"Don't shoot!" Rodney yelled, leaping up, onto his knees, and waving his hands, afraid that Sheppard was going to blow his alter-ego to blazes. "He's me! I think!"

This is the story I was calling "lesbians" for a long time, but I have to warn you that there are no real lesbians in it: just porn lesbians. It's actually the third in a group of stories I sketched out in the summer of 2006, the other two being Kid A and Amnesiac, hence the Radiohead title. Huge beta thanks to Lim, Terri, Resonant, Mia, Julad, & Shalott. Julad says I have to tell you, the reader, that this story is kind of nuts, but hold on, hold on: it all works out.

So, all right: maybe he had Sheppard to thank for getting him to the firing range, for nagging him to practice pulling his gun and shooting at the stupid paper targets, because it meant that when the evil alien thing burst into his room from out of another dimension, Rodney McKay was able to grab his gun and fling himself over the bed and begin firing with something like grace under pressure, though he really wasn't sure whether the screaming he heard was his or the alien thing's.

It turned out to be the alien's. "Stop! Stop! You idiot, stop, it's me!" the alien screamed in a weird, too-high voice. "Jesus Christ, today you choose to be macho?"
Rodney, heart pounding as he reloaded, ventured a quick, nervous look up over his unmade bed and saw that the alien was wearing his face. Oh my God, a shapeshifter—! he thought hysterically, raising his gun, just as the alien yelled, "I'm not a shapeshifter!" and oh my God, oh my God, a mind-reading shapeshifter! "—or a mind-reading—oh, for God's sake," the soul-sucking alien said, now sounding distinctly irritated. "I'm you, all right? Just quit firing! Look, I know about the lesbians."

Rodney froze in his crouch, thinking frantically; that couldn't possibly mean—

"Yes, those lesbians," the alien snapped. "I know about the program, and the box, and what you did to Sheppard," and Rodney felt something creep across his shoulders. The alien sounded suddenly weary, and maybe a little bit sad. "I know all your dirtiest, ugliest secrets, McKay. Some you don't even know yet."

Rodney stayed low, shoulders hunched. "You're really me?"

"Yes. Come on, come on, you're a smart guy; can't you work through this faster?"

Rodney stole another glance over the bed. That wasn't him; couldn't be. "From another dimension," he asked warily, "or—"

"No, not from another dimension; not yet," the other him said. "That thrill's still ahead of you—" and of course that was when Sheppard skidded in, guns blazing.

"Don't shoot!" Rodney yelled, leaping up, onto his knees, and waving his hands, afraid that Sheppard was going to blow his alter-ego to blazes. "He's me! I think!"

The other McKay had turned to the door and gone still, both hands raised. Finally, Rodney was able to get a good look at him: it was him, all right, but he looked like—shit. He was years older, if the slight paunch and graying hair were any indication, and he was standing there in his bathrobe—his same bathrobe, which was even more stained and tattered than it was now, which Rodney hadn't thought possible. This McKay had a slump to his shoulders, and a scraggly gray-brown beard. He looked like he'd been through the wars. Probably he had, Rodney realized, and was suddenly afraid.

Sheppard was looking warily between McKay 2.0 and Rodney himself, and for once, Rodney wasn't coming off worse in the comparison. Sheppard slowly lowered, then holstered, his gun, and you really had to hand it to the guy: he always kept it together when bizarre things were happening.

"O-kay," Sheppard said cautiously, still looking from one to the other of them. "Maybe one of you should tell me what—" and before Rodney could complain that, uh, hello, maybe Sheppard could take a moment to discriminate between his close friend, Dr. Rodney McKay, and this clearly inferior interloper from another dimension, McKay 2.0 was moving toward Sheppard, his hands stretching out.

"Sheppard," McKay 2.0 said in a low voice, his hands fluttering down to land on Sheppard's sleeves. He leaned in, eyes closed, and gently moved his face back and forth near Sheppard's ear—jeez louise, was he smelling him? Rodney waited for Sheppard to pull some fancy martial arts move, maybe put him in a headlock or something. But Sheppard just stared blankly, even when McKay 2.0 abruptly cupped Sheppard's neck and kissed him on the mouth—and where the hell was John Sheppard, insane killing machine, now, huh, huh? Because this, this was just—and Rodney's brain fumbled wildly for the word—outrageous!

Rodney gaped as McKay 2.0 finally broke off the kiss and pulled back. McKay's eyes were closed, but Sheppard's were wide open, and while he hadn't broken either of McKay's arms or pulled his
gun or anything, he looked totally freaked out.

Rodney waited for Sheppard to take command, to yell, "What the hell?" and maybe shake some answers out of his older, pudgier, and yet more brazenly lustful, counterpart, but Sheppard just swallowed a couple of times and fidgeted where he stood. "When—" Sheppard began, in a tense, unfamiliar voice, "—when does it, how long do I—?"

McKay's eyes opened instantly, his hands clamping down on Sheppard's shoulders. "There's time," he said. "Plenty of it. I promise you—" and Rodney realized with a start that Colonel Mensa had worked it out faster than he had. "We can fix it, I'm sure we can," McKay was saying in a rushed, reassuring voice. "I'll run through it with you, the whole scenario, so you'll be ready. Tiny details, a couple of variables—" and Sheppard was holding McKay's eyes and nodding intently. "Just, we have to be careful not to change things too much," McKay added, "because believe it or not—" and McKay let out a queer, high-pitched laugh that Rodney recognized; it was his own, when he was near to hysterical, "—a lot of good came out of that situation."

"Really?" Sheppard actually sounded relieved. "So otherwise things are—okay?"

McKay jerked a nod and looked away; this seemed like a painful subject. "Yes. Things are—they're fine, or near enough; nothing I can tell you about without changing it. Things are great. Everyone's great. Except you, of course," he said, and barked out another queer laugh, hands darting up to scratch nervously at his beard. "And me. We're not doing so well, you and me."

"So will this overwrite it?" Rodney asked. Both Sheppard and McKay jerked to look at him, like they'd forgotten he was there, which—yes, very flattering. He folded his arms and smiled thinly at them, annoyed at having been made a third wheel in his own goddamned life. "The future," he added pointedly. "Will this overwrite your—"

"No, actually," McKay 2.0 said; he seemed vaguely distracted by the question. "It doesn't work that way; turns out it's more of a—" McKay stopped, one hand going to his furrowed forehead while his other hand snapped out a rapidfire beat, "—a—a—a thing that branches off from another thing. What do you call it?" McKay demanded, wheeling on a startled-looking Sheppard. "Come on, you know what it's called. You told me—"

To Rodney's relief, Sheppard just stood there, blinking. Rodney was getting really sick of this shit where McKay 2.0 thought he was Sheppard's fucking best friend or—

"You mean, a tangent vector?" Sheppard said, and McKay went, "Ha, yes," and touched his nose. "That's it. Yes, exactly: I'm trying to provoke a tangent vector to a world line, or, in other words, to create an offshoot reality that leaves my reality—a stump, or whatever it's called."

Sheppard frowned. "A node. I think," and oh, how Rodney hated the both of them. "I mean," he added, "this is graph theory; I haven't thought about this in years. In fact, I was never really particularly good at—"

"Oh, please," McKay 2.0 snorted. "I did the conceptual work, but you worked out most of the equations." He shook his head wearily. "Time travel does my head in."

"But why bother provoking a tangent vector?" Rodney asked. "I mean, the Everett interpretation of quantum theory dictates that every version of reality—"

McKay wheeled on him. "Yes, yes, of course every version of reality exists somewhere," he said, now obviously impatient, "but that doesn't mean we just kill ourselves, go running into bullets because, hey, I bet in some alternate universe we got this right. I mean," McKay said, turning back
to Sheppard, "I'm sure there are versions of reality where you never even came to Atlantis, where you're a math professor or a dog walker or a farmer. But you're the Sheppard I know," McKay said, and then, to Rodney, "and you're the guy I was, and—well." His smile was quick and unhappy. "I've got nothing but time on my hands now."

Sheppard interrupted with a small cough. "Sorry, but you said...I did the equations?" and Colonel Mensa obviously had his thinking cap on. "How is that—I mean, was this something we were working on together before I...before?"

McKay swallowed, his face flashing with guilt. "No." His hand slid into his dressing gown, into what Rodney knew was a deep, inside pocket on the left side. "We only started working on it after you were dead," he added quietly, pulling out a smooth, flat rectangle just a bit larger and thinner than a life signs detector, and then, just as Rodney was trying to decide whether to run to the toilet or just try keeping it down, McKay turned to him and said, "Do you want to tell him, or should I?"

It was just another random piece of Ancient technology, found in someone's long-abandoned living quarters, and it was fascinatingly boring: it didn't light up or have any moving parts or do anything, really. Rodney studied it for a while, turning it around and around in his hands, and then put it aside, briefly closing his eyes to make a mental record of the thing. It was a puzzle piece, and some day he'd find a matching edge.

The matching edge came a year or so later, in yet another abandoned residential room, and it was Zelenka who found it. "Rodney, come and see this," Zelenka said. Rodney went over and saw, on the wall behind the bed, a blast pattern of brown-green mineral deposits that he'd come to associate with fried Ancient circuitry. At the center of the damage, something had been vertically inserted into the wall. Zelenka was frowning and tugging at it with a pair of pliers, and when it came out of its slot, Rodney saw that it was rectangular, twice as long as it was high. Whatever it was, he had one just like it.

"Well," Zelenka said, turning it this way and that. It was discolored and a little warped. "No telling what this was. We could perhaps look for it in the Ancient database—"

"No, don't bother," Rodney said, and when Zelenka looked up at him, he explained, "I found one of these about a year ago. It's a rectangle. You can't search for 'rectangle' in the Ancient database. Until we know what it does, we can't—hm, I don't suppose that mechanism still works?" he asked, bending to peer into the slot.

"I doubt it," Zelenka said, crouching beside him. "We could try," and so Rodney went and found the thing. They pushed it into the burned-out slot. Nothing happened.

"Wait, wait, we're idiots," Rodney said, and so they went down to Rodney's room and looked around for a similar slot. They found it on the wall behind the desk, and Rodney couldn't believe that they'd just assumed all those bizarre curlicues were decorative. Rodney pushed the rectangle in until it clicked, and this time, it lit up like a flash drive.

He stared at it. Beside him, Zelenka stared at it.

"Perhaps it is nightlight," Zelenka said finally.

"Oh, shut up," Rodney said, and threw him out.

The idea, when it came, woke him up with its absolute, staggering rightness. Rodney fumbled his way into his bathrobe, yanked the rectangle out of the slot, and headed back down to where he'd
found it, thinking about flash drives and how to decrypt them. He remembered vaguely where the room was—what area of the city, what hallway—but it took him two or three tries to find the exact one. Still, he remembered it when he walked in: it was typically small (why were Atlantis's living quarters always so small?) but more cluttered than a typical Ancient room, which had endeared its long-ago occupant to Rodney; a like mind, he supposed. There was a bed, a chaise, all the usual dusty bric-a-brac—but there were also bits and pieces of Ancient technology scattered across the desk, like the owner had been tinkering with them. A few broken machines were stacked against one wall, looking forlorn and abandoned.

That was the frustrating thing about the Ancients, Rodney reflected, picking up two bits of twisted metal with a crystal set in the center; you couldn't get a sense of them as people, as human beings with hobbies or interests other than ascension. Surely everyone couldn't have lived on the spiritual plane all the time? Sheppard had told him about his six months in the Sanctuary, all that living without purpose; he'd said it was like being stuck in an airport. Rodney would have gone out of his mind. But this guy, here, seemed to have something going on, some interest in problem solving—and come on, somebody had to have invented all this Ancient technology, right? Somebody with half a brain had to have built all these wonderful machines.

He inspected the wall behind the bed for the slot, and didn't find it; then moved to the wall behind the chaise and found it there. He dragged the chair around, perched on the edge, and leaned forward to press the drive into the slot. It clicked, lit up and—

He was shocked by the burst of color and jerked away from it, falling backwards, and he didn't hit the vinyl back of the chaise like he expected to, but just kept going, falling back and back until he crashed onto the floor. Rodney blinked, hands already scrabbling at the—what? soft, squishy, the floor was—and the room felt, sounded—and then there, looming above him, darkening the sky, was the terrifying spectre of breasts.

Two of them, gigantic, like bowling balls, and Rodney scrabbled up to his knees and saw that—yes, all right, not imagining it. She was topless, and really about eight feet tall: massive, like a Viking or something, wearing a chain mail skirt and a fancy metal necklace and nothing in between but her giant, giant knockers. He looked around wildly for an exit, and saw that the room had, in fact, changed. It was cavernous and dank, and the floor beneath his knees was more like a thin mattress, or a leather wrestling mat. The woman stood over him, smiling. It was like looking up a tree.

When she first spoke, Rodney didn't recognize the language. "Halton," she said, almost purring. She reached out for him, and Rodney saw that she had ridged metal bands around her hands, almost like brass knuckles. "Come here, my darling, and take your punishment," and Rodney instantly skittered backwards, crablike, on hands and knees.

"No, no, no, no, no," Rodney said, panicked. "This must be some kind of—" but before he could even finish the thought, the world shifted around him again. It was brighter and warmer here, almost cozy, the room tinted orange by the fire crackling in a stone fireplace not ten yards away. But there were two bodies tangled on a mattress before the fireplace—four arms, four legs, limbs twisting and writhing—and the air was pierced with the quickly rising screams of someone—well, having an intensely personal experience. It should have been sexy; in fact, it made him cringe with embarrassment. "Sorry," Rodney said quickly, flinging his hands over his eyes and willing himself out of there, "sorry, I—"

He felt the air change again, and this time, when he dropped his hands—

The room was bright, airy, circular, white: clearly Ancient in design. Windows on all sides gave out onto some of the most beautiful scenery Rodney'd ever seen: a panorama of multicolored mountains.
He turned around and around, taking it all in: the brightly patterned carpets, the white couch and comfortable-looking chairs, the broad dining table. But what was really astounding was—god, this was a room, a real room, full of things: half-empty cups and plates, abandoned electronic devices, a blanket thrown over the back of a chair. Weird, alien shoes on the floor. A manuscript casually tossed on an end table. Rodney felt wildly elated: this explained it, this explained everything! God, how stupid they'd been, not to have thought of it! The Ancients didn't need things, they had virtual things, virtual lives that—

"Darling." Rodney jumped and turned around, and there, behind him, was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen: fair, blonde, curvaceous, wearing a clingy white draping thing that left absolutely nothing to the imagination, and carrying a plate of what smelled like freshly baked scones. "Do you want something to eat?"

Then he got it.

"So," Rodney said, mouth full of scone; his second; they were fantastic. "Let me get this straight: this environment is entirely virtual, yes?"

"Yes, Halton," she said, and refilled his cup of tea.

"It's Rodney," Rodney said for the third time.

She smiled indulgently. "Yes, Rodney."

Rodney swallowed. "And all this information is held in the flash drive—the uh, uh, what do you call it?" he asked, fingers tracing the shape. "It's a rectangle, it fits into the wall—"

"I have never seen such a thing, Halton."

"Rodney," Rodney said again, and then it occurred to him: if this Halton guy was an Ancient, she probably hadn't seen him for at least ten thousand years. He tried to make his voice a bit more sympathetic: "When, er...when was the last time you saw Halton?"

The question didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. "He was just here," she replied, and Rodney grabbed another scone and sat back to think that over. Either she'd lost track of time or there was no time here; very possibly the interface reset itself every time it was used. Or else—well, it was possible that Halton had designed himself a mistress with almost no memory, literally or figuratively. Rodney could see where a guy might want such a thing, though he himself found her lack of continuity kind of disturbing. Worst of all, she seemed not to have a name, or not to know her name, anyway: she'd just laughed and gracefully shrugged when Rodney had asked.

"Are there many levels to this thing?" Rodney asked, finally, thinking of the blonde Viking and the Potential Threesome before the fireplace. "I've been to two others so far."

She shook her head and smiled regretfully.

"I bet they're coded to the individual user," Rodney told her. "I'll bet these are Halton's user settings, but if I could get admin privileges, I could wipe them and create my own."

She stared at him across the table, apparently fascinated.

Rodney fidgeted in his chair. "What I really need is an interface," he explained. "I don't suppose you've seen one, or seen Halton use one? A command console, perhaps?"
"I have not seen one," she replied regretfully, sliding out of her chair, and Rodney was distracted by the way her breasts shifted beneath the thin fabric of her dress; he had always been a breast man, and God, her breasts were amazing. She came closer, and he couldn’t help but stare at the way her nipples perked visibly through the gauzy cloth, with just a hint of brown-pink aureoles behind. Suddenly, shockingly, he had a lapful of her, warm and silky, her round bottom pressed against his thighs. She turned to him and loosely draped her arms around his neck. The side of her soft breast nudged against his chest. "Will you make love to me?" she asked.

Rodney swallowed a bunch of times; he couldn’t seem to get his throat to work. "I, er—" but then she was bending her head down to kiss him, and wow, her mouth was incredibly soft, and she smelled so nice, like flowers or something. Obviously, this was where Halton had chosen to use his yottabytes: there was incredible attention to detail. Helplessly, he wrapped his arms around her, then slid his hands over her. Phenomenal! She really felt like a woman, except she wasn't. She was a couple of steps above a blow-up doll; hell, she didn't even have a name—

The clingy fabric was parting under his hands, and he cupped her warm, silky flesh: she was unwrapping like a present. Groaning, he slid his hands under her bottom and managed to get to his feet, taking her with him, lifting her up. She laughed and tongued his ear, and oh, what the hell: it wasn't wrong, because she wasn't a real woman, right? You couldn't have it both ways; either she was a real woman, and he was being a pig, or she wasn't real, and he was—all right: pathetic—but no harm, no foul, surely?

He laid her twice, taking her on the large sofa, spread out beneath him like a buffet, all soft breasts and delicate white limbs, and then again from behind, because Christ, she had a fantastic ass; he wanted to eat off it. He collapsed finally, sated but not tired, with her arms around him and his face in the soft, sweet crook between her neck and shoulder.

"Can I call you Elena?" Rodney murmured, and kissed beneath her ear.

"Yes," she said.

"Or Sonia," he said, after a moment. "Maybe you're more of a Sonia," he said, and then, closing his eyes: "Or Samantha. Can I call you...?"

"Yes, of course," she said, and he hated himself a little.

He opened his eyes when it was over, and couldn't remember where he was: in the chaise, in the tiny room with all the broken electronics. He looked around, then down at himself, because he could smell the tang of semen and feel the sticky wetness in his shorts even before he opened his bathrobe and saw the stain on his pajama pants. He belted his robe again, leaned forward, and yanked the drive out of the wall, looking at it admiringly before tucking it into his inside left bathrobe pocket; Christ, what a find.

The next day, Rodney did what he always did when he found something fantastically great: he ran to tell Sheppard all about it. Sheppard was in his room, crouched over his tiny desk and typing something on his laptop. "I found something you'll want to see."

Sheppard barely glanced up. "I'm kind of busy right now. Can I find you later?"

"It's a holographic porn room," Rodney clarified, already turning for the door.

He heard the click as Sheppard slammed the laptop shut. "All right, I'm coming, I'm coming!" though he had to jog to catch up.
Rodney explained the whole thing to him in hushed, excited tones as they made for the transporter, dropping his voice even further whenever anybody was in earshot.

"Huh," Sheppard said, and "Wow," and "Whoa," and "You know, what you really need is to find a command line to overwrite—"

"Yes, yes. Thank you for that incredibly obvious suggestion," Rodney said, and stopped in front of the correct door. He fumbled in his jacket, pulled out the rectangular drive, and handed it to Sheppard, who frowned at it and flipped it over in his hands.

"This is it?" Sheppard asked.

"That's it," Rodney replied, and then he reiterated the directions. "Vertical slot, wall behind the chair. You can't miss it. Push it in until it clicks and, er. There you go. I'll wait out here, then, shall I?" he added, because this was suddenly incredibly awkward.

Sheppard turned defensive. "I'm just checking it out, McKay. It could be dangerous, or—"

"Yes, yes, yes; of course," Rodney said, making a frantic shooing gesture. He turned sharply, crossing his arms and showing Sheppard his back. "Go on. Check it out."

Sheppard came out fifteen minutes later, looking a little flushed and with his shirttails strategically pulled out over his pants. "Okay, that was a trip," he said with a wry smile, and Rodney burst out laughing and grabbed his arm and said, "Oh my God, tell me; tell me everything."

Sheppard just shrugged. "Nothing to tell," he said, but he couldn't keep a straight face, and Rodney cried, "You double-crossing, cretinous bastard! I told you!"

"I can't help it if you have no discretion," Sheppard said virtuously, but then he was smirking and raising his hands, trying to fend off Rodney's half-serious punches. "All right, all right," he said. "I found your interface, anyway," and Rodney stopped to listen. "It's holographic," Sheppard explained. " Comes right out of the air, like in the puddlejumpers; I left it up for you." Rodney arched an eyebrow and waved his hands wildly; come on, give! For a moment, he didn't think Sheppard would, and then Sheppard grinned and said, "This Halton guy programmed, like, thirty scenarios—"

"Thirty?" Rodney gaped.

"Yeah. It's pretty wild," Sheppard said, thoughtfully scratching the back of his ridiculous mop of black hair, "but pretty boring at the same time. No imagination. They're all—" and he paused for a moment, before finishing, with an amused tilt of the head, "—blondes."

Rodney blinked. "What, all of them?"

"Yep. Must be your lucky day, McKay: you and our pal Halton share a type. Speaking of which," Sheppard said, licking his lip with slow deliberation, and Rodney cringed, because he could totally hear it coming; Sheppard had gotten that tormenting, older-brother, sing-song tone to his voice, "I met your new girlfriend," and God, he could die from embarrassment. "Sa-man-tha." Or suicide, perhaps.

Rodney took a breath and tried to muster up some persuasive outrage. "She is not my girlfriend; she's not even a girl! She's a collection of data bytes and—"

Sheppard wasn't buying. "Yeah, yeah," he said, but he patted Rodney's shoulder with affection before handing him the flash drive. "Just have the car home by eleven, okay?"
"What, that's it?" Rodney stared down at the rectangle, then looked up at Sheppard, bemused. "You're done? I thought you'd..."

"Hey, I went!" Sheppard tensed. "It was good, it was great, just—you know, it's your thing." He leaned toward Rodney, his head tipped a little. "Go on," he said, and his voice was low and conspiratorial. "Enjoy it." He clapped Rodney's shoulder and loped off, down the corridor. Rodney hesitated for only a moment before deciding that Sheppard's blessing was genuine, and then he went inside and connected the drive.

The small room disappeared and left him facing a huge, holographic interface; damn the man and his intuitive grasp of Ancient technology. Sheppard was right: the screen did look remarkably like the ones in the puddlejumpers, and it was similarly jam-packed with information. Rodney took all the pre-sets in at a glance—scenarios, schematics, settings, user profiles—and then took a deep breath and began to hack on the underlying code.

It took him a while to figure out, but then he felt the tingle at the back of his neck he always got when he'd successfully sussed out alien math. He gave himself root access, vindictively deleted Halton's userid, and began sifting through the files. His first big programming insight was that the system was working with limited memory; by creating thirty-one realities, Halton had chosen to sacrifice quality for variety. Rodney considered this, then deleted the blonde Viking with the gigantic breasts and added the freed-up memory to the scenario Samantha (his girlfriend, Sheppard teased in his memory) inhabited. Maybe now she'd be able to remember his name; or hey, even her own.

When he was ready to close the terminal, the interface surprised him by asking him if he wanted to clear his cache, compact the history files, etc. He was about to say yes, being a fellow who believed in regular maintenance, except that he couldn't help but be curious about what a holographic porn machine might keep in its cache. He saved it out, played it back and—

The world shifted and Rodney stumbled, trying to keep his footing on the weird leather mats—oh, Christ, this was the lair of the Viking again. He peered through the dim light, searching for her. Oh, she was there, all right; he could hear her chain mail miniskirt clanking, and felt meanly glad he'd deleted her. Then he heard a soft, gusty laugh, and picked out a familiar shape in the dark: tall, lanky, angular. Incredibly stupid hair. He'd stumbled into Sheppard's session in the cache, and a decent person of high moral standards would log out immediately. He himself was not that person.

"Oh, hell, no," Sheppard said under his breath, just as the Viking sing-songed, "Hal-ton! Come and take your punishments, darling!" Sheppard let out a soft, surprised-sounding, "yeesh!" and then turned to pull a holographic interface from thin air.

It was the same screen Rodney had just been using, but he couldn't help but be entranced by Sheppard's graceful, intuitive use of the technology. Rodney went over to stand next to him and watched him move through the screens with complete unselfconsciousness and almost freakish ease. He wondered if Sheppard restrained himself when other people were around. Rodney could see why he would; he was getting chills, watching this.

The world blurred around them as Sheppard began moving through scenarios, barely stopping to glance around at one before sliding on to the next. Rodney felt a little seasick, grabbed for Sheppard's arm, and passed right through him. He flailed, righted himself, and turned just in time to see a scantily dressed blonde holding up a glowing Ancient device, and then another barely-dressed blonde stretched out on a chaise—and taken like this, Rodney could see what Sheppard meant by "lack of imagination," because they were all blondes. Tall blondes, short blondes, sitting down, tied up, posed seductively in all sorts of costumes: mostly in various states of undress.
Sheppard stopped in a candle-lit room, where a topless woman was sitting at some kind of vanity, brushing her long, ash-blonde hair. She had a beautiful back, and Sheppard stood there for a long time and watched her while Rodney fidgeted invisibly beside him and wondered if she was the one: Sheppard's one. Then the woman put down her brush and turned in her chair. Her breasts were like milk. "Will you come in?" she asked, and Sheppard flushed and said, "Sorry, no. No, ma'am," and yanked them out of there.

Still, he must have gotten hot and bothered, because four scenarios later Sheppard stopped again, dropped to his knees in a pile of pillows, and lazily slid a hand into his pants. Rodney recoiled when he saw the scenario—these girls were young, young, young, eighteen or twenty at most, slim-hipped and coltish and entirely unlike his round-bottomed Samantha. Still, though, he could—er, sort of see the attraction: they were long-limbed and silky and extremely lithe, and not naked, which should have been a disadvantage but wasn't. Instead, they were wearing scrappy, stretchy bits of material over their perky bottoms and barely-there breasts, and yes, okay, that was a pretty picture, wasn't it? The way they were, um, kissing like that, and the way the tips of their fingers disappeared beneath the bra-things, slipped down into the panty-things—

Rodney looked away and inhaled sharply, trying to control himself; God, that was close. He glanced over at Sheppard, who he figured would be beating away like mad. But Sheppard was just kneeling there, hand still in his pants but not moving, though he was taking very deep, very deliberate breaths, chest rising and falling. Still, it was hard not to be impressed by Sheppard's patience—or maybe confused was more like it. Sheppard stroked himself almost casually and watched them make out, watched as things heated up, as they toppled together in a writhing, mewling heap like obscene kittens, mouthing each other's nipples and sliding down each other's bodies to lick between each other's legs, their slim thighs falling open. Sheppard just watched, his head slowly lolling to one side like he couldn't be bothered to hold it up, and Rodney couldn't understand how he wasn't— Didn't Sheppard understand these scenarios were interactive? Rodney himself was violently sucking for air; he hadn't planned to jerk off, but he hadn't been expecting picture-perfect pornographic lesbians, either.

In the end, it was the lesbians who made the first move, taking coy notice of Sheppard and slowly crawling toward him. Rodney half expected Sheppard to run for it, but Sheppard stayed put, watching them curiously as they came close. They touched his arm, his chest, four hands gliding over his shoulders, and then they were taking him down, pushing him back among the pillows. He let them do it, going along with a strange, almost indulgent passivity, and then one of them was kissing his face, and the other undoing his pants, and—

"Stop!" Rodney gasped, waving his arms wildly. "Stop stop stop stop—" but that was almost worse, because they just went still, the three of them, like hitting pause, and now Rodney could see everything: the one girl's pink lips touching Sheppard's mouth, the other girl's mouth hovering just over, Christ, the softly rounded tip of Sheppard's cock. Rodney stared helplessly, unable to think what to do or say next, because it was one thing to watch porn with a friend and jerk off, and another thing entirely when said friend was the porn. Childishly, Rodney put his hands over his eyes, and actually, that seemed to clear his brain a little. "Abort!" he yelled. "Abort, abort—"

Sheppard and the lesbians vanished and the interface appeared. Rodney nearly fell over in relief. He was actually sweating. He logged out and snatched the drive out of the wall. He'd spent more than enough time screwing around with this incredibly useless Ancient technology. He'd wasted Sheppard's time as well as his own, and it wasn't as if they didn't have enough real work to do. In fact, it wasn't overstating the case to say that the mission depended on him, and Sheppard was important too. So really, he shouldn't be spending his few, highly-precious moments of free time on the high-tech equivalent of a blow-up doll, and this line of reasoning kept him occupied until he made it back to his room, whereupon he unzipped, fell onto the bed, and masturbated so hard he saw...
stars.

His self-deception crumbled in stages. He wasn't going to use the drive any more, except he was, but only to visit Samantha, because stress relief was important, and it wasn't like he was getting laid regularly in his own reality, right? Still, he was absolutely going to trash that logfile, because it was an outrageous invasion of his friend's privacy, except of course that he'd never watched the entire thing through, and with Sheppard's intuitive use of technology—well, that file could contain crucial information. Of course, Rodney could easily skip over the part with the lesbians, except he didn't, good porn being hard to come by in Atlantis, and besides, what Sheppard didn't know couldn't hurt him. It's not like he was interested in Sheppard anyway. Except for how he was.

In the end, he had to admit to himself that he liked to jerk off while watching John Sheppard be manhandled by lesbians, but, put that way, it sounded all right. Because honestly, who wouldn't want that? Rodney could imagine an entire cable television empire founded on a solid gold premise like that.

Besides, it wasn't as if it affected his relationship with the actual John Sheppard: it was like they weren't the same person. The John Sheppard who starred in his own personal cable pornography had nothing to do with the guy he hung out with and saved galaxies with. The real Sheppard got way too competitive when they played video games, and passive-aggressive when they played chess, and had the absolute worst taste in movies. Plus he was really annoyingly anal about loaning out his comic books, even though Rodney had apologized, sincerely, a thousand times, for that coffee stain he had gotten on Amazing Adventures #43. Sheppard was his best friend and kind of an asshole, and he had nothing to do with the guy in the holographic threesome.

Of course, he saw Samantha too; in fact, Rodney deleted another of the vapid blondes in order to devote more memory to her scenario, giving her a couple changes of outfit and programming an add-on hot tub module. So it wasn't like he spent all his time ogling Sheppard and the lesbians. Samantha's scenario had its charms too: the scones, for one, and it turned out that, having being Ancient-built herself, Samantha knew all sorts of things about Ancient technology. She wasn't a scientist, but in a way she was better, because she knew the basic things that every schoolchild knew, which were the kinds of incredibly useful things people hardly ever bothered to write down for grownups.

In fact, it was Samantha who explained to him, in a soft, amused voice, that yes, silly, of course you could build holographic people from scratch: there were great artists who did that, and you could see their works in museums. But unless you were an artist, why would you bother? It was so much easier, (and Rodney could almost hear the fondness with which she made clear the extremely obvious) to build one off the wireframe of a living person by extrapolating from their biometric readouts. And that's when it first occurred to him that, if there was some version of Sheppard still cached in the database, the information could maybe be used to construct—

"—Wait just one goddamned motherfucking second!" and okay, he and Sheppard had had their various run-ins over the years, what with solar systems exploding and nanovites invading, the incredible pressure and so forth, but this was the first time Rodney thought Sheppard might actually clock him. "You did what?" and Rodney instinctively moved backwards, hands raised, heart pounding; Christ, this was everything he ever feared might happen. He'd never seen Sheppard so furious; his face was like thunder. "Tell me you didn't," Sheppard said in a truly murderouse tone of voice.

Relief came from an unexpected quarter; McKay 2.0 stepped in front of him, which was pretty brave
of him, considering the look on Sheppard's face. "He didn't do it, he never did any of it," McKay said, as Rodney cowered behind him. "I did it," and McKay looked defiant, but his voice was quavering a little. "Your beef's with me."

That took the wind out of Sheppard's sails, which was somehow worse. Anger ebbed from Sheppard's face, and his shoulders slumped, leaving him looking lost, confused, and more than a little bit hurt. "I don't know how you do that," Sheppard said quietly, but he was addressing himself to McKay, now. "I'm a person, not a pinup. I thought we were—"

"—friends, yes," McKay said in a low, anguished voice, and then he was cupping the back of Sheppard's head and pulling him down into an Athosian embrace. Rodney stared at himself in shock, and why on earth was Sheppard permitting this? "We were friends," McKay murmured, and Rodney all of a sudden realized that his alter ego, his future self, was more than just frazzled: he was maybe a little nuts. "And it was wrong, I know it was, but you have to understand—God, Sheppard, you've just got to understand—"

"Who is it today?" Rodney said, distracted, as he came in trying to finish his donut and buckle on his thigh holster at the same time. "What? What do I need this— " Ronon was handing him an ammunition belt, a giant heavy one loaded up with grenades, and was that C4 —?

"Load up, Rodney," Sheppard drawled. "We're dressing to impress."

"Impress who, Genghis Khan?" Rodney said.

"Close enough," Ronon said.

Rodney felt a lot less stupid once they stepped through the gate; the clansmen were similarly bedecked with weapons: knives dangling from their belts, spears crossing their backs, guns on both hips. They must have made one heck of a parade as they were led to the throne room: the clansmen, the team, the marines. Rodney was expecting somebody extremely fearsome—the fellows who'd met them at the gate were fierce enough, nearly seven feet tall, most of them—but their chieftain was a normal-enough specimen of manhood, though he was wearing an elaborately filigreed suit of armor and carrying a very long, jewel-encrusted sword. Rodney shot a quick, meaningful glance in Sheppard's direction before looking away swiftly and biting his lip. Sheppard's eyeroll told him they were on the same page: this was overcompensation city, baby.

Ronon stepped forward, unbuckled the extra gunbelt he'd put on for precisely this purpose, and meaningfully dropped it on the platform upon which the chieftain's throne sat. "We come to you without fear," Ronon said gravely. "You will find us brave allies."

"Yes, yes," the chieftain said with the bored air of one who's heard it all before. "What do you want?"

"Yes, yes," the chieftain said with the bored air of one who's heard it all before. "What do you want?"

Ronon shot a sideways look at Sheppard, who replied with the merest shrug. Rodney had no trouble translating: Hey, go for it. You're doing great. Ronon nodded back almost imperceptibly and said, bowing his head, "We have heard you are warriors. We have heard you have a weapon that is effective against the Wraith."

Their chieftain nodded, as if this was no more than he had expected. "Are you the leader of these fearsome people?" he inquired, taking them all in with a wave of his hand.

Beside him, Sheppard shifted and murmured under his breath, "Showtime." "No," Sheppard said, and stepped forward, one hand resting protectively on his P-90. "I am. I'm—"
And then he was dead.

Rodney heard the blast before his mind could process the image: the chieftain pulling his gun and firing in a single, fluid movement. The blast momentarily obliterated Sheppard from his view, and then the air was full of smoke and weapons fire. Rodney grabbed for Sheppard to keep him from falling, but Christ, he was dead weight and they were both going down, Rodney's hand cupping the back of Sheppard's head to stop him from braining himself on the throne room floor. It was only when they were sprawled together, shots still flying above them, that Rodney saw the blood on the side of Sheppard's head, the mangled remains of his ear. Sheppard's eyes were open, though, and Rodney felt the impulse to kiss him, he was so relieved. He nearly pressed his mouth to Sheppard's, then came back to himself and jerked away: what the hell did he think he was doing? And then he realized it didn't matter. Sheppard wasn't there anymore. There was no light.

Time stopped until something startled him, clattered beside him; a gun; Teyla's gun. And then he had his first, gutwrenching panic attack, because Teyla had dropped her gun. Rodney stared up at her, his insides spasming and his mind blank. Her face was wet and contorted, her mouth all twisted up. He didn't know she could look like that. She fell on her knees beside him, her chest heaving so erratically that Rodney was afraid for her, was afraid she was maybe having a heart attack or something. "John," she gasped, her voice terrifyingly high-pitched, hands reaching for him. Rodney followed her hands with his eyes and saw them frantically tugging on Sheppard's tac vest, and why had he never noticed how thin Sheppard's chest was, how narrow his shoulders were?

Rodney looked up and saw that three marines were dead, but so was half of the clan and— Christ, Ronon had really done a number on their chieftain. The marines held their guns on lines of men lying face down on the floor, and Rodney, who was still crouching, numbly holding Teyla in his arms, looked up to see Ronon pacing the room, frantic with grief. His face was streaked with sweat and blood: none of the blood was his. Ronon would drift closer, get a glimpse of Sheppard, and then veer away violently, visibly fighting for control of himself. Rodney's eyes kept drifting back to Sheppard's boots, half unlaced as always.

Those first few days they stayed together, within arm's length of each other. The three of them stayed close to Sheppard's body, keeping a vigil in Atlantis's morgue. Teyla and Ronon were like extensions of himself. They thought as a unit. They felt as a unit.

Incredibly, the SGC wanted to ship Sheppard's body back to Earth, despite his having listed no next of kin. "It's procedure," they said. "No," Teyla said, and Ronon growled and Rodney looked up from behind them and thought of all the damage he could do, which was quite a lot, really. They wanted to have his funeral in the gateroom and then ship him back to Earth to be buried in Arlington. The team stared until they went away.

It was Ronon who said the obvious. "We can't put him in the ground."

"No," Rodney said, feeling sick at the prospect.

"No," Teyla agreed. "We will need a—"

"Yes," Ronon said.

"I can fly it," Rodney said, looking up.

They'd orchestrated more complicated missions than this before breakfast; a diversionary tactic, a few overrides, and Sheppard's body had been whisked away to M7G-677, the planet of the children, where some of the kids had grown up, and all of them knew about grief. They spent the night in a
hut that Keras had prepared for them, but nobody slept: outside, the torches had been lit, and they were visited in fits and starts by groups of children, who came bringing flowers and feathers and bits of decorated leather. A pile of flat brown stones began to build. Rodney didn't understand their significance until suddenly he did, remembering the sack of chocolate Sheppard had handed Keras, and then he had to go stand outside for a while.

The next morning, he and Teyla and Ronon carried the rough-hewn wooden coffin to the puddlejumper. Rodney resisted the urge to tug the lid off and take a last look at the man who'd been his team leader and best friend, and instead focused on how to position the coffin so that it would slide easily out of the weapons pod. Ronon had turned away, and Teyla was standing beside him, one hand on his back. Rodney blinked a few times and then hurried into the cockpit to program the flight path.

This was a mistake—the cockpit was Sheppard-haunted—but Rodney gritted his teeth and began the arduous task of convincing the navigational computer that, yes, he really did want to plot a burn-up trajectory. It wasn't that it was difficult; the needle that most pilots, that Sheppard, that most pilots had to thread was finding the entry corridor, not not-finding it. You had a 98 percent chance of not-finding it. The problem was getting the computer to believe you.

When he looked up again, Ronon was in the co-pilot's chair, slumped forward, hands dangling between his knees. "Are we ready yet?" Ronon asked, voice low and hoarse.

"Yes," Rodney said, as if it were a technical question, and then, it having struck him differently, "No. No." He sank back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Come on," Teyla said softly, after a while, and they nodded and moved into position. Ronon dialed the gate, and Rodney guided them through and engaged the hyperdrive.

New Lantea looked like Earth from space, and Rodney wondered if Sheppard had picked it for that reason, if he had been flying Atlantis and recognized something that felt like home. Rodney checked their trajectory, double-checked the autopilot, and then felt a nauseating gut-clench of fear. This was it; it was time. He felt Ronon's hand on his shoulder. He was stumbling to his feet, they all were, clustering more tightly together. Ronon was hard up against his right side, and Teyla's arm was twined tightly around his, and they were standing there together looking out at the blue and white planet beyond.

"I can't do it," Rodney said tightly. "Somebody—somebody else—"

"Teyla?" Ronon muttered, and Teyla's hand tightened on his arm.

"I—yes," Teyla said, and then she took a deep breath and said, in a low, cracking voice, "John Sheppard, we loved you so much." New Lantea swam before his eyes, and a trail of glowing particles arced across the sky, John Sheppard become a shooting star.

"On Star Trek, he came back," Rodney said, and Ronon and Teyla were kind and didn't ask what the hell he was talking about, just put their arms around him and held on.

"You are so lame. So, so lame, McKay," but Sheppard had tactfully put a hand on McKay 2.0's back and guided him to a chair when he had gone pale and faltered. Now McKay just sat there, sweaty and worn out and visibly trying to collect himself. Sheppard set his jaw and looked away, apparently trying not to look like a man who'd just had his own death narrated to him. Rodney himself had had to sit down, too, because he could see it happening all too vividly. One loose cannon. One lucky shot.
Finally, McKay took a deep breath. "That was the hard part," he said, almost to himself, "and the part we'll have to be most careful about changing. I can tell you the rest, because most of it never really happened. Well, not to you, anyway. It all happened to me."

There was a formal investigation into Sheppard's disappearance, but the paperwork kept getting mislaid; everything was in chaos. Atlantis's chain of command was in complete disarray, Carter having recently returned to Earth. Sheppard's death had taken out his entire team, and many of the scientists who might have stepped into the breach had been working round the clock on the superweapon they'd found in the clansmen's vault after they'd sacked the place.

Zelenka had stopped by his rooms soon after his return to tell him about it, and while he had hugged Rodney tightly and offered his sincerest condolences, he couldn't quite conceal his underlying excitement. "It is incredible, Rodney, the properties of it! Our first distillation was effective; our third has been perfection itself. Our tests have exceeded our greatest expectations; the Wraith react as if it is poison—why we have not before considered a solution along these lines," Zelenka said, actually smacking his forehead, "I do not know; certainly, the solution was evident in the literature, quite literally—"

"Garlic?" Rodney said, turning the white root over and over in his hand.

Radek's smile was radiant. "Very like; it is a relative with very rare and special properties. Practically unknown in this galaxy, but now that we have a sample, we can propagate it easily. Isn't it wonderful?" and Rodney agreed that it was wonderful, and said he was happy for him, and for the botanists; happy for all of them, really.

Ronon gave him a little space, and then turned up at his door at the ungodly hour of five-thirty in the morning. "Put your trainers on," Ronon said.

Rodney leaned tiredly against the door frame. "You're out of your mind," he said.

"Come on, McKay. Now," and strangely, Rodney found himself relenting, fishing a pair of barely-used trainers from underneath his bed and putting them on. Ronon started off slowly, and Rodney followed him down the hall, down the stairs, and through a large, curving corridor, focused intently on Ronon's broad back. Ronon began to speed up, and Rodney found himself straining to keep up, arms pumping, lungs burning. It was surprisingly wonderful not to think, just to move, and he zoned out for a while, left, right, left, right, until all at once he couldn't run any more, and collapsed against a wall, fingers scrabbling at the cool metal. Ronon materialized beside him. "Bend over," Ronon said, hand pressed between his shoulder blades. "Head down. Breathe deep," and Rodney doubled over, hands braced on his thighs, and gasped for air until the world sharpened.

"What is this," Rodney asked, clutching his chest, "the John Sheppard memorial run?"

Ronon threw a towel at his face. "See you tomorrow, McKay."

Rodney muttered as he stumbled back to the room, grumbled through the hot shower that completely failed to ease his aching muscles, and mumbled as he fell onto his bed and into the first dreamless sleep he'd had since Sheppard died.

He was waiting for Ronon the next morning. "Come on. Let's go," Ronon said gruffly, and Rodney went without a word. They ran every morning after that, Rodney stumbling along panting and grateful for the routine of it. As time went on, it became the one, real thing in his world, the thing that kept him from losing touch entirely.
Because this was supposed to get easier, wasn't it? Ronon had gone back to work, drawn by the desire to deploy their new weapon against the Wraith. Rodney couldn't bring himself to be interested: biochemistry, Jesus, developing what was, not to put too fine a point on it, an insecticide. Oh, sure, there were things he could work on, not to mention a whole galaxy of things to discover now that he didn't have to devote himself entirely to defense, but what did it matter? New particle: big deal. Strange attractors, so what?

He was the only one who didn't seem to be able to get on with his life. Teyla had gone home to New Athos and the comfort of her people. She had taken up the mantle of leadership, taken another lover, had another child. But then Teyla had always been able to connect with people; God, she made it look so easy. But it wasn't easy, not for him, the whole 'connection' thing. Other people just didn't get him. Not usually anyway.

His last chance came in the form of a smiling Samantha Carter. "Hey there, Rodney," Sam said, unexpectedly appearing at his door. The SGC had changed uniforms again, and Sam had apparently been promoted to General; when the hell had that happened? "Will you come and have lunch with me?" Her smile never wavered even though—God, he knew he looked like shit; he hadn't shaved for days, and his beard was streaked with gray. "I want your advice on something. A project," and when he nodded, she added, tactfully, "I'll wait outside while you get dressed."

They went down to the mess for sandwiches and coffee. Rodney led her to his regular table, which was in a far corner where he was protected from whispers and staring eyes. "So," Sam said, and unfastened a folder of blueprints. "Tell me what you think of this," and it was an interesting enough project—an attempt to alter the underlying geometry of wormholes, so that their forms could potentially extend beyond the gates—that it actually took him a while to realize that this was an intervention, an attempt to draw him back into some kind of normal scientific life. Rodney was moved, and stopped paying attention to what Sam was saying and watched her face instead: the intelligence in her eyes, the warmth and kindness of her smile.

"Rodney?" Sam had stopped talking; she looked concerned, eyes searching his face. She tentatively touched his hand; hers was dry and cool. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Rodney said, but he turned his hand under hers and squeezed, once, tight. "Clearly you'll set up a subspace field experiment; do it virtually first, make some micro-version of that thing they're building at Princeton," and then, before Sam could launch back into her sales talk: "So what do you need me for?"

Sam hesitated, clearly taken aback by his directness. "I hoped you'd come back with me," she said. "To Earth, to the labs. You could run the whole thing, Rodney; design all the protocols. I mean, you're our go-to guy on wormhole technology," and suddenly he could see his way clear. Go back to his room, pack his few things, say a couple goodbyes. He would have to send a message to Teyla. Then he could go back with Sam through the wormhole; Area 51 would give him his lab back: the good one, with the windows and the extra-high-octane coffee machine. He could write his own ticket: all the minions he wanted, as much time with the particle accelerator as he could log, enough processing power to calculate—well, anything, really: the internal thought processes of his cat, the path of the steam rising from his coffee, the way to Andromeda. He could get quarters on base, or maybe buy a place in Ash Springs: a ranch house with big windows, a view of the mountains and the scrub and the sky, that clear blue—

"I can't," Rodney said, knowing that this was his bridge back and setting fire to it anyway. "I mean, I'm flattered, though of course it is true that I am the world's foremost expert in wormhole technology, so I can see why you so desperately need me, but honestly, it's just not a good time. I'm
Rodney snorted dismissively and kept typing. "You're not even alive anymore."

"Rub it in, why don't you?" John got himself a glass of water and perched, sweating and radiating heat, on the arm of the plaid couch. "You're not still working on that?"

"Yes, I'm still working on it! This isn't just a crack I can patch over; this is a huge glitch in the program! You're missing six years in a row—"

"—yeah, of middle school, Rodney," John said, and took a long swig. "I really don't think I need to remember who I sat next to in eighth grade Social Studies."

"Oh, you don't think so!" Rodney said, nearly apoplectic. "Excuse me, but who's the genius here, you or me? How can you possibly evaluate the significance of events you don't remember? This could be crucial to your psychological development—"

John sighed and put the glass down. "Whatever. Sure. It could be crucial—"

"—for all you know. And what do you know, anyway?" Rodney narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "Nothing from 1976 to 1982, that's for sure!"

"Gotta say, I'm not feeling the loss," John said, twisting to stretch out his back. "But okay, fine, go on and work if it makes you happy. I'm going to take a shower—"

"Happy?" Rodney scornfully told John's retreating back. "It's not a matter of happy! It's a matter of —" John closed the bathroom door. A moment later, the shower started up.

Rodney rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the laptop. Three minutes later, the grandfather clock chimed softly, and when Rodney ignored it, the buzzer he'd rigged up began its really annoying metallic bzzzing sound. Rodney sighed and closed the laptop, shoving it away across the rough wooden table.

"I've got a meeting!" Rodney yelled toward the bathroom door. "John! I've got a—oh, hell," he said, and yanked the drive from the wall. He fell back in his chair, fighting the now-familiar disorientation, and tucked the drive into his breast pocket; he didn't like to go anywhere without the Terrarium anymore. His legs were prickling, and he roughly rubbed them with both palms to get the circulation going before tottering to his feet.

There were more people at the meeting than he expected, and he didn't recognize half of them; probably more botanists brought in to cultivate a more effective strain of supergarlic. Rodney took a seat at the table and opened his laptop, mind still circling the problem of 1976-1982. He navigated a path to the SGC mainframes and started grabbing what useful information he could get: states where Sheppard had lived, schools he had attended, missions he had flown. His John needed to know these things, too.

He remembered the day John opened his eyes: that first, terrible blankness, the later periods of confusion. Rodney only had the one scan to work with, and even though he'd designed and run
several brilliant extrapolation programs—clarifying John on the neurobiological level by building out logically from clearly articulated cells to less clear ones—his John had still had terrifying gaps of memory, of veracity.

"Hello," John had said, all too polite, but then his second word had been, "Rodney," and Rodney had nearly fallen over in relief. "Yes. Yes. John," and then they had played their first, frantic round of "Do you remember?" (Rodney, yes; Teyla and Ronon, yes; Atlantis, yes. The rest of the expedition, sort of; the SGC, kind of; Afghanistan, vaguely. His mother, yes; his father, who?—and it was all suddenly a sheer cliff's face: John couldn't remember where he had grown up or gone to school or been stationed; he couldn't remember anyone except those few people he'd teamed with or flown with and, perplexingly, a girl named Charlene. He didn't remember going to summer camp, didn't remember getting married, didn't remember any of his disciplinary hearings.

"It's all right," Rodney had said in a soft, urgent voice, talking more to himself than to John. "We'll fix it. I'll fix it." He had actually fixed an awful lot of it, partly by importing what concrete information he could find (Sheppard's college transcripts, mission reports, military records) and partly by extending the biometric parameters by hand, massaging the code line by line instead of running the extrapolation script. Then John had remembered his ex-wife (Nancy), his college roommate (Todd), and how much he hated his father. Rodney was triumphant. John was thin-lipped and irritable for days.

The thing was, John had memories from 1976-1982, Rodney was sure of it; he could specifically recall John telling him about his late-seventies obsession with Van Halen; in fact, he was pretty sure John had admitted a mullet. So why couldn't he—

"Rodney? Rodney." and Rodney looked up sharply and said, "Hm? What?" Everyone was looking at him expectantly, and Zelenka sighed and said, undoubtedly with more patience than he deserved, "Dr. Kita and her team are having a little trouble with the kind of Ancient technology that is precisely your area of expertise, so could you—"

"Yes, yes. Of course," Rodney said, and went back to ignoring them.

Afterwards, Rodney made a beeline for the exit but found Zelenka standing in his path with a woman he didn't recognize: tall, bespectacled, brown hair tightly pulled into a ponytail. "Ah," Rodney said, clutching his laptop to his chest. "You meant now."

"Yes," Zelenka said. They followed Dr. Kita to her lab, where a long, tubular device of Ancient origin had been laid out on the bench and half taken apart.

"Oh, no, no, no—what are you, stupid?" because it was like trying to take apart a calculator to see the numbers. Exhaling angrily through his teeth, Rodney reassembled the machine, hooked it up to a screen, and began poking through its operating system.

"But that is not written in Ancient." Dr. Kita sounded disturbed. "That is one of the programming languages we have not yet deciphered. You know how to program in—Dr. Zelenka, does he know how to—" and of course he knew how to; he'd had to crack three different alien programming languages in order to create his virtual John.

"Yes, yes," Zelenka said fondly. "This is why we keep him around." Rodney was touched by the protective pride in his voice, though those good feelings were later undermined when he overheard Zelenka murmuring, "terrible loss," and "never recovered."

John had built a fire in the large stone hearth and was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of it,
Rodney's laptop balanced on his knees. Rodney couldn't help but notice that John was wearing red wool socks. He didn't remember programming red wool socks.

"You know, I really don't think you ought to hack on your own code," Rodney said uneasily, dropping onto the floor beside him with a grunt. "There's something unnatural about—"

"Oh yeah," John said, and rolled his eyes, "because that's where 'unnatural' starts in this scenario." He shoved the laptop at Rodney and said, "Anyway, I wasn't hacking it; I was just looking at it—and there, the information's there. I just can't access it."

Rodney grabbed for the computer. "What do you mean, it's there? Where?"

"It's there; it just got compacted and shoved into a subfolder," John explained. "The program's too big, so it just cut off the least accessed subroutine and boxed it away."

"Oh, right. Yes. Yes, I see." He was weak with relief; he hadn't really understood how much it bothered him to lose those six years. "I can fix that, no problem," he said, typing furiously; he'd already deleted a couple of scenarios to expand Samantha, and a bunch more to create John, but if John needed more space, he'd delete even more; hell, he'd wipe the whole drive, he'd—

"Or not." John propped himself against the sofa and stretched his red socked feet toward the fire. "Seriously, it's not bothering me. I only went looking because you seemed so—"

Rodney's fingers stumbled on the keyboard: he had to stay calm, had to, but it was so damn difficult these days. "Look, it's important, all right? It's nine to fifteen: it's when you started reading comic books, the first girl you ever kissed—all the stuff that made you, you! I can't download that, it's not like figuring out what textbook Stanford used for Combinatorial Math in 1985—"

"Oh my God." John looked shocked, and Rodney knew right then he was saying too much, but he couldn't seem to stop.

"—and just porting the information over! If I lose this, it's gone, and I can't get it back, it doesn't exist anymore, and I can't—I can't—" and John leaned toward him, face knotted with concern, and awkwardly patted his shoulder. It was exactly Sheppard's brand of non-touching touching, so familiar it made his lungs hurt. He pushed John away and brought his arm up to protect his face while he tried to squeeze the tears back. "Sorry," he mumbled into his elbow. "I just—I had kind of a rough day."

"Hey, don't worry about it," John mumbled, pulling away to give Rodney some space. Rodney heard him get to his feet and pad away into the kitchen. A clink of glass, bottles of beer probably. Rodney hastily scrubbed at his face and tried to rearrange his features into something like normal. John came back with a bottle of beer in each hand.

"The thing is," John began, obviously trying to be casual, "I don't think you're getting enough sleep." He offered Rodney a dripping bottle of lager, and Rodney deliberately put his laptop aside and took it. John nodded approvingly and let his long legs fold under him. Rodney tilted the bottle to his lips and drank: good, cold. "You work all the time—"

"I'm not working now," Rodney pointed out. "In fact, I'm in my room, relaxing; my body's in a comfortable, trance-like state—"

John pursed his lips into a little moue of disgust. "Yeah, but your brain is in here," he said, and poked the center of Rodney's forehead hard enough to hurt. "Working," he said. "Working, working—Did you ever hear of something called REM sleep?"
Rodney snorted. "Oh, you are not going to lecture me on—"

"Oh, I just might," John said, and swigged his beer, "because, as I'm sure you know, I took not one, but two semesters of neuroscience," and fine, yes, John was mocking him, but just a little. "And this is not sleep, Rodney. This isn't like the virtual reality machine on the Aurora. You are not in stasis out there: you have to eat, and sleep, and move, and go to the bathroom—"

"Yes, well, thank you for your concern," Rodney said hastily, wanting to cut that line of thinking off now, "but I am, in fact, exercising daily and going to work and eating sandwiches and—" John tilted his head to the side, "—all right, yes, fine, possibly not sleeping as much as I ought to be. Just—" He fiddled with his beer bottle for a moment, and took another sip and plumped for honesty. "I'd rather be here."

John nodded understandingly. "So sleep here," he said, and Rodney frowned at him, because that had honestly never occurred to him.

"But you don't," Rodney began slowly, thinking it through. "You don't have to sleep."

"No, I don't," John agreed, "and I don't have to drink this beer either, but I'm doing it, because—" He blew out a sudden, irritated breath. "Well, I don't actually know why exactly: because my programming tells me to. Because Sheppard liked to. Because it's pleasant. Because—I don't fucking know, it's a goddamned existential nightmare every time I open my eyes. The beer tastes good, doesn't it?" and then he grinned a lopsided grin and said, portentously, "If the buzz is real, I must be real, right?"

"Oh, my God; it's the Tao of Grolsch," Rodney groaned.

"Hey, I'm making a serious point," John said. "Have you even tried sleeping here? I don't think it matters where you are so long as you let your consciousness rest for a couple of cycles, preferably with some rapid eye movement. I mean, this is your place, after all; stop fucking around with Sheppard's college transcripts and build yourself a waterbed."

He ended up crashing on the sofa with a pillow and a blanket and having the best sleep he'd had in years. He worried that John would stand over him all night, but after a few games of Forza Motorsport II, John just loped off to the bedroom he didn't actually need and shut the door. Rodney vaguely wondered if John's program would actually simulate sleep or if he would just lie down on the bed and stare up at the ceiling, his long, lean body perfectly still—and then Rodney was falling asleep himself, hard.

He woke up with a start, disoriented, to the ringing of bells, the grandfather clock, and John standing over him wearing nothing but a pair of pink and white boxer shorts. "What?" Rodney asked, jerking up and nearly strangling in the blanket. "What?"

"I don't know!" John shrugged, and Rodney was momentarily distracted by the play of his shoulder muscle. "Clock went off. Are you supposed to be—"

Rodney sat up straight. "Oh, hell. Ronon," he said and yanked the drive out of the wall. He fell back in his chair, the white walls of Atlantis seeming sterile and cold after the warm wood and stone of the cabin. He heard the chiming of the doorbell, then the low, hard thumping that was Ronon pounding on his door. "Coming!" Rodney yelled, hurtling toward it. "Hang on, I overslept!" —and that much was true.

Ronon was on the other side, looking skeptical. "Get moving, McKay. You're not getting out of
"Okay, hold on," Rodney said, and went to put on his tracksuit.

He chased Ronon through the hallways of Atlantis, then showered and shaved and ate a huge breakfast. He stopped by Dr. Kita's lab just to make sure they weren't doing anything unbearably stupid, and then headed back to his room and the Terrarium.

He found John sitting at the kitchen table, reading a magazine and wearing— "Okay, seriously," Rodney said, crossing his arms, "I know I didn't program that shirt." It was white, with pink and black swirls and a wide, pointed collar. John shrugged, but Rodney wouldn't let it go. "Or those pink boxers. And that parka wasn't red, and that red flannel shirt you were—oh, my God, you have been hacking on my code!"

"Actually," John said, letting the magazine drop to the table, "it's my code. And I'm just changing some colors, no big deal. I like reds. You got a problem with that?"

John looked good in pink. Something about the color made his hair seem blacker and brought out the green in his eyes. "No, I suppose not. It's just, I just don't want you getting corrupted," and John slouched back in his chair and drawled, "Rodney, this concern for my innocence, it's very charming." Rodney fidgeted and cleared his throat and was about to suggest they hit the slopes or something—and then he caught sight of what John was reading, and his indignation caught fire again. He'd assumed it was a golf magazine, not—

"The Physical Review?" Rodney spluttered, grabbing for it as John slunk out of his chair and went into the kitchen. "How did you get this? Why would you even want it?"

John groaned and slumped back against the counter. "Don't have a cow, Rodney, all right? Just, I want to know what's going on, so I got the program to suck in some external data feeds and render them as—" and Rodney looked around suddenly and saw the piles of newspapers, magazines, books and—

"Changing some colors, he says! No big deal, he says!"

John had the grace to look guilty, but was clearly going down swinging. "Oh, so you're the only one who gets to improve me? I don't get to improve me?"

"I'm not trying to improve you!" Rodney shouted. "I'm just trying to—" make you more like John Sheppard, except some deep instinct told him to bite his tongue. He took a breath and crossed his arms. "Hmph. And I was going to build you a racetrack."

John stayed still, but his hair perked with interest. "Racetrack?"

Rodney reminded himself, as he stood out in the whipping wind watching the red Formula 1 racecar take another hairpin curve, that John wasn't really alive, so he couldn't actually be killed. It was why he'd given John a ski slope, a half-pipe, a CH-47 Chinook: here, at least, he could let John indulge his stupidest, most daredevilish desires without worrying too much. In fact, he was more concerned about John's new hobby of hacking, which could result in real damage; anything else could probably be solved with a reboot.

The car eventually slid to a stop, and John emerged, in his unnecessary helmet and unnecessary goggles, grinning like a loon. His smile lasted the rest of the day and grew increasingly goofy. John was dazed, happy, over-exhausted and over-adrenalized, and so while, yes, Rodney was able to beat
him at chess (several times), there wasn't a lot of satisfaction in it: John hardly seemed to mind. Later, Rodney saw, to his surprise, that John had fallen asleep on the sofa, face mashed against the cushions and still smiling.

Apparently the program did simulate sleep, and—well, it was very convincing. God, John was so beautiful, and Rodney wanted—Christ, to touch him, to smooth the pale red flannel across his shoulders, to cup his ass through the soft gray sweatpants he was wearing. But there was a line, even in something as crazy as this, and so Rodney took a deep breath and moved away. He almost went back to his room in Atlantis, except he really did sleep so much better here, so he went into John's bedroom instead.

It was familiarly neat, the Johnny Cash poster nailed to the cabin wall over the large bed, with its red (blue; Rodney could have sworn they'd been blue) flannel sheets and the heavy pile of red and green plaid blankets. John's guitar was in one corner, his surfboard (Rodney had not yet gotten around to building the ocean plug-in John had asked for) in the other. Rodney pulled a blanket off the bed and draped it over John, then got himself a blanket from the closet: he figured it was okay to crash out on a guy's bed, but less okay to actually pull back the covers and get in. He kicked off his shoes and pants, turned out the light, and stretched out, pulling the blanket tight around his shoulders, and...hm, something wasn't right about this.

The thing was, he'd spent a lot of time in Sheppard's tiny room on Atlantis, which had served as their team headquarters, rec room, infirmary and personal confessional. Rodney had sat on Sheppard's bed, sprawled out on it, played video games on it and...this wasn't, there was...it didn't smell right. It didn't smell like Sheppard, and Rodney hadn't until that very moment realized that Sheppard had a smell, but he did, and John didn't smell the same. It was probably some combination of personal hygiene products: hair gel and deodorant and aftershave, combined with darker, more medicinal smells. In the dark, it was easy to conjure them up: some sort of antiseptic, chlorhexidine, maybe, and something else more menthol-y camphor-y like Ben-gay, because Sheppard probably had pulled muscles throwing himself over balconies and out of windows and all that. Under that: fear, maybe. A little. He'd seen Sheppard afraid, knew that Sheppard was more afraid than he let on, hiding it behind lopsided smiles. There was a bitterness to Sheppard too, and Rodney remembered his dark moods, his almost paranoid eyes—and missed him all over again; God, missed him so, so, so much.

"Sleep well?" John was standing at the window, looking out over the mountain, the fluffy white trees. He was bleary-eyed and stubbled, lazy, head low over a steaming mug.

"Yes; yes, I did." Rodney hid his embarrassment by pouring himself a cup of coffee with rather more fuss than was strictly necessary. "I took your bed, I hope you don't mind—"

John flapped an idle hand. "Nah. I was really wiped," and Rodney shot him a swift look, but he seemed sincere about it, as if he really had been tired, as if he really had slept. "I mean, that was great, driving, but it really knocked me out: the intense focus. I slept..." and Rodney's hand tightened on the mug hard enough to break it; like the dead his mind supplied; I slept like the—"...really well," John finished on a yawn.

Rodney couldn't keep the edge out of his voice, couldn't stop the sugar spoon clattering to the countertop. "You said you didn't have to sleep."

John didn't seem offended. "But I do it anyway," he said with a faint smile. "Some nights better than others. It's a good bed, though, huh? A lot bigger than we're used to," and before Rodney could even begin to formulate a reply to that, John added, "You know, you could always sleep at Sam's; whatever happened with you and Sam?"
Rodney just stared in dumb incomprehension: Sam? There was a familiar, teasing undertone to John's voice; was John talking about Carter? Then Rodney understood and grinned his relief. "You mean Samantha! Samantha, the simulation." He laughed and waved a hand. "Oh, I deleted her. God. Ages ago."

"Oh." John turned his head, but Rodney still saw some unrecognizable emotion momentarily take hold of his face. "Huh." Rodney cringed with guilt: was that in bad taste, to talk about deleting simulations, being that John was a simulation? Surely John had to know that he wasn't in the same league as the others, not even Samantha, who at her prime had only taken up maybe one tenth of the drive. Or was it that—

"Is it the lesbians?" Rodney blurted, because of course John had liked the lesbians. "Because—okay, yes, I deleted them, but I'm sure I can get them back. Or make you something as good." He realized with sudden dread that his perfect habitat had all the conveniences except female companionship; the Terrarium was seriously lacking in hot babes. His mind was already running through solutions: sexy neighbor? brothel down the road? sex bot?—oh, God, would it be too recursive to give John his own virtual reality scenario?—when John said, in a strange voice, "It's not the lesbians, Rodney."

"Right, no," Rodney said, more to himself than to John, "and besides, you like brunettes."

John slammed his coffee down. "Rodney," and wow, that was the voice Sheppard used when he wanted Rodney to shut the hell up and pay attention. "I wasn't asking for me; I was asking for you, because as your Designated Imaginary Friend, it's my job to tell you that you're wound pretty tight, and it might help you to get laid now and then." John crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows significantly: Capische? "As for me, I'm enjoying the time to myself, and if you want to get me hot—well, I wouldn't say no to that beach scenario. 80 degrees, and don't skimp on the waves."

Rodney spent the next few days happily building John's beach plug-in. It snowed, so they stayed inside and kept the fire going all the time, Rodney leaning back against the sofa with his laptop on his knees while John sprawled out above him and read one broadsheet newspaper after another. The grandfather clock chimed a couple of times, but Rodney was seriously not in the mood to have his artistic vision disrupted by violent physical exercise, so he told Ronon he was near to a breakthrough on something very, very important, and asked him to kindly fuck off for a few days. Ronon rolled his eyes and said "Yeah, all right, whatever," and Rodney went back and put in golden sand, a bright blue sky, miles and miles of clear water churning with white surf. A long stretch of sandy seabed for barrel waves, a nearby reef for the big swells, and Rodney was really enjoying himself, happily constructing the jagged edge of the coastline, when he realized that—holy crap, he was Slartibartfast from Hitchhiker's Guide—and burst out laughing.

"What?" John said, lowering the broadsheet, and Rodney realized, to his delight, that John would get this, and so he turned the laptop's screen toward him and said, "Look, I'm Slartibartfast! Designing the shoreline and—!" John cracked up and shoved the newspaper aside, "—building fjords," Rodney finished, dissolving into gasps of laughter, and John slithered down besides him on the floor and grabbed the laptop, laughing as he saw Rodney's perfect mock-California coast.

"Oh, my God," John said, still grinning helplessly. "You're so pathetic; of course you want to be a Magrathean. 'I am Slartibartfast! Designer of Worlds!'"

"Uh, excuse me, so sorry," Rodney said, wiping his eyes, "but you just a) pulled Magrathea out of your ass and b) made an Oppenheimer reference, so I don't know who you're calling—" and then John's mouth was on his, soft and a little wet. Hands came up to clutch his face, and for a moment, everything lurched—his stomach, the world—and then he was kissing John back greedily, trying to grab hold, hold on.
They kissed for long moments, lips sliding and parting against each other, and then all at once, Rodney couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe. He pushed John away and sucked desperately for air. "I —oh God, oh God," Rodney said, forcing the words out; he had no breath in his lungs, "I need to know, is this you or is this him?" John's face contorted and went terrible. He tried to pull away, but Rodney fist the red flannel shirt that he had not designed and said, "Please. Please. I know it's a terrible question, impossible to answer. Just—can you remember when, do you have any memory of —"

John couldn't seem to get his face under control. "Rodney," he said raggedly, and tried again to pull away, but Rodney felt out of his mind, preternaturally strong. John could get away, but he'd have to hurt him to do it. Finally John went still and closed his eyes.

"I—" John began, in a choked-up voice. "You. You made a bomb. And I remember—" and Rodney kissed him all in a rush, exhaling his relief, except John's hands were squeezing his wrists hard enough to hurt, and pushing him back. "No, you asked, and now you have to hear the whole answer. Full disclosure," and Rodney stared at his dark eyes, the bitter tilt of his smile, and realized that he was Sheppard, or at least that he had been. "He thought about it, but he decided not to," John said flatly. "He wouldn't ever have done it, Rodney, okay? Because in his own strange way, he loved the Air Force." John let go of Rodney's wrists, and Rodney instinctively rubbed at them. "But I'm thinking that doesn't so much matter now. I'm making that call, all right?"

"Yes." Rodney's mouth was dry with wanting him so much. "Yes, I—" He leaned in and kissed John hungrily, and John did something nasty and wonderful with his tongue before pushing Rodney away by the shoulders. Rodney moaned in disappointment.

"I'm not him, Rodney," John said dangerously.

"Yes," Rodney said, sharply, "I told you that, remember?" John glared at him for another moment, and then his expression wavered and they were kissing again, fumbling at each other's shirts and tumbling together down onto the floor.

Rodney had wanted to kiss and touch John because he was Sheppard, or part of him, anyway: the only part he had left. But he hadn't expected the raw physical pleasure of it, of having John's long, lean torso underneath him, hands clutching at Rodney's shoulders, mouth everywhere. Rodney wasn't a homosexual, or at least he hadn't thought he was, even though he'd lost his virginity to his advisor at CalTech and had had more than his share of depressing late-night laboratory hand jobs since. It was a survival mechanism: there were too few girls in his world, and they were immediately snatched up by the hottest guys, leaving the rest of them to grumble or go celibate or make do. Sometimes, in years that had a 7 in them, a woman came into his orbit and he got laid ('87: Michelle Smith; '97: Carole Rartha; '07: Katie Brown) but mostly his life was spent with guys like himself, some of whom could be prevailed upon to give hand jobs or blowjobs if they were drunk or you looked really desperate.

It didn't mean anything, but more than that, sex with guys had never been good. It was like a Snickers bar or vending machine coffee: it kept you from killing people. But it left him staggeringly unprepared for sex with John, which he'd wanted on an emotional level, needing that closeness, except— Jesus, his spine was melting. John was licking and sucking Rodney's dick wetly, chin slick with it, and Rodney gasped helplessly, because John's eyes were closed and his cheeks were hollow, and he was making noises like he never wanted to stop. Every time Rodney got close to coming, he'd back off, change directions, like he was just prolonging the number of minutes he could spend with Rodney's dick in his mouth. Rodney moaned brokenly, tried to catch his breath, couldn't. God, he didn't know, he'd never felt anything like this. John's mouth was soft on his balls, and then his
tongue was sliding down. Rodney's thighs jittered and tried to close, because there was private and there was *private*, but—

He had his first orgasm with John's fingers in his ass, and could have just lain there, wrung out and happily basking in endorphins for the rest of his life, except John was hauling him off the floor and shoving him and his rubbery limbs toward the bedroom, where he laid Rodney face-down on the bed and fucked him senseless while Rodney mumbled "yes, fuck, yes," into the pillow. After that, they dozed off, John's face mashed against his neck. Rodney had forgotten how much heat two bodies could generate, and felt happily immobilized, curled up against John: lazy with heat, insane with it.

He woke up with John's dick in his hand. "Please?" John murmured sleepily. Rodney leaned over him and jerked him slowly, watching his eyelashes flutter. He loved having the hot, heavy weight of John's cock in his hand. The velvety soft skin of the shaft, the slick, leaking head; holding John like this was more intimate than fucking. As he got near to coming, John's mouth fell open and he began making the most incredibly hot noises, and then wetness spurted through Rodney's loosely curled fingers and up, over his belly. "You can fuck me. If you want to," John said breathlessly, and then: "I want you to."

"Whatever you want," Rodney managed, and it was just as well that he'd stipulated that up front, because John seemed to think getting fucked was some kind of extreme sport, and was surprisingly demanding. "Higher, tilt my—oh God, yeah, right there, oh. Fuck...." and Rodney gasped and heaved and did what John wanted. John closed his eyes and had two gut-wrenching, shuddering orgasms, one after the other. Rodney flew over the edge after him, losing his balance and falling forward, hands still curled around John's legs.

He fell asleep on top, which turned out to be convenient when the grandfather clock started chiming. Rodney hardly bothered to wake to full consciousness, just shoved back the covers, pushed himself off a bitchily moaning John Sheppard, and staggered into the living room, where he yanked a driver from John's golf bag and started bashing at the stupid thing. Ronon could go to hell; he was doing a different John Sheppard memorial today, by God. The old clock let out one final, off-key clang, and Rodney let the bent club drop to the floor and went back to the bedroom, where John had kept the bed warm.

They had sex on every piece of furniture in the cabin. They had sex in every position and at every scale, from nine-second orgasms to ninety-minute ones that left Rodney feeling as if he had to gather up his limbs from isolated corners of the room afterwards. They paused only for meals, huge ones (bacon with everything, at Rodney's insistence: bacon and eggs, bacon cheeseburgers, bacon and tomato sandwiches, because what good was a virtual reality scenario if you didn't get to eat what you wanted?) or to fall down exhausted. John strolled around the house naked, or nearly so, though Rodney thought frying bacon in the nude was—well, exactly the sort of stupid risk that Sheppard was famous for, actually. But Rodney tried to get into the spirit of the thing by wearing boxers and nothing else, though he kept having stabs of insecurity. It hadn't occurred to him to tweak his interface, so he was WYSIWYG. While John was—well, not only Sheppard, but Sheppard from the day Rodney'd invited him to the porn room; ages ago, now.

"Chill out, Rodney, will you?" John said, and licked the wrinkled corner of Rodney's eye.

Rodney closed his eyes and shivered. "There's no way you were this uninhibited in life."

John voice was like warm honey. "I told you," he said, his mouth skimming Rodney's cheek with its rough scratch of beard. "This is my call."

Rodney impulsively cupped John's face, which had its own, softer, stubble. "Good call," he said in a
hoarse voice. "I like your call. Call me any—" and that's when he felt the first stabbing pain in his chest and stumbled forward, his legs buckling under him.

"Rodney!" John had caught him. John was trying to hold him up, but the world was spinning, and Christ, he gritted his teeth and rode out another stab of— "Rodney, what's—" He clutched at his chest. He was going down. "Oh God," John whispered. "Rodney." The floor was at his back. He saw John's hair. The rough beams of the ceiling. Hands on his chest. Pressing. Pumping. "Rodney. Please. Please. Come on—"

"—Clear!" The paddles thumped down onto his chest, and Rodney gasped, and wanted to sit up and yell, "What are you idiots doing?" except he was strapped down to a gurney with an oxygen mask over his face and he didn't have any strength anyway. Above him, faces loomed and disappeared, faded in and out. His eyes shut against a bright light.

"—pull the drip, goddammit! I don't want to risk that again! Use hypodermoclysis, one third normal saline, two thirds 5% glucose. Watch him for hypokalemia and I swear to God, if he crashes again, I'll—" There was dust in the air, or snow, like a bad TV picture.

The drive. Where was the. Rodney tried to reach out, couldn't move, flexed his fingers impotently. "John," he said, but his voice came out thickly, and nobody answered, and Christ, how that hurt, like he had razor blades in his throat. "John! Where—"

"Shh. Don't try to talk, Dr. McKay. Your throat, it's not moist enough to—"

Rodney feebly tried to catch at the white sleeve with his fingers. "John," he managed. "Room. Find," but the world was going brown, and the bright lights flickered and went out.

"Well!" a cheerful, unfamiliar voice chirped when Rodney next opened his eyes, "You gave us quite a scare." Rodney had just enough strength to turn away from her.

"You're such a dumbass," and Rodney opened his eyes to see Ronon there, arms crossed and staring down at him.

"I know." Rodney's voice was the barest scrape of a whisper, but he was grateful for it.

"If Sheppard were here, he'd kick your ass up and down every hallway in Atlantis," Ronon said. "But he's not. So I guess it's up to me," but Rodney was already gone, thinking of John, the Terrarium, what John would say when, if the drive hadn't been— He impelled his hand toward Ronon's leather-clad arm, and this time, his limbs obeyed him.

"I need," Rodney scraped out, and Ronon frowned and bent down to listen, "in my room, I need you to look for—something of mine, I lost, rectangular, white—" but Ronon was pulling away and staring down at him with narrow eyes. "Please..."

To his surprise, Ronon slid a hand into his vest and pulled out the white drive; Rodney, who had been straining upwards in a desperate urge to be persuasive, fell back, relieved.

"Oh," Rodney breathed. "Oh, thank God. Ronon, you're my hero, you're—give—" He reached for it, but Ronon didn't give it over; instead, he just turned it in his hands.

"It's not safe; doctors'd have it off you in a minute," Ronon said, and Rodney supposed that was true; in his experience, doctors were quick to confiscate anything that made you feel like a human being.
"What is it?" Ronon asked. "Some kind of memory book?"

Rodney's eyes pricked with tears and he turned away fast. He should have known there would be no fooling Ronon. "Yeah," he managed. "Something like that."

To his surprise, Ronon sat down beside him and let out a long sigh. He let his hands dangle between his slouched legs. "It's not good, too much remembering," Ronon said, and Rodney actually had to grit his teeth together to suppress a sob, because thank you! fuck you! what the hell was he supposed to do about it now? He supposed he might have moved on, surely would have moved on, if it hadn't been for the stupid lesbians. But how could he ever have deleted that logfile? "You want to remember, but the body knows to forget; the body wants to forget pain. It remembers in other ways," and Ronon raised his head and twisted it to the side so that, even laid flat as he was, Rodney could see his tattoo. "I think maybe we went too fast," Ronon said finally, matter-of-factly. "I think maybe we're not done."

"I'm done," Rodney croaked. "I just—get me out of here."

Ronon's lips curved into a smirk. "Yeah. No. Couple days, they said," and then, tucking the drive back into his vest, "I'll hold this for you."

He was at least allowed to walk around a bit if he wheeled his stupid IV along with him, so he was down the infirmary corridor when he saw her. She came around the corner, so strong and beautiful, carrying a toddler on her hip. "Oh," he said, and stopped short.

Teyla saw him and her face was like the sun. "Rodney," she said; her smile was radiant, though her brown eyes moved over him with obvious concern. Rodney swallowed; he had seen himself in the mirror that morning and looked away fast.

"Oh my God, how did this happen?" Rodney asked, letting go of the pole and extending both arms for the child. "I mean," he added, as Teyla laughed and handed him the little girl, who grinned as sunnily as her mother. "I know the science, I just—"

"I sent a message," Teyla said, almost offhandedly, as she stroked an approving hand down her daughter's back. "I was not then able to come to Atlantis; Zina was a difficult birth and she and her brother have been quite a handful. Quite," Teyla repeated, laughing as Zina turned to show what seemed a deliberately adorable smile.

The pang of guilt hurt more than cardiac arrest; some heartaches, he now knew, were worse than others. "Teyla, I'm sorry," Rodney said. "I'm so sorry, I should've, I just haven't been—" but Teyla touched his arm and said softly, "I have not been a very good friend to you either as of late." The little girl was warm and a bit heavy, and also she smelled nice. She looked from him to her mother with open curiosity, and so Rodney swallowed hard and offered up his best compliment: "She, er, seems very bright."

"Yes," Teyla agreed, and took the girl back from him. "Yes, I believe she is."

"Come—come inside and sit down," Rodney said in a strangled voice, and together they walked up the hallway into his room. Teyla tried to keep Zina in her lap, but she wouldn't stay, preferring instead to squirm around on the floor and touch things she shouldn't; it was evident this would not be a long visit. They made small talk for a while, with Rodney asking after Teyla's son, and Jinto, and the general state of the Athosians, and with Teyla politely asking after Colonel Carter, and Zelenka, and the general state of the Atlantis science team. Still, Rodney could see that Teyla was working herself up to something, which Rodney could only assume had to do with the fact that he'd been
found half-dead in his own rooms because he'd forgotten to eat, drink, or pee for a week. Between them, Ronon and Zelenka had managed to break down what was supposed to be a secured door.

"Rodney," Teyla said suddenly, with her usual intensity, and oh crap, here it was. "I would be most honored if you would come back with me. To New Athos," and Rodney blinked rapidly; he hadn't been expecting that. Teyla took a breath; her face had tightened in a way that was eerily familiar; like Sheppard's, when he had to talk about feelings. "I want my children to know you, Rodney," Teyla said, and then she bit her lip and added, "And I fear that you are no longer happy in Atlantis." She reached out and squeezed the paper-dry skin of his fingers. Her hands were warm and strong. "I hope I do not have to convince you that you have a home in my family wherever I may be."

He could hardly speak, he was so touched; he could only turn his hand and thread his fingers with hers. "Teyla," he managed, his throat stopping up. "That is, that is so..." but this would not do, not if he had any hope of convincing her, and so he pulled himself together and said, "...very wrong, though it's an understandable mistake. Admittedly, the life of a first class research scientist is a cruel one, and of course, you've never really seen me do any real science, since my time was always spent averting this crisis or that, but let me assure you, Teyla: better men than me—well, no, there really are no better men than me, but for the sake of the rhetoric—better men than me have been hospitalized for worse and longer in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Seriously, Caltech was like a ward." He saw the briefest flash of hesitation in her eyes, and immediately pressed his advantage, "Yes, yes, I know: we're like children, worse than children, in terms of not being able to take care of ourselves, but you have to understand: it's been so long since I've been able to get really obsessed about something. You've never actually seen me obsessed," and Teyla laughed then, and looked at him fondly, and Rodney laughed too, in relief, because all right: it was going to be all right.

His rooms, when he finally saw them again, were a mess: they'd at least put the door back on, but the furniture'd been shoved every which way. His chaise was gone. (He didn't want to imagine the state of the chaise.) There was some all too familiar medical detritus on the floor—some crumpled paper, a snake of IV tubing, the plastic sheath of a hypodermic—and honestly, they could have cleaned up a little. He should clean up now.

And he would; he would in a minute; he just had to check in, tell John he was all right; because after all, for all John knew, he'd just disappeared; he could be dead; he had to be worried. It was really only polite. Rodney awkwardly dragged his narrow bed to the drive slot. He'd blustered and browbeaten the drive out of Ronon ("—incredibly important, literally irreplaceable—" "Here, take it already!") and was on the verge of pushing it into the slot when he remembered the Terrarium was WYSIWYG. He ran a hand over his beard. It would only take a moment to shave and change his clothes.

He materialized in the empty living room. He frowned: usually John contrived to be around when he showed up, reading one of his endless newspapers. But the room was cold, the fireplace dark. Rodney went to the closed bedroom door, hesitated, knocked.

"John?" he asked, trying to sound cheery and normal. "Are you—" but he was already peering around the door into the empty bedroom. The bed was unmade: either John had abruptly broken the tidy habits of years, or he hadn't been to bed since—well, since they'd slept together. Not that John needed to sleep, of course, but he seemed to like to, and he'd always appeared to, though it was a bit like trying to figure out if the light really went out in the refrigerator. John certainly talked as if he lived in a persistent world, and things seemed to change between visits. But now, for the first time, Rodney really believed it; he could feel the heavy weight of time in the room, feel it in the crumpled newspaper and the unwashed dishes and the ashes in the fireplace.
He grabbed a coat, trudged outside; the ski module was attached to the cabin, so he checked that out first, even though he'd just walked past John's skis, propped by the door. There was a mess of John's size 11 footsteps outside in the snow around the house, but they weren't fresh, and they didn't seem to lead anywhere. So Rodney loaded the racetrack from the interface, entirely expecting to hear John's engine slicing the air. Instead, he materialized in the empty bleachers and saw that there was a giant hole in the concrete barrier wall on the far side of the track. He ran toward it and gradually slowed down in shock. It looked like someone had blown through it with a missile launcher. There was a road on the other side of the wall that Rodney'd never seen before, ribboning off toward the horizon through a field of waving wheat.

"Oh my God, he took the car," Rodney said, and it was then, and only then, that panic engulfed him, flooding and drowning him with waves of metallic-tasting water. Rodney turned, circling helplessly, surrounded by a panorama of brightly colored emptiness: empty racetrack, ringed by flags; empty bleachers, empty field, empty blue sky above.

He went back to the cabin finally: hung up his coat, built a fire, washed the dishes. He tried not to think about John hacking on his own code and accidentally (intentionally?) deleting himself. He tried not to think about John vanishing into an endless expanse of ones and zeroes. He didn't think about what he would do if John didn't come back, because John was of course coming back. But if he didn't, Rodney would go back to Atlantis. He would stay here and search the back roads for John. He would go live in New Athos with Teyla. He would let his clock run down right here in the cabin, which was all those parts of Canada he'd liked best, all those places he'd never lived.

He heard the high-pitched whine of an engine and opened the door just in time to see the red car crest the hill and pull up in front of the lodge, its fat wheels making slush of the snow. Rodney was vaguely aware of being cold, but came outside anyway, rubbing his arms. John got out of the car, slammed the door, and just looked at him. Rodney looked back. No pink today; John was wearing black jeans and a black leather jacket and boots, and looked heartbreakingly like Sheppard, even down to his closed-off body language.

"So," John said, almost offhandedly. "You're back."

"I—yes," Rodney said. "You're back, too."

John shrugged, nodded at the house. "I saw the fire," and Rodney turned and saw smoke billowing out of the chimney.

Rodney took a half step forward, impelled almost helplessly toward John, and then rocked back, hugging himself against the cold. This was not how he had pictured this conversation. "How'd you get the car from there to—"

John frowned and tossed his head, an oddly equine move, like he was shaking off the question. "You looked pretty sick," he said in that same offhand voice, but his eyes were moving over Rodney with a wary focus that was anything but casual.

"I—yes," Rodney said hurriedly. "But I'm fine. I'm fine now. Right as rain."

John didn't look convinced. He shifted, balled his hands in his pockets.

"I know, I know—look, I was stupid, all right?" Rodney shivered and hugged himself tighter, hopping a little. "You were right, it's just what you said: I'm not in stasis, I have to take care of myself, my body, or I'll—" Boots crunched the snow, and then John tugged at Rodney's thin sleeve with two fingers: a classic Sheppard non-touching touch.
"C'mon," John said quietly. "It's cold. Let's go inside," but Rodney felt defiant and miserable and furious all at once, and said, throat tight, "I don't want to."

John stared at him for a moment, and then he hooked an arm around Rodney's neck and tugged him into a loose hug. Rodney closed his eyes and went, arms still wrapped around himself. The collar of John's leather jacket smelled spicy and warm. John's mouth brushed his ear. "C'mon inside," he said, and then, even more softly: "You scared the crap out of me," and then they were hugging so tight that John's leather jacket creaked, and John was kissing the cold air out of his lungs.

"Tell me everything," John said, once he'd gotten Rodney inside and bundled into a blanket on the sofa in front of the fire. "And don't lie to me. And don't leave anything out, or I'll know," and so Rodney told him everything he remembered: collapsing, the gurney, Ronon, Teyla's visit, everything the doctors said: all of it. John's mouth tightened as his listened, and he got a thoughtful, faraway look which made Rodney interrupt himself to say, more defensively than he meant to: "—look, it's my choice, all right? How to live, where to spend my time—and all right, yes, obviously I need to be more careful, but I still want to live here, in the cabin: be here, with you. And I want—"

John's short bark of a laugh had no humor in it. "You think I want to talk you out of it?" Rodney suddenly felt even colder, and pulled the plaid blanket tight around his shoulders. "I'm not alive," John said. "I mean, I knew that, but now I know it—differently. And I—"

"Jesus. John," Rodney said, suddenly straightjacketed by the blanket, wanting it off.

"Shut up," John said in a fast, hard voice. "Let me finish." He took a breath, and his chest rose and fell with air that wasn't there. "If something happens to you, I'm in here—forever. I mean," and there was another of those totally humorless laughs, "literally forever, which is not—" and John was speaking with a slow, careful precision, like a drunk man. "Which is not acceptable to me. So. We're going to have to discuss—"

"Yes," Rodney said hurriedly, trying and failing to banish the spectre of all eternity spent in an empty world. "Yes, of course. I can—build you an off-switch, or alter the simulation, add people, or maybe —"

"I'm not done," John said through gritted teeth, and Rodney swallowed hard and shut up. John stared moodily at the fire, and Rodney forced himself to wait, even though his brain was spinning with solutions: solutions were his business. "Look, I know I'm not alive, but I feel like I am," John said finally, softly, to the fire. "And I'm happy, I think. I mean: I like it here. The house. You." He looked at Rodney. "All the beer a guy could drink," and then: "I want you to tie my lifespan to yours," he said, then added sharply, "That's not romantic, Rodney. It's practical. I need to know there's an end to this." Rodney wanted to agree, say yes; anything but he couldn't get the words out. He was suddenly awash in his own monstrosity; what had he done?

John was still talking it through. "And you need an incentive to keep going, I think. It's not enough to run once a day, though that's something, that's a start. But you need more than that. This machine —" and John was waving his hand idly, taking in the cabin, the mountain, all of it, "wasn't meant to be lived in: there's no stasis chamber. It's just for entertainment, Rodney." John said, amused and bitter all at once. "An hour here or there, like a video game. Play some golf, race a car, visit your mistress—"

"No," Rodney managed, because that was so far from what he was doing here, so fucking far from what this meant to him. Entertainment. "That's not—this isn't—"

"I know. I know," John's voice was strained. "But you still can't live here; it wasn't built for living
human beings. *I'm not alive and you are*, so you've got, you've got to at least try to live in the world —"

"I don't want to," Rodney blurted. "John, I love you."

John flinched and turned away. He laced his fingers and stared down at the white knuckles. "Don't say that," John said. "You don't love me because I'm not Sheppard," and before Rodney could protest, John said, "And I can't love you because I'm not real."

"Oh," Rodney said faintly.

"Yeah. Oh," John said, but then he was leaning in to kiss Rodney’s mouth; sweetly, so fucking sweetly. Rodney let his head loll back against the sofa. And then John was whispering words against his lips: "You've got to live in the world, Rodney."

I can't, Rodney thought. "I'll try," he said.

John coded up a new grandfather clock and encased it in titanium. "No more fucking around," he said when it was done. "When that thing goes off, Cinderella, you go back, you hear me? No exceptions, no excuses," and this meant he was getting it from both sides: John haranguing him from inside the Terrarium, Ronon forcing him through his paces every morning on Atlantis.

"I want you to go spend a couple days with Teyla," John said another morning, and when Rodney argued, John said: "It'll be good for you," and: "I'll make it worth your while."

That shut Rodney up, fast. "Oh?" he said, swallowing as John tucked his fingers into the waistband of Rodney's pajama pants. "What'd you have in..." John slowly dragged the backs of his fingers down along the low curve of Rodney's belly, then turned his hand and curled it around Rodney's cock. "See, that's—" Rodney gasped, as John stroked him to hardness, "—not a good negotiating tactic, because you're already giving me what I—"

John's lip twitched in a barely-there smile. "This isn't for you," he said, and dropped to his knees. Rodney sat down, hard, on the foot of the bed. He knew what was coming: John gave head hungrily and messily and for damn near ever, and Rodney was always struck by how much he wanted it, and how he was willing to let it show that he wanted it. Rodney wasn't used to that; all his guy-on-guy fumblings had been conducted under the tacit assumption that of course, a woman would have been better. But John didn't suck cock like a guy just doing another guy a favor. John sucked cock like a guy who really, really, really liked having a cock in his mouth.

It went on for a long time, and by the end it was John who was moaning helplessly and massaging Rodney's thighs. Rodney was nearly out of his mind by then—flopped backwards, hips rocking upwards without any input from him, because he'd totally lost the ability to do anything but just lie there and let John do him. When he came it was more of a surprise to him than to John, who knew exactly what he was doing, and then John was slurping off him, swallowing and gasping, his face warm against Rodney's side.

John crawled up beside him after a while and slung an arm around him. Already knowing what he would find, Rodney cupped his softening cock, and then slid his fingers through the sticky mess on John's belly. "You know," he said. "I could do that for you."

"Yeah. I know," John replied softly, and then; "Go pack, you're going to Teyla's."

"Am not," Rodney said firmly, "since you haven't yet said what's in it for—"
"A secret," John whispered, breath warm on his ear.

"N'uh-uh. Nice try, flyboy, but you'll have to tell me precisely what you're—"

The heel of John's hand smacked Rodney's forehead. "I am telling you. It's a secret: I'll tell you something about Sheppard, anything you want to know. When you come back," he said, and then he was gracefully rolling up, out of bed, and to his feet.

John had been right to send him to New Athos. Teyla seemed genuinely pleased to see him, besides which little Zina was talking now and calling him, "Uncle Rodney," which freaked him out a little, but was kind of nice in its own way. Rodney hung around the Athosians' communal kitchen and snuck spoonfuls out of the big vats of stew that simmered all day, making the air smell good for miles. He sat out on Teyla's porch and looked out at the thick, old-growth trees that gave shade to the village. They looked wrong, too evenly spaced, lacking the randomness of a really good forest: he'd done better with the trees he'd designed for John's mountain. He got Halling and some of the other men to help him replace their broken old aqueduct with a ram pump, which, he explained, knee-deep in the cold clear water, would be infinitely more efficient; no more hauling buckets up from the river. He slept well.

A couple nights later, sometime after supper, Rodney was sitting on the porch with Teyla when they saw a light move through the trees. A few minutes later Ronon came up the path to the house, rucksack slung over his shoulder. He bent to kiss Teyla's cheek, and then turned to clasp Rodney's shoulder. "Heard you guys were having a party," he said. "Didn't want to miss it." Teyla laughed and sent him to haul up a cask of wine while she went to get them some glasses; Rodney built a fire and pulled their chairs around the pit.

It took four rounds for them to start talking about Sheppard, and to Rodney's surprise, it was Ronon who got maudlin first. "—s'not the same anymore, Atlantis," he told Teyla, his voice dark and a little blurred. "People are different. Everything's different." Teyla stared down into her wineglass. Rodney blinked and fixed his eyes on the fire. "Ask Rodney," he heard Ronon say. "He'll tell you. He keeps himself to himself, and I don't blame him. I don't blame you, McKay." Rodney felt a lump in his throat and swallowed.

"It's not—" Rodney's throat clogged up. He took a quick sip, then drained his glass. "Ronon's right." He poured more wine with a shaky hand. "It isn't the same."

"You should leave Atlantis," Teyla said. "There are too many ghosts there."

"Only one ghost that matters," Ronon said heavily. "Sheppard made us family. And now we're—"

Teyla's eyes flashed fire. "We are still family, Ronon."

"It's not the same," Ronon insisted doggedly, and suddenly Rodney couldn't keep it together anymore, and raised his arm to cover his leaking eyes. Teyla put her arms around his neck, and he pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair. Holding her reminded Rodney of the day Sheppard died, of how they'd knelt over his broken body and held each other. Ronon's arms came around them both and squeezed.

Christ, how could they still be here? How could they still be in this much pain, all this time later? But there was no doubting it, the total fucking agony of it, so it was easy to give Ronon his arm, to watch him unwrap the soft leather pouch of needles and sterilize them in the fire. It didn't hurt; it didn't hurt any more than he was already hurting; he was feeling no pain. He took another long drink of wine and watched Ronon slide the needle into the pale, freckled skin of his right wrist. Bright blue lines
swirled around and around. He turned his wrist so that Ronon could keep working. They were wings. They were the sea. Ronon carefully wiped away drops of blood where they welled up. Teyla held his other hand and smiled.

When Ronon was finished with him, he changed places with Teyla. Rodney stared at the inflamed red skin beneath the blue cuff on his wrist, and thought about wings and water and how Sheppard had always worn that stupid wristband, just there. He blinked and watched Ronon draw the same feathered waves on Teyla's small wrist. He was a good artist. Teyla flinched and Rodney gripped her hand and poured her another drink. It didn't take long for Ronon to finish, and Teyla's wrist didn't have the same ugly swelling, but that's what having sensitive skin got you. He fished in his jacket for ointment, slathering it awkwardly, left-handedly, over Teyla's wrist and then his own.

Ronon downed another glass of wine and said, "Help me." Rodney thought that Teyla'd be the one to do it, but actually, his own hands were steadier, and having seen it twice, he felt he knew what to do. Ronon closed his eyes after a while. Rodney breathed along with him, slow and rhythmic, hypnotized by the careful, repetitive work. The firelight darted over his hands, and he worked steadily, feeling uncannily focused and relaxed.

When Rodney was done, Ronon opened his eyes and inspected his wrist. His eyebrows flew up, impressed. "Good job, McKay. Thank you." "No, thank you," Rodney said, and then Teyla murmured, very softly, "Thank you both," and filled their glasses.

"To John," she said, and drank.

"John," Ronon repeated, and drank, too.

Rodney stared into his glass without saying anything; the wine looked black in the firelight. His wrist hurt but he hardly noticed. "To Sheppard," he said finally.

They fell asleep in their chairs, open-mouthed and drunk, as the fire burned out. Rodney woke up with a blanket tucked up around his chin and a mound of Ronon snoring nearby. He hauled himself up to his feet, fuzzy-mouthed and hungover. He jerked with pain, and looked down at his wrist: oh, fuck. It was badly swollen and oozing pale fluid, which eww, and Christ, what had he been thinking? He applied another coat of ointment to his skin, and stumbled into the kitchen, where he found Teyla grimly staring down a tantrumy Zina, who'd apparently just flung some mush halfway across the kitchen.

"I'm going back, I think," Rodney said, and watched the emotions flit over Teyla's face: disappointment, sadness, regret. "I had hoped you would stay," she said finally. "I am hoping Ronon will stay, too. Atlantis is not as it was, and I miss you both so much; I miss having you at hand, Rodney," and Rodney closed the space between them, clutching her shoulders and pressing their foreheads together. Hers was warm and smooth.

"I love you," he said. "I'll come back soon. I promise."

"Rodney," Zelenka said, almost comically surprised. "There is no meeting today, is there?" He fumbled for his glasses. "Have I forgotten about—"

"No, no," Rodney said, quickly, "I just came by to," and he was absolutely and totally blank for half a second, and then it came to him, "upload some files for Dr. Kita and her team. I think I—" and the tattoo was throbbing encouragement under his sleeve. "I think I'm nearly done with this project I've been working on."
Zelenka blinked in surprise. "Oh? You have really been working? I mean," he added hastily, looking away, "of course I knew you were working on something big, I just did not expect results at this early—" and Rodney saved them both further embarrassment by uploading his programming notes to the server, and a bit of VR environment code as an example. Hunching over a keyboard, he excluded the John class and yanked the other comments into a file. It wasn't exactly coherent, but he was betting that this was how John had learned to hack himself, so Kita and her team should be fired if they couldn't.

"—much easier once I realized there were three separate programming languages, Mugrar, Bose, and Macari, named for repeating elements here, here, and here," Rodney pointed. "You use them for different things, but they're incredibly flexible and they interlock—god, so beautifully; wait, look," and then Rodney was blissfully scrolling through some lines and marveling at the beauty of the syntax—so clean and supple, once you figured out which arguments belonged to which language—and when he turned around again, he was surprised to find that there were maybe thirty people behind him, crowding the lab and craning around each other's heads to see.

After he'd fielded all their questions, he got drawn into quite an interesting conversation with a scientist he'd never met before, or couldn't remember having met, named Finch, who was working on computational complexity theory. Finch had been stuck on a problem for four months and had just glimpsed his answer in a random line of Macari code, and after grilling Rodney about the models he'd used for randomness testing, had hopped around and then twirled and pumped his skinny arms up and down.

It was a nice day, the first one Rodney could remember in a long time. He had dinner in the mess with Zelenka and Kita and Finch and a couple of other people whose names he didn't quite catch, though they had all had nice things to say about him. One in particular kept scribbling frantic notes and muttering, "three! three distinct programming languages!" like he couldn't quite believe the achievement. Zelenka had by now recovered himself, and was saying, quite smugly, "Yes, well, of course, freed from all the annoying problems of bureaucracy with which I am now saddled as Head of Science, Dr. McKay was bound to accomplish great things," and it was funny, but he hadn't thought of them as "great things": it was a ski-lodge, a golf club, a macro for unlimited junk food.

Everyone hung around the mess for dessert, wanting to talk to him, totally fawning over him, and Rodney promised two of the scientists whose names he couldn't remember that he would stop by their labs tomorrow and cast his brilliant eyes over their mediocre projects. And then the party was breaking up. Zelenka punched his shoulder and said, "Welcome back, Rodney," before drifting off, and Rodney had picked up his tray and carried it halfway across the mess hall when he was hit by a wave of grief, because he realized suddenly that he was looking for Sheppard, scanning the room and staring at the tousled backs of heads, trying to filter for Sheppard's posture, that slouch, the casual tilt of an arm that was John eating an apple, and Jesus, McKay, get a grip!

This was a nice day, a real day, this was the real world, and Rodney shoved his tray into the pile waiting to be bussed and took off, with a purposefulness he didn't feel, for his room, before thinking, no, bad idea, and pivoting on his heel. He went back to the lab, his lab, which was abandoned-looking and dusty, and he put up a pot of extremely strong coffee and began clearing up, prioritizing all the work he had abandoned, much of which was totally pointless since they'd developed the Pan-Galactic Garlic Blaster, and okay, really only Sheppard would have laughed at that, because he was lame and in denial about his own geekiness, and so easy that way.

Rodney shoved all the military and defense stuff aside (and Jesus, they'd only gotten that weapon because Sheppard had died for it. They ought to fucking name it after him, like a Winchester or a Colt) and began rummaging through his files. There were a million things he'd meant to work on:
everything from the patterns of galaxy evolution to the weakly interacting massive particles that were the probable key to dark matter. He lost himself for a while, and then the words started to blur: The abundance of antimatter fluxes produced in neutralino pair-annihilations depends upon—and he realized he didn't give a shit about neutralino pair-annihilations, and stumbled, zombie-like, to bed.

In the drowsy minute or two before sleep claimed him, Rodney curled his left hand around his tattooed right wrist. He could do this. He'd already done it; the first day was the hardest. He was as brilliant as ever, obviously, and the science team needed him. Science needed him. He had an obligation to humanity, and to future generations.

He last four days.

John looked hard at him, then kissed him on the mouth, and that was it, game over: he didn't give a good goddamn if John was real or not, because everything outside of this was just negative space. Rodney felt an unexpected surge of joy and started muscling John backwards, toward the bedroom, hands sliding greedily up his hard, lean body. Their mouths broke apart and John was grinning into his face, more white, even teeth than anyone outside of Hollywood had a right to, and then John was roughly cupping his face and kissing him, tongue sliding into Rodney's mouth over and over and over.

"I want," John mumbled, as they toppled onto the bed, "oh, Jesus, fuck," and John's hand was sliding into Rodney's fly and groping his cock through his underwear; John's hand was in his underwear, on him. "I want to fuck you, let me fuck you," and they did it hard and fast, John shoving his cock in and muttering, "oh, fuck; yeah," as Rodney shivered and convulsed, sweat stinging his eyes and John's cock hard inside him.

"You owe me a secret," Rodney said, much later, when he could speak. They'd collapsed into a heap of limbs on John's flannel-covered bed. The whole room smelled of sex.

John lay beside him, his warm thigh slung over Rodney's. "Okay," he said amiably, and then his fingers curled around Rodney's wrist. "Hey, is this a tattoo?"

"I was drunk. We all were," and then: "You said when I came back, you'd tell me—"

"I will: anything you want to know. Wow, it's really cool. Did Ronon—?"

"Ronon did mine and Teyla's. I helped him do his. Oh God, I can't decide what to ask; I want to ask everything. 'Why do you wear that stupid wristband?' How could you ever have gotten married? 'Did you always want to fly? Was that your dream, or—?"

John was gently tilting Rodney's wrist back and forth. "I want one like this: it's like wind and water and the sky all at once. It reminds me of surfing, or—" He went still, and then said, casually: "You all got them? The whole team?"

Rodney looked at him steadily. "Yes," he said. "We all did," and then, deciding to answer the implied question: "Yes, it was about you. We were remembering you—"

"Not me." John took his hand off Rodney's wrist, moved his leg off Rodney's hip, pulling back into himself and putting space between them. "I told you, I'm not him—"

Rodney rolled on top of him and pinned him with his weight. "You know what?" he demanded, ignoring John's yelp. "Let me tell you a secret: John Sheppard changed my life. Not physics, not
Atlantis—though I wish to God it had been physics or Atlantis, because I still have those things. But they’re meaningless now, don’t you understand? *John Sheppard was my friend,* and I guess some people have a lot of friends, so it’s not that big a deal to them, losing one, but I can’t get past it. I’ve tried, I swear I have, and just—" John was staring up at him, throat working. His eyes were that weird color: pale, like a pond or a stone. "I can’t leave you behind."

"It’s not me," John managed finally; he sounded afraid. "I’m not *him.* Rodney, I—"

"You’re close enough," Rodney said.

They fell into a normal routine after that. Ronon had moved to New Athos, so there was no one to force him to exercise, but Rodney dutifully went back to Atlantis whenever the grandfather clock told him it was time to eat or bathe or poke his nose into the labs. John bribed him to do other things (visiting Teyla, getting a haircut, sending a databurst to his sister) with tantalizing bits of information, so that while after a while Rodney had quite a collection of secrets: that Sheppard had once dreamed of being a steeplechase jockey; that he and his father had fought nonstop for seven years about him being queer without ever saying the word aloud; that he had finally waved his wife like a white flag, thinking it would bring him closer to his family (it hadn’t: it had brought *her* closer to his family); that he wore a sweatband on his wrist because he sweated a lot.

Other than that, they lived together quite happily: played chess and video games, did puzzles, argued about trivia, got drunk. They began to hack the Terrarium competitively, each of them straining to code more outrageous scenarios: herd of giant lizards (Rodney), jetpacks (John), couple of extra planets (Rodney), authentic Texas bar with bad beer and terrible country-western band (John), and as they sat there at the rough wooden table, Rodney wincing and trying not to clamp his hands over his ears as the black-hatted singer warbled about everything he had lost and how unbelievably sad he was, John leaned forward and shouted, over the din, "You know what happens when you play country music backwards, Rodney? You get your car back, you get your wife back, you get your dog back," and Rodney shifted uncomfortably and ordered another beer.

John sprang the idea on him out of nowhere. "Rodney?" he began offhandedly; he was sitting at the kitchen table with his morning coffee and fidgeting with his cup.

Rodney was sitting across from him with his laptop, doing a last bit of coding. "Hm?"

"Remember how I told you that he, that Sheppard, would never have—" Rodney looked up immediately and gave John his full attention. John's shoulders dropped, but he began again. "That Sheppard would never have started a relationship with you."

"Yes," Rodney said, and had to look away.

"I think maybe I was wrong about that," and John sounded so miserable that Rodney's eyes were drawn back to his face. "Just," and John shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "He didn't know, all right? He never had a clue about this stuff. I mean, he knew he liked you a little more than a friend likes a friend, but he didn’t know..." and John boggled and circled a hand to take everything in—the mountain, the beach, the stable of racehorses, the helicopter, the giant lizards—"you know: that you were out of your fucking mind."

Rodney let out a brittle laugh."*He* didn't know? *I* didn't know!"

"So I can't help thinking that maybe things would have been different if he'd known...what I know."

John sighed and put his head in his hands. "I mean, maybe he *would* have taken the chance. But just
—it got me thinking," and then he was pushing over a stack of journals with napkins stuck between the pages as bookmarks.


"Time travel," John said, and sat back in his chair.

"You're not serious. You are not serious," but John said that yes, he was serious, because, "We know it's possible, right? SG-1 did it. Elizabeth did it. Birds do it, bees—seriously, Rodney, you're a genius. You can figure it out, I know you can."

"But. But—" did John have any idea how maddeningly, incredibly complicated time-travel was? You couldn't mess around with time: it was chaos theory incarnate. Change one thing and you changed everything,—and Elizabeth only got away with it because there were so few variables; she was literally the only person in a deserted city—"

"Yeah, Rodney—and I'm talking about one man. Actually, I'm talking about two inches: two inches and the bullet misses Sheppard's head, right?" Rodney pushed out of his chair, needing to pace, because Jesus, he couldn't believe they were talking about this: the worst day of his life. "I'm not trying to change all of history, or even stop Sheppard from waking up the Wraith," John said, doggedly tracking him. "That would be complicated, the law of unintended consequences, blah blah. But just—what if that bullet hit his arm?"

Rodney tried to stop his hands from clenching into fists. "Sheppard's death triggered the battle that led to us invading an otherwise obscure tribal armory. We wouldn't have found the goddamned supergarlic otherwise. Don't you get it? That stuff brought peace to two galaxies and happiness to everyone in the fucking universe except me!" and he wanted to snatch the words back as soon as he said them, because he could see the flash of pain in John's eyes, the tightening lines of his mouth as he looked away.

"No, I get it," John said sharply. "Believe me, I get it."

"God. I didn't—John, I don't mean it like that. This isn't about you."

"No. I know it isn't." John's smile was quick and perfunctory. "Look, it's okay. Just, things could be different, that's all. And we've got time on our hands, and—not to speak ill of the dead, but I know a lot more math than Sheppard did. I mean, I don't think he got as much out of Advanced Graph Theory II as you seem to think, but whatever: thanks for the upload."

"His transcript said he got an alpha minus," Rodney said, frowning.

"It was graded on a curve," John explained wryly. "Same semester he started flying F-16s, so I can promise you he wasn't paying much attention. But if you wanted to take a crack at figuring this thing out; well." He shrugged. "I've got some ideas."

"And there you go," McKay 2.0 said tiredly. "That's what happened."

Rodney blinked and straightened just as Sheppard said, "Wait, what? That's—"

McKay flapped his arms, once, like a giant bird in a bathrobe. "Well, we figured it out! Obviously!"
Because, hello! Look, I told you this part: I did most of the conceptual work, you did most of the math." He frowned. "John did most of the math. And now we've got to figure out how to provoke a tangent vector with the smallest possible deviation from—" McKay shot a sudden, swift glance at Rodney, then turned back to Sheppard and said, "Actually, can we talk somewhere private? Also, I'm starving; some food would be—"

"Wait just a goddamned second!" Rodney shoved his way between McKay and Sheppard, crossed his arms, and tried to stare himself down. "Did you just say you wanted privacy from me? Are you out of your—is that even possible?"

McKay seemed totally unimpressed and just waved a hand in his face. "Obviously it's possible, or I wouldn't have suggested it. Moreover, it's sensible: letting you in on the plan doubles the risk, even if you are me. This is no time to play favorites! We need to keep temporal interference to a minimum, which means no one but Sheppard should know the precise details. And I've already told you far too much, except..." McKay studied his face, and Rodney felt weirdly unable to withstand his own scrutiny. "Except this is your second chance, too," McKay said. "So don't blow it, all right?"

Rodney turned to Sheppard. "I don't trust this guy as far as I can throw him."

"Oh, Jesus Christ!" Sheppard grabbed his arm, dragged him across the room, and whispered, "Shut up, Rodney; he's you, and he's trying to save my life, okay?"

"Fine, but—why can't I be in on the plan?" Rodney couldn't seem to conceal the whine in his voice. "And seriously, Sheppard: I don't trust him," he said, and stabbed his finger into Sheppard's chest. "He's obviously not rational. He's some mad scientist version of me, a Dr. Frankenstein. He built a goddamned replica of you, pretended it was real, and then had sex with it: he's clearly obsessed with —"

Sheppard's jaw tightened; all at once he turned on his heel and strode over to McKay. "Come on," he said through gritted teeth. "Let's go," and then, "Wait. Take this off." Sheppard tugged at McKay's raggedy bathrobe, then had the gall to grab Rodney's own robe from where it was draped over a chair. He handed it to McKay, who obediently shucked his robe and put on Rodney's. Rodney wanted to stop him from taking it, except it wasn't the robe he was afraid of losing: it was his entire goddamned life.

"That's better," Sheppard said, eying McKay critically. "Keep your head down and walk fast, and hopefully nobody will notice." He turned to Rodney and said, tersely, "Stay here till I get him through the halls," and Rodney was so outraged and terrified that he wasn't able to work up any sort of protest. He watched as Sheppard escorted McKay out, as the door slid shut behind them, and then began to pace in mute frustration.

Fine, yes, he could sort of see McKay's point: if time worked the way they thought it did, then McKay had already told him too much. It was bad enough he knew the parameters of the mission: a warrior culture, a negotiation for armaments, though God knew that described half the missions they went on these days. Still, he didn't know what would be worse: knowing that this was the mission where John Sheppard got killed, or not knowing and trembling in his boots whenever they—

It slammed into him; his mouth flooded with the metallic taste of panic: John Sheppard got killed. He flung out a hand to steady himself, then sat down on the bed. That wasn't hypothetical. That had happened. It was as real as the beat-up bathrobe lying beside him, the beat-up version of himself that had just walked down the hall—and then he let himself hear what McKay had been saying: that Sheppard had been killed, that the team had been devastated, that he hadn't been able to go on.

It was a lot to take in, but Rodney knew then, in his bones, that he was McKay, that McKay was
him, that he would do exactly the same. Something inside him would break if John Sheppard were killed, and it was awful to know he carried that fragility inside of him. Worse yet, now Sheppard knew it, too, and that was an unpleasant enough revelation that he had to put his head between his legs, and that's when he saw the drive. Its white corner was peeking out from the bathrobe, and Rodney sat up so fast his head rushed and fizzed. He pulled the flat rectangle out of the bathrobe's inner pocket and turned it over in his hands: just like his, it was his, just older and grimier.

He knew he should leave it alone, but that had always been the problem, hadn't it? He'd made this goddamned thing the center of his world after Sheppard's death. A man liked to think that he was made of stronger stuff than that...but he wasn't. He'd learned that much. Three steps took him to the slot in the wall, and then he shoved the drive in and—

—holy shit, he hadn't expected the cabin's high ceilings, the exposed beams, the manly, "I'm a lumberjack," vibe of the whole place. The fireplace was a huge arch of rough stone, the sofas were covered in red plaid, the wood furniture all looked handmade, and—

"Rodney?"

—holy shit, and he whirled around fast and nearly fell backwards over the rough-hewn coffee table. John Sheppard was standing there, Rodney recognized that oh-so-familiar sideways tilt of his head—except it wasn't Sheppard, it was nothing like Sheppard at all. The replica was wearing a pink paisley shirt and jeans, and he was carrying a thick stack of journals in his arms. A pad of equations sat on top, and he was awkwardly holding a pen in his hand, having just obviously pulled it from between his teeth.

"You're not Sheppard," Rodney said, and pointed at him accusingly.

The replica sighed. "Yes," he said patiently. "I know." He shifted the journals so he could half-balance them on his hip, and extended a hand to Rodney. "I'm John," he said.

"Oh," Rodney said, somewhat abashed. "Well." He shook John's hand. It didn't feel like Sheppard's hand, though he couldn't explain that. "I didn't mean to—"

"Nah. It's okay. It seems to be a sticking point." John was watching him closely, and Rodney remembered that he wasn't the Rodney McKay this John was expecting.

"I'm Rodney McKay. Not your Rodney McKay. Of course. Ha. No, I'm from the—" He made a frantic, backwards gesture. "Well, actually, technically it's the present, but—"

"Right," John said, saving Rodney from any further imbecilities, but then he shifted awkwardly and added, "I remember you," and Christ, this John been made from the John Sheppard whom Rodney had taken to the porn room not so long ago.

"Oh," Rodney said, temporarily speechless.

"Yeah." John seemed uncharacteristically unguarded; in fact, this John seemed uncharacteristically a lot of things. Calmer, slower. More cerebral, less brittle. Pinker—God, there was so much wrong with that shirt he was wearing. He moved wrong, like Sheppard's tightly wound springs had come uncoiled and lost all their potential energy. And he smelled wrong, not like Sheppard at all—and abruptly Rodney remembered the way McKay had closed his eyes and sniffed at John's ear.

John sidled over to the kitchen table, put down his armload of books, and then said, uneasily, "I'm guessing the time machine worked?"
Rodney blinked. "Yes. Yes, it did. Your McKay's with Sheppard right now, trying to figure out—"

John flinched, and Rodney stopped, blinked, rewound what he'd said. It came to him in a giant fireball of insight: "Your McKay's macking on my Sheppard!"

John flinched again, then turned away fast. "I don't know," he said, and went to busy himself in the fridge. "How should I know? Do you want a—"

Rodney had followed him doggedly into the kitchen area and was now standing on his heels. "That's what this is all about, isn't it?" Rodney demanded. "You built him a time machine so he could come back, take his life, take over my life—"

John slammed the refrigerator door. "Well, he can't stay here! Jesus, look at this place: nobody was ever meant to live here. It's not real! It's an entertainment center, it's like the internet, it's just—it's not fair to him. He's alive, he needs—" but Rodney was already turning away, going back into the living room, because of course, Virtual John was in love with McKay, and they were all so fucking screwed.

He let himself collapse on the sofa, which was quite comfortable; his design instincts were obviously good. John came in, handed him a beer, and fell into a nearby armchair with a sigh. He put his feet on the coffee table. He was wearing bright red socks.

"How did you do it?" Rodney asked finally. "The time machine."

John picked at the label of his beer with his fingernail. "It wasn't hard, actually. I think Rodney ended up making the actual machine out of a transporter, but we could have used a culling beam, an Asgard beam: anything that turns people into lossless data. Other than that, it was just theories and number-crunching; sending the data along accurately."

"No offense," Rodney said pointedly, "but there's no way Sheppard knows that much math."

John smiled thinly. "I'm not him," and when Rodney rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers, John shrugged and said, "I got extra math for Christmas. Uploads. Rodney gave me all sorts of—" and then his face changed and he said, "Here, wait, I can show you." He got up, disappeared into the bedroom, and came back holding a tablet. "Rodney's," John said, handing it over, "but you're him, so it should work for you."

Rodney took it and ran his thumb over the genetic keylock. The screen exploded with information, and Rodney, who was not easily impressed, boggled. "Did I—" and yes, okay, McKay had said something about having to learn three new Ancient programming languages to make this VE work, but... "Did I really make all this?"

"Yeah. You did. You—you're pretty incredible, Rodney," and Rodney's head jerked up, because he thought that John's voice had gone a little rough, but John was just sitting there, in his ridiculous shirt, staring down at his hands. "It was—tell him I appreciate it."

Rodney's stomach clenched. "He can't have my life," he protested. "He can't have—"

"Sorry. I can't help you," and John wouldn't meet his eyes.

Rodney yanked the drive out of the wall and saw, to his shock, that it was already dark; the moons of Lantea were gleaming through his window. He stood up unsteadily on prickling legs, and arched his aching back. He could hear Virtual John saying, "No one was meant to live like this," but this wasn't the first time Rodney McKay had used his brains while letting his body rot. There had been graduate school, for instance.
McKay 2.0's bathrobe was still draped across his bed, and Rodney steeled his resolve and set out to find Sheppard. He left without quite knowing where he was going, but realized once he hit the transporter where his feet were taking him: down to the lower level room where he and Sheppard hid out to play video games and watch movies. They'd dragged a couple of mattresses down there, too, and some blankets, which hadn't seemed sinister at the time, only for catnaps, but now caused Rodney to break into a run, because he could picture it: Sheppard and McKay, crashed out in a corner, limbs tangled together.

Rodney took the corner so fast he nearly slammed into Sheppard, who was pacing the balcony outside the door and nervously gnawing on a thumbnail. Rodney saw at once that he was too late, because Sheppard's black buttoned-down shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, and he was barefoot: no red socks on display here.

"Oh my God," Rodney said, and Sheppard jerked up guiltily. Rodney was frantically trying to put together language for a speech whose theme was, "For God's Sake, How Pathetic Do You Have To Be To Take Advantage Of A Mad, Sexually Desperate Man From The Future," when Sheppard's face twisted with misery. He looked sick.

"Oh, shut up. Jesus." Sheppard turned to brace himself against the balcony, and Rodney could see his thin rib cage rising and falling through his shirt; wow, he was really freaking out. Rodney's anger evaporated in the face of Sheppard's evident desolation: God, he hadn't even considered things from Sheppard's point of view. Everyone was upset about Sheppard's death, but Sheppard had died, and some part of him was trapped in a hell of Rodney's making. Moreover, Sheppard was an intensely private person, and between them, Rodney and his future self had cracked him open like an egg.

"I'm sorry." Rodney's voice came out strangled. "Sheppard, I'm so—"

Sheppard rubbed the back of his head: a curiously childlike gesture. "I don't know what to do," he said. "Rodney. What do I—?"

Rodney's chest tightened. "Didn't he tell you? I thought the whole reason for this—this—rendezvous was for him to tell you how to save your life—"

"He did. That's the—" There was pain in Sheppard's eyes. "How the hell am I supposed to live with this kind of obligation? How can I possibly—"

"You're shitting me, right?" Rodney was actually gaping. "I mean, you—you've saved everyone's life, like a million times—"

Sheppard was already shaking his head as he turned to stare at the water. "This isn't like pushing someone out of the way of a bullet, Rodney. The guy salvaged what was left of me, programmed a replicant, built a time machine—"

Rodney was unbearably thankful that Sheppard didn't seem to think of "the guy" as, well, him. "Right, so...he's nuts, is the lesson I would be taking from that. Just because he's obsessed with you..." Rodney trailed off, because Sheppard's mouth had gone tight and he was shaking his head. "What, he's not obsessed?" Rodney asked incredulously.

"It's not just that. It's more than that." Sheppard's hands were white-knuckled where he gripped the railing. "He knows me, Rodney. I mean, he..." Sheppard's face and neck were tinting pink in a rapidly-spreading flush, "he really, really knows me."

Rodney had to shove away the image of all that could mean, tried not to look down at Sheppard's bare chest and feet. Of course McKay had had a John to practice on—
Sheppard was still bent over the railing and not meeting his eyes. "He knew everything already," he said, more to himself than to Rodney. "Things I've never—" and Rodney wanted to grab him and plead, I could know you, too, if you would talk to me.

Instead, he thought, pink, and said, desperately, "No, he doesn't. He doesn't know you at all. I've seen the virtual you, and he's nothing like—"

"What?" Sheppard's head came up sharply; that had got his attention. "You—"

"Well, I had to see what he'd built! It's—well, actually, it's pretty brilliant," Rodney admitted, "the house and the environment, and the code's genuinely spectacular, but the other John, he's nothing like you. He's—" and some self-preserving instinct told Rodney that this required extreme tact, because he couldn't say gentler, more articulate, and better at math. Much, much gayer. "He wears a lot of pink," Rodney said finally.

Sheppard's eyebrows flew up. "Pink?" he said, and then, almost musing on the idea: "I like pink, actually—"

This was a nightmare. "Well, I'm sure you would wear a whole other kind of pink than the pink he was wearing," Rodney said quickly. "Believe me: he didn't talk like you or move like you or smell like you. Remember that he was built from a single scan—we're talking highly-compressed data!—which was extrapolated back into a you-shape; that machine was never designed for accuracy. Which is probably why McKay came back: if Virtual John was just like you, he wouldn't need, well—you."

Sheppard was frowning thoughtfully. "Would more data help?"

"What?" Rodney blinked.

"More data," Sheppard repeated, emphasizing the word like Rodney was a moron. "You said he made the virtual-me out of a single scan; would more data help? Because I—" and Sheppard stopped, then lifted his chin defiantly, as if daring Rodney to say a word. "I'll give him more data. If it'll help."

Rodney blinked three times before the genius of the plan sank in. "Yes," Rodney said, snapping his fingers. "Yes, yes, yes, that's brilliant. We'll put you back into the VR, take another scan—" VR John's words suddenly came back to him. "—or, wait, no, we can do better: I'll build a new scanner, something lossless, out of a transporter or a culling beam—" and Sheppard nodded slowly and said, "Okay. Do it."

"Great," Rodney said, and clapped his hands together. "That should provide a rich enough data field to—" but Sheppard had turned away and was moving silently toward the door on bare feet. "Wait," Rodney said, stupidly. "Where are you...?"

Sheppard hesitated, but didn't meet his eyes. "I don't want him to be alone when he wakes up," he said, and then: "Build it, then come get me. I have my radio." The door opened for him and then slid closed behind him. Rodney stood there and stared.

It didn't take long to build, not once he'd hit upon the idea—fine, Virtual John's idea (but really his own idea that he would someday have anyway)—of cannibalizing a transporter. They'd deliberately set up their game room in an out-of-the-way area, so Rodney just went to the second-nearest transporter and ripped out its key components—the beam, the directional computer, the data storage drive, the cables. He dragged them back to an empty lab across from the game room, and began
cobbling them together into a scanner.

The transporter had been built to turn a person into data and forward them on to the next unit, so the actual upload was going to be trivial: a matter of modifying the program to make a copy while leaving the original Sheppard right where he was. He hooked the scanner to a console, then got to work rewriting the code. The test phase went well: he copied a powerbar into the Atlantis mainframe, then his tablet, then a chair.

Then there was the question of where to put the upload. He pushed McKay's flash drive into the console and checked how much space was left. Answer: virtually nothing. The cabin, the beach, the racetrack, those were all props; they were compacted down and took up virtually no room. But John—the simulation of John—filled the whole thing almost to bursting. There was no room to scan the real Sheppard into the drive.

Rodney grabbed his own drive and shoved it into the slot beneath McKay's. It was keyed to his genetic fingerprint, but it was still mostly full of the original owner's programming: the crazy Viking lady, all Halton's beautiful blondes, Samantha, the lesbians, Sheppard with his head thrown back, the girl bent over him, sucking his cock and—Rodney viciously wiped the whole disk clean, because this, this was what would turn him into that crazy Sheppard-stealing freak back there, building a fake John Sheppard because he'd been too pathetic to take his chance with the real one.

Okay, fine, that was the easy part: now there was the question of the merge. Technically, it was simple: a controlled merge, merging Sheppard's data into Virtual John's. Rodney felt a little uneasy about that—the simulation was huge, it was—as big as a real person—but he looked in the direction of the game room. McKay wanted Sheppard, that was obvious enough; McKay had come back through time for him. If he couldn't buy McKay off with a high-quality copy, McKay might not let go of the real one.

Once he'd made that decision, the program wasn't hard to write. He'd preserve VR John's memories of the last ten years with McKay, and replace the rest—the personality matrix, the pre-VR memories—with Sheppard's content. McKay would end up with a Sheppard who remembered building a time machine but couldn't, who'd remember wearing pink but wouldn't want to.

Rodney ran a few more tests, then rubbed his eyes. He glanced out the lab's huge circular window: still dark, though the air was just turning that gray color that presaged dawn. It just figured that he'd worked through the night, while Sheppard and McKay—well, he didn't want to think about that. He stared at his tablet and tried not to think about Sheppard's open shirt and bare feet. A pity fuck: that's all it was. McKay had saved Sheppard's life and lost most of his mind, so Sheppard had taken pity on the old guy and what, let him suck his cock, maybe. Jerked him off, maybe. So much for so little, really, and Rodney wondered if McKay saw the compassion in Sheppard's eyes.

He sighed and raised his hand to turn on his radio, then stopped, two fingers resting on his cheekbone. He got up and drifted though the steadily graying light of the corridor to their game room, knowing he was a masochist, but needing to see, needing to know. He slid his hand over the genetic keystrip and the door opened for him: it was coded to open to either him or Sheppard, which seemed pretty ironic now. It was darker inside than out, as the game room had no windows, but Rodney knew where to turn his eyes: to the corner, where they'd piled mattresses and set up the largest monitor they could find.

He'd hoped to be wrong, but he wasn't wrong. They were there, all right, crashed out together on the mattress, and Rodney recognized the languid drape of Sheppard's body before he recognized his own face-down sleep sprawl. He'd thought that McKay would be clinging to Sheppard, and was surprised to see Sheppard's arm curled possessively across McKay's shoulders. He was even more
surprised when Sheppard pulled away and rolled silently to his feet; damn, he wouldn't have let himself stare so long if he'd known Sheppard was awake. He was still dressed, at least, and he shoved his bare feet into boots, tucking rather than tying the laces, before following Rodney down the hall to the lab.

Sheppard took in the contraption at a glance and nodded vaguely at the circle Rodney'd drawn on the floor. He looked tired; maybe he hadn't slept either. "Me, there?" Sheppard asked, and went to stand on his mark when Rodney nodded. "You sure this'll work?"

"Yes," Rodney said. "Close your eyes." Sheppard's face grew tense, but he did as Rodney asked, hands tightening into fists at his sides. "Here we go." He pressed the button, and Sheppard was immediately suffused with yellow light. It took in all of him at once, glowing like a halo, then rapidly coalesced into a wide, horizontal beam and scanned him more methodically, moving from the spiky tips of his hair down his face, over his pointy nose, across the rough-bearded skin of his adam's apple, and down and down—shoulders, chest, waist, groin, thighs, shins, boots—before winking out.

Rodney bent over the console to check the data. Boy, there was a lot of it: it barely fit on the scratch drive. He wondered if he should compress it, or do another scan at—

"Did it work?" Sheppard appeared beside him.

"Mm-hm," Rodney replied absently, still absorbed in the problem. "Looks like," and then, muttering almost to himself, "Hope this gives him the incentive to leave."

"What do you mean?" Sheppard shot him a curious glance. "He's not staying."

"Oh?" Rodney's head jerked up, hope swelling. "Really? You don't think so?"

"Of course not," Sheppard looked genuinely surprised. "I mean, the whole point is to disrupt our timeline as little as possible. I'd think having two Rodney McKays around here would be, you know: pretty disruptive." Sheppard rolled his eyes. "Besides, we just worked out a strategy: why do that if he was just going to be here?" Sheppard shook his head. "He's not staying, Rodney."

"I hope you're right," Rodney said, but couldn't help adding: "His John doesn't seem to think so."

Sheppard showed him a thin, tight smile. "Well, then, maybe his John is—"

He stopped; McKay had wandered in from the game room, hair mussed and bathrobe hanging open. He was obviously surprised to see Rodney there. "Oh. Hey. Hi," McKay said. "Sorry, am I —" McKay looked up, at the bits of transporter, and then down, at the hand-drawn circle. "Wait. Are you guys building a time machine?"

Rodney shook his head. "No."

"No, no," Sheppard agreed.

"Though that's a very good guess," Rodney admitted. "Similar principle, actually. It's—"

Sheppard was already moving toward McKay, hands extended. "It's a scanner," he said. "Rodney built it. We thought...well, you said you had trouble building...that is, reconstructing..." Rodney had to look away, and focused on the console; Christ, he hadn't stand Sheppard's awkward sympathy, even though it wasn't directed at him; or whatever: not really. Sheppard's voice went soft, and Rodney hadn't known he could sound like that, all gentle like that. "Look, I want you to have...whatever you need, whatever you need from me," and then he said, all in a rush, "Rodney's
taken a scan of me: a better one. I can't fix what's happened to you, but I can help you fix your simulation. Rodney says it's not...well, not much like me, but the new data should..."

"Wait—what?" McKay said, and Rodney immediately jerked around to look at him. He knew that voice: that voice went straight to his lizard brain. "You—you didn't—"

"Let me do this for you," Sheppard said quietly, but he was on the wrong page, and McKay had seized both halves of Sheppard's open shirt before Rodney could get to him.

"No. No, no, no, no—" McKay's voice was strangled, and Rodney could almost feel the panic rising up to choke him. "What did you—you didn't—you erased—"

Rodney lunged across the room and grabbed at McKay's hands, almost recoiling when he touched his own skin. "He didn't! We didn't!"

McKay was clawing at Sheppard in a way that would've been pathetic if it wasn't for the naked desperation on his face. "If you've hurt him—if you—I'll—"

Sheppard was gaping back at him, too stunned to defend himself. Rodney yanked McKay's hands violently away and said, "We didn't! Jesus! Just calm down, McKay!"

McKay turned wild eyes on Rodney. "God, please, you didn't overwrite him?"

"No," Rodney said hastily, "no, no," though of course he'd been planning to do just that. McKay staggered past Rodney to the console and began typing erratically, hands shaking in a way that Rodney knew all too well. "I uploaded Sheppard to my drive, not yours." He shot a swift, reassuring glance at Sheppard, who was standing there, still looking shocked. "Not your drive; we hadn't transferred the new scan to your drive yet, all right? McKay, listen to me; are you listening?" Rodney wanted to shake him; Rodney didn't want to touch him. "I said we didn't touch the—"

McKay looked up from the console with fish-dead eyes. "He's not there. He's gone."

Rodney frowned. "That's impossible," and then he was pushing McKay aside, pulling up the drive specs and—impossible. There had barely been space; now there was nothing but space. "Impossible," he said again, and switched drives again to check, yes, Sheppard's scan was on the new drive, just like he'd thought. So what the—?

"He's gone." McKay sounded terrifyingly calm, like he might start shooting up a building: a school or a church. "Look," and then McKay flipped a switch on the lab's main console and—

A lot of gray nothing. It was like being in an unimaginably huge warehouse, or an empty soundstage: this was the VE, or at least it had been. Rodney turned slowly, trying and failing to get a sense of dimension. Beside him, McKay didn't seem to be able to focus on anything; he let his legs fold and sat down, cross-legged. The floor had a weird resilience under his feet, almost like leather, and Rodney was reminded of his very first experience with the drive: the cavernous, dank room, the leather floor mats, *Come and take your punishments, darling.* God, that was a long time—

McKay was crying. It came to him with a sickening internal twist. McKay's hands had come up, fingers crooked and locked, to shield his face, but still, the sounds were audible. Rodney said, hoarsely, "Now, now. None of that." McKay leaned forward, his shoulders curling inward and his head hanging down. "Look. Please. You have to—" and then Rodney went down on the floor beside him, uselessly tugging at his arm.

McKay barely moved, like he had neither energy nor will. "Can't—" he said, hands falling away
from his face. His skin was gray and papery, his eyes raw; he was suddenly ancient. "I can't do this
again." McKay looked around, bleary and unfocused. "I can't lose him—"

"You won't have to," Rodney said fervently. "We can fix this. It's some kind of mistake!" except oh
God, oh God, what if it wasn't, because he was suddenly remembering Virtual John's insistence that
Rodney wouldn't survive in the VE and the cool intelligence behind his pale eyes and fuck, fuck,
 fuck, a guy capable of noble self-sacrifice in one reality was probably more than capable of it in
another, and how the hell could any of them have thought that John wasn't John Fucking Sheppard?
"Oh God," Rodney said, and it suddenly seemed to him that this situation had John Sheppard's
fingertips all over it.

"What?" McKay demanded, snapping his fingers. "What, what—?"

"Nothing!" Rodney shouted back, having just truly learned what it meant to be beside yourself.
"Just," he added a moment later, wincing. "Could John, your John, maybe have—?" and he twirled a
finger around to take in the destruction of the universe.

McKay was outraged. "No! No way! There's no way he could, not from inside the—" and then,
without pausing, "that rat-fucking, code-hacking bastard!"

"So it's possible?" Rodney pressed, needing the information.

"No, it's not possible, but it's John, so anything's possible." McKay pinched the bridge of his nose,
and Rodney knew that headache from his own many, long days on Team Sheppard. "He shouldn't
have been able to do this kind of damage; he doesn't have the privileges. I deliberately locked his
base code down to root after he tried to give himself wings and corrupted himself so badly I—" and
Rodney winced again as he remembered John coolly handing him McKay's tablet and getting him to
unlock it. "You're him," John had said, "so it should work for you—"

"I, uh, may have inadvertently given him access to—" and ow, Jesus, ow. McKay was beating him
about the head, and Rodney yelped, "It's not my fault! He tricked me, gave me your—! It's not my
fault you and I are genetically identical—"

"You could have locked it again!" McKay said, taking another swipe at his head.

"You could have set it to self-lock!" and Rodney frantically batted McKay's hands away with both
of his. "Don't blame me for your lousy security!"

"Oh, yes: how could I have not built in a firewall against alternate timeline past versions of myself?
What was I—okay, wait, look: this is pointless." McKay rubbed his gray-stubbled cheeks. "You're
telling me John had root access. Which means he did this on purpose. Rigged up a self-destruct:
destroyed everything." McKay smiled bleakly and said: "Shocking, I know, and totally unlike him,
but..."

"You don't know that," Rodney objected. "He might have made a mistake, you said—"

"This isn't a mistake; it's a wipe. Deliberate," McKay said tiredly. "Besides, I...I should have known
this would happen. He's been wanting me out. Wanting to end it, I guess—"

It was weird to hear that negative voice outside his own head. "—to protect you, you idiot; he was
afraid for you. He—" In his head, Virtual John slammed the refrigerator door and said, It's not fair to
him. He's alive!, and Rodney abruptly remembered the conclusion he'd come to in the VE. "I think
he was in love with you," he said.

"He's not," McKay said with surprising viciousness. "He can't be; he's not real—"
"He's real," Rodney said, and tugged McKay to his feet. "And he's John Sheppard, which means he's a cagey, manipulative bastard under all that hair gel, so let's find out exactly what he did."

When Rodney opened his eyes, he found himself sprawled on the floor of the lab, limbs tangled with McKay's. Sheppard was on his knees above them, pale and sweating and apparently trying to pull them apart. "Jesus Christ," Sheppard swore, blowing out a breath and sitting back on his heels. "You scared the fuck out of me. The both of you, you just passed out and collapsed—"

Beside him, McKay groaned and rolled onto hands and knees. "The VE," he said, struggling to his feet. "I wasn't thinking; we should have been sitting down—"

"Yes, and thank you for all the lovely bruises." Rodney gripped the edge of the console and pulled himself up. "We're lucky we didn't crack our damn skulls open—"

"You're both assholes," Sheppard said, looking shaken.

"Us? Ha," McKay crossed his arms. "Tell me about it, you manipulative bastard—"

Sheppard blinked at him. "Uh—excuse me?"

Rodney barely looked up from his typing. "John blew up the VR," he explained. "McKay's pissed."

Sheppard looked pretty pissed, too. "Yeah, well, I didn't do anything! I was just standing here—"

But Rodney just tsked and said, "Yes, well, we all have to take responsibility for our actions: past, present and—" He stopped then, because here was the log list: last action - write to zero. The bastard had really done it: pushed McKay out into the world and burnt the bridge that led back. The whole virtual world was gone, John included, and Rodney was trying to find the right words to break this to McKay when McKay pushed next to him at the console. "I'm sorry," Rodney said, and meant it with all his heart.

McKay stood at the screen. His eyes were fixed and staring. Rodney bit his lip and debated hugging himself. "Don't be," McKay said slowly, "because I think this log file is bullshit," and Rodney’s eyes immediately snapped back to the screen, where McKay had brought up another scrolling list of commands. "Look, see?" McKay said, gesticulating wildly at the screen. "It's—" and yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, he saw it, and the sly, pink-shirted bastard had faked his own virtual death. He threw a nasty glance over his shoulder at Sheppard, who was behind them, craning his neck and trying to see.

"What!" Sheppard demanded. "I'm just standing here!"

"Look," McKay said, jabbing his finger. "There. He's hiding an upload; I think the bastard uploaded himself to Atlantis," and Rodney tried to muscle McKay out of the way so he could get to the keyboard, but McKay wouldn't budge an inch.

"Run a search," Rodney said finally, gritting his teeth. "I checked your drive just before I uploaded Sheppard, so I can give you his specs, likely file size—"

"I know the profile," McKay gritted back.

"Okay, but be careful. He might have changed the numbers," Rodney pointed out.

"Wouldn't put it past him," and they both glanced at Sheppard, who threw his hands up and stomped away to lounge on the windowsill, arms crossed.
"There," McKay said, voice rising. "There, there! That's—isn't that—?" Rodney forced McKay away from the keyboard with a full-body, lateral shove, and yes, something new was running in Atlantis, visible despite John's clever but amateurish attempt to conceal himself, which was the equivalent of hiding behind a slowly-moving and not at all realistic shrub on a stick.

"Yes." Rodney's fingers were tingling with adrenaline. "That's him, that's totally him. See? I told you everything would be—" but he was stopped by the look on McKay's face, on his own face.

"What...?" Rodney began tentatively, except he already knew what, because he was Rodney McKay and he knew his own mind.

McKay locked eyes with him, and hesitated only briefly before reaching out to clutch at his arm. "Will you?" McKay faltered. "Help me, will you?" and Rodney let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding and said, "Yes. Yes, yes. You locate the—while I rewrite the—" They bent over the scanner and began working furiously.

"Wait, what are you..." Sheppard began; Rodney waved him off and kept working.

McKay finished his part of the job first. "Come on, come on," he moaned, pacing, hands clenching and unclenching. "I could do it myself in half the—"

"You are doing it yourself," Rodney snapped. "Make yourself useful, set up the test phase—"

"Test phase?" Sheppard was off the windowsill now. "What—?"

"Test phase?" McKay threw up his hands in exasperation. "There's no time for a—" but Rodney shot him a look so supercharged with derision that McKay gave in immediately. "Fine, then!"

McKay said with barely concealed, thin-lipped fury, and immediately strode out the door, Rodney's bathrobe flapping behind him.

"Rod-ney," Sheppard said dangerously, edging close, now. "What test phase?" Rodney didn't know what to say; he was pretty sure Sheppard wouldn't be on board with this. Sheppard said, in a low voice, "What the hell are you—?" but Rodney was saved from answering by McKay, who had reappeared, dragging a large plant behind him.

Sheppard visibly boggled. "What the—" and Rodney took advantage of Sheppard's distraction to double and triple-check the code; if he screwed this up because McKay was haranguing him, he'd never forgive himself. But everything looked all right; it was a minor modification, all things considered, and when he looked up, Sheppard was helping McKay drag the plant into the circle he'd chalked onto the floor.

"Okay," Rodney said. "Everybody get back!" and then the glowing yellow light was enveloping the tree, turning it a sickly yellow-green. A moment later, a horizontal beam formed across the tops of the leaves, but instead of moving slowly downward, it fell like an anvil—bam!—and the tree vanished in the sudden sweep of light.

"You transported a tree?" Sheppard asked as Rodney bent to check the numbers, which looked fine; looked great, in fact.

"No," McKay replied, looking visibly relieved when Rodney straightened up from the console and gave him the thumbs-up. "Uploaded. And I'm next," he said.

"Wait," Sheppard said. Rodney could almost see his mind working through the possibilities, trying to put together what this meant. He actually did see the moment Sheppard figured it out. "Wait," Sheppard sounded strangled. "Where's the output?"
"There isn't," McKay said. "But John's in there. I'm going after him."

Sheppard immediately stared into a corner of the room, like it was fascinating; his face clouded over. "You," he began, and then he was biting his lip, his mouth pursed together. He still couldn't meet McKay's eyes. "Don't," he said. "This isn't a good idea."

McKay actually laughed. "I know," he said, and stepped into the chalk circle. Sheppard looked at him, then, and McKay said, with a kind of hysteria, "I'd do it all again, you know. I'm perverse like that." He glanced over at Rodney, and said, "Um, thanks."

"No problem," Rodney replied awkwardly. "Are you, uh..." and when McKay said, "I'm ready," he pressed the button. McKay was immersed in yellow light, and Rodney felt a sudden and unexpected surge of hope and shouted: "Good luck! Give my best to—"

And then McKay was gone. Rodney looked down, saw the data that was his future self streaming through Atlantis, and felt an odd kind of euphoria: he'd made it, maybe they'd both make it. He turned to share this with Sheppard, but Sheppard was just standing there, looking drained and a little bereft. The sun was fully up now, and bright light was streaming through the lab's window. Dust motes were slowly turning in the air.

"Did it work?" Sheppard raised a vague hand to his head, rubbed his temple.

Rodney showed him empty hands. "He's in there," he said. "John's in there too, for what it's worth. The data's intact. Their programs are running."

Sheppard looked disoriented. "So is that—what happens now, is that it?"

"I guess," Rodney said helplessly. "I mean..."

"Did we just kill him?" Sheppard's face was turned away, but his voice was tight. "No, wait; I don't think I want to—" and then he was touching his ear and saying, in a hard voice, "Sheppard, go ahead." A moment later, he glanced down at his watch. "Right, yes. On my way." He looked at Rodney. "I've got to go," he said. "See you at senior staff."

"I—yes. Okay," Rodney said, then added, uncertainly, "What—what should we tell them?"

Sheppard face was intense. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing. No one else needs to know about this," and then he was turning on his heel, and leaving the lab, and gone.

Exhaustion turned the rest of the morning into a kind of waking dream, which Rodney experienced in a number of hallucinogenic flashes. Taking the scanner apart so that no one could upload themselves by accident. Going back to his room and taking a shower, bracing his arms against the smooth walls so the hot water beat down upon his neck and shoulders. Coming out swathed in towels only to realize that McKay had stolen his bathrobe. Arriving at Carter's morning meeting and watching Sheppard stroll in.

And maybe it was the post-stress endorphins running through him, making all the colors extra sharp, but he couldn't feel bad about it; any of it. Because John Sheppard was alive and sitting right across the table, looking tired but wearing a clean black shirt and blandly lying through his teeth: yeah, it had been a slow day, a slow week, really, but all was quiet on the Western front. Rodney couldn't take his eyes off him.

"McKay?" Carter said, and something about how she looked made Rodney think this wasn't the first time she'd said his name. "Are you all right?"
"Yes, fine," Rodney replied, cheerfully slapping the table. "Fit as a fiddle." Everyone was looking at him, so he added, hastily: "I didn't get much—well, any, actually—sleep last night, so I'm kind of—you know." He fluttered his fingers. "High."

There was a muffled laugh somewhere in the room. Carter arched her eyebrow but didn't smile. Sheppard sighed and said, in a beleaguered voice, "Permission to postpone today's offworld mission until such time as..." and then Carter did smile.

"Permission granted," she said, and stood up to end the meeting. "Get some sleep, McKay," except Rodney'd learned from long experience that he had to stay awake till the next sleep cycle, so he chugged a gallon of coffee and went down to his lab. He did some routine work, checked the progress of his ongoing experiments; he found himself feeling extraordinarily grateful for the ordinariness of the day. When Sheppard walked in later that afternoon, he was pretty much right on time, and Rodney let himself believe that things were back to normal. After all, Sheppard usually came by about now to drag him off to dinner, or to suggest they go downstairs to play BioShock or video golf.

"Hey." Sheppard cocked a hip, leaned against the lab bench, and frowned at him. "I figured you'd be sleeping. I went by your room—"

"Yeah, no, better to just stagger onward," Rodney said, pressing his hands to the small of his back. "Though I should probably get some food. Have you eaten yet?"

"No," Sheppard said, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. "I mean: yeah, okay."

"Great." Rodney made for the door, sure at that point he was home free, except then Sheppard exhaled noisily and grabbed his arm, and said, "No, wait." Still, Rodney managed to keep his game face on, trying to seem inquisitive and vaguely impatient all at once. Sheppard let go of him. "I guess I wanted to talk," he said and shrugged.

"We don't have to talk. I mean, we really, really don't," Rodney said helplessly. "What's done is done, and I can't change anything now anyway. You want an apology? I apologize. I should never have—I didn't mean to—I never meant to—"

"Rodney, shut up, will you?" but Sheppard sounded exasperated, not angry. He leaned back against the lab bench, braced on his elbows, and tilted his face toward the ceiling, showing off a long stripe of throat; his chest hair was peeking out of the top of his collar. Finally Sheppard let his head roll forward and said the last thing Rodney expected: "I guess I wanted you to know what a disappointment I was to my father."

"What?" Rodney said, bewildered.

"Shut up and listen. I'm telling you the truth. I wasn't the son my father wanted, okay? He had a plan, all laid out for me, but I wouldn't keep to it." Sheppard stopped, bit his lip, and when he spoke again, his voice was subtly different. "A year or two of military service builds a man's character," and Rodney had no doubt of whose voice he was hearing, "but no more than that. It's not a career for an eldest son," Sheppard said.

Rodney frowned. "What did he want you to do?"

Sheppard winced, then pulled a face so outrageous that Rodney would have laughed if he hadn't been able to see all the pain in it. "God. It's so embarrassingly embarrassing," Sheppard said, eyes rolling like he was gripped by a paroxysm of dorkiness. "Choate, Harvard, Europe, the family business. Law would have been acceptable. Politics," and Rodney must have been openly boggling,
because John said defensively, "Hey, it wasn't my idea. And I barely got out of Choate; I probably wouldn't even have graduated if my father hadn't, like, bought them a building—"

"Who the hell is your father, Joe Kennedy?" and when Sheppard winced, Rodney realized that that maybe wasn't the wildly outrageous comparison he had been going for. He looked at Sheppard and tried to see the scion of a wealthy family: a lawyer or banker, married to a debutante. The junior senator from the great state of Massachusetts.

"Commonwealth of Virginia," Sheppard corrected wearily, "but yeah, that's the ballpark. Look, the point is: I'm not that guy, Rodney. I was never that guy. I joined the Air Force and that was it for me. I earned my wings, got recruited for special ops, combat search and rescue, and just—" Sheppard squeezed his eyes shut. "Even after it went bad, I couldn't turn my back on them. Because they saw me, at least, and they accepted a hell of a lot more of me than my father did, even if they maybe didn't know all of me—"

"Rodney—" and Sheppard abruptly straightened and shot a wary look over his shoulder. Zelenka hurried into the lab, wreathed in smiles, glasses slipping down his nose. "I thought you would want to see the—" He faltered, maybe sensing Rodney's building rage, the polite thinness of Sheppard's smile. "Sorry, am I interrupting?"

"Yes! Yes, you are interrupting—"

"Nah," Sheppard said easily, and Rodney looked and saw that Sheppard was gone, slid back under the veneer of lazy charm that was his default mode. "It's nothing important," he told Zelenka, and then he looked at Rodney and said, "We can pick this up later."

Zelenka waved his tablet at Rodney uncertainly. "I just thought you would want to see the first numbers from our low-energy neutrino—"

"Actually, no; no, I don't," but Sheppard was already sliding past them and away, out the door. "No, but really: you can't have any idea how little I care about the numbers from the low-energy neutrino spectography right now," Rodney said earnestly.

"Oh." Zelenka blinked rapidly. "Well. I am sorry."

"Not sorry enough," Rodney said with heartfelt emotion, only belatedly snatching the tablet out of Zelenka's hands and glancing down at the numbers, which were, as he'd suspected, not nearly as interesting as whatever Sheppard'd been trying to tell him.
mean something that, with all the perfect people in the expedition, the best and the brightest from every nation on Earth, Sheppard had picked a team of two aliens and him: a scientific asset to be sure, but hardly the most socially adept guy in the city. None of them were; in fact, they all ranked somewhere near the bottom: eccentric, off-putting, difficult to talk to. Rodney'd always assumed that Sheppard had chosen them despite their social weaknesses. But maybe he'd just surrounded himself with people he understood.

Sheppard happened to glance his way, frowned at him, and tilted his head, and Rodney realized he was just standing in the middle of the mess, holding his tray. Rodney weaved through the other tables and slid into a chair across from Sheppard. Teyla smiled at him; Ronon cut his eyes toward him, but didn't pause in his story, "—and the whole top half was blue, but blue with other colors in it. He'd found this rock, crushed it into powder, and made his own paint," and if it wasn't violence with Ronon, it was painting, though sometimes they amounted to the same thing. "It was a new color," Ronon said triumphantly, and then he picked up his sandwich and tore off a giant bite. "I wonder," Ronon added, with his mouth full, "if your galaxy has colors I've never seen."

Sheppard paused, an apple halfway to his mouth. "Do you mean like," Sheppard fluttered his fingers around the apple, "'is your green my green?"

Ronon grinned hugely, still chewing, and took a lazy swipe at Sheppard's head. "You're a philosopher, man. Nah. I don't mean philosophy—"

"Of course not. You're talking about rocks," Rodney interjected, digging into his own meal. "Different planets, different minerals, ergo: different colors: yes?"

"Yeah," Ronon said.

"Except the color's not in the rocks, it's in the light, and light can only do so much in any galaxy." Rodney suddenly pictured McKay, engulfed in light and vanished into data. He added, faintly: "Of course, there's so much we don't know."

He turned when Teyla touched his hand. "Have you not slept at all?" she asked.

He hadn't, but he was well into his fourth wave of energy, now. "No, not yet," Rodney replied, "but I'll go to bed early. Presuming things stay quiet, which is never a good bet," Sheppard was watching him now: eating his apple and watching him with an unreadable expression. Rodney poked a fork into his salad. "I wanted to be a musician," he said.

Sheppard didn't react to this declaration, but there was a weird little thrum around the table, a subterranean team communication Rodney knew well. Teyla stood up and said, "Perhaps I will see you later," and Ronon balled up his sandwich paper and said, with the last of it hastily shoved into his mouth, "Hang on, I'm done." Sheppard showed them a whip-flick of a smile as they headed off. Rodney stared doggedly down at his food.

"So—a musician?" Sheppard asked carefully.

"You're not the only one with a backstory." Rodney stabbed his salad. "Yes, I wanted to be a—" pianist, he used to say, but he'd had trouble with that word, "—to play the piano. Classical. Obviously. I wanted to play professionally, but—" He shrugged.

"Really?" Sheppard's face broke into a more genuine smile. "You?" and then: "Can you sing?"

This was an unexpected question. "I—well, I mean, yes, I can carry a tune, but—"

"I can't. I think I'm actually envious. Huh." Sheppard seemed to think it over. "You: a musician. I
gotta say, from where I'm sitting, I'm glad you're not a musician."

"Well, that's just my point." Rodney leaned forward over the table and said, in the lowest audible voice he could manage, "Same here. I mean, a thousand times over, same here. I can't imagine this place without you: surviving this without you. So all right: maybe we disappointed some people. And maybe we couldn't—" His throat went tight; he swallowed. "—be everything we wanted. But look where we are!"

He'd meant this to be greatly inspiring, but the corners of Sheppard's mouth were twitching. "Wow." Sheppard whistled softly. "I must be really bad at this."

"No, no," Rodney said uncertainly, and then he felt Sheppard's boot knock against his. He shifted his leg away, and Sheppard moved with him, leg hard against his and—oh. He went still, and Sheppard's knee snuggled in, muscled calf warm against his.

"I was trying to tell you that the Air Force was everything to me. It didn't matter... what else I gave up." Sheppard looked at him meaningfully; Rodney's mouth went dry. "But now..."

"Oh," Rodney said; Sheppard's leg was still warm against his.

"Yeah."

"I, uh. I don't think I fully appreciated the, uh—import of your—"

Sheppard sighed and said, "Well, I'm also pretty bad at this."

Rodney licked his lips, then screwed up his courage. "Sex?" he asked, and began to push his leg against Sheppard's.

Sheppard glared. "Relationships." Then he slouched back in his chair in a way that was at once fantastically sexy and so clearly a studied attempt at cool that it was very nearly middle-school. "I'm actually pretty good at sex."

"Oh," Rodney said faintly. "Well, that's good."

"Yeah," Sheppard agreed, and then, shifting and leaning forward awkwardly: "So. You're not actually going to make me say, 'your room or mine', right?"

"Mine," Rodney said immediately. "Your bed's much too small," and Sheppard grinned at him again, one of those surprisingly goofy smiles he showed when he wasn't being all cool. Then Sheppard leaned in, like he was about to say something; leaned in further. When he still didn't say anything, Rodney leaned forward, too, straining to close the distance.

"So what are you waiting for?" Sheppard murmured. "I'll be right behind you," and Rodney stood up so fast he nearly knocked the chair over.

---

Sheppard wasn't lying; he followed Rodney at a discreet distance through the Atlantis halls, but was pressed up behind him before Rodney'd even finished getting the door open. Sheppard turned him, cupping his face and kissing him and pushing him into the room backwards. The door slid shut; it was dark, and Rodney fought a momentary desire to turn on the lights before just pulling Sheppard into his arms and opening his mouth. Sheppard's hands were still on his face, warm and calloused, and Sheppard was kissing him just the way he liked it. Kissing his mouth, his chin, the side of his face, before sliding in deep and hot and wet. Sheppard's mouth was surprisingly soft, and Rodney became aware that he was groaning softly, hands clutching at Sheppard's lean, muscular sides. Just
the way he liked it, exactly how—

He'd always had trouble ignoring ideas once they occurred to him. "You slept with him, the other—McKay," Rodney blurted. "Didn't you." His brainless dick was still trying to get some friction against Sheppard's leg. Sheppard was rocking into the motion, hips tilting suggestively. "Didn't you," Rodney repeated. Sheppard sighed and stepped back.

"It was more like the other way around, Rodney, okay?" Sheppard's face wasn't quite visible in the dark. "He wanted to, and I guess I wanted to, too. He saved my life."

And that was it: the thing that needed facing. "I'm not him," Rodney said.

Sheppard was there immediately, holding his shoulders. "I know, Rodney."

"I didn't save your life. I didn't build a time machine. I didn't rescue what was left of you or devote my life to building a world whose only virtue was that you were in it. I just—" The words were tumbling out of him now; he had to confess this, they had to be clear about this, otherwise he'd never know if he was just the stand-in for the insane geezer who had done all those things. "I just showed you the VR. And I saved your file for—all right: totally prurient reasons. I liked to watch those girls having sex with you. I used to watch it all the time. I'm not a hero, I'm a pervert, I—"

"He knew me, Rodney. He knew everything about me, things I've never told anybody. But I didn't know him." Sheppard's voice was soft. "What happened to him, it changed him. You think I want you to be him? I don't. I mean, I—" and Sheppard shook his head, laughing, but fierce. "I really, really don't."

"Oh, thank—" and Rodney was on him and kissing him before he'd gotten the words out. But Sheppard was making himself hard to kiss, because he was laughing and pushing at Rodney like he was a big, slobbering dog. "For god's sake, have sex with me already—"

"Just for the record," Sheppard said earnestly, "I'm okay with you being a pervert."

Rodney had no answer for this, focused as he was on unbuttoning Sheppard's shirt and then the buttons of his BDUs. Sheppard's hard-on was outlined in his striped boxers. Rodney ran his palm over the cotton, feeling the hard flesh quivering beneath, and touched his mouth to a tiny patch of unshaved skin on Sheppard's cheek about the size of a nickel. It drove him wild.

Sheppard stopped laughing; he was breathing hard, chest rising and falling. "Go on," he said raggedly. "Come on," and he grabbed the hem of Rodney's shirt just as Rodney slipped his hand into Sheppard's boxers to grip silky hot skin, and suddenly they were tottering together, kissing messily, tripping over each other's feet. Rodney curled the arm he wasn't using to grope Sheppard's cock around Sheppard's neck and tugged him over to the bed. The moment Sheppard's knee hit the bed, he was shoving Rodney down and crawling on top of him and worming his clothes off, and it turned out that his frantic whispers of, "let me, come on, let me," meant let me fuck you.

"Yes. God—" and how had he ever thought Sheppard was passive? Because of the lesbians, how he'd been with the lesbians, but what was entirely clear now as he lay there with his face pushing against the sheet and Sheppard's cock in his ass was that Sheppard liked boys; Jesus, did he. Sheppard's sweaty face was tuck against the back of his neck and he was groaning softly —"Rodney, Jesus, oh, God,"—and Rodney shuddered through full-body convulsions just hearing him sound like that, all undone and needy like that. Every time Rodney shuddered, Sheppard's arms tightened around him until he was squeezing hard enough to hurt. Rodney'd been afraid the fucking would hurt, but it hadn't: with Sheppard it was the hugging that hurt. He didn't complain.
Sheppard's breathing went fast and ragged and he skittered an unsteady hand down Rodney's belly to his dick. "I'm really—close," he said, and gave Rodney's cock a long, slick squeeze and then a couple of quick, tentative jerks, and Rodney's eyes closed heavily as he came over everything. "Oh—oh, yeah—f-fuck—" and then Sheppard was smothering his moans and gasps against Rodney's neck and coming, too.

Rodney was having trouble breathing until Sheppard rolled them both onto their sides, which freed up some lung capacity. Rodney inhaled deeply, and Sheppard's arms relaxed just enough to let him do it before tightening up snug again.

"Rodney," Sheppard murmured against the back of his head. "You okay?"

"Mhm." Rodney's hand found Sheppard's arm. He squeezed it, and Sheppard mumbled something about how this had been great, so great, which, yes, obviously. Sheppard was a comforting background rumble, a gust of warm breath in his hair, and he wasn't really listening until Sheppard mumbled, from far away, "...I'm staying, okay?" Rodney was too far gone for speech, but he tightened his grip on Sheppard's hand and fit it against him, and he felt more than heard Sheppard's laugh and whisper of, "Okay, Rodney. Okay."

---

Epilogue.

"Shut the door," Rodney said, jerking his head toward it. Sheppard rolled his eyes, then went back to the lab door and palmed the keystrip.

"Okay, what?"

Rodney gestured toward his laptop. "Come and have a look at this," he said. Sheppard came over and bent down to look at the screen.

"My God," Sheppard said, looking up again. "It's science!"

Rodney blew out an irritated breath. "Okay, funny guy, seriously, in all the time you've known me, have I ever—ever!—wasted your time with pointless observations?" Sheppard appeared to be thinking this over, and so Rodney yelled, "No! No, I haven't!"

"All right, fine." Sheppard raised his hands in apology. "Look, I see science on a screen. You're going to have to give me a little more information, here."

Rodney was somewhat mollified. "Okay, fair enough," he said, "but here's the thing: I didn't do this science."

"What do you mean?" Sheppard looked concerned.

"I mean," Rodney said, "that I didn't write that! That's the answer to a problem I was only beginning to think about working on; I just had rudimentary notes, basic approaches—"

Sheppard frowned. "So somebody else...Zelenka..."

"Yes, yes, because that's what scientists do; we break into each other's labs in the middle of the night and solve each other's problems without signing our names to—okay, no, just: no." Rodney wiped at his hairline with the back of his hand. "Besides, it doesn't read like Zelenka. Scientists have styles, just like other great artists." He pretended not to notice Sheppard's eyeroll. "I'm saying Zelenka didn't write this! In fact," he said, and crossed his arms, because here's where it got interesting, "at a guess, I'd say you wrote it."
"Me," Sheppard repeated, and raised an eyebrow. "Riiight. Because my scientific prose style is so —" and Rodney saw exactly when Sheppard got it, because he set his jaw and looked a little afraid. It was a familiar expression. "Oh, fuck. You think it was—"

"Yeah. I've seen his work. And did I mention my files were password-protected?"

"Great," Sheppard muttered, and then, suddenly prickling under Rodney's gaze, "Hey, don't look at me! I've got nothing to do with this. Blame yourself, if you want to blame anybody; some version of you's in there, right? Why don't you stop him?"

Rodney sighed. "I don't know that want we to stop him. I mean, do we want to stop him?" He looked toward the proof he hadn't written. "It's beautiful work," he admitted, and then he bit his lip. "Besides, I'm—I think I'm part of the problem."

Sheppard's shoulders slumped, and he scrubbed at his face. "Color me shocked."

"I did a little searching around after I found this. And, well..." Rodney shifted uncomfortably. "Reviewing my work over these last few months, I find I've been—incredibly productive. Like 'it's impossible that I could have done all this' productive—"

Sheppard glared at him.

"Hey, I do the work of four people around here as it is! Things are fixed, they go right, problem solved, my initials: who's going to red-flag that?"

"So you're telling me they're both running around Atlantis, interfering with—"

"Interfering, yes, for some definition meaning 'being very, very helpful'—"

"—our programs and procedures? Hacking our computers? Intercepting—"

"Sheppard, they're in our computers; they live there, remember? And yes, I grant you it's disturbing, but they don't seem to have done anything that—"

Sheppard crossed his arms and stared him down. "So now you trust them?"

"I—" The question stopped him; did he trust them? Rodney frowned. "Yeah, I guess. I guess I do. I mean..." Rodney swallowed uncomfortably; he'd thought McKay was crazy, but now that he had John, he thought he'd go a hell of a lot crazier than McKay had if anything ever happened to him. "They're us. I mean, not exactly. But..." But McKay had been him, once. And now that Rodney had access, he knew that there were a lot of pastel shirts in Sheppard's closet.

Sheppard's eyes narrowed. "You said he was crazy. You said he was a mad scientist—"

"Yes!" This was a sore point. "And I notice you slept with him anyway!"

"Oh my God," Sheppard groaned, arms falling limp to his sides. "I'm not having this argument with you again," but actually, Rodney liked having this argument: it usually ended with him coming his brains out while Sheppard whispered, You, it was always— "Can we please stay focused on the gremlins in the machinery?"

Rodney couldn't hold back his snort of derision. "Gremlins? They're more like pixies with security clearance. I just—" He looked at Sheppard, slouched there in his faded BDUs and untucked t-shirt, and loved him, Christ, so much. "Just. I'd have done the same. If—"
Sheppard surprised him by kissing him; fast, but deep enough to make him wobble a little. "I know," he said. "And—I mean, I would too, if you..."

"Yeah." Rodney leaned toward Sheppard's neck, breathed in the warm smell of him. "But I'm still a genius, and even reduced to data, you're a born hero, so..."

Sheppard blew out a long breath. "So, all right. Jesus," he said softly. "If you really think it's all right, then—all right." He looked at the computer. "But if this has been going on for months, why did we just find out now? Are they getting careless, or—?"

Rodney forced his eyes back to that tantalizing, picture-perfect proof. "I think it's you, actually. Him; John. He's letting himself be seen—sticking his tongue out, actually, thumbing his nose at us. Whereas I'd guess that the virtual me probably has delusions of being, you know, well." Rodney coughed. "The secret master of the universe."

"Oh, so totally unlike you, then," Sheppard said.

Rodney frowned. "Actually, hm. I wonder if he's trying to open a dialogue."

"Who?" Sheppard asked with mock-patience.

Rodney looked around the lab helplessly, realizing for the first time that their virtual counterparts probably could see everything, be anywhere: here, now. "You."

Sheppard's eyes darted around, too. "I don't think I want a dialogue."

"Shh," Rodney said, and grabbed his arm.

Sheppard shook him off. "Don't be stupid, McKay. Either they can see us, and they've always been able to see us, or they can't. No point in whispering—"

"Shhhh! Shhh-hhhh!" Rodney slashed at the air violently. Sheppard made a face, then crossed his arms and stared up at the ceiling, looking deeply aggrieved. Rodney cleared his throat, and said, "Er, hello? John?" He coughed nervously. "John, is that you?"

The overhead lights flickered and went out, casting the lab into darkness.

After a moment, Sheppard said, "You know, I probably think this is really funny."

"Did you just do that?" Rodney stormed up the beach, one hand flailing to keep his battered straw hat from flying off in the wind. "I thought we agreed on a strategy of surgical precision, minimum interference, so we don't muck up the timeline! You're violating the prime directive—"

John was sprawled on a beach chair, wearing swim trunks daubed with huge purple and pink flowers and a ludicrous pair of white plastic sunglasses. Beside him, on the table, were his laptop and a fruity drink. "I think we can say they made first contact."

Rodney flung his hands in the air. "Only because you— That proof! You deliberately—"

John nudged Rodney's calf with the ball of his foot; his hairy leg was streaked with sand. "Like you haven't," he said. "I've seen your sneaky little cryptograms: you're just begging to be noticed." John's lips curved into a smile. "You're not built for unacknowledged genius, Rodney. Admit it; it drives you crazy that they haven't—"

"It does! Jesus! What are they, stupid?" Rodney grimaced. "I thought for sure Sheppard would have
figured it out by now: I mean, he's no you, but he's got a good mind for puzzles. And me—God, what the hell's wrong with me?" This wasn't a rhetorical question. "I'll tell you what's wrong with me: he's a maniac, that's what. Never stops to smell the roses. Just goes obsessively back and forth between today's crisis and Sheppard, tomorrow's crisis and Sheppard—"

"You're one to talk." John hooked his foot around Rodney's ankle and tried to tug him off balance. "Mister I-Gave-Up-My-Body—"

Rodney tried to keep his feet. "Excuse me, but that's Doctor I-Gave-Up-My-Body-For-You—"

"Yeah." John caressed Rodney's ankle as he pulled his foot away. His eyes were hidden behind his stupid glasses but his lips were curving. "Because you're a lunatic."

"Hardly. Perfectly rational; best thing I ever did. Saves me from allergies, backaches, and hypoglycemia, not to mention—" and John launched out of his chair and took Rodney down, tackling him in the sand. They wrestled for a minute, knocking Rodney's hat off, but Rodney couldn't take John on his best day. John scrambled on top of him and pinned him, just to show he could, Rodney thought. John's sunglasses had been knocked askew, but he was grinning down at him. Rodney lay back in the warm sand, almost unbearably happy, and John kissed him, hot and sloppy, until he moaned.

Dominance established, John eased up a little. His skin was golden and little beads of sweat glistened in his chest hair. "Bodies are good for some things," he said.

Rodney was hard before he felt John's cock digging into him. "No, no," he said, and swallowed: his mouth was full with wanting it. He brushed sand from John's cheek with his thumb. "You've got it all wrong." He was just bickering for the pleasure of it; in fact, they understood each other with unnatural clarity, having taken to sometimes trading each other bits of data and chunks of their programming as a form of sexual interpenetration. John called these brief data merges algorgasms, and they were his favorite thing to do in bed after sucking cock. "As everybody knows, and as the internet has definitively proven, sex is in the brain. Which is why I'm the all-time sexiest—" and John snatched Rodney's hat off the sand and began beating him about the head with it, and Rodney laughed and yelped, "Stop. John. Jesus. Asshole. Just. Stop."

Works inspired by this one: OK Computer (podfic) by mific

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