to still be away to Baratha!"

"Who provided the poison?"

John looked up despite himself, his hand stilling on Zuleika's hair where he had been stroking it. Djemet stood very still. The guards had let Besma fall down to her knees, but still held her arms raised up. Her head lolled.

This was it. This was the moment Besma would say his name. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited.

"Tei'ayas."

He snapped his eyes open in surprise. Why would she protect them at this point? Why—Tei'ayas was utterly loyal to the Haralim. It made no sense, unless Besma believed it. She must believe it, she wasn't clever or strong or loyal enough to be lying now. But it still made no sense to accuse Tei'ayas.

Djemet turned toward Idris. "Take her away and prepare to arrest my brother and the slave Tei'ayas. I will execute them all at dawn."

"Rae."

"They have attempted the murder of my Haralim and my child—my heir," Djemet said. "The punishment is death." He looked at Zuleika. "If she dies..." His voice hardened. "It will be death by moa."

"Take her away," he ordered again.

Idris pointed to two of the guards. "You and you. Freka, go with them."

Once they were gone, only Idris and two men at the doors remained, besides Djemet, John, Tulem and Zuleika. Djemet had his back to Idris, his attention on Zuleika again. "I will have the physician flayed, and that fool I sent for him, if they do not arrive soon," Djemet snarled. "Tulem, go, find out what takes so long."

Two long steps ahead of Idris, Djemet's focus had settled solely on Zuleika.
The Rale didn't hear Idris slide the ceremonial scimitar from the sheath at his back, nor Tulem's soft
gasp, as the curving blade began its descent. John would never know why he yelled a warning.
Maybe it was Stockholm syndrome or maybe it was just distaste for seeing a man stabbed in the
back. Possibly it was a swift calculation that Idris wouldn't leave anyone else in the room alive after
killing the Rale. He yelled, "Behind you!" though, as Idris brought the scimitar down in a movement
meant to cleave through the Rale's spine.

Djemet spun and ducked and would still have been impaled as Idris lunged forward, if Tulem hadn't
moved at the same moment, throwing himself between them. The scimitar sank deep into Tulem,
ripping open his abdomen as Idris jerked it free, making him scream.

"Kill her!" Idris shouted at the remaining guards standing at the door. "Kill both of them!"

Tulem crumpled to the floor, clutching at his stomach helplessly as his life blood flooded out, eyes
wide. His cries lost strength, but didn't stop, and the reek of bowel filled the room. Djemet used the
moment it took Idris to free his blade to draw out two long knives and parry the next slashing blow
with one, metal edges shrieking against each other.

John didn't pay anymore attention to that fight. The two guards were coming for Zuleika and himself.
He drew in a deep breath, the way he did when he began a kata, and rose to his feet. No weapons,
but he still had the wetted shawl in one hand. He whipped it forward as the first guard drew near,
tangling silk around the blade of the sword and startling him, so that he had a fraction of a second to
step within reach while the guard tried to free his sword.

A strike to the groin and then John spun away, grasping the guard's wrist and using his momentum to
pull him around, leading with the scimitar, using its weight along with his own and the off-balance
guard's, instead of trying to the wrest it away. They came around and the edge, though blunted by
the silk still caught on it, smashed into the second guard's ribs. The end of the blade sliced through
the silk and into flesh, making him cry out and stagger back.

John flowed in closer to the first guard, managed another strike, this time to the neck, weaker than he
should have been, wished for boots to stomp with, and snapped his fist into the man's face, before
ducking a return blow and tripping him. There was tremble in John's muscles that wasn't right,
slowing him down and distracting him. His movements stuttered and the breath of separation cost as
one of his opponents recovered enough to strike back. The shock of a bed slave knowing how to
fight and how to fight without weapons was wearing off, though it had slowed both guards and was
still confusing them. They were more used to using stunners than blades, as well; they didn't know
how to fight him, had expected him to hold still while they executed him. He could have run, but
Zuleika was still on the floor.

The guard he'd managed to use the scimitar on hadn't been disabled. John caught a glimpse of him as
he moved in closer to the first man. He'd lost the element of surprise and needed to finish this.

Teyla would have faulted his technique, but not his results. The last blow he used was one he'd
learned from Ronon, quick and dirty and meant to kill a more powerful physical opponent, like a
Wraith. He didn't think, just moved, and struck. The first guard went down. One down, one to go, he
thought.

"John!"

*Her* voice.
"Down!"

He flung himself to the floor in a controlled roll as a knife flipped through the air and buried itself in the back of the second guard, who was much closer than he'd realized. John scrambled to his feet as the man groped at his back, hand feeling futilely at the hilt of the knife buried there. John snatched up the sword of the man he'd killed and swung it, cleaving through the arm that tried to block the blow, hitting bone before the blade scraped free. The weight and momentum of the scimitar startled John, but he recovered control and hacked at his opponent again, this time slashing the edge across the man's throat.

Zuleika was on her knees, swaying, and he realized she had thrown the knife.

He stumbled back, realized that he'd killed both of them, and looked for another threat, for Idris.

Idris was on the floor, face down in a pool of his own blood. Djemet stood over him, a knife, wet and red, in each hand. Tulem still lay on the floor, dying slowing, crying. John blinked at him, glanced around for any other threats, then let the scimitar fall to the floor with a ringing clatter, before dropping to his knees and vomiting up a gush of blood.

~*~

John was still curling over, choking up more bile and blood, as Freka rushed in, dragging the physician by the arm, with Tei'ayas trotting behind them.

Djemet walked across the blood-splattered tiles to the wide-eyed physician, knives still in hand.

"Save them or die with them," he told the man, gestured Freka to stand aside, and whipped the edge of one blade across Tei'ayas' throat before anyone even guessed his intent.

John blinked, then doubled over again as the poison began its work once more. The physician was hurrying to Zuleika's side. He didn't register anything else, just shivered and concentrated on breathing, until Freka pulled him up and urged him to drink something. "Here. Malof says it is an antidote. You must drink."

He gulped the thick fluid down without protest, watching past Freka's shoulder as Malof spoke with Zuleika and touched her rounded belly. More guards poured into the room, some of them carrying a litter. Six men carried the Haralim out of the room, followed by Malof and a squad of hard-eyed guards carrying stunners.

Freka gripped John's shoulder.

"You did well," he said.

John swallowed hard, trying to keep the antidote dose down. Aside from the cramping nausea, he felt cold and his limbs ached. A raw cut on his arm, that he didn't remember getting, still bled sluggishly.

"Come on," Freka said. He pulled John to his feet. "Unless you want to wait for a litter."

John locked his knees.

"Just get me back to Rodney."
Either the antidote worked or he hadn't ingested enough to kill him, because he stopped vomiting after Freka left him in their rooms. He didn't realize Freka had left again until he came back with Rodney and Tein. Then Tein forced more of whatever foul stuff Malof had provided down him and Rodney cursed quietly while pulling him into a tub of hot water, holding onto him, both of them still dressed, until the ice in John's marrow melted away.

"Kemahet," Tein murmured.

"What?" Rodney demanded, jerking upright, sloshing water over the edge of the tub and then catching John back up against his chest when he started slide down into the water. "What happened?"

"The Hara Besma poisoned the Haralim," Freka said from the doorway. Shock marked his face and more than a few of the stains on his uniform were from John. "I'm to guard you tonight. The Rale's orders."

Rodney's arms tensed around him. "Oh." There were a wealth of reasons to guard them against an attempt, the one unspoken though was the possibility the Haralim would miscarry her child. They would need John until there was an heir.

"Bint's dead," John tried to say. It came out as a half-audible rasp, his throat seizing up, raw and burning, and left him gasping.

"Bint," Rodney repeated.

"Bint, Tulem, Idris, Gahan, Rafnan, Tei'ayas," Freka recited.

John tried to figure who Gahan and Rafnan were. Freka's expression went blank. He added, "The two guards you killed."

"You killed someone?" Rodney asked. Then he sighed. "No, don't answer me. Don't talk."

John nodded and leaned back against Rodney, the tight cramps in his muscles slowly loosening while Freka relayed what had happened.

"Enough," Tein said. "Time to get out of there."

He felt like his body had turned to water as Freka and Rodney levered him out of the tub, peeled him out of the wet pants and jewelry, then toweled him off, while Tein cleaned and bandaged his arm. He was asleep before they put him to bed.

Moonlight traced the wall when he woke with a jolt. Rodney's arm was heavy over his waist, one leg tangled between his, a soft snore stirring the hair at John's nape. His throat ached as he swallowed. He held still until he couldn't bear it any longer, watching the shadows slide across the walls, monotone dim. Rodney woke with a grunt when John shifted uncomfortably. The silence between them stretched until it frayed and came apart, the way John felt like he might come apart.

"I fucked it up," he whispered. He couldn't have said it to Rodney's face.

"Because you aren't the kind of guy who can stand by and watch a helpless, pregnant woman
hacked up?" Rodney said. "Yeah, that's fucking up."

"We'd be free."

"You'd be dead."

John didn't argue. The same thought had occurred to him at the time. Idris turning on the Rale had likely not been part of anyone's plan—or it was a deeper plot than John could fathom. No one could have predicted he'd fight two guards to save Zuleika. Whatever the plan had been, whoever had stood to gain, they hadn't anticipated what he'd done. He'd had no intention of doing it.

"Tulem stepped in front of Idris. He just did it," he said. "He had more guts than I ever thou—" He choked and began laughing hysterically.

"I don't want to know why that was funny, do I?" Rodney asked when John's laughter had tapered off.

"No, you really don't."

Rodney trailed his fingers over John's bandaged arm. "You think they'll question Keder before he's killed?"

"Probably. Maybe. The Rale didn't question Tei'ayas."

"Nothing we can do, is there?" Rodney sounded distant, philosophical.

"No."

"I shouldn't be glad they're alive."

John turned over and studied Rodney's face. "Are you?"

Rodney tipped his head, considering, then nodded. "I am."

"Why?"

A huffed out breath was his only answer. It was easier to rest his head against Rodney's shoulder and slide back into sleep than ask again, particularly when he was half afraid of any answer.
The Whip

Every world that has life has death. Every world that has death has carrion and carrion eaters. Selket had *hapek*. Dirty-white fliers that were more mammalian than avian, completely deaf but with a sense of smell that rivaled a bloodhound's and the keen eyesight of a raptor. Their two-meter membranous wings sweated a volatile liquid that made those wings into magnificent cooling vanes, letting the *hapek* brave the blazing heat of the midday desert.

Their shadows wheeled over the central plaza where four heads rotted on poles set at the corners of the ambo.

The back of Rodney's neck was burning, while sweat trickled everywhere under his blue-and-white finery. The stones under his bare feet were painfully hot. He curled his fingers into his palms and endured without shifting too much. The last thing he wanted was to draw any attention. He was lucky to be up on one of the platforms, tucked among the rest of the Haralim's household, there to watch and be seen and not in chains waiting for his execution.

Selketi filled the plaza. All of them watching the two prisoners displayed on the ambo. They murmured and moved restlessly, shoulder to shoulder, waiting.

Besma and Keder were broken figures, chained in place, still in the tatters of what they'd worn when arrested. Keder twitched and mewled, probably in too much pain from a dose of *moa* to even know where he was.

The Haralim had been carried to the plaza in a palanquin, green-tasseled and gilded, piled with silk-covered cushions. She remained reclining beneath its shade, swathed in cloth-of-gold. The Rale had walked before it, green robes flowing, face fierce, his head uncovered to the sun. John had walked behind the palanquin and then knelt beside it, hidden beneath veil upon veil of half-translucent, red moire silk and ropes of seed pearls, even his gold-painted face hidden beneath one swathe of fabric. Behind, a second palanquin carried Hara Zoyan, in silver and satin and polished platinum, her features an expressionless mask, her back ruthlessly straight.

Half the nobles of Selketi, *haras* and *raes*, clad in their own glittering wealth, their palms painted the blue of honor and loyalty, walked in lines behind and took their places below the level where the Haralim and the Rale came to a stop. Guards armed and armored, carrying hand stunners and pulse rifles of the same design found throughout Pegasus, flanked them. More were stationed at all the plaza's entrances.

At the far end of the plaza from the ambo where Keder and Besma were displayed, two square towers of rose-red stone flanked the silvery curve of the stargate. Soldiers watched from the towers, from fortifications just beyond the energy back-splash zone, and at the DHD. The armor on their shoulders and arms, the spikes at the tops of their rounded helmets, all glittered in the glaring sunlight, while the pennants and flags of green and blue hung limp in the breathless air.

Rodney squinted against the glare and watched the pale crescent of Ildiza, the small moon, that waxed and waned from full to dark every five days, seem to balance upon one of the red fortress's crenelated towers. Lower on the horizon, Tahmur, the great moon, sulked, half hidden by the Lalo Mountains. Perspiration trickled down Rodney's temple. The Rale's voice was a liquid ripple of sound that he did not let himself understand, each pause greeted with an heated roar from the gathered Selketi.
Drummers began a funerary beat and the crowd quieted. Rodney looked despite himself.

The Rale unsheathed a jewel-encrusted scimitar, water-marked steel gleaming mirror-sharp, a spike of painful light that was quenched as a hapek soared over the ambo.

The scimitar descended.

The blow severed Keder Rale's neck half way through, blood spattering in a crimson arc to splash over the Haralim's slippered feet. The fountain of blood swiftly subsided as Keder's heart stuttered and failed. The crowd howled as the Rale levered his blade loose and struck a second time, successfully severing his brother's head from the body.

Rodney could smell the hot scent of it on the air.

The Rale flicked the scimitar in a sharp move meant to throw the blood from the blade. Because he was watching, Rodney saw John's minute flinch as a spatter of it hit the veil over his face. Hara Zoyan appeared unmoved as droplets of it settled on her pale robes.

The crowd quieted again as the Rale stepped past Keder's body and stopped before Besma. Besma had been kneeling with her back bent, her head bowed. Her hands were manacled before her in functional black iron attached to heavy chains. She straightened though as the Rale's shadow fell over her, first her back, then her neck, looking up proudly, tangled black hair fallen over her shoulders and sticking to her cheeks. The damage to her face was ugly, uglier than anyone anticipated, swelling and bruises overlaid with raw cuts. Only one eye opened enough to see out of but she stared up at the Rale without flinching.

She did not beg for her life or mercy.

No one offered either.

It took three blows to behead her, striking from the side, and Rodney closed his eyes before the end.

High in the towers of the fortress, a bell tolled to the same rhythm as the drums. It would ring through the day and into dusk, until the last trace of the sun had extinguished itself below the mountains and the harmonics shivered through bone and stone, resounded in memory ever after.

~*~

The purple sheets were smooth under his cheek. He still had a fold clenched between his fingers and slowly released his grip. Djemet was draped over him, sweating chest glued against John's back. He resisted the urge to try shrugging him off and concentrated on the small things: the fine weave of the cloth that wasn't silk but a little like a polished cotton, the bed hangings that were tied back with black braided cords, the faint brush of cooler air over his sweating skin. Light from the lamps, glass shades tinted like jewels, that hung from the ceiling on chains colored the room, haloed through the canopy over the bed. Every night the bedchamber was different, the room changed to the Haralim's whim; tonight it was all silver-threaded violet and indigo.

She hadn't joined them in the bed this time, but watched from a chaise piled with pillows, looking weary. She was due in less than a great moon and uncomfortable all the time. Malof the physician had decreed she rest in bed through the rest of the pregnancy after the poisoning. She'd ignored that to attend the execution of Keder and Besma, but otherwise obeyed. She asked no more of John than foot and back rubs, fetching and carrying, company when she would send all others out of her rooms. Djemet was the one who used him each night now; Djemet hadn't touched Zuleika since the
attempted assassinations.

Her eyes were half-closed, the lids painted with shadows that no palace physician could erase. She watched them together, by turns amused and resentful. But John never forgot she was there. Tonight, she seemed entertained, even indulgent.

Djemet rolled off him and John let out a breath of relief, despite the instant of discomfort that accompanied their bodies disengaging. One hand came to rest on the small of his back and stayed there. It felt almost affectionate, something he didn't let himself think about. He wanted to ask, but couldn't, why Djemet persisted in using him rather than Hara Zoyan, if he wanted sex so much and Zuleika couldn't provide it. He'd thought that Djemet fucked him to take back whatever he lost when Zuleika used John and now it seemed different. But questions weren't his purview.

A bell tolled the hour much later, when breath came evenly once more and sleep had come and gone. A shift from the other body in the bed woke John.

"What does this say?" Djemet wondered. His hand trailed up John's back, tracing the designs Rodney had painted there, curving and curling over the patterns, until John shivered. "This is the writing of the Ancestors." His palm cupped John's shoulder.

"I've never asked," he said, distracted by Djemet's hand. God, warm and calloused and so utterly sure, that touch; there was something magnetic about the absolute confidence that Djemet radiated.

"Ro'ney is a very interesting man."

That jolted him out of the warm haze of just lying there. John rolled over, hiding how much even hearing Rodney's name from the Rale alarmed him. The Rale, not Djemet. He had to remember who they were to him and not succumb to the false sense of intimacy the bedchamber fostered. He was here to keep Rodney safe. Rodney was safest if the Rale and the Haralim forgot he even existed and left him doing translations in the library.

"Ro'ney is also mine," Zuleika snapped. She shifted uncomfortably, pushing herself up against the pillows with a small huff.

Djemet leaned over and straddled John, chest against his chest, and he had to feel the half-panicked race of John's heart. Eyes on Zuleika, he kissed John, who cooperated; he even looped his arm around the back of Djemet's neck and sighed into his mouth, wanting to distract him from thoughts about Rodney. Djemet was still gazing at Zuleika through his eyelashes. John didn't know what to think. Djemet had never kissed him before. But the proper response had been drilled into him and he touched his lips to the corner of Djemet's mouth softly, alert to every nuance of his reaction.

That reaction was another kiss, surprisingly gentle and languid, before Djemet pulled away and sat up. "You let me have John, when it pleases me," he said. "Why not Ro'ney?"

His palm rested flat against John's chest. John blinked up at the bed canopy, at the twisting patterns of silver thread running through twilight-colored silk, the way it moved slowly, in the barely stirring air, like the flank of some sleeping animal. He couldn't protest. He couldn't cry out and say no. There was nothing he could do. He tried to remember where he'd seen that shade of purple before but couldn't wrest his thoughts out of the room. Instead, he concentrated on breathing in and out and on stroking his fingers along Djemet's arm.

"You want him?" Zuleika asked in disbelief.
Djemet laughed, low and amused. "I want to take him offworld with me. He reads and speaks the Ancestors' words. He has a touch with their works. Such skills are too rare to waste merely in my library."

John's fingers stilled on Djemet's forearm. Then he ran them down the inside to his wrist, tracing the pattern called Three Silver Leaves over the pulse point. Offworld. If Rodney went offworld, he would have a chance at escape.

And John would be alone.

Desperately, he twisted on the bed and began touching Djemet with every practiced skill he had to call on, beginning with the fifty-third submission, Petals Falling, and unfolding into the Seventh Note and the Second Song of Hands, before calculation gave away to instinct. He set his palms against Djemet's thighs, aware of hard muscle and rough hair distantly, clutching in the way that always pleased, as though he would push the other man away, but couldn't. Catering to Djemet's desires always held that element of uncertainty. Resistance excited him, but too much made him brutal. John didn't enjoy the bruising and aches that lasted for days afterward on those occasions, and even less the guilt and pity he'd see in Rodney's eyes, so he worked at being exactly what Djemet wanted — even when Djemet didn't know what that was — taking him deep immediately.

Survival, he told himself, even as he licked a line up the underside of Djemet's cock and a harsh groan made him harden too. The thrill of pleasure he took from wringing that sound from the other man, though, from making him want until he was mindless with it, couldn't be dismissed as just survival if he was honest. He didn't want to think anymore or feel the fear and denial and wild hope tangling within him and sex was the best escape. Training and practice let him slide away into his mind, into no mind, and just let his body take over.

When he'd finished, he rested his face against Djemet's thigh with his eyes closed. The purple sheets were stained where he'd rubbed himself against them shamelessly, coming while he swallowed everything like he could never get enough.

Breathless and slightly hoarse, Djemet patted John's head and asked, "What would please you?" Offering a pet a treat and as poisonous for John to speak and accept such without caution as it had been for Bint.

"To please you," John replied dutifully. "To please you both." He closed his eyes, relishing the absent caresses.

He'd disliked being touched once. He could remember that, but he craved it now. And this was good, no matter how much he denied it and hated himself for enjoying it. He couldn't say no, but he was afraid that if he could, he wouldn't.

"You aren't that empty-headed, John," Zuleika said, jolting him out of a new round of self-loathing.

He turned his head to where she was. "Hara? I have failed some—" That thought made him feel sick again. Pleasing Zuleika was his life now: it kept him with Rodney and Rodney safe. He was never taking another chance like the one with Keder. He'd felt the blood soak hot through the veil over his face and sworn it would never be Rodney on the ambo. If the Rale took Rodney offworld, though, that would be different. If Rodney was gone... He didn't know what he would do then. Something reckless and suicidal, a voice very like Rodney's said in his mind, but maybe...nothing.
He rolled away from Djemet's hand and off the bed, down onto his knees, prostrating himself before the Haralim.

"Enough," Zuleika said, impatience bleeding into irritation.

"You please us," Djemet murmured, drawing John's attention back to him. "Who were you before? Where did you and Ro'ney come from?"

John didn't move or speak.

Breathe in and out, in to the center and then pull everything from fingers and toes and exhale it, and stay calm. He no longer remembered whether Teyla taught him that or Dullah. He waited for whatever punishment not answering would bring.

"Enough, Djemet," Zuleika said. "John, go."

He rose and found his clothes, taking them with him into the anteroom to dress. Her voice carried beyond the doorway.

"I will consider lending you Ro'ney, but you will not take him anywhere until this child is born."

~*~

"Hold still, damn it," Rodney snapped. If John didn't stop fidgeting, he was going to smudge a line. Then they'd have to remove the entire design, start over, and he'd either miss mid-meal or be late getting back to the library. At least this was a touch up job and not decorating him from scratch. That took far more time and meant John didn't get to visit the Blue Garden to practice his katas.

"I'm just trying to see what you're writing," John said. He stopped moving.

"You've never cared before." He finished one hand and John obligingly extended his other. "Thank you. Now stop distracting me. I want to finish this and get something to eat. If you didn't insist on dancing around every day, ending up sweating like a race horse at the end of the Kentucky Derby, we could go back to doing this in the mornings."

"You don't have to do it," John said. "I can go to the flower house and one of the handlers will do it."

"Like I'd let you do that." Rodney rolled his eyes.

"So what is that? What does it say?"

Rodney looked up and saw that John was actually looking at the delicate, stylized characters Rodney was spiraling up his arm from his palm. Amber flecks in his eyes seemed to hold the light and warm it. He looked interested, engaged, instead of distant. That was different. He'd come back from the Haralim's rooms in strange mood the night before, too.

"I—"

"Rodney?"

A gold-nailed hand closed around his, steadying the fine-bristled brush. He knew John was unaware of the sensuous way his thumb rubbed over the back of his hand. John hadn't touched before, but he
did now, as naturally as he breathed.

He caught his breath. "Oh, well, it's, uhm, poetry."

"Poetry." John's smile made up for any embarrassment. "Okay." The teasing note in his voice was so long missing Rodney tried to memorize it. "Is it yours?"

"Yes," he said, feeling the hot burn of a blush color his face.

"Wow," John murmured and brushed his lips against Rodney's cheek, soft and so light as to be almost, ridiculously, shy. The smile that followed seemed equally amused and delighted, if Rodney ignored the sadness that always lurked behind John's expressions. Bright enough to make anyone stop and stare. Something else to memorize. The seasons had changed and the late morning light filled the room heavy as honey, heated on bare skin. He told himself the warm feeling in his chest came from the day's rising temperature and not John's unexpected demonstration of affection.

"Don't flatter yourself," Rodney told him, pretending the flutter in his chest wasn't there, that he wouldn't write poetry just to describe the way John looked, the line of his arm extended to be painted, the subtle curve of muscle and bone, or just to tell him and make him smile like that again.

John cocked his head and grinned. "Oh, I wouldn't."

"There's a long history of coding mathematical formulas in poetry. I'm doing the same with zero point energy theory. It's a memorization device, one none of these idiots will ever decipher, I'll wager." He dabbed his brush into the pot then finished the line devoted to John's neck, adding bitterly, "Genius being wasted here. No one appreciates any of the discoveries I've made in the last two months and no one ever will. Not here."

"Maybe not," John said.

He looked up. "What?"

"Not here, but they would somewhere else, right?" John didn't say Atlantis. Neither of them ever said that name. As long as they never mentioned it, no one would ever try to question them about it. Silence on where they came from was a lesson they'd learned before their capture. Both of them were frightened of what might happen if the Selketi were ever to learn they were Lantean and not just learned in the Ancestor's letters. Much of the danger had passed, by now everything in Atlantis must have been changed, but, at first, between them they had known a dangerous amount about the city and its security. Between them, they'd had everything needed to take Atlantis down, even the destruct codes and the genetics.

"Hmn, but that's just a pipe dream, right?" He set the brush aside and stroked his palm over John's cheek, checking for the rasp of beard that would mean it was time to use the hair-killing paste again. "Why did you ask about the designs?"

"Because they're words this time and before they were Selketi glyphs," John replied. He held his head still while Rodney blurred bronze-dusted shadow over his eyelids. "The Rale asked what they meant."

"Ah." Rodney wiped his fingers on a piece of cloth. "I'll provide a translation for you."

"He wants you to translate for him offworld."
His hands stopped moving, the cotton cloth still between his fingers. Fingers that closed tightly on it. Tight as the breath in his chest, until he remembered to breathe again.

"Offworld."

"He asked the Haralim to 'lend' you to him," John said. His face was blank when Rodney looked up, everything hidden beneath the painted mask, expressionless as his words had been.

"Me?" The squeak of his own voice startled him.

"Vai."

"Oh, that's good. There's a good chance we could—"

"You could," John interrupted. "Not me."

"What?" Rodney stared at him. "No. Oh, no."

"The Haralim would never let me go, too."

"Well, I'm not going without you."

A spark of anger heated John's voice. "Yes. You'll go with him. She'll tell him yes, for one thing, and you won't have a choice."

Rodney didn't care. He wasn't going without John beside him.

"Not without you," he insisted.

"Yes, without me," John snapped at him. "Fuck, just go, Rodney, and the first chance you have, you run for the stargate and dial the Alpha Site. Dial Belkan or M7G-677 or even Menara. There's a half dozen worlds where you're known and they won't let the Selketi grab you back."

Rodney folded his arms over his chest and looked stubborn.

"Don't be an idiot!"

"Me? Me be an idiot? You're the idiot, you're the one she'll punish—maybe you don't remember the moa—" Rodney stopped. "You remember," he said flatly.

John picked up one of the little pots, the jade green one, and turned it in his fingers, but Rodney caught the shudder that ran through him at the reminder.

"It's the best chance either of us will have. You can come back after me with back-up." He set the pot back down carefully.

"I don't care," Rodney stated as flatly and definitively as was possible. He wasn't leaving John behind. Period. Pegasus had scared him and scarred him and hammered him into a different shape, a different man, than the one who stepped through the stargate the first time. He understood, in his blood and bones, that you don't leave anyone behind. He couldn't, not and live with himself. He could lie, he could keep silent, he could give up the brilliant beauty of science and prostrate himself
before the Haralim, but he couldn't leave John alone. He wasn't going to argue about it.

"Rodney…"

He turned his face away and picked up the last pot, taking off the lid.

"This discussion is over."

~*~

It began with the bells. They rang from the towers of the palace first, echoed off red stone walls, then from the greater heights of the fortress and its surrounding city, hour after hour, a clamor and clang that didn't stop for five days after the birth of Dalal Rale. Banners of blue and green were unfolded from the fortress' battlements, horns and drums sounded through the streets, and every tavern and noble house celebrated.

The Selketi didn't seem to care much that Dalal wasn't a son.

Rodney was unbearably relieved. A daughter bought them time.

John didn't feel the same, it became clear. To him, Dalal wasn't just a key closing the lock on their prison, she was that lock being melted shut forever. His misery and guilt were quiet, never articulated beyond a distance he maintained between himself and Rodney. Nothing Rodney did could keep him from silently punishing himself, and without realizing it, Rodney.

If it had been possible, Rodney suspected John would have moved himself back to the slave barracks. But, though John denied himself touching Rodney, he wasn't able to detach himself that much, probably because he still felt responsible for Rodney's safety.

They didn't discuss the possibility of Rodney going offworld with the Rale again, though it was part of the problem.

It came to a head the day before the ceremony formally acknowledging Dalal as a Rale. They'd barely spoken in weeks, though Rodney still prepared John each day. But he didn't see him in the library any longer, didn't lead him through back corridors to the kitchens to eat with the cooks and laugh, didn't touch him in the night and could not make John meet his eyes. Three weeks passed before he even learned John was training a small contingent of guards in unarmed combat. Guards meant to serve Dalal Rale the rest of either their or her life: if they failed to keep the baby alive, they could not look forward to surviving the wrath of the Haralim and the Rale. Otherwise they could expect to die in harness or protecting her.

Doing something besides entertaining their owner should have made John happier, but it didn't, any more than the discoveries Rodney made in the partial database did him.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Rodney's focus shifted from his reflection in the mirror to John, posed still and apparently shocked, in the doorway. If he hadn't been concentrating the flash of red over his shoulder would have alerted him to John's presence sooner. But he'd been intent, carefully outlining a new pattern over his own features after applying the kohl and rouge to eyes and lips. Stylized numbers wept from the corners of his eyes, down his cheekbones and up his temples. It was an interesting effect, but not successful. Not good enough to use on John.
"What do you think?" he snapped. He slapped the brush he'd been using down, picked up a pot of cleanser and slathered the green-smelling goop over his face. Of course it irritated his skin. He was going to be pink and raw feeling for days. That was better than sporting a bad design, however.

"Playing some fucking game," John said, cold and angry. He turned and stalked back into the main room, feet slapping against the tiles.

Bastard, Rodney mouthed to the mirror.

"That's right!" he shouted, abruptly furious too. "That's exactly it! You've found me out!"

No answer and he began to wonder if John had simply walked out entirely. He didn't actually care if John had left, but he wasn't going to waste his voice yelling if he had, so he peered into the next room. John was pulling clothes from the wardrobe. Not the simple cotton pants and shirt he'd worn to train with the new guards. Silks and gauze, glittering and fine, tossed and tangled on the quilted bed coverlet.

"You'll need a bath before you put any of that on," he said.

John gave him a filthy look. "That's what I was going to get when I walked in and found you—" He gestured at Rodney's face.

"You really are a complete moron, aren't you?" Rodney told him. He went back into the wash room and snatched up a cotton cloth, swiping it over the glistening goop on his face carelessly. "You think —Do you really think I was doing this for fun?"

John had followed him back as far as the doorway. A frown creased his features, the unhappiness they lived with every day out in the open, mixed with perplexity now.

Rodney finished wiping his face, then splashed water on it and carefully washed the last traces of the cleanser away.

"Obviously, everything I've done in my life was meant to let me become the pawn of alien slavers just so I could paint my face like an Egyptian drag queen," he sneered. "I get off on it."

"Rodney…" John sounded tightly reined in and tired. Rodney didn't care.

"Fuck you, John. Painting you with a new design every week means coming up with something and I'm not an artist, it isn't easy. This is the only face I have to practice on, because you sure as hell aren't going to sit still for it." He slung the fouled towel into the hamper. "Now clean up so I can make you pretty for our owner."

John stared at him, blank-faced, then stripped and headed for the tub. "Better come up with something better than you had going," he said as he sank down into the hot water that always filled it. It sloshed over the lip of the tub and onto the floor. Rodney glared and threw another towel down, imagining one of them slipping on the wet tile and breaking his neck. "Tomorrow's the Ceremony of Acknowledgment."

"Is that what's making you such an extra special idiot?"

John sank under the water and didn't answer, even after he resurfaced, hair soaked to his head, eyelashes matted into little spikes.
"John."

"She made me hold it—the baby today," John said, looking away, while water ran from his hair down his face.

Rodney had begun reordering the paints and brushes, getting them in the order he would use them on John in preparation. He stared down at his hands, fingers still on the shafts of the fine brushes. Pale, sturdy hands, gone softer since coming here. The hairs on his wrists and arms looked darker in contrast. The gardens were the only access to the sun he had and he didn't get out in them often, working his days in the dim library. The bristles on the brushes were still darker than his hair though, almost sable—not that there were sable on Selket—fine and pliable. He fantasized about using them on John sometimes. Or John, using them on him, the delicate, almost tickling touch a pleasurable torture. But it was only a fantasy.

The baby, unfortunately, was not fantasy, was very real, and not something either of them wanted to think or talk about.

Dalal.

"Why?" Rodney demanded. Was the Haralim trying to torture John? He imagined the scene, though, despite himself. John liked holding babies, he'd seen it on more than one world, seen him smile goofily down at squinched up red faces, completely oblivious to the way he was winning over whichever pre-industrial natives they were treating with that time. It was difficult to imagine John with kids of his own, though, difficult enough that Rodney frowned, wondering if John even wanted children.

Dalal would never be John's child. Not his to raise or call his own. She might never know who sired her, or care if she did, and would call the Rale her father. Not John, and that was another pain that was never going to go away.

"Showing her to the guards," John answered quietly. "They start tomorrow." He tipped his head back against the edge of the tub, eyes closed, and went on, voice flat, "No more training them after today. It's back to the way it was. Before."

Back to stud duty, Rodney translated. No wonder John's temper was raw.

Still with his eyes closed, John added, "After the Ceremony of Acknowledgment, the Rale is going offworld. Trade mission. He's going to ask her to let him take you along."

"Tell her to say no," he said.

"Like she listens to me?" John murmured.

"Well, she ought to," Rodney blurted out. "You did save her life. That should count for something, especially considering the circumstances."

"Yeah. Funny."

"Hilarious," Rodney agreed. He glanced at John again and wondered if he hadn't been trying to pick a fight, push Rodney into wanting to get away from him, so he'd take the chance to go offworld with the Rale. The chance to escape. It made his mouth go dry. "Come on, get out of there before you
turn into a prune."

He took a chance and set his hand on John's arm as he came out of the tub. Water slick skin and muscle that tightened under his touch briefly, before John relaxed and leaned into the touch almost hungrily, though he didn't look at Rodney.

~*~
"No," Rodney said again. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, knowing he looked mulish.

The Rale frowned at him. From where he knelt beside the Haralim's chair, John glared with silent fury.

"I go where John goes and John goes where I go and I'm not going anywhere or doing anything without him there too," he stated. He heard the creak and rustle of the guards at the doors shifting, restless and ready to move if his intransigence went beyond words. Despite his determination, Rodney's heart was beating too fast and sweat ran down his back. Slaves didn't say no. No one told the Rale no on Selket. He didn't know why he thought he would get away with this, but he couldn't go along. He couldn't bow his head one more time, walk through the stargate, not facing the options of escaping without John or coming back. He didn't think he could make himself come back through the stargate to Selket if he ever got off.

He'd rather die.

"I'd forgotten this one came with your Chosen," the Rale said to the Haralim. He rose from his seat and paced around Rodney, predatory and patient. He stopped behind Rodney.

Rodney kept his eyes on the tapestries hanging behind the thrones. A lion-like animal with zigzag gold stripes standing over a fallen antelope, scarlet pooling beneath its kill. Tahmur and Ildiza full and silver in an indigo sky behind it, the towered silhouette of the city itself forming the black background, and the iridescent blue of the Great Veil shading half the sky behind that, obscuring the the night sky's stars. Tiny seed pearls had been sewn into the tapestry to form the heraldic beast's fangs. The colors were brilliant, rich as jewels, finer than anything Rodney had seen, even on Earth.

"Has he been so intractable?" The Rale's voice is silky, almost amused, and Rodney imagined he could feel the heat of his breath on the back of his neck. Like that lion-thing, ready to snap his neck. "Always?"

In the periphery of his vision, he saw the Haralim's hand stroke over John's head, fingers tangling through his dark hair, golden nails sharpened like razors promising pain if he even twitched. It occurred to him with silent horror that John may have had another reason to want Rodney to obey. She knew exactly how to make John obey, after all: just a threat to Rodney. How likely was it that she knew to reverse that threat to compel his own obedience? He'd do anything to forestall seeing John dosed with moa again.

Go through the stargate…and come back. He'd rather die, but not if it cost John that torture again.

"Yes," the Haralim. "At first. They killed two guards trying to escape after I purchased them."

John's face was completely empty. Rodney concentrated on breathing evenly.

"I hadn't realized it was these two," the Rale said. He clamped a hand onto Rodney's shoulder. "You shouldn't have kept them if they were dangerous."
The Haralim smiled at Rodney. "They aren't dangerous to me, Djemet." He hated the cold curve of her lips, the knowing arrogance in her dark eyes that said she knew them and controlled them. Effortlessly. "Ro'ney is stubborn. I believe Dullah has had him flogged once or twice. Nothing else was necessary."

"Perhaps he has forgotten the lesson," the Rale said. He dug his fingers into Rodney's shoulder. Hard. "He is a slave. Disobedience is punishable by death."

"Perhaps." She cocked her head, still smiling, still toying with John's hair. "Or there is the moa."

John sucked in a harsh breath, loud in the otherwise quiet room. One of the guards coughed. Rodney bit back a whimper, wishing he'd just listened to John and gone along with it, or that he'd found some lethal little Ancient toy among the detritus of ages that the Rale had collected, something he could turn on and use to kill him. He figured he'd finally opened his mouth once to often. God, he wasn't going to be killed by a piece of malfunctioning equipment or a lemon or a Wraith. This sonovabitch with the same eyes as John was going to cut his throat and when he did, John was going to lose it.

He hated himself as much as he hated the Rale right then.

"Death," the Rale insisted.

"No," the Haralim snapped, leaning forward. Her hand was clenched in John's hair, holding his head back, but that wouldn't stop him. "They are mine, Djemet. I decide."

The hand on his shoulder lifted and a soft chuckle sounded in his ear. "You said you would share."

She looked at him narrow-eyed, then laughed. "You enjoy this." She let go of John and gestured to the guards. "Take him," she said, pointing at Rodney. Then she addressed him. "You have presumed above your station, Ro'ney. I take into account that you are not Selketi. I am merciful."

The dark, liquid sound of her voice didn't reassure Rodney, but he didn't move as two guards stationed themselves beside him, their hands locking on his arms. He had gone soft, softer than he'd been before Atlantis, over the last year, and forgotten everything Teyla and John had shown him about fighting. He didn't have a chance of fighting them.

Merciful. Sure.

"Ro'ney," she said. "The whip or the moa?"

He knew how bad a whipping would be, yet he'd endured it twice before. His mouth was dry, but he bowed his head and answered:

"The whip."

~*~

Heat on the back of his neck and a prickling that ran down the backs of his arms made John swallow hard. The punishment of a slave didn't merit performance on the ambo in the central plaza of the city. They were in a courtyard of the palace. Yet the sun felt as merciless as it had at the execution. The heat shimmered off the red stone walls that stretched toward the square of blue sky above them. There was no shade for anyone.
Rodney was stripped to the waist. Each of his wrists was tied to a wide, shoulder-height horizontal cross-piece of a T-shaped rack. The leather strips that had been doused with water and left to dry brutally tight. Trickles of blood meandered along the underside of his arms while the pale skin of his back was rapidly reddening.

On the stones before the rack, exactly where Rodney could see, the whip lay coiled. It had been there when the guards brought him to the rack and secured him in place.

They'd brought in Dullah to whip him. There would be no mercy from the slave master, but Dullah knew his work. He wouldn't do any inadvertent damage. Just the deliberate lashes.

John slitted his eyes against the glare. He saw Dullah, squat, scar-faced Dullah, give him a measuring glance where he stood beside the Haralim.

The Rale lounged next to her. He was bareheaded. Dullah bowed to him, then the Haralim. He frowned a little at John, disapproving of his posture, since he was standing less than step to the side and behind the Haralim. Insufficient. John didn't care. He watched Rodney, who had his head bowed.

Other slaves and members of the Haralim's household watched from shadowed doorways and the deep-set windows that looked inward on this courtyard. But the courtyard itself was virtually empty, only two guards at each doorway, Rodney at the center, Dullah, the Rale, the Haralim and John in the open.

John shifted deliberately, breaking the silent stillness with a chime of ankle bells. He wanted Rodney to know he was there.

Dullah stripped his outer shirt off, folded it and set it neatly on a plain bench sitting next to the doorway he'd entered from. Next, he smoothed his iron-gray hair back over his skull with both hands then knotted the tail in a neat, quick movement that kept it off his face. Finally, he walked to the center of the courtyard, stopping in front of the rack. He bent and picked up the whip by the handle, leaving it to uncoil as he straightened, the end still lying innocuous as a snake on the stone.

He said nothing as he circled Rodney and paced to the required distance. John thought the stone there was worn smoother than the others.

"For pride, one lash," Dullah intoned. He drew the whip back and snapped the length through the air with a crack.

Zuleika's hand closed and tightened around John's wrist as the lash hit Rodney's back. The whip snap made him jolt, but it was the sound of it hitting flesh, of Rodney's choked cry that broke his control. He was moving without being aware of it, and only her hold stopped him from doing something that would result in both of them dying.

"For defiance, one lash."

Crack.

John flinched.

The muscles in Rodney's back tightened and rippled and he jerked against the ties holding him in
place. Blood dripped from his wrists to the ground. The harsh sound of his breath filled the courtyard along with the slither of braided leather over stone, as Dullah drew the length of the whip back again. Two welts ran diagonally over Rodney's back in a perfect X.

"For disobedience."

Crack.

Rodney let out a high, breathless sob and John pressed his eyes closed. He was shaking, fighting every instinct that told him to rush across the sun-steeped space and put himself between Rodney and the punishment. Zuleika's fingers locked around his wrist, anchoring him, reminding him, holding him in place, because it could be worse. He could make it worse.

Eight lashes total. Zuleika had bargained Djemet down. She'd touched John's cheek once, before giving him over to anything Djemet wanted for the night, while Rodney was held somewhere, waiting. "Eight lashes," Zuleika said in the morning, her sharp nails at Djemet's throat. "He is mine and I do not want a crippled slave. I will go to Baratha and I will take my slaves with me."

Djemet had held still, only his throat working as he swallowed. "Vai," he had said at last.

John had pretended to still be asleep.

Eight lashes.

He knew Rodney had suffered more than that sometime while he was in the training barracks. But he hadn't seen it. He hadn't known about it until he was smoothing his hands over Rodney's broad back and felt the phantom scars, the invisible lines of thickened tissue just under his skin. He'd counted them in the dark, by touch: fifteen stripes for disobedience.

He hated.

Crack.

Rodney screamed.

John prayed Tein-ve would be waiting when it was over, with eiff and the rest of her magic drugs. He prayed for it to be over.

The whip came down and down and down and down.
John held his breath until the Rale left, then held still until Dullah walked out of the courtyard. Zuleika finally released his wrist. He still didn't move, just watched Rodney, watched blood run from the eight raw stripes across his back and down his arms. Rodney was sobbing with pain.

"Go," Zuleika said.

He bolted into the courtyard.

"Rodney," he said as he reached him. Rodney's face was screwed up, flushed red and wet with tears, his eyes shut against the pain. "Here, this will help," he added and fumbled out a lavender glass bottle Jehmen had slipped to him at breakfast. 'Eiff,' Jehmen whispered, 'Tein sent it.' He twisted the top off and held it to Rodney's lips. "Just drink this. It'll help."

Rodney choked and a dribble of the syrup ran down his chin, but swallowed most of it. John tucked the bottle into the small pocket on the inside of the decorative vest he wore and began trying to work the leather bindings on Rodney's wrist off. It was swollen so tight the circulation to Rodney's hands had been partially cut off and his fingers were swollen like sausages.

John cursed under his breath, wishing for his combat knife, lost almost two years before when they were taken captive, or any of Ronon's hidden blades. Anything sharp enough to sever the leather his fingers couldn't dig under. He didn't have anything and he was ready to chew the damned things off. Rodney kept making these breathless, gurgling sobs that ripped John apart just to hear. One of his fingernails rip as he dug at the leather desperately, leaving a shred of gold caught against the blood soaked binding.

A hand closed on his shoulder and pulled him away. John protested, without thinking, ready to fight. "Hey, no—"

"John, move," Freka said, moving into the space John had occupied. A knife gleamed in his big hands. "Hold him." He slid the tip beneath the leather and carefully severed the leather, angling the edge away from Rodney's skin.

John ducked around the crossbar and got his shoulder under Rodney's arm, taking a portion of Rodney's weight, as Freka finished cutting. He had to face Rodney to do it, and slip one arm around his waist from the front, to avoid touching his back. It still ripped a hoarse scream from Rodney's throat.

Freka cut Rodney's other wrist free with a small, frustrated grunt, muttering, "This was badly done. Dullah's orders, though."

John braced himself under the rest of Rodney's weight, then Freka closed one big hand on Rodney's other arm and lifted him. For now, all he could see or think about was Rodney, but somewhere inside he marked Freka's words. Dullah, damn him. He'd deliberately made this worse than it had needed to be. The whip hadn't needed to slice through Rodney's skin to satisfy the punishment, either; leaving welts would have been sufficient.

"Tein-ve is waiting in you quarters," Freka told John. "I'll help you get him there."

John nodded gratefully and walked Rodney backwards, away from the whipping post and the dark
stains on the ground.

"Don't pass out on me, buddy," he whispered, leaning his face close to Rodney's, ignoring the tears and snot and the blood trickling from where Rodney had bitten his lips during the flogging. He figured he would have looked and sounded just as bad. God help Dullah if John ever had the chance to make him pay. "I'm going to get you fixed up."

Between them, Freka and he maneuvered Rodney down the dim, narrow corridors that the servants used to service the palace. The sound of Freka's boots echoed off the stone walls and they had to angle their progress where the halls closed in too tight for three men abreast.

Tein took in the situation with one sharp look as they reached the rooms and carefully let Rodney down to lie prone on the bed. Feverish heat simmered off his body and his sobs were reduced to whimpers. John knelt by the edge of the bed and wiped at Rodney's face with his fingers. Everywhere he wanted to touch: Rodney's neck or his shoulders or even his arms, seemed too close to a wound.

"Freka, get me a bowl of warm water," Tein ordered as she fussed through the bandages and jars laid out on a tray on the nightstand. The guard obeyed without protest. "We'll have to clean him up first," she told John. She frowned at Rodney's wrists, where the flesh had swollen closed over the raw places. "This was done to purpose." A disapproving sound followed that statement.

Rodney's breathing had settled into an even rhythm. John held his palm against his hot, damp cheek and murmured, "Rodney? It's over. Just hold on."

Tein touched his shoulder, making him jerk. She handed him a dampened cloth that smelled of a native Selket antiseptic. Harsher even than the infirmary smells he'd once known too well. "Did you give him the eiff?"

John nodded.

"Then he'll not hear you and that's a kindness," she said briskly. "It isn't over for him. This will pain him until it heals." She wrung out another cloth. "Start cleaning his wrists while I do his back. It's best if we do this before he needs another dose. I'll show you what to do."

"Tein-ve, I must return to my duties," Freka said, setting down a large pot filled with steaming water.

"Yes, go, this will take some time," she replied.

"John."

John looked up from dabbing at the painful damage to Rodney's left wrist. He knew he needed to pull the wounds open enough to clean where the leather had cut into raw flesh, but he didn't have to stomach for it. Freka looked at him compassionately.

"The Haralim will expect you to return to her soon."

"I can't leave Rodney like this," John protested.

Tein slapped the side of his head. "You'll do him no good if you earn a punishment too, fancy. You'll give him another dose of eiff and go."
John gritted his teeth and nodded, knowing he had no choice.

~*~

Leaving Rodney drugged asleep, salve and bandages covering his back, grated on John. Kneeling next to the Haralim's chair through the afternoon and into evening cost every ounce of self-control he'd ever learned.

He'd forgotten to do anything about his hands and kept worrying at the ripped fingernail with his thumb, bothered out of proportion by the small mar it presented in his appearance. He sensed the Rale's gaze on him more than once, but kept his head bowed, eyes down.

A select group of nobles arrived to dine at the Haralim's table. Hara Lalin came on the arm of her poet-scholar, providing more support to the old man than vice versa, her exotic hair dressed in intricate braids and studded with jeweled pins. With Tulem's death, Lalin was returned to favor greater than she'd enjoyed previously. She had a clever wit that obviously entertained the Haralim and the Rale.

Silent servants brought the evening meal in on golden trays, platters and bowls full of steaming or sizzling dishes, followed by frothy mixtures of fruit and yogurt in cups of crystal sugar decorated with tiny flowers. John was grateful the Haralim didn't offer him any. The fruit that had been the Haralim's favorite did not appear.

Every bout of laughter from the guests at the single, long table used for the smaller gathering jolted John. In unconscious mimicry of Rodney, he bit the inside of his lip until it bled.

A single flute player sat in one corner of the room, filling the air with melancholy sound, the arrhythmic Selketi music familiar enough finally that John could pick out motifs and themes. The musician was playing love songs, but in the tune of classical tragedies. The Haralim and the Rale spoke against this background of the proposed trip to Baratha and delaying it, the costs of shipping grain from Hunet to Selket and whether to leave it to private concerns or nationalize the entire shipping industry. If they thought of what had been done to Rodney at all, it was only as an inconvenience, since he wouldn't be fit for gate travel for weeks.

"Baratha?" Lalin asked. Her face was alight with interest. She leaned forward to address the Haralim. "You're going there?"

"When my slave has recovered enough to be useful again," the Haralim said.

John flicked his thumb against his torn nail and swallowed, trying not to think about Rodney and the way his body had jerked with every lash. It was his fault. He should have ordered Rodney to obey the Rale and go or found a way to make the punishment for defiance less severe.

"I've never been offworld," Lalin said. "I confess to being envious."

"Baratha will never compare to even the worst place on Selket," the Rale told her.

Lalin laughed. "So I am sure, but I am a creature of great curiosity." Her gaze rested on John for an instant. "My grandmother was a woman from offworld. I grew up with her tales of Aht'os. My grandfather always said there were great treasures to be found on other worlds, if one was brave enough to go through the Ancestor's Ring and bring them back. I suppose that is what I would hope to do." She looked at John again meaningfully.
John didn't acknowledge her interest. He paid no attention to the dancers who swirled around the room after the meal's remnants were removed, either. He endured, concentrating on breathing steadily and not breaking posture, when he longed to bolt out of the dining room and back to their quarters to check on Rodney.

Eventually the guests withdrew and only the musician and John remained in the room in addition to the Rale and the Haralim, who lingered over glasses of wine. The guards were dismissed to wait outside the room.

After hours of sitting consciously still, every muscle in John's body ached like he'd been beaten. Almost worse than that, he had to take a piss soon.

"Have you chosen a new commander for your household guard?" the Rale asked.

"Mohet Umard."

John didn't think he'd ever encountered any guard named that. He hoped the man wouldn't turn out to be as much of a bastard as Idris had been. Some of the guards gave him suspicious looks and jostled him in the halls since he'd killed those two during the coup attempt. Not the men he'd helped train in hand-to-hand techniques, who were part of the contingent that guarded Dalal, but the older ones. Except Freka. Aside from Rodney, Freka was the closest thing John had to a friend in the palace.

"Hmn," the Rale said. He set his half empty glass down and rose. "Enough business."

The change in his voice sent a shudder through John.

"Pleasure then?" the Haralim asked, her voice gone smoky and inviting.

"Come here, John," the Rale commanded.

John started to stand.

"No. On your knees." The hot, thick arousal in his voice along with the command told John it would be a bad night.

He obeyed.

~*~

The hapek were ripping the skin from his back. Face down and helpless, Rodney felt their presence loom over him, movement and shadow, and sudden, merciless agony piercing through the sear of the sun. He tried to get away but he couldn't. Sharp agony tore through his arms—they'd sliced away his hands, he'd felt the cauterizing pain at his wrists and now he could feel nothing beyond them. He couldn't make his eyes open, either, time slipped, black gaps falling out of his thoughts repeatedly, though he could hear the creatures' rasping chatter every time he came around. He screamed then, kept screaming, because he was burning and he was nothing without his hands, without fingers —fingertowritetofighttouchpullattriggertakeapissholdabrushfeedhimselftypetouch— and the hapek were tearing through his back again like he was some poor Prometheus, only he'd bleed and die—He bucked and arched and screamed over and over again, until his voice went hoarse. "Go away, get away, get off me! Get off, get off! Noooooo!"

~*~
Rodney came around sometimes when John was dressing his back or wrists. The sounds that tore out of him then left John shaking and sick to his own stomach. He could handle the ugly wounds, the pus-stained bandages and the smell of infection, but not feeling he was making it worse.

He'd fumble for the bottle of eiff and get as much of a dose down Rodney's throat as he could, his own hands shaking hard enough to spill half on the sheets, then wait until it took effect to finish. It put Rodney to sleep so fast he'd quizzed Tein when he went to her for another bottle.

Turning it over in his hand, he frowned and asked, "How addictive is this stuff? I should start weaning him off it as soon as possible, right?"

He thought Rodney had put drops of it in the tea he fed him some nights, after the dranzi wore off and John began to hurt too much to even sleep.

Tein frowned back. "Eiff isn't addictive."

"It's a painkiller," John said. Every damn painkiller he'd ever heard of was addictive.

"It numbs the mind."

He really had no idea what the hell that meant, but the next time Rodney woke up enough to eat a little broth, John tried not giving him quite so much. But the fever from the damned infection came back and Rodney's delirious flailing began tearing open the scabs on his back. John's determination broke when the whimpers turned to rasping shouts and incoherent begging.

They were too heavy, too big, pushing him down into the raw rasp of the bed of sand that gave under him. He curled his hands—his hands, his hands—into fists, fingers stiff and aching, skin too tight and cried out over and over, clenched his fingers on the wrinkled sheets—

John was holding him down, his voice rough and worn, "God, Rodney, stop, stop fighting, stop, I have to clean the damn wounds, you've got an infection and a fever — "

Fever, no, he was burning, on fire, they were shoving lit matches under his skin. acid, fire ants, bees, biting, stinging, and he couldn't breathe, gasped, gulped for air, something trickled into his mouth—liquid, cool and sweet and good. He swallowed, swallowed, swallowed it all eagerly, let it quench the fire, let seep between him and the pain, and he could lick his parched lips and taste it: eiff.

Eiff washed away the pain, dissolving away even the memory of it, the memory of everything, of the voice murmuring to him to sleep, until he did.

Six hundred sixty-eight days since he'd sat in a chair, John calculated idly, distracting himself. He'd grown used to cool, smooth tile. He was sitting Indian-fashion, beside the Haralim's seat. She was listening to reports from the household. Everyone but the guard commander, who was expected after midday meal. Tein had come and gone, so had the gardener and Malof. Malof had been instructed to check Rodney's recovery so that the trip to Baratha could be scheduled. Now she was reading reports and dictating notes and instructions. Twenty thousand forty bells. Twenty-four thousand forty-eight hours. Terran hours. Twenty-three thousand two hundred forty-six point four Atlantean hours.

Rodney had been aware enough to listen to John before he left. He'd placed a tray with water and
fruit on the nightstand, along with a bottle of *eiff*. Rodney's mouth had been pursed against the pain in his back and his wrists were still bandaged, but he'd croaked out John's name and listened, awareness visible in his eyes. The worry in John's chest had loosened faintly, seeing the blue no longer glassy and blind with fever. Underneath the bandages, Rodney's back had looked better too, the red of infection fading and the whip stripes finally scabbing over.

"Hey," he'd said. "Good to have you back."

"Not so good here," Rodney had rasped. He'd shifted uncomfortably, then grimaced in obvious pain again. "Oh, Jesus."

John had stroked sweaty hair off McKay's forehead. Rodney whimpered against the pillow. "Yeah, I know it's bad."

"Give me something," Rodney begged.

John picked up the bottle of *eiff* and measured out a dose. "Open wide," he said and made a buzzy, airplane noise, trying to make Rodney laugh.

"Fucker," Rodney muttered, then opened his mouth for the spoon.

John snorted, a sound he never made around anyone else, and put the spoon and bottle on the nightstand. "Look, I can't hang around all day—duty calls—but this stuff will knock you out pretty quick. If you wake up while I'm gone, there's water and fruit on the tray, a chamber pot next to the bed, and you can take another dose. A spoonful knocks you out for about five bells."

A shuddering, indrawn breath had been his only reply. "Okay," he'd said. "I have to go." He touched a finger to Rodney's ankle, soaking in the warmth of his skin, pleased that it wasn't so feverish any longer.

"Go," Rodney said with a grunt. "Wouldn't want you ending up here too."

John rubbed a circle on Rodney's ankle bone. He didn't say he'd rather it had been him than Rodney at the whipping post. Rodney knew that and wishing didn't undo what had happened.

"Okay," he said again, awkwardly, and slipped out of the room, running down servants' corridors and arriving at the Haralim's rooms breathless and flushed, prostrating himself before her immediately.

"Come," was all she'd said and led John to the household clerks' room, where she'd begun listening to reports on the state of the palace. Nuret, a woman in her late twenties in slave whites, moved in and out of the room, bringing her various reports and relayed orders while a rail-thin scribe kept a copy. John held onto the hope that the Haralim would let him go at mid meal and not require him again until evening.

Nuret slipped in one the side doors and waited patiently until the Haralim waved at her to speak. "Mohet Umard is waiting, Hara."

The Haralim fingered the sheaf of papers in her hands. Her long nails were painted turquoise and rattled against the heavy parchment. "Let me finish this, then send him in," she said with a sigh. She began reading again, ignoring Nuret's, "*Vai, hara,*" and setting aside each page as she finished.
"Kasha should not cost that much," she declared when she set down the last paper. "Find another supplier and bring me the prices." Her eyes narrowed. She pointed at one of the guards. "You. Have someone bring me Hara Lalin."

"Vai, hara."

"And send in Umard."

John watched the new guard commander stride in, boot hills clacking forcefully against the tiles and then ventured a look at the Haralim, wondering how she'd take to the man. Umard stood almost a head taller than John and had the build of a professional football player—a defensive lineman. His nose was broader and flatter than most Selketi and had probably been broken at least once. A sharp, black gaze took in everyone in the room and lingered on John for an instant before he bowed to the Haralim.

"Hara."

John paid only half his attention to the low-voiced interview between the Haralim and Umard. No one would bother to ask his opinion of the man. He fetched a tray with hot tea and sweet biscuits at one point, detouring around Umard. He wasn't sure, but he thought the man took a step backward that made John brush against his arm. John swayed to the side without jiggling the tray in his hands and marked Umard as someone to steer clear of.

The Haralim absently gave John one of the biscuits and John felt Umard's eyes on him as he ate it.

His interest was diverted by Dalal's arrival. Her wet nurse brought her in and presented her to the Haralim for inspection. Seeing the clever Haralim smile at her daughter, murmuring in a dialect John didn't know while holding her, riveted him.

Dalal wrapped a tiny but strong hand around one of her mother's necklaces and pulled. The necklace broke, sending lapis beads tumbling down into the Haralim's lap and onto the floor. She laughed.

"No, no, no," she said, plucking a bead from one plump fist before Dalal could bring it to her mouth. "That is not for eating.

"I'm so sorry," the wet nurse murmured. She reached to take Dalal back.

"Just help clean up," the Haralim said. She nodded to Umard. "Go. Introduce yourself to your men."

He bowed and backed from the room. "Vai, hara. Blessings on your name and house."

She boosted Dalal higher in her arms and stood, sending the rest of the beads tumbling to the floor and strolled to the room's window, turning Dalal so they could both look outside. John watched for a second then set to helping the wet nurse, Raki, and Nuret gather up the deep blue beads. He absently tucked one that had cracked inside his vest's pocket.

By the window, Zuleika continued to murmur to Dalal, who laughed in delight at something she saw. John felt a weird flutter in his chest. She wasn't really his; she would grow up as the daughter of the Rale, not a pleasure slave. But she still meant something to him. Something more than just another pretty child. More than the Haralim's heir, who might own him one day.

That thought chilled him thoroughly. No matter how long he was here, he would never be satisfied
with this life. He wasn't a slave. He didn't accept it. For now he would go with it and pretend, because Rodney worried to much about him, but he wasn't the person the Selketi wanted to make him.

Raki settled herself next him, plump and content with her world. "I'm lucky," she said.

John slanted a disbelieving glance her way.

"Well, I am," Raki told him. She wasn't a beauty, just pleasant and more than little plump, in her early twenties and already soft under the jaw before she'd lost the round cheeks of childhood. Her brown eyes reflected puzzlement when she met John's gaze. "You're the Chosen. Don't you realize how lucky you are?"

"No," John said, thinking he didn't consider living in a cage lucky at all.

"But…you're the Haralim's Chosen."

He opened his mouth to tell how much he didn't want to be and stopped. It would do no good. Wouldn't convince Raki, certainly, who had lived all her life as part of Selketi society and saw nothing wrong with slavery. Let Raki, let everyone, think he had accepted this. Otherwise there might never be a chance to get away.

Morning slipped into afternoon, mid meal was served, and John was allowed a short break that he used to sprint back to Rodney, checking on him and visiting the washroom before returning, bolting down a piece of fruit and paratha along the way.

Hara Lalin arrived at a midday third bell, after Raki took Dalal back to the nursery, and the Haralim retired to the Green Receiving Room. Other women were there, gossiping and amusing themselves with games. Lalin stood out among them, taller and fairer than most, with her striking blond-bronze hair dressed in ribbons of pale green.

"Hara," she said, with the open-handed gesture that meant respect and greeting and 'look, no knives' among the Selketi. There were blue glyphs painted on her palms. Joy and Loyalty. John recognized them. It was a Selketi tradition that had become rare, the painting of the palms or the face. Most only went to the effort for traditional occasions.

The Haralim gestured her to the closest seat. "Sit." She took in Lalin's appearance with a flicker of her dark eyes, then nodded to John. "Water from my pitcher," she instructed.

John poured a tall crystal tumbler full of clear, iced water and set it before Lalin. It was an honor to drink the same water as the Haralim. Of course, it was a risk too, and a test. Lalin picked up the tumbler and drank deep. John topped off the tumbler's contents. The Haralim appeared satisfied.

"I want you to do something for me," she told Lalin.

"I shall do my utmost," Lalin replied. Curiosity lit her features and she leaned forward.

"Find for me the prices for wholesale kasha by the bushel in the city, and Gemed Port, and the mills. Do this without tying your inquiries to the fortress."

Lalin's brows drew together, then she nodded decisively. "You suspect someone in the palace of an agreement with the sellers to inflate the price and return a percentage to their own profit."

The Haralim looked at him for a drawn out moment. "Clever," she murmured and returned her attention to Lalin. "Yes, I suspect, but to audit all of the palace procurements would disturb my household for great moons. I want this settled before we leave for Baratha."

"It will be my great pleasure to serve, Hara," Lalin said with apparent sincerity. She sipped the water again and then nodded toward John and asked, "May I have leave to address him?"

John looked up at the Haralim. He was used to being in some sense invisible: not his body, but his mind. Lalin wasn't asking to taking him to her bed, she wanted to talk to him. That was different enough to make his heart speed. He felt hot and embarrassed; sweat dampened the back of his neck.

"If you please," the Haralim said.

"Tell me about your world," Lalin asked him.

John licked his lips nervously.

"My world," he repeated. He licked his lower lip. Atlantis or Earth? He shouldn't say anything about either, but it wanted to come bubbling out, all the memories and familiar pieces of the life he'd known before. He and Rodney carefully never spoke of any of the things they missed: the experiences and culture that only they shared on Selket. They didn't talk about Atlantis and never about Earth. "I hadn't lived on the planet of my birth for years before…"

"You've been to more than one world beyond the Ancestors' ring?" Lalin prompted him.

"Vai, hara," he admitted. That was easier.

"Tell me of them. Tell me how many."

John frowned and calculated. "Two hundred four worlds. M47-031 was the last my team visited, where we were ambushed."

"Ambushed," Lalin repeated.

"Stunners," he said, "as we stepped through the ga—ring.‖ He hadn't let himself think back to that moment in a long time because it led to thinking if-only and what-if and helplessness. "I don't think I saw more than glimpse of some trees and a slice of sky." He remembered falling, his body already numb, the sky the color of a robin's egg and cloudless, the arc of the empty stargate bisecting it.

"Tell me about some world you did see."

He flicked his eyes toward the Haralim, checking her mood, before speaking and tried to pick and choose what he said, because he knew that she would remember every word. She saw and heard everything and made the most of it. "There was Hoff. We went there to trade for…to trade. They're gone now, the Wraith culled Hoff five years ago. They were pretty advanced, had electricity and basic physics, no electron microscopes, supercomputers or anything like the Ancients, sorry, what we called the Ancestors, but…It was a good world, except for the coal fuel pollution." John snapped his mouth shut. He'd revealed too much about Atlantis and Earth, just by the comparisons he drew.
"Very green compared to Selket, a completely different climate, pine trees, I don't even know if you have pine trees here, with long needles instead of leaves…?"

"Go on, John," the Haralim said.

He cleared his throat and continued, describing the buildings, the clothes the Hoffans had worn, the motorized vehicles that stank of kerosene and ran so loud Beckett had muttered about issuing ear protection. Lalin leaned forward with her chin supported on her hand, asking to hear more whenever John faltered to a stop, listening in fascination, until John's voice had gone hoarse and the Haralim called a halt.

John felt grateful and weirdly empty.

~*~

Sitting up and walking pulled the stripes on his back, making Rodney gag, but he managed it the fourth day because he desperately wanted to use the bathroom instead of the chamber pot. Using that involved contortions nearly as painful as getting on his feet and then he was left with the stench next to his bed until John returned.

He managed it and when he'd staggered back to the bed, rewarded himself with a generous dose of the *eiff* John had left on the nightstand.

The pain had washed away, the sweet relief as pleasurable as any drug high he'd ever tried out, including Demerol and the morphine sulphate Beckett had given him when he was shot in the ass, and he'd begun the soft slide into sleep when someone strode into the room. He had his head turned to the side on the pillow and had been watching dust motes hang in the sunlight splashed over the floor tiles. The golden specks had been slowly, slowly, slowly settling in the still afternoon air, drifting down as drowsy as Rodney felt, then suddenly they were swirling and flying, pushed by the rush of air before the person entering the room. His second clue was the snap-clack of shoes on the floor and then a shadow falling across the floor, ending with a vision of slate blue robes.

Rodney blinked at the sudden interruption of his sight line.

"Get up."

No, that didn't make any sense. He didn't need to and he remembered, getting up *hurt*. He wasn't going to do that unless he had to.

"Get up, you lazy, pus-filled fart," a woman's voice shouted in Rodney's ear. He jerked away from the noise, felt a vague jolt of pain through the haze of *eiff*, and found himself staring at Macha. Her long, iron-gray hair was dressed in braids again, loops of them knotted and coiled and looping over her shoulders. He tried to follow the turns and twists and felt his eyes cross.

"Lar Macha," he said. Rather, he tried to say, but his lips and tongue didn't work and it came out as a slurred, "Lrrmsha." He didn't care much. He wanted to go to sleep. His body was floating down through the bedding, dissolving atom by atom, he thought. Phasing. That was the concept. He was phasing through the bed. Pleasure at remembering made him smile at Macha.


"You slug," she snapped at him. "You have work in the library—"
Rodney let his eyes close.

"Wake up," she went on. "If your work is not done on time tomorrow, you'll find those eight lashes were only the beginning. San pot motta bhen ken."

Rodney translated the word into English in his head: Stupid, fat, dumb ass fucker. Or something like that. Macha was using Hunese slang and her mainland accent mangled it. He giggled to himself. Maybe she'd said 'sen po mhot tu keen'. Keep fucking my fat ass.

The smack of a hand slapping his face just made him giggle harder, because it didn't even hurt and wasn't that wonderful? *Eiff* was the greatest stuff ever.

"Lar Macha."

Oh, that was John, drawling out her honorific like a curse. Rodney twisted around—his back should have been screaming, maybe it was, but he didn't feel it—and waggled his fingers at John, who stood in the doorway, so pretty and dangerous, like a leopard yawning and watching from a tree limb, red mouth and glittering gold on black. He didn't move and Rodney thought in a distant part of his mind that John had always been most frightening when he was still and silent.

Macha back away from the bed. "Chosen," she said. "He is expected to finish a five of translations by tomorrow. Or he will be punished."

John bowed his head, all ironic acknowledgment and only stepped out of the way of her exit at the last second.

Rodney waggled his fingers at John again. "Heay, thin 'm wass'ed," he mumbled, letting his eyelids fall shut at the same time.

The bed dipped as John sat down next to him. Cool fingers traced over Rodney's cheek, then his eyebrow out to his temple. It felt very far away, like someone else was being touched and he was hearing it described on the radio. "You took another dose?"

"...ad t'ge up," Rodney sighed. "Hurt." He found that word and made it clear.

John's hand moved and stroked over Rodney's head down to his nape, where he rubbed gently. "Yeah. I guess it's a good thing you finally made me learn to read and write Ancient, isn't it?"

"Mnnn…"

"I'll take care of your work in the library, okay? Don't worry about it."

Rodney sank down into the lovely bed of welcoming sleep and didn't.

~*~

He didn't have much that wasn't shiny or silky or transparent, but John didn't quite dare wear any of Rodney's blues or whites. Instead, he pulled on the black gauze pants and the indigo shirt with the silver stitching and kept to the narrow, older corridors on the way to the library. He'd always been good at moving silently and bare feet did have some benefits. He slipped past Macha and the other librarians into the database room without attracting any notice.
Piele jumped like a grasshopper when John touched his shoulder. His pale eyes widened as he took in John. "Oh," he murmured and his expression seemed to dim. "I thought Ro'ney-ve had come."

"Have you ever known Rodney to be quiet?" John asked, smiling.

Piele's mouth twitched into a reluctant smile. "He talks back too much."

John smiled back. "He always has." His smile faded as he pictured exactly what talking back had resulted in this time. Part of him hoped Rodney had learned the lesson, because he never wanted to see him hurt like that again, but most of John hoped Rodney hadn't. Because he didn't want to know Rodney was broken. He'd talked back at Macha, though, John told himself, even if he had been so doped up he didn't know what he was saying.

"Did Ro'ney-ve send you to bring me to him?" Piele asked. "I have pages I have copied, but I can't translate the Ancestors' words. I've learned some, but...Ro'ney-ve doesn't just read their words, he understands what they speak of and I am lost." He gestured to the Ancient console. "And I have not the magic of it, either."

John brushed his hand over the console and watched it light. It was weak, but he could sense an answering thrum in his own nerves, answering the almost-aware systems that sensed him as someone almost Ancient at a cellular level. Piele drew in a quick, surprised breath.

"Oh."

"Show me and I'll do Rodney's work, okay?" John said. "Just until he's better."

Piele looked skeptical. "Pardon me, Chosen, but this is the work of the Ancestors, and you are not a scholar."

John carefully kept his expression amiable. "Were you a scribe before you came here?"

"I was an apprentice when my people sold me," Piele replied. "Too weak to work the fields or hunt bynock and the winters were getting harder." He pressed his lips together. "At least I will not be put out on the ice here, so long as I do my work."

John thought of Raki. Piele hadn't said it, but John knew: he thought he was lucky too. So many values of luck and fortune, of survival and relative comfort. In Pegasus, luck was always to escape the Wraith, but after that: a full belly, a roof and bed, were more than many had. Many would be more than content in a slave's life on Selket, where the Wraith came seldom and in few numbers. People mostly preferred safety to freedom.

He said, "Rodney made me learn."

Piele hesitated, then drew a pile of papers to him and handed them to John. He gathered blank parchment and ink before him and picked up a pen. "This will take time."

"The Haralim gave me the afternoon," John told him, looking at the first page and the dissonant but familiar blocks of Ancient script. He shrugged and offered Piele a lopsided smile. If he stayed in their rooms, all he could do was check under Rodney's bandages again; reassuring himself that, yes, the wounds were beginning to heal, the redness of infection finally had begun to fade, and the fever had burned itself out. That and watch Rodney sleep off the latest dose of painkiller. He'd never been particularly patient and the stillness and near silence offered too much time for self-reflection. Taking
care of Rodney's work, keeping Macha mollified, was better. "What else am I going to do?"

"Would you go back to your world if you could?" Piele asked.

John thought about Teyla and Ronon, the jumpers, the city humming around and through him, Elizabeth, Earth, Atlantis, the summer he was fourteen and his father was stationed at Beale Air Force Base, where the heat made the sleek birds on the runways seem to shiver alive, the shimmer of the event horizon as he stepped through it, night on Athos seen through NVGs, the fries served in the Atlantis mess, target practice at the gun range on South Pier, the offal and ammonia scent of a hive ship...Debriefings, exams, 'don't ask, don't tell', Caldwell, Landry, veteran's hospitals, of finding out half his team was still presumed as dead as he and Rodney must be, and the eyes, always the eyes that would look at him and see and know...Of standing on a balcony, with the sea wind fresh in his face and the stargate spinning.

Choice. No. He'd be able to say no. Rodney was the only one he could say no to here and the only one he didn't want to say no to. He forgot sometimes and he didn't want to forget. Ever. He still wanted to fly. He still wanted the stars. He wanted to go and find what was on the other side of the next stargate. Compared to freedom, there was nothing, not even Dalal, that would hold him.

He wanted to fight the Wraith or even the Ori. Do something that mattered.

He didn't answer.

The question wasn't whether he would go home. He knew there would be bad waiting with the good. He knew that.

It wasn't whether he'd go back, it was whether he would go.

And he would.

~*~

He woke slowly, the drug easing him into consciousness, half-dreaming and still relaxed. The dip of the bed on one side gave away John's presence. The air sifting through the windows felt hot and dry on his bare back, on still tender skin. Selkетi summer and the heat lingered late, hours after the long dusks that seemed to hover, while the sun loitered in the bleached-out sky, drawing out the days. He floated for a while, not thinking, sweat springing from his pores. The \textit{eiff} cushioned everything, softened the sheets under him, cooled the oppressive night, put a cotton-candy filter between everything bad and his thoughts.

Rodney became vaguely aware that John was speaking after a time and wondered, because even his eyelids were too heavy to lift, who he was talking too. The words dissolved into a hoarse blur that he could imagine stroking over him like John's hands. His skin prickled pleasantly. He had only to make a sound or roll over and John would drift his fingertips over his body.

But he was too far away to move, the \textit{eiff} slipping between him and desire and emotion. It was a thick glass wall between Rodney and existence, thicker with every day, every dose. The glass became rippled, distortion building until everything beyond was blurred. Not important.

At first, John had brought him each dose, and Rodney had been shocked by how bleak he looked, in those too bright, sharp, agonizing windows between the drug's embrace. After the bandages came off, Rodney went to Tein himself and John watched him pour the measure into his tea each night and then each morning without saying anything. He wasn't there in the afternoons, when Rodney began
letting himself have a dose early, when his hands began shaking and his muscles cramped. He didn't need to know about that. Rodney wasn't good at handling pain, he never had been, but every time he let any hint of it slip, John looked so devastated he couldn't stand it. If he took enough *eiff*, he didn't need to pretend he didn't hurt. He knew taking more was a bad idea, but it worked.

~*~

Rodney didn't know if John's efforts to act like things were normal helped or made it worse. He went along with him, anyway.

"She's talking now," John said. His hands were deft with practice as he removed Rodney's bandages and inspected his back. Two weeks of constant practice had taught him exactly how to do it without making Rodney hurt more than necessary, something Rodney appreciated.

"Who?" Rodney asked. He always ended up clutching at the sheets, tensed and waiting for the pain, though it wasn't bad any longer. His wrists hurt more, since he couldn't stop himself moving his hands unless he was actually restrained or unconscious. But he expected it to hurt and braced himself each time. He had no idea who John was talking about. John talked through every bandage change, trying to distract Rodney, and most of the time he didn't listen to anything more than the sound. Content meant nothing.

John's hands went still for a breath.

"Dalal."

Rodney felt sick. "Oh." Dalal. John was getting too attached. It scared the hell out of Rodney. So many things scared him, but John relaying slave gossip seemed worse than almost any of them. It was John losing himself in this place. John had a child here that he was entirely too interested in talking about lately. He swallowed back the nausea and tried to pay attention.

"Raki says she's smart. I suppose she'd say that, she's not Dalal's mother or anything, but taking care of her the same, and most mothers think their kid is brilliant and beautiful, right?" John went on.

"I wouldn't know."

When had the sheets become so damn scratchy? It felt like his skin was raw where they touched. That added to his general, usual level of irritation. It was probably someone in the laundries, some lazy slattern, not doing their job and rinsing all the soap out. He'd end up with a rash. He squirmed uncomfortably. He was sweating too; the room had become so damn hot. John said something and he realized he'd lost track again. He made himself lie still and made an inquiring, 'well, go on' sound to cover himself.

"Gefel in procurements was arrested for taking kickbacks on kasha today," John added.

"Kasha's the grain they make flour out of here," Rodney said. He said it even though he knew it was pointless, even though he knew John knew that just like he did. He could care less about kasha. Why was John torturing him with this stupid gossip? He didn't want to hear any of it. He didn't care about any of it and he didn't want to listen while John made it clear He'd finally surrendered to being the Haralim's pet. If John was just going to go on and on about all the meaningless minutiae of life in the palace, Rodney was going to take his dose of *eiff* early and get some sleep.

"Yes, Rodney," John drawled. Rodney imagined him rolling his eyes. John had begun dabbing salve on his back, so he couldn't see him, but he knew that tone of voice. The way John was touching him
felt good and bad at the same time. Almost like John wanted him.

"It's just...the guy didn't think to cook the books enough to cover his tracks? Idiot." The palace used vast amounts of flour. Just the paratha baked every day would be impressive. Gefel, whoever he was, had probably been pocketing a tidy sum. Of course, now he'd be stood up at a whipping post. Possibly. Theft had many different punishments on Selket, geared to the severity of the crime. Gefel had stolen from the Haralim's household. He'd be lucky if he wasn't stripped not only of whatever he owned but of his freedom. He might be barefoot very soon.

John stroked his palms over Rodney's shoulders, smoothing the salve in even on unmarked skin. "Hara Zoyan's been sent to Hunet. I'm not sure, but Hara Lalin might be angling to become wife number three." He glided his hands down Rodney's arms, gentle massage morphing into caresses, his long finger curving rounds biceps, teasing the softer skin of the inner arm, then moving down before starting back up, the heel of his hands offering pressure while his fingertips touched feather light. It should have felt wonderful. It irritated him instead. Rodney shrugged, trying to make John quit.

"Who gives a fuck?" he snapped.

John lifted his hands away. "Me for one. It's my ass he's using whenever the Haralim isn't in the mood." His voice was light, self-mocking, refusing to become annoyed at Rodney. Which annoyed Rodney all the more.

Rodney rolled on to his side and then sat up. The achy, sick feeling in his stomach was getting worse. He pushed himself up onto his feet. Maybe moving would help. He'd been trapped in these rooms for so long it was making him crazy. "You haven't seemed to mind much lately." He didn't look at John as he said it, knew it was unforgivable, but the words just spilled out. John had sounded so...settled in and fucking comfortable with their existence here. He'd almost been joking about something that had ripped him up to begin with and that wasn't acceptable.

"Where's my eiff?" Rodney demanded.

"On the nightstand." John pointed.

"Oh."

John was frowning at him. "Do you really think you need it?"

Rodney began pacing, ignoring the pull over his shoulders. He needed to move and get rid of the damned itch crawling under his skin. He felt ready to explode. "Jesus, I need—"

"I always knew you were an asshole, Rodney," John said mildly, "you don't need to work so hard at reminding me. If you want a blowjob all you have to do is ask."

"If I want a—!" the words burst out. The worst part was that he didn't. He hadn't had an erection, hadn't felt a stirring of interest below the waist since the whipping. He spun around on his heel, nearly losing his balance and pointed a finger at John, who sat on the edge of the bed looking entirely too calm, despite the exhausted shadows under his eyes. "You really are a whore." Christ, his head was going to blow off, pieces of his brain splatter all over if he had to look at him one more moment. "Get out," he hissed. "I don't want a blowjob, I don't want you to touch me, I don't want to look at you."

John's face went blank. He stood with a strange, slow grace. "McKay—"
"I'm the one that was whipped. Whipped! As in blood running down my back, my wrists—what if I'd lost my hands?" Rodney yelled, his voice rising and rising uncontrollably. He waved his hands at John. "I can't believe you want me to lie here in screaming, unbearable pain. Why not just kill me? But no, really, sex with the wounded man will make it all better!" He stopped to catch his breath and heard what he'd just said. "Okay, okay, I know, I do know, you aren't trying to kill me, you don't want me to be in pain, but right now, I just don't want to even look at you, so could you just…go."

John hesitated for only an instant, then dipped his head in assent. He'd stepped back when Rodney began shouting. Rodney couldn't read what he was thinking or feeling. He'd put on the distanced expression he wore outside their rooms, the one he showed everyone else. He was even moving the way he did in public, slinky and sinfully graceful, gliding across the floor, as though it was his default setting now. He'd present himself the way he'd been trained to: seductive and silently obedient.

Rodney watched him walk into the next room and swallowed the saliva and bile in his mouth. When that didn't work, he stumbled into the washroom and threw up. "Shit, shit, shit," he repeated between heaves. His back burned now, the partially healed skin pulling as he bent over.

They were never getting away from this place and John was going to be trapped between who Rodney kept trying to keep him as and this shadow person the Selketi had shaped him into. All Rodney could do was hurt him, it felt like.

He staggered to his feet, splashed water on his face, and went back into the bedroom. His head was pounding, making his eyes blur. He shivered with a sudden chill, despite or because of the sweat springing out all over his skin. He didn't want to think about any of it. Was he really doing John any favors, keeping him from forgetting who he'd been? Was he doing himself any favors dreaming about escape? He felt sick all over again when he contemplated trying to fit in again in Atlantis.

It would be even worse for John and John was smart enough to know it.

The bottle of eiff almost slipped from his shaking hands as he measured out a generous dose. He set it back down with fanatical care.

The soothing numbness spread through him immediately. Psychological, he knew. The drug hadn't had time to absorb into his system, but his mind knew relief was there.

He walked carefully to the corner that separated the bedroom portion of their rooms from the rest.

John was on the lounge, curled on his side. Even bent in a half-fetal position, his feet hung over the edge. It looked supremely uncomfortable. John's back was to Rodney. The tension in the line of his shoulders and spine gave away his wakefulness.

Damn it.

"You look ridiculous," Rodney said. "Just come back here."

He didn't wait to see if John would come or not. The eiff had begun seeping through him, and he felt heavy and floaty at the same time. Being angry was just so much effort. He shouldn't have shouted at John. He wouldn't have if he'd just taken some of the drug a little earlier. It would have steadied him. He needed to remember that.
His eyes were closed and his mind still circling, but slowing, when John joined him in the bed. The mattress gave and they ended up together in the center, but John kept his hands to himself. He knew John was still awake, could feel it in the wary rigidity of the body next to his, and finally mumbled, "Go to sleep."

~*~

No time to slip inside the Blue Garden and practice his katas anymore. It had been uncomfortable since the coup attempt. Before when he was watched, John knew they didn't see him or the truth in his practice. Now the eyes he felt were weighing exactly how dangerous he might really be. The Blue Garden was too public. There were always at least one guard watching, either to protect him or protect someone from him.

He missed the cho trees and the rippling shadows. Rodney's words kept repeating in his head, distracting him.

Whore.

Rodney had always had a nasty tongue, but that hadn't been something John anticipated. He couldn't get it out of his head. All this time Rodney had been the one telling him he wasn't, that this didn't change who he really was.

He felt frighteningly adrift without that support. He wasn't ready to give up, but it felt like Rodney was telling him to. He could rationalize that Rodney wasn't himself and hadn't meant it.

Instead of doing katas, he took the backstairs that threaded through the oldest parts of the palace, narrow stone spirals barely wider than his shoulders, so old the stone itself had worn until it cupped his feet, then cut through the armory courtyard, carefully avoiding looking at the whipping post, and past the guard barracks' kitchen. From there, he could vault over the low wall around the bird coops and enter the library through a back door. Macha never knew he'd been there and Piele would never betray Rodney to her.

Macha didn't really care if she saw Rodney every day or any day, as long as she had new scrolls of translated Ancestors' wisdom to add to her library each small moon.

It was starting to wear on John, though. He spent most of his evenings and nights with the Haralim and the Rale. Mornings when he would have slept and exercised, he spent doing Rodney's work for the last three weeks. Sometimes, he catnapped in the afternoons, but never long enough before he had to be ready again. He glimpsed the new guard commander, but didn't think about it. Umard probably had business in the armory. He kept seeing him around, but the entire palace was Umard's business. A small, paranoid instinct whispered that Umard was following him, but he couldn't trust his instincts any more, they were fucked. Everybody looked at him, everyone watched.

He could feel Piele's gaze on him when he finally went back to work in the library three weeks after. He knew others looked at him too: there went the slave that had to be whipped. Piele wasn't looking for that, not for the scars or if he was broken. Piele was looking for the enthusiasm Rodney had had for their task.

But that had been before.

Maybe he was broken. He did the work set before him without trolling through the corrupted database, exclaiming and cursing and dashing his hands in the air when he found something new, something they would have given their eye teeth to uncover in Atlantis, where there was just so
much, and so much of it still encrypted and protected, that it sometimes felt like they couldn't find the
trees for all the brush clogging the forest. There wasn't any point. Every revelation was futile.
Knowledge that couldn't be passed on might as well have never been discovered at all.

He read and translated for Piele, picking the files almost at random.

By the end of the day he was jittery and sick to his stomach again. He wanted to go back to the
safety and comfort of their room.

"Ro'ney-ve," Piele said, "in the third paragraph here, does it really mean—"

"What?" Rodney snapped at him. "What? You're barely literate enough to write in the worthless
squiggles they call an alphabet here, and you're questioning what your precious, wonderful
Ancestors wrote?"

"But this doesn't make any sense," Piele protested.

Rodney slapped his hand down on the console. "Just be a good little slave and write down what I
say. It's not like anyone in this hellhole has enough brains to even grasp the most basic concepts they
were talking about."

Piele stared at him.

God, he just wanted to go lie down and take something before his head fell off. He pulled in shaking,
unsteady breath and clenched his hands. "Look, it doesn't matter if it's right or wrong. It just doesn't
matter."

"Very well," Piele said, ducking away from Rodney and gathering up all the papers they'd worked
on during the day.

Rodney bumped carelessly against the table where Piele worked, sending the stack of parchments
meant for Macha sliding across it. He blinked at them, thinking something was odd.

It bothered Rodney all the way back to the room he shared with John. He realized what it was as he
stepped inside. Piele hadn't put the work he'd done in that stack meant for Macha. Dusk filled the
room with blue shadows and John was on the lounge, legs bent and a handful of parchments
balanced on his knees. A single lamp glowed on the low table beside the lounge, the cool chemical
light catching on the gold armlet coiled around John's biceps. Rodney knew he'd been translating
some things Piele managed to copy, but suddenly he saw the truth: Piele was going to bring
everything they'd done today to John to check. Like Rodney hadn't been deciphering Ancient when
John was flying supply runs at McMurdo.

It was intolerable. John was taking the only thing that gave Rodney any value in this pit away, the
only thing that had kept him sane, and it didn't matter in the least that a half-bell before, Rodney had
declared that none of it meant anything and he didn't care if he'd got it wrong.

John looked up and Rodney attacked. He didn't want John to see the sweat and twitchiness that came
from really wanting his next dose. John was going to say something soon; Rodney had noticed the
way he was watching each time he poured a measure from his bottle. Then he was going to tell
Rodney had had to stop. It was easier to go on the offensive and distract John. He knew just what to
say to hurt, too.
"I suppose you're screwing that lying little backstabber too," he declared.

"I'm not 'screwing' anyone," John replied. He set the parchments down and got to his feet, watching Rodney with the same caution he afforded everyone here.

Rodney snorted loudly and deliberately and went for the throat. "Right and you don't like it anyway, do you? You don't start breathing fast or get hard when I'm painting you up for a night in the sheets with the Haralim and the Rale. Nobody gives a blowjob like you do unless they like it."

John stood still, watching him, emotions flickering so fast over his face Rodney couldn't read them all, except the first and last: betrayal and pain.

Watching him slink out of the room, carefully making a circuit that kept him beyond arm's length of Rodney, should have felt like winning. Instead, Rodney finished his day on his knees, vomiting again, sick and too weak to get up for some stretch of eternity, and when he did, he couldn't find his eiff. If John had been there, he would have accused him of taking and hiding it, but John was still gone.

Rodney spat and washed out his mouth, then headed for the kitchens. Tein-ve would have what he needed.

~*~

He slept under a cho tree and woke feeling like he'd been fed on by a Wraith. Everything ached and he was cold. Dampness from the moss had soaked through his thin excuse for clothing during the night. John could imagine how Ronon would have laughed at him and almost smiled, until the old stab of pain hit again. Ronon was dead. So was Teyla. All he had left was Rodney.

The night before he'd wanted to kill him.

His temper had been only a breath, only one more word, from snapping. Getting out had been the only option.

The walls were too high to see the horizon, but the sky had begun to pale where the sun would rise, the nearer stars fading before that growing brilliance. The shimmering sheet of of fluctuating brightness that obscured a quarter of the sky caught his eyes and John squinted. He'd never really paid attention to the sky on Selket. Traveling through the stargates meant that there was never time to learn a planet's stars; for that matter, they had seldom stayed overnight on uninhabited planets where they would have camped and when they did, they had slept in the jumpers.

That wasn't aurora borealis. For an instant it seemed almost fluorescent. Rodney probably knew what it was.

John clenched his hands. He wouldn't ask. The last week every time he tried to talk to Rodney everything went sour. Rodney said he didn't even want to look at him and John had begun to believe it. Rodney obviously blamed him for what had happened. The sick feeling it left in his gut came from believing that.

Maybe he could have argued, fought back, said something to Rodney if he hadn't been so exhausted.

He pushed himself to his feet, listening to the morning bells, and stretched. He tried to center himself and warm up, run through one of the simplest katas meant to keep muscles supple, but kept missing the stances, forgetting a step and frustrating himself because he couldn't concentrate. He settled at last
on just breathing the way Teyla had taught him, the touch of first light rose-brilliant though his closed eyelids.

A stop in the kitchens garnered him breakfast, warmer and fresher than anything the servants would bring to even the Haralim. Some of the undercooks looked askance at John's damp, moss-stained clothes, but they'd seen him in worse, so he ignored them.

"Eat more," Tein told him, pushing another bowl of sweetened, boiled kasha in front of John. "You are too thin." If Rodney had been there, John would have joked about keeping his girlish figure and Rodney would have called him an anorexic fourteen year old girl and stolen half his meal, claiming he needed it to fuel his brain. Or he would have before. Rodney didn't have much appetite anymore or much interest in whether John took care of himself or not. The kasha tasted like wood shavings suddenly. He set down his spoon, pushed away the bowl, and got to his feet. The day had barely begun and already he was tired.

Tein stopped him on his way out. "You should take a tray to Ro'ney-ve," she said.

John felt the muscle along his jaw twitch when he clenched his teeth together. "I don't think so. He can get his own."

Tein rested her hand on John's arm. He held still and waited for her to speak again. Instead, she pressed something into his hand. John closed his fingers around the bottle. He contemplated it handing it back, telling her to take it to Rodney herself, or to make Rodney come to her. He considered dumping it once he'd left the kitchen. He wanted to throw it at the wall or possibly at Rodney's head.

"He asked for more last night. It took me some time to cook it down," Tein said.

Rodney must have gone to her after he left, he realized. He hadn't just gone to bed or even taken a dose. Rodney had gone out. But he hadn't come looking for John.

"He is in pain," Tein said.

"He is a pain," John told her, unsure if he was joking or not. The bottle of *eiff* warmed in his hand. "I'll give it to him." He hesitated, wanting to ask why Rodney would still need it so much when he seemed nearly healed. He wasn't stupid. He'd noticed the mood swings, the itchiness and nausea Rodney tried to hide when he hadn't had a dose in too long. Classic signs of addiction. But maybe it wasn't physical addiction. Maybe Rodney just wanted to escape from where he was and the *eiff* offered that. The other possibility was that Rodney really just couldn't stand John any longer, was sick of propping him up and telling him wasn't…what he was. He started to ask, but the bells sounding reminded him he needed to prepare himself for his day with the Haralim.

He forced a smile for Tein, turned, and headed, reluctantly, for their quarters. Maybe if he was really lucky, Rodney would have already left for the library when he arrived.

The designs on his hands and feet were fading. He traced them with his fingers after he bathed. Tried to imagine kneeling and letting Rodney trace his brushes over his skin. The first time Rodney had done that John had almost shaken apart. Each stroke of the bristles and paint over his skin had been a caress. Rodney had learned to do that for him. It had been a promise, a gift, that made John love the marks that he'd despised before. It had been everything Rodney and he would never say in words.

Everything Rodney no longer felt because John had failed him. This was his punishment and he
deserved it. Just give in, go with it, be a slave, forget Atlantis, forget who he was, give up the sky. Give up Rodney. Give up on him.

Give up.

Let go.

A shudder ran through John. He had to stop and lean against a wall, press his forehead cool tile, hit by a wave of vertigo. He found a fragile hold on his composure and walked the rest of the way to the Haralim's rooms. The bells at his ankles sounded with every step; he couldn't keep them quiet.

Tomorrow, he would go to the flower house. Lisha would remove Rodney's marks and apply a new design. One that meant only that he belonged to the Haralim. Even before, even in the training barracks, he'd held onto the thought of Rodney and getting back to him. If that was gone…

John pushed himself away from the wall. He blinked as he glimpsed Umard at the end of the corridor. Then the guard commander walked on. John reluctantly forced himself to walk on.

It didn't mean anything, he told himself. It didn't mean anything that he wouldn't have Rodney's designs painted on his hands and feet again. It never had. He'd never really belonged to Rodney and it was sick and screwed up to want to.

He couldn't hide it completely, the sense of being in freefall. A shiver kept running through him and the bells gave him away. The Haralim frowned at him and John flinched and closed his eyes. She only pulled him closer and urged him to rest his cheek against her thigh with a firm hand on his neck. John kept his eyes closed, confused again as the world turned upside down. Rodney hated him and the Haralim was kind. He didn't understand or know what to do any longer.

He slept all night in her bed, waking once to the Rale slowly stoking his back, telling him to stay when John started to withdraw. He gave in to the warmth and comfort of bodies that didn't reject him and sank back into confused dreams of soaring over a rippling ocean that became the silvery-blue event horizon of an endless wormhole.

~*~

John didn't stop sleeping in the same bed as Rodney. Not quite. He just wasn't ever there when Rodney was. They both grew very good at pretending Rodney was asleep when they couldn't avoid each other. If Rodney took an extra dose, he was, and the chime of ankle bells would ring through his dazed dreams. A few mornings, he woke to the warmth of another body, to John's hand on his arm or an ankle hooked over his, their bodies familiarly fitted together in sleep, but those times always ended once John woke and let go, pulling himself away without any words.

He did his work in the library, translating, and his back healed completely. He'd scarred this time, despite Tein's salve. Infection. He tried to not think about it, couldn't see it without a mirror anyway, didn't allow himself to wonder what John saw.

He began to understand why eiff meant forgetting in Selketi. It wasn't just the pain of the whipping it let him forget.

Nothing hurt. It didn't mean anything. The information in the database was fascinating, but it didn't matter. Nothing did.

"Don't do that again," John said once, sitting on the lounge, apropos of nothing, as Rodney walked
Rodney stopped and stared at him. "What?" John barely spoke lately, at least to him, and he was surprised. He hadn't even realized that until that moment. It bothered him, but he knew it wouldn't bother him long.

John shrugged and looked away, eyes lowered. "Tell the Rale no."

"Hunh."

He wouldn't. It didn't seem so important anymore, defying the Rale, staying with John instead of being separated. Nothing was. John watched him across the table, intent, and Rodney couldn't meet his eyes. It made something twist inside him, the look on John's thin face, the way something in his gaze seemed to become sadder when he looked at Rodney.

"Okay," John said. "Okay, Rodney." Nothing else. He left not much later and didn't come back to sleep at all.

~*~


With a sigh, John obeyed, taking off the embroidered green vest and the black gauze pants and standing in the plain, yellow-walled room of the House of Moon Flowers. Lisha walked around him, then said, "Show me your hands."

John held out his hands, palms up. Lisha frowned at the delicate patterns. Without any formality, he took one of John's wrists and rotated his arm, following the swirling poetry Rodney had inscribed on his skin. It was all fading away. One finger traced over words in Ancient. John stared at the wall.

"This is too old," Lisha said. "I can't refresh it. The lines are blurring. It will have to go."

John nodded. He couldn't say it, but he knew. That was why he'd come to the flower house.

"I can't reproduce it either," Lisha added. "It will have to be one of the traditional patterns instead."

He paused and inspected John's body again, an artist learning his canvas. "Stay here."

"Vai," John whispered.

Lisha patted his shoulder. "Don't go all tense, it's nothing that hasn't been done to you before."

"Vai."

Lisha walked out and John waited, exactly the way he'd been trained to wait. It wasn't that different than standing at attention. During that long three months after the Haralim sent him to be trained he'd stood or knelt in rooms like this over and over. Maybe in this room. The soft yellow walls seemed familiar. A narrow band of dark green decorated where wall met ceiling.

He wondered if Rodney would notice, when he went back to their rooms, that John had new marks. Old marks, Selketti marks, instead of the ones that had reclaimed John's skin. He wondered if Rodney would notice if he didn't come back at all.

Rodney would notice if the eiff was gone. Not John.
He closed his eyes. Opened them and looked at his palms, the blurring, fading Ancient words there. Read them silently. *My love is like unto the stars that are not counted, my love is like the face of the sun, so shall my love last, until the ending that begins, and when the last star flares, shall still remain.* Words. Empty and unvoiced. He had no case for bitterness, John knew, when he'd never uttered any words at all.

Stupidly, he began the trace the lines on his palm with a forefinger, trying to memorize it anyway.

He didn't want to believe Rodney was addicted. Tein had said the *eiff* wasn't addictive. He'd asked, damn it. But if it was... John had given Rodney the first dose. He'd given him a dose every morning and evening, because Rodney didn't handle pain well and John couldn't handle seeing him suffer. If it was addictive, then John had played a part in making Rodney dependent on the drug.

It wasn't like Rodney wanted to be an addict. He'd hated the way the Wraith enzyme had made him feel, had actually asked to have the dose cut back, John remembered. He hadn't been there to see Rodney go through withdrawal, but he'd had a first hand view of what Ford went through. It had been bad, but Rodney had never hesitated, never turned back to it the way Ford had. Rodney was strong. Once he was healed, he'd quit using the *eiff*.

If it was addictive. John clenched his fists. If. If it wasn't, then...

A quiet step and John turned his head, expecting Lisha.

It was Dullah.

John caught his breath, stilled himself, even as his heart sped faster. Leaving the training barracks had meant never seeing the slave trainer except when he came there and after Rodney took over, not even then. It had been a relief he hadn't recognized until this moment.

Unconsciously, he began to move, to face Dullah fully.

"Be still," Dullah snapped.

John clenched his teeth and obeyed. Dullah walked behind him, circling, inspecting, examining him like a piece of meat on display for sale. He measured the muscle on John's arm, then ran hand over his buttocks and down his thigh. He pinched a fold a skin behind John's knee brutally. John twitched but held still. One hand on John's hip to steady him, Dullah commanded, "Foot."

John lifted his right foot. He stared at the green band at the top of the wall. Dullah's hands moved over his foot, checking for calluses. The feet of slaves grew tough, but that wasn't allowed in John's role.

"Too thin," he said as he let go of John's foot and moved away, leaving John to stagger and catch his balance. "More exercise." He tipped up John's chin and turned his face one way, then the other. "More rest. Less playing with the scholar. He's a bad influence."

John looked past him into the distance, a skill he'd perfected while still a cadet and practiced in more than one superior officer's presence.

Dullah cuffed him, a light blow that barely turned John's head. "Too proud, just like that one. Can't flog you, though. There are a enough scars on you already." He poked at the one left by Ellia, a blue
mark that John checked obsessively each day.

John pulled a sharp breath in through his nose and held onto the flare of anger inside. That was nothing. No beating, no flogging, could be worse than what he'd gone through in rooms like this one, with this man. A shiver ran through him as the disjointed, drugged memories rose up: dry lectures and sweat-sodden demonstrations, dose after dose of *dranzi*, until he writhed and begged for just one touch, until he abased himself, until he *pleased*. It hit like vertigo, a lurch in his stomach and the realization he was half-aroused, half-sick.

"The Haralim indulges you too much."

He realized he was shivering and sweating when Dullah laid his hand on his belly and held it there, staring into John's eyes. His breath hitched despite himself, as, finally, Dullah drifted his hand higher, up to John's sternum. He wanted to curl into a ball of shame because he'd wanted Dullah to shift his hand lower.

"The hair is coming back. You cannot go to the Haralim in such a disgraceful state, it brings shame to us all," Dullah snapped. "Lisha! In here, now!" He walked to the doorway, shouting for Lisha again.

Lisha stumbled in, brown eyes wary, hands full of paints and brushes.

Dullah knocked them to the floor. "Never mind that. Everything must be done again. Hair, feet, nails, scrub him down and start over."

"*Vai*, Lar Dullah," Lisha said.

"Hmph."

Dullah turned and looked at John again. "Tip his hair in red this time."

Lisha glanced at John and nodded. "That will look well."

"The Haralim intends to take this slave with her to Baratha," Dullah said. "He must reflect well on her or we are all discountenanced."

"Of course," Lisha agreed. He waited until Dullah had strode out of the room, then started cleaning up the fallen pots of ink.

John knelt and gathered up the brushes, then handed them to Lisha. His hands were shaking from a mixture of anger and relief. He'd been afraid Dullah would want him to perform and didn't know which would have been worse: if he couldn't or if he had, despite his revulsion.

"Come on," Lisha said, taking John's arm. "Hey, it's not so bad."

John couldn't answer. Not honestly. So he said nothing. Lisha shrugged at his silence, guiding him to the communal baths, with their thick mist of steam. "Scrub down, then we'll remove what's left of the ornament work and the body hair."

John stepped down into the hot water and began scrubbing, ignoring the five other slaves as he did so, the echo and splash of water and voices in the humid room. He scrubbed fanatically, until his skin had reddened and stung, and Lisha grabbed his hair and jerked John's head up. "Enough."
Hours later, John watched Lisha's intent expression as he finished brushing gold-tinted powder onto John's nipples. He'd been depilated, washed inside and out, buffed, painted, oiled and perfumed. Lisha had already made him spread his legs and slicked him before beginning with the paints. John had fallen back into the mind-space he'd retreated into during his first three months on Selket, so separate from his body that Lisha or Dullah could do anything to him and he wasn't embarrassed. Lisha's touch was clinical and without the edge of interest Dullah's always communicated. That made it easier.

Dullah inspected him again when Lisha finished, fussing and sliding a belt from John's waist down so that his hipbones were displayed, untangling the fringe of uneven gold chains hung from it, making sure John's nails were perfectly manicured, swiping a *dranzi*-laced gel over John's lips at the last second.

John went to the Haralim in a half-daze, the smooth tile under his feet singing up through his body, the swish of translucent black silk sliding along his legs making him itch to run his hands up and down it, each shift and swing of the fine chains hanging from the belt distracting him, the delicate weight of them like a caress over his groin. He prostrated himself before her and it felt like his whole body had gone liquid. Her voice made him shiver and he licked his lips over and over, even knowing he was absorbing more of the drug doing this to him.

It wasn't all the drug that made him want to touch.

John couldn't stay still. He edged closer and touched the stiff threads embroidered into her shoe. He wanted to tell someone about the green, that on his world, there were apples — a fruit — that were that exact shade of green. He rubbed his thumb over the silky threads, but that wasn't enough either. He trailed his hand up beyond the satin ribbons that tied her shoe on. Skin on skin, his fingers closing around her ankle, steadied him against the rolling waves of sensation the *dranzi* brought.

The Haralim paused in what she was saying to Nuret. John looked up and realized she was looking at him. He'd transgressed, he thought vaguely, initiated when he hadn't been invited. She traced a finger along his cheekbone. Heat melted into him from the path it took and John sighed. Her eyes narrowed. "Who gave you the *dranzi*?"

"Trainers," he murmured. Colors were sliding together, shimmering off everything and he had to close his eyes against the way they tasted, the sound of the green murmuring like a stream, the blue tiles shouting, earth brown a deep hum that vibrated through his veins. The Haralim's fingers soaked red and bronze into his skin.

"Idiots," she snapped. Sharp, sharp, sting-sounds against his skin, needle pricks that subsided into velvet caresses as her voice dropped to a gentler tone. "I don't want you like this when I can't enjoy you."

John bit back a soft moan, kept it inside, but tightened his fingers on her ankle. She felt like cinnamon. The moan became a breathless exhalation of relief as she tugged him closer and let him lean against her leg. Her hand came to rest on his nape and he nuzzled and mouthed the fine silk separating him from the heat of her body. Her perfume felt like a hot mouth moving over him, spice and musk and flowers. He was hard and aching for more sensation, but he could stay like this forever, because she was stroking her fingers over his neck, petting him fondly. Time slid away and he tipped his head, inviting more touching, then resting his head against her legs, curled as close as he could fit, riding the waves of sweet sensation until the drug finally released him.
He fell asleep and woke to the weight of her hand on his head, her voice pitched low as though it mattered that she not disturb him, felt drowsy and safe and pressed a kiss to her knee without thinking about it.

"He's pretty like this," Lalin remarked.

John pressed his face against the Haralim's leg, hiding, suddenly painfully humiliated, picturing how he'd been acting.

"Sometimes," the Haralim agreed.

She pushed John away and came to her feet, frowning down at the damp place on her skirts where he'd mouthed the fabric. John flushed and waited for whatever she wanted.

"John."

"Vai?"

"Go back to your quarters. Tell your scholar Malof has declared him well. A week from now, we will go to Baratha," the Haralim said. She smiled. "Let him enjoy you like this tonight, since he was so intransigent in his desire to remain with you."

Most of the dranzi's effects had passed, but the thought of Rodney pierced John with quick desire. He bowed forward, touched his forehead to the floor, whispering, "Thank you, my Hara," before rising and backing from the room.

Then he almost ran back to their quarters.

~*~

The image of John reclining on the white coverlet of their bed stopped Rodney as he came into the room. He stared. John stretched gracefully, black silk and bare skin, gold glints and painted eyes, and watched Rodney back, his mouth smiling. The ankle bells chimed. Rodney crossed the room to stop at the edge of the bed. So close he could inhale the scents of perfumed oils and musk. Crossed his arms over his chest and dug his fingers into his elbows.

John ran his hand down over his chest to his groin and tangled his fingers in the fine chains hanging from his belt. His pupils were blown huge, making his eyes look black. One knee was bent.

"Rodney," he said in invitation.

"Posing for The Odalisque?" Rodney asked. His voice cracked. He didn't want to deal with this tonight. He wanted to bathe and take his eiff and sleep.

"Rodney?" John asked. He had gone still and focused. Not as drugged as Rodney had thought.

"What are you doing here?"

John scooted up on the bed and sat up with his legs crossed. "Aside from living here?" he asked. He pushed the red-tipped fringe of his hair out of his eyes. Rodney noticed it and thought it was new, but he wasn't sure.

"Yes," Rodney replied, feeling grim. "You're usually with the Haralim at this time of day." That was why he'd come back when he had. John was usually sitting with the Haralim, entertaining her or
watching her play with Dalal. He'd heard enough about it by now to be sick of it. He had grown good at avoiding John.

"The Haralim was busy and I'm... Dullah dosed me with dranzi." John licked his lower lip and lowered his gaze. His fingers plucked restlessly at the gauzy pants. "Please?"

Wouldn't want a slave on dranzi there with the baby, Rodney thought, and knew it was waspish and jealous and not John's fault, but John was the only one he could strike out at. He couldn't do anything to the Haralim or the Rale, certainly not to a baby, but he had to strike out. John was his only target. John took it and sometimes that made Rodney even angrier, because the old John wouldn't have. The man he'd known in Atlantis would have decked him for the things he'd said in the last weeks, not backed away. It only made Rodney angrier with both of them.

He was tired of it, of the fear and frustration and anger. The eiff, at least, made it go away for a time.

"I'm tired of this," Rodney said truthfully. Tired of propping John up, pushing him away, tired of being tired, of Selket, of worry and helplessness. Guilty because John didn't have it easier just because he hadn't been whipped.

"Oh." John slid off the bed. He moved just as gracefully as ever. "Okay." He scrubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing color from his mouth. "You can — " He waved at the bed and then retreated into the washroom in a rustle-slide of silk, so white underneath the paint that Rodney anticipated hearing him vomit, but there was nothing except a rush of water into the tub.

He put aside his own wish for a bath and found his bottle of eiff.

~*~

John jerked off miserably in the bath, alone and unsatisfied. He closed his eyes and pretended it was Rodney's hand on him. It didn't work. Rodney's rejection had cut too deep this time. Even with the last of the dranzi buzzing through his system, he couldn't fool himself.

Frustrated, he let his mind drift and he worked his hand up and down, the hot water whispering over his skin. It had to be someone else's hand, someone else's touch, at least in his head, and he ached, arching into his own grip.

Rodney became someone darker, equally familiar in John's mind, and he gasped. Something in him broke.

"Djemet," he breathed out and shook through his orgasm, slipping under the water for a breathless, terrifying instant, coming harder as he held his breath and his vision, blurred ripple-light above him, grayed into blackness at the edges.

Gasping afterward, he held onto the edge of the tub with one hand and pressed his eyes against his forearm, wishing he'd drowned. "Sonuvabitch." Why couldn't he have imagined Zuleika? Why, why after so many nights when he had come to the Rale's touch while imagining Rodney in his place, did everything turn inside out? Why couldn't Rodney have just lain down with him and not said anything?

Because Rodney was hooked, he admitted to himself. Rodney was addicted to eiff, no matter what Tein had said. Whether it was physical or psychological didn't really matter. Rodney cared more for another dose than taking care of John's insecurities anymore.
John sat in the bath until the water chilled. He clutched at one idea.

They were both going with the Haralim to Baratha. There would be a chance, there would have to be a chance, to escape then. No matter how fucked he was in the head or how much Rodney needed eiff, they could deal with it once they were free.

~*~

They walked to the stargate and John's breath caught as the Haralim herself pressed the appropriate glyphs for Baratha. He memorized the origin marking for Selket, uncertain why, but needing to do it. The Haralim set her hand down on the center crystal of the DHD and the stargate activated, making John shiver. Light chased itself around the rim of the gate and the wormhole splashed sideways, the rush of energy that looked like rushing water so familiar it hurt.

The energy subsided into the placid liquid surface of an open wormhole and the first guards proceeded through, while the Haralim stepped back into her palanquin.

He followed.

And, somewhere behind him, Rodney eventually stepped through the wormhole, too, and out into the shock of rain.

The cobblestones of Baratha felt cold and filthy under John's feet. Rough edges cut into his soles and he shivered and pulled the robes he was swathed in tighter, walking head down in the procession behind Zuleika's palanquin, as they wound through the narrow streets toward the Royal Palace. A steady, miserable drizzle soaked through the silks and linen, left them clinging to his skin, half-transparent, outlining his body. Three and four storey buildings of stone and wood hemmed in the overcast sky, the walls dark and wet, smoke belching from iron chimney pots. Behind and in front, the Barathans escorted them, pushing aside an locals willing to stand in the rain to gawk.

The rain slowly soaked the palanquin, too, turquoise and emerald dappled darker and darker, heavy drops of water dangling like cabochon diamonds from the tarnished tassels, then falling to the fouled road.

Mud squelched between John's toes. He kept his head down, trying to avoid the worst puddles, suspecting the gutters were running with sewage, but water still beaded on his eyelashes and ran down his cheeks.

It had been so long since he had been offworld. Off Selket. Baratha felt wrong. Different atmospheric pressure, different altitude, different magnetic fields, fractionally heavier gravity, too cold, too damp, sour and unhealthy after the arid spice and heat of ho ? Selket. Selket, he repeated in his mind, wasn't home.

Home was…salt sea and sky, the stargates and the long dark between the stars, Teyla's subtle grace and Ronon's rumbling laugh and Rodney's crowing delight at another discovery. Home was not red walls or Zuleika and Djemet and their child.

If he could change her, change the way she was raised, convince her that all of Selket was wrong, it would still remain the same. Doing so wouldn't be for Dalal, he admitted in the quiet of his own thoughts. It would be his blow against Selketti, against the Haralim and the Rale, and it would serve only to make Dalal an outsider and unhappy. There was nothing for him to hold onto. Dalal would never be his child in any way that mattered.
But she was loved. He had seen that when Zuleika held her and even when the Rale did. Dalal was treasured and cherished already. She would never need him.

The best he could hope for Dalal to have would be happiness, what he would wish for any child. It wasn't something he could give, only what he could take away. Whatever Zuleika had been looking for when she handed Dalal to him, it hadn't been there. Whether that had pleased her or not, he could not tell. But he thought they were both better off without it.

He pegged Baratha as about a Victorian level of technology with a few glaring differences, including the battery packs they produced. Whatever high technology they had? likely something left over from either a previous civilization knocked down by the Wraith or left by the Ancients? it didn't extend to objecting to slavery or indoor plumbing and the only lights he saw were of the fuel and flame variety.

The Barathans greeted the Selketi embassy with an interminable ceremony presided over by the Minister of Trade, Lord Vemolk. As Zuleika's Chosen, John had to kneel on dank stone while formal compliments and their responses were exchanged. Any heat left in him leached out through his aching knees and he began to shiver despite himself. By the time the Haralim and her entourage withdrew to the Palace guest quarters, he had his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering audibly.

Technically, the Barathans might not keep slaves, but as far as John could tell their servants came from a class that had fewer rights than he and Rodney did on Selket. They certainly had a lower standard of living. The Barathans didn't have slave barracks, so they'd assigned the Haralim's slaves to two tiny rooms in the servants' quarters. John had slept in prison cells that were better appointed and roomier.

He and Rodney took the smaller room with the single pallet and left the larger one to Nuret, Fasen, and Pesha? the three other slaves who had accompanied the Haralim's entourage: body servant, cook and clerk. A single candle lit the narrow room. Rodney looked around, his mouth turning down and his hands running convulsively up and down his upper arms. "I can't believe they kept us all waiting in the damn hall until the reception was over. They couldn't banish the rest of us up here while you all played political footsie? I'm going to die of pneumonia."

John glanced around and grimaced. The ceiling was sloped so low he had to hunch over. He shivered again and lowered his voice to be sure it didn't carry into the next room, "Did you get a count on how many guards were stationed at the stargate?"

Rodney was pulling one of the chests that had come with them into the middle of the room and opening it. "What?"

"Guards," John hissed. "On the stargate. There were at least two at the DHD. I couldn't see more without giving myself away. " The guards who had accompanied the Haralim were focused on her security, not stopping escape attempts by slaves, and from what he'd seen of the city, the average Barathan wouldn't care to stop them. If they could make it past the security around the stargate, they might have a chance.

Rodney knelt and began pawing through the chest, tossing clothes carelessly aside. "Oh. Hah!" He lifted out a carved rosewood box and unlocked it. John frowned at the contents, the pots and brushes, earrings and armlets, all the paraphernalia used to adorn him for the Haralim. Of course, it had come with them; if she required him, she would require him to appear painted and bejeweled. Had Rodney been worried about that?
"Rodney," he said. "The guards?"

"I didn't notice," Rodney replied. He plucked a lavender bottle from the coffer. The candle flicker reflected off the glass, the slow syrup slide of its content angling to a new level as it tipped in Rodney's fingers. John looked away. Damn it, anyway. Outside the tiny window it still rained and the day was gray and leaden dull. Rodney didn't notice.

The room had no glasses, nothing, and if the pale and malnourished looking servants were any guide, they could expect little or nothing in the way of meals beyond what Fasen prepared. Rodney looked around then shrugged, before opening the bottle and sipping directly from it. The spice-like scent of the eiff mingled with the tallow smoke from the candle and the sour smell of mold and damp.

John quietly began changing into dry clothes by himself. There were two threadbare towels and bowl of water. He used one to dry his hair and then washed his feet. Rodney put the bottle of eiff away and straightened the clothes he'd disturbed retrieving it. His eyelids drooped and his movements slowed, until he stood at a seeming loss, a cotton shirt dangling from his hands. If John looked in his eyes, they would be dilated and unfocused. He let John guide him to the pallet and sank down compliantly, sighing as John competently stripped him of his still damp clothes, dressed him in a loose shirt and pants, then twitched the paltry blanket over him.

Nuret cleared her throat from the doorway. She'd changed as well, into the traditional white slave garb and a vest of blue-green. "The Haralim commands your presence, Chosen."

John sighed soundlessly. He would go to her, of course. He was tired and angry with Rodney, but a command from the Haralim had to be obeyed. He had no choice. Part of him was relieved to walk away from Rodney anyway. Wherever the Haralim was would be more comfortable than this damp room. Rodney was unconscious.

Rodney's eyes were already closed, incongruously thick lashes still damp and clumped together, his face slack in sleep. He wouldn't even know John had gone. John nodded and stepped away from the pallet. He padded into the next room and said, "Someone tell him where I've gone if he wakes?"

Pesha looked up from straightening the contents of his scribe's case. "I will watch him. But the eiff will keep him until morning."

John closed his eyes for a second. Everyone knew then, everyone in the city: the tale of Rodney's defiance and punishment had circulated even beyond its walls in all likelihood. "Thank you," he said. All of that, all Rodney had suffered, and now he couldn't pull it together enough to count the guards at the gate. Didn't care enough to think about making a run for the stargate or he would never have taken the latest dose of eiff.

If he let himself think about it any longer, John thought he might turn back to the second room, the thin pallet, the sleeping man and hurt him until woke and understood what he'd just done to himself. To both of them. His hands closed into fists for a instant, then he breathed the rage out. He couldn't afford it or live with its results.

Recklessness had cost him more than once. He'd finally learned patience.

Pesha nodded.

John drew the red veil up of his face and shrugged once, settling silk fluidly into place, charms
ringing against each other, then paced out behind Nuret, joining one of the guards sent with the entourage, then following them through the bewildering labyrinth of the palace's halls to the Haralim's rooms again. Patience, he told himself, patience and acceptance. This was what it was; he was what he was. He held his head up to present the best effect, just the way he walked seducing the eye, and the guard with them growled twice at a Barathan to stay away.

"There will be a state dinner tomorrow to honor my visit," the Haralim declared when the guards closed the door behind John, locking him in with her. He knelt automatically, bowing his head without fully prostrating himself before her? she seldom demanded that from him of late. The carpet on the floor could not compare to the masterpieces the Selketi produced and needed cleaning when seen from a close approach. The guest quarters the Haralim occupied were the absolute opposite of the servants' cubby he'd come from, the furniture baroque and stiff, gilded and decorated to a dizzying extent, but still seemed poor and primitive. "Stand up. You will be with me when I dine."

"Vai, hara," he said after he'd risen to his feet.

John waited. Awkward paintings of Barathan nobility heroically defending the people from the Wraith graced the walls. The paintings were awful, he thought. The frames were silver — real silver —? and tarnish gleamed iridescent as oil on the black in the crevices.

The Haralim raised an eyebrow, following his gaze. "Does this world remind you of yours?" she asked.

John blinked at her, vaguely shocked. She didn't often…talk to him. He licked his lip nervously. "My world," he said hoarsely. She watched him struggle for an answer. Finally, he finished, "No." Neither Earth nor Atlantis had been like Baratha. He wondered, again, if she truly cared or was only bored. He thought she felt something for him—not what she felt for the Rale—but affection of a sort. She was seldom cruel, often generous, and he wished he could talk to her, sometimes.

That need scared him. He needed Rodney, but Rodney had given up on him. He couldn't summon the easiness with others that he had before Afghanistan, that he'd counterfeited afterward, or the inner resources that let him live in contented aloofness in Antarctica. He needed someone to fill in the hollows that had been scooped out him.

"I did not think so," she murmured, walking to the bed, made up from a frame and mattress their company had brought with them, green sheets and thick wool blankets, velvet pillows, bright as jewels in the the light of oil lamps. She gestured to John to join her and slid into the bed. "I dislike this world. It is too cold. Keep me warm."

"Vai, hara," he murmured again, and obeyed. So, she literally wanted a bed-warmer tonight. He could do that and admit, in the quiet of his own mind, that it felt good. Rodney hadn't let him so close since the whipping and John desperately missed the contact, even more than the sex.

Zuleika curled close to him and threaded her fingers through his hair absently, petting him. The warmth of their bodies and each shift released perfumed incense from the pillows. John shifted closer to her, fitting them together. It felt natural. Their bodies knew how to match up. He thought Rodney would be cold in the narrow pallet in the servants' quarters. He wouldn't know it, though, nor that John wasn't there. The man John had known seemed gone.

He pressed his lips to Zuleika's skin and hoped he never lost her favor.

_I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when_
he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. He shivered and Zuleika ran her hand down his spine.

"What are you speaking?" Zuleika asked and John realized he had been whispering the words in English against her neck.

"The Song of Solomon," he said, not even remembering when or how he'd come to read it. In a bible in some posting, while waiting on the flight line for a mission go or a hotel room on leave. He didn't know. Sexiest thing in the Bible someone had joked and he read it and remembered the words.

"Sleep," she said.

John kissed her collarbone, feather light, without thinking about it, and pulled her closer.

*By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not.*

He felt her body soften into sleep, slow breaths, slack hands, and sank into a warm half-doze himself, still cautiously watchful despite the presence of Selketi guards outside the room. His eyes closed against the lamp-light flicker, red-orange dark through his eyelids. Pictures formed in his mind, that he kept at a careful distance when lucidly conscious, fantasies and wild dreams.

He breathed in, Zuleika's hair brushing against his cheek and lips, remembering where he was and where he wasn't. He couldn't indulge the fantasy that he meant more to Zuleika than a pleasant convenience and he'd never be more than something owned to Dalal.

In this strange bed, caught between giving up and running, he let himself think about Dalal.

He could walk away from Dalal. He couldn't walk away from Rodney, not even now. How hard would it be to slip out of the bed, make his way to the facilities, knock someone over the head for their clothes and run for the stargate? He could do it, even now, and gate to any of the worlds he'd told Rodney to go to, keep gating until no pursuer could guess and follow.

All he had to do was abandon Rodney to agony and death.

He couldn't and part of him raged at himself and Rodney for forcing him to even consider it, when imagining it was all he could do.

He blinked his eyes open again and shifted, finally warm, letting Zuleika slip away from his arms. Letting half asleep fantasies slip away too.

The lamp flickered, smoke staining the glass chimney. The oil level had dropped too low. The flame inside was eating the wick, sending up sooty smoke. John wondered if maybe Rodney didn't have the best idea after all. Maybe the only escape lay in forgetting themselves. Let go of the past and accept where and who they were now.

~*~

He spent the next day kneeling just to the side of the Haralim's seat, aware of the guards flanking them both, struggling not to zone out while endless formalities were exchanged. The Haralim's voice never wavered or raised and he knew her expression gave nothing away, but John felt her impatience where her hand rested on the back of his neck, as her fingers flexed and her nails sliced into his skin. The Barathans wanted an improved trade agreement with Selket and mistakenly entertained the delusion the Haralim would be easier to negotiate with than the Rale had been. It almost amused him,
as Zuleika twisted Lord Vemolk into knots. It occurred to him that the Selketi would eat the Genii for breakfast. No one in the City of Seven Walls would waste an entire nuclear device to take out one man. Assassination would serve far better, a knife in the night or poison in the morning.

"The Great Culling has begun a generation early," Vemolk said. He folded his hands before him. Something about him gave away an avidness his solemn words did not. "Many worlds wish to purchase the firepacks."

"Selket and Baratha have done business for many years," the Haralim replied. "But Selket will survive if you breach the agreement between our worlds. And when those other worlds have been culled and there are none to trade with Baratha, Selket will remain." Unspoken, the taunt that perhaps Baratha itself might not hung in the air between them. Vemolk's courtiers stirred uneasily.

"No world is safe from the Wraith."

"Indeed," she agreed. "Yet the Great Veil hides our world from their hive ships. They come to Selket only through the Ancestors' Ring."

"Selket is blessed." Vemolk looked sour. His hands tightened on each other and the knuckles went white.

The Haralim chuckled, a rich low sound. "Better to grow old in the desert than feed the Wraith in paradise," she quoted.

"There are other worlds the Wraith do not hunt," Vemolk said.

"But they are so very, very cold," the Haralim pointed out in a sultry purr, "and we Selketi are hotblooded." She stroked her hand along John's cheek.

One of the courtiers tittered, but Vemolk's pale eyes just weighed John, a small moue of distaste pursing his lips. John stretched, arching his neck into the Haralim's hand, watching Vemolk back without blinking.

"Tomorrow, we will view these treasures of the Ancestors you have promised my husband," the Haralim declared. "If they please us sufficiently, Lord Vemolk, then the payment for the firepacks will be increased by one percentage point."

"These are very rare."

"And little more than curiosities, when none know the words of the Ancestors or the way of their machines," the Haralim interrupted.

Vemolk coughed and nodded his accession finally.

The Haralim looked out the condensation-fogged windows. "Does it never stop raining on this world?"

~*~

The morning had already passed the half-way point to midday when Rodney blinked bleary eyes open. The room and the blanket over him both felt clammy. Dim light painted everything gray. He felt achy and lightheaded. He needed something to eat, quickly.
He dressed first, noting in passing that the trunks containing John's costumes were unlocked, that their wet clothes from the day before were all hung neatly over pieces of furniture to dry as much as they might. His feet were cold. Someone had washed the mud from between his toes. John, he knew. The idea of that, John washing his feet, seemed strange and weighted with something Rodney preferred not to think about.

Pesha was in the next room. He was reading a small book, hardly larger than his tea-colored hand, bound in red leather. He glanced up as Rodney padded into the room. "There is tea and paratha. A pot of something the Barathans brought up, too. I wouldn't touch it if I was starving." He inclined his head to a rickety sideboard, where a kettle of water was suspended over a tiny brazier, a covered plate and a ugly pot were sitting. Rodney lifted the lid off the pot and silently decided Pesha was right. It looked like some kind of gruel, thin and grayish and dotted with dobs of white fat congealed on top. He made a pot of tea for himself and Pesha and slowly chewed several pieces of paratha.

"John?" he asked eventually.

Pesha turned a tissue-thin page and flicked his gaze up to rest on Rodney. The light was bad and Rodney wondered how Pesha could even read, but the room was cold and quiet. There was nothing to do and nowhere a slave could go. They could only wait until they were summoned to serve. Rodney had always been bad at waiting, resenting the loss of his precious time, the work he might be doing, or if not work, then doing something he would enjoy. Pesha was born to this life, Selketi, child of another slave, either taken from offworld or, considering his coloring, likely someone stripped of all rights and forced into slavery. He knew how to wait with a silent patience like a stone.

"The Chosen is with the Haralim," Pesha told him.

Rodney nodded.

The tea warmed him and he kept his hands folded around the handleless cup, savoring the heat transferring through the fine ceramic and into his fingers. His shoulders ached. The skin had healed, he knew that, John's fingers told him that, ghosting over the scars, but even now he felt sore. Restless as well, as if his skin had regrown too tight, and he itched. It occurred to him that the pallet he'd slept on may have had bugs. Baratha didn't look like a world where hygiene ruled. At least Selket had baths and soap. He poured himself more tea and vowed to use those baths just as soon as they returned from this benighted world.

Pesha turned another page.

It was still raining outside. Rodney watched the hypnotic slide of water down the window and absently finished the last of the paratha, wishing for honey to go with it. Or eiff syrup. He winced, remembering the night before. John had wanted to know something, had been talking to him, but he'd been cold and uncomfortable and so tired he'd barely heard him. Hadn't paid any attention to what he wanted to know, more intent on finding the eiff he'd made sure to pack. Thinking it would take the edge off the awful way Baratha had made him feel.

"Have you got anything else with you I could read?" he asked. He didn't want to think about last night any longer. The bottle of eiff was still in the other room.

"No," Pesha answered.

Pesha was a scribe, brought along to record any agreements, so surely he had that paper and ink with him. Rodney could work out the equations he meant to hide in the next poem he'd paint on John.
Describing John and quantum mechanics were surprisingly easy, but he'd been unable to concentrate lately. Even translating seemed harder. His mind tended to wander onto tangents that left him staring blankly at his work, wondering where he'd been. Too many distractions, Rodney told himself.

"Paper and ink?"

"Needed for my duties."

Rodney opened his mouth to protest that a few sheets would surely make no difference and his work was far more important than any ridiculous agreement between the Selketi and the Barathans anyway, but the words didn't come. All he could think of was what punishment Pesha might receive if he embarrassed the Haralim by failing to have enough supplies. It wouldn't be refusing to do his duty, but it would still carry a cost.

He finished his tea without saying anything more. The calculations he needed to do were too complex to handle in his head, no matter how intelligent he was: he wasn't a mathematical savant. But there was more to the Ancients' approach to physics than mere numbers. Even the silvery tracks of the rain running down the window had something to tell him, the interaction of so many variables, from gravitic to the atomic weight of the hydrogen in the raindrops, to the force of his will. He could tap his finger against the glass and the vibration would change the path the water followed and if he accepted all he'd learned from the database on Selket, he could do the same with his mind. That was the path to ascension. It was frustratingly circular to his mind: he could if he was and he would be when he did. It was will and intention acting upon the physical world. And all of it was in effect an illusion, reality as human senses comprehended, even with sensors and science, no more than a veil beyond which the first truths of the formation of the universe existed. The universe they knew was no more than the surface of an ocean and though the surface was always continuous, at the same time evaporation and condensation were acting on it, storms moved it, warping and shaping it in waves and ripples, even throwing up spray, droplets of water like separate universes with their own continuous surface. For the Ancients, physics and philosophy hadn't been separate at all, and the same studies that eventually led them to Ascension had opened the way to creating ZPMs, or perhaps the search for energy sources had resulted in their own translation into energy beings, consciousness freed from the surface.

Frustrated, Rodney paced until Pesha snapped his book closed and glared.

He went back to the smaller room he and John had claimed and sat on the pallet, pulling the thin blanket around him. There was nothing to do. He scratched at his arms, blaming the poor quality blanket. His back ached. A shudder ran through him. He willed the room to warm. It didn't. He hadn't believed it would. He wanted to go home, where the sun burned off red sand and pots of spicy scented moa were on every window sill, and the big bed he shared with John would let him sleep.

The eiff would let him sleep too.

The little bottle was right there.

A gust of wind rattled the tiny window and a chilled draft curled around the dreary little room.

Just a little, he decided.

Just a little.

~*~
Rodney was curled under the blanket again when John returned to change for the formal reception. The Haralim wanted him in red again, with the ankle bells. In deference to the chill, he was allowed a shirt and over-robe, both decorated in curling Selketi glyphs. He painted his own face, using a mirror Nuret provided.

"Did he eat, at least?" he asked Pesha.

"Paratha and tea."

The little bottle was sitting next to the coffer with the rouge and gold-tinted powders. John picked it up and held it to the light. Half empty. Still half full. He reined in the impulse to dump it all out along with the angry wish to shake Rodney awake. He had had no opportunity to look for a chance at escape and Rodney had wasted the long hours of an empty day in which he could have found out so much.

"Tell him I'll be with the Haralim all night," he said instead.

"This is not a good place," Pesha murmured.

John stood in the doorway and looked back at Rodney. Shadows painted hollows under his cheekbones and his eyes. He looked bruised and thin. He'd lost weight after the whipping and hadn't gained it back yet. His hair needed cutting. One hand, left outside the cocoon of the blanket, curled and twitched.

He nodded, agreeing with Pesha. Baratha wasn't a good place. But it wasn't Baratha that troubled Rodney.

~*~

The Haralim dined the next day with Vemolk and two ministers of science. John knelt on the floor beside her chair. She absently fed him from her plate and listened to them talk, detailing the objects they had found in a buried building during excavations not far from their stargate. A sewer had backed up during a particularly brutal winter and what appeared to be an Ancestors' building had been uncovered during the repairs. A cornucopia of objects had been recovered from the interior after the Barathans used brute force to break in.

John suppressed a snort. They were damned lucky they hadn't all been killed. The Ancients hadn't been exactly conscientious about cleaning up their more lethal experiments behind them. They might not have ever found a way to beat the Wraith, but they'd displayed a more than human ability to come up with things that killed humans. Especially if you factored in races like the Asurans and the Wraith themselves, both products of the Ancients' meddling.

The Barathans had no one who could even read the Ancestors' language, apparently, and no way to guess what they'd found. Rodney would be happy, though. Maybe looking over what had been found would shake him out of the haze of eiff and depression that had hold of him. Apparently the chance to look for an escape hadn't been enough or Rodney hadn't believed there was a real chance. John didn't think there had been, either, but they could have tried.

Nuret tapping his foot, one finger, chilled, nearly made him flinch, but John held still. She had padded into the room so silently the Barathans hadn't even noticed her, he realized, then dropped to the floor behind the Haralim's chair. He curled his toes to let her know he was aware of her. Her fingers traced the silent slave's code along his ankle, just below the belled fetters. It was a simple code in this form, without the intricacies available with speech and visible signs. He had to
concentrate to make sense of it.

He couldn't help tensing as he realized what she was telling him.

Rodney was supposed to be checking the items the Barathans were offering, activating them with his gene if possible, and figuring out whether they were worth purchasing, only he'd taken another dose of *eiff*. No one could snap him out of the daze it had put him in. The Barathans would return soon to the room where he and Pesha were supposed to be working and nothing had been accomplished.

Thinking of how Rodney would be punished for this made John shudder violently, despite his training, hard enough it caught the Haralim's attention. Her hand caught under his jaw and lifted his face to look in her eyes. She frowned at him. John shuddered again, not even trying to hide it.

"Hara?" Vemolk asked.

The Haralim ignored him, still studying John. She gave a sharp nod. "Are you cold, John?"

"Vai, hara," he said.

"Go, take Freka and have Fasen make you both a pot of tea and something to eat." The pinch of her lips told him she disliked the Barathans' food that they had been served so far as much as he did. "I'm sure you are terribly bored here anyway."

"No one could ever be anything but delighted in your company, Hara," John said dutifully.

"Sweet words from sweet lips," the Haralim murmured. She touched his mouth in a light caress and he kissed her fingertips before rising and backing from the room. His knees ached after kneeling so long. Freka, who was stationed at the door, followed him out into a drafty corridor.

Nuret was waiting, her dark eyes filled with anxiety. "Chosen, your Ro'ney, he does nothing, just dreams."

Freka loomed beside John, gesturing to another guard to take his place within the dining hall. "Too much *eiff*," Freka said.

John snapped around to look at him. His sharp movements made the ankle bells ring discordantly. "Tein said it wasn't addictive," he hissed.

"It takes some people that way," Freka replied.

Nuret plucked at John's wrist. "Please come. There must be something you can do."

Freka's big hand was warm against the small of his back. "Come," he said, and pushed John to follow Nuret.

~*~

Rodney was tracing untranslatable equations on the cloth-covered surface of a table littered with Ancient gear. This room looked like it had been a ballroom. The floor was hardwood and polished while the ceilings were high. Lamps were lit again though it was only mid-afternoon. A bank of large windows took up one wall, but the persistent overcast outside made the room dim, even with the lamps burning. Whatever purpose the room had once filled, now it served as storage for whatever the Barathans had excavated from their Ancient site. Rough boots had trampled and scored the floor.
John felt gouges in it under his feet.

Rodney's eyes weren't unfocused, but whatever he was seeing wasn't visible to anyone else. He twitched when John set a hand on his shoulder, but ignored him otherwise.

"Rodney, hey, buddy," John said. He kept his voice down. Nuret hovered a few feet away, next to Pesha, while Freka had joined two Barathan guards near the door and engaged them in conversation. Distracting them, John knew. "You in there?"

Rodney waved a hand at him in irritation. "I've almost got it. Do you see?"

"I don't see anything," John said.

Rodney half turned and blinked at him. "What? It's right here..." He looked down at the blank, bleached cloth on the nearest table and froze. "No, no, it was — I had it all here. John, I understood it! Ascension, zero point energy, it's the same thing, I had the proofs right here. I—I—" He stuttered into silence.

John closed his hand around Rodney's biceps and turned him away from the table. He rubbed his hand along the tense muscle, holding back his own panic, trying to be soothing. Rodney's eyes were dilated and faint dew of perspiration dampened his temples, despite the persistent Barathan chill. His mouth parted on words that wouldn't come.

"Rodney, stick with me here, okay?" John whispered. He flicked his gaze toward the Barathan guards and Freka meaningfully. "Whatever you figured out, you can rework it when we're home. This is no place to start taking apart the universe, okay? We need to know which these gizmos is worth buying and get out of here."

"It wasn't real?" Rodney asked in a whisper. The horror that rushed over his face made John tighten his grip on him. "It wasn't—Oh, God. I'm losing it."

"No, you're not," John gritted out. "Not here, not now."

Rodney sucked in two deep breaths. "Right, yes, there's never any time, there's never a chance to just think about anything, it's full speed ahead and, hurry up, McKay, save the day."

"I don't know about saving the day," John said. "How about settling for our skins?"

He immediately regretted his words. Rodney flinched and hunched over, his eyes flying open wide and wet, glittering with fear. "No, no, I can do it."

"I know you can," John said, wincing inside.

Rodney turned back to the table and picked up a greenish-bronze object the size of a car battery. It took both his hands to lift. His fingers fitted into angled grooves incised in its sides and a column of Ancient letters still vibrantly black and seemingly part of the case, not painted or printed on it, ran down the right side of the top. John leaned closer, looking at it over Rodney's shoulder, his chest pressed against Rodney's back.

"What is it?"

"And I would know that by just hefting it?" Rodney snapped.
John suppressed a grin. He'd missed that more than anything, that acid scorn Rodney used to pour out over everyone. "Well, what does it say?" He leaned a little harder against Rodney.

"If you make me drop this, John..." Rodney peered at the writing. It was Ancient, but extremely stylized, reminding John of some pain-in-the-ass fonts he'd run across on the Internet. "Uhm. It's a... Lovely. It's a vacuum cleaner."

John pulled back and frowned at the item. "Really?"

"That's what it says: all in one house cleaning appliance, with a power source guaranteed to last over a hundred years or your credits back," Rodney said as dryly as possible. It was easy to fall into their old dynamic, if only briefly. John relished the glimpse of Rodney the way he'd been before.

John snickered. "I suppose it's pretty dead by now?"

"Very."

Rodney set the cleaning appliance down and moved down the table to a bright blue, waxy looking, fist-sized oblong. He frowned at it. John followed him and frowned too. Rodney traced a finger over the surface, making a faint squeaky sound, then rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "Hunh."

"Hunh?" John echoed.

Rodney stroked his finger back over the oblong.

"What is it?" John prompted him, he leaned closer and looked over Rodney's shoulder.

"Oh. I don't know. I was thinking that if the ZPMs aren't in fact batteries in the sense of containing a finite amount of energy leached or drained from subspace, but rather conductors with a finite operating span, possibly deliberately engineered?"

John gritted his teeth and shook Rodney's shoulder. "Rodney. Focus."

Rodney twitched. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry, I just can't concentrate. This is, this is some kind of toy. I don't know. Maybe. Nothing useful."

John followed him as Rodney went through the objects. There were holographic books, a lifesign detector, pieces of what might have been a prototype shield generator, and two crates worth of control crystals and the touch sensitive panels that covered most Ancient consoles. Rodney had him hold an object and initialize four times. It worked three. The fourth object looked like the personal shield they'd found in Atlantis, but was already drained. Rodney looked at it sadly and John knew he wanted to take it apart and study it, but it went on the useless list.

Rodney lost track of what he was doing twice more, his mind wondering back into the safe, fascinating regions of theoretical astrophysics. John wondered if he even remembered where he was when it happened and if it was a hallucination, one without real value, the way getting high made it seem like you had grasped the secrets of the universe or if everything that had happened had driven Rodney into retreating so deep into his own thoughts that he became lost. Had the eiff only pried open cracks that were already there?

He realized Freka had been keeping close watch on them when Rodney finished with the last item,
one they both looked at warily, recognizing a duplicate of the containment cage that had held the black energy creature in Atlantis. It appeared dead, all power gone, but neither of them wanted to touch it. Rodney finally ran his hand over the controls. Nothing. "Whatever was inside is long gone," he said and stepped back.

Freka left the Barathan guards and joined them. "Done, Ro'ney?"

Rodney jolted and cringed away. Freka had never laid a violent hand on him that John knew of, but Rodney had the same reaction to every guard since the whipping. It made John's stomach twist with anger and sympathy. "Yes, yes, I'm done," Rodney babbled quietly. "John helped or it would have taken mu? much longer."

"Good, we'll go back to your quarters then. Pesha has the list for the Haralim," Freka said. "Fasen will have a meal for us ready."

"Oh, yes, good, I? John, are you coming with me?"

John nodded and let Freka shepherd them both out and back to the servant's quarters, while Pesha and Nuret hurried away on their own business.

~*~

A smothering blanket of heat wrapped around Rodney as he stepped through the stargate back onto Selket. His hair still dripped, but the air burned in his lungs, arid and dust-laden. Morning, wet and mud-splashed, on Baratha gave way in one breath and step to late afternoon on Selket. The shadows of the guard towers stretched long and black over the plaza, while the sickle curve of the stargate's shadow reaching the base of the ambo on the other side.

Ahead, the Haralim's palanquin and her procession progressed toward the towering crimson walls of the fortress, cleaving through the crowds like the bow of a ship. Selketi cleared the way like water, like a high pressure wave pushed out in front of her.

Rodney shivered as the water in his clothes began evaporating.

"Move, move," someone behind him yelled and he forced his feet to take him forward, to follow. Somewhere just behind the palanquin, John had already passed this way.

He kept his head down, watching where he stepped, but the streets of Selket were clean, though dusty. After Baratha, Selket seemed welcoming, even to the spicy scents of food cooking in the bazaars. It disturbed him deeply that he was grateful to be back, but he was.

They walked through the Gate of Claws and into the first circle of the fortress. Behind the procession the gate closed, sending a reverberation through the stones under Rodney's feet. Ahead of them, the great doors of the Gate of Teeth swung open only to close behind them, this time with a clang to rival every bell in the city. The walls grew thicker and older as they progressed inside, passing through the Gates of Swords and Knives, through the Mouth and the Throat, and finally, through the Fire Gate into the palace proper, inside the city of seven walls.

The Ancient pieces that the Haralim had purchased on Rodney's advice had to be delivered to the storage rooms off the library. Rodney oversaw that, checked that each item on the list Pesha had made had indeed made it through the stargate, entering it into the library's inventory, and watching that it was put away according to Macha's system. Working with Piele was better than Pesha. Rodney hated the way the native scribe had seemed to sneer without ever saying anything. Piele was
always quiet and deferential and though Rodney had always preferred to work with colleagues willing to raise their voices in response to his rants, he found that prospect too daunting now.

John was bathed and dry and wearing a red-bronze silk robe when Rodney stumbled into their rooms. His mouth quirked into a bitter smile as he took in Rodney's appearance: the clothes that had dried on him in a million wrinkles and his hair sticking up in mad tufts. John looked sleek and at perfect ease. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed. Every speck of paint, all the designs the Selketi admired, had been scrubbed away.

Rodney licked his lips, nervousness rising through him. If he looked closer, John wasn't relaxed at all and his eyes looked bruised.

"John," he said, lacking any idea of what else to say. His thoughts had been circling and circling since the day before. What had happened to him back there? He'd lost time, lost his calculations, lost track even of who and where he was. Without John beside him he could never have finished his task.

His breath caught in his chest. Had the *eiff* done that to him? That was actually preferable to the other possibility: that his mind had crumbled under the stress. He'd rather be an addict than that. He could stop using the *eiff*. He didn't have to have it, it wasn't a habit. It wasn't. Rodney remembered how it felt to burn for the Wraith enzyme, the way he couldn't concentrate, the way he would have hurt someone, done anything? anything? for just a taste. He'd thought he'd die without it. He'd wanted to die to get away from that awful need. He didn't need *eiff* like that.

He didn't.

What if they were never taken offworld again? What if it was only one of them the next time? He couldn't endure another whipping. He didn't know why this last one had been too much, when he'd endured them before. But he couldn't, anymore than John could stand up to even the threat of the *moa*. Thinking about it made him shiver and curl his fingers around the bottle of *eiff* in his pocket. He swallowed and his throat felt too tight.

*Oh God.*

John's smile faded. "The Haralim dismissed me for the night," he said, echoing his words two weeks before. No *dranzi* this time, no invitation, just a detached statement.

"Oh," Rodney said. "Oh. That's...good." He waved at the entry into the bathing room. "I'll just wash. I have this suspicion that there were crawling things in that ridiculous excuse for a mattress. Please tell me the Haralim had something better. I really find it difficult to comprehend how a society that manufacture battery packs for neural stun weapons can't master central heating?"

Of course, the Barathans weren't really capable of manufacturing the battery packs. Maybe once, but now they only had initiates running an antiquated factory by rote. He'd listened through most of the time spent packing the Ancient finds and learned that much. The current Barathan monarchy had risen to power in the interval after the last Great Culling, but the battery pack factory had existed farther back than written or oral Barathan histories reached.

John neither answered or moved, just watched him, until Rodney couldn't bear it and retreated into the bathroom. He stripped out of his clothes, stopping only to fish the bottle of *eiff* from his pocket and set it on the counter, then ran hot water into the tub. He was neck deep and scrubbing viciously at his feet when John walked in. "What?" he snapped.
Addict, addict, addict echoed through his head.

John's thin face didn't give away anything, but his shoulders tightened. His gaze settled on the *eiff* bottle then shifted to the wall. "I'm going to the kitchens," he said. "I'll bring back something for you."

"Yes, fine, thank you," Rodney replied. Then, before he could stop himself, he added, "You're going in that?"

John plucked at the heavy silk, then pulled the belt holding the robe closed tighter. "Why not?" His voice gave away nothing. "Everyone knows what I am. This covers more than half the things I wear for the Haralim."

The water in the tub sloshed against the sides and Rodney sank deeper, watched the surface shiver and ripple, the light gleaming off it, and ignored John. John waited in the doorway another minute, without saying anything, then turned and left.

Rodney disregarded his grumbling stomach and finished bathing before pulling on his own robe. He felt tired enough he wouldn't need the *eiff*, but he took the bottle back into the bedroom and set it on the small nightstand, before collapsing face down on the bed. He turned his head to the side so he could breathe and let his eyes close. Sleep wrapped round him and he let go of his thoughts gratefully.

Fifth bell woke him in the comfort of their own bed, sticky with night sweat, nausea twisting through his belly. He groped for and found the *eiff* without light a lamp and swallowed a sip straight from the bottle, sinking back into the bed afterward. His belly grumbled.

John wasn't in the bed. Rodney assumed he was sleeping in the outer portion of the room again.

~*~

He was halfway between the kitchen and their rooms, balancing a tray on one hand, tired and preoccupied with his disappointment, when Umard stepped out of an alcove in front of him. In the dim corridor, John couldn't read his expression.

John stopped, watching him warily. The tile under his feet felt cold. Not clammy and sucking all the warmth away the way Baratha had been, but night-cool. He curled his toes against it.

"The Haralim does not require your tonight?" Umard asked. He swayed slightly. John sniffed. Was that wine on his breath? Wonderful, he thought. The first time the Haralim was out of the palace, her new guard commander had gotten drunk.

Umard smiled at him and took a step closer.

"She did not," John replied, feeling increasingly apprehensive.

"You shouldn't wander around the palace so much."

"I was going back to my quarters." He knew he should keep his eyes down, but Umard bothered him. Looking away from him was impossible.

The hand that brushed along John's jaw made him jolt a step back. It startled him badly enough that he froze for a breath, then the tray wobbled and he grabbed the edge with his other hand.
Umard tightened his hand on John's jaw. Pushed him back until he hit the wall. The next move came out of nowhere, sweeping the tray out of his hands, before John had fully processed that Umard hadn't just run into him or asked his question by chance. Conditioning and instinct clashed, while Umard shoved closer and bit at John's lips. He was mumbling, "—watching you, look just like, it'll be just like fucking—"

Conditioning told him to go with it, give in and maybe even drop to his knees. If he gave Umard a fast blowjob, it might be enough to keep him from doing more.

Instinct was all revulsion.

John went with instinct. What followed wasn't thought out: it was a explosion of frustration and seething anger. He wasn't in control, but every move was thought out in a split second. He hooked one ankle around Umard's and twisted to the side, grounding himself and using the same leverage to destabilize Umard. Then he drove a fist into Umard's side, just under his ribs. It blurred after that. He heard Umard yell and took a blow the face, then attacked again. They were both on the floor, with Umard pinned and John steadily choking him out when three more guards appeared.

It took two of them to pry John off him and he kept fighting even after they slammed his head against the wall. Everything went white and ringing. His head impacted the wall a second time and a forearm cut off his oxygen until it took all his strength to keep his eyes open and feet under him.

Umard was helped to his feet.

The guard choking John looked at him with slitted eyes, judging whether John would try to attack again. John peeled his lips back in a filthy smile, feeling defiant, then dipped his head even though it cut off the trickle of oxygen he was getting. The guard eased his arm off. "Stay," he snapped.

John stayed pinned against the wall, watching Umard. The guard commander rubbed at his throat and gave a hoarse order, "Put him in a cell. The Rale will deal with him in the morning."

John summoned enough spit and blood and hawked it at the floor in front of Umard.

The guards made to drag him away, but John kept on his feet and walked between them.

He'd never been in the palace dungeon. The cell wasn't quite tall enough for him to stand up straight, nor long enough to lie down, even diagonally. A cold iron grill suspended above the actual floor by a hand's breadth. John thought he glimpsed a drain in one corner before he was shoved inside and the door closed him in utter darkness.

He crouched and sank down onto his haunches, wrapping his arms around his knees.

The cell had no heat, no air circulation and stank of urine. The last adrenaline leached out of John's system, leaving him curled in a ball for warmth, aching, blind. He had no way to judge how long he'd been locked up, just the growing discomfort of being folded up too tight.

Rodney wouldn't know why he hadn't come back. A sick bubble of laughter rose in his chest. Rodney wouldn't care.

Lucky Rodney.
Rodney was measuring out a half dose of *eiff*, telling himself he could cut back, when he realized that John had never returned with any food the night before. He'd never returned at all.

He imagined John had been too angry to return and knew he deserved it.

He spent his day cataloging under Macha's gimlet eyes. His skin goose pimpled and he couldn't eat more than piece of paratha for lunch. There was an air through the palace of something *wrong*. The guards he saw looked tense. The other slaves seemed to duck the heads lower, pad by faster, and shy closer to the walls, when Rodney glimpsed them. He heard people talking in low voices, only to fall silent, if he looked up. He didn't know if he had become paranoid or not, if the feeling wasn't just a result of only taking the half dose.

He found no sign of John in their rooms later and wondered if he hadn't finally managed to alienate him completely. If John's clothes hadn't still been in the red wardrobe, Rodney would have theorized he had moved out.

But everything remained, even the chest with the clothes John had taken to Baratha sat pushed against the wall, untouched.

He couldn't make his cramped legs hold him up when they dragged him out of the cell. Brightness and wavering shapes made his eyes water and he couldn't see. John's ears and nose still worked, though. He could hear the distinct slap and click of their boots, could smell sweat and the leather and metal of the guards' armor as he drew in deep gasps of clean air.

His eyes were clear and focused again as he was marched into the same room where Rodney's punishment had been decided. He didn't so much decide to prostrate himself before the Rale as fall to his knees. Once down, he stayed there, despite his aching ribs and a cramp in his thigh, with his forehead resting on the cool floor.

"What have you to say for yourself?" the Rale demanded.

"Nothing," John murmured. "No excuse, sir." He'd learned that one from standing in front of his father, answering for whatever infraction he'd committed as a boy. Reasons meant nothing, they were merely excuses.

The Rale insert the toe of his boot under John's chin and lifted. "Look at me, John."

John met his gaze. Hazel eyes so much like his own, narrow face, and remembered, ‘—*watching you, look just like, it'll be just like fucking*—’ His stomach rolled and he swallowed hard. He could never say to the Rale why Umard had picked John.

"You are my sister's property, as she reminded me only weeks ago," the Rale said. He stepped back and surveyed the guards. John turned his head to see and realized Umard was there, standing at stiff attention. Bruised and more than a little ill looking, too, John noted with satisfaction. The Rale pointed at him. "You, however, while you are commander of the Haralim's household guard, answer to me."

"Vai, rae," Umard snapped.

"I have the testimony of your men. This slave was found attacking you. He had to be subdued and
restrained. There is no doubt."

"Vai, rae."

"No doubt, either, that he would and could have killed you," the Rale went on. He sneered at Umard. "That is not acceptable. In other circumstances, I would put him to death myself, but that does not erase your shame, Commander."

Umard sent John a look full of murder.

John stared back.

The Rale turned back and caught the exchange of silent hostilities.

"Umard, you will be reassigned."

"Rae—"

"Brawling with a slave is unacceptable," the Rale snapped. Umard subsided. The Rale considered John, stroking his thumb and forefinger over his chin. "A whipping will not serve, my Hara has need of this one again soon." The white smile that followed made John shudder. "For this one, there is only one proper punishment."

John bit his tongue rather than drop down and beg for any other punishment. Cold sweat ran down his sides and tasted his own bile. His heart began racing.

"Moa," the Rale said.

John didn't fight when the guards pulled him to his feet and took him back to the cell. He did when they pried his jaw open and poured the drug down his throat. It spilled down his chin and throat, cold and viscous. His head was slammed against a wall again and more of the moa was forced into his mouth, his nose held closed until instinct made him swallow despite himself. They tied his hands behind him and pushed him inside the cell.

The door slammed it shut and the sound knifed through John's eardrums.

He understood an eternity later why they'd bound him as he writhed into knots of pain, battering himself against the walls as the seizures began. If his hands had been free, he would have torn the skin and flesh from his body, to tear the burning out, the acid eating every nerve and into his brain. He bit at any part of his body he could reach, tried to kick, to arch his back into a spine-breaking bow only to stopped by the tiny confines of the cell. Instead, he beat his head against the stone. Unconsciousness, concussion, coma, he didn't care if it killed him. He screamed until his breath was gone. Screamed after his voice was gone. Gasped and threw up and screamed tasting blood in his raw throat and, beyond into silence, in his mind.

Self-awareness beyond agony returned eventually, with his face pressed against the grill, soundless whimpers wracking him. He pulled his legs up to his chest, muscles twitching into brutal cramps. He stayed there, losing feeling in the side he lay on. A new torture slowly entered his awareness.

Thirst.

It built slowly in the dark, cool cell, until all John could think of was one sip of water. Dirty, warm,
clean, cool, he didn't care, just a swallow, before he mummified and fell apart, a bundle of bones and
dust sealed in his black, dead tomb. Except for the slick copper taste of his own blood, tongued from
where he'd bitten the inside of his mouth, he'd had nothing in so long. All the moisture in his body
had been burned up.

The key in the cell lock turned with a sound that made him flinch. When the door opened, the light
poured over him like fire, and he tried to roll away from it, a hoarse wordless cry ripping his throat
open. He flinched as he was pulled out by rough hands and dropped. The hands on him hurt, the
voices struck his hearing in a rush and roar that made no sense. His arms and hands flopped uselessly
after they were cut loose.

His chin was grasped though and his head pulled up. Someone forced his mouth open. He didn't
fight it this time, though somewhere in his head absolute terror gibbered and shrieked at the prospect
of another dose.

It wasn't moa.

Water.

Sweet, pure water in a slow trickle that made him gasp and swallow over and over, desperate for
more, deaf to whatever the voices were saying. He wanted to cry when it stopped and the hand let go
of his face.

John tried to bring a hand to his face and rub the gumminess away from his eyes, but his arms
refused to work. He slitted one eye open as much as he could and recoiled from the blurred face so
close to him. The mouth in front of him opened and closed, accompanied by noise that echoed and
boomed through John's head, making him flinch again.

Then the hand was on his face again, urging his mouth open, and a bottle brought closer. He parted
his parched lips eagerly this time and shuddered in relief as he was given more water. He drank all he
was given, ignoring how even swallowing hurt his throat.

Somewhere in there, sound resolved into words again, though everything remained too loud and his
head throbbed in protest. John paid more attention to the cold acid sensation of a trickle of water than
had escaped his mouth and ran down his chin to his neck. He licked his lips, tasting salt and blood.

"How much did you give him?" the voice closest to him demanded. "More than one dose."

"He fought—"

"Of course, he did. He's had it before."

"We got part of a dose down him, then added another dose and a half," the sharper voice said. "He
assaulted the commander of the guard."

"Who isn't commander anymore, does that tell you something?" This time John recognized the voice.
Freka. Freka was the one who had given him water. He wondered if he was going back into the cell.
His entire body seemed to tremble at the prospect.

Half familiar hands hoisted him up to his feet, but John's knees folded under him. "Here," Freka
snapped. "Help me hold onto him. We need to take him back."
Back where, John wondered, but he couldn't hold his head up enough to even see, and instead staggered on dragging, uncoordinated legs wherever he was led.

The bed that sank under him could have been anywhere and he wouldn't have cared. But his senses seemed hyperacute and he could smell Rodney on the pillow. He pulled it close and hid his face against it, waiting for whatever came next. He flinched when Freka laid one hand on his shoulder again, because everything still hurt and he couldn't think through the vast black wave of fear that rose up through him. His thoughts were still like pieces of wreckage floating on the sea of memory, the memory of pain, butting up against each other sometimes, then floating apart. All that was constant was needing to never do anything to be dosed with moa again. He started shaking and couldn't stop.

Freka left and John remained exactly where he'd been left, afraid to move.

~*~

The smell alerted Rodney. It was as familiar as his own ordeal, the mixture of blood traced through with the reek of dirt, urine and vomit. Basil and feathers and fear: moa sweating from the body balled up on the bed.

"John?"

John flinched at his voice and stayed still otherwise.

Rodney approached reluctantly, seeing more and more, wishing he couldn't. John was still in the robe he'd had on when he left two nights before. The heavy fabric was filthy, stained and ripped. The skin beneath was a collection of shadowed bruises and red scraped scabs, smeared with dirt and blood. John's hair was matted to his head in places with more dried blood.

The sick feeling in Rodney's belly grew.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and John twitched into a tighter curl, face hidden against a pillow. The torn robe fell away from one bent knee and there were bite marks. Vicious wounds, not something left by any kind of lovemaking. Rodney had to search to find a stretch of skin that didn't show some kind of hurt and ended placing his palm on John's calf.

He felt the jolt that ran through John's body at the contact and then the shaking begin. "John," he repeated helplessly. "What happened?"

No answer.

Rodney looked at the bite marks and considered infection and scars. He patted John's leg. "I'm going to get some stuff to clean you up," he said.

John made a breathless sound and twisted, so that Rodney finally saw his face. One eye was swollen shut, his lip had been split, some kind of grid had pressed itself into one cheek hard enough to leave another darkening mark. None of that affected Rodney as much as the emptiness in John's expression or the way it transformed into fear when Rodney reached for his face, to wipe away a smear of something foul.

"Say something," Rodney asked.

John tried. He opened his mouth and a raw thread of barely audible sound came out. He lifted one hand to his throat in pain though and cringed when even that phantom of his voice locked up and
disappeared. There were more bloody marks on his wrists, soaked into the lengths of fabric still knotted around them. He croaked something unintelligible again, jarring Rodney out of his shock and back into the room.

"Stop, don't try to talk," he said. He patted John's leg again, ineffectually, and stood. He needed Tein's help. "Just stay here."

John nodded fast as though frantic to indicate he would do as he was told. Rodney winced inside.

He looked back from the doorway.

John remained obediently on the bed, one hazel eye open enough to watch him, arms now wrapped around his torso.

~*~

Freka was in the kitchens when Rodney arrived. He looked up from talking intently with Tein, saw Rodney and said something more before striding toward him.

"She's already got most of what you'll need together."

Rodney had broken out in a hot sweat. Freka wasn't bad, but he had this reaction to every guard now. He ducked his head and stepped to the side, anticipating Freka would pass him. Freka stopped instead. Rodney blurted out, "Thank you?"

He risked a glance up and caught a cascade of emotions on Freka's face before it smoothed into a warm, almost sad expression.

"I'll take you back and help you, since Tein-ve is too busy," Freka said.

Rodney bobbed his head in assent.

Tein arrived with a lacquered tray holding pots and bottles, bandages and cleaning clothes, all of them far too familiar. Rodney grimaced and took it. Tein touched his arm.

"Yes?"

"I will prepare something special for Commander Umard," she whispered, too low for Freka to hear.

Rodney thought of Seif. He wondered why Seif, why Umard, but not Dullah, not a dozen others? He didn't ask.

~*~

"Two doses of moa," Freka told him on the way back. "The Chosen fought them."

Rodney risked asking, "Why? What did the idiot do to be punished with moa?"

Freka's step hitched and his voice was low. "He said no."

"To the Haralim?"

Rodney couldn't keep the disbelief from his voice and it rose at the end, drawing looks from two passing clerks. He breathed in through his nose and told himself they didn't matter. Besides, he was
with Freka, one of the guard.

Freka stared ahead and replied, "To the Commander."

~*~

John stayed on the bed until his need to piss overcame his fear of moving. He fled into the washroom, falling once, and afterward stayed there. He was afraid to go, afraid to stay, and paralyzed. He wrapped his arms around his aching knees and rocked himself, telling himself he'd be good from now on. He'd be good and no one would hurt him anymore. He'd be perfect. He'd obey. No more escape attempts, no more defiance, or plots, nothing that might make anyone punish him again. He'd please the Haralim and the Rale. He shouldn't have fought Umard, he should have run. He should have been with the Haralim, where he was supposed to be, then nothing would have happened.

~*~

John wasn't in the bed when they came into the room and Rodney experienced the worst fit of panic he'd had since John's removal after the first dose of moa, almost two years before.

"He probably needed more water," Freka said, snapping him out of it.

They did find him in the washroom, huddled against a wall, rocking himself. The way he scrambled back when he glimpsed Freka behind Rodney made Rodney stop and squeeze his eyes closed, willing himself not to rant or worse, sink down and weep. This was his fault. He'd thought he knew guilt before, known he was an albatross around John's neck and wanted to pretend it wasn't true. If he'd just done more than sleepwalk through the entire trip to Baratha, they could have tried to escape. They might have died or they might have escaped, but the very worst that could have happened was this.

Returned to Selket, still slaves, dosed with moa, used and broken. That's what he should have been afraid of.

He'd never on even his most selfish days wanted to see John shattered.

The terrifying reality was that John could just as easily been executed and Rodney wouldn't have known. He would have been alone, the sole Lantean on this planet, sole Earth human.

He'd drugged himself into insensibility while John screamed himself voiceless somewhere else in the palace.

This wasn't the time to explore just how much he could hate himself. He forced himself forward and knelt beside John, pulling him into an uncertain embrace. "Guess it's my turn to take care of you," he said.

John said nothing.

~*~

John's voice returned, raspy and soft, after several days. The moa had worn off completely. It was the damage the guards and John had done to himself that took longer to heal. Rodney knew the rest of it, the things John would never say out loud, might never heal completely. He'd learned to read John in his silences. He recognized the broken spaces from himself.

Malof the physician visited, examining the first aid Rodney and Freka had provided and deeming it
sufficient with a sour comment about Rodney having practice and afterward, Nuret brought word that the Haralim did not wish to see the Chosen until he could present himself properly. Tein came and clucked over the bite marks John had inflicted on himself and whispered that Umard had taken to eating all his meals with the other guards.

They slept together again, strangely chaste, John so eerily quiet Rodney felt like he shared the bed with a cooperative ghost. Rodney still took the eiff, but he didn't fool himself any longer. He had to have it and only managed to scale back enough to function in the library and around John most of the time. John never said anything about it, seemingly willing to put up with anything except a distance between them, and Rodney no longer needed to drive John away — there was nothing left to hide.

The eiff still affected his work, he realized, affected everything in his life, despite the new equilibrium. He took longer to translate simple sections of the database. Concepts he'd once grasped with ease slithered out of reach, confusing and frustrating him. It frightened him, when he let himself think about it. He tried not to.

He still slept better than John, who woke more than once thrashing and crying out. Hoarse wordless shouts that he choked off as soon as he heard himself. He would shake and curl closer to Rodney afterward and no doubt remained wide awake while Rodney sank back down into his drugged sleep.

Rodney fetched meals to their rooms the first week. The second, as the bruises faded and the scabs healed, Jehmen came once and retreated swiftly.

Next to him on the low lounge with the wine-red and dark gray swirling pattern, John tensed, but didn't move. He'd resumed his habit of seeking physical contact at all times. Rodney had taken to reading all of the translations to him, usually with one hand resting on the warm curve of a shoulder, the tender nape of his neck or the base of his throat, where he could feel the steady flutter of John's pulse, if John was lying with his head resting against Rodney's thigh. Sometimes John caught something he'd missed and would whisper the correct version against Rodney's wrist or neck, barely audible.

The sound of feet stamping in the Selketi way outside the doorway screen heralded another visitor the day after Jehmen came.

Rodney looked up. Going through the translations he'd done the day before, transcribed by Piele, was a laborious effort. The pages were stacked in three piles on the low table they often dined at, one those he hadn't looked at, one for those that were correct, and a mortifying third for those where he'd found an error. He had perhaps one more hour of useful concentration left, before the sweats and nausea of missed dose overwhelmed him. He set the latest page back on the unread pile and brushed his hand over John's shoulder in a soothing circle.

Not soothing enough. John sat up and slid off the lounger, onto the floor, onto his knees as Freka walked in.

"I doubt you've heard," Freka said. He set a package down on the table, near the smallest pile of papers.

"So you've come to tell us," Rodney remarked. The palace ran on gossip.

All the muscles in John's back were tense. Freka chuckled and John subtly relaxed with the sound.

"Umard has been assigned to Nuak Island," Freka told them, satisfaction clear in his tone. "Nuak."
"Where's that?" Rodney asked and John was looking up, watching Freka, from the tilt of his head.

"Almost exactly between Selt and Hunet," Freka said with a evil chuckle. "It's an island. Ships stop there for fresh water and meat. The only thing to do is shoot the gephlids that come out of the water to eat the goats. And then you have to get rid of the gephlids' bodies because they stink. They stink before they're dead too, but afterward…" He laughed again.

"So it's a punishment station?" Rodney asked.

"It's where they send you to make you resign."

Rodney chuckled and leaned forward, catching John's shoulder and drawing him back. "You hear that?" It had to be a relief to know he wouldn't encounter Umard in the halls of the palace. "Sounds like Antarctica."

John stiffened again and said in a flat voice, "I liked Antarctica, remember? I wish I was still there."

So do I, Rodney thought. That moment when he saw John in the control chair and the universe seemed to bloom open for them seemed like a story about two other men now. Better if John and he had never met, never stepped through a wormhole, when all the possibilities had narrowed down to this. He couldn't say that, though, not now.

"You would have frozen your skinny ass off sooner or later," he said instead.

John shook his head.

Freka rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I don't know of this Antarctica — "

"Antarctica," Rodney corrected him. "The South Pole and an actual continent rather than the Arctic North Pole, which is actually an ice mass floating over the Arctic Ocean—"

"Don't, Rodney," John whispered. "Don't talk about it."

Rodney stroked his back. "It's okay, really. I don't think Freka's taking off for the Milky Way any time soon, John."

John gave in and leaned back into his touch. "What happened with Umard?" Rodney asked. He didn't actually care about Umard, only how it might impact on John. That he needed to know.

Freka looked at John silently, then finally said, "Two mights ago, the commander got drunk with Subcommander Jalit, Melit, Halil and Benta." He paused and smiled. "Perhaps more drunk than the drink should have made him. Benta has a quick hand."

John had cocked his head and was listening intently.

"And?" Rodney prompted.

"Commander Umard said some things, while lamenting that the Chosen hadn't been punished further — "

"Further!" Rodney exclaimed, then subsided, adding quickly, "Sorry, I'm sorry, I apologize."
Freka shrugged. "He said the Chosen was above himself and needed fucking." John flinched and moved closer to Rodney, who wanted to glare at Freka for bringing that up, but wasn't quite crazy enough to do so. Not when he'd just gotten away with yelling, not when every raised voice sent an invisible tremble through John. He could feel the tremors under his hand. Freka managed to look faintly uncomfortable as he finished, "He said it would be liking fucking the Rale, knowing the Chosen had been in the Haralim, and — "

"And John looks like him," Rodney whispered while John stiffened under his touch, his breath catching audibly. This was something else that must never be said in the open. Umard had been a blind, blind fool, to want and think he could have, to say anything when there were ears everywhere.

"Someone told the Rale," Freka finished. "Jalit's Commander now." He added, "Jalit's married."

"Oh."

Freka nodded at the package. "I came to deliver that. The Haralim requires her Chosen once more."

John went still.

"Now?" Rodney asked.

"Tomorrow," Freka replied. "She sent a gift."

John leaned forward and picked up the package, untying the string, peeling away soft white cloth to reveal indigo gauze shot with gold embroidery, suns and moons, Selketi patterns like something from a Klimt painting. John set the pants aside, the semi-transparent silk shirt that would hang to his knees and lace together over his ribs with golden braid. His fingers hesitated over something else the rested beneath the fabric and finally lift it out.

The collar was a cooler green than John's eyes, carved in looping curves. It was heavy, solid throughout, smooth. Even the hinge that opened it was carved out of the single piece of jade, a round ball in a cup like a shoulder joint. John's fingers looked very slender holding it. Once it was locked around his neck, he wouldn't be able to bend it.

It would look beautiful.

Rodney loathed it.

~*~

Second bell and the distant scent of spices brought Rodney around much later. He felt too lazy, warm and comfortable to move. Food, he thought, and then that they had enjoyed the spicy stew and grain mixture he liked for dinner. John had been mute and crawled into bed later, spooning against Rodney's back and holding onto one of Rodney's wrists as though to be sure he didn't disappear during the night. Rodney had taken his eiff and slid away into its cottony embrace from John's soon.

In a minute, he told himself, he would force himself open his eyes, not even sure why he'd come awake. A vague body sense told him John was sitting up in the bed, back against the carved headboard, knees bent. One long foot was tucked under Rodney's slack hand and John had a hand resting on Rodney's head. He could feel it shaking against his scalp, which made him stay still. Eventually, the sense of what he was hearing soaked through and Rodney started listening.
"...selfish bastard. If you think this is any better than you just walking away, you're wrong. How can anyone so smart be so damned stupid sometimes?" John whispered. Bitterness and anger colored his tone, emotions he hadn't let slip in months. His fingers tightened against Rodney's scalp, verging on painfully, but Rodney doubted John knew it. This was too important to care anyway. John had always been able to shut himself down and this place had made him a master of it. Rodney had begun to think he had locked himself up so tight this time that no one would ever reach him again.

"Jesus, Rodney, you're addicted to this shit and I can't shake you and make you see it. I can't—"

Rodney frowned against the pillow. He was addicted. He knew it now. He almost said something, but if he did, John would just shut up. He wouldn't argue and Rodney still wouldn't have a clue what he was thinking and feeling and he needed to know. He needed to know if John blamed him for what had happened to him. He blamed himself, but John had said nothing since coming back from Baratha.

"I'd throw that damn bottle out, but you'd just get more from Tein. Or someone. I just can't...I want you back, even though we're never getting out of here."

John stopped for so long Rodney thought there would be no more. Then he traced light fingertips along Rodney's hair line and murmured. "If I say anything, you'll chose it over me."

Inside, Rodney squirmed with guilt.

John slid down and tucked his face against Rodney's neck. One hand crept up to rest on Rodney's breast bone. "Don't go away again," he murmured. It was a very long time before Rodney felt John loosen against him and sleep. Much longer before he could again.

He wanted to say he hadn't gone anywhere, that he was in this bed with John, but Rodney couldn't. When he thought about the first weeks after the whipping there was only the memory of bright pain and then a gray haze. He was just recreating what his mind told him must have happened. He'd once hallucinated so clearly that he'd tasted sea water on her lips when he kissed his phantom Carter. Only fragmented words remained of the days after he was on his feet again, things that no one should have to forgive. He wished he could forget them.

Two nights later, he blinked his eyes open in the dark and heard John again, realized he'd returned from his service with the Haralim and slipped into bed without waking him. This time, John whispered with his mouth against Rodney's shoulder.

"Is it better, Rodney?"

Rodney held still against the impulse to roll over and pull him closer. He wanted to hear this. Needed to hear it, wanted to hear John admit what Rodney had known since Freka brought him back to their quarters from the training barracks, bruised and painted: that John needed him. He wanted John to tell him the pain had been worth it. "Can you just forget everything?"

The problem, Rodney thought, was that he couldn't forget anything. He couldn't forget the burn of the whip and concepts that revealed the universe unfolding from studying the partial database, more than he'd ever had the time or opportunity to explore in Atlantis, couldn't forget the taste of John's lips or the sound of his screams, silken luxury and bloody torture, couldn't forget and couldn't reconcile any of it. He didn't know how to deal with caring more for someone else than himself or excuse that his first impulse was still always to save himself, only now he hated that part of himself. He wanted to get away from everything, including John, and the eiff had made it so very easy. He'd
even had the pain from the whipping as an excuse when he began using it.

"I don't think there was any chance of getting to the stargate on Baratha," John murmured. "I don't think so, but I don't know. All I know is you cared more about another dose of eiff."

He hadn't, he hadn't, Rodney protested to himself, but the nearly empty bottle he'd brought back in his pocket called him a liar. He hadn't even thought about flight; he'd just wanted escape.

Not an addict, he jeered at himself then. What do you call it then? Dependency? But there was Baratha. That instant when all his equations disappeared and he didn't know where he was or what he had been doing. The vertiginous terror of that had pierced through his cloudy cocoon. His mind, his intelligence and knowledge were all that he had of who he was, of Rodney McKay, and he was selling it little by little for lavender bottles of oblivion. He would have despised that in anyone else. He despised it in himself. He ran his hand up John's back and felt John start to shake as he realized Rodney was awake and had heard. The tremors scared Rodney, because it wasn't the Haralim or the Rale or any drug that had done this to John. It was him. He hadn't just cost them an opportunity to escape. He'd cost John something vital: surety.

"I can't stop you," John said, pressing closer, his arms wrapping around Rodney.

Rodney shook his head. John's head was a heavy weight against his collarbone. His throat was too tight to speak. Shame choked him. He was so angry with himself. John wouldn't even be here if it weren't for him. But whatever he'd expected, it hadn't been this, John clutching at him desperately, every muscle tensed and shaking.

"I'll stop," Rodney said.

"Stupid bastard," John whispered against Rodney's neck and Rodney wondered which of them he meant. He tightened his arms around John and held on until John succumbed to sleep, but he didn't sleep again.

John tore their rooms apart in the morning. He did it with a sort of restrained fury that was shocking and more than a little painful, as though the search was the first opportunity he'd had to release a pressure cooker's worth of emotion. Rodney was surprised by how well John knew where the eiff was hidden. He had been paying much closer attention than Rodney had guessed. He watched as every single bottle he'd put away—hidden—was found.

John emptied every bottle and disposed of them. A heavy breath escaped him as he finished and he slumped briefly before straightening. He looked at Rodney and asked, "Will you be okay while I go out?"

Rodney nodded and waved at the doorway. "I'll be perfectly fine," he muttered through a yawn. He'd been awake all night. His eyes felt sandpapered. John studied him another moment, then said, "I'm going to get some food and ask Tein to send in meals for the next couple of days."

And tell her to not to give him anymore eiff, no matter what he said or did, Rodney guessed, feeling annoyed. He wouldn't promise to quit and then turn to Tein. That was insulting. He had more self control than that.

John stepped closer. He smelled like spice and soap. "Rodney," he said. He let his hands rest on Rodney's shoulders and his forehead against Rodney's, and held still, while they breathed each other's breath. "Do this," he murmured. His hands tightened briefly before he let go and the open
worry on his face dissolved Rodney's annoyance.

"I can," Rodney promised.

After John had gone, Rodney wandered around the rooms. He picked up things — a brush, a button, a silver toe ring that had been hidden under the cushions of the lounge until John searched it—and put them down. He straightened the mess John had left, closing a cabinet door, picking pillows off the floor, folding clothes and returning them to the wardrobes. The feeling of something he was supposed to do niggled at him. He realized it was a growing craving for *eiff* when he found himself opening a drawer for the fifth time, staring into the empty space where he’d kept the lavender bottles. He shoved it closed with a bang that sent a spike of pain through his head.

He was sitting on the lounge, gripping his knees with white-knuckled fingers when John came back, carrying a tray of food. The smell hit his nose and Rodney bolted into the washroom.

At first he thought he’d just gag and maybe recover once the scent of food left his nose, but another breath brought him the scent of soap, suddenly too strong, and everything came up. He puked until his ribs and abdomen ached and his throat burned from bile.

John helped him wash his face and stagger out of the bathroom afterward. The food had disappeared and all the windows were open. Rodney collapsed onto the lounge and rested there with his eyes squeezed shut. His skin felt too sensitive, chafed and too dry. He drank as much of the water John brought him as he could, anticipating the dehydration that would come when he threw up again. His joints ached. John sat with him. He held his hand without wincing when Rodney tightened his grip through a second bout of nausea.

He tried to do some translations, but his eyes were watering too much to focus. He sniffed and wiped at his nose, realizing it was starting to run. He dumped all the pages together and shoved them away. He'd never figure out how ZPMs were made. He was second rate, no matter how many times he'd told everyone he was the smartest man in two galaxies. It wouldn't matter if he did understand it all—he could have a ZPM in his hands and it would be useless because they were trapped on this hole of a planet, barefoot and stupid… He dropped his head into his hands and just sat. "Fucking useless," he muttered. "It's all crap. Everything. I don't know why you *care*, the *eiff* just makes it bearable."

"It's making you stupid," John said.

Rodney snapped his head up and glared, knowing it was futile. John wouldn't be moved. He'd committed to quitting the *eiff* and John wouldn't let him give up. John would never give up on him.

John was right. *Eiff* was making him stupid. He still wanted it.

His skin felt raw. His clothes were stuck to him with sweat. The nausea was back, too, and his head ached.

The sound of John breathing irritated him. "You've got to stop that, you're making me crazy," he told John and got up to pace back and forth.

John got up, too.

"What are you doing?" Rodney demanded.
John shrugged. Rodney knew what he was doing. He was staying between Rodney and the doorway. Between him and the *eiff*.

"This would be easier if you gave me a little. Just a little," Rodney wheedled. He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. God, he was feverish. The steady ache in his muscles had grown more noticeable, too. His hand was trembling when he lowered it.

"No," John said.

"I hate you," Rodney said and smiled weakly, then gulped and grunted as his intestines tried to twist themselves into knots. "Oh fuck." He bolted into the washroom, untying his trouser's waist as he went. He barely made it to the stool before everything rushed out. Thankfully, John didn't follow him in.

It grew steadily worse after that. He felt his heart racing so hard it threatened to explode inside his chest, while tiny ants seemed to burrow under his skin and bite. His entire body seemed to rebel against him. Everything hurt, and he puked over and over, until he wept and gasped for breath. John stayed beside him constantly and Rodney blindly hung onto him when the chills hit, only to push him away when his body flushed hot and sweaty again minutes later.

He told John he hated him between bouts of vomiting, meaning it more each time. He couldn't say it when his teeth were chattering or his muscles began spasming, but he glared with everything in him, wanting John to know he blamed him for this misery. He had days more of this to endure.

"Make it stop," he gasped after a mortifying episode in the washroom, everything running out of him at both ends. John washed him up afterward, another humiliating experience to add to his memories. He couldn't even pull himself together enough to use a washcloth or tell John to leave him alone.

"Back to bed, okay?" John said when he had finished.

"Just leave me here," Rodney said listlessly, but he cooperated as John got him to his feet and guided him back to the bedroom.

He tried to hit John as he eased him down into the sheets. "I hate you."

"I'm getting that idea," John replied, dodging Rodney's fist easily.

"I don't really, you know," Rodney said suddenly, feeling canny and desperate. "But I'd love you more if you just gave me a little. I'll blow you."

John had perched on the edge of the bed. Now he sat back and seemed to consider Rodney. His mouth quirked up. "That might work better on someone else," he said. "Someone who hadn't just watched you upchuck, you know?"


John's eyebrow rose. "You know, I can't tell if that's a threat or a promise."

"You can fuck me," Rodney said. He started to roll over, only to have John catch his shoulder in a tight grip. "Right now and then give me some *eiff*—"

"No," John interrupted.
"Anything, anything, please, John," Rodney whined. The shivery-sick feeling of wanting was getting worse. Like being eaten from the inside, clawing up from his guts, make him twitch and swallow over and over. "Fuck, please."

"I can't—"

"You limp-dicked sonuvabitch!" Rodney shouted, sitting up, twisting away from John's grip. He couldn't stand this. He had to have a dose.

"Rodney!"

He tried to get out of the bed and tangled in the sheets, ending on his knees on the floor. "I can't stand it," he moaned. "I just need some."

"It'll get better," John said. He sank down to the floor next to Rodney and pulled him close enough to rock, Rodney's head on his shoulder, arms closed around his back, stroking the tight muscles there.

"I hate you," Rodney said.

"Yeah," John said.

Rodney leaned into him and thought he would get some as soon as John had to leave. John couldn't stay with him all the time. As soon as he went to the Haralim, Rodney would find someone to get him some eiff.

~*~
"You imbecile, you filthy, vicious, pillowbiting sonuvabitch," Rodney howled at him as John calmly tied him to the bed.

"What was that, Rodney?" John asked.

"I'm sorry, I forgot you don't actually understand English, shall I grunt it for you?" He tried again to wriggle his hands free but it was useless and he began to panic. "Maybe charades? Untie me, damn it!"

"Sorry, no. But you can grunt if it makes you feel better."

"Eiff will make me feel better. I want it and you can't tie me up like some fucking animal, damn you!"

"It's for your own good—"

"My own good!?" Rodney shouted, kicking at John. "Coward! I will end you, I will scoop that pathetic excuse for a brain out and use your empty skull to piss in. I hate you, I'm going to wring your neck, you torturer, you can't leave me like this. Don't you dare even think about it. I'll kill you, I swear I will! Let me go, let me out of here." His voice broke on a sob and he tugged at the strips of fabric tying his wrists to the bed frame. John had put them on carefully, smoothing them in place like bandages—in fact they were bandages—to keep them from cutting into his wrists. But they were secure and Rodney couldn't pull himself loose.
"Please, please, John—"

John finished tying his legs down and pulled a sheet up to Rodney's neck. He ignored the pleas as well as the curses.

"Sorry, Rodney, but I just can't trust you yet," he said.

"You mouthbreathing, knuckledragging, asslicking faggot!" Rodney yelled.

John turned his head away, but his voice stayed even. "Don't make someone come in here and gag you."

"I hate you, you shiteating, goddamned simpleton," Rodney said venomously. "I want you dead. I'm going to spit on your body. I'm going to kick it into a red mush. You're doing this on purpose to make me pay for what happened and I know it's my fault—"

"It's not your fault, Rodney," John interrupted.

"—that you had to be punished, but you're going too far. I'm going to have a heart attack or a seizure and then I'll be dead and you'll be all alone." He could see it wasn't moving John. The vitriol crept back into his words and he aimed to wound. "How do you like that? You'll be alone and spend the rest of your life on your knees, sucking the Rale's dick, licking out his sister, until you're too old and they put you down like a diseased dog, you shit. I'll never forgive you for this, Sheppard. Never."

"That's okay. I'll never forgive myself, either."

John stood and walked back into the washroom. Rodney kept cursing to himself and fighting the bonds until he came out again, then stared. John in red and black never failed to be breathtaking. He only wore it for the Haralim. He wore the snake armlet, too, coiled around his upper arm, brilliantly-colored enamel scales looking almost real. The ruby eyes glinted, but John's eyes were dark. Rodney drew in his breath and started in again.

"Don't you walk about of here!"

"Sorry, Rodney, I've got to go. Freka or Piele will be by later to make sure you're okay," John said.

"You can't leave me here like this, you backstabbing, worthless shit. If you go crawling away and leave me here, don't come back, just bend over and keep taking it from your owners!" Rodney screamed at John's back. It made John stop and he thought maybe John would turn back, but he didn't. "That's right! Don't forget your collar! And don't forget to swallow!"

John disappeared out the door and Rodney shrieked.

"Bastard motherfucking cocksucker!"

~*~

He wept for a while after John left. The room actually became darker as the day passed into late afternoon and he shivered through another bout of chills, made worse because he was wet with sweat. He jerked at the ties holding him compulsively. No matter how hard he pulled, he couldn't even make the bed shift or shake.

Piele crept in later and brought him water. Rodney tried to browbeat him into releasing him, but John
had obviously already got to him. He tried to feed Rodney some broth he'd brought with him, but Rodney turned his face away in self-defense. He didn't want to choke on his own vomit while tied to the bed.

That didn't seem like such a bad end after his bowels rebelled again.

Piele took one look, paled and fled.

Rodney stared at the ceiling and counted the ways he meant to kill John.

He reiterated them all when John returned and calmly untied him. He was too weak to do more than let John guide him into a warm bath and lie there, but he had his voice and used it. John fed him bread and broth, held his head when it came back up, and fed him more afterward. Then he took him back the bedroom, where the bed had been changed, curling up with an arm around Rodney's waist.

The scent of the Haralim's perfume still clung to John's hair and folded around Rodney, making him gag silently.

~*~

The second day was worse.

Rodney was too miserable to register more than Tein showing up instead of Piele in the afternoon after John left. His arms and legs jerked against his will and he gagged even on water. He begged for eiff when he saw Tein's worried expression, but she shook her head. Then he cursed her, in Selketi and Russian he hadn't realized he still remembered, accusing her of doing this to him on purpose.

Tein untied him and washed him down. Rodney curled up in embarrassment and asked when John would be back. "My back hurts."

"Soon, Ro'ney," Tein promised. She urged him to lie on his belly. Her hands, strong from working dough every day, moved over his back, digging into locked-up muscles and loosening them.

"He has to hate me," he mumbled into the pillow, whimpering in relief as the cramps eased faintly. "That's why he's doing this to me."

"This is your choice, too," Tein contradicted him.

"Only because he wants me to quit," Rodney mumbled.

"He would do it for you."

Rodney squeezed his eyes shut as another cramp twisted his guts inside out. That was the reason: John already had. That was the reason, more than worrying that he'd never unravel how to make a ZPM if he kept using, more than losing any chance at escaping Selket, more than fear of what punishment he might receive himself, if John couldn't cover for him and he screwed up worse, knowing he would. Addiction was something different from dependence. Dependence was what his body was in withdrawal from. Addiction was continuing to use eiff when he knew it was harming him.

Carson had explained it all to him after he came off the enzyme, why he and Teyla and Ronon hadn't felt any overwhelming desire to get more of it, once they'd gone through withdrawal, horrible as it had been. Psychologically, they'd never wanted it.
Except he did want *eiff*. He gone on using it when he didn't need it for pain, pushed John away, wasted an opportunity they might never have again, and possibly impaired himself permanently. He'd been incredibly stupid.

Thinking about it made depression settle in again. He didn't deserve anyone to help him. He didn't deserve John.

"Try to sleep," Tein told him.

He nodded, wishing he could. He hadn't slept since his last dose.

~*~

John stayed with him through the entire third day. A gift from the Haralim, Rodney joked and John nodded seriously. Rodney rolled onto his side and threw up, not caring if he got it on himself or the bed or the floor.

He thought his bones were breaking inside his body. He was burning. He was dying. He wished he would die.

"Just fucking kill me," he moaned. His voice shook and quavered, high and desperate. He pushed his head back against the pillow, his back arching off the bed. "Oh God, oh God, please. You've, you've got to make it stop."

"It's almost over," John said.

"Not so loud," Rodney begged.

"You're almost there, Rodney," John whispered. He wiped the sweat off Rodney's face with a damp cloth, then smoothed the bits of hair sticking along his hairline back. Even his touch burned.

"Oh, please, you're lying. Why are you lying to me?" Rodney accused. "You hate me, don't you?"

"You know I don't."

"You have to! Why are you doing this to me if you don't hate me?"

"I don't hate you," John said. "I hate this."

"No, you do. You're lying to me, you're lying, even if you don't think you're lying to me, you're lying, I know you're lying, I know, I know," he babbled faster and faster and clutched at John's wrist, the fine bones twisting so that John hissed in pain. His voice rose higher and higher. "You want to kill me, oh please, God, John, just a little, just a little, *I know you can get it*—"

"I can't," John said. He turned his wrist and twisted free of Rodney's grasp, then threaded his fingers into Rodney's, letting him hold on.

"No, you can, you can," Rodney wept. "Please…"

John tightened his hand on Rodney's.

Rodney squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, just *kill* me."
"Come on, Rodney, don't say that," John said, intent and leaning closer. "Don't you say that."

"Just make it stop," Rodney begged. "Anything, just make it stop."

John crawled into the bed with him and pulled Rodney closer, his hand still locked with Rodney's. "You can't quit now," he said. "Are you listening to me? Don't quit on me."

"I hate you," Rodney murmured. John nodded and slid down so that he could press his face into the crook of Rodney's neck. He clutched John's hand tighter and let the tears seep under his closed eyelids. "I hate you."

"It's okay," John told him.

~*~

Tein brought a tray of food herself the next morning. She met John's gaze steadily, then spoke to Rodney. John had propped him up in bed after changing the sweat-soaked sheets again.

"You're past the worst of it."

"You couldn't just say I'm past all of it, couldn't you?" Rodney replied. His hands were still shaking and his temperature spiked and dropped abruptly every fifteen or twenty minutes. He didn't feel like his muscles were ripping themselves loose from his bones any longer at least and he hadn't thrown up again all night.

Before Tein could answer, John snapped, "You could've warned us the damn eiff was addictive. I asked you."

"John…"

Tein gave them both a measuring look. "Only a very few ever suffer from the eiff this way."

"I've always been sensitive," Rodney commented. He almost smiled, because John had raised his voice. Pushing Rodney around again seemed to have helped him. It made the misery slightly more worthwhile.

John slanted a look his way that said clearly, Yes, delicate as a rhino.

"Perhaps it is because you are an offworlder," Tein said to Rodney.

John frowned. "Wait, then, it's probably genetic. Dalal?" He stopped and paled. Tein stared.

"The Hara might be sensitive to eiff, too," Rodney blurted out, trying to cover. "Wasn't the Rale's mother from offworld?"

John nodded immediately. "Exactly."

Tein's eyes narrowed, but she accepted it. "I will mention this to Malof."

"Good," John mumbled.

Rodney looked down at his hands, spread across the cover pulled over his legs. Good. His stomach
churned, the way it did whenever John mentioned Dalal. But his hands were suddenly steadier. His head was clearer. Only days ago he wouldn't have been able to think fast enough to cover what he'd said.

"Eat this," Tein ordered and left them.

John touched his shoulder then left too and didn't return until second bell. He didn't offer to tie Rodney to the bed this time.

Freka poked his head in once. "You look better," he commented.

"Thanks so much," Rodney muttered, surly and disgusted, though mostly with himself.

Later, he shakily left the bed, lit a lamp, and fetched himself a glass of water. He was back in the bed, sitting up, wishing he could sleep and unable to. He had a handful of papers and pen and had laboriously begun recreating the equations he'd conceived and lost on Baratha. That and what appeared to an Ancient text describing idiosyncratic solar local space-time phenomena. Interesting, even fascinating, and it felt like waking up for the first time in an eternity to feel excited over something again, even if he was exhausted.

Rodney yawned. Eventually the insomnia would fade, rebound effects usually did, and the human body demanded a minimum amount of rest. Until then, he'd be an insomniac.

John came in quietly and paused in the doorway.

"Are you okay?" John asked carefully. He stayed where he was, ill-lit and uncertain. His voice was hoarse. Rodney recognized the signs. It had been the Rale this night and not just the Haralim.

"Yes," he said. He gestured to the window. He'd opened the shutter and from where he was on the bed, could glimpse a corner of night sky. The starshot darkness faded into a darkly iridescent indigo shimmer in places. "Do you know, I hadn't looked at the sky here until now? I never paid any attention. Funny for an astrophysicist, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe." John finally left the doorway, lured into the room by Rodney's matter of fact tone and the thought of the sky, forgetting everything else briefly. He padded to the window and leaned out, looking up. "What is it?"

"The Great Veil," Rodney said.

"And?"

"And I'd thought it was just the solar wind fluorescing molecular nitrogen in the upper atmosphere, but I did run across a mention of it in the database here." Rodney sat up straighter. "It's much more interesting than polar aurora, however. That veil is actually a massive cosmological phenomenon that exists outside quote real unquote space. It interrupts hyperdrives, both the ones the Ancients used and the version the Wraith have."

John leaned against the side of the window and quirked a smile at Rodney. "And?"

"And that's why the Wraith only come here through the stargate!" Rodney told him. "Look, if we can create a gate shield similar to the one in Atlantis, Selket will be completely safe from culling. Think about it."
John's smile widened into a grin. "You're the one who could do it, Rodney."

"Of course I am," Rodney said. "I'll need more than the control crystals we got on Baratha, though."

John crossed the room to the bed, lifted the papers out of Rodney's hands and dropped them onto the floor. He climbed on the bed and then astride Rodney. His eyes glittered as he framed Rodney's face in his hands and then kissed him. For an instant, as he let his tongue follow John's, Rodney thought he might be tasting the Rale and the Haralim, but it didn't matter. There was just John and wanting John and knowing John wanted him. When they broke apart and John leaned back, smiling brilliantly, Rodney had to ask, "What was that for?"

A duck of the head and John didn't answer.

"Come on, tell me."

John finally shrugged, still smiling.

"For coming back," he said.

Rodney frowned, then slapped the back of John's head lightly. "Idiot." He wrinkled his nose and pushed John away. "Go take a bath."

John kissed him again, instead, before leaving Rodney for the bathroom. Rodney sat back and looked out the window, while wondering how long it would take to convince the Rale to let him go offworld again, to get the equipment they needed, and then access the DHD.

It was easier to push away thoughts of the eiff when he had something real that mattered to work on. Over the week that followed, he put together a detailed proposal, explaining what would be needed and how to power the shield off the excess energy released when the wormhole formed in the gate. There were still days when his joints ached and he wanted another dose, but Rodney anticipated them becoming infrequent. As his head cleared of the last effects, he wanted nothing more than to never lose himself in it again.

~*~

He woke to John's mouth, to his hands drawing the sweetest arousal from his flesh, and rode the waves of pleasure until it all broke and he came. He pulled John up and tasted the wetness, licked inside his soft mouth, bitter and slick, sucked on his tongue and pushed a hand down between them to take John's hard, wet cock in his hand. Stroke followed stroke and John rocked into his hand making breathy, uneven sighs into Rodney's mouth, until the rhythm broke, stuttered into overload. Warm wet spattered over Rodney's wrist and hip and John gasped and murmured, broken sentences, shattered pieces of poetry and urgent obscenities tumbling together and from his lips.

Rodney petted him through the too sensitive aftershocks, listening to the things John never knew he said and painted them on his skin in Selketi and Ancient come morning: *His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend.*

~*~

Rodney hated Baratha. They returned there a second time three small moons after he detoxed.

Rodney finally grasped how frustrated and sick John had felt the first time. He'd watched carefully and didn't see anyway to get past the guards on the stargate.
It reminded him of his lowest point. The food made him long for prison. It rained and even the palace stank. The Barathans themselves treated him with a scorn that ate at his ego like acid. And John was on display like a toy the entire time they were there.

The Haralim hated it, too, making sure everyone in her entourage knew that. She kept John with her at all times and amused herself by dosing him with *dranzi*, then keeping him still at her feet or listening to him beg.

After three days, he gave up. The Barathans didn't have any salvaged crystals capable of channeling sufficient power from the stargate to maintain a shield while a wormhole was opened. There were a few that might be potentially useful, but he considered the trip another painful failure.

The Selketi trudged back to the stargate with three carts carrying battery packs for their stunners.

Rodney was just glad to go home.

When he knelt before the Rale and told him that he still could not create a working shield, he wondered whether it would mean the whip again.

"There is the Great Market," the Haralim said.

"Would you be able to obtain the proper crystals there?" the Rale asked.

Rodney shrugged. "I don't know."

"Everything can be found at the Great Market," the Haralim declared. "If it is not there, there will someone who knows where it is."

The Rale smiled at her and waved Rodney away. "You have wished to go since word of that it would be held this year reached us. In two weeks, then, sister, you shall go. It will be worth any price if we can seal Selket against the Wraith."

Rodney began backing out of the room.

"And will you take your slaves?" the Rale asked, sounding indulgent.

The Haralim's laughter followed Rodney into the hall, along with her words.

"Everyone goes to the Great Market."
Pandora's Box

A windstorm whipped sand through the emptied streets of Selket as the Haralim's entourage reached the stargate. Litter flew across the plaza. To the south, the sky shaded brown at the horizon, then yellow, then a sick and ominous green. The air tasted of dust and the light lowered as billowing clouds dimmed the sun.

John ducked and squinted, glad for the head covering and veil that went with the heavy robe wrapped around him. Harsh crystals of sand pricked at every bit of exposed skin. Beside him, Rodney muttered and grumbled. John nudged his shoulder against Rodney's. The killa harnessed to the merchants' wagons stamped and moaned, shaking their heads so that the tassels adorning their harness tossed and flicked, sprays of red and blue and green, dulled but still bright. They were all impatient, wanting to get out of the wind, looking forward to missing out on the worst of the Selket weather. Even inside the city at the heart of the fortress, John had felt besieged during previous dust storms and Rodney had been twitchy for days afterward. Out in it, instinct insisted they run before the wind.

The new commander of the household guard used the DHD. John and Rodney stepped out of the splash zone automatically, while one of the guards, unused to offworld travel, had to be dragged back by the man next to him.

The last chevron locked into place. The wormhole stabilized into that eerie blue mirror-ripple, so much like water, but faintly glowing. It looked stranger than ever, in the unnatural twilight of the impending storm.

"Yah, yah!" one of the merchants traveling with them shouted and the guards started forward, followed by the Haralim's palanquin, her entourage — including John and Rodney—and wagons full of trade goods and supplies. The killa bugled, loud as an elephant, and began pulling.

They stepped out into sunshine and a cool breeze, air filled with voices and noise, and the shock made more than one Selketi stumble. The guard who had nearly been caught in the wormhole initialization fell to one knee and gagged up his last meal.

Faeatua compared favorably to Baratha and Selket. John stepped lighter under an open sky and gentler sun that reminded him of Northern California and another life. He took in a deep breath and thought he smelled water somewhere. He could see hills and green grass beyond the limits of the market. Rodney muffled a laugh. Like John, his stride hadn't even hitched. For them, the trip through the wormhole itself held no surprises, only what might lie on the other side. John shrugged and dust cascaded from his robe. His fingers itched to drop the hood and unwind the veil from over his face.

The cobblestones laid in a spiraling pattern out from the stargate were rounded and hard under his feet. Uncomfortable but not painful, warm from the sun, not searing hot as the streets of Selket were. No buildings and no walls rose around them, but a city of tents and wagons had already sprung up and the air hummed with excitement. Even as the Selketi party moved outward, the gate activated behind them and another group arrived. The familiar sound of the chevrons locking into place loosed something inside John and he smiled.

Beside him, Rodney murmured, "It's hard to tell, but I think the gravity is fractionally lighter here. It feels…Earth-normal."

John flexed his muscles and silently agreed. Atlantis was four percent lighter than Earth, not enough
to effect bone mass or the cardiovascular system, but enough that Selket, half one-G higher than Earth, had been exhausting for the first few months.

They passed through the heart of the market toward the outskirts until they reached a relatively flat area just beneath the crest of a low hill, a site easily accessible from the rutted wagon track winding away from the stargate. Past the camp site, the track continued to the clear stream that ran down the center of the valley.

The Haralim's palanquin was set down first, with the side panels tied back, where she could watch. John and Rodney were both shooed out the way as the camp was quickly established, the main tent erected before the rest. They sat on the cool grass next to each other, hoods down, veils loosed. John wiggled his toes into the green blades. The damp feel and tickle of them made him reach forward and pluck a blade to run between his fingers.

When he looked up, Rodney was watching him, his mouth doing that thing where it slanted down on one side, but almost smiled on the other.

"You know there are probably bugs," Rodney pointed out. "Alien chiggers. Ticks. Sand fleas. Those nasty burrowing beetles from MX4D78."

John shuddered at that memory and barely kept himself from scratching, but Rodney's complaint still made him want to laugh. He flicked the grass blade at Rodney. He plucked up another and tasted it, to Rodney's obvious horror.

"What are you doing?"

"It's grass, Rodney," he said.

"It's alien grass."

Only it wasn't alien any longer. It was the same grass that grew on hundreds of Pegasus worlds, spread via the stargate, seeds on the wind of the wormhole travelers. More familiar to them now than whatever they'd find by a Nebraska roadside.

"Alien," Rodney repeated, "grass."

The consternation in Rodney's voice made John spit the blade out and laugh out loud this time. He let himself fall back onto his elbows, then tipped his head back to look into the infinite blue of the sky. He felt like he could breathe for the first time in an eternity.

"You're going to get a sunburn and cancer," Rodney told him.

The breeze shifted and with it came the scent of cook fires and food, mouthwatering aromas of sizzling meats and baking breads. Rodney's head whipped around so fast John feared he'd hurt his neck. A soft step, boot-on-grass quiet, drew John's attention. While most of the household entourage were busy preparing a proper meal for the Haralim, Freka approached with a handful of what looked like kebabs, meat and vegetables and fruits skewered on long sticks, and still shimmering with heat.

He sank down beside them and handed over a skewer to each of them. "Got these down in the market."

Rodney peered at his closely. "That's not citrus, is it?"
John sat up, leaned close and sniffed. "Doesn't smell like it."

Freka had already begun eating. "The Haralim told me to watch both of you," he said between swallows.

John felt his eyebrows raise and then he understood. The Haralim had anticipated that he and Rodney might try for the stargate while they were off Selket. He bit a piece of fruit and chewed. Freka slanted him a look.

"You aren't going to get me in trouble, are you?"

John kept chewing.

"Of course not," Rodney said. "We'd at least wait and get someone we didn't like in trouble, wouldn't we, John?"

John swallowed and nodded.

They ate in nearly contented silence after that.

John was on his back again, staring up into the sky, when Rodney nudged his knee. He lifted his head and watched Nuret, standing before the Haralim's tent, turn in a circle, looking for something. She stopped while facing their stretch of hillside, then darted toward them, wincing sometimes as her feet encountered rocks hidden beneath the grass.

She spared a small head bow, with held open hands, for Freka, and a sharp glance at Rodney, but addressed John. "You must make yourself ready to attend the Haralim."

John sat up. "Back to the coal mines," he remarked to Rodney. Rodney patted his ankle, just below the fetter, the pads of his fingers resting for an instant on the skin of the vulnerable joint. John didn't move until Rodney's hand fell away. Then he followed Nuret down the hill.

~*~

Zuleika pressed him back and down until John was stretched out over the soft bed, the sheets cool and silky under him, warming with his body heat. Her hands were spread over his chest. He stared into her eyes and tried to see exactly what she wanted. Hard or soft, fast or slow, stretched out like taffy all night, until she came over and over again? His hands moved over her, practiced into reflex, because he knew every sensitive spot, knew her body the way a musician knew his instrument. She knew John, too, knew exactly what he'd been trained to do and want, how to make him cry out, and used it. Her lips curved into a smile and she pressed herself down over him, all warm, silky-soft, smooth skin everywhere against him. John slipped his hands down her sides, to her hips, and on down to her thighs, pulling her up, cock hardening as she slid against him. When her thighs parted and she rocked forward, he glided inside her wetness without a hitch, practiced and familiar. It was good, easy, and the rhythm of moving into her, with her, came naturally, like breathing and just as urgent.

She licked his throat, the drag of her tongue making him arch his neck, in submission and vulnerability. "Mine," she said, the words more vibration than sound, her lips over his Adam's apple. John shuddered and pushed up and into her. When she came, the feel of her tightening around him ratcheted his own pleasure higher, until he followed her, hips coming off the bed, a moment later.
He disentangled himself from her and moved down the bed until he could lick and kiss at her inner thighs, feeling muscle tremors still shivering through her under his lips. When her breath hitched faster, he ran his fingers down the backs of her calves and up to circle over the soft, soft skin behind her knees.

"Hara?" he murmured.

Zuleika stretched herself over the bed and smiled at the deep blue fabric of the tent overhead, painted in shadows and burnished by lamplight. She bent one leg and let the other fall open, a silent command John recognized. She wanted his mouth. He kissed her knee, then a line up her thigh, applying suction as he reached the crease between thigh and groin. She smelled of warm heat and him and John traced and tasted all of her with his tongue. He didn't stop until she had come twice more, until she was so swollen slick-wet and sensitive she shuddered and climaxed once more just from his breath on her clit.

She pushed him away and told him in a slurred voice, "Enough."

John's jaw and tongue ached. "Vai, hara," he said hoarsely. He sat up and unconsciously licked his lips, tasting her there.

Zuleika was watching him. "Go clean up," she said. "Don't disturb me when you've finished; sleep at the other end of the tent."

He washed silently and padded to the nest of pillows where Rodney was lying, a glisten of white betraying that his eyes were slitted open. A big, warm hand on the small of his back pulled him close as he lay down. He closed his eyes and let his head rest against the crook of Rodney's shoulder, filling his nose with Rodney's scents, listening to the night sounds of the camp.

~*~

The traders began arriving the next day. A Rakati man in the morning, with broken pieces even someone without the gene could tell would never function again. The Haralim sat in heavy chair brought from Selket. John knelt beside her. Wherever the Haralim might step, the bare ground had been covered with richly colored carpets and rugs like those the merchants had brought to trade. Servants brought cups of steaming tea to each trader as he spread his wares over a low table set before the Haralim.

After the Ratakan came three Safonnese men with nothing of interest, then two mismatched partners, one from Tish, sharp-featured, slight, and brown as teak, and one a pale giant from a world only he could pronounce. Their goods looked more like loot, including some jewels the Haralim let trickle between her fingers before nodding in a bored fashion, indicating she would buy them. Rodney found three crystal wafers mounted as part of a ceremonial cuirass, bronze cast by some artisan, the Ancestors' crystals mounted to provide protection from a feeding hand. His fingers slipped over the almost soapy-smooth surface of the crystals, feeling for the telltale roughness that indicated invisible cracks and finding none.

The cuirass was bought, too.

The Haralim suspended trade for mid-meal and dined while a strolling musical troupe from Panjar played. The songs were all folktales of Pegasus, heard and told on most of the worlds the stargates touched: the girl who ran away to be with her lover on the other side of the Ancestors' ring only to return, weeping and betrayed because he already had a wife, to find her home culled and all her family lost; the trickster who disguised himself as an old man and fooled the Wraith into trying to
feed on a scarecrow; the girl with the Wraith-sense who warned her people each time the Wraith came, until her rival convinced them she brought the Wraith and they drowned her, only to all perish when the Wraith came next without warning. That one reminded Rodney of Teyla and he looked down, tracing patterns in the tightly loomed rug beneath him. The musicians finished and started another song, of a hero who possessed a magic amulet of the Ancestors to make himself invisible and went into a hive ship to rescue his love, only to fail, when he betrayed his presence by freeing her from her cocoon. Rodney caught John's eyes as they listened to that one.

Rodney knelt next to John by the Haralim at her insistence, and she fed him with the same absent generosity while three Nandali acrobats tumbled over the rugs before them, tattoos snaking over their twisting limbs. Afterward, she left them and took a group of guards to explore the market herself.

"This is useless," Rodney bemoaned while looking over the morning's finds. "Three crystals. That's not enough to do anything. And I'll need a power source if I'm to set up a gate shield. The Grey Mouser certainly didn't look like he had a ZPM in his pocket, now did he?"

John chuckled. "I guess that makes the other guy Fafhrd?"

Rodney stared at him.

"Well, if he'd had a red beard. Didn't you think those two looked like thieves?" He sighed. "I miss books that didn't end with 'and then the Wraith sucked them into a dry, mummified husk'."

"Yeah," John agreed. "Me too."

Rodney stared down the valley toward the stargate, at the stalls and pavilions, tents and temporary buildings, wagons and yurts and sleds, people teeming between them. Crowds weren't common in Pegasus. He hadn't seen so many people in years, not even in Selket's bazaars.

"It would be a bitch if the Wraith showed up now, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Sitting ducks," John agreed.

They watched the stargate activate in the distance and another group come through, dark-skinned men leading creatures a lot like dogs, dragging travois loaded high with goods.

~*~

Nightfall brought a feast of foreign foods, reports dictated to Pesha while the Haralim tangled her fingers in John's hair, and instructions to send goods through the stargate in the morning. Rodney knelt quietly at the far end of the tent. John watched him from his place at the Haralim's side.

The Haralim dismissed Pesha and everyone but John and Rodney eventually. Rodney had been so quiet, almost hidden in the dim shadows of the tent, that John thought she might have forgotten his presence.

She hadn't.

"Ro'ney," she purred.

"Hara," Rodney replied, so very cautious. The Haralim wasn't arbitrary, wasn't whimsical, but that didn't really safeguard them. It only meant that when they suffered on her orders, she had a reason.
"Three glasses," she directed. "Pour for us each." She gestured to a bottle brought from Selket with them, a dark, nearly syrupy wine John had tasted from her lips before, blackberry velvet, a taste like the essence of a summer's nights.

Rodney did as she'd instructed, not so gracefully as John would have done, but he brought the first cup to the Haralim, then returned to hand one to John and hold the other himself.

"Drink," she said and watched as John and Rodney both obeyed. She sipped hers afterward, then twisted the glass between her fingers, nails tapping against it at uneven intervals. She sipped again, then set the glass aside. "Bring me the jade coffer, Ro'ney."

"Hara?" he questioned.

John swallowed hard and slid his eyes to the side of the tent, where a brass-bound chest held certain items that had traveled with them from the Haralim's own rooms. 'Desire,' he mouthed to Rodney.

"Fetch me the *dranzi* from it," the Haralim clarified.

John controlled a shudder. Rodney opened the chest and found the coffer, the glyph for desire etched in its lock. He moved slowly as he brought it back and knelt before the Haralim. He wasn't trained to move gracefully, had never been athletic, and his reluctance revealed itself in every movement.

"Pour a measure into John's wine," the Haralim told Rodney.

John actually felt relieved as he held out his glass and Rodney opened the coffer, bringing out a small ceramic bottle. Rodney's hands were steady as he poured the dose into the remaining wine. Better him than Rodney, he thought. He was used to it. Pleasing the Haralim was what he'd trained to do. He drank swiftly and felt the first flush heat his body immediately.

Rodney mouthed, 'I'm sorry,' as the Haralim led John into the second part of the tent.

Later, much later, John left her bed and curled next to Rodney, smoothing his palms over fine-woven fabric that hushed words from his tongue, shadows tickling his own flanks between laughing lamp light, finding the curve of a shoulder precise as numbers, body heat like another caress. The *dranzi* faded out of his system swiftly after that, until the world made sense again, until Rodney's hands in his hair were hands and not sounds and colors. He tucked his face against Rodney's neck and pressed his lips against scratchy stubble.

Rodney caught his breath and John breathed softly against his skin. "Sh," he whispered, "sh, let me."

He ran his hand down Rodney's chest, over his soft belly, under the waistband and down between his legs, tangling his fingers through the thatch of hair there. He moved his hand expertly, finding Rodney's balls and working them, while Rodney's cock hardened and lengthened, until wetness smeared against his wrist and Rodney was panting, his own hands locked on John's shoulders tight enough to hurt. Excitement clenched low in John's belly as he turned his wrist and took the silky-damp shaft in his hand, feeling the weight and heat beneath taut skin. He loved how it felt, how it fit, how Rodney's breath stuttered and his hips moved restlessly forward with his heartbeat. Rodney choked on wordless sounds, then shoved one hand into his mouth to stifle the noise as he came, spilling blood-warm and sticky over John's fingers.

Rodney pulled him closer, groped and found John's still wet hand and placed it John's cock, guiding John's fingers over his own flesh in long strokes meant to bring him off. Red sparks burned behind
his closed eyelids, his muscles trembled, and he held his breath at the end, riding out the sweet high as he came, drawing it out.

He kissed the hollow at he base of Rodney's throat after.

"John?" Rodney whispered.

He nodded. "Mmm."

"Just so it's you," Rodney told him.

John pressed closer to him in answer. "It is."

~*~

Morning brought more merchants and traders, professional salvagers drawn to the prospect of a buyer who could determine the value of the Ancestors' technology they found. The word must have run through the market that the Selketi had a man who read the language and understood it, perhaps more. Some came just to stare. The guards sent them on their way. As many others came out of interest in the rugs and carpets, but the Selketi merchants dealt with them.

Hours passed, pot after pot of tea was served and Rodney sorted through more useful items, crystals of course, but not all even Ancient. They both saw a hand stunner of the type the crew of the *Aurora* had used among one trader's goods. It probably lacked a critical charge, but was obviously enough a weapon neither of them would be allowed to touch it. Rodney watched for other things, picking them out of the useless and broken, including a small, black cube that made his eyes wide and his mouth purse in greed. John didn't recognize it, but Rodney certainly did.

"It's a power source," he crowed over lunch. "Minuscule, of course, hardly large enough to support a gate shield, but it's exactly like the one on the prototype personal shield."

"Got a plan?" John asked, picking it up and turning it in his fingers. The cube was dense, much heavier than its size hinted at, and a dull, light-eating black that refused to reflect anything despite its slick surface.

"Well, not yet, but I'll think of something to do with it," Rodney admitted. He snatched it away from John and carefully wrapped it in a length of purple silk, then tucked it inside the wooden chest he had filled with paints and brushes, salves and jewels and cosmetics. "I'm sure I could jury-rig a connection that would at least power up the holographic screen for the database. No more going blind trying to read its underpowered display."

John grimaced, remembering the days he'd taken Rodney's place and read translations to Piele. The lack of power made the display so ghostly dim he'd had a headache after each session. He was still thinking of that when voices caught his attention and Nuret hurried into the tent.

"More merchants, Ro'ney-ve, please come," she murmured, her gaze flicking between him and John. "Chosen, you must attend the Haralim."

John sighed and got to his feet, extending his hand to Rodney and helping him up from the pillows where they'd been sitting. Rodney's nose had begun burning and they'd ducked back inside after mid-meal. Reminded, he reached over and tugged on the length of blue silk meant to cover Rodney's head and face. "Better put that back on."
"You too," Rodney said, while complying.

John picked up the length of crimson veil. He paused for a moment, looking at his own hands filled with the fabric, the way a sharp shadow angled across the coiling lines of the patterns painted on them. Rodney had refreshed them at dawn, his brush moving over John's skin with confident care. He flexed his hand, watching the lines of poetry shift: Rodney's work, Rodney's words again, like having his hands on John even when he wasn't there, clothing him when there was nothing else.

"Chosen," Nuret called from the tent doorway.

He wrapped the veil over his head and face and walked out.

John immediately felt grateful for the veil as he joined the Haralim. He took one look at the men opposite her at the trade table and ducked his head, cold and hot and angry. Their accents gave them away first, then their posture, despite the homespun clothes and innocent trading personas. Genii. Listening to them made John's chest ache.

The Haralim's hand settled on his shoulder, but John couldn't untense his muscles.

He didn't recognize any faces, but wondered if they wouldn't know his, even after two years. They put out a bounty on him once. They knew about the gene. Knew about Rodney and what he could do. A shudder rolled through him.

The Genii might be more than willing to break Rodney and himself away from the Selketi. But if Atlantis didn't know the Genii had them, if Ladon Radim was out of power or just more of a game player than he'd seemed, they wouldn't send either of them back. Worse, they'd use John against Rodney just the way the Haralim used Rodney against him; only the Genii had the technology and enough knowledge to guess at what they could get from Rodney.

He couldn't say a word to Rodney to warn him, either. Nor did he know if he would tell Rodney no if Rodney wanted to chance trying to send a message through the Genii. There was always a possibility these were renegades, too, remnants of Kolya's rebels.

The traders, who said they were from Wiian, were smooth. The Genii always were. The technology they offered was all Ancient and all useless. Junk, and John would have laid good money on odds that they knew that. The man in charge spoke to the Haralim politely, but his second watched with brightly acquisitive eyes as Rodney examined each piece and shook his head. None of them did more than sneer at John, dismissing him without interest as neither useful nor a threat. He was perfectly happy with that.

The traders left at last with protestations of sorrow and regret that they had brought nothing the Selketi wanted, compliments to the tea and the Haralim.

Others followed the Genii and John tried to settle his worries into the back of his mind. Two more groups came and went and the Haralim sent him to fetch a fan as the afternoon sun warmed them all. He came back while Rodney was examining something new, a golf-ball sized orb. He handed it to John, murmuring, "I can't quite get it."

The subtle awareness of eyes upon him made John look up, wondering if the Genii had returned.

On the other side of the camp, Freka and a woman were speaking. She gestured toward some of the trade goods. John held himself very still, lips shaping her name. Teyla. Not dead, not a slave
somewhere no one would ever find her: she was wearing Lantean BDUs and a tac vest, P-90 snapped onto the retractable sling attached to it. Her gaze swept over him and then settled. His heart tripped and then thundered in his ears, so that he barely heard Rodney's words from across the table.

She stared into his eyes for an instant. He couldn't breathe. In his mind, he begged her to recognize him. Her face gave nothing away though, was a gilded bronze mask, her dark eyes unfathomable.

She smiled at Freka and walked away.

She walked away.

John's breath hitched and broke.

"John. John?" Rodney snapped at him, irritation and worry coloring his voice. "John?"

He blinked at Rodney, then forced himself to breathe again. He tightened his hand on the broach-sized sphere in his hand and thought On. It flared, light leaking through his fingers, a glimpse of dark bone caught through incandescent flesh. "Nothing," he said, and, "I think this thing just zapped me. Maybe it's shorting out." He handed it to Rodney.

Teyla, Teyla, Teyla, echoed through his mind and he felt suddenly sick. Alive, she was alive sang through him, but she hadn't known him and the hurt ran just as deep as the joy. She hadn't known him, hadn't recognized him, had walked away. Could he tell Rodney that? Should he?

She hadn't recognized him because he wasn't the man she had known any longer. That bitter thought took root and stayed through the rest of the afternoon.

Hours passed before he could speak with Rodney privately, while he dressed in a new costume to please the Haralim for the evening.

"You're tense," Rodney murmured. "Was it—were those traders—they were Genii, weren't they?"

"You saw?" John asked, looking down.

Rodney slipped a gold ring onto John's little toe. "I heard, actually," he said. "It isn't like I could ever forget that accent." He shrugged, shoulders rolling under blue cloth. "And if you've been up close and personal a few times, there's something, probably their soap, that's pretty distinct. Like mothballs and anise."

John frowned, trying to remember, and there had been something about the Genii uniforms…

"Did you want to trust them with a message?" Rodney asked. He looked up. John could read the apprehension and willingness warring through him on his face.

"God, no," he said.

"Good, good, because…" Rodney stopped. "Just not them."

"I know," John assured him. He felt the same way. Even if Kolya's men had been rebels, too, he could never separate them from the rest of the Genii in his mind. Turning to the Genii, any Genii, for help, just…no. They both had too many scars to take that chance.
Rodney rubbed his thumb over John's ankle absently, brushing the bells on his fetters. The delicate tinkle sounded against the sounds of the camp, the snorts and stamping of the killa hobbled and grazing at one end of the camp, flicking their tails to keep off the ficha, the distant noise of the temporary trade city, a constant murmur like water. "You're tense. Was it... Did you think I would want to?"

John caught hold of Rodney's shoulder with one hand and sank down onto his knees, facing him.

"John?"

"I saw—I saw Teyla." The words tumbled out after catching in his throat.

Rodney's pupils dilated and his mouth parted. No words. He blinked rapidly, processing what that might mean.

"I saw her, talking to Freka," John whispered intensely.

Rodney's hands came up and closed on John's wrists, tight and fierce. "They're coming for us?"

John shook his head. "No. No, I don't think so."

"What? Why—" Rodney stopped and swallowed hard. His grip on John's wrists loosened. He finished quietly, helplessly, "Why not?"

John bowed his head.

"She didn't know me."

"You don't know," Rodney whispered. His gaze darted beyond John, to the other side of the tent. Nuret had come in and begun directing the two men behind her to set up the Haralim's evening meal. They didn't look at John and Rodney directly, but no doubt they were aware of them. Freka was somewhere outside, too, watching. "It's Teyla. You know she wouldn't give anything away."

John's breath hitched.

"I can't let myself believe it," he admitted.

"Oh," Rodney breathed out. He let go and slid his hands down until they were palm to palm with John's, then laced their fingers together. "Oh."

John leaned forward and let his forehead rest against Rodney's briefly. He pulled away a moment later, as the Haralim entered the tent, too. "John," she called and he crossed the expanse of the tent to kneel before her.

He was glad to know Teyla was alive and free, but he couldn't let himself believe it made any difference, because the disappointment would finally shatter him. The Greeks were right. Hope was the worst thing in Pandora's box.

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The food stuck in Rodney's throat. Every swallow threatened to choke him. He breathed in through his nose and out, silently, through his mouth, determined to keep what he'd eaten down. He tried not to watch John too much, instead keeping his gaze down on the rug under his knees, clay-red and
black patterns over a sage-green background.

Everything was horribly like the night before. John knelt beside the Haralim's chair and ate from her fingers. Rodney answered her questions about the pieces that had been purchased that day as well as he could without revealing anything important. He showed her how the opalescent orb recorded sound and played it back and everyone in the tent shivered and twitched in reaction to what the Ancients had thought of as music. Except John, who swayed to a rhythm the rest of them didn't hear, making Rodney speculate that he heard frequencies the rest of them didn't, that the Ancients had.

Even that didn't distract him from the dizzying certainty that if Teyla was alive, then she was coming for them. It warred with the sickening fear of what would happen if she didn't. His hands trembled and he tucked them between his thighs and calves while he knelt and clutched them together when the Haralim commanded him to fetch the damned jade coffer.

He wondered if John would protest, but he didn't.

"One spoonful," the Haralim told him.

Rodney gritted his teeth and poured a measure of *dranzi* into a cup. He noticed the little lavender bottle that slotted into place next to *dranzi*. *Eiff*. He shifted a step to the side, using his body to block out what he was doing and quickly, efficiently measured out a strong dose of *eiff* into the second wine cup. He had more than enough experience to gage exactly how much it would take to send the Haralim into a deep, helpless sleep through the night.

"Ro'ney," the Haralim called impatiently.

He poured the dark red wine into the cups, glad they were metal, because that changed the taste of the wine enough he doubted she'd notice the drug in it. The little lavender bottle, perhaps only three quarters full now, went back into the coffer.

There was nothing odd in Rodney bringing the Haralim's cup to her first, then returning and handing John the one holding the *dranzi*-dose.

He turned his face away when John's eyes dilated, waited until the Haralim took him into the private section of the tent and then carefully doused all of the lamps but one. He tried to ignore the noises from the other end of the tent, while waiting for them to end.

They couldn't afford to wait any longer, Rodney decided. They couldn't afford to wait for a rescue, because when it didn't come they were both going to fall apart. Tonight, while the Haralim slept, they'd go. He'd need to wait until the *dranzi* wore off John, but there would still be time. He absently packed the power cube into the small chest that held the paints and brushes he used, along with various bits of jewelry the Haralim had 'given' John, thinking to himself that they could trade them somewhere. He added the drugs from the jade coffer to the pots of healing salves and disinfectants. Drugs were useful trade items too; Atlantis had bought food with medicine more often than anything else.

He paused with the Ancient recorder in his hands, turning it by the light of the last lamp, still carefully ignoring the sounds John and the Haralim were making. If they escaped back to Atlantis, they wouldn't need trade goods.

A draft of cool air from the night outside swirled around Rodney's ankles. Fresh air, but the door flap of the tent remained laced closed. John and the Haralim were vocally occupied with each other on
the other side of tapestry-and-silk wall. Someone else was in the tent with him. Someone silent and surreptitious. Rodney tightened his hold on the recording orb and tensed. The orb was large and glass-heavy; it would make a decent weapon.

His thoughts skittered, while he held his breath, listening. Had one of the slaves or the guards been suborned? One of the merchants that accompanied them? Who exactly was the target? Himself, John, or the Haralim? All three of them? Could Hara Zoyan have arranged a second attempt on the Rale's first wife?

The lamp on the table before him glowed steadily. Selketi lamps didn't have flames to flicker in response to air currents. Sitting in front of him, it couldn't even offer a giveaway shadow to move and warn him. He listened for a footfall, aware a slave would be silently barefoot as he was. He tried to find some reflective surface to show him any movement behind him, without lifting his head too far. He'd yell for the guards once he saw the intruder. Once he knew the attack didn't come from within the guards' numbers again. Idris and his two traitors couldn't have been the only ones with less than perfect loyalty.

The orb still in his left hand, Rodney bent lower and searched through the mess of Ancient pieces on the table for the hand-sized cutting tool that had been one of the day's best finds. Meant for faceting control crystals, it wasn't much use without a scanner and display to show the crystals' interiors. It created a barely visible blade from one centimeter to ten in length that would shear through Alteran alloys and crystals. It would carve into flesh, too.

His gaze caught on the cutter as the sounds from the other end of the tent increased in tempo and urgency. Listening for the intruder, he couldn't ignore them the way he had the last two nights, and wanted to catch his breath at the ache in his chest. He hated hearing them, knowing the hitching sound John made when Rodney ran his palm up the inside of his thigh to his balls, knowing the Haralim pulled those sounds from him, too.

He picked up the cutter and tensed, guessing the intruder would use the noise to move. The muscles in his thighs and calves tensed as he waited for the rush, ready to spin on his knees, throw the orb and activate the cutter. He didn't know how much charge it had left. He couldn't afford to use it too soon.

The scent of incense from the brazier in the corner grew stronger and Rodney turned.

Green-tinted lamp light limned a stranger's mask on a friend's face, aged bronze and shadows, familiar and fierce. For one breath, even fearsome, until he caught his breath in recognition. John had said he'd seen her, but somehow that hadn't been real to Rodney, and only now, kneeling and looking at her, did he finally believe.

Teyla didn't smile, but it didn't matter. Rodney let himself look and look, memorizing her again, filling color into memories worn into faded sepia tones.

She raised her finger over her lips. Rodney half turned and carefully, because his hand wanted to tremble, set down the orb. He slipped the cutter in a pocket, then dimmed the lamp further. One deep breath and then a another, he reminded himself. No slips. Stay calm. Present a smooth appearance, be graceful and attentive and pleasant.

"Doctor McKay," Teyla said. She spoke softly, but it still jolted him. That was wrong. Panic bubbled up in his throat. He wasn't allowed a title or a name beyond what the Haralim gave him.
"No, no," Rodney whispered, horrified. "You can't call me that. Ro'ney. You have to call me Ro—"
He stuttered over his own name, realizing Teyla would pronounce it correctly, as only John ever did. He swallowed hard. "Rodney." He raised his open hand, to show her the glyph painted on his palm, as was proper. Learned. On his other hand the glyph traced Valued. Together, in Selketi, the glyphs were called Ve. The glyphs he traced invisibly on John's body during the night were always different. Treasured. Cherished. Beloved.

"Do they not know who you are?" Teyla asked. Her voice remained soft as the night breeze as she stepped closer to him.

Rodney would have back away had he been on his feet rather than his knees. He lowered his eyes instead. "Slaves only have one name," he explained. "The Haralim chose."

Teyla shocked him with her next words, bringing his head back up: "Who is this Haralim?"

Rodney looked toward the other end of the tent. A deep groan and words in Selketi he was glad Teyla would not know whispered through the silken walls. John was always quiet, silent even, but the dranzi stripped away his reserves. Distaste flitted over Teyla's face, telling him she heard the same, as the Haralim's voice rose over John's, urging him to greater efforts.

That distaste sent a shudder down Rodney's spine. If Teyla turned away, how could they hope for better from anyone else? He wished suddenly, violently, that John hadn't seen her, that she hadn't come here. Not if she was going to hurt John. For himself, it didn't matter; he hadn't been used in the same ways as John. He could summon his arrogance, his sense of superiority and sneer down anyone, but John would need to rebuild the armor of self that kept a person safe from spite and contempt.

Teyla's hand, hanging at her side, clenched into a tight fist. Rodney winced.

"Teyla," he forced himself to say. Her face had hardened compared to his memory. Hara, his mind insisted. Don't judge us. He wanted to ask what had happened to her. How long had she been free? Where had she been?

Why didn't anyone come for us?

He didn't dare.

"We never stopped looking for you," she said. A flicker in her dark eyes betrayed the lie. Rodney had grown adept at reading the unspoken, the things words could hide, the hidden intentions the body gave away even without a voice. Teyla lied.

He let it go. Let the lie pass unprotested. What did she think he could do about it? Instead, he mustered his own words, speaking softly in stops and starts. "Teyla," he repeated, still in wonder, not quite whispering, because a guard outside might worry over whispers and secrets, "I can't believe it." Part of him still didn't believe it. He'd had dreams, in the beginning, of someone coming for them. He always woke again in Selket, and it hurt. He hated those dreams, after a time, and the people in them.

His hands moved aimlessly over the pieces on the table. "John said he saw you, but it seemed too good to be true."

John hadn't believed Teyla had known him. Rodney wouldn't give that away. Teyla would only hear the lack of faith in it and not that any hope had become too painful eventually.
"The Haralim has brought us on two other trading trips and there's never been a chance to even talk to anyone."

He glanced back at her, speaking quickly to distract her from his study. "Are you all right?" She seemed thinner, as well as harder. There were new lines at the corners of her eyes and her mouth, something harsh in her expression and the set of her lips. Though she was even more beautiful, if anything, time had been unkind. Anger and bitterness had stained something about Teyla and it hurt Rodney, seeing it. But she had reason, hadn't she? She'd been sold too and he had no idea what had happened to her since, had no idea exactly why she had come tonight. Perhaps she blamed him and John. He couldn't know anything but that she had come alone — it occurred to him that there might not be anyone else to come with her. If she was, then she was in more danger than she could know, intruding in the Haralim's tent. "You can't let the guards catch you."

Teyla raised her hands, miming silence once more. Her mouth curved into the rich and knowing smile he remembered, relieving Rodney. "Rodney. It is…very good to see you again." She crossed the last of the space between them, set her hands on his shoulders and knelt before him. He'd shared the Athsian head touch with John so many times that it came as naturally as breathing to bow his head and rest against hers. Their breath mingled and he inhaled the scent of herbs from her hair, dust and laundry soap from her jacket — laundry soap from Earth — the scent telling him so much, telling Rodney that Teyla had come from Atlantis, that tears blurred his eyes briefly.

He blinked them away and focused on what was before him, casting his gaze down and almost chuckling. Teyla's top plunged in a deep V. He could see shadowed cleavage and the perspiration damp curve of her breasts.

"You know, in this position, I'm looking right down your top?" he asked.

Teyla's breasts were beautiful, he remembered, from seeing them in glimpses through the years, on missions, in showers and quarantines, during rushed medical exams or treatments when necessity trumped modesty. Athsians weren't as prudish as the people from Earth, but he still hadn't stared — too much — yet he had looked. She shook her head at him, exasperation and fondness clear on her face. She rose and stepped back with a small, laughing huff.

Rodney faked a return grin. John and the Haralim were still engaged and her voice rose too high to ignore, claiming and commanding him. John would hate knowing Teyla had heard them. He hoped Teyla wouldn't make it worse.

"You should get out of here," he told her.

"No, Rodney. Atlantis has sent marines. Lt. Cadman is waiting outside the camp. You and Colonel Sheppard are coming home."

"Home?" he repeated.

Home.

He felt nearly hysterical. Home was...He didn't know. Home was the rooms he shared with John in the city of seven walls, the palace in the fortress. Home was Selket. Except it wasn't, of course, it wasn't, but it wasn't any place else, not Toronto or Antarctica, Area 51 or Colorado Springs, not Earth at all. And he was afraid, very afraid, that it wasn't Atlantis, either.
But if Atlantis had sent marines to get them, they would have to go back. Marines had guns. The guards would fight and the marines would fight back. Rodney didn't want it, it wasn't worth it. There was Freka, who had been kind, who would fight to stop them. He and John had promised not try to escape while Freka had their charge.

"You aren't going to kill anyone, are you?" he asked, ignoring home because he just couldn't deal with it.

Teyla's smile faded.

"Rodney, you do not want to stay with these people, do you?"

"What?" He wondered what she would do if he said yes.

But he wouldn't, didn't want to, and if he had, it wouldn't have mattered, because John needed this escape far more than he did. John wasn't safe, could never be safe, not once he'd sired a second child for the Haralim. The Rale wouldn't tolerate John once his purpose in the Haralim's bed had been served. John didn't see it, but he was too close, and maybe he couldn't, not and keep his sanity since he had to sleep with both of them. Rodney knew, though. He knew John's days were numbered and whatever affection they seemed to display was nothing more than a game. "No, no, no," he said swiftly. "John…John's going to…" He didn't know how to convey how important it was to get John away or how broken they both were. "It's killing him."

He rose from his knees, unable to stay still any longer, encouraged by Teyla's presence and the reminder of a life before this, the prospect of a life after this. The rugs were too familiar beneath his feet, though, and the spicy incense in the air. The colors everywhere bled into each other, a blur, and Rodney felt dizzy. It was another dream. It was always a dream. They might be on another planet, but they still stood in a bubble that was all Selket and they would never escape. It wasn't possible.

"We need—There's dranzi and eiff and the moa, and, oh, the paints—" he muttered, panicking, thinking of everything they needed to take with them if they escaped. He'd been calm before, but a real chance flooded his veins with adrenaline and fear. He couldn't remember what he'd already put together. "The medical section will need samples—" He didn't know how habituated to the dranzi John really was, if there was any withdrawal from it. John never told him any more of what the Haralim and the Rale did to him than he had to, any more than the marks on his body gave away. Rodney had no way of telling how often they used the drug on him, only the times it hadn't worn off before John came back to him.

"Of paint?" Teyla asked, derailing his fearful train of thought.

"No, the drugs," he told her.

The momentary paralysis of possibility passed and he picked up the wooden chest, checking the samples and bottles he'd already set inside.

"Is—Who is the CSO now?" he asked, realizing someone soon might actually analyze the drugs.

"Dr. Reinhardt."

He didn't know that name. Not one of Carson's staff, not Keller, either. No way to guess if this Reinhardt was a worthless buffoon like most doctors or a bright star. Tein-ve probably knew more than him—her—whenever. "That's—that's not good," he blurted out. "I don't know him. Her?
Carson, I—I miss him. He would have—he would have been better—" Better for John, he thought, than another stranger who would touch him like a thing, the way she did. He picked up the jade coffer, with its toys and accouterments and set it inside his chest. Then he wrapped the chest in one of her shawls.

Teyla said his name. Rodney answered on automatic, ducking his head subserviently. "Vai?" then heard himself. "I mean yes?"

"You should put on some shoes, we may need to move swiftly. We cannot carry much."

Rodney looked down at his bare feet and flexed his toes. It hadn't even occurred to him and Teyla couldn't know, could she?

The dissonance would only get worse, he knew.

"Teyla, I haven't had any shoes for two years." He touched the chest. They had to have something to mark their lives on Selket. He knew that instinctively. "And I'm not leaving it." He wasn't. The chest had to come. How would he paint John's patterns, ward him with Ancient words, without the contents?

Teyla acceded as the Haralim cried out in completion. Rodney grimaced. When would the damn eiff hit her? He'd have been out for hours after a dose like he'd slipped into her wine. The Selketi must metabolize it differently. Of course they did. They didn't get addicted to it. He snapped out of that speculation as Teyla moved and he saw the Wraith stunner she'd pulled out of her tac vest. He hadn't considered what she might do if the Haralim didn't pass out soon.

Soft, low voices came from the other side of the silk wall. John and the Haralim, speaking, but he couldn't make out the words, only the tone, the way the Haralim's voice slowed and slurred away.

Movement followed and Rodney tensed.

John glided through the doorway, dark eyes searching out Rodney, a compass spinning to its north, coming to him without hesitation. Dark, dark eyes and that meant he was still flying on the dranzi. John's sigh went to Rodney's stomach, the way his walk did. He could only see John's bruised mouth, until John twined himself against Rodney, hiding his face against Rodney's neck. He rubbed and petted at Rodney, hands moving compulsively, plucking at Rodney's clothes to get to his skin and almost purring when he did, wordless and warm, an armful of need and affection and relief. It was so familiar, that plaint, eager body against his, that he forgot for a breathless instant and murmured John's name, wrapping his arms around him, returning his touches gently.

John lifted his head. His eyes were almost all pupil, only a rim of dark green iris showing. He melted against Rodney. Rodney felt himself harden in response to John's body against him, John's helpless arousal, and Teyla's presence couldn't stop that reaction. It was almost a reflex.

John toyed with the cuff of Rodney's shirt and panted softly. He had a fascination with texture while the dranzi burned through him. But the dose Rodney had measured out should have been fading.

"How much more did she give you?" he murmured into John's ear, soft, damp hair slipping over his lips, somehow still smelling a little like sunshine and grass under the musk and spice. He settled his arms around John, holding him close, looking at Teyla over John's shoulder. John leaned in and pillowed his head on Rodney's shoulder. It wasn't just the drug that brought John to him, Rodney knew, and that let him respond. John did the same thing when they were in bed together, sleepy or
sated, and the trust in the way he relaxed then never failed to undo Rodney.

John shrugged without moving away.

" Enough." He rubbed his entire body against Rodney, a movement that pushed his hard cock against Rodney's hip, silk slipping between them. Rodney slipped his fingers through John's sweaty hair and caught his breath. "Feels good." Warm lips teased at Rodney's neck and John fist ed his hands in Rodney's shirt, still moving restlessly against him. "Please?" he whispered.

Rodney pressed a kiss to John's temple and asked, "John, is she out?"

John's breath on his throat felt incredible, slick hot tongue tracing patterns against a tendon, the exact way he teased the tip of Rodney's cock before blowing him. He wanted to moan at the thought, because he couldn't have that now, not with Teyla there in the shadows, ready to take them back to Atlantis.

To Atlantis, where John wouldn't need or want like this again.

For one selfish, terrible instant, Rodney imagined yelling for the guards.

The bells at John's ankles chimed. The bells on his fetters. The temptation passed so quickly he didn't even feel any guilt over it; it was something he would never do. Rodney rested his hand on the crown of John's head protectively instead.

"Let me—" John's hand snaked down between them and stroked over Rodney's hard-on, making him gasp.

"John, Teyla's here," he said, because it was the right thing, no matter how much he wanted to rut into John's hand.

John went on touching him, rocking his cock against Rodney's hip, lost, then in one breath he tensed and Rodney knew he'd finally understood the words. The drug swept him under again, though, and he twisted and slid against Rodney with a rough exhalation, then turned in his arms until his back was against Rodney's chest.

Teyla stepped out of the shadows again and John slurred her name in his most sex-drenched voice.

"John," she said, closing the space between them so that she could rest one small hand on his shoulder. John dipped his head, sliding down in the circle of Rodney's arms, and they touched foreheads.

Then she stepped back abruptly and John caught his breath before writhing back against Rodney.

"It's the dranzi," Rodney told her. A shift and a step and they almost fell into the pillow strewn pallet. He stroked John's arms, circled fingers over his belly, all smooth, hot skin. This would be the last time. John wouldn't need this when they were back in Atlantis. He wouldn't want Rodney. In fact, he could foresee how it would go. They would go their separate ways. John would tell him they were friends, but day by day, they would see less and less of each other, because seeing Rodney would only remind John of all he would want to erase from memory. Memory would be all Rodney would have, because even friendship couldn't survive in vacuum.

For this last time, Rodney decided to give everything to John and ignore the ache between his legs.
He rationalized it to himself: they couldn't attempt any escape until the *dranzi* had worn off. He needed to memorize John's weight held to him, the way he twisted and lifted into Rodney's hands, the way his breath sped. And John needed the relief, no matter who was looking.

Teyla doesn't have to look, though: they don't have to endure that from her. He said, his voice rusty and strained, "Teyla, could you just—"

She turned away and Rodney kissed John, slow, an sweet, hot and just as needy as John was, letting it deepen on its own, his tongue in John's mouth, then sucking on his lip for a long moment, until John moaned quietly. He pushed the filmy pants down over John's hips and found his cock. John pushed into his hand, sighing in relief, as Rodney grazed his thumb over the head, adding a little squeeze and then began to pump him.

John moved with the rhythm he set and began whispering against Rodney's jaw, proving he wasn't as overcome as he'd seemed. "Sorry, sorry," he panted, "I'm sorry, Ro'ney, I can't—" His breath hitched and his hips lifted. Rodney turned his hand at the end of his stroke and found the sensitive spot just under the head. He loved watching the way John came apart when he teased him just there and nowhere else, but couldn't take his time, no matter how he wished to. He had to speed up his strokes instead, until John gave a gasping keen, wet breath; yes in Selketi spilling from his lips as he came in Rodney's hand.

He held on through the shuddering aftermath, let John drift his fingers over his chest and shoulders, then kissed him once more before wiping his hand on a pillow and pulling up John's pants.

While John caught his breath, Rodney rose and found a decanter holding water. He poured a cup while Teyla watched, then handed it to John.

"The water helps it wear off faster," Rodney told her.

John didn't look up at either of them, just pulled in breath after breath. He finished the cup of water in four long gulps and held it out. Perspiration still gleamed on his chest as it moved up and down, his belly hollowing with each inhalation.

His fingers grazed Rodney's as he let go of the cup and lingered, surprising Rodney, moving in a tiny, but deliberate caress. Rodney poured a second cup and gave it back. Their hands touched again.

John drank the second cup slowly, then stretched, before sitting up and looking at Teyla, his gaze much clearer, except that he looked at her the way he looked at the Selketi women in the court, measuring what she might ask of him, what she really desired, how to please. But then he smiled a real smile instead of the seductive one.

"You got away," Rodney heard John say, his voice hoarse but happy.

"Ronon as well."

A little piece of Rodney's soul came back to life with Teyla's assurance. He'd been too afraid to ask about Ronon, thought he'd known the answer. Being wrong made him happy this time.

"Oh God, thank God," he murmured. He grabbed up some clothes and shoved them into John's arms. "Here. Clothes."

John began dressing while asking Teyla if Ronon was with them. Rodney felt a little disappointed to
hear Ronon wasn't out there, ready to give them both bruising hugs and then shoot anyone who came after them.

"We should go now," Teyla told them.

Teyla's unhappiness with John's clothes distracted Rodney from thought of Ronon and their team reunited. He retrieved the heavy robes they'd worn leaving Selket three days before. They were both covered completely except for their feet, hands and eyes as Teyla led them to the opening she'd made in the side the tent. Rodney stubbornly scooped up the wooden chest in its shawl wrapping and tucked it under one arm.

They followed her obediently through the dark.

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John had been barefoot for two years, but that had been on smooth floors and carpets, not outdoors. Rocks and burrs cut into his soles as they stumbled behind Teyla. She didn't offer them any chance to slow down, either. He tripped twice and Rodney caught him, holding onto his arm, without making a sound. Then there were marines rising from prone positions in the grass, surrounding them, menacing black silhouettes in fatigues and body armor. Stray light glinted on P-90s, night goggles and teeth. John smelled gun oil and twitched, disturbed, crowding up close behind Teyla along with Rodney.

He couldn't bring himself to speak, even when Cadman offered him a weapon, feeling curious eyes on him, judging him. Something inside him wanted to turn back, to get away from them. He stayed next to Rodney instead, in a kind of daze, all the way through the market, even when they had to run, until the stargate opened before them.

The blue light of the wormhole reflected off the undercarriage of two hovering jumpers. John's steps stuttered at the sight. He'd almost forgotten jumpers.

He'd almost forgotten flying.

Two marines disappeared through the event horizon, like stepping into the sky. He wanted the sky again, he thought, his lips parting as he breathed in the memory of infinite blue reaches and the blur of speed and freedom they had always meant to him.

Rodney's shoulder bumped into his and John snapped back to the present, to the night filled with screams and burning. It still seemed set at a distance from him, though; removed beyond a wall of glass when he could still taste the Haralim on his lips, salt and sticky-sweet.

He was leaving her behind, leaving the Rale, the city of seven walls, all of Selket. Leaving Dalal. His child. It seemed too momentous, too fast. He didn't know if he could do it now that the choice had arrived. He'd almost been content.

He stopped only steps from the event horizon. Teyla dodged past him and Rodney stopped.

What was he going back to?

What was he leaving behind?

He swung around, half expecting to find the Haralim's face among the crowd. The Great Market was burning, fire shooting sparks into the sky, embers like transient stars. Impossible to recognize anyone
in the darkness and chaos or pick out a single voice among the panicked crowd.

When he went through the wormhole, there would be no return. He would be barred from Selket forever. Cadman was yelling something but John didn't comprehend. He didn't care, because she didn't understand: he was leaving behind his life for a second time. He was giving up any chance to mean something to Dalal, to know her, to even know anything that would happen to her. He had to look back at least once more.

Walking through the stargate with no way back was harder when you were leaving something behind.

John stood still. He looked back and hoped he wouldn't turn to salt, even as he tasted it on his lips.

Rodney grabbed John's hand and squeezed tightly. "John." That soft, sweaty grip wouldn't let go, John knew; Rodney was stronger than anyone would believe. It grounded him again.

John gave way and went with the tug on his arm, because walking through the stargate beside Rodney was what he had always done and if he stayed behind, Rodney wouldn't leave him. He turned his back and looked forward, away from the market and the Selketi camp, away from the life they'd endured and Dalal, and faced the event horizon once more.

An eye blink of eternity and they were stumbling into the gateroom of Atlantis.

Rodney froze and John went still next to him. Neither of them knew what to do.

Helplessly, they let Cadman chivvy them up the steps, so cool under John's feet, the lights flaring along each riser as they climbed.

They all stopped on the landing. Amber light fell across the floor onto their bare toes. John stared down. Rodney's feet were bleeding. So were his and they'd begun to burn with pain.

The sound of boots made him glance up through his lashes, while keeping his head down. He glimpsed Colonel Caldwell, Major Lorne and Lar Zelenka, then Hara Elizabeth rushed down past them in a flash of dark hair and a red uniform shirt.

"John! Rodney! I can't believe it — " Hara Elizabeth called out.

John went down to his knees, dropping the dark robe off his shoulders, sliding into the proper posture of submission. He was half aware of Rodney bending beside him, finally setting down his wooden chest, submitting as was expected of a slave before a lady.

The white noise of voices fell away and left only silence, stained glass light, and obedience. He waited and barely heard as someone spoke and Teyla's hard voice sparred with Weir's, until someone told him to get up.

"Vai, hara," he murmured and waited patiently for the next command, his head bowed, his hands open.

"You're safe now," Hara Elizabeth said. "You're home."

John shivered despite the robe Teyla draped over him again. It was cold and he was a stranger in a place that looked the same, but wasn't. Atlantis itself seemed to echo Hara Elizabeth's words, but
there were too many eyes, too many people talking, and it wasn't anything like home anymore.
Estranged

Atlantis thrummed blue-cool all around John, greeting him, but reserved in a way he didn't remember. The first time he stepped into the city, it had felt alien and familiar; he knew it as it knew him, down to his DNA. Each cell had recognized what his mind had forgotten or never known. Atlantis had been right, had felt like home the way no other place ever had. It didn't this time. The city he stood in had changed, gone cold and barren. Maybe his nerves were deadened; maybe something in him had been severed. Something he knew only through its absence.

A negative space.

The change had to be in him, didn't it? It couldn't be so different after a mere eye blink in its existence. He wasn't this place's John Sheppard anymore. He remembered that man, but only remembered.

Weir stared at him. He felt it, felt eyes everywhere on him: marines, scientists on the balconies, technicians in the control room, Teyla and Cadman. Where was the euphoria of escape? Where was the joy and relief? This didn't seem real.

Beside him, Rodney shifted, a rustle of raw silk and linen that reminded John with a shock of what he wore and how he must look. He'd knelt. They both had, as automatic as breathing, because she might not have Zuleika's sheer presence, but Weir was the Haralim of this place. Oh fuck. That had to look good.

He only stood again because she'd told him to get up, but lifting his face to meet her eyes took an effort he couldn't muster. Hara Eliza–Weir was talking, but he hadn't really heard her, caught in his own head and still stunned. Two years and they had just waltzed away from the Selketi camp. It had never been so easy in his dreams and fantasies.

Teyla touched his shoulder and he flinched despite himself, before realizing she was wrapping the heavier outer robe over him again. Too late, really, but the kindness still mattered. He pulled it closer, feeling chilled.

"Safe," he heard Weir say and stifled a laugh.

He made himself smile instead. It felt strange on his face, but he needed to start acting normally. Faking. That's what Weir would want, what everyone would want, and he would do it, he knew how please. But he wasn't ready yet. She was waiting for him to say something and he couldn't. His throat closed up when he tried to think of something to say.

"John?"

Rodney edged closer to him. He wanted to reach out and take Rodney's hand and ground himself in the real, in a warm touch that mattered more than coming back to Atlantis, more than pride or appearances. His fingers twitched. Memory betrayed him, putting him back on his knees before the Haralim for the first time, touching Rodney and giving over the keys to his soul without even realizing it then. If he touched Rodney, would he give them both away again? A jolt of fear made him feel sick. He froze.

Rodney's hand closed on his and it didn't matter. John held on. Just this once, he told himself.

"Rodney?" Weir questioned, worry and confusion filling her voice, while her gaze switched between them.
"Vai, hara," Rodney whispered.

"Rodney, I don't know what that means," Weir said, "but, please, look up. Look at me."

John flinched and moved a step closer to Rodney, uncertain what she'd do if Rodney displeased her. "Yes, lady," he murmured. "It—it means, it's Selketi, it's respect and rank." His voice sounded hoarse and distant.

"Sorry, I should—I didn't mean to give offense, hara," Rodney added.

"Offense, McKay?" Lar Zelenka said. He snorted. "You are always offensive."

"Radek, please," Weir remonstrated.

"This one begs forgiveness," Rodney recited to Lar Zelenka. He held his hands out. John curled his abandoned hand into a fist. He had to stop thinking of them by Selketi ranks.

"Colonel Sheppard, Doctor McKay. It is good to see you..." Caldwell hesitated, then recovered quickly, though John heard the break, "in Atlantis once more." John looked up through his lashes, trying to read how much of that Caldwell meant, trying to read his body language. Caldwell hadn't changed. He was wearing the expedition's gray and black military uniform, though; not the Air Force jumpsuit he'd worn before. John guessed that meant Caldwell had finally received command of the city. He'd expected it, but still felt an ache in his chest.

Caldwell probably expected a salute. John straightened and found his voice again. "We're pretty thrilled to be back, too, sir." Sir sounded strange on his tongue, soft compared to the sharp Selketi word, rae. Not quite right.

Caldwell nodded to Teyla and Lt. Cadman. "Well done," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Cadman said. She stood a little straighter. Teyla inclined her head without speaking, acknowledging the words without letting them touch her. John didn't like the hostility he felt directed from her to Caldwell. He'd sensed it when they joined the marines outside the Selketi camp, too.

Caldwell returned his gaze to John and Rodney. "We'll want a preliminary debrief, of course, but that will wait until you've gone to the infirmary and been examined."

"Colonel—" Weir started to say.

"SOP, Doctor Weir, as you know."

John saw Weir narrow her eyes, lips pressed together, before she acceded with a sharp nod. "Of course, Colonel."

"Major Lorne," Caldwell said. "Why don't you take our stray lambs down to the infirmary."

John gritted his teeth. Stray lambs? Like he and Rodney had wondered off and been lost through their carelessness? Was that the way it was going to be? He'd known this wouldn't be easy, but hadn't counted all the ways it would cut.

"Yes, sir."

"Gentlemen, if you please," Caldwell finished. John was impressed by the way he'd bulldozed Weir. "I'm sure you'll want to get this over with as soon as possible and clean up." He nodded to them
both, his expression communicating his distaste for their manner of dress, John's painted face and golden manacles, his and Rodney's bare and bloody feet. "Doctor Weir, if you would accompany me, I imagine you'll want to compose a communique to the SGC detailing today's events," he said, taking her elbow and steering her away, up the stairs to the control room level where she had her office.

Weir went with him with a regretful look back toward them. John looked at the stained-glass window after she'd continued up the stairs with Caldwell and they had disappeared from view.

"I shall accompany you," Teyla said to John.

"Sir?" Lorne prompted them when neither of them moved. "Doctor McKay. Shall we go?"

Teyla touched John's arm and he jolted, realizing Lorne had been talking to him and Rodney.

"Come," Teyla told him. It was almost a relief to hear a command. He let her pull him toward the nearest transporter, Rodney following so close John could feel the gusts of his breath now and again. Four of them in a transporter made a tight squeeze and John crowded into Rodney's space gratefully, keeping him between himself and Teyla or Lorne. Rodney found his hand again, in the tangle of his robe's fabric, and laced their fingers together.

~*~

Rodney had to let go of John's hand in the infirmary. He hated that. No one could see it, but he could feel the tremors running through John and keeping it together for him meant Rodney couldn't lose it himself. It worked the other way too.

His heel skidded on the floor as he followed Lorne away and he flailed for balance, sliding on his own blood, but he didn't fall. He limped into the exam bay.

"You okay?" Lorne asked. He reached for Rodney, but Rodney ducked away, bobbing his head. Lorne waited, seeming to expect something else, but when it didn't come, he said, "Take a seat. The doc will be here in a minute, I'd bet."

Rodney perched awkwardly on the exam table after starting to kneel on the floor. He set the box beside him and folded his hands together. He wished that he could see John from where he was, but the curtains had been closed. The green light from one of the water conduits that distributed ballast throughout the city dyed his hands an eerie, ill color. He pressed them tight, until they ached, feeling lightheaded despite being seated.

His feet burned and the left one, the one he'd cut sometime during the run through the Great Market, dripped unsteady and slow, plop and splatter, thick and red, on the previously clean floor. He wanted to get down and clean it up. The housekeepers in the palace hated anyone who tracked dirt—or blood—through the halls and rooms and woe to anyone who stained one of the carpets. This wasn't the palace, though. He wasn't supposed to think about that here.

He suddenly wondered where Piele would be reassigned when he didn't come back to translate any more of the database. Macha would be furious.

Lorne patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, a move Rodney endured without flinching, because Lorne was a lot like Freka. Good intentions even under unpleasant circumstances. At least he wasn't yelling.

"Ah, it's really good to see you, McKay. A lot of people... A lot of people really missed you and the
Colonel. Colonel Sheppard, I mean,” Lorne said. He was trying to fill up the silence. "And your sister? I guess she's really raised hell on Earth—" He chuckled. "—hell back on Earth, pulled a lot of people together from the families of folks who—well, there's some kind of class action suit. The SGC is going to be awfully happy to tell her you're alright."

Rodney blinked down at his green-tinted hands and tried to imagine that. Jeannie taking on the SGC, that he could believe, but over him? That didn't seem likely. He wondered what the SGC had told her or done to piss her off enough to go after them. Maybe they'd tried to stiff her. He'd had his insurance made out to her and Madison…But then he wasn't really dead after all, so if it had paid out she'd have needed to give it back. A tiny snort of amusement escaped him. It caught in the back of his throat though and felt more like a sob.

"Okay, I'm just going to get out of here," Lorne finished after waiting and waiting for Rodney to say anything. Rodney didn't respond and he left.

~*~

John blanked out on the way to the infirmary, listening to the hum of the city, deliberately concentrating on that awareness he'd once exerted a conscious effort to ignore, anchoring himself on the cluch of Rodney's hand around his.

He'd held onto Rodney's hand until they reached the infirmary, then given in as Teyla led him to one examination bay and Lorne guided Rodney away. Before the curtains were drawn around the bay, he glimpsed marines stationing themselves at the doors to the corridor. Caldwell had assigned security in case he and Rodney were a threat. Just being a good, cautious commander, John knew, but it still reminded him he was an outsider here too. Now.

Teyla sighed beside him and he twitched, heart suddenly pounding too fast. "I will be outside if you or Rodney need me," she said.

"Thanks," he told her, bowing his head automatically as he spoke.

She looked at him without smiling but John didn't look back, watching her sidelong instead, grateful that she didn't offer any false assurances, already regretting the pain he saw flit over her features. Did she wish she hadn't found them? She didn't offer the forehead touch again, either.

He leaned against the exam table and stared at a wall full of shelves and medical supplies through a gape in the privacy curtain. The English printing on the packages looked foreign, harsh and angular after the swooping grace of Selketi, spidery compared to the wide strokes of Ancient. Bandages, rubbing alcohol, tape, sheets, blankets, scrubs—nothing out in the open that wasn't pretty harmless. No needles, no scalpels, no drugs. He tried to remember if the infirmary had been set up the same before. He thought there were more shelves, but that made sense. The population of the expedition had probably expanded while they were gone.

The curtain rattled back and John jumped as a red-haired man came in, eyes on the tablet he carried, white lab coat flapping around his long legs. Without looking up, he yanked the curtain closed again and said, "I'm Reinhardt, Colonel. I've been CSO here since Dr. Keller resigned. We're going to start with a preliminary exam, then take some samples for testing and to compare with your medical records, which I have here, so if you'll strip, I'll send a nurse in with a gown. After we're done, we'll set you up with some scrubs, but the gown is easier to work with for the moment."

John pulled the heavy robe off and dropped it on the floor, then started on the pants. He immediately began shivering, the tremors making his fingers fumble. Atlantis was cold after Selket and even Faeatua. John could feel that the city was low on power, running off a single ZPM, probably with
many levels shut down to conserve the power from it. He tried, without thinking, to adjust the infirmary environmental controls, and failed; the city's response was too sluggish and over-ridden by conservation protocols—those were new. The low power level translated into a sensation akin to not having enough air to fill his lungs as the city's state echoed back into his consciousness. He coughed and caught at the edge of the exam table, remembering why he'd walled away much of his sensitivity to Atlantis before.

"Colonel Sheppard?" Reinhardt asked.

John sucked in another deep breath and coordinated his fingers enough to drop the gauzy pants. Nothing under them, of course. In a distant way, it was mortifying, but he felt more uncomfortable that he hadn't managed to make the act of stripping graceful than by his nudity.

He seated himself on the exam table, wincing at the crackle of disposable paper under him. It didn't offer enough insulation to keep the chill from seeping through into his thighs and buttocks. Keeping his eyes down, he began pulling off the rings on his fingers.

Reinhardt stepped away and then returned, proffering an emesis bowl. John dropped the rings into the stainless steel, each one making it ring. Earrings next, then the navel ring and the thin chain running from it around his waist. It fell into the bowl with a metallic rustle. Reinhardt set the bowl on the table next to John and stepped to the curtain. He ducked his head out and called, "Clara, get me a hospital gown for Colonel Sheppard. We'll need a bag for his clothes and belongings and a signature form too, please." He came back as John lifted one filthy foot and began working off the toe rings. "Those look pretty valuable, so we'll lock them up for the mo—Damn it. Right, we'll get your feet cleaned up and disinfected before we start anything else."

John shrugged silently. His feet seemed like the least of his worries, though it would ironic to die of an infection at this point.

~*~

Rodney could hear voices, but he couldn't make them out, as he waited. He looked up when someone walked in.

"Oh," a feminine voice exclaimed. "It really is you."

Rodney raised his head enough to recognize Dr. Biro. She had the same glasses, but her sandy hair had grown out and was tied back in a short, messy ponytail.

"Don't start complaining that they've sent you the pathologist, McKay," she said immediately. "I'm the only doctor in this section that even knows you and Dr. Reinhardt thought you'd appreciate a familiar face."

Rodney thought about it and blinked, then nodded stiffly. Biro gave him a sharp glance that took in his state, clothes, and bleeding feet.

"That has to hurt, though I don't suppose it really compares to being shot or a penetrating arrow wound, does it?" she stated and began moving briskly around the exam bay. "Sooner started, sooner finished, and we have a lot of tests to get through."

Rodney closed his eyes.

"What's in the box?" Biro asked later.

He set his hand on the lid protectively. "It's mine."
"Sure, just asking what you brought back," she said easily. She tried a quick smile. "I'm hoping candy."

"No."

"McKay…"

"It's private and it's mine," he said, pulling it closer.

"McKay, anything from offworld has to be examined and cataloged, you know that," Biro said. He twisted around and gave her a mulish look, before remembering himself and dropping his gaze. He didn't really own the box. He didn't own anything. Slaves didn't. Really the box was the Haralim's. Biro reached for the box and Rodney let go.

Biro hesitated with her hands on the box.

Rodney couldn't parse what to do. Hand it over or hold on? He remembered the rules for Atlantis and refusing broke the rules of Selket too, but Atlantis rules said he had choices, didn't they? It made his pulse pound sickeningly at his temples and he pulled the box on to his lap and curled around it.

"All right," Biro said quietly, "but you can't bring it into the scanner so you'll have to trust it to someone."

"Teyla."

That didn't seem to be an acceptable answer. Biro bit her lip, then said, "Teyla isn't actually an official member of the expedition. I think someone else would be better choice. Someone who could check the contents, at the very least."

Someone who would not balk at taking them away from Rodney. He heard the unspoken message.

"What about Dr. Zelenka?" Biro asked, obviously making an effort to think of someone Rodney wouldn't object to. "He's CSO now, so—"

Well, he'd known the position wouldn't sit empty for two years and, of anyone, including Samantha Carter, Zelenka was the best choice to head the science department. Biro seemed to be waiting for him to explode, her petite frame braced for a McKay rant. There was nothing.

He considered the prospect. He didn't want just anyone seeing the things in that box. He'd tucked the jade coffer inside and rumor of its contents would spread through the base like wildfire if it came out Rodney had brought them back, never mind that they'd been used on John. Zelenka, though, would be discreet. For John's sake, even if he no longer respected or answered to Rodney; John and Radek had always gotten along.

"Zelenka," he breathed softly.

"I'll radio him," Biro said, full of brisk, forced cheer that grated on Rodney's nerves and made him pull inside himself further, grow quieter. He barely looked up when Zelenka came into the exam bay and greeted him. Just held out the box.

"Anything I should know about the contents?" Zelenka asked.

Rodney thought. "Drug samples," he said at last.

Biro looked interested at that. "I will turn those over to the medical department," Zelenka told her,
then looked at Rodney again. "Anything else?"

He pressed his fingertips against each other, until the joints and knuckles shone white and muscles quivered in his forearms. The ropy white scars around his wrists, another legacy of the last whipping, stood out, ugly reminders to hold his tongue.

"I will go through everything alone, Rodney," Zelenka promised, "and keep the contents secure." He ventured a pat to Rodney's shoulder, then picked up the box and left, after exchanging a few words with Biro.

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After Reinhardt took John's fingerprints and a retinal scan, the nurse had brought the gown—thin cotton in a washed-out shade between blue and olive. A different nurse, a man, returned to take a blood sample and a DNA swab from John's mouth, followed by a urine sample. Reinhardt administered the rest of the tests.

He stared at the gold manacles around John's wrists. "You'll need to take those off, too, please," Reinhardt said, sounding annoyed. John flinched but held his wrists out and turned them. Reinhardt's eyes narrowed. "They don't come off?"

The Haralim had the keys. John didn't explain, just fingered the manacles and shrugged. Explaining was too hard, when his throat closed up on the words that would tell exactly what sort of life he'd led while he had been gone. Normally the manacles were for show, but these were genuine, just as they'd been on Baratha both times he had been taken there. Less a precaution than a reminder to him, since no chain bound them together.

Reinhardt tapped his pen against his mouth. "We'll get someone in to cut them off."

Someone turned out to be a marine and a scientist with a saw, something specialized from maintenance or engineering. He didn't recognize either of them. The scientist had big knuckles, hands covered with shiny dime-sized burn scars and calluses. One of the scientists who dealt with real world, physical operations, rather than the rarefied, theoretical stuff, one of the ones like Rodney or Zelenka. The saw's vibrations ran through John's skin into his bones, doing weird things to his balance, while the manacle grew painfully hot against his skin. He held still, barely breathing, through it, training taking hold again.

The marine was a baby-faced giant, with the look of a high school football player, a hint of class jock sadism around his pale blue eyes. His eyelashes were colorless, matching the buzz cut that revealed painfully pale skin on his skull. He kept sneaking looks at John, up and down, breathing audibly. When John cocked his head and let their eyes meet, the kid looked away pointedly. As soon as John's gaze dropped to his wrist and the manacle being removed from it, the marine looked back.

John had to work hard not to shudder or jerk away as the scientist—no one had introduced him—lifted the saw away and touched a finger to the manacle. He pulled it back with a hiss at the heat. "We will let the metal cool. You should tell me before it becomes painful."

John shrugged. It was worth a little pain.

The scientist eyed him, then said, "We can begin cutting the left manacle if you are willing, and save time."

John held out his left hand immediately.
"And you are obviously willing." The man said it with a wry hint of a smile in his voice. John nodded emphatically.

His arm was taken and positioned to some exacting standard, braced, his fingers closed around a bar.

"As before, do not move."

The saw was brought back and started, blade steadily cutting into the metal around his wrist.

John slid his gaze to the side, to the marine, who stood with his legs braced apart. He wasn't watching John so much as looking at him. He seemed oblivious to the whine of the saw. The metal seemed to heat up faster this time, until John had to pull in a harsh breath and touch the scientist's shoulder, to tell him to stop.

"Stop?" the scientist asked, cutting the saw out and listing it away.

John nodded.

The first manacle was tested with a fingertip. Still warm. He was told, "I can finish this one." John nodded and switched hands, gripping the bar tightly and waiting. The scientist took his wrist, calluses dragging over John's skin in a way he couldn't force from his awareness, even hours after the last of any drug had burned away. A thumb brushed along the vertical stroke of an Ancient letter and the scientist frowned. "This is not a tattoo. Not henna, but like it, yes?" A sigh. "Beautiful work. I have seen nothing like it in this galaxy." He finished positioning John's arm.

The saw started up and bit into the metal, the vibration rolling through his skin again, making goose flesh spring up everywhere.

The marine licked his lips, an absent, nervous action. John still licked his lips too, but there was nothing casual about it. It was another trick. Slick, wet lips were a sexual symbol on Selket, and licking them signaled not just availability, but eagerness, just as lips painted matte black indicated mourning and celibacy. The Black Kiss. Of course, if Rodney had died after the whipping, John wouldn't have been allowed that gesture. He bit his lower lip now, worrying at it with his teeth, wishing he could stop comparing everything around him to Selket.

The first manacle was removed and after a short, cooling wait, the procedure repeated, finishing the cuts on the second one.

The last piece fell to the floor with a clang, the scent of hot metal strong in the confines of the exam bay.

The scientist dissembled his saw and returned it to his carrying case. Then he stooped and picked up the piece of manacle, weighing it. "A gold alloy, very pure." He set it on a table. "You should keep it." Then he snorted and added, "Melt it down. Take a hammer to it."

John made a noncommittal noise. His wrists felt light, the skin there suddenly overly sensitive, almost raw. He closed his hand where the manacle had been, turning his wrist inside the circle of his fingers just to feel the difference, to soothe himself. He barely noticed the scientist taking his leave with a murmured congratulation on his return, the marine following him out.

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Biro tried a little more banter but gave it up when all Rodney could summon in response were one word answers, his voice too unsure and quiet to be anything but disturbing to her. Her latex-clad hands were so different than the touches he had become used to: careless or angry guards, the tap
and smooth and scratch of silent slave code, the warm press and presence of John always within reach when they were together, Tein's hands, strong and flour dusty, Pielé's dry and ink stained, the Haralim's silk-smooth and razor-edged. Biro's hands made the hairs on his forearms stand up, prickling and uncomfortable.

Biro had her stethoscope against his back, listening to his lungs, the hospital gown folded open, when she shifted and pulled in a shocked breath. One hand traced the first diagonal whip scar, the one that seared down from his left shoulder to his waist on the right. Rodney jerked away from her instinctually, hunching over, and bit back the sound that rose in his throat, that might still be a scream.

"Is this…?"

"Whip," Rodney said economically.

Biro examined each scar.

"The scars are from an infection, after," he added, because she was behind him and he couldn't see her face to read her expression. "They had a salve. It only scarred the last time."

"What kind of monsters whip people like this?" Biro snapped and he flinched again.

He twisted his fingers against each other. "I made them do it. Disobedient and defiant. I knew better. It was my fault."

"They tortured you," Biro said, flat and angry and horrified.

"It was a lesson," Rodney insisted. "I was stupid and forgot my place."

"You can't tell me you deserved this."

Rodney pressed his fingers together, hard, and groped for a way to explain. "I—I could have taken the moa instead, I had—had a choice, and I'd seen. I saw Jo—John when they gave it to him." He felt a flood of cold run through his limbs and ducked his head further. By their rules he had deserved what he received. By Selketi rules, the Rale could have killed him. He could already sense the utter frustration of trying communicate what his life had been like there.

"I take it moa is unpleasant?"

Unpleasant. Unpleasant didn't break a man and leave him desperate enough to do anything to avoid another dose, terrified of it, and John had been, for weeks afterward. Terrifying, Rodney thought.

He swallowed, offered only, "It's a drug," forcing out the words. "The Selketi use a lot of drugs. Eiff is a painkiller and dranzi…" He couldn't describe what dranzi did, how desperate and needy it left John. "They used that a lot." He stopped and started again, groping for a way to say something he didn't want, feeling his face burn hot with shame. "On John. I think the trainers started it, then the Haralim used it, and the Ra—when they fucked him. It, uh, there's no choice."

He was abruptly glad he didn't have to see Biro's face. John would hate anyone knowing, but they would find out and Rodney wanted—needed everyone to know John hadn't had any alternatives.

He thought of cleaning blood from between John's thighs and pressed his eyes closed, sucking in air and wondering if he would throw up. He had nothing left in his stomach to come up but bile. "He won't tell," Rodney said softly. John wouldn't call it rape anyway, though he needed to see it that way now, even if calling it something else had helped him endure before.
"I'll tell Dr. Reinhardt," she said. "Rodney…is there anything else you need to tell me?"

"I—You should test me, too."

Biro would think that meant the same things had been done to Rodney. Not that they had. But he'd slept with John, as recently as two nights before, and anything John had, he had as well. There had been one day in the library that Rodney tried not to think of too often. He’d never told John that the Rale had come to him once. It had scared him too much, that glimpse into the anger and possessiveness the Rale felt toward John. Because it had been all about John, what he had done to Rodney. At least it hadn't happened again and again.

"McKay…"

"I can't talk about it anymore."


Rodney obeyed.

~*~

After the manacles were removed came a set of X-rays, progressing through a PET scan, an MRI, EKG and EEG and a trip through one of the Ancient scanners that could pinpoint everything from an abscess to a nanite infection. That displayed a history of every broken bone and invasive procedure or wound the body had ever suffered. In John's case, a litany that began in his childhood. He'd jumped out of trees and off porch roofs more than once before accepting that willing it couldn't make him fly.

None of the tests found anything until the last scan with the Ancient machine.

"Hmm," Reinhardt muttered, peering at the screen. "These look like…"

John sat up and looked at the tiny blue pinpricks the scanner showed in his intestines.

Reinhardt glanced at him. "Parasites."

John shuddered.

"Don't worry about it too much," Reinhardt told him. "After two years, it isn't terribly surprising, and while you're underweight compared to your previous records, you don't seem malnourished. We'll get rid of them."

John gritted his teeth and nodded.

Reinhardt highlighted something on the scanner screen. "Medication should manage it. These look like borso worms. I've treated several gate teams who became infected after exposure offworld. You probably picked them up going barefoot or eating contaminated food." He tapped his chin. "Just stay here a moment, Colonel. I'll have a word with Dr. Biro to be on the look out for them while examining Dr. McKay. We'll need to get some stool samples and identify the eggs."

John nodded again as Reinhardt stepped out of the bay. He couldn't make out Reinhardt and Biro's words, but caught Rodney's voice rising higher and clearer: "Parasites?" It almost made him smile. More murmuring and finally Reinhardt returned. He checked the scanner again, then glanced at John.
"You haven't experienced any gastrointestinal distress? Pain? Diarrhea?"

John shook his head.

"Asymptomatic. Another argument for the borso diagnosis. The damned things are everywhere in this galaxy apparently. The *ficha* flies spread the eggs." Reinhardt went on, tapping the scanner. "This is going to save you a proctoscopy, Colonel. You appear to have a relatively light infestation. As soon as we've identified the parasite as borso, I'll give you a prescription for Mebendazole. I've had excellent results from it."

Reinhardt was impersonal yet considerate. John could see him slow himself down the third time he made John flinch from a touch. His brows were coppery-colored and drew together as he concentrated, entrenching a single line between them. The latex gloves felt strange against John's skin, the scent making him shudder a little, but Reinhardt's hands were cool and surprisingly gentle. He spoke quietly, explaining what he was doing every step of the way. John didn't know if Reinhardt thought he didn't know what an examination was or just that John might have forgotten parts of it.

He watched Reinhardt's nose wrinkle when he leaned close and caught a whiff of stale sex off him. Reinhardt hadn't shaved very closely that morning; the bristles of his five o'clock shadow had a coppery glint. He smelled like pine disinfectant and band-aids to John and some sort of aftershave. The contrast in smells added another level of humiliation to John's conflicted emotions.

"Colonel," Reinhardt said quietly. "Dr. Biro explained that Dr. McKay indicated you would both need to be tested for STDs."

John flicked his gaze toward Reinhardt then went back to staring at the curtain. He couldn't relax the set of his shoulders. He should have known Rodney would say something. It was Rodney's health on the line, too.

"All right, it's all simple enough," Reinhardt stated. He paused and then asked, "Were you forced?"

He didn't even know where to begin. What exactly had Rodney told them? He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug and let it fall again. He said flatly, "I had sex." That seemed like the simplest truth, even if Reinhardt didn't believe it from the compassionate look he gave John.

"I'll let that go for now," Reinhardt said. "Dr. Heightmeyer will be here soon, to administer a preliminary psych evaluation. She's better equipped to discuss this than I am, but you can talk to me." He looked uncomfortable making the offer. John supposed he got points for doing so anyway. Not that he'd take him up on it, anymore than he wanted to spill his guts to the base shrink. Who, apparently, was still Kate Heightmeyer.

He shook his head. Heightmeyer was still around? That should have been more reassuring. At least, he'd known her before. But he didn't want to talk about it. He wanted to forget as much as he could.

"Can you just do this?" he said.

Reinhardt looked a little surprised. "I'd begun to wonder if you ever spoke for yourself until just now. You've been cooperative enough to be alarming."

John turned his face away.

Reinhardt managed to be even gentler after that, telegraphing every move as he examined John, noting down the signs of recent sex and past anal penetration, accepting John's head shakes and nods without prodding for more when he asked a question. In some ways, he was preferable to Beckett or
anyone John had known. There was no personal horror from Reinhardt, no sympathy and pain that John would have felt obligated to reassure away. Just another man doing his job, marking down the damage. John appreciated that, though he couldn't articulate it.

"You'll need to talk about it eventually," was Reinhardt's only additional comment.

John stopped talking again, because he didn't agree. No one else needed to know. Talking didn't change things.

~*~

"You're so quiet now," Biro said at one point. Rodney just looked at her tiredly. "Aren't you happy to be back?"

"Thrilled," he answered. "I'm absolutely dancing on the inside. Can't you tell?"

"No, though that sounded a bit more like—"

"Happy, happy, oh so happy," Rodney interrupted. "Are you almost done? Isn't it time to get my head shrunk and screwed on straight yet?"

Biro set down the device in her hand. "Well, if the tests hadn't already come back confirming who you are, that would."

He opened his mouth to tell her that a few semi-sarcastic remarks proved nothing and if she considered that as evidence than someone needed to revoke her medical license, as well as selling her water rights in the Nemisel Desert, but snapped his mouth shut instead. No one appreciated a bad-tempered slave. She'd probably get out more needles and take more blood samples. He didn't want his behavior to reflect on John, either.

"McKay."

"I ask forgiveness," he said hurriedly. "I'm tired and hungry and...it's a lot to take in. This morning I was a slave and now..." He tore a piece of paper off the exam table. "It doesn't seem real."

Biro snapped off a glove and threw it into the waste bin. She looked at him and he saw the pity. His mouth turned down. The second glove followed the first, dropping, limp and pale. A faint scent of talcum powder drifted to him, something Biro used to keep her hands from sweating in the latex. He swallowed and wished John was with him.

"You really have changed," Biro said.

~*~

Caldwell and Weir both entered the exam bay while Reinhardt was finally working on John's feet. Cleaning them hurt more than anything else and John had his hands closed tight on the edge of the table, paper crinkled tight and sweaty under his fingers as they came in. The clatter and rustle of the curtains being pushed back by Caldwell's hand had him jerking away from Reinhardt and scrambling back without thinking, his breath coming fast and panicky. He'd heard Biro take Rodney out for his MRI and PET scan and had felt bereft ever since. He hadn't been able to see Rodney before, but he'd known he was there.

"Dr. Reinhardt," Caldwell said in greeting as Reinhardt cursed and let go of John's foot. "Have you ascertained this is Colonel Sheppard?"
"Yes, I have," Reinhardt snarled at him. "Now get the hell out of here."

John wrapped his arms around his bare knees and looked at the streak of blood his foot had left on the paper on the exam table, while trying to steady his breathing. He only lifted his head when Caldwell spoke.

"Doctor, we need at least a preliminary debriefing from Colonel Sheppard in order to be prepared for any threat from the people who were holding him and Dr. McKay."

"I don't care," Reinhardt snapped and straightened up. "You may run this city—"

Weir raised her eyebrows. Reinhardt shrugged. "The military part of it," he amended, and then continued, "but I am the Chief Medical Officer. In medical matters, which include giving a man a decent amount of privacy and patient confidentiality, I'm in charge. So get out. I'll let you know when my patients are ready to talk to anyone."

Caldwell stared at him then gave a single nod that sent the light skating over his head. He addressed John next, unwilling, it seemed, to completely give way to Reinhardt's authority even in the infirmary. "Sheppard, I hope to talk to you soon."

"The Selketi never knew we were from Atlantis, sir," John said.

Caldwell paused with his hand on the curtain.

John laughed, a little raggedly. "They didn't care where we came from. They'll be angry we escaped, but they won't come looking here."

"Good to know," Caldwell said and to Reinhardt, who was glaring, "I'm going, Doctor."

Weir lingered, trying, John thought, to catch his eye. He didn't cooperate, dropping his gaze to the exam bed again, watching her through the haze of his lashes.

"You too, Dr. Weir," Reinhardt snapped irritably. "Now."

"We'll talk later, John," Weir promised, retreating.

"Let me finish your damn foot now," Reinhardt said and John scooted down and extended his foot, the way he had learned to do for Rodney. The gold on his toenails glinted under the cool infirmary lights. The dissonance hit him again, hard, and he concentrated on remaining quiet.

The male nurse arrived after that with a set of the maroon scrubs for John. He was escorted to the washroom, scrubbed himself as well as he could in a sink, and dressed. Back in the exam bay, he sank down on the floor to wait.

~*~

Elizabeth slipped through the curtain and gave Rodney a tight-mouthed smile. He didn't trust it.

"Rodney, how are you?" she asked.

John used to joke she had the worst bedside manner of anyone in Atlantis. It wasn't funny any longer. Rodney saw so much he hadn't picked up before. She wasn't there for him, couldn't even look directly at him, and had her arms crossed, hands folded over sharp elbows as she stood there. Her gray-green eyes seemed paler than he remembered. He could read her now, the discomfort and distaste, the sense of superiority, the cool measurement of whether he might be a useful tool still or an
impedance to her intentions. What he couldn't discern was whether this had always been Elizabeth, or if she'd become this person during the last two years. He'd remembered her as a friend, but reality had shifted while he had been gone.

She wasn't anything as honest as the Haralim's clear ruthlessness.

"Much better now," he lied. "It's good to be back."

"I suppose you'll want to go home to Earth," she said. "I know you're must be looking forward to that."

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," he told her, dry as dust. The extent of his speculation had been when Biro would bandage his feet and let him wear something more than a hospital gown. Maybe if he could beg a Powerbar and some water. Dinner on Faeatua was many long hours ago as his stomach kept reminding him.

The smile that didn't reach her eyes formed again.

"I thought we might arrange for you to record a message for your sister. The IOA will inform her of your changed status, of course, but a personal message would mean so much more," Elizabeth said.

Oh, of course, Rodney thought. Of course.

If Jeannie was really being a pain in the collective ass of the IOA and the SGC, then if Elizabeth could pull Rodney out of her hat and make Jeannie lay off, her stock would rise with both organizations. He didn't grudge her the benefit, just the manner of her manipulation. The Haralim wouldn't have couched it as a favor to him. Rodney preferred that honesty.

"That would be nice," he agreed carefully, wondering exactly what he would be allowed to say.

~*~

"Colonel Sheppard?"

He remembered Kate Heightmeyer's light, measured tones and concerned face exactly. The changes were jarring though, when he looked up. She'd stayed blonde, but cut her hair in tight, pixie cut. The crow's feet at the corners of her eyes were graven deep, like the lines around her lipsticked mouth, reminding him that things might not have been easy in Atlantis either.

"Why are you on the floor?" she asked.

John scrambled to his feet, which hurt, despite the bandages. Pain pulsed through them every time he shifted and he could not stay still enough to stop exacerbating it. He sucked in his breath, though, caught his balance and forced himself into the proper position. He held out his hands crossed at the wrist, palms cupped and fingers together, thumbs crossed and pressed together, in the seventh position of standing penance. It felt strange to even be aware of it, it came so automatically, but it jarred in this environment. Rodney's marks, the curl of Ancient words and Selketi glyphs, stood out against the pallor of his palms. He dropped his hands to his sides and closed them, hiding the marks.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm used to—I didn't think."

"It's all right, Colonel," Kate replied softly. "If you're more comfortable, we can both sit on the floor."

"Whatever pleases you, hara," he said automatically, shifting subtly, letting his voice turn a trace
husky. John let his weight settle on one leg and cocked his hip. The loose scrubs slid down and he tucked one finger under the waistband, ostensibly to hold them up, but hinting at sliding them down and off. He did it all without thinking, reflexively, and only caught himself at it as she reacted, her pupils dilating.

"Hara?" Heightmeyer echoed. "What does that mean?"

John faltered and ducked his head, pulling his hand up from the scrub bottoms and crossing his arms over his chest. "Lady. Selket royalty."

"I'm not royalty,"

He flashed her a quick, charming smile. "You're a free woman and in charge. Doctor. It's about the same thing." If he called everyone by their Atlantean rank, it would remind him not to revert to Selketi.

"A free woman," Heightmeyer repeated. "You weren't free?"

"The Haralim bought me."

"And Doctor McKay."

"Vai."

"Does that mean yes?" she asked. She set a laptop on the exam table and opened it. "I'm going to record this, Colonel Sheppard. The details will remain confidential unless they affect security or your own safety, but I will be preparing a report for Doctor Weir and Colonel Caldwell."

John shrugged.

"How do you feel about that?"

"It doesn't really matter."

Heightmeyer considered him. "Why?"

"Because you're going to do it however I feel about it," he explained softly, stripping any anger from his tone.

"I see."

He really didn't think she did and he dreaded even the thought of peeling back what defenses he had left to let her see. "I don't mind," he said. "If it pleases you, Doctor."

"I have a series of tests I'd like you to take as well."

Psych evaluations were standard operating procedure. John felt sick, but hid it, watching Heightmeyer attentively and nodding. "Okay."

"Then shall we begin?" she said with one of those soft smiles John had always mistrusted. It was all familiar, the same tests he'd faced after the mess in Afghanistan, and he knew the kind of answers that played best. Heightmeyer touched his arm once, saying, "So many of us are relieved to finally have you returned, Colonel," and sounded sincere, but John only slanted her a look and a smile, while controlling conflicting impulses to jerk away or lean into the weight of her hand.

Reinhardt came in with a tablet computer near the end of Heightmeyer's tests. She glared at him and
he ignored her, addressing John. "Well, I think we can safely say that you aren't a shape changer, an Asuran or some Ancient pretending to be you. Everything matches from your fingerprints to your retinal scan and your DNA—which is pretty unique. The deactivated Iratus genes from Beckett's retrovirus serve as a unique identifying marker."

John twitched and brushed his fingers over the inside of his arm where Rodney's design almost hid the Ellia's scar. Heightmeyer noted it.

Reinhart looked up.

"Your blood tests came back and you're free of any STDs. I'm sure that is a relief. I'll start you on a standard prophylactic course of meds anyway and test again."

John nodded. He didn't mind at all. Hearing that he had worms in his gut had wiped out any objections he might have felt over any medication. He wanted them out and any other things he might have picked up.

"The drug screens came up clean, too," Reinhardt said. He frowned. "Not even any metabolites. Very interesting. Dr. Biro mentioned that Dr. McKay brought along samples. We'll analyze them, of course."

So Rodney had brought along their Selketi pharmacopoeia. That didn't surprise John. After his withdrawal from eiff, Rodney had become justifiably paranoid over the drugs and worried each time the Haralim dosed John with dranzi.

Reinhart nodded to Heightmeyer. "Sorry to interrupt, but Colonel Caldwell is getting impatient to start the debriefings.

Heightmeyer sighed. "Very well." She smiled at John next. "I can evaluate what you've already finished, Colonel, and we'll continue this tomorrow."

Reinhart held the privacy curtain open for Heightmeyer after she'd closed up her laptop and gathered the rest of the materials she'd been using, absently courteous.

"We're setting you up in one of the iso rooms for the next few days, Colonel. It'll be ready for you and Dr. McKay by the time you finish talking with Caldwell and Weir. The medical staff's conference room has been drafted for that." He waited for John to comment, then shrugged and went on, "I'll get Ivan in here with a wheelchair to take you there."

"I couldn't use crutches?" John asked. He hated the thought of being in a wheelchair.

"Wheelchair," Reinhardt declared. "You and Dr. McKay. I want you to stay off those feet."

~*~

Biro brought a wheelchair to move Rodney out of the exam bay. She also dropped a set of maroon scrubs in his lap.

Rodney fingered the fabric. "Do you want me to change here?"

"We've got you set up with a bed in one of the isolation rooms. You'll be sharing it with Colonel Sheppard," Biro said.

"The bed?" he said stupidly.
"No." Biro gave him a strange look. "The room."

"Oh." He would have been happy to share the same bed with John. He missed him every night that the Rale and the Haralim kept him away from their bed. It had been stupid to think that he and John would be put in the same bed in Atlantis, though. Stupid to say anything, too.

"The Colonel's in debriefing now, so you might want to clean up and get ready. They'll talk to you after him," Biro informed. "And Dr. Heightmeyer wants to come in and begin your preliminary evaluation."

"May I have something to eat?" Rodney asked. His stomach grumbled in counterpoint.

"After the debriefing," Biro promised.

Rodney ducked his head in assent. He gulped water from the faucet in the washroom when he finally had a moment alone there.

~*~

"She wanted a slave that fit a certain, uh, look," John said. Gray ate at the edges of his vision. He tried not to slur his words, but exhaustion dragged him down. Caldwell kept rephrasing the same questions, either looking for some new information or just trying to trip John up.

He still hadn't been given even a chance to shower, just a few minutes in the washroom, scrubbing off the obvious bits of make-up on his face. He felt naked without it, without the sense of a mask that it offered him. Did women feel the same way? When he'd been married, even if it had only been for eight months, Deb had never wanted to go in public without her 'war paint'. He hadn't understood, because she'd been as beautiful without it. He felt incredibly exposed without the 'face' he had worn for so long, though. Maybe he did understand Deb now.

"And Dr. McKay?"

John squirmed in the hard chair. Sitting in it felt wrong. Like the paper slippers on his feet. He kept thinking someone would begin yelling about that soon.

"Like I said before, the Haralim paid enough for both of us." He raised his hand and rubbed at his eyes, trying make them focus again. "It was a two for one deal, I guess." He didn't want to explain that he'd begged to have her buy McKay too, how stupid he'd been. He'd thought they could escape then. He hadn't known then that he'd handed her the reins with that revelation, hadn't understood himself.

"They had no idea who you were?"

John shook his head. "No. The factor selling us would have asked for more. The Genii would pay for McKay. I think. Maybe everything's changed, but then they would have. Maybe paid to kill me." He shrugged. "We actually saw some Genii on Faeatua. I thought of trying to get a message out, but the odds of it reaching Atlantis seemed pretty low. Then Teyla showed up, so it was moot."

Caldwell tapped a capped pen against the top of the table they were sitting at. No one in the small room but John, Weir and Caldwell himself. The debriefing was being recorded. No transcriber. Someone would do that later. John figured that was for his benefit. Or maybe there just wasn't room. The medical department's conference room felt cramped and enclosed to him. There were no windows, just teal walls and the ubiquitous Ancient abstract overlays between columns of the horizontal white lights.
"I'd like to come back to the question of what Dr. McKay was doing for your captors," Caldwell said. "Would you consider his actions collaboration?"

"No," John spoke automatically.

"But he was cooperating?"

"He…what? No. Not like you make it sound. They have an Ancient outpost there, part of a database, and just enough power to access it sometimes, but no one would read Ancient. Rodney translated, mistranslated some of it, but that's all. If he didn't, then he didn't have any value," John tried to explain. "The Rale wanted to know about anything Ancient. Reading it meant Rodney was one of the Learned, uh, a scholar. Valuable." He groped for something else to tell them. "Someone they wouldn't just whip for not being perfectly obedient." He looked down at his hands. "It took a while for him to learn." Rodney had been learning the Selketi written language while John was learning fucking, in that endless three great moons apart.

"You don't consider translating information from an Ancient database to be cooperating?" Caldwell asked. "Though that information might be used by a potentially hostile society against Atlantis?"

"He never told them anything they could use, they don't have the science to turn any of into weapons," John defended him.

"I hadn't realized Rodney understood Ancient that well, that he could translate large portions of it," Weir commented.

"They had no idea if he was getting it wrong, anyway," John said. Not that Rodney had, except deliberately, other than when he'd been using the eiff. "You know how the Ancients wrote everything theoretical in metaphors. Besides, the Selketi just want to protect their world."

A purse-lipped expression set on Weir's face and John bit down hard on the impulse to apologize. Did she still put the Ancients on such a pedestal? Maybe she just objected to anyone deliberately fouling a translation?

"The fact remains that Dr. McKay did work for these Selketi," Caldwell stated. "And they held you and him against your will. I don't believe we can characterize them as a benign society."

"Atlantis dealt with the Genii after they attacked the city," John pointed out. Against his vehement protests to Weir, at the time. The Selketi weren't like the Genii; their word was good. He didn't think Caldwell or Weir would want to retaliate against them, but John wanted to nix even the possibility. He'd already decided he wouldn't reveal their gate address. He hoped they wouldn't ask him for it.

"Are you defending them, Sheppard?" Caldwell asked, mild and curious.

"No, just…they aren't evil."

"And Dr. McKay shares your estimation?"

John blinked at the table. He didn't know.

"Is that why he chose to work for them, to provide them with information on the Ancients?"

Caldwell insisted.

"They whipped him," John blurted. Rodney hadn't turned traitor or whatever Caldwell was implying. The Selketi had made him work for them. Rodney hadn't had any choice. "They would have killed him. Sir." The raw red X striped over Rodney's back, blood running down his
wrist, Dullah's droning count and reiteration of Rodney's transgressions followed by the whip slicing down replayed in his mind. The Haralim's hand had held him back, just her touch, when any move would have condemned them both to death. How could explain any of that? "Could have..."

John closed his eyes and breathed through the memory of the rest of it. The hot stone had burned through the thin fabric of his pants into his knees. Grains of sand had lodged between his toes. The reek of blood clung, cloying, in his nostrils, thick as the heat filling the courtyard's confines. The whip slithered through Dullah's fingers and John choked on his helplessness.

"—ny times?"

He blinked his eyes open and tried to focus on Caldwell again, to make sense of being in Atlantis and not there. He wrapped one hand around the other wrist and squeezed. "What?" He cleared his throat and added, "Sir."

Caldwell frowned at him. Prickling sweat broke out all over John's body. He twisted his wrist in the grip of his hand. Skin on skin, no manacle, it reminded him. He was here. Here, now, not then, there, though everything seemed to slide to the side sometimes, the change so sudden it seemed surreal.

"How many times was Dr. McKay punished?"

"Flogged. Three." John rotated his wrist again, holding it hard enough that it hurt. "The last time the Rale made me watch. Lesson for me, too, you see. It was..." Unbearable, he couldn't say. The sweat made him feel even colder.

"That must have been difficult," Weir commented. She had her laptop open before her, but hadn't been taking notes. For all John knew, she was playing Solitaire. Difficult echoed through his head, such a slight word in contrast to scream. He hadn't screamed. Rodney had. He'd wanted to. And later, in the hole, the moa made him scream. He looked again and saw that Weir's hands were pressed to the tabletop on either side of the laptop, knuckles shining white, and her eyes were wet.

"Yes," he said, keeping his voice empty.

"Why was Dr. McKay punished, exactly?" Caldwell asked.

"He was whipped for saying no to the Rale," John told him. "He would have been killed for it, if we hadn't been the Haralim's personal property." He stopped before saying she'd saved them both, well aware of how that would sound. He could already predict Heightmeyer's Stockholm Syndrome diagnosis. No use encouraging it. But the Haralim had, she'd negotiated Rodney's life from her husband, done that for John. He knew it.

"Interesting." Caldwell didn't have a laptop. He used a simple pad of paper, making a note. "What did he say no to doing?"

"Going offworld without me. I told him to go. Take the first chance he had and run. They wouldn't have expected it."

"And he refused."

"Yes."

"Why?" Caldwell looked interested.

"Ask him," John said. "It was... he wouldn't leave me there."
"Tell me, if the situation had been reversed, Colonel Sheppard, would you have taken a chance to escape and left Dr. McKay?"

John let go of his wrist and relaxed.

"Never."

Caldwell asked another question. Then Weir. John answered. He kept answering as his voice grew hoarse and everything blurred at the edges, until he forgot where he was and murmured in Selketi, begging for forgiveness when the questions slipped away from him.

"Enough," Caldwell said eventually.

~*~

Rodney glimpsed John being wheeled from the conference room as he was brought in. He looked bruised, in an indefinable, interior way, and that didn't make Rodney any less apprehensive. John lifted his hand, wrists bare and fragile looking. Rodney wanted to reach over and touch, where the skin was thin and veins traced almost visibly beneath.

John's hand moved, a subtle flicker and tap against the wheelchair's arm rest, fingers curling toward his palm after. Slave code for Are you all right?

Rodney tapped twice against his own chair's arm. Yes.

John flashed him a tired smile.

The door into the conference room opened and the nurse pushed Rodney inside and up to the table. Rodney pulled in a deep breath and waited for the questions to begin.

"We'll make this as quick as possible, Dr. McKay," Caldwell said. "I'm sure you are as exhausted as Colonel Sheppard." He offered a small smile to Rodney. "I'm not sure if he was incoherent at the end or speaking in another language."

"Colonel Caldwell," Elizabeth reproved. She, too, smiled at him. "Rodney, don't feel that this is an adversarial confrontation. We just need to know what happened in your own words. Colonel Sheppard indicated there were aspects of your captivity he wasn't privy to."

Rodney assented quickly. "Just ask."

"Tell us what happened from the beginning, when you were captured by the slavers…"

~*~

John couldn't get comfortable in the narrow infirmary bed. The scrubs felt rough, the sheets made him itch, and everything caught and tangled around him when he moved. He tried not to move and that made it all worse, the skin over his entire body prickling. He couldn't get warm either, despite pulling the pale blue blanket he'd been given tight around him. The iso room was too still. The filtered air coming from the vents smelled of nothing, not even the sea. In his memories, Atlantis had always been a salt taste at the back of his throat, a damp wind from the omnipresent water around it. The iso room could have been in a space ship, except even the Daedalus' air had held more character - from the harsh chemicals used to scrub out the CO2, from the sweat of bodies in close quarters, of machinery and electricity.

He missed the scent of gardens and dust, the sounds of birds, distant voices, the whisper of the cho
leaves outside the window of their rooms.

The closed, and he suspected locked, door made him twitchy, too. He was used to open doorways with offset screens and wide high windows.

He wanted to curl into a ball and cover himself entirely with the thin blanket, but the iso room had a sealed observation deck above it, one he'd stood in himself, watching others down where he was now. Someone could be watching, just the way it had been in the palace. There were probably cameras monitoring the room, too. The sense of being watched kept him lying rigid and still, eyes closed to fake sleep.

It didn't help to remind himself no one here was an enemy, that he'd come back of his own choice.

Maybe it would be better when he got back into his own quarters.

There were no bells, no natural change of light to tell him how long he lay, shivering occasionally, as he waited for Rodney to be returned to the iso room. He didn't have a watch and the room had no clock. The glare of the lights that never dimmed burned through his closed eyelids.

He filled his lungs and emptied them slowly, from his diaphragm, trying to reach for the center he found sometimes doing katas. Only he hadn't found any peace in katas since Umard. Trying too hard didn't help.

~*~

"…the fortress is built over and around the outpost," Rodney explained. "It was attached to one of their automated manufactories, in this case one creating stunners." He paused for breath. "The manufactory continued producing them until the power levels dropped too low. Then it went on stand-by. That's my theory. It could just as easily be a lack of raw materials stopped it before the power levels were drained, but at this point it's like the chicken and the egg and doesn't matter."

"So you don't believe the factory could be restored to production?" Caldwell asked.

Rodney sighed. "No, probably not without the sort of investment that could be devoted to building a completely new facility. A quarter of the database that served it is corrupted and there's physical damage either from a Wraith attack or a quake. The Selketi have what was made in storage, but nothing new for over a thousand years."

"And you learned this from them?" Elizabeth leaned forward. "What are their beliefs about the Ancestors?"

"I learned from the books in the library where I worked, mostly, once I picked up enough Selketi, *hara,*" Rodney answered.

Elizabeth laughed uncomfortable and sat back. She pushed a lock of hair away from her face. "Rodney, you need to stop calling me that."

"What?"

"Hara?"

"Oh. This one—I apologize." He wished he had something to do with his hands, beyond folding them together. He'd said that automatically. He'd begun to feel lightheaded. If he held up his hands, he knew they'd be shaking. He tightened them on each other, so the shaking wouldn't show. Show nothing. He'd learned.
"What do they think of the Ancestors?" Caldwell prompted him.

"Oh. Oh, yes. Well. They revere them, but not to the same extent others do, it's more like, well, more like people from Earth who know about them feel. That they made incredible things. The Selketi want to know more." He drew in a deep breath. "The Rale probably wants to find a way to build their own battery pack factory instead trading with the Barathans. Without the battery packs, all the stunners they have are pretty much worthless."

"Tell us about the Barathans," Elizabeth urged him.

"Well, the first time I was there, I remember thinking I'd rather be a slave on Selket than one of their servants," Rodney said without thinking. The Selketi never starved them. He'd seen what the Barathans thought their servants could live off of eating.

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose and Caldwell's face went blank.

Rodney scrubbed his hands over his face and tried to figure out why Elizabeth and Caldwell were listing to one side then the other.

"Rodney?"

Oh. It wasn't them. He was swaying in his chair. He tried blinking rapidly and pulling in more oxygen by taking deep breaths. "I need to eat," he said.

Elizabeth frowned. "Dr. Reinhardt will arrange something for you later."

"Hypoglycemia," Rodney said. "I'm sorry. I can't think straight like this."

Caldwell kept frowning, but Elizabeth flushed. "I'm sorry, Rodney. I'd forgotten."

Of course, she had. John and Teyla and Ronon had been the only ones who had really seen him go down because he hadn't eaten. On Atlantis, he'd never let it get that bad. Off Atlantis, the team had always carried extra Powerbars and MREs for him, along with the epi-pens. Just like Rodney had always had extra insect repellent for John in his tac vest, bandages Ronon wouldn't carry for himself and extra clips for Teyla. They'd taken care of each other.

Elizabeth was touching her radio, he realized, saying, "Sergeant Maynard? This is Weir. Would you please go to the mess hall and arrange a plate sandwiches, then bring them to the medical department conference room. Thank you." She smiled at Rodney. "It will just be a few minutes."

"Oh, good," he murmured.

"Baratha?" Caldwell prompted him.

He ate the sandwiches without tasting them when they arrived and answered more questions between bites.

~*~

With a quiet curse in Selketi, John sat up and pulled his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them and staring at the empty other bed where Rodney would sleep whenever Caldwell and Weir were through with him.

He hoped someone had fed Rodney. They'd either forgotten to give him anything or were waiting
for some medical reason. Unpredictable meal times and insufficient food were part of the softening up process, but he wasn't a prisoner.

John glanced at the door.

He wasn't a prisoner unless he tried the door and found it locked.

The iso room did have a washroom equipped with a shower. He'd already used it once, as soon as the nurse had left him here. He shivered again. At least the water had been hot and unlimited.

With a dark look at the door, John tossed off the sheet and blanket and headed for the washroom. Taking another shower would at least be something to do and he'd already wrecked Reinhardt's bandages on his feet with his first one.

~*~

A knot of white sheet and blue blanket dangled half off one bed when Rodney was wheeled into the iso room. The second bed remained made up pristinely.

Rodney got out of the chair before the male nurse could offer any help. The soles of his feet immediately protested, despite the bandages padding them and the slippers he'd been given.

He had to clutch onto the bed for a moment after the man had gone and the door slid shut. Caldwell and Elizabeth had kept after him for every detail he could remember about Selket and then Baratha, until he started answering them in Selketi in self-defense. He wondered if that hadn't been why John lapsed into it as well. Preliminary debriefing, his ass—that had been an interrogation.

The moment the door shut behind the nurse, Rodney awkwardly toed the slippers off, relaxing a bare degree afterward.

John was supposed to be in the room and obviously had been. Another set of slippers were abandoned under the bed he'd taken.

When Rodney had his balance back, he pushed away from his bed and walked, wincing, to the washroom. It opened for him immediately. No billow of steam pushed out—Atlantis' ventilation and environmental systems were too efficient for that—but the air felt heavy with moisture as he stepped inside.

He noticed and picked up a seaweed tangle of gauze and tape on the floor, damp and marked with brown bloodstains. Rodney tossed them into the disposal. A crumbled pile of maroon on the counter resolved into the scrubs John must have stripped off.

John was in the shower area of the room; water running over his naked body. He had one hand braced against a wall, his head bowed, his back one long, elegant curve of sleek skin, water slick and shining. Rodney traced the patterns he'd painted down John's spine with his gaze. The water turned John's hair to black silk, molded to the shape of his skull, heavy drops gathering at the ends to fall down to his bare feet. Rodney shifted one more step. John's eyes were closed, the lashes spiky dark, and his other hand curled into a fist, riding over his belly. He didn't move while Rodney watched except to breathe.

Rodney stayed just beyond the spray of water until his feet began to hurt too much to stay standing any longer. Instead of leaving, though, he found a wall and put his back to it, sliding down to sit on his ass, legs sprawled out straight. Cold from the floor seeped through every point where he touched it.
John must have sensed his movement. His eyes opened and his head turned, enough to find Rodney and meet his gaze.

"Hey," Rodney said.

"Yeah," John replied. "You want the shower?"

"Take your time," Rodney told him.

John laughed. "I just came in here to get warm."

Rodney tipped his head back against the wall. "I don't remember it being this cold." The floor wasn't just cold, it was hard, but it still felt more comfortable than the wheelchair he'd been stuck in while trying to answer the unending list of questions Weir and Caldwell had volleyed at him. "Did you?"

John pushed away from the wall, lifting his face into the spray, then stepped back and shook his head. The shower stopped as water sprayed from his hair, caught in the air as the air dryers came on, a glittering rain. Rodney had disliked the air dryers from the first, unless he adjusted them to high and nearly burned his skin; they left him struggling into his clothes damp. He'd made a point of keeping genuine towels in his quarters. He wondered what had happened to them. There weren't any towels in this washroom, so John stood and let the dryers work, the air chasing quicksilver droplets down his body. He ruffled more water from his hair, leaving it standing on end, a wild mess.

"No," he said and Rodney had almost forgotten the question.

"Funny," Rodney said.

John limped over to the counter and picked up the scrubs. He stepped into the bottoms first, moving with the same unconscious grace as ever, then pulled the top over his head. He rubbed his arms afterward, an unconscious gesture. He kept his face turned away from Rodney. "Yeah, funny. Ha ha."

"Aren't we supposed to be happy now?" Rodney asked.

"Aren't you?"

"Are you?" Rodney flipped the question around.

John shrugged. "Sure."

"Yeah, so am I."

John's snort communicated his belief in that, but Rodney thought he'd meant it exactly as much as John had. Nothing felt right. He lifted one hand and scrubbed tiredly at his eyes. When he opened them, John was much nearer, looming over him, hand outstretched to pull Rodney up. He took it and let John draw him to his feet, with a muttered, "Ow." John's fingertips were pruney and cool to the touch. "Are you still cold?"

John tugged him closer and Rodney went, until they breathing each other's air, holding onto each other, John's damp temple against his own. Rodney rubbed a circle against John's back.

"We shouldn't do this here," he said.

John's breath warmed his neck. "Fuck it."

"There could be surveillance in here, too," Rodney pointed out. "There probably is."
John nodded, a simple movement that did nothing to move him away from Rodney. "I'm still cold," he said. "And it would be nice if they'd feed us."

"They didn't give you anything? I got sandwiches." He tried to think, but ended up rubbing John's back instead. He was too tired to accomplish anything. "They've stuck us in here with no radios," Rodney added. "Or we could call Teyla. Teyla would get us something." If they let her in. Rodney hadn't forgotten Biro's rejection of Teyla as someone that could be trusted by the rest of the expedition. He moved his hand over John's back in a deliberate pattern, fingers tracing code. *Something is going on with Teyla.* "Let's just try to sleep."

Without letting go, he began walking back out of the washroom, John moving with him like they were dancing. Back in the iso room, Rodney pulled the blanket free from his bed and snatched up John's. They curled up together under both blankets, still uncomfortable and chilled, in a corner on the same side of the room as the door, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, John's bare feet resting on Rodney's still bandaged ones.

"This sucks," John commented, tucked as close as he could get to Rodney without crawling into his lap. Rodney didn't answer, but he tended to agree. They'd had a comfortable, big bed on Selket. He already missed that bed and not because it had been good to his back.

Rodney thought John might have fallen asleep after that, but John surprised him, saying quietly, "I don't know what I'm going to do now."

"You'll go back to—"

"Don't lie," John interrupted. "You can go back. I can't. Caldwell has my job now."

"Zelenka has mine."

"It's not the same and you know it."

"They'll probably send us both back to Earth."

"You'll see Jeannie," John said. He sounded wistful. He'd said, a little drunk, their Year One party on Atlantis, he had no one to go back to Earth for, no one who would want him back. "And Madison."

"You'll come with me, right?" Rodney asked. "John? You're the one who is good with kids. Plus, Jeannie liked you."

"Got to go where they send me," John murmured.

Rodney pulled the blankets tighter around them. John settled closer. The room fell into the near silence of sighing ventilation and the subliminal hum of the city.

~*~

The same male nurse showed in the morning, gaped at them together, and then exited. John snapped awake at the sound of a sucked in breath, opening his eyes in time to see a retreating back. Rodney woke too and shoved an elbow into John's ribs as he stirred. John squirmed away then stilled, turning to share a glance with Rodney, bleary-eyed and unhappy as he was.

"Nice," Rodney muttered, his voice creaky.

"Yeah," John agreed.
They were both on their feet, blankets separated and wrapped around them individually, as Reinhardt came in, followed by the male nurse.

Reinhardt raised his eyebrows at the nurse, then faced them. "Good. You're awake."

"Amazing powers of observation," Rodney muttered sotto voce.

John glared at him, but then asked, "Could we have something to eat?"

Reinhardt was frowning at his bare feet. John shuffled them under the edge of his blanket.

"Of course," Reinhardt said. "Breakfast will be brought here in a minute. Ms. Emmagen is coming in with it. You shouldn't have taken the bandages off."

"They got wet," John said.

"Up on the bed," Reinhardt said. "Taylor, get me a number six tray."

The male nurse—Taylor—left. John obediently went to sit on his bed. Rodney gave him a sympathetic look then shuffled into the washroom. Reinhardt was already reaching for John's left foot as he went.

Reinhardt bandaged his feet again without lecturing him and let John use the washroom after Rodney exited. A pair of wheelchairs were waiting when he limped back out. Reinhardt had half a dozen doses of different medications waiting and told them Taylor or another nurse would supply more on schedule. John eyed the various pills, but obediently swallowed them all.

"Breakfast in the conference room," Rodney told him.

Teyla was there, her familiar face shifting into a real smile for both of them. She sipped Athesian tea while John and Rodney stared at their yellow plastic trays. Someone had brought a carafe, black plastic and stainless steel, of coffee in. Rodney gave it a longing look. Teyla kept her body angled to face them and the two nurses, Taylor and a woman who had introduced herself as Dawkins.

"Are you both feeling better?" Teyla asked.

"Vai," John said as Rodney replied, "Of course," their voices both low, overlapping, heads bowed.

The wheelchairs weren't the right height for the table, so there was a shuffle and transfer and then they were in the hard, upright chairs the Ancients favored for work, both sitting stiff and nervous. John couldn't keep from looking back to the door as it shut. It made him uncomfortable, the feeling of being trapped, as though there wasn't enough air in the room. He waited along with Rodney for permission to eat and pressed his calf against Rodney's under the table for reassurance.

"You are not hungry?" Teyla asked. "I brought those things I remembered were your favorites."

"Starving," Rodney said and pulled one tray close, with a cautious look toward Teyla. His hands were shaking faintly. Whatever he'd been given the night before had barely been enough to stave off his hypoglycemia. John hoped he wouldn't spill anything.

"Please eat."

John checked out his tray. Teyla had a good memory. Waffles, crisp browned sausage links, fruit, a generous serving of scrambled eggs. They even looked like they were made from real eggs—if not chicken eggs. There was a paper cup with a scoop of butter or margarine and two filled with syrup.
The knife and fork sitting to the side were plastic.

He picked them up and sliced off a corner of waffle before dabbling it into the syrup. Teyla's eyebrow went up.

"You're supposed to pour the syrup on the waffles," Rodney pointed out. John shrugged and brought the first piece to his mouth. Fake maple syrup mixed with the taste of the waffle, harsh with an undertone of too much baking powder in the mix. He chewed and swallowed anyway.

"Coffee, Rodney?" Teyla asked.

"Yes, please." He held out the empty cup from his tray. Teyla poured. The acrid scent made John wrinkle his nose. Rodney pulled the cup close, closing his hands around it, lifting it up to inhale the steam in an almost ritual motion. The smile turning his mouth up made John's heart pick up speed. He knew how that mouth felt on his skin, the feel of Rodney's smile against him, secret and rare.

Rodney just breathed the coffee in again, drawing an indulgent and pleased smile from Teyla.

"Two years since my last cup," Rodney murmured.

"You must be very thirsty," Teyla commented, dry as dust. Only someone who knew her well would have heard the affection and amusement in her words. Only with someone she trusted would she even say them, allowing her sense of humor loose.

Rodney glared at her, but didn't dignify the remark with a reply. The cup lifted at last to his mouth and John watched as he took a sip. It was such a simple damn thing, a cup of coffee, and he wasn't even the one to bring it, but there hadn't been enough good things in Rodney's life. John just liked seeing him get something that made him happy.

But the coffee didn't. Rodney's face screwed up and he looked at the cup in betrayal. "That's awful."

Without considering it, John reached over and took the cup, bringing it to his nose, sniffing it again. Part of him thinking poison? Part of Rodney must have been thinking of the same things, because he was protesting already, as John raised the cup to his mouth, taking in a sip. "John, don't—"

It was bitter and acrid, the taste a shadow of the essence in its scent. He didn't taste anything else in it, though. Just coffee, once familiar, and now… not. He grimaced and set the cup down.

"It is not to your satisfaction?" Teyla asked both of them.

"It's fine," John assured him.

"It is, it is," Rodney added. "I just remembered it being better. There's nothing wrong with it."

"It is Dr. Kanapadolis' Jamaican Blue Mountain blend. She offered it when I asked about something better than the brew available in the mess hall," Teyla explained.

"Really?" Rodney frowned. "I don't know her, do I?"

"Probably not or she wouldn't have offered up her coffee beans for you," John told him.

"Very funny, haha." Rodney tried the coffee again and sighed, obviously disappointed. "I guess I've just lost my taste for it."

They lingered over the breakfast trays, unsure of what came next. Reinhardt had said they'd be kept in the infirmary for several days. The food tasted bland and artificial, but not unpleasant.
Teyla spoke of people they had known, who had gone back to Earth, and some Athosians. "Jinto has been apprenticed to Ragen, one of our traders, and is going off world now, and Aylta's baby is walking and talking." John hid a flinch at the mention of a baby. Teyla even had news of the Genii: "Ladon Radim remains their Chancellor. There is little contact between the Genii and Atlantis," she said. "They maintain a polite fiction of alliance, without sharing anything, and refrain from overt hostilities, though offworld…"

"Still not a good idea to turn your backs on them?" John said. He was grateful for anything to think about that wasn't a reminder of what and who he'd left behind. He wasn't ready to tell anyone about Dalal. Maybe he never would be. Rodney knew, that would be enough.

"Caution is not wasted," Teyla agreed. "But Colonel Caldwell does not send as many missions offworld now."

"Hunh."

John was still thinking about that when Caldwell himself arrived. He nodded to Teyla, who rose to her feet in one smooth motion. She bid her farewells to them both, touching her forehead to Rodney's and brushing her hand over John's hand with a promise to return soon, and then left. Caldwell didn't linger, though, and the exchange between them was stilted by a certain lingering suspicion on his part and their own awkward responses.

"Try to relax," he said.

John kept his eyes down. "Vai."

"English, Sheppard," Caldwell snapped.

"Yes, Sir," John said, with a wince.

Rodney caught his hand and held it, edging closer to him. "When can we leave?"

"That's up to Dr. Reinhardt right now." It was a non-answer. Another frown made John want to cringe and he tugged his hand away from Rodney.

"Yes, Sir," John murmured.

Caldwell's justifiable caution was easier to take than any bright, false welcome, though. At least he didn't pretend everything was going to be easy now. He left as Heightmeyer arrived with a new array of tests. John tried to take Rodney's hand and hold it after that, but Rodney glared at him and he let go.

"Why do you think the Selketi choose you and Rodney as slaves?" Kate asked.

"The Haralim," John told her. They'd belonged to Zuleika personally. It had been all that kept them alive. That and that John had been purchased for a purpose. Keeping Rodney around had insured his obedience. He didn't want to explain any of it. Why couldn't Kate just leave them alone? "We belonged to her, not just anyone."

"Was that something to be proud of?"

"Grateful," John said. He touched his wrist where the manacle had been. It was becoming a habit. He swallowed back sudden nausea and focused deliberately on the bubbling green water conduit in the corner.
"We weren't working as field labor," Rodney added. "She didn't want us for that."

"She didn't," Kate agreed. "Why?"

John shrugged.

"You've both insisted you were treated well." Kate paused. "And, Rodney, please let John answer this."

John pressed his leg against Rodney's. He didn't want to go into this. "I…well." He bit his lip. "They weren't sadistic. Even the worst punishments made sense."

"You keep saying that," Kate pointed out. "Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

That…That hadn't occurred to him. John shook his head. It hadn't been like that. Zuleika had been kind in her way. She hadn't loved him, of course, but she'd been fond of him. Like a pet, a voice that sounded like Rodney said in his mind. Or a tool. He didn't answer and kept his gaze on the floor.

"The worst punishment was the administration of something called moa?" Kate asked.

A shudder rolled through John. "I don't want to talk about that," he muttered. He laced his hands together, trying to cancel out the tremor running through them. Zuleika had protected Rodney and him from execution on two occasions. Maybe more. He'd never know if she had guessed their part in Keder's plot. She'd let him stay with Rodney. He'd betrayed her by running on Faeatua. He'd betrayed her and he'd betrayed Dalal. That's what she'd think. The shakes spread through his entire body.

The warm pressure of Rodney's hand between his shoulder blades, rubbing in circles, returned him to the office. Kate looked worried. "John?"

He shook his head, trying to shake away the memory of Umard and the cell afterward, and leaned back into Rodney's hand. If Rodney hadn't been there, even as lost as Rodney was then, he wouldn't have been able to piece himself back together. What would Kate say if he told her that? Or Caldwell, who wanted him to straighten up and fly right, be a soldier again, an officer? He wrapped the fingers of one hand around his wrist, twisting it in his loose grasp, reminding himself. No manacle.

"I used to imagine getting back here," he said softly. "In the flower house, when the drugs would wear off." Rodney's hand on his back stilled. "Escaping, coming home, getting both of us out of there, having my life back. Fantasies about what we'd do next." He looked at the floor again. "But after a while, it got too hard. Because I knew it was a fantasy."

Kate held still, didn't even make a note. John guessed she didn't want to do anything to stop him, but he'd said all he had to say.

Teyla returned with lunch and sat with John after Weir showed up and had Rodney wheeled away to a private room to record his message for Jeannie. She didn't say anything when John gave up on the chair and settled on the floor, instead sinking down to sit with him. When John held out his hand to her, she contemplated it first, then took it in both of her hands. She turned his hand, studying the swirling, stylized patterns Rodney had formed from the Ancient words. She turned his hand over and studied the gleam of gold on his fingernails. John started to curl his fingers and hide them, but Teyla laid her other hand over the top of his.

Her calluses scraped over his skin. His were all gone. A long lock of her hair, a shade between caramel and bronze, fell over her cheek. Her hands were warm around his.
"We should have found you sooner," she said in a choked, hard voice.

"You couldn't." He believed that.

She tightened her hands on his, then eased off, stroking her fingers over the patterns, making John shudder and draw in his breath. "Teyla?" he asked as he turned his hand and caressed her palm with delicate expertise.

She lifted her face and gazed at him. Her eyes were dark, but never as dark as a Selketi's. He watched but she didn't respond or react, her cheeks didn't warm, her pulse didn't hurry, and her gaze never wavered. He had to catch his breath at the relief he felt, but worry immediately followed.

"No, John," she said.

He knew better than to ask what had happened to her.

He lowered his own gaze and let his hand go slack in hers again. Found another subject and asked, "Ronon?"

Teyla's smile in response was still shadowed, but real. "He would not give up."

John grinned.

"He's kind of like that. So, where is he?"

She was still telling him how Ronon had returned and they'd pursued the slavers and any news from world to world, when Elizabeth returned with Rodney.

Elizabeth frowned down at both of them.

"Teyla, may I speak with you a moment?" She aimed a forced smile at John as Teyla rose and joined her just outside the door. John caught Rodney's gaze. They both stayed silent and listened, catching most of the conversation despite the women's lowered voices.

"—think you should be telling him any of this?"

"Perhaps you think I should lie or refuse to answer his questions?" Teyla's voice carried into the room. Rodney widened his eyes at John and John nodded. She sounded nearly strident—for Teyla. "John trusts me."

"—not the time for this—your place—official member of the expedition, your standing is—"

"Perhaps it is not, but then would they even be here if Ronon and I had not continued looking for them?"

"They weren't looking for us on Faeatua?" Rodney whispered in a voice that wouldn't carry, his lips barely moving. John just raised his eyebrows. Of course they hadn't been. No one but Teyla and maybe Ronon, wherever the hell he was, had been looking for them after two years. Faeatua had hosted the Great Market; Cadman's team had been there for trade. Rodney's mouth slanted down and he bowed his head. John wanted to touch him, started to reach for him, and stopped himself. Old conditioning warred with the habits of two years and won, leaving him feeling nauseous.

John cocked his head and listened to Elizabeth's furious whisper.

"They don't need to know—make things worse—obviously traumatized—"
"They are not stupid," Teyla actually snapped. "I will not betray them with lies they would easily see through."

"—ask you to stay away then, until—"

"I will not lie, but I will refrain from speaking of it," Teyla said. "Unless they ask."

Elizabeth glanced at them then and flushed guilty red. Teyla's expression didn't change. Elizabeth pursed her lips and said, "Very well." She stepped into the room and addressed John and Rodney. "I have paperwork, gentleman. Though I've seldom been as happy to have it, since much of it is regard to you both. I'll leave you with Teyla."

Rodney slipped out of his wheelchair after she'd gone and down to the floor next to John. He sat close enough his knee brushed John's. It wasn't enough and John reached over and rested his hand on Rodney's thigh. The contact relaxed them both.

"So where is Ronon?" Rodney asked.

"Ronon Dex is a very stubborn man," Teyla said. "He left Atlantis."

"He's still out there?" Rodney asked.

"Looking for us," John said.

Teyla inclined her head.

During the afternoon there were more tests. Taylor brought in a solvent that removed the gold paint from John's finger and toenails and assured him one of the dermatologists was working on something to remove the markings. John told him it would all wear away anyway, in time. Rodney mentioned that there was cleanser in the box he'd given over to Zelenka.

"It doesn't bother me," John told him after Taylor had left them in the iso room again.

"It bothers them," Rodney pointed out.

Apparently, Taylor or someone had been listening or the designs really did bother someone—probably Caldwell. An hour later, Reinhardt, the dermatologist, and Taylor came in. They had a treatment they thought would strip off the paint, based on the bottle of something Zelenka had fished out of Rodney's box and quickly analyzed. They took John off and applied a thick white coat of foam that leached the pigment from his skin. John watched the lines appear up through the foam and then disappear as it was wiped away, leaving his skin a shade paler than before, unblemished. It felt like they were wiping away who he had been for two years.

"There," the dermatologist said when they were finished. "Now you look more like yourself."

Who is that? John wondered, but instead he said, "Thank you."

~*~

Their second day back was a replay of the first. Breakfast with Teyla; psych tests with Heightmeyer, a visit from Caldwell to tell them they'd be expected to begin their reports soon. With what, Rodney wanted to know afterward. They were already bored and hadn't seen the—any—sun since arriving. Afternoon turned miserable when the anti-parasitics finally kicked in. Some abdominal distress is to be expected, Biro cheerfully assured them when she came in to check them. Rodney had elected to just stay in the washroom and only emerged after she left with a promise that it would be over in the
next day or so. Borso worms didn't give up easily.

"Could have been worse," Biro had said. "You must have picked them up in the last three months."

John and he both exhaled, "Baratha," and Rodney cursed them and the sewage in their streets.

Dawkins brought in a TV, a DVD player and stack of discs. Not a laptop, Rodney noticed, and wondered how much trouble it had been to find something he couldn't actually use for anything but staring at inane stories about inane people filled with jokes that made no sense. It was better than staring at the walls, though, and some distraction from the cramps. They sat on the floor together, his hand on John or John's on him for comfort, though they didn't curl together the way they had on Selket.

Taylor brought them trays in the iso room for dinner, but neither of them ate it. Between the shivering and sweating and bolting for the toilet, neither of them could stand to be in close contact either, so they used the separate beds. Rodney didn't sleep. He didn't turn his head to watch John either, but listened to him breathe, steady and far too fast to be sleeping.

Dawkins brought them breakfast and they were left alone the next morning. John picked out *The Road Warrior* and left it playing. They didn't talk, just sat, and John leaned against Rodney's back after a while, his chin resting on Rodney's shoulder, out of habit. Reinhardt came in just before lunch, making John jerk away and Rodney grit his teeth, and examined them both, quick and efficient, quizzing them on how they felt, asking if they were up to visitors after their session with Heightmeyer.

Heightmeyer had more questions. "I'd like both of you to tell some of the things you felt while you were on Selket. Just throw out some words as they come into your head."


John raised his eyebrow at Rodney. "Bored?"

"It's not like they were utilizing the extent of my intelligence."

A crinkle at the corner of his eye gave away John's near smile.

"John?" Kate prompted.

"Angry," John answered and then, reluctantly, probably because he knew she wouldn't be satisfied with just that, "Helpless."

She waited for more, but Rodney broke before John did, saving him from needing to say more. "How about freaked out? Humiliated, embarrassed, alone, guilty, hurt…"

"Guilty," John murmured, barely audible.

Kate pounced on that, of course. "Guilty?" she echoed. "Why guilty?"

Rodney imagined It all rising up for an instant, the weight of words on John's tongue ready to spill forth, until he was emptied out and his mind gone silent finally.

"For not escaping," John said. A trickle of sweat slipped down his temple. Rodney itched to wipe it away, but imagined the way John would jerk away from him too clearly. All the liberties he'd been allowed before were off limits now. John wouldn't want anyone touching, but especially not
Rodney. Not in public, anyway, maybe never again.

"Yet you're here now."

"Yeah. Now."

John clammed up after that, obviously frustrating Kate, but she didn't push it. Rodney sat quietly and provided only bland, meaningless responses. Slave stonewall; yes, no, I don't know, hara, maybe, maybe, maybe.

Zelenka came in first, at lunch, with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Rodney hoped they wouldn't be as disappointing as the coffee had been. He was already missing Tein've's spicy, exquisite meals and even the kebabs and fruits from Faeatua. He asked what Zelenka was working on lately, but got the brush off and an embarrassed apology. They weren't cleared yet and Colonel Caldwell would be most unhappy if Zelenka told them anything classified.

"Someone could at least bring me a pad of paper and a pen or would that be too dangerous too?" Rodney complained softly to John after Zelenka left. He might have said something to Zelenka, he'd even thought of it, but couldn't bring himself to ask.

"Have a cookie," John said. He kept looking at the door.

Rodney did, since they were the first things that had tasted half way decent since coming back.

Major Lorne visited after that and ran into the same roadblock as Zelenka. They weren't cleared to know anything, not news of Earth and the Ori war, not who had come or gone from Atlantis, and Lorne couldn't exactly say how much he'd missed John as a commander without it getting back to Caldwell. If he even felt that way. He kept looking at John's wrists. When he asked them about Selket, it was just as bad and the conversation devolved into painful silence. Lorne left as soon as he could without actually bolting.

John spent an hour standing under the hot water in the washroom and Rodney could find nothing to say to him that would help.

Taylor brought in legal pads and cheap ballpoint pens the next day. John looked at him and Rodney nodded. Surveillance. They weren't even being subtle about it. Rodney drummed a tattoo against the yellow pad with the capped pen.

Don't say anything out loud.

John tapped his fingers against the edge of his bed, casual and restless.

Yes.

Ballpoint sucked for writing Selketi, failing to provide the wide strokes that served as punctuation. Rodney compensated by paralleling those lines and filled his pad with the poetry he'd used to memorize and hide a chunk of zero point energy theory no one else from Earth had ever approached.

They both sat on the floor, close enough that their arms and shoulders brushed repeatedly.

John folded paper airplanes with the skill of a five year old. A bored five year old. Eventually, he gave that up and sketched things from Selket: hapek and cho leaves, geometric patterns from wall mosaics, Freka and Bint. They were surprisingly good, but after staring at the picture of Bint for five minutes, John tore them all up and flushed them.

Reinhardt examined their feet and declared them healed enough to walk on and added that they would be released from the infirmary the next day. Elizabeth visited at dinner. She examined the pad full of Selketi poetry. They would have to teach it to her, she told them. Dr. Jackson, back on Earth, would be interested too, and the linguistics department. Rodney agreed, keeping his head down, and
John flirted with her, until Elizabeth's shoulders relaxed and she unconsciously leaned toward him, a soft flush over her cheekbones. He could see John didn't even know he was doing it, playing to her the same way he'd acted for the Haralim. And Elizabeth didn't have a clue.

He told himself it didn't hurt and John would be better off with her.

Out of the infirmary meant out of the scratchy maroon scrubs. Taylor brought in two piles of folded clothes in the morning. Atlantis uniforms: gray and black military for John and the scientific department's blue and khaki for Rodney. There were belts, which meant Heightmeyer had decided they weren't suicide risks, Rodney noticed. Useful, too, because the BDUs would have slid off John's hips without one. He hadn't exactly been soft before, but John was leaner than ever, and they'd both lost a couple pounds along with the borso worms.

The shoes were the hiking shoes that had been the expedition's regular wear inside Atlantis from the beginning. Rodney held them in his hands after he'd dressed. Putting them on felt utterly wrong. He glanced up and saw John bent, slowly tightening the laces on his left shoe, teeth closed lightly on his lower lip. John's gaze flicked up and his mouth quirked momentarily, as though he could read exactly how Rodney felt.

"My feet are still tender," Rodney said.

They walked out of the infirmary together, just inside each other's personal space. A big marine, one of the men from Faecatua, was waiting for them in the corner. He straightened, not quite coming to attention, but still communicating respect. "Sirs? I'm Sergeant Olopoto," he told them.

Rodney ducked his head and sidled toward the wall.

"I'm going to be in charge of your security detail," Olopoto said.

John sighed quietly and nodded. They both waited patiently.

"If you would come with me, sirs, Colonel Caldwell and Dr. Weir are waiting for you in the Tower conference room," Olopoto said politely.

They went, passing marines and scientists in the halls between transporters. Most people were intent on their own business, but a few stared at them. Rodney carefully moved out of the way of everyone, and kept his head down. One man even stopped in his tracks, exclaiming, "Dr. McKay!"

Rodney froze, unsure if he should stop or continue after Sergeant Olopoto. His pulse sped up and he pressed his hands together, bobbing his head at the man, and let John, who suddenly had a hand at his elbow, pull him along.

Before they entered the transporter, Rodney heard a voice drawl: "We don't need their kind around here. Look at 'em. Practically holding hands like pohli." He cringed and John released his arm like he'd been scalded.

The transporter doors opened ahead of them, before Olopoto could wave his hand over the sensor. His stride hitched and he glanced over his shoulder at them. "One of you has the gene?"

"Both," John replied.

Rodney raised his gaze from his feet—his incongruously shod feet—to look at Olopoto curiously.

"Not a lot of folks with the gene here these days," Olopoto said.
Rodney and John shared a perplexed look. Sure there had always been too few people with clearance and inclination to cross galaxies who possessed a natural occurrence of the ATA gene, but Beckett's gene therapy had been over sixty percent successful in its last iteration. A few people, like Rodney, had responded especially well to it, and had better control than some naturals. It seemed strange that there would be fewer people with the ATA gene in Atlantis now than when they had been taken.

Maybe now they were out of the infirmary they would be cleared to know a little more.

Olopoto slowed his pace as they exited the transporter onto the control room level. Several people looked up from their work, but back in expedition dress, they didn't draw the same attention they had when they arrived through the gate. Only one face was familiar, as was the short-cropped brown hair and the Canadian flash on his arm. He nodded to them.

Rodney looked down, unsure if he was allowed to talk to anyone. Maybe Olopoto was with them to keep them from that. They could have found their own way to the control tower conference room, after all.

John paused and looked down at the gateroom floor, glossed with colored light from the windows, and the silvered ring of the quiescent stargate. His gaze flickered to Rodney and he smiled, a little wistfully. Rodney got it. John loved the stargate the way he loved flying. It was never about the destination. It was the going. Rodney understood. It was the same for him. He'd never just wanted to know, he wanted to find it out himself, to push back the edges. Like a pilot pushing the envelope in a high performance aircraft, only Rodney's machine was his brain. He and John had understood each other on that basic level from the first.

Olopoto cleared his throat and the followed him, doors opening untouched before them. Olopoto chuckled and murmured quietly as they passed him, "The place really does love you guys. Always thought that was a story."

~*~

"John, Rodney," Weir greeted them as they walked into the room. Caldwell was standing with his back to them, looking out through the windows to the balcony, at a rain-drenched sea. His hands were clasped loosely behind him and he had on one of those Air Force sweaters he had always favored.

"Dr. Weir," John said, not comfortable enough to call her by her first name any longer but trying to stay away from using a Selketi rank. "Colonel."

Caldwell turned and nodded to him and Rodney.

"Gentlemen. Shall we begin this meeting?"

He noticed Rodney waiting to sit down after Caldwell and Weir, just as he was. He jerked a chair out from the table and sank down, angry at himself for that hesitation. He couldn't make himself sit back in it, though. Rodney took the seat next to him.

"Relax, both of you," Weir said, smiling at them. "The first thing I want to say is how overjoyed I am, personally, that you're here, alive and well. When Lt. Cadman radioed with the news a week ago that you had been found, it was one of the happiest days of my life. I know that everyone else here feels the same way. Atlantis…Atlantis has been lost without you both. It's a miracle."

John twitched his shoulders and forced a smile in return. "Thanks." What else could he say?
"Dr. Reinhardt says you're both healthy enough to leave the infirmary now," Weir added. "I'm sure you're both happy to hear that. I'm surprised you haven't been plotting an escape, frankly."

"Where would we run?" John asked curiously.

Weir looked nonplussed.

Caldwell smothered a chuckle.

Neither of them got it. He thought Teyla might. He knew Ronon would. You don't ask the question unless you have the thought. Where would they run?

All of Pegasus lay on the other side of the gate.

Rodney knew: Canada to America, Siberia, Antarctica, Atlantis; no one stayed on a gate team that didn't have an unquenchable desire to go and know, well aware they might not come back. Or might come back utterly changed.

"Nowhere, that wasn't what I meant, of course," Weir recovered and replied. She folded her hands neatly on the smooth, black tabletop. She hadn't heard what his question really meant. She'd lived on Earth and Atlantis, seldom went offworld, wasn't one of the wandering tribe, for all her work for the UN. And Caldwell had traveled between galaxies, but always been in one place: the Air Force. Neither of them had ever been adrift; they had never felt the call of the horizon or the relief of moving on. "You've both been remarkably patient and I'm sure the medical staff has appreciated your good behavior." She trailed off again, looking faintly embarrassed. John really wanted to say We're good at being prisoners. He held his tongue. He was good at that too. Elizabeth settled on an empty, "Well."

Caldwell cleared his throat. "The situation as it stands is somewhat awkward. Obviously, in your absence your former positions have been filled. I'm not sure if you realized that before your return."

"We did," John told him.

Beside him, Rodney nodded. He'd pocketed one of the pens they'd been given in the infirmary and now had it out, fidgeting with it.

Weir sighed. "It's just that it was two years, John."

He knew. He got it. He didn't think he was taking over Caldwell's spot. Weir seemed more bothered than he was. John would go along with whatever they had planned. It really didn't matter to him. He knew that attitude seemed different than the man they'd known, but he'd never craved command, not really, rank just meant not having to put up with a superior officer's bullshit. Over the years, he'd figured out that you couldn't really escape the bullshit no matter how high you rose, though. He couldn't engage now; the idea of being military commander and responsible for lives held no appeal, if he could bring himself to order anyone again. He'd cared about Atlantis and its people, but it and they had survived without him. It turned out all the people who had told him no one was irreplaceable were right—when it came to institutions, at least.

Weir went on, "Rodney? We couldn't ask Dr. Zelenka to fill in for you without eventually appointing him Chief Scientist. That wouldn't have been fair or, frankly, workable. He needed to authority that goes with the position."

Rodney answered softly, "I understand."

Silence stretched after that. It almost amused John. They'd obviously expected loud protests.
Caldwell broke it.

"You'll want to know what is expected of you for now, until a decision on your long term postings is made. For the moment, you both still on medical leave, confined to Atlantis base, with free access to non restricted areas. You'll have a marine escort, headed by Sergeant Olopoto if or when it is necessary for you to access restricted areas such as the jumper bay, the control tower, the laboratories or the the ZPM power room. When Doctors Reinhardt and Heightmeyer clear you completely, Doctor Weir and I will re-evaluate. I know this seems pointless to you, but at the moment we have no proof you haven't been compromised, and until we do, I will err on the side of caution."

"This isn't permanent," Weir said.

John wasn't surprised. He knew Rodney would be frustrated. He would have liked the chance to take a jumper up and just fly or have gone to the mainland or visited the Athosians, even just walked away for a while and been alone, calling his own shots, but he hadn't expected that. Hadn't ever really had it, even when he'd been commander.

He looked at his hands, unadorned and pale. He'd hung on in the Air Force, even when they hadn't wanted him and made it unmistakably clear. The situation was different now.

"I'm prepared to offer my resignation," he said.

Caldwell regarded him and John made himself sit still and take it. It was what most POWs were encouraged to do. No one really thought anyone came back from anything more than a short imprisonment still fit to command. Two years put him so far out of the loop, out of practice, and stuck with so much baggage a train couldn't handle it, that John knew Caldwell had to think that.

"Absolutely not, John!" Weir exclaimed.

John kept his gaze unwaveringly on Caldwell.

"Is that what you want, Colonel?" Caldwell asked.

"I'm just putting it on the table, sir."

"Hold it under advisement, then," Caldwell said. "You've been back less than a full week. I'm not going to push you to make a major decision this soon."

"Yes, sir."

"You are certainly not resigning, John. What's happened to you and Rodney is terrible. We won't let it cost you any more than it already has." Weir sent Caldwell a less than friendly look along with her last words. "I really don't think you grasp how happy we are to have you both back." She smiled brightly. "Really, it's grounds for a celebration. Now that you are out of the infirmary, I think a welcome home party is in order."

John's fake smiled froze on his face. "Really, that's not necessary," he said. He'd been on show too many times.


Weir had the bit in her teeth, though. "I insist." She slanted another look toward Caldwell, obviously challenging him to object.

"Whatever you want, Dr. Weir," Caldwell said. Tossing out a bone, almost.
"This will be wonderful," Weir declared.

"I'm sure it will," Caldwell replied, dust-dry and unamused, before steering the meeting back on track, detailing what they would expected to do: report to the infirmary for examination every three days, counseling sessions with Heightmeyer every other day, an after action report on the mission during which they were captured and a threat assessment of the Selketi, along with familiarizing themselves with the last two years of events. "You'll be provided with non-networked laptops and monitored access to the expedition's systems."

"No jumpers, sir?" John asked. It was the sort of thing he would have asked before. He wanted to appear normal even if he didn't feel that way.

"Afraid not, Colonel. They aren't exactly replaceable."

John examined his hands again. "Yeah, I know."

"Dr. McKay," Caldwell said, "while the laboratories are still off limits, Dr. Zelenka has offered to bring you up to speed on what has been developed while you were gone." He even smiled. "He's insisted—rather strenuously—that your contributions could move several projects that have stalled forward."

"I'll do what he wants me to do," Rodney answered. That was all.

John wrapped his hand around his wrist and twisted, trying to hide the nervousness that built in the silence. He dug his thumbnail into the soft skin inside. He wanted to ask if that was all Weir and Caldwell wanted, but waiting was too ingrained.

"Well," Weir repeated. "We arranged new quarters for you both. I'm afraid all of your belongings were packed and sent back to Earth after you were declared MIA. But if there's anything you need, you have only to ask."

"Olopoto will take you by the quartermaster's," Caldwell added. He checked his watch, then shoved his chair back and rose to his feet. "I think that is everything for the moment. Colonel Sheppard, Dr. McKay, I want to formally welcome you back to Atlantis."

"Thank you, sir," John said, rising to his feet. He wanted out of the uncomfortable chair anyway.

"Yes, thank you," Rodney repeated.

"We'll have that party soon," Weir promised. "This week." She got to her feet, swept around the table and hugged Rodney, who froze, and then John. John caught her arm and feathered his fingers over the red sleeve at the same time he let his breath whisper over her jawline. She stepped back looking startled and he allowed his hand to fall away from her arm in a secondary caress called Drawing on a String, holding her gaze exactly the way Dullah had drilled into him. "John," she murmured again, tongue darting out to lick her lips.

John's heart rate sped up.

John wondered if she would take what she obviously wanted. She could have him. He'd make her feel great, better than any man ever had, and it wouldn't be utterly horrible for him. He doubted Weir would ever ask for anything that hurt. He didn't want her, but sex would be good. He missed sliding against Rodney, sleeping tangled together, waking in the gray pre-dawn before sixth bell, rocking against each other lazy and drowsy and warm.

But Weir stepped back and he shrugged to himself. He didn't really want her beyond his body's
automatic response and the discomfort of going without any kind of sex for the last week after growing used to performing every day. He leaned against the seat back of the chair.

Weir looked him over one more time and walked out of the conference.

"Gentlemen," Caldwell said, nodding to them as he followed. John straightened up.

Rodney pinched his arm as soon as they were alone, hissing, "What the hell was that?"

"What?" John asked, snatching his arm away and rubbing it.

"The—the—the vamping Elizabeth thing you did!" Rodney said in a low voice, darting a glance toward the open doors, where Olopoto was waiting for them.

"What are you talking about?" John asked with a sinking feeling.

"You touched her."

"She hugged me," John said. "She hugged you too."

"Yes, and I didn't give her the 'take me, fuck me' look." Rodney poked a finger at John's chest. "You just can't wait to prove your heterosexuality now that we're back here, can you? It must be hell, sleeping in the same room with me, worrying I'm going to jump you during the night?"

John wanted to object, but he had played to Elizabeth. It hadn't been deliberately thought out, though, and he didn't worry about Rodney ever trying anything John didn't want. He twisted his wrist in his other hand again. He really hadn't meant to or thought about it. He felt sick. It was part of him now.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I know it isn't fair, but we can't act like we did on Selket. People care here."

He retreated away from Rodney and out the doors. "Colonel Caldwell said you'd know where the new quarters are, Sergeant," he said. "I'd like to go there."

"Yes, sir," Olopoto said, responding to John's tone, surprising him a little.

Rodney had to break into a trot to keep up with them.

~*~

Zelenka had stationed himself outside Rodney's new quarters. Sitting at his feet was the box. He had a tablet in his hands and was reading from it, hair falling down over his face, when they reached the door. Olopoto cleared his throat and Zelenka looked up with a nervous smile. "Sergeant," he greeted Olopoto, with a crisp, respectful nod that was returned. Rodney slipped past both of them and inside. He followed Rodney inside, bringing the box.

Inside, he stood and looked around helplessly. It was like the first night in Atlantis. The room held nothing of him, nothing that had been his. There was a narrow bed made up with military precision, one desk, with a laptop sitting on its otherwise empty surface, one chair, unadorned blue walls, a window opening out to the sky and a view of several other towers, a door into an attached, minimal bathroom. A military-style locker sat at the end of the bed, open and filled with folded uniforms.

Zelenka set the box on the bed. His tablet he scooped off it and set on the desk.
"I have examined everything inside for potential dangers," he said. "It is cleared. In my report to Dr. Weir, I described the contents as personal items. Toiletries."

"You didn't tell what they were?" Rodney asked, holding his breath.

Zelenka's glasses flashed as he pushed them up his nose. "Unnecessary." He paused. "I may have implied that it was things like toothbrushes and uninteresting." His mouth twitched. "Ancient power source in bottom was very…uninteresting."

A frown creased Rodney's forehead. "What?"

Zelenka held up his hand and sketched a cube in the air. "Black box, yes?"

Then Rodney remembered. "Oh." He'd shoved it in the box, hadn't he? "The Haralim bought it on Faeatua. I never had a chance to examine it."

"So you were still working with Ancient technology while you were held captive?" Zelenka asked. He looked interested.

"Did you take it?"

Zelenka frowned. "No. It is useless without something to power. Just a curiosity."

Like a bullet without a gun, Rodney thought. Which in the right hands—like John's—could be very useful. It seemed a lifetime ago that he'd nearly crowed over the power cube as the best find of the day's trading on Faeatua.

Rodney sank down to the floor and began pulling off his shoes. "There was a partial database there. They built their library around it and I worked on translating it." He set the shoes aside and glanced up at Zelenka. "Some of it was very interesting." Heartbreaking when he'd believed he would never be able to share it with anyone who could grasp it, never be able to use it. "The surviving data looked like weapons R&D."

"Could you reconstruct it?" Zelenka asked eagerly. He perched himself in the chair and ignored that Rodney hadn't got up from the floor.

"I'd have to translate it from Selketi."

"Oh. But you could."

"If you want me to," Rodney said.

"Rodney, I would not presume to tell you what to pursue," Zelenka said. "I am not a fool. I am a decent administrator, but no one has made the sort of breakthroughs we did when you were here."

"Oh," Rodney breathed. He ducked his head, touched and embarrassed. "That's—thank you. I'd need to catch up on what you have done."

"I know it won't take you long." Zelenka scooted the chair a little closer and let his hands rest on his knees. He indicated the box still sitting on the bed. "You were…those things…"

Rodney looked down at his own hands. "Please don't tell anyone about those things. I shouldn't have brought them here, but the drugs were with them and I was afraid." He twisted the fabric of his pants between his fingers. "They used the dranzi on John all the time and I was afraid he might be addicted. He never used the eiff much, but it was…even though they said it wasn't and the dranzi
could have been the same."

"Colonel Sheppard was addicted to—"

"No, I was," Rodney interrupted, not wanting Zelenka to think that.

"I am sorry, Rodney," Zelenka said, simple and sincere.

"They gave it to me for pain." He made his voice steady and held out his hands, open and steady too. "I will do anything you want.

"I will say nothing of those things in that box," Zelenka promised. "I would not. Rodney—" His voice choked off as Rodney shifted onto his knees and abased himself. "Please, do not do that. It is—it is wrong to see you so."

"Anything," Rodney said as he sat back up. "I wasn't trained in the flower houses, but I can blow you. I've learned a lot from John. Or I could give you the equations, the things I remember from the Selketi database. You can use that; call it your own. Anything."

Zelenka cursed in Czech. He pushed the chair away from Rodney with a screech and jumped to his feet, pacing back and forth in the small room. "Why would you even think I would make or want you to do such things!!?" He strode over to Rodney, grabbed his shoulders and pulled him, with surprising strength, to his feet and then shook him, despite being shorter and lighter than him. "I am not a stealer of ideas and I do not fuck men." His grip gentled. "If I did, I would not want anything not given freely, from one who wanted me. Pitomec."

Rodney stumbled back from him. "I understand. I just…had to offer."

"Was that…" Zelenka swallowed, muttered another curse, and finished, "Was that part of life there?"

"Not for me," Rodney said.

Zelenka blinked rapidly. He seemed to grope for words and find none. Finally he took off his glasses and wiped them with the tail of his blue T-shirt, rubbing the glass angrily, peering at the lens, then rubbing again.

Rodney bent and picked up his shoes, then set them on the locker at the foot of his narrow bed. He wanted to go through the things in his box, but not in front of Zelenka. He'd already bared too much. Each thing he'd said had been like flailing another strip of skin from his body, only in this case it came from the skin of his soul.

"I should get back to the labs," Zelenka said. He set his glasses back in place. "There are many new, stupid people now. Not stupid in new ways, always stupid the same, but new people…" He shrugged. "All very tiresome."

Rodney almost chuckled. "I don't envy you that."

"I will come by later, take you to the mess hall for dinner," Zelenka half asked, half offered.

"Oh, that would be—thank you," Rodney said. He'd forgotten all over again that he couldn't just slip into the kitchens and sweet talk something from Tien-ve or one of the undercooks. He'd have to show up in the mess hall from now on and eat with whoever else was there. Zelenka's company would be a welcome piece of insulation.

"I will go yell at the idiots now," Zelenka declared. "I will use extra sarcasm in your honor."
Rodney went through everything in the box and then the jade coffer, then put it all back and set the box on the desk next to the closed laptop. He stared at the wall after that until Zelenka returned.

~*~

Olopoto pointed at the door to John's new quarters. The door opened before John took a second step toward it, so with a shrug, he walked inside. It closed behind him silently. The instant it did, John regretted it and willed it open again, heart pumping with sudden adrenaline as it occurred to him the door might not open. It did and he ducked his head out into the corridor in time to spot Zelenka picking a box up from the floor and going into another room that he guessed would be Rodney's.

He clutched at the doorjamb and let his head fall forward, biting back a gasp of relief. He needed to know where Rodney was, where he could find him, and he'd almost lost track of that.

Olopoto had stopped at the end of the corridor, stationing himself next to the transporter, John noticed. He had one hand on his radio headset, probably checking in. His gaze caught on John. John gave a weak wave and retreated back into his new quarters again.

With Olopoto out there, neither he nor Rodney would be wondering around Atlantis by themselves. Not that John meant to, but he hated the sense of being under watch and locked down. The trapped feeling built with every door that closed behind him.

He couldn't walk out and down the corridor and into Rodney's without it going on a report that someone, Caldwell certainly, maybe Lorne, maybe Weir, would read. So far he'd managed to skirt what had happened with the Rale and said nothing of his...whatever he had with Rodney. What he did with Rodney. Rodney had been just as circumspect. John had known he would be, would always be, unless John gave some sign he didn't care any more.

He wanted to say that, to not care, but he'd learned caution. John wasn't ashamed; he was afraid. Atlantis was different, even more than Earth would be, after Selket, and his instincts were far out of step. He pulled in a deep breath. Maybe he was ashamed, too. He was supposed to be. John scrubbed at his face and then stared at his hands, bare of the curving, curling designs he'd learned to like. They didn't look like his hands anymore. He looked at his bare wrists.

It occurred to him that he was alone, truly alone, for the first time since they'd returned. Not—presumably—under surveillance, no one about to walk in, not even Rodney's company. That last, that he already missed. Stupid, he told himself. He needed to get used to it.

Time to look around his new quarters. It didn't take long. Bed, locker, desk, lamp, laptop, chair, washroom, window. He wondered what had happened to his Johnny Cash poster, the guitar he'd forgotten how to play, the surf board he'd packed back from Earth just to tease Rodney. He had no one that any of it would have been sent to after he disappeared. Probably all of it was in storage in some sub basement of the SGC. Personal Belongings, LtC Sheppard, John A. MIA/Pegasus. Maybe they'd ship all of it back to him on the Daedalus. Probably not. Weir would know, if he asked her.

Since Caldwell had taken over in Atlantis, the Daedalus must have a new captain. John wondered who it was. Command of an intergalactic warship with FTL Asgard-improved drives had to be most Air Force officers' dream, even with the Goa'uld and the Ori and the Wraith to contend with, the way captaining a nuclear sub or an aircraft carrier was for a Navy man.

He didn't have a headset to radio Weir or anyone. John traced his fingers over the lid of the laptop. It wasn't networked. He couldn't send her an email.

He opened the laptop, just to check what it did have on it.
Nothing special on the laptop, just the bare basics and a load of mission files, AARs and Science supplemental, flagged for him to read. He opened one folder and found the Atlantis status reports sent to the SGC and IOA over the last two years. He'd always been behind with his paperwork. John winced. Another held SGC status reports and mission AARs from SG1 and other Earth-based teams. Things that had happened that he needed to know to play catch up. He shut the laptop down without reading any of them.

He sat on the bed and forced himself to calmly unlace and remove the stiff, new boots he'd been issued. He kept the socks on; the room felt cold. He had on heavier clothes than he'd worn on Selket, but he kept shivering.

The lights dimmed at his silent prompt and he lay back on the hard, narrow bed, then wrapped his arms around himself. There was no one to see, so he let himself shake the way he hadn't since the first nights in the slave barracks, when he'd been separated from Rodney and sick with the drugs used in his training.

He ignored the light knock on his door later. Whoever it was let him.

He didn't sleep. He couldn't.

~*~

Zelenka showed up at his door to accompany Rodney to the mess hall for breakfast, the same way he had done at dinner. Rodney was awake, dressed and waiting. Zelenka didn't remark that Rodney had been sitting on the floor where the morning light fell through his sole window.

They paused in front of John's door. He hadn't responded the night before. The door slid open this time, revealing John in his black T-shirt and BDUs, feet bare, hair ruffled and on end, eyes bruised and bloodshot.

"Oh, good, come on," Rodney said. He reached out without thinking and grabbed John's hand. John came willingly enough. It didn't occur to either of them to let go.

They were padding down the corridor with Zelenka when the transporter opened, allowing Teyla to exit. She nodded to the marine on watch—not Olopoto—and walked toward them. Something in the way she moved showed how much she disliked having anyone at her back, but she smiled at the three of them.

"Hey, Teyla," John said. His voice sounded rusty.

"John," she greeted him. "Rodney. Dr. Zelenka." Her gaze drifted over them and stopped at the floor. Her mouth quirked up. "You are both barefoot."

Zelenka looked down, probably noticing for the first time. Rodney felt himself redden with embarrassment, his face heating, his toes curling against the smooth, cool floor. He'd forgotten that they were supposed to wear shoes here. The stupid marine who was watching them for Caldwell snickered.

John shrugged. "Yeah, sorry." His hand tightened around Rodney's fingers.

"We will wait," Zelenka declared.

Rodney nodded obediently and tugged John to come with him. His door opened for him and he looked around blankly, trying to find where he'd left the shoes the night before. He still couldn't think of them as his shoes.
John let go of his hand and looked around, turning in a circle. "My room looks exactly like this."

"No surprise," Rodney said. He spotted the shoes, half shoved under the bed, a fold of blanket hanging to the floor and hiding them. He hadn't made the bed. The wrinkled sheets and blankets were all that showed someone alive occupied the room. He bent and picked them up, hearing John's restless movement behind him. Before he straightened up, John had stilled so completely only his harsh, indrawn breath could be heard.

Rodney swung around. John was staring at the rosewood box that had come from Selket.

"Zelenka returned it to me last night," Rodney said.

John swallowed and nodded, not looking away from the box. He ran a finger over the satin-smooth wood, then pulled his hand away.

"John?"

He looked up and his eyes were dilated. Heat flushed Rodney's face uncomfortably. His upper lip and armpits were suddenly wet with sweat.

"I should—I should go get my shoes," John said and retreated before Rodney could speak.

Chills swept over Rodney as fast as he'd gone hot. He had to sit down on the edge of the bed. His hands wanted to tremble as he forced on his uncomfortable shoes, uncooperative fingers fumbling with the laces.

Had John been turned on or horrified by the paint box? Did he know Rodney had shoved the jade coffer inside it before they left the Haralim's tent? Besides the drugs that had been removed and turned over to the medical department there were dildos and plugs, rings, clips, clamps, silken cords and silk blindfolds. Gags and leashes and whips coiled in deceptively innocent circles of silk and braided leather. Strings of various-sized beads, ivories and jades and gold and silver, balls made for insertion, crystal bottles of jewel-tinted oils and scented lubricants. There were even ear plugs, feathers and brushes in little fabric-lined niches, plus things that had scared Rodney when he went through the coffer, including one like a pin-covered lint roller and a hand-made glove of gold with different fingertip attachments that seemed more apt for torture than erotica.

He'd stared at the glove the night before, light gleaming off metal chased in intricate Selketi glyphs and wondered if the Haralim or the Rale had used it on John. If John had used it. He didn't know because other than the dranzi and things that he couldn't hide had been done to him, John had never spoken of what happened in the Haralim's rooms. Most of what Rodney knew, he had learned from glimpses in the flower house when he went to Lisha to learn how to paint John. That had been enough to tell him not to ask.

He jerked the last lace tight and stood. He didn't feel like eating now, but couldn't imagine explaining why to Zelenka or Teyla.

"Rodney, are you all right?" Zelenka asked as he came out his door. John was already standing at Teyla's side, shoes on his feet, studiously looking anywhere but at Rodney.

"I'm sorry if I took too long," Rodney said, evading the question.

~*~

Atlantis' solar system lay closer to the galactic core than Selket's. The nights were brighter, the stars so close John could pick out them out by different colors even without a telescope. He memorized all
of them, staring out his window at night. From the bed, when he turned his head to the left, he could see half of the constellation the Athosians called the Plow and Boots. Maybe from Athos those stars looked like a plow and boots. From Atlantis they were distorted, but Teyla had still recognized them and pointed them out once, in the first year of the expedition. He remembered.

He managed to drowse off sometimes, until he woke with a jerk, reaching for Rodney. It was the same each night. After that, sleep hovered out of reach and he stared at the dark ceiling or out the window.

John's eyes burned, gone blurry and dry. Even pressing his fingers against his closed lids until bright, false lights bloomed against the darkness brought no relief. He kept the lights off. Starlight bright as a full Earth moon illuminated the room. He didn't need anything more; previous nights had taught him where everything was.

His body ached, tired and over-sensitized, his skin raw. He twisted and tried lying on his side, then his stomach. He shivered even while he broke out in a sweat. His hand brushed the edge of the bed, where there should have been an expanse occupied by Rodney.

No matter how still he kept himself, he couldn't relax enough to sleep. John slipped his hand down over his belly, under the waistband of the sweats he wore. The elastic was still new and tight, the fleece soft and heavy against his skin. He worked his hand down between his legs and closed it loosely around his cock. Jerking off would leave him relaxed, maybe even prove something to himself. He could do it. He was fine with it. He gave himself a light, teasing squeeze, the way he liked it, and got no response. No arousal. Nothing.

John bit his lip and stroked his hand up and down, tensing up, willing himself to get hard. He'd been like a fucking mink on Selket, a touch, a look, a word, and he'd been ready. Now he couldn't get himself off? This couldn't be happening.

He shut his eyes and kept touching himself, lighter now, trying to do the things he'd learned to use on others. Imagined how his hand looked, teasing at the slit, the way he'd flutter his fingers along the shaft, the way that made the Rale's breath catch, before he sank down and swallowed. His hand sped and he moaned as he finally hardened. The muscles in his thighs tensed and he rocked into his fist, biting his lip, remembering, replaying, getting lost in the feeling. Hot, silky flesh, pushing into his mouth, the taste of spice and sex, the scent filling his head until he choked on it, so deep he couldn't breathe—swallowing and shuddering where he knelt, coming all over his thighs and belly without ever touching his own cock, moaning around the Rale's—

He jerked his hand away from his erection. No, no, no. He wasn't jerking off to that. He wasn't. Because that hadn't been anything he wanted to do. He'd had to do it.

"Jesus," John gritted out. Now his damn erection wouldn't go away. His pulse was racing and he ached.

He gave up and left the bed in a rucked and wrinkled mess and went to stand in the shower. It didn't refresh him, but the cold water finally wilted his cock. He wrapped a towel around his waist when he got out of the shower, then padded back into the main room to sit in the desk chair, open the laptop and read more reports.

The door slid open in response to what he wanted to do. John stared at the green-lit corridor, then thought Close.

Eventually, it did.
Rodney needed something to occupy his hands. He picked the pen up from Kate's desk and twisted it between his fingers, switching it from hand to hand. The heavy, slow feeling that went with insomnia pulled at him, as though he existed in a sphere of increased gravity.

"You look tired, Rodney," Kate said.

He missed John. He missed waking up to John's hair tickling his nose and lips. He jerked awake over and over, worrying because John wasn't there next to him.

He uncapped the pen and tested the nib against his fingertip, then stared at the dot of blue ink sinking into the whorls and ridges. He frowned and drew a line. Added two dots and a backward S-curve, then doubled the line of the lower half for emphasis. The pen was crap. He started to toss it back on her desk, then changed his mind.

"I am tired," he admitted. Just the papers and discoveries Zelenka allowed him to read left him weary. He hadn't needed to stretch his abilities in so long. Physicists tended to peak early in their careers. The prospect of already being past his mental prime would keep any man up at night. There was no one to talk to about that.

So much of what they had theorized was so obviously wrong and he could prove it, but insisting anyone listen to him made his stomach twist. He'd shown Zelenka mistakes in the work, tentatively demonstrating, but backed down as soon as his friend had contradicted him. He was right, though, damn it. Yet all he'd managed to say was a whispered entreaty to check the numbers again.

He rubbed his thumb over his fingertip, smearing and blurring the ink, erasing the glyph for strength. So much for sympathetic magic. Not that he'd thought it would work, not on him. He wasn't that far gone.

Maybe if he could inscribe it onto John's skin.

Every time they sat down to eat together with Zelenka and Teyla, John's hands drew Rodney's gaze by their bareness. Clothes covered everything else. Rodney wanted to take each hand in his and paint words for possession and safekeeping on John's palms.

"Are you sleeping?" Kate asked.

"Of course," Rodney lied. How long could you go without sleep before you started hallucinating? He used to know. He couldn't remember.

He pocketed the pen on his way out.

~*~

The guy wasn't one of the marines assigned to watch him. John noticed him in the mess hall and later when he exited the B2 tower. Then he was gone. Of course he was gone. Caldwell didn't let his people laze around. John hadn't either. Marines made their own trouble if they weren't ordered to find it.

The feeling of being watched, even stalked, made him break out in a sick sweat though and his hands shook so much he had to shove them in his pockets to hide them. It was just paranoia, he told himself. People were going to look.

He and Rodney were both gossip fodder. Victims and freaks. He hated it but there was no changing
human nature. He had to just ignore it.

~*~

The *eiff* coiled over him around him, looping over his arms, slithering between his legs, wrapping around his chest and his neck and everywhere it touched Rodney went numb. He tried to push it off, but his hands were useless and paralyzed. He could only lie on the bed and blink at the ceiling as it tightened around him, cold seeping into his anesthetized flesh and his breath stuttering to a standstill. John was calling to him, begging for him get up, to fight, but Rodney didn't move. The *eiff* nudged its head against his lips and he opened his mouth, letting it slide inside, swallowing oblivion.

He snapped awake, rolled onto his side, and vomited everything he'd eaten at dinner.

~*~

John used the attentive, interested face he'd mastered on Selket when he was in Kate Heightmeyer's presence. He already loathed the sessions with her; they felt like command performances. How exactly was forcing him to do yet another thing supposed to help him deal with having been compelled to obedience through the last two years? As far as he was concerned she wanted to fuck with his head the way the Haralim had fucked his body. Yelling at her wouldn't help, either. Not that he could. He couldn't raise his voice, no matter how angry he felt; part of him remembered *moa* and the consequences of defiance too clearly. But he could fake compliance with her questions easier than faking or forcing arousal.

So he sat, and kept his hands still and open on his thighs, and met her gaze without a visible flinch. He'd been good at fooling shrinks before. Now he had much more self-control.

"What would you like to talk about today, John?" she asked after he arrived for the latest appointment, passing Rodney in the corridor, looking tired and dispirited. They had nodded to each other. Since their first day in their new quarters they saw each other at meals, when either Teyla or Zelenka dragged them to the mess hall to eat. They never talked to each other there, not about anything real. The weight of too many eyes on them choked back all of John's words. He'd tap his spoon against the tray. *Okay?* Rodney would gesture in return with his fork. He'd always talked with his hands. No one noticed the extra circle and twitch of a his thumb. *Fine.* Gestured slave code didn't have a lot of refinement.

Now he sat on the chair that put his back to the windows in Heightmeyer's office. It kept him from being able to look out at the sky, but the glare made it that much harder to read his expressions.

"What did you talk to Rodney about?"

"That's confidential." Her smile was indulgent. It grated on John's already raw nerves. He forced an upturn to his lips that he doubted qualified as a smile. Every muscle and nerve in his body was strung tight, thrumming with tension, ready to part with a brutal snap and twang if he so much as breathed wrong. He kept his breathing even and steady, though, the way he'd learned from Teyla long ago. He imagined the rippling line of blue stones that had made up the wall of the Blue Garden. In and out. The sough of a hot breeze through the *cho* leaves, the damp smell of the green moss the Selketi cultivated instead of grass, the wet give of it under his feet.

Tomorrow he would ask Teyla if they could run *katas* together. Maybe it would loosen him up enough to sleep through the night without waking and reaching for Rodney.

"Then you pick something, Doctor," he said.
"You keep calling me Doctor," Heightmeyer said. "You used to call me Kate."

"Would you prefer that?"

"I'm calling you John." She cocked her head. "Would you prefer me to call you Colonel?" Her carefully lipsticked mouth pursed together.

"John's okay." He didn't think of himself as a colonel any longer. Colonel without a command meant nothing anyway. Not that he meant to tell her that.

"Then you should call me Kate."

John waited for her next question. He was comfortable with silence. Silence was safe and much easier than trying to offer answers that would please Kate and still guard his own privacy. The tension between those two needs consistently made his stomach fill with acid and a headache tighten behind his eyes.

"Is that what you were called on Selket?"

"Yes."

She made a note. Kate was a pen and paper person, something John liked. Someone typing away into a laptop while he talked made him uncomfortable and recordings were worse. He smoothed his sweaty palms along his thighs while her eyes were cast down to the notebook she used.

"How did that feel?"

He lifted his shoulder in a half shrug.

"They didn't give you a Selketi name?" Kate prompted.

He considered it. He knew that it wouldn't have been unlikely to have had his name stripped from him and something else used instead in many situations. Prisoners were reduced to numbers or given insulting nicknames to break them down faster. Drill sergeants did the same to recruits in boot camp. It was an indoctrination tool. But the Selketi hadn't bothered with that, because the Haralim hadn't cared whether her slaves gave themselves up as long as they performed their duties and she'd had enough power of them to compel obedience. But she had stripped him of his full name and identity and done the same to Rodney, taken the intimacy of their first names and the choice to bestow them for use from them.

"I wasn't Selketi," he said. The Selketi didn't accept offworlders as anything but foreigners, no matter how long they were there. Nothing more to it than that.

"So they never integrated you or Rodney into their society?" Kate leaned forward as she asked the question. John leaned back in his chair, miming relaxation and subtle invitation.

"I don't get what you mean," he answered. He did, but didn't want to answer. He and Rodney had been subsumed by Selket. They'd had their place and known it, down to their marrow, most of the time. When they'd defied the rules, they'd done it in knowledge of what the cost would be, mostly, not out of ignorance of what was expected of them.

"You never felt that you had a place with the Selketi, were defined in the context of their society?"

John curled his toes inside his still too stiff and new boots. "I had a place," he said. "That didn't make me Selketi." He tried smiling. "I didn't want it to. Maybe if Rodney hadn't been around to remind me
it would have gone another way."

"And you place was?"

"Pleasing the Haralim. It wasn't awful. She wasn't sadistic. No one was ever punished without reason."

Kate leaned forward. "Tell me about the punishment. Rodney was whipped. Were you punished?"

John flinched despite himself.

"John?"

He lowered his eyes, drew in a breath, and tried to speak steadily. It was over and in the past. "Yes."

"How were you punished?"

John wanted to rub his thumb over his knee. There was a place there, where he'd bitten himself. A hint of indentation in the skin—not really a scar—that no one else could see. "Moa," he said. "First and last. No marks."

"And this moa did what?"

He pressed his thumb into the place on his knee.

"It hurt."

Thinking about it made the sweat spring from his pores, made him feel sick and hot and shaky inside. He'd kill himself before enduring it again. He'd kill Rodney before he let anyone do that to him. He swallowed the words. He'd never told Rodney that. He would never confide any of it to Kate.

"It hurt," Kate repeated. She wrote something down and then tapped her pen against the notebook page. "On a scale of one to ten, how would you describe it?"

"Ten cubed."

"But you didn't break?"

"I learned to please." Maybe not broke, John thought, but bent and warped and twisted into another shape; the Selketi had done that.

"That isn't the same thing?"

"That's up to you, I guess," he answered. "I can say I didn't break, but that's just my word. You're the psychologist. What do you think?"

Kate set her elbow on the desk and leaned forward enough to rest her chin in her hand. She studied John. John waited her out. "I think you're good at redirecting the conversation and evading answering anything you don't wish to reveal." A wry smile curved her mouth. "You always have been." The smile faded into a frown. "But I can't clear you for anything until you start opening up."

Weir wanted him to go on missions again. Without the team, because Teyla was on Cadman's team, Ronon was gone and Rodney might never be ready again.

"Tell me what you want me to say." He stood and strolled over to her desk, stopping far enough away to not loom. He wanted to sink down to his knees, into the proper position of supplication. "I
can say whatever you need me to." Be or do whatever you want from me, his body language said. Let me please you.

"John, this isn't about what I want to hear," Kate said. "It's about what you need to say and face."

"I don't need to say anything. I know what happened to me."

Kate sighed. This close John could smell the floral and herb scent of whatever she used to wash her hair. If he walked around the desk, he could take her hands and lean in close, close enough to inhale the scent from behind her ear. Close enough to suck on the simple gold hoop in her earring, even catch it in his teeth and tug. Kate presented such a self-aware front, John would bet she knew exactly what she liked and would be able to tell him, instead of him guessing. He leaned on the edge of the desk, bracing his upper body with one hand flat on it and smiled at her after licking his lips.

"I could show you," he murmured. It would be so much easier than talking. He'd never been good with words about emotions, when it was real. Deb had screamed at him, toward the end of their marriage, I don't know! I can't read your damned mind, John! I don't know what you feel! But by then he hadn't felt much of anything, except relief when he got the divorce papers. He'd been reaching for Kate's hand, but stopped, caught in the memory. You don't care what I want, you've never cared about what I want! Wouldn't Deb laugh now?

"Is that what you want to do, John?" Kate asked. He pulled his hand back and rubbed the back of his neck instead. The muscles there were knotted tight. He wondered if Kate had seen his pupils dilate and his pulse speed up, the way he could see a flush turning her throat and cheeks pink even now. The light on her pale hair reminded him of corn-silk.

He frowned and retreated from the desk back to his chair. He'd been used to fucking the Haralim every day and his body hummed with want, but it was habit. He only wanted Kate if it would make her leave him alone.

"What's want got to do with it?" he asked. If he could have what he wanted…He didn't even know what he wanted anymore. Rodney. Flying. Atlantis. Dalal. He wanted to go running with Ronon, spar with Teyla, wake up next to Rodney and spend an entire day in bed with him, just touching him, without worrying about anyone or anything. He wanted two years back. John sprawled over the chair instead, drawing up his leg to hide that he was half-hard, and told Kate, "You think I haven't faced what happened to me? I faced it every day. I don't need to keep facing it now that it's over."

"Something like what you've gone through isn't just over with a snap of your fingers," Kate contradicted him. "You're smart enough to know that. Don't lie to me or yourself."

"Why not? It's what got me through it. Telling myself Rodney and I would get out of there someday."

"All right, John, why don't we talk about Rodney for the moment."

John's nerves twanged.

"I think I'm going to have to claim slave/slave privilege," he said, forcing his voice into a light tone, trying to hide how angry he felt suddenly. "You'll have to ask him whatever it is you want to know."

Kate raised her gaze from her notebook, cheeks still flushed, and gave him a sharp look. He'd given something away, he knew it, but he didn't know what, only that it mattered. And if it mattered, then someone would use it against him.

~*~
Someone had been in his room. Rodney felt it, a subtle shift in the air, a lingering hint of gun oil and boot polish in the air. The hairs at the nape of his neck lifted. He didn't touch anything, instead holding still and quiet, prey behavior, his eyes flicking around looking for any clue.

He'd had his laptop with him, so it remained secure. He didn't have possessions to steal or vandalize. Everything he'd been issued was in the locker at the foot of his bed.

He'd locked the paint box with the coffer full of sex toys inside it, too.

Rodney caught his breath.

Was that a faint indentation on the bed cover? He shifted to the side one step. Someone had sat there, at the edge, and then smoothed it carelessly afterward. A shadow gave it away. The walls of the room leaned in toward him, pulling the air out of his lungs, closing up around him and he fought to breathe through his panic.

The locker sat innocuously at the foot of his bed. It hadn't been moved. He approached it the way he would a bomb. There were smudges around the lock and a fresh, deep scrape, bright on the metal. Someone had tried to open it.

He had armed a nuclear bomb, wired an ARW into Atlantis' shield while Asurans hunted him, he'd faced Wraith. His hands were steady as he crouched and opened the locker to check its contents. His knees were weak and watery when he found everything undisturbed.

Sweat stung his eyes as he removed the jade coffer. He'd been so stupid to keep it. There was nothing in it that meant anything to him and any associations John had with it could only be bad. Zelenka had provided the drugs inside to the medical department. The rest of it was poison.

He took it into the washroom and fed each thing from inside into the disposal unit and washed his hands repeatedly afterward.

~*~

Hard hands on his back, shoving him through the stargate before it even initialized and he was in the palace, Seif and Umard holding him while Tei'ayas pried his jaw open and Bint poured the moa down his throat, Besma holding his nose closed until he choked for air and swallowed, acid in his throat and his mouth. Swallowed and gasped for breath, while Bint kept pouring more and more, until it spilled from his mouth, running down his chin, eating through his skin, so much he could only scream through the taste of blood.

He looked around, turned and turned and turned in a dizzying circle, looked for some mercy, and all the eyes on him were dead, all of them, even the Wraith Keeper, standing next to Sumner's cadaver. All of them watching him.

His flesh burned and his voice had gone. He couldn't beg. He turned around slowly, looking for some escape. Caldwell and Elizabeth stood on the other side of the stargate. The shield separated them from him.

His flesh burned and his voice had gone. He couldn't beg. He turned around slowly, looking for some escape. Caldwell and Elizabeth stood on the other side of the stargate. The shield separated them from him.

He reached out and Elizabeth shook her head. Caldwell pointed and he looked down. He was spattered in blood. Bint lay at his feet, doll-like and broken. The stargate had disappeared when he looked up again, looked up and up and up, into familiar eyes, his eyes, slitted and alien.

Kneel.
Her hair was as dark as the vastness between stars, clouds and quasars caught in the inky infinity, the distance between them too far to bridge. She clasped Rodney to her in a parody of lust, smiled with Zuleika's mouth and a Wraith's hunger.

*Kneel.*

"Dalal," he moaned. "Dalal!"

She smiled and slapped her blue, taloned hand into Rodney's chest.

He screamed and the nightmare shattered.

Woke in the darkness with Rodney's face withering before his eyes, sobbing without being able to stop, and crawled into the corner, where he stayed the rest of the night.

Morning light chased the shadows and nightmares back into their corners. John crouched in the corner of his room and watched ominous shapes resolve into familiar objects. He dug his fingers into his elbows and kept his back against the cold wall, the bite into the bones of his spine a reminder of reality.

Atlantis, he told himself. *Atlantis and free.*

He closed his eyes. Morning made it safe again. Sunlight creeping over his feet. He waited for the bells that never rang.

~*~

Elizabeth made a speech. Rodney cringed, John did the stoic, blank-faced thing, and people shuffled awkwardly. The faces gathered in the mess hall for the party she'd insisted on throwing were mostly strangers. Many of them looked at Rodney and John with the sort of avid curiosity that was usually reserved for car accidents, massacres and celebrity fuck-ups. He didn't care much for the reflection that their lives resembled at least two of those.

"And I know you all want to join me in welcoming them both home," Elizabeth finished. "Now, let's all enjoy ourselves."

Polite applause followed.

Tired, faded red bunting hung here and there. Rodney thought it might date back to the last Atlantis party he'd endured. It only added to his sense of displacement. He knew he looked twitchy, but he couldn't control the nervousness. His feet hurt and he'd begun to sweat. He thought the artificial fibers in the clothes they'd been issued were giving him a rash.

He stole another glance at John. His hair was still long; no one had pushed him to have it cut, but when he turned his head, the strands parted and the long line of his bare neck made Rodney's fingers tingle.

"Did you—"

Rodney jumped, surprised by Elizabeth's voice so close. He stumbled back a step, pulse thundering in his ears as adrenaline jolted through him, barely hearing the rest of her words. "—want to say anything, Rodney?"

"No, no, no thanks," he said. His mouth and throat were dry. "I, ah, think I'll get a drink."
"Of course," Elizabeth replied. She turned her smile on John. "John, would you…?"

John shook his head with a forced-looking smile.

Rodney sidled toward the table with the punch bowl, keeping his head down, detouring around the center of the mess hall where space had been cleared. Seventies rock played out of a boombox. The crowd separated into clumps of people talking, their voices rising over the music, increasing the noise quotient. Others separated out and headed for the buffet set out on several tables. Maybe everyone would just forget him and he could leave. If he couldn't leave, he wanted something alcoholic and strong.

"Doctor—" Rodney jerked around to face the voice. "—McKay," Simpson finished.

Rodney bobbed his head at her. "Dr. Simpson." His heart raced uncomfortably.

She frowned. "Are you okay?"

He pointed at his throat. "Dry."

"I wanted to tell you that no matter how many times we cursed you and your mother for giving birth, everyone in the science division is happy you're back," she said. Rodney nodded. "You should come down to the labs and bitch us all out. It would be like old times."

He couldn't match her smile, so he said, "When we—When I'm cleared—I'll, uh, yes. See you in the labs."

He kept working his way toward the drinks table, hoping to escape her, but Simpson followed him.

"C'mon, sir," he heard and turned his head to see Cadman pulling John out onto the dance floor. He had his back to Rodney and his shoulders looked stiff.

"Oh," Simpson said.

Rodney concentrated on breathing, pulling the air in and then pushing it out. John moved with Cadman, all loose limbs and sleek grace. It startled Cadman at first, the expression on her face gave her away, then she went with it, dancing closer to John. John danced the way he had on Selket, slithering closer to Cadman, all sex and seduction. Most people were watching now. Rodney looked away.

Teyla joined them. She considered the dancers and commented, "I shall start sparring with John again."

"He'd like that," Rodney said.

The song ended. John stepped away from Cadman with an empty smile only to find Elizabeth at his side. Rodney couldn't read her lips, but the flirtatious smile and steel in her eyes were clear from across the room. As another song started, John nodded and took Elizabeth's hand. Their dance was more decorous, but still electric. John moved with a certainty in his body that became an open invitation to admire and want.

Rodney used Teyla to slide away from Simpson and finally reach the drinks. Once at the table, he eyed the cherry-red liquid in the punch bowl dyspeptically. It resembled Kool-Aid. There were lemon slices floating on the surface. A glance showed him the same in the pitchers of water. Poison in a bucket. Perfect welcome home.
He headed for the buffet, picked up a plate there and then frowned at the various canapés and finger food. None of it looked appetizing. Dry, tired, tasteless, the antithesis to Tein's cooking. He sighed and realized Simpson had followed him along with Teyla.

"Thought you wanted a drink?"

"Lemon," Rodney said.

"No one remembered your allergies?" Teyla asked.

"I guess all the cooks are new since you were here," Simpson said. She pointed. "There. The little sausages. And cheese. Cheese is usually safe."

With a sigh, Rodney followed her advice.

"Oh, watch out for that sauce. It's sweet and sour," Simpson said.

Rodney nodded in thanks and added mini-pizza rolls to his plate instead.

Simpson angled a look toward Elizabeth, who had been joined by Caldwell and another officer. They were watching the dance floor. John was dancing with a tall woman wearing a Portuguese flag on her jacket. White teeth flashed when the woman laughed, matching her moves to John's snaky hips. Someone applauded. They weren't the only ones dancing and Rodney lost sight of the pair. Simpson shook her head and mentioned, "The punch is spiked."

"With poison," Rodney muttered.

"I'm sure there is something here you can drink, Rodney," Teyla assured him and left, presumably to find the elusive non-allergenic beverage. Rodney took his plate and found a wall. No one paid any attention.

He leaned against the smooth metal, wincing to himself at the cold that soaked from it into his shoulders. At least no one would surprise him from behind that way.

John kept dancing. Each time a song ended, another woman was there, smiling at him. John would slump, then straighten his shoulders and take her hand. Rodney had already watched him dance with Miko, then Bryce, Esposito, two women he didn't know, Heightmeyer, Katie Brown and even Biro. He never had a break.

"Here," Teyla said. She handed Rodney a beer. She put her back to the wall, too. "John does not appear to be enjoying himself."

"You can tell?"

Teyla's brows drew together as John released Biro, his palm sliding down her upper arm, and stepped back. His half turned, apparently searching the room for someone, and sweat gleamed at his throat and temples. His gaze caught on Rodney and Teyla. He took one step toward them before another woman stopped him.

"He does not say no," Teyla stated. Rodney stuffed a pizza roll in his mouth. Teyla's frown grew fierce. She pushed away from the wall. "Enough."

She sliced through the crowd, pausing only once to fend off a red-faced, almost familiar looking marine. Rodney didn't see what happened, but the marine scowled and clutched at his hand as Teyla walked away. She arrived at John's side as the music ended and tucked her arm through his, drawing
him away with a glare for the next prospective dancer. She brought him over to Rodney, who silently handed him the beer he'd been sipping on.

John's mouth quirked but he took a swallow without comment. His throat worked and he slumped against the wall. Flushed and breathing just a little hard, he looked incredibly tempting. Rodney had to look away.

"Where'd you get the beer?" he asked.

"Teyla. Everything else has citrus in it," Rodney said. "I'd feel better if I thought they were deliberately trying to kill me and not just incredibly stupid."

John looked his way and grinned. "Is the food poisonous too?"

Rodney offered his plate, John picked up a square of toast with cheese. "Thanks." He handed the beer back in exchange. Rodney's fingers brushed over his on the bottle's neck. John didn't let go immediately. His eyelashes fluttered down, before he finished chewing and swallowed.

Rodney twisted the bottle in his hand once John let go, while John ate everything left on his plate. He caught Caldwell staring at them with a heavy frown and realized they were shoulder to shoulder, deep in each other's space by Atlantean standards. He moved away and John's breath whispered out, a protesting sound caught before it became words.

"Caldwell," Rodney said.

John angled him and the other officer a look then shuffled one step away. "You don't think I've established my heterosexual credentials enough tonight? We're hardly doing anything suspicious."

"Your what?" Teyla asked. She had two more beers and another plate of food, which she gave to John.

"Rodney's worried Caldwell will think I'm sleeping with him," John said. Instead of standing straight or going tense, his posture and gestures became even more languid, inviting, and overtly sensual. His glances became sidelong and seductive.

"You were drinking from my bottle, eating off my plate."

John licked his lips. "Is he still watching?"

"Yes," Rodney hissed. He couldn't believe John was joking about it. Was that a good sign? He'd learned to read John on Selket, but everything he thought he knew failed him now. He couldn't guess what John was thinking. Why suddenly revert back to the way he'd behaved on Selket? "You're the one scared someone will see you touch me."

Caldwell said something to the officer with him, and then started across the room. He moved purposefully.

Teyla arched her eyebrow. "You are friends." She handed over one of the beers next. "Friends touch."

"Like you go around touching anyone anymore," Rodney muttered. "Don't think we haven't noticed —"

John closed his eyes then said, "Crap. I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm not doing it right, I can't sleep, and everyone…" He shifted closer to Rodney again and there was nothing deliberate or
conscious about it, just the need for nearness. "It's making me stupid. I miss—"

"John!" Rodney hissed.

"My career is over anyway," John replied in a monotone. "No one's said it, but I always knew Atlantis was better than I even had a right to hope to get. Now…" He opened his beer and took a long drink from it. Rodney couldn't look away from the movement of his throat. "Now," John said, watching two of the science division people dance an awkward foxtrot, "there's no going back…and I don't want a desk job."

"So…you want to go back to Earth?"

"I want to sleep until everything goes away," John said. "The rest of it…I don't think it's up to me."

"You belong here, in Atlantis," Teyla declared before Rodney could find any words. He could work on Earth. He could work anywhere, really, given computers and freedom.

John sipped his beer and didn't answer.

Caldwell arrived before Rodney could push the matter.

"Colonel Sheppard."

"Sir," John said. He kept his eyes down, as did Rodney, out of habit.

"I'm still waiting for your AAR."

"I'm working on it," John said. Rodney recognized a lie when he heard it and so did Caldwell.

"It's been a week."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you read your email?"

John laughed, a ragged and alarming sound. "I don't get email, sir. Remember? My laptop's cut off from the city network." His voice was hoarse.

Caldwell frowned. "I think we can take care of that. Dr. Heightmeyer doesn't believe you're a threat to Atlantis. After you're online again, you'll need a temporary office. Mayer at the quartermaster's can take care of that. If you're going on a mission offworld, you'll need the briefing materials. Captain Liu will copy them to you."

"Thank you, sir," John said, his voice even and his expression wary.

"Dr. McKay, you've been cleared for lab work under Dr. Zelenka's supervision. I expect you'll begin on your report on what you were able to learn on Selket tomorrow morning."

The pressures and responsibilities of command showed through Caldwell's command face for a moment. This couldn't be easy for him, either, being faced with the man he'd supplanted. Maybe he even felt a little guilty. Rodney hoped he did: if only so that Caldwell would go out of his way to be fair to John, even though what happened to them hadn't been his fault.

"God knows I could use another qualified jumper pilot," Caldwell said. "The SGC just sent me three marines." He nodded toward three men laughing together at the buffet table. "Bigeon, Rigazonni and Juarez. Hotdogs."
Rodney heard on of them nearly shout, "The San Francisco Treat!" The marine with dark, Mediterranean looks slapped at his fellow's head, scowling, mouthing what looked like, "Bigs, you asshole." John nudged his elbow into Rodney's, chuckling, even as he echoed, "Marine pilots? Ow."

"It's harder to find people with the gene than initial studies indicated and finding individuals who are also qualified and willing to accept an Atlantis posting..." Caldwell shook his head. "Not easy."

Caldwell nodded to John and then to Rodney and Teyla, "Doctor. Ms. Emmagen," before leaving. "Sheppard, work on that report."

"And don't we all feel so very special," Rodney muttered in his wake. He was happy, though. Access to the city network meant not needing to talk to anyone face to face. He could send emails telling each and every idiot where they'd gone wrong. "Who is Captain Liu, anyway?"

"The guy he was talking to earlier, I'd bet," John said.

"He is," Teyla confirmed.

"You're going offworld?" Rodney asked. He wondered if that meant Zelenka would give him lab access, maybe somewhere away from the rest of the sheep, where he could finally work out the data he remembered from Selket. He snatched a round cracker with an unidentified green and red thing on it from Sheppard's plate and realized after biting into it that it was a pimento-stuffed olive. Which he didn't like, but chewed and swallowed instead of spitting it out, though that was his first impulse.

John shrugged. "Weir wants me to." He didn't sound enthusiastic, which pleased Rodney. He didn't want John going anywhere without him. Especially not offworld.

Rodney was still focused on the lack of the ATA gene. "Why the hell aren't they using Beckett's gene therapy?"

Teyla held up her hands. "I have never understood it, either, though...truthfully, I have not cared enough to ask for an explanation. Perhaps Major Lorne would tell you?"

John chugged the rest of his beer. "Whatever. It looks like it might be lucky for me, if I can get back to piloting at least." He dangled the empty bottle from his fingers and looked at Teyla. "Got any more of these?"

Rodney nudged him back, happy that something was going right finally. John handed him another canapé. "Here, you used to like these."

~*~

John staggered into Rodney's quarters with him, clutching his arm when they both started listing to the side. Rodney went down onto his bed face forward. That didn't leave any room for John and he slumped down onto the floor beside the bed. His head kept spinning. Too many of Teyla's beers. He snorted himself, wondering where she'd found them. Probably some marine's carefully smuggled in stash.

Rodney groaned and flailed one hand out, finding John's head. His fingers tangled in John's hair. John leaned into the warm touch, tension unwinding at the rightness of it. He let his head rest against the edge of the mattress and his eyes close.

He didn't even know he'd gone to sleep until a noise jerked him into wakefulness, staring at Sgt. Olopoto standing in the open doorway.
Olopoto looked a little shamefaced. "Sirs? You need to remember to close the doors."

John blinked at him. Selket hadn't had doors. He'd lost the habit of automatically closing them behind him. "Okay," he said. A cold ball of nausea formed in his stomach, warring with a hot flush moving up his face. Olopoto had to think he and Rodney were...He dug his nails into his palm. They weren't, not in Atlantis, never in Atlantis, but they had, on Selket. The thoughts ricocheted through his head and he didn't know what was wrong with him. He couldn't want the things that he'd learned to do—learned to want his own voice mocked from the back of his mind—in the palace. The things that made him wake up hard, biting his pillow, in the middle of the night.

When he didn't wake up screaming.

He was so fucked up.

Rodney's hand had fallen from his crown to rest at his neck, his first and middle fingers, faintly sweaty, tucked beneath the collar of John's shirt.

Olopoto glanced at Rodney, who grumbled and pulled his pillow over his head. "You want some help getting his boots off, sir?"

"No."

Olopoto's big shoulders moved under his tac vest. "Got word. Colonel Caldwell's pulling your escorts, so I won't be following you around, sir. I'm heading out now."

"Thank you, sergeant," John said. Weir had to be pushing Caldwell hard or the SGC had sent instructions on how to deal with them.

"Sir? You should watch out for Corporal Garner. He's been talking a lot of trash."

"People talk." His voice sounded rusty in his ears. Garner? He didn't even know who Garner was. A picture of a marine with short ginger hair flickered behind his eyes, torchlight and fire reflected in pale eyes, the sound of the stargate opening and P-90 fire. If that was Garner, he'd been on Faeatua.

"Yes, sir."

"Good night, sergeant."

"Good night, sir."

He closed the door behind Olopoto while wondering exactly what any of it meant, then took off Rodney's shoes. Rodney flexed his toes with a blissful sigh after his shoes came off. The soles of his feet were pale pink and tender. John gave into impulse, sat on the edge of the bed and began massaging one foot. "Oh, Jesus, don't stop," Rodney told him from under the pillow.

He smiled and started on the other foot. He knew he was good at it and kept up until his hands began to ache.

Rodney rolled onto his back. The pillow slid off onto the floor. John retrieved it while Rodney stretched. He accepted the pillow from John's hand and sighed.

"What?"

"Don't go."

"I should—"
"I can't sleep without you," Rodney blurted out. John went still. He'd thought Rodney was offering for his sake, but maybe it was both of them. He still hesitated, though, with Olopoto's warning so recent and all his own doubts clamoring at him.

He weighed what he wanted, what Rodney was asking for, against the knowledge that whether Olopoto was outside in the corridor or not, someone would know if he stayed in Rodney's room. Caldwell had intimated that John could possibly 'rehabilitate' himself and his career, enough to get in the air again at least. Was it worth it? Weighed against everything else?

The dim light emphasized the bruised look around Rodney's eyes. Nothing in his voice, nothing in his expression said he expected John would stay, but he'd asked. John knew how hard just that was, could never ask himself. The memory of touch, the phantom imprint of the whorls of Rodney's fingerprints burned against his nape, a promise heavier than doubt.

The way he felt was just a hold over from what had happened on Selket. It wasn't really him. He wanted to stay; he shouldn't want to stay, he didn't want to even admit that he did. He couldn't—

"Stay," Rodney said.

He couldn't deny Rodney.

He could tell himself he was drunk, that it didn't mean anything, that he was doing this for Rodney. He could tell himself all that, if he wanted to lie to himself.

John didn't say anything, just bent and began unlacing his boots, before undressing, pretending his hands were trembling. Rodney sat up and stripped, wordless too now, until John joined him in the narrow bed, bare skin to bare skin and a sigh of relief. He slid his knee between Rodney's thighs, warming for the first time in days, tension bleeding away. Rodney's hand rested, broad and warm, like an anchor, on his hip. They fit together.

The bed was too narrow and should have been awkward, but they'd slept wrapped around each other from the beginning. The vague thought that Rodney's sheets weren't as stiff and scratchy as his drifted through John's mind, but his eyes were already closed again, his heartbeat falling into the steady rhythm of the damp, beery breaths against his temple. The sleep he hadn't been able to find all week swept him down, melting warm, wrapped in the comfort of Rodney's familiar presence.

~*~

Rodney swam out of sleep to a foul-tasting mouth, gummed up eyes, and the sweaty heat of another body plastered to him. Ten-pound sledgehammers worked chisels into his skull when he moved. His hips hurt from sleeping on his side and his left arm was numb from the shoulder down. He slitted his eyes open enough to glare at the morning light pouring from the room's window, illuminating the room and John's bare, unmarked shoulders above the crumpled sheet they'd drawn over them during the night.

A swathe of light fell over John's back, all the way up to his head. In direct sunlight, John's hair revealed itself as seal brown rather than black, gave away secret glints of burnt umber and gold, warm as the heat the silky strands caught and held. The morning sunshine made the institutional gray sheets glow nearly pearl. Where it lay over Rodney's upper arm, the heat soaked in through his skin, but not hot enough to burn. He shifted uncomfortably and noticed John's hard-on pressing against his thigh. He started to reach for it and remembered where they were now.

"Shit," he whispered, feeling a stirring in his own groin. He manfully ignored it. Autonomic response, habit, proximity—none of them were good enough reasons to start rocking against John.
The fact that John would let him, would probably slide down and give him a sweet, sleepy blowjob didn't make it any easier, either. He tried to shift away.

John groaned into Rodney's throat and muttered, "I can't believe I'm hungover on beer." He rolled away from Rodney onto his back and then scrambled to stay on the bed. Rodney tried to grab him, but his numb hand just slipped over John's arm. John's hand closed on the sheets and Rodney felt them pull beneath him, before his weight stabilized them. John rolled back toward him in a desperate move that ended with him straddling Rodney.

Rodney used his good hand to steady John, who pulled in a quick breath, chest rising, belly hollowing, and met Rodney's gaze. The morning light caught in John's eyes, turning them translucent amber-green. "Hey," he said awkwardly. His eyes were dilated, his pulse fluttering at his throat, and his entire body tense. His hard-on hadn't gone away. The panicky expression on his face told a different story.

"Hey," Rodney croaked.

One of John's hands came to rest on the center of his chest, gentle pressure. "Sorry."

"Sure."

"Good."

John swung off him and the bed. He retrieved his clothes and began dressing while Rodney swallowed several times, scooched up in the bed and waited for the pins and needles to ease up in his arm. He watched while John pulled on and fastened his pants with extra care, then stood with a pinched expression on his face that Rodney recognized from experience. John frowned the same way when he was fighting the effects of dranzi, telling his body to settle down. A deep breath followed, then John fished his shirt off the floor and pulled it on, leaving his hair in rumpled, silky mess. His expression gave nothing away.

"Meeting with Kate this morning," he said. "You?"

That made it Rodney's turn to frown. "Yes. After the check-ups."

John grimaced. They were both tired of visiting the infirmary, getting scanned, prodded, and tapped for more blood samples. He picked up his boots, swinging them idly, obviously not in a hurry to put them on. His lips quirked as he eyed Rodney. "Sleep well?"

Rodney rolled his eyes. He could pretend, too. "Yes. I realize now it was the drool and loss of circulation I missed." He gave his arm an exaggerated rub. The feeling had mostly come back, in that way where it responded but still felt like it might belong to some other body and not his. He wiggled his fingers.

"It's a small bed," John pointed out in his defense. A hint of real amusement colored his words.

"You're like a leech when you sleep."

"At least I got some sleep, finally," John said. He sounded embarrassed, but looked better, something Rodney felt as well, and it made him relax fractionally. He'd been afraid John would bolt, based on the way he'd looked on waking. Their friendship rested on a fragile layer of ice, with a rushing river of emotion just beneath, and one false move might shatter everything and leave them both drowning. John coughed. "I—Just, no one needs to know, you know?"

"I know," Rodney said.
John rubbed the back of his neck. "I should go."

Rodney nodded. John didn't move.

He decided John could freak out or not, he wasn't hiding anything they both hadn't seen already, so he left the bed and retrieved his blue, terry cloth robe. It was new, but enough like his old one that it had become his favorite piece of clothing, along with loose sweats. He wished he could just go around Atlantis in those instead of the constrictive, artificial science uniform. John looked away, but didn't leave.

It made Rodney angry. His chin came up and he jerked his head toward the bathroom. "I need a shower, so unless you're going to join me…"

"See you in the mess," John said. He headed for the door, ducked his head out and was gone before Rodney could say anything in reply.

The door closed behind John and Rodney wondered why he even wanted the sonovabitch. That didn't stop him jerking off in the shower to the memory of John's body and his mouth when conjuring thoughts of Sam Carter and Katie and his big-breasted neighbor on Earth did nothing for him.

~*~

What the hell was wrong with the woman? She just kept pushing and pushing and pushing. John walked out his session with her gritting his teeth and nearly sick to his stomach. He walked fast, because he wanted to run, and sent the first transporter he reached to a random destination, needing to get away from Kate and her damn questions, her concerned looks, and everyone else who would expect him to act normal.

*Tell me about the Rale.*

There was nothing to tell, damn it.

She'd mentioned the AAR he still owed Caldwell. Like he didn't know he should have written it a week ago. He wasn't ready to write down any of it and she wanted him to talk about it. He'd never been comfortable talking about anything meaningful. Damn her.

*I look like him.*

He'd never meant to say that.

The transporter let him out in an empty corridor facing the direction they'd settled on calling west, since the sun set there, opening on a wide window onto a veranda-like balcony visible at the end. The sky and the sea were all he could see from where he stood, infinite blue, and John needed both. He found himself with a stunning and private view of the modified 302 runway and hangars on the northeast pier, sea and sky fading into each other at an indefinite horizon far beyond it.

Watching the light glitter off the water and the clouds scud overhead finally let him settle back into his skin.

*Was that why you were chosen by the Haralim?*

He'd almost walked out.

Salt damp air brushed cool over his upturned face, sweet on his tongue as he inhaled deep; so very
different from a world where water was rare and precious, the color of royalty. His hands tightened on the balcony railing. There were still walls, walls everywhere he turned, clipped wings and locked gates.

He wasn't going back. Kate and her sessions. No more. He wasn't going to gut himself for her, spill everything out until he had nothing left that was just his. His thoughts and feelings were his; even the Selketi never thought they owned that much.

Fuck her. If she didn't give an okay, he'd never be cleared to go offworld or fly again. Bitch. The crawling feeling of being trapped made him want to do something violent. All of that put on compassion condemning him when she didn't know anything. John bent over, his eyes squeezed shut. He ought to fuck her. Lay her down and make her beg, fuck her until she was willing to do anything for more. Fuck the pity out of her eyes.

**Did you have sex with him?**

He was going to throw up.

**It's okay to—**

It wasn't okay. He wasn't okay.

He needed Rodney. He needed Rodney to make it okay.

~*~

Reinhardt turned the scanner display to show Rodney the results. The display showed very bright and clear in the dimmed room. No little blue lights in his guts showed.

"How fine is the resolution on that, anyway?" Rodney asked, sitting up on the table and peering at the hologram. "Shouldn't I have some intestinal bacteria?"

Reinhardt looked at him, long and faintly irritated. "Yes, you have intestinal bacteria, no, they aren't gone. The scanner is set to display parasites, not symbiotes. Given that it can detect nanites that work within your cell structures, it could show you the bacteria, but what would be the point? They're supposed to be there."

Rodney huffed. "Well. Good." He slid off the scanner's tabletop and caught his hospital gown's tails, holding them closed over his ass. "That's it, right? I'd like to put on something less air conditioned."

That got him a snort, as Reinhardt stepped over to the window and used the manual sensor to key it from completely opaque to clear and only slightly shaded, filling the exam room with light that made Rodney blink. "You can get dressed. I have some questions I'd like to go over with you before you go, though."

Rodney eyed him warily, before bowing his head and reaching for his clothes. Reinhardt used the time he took dressing to make notes in his tablet comp.

"You've lost some weight since coming back," Reinhardt said when Rodney had his clothes on again.

"You'd think getting rid of the worms would solve that," Rodney replied.

A puff of laughter escaped Reinhardt. "Yes, maybe so. I was asking about your appetite. How are you sleeping?"
"I slept beautifully last night," Rodney said perfectly truthfully. "And I'm eating. If I don't eat, I fall over. I know that."

"The hypoglycemia," Reinhardt said, consulting his tablet. "You never had problems with it during your captivity?"

"No, there was always plenty of food. They were never cruel that way."

"Hmn. I leave that to Kate." Reinhardt looked up. "I wanted to ask you about the gene therapy Dr. Beckett conducted on you in the first year of the expedition."

Rodney glared balefully at the shoes he was supposed to put on. "What? What about it? It worked."

"Not in everybody."

"So? I'm surprised that it isn't one hundred percent by now. And, for the matter, why aren't there more people with the ATA around here, even if no one ever refined it beyond the, what, sixty percent success rate?" Rodney said.

"Dr. Beckett's gene therapy was never approved by the USFDA or any governing medical body of the IOA," Reinhardt said. "All use of it has been banned until it has been studied and tested for long term safety—which is one reason I'd like to ask if you've ever had any side effects from it. There's no one else left in the city who had the therapy take successfully."

"Zelenka?"

"Dr. Zelenka has been very cooperative, but the therapy failed to take with him and his DNA shows no signs of it whatsoever. Yours shows a distinct change compared to the baseline samples you provided the SGC before leaving Earth with the original expedition. Beckett was brilliant, really brilliant, and it's a shame he was lost," Reinhardt said. He frowned then. "Though he would have faced censure and probably lost his medical license. He played very fast and loose with medical ethics. The retrovirus that infected Colonel Sheppard, biological weapons, and even the gene therapy. It was years away from being ready for human testing."

He shrugged and smiled at Rodney. "Moot point."

"It wasn't like that," Rodney protested. It hadn't been. He might have called Carson a witch doctor, but he'd been a good man. "You said it was years away from human testing. But it's been years. Shouldn't someone be close?"

Reinhardt gave him a cynical look. "You'd think, but since all of Dr. Beckett's work is classified, no one has been testing it at all. Research and development are generally aimed at generating revenue."

"But...we already know it works," Rodney protested.

"Sometimes. But we don't know why it doesn't always work. That just isn't good enough."

~*~

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Rodney grumbled. He was sitting on the floor again.

John dropped the tray he'd brought with soup and sandwiches onto the desk, sloshing the soup over the edge of the bowl. That, at least, triggered a response. "Hey, watch the laptop," Rodney snapped.
"I wouldn't have to if you'd come to breakfast, instead of sulking in here."

He sank down onto his knees without thinking much about it and peered at Rodney. "Really, are you okay?"

Rodney rubbed nervously at his elbow. "I just don't feel like being on display."

"That's it?"

That got him an annoyed look. "That isn't enough, Mr. I Don't Want Anyone to Know?"

John clasped his hand around his other wrist, pressing his thumb viciously against the bone. He deserved that. Didn't like, but he deserved it, and he understood Rodney's distaste for the way everyone looked and whispered, all the strange faces who judged and thought they knew everything when they knew nothing. He just liked to keep his private life private. Like his feelings. So he ignored the dig.

"What happened to your elbow?" Rodney had his hand cupped around his left elbow. John recognized the way Rodney guarded a hurt. Some days he thought he knew Rodney's tells better than his own.

"I tripped."

John raised his gaze from Rodney's elbow to his face. Wasn't that the oldest fucking excuse in the book? "You tripped," he echoed.

"Clumsy."

"Right."

"In the mess hall," Rodney blurted out. "That's all. I tripped and fell."

"And now you don't want to revisit the scene of your great trauma," John drawled, his mind racing over the possibilities and not liking them. Rodney probably tripped all right, right over some jolly marine bully's booted foot. The wave of rage that rushed through him obscured whatever Rodney said in reply. He wanted to know who did it. He wanted to rip his head off. He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood, bright as his anger, and breathed through it, finding his control again.

Everything made him angry lately. He wanted to yell at Rodney just for putting up with the marines' shit. It just encouraged them.

"Fine," he managed to force out instead, "Just eat what I brought you."

Rodney gave him a dirty look, but moved to the desk and started eating. "The soup's cold and this sandwich is soggy," he complained.

"Don't tip me."

Through a half-masticated mouthful of white bread, some sort of mock lettuce and mystery meat, Rodney commented, "You're pissy today. Bad session with Heightmeyer?"

"I skipped."

"Oh, that's bright."

"Think anyone would care if I dropped her off the top of the B2 tower?"
Rodney swallowed. "Probably."

John sat back on his heels and stretched his back. "Yeah, figures." His shoulders were so tight they hurt. "God, I'm tired," he admitted. He'd stayed in his room the night before, too wired to sleep, and felt it now, exhaustion weighing him down like lead in his veins. Useless. It hadn't proved anything. So he'd stayed away from Rodney. What good had that done?

The clink of a spoon on the tray, set down before Rodney's brushed his fingers over the back of John's neck, provided his only warning. John pushed into the touch before he thought, as Rodney said, "Lie down with me—"

He jerked away. "No."

"Why?" Rodney demanded. His hand closed on John's shoulder. "We both know you want to."

"I do not," John snarled at him, twisting and knocking him away so hard Rodney's elbow hit the desk and sent the tray sliding off it. the spoon clattered and the bowl turned over as the tray fell. Soup spattered across the floor as Rodney clutched at his elbow, making a pained noise. "Oh, Jesus," John whispered. "Did I—"

"Sorry I fucking touched you, Colonel," Rodney snapped.

John squeezed his eyes shut. Rodney had called him Colonel. It should have meant Rodney understood that they couldn't do the things they'd done before, should have been a relief, but it felt like a knife drawn through his belly to his throat. He blurted, "I don't know what's wrong with me," and stumbled to his feet. "I have to—I have to go."

"John…"

He held still.

Rodney rubbed his elbow one last time, hissed, and got to his feet too.

"What?" John asked warily.

"Pretend anything you need to with everyone else, but not me."

"Why is it harder here?"

"No one asked us to be happy there."

They cleaned up the mess on the floor together, without speaking. John's fingers brushed the back of Rodney's hand reaching for the lost spoon. Rodney glanced at him. John pulled his hand back and let Rodney pick up the spoon. "I don't know how to hide anymore," he said to the floor, when he had the empty tray in his hands again, before taking it back to the mess. Rodney had his laptop open again and ignored him.

~*~

Rodney held out as long as he could, long after Atlantis' day shift ended and everyone but the night owls and workaholics were asleep. He took advantage of his newly networked laptop to skim most of the science department's classified work that he hadn't had access to before, just the small desk lamp providing a circle of white light, blanking the single window into a darkened mirror. So stupid, stupid, oh, and here was a moron he hadn't heard of before, arguing something Rodney disproved two, no, three years before. He plowed through reports, firing off emails, grumbling to himself. Fine.
If they were going to call him Fu Manchu—he knew that one started with the scientists, even if the marines have taken to using it with gusto—then they should remember the character was an evil genius. He eviscerated two papers and started on a third, until his eyes refused to focus on the screen and his own calculations began showing more errors than the ones he meant to destroy.

His shoulders ached from hunching over the keyboard when he stood and the muscles at the small of his back were tight and strained. Stretching only exacerbated the discomfort. Once he stopped concentrating, he'd become aware of the throbbing pain just behind one eye, too.

Sleep sometimes helped that sort of headache, if he could manage it. He didn't have any hoarded painkillers any longer and couldn't pad down the halls to the kitchens and beg something from Tein-ve. Certainly wasn't willing to resort to going to the infirmary, where they'd chalk his headache up to either hypochondria or some sort of post-traumatic stress kicking in.

Dr. Fu Manchu. He supposed that was better than what he heard one marine call John. Most of them shut up if they realized he had heard them, but not that one, the one who jostled Teyla at the chow line and stared at John and pushed Rodney into the wall. He had wanted Rodney to hear.

Hot shower then, he decided, in which he didn't linger, because Atlantis still had unlimited water, but not unlimited power to heat it and some bright bulb had created a program to conserve during low use hours in the living quarters and provide more during morning and after shift hours. Afterward, he put on a T-shirt and sweats to sleep in and the blue terry bathrobe that reminded him of the one he'd had before, taking his time to put off the moment as long as he could.

He padded from the bathroom and glared at his bed before settling on it. The bed hated him or he hated it, from the first night in these quarters. Last night, wrapped in alcohol and John's presence, he'd slept easily on it for the first time.

He stretched out with every intention of sleeping, waited for it to come, deliberately calmed his racing brain by reciting primes, and kept his eyes shut tight. He kept the robe on. He always felt cold at night. None of it worked. Only John's presence helped.

His eyes snapped open.

The ceiling looked exactly the way it had every night he'd stared at it and he'd spent too many hours doing just that. The sound of the ventilation system steadily worked to drive him insane. The air blowing in made him shiver. An hour later, after thrashing one way and then the other, his feet painfully cold, he decided he would go insane if he stayed in the room another minute.

If he was going to be miserable, John could be miserable with him. Weird as he'd been earlier, Rodney knew that in the dark, alone, John would let him in.

He scooped up his laptop and left, his feet silent on the smooth floors.

John's door slid open before he could raise his hand or speak. Rodney sidled in, trying to be quiet in case John was sleeping.

Light from the corridor caught and reflected from John's eyes, though. He didn't say anything. Rodney placed his laptop next to John's. He hesitated there. The door closed belatedly, leaving the room darker than Rodney kept his, only faint starshine from the window illuminating it. John's face was a pale blur. Rodney saw him move, though, shifting on the bed and then holding his hand out.

Rodney crossed the room and took John's hand, following its pull into the bed next to John, his body settling into the spaces that seemed made for him. John's fingers tangled with his and didn't let go.
Rodney tucked his nose against John's neck and inhaled. All his muscles seemed to relax. John turned toward him and slid one foot over Rodney's ankle. His breath hissed out as his toes brushed Rodney's.

"Christ. Ice much?"

Rodney rubbed his foot against John's, already feeling warmer.

"N'ce," he mumbled. Oh, this was what he'd needed and missed. He sank into the bed, into John's hold, into the deep, muzzy reaches of sleep, gratefully. "Mmph."


Rodney thought warm lips brushed against his temple, but he was already too deep to do more than mumble agreement as he finally fell asleep.

~*~

"Mmm," John muttered into the sheet, limp and too deliciously comfortable to shift or pry his eyes open. Rodney's weight pulled the bed down on one side, tipping John against hip and knee. He woke up enough to decide that meant Rodney was sitting on the edge of the bed, next to him. "Nnggh," he added and flailed an arm back, finding a bent knee and soft cotton with his hand. "Get up?" he asked.

"No, stay there," Rodney said.

John patted at his knee and relaxed again, drifting. The sheet over him slid down. He made a protesting noise as cooler air hit his back then sighed happily as Rodney's hands smoothed over his skin. Rodney's fingers moved over him from neck to shoulder blades and down, parallel to his spine to his waist, in long strokes. John smiled into the sheet. Rodney adored back rubs and gave them just as generously, big hands combining strength and delicacy, fingers spread warm over John's back. Muscles he hadn't known were pulled taut melted like butter and he stretched with pleasure, pushing up to get more.

"More?" Rodney asked, proving he could read John's body if not his mind.

"Mmm."

Rodney laughed quietly. "Hedonist," he said and leaned into the massage.

"'S good."

John went with it, floating between waking and sleep, and only gradually noticed as the massage changed, no longer including the deeper pressure of the palms of Rodney's hands, just his fingertips skating across John's back. He blinked his eyes open, trying to decide if he should roll over and reach for Rodney, pull him down into the bed again and return the favor. It didn't feel like a tease, though. Rodney's fingers moved purposefully.

He sighed into the sheet and rolled his shoulders. The shadows of the wrinkled sheets were still fuzzy, the light still cool and half dim, so it was early. No need to hurry anywhere. No bells. He flexed his fingers against the sheets. No bells, no rising and prepping to wait on the Haralim all day…No brushes sliding pigment into his skin.

John smiled.
"What're you doing?" he asked, despite having guessed.

"What?" Rodney exclaimed. Suddenly, his hands were gone. "Sorry-"

"Don't stop," John complained. His back felt bereft. He wanted Rodney's hands there again.

Rodney rested one hand on the small of John's back. Hesitant. John wriggled and raised his arms, folding them and resting his face on his crossed forearms. "Go on," he murmured.

The sensation of a spiral tentatively sketched just over the base of his spine rewarded him.

"Yeah."

"Sorry," Rodney said again. He traced another pattern up John's spine.

"I missed this," John mumbled.

Rodney's hand stilled. "You did?"

"It always felt like I had you between me and them," John admitted.

Rodney's hand moved again, settling on the back of John's neck, making him shiver and shove back into it without thinking, making him suck in a breath because he was starting to get hard.

"Should we be doing this?"

John drew in another shuddering breath. They shouldn't, he shouldn't... he didn't care. "Write something on me."

"John?"

"You've got to have a pen. You've always got one, you keep pocketing them all the time."

"I do?"

He huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, you do."

"Hunh."

Rodney shifted, left the bed, and stirred around the room. John turned his head on the pillow of his arms and watched him, willing his arousal away, until it was no more than a quiet hum of possibility. First Rodney poked around John's bare desk, where two laptops sat together. Then he picked up the blue terry robe he seemed to retreat into whenever he was in his quarters. Delving into the pockets produced an "Ah hah," and a ball point pen. He came back to the bed and met John's gaze uncertainly, eyes gray in the colorless pre-dawn light.

"What do you want me to write?"

"You'll figure something out."

John hid his eyes then and waited.

Rodney settled back on the edge of the bed, his hip warm against John's, and leaned over him, bracing himself on his left hand. His right hand smoothed down John's back. "Okay," he said at last and the point of the pen touched feather light along John's spine. Rodney traced something, so swift and sure John couldn't even guess what it was. He hummed quietly, intent, until he finished. The cap
of the pen went on with a small click, then Rodney bent and brushed his lips over the cusp of John's shoulder, a breath warm, tender kiss. "It'll wash off when you shower."

John finally rolled over and sat up to face Rodney. "What did you write?"

"Property of John Sheppard."

"Not—"

"No."

~*~

His hands stilled on the keyboard and he stared at the screen full of equations blindly. Zelenka had put him in his office, away from the lab and sudden voices that still made him jerk out of his thoughts, ready to bow down. Everyone hurried and Rodney felt constantly out of step.

His mind kept wandering back to the morning, John stretched out, the slide of the cheap ballpoint pen—the incongruity of it, plastic and ink brought from another galaxy—over his pale, new looking skin. The words black and stark in English, cursive and curt. Had John understood?

John's moods swung from needy to nasty so fast lately. Not that Rodney felt his own emotions were any more reliable. The only time he felt like himself was with John. The rest of the time, it was all an act, and he'd never lied worth a damn.

It seemed like a bad joke that they'd been more honest before Teyla found them. No one had cared what they did together on Selket. There had been no need to hide there.

Now they were free and home, though it didn't feel like it, and he had to lie along with John. He just wanted…to be able to lie to himself as well as John did. Everything would get easier. Or if he could forget.

A sharp pang through his gut reminded him of the cost of forgetting, but his hands picked through all his pockets by themselves anyway, absently searching for a small lavender bottle, before he focused on the work before him.

~*~

The jumper bay and the 302 hangars were off-limits, but John kept coming back to the terrace off one of the deactivated manufactories on the northeast pier that let him look out on the flight line and the ocean beyond. He had a temporary office now, but preferred being outside. He took his laptop with him in the afternoons, read mission reports and two years worth of the bundled files of 'current events' the SGC sent to keep everyone up on Earth culture. The sun burned off the water, so brilliant it made his eyes water when he watched the black specks of the 302s approach, wings outstretched, to touch and go off the pier runway. He sat on the ground with the laptop balanced on his knees, shoes kicked off, and, best of all, alone.

He should have worked on the after action report for Caldwell, but each time he opened the document, he ended up staring out across the ocean, until the long, slow fall of the day edged it into crimson and flaring orange, searing afterimages against his eyes that left him too blind to even make out the laptop's screen.

The terrace overlooked a well-used walkway between the marines quarters and the nearest transporter, but couldn't be seen from there. The acoustics carried voices upward sometimes, when
the wind threaded through the towers from the right direction.

John had seated himself and been concentrating on learning who won the Superbowl the second year they were gone, along with new gun control laws in the US and what finally prompted them, troop deployments in North Africa and the Caribbean, when he caught a thread of conversation carried from below. It was the laughter that caught his attention. He stopped reading and cocked his head.

"…a regular Dr. Fu Manchu."

Laughter followed that.

John savored the sea-scented air and watched a 302 cavort in the sky. Caldwell or someone would blister the pilot for hotdogging, but the lure of stretching your wings couldn't be trumped with lectures. He was more interested in the aircraft than the conversation below and only half-listened, until he heard: "God, yes, with the bowing and praying hands and he scuttles like a big bug. I can't believe that guy used to be CSO. He's a joke, Bigs."

The case of John's laptop creaked under the pressure of his fingers.

A second voice joined in.

"Him? What about Harem Boy? You heard what Garner said about how they found him?"

"Air Force pansy."

More laughter and then the voices were lost, the marines moving on without any awareness that they'd been overheard.

John stared into the sun.

~*~

The sky fell in on Rodney halfway across one of the first level green spaces between the B4 tower and B2.

He didn't like the exposed areas. The emptiness of the city, the vast sky above him, the towers that stretched higher than anything on Selket, made him nervous. It would be utterly ironic if on top of his claustrophobia he became agoraphobic too, he thought, but the open places reminded him of the ambo. The sun flashed off metal and glass, like the flare of light off the Rale's sword as he brought it down on Keder's neck. His heart beat too fast every time he had to venture across from tower to tower and he cursed the power conservation measures that made it impossible to use the transporters between buildings for anything less than urgent.

Rodney kept his head down when he walked and tried to ignore the marine trailing behind him, otherwise he might not have noticed. The spaces had all been empty two years before, but someone had seeded them since. Not everything growing there was green, despite the preponderance of Terran-type ecologies, there were plants in Pegasus conducting photosynthesis with other things than chlorophyll, providing the botanists with much joy. Most of the plants were green though, with hints of yellow and red. He recognized a native grass from the mainland and the tiny, white, six-petaled Athosian star-flowers. He stumbled to a stop, staring down, though, when his eyes picked out the deep maroon, sessile leaves of a moa plant. More than one, all growing in an innocent appearing row alongside the walkway.

The plants had been everywhere in the palace. Everyone grew them in glazed pots. In spring, they had tiny lavender flowers with three petals. The mauve pollen dusted the area around each plant and
made sensitive people sneeze, so the pots were set outside for about two weeks. The scent had lingered everywhere. Rodney knew them well. The only thing missing was the eiff coiled along the stems.

A painful prickle of heat flashed through his body, starting at his toes and rising, until it almost took his head off. His fingers trembled as he dropped down on his knees and touched a leaf. Parallel veins, curving from the base of the blade to the acuminate leaf tip. So distinctive. A tiny fringe of reddish-purple hairs ran along the margin of the blade like on a honeysuckle leaf. The stems were a darker shade, almost purple, and covered with more silky hairs.

The scent, basil and feathers, nauseating and familiar, filled the air as he brushed his fingers over the leaves. His entire body broke out in a sick sweat. It would linger on his hands, stronger than soap. John cringed whenever he caught even a lingering hint of it. He'd notice.

Rodney threaded his hand through the leaves to the nearest plant's base and jerked.

"Hey! You shouldn't, you can't do that," someone protested.

Rodney ignored the voice and pulled again, yanking the plant from the earth and tossing it behind him, pale, hairy roots trailing clumps of damp dirt. He scrambled forward on his knees and jerked out the next plant and the next, going down the row. He tore them all out before Olopoto or Heightmeyer or Major Lorne could arrive and then he ground them under the heels of his still uncomfortable shoes, knowing how he looked: red-faced and insane. The air felt too thick around him, filled with the reek of the crushed plants. Gooey white sap smeared across the walkway, mixed with dirt and maroon-colored stains that looked too much like blood. He had dirt under his fingernails.

A botanist—not Parrish—ran out of the nearest building. Even his yelling barely made it through the hazy disconnection between his memories and where he stood. He stared at the ground. The sky was too blue, too far above him, and all that held him in place was gravity. He believed in gravity. Gravity would keep him from coming completely undone. His hands shook.

"What the hell did you do!?"

Rodney pressed his fingertips together, feeling the dirt caught on his skin, trying to remember how to breathe before he fell down. He hadn't done this even once on Selket. He skittered away from the marine's hand out of instinct and careened into the botanist kneeling next to the uprooted plants.

"Watch where you're going, you lunatic!"

"Rodney?" Kate's voice made him look up and he saw her hurrying from B2. The sun glinted off her hair and he realized there were silver threads in the blonde. Major Lorne was with her. They were both walking fast. He thought about running, but you could never get away. If he ran, if they didn't find him, John would pay.

He went down on his knees, pressed his forehead to the dirty walkway, the scent of crushed moa so thick in his throat he didn't know where he was any longer, Selket or Atlantis.

~*~

"How is Rodney?" Weir asked.

John continued into her office and answered as the doors slid shut. The windows were opaque. He'd been cleared to move around the Tower the day before. "Fine," he said.
Weir raised an eyebrow. "I heard about the incident in the green space."

"He has unresolved issues with botanists," John waved his hand as he made the joke. "Katie Brown?"

"I seriously doubt that this had anything to do with Dr. Brown's former relationship with him."

No, it probably didn't, but he had no intention of laying out Rodney's vulnerabilities for Elizabeth, any more than of complaining to Caldwell about the marine who began singing *Don't Stand So Close to Me* in the mess hall when Rodney sat down next to John. He had refused to turn and look to see who it was and tapped code against his plate instead. *Ignore.* Rodney had hunched over his tray and stayed, automatically eating his food, saying nothing. The harassment had been amping up in the last few days and John had no idea what went on when he wasn't with Rodney, but it had probably contributed to his meltdown.

They were just some damn plants. No one had to make a federal case out of it. *Moa* plants. John had practically sprinted from the transporter after Lorne radioed him, then got one breath full of the scent of them, and backed away so fast he'd tripped into Teyla, who had followed him from his new, temporary office with its desk and chair and pile of requisitions forms left by whoever had it before him, sweating and nauseated. She'd guided him away before anyone else saw, he thought, when all he'd been able to gasp out was that he couldn't go out there. Lorne and Kate had dealt with Rodney, which made him feel like a shit.

Elizabeth didn't need to know any of that either.

John shrugged and kept moving to the chair opposite her desk. He sat, pretending to be more comfortable than he was. It still felt unnatural.

"I'm sure Kate can help him deal with it," Elizabeth said. She pushed several papers to the side and opened her laptop. "She sent me a memo."

John raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing violating confidentiality, John," Elizabeth said. She used his name a lot, used everyone's names, personalizing all her interactions in a way he'd always found false. Not that Elizabeth was necessarily lying or cold, but she had a set of tools she used to guide her interactions with everyone. She'd thought them all out or learned them and used them reflexively. She leaned forward now, inviting him to share with her, to respond to her sincerity. "But I am concerned. Kate doesn't think you're ready to lead an offworld team again."

"Is that important?"

"John. I know you. I know you want to get out there again, but Kate says you've been skipping appointments."

"Two." John rolled his eyes. "Look, I won't be in the lead. This mission I'm going on, Captain Liu will be in charge. I'll just be along as a lightswitch. Everything will be fine." He grinned at her and joked, "I'm not sure what else you think I should do. Have Rodney hack Kate's files and tweak my test results?"

"No, of course not." Elizabeth laughs with him. "I'm just eager to have you back in the command staff—"

"You know no one is putting me back in Caldwell's position, right?"
Elizabeth waved her hand. "Yes, it's difficult. But, John, I could really use someone that Colonel Caldwell would listen to on my side. Civilian oversight of this expedition is rapidly becoming, well, a joke. Steven pays lip service to listening to me and that's all."

"Colonel Caldwell ranks me. I'm just a Lieutenant Colonel."

Elizabeth rose and came around her desk to seat herself on the couch next to John underneath those butt ugly masks she'd had hanging on the wall since the second year. The pale upholstery rustled against the fabric of her dark pants. She wore civilian clothes now, instead of the expedition uniform he'd been used to seeing on her, and unconsciously fussed with the sharp crease in her trousers. She still dressed in the expedition colors, however, and the dark red of her silk blouse reminded him of the rich colors and fabrics in the palace. She leaned toward him and instead of shifting away; John went with it, holding still. Her knee touched his and then she took one of his hands.

"John."

Circling his thumb in the soft hollow of her palm came as naturally as breathing, watching her eyes dilate and the delicate color climb from her collarbones to her cheeks. He let his gaze rest on her lips, soft and glossy with color too, knowing that lowering his eyes showed off his own lashes. The tip of her tongue stole out to dab at her top lip. John leaned closer.

"Tell me what you want, hara," he breathed softly, so close his lips grazed her cheek. He smiled as he caught a hint of Chanel #5. Elizabeth liked the classics.

"John," she said again. Her other hand was in his hair, fingers combing through it, nails scraping against his scalp in a way that made him shiver.

He kept up the caress of her palm with one hand, feeling her shudder in response, and slipped his other to her waist, tugging the tails of her blouse up and then slipping under it. The silk felt cool in contrast to the heat of her bare skin. A lace and satin bra cupped her breasts. He rasped the lace down over one nipple with his thumb. It tightened immediately and Elizabeth gasped. She practically vibrated under his hand. John smiled. It would be easy to please her. She had no idea at all of the things he knew how to do now.

He let go of her hand, reached for the button on her pants, and stopped.

What the hell was he doing?

With a jolt he understood he'd been doing exactly what Rodney accused him of doing, but he didn't have to with Elizabeth.

He straightened her bra and withdrew his hand, then slid himself to the other end of the couch, out of reach. He kept his movements easy and not too fast, not startling her with his withdrawal, and they ended looking at each other. Masks fell back into place.

"Well," Elizabeth said.

"I'm sorry," John told her.

She cocked her head. Her color remained high, but nothing else betrayed her. "I think that's my line, actually. That wasn't something you really wanted to do, was it?"

"I—"

One hand came up, silently stopping him. "Please, let's not utterly destroy my ego. Kate's right. You
aren't ready for this. Pushing you is unfair under the circumstances. But I do want you here. You're a part of Atlantis and we need you. I need you." She reached over and patted his hand like a maiden aunt, then nodded toward the door. "We'd better get that open before the rumors start flying. In fact," she checked her watch, "I have a meeting with Professor Brun in fifteen minutes."

John got to his feet. "I'll go then."

Elizabeth smiled at him, but he couldn't read anything from it. "Get better soon," she told him. "I need my old friend back." Old ally, he heard.

~*~

Rodney accepted the sedative Kate administered without protest and used that good will to persuade her to leave him in his quarters. He keyed the lock against everyone but Sheppard the instant the door slid shut and appreciated doors again for the first time. His hands itched and prickled with the dirt dried into his skin and the urge to hit something—someone—maybe Lorne for his don't-upset-the-crazy-man voice and look. He'd certainly cemented his reputation as a lunatic. The story would spread through Atlantis faster than a flu bug.

His breath sawed in and out, hard and harsh. Adrenaline still had his muscles trembling.

The dirt would come out and the scent of the moa. He needed to wash.

He stepped into the washroom and started the water running in the square, deep basin. Set the temperature hotter than usual and fumbled for the bar of cheap, institutional soap he'd been issued by the quartermaster. It took work to make it foam and he scrubbed at his hands hard.

The first pass left hints of dirt still in the lines of his palms, at the joints of his fingers and under his nails still. Rodney hissed in frustration and began washing them again. The hot water began to sting. He used more soap, producing an anemic foam. He kept at it, punishing his hands, digging at his nails, and became aware his mouth was working, muttered words lost under the rush of water.

"Bastards, bastards, get off, shit, god damn it, just leave me alone, hate this, hate, bastard, stupid, idiotic, brain dead, selfish, damned..." He didn't even know who he was cursing. His hands began to shake and he fumbled the soap, but he could still see dark lines under his short clipped nails, dark as dirt, dark as blood. He grabbed up the bar again and dug his nails into furiously.

He hunched over the sink and kept his eyes down, looking at his hands and not his flushed, sweating face. The soap foam went from light brown to white and then pink-tinged and his hands ached before his litany petered away. The skin had turned bright red and almost puffy. Dots of blood bloomed at his cuticles.

Rodney stared at them then dried his hands carefully. "Stupid," he said again and this time did mean himself.

Whatever Kate had given him had finally kicked in or he was too exhausted to go on being angry. He walked back into the main room, fumbled off his shoes, wrinkling his nose at the stains and scent that clung to them, and flopped face down onto his bed. He didn't really sleep, but wasn't awake either, lingering on the edge of sleep.

Snapping awake hours later, the light gone heavy and sepia-gold, Rodney levered himself off the bed and finally finished cleaning up. He started with the damned shoes, stripped off his sweaty clothes and even stripped the bed. Showered and in his sweats and bathrobe, he pushed the bed to the side of the room, baring the floor. The box came out of his locker and he pulled out the paints.
He chose the colors to match the room, different than he would have used in the palace, turquoise and teal green, jade black and aquamarine, and knelt at the center of the floor, laying out the pattern of glyphs on the smooth surface from there, spiraling outward so that nothing smudged. He used his own idiosyncratic mixture of mathematics, Ancient and Selketi and finished as the light went, turning colorless so that he knew the sun had set.

"I don't know if Ronon made the rendezvous on Faeatua or not," Teyla said. The bantos sticks sliced through the air toward John. He shifted his weight and blocked both with one of his. They'd stretched together and done one open-handed kata before Teyla decided he was ready to work with the sticks again. The impact shivered down the bones of his forearm, but he held for the instant it took for her weight to come to rest against the sticks, then whirled away, attacking while she was off balance.

"Kind of got distracted, didn't you?" John replied.

Teyla blocked him and laughed. The stained glass of the work out room burnished her skin to the hue of tarnished copper and shone bright in her hair. They were both working barefoot and the stamp and thud of heel and toe, the whistle of their breath, provided the only counterpoint to the swish and clack of the sticks. John grinned back at her. These workouts were when he felt most like he belonged back in Atlantis again.

They circled each other, moving from shadow to light. A light sheen of sweat made Teyla gleam, while John's T-shirt stuck to his back and his hair—too long, he realized, completely past even the loosest interpretation of regs—stuck to his temples and the back of his neck. Teyla gave her sticks a showy twirl, while her mouth curved in a wicked taunt. John didn't let himself be drawn. He watched her eyes and her feet and her hands, not the sticks. The sticks moved when Teyla moved, not vice versa.

Teyla went low and John brought his left stick into place vertically and spun through a series of attacks and defenses, trading between attacking and blocking, the spar becoming a dance, the rhythm steady even as they sped and slowed, parted and returned. Like flying, he could lose himself in it and become a body and a set of reflexes and responses, so that everything outside his focus dissolved away, past and future irrelevant to the exertion of muscle and instinct and training, the pleasure of making his body his own.

By mutual decision they brought the spar to its end, sticks at their sides, just within arm's reach of each other. Teyla switched both sticks into one hand and tugged her top straight unselfconsciously where it had twisted to the side. John pulled his T-shirt free from his skin.

"Thanks," he said between deep breaths.

Teyla nodded and went to the side of the room, where their gear rested on a plain bench. She set her sticks down and fished out a towel, using it to wipe her face, then her throat and the back of her neck.

John stretched for a moment, then joined her as she brought out a bottle of water, offering it to him.

When he'd taken a long swallow and toweled himself off too, Teyla caught his wrists in her hands and drew him close. John dipped his head and bent enough to rest his forehead against hers. They remained in place, breathing slowly for much longer than usual. Teyla's hands slipped from his wrists to lace her fingers through his, both still faintly sweat damp, her calluses scraping against still smooth skin.
He'd earn his calluses back, he decided, all of them.

"You're still better than me," he said.

Teyla let go but gave his hand a slight, consoling pat. "That is as it should be," she said, startling another laugh from John.

"So, you figure you know where to meet up with Ronon to give him the news?"

"Yes."

Something in her voice made John still. Her shoulders were stiff as she turned away, tucking gear back away in her bag, preparatory to heading for a shower and dinner.

"Teyla?" he asked.

She turned toward him. "I have thought that perhaps, now that you and Rodney have returned…"

"What?"

"I might leave Atlantis."

"You want to go back to your people?" John wracked his brain for the name they'd given the world Athosians had been relocated to by the Ancients from the Tria. Most of them had been happy there and stayed, preferring having access to their own stargate to being beholden to Atlantis. He hadn't blamed them. However much goodwill they had toward each other, the Athosians and the Atlantis expedition had misunderstood each other just as often as not. Athosia, Athosinia, New Athos? John's lips quirked into a smile. Porthos, Aramis, D'Artagnan? Then his smile faded. Their team had been like the four musketeers, one for all and all for one, but he supposed that time had passed. Ronon had already gone and Ford before him. He couldn't ask Teyla to stay just for himself and Rodney. "You should do what makes you happiest."

"Perhaps I will go there for a time, but I do not belong there any more than I do here," Teyla said. "I doubt any of us would be very happy there for long."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It is not your fault."

"But I know about not fitting anywhere anymore." He changed the subject. He'd never fit on Earth. Atlantis had been where he fitted. But not now. "I'll miss you. I, uh, I missed you the whole time we were gone, you know? Now you're going to go…"

"I am not leaving tomorrow," Teyla told him.

"I guess I'll get used to the idea." He ducked his head. "So, what would you do?"

Teyla sighed. "Perhaps trade. Exploration. I have learned much here, ways that even the simplest villages and peoples may use to safeguard themselves from the Wraith." She zipped the gym bag and slung it over her shoulder. "Things that have been lost in cullings that can make life so much better. I could be a teacher."

"You are a teacher," John said. "A good one." He held up his bantos sticks. "What you taught me… kept me sane. You and Rodney. Ronon too." When he'd thought he couldn't stand another day in the palace, he'd remembered Ronon's seven years alone on the run and been shamed. When he'd thought
they were dead, the best way he could honor them had been to stay alive.

He folded his towel and stuffed it in his bag. "You aren't really happy here, are you?" he asked without looking up.

"The city has changed," Teyla said.

He followed her out the doors, reluctantly agreeing. His steps slowed as he noticed a marine loitering by the transporter. Olopoto had said Colonel Caldwell had pulled their escorts, but John knew he'd seen the man more than once before. Teyla kept walking, but he saw her back tense.

"If it isn't Teyla," the marine drawled. "Ms. Emmagen."

"Corporal Garner."

John let his gym bag drop off his shoulder and swing from the strap in his hand. There wasn't much in it, his shoes and the towel, but the bantos sticks were hard and weighted. It would make a good ad hoc weapon. "Corporal," he said. Something clicked. He'd seen this guy before, more than once.

"And Lieutenant Colonel Sheppard," Garner replied, a suggestive sneer in his voice. "You get around. Appointments with Director Weir and Ms. Emmagen here."

He'd forgotten just how fast rumor could fly on a base. How many rumors there had been about him and Weir or him and Teyla the first and second years. But none of the marines then had dared look over Teyla the way this one did, not even Bates. Bates had certainly never leered at John.

Garner hit the transporter sensor, making John wince. They didn't require contact; the sensors were calibrated to pick up movement. The door slid open and Garner stepped inside. "Going my way… sir?" he asked with a gesture to join him in the transporter's tight confines.

"I don't think so," John said.

"Ms. Emmagen?"

"No," Teyla told him.

Garner laughed and waved his hand. The doors shut.

"Jesus," John said.

"He is the worst of them," Teyla said.

"Does Colonel Caldwell know—"

"I see no point in complaining. He doesn't—" Teyla sighed. "He is 'all talk'."

"It looked to me like he was harassing you."

"I've learned to ignore it."

"You shouldn't have to," John said. He waved his hand at the sensor and the transporter opened again. Thankfully empty. Teyla stepped in beside him, relaxing minutely. John touched the designation for the hub nearest his and Rodney's quarters and there was a flicker, then the door opened.

He hesitated before stepping out.
"You wouldn't leave without telling me, would you?" he asked, knowing it was stupid, but too many people had just disappeared from his life, beginning with his mother, for him to take anyone for granted. "I'm supposed to go offworld with Liu's team day after tomorrow." He'd rather have gone out with Cadman or Lorne, but Caldwell probably, rightly, thought they'd both be too inclined to follow John if he started giving orders.

"Never," Teyla promised.

"You think I'm ready?"

"I think you will be fine."

He read the sincerity on her face and relaxed a little. "You and Rodney." He grimaced, hoping Garner wouldn't be part of the team tomorrow, which brought him back to the way the guy had been dogging Teyla. "Hey, you'd tell me if this Garner guy was really a problem? Right?" He really had seen the marine around, in the mess and the corridors, felt him watching, overheard him and too many others talking, so that his skin crawled with flashbacks to Umard. He needed to know for himself and not just Teyla's sake. It wasn't paranoia.

"He is not."

"Okay," he said. "Okay. I—I'm going to check on Rodney. The thing with the plants…" He shuddered, imagining he could smell moa in the confines of the transporter.

"Go," Teyla told him.

John searched her face for what she really felt and found only affection and approval. "I know most Athosians don't really approve of, you know…" He couldn't quite say it; bit his lip, then forced out the words. She'd seen him with Rodney on Faeatua, though, so he could say it. "Guys being together."

"I do not care," Teyla said. "Go to him."


"John."

"Yeah?"

"Go," Teyla said again and the transporter doors closed. John blinked at them, then spun on his heel, realized he'd never put his shoes back on and laughed, heading down the corridor to his own door. He needed a shower before anything else. Then he'd see Rodney and make sure he was okay.

He swiped his hand in front of the door sensor, then tapped in the code to unlock it on the small pad that reminded him of the gate dialing console in a jumper done in miniature. The numbers were in Ancient, but he was more used to that than Arabic numerals after so many years in Pegasus. Nearly every world used some variation of Alteran numerics. He didn't even think in base ten anymore.

The scent hit him the instant he stepped inside the room. He choked on it and dropped his gym bag, lurching back. His bare heel skidded on one leaf as he scrambled back out of his quarters until he hit the corridor wall opposite his door. Next he had his fingers wound tight in Rodney's science uniform shirt, Rodney murmuring words to drown out the embarrassing keen of distress he was making against Rodney's throat. Rodney's voice filled the room—Rodney's room—hoarse and worried. His hands moved over John's back and his
arms, chasing away the shakes running through him, absorbing them into his own solid body, the only warm, real thing in John's universe. He didn't remember getting there or how long he'd been latched onto Rodney, but he couldn't let go.

"Zelenka's theories are worthless, of course, but still within the realms of physics and not some magical dimension where wishing makes it so—"

John breathed in his scent, laundry soap and sweat and Rodney. He gulped and tried to be quiet, listening to the soothing litany of Rodney's scorn, still trembling.

"—materials aren't really the problem. It's safety. Atlantis is too fragile—"

The shakes didn't stop. He tried to stiffen his muscles against them, but part of him still tasted the thick scent of the moa leaves at the back of his throat. It threw him back into the cell, agony tearing through every nerve ending, screaming and alone and in hell forever; on and on while everything he was burned from the inside out. He'd been nothing but pain and he was nothing now, clinging to Rodney because Rodney made him more than brittle ashes.

He whimpered and tried to crawl even closer, to get away from the memory. Rodney's arms tightened around him. "Sh, sh. It's maintaining control of the subspace tap that's the sticking point. If the power skips or even drops below threshold, the shielding collapses and the explosion would look like, well, a lot like Doranda," he went on. By the sound of his voice, he'd been talking a long time. "No one wants that. We've got the materials, but the risks…"

The hand on his back kept up steady, comforting strokes up and down John's spine. Rodney cradled John's head with his other, fingers gentle on his scalp. He managed to rearrange his position on the floor without shifting John away from him, until they were propped against the side of his bed, John curled between his legs. He let go long enough to snag a blanket off the bed and drag it off, then wrap it around John, as if the quivers running through him had anything to do with cold. "Easy," he murmured, "You're okay, I'm okay, nothing else matters." A soft chuff of ironic laughter stirred John's hair, warm breath and the smell of peppermint toothpaste. "And I thought I had a bad day."

John breathed him in and managed to finally regain some control. His face heated with embarrassment. Rodney's neck and the collar of his shirt were wet. Another sob caught in his throat, but he fought it down. He finally let loose of Rodney's shirt and his fingers were stiff from gripping it so hard. He left his hands flattened on Rodney's chest, though, trapped between them, concentrating on the feel of his breathing steadily, imagining the beat of his heart, letting his own pulse slow to match Rodney's.

"Talking now?" Rodney asked. He shifted again, awkwardly, and John felt guilty. Having a grown man in a fetal position on his lap couldn't be comfortable, especially with Rodney's back.

John shook his head.

"Okay," Rodney said and started talking about charging ZPMs again. He held on without complaint until John slowly relaxed enough to uncurl, though he still leaned into Rodney, unwilling to give up the contact. He shuddered periodically, as phantom pain ran through him, unreal but still terrifying.

"Sorry," he mumbled into Rodney's collar. His voice rasped, barely there, his throat still tight. He felt Rodney's nod above him. Rodney stroked his hair. It unwound the coiled up things in John's chest. He sighed and went limp, floating in the aftermath of his panic attack, exhausted.

"Better?" Rodney asked.
"Better," John slurred. He shifted enough to wrap his arms around Rodney. The blanket over his shoulders felt warm. He wanted to go to sleep.

"I'm kind of losing feeling in my ass here."

Rodney didn't move, though. John pressed closer for an instant, then forced himself to let go. Not completely. When he slid away, he caught hold of Rodney's hand and held onto it. He couldn't make himself look up into Rodney's face. The blanket slipped off his shoulders as Rodney levered himself to his feet, half bent over because John wouldn't let go. Reluctantly, John allowed himself to be dragged to his feet, too, and stood, swaying and lightheaded once he was.

He blinked down at the floor and realized for the first time that Rodney had shoved his bed and desk against the wall and the open space held a painted design in a dozen colors, glyphs and Ancient intricately knotted together, unmistakably Rodney's work. "Oh," he murmured, amazed and dizzy.

Rodney flushed pink. "Let's just not talk about that, okay?"

John nodded and let himself be tugged to the bed and down, wrapped in Rodney's arms again, legs tangled together, back safely to the wall. When they'd settled and he had his head on Rodney's chest, the words finally came.

"There's moa all over my quarters."

Rodney tensed. "What?"

"Leaves, dirt, I—I—"

"How, no, why? Why would anyone... You heard about this afternoon," Rodney's voice went flat. "Someone guessed it would freak you out too."

John nodded. His head had cleared and he remembered stepping inside his quarters before he registered the invasion. A crushed leaf had stuck to his foot and he'd scrubbed it off against the floor frantically, panic rising like the high, thin sound that had caught in his throat. He hadn't been able to breathe.

He'd stared around the room. Broken and torn moa leaves had been scattered over his bed and the floor, little dustings of dirt among them, barely visible in the dimness. He hadn't needed to see them, with the scent rising smothering strong in the closed room. One step back and he'd had made himself look away from the scattered leaves to the lock next to the door. He hadn't been paying attention before. Looking closely this time, he'd spotted the faint marks where the panel had been pried open and a crystal bridged, short circuiting the lock to open it, amateur hour compared to the tricks Rodney had shown him over the years, but sufficient to force the door open. He'd fought to catch his breath, pushing down the impulse to run blindly or choke and throw up, and then he'd broken and bolted.

John clenched his jaw. Motherfucker. So someone had seen how he reacted when he saw Rodney and the moa plants. They must have thought it would be a good joke, cleaning up the ruined plants and dumping them in his room.

"Bastards," Rodney declared. "Bastards."

"I can't—"

"Teyla will help clean it up in the morning," Rodney promised. "You can stay here until then. It doesn't matter what anyone thinks."
Right then, John didn't care.

~*~

Any appointment in the Tower meant using the transporters, at least, so Rodney arrived at the
gateroom floor only minutes after Elizabeth radioed him, went up the stairs, and then over the
catwalk from the control room to Elizabeth's office.

John had been glued to him all night, and been there, sweaty and still asleep, eyes moving fast under
the thin barrier of his lids, dreaming, when Rodney woke from his own nightmares. John had stayed
inside his space all morning and Rodney hadn't had the heart to push him away, no matter how much
he thought John would regret the display later. He'd needed the contact, too.

It seemed unfair that they'd dreamed of Atlantis on Selket, beautiful dreams that had hurt so much
when they woke, and now that they were back, sleep held only twisted renditions of Selket and even
older wounds. Holland, John muttered in his sleep. Come on, we'll make it. Don't give up. Every day
It became harder than ever to pretend to be all right. He wasn't and John wasn't and they couldn't just
let go of what had happened the way everyone but Teyla expected them to do.

The day before had felt like a breaking point. Rodney had no intention of explaining any of that to
Elizabeth, not after John had appeared at his door and then wordlessly fallen apart, shattered by a
filthy practical joke. Teyla had disposed of the wilted moa leaves with a frown while Rodney fetched
a set of clothing for John from his room that morning, before they went to the mess hall for breakfast,
ignoring the curious and avid who watched them eat, but Teyla couldn't protect them from everyone
in Atlantis; she was messed up too.

They'd finally parted, nervously, after breakfast, John for his temporary 'office' and Rodney to run
more simulations in Zelenka's lab. Zelenka hadn't actually been there, caught up in one of the
interminable morning command staff meetings Rodney didn't miss in any way.

The doors slid open for him before he could knock. Elizabeth looked up from her laptop screen with
a frown. "I'd forgotten how irritating that is," she commented.

"I'll try to walk slower," Rodney offered. He ducked his head, stifled the impulse to kneel and beg
her forgiveness for transgressing. He kept his expression bland.

Elizabeth smiled and waved for him to sit down. She switched her attention back to the laptop and
typed in a series of swift commands. "Something came in the databurst for you," she said.

Rodney relaxed a minute amount. Maybe she hadn't asked him up here to explain why he'd attacked
and destroyed a decorative planting. Not that he couldn't. As far as he was a concerned, moa plants
were about as decorative as a display of torture implements from the Inquisition.

He bit the inside of his cheek. Nothing was fair; he knew that. He braced himself for whatever
Elizabeth had brought him to the Tower to hear.

Elizabeth turned her laptop so the screen faced Rodney.

"Go ahead," she said, gesturing to the keyboard, "start it."

Rodney leaned forward and started the playback on a video file. Jeannie's face resolved onto the
screen, obviously sitting within her own living room. Rodney recognized the truly awful couch and
the picture window, as well as some pictures of Madison ad Kaleb on side table. "Rodney," Jeannie
said. 'If I could get my hands on you, I would crack you over the head. I thought you were dead for
the last year and a half—"

Rodney hit pause and looked at Elizabeth.

"We didn't inform your sister you were missing for six months," Elizabeth admitted. "I still hoped you and John would show up eventually, the way Teyla and Ronon did."

"Oh."

"But after the search was discontinued, sending notification that you were MIA was SOP, given that Jeannie already had Pegasus level clearances." Elizabeth blushed. "I'm afraid the SGC tried to recruit her again at the time."

He couldn't really connect to the idea of Jeannie or Earth, SOP, the SGC, that life. Frozen on the screen, Jeannie looked like a stranger. The Selketti would be fascinated by her blonde looks. She would be popular in a flower house. He coughed, hiding a gag at the thought. Elizabeth was looking at him, expecting a response. "I bet that went over like depleted uranium balloon," Rodney remarked.

Elizabeth laughed and rubbed her cheeks that had gone pink. "That would be describing it kindly. She threw a pot of spaghetti sauce on Colonel Mitchell."

"I hope someone got pictures," Rodney said immediately. He'd never let go of the grudge he had toward that lemon-threatening Neanderthal.

"It's become a rather legendary story at the Mountain, I understand."

Rodney looked back at Jeannie's image, stopped in mid-rant with her mouth open. "I suppose you and the SGC have viewed this?"

"Yes."

"Then would you mind if I watched it in private?"

"I'm sorry, of course, I just thought how much you would enjoy hearing and seeing her after so long," Elizabeth said quickly. "I suppose I was selfish, wanting to share that with you." She busied herself for a moment, then handed Rodney a flashdrive. "There are some reports and papers in there courtesy of Colonel Carter as well, to help you get up to speed again, she said."

Rodney closed his fingers around the drive. "She must be desperate," he said.

"Rodney!"

"Well, she's never been nice before," he noted, "so it's that or she feels sorry for—Oh."

Elizabeth's silence filled him in.

He held up the flashdrive. "I'm going to go listen to Jeannie yell someplace private. I'll probably be lucky if she doesn't throw something worse than spaghetti at me the next time I see her. Raw sewage, probably. Or Tofu."

"She's very relieved you're alive," Elizabeth said. Then she cocked her head. "Are you considering returning to Earth?"

"Of course she is," he replied as he rose to his feet, then he hesitated. "What? Earth? I hadn't—but it might be nice. To see Jeannie and Madison." He rolled his eyes. "Kaleb too, I suppose." Inside, he
cringed at the thought. Crowds of strangers, more examinations and evaluations at the SGC, and then outside it. Nothing to anchor him at all, just endless expansion into emptiness until he dissolved. Anything he said to anyone about his life for the last two years—the last decade—would make him sound insane. He hated the idea.

"Well, it is something to think about," Elizabeth said.

Rodney frowned at her, sensing she meant more than she was saying, only he couldn't figure it out. Did she want him to go back to Earth or was she angling for him to stay? He decided he didn't care. It would become clear sooner or later, he didn't need to waste his time on it. He slid his thumb over the flashdrive. John would enjoy listening to Jeannie shout and threaten him. They'd liked each other when they met. "I'll just go. Now, uh, if you don't mind?"

He needed to make sure John was okay, anyway. He needed to be with John. John understood. John gave him what he needed, whatever he needed, and he did the same for John.

They didn't need anyone else.

"Go on," Elizabeth told him.

Rodney bowed without thinking about it, winced, and left before he could embarrass himself further. He set the transporter to the hub nearest John's temporary office. John would have his laptop with him. They could watch Jeannie's message on it. He ducked to the side of the corridor as three marine lieutenants passed him, keeping his head down, and heard their laughter behind him. Idiots and morons. Ten minutes on his laptop and he could make sure their lives were miserable. If he really hated them, he could design a worm that would modify their OERs after Caldwell made them, tanking their careers with a few carefully changed words. Anything less than hyperbole implied a problem in the military John had explained to him once. That's so stupid, Rodney had exclaimed only to have John nod and say stupid but true. He'd hacked John's records later and 'improved' Caldwell and Landry's evaluations. He'd thought about telling John that and then just as carefully reverted the records to their original state.

John's office door was open. He sat on the floor, propped against the wall under an open window. His bare feet were tucked under him and he looked about fourteen, with his dark hair hanging over his eyes. Part of it was the lack of even a hint of beard, part of it the way his uniform fit his lean body too loosely. He looked up as Rodney came in and toed off his shoes, wide-eyed and skittish until he recognized Rodney and smiled without artifice.

"Lunch already?"

"Not yet." Rodney held up the flashdrive. "Elizabeth just gave me this. It's video from Jeannie. Want to watch it with me?" He had already settled himself beside John. John held out his hand for the flashdrive. Rodney held onto it.

"This should be fun," John said. He closed out the blank form he had obviously not been filling in. "More fun that writing reports anyway."

Rodney bumped his shoulder. "You're going to have to write it eventually."

"I know."

"It isn't like you don't know how to, ah, discreetly gloss over certain things." That was a skill every SG or Atlantis offworld team learned swiftly. John had been a master at it. "Here, give me the laptop."
"It's my laptop."

"It my message."

"Which you could watch on your own laptop." John smirked at him. "I need to read Liu's mission briefing."

"Like you haven't read it six times already." Rodney rolled his eyes. "You're ready."

"Are you sure?" John asked. Unspoken memory of the night before between them and Rodney didn't know if John really was ready, but he knew what John needed to hear, because anything else would tear him apart.

"Yes."

"Okay. Give me that."

"Fine, here." Rodney started to give him the flashdrive. John smiled sweetly and pushed the laptop into Rodney's lap. "You're a jackass, you know that?" Rodney told him as he cued up the message after a quick browse through the index of other files. Carter had included a lot of information. It looked like everything the SGC had come up with for the last two years.

John leaned in closer to him, until they were thigh to thigh. "Yeah, so what?"

"Also, you're about as mature as my niece." He started the message again, propped the laptop between them and braced one hand on John's shoulder. John ducked his head. Jeannie's voice played from the laptop's speakers, tinny and more than a little strident, telling him about Madison and Kaleb and spearing heading a class action lawsuit against the USAF, of trying to steer people who weren't muzzled by the Official Secrets Act in the UK or muzzled by nondisclosure agreements in the US to declassify and reveal at least part of what the Stargate Program had discovered over the last decade. She finished with, "—you have to come stay with us, and Colonel Sheppard too, provided you haven't driven him stark staring mad after two years." John's shoulder shook under Rodney's hand as he laughed.

Rodney reached over and paused the message again, then bent closer and murmured, "Can you imagine her expression when we want to sleep in the same room?"

John snorted, inelegant and unguarded. Rodney nudged him and added, "She'd be happy." John's smile was his reward. Rodney smiled back at him, imagining it, the two of them sitting in Jeannie's kitchen, sunshine bright on her yellow table, the way Jeannie's mouth would drop open and then she'd shriek like a banshee before demanding the sort of personal details that would make Rodney shout back at her and John blush. A hiccup of laughter escaped him as John bent toward the screen, bowing his head so his hair hid his expression and his flushed cheeks.

Rodney tucked a lock behind John's ear so he could see him better.

John looked first as faint noise came from the doorway. Rodney followed his gaze.

Caldwell stood in the open doorway, disapproval radiating from him.

"The door was open."

Rodney felt John retreat into expressionlessness, exactly the way he did, falling into the patient head space of a slave waiting for a command, even as John answered, "Yeah, I keep forgetting about doors." Both of them kept forgetting that freedom meant closed doors and secrets, all their choices
become all their responsibilities. On Selket, everyone had known what they were, what they did, there were no doors, only seven walls and seven gates, fortress and palace, swallowed whole. He let his hands slip from John's hair back to his shoulder and stay there, silently offering his support, while wondering what had brought Caldwell there.

They waited, the silence settling around them, still as the pool of warm light falling on the floor from the window. They could both wait for hours without moving. That patience bothered Caldwell apparently. He broke first.

"I need your report."

"Well, I'm having a little trouble squeezing two year's worth of time into one mission report."

"Do the best you can."

John sighed. "I know. It's supposed to help me." The muscle under Rodney's hand tensed. Kate had asked if Rodney knew where John went when he skipped their sessions. Rodney had said he didn't know. Someplace outside, instinct told him. John wasn't a verbal creature, didn't like routine. He hated to be pushed, the way Kate pushed for answers and Caldwell was pushing now.

"No, it's standard procedure," Caldwell said, looking baffled.

John relaxed and laughed, tipped his head back against the wall and just went with it, his amusement spreading even to Caldwell. "Of all the stupid, mindless, military…" John coughed. "Everything I used to hate. God, I've missed you guys," John finished.

Rodney saw Caldwell's mouth tip up.

"Sheppard. Get a haircut."

"Yes, Sir."²

Caldwell left after giving Rodney another fish-eyed look.

"Okay?" Rodney asked after the door shut behind the military commander of Atlantis.

John hiccuped and nodded. "Yeah. I just—standard operating procedure." His laughter sounded more bitter than amused now, the glimpse of happiness draining away from him alarmingly fast. "He wants to know it all. You know, nothing less than every fucking detail—" John stopped, drew in an unsteady breath and then turned to Rodney. "—every fucking detail," he repeated. "Like a description of every fuck is going to make him happy. He wants to know."

He bent his head to the laptop and exited the audio/video player.

"So, screw him," John declared. "Screw Colonel SOP Caldwell and the Air Force while I'm at it." He opened the report form for the AAR. "They want to know, they can know it all. Then they can throw me out and we'll go camp in your sister's guest bedroom."

He began typing, hunting and pecking over the keyboard.

Rodney settled closer to him and stayed while he worked, filling it all in, their capture, their sale, the first escape attempt and the moa. He rubbed John's back and then hid his face against John's neck when he couldn't bear reading it over his shoulder any longer. There were things that happened in the flower house that Rodney had never known. He wished he hadn't read the words describing them. He couldn't read the words John wrote without knowing John could never be the same. John
had never told him any of it, but he spelled it out in the report; systematic breakdown using isolation and threats, drugs and conditioning. Rodney wished he could go back and make Dullah and every other trainer who had used John pay for the humiliation and the methodical destruction of the man he'd known. Practice and experience, John typed, technique, variation, and described receiving all of it in the flower house training rooms. A litany of things he'd never done with Rodney. A litany of things Rodney knew John had never wanted to do and that the trainers had made him beg them for. It took hours for John to write all out. He stopped once after typing: I didn't know where McKay was or if he was alive until they left me in his room.

"John," Rodney said.

"I would have killed myself eventually," John stated flatly. Without you. Before the Haralim even had a chance to grow tired of him.

That was why the Selketi had kept them together.

John drew in a slow, deep breath and began typing again. He described the training and then what the Haralim and the Rale had done with him. All of it, days and weeks and months turning into years and every word cried out, This is what happened while you gave up and left us to the mercy of fate. This is what happened to me. This is what you made me, too.

This is the truth and I do not apologize.

Rodney read it all.

~*~

John hit send at four in the morning. His hand shook. He stared at the Message Sent indicator and his eyes burned. Finally, he closed the laptop and looked up.

Rodney had insisted they come back to John's quarters sometime during the evening. John didn't even remember the walk, just sitting back down at his desk once they arrived. He was such a mess he hadn't remembered the moa leaves until they were already inside, but there had been no sign of them left. The cover of his bed had been replaced and one of Teyla's meditation candles had burned down to a puddle of reddish wax in a shallow bowl, leaving behind only the heady perfume of Athosian starflowers. He'd continued writing until he finished the report. He included every excruciating thing, from their part in the plot that took Keder and Besma's heads to Dalal. He described everything he'd learned in the flower house and everything that had been done to him, every act he'd participated in as a slave, every way Selket had twisted him into a stranger to himself.

He knew Caldwell would say he was compromised. John wouldn't argue it.

He'd figured out something important writing the report. He couldn't go back, not to the past, not to any kind of life he'd had before, so he had to go forward. Just like Teyla meant to do. He'd just needed something to go forward toward, but he had that too: Rodney.

Rodney was sitting up on his bed, watching him, eyes tired; shoulders slumped, wrapped in his blue bathrobe. Sometime during the evening he'd brought John dinner and eaten his own, even gone to his own quarters and returned with clothes and other items for the next day. John had been aware of him coming and going, even consumed a sandwich one-handed, but barely registered it, caught in a welter of memories he'd been pretending didn't exist for the last three weeks.

"Done?" he asked.
John nodded.

He stripped without another word, leaving the pieces of his uniform folded on the desk chair, walked over to the bed and set his palm along the rough plane of Rodney's cheek. Rodney covered John's hand with his and just held it there. His eyes closed, lashes fluttering. John stood still, taking him in, from the soft ruffled brown hair to the slope of his nose to the mouth that drooped on one side with weariness. All of it made John ache inside.

When Rodney's eyes opened again, he turned his head, still holding onto John's hand, and kissed it. Kissed John's fingertips, lips barely touching the pads, then tiny, painfully gentle kisses pressed to the joints, a chaste touch to the back of his hand, before Rodney turned it and kissed his palm. John was panting and hard by then. He shuddered as Rodney kissed the inside of his wrist, exactly where the manacle had been.

"Let me," he said, his voice gone hoarse and hungry. Starving, he thought, he was _starving_ for this, for Rodney, and he could never find the words for that, only hope Rodney heard it in the words he did have. That Rodney knew why looking at him almost hurt, but John still wanted to do it every day. "Let me touch you, let me, I need something, I can make it good. Please."

"You don't have to—"

John climbed onto the bed and pushed Rodney down, hands flattened on his wide shoulders, pushing at the robe to open it. His cock was already so hard he hurt and touching Rodney only made it better and worse. The desperate compulsion to make Rodney feel what he was feeling, to make him sweat and arch and come made John's head swim at the same time he wanted to push and fuck and _take._

He bent and kissed Rodney's sternum, working his way up to Rodney's neck, licking and biting, sucking at the notch between his collarbones, stopping to rub his cheek against Rodney's throat, feeling him swallow. He moaned as Rodney's hands threaded through his hair; those big, big, clever hands on both sides of his head, thumbs at his temples, urging him upward, but never forcing, so that something shuddered deep in his belly and his cock got even harder. John lowered himself to cover as much of Rodney as he could, writhing against him while sharing a kiss, sucking on his tongue and forgetting to breathe. Groaning into Rodney's mouth, he frantically ground his hips forward against Rodney, letting him feel how hard he was, how desperately he wanted, the tip of his cock wet with it.

The terry bathrobe dragged against his erection, nearly tipping him over the edge and he had to jerk his hips back or come. "If you don't get this robe off," he panted, lips brushing across Rodney's with each word, "I'm going to come all over it."

"Hey, I like this robe," Rodney protested.

John couldn't resist rubbing himself against it again, feeling the welcoming bulk of Rodney's body beneath and a cock as hard as his own under the folds. That felt...John whimpered and rubbed himself just there, the terrycloth dragging between the head of his cock and Rodney's. He heard himself moan and didn't care. No way to lie; it had been weeks, this wasn't drugs or proximity, even if it was desperation; this was what he wanted: another man, this man, not anyone else. He'd wanted to fuck Rodney, but there was no way he was going to last, it was already too good, every nerve in his body sparkling with pleasure instead of pain.

Rodney shed the robe with gratifying speed, his hands coming to rest on John's hip and ass afterward, smoothing over his skin. His thighs parted so that they both slid together. John's cock rubbed against Rodney's, all slick and hard and hot. He'd never known how fucking good that was,
how much he'd like it, the feel of another man against him. He didn't bother with finesse, no drawn out foreplay and teasing. He propped himself high enough to get his hand between them, finding Rodney's cock and stroking it and his together, fast and harsh. Rodney let out a pleased sounding groan. John worked his hand over them, twisting in just the right place to catch the best spot, just under the head of his cock and then Rodney's, his breath hitching in his chest each time. Rodney's hand slipped between his legs and closed lightly on his balls, tumbling them between his fingers. The sensation rolled over him until his eyes squeezed shut and he came in hard shudders, painting Rodney's chest with semen. He kept stroking and squeezing Rodney through his climax, come slipping warm and wet between his fingers, unable to completely forget his training.

Rodney came a breath later, gasping as his cock jerked and swelled in John's hand, his entire body going taut and then bucking up, come spattering over his belly and John's hand. John held his gaze, unable to look away from the way Rodney's eyes went wide and glazed with pleasure, glorying in the satisfaction of drawing a long, guttural groan from his slack mouth. It didn't matter if the jolt of pleasure he felt himself at making Rodney come came from Dullah's training.

John rolled onto his side next to Rodney, then plastered himself as close as possible and wrapped his hand around Rodney's softening cock again. He petted it absentmindedly while Rodney sucked in air, little twitches running through his body. They were both a sweaty mess. John leaned a little closer and licked Rodney's shoulder, tasting Rodney, salt-sweet and a fading hint of spice. Moving up, he kissed Rodney's shoulder before sucking lightly at the base of his throat, floating in a haze of happy post-coital languor.

Rodney batted at him lightly. "Vampire."

John blew a raspberry against Rodney's Adam's apple.

"Gaaah, stop," Rodney exclaimed.

John did it again.

Rodney swatted the back of his head. John tightened his fingers on Rodney's cock as a warning, making Rodney squawk. He scraped his teeth over Rodney's neck, but loosened his grip, smiling as Rodney's cock managed a tiny twitch. Exhaustion settled through him and his eyes fell half-closed. Cleaning up their mess would have to wait. He let Rodney squirm his way up the bed, until he was half-propped against the wall, craning his neck enough to look down his torso to where John still curled his hand around him.

"That is my dick, you know," Rodney stated.

"No, really?"

"Really. And I'm very fond of it."

"I'm really very fond of it too," he murmured.

"Good, good, so you want to not break it."

"Hmmn."

"All right, I'm glad we have that straightened out."

John gave Rodney's softened cock a gentle pat as he finally let go, wriggling himself closer to Rodney, too tired to tease more and enjoying Rodney's bulk and warmth. So much skin for his fingers to wander over. He settled his hand possessively over Rodney's belly, despite the sticky mess
drying there. He pinned Rodney's leg under his thigh, tangling them together, and managed to fit his head onto the crook between Rodney's neck and shoulder. Perfect, he thought.

"I know you're smiling, John."

"I want to fuck you later," John said.

Rodney tensed, then shifted until he had his arm around John's shoulders, his hand in John's hair.

"Rodney?" John asked, beginning to worry.

"No, that sounds…" Rodney flailed his hand toward the nightstand. "Did you even notice what I brought back?"

John couldn't be bothered to lift his head. Rodney sounded irritated, not reluctant or angry. "No?"

"Lube," Rodney told him.

"Well, you are a genius," John said. He should have thought of it. He would have thought of it, if they'd gotten that far.

"I am," Rodney declared, pulling John closer and settling deeper into the bed himself. "I may have worried you would think I was presuming something, but I did have an idea where we were going."

He kicked around and caught the sheets and blanket, managing to drag them up over them.

John patted his belly, mumbling his thanks as he fell asleep, too exhausted to worry about what he'd set in train with the AAR.

He snapped awake in the colorless pre-dawn, bells still echoing from his dream, already achingly hard, Rodney's hand, slick with lube, doing things to his cock he had to have learned from John.

Rodney could learn anything if he tried, if he wanted; give him a demonstration and he'd find a way to improve…John gasped and cursed, "Fuck, don't make me come yet, I wanted—" Rodney let go, which was worse, making John whine and reach for him, wanting his hand back, but Rodney had straddled him and begun lowering his ass onto John's cock. John completely lost his train of thought.

His hands found their way to Rodney's thighs, splayed just under the crease between ass and leg, steadying him. Rodney leaned back, so pale in the dim light, an unfocused exposure, then reached behind him and found John's cock, guiding him between his cheeks and in with one long stroke because he'd already slicked himself up. Just thinking about that made John groan and shove his hips up, pushing into the tight heat. The picture in his mind, of Rodney working fingers into his ass so quietly, while John slept, so they could do this without hesitation, undid him. It felt so good he thought his head might blow off as he began trying to thrust up and found himself pinned under Rodney's weight. Rodney took over the rhythm and began lifting and grinding down with a little twist and shimmy until John's cock hit his prostate. Then his whole body jerked and he breathed out, "Oh, that's it."

John duplicated the angle, because he could learn fast too, making Rodney whimper and push down harder. The rhythm picked up, grew urgent, and sweat dampened the skin under John's hands and ran down Rodney's sides. He got his feet flat on the bed and used the leverage to fuck Rodney harder, while Rodney jerked himself off, panting and cursing, his hand moving faster and faster, so that John's control shivered into a thousand pieces when Rodney came. He couldn't stop or ease up for anything, caught in the heat of seeing Rodney get off on top of him, with John in him.

He came when Rodney bent forward to kiss him, the changed angle and pressure on his cock too
good, the room dimming at the edges as if dawn had run in reverse.

They were wet with sweat and come and lube and he felt too boneless and brainless to move. Rodney had slumped down on top of him and John could barely breathe. John stroked the back of Rodney's neck, feeling the heat radiating through his sweat-damp skin and tried to gather his thoughts together.

"Good?" Rodney mumbled against him.

"I thought you didn't ask stupid questions," John said. He sounded a little breathless, which was okay, because he felt like his body had short-circuited and burned his brain out with an overload of pleasure. Besides, he could blame it on Rodney smothering him. "Air."

"Unnh," Rodney protested, but shifted off him. "God, we're both a mess."

John had to agree. Their bodies and the sheets were sticky and damp and smeared with drying come. With a small groan, he levered himself to his feet. "Shower, sheets, more sleep."

Rodney followed him into the shower and they washed up together under the warm spray, soaping each other and rinsing lazily. John leaned against Rodney with his eyes closed and let him wash his hair, barely aware of the little rumbling noises of satisfaction he kept making. The warm water didn't last long enough, though, and a cold rinse had them both flinching and finishing as fast as they could.

John pulled on a pair of gray sweats and Rodney wrapped himself in his bathrobe again. They changed the sheets together and dumped the dirty ones into the bathroom. Then they curled up, Rodney spooned behind John and drowsing, while John watched the light brighten and fill the room.

Awake now, he couldn't stop thinking. He expected something. Caldwell was human. He'd see the AAR in his inbox and read it sooner rather than later. John didn't know if he'd radio him or maybe dispatch a couple of marines to 'escort' him to Caldwell's office. He thought Caldwell would probably tell him to offer that resignation John had mentioned during the first, preliminary debriefing. He couldn't calculate the variables, there were too many, and he still had no real grasp of the political climate back on Earth. Circumstances and classification likely ruled out a court martial. Dishonorable discharge was a possibility, though. John wouldn't fight it; Caldwell was bright enough to intuit that from the existence of the AAR he'd written. Anyone trying to hold onto a career would have hedged that report.

Despite all of that, Rodney's presence soothed him into falling asleep again. The door chime in Atlantis didn't trigger a jolt of adrenaline or even wake him. Even when he'd been in command, emergencies always announced themselves either over the radio, over citywide, or on occasions with the whump and rumble of explosions. He said without opening his eyes, "Go away."

"Me?"

"No," John muttered, feeling petulant and still tired. "Whoever."

Rodney snorted and mumbled something about Zelenka and breakfast, then abandoned John, lurching off the bed. John rolled onto his back.

The door chimed again, an extended blurt of sound managing to convey impatience. John blinked his eyes open and watched. Rodney padded over to the door. John considered saying something before he opened it, but he'd decided already to stop hiding anything. Let whoever had come draw their own conclusions from Rodney's presence.

Rodney waved his hand over the sensor and retreated a step. John sighed and considered hiding his
eyes under his arm. He hadn't expected Caldwell to come to him. His heart rate spiked as Rodney gave him a look of apprehension. Caldwell stayed in the doorway, his gaze moving from Rodney, nervously belting his robe tighter around his waist, to John on the rumpled bed. The room might not smell of sex with Atlantis' ventilation, but in Caldwell's world men didn't sleep together in sweats or robes. Caldwell's jaw set, but John gave him credit: he didn't yell, but spoke quietly to Rodney.

Rodney frowned and didn't move, but John could read the set of his shoulders as Caldwell folded his arms over his chest and loomed. Caldwell scared him. Shit. The man was in charge and angry and Rodney was still quietly standing up to him. Standing between him and John. It made John's stomach lurch. All his own instincts, to protect Rodney, flared to life.

"It's okay, Rodney," he murmured. "He's invited." 3

Rodney glanced back at him, willing to stay if John gave any indication he needed him to, no matter what Caldwell wanted. John sighed. "Rodney."

Rodney ducked his head before retreating out into the corridor. The door closed behind him, leaving John alone with Caldwell.

~*~

The door shut behind Rodney and he glanced nervously up and down the corridor. The temporary quarters were outside Atlantis' main traffic patterns, though, and he saw no one. Relief made him wobble. He hadn't protested his exile, but he wasn't exactly comfortable strolling the halls in nothing but his damn robe. Plus, it was cold.

He headed for his quarters.

Part of him wanted to linger outside John's door until Caldwell left, but his good sense won out. He couldn't imagine his presence would help. Caldwell had never respected him. His mind and accomplishments, yes, but Caldwell had never seen Rodney as tough enough. No civilian would have been, but there had been an extra measure of disdain reserved for Rodney. He'd only ever expressed it as impatience, but Rodney had worked with the American military for over a decade; he'd recognized the attitude.

The sad part of it, Rodney thought, was that Selket would have shattered most of the tough, uncompromising men like Caldwell. Squishy endoskeletons were better than hard exoskeletons. Only their ability to adapt instead of fighting had kept them alive.

He shook his head and passed his hand over the door sensor.

"McKay," Zelenka said. Someone needed to improve the locks in Atlantis. Zelenka had seated himself at Rodney's desk chair, carefully set to the side of the multicolored, interlocking glyphs painted on the floor. He looked away quickly after taking in the robe and lack of anything else. "You did not come back to the lab yesterday or reply to my radio call?"

Rodney thumbed the sleep crust from his eyes and gave out a sigh. "You've become a tyrant, a sad, little dictator of the science division, haven't you? I always suspected you would if you took over."

"You have, perhaps, been hit on the head recently?" Zelenka shot back with a sniff.

"No, I've just been tossed out in the hall by Caldwell and I'm not really awake yet."

Zelenka pulled off his glasses, folded them, and tucked them inside his jacket. Then he played with
the zip on it, unconsciously, and looked at Rodney. "You were with the Colonel?"

"If you mean John, yes." Rodney shuddered at the thought of being with Caldwell.

A moue of distaste shaped Zelenka's mouth as he followed that thought.

Rodney headed for his locker to find another uniform. He tossed the robe on his bed and began dressing. Zelenka made a choking noise and theatrically looked away. Rodney rolled his eyes and turned his back to Zelenka. Boxers, then pants. He reached for a shirt.

"Rodney"

Rodney turned around and saw that Zelenka had lost his color. "What is it?" he asked. Zelenka looked like that when there were Hive ships on the way or nanoviruses loose. It was his disaster expression. "What?"


Rodney twitched. He'd forgotten them.

"I am sorry," Zelenka said. "I had no idea."

"You thought maybe it was a vacation? John and I just lounging around, painting each other's nails and feeding the Haralim peeled grapes?" Rodney asked in full sneer mode. He was afraid of what Caldwell might be telling John and it made him angry. It made him want to strike back and Zelenka was there, Zelenka had seen the Haralim's toybox, Zelenka knew and hadn't said anything…He trusted Zelenka enough to make him a target for his temper, to be himself with him, in the sanctum of his quarters.

Zelenka shook his head, trying to head him off, saying, "I know—"

"You don't know anything," Rodney swept on, unwilling to accept brushing it all under the carpet again. John was right. Shove it in their faces. "You think I don't hear the talk in the labs? Or the marines in the mess hall? Harem Boy and Fu Manchu? Who thought of that one, by the way? Vogel? She always was a bitch." He stopped, breathing hard, and shook his head. "If you're still wondering? I took four lashes the first time, five for insolence to the head librarian once, and eight the last time. I'd rather take all of them all over again than a dose of moa. That's why I tore up those fucking plants." He glared at Zelenka, daring him to say anything. "I don't know how many blowjobs I gave to a the guards because I stopped counting after five, but you can bet I didn't cry when someone poisoned Seif. I was only raped once and even John doesn't know because he'd have gotten himself killed. That's what being a slave was like."

He stopped, covered his eyes with his fingers, and forced himself to take long, slow breaths until his heartbeat eased off and the memories were distant enough again that he could deal with them.

Zelenka cursed in Czech; Selket and Caldwell recognizable among the angry litany. Rodney sat down on his bed with a thump, still clutching his shirt in his hands. He couldn't believe he'd said it. He'd blocked out that part of his life as a slave so perfectly because anything less would have wrecked John, who could endure so much himself but not the thought of failing to protect Rodney from at least part of it. What the Rale had done to him in the library, if only once, had been painful, but ultimately more frightening in the glimpse it gave him of the twisted lines of emotion knotting John to the Rale and the Haralim and they to each other and him.

He watched Zelenka gather himself together and fall silent.
"I have gone over the work you already did," Zelenka said eventually, ignoring everything that had been said, much to Rodney's relief. "We do not have enough infrastructure to create ZPMs in Atlantis. The Ancients must have done the work elsewhere. Nothing in the city is reinforced against the results of even a non-catastrophic shield breach."

"I've gone over the math as much as I could," Rodney agreed. "They must have established a manufacturing facility somewhere isolated, in case something went wrong."

"Too dangerous for the city." Zelenka nodded. "Yes."

"It could even be in the Milky Way."

"It could."

"More database searching," Rodney said.

"Yes. But, Rodney, this work... They will want you back on Earth to continue it."

Rodney pulled his shirt over his head and tugged it down. "As long as John comes with me, I'll be okay."

Zelenka eyed him, the sharp gaze of a cynic. "If you think Atlantis has been difficult, remember Earth will be worse. The SGC is entirely under military command."

"What are you saying?" Rodney asked.

"Nothing. Yet." Zelenka stood. "But I am worried for you, my friend. You are not the same."

Rodney blinked at him, opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find any words. Of course he wasn't the same. No one was the same. Didn't Zelenka see how much Atlantis had changed too? Earth would be worse; it had been a foreign planet the last time Rodney had been there. He'd felt like a citizen of the past, refugee from a country that no longer existed. He didn't want to go back there, but Zelenka made it sound like he might have to.

His mouth dry, he finally managed to say, "Getting back to Atlantis was supposed to be better."

"You will come to the labs later?" Zelenka asked. "I would like to accomplish as much as possible before Colonel Caldwell decides we are wasting manpower."

"Yes, I'll be there. Soon. I just—" He nodded in the direction of John's quarters. "I should—"

"Yes, yes, fine," Zelenka said. "Go. I will see you at lunch then and we will work then." He activated the door and left. The door remained open and Zelenka's voice drifted from the corridor. "Colonel Caldwell."

Caldwell's brisker tones carried too. "Dr. Zelenka. Can I assume you've just left Dr. McKay?"

Rodney groped around for his shoes, not wanting to face up to Caldwell without them, only to remember he'd left them in John's room. He stood up, tugged his blue shirt straight, pulled the zip at his throat up, then tried to smooth his sleep-ruffled hair with his palm. At least he didn't need a shave. The Selket depilatory hadn't worn off yet, wouldn't for another couple of weeks. He vaguely looked forward to the day John's five o'clock shadow showed up again, it would be another step back from Selket.

Caldwell strode into his room without knocking or a greeting. Little things betrayed his frustration
and anger, as well as an element of bewilderment. His hands were curled into fists, his jaw clenched, and he stood straighter even than normal, shoulders back. But his gaze wandered over Rodney before flinching away.

"I already talked to Sheppard."

Rodney dropped his gaze to Caldwell's boots.

"Would you stop?" Caldwell demanded.

"Stop what, Colonel?" Rodney asked, obedient and half curious. Was Caldwell talking about him sleeping with John? Could he be that blunt?

"The bowing and never meeting anyone's eyes."

Rodney refused to raise his eyes until he was ready. "Did you come here for that?" he asked, finally looking up to catch Caldwell's reaction.

"I came here to tell you Sheppard is writing an amended version of his AAR. Purge the first one from his computer and the Atlantis server. Make sure no one has a copy, make sure if someone has it and they're not connected, the next time they are, it's wiped."

"Is that an order?" Rodney asked. "Because last time I checked, I hadn't joined the US military and civilians answer to Dr. Weir. Or has that changed, too?"

"Are you trying to destroy Colonel Sheppard's career, Doctor?" Caldwell demanded. "Did you encourage him to write that—that prurient recital?"


"That report cannot go back to the SGC," Caldwell told him. "Not that complete."

Rodney met his gaze. "Nothing I can do will affect a hard copy print-out and you'll need to get me the sysadmin codes. Unless you expect me to hack them." He could, but he'd learned the value of not crowing over everything he could do.

"I'll get it for you."

"What about—"

"Cover your tracks. I assume you can do that. If there is a hard copy somewhere," and his faint flush told Rodney that Caldwell had one, "if it can't be actually traced to Sheppard's email, it can be discredited."

"Is there anything else, Colonel?" Rodney kept his tone flat, refusing to imagine Caldwell reading about John, getting an illicit thrill from the descriptions of what John had done with the Haralim. He hoped the sonovabitch felt ashamed. He reminded himself that Caldwell could have been worse, no matter his manner toward Rodney.

Caldwell glared at him. "If you have any respect for Sheppard, do this, then stay the hell away from him. I really don't care what you were before this, but Sheppard—"

Rodney realized Caldwell thought he'd taken advantage of what had been done to John to get something he'd always wanted. That was how Caldwell saw things. John hadn't been gay, couldn't
be gay, and if he even thought he was now, it was someone else's fault. Anything else short-circuited Caldwell's world view. Rodney squeezed is eyes shut, because even looking at Caldwell infuriated him. Did he even realize what he'd implied?

"Don't drag him down," Caldwell ordered. "And put on some damned shoes."

Rodney waited until he'd disappeared into the transporter before padding back to John's quarters.

John remained on his bed, arms resting loosely over his bent knees. He glanced up as Rodney came in, then looked past him again, his expression distant. Rodney sat down on the bed. "So?" he asked.

John let one arm slip off his knee and took Rodney's hand. "No mission," he said.

"Am I sorry?" Rodney asked.

John turned his head and looked at him quizzically. Rodney shrugged. "What? I can't tell if you're happy or not. You're weirding me out. I don't know if I'm supposed to commiserate or gibber and praise the moons in relief."

John grunted and then shrugged.

"Well, that certainly makes everything clear."

"I don't know."

"Hmn."

"I need to write a sanitized version of the report."

"Well, at least that shouldn't take as long," Rodney pointed out.

"You're a regular ray of sunshine."

"I am, aren't I?"

John squeezed his hand.

"Come on," Rodney said. "Zelenka wants me in the lab. You can help me recite poetry. And bring your laptop. I need to wipe out the evidence of your great confession."

"Caldwell told me to see Heightmeyer."

"He told me to stay away from you."

John jerked around to face Rodney. His eyes narrowed, his Adam's apple worked as he swallowed, and his jaw set. "He what?"

"Warned me off," Rodney said. "He didn't say it out loud, but apparently I'm making you gay."

John snorted, a flicker of amusement showing briefly. "No," he said. He leaned in and rested his forehead against Rodney's, hand coming up to cup his face. "I can't...say things." His breath came unevenly, soft gusts against Rodney's lips. "I mean them, but the words aren't...right."

Rodney shaped his hand to the back of John's neck. "I'm smarter than anyone else," he murmured. "I get it anyway."
Three days passed after he gave Caldwell his AAR. Captain Liu went offworld and John didn't. He stayed away from the Tower entirely, spending most of his time with Rodney or Teyla. He ate lunch once with Lorne and Cadman, listening while they talked about missions they'd been on while he was gone. The question of why John had been pulled from Liu's mission at the last minute hovered in the air between them, though neither of them ventured to ask why. He obeyed Caldwell's order and went to see Kate. She had a printed copy of his AAR on her desk.

"I haven't read it," she said. "I won't, unless you ask me to."

John fingered his wrist.

Kate rested her hand on the file cover. "John, why did you decide to confide in Colonel Caldwell?"

He gave her a disbelieving look. "I didn't confide in him. I wrote the report he ordered me to give him."

"And that's all it was?" Kate asked. "Colonel Caldwell indicated it contains…much more than a normal report would."

"I prefer to jerk a band-aid off fast."

He walked out halfway through the session. It cost him, in panic-sick sweat, to defy a command that he be there and talk to her, more than anyone could guess, but he did it. He fucked Rodney that night and thought he could tell anyone no. He was telling Caldwell and everyone who disapproved no just by being with Rodney. It felt better than he remembered.

John didn't bother with his temporary office after that, hanging instead in the labs, watching Rodney and Zelenka deep in arguments over where they could obtain the materials used to form a ZPM casing or what could be substituted without risking a catastrophic failure or watching the 302s from his favorite place, the balcony overlooking the northeast pier. The sun soaked into his shoulders and the sea breeze cooled his skin wherever it touched. He ignored the radio call from Heightmeyer reminding him of their appointment and Caldwell's annoyed attempt to contact him an hour later.

The 302s did their touch-and-goes, practicing maneuvers that took them high into the atmosphere and out of sight, then back into gravity's sink, gamboling through the sky like sea birds. He ached to be in the air too and told himself he hadn't given up anything he wouldn't have lost soon anyway: combat flight belonged young men with young men's reflexes and the illusion of immortality. He'd been old, and even if his strange Wraith ally had given him more years back than he'd taken, John knew he would never be young again.

He felt remarkably at peace with himself by the end of the afternoon, ready to meet Teyla, even confident that he might surprise her when they sparred.

His calm shattered when he stepped inside. His eyes took a instant to adapt after the brilliant outside light, but movement drew his attention. Corporal Garner smirked at him from just to the side of the transporter doors at the end of the hall. His expression grew more knowing with each step John took toward him.

John watched him warily.

Garner had to have followed him to have found this place and be waiting. Tension ratcheted through his muscles.
"Corporal," John said. His mouth felt dry and his thoughts skipped backward to another hallway, another man, and his pulse threatened to drown out any answer.

Garner slouched against the wall, watching John back. He licked his lips. "Sheppard," he said.

John stopped just beyond arm's length. To get into the transporter, he'd have to pass Garner closer than that. Garner's pale eyes flicked down his body. "What did they call you there?"

When John didn't answer, Garner dropped one hand to his crotch and blatantly rubbed the bulge in his BDUs.

"I hear you know thirty-seven ways to give a blowjob. How about showing me some of your 'skills'?"

He wondered who had hacked a copy of his original AAR before Rodney purged it. Caldwell's aide or just someone with a talent for electronic pickpocketing, it didn't really matter. It was out. If Garner had read it, or even heard about what was in it, all of Atlantis knew by now. The expedition was still too small for any secrets to stay that way once more than two people knew. He'd known, on some level, this might happen, but he hadn't anticipated it getting out so soon.

"Come on, I bet you're dying for it," Garner said.

John shook his head, more in disbelief than anything else, and tried to sidle around Garner.

"I bet you looked really good on your knees, all painted and pretty. I bet you loved it." Garner's hand closed on John's arm and jerked him forward, close enough to smell alcohol on his breath, before John twisted his head to the side.

"Let go," John said, trying to ignore the way his skin crawled from the contact. He could break loose with one twist, but he wanted to keep this from escalating. Aside from Lorne and Cadman, he didn't have any friends in the military contingent any longer. All the marines he'd known and commanded had either rotated back to Earth and other assignments or never made it home. The leaked report meant life was going to suck; he didn't need to make it worse by having an altercation with Garner, just because he was an asshole. He needed to keep his cool. "That is an order, Corporal."

Garner laughed.

"Hey, how'd you like your little present the other night?" he said, tightening his grip on John's arm.

It felt like his blood turned to ice. "What?"

"Man, you were shitting yourself, you were so scared of that stuff."

Garner had broken into his quarters and left the moa? The ice turned to anger so fast John lost track of what Garner was saying.

"—does McKay fuck you or do you do him? Hey, maybe I could fuck you both—"

Garner had no clue to what John could do, so close to him. No matter how much hand-to-hand training the marines did, they still believed in their guns. John knew that, because he'd been exactly the same way when Teyla first started to teach him. But he'd spent two years learning to survive without even a knife. He didn't think. He moved. Twisted his arm in Garner's grasp, locking his hand around Garner's forearm to yank him close, off balance and slammed the heel of his other hand up into Garner's nose at the same time, palm open and fingers drawn back. The crunch of cartilage crumpling under the momentum of his blow mixed with an awful sound from Garner, a yowl of pain
and disbelief that choked on the blood pouring from his nose. John heard it, but paid no attention. Garner clutched at his face and John took the opportunity to grab his ears and smash his head face down into the knee he brought up. Something broke in Garner's jaw.

He couldn't let Garner have a chance to recover and take him down, because Garner was bigger and heavier than him, could grapple him to the ground. If Garner did, John could expect no mercy.

The blood still gouting from Garner's broken nose had him gasping, bent over with pain, still stunned. He groped for the wall ahead of him, blindly moving toward John. John caught his arm again with both of his this time, forced it up, then turned beneath it, pulling and twisting down as he moved behind Garner. Like moving closer and closer to the speed of light, time seemed to slow down around him. He jerked brutally, rotating the arm in his hands counter-clockwise and felt Garner's shoulder dislocate. Garner's body followed the movement of his arm, legs going out from beneath him, balance wrecked with the sudden new agony, and he fell forward into a half somersault, hitting the floor without grace or skill headfirst. His free elbow struck the floor with an ugly crack at the same time, inflicting even more damage.

John followed it all with a vicious kick into Garner's groin, then dropped onto Garner's legs and pinned him, shaking in reaction, sucking in air desperately.

It took perhaps six seconds. He observed himself acting in retrospect, calculating everything he had done as though someone else had moved his body.

"Colonel Sheppard, this is Weir. Please report to the Tower conference room immediately."

Elizabeth's voice over the radio headset snapped John out of the haze he'd retreated into and he gathered himself together and braced one hand on Garner's good shoulder while he tried to think. Everything had been reflex between Garner's last taunt and Elizabeth's call.

"Colonel Sheppard, respond."

He activated his headset. "Sheppard here. I'm on my way. Out." The attenuation from the tiny mike and radio transmission would conceal the way his voice sounded too high and still uneven.

Garner moaned and scrabbled at the floor, disoriented and helpless. John swept off Garner's headset, then jerked Garner's belt loose. Garner's eyes were going to swell shut soon, but he twisted his head to the side enough to see John and they widened as John's hands moved over his waist. John noted with grim humor that Garner's hard-on was a thing of the past. John paused. "Hey, isn't this what you wanted?" he asked, silky and seductive as he knew how. He was back in control of himself, but still riding a wave of frozen desperation and adrenaline. Garner might be the one on the floor bleeding, but he had no idea how he had fucked John up.

Garner shook his head and gurgled a denial while gagging on his own blood again.

"That's good," John told him and rolled him onto his side without ceremony. "I don't think you'd like my technique." He grinned at Garner, going for crazy, not needing to try too hard.

He used the belt to bind Garner's arms behind his back. Touching the dislocated arm made Garner shrick and John frown. He tightened the belt another notch and felt the wrong shift in Garner's elbow. Felt like he'd broken that too.

After a second's thought, he swiftly unlaced Garner's boots enough to tie them together. Not as secure as he would have liked but he didn't want to sacrifice his own belt. Someone might notice its absence. His mind kept racing ahead, looking for a way out, because it wouldn't matter what Garner
had done to provoke him, he'd just assaulted a subordinate. He could just as easily have killed him. Only good luck that he hadn't.

He'd snapped, he knew, and it could happen again. That made him too dangerous to wander around Atlantis or anywhere else loose. They'd drug him, put him restraints, even lock him up. A muscle in his jaw twitched from the pressure he was putting on his gritted teeth. He wasn't going to let that happen to him.

He didn't know what he was going to do, but until he did, he needed to stash Garner. As soon as someone saw Garner, the trap would close on John.

"Anyone else know you were coming here today?" he asked Garner, jerking him up to his feet and propping him against the wall. Garner immediately folded over and screamed from the pressure on his shoulder and elbow. "Never mind, I'm going to have to stash you someplace less public."

He'd need to clean up the mess too. Couldn't leave that puddle of Garner's blood on the floor. Anyone looking for him or just passing through would know something had happened. "I don't suppose your mother taught you to always carry a handkerchief?"

He groped through Garner's pockets—bared his teeth with a total lack of amusement as Garner flinched repeatedly—and found what he wanted: a pocketknife. He opened the short blade and used it to cut off Garner's T-shirt, pocketed the knife and mopped up the blood. He wiped his hands while he was at it. A length of the bloodied material made a good gag, too.

"Ueo," Garner said frantically, unintelligible through the gag. "Nrrrgh."

"Having fun now?" John asked. He didn't wait for an answer. Time was ticking away. Elizabeth would be on the radio again soon, asking what was taking him so long. He had no idea what she wanted this time. Maybe she'd gotten hold of the leaked copy of his original AAR. She'd want to talk to him if she had.

He wrestled Garner into the transporter and picked a destination, a distant hub underneath the waterline. He'd been heading there when the Iratus instincts had taken him over, so long ago, down to the dark and damp, where Atlantis responded only sluggishly, and no one went voluntarily. The city had been repaired since then, but he'd bet—was betting—the habit of avoiding that section had lingered. The irony didn't escape him; he was in the same position as when the retrovirus had raged through his body: alone against everyone in Atlantis.

But this time they didn't have Ronon to shoot him in the back. This time Rodney wouldn't track him and John wouldn't hesitate—not even for Teyla. He drew in an unsteady breath and admitted to himself he would always hesitate for Teyla. And Rodney...He hoped no one understood exactly how they could use Rodney against him, because he was defenseless in the face of a threat to Rodney.

He could see how it would be. He had to get out before anyone guessed he was going or they would stop him. John gritted his teeth. No more cages, no more walls. He'd get away, one way or the other. There was always a way, always the way he couldn't take on Selket, because he couldn't abandon Rodney. He fingered the pocketknife.

Garner tried to trip him as John pushed him out of the transporter, throwing his weight sideways into John. John swayed to the side and let Garner hit the floor with a muffled scream. That had to hurt. John knelt and bashed Garner's head against the floor twice, just to quiet him down enough that he could think. The dim green lights stayed low. His bet was paying off. Power to this section had been cut back to a bare minimum. Sensors down here would be activated for sweeps and left off the rest of
the time to conserve against draining their ZPM.

But just in case, he had a little trick. Two strides down from the transporter door he pressed his hand to a faintly depressed, decorative appearing panel. It opened. He felt Garner watching him as he opened it by pressing two sides and then bottom. "A little neater than prying it open with your knife," he said conversationally, as he danced his fingertips over the array of crystals the panel had hidden. They controlled the lifesign sensors in this sector. He found the one he wanted, three to the left and five up. Garner's pocketknife gave him just enough leverage to slip it out of alignment. They'd learned the hard way that the crystals in the Ancient equipment had to be lined up exactly, making complete contact, or they would register as connected during a diagnostic and still fail to do their job.

That had it. John smiled and closed up the panel. From the control room, everything would seem fine. But a lifesign sweep wouldn't register Garner.

He returned to Garner, who had inchwormed his way halfway back into the transporter. Not good enough. John bent and grabbed the belt binding Garner's wrists together. Garner screamed into the gag as John dragged him to the closest door, opened it and pulled him inside.

John crouched before him. "I'll tell someone where you are."

It occurred to him that he could buy himself a lot more time by killing Garner and disposing of the body. Maybe it occurred to Garner too. Fear and pain contorted his face around the T-shirt gag. The part of John that had taken down the Genii when they invaded and made the expedient decision to nuke a camp full of ex-Wraith told him to do it. Tears oozed from Garner's eyes, mixing with the blood and snot already there. His pupils were uneven. It would be easy.

John straightened up and covered his face briefly. When he took his hands away, he'd made his decision.

He couldn't and was relieved to realize he didn't want to.

He left Garner, closed the door and took the transporter to the Tower, walking out into the control room level just as his radio chirped again.

"Colonel Sheppard, where are you?"

"I'm here," he said, strolling into the conference room and casually taking a seat that put him catercorner to Caldwell. He didn't want that sharp gaze resting directly on him. His heart hammered unpleasantly and he knew that he smelled like fear, sweat and possibly blood. John faked a smile for Elizabeth and pretended to relax.

At the same time, he charted how many steps to take out Caldwell, put the pocketknife to Elizabeth's throat and get himself through the stargate. He didn't like the numbers.

"We'll start as soon as Doctor McKay arrives," Elizabeth said.

~*~

Zelenka didn't want to stop for lunch. He ordered Vogel to go to the mess and bring them both back something and sequestered himself with Rodney in his private lab, going over the numbers twice and then setting up a simulation of how a ZPM manufactured from the materials Atlantis had to offer would perform. Or not. The simulated ZPM failed spectacularly, catastrophically, with each new iteration. No matter what they did, Atlantis didn't have enough power to spare to shield a subspace
energy tap long enough to charge a ZPM.

Rodney let himself be swept into the excitement of it, raising his voice and arguing vociferously that they could do the same job with materials available on Earth, if they had to build an entire naquadah-based power plant. He lost track of time and barely noticed Vogel’s return, beyond snatching up a sandwich, giving it a suspicious sniff for citrus and then biting into it, without pausing in his diatribe at Zelenka. He brushed the crumbs off his chest and shouted Zelenka down.

Zelenka seemed to forget his own lunch entirely, yelling back, "No, no, no, and no again, you arrogant donkey’s ass! There is no way anyone can generate enough power on a planet without risking major destruction in the case of a breach!" He gestured, miming an explosion, then shoved his glasses higher up his nose, finally giving up on speech entirely in favor of opening another laptop and typing furiously before demanding Rodney read. "There, there, you see? Subspace—"

"It doesn't work that way," Rodney interrupted, rolling his eyes and pointed at a series of equations. "You are so completely off, you aren't even in a parallel dimension, unless it is one with entirely different physical laws. Also, you reversed the energy output in your third line, so everything afterward is gibberish."

Zelenka glared at the screen, then at Rodney, then growled. "Eat me," he muttered.

Rodney took another, ostentatious, bite of his sandwich and chewed happily, satisfied he'd won the argument.

He watched as Zelenka took his glasses off and tiredly pinched the bridge of his nose, before closing the laptop with care. It made him smile with satisfaction. Zelenka was obviously giving up. He loved winning.

"Rodney."

"What?" he mumbled around another mouthful. He didn't like that quiet, tired tone of voice.

"A special databurst went through to Earth last night."

The bread and mystery meat suddenly choked Rodney as his mouth went dry. Zelenka looked apologetic.

"My report on your work and the simulations we've run was in it."

"And?"

"A databurst arrived, encrypted, for Colonel Caldwell and Doctor Weir this morning."

Rodney set the rest of his sandwich down. He didn't want anymore. Zelenka nervously polished the lenses of his glasses with the tail of his shirt. It gave him an excuse to not meet Rodney's eyes.

"I think they have sent orders to bring you back to Earth."

That could be worse. He didn't want to go, but the implication that he'd be working on actually making ZPMs or at least creating the infrastructure to do so promised enough excitement for anyone. John would come with him and it would be all right. He'd miss Atlantis…Rodney grimaced. He wouldn't. He'd miss Atlantis that was, the same way he had on Selket, not the city as it had become. He didn't like it much, only worried that Earth would be even more uncomfortable.

"Is that why we're working on this now? Because you've been acting like the Wraith were on their
way for the last two days and I've been getting nervous," he joked.

Zelenka nodded, but his expression didn't lighten.

"There's something else?"

Rodney watched him play with his glasses, opening and then folding the earpieces closed, light from the bank of larger computers on the back wall of the lab flashing off the glass. "I have heard…," Zelenka started, but seemed to run out of words.

"What?"

"I said nothing, you understand, but there is talk among the science staff and what they know the marines hear too," Zelenka finally said. "There is talk about Colonel Sheppard." He put his glasses on and straightened his shoulders. "It is very ugly, Rodney. Someone has obtained a copy of a report Colonel Sheppard submitted and the details…." Rod...
to himself. His mind raced like a rat on meth, though. No one would find Garner by accident, but sooner or later he would be missed. Marines had duties and Caldwell didn't let anyone slack off. As soon as someone started looking for Garner and couldn't find him, someone would think of John, because Garner had no doubt bragged about his joke with the moa and maybe about his intentions.

Elizabeth straightened her posture. "Gentlemen."

John inclined his head, Rodney rolled the pen between his palms and said, "Elizabeth."

He had to get out of Atlantis.

"I have news." She smiled and it was maybe a little strained, but not fake. John couldn't relax. Not the AAR, then, or Elizabeth wouldn't be smiling at all. He clenched on hand on his thigh, digging his fingers into muscle.

"Yes, what?" Rodney said. "I was trying to reconstruct one of the fundamental equations on the ZPM manufacturing protocols, the one that tells us exactly how much power the containment fields must have to keep from blowing up whatever facility is making them, when you called." He scowled. "I almost had it."

Elizabeth gave him an indulgent look. Rodney ignored it, snapping his fingers, clearly trying to seem still more interested in what he'd been working on than anything she or Caldwell could say. John felt the tension rolling off him, though. Rodney was scared and covering it the only way he knew how: with his brains.

He grabbed John's hand and inked a series of equations on it, working from fingertip to his wrist in a line. John let his hand go limp so that the pen nib moved steadily over his skin, not thinking about it. He was used to Rodney painting things on him, even used to the pen instead of a brush after only a week. He didn't even twitch. Rodney hadn't done it in front of Caldwell or Elizabeth before though, and that meant he was distracted. John tried to guess what had Rodney so spooked. He couldn't know about Garner or the trouble John was in. It had to be something else.

Rodney licked a fingertip, smudged out a section and rewrote it. He turned John's hand over and began inking more math onto his palm. That tickled and John had to exert some control to keep from twitching his hand closed.

"Actually, this is in regards to the work you've done with Dr. Zelenka since returning," Elizabeth announced. Her eyes had widened.

John frowned. Her tone of voice seemed just a little too bright

"The IOA and the SGC are both very pleased and excited with what you've managed, but they believe you can make more progress from Earth."

"Oh, is that all?" Rodney muttered. "Zelenka said they'd probably think that." The pen paused over the fleshy muscle at the base of John's thumb. He lifted it away minutely and studied John's hand. John looked and hid a cringe. Rodney was looking at Garner's blood, a smear caught and dried in the crease between thumb and palm.

"Do you need a piece of paper, Doctor McKay?" Caldwell asked.

"No, no, I just—" Rodney's hand flailed and the pen nearly jabbed into John's cheekbone. He caught Rodney's wrist, plucked the pen away and pocketed it, then curled his hand into a fist and hid it under the table. Rodney flattened his own hands on the tabletop and stared at them and nothing else. Then he began to drum them fast, nervous, out of rhythm. Blatantly.

"Yes," Elizabeth said, still wide-eyed enough that John thought she might have just put one and one together to get two for the first time. "We'll open the stargate the day after tomorrow and send him through."

F*uck it. Caldwell knew. Everyone in Atlantis would know by the end of the day. John took Rodney's hand and pulled it down, but didn't let go. He started tracing sign into Rodney's palm. *Trouble. Bad. Can't stay.* He didn't have a sign for Atlantis, so he substituted *home* and *here.*

Help me get away.

Rodney twisted his hand and traced, *Come with me.*

*Can't. Trouble. Here. Me.*

No word for marine.

*Guard. I hurt.*

"And me?" John braced himself for it. Caldwell had already pulled him from the mission roster. Kate had counseled against him going offworld again. What use did he have anymore? Atlantis didn't need and couldn't afford to carry dead weight. They'd send him back, the SGC would give him an innocuous desk job and he'd retire. Caldwell might have rethought his decision to wipe John's report and sent something through back channels, explaining John wasn't fit to serve as an officer any longer. They'd get rid of him one way or the other.

Except none of that would happen, either; not once they found what he'd done to Garner. He could have taken it, he thought. He could have got down on his knees and given Garner the damned blowjob. He should have, would have if he'd known, but it was too late. Had been too late the instant Garner threatened Rodney too.

"You'll remain assigned to Atlantis in a supernumerary capacity," Caldwell answered.

"What?"

"No, no, I need John with me," Rodney exclaimed, still gripping John's hand painfully tight.

"Rodney, no," Elizabeth said. "This will be better for both of you."

No it wouldn't, John thought bitterly. It would be better for her, for the SGC and everyone who couldn't deal with how they'd changed and wanted them back the way they were. He stared at Caldwell, wondering how much say the commander of Atlantis had exercised in this decision.

Caldwell met his gaze without flinching. "Since the termination of using Beckett's gene therapy, we've suffered a continuing lack of personnel with the ATA gene. You are still the only person to have tested as anything close to an Ancient, the entire array of genes involved are active in your DNA." His mouth turned up briefly. "I had Reinhardt explain it to me again."

John glared at him.

"You'll be on call to the science department," Caldwell finished.
Rodney stared straight ahead. The knuckles of his free hand had gone white where he pressed them to the top of the table.

"Lightswitch duty?" John forced out in a steady, light voice. He shook his head. He had to get out of this room fast. Every second crept closer to the point of no return. No, he was past that. The clock was racing to the point of no escape. But he couldn't seem to fold too soon or easily. Caldwell would see through that. "Not interested."

"You're still in the Air Force, Colonel."

"I'll resign."

"Your resignation won't be accepted."

"Steven and I both lobbied very hard to keep you here in Atlantis, John," Elizabeth said.

"You didn't ask if I wanted to be here," John snapped. All he wanted now was out.

"You're not competent to decide what's best for you at this point, Sheppard," Caldwell said. "Heightmeyer thinks that will change. I hope she's right."

"She thinks you and Rodney are too dependent on one another," Elizabeth added. So she'd lied and read the report he wrote. That didn't surprise him.

"You showed her the AAR, didn't you?" Rodney said suddenly, glaring at Caldwell. "The one you had John rewrite."

"Dr. Heightmeyer based her opinions on your sessions with her." Caldwell addressed John, ignoring Rodney. "I did provide her with a print-out."

"So that's it?" John asked. "Rodney gets exiled to Earth and I'm confined to Atlantis?" They'd confine him all right. They'd put him down in one of the holding cells.

"This isn't permanent—"

"Sounds pretty permanent to me," John interrupted Elizabeth. "The SGC isn't going to ship Rodney back here unless the Colonel okays it, even if you put in a request, and they don't have any use for me back on Earth, so I can predict any chance of getting a transfer out of here." There were places, places that had no official existence, where they warehoused people like him: embarrassments, security risks, the uncomfortable reminders that things went wrong and people couldn't always be put back together. That was the only place they'd send him. Atlantis had originally been where the SGC sent the useful misfits, but he wouldn't even be useful. They'd never let him do anything. Never let him go. No one wanted a knife that might display a mind of its own, an unpredictable mind, no one would want to take the chance some enemy might take up that knife and turn it on them. Whatever value his ATA gene might have would be outweighed by fear.

Elizabeth's expression hardened. "I think eventually you'll thank Colonel Caldwell and I both for our efforts, John. When you're thinking straight again."

John looked at Caldwell. It wasn't hard to play his fear as anger and he would have been furious and betrayed by this if he hadn't had worse to worry about. "Is that what this is? You're going to straighten me out? Salvage poor broken John Sheppard and turn him into a soldier instead of a whore?"

"John!"
"Jesus, it is," John finished. He wouldn't let his hands shake, wouldn't let them see the despair already rising through him. Two years with no control over what happened to him and now they did this to him. He'd walked right out of one cage into another.

Even if he'd never touched Garner

…They had turned Atlantis into a prison.

Rodney's hand was slick with sweat against his. He didn't know which of them held on tighter, but the bones in his hand ached with the force of it.

He wished he did have some magical connection to the city and could think it into shutting down, refusing to work for its residents. But the Ancients hadn't been complete fools. They had pulled enough ethically hinky experiments that they couldn't allow any outraged individual with the gene to have that kind of access to the city's systems. It couldn't respond to him like that. There were limits and protections built into everything. Walls and locks and bars everywhere he looked.

He sucked in air through his nostrils. Blanked his expression.

"Was that all? I agreed to meet Teyla to spar this afternoon. I should tell her Rodney's going anyway. I'm sure she'll want a chance to tell him good-bye," he said as tonelessly as possible.

"Yes, Colonel, you're dismissed," Caldwell said.

Elizabeth wouldn't meet his eyes.

John scraped his chair back and stood. He didn't come to attention, didn't salute or even acknowledge anyone as he walked out. He couldn't bear to look at Rodney. The doors opened before he reached them and he had to grit his teeth against a bitter shout of anger. What next? Would the IOA decide that since the gene therapy wasn't allowed, they needed to breed up their own gene carriers? Of course, they wouldn't tell John to actually have sex with anyone, they'd just want sperm samples. This was Atlantis, not Selket; it would all be clean and antiseptic and he wouldn't even be afforded the contact that Zuleika had given him with Dalal.

He stopped at the transporter and waited for Rodney without thinking about it, then cursed. Time, time, he had no time. Another day and a half and Rodney would be gone, even if John wasn't. He didn't kid himself that they'd allow him to even communicate with Rodney, not after going so far to separate them. He stabbed at the destination hub for the gym.

Teyla meant to leave, too.

He needed to get her on his side. Now. Before everything blew up. He knew she would understand about Garner. Except for Rodney, Teyla was the only person left in Atlantis that he trusted.

John pressed his face to the transporter wall, felt it cool and slick against his hot cheek, and squeezed his eyes shut. Trapped, imprisoned, caged, worse off than he'd been at McMurdo, when the Air Force would have accepted his resignation with alacrity, before he'd known Rodney and Teyla and Ronon.

God, he hoped Rodney would be all right, because he knew he wouldn't be.

He could feel his chances counting down with every tick of the clock.

He had to get to Teyla and go now.
Flight

Caldwell left after John, so that Rodney found himself staring at his sweaty hand prints on the tabletop, while clenching his hands beneath, ignoring Elizabeth's presence. He knew she was looking at him with her 'understanding' face and it made him want to wipe it off. The anger that had run beneath all of John's other moods since their return made sense now. 'For your own good' left the bitterest of tastes in his dry mouth. It blended with a sense of betrayal so deep he could never express it in words, of loss and rising fear at his own helplessness.

His last thread of loyalty to the SGC had unraveled and parted unheralded while Caldwell spoke words that denied either of them any choice.

Rodney wanted to yell. The need to rage and flat out refuse filled him to the edge of exploding. No, no, no. He held in the words, the vicious, angry things he wanted to use to get his way. Because they wouldn't. Overt defiance demanded a price that would preclude any other effort; a lesson he'd internalized perfectly.

That lesson hadn't been obedience, it had been to reframe the battlefield. In the end, after the whipping, Rodney reminded himself, eyes narrowed, he'd had his way: John had gone to Baratha with them.

"You'll be happier on Earth," Elizabeth said, to fill the silence in the room, Rodney thought. "And John will get better without you…" She flushed pink and looked away from him.

He hated her more than he'd hated the Rale and the Haralim right then. Not once had any Selketi made him feel ashamed of being with John or anything they did together. Caldwell considered him a rapist in all but the word and Elizabeth made John fucking him into something dirty. He hadn't imagined he could miss anything about Selket and he would never forgive Elizabeth for tainting Atlantis to the point that he did.

"Do me the favor of not telling me what I feel," he told her.

John was right. Once they had him on Earth, Rodney would never have even a chance to go through the stargate again. Caldwell and Elizabeth together would never allow him back in Atlantis. He shuddered with the force of his frustration.

He had a sense of time being sucked away, impending known disaster drawing them down into an inescapable gravity well. Elizabeth stared at him and he knew without doubt that no protest would reach her; she had a righteous confidence in her choice that wouldn't be shifted until she stood in the ruins of whatever catastrophe resulted.

"I'd better pack," he said.

Elizabeth looked a little relieved and Rodney wanted to shake his head. Hadn't she recognized the irony? He didn't have anything to pack. A blue bathrobe and a box of paints were the only possessions he had.

And a small, black cuboid Ancient power source.

He headed for the transporter.

He and John had pulled off crazier things than thwarting the SGC. Whatever trouble John was in, they had a better chance together, and the odds went up if they added Teyla to equation. He stepped into the transporter and sent it to the hub closest to his quarters.
Rodney had the paint box open, brushes tossed carelessly over his bed and the powercube in his hand when his door chimed. He eyed it for one heartbeat, then shoved the powercube into his pocket and shoveled the box and brushes together and back into his locker, slamming it shut before going to the door.

"What?" he snapped as the door slid open, softening a little as he recognized Teyla, dressed in fatigues and a laced-up brown leather vest top in the doorway, a heavy-weighted duffel bag hanging from one hand. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, the ubiquitous Atlantis headset tucked onto one ear.

Teyla gave him the old, 'you're a rude man' look. He didn't wait for her to start any good-byes, just grabbed her hand and pulled her inside. "John's in trouble. We need to get out of Atlantis now, before Elizabeth and Caldwell shove me through to Earth tomorrow."

"I know," she said as she pulled loose. Rodney stopped with his mouth open to convince her. It fell a little farther open as Teyla unzipped her duffel bag and revealed the contents: sidearms and holsters, hand stunners, several knives, jackets and two tac vests. Canteens, MREs, Powerbars, medical kit, spare clips and boxes of ammo. "Gear up. John's on his way to the jumper bay. He said you need to crack the security protocols you wrote after Aiden…left."

"He wants to steal a jumper?" Rodney buckled on the belt and fastened the thigh strap on the holster as he considered exactly what he'd need to do to get around the safeguards. "Why am I not surprised? Typical Sheppard plan." If they hadn't been changed significantly since he wrote them… He still had the access Caldwell had provided to purge John's AAR from the system. Rodney smiled smugly. Why not just give the fox a key to henhouse? Teyla was buckling her own sidearm on. She drew a P-90 from the very bottom of the bag and attached the sling to her tac vest. Rodney unholstered his pistol, checked the safety was on and popped out the clip, making sure it was full while Teyla worked the P-90's bolt. The old reflexes John had drilled into him came back effortlessly.

"I just loaded the clips," Teyla told him. "The springs are good."

Rodney nodded, seated the clip in the receiver and racked a shell into the barrel. Not supposed to carry like that, but having one up the spout might save him a fraction of a second. He checked the safety a second time and holstered the pistol. The hand stunner he tucked into his waistband. One knife clipped to the tac vest. The other one threaded onto his web belt. He pulled on the jacket and then settled the tac vest in place. It fit well, a little tighter at the middle than he remembered his last one being, and he realized Teyla must have set it up for him from memory. The tac vest had been customized to carry his laptop. He wondered how long she'd been planning something like this.

"And the plan was not John's. Dr. Zelenka aided me in outfitting a jumper for a rescue mission if we ever found you," Teyla said. "We had a plan in place, in case Colonel Caldwell refused."

"You'd need a pilot," Rodney said. He didn't doubt she and Zelenka had had one lined up.

"Yes. But John is a better pilot than Major Lorne," she agreed, a small smile lifting the corner of her mouth. "And we cannot expect Dr. Zelenka to help us now."

He nodded as he picked up his laptop. "Okay, let's go." Teyla took the laptop and fastened it in place on his back. Her fingers checked the fit of the vest and straightened a strap. Without thinking about it, Rodney turned and did the same for her, the way the team had always done for each other before a mission.
"Rodney, is there anything you wish to take? We can't come back."

"What, like my bathrobe?" he snorted. "Come on."

~*~

John took the long way around to get to the jumper bay from Teyla’s quarters, where she’d insisted they stop before she went to get Rodney. The small arsenal she’d revealed had explained why. He’d recognized some things he’d cached around the city after they recovered it from the Asurans, years before. She even had grenades, C4 and detonators. That shocked him a little until he remembered that Ford had spent their first year teaching her about his specialty.

The irony of heading off to steal a jumper—again—and leave Atlantis made him snort to himself. Santayana should have lived his life.

He hoped to hell he wasn’t as crazy as Ford had been.

The temptation to tap his radio and call Teyla, to find out if she’d got to Rodney and he would help them, teased him. So easy and so dangerous, if anyone else tuned to that channel, heard them and wondered. It would never do to forget that everyone assigned to Atlantis scored smarter than average. Even Garner had more than his share of cleverness.

He didn’t even let himself think about whether Rodney would come with him—them. He wanted that too much, so he buried it.

His boots on the metal-grid risers sent echoes up into the darkened heights as he jogged up the open stairs. He’d stuffed a hand stunner in the back of his belt and pulled his untucked T-shirt over it. Except for a knife slipped unobtrusively into the top of his boot, everything else was still in Teyla’s gym bag. If anyone asked, he’d say she’d left it and he meant to return it later.

He hoped no one asked. He hoped he didn’t encounter anyone until he reached the jumper bay. What he’d done to Garner had been bad enough, he didn’t want to hurt anyone else just for getting in his way. That was why he’d chosen to carry the hand stunner rather than a .9mm. Though he had one in the gym bag, along with several clips and a couple each of shock and smoke grenades. Not wanting to wouldn’t stop him from doing anything necessary to get out of Atlantis.

Ford had probably felt the same way. Not exactly a comforting thought.

He hit the next landing in the stairway and made a right angle turn down a short corridor. The short cut would take him to another set of stairs and bypass the transporter hub for this level of the Tower entirely. Unfortunately, it was a well-traveled stretch of corridor connecting several suites of offices used by the command staff because they were convenient to the control and gate rooms.

John was halfway down the corridor when Lorne entered through the doors at the other end.

~*~

They moved fast. Armed in the halls of Atlantis would raise an alarm from anyone who saw them. Caldwell had defanged the civilians and only the marine security patrols and outgoing gate teams carried weapons. Teyla led him on a course that avoided the security cameras that had been installed at the transporters and main choke points. One turn down a darkened hallway that led to a set of closed up residential quarters and she pointed to a access panel.

"Oh, great."

Rodney grimaced at her. He hated Atlantis’ maintenance ducts. The Ancients had not designed them for normal-sized men. Teyla and Zelenka had no problem slinking through them. He had always
caught his shoulders in the corners. He crawled in behind her, though, and reseated the panel.

"Is John armed?" he asked as he crawled after her.

"Yes," she said from ahead of him. Dim emergency lighting cast most of her in shadow from Rodney's perspective, which was mostly of her boot soles and her khaki-covered rear end. "After Ronon left Atlantis, I relocated the contents of several of John's weapons caches that I knew about."

Of course John had kept weapons off the armory inventory and stashed around Atlantis. Rodney suspected there were probably several of his laptops still sitting in his own hidey-holes, along with other weapons caches that Teyla hadn't known about. John wouldn't have shared them all with her, just in case she was the one hunting him some day. Genii attacks, Asuran occupations, various mental takeovers and getting turned into a bug had made John more than a little paranoid. Rodney had approved. As far as he was concerned, paranoia was a survival trait.

It seemed like they were both right, too.

"Good job," he huffed, scrambling behind her on his hands and knees. His knees were going to kill him when they got out of this. He'd have a collection of bruises, too. Teyla moved fast; he had to work to keep up with her, making his breath come in puffs. His shoulder hit a conduit and stung. He wasn't in shape for this sort of thing anymore.

"Stopping," Teyla warned him as she reached a junction. Rodney paused obediently. "Where do we need to go for you to tap into the security system?"

"Anywhere," he said. "Just give me enough time to get in the system and shut everyone else out."

"Then someplace defensible and close enough to the jumper bay to get there before anyone in the Tower can re-exert control would be best?" Teyla asked.

Rodney considered. "Lab 2E in the Tower. Two flights down from the jumper bay. I can tap the system from there and the storage for the tech that has been classified and isn't dangerous is three doors down. I want to retrieve the personal shield—"

"Isn't it powerless?" Teyla asked. She turned her head to look at him curiously. Dim light, blue-tinted, traced her cheekbone.

"Trust me, I am perfectly aware of how its power source was exhausted," Rodney snapped.

"We should hurry then," Teyla said, starting up the ladder that would take them up from the junction to the next level. "John will be waiting for us once we are done." No argument, no demands for an explanation, just her calm acceptance that his reason would be valid. He loved her with every molecule of his being.

"I am hurrying," Rodney muttered. He squeezed into the narrow space holding the ladder, keeping one arm down and the other stretched overhead to fit. It made climbing a bitch. "I swear the Ancients used malnourished twelve-year-old urchins to work in these ducts."

Teyla's laughter floated down from above him. "Perhaps that explains their beds too."

Luck had a sick sense of humor as far as Rodney had ever formulated an anthropomorphized concept of probability. It seemed to come through for Sheppard—and anyone in his wake—with unrealistic regularity, but before it did, it always jerked them around for the entertainment value of seeing them flail for a while.
It didn’t surprise Rodney in the least to crawl out of the maintenance duct behind Teyla while complaining about nearly dislocating his shoulder and look up at a frowning marine with a weapon aimed right at his face. The baby-faced marine looked more surprised than Rodney felt. Rodney froze, scared he'd scare the marine into pulling the trigger. It had been a while since he'd looked into a gun barrel from the wrong end; that didn't make him nostalgic. He'd experienced plenty of terror since the last time, enough that his heartbeat blipped high and he felt hot from the adrenaline surge flooding oxygen throughout his body, but didn't flinch or scream. An eyeflick to the side located Teyla standing with her hands ostentatiously spread away from her sides, not yet even disarmed. She nodded to Rodney, knees flexing as she settled her weight lower, looking relaxed enough to take a nap. He knew that meant she was ready to do almost anything.

"You mind pointing that thing somewhere else?" Rodney griped, loudly. He had no problem being the distraction for Teyla. "It's not like I could hurt you." He inched forward, showing his own hands were empty. His knees hurt. The marine was alone and that upped their odds nicely. He made it completely out of the access way, thinking how much he hated being on his knees and wondering if their captor had already radioed for reinforcements. The panel automatically closed behind him with a faint shuffle of displaced air.

The marine narrowed his eyes, said, "Hands up—" and Rodney dived forward, face down, arms outstretched, under the muzzle of the weapon and to the side as Teyla moved and kicked downward from her hip, right into the marine's knee. From the corner of his eyes, Rodney saw that knee bend the wrong way and he heard as the bone broke audibly. The chattering, amazingly sharp ring of bullets hitting the wall behind Rodney made him shout, "Have you never heard of a ricochet, you Neanderthal idiot!?" while scrambling forward on his elbows and knees. God damn it, he was going to end up shot in the ass again.

One of the doors to the labs along the corridor opened, a head popped out, then disappeared immediately. Rodney began cursing. He thought that might have been Simpson and Simpson had been around long enough to think fast and sound the alarm.

Everything sped up, too fast for Rodney, too much happening simultaneously to process. Teyla grabbed the marine's arm as his wrecked knee crumbled under him and snatched the P-90 away. Rodney rolled onto his side, fumbling at his thigh for his own handgun, and saw her snap a punch right into her opponent's face. The sound made him cringe while it made the marine cry out. Teyla tossed the P-90 away, far down corridor. The jar of hitting the floor made it fire one more burst that sparked off the doors to Lab 1D as it slid down toward the transporter. Rodney jerked his Beretta out of the holster and aimed it with shaking hands. Teyla closed her hands on the marine's wrist, forearms crossed over each other, and twisted, using her weight, as he fell back from her. His elbow corkscrewed and his wrist splintered. Too fast, too fast, he couldn't keep up, barely remembered to take the safety off the Beretta. He'd never been good at violence, he needed time to think things through, even if he did think faster than almost anyone. His lungs wanted to close up, panic rising through him. He'd never relied on reflex; instinct was alien. Rodney tried to catch his breath and steady his aim, but couldn't fire if he'd wanted to without risking hitting Teyla. She didn't need him. She finished disabling the marine by making some complicated combination to his face, torso and his neck that flipped the man onto his back, made him scream again and ended with Teyla hitting him in the throat. Rodney couldn't follow her moves even while seeing it all.

The sound the marine made choked off and he flailed at his neck wildly, face reddening, eyes wild, while Teyla backed away. Her hair had come loose from its tie and floated down to settle over her temples and cheeks, moving delicately with her breath, giving away how fast her heart beat. Her hands opened and closed unconsciously.

Rodney staggered to his feet by bracing himself against a cool, smooth wall, still holding the gun,
and checked both ends of the corridor. Empty, thankfully, but no doubt Simpson or some scientist from Lab 1A or 1D was already screaming bloody murder to the control room. "Crap," Rodney muttered. He'd never been able to assimilate how fast violence erupted and subsided. The stillness after gunfire made his ears ring and his nerves jump with crazy electricity.

Noise drew his attention back to the floor. The kid marine—couldn't be more than twenty-one or two—kept clutching at his neck and had begun bicycling his legs, broken knee still bending the wrong way, boot heels thudding in the otherwise nearly silent corridor. His face had gone almost purplish, but his lips looked blue.

"He's choking to death," Rodney said. His voice wavered. "We have to radio for a medical team, do something—" The kicking had slowed and weakened into an erratic series of twitches. Teyla dropped to her knees and gently gathered the marine close, fingers tenderly stroking his temples.

"They won't get here in time," she said softly, then murmured to the marine, "Sh, close your eyes and try to find a good memory, think of that, you are there, remember you were happy, Ancestors guide you, you will be there again…"

Rodney watched the man's feet because he couldn't bear to see the desperation in his eyes. Too much like seeing himself going into anaphylactic shock, desperate for air, helpless to do something as basic and simple as breathe.

"He can't do it." He remembered how impossible it was to meditate when you were dying and he hadn't even been in pain. "We have to do something, not let him die like this."

He raised his gaze to Teyla and couldn't identify the emotion on her face. Couldn't tell if she was as wired and jittery and weak feeling as he was in the aftermath. If she felt the same horror he did, she kept it to herself. Still drawing her fingers along the marine's cheek she held out her other hand. Rodney almost protested, but he couldn't. He couldn't just hand her the Beretta and let her do it, either. They were in this together. He'd been willing to shoot in the midst of a fight, he should be willing to do as much for mercy.

He knelt beside Teyla as she lowered the marine's head from her lap to the floor again. "You are not alone," she whispered, looking down into clouding eyes. Rodney rested the muzzle of the Beretta against the marine's head.

"I'm sorry."

He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The report filled the hall and his head, echoing over and over.

They'd just upped the stakes. He couldn't guess if Teyla had miscalculated but he had killed the marine deliberately. Intentionally, mercy and murder so mixed up he would never unravel it; none of it would matter to the rest of the marines who would come after them. The Beretta in his hand, grips damp with his sweat, safety off, bullet in the chamber, condemned him.

He swallowed bile and pulled himself together. Focus. Don't let himself look down. He'd fall apart if he did. He said, "I have to get to 2E now."

Teyla looked at the pistol in his hand. Rodney put the safety on, but didn't holster it. Not yet. He turned his head and looked at the brass casing that had bounced off the wall and now lay, glinting accusingly, by a door.

"Can you get the shield from storage?" Rodney asked. He needed to get into the system now and
worried there wouldn't be time to get it afterward. He needed to get out of the hallway. "Do you remember what it looks like?"

"I remember."

"Good, then meet me in the lab."

They left the dead marine in the corridor. The word would be out anyway.

~*~

"Major," John said casually.

"Colonel," Lorne greeted him, looking puzzled and something else. Worried? John didn't have any good reason to be in this corridor, one level above medical and one down from the gateroom.

John knew the most suspicious thing he could do was justify why he was there. He kept his body language casual and relaxed, swinging the gym bag so that its movement would draw Lorne's gaze away from his free hand. "How are things with you?"

"Good, sir." Lorne still looked suspicious.

John smiled at him, regretting it a half second later as he realized what kind of smile he'd used, one that invited and promised sex. It made Lorne's eyes widen and John curse himself. "I've got to stop doing that," he said ruefully.

"Doing what, sir?" Lorne asked, but his expression gave him away. He knew exactly what John had meant. John's stomach sank. He'd really hoped to get out of Atlantis before facing someone he knew, besides Caldwell, who had seen that report. He didn't give a flying fuck what Caldwell thought of him, but if he had to face contempt from Lorne…that would hurt. He couldn't afford to look away, though.

John forced out a laugh. "The, ah, look. Sorry, it's a habit I'm working on breaking."

Lorne shrugged it off. "I guess it isn't all that easy, coming back like this?" he said. He hesitated and then added, "You should know there's some talk going around about your AAR. Someone got a copy of it. I…read it." He scrubbed at his face. "Colonel…".

"It's okay," John said, wishing it was. "Look, you were going someplace—"

"Just down to the mess. You could join me."

John looked at him. Lorne knew he didn't want to go to the mess and share an awkward meal while people whispered about him. Lorne looked like he regretted the invitation anyway. "No, no thanks," he said.

"Sir?" Lorne asked.

"Yeah?" John felt so tired of it already.

"You aren't planning to stay in Atlantis?" Or the Air Force or the SGC, Lorne didn't say, but John heard it all the same. He didn't think Lorne was telling him to get out because Lorne was disgusted. Lorne wouldn't be talking to him if he felt that way. That counted for something. It still managed to hurt. He couldn't stay, couldn't face this every day, even if there wasn't the specter of Garner hanging over his head.
"No," John said, perfectly truthfully. No matter what Caldwell and the SGC were planning.

"I kind of figured." Lorne held out his hand. "I'm sorry we never found you guys. If things had been different… I wanted to wish you good luck."

John shook Lorne's hand firmly.

"Okay—" Lorne's hand jerked toward his radio headset as the lights in the corridor flickered and dropped to emergency level. The sound of every door and bulkhead in the Tower, maybe the entire city, slamming shut boomed through the halls. The quarantine alarm began shrieking.

Lorne had half-turned away from John when his radio activated.

"—shit," Lorne muttered. His head started to turn back in the next instant, but John hadn't waited to be sure the communique regarded him. He'd drawn the hand stunner from his belt and had it aimed at Lorne, pulling the trigger. Blue energy hit Lorne and crawled over him before it dissipated and Lorne dropped to the floor with a painful thump.

John knelt beside the stunned man, helping himself to Lorne's sidearm and his radio headset. He straightened Lorne out so his limbs wouldn't be cramped from the awkward position when the stun wore off, then slipped the radio set onto his ear and listened to the babble on several channels. A captain and two lieutenants were trying to contact Lorne and figure out the situation. They were overridden in the next second by Caldwell's voice on the secured command channel.

"This is Colonel Caldwell. We have a security breach in the Tower. Some city systems have been compromised. Non-essential personnel are to remain where they are."

Rodney was coming through.

"Major Lorne, report your location. Major Lorne, report. Lorne—Captain Liu, report your location," Caldwell snapped, irritation and impatience clear even via the radio.

"Liu, reporting. I am at the firing range. Out."

John patted Lorne's shoulder. "Sorry about this, buddy," he said.

He scooped up the gym bag and put on his tac vest and the rest of his armament, then loped down the corridor to stairwell, listening as Caldwell told Liu to find someone with the damned gene and get to the labs.

"It's Emmagen and McKay. Stun them if possible," Caldwell directed. "And be on the lookout for Colonel Sheppard. He's—"

A blurt of static and white noise overwhelmed Caldwell's voice and John grinned. Sounded like Rodney had jammed their communications, too.

~*~

"I can't believe this," Rodney muttered as he worked. "They changed the security codes, including the self-destruct, but no one amended the basic interfaces with Atlantis' systems. I wrote these—they should have been completely revised. I always knew they were all idiots, but considering Atlantis hasn't actually been blown up, I thought maybe I'd underestimated Zelenka."

"Can you override the security protocols?" Teyla asked, leaning over his shoulder. Her hand rested on his shoulder. He thought it was the first time she had touched him without conscious thought. She touched John, but he knew why. Touching him had been different, except not, and he'd been
mistaken. Or she'd thought John needed it and he didn't. Or she'd needed to touch John. Maybe she'd been proving something to herself and was now too. He couldn't parse it all out, probably never would, and didn't have time to waste thinking about it now. What he knew was that it felt good, the weight of her hand.

"Of course." He had initiated a quarantine lockdown and then shut down the ZPM. Emergency naquadah generators around the city had kicked in, but eighty percent of the city’s functions were down and hadn’t restarted with them. He activated a program he’d installed years before as an afterthought.

"All right, no one who doesn't have the gene is going to be moving around," Rodney said. "Or talking to each other. I've shut down the radios, too." He had his laptop open, sitting on lab counter, code scrolling over the screen. Teyla returned to lab's doors, on guard. "The control room is shut out of the rest of Atlantis' systems. Anyone who tries something from there will just shut down the power completely."

Two of the Ancients' holograph screens displayed silent, hijacked feeds from the security cameras in the control and gate rooms. Caldwell was shouting and Elizabeth was watching a screen over Chuck's shoulder. He kept typing and accessed the microphone pick-ups in the control room.

"—Miller, get to Liu and the security team as fast as you can," Caldwell ordered, "then get them up to the lab level. Tell Liu he's authorized to stop McKay and Emmagen—and Sheppard if he shows up—any way he considers necessary."

"But they can still move if they have someone with the gene with them," Teyla asked with nod toward the screen showing Lt. Miller bolting out of the control room.

Rodney nodded unhappily. "Yes, I couldn't lock everything down without trapping you and me here and John wherever he is." He typed as he spoke, initiating the next program. He started it and monitored it as it ran. "This is going to block the control room override on dialing the gate. Good thing I left a backdoor in my security program."

"Yes, it is," Teyla agreed. "John told me you would have done so."

"Yes, well," Rodney muttered, flushing a little with a mixture of guilt and satisfaction. Elizabeth had never known he'd done that, when they'd tightened outgoing security in the wake of Ford's getaway. He hadn't told John either, but wasn't surprised he'd guessed. It was taking him longer than he'd thought it would; Zelenka had installed a few new tricks. Or he just wasn't as fast as he'd used to be.

Teyla smiled at him indulgently.

"Where the hell is Lorne?" Caldwell snarled in the control room.

"You don't think that Major Lorne is part of this?" Elizabeth asked.

"We need his damned ATA gene. —Has McKay gone crazy?"

Rodney stifled the urge to open a channel and tell Caldwell he was far from crazy. He stepped back from the laptop and over to the counter where he'd set the personal shield Teyla had recovered for him. He pulled the powercube from his pocket and set it down next to it.

"Here's the thing," Rodney said as he retrieved a set of microtools from the drawer where he knew Zelenka kept them. Time hadn't changed that. He angled a lamp to light his work and began opening up the shield device. "From where we are now or the temporary quarters we came from, there's no
way to use the maintenance ducts to get to the jumper bay or the gate room."

"How soon can Zelenka get control back from whatever McKay has done?"

"I'd imagine that would depend on where he is," Elizabeth told Caldwell.

"And how hard he tries."

Rodney grinned. Zelenka would find a way through what he'd done. Eventually. But not fast enough, not even if he worked all out. He'd have to hack and disable every single ATA lock in Atlantis separately.

Rodney studied the interior of the device. It worked the way he'd remembered. Or rather he remembered the construction scheme and the method of attaching its power source. The source was a tiny black cube exactly like the one from Faeatua, only smaller. But the connections were universal, exactly the same size. He might have cursed the Ancients for many, many things, including their refusal to leave how-to or physics texts anywhere anyone had ever been able to look, but Rodney had to love their penchant for making every crystal to fit any piece of their technology and every connection to the exact same specs.

"Unfortunately, the only way from here to there involves one of those, what does John call them—" he snapped his fingers as he remembered, "—choke points, where Colonel Caldwell has a security detail stationed."

"You noticed?" Teyla asked.

Rodney frowned. Of course he noticed. He kept track of the guards in the palace as well, knew which halls and stairs to take to avoid the worst of them. The same caution had been applied to Atlantis.

Teyla's attention remained more on the door and hall beyond it. Rodney worked, delicately mating the powercube from Faeatua to the personal shield. He had to make several adjustments once it was in place, to keep from burning it out. It wouldn't fit within the casing and had to be secured inside a lifesign indicator. The emitters needed to be remodulated to compensate. He hummed with pleasure as he realized what he wanted to do would work.

"I'm not very fond of the moron corps," he went on, making the necessary adjustments physically, then attaching a sensor and plugging it into his laptop. "But I'm not bloodthirsty enough to want you to shoot them, so I thought this would work a little better." One death already was enough, too much, and he didn't want to think about it anymore. He started a program to check that his adjustments had the shield operating in the parameters he'd wanted.

"This being?"

"With this power source I'm able to expand the personal shield to encompass myself and someone else." Rodney looked up and smiled at her. "Namely, you. We'll need to stick close together, though."

"I hope it is almost ready," Teyla said, her attention switching back to the hall.

Rodney checked the laptop. According to it, the shield would work as long as he remained in physical contact with Teyla.

"Why?"
"A security patrol has just come through the stairwell and is approaching. They have Lt. Miller with them," Teyla reported.

Rodney detached the laptop leads and closed the casing on the shield. He had an awkward moment getting the laptop into place on his back, but managed and joined Teyla, the modified shield emitter in hand. "We have to stay in contact or the shield won't cover you," he whispered. He crowded up against her back and wrapped one arm around her waist and activated the shield with the other. A shimmer of green crawled out from the jury-rigged casing, spreading up Rodney's arm, over his body and across to Teyla. They were encased in it visibly for an instant, then it faded, but Rodney could still sense the faint tingle of it against his bare skin.

"That's a strange feeling," Teyla remarked.

"Yes, well, just hope it doesn't go away," he said.

"Then it is working?"

"Yes. That is, I'm ninety-nine point nine nine nine percent positive that it's working," Rodney said. Teyla raised her eyebrow at him. "What? If I'm wrong I'm going to get shot too."

~*~

John stopped in front of the door into the jumper bay and thought. If someone was inside, he'd be walking right into an ambush. Too bad he didn't have a lifesign detector with him, but he'd never made a habit of carrying one; Rodney always did and could do more with one than John anyway. Unfortunately, he didn't have Rodney with him, either.

The door felt cool under his fingertips as he stood and considered his next move. It felt like a hum, gathered and ready to open under his command. His stomach lurched. He was giving this up, never again to stand in the place that had been made for him down to his very DNA. He had to squeeze his eyes shut and brace himself briefly.

This wasn't the first time, John told himself. They'd all evacuated Atlantis for the Tria's Ancients. It had been bearable only because he'd believed the Ancients would keep the city safe. Only they hadn't, too arrogant and out of touch with ten thousand years of changes to adapt. This time, well… Caldwell and Zelenka and Elizabeth would do their jobs, just like they had for the last two years. John trusted them with that much. Atlantis wouldn't suffer without him.

Atlantis had always been more than just the structure of the city anyway. Atlantis had been dream and duty and family. None of that existed only in its towers and halls. That lay with Rodney and with Teyla and Ronon somewhere beyond the stargate even if… John breathed in and forced the air out. Even if Rodney didn't come with them.

The door seemed to still under his touch, the hum falling away into stillness.

Thinking of Rodney reminded him of all the ways Rodney knew the city that John hadn't, even with the gene, until Rodney showed him. That included the maintenance ways. Doors sometimes malfunctioned. He'd take the maintenance ducts into the jumper bay.

He patted the door, then paused. What would McKay do, he asked himself, smiling. Doors sometimes malfunctioned. Especially sensors.

Five minutes later, he'd cross-connected a crystal in the sensor panel, closed it up, and activated it, then dashed down the corridor and around the corner as the door slid open. He heard it immediately slide closed again. Then open. Closed, open, closed, open, repeat. That would distract anyone inside
the jumper bay.

John opened an access panel and wriggled inside, pulling the gym bag of goodies along with him.

He managed to get turned around and exit into a storage room and one other corridor because the ducts were laid out to access critical city installations, not facilitate travel from room to room, but John reached the jumper bay on his third try. He had some new bruises and a scrape down his shoulder to his elbow when he found the right place to exit. He also had his stunner in hand as he ducked his head out of the duct and couldn't help grinning. The panel opened into the very rear of the jumper bay, where the jumpers nestled in and charged their drive pods. Completely out of sight of the door.

He could hear voices.

"There's no one out there, Bigs."

"The city's locked down and our radios are out, I think a little fucking caution is called for, jackass. That damn door didn't start opening and closing all by itself," a second, annoyed voice responded, presumably belonging to Bigs.

"It's ten thousand years old, things break."

"Hey, Juarez, what do you think?"

"We stay here until we get orders otherwise, is what I think."

"Oh, aye fucking aye, Lieutenant," the unnamed complainer said. "Since when do you give the orders?"

"Since the Crotch promoted me three weeks ahead of you, dipshit."

John rested his hand against the hull of a jumper. Three, he thought. There were three of them, the three marine pilots with the ATA gene Caldwell had pointed out at the party. It sounded like they were all three somewhere near the door into the corridor. Exactly the way he'd planned it.

He wouldn't have done it this way two years before, but he'd learned a hard lesson from the slavers and had no intention of ever walking through a door or gate blind again without some distraction or protection. Not when he had any other option. How long would it have taken to send a MALP through the gate to M47-031? Rodney could have equipped one with a lifesign detector or even just a damn heat sensor tuned to pick out anything hovering around 98ºF. The irony that he'd learned caution and forethought on Selket didn't escape John; the very things Caldwell had always thought he lacked as a commander.

The three marines were still ragging on each other, distracted and clueless.

John padded to the prow of the jumper and peered toward the door. As he'd thought, all three marine pilots were there. The tallest man had the shortest in a headlock and was laughing. The third had a thoughtful look on his features as he considered the still cycling door.

John stunned him first. The other two presented a single target and his fired twice, the blue bolts of energy hitting them before they could separate.

He waited in silence after they fell, listening, in case anyone else remained in the jumper bay that he hadn't noticed.
Nothing and no one.

With a nod to himself, John tucked the stunner under his belt and carried the gym bag over to the jumper in the farthest corner of the bay. Jumper One, Teyla had told him, was ‘officially’ sidelined by Zelenka. The jumper had turned into a hangar queen after they were lost, until it became easier to cannibalize it for parts to keep the others operating with full back-ups. No one but Zelenka was allowed access to the jumper in order to keep straight exactly what had been removed from it, in case they ever had the opportunity and replacement parts to fix it. That was what the science department reports told Colonel Caldwell and Elizabeth each month and neither of them had any reason to believe otherwise.

A touch to the hull and Jumper One's rear hatch dropped open soundless and smooth for John. He stepped into the dark interior and hesitated, waiting for his eyes to adapt. A riot of open panels, darkened crystals and strings of opalescent-pale connectors hanging loose slowly resolved out of the overall darkness. The jumper stayed dark and inert and John wondered if Teyla had been wrong, if Zelenka really had gutted it for parts. He dropped the gym bag onto a bench and reached up to the nearest crystal, carefully sliding it back into place until it seated with a distinct click. The crystal lit: pale, cold blue, perfectly good. John went on, reseating all the other crystals. They all lit up and the jumper hummed to life around him, overhead lights coming on, revealing storage bins and nets packed with supplies, everything from arms and ammo, to cases of medical supplies and gear, MREs, tents, cold weather gear, tools, even two laptops. The cat's cradle of disconnected wiring proved to be nothing but camouflage.

He closed the panels over the crystals and headed for the cockpit, pausing once to crouch and check one locked and bolted down case taking up part of the deck.

John whistled. Teyla had said Zelenka had worked with her to stock the jumper for anything and she hadn't been kidding. That was a naquadah generator. Granted it was a Mark I that probably dated back to the original expedition, it still must have taken some serious effort to 'disappear' it without initiating a citywide search. He'd always known Zelenka was the mastermind behind Atlantis' blackmarket. Apparently becoming CSO had only given him even greater opportunities. He patted the case, then straightened up.

Something in him opened up when he sank down into the pilot's seat. He finally identified it as the part of himself he'd thought had withered away when it hadn't come to life after returning to Atlantis. He'd needed to be free again to feel it and hadn't, until this moment, until he'd thrown away his career, turned his back on Earth and given up Atlantis. The sweet edge of adrenaline, the rush of committing to his course, long past the point of no return buoyed him up. It almost made him laugh, but John knew it wasn't really funny. He'd never considered himself self-destructive, but he got why some people had believed it. He never felt freer than when he couldn't turn back and he'd made some stupid decisions pursuing that feeling.

Part of him wondered if this wasn't one of them.

The stunner tucked into his belt dug uncomfortably into his back when he sat back. John got rid of it and tried to relax.

John ran his hands over the control console and it responded, displaying his own preferred checklist before him. Everything green to go, a full load of drones even. Zelenka was amazing. Teyla, too. They'd put all of this together, on the chance that some day they would find him and Rodney and might need the jumper. He paused and realized it hadn't been just Zelenka and Teyla either. Neither of them had the ATA gene. Lorne had to have been part of it, too, John realized, and was doubly glad he'd stunned him. There would be no question in anyone's mind that Lorne had collaborated in
their escape or the hijacking of the jumper.

Caldwell might suspect Zelenka's part, since he'd sidelined Jumper One, but John didn't think it would matter. Elizabeth would protect Zelenka's position as CSO. She needed him.

He powered the jumper up and brought it into a gentle hover, moving out from its dock to the middle of the bay, where the deck would iris open to provide access to the gate room. He let the jumper settle to the deck. Nothing to do now but wait.

He'd been deliberately refusing to think of anything but the next thing he had to do to get this far, but now he had to face up to the possibility that it would just be Teyla coming, that Rodney wouldn't be with her. He reminded himself that Rodney might not want to give up going back to Earth to run away with John. He'd survive, he knew, if Rodney stayed behind. He'd found a kind of balance since beating Garner down. It might be the precarious balance of a surfer riding a monster wave into the shore, but it felt right. Teyla would be with him and he'd be free, he'd have the sky until the jumper ran out of power, and he'd know Rodney was safe. He could live with that better than the future Caldwell and Elizabeth seemed to have mapped out for him.

John bowed his head. He'd miss Rodney more than Atlantis and Earth put together, but he knew he would have made this same choice eventually. That realization eased the ache in his chest.

~*~

"Ah, fuck it, that's Purdy."

Rodney leaned his forehead against Teyla's shoulder, one of the buckles on her tac vest digging into his eyebrow. The voice of the marine out in the corridor finding the body might not stay with him forever, but the words would. The marine Teyla had killed had a name now and Rodney would not forget it. Under his arm, Teyla tensed and shuddered. She would remember too.

He sucked in a deep breath. He'd been committed before. He couldn't waver now.

"We have to go," Teyla murmured.

"Yeah, just…"

Teyla had a hand stunner in her hand, not the P-90. He felt vaguely grateful for that.

"Miller, get down to the transporter and stay down, we need you to stay mobile," came the sharp words of the officer leading the security detail. Rodney remembered him from Elizabeth's party. Tall, with sharp features, the kind women found handsome, and something in his dark eyes that had made Rodney shiver. He'd been happy John hadn't gone offworld on any team with Liu.

"Rodney?" Teyla asked. "Will the stunner fire through the shield?"

Rodney blinked. "Oh, crap," he muttered.

Teyla turned her head to look at him.

"I don't think so," he admitted, because he didn't know. The shield allowed for exchange of oxygen and waste gases, much the way Goa'uld shields did, but it hadn't admitted liquids and had been immune to electrical and stun charges. He did not want to find out it would mirror a charge inside.

Teyla touched his arm where he had it around her waist. "Then I will have to be outside the shield."

"I can't just touch you and have it protect you," he said. "I'll have to de- and re-activate it once we're
in contact again."

Teyla's fingers rested on the back of his wrist, stirring the hairs there. Her touch felt like a butterfly's.

"Whatever happens, you must go on to the jumper bay and accompany John. Find Ronon. He will come to Doldis in two months."

"And leave you?" His voice cracked.

"And leave me, if necessary."

Protesting would be a colossal waste of time. If Rodney had been willing to leave Teyla in the lurch, he knew very well John wouldn't and so did she.

"Dr. McKay. Ms. Emmagen. Please exit the lab with your hands in the air," Liu shouted from outside.

Rodney grimaced to himself. He hated playing hero. He let go of Teyla and stepped around her. If the shield couldn't encompass her, he could at least stand between her and the guns.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled. "Don't shoot!"

He walked out, Teyla behind him, his bulk and her small stature obscuring the stunner in her hand for a vital instant. Teyla spun and fired the stunner at the marines stationed to take them from the rear. When she did, the men in front of Rodney fired at him. They weren't using stunners and part of Rodney was weirdly proud they considered him that much of a threat, but most of him swung between outrage—they were shooting at him!—and smug satisfaction—a lot of good it was doing them.

At the same time, he knew they were screwed if the marines flanked them. So he ran right at them, spreading his arms to the side, expanding the shield's circumference and allowing Teyla a little more cover.

The bullets hit the shield and hung there, a half meter out from his body, green charges starfishing out from the impact points. The faint crackle of each hit was obscured by the louder crack of the bullets firing. The shield muffled the higher and lower frequencies, creating a distancing effect. The shield flared brilliantly green and the bullets pattered to the floor, threatening to roll under his feet as Rodney pinballed into their midst. He thought they should all be grateful the shield absorbed impact energy or ricochets would have surely hit more than one of the marines.

Failure just provoked more gunfire from the marines. Liu screamed at them to cease fire because now there were ricochets coming off the walls and the ceiling, someone screaming as they took friendly fire. Teyla sniped, picking them off with the stunner and Rodney hit a marine. The shield went green before his hand could reach the marine's jaw, and Rodney felt nothing even as the man went down. The corridor ventilation kicked in harder, trying to compensate for the propellant gases smoking the air. God, he should have thought of using a smoke grenade. John would have thought of that. He kicked at the marines still surrounding him and Teyla stunned another three.

Frustrated, one marine tried to use his P-90 as a club, but it bounced off the shield, and he stumbled off-balance into the man next to him. Teyla ducked under Rodney's arm and stunned both of them.

Rodney sucked in a breath and realized the corridor had gone quiet. The only ones still standing were Liu and Miller. Miller stood a step behind Liu.

"McKay," Liu said, "where do you think you can go?" He already looked a little stunned. His dark gaze flickered over the downed marines.
"It's a big galaxy," Rodney said.

"We'll find you," Liu promised, full of grim determination.

Rodney laughed at him.

"You couldn't before."

Before Liu could say anything more, Miller brought the butt of his sidearm down onto the back of his head. Liu crumpled and Rodney gaped at Miller.

"You better get out of here," Miller said.

"What…?"

"And could you stun me and the Captain? Maybe he won't remember this."

Rodney was still gaping as Teyla stepped out from behind him and said, "Thank you, Sergeant." Then she fired the stunner at him, followed by Liu. Rodney stared. "Did he just—why?"

Miller.

He remembered fifteen hours inside the jumper, coming back from the satellite after Peter died, with Miller piloting. Rodney had stretched out on a bench in the back and tried to sleep; he'd needed it so badly. At some point, he had and only woke when they had arrived in Atlantis, an emergency thermal blanket stretched over him: that had to have been Miller. He'd forgotten that.

"We do not have time to worry about it," Teyla said.

"I—well, yes, I just didn't expect—Anyway." He thought the shield off, grabbed Teyla's free hand and thought it back on so that it encompassed them both. "Jumper bay. Right. Don't let go."

They ran.

~*~

Every minute that ticked away ratcheted John's tension toward the unbearable. What if Teyla didn't make it? What if the marines or someone stopped Rodney? His fingers twitched toward the controls. A picture of the damage a single drone fired into the control room could create flashed through John's brain. Elizabeth wouldn't believe John would do it. Nausea rolled his stomach and made sweat break out under his arms. He didn't know if he could do that, attack Atlantis, because it wasn't the same as running away. Leaving Rodney and Teyla was not an option, though. If they had been caught—or worse, wounded—he would have to do something. He couldn't go without knowing they were all right and free.

He watched the door cycle open and closed over and over, keeping an eye on the three stunned marines and breathing slowly instead of drumming his fingers or jiggling his knee. His lungs emptied in a soft whoosh as Teyla and then Rodney darted through the door. Rodney stumbled over one of the marines as Teyla led him to the jumper.

John lowered the rear hatch with a thought and spun the pilot's chair to look down the length of the jumper as they boarded.

"It's about time you got here," he said, faking casualness, so relieved he felt lightheaded. Rodney, Rodney, Rodney, his heartbeat seemed to repeat. He needed to touch him, and only kept from jumping to his feet with an effort.
"You couldn't move those lummoxes?" Rodney complained. "I could have tripped on one of them and broken my neck! I've already nearly dislocated my shoulder and been shot at, I can't imagine the sheer humiliation of rendering myself into a paraplegic through falling over an unconscious moron." He was already struggling out of his tac vest and heading for the co-pilot's seat. John made a note to ask about the 'shot at' comment—later. "Come on, come on, before someone does something insane like disabling the stargate—"

"Can they do that?" John asked as he closed the hatch behind Teyla and brought the jumper back into hover mode.

"Well, I could," Rodney snapped, "and while Zelenka doesn't approach my level of sheer brilliance, he is sneaky and an engineer—"

"And a hell of friend," John said. The smile taking over his face almost hurt.

Rodney stopped as he reached the co-pilot's seat and swung around. "Is that a naquadah generator?" he demanded, pointing at it.

"Yep," John said.

"I take back everything I ever said about him."

Teyla settled into the seat behind them. John looked back at her, then to Rodney. "He was very bitter that Colonel Caldwell did not initiate the search for our team fast enough," she said. "As were many of us when the search was ended. So we prepared Jumper One for any eventuality with Major Lorne's assistance."

He really hoped Lorne would forgive him for getting stunned. This way Lorne didn't lose his career. Jesus. Stealing a jumper to come after him and Rodney…Lorne didn't need that kind of black mark on his records; John knew.

He shook his head to clear it and said, "Last chance to change your minds."

"Don't be an idiot," Rodney snapped. His hands moved over the console in front of him as he mated his laptop into the jumper's systems, too intent to even look up.

Teyla smiled. "We are committed, John."

"Really, really committed," Rodney confirmed. He winced a little.

"Okay," John said. "Here goes nothing."

He initiated the sequence that opened the deck below them and sent the jumper down into the gate room. He kept one hand on the stick, but reached across and set his other on Rodney's arm without looking that way.

~*~

Accessing Atlantis' systems using the jumper as an interface came as easily as breathing. Already responding to John, it wanted to cooperate instead of resisting Rodney's efforts. "Teyla?" he asked as he typed, "What's the gate address for Doldis? I've set a worm to eating certain addresses in the database. I'd like to get it."

Teyla left her seat and pointed out the address on the dialing console. Six chevrons, plus the seventh point of origin that changed according to the gate in use. Base eight math, like everything else the Ancients did. His fingers raced over the keyboard.
"Did you get Selket's too?" John asked in a hoarse voice.

"First thing," Rodney said.

"Thank you."

Teyla did not ask why they wanted to keep Atlantis from ever stumbling through Selket's gate. "Any other suggestions? No? Okay, the rest of them will be random. If it takes out an address someone knows, they'll reprogram it, but the ones they don't, they'll never miss." Rodney hit Enter with a flourish.

"What did you do to that door, anyway?" he asked as they sank down to the control room level. It provided a distraction from looking up from his laptop. He didn't want to see Elizabeth or the rest of the control room shift. He began crafting the commands that would return control of Atlantis' systems to the Tower and mask exactly how he'd overridden it once the gate shut down. Zelenka would figure it all out eventually, but maybe not the secondary backdoors Rodney had programmed in from Lab 2E. He could guess how John had jury-rigged the door control without much effort, but why baffled him.

"Diversion," John said. "I came in through the ducts that service the jumper docks."

Rodney thought of that and contrasted it with his and Teyla's charge against the marines in the corridor outside 2E. He hiccuped. The hiccup turned into a laugh he couldn't smother. He had to stop typing as the laughter took over, shaking him. John flashed him a concerned look. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, it's—" Rodney waved his hand, laughing so hard he couldn't draw in a breath. "—it's—"

"Hey, are you okay?" John said, catching his hand and squeezing. The jumper was dropping fast, rotating on its axis at the same time, John just at the controls as ever. Marines were running up the stairs.

Rodney bobbed his head. "No, yes, it's—I'm—" He slapped his other hand over his mouth to stop the laughter. Something hiccuped in the code cascading down his laptop screen. Someone was trying to undo his work. Not Zelenka. He thought it might be Simpson. She was good and getting close. He had to pull himself together or they might end up trapped in the gateroom.

"Teyla?" John asked. The jumper faced Elizabeth's office now, windows dark, only emergency lights glowing.

"I do not know," she said. Her head jerked to the side and she pointed. "They are about to fire on us, I think."

Rodney squeezed his hand back and managed to say, "It's just the irony." He let go and started typing, blocking Simpson's bid to re-exert control of the city and denying her access from her current network station.

"What?"

"You didn't charge in like you're made of Teflon and Kevlar for once."

John looked slightly annoyed. "And that was bad?" He activated the jumper shield.

Rodney shook his head and gulped back more laughter. "No, see, that's what Teyla and I did!"
A flare of white hit the jumper, dispersing over the shield. Two more followed, the nimbus of energy from Wraith weapons cranked up to destructive levels spreading over the viewport. The shield shrugged them off without problem; even Wraith small arms couldn't penetrate something designed to withstand everything from orbital re-entry to plasma weapons and bomb-pumped lasers. It still snapped John's attention away from Rodney back to the sensors and reminded Rodney they had well and truly parted ways with Atlantis.

John's eyes narrowed, his gaze moving over Rodney, looking for anything wrong.

"No, no, I had the personal shield, we're okay," Rodney said. He pulled his hand free. "We're both okay."

"We are," Teyla agreed.

"Oh-kay," John drawled, still obviously mystified by Rodney's outburst, but willing to let it go for the moment. "Can you dial the gate?"

He caught a glimpse of Elizabeth and Caldwell on the control room overlook. Both of them were shouting, Caldwell red-faced and grim, but no sound reached inside the jumper. Caldwell wrested a Wraith stunner from one of the marine guards as another fired one straight at the jumper. The energy bloom over the shield obscured him and then the jumper's sightline moved past him as John rotated the jumper to face the gate instead.

"Screw you too," Rodney muttered as he pressed the symbols for a space-based gate over a mudball moon on the other side of the galaxy. There wouldn't be any Wraith hanging around that system, not that they'd be there longer than it took to dial another gate.

John choked and Rodney looked at him. "What, you never wanted to say that to Caldwell?"

"Rodney," Teyla chided, "Perhaps another time?"

"No time like the present, I say," he replied. "It's not like we're going to have another opportunity."

John laughed hard enough he had to lift his hands away from the controls. "Point." Rodney eyed him, wondering if John wasn't as close to hysteria as he was. It hadn't been that funny. John had been positively white when they entered the jumper. Waiting for them had to have been hard for him; he always needed to do.

"This is it," John said, taking a deep breath himself, before activating the microphones that let them hear and be heard outside the jumper.

"Colonel Caldwell, Doctor Weir, in case you hadn't guessed: I resign. By the way, I left Corporal Garner tied up in a room off the Gamma Delta transporter hub on Sublevel 8. A lifesign sweep won't pick him up, I spoofed the sensors there. He's been there a couple of hours and isn't in too good of shape."

"Sheppard, stand down," Caldwell ordered. "You will be—"

John cut him off and glanced at Rodney. "Anything to add?"

Rodney nodded. John reactivated the mics.

"Elizabeth. Jeannie's going to come after the SGC with both barrels when she doesn't hear from me. Sorry about that. And...I'm genuinely sorry about the marine."
Teyla leaned over his shoulder.

"Corporal Purdy's death is my responsibility," she declared.

"Sheppard, McKay, set that jumper down now!" Caldwell shouted. "That's an order."

John smirked. "I'm sure you know how good I am at following orders," he said. "Don't let anyone follow us through the wormhole, we've opened it into an orbital gate."

"John, Rodney," Elizabeth called out. "Don't do this. Don't go throw away everything you could accomplish here—"

Rodney didn't hesitate; he set his fingers over the Atlantis point of origin symbol, the crystal lighting under his light touch. All three of them fell silent as they watched the chevrons light on the stargate's ring. It struck him each time, how much faster the Pegasus gates were than the ponderous stargates scattered across the Milky Way, and how beautiful they all were, as the last chevron lit and the wormhole formed, the energy backsplash rushing into the gateroom before settling into the placid puddle of watery blue light.

The soft sigh could have come from any one of them.

"I closed my eyes the first time I walked through," John said. He looked pale. Rodney remembered that day under Cheyenne Mountain, when they'd all stepped into the unknown, even the few of them with gate experience. They'd walked away from Earth without looking back. He had stepped through the stargate on John's heels. He'd closed his eyes and breathed out the way Jackson had told him and opened them in Atlantis. He'd followed John up steps that lit beneath their feet, not knowing then that he'd spend the rest of his life following John, through stargates, into the dark, into the light, wherever he went. With his eyes open.

"So did I," he admitted.

"Toren had to push me through," Teyla said.

"And now…," John said. He looked at the event horizon caught within the ring with a mixture of hunger and reverence that Rodney might have mocked, if he hadn't felt the same things.

"And now," Rodney repeated.

The wormhole flickered. Rodney sucked in a breath and cursed Simpson and Chuck. One of them was trying to interrupt the power to the stargate. Almost…almost… "If we're going to go it has to be now."

John met Rodney's gaze, then Teyla's.

Without another word between them or for anyone else, the jumper slid forward and entered the wormhole, leaving Atlantis behind.

~*~

Stars.

So many stars, jeweled and burning brilliant, so far away that they were mere cold light, but so many that no man could ever know them all. John heard Rodney catch his breath and knew he felt the same awe.

They shone beyond the viewport as the jumper exited the gate and rotated. The system primary
appeared as a dull red-molten coin against the starshot darkness. Before them hung the shadow of the nightside moon, only a rust-colored crescent illuminated from where the jumper had taken up orbit.

John oriented the jumper on the stargate again, platinum and azure, sparkling as it rolled through space. He wondered what had moved the Ancients to leave it over a airless moon.

Rodney dialed another gate. John piloted them into the puddle, into the rush and infinity of the wormhole and out, high over a planet green and blue and lovely as Earth itself.

"There's a second gate on the far side," Rodney said, reading information off a HUD that appeared. John glanced at it. "Let's use it for the next dial out."

"Anyone following us will lose time searching the planet," Teyla agreed. She'd left her seat to lean over John's shoulder and look at the viewport. The side of her forearm brushed against his neck and then his jaw when he turned his head to look at her.

"Nice," he commented and took the jumper down through the atmosphere in a shallow, arcing descent reminiscent of a space shuttle's return to Earth, calculated to bring them to the second stargate upon the completion of entry. He did the calculations in his head and checked them against the jumper's suggested course, smiled to himself and adjusted it by a degree, unwilling to set up a show as the air dragged against the shield just to save a little time. No reason to light up the sky like a shooting star.

Beautiful world, John thought, as it grew larger and larger through the approach, sweeping over snowcapped mountain ranges, aquamarine seas, verdant jungles and golden deserts, lakes like sapphires spilled over green velvet and sage green plains. The jumper flashed over herds of animals that lifted their heads and ran in response to the sonic boom it trailed in passing and a flock of birds thick and dark as a thundercloud. They were still above the birds as they passed toward the setting sun, but he patted the jumper fondly, thinking about the inevitable crash that would have resulted from encountering them while flying a jet.

The stargate appeared in the distance, occupying a meadow near the center of the planet's largest continent.

"Dial," John said.

Teyla recited an address, Rodney activated it and the wormhole splashed open and settled as John dove the Jumper. They boomed out on another world of red, shifting sand and an indigo sky, three silvery moons chasing each other over the horizon. Huge mesas of maroon stone dotted the empty desert. Rodney read the information gathered by the jumper and said, "Five hour revolution."

"Yeah?" John asked. "Want to stick around and watch the sunset?" He was already turning the jumper back toward the stargate where it sat on the flat crown of a mountain-sized mesa.

"No thanks," Rodney said. "It's cold enough to freeze your bones out there."

John gazed out the viewport. In the distance, a mist fell from the sky but never reached the crimson sand. He aimed the jumper back at the silvery gleam of the stargate. "Okay."

"It is beautiful," Teyla remarked.

John stroked his hands over the controls. "Yeah."

Rodney dialed in another address. They passed through three more orbital gates and one on an airless moon circling a green and ice-blue gas giant that dominated the sky and reminded John of pictures of
Saturn. The next two gates were on terrestrial worlds, one inhabited and one definitely habitable, though there were no signs near its stargate. The heavy jungle surrounding it could have concealed an empire the size of the Aztecs, though. John took one look and shook his head, commenting only, "Bugs." Clouds of them exploded out of the trees as the jumper flew over them. Rodney dialed again, while Teyla patted John's shoulder.

They went through into murky blue-green darkness, water light far above them, and the shield flared as the jumper itself groaned.

John checked the altimeter, found it scrambled and called up the pressure reading instead. "Okay, we need to get out of here," he said and brought the jumper around in a rolling curve, jumping in his seat as a vast, unblinking dark eye swung past the viewport, followed by what looked like miles of fungus-pale tentacles.

"Oh, yes, I am in complete agreement, out of here, now, or even yesterday," Rodney said and gulped, looking pale, sweat shining at his temples.

Teyla made a small sound that John took as agreement. They didn't feel it inside the jumper, thanks to the dampeners, but John watched the HUD and their position shot to the side in conjunction with a sizzling thump as a tentacle lashed against the shield. He flinched as one tried to wrap around the jumper, catching a glimpse of tooth-lined, pinkish-gray suckers, scraping vainly against the shield, sparks of energy fizzling where they touched.

"Okay, that," Rodney whispered, "that is bad. Really, really—"

The jumper flipped over.

"—really bad," John finished. He fired a drone, a tiny golden squid-looking weapon against a giant alien supersquid and held his breath as it hit. The jumper was thrown through the water with a wave of force from the explosion and then the viewport went black.

"Tell me it didn't swallow us," Rodney squeaked. He wasn't being ridiculous. The thing out there was big enough to swallow them. His face had taken on a sickly gray shade.

The jumper groaned again and John oriented it toward the stargate using the instruments. "I think it inked us. Dial the gate. Anywhere."

"Dialing, dialing, dialing."

"Faster," Teyla said, as another tentacle, pale and trailing thick fluid from scores in its dappled skin slipped past the viewport.

The light from the initialized wormhole reached them through the inky water and John sent the jumper toward it at max thrust, listening to the jumper strain and holding his breath. One HUD showed the squid's huge lifesign gaining on their jumper's position. It dwarfed them the way the Daedalus would.

"The shield is eating our power up," Rodney told him.

"I know."

He could see the power levels dropping with every passing second, moving from blue bars into green and heading for yellow.

A tentacle slammed into them. John fought the controls and returned to course. The glow of the open
stargate filled the viewport and they picked up speed. He checked and realized they were being pushed by a sudden current. "Pressure's so high it's forcing water through the event horizon," he said.

"Yeah, we always figured that could happen with an underwater gate," Rodney muttered.

The jumper reached the stargate and they were in, rushing down a green tunnel that twisted, rolled, turned them inside out and back, but ended before the mind could encompass it, and out. The jumper surfed forward on a gushing, horizontal geyser until John took it up, while gravity drew the water down to create a muddy swamp around the stargate.

He turned the jumper nose down so they could see the water hosing out of the stargate. It cut off abruptly as the wormhole closed. Rodney lifted his hand away from the dialing console. "Thirty-eight minutes of sea water could make a real mess," Rodney said. "Besides, we don't want to stay here too long, do we?"

John glanced at Teyla and noticed her hands were closed on the tops of his and Rodney's seats. Her knuckles were pale and the leather-like upholstery dented deeply under her fingers. Her lips were pressed together and she swallowed repeatedly. "I—"

"Yeah, me too," John said. "Twenty-thousand Leagues under the Sea is one classic I never wanted to live."

"That thing back there came out of an H.P. Lovecraft nightmare anyway, not Jules Verne," Rodney added. "Can we go some place where you can put the jumper down and get out? I think I'm going to throw up."

Teyla forced her hands open and leaned between John and Rodney to dial in an address. "Ronon told me of this world. It is empty, he said, and he camped there safely more than once while he was Running."

"Good enough," John said and sent the jumper through the wormhole one more time.

~*~

Rodney forced himself to keep his eyes down as they went through the stargate one more time. Listening to the jumper creak under the pressure of the water had stirred up old phobias. Perfectly justified phobias, he reminded himself, then decided that had been a mistake. He didn't want to remember his time in a sunken jumper, alternate selves who drowned, or pseudo-whales and sunspots.

A splash of sunshine, late afternoon and richly golden, through the viewport brought his head up. John had taken them away from the stargate and they were skimming across rolling grasslands.

"Teyla?" John asked. "Pick out a good camp?"

She leaned between them so closely Rodney caught a fading whiff of fear sweat from her. That squid creature had scared her too. "There, where the trees follow that watercourse."

John angled the jumper toward the distant, greener thread winding through the plain and eventually set it down in a mostly level meadow that edged onto a stand of broadleaved trees bordering a stream. After a quick check of the lifesign detector for anything large in the surroundings, he lowered the rear hatch. The scents of warm grass and earth, even a hint of the running water, pushed into the slightly stale jumper. Rodney got to his feet, stiff muscles in his back and shoulders protesting, and made his way to the hatch.

He paused, just inside the jumper and looked around.
A scuff of boot sole on the metal deck behind him heralded John joining him. Rodney felt him, the heat coming off his body, standing just behind him, so close any shift would have them touching, but not touching. Yet.

"Still going to throw up?"

Rodney turned his head and glared over his shoulder. "I've changed my mind."

"Good." John looked serious despite the lilt in his voice. Rodney held still, waiting, and was rewarded as John snaked his arms around him from behind, chest pressed to Rodney's back, his weight settling against Rodney. His breath grazed over Rodney's ear, followed by a chaste press of his lips to the hollow just behind the lobe. Rodney rested his hands over John's, hoping he'd relax a little.

"Hey," he said, tracing a glyph over the back of John's hand with one fingertip. Loosed. The closest Selketi came to freedom.

"I didn't know…" John's words were soft, nearly inaudible puffs of moist air against Rodney's neck, making him shiver and press back. "I thought you might want to go back to Earth."

"No," Rodney said. He meant it. He could imagine the life he would have led on Earth and didn't like it; lost in his research, hiding from the rest of the world, eventually alienating Jeannie and her family with his neediness and too many secrets. Without John. No, he hadn't wanted that. "No," he repeated and laced his fingers between John's.

Teyla cleared her throat. Rodney realized they were blocking the jumper's hatch. The two of them shuffled to the side without letting go, which made Teyla chuckle. John shifted and rested his forehead against the nape of Rodney's neck. It didn't feel that great, since they were both sweaty. Teyla trailed her fingers over their clasped hands as she went past.

After another moment of just standing together, they followed her out and down to the water, spooking a tiger-striped gazelle-like creature into splashing through it in two bounds and away up the other bank. It's flippy bottlebrush tail stood up, pale orange underside reminding Rodney of a candle flame. They took that to mean there were no large predators in the vicinity and took off their boots. Feet dangling in the cold water, dampness seeping through the seats of their pants from the grass, they sat and related what had happened on Atlantis.

Teyla picked up a stone and threw it into the stream when John told them about Garner. It skipped twice and ricochet off a rock in the shallows. "I wish it had been him and not Corporal Purdy," she stated in a thin, strained voice.

Rodney stared at the light flashing off the surface of the water until his eyes watered blindly. He curled his hand into a fist on his thigh.

John picked up a stone, examined it, set it back down and found another one. It satisfied him better than the first one and he skipped it across the water. Five hops before it plopped under the rippling surface. "Pretty good for moving water," he said and then added, "Damn it." Rodney knew it was because the marines had been his once and the death would stay with John, just like they all did, even though he hadn't been there.

Rodney bent forward and swished his hands through the water, then rubbed them dry against his pants. "Look, we can't sit here all day. While we're in the jumper, we're shielded, but right now, Zelenka or someone in Science is trying to triangulate on us based on the subcutaneous transmitters. So we need to get them out."
Teyla stood in a fluid movement. "I did not have mine replaced after I returned to Atlantis," she said.

"You can help dig ours out," John said as he got up too. He picked up his boots, but didn't put them on again.

"If you wish."

"We wish," Rodney told her as he let John pull him up. He thought about where Reinhardt had injected the miniaturized subspace transmitter and groaned. "Maybe not." He didn't mind the idea of Teyla feeling up his inner thigh, but she'd be doing it with a sharp blade. "I think I'll just get it out myself."

"What, you aren't even going to ask me?" John asked with a genuine pout.

Rodney rolled his eyes.

"Sure you wouldn't get distracted?"

It ended up being a three person job. Rodney sat wearing only his T-shirt and boxers on a crate of MREs in the middle of the meadow, thighs spread, while Teyla held a tray of sterilized medical instruments at ready and John ran his gloved hands up the inside of Rodney's left thigh, trying to find the tiny bump of the transmitter under his skin. Rodney alternated between squirming and holding statue-still while resolutely telling himself he wasn't going to get hard. When his willpower slipped, he stared at the shiny scalpel on the tray.

John moved his hand higher.

"Jesus, Reinhardt didn't inject it into my balls!" Rodney exclaimed.

"Fuck, hold still," John snapped back. "I think it migrated." He was frowning with concentration, bent close enough his breath whispered against Rodney's skin, his cheek brushing the front of Rodney's boxers. His fingers pushed against a spot maybe an inch from the crease between groin and thigh. Then he pinched it and Rodney grabbed John's shoulder hard to keep from jolting right off the crate.

"Bastard," he hissed.

John flailed out his free hand while still pinching a fold of Rodney's skin with the other. "I've got it. Give me that anesthetic spray."

Teyla handed him a small spray bottle. The cold spray hit Rodney's thigh with a shock. The sting from John pinching him faded into numbness. Teyla took the bottle back and gave John the scalpel Rodney had been eying. Light flashed over the blade. "Tell me you took an EMT course or something, even if it was years ago," he said.

"Sure, I was sixteen, but I remember the high points," John replied.

"That's so reassuring."

He watched John set the tip of the scalpel against his skin and gulped, feeling lightheaded. The pink tip of John's tongue stuck out between his lips. He hesitated.

"Tell me you disinfected everything—"

John made a tiny, careful cut and before Rodney could draw breath to shriek, the transmitter popped
out followed by a tiny trickle of blood. John caught the transmitter and held it up. "Gotcha."

Rodney squeaked. "I'm bleeding out, in case you didn't notice, you butcher!"

John lifted his head and grinned at him. "You've bled more from shaving cuts and you know it."

"Not down there!"

John tossed the scalpel and the transmitter into the empty packaging from the surgical tray. "Teyla, you got a bandaid there?"

"Here," she said. "You were very brave, Rodney." She was smiling too.

John began laughing.

"Oh, see how funny you think it is when it's you getting sliced open," Rodney told him.

John flicked a quick, not quite apprehensive look at Teyla, then pressed his lips to Rodney's kneecap. "I trust you," he said. Then he neatly disinfected the tiny cut again and gently pressed a bandaid over it.

"Ow," Rodney said, but stroked his hand through John's dark hair.

"You were very brave," Teyla said again and he knew she didn't mean letting John cut out the transmitter.

"Okay, now you get to do me," John said, sitting back on his heels and making it sound like the next best thing to ice cream and rollercoasters. It would have been, too, if he had been talking about something other than digging a tracking device out from under his skin.

"Whoohooo," Rodney commented.

He barely had his pants fastened and gloves on himself before John dropped his and sat down, pointing at a spot on his inner thigh. "Reinhardt injected it here."

Teyla turned her head away politely while Rodney coughed. John smirked at him, legs spread, and said, "Come on."

Rodney got down on his knees and tried to ignore John's lack of boxers. He set his hand against John's thigh, shocked again as he was each time, by the heat of skin to skin. John twitched and looked down at him, lips parted and eyes a little wild. "Rodney," he croaked. He clutched at Rodney's shoulder.

"Hey," Rodney murmured while firmly rubbing his hand over John's thigh. "Just stay still." John's hold eased and instead he began kneading his fingers into Rodney's muscle. His eyelids half lowered and he drew in deep, slow breaths. Rodney bent closer and ran his fingers over the area John had indicated. He found the small bump, less than a mosquito bite.

"Teyla?"

"Here," she said, handing him the bottle of anesthetic disinfectant.

John jolted and muttered, "Christ, some warning next time," when the cold spray hit his skin.

Rodney handed the spray back and accepted a clean scalpel. "Okay, really, do not move now."
"Not moving," John agreed.

Rodney paused.

"Teyla, are you peeking?" he asked mischievously.

"I am watching in case you need anything else," Teyla said. He knew if he looked up, her expression would be serene and her eyes would be alight with amusement.

John jerked his head up to check what Teyla was doing instead of watching Rodney. Rodney slipped the scalpel in. His hands felt too huge and clumsy for the task, despite having worked on microminiature electronics much more delicate. The transmitter slipped away.

"Crap."

"Rodney…"

He made a tiny cut across his first one. The transmitter slipped out on a slick slide of brilliant blood. Rodney bit his lip, caught it, and dropped the scalpel. He pressed his gloved thumb over the tiny incisions, feeling worse than when John had cut into him.

"God," he muttered.

"It doesn't hurt," John told him.

"Yes, well, good. I guess we're both officially returned to the wild now."

John ran his hand up Rodney's neck and into his hair, urging him up and closer, and kissed his forehead. "Thank you. Okay? Thank you."

He stashed both transmitters inside the leadlined case containing the naquadah generator and scanned the jumper for anything Atlantis could use to track it, starting with the Ancients' version of a blackbox and its emergency beacon. He limped whenever he felt John watching him, making a production of it so that John laughed. Teyla and John set up camp and talked quietly. The day stretched beyond Atlantis or Selket's norm and the light grew heavy and honeyed, dust particles hanging suspended and molten as tiny suns, shadows cutting long and black over the grass, so that the skin prickled with the hint of the long, cold night to come. John left and returned after washing up at the stream, dressed in fresh clothes that had been cached in the jumper. Teyla took her turn next. Rodney settled on a sleeping bag John had unfolded over a ground tarp next to the jumper with a real groan, feeling every year he'd lived like gravity itself. The sleeping bag felt fabulously soft though and his joints were still used to kneeling and didn't crack audibly.

John shoved another piece of wood into the unnecessary but comforting fire Teyla had lit, then settled next to Rodney, shoulder to shoulder with him. The flames twisted and fluttered over the wood, holding Rodney's gaze, as dusk settled over the plains, warmth reflecting back from the side of the jumper. Teyla came back from the stream, dressed in a T-shirt two sizes too large and leather trousers, her hair freshly washed and dripping onto the towel around her shoulders.

"Did you ever—" Rodney started, then stopped.

"Did I ever what?" Teyla asked. She sank down on another sleeping bag and turned to face him. The firelight made her more beautiful and mysterious, her face soft again and more relaxed than Rodney had seen it since their return.

He flapped his hand at John and himself. "I started to ask if you ever thought you'd end up on the run
with two renegade Tau'ri and then I realized how incredibly stupid that question is."

Teyla laughing unguarded told Rodney just how right they'd been to leave Atlantis.

"No, I never did," she said, "but the best gifts are often unanticipated."

"Is that how you see us, because frankly, I'd think you and the rest of this galaxy could figure us for more of a curse." He winced after he spoke.

"That is how I see you and John," Teyla answered. "I would rather die fighting than condemn my children's children."

John closed his hand on Rodney's.

"John?" Teyla asked, sensing her words had touched something painful.

John didn't look away from the flames before them. "I have a daughter on Selket."

Rodney slid his arm around John's waist and pulled him close, until his head rested on Rodney's shoulder. Neither of them had ever said it out loud on Selket. Not even once. Rodney had known John's purpose and John had known Rodney realized, the secret had been woven into every day and night of their lives in the palace, but it had never passed their lips. John had never said it and so it had been in some way unreal to Rodney.

Shock crossed Teyla's face and then understanding. Her hand drifted to her own flat stomach and Rodney watched her thoughts turn inward. The fire crackled and shot sparks high into darkness. Rodney followed them up until they flicked out, lost in the vast and brilliant starscape above them. No one looked at the stars with only their eyes on Earth or Atlantis any longer. He kept his arm around John and tugged him down until they were lying together with their faces turned to the stars.

They looked up until Rodney's stomach grumbled, demanding something to fill it, and John gave his belly a little, fond rub, before retrieving three MREs from the crate.

"Ronon won't come to Doldis for another two months, by Atlantean time," Teyla said. She'd traded Rodney her spaghetti dinner for the Thai Chicken and ate it daintily. "We should not go there until closer to his arrival. Though Atlantis no longer has the trade connections it once did, they still may spread word to look for us, and a ship of the Ancestors is most memorable."

"Probably we shouldn't even be seen there," John agreed. "If we cloak the jumper—"

"We used forty-eight percent of the jumper's power reserves visiting the squid from hell," Rodney interrupted. "We shouldn't use the shield or cloak any more than we absolutely have to, because we can't just take it back and recharge."

"Sooner or later, we'll have to give her up, won't we?" John said. He glanced at the jumper and sighed.

"Well, we should definitely conserve the power left and maybe we'll find some way to charge the jumper before it runs out," Rodney said. It, not her, what was it with pilots and sailors, always anthropomorphizing perfectly engineered machines? No matter how they responded to John's intentions, the jumpers weren't sentient and if they were, they still wouldn't have a gender, since they didn't procreate. He imagined tiny jumpers buzzing around, perhaps nesting in John's hair, and let out a snort.

"What?"
He patted John's back. "Never mind."

"I think we should stay here until it is time to rendezvous with Ronon," Teyla said.

"Sounds good to me," John said. He looked at Rodney and smiled, slow and full of mystery and promise, anticipation and joy. Rodney smiled back without any real regret. He wasn't going to look back, had no intention of becoming a pillar of salt.

He hmmed and murmured, "Me too," between bites of spaghetti.

Later, after they'd disposed of the remains of their meal and set up a line of motion sensors slaved to an alarm in the jumper, Rodney lay down next to John. Teyla had settled less than a meter away. Exhaustion and shock weighed him down. When he closed his eyes, he saw the corridor outside the labs and Purdy, clutching at his throat. He snuffled back a pained sound. John turned and pulled the sleeping bag closer around them both and then they were tangled together, pressed close enough to feel each other's heartbeats, trading slow, careful kisses and touches, silent reassurance and re-establishing their connection as the fire burned down embers and ash, leaving slow burning coals for later.

~*~

Teyla wanted to hunt the first day. She brought it up over breakfast.

"Fresh meat," she said. "We should augment our supplies." John thought she just wanted to get out of the camp and move, see this world, follow her own dictates and not that of a SG team on a mission.

Rodney held up both hands in front of him. "Don't look at me, take him," he said and pointed at John.

John had been picking at his breakfast MRE, more than a little disgusted with it, and looked up. He hadn't put on his boots yet and wasn't really paying too much attention. He felt weirdly detached. Part of him didn't believe he could really be sitting outside a purloined jumper with Rodney and Teyla and the promise of seeing Ronon soon. It didn't feel real, not even as real as Atlantis had.

"What?"

Rodney waved him toward Teyla, who stood at the edge of the camp, a hunting rifle instead of a P-90 in her hands. "Go shoot something. Your moping is getting on my nerves."

John raised his eyebrows. He hadn't been moping. The MRE was just really disgusting.

"John?" Teyla asked. Something in her posture told him she wanted him to come with her.

"Okay," he said. If that was what she wanted. He didn't even mind. He disposed of the MRE and joined her after putting on his boots and retrieving a rifle from the small armory worth of weapons stored in the jumper. He had to figure Lorne had been the one to get a Barrett in there and hoped he never needed to use the .50 caliber weapon or the RPGs that had been packed beneath its case and the cases of boxed of ammo. They headed sunward, out past the trees into the grassland. There had been a lot the tiger gazelle things out there when they flew over.

Dew darkened Teyla's leather pants up to her knees as they swished through the tall grass. John shortened his strides to drop a step behind her, though they had been walking parallel, then flushed when Teyla looked over her shoulder in confusion. He ducked his head and sped up. So many habits he forgot he had now.

The plains weren't as flat as they appeared from the air. The land rose and fell in a low humps and
shallows. The grass grew thicker in the low places, the blades broader and lined with yellow. Patches of viny wildflowers spotted the hilltops, still closed up tight from the night. The air tasted clean and alive, though distinctly lacking in salt. John and Teyla worked their way to the top of one rise. Brilliant morning sun obscured everything until they looked down and spotted a herd grazing placidly.

They watched the animals in silence. John just enjoyed their grace and peace. He imagined Teyla was studying them, deciding which would be the best to target. Eventually, Teyla raised her rifle and sighted down at the herd. John double checked his own weapon and waited. He'd take a shot if Teyla missed, otherwise he was just there in case the kill drew a predator to them.

The crack of the rifle echoed. The herd bolted away, silhouettes black as they streamed over the crest of the next hill, except for a young male with nubby horns. Teyla's target dropped without taking a step.

"Nice shot."

Teyla smiled at him.

"It is almost too easy with this weapon."

John shrugged. "I've got nothing against easy."

They walked down the hill to the carcass. Teyla had put her bullet through the animal's heart, killing it nearly instantly.

"Then you can do the easy part," Teyla said. "I've never liked butchering."

"Easy?" he sputtered, coming to a halt and staring at her. "Easy?"

She laughed.

When they got there, John felt a pinch of regret. Cutting into the still warm body disturbed him. He did it, but he didn't like it.

"Ronon's probably good at this," he remarked, while elbow deep in the body cavity, gutting it carefully.

"Probably."

John twisted to look at Teyla. Something in her voice had sounded…worried. "What?"

She shrugged. "He was not at the Balusi camp at the Great Market. He missed two rendezvous before that."

"You think he isn't coming?" John asked. His cheek itched and he scratched without thinking, smearing blood over his face. "Damn it."

Teyla quirked a smile at his expression of disgust. She crouched tailor fashion and directed while John worked, staying clean herself. "You need to work faster. The flies will find us soon."

"Don't mention that to Rodney," he said. He wasn't distracted, though, and brought the conversation back to Ronon. "You think something happened to him?" He tied the legs together to keep them from flopping and hitting him on the way back.

Teyla shrugged. "If he does not come to Doldis, then in three months we will go to the Garzi, but…"
"He wouldn't just quit." John shouldered the carcass with a grimace. Teyla was right. The sun was high enough to feel warm and the insects were stirring. Maroon-shelled beetles the size of his thumbnail were already investigating the bloodied earth and grass. The cloying scent of raw meat mixed with the musky scent of the hide.

"No," Teyla said. "If he does not come…"

"Yeah," John agreed. If Ronon didn't show, then he couldn't, and the only thing that could stop him would be death. "He'll be there." He believed that as much as he could. He tightened his grip on the carcass' legs and stood. The coarse hairs on the legs prickled at his cheek and something wet soaked into the back of his T-shirt. "Yech. I'm not cooking this, you know."

Teyla took his rifle along with hers and they started back to the camp. "I will cook, if you like."

John considered asking if her cooking had improved in the last two years, but she had both rifles. "Nah, we did our part. Make Rodney do it."

Rodney was busy with his laptop when they reached the jumper.

"Hi, honey, we're home!" John caroled out.

Rodney looked up and his eyes widened. "Stay away from me."

"But look, I brought you a tigerzelle."


John let the carcass down and pointed at the dark zigzag stripes over the reddish-tan background of the hide. "It's a good name."

Rodney snorted.

"You get to cook," John told him.

"The whole thing?"

John looked at the tigerzelle and realized he would have to cut it up further. Crap. "Yeah, wait, aren't there a couple of refrigerated containers in the jumper?"

"With things we need in them, like medical supplies," Rodney snapped.

"Well, look, just cook some steaks tonight and we'll figure something out," John said. "I'll go ahead and turn it into ..pieces."

"We could smoke most of it," Teyla suggested.


John flinched. Of course Rodney would resent this. Playing Swiss Family Robinson wasn't exactly Rodney's dream. He'd given up everything to come with them.

"Teyla, could you find something for me to put the meat in?" he asked.

"Of course."

He finished butchering the tigerzelle without saying anything else to Rodney about cooking it, then
went down to the stream to wash. He started scrubbing and just kept at it, soaping off every speck of blood, and wondering why the hell he'd thought Rodney could be happy with him. What if Elizabeth and Caldwell had been right? Rodney did belong on Earth, with a lab full of cutting edge technology and half a dozen cowering minions, overturning everything the physics community believed, revolutionizing science and finally figuring out how to make a ZPM. He deserved that Nobel Prize he'd always wanted. Hell, he deserved Carter and a bunch of genius kids, not a screw up like John.

He'd deserted.

He stood waist deep in the cold water and the truth rolled over him like wave. He was a deserter.

John touched the dogtags hanging from his neck. They were reissues to replace the ones he'd lost and now they belonged to a deserter. It had been different on Selket. The dogtags had been gone, but only physically. Now he had them and he had thrown away what they meant.

Part of him, the part that still insisted this couldn't be real, that he'd wake up back on Selket, couldn't accept it. He hadn't been the best officer, but he'd never wavered in his loyalty. Even after Afghanistan, he'd been determined to serve until the Air Force kicked him out.

Where would he go now? What in hell could he do? Even on Selket he'd had purpose. Now, he had no idea.

He climbed out of the water when he began shivering too much and fumbled clean clothes on, fingertips pruned and clumsy, then retreated into the jumper, where he sat in the pilot's seat for hours, trying to figure out how in hell he'd ended up a man not just without a country, but without a planet. He didn't figure anything out and gave up when Rodney came in after him, looking so worried John said, "I'm okay."

Rodney squeezed the back of John's neck lightly. "Liar."

"Don't be sorry you came with me," John blurted. "Just don't…"

"I'm not, now come on, before your tigerzelle steak becomes tigerzelle charcoal."

~*~

The second day, Rodney led John down to a half-shaded stretch of the meadow, hidden from the jumper and their camp by a curve in the stream and several trees. He stripped off John's clothes piece by piece and then touched skin dappled by sunshine. He urged John to lie back, stretched out and still. John stayed in place and watched Rodney with questions in his eyes but no words. Rodney knelt beside him and looked his fill. The broad leaves of the trees were heart-shaped and spanned from his little finger to his thumb with his hand stretched open. Their shadows moved over John's body the way the shadows of the cho leaves had in their bedroom.

He knew John's body, every centimeter of skin, but the mystery of why this curve and that angle could make his breath catch in his throat could not be solved. He shaped his palm around an ankle, the vulnerable jut of bone and thin skin fitting exactly into the hollow where life and heart lines met. John gasped and trembled, but held himself still. Rodney ran his hand up John's calf and then down, torn between watching John's face and his hardening cock.

John sounded a little desperate and started to sit up, supporting himself on one elbow while reaching for Rodney. His index and middle finger caught on Rodney's T-shirt. "Let me touch you too. I should—"

"No, just let me," Rodney interrupted. "Tell me what you don't like."
John nodded and lay back. Rodney worked his thumbs into John's instep. John's eyes fluttered half-
already figured out that John loved any contact; the nonsexual just as much as a caress meant to
arouse. Selket had taken away all his standoffishness. Some of it had reformed around him like an
invisible armor after they returned to Atlantis and Rodney had hated that. He wanted the John who
leaned into his every touch back. He wanted John to tell him, to start making choices again.

Tension flowed out of John's muscles as Rodney worked. He didn't have any oil, but massaged each
foot until John nearly melted, sighing and limp and not even hard any longer. Unlike Rodney, who
had to stop and strip off his clothes before he busted the buttons off his pants.

"Don't stop," John complained, holding out his foot again without opening his eyes. He spread his
arms out to the sides and wriggled back against the soft grass. Narrow green blades tangled in his
hair as he arched his neck back and groaned with simple pleasure.

"John, you—" Rodney didn't have any words. The thrum of his pulse filled skin that felt
supersensitized, while patches of sun heated his shoulders. He knelt again, hyperaware of the damp
dirt beneath the grass where his weight pressed his knees into it, the stretch and pull of the muscles in
his own back as he bent over John, the curling murmur of the water and birds twittering among the
trees, even the sound of the air moving through the leaves above them. He felt transcendent,
everything so much sharper than reality, even the tiny hairs on the underside of each blade of grass
imbued with meaning. John, spread out in the gold and the green, encompassed Rodney's universe.

He urged John onto his side and trailed his fingertips from his hip to his knee, pausing over the
tendons then lingering to brush the pad of his index finger over and over the soft skin behind John's
moved up and studied the framework of John's ribs beneath taut skin, the shoulder blade sharp as a
wing ready to unfold, the imprint of the grass blades John had reclined on marked onto his skin like
an abstract design. He whispered his lips over the indentations and soothed with his hands, moving
down and down, until he reached the cleft of John's ass and felt him start to tense beneath his
attentions.

"Not that," John whispered, his face turned away from Rodney, strain in his voice.

Rodney smoothed his hands over John's ass and then up his back again. He nodded to himself. On
Selket, John would have spread himself open reflexively. Less than month ago, he still wouldn't have
objected. He guided John onto his back again and massaged his hands and arms. He worked his way
over John's torso and listened to the wordless sounds of approval John made, then down his legs
again. Touches meant to arouse this time and they did. John's cock hardened and he shifted
restlessly, small movements that Rodney glowed in for their disobedience.

He paid particular attention to the insides of John's thighs, teasing his fingers over tender skin, until
the muscles beneath were shaking. Rodney was paradoxically so aroused that if John had touched
him back in anyway, he would have come, and yet distanced from his own pleasure, intent on
driving John over the edge. He kept caressing John, played with the dark hair at his groin and down
to his balls, but avoided his cock. John dug his fingers into the grass and dirt and the muscles in his
arms stood out, until he broke and pulled Rodney down onto him. Rodney's entire body jerked at the
first sliding contact. John's cock slipped against his belly, streaking it with wet, and then he bucked
up, grinding into Rodney, catching both their erections between them. He curled up, found Rodney's
mouth, cut his lip on a tooth and kissed him, all urgency and no finesse. Dirty fingers pressed against
the back of Rodney's neck, holding him. John sucked on his tongue, jerked hard, groaning, and
Rodney's world collapsed, dense as a neutron star, all sensation drawn into his cock and balls as he
came.
Panting for breath, he tore his mouth away from John's. He had to brace himself to stay in place as John clutched at his shoulders and came off the grass, eyes squeezed shut through his orgasm. He had to kiss him again, when the last shudders had given way to a lax sprawl. They were slick with sweat, still breathing hard, and bits of grass were stuck to his knees and ass and tangled in John's dark hair. Rodney didn't care, not even with a bit of it caught on his nicked lip. John kissed him back and kept kissing him languorously through the long, lazy afternoon.

When the itching grew too much to ignore, they washed off in the stream, stepping carefully over water-smoothed stones until the water grew deep enough to swim in.

John ducked under the water and came up gasping and laughing, eyelashes beaded, and Rodney hoped that he could keep John looking that happy. The depression that had hit him earlier had startled Rodney. John hadn't explained it, which made it scarier. Rodney didn't know how to fix what he didn't understand.

Water flicked into his face, snapping him out of his distraction. John did it again and it felt startling, cold and sudden, despite the fact that Rodney was already wet. He retaliated with a large splash, swamping John, who laughed with undiluted pleasure.

His gaze moved past Rodney and sharpened. Rodney turned. Teyla stood on the bank above the stream. "May I join you?"

"Of course," John called.

"Watch the rocks as you come in," Rodney added. "Some of them are pretty loose." There was no place to just dive in. The water didn't get deep enough to swim in close to the bank. They might look around and find a good swimming hole later.

Teyla stripped off her clothes and left them on a boulder in the sun, then made her way through the shallows to join them. She finally slipped all the way under the water, sleek as a brown trout, and came up next to Rodney. With her hair slicked tight to her head, she looked like a water spirit. John treaded water close by. Swimming together, playing, seemed as natural as the progression of the planet, the long, slow slide of the hours, day that seemed to stand still, before it finally slipped into dusk. John's limbs tangled with Rodney's, silky slick, water cool, and he yelled when Teyla ducked him.

Then she turned on Rodney.

"Oh, no, no, you don't," Rodney told her, paddling as far away from her wicked smile as he could. "I have drowning issues. I swear. Duck me and you'll have to eat your own cooking."

Not the smartest thing he'd ever said. Teyla's eyes narrowed. Rodney resigned himself and breathed deeply as she started toward him.

John, the ass, just laughed until he had to spit out water.

They sprawled on the grass after they finally tired of swimming and napped until the sun dried them enough to dress again. Rodney used John's hip for a pillow. Teyla starfished out on her back. Rodney looked. He wasn't dead. John had looked too before turning his face to the cloudless sky. One hand played with Rodney's damp hair. He closed his eyes, feeling the heat soak in and relishing feeling warm for the first time in too long. He sighed. He couldn't stay out in the sun much longer without burning, but a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. Eyes still closed, he listened when Teyla's voice broke the quiet.
"It has been a long time since I did something like this. Since I was a girl."

"I don't think I ever did something like this," Rodney remarked.

John didn't say anything. He'd probably gone skinny-dipping as a kid. Rodney could picture him, scrawny and fearless, cannonballing into a swimming hole somewhere, splashing everyone else, dark cowlicks undefeated no matter how many times he went into the water. John would have been the first to use one of those rope swings to fly out into the deep water, too. He still would, if they could find a better place for swimming in the stream and a proper tree with enough overhang. There had to be some rope in the jumper. Zelenka and Teyla had packed everything else.

"It's good," Teyla added. "To just...be."

"Mmm," John hummed. His fingers patted slowly at Rodney's head.

"Are you awake?" Rodney asked. Something tickled at his hairline. He hoped it was John and not a bug.

Teyla turned her head toward them.

"I'm awake," John muttered, though he sounded sleepy.

Teyla turned her face toward the sun again. Her hair had begun to dry, wavy strands catching the light, the color of bronze.

"I wish sometimes that I had had days like this with my child," she said.

John tensed and Rodney lifted his head to look closer at Teyla. "Your child?" John repeated.

"When I chose to become a trader, like my father, I first fulfilled my duty to my people," Teyla explained. "I had been ready for three years, but it wasn't something anyone made a girl or boy do before they choose to on Athos. But there are dangers whenever one goes through the Ancestors' Rings." She sat up, legs folded, her arms resting loosely on her knees, smooth brown skin like polished wood. She had her head bent. "It was considered something I should do before I went to another world. In case I did not return."

"Jesus," John breathed.

"I did not want to become a wife, so my child I gave to a couple who had not been able to fulfill their Duty. They left Athos years before you came there. I think sometimes of them." She plucked a blade of grass and smoothed it between her index and thumb. "When the Wraith culled my people, I was glad they had gone."

"Did you have a girl or boy?" Rodney asked. He tried to imagine Teyla as a mother and realized she had been only fourteen or fifteen. She would have been softer, less the Teyla they knew, with a teenager's amorphous potential. He wondered who the father had been. Some other Athosian fulfilling his Duty? Someone who hadn't taken the child, so probably another kid, and it all should have seemed weird, but it was Pegasus. Cullings and lack of medical care kept the populations dangerously low. Women were valued highly, protected and respected on many worlds, but families were started young. Few people lived into old age.

"I do not know," Teyla said. She rose and gathered up her clothes, beginning to dress. "Charin took the baby to its parents and never told me which it had been."

"Teyla..." John pushed Rodney away and sat up too. "I didn't know. I'm sorry if I ever said..."
anything…"

Teyla finished dressing, lacing her vest closed. She frowned. "I did not mean you to apologize. I wanted only to tell you this, because I think sometimes I am glad that it is not a regret I will carry, that I will not be childless if I never take another lover." She sighed. "And I do not wish to have a child now."

When Rodney'd thought about children, they'd always been abstracts. Symbols of success, of achieving what society told everyone they should want. Maybe a little obligation, too, to pass on his genes. So he could understand that part of what Teyla had said. Just not the never taking another lover part. He bit back the questions that sprang to life. She'd told them as much about her experience on Itrios as she wanted to.

He shared a glance with John, who looked sick, so he was thinking the same things Rodney was. Or reliving some of them.

Teyla stretched then regarded them both. "Rodney, you are turning pink."

"What?"

She indicated his shoulder.

"Crap!"

"Time to go back to camp, I think," John said. Rodney nodded and began dressing himself. Teyla went ahead of them.

John slowed until they were too far back for her to hear them. He glanced at Rodney. "Do you think she's right?"

"What?"

John scrubbed his hand through his hair. "Do you think Dalal's better off on Selket?"

Rodney stopped.

John halted on his next step and turned back toward him. Rodney opened his mouth and closed it twice. He hadn't made the connection between Dalal and Teyla's confidence. "Oh."

Worry made John look tired and the shade under the trees drained him of color. Nothing else showed on his face. Rodney couldn't read how he felt at all.

"You know I don't like kids."

"I know," John said seriously.

Rodney scuffed at the dead leaves and loose duff. He bit his lip. John made an impatient noise. "Fine, just so you know I'm biased, but that's not…" Rodney held up his hands. "We couldn't have her on Atlantis, so it would be back to Earth—not that we can go back there either, but if it had been an option." He sucked in a deep breath. "She's better off on Selket. Wraith ships can't reach the planet and the gate is defended. So is the palace. It's probably safer than Atlantis. Probably safer than Earth, the way the Ori war is going."

John didn't say anything.

Rodney plowed on. "And truthfully, you probably wouldn't be much better at parenting than me."
"Don't sugarcoat it," John said. Rodney knew that last bit had probably hurt, but John was messed up. They both were. They weren't Tau'ri or Lantean or Selketi and any kid they tried to raise would end up out of place anywhere. They didn't even know where they'd be going in two months.

"You asked."

"Yeah." John sighed. He started walking again. "I guess Teyla is right."

"She's very obnoxious that way," Rodney said.

John nearly tripped. "Yes, she is," he agreed, laughter in his voice.

~*~

They spent much of the next morning creating a miniature smokehouse designed by Rodney to Teyla's specifications. "We should find a salt deposit," Teyla said.

"We're not staying here," Rodney objected.

"The meat would cure better."

"We'll keep it in mind if we come back here," John had said. He finished and stepped back, wiping sweat from his forehead. Nothing more had been said about Dalal. He glanced at Rodney, who was significantly cleaner than him. "I'm going down to the water."

"I think I will stay in camp and keep the fire going," Teyla said.

"Thanks."

Rodney nodded and followed John.

John took Rodney back to the same meadow and shade tree. He ducked into the stream and rinsed off, then joined Rodney on the ground cloth he'd brought, along with several towels and a bottle of genuine sunscreen.

"You could undress," he told Rodney while toweling off.

"I could," Rodney agreed. "I could get a sunburn after yesterday too."

"I could put sunscreen on you."

"You could."

"So you'll undress?"

"I could use some incentive," Rodney said.

John flipped the white towel around his neck and cocked his head. A trickle of water he'd missed ran down his chest. "Like?" he asked. He cocked his hip and trailed his index finger down the path the water had taken. Rodney's mouth went dry.

"I like," he blurted.

John smiled.
"Good, so do I, so get out of those clothes."

Rodney hurried to obey. By the time he had his T-shirt over his head, John had crowded up to him, still smiling, and leaned close. He licked Rodney's nipple, then sucked on the other, there and gone again, making Rodney gasp and drop the T-shirt. Somewhere. John sank down onto his knees, but tipped his head back to look straight at Rodney, not bowing. He was all dark hair and white towel and bare skin already taking on a darker, golden tinge. Rodney reached for him and John leaned back.

"You're not naked yet," he objected.

Rodney got rid of his pants and reached for John's shoulders again, gulping for air and control when John leaned in and closed his mouth over the tip of Rodney's already hard cock. The delicate suck and swirl of his tongue made Rodney's knees weak and he had to brace himself against John's shoulder. John was using all of his tricks and Rodney thought his eyes might roll back in his head from the the hot, tight pull and then the tongue flutter and the way John would take him deep then open his mouth a little more and suck in air so it brushed cool and incredible over Rodney's wet, aching cock.

"Down," he muttered, "I need to—down—or fall down," and batted ineffectually at John's head with his free hand. He didn't actually want John to take his mouth away so it didn't work very well. John heard, though, and pulled away with a slick pop. His hands were on Rodney's hips and moved up his waist, urging him down. Rodney's knees folded and he found himself face to face with John. John's mouth was red and wet and right there. Rodney had to take advantage and lick his way inside, kiss him while his hands framed John's face, holding him in place. John kissed back until Rodney forgot there was anything but that, his warm wet tongue stroking in and out, teeth nipping at his lower lip, soft slick inside, bitter taste of himself. John's cheeks were still smooth under his palm, his hair silky and cool-damp when Rodney pushed the fingers of his other hand through it, his breath uneven and nearly as desperate as Rodney's shared between them.

John ended it, still taking the lead, and kissed his way over Rodney's jaw. He breathed hot behind Rodney's ear and ran his hands everywhere, until Rodney imagined there were lines of sparks burning under his skin wherever John had touched him, bright and wonderful, tiny explosions of pleasure overloading his nerves. John held him down and licked his way inside, kiss him while his hands framed John's face, holding him in place. John kissed back until Rodney forgot there was anything but that, his warm wet tongue stroking in and out, teeth nipping at his lower lip, soft slick inside, bitter taste of himself. John's cheeks were still smooth under his palm, his hair silky and cool-damp when Rodney pushed the fingers of his other hand through it, his breath uneven and nearly as desperate as Rodney's shared between them.

He did things with his tongue. Incredible things, kissing and licking and then sucking. Things he'd never done before, that Rodney had never had done to him ever. Rodney's balls had never received so much attention and he began squirming, panting, grabbing at John's hair and shoulders in a crazed need to make him stop and keep him there forever. John scraped his teeth against them in a delicate, maddening threat that made Rodney's cock jump. He spread his legs wider, moaned and wondered vaguely if he could come just from having John suck and tongue him without even getting to his cock.

John's tongue licked between the cheeks of his ass, over his anus, and Rodney nearly had an aneurysm.

"Oh my God, you can't do that, that's so dirty," he screeched, scrambling away on his elbows and knees. He only stopped so that he could explain exactly how unhygienic that had been and ended up sitting naked with his arms folded over his chest while John laughed like an inebriated hyena. Each time Rodney opened his mouth, John laughed harder, until he keeled over onto his side, clutching his sides and gasping for breath. Rodney threw a clod of dirt at him. It hit John's belly and made him
laugh even harder. Rodney resolved to aim for his hard-on next time.

When John finally managed to sit up and stop laughing, Rodney asked with as much dignity as he could muster, "Are you done?"

"Maybe?"

"I'm not kissing you again until you've disinfected your mouth."

John's mouth dropped open. Then he said, "I've sucked you and fucked you and bled on you, but that bothers you."

Feeling mulish, Rodney jerked his chin up. "Yes." He braced himself for an argument.

Instead, John shrugged.

"Okay."

"What?"

"Okay." John rolled his eyes as he repeated himself. "You liked what I was doing before, though, right?"

"Yes." Rodney narrowed his eyes. "Just so we're clear. I'm not doing that to you either."

"There's a big surprise." John nodded at Rodney's cock, still mostly hard and interested, no matter what his mouth said. "I could blow you instead."

Rodney pretended to think about it. "Oh, all right, if you really want to."

John crawled over to him on hands and knees, right between Rodney's outstretched legs. He started to lean in for a kiss only to run into Rodney's hand. "Dis. In. Fect. Ed," Rodney repeated. John swiped his tongue across Rodney's palm, making him screech, then took his cock in his mouth. The sound Rodney made when John deep throated him was considerably deeper than a screech.

Sometime later, he decided he might re-evaluate his stance on rimming, about the time he came a second time, but he still wasn't about to kiss John until he'd at least brushed his teeth and gargled.

~*~

Teyla laughed at the grass stains when they limped back to camp much later. She laughed even harder when John obediently found toothpaste and brushed his teeth in front of Rodney. "There," he said. "Minty fresh."

Rodney sulked, which just amused John. "I'm never doing that," he declared.

John's stomach began making noises about missed meals and he sniffed, inhaling the pleasant scent of smoke from the fire Teyla had kept going. "Food?" he said hopefully.

"I mean it," Rodney said.

John started looking through their supplies. The incredibly long days threw his eating schedule out of whack and he was starving. The sun still hovered high overhead, but according to his watch as well as his stomach, they should be eating dinner. He didn't really care if Rodney ever rimmed him or not or if he ever did it to Rodney again. He much preferred giving and getting blowjobs and Rodney had no problem reciprocating those spectacularly. He found a vacuum-sealed package of trail mix and opened it, wolfing down a handful of raisins, nuts, oat clusters and couple of M&Ms.
"Hey, give me some of those," Rodney demanded, losing interest in his lecture about *E. coli* in favor of food, something John had predicted.

They did chores around the camp through the rest of the day. John took over feeding the smoke fire while Rodney cooked, claiming he wanted to try some things he'd seen Tien-ve cook, and Teyla took the opportunity to take a long walk. Rodney surprised him by catching his wrist as he passed by close enough to check what was being prepared. He reeled John in and kissed him. John blinked at him afterward, feeling stupid and shocked, standing with an armful of green wood and no idea what to do.

Rodney raised his eyebrows. "Teyla's not here, not that she minds."

John nodded. It stayed in his mind. He'd been stuck in the 'don't let anyone see or know' mindset since returning to Atlantis. He fed the wood into the fire absently. A shift of the wind half smothered him in smoke for an instant. He waved it away and left the rest of the wood within reach, then stood. Rodney had it right. They didn't need to hide anything.

He found Rodney going through the medical supplies. "What're you looking for?"

"You'll see tomorrow."

"Come on. Tell me."

"Don't you want it to be a surprise?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not a real fan of surprises," John told him, wrapping his arms around Rodney from behind. He rested his chin on Rodney's shoulder. "They usually suck."

Rodney snorted. "Well, I can promise this one won't do that."

"Tell me," John whined.

"Tell me," John whined.

"Tomorrow." He leaned back against John, warm and solid and relaxed.

John couldn't resist closing his eyes and just absorbing the feel of him. He loved touching Rodney, the very thereeness of him. All the too tight things inside him were slowly unwinding. He decided to let whatever Rodney was up to go. Teasing him would be fun, but he could wait. He rubbed his cheek against Rodney's and let go. "Okay."

"The food is burning!" Teyla shouted from outside the jumper.

Rodney pushed John out of the way and went to the rescue of his food. It hadn't burned, contrary to Teyla's report, and tasted remarkably good. Sunset dyed the sky crimson and violet much longer than on any other world John had known, the sun balanced searing and incandescent on the horizon as though time had stopped. Their little cook fire crackled and hissed, loud in the relative quiet between their words.

"You know what I miss?" Rodney said as he scraped his spoon over his empty plate. "I miss music."

John sat back on his elbows. Atlantis had always hummed on a not quite audible level, but there had been noise too. Voices, the background sound of computer fans and hard drives, the accumulated noise of over two hundred people gathered together, and outside, the turbine shriek of the 302s and the constant sea wind. It hadn't been quiet, even in the dead of night. There had been music. Libraries of it, brought in with iPods and hard drives, instruments brought from Earth and acquired in Pegasus; Dr. Henderson had even had a phonograph and collection of vinyl records. The sounds had...
leaked out of headphones and labs, offices and private quarters.

"All that music. And books."

John nodded.

Selket had echoed with music too and the palace library had been open to them both.

"No Beethoven," Rodney said.

"No Johnny Cash," John added.

The jumper had been packed to support a long term search and rescue mission, but not colonization. The laptops were loaded with practical programs and data. Not the things they might have brought if they had known they would have to do without them the rest of their lives.

"Of course, I'd probably end up missing everything else even more." Rodney set down his plate and spoon. "And there's music here in Pegasus. Plenty of it." He nodded at Teyla. The Athosians sang and played music that had a ten thousand year history. "It just isn't the same."

The nights were as long as the days. Awake in their combined sleeping bags, with the light from the fire tracing over Rodney's profile, John kissed him and murmured, "Let me make it up to you."

Rodney shifted and said, "Don't be ridiculous. You didn't make me come."

John snaked his hand down and took hold of Rodney's cock. "I could," he breathed.

Rodney sighed, so very put-upon. "If you must."

John stroked him lazily, pressing his own growing erection against Rodney's thigh. He kept it slow and easy, until Rodney came with another sigh, then jerked himself off, his hand wet with Rodney's come.

"Quiet's nice too," Rodney mumbled before falling asleep again. John followed him down.

He sparred with Teyla the next morning, bare feet on wet grass, slipping anyway. Ground mist swirled around their knees. The sun hovered huge and red at the horizon. The clack of their sticks mingled with the click of Rodney's keyboard, sounding louder when he paused and looked up, watching them. John had to remind himself to concentrate on Teyla and ignore Rodney. He dropped into the right mindset and lost track of time. The morning air cooled his hot skin and he breathed easily. Teyla's moves were a little tight, restrained, but she loosened up enough to knock him on his ass more than once before they finished.

They went down to the water in the afternoon, when the world felt sleepy and warm, as had become their custom already.

Rodney pulled a tube out of the pocket of his folded up pants when they were both stripped and stretched out on their ground cloth, shade-dappled and drowsy. "Medical lubricant," he stated.

John opened one eye. "So?"

"I let you do that thing, even though it is incredibly unhygienic," Rodney said. He wasn't above a little guilty blackmail. He set the tube down and reached for John. They wrestled half-heartedly, hands more apt to caress than hold, and John let himself be spread over Rodney's lap. Rodney stroked the back of his neck and down his spine until he thought he'd melt right there, never wanting
to move again. Rodney talked too, but John lost the thread, dazed and floating just from Rodney’s hands.

"I think it's only fair you let me do this." Rodney patted his ass, then his hands went away. John heard him open the tube and squeeze lube into his palm and tensed, waiting while Rodney let it warm. He jumped and then couldn't keep from squirming when Rodney ran a slick finger down between his cheeks to his perineum.

He clutched at the ground cloth as Rodney delicately stroked his middle finger up and back, adding more lube until it glided over John's sensitive skin like glass. Instead of growing used it, John felt like his nerve endings were being electrified. He shivered when Rodney circled one fingertip over his anus, teasing the tight pucker then sliding away, only to come back with more lube over and over. Rodney smoothed his other hand over John's ass, soothing and petting him, talking the entire time in a hushed, intent voice. "This feels so fantastic, so good, you're so good. I can't believe how much this turns me on, just touching you like this, I wasn't supposed to, that bastard told me not to, but it's good, I want to do this for you, I want to do it for me," his finger pressing so lightly that John felt himself melt open, unable to focus enough to figure out what Rodney meant. What bastard? Not really caring in the moment, only knowing if Rodney wanted it, he wanted it too.

Rodney's cock nudged up against him and John was hard himself. He kept opening his mouth, meaning to tell Rodney to stop, but he pushed back onto Rodney's finger instead. He wanted it harder and more, more than just one finger. He bit that demand back too.

"I told you you'd like this," Rodney crowed.

You did not, John wanted to protest. He couldn't summon the words and moaned instead, because he did like Rodney doing it. It wasn't like he hadn't had this done to him on Selket. He didn't think there was anything short of permanently damaging practices that Dullah hadn't demonstrated to John using his own body. When he didn't like something, Dullah had given him enough dranzi to make him like it. The memory leached away some of his arousal. He started to tighten up and got his hands under him, intending to push himself up, off Rodney's lap.

Rodney rested one hand flat on the small of John's back, pressing down gently to hold him in place. His other stayed between John's cheeks, fingertip just inside, moving in and out in tiny increments that managed to focus all his attention on that single place.

"John?"

"I—"

Rodney's palm moved in calming circles on his back. John knew if he wanted to he could stop Rodney with a single word. He had liked it, it had felt fantastic until he let his own memories get in the way. He sucked in a deep breath and relaxed again as he exhaled.

"Okay?" Rodney asked.

John nodded and wriggled a little against Rodney's hard-on, grinning at the way it nudged eagerly against him. He spread his legs wider. "Go for it."

Rodney slipped his finger in deeper and crooked it, brushing over John's prostate, sending a intense burst of pleasure from there straight to his cock, making it jerk and harden again completely. Rodney rubbed the pad of his finger over the perfect spot, drawing a guttural, almost embarrassing groan from John. His eyes squeezed shut and he scrabbled at the ground cloth helplessly while Rodney began driving him mad. It felt better than anything anyone had ever done to him, not just on Selket,
but in his entire life, and John couldn't hold still. The only things keeping him from flying apart were Rodney's hands.

"Up," Rodney murmured, confusing John. "I need you on your knees, because you're going to make me come and I want to do this for you first."

His groans became more like sobs as Rodney positioned him on his knees, face down on his arms, aching and empty until Rodney's finger—fingers this time and John whimpered because that was better, because he wanted more—slid back inside him. Rodney was talking, but John had a hard time figuring anything out, his world had narrowed to sensation, to two big fingers working in and out, stroking, twisting, gliding over that spot again and again, but never in a rhythm he could predict, making him pant and spread himself even wider, nearly mindless with pleasure.

He came without warning, striping come over his heaving chest and belly, spurting onto the ground cloth helplessly, too caught in his orgasm to care, shaking ecstatically through it, clenching down on Rodney's fingers. Breathless afterward, he slumped down into the mess he'd made. Rodney eased him onto his side then wrapped his arms around him, legs between his, chest plastered to his back, wet, spent cock nestled against John's ass. He kissed the nape of John's neck gently and petted his belly.

John tried to open his eyes, but it was too much effort. He fumbled and caught Rodney's hands in his, then slurred, "Good surprise."

"I told you so."

He wanted to kick Rodney for that, but felt too boneless and satiated. Sluggish thoughts moved through his mind as he hovered on the edge of sleep, cradled against Rodney's chest. His left foot was in the sun and felt hot. He wanted Rodney to do that to him again. He hadn't needed dranzi to love it. He didn't feel sick or ashamed the way he always had after sex with the Rale. Maybe because Rodney had been doing it for him, not just to him, or because it was Rodney. He snorted to himself and Rodney's arms tightened around him, hot breath stirring the hairs at back of his head. He felt right with Rodney. That was all he really needed to know, he decided.

~*~

He used it to ink their history along the valley of John's spine, curled in concentric circles on the cusp of each shoulder, in the tender hollow of his elbows, in swooping curves that traced his ribs and straight lines down his shins. John's pupils were blown wide and he shivered, holding himself in place through sheer will. Dark strokes of blue inked the glyph for Earth on one heel and the Ancient word for Pegasus on an instep. Area 51 and Cheyenne Mountain spiraled around each other and John's ankle, the Air Force Academy and Afghanistan to Antarctica were a straight tense line of prose, a personnel file entry, up John's shin. John's ex-wife was a branch that went nowhere hidden at the back of his calf. Rodney murmured the words as he wrote them on John's flesh. He drew the stargate around John's navel, a Pegasus on his hip, the symbols for Sateda, Atlantis, Athos and Earth again, twined together at the base of his throat and kissed it once the ink had dried. "Because I know you want to say the words," he murmured against John's neck and began again.

He inscribed the equations for stardrives and wormholes on one shoulder blade and the secrets to building ZPMs on the other. He wrote the list of John's dead on his back and his kills on his fingers as John named them all one by one. Rodney took John's hands in his, bent and wrote the last words tongue to palm, love and joy, while John shuddered. "This," Rodney kissed one palm, "and this," he kissed the other, "you can't wash away."

John touched his face carefully. "I don't want to."
Sweat smeared the ink and transferred the words onto Rodney's skin later.

That night he pressed his face against John's neck and wept for Purdy.

"I can't forget him," he blurted between gulping, ugly sobs. He clutched at John's T-shirt. "I close my eyes sometimes and I see his eyes. Or I think I hear the gun go off again."

"Fuck," John cursed.

"How do you make it stop?"

"I don't know, but it's worse if it does."

Teyla sat up and crawled over to them. She slipped inside the sleeping bags John had zipped into one large blanket and hugged Rodney from behind. "I killed him," she said.

"No, I pulled the trigger," he insisted.

Teyla and John both tightened their hold on him when he tried to struggle away.

"I killed him, Rodney," Teyla repeated. "You only hurried him through the pain."

"What if someone could have helped him—"

Teyla pressed her face against his neck and he felt her shake her head. Felt wet warmth and knew she was crying too. He couldn't bear that and turned in John's arms, wrapping her in his, holding on until sleep finally came to both of them, knowing John remained awake, guarding them, though he couldn't guard against their nightmares.

~*~

John stole Rodney's pen and used it to ink a Selketi glyph on the back of Teyla's hand. She raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Rodney smiled at him when he saw it.

"Did you tell her what it means?" he asked John later.

"She didn't ask."

He'd written *forgiveness*.

He hoped she could give it to herself someday.

~*~

The sounds they both made scared a flock of birds into flight. Rodney wanted to memorize the way John looked, his mouth bruised and shaping Rodney's name, his eyes full of the sun and sky, body drawn like a bow, as he came to the sound of wings, laughing.

~*~

They cataloged what they had that they could use for trade goods when they needed supplies and talked about which worlds would be safest to visit. They hunted infrequently and ate smoked tigerzelle jerky, then hiked far across the plains, learning the rhythm of walking together, working together again, the three of them, before returning to the jumper and the camp a week later. They spent the afternoons together as often as they spent them apart, down by the stream.

The thirtieth day local, fifty-eight days by the Earth calendar, after they'd arrived, they packed up everything into the jumper, left the meadow as unmarked by their sojourn there as possible and flew back to the stargate. John landed just beyond the splash zone. The three of them examined the rutted
tracks and signs of campfires surrounding the ring. There were wagon tracks, hoof prints and manure, but no sign anyone had been there looking for them.

"Who would come through here?" John asked. He crouched and brushed his fingers through the pale, dusty dirt where a wagon wheel had caught on a stone and cracked it. "Hunters?"

"Balusi, perhaps," Teyla said. She indicated a desiccated pile of droppings. "They use killas to pull their wagons. This world would provide them good grazing and an undisturbed camp."

"Those are the nomads you said Ronon hooked up with?" Rodney looked skeptically at the droppings. "You can really tell what made those?"

Amusement curled through Teyla's one word answer. "Yes."

"You're not going to kick them apart to read the leavings like some sort of demented tea leaves, are you?"

"No, though one can learn where the killa have been by what they've fed on."

Rodney stepped away. "I never imagined saying this, but that's more than I want to know."

John stood and scanned the horizon, squinting. He'd tanned in the two months they'd spent waiting, but felt otherwise the same. Centered and comfortable with himself, though, finally. Rodney and Teyla looked the mostly same, but their hair had sunbleached streaks. Rodney was leaner and harder. None of them flinched any longer. This place had been good to them, but he felt ready to leave.

"If Ronon is not at the rendezvous, we should consider joining a Balusi caravan," Teyla said. "They ask no questions of those who join them."

"Interstellar gypsies and refugees." Rodney shrugged. "I suppose we'd fit right in."

"No one from Atlantis would catch up with us, maybe not even the Wraith," John offered.

"Can we just go meet our own special Yeti before you start tying a bandanna around your head and stealing sheep or whatever gypsies do?"

John grinned. "Sure, but when we do? You'll have to wear a big gold earring."

Rodney's brow wrinkled as they walked back to the DHD. "Isn't that pirates?"

"Just dial the Alpha Site."

Rodney looked at him. "What?"

"Do it," John ordered.

Rodney hesitated then pressed the glyphs to open a wormhole to the Alpha Site. John watched the ring as it splashed open and stabilized. Teyla came to his side and touched his arm. "You aren't going back."

He looked down and smiled at her. "No. Just sending something back because I'm done with it."

"Not the jumper!" Rodney screeched.

"No," John said.
He walked up to the surface and trailed his fingers into it, testing the cold tingle before pulling them back. "You want to get those transmitters?"

"Oh." Rodney headed back to the jumper.

Teyla looked at him knowingly before leaving him alone. John waited until Rodney returned clutching a knotted rag that held the two trackers.

He drew the chain of his dogtags over his head and held them. They were the last piece of the life he’d left behind. He weighed them, then knotted the rag with the transmitters to the chain. He glanced to the side at Rodney, who nodded. John shrugged, feeling a last, invisible weight fall from his shoulders, and threw the tags and the transmitters through the stargate.

"Okay," he said. He took Rodney's hand as the wormhole closed behind them and boarded the jumper, where Teyla was waiting.

He slipped into the pilot's seat. Rodney sat at his side and dialed Doldis without a word. John took the jumper up and piloted them through.

~*~

Teyla left them with the jumper, hidden between two high dunes, but within walking distance of the Doldinian caravanserai. Sand pattered like dry rain against the hull. She wrapped herself in the bleached robes the natives wore.

John wanted to go with her. From behind him, Rodney shook his head at her.

"I have only these robes," Teyla said, "and you," she touched the corner of John's eye, where Rodney had etched a tiny glyph called Joy, "are too memorable." She smiled at Rodney. "Both of you."

"Be careful then," John said.

"I will," she promised.

Sand immediately drifted over the lip of the opened hatch. Teyla started out, pulling a swathe of cloth over nose and mouth for protection. Rodney followed John out behind her, stopping just short of the cinnamon sand. The dry air burned his lungs, left dust at the back of his tongue, and felt achingly familiar. He glanced at John and noticed his posture, the way he stood, attentive and head faintly bowed. The nervous twist of his fingers over his wrists reminded Rodney that the past would always be with them, ingrained in their selves like sand at the center of pearl.

"It looks like home," he blurted.

John jerked around and looked at him, lips parting on question that never came as he realized exactly where Rodney meant.

"I thought Canada was more temperate," Teyla said.

"It is," John answered. He raised his head, surveying the crests of the dunes, the constant veil of sand whipped from them across the green-hued sky. "This is like Selket."

Teyla's eyes, all of her face that could be seen, widened.

"I must go," she said. "Ronon will not tarry if I am not there."
"We'll be waiting," John said.

They stood and watched until Teyla's silhouette disappeared over the top of a dune, then Rodney tugged John back into the jumper and closed the hatch. Rodney stretched out on one of the benches in the rear. John took the pilot's seat.

"Does it really remind you of Selket?"

Rodney raised his head. "Just the dust."

John wandered back from the cockpit and sat down at the head of bench. Rodney squirmed up until he could use John's thigh as a pillow. "You get the idea Teyla wanted to meet Ronon without us?" he asked.

"Mmm," John agreed. "She was worried."

"About...this." Rodney encompassed everything that had happened to them and the relationship they shared now in one word.

"He won't care," John said confidently.

"You're pretty sure."

John didn't answer, just patted Rodney's head. It felt good, felt right, and eased the worry down to a thin thread among the rest of his thoughts. He closed his eyes and let himself drowse. The perimeter alarm sounding brought him awake. John's thigh tensed beneath his cheek. They both made their way to the cockpit and checked. Teyla was slipsliding down the side of the nearest dune, the wind whipping her white robes against her body, the loose hems billowing out like sails, followed by Ronon.

John hit the hatch release and met them at the base of the dune. He yelled and Ronon spotted him. Ronon raced the rest of the way down in great, leaping strides that kicked up sand behind him, his smile huge and visible from the jumper.

"Sheppard!"

He passed Teyla and tackled John, lifting him into a berserk hug, feet off the ground and spinning. He saw Rodney and gave John another rib-breaking squeeze, before bounding over and treating Rodney to the same display.

"Let go of me, you sand-addled behemoth!" Rodney squeaked with the tiny amount of air left in his lungs.

Ronon tightened his hold on Rodney and then carefully let him back down onto his feet. "Good to see you," he said. He kept one hand, heavy and tight on Rodney's shoulder, as though afraid that he might disappear if Ronon didn't hold onto him, and dragged him back over to John. John punched Ronon's arm.

Ronon looked the same to Rodney, his beard a neat outline of his jaw, dreadlocks past his shoulders, dressed in leather stained in a hundred earthen colors. Deeper lines around his eyes, but his smile was as blinding as Teyla's and obviously came easier.

"You look good," John said.

Ronon slung his other arm over John's shoulders.
"Especially for a dead man," Rodney sniped, remembering the stomach-turning certainty they'd shared that Ronon had died, their last glimpse of his face a bloody mask as he was dragged away.

"Takes more than a beating to kill me," Ronon rumbled. "Knew you weren't dead, either."

Teyla reached the bottom of the dune and approached. "I told them that you never gave up," she said. She pulled the robe off and let fall, then hugged Ronon a little stiffly before stepping back. "We have stories to exchange." To John and Rodney, she added, "I told him."

Ronon grinned at them. "It's good," he said.

"It is," John told him, gaze straying past him to Rodney. "We are."

"Got something to tell you too. Someplace we should go. All of us."

"Fine, but let's do it out of the wind," Rodney said. "I've already got sand in my teeth."

Ronon laughed and marched them to the jumper without releasing Rodney or John. Rodney caught Teyla's hand and pulled her along, catching her when she tripped before she caught up with their longer strides. They entered the jumper abreast, linked by their hands and bound by their hearts.

Rodney watched him for any reaction when John sat on the floor and Rodney joined him, but Ronon just hunkered down too. Slowly, muscles he hadn't known were tense relaxed. He knew John hadn't been as at ease as he'd seemed either when he caught Rodney's hand in his and held on, grip going from too tight to loose and absently teasing, playing with Rodney's fingers. Ronon saw and grinned wider.

"What?" Rodney demanded, hoping his cheeks hadn't flushed and sure they had.

Ronon nodded at their hands.

"It's not going to be a problem where you want us to go?" John asked.

"Where is that?" Teyla asked. She'd taken a place on the padded bench, her legs folded into a lotus position.

"Jom," Ronon told them. "No one's business who is with who there, too many of us from different worlds to make stupid rules." He looked at them consideringly. "Going to need to go to Methmar first, get some gear. Be easy with a jumper."

"Don't think we're going to be popping around the galaxy on your shopping trips," Rodney said.

"We should send the jumper back." John patted the decking. "Leave it somewhere and get word to Atlantis."

"Not until we've unloaded it wherever we're going." Rodney grabbed John's hand back. He knew how much John didn't want to give up the jumper. But having it sit, grounded and dead, wherever they ended up would be painful too. He was a genius, though; he should be able to figure something out. His brain finally connected Methmar and gear and he glared accusingly at Ronon. "Methmar? Don't I remember you telling us it's year around winter there? And we'll need their gear to go this Jom?"

"What did you find on Jom?" Teyla asked. "You said you would tell once we were all together."

"Another city," Ronon said.
"Another...?" John repeated.

Ronon nodded. "Another Ancestors' city."

Rodney leaned forward. They knew there were others. "With power?" he demanded.

"Shield's still up."

Rodney scrambled to his feet. "Oh my God." He started toward the cockpit, turned back toward Ronon, half a breath from hugging him, then almost danced with impatience. "What are we waiting for?"

John rose fluidly, taking his time, but Rodney saw the gleam in his eyes. Teyla smiled while Ronon looked insufferably pleased with himself.


Another Ancient city, one with power, was waiting for them.

John smiled slowly and Rodney smiled back.

"Looks like we're going to Jom."
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four months to reach the end of the steppes and follow the path of a frozen river down to the coast.

John scrambled ahead of the rest of them, eager for the sea, for a glimpse of what they'd come so far to find. Rodney followed, watching his footing, and only looked up, caught by the sight of John, silhouetted against the gray glare of the sky, when he spoke.

"Christ."

Teyla made her way past Rodney, deft and balanced as always, joining John while Rodney still picked his way through the snow and rocks.

"It is not welcoming," she said.

"No," John agreed.

Rodney's boot slipped and he cursed it and the stone and damp equally, including Ronon and John in his half-voiced tirade as well. His ankle turned and he flailed and grunted, sure he was going to fall. John caught his hand though and steadied him. Ronon and Kerren were behind him and Rodney let John pull him the rest of the way up to the vantage point so that they could get by him and see too.

A huge bay opened out before them. Rodney had to admit, it was impressive, in a frozen and dreary way.

No trees, no animals, no plant life of any kind that he could spot and Rodney shuddered at the bleak prospect. They had reached the colorless end of the world, a barren black sand beach edged in glass-smooth ice, where the snow melted into endless pewter water under an overcast sky. An ice shelf stretched across the northern horizon.

John was staring out over the sea.

The smell of the sea, salt and alive, was all that kept it from utter desolation. Rodney couldn't imagine why the people from the settlement had come so far even once. It could only have been psychological pressure, maybe actual psychosis, and the urge to keep moving caused by the cullings that lingered and pushed them on even after they'd reached the safety of Jom. Like Ronon, who ran through Atlantis' halls even after he didn't need to run from the Wraith. Like still painting glyphs on John's skin when they'd escaped Selket almost a year past.

He drew in a panting, tired breath. At least they'd reached the sea. No more constant trek across the white steppes that seemed to never end, no more huddling in a tupek while winter storms shrieked down from the north and they could do nothing but wait them out. The edge of the sea wasn't welcoming, true, but it was clean and empty and beautiful the way he remembered Antarctica. He hoped that at last they'd come to a stopping place.

Ronon handed Kerren his binoculars and the older man scanned the coast line. At last, Kerren lowered them and smiled.

"Not bad."

"Not bad?" Rodney echoed. Kerren had obviously lost his mind. "We're in the back of beyond
nowhere."

"We're one bay north of the permanent camp," Kerren said. He pointed south, saying to Ronon, "Remember that point? The ice is already gone."

Ronon looked into the distance, squinting a little, then nodded. "I took the boat around it." He looked northward. "A lot of ice is gone."

"But it's winter," Rodney objected.

"Spring," Kerren contradicted. "Another couple weeks and the river we used will break up."

"Oh, that makes me feel wonderful and safe," Rodney said. He peered northward too. "You realize this probably means this planet is in the midst of a major climatological change?" He shaded his eyes with his hand, compensating for the strange overcast glare from the gray sky. "Where's the city?"

Ronon pointed to the ice shelf.

"Of course, it couldn't be easy." Rodney gave the deceptively smooth waves a jaundiced look. "I don't like boats, especially small ones."

"You'll be okay," Ronon said.

"I have issues with drowning."

"How permanent is the camp we'll be going to?" Teyla asked as Kerren and Ronon started back, following them.

"We floated logs up from the south and put up buildings on skids," Kerren explained.


"Don't get your underwear in a twist," John said. "With any luck, in a few days, once everyone is settled in, we'll be in Ronon's city and you'll have enough technology at your fingertips to keep you happy the rest of your life."

Rodney snorted. He'd believe it when he saw it. Otherwise, he expected they'd have a long spring and summer of catching and preserving fish, then end up heading back to Jomesha, where he would never, ever stir again. They'd sell the druun to some brain-damaged explorer and use the money to build a house for John and himself. Maybe with a lab or the closest he could come. He might even take in some students, if he could find someone who wasn't too painfully stupid to teach. Write down everything he knew and had figured out. It would take years, but with his knowledge as a leg up, Jom would be able to outstrip any other civilization left in Pegasus. He could save them several hundred years of wrong turns and experimentation.

Not quite the legacy he'd imagined once, but a worthwhile one.

John had pulled his own binoculars out of a coat pocket and aimed them northward while Rodney was ruminating.

"It's there," he told Rodney.

"Really?" Rodney's voice cracked, high and hopeful. He'd told himself it wouldn't matter, but it did.

"Really," John said and handed the binoculars over.
"I can't——"

John took his shoulders and faced him toward the city. "Now look." He left one hand on Rodney's shoulder, warm and strong through the leather and fur of his coat, and pointed with the other, pressed close to Rodney's back, as Rodney put the binoculars to his eyes again, looking across the water.

He found a faint blueish shimmer of a shield. He tried to focus on what lay behind the shield, but couldn't pick out more than the faintest hint of towers that seemed taller than Atlantis'.

"Oh," Rodney whispered. "It is. Not that I doubted Ronon or anything but it didn't seem real..."

"Yeah," John agreed.

"I wish we could go there right now."

They had to get down to the permanent camp first. Check out the boats and let the rest of the people settle in. Someone would want to have a celebration that they'd arrived. It would be days before they could continue on to the city. The city that had been there thousands of years. A few more days wouldn't matter, but it made him ache anyway.

"We'll get there," John promised.

Rodney lifted the binoculars to his eyes again and stared at the shimmer until the light changed and the glare off the water obscured it.

~*~

The *slush-sluck* of the oars dipping in the black, icy water echoed through the fog. Their breath smoked out, tiny beads of ice crystallizing on the fur-trimmed edges of the hoods on their parkas. Ramparts of ice, glowing blue and green and eerie white, loomed out of the pre-dawn. The boats threaded between heights that creaked and growled, towering far overhead, pinching shadows at water level. Water lapped against the ice walls.

Ronon sat at the stern of the boat, stroking an oar to one side and then the other, guiding them after the other boats. Even he was bundled into an insulated, fur-lined parka against the freezing temperature. John huddled deeper into the furs piled around him and wondered why he'd agreed to come to this planet, Ancient city or not. Despite the cold-weather gear and the blankets and furs, the cold crept in and made him shake.

If they went into the water, they were dead, hypothermia an even faster, deadlier threat than drowning.

He would have demanded Ronon turn back if Rodney hadn't been in the boat ahead of them and Teyla in the last one.

Something large crested out of the water ahead of them with a slushy splash, a great dark dorsal fin sliding knife-like back through the water and a snake-tail slapping down sharp as a gun-crack. The sound echoed back from the maze of shifting, floating ice.

"Iq'qaba," Ronon grunted.

John shivered.

"Touli says they're smart."
Big predators often were. He didn't say anything, because his teeth were beginning to chatter, despite
being clenched.

Ronon dipped the oar back in the water with a quiet splat. John watched the surface, the ripples that
didn't come from the boats or the current, and held his breath when something massive nudged
against the keel. The boat rose several inches. Ronon slapped the oar against the water, the noise
shocking and loud. The iq'qaba responded, retreating, and John sucked in a breath at last. He knew
that one hadn't been nearly as large as the iq'qaba grew, he'd watched through his binoculars from
the camp as they drove fish into the bay the last two days, but it was still huge and far more alien
than Rodney's pseudowhales had been, sleek and black and eel-like. Nothing mammalian about the
iq'qaba, the closer they were the stranger they appeared and their inky bodies were covered in
something neither scale nor skin, something oily and iridescent that he didn't want to touch.

"Shit, that's too damn close."

Ronon chuckled.

Ahead, a black crevasse opened between the ice walls. Ronon steered them after the other boats. The
side of their boat scraped against the ice on each side, too narrow for the iq'qaba to follow them
through, and then the passage widened into a shallow skim of water over an ice shelf. Where the
water gave way, the ice had been chipped into rough steps. John followed them up and up to where
the sun reflected diamond-brilliant off frozen spires familiar and strange all at once.

Alterran architecture, dizzyingly taller than Atlantis' towers. He knew instinctively that this city had
never flown nor been meant to.

He heard Rodney's excited exclamation.

"An Ancestor's city," Ronon agreed. John looked down again and glimpsed the white flash and
gleam of Ronon's sly smile, framed by his beard. "Figure it will open for you and McKay."

John turned around. "Hurry up," he said, watching as the other boats were beached ahead of them,
Teyla stepping from her boat with grace and Rodney scrambling out, dragging some of his furs in the
water, his face already upturned, eyes alight with wonder. He couldn't wait long enough to keep his
own feet dry either and splashed out onto the ice steps and up to where the shield sheared the ice
away like a knife.

"We might need the jumper to interface with the security protocols," Rodney said. He was leaning as
close to the shield as he could, peering through the faint shimmer at what looked very much like a
grounding station with a set of stairs that angled until they merged into carved stone, bedrock that
formed a cliff until it disappeared into the ice and water where they stood.

John didn't hesitate. He could feel the equipment just beyond the shield registering them, cataloging
them as alive, as bipedal primates, as probable sentients, as possessors of the same genetic sequence
that formed its locks. The shield shimmered apart before him as he went up the stairs, his wet boots
slapping from ice to stone without any hesitation.

"Come on," he called. He took Rodney's hand and Rodney reached back and took Teyla's. She
formed the next link of the chain with Ronon. Hand in hand, all of them went up the sharp climb.
The first metal stair rang like a bell when John reached it and above them lights flared on.

~*~

He used the Asgard-derived transporter beam to take him to the shore; the steps carved into the stone
cliff were too steep and long for his aged and aching knees. It let him program exactly where he wanted to go and sent him there. The trio of ZPMs Rodney had created for the city after a decade's work meant John didn't have to worry about how much power it took. He tucked the remote that would return him to gate room into the pocket of his jacket and started up the beach. Black sand shifted under his boots, firm packed and wet. The curve of the shore took him beyond the point and out of sight of most of the city. If he looked back and up, he would still see the great spires already sparkling with lights, the tops dyed brilliant red by the lowering sun.

John looked north instead, to where the three moons, Yem, Doh, and Bwet, hung each half full, forming a slowly spinning triangle.

The glacier and icebergs that had half-hidden Vineta when they first arrived were gone, a blue-white line to the north that eventually joined the snowy mountains to the east, but the wind off the water that played through his hair still carried the promise of ice. John shivered a little and pulled his jacket closer. He felt the cold these days, felt it most in the night when he reached for someone who wasn't there any longer, but winter was really coming. The herdsmen would bring the druun south with the snows soon.

The waves lapping at the sand weren't loud enough to mask the sound of foot steps shushing over the sand somewhere behind him. John smiled to himself and kept walking. Jerin had followed him. Jerin worried about him, had worried about him and Rodney for years, even before Rodney's seizures began and they realized what they portended. Jerin had figured it out faster than anyone but Rodney and John, much sooner than Haro and Jomma.

John's children had visited more than once, but they hadn't been very close in years. Hadn't, he admitted to himself ruefully, been close ever. Ronon had been father to Haro and Jomma more than he had been. In the end, he didn't regret it; he'd had his time with Rodney and given them as much love as he could, even given them parents who could be there for them better than him. Haro and Jomma had had good childhoods. Haro had gradually assumed responsibility for Vineta as John devoted more and more of his time to Rodney's failing health. Jomma had duty aboard the Carceres. First officer fit her well, she'd always had more in common with Ronon than Teyla or him.

He knew Jerin was afraid he'd do something stupid. Swim out into the sea until he couldn't make it back. Pull out the old nine millimeter Beretta that had come from Atlantis with him and use it. Maybe just sit out all night until the cold took him.

The last one sounded almost appealing. Cold on the beach, cold in Vineta, cold in Ganeda and Teyla's guest room if he bothered to go back to Jomesha. It didn't matter to him anymore.

He'd spent the last week making preparations to go back the Shipyard, packing his belongings, but had no heart for it. Without Rodney, not even Ancient technology could make it more than a tin can in space. Vineta had become unbearable, too, filled with reminders. He expected Rodney's voice to echo in the lab spaces and their quarters the way they had for so many years. He looked for his broad-shouldered silhouette when he rounded corners in the halls. He reached for him in the night.

Once he'd been a loner, but for half a century he been with Rodney nearly every day.

He was lonely.

Jerin probably wondered why the hell he'd come down here. Rodney's name had been called from the highest tower of Vineta, his last work sent back to Atlantis through Genii back channels along with all the medical data on the slow, painful degeneration that they'd finally linked to Beckett's gene therapy coming back to haunt them. Rodney had insisted on sending a ZPM, too. John had included a letter for Jeannie, if she was still alive, or Madison, if she wasn't, with the key to the cypher all of
Rodney's work had been written in. Writing in English had been strangely surreal after so many years, the inked words elegantly delicate and spidery compared to Alterran. There would be no answer; Jom still didn't have diplomatic relations with Atlantis.

There were no memorials or grave stones on Jom. The three-fourths-built ship slowly accreting via nanobots out in the asteroid belt would be the Makkae. Rodney and he had spent most of the second half of their lives bringing the Shipyard back online, finishing the Carceres and designing the new ship. There would be others after it, built to hunt the Wraith. That would be memorial enough for both of them.

He thought Jomma would end up in command of one.

No, he'd come down to the beach for the scent, the salt sea smell that took him back to their first sight of Vineta, for the distant splash of an iq'qaba playing in the bay, and even the faded but still precious memories of Atlantis' ocean and his childhood days beside the Pacific.

It would have been sweet to walk beside the Pacific with Rodney, but he didn't regret that they had never been able to do that. They'd had their ocean and sometimes John felt like all the oceans he'd seen were all the same, all part of some greater sea that existed in and of itself.

No regrets, he thought again.

Rodney had said that toward the end, before the paralysis stole his words. "The gene therapy was worth it," he'd said. "It isn't like I would have lived much longer than this any way. What's a few seizures compared to being able to wake a sleeping city twice?"

"You've mellowed," John had murmured, aching because he'd always been afraid of being the one left behind. He'd traced the never forgotten glyphs on Rodney's papery palms. Treasured. Learned. Loved.

"No, it's just a clear risk/reward ratio," Rodney had contradicted him. "Send Atlantis the book I wrote."

"The poetry?" John asked with weak smile. All of it was about him and he still felt a little embarrassed by that.

Rodney couldn't swat at him, but he glared. "The encyphered ZPM manual. They're obviously still too stupid to figure out the ZPMs without my genius or they'd have them by now." He coughed and then grinned with a mixture of spite and glee. "Let them make heads or tails of it if they can."

"At least it isn't written in Selketi."

"Prettier if it had been," Rodney had murmured, his words slurring and his eyes fluttering shut.

John had pressed a dry kiss to his mouth then and tried to say the words. "You know I..."

Without opening his eyes, Rodney had grumbled, "Don't break anything trying to tell me how you feel."

"I do, though."

"I always knew."

A few days later, Rodney's breathing had stuttered to an end. John had been sitting in their bed with
him, tucked close, and felt the final hitch of Rodney's chest, seen it in Rodney's eyes. He hadn't been surprised as the flesh under his hand dissolved into light. He'd had to close his eyes at the phantom caress that shivered through him, though. He'd spent a lot of time meditating after that, doing slow motion katas in one of the restored gardens. His body ached but his mind was at peace.

He drew in a deep breath.

No regrets.

He let go of the memory of Selket and the guilt he'd carried over leaving Dalal there that he'd carried every day. Like the lives he had taken and the lives he hadn't been able to save, she was beyond his power.

The iq'qaba in the bay crested high in the water with a slap of flippers and tail, the moan and boom of its voice echoing off the cliffs behind John. All the years they'd dwelled on Jom and they'd never been sure if the iq'qaba were sentient or not. Even the Ancestors hadn't known. He squinted and spotted the black curve of its body rising from the water briefly before it dove again, silhouetted for a breath against the last searing scarlet glimpse of setting sun turning the waves black and crimson.

The air seemed colder immediately.

John breathed out and waited as Jerin scrambled over the sand, his patience having run out. He came to a stop beside John and shifted restlessly. John hid a smile.

"It's too cold to be out here now," Jerin said querulously.

John turned his head enough to look at him. In the dusk, Jerin's profile could have been Rodney's; he had the same nose and skull shape. Jerin's coppery hair, inherited from Teyla, was thinning in the same pattern as Rodney's had. Sometimes it hurt to look at him. Mostly it made John happy.

"You sound like Rodney," he commented.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Jerin said. "Uncle John." He turned too and faced John. "I don't know why you came down here tonight, but it's time to go in."

John nodded.

"You're right," he said.

He set his hands on Jerin's shoulders, so wide, so like Rodney's had been it made John's breath catch, and dipped his head until Jerin reciprocated, strong hands gentle on John's shoulders, warm all the way through his coat, and they rested their foreheads together.

"It's time for me to go."

John stepped back and smiled at Jerin. Jerin looked startled and held out his hand. "Uncle John—"

It was no more than a simple side step. He'd been ready for years, had known without knowing all along. It was simple to finally shape himself into energy. The light from his Ascension flared across the sand and the ocean, reflected from Vineta's crystal and steel and Jerin's blue eyes, then John flashed starward, flying at last.

Above, Yem spun above Doh and Bwet. Below, Jerin turned and walked up the beach, his face turned to the sky as the stars came out.
My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi. Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.

The Song of Solomon

Chapter End Notes

1 Dialogue courtesy of Icarus' Necromancy for the Living, from this point until indicated.
2 End of dialogue from Necromancy for the Living. Thank you, Icarus.
3 Dialogue courtesy of Icarus, Necromancy for the Living.

Works inspired by this one. Cover art for 'In the City of Seven Walls' by steammmpunk

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