The Protection Racket

by Pares (kormantic)

Summary

He found the ad in miscellaneous: Any Job. Sliding scale.

Notes

This story was combed and curried by linabean and runpunkrun. I wrote it especially for McSwain!, who asked for this exact premise.

Rodney was down to his new blue plaid boxers and one black sock when the kitchen door off the back porch swung open.

Carter had so far taken off only her sleek pastel pink jacket, but then, she would have done that anyway. She was giving him her little cat-ate-the-canary smile over her handful of Bicycle cards, and Rodney decided that he had a better than moderate chance of getting some tonight. After all, he was just one thin set of underwear away from true nudity in Carter's very own home. Besides, he had a royal flush.

Of course, that was before Jack O'Neill appeared, face impassive, one eyebrow raised, the key chain in his hand gleaming in the mellow light of the lamp over Sam's kitchen table.

Sputtering, Rodney bolted to his feet, grabbing the pants he'd hung over the back of the kitchen chair.
to his left and hunching over to scoop up his shoes before he ducked out the front door as fast ashumanly possible.

He didn't hear O'Neill pelting down the driveway after him, but he just assumed that Sam had naturally begged him to let Rodney live and that she was employing her soldierly knowledge of hand to hand in order to give Rodney time to flee. He made it to his Honda, yanked his keys out of the pants draped over his arm and veered away before he heard so much as a slamming door.

Sadly, Rodney never did get his Mr. Fantastic tee shirt back.

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As he sped for home, it occurred to Rodney that it might be safer for him to head on to the SGC rather than go straight back to his place. After all, the general might decide to stop over and redecorate his face for taking liberties with his lieutenant colonel, and he was probably less likely to hit Rodney if there were several detachments worth of witnesses around. Rodney could follow up on the Werner readings and give the ZPM another harmonic resonance scan while he was there. And maybe get some pie.

Having zipped a nylon windbreaker from the trunk over his bare chest, Rodney flashed his badge at various uniformed men and women and arrived at the cafeteria with a sense of profound relief, not a little smug at having avoided a spectacular pounding. One day, schoolchildren would lift their surly little faces up at large bronze statues of Rodney McKay, and he preferred that his noble profile not feature a broken nose. His rosy glow faded somewhat when he settled at a table with a slice of pumpkin pie and overheard a whippet-thin lieutenant (he thought her name was possibly Cash Bar? Cassava?) whispering to a redhead Rodney didn't know in a low, awed tone about O'Neill. When she sat up again, McKay could see that her name was written on a patch above her pocket. Qasba.

"I heard the general busted a guy back to cadet just for asking him if he thought he had a chance with Carter."

Focusing on his pie, Rodney forcibly dismissed what he'd heard as the plainest sort of unfounded rumor, but then Major Lorne sat down beside him and added fuel to the fire.

"You two talking about O'Neill? I've heard that he's pretty okay. But then, I've also seen what he can do to a guy firsthand."

"Like what?"

"Well, he made Doug Wenton cry like a little girl, and Doug had only taken the last slice of pie."

"But Wenton's a Green Beret," Qasba whispered in hoarse disbelief.

"And O'Neill's serious about his pie." Lorne said, digging into his plate of gray meat and beige gravy.

Rodney froze; O'Neill liked Carter at least as much as he liked pie—probably more!

Having been on the wrong end of a right hook before, some days Rodney was sure he heard an ominous clicking that could only mean potentially debilitating TMJ. Really, it was his first duty as a scientist to safeguard his own health, seeing as how he was absolutely irreplaceable and, hello, the keystone to basically every practical application of physics yet known to humankind. On Earth, anyway.

Shoving away from the table, Rodney half-ran back to the parking lot and scrambled for home. Once
there, he turned the deadbolt and barricaded the door with a book case full of battered Lovecraft paperbacks, AIP Journals, and a dogeared copy of *The Secret of the Old Clock*. He booted up his emergency laptop; naturally, he wouldn't be able to bring any of his SGC tablets with him, as they were tagged with tracking transmitters. What he needed was protection—protection and a secure location.

There was a surprising dearth of local bodyguard agencies, Rodney found. He had assumed that with all the visiting dignitaries... but then, Rodney reflected, they were nearly all military, and would have a pack of armed guards at their disposal on the government dime. Why pay for gunslinging mercenaries when they got them for free?

The idea of resorting to Soldier of Fortune ads was only slightly less upsetting than letting O'Neill find him in the first place, and in desperation, he scanned cosprings.craigslist.org for a personal security detail, and failing that, possible muscle for hire. He found the ad in miscellaneous: *Any Job. Sliding scale.*

Not exactly informative, but if this guy (Rodney assumed it was a guy, although he could very definitely get behind a woman with a gun. And possibly leather pants...) took cash, and would at least *consider* taking a bullet for him, than Rodney could make do.

He dialed the number, tucking the phone into the crook of his neck as he jammed a handful of underwear in a rucksack.

The phone clicked, and Rodney detected the sound of chewing, followed by a voice saying thickly, "Hello?" around some kind of food.

"Hello?" Rodney echoed. He was confused and mildly repelled by the sound of loud smacking in his ear. "Yes, this is Rodney McKay, world renowned physicist. I saw your ad on craigslist and I wondered if you would be available as a bodyguard for the foreseeable future. Or at least until the rampaging boyfriend is off—very far out of town."

"Uh, it's kind of late for a business call, isn't it?" Rodney's laptop told him it was 11:31 PM Mountain Daylight Time.

"It's a job! Your ad said any job! I assume that sometimes there are jobs that take place on the night shift? I can give you a small cash advance but you'll have to wait a few days until I can access my off-shore accounts and amass some solid capital." A thought occurred to him. "You wouldn't happen to have a bulletproof vest, would you?"

"Are you saying that you're afraid your boyfriend will shoot you?"

"What? No! No, god, no, of course not. He's not *my* boyfriend. He's Sam's."

"So... you're afraid your boyfriend's boyfriend will shoot you?"

"Look, you're getting the wrong idea here. I may have been caught in a compromising position with one *Samantha* Carter, but Lorne tells me that O'Neill is infamous for his jealousy and I'd really like to not have my lungs ripped out. Because believe me, if O'Neill can't do it, Teal'c can."

"Okay. Look, buddy, have you considered calling the cops?"

"Are you kidding me? I bet O'Neill *owns* the police in this town. I need protection! So again, do you have a bulletproof vest or what? Wait, maybe you should bring one for yourself. I mean, yes, I'm sure you'll gladly take a bullet for what I'll be paying you, but I imagine you'd prefer to be alive to spend it."
"What gave you the idea that I was some kind of bodyguard, Mr. McKay?"

"Doctor McKay, and your ad was... very open ended."

There was a considerable pause on the end of the line, and Rodney was just about to wash his hands of the whole thing when the guy said, "It just so happens that I have a bulletproof vest. Two, even."

"How about weapons?"

"I have a whole bag of golf clubs," the guy offered.

"What, you mean you won't be packing any heat?"

"You said you wanted a bodyguard, McKay, not an enforcer."

"But—"

"If you seriously want me to blow somebody away, I'm thinking you read the wrong ad. I'm not that kind of guy."

"But you do have a gun, right?"

"I do," the guy said patiently.

"So you'll take the job?"

Another thoughtful silence, and Rodney dug his nails into the palm of his hand. O'Neill could be on his way even now!

"600 a day, plus expenses."

That was far less than Rodney had expected, but still more than he had the cash on hand for.

"Will you take a check? I can't lay my hands on that kind of cash right away, and I'm sure O'Neill will be tracking my credit cards."

"That depends. If you die, will the check bounce?"

"If I—what kind of bodyguard are you?"

He could practically hear the guy shrugging on the other end of the line.

"I'm guessing I'm the best this town had to offer or you wouldn't have answered a craigslist ad," the guy pointed out.

"You're not wrong," Rodney admitted.

"So where are you?"

"I'm at home," Rodney said stupidly.

"I figured as much. But I don't know where that is."

"You don't need to! I'm going on the lam, here!"

"I get that. We hole up somewhere the boyfriend can't find you. Still, don't you think it's a better idea to have a driver in an unknown vehicle pick you up and take you to an as-yet-unnamed location than
letting this O'Neill guy track you to a seedy hotel in your Honda Civic?"

"How did you know I—Oh. Right. Fine." Rodney gave him his address and figured he'd take the
time it took the bodyguard to arrive to finish packing.

"I can be there in five minutes."

In two (Rodney glanced at his watch—it was already 11:39), there was a knock at the door.
Rodney's hands were full of bars of Ivory soap (you never knew when frou-frou hotel soap would
turn out to be scented with deadly tangerine) and his shaving kit, and he froze—it was too early for
the bodyguard guy to be here already. Jesus, was that O'Neill?

"McKay? It's John Sheppard."

"Who?" Rodney blanked; did he know a John Sheppard?

"The bodyguard?" the man said patiently.

Oh.

Rodney flung the toiletries down on the bed and hurried to the door, lugging the book case aside
before unlocking the deadbolt and releasing the chain.

"But you can call me John," the bodyguard said.

Rodney saw a skinny guy in a black leather jacket on the other side of the door. He had a reassuring
number of teeth and no visible scars, so Rodney felt marginally relieved.

Then he took a second look and found himself disappointed.

"You're the bodyguard?"

"Yep."

"I thought you'd be... taller. Something." He waved vaguely at the man leaning in his doorway.
Upon closer inspection, the bodyguard seemed improbably good looking. It was like ordering a
stuntman and getting a supermodel instead.

"I can leave," John offered, hitching a thumb over his shoulder.

"No, no, you'll do, just—how did you get here so fast?"

"I live in this complex," John said. He pointed at a low, black Audi coupe in the corner lot space.
"That's my car right there."

Rodney gaped at him a bit before remembering that he was fleeing for his life
and walked back into
his bedroom to get his bags.

"Well. Shall we?"

John made an "after you" gesture and let Rodney lock his apartment door before following him to
the car.

"Shouldn't you be, I don't know, scouting the area for assailants?"

"I haven't seen anyone suspicious around," John promised, unlocking Rodney's car door.
"Have you ever actually done any professional bodyguarding before?"

"Nope," John said easily, sliding into his sleek car, his jacket creaking against the posh leather seats.

"Fantastic. I've entrusted myself to a rank amateur."

"Hey now. Think of it this way: nobody who ever paid me to guard them has died, right?"

"Yet," Rodney muttered.


The drive to the hotel was surprisingly sedate.

"Not that I don't appreciate the three second rule as much as the next man, but I have to say… I would have expected a bit more Mario Andretti from a guy who owns a car like this."

"Seeing as how you're paying me to protect your life and all, I figure it's in my best interest not to get us T-boned. Besides, if your friend really does own the cops, we'd do better not to catch anybody's attention."

He pulled into a parking space so smoothly that Rodney hardly noticed the vehicle had come to a complete stop.

"I'll be right back," John said.

After a very tense few minutes slumped down in the car seat so that passing headlights and vengeful generals wouldn't pick him out against the black leather interior, John came back out flashing a card key.

The minute John unlocked the hotel room door, Rodney shoved past him and dropped his bags on the queen-sized bed farthest from the window, nabbing the laminated menu and running a finger down the listed meals searching for hints of citrus. Reaching for the phone, he dialed room service.

"Yes, this is room 14. I'd like an order of hot wings, and an order of onion rings, a medium burger with Swiss and a side of fries, a carafe of coffee and—wait," he held the receiver to his chest and said, "Did you want something?"

John gave him a look and crinkled his eyebrows. "That's plenty."

"But I meant—for you."

"We can share," John said dismissively, flopping back onto the bed by the window, arms tucked behind his head, legs sprawling.

"I don't want to share, which is why I'll order something especially for you. That way? No sharing needed."

John frowned at him slowly.

"You do know that this is going on my credit card, right?"

"But I'm paying you back!"

"We share," John said, and Rodney sighed and completed his order.
Then he noticed that John didn't seem to have a bag with him. Or even one bulletproof vest.

"Is your bag still in the car? Wait, are you wearing your gun?"

"I didn't pack one," John said.

"A bag? Or a gun?"

"Either."

"But we could be in hiding for weeks!"

John shot him a look under his lashes that said he seriously doubted that.

"I'm sure if you just dodge this O'Neill guy for a day or two, he'll cool down and it'll all blow over."

"Oh, I don't think so. Revenge is a dish best served cold, and I've heard tell that he can lay in wait for years until one day, blammo!, ex-astrophysicist."

"So you're an astro-physicist," John said. "And here I thought you were just the regular kind."

There was a discreet knock at the door.

"That can't be our food already," Rodney blurted, grabbing for his bag and holding it against his chest. Now would have been a good time to have one of John's alleged bulletproof vests.

John bounded to his feet and immediately opened the door.

"What are you doing?" Rodney hissed.

A very pretty girl stood there, her smooth, bare arms full of shabby white towels.

"Hello, John."

"Annette. Imagine running into you here."

"I thought you might need these," she said, brazenly peering around John's shoulder to get a peek at Rodney.

"I imagine they'll come in handy. Thanks."

"Any time."

She gave Rodney a little wave and then wandered off, and John gently closed the door behind her, a stack of towels balanced on his hand. He heaped them on the rickety chair bellied up to the pressboard writing desk the room was furnished with.

"What the—they know you here? You're a regular? Oh, god, you must bring all your many conquests here and—you do, don't you? This is Bluebeard's den! Your own personal Playboy mansion!"

Crunching up his face, John shook his head slowly.

"What the hell are you talking about, McKay? I did some landscaping here a while back, that's all. Relax."

"I can't relax! I'm being hunted down like a dog! And I've apparently hired some sort of gigolo, and I
am in no way being adequately guarded against unnatural death! Where are those vests you said you had?"

"McKay, it'll be ninety degrees when the sun comes up and this hotel's AC is for shit. Do you really want to sit around all day in 10 pounds of Kevlar?"

"If you didn't bring one, I'll just buy one on eBay," Rodney vowed. He had a few dummy accounts that he doubted even the SGC could have traced. It was how he'd planned to pay John his fee—but it was a little soon to mess with the balances, on the off chance the general was more plugged in than Rodney had thought... Still. He booted up his laptop and then jabbed at the keys, but nothing happened. "Does this place even have wifi?"

"Nope."

"What the hell am I even paying you for?"

"Technically, you haven't paid me anything yet."

There was another knock at the door. This time, Rodney backed into the bathroom before John opened it.

A very pretty boy stood there, fine boned and lean, pushing a dinner cart in front of him.

"Hi, John," he smiled.

"Hey, Teddy. You can just park that stuff right on the desk there."

Rodney watched John sign the credit slip, and noted that he wrote in a generous tip for the kid.

"Just let us know if you need anything," Teddy said pleasantly.

"Sure thing. Thanks," and Teddy wheeled the cart away and John closed the door again. For a moment there was a curious stillness: the damp, chilled air chugging through the room's dilapidated AC unit smelled like PineSol and polyester bedspreads, overcooked hamburger and limp, greasy French fries. Rodney's stomach rumbled.

"I find it surprising, even suspicious that our food has arrived already. We've barely been here fifteen minutes."

"So the service is good. They know me here," John said, lifting the cover from Rodney's hamburger.

He took a butter knife balanced on a plate with a roll on it and sawed the hamburger in half.

"Huh. Actually, it's not a bad idea, you sharing my food. I'm deathly allergic to citrus, and what better way to knock me off then a supposedly accidental—"

"There isn't generally a whole lot of citrus in a cheeseburger," John said around a mouthful of Rodney's onion rings.

"Yes, which is why it would be the perfect food to spike with lemon zest, you moron!"

Something about John's rangy form and the fact that he was talking with his mouth full reminded Rodney uncomfortably of being on the phone with him earlier, having his sort of raspy voice right in his ear as he munched away at invisible snack foods. Strangely intimate. Maybe John had been shirtless on his couch. Maybe he'd been in bed even, watching TV, watching porn and just about to slide a hand—
Rodney blinked and felt his face heat. What the hell was wrong with him? He briefly considered the possibility that O'Neill had somehow contrived to pump the room full of instantly gay-making pheromones, but dismissed it out of hand and decided to blame this sudden dizziness on low blood sugar instead.

John obligingly took a bite of his half of Rodney's hamburger.

"Tastes fine to me," he mumbled.

Rodney stilled, a horrible thought occurring to him.

"Wait! What if it's poisoned?! With actual poison?"

John tilted his head skeptically.

"He's not trying to kill me," John pointed out reasonably.

"Yes. Yes, there's that," Rodney said. "But it's not like he'd know you were here. Unless you're some kind of secret counter-agent of the SGC!" He pointed accusingly, but John didn't trouble to look guilty. Instead he studied Rodney with a serene expression and took a second bite of his hamburger before mumbling, "Look, it's late. Why don't you eat your dinner and then maybe take a shower or something."

John himself filched the remote from Rodney's end table and started channel surfing.

"No sports," Rodney decreed, wolfing down his own half of the burger while toeing off his shoes. Huh. He hadn't gotten that other sock back, either, he realized.

Thumbing the remote and deliberately pausing on ESPN, John flicked him a look of bland defiance.

"I like sports," he said.

"American football isn't a sport. It's a four-hour commercial for jock itch remedies and that piss you call beer."

"Well. I'd argue with you, but." John dipped an onion ring in a little pot of horseradish sauce and poked it into his mouth.

"You're stymied by my utter rightness?"

"More like surprised that you aren't American. You certainly seem American," he added, giving Rodney a strangely speculative look that for some reason made the heat rise in his cheeks.

"I'm Canadian," Rodney pointed out. Then, "Do you generally go around insulting your clients?"

John just grinned at him and turned up the obnoxious commentary on the game.

Rodney debated the expedience of simply drinking the coffee straight from the carafe, but in the end he filled both of the too-small stained mugs that had come with the tray and set one on the end table beside John's bed, next to the plate of fluorescent orange hot wings and the small tub of lumpy bleu cheese dressing. He'd need John alert, after all.

He downed eight of the twelve wings, finished the onion rings, and after a moment's deliberation, polished off the remaining quarter of John's half of the hamburger, using the butter knife to trim away any of the sections John's mouth may have touched. John seemed absorbed by the television, with its almost hypnotic muted crowd-roar and the short, urgent trills of whistles.
Shaking his head a little, Rodney decided that a shower would be a good idea. He could come down a bit, get John to turn the sound off the TV and climb into a no-doubt smelly and uncomfortable but at least horizontal bed for some well-deserved rest.

Once in the bathroom, he was already stripped, his windbreaker crumpled on the back of the toilet on his folded pants, and leaning over to turn on the tap when he remembered that he'd left his bag in the bedroom. The bedroom currently being occupied by a guy that Rodney, for all intents and purposes, was paying by the hour. Any job, Rodney's mind insisted. Sliding scale, it added lewdly. Scrubbing his suddenly damp hands against his thighs, Rodney yanked the shower curtain aside and stepped into the needle-like spray. He stood so the water pummeled him squarely between the shoulder blades and for a moment thought about how close he'd come to achieving Sam Carter, with her pretty, shiny brain and her flippy golden hair and her pert smile and pert… other things. Since he could hardly forget that he had a paid attendant just on the other side of the bathroom's flimsy door, Rodney resolved to keep his hands to himself, soaping his arms and chest a lot more than was probably warranted while giving his dick only a cursory rinse.

When he came out into the main room in a cloud of steam, with the damp towel tucked around his hips, John was watching some sort of documentary on spy satellites. Rodney shuddered, trying to remember if the Prometheus was in orbit, and close enough to pluck him from the room in a dazzle of Asgard technology. While pawing through his bag for a matching pair of socks, he happened to glance at the television. Apparently, the documentary was being hosted by Gillian Anderson. Mm. Scully. He seated himself on the side of John's bed, seeing as his was covered with his luggage and the laundry he'd been rooting through, and communed.

Some ten minutes passed and Rodney's skin had pebbled with gooseflesh and his nipples felt like someone had bounced a frozen nickel off of each one before he realized a) the AC unit seemed to work just fine and b) that he'd been sitting practically thigh to thigh with John Sheppard, bodyguard for hire, mesmerized by Gillian Anderson's throaty voice and poised head tilt and round little chin, while wearing nothing but a towel. And a cheap, threadbare hotel towel, at that.

"Um."

He stood up and grabbed a tee-shirt and boxers and slipped behind the bathroom door to tug them on. When he came out again, John muted the television.

"So. What did you get caught doing, anyway?"

"Pardon me?"

"You mentioned a compromising position." John wagged his eyebrows. "How compromising, exactly? Like, video evidence compromising, or just," he waved a hand as if to illustrate, "accidentally suggestive?"

"And how is that any of your business?" Now that he was at least wearing underwear, Rodney felt properly scandalized.

"I'm just asking," John said in a placating tone. "If there's a chance I could end up a chalk outline, I at least want to know what I'm getting into. Besides, at this point I'm pretty much working on spec, so I think you owe me that much, don't you?" He tilted his head slightly and gave Rodney a foolish, almost imploring look that Rodney could only blink at—the man was pouting at him. "What did you do to this guy?"

"If you must know," Rodney said at last, "we got caught playing strip poker at her place."
John gave a low, hooting two-note chuckle—it was a dirty old man's oh-ho, and Rodney found it distinctly unsettling.

"Pretty compromising, all right. Did you know she had a boyfriend?"

"No," Rodney said immediately, anxious to keep the higher moral ground here. If John turned out to be an evangelical or something, maybe he wouldn't be quite so quick to body-check Rodney out of the path of speeding bullets. But John had a knowing look that flustered him, and Rodney found he was continuing despite himself. "Well, it was kind of unclear. Technically, he's her commanding officer, but I'd certainly suspected... I didn't know he had a key to her house or anything, though. I mean, it wasn't tawdry. It's not like they're married," Rodney pointed out defensively.

"Well, if he's her commanding officer and they both want to keep their jobs, they really can't be, right?" John looked almost sympathetic.

Rodney's eyes widened and he nodded dumbly.

"I hadn't really—Oh, god, this is so much worse than I had initially thought," Rodney moaned. "He's not gonna leave enough of me to keep in a matchbox."

John rolled his eyes.

"Don't be such a drama queen. She was a consenting adult, right? It wasn't like you had her tied to the chair or anything." He paused. "Wait. You didn't, did you?"

Rodney scowled at him, "Oh, yes, because I frequently abduct my paramours and force them to play card games against their will. Whose side are you on, anyway? I'd like to see a little more company loyalty, if you please."

Lips quirked into a wry smile, John gave him a little two fingered salute and said, "Sure thing, boss."

Truly, Rodney hadn't known that Sam had been seriously involved with Jack O'Neill. He'd figured it was just one of those flirty things you sometimes saw, strictly platonic office romances that were all talk and no walk. In Rodney's experience, people who were actually sleeping together at work usually seemed to sort of hate each other, on the face of it. They certainly never brought each other slices of pie and sat shoulder to shoulder at cafeteria tables, telling each other corny jokes and squabbling about the crossword. He'd just assumed they had a mysterious team bond that could be attributed to the fact that SG-1 had died together and/or separately some 15 or 20 million times.

He'd only been back in North America for nine days before he tried his hand at asking Sam out again. Rodney had decided that she'd had ample time to regret her mistake in shipping him off to Siberia, and knew with absolute certainty that the combination of his native manly appeal and his mastery of ZPM fu could only make him irresistible to her. This theory seemed to be supported by the fact that she'd agreed go out with him—although she'd insisted on pizza and cards at her place rather than a candle-lit dinner for two at the high-end Italian trattoria he'd planned on. He'd taken that as a good sign; the commute to her bedroom would be drastically curtailed, for example, and he wouldn't have to wear a jacket.

"It's just that I would not have pegged you as the kind of guy who slips around with married women," John was saying, back to flipping channels.

Startled, Rodney blurted, "It was just that one time! And anyway, technically? She was slipping around with me."

The angle of John's eyebrows wasn't exactly accusing, but Rodney felt judged nonetheless.
"You're not talking about Sam anymore, are you?"

"No! I told you, I didn't know it was serious. Unfortunately, I can't say the same thing about Petra Sandoval."

He shoved everything but his laptop off the bed and stretched out on top of the horrible bedspread, flinging his forearm across his eyes to block out the interrogation-intensity fishbowl lamp hanging from the popcorn ceiling and flailed out with his other hand to feel around for the plate of cold French fries. With a despondent sigh, he stuffed a few in his mouth and chewed without even tasting them.

Apparently, he was feeling confessional.

"I just got back from Russia, by the way. I was there for the better part of two years. She was running another department, working with—well, it's classified, but really fascinating stuff. Her husband was this weedy little guy, a Venezuelan national, a diplomatic attaché for some oil interests the Russians dealt with. Away a lot on business trips. One night, after everyone else had left, she stopped by with a bottle of vodka and I just... followed her home.

"Look, that first night, I didn't know she was married. I swear. I mean, at that point, I didn't even know her name. I'd just been calling her Hot For Teacher. She was built, you know, I mean stacked, but she had ten years on me, easy, and she had this silver streak in her hair... Anyway, we go home together. It's... it was really good. And it wasn't like I had a lot of dating opportunities, what with the eighteen-hour days and the limited access to things like soap and clean laundry. The next morning I go for a rematch, as one does, and she basically shoves me out of bed, taps her watch and says, her husband's coming in on the red-eye in twenty minutes. Her husband. So I grab my stuff, get back to my lab and work for 33 hours straight on—well, that's classified, too. About a week later, she shows up with another bottle of vodka."

Reaching out for the leftover fries again, he pawed at the plate, finally lifting his head so he could crane his neck to see if he'd missed any. He hadn't. John wasn't looking directly at him; Rodney could only see his almost ridiculously attractive profile and his neutral expression. With another sigh, Rodney flopped back onto the bed, training his eyes on the hideous ceiling. In the far corner of the room, there was a sprawling, rust-colored water stain roughly the shape of Antarctica.

"You've got to understand. She was magnificent and this was pretty much the only sort of relationship I had the time to maintain. I liked her. I... more than liked her. I admired her. Her theories on neutrinos alone, I'm telling you—Besides, I was just a symptom. The things that were wrong with their marriage didn't have anything to do with me."

"Yeah, somehow? I bet her husband didn't see it that way."

Rodney snorted ruefully, fingering the hinge of his jaw.

"He punched me, you know? He was like, 5'5" and a hundred pounds soaking wet, and he clipped me right in the jaw."

"Then what?"

"What do you mean, then what? I was sleeping with his wife! I didn't have a leg to stand on. I mean, I'm no Mike Tyson, but even I could have taken this guy. But instead. I just... scuttled out of there. God, I was such an asshole," Rodney murmured helplessly. "She didn't even like me. I could tell."

There was a heavy silence for a while. Rodney pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes,
trying to clear his mind.

"I'm just saying. That guy punched me in the jaw. And he wasn't in the armed forces! O'Neill has a gun! So, no, at the end of the day, I don't think I'm being too paranoid when I say there's every possibility that O'Neill is out there, right now, looking to end me."

"Okay, buddy. Why don't you grab some shut-eye. We can reassess in the morning."

"Will you be—"

"I'll keep an eye out," he promised, and Rodney was reassured. Climbing under the covers, he switched off the lamp on the end table and rolled on his side with his back to the blue flicker of the muted television.

"There's, uh, still some coffee left. I mean. If you want."

"Nah, I'm good."

And then there was only the hum of the AC unit and the low, almost inaudible whine of late 80s electronics. He listened for it, but he couldn't hear John breathing, or even shifting on the creaky hotel mattress. He also couldn't hear anyone striding down the hallway with malicious intent, or crawling on their second floor roof, ready to swoop in on bungee lines from black helicopters. Eventually, somehow, he fell asleep.

* 

In the morning, Rodney blinked gummily awake and then froze—trying to place the weird sound that had woken him. Warily turning his head, he saw John stretched out on the barren strip of ugly carpet at the foot of the bed. He was as rigid as a plank, and doing what must have been his one hundred thousandth one-armed push-up, if his sweat-soaked tee-shirt and low, harsh breathing was anything to go by. One-handed push-ups. The man was clearly a masochist.

"What are you doing?" He sat up and flung back the sheets in irritation.

Tilting his head enough to catch Rodney's eyes, John said, "I don't wanna hear it."

"But you're dripping on the carpet! This place is gonna smell like a gym sock!"

John just shook his head a little and switched to his left arm. Rodney noted the tension in John's back, the soft morning light edging past the mini-blinds to gild the sweat-sheened nape of his neck, the smooth flex of muscle in the arm and strong shoulder as John levered himself toward and away from the no doubt allergen-ridden wall-to-wall again and again.

He had no idea how many push-ups John had actually done before Rodney realized he was staring. Rubbing his eyes, he clambered out of bed and stumbled in the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth. When Rodney came out again, John was still doing one-armed push-ups.

"Seriously? You have to stop that. If you pull something, how will I be able to count on you to keep me from ending up a statistic?"

Finally, John lowered himself to the floor and stayed there, panting slightly, his chin rested on his folded arms. He made some indeterminate sound that possibly indicated his agreement, or might have meant he'd overexerted himself and was now unable to actually rise from the carpet.

Then he rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms over his head, arching his back. His shirt
rode up a little, showing off a flat, rather extensively hairy stomach and the suggestion of a cut, muscular hip. John's boxers were thin and damp, and therefore clinging, which meant they left little to Rodney's imagination in regards to John's endowments. Not that Rodney had imagined anything. Or was checking out another man's package. Except for the fact that he clearly was.

Tearing his eyes away, Rodney dug for the remote and turned on the morning news. The weathergirl was blonde. Blonde was good, Rodney reminded himself. Mm, blonde.

Meanwhile, John was finally getting to his feet. He grabbed a towel off the stack on the desk and walked into the bathroom. Rodney couldn't help but notice that he hadn't quite closed the bathroom door. Apparently, he was paying for the luxury of hearing another man pee roughly three feet away from him. Lovely.

He heard the shower sputter into a splashing roar and the swish and scrape of the shower curtain being pulled aside. Rodney caught himself actually angling his head a bit to see if he could catch a glimpse of the guy as he got into the shower, and then jerked himself back onto the bed and kept his eyes studiously on the weatherbunny. It wasn't as if he were immune to feminine wiles, after all. And the whole guy-on-guy thing had never really interested him. Getting one blowjob from Bilal Geldar the night before his first dissertation defense did not count.

John came out rubbing his flat hair into wet spikes with a towel, wearing a black tee-shirt and a pair of olive drab boxers. He hadn't bothered to shave and something about the outfit…

"You did pack a bag."

"Sort of. My gym bag was in the trunk of my car."

"Wait a minute, you went out to your car while I was sleeping? Anybody could have busted in and, and blown me away!"

"I suppose that's possible. But not really that likely." He folded the bedspread down and climbed into his bed, settling face down and closing his eyes with a raspy sigh.

"Wait, you're napping on the job now?"

Without bothering to open his eyes, John said, half-muffled by his pillow, "You can't maintain a state of catlike readiness all the time."

"Oh my god, I am so totally going to die! A lot."

"I promise to wake up before that happens," John soothed.

"Shall I assume you'll wake up in ample time to actually prevent my death, or merely to witness the event in its entirety?"

Yawning hugely, John just waved his hand a little, murmuring, "Either or." There were some sticky smacking sounds and then John buried his face in his pillow and began a low sawing breathing that wasn't quite a snore.

Sans internet access and left to his own devices, and given the rather unusual circumstance of being awake before nine and genuinely well rested, Rodney found himself strangely restless. He wasn't bored exactly, but while a sleeping John Sheppard wasn't anything he would describe as interesting, he was certainly distracting. If he'd been alone, Rodney would have cued something from his hard drive's stash of porn. But as he wasn't alone, and he'd forgotten his headphones, he couldn't even watch TOS episodes with any real satisfaction.
His stomach rumbled. Pressing a hand to his midsection, he considered calling down for a ham and egg sandwich—and two carafes of coffee. This crappy hotel didn't even have in-room coffee makers. Of course, whatever he ordered would have to be vetted by John, in case of foreign contaminants... and he decided he could let the man sleep a while. After all, he'd presumably been up all night keeping an eye out for assassins. Eventually, the news ended and some syndicated daytime drivel featuring televised court cases came on. America. Land of litigation.

He grabbed his laptop bag and found three power bars of indeterminate age and two back-dated issues of *Applied Physics Letters*. At least mocking his peers—well, colleagues anyway—would help while away the hours. Tearing into a peanut butter granola bar, he flipped through the journal, cracking its spine so he could review it one handed. Huh. Oaxaca had made some inroads on redshift scattering. He should ask Weir about hiring options. God knew they were handing out non-disclosure agreements like candy these days. In fact, Oaxaca's research dovetailed nicely with that work Grodin and Gaul had been doing with wide-spectrum long range sensors they'd found in the Antarctic chair room...

Rodney was hunched over his laptop in what was likely some sort of fugue state when he realized that John was finally awake. And jogging in place, apparently.

"Do you mind? Your compulsive drive to obtain physical perfection is interfering with actual work here."

John gave Rodney a placid look and then switched to jumping jacks.

Glaring seemed to have no effect on the man.

"I'm bored," John said, entirely unnecessarily.

"I'm shocked," Rodney responded.

"We could go... downstairs and... get some lunch." His speech followed the rhythm of his ridiculous exercises. Rodney tried to remember if he'd ever had a conversation with anyone performing jumping jacks before. It was certainly possible that he'd yelled at Jeannie while she'd been jouncing herself silly on the trampoline their father had set up in the back yard for her eighth birthday.

"Let's remember," said Rodney, drafting an email to Elizabeth that could not actually be sent, "that I'm very busy avoiding being seen in public, and also that the one redeeming quality of this hellhole is the magic of room service."

"We could go... to the lounge... have a couple of beers."

"I imagine that if you promise a large enough tip, they'll bring you one all the way upstairs. Also? I'd prefer that you not dull your reflexes with depressants."

Without warning, Sheppard collapsed onto his bed, making the mattress squeak.

"Christ, Rodney, come on. I'm going stir-crazy here."

"We have cable," Rodney said absently. What the hell was Gaul's first name? "And it's barely been twelve hours. For the money I'm paying you, you can suffer."

The now ubiquitous roar of televised sports swelled in Rodney's ears again as John sought refuge in ESPN.
Some tinny, electronic trill began to emanate from the vicinity of John's leather jacket. The jingle was horrifiedingly catchy, and just before Rodney could place the tune, John snagged the cell phone from his pocket and stilled its tweeting with the punch of a button.

"Hello?"

Rodney stared at the man; it wasn’t a cellphone, it was a perfectly serviceable BlackBerry 7700.

"Nah, I'm on a contract at the moment. Thanks for calling, though." John thumbed the device off and finally noticed Rodney gaping at him.

"What?"

"You have web access and you didn't tell me?"

"What good would it do you, anyway? If you're really afraid that somebody'll track you, you can't exactly—"

"Give me that!" Rodney snapped, dragging the BlackBerry from John's hand and accessing the browser. Sweet, sweet net access... John wisely made no attempt to wrestle the BlackBerry back from him and instead returned to his football game. Rodney had hardly even checked the balance on his off-shore accounts before the BlackBerry gave a sad little chirp. The next he knew, the screen went black.

"What the hell...? How much did you pay for this piece of crap?"

John shrugged one shoulder. "The battery's dodgy."

"Where's the charger?"

"I forgot it at home," John said absently, never looking away from the instant replay.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Nope."

Rodney dropped the thing on John's bed with a little huff of disgust and went back to work, tuning out the sneaker commercials and the talking heads and idly considering jerryrigging a new phone charger out of a lamp cord and the blade of one of his Swiss army knives...

Finishing his letter, Rodney closed his laptop, straightened his cramped back with a groan and made for the shower.

* *

This time, he'd remembered to bring a change of underwear with him. Returning to the bedroom, he saw that John still had the television on but was staring with some intensity at a dot on the wall.

"What? What is it?"

"It's some kind of fucked-up flying ant." He sat up slowly, so slowly that Rodney felt his hackles rise. "Actually, it's a whole hell of a lot of flying ants..." And there was a tiny creepy flutter by his ear, and Rodney spun around so fast he gave himself a friction burn on his heel. A veritable cloud of flitting insects seeped out of a crack in the wall's cheap plaster between the pre-fab desk and the rickety TV stand.
"You've got to be kidding me. This fleabag is actually infested? Oh, we are not paying for this," Rodney vowed.

He stormed down the stairs and right up to the front desk, slapping the wood composite counter with the flat of his hand and startling the teenaged boy dozing there into a slack-jawed pallor.

"Our room is swarming, literally swarming with insects. I demand satisfaction!"

John, who had appeared beside him as if he'd been standing there all along, nudged him with his shoulder and said, "You know, I don't think you can really do that anymore. Besides, I left my dueling pistols in my other pants."

Strictly speaking, John wasn't even wearing pants. Realizing that it was a bit breezy around his knees, Rodney remembered that he, too, was wearing only boxers, black socks and a tee shirt. John's ribbed wifebeater clung to him like a second skin. His boxers, on the other hand, showed off remarkably little in the way of ass, which was a pity, really. His feet were long and skinny, with a crooked left pinky toe.

The boy behind the counter stammered an apology and offered to contact the manager. A sturdy little bleach-blonde with plucked eyebrows materialized and she pursed her mouth at them, giving John in particular a gimlet eye, before finally telling them that an exterminator would be dispatched immediately.

"Wait." Rodney patted at his pocketless underwear. "Do you have the card key?"

"Nope," John said.

"Well, we need to be let back in to our room, please." When the woman just crossed her arms with a thoughtful air, Rodney added, "Chop-chop."

"The cardswipe coder's broken and the maid's got the spare master," she said. Her manner was decidedly insolent, and while ordinarily Rodney liked that in a woman, he generally liked to be wearing pants in public spaces even more.

"So go get her!"

The blonde shrugged.

"She'll turn up."

"And we're just supposed to stand here in our altogether until she decides to take a lunch?"

She gave him a look that plainly said he should have thought of that before escaping the room seething with creepy flying ants.

"Besides, how will the exterminator get in?"

"He'll wait," she said evenly.

Leaning his elbows on the counter, John spoke in a low, wheedling tone, "C'mon, Madeleine. At least give us a couple of beers while we're waiting."

"If it turns out that you're part owner of this, this hovel, I hereby renounce all your expenses on this trip, Mr. Kickback. Give us another room, then," Rodney demanded. "It isn't as if ours won't be shortly full of deadly poison or anything."
Madeleine didn't bother to answer him. Instead, she tipped her head and sighed.

"Go see Kim and tell her to give you and your friend here the crybaby special."

"Will do, ma'am." John clamped a hand around Rodney's upper arm, half his palm against the sleeve of Rodney's shirt, the other half fever hot against his skin, and towed him into the dim, reeking bar. It smelled like an ocean of spilled beer and instead of stools, there were precarious free-form vaguely hand-shaped chairs too far from the ground and upholstered in a tawny brownish vinyl.

Kim was a lush woman with skin the color of a Caramilk bar and possibly the loveliest teeth Rodney had ever seen in person. She immediately leaned forward, setting her hands against the bar. This accentuated her really quite spectacular breasts, already attractively highlighted by her low-cut blouse.

"Johhhhhn," she said, and John smiled at her, curving a hand briefly against her forearm. "Where've you been, angel?"

"Oh, here and there. It's nice to see you, Miss Kim. Madeleine said you should set us up with some crybabies."

"I can do you one better," she said, and brought them half a bottle of Johnny Walker Black and two shot glasses. "I see you got rousted right out of your clothes. That deserves better than a tallboy of PBR."

"I won't say no," John said, and tipped himself a shot.

"What are you doing??"

"It's medicinal," John said primly, and knocked back the shot. He filled Rodney's glass and slid it toward him. "Come on, Rodney. It'll put hair on your chest."

"Apparently you drink a lot of that stuff. I've seen that pelt of yours, you know."

"You sure know how to pick 'em," Kim said, giving John a shrewd smile.

John's face hardened and he turned away from her, leaning his elbows back on the bar.

"Touchy," Kim said, and went to pour out wine spritzers for some elderly women perched at the other end of the bar.

Sipping at his whiskey, Rodney wondered if they served food at the bar, or if they'd have to remove to the dingy restaurant portion proper before they could be presented with BLTs and cups of chili.

A beefy thick-necked football type bellied up to the bar beside him and called for Kim by name. She ignored him, and he muttered something under his breath. Looking over at Rodney, he said, "What are you looking at?"

Rodney glanced away and focused on his drink. Beside him, John had gone strangely still.

"Hell's bells. If it isn't little Johnny Sheppard."

"Dwayne," John said easily enough, nodding slightly.

"You here to get another look at what you can't have?"

"I'm pretty sure Kim doesn't want you here, so why don't you just leave now?"
"Why don't you shut the fuck up?"

No longer leaning against the bar, John had his feet set and his shoulders squared. Rodney was pretty sure John hadn't been this tall when he'd met him, and he'd definitely been wearing shoes then.

"And who's your little boyfriend? I kept telling her you were a fag," Dwayne said with sly satisfaction. "You can't even wait to get upstairs to queer the place up."

"Dwayne," said Kim, holding up the bar's clumsy portable phone. "I've got two words for you, and then I'm calling the cops. Restraining. Order."

Without warning, Dwayne lurched across the bar, making a grab at Kim, or possibly just the phone. In less time than it took for Dwayne to knock over the bottle of Johnny Walker Black, John was behind him, wrenching Dwayne's arm high behind his back and bouncing his forehead off the bar with a slightly wet smack, given that the bar was now slopped with expensive whiskey. Then the guy bucked like a rodeo bull and swung around, clipping John in the face with his elbow before John swept his legs and then pinned Dwayne's arms with his knees while leaning a forearm across his windpipe.

"If you want to keep breathing, you'll calm the fuck down, Dwayne," John said pleasantly. Rodney felt a thrill slalom down the back of his neck; it wasn't entirely fear.

Dwayne stared up at him, wide-eyed and sweating with patent terror before giving a slight nod.

"The cops are on the way," Kim said.

Rodney stared at her dumbly; cops meant witness interviews, and O'Neill would certainly get wind of this little bar brawl.

Getting to his feet, John said, "We need to not be here when that happens. On your feet, Dwayne."

The large man did as he was told and John tilted his head back to meet the taller guy's eye. "You might as well get out of here. The cops can pick you up at your place later."

Dwayne obediently shambled out the door, without looking noticeably any less afraid than he had when John had had him pinned down.

"Thanks, John," Kim said softly.

"Any time. Just, do me a favor, wouldja, can you get Annette or Janine or somebody to open our room back up? Even if it's still crawling with bugs, we're trying to lay low for a while, if you get my meaning."

Nodding, Kim dialed the phone saying, "I've got her cell number," and then, "Hey, Janine. We've got a lockout in…" She raised her eyebrows expectantly and John said, "14." "In 14." "In 14," There was a pause and Kim rolled her eyes. "Yeah, he's here. Did Annette tell you? Huh. No, I don't think your chances are any better than they were last year, but there's no harm in trying." Kim disconnected with a knowing smile. "She'll let you in."

Trudging up the stairs behind John, Rodney said, "Tell me, is there anyone in this building who doesn't want to sleep with you? Because those old ladies at the bar? I swear I saw 'tag-team' in their eyes. It was disturbing."

"Flatterer," John said wearily.

A girl who was possibly younger and prettier than Annette from the night before was standing by 14's now open door.
"I opened the windows for you," she said in a breathy rush. "Fred just got done fumigating in here, but I made him sweep up all the dead ants."

"Thanks, Janine. How's your mom?"

"Oh, she's fine," Janine said dismissively. "How've you been? We miss you around here. That is, I mean, you know, we have a lot to do and it would be great if you came back and, you know, helped —"

"I keep busy," John said. "I was wondering, could you maybe bring me some ice?"

Her face drew into a dismayed pout. "No! The crappy ice maker's broken. I could go to the kitchen, and see if they have some frozen peas...?"

"That'd be fine," he said, and she practically bolted down the stairs.

"Apparently," said Rodney snidely, noting the can of Raid in the wastebasket as well as a sprinkling of tiny ant corpses, "they went with a professional."

John sat down on the bedspread, eyeing the wastebasket warily.

"You know," Rodney said. "You probably shouldn't even be sitting on that. This whole place reeks of insecticide." He picked up one of his tee shirts from the floor and sniffed at it. "God, and it's all over our clothes. I can't wear this. It'll give me hives!" He dropped the shirt again and hurried into the bathroom to wash his hands. When he came out again (he'd washed them twice, soaping his arms to the elbow), John had slumped forward on the bed and was holding what appeared to be a frozen hamburger patty to his face. Janey or whatever looked on, her hands clasped in an attitude of helpless anxiety.

Practically bounding across the room, Rodney grabbed John's wrist and yanked the brick of meat away from the man's face.

"Jesus, what the hell are you doing?" Aghast, and still clasping John's wrist, he turned on the simpleton in the short skirt. "That thing is pure bacterial infection waiting to happen! Do you want him to get a bacterial infection? In his eye?"

"Rodney," John said mildly, but the girl was shaking her head, babbling promises to walk to the local 7-11 to fetch something better.

"See that you do" Rodney said loftily. "And be quick about it. It's already swelling."

Once she'd scampered out again, Rodney realized he was still holding John's wrist. Carefully letting it go, he leaned down and peered at the red mark high on John's cheek, dangerously near his eye, which was blinking hard and often; John didn't seem to be able to keep it open. Rodney found himself holding John's chin, the first two fingers of his other hand lighting just on the edge of the darkening bruise near John's eye.

John's good eye was giving him a measuring, amused look.

"Since when do astrophysicists go to med school?"

Rodney let his hands fall, and snapped, "Oh, shut up, will you? You're not bleeding, anyway, and you don't appear to have any large chunks of bone poking into anything important." Straightening up, he added, "I'll get you a wet towel, at least. You can dab away some of the contagion left by that hunk of frozen e. coli."
He hurried into the bathroom and ran the corner of a fresh towel under the tap. By the time he brought it back, John had his hand clapped over his tearing eye and was reaching for the remote.

"You know, I've got some paracematol."

John just shrugged, but swallowed them obediently enough when Rodney brought him a mug of tapwater and shook a few flat white tablets onto John's palm.

"Maybe you should go to the emergency room," Rodney reflected. Eye injuries were nothing to fool around with. And stereoscopic vision was important in a bodyguard.

"Why?"

"You could have a detached retina!" Leaning forward anxiously, he asked, "Is your vision blurry?"

"Of course it's blurry, Rodney, I got hit in the eye!"

Janet banged back into the room, holding a bowl of crushed ice.

"Kim drove me to the Stop N Save," she explained.

"Yes, yes, that'll do nicely." Rodney scooped a lump of it into the middle of the towel and handed it to John.

"Is there anything else I can—"

"Actually, yes," said Rodney, although she'd been rather focused on John. He heaped their bugsprayed clothes into her arms.

"Have these laundered, would you? And get someone to bring us new bedspreads."

She blinked at him a moment, and John said, "I'd really appreciate it, Janine."

Melting visibly, she cast an adoring look John's way before tottering out the door laden with laundry. How could heels like that be practical in a housekeeping professional?

John had kicked the bedspread down into a heap at the foot of the bed. Holding the makeshift ice pack to his eye, John felt around on the end table beside him, asking, "You seen the remote?"

Rodney peered under the bed and beside it and found no sign of it. "No."

John gave him a strange, bunchy-eyebrowed look that Rodney was slowly coming to realize was a prompt of some kind.

With a noisy sigh, Rodney stamped over to the television and hit the power button.

It roared to life, showing the players of the football game leaving the field. He went to his own bed and opened his laptop, but John cleared his throat meaningfully and Rodney looked up at him and snapped, "Yes, what?"

"The game's over," John said.

"So? I'm sure something else chock full of testosterone and merchandising tie-ins will be on in a minute."

"I kinda feel like watching a movie."
"You've been hit in the eye, not paralyzed. Change it yourself."

John just looked at him, and the bruise on his face was beginning to darken already, and he really was very lucky he hadn't had his eyeball squashed like a grape by that walking billboard for steroid abuse.

Rolling his eyes, Rodney climbed off the bed and returned to the television. He stamped a finger on the channel button and it flipped to a cooking show featuring a blond man doing something with large knives.

John shook his head.

Ten channels later, John had naysayed a telenovela, a legal drama, a children's show about animals, and various disease-of-the-week films showcased on channels devoted to women's programming.

"Jesus, just pick something! I'm not your personal remote. If anything, you should be waiting on me. You're on my payroll, after all."

"This ice is all melted," John pointed out.

Giving up, Rodney took the proffered damp towel and unrolled it, grabbing a fresh handful of some still reasonably cubed ice from the bowl now swimming with runoff.

"Here. Are you hungry? You probably shouldn't take that painkiller on an empty stomach."

"Nah, I'm good."

"Fine. Then we're watching this," Rodney decided. "Whatever it is."

It turned out to be a horror movie about aliens who could disguise themselves as people you already knew. It reminded him uncomfortably of the Goa'uld and since it was set in Antarctica, Rodney was becoming increasingly unhappy about his film choice, but John seemed engrossed, and they both jumped when the doctor doing compressions on a guy who seemed to be having a heart attack got his arms chomped off by the gaping maw that had opened in the heart attack patient's chest. Rodney wondered if John Carpenter had been held for questioning by the U.S. Government, and by the end, was very very glad that the Goa'uld were decidedly tentacle free.

Rodney was strangely reassured that it was the middle of the day, although of course broad daylight wouldn't have prevented an alien invasion.

He found himself getting a bit homesick for the SGC, where he should be working on helping to find Ancient technology so the world would be able to defend itself against snake-headed overlords encased in lamé.

He wondered if, in the larger scheme of things, he hadn't perhaps slightly overreacted to the threat of General O'Neill after all.

Then, just as the camera panned away from the scene of alien devastation the channel changed.

A large man was belting a high note while dressed in chain mail.

The hell?

He swung his head over to John, who looked some combination of caught out and amused.

"Oops."
"You—you've had the remote all this time?"

He bounded over to John's bed and started digging around for it, while John laughed a semi-horrible slow, awful haw haw haw haw and writhed under Rodney's hunting hands.

After a moment, Rodney wondered just what the hell he was doing and froze.

One hand was under the small of John's back, the other braced on the other side of John's long, lean body.

John, breathing slowly, looked up at him with clear, steady green eyes.

Rodney stared back at him, perplexed.

Clearly, he was suffering from some sort of gay-making Stockholm syndrome, because suddenly he wanted to do nothing more than drop down and mouth at the vague shape of John's cock through his thin, thin boxer shorts.

There was a sharp knock at the door.

Rodney sprang away, panicked, and John looked sort of pissed before he yelled, "Who is it?"

"I brought your laundry," Janine said through the door.

Sitting up, John swung his legs off the bed and crossed the room to open the door for her.

"Thanks a lot, Janine," John said, and Rodney wondered if it was his imagination, or if John really did sound somewhat snide as he took the laundry from her arms and she stood there in the hallway, apparently waiting for something.

"Well." John said. "Thanks again."

She blinked at him.

Annoyed, Rodney fumbled for his wallet and peeled off a twenty.

"Here, thank you, go now, bye-bye, yes, that means leave," and he pressed the twenty in her hand and slammed the door in her face before rounding on John.

In retrospect, all those one-handed push-ups became decidedly suspicious.

"You've been flirting with me!" he accused.

John said nothing, and made no move to put down his laundry. His expression was bored.

"I wouldn't say that."

Rodney, who had intended to describe at length all the many ways that flirting with a client was inappropriate in a bodyguard/bodyguarded scenario, was abruptly crestfallen.

"So... you haven't been flirting with me?" He was appalled to hear that he sounded disappointed.

John flung the laundry down on Rodney's bed.

"Okay, fine. I was flirting with you. Can we move on now?"

"No, we can't move on! Now I'm all... confused. And possibly conflicted."
John arched a brow and said coolly, "Look, Rodney, no harm, no foul. I was just messing around."

"But..."

"Goddamn it, Rodney—" John snapped, and grabbed Rodney by the shoulders and dragged him close, letting Rodney get his footing before moving in very deliberately and pressing his mouth against Rodney's. It was warm and wet and John's kiss and his unshaven skin made Rodney's lips tingle and when John finally let him go, Rodney swayed slightly, empty hands swinging.


"Oh no, no, no my bodyguarding friend, you don't get out of this that easily," and Rodney wrapped his arms around John, setting a tentative hand on the rise of his ass before reaching up to kiss him—slowly, experimentally. By the time he'd run his hands up John's arms and stuck his fingers in John's spiky hair, John was sucking on his tongue, and his dick was surprisingly notable, nudging against Rodney's belly.

"Take off your shirt," John muttered, licking his ear.

Rodney obeyed instantly. "Now you," he ordered.

John only smirked at him, stepping back to skin out of his boxers instead.


Cock, Rodney thought blankly, and found himself licking his lips.

He settled his hands on John's hips and hurried him back toward the bed. John acceded with good grace. He shoved John's shirt up and spread the man's knees with slightly sweaty palms, bending low to lap hesitantly at the shiny head of John's blood-dark and rather intimidating cock.

He'd never been on this side of one before, and he decided he felt a new respect for the women who'd done this for him in the past.

"Look," John was saying, "I don't really have the patience for that right now. You're new at this," and Rodney felt unaccountably offended, but John just sighed, "Don't get huffy! Let's just... c'mere," and John hauled Rodney up bodily which was sort of incredibly hot and dragged Rodney down into a deep, messy kiss that Rodney was sure wouldn't have photographed well. In fact, he was sure it would have looked ridiculous to hidden surveillance cameras: John's nose mashed against Rodney's cheek, his mouth opening wide, his slick tongue stroking Rodney's... but whatever it may have looked like, it felt incredible, and there was something deeply thrilling about the way John's cock was nudging hard against Rodney's belly, his hip, god, his cock...

They moved around a lot, John's hands roving, Rodney's just mostly dealing with holding himself up so he could keep his mouth against John's. He found John's shirt maddeningly distracting, but forgot about it instantly when John slid both hands down the back of Rodney's boxers.

"Let me help you with those," John said in a low, smirking sort of voice, and he gave Rodney's ass a pinch, making Rodney jump, before John tugged the boxers down past Rodney's hips, so they bunched around his thighs.

Skin to skin was exponentially hotter. So much so that Rodney held himself very, very still. Beneath him, John kissed Rodney's throat and stroked Rodney's back with slow passes of his hands.

"Easy there," he said, and Rodney gave him a tiny nod as he felt his orgasm back off a little. After
another moment or two, he relaxed slightly and rubbed his face against John's hair.

"Look, it's been... a long time. And also? You're freakishly good-looking. I don't know if you know that." John's lazy expression said he did. "Look, just so we're clear on this, I'm not paying for the last couple of hours, okay? Because otherwise this whole thing goes to a very strange 'Pretty Woman' kind of place, and frankly I'm not comfortable with—"

"I get it, Rodney. Shut up before you say something I'll regret."

And John kissed him again, slowly this time, hungry and mind-meltingly good. His hand curled around Rodney's hip, and he bucked up against Rodney hard, spreading his legs and hooking his heels around the backs of Rodney's thighs.

"Oh god," Rodney stammered. He could—John would—there was every possibility that Rodney could actually fuck this man. The mental image alone made fat black spots crowd his vision, and he screwed his eyes shut and breathed shallowly through his mouth, tasting John on every inhale and promising himself that it would happen, and Jesus, happen more than once.

"Yeah," John agreed.

Rodney shifted to one side, suddenly overwhelmed, and petted John's ridiculously hairy chest, tucking his fingers under the fabric of John's tee shirt still hooked under John's armpits. John finally shrugged out of it and peered at Rodney curiously.

"Look, it's not that I don't... I mean. Coming won't be a problem, that's not it at all, it's just...

"Just...?"

I like you, Rodney wanted to say. And yet he had enough blood in his brain to realize how ridiculous it sounded.

John ran a soothing hand down Rodney's arm and said, "I'm gonna suck you off now."

Rodney came with a helpless little moan, pulsing against John's sweaty thigh.

Smiling weakly, he said, "Uh. That won't be necessary."

John gave him a dangerous grin and replied, "Oh, I think it's necessary. I guess I'll just have to wait a while." His hand curled around Rodney's softening cock, fingers wet with Rodney's come.

His hand left Rodney's skin and Rodney felt John cup his own hard-on with come-slicked fingers—he could feel John stroking himself, his knuckles against Rodney's belly. Rodney's dick gave a hopeful but exhausted twitch.

"Wait, wait," Rodney said, scrambling to his hands and knees, batting John's hands away and stroking the shaft of John's erection with the backs of his fingers. He could see the muscles in John's thighs jump and the soft skin under John's jaw as he stretched and tilted his head back. John bent his knees and lifted his hips, the head of his cock leaving a wet dab against Rodney's chin.

"This should not be hot," Rodney heard himself say aloud.

"Tell me about it," John said, sounding breathless and vaguely amused. And yet, clearly it was hot, or John wouldn't be hard for him.

It was mind boggling, really.
He opened his mouth and licked his lips again before cautiously taking the head of John's dick in his mouth.

It was warm and smooth and sort of... slimy, actually, but his mouth watered and he swallowed eagerly. Rodney knew that if he hadn't just come, he'd have gotten hard just from this. He took as much as he could and John made a strangled sound, one hand coming up to cup the back of Rodney's neck. There was a certain amount of slobber, but Rodney felt that the lack of expertise was trumped by his enthusiasm, and as John didn't seem to be complaining, Rodney sucked him until his jaw ached. And then he sucked him some more.

John pushed him off suddenly, and striped Rodney's upper arm. It was kind of shocking, actually, and Rodney stared at the come on his skin with stunned fascination. John wiped it off with his palm, which he then scrubbed against the sheets, and then he patted the bed next to him and Rodney crawled over to stretch out beside him.

There was an extended silence while Rodney watched John's breathing even out, and tried to keep himself from touching the drying skin of his upper arm.

Eventually, John turned his head and blinked at him.

Leaning up, John stretched out his neck and licked the still-tacky patch of skin on Rodney's arm.

"That should not be hot," Rodney insisted again, eyes fluttering shut.

"Weird, isn't it?" When he opened his eyes again, John was waggling his eyebrows at him. "Wanna do it again?"

"Yes, please," Rodney said automatically, letting his hand curl around John's shoulder. He wanted to kiss the bruise near John's eye, but wondered if that would be too forward somehow.

John got to his hands and knees and straddled Rodney, peering down at him with lazy interest.

Rodney's stomach rumbled loudly, and John laughed, sounding startled and oddly pleased.

"Um. We should probably eat first, though," Rodney added.

John patted Rodney's belly and climbed off the bed.

"I'll call down and get you a burger, grab a shower while we're waiting, and by the time it gets up here..." He did something ridiculous again with his eyebrows.

Rodney found himself basically appalled, and yet still turned on. There had to be mind altering drugs involved in this somehow, he thought. He nodded fractionally, and watched the long line of John's back as he picked up the phone to repeat Rodney's order from last night before he disappeared into the bathroom. Blinking drowsily, Rodney realized his ears were actually tingling from his recent orgasm. It was not unlike the mild shock he'd managed to give himself with a zat while working on reverse engineering one for the U.S. Government. Only far more pleasant.

Now that he thought about it, his toes were tingling, too. Wondering briefly if it was presaging future and possibly crippling circulatory problems, Rodney turned his cheek into the pillow and dismissed the possibility. The room smelled like sex and insecticide. It wasn't great, but it was certainly... memorable.

Eyes slipping shut, Rodney kept a half-hearted ear out for room service, but decided John could handle it on his own.
The rush of the shower was strangely soothing, and Rodney found himself drifting into a floaty post-orgasm nap.

The next thing he knew, John was dripping on him and the room was filled with people. People in uniform. People who were General O'Neill.

John was standing in front of Rodney's bed, wet and extremely naked. His head was a froth of shampoo bubbles, and Rodney couldn't see his expression, but his voice was low, controlled, and incredibly angry. "Just what the hell do you people think you're doing?"

"Sam?" Rodney said, seeing her in the front of the crowd.

Teal'c was behind her and Jackson was there, too.

"It's a death squad," Rodney said in horror, drawing the thin sheet up to cover his undefended nipples.

Sam rolled her eyes and said, "Rodney, we've been looking all over for you."

"How'd you find me?" Rodney demanded.

"We tracked the cell signal when you accessed your accounts," she said brightly. Rodney decided he was definitely going to have to work on a new backdoor.

"You're Sam?" John was saying slowly, lowering his hands.

General O'Neill was giving John a look like he'd run into a neighbor at the grocery store and couldn't quite remember his name.

"Major Sheppard?" He said eventually. "That you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't place you right away."

"Well, usually I'm wearing pants, sir."

"That would be it, then," the general said sagely.

"You two know each other?" Rodney felt suddenly pale and clammy; this had been a set up from the get go. Sheppard had only slept with him to stall for time so that—

"Sort of," John admitted.

"You knew him and you didn't tell me?"

John shrugged, looking weirdly normal despite his continued nudity.

"I figured if it really was General O'Neill, you weren't in any real danger, and that I'd just babysit you until you got bored enough to decide he wasn't actually going to fill you full of lead."

O'Neill gave Rodney a smug grin.

"Thought I was gonna gun you down, did you?"

Rodney's eyes went wide, and he swallowed, his dry throat clicking. "It had... crossed my mind," he
"Rodney, he was never going to hurt you," Sam said, sounding amused, and almost... fond.

"I was just dropping by with a pizza," O'Neill said. "Should have called first."

Sam gave Rodney a sheepish "what can you do?" sort of look.

"Anyway, we need to get you back to the SGC," Jackson said. "I think we've found something incredible and—"

O'Neill elbowed him in the shoulder, muttering "Ix-nay on the op-tay ecret-say uff-stay."

Jackson rubbed his shoulder, giving O'Neill a distracted pout.

"Dr. McKay, we have been trying to locate you for some time."

This was from Teal'c, whose pork pie hat was giving him a freaky sort of shady bookie look. The look of a huge shady bookie who could rip your arms off and beat you to death with them.

"Now hold on a minute," John said, "McKay's not going anywhere he doesn't want to go."

Sam blinked at him, dropped her eyes a bit, blushed pinkly and bit her lip. She looked so earnest and so pretty, that Rodney found himself sighing a little.

"We're not going to make him do anything, Major, I promise. You'll really want to see this, Rodney, it's—" She stepped forward eagerly, holding out a little blue triangle of crystalline material, but John sidestepped to block her and she stumbled a little. Reaching out automatically to steady her, John inadvertently knocked into the device—which immediately glowed into huge spangly life, throwing a cloud of glitter into the air that arrayed itself like galaxies.

"What the hell…?" John said wonderingly, and for a moment everyone just gaped at the pretty colors.

Eventually, John reached out and touched the triangle again, and the lightshow flickered out.

Now everyone was staring at John, except for O'Neill, who was studiously looking to one side.

"Why don't we all take a moment to get less naked," O'Neill said evenly, "and then we can all go back to the SGC and discuss this some more. While wearing pants."

John turned to Rodney, hand scrubbing through his ruff of soapy hair.

"Is that okay with you, Rodney?"

Rodney stared at him, wondering why the room wasn't filled with triumphant choral music. John had defended him from O'Neill wearing nothing but a smile. He was a natural ATA, he was apparently some brand of U.S. military, and he was still naked. He was the most beautiful thing Rodney had ever seen, except for, possibly, the stargate itself. But then the stargate had certainly never offered to give him a blowjob, so therefore John was in the lead.

"Rodney?" Sam was asking. Teal'c was staring at him with mild interest. Jackson seemed to be enthralled by the velvet Elvis painting on the wall, and O'Neill was ostentatiously peering at his watch.

Meeting John's eyes, Rodney found his voice.
"If it's okay with you."

Everyone waited to see what John would say.

*

Three weeks later, John was pacing the hall while a crowd of scientists and marines bustled around the gate room, drilling for the actual moment the gate would connect to the lost city of Atlantis.

"I'm not sure about this whole reinstatement thing," John said, sounding harassed.

"You're saying this now? We've got one foot in the next galaxy, practically! Now is not the time to be getting cold feet."

"I dunno, Rodney. I think now is pretty much the perfect time." Rodney reminded himself that he shouldn't find John's snitty tone and snide expression such a turn-on and tried to look the part of 'sympathetic boyfriend'. "Look, O'Neill's a good guy and all, but Sumner... He's not too crazy about me."

Rodney frowned.

"Has he been giving you any trouble?"

John stopped pacing and something in his face relaxed.

"Not exactly. It's more like… the potential is there."

Stepping close, Rodney set a surreptitious hand on the small of John's back and said, "You want me to rough him up for you? Because I can do that. Shaving accident. Electric shocks every time he takes a leak. Leave it to me," Rodney said firmly, already lining up a proportional response.

"So how much is this little security detail gonna set me back?" John sounded lazy and impudent, which Rodney found reassuring, but also confusing.

"What?"

John tilted his head.

"You're a professional. You're probably way out of my price range. Maybe we could take it out in trade?"

"Oh. Oh! Well. I'm sure we could, we could work on a—a sliding scale."

John gave him a slow blink and tucked his hands in his pockets.

"What kind of sliding did you have in mind, Rodney?"

Rodney felt his ears get hot as a hundred pornographic thoughts exploded into his brain in a parade of orgiastic Technicolor carnality.

"Thought so," John said smugly.

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