freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose

by synecdochic

Summary

Because the meaning of life is "do the next thing", and we all carry the seeds of the past into our future. Futurefic, Rodney-centric.

Notes

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miella read it paragraph-by-paragraph and said "oh, Rodney" a lot; sarahq steered me in some of the right directions when I got lost. This is the Story That Killed Four Betas, including callsigns, girl_clone, unholyglee, and onthecontrary. (I, uh, hope half of you get better soon.) The title's not an accident, and that's all the warning I'll give. Extended spoiler-laden DVD commentary available if you're curious.

There is a gravestone in Arlington National Cemetery. It sits watch over an empty grave, and there is a vine with small blue flowers, one the gardeners can't identify from any book, twining up its side.

It is an utterly unremarkable memorial, name and rank and dates, no different from the thousands of others save for the verse that graces its face:

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea.

Every year, a few more flowers bloom.

For Rodney's first semester at the university, the department chairman schedules him to teach two sections of PHYS101, commonly known as Bonehead Physics, and one section of PHYS441: Special Topics in Physics. This arrangement was painstakingly brokered during hiring negotiations. There's a seven-year gap on Rodney's CV where nearly everything he might have published was classified instead, and another thirteen before that where everything was classified but the little things. He knew when he first took the job it was a risk he'd have to accept, but he'd been young and stupid then. Decisions you make at twenty-five look different with twenty years of hindsight.

But the university isn't as bad as some of the places he could have wound up. The lab space is shit, and the physics program is so easy a gifted two-year-old could sail through, but the chairman, Dr. Vail, is quite a nice man, despite being a completely retarded rhesus monkey. Vail is willing to hire Rodney despite the way he looks on paper, on the strength of some of his older work and a good word from one of the few people Rodney still keeps in touch with from his graduate work. In exchange, Rodney, as the least-senior member of the department, is given the classes everyone else in the department would rather claw their eyeballs out than teach.

He doesn't mind -- much -- because they wrote it into his contract that he gets one section a semester to do whatever he wants with, and also because he's earned a little bit of boring in his life, and ultimately? In a face-off between the Wraith and undergrads for "Things Rodney McKay Never Wants To Encounter Again In His Entire Life", the Wraith win, hands-down.

He inherits from his predecessor: two graduate student teaching assistants, whom he pawns most of his paperwork off on, at least until he scares them off; one wholly inadequate bookshelf, half-full of old instructor evaluation copies of textbooks, three-quarters of which he throws out and one-quarter of which he writes nasty things in the margins of and then throws out; one ancient coffeepot, which he replaces with a model so expensive that it costs more than four years of education at the university, but which makes a cup of coffee that can reduce grown men to tears; and a drawer full of miscellaneous pens, pencils, and Post-It notes.

In the first semester, he teaches PHYS441 as "Special Problems in Relativity". Rodney can't find a textbook that doesn't make him want to spit nails, so he gets by with photocopying all the least-egregiously-wrong journal articles he can find. He uses the same textbook for PHYS101 the department's always used, but he's writing a replacement in his spare time, typing sentences one-handed while eating over his keyboard or grading papers in the evenings. He plans a few lectures involving blowing things up in front of the entire class. "Always makes them pay attention," his chairman says, fondly, when he looks at Rodney's syllabus.

In his first semester at the university, Rodney makes friends with the department secretary (because he knows where all the power truly lies), the research librarian (who is the one to really control which journals the university maintains a subscription service to), and the guy from the financial aid office (who holds a black belt and teaches the university's karate classes, and who says that the hour he spends sparring with Rodney every Thursday afternoon is the best workout he's had in years). He makes enemies with the janitorial staff who cleans his office (who refuse to step foot in his office after the Incident with the cabinet alarm), the mouth-breathing moron who teaches Solid State (who
refuses to believe Rodney's theory of cohesive energy, despite the fact that Rodney is right and he is wrong, wrong, wrong) and one hundred and fifteen undergraduates (who believe they deserve to pass Rodney's class without doing any work, a belief of which Rodney is more than happy to disabuse them.)

He buys a decent townhouse, close enough to campus that he can walk when the weather is nice, and fills it with books on a hundred different subjects that might have once been useful to know more about. He adopts two cats from the local animal shelter to keep the house from feeling empty. Pixel is grey and white and attacks Rodney's feet under the covers at four AM. Fara, short for Faraday, sleeps in the puddle of early-afternoon light on the living room carpet and occasionally deigns to sit in Rodney's lap and let him pet her. Both of them know better than to swat at any of the half-dismembered mechanical things Rodney leaves strewn around his living room.

SGC finally stops calling him by December. Rodney celebrates by writing a final exam for his relativity class so difficult that it reduces four students to tears in the exam hall. Upon reflection, he decides to be merciful and offer partial credit.

The second semester offering of PHYS441 is "Applied Quantum Physics". It's listed in the catalog as an undergrad, but the department offers an MS too, and apparently word is getting around; every lecture period, there's one more graduate student hanging around the back of the room, looking nervous about what they've heard but wanting an open seat anyway. During one lecture, there is a storm so severe that power to the science building cuts out. Hard on the heels of the darkness, the sky lights up for one brief blinding second, the flash so familiar and yet wrong at the same time, the crack of thunder like the sky splitting open and dying.

Rodney is in the middle of carefully implying that Paul Dirac was brilliantly, gloriously, stupidly wrong when it happens. A second later, he finds that he has dropped to a crouch behind his podium, left arm coming up beneath his right elbow, right hand bracing the phantom P-226 he no longer carries. A brief nervous titter moves around the lecture hall, quick and soft and squashed before it really begins.

Afterwards, when he is gathering up the lecture notes he only needs to remind him of what he's not supposed to say, Nichols—or-maybe-Nicholson clears his throat from just outside what Rodney's subconscious identifies as safe distance. Rodney squints at him. Nichols shuffles his weight from foot to foot.

"What branch?" Nicholson asks.

Rodney doesn't even pretend to misunderstand. "Civilian," he says, with just enough closed, clipped I don't want to talk about it in his voice.

Nichols is in his thirties, at least. Rodney likes the returning students, the ones who have been out in the world and figured out that college isn't just an excuse to get drunk and laid on Mommy and Daddy's money. They get a lot of students on the GI Bill, despite the university's second-tier reputation, because it's the cheapest school in the state. Rodney doesn't see a lot of them in his classes, though; he set a first-semester record for low scores on ratemyprofessor.com and the kids who are just looking to get by are giving him a wide berth.

"You saw action, though," Nicholson says.

Rodney's knees are still a little unsteady, and he'll never admit to anyone how much it cost him to hold himself quiet for the second half of his lecture. "Since you hypothetically must have a brain
larger than that of a hummingbird to have passed my midterm, I would have thought that would be obvious," he snaps. "Was there something I could help you with, or are you here just to breathe my air?"

Nichols just passes over a piece of paper. Rodney looks down to see a string of digits. He's still trying to get used to the idea of telephones again, things you have to pick up and dial. "I was in Iraq," Nicholson says. "When you're ready to talk to someone, call me."

Rodney can see the hint of a familiar chain under Nicholson's shirt. Two years after they went to Atlantis, civilians who went off-world regularly started wearing dogtags. Just in case. Rodney hasn't taken his off in years, except during the tests for his debriefing physical. He feels more naked without them, fully clothed, than he would if he were wearing nothing but. He wears the standard two-tag set. No one gets close enough to notice that one of them is printed with a different name.

The rumors start up shortly afterwards. Rodney only gets them in echo and distort, reverberating back to him through the hallways, but you don't spend seven years living in a floating tin can at the edge of the universe without learning how to read the ebb and flow. The students think he is ex-CIA. His coworkers -- no force of nature could bring him to dub them colleagues, not after spending so long learning what the word really meant -- think he was Special Forces. It makes Rodney snort, because a bunch of sheltered academic geeks have no idea what's involved in either. He knows because once upon a time he was a sheltered academic geek.

Every other Friday, Rodney drives the two hours to the range, not the closest one but the best one, the one where they don't lift an eyebrow at the way he brings all his own gear. The one where no one ever looks twice at the way his hands move over the gun, checking and re-checking, obsessively, precisely. They leave him to murder paper targets in peace, and he leaves neat round holes exactly where he wants them.

Rodney keeps his carry-concealed permit current just in case, licenses all his guns, takes any gun safety course the county requires of him. He cannot explain why he does any of it, even to himself, except by the memory of warm strong hands across his back, along his thighs, nudging one elbow up and the other hand down, pushing and prodding and pulling him into the proper stance. Of being handed a revolver, not standard Atlantis issue at all, with half the chambers randomly empty, to break him of the pull he'd developed, the instinctive jerking away from the noise and the recoil. Of long hours until his wrists were cramped and the small of his back was aching, and of the satisfaction of finally hitting the plateau of no-mind, coming back to see the target waving back at him, the progression of force: hand, shoulder, knee, stomach, chest, head.

It would be a tragedy to lose that hard-won competence, he tells himself. Nothing more than that. He is safe on a tiny backwater university campus in the middle of nowhere, USA, and he will probably go his whole life without ever again feeling the hot wet rush of blood through his fingers as he clamps his hand over his own skin, the pins-and-pokers blinding pain, the way a limb hangs useless at his side. Still. It's always better to be safe than sorry.

When Rodney goes for his first physical, his GP blinks at the roadmap of memories written across his skin. She holds one finger over the scar on his shoulder (bullet wound, year five, turning the wrong way at the wrong time; friendly fire isn't, and it was a stupid mistake, an amateur's mistake, but Rodney had been so exhausted it had taken him nearly a full minute to realize that Teyla was cursing and his shirt was soaking through) and looks as though she is about to ask.

"Don't," Rodney says, a soft breath even he can barely hear, and closes his eyes. She is still his doctor because she looked at his face, saw whatever he was incapable of holding back, and didn't.

Every spring, the Physics department holds a game of paintball: physics professors versus physics
majors. Rodney pleads illness, allergies, bad temper, and overwork, until Dr. Vail makes it clear that attendance is mandatory. It is the first year the professors win since 1994. Afterwards, he washes his hands fifteen times a day for a week, trying to scrub off the bright red flecks of dye that spatter them.

Rodney is offered a summer-session section of Bonehead Physics. He declines; he doesn't need the money. Instead, he turns up the air conditioning and reads his way through old friends, in alphabetical order: Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Sturgeon. He is bemused, but somehow not at all surprised, to discover that his favorite story of them all has become "The Man Who Traveled In Elephants". Eleven-year-old Rodney McKay had considered it boring; twenty-four-year-old Rodney McKay had considered it maudlin. Pixel sleeps on Rodney's feet and plays with his rattly mouse, and Fara claims the back of the couch right behind Rodney's head, so he must be careful of how he leans.

The process takes him three and a half weeks. Rodney has always been a bibliovore. When he is through, he amuses himself by shouting at what passes for popular science this season, and supplements his afternoons with the poetry of Kipling. He's never liked poetry, but Lorne had muttered under his breath, one afternoon waiting in barren quarters for someone to get around to handling the last minor details, "if blood be the price of admiralty, Lord God, we ha' paid in full." The line stuck with him.

Just when Rodney is beginning to concede that perhaps it would have been better to have taken the class, to have something -- anything -- to shape his afternoons, he receives an email from Elizabeth. He ignores it, the way he has ignored hundreds of its kind since their haphazard reintegration. She's back working with the United Nations, but he knows from all the emails he's not replying to that she spends most of her free time playing Flying Dutchman to a boatload of half-crazy refugees.

She is apparently undaunted by his silence, though, because she shows up uninvited on his front door with husband in tow right when he wants to see her least. She's wearing her best fake smile, the one that doesn't reach her eyes, but it's Ronon who pushes his way into Rodney's house, slaps Rodney once between the shoulderblades. Rodney still doesn't know how she managed to get clearance for Ronon to come home with them; he remembers how much of a bitch his resident-alien was to get, and he was only coming from Canada. He suspects it might have involved some form of blackmail, been her own, more subtle, fuck-you. Then again, Rodney has been on the receiving end of the Elizabeth Weir reality-distortion field more times than he can count.

(The last stand against the Wraith, they generally agree, began at the moment Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, pinched the bridge of her nose to stave back her headache, and said, "All right, let's put this all together." Rodney cannot pinpoint when, precisely, it ended. He spent the last three days under heavy sedation and restraints in the infirmary, by Elizabeth's order, surfacing from the twilight fugue whenever his IV began to run dry and screaming demands to be let go, to be told what was happening. Later, they told him Zelenka was the one who finally managed to coax the last of the Wraith hive-ships into self-destructing, but it was Rodney's method of recharging a ZPM that powered it.)

(He had to be told of this, because he does not remember anything beyond the instant when their last remaining puddlejumper had swerved just a fraction of a second too slowly and then spread across the sky to rain fragments down on Atlantis's shield. Sgt. Miller had volunteered to fly the mission, but been grounded at the last minute by the loss of two fingers on his left hand while fighting their path clear to the jumper bay. No one at the command center knew of the change in pilots until the jumper was already in the air.)

(The professional head-shrinkers call it post-traumatic stress leading to memory loss, but sometimes,
when Rodney is asleep, he can hear the hiss of superheated metal striking the warm summer ocean, the only sense-memory he retains. When it rains, his wrists still ache; they tell him he splintered most of the bones in his wrists during his struggle against the restraints. On these days, Rodney takes two Aleve when he wakes up, and two fingers of scotch right before he goes to bed.)

Ronon and Elizabeth are careful around Rodney, as though he needs tending. The three of them make uneasy conversation for the first hour, until Elizabeth finally sighs and seems to abandon any hope of getting Rodney to talk about why they're sitting in his kitchen in Podunk, USA. She half-shoves them out Rodney's back door into the late-afternoon sunshine. "Go," she says. "I'll feed us."

"No citrus," Rodney says, because he's trying like hell to seem like the person he used to be.

Elizabeth rolls her eyes. "Yes, Rodney, because you're going to keep something you're deathly allergic to in your own kitchen. Go, both of you. Get it out of your systems."

Ronon is wearing jeans and a wifebeater. It messes with Rodney's sense of the universe, but no matter what clothes he's wearing, Ronon can still kick his ass. They agree on the terms with no more than a look and a nod; six years of placing their lives in each others' hands lends a telepathy that doesn't go away easily. Rodney is almost disturbed at how right it feels when he strikes and Ronon blocks. He loses the next fifteen minutes to the shuffle of feet and the thick, real feeling of Ronon's fist slipping through his guard.

He can tell that Ronon's going easy on him, and he appreciates the gesture. Ronon has always been easy on him, except when he hasn't been. Rodney holds his own, though, and it takes longer than he expected before he is on his back looking up at the sky. He doesn't bother with a formal gesture of concession; he knows Ronon can see it in his eyes. Ronon towers over him, blotting out the sun, and extends a hand. "Better than I thought," Ronon says.

Rodney considers bouncing to his feet without the assistance, but there's showing off and then there's complete insanity, so he grips Ronon's wrist and lets Ronon grip his own and lift him. He can feel the shift of tendons in his wrist, rubbing and chafing, but it's not one of the bad days and so it goes away as soon as he isn't putting pressure on it anymore. "I practice," he says, falling into Ronon's speech patterns with the ease of long familiarity. He hasn't forgotten how much he misses them, but he forgot most of the reasons why.

(In year four, Rodney and Ronon had been imprisoned together on M9L-2VX, in a 6x4 cell painted with human feces. The Myntaxans believed the regular letting of prisoners' blood was pleasing to their gods. It had been seventeen days before the ion storms had cleared up enough for the rescue mission to fly in. By the end of it, Rodney could recite Ronon's lineage back ten generations and all the Satedan litanies of mourning, and Ronon could recite the equations for power transference Rodney hadn't had time to write down before the mission departed and all of the things Rodney had never been able to say to the person -- people -- he loved. The Satedans had a word for it: randatur, message-bearer, the one who brings back the last words of a fallen comrade.)

Ronon nods. "Good," he says, squinting against the sunlight. "I was worried you'd stop keeping up with your exercises."

"It's not exactly easy around here," Rodney says, "but no. I do. I don't want to --"

There are so many ways he can finish that sentence, and he knows Ronon knows all of them. Ronon puts a hand on Rodney's shoulder, warm comforting weight, and Rodney can't remember the last time someone touched him for no purpose other than to bring grounding. "You're fine," Ronon says, and the weight that has been building in Rodney's chest for the last week or so eases, because he is and he knows he is, but it's easier to believe when it comes from someone else, someone who knows
enough to be able to make the assessment. Ronon knows a lot of things. He always has.

"So. What do you think of Earth?" Rodney asks, when he's done drinking his fill of standing in
Ronon's shadow.

Ronon smiles, just a bare breath of lips turning upward. "Pretty," he says, and lets his hand fall.

"It kind of is, isn't it," Rodney says. Together they go back inside.

* *

In October of his third semester at the university, Rodney discovers that someone has put him in for
five days of professional development and made travel arrangements on his behalf. The next thing he
knows, he is sitting in a lecture hall in Geneva, listening to some of the most mind-bogglingly awful
science he's ever heard. And that's saying quite a lot. There is a familiar head in the crowd, but
Rodney can't bring himself to do more than make snide comments in the conference's IRC
backchannel with Zelenka. Too many secrets now; he can't afford to get too close.

Afterwards, he knows there are at least six ways he can publicly humiliate one or more of the
presenters without disclosing anything he isn't yet allowed to say. It's almost a pity the game stopped
being fun a long time ago. Rodney has published exactly one paper since he returned to Earth and
told SGC to go fuck themselves in the ear; it wasn't even in his field, and for the first time since he
was seventeen, he took secondary-author status without a word of protest. In actuality, every word of
"Computational Fluid Dynamics and Navier-Stokes: A Mathematical Proof" was his writing, but he
knows it doesn't count. Writing is the easy part; it wasn't his math.

(Proving the Navier-Stokes equations is one of the Millennium Prize Problems. In another six
months, the special advisory committee of the Clay Mathematics Institute will meet to determine
whether or not the paper qualifies for the one million dollar prize. Rodney does not doubt for a
moment that it will. He'll receive the entire amount, since the paper's primary author died without
leaving a formal next of kin. He plans to use the money to endow a grant for teaching
mathematicians how to fly.)

By the end of the conference, Zelenka has stopped trying to catch him over dinner or drinks. Rodney
knows that Zelenka is working for his government, willing to be absorbed into one of the other
hundred programs available for someone of his background and talents. Rodney could have done the
same, but Rodney is more fond of the grand dramatic gesture than Zelenka is, and besides, Canada
isn't home anymore and Rodney knows that after the way he left things, the US government would
come up with something far worse than Siberia or Antarctica for him this time.

Dr. Vail drops in three days after Rodney returns to the States. Rodney is certain he's just looking for
a cup of coffee from some source other than the roach coach parked outside the building, but
halfway through the conversation he blinks and something shifts, and his boss is actually telling him
that Rodney is failing to bring the university's reputation up by publishing brilliant and insightful
papers the likes of which would be presented at the conference he just came back from, and would
Rodney just get with the picture already before the board of trustees started noticing that he wasn't
exactly qualified for his job?

Rodney stares at him and wonders if the translation subroutine included in the Stargate programs let
him translate academian to English too, because he's pretty sure he's had conversations like this
before and this is the first time he's ever been able to pick up on the subtext. He is, in fact, so startled
that he forgets to watch his mouth, which is pretty much his only excuse for saying, "You are not
standing there and telling me that if I don't publish something soon you're going to fire me."
Vail makes a startled hrrmphing noise, backpedaling as fast as his bulk will allow him, and Rodney realizes that the backpedaling is not just verbal but physical, because all of a sudden he's on his feet and there's a cold still ball in the pit of his stomach and he can only imagine what his face looks like. "If I were permitted to publish one-tenth of what I have locked up in my head," Rodney says, "this university would have a Nobel Prize winner."

Vail's clutching the doorframe by now, only the tips of his toes over the invisible dividing line between Rodney's territory and his own, but he holds his ground long enough to say something about hypothetical work not standing up to a tenure review board before beating a hasty retreat.

That night, after his office hours are finished, Rodney goes home and takes down the cardboard box, one of three, from the coat closet. He selects six envelopes at random, thick manila envelopes with random words and letters scribbled on them and the smudged, heavy imprint of a stamp made by a desultory hand. He spends no more than thirty seconds on each page looking for outdated references before sending them off to six journals without even bothering to look up the submission guidelines. He uses his office for his return address. The department secretary opens the acceptance letters from New Journal of Physics, Annalen der Physik, the Condensed Matter Physics Journal, the Journal of Computational Physics, and the International Journal of Nanoscience and leaves them on his desk. He wonders if she photocopied them first. The editor of Icarus calls him directly, begging for anything else Rodney has to offer. When Rodney gets the proofs back, he wonders who they found to peer-review his submissions; they'd done peer review for each other, in Atlantis, and even Zelenka had been hard-pressed to follow some of Rodney's work.

Three of the journals pre-empt their lead article for the next issue and replace them with one of Rodney's. Over the next six months, he receives four grant offers, seven lecture invitations, and eight awards from various prestigious facilities. He declines the grants, refuses the invitations, and doesn't bother to show up for the award ceremonies. When he receives his contributor's copy of the last of them, he turns it over in his hands, reading the carefully-censored biography, and thinks that the man who used to crave things like this hadn't realized that the only award to really matter is being around to write about it later.

By the fourth semester, Rodney's almost beginning to relax a little. He cross-lists PHYS441 with both the math and the music departments, and since he can't think of a snappy title for it, calls it "Math, Music, and Physics". He checks the box on the registrar's form to indicate "instructor's permission required", and for "prerequisite", he adds "MATH241 (Calculus II) and ability to competently play piano or keyboard". He is surprised at how many students come to him to enroll. He's more surprised by how many of them are starting to be familiar faces.

Before he will let them register, he gives each of them a copy of the sheet music for the one of the Goldberg variations for keyboard, chosen randomly from his stack, and sets an appointment for one week later to assess their competency. One boy hesitates through his entire performance, hands tentative on the keyboard like he's dragging up long-rusty skills. "I'm sorry," he says at the end, unable to meet Rodney's eyes. "I haven't played since I was thirteen."

Rodney remembers him from Quantum Physics two semesters back and from Particle and Nuclear Physics last semester, but he's always been shit with names. Harris, maybe. Hanson. Something like that. "Why do you want to take this class?" he asks.

The kid hesitates for a minute. Rodney can practically see the minute he decides to be honest. "Because the way you teach about it, the universe is beautiful," he finally blurts.
Rodney signs the registration card without a further word. His own first try at coaxing music from dormant keys had been after a far longer hiatus. They'd found the Ancients' music hall on a routine exploration sweep fifteen months in. The anthropologists had practically wet themselves at the chance to reconstruct pieces of Ancient culture. Rodney had waited until the fad had passed, until the next shiny string had been dangled and batted at, before creeping in at five one morning with a datapad in hand and a handful of rehearsed excuses about how understanding the Ancients' music system would unlock bits and pieces of their science as well.

(He'd never needed the excuses, though, because only one person had ever found him there, and by then they'd moved past needing any of those lies. Anyway, it hadn't been until the fourth year, once Rodney had moved past scales and arpeggios and figured out how to transpose Chopin into the heptatonic tuning the Ancients used for their instruments, so if he'd wanted he could have pretended he'd been playing all along. He hadn't pretended, but he could have, and that was the important part.)

He spends the semester teaching the class how to get the equations out of Bach and the melody out of Euler. After each lecture, he lingers in the performance room, his fingers ghosting over silent keys, and lets the symphony of Atlantis run through his head. He's not ready to try to tease it free, yet, but soon. He has time, still. He wants to make sure he gets it right.

Just before Rodney is about to put together the syllabus for his fifth semester of 441, Dr. Mouthbreather quits in a fit of pique. He cites "unbearable working conditions", by which he means Rodney; Rodney chalks up another notch under the list of idiots he's freed his various workplaces from. Rodney inherits his section of Solid State by simple virtue of being the only one even remotely qualified to teach it.

He is so distracted by the frantic two-week scrambling to find textbooks that don't lie and plan assignments and labs that make the most of the university's woefully-inadequate experimental facilities that he gets his final class cards to the registrar's office at four AM the day they're due. For the rest of the semester, he can't for the life of him remember what he calls the class without looking it up. It shows on his students' transcripts as "Practical Crisis Problem-solving", but in his head it will always and forever be "101 Ways The Geek Can Save You From Getting Eaten By An Alien", so much so he slips and calls it that in lecture one Thursday afternoon. His students chalk it up to one too many episodes of bad science-fiction television.

His lectures are carefully-edited clip reels of seven years of ticking time bombs, barely-understood technology, and the heavy weight of knowing that one false move, one wrong calculation, and he'd be shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot while Elizabeth read off the litany of their dead in front of the all-hands Friday meeting and added at least one new name. They'd been forced to design their own funeral ceremony in the first few weeks, because nothing else seemed adequate. Rodney can still recite it, Marshall B. Sumner stretching through an unbroken line to the very last name; he is bad with names, but there'll always be some written deep. Seventy-four of those two hundred and eleven names have their place on the rolls of the honored dead because of him, because of his action or inaction. He spends the entire semester trying to prepare his students for the possibility that one day they might have to start keeping their own memorial list.

"This class," he says, on the first day, "will be about learning how to think fast, use what you have, and turn the impossible into the merely improbable. This may be the only time in my tenure at this university that I say the following sentence, so pay attention: No one will fail this class, presuming you bother to show up. You will be graded solely on your final exam. I will tell you what the final exam will consist of a week in advance, and I advise you not to worry about it until then. Let us begin by defining 'crisis', and discussing the utterly lamentable tendency of humans to waste half of
their crisis time by panicking." He looks over the sea of faces, picking out familiar ones mostly by the lack of the shell-shocked expression people tend to sport on their first exposure to one Dr. Rodney McKay, and is already beginning to sort them through the lens of seven years of learning who'll be useless in a crisis and who won't.

It isn't as easy as it looks on the surface. He's seen Marines able to handle performing field amputations without flinching utterly crack when locked in a small room with the sea water climbing, seen scientists faint at the sight of what happens when the human body is exposed to vacuum, seen grown men and women turn into quivering, shuddering wrecks when faced with the fact of their own mortality. He's broken, himself, more than once: hallucinations and night-tremors and weeks of feeling like you're a sandcastle and the universe is the ocean, taking tiny grains of sand as tribute every time it washes you clean.

"The definition of being good in a crisis," he says, directly to the kid in the front row who's really surprisingly less moronic than the usual caliber of student Rodney encounters and has a pretty good chance of actually making a career out of the whole science thing, "is not failing to be scared. That only makes you unimaginative. The definition of being good in a crisis is being able to take your fear and let it motivate you. Nobody cares if you pissed your pants, as long as you and the pants are around to be mocked afterwards."

He lost a lot of good people before he learned to separate out the ones who had a chance of learning that lesson before it was too late. He wonders, sometimes, if his students have any idea what he's preparing them for. He wonders what he is preparing them for. The chance of any one of the twenty-one students in his class ever finding themselves in a situation where they are one of a handful of people holding back the tide are so marginal as to be nonexistent.

In the fifth class session, Rodney breaks his class into teams of three and four and hands each team safety goggles, a toolkit, and a small, grenadelike item. It isn't actually Ancient technology; all of that is locked in a basement in a facility that does not officially exist, stamped "classified" and scheduled to be re-visited in another fifty years, but Rodney did not spend seven years in Atlantis without absorbing some of the Ancients' design aesthetic, and so his toys carry a sense of the alien. Each one is subtly different, but they ripple with a pretty light show and hum with an increasingly more demanding whine the longer they are left armed.

Each one is also filled with a nontoxic dye that will stain skin and hair, but leave clothing and electronics unharmed. "Congratulations," he says after each group, following his instructions, triggers the devices; "you have just armed a bomb that will explode and kill you in thirty minutes. Think quickly."

It takes them a few minutes to start moving, and Rodney knows they believe he's bluffing. He can practically see the thoughts moving over their faces: half he has to be pretending, there's no way they'd let him and half but he did make us sign waivers at the beginning of the class all mixed with this is Dr. McKay we're talking about. He sits back, puts his feet up on the table, folds his arms across his chest, and watches. It's interesting to see it from the outside, from the safety of actually knowing what's really going on for once.

He has placed small wagers with himself about how everyone will react, and he wins the first one ten minutes in when team four does something idiotic and triggers the device early. The dye catches two of them, one in the face and one across the hands and arms. Rodney stops them before they can panic (much) and hands them the MSDS on the dye and an alcohol wipe, which will leave only enough of a stain to be a mark of shame. They're shaken and angry, more at themselves than at Rodney, and he is gentler than he could be when he tells them to go wash up and be back in twenty minutes.
Everyone believes Rodney when he says bad things will happen to them after that.

Three of the teams manage to reverse-engineer the delivery mechanism and disarm the almost-grenades just before zero hour. The others collect their safety sheets and their handi-wipes and Rodney watches them, carefully, filing mental notes about reactions and emotions and which ones' buttons he's going to have to be oh-so-very-careful about pushing. "All right," he finally says, "let's talk about what went right, and what went wrong."

He asks team six to stay after class. They weren't the first to win the game, but they did it best, and they're the ones who are most likely to be able to move past the initial reaction of "oh shit" and get moving quickly, so he has to take them out of the way for his next "lab". They're willing to cooperate, and three class sessions later, when he arrives at the pre-arranged point in his lecture, Harris screams like he's being eviscerated and falls from his chair to convulse and lie still in the aisle. In the startled silence just before the panic sets in, Rodney claps his hands and says in his take-charge voice, "You are molecular biologists in a clean lab that has just experienced a breach in protocol. You have just been exposed to an unknown airborne pathogen that has escaped from containment. Beneath your seats you will each find a paper bag containing all the tools and equipment you have with you in quarantine. You will also find a timer. When the light on your timer starts blinking, the disease has run its course, and you are dead. You have the CDC, namely me, on the telephone and can ask any questions you deem necessary. This disease has a short incubation period, ladies and gentlemen; think quickly."

He catches one of the girls who sits in the back row leaning over and checking Harris's pulse. "We're physics majors," she says, sharply. "Not biologists. What the hell are we supposed to do?"

"Survive," Rodney says. For a minute, he almost feels guilty, but his syllabus included a warning and he doesn't have a hell of a lot of sympathy for people who don't read the fine print, especially when it's actually printed in sixteen-point bold type.

He has even less sympathy for himself when he listens to Shah, whom Rodney has instructed to make his "death" sound gruesome, and finds himself digging his nails into the arm of his chair so hard that one of them splinters and bends back to the quick. He has no one to blame but himself for setting this up, and anyway, it's not like he can't handle a few flashbacks now and then. This one is to teach them all that there are some situations you just can't win without the kind of luck you only find watching over very intelligent people doing very stupid things.

They fall into a three-class cycle, crisis/postmortem/lecture, and Rodney keeps notes and commentary in a file on his laptop that's triple-encoded and compressed for good measure, because how a person behaves in a crisis is something that should be treated at least as confidentially as course grades. They're shaping up about the way he'd predicted, some of them a little more reliable and some of them a little less, and then it's halfway through the lab where he's issued each team a locked-down laptop counting backwards down from 30:00 towards an unspecified disaster, in a language they've never seen, when Harris picks the laptop up and puts it through the window. The sound of splintering glass and cracking circuitry is a whisper compared to the raspy, fragmented breaths coming from Harris's throat.

"Nobody move," Rodney says, and by now they've learned enough to obey without question. He pauses the laptop timers with the master program he's got on his machine and approaches Harris with his hands spread wide and his face as neutral as he can make it. "Are you okay, Harris?"

Harris is breathing like he's just seen a Wraith; his pupils are wide and his face is locked in a snarl. "You're nothing more than a sadistic fuck," he says, "and I'm sick of performing for your amusement," he says, and Rodney had been waiting for one of them to crack for the past three
sessions but he hadn't expected it to go down like this.

"Okay," Rodney says. "Everybody go on home. Get out of jail free card. Back Tuesday and we'll discuss it." Harris's eyes flick back and forth as the rest of the class hesitates, starts gathering their coats and books. "Come back to my office with me," Rodney says to him. For a minute, he wonders if Harris is going to bolt entirely.

Once he's got the kid settled on his office couch and has parceled out two cups of coffee and some of the chocolate he keeps for emergency blood-sugar issues, he sits down in the visitor's chair -- close enough to be a comfort, not so close to be a threat -- and says, conversationally, "I managed to mostly hold it together while being tortured, being shot at, and working on a homemade nuclear bomb while hopped up on methamphetamine because I hadn't slept in two weeks, among many other things too classified to mention, and you know what finally broke me?"

Harris is past his freakout, and has reached the stage of being pissed at himself for freaking out and at Rodney for freaking him out. "Is this supposed to make me feel any better?"

Rodney goes on as though Harris had answered. It had been a rhetorical question anyway. "Being stuck on the bottom of the ocean under sixty atmospheres of pressure in a half-crushed, leaking ship and no hope of rescue in time. I just went crazy. Hallucinating people who weren't there, making stupid mistakes because I couldn't think straight, utterly convincing myself I was doing the right thing when all I was doing was making things worse. It took a miracle and some really dedicated friends to get me out of it, and when I got over the bends and the hypothermia and could think about it straight again, I hated myself."

This time, he lets the bait dangle; sometimes, silence works better. Harris looks up after a minute. "Why?"

"Because I'd talked myself into thinking that I could solve any problem, handle any crisis, and when the evidence finally came that I couldn't, it was worse than if I'd broken the first time. Because after that I had to prove it wouldn't happen again, and of course it did, right when we could afford it the least." Rodney knows people, learned how to read them through painstaking trial and error as a survival skill, and he's seeing more of himself than he's comfortable with in this kid sitting in front of him. "Do you know why I'm teaching this class?"

"Because you're a sick motherfucker?" Harris asks, apparently deciding in for a penny, in for a pound, but it's less heated than it was back in the classroom.

Rodney shakes his head. "No. Well, maybe I am, but that's not the reason. I'm teaching this class because despite what I was expecting to find when I came here to teach, there are actually some of you, yourself included, who would not be utterly out of place on a team like the one I can't talk about and on a project like the one I left to come here, and there's a chance that someday you might find you're in a situation where you're the only one who can do anything about whatever crisis of the day needs to be solved in the next forty-five minutes. And if I'd gone into it up front knowing that I was capable of cracking, knowing what would push me over the edge, I wouldn't have had to build that picture up in my head and it would have been so much easier when I finally did."

Harris picks up his chin and stares Rodney in the face and Rodney suddenly realizes the reason the kid looks so familiar is that he looks like he remembers Ford looking, just a little around the eyes and the mouth, and that makes his hands tighten on his cup of coffee. "I don't know what you think you're sending us out there to do," Harris says.

"Neither do I," Rodney says, even though he's starting to consciously realize what his subconscious has been telling him all semester. "Because you don't know what you'll run into until you're facing it,
and when you do, you don't have time to panic. It's better if you can recognize it ahead of time."

Harris is quiet again. Rodney lets the tension in his shoulders ease, because the kid's thinking, and he really did mean it when he said that Harris was one of the best and brightest, because Rodney can see the first glint of self-awareness underneath it all. "Sixty atmospheres would've killed you," he finally says.

Rodney nods. "It nearly did. Wasn't even the closest I ever came."

Harris sighs and uncurls his feet out from under him. He finally takes a sip from the mug of coffee Rodney handed him; by now, it must be stone-cold. "I don't think I want your job, Doc."

"Neither did I, by the end," Rodney says. "But it's still the most amazing thing I'll ever do in my life."

On Tuesday, Rodney controls the postmortem with an iron hand and leads the class into a stripped-down, sanitized version of the conclusions he handed Harris all gift-wrapped and ready. Harris watches from the back row, his face thoughtful. Rodney has offered to let him sit out the rest of the semester, offered to let him drop the class without penalty and without it appearing on his transcript as a withdrawal -- cracking the registrar's system had been one of the first things he'd done when he'd started, child's play, really -- but Harris just shook his head. During the next lab, he does not solve the problem, but afterwards, he nods at Rodney as he's leaving the classroom and Rodney wonders what conclusions he came to, to make him stay.

The rest of the semester passes without major incident, though everyone is a little bit slower, a little bit more wary. Five minutes before the end of the final class, someone raises a tentative hand and asks about the exam, which will be their only grade and which is scheduled for eight days in the future. Rodney passes out cardboard boxes, each with a student's name, and tells them not to open them until they get home. (Some of the boxes have "I told you not to open this until you get home" written on the inner flap. That's an easy enough variable to solve for, once you get the sense for it, and it's a little trick that always cemented Rodney's reputation for knowing everything in the galaxy. In two galaxies.)

The boxes took him most of the semester to put together; he started as soon as he started seeing the shapes and the patterns. Each of them contains seven or eight items and an instruction sheet. None of the items can actually explode or leak dangerous chemicals or electrocute somebody or all three at once, because Rodney won't be there to make sure nobody loses an eye. Each instruction sheet describes the scenario, and the contents of the box are all that can be used to get out of it. For the first time, there's no time pressure -- at least, nothing beyond "turn in your analysis paper by the final exam period" -- but there is a very good reason; each box, each scenario, is tailored to what Rodney thinks its recipient can handle the least.

Picarelli shows up at Rodney's office hours the next day, nerves and anger all rolled into one. "How can you do this?" he demands. "You can't base an entire semester's grade on one paper when it's -- it's impossible, we can't even do what you're asking us to do. You're going to kill my chances of getting into grad school if you bring down my GPA."

Rodney suddenly feels amazingly, outrageously old. "Yes," he says. "You never really believed I'd kill you or injure you, but you do believe I'll fail you. Think quickly."

He doesn't say that everyone in the class, everyone who stuck it out and tried to understand, is going to get an A. He doesn't say that Gall had a 4.0 at Cal Tech, that Grodin was a Rhodes scholar. He doesn't say that this class has nothing to do with grades, and nothing even really to do with science, but everything to do with all the things he learned from a man who never lost the habit of eating with
his fingers and another man who wanted everyone to believe there wasn't a single intellectual bone in
his body until he was ready to let you see inside and a woman who probably couldn't have even
passed their eighth grade when he met her.

Sometimes Rodney wonders if he wasn't the dumb one after all.

For semester six, Rodney teaches PHYS441 as a seminar. Permission of instructor required; limited
seats available. He gets more applications than he thought he would, and he carefully sifts through
the cards, folding and fanning them in his fingers. He hand-picks twelve students: brilliant and
flexible and sensitive and too fucking smart for their own good. Ashiwat, Carroll, Dunnellen, Harris.
Hassan and Knight and Montego. Nagamori, Ramirez, Steelerman. Tyler. Watanabe. The ones who
have approached him about graduate study, here or elsewhere. The ones who understand what he's
capable of, and keep coming back anyway.

The first day of class, Rodney is five minutes late. He is five minutes late because he had been in his
office with the door closed and the lights off, having the closest thing he's had to a panic attack since
year three, when he could have sworn he'd burned out his adrenal glands forever in the belly of a
Wraith hiveship. The seminar room is set five degrees too hot and consists of nothing more than one
U-shaped table and a blackboard, some bookshelves against the wall.

Rodney shuts the door without saying a word and makes his way to the bend of the U. He ignores
the smiles and the greetings, the nervous shuffling of papers and backpacks, and leans over with his
knuckles on the table. He meets the eyes of every single person in the room, one at a time.

"The name of this class," he says, very calmly, not soft or quiet but a plain conversational tone, "is
'Scientific Ethics'. It is a pass/fail course. In the coming sixteen weeks, I will humiliate you on a
regular basis. I will savage and berate you in front of your peers. I fully expect I will reduce each and
every one of you to tears at least once a week. I will be fierce, and I will be brutal, and I will dissect
your very worldview and leave it in pieces on the floor, and the reason I will do it is this: each of
you, each and every one of you, is in this class because I am willing to write you a letter of
recommendation to take you anywhere you want to go. And each one of you is sitting here, right
now, listening to me and thinking 'There are things I'd never do,' and what you really mean is 'There
are things I'll never do, until I think I have to,' and 'There are things I'll never do, unless it's to
accomplish something else,' and 'There are things I think I'll never do but will be pathetically eager
and grateful for the chance when it arises,' and you need to know, now, what falls into each
category. By the end of this class, you will know far less than you did when you walked in this door,
and I will not replace the loss with anything. I will, however, equip you with the tools with which
you might -- if you are patient and intelligent and rational enough -- formulate a workable code of
ethics sometime within your lifetime. It is not my place to supply it to you; it is my job to make sure
you can supply it for yourself. I only hope you can do so before you will need it. It took me far
longer."

He thinks he might be able to hear his own heartbeat, echoing back against him from the back wall
of the classroom; it's that silent. He says, in the same thoughtful tone, "I will now turn around and
write completely meaningless things on the blackboard. Anyone who feels that they are unable to
handle what I've just described may leave before I turn back around again, and I will spare you the
mockery I usually reserve for those who drop my classes."

Steeelman and Knight are gone when he turns back. Knight comes back for the second session.
Steeelman doesn't.

They are his hand-picked proto-scientists, all the ones he's cultivated and nurtured (in his own
abrasive sort of way), all the ones he never expected to find in the middle of nowhere so far away from Ivy League campuses and billion-dollar endowments, and what absolutely kills him is he knows half of them will probably wind up pissing away their lives behind a desk, wondering sometimes when half-drunk if calculus really was as beautiful as they half-remember.

He breaks them. One word at a time, one question after another: never contradicting, never arguing, always just asking and what if, tiny step after tiny step. Ramirez is their weeper; Rodney leaves Kleenex on the bookshelves behind the seat she always claims, but he does her the courtesy of never calling her attention to it. Carroll has an answer for everything, rolling off his tongue like honey, and Rodney pushes and pushes until just past Easter, when halfway through one dismal Wednesday Carroll answers yes to and what if it were your mother instead, would you still-- and then puts his head between his knees and breathes like he's trying not to throw up while Rodney rests a hand on the nape of his neck. Dunnellen and Ashiwat start holding hands underneath the table when they think Rodney isn't looking, holding onto each other like they each need the lifeline. Slowly, piece by piece, he watches them learn that "never" is just another word for "until".

He expects them to hate him for it, has come to terms with the fact that he'll never be liked but he'll settle for being listened to. But just after midterms he overhears Nagamori in the hallway outside the chairman's office, sharp and bitter, saying "--not like that, he doesn't treat us like children, is all, he's like that to everyone but I think it's only to hide something he doesn't want anyone to know and he doesn't want any of us to ever have to figure out." He goes back to his office and sits with the lights out and the Seti@Home screensaver (which he persists in running because he has a healthy and well-developed appreciation of irony) playing across his face. He breathes very carefully, and does not think about how once upon a time there was something someone didn't want him to ever have to learn and just how well that wound up working.

A few weeks later Rodney realizes that he's seeing them all, each one of his brilliant and flawed children, and what he sees are eleven people he wouldn't hesitate to step through a Gate with, because what they give him, where they trust him to take them, is pretty much the definition of courage. He told them the truth when he said he would break them, but he lied when he said he wouldn't put them back together, because Rodney learned the hard way to cover up all the tool marks and put back all the access panels when he was done. And in the end, on the last day, he picks up his chair and puts it in the center of the U and lets them question him, and by then they've walked to the edge together so often that nobody comments upon the tears.

It isn't until the end, the very end of it all, that he realizes: the courses of the last two semesters, taken together, should have been called 'Things I Wish Someone Had Bothered To Tell Me Before I Needed To Know'.

* *

Four years is a long time by some people's calendars, but Rodney's lived through weeks and months that went by slower. He still wakes up some mornings and wonders why he can't hear the ocean, still fights the ticking of a body clock conditioned to a twenty-nine hour diurnal cycle and the habits of three days' work at a time, still spends some nights sleeping on the couch with Pixel at his feet and Fara perched on the back because his bed is too small and at the same time far too empty. Those days are growing fewer and farther apart, though, and sooner or later he's going to stop being surprised when he looks around himself and realizes he's almost happy.

He has earned a semester of light work, of no painful emotional realizations and nothing more strenuous than trying to beat Planck's constant into the heads of freshmen more interested in gin than joules, and so PHYS441 for his seventh semester is "Putting the Science in Science Fiction", with Asimov and Baen and all the other old friends. He is settling the last copyright clearances, for the
right to reprint Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" in his coursebook, when there is a knock on his office door and Harris pokes his head in.

"Hey, Doc," Harris says. Rodney blinks for a minute, because he attended Harris's graduation ceremony -- three of his children marched in May -- and Harris is holding one of the file folders the university hands out every academic year, identical to every previous year's save for the "2014-2015" printed underneath the university's logo.

"I'm virtually certain you're supposed to be in Boston right now," Rodney says. He'd pulled some strings to get Harris into his old program at Northeastern.

Harris shrugs. "The fellowship fell through, and I couldn't afford tuition on my own. There were a few alternatives, but I didn't really want to take any of them." Something crosses his face. "Besides, I was already thinking about staying here for the MS at least."

"Why in hell would you want to do your graduate work in this hole?" Rodney says. It's automatic; between inadequate experimental facilities and the utter lack of any faculty with two brain cells to rub together, Rodney wouldn't wish the graduate program on his worst enemy. There's only so much he can do to drag the department into the twenty-first century, and most of his effort has been concentrated on leveling the playing field for the ones who will go on to the programs that will open doors for them.

Harris looks at him like he's just said something insanely stupid. "Because it's like you said; the important thing is to find professors you can learn from." He opens the folder and takes out a form, pushes it across Rodney's desk. The myth of the paperless campus is precisely that: mythical. Rodney turns it around to face him, but he already knows it's a request for graduate advising. "I know you teach mostly undergrad, but Dr. Vail said I could ask you if you'd be willing to take me on anyway. I'll totally understand if you say no."

Rodney has not had a TA since the first semester, when both of the ones he'd inherited from his predecessor put up with him for precisely three weeks before switching sections. He has not had an actual graduate student since before he returned to Earth. And the last one hadn't counted, because the last student whose scientific research he had shaped and guided, the last student he'd pushed and shouted at and challenged, had been unofficial in every sense of the word and there wasn't a school on this planet that would have recognized the Doctor of Mathematics degree he and two of the others on the committee had voted to award.

Atlantis University, Rodney thought, running his fingertips over the edges of the triple layer of carbon paper waiting for his signature. It had started as a joke, and wound up being such a profound truth he was almost tempted to hang the degree they'd awarded him in year five, Doctor of Survival, on the wall next to the rest of his accolades.

"I won't be easy on you," he says, finally, looking up.

Harris's face breaks out in a rueful grin. "Since when have you ever been?" he asks, and Rodney is already reaching for the pen as he asks what topic Harris wants to research.

Harris is interested in a lot of things, from the mechanical to the strictly theoretical, and Rodney reluctantly thinks, after an hour and a half of conversation that leaps from Euler to string theory to the impossibility of finding a good cup of coffee on campus, that perhaps Harris was right in coming to him, because some of the kid's ideas are so cutting-edge they bleed. They outline a tentative class schedule. "It doesn't so much matter what classes you take, really," Rodney says. "Since I'm your advisor I can tell them anything you take applies to your research, so get the classroom stuff out of the way as quickly as possible so you can have extra time to experiment." He is already making lists,
making plans of how he can pull strings and trade syllabi and class materials to get Harris some lab
time at one of the far-more-well-funded private research campuses upstate, trying to remember who
owes him how much and what he can cash in.

By the time they're winding down, everyone else has gone home. Harris gathers up the fifteen
journals Rodney has pulled from overflowing shelves, marking certain articles -- "they're all wrong,
of course, but they're wrong in entertaining ways, and if you start learning how to spot when other
people are wrong now, it'll serve you well in the future --" and tucks them into his backpack.

"Thanks, Doc," he says. "I'll talk to Dr. Vail and the registrar and see about getting listed as your TA
for 101."

Rodney nods. "You'll be lecturing on Thursdays starting next week. I'll give you a copy of my notes
and the syllabus."

The look on Harris's face is one of the most entertaining things he's seen in a long time. "I what?"

Rodney spreads his hands and tries to hide the smile. "You think I coddle my grad students like I
coddle the undergrads?"

There's a second when he wonders if Harris is going to take him seriously, and then Harris snorts, his
eyes gleaming. "If that's coddling and you're going to stop it now, maybe I should rethink the
Northeastern thing after all."

"Harris." Rodney stops him as he's turning to leave. "You said there were other alternatives. What
were they?"

The look on Harris's face means that every inch of last year was worth it, even if Rodney hadn't fully
known what he was doing at the time. "The military came to me," he says. All traces of humor have
bleached away. "They said they'd fund my Ph.D. and all I had to do was promise to give them four
years afterwards. They said it was so classified they couldn't tell me what it was, but it'd be the
chance of a lifetime."

It's like being punched in the chest. No, it's worse, because Rodney's been punched in the chest,
more times than he'd care to remember, and it never made his toes and fingers go cold and icy before.
"Did they say why they wanted you?"

Harris draws himself upright, his shoulders square, his look steady. "They said they're looking at
everyone who came so highly recommended by you. That if you said we were worth it, we were."

Rodney closes his eyes. "It's true, you know," he says, softly. "What did you tell them?"

"That if you'd decided you couldn't work for them anymore, I sure as hell wasn't going to." Harris's
fingers fiddle with the strap of his backpack. "I didn't know if they were the same people you used to
work for, but they didn't deny it. And I remembered -- I remembered last semester. And last fall,
when you said what you said about knowing what your cracking point was. And I figured -- maybe
I'll do it someday. But if I do, I'm going to do it on my own terms. Not theirs."

When he'd first gone to Atlantis, Rodney had mocked the military habit of saluting, because he'd
never understood the reasons behind it. It had taken a while until he'd realized that all the bits of
protocol surrounding a salute, all the times it's required or expected, are just draperies for the times
when there's no other way to possibly respond. Looking at Harris, now, his fingers itch to make the
motions. Instead, he just says, "We'll make you into something better than they could."

And the moment breaks when Harris flashes a smile. "If anyone could do it, Doc," he says, and is
Rodney curls his fingers around the edge of the desk and watches the screensaver trying to find proof of intelligent life in the universe. He is motionless for so long, fitting together pieces, that the sensors in his office click off the lights. If the SGC is looking to recruit right out of universities -- if they're looking specifically to his children -- if, if, if. He wonders if Harris's fellowship funding "fell through" with some help, whether they were trying to force his hand. Landry wouldn't have done it, but Landry isn't in charge anymore, hasn't been for a while, and it's been so long that Rodney's only barely aware of who's even a part of the program anymore and who isn't.

It's like a giant game of three-dimensional chess. Held underwater. While blindfolded. One thing's clear, though; Rodney isn't going to let whatever game they're playing over at the SGC fuck with his people. So: let them try to cripple one of his children with a degree from a second-rate university in revenge for not jumping when they say "how high". Harris was smart enough not to fall for it, and smarter still to come back to him. Rodney might be out of practice playing all the political games, but the one thing he has never been is second-rate.

When he arrives home, he takes the three cardboard boxes out of his closet and piles their contents into stacks on his living-room floor. Pixel climbs into one of the abandoned boxes and makes himself at home while Rodney triages each paper, pulls out the most brilliant, the most far-reaching. He sorts them into series, orders them by which lead to which conclusions, and each one sparks the ghost of four others he'd never gotten a chance to complete.

It feels like the long, slow stretch of muscles he hasn't used in years. He stops four times to scribble equations across whatever sheet of paper comes to hand, differentials and integrations leaping from his pencil so quickly he twice tears the paper with the point. They may have his best work locked up behind security clearance layered ten deep, but if he can prove -- if he can use terrestrial laboratories --

He will be forced to send Harris into the world with a degree from Half-Assed University, yes, but he will send Harris with a line on his CV indicating that Dr. Rodney I. McKay was his thesis advisor, and by the time he is done, it will fucking well mean something.

Harris turns out to be a pretty decent lecturer after all, a fact which both surprises and pleases Rodney. It's a good thing, because the physics department upstate is willing to let Rodney borrow lab space -- for both himself and Harris -- but only if Rodney teaches one class per semester up there as well. With Harris taking over most of the responsibility for 101, it's possible, even with the two-hour commute.

He arranges his spring schedule to leave Wednesdays free for driving, ressurrects the syllabus from Applied Quantum Theory and toughens it up enough to be a 500-level, and ignores the rumblings from Dr. Vail that perhaps his attention would be better paid to teaching on his own campus. "It's not my campus until you morons grant me tenure," he snaps, at the tail end of one particularly vehement argument. "And if you want me to publish, I need a lab. With equipment that was manufactured this century."

It shuts Vail up, as Rodney had expected, because there isn't a first-tier journal in the field that isn't sporting his byline this quarter and people are starting to take notice. The grant offers start to flutter around his periphery again, and Rodney starts to accept them, but only the ones that don't come with strings. He bullies and steamrollers and cajoles the trustees of the university into assigning him space in the new science building that's almost complete, and channels the grants into equipment and supplies. It'll take him a long time to do it, but when he's done, he knows he'll have a lab worth
taking a second look at. It won't be *his* lab, of course, but nothing would be, and maybe this won't be a bad second-place option after all.

And then one Thursday in April, he runs into one of the undergrads exiting the physics building as he is entering it, and she catches him by the sleeve. "Dr. McKay," she says. "There's some Army guy standing outside your office. He's been there all morning."

Rodney blinks, because he's never worked with the Army, and then he realizes that to the average sheltered liberal-arts undergraduate, all uniforms look alike. The Second Lieutenant standing at attention outside his office door is indeed wearing an Air Force uniform; there is a briefcase between his feet. Rodney takes a minute to make sure he's got his game face on before sauntering down the corridor and stopping right in front of him. "You're scaring my kids," he says.

The corner of the kid's eye twitches. Rodney wonders who's told him stories, wonders who's left to remember him enough to deliver the warnings. "I have a message for you, sir," he says, biting each word off with a crisp precision.

Rodney raises an eyebrow. "From?" he asks.

"General Carter, sir. I need you to sign for it."

Rodney sighs. "General Carter, eh?" For a minute, he remembers blonde hair, easy smile; he remembers a hallucination with her face and remembers returning home to find her long-since reassigned. Maybe things would have been different, if she hadn't been. "Well, hand it over and then you can go trotting home and give everyone back on base my fondest hugs and kisses."

The kid doesn't flinch. Rodney almost has to respect that. "My orders are to deliver it to you in private. Sir."

The 'sir's are starting to get on Rodney's nerves. He fishes out his keys and unlocks his office. Then he sighs while doing his best not to show it, because the lock isn't doing that annoying sticking thing at the three-quarter turn anymore, which means the kid's not just a messenger boy, he's also a locksmith, and also, Rodney's going to have to toss his office for bugs. Again. He drops his briefcase on his desk, drops himself into his chair, and puts his feet up on the desk. The kid invites himself in and shuts the door behind him.

"Well?" Rodney asks. He reaches over to pour himself coffee and deliberately does not offer the lieutenant a cup. It's been a while since he's been annoyed enough with someone to concentrate on being rude, on offering blatant insult, but they're skills that don't rust if you leave them alone for a while, and he *really* fucking hates bug sweeps. God help the kid if he disturbed any papers while looking for whatever he was looking for; Rodney still remembers Ronon's lessons on thirteen ways to kill a man with your bare hands.

The kid fixes his gaze at a point over Rodney's left shoulder. "I'll need to see your ID, sir. And take a fingerprint."

"You people are tremendously confident that I want to hear what you have to say," Rodney says, but the intellectual curiosity might kill him if he does kick the kid out, so he fishes out his wallet and throws his ID across the desk. They do the biometric song-and-dance -- Rodney notes that they're finally using electronic ink pads -- and he is left holding a single sheet of paper bearing the public letterhead of the SGC, the one for sending a message to the outside world:

_Dear Dr. McKay,_
Please believe me when I say that I understand your motivations for leaving the program. However, there have been some changes of personnel involved in decision-making, and I find myself in the position of having to repair a number of bad decisions made by my predecessors.

I have noticed that you are publishing again, and I have been following your research with interest. I would like to make you an offer: we will declassify your remaining work from your time with us and allow you to publish it, in exchange for your return to the program. Our research is currently stalled, and your abilities would be an asset to our work -- which, I assure you, is no longer the work it was at the time you left.

Please consider our offer. You can reach me through the usual channels if you have any questions.

Regards,
Samantha Carter

It takes Rodney no more than a few seconds to read, but he backs up to the beginning once he's done, mulling over word choices and reading through the lines. Smart of her, really. Wait until he's publishing again, wait until the offer would mean something, and then dangle the carrot; she knows as well as he does there's a Nobel waiting in at least two of the papers hidden behind lock and key. They want him, badly. Rodney would bet a fairly large sum of money that their "research" had been stalled since he stepped through the gate back to Earth, because it'd be a sucker bet. He'd stalled it himself. He'd just been waiting for them to realize.

He looks up to find the lieutenant watching him, as though he'd been ordered to report back on every tiny flinch and inhale of reaction; Rodney does not doubt he has. He keeps his face very even. "Is that all?"

"No, sir." The kid straightens. "General Carter also included a verbal message. She said to tell you that if this isn't enough of an enticement, you should name your price, and if it's in her power, she'll pay it gladly to get you back on base. She said to say that in your place, she'd probably have done the same thing, but things are different now and you can come back. Should come back. She said to tell you they need you to, and I quote, sir, 'fix whatever it was they did before they left, because the situation is getting critical'. And that if you want it, she'll do her best to get you home."

Rodney nods. It's not something Carter would have committed to paper, because whatever's going on over there, he has no doubt that her position isn't as strong as she'd like it to be. There's a limit to what she can say even in a verbal message, but he can read between those lines too, and if the 'situation' is 'critical' it must mean that the Goa'uld are still hanging around and they need whatever Atlantis can offer.

What Atlantis could have offered, at least. Atlantis isn't going to be giving anyone anything anymore. He wonders how long it took before they came to that conclusion, and how much longer after that until they gave up trying.

"I see," he says, and reaches for the red pen he uses to correct problem-sets, the one that plays a prominent part in the nightmares of undergraduates campus-wide. The lieutenant watches as he scrawls "No. --R" across the bottom of the paper.

Melodrama is another skill that doesn't rust if you don't use it, he thinks. "Tell General Doctor Carter," he says, looking up and handing it back, "that I will be neither bought nor bribed, Lieutenant. Save the world without me, this time."
Once Rodney has freed his office of its unwanted accoutrement (and waved off the concerned looks from faculty and students alike; this will no doubt, he thinks, cement his reputation), he closes and locks the door behind him and puts his head in his hands. He'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop for a long time. The SGC want them all under their control, but they want him most of all, because as much as Rodney calls them names, they're not stupid and they would have known full well who was the only one who could have done it. Carson's gene therapy has long since worn off, modified cells dying and sloughing away like water, but Rodney still remembers what it was like to be able to touch the city and have her listen. He'll remember it for the rest of his life.

"I'm too old for this," he says, under his breath, knowing there is a probability -- a certainty -- that someone is listening.

He'd felt just as old standing in the gateroom, his duffel slung over his shoulder, watching the civilian population of Atlantis mill and pool in front of the gate and waiting for it to activate, believing their chances of ever returning were somewhere in the quantum valley between slim and none but still needing to hope. Watching the new security detail standing against walls, weapons pointed at the floor but still present. A new, far more conservative President-elect in the wings of the Oval Office waiting to step in, a Congress no longer willing to turn a blind eye to billions of dollars disappearing into the black hole of military appropriations, those things could have been worked around; the Stargate program had gone international by then, enough that there could have been concessions made, deals brokered.

But the combination of Landry being replaced by some little NID prick with more delusions of control than sense and the step-up in Goa'uld activity cemented it. When the Wraith had still been a threat, Earth had been willing to leave them there, to be the ones doing the dying, their fucked-up little band of the scientists and mavericks the people in charge deemed reasonably expendable. The minute the Wraith had been disposed of for good, the minute they'd finished paying the price in blood and in full, the vultures had descended.

The betrayal had taken some of them hard, mostly the new hands. The few of them who were left from that first terrible year had few illusions left. When the order had come through declaring Atlantis's repurposing as a military lab dedicated to weapons research, effective immediately, and recalling civilian personnel, Rodney had simply nodded and returned to their -- his -- quarters to pack.

Elizabeth had turned up at his door that night, still flush with temper from arguing and negotiating and finally screaming, clutching a bottle of Athsosian wine and swaying on her feet. "I can't believe -- " she'd said, and "I can't let them do this," she'd said, and finally, sitting next to him on the bed and turning to face him, "Jesus, Rodney, we have to do something, why are you willing to just sit back and them take this over? Don't you know what they'll do with it?"

"I know," he'd said. "Believe me, I know." They all did. They knew what could come out of Atlantis, because they'd almost gone there themselves, and some reports had been destroyed and some conclusions had been thrown away because they weren't going to do it again.

Elizabeth had hiccuped brokenly. "They'll take what we've learned and turn Atlantis into --"

"Shh," he'd said, and put an arm around her shoulder, clumsy behind the casts, offering what little comfort he could to someone who knew the depths to which people could sink, because she'd clawed her own way free of them already. "It's all right. You keep fighting them as long as you can. I'll make sure --" He had paused, looking for a way to finish that sentence, for just long enough that she could probably hear what he'd originally started to say. "I'll make sure they can't destroy everything we bled for."
His people had looked to him for their cues. He'd given them by heading down to his lab to pack up his desk and begin the laborious process of separating the things that were his from the things he was merely custodian of. He'd put his hands on Teyla's shoulders, felt her hands on his, as she leaned forward and touched foreheads and said "We will always remember," before leading her people to somewhere where they would no longer have to depend on the kindness of others for access to the Stargate. He'd walked through his city one last time, as the deadline approached, fixing places and things and memories firmly in place: this balcony, that storage room, this corridor.

And finally, with the whoop of the klaxon in his ears and before they could notice he was late for roll call, he had stood in the middle of the chair room, taken a deep breath, and sat down.

Rodney wasn't Atlantis's fortunate son, but he knew her enough to love her, and she knew him enough to listen. He'd lost himself in the ebb and flow of her systems for just a minute, holding on to it for as long as he could: not sentience but sapience, the familiar touch of something so alien and distant they could never hope to be anything more than the strangers at the gate gazing upon the shining radiance in the distance. And then he had taken a breath and formed the thoughts as clearly and as simply as he could: thank you for all of it and I love you and once I leave, no matter what, never, ever, work for any of us again.

She'd understood. He could feel it, the faintest tint of regret and understanding in the sense of systems that knew what it was like to be alone. The second hardest thing Rodney ever did was to withdraw from that touch, knowing he'd just fired a bullet he'd have to live with for the rest of his life, and pick up his duffel to go.

"Too old for this," he repeats, and slides a hand underneath the underside of his desk. Some advancements in technology shouldn't be cause to celebrate; when he finds it, the bug is nearly microscopic, passable as a flaw in the grain of the wood. He plucks it free with his fingernails and drops it into his coffee mug. And then -- because he still isn't stupid no matter how many times he'd imagined it would be more comfortable to be -- he pulls the visitor's chair over to the bookcase that's just fractionally misaligned where someone was too clumsy in replacing it. He picks the other bug out of the top left corner, where it has been hidden behind the calculus text he only keeps to refresh his memory when he needs it.

"Play the man, Master Ridley," he murmurs, not knowing exactly who is listening but knowing Carter will eventually hear and understand anyway, and walks down the hallway looking for all the world like a coffee addict who needs to wash the last fix out of his mug. It's a good enough cover for flushing the bugs as any.

When he returns to his office, he sends an email to the five or so people who need to read it:

An old friend came calling to offer me work. I turned them down. You know why; I suggest you do the same.

He receives no responses, but he wasn't expecting any. He hasn't exactly been the best correspondant. But none of them belong to Earth anymore, haven't for a long time, and while he doesn't think any of them will believe in pretty words and soft promises, he knows what temptation is when he feels it. He feels better for having delivered the warning, and when Harris breezes in before the afternoon lecture for 101, flush with the gossip that is already traveling the hallways, he is able to smile, even if he knows that it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

By the fall, Rodney's star is riding high in the department; his publication credits are racking up, his "research" -- which is actually just ways of backing up truths he already knows well enough for them to stand up to peer review -- is ticking rapidly along, and Harris is singing his praises to anyone
who'll listen. He's pretty sure Vail hates him by now, but it's the kind of hate that comes from professional jealousy, and that's one thing Rodney's always been able to accept.

The university hires someone new to take over Rodney's two sections of PHYS101 and replaces them with a graduate section of Condensed Matter Physics and an undergraduate section of Experimental Physics. Rodney stops in to introduce himself when he sees a light on in the office after hours, and is startled to find that the newest low-man-on-the-totem-pole is actually low woman on the totem pole. She introduces herself as Dr. Katherine Friedman, which Rodney will need to be reminded of all semester, and invites him out for coffee to discuss the program, the department, and the university as a whole.

He discovers that she did her Ph.D. at MIT, specializing in gravitational study, and they spend a few pleasant conversational turns reminiscing about Boston. She has been teaching at Loyola, the one in Chicago; she says she left because she and her husband split up, and she wanted a change of scenery. "Where did you come from before here?" she asks.

"The private sector," Rodney says, the lie sliding easily from his lips.

"I heard you used to work for the military, actually," she says, pouring herself a refill from the carafe the waitress has left on the table. "Kim told me there's quite the mystery surrounding your past."

Kim is the department secretary, the one Rodney thought he'd charmed pretty thoroughly. Clearly, he has been slacking on doing his own photocopying if she is willing to rat him out. "I can't really talk about it," he says. "To you or to anyone."

She lets it pass, asking him instead about one of his latest articles -- the one that will, in another fifteen years of carefully-timed publications, lead to the "discovery" of the zero point module -- and their argument deteriorates to scribbled equations on napkins and an embarrassing moment where Rodney, hands waving in midair like he's conducting an imaginary orchestra, tips the pot of coffee over into her lap. She laughs about it, though, and Rodney offers her the textbook he wrote for 101 as an apology.

441 this semester is a repeat of the first semester he taught it, Special Problems in Relativity again, and this time he can use some of his own articles in the coursebook. He teaches upstate on Fridays this time; Harris is beginning his research, this year, and they spend pleasant afternoons in the labs. Harris has settled on quantum gravity as his thesis topic, and is working on a theory of correlation between black holes and subatomic particles. Rodney only has to nudge him in the right direction once or twice; he's pretty sure Harris is going to work it out on his own.

They are alone in the astrophysics lab, Rodney checking over Harris's shoulder every now and then to make sure he isn't doing something stupid while programming the synchrotron radiation accelerator, when Harris says, abruptly, "You've fucked up pretty badly before, haven't you."

Rodney has been expecting this conversation, but not like this. "Yeah," he said. "But I can't talk about it."

"That's always your answer." They've learned each other pretty well by now, so Rodney knows it's more of a push and less of a whine.

He shakes his head. "I know. But I really can't talk about it. You can't ever know."

Harris spins around on his lab stool. "But why? I bet I could find out. If I poked around enough. If I spent enough time following what you're researching. Because you're not writing those papers now, are you? You're pulling them out of your files and sending them off now, but you've had them
written for a while."

It's not a secret -- it couldn't be; there's no way he could have been writing fast enough to account for his output over the past year, and everyone knows it. It's not common in Rodney's circles for people to sit on discoveries like his and dump them into the field all at once, but it happens often enough for it not to be suspicious. But Harris is turning into -- Rodney is turning him into -- someone who could piece it all together, at least partially, and that can't ever happen.

"No," he says, and he breaks his own rules, leans over and puts both his hands on Harris's shoulders and squeezes, hopes his urgency communicates itself. "You can't ever know. Not 'can't figure it out'. Can't know. It's too dangerous. Don't look, don't even think of looking, or you might find that one morning there'll be a knock on your door followed very shortly by exceedingly bad things."

Harris swallows, once, hard. "I don't --" He stops. Rodney watches him putting things together behind his eyes. "You were working on weapons research, weren't you."

The answer bursts from his lips, too much but not enough. "No. Not in the way you're thinking, and that's why I left. But there's classified and then there's classified, and --" He runs out of things he can say without getting them both in trouble. He can't explain his part in the destruction of an entire alien species without first explaining about how there are alien species. All he can do is shake his head. "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, but I can still sleep at night. But, and I don't say this lightly, there are some things that should stay buried."

Not long ago, he knows, it would have been enough of an answer for Harris to let the subject drop. He's probably responsible for the fact that it isn't anymore. "A lot of people died because of things you did, didn't they," Harris says. It's not a question.

Rodney came to terms with the fact that he's a terrible liar a long time ago, right about the time he stopped being so painfully bad at it. His children have earned the truth from him, and when he can't give it he gives them the courtesy of at least saying he can't instead of lying. Harris, though, is half colleague, half protege, and to him, Rodney gives a little bit more of it than anyone else gets. "Yes. Directly or indirectly. I've made a lot of stupid mistakes that resulted in a lot of destruction, and a lot of deliberate choices that led to death, and a few of those choices I made at a distance and a few of them I made up close and personal. And that's what I was trying to teach you all when I said that you had to know where your lines were before you were being pushed to cross them."

Harris considers it for a long minute, his eyes going soft and unfocused. "I know you can't tell me," he finally says. "And I know I shouldn't ask. But -- I think I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't have put us through it unless you thought there was a chance we'd need it." He sits on his hands and blinks up at Rodney. "You really think that whatever you went through -- there's a chance I'll have to do it too."

"Not the way I did." Rodney rubs his temples, where the headache is forming; he's getting old, he thinks again. Time for glasses soon. "But there's a chance. More so because you come from me. And you're heading for a few conclusions that will make you -- more attractive to certain interests." His lips curve just a little, remembering. "They always turn to the scientists to save the day in the end, after all."

He can tell Harris doesn't understand, but it's all right. He's planting seeds, after all, and waiting to see where they bloom. He'd never had the patience for horticulture before, but he's learned how to think long-term. When Harris finally speaks, it's soft. "Do you really think I could do it, Doc?"

There are so many ways to answer that question, and three-quarters of them lead to more questions he can't ever answer, but the sum of those answers is yes. He was not expecting to find this here, had
if he is honest with himself) chosen this position because he thought he would not find it here. He had thought he'd had enough of being responsible for putting people in places where their brains might get them killed. But it was not that long ago, as time is measured on a galactic scale, when he was the one with the brilliant ideas and the passion for understanding it all, and he owes this to Harris as much as he owes it to his own younger self.

He is Rodney McKay, though, and so it comes out as "You're not utterly incompetent, or I'd never have taken you on in the first place."

Harris has worked with him long enough to hear what it really means. "Thanks, Doc," he says, nodding once, and turns back to his work.

By the time the fall semester is winding to a close and Vail's annual holiday party is nearly upon them, he finally manages to regularly remember Dr. Friedman's name. She drops by his office now and then, bringing journal articles for his reactions and drafts of her papers for him to scribble upon. Three days before the party, they are talking over coffee in Rodney's office -- she figured out quickly, as many of his coworkers have, that his coffee is the best option around -- when the topic turns to the party. "Are you going?" she asks.

"I generally put in an appearance for an hour or so before making a valiant retreat," he says. Vail's party is always crammed tightly with people, more people than he's comfortable with at a single time; it makes his skin crawl, and sometimes he wonders if he was spoiled by living so long with so much space and so few neighbors.

Friedman trails her fingers along the side of the couch. "It's my first real Christmas without Michael," she says, absently. "Last year the divorce was so ugly around the holidays, I couldn't enjoy them at all. Have you ever been married?"

Rodney's breath catches in his throat. She is hitting on him, he realizes, suddenly and sharply. Probably has been for a while. He says, keeping his voice as even as possible, "Widowed." It's the simplest answer.

She looks up suddenly, fingers stilling, blue eyes soft and sympathetic. "I'm sorry," she says. The words are automatic. "How long were you together?"

Two thousand and forty-seven days; a lifetime, a heartbeat. "Five and a half years."

"I'm sorry," she repeats. "Was -- did she linger?"

This is why he hates personal conversations. "No," he says. "He died quickly."

Her lips round in a brief red O before she controls her face. "I -- there's never really anything good to say here. Except that I'm sorry. Again."

"It's all right," Rodney says, feeling tired. "I don't talk about it. You couldn't have known."

She studies him for a minute, and then nods. "And I won't say anything, either. You've probably got your reasons for not talking about it."

If she's smart enough, she'll figure out what those reasons are. He doesn't bother to enumerate them. "Thank you," he says, and means it. She is almost approaching the level of friend, or at least valued intellectual sparring partner, and he appreciates the courtesy.

Harris's first paper appears in the winter issue of the *Condensed Matter Physics Journal*. Rodney is primary author, of course, not because it was his research (though part of it was) but because his
name will carry it where Harris's would not. That won't be true for long, of course, but for now they're both content to let Rodney be the jump-start. He lets Harris bask for fifteen minutes, which is ten minutes longer than he knows Harris was expecting, before he says, "Now go write chapter two of your thesis."

When Harris leaves his office, still walking on air, Rodney clears one shelf and places the journal copy on it. It reigns in lonely splendor for now, but Rodney knows it'll have company soon. This, he decides, will be the shelf where he keeps the things his children have published, because when he needs something to remind him, it will be good if they are close to hand.

Zelenka comes to visit in spring. He has put on twenty pounds and his hair is thinning. He squints at Rodney from the office doorway and says, "You look horrible. What happened to your hair?"

It has been four years since Rodney has seen anyone from Atlantis save Elizabeth and Ronon, who visit every summer. Not on the anniversary, because that would be too much for any of them to bear, but near enough to it. Rodney knows the rest of them keep in touch via email, those of them who were there long enough to be family instead of visitors; Zelenka is one of the few who have not given up hope and still copies him on the threads. "You've gained weight," he says in return. "It doesn't suit you."

They both know what they're really saying. Rodney rises from behind his desk and Zelenka crosses the room and they hug, briefly but roughly, until Rodney draws back with a pat on Zelenka's back.

"It's good to see you," Rodney finally says, once they're settled on the couch and have the how-was-your-flight, not-bad-but-long pleasantries out of the way. He means it now, the way he couldn't mean it last time.

"And you," Zelenka says. "We would wonder if you were perhaps taken by aliens, were it not for the journal articles."

Rodney glances around automatically, to see if there is anyone who could overhear, but of course it's the kind of joke they used to be able to make without fear of eavesdroppers. "It's hard," he says, finally. "To know how to talk about it."

Zelenka fixes him with one of those direct stares, and then nods. "So, we will not talk about it. You have a minion, I hear."

It makes Rodney laugh. "I think the politically correct term is 'graduate student'. Come on. I'll give you the tour and introduce you around."

And just like that, it's all right, or at least as close to all right as it could be. Zelenka is working on something complex involving cheap mass power production, something Rodney's been half-following, and it only takes a few minutes before they're back to the old snap, snap, snap of finishing each other's sentences and building on statements that haven't been voiced.

Friedman is enchanted by watching the two of them bicker; Harris is amused. Zelenka manages to keep quiet in Rodney's afternoon Condensed Matter lecture for approximately ten minutes before something Rodney says makes him snort in derision, and they spend the rest of the lecture period happily tag-teaming, complete with insults and "no, no, you are oversimplifying" balanced by "because we don't need to get into that level of detail, not until we spend twenty-five minutes discussing the math which I so do not want to get into right now" as counterpoint.
Afterwards, Rodney is glad that he extended the offer, gladder still that Zelenka was willing to accept it. Technically, Zelenka is here to give a guest lecture on twenty-first century engineering solutions. In actuality, he's here for Rodney to mend fences.

He has offered Zelenka his spare bedroom for the duration of his stay, and that night, when they are somewhere no one can overhear, sitting over the remnants of Chinese takeout at the kitchen table, Zelenka pushes his glasses up his nose and says, "They came to me right after they came to you. To offer me a place again."

Rodney didn't know, but he could have guessed. It was the logical thing to do. "Obviously you said no," he says.

"Obviously." Zelenka nods. "But they told me, I think, more than they told you. After we left, Atlantis fell silent."

Rodney has not spent any time with any of them since he returned to Earth because he spent so long being a very bad liar that he always forgets he isn't anymore. "Silent?" he asks.

Zelenka waves a hand. "Lights do not turn on. Labs do not work. Equipment that was already there does not function; things they bring to interface work for a few hours, a day, and then fail. They had to leave, a long time ago; they could not live there."

Rodney closes his eyes and thinks of a city sleeping underneath the ocean for ten thousand years, alone save for one legato heartbeat. When he opens his eyes again, Zelenka is studying his face. "That's odd," he says.

"Yes." Zelenka nods, as though he has received the answer he came here to find. "I told them no. If the city does not wake for them, she must have a reason."

It had been a while before they'd all realized they'd slipped into referring to the city as "she", slow and gradual, but by the end, you could tell the Lanteans from the people who just worked on Atlantis by whether or not they knew the proper pronoun. Some of the ones who showed up right before the end qualified; some of the ones who'd been there for years never did. "Yes," is all Rodney says. "I imagine she does."

"You are the only one," Zelenka says, "that I have never heard wonder if we could ever return home someday."

Zelenka has figured it out. Rodney can tell. Elizabeth knows a little but she'll never ask him for the details, because what she doesn't know she can't accidentally disclose, but Zelenka has no such fear. The rest of them don't really believe they'll ever be able to return, but there is always that one last shred of hope, the belief that maybe, someday, when the tide changes, they'll be able to --

Rodney has often been accused of being a pessimist, but those who truly know him know that he isn't. He thinks of himself as a worst-case-scenarioist. He gripes and grumbles and predicts doom, rattles off the litany of the thousand ways a situation can end badly, because he has always been convinced that if he voices the worst-case scenarios, there is still that hope they will not come to pass. A few people know that when Rodney is utterly silent about a topic, that is when there is nothing. It's why Rodney has hidden from them all since their return, because they're all very intelligent and thoughtful people, and they'll be able to find the shape of the truth made from all the things he is not saying.

He can say none of this. Zelenka would understand, perhaps. Maybe does understand. But understanding and absolution are two different things, and Rodney had resigned himself to being
alone for the rest of his life. Seeing Zelenka again has reminded him of how much he misses the days when he didn't have to watch his every word for the things he shouldn't be saying. He always thought they would hate him if they knew, and perhaps it's worst for a man who was hated by those around him all his life and didn't realize how much of a weight it was until it finally went away. He doesn't know if he can bear hatred from one of the people who taught that relief to him.

"I guess I needed to put it behind me," Rodney says, knowing it's the wrong answer. Knowing Zelenka doesn't need the answer at all to know.

Zelenka reaches across the table and grips Rodney's hand, stopping him from mutilating the napkin he is picking to shreds. He holds it, tightly, almost enough to make Rodney's wrists start aching again. "Rodney," he says. "I did not ever want to leave her in profane hands either."

When Rodney sleeps that night, he dreams of a self-destruct counting backwards from ten minutes, and the painfully beautiful fireworks of energy weapons bursting across the shield overhead. He wakes clear-headed and delivers a lecture to this semester's section of 441, which is titled "History of 20th Century Physics", on the Manhattan Project. Zelenka sits in the back of the classroom and does not flinch.

* *

In the spring of his fifth year at the university, the committee votes six to one to grant Rodney tenure. He receives a copy of Watanabe's master's thesis and sets it on his shelf next to the two journals containing articles by Harris. He receives an invitation to Dunnellen and Ashiwat's wedding, and surprises himself by accepting it. He writes letters of recommendation for three more of his children and lobbies the state legislature to fund the laboratory he is building. He has coffee regularly with Friedman, and accepts her invitation to call her Katherine, but never Kate; he gives her an advance copy of a paper he's mentally slated for publication in the fall of '18, one that applies to her areas of interest, and she turns over each page with awe before looking up and saying, "My God, this is thirty years ahead of anything anyone else is doing."

Ten thousand years behind, he thinks. "Take it," he says. "It's not part of a series. You'll get more use out of it than I will." He doesn't say that it isn't one of the ones he discovered, just one of the ones he pieced together. He can let those go, now.

Harris spends three days terrified before his comps and Rodney finally has to tell him to suck it up. "The worst thing you're going to face in there is me, and you already know what I'm going to throw at you. Shut up and go correct that Oxford comma on page eighty-one before I fire you."

Rodney will miss Harris, and Harris knows it. He is headed to Cal Tech for his Ph.D. Rodney didn't have to pull any strings at all, this time. Rodney has already been approached by two seniors from the undergrad physics department, two more of his children, to discuss the possibility of staying on in the program. "You shouldn't stay at the same place for your graduate study if you don't have to," he warns them; "it looks bad on your CV." They tell him they don't care.

U.S. News publishes their annual rankings of the best universities in the country. Flyspeck University doesn't rate a mention in the print version, but it's highlighted on the website as one of the up-and-coming physics departments in the nation. Applications start trickling in after that, by ones and twos, from outside the state. Rodney sits on the admissions committee, representing the physics department, and baffles everyone who tries to figure out his selection algorithm. He doesn't have the heart to tell them that he looks for nothing more than a hint that the ones he chooses might turn out to be something more than the sum of their parts. He asks for, and receives, permission to include personal letters in the acceptance packages for the ones who have indicated an interest in majoring in physics. Maybe it'll mean something. Maybe it won't. He can't know.
It'll take a few more years before it really starts to pay off. His children will need to work their way through their graduate studies first, need to move into the field and start teaching and publishing, and he knows that not all of them will. But enough. Enough to build the reputation, enough to make it count, enough to get them noticed. The shape of his future is spiraling out in front of him, years of patient tending, of molding and pushing and demanding excellence in all things, building a program that will last. Luring brilliant minds against all common sense and forcing them to own their brilliance, changing the face of everything that comes after. It's not something he ever thought he wanted, but when he sees it spun out on the horizon, he's realizing it's everything he never knew he needed.

Sometimes at night, he looks up into the stars, the patterns that were all he knew for so much of his life and now look like a stranger's face, and wonders what's happening out there. Wonders if they're winning; wonders if he'll wake up one morning and find they've lost. He is surprised at how little he cares. There are things he's done, and there are things he's said he'll never do again, and he knows, now, that the best and only thing he can do to change the world is to set small ripples in motion, because small ripples become large waves and the world, the universe, is a beautiful quantum jewel built from fractals of consequence and conscience.

Maybe he'll try to get Scientific Ethics added to the department's core curriculum. He doesn't think it'll hurt as much to teach, next time.

* *

On the morning of the sixth anniversary of the final xenocide of the Wraith, Rodney finds an email from Elizabeth waiting in his inbox. It reads, with no preamble or closing:

Do you ever wonder if everything was really worth it?

He stares at it for a long time, wondering which of her own personal demons prompted her to ask, before replying with nothing more than:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."

She'll know what he means, he thinks. Maybe. If not now, then someday. He can't take the burden away from her, but he can do his part to lessen the weight she carries, and maybe it'll help if she knows that if he had it all to do over again, he wouldn't change a thing.

* *

He visits every August. Sometimes, when he is sitting in the late-afternoon sun, his fingers brushing the petals of the Athosian flower-of-mourning, Rodney wonders if any passersby ever find it odd that the grave of an Air Force colonel bears the words of the Navy Hymn.

"I miss you, you know," he says, conversationally, to the stone and to everything it stands for. "It's a good thing I knew full well when we started that you were never going to be an old man, because otherwise I'd probably be a wreck."

But he's not. He's really not, because he submerged himself in all of it with his eyes wide open, and it might be romantic to say something like a piece of his heart was ripped away, but it would also be wrong. He has the memory of seven years of working side-by-side, of five and a half years of some of the happiest days of his life even interspersed with the moments, the days, the weeks of sheer terror, and in the end, it's enough. It always was.
Five and a half years of loving someone, of being loved, as much as you can love in the city on the edge of forever, which is sometimes too much and sometimes not enough at all. They'd both known how it could end at the very beginning, and Rodney had made his choices and let everything change him without once looking back. To say it was all worth it trivializes something so profound he knows he will never have the words to articulate it.

"I love you," he says, because it took him so long before he could. "And I wish you could be here to see how happy I really am."

Arlington truly is beautiful in the summertime. It almost reminds him of home.

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