Children of Lantean Design

by Xela

Summary

Somewhere in the unexplored regions of Atlantis, a blast rips through the city. When Sheppard and his team go to investigate, they discover a group of ragged young refugees, transported from an apocalyptic parallel future Atlantis into this one. The expedition struggles with their identity and what makes a family when they realize the children are the progeny of an Atlantis that became a thriving colony. The kids struggle to come to terms with their ordeal, people that seem so familiar but aren't, and their own secrets.

Notes

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On LJ.
Chapter 1

Chuck leaned back, the hum of Atlantis all around him. He enjoyed working the night shift, everything quiet and peaceful. There were no gate teams out, everyone still pulled in close, licking their wounds after...after that Sunday. The Daedalus had just come and gone, dropping off new personnel who were still wide-eyed with awe.

“You got money on the Brown/McKay pool?” Chuck glanced over at the new technician, fresh off the boat. He was a cocky American with a winning smile and an idea of getting into the Atlantis black market. Chuck smirked. The newbies were so adorably out of their league sometimes.

“Nah, my money's all tied up in the Ronon/Teyla pay-per-view fight this weekend.” They shared a grin of anticipation.

“Oh, man, I'm so--” A loud boom echoed in the distance.

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Alex braced her back against the wall, wedging her body into the tight niche as she slowed her breathing. Her heart raced and her body screamed for air, but she ignored it all, blocked it out and concentrated on her surroundings. The knife, heavy and comforting in her hand, couldn't prevent the flash of fear that sliced through her, white-hot and paralyzing. She cast around for something calming, something to break fear's hold on her. Sense-memory came roaring back, so strong she could smell the mingled scent of her parents, feel their arms around her, hear the cadence of their voices.

She got lost in the past, that time when she remembered safety and warmth. Like the night her parents had let her watch Aliens, firmly wedged between their bodies and clutching their larger (soft caring loving familiar strong) hands in her own. Alex watched the whole movie, wide-eyed and scared out of her mind, too stubborn not to see it till the end. They'd let her crawl into bed with them after despite warning her she'd have to sleep alone like a big girl if she insisted on watching big girl movies.

But her parents were gone, lost to the creatures who still threatened those left of her people. One last parting gift from the Wraith. The fear receded and the anger returned, cold and deadly.

Focus.

Alex's body tensed, ready to act even before her mind identified the dry sliding sounds of the creature moving into the room. It materialized out of the inky darkness, moving like the squids of Earth, tentacles reaching out. It searched restlessly, the sharp click of hard, deadly points echoing off the walls. Another bolt of fear crashed through her calm facade before she pushed it aside. Her hand clenched around the knife and she had to hold herself back; if she attacked now, she wouldn't survive.

Patience.
The creature paused, the bulk of its body suspended between its four tentacles, and she got a brief
glimpse of dull, malevolent eyes. Its wide, hungry maw was filled with sharp protrusions that were
too jagged and non-uniform to be called 'teeth.' Alex heard the rustle of its scales as they tensed,
locking into place to form an impenetrable carapace as it scanned the room for danger. She
shuddered when the creature relaxed, body once again pliant and formless.

The nazghoul took the bait, drawing into itself like a dead spider, tentacles folded up stiffly as it
hovered over the blood-soaked shirt. She didn't know what the nazghoul ate, if they ate at all; they
killed indiscriminately and viciously, for no apparent reason. She understood what drove the
Wraith; their actions at least had a biological component, an understandable, quantifiable
compulsion. But these things, these nazghoul as they'd named them, killed to kill. The creature
made a high keening noise and arched up—the sign she'd been waiting for.

Alex moved swiftly and silently, conscious of all the muscles in her body, the way they moved, the
strength in them, the ways she could combine them in a deadly dance. She struck the nazghoul
twice before it reacted, both mortal hits—but it wasn't dead yet. It screamed loudly, a sound that
made her ears ring. The creature spun and carried her across the room, two tentacles embedded in
her left shoulder. It pinned her to the floor, screaming out its victory as it flexed, ripping into the
muscles. She cried out and scrambled for her gun as a third appendage rose to strike her. She rolled
into the beast so that the knife-like tip nicked her arm instead of piercing her through the heart.

Automatic gunfire erupted around her and the beast screamed again. It ripped its limb out of her
shoulder and scrambled backwards away from the guns, collapsing as it died. A hand gripped her
jacket and hauled her off the ground.

“Fuck.” She stumbled into the solid body beside her, the world spinning a little. Sturdy hands
pressed a field dressing onto her shoulder. She hissed as she tried to move her arm to assess the
damage.

“Stop,” Mike grunted, immobilizing her shoulder. His long, unkempt hair fell into his eyes, but his
hands were deft and gentle as he probed the torn flesh of Alex’s shoulder. She stilled and gave into
his ministrations, eyeing the dead monster with hatred. They needed to move before more of them
showed up. Mike peeled the dressing back, noting the absence of clotting. “I think you got a pretty
good dose of anti-coagulant. You'll need a shot.”

“It can wait,” she told him, trying to pull away. “We still have all the food?”

“We got the MREs,” Jason answered as he shot the dead nazghoul once more. Black ichor, putrid
and nauseating, splattered onto his clothes. There were spots of nazghoul blood on his face, dark
against his lighter skin. He scowled at the dead beast and kicked it once, for good measure.

“It's definitely dead,” Mike observed dryly, before turning his attention back to Alex. “We should
give you a shot now, can't have you bleeding out on us.”

“It'll keep till we make it back to base camp,” Alex replied stubbornly. Mike glared at her and
turned away; no use arguing with her when she got like this. He dug angrily through his medpack,
but a hand wrapped around his arm, pulling his attention back to her. “Look, I really want to get the
food back. I promise to let you and Danielle do all the voodoo you want when we get to base camp,
OK?”

“I'm holding you to that.”

“I have no doubt.” Mike offered her a small smile.
Alex watched as Mike carefully took a sample of the fetid blood, making sure none of it touched his skin. If they ran across a working lab or circled back to one of the ones they'd abandoned before, they could work on...something. Even though they were never in any one place long enough to do anything useful, they had to try. It gave some of the younger kids hope.

A shadow moved in her peripheral vision, and she tensed for action before she identified it. Dex stepped into the light, taking in her shoulder and the bandage, silently asking if she was alright. He ghosted his fingertips along the wound.

“Base Camp to foraging team, what's your status?” A tinny voice broke through the silence that had fallen over the group in the wake of the attack. Jason keyed his ear bud to an open channel and took stock of his people. Settling automatically into a diamond formation, they started making their way back to their current room of residence.

“Kayla my love, heart of my hearts! The world is a beautiful place now that I have your dulcet tones whispering sweet nothings in my ear,” Jason sang out dramatically. Everyone made the requisite groans of disgust and annoyance, but any happiness in their lives—like a new, unexpected romance still in the lovey-dovey phases—was celebrated by all. Even Dex cracked a small smile and Alex only muttered derisively under her breath. The moment passed and the team returned to seriousness; distraction in the field could be fatal. “As for the others, Dex is sulking; Alex killed a nazghoul without him, it's all very tragic, they're having a violent lover's tiff. Mike's playing scientist, scooping up liquefied nazghoul bits like there aren't thousands of them he can run tests on. And I'm counting down the seconds till I can see your face again!”

“I'm pretty sure it's not your face he's interested in,” Mike mocked, dancing sideways as Jason took a swipe at him.

“Pay him no mind, darling Kayla. But Boss-Lady's been hit, twice in the shoulder, so have Danni standing by.”

“I am not the boss,” Alex sighed, an age-old argument.

“You don't want to be the Boss,” Jason pointed out unhelpfully. “That doesn't mean you aren't.” Alex glared at Jason, who gave her his best puppy dog eyes. She retaliated by sticking her tongue out at him.

“Very mature,” Mike said blandly.

“How bad is it?” Danni's clipped, efficient voice broke in over the radio. Their flippant conversation irritated her; if someone got injured, she needed to know about it. Alex grunted her noncommittal answer, sheathing her knife and checking her P-90. Guns jamming were just one of the increasingly numerous ways to get yourself killed.

“Enlightening, thank you,” Danni said dryly.

“I'm—” her response cut short when they heard the multi-tonal screech of a nazghoul hunting party. The haunting, terrifying melody making their skin crawl. “Shit, nazghoul.” Danni's gasp sounded over the radios.

“There's at least ten,” Dex said grimly.

“At least.” Alex considered their options, expression dark. “Right, put all the food in one pack.” They swiftly transferred their MREs and canned goods into one of the backpacks, other less vital supplies sacrificed for space. They worked efficiently listening to the sound of the creatures
growing closer. Alex closed the backpack and tested its balance; it would do.

“Mike, Jason, figure out a plan of attack, somewhere we can draw them in, keep them occupied and hopefully escape. Dex is going to run the food back to the camp.” Alex didn't bother to see if they were following her orders; her gaze remained fixed on Dex, reading the protest she saw building in him.

“No.” His jaw set in a grim line of determination, eyes hard.

“Yes.” He jerked his head in the negative, and Alex grabbed his face between her hands, fingers tangled in his hair. She drew his forehead down to touch her own. “You're the fastest runner we have and one of our strongest fighters. They're going to need you. And they need this food, none of this means anything without it.” She willed him to understand what she was saying, willed him not to fight her on this.

“Sateda,” she breathed, the plea caught in her throat. His lips claimed hers in a desperate kiss before he grabbed the pack and took off down the corridor without a backwards glance. Jason watched him go, then called attention to the map.

“There's a large vestibule a couple of--” An angry, triumphant cry rent the air. Alex spun and dropped to one knee, P-90 firing at the nazghoul. It screeched as it died, summoning its brethren. They sprinted from the room, Jason leading them. Alex touched her radio and gave the evacuation order. “Get them out, you have to MOVE.”

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Sounds of machine gun fire and stunners echoed over the open coms, inhuman cries making everyone on a radio shudder. The whole of Base Camp froze, waiting for updates.

“What's your ETA?” Kayla asked, aware that every eye stayed fixed on her as she got updates from the recon team. Fear for Jason and the others in the field made her voice waver. Kayla felt the comforting presence of her brother at her back and reached behind her to grasp his hand in support. Terhaan squeezed her hand, his own fear palpable.

“Doesn't matter.” Alex's words over the radio were clipped and emotionless.

Terhaan growled. “We're not leaving without you,” he said into his mouthpiece as Kayla handed him an M-16 assault rifle.

“Not up for discussion.” More gunshots.

“Alex--”

“Mike! No—**FUCK.**” The pain and anger in Alex's voice landed like a physical blow, harsh and unexpected. Terhaan closed his eyes and fought back the tears that threatened to spill over. Kayla gripped his arm, and he took solace in his sister's touch. Gunfire once again cut across the open radio channel. “Jason, don't let them divide us! Shit! Terhaan, Kayla, go. NOW!”

“Everybody move, escape plan delta seven!” Terhaan thundered. It broke the collective reverie of the group, spurred people into action. Pallets were grabbed, backpacks shouldered, children corralled and paired. In a matter of minutes, the sleep-space was empty, as if no one had ever been there to begin with.

A dark figure dropped silently from the ceiling.
“Alex and Jason are holding them back, but not for much longer. We need to move. Fast.” The high whine of a weapon charging punctuated Sateda's command and the casual utterance of two names where there should be three.

“But Alex and Jason--” Terhaan swallowed at the hollow look Sateda shot him. He pushed the pain that welled within him as far down as he could. Distractions would only get them killed. They'd been through this far too many times for this to be a real argument. Token protests at yet another life lost, their numbers dwindling even further, were luxuries they could ill afford.

“Stay low and keep moving,” Kayla hissed, less instruction and more something to say. She stepped into the hall, gun ready. They spread out, clearing the hallways and ushering their people away from danger. They kept low, moving silently through the dark halls. Teenagers carried toddlers on their backs and guns in their arms; spindly tweens moved in pairs, the group's possessions strapped to their small bodies or carried between them. They moved fluidly, reading each other's body language and unspoken signals, the result of being forced to move too many times to remember.

They kept going until they were a fair ways from their previous camping spot, selecting a small abandoned lab as a resting place, one Ancient monitor glowing a faint blue. Kayla, Terhaan, and Sateda took up point positions at the door as another one of their people turned on the lab's computer interface.

“Dan?” Kayla called.

“I can access the security parameter from here, give me a minute.” Dexterous hands flew across the ancient keyboard. The seconds slipped into minutes, terse and silent. They had an emergency security perimeter, chunks of C4 set up around the base camp; in the event of the nazghoul finding them, it could be set to motion-detect detonate, collapsing the halls between them and the alien creatures.

“Dan.” Kayla's voice came clipped and brusque.

“I'm working! Give me a minute, there's another program in the background here, I have to get around it, the computer is locked. This lab has independent power source, it is marginally connected to the mainframe. I must reroute power protocols and—”

“Bohdan! You have execute it now, we need to move.”

“I can't, I need—”

“You have no more time! We cannot stay here any longer. The nazghoul may still find us.” Bohdan swore under his breath, writing out a last minute code patch that would hopefully circumvent whatever ancient program was blocking his access to the network he'd set up. With a murmured prayer, he hit the execute button.

For a long while, nothing happened. Kayla was about to give the order to move out regardless when the unmistakable sound of a machine powering up sounded through the room. The readout on the monitor started scrolling Ancient text crazily. Dan tried to read it, catching bits and pieces of the readout, but none of it made any sense at all. Not until the last bit.

“Do prdele,” Bohdan swore, before a bright light seared his vision and a sonic boom echoed in his skull.

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Chuck started in surprise, and then clutched at the nearest console as the shock waves from the explosion made the control tower tremble violently. He jerked upright and started calling up all of the various diagnostic sensors and data logs. He knew Atlantis's breath, her moods and tides, second only to Rodney McKay and perhaps Radek Zelenka.

“What happened?” Dr. Weir's voice, tight and worried, preceded her to the control room.

“There's been a power surge in one of the unoccupied sections,” Chuck relayed, sorting through all of the data being thrown at him. He'd never seen anything like this and he didn't quite know how to interpret the numbers. New sensors were coming online in the unexplored region, feeding him information that quickly added up to something Not Good. Self-activating Ancient (often malfunctioning) devices always led to someone trying to ascend, changing genders, getting turned into an animal, or trapped in a similarly uncomfortable situation.

“What do you know what caused it?” Weir shook the last vestiges of sleep from her brain and focused on this new crisis.

“There was an explosion...well, not really an explosion, the readings aren't quite right for that. Sectors R7 through R9 are coming on line; they're drawing power from the ZedPM...we've got lifesigns! I'm reading at least...10 individuals...12...there are two in grid R7, a cluster in R9. They're close together, I can't get an accurate read.” Weir touched her radio, already on the move.

“Colonel Sheppard, Major Lorne, assemble teams. We're reading lifesigns in several of the unexplored sections of the city. You're going to need jumpers...they're on the opposite side of the city. We may have Wraith, stay alert and keep an eye on Teyla.”

“On it,” Sheppard acknowledged, turning abruptly towards the jumper bay. People scurried out of his way in the halls, keeping their distance from the grim-faced soldier. Someone was attacking his city, and John Sheppard was never as dangerous as when something he loved was threatened.

Teyla and Ronon were already waiting for him, Ronon vibrating with unreleased energy that promised lots of pain. Sheppard nodded once in recognition, appreciative of the feral smile he got in return. Major Lorne's team hurried into the room, extra marines buckling guns to their tac vests. Sheppard was busy issuing orders when Rodney came barreling through the door, trying to put his vest on and run at the same time, though not really succeeding at either.

“Lorne's got the two isolated signs. We're dealing with the big group,” John explained quickly.

“Of course we are,” Rodney muttered sullenly. Far be it for John Sheppard to take the less deadly assignment. Sheppard glared at Rodney and yanked Rodney's vest into place. Rodney, unbalanced, fell towards him; the soft sound forced from Rodney’s mouth was suitable for a more intimate setting. John had to bite back a gasp, Rodney’s breath hot against his neck, the skin suddenly unbearably sensitive. He grit his teeth; he could not afford any distractions right now. Steadying Rodney, John stepped away, carefully putting his inappropriate thoughts for his teammate aside. He could torture himself later.

“Be careful, don't get separated. We have no idea what we're dealing with, so...don't get dead,” Sheppard commanded. The marines made some sort of manly, tandem grunt of agreement. Rodney wondered why no one ever felt comforted when he said things like that. They piled into the jumpers, the marines burly and expressionless.

“Hold it!” John turned around in time to see one of Keller's nurses dart into the back of his jumper.

“What--”
“Elizabeth ordered a medical detail since you're going so far away. Keller's with the other group,” the panting medic informed them. John studied the flushed young man and nodded once.

“You stay in the jumper unless we call for you,” John ordered the nurse. The back hatch rose and John began maneuvering the jumper up and out of the bay. Ignoring the rest of the world, he concentrated on flying. Ronon lounged in the co-pilot seat and Rodney stayed in the back, laptop hooked up to the jumper's sensors so he could monitor all the systems coming on line in the unexplored section.

The breathless medic looked longingly at the bench and, after a pointed look from Teyla, Rodney grudgingly slid over to make room for the voodoo practitioner and his giant bag of chicken heads. They made in tense silence, the control room radioing updated information as it came in and Rodney intermittently muttering darkly about power drainage. All of the systems coming online in the unoccupied sector were taxing their one working ZedPM.

Team Sheppard landed on a deserted pier just outside of their contact position. John and Ronon took point, Rodney bringing up the middle surrounded by marines.

“Right at the next hall; they should be 20 meters down,” Rodney told them. The white dots were fairly stable, only three or four moving around. The majority were clustered in a corner away from the door in the hall, a mass of white that made getting an accurate head count difficult. “At least twelve separate entities, probably more than that.”

“How probably?” Sheppard asked.

“Definitely probably.” Sheppard threw him an exasperated look. “Look, they're all clustered together. All I can tell you is they aren't one giant being. You should be relieved. Based on our track record, encountering a large, carnivorous creature is about 22.4%, increasing by a factor of .7 with every mission.” Rodney became abruptly conscious of everyone's gazes. “What? I couldn't sleep one night.”

They moved slowly down the hall, systematically clearing each room. Sheppard wasn't taking any chances; they'd lost enough people in the past month. The section seemed similar to the one the scientists had taken over near the control tower. The hall was populated with labs of varying sizes, providing convenient cover to the group.

“Lorne to Sheppard.” John held up his fist, halting their progress so he could concentrate on his second's update.

“This is Sheppard.”

“We've got a s...heading...” The transmission degraded into static.


“Don't look at me; this entire part of the city is unexplored. There could be anything in between us. Electromagnetic field, malfunctioning Ancient experiment, deadly aliens hacking into our communication systems—“

“Alright, Rodney, we get it.” Sheppard interrupted. His marines were already on a hair trigger; he didn't need them any more wound up than they already were. Since Lorne hadn't sounded distressed or like he needed backup, John decided to move forward. He signaled the group to continue, carefully. Rodney kept monitoring the lifesigns detector, trying to extrapolate some
pattern to the movement and get an accurate head count of whatever lurked in that room.

“They're in the next room,” Rodney stage-whispered to the group.

“Standard approach pattern. Be prepared to lay down cover fire.” Rodney, at the tail end of the column, watched his teammates creep down the hallway towards their possible demise. He should really be used to this by now, John putting himself directly in harm's way. The sharp retort of gunfire echoed loudly in Rodney's ears.

“Back!” Someone hauled Rodney back towards the door by his collar. Rodney concentrated on John's voice yelling orders over the noise. Hands pushed into a room, out of the line of fire. One of the marines jerked and fell, red pooling on the ground around him. On autopilot, Rodney helped the nurse drag the wounded soldier to safety and applied pressure while the nurse dug through his med kit. And to think that blood used to make him faint.

In the sudden quiet, Rodney's eyes darted from face to face, searching. He only relaxed when he met Sheppard's eyes, then Ronon's, then Teyla's. His team reloaded their weapons, expressions grim.

“They've got P-90s,” Ronon said.

“As well as Wraith stunners,” Teyla added. Rodney got the distinct notion that he was missing something in this conversation.

“So we're evenly matched. It's not like we only do impossible things when we're completely outgunned.”

“They have P-90s, Rodney.” Rodney leveled his most annoyed glare at John. As if anything in that statement even approached an acceptable explanation. “Real P-90s. Not P-90 like. Made in the USA, planet Earth, Milky Way Galaxy, P-90s,” John clarified. The blood drained from Rodney's face.

“Genii?” He tried to ignore the cold shudder that raced down his spine and how the scar on his arm throbbed. He forced it all back; he needed to keep calm if he was going to get his stupid, death-friendly team out of this. “So what do we do now?” A voice calling out from the hall saved John from answering.

“Who are you? Identify yourself.” Well. That was a new one. Most invaders already knew who they were here to kill. John glanced around at his team for inspiration and realized they were all looking at him. He shrugged and cautiously poked his head around the door. Nothing. Drawing back, he checked his ammo, cocked his gun, and checked in with Ronon.

“Ah, well. I'm Larry. My friend here is Moe. Curly's bleeding on the floor. Who are you?” A long pause stretched between them. John sighed. He hadn't really expected it to be that easy either. He really, really hated the Genii.

“Was that...” the voice trailed off, confused. John's grin was wolf-like and sharp; he loved playing stump the aliens. “Was that a Stooges reference?” The voice sounded incredulous and almost painfully hopeful. John turned to his team, brow wrinkled.

“Rodney? How many aliens have we met that actually got a Three Stooges reference?” Teyla and Ronon both raised their hands, their looks stating they only wished they did not. “The first time,” John amended.

“Perhaps more questions about your...popular culture would shed light on the situation?” Teyla
“Tom or Colin Baker?” Rodney yelled out, trying to refine the lifesign sensors to give him a more detailed reading. The silence stretched around him, enough that Rodney bought a clue and looked up. John was giving him that “What the fuck” look. “What?”

“Rodney, I don't think--”

“Eccleston.” Even one of the marines reacted to that one. Huh. Well, on the scale of weirdness, Rodney decided to put this at 'Pleasantly Weird,' gunfight not withstanding. John shrugged and went with the penultimate question of all questions.

“If I wanted to travel back in time, what would be my car of choice?” Ronon actually groaned. Out loud.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding! We're trying to establish some sort of amnesty based on a shared appreciation of classical Earth pop culture and you chose BACK TO THE FUTURE, quite possibly the single most insulting use of the space-time-continuum in the history of all things historical, on top of making a total mockery of at least four different branches of physics. As if a DeLorean is an acceptable model of--”

“Doctor McKay?”
Chapter 2

Bohdan groaned and blinked blearily as the world swam into view. He felt like he'd just gone two rounds with a Wraith queen. A small whimper caught his attention, and he painfully pulled himself up using the ancient console as a brace.

“Dan?” Kayla's voice came out thin and unsteady.

“I am fine.”

“What happened?”

“I don't know.” He touched a key on the system and shielded his eyes as it lit up with a vibrant blue glow. When his eyes had adjusted, he started scrolling through the data on the screen. No. This...it couldn't be. Each line got more and more unbelievable. He screamed and jumped away when a heavy hand clamped around his shoulder. “Zkurvysyne!” Terhaan stood behind him looking entirely too amused and smug. Dan pressed a hand against his thundering heart and took deep breaths to calm himself. Bohdan glared at Terhaan, muttering something insulting under his breath. Despite the tense situation, Terhaan smirked and ruffled Dan's hair affectionately.

“You know what happened?” Terhaan asked, ignoring Dan's dark looks. Really, baiting his scientist reamined one of the few pleasures he had in this life, and he intended to enjoy it

“I was trying to figure that out when you snuck up on me.”

“Figure it out faster, we don't want to be here when the nazghoul arrive.” Dan nodded solemnly, the lines of Ancient code moving a bit faster down the screen.

“We are all unharmed,” Kayla reported. She sounded exhausted, but that was pretty much their default state, so Dan didn't think anything of it.

“The...the little ones are asking after Alex and Jason and Mike.” Dan broke away from his work to meet Carson's pained gaze, a pain he was certain his own face reflected.

“We shall celebrate their lives when we have reached a more secure lodging,” Kayla said, allowing her sadness to seep into her voice. Any response was cut short by a sound from the hall.

“Get together, stay down,” Terhaan ordered. Carson and Kayla drew their guns and flanked the door. Terhaan knelt and eased through the door, eyes searching for movement in the shadows. Kayla's gun began to fire, bright flashes lighting up the hallway. Carson jerked back as a bullet ricocheted above his head.

“Shit! They have guns!”

“Those are not the nazghoul.”

“Really, Kayla, I hadn't noticed.” Kayla threw him a censuring look. Carson simply glared back, his mind caught up with the implications of there being other people out there. They stared at each other for a moment, their minds trying to catch on, trying to understand this new development. They'd given up on rescue years ago.

“Should we, I dunno, try to talk to them?”
“I believe that is our only possible course of action,” Terhaan said softly. “Dex?” The tall, muscular form of their friend broke free of the shadows and slunk silently to their side.

“Do it.” They heard the high whine of his gun priming, thumbed down to the rarely used stun setting. Carson shifted, dug out a mirror, and cautiously checked the hall. There wasn’t much light, but the hallway appeared empty and there were no bodies on the ground that he could see.

“Who are you? Identify yourself.” Even he winced at how trite and clichéd that sounded.

“Perhaps you should try ‘Take me to your leader’ next?” Dan hissed from behind his console, the soft click of keys accompanying his work. It wasn’t enough to truly break the tension, but Carson felt himself marginally relax.

“Ah, well. I’m Larry. My friend here is Moe. Curly's bleeding on the floor. Who are you?” Carson felt his entire body jerk involuntarily. He twisted around to check with Bohdan, half convinced his ears were deceiving him.

“It could just be a random combination of names.” The words sounded hollow, even to Carson. Dex jerked his head to the side, impatient.

“Was that...” Carson trailed off. He didn't want to ask, didn't want to know the answer. Dex leaned forward slightly, the heat of his body ghosting along Carson's arm. Carson bent his head towards him, and took a shuddering breath. “Was that a Stooges reference?”

“Tom or Colin Baker?” the people called out. Jesus. He knew that voice. They all knew that voice. He gently placed his gun down on the ground, hands shaking too hard to hold it safely. Dex captured both of his hands and pulled Carson into his chest, grounding them both. Someone was playing a cruel joke on them.

“Eccleston,” Terhaan called out. That was enough to make Carson turn from his hidey-hole in Dex's chest and gape at his friend, who shrugged elegantly. “He was the most unique and captivating of all the Doctors.” Dan's derisive snort conveyed his opinion more eloquently than anything Carson could have come up with.

“Does anyone else think this is a tad surreal?”

“If I wanted to travel back in time, what would be my car of choice?”

A different voice rose in consternation before they could respond.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding! We're trying to establish some sort of amnesty based on a shared appreciation of classical Earth pop culture and you chose BACK TO THE FUTURE, quite possibly the single most insulting use of the space-time-continuum in the history of all things historical”—Carson was pretty sure that while you could fake Rodney McKay's voice, you couldn't fake a Rodney McKay rant. Teyla and Terhaan were looking a bit pale, and Dex's hand crushed Carson's fingers—“on top of making a total mockery of at least four different branches of physics. As if a DeLorean is an acceptable model of--”

“Doctor McKay?”

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Lorne lead his team through the darkened halls, alert for any movement or sign of danger. He made sure they checked every room as they made their way towards the lifesigns.
“Major.” He fell back, still sweeping the area for threats. Sergeant Michaels handed him a lifesigns detector. “One of them disappeared.” Lorne checked the monitor, one white dot blinking up at them. Lorne nodded his thanks and clicked on his radio.

“We could have a Wraith. Keep alert.” They were a few feet away from the room when the coppery scent of blood reached them. Lorne felt his marines tense; they picked up their pace and drew closer together. He could almost smell the adrenalin.

The room was a large, open chamber with glass windows set high in the ceiling. The fading twilight of the Lantean sun cast long shadows against the walls and ground. They canvassed the room, moving in pairs and taking it slow. Lorne gripped his gun tightly, determined to bring every one of his men back.

“I've got a body.” His team collapsed in, making their way to Michaels' side. “Young male; cool to the touch. He's been dead a while. I don't recognize the wound pattern, doesn't look Wraith. More like a stab wound, but not from any weapon I've ever seen.” They left the body where it lay, moving further into the silent room. The single lifesign still blinked up at them from the far side, unmoving.

“I've got another one. Still warm; same MO as the other. Looks like he bled out.” Lorne grimaced at the large pool of blood the boy lay in, glassy eyes staring unfocused at the ceiling. Jesus, he looked young. Not much over 16. Lorne thought about his young nephews and repressed a shudder. He jerked his head forward, and they began moving again, zeroing in on the lifesign. They should be almost on top of it by now, but Lorne couldn't see anything.

“Michaels?” Lorne whispered, moving cautiously.

“We've still got a lifesign registering—” A shadow moved faster than Lorne could track. A dark arm banded around Michaels' windpipe, cutting off his words. Lorne raised his gun, but he couldn't get a bead on the person hiding behind his teammate.

“Not...Wraith...” Michaels gasped, shifting his weight to prepare for a countermeasure; Lorne's fingers tightened on the trigger of P-90, ready to take a shot if presented with the option. Lorne's blood ran cold when his Marine went still, eyes wide; the hostile had some sort of weapon and knew how to use it.

“You're surrounded, there’s no where for you to go. Let him go and we'll try to settle this peacefully.” Lorne could count the number of times that line had worked, but at least he could say he tried.

“Who are you?” The voice sounded low and gravelly, laced with pain and definitely not Wraith.


Lorne made eye contact with Michaels, trying to communicate with his subordinate. He saw the shadow shift, and jerked his head to the side, gun ready. He was surprised when Michaels shook his head slightly, for some reason unwilling to take the out. If anything, the Sergeant relaxed, his eyes wide and pleading with Lorne to...understand? Go with it? Keep talking? After a moment, Lorne nodded slightly, willing to follow Michaels' gut for the moment. Lorne still kept his gun ready, waiting for any opening so he could take down the hostile and get Michaels to safety; he may be willing to give Michaels the benefit of the doubt to a certain extent, but he wouldn't pass up a clear shot.

“I'm not going to ask you again,” Lorne warned. Michaels made a strangled sound and arched
away from what Lorne assume was a knife. He swore silently, tightening his grip on his gun and second-guessing his decision.

“You're lying.” The hostile was female, and there was something...youthful in her voice, buried underneath the pain. Lorne's team watched for his lead, ready to pull the trigger at a moment's notice. Lorne stayed steady and focused, not letting his emotions play across his face. He needed his team calm and prepared, not trigger happy.

“How is this for a second, he was afraid he'd lost the thread of this negotiation.

“Evan Lorne is dead.”

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“Doctor McKay?”

In all his years, Rodney had heard his name (in its various and sundry forms) said and used in many ways. His father had used it as a weapon, hurled with deadly accuracy at his mother. His mother had used it as a means of deflection, sloughing off her guilt and anger at an unjust, imperfect world. His sister had used it as an expression of annoyance, “Me-er!” imbued with the petulance of an annoyed little sister who couldn't understand why her big brother didn't get people. His name had been said with relief (Congratulations on your PhD, Rodney. Can't wait to see where you end up next!), horror (Nine-tenths of a solar system...), confidence (Rodney's going to fix it, right Rodney?), even affection (...you know, like a friend loves another friend).

But never, ever, had he heard his name like this. Like...he held the hopes and dreams of every person he had ever loved or cared about in the palm of his hand, entrusted to him and him alone; like his answer to this simple question was the last hope of a dying man. He could only look helplessly at Sheppard, almost too scared to answer incorrectly and break that fragile thread of hope that made his name sound so much more precious than it was.

“Rodney's a bit busy at the moment,” John called out. He wasn't bringing Rodney into this; too many people in Pegasus wanted him for their own. He really didn't want to deal with McKay stealing aliens today; that was scheduled for Friday of next week. “Can I help you with something?”

“We...we would like to speak with you.” This voice was female and had a strange lilt, reminiscent of Teyla and her somewhat clipped pattern of speech. Except younger. It pulled at something deep within John and left him unsettled.

“It's a trap,” Ronon rumbled beside him.

“Oh, OF COURSE it's a trap,” Rodney snapped. “It's always a trap.” Rodney watched as Sheppard, Ronon, and Teyla had some silent super-warrior conversation that Rodney wasn't privy to. It was really kind of rude. They seemed to reach an agreement and Rodney couldn't believe what came out of John's mouth next.

“I'm coming out. Unarmed, just me. We can have a chat. Make a fire. Sing Kumbaya.” The soft whisper of hurried voices carried to their hiding place.

“Are you insane?” Rodney hissed at Sheppard. The colonel simply shrugged and laid his side arm next to his P90. Rodney stared at the small pile of weapons accusingly. “You can't just go walking out there willy-nilly. You're the military head of Atlantis! If they capture you, you'll compromise the integrity of the whole base! Not everyone is susceptible to your stupid smile and sentient hair,
Colonel!"

“They know Back to the Future.” As if that explained everything. Rodney was dismayed to realize that to Sheppard, that one very short, ill conceived sentence could explain everything. Rodney needed to reevaluate his estimation of the colonel if that were true. “Cover me; Ronon, try not to shoot anyone unless you really have to.” Rodney ground his teeth when Ronon just grunted and charged his weapon. Not even a token protest for this unbelievably bad idea. He turned to Teyla for support, but she nodded at Sheppard, who only had a hand gun for protection.

John moved into the hall, hands above his head. He started walking slowly, his eyes searching for any sign of the people who had been shooting at them. He stopped as a shadow darkened the door to the lab in front of him. A lithe figure eased into the hall, staying close to the wall. John could see the outline of a gun pointed at him and stepped to the side so Ronon would have a clear shot at the other person if it came to that.

“I'm unarmed,” he called out. He smiled openly in the general direction of the person in front of him. Worth a try. “Really, not interested in...” He trailed off and gaped as she stepped into the light. She was...Teyla. Only younger. Same regal face, same kind of hair...but she looked at him like he held the answer to the galaxy's problems.

“Gen...John Sheppard?” He'd never heard Teyla sound lost before.

“Um. Hi. We've...met?” The sound of the gun falling to the ground echoed loudly and John winced. To his shock, the girl stumbled back against the wall, tears cascading down her cheeks. He stepped cautiously towards her and hovered uncertainly. He reached out, only to hear the cold sound of a gun's safety clicking off.

“Don't touch her.” The gruff voice was quiet and deadly and familiar. John once again raised his hands up and slowly turned.

“OK, buddy, no problem here, see?” The young boy was unmistakably related to the girl leaning against the wall. Christ, he could feel a headache coming on. It was hard to think with two pairs of eyes that he knew so well staring wetly at him from unfamiliar faces. The high whine of a power pistol charging was almost welcome.

Sheppard turned his head as a third shadow coalesced out of the darkness. His training demanded that he extract himself from this situation, but he ruthlessly clamped down on the impulse.

“Who are you?” The tall guy's gun wavered almost imperceptibly. John could hear Ronon and Teyla coming down the hall, but the strangers were all focused on him; he needed to keep their attention to allow his team to take up position.

“Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard--”

“Not possible.” John arched a sardonic eyebrow, pretty sure after all this time that he knew who he was.

“Well. Who would you like me to be?” Neither the gun nor the expression wavered. John found himself approving of the boy's focus. Teyla was nearly in position when the boy's left hand moved and there was a 9mm pointed at her head, gaze still on Sheppard. They were locked together, and something Bad was about to happen; John could sense the tension, stretched taut and ready to snap, when one of the Teyla-twins gasped out a soft, “Sateda.” The boy's gaze shifted away and zeroed in on Ronon, hidden partly in the shadows.
Ronon stared at the boy intently, taking in features that echoed his own, the hair...and the tattoo that John could just barely make out on the boy's neck. Ronon let his gun point to the ground, but John could still read the tension in his body, and Ronon wouldn't take his eyes off the young man in front of him.

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Lorne didn't really know how to respond to the pronouncement of his death. That's a new one, even for his team. So he thought, *What would Sheppard do?* and said, “Well, I'm not dead yet.” Sergeant Michaels gurgled slightly.

“Evan Lorne, born in San Francisco, California to Lila and Alan Lorne. Raised mostly in Iowa. Two nephews, one niece. Originally entered the SGC as a member of SG-11 under one Colonel Edwards. Murdered by the Wraith during the last invasion of Atlantis, tortured because he refused to give up the codes to the computers or the address to Earth.”

“I don't have a niece,” Lorne heard himself say faintly.

Michaels was abruptly released and pushed forward. Lorne caught him as he stumbled forward, and his men moved in to disarm and subdue the hostile. A sharp cry of pain and muttered curse had Lorne pushing his explosives tech out of the way. The hostile was actually a young girl, barely out of her teens if that. She was pale and sweating, her eyes glazed. She looked at him like the kids in Afghanistan had, children who had seen too much war and death at far too young an age. She shook violently, and Lorne was impressed that she'd managed to keep Michaels subdued as long as she had.

She leaned forward slowly, reaching for him. He stilled and let her fingers skim the planes of his face, hot against his skin.

“It...God, it really is you.” Lorne noticed the blood when she collapsed against the wall, blue eyes hidden beneath dark lashes. Her left arm hung uselessly at her side, and when he glanced down he could see dark drops against the floor.

“Any other weapons?” he asked, gruffness covering up the fact that he was completely out of his league; there was no SOP for this.

“Knife in my boot. Stunner at my back. Another gun on my—” She gasped and pressed her hand against her shoulder. He could see dark liquid spilling against pale fingers. When she pitched forward, Lorne saw the patch on her jacket, the stitched logo of Atlantis glowing brightly.

“Keller! Get down here, we have a medical emerg—”

“No!” The girl scrambled to her feet and Lorne braced her as she swayed unsteadily.

“Look, you need—”

“They'll think I'm dead. I need to get to them. I need them, they won't understand..” Lorne saw the thinly veiled desperation in her eyes. With a sigh, he keyed his radio.

“Lorne to Sheppard.”

****

“What the hell?” Rodney glared daggers at his teammates and swept his contemptuous gaze over the strangers in the hall. They didn't look threatening but this was Pegasus and you never knew.
“No, seriously, you come out here unarmed to talk to the people who were trying to kill you not five minutes ago and you've struck up a *repartee*. Ronon's lowered his gun. Ronon doesn't *do* that! So kindly step away from the aliens who have made everyone LOSE THEIR MINDS.”

“*Lorne to Sheppard.*” John made a mental note to give his second in command the day off the next time he saw him. The man had perfect timing. He kept his attention on Ronon's look-alike as he deliberately raised his hand to his radio.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“We found a, uh, girl. No Wraith, but she says she's got friends she needs to get back to.”

“We've got...” Sheppard hesitated, because he wasn't really sure what to say. “We've got people. Could be...friends. She have anything else to say?” Sheppard didn't miss the way all three of the strangers looked interested in his conversation.

“*Not really,*” Lorne said dryly. “*We're heading your way, ETA five minutes.*”

“Right. We'll be waiting. It'll be a party.” He clicked off, regarding the three young people.

“So...expecting anyone else?”

“I figured it out, I--” Sheppard, Teyla, and Ronon reacted instinctively, guns leveled at the newest addition to their negotiations, and they were in a stand off.

The newcomer was short, with owlish eyes and crazy hair. He looked haggard, but had a gleam in his eyes that John associated with Atlantis scientists discovering coffee, theoretical breakthroughs, and Lindt dark chocolate. He swallowed nervously seeing the guns, but didn't back down.

“Relax,” Sheppard called out, lowering his handgun. Teyla and Ronon follow suit behind him, though they remained on guard. The tension from the marines remained high, but he'd trained them well enough not to do anything without his command. “And you are...”

“I am Bohdan.”

“And you figured out what, exactly?”

“Ah, yes. We inadvertently turned on an Ancient device that sent us through to an alternate dimension; we are from parallel universe. You seem to be several years in our past. Or, we are from many years in your possible future,” he explained. Rodney harrumphed and fixed the boy with an imperious look. “Uh, according to calculations.”

“The power required to do that would be astronomical, not to mention the small problem of pro--”

“It's an ancient device,” Bohdan pointed out, “and I believe most of the power came from our side.” Rodney processed that and factored in the ZedPM drain he'd been monitoring since the explosion.

“Right. And I suppose all the quantum problems and impossibilities have been magically accounted for?”

“So readout would suggest.” Rodney pushed past Ronon and the creepy Teyla-twin people, grabbing Bo-Diddly's arm and hustling him through the door he just came out of. “I want to see these readings and you're going to show me exactly what you pushed in your universe because I will not have you transporting us to the city of the lost *holy shit.*” Ronon reacted first, already moving towards McKay by the time Sheppard jerked himself forward, heart pounding. He'd have
to talk to Rodney about trusting strangers and running off without protection. Again. But he totally agreed with McKay's sentiments when he got a look inside the room.

There were thirteen children, ages ranging from what looked about four to fifteen, huddled together in one corner. The older children were armed, aiming P-90s and a couple of assault rifles at the door. Bohdan gesticulated widely in what John assumed was a gesture for the kids to put their guns down.

“Carson! Trisha! It's OK!” The two teenagers on guard only lowered their guns when the kids from the hall entered the room and seconded the order. Carson kept a wary eye on the adults; his hair was close-cropped in military style, and his uniform was a size too big. Trisha looked gaunt and spindly with dark hollows under her eyes. She reluctantly lowered her weapon and scowled at the intruders. On second glance, Carson might be in his late teens/early twenties. His eyes darted around the room as he catalogued and assessed John and his team. That was a look any soldier would recognize. The girl, younger and less experienced, glared daggers at Rodney and John.

“It's a trick.” John could see that she’d grow up to be a stunning woman, with high cheek bones and sparkling green eyes; a stunning woman with two parallel scars that ran from her left temple past her eye, under her nose and across her lips to end accusingly at her right jaw bone. The rag-tag group of kids with wide, scared eyes cowered behind her, and John knew without a doubt that she'd die to protect them. Seeing the loss and pain reflected in the children's eyes made John's heart break just a little; whatever, whoever these kids were, every fiber of John's being screamed at him to protect them.

“Trisha, be calm. Remember those we protect.” If the voice was pitched just a little higher, he would have assumed Teyla had been talking.

“Look, we just came down here to investigate some strange readings, we don't want to hurt or trick anyone,” Sheppard said in his best placate-the-natives voice. The girl just glared at him.

“I'm not a crazy native,” Trisha spat.

“You're right, I'm sorry, I just--”

“Colonel Sheppard?” Lorne's voice drifted into their lab.

“In here, Major.” Sheppard saw Lorne enter out of the corner of his eye, an unfamiliar woman limping at his side.

“In here, Major.” Sheppard saw Lorne enter out of the corner of his eye, an unfamiliar woman limping at his side.

“Alex!” Suspicious Trisha called in relief. The kids swarmed around the new girl, happy to see her.

But it was a wordless, keening cry that spoke more eloquently than any string of words that caught Sheppard's attention. A short, chubby figure disentangled itself from the mob of wide-eyed children and launched itself at Lorne, sobbing uncontrollably. Lorne let his P-90 hang off his vest in favor of an armful of crying, babbling four-year-old, whose only word seemed to be 'Daddy' stuck on repeat. Lorne looked at his CO, silently asking for direction. John just shrugged helplessly. They were all in way over their heads; Ronon still hadn't stopped staring suspiciously at the boy named Sateda.

Lorne carefully shifted the sobbing child in his arms. The small boy tightened his grip around Lorne's neck as if scared that he'd have to let go, and the panicked whimper broke his heart. Calling up all of his experience with his nephews, Lorne awkwardly bounced the boy up and down in his arms, murmuring soothing nonsense until he felt the tiny body start to relax.
Alex couldn't quite wrap her head around the scene in front of her, the people she was seeing. People she'd long since given up for dead. There was Ronon and Teyla and Lorne and...she closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath, shoved her chaotic thoughts into a steel box and locked the lid. They'd just been thrown for a huge loop, and she needed to maintain calm and focus in order to make sense of it.

When she opened her eyes, she was in full control of her self. Scott babbled away in Evan Lorne's arms. Alex glanced at Carson, who looked like he might lose it. She lightly touched Carson's arm, offering solace and support. She nudged him, silently trying to get him to pull it together and retrieve his younger brother.

Carson nodded slightly and tried to center himself. He could do this. He'd faced down terrifying life-sucking aliens and murderous creatures who wanted to kill him; he could talk his little brother down. He moved slowly towards the pair, eyes flicking to the tense adults in the room.

“Hey Peanut,” he murmured, rubbing Scott's back soothingly. His little brother whimpered pitifully, face buried in the soldier's (he'd stick with that, nicely clinical and unemotional) neck. “How about you let go and--”

“NO!” The child tightened his strangle hold on Lorne's neck, plastering himself against the major and emphatically not letting go.

“C'mon, Peanut. Remember when we had that one talk about letting D--” the young man cleared his throat and blinked back tears, keeping his gaze focused on his brother so he didn't have to see the looks everyone threw his way—“letting Dad work. ’Cause it's important that he has his hands free, remember? So let's go, Peanut. I'll carry you and we'll let--”

“NO! Nonononono!” The little boy started crying again, wet tears scalding Lorne's skin. The little body in his arms practically vibrated with tension, and he felt something in his chest pull.

“I can, uh, carry him back to the jumper,” Lorne offered. It seemed to appease the...Peanut in his arms, who stopped wailing and settled for making pitiful sniffling noises that went right through Lorne's heart.

“Right.” John clapped his hands and glanced at the unnaturally still huddle of children in the corner. “How about we move this party to Atlantis proper? We've got food and showers and medical personnel there.”

“I think that would be wise,” Teyla said, troubled. These children resembled similar groups that she'd seen on Wraith-decimated worlds, the young left to fend for themselves without parents or guidance. They often met unfortunate ends. She relaxed when the three children from the hall held a brief discussion and acquiesced.

Teyla watched as the group readied itself with minimum fuss. The elder children guided the younger ones, who watched the Atlantis group with wide eyes. The young girl Lorne had brought limped by, the field dressing over her shoulder deep red.

The small group was ready to move, every possession and child accounted for on their persons. It was heartbreakingly efficient, speaking to hundreds of other times when they'd had to do this very thing. Hopefully, this would be the last time.

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“Doctor Weir, the jumpers should be landing any moment now.”
“Thank you, Chuck.” Elizabeth straightened her shirt and smoothed back her hair, nerves tight in her chest. She would have to talk to Sheppard about his radio etiquette. Calling in to say they’d found ‘survivors’ and not giving her much more to go on did not constitute an acceptable update. She had a team of Marines standing by just in case. The outer bay doors opened and two puddlejumpers landed on the floor. The Marines began shifting restlessly when the doors didn't open immediately.

“Careful, gentlemen, I don't want any misunderstanding,” Elizabeth warned. Still, she breathed a sigh of relief when jumper three's hatch opened and John came ambling out, all slinking ease.

“Colonel Sheppard,” she greeted, putting enough snap in her voice to warn John that she wasn't in the mood.

“Doctor Weir. Stackhouse.” They nodded to one another, Stackhouse relaxing when he read the all clear in Sheppard's body language.

“Survivors, Colonel?” John rubbed the back of his neck in a way that meant Elizabeth was in for a lot of paperwork in the days to come.

“Well. We seem to have picked up a couple of kids.” Elizabeth arched an eyebrow.

“A couple? How many is a couple, Colonel?” Her eyes dared him to argue semantics with her.

“Y'know...a couple...like twelve or eighteen.” Elizabeth prided herself on her abilities, namely, on her ability to keep her cool in the face of dirty politics and shocking revelations; but John Sheppard always managed to shake her.

“Where...what are they survivors OF?” Elizabeth felt moderately better when John looked as poleaxed as she felt.

“I...don't actually know,” he admitted. His expression was closed off, and Elizabeth could almost see tension radiating off of her military commander. Sheppard was not a man given to telegraphing his emotions, so his concern and agitation alarmed her. “They're all under twenty and...I don't think traumatized is a strong enough word.” Their conversation was interrupted when the second jumper opened and Keller's voice called over the medical channel for a blood bag, IV, and some medicines. John made it up the ramp to the second jumper before she realized she should probably follow.

“What's wrong?” John asked.

The girl Lorne had rescued leaned against the wall looking scarily pale, the too-fast flutter of her pulse beating against her neck. Keller pressed a fresh dressing against her shoulder, one of the older kids hovering anxiously over them.

“Anti-coagulant in the wound, she's been bleeding pretty steadily for almost an hour.” Keller peeled the pad away and John could see two neat little holes, red and pulpy, in the girl's shoulder before blood started oozing out again. “I think the wounds expand inside. There could be some internal damage, but they won't let me check.” Keller made a frustrated noise. “You have got to let me cut away--”

“No,” the girl said curtly. John was quite familiar with that tone, having used it many a time before with more medical personnel than he cared to remember.

Elizabeth's arrival preempted any disagreement. The children were staring at her wide-eyed.
Elizabeth took in the ragtag group of children and young adults, keeping tight rein on her emotions. The children were dirty, their clothes worn and ill-fitting; they bore signs of deep fatigue and malnourishment. There were children who looked barely older than three, their wide eyes uncomfortably wise and experienced. She pasted a tremulous smile on her face, hoping she could keep up the facade. Clearing her throat, she turned her attention to the injured girl, who met her gaze easily.

“Welcome to Atlantis. I understand that you've been through a lot; we'd like to help you, if we can. You're welcome to stay here until we can figure out what happened and what to do.” The wounded girl studied Atlantis's leader, then nodded slowly.

“We appreciate that. If you don't mind, I think a good night's sleep would be ideal. I'm not sure we'll be able to handle this until then. I think we need time to...process. Everything. And, uh, I guess you need to debrief your people?” She sounded beyond exhausted, like Rodney when he'd been coming off of the amphetamines after the siege.

“Of course,” Elizabeth agreed. “We need to have you all checked and cleared by medical. In the meantime Colonel, please set up housing for all of our guests and make sure they're comfortable. I think the guest quarters where the Athosians stayed will do nicely. We can sort out the rest of the details in the morning, if that's alright?” The young girl nodded, wincing slightly. Elizabeth nodded and turned to leave, wanting nothing more to escape from the pain-filled stares of the abnormally silent children, when a thin hand shot up and caught her arm.

“Thank you, Dr. Weir.” The young woman was bundled onto a stretcher and hooked up to an IV.

****

Jennifer Keller stopped just short of stomping her foot in frustration, but it was a close call. “Look, I need to--”

“No.” The young girl crossed her arms over her chest, digging her heels in. The girl with the holes in her shoulder silently watched them arguing back in forth.

“You don't understand--” Keller tried again.

“No.”

This was ridiculous. Keller ground her teeth, forcing her words out in a calm manner. “I'm the head of medical and--”

“And I've seen more field work than you'll ever dream of, know more about what did this than you, and know what exactly what I'm doing so back. Off.” The diminutive blonde girl was sixteen and terrifying. Her bearing made Keller think of the stories floating around the SGC about Janet Frasier. Her green eyes glittered with derision and stubbornness. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she scowled with the force of teenager surliness.

Keller glanced at her patient, who looked tired but was regaining color. She wanted to get an IV into the girl's arm, but they wouldn't cooperate, wouldn't even let her take off the long sleeve shirt her patent wore, which was literally soaked in blood.

“Danni,” her patient said warningly.

“Shut it, Lexa,” the diminutive terror ordered, still glaring daggers at Dr. Keller.

“Danielle.”
“Alexandra.” While the two girls were caught up in a staring contest, Keller seized the moment.

“Look, I need to get her out of that shirt and take a good look at the wound. There could be serious internal injury. I need to find out about what did this, and run some blood tests. I'd also like to hook her up to a transfusion since the fluids will only help so much.” Jennifer was getting suspicious; they were definitely hiding something from her, and the longer they sat around not treating the girl's wound the worse it could get.

“I can tell you everything I know about the...thing that did this. I've done this before, and I'll take care of her by myself.” Keller glanced between the two young women, hands on her hips.

“I'm going to have to give you a medical anyways if you stay. You're not going anywhere unless I clear you, so why don't we deal with whatever you're hiding now?” They looked at one another, some rapid fire silent communication stretching between them. Danielle sighed in capitulation.

“Fine, but we do this in a private room, and you swear on your life you don't talk about what you see,” Danielle insisted.

“I can't--”

“You're not going to find anything that means I'm a threat to myself or anyone on this base. I promise. But we need your word,” Alex promised. Right now, her only objective was to get painkillers and sleep as soon as possible. Jennifer found herself agreeing and lead them to a private room. She gathered up a tray and returned to the room, gently closing the door. When she turned around, Danielle had already cut the shirt off her patient.

“Whoa,” Keller murmured, her eyes roving across Alex's torso and arms. “What IS that?”

****

Elizabeth studied her datapad as if a solution would suddenly write itself on the paper. Instead, eighteen names and ages blinked innocuously at her.

Carson (20)
Alexandra (20)
Sateda (18)
Kayla (19)
Terhaan (19)
Bohdan (18)
Trisha (16)
Danni (15)
Philipp (15)
Sarah (12)
Peter (10)
Maria (7)
Erin (7)
Scott (5)
Garreth (5)
Julian (4)
Adan (3)
Elora (3)

Eighteen children who came through via an unidentified Ancient device, victims of some horrible tragedy, and now her problem.
Elizabeth pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to still her chaotic thoughts. Sorting out what to do with the children Sheppard had brought back was giving her a migraine of epic proportion. She regarded her Senior Staff, noted the circles under Rodney's eyes, and searched for the quickest way to get through this; it wasn't like they were going to come to a conclusion tonight, but they did need a starting point for tomorrow.

“So what you're telling me is that you don't really know...anything about their situation or how they came to be.” Her flagship team exchanged glances and seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“That would be accurate,” Teyla said serenely. But that didn't mean much since Teyla said almost everything serenely.

“How do we know they are who they say they are?” Weir asked, searching their faces.

“Haven't you been listening?” Rodney huffed, waving his hands about. “They came through an ancient device that can only be activated by a strong gene carrier of at least Sheppard-like quality; Keller's testing them, but from the way Atlantis lights up around them, I'd say the majority of them have a powerful presentation of the gene. We have NEVER encountered that in this galaxy, much less eighteen times over. So I think it's fair to assume that they're probably who they say they are.”

“Alright, I'll accept that hypothesis,” Elizabeth conceded. “What do we need to do now?”

“It's obvious these children have been through a lot,” Kate Heightmeyer said. “I've only briefly talked to a few of them, but they have experienced serious trauma and stress, particularly the young adults and teenagers. They're experiencing something akin to culture shock at the moment; they've gone from an extremely hostile environment to here. It's going to catch up with them soon.”

“What can we expect?” Elizabeth asked with concern. “Anything that might endanger themselves or us?” Kate sighed inwardly; she was treading a thin line here. If she admitted the likelihood of violent outbursts and night terrors, it could place the children at a disadvantage. The danger they posed to Atlantis was slim, though she couldn't say the same of the potential danger they posed to themselves. “Dr. Heightmeyer?”

“Symptoms similar to PTSD once they have time to process. Anger, distress, depression, nightmares, panic attacks. But the worst of these symptoms can be managed through counseling and strong family support.”

“Oh great. So we're going to have a lot of miniature head cases running around Atlantis. That's just what we need,” Rodney muttered.

“Rodney!” Elizabeth shot her chief scientist a warning look.

“What?”

“They do have family,” Kate interrupted firmly. “They're each other's family. They've developed a system of communal parenting and responsibility-sharing. I have full faith in their ability to help one another through and to contain the worst of the fallout.”

“I believe our biggest concern should be is Atlantis safe for children? We have just one mostly depleted ZedPM, can we keep the children here in good conscience?” Zelenka wondered aloud.

“They appear to have lived in more dire circumstances than the threat of Wraith attack. Atlantis is one of the safest place in the Pegasus galaxy,” Teyla pointed out.
“I think it would be extremely detrimental to remove them from Atlantis,” Kate added. “They need to stay here, in a familiar environment.” John was glad for Kate's unwavering resolve.

“I believe there is an added complication,” Teyla interjected smoothly. Dr. Weir nodded at her to continue. “We have noticed that most of the children are quite young, young enough that constant care from a parent or guardian is needed. I know there has been much speculation about the origin of these children. It is my sincere belief that these children are ours.” Teyla pointedly refrained from looking at Major Lorne, though everyone else couldn't seem to keep their eyes off him.

“What gives you this impression, Teyla?” Elizabeth asked.

“They know our names without us speaking them, and they know personal things about us. A majority of the children were wearing clothing that is consistent with what we see here; the youths wore jackets with Atlantis patches on them. There are those that bear a striking resemblance to some of the Atlantis personnel.”

“And?” Elizabeth knew there was more to this story. “If they're from an alternate reality, they could just be alternate versions of us.” This time Teyla's eyes slid over to Lorne, who nodded slightly.

“One of the children was quite...taken with Major Lorne and could not be persuaded to release him.”

“I...see.” Elizabeth sat back, mind racing. This could prove to be a exceptionally complicated situation. She had eighteen young children whose parents may or may not be on base. “What do we do about this?”

Elizabeth really wished she hadn't asked. They spent two hours talking about it. Two hours in which Rodney made a flow chart and a power point presentation, and started in on a Venn diagram before Sheppard distracted him with a written game of prime-not-prime (Rodney possibly might have been flooding the game with sexy primes just to see John scrawl the word across the paper). They were no further than when they started when Ronon spoke up for the first time.

“Why don't we ask them?”

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John escaped to his favorite balcony once the meeting finished and he'd delegated the room assignments to a capable marine. Standing high above the ocean, the wind in his hair, he let out a heavy breath. He couldn't shake the vision of those kids, so silent and small, abandoned in an Ancient city to fend for themselves.

Then there was the problem of who they came from. Namely, the two who looked exactly like Teyla, the one undoubtedly related to Ronon, and Lorne's newest fan. It all added up to kids. As in their kids, the next generation of Atlantis. And they were here.

What the fuck was he going to do? Atlantis was no place for children, even ones who'd been through hell. They'd just fended off an attack by the Wraith that almost destroyed the city. There was violent, dangerous technology everywhere that had a propensity to malfunction, various Pegasus germs and pitfalls that could get them, the Wraith, the Replicators...

He heard the door behind him slide open and caught a whiff of Teyla's scent as she stepped beside him. They stood in silence, watched the moon play across the ocean.

“It has been a most unusual day,” Teyla said, breaking the silence. John turned so his back was to
the water, glancing at Teyla from the side of his eye.

“Yeah.” They stood in comfortable silence, allowing the day to wash over them. John struggled with his thoughts, trying to organize the myriad of impressions and thoughts that careened through his skull. Secretly, he thought this might be what Rodney felt like all the time.

“So you have twins?” John blurted, then winced at how tactless and ridiculous the question was. SHE didn't have the twins, some Teyla in another universe had twins. Maybe. Probably. But what that meant for Teyla and her not-kids was hard to wrap his head around.

“I...” Teyla trailed off, and that freaked John out more than anything else, because Teyla always knew what to say. He could always count on her advice, whether he wanted it or not. His shoulders started to ache with tension the longer Teyla didn't speak. “Part of me sees them as strangers. Strangers who need my help, but strangers still. However, there is another part of me that feels a deep connection, a...an overwhelming desire to protect and to care. I am unaccustomed to feeling this way so quickly. It is very powerful and quite disconcerting.”

John scrubbed his hand through his hair, rubbed the back of his neck. “I...” He looked at Teyla helplessly. “I don't know...”

Teyla was still formulating a response when Ronon joined them on the balcony. He sat down, back against the wall, and pulled out one of his knives to sharpen. The only sign of Ronon's inner turmoil was the angry way he drew the knife over the whet stone. Teyla smiled indulgently at Ronon and settled beside him, allowing her presence to soothe Ronon's agitation.

“I believe this situation to be extremely delicate. We do not know these children, or what has happened to them. It is apparent that, whatever relationships we might share, 'I' am...no longer around. It would seem none of us are. What that means for them, and what that means for us, will have to be decided. But I will not be complicit in sending them back to wherever they came from.”

John nodded his agreement and wished he'd had the forethought to bring some hooch out here.

“It must feel weird to find out you've got a full-grown kid out there somewhere,” John heard himself say. Ronon's blade slid over the stone with increased vigor, and John winced. He'd been staring at his mini-me with suspicion and thinly veiled hostility since he'd first laid eyes on the boy.

“Have you not considered that one of the children may be yours?” John stared at her for a minute. There wasn't much else he could do, since his mind remained resolutely blank.

“Ah...no?” Teyla did the little 'I can't believe you have been so shortsighted' eyebrow thing. “You think one of them is?”

Teyla smiled at John's completely bewildered look; he kept such a tight rein on his emotions, it was nice to see him open up in some small way. She could sense the discomfort the children caused in him, though it differed from the great anger she sensed from Ronon.

“I do not believe it is as unlikely as you seem to think.”

“Huh.” John leaned back to contemplate Teyla's words, trying to imagine having a kid. The door slid open again.

“You need to get Elizabeth to OK a science mission back to where we found the rug rats and I need to check out that console and make sure it's not going to go off in our sleep and transport us to
some world where the Replicators have killed us all or Atlantis is a sentient AI that eats people.”

“Hello to you too, Rodney,” John said wryly. He flushed a little when he realized he'd been imagining his hypothetical child with expressive hands and clear blue eyes.

“What?” Rodney asked distractedly, catching Sheppard's stare. It almost looked like John was blushing, but that couldn't be right. But he was acting weirder than normal. Teyla sensed the shift in the atmosphere and pulled Ronon up to leave with her. She had an inkling he might need a session with her Bantos sticks.

“I will leave you to your planning. I have much to meditate on tonight. Rodney, John.”

“Teyla.” John touched his forehead to hers, trying to steal some of her calm for himself. Rodney was less than graceful in returning Teyla's gesture, but he tried, which counted for a lot. Ronon quietly trailed Teyla inside.

John let himself slide bonelessly to the ground and closed his eyes, awaiting the inevitable continuation of Rodney's why-we-must-go-back lecture. When it didn't start, he cracked an eye open to find Rodney hovering over him scowling. “Wazzat?”

“Something's wrong with you, you're all—“ he waved a hand in John's direction “—and I was trying to be supportive by being here for you and giving you a safe place without demands where you can talk about whatever is bothering you.”

“You've been talking to Heightmeyer,” John said, hiding a grin. Rodney's scowl deepened, the corner of his mouth making that impossible 90-degree down turn.

“Maybe,” he grumped, eyes darting away as color bloomed on his cheeks. John felt that he should probably be encouraging Rodney's attempts at being more sensitive.

“Do you...think one of the children could be mine?” Again, not what he actually meant to say, but his mouth was bypassing his brain tonight. He winced as Rodney's head snapped around so fast it had to hurt.

“What makes you think that? Did you...was one of them...oh my god, you're a father!” Rodney felt something in him protest. 20-years-from-the-future-John had a kid. Which meant John probably had a wife, someone from the expedition, who was probably already here or going to be here soon if the timelines followed each other closely, and John Sheppard was a self-sacrificing bastard and would raise the kid and move off Atlantis and have a white picket fence and 2.5 kids, the wife, no cats and three dogs because Sheppard was such a dog person and wouldn't want just one.

“What? No! I don't...Jesus, McKay. I'm not a father! It was just some stupid thing Teyla said!” The only thing that prevented John from hyperventilating was that Rodney already had that covered, and one of them needed to be able to call for medical assistance if it came to down to that. Rodney calmed down at that...for a moment.

“Teyla thinks you're a father? You could so be a father.” Rodney winced at how petulant he sounded.

“I don't. Have. A kid,” John ground out.

“How do you know? The rug rats are a little unkempt, I know, but some of them had crazy enough hair! There was that one little kid who smiled at Nurse What's-her-face and she practically broke her back fawning over him. He has Sheppard written all over him.” John rolled his eyes and
pretended he had a really big, very strong Jack and coke in front of him.

“Rodney.”

“I can just see it now, you giving the poor kid Kirk lessons. You'll teach him all the cool soldier-stuff that will make him absolutely irresistible, teach him to do that military swagger walk that makes women ooze at your feet, and top it off with instructions on how to style his hair. He'll seduce his first alien princess by 12, which, granted, doesn't leave him much more to look forward to but I can't imagine seducing alien princesses ever gets OLD—“

“Rawd-ney,” John drawled, rolling the ‘a’ in his friend's name. “What about YOUR kid?”

THAT shut Rodney right up. It was pretty funny the way Rodney stared at him, mouth hanging open, eyes huge. John could read McKay's thought process, starting with 'I don't even LIKE kids' and running the gamut through 'Holy crap, I could have a kid', 'Oh no, I have a kid, how badly did I screw them up?', finally ending with 'Sheppard's a moron, I don't have a kid.'

John forced himself to look away, anger rising up within him because while Rodney WANTED a kid, he was deathly afraid of his own parenting abilities. Children had an innate understanding of people, of who would protect them and who was bad news. Rodney was their favorite. John personally thought Rodney would be a great father, attentive and completely committed to his offspring.

Rodney had never really thought about children. Well, yes, he had; they were smelly and demanding and not yet smart enough to be useful. But he'd never thought about HAVING kids; not in a serious, concrete way. He'd never met anyone who'd want that with him, and his own childhood wasn't anything to write home about. He was terrified of messing up, of becoming his father, of not being good enough. A tiny little person completely dependent on Rodney McKay for the first 18 years of their life? No thank you. But a small, hidden, unacknowledged part of him manufactured images of a little boy with a shock of dark, untamable hair, blue eyes and oddly-shaped ears.

“But—“

“None of us have kids, Rodney. They're just...people. From another universe.” Rodney humphed and folded his arms. John was oversimplifying an incredibly complex situation in that annoying way of his.

“Fine. Whatever. We need to go back to that area and make sure there are no more surprises.”

“Sure, we can bring it up in the meeting tomorrow.”

“Great.” Rodney hovered, torn between sitting next to John, sprawled wantonly on the floor, or going off to get some of his ever-present work done. John looked so...accessible spread out like that. Rodney's thoughts took a decidedly naughty turn and he could feel his face heating.

“Rodney?” John asked softly. He watched as Rodney turned a brilliant shade of red, unsure what brought it on.

“Right, good, don't freak out, talk to Elizabeth tomorrow, I'm going to get some work done, bye.”

John's laughter followed him through the door.

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Kayla occupied herself with getting people through the medical check up, handing out clothes and toiletries, and calming down the younger children who were just now realizing what their new situation meant. She assigned them each a room, but she suspected it was mostly an exercise in futility. They'd all been sleeping together for years now, as a matter of survival; they'd probably end up sharing just one or two rooms, and it would take a while before they felt comfortable enough to sleep alone. Privacy was a luxury with which they'd have to reacquaint themselves. Provided they could stay.

Terhaan watched his sister with growing concern. She'd taken their entire relocation upon her own shoulders, organizing and marshaling everyone with disturbing mania.

“Your sister's gone a little crazy,” Sateda's voice said from behind him. Terhaan grunted his agreement, his eyes never leaving his twin. Carson wandered over, almost-turkey sandwich in hand. He let out a moan that had anyone over eleven looking over speculatively.

“Oh, god this is...mmmmmm.” They watched with open humor as bliss passed over Carson's face.

“Carson?” Sateda asked, his voice a low rumble of amusement. The other man paused, sandwich almost to his mouth.

“Yeah?” Sateda leaned in and ate the rest of the sandwich in a single bite.

“HEY!” Childish giggles floated around them as Sateda savored his stolen treat, smacking contentedly. Scowling at the stealer of delicious non-MRE food, Carson turned to Terhaan.

“Kayla's going postal.”

“That would imply that she is on the verge of murdering her co-workers,” Terhaan said dryly. Carson shrugged and started watching her with the other men, Kayla's manic efficiency rendering them useless.

“What are we going to do about Jason and Mark?” Carson asked softly. The pain of their loss was muted by the sheer roller coaster of the day, but as the day wound down, there was less to block it out.

“It is Kayla I am worried about at the moment,” Terhaan said tightly. Sateda clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder.

“We'll take care of her; we always do.” Terhaan briefly squeezed the hand on his shoulder, but kept his attention on his sister. He did not think she would take the loss of her lover easily; but Sateda was right, she wouldn't be alone.

“Scott and...the Major are back,” Carson said, suddenly subdued. “I'll just...” Terhaan turned and drew his friend into the gesture of friendship and comfort his mother had always used.

“He is still, at his core, the man your father was.” Carson swallowed painfully and nodded. When he pulled away, Sateda wrapped him up in a hug.

“You know where to find me. Bring Scott with you.” Carson nodded stiffly, eyes already suspiciously wet.

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Lorne shifted the heavy weight in his arms; he'd have to deal with his sleeping limpet eventually. Right now, his marines were busy opening rooms, requisitioning blankets, and searching for
clothing that might actually fit some of the kids, who were looking pretty shell-shocked.

They were eerily silent. For a man who grew up with more cousins than he knew what to do with, quiet was unsettling to say the least. The little kid slept peacefully, head buried in Lorne's neck. As he looked down at his tousled head, Lorne thought he might be a little bit doomed.

“Um, hi.” Lorne started back to the real world. Right, the brother. He looked timid and unsure, his eyes darting around with no where to go. Lorne knew exactly how he felt. “I can, uh, take him. If you have...to go.” Lorne studied the boy, taking in the similarities in their height, build, and certain facial features. It was...unnerving, amazing, scary, and unfamiliar all at once. As he shifted the child in his arms, he realized didn't want this conversation to end.

“What's his name?” The boy—young man—started, his eyes meeting Lorne's for the first time.

“It's Scott.” Lorne looked down at the kid nestled in his arms, still clinging to him even in sleep. Scott. It felt right.

“And he's, uh...”

“My little brother.” The kid's face lit up bright red and he cleared his throat nervously. “You might...look like his father. Our father. From our universe.” The kid wouldn't meet his eyes, but Evan could read the layers of emotion written in them, eyes that he'd seen reflected in mirrors his whole life. Gently, he unwound the child's arms and handed him to his brother.

“If you need anything...” He got a small, strained smile, before they both disappeared into their temporary room. Lorne barely made it to his own before he collapsed on the floor, spread eagle, staring up at the ceiling just...thinking. He had...kids. Kind of. A really cute, slightly traumatized five-year-old, and a young adult. Or something. Whatever came after teenager.

He thought he was processing pretty well. He could get to know them, see what he could do to make their transition easier. He'd almost fallen asleep when he wondered what the hell he was going to tell Parrish—and what the existence of the children meant for his relationship.

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When Kayla made it to her assigned room, she wasn't surprised to find Carson, Terhaan, and Sateda waiting for her, Scott sleeping soundly on the bed. She'd felt them watching her all night, and their concern. They'd allowed her to immerse herself in the arrangements, but now...now that she had no filter, nothing to hide behind...Jason was dead. Mike was gone. The shadows in Alex's eyes, the hollow way she'd shaken her head, once, definitively...they'd told her everything.

Her knees buckled, but hands caught her. She gasped for breath and soft voices talked her through it, reminded her how to breathe. Someone wiped away her tears. She steeled herself and started to pull it together, trying to shut her pain away. She sectioned it, filed it away to work through in small, manageable parcels.

“We're safe,” her brother whispered softly. “We're safe, and you can grieve.”

Her body jerked involuntarily, and there wasn't enough air in the room. They were safe. She wasn't responsible for the next watch, ever on the lookout for death; there weren't children who needed her, food to ration, medicines to worry about. She could...feel. But she wasn't sure she remembered how. She sucked in a desperate breath.

“We're here.” Terhaan's whispered words of comfort chipped away at her armor, and memories flooded through her. Of Jason and Mike and the people they'd lost. Long buried emotions seemed
to assault her, unrelenting. But she was safely wrapped up in her brother's arms, surrounded by the people she loved, the weathered remnants of her family.

At some point, she fell asleep curled at her brother's side, her twin, the one constant in her life. When she awoke to use the bathroom, the room was filled with the soft sounds of sleep. Almost every one of her people crammed into the small room, sleeping in the same tight jumble of bodies as they had for over two years now. Safety in numbers, comfort in knowing there was someone else with you, alive and whole.

Kayla looked at her face in the mirror, eyes puffy from crying, dark circles under her eyes. She leaned against the mirror, the surface of the glass cool against heated skin. She'd grieved for Jason tonight, grieved for his loss. Tomorrow, she would celebrate his life with laughter. Because tomorrow was the start of a new life, one Jason would want her to have.
Alex burrowed into the covers, trying to drown out the voices of her friends. She'd had her first full night's sleep in forever (2 years, 4 months, 24 days...not counting yesterday), and she really didn't want to wake up just yet, especially considering the current topic of conversation. She didn't want to think beyond their turn of good fortune— while these weren't their parents, they still kind of were and they would never send them back to that...that place. But that didn't mean living here would be easy. That didn't mean they'd be allowed to stay on Atlantis. She pushed the thoughts away, tried to reclaim sleep. She just wanted to rest. To not have anyone's life depend on her choices.

“We know you're awake.” She cracked one bleary eye open and glared at Terhaan.

“I'm in the hospital. I'm healing. The doctors advocate rest and relaxation and no annoying friends talking about horrid things. And lots of chocolate. So come back when you have chocolate. Or caffeine. I'll accept caffeine.”

“I have half a cup of blue jello,” Dex offered. Alex pushed herself up and glared at him.

“That's MY half cup of jello. From MY lunch tray. Sateda!” Dex grinned and made a big show of eating the last spoonful of jello.

“Have you been listening?” Kayla asked, taking a seat at the foot of the bed. Alex sighed and gingerly maneuvered herself so she was propped up. Terhaan and Sateda were there in a moment, plumping pillows and easing her down.

“I have. Really, it's only a matter of time before they come to us. And I think it would be best if we had a plan of action. Scott and Carson have already proven this isn't going to be easy.” Kayla nodded in agreement with Terhaan's assessment. Alex gave a one shouldered shrug. “Really, the only thing we can do is ask everyone what they want. Kids and potential parents. We run interference on the young ones, try to keep them away from anyone who doesn't want to know. Try to...explain things, if we even can. Obviously, we have to limit this to people who know about the Stargate program; I doubt the IOA is going to bring people in on our say-so. Of course, this all contingent on if...if they let us stay.” Kayla and Terhaan tensed, and Sateda actually stood up.

“We can go, live in the unoccupied sectors like we were,” Sateda said, looking around, ready to move. Alex laid a calming hand on his arm, gently caressing the tense muscle.

“Sateda, think. Where would our food come from? What would we do to keep ourselves occupied? We don't have huge stashes of MRE's hidden around the city anymore, or seeds we can sow in the garden areas. That wouldn't work here, Atlantis is not a self-sustaining city. We'd need medicines and clothes. We can't live here without the support of the expedition.”

“They can't kick us out.”

“I don't think they will. This is Atlantis, stranger things have happened than a bunch of kids showing up out of thin air. Um. Maybe. Regardless, I have faith in these people; they're...they're our parents. They wouldn't kick us out or send us back. If anything, it'll be the IOA who have a problem with us.”

“I believe we are borrowing trouble before it has arrived,” Kayla said appeasingly. “We should concentrate on the issue at hand. Terhaan and I were concerned with our existence in this universe.
Is it possible that we will adversely affect the relationships and happiness of the people we are so relieved to see?"

Alex closed her eyes and sank into her pillows. These were not contingencies she wanted to try and wrap her brain around. Too many what ifs, too many potential problems. Plus, she was in the hospital. There had to be a rule against making decisions while in hospital.

“I don't get it,” Sateda grunted. He'd been bored with this situation since it started; their 'parents' would either accept them or not. There wasn't much they could do about it. Give everyone their options, see what they chose...and go from there. Simple.

“We have to keep the Prime Directive,” Alex intoned mockingly. She cracked an eye to find them all staring at her. “Star Trek? Anyone? Ugh. Aliens.” Sateda flicked a crumb from his sandwich at her head and the siblings Emmagan shared a secret twin smile.

“As Dex is clearly Warf, who gets to be Picard?” Terhaan asked with a playful smile. If it wouldn't rip out her stitches, Alex would have gladly chucked her pillow at him.

“Obviously, I'm Jean Luc. None of YOU speak French.”

“Weak,” Sateda grunted, a smile coloring his voice.

“Whatever. We can't lose sleep over what could happen. We're here, and barring any—absolutely possible and probably probable—further malfunctions of the ancient tech that zapped us here in the first place, hopefully to stay. We can't expect everything that happened there to happen here. Otherwise we're going to go insane, and it's already a really short trip for Sateda, so let's not push our luck.”

“Hey!”

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Elizabeth looked forward to getting this meeting over with. Atlantis was already buzzing with rumors about their newest guests and she wanted a plan of action before things got out of hand, before the next databurst back to Earth. Five of the older refugees sat in front of her Senior Staff, preparing to relive the disaster which had brought them all to this point.

“Thank you for meeting with us. We...well, we're not really sure how to proceed. This isn't a situation that can be adequately prepared for.”

“I think we can understand that,” Alex drawled. Elizabeth studied the young woman currently speaking. She had long dark hair curling around her face and striking blue eyes. Her arm was immobilized in a sling and she looked tired. All of the children looked world weary, aged beyond their years.

“We would like to understand precisely what happened. What brought about your...situation. We realized in our debriefing last night that we don't really know your whole story,” Elizabeth requested. Even Rodney would have noticed the ripple of tension that passed through the group.

“We would like to understand precisely what happened. What brought about your...situation. We realized in our debriefing last night that we don't really know your whole story,” Elizabeth requested. Even Rodney would have noticed the ripple of tension that passed through the group.

“Of course. We'll tell you whatever you want to know. But you do realize that our presence here, in your universe, has probably already shifted your future away from the track it took with us? Further than it already was. Is. Um, also, most of us weren't born at this point in time, so we don't really know what went down, so there's...there's probably not a big advanced-warning trade off if you decide to, ah, keep us.” Alex felt slightly gratified at the uncomfortable expressions on the Senior Staff's faces. It's good to have proof they're not going to escort them off the base as soon as they're
all physically OK.

“We haven't yet discussed the situation or its ramifications,” Elizabeth recovered with a diplomatic smile. “But we would still like to hear your story so we can better understand you and your people.” Elizabeth had been in the political game for a long time. She was used to feeling studied, her every word and reaction deconstructed and evaluated. Yet she had never felt so transparent as she did now.

“Right. You'll...you understand that this isn't easy for us?” There was a deep vulnerability in her words, and Elizabeth was freshly struck with how young they all truly were. They had the bearing of the most seasoned members of her expedition, but they were still kids. Kids who had seen and experienced far too much.

“We are. We wouldn't ask you if we didn't need to know.”

“Yeah. You do.” Alex looked down at the table, collecting her thoughts and her resolve. The children seemed to draw closer, offering strength and comfort to one another. Alex pointed to each young adult at the table as a means of introduction. “Carson and I were the first children born to the Atlantis base personnel. Terhaan, Kayla, and Sateda were all born shortly after but for...ah, very different reasons. But our parents—and by parents I mean all of the adults—had recovered a cache of ZedPMs. We found four; kept three for Atlantis, sent one to Earth.”

Rodney and Zelenka immediately began yelling out questions, one right after the other without waiting for answers. The children collectively settled in to wait the fervor out. Weir finally managed to get the over eager scientists settled down.

“But Elizabeth! Four charged ZedPMs! Think about what we could do with that much power...” Rodney made a strangled whimper that had John shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He glanced up to make sure no one noticed.

“I understand that, Rodney, and there will be time to explore our options later, but we have more pressing matters at this time.” Elizabeth turned back to the children, a gentle smile on her face. “Please, continue.”

“Having three ZedPMs allowed us to power up all sorts of new systems. We had enough shield power to withstand a kamikaze Wraith hive ship. Atlantis was as safe as Pegasus could get. So the brass decided it was time to take the next step and turn Atlantis into a true colony. Of course, there were still problems. But we had full shields, full hyperdrive capabilities, and as many drones as we could manufacture.

“When I turned seventeen, the Wraith were scattered and their numbers were low. We hadn't heard from them in a long time, worlds were beginning to rebuild, people were starting to hope. There was this meteor shower one night. One of the most beautiful things I've every seen.” Her voice broke, and her nails bit into the palm of her hand as she turned inward, remembering.

“That's how the end started. The meteor shower wasn't natural. The Wraith created it. They had to have been planning it for years. There were...these things...it was like a bad horror movie, aliens falling from the sky in a meteor. They were vicious, ruthless creatures, with a physiology unlike anything we had ever seen before. They started consuming the planet. The biologists and the zoologists noticed it first, that the animals were disappearing from the planet.

“The first one got into Atlantis. It was big, and smart, and fast. They're...like roaches. They can squeeze into tight places, into cracks and under doors; they don't have a skeleton. They've got these scales over every inch of their body, interlocking cells that can be unbelievably soft and flexible, or
fit together and harden into a kind of protective covering. They've got four tentacles that...” She laughed humorlessly and gestured at her shoulder. “There's a gland that secretes an anti-coagulant. Causes their victims to bleed out.

“They don't...didn't show up on the sensors, Atlantis didn't register them. By the time we thought to recalibrate the sensors, it was too late to do any good. We called them the nazghoul. We were...God, it was horrible.” Alex swallowed, her hands clenched on the table in front of her. She couldn't get the words out.

“They multiplied at an alarming rate,” Kayla took over. “We were soon overrun. We could not risk dialing out and endangering others. They were in the ducts and wreaking havoc with the power supply and life support systems. We did not realize just how dangerous they were until they began killing us. And then the Wraith showed up, suddenly and unexpectedly.”

“They were cloaked by a perfect storm: a once-in-a-lifetime combination of solar radiation and one of the storm systems that interferes with the sensors,” Bohdan explained. “They jumped into the atmosphere—impossible, I know, and the ship disintegrated, but not before darts got away and materialized dozens of Wraith in the city. We didn't have time to raise the shield. We were...they built a shielded lab, specifically designed as a protective bunker should something like this happen. We sat there, and listened as the explosions rained over our home, listening to snippets of the radio messages, heard our parents and friends and mentors fall.” John had to clench his jaw to keep the sudden anger he felt in check. The kid's story was too much like situations they'd faced that could have so easily gone wrong.

Bohdan's voice was soft when he spoke again. “I thought it was the most awful thing imaginable, hearing that. Until everything went silent. No more chatter, not more explosions. And no one came to get us. We were there for days before we decided we had to do something; we were running out of food. I don't...I don't think we actually believed the city had fallen. Held out hope that our parents were just busy putting her back together after some last minute plan worked. When we went out—” Bohdan couldn't finish. He turned into Terhaan's embrace. Elizabeth glanced at her Senior Staff. John sat stiffly, eyes straight ahead. Keller wiped surreptitiously at her eyes. Rodney was as still as Elizabeth had ever seen him.

“There wasn't anybody left,” Alex finally continued, voice flat. Her gaze was fixed on a spot on the table. She gripped Carson's hand underneath the table. “The only things in the halls were desiccated husks and smears of blood. The chair room was gone, that entire section of the city completely destroyed. We found out later the auxiliary control room and stardrive had been destroyed as well, taken out by our own people when the Wraith stopped the self-destruct.

“With everyone dead, the Wraith concentrated on trying to recover our computer data, looking for the address to Earth, cannibalizing the technology they found. The nazghoul weren't doing the Wraith any favors, but the Wraith didn't care—they didn't plan on staying long. They were making progress in restoring our systems, had already disabled the self-destruct, killed our—the city's guardians. So we took matters into our own hands.

“We locked out the power manifold, put all of the city's energy into maintaining the shield and...we blew up the the control tower. Took out everything, even the Stargate. Blew all of the science labs as well. It was the only thing we could think of, the only way to stop them from coming, to keep Earth safe. They knew where Atlantis was now, and they knew it was undefended. There were two hive ships in orbit, and more on the way.

“In a last-ditch effort and some help from our drones, the hive ships slammed into the shields. That wiped out most of our power; a couple of the shield emitters failed and the blast took out huge
chunks of the city. The ZPMs had enough power to operate the city on standby mode for years, so we sealed the room shut. We wiped out the Wraith in the city, but we couldn't get rid of the nazgoul, who started hunting us.”

“How--” The word came out garbled and choked. Elizabeth cleared her throat. “How did you survive?”

“We migrated to the other side of the city, stashing crates of MREs and meds along the way,” Carson answered this time. “Atlantis was outfitted with enough food to feed her entire population for a year. We sowed what seeds we had in some of the hydroponic gardens. We thought we were safe that far away, that we'd be left alone until someone could rescue us. The first time they attacked, we lost…” The room was silent and still during the pause, and Carson had to struggle to remain composed. Rodney looked away in embarrassed pain; every close call, every time they'd survived by sheer luck came rushing back. Every time they'd nearly lost John on some ridiculously heroic suicide run...Beckett. His gaze flickered towards John, and their eyes met, the same collection of emotions reflected in hazel and blue. Rodney had to look away.

“They're smart.” Alex spat the words with venomous hatred, a sharp contrast to the subdued tones from before. “The nazgoul learn. They learned us, learned how to get through Atlantis. Tracked us, hunted us, used fucking tactics against us. There were...there were more of us. And no one ever came. Or if they did, we never knew. Two years and we've got eighteen left.” Carson couldn't stop the wordless sound of pain and loss, couldn't stop the shaking, couldn't stop the memories that assaulted him, the people that they'd lost. The kids, dependent on him, that he hadn't been able to protect.

“There were more,” Alex managed in a choked whisper.

Teyla had to excuse herself. Ronon listened to the whole thing stoically, though his knuckles were white where he clutched the hilt of his gun. If John sat up any straighter, his back would snap in half. There was more to the story, two years more, but no-one could find the strength to ask.

“I'd like to thank you for sharing your story,” Elizabeth said sincerely when she could trust herself to talk.

“Communication with Earth is still sporadic and short at best. The Daedalus is scheduled to arrive in three months, we'll send a message to Earth through them when they get back. Until then, I suggest we take each day as it comes.”

“We would like to know what you intend to do about your parentage,” Heightmeyer said gently.

“We have discussed this in great length,” Kayla assured them. “There are many of our...people who would like to know the men and women who would be our parents in our universe.”

“Is that a good idea?” John asked, leaning forward, a small frown on his face.

“We understand your reservations, and—”

“We don't know,” Alex interrupted, suddenly exhausted. The faster this meeting was over, the faster she could get out of this claustrophobic room. She didn't have much energy to spend on social niceties to begin with, and retelling the story of losing their people and their parents had tapped the well dry. “We don't know if it's a good idea. But...you have to understand. We never
thought we'd see any of you ever again. Not just our parents, but YOU, the people we grew up with. In any form. You're...we...the younger kids, especially, they need their parents. We've been doing alright, I think, but we're eighteen and nineteen and turning twenty. I can keep someone alive, I can kill a nazghoul with a hunting knife, but I'm not sure I can raise a traumatized three year old with PTSD."

“We have all agreed,” Terhaan said evenly, “that the desire must be mutual. We would ask both parent and child of their preference and act accordingly.”

“This is obviously a very poorly thought out plan that is bound to fail—” Rodney broke off as a heavy boot kicked him under the table.

“Yes, well, I think you'll excuse us,” Alex snapped. “In all of the ways we did imagine the impossible happening, we neglected to come up with this particular scenario.” Kayla reached over and placed a restraining hand on her friend's arm.

“The least we can do is give people the choice, Doctor McKay. On both sides,” Kayla pointed out rationally.

“What difference will it make? It's not like any of us are actually your parents. You can't expect to just launch into a relationship because you share part of a genetic code.” John had never wanted to smack Rodney so much, and Teyla looked like she just might toss her 'unflappable Alien Princess' exterior and hit Rodney with her sticks. This time, Alex laid the restraining hand on Kayla, flashing a disarming smile at Rodney. If John had needed more proof that these kids belonged to the Atlantis expedition, he had it; Rodney need time to grow on you. Like fungus.

“I'm not sure I can explain it very well,” Kayla started, but Carson jumped in.

“It's like this: say the good Colonel touched an ancient device he shouldn't have;” he started. Rodney smirked at Sheppard.

“I like this story already.” John kicked at him under the table, the blow hampered by the angle of attack. John settled for scowling and nudge Rodney with the boniest part of his elbow.

“Right, well he turns it on. It wipes out all memory of you.”

“Why me? Why not Teyla or Ronon? Or Kavanaugh's last excuse for a proof?”

“Rod-ney,” John warned, but again,. 

“Because you were the most obnoxious person around, and the machine wipes out all memories associated with that particular person,” Carson said tiredly. “He doesn't remember you, but does that negate what YOU know about him? Or feel about him? Would you just shrug and move on, find an acceptable replacement for him?”

“Huh.” Rodney looked pensive.

“Good. If we're in agreement, I'll draft an official announcement. We'll trust you to handle your...the children,” Elizabeth prompted.

“We, uh, thought the initial meetings should be private. We'll do whatever it takes to keep everyone safe and minimize the trauma. We've got enough of that to spare,” Alex said. Elizabeth nodded, looking a little worn out herself. This conversation had been one emotional tidal wave after the other, and it wasn't done yet.
“I think one more thing and we can hopefully end this conversation,” Carson said. No one missed the way Kayla stilled.

Alex sat up straighter in her chair. “We'd like...our friends who didn't...” she trailed off uncomfortably.

“They're in the morgue,” Lorne said solemnly. “We have their things.”

“We would like to bury them. On the mainland. If you'll allow us,” Carson requested.

“I'll fly them,” John volunteered. Lorne quickly seconded the offer.

“When would you like to...” The children exchanged quick looks.

“Tomorrow, if it's not too much trouble.” Sheppard was already nodding his agreement.

“Very well. I'll have Colonel Sheppard work out the details. If there's nothing else, Major Lorne will escort you to your rooms.”

“There are tissue samples in Mike's...in one of the packs. Of the nazghoul. And a research disk, everything we've managed to learn, which isn't a lot but if the Wraith try the same thing again, at least you'll be prepared. You are welcome to them,” Kayla offered.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said sincerely. “For sharing your story and trusting us to hear it.”

“We do not believe that trust is misplaced,” Kayla told her.

Lorne and a few of the marines escorted the subdued group back to the guest quarters. Carson spared a tight smile for their honor guard as they took up stations at the end of the hall.

“Do you think they will suspect anything?” Kayla asked when the marine moved out of earshot. Alex glanced at her askance.

“The devil's in the details,” Alex said wearily. “I honestly have no idea. But right now, we have some excited kids to put to bed.”
“Who wants a bed time story?” Carson asked, the strain of their meeting with the Senior Staff melting away. This was his favorite part of their nightly ritual, telling the bedtime story. Every hand in the room shot up, from the youngest to the oldest. Carson staggered back, exaggerating his surprise. “THAT MANY? Well, what do you want to hear?” Everyone started calling out suggestions.

“The one about the Furians!”

“No, Skobol and the Wise Woman!”

“Bohdan and Sateda's Naked Sprint!”

“Absolutely not!” Bohdan vetoed. Giggles floated around the room as Bohdan glared daggers at them all.

“The one about the girl who got kidnapped an, an' became good,” Scott said, tugging on his brother's pants.

“The one about the girl who became good, huh? Again?” Carson asked, grinning over at Alex. She smiled and shook her head indulgently, shifting Erin on her lap. “Everyone happy with that?” A chorus of excited yeses greeted him. “Alright then.

“Once upon a time, a group of kids who always obeyed their elders and were perfect in every way went on a trading trip with their parents. They went to this awesome planet with blue, soft grass and tall, tall trees. And when the parents went to trade, they told their children to go off and play, but not to wander too far. The blue grass looked so soft that there were children from the village playing in it. So the trader's children asked if they could play too. Do you know what the other kids said?”

“Yes!” they all yelled.

“That's right! 'Of course you can come play with us!' they said. 'Come on, we'll show you secret places in the woods!' And they raced through the woods, climbing over trees and splashing in rivers. They were having so much fun, they didn't even remember the time, and when they looked up, there were stars in the sky and the moon was big. And they were far away from the village.”

“Uh oh,” Julian whispered.

“Uh oh is right!” Carson exclaimed. “So they started running back. But it was too late—some big bad ogre found the children and took them all. He threw them over his shoulders and said in his deep, ogre voice “Ho ho hum! I found me some tasty child-er-run!” And he took the kids through the Stargate to a planet far far away. But these children, they were crafty. The ogre would try to eat them”--Carson lunged at his audience, who squealed in mock-fright--”and they would kick and fight, and their elbows would be extra pointy, and their knees extra hard and eventually the ogres gave up. And he said, “What shall I do with these meddling kids?” And he had a thought. Do you know what it was?”

“SELL THEM!”

“That's right! ‘I'll make them someone else's problem!’ the ogre decided and took them aaaallll off to market. And at this market there were all kinds of creatures. Ogres and Umberian dikhars and
“Shilli crassa witches and Baba Yagas and—”

“No Nazghouls?” Maria asked in a small voice. Carson shook his head, all dramatic seriousness.

“Nazghouls?” Maria asked in a small voice. Carson shook his head, all dramatic seriousness.

“No Nazghouls. A long time ago, all the peoples of all the worlds banded together to get rid of the Nazghouls. But there were Earth centaurs and Stimaal demons and Frith faeries and all sorts of other creatures. And the ogre stood up and roared, “Children! Getcher Children! Cheap, delicious, fun little children! Good in pie!” And creatures of all shapes and sizes came and looked. And there were two kids who were older than all the other children, and girl and a boy, and they glared at any one who came too close. One dikhar stopped and looked at the two kids glaring at him and said “Oh no, that's too much for me!” And the ogre tried to intimidate the boy and the girl, but they would have none of it, just glared at him and sharpened their elbows.

“But then, an old witch, hunched and wrinkled, walked up to the ogre. She peered at the children, at the boy and the girl. She had marks all over her body, and her eyes were older than the stars. She asked the two children, “I want just one of those kids, pick one and I’ll let the rest go.” The little girl shook her head and said—”

“Not on your life you ugly old hag!” the young children yelled out happily. Laughter spread through the group.

“That's right! But the old lady would not be deterred. She offered again, “I want just one of those kids, pick one and I'll let the rest go.” And the boy shook his head and said—”

“Not on your life you ugly old hag!”

“The old witch frowned. “I won't ask again,” she threatened. “I want just one of those kids, pick one and I'll let the rest go.” The little boy shook his head, and the witch was ready to weave a powerful spell, but the little girl stepped up and said “Take me.” The little boy was shocked and said, “No! Take me instead!” But the witch had already snatched the little girl up, and paid the ogre and took her away. And the children's parents came and found them all waiting where the witch had left them, but without the little girl. And they all went home to Atlantis, where there were no ogres.”

“But what happened to the girl?!”

“What happened to the girl?” Carson gasped. “Well the old witch was a good witch. She did great things for people. She made sure people Remembered things. And if they were really lucky, so their Memory wouldn't get Lost, she'd put a mark on her body for everyone to see. So she took the little girl and taught her about helping people Remember, and to cast spells and make marks. And the little girl thought it was beautiful and cool. The witch took her to an amazing city, completely built out of Memories. The old witch said they were things and people who would have otherwise been forgotten. It was beautiful—”

“More beautiful than 'Lantis?” Adan asked.

“JUST as beautiful,” Carson assured him. “And the little girl was amazed. She was sad when the old witch said she had to go home. She knew her parents had to miss her, but she loved the old witch and didn't want to leave the pretty city of memories. “But you can come back,” the old witch said, “and bring more memories. And tell your parents all about it. Maybe some of their memories made it to the city and they want them back.” “Can't they come and see?” the little girl asked. “No, this place is only for people who know the secret password, and you must promise never to tell it to anyone.” So the little girl promised, and the old woman gave her a special mark as a gift, and she went back to the village where her parents had gone to trade. And they called the little girl's
parents, who were so happy to see her that they only grounded her for a year.”

“A whole YEAR?” Peter asked, aghast.

Carson leaned forward conspiratorially. “It was actually two, but they only remembered about one!” All the little kids started chatting at once, asking questions and wanting to hear more of the story. Carson answered some of them, before he decided it was time for bed. Obediently, everyone climbed into their beds and pallets.

Carson had Scott tucked under one arm and Garreth under the other as he swung by Alex and Sateda.

“Bohdan and Terhaan sleeping in their own rooms tonight?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Sateda confirmed, “though I don’t think they’ll get much sleep.”

“They better not,” Alex mumbled. “Who's on first watch?”

“I am,” Sateda yawned.

“I will take second,” Kayla offered, joining their conversation.

“You don't have to,” Carson said quickly. He set Scott and Garreth on the ground as they started to squirm. “I mean, tomorrow...”

“I will not be sleeping anyway,” Kayla said softly. Carson nodded, swallowing thickly as Kayla walked off to bed between Trisha and Maria.

“Who's sleeping near Phil?” Sateda asked. Carson volunteered with a wave of his hand. “Anyone else having bad nightmares?”

“Peter is, I think, but he and Erin have something worked out. If you need back up...” Alex trailed off.

“I can handle it,” Sateda assured them. “Get some sleep.” He caught them both up in a quick hug before tucking kids into bed and moving to take up his post. Alex watched him interacting with the toddlers, a small smile easing the worry lines around her mouth and eyes.

“Not on your life you ugly old hag,” Carson whispered in Alex's ear, wrapping her in a hug. She huffed a laugh.

“I don't remember you saying that,” she said, leaning into him.

“I don't remember you saying that either,” he laughed.

“I prefer their version of events,” Alex confessed with a sigh. Carson's arms tightened around her reassuringly. He hooked his chin on her shoulder and watched their family settle into sleep. Things were so different, so unsure now that they were here, but they were safe for now.

“I wonder how we'll tell this story, years from now,” he mused.

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Sheppard stood a little ways away from the growing piles of brush and dry kindling. Eighteen and twenty year-olds building a funeral pyre. A part of his soul seethed with the injustice of it, wanted to take over so these wet-behind-the-ears (but that was a lie, wasn't it? They were more experienced
than the replacement marines the SGC had just sent) kids didn't have to bear that burden on top of everything else.

“It's comforting,” a voice said. Alex came to stand beside him, watching as her friends gracefully accepted Rodney's criticisms of their funeral pyres. Kayla and Carson were shooting the irate scientist affectionate glances while Terhaan and Sateda kept carelessly dumping armfuls of sticks on the growing pile, winding Rodney into a bigger tizzy.

“What are you...that's not going to stay up!” Rodney had shown up ten minutes before they were scheduled to take off, much to John's surprise. Teyla had seemed less shocked, nodding to Rodney as he shrugged and settled in the copilot's seat with his requisite scowl; it had to be John's imagination that Rodney's look softened just a little when Alex smiled at him in genuine thanks. “Look, you have to build it. It's not just a pile. Waitwaitwait!”

“I've never thought of funerals as comforting,” John murmured, shifting his weight. He didn't know why Alex had decided to confide in him.

“When you've watched the people around you die, had no body to bury and no time to grieve, the luxury of this ritual is comforting. We have time to say goodbye. It helps. It's...not something we've had yet.” John pulled out his aviators and put them up, a physical barrier between the palpable grief in the little clearing and memories long suppressed.

“Yeah, sorry about Rodney. He's...special.”

“Yeah, he really is. I should probably go run interference. And...thanks. You didn't have to come.”

John gave her a lopsided smile. “Yeah, well.”

Alex reached over and squeezed his shoulder lightly in thanks before running off to help her friends pile the sticks to Rodney's specifications. They had just finished, two teenagers (one John strongly suspected belonged to Radek based on the crazy hair and constantly harrowed expression) littering the pyres with flowers, when the high whine of the second jumper broke through the clearing. Lorne set down on the grass a short pace away.

The young children filed out of the craft, silent and solemn. Lorne brought up the rear, Scott nestled in his arms. John spared a brief glance for his second in command and the young child in his arms. The other five-year-old, a little boy named Garreth, promptly asked Kayla to pick him up and hid his face in her neck. The two seven-year-olds made a bee-line for Rodney. A slightly pleased flush underscored the look of sheer terror that crossed Rodney's face when the children latched on to his hand and refused to let go. Rodney stopped pretending to shake them off when the first body emerged from jumper.

Carson and Sateda carried Mike, wrapped in a colorful blanket donated by Teyla, to one of the pyres. Kayla and Terhaan carried Jason, similarly shrouded, to his final resting place. Kayla tucked the blanket tightly around her lover's shoulders. Trembling, she laid a kiss to his forehead, whispering a final goodbye.

John and Rodney watched silently as each person said goodbye, some of the children leaving a memento next to their friends. Rodney didn't even protest when his seven-year-olds reclaimed his hands, their eyes suspiciously wet. The pyres flared brightly against the darkening sky.

They told stories until the fires burned themselves out, shared their memories of Mike and Jason, two people John would never get to meet or know but who came alive for him. He knew Mike had wanted to be a doctor, made up great stories to lull the younger kids to sleep, and almost always
had a smile on his face. He heard how Jason had asked Kayla out for two months straight before she finally said yes. The kids had done what they could to make their 'date' special with the nazghoul all around and the ever-present need to be on guard. Jason had been a practical joker, loved the Denver Broncos with an unholy passion, and knew every single line from *The Princess Bride* by heart. Inconceivably.

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The next few days were a whirlwind. Amazingly enough, they had official paperwork that went along with people who appeared out of thin air, and John had to fill out at least three forms, in triplicate, for each and every one of their newest acquisitions. Not to mention issuing permanent quarters and requisitioning uniforms for each of them; not uniforms, John reminded himself *clothes*. They didn't make uniforms for five year-olds.

Sheppard let his head fall to his desk and whimpered. His hand hurt. Paperless system his ass (which also hurt from sitting in his office chair too long.)

And then a very, very long list entitled “Things John Sheppard Hasn't Thought About But Will Eventually Have to Deal With (Suck it Up)” had appeared on his desk amidst the rest of his paperwork. He'd taken one look at and almost been reduced to tears. Because SCHOOL was on there. And little things like birth certificates, IDs, licenses, growth spurts, and—John swallowed thickly—puberty. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* had a smiley face next to it, but it was *What's Going on Down There? Answers to Questions Boys Find Hard to Ask* that made John's brain hurt, which was not only underlined twice but came with a list of possible alternative titles, incase that one 'hadn't been published yet.' John was pretty sure whoever wrote the list knew exactly whether or not that book was around and was just doing this to make his life miserable.

“Are you alright, sir?” John jerked up to find his second in command looking at him, trying (and failing) to keep his amusement in check. He groaned, thrust the list towards Lorne, and dropped his head right back on his desk. It was dark and comforting there.

“Wow, this is pretty well thought out,” Lorne said, flipping to page two. “And it's good to know they still have a sense of humor.” John whimpered.

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“D'ya think they'll consider our proposition?” Danni asked excitedly. “Like, I could work in the infirmary again?”

“I'm sure they won't say no to a candy striperr. Especially if you find a uniform,” Carson teased. Danni threw a pea at his face and stuck her tongue out. Carson threw a cracker at her tongue and they both laughed when it stuck.

Sateda leaned back in his chair as they kept up a steady stream of light, mindless chatter. This was the first time they'd ventured out as a group. He could feel the curious gazes on their table, taking in the unfamiliar sight of children in Atlantis.

The older kids had spread themselves along the table, Kayla and Alex at either end. Terhaan, Carson, Sateda, and Bohdan were at equal intervals around the tables. There was an undercurrent of nervous energy, though it didn't stop them from goofing off simply because they could.

Philippp was up bringing food to some of the kids and Sateda tracked his progress across the cafeteria. He had plates of food and utensils stacked on his tray. A knot in his gut told Sateda that something was about to happen, though he couldn't guess what. Right now, Phil was the only one
of his people not within easy reach and it made him nervous.

The world slowed down.

Phil tripped and stumbled forward, things shifting on his tray. A fork slid off the edge and tumbled to the floor, the sound of it hitting loud in Sateda's ears. Phil bent to pick it up at the same time a helpful scientist reached out to steady the precariously balanced tray. The other man's shadow fell across Phil's vision and he reacted instantly.

Phil lashed out with his tray, laying the scientist out even as he scrambled back away from the perceived threat. He moved back until he hit a wall and curled in on himself, a dull eating knife clutched in one hand, chest heaving and eyes dilated.

Sateda was up and across the room as fast as he could get there. He growled at all the helpful, concerned people gathered around the groaning scientist and trying to calm Phil down.

“Get back,” he snarled in his most dangerous voice. Phil shook visibly, eyes darting from person to person. He was close to hyperventilating, and a thin trail of blood leaking from his clenched fist.

“Phil,” Sateda called out, settling right in front of the terrified boy. Phil's gaze snapped to him, seeing him but not really comprehending. He was grateful when Kayla and Terhaan showed up. Kayla settled herself a pace away from Phil and began to talk to him in soft, even tones. Sateda got up and kept people away from his friend, glowering at anyone who looked too long at them, his protective instincts in overdrive.

The shrink, Heightmeyer, showed up looking concerned. Terhaan pulled her aside to talk to her. Colonel Sheppard and Dr. Weird soon joined the conversation. Sateda stayed and held watch as Alex, Carson, and Bohdan herded the other children out of the cafeteria before they could get any more upset.

What a great way to lay the foundation for their future.

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Kayla knocked on the closed door in front of her, balancing the overflowing food tray on her hip. When no answer was forthcoming, she knocked again, louder this time.

She frowned at the barrier in front of her. Though they had slowly started sleeping in their own beds, rediscovering the luxury of private space, none of the doors to anyone's private quarters had ever been closed for more than a few hours. They were generally open wide in invitation, reinforcing the sense of community and support they had developed over the years.

But today, Philipp's door stayed shut tight, and he wasn't answering her knocks. She tried to open the door manually, but it remained close. Kayla huffed in frustration, wishing she could override the lock herself. Luckily, Bohdan stepped out of his room, on his way out.

“Bohdan, could you help me for a moment?” she asked.

“Sure. What's going on?” He glanced at the door. “Phil?”

“He has not left the room since yesterday,” Kayla confirmed.

“Shit. He lock it?”

“It would seem so, yes. Can you override the lock?”
“Yes, give me a moment.” Bohdan pulled out a set of small tools and pried off the control panel. He had the door open in a couple of minutes. “I will have to reset the locking mechanism at a later time.”

“Thank you, Dan.”

“You're welcome.” He hesitated, glancing at the door. “Do you need help?” Kayla considered the darkened room, and how Phil must be feeling.

“No. I do not think that is necessary. But thank you.”

“Alright. Tell him...” Bohdan trailed off, uncertain of what sentiments to express.

“I will let him know you are thinking of him,” Kayla assured. Bohdan nodded thankfully and went on with whatever he was doing. Kayla took a centering breath and stepped into Phil's room.

It was dark despite it being midday. A blanket hung across the window with a thin sliver of light peeking around the edges.

“Phil? I have brought food.” The door swished shut behind her, and without the light from the hall, she had to wait for her vision to adjust to the dark. She brought the lights in the room up a little, just enough to let her see where she was going. Phil was a small lump on the middle of the bed, his entire body curled underneath the blankets. Kayla placed the tray on the side table and sat down on the bed.

“Phil?” She reached out and gently shook him. Phil's reaction was violent and intense. He flailed underneath the covers, his arms and legs getting tangled in the sheets. He started making short, desperate noises, increasing in volume as he fought to get free of the bed. “Phil! Philipp! It's me, calm down!”

She pulled the bedding off of Phil, freeing his arms and legs. The tray crashed loudly to the floor when he struck it, but he didn't notice. Kayla winced as his fist struck the wall with crushing force, and Kayla was torn between subduing Phil and letting this episode play itself out. When his foot smashed into the footboard of the bed, Kayla decided that if she didn't act, Phil would most likely hurt himself.

She vaulted onto the bed, using her body weight to pin him down. She caught his wrists and crossed them over his chest, taking away any leverage he might gain against her.

“Phil, it's Kayla, I need to you to calm down, you're safe. Concentrate on my voice, relax. I need you to stop struggling. If you can do that, I will let you go. Can you do that for me Phil? Please? Philipp. You're safe. You're alright, we are all OK. That's good, Phil. Concentrate on your breathing, in and out and in. Very good. That's it.” Kayla let out a shaky breath when she felt Phil relax beneath her. She talked him through his breathing, kept up a soothing stream of words.

“I'm OK,” he finally said. Kayla carefully rolled off on the bed. Phil looked horrible. His eyes were red-rimmed. His face looked pallid and gaunt, his cheeks hollow in the dim light. He pulled his knees up to his chest, making himself as small as possible on the bed.

“What's going on, Phil?” Kayla asked. She wanted nothing more than to pull him close and chase away whatever nightmares were haunting him. But Phil's body language screamed back off, and she was wary of touching him again. Phil didn't answer, so she changed tactics. “Would you like to go get lunch? You must be hungry.” Phil shook his head. “Would you like me to get another tray?” Another negative. “Do you want anything?”
“Go 'way.” Kayla tried to think of something else to offer her young charge, but couldn't think of anything. She was concerned with Phil's mental state and increasingly disturbing actions. It scared her to see him so broken. Phil needed help, help beyond her abilities to offer. She considered her options and began formulating a plan.

“I'll be back later,” she told Phil, but didn't receive a reply. The lights were turning off even as she left the room.

Kayla tracked down her brother, who happened to be with Bohdan and Carson. Terhaan picked up on her distress immediately.

“What happened?” Terhaan asked with concern.

“Phil is very unstable. He will not come out of his room, it is dark and when I touched him...”

“We shouldn't leave him alone,” Bohdan said.

“How would we do that? Rotating shifts?” Carson asked.

“I...I do not think we are equipped to handle this. I think we need to go to Dr. Heightmeyer,” Kayla said. No one spoke for a moment.

“It's that bad?” Carson asked softly.

“I would not suggest Heightmeyer if I thought otherwise,” Kayla pointed out. “Or if I thought we were capable of keeping him safe.”

“What if they use it against us? Kick us out or, you know?” Bohdan wondered.

Terhaan sighed. “I think none of us would trade Phil's life for Atlantis. And if we cannot entrust these people with our sick, do we really want to stay?”

“Go get Dr. Heightmeyer,” Carson instructed Kayla. “I'll sit first watch with Phil.”

****

John watched a group of kids weaving through the chair in the cafeteria. In spite of inauspicious beginnings, they were settling into the routine of Atlantis. Elizabeth's main concern had been how everyone responded to the children and if the children would have trouble adjusting. She needn't have worried.

Atlantis and her people took to the children like Rodney to chocolate cake. The official memo concerning the children and where they came from, complete with The Question, had caused a flurry of excitement over Atlantis. All answers had been funneled through Heightmeyer and the combined forces of Kayla and Terhaan. An overwhelming majority of the population were eagerly waiting to hear if they were suddenly parents. Heightmeyer had been like a broken record, meeting with prospective parents and stressing the realities of the kid's situations versus the romanticized ideals everyone got swept up in. Not many people were listening. Yet.

The children had been adapting better than Heightmeyer could have hoped, according to her reports. Two weeks, and only one serious incidents had been reported. In one, a young teenager had had a panic attack, wedging himself in a corner of the cafeteria and refusing to move for hours. The twins had talked him out of his hiding place, eyes wide and fearful, hands shaking like a leaf.

Heightmeyer had assured them that the children were not a threat and that there had only been the
one incident so far was amazing in and of itself. John and the other soldiers who had seen the fallout of intense combat situations were inclined to agree.

Two knee-high tots streaked around his table, giggling madly and playing keep-away with a ball of Athosian leather. Miko shuffled behind them, a wide smile on her face. She'd certainly blossomed since being introduced to little Julian.

John was kind of jealous. None of the kids really hung around him. Their eyes tended to get really big, and they all went shy. He had no idea what to make of that. But those who had answered the City-wide e-mail in the positive—or like Teyla and Lorne, had no real choice in the matter—were forging bonds.

Lorne was bonding with Scott; they'd been almost inseparable since the rescue. The little five-year-old would sprint up to Lorne every time the Major entered a room, asking to be picked up and keeping up a steady stream of excited kiddie-babble the whole time. Lorne glowed, a permanent smile etched on his face. Things were a little more tense with Carson, though that was probably to be expected.

John's instincts had been right about Zelenka; the Czech scientist had a kid with the same crazy hair and a penchant for forgetting proper English when he got excited or stressed. Radek and Bohdan had taken their new situation in stride, jabbering on in Czech about...whatever they talked about. According to Zelenka's latest report, Bohdan had a flair for electrical engineering and mathematics. Most of the children had been raised in the labs of Atlantis and were intimately familiar with the way they worked. Zelenka was working with the elder tier of the kids on a petition for Elizabeth to let them all start helping in the labs.

A peal of delighted laughter echoed through the mess, and John couldn't not look. The children were losing their gaunt refugee look, the cooks doubling up on their portions and sneaking them extra cookies and desserts that John pretended not to see. They were laughing more, starting to relax. As someone who'd seen the ravages of war, John had known what to look for. The panic attacks, the shyness, assessing every room for enemies. The marines he posted at the guest hall had told him about the nightmares they'd overheard. He never assigned anyone to guard duty two nights in a row.

The clatter of Rodney's tray interrupted his thoughts.

“Oh God, they've got you,” Rodney groaned, scowling down at his food. Everything on his plate had a green tinge to it.

“What?”

“The undeveloped life forms that seem to have entranced everyone on Atlantis! You haven't noticed? Everyone's gone kid crazy. And my staff has gotten—I know this is shocking—dumber. They coo and giggle and...God, Miko was gushing yesterday. All they want to do is go play with the ankle biters. They don't even bother to proofread their work anymore, which never did all that much for them in the first place, but at least they made some sort of concession to their raging incompetence and Sheppard!” John snapped his attention back to Rodney, who'd turned a brilliant shade of red. John grinned; Rodney made a pretty picture in red. (He could imagine Rodney red for other reasons...)

“Sorry, they're just...you know.” He gestured towards the cavorting kids. Rodney looked at him in disbelief.

“No, I do not know.”
“They're kids, Rodney.”

“Oh, now we're stating the obvious, are we? That's the sign of an inferior mind, as if we needed MORE proof.” John rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“They're not that bad.” Rodney stuffed his face with green definitely-not-chicken. John leaned back and smirked. “At least your staff has someone to play with now.”

Rodney paused. “That's a fair point.”

****

Kayla knocked on the unfamiliar door, Terhaan hovering behind her. He appeared calm, but she knew he was incredibly nervous. Sometimes she wished she had inherited their mother's calm exterior.

The door opened at their first request, a younger version of their mother on the other side. Kayla had a moment of dissonance when the woman smiled invitingly and bade them enter.

Her quarters were soothing, a combination of Athosian tapestries, candles, and items appropriated from allies and travel. A familiar picture stood next to the bed: Atlantis's flagship team grinning at the camera. Kayla had seen it many times growing up, and ran her fingers over its surface.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation,” Teyla said with a bow.

“Thank you for extending it,” Terhaan murmured with equal formality. He reached out and gently clasped her arm, bending at the waist so their foreheads could touch. Kayla stepped in after to repeat the gesture of friendship.

“I have prepared tea, would you care for some?” These were rituals they knew well, traditions handed down through the generations. Kayla was grateful for their familiarity, allowing it to wash away her disquiet. They sipped their tea in silence, sharing in the savory taste of their shared heritage.

“Have the rooms satisfied all of your needs?” Teyla asked with a gentle smile.

“Oh yes, they have been most appreciated. We are not accustomed to real beds after so long, and some of the younger children find it disquieting to be in separate rooms, but...for the first time in a long while, we rest at ease each night,” Terhaan answered.

“You have not encountered many problems with the transition?” Kayla and Terhaan exchanged a glance.

“There are those of us who cannot sleep without seeing images of the nazghoul or the Wraith. There are those who will not leave our rooms.” Kayla placed her tea on the ground, signaling her earnestness. In answer, Teyla wrapped her hands around her own cup and rested her hands in her lap, denoting her receptivity and attention. “Some of our people are troubled, and we are concerned that their actions may be misconstrued or used as a means to deport us to Earth.”

Teyla leaned back and frowned in concentration, trying to determine what advice she could give. She still did not fully understand the Lantean culture. They could be unpredictable and rigid about the most inconsequential matters.

“I am confident that Dr. Weir and Colonel Sheppard will support your petition to stay in Atlantis. They are both good people with good hearts. I am still somewhat baffled by their complex chain of
command, but from what I have observed of the organization called the IOA, this support is instrumental in the decision-making process. They would be more inclined to accept you if you contribute to the city.”

“Bohdan has discussed this extensively,” Kayla said. “He is a skilled scientist, and has a base of knowledge twenty years ahead of where Doctors McKay and Zelenka are today. He has already begun working on a proposal with Dr. Zelenka. While Dan is by far the most advanced of us scientifically, we all call Atlantis home; there are a good many skills that we have grown up with that would benefit the people here.”

“I will, as the Lanteans say, put an insect in Dr. Weir's ear about this matter.” Terhaan smiled and Kayla giggled.

“I believe the expression is 'put a bug' in someone's ear,” Kayla said. Teyla nodded with the utmost gravity.

“I shall make a note of it.” Both of the twins burst into giggles, and Teyla's eyes sparkled. Seizing the moment, Teyla placed one hand over each of the twins'.

“I am honored to have met you both.” Life was something to be embraced and celebrated in a universe threatened by Wraith; it had not taken much meditation for Teyla to remember that fact. “And I would like to know you better.”

****

“Teyla indicated Dr. Weir was intrigued by the idea,” Terhaan said.

“Yes, I get that, but this is Bohdan's thing. He and Zelenka have been making charts and graphs and lists of duties. He should talk to Dr. Weir about it,” Alex said.

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Bohdan said, “but you are much more persuasive than I.”

“You and Dr. Z have been through this entire thing; you have sample schedules and are writing placement tests for us. That's pretty persuasive,” Alex argued. “You should go, you know what this is about. This is...Doctor Elizabeth Weir.”

“Yes, I get that, but this is Bohdan's thing. He and Zelenka have been making charts and graphs and lists of duties. He should talk to Dr. Weir about it,” Alex said.

You are backing down because she makes you nervous?” Carson asked in surprise.

“No, it's just that you want me to go and negotiate jobs with the fabled first leader of Atlantis, who, by the way, has no reason to keep us here and even less reason to let twenty year-olds without credentials work in a top secret, potentially deadly laboratory!”

“We may not have credentials, but we were trained by the people who run the labs. We were educated on Atlantis—practically and theoretically. That makes us very qualified,” Bohdan argued.

“They see us as a bunch of scared, traumatized kids!”

“A view we must change if we wish to stay! Why don't you want to do this?” Bohdan asked. Alex's jaw tightened and she stared out the window, refusing to answer and ignoring the silent communication between the others in the room.

She took a deep breath, forcing away the tangle knot of irritation and mulishness. She was acting irrationally. She knew it, logically. This was a big deal, their ticket to staying here, and she should be all over it.
“I’m gonna need to look at your charts,” Alex sighed. “And your reports and—God, I have to do homework again.”

“I will write you a song to help you remember the key points,” Bohdan said smugly. “Would you prefer your mnemonic device in odd time or double time?” Alex whimpered.

---

Elizabeth was catching up on some translations when someone knocked on her door. Setting down her stylus, she was surprised when Alex walked into her office. As far as she knew, the children had been keeping to themselves, adjusting to their new life and eating everything in sight.

“Alex, hello. Please, sit down. What can I do for you?” The young girl flashed Dr. Weir a grateful smile and settled herself into one of the chairs, slouching comfortably in the hard plastic.

“Thank you, Dr. Weir. I hope I’m not interrupting?”

“Oh, no, I was just catching up on some translations. It's never ending.” She got a wide, knowing grin with a touch of mischief sparkling in Alex's eyes.

“Scholas labur ani nunqum compleo,” she murmured.

“You speak Ancient?” Elizabeth asked with surprise. Alex looked taken aback by the question, as if she'd never considered it.

“We all do. We speak and read it. We grew up here. On Atlantis.” Elizabeth took a moment to think, really think, about what it would mean to grow up in Atlantis, amongst the remnants of the Ancient's legacy and the best scientific minds in two galaxies.

Alex watched Dr. Weir digest the new information. As she suspected, these people only superficially understood what they'd been saying about growing up in Atlantis.

“Do you understand the operating systems as well?” Elizabeth thought she saw a flash of triumph cross the girl's face before her face was overtaken by earnestness.

“That's one thing I wanted to discuss with you,” Alex said eagerly. “Naturally, some of the younger kids haven't learned to read yet. But the rest of us have a valuable skill set. We know this city, her systems, her temperament. We grew up operating like apprentices, helping the different departments out. Like interns, if you will. We can't just be a dead weight. We're smart and capable; we can work for you, with you. If nothing else, we can help with the translation backlogs. I'm almost certain a few of us could engineer a better, faster translation program to help with your workload, not to mention help you wade through the database, maybe help out in a few of the science labs.”

“I understand,” Elizabeth said, holding up her hand. “I really do. I'll think about it, talk to the department heads and get their input.” Alex's smile was brilliant. That smile could be dangerous, Elizabeth thought, even as she responded in kind.

“Thank you. You have no idea...we never though that something like this would...” There was a wealth of emotion and meaning in the truncated sentence. Alex cleared her throat and started again. “We're still getting used to everything, but soon people are going to start going stir crazy, and that's not going to be a pretty sight.”

“You said there was something else?” she coached.
“Yes. This part is...kind of off the record.” Elizabeth leaned back, a bit wary at this turn in the conversation. “It’s about our parents. Or, more accurately, our genetic lineage. We were talking and...well, uh, things happen. This is Pegasus. Someone might end up needing, um, a bone marrow transplant or develop some rare genetic disorder, and it would be nice to know if there’s a good donor nearby.” Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully.

“I believe someone else would be better suited than me. Someone with the proper expertise to make good use of such information,” Elizabeth said diplomatically.

“We’ll take that into consideration if we decide to move forward with this. I was thinking about asking Doctor Keller if she had any suggestions,” Alex said nonchalantly.

“That would probably be best,” Elizabeth agreed. She enjoyed negotiating while not negotiating.

“So when do we hear about the jobs?” she asked, bouncing in her seat.

“I'll talk to Rodney. But you won't get paid, not unless we can convince the SGC to hire you and that would take—”

“Paperwork in triplicate. We don't care about payment. This...this is our home. I've never been on Earth longer than a month at any given time. We just...we want...” Elizabeth reached over and touched Alex's hand gently.

“We'll work it out.”

****

“You want me to WHAT?” Elizabeth sighed.

“Calm down, Rodney. They're not going to bite you.”

“Are you insane? They're CHILDREN. Of course they bite!” John rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair, effectively zoning out of the conversation. He'd said his part, done his token Rodney-calming already; this was Elizabeth's deal now.

“The labs are one thing, I can give them all to the botanists where they can't do any harm but you want me to SOCIALIZE with them? During my free time?!”

“What free time?” John muttered under his breath.

“Dr. Weir's suggestion makes sense, Rodney,” Teyla admonished. “Especially considering Philipp’s episode. We have agreed that they will stay with us, and this will help ease their minds on that front. We also need to ascertain their skills and abilities in order to determine their place in Atlantis.”

“Why me? I hate kids!”

“They're twenty, Rodney, I don't think they count as 'kids' anymore,” John muttered.

“It's not just you, Rodney,” Elizabeth pointed out. “I want you all to get to know the older...young adults.”

“It still begs the question WHY ME?” Rodney demanded, crossing his arms and scowling.

“Sheppard can tell if they're a threat, you can tell if they're smart, Teyla can help 'em make friends,” Ronon said.
“Well...yes, there is that,” Weir said. “But I want you to get to know them, as well. Mentor them, give them someone to talk to if they need it.” Rodney snorted derisively, and John tried to conjure up the image of Rodney being someone's mentor.

“You want me to mentor some snot-nosed Next Gen who assumes Tsiolkovsky is a depressed Russian author!”

“Next Gen?” Elizabeth asked, the hint of a smile lurking about her lips.

“It's a Star Trek reference,” John pointed out helpfully.

“Yes, thank you Captain Kirk,” Rodney snapped.

“I believe this to be a wise and productive course of action. It will give us a chance to assess their abilities and to cultivate trust on both sides,” Teyla said.

“Thank you, Teyla,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Rodney, what has your examination of the device that did this uncovered?”

“We can't bring it back to study it properly since it's built into the lab, but I turned off its independent power source. We shouldn't be getting anymore surprise visitors since the device needs two active contact points to work. Since it's an incredibly advance piece of technology that moves matter between universes, it accounts for matter drift. So the universe isn't going to implode.”

“That's wonderful news, Rodney,” Elizabeth said. The conversation lulled after that, the matter of the Next Gens talked out for the moment.

“If we are ready to move on,” Teyla ventured, “I would like to discuss the upcoming mission with Neeld.”

“You've heard back from them?” Elizabeth asked excitedly. The Neeldari were a very influential race in the Pegasus galaxy, but incredibly selective about who they allied with. They had a shield over their Stargate, which made it impossible to visit their world without an express invitation. Some of Teyla's people had been approached by Neeldari representatives regarding a meeting with the people of Lantea.

“They are prepared to offer us a meeting on the Neeldari home world,” Teyla said, her own excitement coloring her voice. Rodney rolled his eyes and defaulted a game of Prime-Not Prime with Sheppard to stay awake, promptly tuning out the conversation around them.

“What should we expect?” Elizabeth queried, leaning forward in her chair.

“I am not sure. In my lifetime, they have taken no new allies; most of their relationships are longstanding. They are a very proud race, with a very rigid code of conduct. Were this mission to be successful, Atlantis would profit greatly.”

“Is your team an acceptable first contact group?” Elizabeth wondered.

“Yes. Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay are well known to them, both through their actions outside of Atlantis and their position within the city. The Neeld are honored by their inclusion. Ronon and I are considered...I believe you would call us 'cultural attachés.'”

“That sounds great, Teyla. I'd like a report on everything you know about these people in the morning.”
“Do we have to?” Rodney whined, eyeballing their intended table.

“Yes, Rodney, we do.” Teyla's voice was filled with steel and promised many a painful stick session should he not be on his best behavior. “We have been given this responsibility by Elizabeth.”

“But...why not tomorrow? Tomorrow would be perfect, it's supposed to be sunny out.”

“It is sunny now,” Teyla said stubbornly. John nudged him forward.

“It'll be fine,” he whispered, and Rodney could feel John's breath skate along his neck. “If you're really good--” Rodney closed his eyes, his overactive brain flitting through a thousand different scenarios--“I'll give you my dessert.”

“Yeah, um OK.” Teyla pursed her lips, unconvinced by his sudden change of heart, but Rodney just shrugged and allowed her to led him towards the table.

Their arrival was met with silence and five pairs of unblinking eyes.

“May we join you?” Teyla asked solemnly.

“Of course!” one of the girls said. They shuffled over a bit and John pulled Rodney into a seat beside him. An awkward silence descended over the table, no one quite sure where to start.

“How are you handling the transition? Are you comfortable?” Teyla asked.

“The rooms are great, it's nice to sleep on a real mattress again!” Carson said enthusiastically.

“Carson loves to sleep,” Kayla teased. She didn't miss the brief flicker of discomfort that crossed Dr. McKay's face. The Carson Beckett of this universe had just recently been killed, and the pain of his loss still a palpable thing.

“Yeah, well, some of us appreciate the finer things in life, Kayla,” Carson said snappishly. He stuck his tongue out at his friend. Kayla arched an eyebrow in a fair imitation of Teyla, then flicked a piece of lettuce at him. It hit Carson smack in the middle of the forehead and stuck. Ronon seemed amused by their antics and started flinging little bits of lettuce at Rodney, who huffed testily.

“So Kayla. Teyla. What's up with the name thing?” John asked, stealing a fry off Rodney's plate while Ronon distracted him. Rodney ed to remain stony and irritated, but John could tell his front was cracking.

“Kayla is my daughter, and as such is named after me,” Teyla answered with a fond look at Kayla.

“Oh yes, the originality is astounding. Kayla, Teyla. All you have to do is change the consonant and voila, insta baby name. I'll name my first child Sodney.”

“Twins are an unexpected blessing in much of Pegasus, Rodney,” Teyla told him sternly. Rodney suppressed a sigh; Teyla was in lecture mode, which meant he was in for a treatise on certain traditions of the Athosian people and why it was important to them that all really meant stop judging my people or I'll beat you with sticks. “The names of twins are chosen to honor their parents.”
“So...you know who their father is?” Rodney asked, jerking his thumb towards the Teyla-twins. Teyla looked sideways at her otherworldly offspring with a secret smile.

“There are not many candidates,” she said softly. Rodney shuddered; Teyla looked almost...twitterpated. The twins in question ducked their heads and smiled at their food.

“I would hate to be named after my parents. I'd be upset that they procreated in the first place, except they did give the world me and I guess, to a lesser extent, Jeannie. But she went and married an English Major, so I'm not so sure anymore.”

“At least we were not named by committee,” Kayla said nonchalantly, and all the younger eyes snapped to Alex. She stared pointedly at her food, ignoring everyone around her.

“A committee? That's...actually kind of brilliant,” Rodney marveled. All the kids started laughing, except for Alex, who did not look amused. “What? Seriously, I've been told that names can dictate a person's future and personalities. So if my child ends up royally fucked up or a mass murdering psycho or, god forbid, a soft scientist, at least I can blame it on a collection of other people.”

“We're actually in agreement about that,” Alex muttered darkly. Carson choked on his drink trying to contain his laughter.

“I think this is the point where you tell us WHY you were named by committee,” John broke in. Alex tried to change the subject, but her friends made it apparent that if she didn't suck it up and tell the story they would.

“Alright, fine, OK. I'll tell the story. So I was...kind of a surprise.” Amused chuckles spread through the group of kids, and all of the SGC personnel got the impression there was something more to that statement. Alex glared them into submission, and John thought she looked a little like Rodney in that moment. “My parents weren't really ready--”

“They had nine months to prepare! The sheer amount of research one could do in nine months would at least--”

“They weren't. Ready.” Rodney subsided under Alex's arched look, just short of being a glare. “They definitely weren't ready to name me. I think they thought fate was playing a big trick on them when the doc handed them a girl. Anyways, they couldn't settle on a name. They bickered about it for weeks. They were going to name me Carson, but then HE was born first and stole my name. Which meant my name was 'hey you' for like, the first month of my life.”

“Better than the alternative,” Sateda said with a grin.

“What were some of the suggestions?” John asked, interest piqued. Alex rolled her eyes and rocked her chair back on two legs.

“Lessee. There was Hypatia—“

“That's a great name with a noble background, especially for a woman,” Rodney said. “The first independent female mathematician who made any sort of recorded advances in the field. She taught math and philosophy, wrote three major treatises on geometry and algebra and one on astronomy, invented the astrolabe and planisphere. People addressed her as The Philosopher! She —“

“Died violently by oyster!” Alex protested.

“Perhaps not the most auspicious namesake considering the galaxy we currently reside in,”
Rodney conceded.

"Ya think?" Alex asked sarcastically.

"Right, well, carry on."

Alex rolled her eyes and did just that. "I think one of the other choices was something that could be easily bastardized into Flutie." Everyone looked at John.

"What?" John asked defensively. "I wouldn't name a girl Flutie!"

"I sincerely hope you wouldn't name a boy Flutie," Alex groaned before continuing. "There was Gaetana, Rosalind, Tall, Akira, Lucretia, Raquel, Sybilla, Courtney, Florence, Donna--"

"Those last ones don't seem too bad," Rodney offered. Alex fixed him with a haughty look.

"Do I strike you as a Donna? Or a Florence? Or a--"

"Well...maybe not."

"Exactly. So after the whole of the expedition waited with bated breath to know the name of the second child born on Atlantis for 10,000 years...everyone got fed up with waiting, drew straws to see who'd get to name me, and the linguists won."

"The linguists?" Rodney asked, appalled. "Your parents let a group of LINGUISTS name you? I'm amazed you didn't end up with some ridiculous horrible name--"

"Worse than Sybilla, Flutie, or Gaetana?"

"Ah, well..."

"They named me Alexandra, which means helper and defender of mankind in Greek. And my middle name is Beckett." Silence fell over the table, and Rodney found it difficult to swallow.

"Kind of perfect," Ronon decided with a nod.

"Carson..." Rodney trailed off, not sure he could voice the question. It hurt just to think of it. He felt John shift beside him, felt the smallest increase of warmth.

"It happened the same way in our universe," she said, glancing at her her Carson, whose attention was directed at the tabletop. "A few weeks before we were born, Carson and I. We're both named after him."

"I can think of no better way to honor Carson Beckett than to celebrate new life." Teyla raised her glass. "I am told it is tradition to...toast?" Everyone raised their glasses.

"To Carson," Rodney said. If it came out thick and choked, no one mentioned it.

"To Carson," they all echoed, glasses clinking together.
Radek swore as he scrolled through his calculations again. There was a mistake somewhere, but he couldn't find it. “Zkurvysyne!”

“Problém?” Radek looked up to see Bohdan gazing curiously at him.

“There is a flaw in my equation that eludes me,” he sighed. Radek eyed Bohdan's computer. “Was there something you need?”

“Oh, no, I've just been familiarizing myself with the base code; it's quite different than when I learned. But I believe I can suggest some patches that may help. Especially with the waste management and water systems.” Radek perked up, because those two particular systems were the most finicky in Atlantis. Bohdan put the computer down between them. “See, here? There is a disconnect between our operating system and the Atlantis base code. But this”--Bohdan brought a different window to the forefront--“would take care of many of the translation problems.”

Radek scrolled quickly through the code. It was very well done, a blending of Ancient coding and their Earth systems. “Yes, it is much more elegant than the current system. Can you do this with other systems as well?”

“Yes. I enjoy coding, but I did not want to overstep my boundaries. I do not know how much access to the server I am allowed.”

“How much do you have now?” Radek asked.

Bohdan blushed and ducked his head. “Technically? Shared folders.”

“You hacked your internet connection?” Radek sounded more amused than anything else.

“Only a little.” They shared a smile.

“Continue what you are doing, it will be very helpful.” Bohdan nodded enthusiastically and shut down his machine. “How is the internship coordination coming?”

“Oh, very well! Most of the departments are very interested. It is matching us with things we want to do that is the most challenging. I hope to have a final list for Dr. Weir by the end of this week,” Bohdan replied.

“Excellent!”

Bohdan smiled again and tucked his computer under his arm.

“I would like...”

“I was wondering...” Bohdan gestured at Radek to go first. “Would you like to eat dinner with me? I am very interested in hearing more about the advances we made in your universe.”

“I would love to,” Bohdan said sincerely. They stood awkwardly for a moment, Bohdan waiting for a time and Zelenka's mind playing catch up with his impromptu invitation.

“Oh! Tonight at nine? Er, 2100?”

“That would be lovely.” Bohdan paused, considering whether it would be rude to invite someone...
else along. He wasn't sure if Radek's goal was to get to know him or truly find out about twenty years worth of advancements. Probably both, but if the former, then Terhaan was a part of getting to know him. “May I bring Terhaan?” Radek looked startled by the question. “He is my boyfriend.”

“I would very much like to meet him,” Radek said simply.

----

Bohdan had a great time watching Terhaan run around their room, sorting through the clothes the expedition donated to them.

“Do not laugh at me!”

“I am not laughing at you, I am laughing with you,” Bohdan said seriously, managing to keep the smile off his face.

“Dan! This is not funny.”

“That is where you are very wrong,” Dan said. Terhaan sent a pointed look Bohdan's way and rifled through the pile of clothes again. “Terhaan. It's not a big deal!”

Terhaan stared at Bohdan.

“Perhaps it is a small deal,” Bohdan conceded. “But I'm sure he will overlook your clothes. He is aware of our situation.”

They were only ten minutes late to dinner, since Terhaan decided to troll through all of the other clothes caches spread throughout their rooms. They bickered to hide their nerves on the walk to the crew quarters, in the midst of arguing about something inane when Terhaan caught a flash of someone small and slender darting down a hall.

“What's wrong?” He turned his attention back to Bohdan, who looked at him with worry.

“Nothing. I thought...it is nothing.” Terhaan smiled and laid his hand on the small of Bohdan's back. “Will you please promise to keep the scientific talk to a minimum?”

----

Alex swore as she tried to find a long sleeve shirt that fit amongst the donated clothing the Atlantis personnel had scraped together. They really needed to get this stuff sorted, because she was running late and that would not make a good impression.

“God fucking DAMN it!” She finally settled on something several sizes too big, cut to fit a man. Throwing it on and clipping her hair back, she nearly barreled into Terhaan as she ran out of her room. “Dude, sorry, I'm late.”

“We need to talk,” Terhaan said without preamble.

“Um. OK.” Alex glanced at the clock and resigned herself to being late. She followed Terhaan to one of the common rooms and perched on a chair. “So. What's wrong?”

“I...” Terhaan sighed and rubbed his eyes. He looked lost, and Alex stilled, filled with apprehension. Terhaan was a rock, stalwart and unflagging. He didn't get lost. He always took things in stride, and Alex really didn't want to think about what might happen if he suddenly took a
“Terhaan?” Some of her nervousness must have carried into her voice, because he immediately reassured her.

“I am fine. No worse than yesterday.” She relaxed into the chair. “But Sarah is not.”

“Sarah? What happened? Is she...” Alex hesitated to finish like Phil. One kid with severe PTSD and depression was hard to deal with. Two sets of suicide watches was more than she wanted to contemplate.

“No. Nothing like that. I was walking with Bohdan to Dr. Zelenka's room, and I thought I saw a child come out of one the rooms on that hall. I decided to hang around and see what was going on. A few days later, I caught Sarah on the hall lurking outside of the room.”

Alex leaned forward. “OK. Weird. What was she doing?”

“The room belongs to Chuck Campbell.”

“Oh.” Alex sat back. “Shit.”

“Yes. I looked through some of her belongings. She has hidden some of his things under her bed. There are also times when she disappears from the hall. Around the time his shift would be ending, he took lunch, or during his down time.”

“Are you telling me Sarah's stalking this universe's Chuck Campbell?” Alex asked tiredly.

“It would appear so.” Alex groaned and closed her eyes, wishing fervently that she hadn't gotten out of bed this morning.

“Alright. Thank you for that. What do you think I can do about it?”

“I don't expect you to 'do' anything,” Terhaan said irritably, “that you do not already do. I thought someone else should know, and keep an eye out for unusual activity. I have already asked Bohdan to give her an assignment with one of the departments to try and keep her occupied.”

“You know, Kayla can totally take care of these things. Or Carson. They're better at it.”

“Kayla would want to talk to Sarah, and I do not feel confrontation would help at this point. And Carson is coming to terms with this world's Major Lorne. I thought it would be tactless to tell him about Sarah's own problems when his concentration is elsewhere.”

“Oh.”

Terhaan's expression sharpened. “He is quite apprehensive about going to see Major Lorne tonight. Have you talked to him about this?”

“What? Yeah, of course, I know all about his Lorne angst.” A worried knot of suspicion settled in Terhaan's gut. Both Alex and Carson were acting oddly towards one another. Perhaps understandable given their new situation, but now that Terhaan thought about it, he hadn't seen them alone together since they got here. Or alone with Sateda. When they were running, the trio had ensured they had what little privacy could be spared at least once a week. It seemed odd they had less time for one another when they no longer had to be so alert.

“Hey, I gotta run, I'm late,” Alex said, and insincere smile pasted to her face. “I'll keep my eye on
Sarah though, alright?"

“Thank you. Have a good day, Alex,” he called after her.

“Yeah, you too,” was her distracted response.

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Lorne dropped his head in his hands, desperately trying to convince himself that this conversation wasn't happening.

“David I—“ he stopped abruptly, mind blank. What the hell was he going to say, 'I've got kids from another universe who I want to get to know, would you like to meet them and maybe play house'? He looked over at Parrish, the man he was hopelessly in love with, trying to convey everything he felt but didn't have the words to express.

They'd been together almost since he'd arrived on Atlantis. Evan didn't usually do relationships; his job made that kind of connection difficult to maintain, and the stress of keeping it hidden grated. But Dr. David Parrish had countered every one of Lorne's protests, broken every rule he set up for himself, and somewhere along the line become the most important person in Evan's life.

“Evan, I can't...” David choked on his words and Evan wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around his lover and hold on. “I can't...do this. I can't watch you with them. I can't...hold you back.”

God, Lorne would give anything, destroy anyone, to take the broken tone out of David's voice.

“You're not...there's no one else;” he swore vehemently.

“Not yet.” He said it so softly Lorne almost missed it.

“David--”

“No.” The tone was firm and unyielding. “I can do the math. You deserve two kids and...whoever can give them to you.” Lorne wasn't generally given to dramatic romantic statements, but all he wanted to do was whatever it took to convince David that he didn't—and would never—want someone else. They'd been through so much—and not just the connection that came with being on a gate team together, life-or-death a reality every day.

“They're not from this universe! Who knows what happened there?”

“Does it matter? There are years between them, Evan.” Parrish flushed and looked away, misery echoed in every line of his body. The thought had occurred to him. “And you couldn't even tell me.”

Lorne flinched, felt himself flush in shame. He should've told David the day the kids showed up and Scott latched on to him, instead of waiting for the Atlantis grapevine to catch up with the gossip. Honestly, he was surprised it had taken this long for David to confront him. Or maybe it hadn't. He'd been extremely busy the last couple of weeks, settling the kids in; he'd barely seen his lover. If David had been holding on to the information for all this time, waiting...

His door chime was loud, and his heart broke a little more when David moved back automatically, out of sight from the door so no one would see him. Lorne opened the door angrily and the panel slid away to reveal Carson and Scott hovering at the threshold.

The little boy gurgled a happy “Daddy!” and moved towards Lorne; Carson read the distress on
Lorne's face and held Scott back as he tried to rush into the room. Scott whined and Carson shushed him gently.

“We can come back later,” Carson offered, a fake smile plastered on his face. Lorne sagged with relief, thankful for the young man's tact. He'd obviously been raised well. He and David would work this out, and everything would be fine.

David's voice shattered his tenuous resolve.

“It's alright, I was just leaving.” Carson's eyes widened in surprise, but it was Scott's delighted “Papa!” that hit Lorne like a ton of bricks.

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Carson hovered uncertainly by the door, eyes darting around the room rabbit-quick. David Parrish sat on the end of the bed staring at Scott with wide, disbelieving eyes. Scott hummed happily on his lap, hands fisted in David's shirt.

“Could you, uh, explain that again?” the scientist asked faintly. He ran a hand through the soft hair on Scott's head, trying to wrap his brain around the amazing impossibility of the situation. Of Scott. He could see it in the boy's face, in his features, a perfect blend of him and Evan. Their son.

“Uh, sure.” Carson cleared his throat, glancing between Parrish and Scott. “There's this device in one of the unexplored areas. The teams exploring that section found them on standby, couldn't figure out what they did. But if two people got too close, it turns on, and there's this...compulsion to touch, which is how we found out they were incubation chambers. You touch them and then poof, seven months later, you have a baby.” He smiled at his little brother. “As you can tell, it doesn't discriminate based on gender.”

Parrish marveled at the delicate life in his arms. His son. Somewhere, in an infinite number of universes, he and Evan were living openly and had a family. Had a son. He glanced up at Carson hovering protectively nearby. “What about you?” Carson smiled wryly.

“I was a mistake.” Lorne made a sound of protest, but Carson waved him off. “I'm not just saying that. It's kind of a running joke. People's reactions are great. Dad—uh, you,” Carson indicated Evan, “was part of the team that discovered the chambers, one of the people that got caught in the compulsion field. He and this marine touched the activation pads and...well. I never met the other guy, you two were already...together. But the, uh, marine didn't want anything to do with me. Don't Ask Don't Tell was still in effect, and he didn't want anything like...that...hanging over him or on his record.” Carson fidgeted nervously, glancing at Parrish. “He gave me up and you...you're the only Papa I've ever had. Dad and Papa, me, and then Scott.” Carson ducked his head and blushed. David fought back the urge to give the boy a giant hug, unsure of how it would be received. “The Air Force had a bitch of a time figuring out how to make us legitimate. At least it was easier for Scott since I paved the way.”

“If that's true, then who's the us?” David asked. It was funny to watch how Carson's eyes widened and his mouth dropped into a perfect 'O' of surprised consternation. Lorne grinned at his son's slip; if his story was true and there were two incubation chambers, only one other person was same age as Carson.

“Who are Alex's parents?” he asked with a grin. Carson blushed and shook his head. “Come on, we're certainly not going to tell.” Lorne pulled out his most winning grin. Carson hemmed and hawed, but eventually swayed. He sighed and mumbled something almost unintelligible.
Lorne gaped.

David laughed.

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Bohdan walked into the common room with his assignment pad and an armful of files. Several of his people were lounging around, reading things or watching the television Colonel Sheppard had requisitioned for them from somewhere.

“Carson?” he called.

“Hey Dan, what's up?”

“What did Major Lorne say about the possibility of training with the Marines?”

“Oh, he thought it was a pretty good idea, I can jump in with one of the newbie groups off the Daedalus. Except for the weapons training. He wants to regulate that himself. So yeah. I'm good to go. And if everything goes well, he said he'd talk to Sheppard about adding a couple of spots,” Carson said enthusiastically.

“That's wonderful.” Bohdan carefully wrote 'Marine Intern' next to Carson's name. All of the young adults in their group were working with different departments of Atlantis, contributing their accumulated knowledge to what they hoped was their new home. All except for one. “Alex, how are you today?” Bohdan flashed her a salesman's grin when she slowly shifted her gaze from her book to his face.

“Bohdan,” she greeted warily.

“After considerable thought, I have decided you would be a most welcome addition to the Physics Department. You start tomorrow at 1000 hours.” Alex stared at Bohdan for a moment.

“How much thought did you put into this?” she asked.

“Considerable,” Bohdan stressed in annoyance. “I myself am working in Engineering.”

“Yes, but you want to be a brilliant engineer!”

“Yes, and? You enjoy math and physics,” Bohdan pointed out.

“It's a hobby! It's like, my second major in college.”

Carson snorted and said, “You didn't want to leave Pegasus for college. And second major? After what?”

“English,” she responded haughtily. Carson muttered something that sounded surly, so she turned her attention back to Bohdan. “Regardless, I'm way out of practice. Don't have the base knowledge.” Bohdan rolled his eyes at the false humility and blatant lie.

“You have twenty years of theoretical breakthroughs at your disposal, hobby or not. Your only other area of interest lies with the Anthropologists, who ask many questions you do not want to answer,” Bohdan said pointedly. When Alex groaned and threw her book on the floor, Bohdan knew he had won. “But since you are concerned, I took the liberties of getting you reading material.” He dropped his armful of physics paper on Alex's lap.

“You must be joking.”
“There are more in the shared Science Department network subfolder,” Bohdan informed her happily. “Ask if you need help finding them. Remember, 1000 hours, do not be late!”

Rodney slammed his empty coffee cup on the lab table, scowling at the fritzy ancient device that wouldn't turn on. This day sucked. He poked at the stupid whatever-it-was and thought ON very, very sternly.

Nothing.

Rodney glared at the device and thought work.

He tried thinking it in Ancient. That, too, yielded no result. He scanned it again just to make sure that, yes, it had an active power source and, yes, it should turn on for him. But no, the device stayed cold and unresponsive. Oh, now if Sheppard were here, the stupid thing would be falling over itself to roll over and do tricks. And John would get that happy look in his eyes and pet and coo and have a freaky gene pow-wow with the pretty piece of Ancient tech. (Rodney was not jealous of Atlantis, no not at all.) Rodney poked the machine in a half-hearted attempt, because maybe—just maybe—it would turn on this time.

“The definition of insanity is repeating the same action over and over and expecting different results,” a voice told him.

“No, the definition of insanity is making thought-controlled machines that only work for mutant freaks of nature whose family inbred so much he expressed a long-dormant, synthetically engineered gene that barely 2% of the population has recessively!” Rodney emphasized his point by slamming the offending tech down against the surface. He held his breath to see if any bomb-like lights lit up on the surface.

“So...is this a bad time?” Alex asked. Rodney growled and pointed at the girl-shaped nuisance invading his lab.

“Get out! Out! I don't have the time to deal with a lab brat, I have enough of them pretending to be scientists. I don't need you too. Go bother the soft scientists. Biology or something.” Zelenka glared at Rodney; this was his side project, integrating the Next Gens into the labs, and he did not appreciate Rodney's caustic attitude. Plus, he and Heightmeyer had already given Rodney a stern talk about treading carefully around the fragile Next Gens.

Zelenka cast an apologetic glance at Alex, but she was rolling her eyes good-naturedly at Rodney's antics, a small, indulgent grin on her face. She pulled her hand from behind her back and presented Rodney with a steaming cup of...

“Is that...Hawaiian Kona?” Rodney asked breathlessly, his eyes dilating. He snatched the cup up and took a reverent sip of the perfectly brewed coffee, making a series of noises that made Radek quite uncomfortable. Zelenka wondered how any of the Children had found their way into the Atlantis black market so soon.

“This what you were working on?” Alex asked and reached over to Rodney's machine.

“Don't tou—” It lit up in her hand, flashing a series of brilliant hues.

Every color of the rainbow swirled beautifully before coalescing into a beautiful abstract mash of color. The picture was three dimensional, the surface an overlay of blues, grays, and pale pink-purples. As Zelenka peered closer, the surface colors parted and he saw more color swirling
beneath it. Tall pillars of dark, desaturated colors clashed with a tarnished gold sea; in the center was a swirling spot of red that looked like spilled blood, reminiscent of Jupiter's Red Spot; there was a slash of yellow that looked angry and sick, but it plunged downward, through several other layers and bled into a brilliant, healthy swirl of peacock blue and hunter green that influenced the entire picture.

“Cool,” Alex murmured. She sensed the possibility of change and concentrated on the little machine in her hand, trying to get the colors to shift. The pattern held despite her effort. Mentally shrugging, she let her eyes drift over to the two scientists, who were staring at the swirl of pretty colors. She smiled, the warm buzz of contentment blossoming in her chest.

“Beautiful!” Radek gasped. The surface colors shifted and swirled, settling into an red-tinged purple canvas, large cracks of silver-grey and deep red spiraling out from the center of a molten whirl of yellow-orange-red.

“Oh,” Alex said softly. She quickly turned the machine off and laid it carefully on the lab table. “It, uh, reflects emotions. I think. Heightmeyer would like it.” She avoided Zelenka's assessing gaze.

“Oh my God, you're a light switch!” Rodney crowed ecstatically, free of the hauntingly beautiful images. He grabbed the girl by the arm and dragged her to the stool, victory rising up in his breast; after years of asking, he had his very own naturally-expressed ATA gene light switch! “You. Sit there. I'm requisitioning you for Science Department use. Elizabeth gave you to us, so I don't have to share you with any of the other departments, you're MINE, no one else gets you, they can go recruit their own rug rats to use because I have my own. Go through these--” he plunked an overflowing box on the desk in front of her “--and tell me what they do. You survived two years on your own and grew up around Ancient technology, I'm trusting you to not blow us up or turn anyone into a cat. This is actually more than my accredited scientists can be trusted to do, and they have PhD's, but I still hold out hope because otherwise I'd get less sleep than I already do now. Go, do the work that's beneath me.”

“I don't think the Ancients had cats,” Alex felt compelled to point out.

“Sit down and earn the air you're breathing.” Rodney was pleased to see his light switch shrug and get to work.

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Lightswitch by @Berlinghoff79

Alex sighed as she rifled through the box. There was nothing new or unusual here; most of these devices she recognized on sight, and the equation on the whiteboard taunted her. It was so very, very wrong. Glaringly wrong. Like, wrong in the placement of the second integer wrong. Her fingers itched to fix it, but she forced her attention back to the box of Ancient crap, trying to open her mind to the familiar sense of Ancient tech.

She grit her teeth in frustration as thoughts kept invading her mental space, making the identifying process unnecessarily difficult. It was hard to appear happy and carefree when her thoughts wouldn't go away. Like how Philipp wasn't doing well. He had nightmares the whole hall could hear, and she knew their marine guards were reporting everything to the Senior Staff.

Peter had started crying when this universe's Dr. Kavanaugh walked through the mess, fists buried
in Sateda's shirt. Erin, who had been all of five when her parents died and didn't really remember, followed her brother's lead and refused to stop crying until he did. Peter been hollow-eyed and shrunken for days afterwards, and wouldn't go anywhere without Kayla or Sateda as an escort.

Sarah was still stalking this universe's Chuck Campbell, who was only a gate technician here and didn't THAT just beat all? She didn't think anyone else but Terhaan realized what was going on, and that was only because he'd caught her doing it. Maria definitely didn't know. Alex wasn't sure if Maria would kick her big sister's ass or join in on the stalking. Bohdan had recently listed Sarah first on the list for linguist's intern, which would hopefully keep the pre-teen out of trouble. Maybe Sgt. Campbell would be one of those who wanted to know they suddenly had children running around Atlantis.

All of that was cake compared to Trisha. Trisha still acted like they lived in a war zone, always on high alert and jumpy. Alex could appreciate that; you didn't spend two years acting like every sound heralded your death and come out Miss Mary Sunshine. But with Trisha...something had to give there. She hadn't been easy before the apocalypse, and Alex didn't want to think about the imminent explosion. Terhaan thought Trisha just needed time to cool off and grow up. Personally, Alex thought two years of living life-or-death as your day-to-day existence was about the biggest fucking wake up call anyone could ever face, and if Trisha hadn't grown up in their years on the run, this place, populated by strangers with familiar faces, wasn't going to help that much.

Alex sighed and was intensely thankful that Scott, Garreth, Julian, Adan, and Elora were all under five and therefore still fairly manageable. Give her under-five babysitting duty any day. She loved her family, but temper tantrums and complex emotional issues were Kayla, Carson, and Terhaan's purview.

Her sleeve caught on the side of the box. Alex stared at the raised mark it revealed, disappearing up her arm. Other people's words filled her mind, memories and stories. She wrenched her shirt way and covered the mark angrily. She hadn't thought about them in years. She saw them when she dressed, but she didn't contemplate the stories behind them, acknowledge them in any way beyond they're there. Definitely didn't think about the inherent responsibility of them. Guilt mixed in with the anger, but she forced it aside because now was not the time.

With her thoughts swirling around her people and the issues surrounding their sudden turn of good fortune, it took Alex over an hour to sort the contents of the box. It was far more taxing than it should have been.

There were a couple of broken devices she could fix in her free time, but there wasn't much she could do for the dead ones; mini-power sources were beyond her capabilities. But when her hand brushed against a small bracelet and she felt the distinctive hum of Ancient energy, she grinned. Oh, this could be extremely useful. She fiddled with the bracelet as a devious plan formed in her head. After all, she had the benefit of twenty years of history on the people of this Atlantis; shouldn't she use her powers to make a few of them blissfully happy? It was the least she could do to thank them for being so hospitable.

She ignored the annoying voice in her head that accused her of being selfish. Everything in life can be construed as selfish if you cast it in the right light.

“Hey Rodney I...oh. Hey, what are you doing in here?” Alex closed her fist around the bracelet and turned towards the voice. This was just too perfect. She stuck a welcoming, easy smile on her face and turned towards the Colonel. She could start working on her super secret project right away.

John Sheppard hadn't changed much with the years or the universes. A little thinner, fewer lines around the eyes...many more dark hairs. No kids around to turn him grey. Yet. But his eyes still
sparkled hazel-green, and he still had that aura of dorky cool around him. And Alex would bet dollars to doughnuts that ferris wheels are still the third coolest things in the world (though he'd say second after anything that flies, but only because he hadn't actually done number one yet).

“I've been requisitioned by the Science Department to be their official Light Switch.” John's face fell a little at that, a quick flash of hurt that he hid well but didn't pass Alex's notice. Oh, he'd so be writing her thank you notes for the rest of his life if her little plan worked. On embossed bone white paper in proper calligraphy.

“Cool. Found anything fun?” John leaned back against the table—Rodney's table—where Alex had set up shop. John firmly tamped down on the petty part of himself that hated her for taking away his best excuse to hang around the labs. She shrugged and held up a small bracelet with blue and green crystals inlaid on it.

“Just this.” John reached out and touched one of the shiny green shards. The crystals glowed green-blue, but the energy faded before he could figure out what the bracelet actually did. Alex slipped it onto her slim wrist, holding it up so the light reflected off it. “Used to have one back home. Fun little toy.” Before he could ask what it did, Weir called him to a meeting. Smiling a little at Alex, he darted off towards the control tower.

Alex watched him go with a smirk. Phase One complete. Now all she needed was one surly astrophysicist for phases two and three.

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Rodney got a moron-free hour and half of work done before the Light Switch appeared by his workstation, a considerably diminished pile of devices in the box. She plunked it down by his computer, blithely ignored his scowl, and started pulling the things out.

“We've got a mood ring; picture projector, good for use with schematics; soil analyzer, the geologists will go crazy and owe you a big one; personal shield version 1.2; REM cortical stimulator; Ancient equivalent of a spray can, it'll turn the walls pretty colors for a couple of days. This is part of something bigger. It's operational but useless without the other part, and I can't figure out what it's supposed to do without the other half so...that's about it.”

“A mood ring? Really?” Alex gave him a weird look.

“Not where I thought you'd go first, but yeah, for real. It's that thing you couldn't turn on earlier. It changes colors as your mood shifts; you'd have to experiment to understand it though, and the colors don't mean the same thing for—”

“Personal shield?”

“Needs a battery, but I could probably scavenge one from somewhere else if I had some time.”

“That's your newest project, go go,” Rodney said dismissively.

“Now this,” Alex continued as if Rodney hadn't even spoken, “is my favorite. It gives you REALLY vivid, uber awesome dreams. We're talking I-think-I-just-lived-my-biggest-fantasy type dreams.” She laid the bracelet in Rodney's outstretched hand. It flared blue-green in his palm, and he felt the tickle of Ancient Tech in the back of his mind. “It stimulates the pleasure center a little, eases you into a fairly natural sleep. You sleep a solid six hours or so, great dreams, no hangover. Works better than a sleeping pill. And if that's all, I'm gonna take off.”

Zelenka chose that moment to need Rodney's attention immediately. Much to Alex's delight,
Rodney absently pocketed the bracelet before heading off to fix Atlantis, muttering about his incompetent staff. Hopefully, he'd forget about the little toy. Phase Two complete, Phase Three in process, outcome to be determined. Alex hummed contentedly as she made her way to the cafeteria.

“You look pleased,” Sateda said suspiciously. Alex grinned and pressed an exuberant kiss to his lips.

“This could end badly,” Kayla murmured.

“It will not,” Alex declared, snagging one of Sateda's fries and feeling extremely pleased with herself. “Operation Gerojo Togo has commenced.”

“Ger-roe-jho...toe-go?” Terhaan asked, mystified.

“Get Rodney and John Together,” Sateda clarified.

“Really?” Kayla asked skeptically. Alex arched a challenging eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“You seem very...optimistic.”

“What's THAT supposed to mean?” The males at the table subtly drew away from Kayla and Alex. Carson, who had been heading for their table, changed course and headed for more neutral ground, ignoring Sateda's glare and silently-mouthed 'coward.'

“I did not mean to imply anything untoward about your—”

“You know, sometimes your diplomacy comes off as condescension,” Alex told her. Kayla's eyes narrowed dangerously. They glared at one another, tension thick and palpable. For all that they acted like everything was fine and dandy, the strangeness of this place—things being so similarly different—was getting to all of them.

Alex and Kayla squared off on opposite sides of the table, tense and unyielding. Terhaan's eyes darted from his sister to his friend. The last time Kayla and Alex had fought, really fought, their group had almost split down the middle. They couldn't afford to have the leadership divided while their future was still so precarious.

“This is neither the world nor the people we once knew, Alexandra. You would do well to remember it.”

“It is hard to forget, Kayla Satall.”

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Rodney stumbled into his room at...late. Ridiculously late. Or maybe it was early? He shook his head; his eyes were so gritty and blurry that he couldn't read his clock. He shucked off his shoes and collapsed on his bed with a groan, asleep within moments and completely unaware of the green pulsing glow in his pocket.

“Huh.” John looks around the beautiful, empty, room. This is the strangest dream he's ever had. Most of his dreams are swirling messes of impressions with a solid image in the center of the mass, like a bright star around which all his other thoughts revolve. More often than not, that 'star' is
Rodney. But tonight...tonight he's dreaming about decadent rooms decorated in luxurious middle-eastern styles, lush rugs and tapestries adorning the walls. John looks down and finds himself outfitted in a pair of sheer silk pants slung low on his hips and a loose linen shirt, open to display his chest and stomach.

He wanders over to one of the intricately woven tapestries. He feels the tips of his ears heat up. The entire wall is covered with pictures that could have come straight out of the kama sutra. Women with women, men with women, men with men...it's all there, vivid and lifelike on the walls. A soft tinkling sound draws his attention from the wall and he can't stop the sharp gasp at the sight that greets him.

Rodney is dressed like a sheikh. A patterned headpiece matches a beautiful blue robe that opens at the waist and shows off Rodney's muscular, linen-encased legs. Rodney's barefoot and has a sword. Rodney has an actual sword. It's unbelievably hot, even though Rodney's currently taking in his attire and scowling.

"Rodney," John breathes out and forgets how to think when those blue eyes pin him in place. Rodney's eyes roam John's body, taking in every detail and storing it away for future use. John is...and that outfit is...and he is...

"I would make you a harem girl," is what comes out of Rodney's mouth. John's mouth quirks up, hazel eyes dancing, and Rodney is so thankful that this is a dream, his dream, because fuck. John moves over to the bed and sprawls bonelessly on his back, looking like sex personified. He spreads his legs, the clinging silk of his pants outlining everything, and props himself up on his arms, beckoning Rodney.

"If I'm the harem girl, what are you doing over there?" When Rodney's jaw drops open and his eyes turn black, John decides that this is quite possibly the best damn dream ever.

"I...I'm...not sure?" John smirks and crooks a finger at his sheikh, laughing when Rodney stumbles towards him as if stunned, but unable to deny John anything. His final stumble brings him crashing on top of John, their faces inches apart.


For his part, Rodney's pretty sure he should be weirded out that dream-John likes Eskimo kisses, but he doesn't really care as long as dream-John keeps touching him.

"You're hot," John murmurs, and Rodney can't stop the snort. Sheppard smirks, and enjoys the way Rodney's eyes get really wide when he tucks his hand into the waist of Rodney's pants, caressing the smooth skin of his ass. Rodney's suddenly achingly aware of his reaction to the situation, dream or not, and of John's answering state. When John feels Rodney's arousal, he jerks, eyes darting from Rodney's face to his lips and back, waiting for Rodney to meet him half way.

Rodney's frozen for an impossible moment, before he slowly lowers his head, down down down until his lips brush against John's waiting ones. For a moment, the world is silent. Then everything comes crashing back, and Rodney's on sensory overload, his heart pounding in his chest, the scent of John surrounding him. He dives in again, more eager and demanding. A tongue snakes into his mouth, sinfully seductive, and Rodney moans low in his throat. John's hand clutches at him, squeezing his ass and grinding their erections together.

Rodney woke up with a gasp, painfully aroused and depressingly alone, the remnants of a dream
his only company.

Across Atlantis, John jerked up as the dream dissipated around him, Rodney's warmth fading into wakefulness. John sighed heavily and threw an arm across his face, the dull ache in his groin bringing him back to reality. It was only a dream.
“Doctor Keller.” Jennifer looked up from her paperwork. Keeping unofficial records was a lot of work, especially when they couldn't be saved on any computer hooked up to the Atlantis network.

“Hey, Kayla, how are you?” The young woman had one of the young children in her arms.

“I am fine, thank you.”

“And who's this beautiful little girl with you, hmm?” The child squealed delightedly as Jennifer started tickling her, squirming in Kayla's grasp. She had the most unusual violet-colored eyes and a well-loved, well worn teddy bear with no eyes or nose.

“This is Elora Dannin of the Pyrithi.”

“Well it's wonderful to meet you Elora,” Jennifer said cheerily, ruffling the three-year-old's hair. Kayla whispered something to the youngster.

“You too.” Elora blushed and buried her head in Kayla's shoulder; Jennifer felt a soft flutter in her chest at the childish tone of voice. Elora's hair felt soft and downy. Jennifer wanted to gather her up and hold her.

“Is something wrong? She doesn't feel hot or look sick...”

“No, nothing is wrong. May we talk for a moment?” Kayla took the child to one side of the room and placed her on the ground to play. Jennifer gave the toddler a plastic pan to play with. Elora was happily banging the pan against the ground, clutching her teddy with her other hand.

“What's up?”

“I have spoken with Dr. Heightmeyer, and she felt that I would be the best person to explain Elora's situation.”

“Her situation?”

“Yes. She is not from Earth; as I said, she is Pyrithi. Their people were culled to extinction in our universe. She was the only survivor we found, so we brought her home. Our Dr. Keller adopted Elora Dannin in accordance with Earth customs.” Jennifer sat down hard, her eyes straying to the playing child.

“I was...a mom?”

“A very good one,” Kayla said with a smile. “We estimated her age at six months when she was first rescued. Shadows chased across Kayla's face.” “You—our Jennifer Keller did not have long with her daughter before the nazghoul came. But their bond was as true as any of the blood relationships here.”

Jennifer's gaze never wavered from the fragile child playing quietly on the ground. She was beautiful and perfect but...she wasn't sure she was ready to be a mother. When she'd answered 'yes' on the query e-mail, she hadn't truly expected it to go anywhere. Especially after Terhaan and Carson had come to her and revealed everyone's parentage.

But this? This was huge. This was a life completely dependent on her, a little girl with violet eyes.
“Can we...get to know each other? I know I said I wanted to be told, but I'm not sure if I'm ready.”

Kayla smiled encouragingly. “Of course. You are not the first who has had second thoughts.”


“We do not have the luxury of choosing not to know. Trisha is...troubled.” Jennifer looked at Kayla, unsurprised. No one could come through what they had without 'troubles.' “No, you misunderstand; Trisha was troubled before. She has always been overly suspicious and malcontent. Her relationship with Captain LeVine was not ideal; we counseled against the meeting, but she remained adamant about talking to the Lieutenant regardless of his answer to the questionnaire. It is my hope that the incident has not done any lasting damage.”

“From what I've heard, most people are still pretty sympathetic. You've all been through a lot. We're all rooting for you,” Keller assured.

“We appreciate that.”

“So what about the rest of you?”

“Dr. Heightmeyer is very good at what she does. She has been helping everyone with the integration process. There are some, like Bohdan and Dr. Zelenka, who have become quite good friends. There is great tension between Sateda and Ronon Dex, and it bothers Sateda though he will not say it. But these problems are not as grave as they could be. We are all adapting, and your people have been most graciously accommodating.” Jennifer smiled and Elora's happy babble pulled their attention back to her.

“So tell me a little about Elora Dannin.”

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Rodney collapsed in his chair, whimpering in happiness. It was pancake day in the mess, and he'd made it here before Ronon. Real pancakes with real eggs and real grade-A Canadian syrup. Life was glorious.

He laid out his utensils with exceeding care. The fork, the sharpened knife, and his carafe of syrup, warmed by the kitchen staff. A side of strawberry-like fruit and some butter. He leaned forward and inhaled the heady aroma of fluffy, perfectly browned pancakes. Carefully, he cut a perfect bit of perfect pancake away: just big enough for him to really taste the pancakes whilst leaving the maximum amount pancake behind for future savory bites. It was a precise science, honed from years of careful practice and experimentation.

Rodney was just about to take his first bite when Ronon walked up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey McKay.” Rodney watched mournfully as his perfect bite of perfect pancake tumbled off his fork and on to his plate, landing in a puddle of syrup. His formerly perfect bite was now far too syrupy.

“Ronon, can't you see Rodney was having a moment?” Rodney fought the blush that threatened to rise upon hearing John's voice. His vivid dream from the night before came rushing back to him, every little...and not so little...detail flashing before him in technicolor. He could still hear John's voice, low and rough with arousal, feel the phantom touch of fingers on heated skin.

Rodney schooled his features into a scowl and viciously speared his non-perfect, soggy bite of
pancake, stuffing it into his mouth and sucking all the syrup off his fork. He missed the slight flush of John's cheeks and the hitch in his breath. The way John's tongue darted out as he watched a golden drop of syrup crawl down Rodney's lip.

A loud shriek of laughter caught their attention. A group of younger Next Gens streaked through the mess, fighting each other to get to the front of the pancake line. The serving staff were enamored with the little terrors, piling towering plates of pancakes on their trays. Rodney watched as the older Next Gens herded the kids to the tables the group had claimed as theirs, balancing full plates and sticky syrup with few casualties.

Teyla watched the children with an indulgent expression, and John smiled softly. Rodney rolled his eyes and resumed the holy rite of eating his pancakes.

“Ronon?” It was Teyla's 'I sense something is amiss' tone, and it was enough to make Rodney pay attention if not forsake his precious food. Ronon, oddly, ignored his food in favor of studying the kids. A few of the children had discovered that Ronon made a wonderful jungle gym, and he'd let them climb on him all day as long as they didn't tug on his hair too hard. He could just be feeling overly protective.

“Something wrong, buddy?” John asked, looking relaxed, but Rodney had long ago learned to tell when John was on edge. Ronon shrugged, but didn't relax.

“Ronon,” Teyla said softly, laying one hand on Ronon's arm. He looked to Teyla, then glanced at the kids.

“Maybe nothing. Later.” Teyla studied him for a moment longer, then nodded in acceptance. John glanced at Rodney, who got the impression John was looking for something. So Rodney shrugged, jerked his head towards Ronon, and shrugged again.

For whatever reason, this seemed to pacify Sheppard, and Rodney got to enjoy the rest of his pancakes in peace.

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John gingerly fingered the gash on his brow. Ronon prowled around him, waiting for Sheppard to recuperate enough to allow Ronon to continue beating the hell out of him. John wondered what was eating at Ronon, and how long it would take before Ronon would talk to him about it. John braced for the force of Ronon's blows.

“This about the kid?” John asked warily. Ronon had some unspecified issues with Sateda. Both he and Teyla had tried to figure out why the boy bothered Ronon so much, but had be unsuccessful so far. Ronon growled and laid John on his ass, sticks clacking loudly as Ronon upended him. John coughed weakly, trying to remind his lungs that they knew how to draw breath.

“No,” Ronon said. John pulled himself up with a shrug. He was willing to play this part for as long as Ronon needed him to. He understood clarity through physical exertion well enough. Ronon would either work through what was bothering him on his own or start answering John's questions.

The next time he ended up on his ass, John signaled for a water break. He watched Ronon from the corner of his eye and tried to determine if he would respond to another question.

“What was that thing at the table?” John asked casually, his body language telling Ronon that he wouldn't push the issue if Ronon didn't want to answer. Ronon chugged an entire bottle of water before turning to John.
“Alex.” Ronon stalked to the center of the mat and raised his sticks. John groaned and followed, reminding himself that this was productive and good for him. He lasted three minutes, mostly because Ronon wanted to practice a series of intricate, precise moves that he needed John perfectly positioned for.

“What about Alex?” John asked as he rubbed his abused hip.

“She's always covered.” John yelped as Ronon laid a reproving smack against John's upper thighs. He glared at Ronon, who shrugged unapologetically. John really should have better concentration.

“What do you mean?” Ronon finally gave up the pretext of training, laying the Bantos sticks down.

“Long sleeves, long pants, jackets. All the time.” John cast his thoughts back. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember seeing her in a t-shirt or any of the Athosian clothes Teyla's people had donated. He frowned, remembering the girl's unwillingness to allow Dr. Keller to cut off her shirt when they'd first rescued the Next Gens.

“You're right.” Covered, and one time when one of the scientists had touched her, she'd nearly broken his arm. John came to a chilling conclusion. “You think assault? Reaction to trauma?” Ronon shrugged, but his expression gave a different answer. “Torture?”

John found he had a good deal more aggression after their conversation.

****

Their room was dark and silent when Alex got home, an increasingly routine happening as the days wore on. They were all leading their own lives, and the intersection was drifting away. She dropped her jacket on the floor and toed off her shoes. She opened the closet and stared at the neat row of clothes hanging there. Hers, Carson's, and Sateda's. At least she knew Carson had been here at some point. He was a neat freak, forever cleaning up after them.

This should be the answer to their prayers. They weren't running for their lives anymore. The kids could grow up. Would grow up. And they got to stay on Atlantis. Maybe, if the IOA and SGC let them.

Alex tried to shake off her somber thoughts. A hot shower and a good night's sleep would make it better. At least she'd have the energy to put on her Happy Face for tomorrow. She stripped of her clothes, dropping them in a pile by the shower. The water snapped on, steam rising in the small room.

She was just about to climb in when she caught sight of herself in the mirror. She raised a hand and mapped the changes in her face on the smooth glass. A furrow in her brow. Permanent bags under her eyes; she'd lucked out somewhere because they weren't the dark and heavy kind. Just some puffiness easily overlooked unless she tilted her head just so or the lighting was right. Her cheekbones were more pronounced, weight lost that she hadn't gained back yet. Maybe never would. Her tongue snuck out and licked the metallic-tasting split in her lip that never really went away. She worried it constantly, opening and reopening the small wound. A small scar on her chin, faded with time.

Overall, she looked...like the person she used to be. The person she channeled every time she stepped outside of this room. One day, someone was going to look at her and see the truth underneath the face she wore. But not until after the IOA. She could do this, her people needed her.

She dropped her hand to her side, accidentally knocking a glass off the sink.
Glass shattered everywhere, pinging off the ground, slicing into exposed skin. People started screaming, panicked wails and frantic yelling.

Something hot and sticky splashed across her torso. She looked down, trying to make sense of the slash of red on her clothes. A shadow passed over her and she looked up in time to see the tentacle arching towards her. She rolled just in time to avoid getting skewered.

A flood of adrenaline brought the room into sharp focus. There were bodies on the floor staring up sightlessly, blood smeared along the walls. The scent of gunpowder heavy in the air, and the sharp retort of machine guns mingled with the screams of the dying.

Peter standing against a wall crying, a blanket clutched in his hands.

Peter in her arms and black ichor coating her shirt.

They ran through the corridors, panicked bodies pressed around them.

Jason blew up a hall behind them; the shrapnel dug into her calf.

Carson stumbled, unable to stop his forward momentum. He had holes in his stomach and thigh. Blood seeped out of him, too fast, too much.

Peter whimpered in her ear.

She wanted to go home.

Water swirled down the drain at one end of the shower, tinged pink.

She could still smell the gunpowder.

Alex studied her hand with a dispassionate curiosity, her limbs heavy and listless. Bright red blood dripped down her palm and over her arm, winding its way around until the water from the shower swept it away. The pads of her fingers were pruned. She didn't remember getting into the shower or cutting her hand. (A mathematician confided)

Get up.

She should probably get out of the shower. Bandage her hand. She didn't want to. But she didn't have a choice. (That a Mobius band is one-sided)

Get Dressed. (And you'll get quite a laugh)

People needed her. She had to be tough, keep fighting. They had a plan and she had to play her part. (If you cut it in half)

Survive. (For it stays in one piece when divided.)

By the time she shrugged into pants and a long sleeve shirt, the lethargy had changed into restlessness. The thump of her shoe falling to the floor made her pulse jump and breath catch.

Focus. (A mathematician confided...)

There was a lump in the bed when she slipped out of the bathroom. Carson, arm wrapped around a pillow. For a second, she thought about crawling into bed and seeking solace from him. But no. He had his own problems, didn't need hers. And he was sleeping soundly for once. She'd take care of this.
John was restless and couldn't sleep, his conversation with Ronon playing over in his head. He was beginning to realize how much of the Next Gens' story they didn't know, how much of their experience couldn't be described in one staff meeting. Had the Wraith gotten ahold of some of the kids? What were they planning on doing when their food ran out?

He tossed and turned for hours before giving up. He threw back the covers and stepped into an old pair of worn sweatpants. John silently slipped out of his room and headed away from the populated areas, towards the unused sections he wandered around when he need to stop thinking and just be.

Atlantis felt different at night. She seemed more accessible when there weren't people up and about, and walking around calmed him better than any of Keller's pills.

He ran his fingers across the wall, enjoying the hum of the city against his skin. He closed his eyes and walked, followed the curve of the hallway by sense memory and touch alone. He turned a corner and ran smack into a body that shouldn't be there.

“Oh!” He reached out and steadied the teetering figure.

“Sorry!” He blinked and jerked back. Alex blinked owlishly at him, the corner of her mouth quirked down in an impossible way. He took in her attire and frowned; a long-sleeve shirt over long sleep pants, despite the warm evening air. She looked troubled and pale.

“How'd you get past security?” John asked suspiciously. She ducked her head and looked up at him coyly, all traces of anguish wiped away.

“Trade secret?” she suggested with an ingratiating grin. John felt his lips tug in an answering grin, something in his chest loosening a bit. He leaned against the wall and smirked.

“Come here often?”

She chuckled at the line. “Kinda. When I can't sleep this...calms me.” She ran a hand reverently over a patch of hall. “My Dad...” Her voice trailed off, throat too tight for words. She traced something on the wall between them. “We used to do this. Wander around Atlantis when the insomnia got too bad. It was our...thing.”

John understood that too. Horses had been the only subject he'd ever been able to discuss with his father without it turning into a screaming match.

“I can go back. Sorry about sneaking out, I won't do it again.”

“Nah, it's fine. At least if you're here, I'll know where you are.” Alex's smiled, grateful and warm. They started walking, letting their feet wander where they would. They ended up on one of Atlantis's many balconies, looking over a city bathed in moonlight. Alex leaned against the railing, taking in the beautiful sight of a whole and unscarred Atlantis.
Ronon sank further into the shadows of the mess, eyes never wavering from the group of young people on the other side. He'd been shadowing them since Weir had recalled their guard, officially sanctioning their integration into Atlantis.

The kids tried to eat together, all eighteen of them, at least once a week. Their banquets had grown exponentially as some of the children reunited with their 'parents' and the adults joined the festivities. Others had been adopted into groups of people, bonds that splintered out and connected the children with all of Atlantis.

He shifted as laughter echoed loudly through the cavernous room. That was one positive to the situation: the Lanteans laughed more with the children around. He and Teyla were pleased to see the children integrating into the society. The presence of young signaled a willingness to stay, gave the adults a greater sense of ownership. They were less likely to see this as a posting and more as a permanent place to live.

Kayla caught his gaze and beckoned him in invitation. Ronon shook his head curtly, surprised that she had noticed his perusal.

Moments later, the dark eyes of the boy who bore his family mark sought him out. Ronon felt anger surge through him, memories long buried under years of running trying to resurface. He held the boy’s gaze evenly, not giving anything away. A Lantean scientist walked between them, breaking their connection. Ronon bared his teeth at the boy one last time, satisfied when he turned away, jaw tight.

Ronon glanced back at the table and was accosted by twin gazes of displeasure. Teyla's twins had certainly inherited her ability to convey a wealth of disapproval in one look.

“Kayla, Terhaan.” Kayla broke away from her stare-down with Ronon to cast Alex a disgruntled look. “Leave him alone.”

“He is--”

“I know. I'm going to talk to him.” Kayla arched an eyebrow.

“How are you going to do that? And what do you plan to say?” she asked. Alex pulled her long hair up into a messy bun, flashing them a glimpse of the mark behind her left ear.

“You forget I Keep the memories of the dead. He's got more than enough of those. Don't wait up.” She grabbed a slice of the kinda-cheesecake they'd bribed the kitchen staff for and headed over to Ronon's table. He sat up a little straighter as she approached, eyeing her warily. “Ronon,” she said pleasantly.

“Alex,” he greeted. She laid out her offering in front of him, complete with fork. Ronon eyed the dessert like it might bite him. She leaned back and smirked at him challengingly, a familiar look. He'd studied every one of the children in detail: the way they moved, the words they chose, the way they smelled. He was certain he could match each child to their respective parents—provided he had met them. Carson and Alex had been frustrating, Ronon trying to rationalize what his senses were telling him. Teyla had pointed out they were in the city of the Ancestors, where anything was possible.

Alex watched him with amusement as he inhaled the cheesecake. She shifted in her seat and deliberately angled her head so that Ronon would have an unobstructed view of her left ear. Ronon
looked up from his dessert and froze. Behind her left ear was a tattoo that matched the one on his neck. He reached out automatically to touch the mark of his House, dark against her pale skin.

“Nahakat leehal a’an.”

By the time Ronon came back to himself, her scent was already fading.

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He found her sitting on one of the smaller piers, feet dangling over the edge. There were flowers and strips of cloth at her side, her hands weaving them together in an intricate, familiar pattern that made him ache for his home, for Sateda. Ronon hesitated on the threshold before sitting down next to her.

She didn't try to fill the silence with chatter, or try to make him say something. It was...refreshing. Many of these people from Earth talked aggressively about nothing and missed everything. He leaned back and watched her, trying to figure out how she came to bear his family mark and know the Summoning Words of his House, the ones that called him here and honor-bound him to hear what she had to say.

Alex continued weaving the cloth and flowers together, creating a tapestry of flora and color that gleamed under the Lantean sun. She layered the strips of cloth together, a riot of lively hues that spoke of life and love and happiness. Her creation started to take form, a conical cup of tightly-woven strips.

Ronon's fingers brushed against the purple Athosian silk that could only have come from Teyla. He picked up the length of cloth and threaded it into the center spiral of Alex's creation, starting a similar weaving that would work counterpoint to hers.

“I asked for the mathe when I was eight,” she said softly. “I saw the mark on your neck, and asked my Dad about what it meant. He explained what he knew of Satedan Houses and family Clans. Once I understood, I marched out of the room, tracked you down, and demanded you give me one.” She stopped a moment to glance at him with a sheepish expression. “I was kind of rude about it.” That startled a bark of laughter from Ronon, imagining an eight-year-old slip of a girl demanding he mark her as Family, baby-face stern and uncompromising.

“They didn't have a problem?”

“Oh man, Damma freaked about me getting a tattoo. Especially at eight. Went OFF on Dad for telling me I could do it. They had a huge fight. I didn't really understand the big deal. I mean, I grew up around...”

“Me,” Ronon said, surprised at how easily it came. The memories she had of the man who had marked her, it wasn't him...but it wasn't not him either. In no universe would he have given his mathe to someone he didn't see as Family, didn't trust in that respect. She smiled wide and warm, bright with happy memories.

“You. With all your tattoos and it was no big deal. They were pretty and who you were. I thought you were so cool; you were my hero. You gave me my first knife and everything.”

“What kind?”

“A khukuri with an ankle sheath. I wore it for a week before the parents found out. They came around on the tattoo; not so much on the knife. Teyla helped a lot.” She touched the place behind her ear and felt the raised edges of her Family Mark. She took his hand and pressed his fingers to it.
“He didn't expect to be a father,” she said softly, her words flowing through the gaps and spaces of their art. “Didn't choose that path, and definitely didn't choose to walk it alone.” Ronon's eyes snapped up to search her face. She smiled sadly. “He always said Sateda was worth it. Loved being a father. Sateda and you—he, were close.”

Ronon turned his attention back to their work, unable to face her empathy for a man he would never be. He worked an angry orange slash into the rich colors of their wreath, familiar anger rising up in his breast.

“He reminds me of them.” Ronon's voice was even and careful.

“I know.” He met her eyes and realized that she did know, that this wasn't the first Wreath of Remembrance she'd woven with him.

In another universe, she'd sat with him and bore witness to his past. He'd told her about Merina and the child he'd only known for a few weeks, the one the boy reminded him of so much. How he'd thought about Merina, let his rage at her death fuel him through seven years of running. But he hadn't thought about their child until he saw that boy, almost a man, standing in front of him, marked as his first-born.

Alex rested the conical wreath on the ground between them, each side propped up against one of their knees. They took turns threading in flowers from a dozen different worlds, reminders of how fleeting and delicate life could be. For each flower, a memory was spoken with reverence and remembrance, christened with the names of the fallen. Memories of Sateda, of an Atlantis Ronon would never know, and of friends and loved ones gone from the world. When Ronon's voice went hoarse from use, they placed the remaining flowers in the bowl of the Wreath with a whispered prayer for the living.

She picked up the Wreath and handed it silently to Ronon, who carried it to the balcony's edge.

Ronon hesitated. The Wreath represented...everything. It embodied every moment he'd shared with Merina, his people, his past...his son A Satedan ritual of remembrance, burial, rebirth and forgiveness. He held, in his arms, everything he'd use to give him strength while he was Running.

He glanced at the girl beside him, so young to have lost so much; so filled with hope in spite of it. The sounds of Atlantis encroached on his bubble of silence, the lapping of the waves, the distant sound of chatter. The sounds of home. He hadn't had a home in so long he'd almost forgotten what it felt like. Ronon dipped his head, inhaled the sweet scent of the flowers, and let go.

The basket shone brightly in the sun, spinning in a swirl of colors, peacock blues, purples and reds, emerald greens and burnished golds. Flowers shot out from it, arching out from their container; the tail ends of the cloth unraveled and fluttered behind.

A small, strong hand slipped into his, anchoring him to this place as he lost himself in his memories.

The sun was setting when he was ready to move, to put his memories to rest. There was one thing left for him to do before they left, a kind of thank you.

“You don't say their names,” he said. Ronon felt her tense. He squeezed her hand. “I see them in you. I wanted you to know.”

Alex's eyes were haunted when she looked up at him. “Thank you.”
Alex paused in the doorway, light from the hall spilling into the darkened room. She rested her head against the jamb, a small, indulgent smile on her lips as she took in the curled forms on the bed.

The long line of Sateda's back, well-muscled and mouthwatering, called to her. He had a thin scar across his shoulders, almost faded. Her fault. She'd dared him to walk across a thin beam in the solarium and he'd fallen, cut himself open on a table. Dad and Damma hadn't even yelled at her she'd been so guilt ridden.

A soft murmur drew her attention to the second figure on the wide bed, mostly blanketed by Sateda's bulk. Carson's arm rested low over Sateda's hips, pale fingers against olive skin, his head tucked under Sateda's chin, and she could see the outline of their legs twined together. He always slept wrapped up in one of them, as if afraid one day he'd wake up and they wouldn't be there.

How could she prove to him they don't know to do this without him anymore, that whatever she and Sateda had before couldn't compare to what the three of them had now?

Alex swiped at the hot tears pricking her eyes. She'd cried enough for today, and bore enough reminders of the dead littered over her body to last anyone a lifetime. No need to be morose about the living.

"Stop thinking." She laughed and stepped into the room, the whisper of her shirt hitting the ground, a seductive accompaniment to her footsteps. Carson went from dead asleep to alert and horny in no time, chin hooked over Sateda's side, eyes wide and shiny. Her heart stuttered when Sateda ran a lazy hand through Carson's hair, and he moaned his appreciation. Everything but the three of them, in this room, fell away for the time being. All their fears and problems supplanted for the moment. A tiny tendril of surety curled through Alex as they pulled her towards them. They survived hell; they could certainly survive what came after.

****

Phil stared at the door to his room in consternation. It was a simple thing, a fairly flimsy barrier to the outside world. The weakest point in the room along with the window. He chewed on his fingernail, wincing at the slight pain. He'd already bitten them to the quick.

"Take your time," Kayla encouraged. Phil glanced at her, then back to the door. He swallowed. It was just a door. That's all. They weren't in that bowels of Atlantis anymore; weren't even in the same universe as that place. There were no nazghoul waiting outside. Kayla was here, she wouldn't let anything happen to him. He shifted his weight on to one foot, prepared to take a step.

His foot hovered in the air. All he had to do was put it down. A drop of sweat rolled uncomfortably down his back. Put it down, one step closer.

His foot came down right beside his other one.

Four measly little steps. That's all he needed He grit his teeth and narrowed his eyes. He could do this. He was not a coward.

"Do not strain yourself," Kayla said in concern. Phil shook his head angrily. He should be able to do this! Walk through a stupid door! He'd walked in it after all. Stood to reason he should be able to walk out. He clenched his fist, his raw fingertips protesting the pressure. He screwed his eyes shut and stepped forward.

One. He held his breath because he couldn't breathe anyways.
Two. He fought the swell of fear that threatened to paralyze him.

Three. Tremors wracked his body as his mind tried to get him to stop.

Four. He opened his eyes.

The hall stretched on forever to his right and left. There were shadows everywhere, places for the nazghoul to hide, for the Wraith to lie in wait. Too many places for bad things to hide, where he couldn't get away if they surprised him. His room was small, it was safe he should go back.

The hallway was getting smaller, like a telescope pointed the wrong way. He felt light a fuzzy. Someone was talking to him, but they were far away. The cadence was nice though. Phil rather liked the voice. He felt warm, too warm.

“Phil? Philipp!” Something cool pressed against the back of his neck and Phil opened his eyes. Kayla bent over him. She looked so sad and scared. She shouldn't be sad and scared. Her lips moved, telling him to do something. Breathe. He could do that. He breathed with her, when she told him, and the fear started to fade. His body started to calm. When he was rational again, frustration-anger bring tears to his eyes. Kayla shook his shoulder.

“You have nothing to prove with me,” she said evenly, and Phil flushed. “Shall we try again tomorrow? Slower, though.” Phil wanted to say no, because he hated the trembling, the irrational fear, the shortness of breath. But he hated being confined to this room by his own fucked up head.

“Yeah. Tomorrow. One step.”

****

Carson jogged to their Hall. He needed to change out of his workout clothes and meet the Major...Evan—Carson shook his head; he really needed to figure out what to call his not-father—in fifteen minutes. Colonel Sheppard had given Lorne the OK to take Carson shooting in a very controlled environment. Carson ducked into the shower to rinse off the sweat from the gym.

He was just out of the shower when Sateda swept into the room.

“Hey!” Carson greeted. Sateda grunted a hello and stripped out of his shirt. “What are you up to?”

“Ronon invited me to go for a run,” Sateda said with a grin. Carson frowned as he studied the contours of Sateda's body. He was too skinny, the muscles of his back unable to hide his ribs.

“Didn't you go for a run this morning?” Carson asked. “For like, two hours?” Sateda's grin disappeared and he jerked his jogging pants on.

“Yeah,” Sateda said gruffly. “This is a short one.”

“How short?” Carson wondered. He'd gone on one of Ronon's 'short' runs, long ago when he was barely a teenager.

Sateda rolled his eyes and huffed in annoyance. “Short enough, OK? I'll see you later.”

Carson frowned as he made his way to the shooting gallery. Sateda seemed to be running a lot these days. And he wasn't putting on weight as quickly as the rest of them, despite being on the same high-calorie diet Keller had ordered for them all. He made a note to keep track of Sateda's running and to mention it to Alex later.
“Carson?” Carson was surprised to find himself standing outside the range.

“Whoa, sorry. I got lost in my own thoughts,” he apologized to Lorne.

“It happens,” Lorne said in understanding. “Shall we start?”

Carson left the gun range feeling good. Evan, as he'd asked Carson to call him, was easy going and willing to work around the awkwardness of this whole not-parent/not-kid process. And he thought the world of Scott. Whenever Carson brought his brother up in conversation, Evan's face would light up. And Scott thought the world of Evan too, always asking when they'd get to see him again.

David had extended an open invitation to both of them: they could stop by to talk whenever they wanted. Carson had taken to hanging out in the botany lab when he wasn't hanging out with the marines.

Carson felt good when he walked past the common room and caught sight of Trisha. She was pacing restlessly, her shoulders hunched over and arms wrapped around her waist. Her lips were moving, silently forming the shape of words never spoken. Her attention never wavered from her feet.

“Trisha?” Carson called. She didn't respond, just kept pacing. “Trisha?” He reached out and touched her shoulder. She spun, aiming a vicious left hook at his face. He blocked the punch as well as it's follow up. “Trisha!”

She paused, her eyes focusing on his face. “Carson?” She scowled at him and Carson loosened his hold on her wrists.

“You OK?” he asked warily. She went from confused to pissed off in seconds.

“What the fuck, Carson?” she yelled. He jerked back, and Trisha broke his hold on her wrists. “You don't just DO that to people! Fuck, man. Sneaking up on me. Seriously, what the hell?” Carson held up his hands to try and appear unthreatening.

“Sorry, Trisha, that was my fault,” he said.

“Hell yeah it's your fault, you stupid fuck!” Trisha sneered at him. Carson backed away, ignoring the sting of Trisha's attack.

“I'm just going to go, OK? Sorry about that, it won't happen again.” He spun on his heel and strode away, trying to tell himself that Trisha was sick, she was dealing with what had happened to them, and it wasn't about him. She'd been treating everyone that way.

It still hurt.
“Rodney, thank you for joining us.” Rodney waved to Elizabeth absently; he had much better things to do with his time than listen to psycho-babble about the Next Gens. He had a dedicated Light Switch who wasn't unbearably stupid and stayed out of his way. She'd held Kavanaugh up at knife point, which was the most sane thing anyone had ever done, so he couldn't figure out what this meeting would tell him that he didn't already know. Elizabeth sighed and gave up.

“I'm eager to hear your reports on the progress of the children. Dr. Heightmeyer, would you like to start?”

“They have a multi-layered system of communal responsibility sharing. It's not unlike—“

“Yes, we get it, they're competent human beings. Can we move on?” Rodney interrupted. Teyla frowned at him, and Elizabeth's lips thinned in displeasure. Sheppard kicked him under the table and scrawled 24563491 on the pad between them. Rodney snorted derisively.

“The children have formed and incredibly complex system of leadership and behavior, which we can use to help integrate them into Atlantis.”

“So what's your official recommendation?” Elizabeth asked.

“They're adapting well to being here. They've been here almost a month, and already they're becoming part of Atlantis's landscape. If you don't want them to stay on Atlantis, you need to make that decision now. By the time the Daedalus gets here, you're going to face a lot of resistance and objection if you decide to send them to Earth. They're bonding with people, creating new relationships and making this their home. Moreover, they're making others think of this as home.”

“And they're not a threat?”

“No more than any new recruit straight off the Daedalus. But they are hiding something.” The atmosphere in the room completely changed.

“What are they hiding?” John asked.

“I don't know. It's taken me this long to even be sure of it, much less figure out what it is.” John and Elizabeth were looking at each other with worry. “I don't think it's anything dangerous, and they'll most likely tell us what it is in their own time.”

“What makes you think they're hiding something, Doctor?” Elizabeth asked. She wanted to believe Heightmeyer, she really did, but she had to put the safety of the expedition before all other considerations.

“Nothing concrete. It's more about what they don't say, and won't talk about. If I ask about it directly, I run the risk of undoing all the progress I've made so far. If I ask about it indirectly, all I get are answers that confirm there's something there, but that doesn't tell me what it is. I'm not comfortable pressing them for anything at this time. They're not going to do anything to damage their invitation to stay here,” Kate told him. “This is where they want to be; they're not going to ruin that.”

“Thank you, Dr. Heightmeyer. I'll take that all into consideration, I'll expect a written report in the morning.” Kate nodded, and Elizabeth focused her attention on Rodney. “Rodney.”
“Yes?” he asked, only peripherally aware of what they were now talking about.

“How are the children doing in the labs?” Rodney waved his hand vaguely.

“Oh yes, very nice, competent for what they are, I have a Light Switch, the botanists don't annoy me as much and Zelenka's met someone squirrelier than him.” Elizabeth blinked.

“That's...enlightening, thank you, Rodney.” John snorted and thwapped Rodney upside the head.

“A Alex turns on those hard-to-seduce devices that won't work for a fake gene. Most of the older lab-trained kids are working with the botanists, geologists, and the medical staff. Bohdan and Zelenka spend most of their days in Jumper Four talking in Czech,” John translated.

“Ah. Good. Then we'll meet back here in one week for an update.” Rodney grumbled about pointless staff meetings keeping him from his so very important work. John clapped a good-natured hand on Rodney's back.

“Come on, Rodney. I'll buy you some mystery not-chicken and a cookie.”

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Rodney's knees go weak at the sight before him. He's genuinely surprised that even his dreams could come up with this.

The room and everything in it is completely white: the walls, the soft carpeting, the fixtures. He's facing a large set of double doors, opened to a gorgeous white sand beach, silver curtains blowing in the soft breeze coming off the water. It's all so very austere...except for John.

John is lounging in the middle of the room, a slash of jet-black surrounded by the white. He's sin in a sea of purity and Rodney wants him.

Rodney lets his eyes trail across John's body. Whatever light, clingy fabric his brain has wrapped around the Colonel's body leaves nothing to the imagination. He lets his gaze slip down, feels the blush stain his cheeks at John's obvious arousal. When he tears his eyes away, forces them up up up, John's hazel eyes are shining and his lips are taunting him.

“Rodney.” The word slides around him, caresses him. There's desire laced through John's voice, and it's the most erotic thing Rodney's ever heard. “Why are you still over there?”

“I...don't really know,” Rodney admits. “I was expecting more chess.” John chuckles and beckons Rodney over.

“Chess was last dream, McKay.” John imbues his last name with roguish lechery. “This is the third date. You're supposed to put out.” John pouts and Rodney can't tear his eyes from that lip.

“You're the one who's not putting out,” Rodney complains absently. He can feel John's lips ghosting against his, his tongue darting out for a taste.

“Then let's fix that.” John lazily pushes himself onto his knees, a careless leer on his face. Rodney watches as one of John's hands trails across his chest. It leaves a trail of buttons undone in its wake, and Rodney catches tantalizing glimpses of chest.

“Rodney.” John's driving himself to distraction, the feel of his fingers on heated skin, the caress of Rodney's eyes, bright blue against the stark whiteness of the room. He's falling in them, drowning in the lust and sheer want he can read in Rodney's expression.
He slips his fingers underneath the sensual material of his shirt and twists a nipple, satisfied at the strangled moan he wrenches from Rodney's lips.

“Jesus, John!” John gasps when a hot, wet mouth replaces his fingers, sharp teeth scraping against his nipple. Rodney's hands everywhere, touching and pinching. This is nothing like the first dream, slow and sensual; this is hot and passionate and NOW.

“Alliteration, Rodney?” John teases. He pushes Rodney off him, ignoring Rodney's annoyed huff, and rips Rodney's shirt down the center.

Rodney looks down at himself, slack-jawed and shocked because that's... “UnbelIEVably hot.” John laughs and returns the nipple-licking favor. His tongue swirls and dips and Rodney has sensitive nipples. John retaliates by biting down. Rodney almost throws John off when he arches back, so hard he strains the muscle. Rodney's mouth is frozen open, his eyes unblinking. God, it's hot, seeing all of Rodney's higher brain functions dashed away with one sweep of John's tongue. John sees the moment Rodney comes back to himself and frowns. That won't do. He bends his head and sucks Rodney's other nipple into his mouth.

“Jaa-ah!” Rodney grips John's arms, digging into the fleshy muscle, leaving angry bruises and testament to how much John drives him crazy.

“God, Rodney, so responsive!” John mutters against the pale, flawless skin. Rodney laughs between panting breaths. He reaches up and pulls John's shirt off, hooking it behind John's back so he can't move his arms. “Bet you couldn't tell me what a Mersenne Prime is right now.” Rodney whimpers because John's random math skills? Well, let's just say Rodney can justify liking someone with that hair because of them.


“2^{1279}-1” It's not a big Mersenne Prime, but it'll do.

“Rodney!”

“Yes, Colonel? If you want, we can try listing quadratic primes.” John growls and thrusts up with his hips, rubbing his erection against Rodney's ass. Rodney’s eyes roll up in the back of his head, and he grinds down against John's lap. John can only whimper and let Rodney do what he would.

As much as Rodney is enjoying the frottage, he wants more. So much more. He lays John down and pulls against the illegally tight pants slung low on John's hips. He licks at the sharp jut of bone and tries to figure out if John will kick him out of bed if Rodney calls him a twink.

He notices the wet patch spreading across the front of the material and Rodney feels a smug sense of 'I did that' wash through him. He slowly starts peeling the pants away, savoring each inch of flesh as it's revealed. John whimpers and thrusts his hips in the air as Rodney drags the soft material over his aching cock.

“Rodney,” he whispers, “Rodney RodneyRodneyrodney!” Rodney kneels between John's hairy, muscular legs and nuzzles him. John's chant rises in pitch, his back bows and every muscle contracts. Rodney sucks just the tip in, savoring the bitter, salty taste of John on his tongue and it feels so damn real. He works himself down, exploring each inch of John's prick with scientific thoroughness. He makes John arch and groan, makes him gasp and laugh, drives him to tear the pristine white sheets as his fingers scramble for purchase.
John fights against oblivion, against his orgasm because he wants Rodney forever, and this can't end. John struggles past the searing heat of Rodney's mouth and pulls him up by his ears. Rodney's eyes are dark and glazed, and John has to kiss him. Looping his legs around Rodney's waist, John flips them over.

“I want you,” John mutters against kiss-swollen lips. He takes Rodney's groan as encouragement and presses two fingers against his entrance. Rodney is already stretched and ready, waiting for John to come along at take what's his.

John slides in, trembling at the amount of control it takes to keep from coming straight off. Rodney is scorching hot and unbelievably tight. He finds Rodney's prostate with scary precision, and sets a brutal pace. Rodney's hands are banded around John's biceps, each pant and grunt encouraging John faster and harder.

John comes with a groan and bites down on the chorded muscles of Rodney's neck. Rodney stiffens beneath him, mouth open in shocked pleasure, a soundless scream of completion. John's body ripples with aftershocks and he hums contentedly into Rodney's neck, lazily extending his tongue to lick an errant drop of sweat.

“Mmmmmmmmm,” Rodney murmurs contentedly, wrapping his arms around John and pulling him closer. John burrows happily into Rodney's chest, breathing in the scent of contentment.

“R'ny s'gud.” he slurs somewhere north of the Nipple of Doom. Rodney chuckles and runs his hand down John's spine. John arches into the touch like a cat and Rodney laughs again. He could spend his life cataloging John's reactions. With one final sigh, they both fall asleep in a sea of white satin sheets.

Rodney woke up with a sigh, the vestiges of pleasure rippling through him. Despite the fact that he KNEW it was a dream, Rodney couldn't help checking to see if John was there...

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John couldn't shake his dream from the night before, so he prowled around Atlantis looking for Ronon. He found the Ronon in the infirmary, of all places, chatting with Keller.

“Don't tell me you're stocking up before we start,” John joked. His cheek still hurt from last time.

“You wanna spar?” Ronon asked, a grin lighting up his face. John nodded and Ronon jumped off the seat. “You know, stocking up's not a bad idea.” He grabbed a box of gauze and John started reconsidering this idea. They bade Keller good bye and John trailed Ronon out of the infirmary.

The sounds of Bantos rods knocking against one another echoed through the hall well before they got to the training room. Ronon cocked his head and listened to the sounds of the fighting.

“Teyla,” he said immediately. His eyes tightened in concentration. “Two others, haven't fought them before.”

John and Ronon paused in the doorway, taking in the dance before them. Teyla moved with precise grace, and economy of movement. Her movements were smooth and effortless, though the lights glinted off the thin sheen of sweat on her skin and her chest heaved with strain. But she was beautiful, in her element.

Teyla, Terhaan, and Kayla were gracefully in tune, not fighting to win, but taking joy in the impromptu choreography, communicating with one another through the barest twitch of muscle and the flick of a rod.
John could hear their different voices in the clicks and clacks of the Bantos; all three of them had a similar cadence, the quirks of their personalities the differences between them.

Kayla was the most dynamic of the three, less dedicated to form. Her movements had the flavor of improvisation, a hint of the unpredictable that might eventually give her the edge.

Terhaan's style was almost a clone of Teyla's economical, precise style, but there was something...contained about him. A missing element he hadn't discovered that would balance his technique.

Teyla was untouchable, and John was once again reminded of how truly amazing she was, every movement second nature to her, honed by years of dedicated practice. An Alien Princess, one of the most dedicated warriors he'd ever had the honor of meeting. Every year of her life was reflected in each precise movement.

“They're good,” John whispered, not wanting to interrupt the moment.

“They're Teyla's,” Ronon answered, his eyes tracking the three syncopated forms. John couldn't disagree when. By some unspoken concordance, the three combatants broke apart.

“John! Ronon!” Teyla grabbed a towel and wiped at her brow. Her eyes were bright with exertion. She looked exhilarated and happy, a smile about her lips. “Are you planning to train?” Her eyes slid to the side, and John noticed Carson and Sateda move in from one corner of the room. He checked to see how Ronon was handling it, but he didn't look upset.

“We'd planned on it, but we could reschedule?” he queried, bringing the younger men into the conversation. Sateda shot a hidden glance at Ronon.

“We can go elsewhere, Colonel. Not a problem,” Carson offered with an easy smile. Ronon folded his arms and sent a challenging look at both boys, his eyes finally resting on Sateda.


“My father didn't train a loser.” Ronon grinned and tossed the boy a couple of Bantos sticks. He twirled them in his hands, testing their weight and balance.

Ronon struck without warning, sticks flying at the younger man with full force. Nothing elaborate, moves someone he had trained—like his son—should easily block. Sateda confidently parried Ronon's attack, coming back with a quick counter-offense and delivering an unexpected rap to Ronon's knuckles in retribution.

Ronon paused, then grinned widely. This was the kind of language he spoke fluently. Sateda grinned back and the fight was on. They threw themselves into the contest.

John carefully stepped clear of the battlefield as sticks went flying. He watched the two men attack each other, wincing as Ronon landed a blow to the boy's thigh. Sateda laughed and danced away, rubbing at the sore spot.

John wondered if he should step in and stop this before there was blood on the floor, but Carson stopped him.

“They're bonding,” he assured John. They danced out of the way when Ronon and Sateda moved too close, sticks flying.
“You sure about that?” John asked dryly. Carson winced at another particularly violent clash.

“Mostly.”

When Sateda executed a complicated move Ronon used on John all the time and Ronon actually laughed in delight, John figured they’d both be fine.

****

Rodney scowled at the light knock on the door of his personal lab.

“What?” he snapped. Light Switch popped her head in the door.

“You got a minute?” she asked with a charming smile. Rodney was not taken in.

“Depends,” Rodney griped. Her smile just got bigger, and Rodney's scowl deepened. “What do you want?” Alex laid a datapad between them and pulled up another stool. Rodney didn't recall inviting her to do that. He scrolled through the schematics loaded on the pad.

“Oh look, Atlantis!” he exclaimed sarcastically.

“It's a treasure map,” Alex said, equally sardonic.

“I don't see any Xs.” Alex smirked and opened a different file, a large black X over one of the rooms.

“That room has some independent components of Ancient technology in it. And a partially disassembled ZedPM.”

“What?” Rodney yelped, his mind flying. A partially disassembled ZedPM would help them understand the fundamental principals of the entire technology, which would put them that much closer to figuring out how to recharge them and--

“There's more.” Alex had his full attention. “We've all been racking our brains, trying to remember all the cool stuff we had and where it came from. Some of these areas are more specific than others. Like this one, in green? It's a medical laboratory. In our universe, there was a bone knitter and flesh regenerator in there. Your universe isn't that different from ours, so most of these places should be the same.” Rodney flipped through the different pages; there were so many. The possibilities of new technology sent a warm buzz through him.

“We coded them, and each area either has a cache of artifacts or something really awesome. The X's are pretty specific; we're almost 100% sure there's something there. There others are ones we think we remember, general areas. Each department got its own color. Like this brown one? The geologists won't come out of their lab for days if they get their hands on what's in it. We know this stuff is there, but it's going to take specialists to really understand what it is.”

“An expedition-wide mission to the unexplored areas,” Rodney mused aloud.

“Dr. Weir would have to sign off on it,” Alex added. “We'd need to make a pretty good case in order to take a good portion of the science department into these areas.”

“You plainly already have a plan, so if we could skip all the subtleties—most of which I usually miss—and just get straight to what you want to do and why you brought this to me, it would rapidly speed up the process.”
“Well, in order to get Dr. Weir to sign off on this, we'd have to have a route. One that maximizes our technology-to-travel ratio. High yield returns. A few of these places are actually labs, and the equipment can't be taken out of them, but they have specialized datapods that can be downloaded and interpreted back at Atlantis. And we'd like to come with you.”

“We?”

“Me, Bohdan, Carson, and Terhaan. As guides.”

“You're children, we're not--”

“When we were raised, many of these areas weren't unexplored. Others we discovered while we were running from the nazghoul. We know them, and we can take you right to most of these labs and the tech.” Rodney looked unconvinced. “Like it or not, we've just become your leading experts on identifying and cataloguing Ancient technology.” Rodney harrumphed and scrolled through more of the schematics. The labs and caches covered a large geographical area; to get there, do what they needed to do, and get back would take at least a week. A week and a half to do it right.

“We need to plot our path so it combines the most useful stuff with the easiest to access. I think...” As Alex pulled her hair up into a sloppy bun and started writing out possible pathways, Rodney took a moment to study her. Hot, though not his type, long brown hair, lips that curled in when she was deep in thought. She showed signs of being fairly competent, which threw Rodney off his game; he was too used to people being hopelessly inept.

Rodney finally had to resort to pulling out his carefully guarded reams of paper. They printed out maps of the area, trying to think three dimensionally on a two dimensional representation, slowly piecing together the first leg of the scientific journey.

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Alex lengthened her stride, pushing herself beyond the limits of her endurance, waiting for exhaustion to catch up with her. From the moment she'd woken up—a scant three hours after she'd managed to fall asleep—she felt like she had too much energy buzzing beneath her skin, clawing to get out. She went for a run, the one form of exercise she hated more than anything else, but sometimes there was no getting around it.

She had hours before she was scheduled to be anywhere or do anything. She still felt a disconnect with the idea of actually having a schedule, a set time to wake up, eat (three meals served hot in the mess and not MREs), go to the labs and sleep. She played teacher with the younger kids every other day and standing appointments with Dr. Heightmeyer. A calendar with meetings penciled in, reminders about the future.

Permanence and stability were parts of her vocabulary now, but there was a disassociation somewhere in there. She used to dream about this return to normalcy at night, but now that they’re here the dream doesn't match the reality.

Alex shook off her thoughts, circling one another like sharks, and headed back to their hall. She wanted...to talk to someone. Maybe hang out with Sateda and Carson, let them draw the restlessness out of her. Sateda came around the corner, dressed in loose workout clothes and a pair of donated sneakers.

“Sateda, hey. Do you want--”

“Going on a run,” he answered without stopping, brushing past her. She frowned, but headed back
to their room.

“Hey Carson,” she greeted. He glanced up at her with a small, distracted smile. Fully dressed and ready to start his day. Except it as earlier than normal and most of Atlantis was still asleep.

“Alex.” He was terse and distracted. Wouldn't look at her.

“Do you have a minute, I--”

“I'm a little busy right now.” He flashed another small smile her way, but he kept his gaze away from her.

“Oh. Um--”

“I've got to go.” Carson waved his way out of the door.

Alex looked around their room. It didn't look lived in; they hadn't unpacked. There weren't many signs of them around, just a few things out of place. It felt...transient. Like they still couldn't quite believe their luck had so drastically changed and they'd have to leave at the first sign of danger. Maybe that was the root cause of this feeling. And that was something she could change.

She rifled through her pack, digging down to depths she hadn't seen in months. Old clothes, some bound journals with hastily scribbled notes. Stray MREs, a box of ammunition. Her fingers grazed against glossy paper, squished between two dirty shirts, and she pulled out a long-forgotten photo.

Her parents were there in living color. Her Damma was giving her Dad a soft, goofy look that said “you're a moron but I love you anyways.” Her Dad clutched something that look suspiciously like a miniature model of a jumper to his chest and grinning like a loon. She traced the wrinkled crow's feet around both their eyes, deepend in evidence of their good humor. She'd always hated that Earth expression. It was ugly and judgmental. On Narm they called them Mother's or Father's Joy. The Yr thought they could read the whole of a person's life in those wrinkles; tell if a person had been happy or sad, just or deceitful.

Her chest felt tight and tears crept into her eyes, obscuring her view. Because they were gone. They'd left her. Promised her so many things, said so many empty words that she'd believed and then just...

She very carefully ripped the photo in half, splitting the happy couple in the picture apart. Even then, they both smiled up at her, happy and content and in love. She tore the picture in quarters, and the eighths, and kept going until she'd made confetti of the people who had left her without a goodbye.

The shredded paper fell like snow around her. An eye landed on her knee, and even without the rest of the picture you could tell the person had been smiling. She flicked it off and watched it flutter to the ground with a cold kind of anger. She sat there, staring at the shredded remnants of her past.

Her watch alarm went off. Time to go to the labs.

She dressed mechanically in borrowed clothes, ignored the bits of paper that stuck to the sole of her boots. She paused at the door and schooled her expression into an easy smile. Her face felt brittle and stiff, didn't want to stretch how she wanted, and Alex was sure her smile must look glaringly false.

But no one had noticed yet, and she doubted anyone would notice today.
“Light Switch!” Rodney called out in irritation. He poked at the unresponsive device in front of him. It should work, only it wouldn't turn on for him. He had the gene! Maybe not Sheppard's mutant gene, but...ATA certified, here! “LIGHT SWITCH!”

He spun around on his stool to see her bounding up to him, an almost...indulgent smile on her face. Rodney scowled, immediately on the defensive. He associated THAT particular expression with blood-thirsty natives trying to lull him into a false sense of security. She pulled to a stop in front of him, practically vibrating with goodwill and happiness. Rodney could smell it, and it had no business in his labs.

“What?” he snapped in his most waspish tone, but the girl didn't even flinch. Rodney wondered at her survival skills.

“You liiiiiike me.” Rodney's horror increased ten-fold when she hugged him.

“Wh-what?! I most certainly DO NOT!” He could hear Zelenka sniggering in the background and made a mental note to kill the irritating Czech; he could make it look like an accident. Light Switch continued to beam at him, bouncing on her toes. “Why in the world would you think I like you? Please tell me so I can stop doing it immediately.” Rodney instinctively jerked away when she leaned towards him.

“You gave me a nickname!” Zelenka gave up all pretenses at hiding his laughter at that, and Rodney made a mental note to kill him twice at the least. The Girl looked quite smug, and Rodney's glare wasn't phasing her in the least.

“I did not!”

“Aaaaaawwww, you didn't even realize, that's so cute!” Alex let her grin widen; she was pretty sure she could see actual steam coming out of his ears. Rodney spluttered, unable to find any words to fully quantify his feelings on this situation. “See, nicknames convey a certain amount of closeness and affection, and you've called me Light Switch consistently over the last few weeks, which is a pretty awesome nickname considering how highly you appreciate and value Ancient tech. I compiled and analyzed the data, and all evidence points to the emergence of a mutually affectionate and wholesome friendship. Ergo...you like me!”

“That's...it's...you...I just didn't bother to learn your name!” Rodney protested. “I do that to everyone, ask Zobinkie the Laughing Buffoon!”

“No, you mangle everyone else's name. It's aggressive forgetfulness as a means to illustrate your disdain for them and to demonstrate the fact that, though they may have the credentials to be here, they haven't proven worthy of your respect. But you gave ME a nickname, which insinuates a certain amount of affection. And you've used it consistently, meaning I've made an impression on you and you like me!”

Rodney gaped, vaguely aware of a pained whimper coming from somewhere.

“I definitely like you,” Zelenka volunteered happily. The only one not laughing was Bohdan, who watched the scene with quiet intensity.

Sateda woke up abruptly, adrenalin flooding his system when a sharp elbow dug into his stomach.
Carson screamed and thrashed again, his fist hitting the pillow next to Sateda's head. Sateda swore and rolled over, getting out of Carson's way. He heard a muffled thump from the other side of the bed. Carson was whimpering now, his hands clutching at the bed sheets, tears streaming down his face. Sateda winced as a nail snapped, bright drops of blood soaking into the white cotton.

“Carson!” Sateda yelled. He grabbed Carson's hands to prevent him from lashing out. “Carson, wake up!”

At first, Carson's eyes didn't quite focus correctly. Sateda kept up a steady stream of low, soothing sounds as Carson slowly focused on his face, his breathing evening out.

“Sateda?” Carson's voice came out shaky and weak.

“Yeah, I'm here.” Carson buried his face in Sateda's neck, breathing in the familiar scent and trembling through the after effects of the nightmare. His throat felt raw; that’s a new one. When they were running, they all learned not to make a sound, even during nightmares.

“Water?” Carson croaked. Sateda watched as Alex peeled herself away from the wall and headed into the bathroom.

In the bathroom, hidden away, Alex filled a glass with water. Her hand shook so badly the liquid sloshed over the sides. Her chest felt tight and why was it so hard to breath? She screwed her eyes shut and tried to calm herself.

A mathematician confided, that a Mobius band... That a Mobious band... She couldn't find the rhythm.


Think about something else. (The golden trees of Naa. The mini-dragons of Parnas. The Leed.)

Relax. (Start at the toes. Go to the knees, the thighs, the chest. Work your way up.)

The shaking subsided and the band around her chest loosened. She managed to fill the water glass, but by the time she made it back to their bed, Carson was already back asleep.
He kneels on a hard surface, hands clasped in prayer, head bowed. He lifts his head to find himself in the church of his childhood, pompous carving on the walls, high arched ceilings reaching up to the heavens.

It's all annoyingly Catholic.

“Do you need to confess, my son?” Rodney turns and gawks, his mouth falling open because holy. Sheppard’s dressed as the naughtiest priest he's ever seen. His hair is extra messy, short of being 'just been fucked' hair. His lips are red and look a little swollen, begging to be kissed. His lean body looks even slimmer in the dark, priestly robe, tapered at the waist. The white square at his collar clashes against the black, and Rodney wants to lick it. Rodney swallows.

“I didn't have a priest kink till two seconds ago,” he says, not really in control of his mouth anymore. John laughs low and dirty, unbecoming of a clergyman.

“Wanna do it on the altar?” he asks with a smirk. Rodney practically sprints to the front of the church, over the crossing and the chancel. John's two steps behind him. Rodney sheds his clothes with frantic abandon wanting nothing more than to be naked. Now. John pauses to watch the show, and when he has Rodney's full attention, moves his hands to the zipper of his cassock. Rodney's hand stops him.

“Could you, uh, keep it on?” Rodney blushes bright red and John has to kiss him, has to grind up against him because he's suddenly so unbearably turned on he can't even stand it. He kisses Rodney's embarrassment away, replaces it with lust and passion and need. Rodney tastes like coffee and science.

John runs his hand down Rodney's flank, pressing them firmly together. The coarse wool of his priestly vestments scratch against Rodney's cock, making him moan. John pushes Rodney up against the altar and then steps back to collect himself, to look at Rodney leaning wide-eyed against the altar.

Rodney's bare, a literal representation of how he feels around Sheppard both in his own dreams and out in the real world. John's standing there looking at him with happy green eyes and Rodney's so in love with him that it hurts. He sees the second John gets it, reads the truth in his eyes, and then John's dropping to his knees in front of Rodney, hands banded around Rodney's waist, face pressed into his stomach.

The scritch of John's stubble makes Rodney's cock jump and beg for attention. John chuckles low in his throat, the warm puffs of air glancing off Rodney's cock. He bends closer, licks the tip of Rodney's erection just to taste the clear beads of precome leaking out of the slit. Rodney whimpers in encouragement and grasps the edge of the altar.

John takes his time, exploring Rodney's body with his lips and tongue, doing here what he's not allowed to do in the waking world. He loves the way Rodney's ass fits in his hands, soft and smooth, the muscles tensing as John swallows Rodney down. John's happy and content with Rodney heavy on his tongue. He can feel Rodney's heartbeat throbbing in his cock, can hear his breathless pants and taste the proof of his excitement. Rodney's hand brushes his head and John leans into it a little.

“God John, you're—“ Rodney cuts himself off, overwhelmed by John's tongue and the image of
priestly Sheppard on his knees for Rodney. It's too much. “John! Stop, please, I want...I want...”
John practically crawls up Rodney's body, cassock rubbing against his sensitive skin.

“Yeah. Yeah, OK Rodney.” Rodney turns blindly into John's kiss, desperate for it. John's tongue is sin, his touch salvation. Rodney allows himself to be turned and pressed against the altar. John licks a path down Rodney's spine, savoring every quiver. Rodney's so fucking responsive it's driving John wild.

“Can I fuck you, Rodney?” he whispers hungrily. He fits their hips together, Rodney's ass rubbing against John's cloth-covered erection.

“Fuck now!” Rodney shouts demandingly, thrusting back against John insistently. “Now, c'mon, c'mon John please!”

“Yeah, Rodney. I gotcha.” There's a convenient split in John's cassock, and John shudders as the rough wool drags over his cock. He totally gets why Rodney asked him to keep the robe on. Rodney's open and ready for whatever John can give him, and John almost loses control.

He slides home in one long push, Rodney gripping the far edge of the altar and pushing back into John's thrust.

“Yessss,” Rodney hisses when John slides in, and drops his head to the table with a happy sigh. John laughs a little and rests his head on Rodney's shoulder, taking a minute himself. He bites down on Rodney's neck when the bastard squeezes around him, trying to suck John's cock in farther.

“Fuck!” John growls and Rodney's laugh shakes his body. “Oh, you think that's funny, McKay?” he asks in his best military voice. Rodney shudders and does it again. John's reaction is immediate: he picks up Rodney's hips and slides him forward on the altar, Rodney's entire torso resting on the cool marble, feet not touching the ground. John bends his knees and thrusts up and forward. Rodney throws his head back, filth spilling out of his mouth as John takes him in the rawest sense of the word.

“You're...inna...fucking...church, McKay,” John grunts, each word punctuated by a soul-moving thrust. “Have some...respect!” Rodney keens loud and high as John ruthlessly plays his body, winding him up.

“Yes...Father John!” Rodney manages to grit out, before sanity fails him and his entire world is the sensation of John's cock pistoning in and out of him. John's pace becomes, impossibly, harder and faster, Rodney's words cutting loose any restraint he had left. Rodney starts babbling, a combination of words and sounds, each syllable driving John higher and higher, taking Rodney with him.

“John. John, christ! God, John I love this, I lo—“

John sat bolt upright in bed, completely disoriented.

“Gateroom to Colonel Sheppard.” John flopped back on his bed with a curse as his erection made itself known. “Gateroom to Colonel Sheppard, come in Colonel Sheppard.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm here,” he grumbled, searching for his radio. “This is Sheppard.”

“Colonel Sheppard, Dr. Weir wanted me to remind you of the staff meeting at 1000 this morning.”

“Uh, thanks, Chuck. What time is it?”
“1015, Colonel.” John swore and threw himself out of bed, pulling out whatever clothes he found first. He ignored Chuck's disrespectful laughter. “And if you could find Dr. McKay, he's not answering his pages either.”

John groaned, his half-hard cock twitching in anticipation of seeing Rodney. This was going to be a long day.

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John walked carefully towards Rodney's door, trying to accommodate his uncooperative penis. It remained stubbornly at half-mast despite his every effort to dissuade it. This included thoughts of Kavanaugh in a tutu, the asexual pink people from PX7-855, and Todd the Wraith dressed as Frank-N-Furter.

He shoved his hands in his pocket, pulling his pants as far away from his front as he could without it looking weird. He rang the doorbell, and frowned when Rodney didn't answer. Unresponsive to pages, not answering the door...this was not Rodney's normal behavior. John asked Atlantis to override Rodney's special locks and stepped into the room.

Rodney was curled on the bed, whimpering and jerking under the covers. John was over in an instant, shaking Rodney awake and pulling back the covers.

“Hey, Rodney, wake up, it's only a...” John trailed off and blushed. Rodney's hand was shoved into his boxers, which were tented.

“Colonel...” Rodney murmured. John jerked back and fell into the desk, sending a pile of books and Rodney's fourth favorite laptop crashing to the floor; the thought of Colonel Carter and Rodney together was enough to kill John's insistent erection. Rodney jerked up in bed, hair sticking out in all directions. “Wha—I don't...Sheppard? What's wrong?” John felt his ears heat and his eyes flicked down before he could start himself. Rodney looked down and gaped before turning bright red and jerking his hand out of his boxers. He pulled the sheets up to his chest.

“Is there some reason you're in my room, Sheppard? And if we blow up because you were busy molesting me in my sleep while my idiot staff was allowed to run amuck, I'm going to make eternity miserable for you.” John grinned at the thought. “What are you smiling about?”

“Amuck, McKay?” John responded lightly. Rodney puffed out like an angry bluejay and glared at John.

“Why are you here? I'm assuming nothing's life threatening since you're standing there looking like...that.”

“Staff meeting at 1000.” Rodney looked at John blankly.

“OK...”

“It's 1030.”

“Shit.” John watched in amusement as Rodney shot out of the bed and started rummaging through his things and muttering under his breath. John grinned as Rodney hopped around on one leg, trying to get his pants on, his toothbrush in his mouth. John's laughter faded away when Rodney stripped out of his sleep shirt and into a clean tee. Rodney, oblivious as always, just gathered up his laptop and looked around the room. “Ready?”

“I'm missing something,” Rodney muttered, eyes darting into every nook and corner of the room.
John smirked and handed him a napkin-wrapped bundle.

“Breakfast, buddy. Let's go.” If Rodney's grin looked a little goofy, John didn't call him on it because he was too busy willing his body to behave.

****

John made his way to the small balcony, the corner of Atlantis he thought of as his more than any other place. Even his room. A figure was silhouetted against the light reflecting off the ocean, staring into the distance.

Alex had a bottle of Athosian wine in one hand, half-empty. John stepped out, joining her in silent contemplation. The air was cool, a slight breeze lifting the fringes of her hair. He studied her out of the corner of his eyes. She looked tired and worn, a dramatic shift from the chipper and controlled front everyone else got. John wondered when he'd been allowed in, when she'd decided to trust him enough to let him see this.

He popped the top off one of the beers he'd carried out here and took a long gulp, letting out a content sigh. Alex's lips quirked up slightly, and he took it for an invitation.

“Rough night?” Alex shifted so she could see him better, her torso turned towards him in the darkness. She studied him, and he could feel every place her eyes touched. He felt a curious tension coil in his chest, like he was approaching some barrier at full speed and he could only hold on and find out if he was going to crash through it.

“Carson has night terrors,” she said, her voice barely a whisper on the wind. “I—Sateda's handling it.” John gave a small nod and drank his beer, keeping his eyes on the ever-changing ocean. She sighed and took a long draw from her bottle, and when she spoke again her words were weighted and measured, filled with pain and anger and a whole mess of emotions John couldn't even begin to work out.

“Carson has night terrors,” she repeated, sounding empty and drained, “Sateda runs to the point where he's sick and dangerously dehydrated. Phil still won't leave his room, won't even shower or eat without someone to help him. Trisha's angry all the time. Danni's got OCD and spends her days doing inventory in the infirmary. I'm pretty sure Dr. Keller knows and is indulging her. Garreth hasn't said a word in almost two years because we kept telling him to shut up when everything began, when a single sound could bring the nazghoul down on us. Kayla's been stockpiling MRE's, hiding them around Atlantis.” John gripped the Ancient railing, keeping his peace by sheer force of will. Heightmeyer only knew some of this, only saw the symptoms they wanted her to see; because they didn't trust her, or they didn't trust her to lie for them if the IOA showed up tomorrow and asked if a bunch of teenagers dropped in the middle of a war zone were shiny happy whole people. Or maybe they didn't want her to HAVE to lie for them, though it all amounted to the same thing in the end.

He hadn't realized it was so bad, though he should have known.

“We're broken. And I can't fix them. I don't know how. Sometimes...it's hard to be here. Sometimes I wish we were back there, where we knew the score and didn't...weren't...”

“We're not going to let them take you,” John promised, quietly fierce. Somewhere along the line, they'd all become his, and the IOA wasn't going to take that away. They lapsed into silence, the sound of the sea surrounding them, the hum of Atlantis in the back of their minds.

“We're not telling you everything.” John wanted to smile because no shit. It's a reminder that
They're still young, and they're not as smooth as they think they are. The folly of youth; but Alex says it so simply. Without apology or attempting to make it anything than it is. So John responds with equal simplicity, “I know.”

They left just before the sun crested over the horizon.

****

Kayla surveyed herself critically in the mirror. There were patches on her skirt, a stain set in her shirt that would never wash away. They were threadbare in places.

“You look fine,” a bored, irritated voice told her for the hundredth time. Kayla gazed coolly at her friend.

“I do not appreciate your tone.”

Alex groaned and flopped back on the bed, praying for someone to save her. “I bet Teyla doesn't have clothes-anxiety,” she grumbled. A shoe flew through the air and landed heavily on her stomach.

“Teyla is not meeting her people for the first time.”

“Look, I don't want to rehash the whole they're not your people but they really kind of are thing again, but seriously. One thing we HAVE figured out is that this is a pretty close parallel to our world; most of the people are a little less mature, a little better looking...OK, some of them are hot, like Carson's dad and your mom—” Kayla turned and glared at her.

Alex held up her hands and rolled her eyes. “I'm joking, I'm joking!” Kayla looked at Alex, reflected in the mirror, her expression unconvinced. “I do remember how to do that.”

“Sometimes I am not so sure,” Kayla murmured. Alex swallowed and looked away, and tension settled uncomfortably between them. Alex cleared her throat because Kayla was not going to meet her people on the tail end of a stupid fight.

“And remember Trisha's mom—” Kayla threw her second shoe at Alex's head. “Right, hot parents aside, you're...you. And there are TWO of you, if you overlook Terhaan's dangly bits. You know how the Athosians feel about twins, you're a good omen. So take your concerns and quiet neurosis, stick 'em in a box, and shove 'em where the sun don't shine.”

“Alex,” Kayla said warningly, though the corner of her mouth twitched into a smile.

“What? I was talking about the bottom of the ocean!” Kayla looked around for something else to throw. “Seriously. You're like...a redhead on Planthe. A carmine beauty renowned for your charm, elegance, and--”

“Red hair?” Kayla asked dryly.

“You bathe regularly, have a great rack, an ass I could play plinkit off of. Not to mention the annoyingly flawless complexion of those fortunate enough to be of non-Germanic origin. The boys will be lining up to breed with you, the girls will all hate you, and Terhaan will protect your quivering innocence so can you please say you're reassured and let me out of here?”

Alex squawked as Kayla jumped on her, pinning her to the bed in a giant bear hug. They tussled, Alex trying to get away and Kayla wrapping her arms and legs around her friend in a full-body hug.
“Oh come on! Get off of me! Kayla!”

“Shut up, Alexandra. I will not let go until you have gracefully accepted my thankful hug like a grown, dignified woman.” Kayla held on and Alex gave in with a sigh, her body relaxing into Kayla’s hug even though she didn’t return it. Kayla pulled back, her expression serious. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Alex said, smiling brightly up at Kayla, whose lips pressed into a thin slash of annoyance. She was not taken in by that smile.

“Everything is well? Between you and Carson and Sateda?” Kayla pressed.

“Well, we ran out of lube the other day, which was a little awkward with the—”

“There is something wrong,” Kayla interrupted, irritated with Alex’s deflection. “It pains me you will not share it.”

“I’m fine. Really. You need to finish up or you’re going to be late.” Kayla paused long enough for Alex to understand she was not taken in by the false smile or easy camaraderie. Something dark passed through Alex’s expression for a moment before the wide, easy smile returned.

“Gods, I’m f-i-n-e. And you’ll be fine.” Kayla sighed and rolled over on the small bed. “I bet there’ll be boys lined up the block eager for your hand.”

“I vow to return betrothed, impregnated, or not at all,” Kayla said seriously, pushing off the bed and running out the door.

“What? I was kidding about the breeding! Kayla? Kayla!”

----

Kayla and Terhaan stepped through the event horizon and onto New Athos. Kayla closed her eyes and breathed in the smells of her second home, listened to the sounds of her childhood. When she opened her eyes, Terhaan was across the clearing running his fingers over the trunk of a tree.

“Terhaan once carved his name in that tree,” Kayla whispered to Teyla. “He was madly in love with a girl from Kandor.” Teyla laughed and linked her arm with Kayla’s.

“When I was very young, I was quite taken with a young man from Kadesh. His family would travel through our village each summer and stay for several moons before moving on. The last time he left, he spoke of his engagement to a woman from Braedon. I wove a mourning mat and sequestered myself in my mother's tent.”

“What happened?”

“My mother took my heartbreak very seriously. The elder women all gathered and commented on my weaving, suggested new patterns and creative ways to demonstrate my unrivaled heartbreak. I could not meet their eyes for days after.” Kayla and Teyla laughed together, making their way down the path to the Athosian camp.

Kayla’s heart sped up as the smell of cooking meat filtered through the natural smells of the forest, triggering memories of watching her first Elder Meeting, receiving her first real Bantos rods—carved by Halling himself—as a sign of her transition into adulthood, a hundred other little things in her life. The village seemed smaller than she remembered, but she still recognized it as home.
“Teyla, it is good to see you,” Halling's voice boomed out. He bound up to Teyla and lowered his forehead to hers in greeting.

“It is good to see you too, Halling. I would like you to meet Kayla and Terhaan.” Halling's eyes widened at the sight of the twins, though his welcoming smile never faltered. He bowed to them both. “Teyla told us a bit about your situation. We would be honored to share tea with you tonight.” Kayla and Terhaan both bowed formally to the older man.

“This would honor us as well,” Terhaan responded.

“TEYLA!” A lanky teenage boy sprinted to their group and threw his long arms around Teyla's waist. “Have you heard from Colonel Sheppard? He said he'd come to visit, but he hasn't been by yet and I want to talk to him about this foot-ball thing he keeps teaching us!” Teyla stilled the bouncing boy long enough to greet him properly.

“I will ask him next time I see him, Jinto. Colonel Sheppard is a very busy man.” She motioned to the silent twins beside her. “I would like you to meet Kayla and Terhaan.” Jinto shifted uneasily as both newcomers stared at him.

“It is an honor to meet you,” Jinto said politely. Kayla and Terhaan continued to stare.

“Is something wrong?” Teyla asked with concern. Kayla physically jumped at the light touch on her shoulder.

“Forgive us,” she said, a light blush staining her cheeks, “but it is...we are older than Jinto. It is very odd.”

“He is twelve,” Terhaan said disbelievingly. Jinto immediately bristled.

“I am fourteen!” he insisted.

“Forgive Terhaan. Where we come from, you are an Elder and Terhaan's mentor. It is very strange for us to be older than you.”


“You were quite wise,” Kayla assured him seriously.

“Cooool,” Jinto drawled happily.

****

Alex tapped her pen against the lab desk, trying to pay attention. Kayla and Terhaan were off base and it made her jumpy. It was the first time any of them had gone off world since they returned and not having everyone within easy reach was nerve-wracking. Her skin felt itchy, like something was crawling just below the surface. She felt antsy and agitated, and every loud noise made her heart speed up and her breath quicken.

She tried every meditation technique she'd ever read, cleared her mind and reached out for Atlantis, repeating the stupid little poem her Damma had taught her when she was three:

A mathematician confided That a Mobius band is one-sided. And you'll get quite a laugh If you cut it in half, For it stays in one piece when divided.

She'd used it whenever she felt the world tilting crazily under her feet, or like slipping away would
be far easier than running with the weight of her family's death.

It didn't work today. She couldn't concentrate, couldn't stay still, couldn't stop thinking. She left the labs and went for a walk, wandering aimlessly around Atlantis. Whatever was crawling around inside her wasn't appeased, and the fifth time a couple of the Marines gave her odd looks, she decided going to their rooms was the best course of action.

She booted up the laptop they'd given her—limited server access—and scrolled through the movies hosted on the main hub. Everything was beyond old. She growled and tossed the laptop on the bed in frustration. The door slid open, but she ignored it.

“Hey, aren't you supposed to be in the labs?” Carson asked, peeling off his sweaty shirt. Lorne had invited him to train with his Gate Team, and Carson was enjoying the experience.

“Yes.” Carson paused on his way to the bathroom and frowned. Alex was sprawled on the bed, but Carson could see the truth underneath the carefully cultivated exterior.

“You OK?” Sullen silence was his only answer. He breathed out a silent sigh and steeled himself for whatever shit storm was to come. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Yes, absolutely, let's...talk.” Alex sat up and smiled at Carson so sugary-false he felt his teeth ache. “How's your day been going, Carson? Mine's been AWESOME.” Carson folded his arms and refused to rise to the bait; these little episodes were really starting to get on his nerves. Alex wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't talk to Sateda—who was off running tirelessly around Atlantis more often than not—wouldn't talk to anybody.

“Fine, I get it. Enjoy being a bitch on your own time.” He stalked into the bathroom, his good mood shot to hell.

Alex winced as the door between the main room and the bathroom slid closed. She really was being a bitch. She didn't mean to be, couldn't explain why everything coming out of Carson's mouth set her on edge. Her reactions were totally unjustified, and what she was doing wasn't fair to him. She got up and put on her jacket; she needed to shoot something.

Carson scrubbed his hands through his hair, water turned as hot as it would go, raking his nails against the skin. Trying to scrub away the anger. His conditioner sailed across the tiny room and landed with a splat against the other wall.

And neither of them were around to listen to him. Alex and Sateda weren't big talkers in general, but they'd never begrudged him the chance to talk. They'd always been there, always felt close. He sank to the ground, staring at the other wall blankly.

He was becoming less and less sure their relationship would survive this whole transitioning process.

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John watched Alex switch out a clip on a standard issue semi-automatic handgun, and contemplated her.

John really hadn't expected to like her so much.

And she was Rodney seal-of-approval competent—a admission told to John in secrecy under pain of death, and right up there with how much Rodney actually liked Zelenka and was beginning to accept Zelenka's offspring—which meant something, in the grand scheme of things.
“You’re not a bad shot,” John grunted as they paused to switch out clips. She smiled at him, pleased at his praise.

“Yeah, well, I could shoot a gun before I could walk.”

“Really?” It hadn’t escaped John that she never talked about her past, or her parents, aside from the occasional direct question.

“No. Not really.” She threw him an exasperated eye roll, and he gave her his best ‘Who, me?’ look. She laughed—a small one but John still counted it a victory—and killed another target. “But it was a close call. I have a thing for guns. Makes me feel all girly.”

“Ha. So...how are all your kids doing?” John asked nonchalantly. It was his turn to kill the paper target. He heard Alex breaking down her gun and flicked the safety on. When he turned, she was studying him, her eyes hooded.

“Are you asking as a friend, or as the military head of Atlantis?” John briefly wondered if they were friends (and realized that to his surprise they were), before giving her a tight smile and no answer. It wasn't an either-or kind of thing; he was rarely one or the other.

“We're healing. A couple of people aren't dealing very well; Philippp still won't leave his room without someone with him. Trisha flinches at every shadow, and some days I think she really will take someone's head off. The young kids are doing alright; we did what we could to keep them shielded, protected them from the worst of it, taught them little tricks and devices to manage the stress. Us, the older ones...” John saw the weight of her life, of every choice she'd had to make, the stress of keeping people alive in a war zone and he wanted nothing more than to chase all her demons away. John had no words, nothing that wouldn't sound like empty platitudes, so he settled for loading his gun and emptying a round into the thin paper target.

“It's hard to be back,” she said softly. “We're used to keeping everything inside. There's no time for breakdowns in the field. A couple broke in the beginning. Didn't survive long.” John's seen that too, men who lost their wills in POW camps. You couldn't save someone who wanted to die. “We try to deal with it. And we're watching the tweens to make sure every thing’s OK. None of us are going to go crazy and try to blow up your control room, I promise.”

John forced a hollow laugh, but it wasn't a joke.

“What about you?” She shot him a confused look.

“What about me?”

“Is there anyone, ah, helping you out? You know...with the...stuff?” John winced and he wondered again why Teyla thought he should do this. He let her wander around with him at night, but that didn't mean he was ready to play therapist with a twenty year-old girl. Her lips twisted into a bitter version of a smile.

“Well, I’ve always got Carson and Dex.” John was missing pieces of the puzzle, and he couldn't figure out what they were. She emptied another clip into the target, center mass.

“Carson and Dex? Why them?” Alex glanced at John, tilting her head to look at him. He gazed back, waiting for an answer. A slow, genuine smile crept on her face, and he decided she looked entirely too amused for his tastes. “I just thought you and Kayla would’ve done the whole girl-bonding thing.” Alex’s grin grew wider, and her eyebrows climbed into her hairline. He gave her his best “I'm really not dumb, I promise” look. Alex smirked, just shy of a leer, and wiggled her
eyebrows suggestively.

“Wait! What? You and Carson AND Sateda? The...three of you?” Alex turned and unloaded another clip into the target, her laughter not affecting her aim one bit.

****

“Have you enjoyed your stay?” Teyla blew on her tea to cool it, watching the twins over the rim of her cup. She had watched their burdens lift over the days spent in the camp, the shadows under their eyes receding.

“It has been beyond enjoyable,” Kayla enthused.

“Yes, I am glad you invited us with you. We have missed this part of our heritage,” Terhaan confessed.

“It warms me to hear you say that.” They continued eating their breakfast in comfortable silence, and were soon joined by Halling.

“Teyla. Kayla, Terhaan.” Once the proper greetings were exchanged, Halling laid a wrapped package on the ground between them. He carefully began unwrapping it.

“I have asked Halling to bear witness should you accept my request.” Teyla leaned forward and offered a hand, palm up, to each twin. “It would honor me greatly to formally recognize our bond of family.” Kayla took Terhaan's hand before they both reached for Teyla.

“We would be honored.” Terhaan's voice caught on the words.

“You have traveled far and faced great adversity. Your path has led you to us. Teyla has asked to walk that path with you, by your side. She looks upon you and sees the bonds which tie you together, and would formally declare it.” Halling poured a specially blended tea into an empty cup.

Kayla, as the eldest, drank first. “I share this in remembrance of our past; where we came from has shaped who we are, and that will never be forgotten. For those lost before their time, whose voice will always guide my heart.” She passed the cup to Terhaan, who also drank.

“I share this in anticipation of our future; there are things yet done and words yet spoken, we are not the people we will be tomorrow. I surround myself with those who would guide me down a path of honor.” Terhaan passed the cup to Teyla.

“I share this with joy in the present; the past is gone and the future uncertain, but today is a celebration and filled with promise. Welcome.” Halling whooped, pulling both twins into a bone-crushing hug, and Jinto spilled into the tent.

“Have you finished? Is it done? Is it time for food?” Teyla smiled widely at Jinto's earnestness, watching Halling greet Terhaan and Kayla.

“It is done, Jinto. Tell Doran the feast may begin,” Teyla told the boy, who was looking up at Kayla and Terhaan with admiration.

“Awesome,” he breathed, and Teyla laughed. She feared Sheppard's influence on the young might be permanent. “Oh, Kanaan is outside!”

“I will ensure everything is ready,” Halling said with a bow, slipping out of the tent. Kayla and Terhaan stared at the tent flap.
“Kanaan would like to meet you,” Teyla told them softly. “It is your choice, but—”

“Yes,” Terhaan interrupted. He blushed and lowered his eyes respectfully. “Yes, please. We would quite like that.” Teyla moved to the tent opening and spoke a few quiet words. She returned with Kanaan.

He paused at the sight of them. They both had Teyla's bone structure, clear in their faces, but he could see himself in them too. Their skin was lighter, and Kayla...there was something familiar about her, something within Kanaan that answered to her presence. He brought his hand up to her face, but stopped short of touching her. Kayla leaned into his touch, sighing in contentment. He turned to Terhaan, who stepped closer, and Kanaan put his hand behind the boy's neck, guiding their foreheads together.

Teyla watched them together, content to the bottom of her soul.

****

Zelenka had noticed something different in the labs a few weeks after the Next Gens started working. The lab dynamics were out of synch. The new scientists, dropped off green from the Daedalus, were whispering amongst themselves. The older scientists, the veterans of both the Wraith and Rodney's temper, were constantly scowling at them. Because while Rodney seemed to be yelling less on the whole, he was yelling less at the green scientists. This was illogical; no one was up to any of McKay's standards right off the Daedalus. Something was going on and Radek was determined to find out what.

It wasn't often Radek found himself cut out from the happenings of the lab. Rodney reminded everyone loudly and with great frequency that he was the smartest of the smart and completely, irrevocably, 100% in charge that most of the scientists forgot that Radek was 'management.' It worked well; Rodney took the flak for being the uncompromising boss and Radek freely mingled with the staff and gauged their moods. But this time, they were freezing him out.

So Radek did the one thing that had never failed him: he watched.

He watched the people around him, swirling like eddies in the tide. He took the measure of each scientist, their actions, their habits and compiled the data.

The new scientists were very fond of Alex. They'd catch her in a moment alone, when Rodney or one of the senior scientists weren't around, and slide her a datapad then wander away. The datapad would be slipped into Alex's bag, returned in the morning, and a report would be filed soon after.

When Zelenka had observed this enough times to be sure of the pattern, he cornered Robertson after a morning exchange and confiscated his tablet. The man looked nervous as Radek scanned the edited contents. It was...edited. The comments on Robertson's report were pointed and leading, stopping well before they did any of Robertson's work for him. All of the areas that would usually send Rodney spiraling into a rant about the shortcomings of higher education were covered, and then some; there were suggestions of higher maths and paths to follow up on as well. Zelenka downloaded a copy of the edited file and handed the pad back to Robertson without a word.

Radek considered his options. He could confront Alex. But they were not that close and he wasn't sure how she would react to him. He could let her continue doing what she was doing and turn a blind eye. Or he could ask Bohdan.

“Oh, yes, we have both been doing this,” Bohdan informed Radek. He scrolled through Alex's notations. “She is a good editor, I am better at applying theory and seeing the big picture. We
collaborate frequently.”

“You have been doing this? For who?”

“Several of the engineers. They are not as frightened of you as Rodney's staff is of him.” Radek pondered this new information.

“How would Alex react if I were to offer her official position?”

Bohdan snorted. “Don't offer. Tell her to do it. But do not tell Rodney. In our universe, he was offered many 'assistants' of this kind. He resents them and many left in tears or worse. She will grumble in private, but she will do it.”

Radek accepted the datapad back with a pleased smile.

“Good. You are now official Engineering lab assistant.” Bohdan blinked in surprise. Radek reached for the datapads stacked next to his desk and dropped them into Bohdan's arms. “You may start with those.”

Radek grinned happily as he went in search of his next victim.

****

John heard the soft scuff of footsteps behind him. He turned so he could see who was interrupting his nighttime solitude.

“D'you mind?” John waved her in. Alex settled beside him, wrapped up in a blanket. He could see her bare toes poking out of the bottom. This high up, a constant breeze brought the scent of the ocean to them.

They sat in silence, letting the wind caress their skin. The stars sparkled in the sky, bright and clear with no light pollution to dull them. The moon was climbing, the hours of night waning with its path. John let his mind wander where it would, back to the first time he'd looked at the sky and thought, I belong there. The first time he'd flown an F-14. The first time he'd flown a puddlejumper. He soaked in Atlantis, because there really was no place like home.

“Have you met the Dorn yet?” Alex asked. She sprawled on her back, hands tucked under her head, staring up at the sky.

“No,” John said after a moment. “Don't think we have.”

She hummed happily. “You should go. They’re awesome. They have this pink and blue fruit called a chochi. It's fantastic. Makes great pies.”

“They have any super-complex, easy-to-break customs that will result in a death threat?” John asked dryly.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Yes, because everyone is out to get you.”

“A second grader could count the number of missions that have gone well.”

“You have Rodney McKay on your team, which isn't exactly the best move if you're going for the SGC Tactful Team Award,” Alex said dryly. “But of course you remember the bad missions. There's adrenaline and shooting and running for your life. And some of the cultures here are a little...tetchy.” John snorted. “But then again I bet you've never been to Abin Gra, or the crystal
fields of Elar. And there's this planet called Chet where the people revere these small bear-like creatures called *chetlings*. Their fur is softer than anything I've ever felt, and they like to cuddle. There are some awesome things in the Pegasus Galaxy. You just have to know where to look.”

“And you found these places using Michelin's guide to Pegasus?” John asked.

“Something like that.” There was something troubled and sad in her voice, and John didn't push for anything else, just closed his eyes enjoyed the silence between them. Not long after, he heard the rustling sound of someone standing up and stretching out the kinks.

“You should really check out the Leed,” she called over her shoulder. “They're pink.”
Chapter 10

Sateda stared at the calendar count down on the wall. As of today, it read one month until the Daedalus showed up.

“I hate that thing,” he told Alex.

“The Daedalus or the calendar?” Sateda rolled his eyes. Alex picked up her laptop bag and pushed Sateda out of the room. Kayla, Terhaan, and Danni were waiting for them at the end of the hall.

“Why can't it be both?” he asked.

“What's this?” Danni asked, pushing her dark hair back. She'd been letting it grow out ever since their rescue, and it was in that awkward just-below-the-ears place.

“Ax’s Daedalus countdown,” Sateda said. Danni made a face at the reminder of the spaceship of doom.

“Who's the commander here?” Danni asked.

“Colonel Stephen Caldwell,” Terhaan told her.

“Eesh. We are so screwed,” Danni muttered. They piled into the transporter, headed for the science level. They all froze as the ground rattled, and a dull pop echoed through the small space.

The doors opened on to chaos.

Dark black smoke billowed out from one of the main shared labs. A dazed scientist stumbled out of the room, bloody and sooty. He stumbled towards them, blinking owlishly. Terhaan jumped forward to catch the man as he fell.

“What happened?” Terhaan asked. Danni snapped into medical mode, checking the man's pupils and his head wound.

“Explosion. Something...” Danni shushed him as alarms started blaring moments later, summoning emergency teams and medical personnel.

“Bohdan's down here.” Terhaan's expression was grim.

“So are a hundred other people,” Alex reminded him. More scientists stumbled out of the lab, coughing.

“Stop talking,” Danni said brusquely. “Set up a triage area over there, I'm going to send people to each of you. The serious cases go nearest to the transporter.”

“I'm going in,” Terhaan said stubbornly.

“Kayla, Sateda, help Danni. Terhaan and I are going to go in and look for survivors,” Alex instructed. She pulled out a bottle of water and soaked the front of her shirt. Terhaan did the same, and they pulled the wet material over their mouths.

“Be safe! Get out if you start feeling dizzy!” Danni yelled after them. They disappeared into the room together, hoping to find Bohdan soon.
The first of the medical units showed up, and Danni absorbed them into her command structure. So far, none of the survivors had been seriously injured, but there weren't as many people coming out of the room as there should be.

Sheppard showed up and took in the scene; Danni commanded the medical staff like she'd been born to it, and they listened to her. The survivors were all being herded into different triage groups. Sheppard's eyes narrowed as Alex and Terhaan stumbled out of the smoking room, each supporting two scientists and leading a line of others.

“What the hell—” Sheppard started. Medical people rushed to check each of the soot-covered survivors. Alex and Terhaan side-stepped the ones trying to treat them.

“The ceiling's caved,” Terhaan gasped. Someone pressed an oxygen mask into his hand, which he accepted. “I can hear people trapped behind it. The air scrubbers should kick in soon, so they should be OK as long as nothing else happens. They've got injuries, I think, but it was hard to hear anything. I think Terhaan and I got almost everyone else out, but the smoke's pretty thick.”

“Harris, Everett, do a sweep of the room for survivors. No one else tries anything until Rodney or Zelenka get here.” John ordered.

“Dr. Zelenka isn't responding to his pages,” Lorne said, “but Dr. McKay should be here soon.”

“Good.” Sheppard eyed the Next-icons. “You can all go back to your rooms.” They looked thoroughly unimpressed with the dismissal.

“We aren't leaving,” Terhaan informed Sheppard.

“We think Bohdan's in there,” Alex added. Sheppard eyed them and realized that unless he put an armed guard on their door, he wouldn't be able to keep them away.

“Fine, but you stay in the hall and don't get in the way.” Sheppard turned all his attentions to the rescue operations.

They had fourteen people stuck behind a wall of debris and ceiling. There was a small hole that they were passing water and supplies through. And they had injuries. Zelenka was reportedly badly burned and in a lot of pain.

“If we don't get him treatment soon, he's going to die,” Keller insisted.

“I know that! There's not much I can do about that without bringing the rest of the ceiling down on the survivors, which would be antithetical to what we're trying to accomplish!” Rodney snapped. He tried not to think about Zelenka and what 80% burns meant.

“I need to get fluids and antibiotics in him yesterday!” Keller protested. “He's got burns and blisters over most of his body; he'll die of dehydration before we can get to him if I can't talk someone through running a line. And it's not easy to do in someone that badly injured.”

“Sheppard vetoed.

“Let me go.” They all turned to look at Danni, who stared at them with a fixed, stubborn expression. “I'm small enough to fit through that hole; I can run a line and assess the degree of the burns, I've been trained. I can treat any of the other injuries in there as well, and he's got less chance of dying before we can get to him if you send me through.”

“I'm not sending a 15 year-old kid into a dangerous situation,” Sheppard vetoed.
“He's going to die if you don't,” Danni told them. Sheppard clenched his hands, nails biting into his palms. No matter how much he liked Zelenka, he could not justify putting Danni in that situation.

“No, and that's final.” Danni smiled at him, thin and unconvincing.

“OK, sure.” He watched her go suspiciously; that was far too easy.

“She's right, you know,” Keller said softly. “He's going to die before we get to him if it's as bad as they say. And I don't think they even know how bad it really is.”

“I know,” Sheppard said unhappily. Shouts drew his attention back to the room in time to watch Danni dart past the guards and disappear into the hole.

“Danni! Danielle!” he yelled, but she had already shimmied down the hole. “Get back here right now! Danni! ALEX! Come control your people!” Sheppard fumed as Danni made it through to the other side.

“What happened?” Alex asked breathlessly, appearing beside him.

“Danielle decided to crawl through a hole filled with sharp, dangerous things against my direct orders,” he growled. Alex blinked at him.

“Oh. Yeah, she does that,” Alex said apologetically.

“This—she's fifteen,” Sheppard growled dangerously. “She's too young to be in this situation, and you're just—”

“Colonel! I can't do anything about it right now. I didn't know what she was planning, otherwise I would have stopped it, but she's there now and it would be really, really dumb not to use her. She's not going to come out just because I tell her to.” Alex folded her arms across her chest and glared at Sheppard, who glared right back.

“Fine,” John finally grit out.

He concentrated on working with Rodney and the combat engineers to get everyone out while trying to ignore the graphic, disturbing conversations Keller and Danni were having about Radek.

The explosion had been caused by an overloaded Ancient device; Radek had been close to the blast and had severe third- and second-degree burns over almost 80% of his body. Danni had hooked up to two saline lines to prevent dehydration, and commissioned the scientists, most of whom were ambulatory, to build a sling to hold Zelenka's arms and legs above his heart. Danni tried to clean the burns as much as possible without letting Zelenka go into shock.

The situation remained tense, Radek's life hanging in the balance. Rodney and the combat engineers were working quickly to clear a hole large enough that everyone who wasn't a fifteen-year-old girl could get through.

“Allright, we're ready to try this!” Rodney called. “Everyone move back, Keller, tell me when we're clear to go!”

The wall of debris spilled into the room, away from the trapped scientists. Keller and her medical team moved in on Zelenka and Danni, and Sheppard swallowed against the bile. He'd seen a lot of things in combat, but a person with severe burns over most of their body wasn't a pretty sight.

The figure on the gurney didn't look anything like Radek Zelenka.
“Shit, he's going into v-fib!” Danni called. The young girl climbed onto the gurney, straddling Zelenka's chest. “Starting compressions, one, two, three, breath!”

Rodney came barreling up as they whisked Zelenka away, gasping at the sight of his friend. John got to Rodney before he collapsed, easing the scientist down and pushing his head between his legs. John thought about Carson—the real Carson—dead in an explosion not so long ago.

“C'mon Rodney, breathe, buddy,” he coaxed. John took a chance and let his hand slip underneath the expedition jacket Rodney wore, getting that much closer. He kept his voice low and rhythmic, words of assurance slipping unheard from his lips.

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“How's it look?” Sheppard asked. Keller's expression was uncharacteristically grim. John glanced at Rodney, who still looked pale and drawn, his mouth turned down.

“It's not good. His burns are extremely painful, and infection's set in.”

“Can we send him to Earth?” Rodney demanded.

“I don't even want to risk moving him from here to the gate room, much less what it would take to transfer him to a burn unit on Earth.”

“So...what are you saying?” Teyla stepped in and laid a comforting hand on Rodney's arm.

“We can...we can make him comfortable and keep fighting but...” John watched Rodney, saw the way he drew in on himself, suddenly taking up less space. His eyes were dull and unfocused, lifeless. John wondered what losing another friend would do to Rodney, so soon after Carson.

“How long?” a new voice asked. Alex hovered on the periphery, not quite sure she had an invitation to their conversation.

“What?” Keller asked.

“How long does he have? Roughly speaking?”

“Well, there's no real way to tell for sure, but a week? Maybe two?” Alex turned to Rodney, nearly vibrating with agitation.

“The medical area I showed you the other day? Marked in red? There's a flesh regenerator and bone knitter there. If we can get there and back in enough time—”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Rodney took off towards his lab, Alex hot on his heels. John and Lorne followed, trying to catch up. Conversation and plans flowed between Rodney and Alex.

“We'll need two groups. They're both heavy pieces of equipment, so we'll need to swing by for the anti-grav sleds.”

“Which one's closest to the surface?”

“Doesn't matter—we take two jumpers, with different drop off points, and converge at the closest rendezvous.”

John and Lorne watched as Alex and Rodney pulled out a schematic of Atlantis. There were various colors and symbols that didn't make any sense to John. But that didn't matter. All that mattered was the light in Rodney's eyes when he looked at John and said, “We can save Zelenka.”
John let Ronon pick the soldiers going on the retrieval operation. They were going deep into Atlantis's unexplored area, almost on the other side of the city. It was going to take a day from their drop point to get to the medical area, and more than that to get back with the heavy equipment until the anti-gravity sleds made it to them. They needed to move as fast as possible, for as long as possible, which was the main reason Rodney wasn't coming.

“I want full descriptions when you get back, Sheppard,” Rodney told him.

“Yes, McKay,” he answered automatically.

“Seriously, a full run down of what it's like, and if you turn on any malfunctioning technology and I'm not there to save you I will bring you back to life so I can kill you repeatedly.” John gripped Rodney's shoulder.

“We're going to save him, Rodney. You've cleared everyone on this mission. These kids lived in the unexplored areas for two years. He'll be OK.” There was more, but John couldn't...he squeezed once more and withdrew his hand, heading towards the jumper.

****

“Stop.” John ground to a halt, the rest of his men following suit. Terhaan studied the ground before them, the long Ancient hall disappearing into the darkness. John lead the group headed straight towards the medbay for the Ancient devices, and he'd learned within hours of trekking through these unexplored regions that Terhaan and Alex knew what they were doing. The Next Gens paused at the next junction. Terhaan cocked his head to one side, and John tried to see what he saw, what had made them halt.

“What's up?” John finally asked.

“Floor's corroded,” Terhaan told him. John looked again, still not seeing it.

“There's a slight buckling in the sectors without support beams running underneath,” Alex explained. “Means the floor isn't stable”

“You can see that?” John asked, impressed.

“No,” Alex said. “But Terhaan can. He's the best scout we've got.”

“You learn quickly when lives are on the line,” Terhaan said bleakly. “The support beams may hold our weight. We'll need to test it.” John held his breath as Alex and Terhaan gingerly made their way across the floor.

John gripped his P-90 as the ominous groan of strained metal reached their ears. Alex and Terhaan turned back immediately, deftly navigating the treacherous landscape. John signaled Harris. They needed a new route.

****

Lorne's Anti-grav sled retrieval team was making good time. The majority of their path was intact and not water-damaged. Sateda and Ronon loped ahead, their long legs eating ground. If Sateda deemed something potentially hazardous or better avoided, he and Ronon sorted out an alternative route and left directions for the rest of the group.
As they waited for the Lanteans to catch up, Ronon shared his canteen with Sateda. He'd been working with the boy, sparring and running with him. They worked well with one another; Sateda was focused and dedicated in his pursuits, which Ronon appreciated. Sateda also spoke the Old Tongue, a language Ronon hadn't thought he'd hear again.

The next time Lorne caught up, he called for a break. They ate quickly and in silence.

“According to the last radio contact with Sheppard's group, most of the ground leading to the med center is water-damaged,” Lorne told them. “That means once we reunite, the trek to the jumper is going to be more dangerous. We'll need Carson and Sateda on point. Terhaan said to look for signs?” The last was directed at the two young Lanteans.

“When we cross the path they took, there will be warnings and directions on the walls. Sort of a shorthand we developed for when we'd get separated,” Carson explained.

“All right,” Lorne agreed. “Let's get this show on the road.”

They found the store room of dollies, lined up for use, right where the Next Gens said they would be. A couple of his soldiers let out whoops of joy. At least one part of the plan was going well. They made camp in the sled room, and left at first light the next day.

The sleds, once activated, would work for anyone. After were all turned on, everyone picked a sled. Their packs and extraneous equipment were placed on the sleds for easier mobility.

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Alex glanced at the Ancient emblazoned over the doorway.

“This is it,” she announced.

“You're sure?” Sheppard felt compelled to ask. She ignored the question. “Right. Let's do this. How heavy are these things again?”

As it turned out, they were extremely heavy. The tissue regenerator was large and bulky, meant to cover sizable sections of a person's body. The bone knitter was more manageable, but still not a walk in the park. They didn't have enough people to manage the parts and scout ahead.

“All right, change of plans,” John announced. “Lorne's coming to us. We're staying here, resting up. As soon as they show up, be ready to load up and move out.”

“Colonel Sheppard, Alex and I would like to scout the most likely routes Major Lorne's team will take. We can mark them and make sure they get here unharmed,” Terhaan said. John considered it for a minute; Alex and Terhaan were already out here risking their lives, and Zelenka was on borrowed time.

“Go, but don't do anything risky.” Terhaan nodded gravely and set about securing food and water. Lorne's people, provided they were on schedule, were about a day away. The hope was the exhausted soldiers could rest on the empty sleds while Sheppard's people moved them. They could cut their travel time in half by moving in two shifts.

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Four days after the retrieval groups initially set out, Keller hooked Zelenka up to the tissue regenerator with a relieved sigh. Infection had set in, and it had been all she could do to keep it from spreading. According to Danni's understanding of the machine, it worked on two fronts:
injecting nanites to begin repairing the most serious points of injury, and the large tank-like section
which actually stimulated and replaced damaged tissue.

Radek was on a generous stream of nutrient-rich IVs; the purpose of the machine (as well as the
bone knitter) was not to replace tissue and bone with the nanites, but for the nanites to speed and
enhance the natural healing process.

Keller monitored Zelenka's stats, happy to see improvement. It was hard to see Radek this way,
swathed in bandages and livid burns covering his body. One side of his face was a mess of burned
flesh, red and angry.

Danni had sworn that the regenerator would take care of the worst of the scarring, though it might
take a couple of applications before the final results were visible.

After getting Zelenka situated, Keller had checked each member of the expedition thoroughly.
Aside from a few bumps and bruises, she prescribed a good night's sleep and three days mandatory
leave for them all.

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Radek's return to consciousness was slow and painful. His eyes were gritty and stuck together, and
his mouth felt dry and disgusting. When he tried to move his hand to wipe away some of the gunk,
a sharp flair of agonizing pain raced up his arm. He gasped at the unexpected sensation, and
started coughing weakly. Kurva, his lungs hurt!

“Careful,” a concerned voice cautioned, “You have been gravely injured. Try not to move.”
When the pain subsided and Radek felt centered enough, he tried to open his eyes again. A wet cloth
ghosted over his left eye, sweeping away most of the residue there. His right eye refused to open.

Terhaan hovered over him, looking worried. Radek opened his mouth to speak, but searing pain
took his breath away. Terhaan gently squeezed Radek's left hand in reassurance.

“Do not try to talk, Dr. Zelenka. You were in a lab explosion. You are very badly burned over
much of your body,” Terhaan explained gently. Radek fought the rising panic. “You are attached to
a device that stimulates cellular regeneration, so your condition is only temporary.” Radek's good
side pulled down into a frown; he knew of no such device. He looked down at himself as much as
he was able and stared at the large tube his entire chest was encased in. He tired to sit up to get a
better look, but Terhaan stilled him. “Please, conserve your strength. Bohdan is not going to be
happy that I sent him away for five minutes and you woke up.”

Radek deliberately squeezed Terhaan's hand, trying to convey his thanks.

“Bohdan has not left your side for a week. Dr. Keller has threatened to kick him out if he does not
eat regularly and leave to sleep from time to time. This is one of those times.” Radek managed a
small half smile in spite of the pain.

“Terhaan? You pushed the call button?” Keller stepped into the curtained-off cubicle. Her face lit
up with delight seeing Radek awake and alert. “Dr Zelenka! I was hoping you'd wake up soon.
How's the pain?” Raked carefully tightened the left side of his face into a passable grimace. “Yeah,
I figured. I'm going to up your pain meds a little; unfortunately, we can't give you much because
we don't want to impair the device. What has Terhaan told you?”

“I told him a little of the explosion, but not much about the Regenerator except for it is there.”

“OK, well, Dr. Z, you have some very bad burns over a good part of your body. Most of your torso
and your right arm are hooked up to this device that's encouraging and expediting the healthy regrowth of your skin and muscle tissue, as well as some of your nerve endings. This Ancient device saved your life, and from the tests we've run, you're going to make a full recovery with minimal scarring. Though we can't do much about your hair except for wait for it to grow out.”

“My hair?”

“Terhaan? What's going on, I—” Terhaan stepped back to let Dan reach Radek's bedside. “Chvála bohu! Já domnění—but you're alright now, and I was tolik poustrašený...” Bohdan grabbed Radek's hand and held on. “Tafka,” Bohdan breathed.

Radek licked dry lips, trying to gather whatever moisture he could. He worked his mouth and throat, ignoring the pain the movements caused.

“Syn,” he whispered, barely audible, but Bohdan heard.

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“You are scheming.” Kayla flashed her brother a secret grin then turned her attention back to her prey. Terhaan followed her gaze and settled on Ronon, inhaling his food with John and Rodney. He felt a slow grin creep across his face.

“No more than you.” He didn't bother to deny it.

“Keller?” Kayla nodded. Terhaan glanced at their quarry once more. “I believe we should enlist a bit of help.”

“I believe you are correct.”

----

Ronon was heading towards the gym when a desolate wail sounded through the halls. He started sprinting towards the sound before he'd even fully recognized the sound of a young child crying. He skidded to a halt in front of a young child, Lorne's five-year-old Scott, who was crying and clutching his elbow.

Ronon crouched down so he was eye level with the teary-eyed boy. “Hey, what's wrong?” Scott abruptly stopped crying, sniffing piteously. “Lemme see it.” Scott lifted his arm to show Ronon his ‘injury,’ and Ronon nodded gravely. He gingerly took the child's arm, running his finger over the bone.

“I think it's broked.” Ronon suppressed a smile. The bone was not broken and wasn't even going to bruise, but it couldn't hurt to humor the boy.

“Yeah, but you're being pretty brave. Think you can tough it out?” Ronon winced and regretted his question when Scott started crying again, his voice climbing into a glass-shattering register. Stubby fingers threaded through his dreads and pulled.

“Scott?” Kayla and Terhaan materialized in the hall, but Scott didn't stop crying. “Is he alright?” Kayla reached for Scott, but he just cried harder and pulled Ronon's hair to get closer to his new protector.

“He's fine, I think he fell. Just started crying again.” Ronon wondered why he wasn't picking up more concern from the twins. And what was Scott doing in a hallway unattended.
“Perhaps we should take him to the infirmary,” Terhaan suggested. He eyed Scott's hand, buried in Ronon's hair. “Perhaps you'd care to join us?” They walked to the infirmary in silence, broken only by Scott's pitiful sniffles and the occasional whimper.

Jennifer was all smiles and efficiency, making a big show of checking Scott's injured elbow and then putting on a 'big boy' band-aid. She watched in amusement as he cajoled Ronon into drawing the Satedan symbol for bravery on his bandage, proudly showing it to everyone who passed by afterwards. Keller handed Scott a lollipop and he settled on Ronon's lap, playing with a dread.

“You're really good with kids.” Ronon glanced down at Scott, humming happily and looking around curiously.

“I like 'em. Heard you were adopting Elora.” Jennifer's face lit up.

“Yeah. She's just so...she's got this sound she makes when she's happy, kind of a giggly-happy noise. And these rosy red cheeks and she's smart. They told me she was mine in their universe too, that I adopted her there. Love at first sight. Guess some things don't change, because when I picked her up I...” she trailed off a blushed. “I tend to babble about her, so...yeah. I, uh, would have thought you'd hate kids. Kinda. Cause they're noisy and uh, and I'm going to just stop now.” Ronon grinned. Jennifer was kind of adorable when she babbled.

They're innocent 'S hard to come by. Precious.” Ronon watched from the corner of his eye as Kayla and Terhaan collected Scott and slunk away.

“You're really good with kids,” Jennifer said wryly.

Ronon let his dinner tray clatter loudly to the table. He took his seat, not giving Kayla, Terhaan, or little Scott any indication he knew he'd just intruded on their dinner. He ate in silence, watching them from his peripheral vision. When he got to his dessert, he leaned back and looked at them for the first time.

“So. Me 'n Keller.” Kayla's lips twitched upward before she schooled her features into a questioning look. She was good. He looked them both in the eye before deliberately dragging his gaze to Scott, giggling quietly in the corner, three slices of chocolate cake lined up in front of his tray. Terhaan arched an eyebrow, dark eye dancing with laughter. Ronon finished his desert, stole a bite of Scott's second piece, and got up to leave.

“I'll call you if I need more help.” Their laughter followed him out of the mess.

John flipped the DVD case nervously in his hands. Images of his incredibly vivid dreams flashed through his head and he fought the heat rising in his face. He could do this. This was purely innocent, nothing to be nervous about; he was just asking his best friend to watch a little bit of Dr. Who. There was NOTHING else going on.

He found Rodney in his lab, scowling at his second favorite laptop.

John's stomach did not give the same fluttery feeling he got at the top of a Ferris Wheel or going Mach 5 in a fighter jet. He leaned against the door jamb and watched Rodney tapping away at his
“Hey Rodney,” he called during a lull in the typing. Rodney jumped a little, but hid it with the ease of practice. Rodney shifted so he could see John out of the corner of his eye.

“Colonel.” Rodney kept most of his attention on his computer, afraid to look at John should he give something away.

“What cha doin’?” John drawled, the 'o' dragged out. Rodney turned to look at Sheppard when felt he'd worked up enough ire to hide his other emotions.

“Potting plants, obviously.”

“Well, when you're done,” John brandished the DVD case, “got the new season of Dr. Who.” Rodney's face lit up and John felt a warm wash of satisfaction.

“Let's go.” Rodney locked down his computer and bounced over to the door.

“What, now?” John asked in surprise. Rodney frowned and gave John a funny look.

“Did you have some other time in mind, Colonel?” John shook himself.

“Oh, uh...no?”

“Right. Rec room?”

They walked down the hall in silence, shoulders brushing every few steps. Rodney tried very hard to tell his libido that this was not a date. This was John letting his deceptively prescient inner geek out to play.

But Rodney couldn't help glancing at John's profile as they walked, snippets of his dreams causing a low hum of arousal to swirl through his body. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to ward off potentially embarrassing bodily reactions by running complex calculations through his head.

John glanced at Rodney from the corner of his eye and frowned. Rodney was off in his own world; John could practically see the lines of numbers and integers scrolling through Rodney's head. He tamped down on the flair of disappointment. This was not a date, this was Rodney-bonding courtesy of Dr. Who.

“Too bad Eccleston left. That Tennant guy just doesn't understand what it means to be The Doctor.” Four...Rodney snapped out of his reverie. Three...John hid his smirk as Rodney's brain tried to process the stupidest statement ever and he turned bright red. John let his smirk show. Two...Rodney glared at John and sucked in a long, preparatory breath. One.

“Oh, OF COURSE you'd identify with the PTSD war-ravaged alien who tried to kill himself in a blaze of glory but managed to survive against all odds. And while he may appeal to your twisted martyr-Kirk complex, Eccleston never even came close to Tennent's brilliance! Tennent has the passion and the attitude and the hair!” John brought the lights up with an eye roll. “All Eccleston had was a big nose and a leather jacket! Though Rose was hot.”

Someone jerked upright off one of the couches, startled out of sleep.

“Oh. Sorry, I didn't think anyone would be in here,” Alex said awkwardly. She scrambled off the couch, blinking at the bright light. Her eyes were glassy, sleep lines and messy hair making her look young.
“Oh, no, sorry, my fault. I was just, uh...why are you in here?” John asked.

“Uh, well...” Alex's eyes went wide and a faint blush crept up her neck. She ducked her head and rubbed the back of her neck, clearing her throat. “Carson and Sateda were, ah...” John blushed, a vivid image of the two boys springing up unbidden. He felt the tips of his ears burn.

“The rec room is a horrible place to take a nap,” Rodney said primly. “There's a much better couch on the other side of the botany labs.” Rodney reddened when he felt John's eyes land on him, incredulous. Rodney NEVER shared the good spots. With anyone. Not even John. Alex beamed at Rodney, who fidgeted under her grateful, happy look.

“Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. So...whatcha watchin'?”

“Dr. Who,” John said, brandishing the case. Alex's eyes lit up.

“Oh man, Ten! These are classics!” She grabbed the case and flipped it over. “Dude, they're actual DVDs. Wow! This is, like, the full experience, huh? I gotta say, I loved Ten, and Nine had his own awesome charm, but Eleven was just to die for. You wouldn't BELIEVE what they did—” Rodney slapped a hand over her mouth, glaring warningly.

“You will NOT kill the Doctor before his time. ANY of them.” John thought it was kind of cute how serious Rodney took this. “No spoilers.” Alex nodded in agreement, her eyes dancing. Rodney carefully lowered his hand.

“You know, Dr. Who's great, but there's this one planet that has something like TV, and they made a show that's so much better.” Rodney made an angry, choking noise in the back of his throat. “It's like if you took everything that made Dr. Who awesome, distilled it, and combined it with Quantum Leap. It's called Farthen Dawn, and it kind of spoiled Dr. Who for me because it's so much better.”

John appreciated how utterly indignant Rodney was, his mind so busy firing out the reasons the she was so wrong wrong, so very wrong to even suggest anything was better than Dr. Who that he couldn't put together a coherent sentence. The corner of Alex's mouth twitched.

“Well, enjoy your movie, I'm just going to--”

“No,” Rodney commanded. “You're staying, it may be the only opportunity I have to knock some sense into you.”

Alex coughed nervously, her eyes darting from John to Rodney and back. “You really don't have to—”

“Stop talking,” Rodney snapped. She exchanged a feeble ‘what can you do?’ smile with John. He looked around for a place to sit, but Alex was between them and the large couch. The only other decent seat was the smaller couch that would have John and Rodney brushing against each other throughout the whole movie. John swallowed, trying to remind himself that this was just Dr. Who. Nothing else.

John sent Rodney off for some popcorn and took the opportunity to talk to Alex.

“And you're napping in the rec room because...”

Alex shrugged noncommittally. “The couch is comfortable?” she offered. John snorted and folded his arms. The couches in here were only comfortable to sleep on if you were dead tired or something like Glitter was on. John shuddered, remembering that particular movie night. Rodney
came back with the popcorn and sat down next to John. They were pushed together arm-to-thigh.

“Hey, enjoy your movies. I really need to get back to the loud and crazy toddlers. Enjoy your DVDs.”

Rodney, having reflected on how utterly stupid he had been to invite someone else on their (not a date) manly bonding time let her go.

“There's a folder on the server called Brilliance. Find it and read it,” Rodney yelled to Alex's retreating back.

John couldn't say he was overly disappointed when Alex booked it out of the room. Or with the way Rodney had settled the popcorn between them so that their arms brushed when they reached in the bag. John started the DVD and settled in for some new-old fashioned Doctor.

They were half way through their fourth episode when they both reached into the popcorn bag at the same time. Their fingers tangled together, butter-slick. John froze. Rodney blushed bright red and gently untangled their fingers.
Chapter 11

Rodney yelped and snatched his hands back as the top of his laptop closed with a thump. An irate John Sheppard glared at him across the table.

“You stood me up,” John accused, lower lip pushed out in a pout that should look ridiculous on a man pushing 40. Rodney tore his gaze away with supreme force of will.

“What?”

“You stood me up. Lunch? On the North pier?” It took a moment for Rodney to remember the barbeque picnic Elizabeth had arranged to try and ease some of the tension in the city. Rodney had been understandably leery after the last morale day, but John had convinced him to meet for lunch at noon.

“That wasn't until noon, Sheppard, and—”

“It's 1300, Rodney, and you have the day off.”

“Oh,” Rodney managed as Sheppard walked around the table. He was wearing civilian clothes—a threadbare black tee-shirt with a pair of well worn, ass-hugging jeans. Rodney's eyes kept slipping to the thin band of skin playing peek-a-boo between John's shirt and waistband. He was definitely going to set an alarm next time.

“Rodney?” Sheppard prodded.

“Right! Food! Wouldn't want to have a hypoglycemic reaction now would I?” He brushed past the bemused Colonel and out the door, heading for the nearest transporter. He paused to stick his head back in the door. “Coming?”

----

The North pier looked like a scene from a pleasure cruise. Permissive adults lounged around the pool in deck chairs, eating food from a buffet to one side as rambunctious, half-naked children ran around screaming and dripping on everything. There was quite a good deal of skin on display around the pier.

“They're called bathing suits, Rodney.” John's voice was close in Rodney's ear, breath hot, and he scowled to hide his reaction, calculating the likelihood of the little hellions developing skin cancer from all the sun exposure. It was depressingly low when one considered their age. He followed Sheppard to a set of chairs set off to one side, well shaded. Teyla and Ronon were already there with Teyla's slightly creepy twins sitting in his and John's chairs.

“Kayla, Terhaan,” John greeted amicably. The two young adults immediately stood and offered their seats. While John was protesting the gesture, Rodney plunked himself right down and started eating his mock-sloppy joe, made with so many spices he couldn't even taste the fake-cow. Rodney paused to admire Kayla's extremely skimpy outfit before he felt Teyla's disapproval boring into his skull and his survival instincts kicked in. Plus, it was almost like watching Teyla, and while she was hot, she'd firmly entered familial territory.

The food was good and boisterous ankle-biters aside, Rodney had to admit he might be having a good time. He might even be relaxed, though the sensation was so foreign to him these days that he couldn't be sure. Rodney was just about asleep when Ronon sat up straight and nudged John.
“Look,” Ronon instructed, pointing with his chin. They watched Alex and Carson, who'd just arrived and were keeping a premeditated distance between one another. Alex said something, and Carson glared at her. She folded her arms defensively and Carson snapped something that made her spin on her heel and walk off.

Carson wore an old, borrowed tee and board shorts; Alex was fully covered in a long sleeve t-shirt and loose workout pants. Her only nod to the lax summer atmosphere was a lack of shoes. Carson eventually allowed himself to be pulled into the pool, giggling toddlers and pre-teens swamping him. Alex watched it all with strained amusement, no indication that she planned on joining in the fun.

“Colonel Sheppard?” a small voice asked. One of the younger tweens, a shy girl named Sara, watched him with wide eyes, chewing on the end of her hair.

“Hey, what's up?” John asked with an easy smile.

“Um. We were hoping you might wanna help us?” she asked.

“Sure. With what?”

“We wanna push Alex in the water, but she's way too smart to fall for it. Sateda says she's wily. Can you be a div-diversion for us?” Rodney's snort turned into a choked whimper at the look on Sheppard's face. Mischievous was a hot look for certain Air Force Colonels.

“I think I can do that,” John said gravely. “If I go now, will you be ready?” Sara grinned, eyes bright.

“Yeah!”

“OK, so here's what I need you to do...” Rodney felt mild shame that he found Sheppard sharing military tactics with a twelve-year-old adorably endearing and kind of sexy.

----

“Everyone having fun?” John asked, handing Alex a glass of Athsian iced tea. He caught a brief impression of haunted blue eyes before the shadows were hidden away. John wondered what she'd been like before, if her smile had come easier and she'd sparkled with mischief and humor all the time. She accepted the tea with a nod of thanks, attention never leaving the cavorting kids in the pool.

“Yeah, they love it, it was a great idea. Thanks for setting this up.” Alex toasted him with her glass. John shrugged and ducked his head, toeing the ground in front of him.

“It was Elizabeth's idea.” They stood there for a moment, taking in the feeling of community and relaxation pervading the pier. “Walk with me?” John asked, feet turning towards the edge of the gathering.

“Always patrolling, huh?” They fell in step, walking the perimeter of the pier, always watching. John chose a route that would end with them walking alongside the pool area.

“Never stops, but you already know that.” Alex's expression pinched, and John kicked himself for bringing it up. “So I was wondering if any of you can fly a jumper.”

“Most of us can. It's our equivalent of driving a car, except more like: turn 15, have the gene? Learn to pilot a jumper well enough to get through a gate and out of trouble. Standard practice after
this one incident that could have ended badly. But Carson...” she stumbled mentioning his name, but covered it well, “Carson's the Pilot. There's nothing more in this world he likes more than being in the air, however he can get up there.” John grinned in understanding. “He sometimes...flying calms him down. Even just remembering it. It's helped us through some bad times.”

“And you?”

“It's fun from time to time, but I'd only be considered 'good' at it if you redefined what constituted a straight line.” John chuckled. “But yeah, Carson...he's the real deal. Flying isn't something he does, it's something he lives for. And I'm told he's got great instincts for it as well.”

“Yeah? Who told you that?” She grinned impishly at him.

“You did. In a universe far, far away.” The moment turned a bit nostalgic, but Alex kept it light with a quick wink. John grinned in return and stepped away from her on the pretense of a bow; at the same time, a young voice yelled “CHARGE!” John had a moment to register Alex's betrayed look before she was attacked on all sides. Every kid glomped her at once, pulling her towards the pool. Sateda fired the fatal shot, body-tackling her into the deep end amongst loud cheers and victorious applause. She came up spluttering and swearing vengeance on them all, viciously demanding John Sheppard's untimely demise.

John doubled over, laughing his head off, so he didn't see her climb out of the pool and stalk towards him. Squealing kids alerted him to the approaching danger. He swallowed nervously as Alex stood before him, dripping water and baring her teeth. Her long sleeve shirt sagged off her body, and John caught a quick glimpse of something dark and jagged underneath the tee before he started backing up for his life.

“Colonel,” she said sweetly, advancing towards him.

“Hey! You're looking a little...damp.” Her grin twisted, turning feral at the edges. He nervously picked up the pace, keeping one eye on the other kids. He didn't trust them, they looked shifty.

“I think I need to thank you for your part in this little coup,” she said, opening her arms wide and quickening her step. John started backing up faster, his best placating the crazy natives smile on his lips. When she started towards him with real intent, he turned to run for his life, but found his escape blocked by a solid wall of giggling, traitorous turncoats. His coconspirators had betrayed him, blocking his every attempt at freedom, herding him towards Alex and the pool's edge. The military part of his brain pointed out that they were actually fairly effective and well organized. They hemmed John in from all sides, executing a textbook pincer movement and leaving him trapped with Alex in the center. The bright flare of a camera flash momentarily stunned him, and Alex capitalized on the distraction. He squirmed and shouted as jumped jumped him, wringing out her sleeves so that every spare drop of water soaked into his civvies. Garreth and Scott wrapped their cold, tiny, salt-soaked bodies around John's legs, impeding his movement and soaking the front of his jeans. Small hands sent them both crashing sideways into the pool, the wake spilling over the sides, children cannon-balling into the water after them.

John came up spluttering and laughing, splashing at anything that moved.

John spent the good part of an hour tossing small children as far as he could, which turned into a pretty good work out. He was incredibly thankful when Ronon took over. But just when he thought he was done, he got roped into a friendly game of sharks and minnows that turned fierce when the marines got involved. All in all, Sheppard lost a splash fight with two seven-year-olds, failed to get McKay anywhere near the pool, and launched every child under the age of ten across the pool at
least a dozen times before he called it quits.

He dragged his exhausted body out of the water and flopped down on a conveniently placed towel, peeling off his wet shirt and stretching out in the sun. A shadow fell over his face just as he was slipping into a light doze.

“Do you know what malignant melanoma DOES to the human body?” John cracked open an eye and grinned goofily up at Rodney.

“No-pe!” he declared happily, going back to his nap. John opened his eye again; Rodney was standing in his sun, so he tugged at Rodney's pant leg and motioned for him to lay down on the spare towel. Rodney shook him off scowling. “Lay down, Rodney.” Rodney flushed bright red, those innocent words taking a detour through the gutter of his mind.

“A shadow fell over his face just as he was slipping into a light doze.

“Are you kidding? I'm already risking death by coming out here to warn you, Sheppard. And if you think I'm going to lay down on the hard, unforgiving ground when there's a perfectly serviceable deck chair right there, you're mistaken. Unless you want me to develop severe back problems. In which case, you'll be the one working the kinks out of my back for the next three days.” John was just tired enough to seriously consider the offer and gaze at Rodney with a hint of suggestion. Rodney swallowed and knew that tonight's dream would probably involved a very tan, very wet John Sheppard in a skimpy bathing suit.

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Alex chose that moment to stumble onto the towel beside John, still covered head-to-toe, her hair plastered to her skull, revealing her oft-covered ears and the Satedan mathe.

“You should go in, the water's great!” Alex told Rodney as she sprawled on the ground.

“See, that's what I said,” John groused. John kicked out, nudging Alex's legs. “Hey, d'you know if I ever convinced him to go surfing in your universe?” Alex hummed, searching through her memories.

“I think you got him as far as the beach once. There was an unfortunate incident with the training board that cut that trip short,” she snickered. “People talked about it for weeks.”

“He is right here!” Rodney felt compelled to point out.

“Oh yeah?” John asked as if there'd been no interruption.

“Someone used lemon wax on the board; he had a giant rash over his chest for days afterwards. I think it looked like a map of Soviet Russia.” Rodney didn't even register John's muppet laugh, because his brain had just come up with a solution to a problem he hadn't even been aware of. A hundred small unrelated clues and random bits of information coalesced into a conclusive, irrefutable proof. He glanced between Alex and John, and now that he knew, he couldn't imagine how he'd ever not known.

“Rodney? Buddy? You OK?” John asked with concern. He sat up and reached for Rodney, who jerked back as if burned, blue eyes too bright against pale skin. He was breathing hard and just this side of hyperventilating. “Rodney?”

“Because she's...and yo—I—just remembered this, this thing. With the labs. I gotta go and...” Rodney turned and hurried away from the pier.
Rodney's feet took him to his lab, but for once he couldn't lose himself in the base code that formed the lifeblood of Atlantis, or the equations that told him how to harness the world around him. He retreated to his little-used room. In the light of day, it was small and unkempt. The bed was messy and there were clothes crumpled on the bathroom floor. And John Sheppard had a kid.

Rodney sank onto his prescription mattress, hauled all the way from another galaxy. John had a daughter. With his ears and everything.

Rodney scowled and tried to imagine the woman John had bred with. Probably some alien priestess with a great body and no brains. Or he got himself roped into an engagement that he couldn't charm or run his way out of. Or a glowing Ancient came down nine months after her other plane of existence-moving experience with Sheppard and dropped a squiggly mostly-Ancient baby in John's lap. That about covered all the viable options. (Because John Sheppard did not fall in love with some gorgeous blue-eyed woman who was almost as hot as him and gave him pretty blue-eyed, dark-haired kids. Oh who was he kidding, that's exactly what he did. Got a three-bedroom apartment on the west side of the control tower, a space dog, and a baby-sized US Air Force sweatshirt. There was dinner on the table at 6, he made love to his gorgeous wife every night, and won Dad of the Year for the rest of his life.)

Rodney glared sullenly at the far wall. As if he needed definitive proof that Sheppard was straight and unavailable. Stupid kid with her stupid gene.

Rodney wondered if he could determine how much of Alex came from John. He could calculate the percentage and only like her as much as the John-part of her allowed, because while Rodney could be annoyed, frustrated, and angry and John Sheppard...he couldn't hate him. Any part of him. Rodney groaned and buried his head under his pillow. One day, he would grow up and be a non-pathetic real boy. Honestly.

He didn't dream that night though. Or the next.

----

Alex looked up from her work. Rodney was staring at her. Boring holes in her skull. She slanted her eyes to the side and caught Rodney in the act seconds before he jerked his hole-boring gaze back to his computer. She resumed concentrating on the Ancient device Rodney had given her with directions to “Play with this.” Which would be infinitely more interesting if it actually did something. Moments later, Rodney's gaze moved back to her.

She brought him coffee. That got her a temporary reprieve, though Rodney stared the coffee to death instead of drinking it which was so out of character she trolled through the labs to make sure no one had inadvertently found an Ancient mood alterer. After determining there were no errant devices turned on in the lab, she convinced Bohdan to steal her a chocolate power bar, which she left on Rodney's laptop when he slipped away for a rare five minute break. That had only increased the staring and its intensity.

She fidgeted in her seat, trying to figure out what was going on that crazy head of his. She glanced at him again, and this time he didn't look away.

“15485863,” Rodney said. Alex blinked.

“Um. What?”

Rodney scowled and repeated, slowly for the slow, “15,485,863.”
“I...don't understand,” Alex said, wrinkling her nose in confusion. Rodney huffed in annoyance. It had been a long shot anyways. “Wait. Are you trying to play Prime-Not Prime with me?” Rodney crossed his arms and refused to answer that question because Prime-Not Prime should not have to be announced. “Oh. OK. Um. Were you looking for a fast game of Prime-Not Prime, because you'd probably have to keep it under the first 10,000 or so for that.”

“Go away,” Rodney commanded, turning back to his computer. 25% in the “John Reproduced with a Space Bimbo” column.

“It's just, I'm not a fan of long division.” 75% in the “John Reproduced with a Space Bimbo” column. Things were not looking good for John's genetic influence, though she had an automatic, unalterable 15% for gene strength alone.

“Go back to your paper shredder or I'll make you work with Kavanaugh,” Rodney growled. Actually, that was perfect. She could work with Kavanaugh for the rest of her life, and Rodney would never have to see her again.

“That's just—wait, you KNOW it's a paper shredder? Did the Ancients even use paper?” Never mind. He was taking away everything but 1% for the ears. John could've knocked up one of the glowing squids.

“KAVANAUGH!”

****

Carson growled as he stormed into his room. His empty room. He angrily picked up one of Alex's shirts and threw it in the laundry basket, so fucking happy that she felt at home enough to leave her clothes on the ground even though she was never here. Though he preferred that to Sateda; the only evidence he lived here were clothes in a drawer.

Carson felt spread thin and frenetic. He couldn't concentrate and constantly fidgeted. Working out was only a temporary refuge from the anxiety that plagued him; the rest of the time he felt like he was on a razor's edge just waiting to snap.

His anger surged through him when Alex stumbled in the door, bleary-eyed from long hours in the lab. He tracked her through the room, glaring at her back. She kept throwing him little glances, as if waiting for him to say or do something.

“What?” she asked thickly, swaying a little on her feet. She'd felt his gaze on her since she walked in the room, and waited until it was obvious he wasn't going to make the first move. Carson glared at her silently, too angry to talk. “Carson?”

He stepped back and shook his head, hands fisted at his side. Alex's annoyed sigh echoed through the still room.

“Look, I'm exhausted and cranky; I spent all day patching secondary systems, I have so many lab reports to read over, and I don't have the inclination or patience to ferret out what's bothering you, so could we skip the strong, silent act and you can just tell me what's wrong?” Carson shot her a withering look that Alex allowed to roll off her; whatever bug had crawled up Carson's ass could be dealt with in the morning. She wanted a shower and sleep.

“You're an unbearably selfish bitch.” Alex spun around in shock. She ran a gamut of emotions before settling on outrage.

“Oh please, don't spare my feelings or anything,” she said sarcastically. Carson bristled.
“You're always so fucking glib,” Carson hissed angrily. “Brushing me off with a smart remark or a joke. You're never around, and when you're here you're not here. Fuck, you're like dating a rock, except the rock might be worth the effort!”

Alex's eyes went cold and flat; her lips thinned to a dark slash. When she couldn't think of anything to say, she spun on her heel and headed into the bathroom for privacy. She braced herself on the sink, resting her forehead against the cool bathroom mirror.

When had everything gotten so fucked up? So difficult? Carson and Sateda were supposed to be immovable, stalwart and strong and unchanging. The little kids talked about them like they were heroes, whispered words of awe about how cool it was to find two people to love, where some people didn't even find one. They were an oasis of calm and awesome in the deserted halls of Atlantis while the things of nightmares slowly picked off the remaining survivors.

Right now they were just three people living in the same space, playing at being together, when they were all just running scared. Maybe it was because they weren't faced with life-or-death everyday. Between the nazghoul and taking care of the children, relationship problems were petty and moot. Now that they were here, in a new Atlantis with a fresh start...something needed to give, someone needed to stand up and change the pattern they'd all fallen into.

Alex was so lost in her head she didn't register the hand that touched her shoulder, simply reacted.

Carson, sprawled on the floor, looked up at her in hurt astonishment, a small cut on his darkening cheekbone. He touched it, staring at the red blood on his fingers.

“You...you just—” Carson cut himself off. She made a high, distressed sound in the back of her throat and ran out of the room.

Carson didn't try to stop her.

----

She retreated to her balcony, thoughts crashing into one another like a giant clusterfuck of bumper cars, one piled onto the other. She'd hit Carson. She had hit Carson. She buried her head in her knees, trying to drown out the voices screaming in her head. Her hands were shaking, so she tucked them under her arms and tried to find some sense in the mess that was her head.

What felt like hours later, a warm hand pressed between her shoulder blades, but she didn't move. Couldn't move. The hand rubbed soothing circles on her shoulders, and the distant buzz in her ears might have been an encouraging voice, but it couldn't cut through the screaming wall of guilt and pain.

The voice tried to get her to stretch out, to look at him, but she couldn't face him; she didn't want him to see what she'd done, so she stayed curled in her ball where the pain couldn't go. The warmth from his body chased away some of the cold, and she caught the familiar scent of home. A selfish part of her whispered that it would be so easy. So easy to turn into him, to pretend that he was—she screamed, sound muffled by the tight curl of her body, and pulled at her hair.

Familiar, gentle hands gently detangled her fingers, and she suddenly felt totally drained and exhausted; her thoughts and emotions settled blissfully into numbness. He held her hands until his question, “Are you alright?”, cut though the recriminating voices in her head.

“No,” she croaked, her throat dry and swollen. He sat beside her, silent and supportive, through the night.

“You want to talk about it?” John offered, torn between running to get Heightmeyer right now and
staying right where he was in case...

“Not really,” she said flatly. Every word pushed at her precarious hold, forcing barely contained emotions back towards the surface.

John stared at the sun climbing over the horizon; he would have to go soon, but he didn't want to leave her alone in her state.

“M not suicidal.” She met his gaze, eyes red and puffy. “Really. Things just got...overwhelming. I'm fine.”

He didn't call her on the lie.

----

She waited until the sun was high and she'd finally convinced Sheppard she really wasn't going to swan dive off the balcony. Carson should be out helping Major Lorne. Sateda had something planned with Ronon. The room should be empty and she could do what she needed to do without any fuss or mess.

She forgot that life made a game of fucking up her plans. She'd already gotten through the door when she became aware of them, Carson and Sateda sitting rigidly on the bed, Terhaan and Kayla standing to the side looking grim and determined.

Her eyes flicked to the door, but Terhaan's expression promised retribution if she tried to bolt; she considered doing it anyways, because she had a bad feeling about what was coming. Carson looked like he'd rather be anywhere else, but was stubbornly going to stick this out. Sateda glowered beside Carson, his hands reflexively closing around the older man's, the two of them posing a united front. Alex really didn't need any of Sateda's disappointed, accusatory looks. She was pretty upset about this whole thing as it was, because she'd never had a flashback around either of them. They were...home base. Safe, always.

But Carson's cheek was dark purple, an angry, violent bruise that condemned her. Fuck, she'd hit Carson. The enormity of it made her legs tremble and her vision gray. She took an involuntary step back, trying to get some distance from everything.

“You were gonna leave,” Carson accused. She could tell from his voice he's been crying. “Oh, you'd still be here, looking out for everyone and smiling and right down the fucking hall, but you'd have left just the same.”

She didn't try to deny it; she owed Carson so much, least of all her honesty. Carson, who'd been born two hours before her, knew her better than anyone. Even Sateda, who was currently looking at her with wide eyes, expecting her to deny it, to prove Carson wrong. She looked away so she wouldn't have to see the devastation the truth would cause. Despite everything they'd been through, all the mistakes they'd made, Sateda still like to believe she was a good person without a novel-length list of issues in her suitcase.

“You'd do that? Just...leave? Like that? After--” Sateda cut himself off, words harsh and accusatory. He strode up to her, eyes angry and glittering. “Fuck you, Alexandra.” Alex stood her ground as he towered over her, fury etched into every line of his body. She deserved every ounce of his ire, and then some.

“Sateda!” Carson yelled, getting off the bed. “There's been enough violence for today, thanks.” Alex looked stricken and turned away, wrapping her arms protectively around herself. Carson
sighed and approached her, cautiously, making enough noise that she'd know he was coming. There were years of pent up emotions, problems and issues they'd never had a chance to talk out, that had been pushed aside in favor of surviving that were all coming to ahead now. They had a countdown hanging over them, the Daedalus' putting them all on borrowed time. Damned if Carson wasn't going to take what the time they did have and enjoy it.

"I wouldn't want to waste my time on a coward anyway," Sateda hissed. Alex didn't even flinch, her eyes glued to a spot on the floor, hands curled loosely into fists. The only indication she heard was a quick intake of breath and a tightening around her eyes. Carson wanted to scream at her. Alex's self-sacrificing martyr act was old and worn; he'd heard that song, danced to that tune.

"Please," Kayla intervened, herding Sateda back towards the bed. "This is not the time for recriminations. Words spoken in anger often lead to great pain."

"Not that I'm not thrilled to see you two," Alex said, her voice heavy and fatigued, "but why are you here? I'm not...it's two against one, I don't think I'm going to pose much of a threat right now."

Carson spun away, anger rolling through him once again because Christ, did the woman have to beat herself up all the freaking time? Kayla and Terhaan glanced at one another, trying to determine the best way to go about this; there was more subtext here than the issue they'd initially come to discuss.

"You're hurting, and we just want to help," Terhaan started soothingly. Alex shot him a supremely unimpressed look. He sighed and went with the direct route. "You are destroying yourself and it must stop." Alex smiled transparently and forced her body to relax, appearing calm and totally unthreatening. Kayla was not taken in by the smile and easy body language; Alex was always most dangerous when she seemed mellow.

"Alex," Kayla murmured, raising her hands appeasingly. "Kayla," the other woman returned, her tone even and smooth.

"You must allow yourself to grieve, Alexandra. You have been so concerned with us that you have forgotten yourself. You have not even spoken of your par—"

"No." She couldn't breath, couldn't get enough air into her lungs. "You can't—I'm fine, I, we can discuss this later, I have things to do."

"You're hyperventilating and we haven't even mentioned the feelings part," Carson said dryly, shamefully vindicated when she flinched.

"I deal with--"

"You cannot bear the onus of all our actions."

"Really? I thought that's what happened when you decided I was your leader," Alex said snidely, lashing out indiscriminately. She saw Carson's face go hard and turn away, but Sateda wrapped him up in a hug and stopped him from leaving.

"We did no such thing," Kayla said archly, struggling to keep her calm. Alex opened her mouth to protest, but Terhaan beat her to it.

"You have always taken responsibility for the people around you. When we were children on the playground, when we were forced to run for our lives. You placed yourself in this position, and we were all pleased to follow. But following does not mean we will passively stand by and let you
destroy yourself under the weight of assumed responsibility. We are more than capable of taking care of ourselves.” Alex glared at Terhaan, some of her anger leaking through her facade.

“Oh really? Because—”

“You cannot be solely accountable for the actions of our entire group.” Terhaan crossed his arms over his chest and refused to let Alex dissemble her way out of the confrontation.

“Well this is great, let's all gang up on me today. Please, tell me what else I'm doing wrong so I can fix it an act in a manner that's OK with all of you,” Alex bit out.

“That was not our intent,” Kayla said, frustration evident. “We are concerned with the strain you've placed on yourself. The people here like us. This overly helpful, extremely false version of you is unnecessary and, I imagine, difficult to maintain. We are watching you crumble under a weight that are not yours to bear!”

“I'm beginning to see that,” she said, glancing at Sateda and Carson standing beside one another, a united front. Sateda bristled.

“Yeah, we're just dead weights around your neck drowning you in your own self-pity.” Sateda said vengefully. Alex's eyes burned with fury, and Carson had a moment of panic. He could see Alex and Sateda gearing up for a fight, their tempers high. Sateda pulled away from him, accusations flying at Alex like blades. Kayla and Terhaan were looking between the three of them, uncertain how to handle witnessing the break down of an entire relationship.

“Stop,” he sighed out, too low for them to hear, but he was so incredibly tired of this. “Stop stop stop stop STOP!” Alex and Sateda jerked away to stare at him. “Jesus Christ, I don't think we deserve to be considered adults,” he grated out. He pointed at Alex, eyes hard. “You are not a coward, and you're not a martyr, so stop acting like one. And you”--he eyed Sateda--“are so busy dickering around with your new marine friends that you've missed every warning sign that this has been building. You're never here, so how do you know how Alex has been acting? Stop assigning blame. We're all at fault, and I hate this. I love you both, you're the stupidest smart people I know, but I can't—I can't do it anymore, I can't keep you together because I can barely get it together myself and I just—I want—” He buried his head in his hands, trying to regain his control. Someone drew his hands away, soft lips pressing against his temple. Sateda wrapped around his back, kneading away the tension in his shoulders. It wasn't a magical heal-all quick fix, but it was an inherent promise to try.

Kayla watched them have their moment, the three of them just touching, reaffirming their connection to one another even if it was frayed and strained. She waited until Carson looked up and nodded. Carson and Sateda carefully untangled themselves from the little huddle, standing on either side of Alex, who watched Kayla warily.

“I would like to hear a story,” she requested. “Something you remember from Before.”

“Why?” Alex asked, shifting like a skittish colt.

“Because you have not spoken of the people we lost, or the life we once lead, in over two years,” Kayla murmured. “For one as steeped in storytelling as you, it is unthinkable.”

“You carry your grief like a dead weight on your shoulders,” Terhaan said, “stagnant and consuming.”

“God, will this day never end?” Alex muttered, rubbing at the back of her neck. “Can we move off
the woe-is-Alex thing? I've emo-angsted plenty. Promise.”

Kayla was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “I have known you my whole life. I have seen your happiness, your confusion, and your joy. I have seen you enraged. I have seen you coldly furious. I have seen you harden yourself against every horror that would do us harm, bury yourself beneath a shield of steel. I have seen you present a warped version of who you were because you think it is what the people here expect. I have seen you in many ways, and in every situation imaginable. I have never seen you mourn.”

Alex felt caged and cornered, her body trembling with the need to get away but without anywhere to go. She'd wrapped herself in cellophane and bubble wrap long ago. Things bounced off and didn't penetrate; people saw what they wanted to see in the images warped by her filter. And now her friends were waging an all out assault.

“You deal with the pain of others, soothe their minds and heal their souls. That is your burden; you bring them hope, but you have none left for yourself. This is our burden. We are your Keepers, and we will not fail you. Let us help.” Alex wrenched her arm from Terhaan's touch, angrily backing away from him.

“I don't need your help. I'm fine, I've grieved, I've been sad and mopey and all dewy-eyed. I wove a Wreath of Remembrance with Ronon—“

“For yourself?” Carson asked rhetorically. Alex didn't answer, just glared at her lover. “You didn't weave that for you. I know you, 'Lexa. You're concerned with everyone else to the point that you lose yourself—no different than when you're stuck on a problem. You'll do anything for one of us, go to any lengths, but when it comes to taking care of yourself, you really suck. You get that from—”

“Don't.” She gasped for breath, and the world went gray around the edges. Her entire body was trembling with the need to get away. “Don't say—“ She backed up, trying to put distance between Carson's words and the reality of them, laid out in front of her every day.

“Please, let us do this with you,” Kayla asked, reaching for her. Sateda tried to intercept the touch; he knew Alex and if Kayla touched her, she'd be gone before they could stop her.

He wasn't fast enough.

Kayla's hand brushed against the other woman's shoulder and Alex was gone, hip checking Terhaan and pushing Carson out of the way, Atlantis opening for her.

“Shit.” Sateda took off after her, settling into the ground-eating lope his father had taught him so long ago. He could smell her in the halls, felt the impression of her desperation. He chased her through the populated sections, dodging around confused-looking groups of people, not trying to catch her yet, just keeping pace.

They were in the unused sections by the time she stopped. He smiled as he recognized the place. Their pier, where the remnants of a charred grounding station sat in this reality and theirs. They'd started coming here when she was a teenager, hiding from her Damma amongst the wreckage. Her Damma avoided this place if possible, and when things were bad between them she'd come out here as a giant, silent fuck you. Eventually, this had become less about them and more about all the kids of Atlantis. Their space, marked and claimed. Eventually, their parents had learned, and adults only ventured out here when there was something to fix that one of the science-minded kids hadn't been able to do.
She stood to one side, balanced on the railing of the pier, face turned to the sky. He hovered on her periphery, waiting for the invitation to come closer.

“They're gone,” she whispered so softly he almost missed it. He stepped closer. “They're gone and...**FUCK!**” The word, shouted in anger, carried over the empty spaces of the city, tangled with the sounds of crashing waves and swallowed by Atlantis. She fell backwards and he caught her, like she knew he would. He folded them to the ground and she shook in his arms, rage and loss spilling out from the gaping wound she'd tried to pretend didn't exist.

She let out a pain-filled howl, let the knowledge of her parents' death consume her, rip her open and leave her gutted like she hadn't allowed before. There were tears and words and *feelings*, but they rode it out together, Sateda's memories mixing with her own. She looked out at Atlantis, whole and together, and wished it was hers. Selfishly indulged in the fantasy that the nazghoul had happened to this universe instead of their own.

She hated herself for that moment.

Sateda heard footsteps long before the first of their group made it out. He drew her closer and pressed a kiss to her temple, bringing her back to him. She opened her eyes and blinked the tears away.

Her people, her friends, her family were gathered silently on the pier. Even Trisha, who'd been doing her damnedest to pull away, and Alex was convinced would move to Earth after they'd healed a little more. Phil, who could barely leave his room, was there with little five-year-old Garreth in his arms, looking so pale and vulnerable.

And Carson. God, she'd been so awful to him, and he was still there, watching her and Sateda with guarded, uncertain eyes. She hated that she'd put that uncertainty there. She opened her arms, silently asking him to forgive her for a moment, saying that she needed him. And Carson, who loved her and made her a better person, wrapped her up in his arms, leaned into Sateda as they supported her weight together.

They took their moment, silent promises and apologies made all around. Someone sniffed, drawing their attention back outwards. Alex managed a watery smile and then seventeen bodies pressed closed against her; the seventeen people she managed to save grounding her here, keeping her safe. They huddled together, all of them orphans of a war they had never asked to fight. She cried for the dead, for her parents, for the ones she couldn't save, for what might have been and for what could be, surrounded by the sounds and scents of the ones who made it. Life.

Sateda started the Storytelling. He told stories about his father, funny stories, sad stories, hurtful stories of growing up with one parent, a man who'd been as damaged as they are now. Love and affection laced his words, the good and the bad, and Alex loved them both.

They each told their story, even the children who spent more than half their lives in the darkened corridors of a dead city. Julian, Adan, and Elora have to trust the stories their older guardians remembered, of mothers and fathers who did great things. Together, they painted a picture of a thriving, living colony called Atlantis, and brought it back to life for a few bittersweet hours.

No matter what happened, this would always bind them together. Alex took comfort in that, because she'd felt them all slipping into this new place, assimilating and changing.

When they were done, when the last story was told and the stars were high in the sky, Sateda pulled out three pots of ink and a needle, so that Alex could Keep the Memory of their loved ones close to her heart.
There were still things to be said by the time everyone left the pier. They tucked all the kids in bed. Phil snuggled between Trisha and Danni, a bright point in the emotionally draining day. Kayla and Terhaan gently shooed their friends off to bed so they could recover. She settled on the bed and watched Sateda and Carson go through their nightly routines.

Most Earth kids their age were in college. Drinking and carousing and oat sowing instead of wondering if they'd still have a home in a week. Worrying about where the next part was instead of how a group of diplomats and politicians might judge their actions. Wondering if Philipp would ever recover, or if Trisha would ever smile again.

Bohdan had been talking about college and PhDs Before. Terhaan had made noises about going to Shad, an entire civilization built around scholastic pursuits. They had a library a mile long there. She'd been thinking about tracking down Arin, the wise old witch who'd taken her from the ogres so long ago.

“Hey,” Sateda said.

“We should talk,” Alex blurted. “While we're all too drained to say something incredibly stupid.”

“Yeah, that's probably a good idea,” Carson said, though everything in him wanted to sleep. But if they put it off till the morning, they probably wouldn't ever talk about it. They sat in strained silence, none of them willing to start what was going to be a painful conversation. Carson suddenly laughed, startling Alex and Sateda. Because that was the point—this was Alex and Sateda, and he'd die of old age before they found the right words to open this kind of conversation.

“I need to apologize,” Carson started. “Because I gave up. We stopped talking to each other, stopped being together, and I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong. I don't know what I'm doing that has Alex gritting her teeth whenever I open my mouth. I have no idea why you prefer running laps around Atlantis and yukkin' it up with a bunch of marines instead of hanging out with us. So I just stopped trying and let everything fester and... if you'd let me know, I'd love to fix it.”

“Mother Night, Carson!” Alex exclaimed. “You know, the Lirans have a term for people like you. It's Skeshmaput. It literally means key stone, but in this context? A person who sees himself as a key stone. You can push back, throw your weight around a little. We're not going to collapse if you're not there to hold us up.

“Sometimes, the best thing you can do for us is to let me and Alex fall right on our asses,” Sateda said. “Seriously. I need you to tell me when I'm being...”

“Fucktardish?” Alex suggested innocently.

“Fucktardish,” Sateda agreed. “Don't let us get like that, don't let us push you away. Call us on the bullshit. Stand up for yourself. We need you, because if it were up to the two of us...”

“You dated for almost year before me,” Carson felt compelled to point out.

“Not very well,” Alex said cryptically, and shared a wry look with Sateda. She sighed and sagged against the pillows looking at both of them. “I know I'm—not easy. Never have been. I get wrapped up and lost in what I'm doing and I know that about myself but sometimes, lately...everything annoys me. I can't stand to sit down, don't want to talk, just want to be angry. It's hard, and I can feel it coming, I just don't know why or how to stop it, and I shouldn't take it out on you and Sateda but...I'm sorry.”
“When we were running, we knew what we had to do; we had to survive and everything was so simple,” Carson sighed. Sateda rubbed his leg comfortably.

“I run because...” Sateda trailed off, confession stuck in his throat. Carson shifted so they were pressed together, and his hand found its way into Alex's. “It's quiet. There's a point where everything stops and there's only running. I'm so angry. I don't want you to be part of it. Ronon's helping.” Sateda's head popped up. “He said I could consider him shaarlo.”

“Is that...like a step father?” Carson asked.

Sateda shook his head. “More like the Athosian second-father or an Earth godfather.”

The conversation lulled, each of them taking time to regroup. Carson felt his own secret bubbling under the surface, something that had plagued them since he was pulled into Sateda and Alex's relationship. And if he couldn't speak it now, he'd never say anything.

“I'm waiting for this to end,” Carson admitted. “I'm waiting for you two to wake up and realize we're not in that place anymore, that we don't start everyday wondering who's going to die. And you'll figure out that I'm just...that I don't belong, you just kept me because you felt sorry for me, and it was easy and none of the rules made sense anymore.” His agitation built as the words bubbled out of him.

“Carson—” Alex began.

“No! You don't understand! I've loved you my whole life! I don't have a single memory you're not in; not one where you weren't getting me into the best kinds of trouble or I did something and thought, 'I can't wait to tell Alex.' And you never saw it, so I hid it and pushed it down and then you—and then you had Sateda and I gave it up, my silly little crush that I could never have and you were happy and it was awesome and...” Alex wrapped her arms around him and he tried to push her away, didn't want pity or sympathy or—

“I'm not letting you go, you ass, so stoppit.” It was such a ridiculous thing to say that Carson sagged, hysterical laughter bubbling up in his throat. Sateda rested his head in his hands, heels pressed into his eyes, giving them their privacy.

“You never said anything,” she said into his hair. “I never knew.”

He pulled back a little to look at her incredulously. “How could you not have known? Everyone knew! God, were you just off in Alex-land, charming the entire city and getting me in trouble and being all...and never noticing. And you didn't like me like that, so of course I wasn't going to--”

“You utter ass. I've had a ginormous crush on you since I was, like, five!”

“You did not,” Carson accused, voice rough.

“Dude, you think I kept coming up with fun things to do, that I knew you'd WANT to do, just because I felt like it?” Carson blinked at her and opened his mouth. “No, don't answer that. I only got in trouble when I was trying to impress you. Not to devalue either of our feelings or suggest it would have been different somewhere else but...you were the only friend I had for ages. We were the only kids our age for years, even the twins weren't in our league for a while so...yeah. You must've hid it well, 'cause I just figured it was a lost cause. Figured you thought I was your alien-incubator sister or something.”

“We're fucking morons,” Carson moaned, burying his head in her shoulder.
“Yeah, that's not news.”

Sateda cleared his throat and rolled to the side of the bed, clearly uncomfortable. “I'm just gonna--”

“No,” Carson vetoed, “absolutely not!” He launched himself at Sateda, planted himself squarely in the other man's lap. He forced Sateda's hands away, pulled his head up so he could meet bloodshot-eyes.

“None of that is—you're not second best, you're not something I just put up with to have her. You're fantastic, smart, unbelievably hot. I never would've done this if I didn't—” Sateda kissed the confession from Carson's lips, pulling Carson into his lap.

“I just had to go to the bathroom,” he murmured.

“Oh,” Carson said stupidly.

“But I always knew. About both of you. Maybe at first, it was...the way you said, but we worked. The three of us worked where the two of us didn't. We've always been waiting for you, Carson.”

Alex hovered on their periphery, allowing the men to work out their issues together. Even if neither of them had seen it, she'd watched them both fall in love with one another. It had never occurred to her that they might not have acknowledged that fact. A short cough brought her back.

Carson was still curled comfortably in Sateda's lap. Sateda's arms were pulling Carson back to his chest, one hand resting possessively on Carson's ass. They were both looking at her expectantly.

“I know you both love me, and I'll stop being an unmitigated bitch?” she offered.

“Christ you suck at being vulnerable,” Carson grumbled with good humor, sleep already pulling at the edges of his consciousness. Alex crawled towards them, pushing Carson and Sateda back and sprawling on top of them in a puppy pile. She rubbed her nose against each of them, snuffling at their necks until Carson squirmed at the ticklish sensation.

“I can work on that.” Alex told them. Carson snorted and Sateda raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “What? I can do vulnerability. I can sit around the campfire with you and hold hands and sing Kumbaya while we mmrph!”

Sateda glared at her over the hand he'd pressed across her lips, grunting when she bit the inside of his hand. “We'd settle for you dropping the everything's-alright-the-world-is-beautiful facade and actually tell us what's going on in that fascinatingly fucked up head of yours,” Carson translated. Alex said something, glaring when Sateda refused to move his hand.

“You don't have to speak to answer the question,” Sateda pointed out helpfully. Alex glared at him before nodding her head with exaggerated gravity. Sateda pulled his hand away, but his eyes were still troubled. “We're not kidding.”

“I promise,” Alex swore, leaning close, “that I will stop holding everything in. And if I don't, you can both gang up on me until I do. Deal?”

“We'll hold you to that,” Carson told her. “But can we gang up on you anyways?”

“Yes,” Sateda answered for her, and Alex didn't feel the need to protest the truth.

Exhaustion finally beat them. Carson loosed a jaw-cracking yawn, and Sateda decided it was time for bed. They arranged themselves in the bed, spoon into one another.
“You know, that wasn’t a very good fight,” Alex mused.

“That was the point, it wasn’t a fight, we talked. And you sound disappointed,” Sateda huffed, pulling Carson’s pliant body on top of him.

“She’s thinking of the hot make-up sex we’re not having,” Carson whispered in Sateda’s ear. Sateda grunted and arranged Carson’s body into the spoon position, nose pressed into the nape of Carson’s neck. Alex tucked her head underneath Carson’s and threw a leg over both her men.

Sateda reached over and snuck a hand up Alex’s shirt, rubbing against the soft skin of her stomach. “We’ve got time.”
Chapter 12

John knocked on Alex's door, wondering if he should be worried. No one had seen any of the Next Gens in almost two days. The last one John had seen personally had been Alex, freaking out on the balcony. Sateda was standing behind the door when it opened. His eyes were red-rimmed and he looked tired.

"Is everything OK?" John asked, trying to see further into the room. Sateda stepped aside so John could see Carson, Alex, and two of the younger kids in the room.

"We've had a rough couple of days," Sateda said, voice low like Ronon's. "Worked through some stuff."

"Oh. Good." Alex and Carson pushed themselves off the floor and joined Sateda by the door.

"What's up?" Alex asked. John checked her over for signs of distress, but aside from looking tired and worn, she wasn't hurt. He hated to add to their troubles now.

"We got a transmission." They all tensed. Alex said an alien word with such vengeance it had to be a curse.

"How long?" Sateda asked.

"The Daedalus should be here in two days."

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Rodney was completely oblivious to the dark storm cloud that slunk into his lab the next morning. Simpson tried to ask an innocent question and barely escaped with her head intact. After that, Zelenka and the rest of his staff, however, gave Alex a wide berth.

"If you're going to insist on keeping those glasses on, you're not allowed to rewire any of the Ancient tech. I don't know why you feel the need to wear them indoors, it's not like you need them to cultivate an aura of cool or anything, people seem to like you well enough."

"McKay," Alex growled warningly, her entire body radiating tension. She was like an over-tightened wire, strung taut and just waiting for a stiff breeze to come along and snap it.

"I understand there's a certain amount of appeal to the opaque-sunglass look, there are people who build their mystique on them, but--" Alex ripped the glasses off and slammed them down on the table. One of the lenses went skittering off the table and across the room. An oppressive blanket of silence descended over the lab, everyone holding their breath.

"They're off, happy?" Her eyes were red and swollen, dark bags making her face look pale and washed out. But her eyes were bright and angry, daring anyone to fuck with her. The kind of person who walked into a bar to start a fight.

"As long as they don't interfere with your work--" Alex snarled something vicious in Ancient and stormed over to Rodney's Do Not Touch on Pain of Death board. Ignoring Rodney's indignant squawks, she wiped the equation off and rewrote it, dry-erase marker squeaking in protest.

"You might want to remember that the phase plane diagram this would give you would have a totally different structure in the presence of even a very weak electromagnetic field and, in fact,
requires an even higher order of differential equation to even *approximately* model it!” Alex turned around and threw the marker at Rodney's head; only his time in the field and well-developed desire not to lose any brain cells prevented it from smacking Rodney dead center.

“I'm taking the rest of the goddamned day off!” Everyone heaved a sigh of relief when she stalked out of the room. Rodney watched her go, slack-jawed. Alex had always been so annoyingly polite and peppy, almost to the point of being obsequious. She smiled at Rodney's rants and shrugged off his harsh words in the same oblique way Sheppard always did. This was...a refreshingly typical reaction.

“Rodney,” Zelenka breathed, eyes glazing as he considered the newly rewritten formula.

“Look, before you give me the evil Czech eye, I didn't mean it! I don't catch on to these things, you know I don't, I'm—“

“RODNEY!”

“What? I'm trying to...is that?” Rodney stepped forward, going over the equation on the white board. “She...she solved it. It's right.” The completed proof unfurled in his head, beautiful and perfect in its balance. “This is years beyond where we were. There are at least three theoretical extrapolations we were nowhere near coming up with it's...inspired! I can't believe...wait that's doesn't....oh my God, she solved it!”

“She didn't solve it,” Zelenka muttered to himself. “She already knew it.”

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“Colonel Caldwell. Welcome back to Atlantis,” Elizabeth greeted amicably.

“Dr. Weir. We're ready to begin offloading supplies at your earliest convenience,” Caldwell responded.

“We're ready whenever you are, Colonel.”

“We're starting the transfers now. Did you receive the leave rotation schedule?”

“We did, and it looks fine. Your crew is welcome to beam down to Atlantis whenever they're ready.”

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Colonel Steven Caldwell has long ago learned to trust his instincts. They'd kept him alive on several occasions, and lead him to the position he held now. So when the niggling voice in his head told him something was wrong, he listened. He couldn't place it at first, but he soon noticed the looks. Thinly veiled hostility stretched over fear and impotence. It came from everyone on Atlantis, though the military contingent was too well trained to let it show. But once he knew what he was looking for, he saw the signs.

The only thing he couldn't figure out was the why.

Sheppard irritated him. The man set his teeth on edge, though Caldwell couldn't help but be impressed with the loyalty the man inspired. And many had compared his haphazard command style with General O'Neill. And just like O'Neill, Sheppard could be incredibly hard to read. Only today, Sheppard was nervous about something, and that made Steven nervous in turn.
“Colonel Caldwell, would you join us for lunch?” Elizabeth invited warmly. The rest of the Senior Staff had already gone, disappearing as soon as the Elizabeth thanked them all for their time, meeting adjourned.

“I would love to, Dr. Weir.” Sheppard fell in step beside them, letting the ebb and flow of Caldwell’s conversation with Elizabeth wash over him. They had all agreed that keeping the children sequestered was not the best course of action; they had nothing to hide and this day was inevitable. It was the how that had John worried.

Everything was business as usual until Lorne walked in with Scott in his arms, a gaggle of toddlers following after him like ducklings. Caldwell’s fork paused halfway to his moth, his eyes tracking each and every kid that straggled in.

John cleared his throat as four-year-old Julian Kusanagi ran up to him, tugging on his sleeve. John smiled self-consciously at Caldwell before bending over and picking Jules up.

“What’s up, little man?”

“I was going to school an’ Danni said I should-should drawed something fun.” He handed John a folded piece of paper, which John opened to see a puddlejumper. To be fair, it was more like a brown blob on the white paper, and Rodney would have serious things to say about its ability to fly. But...John swallowed the lump in his throat and thanked Julian, tucking the paper into his breast pocket. The young boy ran off, looking happy and bright.

“Colonel,” Caldwell said neutrally. John flashed him the wide, obtuse smile that had driven every one of his superiors crazy.

“Colonel,” John returned, stretching the word out in a long drawl.

“Gentlemen,” Elizabeth cautioned.

“Dr. Weir. Why is Major Lorne escorting children through the mess?”

“Lorne's on kid wrangling duty today. You should be here when it's Rodney's turn.” Elizabeth shot a disapproving look at her military commander.

“We had an incident several months ago. A piece of malfunctioning technology transported a group of children and young adults into the city. Their world had fallen victim to a Wraith attack and they were the only survivors. We've been caring for them.”

“I don't recall reading a report,” Steven said dryly.

“We mentioned it,” John said.

“I've read all of your reports, Colonel Sheppard. I recall a short note about a group of—you must be kidding! The report I read was three lines about how you stumbled across a group of refugees! Nothing about how they were children and you planned on keeping them! Dr. Weir, this is a military base in a hostile environment.” He stood abruptly. “I want an official, detailed report written within the hour to send to the IOA and SGC.”

“Colonel Caldwell,” Elizabeth said sharply, “if you don't mind.” He glared, but slowly sat down. Elizabeth leaned forward, her eyes hard. “This is an Atlantis matter, Colonel Caldwell. The SGC and IOA entrusted me to do my job and gave me their full confidence in making decisions regarding the safety of this base. I did not consider this a matter which the SGC could have or needed to help us with.”
“With all due respect, Dr. Weir, this is still a military base in hostile territory. The SGC will have something to say about the presence of children in potentially life-threatening situations.” Caldwell took their silence for the acknowledgment that it was. “I must insist on contacting the SGC and sending a full report through immediately.”

“Very well, Colonel Caldwell. I'll have Chuck compile all of the information regarding the children and encode it for transmission. If you'll follow me.” Elizabeth led him out of the mess hall, poised and head held high; Caldwell wasn't unaware of the accusatory looks thrown his way, and at least he now understood what they meant.

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“We have no way of knowing when or if the IOA will get back to us on this matter,” Elizabeth reasoned.

“They're the government, of course they're going to 'get back to us' on this! When has the government NOT taken the opportunity to throw its weight around?” Rodney asked with an eye roll.

“Thank you, Rodney,” Elizabeth said through clenched teeth.

“If I may interject,” Teyla said calmly, “this is not an opportunity that will come again. The Neeldari will not issue an invitation again.”

“What would happen if we didn't go, Teyla?”

“They would be quite insulted; we might find many avenues of trade and potential allies closed to us. We most likely will not be extended an invitation to return.”

“I want to get a look at this gate shield they supposedly have,” Rodney added for the hundredth time.

The klaxons went off, and the gate started lighting up. They trooped in to the command center as the wormhole engaged, wavering blue for an instant before it shut back down.

“Dr. Weir, it's the SGC. The IOA is sending a representative to 'take stock of the situation.' No ETA on it, though,” Chuck informed them.

“So much for the hands off approach,” John muttered under his breath.

“Now what?” Rodney asked.

“The mission goes ahead as scheduled,” Elizabeth announced. “We can't afford to lose these people as allies, and I cannot allow this matter to interrupt the running of this base. You leave in the morning, so get some rest. Chuck and I will prepare a packet for our visitors.”

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Elizabeth saw her flagship team off early the next morning. Rodney and John were sniping at one another, but there was an edge to it that told her they weren't entirely at ease. John paused at the threshold to salute her, which Elizabeth returned with a grave nod.

She had a meeting with Bohdan and Radek to discuss the impact of the Next Gens on Atlantis. They'd both been keeping records of the jobs each youth had been assigned; every job came with performance reviews by the overseeing staff member, as well as Kate Heightmeyer's assessment of
each child in relationship to Atlantis's working environment. They were all prepared for several
sleepless nights as she prepared the Next Gen's defense.

They were half way through when Chuck uttered the most hated words in any language.

“Dr. Weir, Teyla and Ronon just checked in; we have a problem...”

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The negotiations were going well right up to the point where everything went straight to hell.
They'd been making friends with the Neeldari when something had gone wrong. John wasn't sure
what, because he'd been watching Rodney pretty closely and he'd been restraining himself. But the
diplomat Rodney had been talking with had started growing more and more agitated before finally
rising and stalking out of the receiving chamber. A very apologetic Premier had apologized to them
before the guards arrested them for some grave offense against the Royal House of someone.

What their offense was had yet to be revealed to them, but whatever it had been, the Neeldari were
pissed but both John and Rodney, as the official representatives for Atlantis, were on the receiving
end of their ire. They were locked in a cell—really, it was a tastefully decorated waiting room but a
door with a lock was still a cell—with Teyla and Ronon negotiating for their release.

“I didn't—“

“Rodney,” John warned.

“Really, it was—”

“Rodney.”

“But they—”

“RODNEY!” John turned away and glared at his cellmate. Rodney scowled at him and sat down
on the small cot in the corner. John ignored the flash of hurt he'd seen on Rodney's face and turned
back to his perusal of their cell. Eight paces there, eight paces pack.

Rodney gave into his inner twelve-year-old and stuck his tongue out at John's back, all the while
reminding himself that growly John was NOT hot when they were trapped in a cell with no idea
what was going on. But damn it, those stupid dreams were fucking with Rodney's head, as well as
his libido. John growled again and continued pacing.

“I really have no idea what I said,” Rodney groused. Seriously, he didn't. John sighed and all the
tension leech out of his shoulders. Rodney swallowed hard when John slunk over to the bed and
sat next to Rodney.

“Doesn't matter, Teyla will fix it.”

Rodney snorted. “Good thing I'm used to being rescued by a girl, otherwise my ego would never
recover.” John let out a bark of laughter, and Rodney couldn't help but cringe at the harsh bray.
Maybe that was the key to getting out; John could laugh their captors into letting him go just so
they'd never have to hear it again. Because there was no way anyone in the world thought that
laugh was attractive.

John wiped his eyes and glanced at Rodney, his entire body flushing when they locked gazes. He
could see something swimming in Rodney's eyes, something deep and...he was on his feet before
he registered the sound of their cell unlocking. Rodney hovered behind him, the heat of his body
leeching through John's clothes, distracting him as Teyla and Ronon walked in.

The look on Teyla's face was not reassuring.

“So? How do they want to kill us this time?” Rodney demanded. Teyla's face remained stoic and grave.

“There is much political intrigue going on here,” Teyla sighed. “The man who was talking to Rodney is against uniting with Atlantis. He believe were are not sincere in our overtures. This is a minority opinion, but he and his family command a great deal of respect in the Neeldari culture. He has accused Dr. McKay of repeatedly insulting him and breaking faith during the preliminary overtures of friendship.”

“What? What did I do?” Rodney demanded. Teyla hesitated, and Rodney snapped his fingers to hurry her up.

“They will not say.”

“What?” Rodney exploded. “What do you mean 'they will not say?' WHY would you not say? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, and I have to listen to Kavanaugh's 'theories' about Physics on a regular basis.” John hovered behind Rodney, glowering in agreement. “I think I deserve to know what I did to insult the inbred moron who put us in here!”

“They...believe that to talk of it is tantamount to giving the insult. There are none who would insult us by discussing the nature of the offense. Not in a diplomatic context.”

“That's utterly ridiculous!” Rodney yelled. John's hand on his arm was the only thing that stopped him from launching into a full fledged rant about backward societies who trapped unsuspecting explorers with their unspoken customs and rituals.

“So how can we...atone...for breaking their most sacred law?” John asked. When Teyla's expression grew graver, John felt something in him tighten.

“The Neeldari take the rights and grievances of every citizen with great gravitas. It would take a gift equivalent to the nature and scope of the negotiation, and restitution to the offended.”

“What does that mean?” John asked with practiced calm. He saw Teyla twitch slightly.

“You would need to present the Neeldari with a gift that serviced their entire people, just as our negotiations would have serviced the people of Atlantis and Neeld, as well as appeasing the House who brought suit against you.” John sank down onto the cot.


“We have offered all these. They...there is nothing we have that would satisfy the aggrieved. He has witnesses and his entire House stands behind him. They believe their cause is just; they are willing to sacrifice standing and favor from the people in order to sabotage this negotiation. They have called for your lives as recompense.”

“So call Lorne and the marines so they can bust us out of here,” Rodney said mulishly.

“They have a shield, Rodney. Jumpers cannot fly here, and foot soldiers would be vulnerable on the road to the city. It would be very difficult to stage a rescue without incurring significant casualties.”
“So...what? What are we going to do?”

“Call Lorne and have the marines bust us out of here,” John said with a humorless smile. Ronon nodded shortly, and Teyla looked a little sad.

“But Teyla just said—” Rodney shut his mouth with a click, nodding tightly to Teyla and Ronon.

“We will see you soon, Colonel. Doctor McKay.”

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Elizabeth stared into the distance, looking for answers. Teyla and Ronon waited patiently on Neeld, the MALP transmitting their images back to Atlantis.

“And there are no other options, Teyla?” Elizabeth asked, though they'd been through this so many times before she sometimes wondered why she asked anymore.

“They will only say that we may send a representative to sit with the condemned and offer solace. They are most apologetic about this turn of events.”

“We can watch 'em die,” Ronon added, and Elizabeth could tell by the way he said it that it wasn't an option.

“Major?” Lorne popped into view, P-90 at ready.

“It doesn't look good, ma'am. They've got shield technology around the city; we can't fly a jumper in, we'd have to go in on foot and they're well armed. The city's walled in, so getting in could be difficult. If we go in, I expect heavy casualties.”

“Alright, assemble an assault group and get Dr. Zelenka. We may need to try and override their shield.”

The tower began to fill with people. Marines strapping on combat gear, medics preparing for incoming wounded, Zelenka with his tablet. The buzz of activity before a rescue mission.

“Dr. Weir?” Elizabeth turned. Alex and Kayla were standing in the entrance to the control room. Kayla nudged her friend in the shoulder, and Alex glanced around uncomfortably.

“Alex, I'm sorry, but we're in the—”

“I heard. I have a solution. No one will get hurt, I promise.” She was suddenly the center of everyone's attention. Kayla laid a hand on Alex's shoulder in support. “Look, I...can we talk? In your office?”

“Major Lorne, make your preparations but don't move until you hear from me.”

“Yes ma'am.”
“You're sure about this?” Elizabeth asked.

“No. This is—not how I wanted to make my debut and really against everything I've been taught and believe, but I can't just let them die.” Alex rubbed the back of her neck.

“I have questions.”

“I know, but can I answer them after this is over?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Get back here as soon as you can, we dial Neeld as soon as possible.”

Every eye was on Dr. Weir's door as it slid open. Alex tore out of the room, sprinting down the hall towards the Next Gen quarters.

“Sgt. Campbell, dial Neeld. Lieutenant LeVine, you're to escort Alex to the city gates. From there, Teyla and Ronon will escort her into the city if they're allowed; you're to remain with Major Lorne and await their return.” The Lieutenant snapped off a crisp salute. The gate swooshed to life, and Elizabeth repeated her instructions to an equally confused Major Lorne.

“Not to question you, ma'am, but is this safe?”

“She'll be in no danger from the Neeldari, Major.”

The loud clatter of someone stumbling down the steps was Alex returning, draped in a white bed sheet. Elizabeth was about to ask her a question, but Alex forestalled her speaking.

“They're going to execute them in less than an hour, we'll have to hoof it to the city. I'll be fine. Promise.”

“I trust that you will be,” Elizabeth said gravely. “Bring them home.”

“I will,” Alex promised, before leading the Marines through the gate.

An oppressive silence fell over the gateroom when the wormhole closed. Elizabeth had just turned to her people when the gate started dialing.

“Unscheduled off-world activation!” Chuck called. Elizabeth retreated to the relative safety of the control area while the gate guards took up position, guns cocked and ready. An eighth symbol locked in and the wormhole connected. “It's Earth.”

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“I don't understand why you're here,” Lorne said. Again. Alex sighed and hitched the sheet so she could walk easier.

“Please believe me when I say I cannot easily explain it while we're practically sprinting towards a hostile city in order to save the city's CSO and military commander from certain doom!”

“You did a pretty good job there.” Alex glared at him and picked up her pace in answer. The city gates appeared before them, dark and foreboding.

An official-looking man, surrounded by well armed guards, greeted them at the door. Alex strode
right up to them, head high, and planted herself firmly in front of the bejeweled official.

“My name is Alexandra, I am here to bear Witness. My people shall wait for me at the city gates and come no further, though in deference I would ask my Honor Guard be summoned should anything happen,” she said, gesturing at Teyla and Ronon. The bureaucrat seemed to find this all acceptable and bowed to Alex, his hand pressed over his heart. Alex inclined her head slightly, accepting his actions as her due. The official issued a few instructions to the guards stationed at the gate, and then disappeared inside with Alex.

Lorne sighed and settled in for the wait. He hated this part.

****

“Mr. Woolsey,” Dr. Weir greeted with practiced cool. He looked jumpy, which was never a good sign.

“Dr. Weir. If you don't mind, I'll cut straight to the point. My colleagues and I are very concerned with the reports we've received. Is it true that you have a group of children living on Atlantis?”

“They're refugees—”

“From a parallel universe?”

“They were transported here by an ancient device which—”

“Yes, we read the report. The IOA does not concur with your decision to allow the children to remain on Atlantis.” Elizabeth felt the temperature in the control room drop appreciably. She glanced over and saw every staff member, including generally mild-mannered Chuck, glaring daggers at Woolsey.

“The IOA entrusted me with the running of Atlantis,” Elizabeth reminded him archly. He may speak for the Powers that Be, but he was on Elizabeth's home turf, and Richard Woolsey would do well to remember that.

“Which is why we are so taken aback by this uncharacteristic lack of judgment.” The various gateroom staffers appeared to be going about their business, but Elizabeth could tell they were all focused on what Woolsey was saying, and none too pleased.

“Why don't we continue this discussion in my office?” she offered.

“If you insist,” Woolsey said tightly. “However, while we're 'discussing' things, perhaps you could dispatch someone to retrieve”—Woolsey pulled out a list—“Carson, Alexandra, Kayla, Terhaan, Bohdan and Sateda. I'm told they are the oldest and form the leadership of your band of refugees.” Elizabeth put on her best diplomat's smile.

“They do. I'll dispatch a Marine to retrieve them.”

***

Rodney laid on the bunk, looking morose and shooting John random half-hearted glances. They were doomed. Doomed doomed doomed doomed doomed. Rodney sighed and glanced at John again. He had a terrifying feeling he might spend his last few hours of life channeling his inner thirteen-year-old, compete with unrequited high school love-angst.

John turned in time to catch one of Rodney's heavy glances. Awareness crackled between them,
undefined and formerly hidden in stolen touches and covert glances.

And something clicked, way deep inside Rodney, and he didn't feel scared. Because this was John Sheppard, the man Rodney McKay had followed into the most dangerous situations imaginable. And as smartest man in two galaxies, he had the most well developed survival instinct in two galaxies. John had taught him more about his capabilities than he ever would have discovered on his own, in his safe (relatively speaking) lab on Atlantis. So if a large king-sized bed with a naked John Sheppard in wasn't an option, Rodney was right where he needed to be, and nothing else mattered. It felt weird, being so calm in the face of eminent death. Rodney wondered if Ronon and Teyla felt like this all the time.

John had catalogued everyone of Rodney's looks. It had started as a team thing; he needed to be able to assess the status of his team members with a glance in the field. But this...the intense, set look tinged with utter calm. This was new. This was Rodney, beyond the intelligence he wore like a shield and the defensive uncertainty countless people before John had hammered into his character. John grinned, wide and real because yes. There was no where else he'd rather be either.

A thousand confessions stretched between them, things they'd never spoken of before. John took a measured step towards Rodney, eyes darkening. If their time was limited, they had a few things to do before The End.

“I'm not interrupting, am I?” John's head whipped around so fast it hurt; he berated himself for getting lost in the moment. They weren't dead yet, they could still escape if John stayed alert. His jaw dropped because Alex was standing there in a white cloak draped artfully around her body; she looked like a smirking Virgin Mary, if Mary had two boyfriends and was deadly with a pair of Bantos sticks.

“What are YOU doing here?” Rodney demanded perfunctorily, his surprise evident in his voice. Alex smiled at him, blue eyes twinkling.

“I'm staging a rescue. Obviously.”

“Oh yes, obviously,” Rodney snorted. He turned and glared accusingly at Sheppard.

“What?” John demanded.

“This is actually a worse idea than your worst idea.”

“Hey!” John protested. Alex groaned.

“Gentlemen! Focus!” She glared at Rodney, her hands on her hips. “One day, you'll have faith in me. My plan? Can't fail.”

“Oh great, now you've jinxed us,” Rodney said snidely and crossed his arms, scowling at the girl. One of the guards outside called out, and Alex turned serious.

“Look, I need you to work with me. Act properly respectful and don't say anything stupid.”

“What?” John asked.

“Yes, like that. Don't say that.” She turned her attention to John. “I need you to not do anything heroic or stupid. Please, I know we haven't known each other long, but I need you to trust me. It's the only way we're going to get out of this without bloodshed.”

Before either of them could talk again, the guards came for John and Rodney. The guards didn't
push or prod them, nor were they mocking. They were respectful and as professional as one could be, leading men to their deaths. Alex watched them with an air of serene gravity that didn't make Rodney feel safe.

They processed through a large crowd to the middle of the plaza, a large raised platform dominating the entire east section. The people didn't spit at them, throw food, heckle, or do any of the assorted debasing things Rodney had come to expect from these situations. In fact, they were positively somber, and each person Rodney made eye contact with gave him a sad little bow. That more than anything freaked Rodney out, and he instinctively looked back at John, walking a few paces behind him, for comfort. Rodney felt Sheppard step closer behind him, felt John's warm breath against his neck, and it eased some of the tension from his shoulders.

Their guards positioned them in the middle of the platform, kneeling in front of the throngs of people. John glanced at Rodney and saw the fear underneath Rodney's carefully schooled exterior, his expressive eyes hiding nothing. He wanted nothing more than to rush the guards, create a diversion so Rodney might have a chance. But he fought that aside and placed his trust in a broke slip of a girl, even though he had no idea what she could possibly do for them. She hadn't even tried to stop the proceedings.

One of the guards pulled a wicked looking sword from its scabbard, and Rodney's panicked eyes flew towards John.

John let everything fall away, focused his attention solely on Rodney. Let some of his desperation bleed through, tried to convey things he would never be able voice. The here disappeared. John's world filled with the flare of Rodney's nostrils as he valiantly tried to control his breathing; the long dusky flutter of his eyelashes, blinking against the harsh sun; the thin bead of sweat that crept down the side of Rodney's face; the downward, worried quirk of his lips, pressed thin. The azure of Rodney's eyes ripping through every shield he had, as tangible as Rodney's thick hands on his body.

A robed official stepped between them, the same man who had been presiding over their meeting, began stating their crime—still being vague about what insult had been given—and asked John and Rodney a series of questions that boiled down to 'Do you realize why we're doing this?' John wanted to scream out that no, he emphatically did not understand why they were doing this, and could they please just forget about the whole mess and let them go home? In lieu of that happening, he'd take seeing Rodney escorted off this platform.

When the Crier nodded, satisfied, he called for 'Farewells and Benedictions.' Alex finally moved then, walking up to Rodney. She took his head in her hands and kissed his forehead softly, then both cheeks, whispering something into his ear that didn't relax Rodney at all. Rodney's eyes never left John for a moment. A murmur rippled through the crowd at that, and John wondered at the significance.

John saw Alex move towards him out of his peripheral vision, still locked in his silent detente with Rodney. As her lips brushed his forehead he hissed, “This better be something good.”

She kissed one cheek, then the other, and whispered, “You wouldn't believe it if I told you.”

The murmur that rippled through the crowd sounded louder and more emphatic this time, an aura of distress underwriting the indecipherable words. Even the Crier and the executioners looked defeated. The Crier extended his hand and called for Alex to bear witness as the executioners and their sharp, unforgiving knives glistened in the sunlight. Rodney caught the gleam of the metal out of the corner of his eye, but it was soon overwhelmed by the force of John's presence. The part of Rodney detached from this experience, muzzled and far away, whispered about how much John
said with the slightest twitch of a muscle, the barest shift in his stance, everything always straining imperceptibly towards Rodney. And how hot he looked doing it.

The shocked pitch of a thousand voices gasping in surprise finally made him look away, away from the bald truths he could see in Rodney's eyes. Truths reflected in himself, bare for Rodney to see if Rodney really wants to know. John suddenly couldn't stand the though of what they could've had—too little too late. But when he finally turned his head, his gasp added to the thousand others.

Alex had bypassed the Crier's hand and stepped towards the front of the dais in full view of every Neeledri. Centering herself, she unwrapped the sheet and let it drop to the ground. The reaction rippled through the crowd, the voices of the people rising in surprised shock. John could barely pick out words, 'Guardian' and 'Keeper.'

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"Thank you for agreeing to this meeting," Elizabeth told the assembled Next Gens sincerely. She ignored the irritated drumming of Woolsey's fingers. Kayla, taking up the spokeswoman position for her people, looked sincerely unimpressed with Richard Woolsey, her expression cool and closed. "This is Richard Woolsey, the IOA representative here to investigate your presence on Atlantis. With him is Agent Coleman of the NID."

"Dr. Weir, there are only five children here. I believed I requested six."

"Alexandra is indisposed at the moment," Kayla informed the man politely.

"Indisposed?" Woolsey asked skeptically.

"Yes," Kayla said blithely. She offered no further explanations, much to Woolsey's ire.

"What has made her indisposed?" he asked with exaggerated patience. Kayla didn't answer, offering only an elegant shrug as explanation. "Dr. Weir?" Woolsey's eyes were narrowed, and Elizabeth recognized that the representative would not accept a vague answer.

"Alexandra is off world seeing to a diplomatic matter for which she is uniquely qualified."

"Wasn't your flagship team scheduled for an off-world mission this morning?" Coleman asked suspiciously. Elizabeth gazed at the NID agent, suspicion flaring within her. While the mission had been included in the last databurst to Earth, something about Coleman's tone that suggested he knew something more than he let on.

"They were," Elizabeth confirmed.

"What diplomatic matter would Alexandra be involved in, Dr. Weir?" Woolsey asked.

"She is involved in precarious negotiations with a very powerful Pegasus group whose friendship will go along way to establishing contacts and a great number of allies for us." Woolsey stared at her for a beat, his face contorting into a disbelieving, affronted expression.

"Am I to understand you've allowed a potentially compromised child to take part in the rescue attempt of two key members of this expedition?" Coleman queried, his smile slick. Elizabeth controlled her anger at whoever had fed Coleman information; she could think of no other way he could have known about the rescue attempts, or her authorizing Alex to act as Atlantis's negotiator. She could count on one hand the number of people disgruntled at the presence of the children here.

"Alex is extremely competent and has a unique skill set that I believe will—"
“She's a child! Holding the safety of two of your most valuable people in her hands!” Elizabeth steepled her fingers in front of her, the lines around her mouth the only outward sign of her internal emotional state. “Furthermore, we have no proof that these children are who they claim to be as you refused to mandate DNA testing. I feel it an extremely negligent act on your part to entrust such a vital mission to a child; the IOA has harbored serious concerns regarding this incident, as has the NID, and I've come to believe they have not been concerned enough!”

“Alex and several other of the young adults have earned our trust and proven themselves very capable. I have the utmost faith in Alexandra's abilities to free Colonel Sheppard and Doctor McKay with the least amount of violence.” Woolsey frowned.

“I cannot see a course of action that would condone sending a twenty year-old civilian into a politically volatile situation, Dr. Weir,” the IOA representative cautioned.

“Mr. Woolsey, the Neeldari are a very influential race in the Pegasus galaxy, and one of the most advanced we've come across. Teyla has been working for months to get us this meeting. They have ties to many other people, we cannot afford to ostracize them. Alex came to me and offered a bloodless means to save Dr. McKay and Colonel Sheppard, as well as ensure that our negotiations are successful. It would be negligent of me to ignore her abilities based on her youth. She is twenty years old, which is over the age of majority in every nation represented here and by the IOA. I've soldiers her age serving on this base.” Coleman scowled, scribbling something emphatic on his notepad.

“What is the solution?” Coleman asked. Woolsey looked at her expectantly.

“I'm not at liberty to say at the moment,” Elizabeth deflected. Coleman looked ready to press the issue, but Woolsey let it drop with a look that promised they'd revisit the subject before the day was out.

“The IOA will be alarmed about this turn of events. We would, perhaps, feel more comfortable if the children's files were complete. You've allowed them access to critical systems, embedded them with the scientists and the military, yet we know next to nothing about them,” Woolsey said, changing the direction of the conversation.

“I understand your reservations. But rest assured that Colonel Sheppard personally tested each of the older children for combat fitness, and Dr. McKay determined their level of proficiency in the labs. These children have aided our work here, increased productivity and theory by years if I am to understand the reports. Their expertise and knowledge saved Dr. Zelenka when he was gravely injured after a lab explosion. They have not been idle while in Atlantis. Even the youngest amongst them has an adept understanding of Ancient. They are safer here than any other place in this galaxy. They have earned their right to be here.”

“Doctor Weir! I insist that you recall this Alexandra person immediately!” Coleman demanded. Elizabeth sat back in her chair and leveled her coolest look at the NID agent, eyes hard and unyielding. “This incompetence will not be overlooked, I assure you——”

“And I assure YOU, Agent Coleman, that I will not endanger the lives of ANY of my people simply because you do not have a comprehensive understanding of a tenuous political situation! I will update you on the status of the rescue mission just as soon as I can, but I will not be recalling anyone. These young adults have agreed to set aside all of today to meet with you and answer any questions you might have.” Coleman sat back and glared at Atlantis's leader, already calculating how he could get the answers he needed. Elizabeth's eyes narrowed and she leaned forward in her seat. Woolsey watched the byplay curiously, wondering at Coleman's obvious bias. His instructions were to fairly assess the effect of the children on the base and determine if the situation
merited a more in depth assessment.

“I want to make it very clear that I respect the privacy of every person on this base, whether they're employed by the IOA or not. If I find out you have tried to obtain information about them in an uncouth or sinister way, or take DNA samples without their express, written permission, I will report you to every person of power I can think of.” She leaned back, feeling smug satisfaction at the color blooming across the agent's face and his lips thinned to a straight, white line.

“Well, if that's done, I'd like to move on.” Woolsey glanced at his notes. “I'd like to start the interviews with the one named Carson. I understand he's Major Lorne's son?”

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Rodney's eyes traveled the length of Alex's body and back down, never resting, trying to absorb all the detail he could.

There was an elegant symbol emblazoned on her right calf, a newborn star exploding out with great force, violent in its birthing pains. On her left, he though he could make out the figure of a dragon, wrapping around and around, claws digging into her flesh, crawling up her leg and disappearing on the other side of her thigh. There were other pictures hidden within its body, pictures within pictures.

A Willow tree arched over her right buttock, and he could see the intricate fill: every line was comprised of some form of writing, a series of letters and symbols that made up a strong trunk and gave way to long, trailing limbs, the ends dragging over the top curve of her buttocks. It wasn't finished, the tree fading into her natural skin tone. The earthen colors were soothing yet powerful, and the roots flowed down, twisting into different primal patterns; the dragon melded seamlessly with the tree, the roots wrapping around its body.

A beautiful red-pink flower, unlike anything found on Earth, bloomed in the top branches of the flourishing tree on her back. Within each petal lay a cityscape, each one different in its own right: one had soaring spires that reached for the sky; another sprawled lazily on the bank of a river; one was a simple collection of huts and grazing livestock. At the center of the flower are four long stamen, each with its own color and technique, inked in at different times.

Falling off the flower are a series of water drops. Together, they formed a stylized Tree of Life. Each droplet reflected a single symbol, some more alien than anything Rodney had seen yet, some achingly familiar, echoes of Earth.

The tattoos went on and on, works of art from different hands and different times, wrapping around to the front where Rodney couldn't see. They all coalesced into one beautiful mural inked on the canvass of Alex's body.

She slowly turned around, facing away from the crowd so they too could read the tales writ on her figure, and Rodney's eyes devoured the rest of the story.

The dragon Rodney had seen climbing on her left leg spiraled around on the front, it's head resting on Alex's hip. It's unfinished, scales lined but unfilled, and Rodney aches for it to be complete, for the whole saga to be there.

His gaze traveled on, and he took in tribal symbols, lines thick and harsh, as well as careful, painstaking patterns that reminded him of Tibetan tapestries. They were fascinating, done with such care that he could feel the weight of them. They're not just pretty decorations. They have purpose and meaning to them, though he wasn't able to divine the extent of them.
All of the tattoos are beautiful, but there was one that left him breathless.

The tattoo over her heart, done in a gradient of blue inks, brought stinging tears to his eyes. The latest addition to her masterpiece, but the image around which all the others flowed. The central spire of Atlantis rose up over the swell of her breast, whole and strong, standing guard over all the other worlds represented on the canvas of her body.

His journey finally led him to her face. No needle had pierced the skin here, but the naked pain of remembrance marked her more effectively than any symbol.

No, she wasn't nude, standing on a dais before thousands of strangers. She was clothed in the tapestry of the Pegasus Galaxy.
Chapter 14

John and Rodney mechanically put on their vests and weapons, returned to them by the people who moments ago were pretty dead set on killing them—bad pun completely intended. They numbly followed their guard into an antechamber where Alex paced, dressed in a shear robe that displayed her tattoos. She bounded up to them as they entered, checking them over for injuries or signs of freak out. They stared at one another, John trying not to look at anything below Alex's eyes and Rodney being blatant about it.

“Oh no,” Alex gasped, her eyes wide with horror, “I think they've damaged it!”

“What?” John asked, just this side of frantic, checking Rodney over to make sure he wasn't hurt, that John hadn't missed something vital. Alex pointed at him, her lower lip trembling.

“Your hair. I think it's been emotionally traumatized. It's all...wilted.” John's hand flew to his head before he could stop it. He jerked it down with a glare at Alex, deliberately slipping his hands in the pockets of his BDUs. Rodney snorted contemptuously and pushed past John, bending to get an up close look at Alex's tattoos. Some of them had such minute detail he couldn't imagine the time and effort it had taken to ink them, or the skill. His eyes slowly traveled the length of her body, taking in every intricate design; he pulled the sheer fabric aside without asking permission, staring at the image of Atlantis settled over her heart. It looked rougher than some of the other designs, cruder and amateur, but still inked with immeasurable care. Alex bore his scrutiny with infinite patience, letting Rodney look his fill without a word of protest.

John just couldn't get over the fact that a young girl was standing naked in front of him without the smallest hint of discomfort.

When Rodney finished, he stepped backed and cocked his head to one side, as if weighing an impossible problem. “I think I do like you,” he finally said, as if imparting the formula for recharging ZedPMs. Alex ducked her head and looked up through her long lashes, suddenly shy.

“Yeah?” she asked, a small smile hovering on her face.

“Don't let it go to your head, and only a little.” Alex grinned, bright and cheerful. John shifted uncomfortably as she bounced happily on her toes.

“I won't let any of the other scientists know,” she swore. “Specially Kavanaugh.” John felt cracked down the middle, thoughts and impressions swirling through his head so fast he'd need to borrow Rodney's supercharged brain just to register them all. He cleared his throat and asked his most pressing question.

“So what's with the...” John motioned to her body, vaguely embarrassed that he'd been staring at her despite his best efforts not to—though it definitely hadn't been in that way. It didn't help that the Neeldari were trying to encourage people to look, the cloth draped around her body a passing nod to proper attire that left nothing to the imagination. Which was way more than John ever wanted to know, because Alex was more like a cool younger sister than a woman.

“Ah, it's...complicated?” Alex hedged, fiddling with the robe.

“This is the Pegasus Galaxy,” Rodney said caustically, “complicated is the new simple.”

Teyla and Ronon chose that moment to reappear; they spared cursory glances for Rodney and John, the bulk of their focus on Alex, who shifted under the scrutiny. Teyla stepped close and, after
receiving Alex's permission, traced the contours of the jagged symbol that crossed one of her shoulders. Ronon, more intense than usual, flinched when she looked at him.

“Ronon—” Alex started.

“Is the mathe one of them?” John had never heard Ronon sound vulnerable before, and it's weird as fuck. Alex tensed in distress.

“No no no. It's not—well not just.” Ronon didn't move, but he pulled back just the same. Alex touched the mark reverently, then extended her left arm. There were two concentric circles on her forearm shifting through every color of the rainbow. Ronon stared at it for a moment before focusing his attention back on Alex, who again touched the mark behind her ear. “This space is mine. Everything you can see outside a long sleeve t-shirt is personal. I'm not...I'm not ready to take that step yet. To give over to it completely. And you marked me before I was even Called so...” Ronon searched her face for confirmation, and relaxed when he found what he was looking for. John was completely lost.

“Someone want to tell us what the hell is going on?” Rodney demanded.

“We have contacted Atlantis to inform them of our success. The Neeldari have invited us to a Feast of Honor. They will summon us within the hour;” Teyla told him, still taking in Alex's tattoos.

“A feast? They went from public execution to feasts in our honor? That's insane,” Rodney protested.

“Uh...not in our honor, per se.” Rodney's eyes narrowed on Alex. “It's in theirs.” Alex swept her hands over her tattoos.

“The tattoos?” John asked, keeping his voice even. His skin itched with residual adrenaline, making him jumpy and terse.

“Yeah. But they're not just tattoos. I'm a Memory Keeper.”

“Right. And a memory Keeper is...” John prompted; the room felt too small and his temper frayed. He didn't come down from almost dying easily, and when Rodney was in danger, it got that much worse.

“A Memory Keeper,” Teyla said, giving the title the weight it deserved, “is revered amongst every world which has been touched by the Wraith. They are charged by the Ancestors to hear the stories of a people and to Keep them. They know the stories of people long Culled by the Wraith; people who would otherwise be forgotten. The tattoos are visual reminders of the people she Keeps.”

“She's the Iliad,” Rodney said, as if that explained everything. Ronon and Teyla were looking at him in confusion, John like he was insane.

“That's...kind of accurate, actually,” Alex said in surprise.

Rodney scowled at how shocked she sounded. “I'm a genius, not a savant. I have layers.” Rodney cocked his head, eyes falling to the tattoos again.

“Lots,” John agreed, his tone only hinting at sarcasm.

“Stories like the Iliad and even Beowulf are how the people of the time immortalized themselves; generations upon generations of people will always know who they are and where they came from. The tattoos are the same concept, only on a cultural, planetary scale.”
“I should've paid attention in Freshman English,” John muttered, shaking his head.

“The station is highly revered. A Keeper wields great power over the people she Remembers. And the people she chooses to stay with.” Teyla sat even more rigidly and formal than normal, which in John's experience meant she felt insulted by their disrespect, but remained determined to rise above it.

“Most Keepers are nomadic; we travel around from world to world talking to survivors of extinction-level Cullings and writing down their stories,” Alex explained. “In a galaxy where entire civilizations can disappear in a matter of hours, it's important that someone remember.”


“That'd be it,” Alex confirmed.

“You have given Atlantis much power by choosing to stay there,” Teyla said seriously.

“I know. Using this to get them free was not an easy choice to make, but I never would have come here if I hadn't though Atlantis and her people worthy of my Honor. If it becomes a problem...” Her words appeased Teyla, and some of the rigidity seeped out of her frame.

“You should be fat,” Rodney said out of the blue, bringing the conversation to a grinding halt. “You know, so there's more--” he waved in Alex's general area “--real estate.”

Alex paused and blinked at Rodney, completely blindsided by the non sequitur. “Um, thanks. I'll, uh, get right on that.”

They were interrupted by a respectful knock before she had to choose one way or another, or Ronon leapt across the room to defend her honor. The Crier from before entered with a bow.

“We would be honored if you would join us for a celebratory feast, Keeper. It has been long since one of your kind has visited us.” Alex rose and bowed back, still completely at ease in her sheer cloth and the...exposure. John stifled the urge to throw one of the heavy throw-rugs over her body.

“You flatter me, Crier. I am honored.” The Crier bowed low, flushed with pleasure from her praise. “We have arranged special seats for your fa—”

“I'm sorry, a moment,” Alex interrupted. She turned to Teyla. “Atlantis is alright with this?”

“They are not expecting us for several hours,” Teyla confirmed.

“Wonderful. Please, lead the way.” Alex said with enthusiasm, guiding the Crier towards the door. “What's on the menu for tonight?”

“That was...weird,” John murmured.

“Weirder than you turning into a bug?” Rodney asked.

John was saved from responding when Ronon clapped a hand on his back, grinning. “I'll explain it later. There's food.”

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The feast went well once John and Rodney got over the whole execution at dawn thing. And John stopped thinking about all the things he came so close to telling Rodney. The things he'd tried to show Rodney in those moments he'd been sure they were doomed.
Alex sat at the head of the table, on a slightly elevated dais. She had been talking nonstop since she sat down, barely pausing to drink.

“She's telling them stories,” Ronon said when he caught John looking. “If you ask about a tattoo, she is bound by her promise to tell you of the people it came from.” Ronon glanced at John sideways. “I've never heard of a Keeper with a home though.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” John asked.

“A Keeper can command a good deal of power should they so chose,” Teyla said. “It is the same as any person who can win the respect of many. Keepers travel wide and far in their quests for stories; many are victims of the Wraith themselves without a home to go back to. For one to call a certain place home...there are many political implications in such a choice. Dr. Weir must give serious thought to how this will be dealt with.”

“What happens when she dies?” Rodney asked. “It seems kind of ridiculous to put the memory of your entire civilization in some random person's hands who isn't going to last much longer than you are.”

“The legends say there is an entire city, built by the Ancestors, where the Keepers store their Memories.”

“You're putting that much trust and influence in a legend? And in a person who is fallible and possibly manipulative?” Rodney asked incredulously.

“I have met two Keepers in my life,” Teyla said, steel in her voice. “It would be very hard to impersonate what they know and do.”

“Alex could be--”

“She's real,” Ronon interrupted, his tone final. “Young and broken right now, but she's not faking.”

“Very young,” Teyla agreed.

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The feasting ended, but no one had left the table. John started getting antsy. He wanted to get the hell out of dodge and back to Atlantis. A gong sounded through the room and everyone immediately fell silent. The Crier rose and began a long, involved litany about the honor they felt at hosting a Keeper.

Then came the two hours of story telling, from the inception of the Neeldari culture to present day. Rodney had pulled out a data tablet ten minutes in and challenged John to a game of 'Most creative escape attempts.' John had McGuyvered himself out using two of the wooden spoons as rubbing sticks to create a mass fire when the story telling ended to great applause. Rodney wasn't faking his enthusiasm.

“Good, we can go now, right?” Rodney asked hopefully, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

“The Keeper requests your presence at the Marking.” John jumped, having missed the Crier's arrival.

“The what?” he asked to cover.

“The marking. The Keeper has agreed to hold our marking; this is a great honor, and she would like
you to bear witness.” John shrugged and they all trooped up to the dais. The Neeldari elite surrounded the small throne. A woman covered in tattoos from head to toe held a needle and spread pots of ink over the ground. Alex smiled tiredly at them.

“So what's up?” John asked, slouching by her chair.

“I offered to bear their mark; it's usually something I only do for cultures whose people have been lost and scattered, so they're extra honored. I figured it was the least I could do in thanks for sparing your life.” Her voice was strained from talking all night.

“How long will this take?” Rodney demanded irritably. Teyla tripped and Rodney ended up with a sharp elbow in his ribs.

“Not long. I chose their home symbol from the Stargate. Small and easy.” A young woman carrying an arm load of books staggered up to their group. “You can give those to him,” Alex instructed, pointing at Rodney. The woman dropped the heavy tomes in Rodney's arms. “History books. Gotta love 'em.”

True to her word, the tattoo ceremony only took about an hour. Rodney hadn't been able to watch the whole thing; needles made him queasy. But once Alex was tatted up and the Neeldari were ecstatically happy, they gave Alex real clothes to wear home.

Two gate teams were waiting for them on the outskirts of the city, armed and alert. John nodded to Lorne, thankful for the backup. He didn't miss the covert glances the Marines threw Alex, once again fully covered, no doubt wondering how she'd pulled off the impossible.

It didn't help that Ronon acted as if he'd been charged with protecting the Queen of England, even growling at the Marines if they stared too long or too hard. Teyla kept a deliberately respectful distance between them, surreptitiously glancing at Alex from beneath her lashes.

“I still don't know what we did wrong,” Rodney mumbled after a few minutes of silence. John suppressed a grin.

“You rolled your eyes,” Alex told him. Rodney stopped short, spluttering, and one of the Marines walked into him.

Rodney stumbled to one knee, yelling, “I what?!

“You rolled your eyes. It's an extremely rude gesture. Actually, I don't think there's anything in the English language that's quite comparable to it,” she said. John pulled Rodney up, letting his hand linger a little too long on Rodney's shoulder.

The restless part of him, the one that let him get through the life-or-death situations without losing his mind, wanted to know that Rodney had come through this OK. It wanted permission to strip Rodney down and make sure he wasn't injured or harmed in any way. The rationally functioning part of John pointed out the Neeld hadn't harmed either of them, had in fact been quite pleasant, death threats aside. But the demanding part kept getting louder with each day, and John's extremely vivid dreams weren't helping him control it.

“What could an eye roll POSSIBLY mean?” Rodney asked, agog and oblivious to John's inner turmoil.

“With the gate shield, the Wraith only come from the sky. By casting your eyes upwards to show your disdain, to the Neeldari, you're saying 'I wish you were Wraith fodder.’ Only ruder. More rude? More ruder? As far as I know, there's nothing you can actually say here that matches the
sentiments of an eye roll.”

“That's...that's preposterous!” Rodney yelped. He jumped when Ronon clapped one of his giant warrior hands on Rodney's shoulder.

“Keep walking, McKay,” he grunted.

“No more ridiculous than raising a middle finger means 'fuck you' and has been known to cause its own diplomatic problems back on Earth,” Alex said. Rodney huffed in annoyance.

They made the rest of the trip in relative silence, Rodney's grumbles punctuating the quiet. When they reached the gate, two Marines stepped out of the woods and saluted John. The stoic Neeldari gate guards deactivated the shield for them.

“Dial the Gate, Major. It's time to get home.” Lorne punched in the coordinates and sent through his IDC.

“**Major Lorne?**” Dr. Weir's voice came through the radios.

“Elizabeth. It's good to hear your voice,” Sheppard said with a grin.

“It's good to hear yours as well, Colonel. I'm glad you were safely rescued. But we've had a few developments in your absence. Mr. Woolsey came through from Earth several hours ago.” Teyla stiffened and Ronon actually growled.

“Oh? Did he pop in for a friendly chat?”

“He would very much like to speak to Alex,” Elizabeth said dryly. Ronon bared his teeth at the pronouncement, stepping closer to the Keeper.

“Understood. We'll be through shortly. Sheppard out.” He signaled the Marines to straggle through the gate at a leisurely pace. He turned to Alex, eyes inscrutable underneath his aviators. “So Woolsey's here.”

“I heard.” Alex seemed supremely unconcerned.

“Don't think he's here to do you any favors.”

“Nope.”

“Right. So long as you know that.” Alex bared her teeth in an expression reminiscent of Ronon's when he smelled fresh meat.

“I think I can handle him,” she said silkily. John didn't doubt it. Adopting the most lazy, laid back, guaranteed-to-piss-authority-figures-off attitude he owned, Team Sheppard strolled through the gate. They were in tight diamond formation around Alex, anyone with any sense trying to get as far away from her as possible.

“You must be Miss Alexandra,” a dry, flat voice intoned. “I've heard so much about you.” Teyla actually full-out glared at Richard Woolsey, IOA pain in the ass. And if his tone of voice was any indication, he was here gunning for the Next Gens. John felt Rodney stiffen beside him in recognition of that fact, and Ronon stepped between Alex and Woolsey with a growl, drawing himself to his full height. John felt viciously pleased when the suit took an involuntary step backwards, neck craned up so he could see Ronon's face.
“Ms.” Alex corrected coolly, laying a calming hand on Ronon's arm.

“Excuse me?” Woolsey spluttered, a bit thrown by the chilly reception.

“It’s Ms., not Miss. Miss is a salutation indicative of youth and insinuating a certain a lack of authority. It places me in a subordinate position to you, Mister Woolsey, and also makes an inappropriate assumption about my marital state. I am neither your subordinate nor a very young child, and I would appreciate it if you would address me as Ms.” John smiled laconically at Woolsey, hand stroking the butt of his P-90. Woolsey's eyes were jumping from each member of Team Sheppard to Alex and back, rabbit-quick.

“Right,” Woolsey said, pulling himself together. “MS. Alexandra. If you don't mind, the IOA has some questions we'd like you to answer.”

“Sorry, sir, IOA and SGC medical protocol dictates that every off world traveler pass a medical check up before being released into the general populace. You know how these things are,” Keller interjected with a wide, fake grin. She started herding all the off-world travelers towards the hallway. Woolsey opened his mouth to interject, but John's eyes went hard.

“Wouldn't want to get in trouble with the IOA would we?” he asked.

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Keller banned all but medical personnel and patient from the infirmary. It looked like all of Atlantis tried to take Sheppard or Rodney aside to let him know how much Woolsey was hated, or why he was wrong, or any number of things.

Sheppard, Rodney, and Lorne were holding a hurried conversation with Alex about strategies and tactics. Danni had slipped into the infirmary under the guise of sorting supplies, but really delivered the run down of the questions and answers from the others' session with Woolsey.

“He's looking to discredit you,” Lorne said. “Don't give him anything he can use against you.”

“I know what he's trying to do,” Alex grumbled, rubbing her temples. She had one hell of a headache that just wouldn't go away. She looked around at the assembled faces, each one taut with concern. She had to take a moment to compose herself, to absorb the realization that this place, this Atlantis, was Home. “There's nothing I can do to change his position but let our actions and accomplishments speak for themselves. This is our home. I'm not going down without a fight.”

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“Miz Beckett, so nice of you to join us,” Mr. Woolsey said, emphasizing the title. She nodded to Dr. Weir, sitting unobtrusively to the side, taking her seat across from Woolsey and his cohort. “This is Agent Coleman.”

“Agent Coleman, Mr. Woolsey,” Alex acknowledged. “Alex or Alexandra will be fine.” She settled in the chair like she owned it, burying her true feelings underneath a layer of lackadaisical indifference. “And my last name is not Beckett. Beckett is my middle name.”

She paused again, watching the IOA delegates for any sign they were going to speak. Woolsey watched her openly; in her experience, he was a fair man who had to speak for the collective annoyance that was the IOA. Coleman, on the other hand, watched her with narrow eyes and pinched lips, the very picture of disdain. He would be trouble, and she needed to isolate him as soon as possible. Cut him off and cast him as a negatively biased, hostile force. And she knew just how to do it.
She flashed a small, shy smile at Woolsey, who blushed lightly and glanced down at his sheaf of papers. Coleman scowled at her, and she let a lazy smirk creep across her face, insolent and challenging. Coleman opened his mouth to speak, but Alex beat him to it. “Beckett, after the late Carson Beckett. Great man, I'm told.”

“He was,” Woolsey agreed softly. Coleman looked supremely irritated, and she flicked a glance at him, letting the corner of her mouth twitch up. His lip curled up and she saw him suck in a breath to speak again.

“I was conceived roughly around this time in my universe,” she told him amicably, looking innocent and adding a touch of nervousness to her voice. Coleman's face began to purple, anger suffusing his expression.

The Interrupting Game had been one of her favorites growing up. Particularly when she played it “with” her Damma. When you really wanted to irritate the hell out of someone, the fastest way was to not let them talk. Wait until you saw they were just about to say something and jump in right before they even got the first syllable out. If you read people well enough—and Alex had had a LOT of practice with this particular game—you could make someone lose it without anyone else picking up on what you were doing. It made the other person look like a complete hot-head asshole. Especially when the interviews were being taped for review by people not at the meeting.

With Coleman looking like an over-inflated balloon, one more interruption should do it. An irrational outburst should put Woolsey in her corner and devalue anything Coleman had to say. She saw the muscles in his mouth twitch, but held her peace; he eyed her, waiting to see if she would talk. Satisfied, he moved to ask his first question.

“Carson and I have the same birthday, you know. We're both named after...him.” She paused meaningfully, one eye on Coleman. “It feels weird to be named after someone you'll never meet, but everyone else knew so well and—”

“Do you mind?” Coleman spat. Elizabeth and Woolsey looked at Agent Coleman in shock. “I'd like to get a word in edgewise.”

“Agent Coleman!” Dr. Weir exclaimed angrily, rising from her seat to glare angrily at him. “I will not have you speak to one of my people in that way!”

“One of your people?” the agent sneered. “If she wouldn't interrupt me—”

“Agent Coleman,” Mr. Woolsey interrupted flatly. “Your behavior does not reflect well on the IOA. I have to ask you to calm down or I'm going to be forced to conduct this interview alone.” A silent power struggle waged between the two men before Coleman grudgingly sat down, glaring daggers at Alex.

“I apologize for the interruption, Ms. Alexandra. I believe it best if we commence with the interview. Would you care to explain why Dr. Weir sent you on a very sensitive, potentially hazardous mission to rescue Dr. McKay and Colonel Sheppard?” Alex started in surprise, looking at Elizabeth for confirmation.

“I didn't feel comfortable revealing your...position. Nor that I would do it justice.”

“That...thank you,” Alex said sincerely. She stood and reached for the hem of her shirt.

“Wait wait!” Woolsey yelped, a blush staining his face. “What are you doing?”

“I'm trying to answer your question, Mr. Woolsey.” She drew her shirt over her head, and even
Coleman dropped the aloof act to get closer look at her markings.

“What...what are they?” Woolsey asked breathlessly, his eyes tracing the sharp tribal zig-zag over her shoulder.

“They're Pegasus,” Alex said reverently, tracing a vine climbing over her stomach and around her belly button. “The people lost to the Wraith.”

“Am I to understand each of your tattoos represents an alien world with which you had contact?” Coleman asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” Alex responded

“What manner would that be?” Coleman asked through gritted teeth.

“Generally speaking, I only had contact with one or two survivors of a decimated world. Sometimes, only with their progeny. The tattoos are a visual reminder of their stories, of keeping worlds and people alive.”

“And how do you manage that?” Woolsey actually seemed intrigued.

“I'm bound by my promise to the people I Keep to tell their Story to whomever asks. Pick a tattoo,” she offered, spreading her arms wide, “and I'll tell you about it.” Woolsey's eyes jumped from picture to picture, trying to decide on one. Coleman pursed his lips and his eyes gleamed in a way that Alex didn't appreciate.

“The thick one on your upper arm.” Alex looked down at the dark slash, made up of tight, blocky lettering from an alien world; anger coursed through her. Of course Coleman would pick that one. He probably recognized the symbols from Atlantis's reports and records. He wasn't asking because he was curious about their fate, or the tragedy that had befallen them, but because this was political maneuvering as a means to discredit or at least cast suspicion on her loyalties. She touched her fingers to her lips, then brushed them across the mark in remembrance and respect.

“The Genii. Our Atlantis had a history with them as well. The Genii were a proud people, creative and ruthless. Made so by the Wraith. Long ago, they retreated into the bowels of the Earth, seeking asylum from those who would do them harm. They developed technology secretly, trying to create the ultimate weapon against their enemies. They began to experiment with nuclear energy, splitting the atom. In their lust for weaponry, to build a better bomb, they sacrificed much, including the lives of their people. Thousands died of radiation poising due to poor shielding within years of their project, but they kept on, driven by a desperate desire to be free from the Wraith. Eventually, there were few left, and fewer who remembered. The planet is uninhabitable.”

“I would like a full accounting of your tattoos and the societies they represent,” Coleman ordered.

“Neither you or the IOA have that kind of time,” Alex said with measured patience. Coleman could attack anything but her tattoos. Those were sacred and she wouldn't let him desecrate the memory of her people.

“Excuse me?” Coleman growled.

“If I were to give you a full accounting of each and every civilization I Remember, it could take upward of a year. The Genii I just told you about? That's the super-abridged version. I can tell you their lineage, their mythology, the people they held in great esteem from the time they began writing it down. I hold as much knowledge as I can for each people I bear a mark for. I can go get my notes if you want; they're stored on a 100 gigabyte external hard drive in my room.”
“That seems quite an exaggeration,” Coleman said dismissively. Elizabeth sat up straighter; Alex's posture had shifted, turning aggressive.

“Kayla and Ronon have both confirmed the nature and expectations of a Keeper,” Dr. Weir stepped in, trying to stop things from degenerating further.

“A Keeper?” Woolsey asked, jumping on the olive branch.

“We're storytellers. Most Keepers are wanderers who lost their home world to the Wraith. Their way to deal with the pain is to Remember; sometimes, they want to Remember others as well. Other times, a dying or older Keeper will Call a successor. That's what happened to me.”

“How were you...Called?” Woolsey asked.

“Well, that's a long story that involves several of us getting kidnapped from a planet and—well, it turned out alright in the end. But I was chosen by an old Keeper who initiated me.”

“Initiation? You speak of this like it an organization,” Coleman said suspiciously. “And your job seems pretty pointless if you don't plan on living forever.”

“It's not an organization, nor is it looking to infiltrate Atlantis,” Alex ground out. “And we've got 'forever' covered Agent Coleman, but it's nice of you to be so concerned.”

“I'd like you to explain that last statement,” Coleman demanded.

“I don't really feel like it,” Alex said, adopting a bored tone of voice.

“I'm interested in the answer,” Elizabeth interjected.

Alex sighed and directed her answer at Dr. Weir. “There's an Ancient repository with a large, functioning database. I was the first person who's had the tools to upload to the database in several thousand years, since the people who were there right after the Ancients left. The other Keepers use vacuum-sealed containers to store the books, notes, and various other artifacts from the worlds they Remember.” Coleman opened his mouth to speak, but Alex glared at him. “I will not take you there, I don't care what you say about it. No one goes there but the Keepers, not even the linguists or anthropologists from my home universe.”

“What exactly does your presence mean for Atlantis?” Elizabeth asked. There hadn't been time to go into the full impact of Alex's presence, but the young girl had done more than insinuate it would change their reception in this galaxy.

“I'm quite interested in that answer as well,” Woolsey added.

“The Neeld will spread the news that there's a Keeper around, and I'm staying on Atlantis. I...staying in one place puts me in a difficult position. The gate teams will find many societies more welcoming and open. There will also be those who may try to use the gate teams for their own purpose. Some people will be very angry that Lantea has a Keeper because they don't see you as part of the Pegasus Galaxy. Others will see it as a sign that you won't abandon the galaxy and are here to stay, to herald back the time of the Ancestors. Others will just see power and react to it. You'll run the gamut of reactions.” She leaned forward, holding eye contact with Dr. Weir. “I won't let anyone use this for political gain, and I'll leave before I let it become a problem.”

“And when were you planning on telling Dr. Weir or Colonel Sheppard about your...Memory Keeping?” Coleman challenged. “Keeping it hidden doesn't seem to be the actions of a trusting ally.”
“As much as we try to pretend otherwise, Agent Coleman, this isn't our Atlantis. There are people on this base I've never laid eyes on, things that have happened here that my people didn't face. That changes people, changes groups. I have a responsibility to ever world represented on my body. I had to be sure, and it wasn't an issue until it was.”

“What else are you holding back until it becomes an issue?” Coleman asked belligerently.

“Agent Coleman!” Woolsey protested, irritated that the NID agent kept directing the conversation. Alex glared at the hostile man.

“You know, these people here are our friends, and they're helping us. They've allowed us to contribute to Atlantis, to be productive. They've given us something familiar to latch on to so we don't have to spend every moment of every day thinking about what we've lost. You've never had your entire family—single person that you ever looked up to or loved—taken away at one time, Agent Coleman. I can see it in your eyes, in the way you move, how you so casually dismiss us. We all have. And we've all lived through it. I heard Garreth laugh for the first time in longer than I can remember the other day. These people gave that back to me. To us. You take us away from here and you're going to kill that. We're not from Earth. We were born and raised here and I will not let you destroy them. I worked too long and sacrificed too many people to bring the ones I could out alive. So if you could take your condescension and shove it right up your ass, that would be splendid.”

Coleman was, for the moment, taken aback by Alex's tirade. Elizabeth and Woolsey glanced between the two combatants, each of them searching for a way to bring the meeting back to some kind of order.

“We're very sorry for your loss,” Woolsey said sincerely. “But you're here now, and we can't in good conscience allow children to remain in this city. This is a functional military base and we have no way to guarantee your safety.”

“There are soldiers my age at the SGC,” Alex pointed out, regaining her cool. And quite rationally, if she did say so herself.

“Yes, but they signed up to serve their country. It's different, and there are no 7 year-olds in any capacity at Stargate Command.” Alex almost thought Woolsey was cracking a joke.

“So your biggest concern is our safety?” she pressed.

“Yes, I believe that's an accurate assessment,” Woolsey agreed, shooting Coleman a censuring look when he opened his mouth to speak.

“If there was some way to guarantee our safety to a certain extent, say we found a way to rig the shields so they stayed up indefinitely...how would that factor into your decision to let us stay?” Woolsey's eyes narrowed, sensing a power play coming. With the documentation Dr. Weir had provided, the reports he had read about what the children had survived to get here...while there were certainly inherent dangers to living on Atlantis, in some universe it had been allowed. Shielding and power would go a long way to cutting down the risk, and the Atlantis expedition members had proven themselves competent in dealing with internal problems.

“A fully defensible Atlantis, with an operating shield and the possibility of evacuation through the Stargate would at least make it plausible to consider allowing you to stay.”

“We have three fully functional, charged ZPMs,” Alex announced calmly.
The silence was nearly as deafening as the explosion that followed. Agent Coleman started yelling, his face red with strain; Woolsey's mouth moved but Alex didn't hear what came out. She watched the play of emotions on Elizabeth's face. Betrayal, shock, excitement, anger, suspicion, understanding all flickering by rabbit-quick. Alex sat through it all, waiting judgment.

"SILENCE!" Elizabeth finally yelled over the din, her emotions hidden behind her diplomat's mask. Coleman and Woolsey obeyed, more out of shock than anything else. "Please explain—"

"Your trust in these people is astounding," Woolsey said dryly. Alex remained silent, jaw clenched and eyes forward. Woolsey shook his head. "The IOA will have something to say about this. At least we can get you back to Earth quickly now."

"We're not going to Earth, Mr. Woolsey," Alex said, her voice devoid of any emotion. "Once we're there, we have no guarantees we'll ever return to Pegasus."

"That's preposterous, you're asking to--"

"Agent Coleman," Elizabeth interrupted, her voice quietly deadly, "we'll deal with that later. Right now, I'm more interested in the ZPMs."

The Senior Staff scrambled to find a legitimate excuse for being in the gateroom when Alex, Dr. Weir and the Earth reps exited unexpectedly.

"Doctors McKay, Zelenka; Colonel Sheppard, please follow us," Weir instructed. John and Rodney exchanged a look and moved to follow. Ronon decided to tag along, clapping Zelenka on the back as he fell in step with the group. They walked to the Next Gens' quarters in silence, the newest additions to the entourage picking up on the tension. They crowded into Alex's room and watched in surprise as a drawer lowered from the ceiling. She removed a small bundle from the drawer and carefully unwrapped it. Rodney let out a strangled moan that John had only heard in his dreams when Alex gently handed him a glowing ZPM.

"It's...you...oh my God, I love you," Rodney rambled, reverently running his hands over the orange glowing device. Rodney's eyes bugged as Alex unwrapped a second, similar bundle and handed it to Zelenka, who hummed in appreciation, his eyes going glassy.

"Fuck me," Rodney gasped when she thrust a third one into John's arms, and John would have been tempted except he was holding a ZPM in his arms. One of three.

"You should talk to Bohdan," Alex told Rodney and Radek. "He's been rebuilding the proofs and schematics for recharging them." She turned away from their questions and caught John's gaze.

"I didn't realize you were hiding this," John said, his voice carefully blank.

"You knew?" Elizabeth asked sharply. She felt raw and betrayed, her trust in the Next Gens stripped away. John shot her a scornful look that made her flush despite her anger.

"What is this?" Zelenka asked. He brushed the top of his ZPM where the metal was slightly warped and scratched, the casing pried away from the body.

"Salvation," Alex said quietly, jaw tight. Rodney turned and scowled at her.

"You marred a ZedPM because of some sort of religious impulse?"

"Salvation for the last man standing," Ronon said quietly. John sucked in a breath.

“A bomb,” John said thickly. “A ZPM bomb for the last survivor, if there was no one else.”

“We dismantled it the moment we got here,” Alex said softly, eyes haunted. She raised her gaze to meet Dr. Weir's after a moment. “This was my call, and I'd do it again. We needed the time. To get to know you, to make sure you were the people we remembered. To give you time to know us, to see if we could coexist. If we'd given them to you when we got here, the IOA would have kicked us out, no questions asked. But we've had three months to prove that we can contribute to Atlantis, that we're competent and useful. They can't change the evidence of what we've done and what we're capable of. Be mad all you want, but I did what I had to do to give my people a fighting chance.”

Elizabeth could appreciate what she'd done, on a purely cerebral level. Alex had bought the time necessary for her people to integrate into Lantean society, to form bonds and become entrenched. Woolsey was already getting heated looks and grumbles of discontent from the staff. And Alex took full onus of the responsibility when any of the other young adults could share the blame.

“Your actions haven't helped your arguments with the IOA,” Elizabeth said finally. “Whether you can stay or not is in their hands.”

“We're not going to Earth,” Alex restated clearly. Elizabeth nodded.

“I understand,” Elizabeth assured her.

“Good, just so long there is no confusion on that point,” Alex said with finality.

Elizabeth turned to Rodney and Radek. “Please install the ZPMs. Mr. Woolsey would like to phone home.”

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Sateda stuck his head into the room the four Tweens—as Sarah, Peter, Maria, and Erin had started calling themselves—had claimed. The two sets of siblings had formed a very tight bond when they were running, and it had only solidified here.

“You good in here?” Sateda asked. He got various affirmatives to his question, except from Sarah who was already passed out in her bed. “Alright, Kayla, Terhaan, and Bohdan are first pick tonight if you need something. Good night.”

“Night!” Peter called from the bathroom.

“Night Sateedee,” Erin giggled. Maria climbed out of bed and threw herself at Sateda, who caught her up in a giant bear hug.

“Night shaarli,” Sateda whispered.

“Night Sateda,” Maria whispered. He set her on her feet and shooed her towards her bed. When he looked down the hall, Carson was still saying goodnight to Scott, listening to his little brother tell him about his dinner with Lorne and Parrish. He waved goodnight to Terhaan and Kayla, grateful he wasn't on nightmare-wrangling duty tonight.

He paused just inside the door to admire the view. Alex stood before their floor-length mirror, the lined of her tattoos accentuating the curves of her body. But there was a tension in her shoulders, a disquiet in the way she held herself. He moved over to her, making noise so she'd know he was
“What's wrong?” he asked, ghosting up behind her. He watched her eyes, reflected in the mirror, travel over her marks. One hand absently traced the outline of Atlantis on her chest.

“Two and a half years,” she said softly, “and I haven't thought about them. I haven't looked at them, or Remembered them. I was too busy doing other things--”

“Surviving,” Sateda felt compelled to interject.

“--to give it much thought. And I come here, and the first thing I do is use them to manipulate a political situation to my advantage. That's not...I'm not...”

Sateda stepped behind her and pressed himself along her back, her body settling into his with familiar ease. He traced a complicated knot along her stomach.

“Who's this?” he asked, pressing a kiss to her neck.

“The Lomec of Tridan,” she answered without hesitation. “They made beautiful tapestries out of *pitar* fur.”

“And this?” he asked, caressing a raised, thin twist of a symbol.

“The Spera. They tamed *angraks*, powerful beasts with mercurial moods and deadly horns, but fiercely loyal when won over.”

“And these circles?” He brushed a kiss over the base of her neck.

“They had no spoken name. They called themselves 'the people' and welcome all in peace.” Sateda covered the mark of Atlantis settled over her heart, the strong pulse of her heartbeat against his palm.

“This was the first thing you did,” he told her, capturing her gaze in the mirror. “We gave you the memories of our parents, and you'll keep them safe for us. You'll keep them for Elora and Adan and Julian. You'll remind us when we can't remember the sound of our mother's voice or the color of our father's eyes.”

He turned her around so he could look at her fully.

“You save two people you care about from death, and probably many others as well. You manipulated a society by your very presence. You Remembered a people, took their history and vowed to keep it safe. You did all of these things in one action. We all believe and act in contradicting ways everyday; you just have to find the peace within yourself to accept the consequences of your choices. All of them.” He wrapped Alex in a hug. “This Teyla would talk to you if you asked.”

----

Teyla was preparing for bed when her door chimed. She passed her hand over the sensor and was surprised to see Alex hovering hesitantly on the other side.

“I...my Teyla. From my universe, she...” Alex trailed off, frustrated.

“Come in, I will make tea,” Teyla said gently. She guided Alex to some cushions and began her preparations. Alex's hands were in constant movement, fingering the hem of her shirt, skating
along the seam of her pants.

“I was Called by an older Keeper,” Alex started, watching Teyla’s hands move over her tea set. “I grew up on Atlantis, but...I didn't grow up in Pegasus. There was this disconnect somewhere, because I hadn't lost anyone close to the Wraith, and Atlantis was pretty safe for the most part. Arin—the Keeper—she...she showed me things. The pain, the sadness. Taught me a lot about loss. And then she showed me how to take it away. Or at least make it easier. I accepted her Calling at fourteen.”

“She should not have done that,” Teyla said, quietly angry. Such responsibility was not for a child to bear.

“Yeah, a lot of people said that. But...it's right. To do this. And I didn't understand, not completely when I accepted but—she explained it to me once. How Atlantis and the Earth-people had changed Pegasus forever. How they were caught between two galaxies, trying to be loyal to both. She thought she could help the Lanteans forge stronger ties with Pegasus if one of them was Pegasus.” Alex accepted a cup, head bowed, hair sliding over her face. “But I'm not. And I don't know if I can be that.”

Teyla sipped her tea and gathered her thoughts. “Of the Keepers I have met, one had tattoos over his entire body, even his face. He had accepted his Calling completely, given up everything he was to his work. The other had marks only on his torso. The first man had been a Keeper for several years. The second, most of his life. You are young. You have just been allowed to mourn the loss of your people. I found that Keeping a Memory is as personal journey for the one who Keeps as the one who Gives. There is not one way. And while your Atlantis was lost, perhaps your mentor's wish may come to fruition here.” Teyla leaned closer. “I have observed you here. You are strong, and there are many who love you. Do not be afraid to trust them to help you, just as I trust you to find the path you were meant to walk.”
Chapter 15

The mood around Atlantis remained dark and tense. Alex kept a low profile, ghosting around the city and avoiding everyone she could. Elizabeth remained still icily upset about 'ZPM Gate,' and all of the kids were avoiding her, though her anger was mostly directed as Alex—as intended. Rodney hadn't bothered being pissed, and he didn't have the patience for when Bohdan and Zelenka increasingly slipped into Czech just to avoid him; he eventually just dragged Light Switch into his lab so she could explain some of the brand new systems that had come on line since plugging in all the ZedPMs.

Atlantis settled into a holding pattern waiting to hear from the IOA.

“Control to Colonel Sheppard.”

“This is Sheppard.”

“Sir, we've just heard from Earth and the IOA, Dr. Weir would like you to report to the meeting room immediately.”

“Understood.” Sheppard signed off, his mouth set in a hard line as he made his way to the central spire.

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“So that's a good thing, right?” Rodney asked earnestly. “They get to stay, at least long enough for us to figure out some of these systems, did you know the Ancients monitored the number of footsteps in any given hallway? It's incredible the random, ridiculous things they—”

“Rodney,” Elizabeth censured.

“The sheer amount of information could take us years to sort through, it's a valid concern!” John kicked Rodney under the table.

“The IOA is sending a 'multi-national team to evaluate the operation of Atlantis, concentrating on the interaction of the young refugees to evaluate their place in Atlantis','” Elizabeth read. She put the piece of paper down and looked at her Senior Staff, one by one. “They're not just going to evaluate the children, they're going to look at all of us.”

****

The IOA delegation included Woolsey, General O'Neill, and seven international representatives from France, Canada, Japan, Spain, and Russia. And Agent Coleman, who the Next Gens had renamed 'Fucktard' and the rest of Atlantis adopted. John greeted them all in full dress, face blank.


“Yes. Loved the invitation, got it framed,” O'Neill piped up. John stiffly saluted the general, who arched an eyebrow and returned the salute, albeit somewhat sloppily.

“If you'll come this way, Major Lorne will escort you all to your quarters,” John said smoothly.

“When shall we see the children?” the French rep asked, her words lilting pleasantly.
“They're all seeing to their duties, or at school,” Lorne said, reading the tense lines of John's shoulders and stepping in. “The older children rotate, and some of the staff have volunteered to teach the younger children as well. They usually all eat together in the mess hall, that's the easiest way to find them all.” The group obediently began following Lorne through the network of Ancient halls. Except for O'Neill, who intently studied one of the walls.

“General O'Neill?” Woolsey called. He sighed when the insufferable man continued to gaze at the wall. “General O'Neill!”

“Yes?” Jack asked laconically.

“Are you coming with Major Lorne?” Woolsey asked with infinite patience. Jack seemed to ponder the question, head cocked to one side, then ponder it some more, head cocked to the other side.

“Nah. I think I'll stay here and see what's up with Chuck.” He glanced up at the Canadian Gate tech who watched the proceedings with ill concealed interest. “It is Chuck, right?”

“Uh, yessir. General O'Neill, sir.” Chuck stammered less than gracefully. Jack smiled winningly at Woolsey, who backed away slowly, as if trying not to startle a wild animal.

“Very well. We'll keep you informed of our plans.”

“You do that.” Jack was thrilled when Woolsey disappeared into the waiting transporter. He turned to Colonel Sheppard, who watched him with keen interest. “So. What do you do around here for fun?”

****

“You want to shadow some of the children?” Elizabeth asked uncertainly. The IOA committee laid out their plans for the two weeks they'd be on Atlantis evaluating the Next Gens, which included a combination of interviews, tests, and following them around as they went through their daily activities.

“In a manner of speaking. You've said they have their own hall? That they are not seeded through the general quarters?” the French ambassador queried. Elizabeth looked to Heightmeyer to answer.

“Yes, for the most part they've elected to remain together. Elora Dannin is gradually being acclimated to a new apartment with Dr. Keller, who is in the process of adopting her. Scott Lorne sometimes stays with Major Lorne. They're finding breaking two years of sleeping in close proximity difficult,” Heightmeyer explained.

“Yes, we would like to place someone on the hall,” the Japanese representative clarified. “We are interested in their interactions away from the main population.”

“Dr. Heightmeyer?” Dr. Weir prompted.

“I don't foresee it being a big problem as long as they have a chance to give their own input,” Kate decided. The kids wanted nothing more than to stay, and would do whatever it took, she was sure. Before the meeting could continue, the door chimed.

“I believe that's Alex, Kayla, and Carson. Excuse me.” Elizabeth rose and went to the door. True to her word, the three Next Gens were on the other side, Alex standing a little in front of Kayla and Carson. “Thank you for coming. Please, have a seat.” The committee members watched with open fascination as the three young adults walked in. Since the incident on Neeld, Alex had taken to wearing short sleeve t-shirts, her tattoos on open display. They caused a stir amongst the IOA
delegates, as Elizabeth assumed they were supposed to. They placed Alex in a good bargaining position, her status within the Pegasus galaxy and the prestige of Atlantis having her on base highlighted in every correspondence she’d sent to the SGC and IOA. The blatant visual reminder of that power was a smart move.

“Alex, Kayla, Carson, thank you for meeting with us,” Woolsey greeted formally.

“You are most welcome,” Kayla replied with a respectful nod, which Alex and Carson copied.

“You are Teyla Emmagan's daughter, yes? The resemblance is striking,” one of the delegates murmured, a Russian Colonel with grey hair and a sharp gaze.

“I have that honor,” Kayla responded with a small smile. She touched the Athosian bracelet around her wrist unconsciously, a gift from Halling after her first trip to New Athos and the official adoption ceremony.

“And you are Major Lorne's son, I am told?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” Carson said politely.

The man's gaze turned speculatively to Alex. “I have not been informed of your parentage.”

Alex smiled obliquely, making a brush-off motion. “Neither have I.” He frowned at her, but her smile remained oblique and impenetrable.

“We asked you here in hopes that you could clarify a few questions we had, and help us organize our visit so that it flows smoothly,” Woolsey said, taking control of the conversation. “First, we would like to assign someone to live in your hall, so that we can better get a feel for your group.” The three Next Gens shared a series of looks.

“If we may, we'd like to request Señora Flores,” Kayla said. The Señora looked surprised, particularly since none of the representatives had yet been introduced by name. “Most of us knew her from our Atlantis; it will make everyone more receptive to her presence.”

“I-I would be honored,” Señora Flores said, still surprised at the turn of events. Academically, she had been told that these children knew things, were deeply affiliated with the SGC and Atlantis from another universe; it was an entirely different thing to have proof.

“Wonderful, with that out of the way, we'd like to continue getting to know your people better.”

****

Jessica Flores watched in amusement as the children she'd been sent to study prepared for bed. All of the doors on the hall, save one, were wide open. Children of all ages darted from room to room. At one point, two wet, naked toddlers streaked out of one room and into another. A harrowed looking teenager, soaked to the bone, dashed out after them panting.

“They went there,” Jessica offered, indicating a room down the hall.

The teen flashed her a relieved look. “Thanks!” she yelled, sprinting down the hall. Shortly thereafter, twin shrieks echoed from the room, followed by a muffled thud and the unmistakable sound of objects crashing to the floor.

“DAMMIT PETER!” a voice bellowed.
A gawky ten-year-old fell out of the room laughing and took off to the farthest room down the hall yelling, “Sateeeeeda! Danni said a bad word!” More crashes sounded from the room, followed by impish young giggles.

“That's IT! Elora Dannin! Adan Flores! Front and center right now!”

Jessica sagged against the wall. Adan Flores. She and her husband had been married three years. They'd been trying to conceive a child for most of them. They'd turned to fertility treatments and specialists, had suffered through injections and exams. The first two miscarriages had been harder than either of them expected, almost pushed them apart. But in the darkness of their room, wrapped up in one another, they whispered possible names for the child they wanted to badly. Adan was to be the name of their son.

Jess caught her breath as a dark-headed little boy, wrapped in a blanket that trailed after him, stumbled and tripped his way out of the room, giggling madly. He turned to look up at her, and Jessica could imagine Victor's eyes, dark and hot with Castilian blood, gazing up at her.

“Hola. ¿De quién oculta usted?” she asked, slipping into Spanish. She blushed and knelt down, realizing that he would have most likely been raised by the others to speak English.

“Danni! Ella dice qu'es tiempo la cama.” Jessica's breath caught, his childish Spanish halting. He leaned in conspiratorially. “No quiero!”

“Adan! Get back here,” Danni commanded. The other child squirmed in her arms, trying to twist away. “Elora, stoppit! I'm so sorry.” The girl reached for Adan's hand. “They're being particularly difficult tonight.”

“He speaks Spanish?” Jessica asked, smiling down at Adan, who had taken refuge behind her legs and peered around them at Danni.

“Oh yeah. His parents were Spanish. We've been teaching him to speak it to keep at least part of his culture alive. Most of us grew up bilingual thanks to Atlantis's education policy, and several people spoke Spanish so it wasn't too hard,” Danni answered distractedly. She lunged for Adan, but he skipped away and Elora laughed gleefully.

“And who...who were his parents?” Danni looked up, startled, and Jessica saw the young girl recognize her. Danni looked trapped for an instant before her expression closed off, a friendly yet distant grin sliding onto her face.

“A couple of scientists. Nothing special. Gotta get these kids to bed, thanks for all your help!”

----

“You did WHAT?”

“I know.”

“Danni!”

“I know!”

“Why...”

“I didn't know! You should have told me!”
“Jesus.” Alex collapsed onto the couch, a deep sigh building in her chest.

“We can use this to our advantage,” Sateda suggested. Alex, Kayla, and Terhaan turned to glare at him in tandem. “Just pointing out our options.”

“We will not use Adan in such a manner,” Kayla decreed with finality.

“Or the Flores' infertility,” Terhaan added.

“Besides, we shouldn't have to, our contributions to Atlantis should speak for themselves,” Alex yelled at the ceiling.

“Yes, because we live in a world where merit always matters and the good guys always win,” Carson pointed out.

“What if they think it was intentional?” Bohdan asked. He worried his bottom lip with his teeth; he didn't like problems without obvious solutions. He preferred the clean sophistication of numbers and lines, the way his father had first shown him how to structure the world around him.

“If they think we're trying to manipulate them by throwing small children at the feet of struggling-to-conceive IOA committee members? I can't imagine that would be bad,” Alex said sarcastically. Carson nudged her with his foot, scowling.

“Don't be bitchy,” he warned. Alex's jaw set, and they could all see the building rant.

“I do not believe Jessica Flores to be irrational or prone to jump to such dire conclusions,” Terhaan deflected. “If we talked with her first, we could have a powerful ally.”

“But what if she wants Adan?” Danni asked in a small, scared voice.

Jessica Flores waited patiently for the chime on her door. She smoothed down her clothes and straightened her hair before walking over and opening the sliding ancient entrance. The three children from the meeting were hovering on the threshold of her room.

“Hello,” she greeted them easily.

“Hola, Señora Flores. ¿Podemos entrar nosotros?” Carson asked solicitously.

“Sí. Sí, por favor.” She motioned them in and perched on the edge of her bed. The three children—though really, she should think of them as young adults—spread through her room. She took them all in, reading what she could in their body language. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“Oh, I'm pretty sure you already know why we're here,” Alex said. She forced herself to relax. “I'd like to apologize. For Danni, she should have been more aware.”

Many years of diplomatic service had taught Jessica to read between the lines and hear what wasn't being said. Her instincts were also telling her that in this case, diplomatic obfuscation would be a gravely misplaced skill.

“I do not think she did it intentionally to curry favor,” she assured them. “Adan...he is...mine?”

“He is,” Kayla assured her gently, a small smile on the young girl's face. Jessica sagged back on her bed, a thousand emotions and thoughts running through her. A child. Her child. After so many attempts and so much failure. “How?” She couldn't help the broken whisper from escaping.
“There’s this device,” Carson said, his deeper voice an ocean of calm. “It takes a DNA sample from two people and uses it to create a child. When Atlantis was formally made a colony in our universe, you and your husband came over and used it.”

She gave herself time to absorb that. In her many years as a diplomatic liaison, she’d learned the power of taking a moment and collecting her thoughts.

“May I see him?” she asked, poised. Jessica’s emotions rode on a razor’s edge as the children debated amongst themselves. She had a sudden, empathetic understanding of their current situation, waiting for a group of strangers to decide their fate.

“He doesn’t know you,” Alex finally said, apology in her eyes. “He was one when we started running. We’ve told him about you, and your husband, but he doesn’t know who you are. Uh, it would be difficult if you grew...attached.” Alex winced at the flash of pain that crossed Señora Flores’s face. She dealt with the dead; that was easy. This? This was not her cup of tea.

“¡Ah Dios! ¡No, no, yo no quiero llevarlo!” Jessica hastened to reassure them. Alex looked blankly to Carson for a translation. “No, I do not wish to take him away.”

“You haven’t really met him yet,” Alex said dryly. She held up a hand to forestall any more of Jessica’s protests. “Really, we get it, you don’t intend to take Adan away but you never know what’s going to happen when you see your kid for the first time. When you KNOW it's your kid. We're not saying no, we're just...we don't want to lose him.”

“We are in a difficult position,” Kayla interrupted. “You and Adan's are biologically linked, but you are not of Atlantis. You are also of the IOA, which gives you great influence over us. We are unsure of how to balance the different aspects you embody.”

“I will not allow this to influence my decision,” Jessica swore.

“But it will,” Kayla said softly. She moved over to the bed and perched beside Jessica. “When you meet him, and accept him, when you begin thinking of yourself as his mother...there will not be a single decision you make unaffected by that knowledge. For good or for bad.” Kayla gestured to the others in the room. “We would know.”

“You...you’re parents,” Jessica whispered. How could they have been so blind? There were no adults living on this hall; there were two people over the age of twenty, and eight children under the age of ten. Two years they’d lived in the abandoned halls of Atlantis, caring for one another. Parents making the best decisions in order to care for the children who depended on them.

How had they missed that?

****

Carson checked his watch. 2200 hours. Alex should have been home hours ago. With the IOA everywhere they looked and everything happening so fast, he’d been looking forward to a relaxing night with Sateda and Alex. Kayla and Terhaan had agreed to keep anyone from interrupting them for tonight. He glanced at Sateda, reading a book in the corner, and wondered what the thought about the situation. Carson couldn’t discern much of a change, despite Alex’s promise to quit pushing them out.

“Hey,” Alex said as she breezed into to the room. She barely glanced at them as focused as she was, rummaging through the storage box under their bed.

“Where have you been?” Carson asked, working at keeping his voice even and non-
confrontational.

“Bohdan had this idea for retrofitting the Lantean-Earth System interface, and he was bouncing ideas off me when I remembered this paper I had read that is ha! Right here! Bohdan is going to love me forever!” She held the paper aloft triumphantly.

“So you're leaving?” Sateda asked flatly. He kept up the premise of reading his book, but his knuckles were white where he gripped the cover.

“Work is never done,” Alex said distractedly, flipping through the pages of the paper. Carson bit his lip to keep from saying anything he'd regret. “See you later!”

As soon as she was out the door, Sateda's book hit the wall with a resounding 'THWAK!' Carson made sure their door stayed closed for privacy so that none of the young children would witness what was coming. Carson folded his arms and looked at Sateda, trying to find something to say. He opened his mouth to speak, but the door slid open and Alex came back in.

“I'm sorry, I got excited about Bohdan's idea and lost track of the time, I forgot how much fun he could be when he gets his teeth into a problem and we start bouncing ideas off one another and...I didn't realize it was this late I really didn't mean to blow you off or work so much and I'm trying so...” She glanced between Sateda and Carson, who were both staring at her. “I'm sorry.”

Sateda banged the back of his head against the wall, the dull thunk resonating through the room. “You're something else, you know that?” The rueful smile on his face took most of the sting out his words. Alex tossed her paper over her shoulder and sashayed towards Sateda. She grabbed Carson's shirt as she went by, pulling him with her.

“I could always make it worth your while...”

****

Rodney made sure his tray hit the table top at prime velocity, in which it would make the loudest noise possible without spilling any of the food on it. He made sure his silverware clattered with obnoxious frequency, and half-dropped his glass on the table whenever he could.

“You trying to scare all the animals away again?” John asked, sliding into his customary seat beside Rodney. Their knees brushed together, and John saw Rodney blush just a little. They hadn't had a chance to talk since Neeld (dreams didn't count), but John was really looking forward to when the whole Next Gen-IOA show down was over.

Ronon snorted as he folded into his own chair and promptly started in on his meal, already eyeing Rodney's. Rodney glared at Ronon and hooked his arm around his tray, tucking it into a corner of the table and shielding it with his body from Ronon's hungry eyes and roving fork. John felt his grin going a little sappy at the adorkability of it all, so he schooled his features into something less pathetic.

“The IOA keeps barging into my lab,” Rodney grunted around bites of food. “They're distracting my scientists, and they keep hovering over people's shoulders, looking at their work and making them explain what they're doing. As if they can even understand it! They asked Zelenka's Clone to explain how gravity works! And one of them has been bribing my staff with chocolate!” Ronon took advantage of McKay's irate gesticulations to snag some of his chicken and a good chunk of dessert.

John listened to Rodney rant about the IOA and their presence in Atlantis for the rest of the meal,
content to let the cadence of Rodney's words wash over him. Truth be told, the IOA set him on edge too. He rarely saw one of the Next Gens without a suit trailing behind them, beady eyes darting over everyone, scratching notes even when John just raised his hand to wave hello.

“...and The Lord of the Rings is a better trilogy than Star Wars.”

“Uh huh,” John grunted at the appropriate pause in the conversation. His brain replayed Rodney's last sentence. “Wait, what?”

“You haven't been listening to me,” Rodney accused.

“The IOA sucks. Bohdan knows how gravity works. IOA sucks a lot, and they've been feeding your trained monkeys,” John summed up. “I bet I could get Lorne to paint you a sign that says 'Don't Feed the Animals.'” Rodney harrumphed, but John could see the sparkle of humor in his eyes.

---

O'Neill caught up with Sheppard coming out of the cafeteria.

“Colonel.”

“General.” John glanced at O'Neill from the corner of his eye, trying to figure out what the older man wanted. Or even where he was going. But the General seemed content to match pace with John, so he continued walking towards his office. John was pretty sure he was going mostly in the right direction.

“So I hear you've scheduled some practical runs on the mainland next week,” Jack said.

“Yes sir. We do them a couple of times a month with paint guns. The Marines love 'em. Especially when we have enough Air Force personnel to go head-to-head.”

Jack arched an eyebrow. “Doesn't that create tension?”

“Nah,” John said with a grin. “I just switch whichever team Ronon's on each time, because he always wins.”

“Huh.” John resolutely refused to read too much into General O'Neill's grunt. “So who's going this time around?”

“I was going to take volunteers,” John said, wondering where this was going and if he should be doing something more structured. Because he usually let Lorne take care of these things, and everyone went on a practical at least once every two months, if only to shoot a gun outside of a SNAFU mission.

“Volunteers. Like kid-sized volunteers?” John stopped in the middle of the hall, watching O'Neill's back as he continued walking a couple steps, paused, and then turned questioningly around to look at John.

“Sir, permisson—”

O'Neill huffed an irritated sigh and waved at John. “Yes, yes, free speech and whatever.” John smiled briefly at that.

“Sir, what...what do the Next Gens have to do with practicals on the mainland?”
“Oh, I dunno. I may have read some interesting reports about a few of them passing marine quals from time to time. And there may have been some grumbling about their ability to defend themselves.”

“They survived some seriously nasty murderous Aliens-things in their own reality,” John protested, like it should be obvious.

“Yes, you know that, and I know that, and the kids know that. But the IOA? The things they know could fill a very small, yet highly amusing children's book.” Jack studied Sheppard as he mulled it over, connecting the dots. “I mean, I wouldn't mind a little 'who's the greatest generation' paint ball fight.”

****

Jack shouldered his pack, checking over the straps and gear one more time before ambling into the Next Gens' ready room. They were all clustered over a topographical map, ideas and strategies flying back and forth between them.

“They'll underestimate how well we know the terrain, I promise you,” Carson said.

“It's been a while, and we don't actually know where they're going to drop us off,” Sateda countered.

“Hey kids,” O'Neill greeted jovially. “What's going on?” Their eyes snapped to him, conversation stopped cold. Jack walked up to the table and leaned over it, studying the terrain with a practiced lack of concern.

“Just gearing up for practicals, Sir,” Carson answered, his spine straightening, coming subtly to attention.

“So you are. Do we have a team name?”

“We, Sir?” Alex asked with a suppressed smile. Jack glanced up at her, but read no distrust or reticence, just a general good humor and knowing amusement.

“We, us...the team.”

“Ah, we're Team Clam, General,” Carson told him.

“Team...Clam?” Jack asked, eyebrow arched. Alex choked back a laugh, trying to keep her expression stoic, because there was no way any of them were explaining where THAT name came from. Danni, already psyched that she was invited to come along on the mission, wasn't so subtle, a full giggle making it out before she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Yessir,” Carson answered seriously, though there was a smile struggling to break free.

“Team Clam,” Jack repeated dubiously. More giggles broke free. There was a story there, one he'd have to find out about later. Jack studied them for a moment before shrugging and shifting his paint gun to the other side. “Alright then. What's our game plan?”

****

Jack wasn't impressed often. It came from an unfortunate combination of knowing Teal'c for too long and saving the world in increasingly impossibly ways roughly once a year—the Goa'uld didn't understand the concept of 'retirement.'
But he had to hand it to these kids—they were good. They moved in tandem, reading each other easily. He could tell they'd grown up together, trained together, learned together by the way they moved and interacted. They assessed situations quickly, working as if they had one mind. Jack was more of a hindrance to them, despite his experience. Though they did at least pretend to listen to his suggestions, which was nice.

All in all, Sheppard's team didn't stand a chance. Ronon and Teyla had been sidelined for this run, so they were up against Sheppard, Lorne, and four of their handpicked soldiers. The IOA had politely requested O'Neill join the kids' side so he could give an accurate reporting of their abilities. Jack thought the fact that they used Sheppard's team as target practice was a pretty good indicator. As far as he was concerned, the kids could stay on Atlantis to their heart's content. They were better equipped to survive here than half the recruits they sent.

Unfortunately, he didn't think the IOA would be as easy to convince.

****

“Oh my God, they hate us!” Danni despaired. The older Next Gens were having their daily debrief in Terhaan and Bohdan's room, all of them sprawled over one another in the cramped quarters. Hands brushed Danni's legs in greeting as she picked her way across tangled limbs, settling down with her head on Bohdan's lap and her feet propped against Alex.

“Who'd you have today?” Carson asked.

“The Russian guy? With the fluffy eyebrows and that pinched, constipated look.”

“Ohmigad, he's worse that that French chick who looks perpetually startled!” Trisha said.

“Seriously, he hates us—he kept frowning and taking notes while I restocked the cabinets. He really didn't like it when I stitched up one of the marines,” Danni reported.

“Oh yeah, I had him yesterday,” Alex said tiredly, rubbing her hands across her face. She'd been unable to sleep well for the past week, worrying about the IOA committee and what they thought. She'd been trying to take Carson and Sateda's lessons to heart: she was not personally responsible for the entire group, they each had to pull their own weight and no matter how much she worried, she couldn't actually do anything.

“The Spanish lady is nice,” Sarah said softly. Sarah was twelve, still too young to be part of the inner circle, but too old not to want to be involved. She hadn't been told of Señora Flores' connection to Adan. They were lucky that they could solidly count on the Señora's support, Adan notwithstanding.

“Yeah, she's pretty awesome,” Carson agreed, pulling Sarah's ponytail.

“What about the others?” Terhaan asked. They'd been keeping track of the questions they were asked, the general attitude towards them, how each of the members behaved. So far, they were coming out on the losing end. Both of the Russians blatantly disliked them. One of the French representatives played it close to the vest, and they were all convinced the second was quietly insane.

The Canadian guy gave off a super sketchy vibe, and the older kids were running what interference they could to keep him away from the really young children, like Scott and Garreth. The others seemed genuinely curious about the kids, asking valid questions and staying out of the way whenever possible.
Which just left O'Neill.

Alex and Terhaan were convinced that he was on their side. He seemed pretty pleased with the practical run on the mainland, and watched the younger children play with a paternal air of amusement. Kayla and Carson remained unconvinced; they'd grown up with stories about Jack O'Neill and SG-1. He was a master of subterfuge and misdirection, not a man given to easy praise or friendship.

“Speculation, at this point, would be unhealthy,” Kayla, ever the voice of reason, said. They'd done what they could to influence the committee's decision. All that was left was to enjoy what time they could and make peace with the people they'd come to love.

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“Why are you dragging me out here, Sheppard?” Rodney groused. John had shown up in his lab and dragged him off like a caveman. Once Rodney had deduced it wasn't to take care of this thing simmering between them—and really, Rodney didn't care at this point, he was willing to have sex on the floor of his lab—he'd lost all interest in hiking clear across the city.

John rolled his eyes and tugged Rodney down the hallway towards his balcony. Alex spent the better part of her nights on it these days, insomnia exacerbated by worry over the IOA. Why he'd had the desire to invite Rodney with him tonight, John couldn't say, other than it felt right.

“We're here,” John broke in. Alex sat on the balcony, gazing down into the sea, her legs threaded through the safety railing.

“We come bearing gifts,” John called. Alex turned, surprised to see Rodney there. Rodney, who had caught on to the easy ritual of the balcony and the understanding that existed between John and Alex, hung back. He shifted, glancing between them, trying to figure out where he fit in and why John had invited him here.

“Pull up an ass, Rodney,” Alex invited, accepting the beer from John. “Oooo, Heineken. Hey, big spender.” John grinned and settled on Alex’s right. After a moment, Rodney sat down beside John, trying to figure out what the point of it all was. John handed him a beer, which Rodney was pleasantly surprised to discover was a Molson's.

Whatever weird tradition John and Alex had going on included not talking until after the first drink was done. Alex and John drank like their beers were the last alcoholic beverages in the world, savoring the flavor, and Rodney was ready to kill them by the time John reached in his bag for round two.

“How’s everyone doing?” John asked. With a flash of inspiration, Rodney realized this was how John knew so much inside info about the kids. He had a mole in their midst, which was completely unfair when the rest of them had to work on guess work alone.

“Not good,” Alex replied shortly.

“Did you drag me out here to play Dr. Phil?” Rodney demanded. He expected the usual irritation at his lack of tact, but both John and Alex were grinning at him fondly. Disgruntled didn't work overly well when the people it was directed at only saw it as cute or endearing.

“Nah, he brought you out here to ply you with alcohol and take advantage. I'm here to lull you into a false sense of security.” Rodney and John both choked on their drinks, and Alex mentally patted
herself on the back. She wondered if they'd ever get it on their own. They looked at one another with such intensity; how could they NOT recognize answering passion? Alex shrugged off her melancholy, starting a heated debate about the dubious 'merits' of Episodes I-III, letting the familiar banter drive away thoughts of the IOA, the future, and stupidly clever men who couldn't be trusted to lead their own lives without help. Seriously, it was just about time to bring out the Big Guns. She just had to figure out what those were.

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Elizabeth sat stiffly in her seat, John to her right and Rodney to her left. Major Lorne sat beside Sheppard, and Heightmeyer nervously scratched notes onto her pad. On one side of the round table sat the Next Gens. Alex sat calmly at their center, Sateda, Carson, Teyla, Terhaan and Bohdan flanking her. Across from them was the IOA committee, their pressed suits out of place with everyone else wearing Atlantis uniforms. The only one who looked like he belonged was O'Neill, who looked utterly bored.

The room was somber, no chatter or laughter to ease the tension.

“Well, I suppose we should get started,” Woolsey said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. He shuffled his papers and cleared his throat. “I don't think I need to revisit why we're here. We as a committee have been commissioned by the International Oversight Advisory to review the rather unusual situation Atlantis has found herself in; as such, we have been entrusted with deciding whether or not the refugees can stay.

“We've reviewed all of the information we have about you. You've done some incredible things here. Both Dr. Keller and Colonel Sheppard credit you directly with saving Dr. Zelenka and forging a strong alliance with the Neeld. Dr. McKay says you've helped advance the understanding and operation of key Ancient devices and systems. And apparently, your presence on Atlantis gives it a certain amount of influence over the rest of Pegasus.

“However, we have a hard time reconciling your willingness to help and stay with some of your actions. Namely keeping three ZPMs hidden from us. No matter how noble your intentions, those were not the actions of allies. We also have concerns with the development of your youngest members. Atlantis is an isolated place; there aren't many young people around for them to get to know, peers their own age. Visits with Atlantis's allies are not enough to ensure a positive course of development.

“All of that considered, we cannot deny your affinity towards Atlantis. We've watched you with her people and in her halls. Señora Flores has watched you with one another. There is no doubt in our minds that you are the Children of Atlantis. In three months, you have changed and shaped this place, left an indelible mark on the city and her people. The long term goals of the IOA have always been to make Atlantis a colony if feasible, and with your presence here, that goal appears more promising than ever.

“It is with only mild reservation that we grant you a year's probation to remain on Atlantis, at which time we will reevaluate your continued presence.”

There was a brief pause before the room broke into excited babble. Carson stood up with a loud whoop and kissed Kayla full on the mouth with exuberant jubilation. Sateda had a wide, smug smile on his face. Bohdan pounced on Terhaan, still seated in his rolling chair; neither one of them trying to control it when it crashed into the wall, both men suitably preoccupied. Alex had her head buried in her arms, shoulders shaking, but John wasn't worried.

John took in the room with a wide, silly grin plastered on his face. Suddenly, he had an armful of
Rodney McKay hugging him exuberantly. John wrapped his arms around Rodney, returning the hug. He had a count down going in his head for how long a respectable man-hug should last, but when he shifted to move away, Rodney didn't seem inclined to let go. So, after a brief not-too-difficult battle with his better judgment, he pulled Rodney in closer.

“That is not the hug of a consummated relationship,” Sateda whispered in Alex's ear.

“Shut up,” Alex said happily, watching the two men out of the corner of their eye. “I'm working on it.”

“We should make sure they don't get out,” Sateda mused. Alex's head swiveled so she could see him fully.

“What?” Sateda grinned and moved, years of combat and martial arts training at his disposal. He knocked her knees out from under her, wrapped one arm around her waist and tangled a hand in her hair, and dipped her. Her hands came up of their own accord, twining through his hair. He planted the biggest, sloppiest kiss he could on her laughing mouth, romance-novel style. He could hear the jeers and cat calls of his friends all around them, but that was par for the course. When they came up for air, every pair of eyes—except two—were on them. Sateda set a dazed Alex back on her feet and, with a smug grin, repeated the process with Carson. THAT got the undivided attention of every single IOA member in the room. O'Neill watched the two boys kiss with a sort of removed indulgence. He appreciated the lengths they were going to give John and Rodney their moment, even though the, ah, sentiments weren't exactly faked. He'd have to have a talk with the Lieutenant Colonel about proper displays of affection vis-à-vis SGC scientists. If they ever got around to...anything.

Carson and Sateda finally pulled out of their kiss just as Rodney and John pulled back to the real world. The tips of Sheppard's ears were bright red, and Rodney looked like he wanted to blurt out something extremely inappropriate for the current venue.

“So where's the party?” O'Neill asked.

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An officially unofficial party broke out on the East Pier when the committee's decision was announced. Not so much announced as Chuck had been eavesdropping outside the door, heard the excited whoops of success and announced the decision to the gateroom at large. Word had spread like wildfire after that and Zelenka, new skin shiny pink (and with only half a head of hair), started pulling out his stock of hooch.

The IOA committee received a much warmer send-off than their chilly reception. Atlantis was happy to have them go, and O'Neill counted himself in that group as he waved goodbye to Woolsey.

“So. How's the kid?” he asked Señora Flores. Officially, she was staying behind to ensure all the requisite paperwork declaring the children citizens of earth was taken care of. Wary of Jack, no doubt having been briefed by the IOA in regards to his sense of humor as they liked to call it, she regarded him with careful consideration.

“Which, there are several?” she obfuscated.

“Yes, there are. Take your pick.” Jack started maneuvering them towards the designated party area.

“I believe they are quite pleased with our decision.” Jack nodded thoughtfully.
“You know,” he said, pausing at the end of the ancient hall, “it might behoove the IOA and the SGC to keep an eye on these kids. They're awfully smart. I might have to suggest the IOA create a position here on Atlantis. We'll call it 'Kid Wrangler' or something like that. Know anyone who might want the job?” Jessica stared at the General, brain trying to come to terms with what he'd just suggested. “No? Think about it, get back to me in the morning.” Jack disappeared into the crowd.

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“There's a no pouting rule in effect, you know that right?” Alex asked, slinking up beside Rodney. She handed him a glass of Zelenka's best hooch. “And in the shadows, you look like a brooding thirteen year-old girl.” Rodney scowled at the annoying young woman but accepted the alcohol.

“Shouldn't you be sharing obscenely dramatic kisses with your lovers?” Rodney asked. Alex laughed and nudged the disgruntled scientist's shoulder with her own.

“Don't be surly, Rodney. One day your prince will come.” She leaned closer. “Though I gotta tell you, having two rocks.”

“Too much information! Too much information!” Rodney cried. Alex grinned knowingly into her cup. Something occurred to Rodney just then, and he turned to Alex. “What do you know?”

“I'm sorry?” Rodney wasn't taken in by her faux innocence.

“You and your little friends keep talking about the future and changing things and what you know about us. So what happened to me? Who'd I end up with?” Rodney brightened, snapping his fingers excitedly. “Did Samantha Carter finally realize the true extent of my brilliance and fall madly in love with me?”

“Wrong Lieutenant Colonel,” Alex muttered under her breath.

“What?” Rodney asked sharply.

“What?” Alex returned innocently.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing. But hey, since you like me and we're friends now, we should totally have a sleepover to talk about this more. We can pop in Steel Magnolias and talk about our love lives. OH! I just got this stunning nail polish that would go perfect with your complexion—”

“I hate you,” Rodney grumbled. “Fine, don't tell me.”

“Have you thought about a make over?”

“I'm going to find more alcohol.”

“I'll hold your hair back if you need it, friend!” Alex called after him, snickering. She turned back to the darkened ocean and let her mind wander, granting herself a few worry-free moments as a well earned reward.
“So Sateda and Bohdan are running through the halls naked, Terhaan is trying to find Mike since he stole their clothes, and Kayla's trying to run interference because there's this huge multi-national leadership group in to see the fabled 'Lost City,' and Sateda walks right into them.” Elizabeth laughed so hard tears leaked out the corners of her eyes, and John had been grinning so much his jaw was starting to hurt. He casually extended his hand behind Rodney's chair. They had a chess date tonight. Finally. Bohdan had his head buried in his hands and wouldn't come out. “It was fantastic! We talked about that one for years,” Alex said fondly, squeezing Sateda's thigh.

“Yes, and I appreciate it every time,” Bohdan grumbled. Terhaan rubbed his boyfriend's back soothingly. In the wake of the IOA's decision, everyone felt loose and a general good humor permeated the group.

“I've got chocolate chip cookies straight out of the oven,” someone announced. The table let out a cheer. Eager hands snatched the cookies before they made it to the table, the gooey melted chocolate coating sticky fingers and hungry mouths. “For anyone that wants them, we have sugar, lemon, and snicker doodles too.”

Alex stole a bit of Sateda's cookie, ignoring her boyfriend's warning growl. She made a big show of licking up all the crumbs off her lips.

“Mean,” Sateda grunted, his fingers curling around Carson's shoulder as her tongue peaked out, slow and provocative. Sateda narrowed his eyes, but Alex simply grinned unrepentantly and licked her lips again. Which were tingling oddly. She frowned and smacked her lips.

Ignoring the kiddies, Rodney reached for a cookie, but was distracted by the sight of John's tongue darting out to lick melted bits of chocolate off his fingers. One by one. That just wasn't playing fair, and Rodney's libido revved up in anticipation, images of John's tongue traveling over his body, of harem pants and dark robes short circuiting his brain. John finished his torture and grinned smugly, nudging the tray of cookies towards Rodney. Bastard.

“So what happened with the ambassadors?” John asked. He frowned a little when the expected answer didn't come. “Alex?” Alex's head was down, her long brown hair tumbling in front of her face. Rodney reached for the tray; Alex's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist, her grip weak and loose.

“What the hell?” Alex jerked her head up, and Rodney tried to reconcile what he was seeing with the flash of memory that temporarily paralyzed him. “Oh fuck.”

“What's wrong?” John asked, adrenalin pumping through his veins—an instinctive reaction to Rodney's 'we're screwed' voice. Alex's eyes were wide and panicked. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. It took John a minute to realize no air was going in. The area around her mouth began to swell and her lips started turning blue.

“I need an EpiPen!” Sateda yelled, knocking his chair over as he stood. He picked Alex up and laid her on the floor, tilting her head back to try and clear her airway. Rodney watched in horror as Alex's eyes rolled to the back of her head, in the throes of a severe anaphylactic reaction. Ridiculously, he registered Sheppard pressing an EpiPen into Sateda's hand; his most coherent thought was Sheppard carries those around. Sateda administered the shot, but Alex started convulsing, her breath barely a rasp in her throat.
“We gotta get her to medical,” Sheppard said. “Rodney, hold her head.” Rodney snapped into action at John's terse instruction, his paralysis shattering. Sateda and Sheppard picked the convulsing woman off the ground, Rodney keeping her head straight and steady.

Rodney was vaguely aware of people clearing the way for them, their feet traveling to the transporter and the med center without conscious thought. Someone had had the foresight to radio their arrival, and a gurney was set up and waiting. Dr. Biro and a battalion of nurses at the ready. They laid Alex on the cot, the blue tinge spreading to her fingertips and her body shaking, which Rodney knew from personal experience was Very Bad.

“Start a line and get me some epinephrine STAT, and get an oxygen mask on her,” Biro ordered, checking Alex's eyes for responsiveness. “What's she been given?”

“Standard EpiPen,” John replied tersely.

“Is she allergic to anything?”

“I don't know,” John said, “Keller—”

“Off world with the Athosians,” Biro snapped out.

“Whatever he's allergic to,” Sateda said, pointing at Rodney. Biro glared at the young man.

“You can't use someone else's—”

“They're the same!” Sateda snarled, and Biro stopped writing to stare. She jerked back into movement when Sateda snapped at her.

“Someone get me McKay's chart!” Biro bellowed, and the mass of organized chaos swept further into the infirmary. John, Rodney, Sateda, and their entourage were left standing uselessly in the doorway.

“Why did she want my chart?” Rodney asked dimly, his eyes still trained where Alex had disappeared behind a treatment curtain. Sateda rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath, turning into Carson who'd been hovering at his back. Carson led him over to the waiting chairs, which they both fell into.

“Why would they use my chart? I have very specialized allergies, and it's not like I could help, and I haven't pioneered any advances in treating anaphylactic shock. Then again, I haven't really applied myself to the area, which could be seen as a fairly self-destructive oversight on my part and —”

“Rodney,” John said sympathetically, rubbing Rodney's back. “It's OK, buddy, she's going to be fine.”

“If she's that allergic, she should know better,” Rodney persisted. “It's not exactly fun to die of anaphylaxis. It's number three on my ways not to die, and if you saw the other things on that list, you'd understand just how much it sucks.”

“She's going to be...you number the ways you don't want to die?”

Rodney frowned, though his eyes didn't lose that far-away look. “Well yeah. Don't you?”

“Uh...” John trailed off.
“That's OK, I made a list for you,” Rodney rambled. “You can use it. It's a good list.”

“That's great, Rodney,” John said, feeling pleased despite the morbid nature of Rodney's gesture.

They all lapsed into silence, Carson's soothing murmurs the only thing audible over the bustle of the infirmary. Sateda looked like he was barely in control, jumping at every sound and breathing hard.

“Why would we have the same allergies?” Rodney asked faintly. John could feel the fine trembling in Rodney's muscles. “We shouldn't--”

“It's genetic, McKay, so shut the fuck up already!” Sateda exploded, standing up to tower over Rodney, hands balled into fists. “YOU gave them to her.” It came out accusatory and angry. Carson quickly put himself between Sateda and Rodney, pressing his forehead to Sateda's and murmuring soothing words despite the way his own hands trembled. Sateda was close to snapping, and this day did not need to get any worse.

“What...what do you mean MINE?” Rodney demanded, his voice trembling with the fine edge of hysteria. “She's not mine! She's Sheppard's! She's got Sheppard's nose and that annoying, impossible slouch and his freakish elf-ears! How can she be mine?”

John was looking at Rodney oddly, like Rodney had suddenly lost his genius or spontaneously grown a full head of hair.

“What are you talking about, Rodney? She's got your eyes, is almost too smart for her own good, and appears to be deathly allergic to common food groups. Your scientists have taken to making her proof read their work before they turn it into you. How can she NOT be yours?” Rodney looked poleaxed.

“She proof reads their work? I was wondering what explained the sudden decrease in stupidity. My best guess was an unreported Ancient device or an undisclosed breakthrough in decoding the database.”

Because he was watching, John saw the moment Rodney got it. In a parody of Alex's attack, Rodney's blue eyes went wide with panic and he started wheezing. John grabbed his arm and guided him to a chair, forcing Rodney's head between his knees.

“Alright buddy, just breathe.” Rodney doubled over, putting his head between his legs. Elizabeth sat down next to him, rubbing his back soothingly; John ached to do that himself. Once he'd calmed down a little, Rodney pulled himself upright, face red, and pointed a finger accusingly at John.

“But she's yours!” Rodney's eyes were still wild. “I saw it! I analyzed...and the conclusion...I wrote a proof! I'm not wrong!” John smiled ruefully and shook his head. How Rodney could've thought Alex was his when she was so clearly Rodney's was beyond him.

“Think the evidence says you are, McKay.” When Rodney stopped shaking and was breathing normally, John stepped back and crossed his arms to put something physical distance between them; he was feeling raw and vulnerable and he hated being here. Hated having this conversation with Rodney and facing the implications.

“No, I'm not, because...she's all you! She's got that stupid grin that makes people want to do whatever she asks! She uses it on Kavanaugh and he's actually a marginally decent human being when she's around. And her ears.” Rodney pointed at John triumphantly. “No one else has pointy, inhuman triangles for ears! How do you explain THAT?” John shook his head again; Rodney was clearly delusional, but before he could protest Carson stood up and glared at them both.
“You're both idiots,” Carson snarled. “She's both of yours, now will you please go away? Our girlfriend is currently dying, so Sateda and I have more pressing matters than listening to you two play who's her daddy!”

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John and Rodney were on watch when Alex finally woke up. They'd rock-paper-scissored Carson and Sateda for the right, lost five times in a row, so John had pulled rank on both of them and sent them home to sleep.

Rodney's chair was about as far from John's as it could get. They hadn't talked about It. Her. Because, in a universe far, far away he and Rodney had raised a kid. A pretty cool, kind of awesome kid who had her priorities straight when it came to the greatness of *Star Wars* and *Back to the Future*.

Together.

As in John-and-Rodney together. It was...completely unexpected, and John wished he had listened more attentively to the few times Alex had mentioned her parents.

John caught Rodney sneaking a glance at him, and their gazes caught for a moment before Rodney looked away again. He cleared his throat to say something, but the words got stuck. He leaned forward and laid his hand on the bed, millimeters from Rodney's.

Alex groaned and her eyes opened. Rodney was out of his chair and hovering over her like a concerned mother hen. John smiled at Rodney all flustered and anxious. He ducked behind the curtain and called for a doctor. He was grateful when Keller herself showed up, sleep rumpled but alert.

He and Rodney were chased out after that, but not before Alex offered them a weak, thankful smile. Her throat was too raw and swollen to make any sound, but she had caught Rodney's hand and given it a weak squeeze.

John ignored the lump in his throat until it went away.

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They carefully avoided one another for the next four days, but neither of them were unaware of the whispers and looks that followed them through the halls. John had stumbled across a city-wide e-mail chain about Alex and her alleged parentage. He'd forwarded it to Rodney. Soon after, anyone who so much as mentioned her name in an e-mail ended up with a fried hard drive and no hot water.

He couldn't think. Not about this. His thoughts just chased themselves in circles, because Alex had always ended with Rodney, and John had never been a part of the equation. He found himself on the balcony he'd started thinking of more than just his.

Christ, he had a not-kid.

Footsteps approached and hovered at the threshold. He fought the instinct to tense up and slid a veneer of calm over his thoughts.

“Hey.” Sateda stepped beside him, keeping his distance.

“Sateda.” John glanced at him sideways.
“How is...everything?” Sateda asked uncertainly. John's eyebrows jumped into his hairline. “Yeah, I figured. Carson's beating himself up over the whole mess. Alex threw a spork at us when she found out.” Sateda glanced down at the Ancient metal beneath their feet, uncomfortable with the silence but unwilling to break it.

“What were we like?” John asked.

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Carson surveyed Dr. McKay and frowned. He looked like Jack Nicholson at the end of *The Shining*. Awesome. Carson hovered uncertainly, trying to figure out the best way to approach Rodney.

“What do you want?” Rodney snapped, glancing up from his keyboard. “I'm very busy and you're irritating me with your loitering.”

“To apologize,” Carson said, refusing to be ruffled by McKay's contentious exterior. “We shouldn't have told you. And not like that.” Rodney remained silent, staring at the screensaver on his laptop.

“Alright,” Rodney said, and went back to typing. Carson blinked. ...that was it? He frowned, because no. He wouldn't let Rodney leave it at that.

“She built a naquadah bomb for her fifth grade science project,” Carson volunteered. Rodney stopped typing. “Non-working model.” Rodney turned his head slightly towards Carson.

“Did she win?” he asked after a long moment.

“Nope. We didn't have awards because some parents were concerned about how their kids might feel if they didn't win.”

“That's preposterous and a false representation of how the world works,” Rodney said contemptuously.

“Didn't really matter since I'm pretty sure you built most of the bomb, and that's totally against the rules. But she was thrilled that you spent almost a week locked in a room with her and wouldn't let anyone else in. Not even Sheppard. Just Rodney and Alex and their Super Secret Science Fair Project. She even made a sign for the door.” Rodney swallowed, trying to imagine that sort of connection with someone. “You were a good dad, in our universe. I think you'd be a good one here too. I just...wanted you to know that.”

“Did I at least explain the theory of the bomb to her?” Rodney finally asked. Carson grinned and settled into a chair.

“You crammed about as much science and math knowledge into her head as you could, from the day she was conceived. You rigged up a sound system near the incubators so you could pipe classical music into the room.”

“Classical music is scientifically proven to stimulate mathematical abilities,” Rodney said defensively.

“Yeah,” Carson said with a grin. “So you always said.”

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On day four, when Keller had given Alex permission to speak, Rodney and John ended up back in
their respective chairs. Carson and Sateda had fled as soon as John's shadow fell over the curtain.

Alex looked between them. “Hey,” she whispered, voice strained.

John opened his mouth, but it snapped closed. What was he supposed to say, “Hey, so, you're our kid and we'd kind of like to know the details on that one”?

“How are you still alive?” Rodney wondered. Alex started laughing, a weak sound that ended in a coughing fit.

“Well...the people on Atlantis helped,” she rasped.

“So you're...really...” John swallowed, unable to fully finish that sentence. He stared at her, trying to see himself in her face after only seeing Rodney for so long.

“50% Sheppard, 50% McKay, which makes me 100% awesome!” she said with choked laugh. So she might be on a few of the happy drugs, and a little humor never hurt anyone.

“How long have you been holding that one in?” John asked with wry amusement.

Alex pointed her finger at him accusingly. “You said it first.”

“That sounds like something he'd say,” Rodney agreed. The conversation lulled, listing into awkward waters.

Rodney suddenly jumped up in horror. “You don't like coffee!” John rolled his eyes, but Alex blushed.

“Yeah, I know. It's my greatest flaw,” she mumbled. She perked up and fixed Rodney with an ingratiating smile. “But I brew an awesome pot!” Rodney folded his arms and considered that.

“I don't suppose there's anything else you'd like to come clean about?” John asked. “More ZPM caches? Carson's actually a descended Ancient? A little brother or sister running around there? Your own kid?” John steeled himself when her eyes darted off to one side, the classic McKay sign for 'I have a secret I'm hiding very, very poorly.'

“I wasn't going to tell you this, but I'm out of ideas and you're both idiots. So, in the interest of full disclosure, those really vivid dreams you've been having? Starring one another? Not normal dreams. I hooked you up to an Ancient device and you've both been having them. Whatever the two of you have talking about or in your dreams for the last three months? It's been real. Discuss.”

John looked at Rodney in astonishment.

Rodney looked at John, feeling the heat rise in his face at how uninhibited and open he'd been in those dreams, how many kinks and fantasies he'd given up. No way, not possible. She was totally fucking with them—

“A priest, Rodney?” Rodney gaped at John, his face burning brighter. John took a tentative step closer, arousal singing through his veins, the years of want and lust struggling to break free. “That's a helluva kink.”

“What? How do you know that was ME? That could have been all you. I knew you were a pervert, the hair gave you away. Seriously, why me?” Rodney demanded, though it lacked his usual rancor. Rodney shied away from him, pink tongue sneaking out to lick his lips, leaving Rodney's lower lip shiny and wet.
“Not MY kink,” John responded, a slow smile stretching across his face. Because if the dreams were real, then they'd already had The Talk (“You like me!” 'I do.' ‘I like you too.’ ‘I know.’ “Does this mean we can have sex now?” 'Christ, I thought you'd never ask!”) which meant they could jump right into the fun part (which, honestly, they probably would have done anyways). Rodney ran into the wall behind Alex's bed, and John's last step brought him into Rodney's personal space. John wiggled his eyebrows at Rodney and jerked his head a little towards Alex, mischief in his eyes. It took Rodney a second before he got it, his eyes darting to Alex and lips curling into a smile. Rodney nodded slightly, trying to keep his face as neutral as possible.

“You don't know it was me!” Rodney's eyes fixed on John's lips.

“You turned Ancient couples therapy into a sex toy?!” Alex exclaimed, horrified. “And, uh, since you had the bracelet, ah, Rodney, you controlled the settings and, um, scenarios.” Alex couldn't help the a silly grin as they started at each other, even though she was extremely traumatized. She could practically hear the romantic music playing underneath their slow walk, unrequited love realized after building for so many years. She started humming a barely recognizable rendition Wind beneath my Wings; the quality was marred by the fact that her vocal chords were still pretty shot and she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket.

Rodney shot her a withering look. “You're the worst child ever.”

“Um, this is the second time I've gotten you two together,” she felt obliged to point out.

“We're not together,” John pointed out. He leaned forward, hovering millimeters above Rodney's lips, breath ghosting over the sensitive skin. Rodney let out a strangled sound of impatience and pulled John to him, licking at the seam of John's lips, demanding the right to taste. John opened obligingly, one of his hands settling on Rodney's waist, the other drifting down to cup his ass. Rodney's hands were fisted in John's shirt, trying to drag him as close as possible.

Alex savored a job well done for a moment before averting her gaze. She was all for the parental lovin', but she had her limits. She stole another peek. They were still kissing, surprisingly chaste, and she was kind of grateful about that. Seriously, they were still only human, and they needed to come up for air sometime. Soon. Within the next minute or so. Maybe.

“Um...guys?” she squeaked. John's hand disappeared under Rodney's shirt, and she could have gone the rest of her life without hearing...that. “OH MY GOD, scarred for life!” she declared loudly. Rodney was now sagging against the wall, his hands clutching spasmodically at John's back.

The detached, that's-not-my-parents-making-out part of Alex was pleased that John and Rodney trusted her to witness the beginning of their relationship, to see them both so lost in one another. It was sweet. To a point. Because the that's-my-parents-making-out part would really, really like them to stop now.

“Really, guys? I hate to break up the love fest over there, but...seriously? Please? Can we just...take it to your room or the lab or something? No? OK.” Alex picked up the cup on her tray and chucked it, hitting John smack in the back of the head.

He pulled himself from Rodney's lips, dazed.

“Hi there,” she said with a wide, false grin. John scowled, and Rodney tried to pull him back into the kiss. “Whoa no! You just put...everything away until you're in private, OK? Because I'm open and happy for you but it's still...you know?” There was an undercurrent of desperate panic to Alex’s raw voice. With a smirk, John stepped away from Rodney, who also looked superior and smug.
She glanced between the two, suspicion blooming in her chest.

“Wait...were you two messing with me?” she asked. John's grin widened.

“We figured it out on Neeld,” John said, shoulder brushing against Rodney.

“Pay back's a bitch,” Rodney informed her smugly, bumping John back.

“That's just...you can't just DO that!” They were both grinning like loons, and Alex couldn't help but respond in kind. It felt good to have them know, and that everything was alright. But there was one thing she wanted to address. “So I wanted to talk to you about something kind of sensitive.” John straightened, and Rodney's smile dimmed. “It's not bad—well, it is, though more wrong than bad, but it affects you and...”

“You mean...” John gestured to his BDUs.

“Yes, that. That's exactly what I wanted to talk about.”

“How in the world did you think she wasn't yours?” Rodney asked incredulously. “You don't actually have a language for talking to each other, she just says something obtuse and intentionally cryptic and you understand.”

“She's talking about Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Rodney,” John sighed. “YOU know that!”

“Again, can we save the foreplay for later?” Alex groaned. “What I wanted to tell you was that Don't Ask Don't Tell should only be in effect for another four years or so. Give or take. If your timeline follows pretty close to ours, which it seems to be doing.”

“So you mean...” Rodney paused to consider that tid bit, and wondered why Alex was telling them.

“In our universe, you had me. You were actually encouraged to move in together, and the close quarters got you together the first time around. You don't have that here, and it was hard for you those first years with DADT, so...I'm trying to give you a heads up. Though, if you want, I can take you to the room with the incubation chambers. Maybe get a little brother or sister out of the deal,” she said slyly. Alex started laughing at the looks on their faces, a deep, awkward guffaw that had hints of John's muppet bray in it. She laughed so hard she sent her recovering lungs into another coughing jag, choking on her own humor. John quickly settled an oxygen mask over her face, wary of the giggles she let loose in between fits.

“Those are your genes in action,” Rodney informed John primly, nose turned up at the laughing girl. John scowled and elbowed Rodney's ribs in retaliation.

“Dude, you should've seen your faces!” Alex gasped when she'd calmed down. “I guess that's a no on the sibling?”

“I think it's a little early to talk about children,” John said nervously, his hands spread placatingly in front of him.

Rodney's face paled and his blue eyes widened. “Children?” he squeaked. Alex started laughing again, but she got it under control quickly.

“Sorry, totally kidding. I'm well aware that neither of you would have volunteered to have a kid if I
hadn't been a complete and utter fluke of Ancient device-touching!” Something paternal deep inside John protested what she'd said, but Alex forestalled John's angry retort with a dismissive wave. “No, you loved me tons. Were great parents. But I was like...the result of the one-night stand you never had. I know both of you, and you're not the 'lets make a baby' type of people. We've all been going back and forth on warning you about the room because several of us were born that way. Even though second-me isn't going to happen here.”

“What makes you think it won't happen now?” Rodney asked. Alex's eyebrows rose, and she fixed Rodney with a version of his own 'You're an Idiot, let me tell you How' look.

“Well, when two men share a 'special embrace,' it's a little different from when a man and a woman do it.”

“She's got YOUR sense of humor,” Rodney observed darkly, scowling at John.

“I figure now that you know about me, and how I was conceived, you're not likely to make the same mistake twice.”

As the silence in the room stretched out, Alex stared at them both like they'd lost their minds. “You mean you're actually going to talk about children? Like...your own?”

“Well why wouldn't we? Apparently we had you, and I'm told you're a fairly well-raised, balanced individual for the most part,” Rodney said haughtily.

“Yeah, you know, I think it could be fun,” John agreed. Alex's gaze flicked between them, trying to figure out if they were serious.

“Seriously?” she asked. Rodney crossed his arms and scowled at her. “No joke? Because really, if you wanna do it, that's awesome, I'm totally down for a little sister or something. If that's what you want. Because, uh....really?”

“Nah,” John said with a grin.

“Son of a...” John and Rodney grinned triumphantly at one another. They lapsed into silence, enjoying the feeling of fulfillment and rightness.

“So, uh...where do we go now?” John wondered. Alex shrugged, and John could see them both in her: Rodney's eyes framed by his cheekbones, a balance he'd never thought would work but...

“Wherever we want.”
Epilogue

John slouched further in his rocking chair, a gentle breeze lifting off the ocean and ruffling his hair. A warm, stout hand slipped into his, and he smiled, loosely twining their fingers together. A thumb brushed against the newly placed gold band on his ring finger. To his right, Alex let out a pleased groan as she settled into her own chair, feet propped up on the railing in front of her. She would stay on Atlantis for a while before venturing out into Pegasus again.

Carson and Sateda had carved the chairs themselves, country-style rockers with deep seats, built specifically for each of them. Wedding presents for John and Rodney. Just thinking about it raised John's heartbeat and sent waves of tension and apprehension through him.

“Oh for God's sake, we're already married!” Rodney griped, though he squeezed John's hand gently in understanding. Three years after the repeal of DADT, two since gay marriage was declared an unalienable right for those who wanted it, but John couldn't help years of conditioning.

“Maybe that fact has finally hit him, and he's realized what he's done?” a sugar-sweet voice suggested.

“You have half of my genes,” Rodney reminded Alex with vicious satisfaction. “And you're passing them on to another generation, so HA!”

Alex sighed and glanced down at her swollen stomach, patting it with apologetic tenderness. “It's OK, babies. You didn't choose this. Mommy will just have to make sure you have the internal fortitude to overcome any residual McKay-ness.”

John rolled his eyes at the antics of his family.
Extras/Deleted Scenes

Deleted Scenes
Keep in mind these were deleted (or left unfinished) for a reason! A lot of them are 'sketches,' i.e. I spell out what I'm trying to accomplish instead of threading it through the scene. But I figured they might be fun for you to read. My betas haven't even seen most of these, so there's that to consider as well.

Balcony 1
Just establishing how well they came to know each other, but I couldn't figure out where in the story flow to put it so...

He's lost three marines to a fucking group of Wraith worshippers. They'd barely managed to get to the last man, bleeding out on the ground of an alien sun.

She leaves out a blanket, a cushion, and jerry-rigged sound system playing Johnny Cash, the mournful tones of the Man in Black going along with his mood.

Balcony 2
After Alex reveals the ZPMs they're hiding, she and John have a showdown, but...yeah, didn't go anywhere.

“ZPMs are just...things. They're not important.”

“Of course they are!”
John Contemplating Alex
This wasn't even in a draft; I wrote this as an exercise to establish Alex in John's eyes and explore how they might interact. Though it would be interesting to dance around the issue of parents who didn't say yes. (John and Rodney didn't respond one way or the other--they just both assumed no.) Forgot about it soon after I wrote it.

Something about her made John jumpy. She was like Teyla, but with a quirky sort of personality. She could hold her own with Rodney and get away with mocking him because somehow when she insulted you you just felt inordinately pleased that she'd gone through the effort and noticed you. People seemed to just...like her in a 'we've know each other for YEARS' kind of way. She was...competent. Almost unbearably so. No one that young should be that competent. Rodney had been beside himself the first time she'd worked a day in the lab. People liked her. She was. John swallowed. She was everything he wanted to be. At age 20. He looked at her, searching for something to say. He saw one of the teenagers walk in carrying one of the toddlers on his shoulders.

“Do you...is it hard for the kids who can't contact their...parents?” he asked. Shit, he mangled THAT question, but it wasn't really an easy question to ask. Too many layers, too many semantics. He squirmed under that intelligent gaze. It was like being the focus of all of McKay's intelligence without the self-doubt and social retardation as a buffer.

“Are you asking me, if those of us whose...parental doubles opted not to know or be contacted have trouble with that decision?” John nodded, mouth suddenly dry, and wondered just why this question seemed so difficult. He felt like she was picking him apart, piece by piece, laughing at his
pitifully constructed walls. She gave him a sad, enigmatic smile. “I see my parents' doubles everyday. Talked to them. You can’t imagine how it feels to know that I can see them whenever I want, even if they aren’t the people who raised me, that there are differences there; because here, they’re alive and well and that's...fantastic. They’re not my parents, but in a way they are, because the fundamentals are there. Personality, smiles, isims.”

“Isims?” She laughed, and John was momentarily stunned by how young and happened she looked.

“You know, those little quirks that define a person; like if you were playing charades and you had to act out a person. The movements you'd use to define them. Or something they say a lot. Their isims.”

Agent Coleman of the Evil League of Evil

I was going to make Coleman more sinister, but as I really got into the middle of the story, that just felt...wrong. So this story line and glimpse into the Next Gen's/Alex's previous life got cut. This would have been where the big break down scene came, what precipitated it. And John and Teyla were supposed to have followed them out there and witnessed the breakdown-come-group therapy and 'protect' the kids by keeping away anyone who might have interrupted. In my head, that still happened in the real fic, just off screen.

The card opens automatically, pictures popping up on the big screen for everyone to see.

John's asleep on a couch, neck bent at an unusual angle, mouth wide open. A small little girl is asleep on his chest, her hands curled into his shirt, short hair as unruly as her dad's.

John and Rodney are walking in tandem, swinging an elated toddler between them, the bright Lantean sun reflecting off the blue water behind them.

The last one is of Rodney. He's got a red paper and a marker in his hand. He's looking at the camera, trying to scowl and smile all at once, blue eyes dancing with joy and love. It's an expression no one has seen before, quite possibly one Rodney has yet to make in his lifetime.

Alex makes a choking nose, and a single tear spills over, carving path down her cheek. She takes one involuntary step towards the projector, back towards a life she can never have again, her hand reaching out to touch a face that's lost to her forever.

Rodney sitting in a dark room reading from a book, his face cast in a green glow from the Ancient machine he's sitting next to. One can just make out the dark outline of a fetus in the chamber of the machine, listening to her father's voice.

“Babies learn their parent's voice in the womb,” Alex whispered. “Turn it off.” Her words are swathed in pain, enough to break the heart of the most hardened soldier. Woolsey is the one who steps forward and turns off the projector, looking more apologetic than he’s ever been before. Alex's pain and devastation is written plainly in the planes of her body, in the ragged sound of her breathing. She turns, her face a hard mask of pain/hatred/loss/love/uncertainly/lost and she rips the memory card out of the reader. “This. This is not for you.” She turn on her heel and moves out of the room on autopilot.

The first person she runs into is Sateda. She blinks up at him, completely shell shocked, clutching the tiny disk in her hand.

“Come on.” He leads her away, unresisting and unquestioningly. She doesn't register anything at
all, not her surrounding or the people pausing in the halls to give her concerned looks. At some point, Sateda touches his ear piece and calls Carson and the rest of their group, because they're all waiting on the Western Pier when they get there.

Alex sees them standing there, her family, waiting for her, and she breaks. She collapses, Sateda's strong arms catching her before she falls just like she knew they would. Then Carson's there as well, supporting her, holding her, whispering nonsense words that aren't so much for comfort as just to let her know he's here, she's here, they're all here in this place together. That she doesn't have to be alone.

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John's entire body just...stopped. Froze, unable to do anything when confronted, overwhelmed by the scene before him. Something deep within him, that inner core of his humanity, pulsed in painful harmony with the small group huddled together on the pier. On a balcony overlooking Atlantis, every one of the rescued formed a puppy pile, Alex at the crux of their attention, every one of them tuned to her every movement. They sat with her as she stared across the expanse of Atlantis, the city of her birth, tears welling in her eyes and falling unchecked down her cheeks. She was nestled into Sateda's chest, his body and arms wrapped around her as if he could shield her from all the bad in the universe. Carson (and God, it still hurt to hear that name) was stretched out on the ground, his head in her lap, her fingers idly carding through his hair. One of the smaller children was tucked under her arm. Even from his vantage point, John could see that she was lost in her memories, replaying some private moment with people she'd never see again. Her pain and joy and sorrow and loss were writ in the lines of her face, the tears falling from her eyes, the way she'd occasionally clench her fingers in Carson's hair in a way that had to be painful, but he never flinched. John couldn't figure out just what was so different about it.

“She is not hiding.” John startled at hearing Teyla's soft voice. She drew up beside him, her eyes sad and understanding as she gazed on the scene.

“What?” Teyla pursed her lips in that way that meant she was thinking, processing.

“We are taught,” she began slowly, testing and weighing each of her words, “to manage our grief. We create rituals and structures to our mourning. My people have a time of remembrance, where we honor our dead. But we do not...share our grief. We hold it, and take comfort from friends if it is offered, but we do no share. We bear it alone. But they...they take it from her, willingly accepting the burden of her pain. She gives it to them and they accept without reservation or judgment.”

“How...” John choked up, blinking back tears. “How can they do that?”

“I suspect because she has done it all for them, and never once for herself.” Teyla must have felt his startled gaze, because she never looked away from the grieving pile of Lateans. “Consider, major, that they had been surviving in a war zone for almost two years when they came here. She is their leader; in a place where death is a matter of how soon, a test of how well prepared they are, when would she grieve for her losses?”

Zelenka/Alex Hire Chat

*This scene was out of place and a little out of voice, so it didn't make the final cut. Plus I wanted to emphasize how well Radek and Bohdan were getting along, and how talented they BOTH are.*
We must talk.” Alex glanced up at him.

“Sure.” She handed him a couple of crystals to hold. “Just as long as you make yourself useful in the process.”

Radek watched her work, noting the ease with which she connected nodes; like a chess game, her mind many steps ahead of her fingers.

“I have increasingly growing suspicion,” Radek said casually. Alex deftly connected another crystal to the main processor.

“Run the test program on the computer? Thanks. A suspicion? About what?”

“Rodney is not only genius amongst us.” Her movements paused for a second before resuming.

“I think you've spent too much time listening to him rant. I'm pretty sure you qualify. At least a little. Your own special brand of Czech genius.” Radek smiled a little at that. Yes, much more subtle than Rodney, though still gravely allergic to bullshit it would seem.

“I would very much like to know your brand of genius. And its extent.” Cards down on the table, all in. Alex gave up all pretense of working.

“I'm not a genius. The Asguard refused to give us technology until we had proven ourselves worthy, and if their society hadn't started collapsing around their ears the Daedalus would still be a dream. Even in my universe, the Nox still won't share. Still thought we were too young and impetuous. Plus, there's something to be said for the thrill of discovery.”

“You are not disabusing me of my conclusions,” Radek told her. She smiled enigmatically. “And I will not ask you for technology or information. Much. You have my word. I cannot promise same for Rodney when he realizes full extent of twenty years of mathematical knowledge.” Radek was surprised when she detangled herself from the wall and pulled him into a hug.

“You let me handle Doctor-Doctor Rodney McKay, yeah?” She burrowed herself back into the wall.

“Ah, that is other thing. Rodney-handling is a rare skill.” Alex grunted to show she was listening, torso swallowed up by the Ancient wall again. “I would like to make it unofficially your job description.” Alex pulled herself out of the wall once again, a dark line of grit across her cheek.

“You found out about the reports and you're trying to interrupt my pipeline into the Atlantis black market. I think it'll be more lucrative to continue being officially unofficial,” Alex said dryly.

“Oh no, you may still receive...gifts of thanks. But I will make officially unofficial announcement about you and settle for ten-percent.”

“What?!”

“It is standard agent's fee,” Radek pointed out reasonably.

“Commie pinko thief,” she muttered darkly. Radek typed a few commands into the computer and
Alex yelped as the small power surge sent electricity down the pads of her fingers. Radek smirked and climbed into the wall after her, caressing the alien wiring. They worked in comfortable silence, repairing Atlantis. Radek let his mind wander, pleased to have a few quiet minutes to himself. He glanced over at Alex as she worked, a picture of concentration with the side of her mouth quirked down.

“He was a good father?” Zelenka couldn't help but ask. Another pause in the work, and Radek observed the soft smile that graced her face.

“We had our moments.” Zelenka snorted. Alex glanced at him sideways, her smile more knowing now. “It got worse before it got better. We didn't speak a word to one another for a month and a half when I was 15. We were...I don't even remember why anymore. He got injured off planet, and I freaked out. Wouldn't let him out of my sight for a week after that. Though it helped that he was confined to the infirmary for that week.” She paused to rub a hand across her eyes. “I'd give anything in this world to have that month and a half back.”

Alex & Kayla: Yentas R Us

Initially, I had the kids making bets on who would get together first: McShep or Ronon/Keller. That sort of got shoved to the wayside during the bulk of the story, and this was where it was reintroduced, after the trip to the unoccupied sectors. It didn't take much to edit it out of the story.

Alex groaned and flopped down on her bed, not even bothering to take off her field pack. They'd retrieved the tissue regenerator and the bone knitter and had seen Dr. Zelenka plugged in and recovering nicely before they all left to get some much needed sleep.

“Bed. So good,” she moaned into the mattress. After a week and a half of sleeping on the hard Atlantis floor, her bed felt glorious. It felt weird to think that mere months ago she'd never expected to sleep on a real mattress ever again. She grumbled and shifted over when Kayla dropped down beside her, making the mattress bounce. Kayla poked her in the side and Alex growled half-heartedly.

“Tell me how the mission went,” Kayla demanded, poking Alex in the ribs. Alex swatted at the annoying girl with all the energy she could muster.

“'wuz fine,” Alex finally grumbled.

“You are being singularly uninformative,” Kayla said haughtily. Alex grunted in agreement. When Kayla poked her again, Alex began calculating the force necessary to know the average human out cold, and whether she could generate the required amount of torque from her current position. “I have sensed some tension between Colonel Sheppard and Doctor McKay recently.”

“Nugh,” Alex replied helpfully. While in theory, she could knock Kayla out, she didn't have enough energy to go through that effort.

“I believe that would suggest your efforts to unite them have been unsuccessful.” Alex turned her head and glared balefully at her nemisis.

“The fact that you can actually sense the tension between them means it's working.” Kayla arched a skeptical eyebrow. “Seriously, you know how well they can both hide things when they're really motivated. And I could have sworn you said something about getting Ronon Dex and Jennifer Keller together.”

“Terhaan and I have been considering our options and laying the groundwork,” Kayla protested.
“Oh yeah? The groundwork? And what, pray say, has that entailed?”

“We have established that both Ronon Dex and Jennifer Keller would be amenable to seeing one another in a romantic sense.”

“Well. That was a bunch of six-dollar words to say 'We know Ronon and Jen like each other' which you already knew.”

“I have a plan,” Kayla maintained serenely.

“Yeah. Sure you do.” Alex buried her head back under her pillow. “Go'way. Sleep now. Yenta later.”

A McShep Snippet from Before

In anything else, this would be a 'future snippet.' Here, it's a 'past snippet.' It's Father's Day for the McShep clan.

The smell of coffee woke them up. John cracked open an eye to see his daughter smiling happily at him, two cups of coffee in her hand.

“Hey, Number Two.” John pushed himself up, dislodging Rodney who snorfeld and rolled over. John poked his partner in the ribs, ignoring Rodney's threatening growls of death and dismemberment.

“Happy Father's day,” Alex said shyly, holding out the cups. John felt his heart clench just a little bit. He hadn't even realized...

“Rodney,” he hissed. One malevolent blue eye opened. John jerked his head towards their progeny. “It's Father's day.” Rodney pushed himself up, looking cranky but willing to suffer through this for their child. Alex stuck Rodney's cup of coffee under his nose.

“Oh, brilliant, intelligent child,” he murmured, “blood of my blood, brain of my brain. You are truly wise.” Alex giggled and Rodney scooched over. Alex immediately crawled onto the bed and settled between them, her head resting on Rodney's solid chest. John grinned into his coffee mug as Rodney ran his fingers through her hair, savoring his morning coffee.

“Hey Damma?” Rodney grunted around his mouthful of caffeine. “If you're awake, an' hungry, an' not cranky, an' not doing sex-things, can you come to breakfast?” John's eyes watered as some of his coffee went up his nose. Rodney was looking down at their child, poleaxed, his mouth opening and closing in shock. John shook his head when Rodney turned panicked eyes to him. Nu-uh, she'd sprung this on Rodney, there was NO WAY John was tackling this. They'd both agreed long ago: when it came to this kind of stuff, it was every man for himself. Whoever got the question had to answer it.

“Sex-things?” Rodney repeated faintly. Alex pushed herself up and looked at Rodney expectantly.

“Um, well, I don't...I mean...why are you asking me?”

“Teyla said it would be a growing experience for you.”

John laughed so hard he didn't even struggle when Rodney kicked him out of bed. Best father's day ever.
FAQ

1. Do you know the Whole Story
I know the Whole Story. From the kid's formative moments, how Colony!Atlantis was structured, how they knew each other, what they were like Before, and what happened during the two years they were trying to survive in the halls. At this point, I doubt I'll ever get around to writing it down unless I win the lottery, but it's there. In my head.

2) What's up with the kids being ssssooo like their parents? I mean, Sateda has dreads?
Really? Really??
A lot of the kids resemble their parents; this wasn't JUST a cheap writing trick to help you identify with them. They all started to embody aspects of their parents as a means of remembrance, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconscious. For example: Sateda didn't have dreads until After. He grew them out in remembrance of his father. And Bohdan took to speaking to himself only in Czech in order to remember where he came from and make it as much a part of himself as he could.3) Alex has A LOT of tattoos."
Someone might go "Wow, that's a lot of tattoos for Alex to have if she's only been doing this for three years before Atlantis fell." Well, she has a pretty long story to tell, but on a planet far, far away a Keeper was gravely injured and passed a large number of Memories that hadn't been placed in the Repository yet on to her. This is also one of the reasons she was able to create a fairly cohesive picture along her back. Rodney was nervous the whole time, John sat silently in the corner.

4) What's up with the threesome?
Alex and Sateda were dating when the whole nazghoul thing went down. It was a teenage thing that wouldn't have survived if not for the bonding over constant life and death thing. Carson almost died one day and got sucked in to their orbit; his presence solidified their relationship and made it possible to survive in the 'real world.' He makes them talk, to him and one another. Because otherwise, Sateda and Alex would just let thing be as they are. Because they're both kind of relationship idiots.

5) What's up with the Keepers?"
Keepers! They're interesting. Their history goes like this: A keeper is either Called by another Keeper (like Alex was) or finds the Path on their own. They collect as much information about the people they Remember--books, scrolls, information, etc--in their own words as they can. They distill it all into a Story they can tell. The collection of information is taken by Keeper to an Ancient Repository on a distant planet known only to the Keepers (therefore, someone who decides to become a Keeper has to wait until they find another Keeper who's 'in' on the secret and is willing to take them there). There the Memories of thousands of worlds and people are kept in storage. In Colony!Atlantis, Alex worked closely with the anthropologists. She was trying to find other Keepers to see if it would be acceptable for her to download part of the Ancient database of Worlds for archival, and leaving data pads and other helpful tools for the other Keepers to use.

6) Explain Carson/Alex name thing again?
The scene: One late night on Atlantis. Evan Lorne and Rodney McKay, parents-to-be, sit at their respective incubators and agree that the first kid born on Atlantis should be named Carson. Rodney: absolutely certain his kid will be first...is totally shocked when Lorne's kid pops out of the incubator 20 minutes early. (He checked the logs, there was a power surge.) So he and John are totally unprepared to name their little bundle of female joy. A month passes without any progress on the name front, until the whole of Atlantis takes it upon itself to name the poor kid, because McShep isn't cutting it (neither is 'Hey you!'). The departments draw straws, the linguists win (the drawing may have been rigged) and Alexandra Beckett McKay-Sheppard is thusly named.
The CoLD Wordle

The CoLD Scene Flow Chart

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