Wraith Killers

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by LadyRa

Summary

Atlantis ends up with some unexpected new residents

Notes

This takes place between ninth and tenth season of SG1, and assumes Jack is still the head of the SGC. It's set in the 3rd season, probably early, for Atlantis, and I have no idea if those timelines line up, we're pretending, right? While we're at it, let's pretend there's no such thing as the Ori, okay? Weirdly enough this was going to be a Daniel/Ronon story back eons ago when I first thought it up, and back when it was just going to be a nice short story, but Jack WOULDN'T ALLOW IT, and now it is, as usual, one of my monster stories. Sigh.

Look at my new story wallpaper!!!! Thanks to Bine!!!!!
This was the picture that started this story. It was a real picture with some guy and Montana remade it with Rodney.
Chapter 1

As usual, John Sheppard and Elizabeth Weir welcomed the newly arrived soldiers and scientists as they stepped off the Daedalus. John watched the faces, looking for people he knew. Elizabeth had a list of arriving passengers, of course, and John had access to it, but he'd barely glanced at it. He didn't request specific people the way Elizabeth did, and Lorne was the one who actually checked in the new military arrivals. He noticed someone vaguely familiar and nudged Elizabeth. "Don't we know that guy?" John searched his mind for a name.

She followed his pointing finger and her jaw dropped. "Oh, my God," she said in surprise. Moving quickly, she headed on an intercept path.

Whatever his name was, obviously Elizabeth thought it was a big deal. John got there just in time to watch them smile at each other, and then Elizabeth put out her hand. "Dr. Jackson. I didn't realize you were coming."

Dr. Jackson. Dr. Daniel Jackson. John remembered now. He'd seen the man in Antarctica, usually with General O'Neill circling around him. Even in the short time John had been at SGC, it was clear the guy was as much of a legend as General O'Neill.

"I wasn't sure if I'd be able to make it," Jackson explained. "But I had all the right papers signed, so Caldwell let me board."

"I should hope so," Elizabeth exclaimed. "I'm thrilled to have you here."

"Really?" Jackson asked, as if he hadn't been sure of his reception. "I hoped you wouldn't mind."

"Mind? Why would I possibly mind? I can't wait to sit down with you and show you the translations I've made. I'm sure you'll see all sorts of errors."

"I doubt that," he said kindly.

"I'm Lt. Colonel John Sheppard," John said, deciding it was time to be noticed.

Daniel shook his hand, smiling nicely. "Colonel. It's very nice to see you again. It sounds as if you've been able to pull one miracle after another out of your magic bag of tricks. Even Jack's been impressed."

"Jack?"

"General O'Neill," Jackson explained.

Oh. John should have guessed. He grinned. "Well, welcome to Atlantis, Dr. Jackson."

"Daniel, please," he said and then to Elizabeth, "And that goes for you, too, please."

"All right," she said with a grin. "I still can't believe you're here. I can't believe General O'Neill let you go."

John saw a small grimace cross Daniel's face and wondered what it meant.

Elizabeth kept talking. "The last time I saw the two of you, you were trying to talk him into letting you come with us, and he was saying no quite emphatically."
"Um." Daniel said. "He doesn't...um." He stopped whatever he was going to say and started to look around.

John wanted to know what Daniel had been about to say but then saw the starry-eyed look on Daniel's face and chose not to interrupt him. He knew that look. John was pretty sure he'd had it on his face last night when he stood out on the balcony and watched the sun go down casting its last golden rays on the spires of Atlantis.

Daniel was looking all around him, his eyes as large as saucers with a goofy grin on his face. "I'm here," he said reverently. "I'm in Atlantis."

John couldn't help but grin back, along with Elizabeth. "You're definitely here," John confirmed. He wasn't positive, but it almost looked like Daniel was glowing.

"This is so annoying," Rodney muttered as he raced along the hallway, glaring at the lights that were shining too brightly for no apparent reason—using power they couldn't afford to use.

He saw John and Elizabeth and headed straight toward them. He didn't know how, but somehow this was all John's fault. Rodney just knew it. They were talking to another person, but Rodney dismissed him as unessential. "What are you doing?" Rodney demanded of John.

"What are you talking about?" John asked, a line of contention drawn in his forehead.

"The city?" Rodney clarified as if John were the stupidest person alive. "What are you doing? Lights are shining, all the Ancient technology is working at a higher efficiency, and everything's blinking merrily. If this place were a Disney movie, there'd be little nauseating bluebirds zipping all over the place, probably landing on your shoulder. Did you get laid last night?"

"Rodney!" Elizabeth responded with a gasp that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, too.

Rodney rocked back on his heels. "Did I say that out loud?" he said to her. Then he shrugged, glared at John and said, "As long as the damage is done, answer the question. Did you?" Rodney wasn't sure why the thought infuriated him.


"Ah ha!" Rodney said with a pointing finger. "You did. You Kirk you," he said scathingly, a flash of disappointment, maybe even, God forbid, envy, washed through Rodney. He gestured at the city. "Well, try to turn off the afterglow. We're wasting power."

"I'm not doing anything," John protested. "It's probably him," he added.

"Him, who?" Rodney asked, finally taking a look at the third person. His eyebrows climbed up on his forehead. "Dr. Jackson? What are you doing here?" Rodney felt an acute sense of anxiety about the doctor's presence. He spun to John. "You're trying to get rid of me, aren't you?"

John sputtered at him.

Rodney spun back to Daniel. "What are you doing here?" he demanded again.

"Rodney," Elizabeth reproved again. "I hardly think..."

Rodney was back to John. "Don't even think about replacing me on your team with Dr. Jackson. Just because he's been on SG-1 for nine years, doesn't mean he can do the things I can do. You need
"me." Before John could even get his mouth open, Rodney took a step closer to him. "You try to replace me," Rodney threatened, "I'll make you rue the day you were born. Are we clear?"

"Clear as rue," John drawled.

"Dr. McKay," Daniel said placatingly, "no one even knew I was coming. I'm only here to study the Ancients. I know the work you do here is amazing, and I have no intention of taking anyone's place. Sam's already used a few of your ideas, and she sent some work with me for you to review."

"Really?" Rodney said, pleased, momentarily diverted from his quest.

"Really. In fact, she gave me some information to give to you. She thinks your idea about opening up a communication wormhole will work."

Rodney squinted at Daniel. "Hmm. Okay." He frowned again. "You're really not here to replace me?"

Daniel looked at him like he was crazy. "I'm an archeologist. I can't do any of the stuff you do."

Rodney wasn't sure about that. As far as he had read and seen, Daniel could do anything he put his mind to. But Daniel also hadn't struck him as the lying kind. "You ascended," he blurted out. It suddenly made sense that the city was doing figurative cartwheels.

"Um," Daniel said.

"You ascended," Rodney said aggressively, as if arguing with Daniel's 'um'. "Twice."

Daniel looked like he wanted to argue, but he just opened and closed his mouth.

"And you're sort of glowing right now," Rodney pointed out.

Daniel looked down at himself in some alarm.

"In fact, it's probably what's got the city all worked up." Rodney frowned at Daniel. "You need to stop it. We're using too much power."

Daniel looked at his hand, which was definitely glowing. "I'm not sure how."

"Just think off," John suggested.

"No!" Rodney yelled. "Don't do that," he said with a blistering look at John. "Given the city's response to you," he said to Daniel, "you might shut everything off."

"Oh," John said. "Good point."

"So what should I do?" Daniel asked.

Rodney had no idea. The city hadn't done this for Chaya. He sniffed. Not that that was surprising. He was more surprised the city hadn't found a way to throw her over a balcony. Hussy. "Try--"

"Uh, Rodney," John interrupted, looking nervously at Daniel.

"Shit," Rodney said, taking a step back. Daniel was really glowing now. And so were the lights. If the city was playing music it would be performing a resounding version of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, cannons thundering overhead. The city liked Daniel a little too much; Rodney's scanner was going nuts. "I changed my mind! Tell it to stop! Tell the city to calm down!" Rodney yelled.
Daniel closed his eyes, concentrating, his brow furrowed.

It took a few minutes, but the lights finally toned down, and Daniel's luminosity decreased with it. He was still glowing, but you had to really look to notice it. Rodney checked his scanner; power usage was back to normal. In fact...

"What was that about?" John asked.

"Was the city truly responding to your presence?" Elizabeth asked, fascinated.

Daniel winced a smile at her. "I don't know."

Rodney bounced on his toes. "Whatever you're doing now, keep doing it." He frowned crookedly at Daniel. "By the way, what did you do?"

"I told the city to do what you wanted it to," Daniel said cautiously. "Is that okay?"

Rodney's eyes opened wide. "You did?" He stared at his scanner then grinned maniacally at Daniel. "The city really, really likes you. It's working at a 10% higher efficiency." He glowered at John. "Why didn't you ever tell the city to do that?"

John frowned back. "Because I think telling anyone or anything to do what you want is intrinsically a bad idea."

Rodney sneered at him. But after looking at his scanner, he bounced again and was back to grinning. "This is excellent," Rodney said to Daniel. Then he smirked at John. "Sorry, Colonel, I guess you're no longer the teacher's pet." A bothersome thought crossed his mind and he scowled at John, pointing at Daniel. "I know you have a thing for ascended beings, but try to keep your hands to yourself."

"Actually," Daniel began after a startled look at John and Rodney. "I'm not sure I did ascend a second time, but I did sort of die and come back to life again." He sent a sour look to the universe at large. "Naked, again." He sighed. "Anyway, Hermiod told me that when my body was, well, when it rematerialized, or whatever it did, there were some genetic changes."

"If you're willing," Elizabeth said, looking a little dazed, "I'm sure Carson would love to take a look at you."

"Sure," Daniel said agreeably enough.

Rodney was still playing with his scanner, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. Quickly glancing at Daniel, he said, "Want to go get something to eat?"

Daniel nodded. "I could eat."

Rodney stared at the scanner again and bounced on his toes one more time. "Well, come on, come on." He headed off, not even bothering to check if Daniel was behind him. "Then you need to come to my lab," he told the space he was assuming Daniel would be. "I have some experiments I want to try."

With a quick 'save-me' smile toward John and Elizabeth, Daniel said to them, "I'll talk to you later." With that he bounded off after Rodney.

John stared as the two them walked off together, feeling very, very annoyed about everything. He
was the one who usually ate with McKay, and he was the one McKay dragged down to his lab to play with Ancient stuff. And let's not even talk about being supplanted as Atlantis' fair-haired boy, and Rodney's accusation about his questionable 'thing' for ascended beings. And for damn sure he didn't get laid last night. "Oh, boy," he muttered under his breath.

"No kidding," Elizabeth added.

"What?" Jack yelled. "He's what?" He'd been in Washington for a whole freaking month. As soon as he'd gotten back, he'd gone looking for Daniel only to be told by Walter that he was probably in Atlantis by now.

"You approved his transfer," Walter said.

"And you didn't think I needed to know that?" Jack yelled some more.

"You signed the papers, sir," Walter said reasonably.

"What's your point?" Jack said as he stomped around the office. "I need to know these things. Damn it." He glared at Walter. "Get him back."

"I can't, sir," Walter informed him. "He's in Atlantis. The Daedalus won't be leaving there for a month, and it will take another two weeks after that before it's within communication range, at which point it would take them another two weeks to return to Atlantis and another month to return here."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Walter, you're fired."

"Yes, sir," Walter said. "Your next meeting's in one hour."

Jack sighed and sat down, waving at Walter to get the hell out. Shit. He hated meetings. He hated being a General. He hated his job. The only good thing about it was Daniel, and now that rat bastard had tricked him into letting him go to Atlantis. "Shit." His anger ran out of steam, and he slumped in his chair, feeling old and lonely and wondering what the hell he'd done to make Daniel run so far away.

John stalked down the hallways. Fucking Rodney McKay. The man had to be the most exasperating person on the face of the planet. Galaxy. Universe.

He toyed with the idea of going to the gym and beating the crap out of a punching bag, or maybe a willing Marine or two, but then decided he'd rather give McKay shit, so he headed toward the cafeteria.

Rodney and Daniel were still together when he arrived, blabbing away, thick as thieves. He got in line, made his choices through monosyllabic grunts, and then stalked to the table where they were sitting. Slamming his tray down next to Daniel, he sat down.

Their conversation came to a screeching halt, much to John's pleasure. Without saying a word, he started to eat.

Rodney frowned at him. "What's got you in such a snit?"

The unfairness of the question made John seriously consider throwing the remains of his almost-meatloaf at Rodney. Only the fact that it was one of the few entrees he actually liked kept him from
it. "What's got me in such a snit?" he asked in return, in that quiet voice that made most people back up.

"Something wrong with your hearing now?" Rodney asked around a mouthful of food.

Most people meant everyone but Rodney, something John just didn't get. Rodney totally fit in the category of people who should be wary of a man with a large gun, but for whatever reason, Rodney had never been afraid of John. Ever.

"Have I gotten laid? Not Atlantis' fair-haired boy? I tend to be attracted to ascended people? Any of that ring a bell?" John snapped out. He didn't mention that he and Rodney generally had lunch together if they weren't working to avoid imminent death. Despite the seemingly unending crises they experienced, they'd still managed to fit in a lot of lunches. And dinners. And evenings. John was taken aback at the realization that he spent a shitload of time with Rodney.

"And?" Rodney asked, unperturbed. "What's your point?"

John counted to ten.

Fortunately, Daniel interrupted the conversation before it could spiral into the depths of hell. "Are you really attracted to ascended people?" he asked John.

Rodney held up two fingers. Only a gargantuan mouthful of food kept him from speaking, for which John could only be grateful. He wasn't in the mood to have crumbs spewed all over him. John glared, silently warning him to keep his damn mouth shut. Again, unaffected, Rodney finally swallowed his food. "Glowy sex," Rodney announced.

Daniel's eyebrows shot up. "Glowy sex?"

"Once," John spit out. "I had glowy sex once," he said, shooting daggers at Rodney. "And that was none of your damn business," he bit out to his now very ex-best friend.

"Then you shouldn't have bragged about it, Colonel," Rodney said primly.

Okay, John mentally conceded. He had bragged about it, but it had only been to piss Rodney off.

"I was ascended for almost a year, and I never got the chance to have glowy sex," Daniel said with a hint of pout.

"You didn't run across John Kirk here," Rodney said acidly.

Daniel blinked at Rodney. "You held up two fingers," he pointed out.

John sat back with a disgusted sigh and pushed his tray away, his appetite lost. Figures it would happen on almost-meatloaf night. "She wasn't ascended," he explained through narrowed eyes, still glaring at Rodney. "And you left me there for six months. Six."

"I explained about the time dilation," Rodney said, chin up, looking affronted. "I worked as fast as I could. If I'd listened to Elizabeth, you'd have been in your grave by the time we showed up. And she wasn't ascended yet," he clarified spitfully with emphasis. "She was trying to become ascended, and after you had your way with her, poof, gone in a ray of light." His hands expressed the poof by fisting and then exploding open. If those fingers had come any closer to John's face he would have bitten one off.

"Really?" Daniel asked, fascinated. "She ascended after…" he delicately left off the second half of
"Not right after," John said witheringly. "Her whole village was trying to ascend."

"Wow," Daniel said.

John decided it was time to get back at Rodney. Slouching back in his chair, John spread his legs a little, assuming the pose that always seemed to generate the most amount of attention at a party. He shot Daniel his best come-hither lopsided smile, and drawled, "I understand you've ascended twice." He raised one eyebrow.

Daniel blinked at him.

Rodney's jaw dropped open. "Hey!" he protested.

Stuttering, Daniel said, "Well, once for sure, maybe, um, twice."

John leaned forward. "I'd love to hear about it." It was true he never saw it coming when women walked into wherever he was and took their clothes off, but he'd always known how to go after what he wanted—at least until Rodney. Rodney was impervious to flirting unless you smacked him with a brick right between his eyes. John knew that for a fact, because he'd been giving it his best shot and gotten nowhere. He was stockpiling bricks in his quarters and was going to enjoy throwing them at the man. And while he didn't want Daniel, he so wanted to see that pole-axed expression on Rodney's face.

Daniel's eyebrows danced on his forehead as he first gave John a long stare from head to toe, and then looked between John and Rodney. "Um," was all he managed to say.

"Stop that," Rodney demanded.

"Stop what?" John asked, all innocence.

"The Kirk thing!" Rodney practically yelled.

"You're the one who said I had a thing for the ascended," John said. "Are you saying you were wrong?" Ha, thought John.

Almost incoherent with indignation, Rodney babbled out nonsense for a few moments before finally hissing, "Keep your hands to yourself."

"Why? Why do you care what I do with my hands?"

"Because you're m--" Rodney cut off mid-word. "Never mind. Forget it. Have fun," he added bitterly. He got up fast enough to topple over his chair. Without bothering to right it, he picked up his tray, tossed it in the dirty line, and stormed out of the room.

John debated the wisdom in going after him, finally decided he liked living too much.

"You two remind me of me and Jack," Daniel observed. "We can get under each other's skin better than anyone. We spend half our time hanging out together, and half our time furious with each other."

"Yeah," John said. "That about sums it up."

Daniel cocked his head to the side. "You don't really have a thing for ascended people, do you?"
John shook his head.
"But you did have glowy sex?"

Smirking, John nodded.

"I never get to do the fun stuff," Daniel said with a sigh.

John suddenly felt ashamed of himself for acting like this to Daniel. "Sorry," he said. "I wasn't really coming on to you, I just wanted Rodney--" He cut off, frustrated.

"To make him jealous?" Daniel guessed.

"Maybe," John admitted. It was hard to lie to those sincere blue eyes.

"Think it worked?"

John shrugged, defeated. "I have no idea."

"How was it?" Daniel asked.

"How was what?" John said, confused.

"Glowy sex?"

John shrugged again. "Okay. Not as good as the real thing."

Daniel pursed his lips and studied John for a moment. "You could tell him how you feel, you know. You being in the military is the biggest obstacle. If you're willing, then you're only dealing with two people who either are or aren't attracted to each other." He paused. "I'm guessing are."

"You don't know Rodney if you think the only obstacle is me being in the military," John admitted with a rueful grin. "You haven't seen what Rodney can do when he's really pissed."

"I do know him," Daniel assured him. "It took a team of plumbers a week to figure out how to get the hot water turned back on at Stargate Command after Rodney was sent to Siberia."

John couldn't help but grin. "A week?"

"I've never seen General Hammond so angry," Daniel admitted. "Of course, when they found the problem, there was no way to prove Rodney had done it," he added with his own grin.

Snickering, John said, "That's Rodney." There was something so weirdly appealing about Rodney being so prickly and obnoxious, although John had no idea why. Maybe it was because he was the best entertainment to be had in a scary-ass world.

Daniel was studying him again.

"What?" John asked.

"Tell him," Daniel said in deadly seriousness. "Tell him how you feel. Don't wait until it's too late. Time goes by so fast, relentlessly fast. As you continue to fight your enemies here in the Pegasus Galaxy, at least you could be together."

This time it was John's turn to study Daniel. "Is it too late for you?"
"I don't know," Daniel said with a small sad smile. "Maybe it's always been too late. I've never been good at this sort of stuff."

"Yeah, me either," John confessed. "In fact, I usually can't talk about this shit at all. It's like pulling teeth."

That got a real smile from Daniel. "I don't know about that. You looked pretty good at it when you were putting on a show for me." He looked up at John through his eyelashes, his eyes huge and blue, and John thought maybe Daniel was better at this than he thought.

John smacked his hand over his face. "Pretend I didn't do that."

"It's forgotten. At least by me," Daniel added with a sly grin. "Something tells me Rodney's going to have a long, long memory."

Groaning, John shook his head. He needed to come up with the perfect peace offering if he ever wanted Rodney to talk to him again, let alone to keep him from cutting off his hot water, stopping up his toilet, or whatever other Machiavellian tortures the man could come up with.

His head set clicked. "Colonel Sheppard?" Zelenka's voice said.

"Go ahead," John responded.

"Can you come to jumper bay, please? It is necessary for you to activate a puddle jumper to check repairs."

"Be right there. Sheppard out." He looked at Daniel. "Duty calls."

"I understand," Daniel said graciously.

John stood, then with a rueful grin, apologized again. "Sorry, again. That was pretty high school of me."

Daniel's eyebrows rose. "No apologies necessary." He gave John a quick once-over. "I enjoyed the show."

With a short laugh, John decided he liked Daniel Jackson.

All the rumors about Daniel Jackson had made Ronon curious, so he waited for John to leave, and then got up to sit across from him. He gave Daniel a moment to notice him.

"Hey," Daniel said, his eyes friendly.

"I'm Ronon."

"I'm Daniel."

"You're new here," Ronon said unnecessarily.

"I am," Daniel agreed. "Are you new here, as well?"

"I've been here for about a year," Ronon informed him.

Daniel took a long moment to look at him. Ronon didn't think anyone had ever looked at him so intently before. "Not from Earth?" Daniel finally asked.
"Sateda," Ronon said. "My planet was attacked and most everyone died."

A genuine pain on his behalf crossed Daniel's face. "I'm sorry."

Ronon shrugged. "My home is here now." His chin pointed toward the direction John had left in. "With John Sheppard."

Daniel's eyebrows rose. "You and John--?"

It took Ronon a few seconds to figure out what Daniel was hinting at. "No. Me and Sheppard aren't sharing blankets."

"Sharing blankets," Daniel said with a soft grin. "I like that expression."

"I'd be willing," Ronon continued, grabbing Daniel's dessert and digging in. He'd given the man plenty of time to start eating it, but he hadn't made a move.

"With Sheppard?" Daniel hazarded a guess, making no move to steal his dessert back.

Ronon nodded. "But, he and McKay--" He stopped suddenly and leaned in, looking dangerous. "You're not military, are you?"

Daniel shook his head. "No, I'm not. And I think it's a stupid rule."

Ronon was glad Daniel had known what he was talking about. "Very stupid rule," he agreed.

This time Daniel leaned in to say softly, "So, do you think Rodney and John are sharing blankets?"

Ronon rolled his eyes. "No, but only because they can't get their heads out of their asses." He used his finger to scrape up the remaining dessert. "Idiots."

Snickering, Daniel drank a sip of coffee. "Are you in love with John Sheppard?"

"Nah," Ronon said easily. "But he's hot."

Daniel's mouth made a silent "oh," and he took another sip. It made Ronon think of all the things Daniel could be doing with that mouth.

"There's a betting pool on the two of them if you want in on it," Ronon offered.

"On John and Rodney?" Daniel asked, amused.

"Yeah. You want in on it?"

"No, thanks," Daniel said. "Though I appreciate you asking me."

Ronon grunted, nodded, and wished he had another dessert. It was good today. He thought about getting up and getting one, but he wasn't done with this conversation. "There are rumors that say you've been dead," he finally threw out.

"Really? There are rumors about me out here?" Daniel looked astonished.

"Have you?" Ronon asked, wanting to know the answer.

"Um, yes, actually. I have been dead. Three, maybe four times. Almost dead a few times, too."

"Dead dead?"
Daniel nodded. "Completely dead."

"How come you're not still dead, then?" Ronon asked, deciding that if anyone else had told him that, he wouldn't believe it. But, Daniel Jackson, Ronon somehow knew, wasn't a liar.

"Are you familiar with a sarcophagus?"

Ronon shook his head.

Frowning, Daniel thought for a moment. "It's a large box, a mechanism, that can heal almost anything, even death, if it's used quickly enough. The first time I died, someone put me in one, and it healed me. The second time I died, the Nox, another alien species with extraordinary powers, brought me back to life."

"Lucky," Ronon observed.

"Yeah, you could say that," Daniel said ruefully.

"What happened the third time?"

"Radiation poisoning."

"And the fourth?"

Grimacing, Daniel touched his chest. "Someone stabbed me."

"A killing wound?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes. But, then I was alive again, and I'm not sure if I died, or ascended, or what. I think maybe I ascended because Hermiod says my genetic structure is different, and that's what set off Atlantis when I arrived. I know it didn't happen the first time I ascended and descended, because the Ancient stuff that worked for Jack didn't work for me."

"You really ascended?" Ronon asked. He'd never even heard of an ascended being before he'd come to Atlantis. He, personally, didn't see the appeal. "Why?"

"As I said, I was dying of radiation poisoning," Daniel explained. "My skin was falling off and my organs were liquefying. One of the ascended I'd met earlier came to me and offered me the chance." Daniel shrugged. "So, I took it. Seemed to beat the alternative, and I was curious. I thought I could help."

"Could you?"

"Not as much as I wanted to."

"Is that why you came back?" Ronon asked, intrigued. While well familiar with death, Ronon had never met anyone who'd dealt with death so personally so many times.

"In a manner of speaking," Daniel said. "I broke some rules. Helped when I shouldn't."

"Good for you," Ronon said briskly, liking this Daniel Jackson.

That got a small smile.

"Do you miss it?" Ronon asked. "Being ascended?"
"No," Daniel said after a long moment's thought. "No, I don't. Living's better, I think. Harder in some ways, but better."

Ronon grunted again. "You want something else to eat?"

Daniel shook his head. "I'd love some more coffee, though," he countered.

"Just like McKay," Ronon said with a grin. He stood and moved to the food line, returning in a minute with another two desserts and a fresh cup of coffee.

"Is one of those for me?" Daniel asked politely.

"No," Ronon said. "You want me to get you one?"

Eyes amused, Daniel shook his head. "I'm good." He exchanged his old cup for the new one, and took a cautious sip.

"You're hot, too," Ronon observed casually, pulling the first of his two desserts closer and going after it with a spoon.

Daniel coughed on his sip of coffee. Putting the cup down, he coughed again, patting his chest. "Excuse me?"

"You're hot, too," Ronon said again.

Daniel just stared at him. Then, "Thanks?"

His uncertainty made Ronon smile. "You interested in sharing blankets?"

Daniel blinked. "Uh. With anyone or with you?"

"With me," Ronon said, finishing up his first dessert.

"Huh," Daniel said, his eyes wide. "No, but thanks. Really. I'm flattered."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure," Daniel said.

"You got someone else?"

"Not really."

"Like Sheppard and McKay not really?" Ronon asked, disappointed that Daniel had said no, but okay with it. There were plenty of other willing people on Atlantis.

"No, not even that much," Daniel said regretfully.

"You want me to shoot him for you?" Ronon offered.

Daniel let out a surprised laugh. "I'll let you know," he said with a grin.

"Okay," Ronon said, standing. "Gotta go. See you around, Daniel Jackson."

"Yeah, you, too, Ronon. Thanks, for, um, saying hello."

With a nod, Ronon dropped his dishes off, then headed off to the gym. A part of him was wondering
what was for dinner. The rest of him was wondering how in hell's name anyone could say no to someone that hot.

Daniel stared as Ronon passed through the door. Two propositions in one day. Maybe he should have found a way to come here a long time ago. Granted, John hadn't really been propositioning him, but it had felt real at the time. And Ronon's had been genuine enough.

Ronon was a handsome guy. Perhaps not the most scintillating of conversationalists, but he got his point across, and probably better than Daniel did with all his languages and education.

A small part of Daniel was tempted. It had been a long time, a really, really long time. But, Daniel had rarely been the sort of man who could have sex--no, share blankets--Daniel liked that phrase a lot, with someone he didn't truly care about. Every time he'd tried, it hadn't felt right. And seeing as the only person Daniel felt that way about was currently in another galaxy and had never given Daniel clue one that his advances would be welcome, Daniel didn't see himself getting lucky any time soon.

Besides, it wouldn't be long now before Jack found out that Daniel was gone, and he was no doubt going to be on Jack's shit list for a long time to come. Daniel wondered if Jack would even care after he got over his snit. Sometimes their friendship felt as strong as ever, and then, sometimes, Daniel wasn't even sure Jack liked him. Of course, that sort of defined what their relationship had been like for years, so it was nothing new. But, it had finally gotten to be too much for Daniel to deal with. If he couldn't have Jack, it was easier to be away from him. So here he was, in Atlantis.

Missing Jack.

Daniel sighed, took a last sip of coffee, then decided to go find Elizabeth. He needed some living quarters and then it was time to do some of the work that had pulled him here.

Jack had a respectable few feet of paper clips linked to each other. He was thinking of looking up the Guinness Book of World Records to see what it would take to beat the current record. He was a general, after all, so he could order as many goddamned paper clips as he wanted.

"General?"

Looking up, Jack saw Carter standing in his doorway. "What?" he groused, not really in the mood for technobabble.

"I thought you might want to get some lunch, sir," she said, trying her best not to notice the mound of paper clips, but Jack could see that her eyes kept dropping to his desk. "I thought you might need a break," she added, starting to smile, "from all your hard work."

"Ha ha," Jack said sarcastically. "Carter," he asked, leaning back and putting his feet up on his desk. "Am I that much of a bastard?"

"Sir?" she asked, looking surprised at the question.

"Sit," he said, pointing at the chair across from him. "Just answer the question."

"I need a little more than that to go on," Carter answered carefully, sitting down as directed.

"Why'd Daniel leave?"
Carter bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm not sure."

"But you knew he was leaving?"

She nodded.

"And you didn't think you should tell me?" Jack asked her, annoyed at her, at Daniel, at fucking everyone.

Her mouth dropped open. "You didn't know?" Then, "You signed the orders."

"He pulled a Radar O'Reilly on me," Jack pouted. "The bastard." He dropped his feet off the desk and leaned forward. "What I want to know is why?"

"He's wanted to go to Atlantis ever since we found it," she tried.

"And I told him he couldn't go," Jack protested, which, as far as he was concerned, should have been the end of it.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you tell him he couldn't go?" she asked, perplexed.

"It was a one-way trip, Carter," Jack said, exasperated. "Of course I wasn't going to let him go. I wouldn't have let any of you guys go. I need you here."

"It hasn't been a one-way trip for a long time now, sir. You could have let him go. It's not like we wouldn't have seen him again, or been able to contact him if we needed to."

Jack scowled. "I want him here."

"Why?" she asked him again. "Why do you want him here?"

"Why do you think?" Jack snapped.

"I don't know, Jack," she said, using his name, letting him know this conversation was now off the record. She'd earned that right. He and Carter, hell, all of SG-1 had been through too much together to be anything but friends now, despite the difference in ranks. He focused back on her words as she said, "You and Daniel are like two peas in a pod one day, and like oil and water the next. If you weren't military, I'd--" She suddenly stopped.

"You'd what?"

Carter tightened her lips, opened her mouth to speak then shut it again with a frown. Then, looking determined, she said, "It's a subject I'm not supposed to ask about, and you're not supposed to tell."

Jack's eyes widened. "Me and Daniel?" he asked faintly.

She shrugged. "It's crossed my mind. It's crossed a lot of people's minds. Surely, you've heard the rumors."

Jack had heard the rumors, but he'd also heard about him and Carter, him and Teal'c, even him and Hammond, for God's sakes. He ignored them, and sooner or later they all went away. He pushed his chair close enough to the desk to get his elbows planted and arms crossed in front of him. "You think
that's why he left? Because he thought I--that I wanted him that way?"

"No," she said shortly.

He thought about it. Something was being said here, but he wasn't quite sure what. Jack thought about it some more. Then his eyes opened wider than before, floored at the possibility. "You think he felt that way about me?"

Carter only shrugged, which Jack took for probable confirmation.

"Did he tell you that?" Jack asked, dumbfounded, wondering how he could have been so blind not to see this, and astonished at how weirdly appealing the idea was.

"Not in so many words," Carter said, looking like she was sorry she'd brought the whole thing up, "but I've known Daniel for a long time. General …Jack," she amended sincerely, "I don't want this to end up hurting Daniel, in any way."

"What did he do that made you think that?" Jack asked, captivated at the thought of Daniel crushing on him.

Carter rolled her eyes. "I can pass him a note when I see him next, if you want."

Okay. Jack guessed he deserved that. The question was sort of ninth grade. But, still, "Can you tell me anything?"

"No," Carter said firmly. "I can't. I don't want to abuse Daniel's trust more than I already have. I just, you just asked, and you sounded like you really needed to know." She stopped talking, looking stubborn.

"I'm old, Carter," Jack confessed, weary.

"You're not old," she protested.

"Yeah, I am. I'm old, and creaky, and I'm tired of going home to an empty house."

"That doesn't get easier, does it, sir?" she admitted.

"Why didn't you marry Pete, Sam? And don't tell me it was because you were in love with me, because that's horse shit."

She smiled tightly at him. "Because I'd rather face down a Goa'uld than face a commitment?"

"I've never met anyone more committed than you," Jack said.

"To my work. To a cause," Carter said definitely, like she'd given this a lot of thought. "Same as you, same as most of us here. We're consumed by what we do. It's important, and none of us want to dilute that with anything as undependable as love," she ended a little bitterly.

"But sooner or later the work's done, and then what do you have?" Jack asked her.

"An empty house to go home to at the end of the day," she said resignedly.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing at his chin with one hand. "An empty house." He eyed Carter a little nervously. "Did I ever really give you the impression that it'd be you and me in that house some day?"
She shook her head. "No, sir, you didn't. It was fun to think about every now and then, but no. I think we both knew we'd drive each other crazy and end up again in our own empty houses sooner or later. Probably sooner."

Relieved, Jack grinned. Yeah, it had been fun to think about every now and then, but it had never been anything more than that to him.

"Do you want Daniel in that house of yours?" she suddenly asked.

Applauding Carter for her temerity at asking, Jack gave the question its due. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I mean, not that way, the don't ask don't tell way, but yeah, I guess I always sort of saw him there. I don't know why. He hates to fish."

Carter laughed. "He does, doesn't he? He wouldn't even put bait on his hook."

Talking about him reminded Jack that Daniel was a galaxy away. He wouldn't even be coming over to Jack's for beer and pizza, let alone retiring with him. "I want to talk to him."

Carter looked at him.

"I mean it. Figure out how. I don't want to wait until the Daedalus comes back, or until Daniel gets tired of Atlantis. Weren't you babbling something about some work of McKay's, some kind of wormhole telephone thingy?"

She nodded, her eyes lit with excitement. "It's genius, actually, even though I have no intention of telling McKay that. I think it'll work."

"When?" Jack wanted it to be working tonight.

"Months if not longer," she said. "I need Rodney's input, and all our proofs will end up going back and forth on the Daedalus. He should have just gotten my latest work."

"Will it happen faster if you can talk to him?" Jack asked.

"Of course."

"Open a wormhole. Talk to him. Get it working."

"It'll take us dozens of conversations to work everything out, and I don't think we have the power for that." She hesitated, then, said, "Why don't you just open a wormhole and talk to Daniel?"

He slapped the table. "See, Carter? That's why I pay you the big bucks."

Grinning at him, she shook her head in a you're-hopeless sort of way. "Do you want me to arrange for some time tonight?"

Jack shook his head. "Nah. I gotta figure out what I have to say to get him to come back."

"He might not want to come back, sir," she cautioned him.

He scowled at her. "Then you better help me come up with some arguments to convince him."

Sighing, she stood. "Can we go get lunch first?"

Deciding he was hungry, Jack stood, too. "Good idea."
"Rodney," John said to his back as he worked at one of the laboratory consoles.

"Busy," Rodney said in that annoying sort of sing-songing way he had. "Too busy to talk."

"Rodney," John said again, just as determined to get the man's attention.

"Really, really busy." Rodney didn't even turn around, just sort of waved go-away fingers over his shoulders.

Resisting the urge to throttle the man, John finally snapped out, "We have a mission in ten minutes, assuming you can find time in your really, really busy schedule to gear up and get to the gate room."

"Oh." Rodney turned around. "I forgot." He winced a lopsided smile at John. "I'll go gear up."

Now that he had Rodney's attention, John thought maybe he could sneak in an apology. "Rodney," he began.

"Busy," Rodney said. "Can't talk now." He walked out of the lab, leaving John standing there realizing he was in even deeper shit with Rodney than he thought. He'd have to come up with something really cool to placate the man. As he headed to the gateroom, John decided when he got back he'd go explore the city and see if he could find some Ancient doo-dad that would make Rodney's day.

They were visiting one of the last planets on the list old Elizabeth had provided them to help them find a ZPM. Without waiting for John, Rodney had paired himself with Teyla, and the two of them had gone off to scour the ruins for the source of the energy signal Rodney had picked up. John thought about making a stink, but decided against it. It's not like Teyla couldn't handle anything that came up at least as well as John, and probably better in some cases.

But, still, John was planning on having a talk with Rodney about who was in charge on these missions, even if it meant he had to tie Rodney up to listen to him. One of John's eyebrows went up at that thought, his brain, and other parts of him, enthralled by the possibilities.

"Sheppard," Ronon called to him, his gun pointed in a purposeful way at the ground.

Chastising himself for letting his thoughts wander on a mission, John went over to see what Ronon was looking at. "What is it?"

"Blood," Ronon said in his usual succinct way.

John tapped his headset. "Teyla, you there?"

"I am here, Colonel Sheppard," Teyla said in response. "Is there something wrong?"

"I don't know," John said. "We found some traces of blood. We're gonna follow the trail and see where it leads. Stay frosty."

"Excuse me?" she said.

John could almost see her brow furrow. "It just means keep a close lookout. And keep an eye out for McKay."

"I see. In that case, I shall," there was a pause, "stay frosty."

Grinning, John clicked his headset off. "Let's go," he said to Ronon.
The trail went on for some time, sometimes easy to follow, sometimes more difficult. Twice, Ronon had to hunt for it when they lost it. He crouched down, his fingers touching a mark on the earth. "I found an animal track. It's big."

Now that he'd said it, John could see the print, too. It was scuffed, which made it difficult to recognize what kind of animal, but it obviously had large claws, and made John look around nervously. Large clawed animals and blood weren't a soothing combination.

Ronon stood and resumed tracking, John watching their six. They found the first dead carcass five minutes later. "Jesus," John said with a grimace. "It looks like a kitten. Or it looked like one anyway." It had been slashed open half a dozen times. He pointed ahead. "There's more blood."

They left the dead kitten behind and continued following the trail. They found a second and a third one about half a click away from the first; they weren't in any better shape than the first. Holding his P-90 firmly, John did a 360 turn, checking for danger. John was predisposed to hate anything that ripped kittens apart.

"There's more blood, Sheppard," Ronon called out.

Great. He decided to check in with Teyla again. "Teyla?"

"We are fine, Colonel," she assured him, as if knowing that was what he wanted to hear. "Have you found the source of the blood?"

"Yes and no," John answered. "We keep finding dead animals, but the trail of blood hasn't ended yet. What's McKay doing?"

"He is working on his laptop," Teyla said. "He has found the source of the energy reading and is investigating it."

"Good. Keep him inside," John counseled. Rodney was larger and a lot tougher than a kitten, but John wasn't taking chances. When Rodney freaked he was just as likely to run toward danger as away from it.

"Sheppard," Ronon hissed, peering around a large boulder.

"Gotta go," John said, tapping off his headset. He moved quietly to join Ronon, taking his own peek. His jaw dropped. "Holy shit, is that a pterodactyl?" It was huge. And, John saw, much to his dismay, that it had one dead kitten smushed under one of its feet, accounting for the blood trail they'd been following, and was doing its best to dismantle another kitten. It ripped into the kitten one more time and brought out a hunk of bleeding flesh. Its heart, maybe, or some kind of organ. It lifted its beak up and swallowed down its prize. John wondered why it wasn't just swallowing the damn thing whole, but decided maybe it didn't like all that fur.

"What's a pterodactyl?" Ronon asked. "You mean that big lizard thing with wings?"

John took another look and decided it did sort of look like a big lizard thing with wings, but that's sort of what pterodactyls looked like, too. It sat back on its haunches and, lifting its beak again, let out an ululating cry that sent shivers up and down John's back.

That was when John heard a plaintive mew. For a horrified moment he thought the dismembered kitten was still alive, but then he realized the mew was coming from slightly farther away.

Unfortunately, the creature heard the sound as well, and its body went on alert, head cocked as if listening. Right then and there, John determined that there was no fucking way that thing was tearing
another kitten apart right in front of him.

"You go after the kitten," John told Ronon. "I'll distract the pterodactyl." Hoping Ronon would just obey orders and not give John any shit about it, John stepped out from around the rock. "Hey!" he yelled, waving his arms.

The creature spun around, its beady little eyes now ferociously focused on John. It was really, really big.

The kitten chose that moment to mew again.

The pterodactyl thing's head moved sharply, honing in on the mew, then back to John. John had no doubt that he was looking like a larger source of giblets than a little kitten. Like in a Looney Tunes cartoon, John could almost see himself in the thing's eyeballs, trussed up like a turkey.

In his peripheral vision he could see Ronon searching the bushes. The creature looked like it was taking an interest in Ronon, too, so John took a step closer to it. "Over here, Rodan," he yelled.

Deciding to take John seriously, the creature lunged at him, fast. Really, really fast. John saw his life flash before his eyes, even as he pressed against the trigger mechanism of his P90. Just as he got the first spray of bullets off, he heard Ronon's gun fire, and the thing's head blew off.


Ronon shrugged and casually put his gun away, as if shooting dinosaurs was all in a day's business, then reached down into the grass at his feet and lifted out a white kitten with black stripes. He walked to John and unceremoniously dumped it into John's arms. "Here," he grunted.

John scrambled not to let it fall, letting his P90 hang loosely, as he held the kitten in both hands. Its body wasn't much bigger than the area of his two hands together, its four paws and tail extending past. The thing kind of mrrwwped, then yawned, revealing a pink mouth, a little pink tongue, and the start of tiny sharp teeth. "Where's your mom?" John asked it. It looked too little to be on its own.

"What'd it say?" Ronon asked John, eyes mocking.

John shot him his best sneering lip curl, and suggested, "Let's look for her."

They searched the area, but only turned up one more eviscerated kitten, no sign of a mother anywhere. John held the animal up, saying, "You are one lucky kitten."

"What are you gonna do with it?" Ronon asked, keeping a wary eye on the sky, as if expecting it to rain winged lizards.

And just like that, John had a great idea. "I'm taking it back with me," he said with a grin.

"For the kitchen?" Ronon said disparagingly. "It's not even enough for a sandwich."

"Ewww," John protested. "No, not to eat. As a pet. It's for Rodney." It was the perfect peace offering. Elizabeth would have a cow, but John could work around that.

"A pet?" Ronon asked, as if he'd never heard the word before.

"Yeah, you know, a small furry animal you keep around for company."

Ronon shot John one of his how-have-you-survived-this-long looks.
Grinning, John tapped his headset. "Teyla?"

"Yes, Colonel. What have you discovered?"

"A pterodactyl type thing," John said.

"You found a dinosaur?" Rodney's voice said in excitement.

His voice brought John back to the day he'd both shot Rodney and thrown him over the railing. Rodney was such a six-year-old when he got excited.

"Don't get too excited," John warned him. "Ronon blew its head off."

There was a disgusted snort. "Of course he did."

"You find anything worth staying for?" John asked Rodney.

"No." There was another sound of disgust. "The signal I was picking up was some sort of electronic buoy, no doubt left so someone could find their way here again, although I have no idea why. There's certainly no ZPM here."

"Let's go home, then," John said. It was disappointing that there wasn't a ZPM, but at least they could go now.

"Wait," Rodney complained. "Maybe there're more dinosaurs I could see before Rambo blows them apart."

"It was really big and mean, with a long pointy beak that it was using to tear animals apart and eat their insides like giblets," John pointed out.

There was a long moment of silence, then, "Right. Meet at the Stargate, then?"

"Yeah," John said, manfully biting back a laugh. "See you in fifteen or so. And Teyla?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"Keep an eye to the sky. There might be more of them."

"Understood," came her steady reply.

John clicked off his headset, tucked the kitten in the crook of one elbow like a football, and held his weapon with his free hand. "Let's go," he said to Ronon.

The return to the Stargate was uneventful, and as he approached, John could see Rodney and Teyla waiting for them. He gave some thought as to how to hide the kitten so he could surprise Rodney with it later. He didn't think it would fit in any of his pockets, besides, he'd be expected to give a report to Elizabeth. He stole a look at Ronon's outfit, wondering if he could hide the kitten in his vest.

The look Ronon shot him disabused him of that notion, quickly.

Moments later the question became moot, as two pterodactyl things suddenly shot into view above them. "Crap!" John yelled, running toward the gate. "Dial it up!" he hollered to Rodney. He unzipped his tac vest a couple of inches and rammed the kitten inside, ignoring its mrowling complaints.
After Rodney took a look at the sky, his eyes almost bugged out of his head, and he started slamming his hand down on the DHD keys. Teyla was already firing on one of the creatures as it tried to dive bomb her and Rodney. John ran faster, trusting Ronon to take care of the second one, and then he joined Teyla in firing on the one getting dangerously close to Rodney.

He heard the one behind him hit the ground with a bang, courtesy of Ronon's gun. One of these days, John had to get himself one of those. Between him and Teyla, the second pterodactyl was bleeding profusely, and was now keeping its distance, letting out a keening cry.

The wormhole kerwooshed into being just as several more of the creatures appeared in a heavy rush of wings. "Go, go!" John yelled, waving his hand at the wormhole. As Rodney stood there, John wondered what the fuck he was waiting for. When Rodney started firing his own weapon at the creatures, John realized with a start that Rodney was waiting for him.

He hit the dais, Ronon right behind him. "Go!" he yelled again.

This time Rodney obeyed his command, jumping through, Teyla right behind him. He and Ronon hit the circle at the same time, and John could swear he felt the wind of a large beak snapping shut centimeters from his body.

As he shot out the other side, he could already hear Rodney yelling, "Close the shield! Close it!"

The second it went up, there was a huge thump against it, then another, then a third, fourth, and fifth thump. The wormhole disengaged, and the silence in the gateroom was momentarily deafening.

The silence was broken by an unhappy mew.

John had forgotten all about the kitten.

"What was that?" Elizabeth asked, one eyebrow up.

Deciding to surrender the kitten's fate to Rodney's protection, John unzipped his vest, pulled the kitten out, and said, "It's a present for Rodney. Here." He handed it over without ceremony.

Rodney took it with surprisingly gentle hands, considering the unexpectedness of the gift. "For me?" he said in surprise. "You got me a cat?" he added with incredulous delight, a lopsided smile on his face. He held the kitten in one hand, his other caressing its fur. The sight of Rodney's hands touching the kitten so gently did something funny to John's insides, sort of like how he felt when he was zipping around on a large Ferris wheel.

John couldn't help but grin back. The kitten was putty in Rodney's hands, legs dangling over his palm, its head resting on Rodney's wrist. Its purr could be heard all over the control room.

"You brought an alien animal to Atlantis?" Elizabeth asked in a disapproving tone.

"It's a kitten," John pointed out.

"It needs to be returned to its planet," she said. "It doesn't belong here."

"The rest of that kitten's family was torn apart by this big pterodactyl thing," John protested. "I saved this one."

At John's words, Rodney held the kitten close to his chest, glaring at Elizabeth through narrowed eyes.
"Until we decide what to do with it," Elizabeth said firmly, "it needs to be in quarantine."

John thought Elizabeth would have as much luck getting that cat away from Rodney as she would getting a slab of meat away from a pack of ravenous wild dogs.

"First of all," Rodney said in scathing tones, "Atlantis, remember? If this tiny defenseless kitten had any kind of contaminant dangerous to humans, the city would be containing it by closing down the control room. Do you see any doors closing? No? I didn't think so. Second," he added hotly, holding the kitten out for everyone's perusal, "Tiny. Defenseless. Kitten."

As if in full support, the kitten let out another piteous mew.

Rodney immediately brought it back close to his chest, speaking softly to it. "Did that mean old lady scare you?" he asked.

Elizabeth let out an unusual, for her, affronted noise. "Rodney," she protested.

"Don't you worry," Rodney continued in his cutesy voice, "I won't let her hurt you." He started to walk away. "I know this doctor with a very disturbing affinity for sheep," he told the kitten. "For once that might actually be a good thing, as I'm sure he'll know just what to feed you." He started walking away.

"Rodney," Elizabeth called. "Debriefing."

"Yes, yes," Rodney called back distractedly with a dismissive hand-wave over his shoulder. "Later. Saving a life now." With that, he walked through a set of doors, which then closed behind him.

Oh yeah, John thought to himself with a grin. The kitten was a stroke of genius. It was like getting a Get-Off-of-Rodney's-Shit-List-Free card. He'd be able to milk this for months.

"John," Elizabeth said in a less than pleased tone of voice.

John slowly spun in her direction. "Yes?" he asked, in his most innocent voice.

Her eyes narrowed at him. "Perhaps you might be willing to debrief me on your mission?" she asked him, dangerously polite. "In my office."

"Sure," he said genially. Getting reamed out by Elizabeth was a small price to pay for that look on Rodney's face.

Later that day, Elizabeth sat back in her office chair and watched Daniel Jackson at work. He occasionally spoke, but more, she thought, to think out loud versus actually communicating with her.

In two hours, he had deciphered more Ancient than she had in the well over two years that she'd been here. Granted, she'd had a few things on her mind, but still, she was gracious enough to know when she was in the presence of sheer genius.

It was easy to be gracious with Daniel. He was so unassuming about his genius, as opposed to Rodney, who liked to sledgehammer you with the fact whenever he had the opportunity. Not that he wasn't equally awesome to watch in action. The problem was that when she was watching Rodney in action, they were usually all about to die. She wasn't sitting in her office, drinking coffee, relaxed, like she was now.

Elizabeth observed Daniel scrolling down the computer page. It wasn't so much that he'd actually
deciphered more than she had, it was that he'd understood it better. It gave her a glimpse into how his brain worked, how it could hold over twenty languages, why he had been SGC's best first contact representative for years.

Words on a page spoke to Daniel in a way they seldom spoke to anyone else. He saw within the spaces between the letters and words, a civilization, a way of being, a societal structure. It was a code he seemed to break effortlessly. He'd shown her how the Ancients thought, how their writing needed to be approached, and it all made so much more sense.

"You need to show Rodney what you've shown me," Elizabeth said. Rodney would be beside himself. With assistance from Daniel, Elizabeth suspected Rodney would finally be able to crack the databases that had been resistant to his efforts up to now. Perhaps there would be information regarding where to find ZPMs, perhaps even how to make them.

"Hm hmm," Daniel mumbled, eyes glued to the computer screen.

Grinning, Elizabeth asked, "How did you convince General O'Neill to let you go?" There hadn't been the slightest chance of Daniel going with the expedition back at the beginning, even though Elizabeth knew Daniel would have come if given the opportunity.

"I didn't," Daniel said absentmindedly.

"Didn't what?"

"Convince him," Daniel said. He grabbed a pad of paper and started jotting down a few notes.

"I don't understand," Elizabeth prompted.

"He doesn't know I'm here." As if suddenly realizing what he was saying, Daniel straightened up in the chair, adjusted his glasses, and glanced at the calendar on Elizabeth's desk. With a quick, wincing smile, he amended, "Well, he probably does now."

Elizabeth blinked at Daniel. "I thought you said your paperwork was in order." She couldn't imagine Steven Caldwell would have dared to take Daniel Jackson away without signed orders from O'Neill.

"Um," Daniel said, grimacing, "I did."

Elizabeth shot him a look. Working with John and Rodney over the years had provided an excellent opportunity to hone her bullshit meter. "Daniel."

Leaning back in his chair, Daniel threw the pencil onto the desk, and blew out a sigh. "He wouldn't let me go and never gave me a good reason why. He's not even around anymore. He's off to Washington for weeks at a time."

She let that all percolate for a few moments; there was a lot going on in those few short sentences. She waited for him to continue speaking.

As if realizing he wasn't getting off the hook, Daniel admitted, "I snuck the request into the middle of a bunch of requisitions. Jack hates signing those things so he usually doesn't even look at them."

"Daniel Jackson," she scolded, somehow amazed he had it in him. He came across as so mild-mannered. Like Superman, she thought to herself. He even had the glasses.

His face was set in a mulish expression. "I've been doing the same job for too long. I was losing myself." He gestured around the room, around Atlantis. "This is what I love to do. To explore, learn,
meet new races, establish friendships." He leaned forward, adding vehemently, "In a civilian run expedition, not military."

"You won't get away from warfare here, Daniel," Elizabeth said seriously. "Even Rodney knows how to shoot a P90, and he's used it, often."

"I've read all the reports," Daniel said. "I know what you're up against."

She considered him for a long moment. "So what's this mean for us? Is the general going to expect me to return you? Will he order Colonel Caldwell to bring you back?"

Daniel shook his head, not in negation, but in sadness, or resignation. "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe he won't even notice I'm gone."

"This is a bit excessive as an act of rebellion," she pointed out.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" he asked her seriously.

"I don't know. Are you rebelling?"

He did her the courtesy of giving her question some serious thought before answering. "I was ready to leave the program," he finally admitted. "If I hadn't come here, I think I might have left entirely. I didn't really like what I was becoming, or the direction the program was heading, and Jack couldn't understand that. I saw an opportunity to do something for me, knowing that Jack would be okay eventually. He'll miss me for a while, but he'll adjust."

Elizabeth could hear a taint of bitterness in Daniel's voice. "What about Colonel Carter and Teal'c?"

With a genuine grin, Daniel said, "Sam will be heading research at Area 51, and Teal'c is helping the Jaffa become a united nation." His love for his teammates came across strong and true. "Change is inevitable, Elizabeth. It was time for us all to move on. It's a bit of a miracle we stayed together as long as we did."

"I don't think anyone was willing to mess with a winning team," she said with an admiring grin. "From the reports I read, the four of you have saved Earth from certain destruction more times than I care to think about."

He stared at her for a few seconds, dropped his eyes, and said, "After all of that, is it selfish to want something for myself?"

The emotional tenor of the question startled her. "No, no it isn't," she reassured him.

"I want this," he stated. "I think I can do some good here. I want to be a part of this."

She reached for his hand and held it in hers. "Then, you're welcome here, Daniel Jackson. More than welcome. And if it's within my power, I'll keep you here. Now that I have you, I'm not any more eager than General O'Neill was to let you go."

"Thank you," he said simply.

Elizabeth hoped it was that simple. She'd taken on the general a few times already and had emerged victorious. But she hadn't been fighting with him over Daniel Jackson. Elizabeth wasn't sure O'Neill would give up so easily.

She had no idea what the relationship between the two men had truly been. Clearly, they'd been in a
close working relationship for almost a decade, saving each other's lives on a regular basis. She knew what that did to bond people together. She'd seen it happen to Rodney and John, another mismatched pair if there ever was one. They were like an old married couple, much like what she had seen between O'Neill and Daniel in Antarctica.

There had been rumors about Daniel and O'Neill; there were rumors about Rodney and John. Up 'til now, she'd dismissed them as nothing more than rumors. But, the sadness in Daniel's eyes when he spoke of the general revealed a profound loss. It could have been the loss of a deep friendship, maybe a lover, or perhaps it was the loss of the possibility of more. Coming here was an irrefutable, and possibly, irrevocable message to O'Neill that Daniel was ready to move on, whatever that meant.

It made her wonder about Rodney and John, if anything else was going on between them besides a weird and unusual friendship. The idea stung a little, even as she scolded herself for not being able to let go of the romantic notion that John might want her. Not that she'd ever do anything about it, even if he did. They might work well together, but they'd be like oil and water in a relationship. Still, it was a fun fantasy to take out and admire every now and then.

In actuality, Daniel was much more her type. She'd have to wait and see what was truly going on between him and the general. She had a feeling that for all of Daniel's words and his journey across the universe, for all intents and purposes, he was a taken man.

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Rodney was appalled that Carson insisted on drawing blood. "You sadist," he hissed, even as he held the kitten still.

"Aye, Rodney," Carson said in his dry resigned manner, "you've got me pegged. I love to torture kittens in my spare time. My true spots have finally been revealed."

The kitten didn't even seem to notice the needle, much to Rodney's vast relief. A kitten. John had gotten him a kitten. It was the best thing anyone had ever given him. Yes, he'd had cats before, but this was different. Lt. Colonel John Sheppard had given him a kitten. Him. Rodney McKay. He grinned.

Carson scooped the kitten right out of Rodney's hold.

"Hey," Rodney protested.

"Hush," Carson said. "I just need to give him, hmm," he added, lifting the kitten up and taking a look, "ah, the wee thing's a lassie," he said with a grin.

"Really?" Rodney frowned as he processed that new information. Then, he grinned. "A girl?" He liked that idea.

"What are ye going to name her?" Carson asked.

"I have no idea," Rodney said, frowning. He'd never been good at naming his cats, the process always vaguely traumatic, thinking he'd scar it for life, or be mocked by all and sundry if he gave it a stupid name. Deciding Carson had held her long enough, he carefully snatched the kitten back.

John chose that moment to stroll into sickbay. "How's the cat?"

"It's a wonder she's still alive considering the size of the needle Dr. Moreau used on her," Rodney said heatedly, glaring at Carson.
Carson rolled his eyes. "Aye, more's the pity I didn't have a reason to stick an even larger one in Rodney here."

"She?" John asked. "It's a girl kitten?" He reached out and scratched the kitten's head where it lay comfortably in Rodney's arms.

Rodney smiled proudly like he'd hatched her himself. "All 1.08 kilograms of her." Then, nervously, he asked Carson, "Speaking of weight, what should I feed her?"

"I've just the thing," Carson said with a happy grin. "I always wondered why they sent this, but now I'm glad they did." He entered a closet and rummaged around, finally bringing out a flat of Pedialyte. "You can mix this with a bit of milk, and see how she does." He then rummaged through a drawer and brought out a good sized dropper. "Use this for now. I'll see if I can hobble together some sort of bottle for her." He touched his nose. "If the solution starts bubbling out her nose, you've fed her too much. Keep track and adjust accordingly."

Rodney looked nervously at John. "Did you get all that?" Both of his previous cats had been old enough to eat on their own when he'd gotten them. This was the first time he'd have to take care of one so young.

"Me?" John asked, eyebrows up. "It's your cat."

"Yeah, but you're like its uncle," Rodney countered.

John grinned. "Uncle John?" He scratched the kitten's head again. "Hear that, little girl? I'm your Uncle John."

Carson, in the meantime, wrote some instructions out on a sheet of paper which he handed to John. "Here, Uncle John," he said with a teasing grin of his own. "Oh, and keep her warm, and you'll have to figure out some sort of litter box for her to use." He smiled at the kitten. "It'll be fine to have a cat around."

A cat. Rodney still couldn't believe it. He'd given some serious thought to trying to figure out how to bring his cat here, but had finally decided against it. It was a decision he'd regretted countless times. Knowing he was being a complete sentimental ass, and doing it in front of witnesses no less, Rodney brought the kitten up so he could kiss her on the top of her little kitten head, between her little kitten ears.

After keeping Rodney company through one successful kitten feeding, John took a jumper to the mainland and brought back a big bag of sand. He found a good strong box, cut it down, covered it with plastic wrap, and filled it with a small portion of sand. Then, he arrived at Rodney's quarters and knocked on the door.

When Rodney opened it, John showed him the kitty litter box with a flourish. "Ta dah!"

"You're a genius," Rodney said with a lopsided grin.

"High praise, coming from you," John drawled with a satisfied grin. He walked inside and put the kitty litter box inside the bathroom door. "You're on your own teaching her how to use it, though." He looked around. "Where is she?"

Rodney pointed to the foot of the bed where he'd built a small fortress out of pillows, with her in the middle. When John went to investigate, he saw she was sleeping on an Ancient's version of a heating pad. "Cozy," he observed.
"You think?" Rodney asked anxiously.

John found his nervousness endearing. Rodney was so seldom insecure. Actually, that wasn't quite true. Rodney was often insecure, but he hid it behind bluster and a scathing wit, so if you weren't paying attention, and weren't watching the eyes that revealed every emotion Rodney was feeling, you could miss it. "She looks happy, Rodney," John said. "She's warm, full, and sleeping. That translates into one happy kitten."

"What if she reacts to the formula?" Rodney asked. "Maybe she's allergic."

"Like father like daughter?" John asked with a lopsided grin.

"Ha ha," Rodney said nervously, without his usual bite. "Seriously."

"She's fine," John insisted. He sat down on the floor by the bed and carefully, not wanting to wake her, tore down two sides of the pillow fortress so he could see her better. Rodney sat next to him, their bodies turned so they could rest their chins on their forearms as they watched her breathe.


"You're welcome," John said, beyond pleased at how it had all worked out. "What are you going to name her?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"How about Tiger? She sort of looks like a tiger, you know, one of those white Bengal tigers, all white with black stripes."

"Oh, please," Rodney said disparagingly, "that's like naming a dog Rover. I'd like to think between the two of us we can come up with something a bit more clever."

John liked that it was between the two of them. It dawned on him that he was acting like a girl with a crush. He turned his head a little so he could watch Rodney watch the kitten. Definitely a crush. "How about Snowflake?" He waited for Rodney's reaction.

Rodney made a disgusted noise. "That's even worse than Tiger."

"You want to give her a real name? Like some famous woman physicist or mathematician?"

After thinking about it for a moment, Rodney shook his head. "I want her to have a name that has something to do with being here."

"We could name her M7F 332," John suggested. That was the planet they found her on.

"Very amusing, Colonel," Rodney said snidely.

"How about ATA?" John suggested. "It could stand for A Tiger Animal."

Rodney glared at John. "You're even worse at this than I am."

"What was your cat's name on Earth?"


"Cat?" John asked, teasingly outraged. "And you think I'm worse than you?"
"It's not like he cared," Rodney defended himself.

John snickered, and went back to observing the kitten sleep, surreptitiously keeping an eye on Rodney.

They stayed like that for a long time. John couldn't ever remember seeing Rodney so still. It was like the kitten was some sort of meditation therapy. Rodney broke the silence, saying softly, "I had a cat when I was a kid, too."

"Yeah? I thought you had a dog."

"I got the cat after the dog ran away," Rodney said. "Stupid dog." he declared bitterly.

"What was that cat's name?"

Rodney let out a long exhale. "Cat," he reluctantly said.

"You named both your cats Cat?" John sent Rodney a warning glare. "You are not naming this kitten Cat. Tiger is a way better name than Cat."

Rodney reached out a hand and softly ran his finger down the kitten's flank. "I loved that cat. I loved both my cats. But that one I had as a kid was something special."

John would have shot anyone who interrupted them right now. Rodney never offered to share anything from his youth except as a throwaway line during some diatribe. And yes, this was coming uncomfortably close to a conversation about feelings, but he had complete faith in Rodney that he wouldn't let it come to that. "So what was so special about that cat?" John cajoled.

Rodney opened his mouth to speak but then shut it. "Never mind. It's pathetic."

"Hey, come on," John protested. "I got you this new cat, the least you can do is tell me about your old cat."

Giving John a sharp glance, Rodney said, "You're going to make me pay forever for this, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah," John said with a wide grin.

Rodney sighed. "Okay. Typical story. Sucky childhood, parents who alternated between being completely weirded out by me, or arguing with each other so viciously they forgot Jeannie and I existed."

John made a keep going sound.

"I just never fit, you know?" Rodney said with a mirthless laugh, covering a world of hurt.

John could totally see it. "Were you as pleasant to be around then as you are now?"

"Worse," Rodney said definitively. "I was surrounded by idiots, including the teachers. Even the experts they brought in for me were ignoramuses. There wasn't anyone, as far as I could see, who was worth the air they were breathing."

"So, sort of like now," John drawled.

"There are maybe," Rodney said through narrowed eyes, "and I mean maybe, a few people I might, possibly, consider worthwhile."
John grinned.

Rodney rolled his eyes.

"Okay, so get to the cat part of the story."

"When I got to high school," Rodney continued, "I was ten."

"Ouch," John said in sympathy, imagining the shit a ten year old would have gone through.

"Yeah, ouch," Rodney agreed. "I went home at least twice a week with a black eye or bruises from being pushed around." He shot John one of his lopsided grins. "Being that smart? Not so much fun." He shrugged. "But I didn't know how to be any other way. I was smart. The world was full of interesting stuff. I just couldn't see the point of pretending I was stupid. So people kept annoying me, and I annoyed them right back."

"So, sort of like now," John said again.

"Shut up," Rodney said with a grin he was doing his best to bite back.

Snickering, John took his turn petting the kitten, smiling when it stretched, extending all its legs, even its claws, yawning. When it settled back down, it began to purr.

"Every day," Rodney started up again, "when I got home, and Jeannie patched up whatever injury I'd come home with that day with the supplies from her Doctor Barbie play set, I'd go up to my room." Rodney reached out to pet the kitten, too, his hand colliding with John's. It took them a few seconds to divide the kitten in half, with John scratching her head, and Rodney playing with the pads of her feet. Every now and then their hands would brush together.

John tried to make it happen as often as possible. "Where's the cat come into it?" he asked.

Rodney sent him a disgruntled sidelong glance. "Are you going to let me tell this story or not?"

"If you ever finish it," John prompted with mock impatience. "I'm an important man here in Atlantis. I've got things to do."

With an affronted scoff, Rodney let off touching the kitten to jab with his thumb over his shoulder. "Well, Mr. Important Man, don't let me keep you."

"Nah," John said, making a point of settling in more comfortably on the floor. "Elizabeth's already pissed at me, might as well take advantage of it before I need to get back in her good graces."

"Because of the cat?"

John nodded. Snickering again, he mimicked Rodney, "Tiny. Defenseless. Kitten. You should have seen her face." John let out a real laugh. The look on Elizabeth's face when Rodney had asked the kitten if the mean old lady had been scaring her was something John wished he had on video.

That got one of Rodney's very rare delighted grins. John loved those grins. He loved a lot of things about Rodney. He let that thought lie. "Okay, back to your cat story."

"Am I supposed to feel grateful that you're granting me the boon of your presence?" Rodney asked sarcastically.

"Ye-a-a-ah," John said slowly, making the word several syllables long.
Rodney rolled his eyes. But the next look he shot John was full of affection, another rare expression.

"So, you'd get home from work--" John prompted.

"School," Rodney interrupted.

"Right, school. Jeannie would patch you up with toy Band-Aids," John reiterated, both charmed and saddened by the image.

"And I'd hide in my room until dinnertime."

"Your family ate together?" John asked.

"The cook cooked. Jeannie and I ate in the kitchen with her."

"Did you like her?"

Rodney shrugged. "She fed me."

"Where is she now?" John asked.

"Dead," Rodney said. "She died about ten years ago." He let out a surprised hmph sound. "I haven't thought about her in years." Rodney got this faraway look in his eyes, and John wondered where he'd gone. He let him stay there for a minute, but finally poked him in the side. "Hey," Rodney protested.

"You're supposed to be telling me a story, not taking a trip down memory lane all by yourself," John stated.

This time, the smile Rodney shot John was sad and tight. "She was...she was sort of mean." He shrugged. "But, like I said, she fed me."

John could hear volumes in that sentence, and sort of wished the woman was still alive, so he could pay her a visit with something sharp and pointy. "So, cat."

"It was weird. My mom actually gave me that cat. I almost liked her that day," he said with a short laugh. "I don't know what possessed her. I came home one day from school, with a sprained ankle I got when some brainless Neanderthal tripped me, and without even looking at me, she pointed a finger toward a nylon bag by the door, saying, "I'm expecting company. Do something with that."

John's eyebrows went up. "Nice."

Rodney let his fingers run down the length of the kitten's tail. "Pretty typical," he said with a shrug. "The cat stayed in my room for the next two years until I went to college. Cook hated it, and I was afraid it would end up in some casserole, a la Glenn Close, so it lived in my room, being fed on--"

"Two years?" John asked, interrupting. "You were twelve when you went to college?" Twelve? A twelve-year-old in college? A lot about Rodney was suddenly making much more sense.

"Thirteen, actually," Rodney said. "Do you believe they made me stay in high school for three years?" His face made it clear what he'd thought about that.

"Thirteen?" John asked, no less incredulous. No wonder Rodney had the social graces of a bull in a china shop.

"You do get that I'm a genius, right?" Rodney asked, a pitying look on his face.
"Yeah, yeah, yeah," John said, as if it wasn't a big deal. "Whatever." Thirteen? So, no friends probably. And probably no fun. "Cat?"

"What is it with you and this cat story?" Rodney asked with a puzzled frown.

"I just want you to finish it," John protested. "You suck as a storyteller."

"Fuck you very much," Rodney said snidely.

The kitten chose that moment to wake up with an inquisitive trill. Beating Rodney to the punch, John scooped her up, heating pad and all, and blew a raspberry on her soft belly. Then, spitting out hair, he pretended to be annoyed when Rodney laughed at him.

When she mewed again, Rodney's laugh stopped and he grew anxious. "Do you think she needs to be fed again?"

John shrugged. "Try it. If she's not interested, she'll let you know." He'd nursed a couple baby squirrels in his youth. He held the kitten, rocking her, as Rodney fussed over the formula, pulling it up into the dropper Carson had supplied. John held out his hand and, with a frown, Rodney gave him the dropper. John put the end by her mouth, letting her taste it. She appeared to mull it over, and then happily started feeding.

"You know we have a mission tomorrow," John said, using his index finger to catch a drop that was missed.

"I know," Rodney said unhappily. "Carson said he'd watch her."

"He'll do a good job," John consoled him, handing the dropper to Rodney to refill.

"I just don't want her to bond with anyone but us," Rodney said. "Me," he hastily corrected himself.

"Too late," John crowed. "You said us." He held the cat up eye height. "You hear that, Tiger? That makes you half mine." He grinned at Rodney. "I feel like I should move in."
Rolling his eyes, Rodney handed the dropper back. He did his best to look thoroughly annoyed, but John didn't believe it for a minute. "Just shut up and feed my cat," Rodney said.

"Our cat," John corrected him.

"And her name's not Tiger," Rodney added with a dark, dire look.

"It so is," John argued. "And you so like me."

There was a pause. "So?" Rodney finally asked defiantly, almost pugnaciously, like maybe liking other people hadn't worked out so well for him in the past.

John felt another uncomfortable twinge of sadness. "Relax, Rodney," he said, taking the now filled dropper, and resuming the feeding. "I like you, too."

Rodney kept eye-contact for a second or two, but then his eyes dropped, and he looked away, a shy smile on his face, actually blushing. John wanted to give him shit about it, but decided to do it later. The kitten looked like she was falling asleep. "Feeding time's over at the zoo," he said, handing Rodney the dropper. "Finish the damn cat story."

Rodney got to his knees, and then moved onto the bed, lying down. "Give me the kitten."

Curious, John handed her over, heating pad and all.

Rodney put her on his chest, rubbing her back. She began to purr loudly in contentment. "This is the damn cat story," Rodney said softly. "Every day I'd come home, and I'd lie in bed, and Cat would get on my chest and purr at me." His voice had gotten thick and he cleared his throat. "It was the best part of my day." He shot John an embarrassed smile. "Stupid, huh?"
"Not even a little bit," John told him. Acting on an impulse that was composed of half craziness and half inevitability, John added, "Shove over."

"What?" Rodney asked, startled at the order.

"Shove over," John said again. "I want to experience the Cat story for myself."

Hesitating, and then moving carefully so as to not jar the kitten, Rodney shoved over. John lay down next to him. "Okay, hand her over."

"Bear in mind that she's staying here with me, in my quarters," Rodney said with a frown. "You gave her to me. I'm not arranging visitation rights for you."

"I already told you I was moving in," John teased, working the heating pad from Rodney's chest to his own. Rodney kept caressing her, keeping the purr going. Even through the heating pad, and with how small she was, John could still feel the reverberation of her purr through his chest. "Oh, yeah," he said. "This is nice. I get this." He inched closer to Rodney until their sides were pressed together. "Here, we can share." He arranged the heating pad until it was half on him and half on Rodney.

"We're in bed together," Rodney observed, sounding perplexed.

John noticed that while Rodney certainly sounded confused, it didn't seem like he was protesting.

"Why are we in bed together?" Rodney persisted.

"I told you," John said, "I wanted to experience the full sense-surround cat thing." He listened to the contented rumble, ignoring the fact, for the moment, that Rodney was staring at him as if he'd lost his mind. "So, you and the cat?"

"Yeah," Rodney said slowly. "It was Cat and me."

"And now you have me. And that makes three," John added ridiculously.

There was a long moment of silence. "Colonel. John. What--?" Another pause. "Are you channeling Dr. Seuss, or are we--?" Another pause.

John kept quiet, sort of hoping that Rodney would find a good name for what was happening between them.

"Are we, is this, sort of a, um, a moment?" Rodney asked, voice half-hopeful, half-horrified.


"Oh, thank God," Rodney said just as quickly in return. "Me, too. I never know what to do with them. I always screw them up."

They lay there in silence for a minute or two.

"But, uh," Rodney said, breaking the silence, "if this was, you know, sort of a moment, just out of curiosity, would it be the sort of moment that might actually lead to sex? I mean, with the whole being in bed together thing."

"It might," John said. "If it were a moment." He was enjoying the hell out of himself.
"Right, right," Rodney said, lapsing into a contemplative silence. "But, don't you think," he finally said, "even if it's not strictly a moment, that it sort of has moment overtones?"

John turned his head to look at Rodney and found himself almost nose-to-nose with him. A quicksilver flash of desire made his stomach flip.

"What's that?" Rodney asked, all his attention suddenly gone from John, and back on the kitten. Then, with a grimace, he said, "Ew, cat pee." He was off the bed so fast, it was like he levitated.

That was when John felt it, too. The pee had dripped over the edge of the heating pad and was soaking into John's shirt.

Rodney scooped up the kitten and plopped her in the makeshift kitty litter box. "Go there," he directed.

John rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that'll work," he said dryly. Holding the heating pad carefully, so more of the pee wouldn't drip off, he got to his feet. Fortunately, the heating pads were waterproof, so John took it into the bathroom and rinsed it off. He came back to find Rodney patting the sheets, to see if they were wet. John pulled his shirt away from his body. "I think it all got on me."

Rodney pointed at the wet spot on his own shirt. "And me."

John grinned. "Aww. She peed on us both. I guess it was a moment."

Rodney shot him a look that was mostly exasperation but held a hint of grin. "Do you want a dry shirt?"

"Nah," John said. "I'll go back to my quarters. I need to take a shower."

For a dizzying moment, John thought Rodney might invite him to stay, maybe to take a shower together, but instead, he could see Rodney sort of shut down, like he was deciding any positive spin he'd put on the whole moment-not-moment thing had been his imagination.

"Hey," John protested, hating that look on Rodney's face, especially when it didn't need to be there.

"What?" Rodney asked, arms crossed defensively over his chest.

"There were definitely moment overtones," John said. "Definitely."

Rodney's eyes narrowed as he looked at John, as if trying to decide if he could trust him. "What kind of overtones?" he asked suspiciously.

"The kind that could possibly lead to sex," John said cautiously, watching Rodney closely for his reaction.

Now, Rodney's eyes opened wide. "Really?" he asked hopefully.

John nodded.

"I, um, I have a shower here, you know," Rodney offered hesitantly.

John took a step in Rodney's direction. Before he could take another one, he heard Elizabeth's voice, very faintly. "Do you hear that?" John asked, head cocked. He heard it again which was when he remembered that he'd taken his head set off before lying down on the bed. Putting it back on, he tapped it. "Elizabeth?"
"John," she said. "Do you have a moment? I'd like to discuss something with you."

"I'll be there in twenty," John said. He tapped off the connection and gave Rodney a wry grin. "Gotta go."

"What?" Rodney yelped indignantly. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah," John said. "You heard Elizabeth call."

"But, but," Rodney stuttered, "we were having a moment--I mean a non-moment with overtones. Whatever," Rodney finished impatiently. "You can't just leave."

John grabbed Rodney by the lapels of his science jacket, yanked him in and landed a quick smack right on his lips. "We'll finish our non-moment later. I gotta go. I stink of cat pee."

"But, but, but," Rodney started. John left, and as the door slid shut, he could still hear Rodney putting like a motor boat. Grinning, John trotted toward his quarters.

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"So General O'Neill didn't mean to send him?" John asked Elizabeth.

"According to Daniel," she answered, "the general had no idea what he was signing."

John didn't understand the need for subterfuge. "Why all the sneaking around?"

"I'm not really sure," Elizabeth said. "But what I do know is that he wants to stay, and I could use his help."

"And you're expecting O'Neill to insist on us sending him back?"

She nodded.

"Does Caldwell know he had a stowaway yet?"

A small grin graced Elizabeth's face. "He will shortly. I thought I'd fill you in first."

"Well, good luck with that," John drawled. "He's the one who's going to have to disobey a direct order if O'Neill wants Daniel back."

"I can't see him hogtying Daniel if Daniel wants to stay," Elizabeth said firmly. "After all, he's a civilian."

No, John couldn't see Caldwell doing that. Not that Daniel, at least from the stories John had heard, was one to just let anyone hogtie him, except maybe for Jack O'Neill. Although, even Jack O'Neill this time, had let Daniel slip through his fingers.

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"You drink a lot of coffee," Ronon observed the next day, as he watched Daniel sit down after refilling his cup for the third time. He'd discovered Daniel in the cafeteria again when Ronon had decided it was time for another meal.

"Yes, I do," Daniel admitted.

"McKay drinks a lot of coffee," Ronon said. "But you don't seem as nervous as he does."

"No, caffeine has never really made me jittery," Daniel said, taking a sip. He leaned back and looked
at Ronon. "What do you do all day when you're not on a mission?"
"So, you have free time?" Daniel asked.
"Why?" Ronon asked with sudden interest. "You change your mind?"
"No," Daniel said kindly. "But I would like to explore the city a little. I've been told not to wander around unescorted. Would you be willing to play escort for a few hours?"
Ronon shrugged. "Sure. You gonna freak like McKay does?"
Daniel grinned a little. "I don't think so. Does Rodney freak a lot?"
Ronon chuffed out a laugh. "He freaks all the time." He shrugged again. "But then he gets over it and fixes whatever's wrong, so that's okay."
"So you like having him on your team?" Daniel asked.
"Yeah," Ronon said without reservation. "He's noisy, but he's handy to have around. There's not much he can't figure out." Ronon's opinion about Rodney had changed so much in the time he'd known him. The man could still drive him crazy, but Ronon trusted him as much as he trusted Sheppard to get things done and bring them back alive.
"I've heard that," Daniel said with a kind smile. "The people here have survived against some insurmountable odds."
Ronon stood, waited for Daniel to stand as well. "Any place in particular you wanna go?" Ronon asked.
Daniel shook his head. "I just want to see her. See Atlantis. Get to know her better."
Frowning a little, Ronon thought for a minute. "You got the gene, right?" Someone would need to be able to open up some of the tougher doors.
"More or less," Daniel said as they both strode out the cafeteria door.

Jack finished signing the last piece of paper in the stack in front of him. He recapped his pen, then gathered up the stack, tapped the edges to line them up, and slid them inside a manila envelope. Sealing it, he placed it on top of several other inches of paper in his out box. A glorified paper pusher, that's all he was these days.

He checked the list that he and Carter had come up with of all the reasons why Daniel needed to come back. The most important reason wasn't on the list: the fact that Jack wasn't really interested in living his life without Daniel in it. Jack had no intention of telling Daniel that, mostly because he didn't think he could take it if he lay that one on the table, and it failed to sway his friend.

He stared at the two large duffel bags he had stashed against the side wall of his office. Jack had a few boxes already down in the gate room, ready to shove through the gate for Daniel when he called him in a little while. If Daniel wasn't coming back, then he at least deserved to have a few comforts of home go to him.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was time. It would be early evening in Atlantis, so personnel would be at a minimum, which suited Jack just fine. If he was going to make a fool of himself, he'd
just as soon do it in front of as few people as possible.

Grabbing up the two duffel bags, slinging the strap of one over his shoulder, he headed down to the gate room, dropping them at the bottom of the ramp by the boxes. Then he went back up to the control room. "Dial it up," he told Walter.

"Yes, sir," Walter said.

The door opened and Jack saw Carter enter the small room. Down in the gate room were the usual two SFs, armed to the teeth. In a matter of moments, the gate opened with a kerwhoosh. As long as Carter was there, Jack had her enter their ID code.

Leaning over so he could speak into the microphone, Jack called, "Hey, anyone home?"

There was a long pause, some frantic whisperings, then Elizabeth's voice came over the speaker. "General O'Neiil?"

"Yeah," he said. "How ya doin'?"

"Fine," she said cautiously. "To what do we owe the honor of this call? Is something wrong?"

Jack smiled tightly. You bet your sweet bippie something's wrong, he said to himself. "You have something that belongs to me," he said out loud.

"I assume you're talking about Dr. Jackson?" she said as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "We're thrilled to have him here."

"I bet you are," Jack said sarcastically. Her tone told him everything he needed to know. She knew Daniel had fooled him and she was planning on taking full advantage of the situation by keeping him. Not that Jack could blame her. "I don't suppose Daniel is around anywhere, is he? I'd like to talk to him."

"If you give me a minute, I'll see if I can track him down." Jack heard her issue a few orders. Then, "Was there anything else, General?"

"No," he said casually. "I just wanted to talk to Daniel."

There was another long pause. "You dialed Atlantis to talk to Daniel?" she asked, her astonishment clear in her voice.

Yeah, Jack got that it was a honking waste of power. "Hey," he said, "I gotta get some perks out of being a general."

Someone was speaking to Elizabeth and Jack frowned. He could have sworn he heard the word--

"Apparently," Elizabeth said, cutting into his thoughts, "Daniel's in the infirmary. I'm getting Carson on the line now."

Yup, that was the word. "For cryin' out loud," Jack complained. "He's been there, what, a couple of days? And he's already in the infirmary?" Inside, Jack's heart was racing, waiting to hear what was wrong.

"Daniel's fine, Jack," Elizabeth finally said soothingly. "He's on his way to the control room right now."

Jack sat down. This long distance shit was for the birds.
Daniel's brow was furrowed as he headed toward the control room, Ronon by his side. He eyed the bandage on his right hand. It was just as well Jack wasn't here because he'd give Daniel hell for not paying attention. Daniel had been running his hand along the wall and a sharp edge had caught his hand unexpectedly, slicing into the side.

When it had happened, Ronon had watched him for a second, expectantly, as if hoping for a tantrum a la Rodney McKay. Daniel supposed that Rodney was, in general, probably much more entertaining than he was. When it was clear that Daniel wasn't going to freak, Ronon had escorted him to the infirmary.

Carson washed the wound, applied a few steri-strips, and was in the process of bandaging it when a Marine burst into the room. He took one look at Daniel, then spoke into his headset. "I found him, ma'am, he's in the infirmary."

Daniel shot a puzzled look at Carson who shrugged and continued wrapping some gauze around Daniel's hand.

"She'd like to speak with you, Dr. Beckett," the Marine said.


That got Daniel's attention.

"Yes, I'll tell him. Yes, I'll send him on his way. Goodbye." He tapped his headset, disconnecting.

"General O'Neill?" Daniel prompted, his heart pounding, worried something had happened to Jack.

"Apparently, he's dialed the gate and wants to have a wee chat with you," Carson informed him.

Daniel blinked. "He dialed Atlantis to talk to me?"

"Aye," Carson said. "So, you best be off."

Ronon pushed away from the wall he'd been slouched against, clearly ready to continue his escort duties.

"You sure I don't need to stay here for observation?" Daniel asked Carson hopefully.

Carson grinned at him. "Now, that's a switch. Most of the time the lot of you can't wait to get out of here. Now, run along, you shouldn't keep the general waiting."

Daniel was actually quite comfortable with the idea of keeping the general waiting. He was sure Jack hadn't called to be friendly. Sighing, he slid off the gurney. "Thank you, Carson." Daniel liked Carson. He liked everyone here. Granted, he'd only been here two days, but he'd genuinely liked everyone he met so far.

He and Ronon started walking down a hallway. "I've heard rumors about this guy," Ronon said.

Daniel snorted. "They're probably all true."

"I heard the two of you share blankets," Ronon said casually.

"Except that one," Daniel said.
They finished their walk in silence. When they got to the gateroom, he heard Elizabeth doing her best to keep a conversation going. When she saw him, she smiled in relief. "Ah, Daniel," she said, throwing him to the wolves. "General O'Neill wants to speak with you. He's on speaker."

"Jack?" Daniel said.

"Daniel?" Jack's voice said loud and clear.

"Whatcha' doin'?" Daniel asked.

"Just thought I'd check in," Jack said nonchalantly.

"That was nice of you," Daniel said, waiting for it.

There was a longish pause. "You tricked me," Jack suddenly yelled.

Daniel heard the sound of running feet, and looked to see both John and Rodney entering the gateroom at a fast pace. Apparently word had gone out there was a free show. He noticed that Rodney seemed to be holding a kitten. Ronon had mentioned something about a cat while they'd been exploring.

"I can't help it if you don't pay attention to what you sign," Daniel said casually.

"Daniel," Jack ground out.

"You only have thirty-eight minutes, Jack. Why don't you say what you wanted to say?"

"I want you to come back," Jack said sharply.

"No, I don't think so," Daniel said firmly.

"You knew I didn't want you to go," Jack said, sounding suspiciously like he was pouting. Daniel noticed Elizabeth, John and Rodney all exchanging amused glances.

"And you knew I wanted to go," Daniel countered. Daniel could hear someone whispering, figured it must be Sam. "Hey, Sam," he said warmly.

"Hey, Daniel," she said back, her own affection clear in her voice. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too," Daniel said.

"So why don't you come back?" Jack said, interrupting. "We can have a welcome back barbeque at my house."

"Tempting," Daniel said, "but, no."

A frustrated sigh came clearly over the speaker. "Daniel, I'm ordering you to come back," Jack finally said.

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Is that the best you can do?" He caught another look between the Atlantis personnel.

"Most people do what I tell them to," Jack complained.

"How long have you known me?" Daniel asked.
"Way too long," Jack said huffily.

"And how many times have I done what you've ordered me to do?"

"Isn't this O'Neill guy the head of everything?" Ronon asked in an aside to John.


"No," Daniel said.

"He can say that?" Ronon asked.

"Yes, I can," Daniel said at the exact same time that Jack said, "No, he can't.

Jack continued, "Elizabeth, I want him on the Daedalus when it comes back."

"General," Elizabeth said in her best treaty negotiating voice. "Daniel is a civilian, and as such, is not under military command."

"If he's a part of the SGC," Jack groused, "he is too under military command. He's under my command. Shit, I run the whole damn thing."

"I just don't see how you expect me to force Dr. Jackson to leave," Elizabeth said, and Daniel grinned at her.

She grinned back.

"It's easy," Jack said. "Zat him, hogtie him, throw him on the Daedalus, and have Caldwell leave before he wakes up."

Daniel rolled his eyes as he listened to the snickering around him.

Rodney was taking in the entire debate with vast amusement, blue eyes twinkling.

"Read him the list, sir," Sam's voice said.

"Oh, yes, Jack," Daniel said in return. "Please, read me the list. Did you write it, Sam?"

Laughing, Sam said, "We wrote it together."

"Right," Daniel said. "That means you came up with everything, while he nodded, right? Was he juggling?"

"No, but he's made this really, really long chain of paperclips."

"Hey," Jack bitched. "Don't knock the paperclips. I'm only twenty feet from beating the world record."

He sounded so close, it made Daniel miss him fiercely. It was like he was around the corner, and he'd show up any minute with a shit eating grin on his face, saying something ridiculous, then making Daniel go have something to eat with him. "Jack. Forget Sam's list. Why do you want me back there? The team's breaking up. Teal'c's gone more than he's around. Sam's going to head up R&D at Area 51, you're in line for a job in Washington. So, tell me. Why do you want me back?"

Daniel listened to the long ensuing silence. He knew Jack would never say it. And not only because
he sucked at expressing his feelings, but also because he didn't feel the same way Daniel did. The only words that would make Daniel get back on the Daedalus would never come out of Jack's mouth.

Jack stared at the wormhole, feeling the paradox of having a conversation with someone clear enough to bring tears to any phone company executive's eyes, and yet having that someone be an entire galaxy away. Daniel wasn't coming back; Jack could hear it in his voice.

There was a remote chance he might return if Jack started spouting feelings, telling Daniel how much he missed him, how empty his life felt knowing he couldn't call Daniel up and make him come over for pizza and beer, and how the future of his job at Stargate Command seemed so futile without a Daniel Jackson to harass. But, Jack couldn't do it. It wasn't that he didn't have all those feelings, but he sure as hell wasn't about to blab them out loud in front of two audiences across two galaxies. There were limits, Jack thought.

Jack had been giving his limits some serious thought over the last two days, since he found out Daniel had left, and he'd decided that he'd reached a few of his. "Daniel, I have some stuff for you." He put on a headset, left the small control room and headed down to the gate. When there was no answer, he continued. "I figure you took pretty much nothing except for books, so I thought you might need some supplies."

He climbed up the ramp and grabbed one of the boxes. One of the soldiers joined him, picking up another. "I packed some stuff I thought you might want, and I'm sending it through now." He walked up to the event horizon and pushed the first box through. He gestured for the SF to send the next one, while Jack retrieved a third.

There were eight cartons in all and they sent them through one by one. "Daniel? Are they showing up at your end?"

"Yeah," Daniel said slowly. "They're coming through." He sounded sad, maybe disappointed. He probably was; he'd probably been hoping Jack would say something meaningful. But Daniel should know better. After all, all Jack could come up with when Daniel lay fucking dying was that he'd come to admire him a little. Jack still hadn't forgiven himself for that.

"Couple more things, Daniel." He threw the first duffel bag through. He'd gone to Daniel's apartment, only to find it closed up. Daniel had obviously been planning this for a while. So, Jack had gone shopping. After all those years together, Jack knew Daniel's sizes, and this had been his chance to get Daniel out of his geek clothes. Jack had spent last evening at the mall, and Atlantis wasn't going to know what hit it.

He picked up the last bag. "Thanks," he said to the SF, who saluted, and walked back down the ramp, assuming his position by the back blast door.

"Carter?" Jack said.

She leaned down to the microphone. "Yes, sir."

"There's a packet on my desk in my out box, in a manila envelope. It's for Hammond. Tell him I'm sorry to be giving him such short notice."

He could see a look of consternation cross Carter's face. "Sir?"

"Jack?" came Daniel's voice. "What are you doing?"
"I'm leaving you in charge for the time being," Jack said to Carter. "It may hold up your research job for a while. Sorry about that."

"General. Jack," Carter said. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Jack," Daniel said again. "What's going on?"

Jack crossed his fingers he wasn't imagining the hope he heard in Daniel's voice. He could see the SFs start to realize things weren't as copasetic as they'd thought, and they were looking between him and Carter in the control room, looking for orders. It was time.

"Come visit if you're in the neighborhood," he said to Carter, and with a last wave to her and to Walter, he stepped into the event horizon.

When John saw General Jack O'Neill walk through the Stargate into Atlantis, his first shallow thought, which he was vaguely ashamed about, was "Thank God, someone else can be in command now." His second, much more visceral response was to fist his hands, prepared, at any cost, to keep his command.

He and the rest of the soldiers in the room saluted as the wormhole shut down behind him.

"Oh, please," the general said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I never stood on ceremony before, and I'm sure as hell not going to start now when I'm an ex-general. At ease."

Something inside of John began to relax. "Ex-general?" he asked, walking toward O'Neill.

O'Neill nodded, although he wasn't looking at anyone but Daniel.

Daniel's mouth was hanging open, and his eyebrows were almost off his head.

Finally, Jack turned to Elizabeth. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," she said faintly in return.

O'Neill opened his arms wide as if to say "I'm all yours", and then he grinned wryly. "I don't suppose you could use an ex-general around here, could you?"

She blinked at him. Then she looked at John and blinked at him. John knew just how she felt.

"Cat got all of your tongues?" O'Neill asked. He pointed at Rodney, "Nice cat, by the way."

"Thanks," Rodney said faintly, looking speechless for once in his life, clutching the kitten tightly, as if O'Neill had maybe come through the Stargate to confiscate her.

"Jack," Daniel said.

O'Neill spun neatly around to face Daniel again. "Daniel."

"Why, um, why are you--" Daniel's hands flailed around taking in the control room, the city, the galaxy, maybe even the universe, "here?"

O'Neill bit his bottom lip for a moment as he considered Daniel. Then, he turned to Elizabeth. "I can do lists. I'm great with lists." To John, he said, "I've sort of dealt with the whole fighting aliens thing for a while. Maybe you could stand to have a civilian military advisor on retainer." To Rodney, he said, "And hey, I've got the gene and I'm used to hanging out in labs." With that he turned back to
Daniel. "And I was thinking that maybe you could stand to have a friend around, even if you were sort of willing to give me up."


John watched as O'Neill's shoulders relaxed, as if all he'd been waiting for was a signal from Daniel that he was glad to see him.

"You hungry?" O'Neill asked Daniel.

"I could eat," Daniel said, still smiling.

"Good," O'Neill said, rubbing his hands together as if to say he could hardly wait. "Chow here any good?"

"There's coffee," Daniel said.

O'Neill frowned slightly at Daniel. "Food, Daniel. You know the solid stuff that most of us actually need to survive."

"Yeah, there's that, too," Daniel offered.

John noticed that he hadn't taken his eyes off of O'Neill.

"They got pie?"

Daniel nodded.

"Great." He grabbed Daniel's arm. "Let's go." He glanced at Elizabeth, John and Rodney, noticed Ronon with a bit of a double-take, grinned, and said, "I'll catch you all later." With that, he and Daniel left the control room.

John looked at Elizabeth. Elizabeth looked back at him.

"Huh," Rodney said.

Daniel led Jack to the cafeteria, the entire journey feeling surreal. Jack was here. In Atlantis. Daniel couldn't find any words to say, his thoughts tumbling, not knowing where to start. Jack also kept silent, simply walking by Daniel's side. It made Daniel realize how much he'd missed this simple thing, walking with Jack.

They made it to the cafeteria and retrieved cups of coffee, Jack a piece of pie, and sat down. Daniel gave himself permission to really look at Jack, and apparently Jack took that as permission to look his fill as well. Jack appeared tired; there were circles under his eyes. It gave Daniel a pang to think that he was responsible for some of that.

"Will you tell me why?" Daniel finally asked him. "Why you came?"

Jack pursed his lips, then countered with, "Will you tell me why you left?"

For a startling moment, Daniel wondered if their reasons were the same, if Jack had come for him because his feelings for Daniel echoed Daniel's feelings for Jack. The thought made his heart race. He wasn't ready to answer Jack's question, but his hope made him brave enough to say, "I'm glad you came. I'm glad you're here. I've missed you."
He was rewarded by Jack's face lighting up with pleasure. It was an expression he hadn't seen on Jack for a long while. Daniel didn't expect a similar sentiment in return. He'd never met anyone worse at expressing his feelings than Jack.

But, then, Jack frowned. "If you missed me so much, why'd you leave?"

Daniel could see this conversation going in circles for hours. "Jack, they were grooming you for a job in Washington. Can you honestly say you wouldn't have taken it if they'd offered it to you?"

Jack looked like he wanted to say yes, but he couldn't. "No," he grumped.

"So you were planning to take a job across the country from me," Daniel said reasonably.

"At least we'd have been on the same planet," Jack sniped.

"Would you have wanted that job?" Daniel asked. It was something he'd wanted to ask, but hadn't quite figured out how without revealing the reason why he was asking. Jack hadn't been the same since he'd been taken out of the field. There'd been a streak of unhappiness in his countenance that had always pulled at Daniel's heart.

Jack scowled. "No. Not really. But, when the President asks you to take a job, it's not like you can really say no."

Daniel couldn't help grinning. "Unless you're in a different galaxy."

Jack smirked. "Or unless you're retired. And both is even better."

"Did you really retire?" Daniel found that hard to believe. He always sort of assumed, as unappealing as the image was, that Jack would drop in the traces.

"Signed and sealed," Jack said. "The only thing missing was the two weeks notice."

"Do you think they'll accept it? I can't imagine Hammond will be thrilled, let alone the President. Can't they refuse it?"

Jack shrugged. "Maybe. But, they can't exactly send MPs after me. Besides, I'm sure if they put their minds to it, they can figure out something they want me to do out here."

"Yeah, like take charge," Daniel warned. It was true that most of his attention had been on Jack when he'd arrived through the wormhole, but he hadn't missed the looks exchanged between John and Elizabeth.

"Not interested," Jack said firmly. "This is a civilian operation, and Sheppard's the military commander."

"If you've retired, you can take over as the civilian lead," Daniel said, playing devil's advocate.

"Elizabeth would disembowel me if I tried," Jack admitted. "Not that I want to try. I'm sick of paperwork, Daniel. I wanna be doing stuff."

"Stuff?" Daniel teased.

"Yeah," Jack defended himself. "Stuff. Going through the gate, shooting at things. Bitching at you while you bore me to death."

"Be still my heart," Daniel said sarcastically.
"See?" Jack said, with a slap on the table. "This is what I miss. The mocking."

And just that fast, Daniel got why Jack was there. It really was because of him. And maybe Jack didn't exactly understand what was truly motivating him, but Daniel was willing to take a leap of faith that Jack's feelings weren't that different from his. All Jack needed was for someone to point out that fact, and Daniel was just the man for the job. He found himself grinning.

"What are you grinning about?" Jack asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Daniel lied. "I think the quarters next to me are empty," he said. "Should we get them assigned to you?" He waggled his eyebrows. "Ocean view," he tempted.

"Ocean view and my best bud as my next door neighbor?" Jack enthused. "Sweet."

Sweet indeed, Daniel thought to himself. "Let's go."

Jack hastily crammed the last few bites of pie in his mouth and stood. Coffee cup in Daniel's hand and other dishes disposed of, they headed toward the exit. On the way out, Daniel noticed Ronan. He stopped by the man's table, saying, "Jack, this is Ronon Dex. Ronon, this is Jack O'Neill."

Ronon sort of grunted.

"Handy how you've just dispensed with silverware," Jack said.

"Eating is about getting food in your mouth," Ronon said. "Silverware just makes that harder."

"I think I like him," Jack said to Daniel.

Daniel wasn't the least bit surprised. He saw Ronon and Jack bonding in the future over big guns and pie. "Come on," he said, tugging at Jack's sleeve.

"See ya," Jack said to Ronon.

Ronon sort of waved, his mouth full of food.

When they reached the corridor, Jack hissed out of the corner of his mouth, "Who the hell is he?"

"He's sort of their version of Teal'c."

"Complete with gross alien slug?" Jack grimaced.

"No. He's from a warrior race, excellent with hand-to-hand combat and weapons. And," Daniel added, not sure what imp had control of his tongue, "he asked me to have sex with him."

Jack came to an abrupt halt. "Teal'c asked you to have sex with him?" he asked, astonished.

"No," Daniel said. "Ronon did."

Jack frowned at him. Deeply.

Daniel put on his best innocent face, fighting back a grin.

"You said no, of course," Jack said, with an unspoken "or else there'll be hell to pay" tagged on at the end.

"I don't know," Daniel said contemplatively. "He's sort of hot." He shot Jack a sidelong look to see
how that was going down. The muscle clenching and unclenching in Jack's jaw was sort of a giveaway that it wasn't going down well. Relenting, Daniel said, "I said no."

Jack shot him a narrow-eyed glare. "You're just yanking my chain, aren't you?"

"No," Daniel said sincerely. "In fact, I got propositioned twice." He held up two fingers, to make sure Jack got it. "Twice."

"Did you say no twice?" Jack growled, looking around as if danger lurked everywhere. He made an aborted grab for a weapon he wasn't carrying.

Daniel fought back another grin, but didn't answer.

"Daniel," Jack said warningly.

"Jack," Daniel said in return. "Oh, look, here we are." They were at Elizabeth's office.

She looked up and smiled at them. "Our two stowaways. Come on in."

Still glowering, Jack followed Daniel into her office. "Jack needs quarters," Daniel said. "I think the one next to me is empty."

Elizabeth pulled up an Excel file and entered Jack's name. "Okay, you're all set," she said with another smile. Then, smile faltering a little, she asked Jack, "Should I expect a call from General Hammond or someone even higher up the chain of command, demanding I send you back? Or," she added, with a small frown, "orders for you to take over this command?"

"That's not going to happen," Jack assured her. "I can promise you that. As far as the other?" Jack shrugged. "We've essentially defeated the Goa'uld. There's no major enemy on the horizon threatening Earth. In some ways, me retiring and moving here will solve some problems for them. I know it'll come as a surprise to both of you," Jack added dryly, "but I don't always obey orders very well."

"No," Daniel mock gasped.

Elizabeth grinned, but said, "Maybe not, but you do tend to save the Earth on a regular basis."

Jack waved a dismissive hand. "Let someone younger do it. My knees can't take it anymore."

"Well, I'll tell you the same thing I told Daniel. You're welcome here, and I have no doubt we'll find you plenty to do. Why don't you take a day or two to settle in, and then we can pull the leadership team together and come up with a plan." To Daniel she added, "Rodney's already suggested you take over as head of what he considers the soft sciences. Maybe you could give that some thought."

"Oh," Daniel said, surprised. Not that he couldn't do it, after all, he'd held that position at SGC for years, but he hadn't expected to be offered it here. At least not so quickly. Somehow he suspected that Rodney wouldn't weep any tears over the loss. "I will. Think about it."

"Good," Elizabeth said. She stared at them for a moment. "It's seems so odd to have you both here."

"Pretty soon we'll just be part of the woodwork," Jack said.

"Somehow I doubt that," she said dryly. "Oh, by the way, I had all the boxes and duffel bags put in your quarters, Daniel."

"Thanks," Daniel said with a smile. "Jack will probably need weapons," he added with a smirk. "I
don't think he'll be able to sleep without one in close proximity. Sort of like a blankie."

Elizabeth chuckled softly. "I'm sure Colonel Sheppard can arrange something for you."


Daniel rolled his eyes, said his goodbyes to Elizabeth and yanked Jack out of the office. "You brought weapons with you?"

"Hey," Jack protested, "I like my pistol. I'm used to it. And you can never have enough C4. I mean that."

"I'm sure you do," Daniel said, pulling Jack into one of the transporters and looking over the controls, trying to remember how they worked.

Jack reached over his shoulder and touched something. A second later the door opened and they were in the right corridor. "How did you do that?" Daniel asked.

Jack shrugged. "Seemed the thing to do." They stepped out of the transporter. "So, you never did answer my question. You said no twice, right?"

Pretending innocence, Daniel said, "No to what?"

Snorting, Jack said, "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Ronon and who else?"

Daniel lowered his face a little and then looked back up at Jack through his eyelashes. It made Daniel feel like a complete idiot, but Sam and Janet had assured him countless times that when he did that, it made him--what was the word Sam had used?--right, swoon-worthy. Daniel was curious to see if it would work on Jack. "Does it bother you?" he inquired in as flirty a tone as he thought he could get away with. If he pushed it too hard, Jack would just laugh at him. It still made him feel like a strumpet.

Jack blinked at him. Then, he cleared his throat.

Deciding that was enough for right now, Daniel gestured toward his door. "This is me." He pointed to the left. "And that's you." Daniel's door obediently opened and he stepped inside. "Is any of this stuff for me?"

"Half of it," Jack said. He looked around Daniel's apartment, even opened up the closet door. Pointing at the stack of books by Daniel's bed, he grinned. "See? I knew it. Did you even bring a change of underwear?"

"And a toothbrush," Daniel said primly.

Snickering, Jack moved to the first box and ripped it open. He pulled out a sweater, then stood, frowning at Daniel. "Wait. You're distracting me. You still haven't answered my question."

"I didn't need to say no, Jack. John was just trying to--"

"John?" Jack asked, his eyes narrowed. "John as in John Sheppard? John Sheppard came on to you?"

"No," Daniel tried to explain. "He was just trying to make Rodney jealous. Rodney was accusing him of having a thing for ascended--"

Again, Jack interrupted him. "John has a thing for people who've ascended?" he demanded.
"No," Daniel said, exasperated, "of course not. He was just--"

"Are you trying to tell me that he has a thing for Rodney McKay?" Jack asked in sheer disbelief.

Daniel nodded, relieved they were getting to the same page. "Yes."

"So, he was coming on to you, but told you he was just trying to make Rodney McKay jealous?" Jack said, still in a disbelieving tone.

"Yes," Daniel said again.

"And you believed him?" Jack hollered. "Are you really that clueless?"

"What?" Daniel had somehow lost track of the conversation.

"Where're his quarters?"

"Who?"

"Sheppard."

"I don't know," Daniel said.

"Oh, you mean he hasn't tried to lure you there so he can cry on your shoulder about his unrequited love affair with Rodney McKay," Jack said snidely. "Rodney McKay?" Growling, Jack headed for the door and it opened for him.

"Um," Daniel said, as the door shut behind Jack. Too bad he didn't have a headset yet, or he could have called John and warned him what was heading his way. Then, grateful that at least Jack hadn't unpacked his weapons, Daniel decided he better follow Jack.

Back in Rodney's quarters, John pointed to the kitten. "You know, you can't take her with you everywhere."

"I know, I know," Rodney said, putting the kitten down in her kitty litter box, just in case. "But, you called, and it sounded urgent."

"What if the Wraith were attacking?" John pressed with a teasing grin. "Would you have expected her to tear them limb from limb with her vicious kitty claws?" He swiped his hands through the air, hissing, fingers extended like talons.

Standing tall, arms crossed over his chest, Rodney said defensively, "Well, I could hardly leave her here all alone."

John finally relented, deciding he'd given Rodney enough shit. "You need something you can keep her in, so she won't get into trouble if you have to leave her alone. Like a kitty play-pen or something."

"Right," Rodney said. "A kitty play-pen. Right." Rodney looked around the room, weirdly desperate, as if, by some miracle, a kitty play-pen kit might be leaning against a wall somewhere.

John found it bizarrely endearing that Rodney was so undone by something so simple. His brain going tangential on him all of a sudden, he asked, "You ever want kids, Rodney?"

Rodney shot him an incredulous look. "Kids? Are you nuts? Look at me. I can build a nuclear
weapon out of rubber bands and spit, but I'm a nervous wreck about a kitten. What if I screw up and something happens to her? What if she gets sick? What if something happens to me? What if she's really some alien creature that needs human blood to survive like that plant in Little Shop of Horrors? What were you thinking?" Rodney was almost shrieking at this point.

"I think you're cute when you're panicking," John drawled with a lopsided grin.


John scooped up Tiger and held her in front of Rodney. "Tiny defenseless kitten. Remember?"

"So was that plant at first," Rodney countered. "And that dog. Oh my God, that dog from The Thing. They saved its life and then it ate them." He stared at the kitten in horror.

John fought to keep the wince off his face. He'd be lying if he said that the same thought hadn't crossed his mind. Instead he put the kitten right up to his face and asked it, "Are you a human-eating monster, kitty?"

The kitten mrrrpped and licked John's nose. Then she peed all over his hand.

John rolled his eyes when Rodney snorted with glee. He put the cat back down in the kitty litter, grabbed one of Rodney's t-shirts that was lying around and cleaned up the floor.

"Hey," Rodney protested.

Ignoring him, John went to wash his hands. When he came back out, Rodney was sitting on the floor by the litter box, now watching the kitten with affectionate eyes, all his fears of her being a blood-sucking creature apparently put at ease by having her pee all over John.

John decided it was worth it. He sat down by Rodney, and still not done annoying the man, asked him, "So, no kids?"

Rodney grimaced. "No kids. Although, I do feel a certain responsibility to pass my genes on."

"Yeah, the world totally needs more cranky astrophysicists," John said, not liking the idea of what Rodney would need to do to pass his genes on.

"Exactly," Rodney replied. "And for that very reason, I'll have you know I deposited sperm in a reputable sperm bank before I went to Antarctica, and there've been three withdrawals." With a lopsided grin, he added, "Apparently women find large IQs very appealing when it comes to their offspring."

"How do you know there've been three withdrawals?" John asked, relieved at how Rodney chose to pass his genes on. "I thought that stuff was confidential."

"Hello?" Rodney said in a pitying tone. "Computer genius here?"

Stupid question. "So there are three little yous running around the United States?"

"Canada, actually," Rodney said smugly. "It seemed the least I could do to support my own country."

"How big of you," John said sarcastically.

"I know," Rodney said proudly, the sarcasm missing him by a mile.
"Aren't you curious about them? I mean, they're your kids."

"Nope," Rodney said definitively. "A woman who goes to a sperm bank, and specifically chooses a donor with a large IQ, obviously wants a kid and is prepared for them to be smart. That's good enough for me. Better than repopulating the species with who knows what because you forgot to bring condoms." He ran a finger down the kitten's back, now fast asleep, sprawled in the kitty litter. "What were we talking about?"

"When?" John asked.

"Before."

"Before what?"

"I don't know," Rodney said, exasperated. "Before we got on the kid subject."


"Right," Rodney said anxiously. "That's right. Oh, God."

"Relax, Rodney. I'll build one for you," John offered. "It's not like it's rocket science," he teased. That got him yet another glare, but then it turned into a smile. "You will?" Then, "Of course, you will. After all, you're her uncle. That's the sort of thing uncles do."

"I think I'm more than an uncle," John protested. "I'm thinking I'm more like a step-dad."

Rodney frowned at him. "A step-dad?"

John liked the sound of that. "Yeah, a step-dad."

"But a step-dad would imply that you and I--" Rodney stopped and waved an energetic hand between him and John.

"Why, yes it would," John agreed amiably. Rodney blinked at him. "Do you, um, do you remember what you, uh, we, no, actually you, did, right before you left?"

"Argue with you?"

"No, no, I mean yes, of course we were arguing, that goes without saying, but I mean the other thing."

"Oh. The kissing thing?" John asked blithely.

Rodney did that finger snapping, fist tapping, finger pointing thing he did. "Yes. Yes. That."

"Yeah, I remember," John said. "What about it?"

"Uh, well, you sort of implied, no, no, you said, that there was a possibility of sex that went along with the kissing thing," Rodney said in a brave rush, chin up. John saw his life stretching out in front of him with he and Rodney arguing on a daily basis, and Rodney getting all defensive and prickly and crossing his arms over his chest and sticking his chin out, and for some unearthly reason, John wanted that future, badly. "I did?" he asked, absolutely
constitutionally unable to not annoy Rodney when the opportunity availed itself.

There went the arms crossed over the chest. And there went the mutinous glare. Oh, yeah, and there went the chin.

"Hmm," John said, "I vaguely remember something like that."

Now Rodney's eyes were narrowing, as if it was starting to cross his mind that John was fucking with him.

"You mean this kissing thing?" John asked, grabbing Rodney just like he had before, and meeting Rodney's lips with his own.

In answer, Rodney wrapped his arms around John as if to keep him from escaping, and John found himself pushed to the floor with Rodney lying on top of him, doing his best to excavate John's tonsils.

John put his hands on Rodney's ass and shoved up, enjoying the snarled groan Rodney found the time to gasp out between frantic kisses.

Jack continued stalking down the hall as if he knew where he was going. He heard a noise that sounded just like Rodney McKay and thought 'open' at the door. He spared a moment for thinking, as the door slid open, just how cool that was.

He stepped into the room and saw Rodney and Sheppard in a clinch on the floor. For a second he thought they were fighting, but then he saw that they weren't. "Oh," he said, before he could think about keeping his damn mouth shut and leaving. "I guess it worked." Just as Sheppard looked up to see who was talking, and as his eyes opened comically wide, Jack stepped back into the corridor and let the door slide shut. "Okay," he said to Daniel. "That was really embarrassing."

"What was?" Daniel asked. "Were they in there?" Then, his eyes widened. "They were in there, together?"

Jack held up a finger to indicate that Daniel should hold onto that thought for a second and reopened the door. He poked his head in and found both men now sitting with a couple of feet between them, whispering furiously. "Don't, uh, worry about me, gentlemen," Jack said. "I didn't see a thing." He gave them a closed-lipped grin, waved his hand goodbye and left again. He turned around in time to see Daniel rolling his eyes at him. "What?" Jack asked.

"Are you done playing the jealous boyfriend now, Jack?"

Jack frowned at Daniel. "What are you talking about?"

Instead of answering, Daniel just blew out a dramatic, way overdone in Jack's estimation, beleaguered breath. "Can we go unpack now?" Daniel begged.

"You betcha," Jack said cheerily. "It was back this way, right?"

Shaking his head, Daniel led the way back to their quarters.

"Holy shit," John said as he took his first breath since he'd looked up over Rodney's shoulder and seen General O'Neill standing in Rodney's doorway. The panic was starting to recede. "Holy fucking shit."
"He's not a general anymore, John," Rodney reminded him tightly.

"Right. Right. I forgot." He ran a hand through his hair, amazed his hand wasn't shaking.

"So, I guess this is probably the fastest relationship you've ever had, right?" Rodney said in his isn't-this-all-so-so-amusing-please-kill-me-now voice. He glanced at his watch. "From first kiss to last kiss in less than five minutes. That's a record, even for me."

John lunged at Rodney, pushing him down on the floor so this time John lay on top. "That wasn't a last kiss, Rodney," he explained in his best you-are-an-idiot voice. "That was a reminder to lock the door before I do it again kiss."

"Oh," Rodney said a little breathlessly. "So, does that mean that you'll be locking the door and there'll be post-door-locking kissing going on?"

"Absolutely," John said with conviction. "As soon as you've fed Tiger," he amended, as it dawned on him that there were some hungry mews coming from that corner of the room.

Rodney sighed. "A parent's work is never done," he said piteously.

"Well, now there are two of us," John said comfortably.

Rodney's face brightened. "Yes, yes, there are." There was a pause. "Really?" There was a slight edge of anxiety in Rodney's question.

"Really," John agreed, sealing the vow with a kiss. Then he scooted over to the kitty box and picked Tiger up. "Get some formula ready before she starts putting out some of those blood sucking tendrils."

"Oh, you are a riot," Rodney said cuttingly, as he got up and marched over to his small kitchen area.

Chuckling, John went nose-to-nose with the cat. "No more peeing on me, got it? Twice is enough."

"Cats poop, too, you know," Rodney said with a smirk.

Quickly, John held Tiger over the kitty litter box.

Grabbing a towel and one of the waterproof heating pads, Rodney sat down, arranged the towel over the heating pad, and said, "Give her to me, you big chicken."

John handed her over. "I hope she shits all over you," he said darkly.

"If she does," Rodney said, remarkably calmly, "I'll just have to take a shower. Have you noticed," he added, as if he were talking about the weather, "just how big the showers are here on Atlantis?"

John had noticed that. And now he really did wish Tiger would poop all over Rodney so they'd have a reason to try out that shower. "It would be a shame wasting all that space," John said righteously.

"And all that water," Rodney added.

"I'm a big believer in water conservation," John said earnestly.

"I've always liked that about you," Rodney said, grinning.

John grinned back.
The next morning, Jack lay in bed staring up at the ceiling finding it hard to believe that he'd actually done what he'd done yesterday. He'd resigned. More than that, he'd left Earth, with no intention of going back, unless, of course, Daniel did.

Maybe that was the hardest thing to believe, that he'd done all of this because he'd been missing Daniel.

He hadn't had a single doubt about it when he'd been packing his clothes, or when he'd filled out those resignation papers, or when he'd been talking to Daniel through the wormhole, or when he'd been tossing boxes and duffel bags, or saying goodbye to Carter. His goal had been crystal clear. If Mohammed wasn't coming to the mountain, then the mountain was damn well going to Mohammed.

So, he'd stepped through, seen Daniel smile at him, and Jack had known he'd made the right decision.

Then, Daniel had told him he'd been hit on twice. Granted, Jack could disregard John Sheppard as competition. Maybe. Jack frowned. But that Ronon guy. Jack scowled. It was like a goddamn monkey wrench had been thrown in the works and now it all felt muddy.

Jack could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Daniel get worked up over someone, and that wasn't even counting his thumb, and they'd all been women. Jack had seen all sorts of looks come Daniel's way from men, on base, off base, off planet, Daniel got looks all the time, but they just went right over his head. Of course, most of the looks from women went right over his head, too. In fact, the four times Daniel had actually gotten involved with someone, Jack was pretty sure it was because they all sort of jumped him.

Ronon was a jumper, no doubt about it. The fact that Daniel had said no was small consolation. Ronon could, and probably would, jump again, and Daniel might not say no the next time.

Jack had to admit that he'd never liked it when someone jumped Daniel, from Sha're on up, and he hadn't been crazy about Sarah Gardiner, either. As much as Jack liked to pretend he was about as evolved as Homer Simpson, it was disconcerting to find out that occasionally it was true. From day one, Daniel, well, basically, had been Jack's. That whole year Daniel had lived on Abydos had sucked. And the year that Daniel had been ascended sucked beyond the telling of it.

So, rather than live without him any more, Jack had abandoned his entire life and stepped through a wormhole. And his plan had been going perfectly until Daniel just happened to mention that Ronon wanted to have sex with him. Jack snorted. Over his dead body.

With that settled to his satisfaction, Jack got up, took a shower, and got dressed. Then, mentally following their trail from last night, Jack headed for the cafeteria and a cup of coffee, and that was where he found Daniel and Ronon having breakfast together.

John let out a sound of dismay when he realized he was waking up before his wonderful, warm, wet dream had reached its satisfactory conclusion. But when he opened his eyes and the wonderful, warm, wet dream was still going on, he realized it wasn't a dream. Rodney was under the sheets, lying between John's legs, giving him a toe-curling, back-arching blow job. He let out a moan, thrusting up into Rodney's mouth, reaching down so he could feel himself slipping in and out of Rodney's lips. Rodney licked John's fingers and sucked one into his mouth. With another moan, John came hard enough to see stars. His body melted into the sheets, and he concentrated on breathing for a few moments.
Rodney popped out from under the sheets, gave John a lopsided grin, and crawled up his body until he was lying full against him. He started doing his own thrusting in the hollow of John's hip. John helped as much as he could, which wasn't much considering what a wet noodle he was, but he held Rodney's ass, and nibbled at his neck and, apparently, that was enough, because with a low groan, Rodney came between their bodies, a sense of heat spreading over John's hip and lower abdomen.

Now it was Rodney's turn to collapse which he, thankfully, did by shifting off of John and sagging against his side. "That's a great way to start the day," John drawled, grinning.

"Hmm," said the other wet noodle. "I just wanted to make sure that last night had actually happened."

"Suppose it hadn't happened?" John asked. "Suppose it had all been a dream?"

Rodney rolled a little until he was on his side facing John, his head now supported by his hand that was held up by his elbow planted into the mattress. "And you being naked in my bed was just some weird coincidence that falsely supported my ultimate wet dream?"

John smiled smugly at being considered someone's ultimate wet dream. "Yeah," he said.

"Then giving you a blow job would get things going in the right direction," Rodney said reasonably. "I figured I couldn't really lose, unless you being in my bed naked was only some sort of military revolt--"

John slapped a hand over his face. "O'Neill. Shit."

"Oh, stop being such a drama queen," Rodney snapped. "First of all, he's not a general anymore. Second, he's not your boss, or mine. And third, he said it didn't matter. In fact, he probably took Daniel back to his quarters and did the same thing to him."

John moved his hand and stared at Rodney. "O'Neill and Jackson?"

"According to the rumors," Rodney answered with a shrug. "Granted, those same rumors had Daniel with just about everyone, including me, so they could all be vicious lies."

"You and Daniel?" John asked with a frown.

"Vicious lies," Rodney said again. He sat up, looking over toward the makeshift bed they'd made for Tiger with the Atlantis heating pad and some towels. "How's Tiger?"

"Ha!" John said victoriously, "You called her Tiger. That is so her name."

"Only because you're impossible to argue with," Rodney said sulkily.

"Me?" John crowed. "I'm impossible to argue with?"

"When it comes to naming things, yes," Rodney said, continuing to pout. "You haven't let me name anything."

John shot him a narrowed-eyed look. "You're just expecting me to make it up to you with blow jobs, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," Rodney said with his lopsided grin.

John couldn't help but grin back.
"She's awfully quiet," Rodney observed. "Shouldn't she have woken up sometime during the night wanting to be fed? God, do you think we slept through it and she's dead?" He crawled over John, narrowly missing his balls, to get to the floor.

John rolled his eyes but couldn't help a twinge of concern as Rodney hunkered down next to the towels. "She's fine, Rodney," John said. "Right? I mean, she's fine, right?" He couldn't imagine them sleeping through her hungry screeches. For something so little, she had a set of lungs on her.

"She's fine," Rodney said.

John took in a breath, realizing he'd forgotten to breathe there for a second. Then, seeing that Rodney was just staring at the kitten, said, "But?"

"Doesn't she look bigger?"

John rolled out of bed and joined Rodney by Tiger's bed. She did look a little bigger. "She's a growing kitten. Why wouldn't she look bigger?"

Doubtfully, Rodney nodded. "I suppose."

"If you're worried about her, take her to see Carson."

Nodding again, Rodney said, "Yeah, good idea. What are you doing today?"

John had to think about it, but when he remembered, he dropped his head and groaned.

"What, what is it?" Rodney asked worriedly.

"I'm orienting Jack O'Neill to Atlantis," John said in dread.

Like a complete bastard, Rodney grinned at John. "Good luck with that," he teased.

"Asshole," John said.

Jack grabbed some coffee and sat down at the table with Daniel and Ronon. He bared his teeth at both of them in a mock semblance of a grin, making his displeasure known.

Ronon, fortunately, got the hint. "Remember what I said, Daniel," he said cautiously.

Daniel rolled his eyes. "It's Daniel. And I don't bite."

"All evidence to the contrary," Jack said, remembering Daniel going ape-shit at Lorne for moving his precious artifacts.
That got a grin out of Lorne. "I think I've toughened up, some," he said, grinning more broadly. "I have to deal with Dr. McKay now." Jack noticed he glanced around quickly as he said that, no doubt making sure the good doctor wasn't in hearing range.

"That's true," Jack said. He'd deal with Daniel in one of his pissy moods any day over McKay. He pointed back to Lorne's table. "You better get back. Ronon's eyeing your dessert."

Lorne started a half-salute which turned into a sort of wave, and with a "Welcome to Atlantis, both of you," he headed back to his table.

"Where were we?" Jack said to Daniel

Daniel shrugged casually.

Thinking back, Jack narrowed his eyes, remembering. "You will, what?" Jack asked, danger in his voice that he just knew Daniel would completely ignore.

"I will what?" Daniel inquired, taking a sip of his coffee, eyebrows up as if he just couldn't imagine what Jack was talking about.

"Daniel," Jack said menacingly.

"Jack," Daniel said mischievously. Then, with a dismissive wave of his hand, asked, "What are you doing today?"

"Following you around everywhere," Jack said sternly.

"Promise?" Daniel asked, his voice husky.

Jack stopped with his coffee an inch from his lips. That had sounded flirty, and, and, well, flirty. He couldn't think of a thing to say to save his life. Him, Jack O'Neill who snarked with system lords on a weekly basis, was completely flummoxed by Daniel Jackson saying one word to him.

That was when McKay walked in, followed by Sheppard. McKay walked right to their table and smiled that smile that boded nothing good for anyone blond within a five mile radius. "Jack, Daniel," McKay said, still smiling.

"McKay, Sheppard," Jack said guardedly. He almost had to shut his eyes against the vision of the two of them grappling on the floor. Some things should never, ever be seen.

"Rodney," Sheppard said with a hint of warning, distressingly similar to how Jack said Daniel's name several times a day, especially on a mission.

"John," Rodney said with an irrepressible grin. Then, actually bouncing on his toes, he added, "I'll just let you and Jack get going, while I steal Daniel." To Daniel, he added, "I thought we could see what that ascended-manufactured ATA-gene of yours actually does."

That was when Jack remembered that Sheppard was supposed to be orienting him to Atlantis today. Great.

"I thought we'd start with the puddle jumpers," Sheppard said, looking almost as thrilled at the thought of spending time with Jack as he was with him. "Thought we could take one out for a flight."

For a goodwill gesture, Jack decided it was a great one. There wasn't anything that couldn't be made
better by flying. "Good idea," he said, standing. He sent a quelling glance to Daniel through narrow eyes, hoping it was clearly communicating to Daniel that whatever it was he had told Ronon he would do, it better not have anything to do with getting naked.

Daniel, as usual, ignored him. He had the nerve to smirk at Jack, and say, "Have fun. Try not to shoot anything."

"Unless it's a Wraith," Rodney added. "Or dinner."

John rolled his eyes at the same time Jack did, and Jack decided that taste in sex partners aside, John Sheppard might be all right. They all said their goodbyes and headed off in separate directions, Rodney and Daniel to the lab, and John and Jack to the jumper bay.

"So," Jack asked as they flew over the mainland, "Rodney McKay?"

"You don't seriously expect me to discuss my love life with you, do you, sir?" John asked, not quite comfortable calling Jack Jack.

"Hell, no," Jack said vehemently.

"Exactly," John said smoothly. He pointed to the read out. "Just think weapons at it," he instructed. It was no surprise that Jack had taken to flying the jumpers like a duck to water. He had flown one of the time travel versions for some mission that still, apparently, weirded Jack out enough that he hadn't said much except muttering something about there being fish in his pond, now. John was perfectly happy to leave it at that.

Jack obediently brought up the weapons control. "Sweet," he said with a grin. They flew in silence for a few minutes while Jack did some banks and rolls getting used to the inertial dampeners. "But," he suddenly said, "Rodney McKay?"

"Daniel Jackson?" John said in retaliation.

"Completely different thing," Jack said firmly. "First of all, there isn't a me and Daniel. Second of all, everyone likes Daniel. Everyone," he added sulkily.

John's eyebrows went up. "There's no you and Daniel?"

"No," Jack said, still pouting. "Maybe, but no."

"Maybe but no?" John asked. "Usually with stuff like that you either are or you aren't."

Jack frowned, then asked, "So what's with this Ronon guy?"

John was perfectly happy to change the subject. "His planet was destroyed, and the Wraith made him a runner. Put this thing in his back so they could track him and hunt him. He kept them on the run for seven years." John still couldn't believe that. He wasn't sure he'd have lasted a month. Ronon was one tough son of a bitch. Jack didn't look particularly impressed. "Wait until you meet the Wraith, sir —"

"Jack," Jack interrupted.

"Jack," John said reluctantly. "Then you'll be impressed." Not that he wanted Jack to meet the Wraith. If none of them ever saw a Wraith again, that would be fine with John. "If you think location and Stargates," he said, "a display will show you where all the nearest ones are."
The indicated screen came up and Jack studied it for a moment. "A portable version of this would have come in handy a time or two," he noted.

"Rodney figured out how to download this program into the lifesign detectors," John said. In response to his thought, a detector popped up and he pointed it out to Jack. Jack reached for it, and gave it a good look. "Sweet," he said again.

As they flew over the Athosian settlement, John pointed it out.

Jack sat up a little to give it a good look. "Why don't they live on Atlantis?"

"They're farmers," John said. "They lived on Atlantis for a while, but it didn't really work. This way we can offer them protection from the Wraith, and they share their food with us."

"Why doesn't that Teyla person live with them, if she's their leader?"

"She believes she can better help her people by helping us fight the Wraith. Halling, this guy who's sort of her second in command, keeps an eye on things."

They flew along for a few more minutes. Then, Jack glanced at John. "Rodney McKay?"

"What about him?" John snapped out.

"I don't get the appeal. He drove us all nuts at the SGC. He managed to totally piss Carter off, and that's not easy to do. Trust me, I've given it my best shot, and the most I get from her is an eye roll."

John had no idea how to explain Rodney to someone who didn't really know him. He knew that a lot of people would agree with Jack's assessment, even a few people on Atlantis. Although, most of the people there knew they owed their lives to Rodney a dozen times over, and were more than willing to overlook his arrogance. And Rodney had more friends than he knew. John wasn't the only one who had seen what lay underneath Rodney's ego. He was just the lucky one who got to see it most of the time.

He could see that Jack was still waiting for an answer, so he shrugged.

"That's it?" Jack demanded.

"Why do you like Daniel?" John countered.

"That's easy," Jack said. "He's brilliant--"

"Check," John said, interrupting.

"Nice," Jack added strongly.

"Check," John said, then added honestly, "sometimes. To me," he finished with a wince.

"Good looking," Jack said next.

"Check," John said.

"What?" Jack asked skeptically.

"I think he's good looking," John defended himself. Then, taking the lead, said, "He's a genius."

"Check," Jack said. "But that's sort of like brilliant, so that doesn't really count."
"He's funny," John added. "He's really good at insulting people."

"Okay, you got me there," Jack said reluctantly. "Daniel's too nice most of the time to insult people. Although," he added, "he can be a sarcastic bastard when he wants to be."

"He's never boring," John said with a grin. Say what you want about Rodney, but things were never dull when he was around.

"Crap, you got me there, too," Jack griped. "Daniel can put me to sleep in a heartbeat when he gets excited about potholes and artifacts in situ."

"He saves my life all the time," John pointed out.

"Ditto," Jack said.

"He's scared shitless all the time, but he never lets it stop him," John said. That was one of the things he admired most about Rodney.

"Hm," Jack said. "I'm not sure Daniel's got the sense to be scared shitless. He's too busy baiting Goa'uld to be scared."

"He lives on powerbars and coffee," John said with a grin. He was actually starting to enjoy himself.

"That's one more food group than Daniel lives on," Jack said. "If I didn't go get him out of his office, he'd never eat or sleep."

"Half the time I find him asleep on his keyboard," John said with a grin. He touched his face, "With little box shaped imprints all over his cheek."

Jack snorted. "Books."

"Laptops."

"The Discovery Channel," Jack said in a tone of voice that suggested he'd watched hours and hours of educational television against his will.

John grinned. "Mocking the Back to the Future trilogy."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Jack said.

"Over and over and over again."

"Got it," Jack consoled. "If I have to see one more National Geographic special on Egypt, my television goes out the window."

"Unless he brought DVDs with him, you probably don't need to worry about it anymore," John said.

"Excellent point," Jack said in a very pleased voice. "I like the way you think, even if I still totally don't get the McKay thing."

The memory of how he got woken up this morning still fresh in his mind and body, and deciding Jack so deserved it, he said, "He gives truly excellent blow jobs."

Jack looked both intrigued and horrified. "TMI, Sheppard!" Then for good measure, he added, "Ack."
Smiling smugly, John sat back comfortably in his chair.

Scowling, Jack paid attention to his flying for a few minutes.

"So why not with Daniel?" John asked, deciding if he and Rodney were Jack's business, then he could be equally nosy. "He seems nice enough, and, you know, all that other stuff."

"Welcome to Gay Atlantis?" Jack asked sardonically.

"I am the head of the military," John said self-righteously. "And you came all this way for him, didn't you?"

This time it was Jack's turn to shrug. Then he pointed. "What's that?"

John peered through the windshield. "Huh. I don't know. They look like ruins of some kind."

They both asked at the same time: "Should we go look?"

Then, at the same time John said, "Rodney'd kill me if I didn't go get him first," Jack said, "Daniel would skin me alive if I didn't take him with."

They stared at each other, then scowled, neither of them willing to admit how whipped they were. John sighed and Jack turned the jumper around. About half way back to Atlantis, John, as nonchalance as he could, although he could hear the smugness in his voice, said, "If you're putting up with the rest of the crap, it seems to me you might as well be getting blow jobs out of it."

It wasn't until the next day that they went back to explore what John and Jack had discovered from the air. Teyla and Ronon had been co-opted by another team, so it was just the four of them.

Rodney stood, tapping his toe, arms crossed over his chest, as he watched and waited while the testosterone-laden Boy Scout twins grunted as they poked their P90s into every nook and crevice on the off-off chance that this very abandoned site might--might--contain some here-to-fore undiscovered invisible menace.

"Are you done?" he asked, gesturing at the very empty clearing if you didn't count the rock formations and the altar looking thing in the middle.

He got a set of twin glares, reminding him of the twin complaints that had shot both his and Daniel's way as they very reasonably followed the readings on Rodney's hand-held and entered the ruins without, apparently, permission and sufficient hand-holding. John had snapped out a "Rodney" precisely at the same time that Jack had snapped out a "Daniel" and they'd both been shunted aside.

He and Daniel had exchanged eye rolls, and Rodney had been patient, exceedingly so. The Hardy boys had been at this for at least an hour. "How long are you going to take?" he snapped out.

"We've been here for less than a minute, Rodney," John drawled in that infuriatingly sexy way he had, that made Rodney want to take him behind the nearest boulder and rip his clothes off.

"Whatever," Rodney said.

"Okay, I think it's safe," Jack said.

Rodney rolled his eyes again. "Finally." He shooed his hands at John and Jack. "Go away now. Go hunt wooly mammoths or build a fire and stare at it while you scratch yourselves."
"Charming," Jack said sarcastically, although he agreeably enough turned and headed off, John behind him.

Ignoring them, Rodney collected up Daniel and proceeded to check out the altar that was in the center of the circle of stones. Rodney took some readings then glanced at Daniel. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to see if this decoration is some sort of writing or means of communication," Daniel said, his finger tracing a spiral looking thing.

Rodney looked at him, the altar, him, the altar. "Hm," he finally said, going back to his readings. As long as Daniel didn't get in his way, he could draw on the altar in crayons as far as Rodney was concerned.

"Do you always talk that way to him?"

"What?" Rodney said, pulling his eyes away from his readings.

"John. Do you always talk that way to him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, sort of mean," Daniel said with an apologetic smile.

Rodney let out an outraged scoff. "I am not mean," he protested. Then, he furrowed his brow, and said anxiously, "You think I'm mean?" Then, definitively, "I'm not mean. I just tell the truth." He waved at Daniel in a you-can't-help-being-the-way-you-are sort of way. "I was raised by parents who couldn't possibly appreciate the raw talent I was born with, so it's a minor, no, actually a major miracle that my genius wasn't stifled, but at least they never attempted to foist societal niceties on me, as they're a complete waste of time. The truth never hurt anyone," he finished defiantly.

"I think the truth can hurt more than anything, sometimes," Daniel said a little sadly. Rodney thought about that, almost dismissed it, but then, nervously, asked, "Do you think I hurt him with what I said?" Rodney didn't want to hurt John. John was probably one of the only people Rodney might actually consider going out of his way to be nice to. And maybe Elizabeth. Teyla. Ronon. Carson. Daniel. He scowled. As if Wraith weren't bad enough, now he might have to start keeping a list of people he maybe sort of actually liked and might have to be nice to.

"No," Daniel said. "I was just wondering if maybe I should be meaner to Jack."

"Why?" Rodney asked through furrowed brows. Mean and Daniel just didn't go together in his brain. Sarcastic, yes, foolhardy, yes, annoying in that soft science sort of way, yes. But, mean?

Daniel shrugged, but then, his eyes darting to Rodney's, then away, said, "Maybe I thought it might--." He stopped, frustrated. "John obviously doesn't mind it, if he's sleeping with you," he finally said.

Rodney thought that one through. "Hmm. I thought you and Jack were already, you know?" He made a brief pumping motion with his hand. Vulgar, yes, but it got the point across.

Shaking his head, Daniel said, "No, we're not."

"Why do you think that John and I--?" he started, finishing with the same hand motion.

"You mean besides Jack walking in on you the other night?" Daniel asked.
"Right. Good point," Rodney said, feeling the blood rush to his face. "So you two really aren't?"

Daniel shook his head again.

"And you think if maybe you're mean to him that he'll want you?" Rodney asked incredulously.

"Well, how did you know?" Daniel asked a little defensively. "I'm so bad at this stuff," he confided honestly.

"God, me, too," Rodney agreed, glad to have that on the table.

"So, how did you know?"

"He crawled into bed with me," Rodney said, remembering the moment fondly. On the whole, the last two days had been two of the best days of his life. "I mean, not to actually have sex, but still, in bed, with me. It made me think."

"I can see how it would."

"He gave me a cat," Rodney said, hoping it would help. "Cute little thing." He frowned. "Although her weight's doubled in four days. I don't think that's normal. Do you think that's normal?"

"I don't know much about cats," Daniel admitted.

"She looks like a cat. Cat ears, and a cat tail, cute little cat teeth, and a cat tongue." Rodney wasn't sure if he was trying to convince Daniel or himself. "She purrs like a cat."

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck," Daniel offered.

"Yes, yes," Rodney muttered. "I keep telling myself that."

"I don't really see myself just getting into bed with Jack," Daniel said. This was one of the weirder conversations Rodney had had in a long time, and considering the people he worked with, that was saying a lot. He wasn't the most likely candidate for Atlantis' Advice-to-the-Lovelorn columnist. But, on the other hand, Rodney had somehow scored the hottest guy in Atlantis, so maybe that did make him somewhat of an expert.

"Maybe a picnic?" Daniel suggested hopefully when the silence had gone on a little too long.

Rodney snorted. "Right." He held few fond memories of picnics, the vision of John and Chaya and a picnic basket still painfully burned on his retinas. "Why don't you just tell him the truth?" Rodney countered. Mean or no, Rodney always found the truth to be the most direct path to getting him what he wanted, or getting the pain of not getting what he wanted over as quickly as possible.

Daniel looked wistful all of a sudden. "I sort of want to, I don't know, woo him."

"Woo?" Rodney said. He wasn't sure he'd ever said that word before except as someone's last name. He thought he used to have a lab technician named Woo. Or maybe it was Lee, or Chin. "Woo?" he said again, deciding it was kind of a stupid word.

"Yeah," Daniel said with a hint of glare. "What's wrong with wooing?"

"Nothing," Rodney said. "Woo away." He thought of the cat, wondered if John had been wooing him and found himself somewhat charmed by the thought. "I'd suggest you get him a cat, too, but the planet John found her on is filled with really big giblet-eating pterodactyl things."
"I'll pass, then," Daniel said reasonably.

Rodney looked at the gadget in his hand, felt the lure of the numbers scrolling across the screen. He manfully resisted and said, "How about a late night stroll around Atlantis? She's beautiful at night. John's taken me all over the city. Huh," he added. Maybe John really had been wooing him. Or maybe they'd been wooing each other, both completely clueless. Typical. "I could show you some places to go."

Daniel smiled. "Thank you. I like that idea."

Pushing aside his personal distaste for picnics, Rodney confided, "One of the cooks, I think her name is Della, is a romantic at heart, or so I've been told ad nauseum by Lt. Cadman." He shuddered. "Long story. Anyway, I understand she'll cook private dinners for two."

Daniel's eyes lit up. "I remember her. She makes excellent coffee."

"That she does," Rodney agreed dreamily. "Oh, oh, and I've downloaded a huge amount of music into Atlantis' databanks, so you can play a wide choice of musical selections in your quarters." In fact, maybe he'd surprise John one night with dinner and music. He got lost for a moment in anticipation of the evening's probable end. Then, deciding he'd played cupid long enough, he sighed, "Can I get some work done now? Any other personal problems I need to solve for you?"

"No, I'm good," Daniel said.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Jack asked, watching Daniel and Rodney chatting.

"Some geeky thing they found," John said.

"Yeah, probably," Jack admitted. He patted his P90, adjusted his baseball cap, and leaned against the puddle jumper. For only being there one day, he felt remarkably at home. "At least they're getting along," he observed. "McKay and Carter were like two spitting tomcats. Course," he added, a glint in his eye, "sexual tension can do that."

John glared at him.

Jack grinned.

"So," John began, clearly in retaliation, "had any good blow jobs lately?"

Jack scowled.

"Just go for it," John advised.

"Right," Jack said. "And blow the best friendship I have? No pun intended."

"Do you really think he'd say no?"

Jack shrugged. He'd never really even thought about it until that conversation with Carter. It was hard to believe that Daniel had left Earth because he had the hots for Jack. And, okay, yes, there had been that weird little bit of flirting, but for all he knew it was some strange Daniel blip that didn't mean anything. "He tricked me into signing some papers that would take him to a different galaxy," Jack reminded John. "Not exactly a proposal."

This time John shrugged, and then his eyes moved back to Rodney and Daniel. "They're really talking up a storm, aren't they?"
"Which just goes to prove my point that Daniel gets along with everyone," Jack said pointedly.

"Maybe," John said snidely, "but my boyfriend's smarter than yours."

Jack snorted. "Yeah, well, my boyfriend's better looking than yours. And Daniel's no lightweight in the brains department."

"My boyfriend can build a nuclear bomb," John taunted.

"My boyfriend can speak twenty-three languages," Jack boasted.

"Okay, that's pretty cool," John admitted.

"You betcha," Jack said. "Now if I could only understand him when he spoke English, we'd be on to something."

Snickering, John said, "My boyfriend can fix anything."

"Daniel, not so much," Jack said with a sigh. Daniel might spend hours, days, weeks, gluing together pottery shards, but his overall philosophy was, essentially, if it was broken and replaceable, throw it out and buy a new one. Even if it was only sort of broken, like he couldn't figure out how to turn the damn thing on. Jack had fished several cell phones out of Daniel's trash can that went on to live fruitful lives in someone else's hands.

"He was glowing the other day, you know," John said, out of the blue.

"What do you mean?" Jack asked apprehensively. Daniel and glowing were a bad combination.

"When he first got here, he started to glow, and then he really got glowy. Rodney helped him get it under control."

Jack screwed his face up, wondering what the hell that meant. No way was Daniel going all the way glowy. Once was already one time way too many. He hadn't noticed Daniel glowing since he'd arrived; maybe it had been a one time deal. "There is no way in hell Daniel's doing the ascended thing again," Jack growled. He could only hope that Daniel had a better track record at staying alive in Atlantis than he did on Earth.

"I watched a whole village ascend once," John offered. "It seemed sort of peaceful," he ended on a questioning note.

"Bullshit," Jack snarled. "Try watching your best friend, as he slowly liquefies to death from radiation poisoning, who somehow manages to tap you on the shoulder so you can have some mumbo jumbo conversation with him so he can get you to give him permission to move on, and watch him walk away from you after six goddamn years, never knowing if you'll ever see him again. There isn't anything goddamn peaceful about it."

John pursed his lips as he studied Jack but didn't say anything.

"Second worst day of my life," Jack muttered.

"What was your worst day?" John asked.

Jack gave him a look, decided John wasn't asking out of idle curiosity. He knew John had had a few sucky days of his own. "When my son blew his brains out with my gun," Jack said softly.

"Jesus," John said, physically recoiling.
"How about you?" Jack asked, wanting the attention off of him.

"My worst day?" John asked reluctantly.

Jack nodded.

"You've read my file," John offered by way of an answer.

Jack nodded again.

"So, going to rescue my friends and having them die, and then getting almost court-martialed when I got back sort of sucked." He thought for a minute. "Waking up the Wraith sucked," John said. "Watching all these planets get culled knowing it's my fault. That totally sucks."

"Yeah, I'll bet it does," Jack agreed, "but it's not your fault."

"I picked up that damn amulet and activated it, and then I killed the queen."

"Not your fault," Jack insisted. "Fucking bad luck. That's all. Shit, half the stuff SG-1 did was all about luck. It's a wonder we didn't blow up the universe. We damn near tried a few times." He shrugged. "Whatever happens, you just deal with it the best you can. That's all you can ever do."

Jack didn't miss the quick flash of gratitude that crossed John's face. Figuring they'd never end up having this conversation again, Jack added, "John, I know you weren't prepared in any way to become base commander after Sumner died, but you've done all right. It wasn't just Elizabeth rooting for you that kept you here. Trust me, if I didn't think you could do the job, I'd have sent someone else."

John looked away for a moment, but then he nodded, and said, "Thanks. I appreciate that."

Deciding it was past time for this conversation to be over, Jack yelled, "Daniel, are we done here?"

To his immense and staggering surprise, Daniel yelled back, "Yes." Then, he and Rodney strode over to where Jack and John were hanging out.

"There's nothing here," Rodney said unhappily. "The altar's not putting out any kind of energy reading to speak of, and Daniel can't make heads or tails out of the scribbles all over it. Might as well be covered with John's doodles of jets and puddle jumpers."

Daniel looked like he might take offense at the use of the word scribbles, but apparently even he wasn't interested enough in the site to get worked up about it.

"Great," Jack said, deciding they were getting off easy and should get out of there while the getting was good. "Let's go."

There was no argument as all four men got in the puddle jumper, Jack gesturing for John to pilot, and they headed back to Atlantis.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Look at my new story wallpaper!!!! Thanks to Bine!!!!!

This was the picture that started this story. It was a real picture with some guy and Montana remade it with Rodney.

Still gasping for breath, John stared up at the ceiling, Rodney half sprawled on top of him. Even after two weeks, it kept getting better and better. "You know," he said sleepily, "I think it's good Jack is here."

Rodney squinted at John. "We just had mind-blowing sex and you're talking about Jack O'Neill? Why, exactly?"

Okay, that was a fair question. He shrugged.

Instead of doing his usual impersonation of a limp jelly fish after they'd had sex, Rodney hoisted himself up on one elbow and stared at John, eyebrows up.
John shrugged again, sort of sorry he'd brought the subject up.

"I get it," Rodney suddenly said. "Now you have someone you can go running to when everything's falling apart."

"Hey!" John protested, although there was some truth to Rodney's statement. Jack knew a lot. He'd been a military commander for years. Decades. He totally got John's job and his responsibility. And in the two weeks Jack had been in Atlantis, the advice he'd given John had been low-key, non-intrusive without an I-know-better-than-you tone, and was mostly pretty damn funny. It was an added layer of comfort for John that he'd never expected.

"Seriously," Rodney said, his lopsided grin belying his word. "Now you have someone to bond with over the horrors of inventory or when you run out of target paper."

"Shut up," John said, even though he couldn't stop a returning grin.

"You're more relaxed," Rodney said quietly, all humor now gone from his face. "You smile more. Your shoulders aren't as tense."

John realized it was true. He was more relaxed. "Could be the sex," he offered. That was new, too, and started at the same time Jack arrived.

"Of course it's the sex," Rodney said smugly. "But I also think it's O'Neill."

"You've been more relaxed, too," John said, sort of ashamed he'd just noticed. Maybe he hadn't seen it because he'd been slowly relaxing right along with Rodney and they always tended to be at the same level of vigilance, even if they expressed it differently.

"Well, sex," Rodney said. "And then giving half my departments away helped." He let out a happy sigh. "No more botany, no more zoology or sociology. Thank God."

"They're all looking a little more relaxed," John teased. Simpson had been glowing from Daniel's praise the other day when John had seen them in the hallway.

"Of course they're more relaxed," Rodney scoffed. "They don't have to deal with their inadequacy anymore by coming face-to-face with my genius every day."

"Right," John drawled. "That must be it."

Rodney slugged him not-quite painfully in the arm.

"Ow," John complained. "So, how goes the wooing?" Rodney had related the conversation he'd had with Daniel, much as John had shared his conversation with Jack.

"Daniel hasn't had a lot of time since I dumped all my work on him," Rodney said a little too gleefully. "But I know they've been going for walks."

"Walks?"

"Yeah, romantic walks, around Atlantis. Like we used to do. Still do."

"Those were romantic walks?" John asked. "I thought they were planning sessions on how not to be destroyed by the Wraith."

"That too," Rodney agreed. "But they were sort of romantic, in a Wraith barraging the shield in a fireworks display kind of way."
"Very romantic," John said, rolling his eyes.

"You mean you weren't wooing me?" Rodney asked, disappointed.

"Not consciously, no," John said honestly. "But, unconsciously? Probably since the day we met."

Rodney grinned at him before narrowing his eyes. "And all your floozies?"

John huffed out an annoyed breath. "All my floozies? Rodney, there were maybe three floozies. That's all. Time to move on."

"Not in my lifetime," Rodney said derisively. "If I don't keep reminding you of the errors of your ways, you might have a relapse."

The bed dipped accompanied by a thump and an inquisitive mew. John looked at Tiger speculatively; she was growing every day.

Rodney reached out and pulled her close. "John," he said guardedly. "Two weeks ago she fit in my hand. Now she's as big as a house cat and she's still a kitten. She's barely eating on her own, and she still trips over her own feet."

"Yeah, I sort of noticed the growing bigger thing." John wished he'd found the kitten's mother so they had some idea of what they were in for.

"That planet had pterodactyl things," Rodney continued. "Really big pterodactyl things. What if it really is a dinosaur planet? What if she's like this saber tooth tiger that's going to eat all of us," he finished nervously.

To punctuate his words, Tiger mashed her face into Rodney's, licked his cheek, and then settled back down to gnaw on Rodney's thumb.

"See?" Rodney squawked. "She's tasting me."

John noticed it didn't stop Rodney from petting her. "Yeah, she's a real man-eater," he said. Fortunately, John hadn't seen any aggressive behavior out of her at all other than an occasional accidental scratch when John was tickling her. She was also still drinking milk mixed with Pedialyte, turning her nose up at more solid food. It was only a matter of time, though, because between her teeth and claws, there was no doubt that she was a carnivore. "Maybe we should let her roam around the city, get used to everyone here."

"So she can scope out her dinner?" Rodney asked skeptically.

"No," John said slowly, "so she'll know who not to eat."

"Oh," Rodney said. "That's a good idea." He pointed a warning finger at Tiger. "No eating any of the scientists. Except Kavanaugh. Him you can eat. And the occasional Marine."

"Hey," John complained.

"So, have you met them?" Ronon asked Teyla, gesturing to where Jack and Daniel were sitting across the cafeteria.

"I have," Teyla said. "I accompanied Daniel to the Athsosian settlement the other day. I found him to be soothing company, although he is very curious."
"And Jack?" Ronon liked Jack, even if Jack still gave him funny looks. It hadn't taken long for Ronon to figure out it was Jack's way of telling him to keep his hands off Daniel, which Ronon took as invitation to get in Daniel's space as often as possible.

"He reminds me much of the colonel," Teyla said. "He is a warrior at heart."


"No," she said with an answering grin. "He is not."

"You think they're doing it?" Ronon asked, as he took another large bite of his sandwich.

"Sharing blankets?" Teyla inquired.

"Yeah," Ronon said.

"I believe they are very much in love," she observed, by way of an answer. A soft smile was on her face. It made Ronon wonder what she'd look like if she was in love with someone.

"They look good together," he said.

Her gaze was admiring as she nodded. "I agree."

He grinned again. "Sheppard and McKay?" he tossed out as if in comparison. "Not sure that'd be so nice to look at."

Teyla sent him one of her disapproving looks. "Dr. McKay has much to commend him," she said kindly.

"Like what?" Ronon asked, enjoying getting Teyla riled, and noticing she hadn't felt the need to argue on Sheppard's behalf.

This time the look promised retribution, probably with her sticks. "I do not believe I need to convince you of anything," she said sternly.

"Nah," he agreed with another grin. "McKay's all right." Not that Ronon was interested in having sex with him. Ronon had thought about it a couple of times; there was something weirdly attractive about the guy, but then he'd open his damn mouth, and Ronon always decided there was easier and quieter game afoot. Sheppard was the only one who didn't seem to mind Rodney's non-stop talking. Ronon wondered if McKay talked as much in bed.

Daniel and Jack got up and walked by the table where Teyla and Ronon were sitting and Daniel gave both of them a warm smile. Jack was a little more reserved, and Ronon noticed that Jack did his best to unobtrusively inch Daniel away from passing too near to Ronon. Ronon would have bet money on it that Jack wasn't even aware of how territorial he was.

Then they were out the door and gone.

"Where are McKay and Sheppard?" Ronon asked, stealing Teyla's dessert.

Teyla glared at Ronon and Ronon gave the dessert back. Teyla might be short but she was vicious.

"I believe Rodney is in the lab, and John is with Elizabeth," Teyla answered his question, enjoying her first spoonful of her dessert with a taunting "Mmmm."

"Where's the cat?" Ronon asked.
"Either in Rodney's quarters, or with Carson," Teyla answered with a small grin.

"It's growing fast," Ronon commented, thinking about how much the damn thing had grown in the last couple of weeks.

"It is, indeed," Teyla agreed, pushing the uneaten half of her dessert at Ronon.

Not waiting for her to change her mind, Ronon picked it up and shoved it in his mouth.

Two weeks later, Elizabeth called John into her office. "John," Elizabeth started off sternly. "We need to talk about the kitten."

John managed to keep a grimace off his face as he sat down in one of Elizabeth's chairs. "Shouldn't you be having this conversation with Rodney?" he suggested, perfectly happy to deflect Elizabeth's wrath Rodney's way.

"You brought it here."

"Her," John corrected Elizabeth. "I brought her here."

"She's only been here four weeks and she's as large as a bobcat. How much larger is she going to grow?" Elizabeth said with a frown, crossing her arms over her chest.

John always felt about twelve years old when she did that. Twelve hadn't been a particularly good year for him. He could have used Rodney's cat on a regular basis as therapy. "I don't know," John answered honestly. "But, she's completely tame."

"She probably is," Elizabeth conceded, "but at some point she'll need to start eating solid food, and if she grows as large as Carson suspects she will, she'll need the equivalent of a deer a week. We can't spare the food, John."

Frowning, John thought fast. "Um, we'll take her to the mainland and teach her to hunt." His mind was full of Rodney on his hands and knees showing Tiger how to pounce on dinner. Then, his mind was full of Rodney on his hands and knees for entirely other reasons. He shifted in his chair.

"And if she can't find dinner one night?" Elizabeth challenged. "Will she decide that one of the Athosians would do?"

"No," John protested, even though it was entirely possible.

"She's too young to be let loose, now," Elizabeth said, "but as soon as she's eating solid food, she needs to go."

John lifted his eyebrow at her. "I'll let you tell Rodney."

"No," she countered. "You will tell Rodney. You brought her here, as far as I'm concerned, you're responsible for her."

John scowled, thinking Elizabeth really was a mean old lady.

It was hard to believe he'd been here a month already. "It's beautiful here," Jack admitted, leaning over a balcony, watching the sun go down. He wished he'd brought his fishing gear.

"Too bad you didn't bring your fishing gear," Daniel said, echoing his thoughts.
"I was just thinking that."

"You could have them send something on Daedalus' next run." 

"I could," Jack said agreeably. The Daedalus was leaving tomorrow, its month long stay coming to an end. Colonel Caldwell had politely asked him if he was coming back with them and Jack had just as politely told him no.

"Are they going to let you stay here?" Daniel asked anxiously.

There were a lot of ways to answer that question, and none of them would quite say what Jack wanted to say. He turned toward his friend, gave him a long look. "If you're here," Jack finally said, "so am I."

That got a small smile out of Daniel, but then he asked, "Suppose the President insists you go back to Earth?"

"He can come and get me," Jack said with a shrug. "Daniel."

"Daniel." When he caught Daniel's glare, Jack relented, saying, "You want my best guess?"

Daniel nodded.

"I think they're glad to have me here. Ever since the Wraith showed up, no one back on Earth has been thrilled to have this base under civilian control, and Sheppard wasn't most people's first choice for ranking military." When it looked like Daniel was about to interrupt, Jack continued right over him. "I don't have any intention of being in charge of anything, but if things go bad, I think Elizabeth and Sheppard would listen to me."

"They'd be foolish not to," Daniel said loyally.

"Even though you've hardly listened to me in eight years?" Jack said disparagingly.

"I listened, Jack. I always listened."

"And then you did whatever the hell you wanted." 

Daniel shrugged. "Not all the time. Whenever you'd get that certain tone in your voice, I almost always did what you said."

"Almost always," Jack said disparagingly. "Words every team leader lives by." He tugged at his gray hair. "Your almost always, Daniel, gave me each and every one of these."

"It makes you look distinguished," Daniel commented.

Jack couldn't help but grin at that. "Distinguished?"

"Very," Daniel agreed. His eyes took a quick roam over Jack from his toes up to his gray hair.

Despite the passage of four weeks, they weren't any closer to whatever Jack suspected they'd end up being than when he'd arrived. They spent every free moment together, hanging out late into the night in one of their quarters, even falling asleep and ending up in a puppy pile come morning.

Daniel had shown him some breath-taking scenery, had shared his popcorn on movie night, had
taken him to a couple of Athosian festivals where Daniel had pulled Jack into the celebratory dancing, and he'd even treated Jack to a couple of dinner picnics. In fact, Jack thought, turning back to the food set up behind them, he was getting hungry. "Let's eat."

"Okay," Daniel said agreeably.

They settled down onto the blanket Daniel had provided, and proceeded to make their way through an astonishing amount of finger food that required Daniel to continually suck on his fingers.

Jack found himself disconcertingly aroused. Now that he was admitting it, he realized there'd been a lot of that going on for a long time, but Jack had been quick to repress it or blame it on the situation or, he was embarrassed to admit, on Carter.

He knew better now.

Daniel was the pick of the litter, no doubt about it. Inside and out, he was a beautiful man, and Jack found his eyes focused on Daniel as he, yet again, put two fingers in his mouth to suck off whatever sauce had been left on them.

Jack had to look away, or he was going to be hard enough that Daniel couldn't fail to notice. Last night, for the first time, Jack had jerked off to thoughts of Daniel. He'd been tempted many times during the last couple of weeks, but last night he'd succumbed to the temptation. Now he was ready for the real thing.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daniel lean forward. Jack turned his body in time to have Daniel wipe something off Jack's face, near his top lip. Before Jack could do anything, like suck Daniel's finger into his mouth, or at least get a lick in, it was gone.

"You had something on your face," Daniel explained, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Jack might have bought it, but then Daniel put the same finger in his mouth and sucked on it.

Jack needed some ice cubes, fast. "Thanks," he managed to squeak out.

Daniel grinned at him.

Jack wanted to jump him.

Daniel leaned back until he was resting on his elbows, his body on display in khaki pants and a form-fitting t-shirt, his feet bare.

Jack decided if Daniel was putting it on display then he ought to get to look, so he did, from the top of Daniel's head down to his bare feet. Jack had no idea why a Daniel without socks or shoes sort of felt like a naked Daniel, but it did.

This wasn't the first time Daniel had been around him with naked feet. In fact, on a couple of memorable occasions, Daniel had even had his shirt off when he'd come to the door. Once, two days ago, he'd answered the door in nothing but a towel. Jack had still been gaping when Daniel had smirked at him while walking back into the bathroom. The towel had come off as the door shut letting Jack see a tantalizing glance of a naked hip.

He glanced down at the food, at the sunset, at Daniel on display, and suddenly realized that Daniel was seducing him. Slowly but surely, he was driving Jack insane. Bringing him over to the dark side, although in this case it was the Daniel side. Letting him get accustomed to the idea of Daniel as something more than a friend. Way more.
"Huh," Jack said.

Daniel lifted his eyebrows in question.

"You're a very sneaky man, Daniel Jackson," Jack admitted.

Now the eyebrows danced in confusion. "Where did that come from?"

Jack rolled his eyes, not deigning to answer. Let Daniel stew on that for a while. He was aggravated at being played so phenomenally well, but he was equally flattered. Actually, more flattered than aggravated.

"Jack," Daniel complained.

"Yeah?" Jack said, deciding two could play at this game. He kicked his own shoes off, stripped off his socks, and lay back on the blanket, his hands behind his head. There was silence. *Like what you see, Dr. Jackson?* he thought to himself, barely keeping a grin off his face.

Daniel cleared his throat.

Jack stretched.

Daniel cleared his throat again.

Jack reached over and stuck his finger in the cheesecake Daniel had included in their picnic, and then stuck his finger in his mouth, making sure to hollow his cheeks as he sucked. *Ha!,* he thought as he heard Daniel shift. Jack decided this was a fun game and wondered how long it would take before Daniel realized this was his invitation to pounce.

Unfortunately, his headset chose that moment to click at him. "Jack?" Sheppard's voice came over.

"Right here," Jack said, sitting up, glancing at Daniel who was a lovely shade of pink, sitting in a way that conveniently hid his groin.

"You told me last week you wanted to help out if a rescue mission came along. Well, we just got a distress call from one of our allies, and we're gearing up."

Jack looked at Daniel and sighed. Games were over for the evening, apparently. "Can you give me fifteen minutes?"

"See you at the gate," was the affirmative response.

Jumping to his feet, Jack opened his mouth to speak, but Daniel beat him to it. "We'll come back for this later," Daniel said, as he stood.

Obviously he'd heard the message, or caught enough as made no difference. "You don't have to go," Jack pointed out.

"If you're going, I'm going," Daniel said firmly.

That worked for Jack, actually. "Okay, let's go. We've got less than fifteen minutes now to get geared up."

Jack stared down at the food; thinking of where the evening had looked like it was heading and smiled ruefully as he followed Daniel off the balcony and into the hallways of Atlantis.
"Holy shit!" Jack yelled as the Wraith holding him down drew back his hand to ram it into his chest. Thesefuckers were strong, and while Goa'uld were strong, too, they couldn't suck your life away through their fingers. Jack had seen too many dried out husks in the last hour to want this to be how he bought it.

He grimaced as the hand descended, deciding it was just his fucking luck that this was going to be how it all ended, in another galaxy, after years of fighting aliens--and surviving--in his own, and before he'd even fucking kissed Daniel.

"Jack!" he heard yelled from too far away, and Jack tried to buck the Wraith off again, even as he felt the first pain of contact.

Then the Wraith was flying off of him, and Teyla was standing there handing him the P90 that had gone flying when the Wraith had attacked. She reached down to pull him up with a surprisingly strong grip and display of strength. A Wraith ray from a dart flying overhead flashed down in front of them, and Teyla pushed Jack out of its path, landing on top of him.

Cursing loudly, Jack let Teyla help him up again. He was already sick to death of the Wraith after meeting them up close and personal for only a couple of hours. How the fuck had Sheppard been doing this for two years, let alone Teyla and Ronon who'd lived their entire lives with this threat hanging over them? Now he got why Sheppard was so damn impressed with Ronon having given the Wraith a good run for seven years.

He glanced around frantically for Daniel and saw him shooting at the Wraith who was advancing on his position where he stood over Rodney. Rodney was keeping up a running panicked monologue, trying to repair the DHD. When the Wraith first appeared, Sheppard had shot down a dart that, in its death throes, had blasted the DHD.

Jack started running toward Daniel, but Ronon got there first and shot a hole in the Wraith's head. Daniel sagged in relief and then looked frantically for Jack.

Jack waved at him, letting him know he was okay, at least for the moment. The last thirty minutes they'd all just been trying to stay alive as Rodney did his best to pull a miracle out of his ass. Daniel was pulling double duty, protecting Rodney while also being a second set of hands if Rodney needed them.

Sheppard was shooting at another dart, and Jack lent his P90 to the cause. He was gratified to see it start to spin and then crash into the foothills a thousand yards to the east of them. Ronon continued to take care of the Wraith on the ground, that gun of his blowing satisfyingly large holes in the ones that wandered too close.

They'd lost two Marines to the Wraith, victim to a surprise attack that had them dead before the team could muster a defense. Another two were down due to being stunned, currently being watched over by a third Marine in the cloaked jumper.

The village had been in the process of being culled when they'd arrived. In addition to the three Marines, the jumper was also crammed to the gills with what women and children Sheppard and his team could round up. In a stroke of amazingly bad luck, one of the kids had decided the DHD in the jumper was a fun toy and had broken something vital, leaving them stranded unless McKay got the planet's DHD working.

A team of four Marines were doing their best to lay low with another group of villagers. Jack sincerely hoped there were more people hiding somewhere else; otherwise the population of this town was all but decimated.
Jack heard the unsettling whine of another dart and he spun and started to shoot, hearing Sheppard's weapon join his. This time it was Ronon pushing Sheppard out of the way of a culling ray.

Like music to his ears, Jack heard the sound of a DHD address being punched in and a wormhole kerwhooshing into existence.

"Go, go!" Sheppard yelled.

Easier said than done as another dart flew into view. Several ground Wraith chose that moment to attack as well, seeing their quarry attempting to escape. Ronon and Teyla focused on them, while Sheppard and Jack kept shooting at the dart.

"Colonel!" McKay yelled, "Move it."

It was one of the disadvantages of working with a team that cared so much for each other. Jack was very familiar with the situation—no one wanted to leave when their teammates were in danger. Jack watched as Daniel moved to help Teyla.

McKay was yelling at someone else, and out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw the four Marines bringing their chicks out of the woods and into the wormhole. The Marine on the jumper decided that was a good plan, and he had the women and children out of the jumper and running for the Stargate as well.

A dart made a run for the Stargate, but between Jack, Sheppard and Ronon, the thing didn't have a prayer, although it exploded uncomfortably close, spraying the area with shrapnel.

He saw a Marine go down. McKay, even though he was screaming bloody murder, ran to him, checking him out within seconds. Jack thought he saw the Marine grin, so he put him out of his mind.

There was a moment's respite, and Sheppard yelled again, "Go, now!"

This time, everyone scrambled. Ronon picked up the injured Marine and he and Teyla jumped through the gate. Sheppard and McKay ran for the jumper, Jack and Daniel right behind them.

The two stunned Marines were on the floor, and the third Marine who had returned once he'd gotten his villagers to the Stargate, got out of the way as the four of them ran onto the jumper. Sheppard took the pilot seat, Jack the co-pilot, McKay and Daniel behind them.

"Are there more?" Sheppard asked.

"More what?" Jack snapped, looking out the window for darts. He knew the jumper was cloaked, but it was still hard to relax.

"Rodney, are there more villagers?" Sheppard clarified as the jumper began to rise.

"Yes," McKay said, "assuming they're still alive. Stackhouse said there were pockets of them still in the village."

"Shit," Sheppard said with feeling, then added, "We gotta go find them." The jumper took off in the direction opposite the Stargate. Into his headset, Sheppard said, "Atlantis, this is Sheppard. Put the shield up. We're going after more survivors."

"Understood," came Elizabeth's calm but anxious voice. "Be careful."
"Always," Sheppard said with a smirk.

Jack stared at him in disbelief and then turned to look at McKay. "You've been on this team for two years? Fighting the Wraith?"

McKay nodded, his face white and pinched.

"Rodney shot a 10,000 year old Wraith that was about to feed on me," Sheppard said proudly.

"I take back anything bad I've ever said about you," Jack said fervently, astonished that a scientist like McKay had stuck it out so long. Not that Daniel wasn't just as astonishing, but Jack hadn't expected it from McKay, despite the mission reports he'd read.

McKay glared at him but then, unexpectedly, shot him a lopsided smile, and for a second Jack could totally see his appeal. To Daniel, Jack said, "You all right?"

Daniel nodded, although he was doing something with his jacket or under his jacket. When he pulled his hand out it was bloody. "Then, again, maybe not so much," he said to Jack.

"Jesus," McKay snarled, moving to Daniel, helping him strip off his jacket. "Get me the first-aid kit," he ordered the Marine.

Jack started to get up as well, but Sheppard pointed out the front windshield. "Incoming," he said tensely.

Reluctantly settling back down, Jack lit up the weapons console. There were two darts heading right for them. Sheppard started flying defensively, while Jack did his best to blow them out of the sky. "How is he?" he called back to McKay, who was barking out orders to the hapless Marine.

"He'll live," McKay snapped. There were paper tearing noises, and Daniel saying, "Ow," and McKay telling him to shut up, and that this was nothing more than he deserved for not knowing how to duck.

Jack was always glad to see someone with a bedside manner that sucked worse than his.

"Where the fuck are they coming from?" Sheppard gritted through his teeth as two more darts appeared. "Rodney, where's the hive ship?"

"And you're asking me that because I can suddenly sense the locations of Wraith hive ships with my mind?" Rodney said acerbically.

"No, Rodney," Sheppard drawled, "I'm asking you because you're the only one who can make the sensors work who isn't currently trying to keep you alive," he finished with a tad of sarcasm and a lot of so-figure-it-out-now-McKay-so-I-won't-have-to-kill-you.

"Perhaps it's escaped your attention that I'm trying to keep Daniel from bleeding to death," Rodney griped.

"I thought you said he was fine," Jack complained, his heart rate soaring along with the jumper.

"I am fine, Jack," Daniel insisted tightly. "I'm just bleeding a little."

"A lot," McKay sniped.

Knowing Daniel, Jack was more inclined to believe McKay. "All his body parts where they're supposed to be?" he asked. To Sheppard, he asked, "We got drones?" At Sheppard's nod, Jack
thought drones at the darts, giving them the silent order to search out and destroy. He smiled smugly as first one, and then the second dart blew up in a fiery explosion.

"Ten fingers and ten toes," Daniel said reassuringly, despite the slight hitch in his voice as Rodney attended to him. "I just got hit in the side."

"By a jagged shard of metal," Rodney bitched.

There was the sound of tape being ripped as Jack peered out the windshield, wondering if they were finally done, at least for the moment. He could see the village below them looking eerily abandoned.

Jack couldn't help but think of the Goa'uld again. They conquered planets all the time, but they left most of the people alive. Sure, they were slaves, but they were alive, and they weren't being culled and cocooned so they could be eaten. "I hate the Wraith," Jack said.

"Welcome to the Pegasus Galaxy," Sheppard said dryly as he slowly landed the jumper. "See anything?"

Taking a break from treating Daniel, Rodney looked at his lifesigns detector. "I'm getting several readings," he said, "mostly that way," he added with a jerked thumb over his shoulder to the rear of the jumper. "And I'm picking up one Wraith cruiser."

"Great," John muttered darkly.

Jack peered out the windshield again, seeing nothing threatening. "Lower the hatch," John said. Jack did as requested and both of them walked to the back. Staying on the ramp to remain cloaked, they took a good look around.

"I think we're clear," Jack said. He heard a couple of groans and turned to see that the stunned Marines were beginning to come around. Those stunners sucked, too. The hit lasted much longer than a zat blast; plenty of time for the Wraith to get their claws into you and suck you dry while you were paralyzed and helpless to resist.

"Rodney," John said over his shoulder, "you stay here. I'm going with O'Neill to see if we can find any other survivors."

McKay didn't look like he was too happy with the idea but nodded. He was back to wrapping a long gauzy type of bandage around Daniel's torso. Daniel looked up and caught Jack's eyes, and Jack wished like hell they were still having their picnic.

Rodney finished taping up Daniel's wound, hoping the bandage would stay in place. "There," he said, "that should hold as long as you don't do anything too stupid."

Daniel looked down at himself and then smiled at Rodney. "Thanks."

Rooting through the first aid box, Rodney held up a bottle of pills. "Want anything for pain?"

Shaking his head, Daniel just closed his eyes, letting his head sag back on the headrest of the chair.

Rodney shoved everything back in the first aid box and shut it. "Hey, you, with the gun."

The Marine shot him an aggravated look. "Me?"

"You see anyone else around here with a gun?" Rodney asked, exasperated.
The Marine's eyes went to Rodney's thigh holster, and then to Daniel's.

"Never mind," Rodney said sharply. "Come off the ramp, I need to close it up."

The Marine shook his head. "We need to keep it open so the Colonel and General O'Neill can get back inside."

"First of all," McKay said without a semblance of patience, "that's what the radios are for." He tapped his. "Remember these? Yes? Good. Get off the ramp."

"You said first of all," Daniel prompted him, his eyes still closed.

"What?" Rodney griped.

Opening his eyes, Daniel said, "You said first of all. Usually that means there's a second and a third."

"What are you babbling about? You must have lost more blood than I thought."

Daniel's eyes looked heavenwards as if looking for strength. "Rodney, you said, 'First of all', when you were talking to Marvin."

"Marvin?" Rodney snorted. "Your name is Marvin?" he said to the Marine. "Not that it matters, because you're still not off the ramp."

"The Colonel didn't tell me to shut it," Marvin argued.

"First of all," Rodney began, then glared at Daniel only to find Daniel grinning at him. "Shut up," he said to both of them.

Daniel snickered.

Deciding the best way to win this argument was just to win it, Rodney walked toward the back of the jumper and pushed the panel to shut the hatch, smirking as Marvin essentially slid into the jumper.

"Hey," Marvin protested. "The Colonel left me in charge."

"As if," Rodney snorted. "You couldn't find your ass if your hands were tied behind your back."

Marvin glared at him.

Rodney ignored him, sitting down in the pilot's seat, taking a good look around. He saw a shadow in between two of the buildings. He clicked his radio. "Colonel?"

"Sheppard here." John answered back. "What is it?"

"I saw something moving out there," Rodney reported anxiously.

"Is the jumper still cloaked?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Rodney asked indignantly.

"Is the ramp shut?"

Rodney sneered at Marvin. "And again, do you think--"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Just sit tight, we're on our way. Sheppard out."
"Maybe I should go take a look," Marvin suggested.

"Oh, my God!" Rodney said in disgust. "What is it with you military types? Do you all have a death wish?"

"It could be villagers out there," Marvin said.

"Or it could be a Wraith just hoping we're stupid enough to go out and look around," Rodney snapped.

"If it's a Wraith, I should find out so I can warn the Colonel."

"If it's a Wraith," Rodney pointed out, positive the man was with the last group of soldiers disgorged from the Daedalus, in other words too stupid to live long if they didn't lose the gung-ho attitude, "then you should stay here and protect me."

There was a pause when Rodney just knew Daniel was staring at him. "And Daniel," Rodney added generously. He turned to see, and yes, he'd been right, Daniel was staring at him, chin pointing toward the other Marines. "Okay, fine, them, too," Rodney huffed.

The Marine didn't look too impressed with Rodney's plan and Rodney couldn't imagine how the fact of his importance hadn't already been hammered into Marvin's psyche seeing as he'd been in Atlantis for a month. All the more reason to send him back.

Then something about the way Daniel looked seeped into Rodney's brain and he turned back to him. Daniel was sweating, panting a little, and his eyes were glassy. "Crap," Rodney yelped, moving back over to the man, lifting his shirt only to find that he was bleeding again, badly. He tapped his radio, "Sheppard, Daniel's in trouble. We need to get him back to Atlantis."

"What do you mean, trouble?" O'Neill snapped back over the radio.

"You don't know what trouble means?" Rodney snapped right back. "He's bleeding again, a lot, he's having trouble breathing, and he's sweating. Is that enough for you?"

Marvin muttered something about being right back.

"No," Rodney shouted, but to no avail as Marvin slapped the hatch control opening the door and headed down the ramp. "Sheppard, I'm firing your Marine. Get your ass back here," he demanded of John.

"Idiot," he said to the world at large before moving to Daniel. "You need to lie down," he said, helping him up off the chair. He got Daniel situated in the back with the other Marines who were starting to be able to twitch limbs but not much more. "It's like naptime at the kindergarten," Rodney sniped to the three of them. Pulling one of the large cushions off the bench in the back, he folded it and put it under Daniel's knees, then covered him with a blanket.

He was just starting to look for something to use to put serious pressure on Daniel's wound when he heard a scream and saw Marvin being yanked off the ramp by a maniacally grinning Wraith. "Crap, crap, crap, crap," Rodney said, lunging for the hatch control, only to end up face to face with the same Wraith, fingers bloody from draining Marvin, and looking more than ready for the main course. The gleam in his eyes as he looked at Rodney, then the three sitting ducks lying on the floor, said he wouldn't mind dessert, either.

Rodney backed away, scrabbling for his pistol, knowing he was not going to be able to fumble it out before the Wraith was on him. Further retreat wasn't an option because that would put him behind the three on the floor, and while Rodney's quest for ongoing living was high, it wasn't high enough
to sacrifice three helpless people to the cause.

He heard a noise behind him, and hoped like hell that Daniel or one of the Marines was grabbing a weapon. Fortunately, and maybe because the Wraith had just fed on Marvin—which was a little bit convenient, Rodney couldn't help thinking, because now he wouldn't have to spend his valuable time, on the off-chance he didn't die right now, on how to endlessly torture the idiot. Not that he'd wish being fed on by a Wraith on anyone no matter how much he loathed them, except maybe Kolya—but in any case, because he had fed, the Wraith was enjoying himself contemplating the feast ahead versus just plunging in, so to speak. Rodney winced at that too-graphic thought.

"Rodney, get out of the way," Daniel said weakly behind him.

But before Rodney could move, the Wraith was heading in his direction, saliva dripping off his desperately-in-need-of-orthodontia teeth, and Rodney's heels were against the shins of the first Marine. He finally got his pistol out and managed to flick the safety off without ejecting the bullets which was a plus, and he got one shot off before the Wraith's hand was around his neck, and he was being lifted off the floor.

Panicked, Rodney grabbed at the Wraith and lost his grip on his pistol which clattered to the ground. He stared his death in the eyes and wanted to rail at the unfairness of it all.

"Shit!" he heard from outside the jumper. A loud worried "Rodney?" came next, along with a "Daniel?" from Jack.

Rodney had never in his entire life been so glad to hear John curse and found himself thinking loving thoughts about John's very big gun. Then, Rodney realized the jumper was still cloaked and they wouldn't be able to tell what was happening unless they got on the ramp. Despite the grip around his neck, and the fact that he was finding it increasingly hard to breathe, Rodney thought 'off' as hard as he could at the jumper, hoping asphyxiation didn't diminish the power of his ATA gene.

Whether John had stepped onto the ramp or whether Rodney had managed to decloak the jumper didn't really matter because Sheppard was there and yelling, "Rodney, get down!"

Imminent death or no, that deserved an eye roll and a frantic hand movement pointing out the fact that getting down wasn't an option. The Wraith seemed unconcerned that there was someone behind him and by the vicious grin on his face, obviously thought that the after dinner aperitif had just thoughtfully shown up.

There was a second or two of frantic whispering, then over the Wraith's shoulder Rodney could see John aiming carefully. Rodney's heart started beating even faster and he knew a stroke was just around the corner, assuming he didn't suffocate or get fed on first. He tried to stay as still as he could, waiting for the additional pain of bullets ripping through his vulnerable flesh.

There was a deafening bang, and he was summarily dropped to the ground as the Wraith spun around. That was when all hell broke loose as both Jack and John sprayed the Wraith with bullets from their P90s. Rodney cowered on the ground, waiting for the Wraith to land right on him, because wouldn't it figure that he'd be saved from being eaten, only to die of a broken back.

Then the Wraith was dead and falling forward to land with a loud metallic thump, and John and Jack were racing into the shuttle, dragging the Wraith outside and pumping about a million more bullets into him to make sure he stayed down. Then they were racing back in, John yelling, "Rodney," again, while Jack yelled, "Daniel," and Rodney gave a passing thought to passing out in a manly fashion.
"Get down?" Rodney asked John sarcastically, instead, hating to let an opportunity for mocking pass him by.

But then John was crouching by his side, checking his neck and his chest, and looking awful, and Jack was doing the same for Daniel who was holding his Beretta in lax fingers, and both of them were glaring at the Marines who were still partially stunned as if they should have managed to somehow work through the paralysis and save the civilians. Rodney saw lots of KP and latrine duty for the two of them and that was okay with Rodney because they should have managed to work through the paralysis even though Rodney had been drooling in an infirmary bed for hours after he’d been stunned.

Jack went out to get Marvin’s dog tags, muttering about coming back with a body bag. He shut the hatch and returned to Daniel who was rallying a little under Jack’s attention, and who asked grimly, "No villagers?"

Looking equally grim, Jack shook his head no. "We didn't get very far before McKay called us back." He sat on the floor by Daniel, while John moved to the pilot's seat and started up the jumper.

"It needs pressure," Rodney managed to squeak out through his increasingly painful and no doubt crushed esophagus.

Nodding, Jack rolled Daniel a little so he could apply pressure from a better vantage point. Jack lifted his hand for a second to reposition himself, and Rodney could see it was already covered in blood. Blanching, Jack put his hand back down. "Daniel!?" Jack said.

"Jack," Daniel said back but without his usual panache.

"Don't you fucking die," Jack warned him.

"Not planning on it."

"You always say that, and you always fucking die," Jack hissed. "And if I see you glowing, I won't be responsible for my actions."

Rodney glanced up at John, thinking it was bad enough John threw himself under a speeding bus on a regular basis. It would truly suck if John actually periodically died. He started crawling to the front, deciding he wanted to be near John, allowing Jack and Daniel to have as much privacy as a jumper filled with six people, including two Marines about a foot away, could provide.

"We have a picnic to finish," Jack said.

"And breakfast," Daniel said back with a weak grin. "And I'm not glowing, Jack. I promise."

Rodney found himself grinning as he pulled himself into the seat next to John. When they arrived at the Stargate, Jack ran out to punch in the address on the DHD. There were no darts, thank God, and after sending their IDC, and John telling Elizabeth to have a medical team standing by with three stretchers, they were through and on their way home.

Despite the short trip, there seemed to be plenty of time for the image of Rodney in a Wraith stranglehold to make John a little crazy. What if the Wraith hadn't waited to gloat and had just decided to feed? What if he and Jack had taken just a minute longer? What if Daniel hadn't been hurt badly enough for Rodney to tell them to come back?

Forcing himself to concentrate on flying, John flew the jumper up to the jumper bay. Teyla and
Ronon were already waiting for them as well as--"Isn't that Tiger?" Stupid question, because of course it was Tiger, but…

"Yeah," Rodney said, surprised. "What's she doing here?"

She was sitting on her haunches between Ronon and Teyla, looking at the jumper.

John brought it down gently and opened the hatch. As soon as he did, Carson and several crews entered the bay, with stretchers in tow. Tiger bounded into the jumper, somehow evading all the feet, and ran to Rodney. She jumped onto the chair Rodney was standing by and put her paws on his shoulder, sniffing him thoroughly. Then she started licking his neck where the Wraith had had a hold of him.

"Uh," Rodney said. "She doesn't look like she's going to tear into my jugular, does she?"

John rolled his eyes. "No, but she sort of looks like she thinks you're a lollipop with a yummy chewy center."

"Ha ha," Rodney said snidely, even as his hands started stroking Tiger, his fingers digging into her fur.

Carson and his team first took Daniel out--Jack glued to his side--and then came for the stunned Marines who were definitely starting to come around. They were shooting nervous looks at John, as they should. John got that they were stunned, but he needed to be pissed at someone and they were easy pickings.

"She was making a racket in your quarters, McKay," Ronon volunteered after he and Teyla had joined John and Rodney in the jumper. "So I let her out."

"You let her out?" squawked Rodney, as Tiger obviously hit a ticklish spot.

"She looks like she's hugging you," John observed. It was sort of cute.

"She ran directly here to the jumper bay and refused to budge until you arrived," Teyla added.

"Really?" Rodney asked, pulling back to get a good look at Tiger. "Huh."

"It's too bad she wasn't with us," John said, almost meaning it. "She could have latched onto the Wraith's kneecap and given him a good scare."

Tiger gave Rodney one last lick and then head-butted him until Rodney heaved her up into his arms. "Jesus, you're getting big," Rodney said, sitting down. "I won't be able to do this much longer," he added with a nervous look up at John.

John knew this was a perfect opportunity to tell Rodney about what Elizabeth had said, but he chose to let it slip by. He wanted to hold off on that announcement as long as possible. It maybe wasn't the best decision, because Rodney was just getting more and more attached, but John was a coward at heart about shit like this, and the longer he could put it off, the better.

"We are glad you have returned safe and sound," Teyla said, taking a moment to scratch Tiger's ears. She'd already been purring, but now she stepped it up until she sounded like a motor revving.

"Me, too," John said with a wince.

"But," Teyla continued, "were there no more survivors?" She looked both saddened and resigned,
and John remembered that she had said she'd known these people since she was a child.

"We couldn't find anyone," John confessed, "but we had to break off the search when Daniel started going downhill." He glanced at Rodney, adding, "And it's a good thing we did, because Rodney was having a little one-on-one with a Wraith when we got back." He kept his voice casual, but his skin was prickling with the memory. He'd have nightmares over that. "We'll go back," he told Teyla.

Rodney scoffed at his choice of words, but instead of grumbling about it, he buried his face in Tiger's fur between her ears.

At the picture of the two of them together, John decided he was just going to have to talk Elizabeth out of it.

Then Carson was speaking in their headsets, saying he'd like to see Rodney in the infirmary, if you please, and Elizabeth was asking for a report, and they all headed out of the jumper and back to duty.

An hour later, John was in talking to Elizabeth when Jack poked his head in. "Got a minute?"

"Of course," Elizabeth said kindly. "How's Daniel?"

Jack scrubbed at his face. "He's fine. He's gonna be the death of me, though." He threw himself onto a chair and shook his head. "I wouldn't wish him on my worst enemy."

Elizabeth just grinned at him, and John snickered. "I wouldn't wish Rodney on my worst enemies," he said, "because Rodney would tear them to shreds with the power of his mouth alone."

"What can we do for you?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's not so much what you guys can do, but what you've done."

Elizabeth and John exchanged a look.

Seeing it, Jack waved his hand, "No, nothing bad. The opposite, in fact." He leaned forward toward John. "John, now that I've seen what the Wraith can do, let me ask you this. Just how far gone was Sumner?"

John blanched a little, but he said, "About a second away from ancient. A lot older than Everett."

Jack nodded unhappily. "That's what I figured. And I want you to know that, if I could, I'd give you a medal for putting Sumner out of his misery, and I'd want you to do the same for me."

John blinked, surprised.

"Today scared ten years off of me, and I don't mind admitting it," Jack said. "The fact that you've all survived out here as long as you have with those creatures as your enemies, well, it surprises the hell out of me."

When he saw Elizabeth sit up straighter as if to take offense, Jack quickly said, "And I mean that as a compliment. I've faced some weird shit in my day, but these Wraith are about the worst I've ever seen." To John, he added, "And now your comment about worst days makes more sense, but I meant what I said then, and I stand by it."

Elizabeth looked a little confused by that, but Jack let it ride. John watching all these villages being culled, knowing he'd woken the Wraith up, had to be the stuff of nightmares, but it hadn't been John's fault. It really was just bad luck.
"I just wanted you to know," he said to John, "that I'm going to recommend you for a promotion to full colonel, along with a shit-load of medals, and I'm gonna try like hell to get some of those civilian awards for McKay, Teyla and Ronon." He let out a disbelieving laugh. "Especially McKay. I'm impressed as hell that he goes out there day after day. I'd never have expected it of him."

John's eyes were about as wide as Jack expected. He knew John had never expected to get light colonel and sure wasn't expecting to go any higher.

"Do you both have what you need?" he asked them.

"I'm not sure I follow," Elizabeth said.

"People, weapons, Marines, scientists. Do you have what you need?"

"We can always use more soldiers," John admitted, "but we've always been told that we had to make do."

"Yeah," Jack said with a wince, "and some of that's my fault, but I'm singing a different song now, and to be perfectly honest I'm a little pissed neither Everett or Caldwell clued me in to what you were facing back here."

"Everett wasn't here long enough, and to be perfectly honest," John drawled, "I would have thought him going home an old man told the story pretty well."

"Okay," Jack said with another wince, "I'll own that one, too. In my defense, up until recently, we were engaged in a pretty fierce war of our own. But, I'd rather have ten Goa'uld on my ass than one Wraith. The Goa'uld like to play games and it makes them ultimately vulnerable. The Wraith don't give a shit, they just want to eat." Again, he said, "What do you need?"

John didn't waste any time. "I need enough troops to patrol adequately. Every now and then the Wraith drop by and we don't even know they're here until we trip over a dead body. We haven't explored most of the city yet, because we don't have the manpower."

"You need an assistant?" Jack asked Elizabeth.

She blew out a breath. "An assistant would be wonderful. As would a couple more treaty experts. We're not doing as good a job as I'd like making allies here."

"I might requisition some zats," Jack mused. "Not sure how effective they'll be on the Wraith, but I'm betting three hits and they'll still disappear." He slapped his hand on the table. "You've got an hour to make me a list. I told Caldwell to hang tight until I got it to him so he could pass it along." To John, he said, "Check with Rodney, and I'll talk to Daniel, and we'll get what they want on the wish list, too." He stood.

"You're still staying?" John asked hopefully. "Or are you going back?"

"Hell, yeah, I'm staying," Jack said, pleased to see John relax at his words. "They might have scared the shit out of me, but I'm thinking you can use all the help you can get. Besides," Jack added with a grin, "there's no way in hell I'm getting Daniel out of here, and as long as he stays, you're stuck with me."

"And we're glad of it," Elizabeth said warmly. "I know I can speak for both John and myself when I tell you that we're delighted to have you and Daniel with us."

"All righty then," Jack said. "Gotta go make sure Daniel isn't trying to go AWOL from the
infirmary." With that he was out the door.

John and Elizabeth stared at each other. "Well," Elizabeth said with a laugh.

John found himself smiling. A full colonel. Of course, there was no guarantee that Jack could talk them into it, but it meant a lot that Jack thought he deserved it. "I better go talk to Rodney and make that list."

Elizabeth nodded, pulling her laptop closer. "Think I should ask for an IT administrator?" she asked John.

"I think you should ask for anything you want," John said, still smiling, as he left Elizabeth's office and headed for the lab.

Later on, after all the frantically assembled wish lists had been delivered to Caldwell, John and Rodney were in Rodney's quarters.

"Of course you should be a full colonel," Rodney said loyally, "and it's about time someone noticed." He smirked at John. "Just don't expect me to suddenly start calling you sir."

"Only when we're in bed," John replied with a lopsided smile. He hadn't told Rodney about the civilian awards Jack wanted to get for the team. He didn't want Rodney disappointed, although listening to Rodney rant about it could be fun. But, mostly, if Jack pulled it off, he wanted it to be a surprise.

Tiger jumped on the bed and snuggled up between the two of them, purring.

"John," Rodney said, picking up one of her huge paws that still looked out of place on her, despite her growing another inch every time they turned around. Rodney placed his hand against her paw, and it was the size of his palm. "I think we need to face facts."

"Yeah," John said, frowning. "I think your cat is a tiger."

"Which is ironic," Rodney said dryly, "considering the crap you gave me for naming my cats Cat, and here you've gone and named our tiger, Tiger."

"Well, at least I didn't know I was doing it," John said snidely.

Rodney sighed. "Elizabeth isn't going to let me keep a tiger as a pet," he announced sadly.

"No, she probably isn't," John agreed.

"That sucks," Rodney said heatedly. He lay there, obviously thinking.

John watched him as Rodney thought, enjoying the play of emotions crossing his face. They slowly morphed into one of determination. "What are you thinking?" John asked curiously.

"Operation save Tiger," Rodney said firmly. "And it starts tomorrow."

Daniel was spending the night in the infirmary--against his wishes--after having his side stitched back together. "All I'm saying, Jack," Daniel pouted, "is that if all I'm going to do is sleep, why can't I do it in my own bed?"
"Not listening," Jack said airily, flipping through an aeronautical magazine he'd brought with him. Oh, if he only had a dollar for every time he'd heard this speech.

Daniel exhaled a beleaguered sigh and crossed his arms over his chest. He let out an "Ow," and quickly uncrossed them.

"You all right?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Daniel snapped out. "Stop asking."

"Fine," Jack said, standing.

"Wait," Daniel stammered out. "Where are you going?"

"Well, I seem to be annoying you," Jack said slowly, "so I thought I'd just go so you could get some sleep."

Daniel looked at him anxiously for a few seconds, looked at Jack's chair, at Jack, at Jack's chair.

"Or I could stay," Jack offered, grinning.

Rolling his eyes, Daniel said, "Sit down, Jack."

Jack sat down.

"I don't like the Wraith," Daniel suddenly announced.

"Yeah, me either," Jack agreed with a shudder.

"They wiped out an entire village in a little over an hour," Daniel said sadly. "How many did we rescue?"

"About thirty-two."

"And how many did Teyla say lived there?"

"Over a thousand," Jack said softly.

Daniel closed his eyes. "How do they live like this? How do they find the strength to go on," he asked Jack, eyes open again and pained, "when they have no means to protect themselves, knowing they'll just be taken? How do they fall in love and have children, knowing how futile it is?"

"I have no friggin' idea," Jack confessed, Daniel's thoughts similar to his own. "Maybe you should talk to Teyla about it."

Daniel grinned at that. "She's amazing, isn't she?"

Jack was not going to get jealous. He wasn't. He never realized how much work it was not to glare when you really wanted to.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Daniel asked.

"Nothing," Jack growled, glad to now have a reason to glare.

Daniel narrowed his eyes at him, but accepted his answer. He sighed again. "What will happen to them?"
"The survivors?"

Daniel nodded.

"The Athosians will take them in or, according to Teyla, there are other villages on other planets that are always glad for a fresh gene pool."

"Will they go back to look for more survivors?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "John's going back tomorrow."

"Are you going with him?" Daniel asked a little anxiously.

"I am," Jack said.

"Be careful."

"Always am," Jack said casually.

"I mean it," Daniel said sternly. "I don't like you going out there without me."

Jack snorted. "In case it slipped your mind, you're the one who got hurt today."

"And in case it slipped your mind," Daniel countered hotly, "you'd have been dead if Teyla hadn't saved your ass."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Jack thought to himself. And okay, Teyla was pretty amazing. "I'll be careful," Jack promised. "I have no desire to end up being Wraith food."

"Bet you didn't realize what you were signing up for when you ran away from home, did you?"

Daniel said.

"You'd be right about that," Jack agreed, "about the Wraith part anyway. The rest of it," he continued, gesturing at Daniel, his bandages, and the infirmary, "I had a pretty good idea."

"Would you do it again?"

Jack studied Daniel for a few seconds. "In a heartbeat, if you were here."

A slow grin took over Daniel's face. "Come here." He patted the side of his bed.

"There?" Jack asked, pointing at the bed.

"Jack."

Jack stood and perched on the edge of the bed. "Now what?" he asked, hoping like hell it was finally time for first contact.

"Come here," Daniel said again, grabbing Jack's arm and yanking.

It took all of Jack's coordination not to fall right on top of Daniel, injuring him further. He managed to get an arm out and ended up sort of to the side, away from his wound. "Close enough?" Jack said dryly.

"No," Daniel said, "but this will do for now." He got a hand around Jack's neck, pulled him even closer and kissed him. It wasn't a long kiss, but it meant business with a touch of tongue and a
softening of lips, and Jack wanted more. Daniel pulled back and asked, "This all right?"

"You betcha," Jack said firmly, leaning back down and returning the favor. This time there was a lot of tongue, and Jack's cock was hardening in joyful anticipation of what it clearly thought was coming next. Jack hated to break the news to the happy fella that nothing much more than this was on the agenda for the evening.

Someone cleared his throat.

Jack pulled away and sat up, pleased to see that Daniel was looking very kissed and very his. He had to force his head away from admiring Daniel to see who had interrupted them. "Hey, Doc," Jack said with a wry grin, deciding that doctors were the same all the universe over, ready and waiting to suck all the fun out of your life.

"I don't recall that," Carson said with a pointed look toward the gurney and what he'd walked in on, "being included in his orders for bed rest."


Carson gave him a shame-on-you look, but Jack was in too good a mood to feel guilty in the least. He turned back to Daniel only to find him fast asleep.

"That's bed rest," Carson instructed, too pleased by half. "Now, please leave, so he'll stay like that."

Jack got off the bed and made as if to sit back down in his chair.

"Leave," Carson said again. "Come back tomorrow after you've gotten a good night's sleep. He'll be fine."

"He's used to me being here when he wakes up," Jack insisted.

"And if he was badly wounded and likely to wake up confused, I'd be the first person to pull up a second gurney for you to sleep on. But, he's not and he won't, and if you're going on a mission tomorrow, you need to get some sleep."

Jack was impressed. Carson could have given Janet some lessons. Then again, Jack corrected himself, thinking of the evil glint she used to have in her eyes and her large needles, maybe not. "All right," he agreed grumpily, "but I expect a call if he wakes up looking for me."

"Of course," Carson agreed, shooing his hands. "Now off with you."

Sure that this wasn't the way a general, even a retired general, should be pushed around, Jack frowned at Carson.

"Don't think that'll scare me, General," Carson assured him. "I put up with the likes of Rodney McKay daily."

Crap.

With one last look at Daniel who was sleeping like a baby, Jack headed back to his quarters.

Operation Save Tiger was simplicity at its finest. In the morning, instead of holding Tiger back while he and John got out the door, Rodney just let her loose.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" John asked as Tiger bounded down the hallway, around the
corner and out of sight.

Rodney shrugged. "I figure that if she's going to be a danger to anyone, we might as well find it out now before she gets any bigger, and if she's not, this way people can start getting used to having her around, and it will be harder for Elizabeth to get rid of her."

"Maybe, but today might really suck for someone if she decides this is the day she starts eating raw meat."

With a slightly crazed look in his eyes, Rodney grinned. "I know. I thought I'd go to the infirmary and get Carson to give me a vial of blood and I'll go accidentally spill it on Kavanaugh."

John couldn't help but admire Rodney's moxie and applaud his choice of victim, but instead he said, disapprovingly, "Rodney."

"Oh, I'm just kidding." There was a pause. "Mostly." Another pause. "Well, all right, personally I think she'd be doing the galaxy a favor by going for his jugular, so maybe I sort of meant it."

This time John didn't hold back the grin. Rodney's absolute inability to tell a lie never failed to amuse him. Why Rodney was so unfailingly, and vulnerably, honest was a mystery, considering how prickly he was in every other way.

Rodney rolled his eyes, waved his hand at John's grin in disgust, and they headed down the hallway. As they rounded the corner, they saw Tiger butting up against Ronon, who was scratching her under her chin.

"She get loose?" Ronon asked as he saw the two of them.

"On purpose," John said. "Rodney's hoping she'll eat Kavanaugh."

"Want me to cut him so the scent of blood will draw her?" Ronon offered.

John wanted to think he was kidding, but he probably wasn't.

"No," Rodney scowled. "The Colonel here won't let me."

"Too bad," Ronon said.

The three of them headed toward the cafeteria.

Rodney had brought Tiger to the cafeteria a number of times to see what sort of semi-solid foods she could eat. One of the servers, Donovan, was already quite taken with her, and had started making up a sort of gruel that Tiger loved.

However, Rodney usually brought her late at night when there was hardly anyone else there. They'd never brought her right in the middle of breakfast time when the place was packed.

There was a gasp, and all heads turned their way. The place grew weirdly quiet as the three of them walked, and Tiger padded, their way in. Tiger walked right up to Teyla, who was sitting with Kate Heightmeyer, and licked her face.

Teyla laughed in delight and threw her arms around Tiger, pressing her forehead to the large cat's. "Good morning to you, too," she said. When she lifted her head away, she scratched Tiger's ears. "Have you met Tiger?" she asked Kate.

Kate was shaking her head nervously.
"She is quite tame," Teyla promised, "and loves to have her ears scratched like this." Teyla demonstrated again, and Tiger, as if on cue, began to purr.

Smiling, Kate put her hand out and took the place of Teyla's fingers, scratching, growing bolder when the purring increased.

Lorne came by, did a double take, and then, after getting an encouraging nod from Teyla, ran his hand down Tiger's back. Like any house cat, she undulated under his caress, so he did it again.

"Hussy," Rodney said with a huff.

John grinned and prodded Rodney along. "Tiger's in good hands," he said. "Let's get something to eat." He hoped like hell that Tiger would behave. She was putty in Teyla's hands, so hopefully having Teyla there would keep her on her best behavior. Other than Teyla and Ronon, Tiger rarely saw anyone else except the scientists, when Rodney would take her to work with him.

Rodney frowned but let John push him toward the food. They made their selections and turned to find a place to sit. John laughed out loud at what he saw.

Tiger was on her back, four legs splayed in a very unladylike fashion, and she was surrounded by about ten people, all of whom were petting her. Even Carson was on the floor, admiring her tail. They could hear her purr from where they stood.

Rodney smiled smugly. "My plan is working," he whispered to John.

John looked around for Elizabeth, thinking this would be a perfect time for her to show up.

As they approached, Carson looked up at Rodney. "Ah, there you are. After you eat, Rodney, come by and see me. I want to check out your throat."

Having completely forgotten that Rodney had been hurt yesterday, John eyed him in consternation, looking at his throat.

"I completely forgot," Rodney admitted. "It doesn't hurt at all."

"I can barely see the bruise," John said, surprised by that, considering how bad it had looked immediately after it had happened.

"Aye, well, I'd still feel better checking it out," Carson insisted.

"Whatever," Rodney said. "How's Daniel?" He put his tray down in an empty spot and dug in.

"He's fine. The general was back in early this morning and hasn't left his side since."

It was no secret to anyone on Atlantis that Daniel and Jack were a matched set, like night and day, or salt and pepper shakers. Everyone knew Jack left Earth, and the military, for the man. John also knew, from the rumor mill, that everyone assumed they were sleeping together. He suspected he and Rodney were the only two who knew they weren't. Yet.

John was pretty sure it wouldn't be true for much longer once Daniel got out of the infirmary.

Digging into his own breakfast, John was reassured by the constant drone of Tiger's purring.

"We should have done this before," Rodney said around a mouthful of sort-of-eggs. "I feel bad she's been locked up whenever we've been on a mission."

"Looks like she's making up for lost time," John reassured him.
"Hey, baby," a voice cooed, soundly suspiciously like Donovan.

John looked over to see Donovan rubbing Tiger's tummy. To John, Donovan said, "Bring her back when you're done. I've been saving her scraps to eat. I think she's ready to start on solids."

"Thanks," John said before Rodney, his mouth too full of food to answer.

As they ate, people came and went. A few gave Tiger a wide berth, but almost everyone came over to gawk or to touch, with the bravest souls getting on the floor to sink their fingers into her soft fur.

"She is loving this," John said with a grin. He looked closely at Rodney's neck again. "I can still sort of see a bruise, but it really is almost gone."

Rodney patted his throat. "I know. I thought I'd be miserable for a few days at least." He shrugged. "Guess he didn't have as tight a hold on me as I thought."

"It was plenty tight," John growled, living it all over again for a moment.

Patting him on the hand, Rodney said, "Hey, I'm fine, and I don't say that unless I mean it."

That was true enough. Jack suddenly appeared, putting his tray down next to John. "She sounds like a diesel engine," he commented as he started eating.

"How's Daniel?" John asked, wanting to hear it from Jack.

"He's griping about having to stay in the infirmary, so that means he'll survive. I've been ordered to bring him back something good to eat."

John noted the pie sitting on Jack's tray, wrapped in saran wrap. "You check with Carson about that?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Yes, mom, I checked with Carson." He gave John a surly look. "I've been doing this for a long time," he commented.

Duly chastised, John grimaced a little.

"He's gonna want coffee," Rodney observed.

"I'll pick up some decaf when I'm leaving," Jack said.

Rodney snorted.

"That's all he gets for a few days," Jack said, narrowing his eyes at Rodney.

"Good luck with that," John said with a grin, knowing what Rodney was like when he was taken off caffeine even for a day.

This time it was Jack who snorted.

John had to admit he liked this, having someone who was sort of a friend, who wasn't Rodney and wasn't someone who reported to him. It was, well, it was nice.

"What time are we leaving?" Jack asked.

"Eleven hundred," John answered. "You don't have to go, you know."
"I know," Jack said, and then let out a surprised "Hey!" when Tiger jumped up on the seat next to him and sort of growled out a meow. Loudly. She looked at his food then at John's, and then at Rodney's empty plate.

Rodney huffed but got up. "Come on. Donovan's got some food for you."

With a last chuff at Jack, she jumped down and followed Rodney to the back of the kitchen area.

"She is getting big," Jack noted.

"Yeah," John said, finishing up his last bite. "We think she's probably a real tiger."

"Tigers don't exactly make the best pets," Jack observed.

"Yeah," John said again. "But she seems really tame."

"Yeah," Jack responded, "I bet Siegfried and Roy said the same thing."

John sighed. "Elizabeth wants her gone."

"Not sure I blame her. She might never attack anyone, but even once is too much."

"I know." And it was true. For all the joking about Kavanaugh, the idea of one of his people ending up the victim of a tiger attack wasn't amusing at all.

Rodney showed up then, looking a little wild-eyed. "Jesus, Donovan gave her soup bones, and she's back there chewing on them. She's cracking them apart and licking the marrow up with a gleam in her carnivorous eye."

"You know you can't really keep her here, right?" Jack said. "Today it's soup bones, tomorrow it could be one of those Athosian kids."

Rodney scowled at him.

Jack was undeterred. "You know I'm right, or you wouldn't be standing there worried about her new bone-cracking hobby."

Rodney slumped down into a chair. "Shit."

"Can you take her back to the planet you found her on?"

"It's a real dinosaur planet," John said, "with these huge pterodactyl things that ripped all her little kitty brothers and sisters into bloody pieces."

"She's probably big enough to take care of herself, though, don't you think?" Jack asked. "You can't really dump her on a planet with humans, and taking her some place where there're more of her kind is probably the best thing to do."

John glanced at Rodney who was looking stricken. "Rodney?"

"She's my cat," Rodney said plaintively. To John, he added, "You gave her to me."

"I know I did, buddy," John said apologetically, "but I wouldn't have if I'd known she'd get this big. I'm sorry." He hated that he was putting that look in Rodney's eyes, and he knew he was contradicting his own determination just a short while ago to figure out a way to keep her. But, somehow, hearing it from Jack made it clear that he'd been deluding himself, and John knew Rodney
would never forgive himself if Tiger actually hurt someone.

"We don't have to do anything about it today," John said, trying to be consoling.

Rodney let out a squawk when something big and hairy draped itself over his shoulders. John grinned as Tiger made herself at home, her huge paws resting on Rodney's chest, and her hairy cheek pressed against his.

"She doesn't look hungry, does she?" Rodney asked, even as he patted her paws.

"She's licking her chops," Jack observed.

Rodney let out a small whine, but did nothing to move her.

"Actually," Jack said, "I think she's hiding from Elizabeth."

John turned to see that Elizabeth had entered the cafeteria and was looking in their direction.

"Is the scary lady bothering you?" John asked Tiger with a grin.

Elizabeth came over to the table, arms crossed over her chest.

"He knows," John said, deciding it would be better to keep anything Elizabeth had to say on the subject to a minimum. "We'll take her back." He sent Rodney as apologetic a look he could, but Rodney was ignoring him and Elizabeth, focusing all his attention on Tiger.

"I'm glad to hear it," Elizabeth said. She nodded to Jack, gave Rodney and Tiger a frown and then headed for the food line.

As if that was his cue, Rodney pushed Tiger back, stood, and left the cafeteria with Tiger padding behind him.

John watched him go, frowning at his dejected air. "That sucks," he said.

"Doesn't he have a cat at home?" Jack asked.

John nodded.

"I'll see if Carter's willing to go rescue it and send it through the next time we open the gate."

John looked at Jack gratefully. "That would be great, sir."

"Jack."


Jack waved him off. "Time to go feed Daniel," he said, standing, picking up the piece of pie. John watched him stride off, realizing, with some amazement, that he had a lover he was crazy about, and the beginnings of a really good friendship.

Later that morning, John, Rodney, Jack, Ronon, Teyla, Lorne and several marines were readying three jumpers in preparation to find more villagers. John was already sitting in the pilot's seat; while Rodney was checking out an array of crystals, making sure they had spares. Rodney had already repaired the jumper's DHD, but it couldn't hurt to have extras.
"Where's Tiger?" Jack asked.

"Roaming around," Rodney said absentmindedly.

"Trolling for dinner?" Jack inquired nicely.

Rodney sent him a narrow-eyed glare. "I'm not keeping her locked up on her last days in Atlantis. She needs to get in shape if she's going to be running away from tiger-eating dinosaurs." He shut the tray. "We're good," he announced to John.

Jack walked toward the hatch. "I'll be next door," he said. Jack was flying the third jumper. Rodney came up and took his seat next to John. There was a scrawling outside and, before Ronon could close the hatch, Tiger leaped into the jumper and looked around as if making sure they were all there. She curled up on one of the benches and stared at John as if to tell him to get going.

"Um," John said.

"Let her come," Ronon said.

John wasn't sure it was a good idea, and Jack would probably let him have it, not to mention Elizabeth, but when Rodney looked at him with his unhappy blue eyes, he totally caved. "She still--"

"I know," Rodney said quickly and angrily, with a hand chop to cut the conversation off. "I know she does."

"Okay." John started the jumper and dropped down into the gateroom. When the gate kerwhooshed open, he flew the jumper through.

After a quick surveillance where they failed to locate anyone from the air, they landed the jumpers back in the village hoping any survivors would see the jumpers and come out of hiding.

As they were landing, Teyla started to smile. "Look! There are more villagers here," she said gladly.

With a glance at Tiger, John let the hatch open. She stayed put until Rodney passed her, then she got up and followed him out. The villagers started coming out of doorways, mostly men, though there were a few women and children.

Teyla went to greet them and reassure them that there were other survivors. There seemed to be a difference of opinion as to whether the survivors should be brought back from Atlantis, or if the ones here should join them. John silently counted twenty-three heads. With the ones back on Atlantis, that didn't seem enough to make surviving on this planet doable. But he also got that losing most of the people you've known all your life wasn't going to get easier by having to leave your homes as well.

"Wraith killer."

John looked to see who had spoken but no one was looking at him.

"Oh, no, that's not, oh for crying out loud," came from Rodney, and John turned to see two young children who hadn't been rescued yesterday, hugging Tiger. Rodney looked annoyed about it, but then he always looked vaguely revolted any time he had to interact with kids, much to John's amusement.

"Wraith killer."

Again, John tried to find the speaker, but most of the attention was on Teyla and Tiger, now, and no
one looked as if they were trying to speak to John.

"What's a Wraith killer?" Jack asked him out of the corner of his mouth. "Or are they talking about us?"

That was a possibility, John thought. "We did kill a bunch of Wraith yesterday," John mused quietly. Wraith killer. Not a bad title.

Teyla said to the villagers, "Perhaps we could reunite you with your loved ones, and then, together, you can decide what you wish to do. If you decide to stay with us, we can come back and allow you to gather your belongings."

"Absolutely," John agreed with a smile. To Teyla he added, "Is this all there are?"

"Yes," she answered quietly. The happy look on her face from earlier had slipped away to be replaced by a more solemn one.

There was nothing to be said, so John just nodded. "It'll be a tight fit, but we can get you all on." He glanced at the sky, glad to see it remained dart free. Chances were it wouldn't be for long. The Wraith often came back several days in a row to pick up stragglers. "We should get moving."

Lorne and Jack started herding groups onto their jumpers while Teyla and Ronon did the same with the one John was piloting. The kids had to get picked up to move them away from Tiger, but she followed them onto the jumper and sat on the floor so the children could have easy access to her.

Watching, John couldn't believe she was dangerous, but he knew he wouldn't be able to convince Elizabeth of that fact. "Everyone tucked in?"

There was a moment's delay when one of the men noticed someone missing. Several got off the jumper to look in the other jumpers and then around the village square, but he was nowhere to be found. When they unhappily got back on, Teyla asked, "Is it possible you mistook him for someone else?"

One of the men shook his head, still looking around, but the other two shrugged their shoulders. "I was sure it was Cerin," the older one said, the one who had shaken his head, "but I suppose I could have been mistaken," he admitted unwillingly.

"So, we're going?" John asked.

There were nods all around, and Rodney got himself settled as he, too, looked anxiously through the windshield at the sky. John cloaked his jumper, saw Lorne and Jack doing the same, and he sat back, breathing easier. Five minutes later, they were through the gate.

While they were flying, John heard the phrase Wraith Killer a couple more times, thought that maybe he should get a t-shirt with that slogan on it, and then dismissed it from his mind as he flew them back to Atlantis.

"Hey!" Daniel said brightly when he saw Jack enter the infirmary, in one piece and not any older.

"Hey back," Jack said, swooping down and laying a kiss on Daniel.

"I could get used to this," Daniel said with a grin, feeling a bit dazed at finally having what he'd wanted for years.
"You better," Jack threatened him, kissing him again.

Daniel did notice that Jack had first looked around for Carson. "Scaredy cat," he teased.

"Hey," Jack protested. "I know better than to piss off the person who wields sharp, pointy objects." He pulled a chair around and threw himself into it. "When the hell are you getting out of here, anyway?"

"Tomorrow," Daniel answered him. "He would have let me go today but I spiked a fever."

Jack eyed him. "You don't look sick."

"I'm not sick. It was a fluke," Daniel insisted. "He probably forgot to shake the thermometer down."

"I heard that," Carson said, holding up an ear thermometer, "and there's no shaking required." He stuck it in Daniel's ear and a few seconds later it beeped. He showed it to Daniel and then to Jack. "Low grade, but still a fever."

"He's always been hot," Jack said.

"Thanks, Jack," Daniel said, beaming.

"I mean temperature," Jack explained. "Janet used to say he always ran a degree hot."

Daniel frowned at him. "Thanks, Jack," he drawled, sneering. Typical Jack, almost throw a compliment out there and then take it back before anyone took you seriously.

Jack looked confused for a second, but then he rolled his eyes. "You, Daniel Jackson, are a total hottie."

Daniel frowned again. "A hottie?"

"Totally."

"You've been hanging out with Cassandra way too much," Daniel decided, although he was inwardly very pleased to be considered a hottie, especially by Jack. To Carson he said, "Jack's right."

"That you're a hottie?" Carson asked with a grin.

"No," Daniel said with a return grin, "about me running hot. I feel fine."

"Give me another couple of hours to see if it climbs at all. If it doesn't, I'll let you go if your wound doesn't look infected," Carson conceded.

Motioning between himself and Jack, Daniel said, "We've been doing this for nine years. We're pretty good at it."

Jack snorted. "No, I'm pretty good at it. You're good at saying 'you're fine' when you're bleeding out on the floor."

Daniel sat back on the bed, arms crossed over his chest, glaring at Jack.

"You two are as amusing to watch as Colonel Sheppard and Rodney McKay," Carson said with a short laugh.

"Who am I?" Daniel asked at the exact same time as Jack did.
Carson shook his head, "Ooh, I'm not touching that question with a ten foot pole." He took his thermometer and walked away.

"Coward," Jack called after him. "Besides," he added to Daniel, "naturally I'm Sheppard. We're both military, both pilots, both handsome and debonair."

With a darkly furrowed brow, Daniel considered Jack. "You think John's handsome?" he asked bitterly.

"Sure," Jack said blithely.

Daniel glowered at him.

"But," Jack said as he stood up and kissed Daniel again, "he's no hottie."

Somewhat mollified, Daniel grabbed Jack's lapel and reeled him in for another kiss.

Elizabeth and Jack sat on one side of the conference table, and John and Rodney sat on the other.

"Now, Rodney," Elizabeth said sternly.

Rodney glared at her, and John wished like hell they had a leg to stand on in the fight to keep Tiger.

"It's only going to get harder," Elizabeth said just as implacably.

"She's still mostly a kitten," Rodney said.

John tried not to roll his eyes when the kitten threw herself over Rodney's shoulder from behind like she had in the cafeteria, paws over his shoulder, her cheek next to his cheek.

Even Elizabeth looked like she was trying not to smile, but she couldn't afford to lose any ground, and John was impressed when her face grew stern again.

"She'll starve," Rodney tried again.

"She needs to learn to fend for herself," Elizabeth countered.

"And if she'd had a mother to teach her to hunt, she could," Rodney said in his I-know-you're-stupid-but-even-you-should-get-this look, "but the closest she's come to it is attacking her bowl of milk."

John kept his mouth quiet about the bone crunching in the cafeteria.

Unswayed, Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest. "I mean it, Rodney. She needs to go before she hurts someone. I admit there's only a remote chance that she ever would hurt anyone, but are you really willing to take that chance?"

Scowling, Rodney looked like he wanted to argue, was willing to argue all night giving new meaning to a filibuster, but John knew he was worried about someone getting hurt, too.

Rodney tried one more time. "As long as we keep her fed--"

Elizabeth put her hand up, and it actually stopped Rodney, which surprised the hell out of John.

"We've been through this. Even with the Daedalus, you know our food stores are never truly robust. We can't afford to give her, once she requires full meals, a weekly quantity of food that would feed a family, especially with all the new refugees."
Rodney gently pushed Tiger's paws off his shoulder, and turned around to give her a hug, smushing his face in the soft short fur between her ears. John swallowed around a lump in his throat as Rodney stood and stalked out.

Tiger looked at John to see if he was going, too. When John made no effort to rise, Tiger stood as if to follow Rodney.

"Tiger," Ronon said, entering the room, kneeling down and giving her an enthusiastic rub on her chest.

She began purring and dropped to the ground, exposing her belly.

Elizabeth heaved out a sigh. John wanted to give her shit, say something sarcastic about what a killer Tiger was, but it didn't really matter. Even if she was completely and reliably tame, her appetite and the food it would take to support her was still an issue.

"I'll take her," John said, not sure if she'd follow anyone else.

"No," Jack said, speaking up. "You go after Rodney. Ronon here can take her."

"Who's gonna fly the jumper?" John argued.

"I'll get Lorne," Ronon said, going to town rubbing Tiger's belly.

John wanted to ask how Ronon could be rubbing her belly right now, only to be shortly dropping Tiger off on a planet where she'd probably be dead before a week passed. Then Ronon looked up at him, and John swallowed anything he'd thought of saying. Ronon didn't want to do this any more than John did, but he'd do it because it had to be done, and he'd spare John and Rodney the doing of it.

"Thanks," John said to him, then nodded at Jack, made brief eye contact with Elizabeth, and left to go find Rodney. Tiger made an inquisitive growl as the door slid open, but John told her to stay. Wishing he could get down on the floor and give her one last hug himself, he strode off.

The door shut behind John, and Jack looked down at Ronon and Tiger.

Elizabeth sat down and asked, "Do you disagree with my order?"

Jack shook his head. "Nope. I told them the same thing before I even knew it was an issue for you."

Ronon glanced at them. "She'd never hurt anyone."

"Maybe not," Elizabeth said, "but what would you say to the mother or father of the child she mauled if you're wrong."

"If one of us is with her, and we keep her on a leash, she wouldn't have a chance," Ronon argued.

"And the amount of food she'll require?"

Ronon shrugged. "I can hunt for her. There's plenty of wild game on the mainland."

"I think she's a complication we can't afford right now," Elizabeth said. She tapped her headset, "Major Lorne?"

"Yes, Ma'am," came the answer.
"Would you please get a jumper and bring it down to the gateroom for a brief mission."

"Just me?"

"You'll be going with Ronon. You'll be dropping Rodney's cat off on her home world."

There was a long pause, then, "Yes, Ma'am. Lorne out."

Elizabeth tapped her head set off.

"Rodney's gonna be pissed for a long time," Ronon observed.

Elizabeth swallowed and looked pained.

In her defense, Jack said, "And that's different from how he usually is how?"

Ronon grinned at him. Just then, Lorne and the jumper dropped down from the jumper bay. Ronon stood. "Come on, Tiger, let's go."

Happily enough, Tiger stood, shook herself out, then ambled after Ronon. When the jumper landed and the hatch opened, she followed Ronon without hesitation. A few seconds later, the Stargate engaged, and the jumper was through.

"Sometimes being the leader sucks," Jack offered sagely.

"Tell me about it," Elizabeth said ruefully. "Rodney's never going to talk to me again."

"Is that such a bad thing?" Jack consoled her.

She let out a short mirthless laugh at his words. "He told Tiger I was a mean old lady," she admitted. "I can only imagine what he's telling John right now."

Jack winced and decided the best thing he could do for now was distract her. "Where's the personnel manifest of people wanting to come to Atlantis?"

She walked to her desk, retrieved the file, sat down next to Jack and opened it.

It didn't take John long to find Rodney; he was out on his whale-watching pier. "Hey, buddy," John said, stopping behind him, putting his arms around Rodney's waist and holding him tight.

"Hey," Rodney said miserably.

"I'm sorry," John said. "I never should have given her to you."

Rodney turned in his arms, frowning. "That's right," he said through a narrow-eyed glare, "this is all your fault."

"Wow, and suddenly I'm not feeling sorry for you anymore," John drawled.

Resting his forehead on John's shoulder, Rodney muttered something.

"What was that?" John asked.

"I love that you gave me a cat," Rodney said louder.

"Yeah, but it would have been better if you could have kept her."
Rodney muttered something else.

"What?"

He muttered it louder.

"All I caught was blow job," John said with a grin.

"I said," Rodney said with some exasperation, "that maybe a blow job would help."

"Thanks, Rodney," John said teasingly. "I'd love a blow job, and I totally think it would help."

"I meant me, you asshole," Rodney growled.

John laughed and tugged at Rodney's arm, pulling him off the pier and into Atlantis proper. "Yeah, I got that."

Jack and Elizabeth had just finished going through the list of prospective applicants asking to come to Atlantis, making up separate lists to go to Rodney, Daniel, and John for further vetting, when there was a noise at the doorway.

Looking up, Jack saw a young girl there. "Hello," he said kindly.

Shyly, one finger stuck in her mouth making it hard to fully hear her, she said, "Where's 'iger?"

Thinking it through for a couple of seconds, Jack replied, "The tiger went home."

She had to think about that. "'iger's 'ome not 'ere?"

"No," Elizabeth answered. "The tiger's gone to be where other tigers live."

The little girl looked disappointed. Then, to someone behind her, she yelled, "'iger's not 'here."

A grown-up this time, one of the survivors they'd saved from the recent culling, put his hands on the little girl's shoulder. "I am Counselor Jard," he said with a small bow. "I was hoping to meet the Wraith Killer."

Jack frowned, a little disappointed that the label of Wraith Killer clearly didn't pertain to him. "I think he's talking about Sheppard or Ronon," Jack said to Elizabeth, after seeing the look of confusion on her face.

"I could call Colonel Sheppard for you, if you like," Elizabeth offered. "Ronon is off-world right now, but he shouldn't be gone too long."

The man looked at them both with confusion, his face telling them that he thought they were both a few cards short of a full deck. "I was speaking of the large feline. The Wraith Killer. I have only heard of them in legend, and seeing one has filled my people with hope despite our circumstances. Surely the war against the Wraith will turn in our favor now that they have returned."

Jack looked at Elizabeth who blinked back at him. "Excuse me?" Jack finally said. "You're talking about the big black and white striped cat?"

"The Wraith Killer," the man said, speaking slowly. "I know we are a poor people, but we would offer anything we have in trade for her."
Elizabeth cleared her throat. "I appreciate the offer. May I get back to you?"

"Of course," the man said amiably.

"Pat 'iger for me?" the little girl asked.

With that they were gone.

"I heard them use that phrase on the planet," Jack said, "but I thought they were talking about us. She certainly didn't do anything to make them say that based on her actions. We didn't even see any Wraith when we went back for the second time."

Elizabeth tapped her ear set. "Rodney, John?"

It took a few seconds, but John got on the headset. He sounded a little breathless, and Jack wondered what they'd just interrupted. Nothing like a little make-me-feel-better sex to make someone feel better.

"Sheppard here."

"Could you and Rodney join Jack and me in my office?" she requested.

There was an indignant squawk in the background that had Jack hiding a grin behind his hand.

"We'll be there in twenty," John said, and hurriedly disconnected.

Elizabeth frowned, but let it go. She pulled her laptop closer. "I've never seen anything in the database that mentions Wraith Killers as a specific subject, but then again, we weren't looking for it, either."

"How long have the Ancients been gone?" Jack asked.

"10,000 years," Elizabeth said.

"So, even if the Ancients had actually trained some tigers to kill the Wraith," Jack mused, "the odds of the behavior still existing after this long is pretty slim to none, right?"

She nodded, but still kept tapping.

"I'm gonna go get some coffee," Jack said, standing. "You want some?"

All he got was another nod. Rolling his eyes, wondering if his fate was to always be surrounded by people who were more excited about their laptop than him, he headed for the mess hall.

They actually arrived closer to thirty, and both of them were freshly showered. Jack couldn't help but roll his eyes and think it was a good thing Sheppard was a gazillion miles away from being in trouble for conduct unbecoming because they were consistently useless at the hiding thing.

Five minutes later, Rodney was staring at Elizabeth, looking as confused as Jack felt about the whole thing. "Wraith Killer? They think Tiger's something called a Wraith Killer?"

"What's a Wraith Killer?" John asked.

Jack thought John sort of looked disappointed that the villagers hadn't been talking about him, either, when they'd mentioned a Wraith killer.
"I don't know," Elizabeth said. "That's what we need to find out." She frowned at her laptop. "I've found the phrase once or twice, but nothing explanatory," she said. Then to Rodney, added, "But I know you're much faster than I at searching the database."

Rodney preened a little. "Of course I am," he said with a little I'm-so-much-better-at-everything-than-anyone snicker, even as he was turning his own laptop on. "Speaking of the cat in question, where's Tiger?" he added, looking around. When there was no forthcoming answer, he gawked at Elizabeth. "You still sent her away?"

"I didn't find out about this until Ronon and Lorne had already left."

"So call them back," Rodney insisted. "If she really is some sort of Wraith killer, the last thing we need is for her meet an untimely end on the Lost World."

Elizabeth nodded at John, who was up and at the console in the control room in seconds, presumably opening up a wormhole to the Dinosaur Planet. Jack went out to join him. Rodney and Elizabeth were already lost in their laptop research which was about as boring as watching Daniel play with his cuneiform squiggles.

Once the wormhole engaged, John said, "This is Sheppard. Lorne? Do you copy?"

There was no answer.

John frowned, shot Jack a look and tried again, "Lorne? Ronon?"

Another long pause with no response.

"You're sure that's where they went?" Jack asked.

John turned to Chuck who nodded, saying, "That's the same address."


Silence.


Elizabeth looked up from her laptop. "Are you sure--"

"Yes," John said impatiently. "I'm sure it's the right address, and yes, I'm sure they should be answering. We need to go now."

Even Jack was a little frustrated at how long Elizabeth was taking to respond. He got that she was always weighing out the greater good, but you just didn't leave men in trouble. He added his own opinion into the mix, "We should go."

"Go," Elizabeth said as if that was just the push she needed.

"Rodney," John said, getting his attention. He tapped his headset. "Teyla, gear up. I think Ronon and Lorne are in trouble." Then, he called for a team of Marines.

"Maybe Rodney should stay and finish this research," Elizabeth suggested.

But Rodney was already standing. "I can finish when I get back." He picked up his laptop. "In fact, I can do it in between moments of life-threatening terror."
Elizabeth frowned, but Jack found himself grinning. There was no doubt about it that the SGC had written McKay off prematurely. The guy had some serious balls.

Then they were all racing to the jumper room, John, Rodney, Teyla, and Jack, as well as a handful of Marines, and they were cramming into the jumper. A minute after that, John was punching in the planet's address and they were through.

"Holy buckets," Jack yelled, involuntarily ducking, as a dart whizzed by, only to get taken out with a loud and disconcerting crunch by something that looked uncomfortably like some mutant tyrannosaurus rex.

"That thing just ate a dart," Rodney squawked. "It's looking at us!" he screeched. "Cloak! Cloak!"

Jack thought 'cloak' at the jumper, imagined John was doing the same thing, but it was a second too late as the dinosaur lunged at where it had been, and just like that scene in the Back to the Future ride at Universal Studios, Jack and the rest of them were getting way too up close and personal with a mouth full of teeth half the length of a human body.

"Fuck," John yelled, ducking, as teeth actually tore through the roof of the jumper right where he'd been sitting.

"This cannot be happening!" Rodney was yelling, yanking on John's shoulder to get him fully out of harm's way. "I am not going to get eaten by a fucking dinosaur before I've won my Nobel Prize."

The dinosaur started shaking them briskly side to side, and only the inertial dampeners, that by some miracle were still working, kept them from slamming across the jumper.

Jack was having a hard time not recoiling from the vision through the windshield of teeth, teeth, and more teeth. But, seeing as he was main pilot now with John's seat out of order, given the several nasty looking teeth residing where John's head had been, he needed to focus.

"Can we shoot it?" John yelled. It was hard to hear with all the growling, and Rodney's ranting wasn't helping. "Can you send a drone at it?"

"No," Rodney shouted back, busy on his laptop despite the ranting. Jack needed to remind himself that, for Rodney, ranting didn't mean not working. Most of the time when Daniel had been yelling, work had already come to a screeching halt. "When that monster out there took a chomp out of us he closed down the drone access ways."

"How about regular weapons?" John asked, just as Jack brought up the weapon's console.

"You've only got weapons on the right side," Rodney yelled at them. "He took out the ones on the left."

Jack frowned. The weapons on the right weren't going to do any good.

"Shoot them anyway," John suggested hurriedly. "Maybe it will scare him into letting us go."

Jack sent off a volley of blasts which took out a good sized tree and a hell of a lot of shrubbery. It didn't so much startle the t-rex as make it decide to get a firmer grip. His mouth opened wide to adjust his mouthful, and Jack used the nanosecond's opportunity to throw the jumper in reverse and get the hell out of Dodge.

It was touch and go for a second as the t-rex lunged again, but as they were still cloaked, it only grazed the side, sending them spinning for a few seconds.
"Shit," John said, as he slid back into his chair. "Nice flying there," he added to Jack. "Everyone okay?" he asked, turning around.

Jack turned, as well, seeing everyone's very pale faces. Even Teyla was looking a little strained.

"There," she suddenly said, pointing off to the right. "It's the other jumper."

"I got it," Jack said, turning the jumper toward that direction. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the wormhole kerwoosh and another dart come through.

"Why are the Wraith here?" Rodney asked unhappily. "Not that it's a bad thing if T-rex here eats them all, but the sensors said this planet was uninhabited."

"I don't know," John said, tapping his headset. "Lorne? Do you copy?"

There was a brief burst of static, then silence.

Jack flew them over to the jumper and winced. Even from here he could see it hadn't been a planned landing. It was sort of on its side at a thirty degree angle resting against a tree. He settled down next to it, checking the sky for darts one more time, thrilled he couldn't see any. He'd take a tyrannosaurus rex over the Wraith any day.

"Another question," Jack asked, "is seeing as there are darts, why aren't they coming after us?" He was glad they weren't, but it didn't make sense. "We might be cloaked, but they aren't," he added, pointing at the uncloaked and damaged jumper. Of course, he thought with a grimace, it was possible the Wraith had already been and gone.

John didn't answer, just stalked to the back, opened the hatch and headed for the other jumper, P90 at the ready, Marines right behind him. Jack checked out the front windshield one last time to see if something out of Jurassic Park was about to have them for lunch, and then, clutching his own P90, he followed John out the door.

"Rodney," John yelled when he couldn't get the hatch door open on the other jumper. "Get out here." He could still hear Rodney ranting in their jumper, probably assessing the damage to that one, and also maligning every dinosaur movie every made. John saw heavy Spielberg mocking in his future.

"What?" Rodney griped, cautiously stepping out on the ramp, as if sure he was seconds away from a velociraptor attack.

"Get this open," John said.

Rodney sighed but came out of the jumper to stand beside John, pulling out his scanner.

Trusting that Rodney would take care of that end of the jumper, he commanded the Marines to keep watch for Wraith and dinosaurs--and how often do you get to give orders like that--and then headed for the front of the damaged jumper, Jack right behind him.

When he got there, it was difficult to see anything because the windshield was badly cracked, but after finding a small area that was unblemished John looked inside to find Ronon and Lorne both lying on the floor.

As something lunged for the windshield, John gave out a yell and backed up into Jack, until he realized it was Tiger. She let out a frantic yowl and butted against the glass.

John wondered how much of the damage had been because of the crash, and how much was due to
her trying to get out.

"Back up," he said to her.

"She been brushing up on her English?" Jack asked with a smirk.

John narrowed his eyes at Jack and gave him a fuck-you smile, and then, freeing his P90, he turned it so he could hit the glass with the hilt. Just as he was about give it a good slam, he saw the light from the back as Rodney got the hatch open. Tiger hightailed it to the back of the jumper.

He and Jack followed to find Rodney flat on his back, Tiger licking his face. "Get off me, you hairy beast," he was yelling, even as his arms tightened around her making it hard for her to follow orders-if she had any mind to.

Teyla and the Marines were already in the jumper assisting Lorne and Ronon. John thought the air smelled fine, so didn't think lack of oxygen was the problem. With a groan, Lorne sat up with the help of two Marines, holding on to his arm. John winced when he saw the bone sticking out. "Ouch," John said.

Lorne nodded wearily. "Thanks for coming."

"What happened?" John asked, watching as one of the Marines got out the first aid kit, looking for a shot of morphine. Ronon was already sitting up with Teyla's help, blood all over the side of his face. He was looking a little dazed.

He still managed to answer though, as Lorne was busy hissing through his teeth as the Marine accidentally jostled him. "It was one of those lizard things," Ronon explained. "It flew right at us." He pointed at the windshield. "Ran right into the window."

"I lost control," Lorne said, looking a little more relaxed as the morphine hit his system. "We would have been okay but then this," he scrunched his face up and looked at John as if sure he wouldn't be believed, "honest to God, sir, it was a tyrannosaurus rex. It smacked us right out of the sky and we lost the inertial dampeners. We hit a tree hard and that's all I remember."

"We were both knocked out," Ronon said, touching his head, his hand coming away bloody. John didn't even bother offering him pain medicine; he never took it. Teyla, though, did start to wipe his face off with a rag. Ronon grunted at her in thanks.

"I still want to know why there are Wraith here." Rodney complained from the front. He'd worked his way around everyone and was busy trying to assess damages.

Ronon shook his head. "No idea."

Rodney grumbled unhappily and went back to his scanner.

There was a loud noise and everything shook for a second.

Everyone eyed one another nervously, except for Lorne, who looked like he was just about out for the count.

Another loud noise and everything shook again.

"You are fucking kidding me," Rodney yelped, staring out the shattered windshield. "I really am stuck in a Spielberg movie." He turned around, his eyes wide in panic. "We have to go. Now."
John didn't even ask. He just got on one side of Lorne while Jack got on the other and one of the Marines grabbed his legs. Teyla was keeping Ronon steady on his feet.

"Now!" Rodney yelled. "Now. Move it!"

"Where are we going?" John yelled back.

"Get in the other jumper and shield it," Rodney hollered, pushing at everyone to get them to move, and move faster.

The loud thumps were getting louder, and the ground was shaking.

John risked a look and saw the tyrannosaurus rex bearing down on them. "Fuck," he cursed, moving faster.

One of the Marines took over helping Lorne and yelled, "Go!"

John tripped over the ramp of the still cloaked jumper and ran inside to the pilot's seat. He got it turned on, and waited impatiently for everyone to clear the ramp.

Just as he was about to close the hatch and shield the jumper, Rodney yelled, "Wait," and Tiger bounded aboard a moment later.

Shielding the jumper took less than a second, and John could see the dinosaur was only moments from their area. As Jack sat down, a horrified look of fascination on his face, John tried to make a quick decision as to whether they were safer there or trying to move.

But then the t-rex was there and the stomping of his passage made everything tremble. It landed on the damaged puddle jumper squashing it flat underneath its huge clawed feet and then it was gone, moving right past them, in search of something, that--thank God--wasn't them.

"Holy crap," Jack said, sagging back in the chair. "This galaxy's gonna give me a stroke."

John found himself laughing. "Shit," he said, heartfelt, then turned around. "Everyone okay?"

Before the words were barely out of his mouth, there was a deafening roar and the tyrannosaurus was back and trying to get at the jumper.

"How the fuck did it see us?" John yelled, getting back in his seat, ready to do whatever it took to get them away from the thing. It really couldn't hurt them with the shield on, but he didn't fancy being a play toy, either.

"He's still mad he missed out on lunch," Jack said, gesturing at the holes above John's head.

"Well, he's shit out of luck if he thinks I'm on the menu," John snapped.

"Oh, shit," Rodney said in a panicked tone.

John hated hearing that particular tone in Rodney's voice; it was his we're-about-to-die voice. "What?" he asked guardedly, having no luck with flying. It seemed as if the stupid dinosaur had some kind of radar and every time John got some altitude, the thing batted them back down like they were a beach ball.

"We're losing power to the shields," Rodney said shrilly.

"So, fix it," John bit out, fighting the controls.
"Oh, thanks for that advice," Rodney bristled. "That idea never crossed my mind."

"Rodney," John warned.

"Working on it," Rodney said, miffed. "I don't suppose you could actually, oh, I don't know, fly us out of danger?"

If they got out of this, Rodney was so sleeping on the couch, even if John didn't have one. He'd fucking find one, just so Rodney had to sleep on it.

Then, the tyrannosaurus rex was on their right side, and Rodney yelled out, "Shoot it," and Jack was bringing up the weapons console and letting it rip. The t-rex staggered back under the barrage, just long enough for John to get airborne and get the hell out of there.

The shields chose that moment to completely fizzle out, even sending some sparks flying from the console.

Jack frantically waved them away, glancing down at the enraged dinosaur.

"Okay, we either need to get through the gate now," Rodney said in a majorly stressed tone of voice, "or we need to land, because we're about to lose power."

"What do you mean, we're about to lose power?" John asked.

"What do you think I mean?" Rodney snapped. "Power. As in no power. As in crash landing. As in mangled twisted bodies and pissed-off dinosaurs tearing the flesh off our dead bones."

John wanted more information--preferably with less grisly explanations--but he could suddenly feel how sluggish the jumper was getting.

"I think we need to land," Jack suggested. "And I think everyone better hold on."

"Oh, shit," Rodney whined, sitting down, his fingers clenched tightly on the chair rests. Of course, that only lasted a second, then he had his scanner back out, pressing buttons frantically.

"Why are we losing power?" John said, even as he fought with the jumper to get them down safely, while getting them away from the t-rex and as close to the gate as he could.

"Get us close to the gate," Rodney said. "For all we know Godzilla took the DHD out on his killing rampage and we might need to use ours."

"Good idea, Einstein," John said dryly.

"Okay, fine," Rodney said anxiously, "I guess you knew that."

"Yeah, but feel free to remind me to brush my teeth or eat my Wheaties," John suggested sarcastically. "And you never answered my question."

"I don't know," Rodney said, frowning. "I'm assuming we took on more damage than I thought when we were being eaten, but I'd have to run diagnostics to be sure. Right now, everything's draining exponentially. By my calculations, we have less than two minutes of power left."

John saw the Stargate and aimed for it. Jack started punching in the gate address. Before he could finish, a wormhole kerwooshed into existence and two darts came through.

"Fuck me," John said harshly. This was turning out to be one hell of a shitty day. "Tell me we're still
"For about thirty-five more seconds," Rodney shouted.

Thinking quick, John decided landing was his only option. Aiming for a copse of trees, hoping they'd get under them before the cloak failed, before everything failed, he gunned it with everything he could milk from the jumper.

They made it to the trees, but not quite to the ground. The jumper fell the last twenty feet, landing with a jarring thump that threw everyone around.

Lorne let out a pitiful groan, and a Marine yelled, "On it, sir." John could hear the first aid kit being messed with.

"Everyone else okay?"

"Define okay," Rodney griped.

"If you're still bitching," John said uncharitably, "then you're okay." Although he did turn around to look, and was relieved to see that Rodney looked fine. So did everyone else for that matter, although it appeared as if Ronon's head was bleeding again.

"He will be fine," Teyla assured John.

Jack was looking out the windshield. "I don't think they saw us," he said.

"I still don't get why they're here," Rodney bitched like a broken record.

"So," John said, looking at Rodney, "how screwed are we? Can you get it fixed?"

Rodney shot him an incredulous look. "Just give me a Phillips head screwdriver and I'll have it fixed in no time," he said sarcastically.

John took that as a no. "Okay, then, we get out of here and get to the gate. Piece of cake." If you ignored the fact that they had two men injured and two darts out there somewhere and maybe more to come, and a planet filled with dinosaurs, all with a hungry glint in their eye.


"Small problem," Rodney offered snottily, from the back of the jumper where he'd gone to nose around, pushing people out of his way.

"Oh, this should be good," John said back, just as snottily.


"Remember the bit about having no power?" Rodney threw out with a narrow-eyed glare at Jack. John thought about it for a moment. "The hatch has a manual override," he said, "doesn't it?"

"Yes," Rodney said impatiently, "but I doubt you'll be getting it open seeing as when the jumper fell it must have dented us, because the console that the manual override is inside of won't open."

Ronon shoved his way in next to Rodney. "Where is it?"

"Here," Rodney said, gesturing at the outlines of an opening.
Ronon hit it, hard.

"Oh, that'll help," Rodney snapped.

"Where is it under this?" Ronon asked, pulling out his gun.

"Typical," Rodney sniped, "solving everything with your gun." He leaned forward, his hands out as if protecting the hatch from harm. "The mechanism takes up the entire space, Conan."

John joined them, sending some of the Marines up front to make room. "Rodney, stop being an ass and figure this out. With no power, we're gonna run out of fresh air soon."

"Actually not," Rodney said, "seeing as we've been freshly ventilated by Godzilla." He pointed up to the ceiling by the pilot seat.

"Oh," John said. "Good point."

Rodney turned to the hatch, furrowing his brow, as if doing calculations in his head. He pulled a sharpie out of one of his pockets, and drew an X on the console. "Shoot here." Then he backed out of the way.

Ronon aimed for a second, then shot, hitting the spot exactly. The cover to the hatch sagged open as if dead. "Nice job," John said to Ronon, then crouched down to yank on the lever. The back hatch slowly lifted and, even though John knew they weren't in danger of running out of oxygen, the air still smelled sweet.

Tiger, who up 'til now had been hunkered back on her haunches as if enjoying the show, suddenly was on her feet letting out this weird growl that raised the hackles on John's neck. It was almost a keening, but angry and dangerous. Teyla got that look on her face that John was growing to hate and she spit out "Wraith."

"What--" John started to say, and then Tiger was bounding out of the jumper, and John heard something yell, and something being fired that sounded suspiciously like a Wraith stunner. "God damn it!" John cursed.

The Marines all lifted their P90s along with Jack and Teyla. Rodney had to find his, but then gamely lifted it, his face pinched and unhappy.

John totally didn't blame him, and if they got through this, he was going to spend the rest of the night fucking Rodney through the mattress. Forget the damn couch. Life was too freaking short for anyone to be sleeping on a couch.

He blew out a breath then raced out of the jumper, finger on the trigger. John started firing immediately as there had to be at least eight Wraith spread out around them. Tiger had another one on the ground and it looked like she was ripping his throat out. He yelled for everyone to take cover.

After that, he was too busy to notice anything because they were all fighting to stay alive. He saw a Marine go down under a stunner, then a second. Five Wraith were down due to the element of surprise, but he could already see two of them moving, and they'd be up soon. They didn't have an endless supply of ammunition with them, as they hadn't exactly been expecting to get into a fire-fight with dinosaurs and Wraith, and at the rate they were going they'd be out of ammunition way too soon.

Pistol rounds joined the automatic firing of the P90s, and one of the Wraith that had just gotten up, went back down. They must have recently fed to be this resistant to dying. "Rodney," he hissed.
"What?" Rodney hissed back.

They were all doing their best to use the jumper as a physical shield, but they had to come out of hiding to get any good shots off. John stepped out and let out another burst of weapons fire. He took a nano-second to look for Tiger but didn't see her, and hoped she wasn't dead.

"We need an explosion or something," John said. "Can you rig something with some C4?"

"Already on it," Rodney said.

And that was only one of many reasons why John loved the man.

"Duck," Rodney called out in a very loud whisper.

John did as told. There was a satisfyingly loud bang, and John sneaked a peek to find that only two Wraith were left standing. He couldn't be sure the others were dead, but he still liked those odds much better. He noticed that Ronon's shots were going a little wild, one of the reasons there weren't more Wraith out of commission. Ronon was probably seeing double because of his head injury and it was pure luck he'd hit the panel in the right spot.

The Wraith on the left fired his stunner and another Marine went down along with Teyla. John was briefly distracted by something out of his peripheral vision and saw Rodney planting something in the ground by some of the downed Wraith, something, no doubt, to permanently take them out of the equation. One of the Wraith noticed him, too, and before John could yell, Rodney was taken out by a blast from his stunner.

"Fuck," John said, shooting at the Wraith, knowing he was coming to the end of his ammunition. Jack and Ronon were still shooting, and so was the last Marine standing, but one of the downed Wraith was getting back up, and it probably wouldn't be long before a couple more rejoined the party like freaking zombies.

To make matters worse, John heard the sound of running feet, and when he chanced to look up, five more Wraith were joining the party. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," John cursed.

One went flying with a sizeable hole in him thanks to Ronon. And at that exact moment, John's P90 ran out of ammunition. He moved to one of the stunned Marines and helped himself to his weapon.

Ronon had to leap out of the way to avoid being hit by a stunner and he hit the ground hard, grunting and rolling, causing him to slam into Jack, taking him down.

If they all survived this, John thought wildly, that would make a damn funny story. Ronon was usually as graceful as a cat.

That was when he noticed a Wraith heading toward Rodney, his hand out, intending to feed. Then, nothing was funny anymore, and John began to shoot at him in desperation.

The woods suddenly exploded and, at first, heart clenching, John thought maybe whatever Rodney had planted had gone off, taking Rodney with it, but then he saw Tiger. No, tigers. Multiple tigers. A dozen, at least, and they leapt at the Wraith, taking them down, ripping into their throats, growling and snarling like rabid beasts. He saw one get hit by a stunner but it had no effect; it just kept running, hitting the Wraith in his chest, bearing him down to the ground.

His jaw open, staring, he turned back to Rodney to see the Wraith that had been going after Rodney was on the ground with a tiger at his throat. Tiger--at least he thought it was Tiger--was standing over Rodney protectively.
Another Wraith came near and John shot the fucker's head half off with the remaining bullets in his borrowed weapon. He swore Tiger shot him an approving look before she turned around and started licking Rodney.

Just that fast it was over. All the Wraith were down. John stared at their remains; it had been a massacre. Blood and guts were everywhere, both from the bullets and the tigers. No Wraith had been spared the tigers' fury; a couple of the tigers were still snacking.

John winced at the thought, but he wasn't going to complain. If they hadn't shown up, John wasn't sure they'd have survived. He wasn't going to begrudge them a little Wraith snack if they wanted it.

"Tigers, tigers, everywhere," Jack said, moving to his side, rubbing his hip where he'd been slammed to the ground due to Ronon's fall.

"Wraith killers," John said in return.

"No kidding," Ronon said, sounding impressed. "I could have used a few of these when I was running."

Rodney let out a gasp, and his eyes sprang open. "John," he called, although it came out sounding more like "'on" because his mouth wasn't working right.

"Right here," John said, crouching next to him. "Thanks to Tiger and all her buddies, we're okay. Every Wraith is dead, and while we have a few stunned on our side, including you, we didn't lose anyone." He reached out to pat Tiger who was still busy licking Rodney everywhere she could reach skin. "By the way, Tiger saved your life."

Rodney actually managed a smile, and his fingers twitched where Tiger was licking him.

John pursed his lips, considering. "Hey," he called out to the others, "are any of the others who got stunned able to move?"

A few seconds passed and then Jack joined him. "No."

John pointed at Tiger. "I think she must have something in her saliva that's like an anti-Wraith enzyme. I'm thinking it's why Rodney didn't bruise badly when he was choked by one the other day, and it's why Rodney's coming around faster."

And Rodney was. He actually had a hand in Tiger's fur, and one of his legs was shifting.

"Well, as fascinating as this all is," Jack said, "we're still not out of the woods yet. We've got more people down than up, and we still need to get to the gate and get out of here. For all we know there are still more Wraith around, and let's not forget all our dinosaur friends."

"We won't make it to the gate like this," Ronon said. "I can carry Rodney, and one of you can carry Teyla, but that still leaves Lorne and three downed Marines."

"He's right," John said. "Ronon, take Teyla, and Lieutenant Amend here," John directed, nodding at their one last standing Marine, "and get to the gate. Tell Elizabeth to send a couple of jumpers."

Ronon nodded, picked up another of the stunned Marine's P90, and handed his own gun to John. "You can't keep that," he told John with a sly grin.

John held it covetously and scowled. "Yeah, I know. But, thanks for the loan."
With another nod, Ronon picked up Teyla as if she weighed twenty pounds and with a glance at the Marine, they headed off for the gate.

"Okay," John said. "We should get everyone in the jumper, or at least out of the open." He wasn't sure the jumper was the best place for them in case Godzilla came back around still nursing a grudge. Maybe under the trees would be best. His eyes opened wide when he saw Rodney actually sitting up. He was about to see if he could convince the other tigers to start licking the downed Marines when he noticed that they already were.

At least he hoped they were licking them. John walked over to take a closer look, just in case the tigers were hoping to get a little Marine after dinner aperitif. But, no, they were licking them. There were two tigers on each Marine, busy licking faces, necks and hands.

"Okay," Jack said. "That's got to be one of the weirdest things I ever saw."

John agreed. "But hey, if it works…" For a blissful ten minutes, as he helped Rodney move into the cover of the trees, and then, as he and Jack helped the other three Marines and then Lorne to get situated, John thought maybe the excitement was over. They all sat together, weirdly ringed by the large cats, except Tiger who was lying with her head on Rodney's thigh, purring as he patted her.

John's radio clicked, and Ronon said, "We're at the gate and the DHD isn't working."

Fucking great. John exchanged a what-the-fuck-can-go-wrong-next look with Jack and shook his head. "Okay," John said back to Ronon. "Guess we'll wait until Elizabeth checks in." Which, John thought as he glanced at his watch, wouldn't be too long.

"Should I come back?"

"Yeah," John said. "I'd rather have us all together." Besides, that way, the tigers could start working on Teyla. Rodney didn't look like he'd been stunned at all, and the Marines weren't far behind.

"Be back in a minute," Ronon said, and clicked off.

They sat there silently for a minute, then Jack said, "Think they'll want to go back with us to Atlantis?"

"The tigers?" John said.

Jack nodded.

"Yeah, I do," John decided.

"That reminds me," Rodney said, as he sort of staggered to his feet. He made his way to the jumper, Tiger practically glued to his side, which was a good thing as Rodney would have fallen a couple of times if Tiger hadn't supported him like some kind of balance dog. Rodney came back a minute later with his laptop. He powered it up and said, "What I don't understand is why the Ancients didn't leave information about the tigers where it could be found? They're obviously a formidable weapon," he added, patting Tiger on her head.

"Unless there's something wrong with them," Jack said. "Maybe the Ancients purged the database on purpose because it was an experiment gone bad."

Given the other Ancient nightmares they'd tripped over, that wasn't outside the realm of possibility. John winced as his imagination went wild.
"Or maybe they purged the records to protect them," Rodney said absently, "in case the Wraith ever got into the database." As he continued to somehow manage to pat Tiger and still type one-handed faster than John could type with both hands, he added, "The traits that were bred into them are clearly dominant to have survived this long."

"Can you imagine how cool it would be to have tigers patrolling Atlantis?" John said.

"There could be a tiger assigned to every team," Jack offered. "Oh, and hey, when that villager guy came into Elizabeth's office to talk about the Wraith Killer, they offered anything we wanted in exchange for yours."

Rodney's fingers clamped into Tiger's fur as if keep her from being given away in trade accidentally. But, then, his face brightened. "Hey, if we had kittens, we could trade them for whatever we need."

"And it would also be a nice thing to give all our allies Wraith Killers," John pointed out, just in case Rodney had hopes of holding all the kitties hostage for ZPMs.

Rodney scowled at him.

"Of course, they can't really stop a culling," Jack said with a frown.

"No," John agreed, "but they could stop the killing on the ground, and if they culled a tiger by mistake, it could do some damage before they managed to kill it."

"And again I ask, why were there Wraith here today?" Rodney asked.

Jack snapped his fingers. "Maybe they were here to kill the tigers."

John and Rodney frowned at him.

"No, hear me out. Remember at the village, how that guy, Cerat, or something, went missing? Maybe he was a spy for the Wraith. They have them, right? I remember reading about that in one of your mission reports."

"Yeah, they have them," John growled. "Wraith worshippers."

The phrase made Jack grimace, but he said, "So, maybe he slipped away and contacted them, to tell them that the Wraith Killers were back."

"And how'd they know to come to this planet?" Rodney asked.

"Maybe this is where they originally came from," Jack answered with a shrug. "Maybe the Wraith thought they were all dead until Celery ratted on them and they kept good records. Maybe they heard the tigers were back, and figured they had nothing to lose stopping by to see if the report was true."

"Which means they'll send more," Rodney said unhappily, "after none of these make it back."

"Don't worry, Rodney," John said. "We're taking Tiger back home with us."

"Yeah," Rodney said, "I know, but what about the rest of them?" He glanced anxiously around the ring of large cats surrounding them. "Do you think this is all of them?"

"We'll take them all, if they want to come," John said. He gestured at Rodney's laptop. "Find anything?"

"Nothing of substance," Rodney admitted. "It's going to take me some time." He put his laptop down
and stood, stretching. "I'm hungry. MRE's anyone?"

Jack and John shook their heads as if Rodney was nuts.

Shrugging at them, he headed off for the jumper.

Two things happened simultaneously. Lt. Amend and Ronon, still carrying Teyla, walked into the clearing, and there was a whine of a Wraith dart overhead.

"This is turning into a really, really, sucky day," John muttered.

"Yup," Jack observed. "Days like this, better to just have stayed in bed." His P90 was lifted toward the sky.

Ronon put Teyla down carefully then joined Jack, putting out his hand to John for his gun.

John reluctantly handed it over, taking the P90 back from Ronon. "Spoil sport," he said to Ronon.

Ronon grinned but still took the gun.

John noted that one of the tigers had started licking Teyla. At Ronon's look, he explained, "Something in their saliva helps counteract the stun."

Ronon watched for a moment, glanced at the previously stunned Marines who were sitting up, and seemed almost impressed. Then, his attention returned to the sky.

Rodney had scampered into the jumper when the dart had flown by and he now poked his head out. "Is it gone?"

John was listening hard but couldn't hear anything. "Do you think he's looking for tigers or for his lost pals?" He glanced behind him where all the dead Wraith lay in a bloody mess. Maybe they should have covered them up.

Rodney looked up as well and when nothing appeared, he left the jumper quickly, MRE in hand, heading back to the copse of trees. With little notice, the dart was back and a culling ray headed right for Rodney.

"Rodney," John yelled out even as he started to sprint the twenty feet that separated them, as if he could outrun light. His heart raced as he thought about the odds of capturing the dart in one piece, let alone rematerializing Rodney back in Atlantis.

But then Tiger and one of the fully grown felines was knocking Rodney down and sprawling on top of him, covering him, and the ray ran right over them all and, astonishingly, left Rodney and the cats behind.

"Damn," Jack said in amazed delight. "I want Santa to bring me my very own Wraith Killer. Holy shit."

"God," Rodney was moaning. "God, am I still here? Do I have all my fingers and toes? And would someone get this damn cat off of me, she weighs a ton."

"Make that two cats," John said. "And they just saved your ass. Again," John added, even as he loped over to help Rodney up. "The culling ray hit you but didn't take you."

Rodney stared down at Tiger and the other larger one who was licking Tiger's face. "How is that possible?" He crouched down and looked Tiger in the eye. "Something in their blood?"
"Like naquada?" Jack offered.

"That's…almost not a stupid suggestion," Rodney said in return, his voice changing from scathing to focused from one end of the sentence to the other.

"High praise," John said to Jack.

"Be still my heart," Jack said to John.

"Blah," Rodney said as the larger tiger licked his face, too, bathing him in tiger saliva.

"What are they culling for?" Ronon asked. "Us or were they hoping to cull one of the tigers as proof?"

Good questions all, and John had no answers. "For all we know, he hit the culling ray button by accident." Just then his radio clicked. "John?"

"Elizabeth," John said with a relieved grin. "I'm very glad to hear from you. We've run into a few snags here, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd send a couple of jumpers to come pick us up."

"What happened to the other jumpers?" Elizabeth asked warily.

"That's quite a story," John said, "and I'd be glad to tell you all about it when we're back in Atlantis." He could hear orders being given behind Elizabeth. "Oh, and tell them to be ready for anything. The dinosaurs are feisty, and they seem to think that the jumpers make a tasty snack. And there are some Wraith here as well so tell them to come in cloaked."

"Wraith?"

"Wraith," John agreed. "Mostly all dead, now, but there's at least one dart still out there."

"They'll be on their way momentarily," Elizabeth assured him. "Is everyone all right?"

"We're mostly in one piece, although Lorne has a badly broken arm so we'll need a medical team standing by." Thanks to the tigers, everyone who had gotten stunned, except Teyla, was walking around.

"Understood," Elizabeth said. "They'll be there shortly and get in radio contact with you as soon as they arrive."

"Great," John said. "Sheppard out." He clicked off his headset. "Think we can all manage to survive for another ten minutes?"

"I really wish you hadn't said that," Rodney complained. "You've jinxed us for sure."

The Marines were all staring anxiously at the sky.

Teyla was starting to come around, in fact, John was sure he'd heard a giggle from her, something he didn't think he'd ever heard. The tiger must be tickling her with his licking. He found himself grinning as he heard it again.

That was when the pterodactyls struck. The first one swooped down and landed on the jumper, staring at them with a gimlet eye, head cocked as if measuring them for its gullet. It lifted its head and let out that ululating cry that John knew meant it was calling its friends for dinner.

The cry was cut off as Ronon blew the thing head's off. Either Ronon's double vision was gone, or
the damn thing was so big he couldn't miss. But the swooping of wings alerted them to the fact that enough of the cry had been heard to bring more their way.

"Fuck," John said for about the thousandth time. He was going to need a vacation after this day. "In the jumper," he yelled, pulling people to their feet and pushing.

Rodney needed no further prompting. Laptop and half finished MRE in hand he sprinted for the open hatch, everyone directly behind him. A huge pterodactyl landed on the ground, separating the group.

Jack fired on it with the last of his ammunition. And while it didn't kill the damn thing, it kept it at bay until Ronon could take it out. "I seriously need one of those guns," Jack said. A sentiment John wholly agreed with. Maybe a trip to Sateda was in the cards to try to find more of their weaponry.

Teyla let out a yell and John spun to see a pterodactyl coming after her, lunging and snapping. Then he heard a blood-curdling yell coming from the jumper and turned to see Rodney and one of the Marines fighting off another one that was trying to get into the jumper.

He could see that Ronon was on the job helping Teyla, so John spun around and started shooting at the one going after Rodney. Rodney and the Marine were shooting their pistols, as their P90s were out of ammunition. Rodney hit one of the pterodactyl's eyes, and it let out an enraged shriek, adding incredibly pissed off to hungry. It reached out a taloned claw and raked it across Rodney's chest, shredding his vest.

Tiger was doing her best harrying the beast, trying to hamstring it, and it kicked out at her and sent her flying. The pterodactyl went after Rodney again, but the Marine pushed in front of him and took the next hit, the pterodactyl's long beak taking a chunk out of his arm. Rodney fell back on his ass, his hand on his chest.

Behind him, John heard a scream of pain that didn't sound completely human, and he hoped like hell that it was the death cry of one of the pterodactyls. Then he was too busy shooting at three of the things, as more and more started to land.

His headset clicked and a voice said, "This is Stackhouse, sir. What's your situation?"

"Our situation is that we're all about to become dinner," John screamed into his headset. "Get us the fuck out of here!"

"Where are you?" Stackhouse said urgently.

"See all the fucking pterodactyls?" John asked even as he rained the last of his ammunition on the persistent fucker that had attacked Rodney and the Marine. "We're right underneath them. Move it!" He tossed the P90 to the ground and pulled out his Berretta.

"On our way," Stackhouse promised.

"Be careful," Lorne said into the headset. "One of them took out our jumper."

Good point, John thought. Another scream came from behind him. In front of him, Rodney was flat on the ground, half on the ramp, half in the jumper. The Marine was bleeding profusely, one arm hanging useless by his side. Two of the other Marines were fighting by John's side, but as soon as they convinced one pterodactyl to go away or die, another one took its place. At least they had won some ground, so they were now standing in front of the jumper, protecting the wounded Marine and Rodney.
Thank God, again, for the tigers. They were fierce fighters, and John could hear them snarling and roaring their displeasure at this new foe.

Then the jumpers were there, firing on the beasts in the air, and another jumper landed, disgorging several Marines who immediately started firing on the pterodactyls on the ground. John saw Carson, and one of his medics, with his medical kit head for Lorne, and John was going to give him a fucking medal for coming with the rescue team.

But then he saw Carson run for the jumper Rodney and the Marine were in, and then Carson yelled out, "He's not breathing," and "I need an endotracheal tube and an ambu bag," and John's heart started to jack hammer in his chest.

Deciding things were somewhat under control with the fresh Marines, John ran to the jumper to Rodney's side, where one of the Marines was cutting Rodney's vest and shirt off. "What the fuck happened?" John yelled. Rodney looked dead. Dead dead, not just looking like shit dead.

Carson was busy intubating Rodney, while the medic was pulling out the defibrillator at Carson's demand.

John looked at Rodney's chest, his very still, not breathing chest, expecting to see a gaping hole where his heart should be. But all he saw were a few scratches.

"I'm thinking he's allergic to whatever scratched him," Carson said, attaching an ambu bag to the end of the tube and starting to breathe for him. "God only knows what the creatures have on their talons. Aye, lad," to the medic, "place the paddles on his chest; I need to see what his heart's doing."

Even John could tell that the green blip was supposed to do more than make a squiggly etch-a-sketch line. Meanwhile, the medic stuck a needle in Rodney's arms as one of the marines pulled out a bag of saline and tubing from Carson's med kit. Moving astonishingly quickly, the medic got the bag hooked up to the tubing, and the tubing attached to the needle in Rodney's arm.

"Oh, laddie," Carson said unhappily to Rodney.

"What?" John asked anxiously.

Ignoring John, Carson told the medic, "300 joules." The medic nodded, moved a dial and hit a button. There was a whining noise.

"Charged," the medic said.

Carson looking around briefly, saying, "All clear," and Rodney's body jerked in response to the charge.

"Again," Carson barked out.

John couldn't even think. Carson would fix Rodney; he had to. John refused to think of anything else.

Carson watched the monitor and cursed under his breath.

The part of John that was always able to cut through the bullshit, even when he didn't want to, saw the flat line and thought dead. But, the part of him that had to actually live the rest of his life fought that conclusion like a rabid dog. Rodney couldn't be dead. He couldn't. That's as far as John's brain could go. It stopped right there like it had run into a fucking brick wall.
"What happened?" Jack asked, suddenly at his side, a supporting hand on his shoulder.

Shaking his head, unable to even talk, John watched as they shocked Rodney again. His eyes swung between Rodney's body and the small data screen where the green tracer ran in an ominous straight line.

Carson prepared a large bore needle and, to John's dismay, rammed it right into Rodney's heart, pushing the medicine in. "Fuck," John said, grasping his chest, over his own heart, totally freaked out.

But then, miraculously, the straight line began to squiggle again, and Carson said, "Another 300, lad," to the medic. He shocked Rodney again, and this time the green blip started to sort of look the way it should with peaks and valleys, and Rodney wasn't looking completely dead anymore.

John forced himself to relax his hands which had formed such tight fists that they hurt. "Is he okay?" he managed to ask.

"For the time being," Carson said. "But I need to get him back to the infirmary."

"Will he stay okay?" Jack asked.

"With proper medical attention," Carson said, sounding frustrated. "I only have a limited amount of medicine with me."

"We'll get you out of here as soon as we can," Jack promised, one hand on John's shoulder.

With another look at Rodney, John found the wherewithal to leave Rodney in Carson's capable hands and turn around to survey the damage and assess the well-being of the rest of his team. The fact that he felt like falling to his knees and puking wasn't important. Jesus fucking Christ, he'd almost lost Rodney. He hadn't even known that Rodney had been dying, suffocating, while on the floor of the jumper.

Furiously pushing that thought aside, he saw Teyla and Ronon still in one piece, hunkered down by a tiger that was bleeding profusely. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the medic had turned his attention to the Marine with the bad arm. Lorne looked no worse off than he had before, except the pain was clear on his face, and he looked like he might be puking any second as well.

"Anyone dead?" he called out, looking for the rest of his Marines.

"Amend," Lorne called out in stressed tones.

That was when John noticed the dead body only a few feet in front of Lorne. Amend must have been killed while protecting Lorne.

"Two of the tigers," Teyla called, standing and moving away from the now dead tiger on the ground. "They were very brave," she commented. "Several more are wounded."

John could see that. The only two lying still were the dead ones, but most of them had blood clearly visible on their white fur. He searched for Tiger and found her limping toward him.

"Hey, girl," John said, ridiculously glad to see her, blinking his eyes against the prickle of tears. She butted against him and collapsed at his feet. He took a moment to pat her and praise her, and then moved to check everyone out.

"John?" Jack called.
John spun around. "Yeah?"

"Get everyone loaded up, and let's get out of here. We can't afford another attack like that."

"Good idea," John said, annoyed that he wasn't thinking as clearly as he needed to. But, fuck, he'd almost lost Rodney.

"Everyone in the jumpers," John ordered.

Behind him he heard Jack say, "We have to move him, Doc, this jumper isn't going anywhere."

Ronon, Jack, and the fresh Marines helped move Rodney, and then they assisted Lorne and the injured Marine on board. Another two Marines, faces blank, got out a body bag to take the fallen Marine home in.

John ordered Teyla and Ronon on board a jumper. Ronon looked like he was about to pass out; his head was bleeding again, and Teyla looked as weary as John had ever seen her. This day was one for the record book for sheer suckiness. They were damn lucky they hadn't lost more; they were damn lucky they weren't all dead. That reminded him about Rodney again, and John had to close his eyes for a second and swallow against the sour taste in the back of his throat.

"Hey, you, too," Jack said, slapping his arm.

John opened his eyes at Jack, who was now standing in front of him. His eyes moved quickly to where Rodney was to see that someone else had taken over the ambu bag.

"Let the guys who haven't been fighting Wraith and dinosaurs all day take over now," Jack suggested.

John nodded and blew out a shaky breath. "Sucky day," he said.

Jack just snorted in return. "Daniel's not gonna believe a word of it."

In a few minutes that felt like hours, everyone was on the jumpers. Everyone but the tigers. Tiger was on board, but the rest of them were sitting on their haunches, watching.

"How about them?" Ronon asked.

John had no intention of leaving them behind, not after they'd saved their asses so many times. "Come on," he said with a hand wave, imagining Elizabeth's face when he showed up, not only failing to leave Tiger behind, but bringing a dozen more home as well.

They started entering the jumpers, settling down wherever there was space. When it seemed as if their original dozen or so, minus the two dead ones, should have been on board, John started counting. He glanced around and saw tigers coming from every direction, big ones, small ones, they were everywhere.

"It's like A Hundred and One Dalmatians," John said.

Jack nodded and added, "We're gonna need a bigger boat."

As they kept trying to cram in, John put Stackhouse in as pilot of the jumper with all the wounded and sent them off through the gate, Tiger sticking close to Rodney. Then, like a circus act, it was all about cramming as many clowns into a Volkswagen bug as humanly possible, except it was tigers into a jumper. It got so full, John wasn't sure it would even take off.
"We'll be back," he told the rest of them, as if they could understand. "We'll drop this load off, and come back and get you. I promise." He gestured behind him. "There's no more room." Then, seeing as he was on a roll, and everyone was going to give him shit about this later anyway, talking to tigers like he was Dr. Doolittle, he added, "Get closer to the gate so we can find you."

One of the Marines coughed through a laugh, and John narrowed his eyes at him. "Hey," he said, "you didn't see what these guys did to help us today. For all I know, they can speak English."

"Wouldn't they speak Ancient, sir?" a young-faced Marine asked, biting back a smile.

John chose to ignore that as he closed the hatch, making his way awkwardly through the morass of people and tigers to get to his chair. Miller was piloting, which was fine with John. His last nerve had been shot when he'd seen Carson plunge that needle into Rodney's chest.

Jack was in the co-pilot seat, and Teyla was next to John. The floor was a seething sea of white fur. "Elizabeth's gonna have a stroke," John said. He found himself patting the closest tiger who began to purr, which set them all off, and the combined purring was loud enough to make the jumper rattle.

"Only for a while," Jack consoled him. "Once she realizes what they can do, and we put together a plan for feeding them, she'll be okay."

"We're going to need to get some veterinarians," Miller observed. "I can't see Dr. Beckett wanting to take on their care."

That was true enough. John sighed and closed his eyes. What a fucking day.

When they landed, Jack pushed John off toward the infirmary, telling him he'd deal with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had come up to the jumper bay and was watching, stunned, as tiger after tiger stepped out of the jumper. Daniel was standing next to her, shaking his head, as if he'd expected nothing less from Jack.

"What were you thinking?" Elizabeth said. "We can't keep them all."

"Yeah, we can," Jack said.

She turned aggravated eyes on him. "Jack."

"No, we can," Jack insisted. "Listen to me. You didn't see what they did. They were called Wraith Killers for a reason. They kill Wraith. Dead. And something in their saliva helps counteract being stunned, and we think it also helped Rodney not bruise as badly when that Wraith choked him. When one of the tigers is covering you," he continued implacably, "the Wraith's culling rays don't work. They'll keep us safer, help with patrol, help on missions, we can give them to our allies, trade them for ZPMs, and we need to go back for more. They're waiting for us."

"They're waiting for you?" Elizabeth asked incredulously.

"We couldn't fit them all in," Jack explained, deciding not to mention how John had given the tigers express instructions to be waiting at the gate. Jack wouldn't be at all surprised if they were right there when he went back through.

"How will we feed them?" Elizabeth asked, staring at the twenty something tigers who were staring right back at her as if they knew their fate rested on her.
"We'll work something out. Ronon already offered to take them to the mainland to hunt. I'm sure we'll be able to trade some for the rights to let them feed on other planets. We'll find a way," Jack said. "But, we can't afford to turn down this kind of help, Elizabeth."

Teyla, who had been standing there all this time, added, "They are fierce fighters. I doubt we would have survived without them. Two of them died protecting us and many more were injured." She gestured at several of the tigers who, despite all the licking that had been going on in the jumper, still bore stains of blood.

Elizabeth was speechless, her hands sort of flapping around.

Jack grinned. "I need to go back." Miller was hanging out nearby, fully intending to accompany him. Stackhouse was willing to go, too, and Jack had sent him off for some grenade launchers, just in case they ran into trouble. The machine guns just didn't have the oomph they needed to get through that thick dinosaur hide.

"I want to go, too," Daniel said.

"Forget it," Jack said. "Are you even supposed to be out of the infirmary?"

Daniel turned stubborn eyes to him. "Carson said I could leave."

"Yeah, well I bet he didn't let you out of his clutches so you could go on a mission to a planet where we already almost died about a dozen times."

"Jack," Daniel said.

Jack grabbed Daniel and dragged him to the side of one of the jumpers. "Look, I get it. If you'd almost gotten eaten by a dinosaur today, I wouldn't want you out of my sight either, but you can't go. All we're doing is landing, picking up tigers and leaving, and hoping like hell we don't run into any Wraith or man-eating dinosaurs. And if we do run into any of those," Jack said, cutting Daniel off who was about to protest again, "you aren't in any shape to help."

Daniel's eyes narrowed, but he, amazingly, kept his mouth shut.

Jack gripped his arm. "As soon as I get back, I'll find you, and I promise to stay with you until you're sick of me."

"Promise?" Daniel asked.

"I promise." That was an easy promise. Jack thought he'd sleep for a week.

"Don't you dare get eaten by a dinosaur, Jack, or I will never forgive you."

Jack found himself grinning, even though it wasn't well-received if the expression on Daniel's face was any indication. "Gotta go," Jack said. "I got cats to rescue." He wished he could give Daniel a big hug and a wet nasty kiss, but there was too big an audience for that.

Elizabeth was still there when Jack had finished with Daniel. The tigers were gone. "Hey, where'd they go?"

"Teyla and Ronon took them," Elizabeth said. "She wanted their wounds cared for."

Jack wondered who the hell would do that. The infirmary already had a bunch of human casualties on their hands.
"The zoologists," Elizabeth offered, even though he hadn't asked.

"We'll take three jumpers," Jack told her. "We get in and out and be back in as much time as it takes to cram these suckers full of tigers." Typical extraction, Jack thought with a bit-off grin. He'd done a million of them.

"That's what Lorne said," Elizabeth remarked, frowning.

"Yeah, but I'm going with the philosophy that even I can't be that unlucky as to get handed more shit today," Jack said with a grin.

Elizabeth sighed. "Be careful."

Daniel sighed, too. "Don't get eaten."

"You guys ready?" Jack said to Miller and Stackhouse, who had returned.

They nodded, and without further ado, Jack got into a third jumper. "Stay sharp, you two," Jack warned the other two pilots. "You only saw the pterodactyls. You missed out on the rest of the fun."

He got affirmative noises from the others, and minutes later they were heading through the Stargate. Jack kept his fingers crossed as they zipped through the wormhole that nothing ugly would be waiting for them on the other side. There was a chance the Wraith would be there, because at least one dart was still on the loose, even if they hadn't seen it again after that one unsuccessful culling.

Then they were shooting out the gate on the other side, and Jack let out a laugh, because the damn tigers were there and he wasn't sure the three jumpers would be enough. He landed his, saw Miller and Stackhouse land theirs as well, hatches were opened, and they waited for the tigers to approach. Jack wondered if he should have brought Tiger to help ease the way, even if getting her away from Rodney's side would have been easier said than done.

But, then, one of the tigers moved forward and behind her came six kittens. Then another one moved, and more kittens stumbled their way toward the jumpers.

"They're all moms," Stackhouse said as they kept coming, slowly filling up the jumpers.

Not all, Jack thought, but most of them. Women and children first, apparently, even in Tiger Land. Fortunately, the kittens took up hardly any room, and were more than happy to climb on top of their moms to help make room for the larger tigers. There were some older ones, or at least Jack thought they were older because they looked gray, like him, and they moved slowly and creaked a little. Jack could relate. In fact, when the most grizzled one came up to him, Jack put his hand on his head, and then showed him to the co-pilot seat, deciding he deserved a place of honor. "I'd let you drive," Jack offered, "but John would skin me alive."

The tiger chuffed at him, but then curled up on the floor by the seat. As he made his way back outside he gingerly stepped around kittens, several of whom were tussling on the floor.

Once outside, he saw that it looked as if the last of the tigers was making her way onto Stackhouse's jumper, two adolescent aged cubs behind her. He flashed Stackhouse a grin, got a brilliant one in return and a matching one from Miller. "One for the history books, boys," Jack said. "And now I'm going to go sleep for a week."

He glanced around one more time to see if any more tigers were coming. Despite the dangers, they'd need to check back here periodically for more, especially if the Wraith were going to be after them. He glanced around one more time, taking the time to check the skies for darts and pterodactyls. Glad
that fate was smiling on them for a fucking change, he gestured Stackhouse and Miller back onto their jumpers.

Jack dialed Atlantis, sent in his IDC, and they were through and home.

"How many?" John said faintly.

"163," Elizabeth said, arms crossed over her chest in an I'm-not-happy posture. "109 of them are kittens."

John blinked at her. "Wow," he said. He was still in the infirmary, sitting by Rodney's bed. Rodney hadn't woken up yet, and John was still feeling sick to his stomach.

Carson had reassured him it was only a matter of time, that the Ancient EEG machine didn't show that there'd been any brain damage, but John wasn't going to rest easy until Rodney opened his eyes and snarked at him.

"Where are they?" John asked, trying to imagine 163 tigers roaming around Atlantis.

"All over the city," Elizabeth lamented.

John glanced down at Tiger who was at the foot of Rodney's bed; even Carson hadn't been able to get her to budge. "You should have seen them," John said. "They were awesome."

"I'm not disputing that fact, John," Elizabeth said, "but we still know nothing about them. And the fact that there's so little to be found in the Ancient database concerns me. For all we know, they're more of a danger than a help, and we've allowed close to two hundred of them free access to Atlantis and our people."

Ordinarily John would say that Rodney would figure it all out soon, but Rodney would be lucky if Carson let him sit up in bed let alone use his laptop.

"I've got Daniel Jackson working on it," she continued, "and of course, the zoologists are checking all the databases they've found that have references to animals. But, I'd feel more comfortable if we'd waited to find out what we were dealing with before bringing so many here."

"Hey," John protested, "I'm only responsible for a couple dozen of them." Jack had brought the rest of them. Go Jack, John thought with a bitten back grin.

The look on Elizabeth's face let him know she didn't appreciate the distinction. "I plan to contact, with Teyla's help, some of our allies, and see if they know of them. While the villagers we brought here had heard of Wraith Killers, Teyla's people had not or," Elizabeth qualified, "at least Teyla hadn't. She is planning on speaking with some of the Athosian elders to see if they know of their existence."

"That's a good idea," John said, wishing he had some answers to give her. He should probably offer to go get things organized but he really didn't want to leave Rodney's side. Forcing himself, he said, "Do you want me to--"

Elizabeth uncrossed her arms and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I want you to sit here and relax," she said kindly. "We'll manage. Donovan's busy making kitten gruel, and Ronon took several Marines with him to go hunting on the mainland. I've already got a list a page long of people who want one of the kittens, and Counselor Jard has already requested two."
"Hey, that reminds me," John said with a snap of his fingers. "We think the guy who went missing may be a Wraith worshipper. It's the only thing we could think of that would account for the Wraith being on the dinosaur planet."

"Missing?" Elizabeth inquired, looking puzzled.

"Yeah," John said, foggy as to whether he'd mentioned that in his report. "Ask Jard, he'll remember. Jack, too."

"Jack, I imagine, is fast asleep," Elizabeth said with a hint of a smile. "I saw Daniel herding him to his room a little while ago. Something you should be doing," she added.

"Yeah, I know." He stretched his neck out, trying to get rid of some of the kinks. "As soon as I know he's okay."

She nodded, glanced at Rodney, put her hand on John's shoulder again with a comforting pat then, as if against her will, scratched Tiger under her chin. When John grinned at her, Elizabeth shook her head, and left the infirmary. John wondered how long it would take before Elizabeth had a kitten or two underneath her desk.

John sat back down and took Rodney's hand in his. "Come on, buddy, open those baby blues for me," he said softly. Rodney just lay there. Carson had taken him off the ventilator when Rodney had started breathing on his own, so all he had on his face was a nasal cannula giving him extra oxygen. He still had his IV and a catheter, which Rodney would bitch loudly about as soon as he awoke.

Yawning, feeling as if he'd been beaten black and blue by six sumo wrestlers, John put his head down on Rodney's bed and closed his eyes.

Jack flopped down on the bed. "Jesus, I'm tired."

"And you stink, too," Daniel informed him. "Go take a shower."

"I can feel the love," Jack complained.

"And it stinks," Daniel said again. "Come on." He pulled Jack up, and started removing layers of clothes.

Jack wished he wasn't quite so exhausted so he could really enjoy this. At least it was nice not to have to expend any energy on getting naked. "Hey, is Rodney okay?" he asked, realizing he'd forgotten to ask anyone.

"He hasn't woken up yet," Daniel said. "John's with him."

Jack thought about taking a walk to the infirmary to check on them and it almost made him cry. He realized his eyes were shut, and he opened them to find that Daniel was stripping out of his clothes, too. "Daniel," he said. "The spirit is willing…"

"Just planning on keeping you from falling down and breaking something," Daniel assured him, as he prodded Jack toward the bathroom. "Come on."

Jack forced his feet to move and leaned against the bathroom door as Daniel adjusted the water temperature. He let his eyes take a leisurely stroll down Daniel's naked body, wishing he had the strength to do something about it. Figures, he bitched to himself.
Daniel pushed him into the shower and followed him in, leaning him against one of the side walls of the shower. The hot water felt great, and muscles Jack hadn't even known were achingly tight, started to relax. Daniel soaped up a wash cloth and began to lather Jack's body, and that felt great, too.

He obediently moved however Daniel wanted him. Arm up, arm down, turn around. Like some children's nursery rhyme. He wasn't sure when it stopped just being washing and turned into something more, but despite his exhaustion, his body could tell the difference, and little Jack began to show some interest in the proceedings.

Daniel slid to his knees, opened his mouth, and swallowed Jack down. Jack was drowning in heat, from the water, from Daniel's hot, hot mouth, and it felt as if only seconds had passed before he was coming down Daniel's throat.

His knees were like spaghetti, and he would have fallen if Daniel didn't slide back up his body, pressing him against the wall of the shower. Daniel's hard cock pushed against him, and Jack wanted to return the favor, but Daniel had managed to do what the Wraith, the tyrannosaurus rex, and a thousand pterodactyls couldn't do: Daniel had done him in.

Jack did manage to rally enough to kiss Daniel, to taste himself on Daniel's tongue, and he held Daniel close until he came, adding more heat into the equation, spilling on Jack's belly.

They hugged for another minute, then Daniel rinsed them off, cajoling Jack to move, to get out of the shower, to stand while Daniel dried them off, and then to collapse on the bed. He stayed awake just long enough to feel Daniel stretch out beside him and then Jack was gone, gone, gone.

John was fast asleep when Rodney finally awoke. At first, John thought it was Carson patting his head, but when he heard Rodney try to clear his throat, John lifted his head to find Rodney awake.

"Hey," John said.

"Hey," Rodney croaked.

"How do you feel?" John asked.

"Like shit," Rodney said. "What happened?"

"One of those pterodactyls got you with its claws and you had an allergic reaction." And because it sounded so stupid, but wasn't at all, John climbed up on the bed with Rodney, being careful not to smack Tiger, and lay next to him, holding him as tightly as Rodney would let him.

Rodney patted his shoulder awkwardly. "Am I dying?" he asked anxiously.

That should have been funny too, but it totally wasn't, and John just buried his face in Rodney's neck.

Carson came around the curtain and saw them there and said, "Oh!" in surprise. "Colonel?"

"He died, Carson," John said from the safety of Rodney's neck.

"Aye, lad, that he did, but he's fine now," Carson said understandably.

"I died?" Rodney asked. "For real?"

"But, I'm fine now, right?" Rodney asked nervously.

"Now that you're awake, you'll be right as rain," Carson said.

"How long have I been asleep?" Rodney asked cautiously, as if expecting to be told he was Rip Van Winkle the second.

"Too long," John muttered.

"About eight hours," Carson told him.

"That doesn't seem too long," Rodney said.

"You were dead," John reminded him.


Elizabeth chose that moment to come around the curtain. "Is everything all right?" she asked guardedly.

John almost let out a manic little laugh. No, everything wasn't all right, he felt like yelling at her. Rodney had died, and it was only freaking good luck that he wasn't still dead. John nuzzled Rodney's neck, reassured by the steady pulsing of his neck veins.

"I had a nightmare," Rodney threw out desperately, doing his best to explain why John was in his bed with him.

All they needed now was for Colonel Caldwell to stop by. John decided it was a lucky break for him that the Daedalus wasn't in orbit.

"John," Rodney whispered in his ear. "You need to get out of this bed."

"No," John said.

Rodney sighed. "He's a little upset that I apparently died," Rodney offered.

"There was no apparently about it," John complained.

John could feel Elizabeth staring at him.

"So," Rodney said, striving for normal, as if John wasn't in bed with him attached like a giant leech. "Allergic to pterodactyls? That's not something you get to write on a medical form everyday."

John snickered into Rodney's neck. Maybe another hour or two and he might be willing to move a few inches away.

"Is everyone else okay?" Rodney asked.

"We lost Lt. Amend," Elizabeth said, "and there were a few injuries, but no other fatalities."

"Ronon and Teyla?"

"Fine," Elizabeth said. She sighed, and finally said, "Colonel, when you're through here, I'd like a word." John could hear her steps fade away.

"Well, that was discreet," Rodney said in a huff. But now that she was gone, Rodney settled against
John, working an arm around him.

Carson came closer to check out Rodney's IV pump and fluids. "How are you feeling, Rodney?" he asked.

"Like I was just shoved out of the closet by my boyfriend," Rodney snarked. "Oh, you mean physically? Like crap. My chest is killing me, and my throat is sore."

"Aye, yes, well we put a tube down your throat and had to use the defibrillator."

"You were dead," John said again, just in case Rodney wasn't getting it.

"John," Rodney said, "I'm fine." He leaned down and whispered, "Really. I'm fine. Stop freaking out."

Letting out a long sigh, John sat up, but he didn't get off the bed. "Sorry I shoved you out of the closet," he said.

Carson grinned at them. "Your closet had a big window in the door with frilly lace curtains. I don't think you'll be surprising anyone."

Rodney gaped at him then frowned at John. "We're not telling anyone else. You might not be concerned about everyone's reaction, but I am. If Caldwell wants your job, this could hand it to him on a platter."

"Fine," John said, partly relieved, partly pissed off that he couldn't just have this. "Only Carson and Elizabeth. And Teyla and Ronon," he added after a pause.

"Hey!" Rodney protested.

"They already know," John said. "And so do Jack and Daniel, so this secret isn't much of a secret anymore. You don't see anyone trying to harass them, do you?"

Rodney reluctantly conceded the point. "No," he said petulantly.

"And somehow I doubt Caldwell's going to want to take on General O'Neill, and I'll bet he knows he'll be dealing with Jack if he wants to take me on," John added.

"Maybe," Rodney said, "but let's not find out, okay? I'm not saying we have to date women to throw people off the scent, but maybe you could not climb into my bed when I'm in the infirmary." Then, leaning forward, he whispered, "Even if I loved that you did that."

John grinned at him for saying that. A big fat dopey grin.

Rodney rolled his eyes and lay back on his pillows. "Can I leave now?" he asked Carson.

"No, you can't leave," Carson practically sputtered. "You'll be here at least another twenty-four hours until I'm sure you're fine." With that he took another couple of readings and left John and Rodney alone, flicking the curtain closed behind him.

"By the way," John said, "it was Lorne who saved your ass. He must have seen you guys get attacked and sent Carson to the other jumper. If he hadn't..." John couldn't even finish the sentence. It had been so close.

John had already been by Lorne's bed in the infirmary to thank him. He'd been completely tongue-tied, not sure how to thank someone for saving the most important person in the world to you, when
Lorne wasn't really supposed to know that.

Based on what Lorne had said back to him, John suspected that, as Carson had already intimated, he and Rodney weren't exactly the secret they thought they were.

Meanwhile, Rodney was pulling John back in for another hug and John was all over that.


"It was kind of a shitty day, remember?"

Rodney snorted. "Vividly." He glanced at the foot of the bed. "How's Tiger?"

"A little bruised but she's fine. She hasn't left your side."

"Did we bring the others back with us?" Rodney asked.

"Yup, although two of them died fighting the pterodactyls."

"So how many do we have now?"

John grinned. "163."

Rodney's eyes opened so wide it was almost comical. "What?"

"More and more of them kept coming out of the woods until we couldn't fit them all in. Jack, Stackhouse and Miller went back for more, and they filled those jumpers up, too, including a boat load of kittens."

"163?" Rodney repeated.

"Elizabeth's not thrilled," John said understatedly.

"163?" Rodney said again.

"Good thing you're not allergic to cats," John commented. "Carson's been handing out antihistamines like mad. He's already working on developing allergy shots."

"163?"

John snickered at him.

"How are we going to feed them all?" Rodney asked.

"That's Ronon's problem for the time being," John said. "He's planning on taking the tigers in shifts to the mainland to hunt. Meanwhile, Donovan's made vats of kitty gruel." He reached for Rodney's hand and laced their fingers together. "Actually, Elizabeth is more concerned about what they are than how we'll feed them. She still can't find anything of note in the database."

Rodney waved that concern off as if it had no validity. "I'll find something. In fact," he said, wheedling, "if you go get my laptop--"

"Forget it," John interrupted. "Carson would skin me alive if I got your laptop."

Rodney pouted but it didn't have his usual heat, and John guessed that he was exhausted. "Maybe
"You need to sleep some more," he suggested.

"Yeah, maybe," Rodney mumbled, eyes closing. "You, too."

John thought maybe he could sleep now. And something to eat and a shower would be good, too.

He watched Rodney breathe for a minute, watched his chest rise and fall, and did his best not to remember Rodney lying in the jumper, his chest not rising at all.

Three days later, Rodney was back to his full snarky glory, and everyone was crammed into the conference room to discuss the tigers. John glanced around the room. Elizabeth was there, of course. Jack and Daniel, Teyla, Ronon, Radek, Carson, Evan Lorne, and Bailey Valler, the lead zoologist, a short, very slender, almost boyish looking young woman, were also there. There was a tiger in the room for each one of them, a self appointed guardian of sorts.

At first it had been like some scene out of Hitchcock's The Birds, as everyone made their way gingerly around almost two hundred tigers. Of course, if you got one riled up the worst that would happen is it would knock you down and lick you to death, but it was pretty undignified and John tried to avoid it. Although, he'd laughed pretty hard when a couple of them took down Ronon and sat on him. Ronon had gotten him back the next time they sparred but it had totally been worth it.

Tiger was there, of course, on her haunches near the front of the room where Rodney was about to launch into one of his ego exhibitions. Like the smitten idiot he was, John was looking forward to it. Then again, he was looking forward to anything Rodney did these days after coming so close to losing him.

John's tiger had recently appointed himself, so John was just getting to know him. He was full-grown but still had that bounciness that made John guess he was a young adult. John suspected he'd been adopted by him because the young male had his eye on Tiger. She was doing a masterful job of completely ignoring him, while keeping an eye on him all the time. Of course she was much too young to mate, but visions of Simba and Nala kept going through John's mind.

The head female had latched on to Teyla, which made Teyla some sort of honorary top dog. John was pretty sure Elizabeth wasn't too happy about that, but it had taken Elizabeth a while to succumb to the temptation of rubbing all that soft, thick fur, and meanwhile alliances had been struck.

Jack was pretty high up there, too. In fact, he was Teyla's counterpart. The oldest Tiger--Jack had taken to calling him Bra'tac--had chosen him, making Jack top of the heap as far as giving orders; the tigers all paid attention to him. John had sulked at first, thinking that as he was in charge, he should get the lead tiger, but Rodney had told him not to be stupid, that he needed a younger tiger that could fight and run really fast, and probably do moronic life-threatening things right along with John. That had actually made John feel a lot better.

All the tigers, for some odd reason that no one understood, adored Rodney. He was constantly besieged by them, but no matter how much he yelled at them, they'd just yawn and continue to loll at his feet. Radek thought it was hysterical.

One of the kittens had adopted Radek and was sitting in his lap right now, fast asleep. Another kitten had adopted Bailey, and had become the honorary mascot of the zoologists. Ronon had bonded with a huge tiger that everyone, including the other tigers, tended to stay clear of. Daniel, for some reason, had two tigers following him around, a male and a female, the female very pregnant. Jack had rolled his eyes and talked about getting larger quarters for the grandchildren.
Elizabeth had a mellow female adult who seemed to like to do nothing but sleep, which was probably a good thing considering how much time Elizabeth spent in her office.

Lorne had a rambunctious adolescent that spent most of his time getting cuffed by the adult tigers. Lorne spent half his time laughing at the tiger’s antics and half the time mortified. His tiger was the one who’d gotten up on the conference room table at the beginning of the meeting and eaten half the donuts before Rodney had noticed and started yelling.

Over the last day or so, the tigers had been disappearing. The only ones in the main part of the city were the ones in the conference room, a few others that had attached themselves to people not currently present, and the ones who—and John had no other word for it—had assigned themselves areas to watch over.

"Rodney," Elizabeth said, "let's get started. What have you found out?"

"Excellent question," Rodney said with zeal, putting a large map of Atlantis up on the screen. "Let's talk about where the tigers have gone, first of all."

John could see life signs in a part of the city they hadn't explored yet. Lots and lots of life signs.

"Even I can answer that now," Jack said, gesturing toward all the life signs. "The real question is why?"

"I think I might have the answer," Rodney said. "The blueprints--" he gestured at Radek, who hit a button on his laptop, eliciting an annoyed meow from the kitten in his lap. "There," Rodney said as a blueprint showed up. He tapped a spot. "This is the area where the tigers have moved to. One of the reasons we haven't bothered exploring that area is because according to the blueprints it's nothing but offices and storage space. It was given a low priority, and it's still so far down the list, I'm not sure we'd ever have gotten there."

"Plus," Radek threw in, "it has always appeared to be flooded."

"Exactly," Rodney agreed, even though he sent Radek a look as if to chastise him for interrupting. Radek, as usual, ignored him.

"Are you saying it isn't flooded?" John asked.

"No, it is flooded, or at least part of it is full of water," Rodney said.

"Isn't that the same thing?" Ronon asked.

"No," Rodney said definitively. "I think it's supposed to be full of water, at least this part of it. I'm guessing it's a tiger habitat. I've been focusing on that area for the last few hours, attempting to isolate some readings, and if I'm not mistaken, which, I'm not," Rodney said smugly, "there are a large number of plants there, and a very sophisticated ventilation system, I'm guessing to help eliminate the odor of hundreds of tigers answering the call of nature."

"Why didn't we see it when we were working on those grounding stations?" John asked.

"Because this particular wing doesn't have a grounding station," Rodney answered. He frowned a little as if that should have tipped him off that something was going on.

"So, are we going to go take a look at it?" Ronon asked.
"Yes," Rodney said, "but it will take a little work. There's some damage between here and there and while the tigers may be able to traverse the area without any trouble, it might prove more problematic for us."

"Before we all go on a field trip," Elizabeth said, "I still have a few questions."

"Me, too," Lorne said. "Like why are the tigers hanging out in the gate room?"

"They're not just in the gate room," Jack said. "They're in the jumper bay, the gear up room, and the armory, plus they're patrolling all the living areas. If I had to guess, I'd say that they're protecting vulnerable areas, and conveniently placing themselves in all the areas that would tell them trouble's afoot."

"And be ready to go on any missions," Daniel observed. "You wouldn't be able to get near ammunition, jumpers, or the gate, without the tigers knowing."

"They're smart," Ronon observed.

"Yes, they are," Daniel agreed. There were nods around the table. "They almost seem able to understand what we say. I find it hard to believe they understand English, because if they had a rudimentary understanding of language, it seems much more likely that it would revolve around Ancient."

"So what are you saying?" Jack said, nudging Daniel to keep going.

"Some sort of telepathy?" Daniel suggested. "Not true mind reading, but enough to be able to differentiate friend from foe and to easily trust us, and to choose their human partners so quickly."

"I have spoken to the elders on the mainland," Teyla said, "and they remember stories of the Wraith Killers. The legends are vague, but they do exist."

"What do they say?" Elizabeth asked.

"They were called the Ancients' shadows. The stories speak of their strength, their fierce loyalty, and how the Wraith feared them."

"It still didn't stop the Ancients from fleeing this galaxy to get away from the Wraith, though, did it?" John asked darkly.

"No, it did not," Teyla agreed. "However, I rejoice at finding such ferocious allies."

"And are we sure they are allies?" Elizabeth said tentatively. She had come a long way toward softening her stance in the three days since the tigers had moved in, but John knew she wasn't completely convinced.

John could understand. A lot of seemingly good stuff had gone bad pretty damn fast in the last two or so years.

"I think I can, without reservation, state that they are definitely allies," Rodney announced.

"You found something?" Daniel asked excitedly.

"I found something," Rodney said with a self-satisfied grin.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Elizabeth said.
After making sure he had everyone's undivided attention, Rodney's very favorite thing, and with a quick narrow-eyed glare at John as if he could read John's mocking thoughts, Rodney said, "When I couldn't find anything in the database, I had one of my usual bursts of intuitive genius--"

Radek rolled his eyes.

Rodney glowered at him. "And I remembered," he continued loudly, as if he had to speak over Radek's internal thoughts, "that when we first got here I ran across several personal entries that I quickly chose not to invest time in as they seemed to be full of Ancients moaning about how much their lives sucked." Rodney snorted. "As we were too busy dealing with the sucking black hole our own lives had turned into, it was hardly something I wanted to waste my time with."

Elizabeth looked a little annoyed that Rodney hadn't seen fit to share this information until now.

Ignoring her, Rodney continued, "I went back and found part of Melia's journal."

"And? So? Therefore?" Jack prompted after a pause.

"Let me read it," Rodney said, clearing his throat which made John grin. He read: "The time grows near for our departure. We leave so much behind. So much knowledge, so much damage. While many of our people…" Rodney stopped, "Blah, blah, blah," he continued, his hand circling as if to speed himself along. "Right, here, she continues: So few still live, too few to survive for long. And while they are dear to us, we cannot take them where we are going. We shall return them to their planet of origin to live out their lives. And while their function is to fight the Wraith, they, after fighting so long and tirelessly at our side, deserve to live the rest of their lives in peace. True companions. My heart grieves to part with them. With all the horrors our experimentation has wrought, at least in this, we succeeded."

There was an appropriate hush in the room. Then, Elizabeth asked, "Is there anything else?"

"Yeah," Rodney muttered, "hold on." He read silently for a few seconds, "Right, here we go. She writes: I've asked Janus to remove any record of them from our database to protect them. By sinking the city we hope to prevent Atlantis from enemy invasion, but the future cannot be foretold. In time, the Wraith Killers will be little more than legend, and their planet of origin lost."

"Elizabeth," John suddenly said.

She looked at him, eyebrows up.

"No, no, not you, Elizabeth, the old Elizabeth. She was the one who gave us all those addresses for ZPMs, which included the dinosaur planet."

"Which didn't have a ZPM," Rodney pointed out.

"Exactly," John said. "She must have gotten the address from Janus or someone before they left, so she could give it to us. It was probably locked out of the system to protect them, but Janus knew we might need them, if they somehow managed to survive."

Elizabeth looked intrigued by that idea, and John thought old Elizabeth might be the ticket that would help fully sway this Elizabeth.

"Was there anything else?" Teyla asked.

"Not really," Rodney said, skimming the text. "More about leaving, and other things they needed to wrap up. But then," he added, his face brightening, "she mentions a room number." He turned to
"Bring that blueprint back up." When it appeared, courtesy of Radek, Rodney tapped the alleged tiger habitat with his index finger. "Coincidentally, it's the same room number assigned to this flooded area."

"Why would there be water there?" Elizabeth asked.

"Tigers love water," Bailey said. "All zoo habitats have swimming holes for the tigers. They're one of the few felines who purposefully spend time in water."

"What did she mean when she said too few to survive?" Elizabeth asked. "Obviously, I'm assuming she meant too few to breed, but that would mean only a truly small number survived, and if that's so, then how do you explain this?" she added, gesturing at the white carpet at their feet. It didn't take too many sprawled tigers to cover the floor.

"And why were they all dead?" Carson asked. "Why didn't they make sure they kept enough for breeding? That doesn't make sense."

"Right," Rodney sneered, "like the Ancients have taken such good care of everything here in the Pegasus Galaxy. Considering their genius, they were incredibly shortsighted about almost everything."

That was true enough. And John supposed the tigers had slowly been exterminated from battling the Wraith for centuries. He hoped to any god that was listening that their fight didn't last that long.

"That still doesn't explain this," Elizabeth said again, again gesturing at the tigers.

"The simplest explanation," Radek offered, "is that there were wild tigers still living on the planet. And the Wraith Killer genetic adaptation was dominant and bred amazingly true, considering the time that has gone by."

John considered the tigers in the room and the life signs at the tiger habitat. "This still doesn't seem to me like a lot of tigers after 10,000 years. Not to be depressing, but seeing as we lost two today, it won't take long to, well, you know…" He trailed off, not really wanting to finish the sentence.

"I might have something to offer about that," Carson said. "While I haven't had a lot of time to study them, I can tell you that they heal amazingly fast, and several of them are quite old."

"How old?" Jack asked, looking at his tiger companion.

"Hundreds of years old," Carson said. "I believe they have some Wraith DNA in them, which allows them to sense them, much as our Teyla can do." He smiled kindly at Teyla and she smiled back. "It was several hours before any of my team had time to look at the wounded tigers, and by then, there wasn't much to treat."

"We've looked at the tiger saliva," Bailey said, "but while it seems to have the ability to counteract Wraith-related injuries, it doesn't seem to work on regular injuries. Dr. Simpson came in with some blisters and the saliva had no effect."

"Except probably exposing her to some deadly tiger toxin and condemning her to death by septic shock," Rodney said disparagingly.

"Considering how much tiger saliva you've had licked all over you," John said, "I think it's safe enough."

"Jack, you seemed to think there were more on the planet," Elizabeth said.
Jack shrugged. "It's not like I saw them," Jack said, "but I bet there were more staying back."

"Because they didn't trust you?" Elizabeth asked.

"No," Jack said. "I think because they could see we were out of room," Jack suggested pragmatically. "I think every time we go there, there'll be tigers to pick up."

"Shouldn't we go get them all?" Bailey asked anxiously. "Won't the Wraith be trying to eliminate them?"

"Somehow I don't think the tigers are going to be easy to either a) be found, and if they are found, b) be killed," John drawled. "We've already decided they're smart, they're old, and they heal fast. Plus, they can't be culled. I think they'll be okay for the time being."

"But if we want to be smarter than the Ancients," Rodney said, "we'll need to have some idea how many there are so we can ensure an adequate breeding program."

"That's where we come in," Bailey said. "And yes, it would be great if we could get an estimate of how many tigers there are, but in the meantime, we'll observe the ones we do have, determine how long their gestation period is, how long the cubs take to wean, that sort of thing. We have at least four pregnant females counted so far, and they seem amenable to examination."

"We'll need to go check out the habitat, see if it really will meet their needs," John said, "And we'll have to figure out how to feed them." He grinned. "I think we should recruit some big game hunters and let them loose on the dinosaur planet. One good sized tyrannosaurus rex would probably feed the tigers for weeks." John had been kidding, so he was surprised when his suggestion was taken seriously.

"Will they just…" Lorne stopped, winced. "I don't know, just assign themselves?"

"They seem to already be doing that," John said. "If you look at the map, while most of the tigers are in the habitat, they've also stationed themselves all over the city, and not just the inhabited areas."

"You think they're patrolling?" Jack asked.

John nodded. "I think they know exactly what they're supposed to do, and we just need to let them do it."

"We will need to set up some sort of elimination system for the tigers that are staying in the inhabited part of the city," Radek said. "We have a team working on something."

That would be good, John thought. There were a few corridors off the beaten track that were smelling a little ripe. He suspected his Marines would be on their best behavior so as to not be put on tiger clean-up duties.

"I'll keep going to the mainland to hunt," Ronon offered. "Teyla said it would be okay."

Teyla nodded. "The elders are honored to help feed the Wraith Killers," she said. "And there is plenty of game."

"Would they like some of them?" John asked. "Maybe we should leave a contingent there to help protect your people."

"I believe that would be much appreciated," Teyla said with a smile.
John hoped there'd be some tiger volunteers. He wasn't sure how to make that happen other than flying a bunch of them over there and seeing if any of them got out of the jumper.

The meeting broke up shortly thereafter. They probably could have kept deliberating for hours, but there were technicalities to deal with. The tigers needed to eat, they needed a place to shit, there was still a city to run, and John was hungry. Everyone started drifting out of the room, their tigers either in their arms, or padding along behind them.

"You want to go hunting?" Ronon asked him.

Not particularly, John thought to himself. "Sure," he said. "How about you, Rodney?" John said, determined to share the misery.

"Oh, sure," Rodney said with ruthless false enthusiasm. "Let's go bag us a couple of pterodactyls, shall we?" He rubbed his hands together with mock glee, rolled his eyes, and went back to his laptop. Elizabeth immediately began to harangue him for not sharing the Ancients' journals back when he'd first found them.


"What?" Rodney said absentmindedly, as his fingers flew over the keyboard.

"Once we bag us a couple of pterodactyls, we'll be flying the shuttle out to where the tigers are. Sure you don't wanna go?"

Rodney stopped typing. "I won't have to actually hunt, will I?"

Ronon snorted.

"Very amusing," Rodney said to Ronon. "I'll have you know that I won second place in the junior marksmanship contest in the fifth grade."

"No, you didn't," John said, grinning.

"Fine," Rodney pouted, "so that was a lie, but it was only because I was too busy building a non-working version of a nuclear bomb, which," Rodney crowed, "is so much cooler."

"Now that I agree with," John said. "Come on, Daniel Boone."

Grumbling a little, Rodney closed his laptop, picked it up, and followed John and Ronon out of the conference room.

Two days later, Jack, Daniel, and John all watched as Rodney worked thigh deep in water, trying to fix something. The tigers wouldn't leave him alone which only added to the entertainment value.

When they'd found the habitat, two days ago, several dead deer things in the back of the jumper, it had been Jack's and John's work that had gotten everything operational. There had been a ton of shit to turn on, and by the end of the day Jack's skin had been tingling because of it. Other than the times he'd been dealing with the Ancients' database downloaded into his brain, and the fun he'd had in Antarctica when Anubis had been attacking, he'd never spent quite so much time interfacing with Ancient equipment.

The place was amazing. And, best of all, hunting wouldn't be required. The tigers would probably appreciate it now and then as it would provide a change of diet, but they wouldn't have to. The
'flooded' section, was, as Rodney predicted, purposeful, and it allowed a steady influx of ocean water, and with it, the fish. Lots and lots of fish, as if they were being lured in by something that Rodney had added to his list of things to figure out.

The habitat was huge, with room for hundreds of tigers if need be, maybe more. There was also a supply of fresh water, using some sort of desalination process, an additional something for Rodney to figure out.

Jack leaned back on a bench that had clearly been put there for humans and looked around. Other than the huge ocean pool, that two tigers were currently doing their best to scoop fish out, and where several tigers were doing their best to annoy Rodney, there was also a large area that was essentially a jungle. The Ancients had set up part of the area as a greenhouse which periodically vented, allowing the entire habitat to be filled with fresh air and rain.

The best part was the giant kitty litter box. It was like one of those boxes you saw advertised on the home shopping network that automatically sifted the poop out and then did something with it. Jack had never really paid close attention to how they worked as he didn't have cats, and he was usually watching stupid stuff like that when he was drunk, exhausted, or totally freaked about something, and all three choices tended to fuck with his ability to absorb anything. But, that's what it reminded him of.

Rodney already had a team of scientists working on how to make smaller ones for, well, the four of them for starters, but Jack had faith in Rodney that he'd eventually share. Meanwhile, seeing as he was part of the Rodney in-crowd, he was happy.

Jack cast his eyes over Daniel, amazed anew at the direction his life had taken. It was inconceivable to him now that he'd worked with the man for years and denied himself this. He glanced over at John and saw he was watching Rodney with dopey eyes, probably the same look Jack had on his face.

That was even weirder, that he'd end up living in another galaxy, in a sexual relationship with Daniel, and sort of best friends with John Sheppard and Rodney McKay. Carter would have a stroke. Not about Sheppard, but sure as hell about McKay. Her lip still curled in a sneer whenever she talked about him, even though Jack knew they'd played nice a couple of times since Rodney'd left the galaxy.

"Go away," Rodney complained, putting his hand on the forehead of one of the tigers near him and shoving. Putting the proof to Newton's law of equal and opposite reactions, and as the tigers were a fairly immovable force when they wanted to be, Rodney was the one who went flying, right into the console he was working on. "Ow," he yelled.

The tiger chuffed at him and then, like all the tigers seemed to do to Rodney, rose up on its hind legs, water streaming off its body, and put its paws around Rodney's shoulders so it could rub cheeks with him. Jack had seen at least ten tigers do it, and Tiger did it whenever she could reach him.
“Oh, will you stop it?” Rodney groused.

Jack couldn't help but notice that Rodney did a little rubbing of his own; the tigers were hard to resist. When they weren't ripping the throats out of Wraith, they were such contented little buggers.

“Need a hand there, Rodney?” John drawled out, leaning back, thoroughly enjoying the show.

“Ha, ha,” Rodney said darkly. He was trying to shove at the tiger again, to no avail. Another tiger came over and butted at Rodney's thighs, and it must have picked the exact moment that the first tiger was pushing at Rodney, because Rodney's feet went out from under him and he was under water.

All Jack could see were tigers, and he waited for Rodney to surface.

Enough time went by that John was on his feet. "Rodney," he called out, "quit playing around."

Nothing.

John was in the water in a heartbeat, pushing tigers away who, fortunately, allowed themselves to be shoved this way and that without complaint. The fact that they seemed completely unconcerned told Jack that Rodney was probably fine. It didn't stop him from getting to his feet, along with Daniel, and following John.

"Where the hell is he?" John snarled, thrashing through the water.

Just then, Rodney popped back up, coughing.

John grabbed him, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Me?" Rodney said indignantly. "They pushed me," he whined, pointing at the tigers. "But hey," he said, his petulant tone of voice changing to one of excitement, "I think they were trying to show me something."

Jack made his way back to the shore once it was clear that no one needed rescuing. "What were they showing you?" he asked, when he'd gotten back to his bench.

"I'm not sure," Rodney said. Then he took a deep breath and went back under. John took a deep breath of his own and went under, too.

Jack watched for them to resurface when there was a sudden movement across the way, behind the sanitation area. An entire wall slid back revealing a large room. "Cool," Jack said, standing, Daniel already on his way over.

John and Rodney resurfaced, both looking around.
Jack pointed to the room.

They were both out of the water, dripping wet, in seconds, heading for the newly revealed room. Several tigers joined them. "What is this place?" Jack asked. It was filled with counters, consoles, couches, chairs, and tables; it looked like some sort of student lounge, reminding Jack of his college days.

"It's the lab," Rodney said in wonder. He was standing at a counter, turning something on, and unintelligible information started scrolling across a large screen. It looked like that Matrix shit, Jack thought.

"The lab?" John asked. "You mean the tiger lab?"

"Yes, yes," Rodney said impatiently, already lost in whatever the hell he was reading. Figures Jack had had an Ancient data base downloaded into his brain twice and still couldn't read a damn thing. Of course, he had Daniel which was just as good, being a linguist and all.

"Good way to hide the entrance," Jack offered.

Daniel and Rodney ignored him, because, of course, Daniel was now as sucked in as Rodney had been.

Jack caught John's eye and rolled his own.

John grinned at him.

Yeah, as much as Carter might gripe about it, Jack liked these guys.

"We need a bigger place," Jack said to Daniel, as his tiger looked more pregnant every day. Her name was Claire, after Daniel's mother, and between her and her huge belly, Daniel's other Tiger, Mel, named for his father, Jack and Daniel and Bra'tac, the quarters they were using--Jack's--were claustrophobically crowded. Jack had tried to get the tigers to stay next door in Daniel's quarters, but the tigers weren't interested. The more pregnant Claire got, the more she insisted on being within tail length of Daniel.

Daniel thought it was sweet. Jack, on the other hand, was tired of tripping over tiger tails in the dead of night when he needed to use the bathroom.

"I know," Daniel agreed, as he squeezed by Bra'tac, who was occupying way too much floor space for one tiger. It was like he oozed to take up more space than was physically possible. Even Claire had been pushed to the side, and she took up plenty of room on her own. Mel was safely on the bed which meant Jack was going to be spitting out tiger hair all night.

Jack tapped his headset. "John?"


"Are there larger quarters?" Jack asked.

There was a pause. "Where are you?"

"In my room," Jack said.

"I'll be there in a minute," John said and signed off.
To Daniel, Jack said, "I guess sex is out, then."

Daniel lunged at him, knocking him flat on his back, narrowly avoiding Mel who growled in complaint and got off the bed. "We could try," Daniel suggested as he crawled up Jack's body, then swooped down and kissed him.

Jack decided he definitely should have asked where John was. As he sucked on Daniel's tongue he tried to figure out where he'd probably been, and how long it would take him to get here. Just as Jack was hoping it would be long enough for him to get naked, there was a knock at his door.

"Told ya," Jack said to Daniel.

"Don't answer the door," Daniel whispered, "and maybe he'll go away."

"Nympho," Jack said tenderly then pushed Daniel off of him with a loud "Oomph," and got to his feet, willing his erection away. "Come on in," he called, telling the door to open. He never got tired of that.

"Hey," John said. He glanced at the floor. "Wow. They take up a lot of room, don't they?" Even his tiger stayed by the door, clearly deciding there was no room at the inn for him.

"Ergo, the problem," Jack said. "When Claire has her puppies, I'm moving out."

"Kittens," John said helpfully.

"Whatever," Jack said. "Kittens, puppies, I'll have to scale the walls to get from the bed to the door. We need a bigger place. One for the whole family."

John looked wistful for a moment, and Jack suspected it was because he wished he could do the same. It had to suck to have to hide his relationship with Rodney from all and sundry, even if almost everyone knew about it. It would be hard to abide by Don't Ask, Don't Tell if the military leader of Atlantis just shacked up with the very male head of the science division.

"So, bigger room?"

"Rodney and I found some quarters sort of half way between here and the tiger habitat," John said. "Now that we've got the transporters working in that section, people can live there."

"Does anyone know about it?" Jack asked.

John shook his head. "No. They're sort of family units, and you guys are the closest thing we have here to a family."

"Besides you and Rodney," Daniel said.

"Yeah, but we can't exactly live together," John said.

"You will one day," Daniel said kindly. For some reason he poked Jack as if Jack was supposed to make it happen. Jack shot him a disgruntled look which Daniel totally ignored.

John shrugged. "Want me to show you?"

"You bet," Jack said enthusiastically. "The sooner we can move the happier I'll be. Claire's gonna pop any second."

As if to refute his words, Claire rose gracefully to her feet, clearly intending to join them on their
field trip. Bra'tac took a little longer, taking his time to slowly stretch his legs and arch his back. Mel was already at the door.

"You done?" Jack asked Bra'tac.

Bra'tac shot Jack a look that totally meant he was calling Jack a smart ass.

Snorting, Daniel said, "He's got your number, Jack."

Jack thought about grumbling that he got no respect, but decided to leave it alone. "Let's go," he encouraged, shooing the tigers out, then John, then Daniel. "Caravan, ho," he said with a forward ho sort of gesture.

They moved to the closest transporter, and after they'd all crammed in, John hit the display. Seconds later the doors opened up and they were in the tiger section, as it was now called. Jack gave a grateful thought to the tiger habitat sanitation system as he couldn't smell a thing.

"They're here," John said, gesturing down a hallway. He was standing in front of a doorway, but clearly not including it in what was on offer.

"That where you plan to live one of these days?" Jack asked.

John's cheeks reddened, but he nodded. "Rodney likes it."

Jack moved to the next door and thought it open. He walked inside and found himself saying, "Sweet."

"Wow," Daniel said. "This is huge."

It was. There was a large kitchen, and several doors leading off the large living area. Jack started opening them and found a closet, a bathroom, two bedrooms, and in one of the bedrooms, clearly the master, there was a second bathroom. It had a large balcony that stretched the length of the apartment, filling the place with natural light.

"Sold," Jack said.

"I agree," Daniel said happily.

The tigers seemed to agree, as they all padded to a patch of floor flooded with sunlight and made themselves at home. This time John's tiger joined them.

"What'd you decide to call him?" Daniel asked.

"Warner," John said.

"As in?" Jack asked.

"Kurt," John explained.

"Great name," Jack enthused.

"Why?" Daniel asked, confused. "What does it mean?"

Jack gave the love of his life a pitying look. "Super Bowl 34? MVP?" he prompted.

Daniel shook his head.
"Forget it," Jack said in an it's-hopeless sort of tone.

Daniel shot him a look that said something along the lines that Jack should just forget about finishing what they'd started a short time ago. Jack wasn't impressed; he knew how easy Daniel was. In fact, Jack was already thinking about how much fun it would be to christen every room in the new place. "Let's move now," Jack suggested.

"Want some help?" John asked.

"Yes," Jack said without an ounce of pride, "but not Rodney. Otherwise I'll have to listen to him bitch for days about how he threw his back out."

Grinning, John called for some Marines to meet him at Jack's quarters.

"Steven," Jack said to Caldwell, when the Daedalus had made its way back to Atlantis. Caldwell was sitting behind his desk in the office he used when he was here.

"General," Caldwell said.

"Ex-general," Jack said.

"Sir," Caldwell said instead.


"You're older," Caldwell said with a sly grin.

"Not by much," Jack protested. "Not enough to warrant a sir, for crying out loud."

Caldwell snickered. "What can I do for you?"

Jack decided there was no sense in beating around the bush. "What's your point of view on Don't Ask Don't Tell?"

Caldwell considered Jack. "You talking about you and Daniel Jackson moving in together?"

Jack snorted. "Yeah, me, Daniel, Claire, Mel, Bra'tac, and six kittens." They were cute as hell, but a total pain in the ass, especially as they were just walking now, and he stepped on one every damn day. They had no survival instinct at all. Like lemmings, the damn lot of them. "And how'd you know that?" Jack asked, put out. "You just arrived."

"I have my sources," Caldwell said with a smug air.

"Well, in any case, no, I'm not talking about me and Daniel," Jack said snidely. "I'm a civilian. I can sleep with whoever I please." He watched Caldwell's face for any sign of homophobia, but the man just looked amused.

Jack had known Steven for a long time. And while the guy was military to the bone, he'd always had a killer sense of humor that occasionally came out to play. Steven didn't suffer fools gladly, but Jack had never known if he'd consider gays the fools, or the ones who hated them.

"You weren't always a civilian," Caldwell said candidly. "And you'd be amazed at how well-trained everyone at Stargate Command got at looking the other way. You and Dr. Jackson, single-handedly, did more to promote the gay military lifestyle than Clinton ever did."
Jack's jaw dropped. "What?"

Caldwell didn't bother to repeat himself.

"Me and Daniel?" Jack asked weakly. "Everyone thought me and Daniel…?"

Caldwell started to look confused. "Weren't you…?"

Jack shook his head. "Not until here."

This time, Caldwell's jaw dropped. "You left Earth for him. You retired for him. What the hell was that about?"

"Repression, Olympic style," Jack said, almost proudly. He couldn't believe he could have been sleeping with Daniel all this time; that everyone already thought he had been. "Even Hammond?"

"Even the President," Caldwell said.

"Well, spank me rosy," Jack said, shocked.

"No, thank you," Caldwell said primly. "I'll leave that to Dr. Jackson."

Jack shook his head. "The President?" he clarified.

"And the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Caldwell threw out.

"Get out of here," Jack protested.

Caldwell put his hand up. "I kid you not."

"Why didn't I know this?" Jack griped.

"Everyone thought you did," Caldwell countered reasonably. He leaned forward. "If you weren't asking about Don't Ask Don't Tell for you, then I'm assuming you were asking on behalf of Sheppard and McKay?"

"Boy, you do have good sources," Jack said.

Caldwell rolled his eyes. "Not exactly a secret. The two of them might be aces at keeping classified secrets, but the looks on their faces give them away. Not to mention the fact that they are seen routinely leaving each others' quarters at 0-dark-thirty, or that they show up together, late, having both recently showered."

Jack winced. He'd meant to mention that last one to John. "Is it a problem?"

"If he ever got stationed Earthside again, it would be," Caldwell said.

"He won't," Jack said. "This is his home. He might go home on a visit with Rodney to see Rodney's family, but they'll always come back." He pressed. "Is it a problem?"

"You mean have I had any raging homophobes beating down my door to complain about them?"

Jack nodded. "They do their best to be circumspect--"

Caldwell snorted.

"But," Jack continued, "they'd like to live together. I think they should be able to."
Caldwell sighed. "In answer to your first question, there aren't too many homophobes in the Stargate Program. They were weeded out when you and Daniel were carrying on your years-long nonexistent affair. The two of you were far too valuable to lose, and people mumbling about the wrong things were quickly shown the door."

Jack smacked himself in the forehead with the palm of his hand. "How did I miss this? It's embarrassing."

Grinning, Caldwell said blithely, "Too blinded by passion, I guess."

Maybe that was the truth, Jack thought to himself. "Holy buckets," he said, distressed. "Guess that's why no one, from the President on down, was too surprised when I played hookey."

"Mostly everyone was surprised it took you so long," Caldwell taunted.

Sighing, Jack said, "John and Rodney?"

"To be honest, I didn't think John would last here," Caldwell admitted. "And, for a while, I thought I could do a better job. But, as much as it pains me, he's the right person for this command, and with Rodney McKay at his side, they're a powerful combination. I think Rodney would make life a living hell for anyone other than Sheppard."

"So?" Jack prompted with a helping hand through the air.

"They're valuable. And no one wants to mess with a winning combination."

"So if they broke a few rules, it'd be okay?" Jack pressed.

"You mean, if they broke more rules, would it be okay?" Caldwell said ruefully.

Jack smiled at that. "I know Rodney can be a pain in the ass," he said, "but the guy's got nerves of steel."

"I know he does. And despite the fact that I want to throttle him on occasion," Caldwell said, "he's what stood between Atlantis and certain destruction more times than I can count. And he and Sheppard seem to be able to read each other's minds." He paused, then added, "And now with you and Dr. Jackson here, and both of you in full support of Sheppard and McKay..." he trailed off.

"Yeah?" Jack asked, wanting to know the bottom line.

"I don't want an invitation to their housewarming party," Caldwell said.

Grinning in satisfaction, Jack said. "Hey, come around for dinner tonight. Meet the family. You're not allergic to cats are you?"

"No," Caldwell said. "And I'd be glad to join you."

"We'll expect you at 1900," Jack said. "And don't feel bad if you step on some kittens. They're too busy trying to stay on their feet to worry about where they are. I haven't managed to kill any of them yet."

"I read the report about the tigers in general. Are they really that impressive in battle?"

"More," Jack said. "They're unbelievable. And in addition to their fighting skills, they've cemented our relationships with our allies, and given us an amazing edge in trading, as everyone wants them."
"So you just give them away?" Caldwell asked.

"Nooo," Jack said, dragging out the word. "The tigers choose. A couple of them always go on missions, and they decide if they're staying or not. I can't ever predict it, but we've learned to stay away from the villages the tigers want nothing to do with." He glanced around. "Maybe you should think about taking one. The Daedalus could use a cat or two."

Snickering, Caldwell asked, "Do you think you have them all?"

"You mean from the dinosaur planet?" Jack asked. At Caldwell's nod, he said, "No, not even close. Every time we drop by, there are more tigers waiting for us. We think word's getting out, and the tigers are slowly migrating from all over the planet to come home to Atlantis. We have over 300 hundred living either here or on the mainland, and another hundred or so that we've handed off to allies or trading partners." He let out a soft chuff of wonder. "You should see their faces, our allies, these villages that have been culled time and time again. These tigers bring them such hope. They're all convinced that the tide is turning against the Wraith, and they see us, along with the Wraith Killers, as being responsible for that. It's gone a long way toward forgiving us for waking the damn things in the first place."

"Sheppard did that," Caldwell pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," Jack said shortly. "Bad luck. He killed a Wraith who had just been responsible for draining all the life out of his commanding officer. Wouldn't you have killed her?"

Caldwell nodded. "Yes, I would have."

"Bad luck," Jack said again. "Trust me, John's had plenty of sleepless nights over it. Maybe it was a good thing for it to happen now when we're here to help fight. They were going to wake up sooner or later."

"That's circular reasoning," Caldwell pointed out.

"Maybe," Jack said. "But if they'd woken up when we weren't here, this galaxy would be toast." Of that he had no doubt. He leaned forward. "John and Rodney have done an amazing job keeping everyone alive. I don't know that I've respected two men more, other than my old team. And not just the two of them, of course, everyone here gives their all, but it works because of the two of them."

"Not Elizabeth?" Caldwell asked.

"She keeps them from going too far out there," Jack admitted, "but between you and me, if John and Rodney both wanted something, she wouldn't stand a prayer of saying no and getting her way."

Caldwell nodded as if this wasn't anything he didn't already know. "That reminds me," he said, opening up the top right hand drawer of his desk. "The President asked if you'd do the honors, even if you are an ex-general." He laid four boxes out on the desk. "And these are for Sheppard," he added, pushing a smaller box in Jack's direction.

Jack grinned and reached for the box. "They're giving him birds?" He opened the box and saw the eagles within. "Sweet." He couldn't wait to see the look on John's face. He picked up one of the longer boxes and found a Presidential Medal of Freedom within. "Shit," Jack said reverently. He was honored that he'd be able to present these in lieu of the President. That was when he noticed there was a fourth box. "Why four?"

"It's a second one for McKay," Caldwell said, opening it up. "It's a Meritorious Service Cross."
"Cool," Jack said with a big smile. He couldn't wait to see Rodney's face. He was tempted to throw a big party, and he might for John, but he'd give Rodney, Teyla and Ronon their medals with just the team present. He didn't want there to be any hard feelings from anyone else on Atlantis because they weren't being recognized. Maybe between Jack and Caldwell, they could come up with something to give everyone next time. It wasn't like the hazardous duty pay they were all getting was doing them any good.

Jack scooped up all five boxes and shoved them into the various pockets of his pants and jacket.
"Thanks, Steven," he said. "Really. I know you had to add your voice to mine to make this happen."

"Not really," Caldwell said. "You were pretty persuasive." He grinned. "And it's just as well you got it done now. Not sure how happy they'd be promoting a happy homemaker to full bird." With a bigger grin, he added, "Although they did make you a general."

Jack made a disgruntled noise. It really was embarrassing how he'd missed all of that. "I'll see you at 1900," he said, choosing not to respond to Caldwell's taunt.

Grinning, Caldwell said, "I'll be there."

In a huff, but only a small one, because he'd gotten everything he'd hoped for and more out of their conversation, Jack swept out of the room, only to trip over Bra'tac who'd been waiting outside. He thought the door shut over Caldwell's laughter.

"See?" John said proudly to Rodney, showcasing the collar of his jacket where he was displaying his birds.

"Yes, yes, I see," Rodney huffed. "Just like I've seen them the last hundred times you asked." When John looked a little deflated, Rodney relented and pulled John in for a kiss. "Colonel, colonel, colonel," he said. "Nothing less than you deserve," he said loyally.

There was a knock on their door. Their door, Rodney thought to himself. His and John's. He still couldn't believe it even if they'd been living together for a week now.

"Come in," John called.

"Just watch out for the supersized ego," Rodney warned.

John shot him a disbelieving look. "Excuse me?" he demanded.

Rodney ignored him and waved at Jack when he crossed their threshold with Daniel, Claire, Mel, Bra'tac and the six kittens. Jack had named them Huey, Duey, Louie, Minnie, Mickey, and Pluto. Claire and Bra'tac went to pay their respects to Tiger and Warner and then settled down on the ground. The kittens started mock fighting, running into everything, including people.

"What's up?" John asked, then added, "Want something to drink? A beer?"

"You bet," Jack said.

Rodney watched John walk to the kitchen area--their kitchen--and open the Ancient version of a refrigerator--their refrigerator--and grab two beers with each hand. It wouldn't last long, but there was always some beer from Earth on hand for the first couple of weeks after the arrival of the Daedalus.

There was another knock on the door. When it opened, Teyla and Ronon were there.
"Hey!" John said brightly. He handed Jack, Daniel and Rodney a beer. "Want something to drink?"

"I would love some of your apple cider," Teyla requested.

"I'm fine," Ronon said, getting down on the ground to tussle with the kittens. His grouchy tiger, that he'd named Meredith, much to his amusement and Rodney's consternation, butted heads with Warner and Bra'tac, and then removed himself to the balcony.

Mikela, Teyla's tiger, planted herself in the middle of the room, as befitting a queen, head held high as she surveyed her kingdom.

"So," John said, "glad you could all make it."

Rodney stared at John, wondering what he was up to. Whatever it was, he hadn't told Rodney a thing. Not that he minded having any of these people over. This was family, after all. Almost as astonishing a thought as the fact that he and John were now living together.

Jack pulled out some boxes and put them down on the coffee table. "John and I are here to make some presentations."

With a nod, John tapped one of the boxes. "We could have done this in front of everyone here in Atlantis, but we decided it would be better in private." To Rodney, he added, "Help keep the egos in check."

Rodney scoffed at John. "Nice," he said. "Should I share with everyone about how you sleep with those damn things on your collar?"

John reddened but then, grinning, he admitted with a sheepish grin, "I do." With Jack's permission, he grabbed one of the three boxes that looked the same. "And here's a little something for you to sleep with," he teased. He handed the box to Jack.

Jack opened it up and showed it to Rodney. "This is a Presidential Medal of Freedom," he said formally, showing it to Teyla and Ronon as well. "It's one of the two highest civilian awards in the United States and is bestowed by the President of the United States. It is designed," he quoted, "to recognize individuals who have made an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Rodney stared at it. Then he stared at John, then at Jack. "Is that…is that…" He couldn't say the rest of the sentence. He'd die if he asked if it was for him and it wasn't.

"I present this award to Dr. Rodney McKay," Jack said proudly and seriously, "on behalf of the President of the United States, for his contribution to the safety of Earth, as well as both the Milky Way and Pegasus galaxies." He took it out of the box, and pinned it on Rodney's shirt.

Rodney stared down at it. "Is this real?" He covered it with his hand.

"It's real, Rodney," John said, sitting down next to him. He picked up another box and handed it to Jack.

Jack turned to Teyla and made the same speech. When he was done he pinned it on her and, as she touched it in wonder, he did the same for Ronon.

"This is a big deal, huh?" Ronon asked, his eyes on Rodney who was still in shock.
Rodney just nodded.

"Cool," Ronon said. He pointed at the last box, and asked, "What's that one. Is that one for Daniel?"

Jack shook his head. "No, Daniel has one of these already. A couple of them, actually," he admitted proudly, looking up at Daniel.

Daniel waved him off. "Give that one."

"I'm letting John give that one," Jack said.

John picked it up and opened it toward Rodney.

Rodney thought he was going to have a stroke. "That's a Meritorious Service Cross," he gasped.

"Yeah, it is," John said. "And it's yours. Straight from the Canadian Governor General to you. And for those of you who don't know what it's for," he explained, with a look at Ronon and Teyla, "it's to recognize outstanding performance that brings major benefit or honor to Canada." He picked it up out of its box and pinned it next to the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"I don't believe it," Rodney said, filled with a confusing mix of vindication and humility. It made it hard to breathe. He touched the Canadian one; the United States award was astonishing, but to receive one from his own country was truly…Rodney didn't even have a word.

He'd always expected to win awards and accolades, a Nobel Prize among them, but now that he was actually getting them, it felt different than what he expected. Better, in some ways, but they also seemed to come laden with expectations that he not stop now, that he do more and better. Not that Rodney hadn't intended to, but he felt the weight of the honor. It was important. Significant.

"He's totally speechless," John said with a grin.

"I've never heard him be quiet this long," Ronon observed.

Normally, Rodney would have a thousand cutting words at his disposal, but they all deserted him. He just couldn't sully this moment with chatter. He took a swallow of his beer and smiled apologetically at everyone.

John put his arm around Rodney's shoulder and pulled him in for a hug. "You deserve all this and more," he said softly in Rodney's ear.

To his dismay, Rodney felt a sting of tears and did his best to blink them away before anyone noticed.

Thankfully, Jack took all the attention by saying, "There're letters that go with the medals." He pulled out envelopes and handed them to Teyla, Ronon, and two to Rodney. "They say the usual thing, thanks from a grateful nation, thanks for all your hard work, yadda yadda yadda." He leaned back, smiling at them all, slinging his arm around Daniel's shoulder.


Just as Daniel had, Jack waved his words off. "You guys deserve the recognition. All four of you."

Rodney touched the medals again.

"You gonna sleep with those?" John teased.
Rodney thought he just might.

A week later, Jack and Daniel, sans their menagerie, came over for dinner. Jack made a point of saying hello to Warner and Tiger.

"Hey, hey," Rodney said, prodding Warner with his foot. "Leave her alone."

"He's just licking her face," John protested.

"Right," Rodney said untrustingly. "First it's licking, then it's…more," he finished weakly.

Jack snickered. "Makes me glad I don't have any teenage daughters." He shuddered at the thought.

Loyally, Daniel said, "You'd have been a great dad."

"Yeah," Jack said, miming loading a shotgun and pointing it at some luckless Romeo. "If I'd had a daughter she'd have had to wait until she was thirty to date." He felt a pang thinking of Charlie, but with Daniel at his side and his new life, the venom was finally, after all these years, leaching out of the wound.

"Stop it," Rodney snapped, moving down to the floor and putting his arms around Tiger protectively, glaring at Warner who had started licking her again.

"Tigers lick," Daniel said. "It's what they do. They're always licking each other."

"I don't care," Rodney said. "He can go lick another tiger and leave Tiger alone."

"But he wants to lick her," John said. "They're in love," he said in sing-song fashion, crossing his eyes.

"Oh, please, he's totally driven by his hormones," Rodney said disgustedly. "Any port in the storm would do."


"They actually mate for life," Daniel said.

"Like wolves," Jack said.

"Or black vultures," Daniel added.

Jack shot him a look. "Black vultures?"

Daniel nodded.

"How do you know that?" Jack asked. "How do you fit all that useless knowledge in that brain of yours and still manage to walk and talk?"

"It's not useless knowledge," Daniel protested.

"What?" Jack asked. "So somehow knowing black vultures mate for life is going to come in handy?"

"It's coming in handy right now," Daniel said primly.

Jack snorted at him.
"As I was saying," Daniel said, narrowing his eyes at Jack, "the zoologists have found a huge database on the tigers in the tiger lab and found that they apparently mate for life."

Rodney looked at Warner, horrified, and hugged Tiger more tightly. "All the more reason for Warner to go find himself some floozie that fits his temperament better. Like father like son."

"Hey," John griped. "I'm not a floozie. I'm here with you, aren't I?"


John rolled his eyes.

"Tiger needs a mature tiger, someone older, wiser," Rodney began.

"Someone with a Ph.D. in astrophysics, tiger style?" John asked.

Rodney glared at John, glared at Warner, and got up to finish his breakfast.

Six months later

Rodney put his hand over the sensor and let himself into his and John's home. The thought still made him grin even after all these months. "Hey," he said to the two tigers lounging out on the patio, catching the day's last rays.

Warner didn't deign to get up, just sort of flicked his ears in Rodney's direction, but Tiger got up and bounced in to greet him, butting up against him, and then, as usual, rearing up on her hind legs to give him a tiger hug.

"Jesus, you're heavy," Rodney complained, as he staggered under her weight. Not that he'd stop her; he liked that she did this. He especially liked it when she draped herself over him from the back when he was in an argument with someone. It was amazing what a small growl from her would do to make someone agree with him.

She dropped to the ground and rolled over, exposing her belly. Rodney hunkered down and rubbed her stomach. "Huh," he said under his breath, noticing that her nipples seemed more pronounced. An annoying thought occurring to him, he felt her belly, feeling an unaccustomed roundness. He shot to his feet and pointed an angry finger at Warner. "You knocked up my little girl," he yelled.

Warner sat up, looking entirely too proud of himself.

John chose that moment to walk in. "What's up?" He gave Rodney a kiss on the check and then took a step back as Warner rammed into him with his enthusiastic greeting.

"Oh, sure," Rodney griped. "He barely flicked an ear at me." Then, remembering, he yelled indignantly, "and your damn tiger's gotten my tiger pregnant!"

John grinned down at Warner and patted him on the head. "Atta boy," he said.

"Atta boy?" Rodney yelped incredulously. "Atta boy? That's all you've got to say?"

John shrugged. "What do you want me to do? Get a shotgun? She's old enough, Rodney, Carson said so. And we know they're a couple. It's not like it was a one-night-stand."

"But, but," Rodney stammered, "she's…it's not…he's…" Through a narrow-eyed glare, he finished, "He's clearly got your genes."
Snickering, John pushed past him to enter the kitchen, opening up the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of Athosian ale, holding another one up in question for Rodney.

"No," Rodney snapped. "And how you can think of drinking when it's your own steptiger who's pregnant is beyond me."

"Rodney," John said placatingly as he put his ale down. He moved back into the living room and put his arms around Rodney, who did his best not to succumb to John's charms. The man was like a damn succubus with his wiles and his touching. "Think of it this way," John said. "We're gonna be grandparents." His hand caressed Rodney's back in long strokes.

Rodney's eyes closed involuntarily.

"Besides, Tiger looks pretty happy about it," John added.

Rodney opened his eyes to find Warner and Tiger laying very cozily together half in and half out of the sunshine. "Hussy," he scolded her.

John started to laugh and hugged Rodney tighter. "You and me, Rodney, grandparents. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Rodney pulled back from John just enough to see his face clearly. "Seriously? I find most of this hard to believe."

"What do you mean?" John asked.

"You mean besides the fact that we're living in the lost city of Atlantis in another galaxy?" Rodney asked.

"Yeah," John said with a grin. "Besides that."

John's hand started stroking again and Rodney had to force himself to concentrate. "You and me, together, living here, with best friends next door that include someone foolishly committed to the soft sciences and an ex-general. That's what I find hard to believe."

"And all because I gave you a cat," John said smugly.

Rodney stared at him, prepared to give him shit for his ridiculous self-proclamation, but then he thought about it. Frowning, he said, "Daniel was already here, and Jack didn't come here because of the cat."

"Maybe not," John conceded, "but you and me was because of the cat. Your alien cat with her blood sucking tendrils," he teased.

Rodney scowled. "She could have had them," he defended himself.

John pulled him back in, resting his chin on Rodney's shoulder. "Just admit it, Rodney. I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."
Rodney wanted so much to argue the fact, but he just couldn't argue with the truth.

Epilogue:

The End!!!

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