Regions of Darkness and Light

by puddleofgoo

Summary

After a particularly disastrous mission for Sheppard and McKay, the two are forced onto medical leave and into an even more volatile situation as word of Atlantis is leaked to the media. Forced into the limelight and onto the television sets of millions worldwide, Sheppard and McKay discover there is more to the announcement that meets the eye.

Chapter 1

A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam’d, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv’d only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all; but torture without end
—John Milton, Paradise Lost

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She leaned in, lips brushing his ear as she whispered words to him. Promises. Terrible promises.

He’d refused to help her, refused to make her a weapon that would wipe out her greatest enemy. The fists had hurt, pounding into his flesh, leaving horrible marks and bruises.

He didn’t believe her, didn’t believe she’d do the things she told him, her tone just like a lover’s—deep and dirty and full of promises yet to be fulfilled.

But they were just words, simply words. What harm could words do to him?

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John Sheppard, Lieutenant Colonel in the USAF and military commander of the lost city of Atlantis in the Pegasus galaxy collapsed onto an uncomfortable, cheap motel bed and turned on the television, flipping through the channels. Finding nothing after three rounds John tossed the remote down beside him on the bed and sighed, loudly. He stared at the ceiling, irritated.

Elizabeth and Carson had conspired to do this to him. Well, him and McKay. After the last few months…

It was like everything that could go wrong, had. Being chased by natives. Captured. Various injuries. And that was just off-world. In the city, they had had explosions, a few deaths, an attempted invasion…

It wasn’t like it was anything new. Just another month in Atlantis.

But Carson and Elizabeth had decided that he and McKay needed a break, since neither of them was inclined to take leave on their own. There was just too much to do. Along with the SGC, they had been bamboozled, and practically tossed through the gate for some "well-deserved rest".

Fuck that. What was he supposed to do for two weeks on Earth?

Sighing, John just stared at the cheap hotel ceiling, the first place he had found when he’d left the
mountain. This sucked.

The ringing of his cell phone just added to his irritation. It was his leash. He was supposed to take time off, but the SGC wanted him to be available at a moment's notice.

Rolling over, John snagged it from the bedside table. He fought to keep his voice even when he answered. "Sheppard."

"Starbucks and McDonald's have twenty-four hour drive thrus." McKay. Hyped up on sugar and caffeine and junk food.

John wondered when the most irritating man in two galaxies had become the one thing that could make him grin, his tense muscles relaxing immediately. "How many cups of coffee have you had today?"

There was a long pause and the sound of shuffling paper. "Before or after lunch?"

"Where are you?" John toed off his shoes, laying back on the bed again.

"Um…” Rodney started and John swore he heard the sound of a car horn. "Not on base. They wouldn't let me stay." He sounded disappointed.

Raising an eyebrow, John shook his head. "Yeah, me neither. I'm at the Motel 6 a mile from base. It's kind of shitty."

"Motel 6?" McKay sounded scandalized. "What are you doing in that dump?" There was another honk of a car horn and the sound of screeching tires.

"Absolutely nothing. It was the first hotel I found when I left the mountain." John sighed.

"So you're spending your leave at a shitty hotel in the middle of a neighborhood that you most likely will get mugged and raped and pillaged by just stepping out of your room? That's just… insane. Do you have a death wish again? What did Kate tell you about tempting fate?" McKay talked fast, the words washing over him, sentences punctuated with the sound of rustling paper, car horns, and the thump-thump of car tires on pavement.

Smirking, John shrugged, even though McKay couldn't see him. "Don't have anywhere else to be."

"You need to eat."

"I will. Eventually. I think there's a snack bar in the lobby."

"A snack bar?" McKay's voice had arched into the higher-pitched range. "A vending machine with foods six months past their freshness date is not a snack bar!"

"I think I saw Fritos."

There was a loud screech of tires and a thump. John swore he heard McKay cursing then the sound of fumbling before the scientist was back on the phone again. "People need to learn how to drive. Canadians are at least civilized and they don't honk just because they feel like it!" John could almost picture McKay hanging out the window and yelling at whatever car and driver who had wronged him.

Shuddering a little, John decided he would avoid being in a car with McKay behind the wheel at all costs. "How many lanes have you jumped?"
"Why do you always assume it's my fault?" McKay asked instead of answering. Yeah, he'd jumped multiple lanes.

"Because if you drive a car like you do a jumper...." Shaking his head, John lifted a foot to examine his sock, wiggling a toe.

"For your information, Colonel, I have a clean driving record. No accidents. No tickets. No nothing. It's your statesmen that don't know how to drive." There was a loud slurp and then he was talking again. "There should be a law against drivers honking their horns for no good reason. It disturbs the peace."

"Uh huh. Sure, McKay. Whatever you say." Winding the scientist up was one of John's favorite hobbies. It was sad that this conversation was going to be the highlight of his leave.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

He changed the subject. "So what are you going to do on our exciting two-week leave?"

McKay didn't even blink, it seemed, heading off on a new rant about Colonel Carter and his restricted access to the labs and the SGC as a whole. There was something about the Stargate project scientists and the loss of his genius on all of mankind in there, too. John had kind of tuned him out, "uh huhing" when he needed to just to keep McKay going. It was the one hard, finely tuned question that finally got him listening again.

"And you call this a good hotel?"

"What?" John blinked, tearing himself away from the sad contemplation of his sock. He was pretty sure the threads were getting a little thin around the big toe.

"This place is like one step from falling down around your ears. What room are you in?"

Sitting up, John raised an eyebrow. He walked to the door, opening it and peering out. "You're not really here, are you? I thought you were headed...somewhere more interesting than Motel 6."

"As you well know, without access to a lab I have nothing to do," McKay said disdainfully and John swore he heard him in stereo—over the phone and from around the corner of the motel. "The world is losing the scope of my genius because of this idiotic forced vacation."

Easing out, John glanced around. "Yeah, but just because I have no where to go but a crappy hotel... You can at least go see your sister or something."

McKay snorted, the sound getting louder. "As if I want to be forced to eat Tofurky for two weeks."

Blinking, John still couldn't believe it when McKay rounded a corner. "Um."

His arms were full of McDonald's bags and take-out cup containers. John was impressed with McKay's ability to juggle all that food as well as various cups of soda and coffee, the phone, and a small overnight bag. "There you are. The idiotic girl at the desk was no help whatsoever. You know you could help me here. I'm liable to pull a muscle in my back because of the horrible position I'm forced to hold while I try not to drop anything."

Blinking again, John snapped his phone shut and stuffed it in a pocket, taking an armful of food bags. "What is all this?" He stole a fry off the top of one of the bags. Yum.

McKay rolled his eyes, shoving a cup tray into John's arms and splashing soda on his wrist. "What
does it look like? Food. I swear several people were peering out of their rooms as I was passing by. I think they want it. We should go inside." He shoved past John a beat later.

John was pretty sure he looked stupid, standing outside the door with an armful of fast food. But he was used to Hurricane McKay, so he recovered fairly quickly and followed the physicist inside, dumping his armful on the small dresser.

McKay's stuff was already littered across the room and he was scowling at the small bathroom. "They actually still make stuff in this color?"

Shrugging, John snagged a Big Mac, coke, and large fry from the pile and sprawled across the bed with it. "I haven't gone in there yet. Bad?"

"It's puke green. Everything is. I guess it's to hide the stains when the occupants pass out next to the bowl."

"Great imagery there. I'm trying to eat."

"You're the one who picked the hotel."

"I wouldn't say picked so much as it was the first one I hit when I left the base."

McKay snorted and strode into the main part of the hotel room, dropping down heavily on the bed. "Oh god! How do you expect me to sleep on this mattress? I knew I should have picked the hotel and you should have gotten the food."

It took a few beats for that to process. "Wait…what?"

The scientist rolled his eyes, reaching for the McDonald's bag and pulling out his own Big Mac and large fries. "I know you're not deaf. I'm not repeating myself."

He thought about protesting. But at least with McKay around he wouldn't be bored. So John smirked instead.

"We are not staying here," McKay said a few beats later around his first bite of his Big Mac, a few stray onions flying into the air along with his words. "One of your neighbors will break in and kill us in our sleep for the fries."

"Or, you know, they could just go down the street to McDonalds and get their own."

"If they're staying here they are either running from the law, broke, or high. What do you think the probability is of them actually going to purchase their own food?"

Shrugging, John examined a fry before eating it in three neat bites. "We could mess with them. Lay out a trail of fries that just runs in circles or something."

"Oh, yes, and end up strung up in the puke-green bathroom, because you know that's how it would end," McKay glowered at him, his expression darkening as he shifted uneasily on the bed, turning away.

John shrugged again. "I'm not married to this place. If you have a better idea, I'm game. I've spent all of about forty-eight hours total in this city, I have no idea what's around."

"Anything is better than this."

"So I'll check out and we'll go somewhere else. I'll follow you."
McKay shivered slightly in the warm room, shoving the last piece of hamburger in his mouth. He chewed for a minute, his eyes flickering around the room. Yeah, he was more jumpy than normal. Beckett was probably right about McKay needing a break. "Can we go now? I can feel the bugs crawling on the bed."

John finished his own burger in a few bites before standing up. "Sure. I'll go check out. Be right back."

The scientist was on his feet a second later, already grabbing his bag and the food. "I'll come with you."

"Okay." John didn't actually have a bag, so he just patted his pocket to make sure the phone was there, and grabbed the keys to his rental car.

McKay followed behind him, clutching the food to his chest and glaring at every window as they passed. John had to admit, it was a little creepy with everyone peering out at them as they walked past.

"Okay, I see your point with the fries." He shrugged. "But I promise, if anyone tries to jump us for them, I'll beat them down for you."

"With what? Your phone?"

John shot him an amused look. "I was thinking I could use one of the burgers and my shoe."

"You are not using the food," McKay said with a scowl. "Do you know how much it costs now for one of those?"

As they walked into the lobby, John smirked. "I think you can afford a Big Mac, McKay."

"You buy the food next time and then you can talk about what I can and cannot afford."

"I know you make more than me, even with hazard pay factored in."

"Oh, so now we're onto the 'who makes more money than who' argument. I figured that would wait until we were in the car."

John rolled his eyes. "I really don't care how much you make, McKay. I was just pointing out that I was pretty sure you could afford a Big Mac."

"Have you seen the price of a Big Mac?"

Shaking his head at the round-about conversation, John walked up to the clerk at the front desk. "Hi, I know I said I'd be here for two weeks, but apparently my plans have changed." He smiled at her, sliding the key across the desk.

She looked up from her National Enquirer magazine, snapping her gum. "What room?"

He blanked for a minute, then glanced at the key. "108."

Snapping her gum again, she turned to the computer, her long fake nails tapping at the keys. "You checked in two hours ago," she said, her eyes sliding past him to McKay and back.

He rolled his eyes—he knew exactly what she was thinking. "I didn't know my friend was going to come by, or that he would decide I can't stay here. Sorry."
"He decided?"

John wondered why she cared. He shrugged. "Apparently hanging out in a hotel right next to base on my leave isn't his idea of a vacation. So he's taken it upon himself to force me to do something."

Her eyes flicked back over to McKay who was hovering at the door to the main office, peering out the window. "I'll have your cancellation completed in a few minutes. We'll have to charge you for the time you were here."

He nodded. "That's fine. I figured as much."

"If it was just you I could have probably given you a discount."

"Just me? Oh—he didn't stay there. He came in with food because I admitted I was going to have dinner from the vending machine tonight, and then decided I should stay somewhere else. Since I don't have anything better to do, I'm going along with it."

"Course he did." The tapping on the computer keys continued.

John rolled his eyes. There was no way he was going to convince her otherwise, he knew. "Whatever."

McKay picked that moment to approach. "Aren't you finished yet? How long does it take you to check out of this fleabag hotel?"

"McKay..." John shot him a warning look. "The nice receptionist has to process the cancellation paperwork. Just hold your horses."

He glanced over the desk, narrowing his eyes at the girl. He snorted, rolling his eyes. "I guess it's better that she's doing work than the guy that was in here before."

With a sigh, John decided there was no way to stop the train wreck coming. He put on his best 'placate the natives' smile. "Don't mind him. He's cranky when they kick him out of his lab."

She looked at John evenly, ignoring McKay. "You should have taken a little longer with the room."

"I didn't know I'd be having company, or that said company would demand I go to another hotel." John shrugged again. "I can pay for the whole day—it's fine."

"If you'd taken longer maybe he wouldn't be so wound up," she said, her voice changing a little until it felt like she'd hit him over the head.

"Taken longer? What are you babbling about? How long does it take to pay for a few hours in a hotel room?" McKay demanded, leaning over the counter and pointing to the computer screen. "What does it say there? How much is it?"

John felt a little sick. This close to base, assumptions like that could tank his career, true or not. "Look, ma'am, I think you've gotten the wrong impression here. We're teammates, not...anything else. He's my friend."

McKay turned to John, exasperation and annoyance on his face. "And what the hell are you talking about? Can we just pay and get out of here?"

"Not helping, McKay." John sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.
"Help what? Do you need cash, is that the problem?" He shifted the bags onto the counter, a few fries spilling over the edge to land on some papers down below, leaving a greasy trail. He dug into a pocket and pulled out a fifty. "Here. Does this cover it? Can we go, please? I can feel a rash coming on."

John fought down the urge to strangle him. "No, I don't need cash. I've got it. Christ, she thinks I rented to room to have gay sex with you. Since I happen to like my job, I'd like to clear up that little misunderstanding if it's all the same to you."

McKay blinked for a minute, looking at John as he processed the comment. "Oh. Is that what this crisis is all about? What does it matter? You're never coming back to his flea-trap ever again. Come on. Let's go. I can call on the way to make a new reservation."

John leaned over and banged his head against the counter a few times, but he pulled out his wallet and handed over a few bills. "I'm going to kill you. Forget being murdered for your fries, I'll beat them to it."

The gum snapping woman simply handed the money back to him. "Your boyfriend's bill covered it. I'm printing your receipt now."

"He's not my boyfriend!" John glared at McKay, thrusting out a $50. "You're not paying for my fucking hotel room."

McKay shifted away, ignoring John's outstretched hand. "I told you before. You can pay for food next."

"Hell. This is hell." John sighed, signing his name to the receipt. But he had to admit, even irritated, this was more entertainment than he'd had since he got back to Earth.

"Are you done? How long does it take you to sign your name? You do know how to sign your name, right? That last blow to the head didn't knock anything loose, did it? Just make a big 'X' and let's get out of here." He was back at the door, peering around outside. "I swear they can smell the fries."

Despite himself, John's lips twitched. He shrugged, got his copy, and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's get out of here before the slavering horde come beating down the doors for your French fries."

"They might," he said with a sniff, clutching the bag to his chest.

Pulling his keys out of his pocket, John started for his rental. "Since I have no clue what else is around here, I'll just follow you. I'm assuming since you dragged me out of my hotel, you have somewhere else in mind?"

"Hmm…what?" McKay asked, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk as he turned to look at John.

John dangled the keys, making them jingle together. "You drove here right? And I have a rental from the base. So I'll just follow you to wherever it is we're going."

"Oh, yes yes yes. The car. It's over here somewhere," McKay said, swinging around again, his eyes scanning the parking lot.

Smirking, John leaned against the wall. "You just holler when you figure out which one is yours."

John actually figured it was the one parked half in and half out of a spot, all crooked across the
way. When the scientist finally spotted it and started walking to the car John had picked out he
gave himself a mental cheer. "There it is," McKay said. "I'll call and see what's available. Just
follow me."

"Just don't crash. I've had enough of pulling you out of burning wreckage." He said it quiet
enough that he wouldn't upset the other man.

"I know how to drive," McKay yelled across the parking lot, apparently only hearing the first part
which was what John wanted. He was shoving himself in the small car—which had managed to
take up nearly three spots—a moment later. "What are you waiting for?" he asked a moment later,
leaning out the door to yell at John again.

Smirking at him, John took his time sauntering to his own rental, a boring grey sedan.

He followed Rodney's small bright red car easily as he weaved through traffic, almost leaving a
trail of wreckage and carnage behind him.

By the time they pulled up to a Hilton—he privately admitted it was a hell of a lot nicer than Motel
6, not that he'd tell McKay that—John's jaw ached from clenching it so hard. It was a good thing
he was a pilot, used to quick maneuvers. And yeah, never, ever getting in a car with Rodney
McKay behind the wheel. Ever.

McKay was on the phone, arguing with someone as he one-handedly pulled a suitcase from the
trunk of the car. "...been through his with Wanda...Willma...Westly...whatever the hell his name
was. Two rooms. What's so difficult about that?"

John raised an eyebrow at the suitcase and stuffed his hands in his pockets. All he'd had was the
change of civies he had left in his SGC locker. Idly, John wondered where McKay kept all this
stuff when he was on Atlantis—John would have noticed if he had hauled it all through the gate.

The scientist sighed explosively into the phone. "You know, I really don't care that there's a
conference and you're booked solid. I know you can find me something. Don't make me call
Herman. I'm sure you remember what happened the last time I had to do that."

Herman? John mouthed it at McKay, giving him a questioning look.

John found himself ignored as they walked toward the hotel entrance. "Yes, I'm glad you're finally
seeing it my way. Yes, a two bedroom suite would be perfect. Two weeks, yes."

His eyebrow felt like a permanent part of his hairline. Okay, so apparently they were spending
their entire leave together. Not that John objected, it was far more interesting that spending two
weeks looking at his socks, but he wondered when exactly he had lost control of the situation.

"Good. You have my card on file. I'll pick up the keys at the desk in five minutes."

"Stayed here before?" John rolled his eyes as several bags of food were shoved into his arms.

"Several times. I only stay at Hilton properties. They annoy me less than the other ones," McKay
said, snapping the phone closed and shoving it into his pocket. "Where's your suitcase? Don't tell
me you left it at the flea-trap across town."

He shrugged as best he could with his arms full. "Don't have one. I figured when I needed clean
clothes, I'd go find a K-Mart or something."

"You have got to be kidding me," McKay said, stopping in the middle of the parking lot. "How
can you not have clothes? Where did those come from?"
"My locker. I leave a set on base when we leave."

"And where are the rest of your clothes?" Each word was enunciated carefully.

"Don't have any." John shrugged again. "The few personal belongings I have are all back home."

"Home being...?"

This time it was John who gave Rodney the "Are You Really That Stupid" look. "Where do you think? Where do we live 99 percent of the time?"

"Why did you leave everything on Atlantis?" McKay asked, well technically—and given the decibel volume—shouted.

John stepped forward and slapped a hand over McKay's mouth. "Hello? Ever hear of 'classified'? And I didn't bring it because it's pretty much all uniforms. I leave one pair of jeans there, and one here. What's the big deal? I'll just go to the store and grab something when I need it."

McKay narrowed his eyes at John, waiting for him to remove his hand. When John finally did, the scientist was scowling. "Well, I'm sorry for trying to make your vacation a little nicer. Why don't you just go back to the flea-bag motel if you don't want to stay here?"

Sighing, John felt himself deflate. "Sorry. You're right, this is a lot nicer. I just... I don't have anything here, okay? It's a little unsettling if you want me to be honest about it."

"Why didn't you just leave a bag at the SGC?" McKay asked, his volume—thankfully—much lower. "That's what I did."

He shrugged, shifting the food to his other arm. "Nothing really to leave. I brought everything I wanted with me, and gave the rest to charity. I haven't been back here enough to make it worth replacing."

"Are you telling me that we have to drop my stuff in the room and then go shopping? Do you even have clean underwear?"

John flushed slightly. "I had planned to just wash them in the sink when I needed to."

McKay's eyes opened wide and he sputtered for a few moments before finding his voice. "You're kidding. Please, god, tell me you're kidding. Please, do not tell me that my team leader is an idiot!"

He felt his cheeks get a little hotter. "I didn't really plan this well, I admit. But in my defense, I didn't really think I would be taking leave until I was pretty much shoved through the Gate. I planned to get out of it, so I didn't bother packing anything."

"Get out of it? Get out of it?" McKay's volume was rising again. "How did you expect to get out of it? If we didn't leave they would have thrown us out on our asses for a month!"

With a sigh, John snagged a fry from the top bag. "I guess I hoped they were bluffing."

McKay scowled—John wasn't sure if it was because of the stolen fry or something else—and quieted. "After everything, I knew they weren't."

"I probably did, too. But you know what they say about denial..."

"That's it's not just a river in Egypt?"
"Exactly." John grinned a little. "So where's a good place to get a pair of jeans and some clean underwear around here? Is there a gift shop?"

"Yes, there's a gift shop, but you'll be going to the mall. Real stores. I refuse to spend my vacation with someone who has 'Pike's Peak' emblazoned across his chest."

Chucking, John shrugged. "Okay. I haven't been shopping for clothes in a long time. I've been wearing uniforms most of my adult life."

McKay shook his head, turning to walk to the hotel once again. The check-in process was relatively painless for him. For the receptionist…not so much. After Hurricane McKay blew through, they were on their way to the suite ten minutes later, the scientists ranting about the incompetence of the current hotel staff. John wouldn't be surprised if the bellman took a bribe from reception to kill McKay.

He wandered around, letting his teammate's words wash over him. Nice place. A hell of a lot nicer than Motel 6.

McKay let them into a room, a suite…a huge suite. He huffed as he dropped his bag in the middle of the floor and left the now very wrinkled and cold McDonalds on the coffee-table before poking around the entire suite. He opened closets, drawers, doors, checked all the taps, the beds, chairs…

John wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he wasn't complaining. He grabbed a few more fries, and checked out what he decided would be his room.

The room was furnished tastefully. There was a king-sized bed and the large window overlooked the mountains. McKay breezed in a moment later, throwing himself on the bed. "Not bad. I think the other one's better for my back, though."

"The beds are exactly the same. You just want this one because I do."

"No they're not," McKay scowled up at John. "You haven't checked either of them. You can have this lumpy mess of a bed. If I were you, I'd complain to reception."

John grinned at him. "I'll be okay. Check out the view."

"Don't complain to me if you can't walk in the morning," he grumped, following John to the window. He looked for a second before backing away. "Oh, god. I think I might get a nosebleed."

Taking a deep breath, John put his forehead on the glass, angling himself so it was as if there was nothing between him and the open sky. "Think there's a carnival anywhere nearby? That would be cool."

"You want to go to one of those deathtraps? Have you ever seen the list of violations those things have?"

"I like Ferris wheels."

"And Ascended women. And anything that goes faster than 200 mph." He huffed and headed for the door. "I'm going to unpack and then I can drive us to the mall so you can get clean underwear."

Straightening, John followed him out. "Come on, I'd buy you cotton candy. And corn dogs. And those fried dough things."

McKay turned around at that, eyeing John. "With the strawberry sauce, too?"
"Of course." John made an X over his heart. "I promise. It will be awesome."

The scientist rolled his eyes as he picked up his suitcase and headed into the other room—the larger bedroom. No surprise there. "What are you a twelve-year-old girl? Are you going to make me pinky swear, too?"

John flopped onto the bed. "Would it help?"

He had to laugh at the sheer horror in McKay's expression.

Feeling suddenly more relaxed than he could remember being in a long time, John put his hands behind his head, grinning at the ceiling.

McKay moved around the room, slamming drawers and clanking hangers. It was comforting in a strange way. Normal.

"So other than shopping for underwear and finding a carnival, what did you have in mind for the next couple of weeks?"

McKay was silent for a long moment and John wasn't sure he was going to answer. He turned his head, watching as the scientist dumped his boxers into one of the dresser drawers. "Besides sneaking into the SGC?"

Huffing, he rolled his eyes. "So in other words, you're not much better than I am. All right, we'll grab every brochure the hotel has to offer, and pick some things that sound interesting."

"Working in the lab sounded interesting," McKay grumbled. A few pairs of sad-looking dingy socks were shoved into another drawer.

John wrinkled his nose. "Okay, you gave me a hard time about the clothes, but those things you just shoved in a drawer look like they deserve a burial at sea or something."

"I at least own another pair of socks."

"Touche."

They settled into an easy silence as McKay finished unpacking. He finally sat gingerly on the edge of the bed—his body all tense and keyed up. "So…as much as I'm actually dreading walking through the local mall—it's worse than fighting the Wraith, I swear—are you ready to go? Or did you want to do something else? Maybe dinner? A movie?"

"Sure. We can do all three even." Standing, John stretched, several kinks in his back popping. "We should see if this hotel has a spa."

"They do," McKay said absently, watching John. "Inga is great. So's Sven."

That was interesting. John wasn't sure how to classify the expression on McKay's face, so he chose to ignore it for now. "I could go for a massage in the worst way. I vote we put that on the list, too."

He nodded. His eyes were still on John, but he didn't actually seem to be seeing him. "Sure. Make a list."

Curious, John stretched again. Glancing down to see if maybe he had a stain or something that showed when he raised his arms above his head.
McKay didn't bat an eye.

"Um, you okay there, buddy?"

"Mmm…what?" McKay asked, physically shaking himself as he turned, eyes focusing on John. "I thought we were going."

John gave him a weird look, but shrugged it off. "Yeah. Let's head out."

"I have to find my keys," Rodney said, all nervous energy once again as he bounded off the bed in search of the elusive item.

John spotted them on the dresser, and pocketed them. No way in Hell was he letting Rodney drive anywhere. Wandering out, he made sure his own keys were in his pocket as well. "If you can't find yours, I can drive."

McKay glanced up from where he was digging through the couch cushions, his hair standing up on end in places. "No, why? You could barely keep up with me on the way here you were driving so slow, like your grandmother's grandmother. Besides, you'll just get us lost."

"Okay one: I don't drive like a grandmother, I drive like a normal person. And two: your driving scares the shit out of me—and I'm a test pilot used to pulling crazy maneuvers."

The scientist gave him one of his patented "you have got to be kidding me, I really do work with idiots" looks. "There is a vast difference from flying a puddlejumper—that can read your mind—and driving a car and you can't do the latter. Come on, give me the keys," he said stepping forward, grabby hand extended, demanding John's keys.

"Um, hello, before Jumpers, I was flying helicopters and fighter jets. And I'm invoking Team Leader privilege—I'm driving."

"You are not. You don't even know where you're going," McKay argued, following John as he headed out the door and into the elevator. "Give me the keys."

"No. You can navigate, but I'm driving."

"Who gave you the right to run right over my opinions like they didn't even exist?" McKay asked, eyes wide and his hands waving.

"I'm not running all over your opinions, stop being such a drama queen." John rolled his eyes. "I just fear for my life with you behind the wheel."

John tried not to laugh when McKay crossed his arms over his chest and started pouting. "I am not a drama queen and as I said before I'm one of the safest drivers I know. No accidents. No issues. No problems."

"That's because you leave a trail of wreckage in your wake. You're the one always saying I need to take more of an active interest in my own safety—that's what I'm doing. I'm driving."

McKay pouted some more, but then raced to catch up with John when he left him in the elevator, walking purposely to the parking lot. "And so you've decided to put my life at risk instead when you end up driving three miles an hour! I can walk faster than you drive."

"Everyone who has a pilot's license raise their hands." John put his up. "Everyone who's been trained to fly multi-million dollar fighter jets, raise their hand." John waved his.
The scientist scowled. "That's out of context and unfair."

"It's totally applicable. I'm trained to drive fast vehicles safely. You're not." John slipped behind the steering wheel of his rental and raised his eyebrow. "Are you coming?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Nope." Smirking, John started the car.

McKay wrenched the passenger door open and dropped into the seat, huffing and puffing and complaining. "This is so unfair. Why did I decide to agree to this vacation with you?"

Chuckling, John decided not to point out that McKay had more or less hijacked John's vacation—not that he was complaining. "Because you want to use me to attract women?"

"Oh, please," McKay said, rolling his eyes. "As if. I have no problems attracting beautiful women. I don't need you. Besides, with your Kirk personality you're liable to take them all for yourself."

"What is it with you and Kirk? I haven't gotten laid in like two years."

"So you claim. I know better." Rodney's finger was pointing and waving.

"How the hell can you know how much sex I'm having?"

McKay actually fidgeted in his seat, looking out the window. "I have sources…ways." He was quiet for a moment before turning back to John. He looked…put out in a way. "I think it is so unfair that you don't see it coming and yet you can still get laid several times a month! From alien priestesses to scientists to…to…Ascended woman! It's not fair."

John gave him an incredulous look. "Okay, your 'sources' are incredibly wrong if they think I'm enjoying that much female company."

"They're not wrong."

"Yes, they are. McKay, I haven't anyone but my own ten fingers touch certain parts of my anatomy in a long time."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better," McKay grumbled, looking out the window. John sighed and put the car in gear, backing out of the spot.

"Believe me, I wish that were true. I miss sex."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," he mumbled. "I want coffee."

"Which way to the closest Starbucks?" John made his way to the hotel entrance.

"Just drive to the mall, you'll pass three."

"Perfect. Which way to the mall?" John smirked at him.

"Oh." McKay shook himself, looking around. "Right and then another right at the light. Then straight on."

John slipped out into traffic, following the directions. He spotted a Starbucks fairly quickly and got them both lattes before they continued on their way.
The rest of the afternoon was…nice actually, much to John's surprise. The mall was pretty painless and he ended up with about a week's worth of clothes. They browsed through a few electronics stores, both coming out with iPods and a few other odds and ends, as well as some new DVDs and Nintendo DS game systems with a ton of games. John had gotten his in black, while Rodney had rolled his eyes and gone for classic silver.

They had a quiet meal at a local steak place… well, quiet for them. They debated the finer points of hockey versus football for most of it, each of them defending their favored sport. In the end they had to agree to disagree, although they both agreed that if they could find tickets, they would grudgingly give the other's sport a try.

As they headed back to the hotel, John was feeling pretty darn relaxed, more so than he thought he would. Which is why it took him by surprise when another car came around the corner, headlights on, and he suddenly flashed back, remembering…

The light was bright, blinding after the absolute darkness.

He ached all over, even his hair. Hanging from the restraints in the ceiling, his body bruised and bloody.

They were silent as they came in and after blinking rapidly in an effort to clear his eyes and adjust his vision, he finally saw the knives, the bats, the muscle-bound knee-breakers.

He knew what was coming next.

John jerked as he tumbled back into the present, back into the car in Colorado. He blinked several times trying to clear his thoughts, trying to convince his mind that it was only a memory, that it wasn't real, that the road outside the windshield was the reality. Fortunately, they had been at a stop light, so he didn't crash anything, and he snapped back before it turned green. He hoped McKay hadn't noticed his little slip.

He shot a quick look to the side and sighed in relief. The scientist—thankfully—had his face pressed against the glass of the window, eyes closed, dozing. He'd been rubbing his eyes a lot during the day and at dinner and John had caught a few badly-concealed yawns throughout the day.

The rest of the drive passed without incident, and John parked the car, reaching over to shake McKay awake. "Hey, buddy, we're back."

His touch more than his voice startled the scientist awake, jerking upright so fast John's neck hurt in sympathy for McKay's. With his hand wrapped around the back of his neck, he turned to John with a sheepish scowl. Only the Canadian could manage to look annoyed and embarrassed at the same time. "God…I swear something hit me. Are you sure we didn't get into an accident or something on the way home?"

Shaking his head, John pulled back to his side of the car. "I'm sure. Let's go upstairs—I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

"What? No, I'm fine," he said, fumbling with the seatbelt and more or less falling out of the car. "Uh huh. Sure you are. If you want to stay up that's your decision, but I'm taking a shower and hitting the sack. Don't turn the TV up too loud."

"I'll do whatever I want," McKay grumbled, rubbing his eyes again as they wandered into the hotel.
"Now who sounds like the twelve-year-old?" John rolled his eyes.

Apart from the roll of his eyes, McKay ignored John, stumbling into the elevator and collapsing against the side wall, letting John get the buttons.

The ride to the suite was silent, and once they were back inside, John went immediately into his room, dropping the bags on the dresser and pulling out a clean pair of boxers before heading to the shower.

Walking past the bedroom door on the way to his bathroom—there were two thank god—John spotted McKay on the couch in the living room, feet up on the table. The overhead lights were off and the blue-white light from the television created weird shapes and shadows on the scientist’s face. He was flipping through the channels, not staying on any station long enough to really see it.

With a shrug, John continued on his way. He took his time, enjoying the hot water, relaxing his muscles. He thought about jerking off, but felt weird about it with McKay in the next room, so he decided against it. Eventually, he made his way back out, feeling relaxed and sleepy.

The television was a quiet hum in the background—apparently McKay decided to be considerate—and when John slid in between the cool sheets it was close to perfect.

With a sigh, he let his body go, slipping into a deep sleep.

A loud bang at some unknown point later had John bolt upright in bed, heart pounding as his eyes tried to find some kind of purchase in the dark. The glow of the television was constant, spilling in from the main living room into his bedroom, the suite otherwise eerily silent.

His field instincts immediately kicked in. Moving slowly, John retrieved the knife he usually kept stuck in his boot, but he had taken off to shower. On silent feet, he moved into the main room.

The couch was empty, McKay no where in sight.

That just heightened his senses. Still moving slowly, John was scanning the area, alert for any movement, any sounds.

The television—showing nothing except snow—gave him more than enough light to see.

He continued to move through the suite, slipping into McKay's room after finding nothing amiss in the main area.

He just about stumbled and fell over the scientist, who was hunched in a ball on the floor of his bedroom. The desk chair was on its side next to him, the garbage pail spilled as well. As soon as John had touched him, he'd flailed his arms, nearly catching John in the chin with a hand.

Still on high alert, John continued to scan the area. "McKay! Are you all right?"

The scientist was panting hard, as if he'd just run a race. "You didn't have to sneak in here and scare me half to death," he said sharply, voice shaking belying his words.

"What happened? I heard a thump—it woke me up."

"Sorry sorry. I'm fine. Go back to bed." McKay clamored to his feet, stumbling when he took a step.

Catching his arm, John steadied Rodney before he took another dive. "Are you sure you're okay? What happened?"
"I'm fine," he insisted, pulling his arm from John's grasp. "Just go back to bed." He didn't sound fine, that was for sure. Kate had warned him that the Canadian was having a tough time of it.

John waited until the scientist had crawled into bed—it looked like he was just now making it in. Eyeing the bed by moonlight, he set his knife on the floor and then curled, like a cat, at the end of the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Sleeping."

McKay kicked out, but missed John entirely. "Go back to your own bed. I didn't fight for two rooms to have you sleeping in my room."

"Just for tonight." John rolled so he could look at McKay without getting kicked. "I won't be able to go back to sleep with you in another room now. I thought you were being attacked. I need to know you're okay."

"I'm fine. Just...please...just go." God. And now he sounded one step away from sobbing. What the hell was going on?

John sighed, his blood was still pumping, and he could still see Rodney, hurt, screaming.... "I... please let me stay?"

McKay didn't answer, instead curling up on his side, turned away from John. He was still shaking, but at least he wasn't physically trying to kick John out of the bed anymore.

The urge to climb over and wrap his arms around McKay hit John like a ton of bricks. He shook through it for a moment, forcing it back. Where the hell had that come from? Jesus.

Silence settled over them, only punctuated by a quietly shaky in-drawn breath or a small sniffle from the scientist. John listened, waiting for the other man to settle down, fall asleep, but from the tension radiating off him...

Sighing softly to himself, John rolled back off the bed, grabbing his knife. He moved to the main suite, curling in front of the door. It was a lot more uncomfortable, but if it would let McKay sleep...

McKay quiet footfalls followed a few minutes later, pausing a few feet away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to go back to sleep." John didn't turn around, just shifted on the floor. "I didn't want to keep you up all night."

"You can't sleep there."

"Why not?"

"You just can't. That's what beds are for."

"I'll be all right. I won't be able to sleep if I don't know you're safe anyway. At least here I can doze. Go back to bed, Rodney."

"No."

John rolled over onto his back so he could look up at the scientist. "Look, you don't want me in
bed with you—that's fine. I can sleep out here and be sure no one tries to sneak in. You scared the shit out of me a few minutes ago—I won't be able to sleep at all if I don't do this."

"You were sleeping perfectly fine before. Out like a light. Go do that again."

"That was before there was a thump in the middle of the night, and I found you curled up on the floor. Now... Well, I just can't okay? It's not a big deal. I'll be fine tomorrow."

"No, it's not fine. I tripped over the chair and fell. It happens. I don't need you camped out protecting me." Rodney's volume had gotten increasingly louder as he went on. "There's nothing to protect me from! I'm not some damsel in distress that you have to save from the evil clutches of Lord Farquaad. Just go to bed!" He turned on his heel suddenly, heading back to the bedroom and flicking on the overhead light. John heard drawers opening and slamming a minute later.

Sighing, John wished sometimes that he had a less high-strung best friend. It would make life easier. "What are you doing?"

"Packing. What does it sound like I'm doing?" McKay shot back, the words punctuated by another slam of a door.

John stood up, heading toward McKay's bedroom. "Don't pack. I'll go lie in my own bed. Just... Don't. Please?"

McKay turned to him as soon as he was standing in the door. God, the scientist looked horrible. The dark circles under his eyes stood out sharply against his pale skin, the eyes themselves red. His hands were paused above the smaller overnight bag he'd dragged in, shaking with something—fear, anger, something John couldn't make out. "I can't stay here. I... it was a bad idea. I'll find another place."

"Please." John chose to ignore the note of desperation in his own voice. He didn't know when spending his leave with Rodney had gone from just something he was doing to absolutely necessary, but now it was.

"Why?" he whispered, his voice sounding almost broken. "I can't do this. I can't."

"I... need you here. Please." John took a step forward, a few of his own carefully constructed masks falling. He didn't know what the hell he was doing; all he was sure of was that if Rodney left, John wasn't going to be able to cope with it.

"I can't sleep anymore," McKay said quietly. "I've tried. I can't. I keep waking up... keep seeing..." He turned away, his hands shaking even more than before.

John closed the last few steps between them, slowly reaching out to put a hand on McKay's shoulder. "Let me sleep on the end of your bed tonight. Maybe it will help."

"You were so peaceful... sleeping there," he said, not moving away from John's hand. "Watched you... envious."

John watched his own hand stroke up and down McKay's arm. It was surprisingly soothing. "Let's go to bed," he whispered.

"Don't you get it?" McKay asked, turning toward John, his expression wretched. "I can't sleep. I've tried." He was twisting one of his t-shirts in his hands, one of the ones that had almost been re-packed.

"But you've never tried my way." John gently pulled the shirt away, setting it on the dresser and
guiding his geek back to the bed. He reached over to click the bedside lamp back off, pressing Rodney down. "Roll over onto your stomach."

"Sheppard, what are you doing?" he asked, struggling against John's hands.

"Shh. Just lie back. Your back is full of knots. I'm going to try working them out, get you relaxed so you can try to sleep again."

"Sheppard, no, you don't have—"

"Rodney." John interrupted him. "You're my teammate, but more than that you're my friend. Let me at least try to help."

"It's not going to work," he said miserably, letting John roll him onto his stomach. "Nothing works. Even Carson's pills don't work for very long and he won't give me anything stronger."

"He's not me." Once Rodney was settled, John started by warming the muscles up, letting his hands glide over Rodney's back to get him used to the sensation.

John tugged Rodney's shirt flat before really started to dig into the muscles, working them out one by one.

Massages were one of the few areas he had always been good at. He was good with his hands, knew the human body, how it was put together. It was almost hypnotic, working at slowly releasing the other man's tension.

He could hear the soft panting breaths of the Canadian, the soft exhales when John managed to release a knot of tension. He moaned a few times when John had to lean in hard to work out one area or another.

It was... surprisingly sexy. As soon as the thought occurred to him, John firmly pushed it away. He let himself get lost in the rhythms of the massage.

When his hands started to ache, he started to slow down, rubbing lighter and lighter until he was finally resting his hands on McKay's back, feeling the even breaths of the sleeping scientist.

Moving slowly, John eased from his perch over the other man's legs and onto the bed beside him. The even breathing lulled him even further, and it wasn't long before he slipped into his own rest once more.

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The ropes held him tightly to the chair. The blindfold took away his vision, the gag his voice.

They'd taken away his freedom and his teammate, but he wasn't going to break. He wasn't.

He repeated the chant to himself over and over again. Repeated it even as they—she—whispered filthy things in his ear.

Then he would hear... hear the screams of pain, hear the hoarse comments breathed out between beatings, between periods of unconsciousness.

Why wouldn't she leave them alone, let them go home?

But the words became truth, and the truth became the reality.

Later on... much later, after beatings and whispered promises and tormented minutes praying he
was still alive, they'd be brought back to the cell.

Then, only then, in that cell were they safe and alone. Here no one would touch them. Here they could rest and eat what little was provided. Here they were safe until the next day when it would start all over again with words and beatings and promises fulfilled.

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After finally crawling out of bed sometime around eleven in the morning, Rodney had to admit that Sheppard's way of doing things worked. He wouldn't admit it, of course, but that was the best sleep he'd had in weeks.

He showered and then stumbled into the main living area of the suite, spotting Sheppard on the couch, small pamphlets and papers littered all around him.

"Where's the coffee?"

The soldier waved toward a covered tray. "There's waffles there, too. With real maple syrup and butter. I already ate, so the rest is yours."

Rodney dove for the food, inhaling nearly an entire waffle and two cups of coffee before turning his attention back to Sheppard. "What are you doing?" he asked around a mouthful.

"I grabbed some brochures of local tourist attractions when I went jogging this morning. I've started a 'No the Hell Way' pile and a 'That Looks Kind of Interesting' pile."

Rodney felt his eyes widen in surprise. "You went jogging? Why?"

"I jog almost every morning. I like doing it that time of day, since no matter where you are, it's usually quieter, more peaceful."

"Did you even sleep? The last time I saw was just before four."

"I actually slept pretty soundly. I got up at about eight to run."

Rodney huffed, rolling his eyes as he turned back to his food. It was cool, but he didn't care. It was food. Real food. If Sheppard wanted to run for no apparent good reason, so be it. He wasn't setting one foot out of bed until he was damn well ready.

"What did you find?" he finally asked a few bites later, feeling the caffeine settling into his body.

Sheppard scooted over, making room on the couch. "That pile includes the ones that might be interesting."

"Might be?" Rodney asked, shoving another bite in his mouth. He wasn't moving until he was finished. And the coffee, actually, might run out first.

Glancing up, John gave him a surprisingly boyish grin. "Well, some of them are pretty obviously tourist traps, which can either be incredibly funny or incredibly sad. You never know until you show up."

Realization dawned a moment later and Rodney threw Sheppard a "you have got to be kidding me look"—even though it seemed to be wasted on the soldier. "You…you actually like tourist traps, don't you? You like the people, the horrible souvenirs, the…the…snow globes!"

Sheppard actually bounced a few times on the couch. "The cheap, gaudy snow globes are the best
"Oh god, no! This is like a really bad and horrible joke. My first vacation in years and you're going to drag me to every single tourist trap you can find."

"Not all of them." Sheppard pointed to the discard pile. "I already ruled those out as the ones most likely to make you turn purple."

"Great. Just great," Rodney said, rising to his feet and snatching the other pile. "Are these supposed to make me turn a nice lilac shade instead?"

"Well, I was hoping for more of a scowl that was threatening to turn into a grin, because you were having fun but refuse to admit it."

"Fun?" Rodney glanced at the pamphlets in his hand before he waved them in Sheppard's face—complete with a smirk. "I don't remember the last time I had anything that could have been described as fun. And for your information, the last time I was laid was far too much work for it to be fun and that was something close to five years ago."

"Five years? And I thought I was repressed." To Rodney's surprise, Sheppard actually looked sympathetic instead of mocking.

"Yes. Five years," he said, dropping heavily onto the couch next to Sheppard. It was easier if he didn't see his face. "The last time was awkward and just...bad...for both of us. Too much lube, then not enough, and bruises and tangled, almost ripped clothing. And for some reason nearly getting my nuts crushed seemed to put a damper on the evening's...fun."

"Ouch." He could feel Sheppard's wince. "My last time wasn't that bad, but it wasn't great either. An Athosian woman at one of the festival things. It was the first, last and only time I let myself get drunk enough to be that stupid."

"That was, what, a month ago? I remember that night. She was pretty...beautiful even. Don't tell Teyla though, she'll kick your ass into next week."

John shot him a look. "No, it was two years ago, like I keep telling you. I won't deny that I flirt, but it's just harmless stuff. That was the only time I ever let it go further than that. And before her my last time was right before we left for Atlantis."

"I saw you, Sheppard," Rodney said bitterly, remembering then night. Incense had been in the air mixed in with the smell of alien food and drink. Laughter and music rolled through the camp, chasing even the darkest moods away. The light from the fire had cast a warm glow over John's face making him appear even younger than he was. "I watched you flirt shamelessly with that girl. When she pulled you into the forest and you were gone for an hour and came back all rumpled... Look. You don't have to tell me about it. I'm not a kiss and tell kind of guy. Just stop lying about it," Rodney said, rising to his feet, heading into his bedroom, needing to put some distance between them, not sure where the anger was coming from. "Do whatever you want. I'm going to take a nap."

"Rodney... I'm not lying. If you're talking about the girl I think you are, yes we were flirting, and she asked me to come look at something for her. Yes, she made a pass. I refused it, and she didn't want to take no for an answer. I got away and went for a walk down to the river. I met Halling there and we chatted for a bit before I headed back if you want to ask him."

Sheppard sounded so sincere, but Rodney knew better. He knew the type. He tried to close the door behind him, but the soldier was there, opening it up before it could slam shut. When had he
moved and why did he care what Rodney thought? And why was he angry...jealous...of something that happened two years ago?

"Rodney...look, I don't know why it matters, but it does. I don't want you to think of me that way. As a, a player and a liar. Because I'm not either."

"Whatever happened to privacy? I closed that," Rodney said, pointing to the door as it bounced back from where it had hit the wall.

A strange look passed over Sheppard's features. "I just... I don't want you to think of me that way."

Rodney sighed. "What does it matter?"

He shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know. I just know it does. I'm not that guy. I don't do that. I never have—I don't really like one night stands, and with my job... I even tried marriage once, but I was never there, so she... Well, we decided to part ways. It was amicable at least. But I never... I don't do that, what you think I do."

"Just..." Rodney said, dropping onto the edge of his unmade bed, exhausted without really even having done anything yet today. "Look. I don't really care if you have sex with everyone you think is hot. I don't. It's your right as long as it's consensual. Can we just...I don't want to spend two weeks arguing with you and so far we're two days in and that's all we're doing."

John was suddenly there, his gaze intense. "I don't. I don't do that, Rodney. Please... I need you to believe me. Believe in me. I'm not that bastard of man. I'm not Kirk."

Rodney waved him off, looking away, unable to hold his gaze. "Can we just...not have this conversation?"

Sheppard sighed softly. Rodney was surprised when he realized the other man was sitting on the ground, his forehead resting against Rodney's knee. "I'm sorry."

"What are you doing?" Rodney asked, holding completely still, surprised that this normally touch-phobic man was actually...touching him. Purposely.

"I don't know." Sheppard sounded... a little lost. "I just... Look, I don't know why or when your opinion of me started to mean so much, but it does, and I... I don't know."

Rodney reached down, awkwardly patting John's shoulder. "Okay...that's great and all but right now you're sort of freaking me out."

The soldier blew out a huff of air, warm against Rodney's leg. "Sorry."

"Are we done with the...talking?"

"Are you still trying to leave?"

"I'm a grown adult who can leave if he wants...as soon as I find my keys."

John finally looked up. "Don't go."

"Why not? You're always the one doing the leaving with a 'So long, Rodney' before you go and try to blow yourself up!" Rodney said, managing to get free of Sheppard's grasp. Instead of running out the door as his mind was telling him to do, he ended up pacing on the far side of the room.
Sheppard wrapped his arms around his knees, still sitting on the floor as he watched Rodney pace. "We're a team. Best friends. We save galaxies, kill Wraith, and discover cool shit. Together."

"We're not on Atlantis now. We were sent home because they think we have something wrong with us. What does that tell you, Sheppard? It tells me I should be shopping for parkas again because I might be headed for Siberia."

Sheppard's face seemed to shut down. "I... fine. Do what you want." He stood up and started for his own room.

"Oh so, now you're running away? What? Did I strike a nerve, Colonel?"

Glancing back, he shrugged. "I'm not the one who wants to leave."

"If it wasn't for me you'd probably be dead and I'd be downtown trying to identify your mangled body."

He shrugged again. "I didn't protest. I want to hang out and go do stupid tourist shit for the next two weeks. You're the one who wants to pack up and go, McKay."

"I didn't drink enough coffee for this conversation," Rodney sighed, the anger leaving his body in one fell swoop. He rubbed a hand over his face, digging a little into his eyes. They ached and itched and he was probably dying from some kind of horrible eye-related illness. "Can we just... go already?"

"There's a carnival about ten miles out of town. I asked at the front desk..."

"Yes, yes, fine," Rodney said absently, moving toward the closet. Shoes. He needed shoes. "There should be a Starbucks on the way."

He caught the edge of John's brilliant smile before the other man slipped out. "Lemme pull on a pair of jeans."

Rodney tugged out his old worn and completely broken in sneakers, sliding his feet inside once he found a pair of socks without holes in the toes. His eyes slid to the dresser where his wallet was sitting along with the hotel room key. He did need to find the keys for the rental. "Have you seen my car keys?" he called out, hopefully loud enough for Sheppard to hear.

There was a brief hesitation. "I'm driving."

"That didn't answer my question."

"I'm ready when you are!" John strode back in, tight jeans and a black tee-shirt pulled on, along with a pair of sneakers.

Rodney just about felt his eyes bug out of his head but he turned around, digging through a dresser drawer in an attempt to distract himself. Sheppard was straight. Straight as an arrow. This was going to be a very long week...two weeks. "Just...give me a minute."

The pilot hopped up to sit on the dresser, swinging his legs slightly. "I'm thinking we save the Ferris wheel for sunset—that's usually the best view. In the meantime, we can eat all the fair food, and play some of the games on the strip. Go on the other rides. Stuff like that."

"Sunset?" Rodney glanced up, trying not to panic. Even as socially constipated as he was, even he knew that was one of the most romantic times to be on a Ferris wheel. That was just wrong and cruel on so many levels.
John's face got almost soft. "Yeah. At the very top, looking out over the horizon with the sun setting—it's like you're floating."

"Well, why don't you float off of my dresser and find my keys."

"You don't need them. I'm driving."

"I still need my keys, you know. I have to be able to return the car. I haven't seen them since we got here yesterday."

"You have a few weeks. Don't worry about it. Let's get moving, the sooner we leave, the sooner you get more coffee."

Rodney watched as Sheppard slid off the furniture, allowing himself to be tugged out of the hotel room and out into the hallway. The housekeeping staff had a cart parked next door, which Sheppard easily moved around as he headed for the elevator. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I'm not really in a hurry, per se. But why sit around feeling sorry for ourselves when we could be out having a good time? Not to mention, I know you want another cup of coffee. We'll get you a Vendi triple-shot."

"You actually think this is going to be fun for me?" Rodney asked as Sheppard pulled him into the elevator.

"Fairs are always fun, if you let yourself enjoy them. Fried dough. With that jelly you like..."

"We should look up their safety and health violations before we do anything."

"Nah, that will only make you nervous. Just let go and live a little."

Rodney snorted, following Sheppard out of the hotel. "You do realize who you're talking to, don't you?"

"Yeah." John shot him a grin. "And I know you have it in you. C'mon, Rodney—this will be fun."

Rolling his eyes, he didn't comment. Fun. Yeah, right.

He insisted on walking into the Starbucks and sitting down with his coffee and muffin. There was no point in rushing off to the violation-ridden carnival a.k.a the sad excuse for something to do.

Sheppard had agreed, reluctantly, but had no problem downing his own coffee and doughnut.

The fair had been as bad as Rodney had feared.

After the fourth time he pointed out a health or safety violation, Sheppard pulled him to the side, around the back of one of the rides, shoving him into the wall. His expression was intense, his eyes focused and angry.

"Stop it. Just... Look, I know this isn't your idea of fun. I get it. I'm sorry I dragged you out here. I'm going to try and enjoy the rest of my day, and then since I'm such a fucking moron with 'no idea of what fun is if it hit me in my spiky head' we'll go back to the hotel, I'll get my stuff, and get out of your hair."

"You have no where else to go and there's no way I'm going to let you go back to that fleabag hotel I found you in."
"I'm obviously not the company you wanted for your vacation, and I'm not a fucking charity case." Sheppard backed off, turning on his heel to stalk off.

"I didn't want this vacation in the first place!" Rodney yelled, stopping Sheppard in his tracks and turning a few heads.

"Neither did I, but at least I'm not taking it out on you." His voice was quiet, and a little sad.

"What do you want from me? This is how I am." Rodney was frustrated and tired.

Sheppard moved closer so they weren't yelling. "I just... we have fun together. I like hanging out with you. You're funny, in a sarcastic kind of way. Why do you think I spend most of my free time in the labs? You amuse me, and make me laugh. I don't want you to be someone else, I just want you to not use me as a punching bag for your frustrations."

"We have fun together? When was the last time we did anything even resembling fun? Sure we used to play computer games, but Elizabeth found out we were actually changing civilizations so we had to stop. Since then, we haven't done anything even remotely like that. But now you go and say that you like my company, except for the fact that you can't stand what I say or how I say it or what I do. I'm fine as long as I keep my mouth shut and walk quietly at your side. Oh yeah, sounds like fun."

Sheppard leaned against the wall. "We watch movies. Hang out. And stop putting words in my mouth. I just said I like listening to you. I just don't like when you take out all your frustration on me, when it's not my fault we're here in the first place."

"Fine. It's not your fault. I'll keep my mouth shut for the rest of the afternoon. Will that make you happy?"

"No. I don't want you to keep your mouth shut." John sighed again. "I just want you to be you, without the vitriol aimed my way."

"So you'd feel better if I aimed it at the hot dog vendor or the flying death trap operator?"

"Exactly." John gave him a hesitant grin. "Then it's funny."

"So you telling me 'shut up, Rodney' when we were standing at the carnival games stand when I was discussing the finer points of why the game was for morons was funny."

"Exactly."

"Then why did you insist on telling me to shut up?"

"That's what we do. You rant, I tell you to shut up while secretly I'm laughing and egging you on. You're the bad cop, and I'm the good cop. It's why we make such a great team."

Rodney scowled. "Yeah, well it doesn't come across that way."

John's face fell again slightly. "Fine, sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or whatever. Let's just go. I'll drive you back to the hotel." He fished a set of keys out of his pocket and tossed them over.

Sighing, Rodney shook his head. "I thought we were eating dinner here."

"It's fine. I'll grab something somewhere. You're not having fun, so let's just head out."
"But you haven't gone on the flying death trap yet."

"I'll live." John was walking away, heading toward the parking lot. When Rodney looked down, he realized they keys John had tossed him were the missing set to his rental.

What…? Rodney glanced from his hand to Sheppard's retreating back and then down to his hand once again. Where had he…? And what was he supposed to do with keys when he had no car?

He scowled—more to himself than to Sheppard since he wasn't around to scowl at—and headed in the opposite direction. He didn't feel like dealing with his childish temper-tantrums. He checked his pocket and vaguely realized that in the rush to leave, he'd left his cell phone at the hotel. Oh well. Wasn't like anything Earth-shattering was going to happen while he was sitting at a stupid fair.

Passing several of the typical carnival games, Rodney spotted a food vendor and bought some of the least questionable products, sitting down at one of the covered picnic tables.

It was probably an hour later when Sheppard found him. "Where have you been? I was sitting waiting for you in the car. I thought you were right behind me."

"Your observational skills seem to be in fine shape," Rodney commented snidely.

Sheppard dropped onto the bench next to him.

"They have some packaged food over there," he said pointing. "The dates are still good."

"I'm okay, but thanks."

"Suit yourself," Rodney said, taking a sip of his soda, burping a little from the bubbles.

Sheppard had his sunglasses on, and was staring out into the fair.

"I figured you left and I was going to have to call a cab. But then I realized my cell phone was in the room so that might have been difficult."

"I wouldn't leave you."

Rodney shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time someone left me behind. You should go have fun or something. Don't let me stop you."

Sheppard just sighed, slouching further into the bench.

Rodney sighed, rolling his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"And wow, you're even less forthcoming than usual," Rodney said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "Don't let me keep you from any of your fun, Colonel."

Instead of replying, Sheppard stole a piece of Rodney's snack.

Rolling his eyes again, Rodney shoved it across the picnic table. "If you don't have cash to get something you can just say so."

"I have cash."

"Oh look! It can speak. More than one-word sentences."
The soldier, picked at his food. "I just wanted to have fun. With you. I always loved carnivals, and I hoped you would have fun too... I'm sorry okay. I fucked up. Can we just go now?"

"So go and have fun. I'm not stopping you from having fun. I'm sitting here eating and watching the moronic people that work here and taking mental notes about the health violations I see. I'll write a letter to the city when I get back to the hotel."

"It's not fun by yourself." Sheppard sighed again.

"What do you want from me? You're not happy when I'm walking around with you unless I have my mouth shut and now you're sulking because I won't walk around with you. What will it be, Colonel?"

"I never said I wanted you to keep your mouth shut, McKay. Most of the time when we banter its fun, and we both enjoy it. But today you seem bent on taking me down a peg or whatever and I was getting tired of it. Can we please just go? I'll get my shit and get out of your hair and you won't have to spend your vacation with someone you hate. I appreciate the thought, but I'm not going to force myself on you. I'm not a pity case."

"No."

Sheppard huffed. "Look, I thought we were here because we were friends, but apparently I was wrong and you'd rather be anywhere but with me. Fine. I'll take you back to the hotel and you won't have to see me again until we leave to go home."

"No."

Throwing him an exasperated look, Sheppard huffed again. "No what?"

"Do you want a list?"

"Do you have one?"

"I'm a genius; of course I have a list."

"All right. So yes then, give me the list."

Rodney turned on the picnic bench so he was more-or-less facing Sheppard. Leaning one elbow on the table, he ticked off the points one-by-one on his fingers. "I'm not bent on taking you down a peg no matter what you think. No, we can't just go because you wanted to come here and have fun and I'm not leaving until you do. I don't hate you. You are not forcing yourself on me. I'm the one who found you at the fleabag hotel because I didn't want to spend my leave alone. I know you're not a pity case so stop acting like a martyr."

Blinking, the other man took a moment to process, a hint of a grin appearing on his lips. "Wanna go shoot targets for impossibly large stuffed toys we have no use for?"

"Sure, fine. Anything to stop you from sulking."

"What about pouting?" Sheppard made an exaggerated pout, pushing his lips out and opening his eyes wide.

"Do that again and I'll shoot you instead of the target," Rodney said as he climbed to his feet, heading toward the gaming area.

He heard a chuckle from behind him as the pilot followed him. He won a massive, pastel pink
teddy bear, and then presented it to Rodney, smiling widely. "This is my apology for being a dick before."

"I'd rather have chocolate and coffee," Rodney sniffed, holding the pink monstrosity away from his body. God only knows where it's been or what five-year-old germ factory touched it.

"I'll make sure to provide that, too." John swung an arm around Rodney's shoulder for a moment. "Ferris wheel? And then we can go get dinner."

"I am not taking this thing on that death trap."

"We can leave it with the ride operator." John was tugging him toward the huge wheel at the end of the strip. "The view will be spectacular."

"If we don't plummet to the ground."

"It's like floating. One of the coolest feelings in the world." They were in line now, and Sheppard was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Rodney just let himself be led along with the crowd, handing over the stuffed Peptol Bismol-pink bear to the acne-covered fifteen-year-old as they climbed on board the rickety car, the single bar the only thing keeping him from certain death. With one hand clenched around the car's metal side, the other only a second from holding onto Sheppard's arm in a death-grip, they were off.

Only two feet off the ground and Rodney swore he was going to die a horrible and painful death. Closing his eyes, he tried to keep his panic at bay, jumping every time the ride jerked to a stop, leaving them swinging mid-air before it jerked again, sending them up higher.

To his surprise, Sheppard squeezed his knee. "If you open your eyes, we're almost at the top. It's really beautiful."

"Really don't want to embarrass myself any more by throwing up on your shoe."

"I promise, even if you do, I won't be upset. Just crack one eye. The sunset is…it's spectacular."

The car jerked to another stop, swinging forward and back and he let out a small strangled moan. The breeze had picked up and Rodney knew they had to be at the top of the flying death trap. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, feel it clenching inside.

Sheppard's hand was slowly kneading his leg, a steady, calming pressure.

He felt the pilot lean over, his movements slow so as to not move the car any more than it already was.

He whispered in Rodney's ear, his breath sending chills of an entirely different sort through his body. "From here, you can see the sun just starting to slip beyond the horizon. The sky is painted in pinks and purples and the deepest blues. If you look straight out, all you see is sky, and the world just falls away. Take a deep breath and picture it. Feel the breeze against your face, the soft quiet around us. Peaceful, relaxing."

"Flying….death….trap," Rodney whispered.

"You don't have to open your eyes. Just picture it. Just let yourself enjoy the quiet, the way the breeze feels against your face. Forget about where we are."

"I can't just forget about it!" Rodney said, the words far more panicked-sounding and desperate
than he thought. He'd wanted to hold it back, not to show it.

John's hand squeezed again, his thumb starting to rub slow circles. "The sunset. Picture the colors, the way the sun looks as it's sinking. The bright oranges and pinks."

"I'm gonna die, right here on his stupid ride," Rodney whispered, letting out a small shriek when the car jerked again, moving them forward.

"No, you won't. I won't let you die, I promise. I'd never take you on anything I wasn't confident about."

Sheppard shifted in the car and then there was warmth all along his side—shoulder to knee—as the pilot pressed close. An arm wrapped around his shoulders, holding him securely.

"Just breathe. I won't let anything happen to you. I've never let you down yet, have I?"

Rodney laughed, just short of hysterical, as he thought back to all the shit they got into over the course of the last few years. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Okay, but I've always brought you home alive, right? I've never left you behind, and I've never put you in danger willingly. And I haven't now."

The ride jerked to another stop again, the car swinging back and forth. Rodney managed to hold in his shriek this time. Sheppard was right about that. He never did anything on purpose, it just happened. He nodded, agreeing with the pilot this time.

Sheppard continued to talk to him, soft, steady, soothing. He stayed pressed against Rodney's side for the whole trip—who knew such a skinny man could put off that much heat?

By the time they got to the bottom, Rodney felt light-headed and discovered he was shaking a little. Sheppard helped him off the ride, holding onto him, steadying him. Rodney could feel the eyes on them, knew they were laughing at him, at his weakness. He tried to push Sheppard away, but the man was stubborn and wouldn't let go. "I'm fine," he said, his voice giving away far more than he wanted to. His eyes were open now, but focused on the ground, on where he was putting his feet. He couldn't look up and see how people were looking at him, staring at him.

"It's okay. Just breathe." He was guided to a bench—and realized the pink bear was now sitting next to him. "Wait here. I'll go get you a soda."

Rodney leaned down, putting his head between his knees trying to get some of his panic under control. He hadn't thought it would be quite so bad as it had been.

A few minutes later, there was a warm body pressed along his side again, a hand rubbing his back. "Here, see if this will help."

"Just... just give me a few minutes," Rodney said, willing his breathing to calm.

"Take as much time as you need." A soda with a straw was pressed into his hand, and the rubbing on his back continued.

"Sorry," he finally managed to get out a few minutes later, knowing he screwed up John's fun—again.

"For what? You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Screwed up. Again." He finally lifted his head a little, managing to take a sip of the soda.
"You didn't screw anything up."

"You're telling me you enjoyed that? If so, you are more of a sadistic sick bastard than I thought."

John chuckled softly. "Well, it wasn't exactly what I had planned, no. I'm upset with myself for putting you through that, though. You didn't want to, and I was the one who pushed the issue."

"Didn't think it would be that bad, honestly."

"So we won't do that again. When you're up for it, let's head back to the car. We can find a quiet place to have dinner."

"Are you sure you want to go to dinner with me now? I've made us into some horrible spectacle."

He could almost hear the eye-roll. "No one is paying any attention to us. Come on, what are you in the mood for?"

"Something that won't result in me dying or embarrassing myself any further."

"Surf and turf? I saw a steak house on the way in."

"Fine. That's fine. As long as they keep the lemons far, far away. I have no desire to add an allergic reaction to today's agenda."

"Yeah, me neither. But we'll tell them up front." A hand on his arm guided him up. "Don't forget your bear."

Rodney finally lifted his head, looking at Sheppard with a "you've got to be kidding me" expression.

The soldier just grinned and grabbed the bear. "I won him for you. You can't just ditch him."

"He's Pepto-Bismol pink!"

"Hey, that's what we can name him! PB."

"You forgot the J."

"J?"

"PB&J. Peanut butter and jelly."

Sheppard threw his head back and laughed. An honest to god, carefree kind of laugh. "PBJ it is."

Rodney scowled and shook his head. "You are certifiably insane. Do you know that?"

"And yet you follow me. What does that say about you?" They were weaving back through the crowds now.

A few people gave them weird looks, but Rodney ignored them. They probably had enjoyed his freak-out, too. "It's all your fault."

"My fault you follow me?" John shot him a smirk.

"Yes. Four years of yelling at me and drilling it into my head on off-world missions."

"I don't yell. And watch what you say. We are in public you know." Still laughing a little,
Sheppard winked at him.

Rodney snorted, rolling his eyes as he walked with Sheppard back to the car.

Sheppard put the bear in the back seat, and then went so far as to put a seatbelt on the monstrosity, humming to himself and grinning the whole time.

Rodney simply shook his head, climbing into the car and buckling himself in. He closed his eyes, trying to force his body to relax.

He heard Sheppard slide into the driver's seat, and a moment later they were on their way.

Dinner was surprisingly good and low-key—even though McKay swore people kept watching them, looking at them. The steak was perfect and the chocolate cake for dessert had been heavenly.

Once they were back at the hotel, Rodney kicked off his shoes and dropped onto the couch and turned on the television. He was flipping through the channels when he stopped suddenly, flicking back a few stations to the news report.

"...Sheppard and Doctor Rodney McKay were unavailable for comment. And next in the news is..."

Holy shit.

"Sheppard?"

There was no answer, but he realized he could hear the shower running.

He'd seen his picture on television. On the local news. His picture. And Sheppard's. Holy shit.

He quickly moved into his bedroom, digging his phone out of the drawer he'd dropped it into. Twenty-five missed calls.

Crap crap crap.

Running into the other bedroom, he stormed into the bathroom, steam billowing out as he opened the door. "Sheppard. We have a problem."

The shower door was glass, so he saw the other man in all his naked glory. Sheppard raised an eyebrow at him, but otherwise just kept washing, not appearing to be overly concerned.

"We were on television," Rodney said, making sure it was loud enough to be heard over the water.

There was a pause, and then the water shut off. "What? I thought I heard you say—"

"Television. Local news. Our faces and names. We were unavailable for comment and I have twenty-five missed calls." He held up his cell phone so Sheppard could see.

Sheppard was out of the shower so fast, Rodney was absentmindedly impressed he hadn't slipped. And he was still naked, walking across the room to grab the phone. "Shit. I tossed mine on the dresser when we got here, and I didn't check it..." He darted out to go get it, presumably.

"You had yours with you! Why didn't you answer it?"

"I didn't have it! I left it here while we were out! Shit! I have forty-five missed calls. Shit!" He
walked back into the bathroom to grab a towel. "Okay, do you want to call the SGC while I go online and find out what's out, or do you want to surf while I call?"

"Calling the SGC might be a good thing," Rodney admitted.

"All right, let's do that first. More than half of these calls are from O'Neill, so let me start there and find out what the fuck is going on."


Sheppard was sitting on the bed. It seemed he was put straight through. "General O'Neill? Sheppard here. I didn't have my phone with me today..."

Rodney listened to Sheppard's side of the conversation, the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach only getting worse the longer he talked to O'Neill.

When he finally hung up, John looked shell-shocked. "It got out, the program. Well, parts of it. Someone accidentally said something that peaked a journalist's interest, and it got out. Atlantis is the biggest piece of the leak. Holy shit."

"Why didn't they contain it? That's what the government does the best, cover things up!" This was bad. Really bad. Rodney could picture riots in the streets. Bombings. Attacks. "When are we getting bodyguards?"

Sheppard grimaced. "Apparently this is how they're covering it up. There was a hasty meeting, and it was decided to admit to some things in order to ensure others stay secret."

"Admit some things? Some things? Why the hell was my picture on national television?"

"We were the 'some things' I guess," Sheppard flopped back on the bed. "They're sending a team to us now to brief us completely. Apparently, since we're the only senior staff of Atlantis currently reachable, we get to be the spokesmen."

"But how do they expect to explain away the 'we work and live in another galaxy' thing? This is bad. This is horrible!" Rodney climbed his to feet, stalking around the suite. "Do you have any idea how bad this is? This is like a nightmare come true! I need to call my sister. She's probably the one who leaked it. She can never keep her trap shut. All the time when we were growing up, she could never keep a secret. But this is bad, so bad! This...we're going to get swarmed with the press and with...with...crazy people wanting us to take them with us when we go home and—"

"Well, the fact that we live and work in another galaxy is not what's been leaked. The Atlantis program is what they know about and the government decided to confirm the existence of the program...at least that part of it. O'Neill said we'd be briefed as soon as we get back to the SGC."

"And since when is revealing a classified program a good idea?"

"Rodney, I don't know anything else. You know what I know. We have to wait until they arrive to get more detailed information. With a sigh, the pilot rolled out of bed. It looked like he had aged like ten years in the space of an hour. "Lemme go put on a uniform. Our leave has been officially canceled, as we'll be needed to do interviews and shit."

"Oh nonono. They forced me on vacation. They are not taking it back now."

Shrugging, the other man began to dig through his dresser. "Unfortunately, I don't have a choice."
"We didn't ask for this, Sheppard," Rodney said stepping closer to the naked man. "This is their mess and we don't have to clean it up for them."

Shoulders drooping, Sheppard's head dropped to his chest. "I'm military. They say jump, I have to say how high or I'm out on my ass. And now the whole fucking world would get to hear about it."

"It's their fault for screwing up."

"It really doesn't matter whose fault it is. Right now, they want us to help fix it."

"Then you probably want to put some clothes on before the SGC sends people."

He got a laugh for that. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure showing up naked to a briefing would be frowned on. They'll bring me some uniforms, but I should be dressed at least."

"Dressed is good." Rodney nodded, turning to head out into the other room. He wanted a few minutes to panic on his own before anyone showed up.

This was going to be hell. Living hell.

****

This was hell or very close to it.

It was supposed to be an easy mission. A friend of a friend recommended the visit, the offer to trade, said they'd be open to it. They'd done dozens of missions like it. The referrals were generally good, opening up routes for trade which otherwise would have remained closed.

But no one had foreseen this.

They'd descended upon them en masse as soon as they stepped into the settlement. Ronon and Teyla had gotten away, he'd seen them escape into the forest with hunters close on their tail.

Trade was not what the Tellonians had in mind. They wanted to possess power and they were not shy in their use of it.

They were beaten to the ground until they were either unconscious or completely unresisting before being taken away from the village, deeper into the mountains, away from the gate. He tried to stay awake, tried to memorize the route, but it was hard.

His mind faded in and out, maybe minutes or hours passing between his periods of consciousness—he did now know, couldn't tell. Only when they reached the caves did they discover the Tellonians' true desire: the cold-blooded extermination of their enemy.

They'd refused to help, to be a party in the genocide of another people, but the Tellonians would not take no for an answer.

Then the torture really began, when they were already worn down, bleeding and bruised. They screamed until their voices were raw, screamed in pain, pleading for mercy, for understanding, for their freedom.

The Tellonians uncovered their weaknesses in this first vicious attack.

They used it against them, breaking them piece by piece by piece.

All they had to do was hold on. Someone would find them, rescue them, free them from the hell they were subjected to.
But one day morphed into two and into more until that last ember of hope finally faded as they were huddled together for warmth and comfort, trying to ease the pain of broken bones and battered flesh, trying to convince themselves that the end was nearly upon them.

They were alone and the Tellonians wouldn't take no for an answer.

****

John pulled on a pair of jeans and the crispest button-down shirt he currently had, one of the new ones. He paced a bit, and worried a lot. When they finally had a knock on the suite door, he was a bundle of nerves again.

Answering the door, he stepped aside to let in a bigger group that he expected—one general, several soldiers, and six other people he assumed were experts and/or the media representatives O'Neill had told him they would have assigned to them. Those would be the people responsible for deciding who got interviews, and scheduling it all, as well as making sure they arrived on time.

Once they were all in, John snapped himself to attention. "Sir."

McKay just scowled at the lot of them, his arms crossed over his chest. "So who's the one that spilled the beans?"

One of the women in a smart powder blue suit and thin glasses smiled at McKay. "That's not really the issue here. We all knew it had to happen eventually, so now it's just shaping the message. I'm Kathy Schneider, and I'll be your personal public relations representative. I'll be helping you shape and maintain both your own image and the image the SGC would like to project."

"Actually, that is the issue," McKay said, his scowl deepening. "We're not cleaning up your mess until you tell us how it happened in the first place. And if it was because of any of you in this room, I want to be assigned another staff."

John was impressed that her smile didn't even crack. "Actually, it was an accident. As I understand it, a scientist was visiting family, and one of his in-laws was a reporter. The gentleman didn't realize he had several pictures of Atlantis and its technology mixed in with other, not classified work, and when his relative saw them, he began asking questions."

"It was Kavanaugh, wasn't it?"

"No, Doctor McKay, and the identity of the leak isn't really your concern. That's already been handled, now we need to focus on you and Colonel Sheppard." She moved inside, and the other civilians followed her—John guessed they were her staff. He stayed at attention since the general hadn't given him permission to do otherwise.

"Actually, if it's a member of my staff it is my concern."

"As I understand it, the person in question was actually under Colonel Carter."

"All scientists on Atlantis report directly to me."

"It wasn't an Atlantis-based scientist, Doctor McKay," she said dismissing him as she turned toward her notes. "Now, I have a tentative interview schedule lined up for you. Obviously, everyone wants to speak with you. Since we don't know how you'll do, I'd like to start smaller—with a local news crew actually. From there, once you've gotten your feet wet, I have Barbara Walters scheduled for an hour-long special. Then you'll be one of the primary interviewees for a
Dateline special on Atlantis that will follow your interview. I have both Letterman and Leno clamoring for you—do you have a preference?"

"How about none of the above?" McKay snapped, his eyes flashing in anger.

She gave McKay an almost sickly sweet smile. "Oh, I know you'd also like to speak with the scientific community. I have several possible guest lectures for you to look at as well."

"No." McKay angled his head, his entire body radiating his stubbornness.

John wanted to sigh, but held his pose. He had been pretty much forgotten. The general had moved inside and was slowly moving around the living area of the suite. Kathy set down her pencil and took off her glasses, leaning forward a little. "I understand this is all a little sudden and can be overwhelming. Would you like to start smaller? Are there any programs you'd be more comfortable beginning with?"

"I'd be more comfortable if you'd turn around and head back out the door you came in. I'm here on two weeks of leave and I plan to take all two weeks of it. Come back in thirteen days."

"I'm afraid your leave has been canceled, Doctor," the general said as he sat down. He looked as tired as John felt. "I regret it as much as anyone because I know you needed it, but unfortunately we didn't have any say in the timing of this. We have to get out there and give out the right information now, before people start making up their own scenarios and it gets even more out of hand than it already is."

McKay, though, wasn't backing down. "That's your problem, General, not mine."

"As a contractor with the Stargate program, you know we have the right to cancel leave time as we see fit. This is something of an emergency, McKay."

"I. Don't. Care."

"Then you'd rather have Colonel Carter speaking for the scientific community of Atlantis? It's you or her, Doctor McKay."

"She's not on Atlantis, General. She has no say or standing on the base."

"Which is why we'd rather have you. But we don't have the luxury of waiting, and if you refuse to do it, she's our next expert. It's your choice."

"Oh, so now it's my choice?" McKay snorted and rolled his eyes. "This is your mess. You clean it up." He walked to the door and opened it, gesturing to everyone. "If you don't mind, this is a private room and I'd like you to leave."

The general—the name of whom John still had no idea about—nodded at one of the civilians. "Call Colonel Carter and start booking her for the interviews we were going to have McKay do. Colonel Sheppard, since we've been asked to leave, we'll need you to come with us. We can brief you on what your role will be on the way."

"Yes, sir," John said it without any inflection.

"Sheppard's staying here."

The general glanced back. "I'm afraid you don't have any choice in that matter, Doctor."

"He's on enforced medical leave with no return to duty until at least two weeks have passed. You
can check his orders from Carson Beckett."

"I am well aware of what his orders were, and those orders have changed. Have a good vacation, Doctor." The general headed for the door. John swallowed hard, but knew he had no choice—he had to follow them out.

"So now you think you can just over-ride the Atlantis' chief medical officer? The last time I looked, medical orders overrode military ones when it came to the health and safety of the officer involved. If you force Sheppard back to duty when he's not finished recovering, there's no telling what damage could be done. Is that what you want?"

"I don't believe Colonel Sheppard's medical condition is any of your concern. However, to put your mind at rest, Doctor Lam will be monitoring him for the next two weeks."

"Doctor Lam is not his physician and did not perform the initial medical exam."

The general didn't answer, just walked out. John saw the other soldiers smirk as everyone followed the general. With a soft sigh, and throwing McKay a sad look, John turned to follow as well.

"Don't go."

McKay's words hit him hard, right in the center of his chest as if he'd used his fists. "I don't have a choice," John whispered softly, wishing it was different, wishing he could just stay here and hide. But there were duties and obligations, things that he couldn't change, couldn't adjust to his whims and desires. He knew when he put on the uniform it wouldn't be easy, and it hadn't been, but right now, leaving McKay alone in this hotel room seemed like one of the most difficult things he'd ever done.

"You can fight them."

John shook his head. "No, I can't. I'd be brought up on charges for disobeying a direct order. I'm sorry... I was looking forward to the vacation. Have fun for me, okay?"

"As if," McKay scowled, his eyes narrowing. "Carter's gonna fall on her face. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, she's not you." One of the soldiers moved back into view, his expression giving John no choice but to join the group going to the SGC. If he didn't leave in the next minute, the Marine would "escort" him out of the room. He really had no choice. He was trapped—again.

John was tempted to say 'So long, Rodney,' but knew it would only piss his friend off. So he waved instead, turning to head out the door.

He could feel McKay watching from the hotel room door as the group made their way to the elevator. But by the time John got up the nerve to glance back, the door was closing with a firm sound, the deadbolt sliding into place a moment later.

He wanted to cry, and didn't know why. It felt like he had just lost an important piece of himself. He just hoped Rodney could forgive him, someday. If he had had any choice in the matter... He would much rather have stayed.

There were three black Suburbans with tinted windows parked at the front entrance. And then there were reporters. Lots of them. Along with cameras and flashes and oh god...this was going to be a nightmare and McKay was on his own.
"Sir," John swallowed, and knew he probably looked shell-shocked. "I don't think it's a good idea to leave McKay to deal with this alone. He can't know what's waiting for him." Someone broke through the line of reporters and flung herself at him. It was pure instinct that John reached out and caught her before she fell.

"His problem," Schneider said, sliding into one of the vehicles. One of her staff got the reporter out of John's arms and shoved him toward the vehicle.

Glancing up to where he thought their suite might have been, John wondered if he could sneak away after the briefing. He at least wanted to come back for his clothes. God, he wished McKay had come. At least then he wouldn't be doing this alone.

It didn't take long to ride to the base in the caravan of trucks. Along the way, his role was explained to him. Although Atlantis had a military presence, and was operated here on Earth from a military base, the civilian leadership and scientific research was being stressed. Minor details like life-sucking space vampires were being glossed over and ignored.

That and the fact that they lived in another galaxy.

John blinked at that. "Wait a minute, where exactly are you saying Atlantis is?"

"A scientific base in Antarctica." Schneider didn't even bat an eye.

He resisted the urge to bang his head against the window. "So you aren't telling anyone that we travel through space at all. So what exactly is Atlantis supposed to be?"

"A scientific base that was established adjacent to what we believe to be an alien outpost. Research is still ongoing."

"But when people start pulling up old satellite images, they'll be able to see that there's no fucking way we have a whole city hidden there."

"They will be given the appropriate information and images." The Suburbans came to a stop just outside the entrance to the Mountain and Airmen were there to open the doors a few seconds later.

"But—" John was cut off by the people who swept him along inside. "So what do you need me for, exactly? Just to stand around and look pretty?"

"Yes," she said. "And to add credibility to the information."

Great. So he had suddenly become the intergalactic call-boy Rodney always accused him of being. John resisted the urge to sigh.

The rest of the evening was filled with basically being told the same things over and over. He was fitted for a new dress uniform, given a daunting press schedule where he was just expected to show up and shut up, and then assigned to a little room deep in the mountain after a brief run through the infirmary where Lam 'cleared' him. He was feeling more than a little claustrophobic, so he grabbed his phone and headed up to the surface, to the top of the mountain. He dialed McKay's number.

"I don't know how the fuck you got my number, but my answer is the same as it has been the last five hours. No comment."

"Rodney?"

"Sheppard? Oh, god, is that you?" There was the sound of clothing rustling and John could almost
see in his mind Rodney straightening up from where he'd been slumped in a chair.

"Yeah. And I'm having second thoughts. Being arrested for going AWOL is looking better and better."

"I went to get dessert and I was nearly mauled. There's hundreds of them out there. I just keep telling them 'no comment'. I don't want to get in any trouble from the SGC by accidentally saying something I shouldn't. Why didn't they leave someone here if they knew it was going to be a circus?"

"I don't know. The press was there when we left. I tried to get Schneider to at least send someone up to warn you, but they shoved me in a car and sped off. God, Rodney, I've been turned into a fucking show piece. They're telling everyone Atlantis is a research facility in Antarctica being run by civilians. I'm just there to look pretty."

"I had to unplug the hotel phones because they kept calling up and I'm worried that they have people in the hallway lying in wait. I can't leave the room, Sheppard. They'll probably attack the room service boy when he brings breakfast in the morning. I can't do this."

"I know. Do you think you can find a way to sneak out and come get me? Fuck this. I'm going to leave them a message that if my choices are to be the centerpiece in a grand lie to all of Earth or resign my commission, I'm fucking retiring. I'm black-ops—I can get through the line of reporters here and meet you a few miles down the road. We could go to Tahiti or something."

"Sneak out? I barely escaped with my life before. There's no way I'm going outside now. And—what the…" McKay paused, coming back on a second later. "Fuck. The cell's dying and I don't have the charger. It's in the car."

"All right, you remember the knock we used in the prison? I'll come to you. Don't open the door until you hear that."

And for a brief moment reality shifted.

*They still had a little fight left. Or they had. But the Tellonians knew. Knew they protected each other, needed to know the other was alive.*

*Another cell, alone. Alone.*

*Faintly, from the next cell over, he heard a pattern. At first he thought it was just random noise, or maybe what passed for rats here. But it was too regular.*

*He knocked back.*

*They kept it all night, tapping out their message to one another.*


He shook himself, hearing Rodney's response as if nothing had happened, as if the memory hadn't tried to intrude. "Just…I give up, Sheppard. I can't do this."

"Just hang in there, buddy. I'm on my way, and then we'll figure something out."

The sound of the dial tone was his only response. McKay's cell had died.

"Sir?"
John started—he hadn't realized anyone else was up here. He turned, wary. "Yes?"

There were three men standing there beside the speaker. "If you'll come inside, sir. You need to get your rest before your interview tomorrow morning." From the way the three others were standing, John knew it wasn't a request.

He stuck his phone in his pocket. "No. I am hereby resigning my commission. I can't do what they want me to, gentlemen. Please let them know I wish them luck."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's not an option. Please give me your cell phone and come with us. Don't force us to do something you'll later regret."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I'm leaving now. Give the generals my regards." He had been eyeing the way the mountain curved before—he had never planned to get out by going back inside. So now he darted to his escape route, immediately putting a tree between him and the soldiers in case they had Zats.

He wasn't expecting the sharp pinch in his neck. Reaching up, he felt around, grabbing the small tranquilizer dart that had been embedded in his neck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Pulling it out, he kept going, hoping he had moved fast enough that it would only slow him down, not stop him. He had resigned! Why were they doing this?

He could already feel it working, the drug traveling through his bloodstream. The lethargic feeling settling in, feel his muscles reacting slowly, too slowly.

"Come now, Colonel. You'll feel better in the morning."

He jerked away, growling, and kept moving. His feet caught on something and he went down. Before he could get back up, there were hands on his arms, hoisting him up. He tried to fight back, but he couldn't. His brain and his arms and legs weren't connected somehow.

His body had stopped listening to him, and despite fighting it, he was dragged down into darkness.

He didn't know how long he had been out, but he woke up with a splitting headache in a plain room on a cot. Oh, this just kept getting better. Panic started to set in—he had never liked being locked in anywhere, but knowing he was locked underground, especially after that last mission...

Trying to contain his panic, the door opened a few minutes later, General O'Neill striding in like he had all the time in the world. "Sleep well?"

John didn't know how he looked, but he was willing to bet his eyes were a little wild. "Let me out."

"Can't do that," O'Neill said, sitting down on the one chair in the room. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I know this isn't the…best way to do this, but it has to be done."

John shook his head, trying to get his breathing under control and his thoughts in line. "I can't... can't tell the lies they want me to. I resign. I'm a civilian now—let me leave."

"Unfortunately, resigning is not an option. In two weeks, sure. I'll sign the paperwork and help get you set up."

"I won't tell the lies they want me to." John stood and paced to the door, absently trying it. It was locked, not that he had expected otherwise. "And keeping me here locked away won't do you any
good either."

"We seem to have a little…difference of option here. Let me put things in perspective for you. You've been lying about Atlantis for three years. One more lie is not going to make a difference and it will help to keep the peace. If you don't help us with this…situation, I'll have no choice but to court martial you and send you directly to Leavenworth. I don't think that's a road you want to walk down since the cells are even smaller than this room." O'Neill paused, looking at John for a long moment. "If I had another option I'd give it to you. I would. I have to go through the same dog and pony show as you do. Right now I'm trying to get someone assigned to McKay. I've been up most of the night working on it. There should have been at least one guard left behind for McKay when you returned to the base. I don't understand why no one was. It's SOP, but I'm just getting the run-around but I'm about ready to go to the President about this."

The thought of being locked in a small room permanently left John's palms clammy—the room started to spin a little, so he sat down on the floor. "I..."

"Just play nice, Sheppard. That's all we're asking. Don't be like McKay."

That made him look up, eyes flashing. "McKay is my teammate and my responsibility. Regardless of what anyone here thinks of him, he's the best there is. Let me go see him—he was being hounded at the hotel last night, I want to make sure he's okay. I'll give you my word I won't do anything stupid, but... I need to get out of this mountain, and I need time to think."

"No can do. You and Carter are on the Early show. I'm sending over a guard as soon as I finish with you."

"Carter can't speak for Atlantis. We both know this is going to be a disaster. Let me try talking to McKay again. Maybe without a bunch of people there pressuring him—"

"You can talk to him after. I promise."

John gave him a long look. "Promise me I'll be taken directly to him if I go and behave myself. Otherwise, I'm going to make you look very stupid, regardless of any personal consequences."

O'Neill stood. "I guarantee it."

John swallowed hard. He used the wall to stand, aware his hand was shaking a little when O'Neill took it. God damn Tellonians and their god damned torture that left him so fucked up about small closed rooms.

"Now, you need to shave and shower and get some food in you."

"Just a shower and my uniform, please. If I try to eat, it will only come back up again."

"They're waiting for you in the locker room. I'll expect you in the mess hall in thirty, Colonel."

It was an order, so he sighed, and made his way—under guard, although he wasn't sure if he should be insulted or flattered that there were three of them—to the showers. There, he transformed himself into Colonel Sheppard. He was then escorted back to O'Neill. Sitting across from the other man, John sipped on a cup of water.

O'Neill looked him over for a minute before signaling to an Airman. "Bring the Colonel some coffee and Fruit Loops."

John fought down the urge to gag. "Ah, thank you, sir, but that's really not a good idea, unless you have more than one uniform ready for me, and time for me to shower again."
"You need to relax and eat something. I have a guard assigned to McKay. He's heading there now."

While that did make him feel a little better, a guard wasn't him. Irrationally, John needed to see him to make sure he was okay. It was like the prison all over again. Closing his eyes, John took several deep breaths, trying to force down the rising panic.

"Breathe, Colonel." O'Neill's voice was softer than normal. "Just breathe. Carter will be here in a few minutes and she'll walk through everything with you. All you have to do is stand there and smile—my usual job."

"That's not the problem, sir. I wasn't on leave by choice, sir. Beckett and Heightmeyer forced the issue because after my last mission I can no longer be closed into a small room for any length of time without..." Despite himself, John found his breathing getting faster. Because they had both been held and used against each other, he knew damn well he needed to see Rodney to make this go away completely. But there was little chance of that, which just made him shake harder although he tried to hide it.

O'Neill's hand was warm on his arm. "McKay's fine."

John focused on the touch, trying to will himself calmer. "I told him not to open the door unless he heard our signal. If they tried to break through... oh god..."

"Reporters are not going to break into his hotel room, Sheppard. They know better than that. He's going to be fine. You'll talk to him in about three hours."

"His cell phone was dead. He can't even call for help..." John forced his eyes open, knowing he probably looked like shit, too pale, breathing too fast. "Please, I need to go outside. I can't be here anymore."

O'Neill didn't even hesitate, gesturing to the same Airman that had brought him breakfast. "Bring the Colonel upstairs. Carter and I will be along in ten."

Grateful, John was on his feet almost before the general had stopped talking, heading for the door. Five minutes later and John was outside, leaning against the Suburban and taking in deep breaths. Just having open sky above him, a light breeze in his face, was doing wonders for him. He was still worried about Rodney, and would be until he could see for himself that his friend was okay, but at least now he could get some control of himself, forcing down the panic and burying it deep again.

It was closer to fifteen minutes when he heard Carter and O'Neill approaching. "Better?" the General asked.

John nodded. "Thank you, sir."

With a nod from O'Neill, they got into the car, and Carter briefed him on the way. John wasn't sure how he felt about his national television debut.

It seemed easy. He was head of base security. That was really all he was supposed to say. Carter would handle the rest.

By the time they were at the studio, he had himself completely under control again. He followed the Airmen in, and allowed the make-up people to set him up. Next thing he knew, they were
being settled on a couch, and introduced to the morning audience.

There were lights and cameras and wow…this was kind of cool.

John looked around, taking it all in. Licking his lips, he settled back in the couch listening to the hosts—a perky blond and a dark-haired older gentleman—chat with Carter.

It was only when the tone of the man changed that he realized they might be in trouble. "So Colonel Carter, while it's been a pleasure to speak to you about this fascinating scientific endeavor, we—along with the viewers at home—have to ask: why isn't Doctor McKay here to speak about it himself?"

He saw her smile falter a little. "Well, unfortunately Doctor McKay is, as you can imagine, incredibly busy right now. He regrets not being able to join us himself."

The host nodded politely. "Our cameras caught him in the lobby of the Colorado Springs Hilton last night and he wasn't very forthcoming with information. What, exactly, has Doctor McKay so busy in the Hilton, Colonel Carter? Or does the US government want a more…palatable spokesperson—especially because of Doctor McKay's background and volatility?"

John fought the urge to roll his eyes when Carter shot him a quick look. He smoothly interjected. "As you know, this was not a planned reveal for us—it caught us by surprise. While we've been planning to release our existence to the world for some time now, we weren't quite ready yet, so we've been scrambling."

John could see the phoniness of the host's smile now. "We're actually interested in hearing from Colonel Carter on the subject, especially because you don't have any ties to the project. It seems like the government is simply going to try to sweep this under the rug once again."

Carter smiled politely again. "Well, as Colonel Sheppard noted, we've been scrambling to up our timetable in terms of what we declassify. I'm sure you understand the need to keep certain aspects of our research classified because of reasons of National Security."

"So you're saying that Doctor McKay has a problem with keeping secrets?"

John bristled a little but Carter again answered. "Of course not. No one could work on this project unless we know how to keep secrets." She chuckled a little, and to John it sounded strained. "Doctor McKay is just a very busy man, especially right now."

"Vacationing at the Hilton while you and Colonel Sheppard talk to the press," the blonde said, pinning Carter with her eyes. "We appreciate that Colonel Sheppard took the time with visit with us, but when the guests are changed at last minute—such as they were this time—it makes us wonder what you might be trying to cover up and what Doctor McKay really knows about the project."

John interjected once again. "As you undoubtedly know, both myself and Doctor McKay were actually on a very rare leave when this story broke. When we all had a chance to talk about it, it was decided that I would cancel my leave for the time being while he enjoys a well-deserved rest. And in a few weeks, it will be him you'll be talking to, and I'll finish out my vacation."

The blonde—Wendy? Sara? John couldn't remember—turned to him. "With our location so close to several government facilities, we've dealt with a number of government officials over the years, as you can imagine. Even in the worst of times, the government has been quite forthcoming with regards to interviews of their top people. In this case, the government has been anything but. While I have to admit that both you and Colonel Carter are much more…presentable to the
American people, it only goes to emphasize that Doctor McKay knows something you're afraid of releasing. Also, the caravan of Sububans in the early hours of the morning at the Hilton is quite telling. Do either of you have any comments about where you might have taken Doctor McKay?"

John's chest tightened. Had they taken McKay somewhere? O'Neill had reassured him his scientist was fine, but... "Doctor McKay is probably the smartest man on this planet, with the exception of Colonel Carter here, ma'am." He tried for a smile. "He knows a lot of things you or I or anyone else have no business knowing. So that's not really the issue here. As for where he might have gone—you said yourself that your people had been accosting him in the lobby of his hotel, and I know he had been getting phone calls at all hours of the day since this story broke. I don't think any of us can blame him if he wanted to go somewhere a little more peaceful. No one likes to be stalked, ma'am."

"If you don't mind," the other host said, Tom something, "I'd like to bring up our footage of the event and get your comments."

"Actually, I do mind." John let his tone get a little more frosty. "I don't think intentionally trying to humiliate a man who isn't even here to defend himself just to get better ratings is really a very nice thing to do."

"If the government is trying to cover something up, the American people have the right to know," Tom responded, holding John's gaze. "Roll the clip."

John rose smoothly, a hand on Carter's elbow forcing her to stand as well. "Then I believe this interview is over. I'm more than happy to chat with you about the Atlantis project, the advancements we're making, and some of the research we're doing there. And I'm more than happy to answer your questions about why we've kept it classified until now. I will not, however, stay here and help you insult a man I highly respect."

"John, wait," Carter said quietly, her eyes on the screen that was running through footage from the hotel lobby early this morning. It was hard to see—too many people in frame—but John could make out McKay's panicked voice over some of the hum, demanding to know where they were going, where they were taking him. John could see his head in the middle of a group of men in dark suits as they swept by the camera location to the waiting Suburbans. The camera caught a quick glimpse of something shiny on McKay's wrist and John's heart nearly stopped beating. Handcuffs?

"Do you have any comments, Colonels?" Tom asked looking smug.

He fought down the rage—O'Neill had lied to him, but this wasn't the place. "My only comment is that I won't be doing any more interviews until the hosts learn a few manners and get some common decency." His back was to the camera, so John let Tom see the full extent of his scorn—he was satisfied by the flinch he got in response. Turning back to the camera, John kept his expression sober, but not as stern. "Yes, the project is classified and yes, there are things we aren't going to tell you about yet. Not because we like keeping secrets from the public, but because it's necessary. I know a lot of you out there will scoff at that; I hope you can trust me that we're not doing it to keep you in the dark—we're doing it to protect you. I'm sorry this has to be my first introduction to you, the public, and I hope our next meeting can be on better terms." He gave a crisp, by-the-book salute, and then turned on his heel and left the stage.

Carter stuttered something and followed behind him a moment later as the hosts called for a commercial break. O'Neill was standing on the sidelines, anger on his face, cell phone to his ear. "Explain it to me."

The fact that O'Neill seemed as pissed off as John was, oddly enough, allowed him to get his own
anger under control. "What the hell was that?"

O'Neill held up a finger to John as he listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone. "And you didn't do anything? What do I pay you for? Why wasn't I informed earlier?"

Panic, anger, frustration—John buried it all. Right now he was a team leader and one of his people was in an unknown situation. He wanted to be taken to McKay right the hell now.

"Keep me informed," O'Neill finally said. "I don't appreciate being the last to know."

As soon as he snapped his phone shut, John jumped in. "Take me to him. Now."

"Not here," O'Neill said, turning on his heel and heading out of the studio.

With a curt nod, John fell into step behind him.

It wasn't until they were outside, Carter and John standing with him did O'Neill begin to explain. "There seems to have been an…incident."

"Explain." To say John was upset was the understatement of the year.

"What you saw…we saw…wasn't us." O'Neill's voice was tight, controlled—barely. Stiffening, John fought down the urge to punch something. "Then who the fuck was it, and where is McKay?"

"I don't know. I was just as surprised as you were, Colonel. We're looking into it. Did you want to go back to the hotel? We might be able to get more information. There is a team on-site."

"Yes." God damnit. If they hadn't fucking shot him when he tried to go back to the hotel last night, none of this would have happened. He knew leaving Rodney alone like that was a bad idea.

They settled into their truck and sped to the Hilton. "Sheppard, you mentioned something about McKay getting phone calls last night," O'Neill said—a statement more than a question.

"Yes, until his phone went dead. It happened while I was on with him actually. He said he had been getting them for the past five hours—he thought I was someone asking him for comment when I first called. And that's another thing I want to know—these phones were issued to us by the SGC—how the hell did his number get out to the press?"

"He was getting calls on his cell?" O'Neill seemed surprised.

"Apparently he unplugged the hotel phone because it wouldn't stop ringing, and then it started on his cell, yes. That's why his battery went dead, and the charger was in the car. He was afraid to try and leave his fucking room to go get it, and he was afraid room service would be attacked if he tried to order anything. Why the fuck do you think I was so hell bent on getting back to him before I was fucking shot?" John knew his voice was rising as he spoke, but he didn't care. Right now he viewed this as the SGC's fault. If they hadn't forced him to do this…

O'Neill's eyes narrowed. "You should have said something before heading to the surface in the middle of the night without a guard."

"I didn't know about it until I called him." John rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was calling to see how he was holding up since there had been a crowd of reporters in the lobby when we left, and when I asked them to send someone back up to at least warn him, I was rebuffed. And then I turned around and was confronted and shot."
"The Airmen were ordered to make sure you stayed in the Mountain," O'Neill said, flicking open his cell after the first ring. "O'Neill." He listened for a long minute before nodding. "We're two minutes out. I have Carter and Sheppard with me. I expect a full report when I get there."

Rolling his eyes, John looked out the window. "No offense, sir, but so far, this whole coming out thing? Has really been handled badly."

"Tell the President. He doesn't listen to anyone anyway."

"If you let me talk to him, sir, I can't guarantee you'll ever see me again as a free man."

O'Neill shrugged. "You might be surprised." They pulled into the Hilton a minute later, tires screeching to a halt. The press were several yards away from the building now, back behind a yellow line, but the cameras were still rolling as they strode into the lobby, John heading for the elevator.

As soon as he was in the suite, John ignored the team already casing the place, and went looking in the few places he knew McKay might leave him a message as to what the hell happened, if he was able.

The room, though, was a mess. Two floor lamps were overturned, papers scattered all over. Every drawer in McKay's bedroom was open and empty, the clothes spread everywhere. This didn't look like a peaceful exit at all.

Someone had been looking for something, that much was certain.

John was furious. And, admittedly, he was dangerous right now. When he found the people who did this... Moving into his own room, he saw signs that someone had been through it, but not to the same extent. Poking around, he found what he was looking for—a small Ancient recorder he knew McKay like to carry around with him sometimes because not many people outside of a select few mostly on Atlantis could get the data back off.

Clicking it on, John listened to a very short message from McKay—whispered and hurried. "Sheppard, I hope that you get this. I’m going to leave it in your room. I can hear someone trying to get in the door. The cell's dead and I tried plugging in the hotel phone and it's not working now either. I don't know what they want from me. I've been up all night. If you get this, you had better get your ass in gear and find me. I don't think it's reporters out there." There was a loud snap—which John realized had to be the chain on the door finally giving out—and then McKay's quiet and panicked "Oh god..." before the recording ended.

Taking a deep breath, John walked back out to where O'Neill and Carter were standing with the security team. Ha! Security his ass. Without a word, he triggered the message again for them.

Carter paled and O'Neill only seemed to get angrier. "Do you have a time stamp?" he asked after listening to the message twice.

Closing his eyes, John focused on the device, asking it for the information. A moment later, a computerized-sounding voice told him the information—in Ancient of course—which John knew just enough of to translate. "About 2am last night."

"I won't ask how or why you have that recorder here, but that does seem right in line from what I'm hearing from the reports," O'Neill said.

Shrugging, John pocketed it. "It's Rodney's. It's one of the little gadgets he's rarely without these days, so I was hoping, if he had time, he had left me a message."
"It's Ancient," Carter said, her eyes lingering on where he'd placed the small device.

"Yes. Both of us have a variety of Ancient stuff we travel with. Has anyone tried to track Rodney's sub-cu? What about getting the footage the press took of the guys who grabbed him?" As he spoke, John was walking around the room, pulling out the various little gadgets they had stashed as soon as they moved in—paranoia he had picked up from McKay that had proved justified. Among the stuff was his Life Signs Detector that John refused to go anywhere without anymore.

"There seems to be a problem with the equipment," O'Neill said snidely. "Conveniently."

"Of course." John growled. He turned on the detector, and asked it to widen it's parameters to the maximum range and seek out McKay's individual sign. It wouldn't find him if was further away than a few miles, but John had long ago learned how to make the LSDs distinguish a few specific signs—most notably his team.

"I'm not the enemy, Colonel," O'Neill said, looking over his shoulder. The LSD wasn't showing anything.

Sighing, John nodded. "I know, sir. I'm just frustrated. And I really wish I had a Jumper. They can scan a bigger area faster than I can on foot with this."

"We'll find him. I promise. We're doing everything we can."

"Yeah, but will we find him in time?" Shutting down the LSD, John sat down in one of the chairs, putting his head in his hands. He couldn't even fucking protect his team on his home planet.

"General?" A Marine walked in, eyes scanning for O'Neill and finding him a moment later. "Sir, if you have a minute…"

O'Neill gave a curt nod, and moved off to the side with the soldier.

Carter sat down gingerly next to him. "We'll find out what happened," she said quietly.

"It's my job to protect him, and I wasn't here."

"You weren't given the choice and he should have been safe here."

"I should have fought harder to stay with him."

Carter shook her head. Her voice was full of understanding. "You couldn't have. I've been in your place. I know."

"I should have done something. He's my responsibility."

"Like what, disobey orders? Then you'd be in lock-up and McKay would still be missing."

Sighing heavily, John rubbed his forehead. "Not like I'm going to have a career after this anyway. We both know I'm being set up to be the one who takes a fall to ensure nothing else gets out."

"The General won't allow that to happen, Sheppard," Carter said strongly. "He was against this from the get-go. This isn't the right time to reveal the program, not with everything else that's going on and the dangers we're facing on a daily basis. The last thing we need is to be fighting on two fronts: out there and then here with the press and the other governments."

"But we don't have a choice now, and the only way they're going to distract the press from
hunting for more classified information is by having a scandal. I've done this before, Colonel. I've been the fall guy in the past, and I know damn well my record, position, and vocal disagreements the last few days make me the perfect and only candidate for it this time too."

"Right now, it seems that they're setting up McKay for that scandal, Sheppard. The anchor this morning already alluded to his sexual orientation."

Looking up, John was surprised. He must have missed that. "What difference does that make? He's a civilian. And he's straight to boot."

"Actually, he isn't," Carter said carefully, watching John's face. "When the anchors said that we were more 'presentable' I knew exactly what they meant. As much as he drives me crazy, there's no reason to slam a man for his personal choices."

John blinked a few times. He wasn't sure what to make of that, and was more than a little surprised that certain parts of his anatomy perked up a bit. Okay, that was just weird. "Okay, I've known him for years and he's only ever talked about women—you specifically. But that's beside the point—even if he was banging ever girl, boy, or alien creature between here and Atlantis he's fucking good at what he does, and that has no bearing on absolutely anything."

"As surprising as it sounds, McKay does know when it's best to keep things to himself. He's worked for the US military for years, Sheppard, on and off since he was twelve. He knows what goes on. He's just trying to save his own skin and his job," she said quietly. "And I agree with you. He's good at what he does. Some of the solutions he figures out surprise me sometimes too because I would have never thought of it. And don't tell him that."

John chuckled softly. "I won't. Now we just need to find him."

Her hand on his arm was comforting and firm. "We will."

With a sigh, he straightened up a bit. "So how are we going to coordinate finding him, keeping it from getting any worse in the press, and keeping the real program a secret all at the same time?"

"We'll wing it," O'Neill said, stepping close. "Sheppard and Carter, I need you in civies to investigate a tip we've gotten—actually from one of the journalists."

Standing, John nodded. "Most of my clothes are still here. I can be changed in five minutes."

"Do it," O'Neill said, with a nod. "And pack up, too. Give your stuff to Corporal..." He pointed at the Airman at his side. "Give it to him. I'll make sure it gets to where it's going. And we'll have McKay's stuff packed up as well."

"We're ten minutes from my house. I can grab something on the way," Carter said as she rose to her feet.

With a nod, John was in his room, grabbing a pair of jeans and a shirt—with a pang, god had it just been yesterday they were still on vacation at the fair?—and then stuffed everything else, including the uniform, into his duffel. Heading back out, he handed that to the Airman. "I'm ready when you are, sir."

O'Neill nodded. "Carter's already downstairs commandeering a car. Keep your cell on. She has all the details. Go."

"Right. Keep me posted if you hear anything else." John headed for the door, down the elevator and through the lobby. He was grateful to find Carter parked right outside.
"Ready?" she asked as soon as he slid inside.

"Yeah. What lead do we have?"

"Apparently one of the journalists was headed to the hotel at the time of the abduction and spotted two dark Suburbans headed out of the city center. He was able to give us an approximate direction—which is better than what we had, which was nothing," she said, headed into traffic, maneuvering the large vehicle easily.

"I have the LSD with me. Its range is about two miles. Having a direction to work with is better than casing the whole damn city."

She nodded as she weaved between a few cars. "The General is trying to get our sensors up and running so we can locate McKay's sub-cu. If the Daedalus was in orbit it would be much easier, but it's not due into the system for a week."

John ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, we're supposed to be catching a ride home on her after the re-supply." He glanced out the window. "What about that jumper the SGC found? If I promise not to tell it to take us to another time period, think they would let us use it?"

"No. Area 51 took it apart. Only McKay and Zelenka could put it back together now."

"God damnit. Why did they do that?" It caused him physical pain to think of a beautiful jumper, all torn to pieces.

"They wanted to see how it worked," she said with a sigh, cutting across two lanes to make a right turn onto a residential block. "Almost there."

He rolled his eyes. "I could have told them that without them destroying a perfectly good ship."

"They wanted to physically see it," she said. "We tried to talk them out of it, but they went over our heads and got approval from the President. They pointed to the success of the X302 project and reminded us that we did the same thing to several Goa'uld ships."

"And let me guess—none of them have the gene, so it was a completely pointless waste of a good resource."

"You guessed right." She turned down another block, tires screeching a little before she pulled to an abrupt stop outside a small house. "It'll take me five minutes. I also have a sidearm I can give you."

"Good. I have a knife, but I'll feel better armed. I can wait here for you."

"Thought so," she said with a smile. "You can come in if you want."

With a small smile, he took off his seatbelt and followed her inside. It was a neat house, well kept. He lingered in the living room, absently looking at the photographs on the mantle.

Team photos, all of them. Smiling faces of Daniel Jackson, Teal'c, O'Neill, Mitchell, and others stared back at him. They were her family, just like McKay was his family. She understood the same way O'Neill did.

Carter returned a minute later in jeans and a nice shirt, holding out two 9 mils for him. "Have a preference?"

He looked up, and really smiled for the first time in what felt like a while. "As long as it goes bang
when I pull the trigger, I'm good."

She laughed. "I cleaned them the other day. They're good."

He took one, checking the safety out of habit, and then sliding it against his back, held tight by his jeans. "Let's go find my geek."

She handed him three extra clips. "Just in case."

He pocketed them, following her out the door. In no time, they were on the highway, heading north. John had his LSD out, scanning constantly.

A few minutes after they hit the main highway, John's cell rang, O'Neill's number coming up on the display.

He answered without taking his eyes off the detector. "Sheppard."

"Scanner's up and running and we have a ping coming from north of Denver, Rocky Mountain State Park."

"Roger that. North of Denver, Rocky Mountain State Park." He relayed the information to Carter. "We're headed that way now, sir."

"I can get you a chopper with a strike team in about thirty minutes," O'Neill said, and John relayed the information to Carter.

She sent a sidelong glance at Sheppard. "It would save us a good three hour drive. But depending where he is in the park…we might not be able to get in with the chopper."

"Sir," John said into the phone. "We're concerned about the viability of the chopper in the park. We might not have a landing site."

"I can arrange to have the Suburbans meet you at the Ranger Station. There's a helipad there. We have a small office not far away."

John nodded, signaling with his hand to turn around. "That sound good, sir. It'll save us some time. We'll be at Peterson in about twenty minutes."

"The chopper will be waiting. O'Neill out."

John let out a long breath as Carter maneuvered the truck back toward the Air Force base.

"We'll find him."

John hoped so. If they didn't, he wasn't sure how he would be able to cope.

Twenty minutes later and they were at Peterson, O'Neill pulling up in a military Jeep several seconds later. "Just so you know, we've made the news," he said without any other preamble.

"Fuck. How bad?"

"Bad enough. When one of the heads of a scientific outpost is kidnapped while on vacation, that's never good. It's a national headline story and I have to make a statement in about thirty minutes."

John was smart enough not to say the 'better you than me, sir' that was on the tip of his tongue. "Anything we can do to help?"
O'Neill shook his head. "Find him."

"That's my plan. And, sir? With your permission, I'd like to ensure I stay with him for the duration of our stay on Earth. Now that it's out, he's even more of a target than we could have imagined. I'll feel better if I have your permission to assign myself as his permanent guard."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Sheppard, but you're also going to have your own guards in addition. I won't let this happen again."

"Understood, Sir. I don't mind having more men at my command, but I don't think I'll be able to sleep easy unless I have personal control of McKay's safety. He's my responsibility."


"Understood. We'll call you on arrival."

"Oh!" O'Neill said, walking back a few paces. "And don't tell Schneider anything."

"Schneider? Why? I thought she was the one crafting our image." John made a few connections. "We have a leak somewhere and you suspect her, with the leak of McKay's cell number and location."

"Just be smart. Gotta go." O'Neill hopped back into the passenger side of the Jeep, his driver putting it into gear a minute later.

John rubbed his forehead again. He was getting a headache. Carter was headed back his way after checking with the strike team and the chopper. "We're under orders not to give Schneider any intel."

"Schneider?" Carter asked, her eyebrows drawing together.

"Press aide. She's the chick who came in yesterday and tried to bowl McKay over with her massive interview schedule. She's probably the main reason he dug his heels in and said no, and when we went outside and encountered the press, she refused to send anyone back upstairs to warn McKay what was coming."

"Oh. Her," Carter said, rolling her eyes. "She's useless, but the president likes her."

"You know, so far everything really irritating that's happened has been prefaced with 'But the President ordered...' or 'The President likes...' Why is that?"

"He's the boss," she said with a shrug.

"I don't remember voting for him."

"Doesn't matter."

"I know." John sighed, letting his gaze wander to the chopper. It looked like they were just about ready to go. The pilot was going through his pre-flight. "I really can't wait until I can go back to my city. I'll take space vampires over politics any day of the week."

"I know what you mean," Carter said with a sigh. "You have it easier than we do, I think. You can actually get away from it all. I have to deal with it day in and day out."

"I don't envy you that. And it will be even worse now."

"And thanks for that reminder," Carter said, rolling her eyes. She was quiet for a long moment
John flushed a little. "I really didn't. He's always talking about leggy blonds and whatnot. You're his number one fantasy I think—smart and sexy. I never suspected he might swing both ways."

"A lot of it is for cover. He knows most military people frown on what he does in his spare time—not that he has much of that."

He wondered if Rodney had anyone back on Atlantis that he was secretly with. The thought made John unaccountably upset for some reason, and his body flushed again. "I... so he doesn't like women at all?"

Carter shrugged. "He claims to be bisexual, at least that's what I've heard."

"I bet he likes his men like he likes his women—blond, classically sexy. Smart." Unconsciously John ran his hand through his own mess of dark hair.

"Smart, yes," Carter said, with a nod. "Blonde not so much. I think I was one of the few exceptions to his rule."

He shot her a startled glance. "All he ever talks about are blondes. I was pretty sure he had a weird paranoia about brunettes in general."

"I think with McKay it's what he doesn't say that you need to pay attention to. I figured you knew that by now. You've worked with him for three years already."

The whole conversation was a little surreal. "I'm, ah, not that perceptive about stuff like this. I never see it coming when someone is interested in me, the odds of me noticing it in anyone else are slim to none."

"You?" She sounded surprised.

He shrugged, glancing away. "I'm not the Kirk Rodney claims I am, and I have no idea where he got that idea. But don't believe the rumors. I'm just not interesting enough to get much attention, most of the time."

"Oh, god, you really have no clue. You should hear the people at the SGC whenever you come home."

He looked back over, incredulous. "What?"

"They all try to work when you're going to be there on the off-chance you might notice them," she said with a laugh. "God, it goes on for days before and after. That's all I hear."

He felt his cheeks heating up, and he spluttered a bit. "But... I'm not... why?!"

"You're cute when you get embarrassed."

That just made him flush harder, so he looked away before he made an even bigger fool of himself.

Carter chuckled. "Don't feel bad. Daniel's the same way. It's that...obliviousness that gets them every time. It's so endearing."

He choked a little. "Endearing? God..."
"I'm still surprised you didn't know about McKay," she said shifting the conversation again. "I figured since you two were so close…"

John shifted uncomfortably on his feet. He was close to McKay—very close. In fact, not knowing the other man was okay right now was nearly killing him. So what did that say about him? Why did he always seek out Rodney to hang out with, make him his partner in crime? "I, ah, we don't talk about that much, I guess. And when we do, it's usually him accusing me of lying about how little, um, action I get."

"You argue about your sex life?"

He knew he was beet red again, and he was never going to be able to look her in the eye again. Ever. "He, ah, accuses me of sleeping with every woman we meet. And I keep telling him I've been celibate for about three or four years now. He just says I'm lying and storms off in a huff, then doesn't talk to me for days. So we don't talk about it much."

Carter laughed. "You really don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"Why else would a bisexual man bring up sex with another guy?"

"All guys talk about sex. It's our favorite topic."

"Come on, Sheppard. Think. Use that brain McKay knows you have."

He stared at her. "What am I supposed to be thinking about? I don't get it. What does me and McKay arguing about my lack of a sex life have to do with anything?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Nevermind," she said with a glance over her shoulder. "Looks like they're ready. Are you?"

John nodded and blindly followed her, settling into the back of the chopper with the small strike team—three other soldiers.

His mind kept going back to the conversation he'd just had with Carter, mulling over the possibilities that Rodney might have a crush on him. John wasn't sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, he'd never been attracted to a man before. Hell, he'd been married once. But the thought of Rodney... wanting him... it made his pants feel a little tighter than strictly platonic.

He tried to pull his thoughts away from his mind's wanderings to concentrate on the mission on hand. Before he knew it they were landing at the Rangers' station and three black Suburbans were waiting for them.

John made sure his cell was on vibrate before shoving it in his pocket. A park ranger was waiting for them as they reached the trucks. John put on a forced smile as he walked up to him. "Sir. We're here following up on a lead that several men we're looking for might be in the area. I was told you've been briefed already?"

"Yessir. Like I told that General, a truck like yours sped through here this morning... around seven, heading into the mountains. Had tinted windows."

John squinted down the winding road. "How far back does that go? And is there another way off the mountain, or would they have to come back this way to leave?"

"Mountains. Plural, son. You're in the Rocky Mountains and there are a few ways in and out and..."
multiple trails and such. I have the Rangers looking for where they may have ditched the truck, but so far I haven't heard back from them."

Muttering a curse under his breath, John moved away slightly, pulling out his LSD. He flipped it on, hoping maybe they would get lucky, and the McKay-nappers hadn't gone far in.

"Didn't you notice the Mountains flying in, boy? You can't miss them."

"I wasn't paying much attention, to be honest..." he replied absently, mentally adjusting the range and target of the detector, trying to push it to find Rodney.

"Let me get an update from my men and I'll fill you in on all the latest."

"'Kay." He moved off down the road, focused more on what he was doing than on what the ranger was saying.

It took a few minutes to get the report, the ranger talking over his radio with his men. He moved back to Carter, his voice even as he explained.

"Sheppard, you might want to listen to this," Carter said a few minutes later, interrupting the ranger.

Looking up, he moved closer again—he wasn't picking anything up anyway. "You found something?"

The ranger adjusted his large hat, nodding his head. "Seems they may have abandoned the vehicle just before you get to Lulu City, near the trailhead for the Colorado River."

"How far away is that?"

"Ten miles. Not far at all. Rangers said they took to the trail. I have one man following it."

John was already heading to the car. "Carter, we need to get there now. If they're on foot, we have a better chance of getting in range."

"The trail forks off. They could be anywhere."

"If we can get within two miles, I can pick up McKay. Let's go."

"Colonel," the Ranger said, moving a few steps closer. "There are a few cabins up on the ridge. If I were them, I'd head there."

"Come with us. You can point us in that direction once we're on the trail." John swung into the passenger seat again, still focused on the LSD.

"Ranger Rodgers is waiting at the truck at one of the trailheads. His partner is headed up the trail."

"Radio ahead and tell him to hold his position until we arrive. I don't want to put our man in any more danger than necessary, and I'd rather not spook them into moving again if they've stopped."

"There's a few trails that head into the same area," the Ranger said with a shrug. "I'll let my men know."

"Never underestimate desperate men." John muttered to himself. He looked at Carter. "What are we waiting for? Let's get down there."

"Yes, sir," she mumbled, climbing into the truck. She turned back to the ranger. "Thanks for your
They decided to split up to cover more ground. There were several ways to reach the subcu's signal and they were going to go at it from every direction possible. The other four members of the strike team headed to two other trails, planning to cover the other areas in case the kidnappers decided to run for it.

It only took about ten minutes before they were at the trail, and John slid out of the car, pushing the LSD again. "Come on, Rodney. Where are you?"

He got the barest hint of a response before it showed a clear screen again. They were close.

"He's just out of range, so a little beyond two miles." John looked up at the ranger who had been waiting for them, not caring that the man looked a little intimidated by John's intensity. "The guy at the gate said there are cabins nearby. How far away are they, and which direction?"

"About three miles. They're off the second fork, but they're locked down tight. We make sure of that."

Without a word, John drew his gun and started down the path. It was second nature now to be able to watch the LSD for the blip he wanted and keep his weapon up and aimed at the same time.

"Sir, you can't get into those cabins."

"Watch me."

"They're boarded up. They're not for use and we check them regularly for squatters."

John didn't bother to answer. He continued down the path, praying Rodney was there and all right. That they had caught these bastards before they had a chance to do anything.

He heard Carter talking with the Ranger, keeping it short and sweet, before she was running to catch up with him. "His partner's still on the trail."

He gave a curt nod, moving quickly. Finally, on the far edge of the screen the dot he had been waiting for blipped up—a bright blue, the same color as Rodney's eyes. It was him. He was close, and still alive.

The trail wasn't hard, but it wasn't easy either. They were somewhere above 8,000 feet heading up to nine.

"There's some tracks, but it's hard to make out much," Carter said quietly. "I can't tell how many men there are."

"All I care about right now is that McKay is there. They'll either give him up or they'll die. Those are the options."

"We don't want to make it worse, Sheppard."

He stopped and looked at her. "They took what belongs to me. I'm not going to play nice."

"I understand. I do. But we have to be smart. We don't want them to do something to McKay either."

"I don't plan on being rash, but I'm not going to let them walk away either." He started hiking again.
"Rodgers said his partner was waiting for us at the first fork."

It didn't take them long to reach that point. John glanced at the ranger, dismissing him as a likely liability if it came down to combat. He knew they needed the right fork, but he let Carter deal with the guy while John reconfigured the LSD to give him total human lifesigns in the designated area, Rodney's dot still in blue. Six men total, with three on McKay, and three patrolling. Not as bad as it could have been.

Carter nodded, heading to Sheppard. "He said he tracked four men up the trail, but another group of three went up the day before. They didn't come back out yet, so they're still on the trail."

"There are three clustered around McKay, my guess would be in one of those cabins. Three patrolling in the woods around a central point."

"That's our seven."

John nodded. "Let's move out."

Carter fell in step next to John, her gun drawn, her eyes moving constantly over the area. A few minutes later she spoke, her voice hushed. "Do you realize they had to have been planning this?"

"Yeah, which worries me. That means we had a leak even before the program went public."

"So this might not be about the program. This might be something else entirely."

"We'll deal with the motivations later. Right now I just want to get McKay back in one piece."

"But why snatch McKay in the first place? Yes, they're getting national media attention because he's tied with a high-level news event, but there has to be something else."

"I'll let one of them live so you can ask."

"Sheppard, it matters."

Pausing, he glanced over at her. "I know it does. And once Rodney is safe, I'll care. But right now, getting him back is my top priority, not trying to guess why he was taken in the first place."

Carter shook her head. "But if his health and safety isn't their top priority, if making a statement is, they might kill him before we can rescue him. Something's not right here and I don't know what it is. They haven't been trying to hide themselves, or at least not very hard. They left the truck out in the open. It's almost like they want to be found."

He rubbed his forehead. "So what do you suggest? We can't leave him there, and we have no way to beam him out right now."

"I don't know," she said sounding just as frustrated as him. "We need to be careful."

He nodded again. "I always am. We'll go slow, and take out the guards one at a time. They can't have anticipated we'd be able to track them individually like this."

"Never assume, Sheppard."

He resisted the urge to remind her that he did this every day for a living too. For now, he just moved forward slowly, all his senses on full alert as they closed in on the first dot.

The area was quiet, peaceful, the foliage thick as soon as you stepped off the main trail. On
another occasion, this would be a perfect trail to hike.

Carter might outrank him, but John was a team leader in the field. They naturally fell into sync, and he motioned her to move around so they could come at guard number one from two sides.

John spotted the guard easily. It was certainly helpful to know exactly where to look. He was mid-aged and looked like a soldier. He was armed with a semi-automatic weapon and at least two knives and a side-arm—at least that John could see. This Boy Scout wouldn't be living long enough to use any of them and it would give them some additional weapons.

John took careful aim, glad Carter's guns had silencers on them. They wouldn't alert the others to their presence—yet.

He squeezed the trigger slowly, feeling the kick-back as the bullet launched itself forward, Boy Scout tumbling forward with a soft cry a few seconds later.

John waited several heartbeats, watching the LSD carefully. None of the others moved from their positions. Perfect. He moved slowly to the body, checking to make sure the man was really dead before looting everything of value to them.

Carter stood next to him, tight-lipped and silent. She took whatever John handed her, tucking it away.

One of the items they looted was a taser—nice. Standing, John handed it to Carter. "If you can immobilize them, do it. We can question them later, once McKay is safe."

"You have ties? I didn't bring any."

He shook his head. "No. But they might have something, and we can improvise if necessary. I'd rather not kill any more of them than absolutely necessary."

Carter nodded. "I'll follow your lead. What's next?"

John showed her the screen. "Let's take out goons two and three, so we don't have to worry about anyone coming up on our six. Then we'll deal with the men inside."

"Good." She pointed to two other life signs. "Are these the rangers? Why are they getting closer?"

He cursed quietly. "Because they're idiots. Let's move quickly and take out the goons before the rangers blow our cover."

"I told Rodgers to stay behind," Carter said, shaking her head. "I'm right behind you."

"This is turning into a fucking fiasco." They started moving again, quicker this time, although still on high alert.

"Hate to tell you, but it was one already."

"No kidding." They fell quiet as they got closer. John motioned for Carter to take the first shot, hoping they wouldn't have to kill this one too.

She moved quietly, silently, taking aim with the taser. A few seconds later and the guard was on the ground, unconscious. Perfect.

While John looted this one too, she used some rope the guy had on him to bind and gag the guy. They dragged him to a tree and secured him to that, as an extra security measure.
"One more?"

"Yes. That way." John pointed through the woods. "Let's do it the same way, nice and easy."

Ten minutes later, the last guard was unconscious and secured to a tree. They'd worry about the clean-up later. He'd get O'Neill to send the local police to round them up.

"All right, now for the hard part." John studied the dots on the map. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing the layout of the cabin ahead of time, so they didn't know if they were all in the same room or not. "Any suggestions?"

"Any intel we can get on the layout would be helpful. Three guards inside?"

"Yeah, and unfortunately this thing gives me lifesigns, not a full map. So your guess is as good as mine as to the layout."

"Think we can get one of the guards to come out?"

"We can try. All three of our goons had radios. Want to try and set up a diversion? I'll play bait and get him into the woods if you stun him as soon as he's clear."

Carter thought for a long moment, her finger tapping against her top lip. "Might be too risky for McKay. Can you get any bio data on him?"

"The basics, yes. He's alive, and his vitals are steady. Heart rate is a little elevated, but nothing to worry about at the moment."

"Conscious?"

"It doesn't tell me. Based on what I know of his baselines, I'd say yes, though."

"Let's get a little closer, see if we can get a line of sight. It'll help us to make a decision as to how to proceed."

Nodding, John started moving again, keeping an eye on all the dots. He motioned to the back of the cabin once it was in sight—it looked like that was where McKay was, relatively speaking, so maybe there was a window they could look through.

With hand signals, he let her know he was moving ahead to look in—he'd spotted a small area he could peer through where some of the wood had pulled away after they'd boarded up the windows.

He approached slowly, all his senses on alert. With a last quick look at the LSD, he shifted so he could look in, spotting McKay immediately. He was in the center of the room, handcuffed hands secured to the chair with another pair of cuffs. He was blindfolded and gagged and no one else was in sight.

Glancing at the LSD again, John guessed that all three goons were probably in the next room.

There was no quiet or easy way to get in the smaller room. He had to go through the front.

He fell back to Carter's position, quickly going over what he had seen. "I'm not sure we're going to be able to avoid this getting messy, as much as I'd like to."

"I'm worried about McKay's position in the house. If they retreat there we're going to have a problem."
"Yeah, That's my concern too." He looked at the back of the house. "If I go in the front, can you aim through that hole and take out anyone who tries to come through the door?"

"We need to get them out. I think that's going to be our best bet. Can we wait them out a little? Maybe take out one if he goes to answer the call of nature."

"I hate to wait. We don't know what they're planning, so it could just be worse."

"Worse? How?"

"Reinforcements. Torture. I could think of a hundred things."

"Can we get a line of sight on the three in the front?"

"We can try, but I'm not holding out much hope. Let's move around and see what we have."

Carter nodded, falling silent again as they moved around the cabin.

They took up position in the woods, both of them using pilfered binoculars to peer through the windows. "I see two of our marks, but no sign of the third."

"Is he outside already?"

John shook his head. "No, still inside. My guess is in either another room, or just out of our line of sight. He's not in with McKay."

"With the boards on the window, it limits our options."

He made a frustrated noise. "So give me some options. I'm all for drawing them out if we can and picking them off one at a time, but I don't want to sit here and wait hours while we have no idea what they're doing with McKay."

"If they're not in with him we know they're not doing anything. I don't want to put us in a worse position that we're already in. We have surprise on our side. Would a frontal attack work?"

"With just two of us and three of them, plus a hostage?" John bit his thumb while he thought. "It might, but it would put all of us in a lot more danger. Let's try luring one out. Take up a position where you can get a clear line of sight as soon as he's out of the immediate vicinity of the cabin. I'll press the radio button a few times, and see if that will draw them out. At least it would even the odds a bit."

"Might put them on the defensive, though. They have to know we're looking for McKay."

"Probably, but if we want to lure one out, that's really our only option at this point."

Carter nodded after a minute. "Okay. Let's do it."

They both moved into position, and John signaled that he was going to start, waiting for Carter's acknowledgement before pressing the radio button a few times, as if someone was trying to call in to base, but was having interference.

One of the goons responded, asking for a repeat. John watched the screen of the LSD, waiting for someone to head out. It took three more tries before they got fed up, one of the guy's storming out. The two remaining men shifted around inside, one of them moving toward the back of the cabin toward McKay. Damn.
They would have to deal with that eventually. For now, John watched as goon four stormed into the woods, right toward Carter's position. Perfect.

She picked him off with the taser as soon as he was in range, moving quickly to secure him and move him out of sight. Good. One more down.

John watched the two left inside as they shifted around, obviously a little on edge. They might have to move in soon.

John waited for Carter to join him again. "I think we're going to have to go for a frontal assault. Move around to the back and take up a position in case either of the goons try to go for McKay. I'll go in the front and pick them off. Hopefully surprise will be all we need."

"Where are they now?"

"Both are in the front room again, but they're moving around a lot."

"How about we wait five minutes, let them settle down once again?"

He was ready to go, but took a deep breath. "Okay. But if it looks like they're getting more agitated instead of less, we move."

"Of course. Just tell me when you want to move in," she said, giving John a nod.

Since they had a few minutes, probably, John pulled his cell out, dialing O'Neill's number. He might as well check in and update the General as to their status.

After a long pause, he got the fast beep of a disconnected call. Checking his phone, he noticed there was no signal. Great.

He pocketed it again. They would just have to call when they got back in range of a cell tower. All this advanced technology, and they still had no fucking cell phone signal.

Five minutes passed slowly, John watching the LSD and the dots shift around the cabin before settling down into the same position as they were before, leaving McKay alone once again.

"All right, this is probably as good as we're going to get. Two of them, both in the front room, more or less stationary."

"Want to go in together then?"

He let her see the screen. "Take the guy on the left. I'll take the one on the right, closest to Rodney."

"Good. You want to take the door and go in first?"

"Yes. Cover me. Let's move out." Together, they moved fast and low toward the door. John did one last check to confirm the positions in the house before tucking the LSD away and bringing his gun to the ready. He silently counted down from three, and then they burst through, John taking aim and firing at his target, although he didn't deliberately aim for a kill.

He heard another pop and thud, indicating Carter had hit her target as well. John moved in quickly, checking his guy. The shot had gone through his shoulder—a through and through. A quick flip and the guy was on his stomach, John securing his arms with an extra piece of rope he'd saved from before.
Glancing up, Carter nodded at him. "Go. I'm good."

He nodded, and went through to McKay, weapon still up—just in case. "Rodney? Buddy?"

The scientist's head came up and he moaned, shifting in the chair as much as his bonds would allow.

He moved across the room, putting a hand on the scientist's shoulder and squeezing before removing the gag and blindfold as he tried to reassure his friend. "Hey buddy, it's John. Carter and I are both here—she's securing the guys who snatched you, and I'm going to find the key to get you out of here."

As soon as the gag was free, McKay licked his lips and then started yelling. "What took you so long? I thought they were going to kill me! They broke into the room, I tried to fight but there were three of them and they—"

John put a finger to Rodney's lips, and he was a little...surprised...at how strong the urge was to use his own mouth instead. "We got here as fast as we could. We didn't find out until this morning that you had been taken."

Carter poked her head around the corner. "We're clear, Sheppard."

"Good. Search the goons and see if either of them have the handcuff key so we can get Rodney out of here."

"Be right back," she said, offering the scientist a smile. "Good to see you're in one piece, McKay."

John went down on one knee, bringing himself to Rodney's level. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you at all?"

"I was kidnapped. Of course I'm not all right."

John rubbed his thighs, needing to reassure himself. "Well, besides that. Did they hurt you?" because if they did, the others were dead.

"Bruises, mostly. I think," McKay said finally. "They put the cuffs on almost immediately and they're tight. They wouldn't take them off no matter how many times I asked. Apparently I asked them once too many times because they ended up gagging me to shut me up."

"Carter is looking for the key now, so we'll have them off soon, and then we'll get you out of here. For the duration of our stay on Earth, I'm officially your very own personal bodyguard. I won't let anything like this happen again."

"What about your national television debut?"

"It sucked big time." John sighed. "We didn't do so well. I'll tell you about it once we're in the car headed home."

"I'm tired and thirsty and hungry and I just want to get out of here," McKay said quietly, head dropping down.

"I know, buddy." John squeezed his thigh again. "Well get you something to eat and drink soon, okay? Just hang in there a little longer." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Carter? Any luck finding that key?"
"Still looking. I might have to check on the guy I tagged outside," she called from the other room.

"I'd rather you not go alone. This was a little too easy for my piece of mind. Let's see if we can pick the lock and get out of here."

"Sheppard, please," McKay begged quietly, shifting in the chair, pain filtering across his face.

"Shh. I know, buddy." John moved around to the back of the chair, examining the handcuffs. They were a pretty basic pair. "Carter, I don't suppose you have anything long and skinny? I think I can pop the lock if you do, or can find something like that on one of our friends."

"Give me a minute, Sheppard," she called, huffing a little. "Tiny here is sitting on his key ring."

Huffing softly, John didn't realize he was stroking Rodney's arm until the other man said something.

"I'm okay. Banged and bruised, but I'm okay."

"I was really worried. I tried to get back to you that night, but I ran into some airmen who had been ordered to keep me on base, period. They tranqued me."

"Nice people you work for," he said snidely, flexing his fingers a little. John could see how the cuffs were cutting into his wrists, could see the marks—black and blue in some places, others rubbed red and raw.

"I tried to resign. Several times. They won't let me, and told me if I leave anyway, I'll be locked in Leavenworth for the rest of my natural life." He sighed.

"We were both kidnapped, weren't we?"

John decided not to fight the urge—hell, he could always put it off as stress later if necessary. He brushed his lips against the fragile skin of Rodney's arm. "I'll find a way to get us out of this in one piece, I promise. We'll get back to Atlantis."

McKay stilled and quieted in the chair. "Sheppard?" he asked a few beats later, his voice quiet, curious. Carter picked that moment to walk in brandishing a key ring.

"Later." John said softly, then stood to take the key ring from her. It was almost anti-climactic when the first one opened the cuffs.

McKay groaned as he pulled his arm forward as John moved to unlock the second cuff. The bruises were deep and ugly and would provide a reminder for days about what happened.

Taking a deep breath, John pushed down his anger. He could give in to it later, when everyone was safe. "Let's get back down to the car so I can call O'Neill to come pick up the goons."

"Didn't you bring the car up?"

"We couldn't. The path is too skinny to get a car through here. And we didn't want to lose the element of surprise by taking the main road."

"What do you mean the path is too skinny? Where are we?"

"Rocky Mountains." John took point, nodding to Carter to watch their six as they moved out. "In a remote cabin in the middle of bumsuck nowhere."

McKay's paused as soon as they stepped into the other room, his eyes skimming over the two men
McKay's paused as soon as they stepped into the other room, his eyes skimming over the two men tied up in the main room of the cabin. He was on his feet, but a little unsteady. He moved forward when John tugged gently on his arm only to pause again as soon as they stepped outside.

"We're…" His voice trailed off as his eyes widened, scanning the area around them. "I was…I didn't know. They had me blindfolded as soon as I was in the truck. Then they complained when I kept tripping because I couldn't see where I was going. It felt like we walked forever and then they tied me down to that chair…"

The scientist started shaking a little, the reality and enormity of everything finally settling over him.

Stepping closer, John put a hand on his shoulder. "We found you. You're safe now."

"They could have done anything…no one would have heard me, found me…"

"We did find you." John stepped in front of him, forcing the other man to look him in the eye. "I came for you. I'll never leave you behind. Period."

McKay held his eyes for a long moment before finally nodding. "Can we…can we go?"

"Yeah." Falling back into step, John led the way, keeping his gun out and ready—just in case.

He heard Carter talking quietly to McKay along the way, the scientist answering her most of the time. He sounded tired, looked tired.

Fortunately there were no more incidents, although John was a little suspicious at the lack of park rangers they encountered. God damnit, those guys were probably in on it. He radioed the other two teams on the way down, letting them know what happened and that they were headed back. Although, their missing Suburban was a good enough indication of the Rangers' collaboration.

"Sheppard?" Carter asked as soon as the road came into view minus the kidnapper's truck and their own vehicle.

"Yeah, I'm thinking the park rangers seriously suck. I should have just shot them." He pulled out his cell, hoping maybe, just maybe, he'd get reception here.

Two bars. Hopefully it would hold.

"The park rangers…?" McKay asked, looking between the two of them. "Are you kidding me?"

"I seriously think I might hate Earth now." John sighed as he dialed O'Neill.

"About time you checked in." You had to love how the General answered the phone.

"Sorry, sir. No reception in the mountains. The short version: We have McKay, there are a bunch of goons tied up in the woods, one casualty, and the park rangers stole our car."

"You lost the Suburban I sent you?"

"Lose would imply I misplaced it, sir. When in fact, it was taken while I was busy shooting tasers at the goons who stole my scientist."

"They had tasers?"

"Yes, sir. The only casualty was the first one we encountered. We took his taser, and used it to subdue the rest. McKay is safe, but shaken up and bruised, and he needs to eat something soon,
since I don't think they fed him. We'd appreciate it if you could send someone to get us ASAP."

There was a pause. "Can't you just find your Suburban?"

John ran a hand through his hair. "Well, sir, we'll start walking, but the ranger station is about ten miles from our current position, and I don't think McKay is in any shape for a long hike followed by a possible assault on an armed position with an unknown number of additional goons. The other two strike teams are heading down the mountain themselves and it'll take them some time. I'd rather not wait any longer than I have to."

"Okay. Let me see what I can do. Hang tight. O'Neill out."

"Yes, sir." John snapped the phone closed and slipped it back in his pocket. "He's seeing what he can do," he told the others. "In the meantime, should we wait here, or start walking? Rodney, what are you up for?"

The scientist shot him a "you have got to be kidding me" look. "You said ten miles. I'm not walking ten miles anywhere."

"Yeah, that's what I figured." John waved at the road. "I'm afraid our accommodations aren't great, but if you want to have a seat, we might be here for a while. Carter, I'll take first watch if you want to stand down and rest for a bit."

"I'm good," she said, gesturing toward a bench just off the road. "Go sit. You had a rough night." McKay was already moving, dropping down on the bench with a groan.

He nodded, going to sit next to the other man. God, he was exhausted.

"We need a time machine."

"Why?" John looked curiously at the scientist.

"I just want to hit one button and erase the last few years of my life."

John looked over, and sighed. "Not me. Despite all the downs, I wouldn't give up Atlantis or the people there for anything."

"I don't know," Rodney said, grimacing when he shifted on the bench. "I'm just tired of all the alien rituals, the Wraith, the Genii, the Replicators, the Asurans…" He sighed. "I don't know."

John swallowed hard. He couldn't imagine life without Rodney. He didn't know what he felt about Carter's belief that Rodney... wanted him? But he did know he didn't want the other man to leave Atlantis. So instead of answering, he just slouched on the bench.

At the sound of an oncoming car, John perked up. If they could get to the visitor station, town wasn't far from there. Carter glanced back at him, her expression questioning. It wasn't one of their cars. Did they try to flag down the car?

"High alert. Rodney, move behind the bench. Let's see who it is."

Thankfully the scientist didn't argue. He groaned as he moved, but he did what he was told without complaint. Carter stepped into the road, waving her arms.

John kept his 9mil out and ready, but hidden as he pretended to slouch on the bench, everything back on high alert.
The car turned out to be an Expedition—huge truck—and a family of three heading home from a day of hiking. They had pulled onto the shoulder, the driver—the father—sticking his head out. "Problem, folks?"

John stood, tucking his pistol discreetly into his jeans as Carter walked up. She smiled, a bit tired. "Hi, there. Yeah, we're a little lost. We thought we left our car here, but as you can see, we miscalculated. I don't suppose you could give us a lift back down the mountain? We can regroup from there and figure out where we should have come out."

McKay had edged out from his hiding spot, tugging his sleeves down over his wrists.

"Sure, thing. Hop on in. Where do you need to go? Ranger station? Visitor's center?" the driver asked, unlocking the doors so they could slide in. A teen-aged boy was sitting in the back, immersed in a hand-held computer game.

John motioned Rodney to get in first, then Carter, then him. "Actually, the visitor's center would be perfect, thanks so much. We appreciate it. We weren't looking forward to another ten-mile hike."

"Not a problem," the father said, offering a smile. Mom turned around in her seat as soon as they started off. Carter was next to McKay in the third row of seats, with John up next to the teenager.

It only took about two minutes before the mother's eyes widened a little. Damn. Damn. Damn. John gave her a charming smile, hoping to distract them. "How's the camping out this way? This is my first time here, and it's pretty beautiful."

"You're Colonel Sheppard," she said, pinning John with a look before her eyes slid to the back seat. "And Doctor McKay. You were on television. Harold, these were the two we were talking about this morning."

He stifled a groan. He was about to try and deny it, when his cell phone buzzed. Since ignoring a general wasn't really a good idea, he answered it, knowing all plausible deniability was going right out the window. "Sheppard."

"We located your Suburban."

He sat up straighter. "Where? A nice family is giving us a lift down the mountain now, so we'll be at the visitor center in about ten minutes."

"Parked at the Visitor Center. Some Good Samaritan said they found it abandoned on the side of the road."

"Huh. That's...weird but good news." John ran a hand through his hair. Since when would someone report the car abandoned? Many hikers left their cars at the trail head and came back for it later. Someone wanted something with it and that worried him. "We'll check it out, and I'll report in once we're on our way back, sir."

"Don't lose it or McKay again," O'Neill said, hanging up just as abruptly as before.

Rolling his eyes, John put the phone away. "Turns out our car is parked at the Visitor Center now—someone found it and thought it was abandoned so moved it for us. No wonder we were lost."

He gave another charming smile to the Mom. "Thanks again for the lift."

"Not a problem at all. So what's it like to work with alien technology and why are you out here? I thought you had all sorts of public appearances. At least that's what the news said last night."
"We were just doing a little hiking, like I mentioned."

"Honey, don't grill them. It looks like they've had a rough day," Harold—the dad—said quietly.

John shot him a grateful look in the rearview mirror. Looking back, John knew they needed to get Rodney something to eat soon. "I don't suppose you folks have any ration or granola bars, do you? My friend is hypoglycemic and we didn't think we'd be out here this long, so we didn't bring anything for him."

"In the trunk we have a cooler. I can get something out once we get to the Center," Harold said.

"Thanks. We'll owe you."

"Not a problem. I'm glad to help. Was in the service for a while. I know what it can be like."

"Which branch?" John leaned forward, interested.

"Army. Did my time and got out. Wasn't for me. I respect the work you do, though," he said, meeting John's eyes in the rearview mirror for a brief moment.

John chuckled softly. "Army was your problem. They don't have anything you can fly."

"I can't stand planes. I drive everywhere—as my family will attest."

He chuckled again. "Don't know what you're missing. There's nothing like the feel of the Gs when you're a few thousand feet up and it's just you and the sky."

"I know I'm missing nausea and vomiting." He shrugged, eyes sliding past John for a moment before they were focused once again on the winding road. "Doctor McKay, are you all right back there?"

John glanced back as well, to see Rodney looking a little glazed. "Hey, buddy—we're almost to the car, and then we'll get you something to eat. Stick with me, okay?"

Carter's face looked a little pinched. "He's too quiet."

John looked over his scientist carefully. "Fuck." He turned around so he could reach back, catching McKay's face. "Rodney, look at me. I need you to focus."

"Tired," he mumbled, shivering a little. John could feel the power of the truck as Harold sped up.

"I know. You've had a really long night. But I need you to stay with me just a little longer, okay? Once we're in our own car, you can curl up and go to sleep, I promise."

Carter was rubbing a hand along McKay's back, her other hand squeezing his knee. "Come on, McKay. You don't want to give up now do you?"

McKay snorted quietly.

It made John smile slightly. That was his geek. "Stay awake and alert for me until we're safely on the road back to town, and next time, I'll let you pick our excursion destination, and I promise not to snark or complain about the lack of Ferris wheels the whole time. How's that for a deal?"

He rolled his eyes and mumbled something, leaning a little heavier into John's hand.

"What was that?" John leaned in closer, unable to resist, stroking his thumb a little along Rodney's
He felt Carter's eyes on him, but ignored it. "You'll just pout instead," McKay said, his voice quiet, the words enunciated.

"I won't. I promise. I'll behave myself. You can drag me off to any weird museum or science place, and I won't even bat an eye."

McKay snorted again, his eyes drifting closed.

"We're pulling in now, Colonel," Harold said. "Where's your truck?"

John turned back around reluctantly, scanning the parking lot. "There," he pointed to the black Suburban. "Carter, can you check it over while I get McKay fed?"

She nodded. "Of course. Was going to suggest it."

Harold drove through the parking lot, pulling beside the Suburban and unlocking the doors a beat later. Only then did the teenager glance up, tugging the earphones from his ears.

"Hey. You were on TV," he said, eyeing John.

John shot him a brief smile before sliding out, a hand on McKay's arm to help the other man as soon as Carter was out and over to the car. He was grateful she was more experienced in this sort of thing than the two of them put together—she knew without asking to check the car for any traps that might have been left, and she was good enough to catch them all if there were any.

"I'll bring the cooler to the table," Harold said pointing to a nearby shaded table as he opened the back hatch of the truck.

With a nod, John led McKay to the table, pushing him down on the bench.

Pain flashed across Rodney's face for a fleeting second to be replaced by a scowl. "I'm not five you know."

"I know, but humor me, okay? You've spent the last twenty-four hours scaring the shit out of me. I need to make sure you're really all right."

McKay opened his mouth to protest again, but instead closed it, falling silent. He offered a tired nod a minute later.

When Harold arrived, John took the offered trail ration bar, automatically checking it to make sure there was no citrus before unwrapping it and handing it over.

The scientist made a face, but began eating when John turned a stern eye on him.

"I have some cold cuts," Harold said, digging around in the cooler. "Also some fruit juice. I think I only have apple left."

"Apple would be perfect actually, if you have any. He just can't have anything with lemon or orange in it—he's allergic to citrus."

"Apple coming right up. I have two sixteen-ounce bottles. Do you want both?"

"Let's start with one and see how he does." John flashed another grateful smile at Harold before handing over the juice to McKay. He was glad to see some color and alertness returning to his scientist's face.
As McKay took the juice, his sleeve slid up, revealing the deep bruising around his wrist. John shot a quick glance at Harold, but the other man was already turning away. John knew that he’d seen it, though.

Well, there was nothing they could do about it now. John glanced over and quickly memorized the family's license plate number—the SGC could use that to track them down and do something nice for the help they had provided. Carter was walking toward them, and John really hoped it was with good news.

"Truck’s clean now," she said when she got close.

"How bad was it?"

"I found an extra GPS tracker where it shouldn't be. It's government issue."

"Once we're on the road, I'll call O'Neill and have him send another car to meet us. I'd feel better switching it out so they can sweep this one more completely."

She nodded, her eyes drifting to McKay who was sipping at the juice. "I was going to suggest the same thing."

"Perfect. As soon as Rodney's ready, we'll hit the road then."

"I'm going to go chat with the family," Carter said, gesturing to the mother and son. "Just let me know when you're ready to go."

"Thanks." He smiled at her, looking back at McKay. "Feeling a little better?"

"Little," he said nodding. "Still hungry."

"Want to try some cold cuts?"

He shrugged, but his eyes slid over to the cooler. John swore if he was feeling better he would have been rummaging through it.

Rising, John pulled out the promised lunch meats and handed them over, along with the other bottle of apple juice.

"I have some wheat bread," Harold said, tugging that out as well.

John took it, and a bottle of mustard in the cooler as well, and made Rodney a quick sandwich.

He could see the scientist starting to twitch, wanting to do it himself so it would be faster. That was a good sign that McKay was starting to feel better. John knew, though, it would be short-lived once everything finally caught up with him. McKay would probably be out-cold on the ride back to the Springs.

He handed over the food, smiling to himself as Rodney devoured it, and then chased it with the other bottle of juice. All very good signs.

"Need anything else?" Harold asked quietly, hovering a few feet behind John.

"I really appreciate all the help. You guys have been great." John shook his hand firmly. "If there's anything we can do to repay you, just let me know." Not that he would wait, but if there was anything specifically they needed...
"I don't need anything. Just glad to help. You might want to have the base doctors look him over," Harold said, gesturing toward McKay. "This is only a stop-gap measure. You might want to stop on the way and grab some more juice or protein bars, too."

"Yeah, we will. I usually keep some glucose pills on me just in case, but with all the craziness they got left behind." John smiled as McKay stood—not nearly as shaky, and looking a hell of a lot better than he had ten minutes ago. "And it looks like we're about ready to get moving. Again, thanks a lot for all the help. We appreciate it."

"My pleasure. Like I said, I was glad I could help." He paused for a moment, eyes sliding to McKay and back to John again. "He's really important isn't he?"

John hesitated for a moment before nodding. "One of the most important people you'll ever meet, probably. Which is why it's my job to make sure he's kept safe."

"But they still kidnapped him."

Flinching a little, John sighed. "I fucked up. But it won't happen again, I can assure you."

"Sheppard?" McKay said quietly, a few steps closer to John than he'd been before. "Yeah?" He immediately turned back to Rodney.

"I gotta…" he gestured to the Visitor's Center.

Grinning, John shook his head. "Never change, McKay. Carter? We'll be right back."

Carter gave John a nod as they headed to the building. "What?" McKay asked as soon as they were alone. "What else did you want me to do? If I walked away from you, I swear you would have put me in a headlock or something."

"Probably," John smiled. "I wasn't kidding when I said I'm your personal body guard for the duration of our stay here. I won't let anyone take you or hurt you again."

"You can't guarantee that. No one can."

"But I can do my damnest to try."

McKay shot him a long, lingering look before nodding, turning his eyes back to the path they were walking. It was then that John really understood that McKay trusted him, really and absolutely trusted him.

It gave him a thrill he still wasn't prepared to completely analyze yet. He just knew there was no way in hell he was ever going to do anything to betray that trust.

It took a few minutes to take care of business and as John stepped out of the stall he caught a glimpse in the mirror of a bruise on McKay's back as the scientist quickly tugged down his shirt to hide it.

John didn't hesitate. He walked over and pulled the shirt up so he could examine the spot. "How did it happen?"

"Hey!" McKay protested, trying to shift away. John just pulled it higher, hand skimming lightly across the skin over the various bruises littering the scientist's torso and back.

"God, Rodney..." John's chest ached. "God, I'm so sorry I didn't get there sooner..."
"It's nothing," he said quietly. "They'll fade."

"You shouldn't have had to get them in the first place."

McKay shrugged. "It happens."

"I'm still sorry," John whispered, tracing the lines of each bruise with his fingertips.

The scientist shivered, his eyes closing. "Please, don't."

"Why?"

"You don't...you're not..."

Licking his lips, John stepped a little closer. "I don't know. I just know you're... you're... you. And I... like you."

McKay...Rodney...dropped his head forward, leaning more heavily on the counter with his hands. "It's...adrenaline."

"It's... been for a while now. I just didn't realize it. I... this isn't really the best place for this. But please... don't run off when we get back? I want to talk. I... I don't know what I want, to be honest, but you... I think I might want you."

Rodney shoved him off, pulling down his shirt with short angry moves. "No, you don't and it's not even funny to kid about that," he said, turning on John, his face angry. "Who put you up to this? Carter? Schneider? Trying to lure me in. No."

He turned on his heel and headed out the door to the bathroom, leaving John standing there feeling shell-shocked.

John took a few deep breaths before following Rodney out. He caught up to the other man before he made it back outside, while they were still out of Carter's line of sight. John stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Rodney. Wait, I'm not fucking with you, I promise. I won't pretend to know what's going on with me, but you... you're more important to me than anyone else, okay? And I... feel things. For you. I just... it's all kind of new to me, okay? I'm sorry I'm kind of fucking this up... You can say you don't feel the same way, but... but I'm not messing with you."

Rodney actually looked hurt, his face a mix of emotions. "I can't...no. I'm not going to discuss this now or any other time. When things settle down, you'll think back and realize you got it all wrong, that it was just something you thought you felt in the heat of the moment. I'll be just another loud-mouthed, balding, over-weight scientist, an arrogant asshole you can't wait to be rid of. Just...no. I don't want to have to deal with your straight-boy gay freak-out, either."

"We've been flirting for months, years, I think. I just didn't realize it. I..." John sucked at words, so he stepped close, pressing their lips together, briefly, almost chastely. It made his whole body tingle. "I can't promise I won't freak out later, but... this isn't something that just happened, Rodney. You're the one I spend all my free time with. You're the one I seek out when I want company. You're the one I always want on my team."

The scientist moved a few steps away, looking as shell-shocked as John felt. "You are fucking crazy," he whispered, his hand drifting up toward his lips.

"Maybe," John admitted. "But no more so today than I was yesterday."

Rodney shook his head, staring at John for a long moment before turning, heading outside and
back to the truck where Carter was waiting along with the family who’d helped them.

Okay, so that hadn't been planned. John hoped he hadn't seriously screwed up again. But at least now he had a better idea of what the fuck he was feeling for McKay. With a sigh, John followed him out. "All right folks, it's time for us to hit the road."

"I thought I was going to have to call in the reserves," Carter said lightly, but throwing questioning looks toward John as McKay moved directly to the Suburban's back seat.

He shook his head slightly. "Nah, we're all present and accounted for. Let's get back to the chopper so we can head back."

Carter nodded. "The Hendersons are heading out now."

"We need to do something nice for them."

"We will," Carter said as she slid into the driver's seat. "As soon as we do a full background check."

He chuckled. "I figured as much. Rodney? How are you doing?" John looked back, unconsciously licking his lips.

"Fine," he said simply, eyes fixed on something out the window. "Can we just go already? I swear my allergies are starting to act up with all this pollen out here."

They got moving without any more incidents, arriving at the Ranger station and the helipad only a few minutes behind the rest of the strike team—the big help they'd been.

The scientist was unnaturally quiet the entire way home, his gaze unfocused as he stared out the window at the scenery flying by.

John watched him carefully the entire time, wanting to touch him, wanting to make sure he really was okay, but he held back. It wasn't the time or the place. Once they were alone he'd make sure he was okay. Then, it would be okay to touch.

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Between beatings he could hear the scientist screaming and begging—and later on, crying in pain and fear.

He struggled against his bindings, wanting to go to him, to stop their captors from torturing and beating him. He wanted them to turn their attentions back to him. At least then, he knew the scientist wouldn't be injured any further.

They never listened to him. They ignored him, laughed at him and just continued what they were doing.

He didn't blame the scientist for their situation, for refusing to help the Tellonians wipe out another village. He blamed himself for not getting them away. He should have been faster. He should have seen it coming.

But he hadn't and they were trapped here, deep in the mountains in a series of cave cells and rooms. Here they never saw the light of day. Here it was perpetually cold and damp.

Here he was always cold except for the few hours they allowed them to sleep, huddled together, sharing what little heat their chilled and bruised bodies could emit.
At first they wouldn’t touch, insistent on privacy and pride, keeping their eyes to themselves to avoid the embarrassment of their nakedness. But as the days wore on privacy was no longer a factor. Survival was more important.

Huddled together, careful of broken bones and bruises, they slept. It was only during those hours that they were assured of peace, assured the other was still alive.

It was only during those hours that he found peace in the middle of this hell.

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When they finally got back to Colorado Springs, they were driven from Peterson directly to the SGC where they were whisked inside for briefings and for him, a very thorough medical exam.

It was late by the time Doctor Lam finally released him—some time after dinner—and the only thing Rodney wanted to do was sleep for days. Well, sleep after he ate dinner. He’d been told he’d been assigned a room at the SGC—for his safety. He didn't have the energy to argue, so he'd just nodded and waved off the Airmen as he waited impatiently for BDUs since Lam had taken his clothes as well—for evidence, she'd claimed.

Even after the exam he could still feel Sheppard's hands on his skin, how they'd lingered with intent.

He was trying not to think about Sheppard. It was better, safer that way. But of course, the soldier was waiting for him when he stepped out of the infirmary, lounging against the wall.

"Hey."

"You look horrible." And he did. Tired and worn in ways a man shouldn't.

"Then I look about how I feel," the soldier sighed. "Same to you by the way. Want to go grab some dinner?"

"Can't we just order take-out?" Rodney asked, falling into step beside him as they headed down the hall.

"Somehow I'm not sure we'd be able to convince security to let the pizza guy come down." John gave him a somewhat lopsided smile.

"So let's go and get some." It was the easy and simple solution.

"We can try. But I can't promise they'll let us. They shot me last time I tried to leave without the official escort."

"Ask Carter. She might be able to do something. I don't want to stay here."

John veered off slightly, heading to the labs. It didn't take them long to find Carter. "Hey. McKay and I want to head off base for dinner and the hotel. Can you make sure no one thinks we're making a break for it or something?"

She glanced up, eyeing both of them carefully. It took her a long moment before she answered and Rodney knew there was going to be a problem. "That might not be a good idea."

"Why?" John leaned against the door, slouching slightly.

"Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be. We just want to go out, have a quiet dinner and
sleep somewhere far away from here," McKay said, taking a few more steps inside.

She glanced at him, smiling a bit tired. "I'm not trying to, McKay, I promise. If I could, I'd make sure you both had the clearance to leave. But there are orders from people further up the command structure than me."

"Who? O'Neill?"

"No. The Pentagon and the President. They ordered us to keep you both on base for your own safety tonight after what happened today. Look, stay tonight, and then talk to Jack in the morning. He can probably help you set up off-base somewhere, with security protocols that will satisfy the ones who ordered you here."

"For my safety? I was kidnapped by members of the US military," Rodney scoffed, shaking his head. This was unbelievable. "I didn't ask for this. I came here because I was ordered to take a vacation."

She sighed. "The people who grabbed you weren't military—we're not entirely sure who they were, or what they wanted with you. That's why it's dangerous right now."

"No." Rodney shook his head. Neither John nor Carter had sat in on the briefings with him so they didn't know yet. Why didn't that surprise him? The military left hand never knew what the right was doing. "You've got it wrong. They were military. I'd seen them before, here."

She sat up, suddenly alert. And next to him, John stiffened. "What? You knew them? Who are they?"

"I don't know their names, but I remember seeing them. I went through enough books during the debrief. I picked out a few I recognized, but it was only so much help. The ones from the SGC handed me off to someone else at some point but I was blindfolded by then so I don't know who they were." He shrugged. "You found me. I figured you knew or at least someone had filled you in."

Both soldiers shook their head, but it was John who answered. "No. We didn't know who had grabbed you. We figured there was a leak somewhere and that was how they knew where to get you, but we didn't know it was someone inside who did the snatching."

"How did you find me, then? I thought you would have gotten all of the kidnappers. You said I was safe." The last sentence was aimed directly at Sheppard as some of his panic and worry about it happening all over again flooded through him.

"We tracked your subcu, and then I used the LSD to pinpoint your location. O'Neill was handling trying to figure out who snagged you in the first place."

"So I'm not safe at all."

John stepped right into Rodney's personal space, a hand on each shoulder. "I will not let anything happen to you."

"You already did!" Rodney tried to shove John away, but the pilot wouldn't let him.

"I messed up. It won't happen again."

"You can't be sure of that, Colonel. There's no way you can be one-hundred percent certain of anything."
John's expression was intense. "I will not allow anyone else to hurt you, Rodney. Whatever it takes."

"Whatever it takes? What's with the macho posturing?" This time John let Rodney push him away, letting him put some distance between them. "I'll only get you injured or killed and we all know how that goes. We've been there enough."

Sheppard shrugged slightly. "Better me than you. I will keep you safe this time. If that means I have to get hurt to do it, I will."

"No. Absolutely not." Rodney shook his head emphatically. The quiet click of the closing door was the only indication of Carter's departure.

"You're more important."

"No, no I'm not. You're the one with the uber-gene. You're the one who matters, who really matters. Sure, I can figure out stuff, but you can make the Ancient equipment sing."

The soldier shook his head and stepped closer once again. "I'm a lightswitch and expendable. You're the one with the smarts. You're the one who keeps the city running and everyone alive."

"No," he said, taking a breath as John—no, Sheppard—stepped into his personal space. He shifted back, trying to put more distance between them.

But John—Sheppard—followed him until Rodney felt the cold cement against his back. The other man leaned in, breathing Rodney's air. "Tell me to stop and I will. Otherwise, I'm going to kiss you again."

Rodney felt his panic growing. "We're in the SGC! There are cameras! This isn't smart!"

"I don't think I care," John whispered. Their lips barely brushed together. Part of Rodney's brain shorted out.

With a low hum, John took the lack of protest as an invitation. This time, it wasn't an accident, but a deliberate kiss. Tongue teased at the seam of Rodney's lips, asking for permission to enter.

God. How he'd dreamed of this moment, the strength of the pilot's body against him, the taste of him on his lips. Rodney moaned quietly, hands clutching at John's waist, tilting his head to press their lips together even further.

John responded by diving into Rodney's mouth and pressing even closer. There was an erection pressed against Rodney's thigh. John was hard from kissing him.

It around that time that reason suddenly broke through. They were at the SGC. They couldn't do this here. With a strangled moan, he pushed John away, breathing heavily. "We...we can't..."

The pilot's eyes were blown out and he was panting. He stepped forward again. "Rodney..."

"I can't...we can't...not here."

John blinked a few times. Wow, he looked wrecked. "I... okay. But as soon as we're out of the SGC... We're picking this conversation back up where we left off."

"It's a bad idea."

John moved fast, pinning Rodney to the wall, his training allowing him to prevent Rodney from
moving at all. "If we have to finish talking here for me to convince you, we will." He shimmied his
hips against Rodney, making them both moan.

Rodney felt his body reacting even though his brain was panicking. "Sheppard, no…this is a bad
idea. Trust me. A really bad idea."

"Give me a good reason." The other man tilted his head, pressing his lips against Rodney's neck.
"You taste good."

"You'll never go back to Atlantis," Rodney finally said when his brain started firing again a few
moments later.

"I'll go wherever you go."

"Not if they kick you out of the Air Force, you idiot," McKay hissed.

Lifting his head again, John nuzzled at Rodney's jaw with his nose. "Right now they can't afford
to lose me—the hype surrounding it would be counter-productive to what they're trying to do.
And I'm not suggesting we go fuck in the Gateroom, Rodney. I just... didn't realize how much I
wanted this until I almost lost you."

"They were willing to do this dog and pony show without me. They can do it without you, too.
One word: reassignment." Rodney tried not to sound bitter. He wanted this more than he knew,
but he couldn't do that to John...to Sheppard. Wouldn't.

Long, strong fingers curled around his face. "I'm willing to take the chance. We're mostly there
already, Rodney. We spend almost every waking moment together, we work together, we play
together. All that was missing was this. And I want it all."

"Just...wait. We have to wait."

With a soft sigh, John brushed their lips together before standing up straight. His expressive face
had closed down a little. "I won't force the issue. If you're not interested, it's fine."

"Not interested..." he whispered, taking hold of John's hand, pressing it against his groin. "I'm
more than interested, but this isn't the time or the place."

The other man's eyes widened and darkened, and he made a soft noise, squeezing slightly. "I...
okay. Okay. When we're not here, okay?"

Rodney held back a yelp and nodded.

Licking his lips, John let his hand drop slowly. "So. Um? Dinner?"

"Pizza?"

"You still want to try and leave?"

"I...I want a lot of things," Rodney finally answered, turning his head away from John.

"There's nothing stopping you from having them."

"Oh, yes there is," Rodney said, chuckling bitterly. "Is there somewhere we can just grab some
food and watch a movie or something normal?"

"Yeah. Let's swing through the mess and grab food. The quarters they assigned me have a TV
and DVD player. We can watch something there while we eat."

"Okay," Rodney said quietly, strangely tired and worn out. They hadn't done anything except argue and, well…but he was exhausted. Maybe it had been too much after the kidnapping and subsequent rescue."

They walked together quietly, and it didn't take them long before they were ensconced in John's room, on the bed with their trays, a borrowed Star Trek season set from Teal'c playing.

Rodney ate mechanically, not really tasting anything, his eyes focused on the television but not really seeing it either. Everything was so…surreal. John coming onto him, the kidnapping, being here watching classic Star Trek.

At some point they finished and set the trays on the floor. He didn't realize how tired the soldier was—how much effort he had expended finding and freeing Rodney—until he glanced over to see John twisted into an uncomfortable-looking position. Fast asleep.

He shifted on the bed, kneeling in an attempt to get John into a more comfortable position.

He got a hum, and, still asleep, John curled suddenly, so he was now partially wrapped around Rodney. He made a soft, content noise before settling again.

Rodney managed to get himself untangled, pulling up the blanket to cover the soldier. Taking a long moment to simply stare at him, Rodney took in the softening lines of his face as real sleep set in. He looked younger, much more carefree—but just as reckless.

With a quiet sigh, he headed out of John's quarters and to his own room in the VIP section, a single guard nodding to him as he passed.

He settled himself into his room a few minutes later, stripping down to one of his old T-shirts—conveniently folded and placed in the dresser drawer—and boxers. Climbing into bed—the cold bed—he burrowed down between the sheets and forced his body to relax. Nothing would happen. He was safe.

Maybe if he said it enough times he'd really believe it.

He fell into a restless slumber, waking up several times during the night with a choked-off scream or moan echoing in the room. Once the sheets had been tangled around him and he'd fought to get free, trapped in a nightmare, until he finally woke—panting and panicked.

His body ached, but he didn't want to go to the infirmary to get anything, didn't want anyone to see him like this. Instead, he settled back down, trying to ignore the feeling of his clammy skin. He drifted into sleep once again, only to wake when a gentle hand stroked along his arm, soothing him.


"Why— Should be sleeping," Rodney protested, trying to roll so he could see the other man.

"I did. Don't worry about me. You need the rest."

"John—"

"You were having nightmares. One of the guards came and got me." John was still stroking his arm. "Once you fall asleep again, I'll doze in the chair."
"Hurts..." he whispered, suddenly not afraid to tell someone. He could trust John.

"Where?" John's fingers skimmed his bruises, the ones he could reach. "What can I do to help?"

"Get me something?"

"Anything you need."

"Tylenol. Advil. Something. Anything. Please. I ache." And he did. Even down to the roots of his hair. Maybe he shouldn't have stopped moving. Everything stiffened up. He was getting too old for this.

He heard more than saw John stand and move. He went into the tiny bathroom, coming out a moment later to press a glass of water and a few small pills into Rodney's hands. "They had Advil in your medicine cabinet."

John helped Rodney sit up enough to take the pills and a few sips of water before handing the glass back to the soldier. "What time is it?" he asked, looking around for the clock he knew had been there when he'd come to bed.

"About two in the morning." John settled back into the chair next to the bed.

"Only two? What happened to my clock?"

"It's still here, I just turned it face down when I got here, since it was god-awful bright."

"It helps you when you want to see what time it is in the middle of the night," Rodney groused as he shifted on the bed, plumping the pillows behind him.

"Sleep. I'll keep watch."

God. He wanted to sleep, needed to. He knew John would watch over him, keep him safe, but he needed to rest, too. He looked as worn and tired and exhausted as Rodney felt. "You need to sleep, too."

"I did. You had a longer day than me yesterday, though."

"I won't be able to sleep if you're in the chair." It was the truth. He needed something more—the comfort that touch brought.

"Where do you want me then?" John asked quietly, kindly. "I want you to be able to sleep without nightmares."

"Not on the chair," Rodney said, with a yawn, suddenly and overwhelmingly exhausted.

"The floor?" He heard John move.

"No." No. Not the floor. Please don't make me say it, Rodney thought, trying to force his eyes to stay open, trying to push down the nausea of his desperateness, the embarrassment of his weakness.

Fingers brushed against the inside of his arm. "Want to share the bed?"

Yes. That was it. Exactly it. John knew. Remembered. Rodney turned toward him, toward his touch, his body sluggish and slow—more so than just from sleepiness. "Did you give me something besides Advil?"
"No. Why?" John's voice sharpened. It was as if Rodney could feel the knife-like edges. Blackness was encroaching on his vision even as his nausea continued to grow unabated.

"Really tired." Rodney tried to push himself up, but his hand and arm weren't working, the muscles weak and loose, refusing to hold him up, to move him. He could still feel John's hand on his arm—warm and tangible—but feeling the trembling, the muscle weakness.

"Shit. Sheppard to the infirmary."

"John?" His voice sounded weird. But then everything was fading in and out, getter loud and soft at the same time, in the same word.

The other man caressed his face, shifting on the bed to press up against him, to support him. "Yeah, I'm in McKay's room. I gave him some Advil in the medicine cabinet since he was sore, and now he's having some side effects. Can you send someone to his quarters ASAP?"

A wave of dizziness swept over him and he groaned, closing his eyes, pressing into the soldier. "John..." he whispered.

"I'm here. Tell me what you're feeling. The doctors are on their way."

"Fuzzy...dizzy...nauseous...slow...tired..."

"I'll tell them. God, Rodney...." John leaned down and kissed him once, hard. He moaned, clutching at John. "Please..."

"I'll take care of you. God, Rodney... I'm going to fucking kill whoever's behind this."

There was a bang and a sound at the door and then there were people in the room, the overhead light nearly him, making the black edges of his vision all the more prominent. "John?"

But the soldier was talking to someone else, not listening to him. "Doctor Lam. He said he's dizzy and fuzzy and nauseous. Slow. Tired. I just gave him two of the Advil out of the medicine cabinet..."

"Diane, grab the bottle. Colonel, show her," Rodney heard Lam say before she was replacing John, hovering over him, shining the stupid light in his eyes.

"Doctor McKay, how long have you felt the symptoms?"

Long? The time. He didn't know what time it was. "Couldn't see the clock."

"I gave them to him about ten minutes ago," John said, his voice far away. Rodney tried not to whimper at the distance between them. "He started showing symptoms about five minutes ago. I called as soon as he said something."

Rodney opened his eyes, trying to shift away from the bright light, looking for John. He needed him.

And then he felt familiar fingers brush his arm as the pilot shifted close to him again. A part of Rodney smiled and relaxed. John remembered their bond, their link. He would protect him, stay with him. He trusted him.

John kept talking to Lam, answering a question Rodney must have missed. "One of the guards called me, and said he was crying out. I woke him out of a nightmare, and I was going to stay to
make sure he slept. He said he was sore and achy, so I thought the ibuprofen might help with that."

"After the exam, I told Doctor McKay he could take something if he needed it," Lam said.

Everything was blurry, the edges soft, sickly soft as the nausea and unsettledness of his stomach grew. "Don't feel good," he whispered, hoping John heard him.

"Hey, buddy, I know. Just stick with us, okay? Doctor Lam here is going to figure out what was in those pills, and then I'll find out who put them there. We're just waiting on the gurney to take you to the infirmary."

John heard him. Good. He could tell him, he'd listen, he'd help him. "Gonna be sick." Could feel the bile rising.

Hands helped him roll to the side. John's hands. But it was Lam's voice he heard. "Actually, vomiting is good. Whatever he ingested hasn't had time to fully absorb into his body. The more of it we can get out now, the better."

Seconds later he started coughing and gagging, the bile and dinner coming back up, John's hands holding him over the trash can.

As he emptied the contents of his stomach, John's hands rubbed his back, and the other man murmured a stream of encouraging, comforting words.

By the time he was done, he was sweaty and shaking, his body aching all over. Life sucked.

He was vaguely aware that at some point, one of the doctors had started an IV in his arm. "Rodney?" John sounded worried.

"Just kill me," he groaned.

"I know you feel like crap right now, but are the symptoms that you were feeling before you were sick still there?"

Rodney thought for a moment, trying to sort out what he was feeling, how he was feeling. "Little better. Can I sleep now?"

"Soon, Rodney. Soon. We need to get you to the infirmary." John's hands were gentle as he helped Rodney sit up.

He shivered as soon as the blanket slid away and the cool air hit his sweaty skin, some of the nausea returning again. Rodney coughed and gagged a little, groaning.

"Shhh. It's okay. I'm right here." John's hands were soothing, comforting.

He gagged a few times, but nothing else came up, leaving him wrung out and exhausted, hanging in John's hands.

He let John and Lam manhandle him onto the gurney, felt the blanket cover him, warming him again. And then they were moving, the breeze brushing against the skin of his face, John's hand on his arm.

He vaguely heard John and Lam talking, and then the next thing he knew he was being helped into a bed—cold bed!—blankets pulled up over him. There was a prick in the back of his hand and Doctor Lam was telling him to relax and sleep. He was okay with that.
With a huff and a nod, and with John's hand still on his arm, Rodney let himself fall into slumber.

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*He rocked them, holding him close to his chest, trying to offer warmth and comfort, trying to get him to sleep so maybe he'd forget about the pain.*

*John had done it for him the night before after they'd beaten him, but they always hurt John worse.*

*They were wearing them down.*

*Every day it was worse than the day before. They didn't have time to heal, to recover.*

*Day after day after day.*

*It wore on you, wore you out.*

*How much longer would they be able to stay alive? How much more could they take? As long as they had each other, though, they'd get through it.*

*They had to.*

****

John watched Rodney slide into sleep almost immediately. God, what a fucking fiasco.

He leaned against a wall, staying out of the way as the doctors set up monitoring equipment and got Rodney completely settled.

A blanket was draped over his shoulders by a nurse who offered him a smile as she continued on her way.

Finally, everything seemed to settle down again. Most of the nursing staff had moved off, so John snagged a chair and sat next to the bed. He had promised Rodney he would keep watch, and he intended to keep that promise.

"Colonel?"

"Hmm?" He glanced up, surprised to see Doctor Lam. He had thought she had retired for the evening once Rodney was settled.

"We've got him, Colonel. You can go back to your quarters."

He shook his head. "I'd rather stay here, if it's all the same to you, ma'am. He's my teammate, and I promised him I'd keep watch while he slept."

"We can make sure he sleeps, Colonel. It's our job."

"I know. I'll stay out of the way. But I'll feel better if I stay here." He gave her a tired smile.

She stepped closer, her eyes softening a little. "He's going to be fine. The fact that he vomited so quickly after being poisoned was a good thing."

He absently ran a hand through his hair. "Do we have any idea of what it was I gave him? Or how it got there?"
"The pills were coated with a fast-acting toxin. We're still trying to figure out exactly what it was. You couldn't have known when you gave him the pills."

"Doesn't change the fact that I could have killed him." John's eyes returned to Rodney. God, he was so over this fucking leave. He wanted to go home where the only ones trying to kill them were the fucking Wraith.

"You might be able to answer a few questions, if you don't mind, Colonel."

"Sure, if you think it will help." He returned his attention to Doctor Lam. He wondered absently if they were going to force him on another interview tomorrow.

"Did Doctor McKay bring those pills with him from Atlantis?"

"No. When I got to his quarters, we talked for a few minutes, and then he said he ached all over and asked if I could see if there was anything he could take. I checked the medicine cabinet and found that bottle there. None of us have our own bottles on Atlantis, since we're a bit more rationed—we just go down to the infirmary and there's a sign-out sheet where you log if you take any of the over-the-counter stuff so the staff knows what to replace. Since he was just assigned those quarters this evening, I assumed you or one of your staff had put the bottle there in case he needed them."

She shook her head. "We have a similar system here for pharmaceuticals although we can't stop people from bringing in their own bottles from home. We wouldn't have placed any in the bathroom in the VIP room."

"So someone else must have put them there," he sighed. "That never even occurred to me. I figured he would be safe here, so I didn't think to check them."

"Who would have planted the medications? They wouldn't have known he would even take them."

"If I knew that, I'd know who was behind all this, and what exactly they hoped to accomplish. Rodney said he'd identified several people during his debrief. Could it have been one of them?"

Lam sighed softly. "Maybe. I'll have to check with the General. We'll keep an eye on Doctor McKay for the rest of the night and there's a camera in the corner that connects to the nurse's station. He'll be safe here tonight."

"Thanks. I'll still feel better if I'm here, too. I'd just sit and worry all night if I went back to my quarters."

"If you're going to stay, I'm going to insist that you sleep. There's an empty bed behind you. Use it."

He shook his head. "I slept a bit earlier. I'll be all right."

"Don't make me bring in the big guns, Colonel," she said, hands on her hips. "Bed or else I'll ask an Airman to escort you back to your room."

He scowled at her. "What is it with doctors bullying me all the time? Is that a course in med school?"

She moved forward, taking him by the arm and moving him to the bed she'd indicated. "It's a special course for dealing with difficult patients."
With a sigh, he hopped up on the bed. If it would humor her, he'd sit here instead of the chair. "I'm not difficult, I just have different ideas about how far I can push myself than you do."

"And here and now my opinion is the only one that matters." She gently pushed him back until his head hit the pillow. "I'll be watching you and if I see you get out of this bed for anything other than a bathroom break, I will send you back to your quarters. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." He gave her a sloppy salute. "No getting out of bed. Got it."

She rolled her eyes and chuckled. "Go to sleep, Colonel."

He didn't really plan to sleep, but he would stay in bed—for now. He grinned at her, and rolled to his side, propping up his head so he could see McKay.

"Eyes closed."

John raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sleepy." Of course, that was when his traitorous body chose to push through a huge yawn.

"I can help with that."

"You wouldn't drug me just to make me sleep."

"I'm not a softy like Beckett," she said with an evil smile.

"If you think he's a softy, you've never been his patient. He's a tyrant."

"I grew up in a military household and I'm proud to be a bitch. Who would you rather cross?"

It startled a laugh out of him. "I'll keep that in mind, Doc."

"Good," she said with an easy smile. "Now sleep. Let me keep watch for a little while, Colonel. I fear you're going to need all your energy for tomorrow."

He groaned, rolling onto his back. "Please don't tell me they're going to make me go through the dog and pony show again."

"I've been told you and Doctor McKay have a packed schedule and need to be ready to roll at seven in the morning."

"Fuck."

"My thoughts exactly. You have four hours. Use them wisely."

"Yes ma'am," he sighed. He closed his eyes, but didn't think he would sleep. So he was surprised when the next thing he knew, someone was shaking him awake.

"Sir, it's a little past seven," the nurse said quietly. "Doctor Lam asked me to get you up so you can get ready."

"Mrph," he muttered, trying to roll away.

"Please, sir."

He muttered and tried to roll away from the intruding hand.

The nurse let out a huff and then shook him again—hard. "Colonel!"
He shot up. "Wha..?"

The nurse smiled evilly at him. "Good morning, Colonel. There's a dress uniform waiting in the bathroom. A shaving kit is in there as well. General O'Neill wants to see you in the mess at 7:30."

He blinked a few times. "McKay?"

"Is still sleeping. You need to meet the General."

Moving slowly, John slid off the bed. "How long do I have?"

"Twenty minutes. Plenty of time for a shower and shave."

Nodding he stumbled into the bathroom. The shower helped wake him up, so by the time he returned to the main infirmary, he felt at least mostly human again.

Rodney was awake—if you called it that. He looked bleary-eyed, but was sitting upright in bed. Doctor Lam was giving him a check up.

"Hey. How are you feeling this morning?"

Rodney opened his mouth to reply, but Lam beat him to it. "He's grumpy, irritable, and has been complaining the entire time I've been here."

That, of course, made John's smile brighter. "So he's feeling better. Great!"

"She's refusing to get me coffee," he grumbled.

"Well, you were sick last night. We don't want to irritate your stomach again."

"Oh, yes, because that's better than the blinding caffeine headache I feel coming on."

John looked over at Lam. "Can I get him a small cup?"

Lam nodded as she tugged off the blood-pressure cuff. "He needs to go easy on his stomach."

Patting Rodney on the arm, he went over to the infirmary coffee pot and got his scientist a small cup, fixing it the way he knew the other man preferred before returning and handing it over.

Rodney grabbed it from John's hands, dislodging Lam while she was trying to draw a vial of blood. "Sweet nectar of the gods," he moaned, sticking his nose into the cup and smelling it before taking a tentative sip. He moaned quietly, taking a sip a moment later.

It made John chuckle, eyes sparkling. "Glad to be of service. I have to go meet O'Neill, but I'll be back soon, okay?"

Lam nodded. "I'll make sure he finds you in the mess."

He patted Rodney on the arm again, and then headed out. It didn't take him long to make it to the mess, where he spotted the general. Moving over, John held himself at semi-attention, waiting for permission to sit.

O'Neill glanced up and rolled his eyes. "Relax. What did you want for breakfast?"

John sat down, setting his hat aside. "I'll grab a cup of coffee in a few minutes. Doctor Lam said you wanted to see me, sir?"
"You might want to eat. You have a busy schedule for today," O'Neill said, taking a large spoonful of something that looked suspiciously like Fruit Loops. "I wanted to know what happened last night," he said around the cereal.

"More interviews?" John sighed. "All right, I'll go grab something. I'll be right back, sir."

"Ask for the waffles. They're excellent."

John took his commanding officer's advice, and returned to the table a few minutes later with a large cup of coffee and a plate of waffles. With strawberries. Yum.

"Try them. You'll love them," he said with a smile. O'Neill was one odd duck, that's for sure.

John tucked into his breakfast. And he had to admit, they were pretty good.

It was when he had just taken a bite of his waffles and a sip of coffee that O'Neill spoke again. "So, what's up with McKay?"

John sighed again. "Well, sir, it seems someone tried to poison him last night." John went through the whole story again, filling O'Neill in on what they knew, and what they suspected.

The General was quiet as John outlined everything, nodding on occasion, his eyes piercing on others. "So what do you think about this?"

"Someone here has another agenda. McKay said he recognized one of the men who grabbed him as someone he had seen on base, but he didn't know the guy's name. And only someone inside would have been able to put a bottle of laced pills in his room. He said he identified some people for you."

O'Neill nodded. "We're investigating. And about those pills, are you sure he didn't bring them from Atlantis?"

"I'm sure, sir. We don't have enough for everyone to keep a private stash. He was vocal about wanting to keep a bottle in his lab when we first implemented the policy, but it was more for show. There's no way it could have come from Atlantis."

O'Neill sighed, looking down at the remains of his breakfast. "You and McKay are scheduled for several interviews today in Denver. The Lieutenant traveling with you will brief you on the way."

"I'm not sure Rodney is up to that, sir. But I'll do my best."

"Doctor Lam will make sure he is."

"Yes, sir."

"And please remind the good doctor to be on his best behavior." O'Neill rose to his feet, straightening his uniform. "I'll be in touch with you throughout the day to keep you updated on the progress of our investigations."

John rose as well, saluting the general before the other man left. He sank back down into his chair as soon as O'Neill was gone. He had no idea if he was supposed to wait here or not, so he swirled the remainder of his coffee in the mug.

"Sheppard?" It was timid and quiet, but all Rodney. Looking up, John found himself looking at a completely transformed scientist. A perfectly cut dark suit took ten pounds of his body, the navy coloring only emphasizing his blue eyes. He looked tired, but alert—and a little uncomfortable.
God he was... John was... He was aware he was staring, but he couldn't stop. Rodney was fucking beautiful. How had he never noticed this before?

Rodney shifted uneasily on his feet. "Can I sit?"

John nodded. "You look...really nice."

"Thanks," Rodney said, making a face as he sat down gingerly. An Airman cleared away the General's dishes and placed a cup of coffee and a bowl of oatmeal in its place.

John nodded at the soldier absently, still busy studying Rodney. "How are you feeling?"

"Little off, but better," he said, frowning into his oatmeal. "Lam insisted I eat this slop."

"Yeah, O'Neill made me eat waffles. Apparently, they have us doing a few interviews today together."

"So I've been informed. Carter stopped by once I was out of the shower."

"Yeah. We've been warned to be on our best behavior. We'll be briefed in the car about who we're talking to and what they're likely to ask."

"It seems like I have no choice in the matter this time," Rodney said, taking a small spoonful of the oatmeal. His frown deepened and he shifted, turning around to look for something.

"Can I get you anything?" John followed his line of sight. "And yeah, now that we're both here, we don't really have a choice. Sorry."

"I need brown sugar. This is...unsuitable for human consumption."

Chuckling, John rose and grabbed brown sugar, cinnamon, and a few packs of regular sugar, bringing it all back to their table. "See if these help."

He watched in amazement as Rodney dumped everything on—in great amounts. No wonder he was always hyper. Combine the sugar with the coffee... A few moments later, Rodney took another spoonful and sighed. "Much better."

Shaking his head, John went back to nursing the last of his coffee while Rodney polished off breakfast.

He was bouncing a little by the time he was done, fingers tapping away on the top of his thigh. Sugar and coffee did wonders it seemed—at least where McKay was concerned. "So, where are we going?"

"First, up to the surface to meet our handler for the day, and then from there, no idea. O'Neill mentioned a few interviews."

"A few?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"I think I'd rather be kidnapped," he muttered.

"Don't even joke about that."

"It's better than sitting in front of a camera on national television! At least with kidnappers you
know what they want. They tell you. It's cut and dry."

"Yeah, but half the time they'll kill you if you don't give them what they want. At least reporters only get catty."

Rodney snorted, finishing off the last of his oatmeal and coffee. "You'd be surprised."

They both stood, bringing their trays to be cleaned. "We could make it interesting. Maybe devise some kind of point system. Winner buys dinner tonight."

"We'll be lucky to still be standing tonight," Rodney muttered, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. His sleeve inched up and John could see the dark bruising from the handcuffs.

"As long as we're both in one piece, I'll count it a success," John said as they boarded the elevator to the surface.

Rodney snorted, rolling his eyes, as the elevator doors closed. He was quiet, shifting uncomfortably in his new suit.

John let his eyes roam again, feeling unaccountably breathless. "You really do look amazing in that."

The scientist looked up, confusion on his face. "Sorry? What?"

He swallowed. Hard. He couldn't take his eyes off the man. "How did I miss how... how good looking you are? God..."

"Sheppard," Rodney hissed, eyes narrowing. "What do you think you're doing? We're getting ready to go on national television."

"M'not doing anything. Just looking."

"You're gawking! You're...you're undressing me with your eyes!" Rodney's words were whispered and hissed across the elevator.

John felt himself glaze over a little. "Mmm. Maybe."

Rodney's mouth dropped open and he gasped, face turning red. "That's...that wasn't a suggestion!"

John let his eyes linger for another few moments before forcing them up to Rodney's face. "Very nice. Very, very nice."

"You are...evil," he muttered, storming out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened on the transfer floor. He stalked to the second set of elevators and stabbed the call button, his entire body radiating annoyance.

John waited to respond until he was close enough that Rodney, and no one else, could hear his response. "And you have a wicked walk-away."

Rodney squeaked and jumped away, sending death glances at John. He pointed a finger at him and scowled. "You...you...just...stay away."

John smirked at him, unrepentant, and stepped into the elevator first when it arrived.

Rodney kept looking at him warily as if John was going to jump him in the elevator. It was an interesting thought, but not very practical. The scientist had been right last night about "now" not
being a good time. They needed privacy for what he wanted to do.

When they finally arrived on the surface, John looked around and spotted what he assumed was their escort for the day. "Major."

The man shook his head. "Lieutenant Pearson is you liaison today, sir. I'll escort you to the car."

"Thank you, Major."

"My pleasure, sir." He gestured for them to follow him out of the tunnel and to the awaiting car—limo. Wow. The Major had turned to address the scientist along the way. "Doctor McKay we have a small fridge in the car that has food and beverages if you require anything along the way. If you wish it to be stocked with anything else, please inform your driver and Lieutenant Pearson and they will make sure you get the items you require."

"Uh…I'm sure it's fine," Rodney said, his eyes a little wide too when he caught sight of the car.

John saluted the man. "We appreciate the thoughtfulness. Do you know if we'll be returning here tonight or staying off-site?"

"Your luggage is already in the trunk, sir. You can discuss your itinerary with Lieutenant Pearson." The Major opened the back door, gesturing for Rodney to enter.

Huh. John gestured Rodney to get into the car first, then followed him in. "Lieutenant. Colonel Sheppard." He held out his hand to shake.

The man's grip was solid, his palm dry. He was seated in the facing seat, folders scattered next to him. "Colonel, Doctor. Right on time. My name is Nick Pearson, I'll be your press liaison for the next week. General O'Neill appointed me directly and I answer to him. I was asked to let you know that up front. If you need anything at all, please don't hesitate to let me know."

John found himself relaxing almost immediately. He trusted O'Neill a hell of a lot more than he trusted the press chick. "Nice to meet you Nick and call me John. No sense in tripping over ranks when I have a feeling we'll be spending a lot of time together."

He smiled easily. "We may become intimately acquainted by the end of the week, sir."

Chuckling, John settled himself into his chair. "I like to be wooed. Chocolate, flowers, long walks on the beach…"

"Chocolate I can do. We have a selection of dark chocolate in the fridge," Pearson said as Rodney's eyes widened.

John leaned forward, opening up the little fridge and pulling out a bar, along with a Diet Coke. "I think it might be love."

Rodney grabbed the chocolate from John's hands and then scooted forward. "What else is in there?"

Grinning, John would never admit he had gotten the chocolate for Rodney in the first place. He got out of the physicist's way, giving him full access. "All right, so what's the agenda for the day? O'Neill mentioned more than one interview?"

"Yes," Pearson nodded, picking up one of the folders. "We're going to start at the Denver affiliates of all the national broadcast stations. You'll be able to make one of the morning shows and then we'll tape several segments for the evening news."
"Will it be the same shit as yesterday?" John narrowed his eyes a bit. "I'm willing to play nice, but only to a point. I won't sit by and be insulted, or allow them to insult the people I respect."

"I imagine most of the questions will involve Doctor McKay's kidnapping yesterday and then will move into some of the Atlantis project. I have folders for each of you that you will need to read before we get to Denver in an hour. It includes the topics you can and cannot comment on."

John took his, and handed the other to Rodney, who was nibbling on the chocolate bar. "How much does the press know about yesterday? Which reminds me—before I forget, a nice family helped us out. I have their license plate number, and names—I'd like it if the SGC could do something for them to say thanks."

"The Hendersons," Pearson said, nodding.

"Carter already gave you the information?"

"We've taken care of things for them already, sir."

He raised his eyebrows. "That was fast. What did we do for them?"

"It should be outlined on page three of your documents, Colonel."

"I'll take that as a not-so-subtle hint to shut up and read already." John grinned at him and flipped open his folder.

It was all pretty standard stuff, and almost the same as the one from yesterday. He was pleased to see that the Hendersons had been given a rather large sum of money, in addition to a few other things.

By the time they reached NBC's affiliate in Denver—their first stop of the day—Rodney was nearly bouncing in his seat from all the sugar and caffeine he'd ingested along the way. The way Pearson was eyeing him John knew there would be a rationing of the chocolate from now on.

Personally, John thought his geek was more entertaining this way. But he was well aware that he was in the minority on that point. They were hustled into first make-up, and then into the green room.

Rodney was vibrating at his point, wandering from one side of the room to the next, poking into things, opening doors—everything except sitting still. His first interview would be interesting.

John couldn't wait. This was going to be fucking great. If nothing else, he planned to be amused.

Finally someone came to bring them on-set. John followed his partner in crime, and before long they were miked and settled in large, comfortable chairs.

Rodney shifted several times before finally stilling—except for his right leg which was shaking a little with the energy he was actually attempting to repress. He was looking everywhere, eyes taking in the cameras, lights, people. He leaned over. "That sandwich the camera operator has looks fantastic."

John followed his line of sight. "Roast beef maybe? Want me to distract him while you swipe it?"

"Tempting."

John chuckled softly. "I'm sure we can convince Pearson to get us lunch after this."
"Hmm…yes. That would be good. I think I'm hungry."

John was going to respond, when the hosts of the show came on set. He rose, shaking their hands. "Ma'am, Sir. A pleasure to meet you."

They turned to Rodney who was still climbing to his feet. He wiped his hand on his pants before offering it to the hosts—along with inappropriate question number one. "How long do you think this is going to take?"

The woman—Stacey?—looked taken aback. "Well, we'll be on camera for about twenty minutes, with ten of those being the live interview."

Rodney looked surprised. "Oh. That's it?"

The male host nodded. "That's all that will be on camera. If you'll have a seat, we can chat for a few minutes first, and then after the cameras stop, we might need you for things like pick-ups, or some publicity shots. That could take anywhere from an hour to several hours, depending on how the interview goes."

The scientist glanced up sharply at that, narrowing his eyes. "Depending on how the interview goes? What do you mean by that? Do you expect it to go badly?" Oh yeah, this was going to be a lot of fun, John thought, trying not to smirk. These two had no idea what might be coming.

The guy, Steve, shook his head, smiling smoothly. "Or course not, Doctor McKay. The pick-ups aren't for when an interview goes badly. Actually, just the opposite. The better the interview, the longer the things afterward usually take, because we want to promote it more, and make sure we have perfect shots."

Rodney scowled again, muttering something about idiotic morons as he settled back into his seat. He shifted a few times, glancing around. "Do I get coffee or something?"

John smirked. "I'm not sure you need any more coffee right now, buddy. If you do, you might vibrate off the stage."

"Of course I need coffee. Lam would only let me have one cup in the infirmary and I only had two at breakfast," Rodney said, turning toward John. "And I got none yesterday so I'm worried about the caffeine headache. Trust me, you don't want to be around me if I get one of those."

"But you also had chocolate in the car on the way over here. That has the same properties as coffee."

Rodney snorted. "What, are you a scientist now? They have very different properties."

"I read it somewhere. I'm not suggesting chocolate is a perfect substitute, but when combined with coffee, it makes you jittery."

"I am not jittery," Rodney said with a scowl, before turning to the hosts. "I want coffee, light and sweet before we begin this dog and pony show."

John rolled his eyes, but shrugged. It would just make the whole thing more amusing, but O'Neill couldn't fault him for not trying. "What the hell, make it two."

Stacey looked a little pinched around the edges. "We don't—"

"How difficult is it to get coffee?" Rodney asked, throwing his hands up in the air as he stood. "I saw some in the other room. I'll be back."
"Get me a cup, too. And don't drink half on the way back!" John glared at McKay—he knew that trick.

Rodney waved him off as he disappeared somewhere in the direction of the green room, the hosts looking like they wanted to run after McKay but were held back because of their fear of the unknown and the fact that these television hosts had assistants to do the running for them.

John leaned back, and shot a charming smile their way. "He won't be long. But trust me, he'll be happier if you let him have his coffee. Jittery, but less likely to bite your head off."

"Is this…normal for him or a result of the…events that transpired yesterday?" Steve asked, eyes sliding past John toward where Rodney had disappeared. There was a crash and he winced.

"Oh, this is normal. I'd worry if he was quiet or withdrawn, or meek, God forbid. But cranky and headstrong are his standard settings." John looked indulgently toward the sound of another crash. He was pretty sure he heard a few moans.

Steve signaled for someone to go and check on things, but John heard Rodney heading their way a few moments later. The muttering carried well.

"…stupid, idiotic place to put a table," he mumbled as he shoved a mug into John's hand before dropping into the seat he'd vacated a few minutes ago. "So, are we ready?"

Sipping at his coffee—perfect, John had to give McKay that, his coffee was always perfect—he watched as people scrambled around, and then they were given the signal that taping was about to begin.

The jumpiness had settled down since Rodney had come back with the coffee. He was watching everything with the same attention as before, but it was different now.

Like before, the interview started out with the basics, the carefully constructed blend of truth about Atlantis. Rodney was surprisingly un-insulting until John was answering a random question about the gene. "...kind of a fluke. It doesn't get me much besides being able to turn on some admittedly neat stuff—"

"Gets you girls," Rodney muttered with a snort.

John rolled his eyes. "A little random strand on my DNA does not 'get me girls'."

"Of course it does. The women in the labs nearly melt when you walk in."

"That's because they know I'm going to turn shit on for them. They don't really care who's doing lightswitch duty, as long as someone comes in to help out."

"Oh no. When you show up, you turn on more than just the equipment," he snorted. "You and that swagger and the Kirk complex. They're no good for the rest of the day."

John turned toward Rodney, forgetting both that they had an audience, and were being filmed. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me Kirk?"

"When you stop acting like him."

"I don't act like him!"

"Of course you do. My staff is useless when you show up—even if it's just to bring me coffee. It's disgusting and you're ruining the little productive time I actually get from them!"
John rolled his eyes. "I'm down there to help you out you know. If you don't want me there, you can just say so. You don't have to make up elaborate stories about my supposed conquests."

"Supposed? Supposed?" Rodney's voice got higher on the second repeat. "There's documented proof!"

"There is no documented proof because nothing has happened! I've been fucking celibate for years now! Everyone is either under my command or my protection, which severely limits the options. And before you even start on the bimbo thing, I'm not stupid enough to sleep with anyone on missions either!"

"And with that, we'll break for a commercial and be right back," Steve said loudly, the sudden "oh shit" realization hitting a second later.

John's eyes widened, and he suddenly felt very, very sick. With a moan, he dropped his head into his hands.

"Commercial, what commercial?" Rodney asked, voice still pitched quite loudly.

"Please tell me this is a really bad dream and I didn't just admit I haven't had sex in years on national television." John moaned again.

"You lied on national television," Rodney hissed in his "this is really bad" tone.

"I didn't lie! Jesus Christ." Standing, John thought he'd find a restroom and go get sick for a few minutes.

"Colonel, we're not finished yet," Steve said politely, carefully. "We have a few more questions for you and Doctor McKay."

"I need to use your restroom." And maybe disappear through a convenient hole in the ground.

"There's really no time, sir. We're back on the air in two minutes."

He sank back down, although he did at least put his head back in his hands. Maybe if he thought hard enough, some random bit of previously undiscovered Ancient technology would just happen to initialize nearby and zap him into oblivion.

Rodney had lapsed into silence—thank god—the hosts checking over a few things with the producer as the two minutes counted down. At the thirty-second mark, McKay shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"You aren't the one who admitted to celibacy on television. It was my stupidity." He sighed, straightening up. "I suppose it's too much to hope that it wasn't live, and it can be edited out later?"

Stacey turned to him, offering a smile. "It'll be fine."

He manfully resisted the urge to moan again as she and Steve turned to the cameras, welcoming back the viewers.

"We're back again with Colonel Sheppard and Doctor Rodney McKay from the Atlantis Project based in Antarctica. We're actually going to turn our attention now to the events that transpired yesterday," Steve said.

Rodney stiffened immediately beside him, his hand gripping the arm of the chair.
John sat up straighter. He would be damned if they were going to break McKay for a television audience.

"Throughout the day, General O'Neill held several press conferences, updating the public about the status of the investigation, but it wasn't until this morning that we received official word that you had been recovered," Steve said, holding Rodney's gaze.

"And?" McKay asked expectantly.

"Can you give us more details about your ordeal, Doctor McKay? It must have been awful." Stacey leaned forward in her seat, putting on what John would be willing to bet she believed was a sympathetic expression designed to invite confidences.

"I was kidnapped," he said, narrowing his eyes. "It wasn't like it was a day in the park."

She nodded. "We're all very impressed that you've held up so well after that ordeal. Do you blame the government for not protecting you properly?"

"Blame the government…" Rodney repeated, voice trailing off. "Why would I?"

"Well," Steve interjected, "It was their fault you weren't protected, wasn't it? I believe Colonel Sheppard has said your safety is his top concern, and yet he was no where nearby when the kidnappers grabbed you."

"And? It's not like we're living together. He's not at my beck and call. He was at the Cheyenne Mountain complex. I was on vacation."

"But surely you harbor some resentment," Steve pushed. John had gone completely still next to Rodney.

"Why? He's the one who rescued me."

"After he allowed you to be taken in the first place." Steve glanced at John. "Colonel Sheppard, how do you feel about this situation? Do you blame yourself?"

John opened his mouth to respond, only to be cut off by McKay.

"Okay, what is your pre-occupation with this? I was kidnapped. Held in some mountain cabin until Colonel Sheppard and Colonel Carter found me. It happened. I couldn't fight back, but apart from the bruises from the handcuffs," he said, shoving up his sleeves to reveal the dark purple bruising that even made Sheppard cringe, "they didn't do anything except threaten me."

"What did they threaten you with, Doctor McKay?" Stacey was still trying to cozy up to Rodney. "You must have been terrified."

"I was angry. They had no right to ruin my well-earned vacation."

"What security measures are you taking now, Colonel, to ensure something like this doesn't happen again?"

Once more, John started to respond, only to be cut off.

"Security measures? We're going to be on national television for the good part of the week. I don't think it'll be a problem."

John jumped in before Steve could ask another question. "Obviously, we can't go into details"
about precisely the measures we've taken. It would compromise the security they offer. But I can
tell you that until we return to base, I've appointed myself Doctor McKay's personal bodyguard."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "The idiots won't try it again."

"I'm not going to give them the opportunity to try."

"What, are you going to handcuff yourself to me and follow me into the bathroom when I pee?
And that's a big, fat no before you even consider it."

John rolled his eyes. "Um, no. But I'm also not going to leave you in a hotel with no protection
again."

"As if we're going to have any privacy with the entourage that's been assigned to us."

"Privacy isn't the issue. Safety is. I wasn't kidding when I said I would protect you. No matter
what it takes."

"We're going to be surrounded by television cameras and fifteen other people. Safety and security
are pretty much guaranteed."

"Not necessarily. How many assassination attempts happened in full view of a crowd? If someone
wants to make a statement, camera crews won't deter them. And this isn't an argument we need to
be having right now. You can yell at me about it later."

"Oh. You can count on it," Rodney huffed, turning back to the hosts. "Anything else you wanted
to ask or are we finished? I have a Colonel I need to straighten out."

John winced slightly. Yeah, his day just kept getting better.

"Actually, Colonel Sheppard, I did have another question," Steve said, holding the fake smile as
he turned toward John. "You mentioned in the first interview you did that there were parts of the
project that were not declassified. Did you make that decision?"

"It's not my decision as to what is and isn't classified. I leave that to people like the President and
his advisers, who probably have a better grasp of the whole picture than I do."

"But you're in charge of the project, aren't you?" Stacey leaned in.

"I'm the military commander of the base. Doctor Elizabeth Weir is the one who runs Atlantis
Base, while General Landry heads up the operation here in Colorado."

"Why isn't Doctor Weir with you?"

John plastered on what he hoped was a genuine-looking smile. "Well, as I believe I've mentioned
before, this was a bit of a surprise to us. Doctor Weir is still on base, and it was just coincidence
that Doctor McKay and myself were in Colorado on leave."

"Is this Doctor Weir the same one who brokered several peace agreements?" Stacey asked.

"She is. Doctor Weir is a very accomplished and well-respected diplomat."

"I thought this was a scientific program," Steve said. "What need do you have for a diplomat?"

"It is a scientific program, but as you are no doubt aware, we're studying what was left behind by
the first evolution of our race, which was very advanced. Her knowledge of how societies work
has been invaluable, and her skills at bringing together diverse groups to work together has also
been absolutely necessary, as we're working with both civilian and military staff, from almost every country in the world."

Both Steve and Stacey were silent for a moment, obviously not expecting that response. Stacey recovered first. "Well, thank you again—Colonel Sheppard and Doctor McKay—for spending time with us this morning." She continued with the station sign off and the plug for the next segment, keeping a smile on her face until the light on the camera went off signaling they were off the air.

John waited until then to rub the bridge of his nose. Well. He was two-for-two for semi-disastrous interviews. Just peachy.

Rodney let out a sigh and then rose to his feet, already trying to get the microphone pack off his body. "How do you get this damn device off?"

A few technicians moved in to help. "We'll take a quick break, Doctor McKay, and then if we could have you both back on set for a few follow-up questions, as well as some promo shots, that would be great."

"Just get it off," McKay demanded, his pent up nervous energy back again.

They quickly worked at getting Rodney unhooked, while John did the same for his own mike. He managed to get his off faster than McKay, so he made a break for the bathroom, hoping to avoid the confrontation he knew was coming. He still sort of wanted to throw up over the whole damn debacle.

He was in the middle of his freak-out when he heard Pearson yelling in the hallway outside. "...no...you can't just...Doctor McKay come back here!"

Closing his eyes, John counted to five before the door banged open.

"Colonel Sheppard, are you in here?" Pearson.

"Only if you're telling me I can go home now and pretend none of this ever happened."

"It really wasn't as bad as you think," he said quietly, his voice moving further into the bathroom.

"How do you figure?" John looked up from the toilet he was sitting on when Pearson came into view. "How much more do we have to do today? And where did McKay go?"

"Outside, I think. Ron is there with the car," Pearson said answering the easier question first. "He said he needed to get some air. As regards to the interview, it actually went a lot better than I thought it would given Doctor McKay's temperament."

"How do you figure? I talked about my fucking sex life, and then got yelled at by my scientist for protecting him."

"McKay didn't attack either host," Pearson said, holding up his fingers as he ticked off the points. "You were both amusing to watch interact. You could tell you were friends as well as colleagues. You had a good on-screen chemistry. The honesty will win you points with viewers and will make the rest of your press tour easier. Should I go on?"

John looked up, incredulous. "So you're telling me us snarking at each other will win us brownie points?"

"Yes."
John shook his head and sighed. "Okay, for the record, this makes no sense to me whatsoever, but I'll take your word for it. Are we allowed to leave the studio, or do I need to go convince Rodney to come back in?"

"He can’t go far and we still had a few more things to finish."

"Still, I'd rather talk him into coming back freely, than have someone drag him in. Besides, he needs time to yell at me for a bit."

Pearson raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "They wanted to start in about fifteen minutes."

"Great. Hopefully this won't take that long." John rose, straightened his uniform and started to wander out, hoping Rodney had used the last few minutes to calm down a bit.

The driver—Ron—was the only one in sight when John stepped outside.

John moved into hearing range. "Which way did McKay head?"

"He's in the car," Ron said, pointing to the back seat. "Told me to stay outside."

With a nod, John opened the door and slid inside. "Hey."

Rodney was sitting in the dark, head in his hands. He didn't even look up when John slid inside.

Scooting closer, John pressed their legs together.

"I am an idiot."

"No, you aren't. You did great. Pearson actually told me he thought we were entertaining and fun to watch. And that people will love us."

"We're not a comedy duo."

"I know. But you're not an idiot. I'm the one who spouted off about my sex life on television."

If anything, Rodney got quieter. "Because I made you."

"You didn't make me do anything." John bumped their shoulders together. "I'm not upset with you, if that's what you're worried about. Embarrassed, yes. But I'm not angry or anything."

"I don't want to do this."

"I know. I don't either, but we really don't have much of a choice."

"Can't we just go home?"

Sighing, John bumped shoulders with McKay again. "If we could, I'd do it."

"The Daedalus isn't even here. We're trapped." The words 'just like we were before' hung on the air between them, unsaid.

John shuddered a little, unable to help it. "This is different."

"How?"

"We're not being held by the enemy. We know we're going home, and we have a time-table for it. We're not being tortured or starved. We're not being held apart to keep the other on good
behavior."

"They're still pitting us against each other to see who will slip up first."

"Not really. They're reporters, so they want to get a sensational story, but I don't think they intentionally want to break us."

Rodney sighed, shifting forward a beat later to dig in the small fridge, grabbing another chocolate bar.

John settled against the seat, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Feels the same to me," Rodney finally said quietly as he settled next to John again.

"I don't know what to tell you, buddy. We're in this together though."

"I know. That helps a little." He paused again. John could hear him playing with the still-wrapped chocolate bar, sliding it between his fingers. "I knew you would come for me yesterday. I knew you would find me."

"I'll always come."

"They tried to convince me that no one was coming, that no one knew, but I knew better."

Shifting so they were pressed together from shoulder to ankle, John nodded. "Nothing and no one will ever stop me from coming."

"I was scared, though. Scared that they might do something to me before you could get there."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" He could feel McKay's gaze on him finally. "You didn't kidnap me or lock me in a mountain cabin in the middle of nowhere."

"I left you. I walked away and I wasn't there to stop it. I shouldn't have left."

"You didn't have a choice. As much as I hate it, I know what the military is like, Sheppard. I've worked for them for most of my life. I know what I can and cannot do and what soldiers like you can and cannot do. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

John shook his head, although he didn't open his eyes. "I should have found a way. Especially after I saw all the people in the lobby."

"You couldn't. You were caught in your own trap."

"I let you down."

"No. No, you didn't. You did what I knew you would do. You saved me. I'm the one who picked the wrong battle."

This wasn't an argument either of them was going to win, John knew. Instead, he sighed again turning his head and opening his eyes. He was a little startled at how close the intense blue eyes of his companion were to his face.

"I picked the wrong battle," Rodney said quietly. "I should have gone with you."

Swallowing hard, John couldn't look away. "I tried to get to you sooner."
"You had your television debut. You were busy."

"I tried to resign. They told me they couldn't let me. It was either appear or be charged with desertion." John was whispering, their lips only inches apart. He wanted to close the gap, but wasn't sure Rodney would let him.

"I know. The kidnappers played the interview for me. Taunted me. But I knew better."

"I defended you. I was pissed when they tried to attack you."

"I heard." Rodney smiled softly. "You didn't know about it until the clip played."

"I didn't." Their lips were barely brushing as they spoke now. "And as soon as I heard, all I wanted to do was come find you. The only reason I did the interview was because I was promised you were safe, that a guard had been sent to make sure you were okay."

"I was gone already. Long gone. They came in the middle of the night. I was tired, but I couldn't sleep. Wired."

"I was trying to leave after we talked. That was when they shot me. I was out until the next morning."

"Trapped in our own ways, caught," he whispered, eyes fluttering closed as their lips brushed. The knock on the window startled them apart.

John dragged in a couple of deep breaths before he rolled down the window.

Pearson was smiling down at him. "They're waiting inside for you."

That required a few more deep breaths before glancing over at Rodney. "Ready to go play nice for a little longer? I think, after this, we deserve a really fantastic lunch."

Rodney tossed the unopened chocolate bar on the opposite seat. "Not hungry," he said, shoving open his own door and stepping out.

With another sigh—John wasn't sure he was going to survive this whole ordeal without going fucking insane along the way—he slipped out his own door and followed the other men inside.

Steve and Stacey's smiles were a little forced when John and Rodney were finally brought to the photoshoot room. "Colonel, Doctor, we're pleased you've been able to spend a little more time with us today," Steve said, offering his hand as he stepped forward. "I think the interview went well this morning. Sorry if there was any awkwardness. Live television is hard to get used to."

John plastered on a smile and shook his hand. "Not a problem. What else did you need us to do?"

"I'll let the photographer walk you through the next part," Steve said, glancing at Rodney who was standing a step behind John, arms crossed over his chest, scowling at everyone and everything in the room.

"Photographer?" John glanced over at a gentleman who had several cameras around his neck.

"I represent several of the larger media organizations so we'll be able to use these photos across multiple publications and media," he said. "Let's see if we can loosen you up and get these images shot. I understand we're on a schedule."

"Um, okay." John followed his direction, putting his hat back on, and going where he was
directed. The photographer wanted to take a few of each of them alone first, so, for lack of knowing what else to do, John let himself flow into Attention.

The photographer began, adjusting the lighting before taking rapid shots from several cameras from different angles. "Take off the hat and relax."

John took it off, but couldn't bring himself to relax. He hated having his picture taken. He always thought he looked ridiculous.

"You're too good looking to be self-conscious," the photographer said. "Relax."

John felt a slow flush riding up his neck. "Ahh..."

"Oh for god's sake," the photographer said with a huff, rolling his eyes. "Let me do the other one while you get over yourself."

John could still feel the heat from his blush, but he gratefully moved off to the side. Maybe, if he was lucky, they would just decide they had enough of him already. He moved back over to stand next to Pearson.

"Didn't think you could turn that color," Pearson whispered, his words softened with a smile as they watched the photographer try to arrange an uncooperative McKay.

"I, ah... I don't really think I look... you know."

"I got that," he said with a soft chuckle. "Think he'll be able to corral the good Doctor?"

John gratefully looked over. It was actually pretty funny to watch, and he found himself grinning, and relaxing a bit, now that he was out of the spotlight. "Not a chance in hell."

The photographer was trying to get Rodney to turn a little and uncross his arms, but as soon as he got one thing the way he wanted it, McKay forgot about the other thing and messed it up.

After about ten minutes, John was pretty sure the poor guy was ready to shake something. He called a break, and John walked over, sitting down next to McKay and chuckling. "Wanna take bets as to how long it takes him to cry?"

"Make who cry? Pearson?"

"The photographer."

"Oh. He's fine. If he can't take it he shouldn't be in this line of work."

Stretching out his legs, John made himself comfortable. It was easy now that no cameras or eyes were pointed their way.

Rodney rolled his eyes, shifting to a more comfortable position in the chair. "Relaxing?"

"Might as well why we have the chance."

"Why are we doing this again?"

"Because we were ordered to."

"And that makes no sense! This whole thing makes no sense to me. Since when does the government admit anything?" he hissed. "They sweep it under the rug. They ignore it. They cover it up. They make up a story more asinine than the real one to distract the public. They don't admit
anything."

John shrugged. "I wasn't there, so I don't know why they made this decision."

"So you agree with them?"

John stared off into space a bit. "I understand the need to keep some things classified. It's necessary for security and safety, and the general public would panic if they knew half the things that are classified, and it would be unnecessary panic. But at the same time... I sometimes wonder if we take it too far. People aren't stupid. There has to be a line, but in recent years, have we veered too far to the secrecy for the sake of secrecy side of things?"

"It's all political maneuvering and posturing. It's greed when you get down to it. Greed for power and prominence and this program gives the government both."

"Yeah," John said, keeping his voice down. "And I suspect that's probably a big reason why they decided to declassify part of Atlantis. They could blame it on a leak, and still contain it to a certain degree. Not to mention, by declassifying now, they can start releasing some of the advancements you and the others have made into the scientific community, and we can start working more on reverse-engineering some of the more useful gadgets for general use. It would have taken us decades to do that if we had to keep the sources secret."

"We're already passing along technology. The government has companies already picked out. Those companies don't want the program declassified. As soon as the SGC program is declassified and other companies get involved with the manufacture of products based on alien technology, the first companies will lose money. It will cut into their profits."

"But what they could pass along was limited, and the companies, not the government, was profiting from it. We were making some money, but now we can release gadgets directly, own the patents outright, and all the proceeds can go toward funding the SGC. We could eventually be self-sustaining that way."

"No, Sheppard, that's where you're wrong. The companies are profiting. And we're talking billions of dollars of profits from even a small advance in technology. And it will continue because the government doesn't have the manpower to do the additional research and development to bring the products to market. This will just open it up to more companies and cut into the profits of the ones currently on the government's list."

Rodney paused, his eyes focusing inward for a minute, obviously caught in a thought.

John watched him. "I won't pretend to know anything about that—you're much more versed in the ins and outs of scientific politics. If that's the case, why do you think they're declassifying now?"

The rapid snapping of the camera jolted Rodney from his thoughts as he glanced up and scowled at the photographers. "What was that for?"

John blinked, glancing around. He had forgotten again where they were. "Um."

"You were relaxed. It was perfect. Keep talking. Ignore me," the photographer said, gesturing with his free hand. Rodney just scowled at him.

Licking his lips, John shrugged. This was better than posing he guessed. He forced his body not to tense up. He tried to get McKay's attention again. "You were going to tell me what your theory was."

"No." Rodney crossed his hands over his chest, eyes still focused on the photographer. "I think we're done."
He gave it one more shot, figuring if this didn't work, the photographer was on his own. "How long do you think it will take the Nobel committee to nominate you now that your body of work is eligible?"

"They probably took me out of any considerations now because they're always going to assume that I just reverse-engineered something," he said bitterly, rising to his feet. "Pearson, we're done."

John wondered why Rodney was suddenly so bitter and angry. Yeah, this sucked, but he was kind of blowing it out of proportion—even for him. With another sigh, he rose to his feet again.

Pearson was trying to talk to the scientist, but Rodney had brushed by him, tugging off his suit jacket on the way, his direction unerringly accurate even in the maze of the television studio.

Feeling a bit like he had the other man's six, John followed behind, keeping his senses aware of what was going on around them.

Pearson had fallen back, making apologies for their abrupt departure.

John followed Rodney into the car, settling in next to him once again. "You all right?"

"No," he sighed, his body stiff and radiating tension and annoyance. "I'm tired of being manipulated."

"Talk to me, then. Give me some options."

"We don't have any options."

"There are always options."

"No. Not always." Rodney sighed, rubbing a hand over his face before sliding it around to the back of his neck where he pressed a few times. "This whole thing has to be about money. Has to be."

John reached back, feeling the knots under his friend's skin. He started to work them out. "It wouldn't surprise me."

"Money and power," Rodney said, sighing as John massaged his neck. The two front doors opened and closed a moment later, Pearson glancing back through the window that divided the front of the limo from the back.

"We're going to head for the airport, but I'll give you some privacy," Pearson said. "Hit the intercom if you have questions or need me for anything."

"Privacy?" John raised an eyebrow.

"You look like you need it," he said, the window starting to rise.

With a sigh, John decided he really didn't want to know. He let his hand drop and slumped into the seat.

"I didn't say anything to him," Rodney said as soon as the window between the front and back section of the car was closed.

"What?" John opened his eyes again. "I didn't think you did. He just knows we're both a little wrung out from all this."
"Nothing, nothing," Rodney said with his own sigh, curling into himself a little, turning his back to John as he leaned into the window of the limo.

Closing his eyes again, and not entirely sure when he had lost complete and utter control of every aspect of his life, John fell into a light doze.

****

They had no power here, no control over their own destinies.

She took a great deal of pleasure keeping them off balance, even after the official torture sessions were over. She had the power. She controlled every aspect of their existence.

This was another night alone, shivering in his cell. They hadn't even been particularly resistant today. He had mostly screamed on command.

But she had the power, and she used it, just to prove she could.

He started to tap, not relaxing until he heard the answering call. Alive. They were still alive to fight another day. And maybe tomorrow night, they would be allowed to find a little peace.

****

Rodney McKay was scared.

Being scared wasn't a new thing, not for him. Come on, he ran from Wraith and angry natives on an almost daily basis. He knew what fear was. He knew what it felt like to be scared.

And right now, even when he was sitting next to Sheppard in a well-appointed limo, he was scared—and that scared him.

Rodney had known John would come for him. Known without a doubt. If he'd learned anything in Pegasus is that John Sheppard never left anyone behind. He was a loyal puppy—or a pitbull—when it came to things like that. He'd stay with something until he got to the end of it or until he found you.

What really scared Rodney was that his kidnappers had never asked him for anything, never demanded anything. Sure they threatened, waved a gun, roughed him up a little. It was a warning of something more.

The fact that they were military added another dimension.

When they were talking about the Nobel—which, yeah, after this he was never going to qualify for—and the technology that was funneled to the Earth-based companies, it had hit him then.

This wasn't about Atlantis. Not really.

This was about power and money and greed.

Someone had leaked Atlantis in a way that the government had to reveal the project—the absolute minimal details of it, granted—but they'd had to reveal it. Who would benefit from it? The companies already on the government's payroll certainly wouldn't. They wanted the exclusive deals.

No. Someone else wanted into the boy's club and kidnapping him had been the entrance fee. They had connections. They knew the scope of the project already. They could blow the whole thing
wide open if they'd wanted.

But they hadn't.

Why?

And that was one answer Rodney didn't have and that scared him. The unknown. Not knowing.

Shifting on the seat, he glanced over at Sheppard…John. So much potential. And yesterday….god. It had been so hard to tell him to stop. He'd wanted it so much. But it wasn't right, wasn't good. Not now. Especially not now.

He reached out, lightly brushing hair away from his forehead, glad the lines of worry had faded as he slept.

John made a soft noise, lips curling up slightly in sleep as he turned into Rodney's fingers.

He quickly pulled his hand back, holding his breath. That had been stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He shifted in the limo, managing to get himself into the other seat across the way, away from Sheppard. It was better here. Safer.

The other man sighed softly, curling in a bit.

Much safer, Rodney thought again, nodding. He was doing the right thing. He didn't want to ruin their friendship over something like this.

He closed his eyes, letting the rhythm of the car lull him into a half-doze, waking when they finally ground to a stop.

John blinked his eyes open, looking way too sexy for his own good. "Mmm?"

"We stopped." He rubbed his eyes, wishing he had a bed and more coffee.

"We did?"

"Hmm. Yes. We're not moving anymore which indicates we've stopped." Rodney rapped at the divider behind his head.

John blinked again, rubbing at his eyes.

The window opened a beat later and Rodney could see a small plane just in view out of the front window. Pearson was turned toward him. "Are you ready? We'll be taking the plane to LA for tonight's taping of Leno."

"Leno?" John sat up. "Cool."

Rodney shook his head. "Of course you like Leno," he grumbled, watching as John more-or-less fell out of the car. "That show should have been Letterman's."

"Letterman has his own show."

"I'm talking about when Johnny retired. The show should have been Letterman's," Rodney said, following John out. He had to raise his voice in order to be heard over the sound of planes and engines.

John shrugged. He looked rumpled and still a bit sleepy. "True. But Leno's done a good job, and Letterman ended up with his own show, produced by his own company. In the long run, he made
out better than he would have if he'd been the one to get the Tonight Show."

"That doesn't mean I have to like the Tonight Show," Rodney argued, following Pearson's direction as he gestured to an awaiting plane. Their driver was pulling luggage from the trunk of the limo.

"True. You don't have to like it. But you do have to acknowledge that while Letterman might have been your first choice, Leno hasn't exactly done a bad job."

"I can't stand the show because of what happened," Rodney admitted, climbing up the stairs into the plane.

John settled into a seat next to Rodney once they were on board. "To be honest, I know the basics, but I was never interested enough to look deeper."

"It always bothered me, how it was handled," he said, looking around the plane—the really nice corporate jet. He craned his neck, looking in the back of the plane where there was a door that led into a room. "Is there a bed in here?"

John seemed to notice for the first time where they were as well. "Wow. I wonder if they'll let me fly?" He started to unbuckle so he could stand up.

"If you could take your seats, we can get clearance for take off," Pearson said, stepping on board. "We're already late."

"Who's flying?" John didn't stop unbuckling. "It's been forever since I was up in a real jet. I love my Jumpers, but there's nothing like flying something that can pull a few Gs."

"Colonel, we have it taken care of. Maybe on the flight tonight we can see about you taking the stick, okay?"

John held still for a moment, then slowly refastened his belt. "Yeah, all right."

"Is there a bed?" Rodney asked, pointing to the back of the plane.

Pearson nodded. "There is. We'll be using this plane for all your long-distance travel, and because the schedule is tight in some places, we'll have to do some over-night flying. When that happens, you can still get some rest. There's only one bed, but I know SG teams are used to sharing tents and rooms off-world, so I'm hoping it's the same on Atlantis."

Rodney tried not to flinch when he thought of sharing a bed with John…with Sheppard. "We share tents off-world, yes."

"So it won't be a problem." John answered for them. "Thank you."

"Good. We'll be getting underway in the next few minutes," Pearson said, moving into the cockpit.

John turned to look out the window.

"Sheppard?" God. He felt like a girl.

The other man immediately looked over. "Yeah?"

"I'm really not trying to give you a hard time this time. Other times I know I do it on purpose, but not now and I wanted you to know that. This whole thing is just…” He sighed. "It's complicated."
He got the small half-smile that John so rarely broke out. The one that made his face softer, more open. "I know. It's not an easy situation. None of it. And when you add in the fuckers who tried to take you... Look, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I still... feel that way. And I want to try. But... if you can't... I'll understand, okay?"

"I don't think this is even about Atlantis anymore."

"I'm not sure it ever was. There's only enough truth mixed in to make it a story, but so much of what Atlantis really is... Anyway, it's fine. We're cool at least, if that was something you were worried about. I'll tell Pearson I'm not tired when we get back on board later so you can have the bed to yourself and get some sleep."

"I'm not talking about that," Rodney said, rolling his eyes. "Would you listen for a minute?"

John rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. I'm listening."

"No, actually, you're not. What's wrong?"

Sheppard waved his hand. "I'm listening. Go on."

"No," Rodney scowled. "What's your problem?"

"Nothing."

"You obviously have a problem."

"I don't have a problem. I'm listening."

"You have a problem. Why won't you admit you do?" He stared at John for a few seconds and then started unbuckling his seatbelt. He wasn't just going to sit here and be patronized by a pilot.

"Rodney... I don't have a problem. I'm just tired and confused and a little overwhelmed, okay? This is all... a lot to take in, and when you add in realizing I think I... my feelings for you, it's just all... a lot."

Rodney snorted. "That's certainly the understatement of the year, maybe the decade, even. We've been shanghaied by your government into doing a press tour to save their asses because someone in corporate America wants into the 'Boys Club' and they decided that we're the price of admission."

"Exactly." Sheppard sighed. "I'm worried they're going to try and set one or both of us up to take a fall of some kind, and so on top of everything else, I'm constantly watching both our backs waiting for that other shoe to drop. Add to all that the fact that someone on our own team tried to snatch you, and I'm just a bit twitchy right now."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. I taught you half of it myself. But it doesn't change the fact that I'll be watching your back and keeping you safe. I'd rather be in the way of whatever tries to get at you so you can get away, instead of being forced to fight. You're too valuable to risk."

"You're valuable, too, Sheppard," Rodney said, turning his gaze to the man sitting next to him. "You need to stop under-estimating yourself. One day it's going to get you killed."

The other man's eyes slid away. "Better me than you."
"Don't give me that."

Sheppard's lips curled up in a little forced half-smile. "Hey, you're always complaining that your genius and value to the galaxies isn't recognized enough. I believe you, though."

"Yes, yes, placate the genius," Rodney rolled his eyes.

"I'm not placating you." John's expression got a little intense. "Despite what you may think, there aren't many people I'd be willing to lay down my life for. You're at the top of that list."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to be happy that you're willing to die for me? I don't want you dead. I'm not sure if you understand that or not. You and Death should have nothing to do with each other. You shouldn't be passing acquaintances or pen pals."

"I don't want to be dead. I'm actually enjoying living for once. But... You know what, never mind." John sighed again. "Forget I brought it up."

"No. I won't forget you brought it up. You're getting all squirrelly on me. What is with you?" Rodney asked, vaguely aware that the plane was moving, that they were taxiing to the runway for their departure.

Unbuckling his seatbelt, John moved too fast for Rodney to anticipate. He was suddenly over Rodney, their mouths pressed together hard, a tongue demanding entrance, not taking no for an answer. John kissed him breathless before breaking it, reaching down to re-buckle Rodney's seatbelt, and then sitting back down and re-doing his own. "That."

It took a few moments—and panting breaths—before Rodney could speak without fear of squeaking. His pants had gotten uncomfortably tight in the matter of a few seconds. "You just..." he said, licking his lips, wide-open eyes turned to John.

Licking his lips, John's expression was soft. "I did. I've been wanting to. I want to do more."

"But we're in a plane! A plane chartered by your tight-assed government!" he hissed, panic and desire battling within.

John shrugged. "You asked what was wrong with me. I showed you. I want to keep doing that."

"So you think it's wrong?" Rodney was confused and really turned on right now. He could still feel the lingering power and strength in the other man. He'd missed that feeling, missed the solidness and muscles of a male lover. God, he wanted John so badly, but it was obvious that the soldier was conflicted. He probably thought it was wrong, bad, something he'd regret.

"No. You do. Every time I try, you push me away." John shrugged. "I just want to make out with you right now."

"But we can't! Not here! Pearson is just up front along with a very military pilot. Are you insane? You can't just...tank your career."

"We've had a long day. If we told him we were going to go lie down—he's the one who suggested we share the bed if we were tired—he wouldn't object. And then we could make out. The sound of the plane would cover up any noises."

Rodney groaned, looking away. "Like I could stop at just making out."

"Who says we have to?" A long finger traced the bulge in his groin.
He jumped, the seatbelt the only thing holding him in place. "Are you insane?" he hissed, his eyes tracking toward the cockpit.

The hand disappeared. "Probably."

"I won't be the one to get you discharged."

"I'm not trying to get discharged. I'm just tired of not getting what I want because I'm worried about what someone else will think."

"Acting like that on a jet surrounded by military people will get you discharged! It's not my fault your military is ass-backwards," Rodney grumbled, shifting in his seat, officially very frustrated and uncomfortable.

John shrugged, unbuckling his seatbelt and standing. "I'm going to go lie down. You're more than welcome to join me."

Rodney reached out grabbing his arm and pulling him back down. "You can't get up until we're in the air."

John stumbled a bit, practically ending up in Rodney's lap.

McKay moaned quietly as John's hand landed right where Rodney did and didn't want it to be. His entire body stiffened and he shuddered, eyes closing as he tried to catch his breath. This was so unfair.

He heard John's breath hitch a little, but he didn't move his hand away.

"Can't...can't ruin the suit," he whispered, licking his lips that were suddenly very dry. He could feel the plane picking up speed as they headed down the runway. They were nearly airborne.

"That close?" John's thumb caressed him lightly.

He moaned again, his body reacting more than he wanted it to. "Sheppard..."

"John."

As the plane's nose angled upward, John shifted, leaning even further into him. Between the pressure and the fact that he hadn't had a partner in years...this was on the edge of too much. "Please..."

The tip of a tongue touched his neck, along with a soft groan. "Rodney... God..."

His mind was screaming 'wrong wrong wrong wrong!' but his body had other things in mind completely, arching up into the body and hands that held him down.

"Want you," John whispered softly in his ear.

He moaned, his arm clutching at John's. He was unsure if he was holding the man in place or trying to push him away. Neither was a good idea and yet they were both right.

Warm breath grazed his ear, and lips pressed softly against the skin there.

"Sheppard...please..." he whispered, not sure if he was asking for him to 'please, stop' or begging for him to 'please, keep going'.

"Call me John. Say my name, Rodney." His thumb moved slightly as he whispered.
Rodney squeaked a little, drawing in an abrupt breath. "Sheppard…"

"Please. I want to hear it. Just once."

The plane was leveling off. It would climb again in a few minutes before it settled into his final altitude for the flight. Pearson would come back any minute now. Pearson would see them like this. But John—Sheppard, it was Sheppard—felt so good. He moaned again when John—when Sheppard—licked just under his ear, the soldier's name falling easily from Rodney's lips.

He felt the other man shudder against him, hips thrusting in slightly.

"Pearson…" he whispered, wanting to warn the other man. It was only a matter of time before their press liaison came into the cabin.

John sucked in a gulp of air. He lifted his head, brushing their lips together very, very softly.

Oh god, Rodney moaned, following John when he backed off, putting distance between them. John's hand on his groin, however, hadn't moved.

"Come lie down with me. Please, Rodney…"

"Want to, but—"

"No buts. Just come." John squeezed lightly before standing, his hand dropping away. He turned to the cockpit, raising his voice. "Pearson? I'm a bit wiped out, so I'm going to lie down while we're in transit."

"It's a short flight."

"I don't care." John licked his lips a few times, looking at Rodney. Then he turned, making his way back to the small bedroom.

Rodney watched him disappear into the back, closing the door between the sections halfway. A quiet whimper later and he was tugging at his seatbelt, trying to get it unbuckled in order to follow John. He was halfway down the aisle when Pearson called out to him, spinning him around on his heel.

"Doctor McKay, I was wondering if we could chat for a bit while we fly."

"You were…." Rodney shook his head, looking at the other man. "What?"

Pearson sat down and gestured Rodney into the seat across from him. "I know this whole situation has been… less than ideal, especially for you. And while I can't change some things, I'd like to know what, if anything, I can do to make this easier on you."

Rodney almost—almost—ignored Pearson. Sending a glance to the back of the plane, he sighed and settled into the seat the liaison had indicated, hoping his suit pants and the dark interior of the plane masked his hard-on. "Less than ideal? That's certainly an understatement."

"I know. And believe me, I, and others, wish this hadn't happened, or at least hadn't happened in quite this way. Unfortunately, you and the Colonel are bearing the brunt of it. I'd like to at least try to make this easier for you if I can—I just need to know what would help, if anything."

"Let us go home."

Pearson sighed. "Even if I could, your ride home won't be here for another week, and then it
needs a week to restock. You will be on it as originally scheduled—I'll make sure of that."

"What is our schedule like, really? And why all the interviews?"

"It will be pretty hectic, I won't lie to you. Right now, all your interviews are going to be joint. In the next week or so, however, we'll start booking you separately. As for why—the SGC is hoping that by putting faces people can relate to on the project, there will be more acceptance and less panic."

"But why not sweep it under the rug again like they usually do? Why the circus?"

"I can't answer that completely because, honestly, I don't know either. I can tell you that some of this, at least from General O'Neill's perspective, is trying to control the message before someone else does it for us."

"I think it's already too late for that."

"Possibly. But we can't do anything about what happened in the past, all we can try to do is move forward." Pearson shrugged. "Which is why I wanted to find out what I could do to make this easier for you."

"Schedule as few things as possible. Neither of us is good at this…” Rodney waved his hand. "You know, the being nice thing. Well, Sheppard is. I'm not."

"I will. Unfortunately, there's only so much I can do about that. There are certain things we'll need you to do, and interviews are a big part of that. I will try to keep it down to the bare minimum though, and combine them when I can, like for radio programs."

"No," Rodney said shaking his head. "Pick and choose. We don't need to do everything."

"I'll do my best," the soldier promised.

"You don't understand, Lieutenant," Rodney said, leaning forward. "I'm here against my will. If I actually had a choice in this, I wouldn't be here. I tried to opt out of this days ago and look where it got me; in a cabin in the middle of the mountains because I'd been kidnapped by members of the US military."

"I do understand, Doctor. Really I do. And General O'Neill understands, as well. Before you were kidnapped, he had arranged to send guards to ensure exactly that didn't happen, so you could enjoy your vacation in peace. Unfortunately we acted a little too late to be of any use, and I assure you that, at least, won't happen again."

"So what are you doing to ensure my safety? I know what the Colonel says, but he's limited in what he can do—especially because we're forced to be the SGC's poster children."

"Well, the Colonel is our last line of defense, at his request. If everything else fails, with luck, he'll be able to protect you. In the meantime, I'm vetting personally all personnel in the cities we'll be visiting, to ensure I know exactly who is transporting us, and the locations we'll be using. At each hotel, there will be a guard posted on the room, to ensure no one gets in unless it's someone I've specifically invited."

"Can you actually vouch for everyone?"

"Not everyone we'll be seeing, no. But for those that will be transporting us, and for anyone that will be allowed direct access to you in the hotels—yes. I sent my own people that myself and the General trust ahead to each location to secure our accommodations, and since I know you'll both
be exhausted when we are able to retire for the evenings, I don't plan to give anyone access unless it's an emergency. I've even brought along a personal chef to prepare your meals. He's been given a list of all your allergies, so that will be one less thing you'll have to worry about."

Rodney sat back, his eyes widening a little in surprise. He hadn't expected the government to go to such lengths for them. "Why us? Why Atlantis?" is what he asked instead. "Why was it Atlantis that was leaked? Why not the SGC? The Ori? Other things that are much more...present—at least in terms of locality."

"Partially because it was the most convenient, to be honest. It was information about Ancient technology that was leaked. Atlantis—given the fact that we're telling people it's in Antarctica—is remote enough to discourage people showing up and poking around. We couldn't say that about the Colorado base, or security would have become a nightmare. And since we have that remote excuse, and in actuality you will be very remote, we can control the amount of time you're forced to be in the public eye without raising any more flags."

"And there's already a scientific post set up there."

"Yes, and it was already a top secret base. So it allows us to release some of the truth, while keeping a large part still hidden, and it also means no personnel will become nothing more than talking heads. After this initial run, I'm predicting the furor will die down. You might have one or two interviews on subsequent visits home, but this should be the worst of it."

"I'm also guessing that the Ancient technology is a lot more...attractive to the government's corporate partners."

"Some of it, yes. Those we already had contracts with for technology will benefit the most in the short term. They are still the only ones who will get direct access for now. There have, admittedly, already been many inquiries about expanding that program, but to be honest, that's not my field so I don't have all the details, just the basics. I've been more focused on you and the Colonel, and ensuring your trip is as safe, productive, and as comfortable as I can make it."

Rodney sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He was tired and sore, his bruises reminding him of the treatment he'd received. "I can imagine there were inquiries," he finally said. "They're finally realizing where some of the new advances are coming from. How have the other governments reacted? I'm surprised there are no riots in the streets."

"There were some...protests. But because Atlantis, especially, is an international expedition, most of the key people in the world governments already knew at least something about the project. As I understand it, there are a team of our people putting together the paperwork on what was reverse-engineered, and what was invented by us. Colonel Carter is heading up that team, and she's pulling on both the SGC and Atlantis' advances. In fact, I believe she and her team are reviewing the papers various personnel have written over the years, deciding which will get published, in what order, and to which journals."

Rodney straightened up, brow creasing. "She can't do that."

"She won't make any final decisions without consulting you, when it comes to yours and your staff's contributions."

"She shouldn't be doing it in the first place. She had no background on any of the projects we worked on."

"I believe she's starting on the SGC files. If you'd like, I can put in a request to have her forward all the Atlantis papers to you to sort through while we're on the road. The only reason she was
going to do the first sort was because we didn't want to overload you."
"I'll do it," Rodney said. "I have all the papers on Atlantis. There's no reason Carter should."

He nodded. "I'll let her know. Do you need her to send them to you so you have everything?"

"No. I have everything. I probably have more than she does. I'll take care of it," he said, his mind already tracking to what could and could not be used—given the restrictions.

"Right. Is there anything else I can do for you then?"

Rodney sighed. "I guess flying us to a tropical island without reporters is out of the question."

Pearson chuckled. "I wish I could. I could use the vacation myself."

"That's what we were supposed to be doing until you came along."

"Not me, Doctor. I'm trying to make it as easy for you as possible, remember."

"You're the one who's sitting across from me, so it's you. You're the one managing our schedule. Less is more."

"Understandable." Pearson gave him a small smile. "Now, I'm guessing you were going to lie down when I stopped you. I'll let you get some rest. We have about an hour before we'll be landing."

Rodney nodded, rising to his feet, his urgency from earlier long gone, leaving only exhaustion. "Yes, that's where I was headed. Sheppard beat me to the bed."

"I figured when I didn't see him. You've both had a long day. Go get some rest. I'll knock when we're on the ground again."

"And the day's not over," Rodney said with a long-suffering sigh.

"The Leno appearance shouldn't be too long. And after that you'll be able to rest."

"Yeah. On a plane as we head to New York, probably."

"Don't worry about it. I'll brief you later." Smiling again, Pearson stood up. "Enjoy your rest, Doctor."

Rodney rolled his eyes as he shuffled to the back of the plane. The lights were on low. He could see a lump curled under the sheets and blankets on the far side of the bed, back toward the center of the mattress. John's dress uniform hanging neatly on a hanger from a hook on the wall.

With a quiet sigh, Rodney closed the door and started stripping out of his suit—the remains of his suit. The jacket was somewhere in the front of the cabin or in the limo. He hoped someone had thought to grab it since he hadn't.

After stripping down to a t-shirt and boxers, he headed into the small bathroom. After peeing, he looked at himself in the mirror, charting the bruises on his torso, his wrists, neck. They were angry marks against his naturally pale skin.

With a shake of his head, he ducked down, aggressively washing his face, turning the skin red and then patting it dry. He was exhausted and in a few hours was expected to be on national television—again.
Climbing into the bed, he settled on the edge, trying not to wake the slumbering Colonel. John needed the sleep probably more so than he did.

The other man snuffled a little, but didn't wake up.

Rodney sighed. Part of him had been hoping John was still awake, but this was better. It was for the best. They'd just end up regretting it later on.

He rolled onto his side facing away from John and tried to sleep. His mind, though, wouldn't let him, continuing to turn, going over whys and hows and everything in-between. There had to be a connection somewhere he wasn't seeing.

He was surprised when he felt movement next to him, and there was suddenly a warm body pressed against his back. "Mmmph?"

Rodney stiffened. "Sheppard?"

"Mmmmmm. Fell asleep. Heard you talking to Pearson. S'rry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. You need it."

"S'do you." A nose nuzzled into his neck.

"I've slept more than you have," Rodney said as an arm snaked over his hip.

"Ma'be." He could tell the other man was falling asleep again.

Rodney stared at the wall, not sure what to do exactly. If he tried to roll away he'd end up on the floor. This was…awkward.

"Sleep. Everything else c'n wait till later."

"How do you even know I'm awake?"

There was a warm puff of amusement against his neck. "Cause I can."

"That is so unfair."

"Sleep, Rodney."

"I can't just fall asleep because you tell me to."

"Relax then." The hand across him began to rub slow circle into his skin.

With each pass of his hand, John's fingers got dangerously closer and closer to his groin.

He stopped just short of where Rodney both did and didn't want him to go. "Later. I want the first time I touch you to be more than a fast grope."

Rodney was breathing heavily, the close proximity of the other man and the touching turning him on far more than was appropriate. "Didn't stop you from groping me before."

"Mmm, maybe I want to do this right." He shifted and Rodney could feel that John was as turned on as he was.

He rocked back, pulling a moan from the soldier. "What made you change your mind? You were trying to make me come in my pants half-an-hour ago."
"No...no I wasn't. I wanna see when you come."

"Yes. Yes, you were. And I was like half a second away from it actually happening."

"God, that's hot..." John moaned softly, rocking into him again.

"No, it's not," Rodney protested with a groan. "I did not want to explain a come stain on the suit."

"Mmmm, very hot. God, I want you..."

John's hand slipped down, brushing against Rodney's growing erection making them both groan. "Sheppard..." he whispered, trying not to react, but his body continued to betray him—shuddering against John.

"John, my name is John..." His fingers curled more firmly around Rodney.

Rodney moaned, turning his face into the pillow, trying to muffle his sounds. John's hand fit him perfectly and felt...oh, god...

"You're so... Rodney...." John moaned into his neck, rocking his own hips against Rodney's body.

He whimpered, trying to hold back. It wouldn't take much more at this point for him to come.

Moving suddenly, John flipped Rodney onto his back, with the pilot above him. He was watching his own hand as it toyed with Rodney, his cock standing up out of the hole in his boxers.

"Sheppard..." Rodney moaned, his body arching up into John's touch, craving more. He could feel his arousal pooling in the base of his spine.

John's hand worked him faster, and he was panting next to Rodney.

"Gonna...gonna..." Rodney panted quietly, clutching at the sheets.

"Come on. Let me see you come. I want to see..."

"Sheppard..." he moaned, the word still on his lips as he climaxed, spilling over his shirt and John's hand. His body shuddered hard, aftershocks rolling over and over through his body as John continued to stroke him.

When it was just this side of painful, John stopped, stilling his hand although it was still wrapped around Rodney as he softened. He was making soft, whimpering noises.

Rodney, though, was a puddle of pleasure, all of his muscles relaxed all at the same time for the first time in years.

"Want... please...need...Rodney..."

"John...what..."

Next to him, the other man shuddered. "T...touch me... please...oh god, I'm close, just need..."

Rodney shifting, trying to get his muscles to listen to him. It took him a few moments to get his hand wrapped around John's dick, but it seemed to be all the pilot needed.

With a soft cry and a hard shudder, it only took one stroke before John was coming.

Huh...wow, Rodney thought with a sloppy grin, stroking John a few more times as he shuddered...
on the back-half of his own orgasm.

Slumping next to him, still twitching a little, John cuddled up close, apparently trying to fuse them together. "Mmmmmm."

Rodney wiped his hand on John's boxers, too tired to do much else. "God," he whispered.

"Uh huh."

"You're gonna kill me."

"Reg'lar orgasms are good f'r your health." John was back to slurring his words, this time from pleasure instead of sleep.

"You're a doctor now?" he asked, shifting closer.

That got him another puff of laughter as John's arms wrapped around him, eliminating all space between them.

Rodney sighed, relaxing. He'd missed this closeness. It had been different before. It had been for survival before. Now…not it was something else, something better. With another breath, he let his eyes close, his brain finally slowing down enough for him to sleep.

He didn't know how long they were out for, when there was a knock on the door. "Colonel Sheppard, Doctor McKay? We've landed, but you have a few minutes to freshen up. Just come find me when you're ready to disembark."

Rodney groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. John had shifted again while they were sleeping, more or less pinning him in place. The soldier was blinking slowly, taking his time waking up.

Looking down, John suddenly smiled widely, openly. With no hints of the shadows normally in his face. "Hi."

Rodney swallowed thickly. "Hi."

If anything, John's smile got wider. He leaned down, brushing their lips together with barely-there pressure. "I could get used to waking up this way," he whispered.

'Oh, god, yes!' was what Rodney thought. "We need to clean up," is what Rodney said instead.

Chuckling, John kissed him again softly before slowly pulling away.

Rodney rolled to the side, watching as John moved across the bedroom and into the small airplane bathroom, closing the door behind him. They'd actually…done it. Well, kinda. Hand-jobs, but still.

And there was no freaking out yet from the straight US Air Force pilot. Rodney was betting it would happen before the end of the night. There was still time.

He didn't take long, emerging a few moments later looking less sticky. He moved to start pulling on his uniform. "What did Pearson want earlier? I heard him waylay you, but then I fell asleep before I heard what he wanted."

Rodney rolled to his feet, wrinkling his nose when he caught a whiff of himself. He needed new boxers and a shirt. Where had they put their luggage? "He wanted to know how he could make things easier for us. I told him to send us home," Rodney said, lurching over to the suitcases.
"That would be nice. I wonder if Elizabeth and Carson will actually let us go back on duty when we return, since we're not actually following orders and taking leave."

"Don't you mean Kate?" Rodney asked, opening the first suitcase. Whoops. Not his. He headed for the other one.

"Her, too." Hands were suddenly on his hips, caressing. "But we'll figure it out, whatever they decide. It's not like we chose to buck orders."

Rodney glanced over his shoulder, eyes questioning.

The other man gave him a sheepish look. "You were standing here, and I just... wanted to touch. And then I realized I could. So here I am."

"Yes, you are," he said, standing up straight. Rodney leaned back into Sheppard's solid body. He was stronger than he looked. Rodney sighed and closed his eyes. He could get used to this.

John's arms circled him more firmly, and he pressed a kiss into the top of Rodney's shoulder. "This is really, really nice."

"Yes, it is," he said quietly, hands covering John's.

They stood like that for several quiet minutes before John sighed softly. "I supposed we should finish getting dressed."

"I smell like sex," Rodney said with his own sigh. "How did I manage to get both yours and my come on me?"

"You were lucky?" John pressed another kiss into his shoulder. "There's a washcloth and some soap in the bathroom. You can wash the worst of it away that way. If you want, I'll look for clean boxers for you while you do that."

"I need a shirt, too," Rodney said, untangling himself reluctantly.

"Okay. I'll find them for you."

Rodney nodded and headed into the bathroom, stripping once he was inside. It took him a little bit of maneuvering, but he managed to clean up a little. At least he didn't smell like he'd had sex in a plane.

He'd had sex in a plane.

When he came back out, John was leaning against one wall, uniform completely back in place. A pair of boxers and a new undershirt, along with Rodney's suit, were all laid out on the bed.

He paused, the small excuse for a towel covering up himself since he didn't want to put on the dirty clothes. "Oh," he said, turning red. "I thought you would be..." He went to gesture, but the towel started slipping. "You know...out there."

"I can if you want me to. But I wanted to see you."

"You're all dressed!" he said, hands moving unconsciously, making him grab for the falling towel again.

"So?"
"I'm in nothing except a sorry excuse for a towel!"

"Again, so?"

Rodney scowled, trying to ignore the heat he could feel in his face. If he could cross his arms over his chest without the fear of losing what little dignity he had left—along with the towel—he would have. "It puts me at a severe disadvantage."

Standing up from the wall, John moved over, leaning in to brush their lips together. "For what it's worth, I've always thought you had a great body. But since it bothers you, I'll wait for you out in the cabin."

"I'm just saying that if we're going to be naked it should be together."

The pilot's lips curved into another soft smile. "We can arrange that. Later."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Sheppard."

"I never do." John's expression turned more serious. "I wouldn't start something I didn't plan to give a fair try, Rodney. I don't know what will happen, but I'm not playing games with you."

"So you say after an amazing hand-job. You're still in post-orgasmic bliss. Wait a few hours."

"The hand-job was last night." John leaned in for one, hard kiss. "It's not going to change."

"Apparently you've lost all ability to tell time, too. It's only four in the afternoon."

Shrugging, John straightened up. "Still. We napped and cuddled after the hand-jobs, that automatically moves us forward."

"Does it now? I didn't realize there were stages to a straight man's gay freak out. Do tell." Rodney straightened, forgetting about the mini-towel as he crossed his hands over his chest. With a grin, John wrapped his hand around Rodney's now-exposed dick, although he didn't do more than hold it. "If I was entirely straight, I wouldn't be here doing this in the first place."

Rodney squeaked, trying to draw away, but John tightened his hand, keeping him in place. "Still…post… post-orgasmic bliss," he stuttered.

"While there is some of that, this isn't what that is." He began to stroke slowly. "Stop trying to convince yourself this isn't happening."

"Sheppard…" he moaned, his hand coming to rest on John's arm.

"Why won't you call me John?" He asked softly.

"Habit," Rodney panted, squeezing the pilot's arm as John continued to stroke him.

"Use my given name. I want to hear you say it."

"What…what does it matter?" he asked, the question ending in a moan as John twisted his hand a little, sending pleasure shooting through him.

"My last name is impersonal, something you use for a distant friend or a colleague. I want to hear you use my first name, here, when it's just us—if no where else."

The pilot picked up the pace, the towel long since abandoned on the floor. "God…please, don't
"I won't, I promise." John had moved to the side so when he came, Rodney wouldn't get come on
him, but he still had access to everything he wanted to get his hands on—namely Rodney's cock,
which was really, really enjoying John's hand.

"You look so hot like this, aroused and panting for me."

"Come on, John…you bastard, please…"

The other man immediately sped up his hand, and seemed to know just how to move his hand so
it felt the best. "You said my name… God, so fucking hot... Come for me."

"John…" he whispered, his climax just out of reach, his body still reeling a little from the first one.
Having a second so close to the first…God…John was a god.

"I want to see it, want to hear it..." He nipped at Rodney's ear, sending little shudders of pleasure
straight down to Rodney's cock.

This orgasm wasn't as hard as the first, but it was just as powerful, sneaking up on him and nearly
making his knees buckle as he came with a groan, moaning John's name as his body shuddered.

His… partner? Lover? Friend with benefits? ... continued to stroke him through it, wringing out a
few aftershocks.

Rodney was panting heavily, barely on his feet as John slowly put him back together.

Using the towel that had slipped to the floor, John cleaned him up gently before guiding him to sit
on the edge of the bed again.

"Gonna….gonna kill me," he groaned.

"But what a way to go."

"Bastard," he whispered, a half-smile on his face as he tilted his head up to John.

Grinning, John met him half-way, bringing their mouths together for a slow, sweet kiss.

"Pearson's going to wonder what we're doing in here."

"We'll tell him we were contemplating escape routes, but ultimately we decided it was too risky."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "You should wash your hands and I need to get dressed."

"Sir, yes, sir." John grinned again, brushing their lips together one last time before straightening
and heading back into the bathroom.

With a soft chuckle, Rodney shook his head, climbing into his boxers and tugging on his
undershirt. John stole another kiss before he headed into the main cabin, chatting with Pearson as
soon as he stepped through the door.

Rodney got dressed quickly, putting everything back to rights within five minutes. When he
stepped outside, John and Pearson were standing outside the plane in the sun, a waiting limo
idling several feet away.

This was the way to travel.
Both men turned to him when he stepped outside, Pearson smiling. "Ah, good. We're going to head straight to the studio for the interview, and then have dinner back here. We were just chatting about what you'd like me to tell the chef to prepare while we're out."

"What happened to lunch?" he asked when he stepped close.

"We'll have a light lunch for you at the studio, but we figured you would be more comfortable having your bigger meal in the comfort of the plane, knowing you're done for the day," Pearson said easily.

"Oh. Okay," Rodney said with a nod. "So we're going to the Tonight Show's studios now?"

Pearson looked a little pained. "Actually, there's been a bit of a change of plans. Leno canceled on us, so we're going to do Larry King instead."

"Leno cancelled on us? I thought we were big time national news. Why did he cancel?"

Pearson shook his head. "I have no idea. I argued with his PR person for an hour on the plane. Apparently some B-list star is promoting a movie, and they owed them a favor or something."

"Who is it?" Rodney asked, narrowing his eyes at the Lieutenant.

Pearson flinched again slightly. "Jenny McCarthy."

Rodney's eyebrows drew together and he took a step toward Pearson. "Who?"

The soldier took an involuntary step back. "She's an actress. Apparently Leno's guy owed her guy a favor, so they're bumping us to get her on to promote her new come-back movie."

"Okay, she's apparently desperate and a nobody since I've never heard of her, but how could we get bumped off a show for a…a…floozy B-list actress? I thought you were supposed to be good at your job or did the government saddle us with a second-rate press liaison?"

"I am good at my job—which is why we're headed to Larry King Live now. I booked you on there last minute, and Mister King is very excited to have you both on. The Leno thing is just an example of how Hollywood works, unfortunately. Sometimes it's all about who owes who a favor."

"Why don't people owe you favors?"

"They do. Just not this particular PR guy."

"Great," Rodney said rolling his eyes as he moved a few away. "So instead of a nice light dumb interview from Leno, we'll get to be grilled by Larry King and then have to sit through the call-in viewers."

They got into the limo, all three of them getting comfortable. "Larry isn't too tough. He likes to get his guests talking, so it might actually be a better venue for you two, rather than having a host who really wants to be the center of attention. This could work out well for us."

"Well, we all know what happened the last time the host got us talking," Rodney grumbled, throwing a look over toward John whose cheeks were turning a little red.

"God, I hope that just dies. It was a little local show, with any luck, no one saw it."

"Actually, it was broadcast to the national markets for their noon news programs," Pearson said
quietly, riffling through a few folders.

John turned white. "What?"

Pearson actually looked a little sheepish. "We were in a local studio because we couldn't get you to a major city in time."

John looked like he was going to start panicking. "They edited it right? Please tell me they edited it."

"I don't know. We were still dealing with the photos and such at the time. I haven't had the chance to see it. No one's called me about it so I'm assuming it's fine."

"Oh god..." John put his head down into his hands. "Someone shoot me."

"Absolutely not," Rodney said firmly. He'd had sex for the first time in years. He wasn't going to give up the possibility of it happening again. "I'm not doing this by myself. If I have to do this, so do you."

John peeked through his fingers. "You'll distract them if anyone mentions that interview, right?"

Rodney raised an eyebrow and looked at him. "We're talking about me now. What do you think?"

"I'll give you copious amounts of good chocolate and coffee, and be your slave for a week if you derail any attempts to bring that up again."

Rodney considered it for a minute. "Does that include laundry?"

"Anything you want. Just don't let me talk about my sex life in front of a camera again."

An evil smile came to his face as he began to tick off the points of the arrangement. "Laundry for a week. No 'let's meet the nice natives who want to kill us' missions for the same week. Instead, it's a science mission of my choosing. If we're home, you bring me coffee and snacks throughout the day, all week. There will be none of your sadistic training over said week. And that includes Teyla and her Satan sticks and Ronon and his 'I can break you just by looking at you' training sessions. You'll work in the labs helping my staff turn things on that week, at least three hours a day. And I get to pick the movie for Team night."

"Deal." John held out his hand to shake.

"And don't forget the copious amounts of coffee and chocolate. You'll need to stock up while we're here," Rodney said, hesitating before clasping John's hand.

"I would have done that anyway." John grinned as they shook hands.

Pearson sighed and shook his head. "So, about Larry King," he began, briefing them on the format of the interview and what questions he'll probably ask. The ride to the studio didn't take long—fifteen minutes tops—and there was a veritable feast in their dressing rooms—connecting dressing rooms. That and what looked like an entirely new wardrobe—complete with the tags on every piece.

John poked his head into Rodney's side. "Hey, nice clothes!"

"Are they trying to tell us that we can't dress ourselves?" he asked, looking up from where he was gingerly touching a shirt.
"Speak for yourself. I have to wear a uniform, so I always look like I'm wearing the same outfit every day. People probably wonder if I smell."

"Are you saying that you don't have this rack of clothes?"

"No. I have to wear my dress uniform."

"Oh, great. So I'm the one who needs to get his image polished."

John rolled his eyes. "Or they thought you might appreciate being able to change into a fresh suit."

"Oh, god!" Rodney said, eyes widening as fresh panic hit again. "Do you think they can smell sex on me?"

"No, Rodney. But we've lived in these clothes for the better part of twenty-four hours. Most people would want to change."

Rodney huffed, turning back to the rack of clothes. There were suits, sport coats, shirts, pants. Everything looked like it was in his size but nothing was quite his style. What happened to the t-shirts and jeans?

"The black slacks with the blue blazer would look great on you."

"Wouldn't a suit me more appropriate with you in your dress uniform?"

"If you're more comfortable in one. But it's really more about what looks great on you, rather than anything else. Try it on—let's see how it looks."

Rodney glanced up again, finding John at his side, a few inches away. He was looking through the clothes, fingering the lapel of one sport coat before checking the next. Rodney's breath caught in his throat remembering what they'd done less than an hour ago, wanting that and more, wanting to keep this easiness between them.

"This one." John pulled a navy blazer off the rack, holding it up to Rodney.

But Rodney wasn't looking at the clothing, he was staring at John, really looking in a way he never could before.

The other man noticed suddenly, and smiled shyly. He set the coat aside and moved closer to Rodney, reaching out to touch his face. One finger traced the edge of Rodney's jaw, trailing down his neck. "Hi."

Rodney loved the way John had a five o'clock shadow at ten in the morning. He loved the crinkle of crow's feet at the corner of his eyes when he smiled. He loved his hair—hordes of hair—that had a mind of its own. The Adam's apple and neck were pretty amazing, too.

Licking his lips, John swayed further into Rodney's space. "When you look at me that way, it makes me want to do things to you that really aren't appropriate for a dressing room."

"Why do you have to be so damn perfect?" Rodney asked, reaching out, letting his fingers trail over the skin of John's neck and along his jaw.

Humming softly, John leaned into the touch. "M'not. You are though."

"You are. You're everything I've always wanted but could never have. You were always untouchable. I don't know how or why this is happening. Nothing like this ever happens to me."
John's lips brushed his lightly. "Everything I never realized I wanted. But now... God, Rodney...."

He leaned closer, deepening the kiss like he'd wanted to all the other times.

John moaned, opening up for him, letting him in.

Rodney let his hands drift down, fingers encountering the medals on John's chest and the reminder of who John was and what they were doing there in the first place came rushing back. With a whimper he stepped back, ending the kiss abruptly. "Food," he said, trying to cover up his own panic at being found out. "I need to eat something."

John swayed, trying to find Rodney's lips again. He whimpered softly. "Please..."

"There was food. I know I saw it," Rodney said, sidestepping the listing pilot, heading toward the catered trays that signified lunch.

He heard a soft sigh behind him. "Right."

He loaded up a plate with chicken and potatoes, leaving the vaguely scary looking vegetables behind. A large roll with butter was the last piece to be added before he grabbed a bottle of diet soda and settled into an arm chair.

John was right behind him, although he was just nibbling on a roll. He perched on the chair next to Rodney. "All right, so I don't know squat about Larry King. I never watched the show. What can you tell me?"

"He interviews people," Rodney mumbled around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Well, yes, I got that. But anything I should be on the lookout for?"

Rodney shrugged, filling up another fork-full, mingling chicken and potatoes and gravy. "He asks questions. People sometimes call in to ask questions."

"Call in?" John paused in his nibbling. "As in, anyone can call the show and ask whatever they want?"

"I guess. Not like I spend what little time I'm on leave watching Larry King when there's scifi to catch up on."

"This is true. When does the new season of Doctor Who come out?"

"I don't know. I didn't get the chance to look since we got here. I was too busy getting kidnapped and dragged all over the US," Rodney grumbled, shoving in more food.

"We'll have to find time to go to the store and stock up. I bet if we're creative about it, we can get a whole crate of DVDs to take back with us."

"I should have made that a requirement of my incarceration."

"I'm sure you can find a way to work it in down the line." John grinned at him.

"Maybe," he said with a grimace. "I think Pearson's onto me."

"Maybe. But that doesn't change that he's here to make our lives easier, wherever possible." John tossed the remainder of his roll in the trash. "I guess I'll go make sure everything is on straight so I don't look like an idiot again."
Nodding, Rodney glanced up, eyes tracking toward the rack of clothing. "I should find something a little less rumpled."

"The jacket I pulled out and maybe black slacks with a cream shirt."

Rodney scowled a little, but eventually nodded. "Sure." It was easier to say yes sometimes especially when nerves were threatening to send his lunch for a re-visit.

With a wink, John disappeared back through the joint door.

Rodney stayed sitting for nearly five minutes before managing to get his feet under him. He wandered through the clothes again, pulling out the ones John suggested, cutting off the tags and dumping the remains in the trash. His dirty suit he hung over the back of a chair, vaguely wishing there was a shower. Everything was better after a hot shower.

Pearson arrived a few minutes after Rodney managed to not mangle the third tie he tried to put on. After a quick trip to the studio's make-up artist, Rodney found himself settled into an uncomfortable chair in the main studio, the sound tech attaching the lapel microphone and securing the battery pack. John was already there looking completely at ease as he chatted with Larry King.

THE Larry King.

It was a little surreal, to put it mildly.

Finally, they were all walking out to the set. John and Rodney getting comfortable in their chairs, and then the countdown and they were live on the air with Larry King.

Larry King settled in and then opened up, the familiar voice putting Rodney on edge more than the interview this morning had. "Tonight, one of the government's skeletons comes out of the closet as we discover we might not be the only ones to have inhabited this planet. Is national security on the line? Two high ranking military and civilian officials have seen things you won't believe. And tonight they're here, ready to talk about the things they've seen. Next on Larry King Live."

Rodney shifted in his chair, glancing to the side toward John, taking in his rigid posture. John was in professional mode.

"Good evening. This past week, the United States government released some very startling information about a classified project they've been running in Antarctica for the past several years—the Atlantis Project. Here, under the ice, they discovered something that was truly out of this world: alien technology that may indicate that we are not the first evolution of the human race, but the second.

"Here in Los Angeles tonight, I have the pleasure of talking to two of the project's senior staff. Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard is the military commander of the outpost discovered in Antarctica. Also with us this evening is Doctor Rodney McKay, the Chief Science Officer for the outpost. Gentlemen, welcome to the show."

Murmured thank yous were the only response King allowed before heading into his questions. "Colonel, the news released early in the week—coupled by the kidnapping of Doctor McKay a day later—seems to indicate that this is a very high-level project within the United States government. What was the thinking behind the declassification of the Atlantis project?"

John answered easily, proving that when he wanted to, he could be a diplomat. He just usually preferred to let Teyla or Elizabeth do it. "Well, we thought it was probably time to let the world
know about what we had found. We had to balance the innovations and advancements we were
discovering with the impact it would have on the entire world. For a long time, we judged that the
panic this might cause would be worse than keeping it secret. But over time, we've come to decide
that, while we obviously can't release all the information, the existence of the project and what it
implies is something we can't keep to ourselves any longer."

"What it implies?" King asked, leaning forward. "Doesn't it more or less re-write our history?"

"It doesn't re-write it so much as redefine it." John smiled his 'be nice to the natives' smile. "We
still know we evolved on this planet, and it doesn't invalidate the things like the fossil records
we've found. What it does do is remind us that this planet has been here for 4.5 billion years, with
a life-cycle of almost 3.5 billion. If you think about it that way, and look at the evolution of some
of the other creatures we share the world with, it's not surprising to discover that we aren't nature's
first attempt."

"To you perhaps," King said, gesturing toward them. "You've been working on the project for
years now."

John nodded. "True. We've had the benefit of time to get over the initial shock. But we're hoping
that, by talking openly with people such as yourself, we can reassure the public that there's
nothing to worry about. This is a big thing, yes, but when taken in context it's not so much
surprising that we're the second evolution as it is that it took us this long to figure that out."

Rodney was perfectly content letting John talk. He sounded good. Professional. Reasonable.

"What was your first indication that the finding in Antarctica was alien?" King asked.

Chuckling, John leaned in a bit. "I have to say, for me, it was when a weird squid-thing was shot
at my aircraft while I was flying a general in to visit the base, and then when I walked down into
the base itself, stuff started turning on when I thought at it. That was a pretty good indication that
this was either completely alien, or someone had been doing some serious innovation in secret for
the last hundred years or so."

King's eyebrows had done a weird dance on his forehead as John had been talking—seemingly as
surprised by the answer as Rodney was. When had John gotten charming?

Rodney cleared his throat, leaning into the conversation a little. "Prior to Colonel Sheppard's
arrival, all indications were that the…ruins we were exploring were both terrestrial and alien at the
same time. Clearly, the origins had to be on Earth, but the construction and the architecture was
unique." Okay, yeah. That made no sense, Rodney thought, shutting his mouth with a snap.

John nodded. "Obviously, they had done quite a bit of work before I came on board, mostly
headed up by Doctor McKay. They wanted to be absolutely sure of what they had found, before
they did anything about it."

"Not that our moving forward on the project hinged on whether or not Colonel Sheppard joined
the project," Rodney clarified. "We would have continued with our discoveries and research."

Chuckling, John nodded. "Of course. It was a very happy accident that I joined the project. At the
time, I was a major doing taxi service for the people who needed to go back and forth between the
McMurdo base and the outpost. I didn't even know what it was. It wasn't until General O'Neill
took me down inside with him that we discovered I had the ATA gene, and I was brought on
board full time."

"The ATA gene?" King asked, watching the interaction between them.
"We call the first evolution of humans the Ancients, so ATA stands for Ancient Technology Activation. Most of their technology was tied to a specific strand of DNA that is very rare, but still present in people today. I'm fortunate to be one of the lucky ones, which means I can activate and control the technology. Hence, when you hear me refer to 'lightswitch duty' I mean when I take time out as often as possible to make myself available to the science team, to turn on and work various things they've found in an effort to figure out exactly what they were designed to do."

"So this…gene. Anyone could have it."

John nodded. "Yes. It is randomly scattered throughout the population but it seems to be passed on through the genetic line. Doctor Carson Beckett, our Chief Medical Officer, is also a phenomenal geneticist. That's one of his responsibilities—trying to learn as much as we can about the ATA gene. In the future, once we're a little more equipped for it, I imagine anyone who wants to be tested will be able to—but that's something pretty far down the line."

"And not all of the technology we're finding is based on this gene," Rodney said for clarification.

"Exactly. Not to mention, Doctor McKay and his team are doing an amazing job taking what little we do understand and turning it into useful technology anyone can use. The work they're doing is just incredible. I'm proud to be a part of this project."

"So how will this discovery trickle down to the common man?" King asked. "Apart from the issues regarding our history, how will this…technology—or will this technology—be integrated into our society?"

John glanced over at him, but when Rodney gave a minute shake of his head, he kept talking. They had easily fallen into a pattern they used off-world—either John or Teyla did the bulk of the talking, with Rodney jumping in where necessary, and Ronon standing around looming. Rodney wished Ronon was here to loom a bit now. "Well, for now, you won't really see much. We're still in the early stages of understanding all of this, so real products designed with the Ancient stuff as a direct model is pretty far out. The biggest changes that will happen first, I believe, will probably be things like our power sources. The Ancients had a very clean, very safe form of power that we've barely scratched the surface of. One of our biggest projects, as you can imagine, is focused on learning how this power source works exactly, and then Doctor McKay and others will attempt to create our own version of it."

"The science of it is…intricate and amazing," Rodney said, stepping in again. "We could spend the next hundred years researching it and not come close to understanding every aspect of it. The Ancients…they had a unique view of the world and how it worked and you can see that in every single device we've examined."

"How many devices have you examined?" Larry King looked like he was interested at least.

Rodney took a breath, trying to hazard a guess. He offered a shrug. "Hundreds. Some big, some small. Some working, others not. It's like we're trying to piece together a huge puzzle of a civilization—a technologically advanced civilization. We're used to digging up pottery pieces and fire pits. This is…it shows us the potential of what we can become, of what our race has already done once. We just need to learn from it and grow."

"Why is it that, if they were so advanced, we haven't found evidence of them before. As you said—we're used to finding fragments of much less advanced civilizations. You would think more would have survived from one like what you describe."

"We're hypothesizing that there had to be some global event, an extinction-level event—much like the kind that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs—had to be the cause of the Ancient's downfall"
and disappearance," Rodney said. "We believe the facility in Antarctica was preserved because of
the ice."

Larry King nodded. "With that, we'll take a quick break. Stay tuned as we chat more with Colonel
Sheppard and Doctor McKay, and take viewer calls."

The light on the camera went off and Rodney sagged in relief, taking a deep breath.

John also relaxed a bit next to him. "Well, that actually went... incredibly well. We didn't fuck it
up again."

"I'm not trying to make things difficult for you," King said, shifting in his own seat, re-arranging
his note cards. "It's certainly interesting stuff you're talking about."

John laughed. "Oh, I know. You've been great, especially compared to the last few interviewers
we talked to. No, I was referring more to Doctor McKay and myself—we're friends as well as
being colleagues, and sometimes we forget that not everyone is used to our banter."

"Banter?" King's eyebrows rose.

John grinned over at Rodney. "We amuse each other, although to anyone else it probably sounds
like we want to kill one another."

"Amuse?" Rodney asked, his own eyebrow rising. "Is that what you call it?"

Nodding, John put on what he probably assumed was an innocent look. "Of course. What would
you call it?"

"Tolerate. Annoy." Rodney shrugged. "Did you want the Thesaurus list?"

"If I wasn't around, who would be your partner in crime? Who would shoot you when the
situation called for it? Who would be right there next to you eager to try out the new doohickey?"

"Shoot me? Okay, that's not even funny," Rodney scowled.

"Hello? Personal Shield? Who showed up bouncing around and asking me to shoot him and push
him off balconies and shit?"

"Balconies? How large is the facility down there?" King asked, breaking into the conversation.

They both blinked a few times. "Um." John refocused a bit. "It's pretty large. In parts. And we're
still discovering more."

"I'd love to take a tour of the facility one day," King said, his gaze wandering over Rodney's
shoulder. "Looks like we're going back on air in thirty seconds."

"Ah, maybe. That's something people higher in the chain of command would have to decide." John
smiled, and his posture changed, as he visibly reset himself for being on camera.

The next part of the interview went well, Rodney thought. They discussed some more about the
technology and then moved into Rodney's kidnapping. Apparently it was big news when a top-
level scientist working for the government was kidnapped.

He got to show off his "war wounds", the dark bruising on his wrists and talk about what it was
like to be kidnapped. He wasn't sure what the fascination was about the subject, but he was going
to play nice for now.
The call-in portion of the show was a different story all-together. He should have known that it had been too easy.

The questions were random—"What do you do for fun in Antarctica?—or extremely pissed off and paranoid—"What else is the government hiding from us, that there are aliens?

Until the sexy-voiced woman named "Katherine" came on.

It was going to be the last call of the show, and from what Rodney could tell of John's posture, they were both ready for it to be over.

"This question is for Colonel Sheppard," she said, voice slow and seductive. Rodney's back went ramrod straight as soon as he heard it. Her voice was the same as the leader on Tellonia. He still could hear it, whispering in his ear…

"Doesn't he scream well? It's such a pity you've made us injure him. He was so pretty before."

He struggled in the chair he'd been tied to, trying to get away from her voice, but he couldn't. Blind and mute and restrained, he could only listen as John screamed and as she whispered to him.

"Did you hear him when we broke his finger? You could have stopped it. You could have kept him whole. All it would have taken was a simple word when you had the chance."

"...and since it's been so long since he's had any kind of...female companionship, I would be willing to provide some assistance if he desired it."

Next to him, John blanched. "Ahhh. Thank you for your... ah... kind offer, ma'am. But I'm afraid I can't accept."

"Don't be so bashful, Colonel. There are many women who would offer their services for you."

John threw a terrified look at Rodney.

Narrowing his eyes, Rodney shifted in his chair, leaning forward. His voice was calm and level, much to his surprise. "Under no circumstances will Colonel Sheppard accept your proposal and you should be ashamed of yourself for propositioning yourself for illicit activities on national television. If you do not apologize and hang up, the government will have to prosecute you for the promotion of prostitution."

King's eyebrows had gone up as well. "Ma'am, I'm afraid I agree with Doctor McKay. This is not the forum for propositioning my guests."

The sound of a dial tone was loud and the sound guy cut it off abruptly a few seconds later.

John cleared his throat after a few moments of silence. "Ah... anyway..."

"I think that's going to be end of the show for today," King said, shuffling the papers on his desk. "I want to thank Colonel Sheppard and Doctor McKay for taking the time to appear on the show. Tomorrow I'll be talking with Jennifer McCarthy about her Hollywood comeback—on Larry King Live. Goodnight!"

After a few moments, the red lights on the cameras went off, and someone in the shadows declared they were off the air. King rose, and held out a hand to shake both of theirs. "Gentlemen, it was a real pleasure. I hope you'll be our guests again in the future."
John was polite, graciously accepting while Rodney muttered something very close to 'over my dead body' as the sound tech started unhooking the microphone.

John glanced over at him as they were completely unhooked. "Thanks for the save."

Rodney nodded, keeping his head down, hoping John couldn't see that he was shaking, couldn't see the terror that woman's voice had brought back. "You owe me."

"I remember. I'm good for it." There was a brief pause. "Are you okay?"

"I want to get out of here," McKay said quietly, the sound tech caught up with something on his jacket.

The pilot stiffened a bit, obviously catching something in his voice. He reached over and deftly unhooked the mic from Rodney's shirt, handing it over. "Let's go then."

John took his arm and lead him out of the studio, Pearson meeting them as soon as they stepped foot in the green room. "Well, that went well," he said. "Apart from that last call, but I think Doctor McKay handled that really well."

John nodded, smiling slightly. He hadn't dropped Rodney's arm yet. "Yeah, he did a good job. A very good job."

"We need to shoot a few more—"

"Do you think we could do without those?" John cut him off. "We're not trying to be difficult, but I think we're both exhausted, even with the nap. And that last call shook me up more than I really want to admit. So I'd appreciate if we could call it quits for the night."

"Sure," Pearson said, his voice surprised. "Of course. The car's waiting outside. I need to talk to the producer so I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Thanks." John smiled at him, even as he started walking, gently pulling Rodney along with him.

Even the small amount of contact—John's hand on his arm—was enough to help settle him a little. The terror was replaced by exhaustion, however, the last of the adrenaline leaving him wrung out.

He wasn't even fully aware of their surroundings until he was guided into the seat of a car, the door closing behind them. For the moment, they were alone. "Are you okay?" John's voice was soft.

Rodney shook his head. "Her voice…"

He heard John swallow. "The bitch on Tellonia."

He nodded, closing his eyes. "The same tone, same pitch."

"Same..." He felt his friend shudder. "God..."

"I hate this…hate what it does…"

A warm hand rested on his leg. "I know. Me, too."

Rodney lifted his head, opening his eyes as he shifted, turning closer to John, seeking a different kind of comfort.

John's arms came up, wrapping around him, pulling him closer. Rodney could feel the light
tremors that were running through the other man, matching his own.

"I can't... If just someone's tone does that..." Rodney swallowed the words, pressing closer, lips brushing against skin.

"We'll get better. She was just... a surprise." John's hand skimmed down his side, over his leg. The pilot shuddered again, this time for a more pleasurable reason.

"Please," Rodney breathed, shifting closer wanting more, wanting the comfort. They hadn't done this on Tellonia, but now things were different. They were different.

With a soft moan, John closed the last of the distance between them, pressing their mouths together in an almost painfully sweet and gentle kiss.

Rodney shuddered, moaning quietly.

A tongue teased at his lips, asking permission to slip inside.

With another soft moan, Rodney opened his mouth, letting John in, craving the closeness, the comfort.

The other man dove inside, sweeping the inside of Rodney's mouth, kissing him deeply. With a moan, he pulled back slowly. "We can't... not here. Pearson's coming... after dinner... I just want... I want to hold you, do this, exactly this..."

Rodney nodded, pressing his face into John's neck, panting against the skin, hands grasping at the solidness of the pilot.

Hands skimmed his back, and he felt tiny kisses being pressed into the top of his head. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

"She... she... she would tell me things..." he whispered.

John sucked in a soft breath, but his voice was quiet, soothing. "What things?"

"What she'd do... to you..." His voice trailed off as memories assaulted him again. How he'd been tied down, blindfolded, gagged and she would whisper in his ear, telling him how she'd torture John—break bones, make him scream as he was taken by the guards, cut him, brand him...

"Jesus... Rodney..." John pulled him closer, tightening his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

"I could hear you scream."

He felt the shudders running through John's body. "She was... doing the same thing to me. Telling me if I didn't... give her what she wanted... she'd... she'd do to you what she was doing to me. I had to... I couldn't let that happen, Rodney. I..."

"Colonel?" Pearson's voice was quiet.

They were both shaking, and neither of them could let go. Rodney did feel John lift his head a bit. "I... flashback... We were... tortured. Together. Her voice, the caller...."

Pearson's response was immediate. "Do you need anything? Can I do anything?"

Rodney felt him suck in several deep breaths, trying to get control again. "Someplace private. The plane, hotel, I don't care. We just... we both need somewhere we can... deal with this... and not having it plastered all over the news tomorrow morning."
"The plane is waiting for us. The hanger's private. We'll be there in fifteen."

"Thank you. I'm sorry. We were on forced leave because we're both a bit... damaged... right now."

"They didn't tell me. I'm sorry. We'll hurry. Just let me know if I can help."

John took several more deep breaths. "When we get there... can we have dinner brought into the bedroom. I... think we both need to know the other is okay and not... screaming..." John shuddered again, and swallowed a few more times before continuing. "But I can't... do this... for an audience."

"I'll call ahead and have it ready for you."


Rodney nodded, simply holding on. Right now, it was all he could do.

****

John didn't think either of them had slept much last night.

He glanced over, glad to see Rodney was finally getting what looked like a little bit of peaceful rest. They had tried to sleep, wrapped in one another's arms, but with the mutual nightmares, it had been a long night.

He'd felt them touch-down nearly an hour ago, but Pearson hadn't been back to get them up. It would happen soon enough, so it might be a good idea to get himself up.

Sighing, he carefully climbed out of bed, running a hand through his hair. He was still feeling more fragile than he really liked. They hadn't talked much, after the initial scene in the car. They had just stayed more or less plastered together for the evening, both of them craving the comfort the contact gave them.

Sex…sex would have been too intense and they needed the comfort and the connection more than the release of mutual pleasure.

Pulling on a pair of sweatpants he found in a drawer, along with a t-shirt, he wandered out into the main cabin. He wanted to get them both coffee—they were going to need it—and find out how long until they headed to the hotel, as well as what the schedule for the day was looking like. He really hoped it wasn't too intensive. There was just too much too close to the surface right now.

Pearson glanced up from his papers as soon as he heard John enter the main cabin. "Colonel. Good morning."

Blushing a little—he hated that another officer had been witness to his breakdown—John moved closer. "Morning. Ah...Coffee?"

He pointed to the galley. "Pot's on. We have some bagels and fruit if you're interested in food."

Making a face, John wasn't sure his stomach was up to solids yet. It still felt a little unsettled. He poured himself a cup of liquid crack and settled across from Pearson. "Sorry about yesterday."
"Nothing to be sorry about. I already complained to Larry King's staff about the caller pre-screening. They admitted they let the ball drop. They had two interns working the phones."

John sighed, settling more deeply into his seat. "It wasn't so much what she was saying, to be honest, although that was a little disturbing. What threw us into flashback was her voice, her tone. She sounded just like..." He swallowed. "We were captured and held for... a while. It was... bad. Beckett, Heightmeyer, and Weir are the ones who conspired to send us on this leave, because we were both 'unfit for duty' although neither of us completely agrees with that assessment."

"And now?" Pearson asked, his eye piercing.

He sipped his coffee to buy a little time to think. "I both agree and I don't agree. I don't think I'm unfit for duty, but I also recognize that I still have some... issues... to work through. It's worse when I can't see McKay, when I don't know he's okay. You probably heard they had to tranq me the night Rodney was kidnapped. I was trying to leave the base to get to him—and I didn't even know he was in danger then."

Pearson nodded, sipping his own mug of coffee, the papers and folders gathered together on his lap. "I had heard there was an incident that first night. I didn't get the full details, though." He paused again, pursing his lips. "You're both showing signs of PTSD, McKay more than you. Some of it I figured was due to the recent kidnapping."

John sighed, looking away. "They shot me with tranquilizers when I tried to leave. Chased me down and drugged me, and I woke up in a cell."

"Bring back memories?"

John stared resolutely out the window. "I've... had trouble with enclosed spaces since we were rescued."

"Has the plane bothered you? Or the limo?"

"No. I can see the sky. It's only... when I can't. The mountain is... hard." He tried to hide the fact that even talking about it, thinking about it, was making his breath come a little faster.

"Are you going to be okay in New York City?"

Biting his bottom lip, John nodded. "As long as I have a window, I should be fine. I just... can't stand to be locked inside for long. I can take it for a little while if I have things going on to distract me, but after a while..."

"It gets to be too much. I understand. And Doctor McKay? Is it the same for him?"

John glanced at the bedroom door. "It's a little different for him. She... While they were torturing me they were letting him hear me scream, telling him what they were doing to me..." John put down the cup, his hands starting to shake a little. He closed his eyes, trying to keep it from coming back again.

"They used you against each other."

He nodded, not opening his eyes. Unconsciously, he rubbed his wrists. They had long since healed with the aid of the Ancient equipment at Carson's disposal, but the memory of having them broken one piece at a time...

Pearson's hand on his shoulder was gentle. "Just breathe, Colonel. You're safe."
"I fucking hate this," John finally said once he had gotten his breathing into an almost normal state. "And it's worse for Rodney. For me it was mostly physical. For him... they deliberately messed with his head. They did it to me some, and they did hurt him a little, but it seems like they wanted to test which method would be more effective and faster at breaking someone."

"It hit him hard before, didn't it?"

"Her voice. The woman on the call. It sounded just like the bitch who held us. She talked to him more, whispered in his ear about all the shit they were doing to me. Telling him what was coming next and then forcing him to listen to me scream when they did it."

Pearson nodded. "He relies on you a lot now, doesn't he?"

"It's not that as much as... we were never sure if we would see the other. It was all on a whim, whether or not we spent the night together or apart. When we weren't... we made noise to let the other know we were alive, but... the nights we were together, those were the only hours either of us got any real respite. We've... gotten better since we were recovered but, especially when it starts getting more stressful, we... have to know where the other is, touch to make sure he's still alive, still okay. It's... one of the big reasons we were forced on leave."

"I can understand that," Pearson said with a nod, head tilting to the side. "You might want to check on the good doctor, then."

John stood, grabbing another cup of coffee. "Thanks. How long do we have before we need to be anywhere?"

Pearson checked his watch. "I've cleared your schedule for today. Interviews begin tomorrow morning again. That enough time for you to get some rest?"

John's body let go of some of the tension he didn't even realize he was carrying. "We may have to nominate you for sainthood. Thank you. Are we staying on board or going to a hotel?"

"Limo to the Waldorf Astoria. Free schedule today which means you can do whatever you want. There will be a car at your service."

John shook his hand. "Definitely sainthood. Thanks. I'll let Rodney know."

Pearson nodded again as he rose to his feet. "Good. I'll be up front until you're ready to head out."

John nodded and made his way back into the small bedroom. "Rodney?"

The scientist was half awake, sprawled across the bed. He was on his stomach, his hand braced on his lower back.

John moved closer, setting the cup of coffee in the other man's reach. He sat on the bed next to him, and traced the curve of Rodney's spine with his hand. "Hey."

"Mmmm," Rodney hummed, turning his head and opening his eyes to look up at John. His smile was soft, still edged with sleep. "Hi."

John's chest tightened, and his breath felt short, but this time it was pleasurable. He leaned in and brushed their lips together. "Hi."

"Are we there yet?"

"We landed an hour ago. They cleared our schedule for the day, and are giving us a hotel room
and a car if we want one."

Rodney rubbed his face on the pillow before shifting onto his side and looking back up at John, confusion on his face. "What?" John could get used to an early morning Rodney who didn't have his brain in gear yet.

He leaned in, catching that crooked mouth in a soft kiss. "Pearson knew we had a rough day yesterday, so he cleared our schedule for today to let us rest and recover."

"Oh," Rodney said softly, another "oh" following a few seconds later as understanding finally sank in. "No interviews?"

"No interviews. No press events. No reporters or photographers. We can hole up in the hotel room if we want to and do absolutely nothing."

"Mmm," he said, a small smile growing on his lips. "I know something I'd like to do." He shifted again, rolling onto his back, his t-shirt and the sheets all twisted around him.

It took John's breath away, and he had to touch. Crawling closer, he let his hand linger, tracing the little flashes of bare skin from where clothes had ridden up and were exposed. "That's a plan I am totally and completely in favor of."

Rodney licked his lips, eyes focused on John's face. "Why do I taste coffee?"

"Because I had a cup already. I put yours on the table." John hitched his head in the direction of the steaming cup.

"I like how yours tastes."

John grinned and leaned in for another kiss. "Then I guess I should give you more."

"Mmm," Rodney hummed, lifting up his head to meet John halfway. They had coffee and morning breath, but neither of them seemed to mind.

The kisses were lazy, and so fucking good. John wished he had had his epiphany years ago—he hated to think of all the kisses, all the lazy mornings, they had missed out on. Well, they would just have to make up for it now.

He could feel Rodney hardening, feel his body's arousal. The scientist's hands were as grabby as he thought they'd be—gripping and grasping and demanding John move or shift.

John allowed himself to be rolled onto his back, moaning softly at the heavy feel of the other man pressing him down.

"Wanted this…" Rodney whispered between kisses, his hands exploring John's body.

"God, want you. Rodney…" John arched up, trying to get more.

Rodney tugged at his shirt, shoving it up into John's armpits as his hands stroked John's chest and sides. "Never…never thought…"

With a whine deep in his throat, John arched again. God, he hadn't even known he had this many hot spots on his body, and Rodney was still just focusing on his chest. "Please... oh.... please, Rodney...."

But the scientist wasn't going to be moved, his focus intent on where his hands were touching
John's body.

Sucking in deep gulps of air, John shivered. He was hard, harder than he could remember being in a very long time.

"So... amazing," Rodney was whispering, getting his knees under him so he could get more leverage, kneeling over John.

"Driving me... crazy..." John was panting, but when he tried to reach for Rodney, he found his arms pushed above his head. He moaned again, arching up, wanting, needing more.

"You've done it to me for years," Rodney said, one hand holding John's together as his other explored.

"I... oh god... Rodney... you..." John couldn't think straight anymore. His brain was being overloaded with pleasure. He was fast getting to the point where he existed solely for Rodney's pleasure.

"Wanted you... untouchable... never thought we could do this..." Rodney panted, his hand running down along John's side, fingers drifting under the waistband of John's boxers and sweats.

John whined, trying to arch again and loving that he was being held down by Rodney's greater mass. "I didn't know... oh god... I'm sorry I didn't know... Rodney... I need you... please..."

"You want this?" Rodney asked, hand swiftly moving to John's cock, fingers wrapping around it firmly.

Keening, John's whole body spasmed, strained up into Rodney's grip.

Rodney began to stroke him, not even pulling his sweats or boxers out of the way. He leaned down again against John's side, lips pressing against John's.

John whimpered. It was good, but not enough. "Please..."

"Come on, John," Rodney whispered, stroking and twisting his hand, his lips brushing against John's with every word.

With a soft cry, John's body obeyed. He was coming, hard, his brain shorting out with it.

When he came back to himself—sated and completely relaxed—Rodney was plastered against his side. His hand was fisted in John's shirt, head on John's shoulder, leg thrown over John's.

"Mmmmm."

Rodney shifted, letting out a long quiet sigh. He was hard against John's thigh, but didn't seem to be in any hurry to get off.

John's limbs felt heavy and pleasantly sated, but he managed to make his arm move, to stroke Rodney's side. "I wanna do that to you, too."

"It's okay."

"Feel really, really good." John realized he was all but purring.

"Don't wanna wake up."

"We c'n go back to bed at the hotel."
"This is just…really nice. Don't want to screw it up and wake up. Want to enjoy it for a little while."

Rolling slightly, John was able to press his face into Rodney's neck. "S'really nice."

Rodney nodded, wrapping his arms around John. "Very."

John closed his eyes, letting himself drift. He was completely relaxed for what felt like the first time in a very long time. He had to admit, he was reluctant to move, too.

He could tell when Rodney fell asleep again, the scientist's breathing evening out as his grip loosened around John. Pearson would be in soon, he knew. They couldn't stay here forever and John didn't want the man to find them like this.

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Rodney? We have to get dressed before Pearson comes storming in."

The scientist snuffed quietly, tightening his arms around John, but otherwise not waking.

Smiling, John felt another surge of almost overwhelming affection. "Hey, buddy. We can get right back in bed when we get to the hotel."

"Comfy," he mumbled into John's shoulder.

"I know. Me, too. But we have to get dressed. It should be a short drive to the hotel."

"New York is never a short drive anywhere."

"It is when you're at a private airport, in a government limo."

"Still never a short drive," he grumbled. "Something called traffic exists here."

John grinned and leaned in to kiss Rodney hard, slipping his tongue inside the other man's mouth and giving his dick a few pulls at the same time. Then he sat back and swung his legs off the bed. "That should give you something fun to think about to distract you from it then."

Rodney was panting, scowling across the bed at John. "What…what was that for?" He paused, looking at the front of John's sweats. "What happened…did I…we…"

John hummed. "You made me come spectacularly hard."

"It was a dream!"

John wigged his eyebrows. "Nope. You held me down and made me come so hard I blacked out for a minute. And by the time we get to the hotel, I'll be ready to do it again."

"Nonono…that was a dream. You wouldn't…" Rodney was gaping at him, his blue eyes wide open.

John stepped closer again, pulling Rodney in for another kiss. "You had me moaning and begging. It wasn't a dream. I want you to touch me again. I want to turn the tables and do the same things to you."

It was too tempting not to, so he shifted tumbling them both onto the bed. Instead of the grunt of pain he expected, he got a moan when he landed on top of the scientist.
Swallowing, John wiggled a bit, rubbing their bodies together a few times. "When we get to the hotel, I'm locking us in for all twenty-four hours so we can do this without interruption," he panted.

"God," Rodney moaned. "Please…"

John wiggled down Rodney's body and pulled the other man's boxers down. He had never given a blow job, but he had gotten plenty, so how hard could it be? He licked experimentally at the head and, pleased with himself, he carefully took it in his mouth and sucked.

The scientist moaned and Rodney's entire body twitched and he arched up, his cock sliding further into John's mouth than he expected, choking him.

Pulling up, John took a moment to study the cock in front of him. He remembered a girlfriend wrapping her hand around the base of his dick when she would give him head, so he decided to try that. Slowly taking the head back in his mouth, he hummed in pleasure when he realized he could now control the depth.

Rodney moaned—louder this time—trying to arch up again. His hands were clutching the bed, fisting the sheets.

Once he got used to the feeling of a cock in his mouth, John started experimenting, trying to replicate some of the moves that had felt fantastic when someone did them to him.

A few got higher-pitched moans, several others sobbing whimpers.

John quickly found a rhythm, bobbing his head, using his tongue to catch that sensitive ridge that separated the head from the rest of Rodney's cock.

It didn't take long—a few minutes tops—before Rodney was coming. As soon as John tasted it on his tongue, he pulled off, watching as Rodney continued to come. He was moaning in pleasure, his body trembling as his orgasm rolled through him.

Licking his lips, John decided that while it wasn't his favorite flavor in the world, it wasn't bad. Not at all. He might even be interested in trying it again. "You taste pretty good."

Rodney moaned, his body finally melting against the bed.

Crawling up the bed, John kissed him softly, keeping it light.

"Gonna kill me," he whispered.

"But what a way to go."

"Never…never come so much."

"And that was just my first try. I'll get better."

"Dead," Rodney moaned, "so dead."

Chuckling, John rolled off the bed. "Come on, we have to put on jeans. The sooner we get dressed, the sooner we can get undressed again."

"Covered in come," he complained, whining a little.

John dug out clothes for himself and Rodney, and tossed the other man's set onto the bed. "Want me to grab you a washcloth?"
"I want a shower," he said, rolling slowly to the side.

"The one here is tiny. If you can hold out for a bit, the hotel will be nicer. And bigger." John stripped, and started pulling on his street clothes. If he was off, he wasn't going near his uniform.

"I reek."

"Up to you. If you are going to take one here, you'll need to jump in now and be fast."

"I'm not showering in a plane."

John laughed, leaning against the dresser. "I don't blame you. Get dressed. Pearson had pastries set out too if you want to grab something quickly before we head to the hotel."

"You just..." Rodney waved his hand at John. "My limbs are still not communicating."

Still grinning, John moved back to the bed, claiming another quick kiss. "I'll go chat with Pearson. Join us whenever you're ready."

"It's all your fault."

"I take full responsibility."

"You should. I might have lost IQ points."

"Does that mean you won't let me do it to you again?" John put on a little fake pout and trailed a finger over Rodney's spent dick.

The scientist shuddered. "Oh...John..." he moaned. There was no way he was getting it up again right now but he was ultra sensitive.

Chuckling, John drew back to blow soft air along Rodney's length, making him shiver again. "You're beautiful, did you know that?"

"Oh...god...brain...cells...dying...can hear them."

"You've got a few to spare." John blew again, before standing up. "I'll meet you out in the cabin when you're ready to move again."

Rodney groaned and let his body drop back against the mattress. "Dead man here."

John laughed again before opening the door, slipping back out. He spotted Pearson still in the same chair from earlier. "Hey. We're just about ready to go."

Pearson looked at his watch. "Good. I'd like to get moving in about twenty minutes or so."

"Okay." John snagged a Danish from a tray and sat back down. It felt good to be dressed in something other than a uniform or sweats. "How far away from the airport is our hotel?"

"We landed at LaGuardia, so depending on traffic..." Pearson shrugged. "Could be thirty minutes, could be two hours."

"Ug, let's hope for thirty minutes then. How incognito will we be? Does anyone know we're landing today?"

"The media does know you're coming in, but we have been trying to keep your schedule confidential. I know that doesn't mean much, but..." Pearson shrugged. "We'll do our best to
"I don't think either of us are planning on going out, for exactly that reason. Being mobbed isn't my idea of restful. I'm just concerned about getting caught on the way to the hotel."

"You'll be in a limo and New Yorkers are accustomed to celebrities. You'll probably blend right in."

John sighed with relief. "I hope so."

Rodney stumbled out of the bedroom a few beats later, dressed in jeans and the double t-shirt combination he generally wore when he was off-duty. That man had absolutely no sense of how to dress himself. No wonder they'd given him a rack of clothes for Larry King Live.

"Coffee. Please tell me there's coffee."

Grinning, John pointed at the pot. "All you can drink, buddy."

John caught a whiff of soap as Rodney brushed by him on the way to the galley where he bellied up to the counter, pouring a mug full of the steaming hot liquid.

"Morning, Doctor McKay. Did you sleep well?" Pearson asked, only to be ignored by the scientist as he dumped sugar and milk in his cup.

John shook his head at the other soldier. "Until he's had a few cups, it's better not to ask too many questions. You're better off just answering whatever he asks you, and waiting to get any of your own in until later."

McKay's first sip…oh…wow. John had heard those same sounds about fifteen minutes ago.

"Good to know. I'd been warned about his coffee intake, but I hadn't thought it was such an addiction. How did you deal with that on Atlantis during the first year? You must have run out of coffee."

John swallowed hard, telling his body now was not the time or place. "We, ah, had tea, which wasn't as good as coffee, but still. Plus, we had come through the gate with a lot, and quite a few people made private stashes part of their personal kits. A pretty robust black market sprung up in those early days."

Pearson chuckled as he watched McKay pour more coffee, topping off his half-full mug. "I can imagine."

He had to look away from Rodney or risk embarrassing himself and possibly ruining his career. "It's changed since we have regular contact now, but the black market is still going strong. It's run by civilians, so I officially look the other way when one of my men trades something. We live too dangerous of lives to get annoyed over things like someone wanting to trade a DVD for some jelly beans."

"I'm not judging anything, Colonel," Pearson said with a smile, still watching McKay as he rummaged for food—a small Danish already half gone. "It makes sense. I'm guessing your bags are going to be full of coffee and chocolate for the ride home."

"Oh, yeah. Along with a few DVDs. I have a list of requests for our library. I won't be able to bring them all, but any time anyone has leave, we try to bring back a few for the public collection."
Rodney wandered over, dropping heavily into the chair next to John, his hands full of food and coffee. "Are we going to get real food at the hotel?" he asked, his mouth hall-full of bagel.

Pearson nodded, still smiling. "Our chef will be at your disposal. So anything you'd like to eat, let him know and he'll make it for you. We've made arrangements with the hotel kitchen to give him access and space."

"Steak. I want a big fat steak," Rodney said. "With a baked potato."

Their coordinator pulled out a piece of paper and made a note, nodding. John's stomach rumbled. "Make that two. That sounds really good."

"With butter. And sour cream," Rodney said, dreamily. "Oh, and mushrooms for the steak."

John hummed in agreement. "And roasted garlic."

"Nonono. Garlic bread."

John made a deeply approving and happy sound. "God, yes..."

"And chocolate cake for dessert. With frosting. The real stuff."

"And ice cream."

"Ohohoh, yes," Rodney said leaning forward, his finger snapping in rapid succession before he pointed them at Pearson. "Chocolate chip cookie dough."

"The good stuff. Not the crappy brands."

"Yeah. Don't just buy something because it's on sale."

"Don't they have Cold Stone's in New York? I want that brand." John knew he had a dreamy expression on his face, and he didn't care.

"I can…find out," Pearson said, looking a little pained.

"God, I haven't had a good meal like that in ages. What about lobster? Do we want surf and turf?" John ignored Pearson's dread to focus on Rodney.

"The threat of lemon is far too high for me to actually enjoy it."

"But if we have a personal chef, you know there won't be any. Just lobster and melted butter."

"Maybe," Rodney said, taking a bite of his bagel and washing it down with coffee. "I really never enjoyed a good lobster dinner because every chef loves to put lemon in the butter. I always worry if my next bite will be my last."

John glanced at Pearson. "Can you make sure there's no lemon in the butter?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "Of course. Killing the people I'm protecting is not on my agenda."

He beamed at Rodney. "See. No worries."

"You still get to test everything."

John raised an eyebrow. "When have I ever not tested everything?"
"I'm just saying that I'm not putting down my guard again after everything that's happened so far with this enforced vacation."

Shrugging, John nodded. "I don't blame you. To be honest, I'm not either. It's one of the reasons I'm looking forward to a day of rest."

The trip to the hotel was routine. There was some light traffic, but apparently nothing too bad, as they were pulling up to the Waldorf about an hour after landing. The drive had been fairly pleasant, with small talk between the three of them. Nothing controversial or work related—the most heated debate had been over which team was going to win the Stanley Cup this year. Pearson, it turned out, was as big a hockey fan as McKay.

When the doorman opened the door for him, John slipped out, stretching and enjoying the little bit of sun peeking through the clouds overhead.

Rodney followed a minute later, squinting as his eyes adjusted. What John wasn't expecting, however, was the loud crack that echoed off the buildings or the puff of dust as a bullet hit the sidewalk next to them.

He reacted instantly, grabbing Rodney and twisting so the other man was on the ground against the car, with John over him, offering some protection.

Pearson had his gun out—as did the driver—scanning the area all around them. Two more shots rang out—one of them shattering the side window of the open limo door—raining down glass pellets onto him and Rodney.

People around them were screaming and scattering. And here he was, protecting McKay without a sidearm. He wasn't stepping outside without one again. "I'm getting us inside. Cover me." John shouted it at Pearson, even as he tightened his grip on Rodney. "Get ready to run on my mark."

"Sheppard—" Rodney started to complain, but another bullet buried itself into the building. There was a sniper—a bad one—taking shots at them. But a sniper was a sniper.

"No arguments. Three, Two, One, Mark! Go!" John had waited until after the next shot, knowing it would take at least a second to recover from the recoil and re-aim. He was right behind Rodney, using himself as a human shield as they made a break for the interior of the building and the safety it offered. He cursed as he heard another shot and felt it graze his arm, but otherwise he ignored it.

John pushed Rodney deeper into the main lobby, putting stone and distance between them and the sniper. Hotel security formed up around them immediately, guiding them to safety.

They were taken to a ballroom, which had no windows. Adrenaline was coursing through him, and John paced the room, checking for hidden alcoves, needing to ensure it was secure for himself.

"Sir, we need to check your arm."

Shrugging him off, John continued to pace. He ignored the fact that he could feel the blood starting to flow down his arm. "It's fine."

"No, Sheppard, it's not," Rodney said, voice shaking a little. "Let the medic take care of your damn arm."

Glancing over, John saw how pale his scientist was. He conceded, dropping into a seat next to Rodney and letting the medic take his arm. "Are you okay?"
"Fine."

Looking him over, John was glad to see no blood. So he hadn't been hit, at least.

The medic worked quickly—it was just a graze—cleaning and bandaging his arm. Pearson walked in just as he was finishing up. "It's clear now. The NYPD are already looking into it. One of the detectives will be up to talk with you in a bit, but since the Waldorf has exterior security cameras everything's on tape. I'd like to move you to the suite if that's okay."

"Has the suite been checked already? How secure is it? How many vulnerable windows are there?"

"You're in one of the larger suites and I've had my security go through the suite already. They've been here since early this morning—even before we landed."

"Which is fine for internal security, but how safe is it going to be from outside threats? If there's another sniper out there, do I need to worry about getting too close to a window?"

"The windows are bullet-proof. The hotel has assured me of this."

"And you tested it?" John moved closer to Rodney, needing the reassurance that the other man was okay.

"I'm not going to shoot at the window. The President of the United States has stayed here. I think they know what they're doing."

After a moment, John nodded. "All right. Let's head up then. You've got men on point and on our six?"

"We're taking the service elevator."

"Good. I want a sidearm."

"Sir, I don't—"

"No arguments, Pearson. We don't go anywhere until I'm armed."

Pearson looked at John for a long moment before finally—reluctantly—nodding. He gestured to one of the Marines to hand John his 9 mil.

"Thank you," John said, automatically checking the weapon, nodding to himself when he found it in perfect working condition. "Let's move out then."

Pearson nodded and led the way. They moved quickly through some of the back rooms and halls of the hotel before getting to the service elevator where a secret service agent was waiting. "We're clear," he said to Pearson, gesturing John and Rodney on board.

They stepped on, staying close together. John hated to admit that now that the initial rush was fading, he was starting to feel shaky, and the graze, which he hadn't really felt, was starting to throb. He tightened his grip on the sidearm.

Rodney was silent, hunched in on himself a little, his eyes scanning everywhere and everything.

"So, should we expect more of this? Because I have to be honest, I get shot at enough in my day job as it is."

Pearson glanced back at him. "I wasn't expecting this at all. We need to find out who the sniper's
Pearson glanced back at him. "I wasn't expecting this at all. We need to find out who the sniper's target is."

"Yes. Until we have a better idea of who it was and why they want one or both of us dead, McKay and I aren't leaving the suite. Any interviews you want us to do will have to come to us."

"I can arrange some of that," Pearson said without hesitation.

"Perfect. Let's go with that for now then, and we can decide on the rest once we've had a chance to collect more information and recover a bit. I'll feel better if we're in a place I can guarantee is secure."

"Only thing that's sure in life is death and taxes," Rodney muttered, arms crossed over his chest.

John bumped their shoulders, wincing when he realized it was his injured one, but trying to hide it.

"Idiot."

"I forgot about it."

"You were bleeding."

"It was just a graze. Whoever was shooting at us had really bad aim."

"You were bleeding. The person having bad aim still hit you."

"I doubt he was trying to hit my arm. Overall, I'll take that over something more serious."

"And then you went and ignored the medic."

"I was securing the room. I needed to make sure you would be safe there."

"I was in the middle of five security guards."

"They aren't me."

"But just as capable and oh look! They didn't get shot!"

This was an argument John knew he couldn't win. "I did let them check me. And once we're inside, I'll let them take over security."

Pearson and the other man were pretending not to listen, but in an elevator not hearing was impossible and only possible with the use of earplugs. The bell chimed as soon as they reached the top floor, the doors sliding open to reveal two more agents.

"All clear, Lieutenant."

Following the armed guards, John and Rodney were quickly hustled into a truly luxurious suite. "Wow."

"We're here how long?" Rodney asked, poking his head into one of the bedrooms.

"We were originally scheduled to be here today and tomorrow. However, given the incident this morning, we might be extending. I'll have a better answer for you in a few hours." Pearson and the rest of his team were finishing up doing another sweep of the suite.

"And where are you staying?" Rodney asked, sliding into the bedroom.
"I was again originally staying next door. However, if you two have no objections to sharing a room, I'll feel better staying here with you."

Rodney appeared a few beats later. "Of course I have issues with that."

John was doing his own sweep, half listening to the conversation. "What are your issues, Doctor? I want to accommodate you, but I also want to ensure your safety."

"I don't want you breathing down my neck twenty-four hours a day. I want privacy."

Pearson appeared to be thinking about it. "Will you allow me to post a double-guard on the door to the suite, as well as in the entrances leading to it? I would also want you both to have a radio to call for assistance should you need it."

"That would be sufficient. I also want Colonel Sheppard to be armed."

John sighed. "I have several knives and a gun, but it was in my bag."

Rodney shot him a look. "And a lot of good that's done so far."

"You wanted me to return fire on a sniper from an unknown building in the middle of New York?" John shot back.

The scientist just scowled, turning his back on John and striding into the bedroom he'd apparently picked as his. John could hear the drawers and doors opening and closing inside. That certainly sounded familiar.

Running a hand through his hair, John nodded at Pearson as one of the Marines carried in their luggage, leaving it next to the couch. "Those measures should be fine for now. Can you have lunch sent in for us?"

He nodded, his eyes a little wide. "I'm going to have sandwiches and salads brought in around noon." He checked his watch. "So you should have about three hours to relax. There's coffee and some snacks on the sideboard here. Do you need anything else?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you. Brief me this afternoon on how the investigation is going, and what information we obtain on who the hell is taking shots at us, and why."

"I'm heading to talk to the police now. I should have something for you by lunch," Pearson said just as John heard the water turn on from inside the bedroom. Apparently there was a bathroom in there somewhere.

In a few more minutes, he was alone in the suite except for Rodney. With a sigh, he headed into the bedroom, dragging the suitcases with him. "Rodney? Buddy?"

"Showering." How that one man could make a single word a sing-song phrase always amused him.

Walking into the bathroom, John jumped up to sit on the counter. "The guards are outside. Pearson will send in lunch and give us an update at noon, so we have a few hours of peace at least."

Rodney's clothes were in a pile on the floor near the door. Apparently he'd taken one look at the shower and decided to dive right in. The steam was certainly tempting. "Good," Rodney replied.

"Want company?" The temptation to just strip and join him was strong, but John didn't want to
There was silence for a long moment and John wasn't sure the other man was going to respond. "In terms of wants and needs, in my experience I've discovered that there is a vast difference between the two," he began, his tone slightly off.

"Okay, so let me put it another way." John jumped down, toing off his shoes and pulling off his shirt. "If I join you in the shower, will you welcome me or shove me away?"

"I value my brain cells."

Stepping out of his jeans and boxers, John opened the shower door and was distantly impressed by how large the stall was. He stepped closer to Rodney. "I promise to treat them with care."

The scientist looked a little paler than normal—even under the hot water—and shaken. "You're going to ruin the bandage they put on your arm."

"I'll be careful," John repeated. He reached out slowly, tracing a finger down the side of Rodney's jaw. "I'm okay."

"You were shot," he said, quieter this time, eyes fixed on John's face.

"Yes. But it just grazed me. I'm okay, Rodney." He stepped closer still, breath hitching a little as he realized they were both naked and inches apart.

"There was blood."
Naked.
Check.
Wet.
Check.
Aroused.

He closed the rest of the distance between them, making a soft noise when their bodies rubbed together, the water making it completely frictionless. "It was a scratch. I didn't even need stitches."

Rodney made a quiet, broken sound. "They hurt you again."

"I'm sorry, so sorry..." John needed to kiss him. Needed to taste him, reassure them both that they were there, alive, whole.

The scientist shifted, but didn't close the distance. He licked his lips, his hands ghosting against John's sides.

"Touch me. Please. Rodney..."

McKay's hands landed on John's hips, his grip firm, tugging him closer.

John moaned softly, burying his face in Rodney's neck, his own arms wrapping around the other man. "Rodney..."

"Don't do that again. Do you hear me?"
"I'll try. I promise. I'll try... I don't want to scare you, but I have to protect you..."

"And you don't do that by getting yourself killed!" Rodney leaned back, looking John in the eyes. The tone of his voice was somewhere between scolding and panicked. "Do you hear me? Do you understand? Can you comprehend that valuable piece of information?"

Swallowing hard, John nodded. "I don't want to die. At all. I want... I want... I..." He closed his eyes, not able to say this with them open. "I want to be with you."

Rodney shook him hard. "Then stop doing stupid things like trying to get yourself killed!"

"Not trying to get myself killed..." John moaned softly as he was pressed back against the shower wall.

"You are! You rush out and do things... without thinking! I know you have a brain. You need to use it."

"Training. I was trained to be a soldier, to protect the people under my care. At all costs..." He was afraid to open his eyes, afraid of what he would see.


"Don't want to let you get hurt."

"Then be smart about keeping me safe." Rodney's voice was softening again.

"Keep us both safe," John whispered.

Rodney leaned into him, snaking his arms around John's waist.

It was... right in ways that no physical relationship John had ever experienced had been. He moaned softly again, letting his head fall back to Rodney's shoulder.

They stayed like that—under the water, holding each other—for a long time, taking the comfort and security this provided. Rodney had melted against him, huddled in close like they had been last night.

Finally, the water even in a fancy hotel like this started to go cold. John shivered slightly. "Bed?"

Rodney nodded, but otherwise didn't move.

Chuckling, his voice feeling a bit rough, John carefully stood up, taking on most of Rodney's weight. He shut off the water, and carefully guided them—both dripping—to the bed where they collapsed together.

"They're gonna yell," Rodney mumbled into John's shoulder, settling in close.

"I don't care." John sighed happily, loving that this new position let them completely plaster themselves together.

"Cold now."

Without untangling them, John grabbed at the edges of the comforter, managing to get it up and over them both. "Better?"

Without letting go, Rodney managed to roll them so he was underneath and they were wrapped in the comforter like some kind of soft taco or something. "Mmm. Yes."
"Mmmm." John wiggled his hips a little, liking the way certain parts of them rubbed together. "Very nice."

Rodney slapped the top of John's ass. "Stop that. Sleeping."

It startled a laugh out of John, but he wiggled a bit more, getting comfortable this time. "Kay. Nap sounds good."

"Mmm. Nap now. Other stuff later."

John hummed in agreement, the rush of adrenaline from earlier leaving him feeling a bit wrung out. He closed his eyes and immediately drifted off warm and comfortable.

A knock on the bedroom door woke him, startling him out of his slumber.

"Whassat?" He blinked a few times, disoriented.

"Colonel Sheppard?" Pearson. "Lunch is here."

Shaking his head, John sat up on his elbows, wincing as his injured arm protested. "All right. I'll be right there. Thanks." He carefully climbed out of the cocoon of blankets and Rodney, trying not to wake the other man.

John stumbled into the bathroom, pulling on his clothes as the scientist slept like the dead in the warm nest he'd had to leave behind.

Stupid military. John wished he could tell the Lieutenant to go away and let him sleep, but unfortunately that wasn't an option. He wandered out, closing the door firmly behind him. He didn't realize how askew he looked until he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror across the room. Wow. Talk about bed head.

Pearson didn't even seem to notice—or else was really good at ignoring things. He was sitting at the table, several trays of food spread out on the sideboard where the coffee and snacks had been when they arrived. The Lieutenant glanced up briefly before going back to his papers. "Sorry to wake you."

John fixed himself a plate—suddenly ravenous—and sat down. "No problem. I told you to wake me earlier. I didn't mean to fall asleep for this long anyway. What news do you have for me?"

"Not much, unfortunately. The sniper was gone by the time the police got here. They found out where he was shooting from—a vacant office across the way. An older building. There was nothing left behind. Not even shell casings. The shooter knew what he was doing."

"So we have a shooter who's competent enough to clean up the site, but has shitty aim?"

"Unless his target was too well protected and he took what shots he could." "You think he was aiming for McKay." John didn't make it a question. Pearson nodded. "Yes. He didn't start shooting until McKay stepped out of the limo."

"Any theories as to who or why?" John pushed his plate away—he wasn't hungry anymore. "No. We're still investigating."

"Do we think it's the same person or group who kidnapped him? And were we able to get any
information from the guys Carter and I left tied up in the woods?"

"You mean the dead guys? No. Nothing from them."

"Dead?" John sat up straight. "We had to kill one, but the rest were left alive and trussed up."

"They were all dead. Single shot to the head."

John closed his eyes, feeling woozy. "God..."

"You didn't?" Pearson's voice trailed off.

"No," John whispered. "We left them alive. Restrained but alive."

Pearson sighed. "Someone didn't want them talking."

"But about what? If someone came in behind us, why didn't they just untie their friends and leave?"

"I don't know," Pearson said, shaking his head. "And that's the issue. There was no ransom note. No messages. No nothing. If we hadn't known he was gone, I'm not sure they would have said anything about it. McKay would have just vanished. If you don't know the reasons behind their actions, it makes it very difficult to know what they might be planning."

Running a hand through his hair, John stood and started to pace. "He said they never asked him any questions, demanded anything of him. And it was almost too easy to retrieve him."

"The SGC checked him over very thoroughly. They didn't implant him with anything, do anything to him apart from roughing him up."

"No, and that's what worries me. It's almost as if they were testing us, to see how fast we would respond, and what form that response would take."

Pearson sighed. "O'Neill agrees."

"What does he think about the incident today? Same group or are we dealing with more than one?"

"I haven't been able to get hold of him. Meetings, I've been told."

"Meetings are more important than having two of his people shot at in the middle of New York City?"

"I'm getting the run-around from the people in Washington. Something is up."

"Great. So we're essentially out here on our own. God, I'm never taking another fucking vacation again."

"Never say never," Pearson said with a sigh. "Look. You have today to relax and get your bearings. Your next interview is tomorrow morning at NBC studios."

"No. They can come here, but we're not leaving this suite. Not yet. You can't guarantee me no one else will take shots at my geek, so I'm not putting him in harms way."

"I've rescheduled everything else for the suite, but NBC won't budge."

"Then cancel it. They can come here, or they don't get an interview."
"I can't. We owe them a favor and they're cashing in."

"I don't really care. I don't owe them shit, and McKay is my responsibility. I will protect him, and in this case, I'm not letting him out of this suite, not yet."

"You don't have a say in this," Pearson said, his voice rising.

"I have a huge say in this. We've been pretty cooperative, all things considered. We're putting up with a lot, on what was supposed to be mandatory leave to recover from a pretty shitty experience. Instead we're crisscrossing the country doing interviews. I haven't asked for much, but I am asking for—demanding—this."

"And we're committed to it. We can't back out."

"I'm not asking to back out. I'm asking them to come here, since we had an incident yesterday which puts the safety of my scientist in jeopardy."

"And they physically can't do the interview here. We don't have any other options."

John shook his head. "We have options, and right now I'm exercising mine. I'm sorry, but we won't be leaving the suite until I know who is trying to kill McKay, and I'm confident I can keep him safe."

"No, Colonel, you don't have that option. We're under orders."

"You can put me up for court martial if you want, but it's not going to make the US military look very good when it comes out that I'm being prosecuted for putting the safety of my people over five minutes of fame on television."

"This is not about what you want, Colonel," Pearson said sharply. "This is what's best for the Stargate program and your government."

"No, that's where you're wrong. It's about keeping Rodney safe. I'm willing to play the game, but not at his expense."

Pearson's eyes narrowed. "Keeping Rodney safe?"

"Yes. His safety is my primary responsibility, and that doesn't change just because the planet we're on is Earth. He's too valuable to risk unnecessarily."

"He's too valuable to risk or you don't want to lose your bedmate? Which is it, Colonel?"

John's eyes narrowed, and he stood up. "If we're stooping to accusations to try and blackmail me into compromising his security, then this conversation is over, Lieutenant."

"I'm just calling it like I see it, Colonel. It worries me when a soldier thinks with his dick instead of his brain, but then we've all read the reports from Atlantis," Pearson said coolly, his gaze sliding past John toward the bedroom. "Isn't that right, Doctor McKay?"

John didn't turn around. "If you've read the reports, Lieutenant, then you know we both risk our lives regularly to protect not only the people of the Pegasus Galaxy, but the people of Earth too. The fact that Doctor McKay and I have become good friends in the course of being in that kind of constant danger is really no business of yours. And none of this changes the fact that we won't be going to do an interview off-site until I know for sure there won't be another incident of someone taking shots at us."
Pearson stood, holding John's gaze. "That's not your decision to make, Colonel. General O'Neill has specific instructions which you will abide by."

"Then he can call and give them to me himself. Until such time, I outrank you, and I'm not going anywhere." John turned to leave, needing to walk away before he did something he would regret.

"General O'Neill will be in touch," Pearson said, walking toward the door with all his papers and folders in hand. "Oh and next time you might want to close the bedroom door."

John waited until he had left before sinking back down into his seat. "Well, shit."

"Sheppard?" Rodney's voice was quiet, confused.

Looking up, John gave him a weak smile. "Hey. Sorry about that. Pearson and I were having a disagreement over logistics."

"No, you weren't. You were arguing about me."

"Exactly. He wants us to go to the NBC studios for an interview tomorrow, and I refused on the grounds that if someone is taking shots at you, it's not safe."

"Don't patronize me, Sheppard. I heard most everything. Pearson knows."

"That was what we were arguing about. He only threw in the last accusation to try and blackmail me into caving. I told him we were happy to do the interviews, but I wanted them here for the time being. They can't tell me who or why people are after you, and I won't risk your safety. You don't want me to put myself in danger to protect you, so staying in a suite I know is secure, for the moment, is my next best option."

"I won't let you throw away your career."

"Yeah, I wasn't planning to do that either." John sighed. "For now, let Pearson cool down. He's not a bad guy, he's just a little stressed about trying to balance all the shit his current assignment entails. If he can come up with a way to guarantee your safety and do the interview, I'll go gladly."

Rodney moved further into the main area of the suite, scratching his forearm. He was dressed in boxers and a t-shirt, his hair sticking up in every direction. The bruises on his wrists were better, but still stood out. The angry black-and-blue was merging into a yellow-ish color in some sections. "And what if he doesn't cool down, Sheppard? What if he does tell O'Neill? What then?"

"Then I deny it. At most he saw us wrapped up together in a blanket. The military knows we're both suffering from PTSD, and need to be close to each other to make sure the other is safe. The fact that someone took a shot at us today just exacerbated the issue, and we fell asleep pressed close so we could both get any sleep at all."

Rodney snorted. "Yes, because sleeping naked wrapped up in each other is the cure-all for PTSD." He moved to the buffet, half-heartedly picking through the food.

"He doesn't know we were naked. We were cocooned in a comforter."

"And the clothes spread across the bathroom is not a big enough clue."

John shrugged. "I can't do anything about it now. Hopefully he'll calm down and it won't be an issue."
"Hopefully. Maybe. Very reassuring."

Sighing, John looked up again. "What do you want me to tell you? I can't change what already happened, I won't put either of us in more danger than necessary, and I sure as hell don't want to stop whatever it is we're starting."

Rodney turned, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the cabinet. "And what is it exactly that we're starting?"

John let his eyes roam over the stocky body before him. "Lovers?"

The scientist shifted uneasily under John's gaze. "Are we really? I don't appreciate getting jerked around."

Standing, John crossed the room. "I'm not playing with you. I don't know where we're going, I can't predict the future. But I do know that I want that, with you. It won't be easy, but... I want it."

"Because if you're just screwing with me and my head, I should remind you that I know every system in Atlantis and you will never be comfortable ever again."

John moved a little closer, so they were almost touching. "I'm not screwing with you. I...want you. I think I have for a long time, I just didn't realize it."

"Oh. So all of a sudden you had a revelation? What, did the last mission turn you gay?"

"No...I...Can't explain it. I just...we've been flirting for years. I'm restless when you're not around, and I'm the first to admit that I'm a little obsessive about keeping you, in particular, safe. I'm just...not very good at the whole...relationship...thing. I never look for it, or see it coming, but with you..."

"But with me you had a gay revelation."

John huffed in frustration. "Admittedly I've never done anything with a guy before, but...I've thought about it, okay? It was just never anything more than a passing interest, and never anything I was willing to risk flying for. You're...different."

"How? How am I different?" The tone was demanding, bossy, so Rodney.

John closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. And then another. "I...love you?"

"No," Rodney said, his voice tight. "No, you don't. You can't love me. Lust, maybe. But love? No. I'm not your type."

Opening his eyes, John glared at him. "You don't know what my type is. Look, I'm not saying I know exactly what I feel. I'm shit at this. I just know I feel more for you than I even felt for my ex-wife, okay? If you're not interested, fine, but don't make me try to define my feelings."

"I didn't say I wasn't interested."

"So what are you saying?" John swayed in toward Rodney a bit. "Because on the one hand you're telling me you're interested, and with the other you're pushing me away. You're worried I'm fucking with you, but are you just fucking with me?"

Rodney narrowed his eyes. "I don't have the luxury."

"What does that mean?"
"It means that I never had the opportunities you've had."

Taking a chance, John stepped in and kissed him once, hard. "That's because you're probably almost as bad as I am at spotting when someone's interested. You have groupies who would do anything for you."

Rodney was panting a little, but he was still scowling. "I don't want groupies."

"What do you want then?" John trailed a hand up his arm.

The scientist shivered, but didn't draw away from him. "I don't want a pity fuck from you."

"That isn't what this is. At all."

"It's not love. You don't just decide you love someone all of a sudden."

"It's not sudden. We've known each other for years, been in each other's orbit. The only thing we haven't done is sleep together. We're a couple in every other way." John forced himself to draw back. "But I'm not willing to do this if you're not on the same page as me. I'm not looking for pity either."

"And what if Pearson gives you a problem? What then? Are you going to regret doing what you already have?"

"No. I know this is a huge complication that, in all honesty, neither of us probably needs. But... I don't care. I'm willing to risk that, to risk what could happen, if I know you're in it with me."

"Sheppard..." He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "I've worked far too long for the government. I know what happens. I've...been in this position before. It was ugly."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," John repeated. "I think you're worth it—the potential for an us is worth it. But you have to decide if it's a risk you're willing to take with me."

"It's not my job that's on the line, Sheppard."

"I know." John moved away, suddenly exhausted. "Let me know when you decide what you want. I'm willing to put my career on the line to give it a shot. But the real question is if you're willing to take that jump along with me."

"You say that now," Rodney said at his back. "But a month from now is a different matter entirely. I've been here, in this place, before. Not only will he never talk to me again, but he uses every opportunity to make sure he 'puts me in my place'. I don't want that to happen again. So you'll have to excuse me for being cautious this time around. What I want and what I actually need are two very different things. I learned that lesson the hard way and I don't want to repeat it."

John whirled with a flash of anger. Both at Rodney and at whoever had hurt him in the past. "Is that what you think of me, of what I'd do? You're my friend, Rodney. My best friend. I wouldn't put that at risk for something I didn't think would be incredible."

The scientist looked miserable, arms wrapped around his upper body. "I know what I want, but the consequences of screwing up are just...astronomical. I know you wouldn't mean for anything to happen. I know what you're telling me now, but..."

John moved close again, cupping Rodney's face in his hand. "So don't overthink it. We've been together for years already. This is just a small step."
"A small step is watching a movie together, holding hands. This is not small. This is huge."

Smiling softly, John caressed Rodney's face with his thumb. "Wanna watch a movie and hold hands with me then? Maybe make out a little?"

Rodney's eyes closed and he shivered. His words were whispered, but harsh, a little forced. "I want you to fuck me. That's what I want."

Breath hitching, John moaned a little. "I... God, yes... I want... I want your hands all over me. I want you..."

The scientist's hands slipped under the edge of his shirt, gliding along his skin. "This is a bad idea."

John arched into the touch, wanting more. "That's never stopped us before."

"Just because we've done stupid things before doesn't make it a good idea now."

"But we always come out ahead, why should now be any different?" John moaned again, letting his own hands drift over Rodney's body.

Blunt-tipped fingers stroked across his skin, lighting a fire as they passed. "You...you usually... flirt with the priestess...to get us out..."

"I do not. I'm just friendly. Would rather flirt with you."

"You flirt," Rodney said, his touch firming, fingers accusing John.

Panting, John lowered his head, resting it against Rodney's shoulder. "I'm sorry? Tell me next time and I'll stop. Not doing it on purpose."

"Think...think you need to make up for it." Rodney's hands slid up John's back, tugging him closer.

"I've been bad." John wholeheartedly agreed with this line of punishment. "I should give you whatever you want. As many times as I can."

"I think so," Rodney growled. "Need to...easier if you top."

"Bed. Bed would be better than standing up."

"Probably," Rodney agreed, but made no move to actually move into the other room.

John worked his own hands around to Rodney's ass, giving it an experimental squeeze.

Rodney groaned, rocking forward into John before pressing back into his hands. "Yeah..."

Squeezing again, John lifted his head, wanting to see Rodney's face. "Tell me what you like, what feels good. I want to make you feel good..."

Pleasure eased some of the worry lines away from Rodney's face. His bottom lip was caught between his teeth. "I've wanted you...so much," he finally whispered, tugging John closer.

"Rodney..." John whispered it, wanting to soothe away the rest of the worry, the fears plaguing his friend and, maybe, lover. "Anything. Whatever you want..."

"Door locked?"
"I'll go check. You go get in bed." John pulled away slowly, looking into deep blue eyes.

"I don't want you to regret this."

John kissed him as tenderly as he knew how. "I won't."

Rodney whimpered into his mouth, hands grabbing him a little more firmly, desperately.

John moaned into his mouth before forcing himself to pull back. "Bed. I'll get the door and be right there."

His scientist nodded, licking his lips—already a little swollen.

John stole another fast kiss before stepping back, back toward the door. When he got there, he quickly threw the deadbolt, pulling the chain across for good measure. Then he turned and made his way into the bedroom, where Rodney was waiting for him.

Something in his chest hurt just a little as soon as he caught sight of Rodney, standing in the middle of the floor looking lost and scared and hopeful and aroused all at the same time. John closed the bedroom door behind him, locking it as well. He didn't want any interruptions.

Moving forward, he slowly, deliberately grabbed the hem of his shirt, pulling it up over his head and tossing it aside.

Rodney's eyes widened, gaze focused on John's chest. Fingers twitched a little as if they wanted to reach out but Rodney was holding back. Waiting.

John took another step forward, taking Rodney's hand and placing it in the center of his own chest. "Touch me."

Rodney's mouth formed a small "o". But, John's quiet command was all Rodney needed to get him in motion. Both hands quickly began exploring John's chest, skimming through the hair, fingers tweaking his nipples. Rodney's expression moved to the same sort of intense concentration he had when he was examining a scientific object. It was... intoxicating.

John was panting almost before he really got started. He put his hands on Rodney's hips and guided them both to the bed, laying down and pulling the other man with him. Rodney had mentioned he wanted John to top, and he would, later. Right now, he wanted to let the scientist prove to himself that this was real.

Rodney didn't protest as John moved him, instead picked up where he'd left off moments later with barely a pause. He glanced up at one point, a twinkle in his eyes, before leaning down, capturing one of John's nipples in his mouth, sucking hard.

John made a noise he didn't even know he was capable of, keening, as his entire body arched up, pleasure sparking through every part of him.

"Mmm," Rodney hummed, pressing kisses along John's skin as he continued to caress, his hands dipping lower, skimming under the waistband of John's boxers.

It made him gasp, whine, keen again. He had never felt anything like this. Sex had always been something he did to please whoever he was with, John hadn't known his body could react to anything like this. "Rodney, oh God... Rodney..."

"Mmm?" The scientist angled his head up, smiling up at John. His eyes were nearly all pupil, dark
with a ring of blue around the edge.

"I...feels so good. Didn't know...never felt like this..." John moaned as questing fingers found another hot spot, his head thumping back to the bed.

"It's supposed to."

"Nev...never has. Never felt this good. Oh... oh god..."

"Think it's my turn," he said, leaning back onto his heels.

Forcing his eyes open, John tried to focus. "Hmm?"

Rodney smirked down at him before reaching down and stripping off his shirt, tossing it to the side somewhere. "My turn."

Humming, John grinned a little then used one of his hand-to-hand moves to flip them, getting Rodney on his back. "That's a plan I'm completely in favor of."

Rodney "umphed" when he hit the bed, but immediately, wrapped his legs around John's, tugging him closer with his hands. "Good."

Figuring Rodney had done to him what he liked too, John started with the other man's chest, running his hands through the hair dotting the skin, tweaking the nipples.

Rodney's eyes fluttered closed and he moaned loudly, arching up into John's hands. "Oh... yeah..."

Pleased with himself, John narrowed his touching in on the dark, rose-colored nipples. He wrapped his lips around them, pleased that with a male body, there was no breast to get in the way of his play.

The scientist shuddered and moaned under him, arching into every touch. God...and they were just getting started. He watched as Rodney's hand slid down, trying to get between them—a very specific target in mind.

Shifting his weight a bit, John raised up enough to give Rodney space to work.

Rodney slid his hand under his boxers and wrapped it around his dick, his moans getting louder as he stroked himself.

"Oh, oh fuck that's hot..." John lowered his head so he could watch, breathing in Rodney's skin.

The scientist was coming a few seconds later, arching into his own hand until his body finally relaxed against the bed, melting into it. "Oh... god..." he moaned, head rolled to the side.

"Wow." John trailed a finger through the mess, making random patterns with it. His own dick ached, but he tried to ignore it for now, wanting to make this really good for Rodney, whatever Rodney wanted.

"Need...new...boxers," he said a few minutes later, finally catching his breath.

"That was so hot..."

Rodney turned his head, a half smirk on his face. "Liked that did you?"

John took Rodney's hand, guiding it down to his own still-hard dick. "More than just liked."
"Mmm... I have a better place for that."

John’s breath hitched again, and another moan escaped. "Sh... show me. Don't want to hurt you."

"Need lube and condoms. Please tell me you have them."

John licked his lips. "I... don't know. I'll check. Oh, god, I hope so..."

"If you don't this is going to end badly."

With a whimper, John moved to his bag, digging through it. He found a bottle of lotion and one lone condom in his wallet, way past its expiration date. He almost sobbed.

"Gift shop?" Rodney was sitting up in the bed, his eyes hopeful.

"I don't know... we might get seen, and then people will put a few things together. The bathroom? This suite is well-equipped, let's ransack."

Rodney scooted to the end of the bed, watching as John opened and emptied drawers. Who needed three Gideon bibles in one room? "Anything?"

"I think the universe hates me." John was about ready to cry.

"John?" Rodney's voice was soft.

Lowering his head, John's breath hitched. "I just... I want... God..."

"Come here."

Feeling helpless, John crawled back over to the bed. "I'm sorry. I want... And I can't give you what you want... And I—"

Rodney pressed a finger against his lips, quieting him. "We'll work on that in a few minutes. Right now I have something else to take care of." He tugged John down with him as he leaned back, rolling them so John was on his back. He scooted down the bed, taking John's boxers with him as he moved. A minute later John was enveloped in wet warmth.

Keening again, John arched up, his head going as far back as the bed would allow. He fisted his hands in the sheets, panting hard, begging, needing Rodney so much it almost hurt.

The scientist was too damn talented for his own good, John thought as Rodney went down on him like a professional. Between the suction and the hint of teeth, it didn't take long before John was coming, Rodney drinking down every last drop as he eased him through his orgasm.

Still shaking through his aftershocks, John melted into the bed. He was vaguely aware he was purring softly, but couldn't work up the energy to care.

Rodney stretched out next to him, resting his head on John's shoulder.

"Mmmmmm."

"When you get activity in your higher brain, you'll be taking a trip down to the lobby."

"'Kay. I c'n do that."

"Good. I fully expect a fuck today."
Purring again, John rolled so he could cuddle in closer to Rodney.

Rodney sighed quietly, wrapping his arms around John as they settled in close together.

It was nice, just laying there together. John was... relaxed. Peaceful. It was the first time in a long time he could remember feeling this way. If he ever had. "So when I go shopping, any requests for anything specific?"

"Lots of lube."

"Any particular brand or kind? I've used it before, but not for... you know. I want it to be really good for you. I don't want to hurt you."

"If it's not creamy or thick, you'll need to make sure you have a lot. With any kind of anal play, the more lube the better."

"Okay." John nuzzled Rodney's neck a little. "I'll see what they have."

"And I'll be here waiting for you."

John hummed again, happy. "As soon as I can move, I'll go shopping."

"Okay," Rodney said, letting out a long breath as he relaxed against John.

They stayed like that for several more minutes, relaxed and sated. Finally, John sat up on one elbow so he could look down at Rodney. "I shouldn't be too long. If the gift shop doesn't have what I need, I'll just run out to one of the corner stores."

"I fully expect you to be able to complete a simple shopping expedition. If you can't find lube, condoms, and snacks then I worry about you."

"Snacks?"

"Yes. Snacks."

"What kind of snacks do you want?" John grinned a little.

"I think you need to surprise me."

Laughing, John sat all the way up and swung his legs off the bed. "I can do that."

"Good. It's about time you started doing something for this..." Rodney's hand waved in the air, "...thing we have going on."

Still chuckling, John got up and went to the bathroom, using a washcloth to wipe away all the evidence of their earlier activities. He found his clothes scattered around the bedroom, and pulled them back on, running a hand through his hair a few times to try and tame it. He also dug around in his bag for a pair of sunglasses. Hey, if celebrities could use shades to try and hide, so could he. "How do I look? Presentable?"

"Mmm?" Rodney asked, opening an eye to look him over. He'd slithered back under the covers when John was cleaning up.

"I'm going for the 'don't look at me, I'm just another tourist' look."

"People will always look at you," Rodney said with a smile. "It's like you're a black hole for
grabby priestess hands."

Moving close again, John leaned in to brush their lips together. "The only one I want looking at me is right here."

"You better say that after the orgasm I gave you."

"It was the best orgasm I've ever had." John knew it sounded corny, but it really was true. He hoped Rodney knew that.

The scientist rolled his eyes. "That was nothing. Just wait. And right now my ass is complaining. You need to go shopping."

Shivering a little, John nodded. "I shouldn't be long, I hope. Lunch is still in the main room—I know you haven't had much today, and I don't want your hypoglycemia to pop up later. I plan to want your full and undivided attention when I get back."

"Mmm... I guess we'll have to see if you can get my full and undivided attention," Rodney said with a smirk. "And as for lunch, I'll eat something when you're shopping for supplies."

"Good. I'll see you in a bit then." John kissed him again before straightening up. He grabbed his wallet and headed back out into the main room.

He didn't even take one step out of the room before he was stopped—a hand on his chest holding him back. "Where are you going, sir?"

John paused, blinking. "Out."

"I'm sorry, sir. That's not permitted."

"I can't go shopping? Pearson said we would be allowed to take a walk if we wanted to. If he wants me to agree to let McKay leave the suite tomorrow, I want to walk around a bit and determine if it's safe." It was as good an excuse as any.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I need to get approval from Lieutenant Pearson." The guard wasn't budging. With a sigh, John waved his hand. "I'll wait here."

With a hand gesture to the other guard to watch John, the first one moved a few steps down the hall, tapping his radio obviously communicating with Pearson.

John leaned against the wall, and wasn't surprised when Pearson emerged from the suite across the hall a moment later. "Lieutenant."

"I didn't think you were leaving the suite, Colonel," he said sharply. He was in shirt-sleeves, the top button open, his sleeves rolled up.

"I didn't think you were leaving the suite, Colonel," he said sharply. He was in shirt-sleeves, the top button open, his sleeves rolled up.

John took a deep breath, reminding himself that the man was just under a lot of stress. "I said McKay wasn't leaving the suite. But I am trying to be accommodating here. I want to do my own assessment of the hotel and the surrounding area, and if I think we can keep him protected, we'll do your interview tomorrow."

Pearson looked at him for a long moment before nodding. "I'll agree to it as long as you have an armed escort."

John raised an eyebrow. "Walking around practically screaming 'hey, look, someone important'
isn't going to really let me blend in. I'll take one guy, and he stays back. I do know how to protect myself."

"Two. I'm not budging, Colonel."

John scrubbed a hand through his hair again, but finally nodded. He was the one throwing a fit about safety after all, he couldn't really fault the guy, even if it was irritating. "Fine, but they stay back. I want to drift around the hotel, and possibly the surrounding area, and I plan to act like a tourist, go into shops, etc. I want to get a feel for the area, vulnerable spots, etc."

Pearson rolled his eyes. "You can also give your shopping list to me and we'll have it to you in an hour."

Yeah. No. "The shopping is just an excuse to wander around. People who look like they have a reason to be there are less suspicious. I figure I'll get some snacks and anything else that looks interesting. I have a whole list of shit I need to get to bring home with me anyway."

Pearson's eyes narrowed, but they said far more than John was comfortable with. "Harolds here," he said, gesturing to the silent guard on John's right, "will go with you. Broone will meet you on the ground level. I'll brief him as you go down."

He shrugged, deciding to pretend he didn't catch the look. It did pose a bit of a problem though. He was going to have to buy a lot of stuff to hide the real reason for going out. Damn. "Fine. I don't plan to be gone long. I don't like leaving McKay alone for this long. He's eating lunch now."

"Good. I'll check on him while you're gone and get someone to clean up the remains of lunch."

John hoped McKay was smart enough to get dressed. Ah well, nothing he could do about it now. With another nod, John turned and started for the elevators. He called back over his shoulder. "Try not to let anyone take him again while I'm gone. I'm trusting you, Pearson."

"Right now I'm more worried about someone taking a pot-shot at you. Don't go far. The Duane Reade is on the corner of Park and 49th."

"If they do, at least then we know who the target is." John gave him a cheeky grin as the elevator doors closed.

Sure enough, Broone—another hulking guard in a dark suit and earpiece—was waiting for them at the bottom. "Colonel. You wanted to go to the drug store?"

God, these people had no idea what stealth meant. "Yes. I'm taking a walk to assess the area. You and Holmes can shadow me, but stay far enough back that you don't attract attention. I also want to see if anyone makes an attempt on me. Whoever took those shots earlier is probably gone, but if they are still here, then maybe we can lure them out."

"It's Harolds, sir. Bob Harolds," the guard corrected.

Blinking, John looked at the guy. He felt his ears get a little warm. "Ah, sorry about that Harolds. The only excuse I can give you is that I have a lot on my mind right now. I'll try not to forget again."

"Not a problem, sir. And if you'll come with us, we can patrol the area," he said.

John realized there was no way he was going to fly under the radar. As they moved out, he could feel eyes on him, although he tried to act normally. He also plotted how he was going to hide his real target for going out. He decided on basically buying out the grocery store. Most of it would
go over well on Atlantis anyway, both as gifts and on the black market, so it wasn't like it was a waste.

Even though John could tell that everyone was looking at him, most everyone left them alone. That was the beauty of New York City. There were a lot of famous people wandering the streets.

They made it to the Duane Reade without incident, and John grabbed one of the mini-carts. He decided to start on one end of the store, and started tossing in anything he thought the people of Atlantis might like. Luxury items were still rare, even with regular contact, so it would be appreciated. The condoms and lube were a few aisles in, so hopefully that would just look like another set of items John was purchasing, and not anything special.

"Sir?" Harolds said quietly.

"Yes?" John eyed the make-up. He had no clue what women liked. He decided to play it safe and get all the nailpolish and lipgloss. Who didn't like those things, right?

"You don't need to buy out the store. We'll be at the exit when you're ready."

John looked up and grinned at him. "You don't have any idea how much good will I'll get from bringing this stuff back. We get the basics, but stuff like this? Not so much. I'll try to be good though."

"I'd recommend waiting, sir. There's a day already on your schedule for shopping. You can do much better than drug store cosmetics."

"I can do both." Laughing, John started to go down the aisle. He tried to focus on smaller, more useful items. The entire travel section he completely cleaned out—people on Earth just didn't understand how awesome it was to have toothpaste that fit in your vest for off-world trips. All the condoms and lube went into his cart—he'd trade away what they didn't want—and then he filled out the rest of the cart with snacks of every kind, taking care to make sure he grabbed all of the high-end chocolate, the chocolate-covered espresso beans (who knew you could get those in a drug store now?) and the Pringles. And Cheetos. Finally, John had to tear himself away. The cart was overflowing. He just couldn't get any more in.

The check-out line, though, was torturous. Twenty people deep and ache-covered minimum-wage teenagers working the register.

He waited, trying to be patient. As he stood there, he spotted a section he had missed somehow—the foot care. Biting his lip, he darted over and grabbed everything he could. Inserts and powders and blister care. That would be nice for those long hikes, and they had a good variety of sizes. He would have to get Pearson to find him enough of this stuff to pass out to everyone on base who went off-world. He got back and did his best to shove the new items in the cart, picking up stuff that fell off the top as he inched his way forward.

Nearly twenty minutes after he entered the line, he finally made it to the front. The girl that was stuck with him didn't look happy. She snapped her gum and started ringing, handing him half-full plastic bags even as he was trying to put more merchandise on the counter.

Looking over, John decided to put his guards to good use. He gestured Harolds over, and handed him the bags. "Hold these."

"Yes, sir," he said, sounding pained.

Ahhh, rank did occasionally have its privileges. It took them a good ten minutes to get everything scanned and bagged. Once the cart was empty, John gestured for Harolds to put the stuff back in
the cart. He hoped the store wouldn't mind if they borrowed it to get this stuff back to the hotel.
He pulled out his credit card and handed it over to the girl before she told him the total.

She took a look at the card and then handed it back. "It's expired."

He blinked. "It is? What about this one?" He gave her his debit card.

She snapped her gum, checking the date. "Nope. Got another?"

He looked through his wallet. He thought the SGC had issued him a new one, he just had to find
the damn thing...

"I've got it, sir," Harolds said, handing over a card.

"That's a good $700 of merchandise for my people. You don't have to do that. I just need to find
an ATM. I have the back-pay..."

She snapped her gum again. "Either he pays or I have to void the whole sale."

With a sigh, John waved her on. "Go ahead and charge it then. Harolds, I'll pay you back as soon
as I find a card that isn't expired."

"I know you're good for it, sir," he said as the cashier ran his card through and he signed for it.

In another minute they were back on the street, John pushing his cart of goodies. "Can one of you
remind me to ask Pearson about finding more of the foot gear? I'd like to be able to issue inserts
and basic care items to everyone assigned to me, but this store didn't have enough."

"I'm sure you can order them through your normal requisition form," Harolds said as Broone fell
into step on his other side.

"You'd be surprised. Caldwell doesn't like me much, so a lot of the goods deemed luxury items
get stricken from the manifest. Plus, it's more fun to have an almost-Christmas passing stuff out
when I get back." He grinned at them. "I need to remember to clean out a few more stores worth
of those little travel sizes of stuff. Those things are fucking awesome."

"I'll mention it to Lieutenant Pearson for you, sir."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate it. My people work hard, so when I can do something to lighten their load
and take their minds off it for a while, I try to take advantage of it."

"Yes, because travel toothbrushes say 'thanks for not getting killed this week'."

John shrugged. "You'd be surprised. You guys take it for granted because you can get this stuff
whenever you want. We can't. I'm not saying this makes up for people putting their lives on the
line, but if I can make missions a little more comfortable, or give them things to play with or watch
on their down time, I will. I wish I could keep all my people wrapped up and safe. But while I do
my best to keep them safe, we all know going in that part of our job is to risk our lives, and defend
the civilians we've sworn to protect at all costs. No one who isn't willing to commit to that is
stationed with us."

Harolds shrugged, falling silent as they made their way back to the hotel—without incident.

John wondered if it was because the guy had fled, or if Rodney was the target after all. He sighed
softly—leave wasn't supposed to be something he spent on mission-level alertness.
They got a few odd looks from the doorman and the people in the lobby as they made their way back into the hotel pushing the shopping cart. Otherwise, they were more or less ignored. Apparently people were allowed to be odd and get nothing more than a look.

Once they got back to the room, John pushed the cart inside, thanking the soldiers before closing and locking the door behind him. The lunch buffet had been cleared away and in its place was light snacks—fruit, cookies, coffee, water, soda, juice. The room was quiet otherwise. Through the half-open door, he could see the lights were off and the drapes still drawn closed in the master bedroom.

Walking quietly, he peered inside, a smile growing on his face as he watched Rodney sleeping. He was sprawled in the center of the bed on his stomach, head turned to the side. The sheets were draped across his back, but shoved down enough to reveal the scientist's naked back. It made John want to pull down the sheet the rest of the way to see if he was still completely naked.

Knowing Rodney was absolutely exhausted, John moved in and just ran one finger lightly down the other man's back. He was safe, he was here. That was enough for now. Silently, John returned to his cart, dumping everything out on the floor so he could start sorting through what, exactly, he had purchased.

It took him nearly an hour to go through everything, organizing and making notes of what he wanted to do with everything and where it needed to go. He'd have Pearson pack it up tomorrow.

One bottle of lube, one box of condoms, and the snacks he brought into the bedroom and tossed into his duffel. This way, at least they'd have them when they wanted them again.

Looking back at the bed, John licked his lips. God, how had he never realized how much he wanted Rodney before? He realized he had wanted him for a long time, but something in him had repressed it to fantastic levels. He went and locked the outer door again, and then the bedroom door, stripping and crawling in next to Rodney. He tried to move quietly so as not to wake him.

The scientist, though, shifted immediately, moving to accommodate John, sleepy eyes regarding him softly.

"Hey there."

"Shopping uneventful?"

"Yeah. They made me take guards though, so I bought out a drug store to hide my real purpose for being there. We have a lot of stuff to bring home with us, and I have a list of more I'd like to get."

"Mmmmm…good," he said, stretching. He rolled onto his side so he was face to face with John. "So does that mean you officially have supplies?"

"I do. And if you don't like the ones I brought in for us, we have a whole collection out in the living room." Grinning, John arched a little as Rodney's hand swept down his side.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. I trust you.” His smile was soft, genuine.

It made John want to kiss him. Realizing he could, he leaned in, pressing their mouths together softly.

"Mmm," Rodney hummed, kissing him back gently, unhurriedly.

Rolling, John settled on top of Rodney. He wished now that he had taken the time to undress
before he crawled back into bed. It was nice, this lazy kissing and rubbing.

"Could do this all day," Rodney whispered in between kisses, his hands roaming up and down John's back, sneaking under his shirt to get to skin.

"Oh... God yes..." John breathed the words, his eyes closing as he rocked between Rodney's hands and his body.

"Overdressed."

"I should... should fix that. And get the stuff I bought."

"Yes. You should," he panted. "Think I need to be wooed."

"I can do wooing. Totally." John nibbled his way down Rodney's neck.

"Good," he whispered, offering more skin to John even as his hands tried to tug him closer.

It was a few more minutes before John lifted his head again. "Clothes. I need to get rid of them."

"Yes... yes, you do," Rodney panted. "Need to feel you."

With a moan, John rolled off to the edge of the bed. Standing, he started to strip, tossing the material that stood between him and Rodney in almost every direction.

The scientist had shifted on the bed as soon as John had moved, rolling to his knees and crawling toward John, following him.

John gasped as he felt hands on his sides and chest while he was still tangled in the shirt he was trying to pull over his head. "Oh god, oh god... Rodney..."

"Want you."

"Please... please..." John struggled with his shirt, finally managing to toss it away. He managed to lean down and snag the items from his duffel without moving out of Rodney's reach, putting them on the bed. "Show me. Show me how to make you feel good without hurting you. Want to touch you..."

"You won't hurt me," Rodney said, turning John with his hands and pressing their lips together again.

John moaned into Rodney's mouth, letting himself be tugged back onto the bed. It was so much better with no barriers between them.

Rodney's legs were spread open, letting him settle in close, even closer than before.

It was intoxicating. Lifting his head, John looked down, at where their bodies mingled. "Oh fuck, that's hot..."

Rodney chuckled, low and dirty. "It only gets better."

With a moan, John's hips stuttered. "Might... might be the death of me."

"So...what now?"

"You... tell me. Never...done this before." Reaching between them, John stroked Rodney lightly, marveling at the way the other man's erection felt in his hand.
Rodney moaned, arching into him. "Doing...doing fine so far."

"What's the best...best position to... to be inside you?" Just the thought of it made John's dick leak, the precome dripping down onto Rodney's stomach.

"Easier...easier if I'm on my knees, probably."

"'Kay." Panting, John forced himself to roll off, to the side. He picked up the lube, showing it to Rodney. It was called Boy Butter, so he had guessed it was suitable for this type of thing.

"That'll work," Rodney said, sitting up and pressing his lips to John's again, his hand curved along the back of his neck.

Moaning softly again, John opened up, letting Rodney's tongue slip inside.

Rodney broke off a few moments later, breathing heavily. "Come on, I won't break."

"I want you to enjoy it." John licked his lips as Rodney went to his knees, spreading his legs wide. It was beautiful. With something akin to awe, he traced one finger down the other man's back, and over the entrance he had exposed.

The scientist moaned, rocking back into John's touch. "I...oh god...I will."

With hands that shook slightly, John opened the lube and slicked up a finger. He didn't know much, but he did know he needed to stretch Rodney open before he just tried to shove inside. That hole looked really small—he hoped his vague memories that stretching would make it bigger were right. Breathing hard, he very slowly pushed one very lubed finger inside.

"Yes..." Rodney moaned, pushing back into John's finger. The pilot could feel Rodney's muscles clenching around his finger, squeezing it. "Come on..."

"You're so... so smooth, so tight." John stared at his finger as he moved it in and out. "Wow."

"Keep...keep going. It's been a while," Rodney panted.

"Can I add a second finger?" John suddenly, desperately, wanted to be balls-deep inside that tight hot place.

"Won't...won't break. Lots of lube. You'll...I'll tell you...if it...hurts."

Pulling his finger free, John got more lube and pushed two in this time. It was very, very tight. Rodney moaned louder this time, clenching down on John's fingers for a long moment and then he was sliding in, the muscles relaxing. "Oh...yeah..."

"Wow. Just... wow." John swallowed hard, moving his fingers in and out. He could feel Rodney loosening, opening up around them.

And the noises... Yeah, John thought he could come just from listening to the scientist moaning and groaning, whispered "yes" and "more" and "oh god yeah" only making him want it more.

Without asking, he pulled free and got more lube, adding a third finger when he went back inside.

It was tight again at first, but Rodney opened up easily for him now. There was a gleam of sweat on the scientist's shoulders and back as he trembled and moaned, lost in the pleasure.
"I need... God, Rodney... tell me I can... Please..." He knew it wasn't very coherent, but John very much needed to be inside him right now.

"Won't...won't break...please...please fuck me..."

Moaning, John pulled his fingers out and with shaky hands he slid on the condom. He was surprised he didn't break the damn thing. Then finally, finally, he was smearing on more lube and slowly pressing himself into Rodney's body. "Oh...oh fuck... oh god... Rodney..."

It was still tight, but once John got past the outer ring of muscle... oh wow.

He continued to push until he was all the way in. He was vaguely aware that he was making soft, needy noises, but he just didn't care anymore.

Rodney was panting hard, his body shuddering and trembling, arms barely holding him upright. "God...oh...god..."

"Tell me... tell me I can... I want to move... Please, Rodney, please..."

"Yes!" Rodney more or less yelled before reining himself in. "John, yes, please..."

That was all he needed. Slowly the first few times, and then speeding up, John started to fuck him. It was amazing and incredible and the best thing he had ever felt in his life. "I'm not...not going to last long... So fucking good..."

Rodney was...nearly incoherent: moaning and rocking back to meet John's thrusts.

Letting himself go, John just lost himself in the pleasure. In and out, hips snapping, orgasm starting to pool in the base of his spine. He realized Rodney had managed to get one hand around his own dick and was jerking off in time to John's thrusts. That was enough to put John over the edge. With a cry, he gave three more short, hard thrusts before he was coming so hard he saw stars.

They collapsed down onto the bed in a pile, both moaning and breathing heavily. He could feel Rodney's body twitch every few moments.

"Nnngh." It was the closest he could get to asking if Rodney had come, and if it had been as good for him as it had been for John.

A beat later, Rodney took another breath, releasing it slowly, his body molding even a little more into the bed.

Slowly, John's breathing returned to normal. Not wanting to squish Rodney, he slowly pulled out and lowered himself to the bed next to the other man.

With a sigh, he tugged the condom free, tying a knot in the top and dropping it over the edge of the bed, before rolling close once again. Rodney looked...wrecked.

"Mmmmm." He snuggled in a little closer, so they were pressed together along their sides.

"Closer..." he mumbled, rocking against John a little.

They both wiggled a bit more, until Rodney was on his back and in John's arms, their legs tangled.

"Mmmm," Rodney sighed, apparently only capable of very short words or sentences.
"Sleep." John managed that word, already feeling the almost drugged way his post-coital body was rushing toward oblivion.

"Mmm," Rodney mumbled again, the sound edging toward agreement.

That was the last thing John knew before he slipped into a dreamless, sated slumber.

****
John screamed.

They had started on the pinky of his left hand, breaking every bone, meticulous in their precision. By the time they were done, all ten fingers, and both wrists were destroyed.

They never asked him questions. Never demanded anything of him except that he bleed. Rodney got the questions, John paid the price for their resistance.

He didn't blame the scientist. He couldn't give them what they wanted. They had to be strong. So John did the only thing he could.

He screamed.

****

The next few days were… nice. Really nice. John still didn't like the interviews, and was still wary about taking Rodney out in public, but when nothing further happened, he started to relax a bit. And the evenings were… better than nice.

Much better.

This was their last day in New York, the final interview had been with Jon Stewart for the Daily Show, and then they were off again. To Washington, he believed.

In the car, he leaned back, closing his eyes. Pearson and Rodney were chatting quietly about something—probably food-related—and he let it wash over him and soothe him. They were both exhausted, but the thrill of what they were discovering together… it was worth every late night.

It had been fun to watch Rodney squirm that first day—the really long day—knowing he'd done that to him. The way Rodney would get the red marks high on his cheeks when he caught John watching him shift in the chair were perfect.

It had been thrilling. God, he needed to think of something else before he started getting hard from the thought of what they did.

He didn't realize he had completely zoned out into his own little fantasy world until someone shook his leg.

"Hey. We're stopping to get gas. We can stretch our legs if you want," Rodney said, pointing with his thumb toward the mini-mart. "Pearson said there's another two hours before we reach DC. There's some traffic or something so it might end up being longer. I still can't believe they thought this would be better than the plane."

"It would have taken the same amount of time given the congestion at the airport," John said with a shrug as he tried to get his brain in gear. The nap had been nice. "All right, wanna go see what kinds of snacks they have?"

Rodney smiled easily, openly. "Thought you'd never ask." John spotted Pearson outside, talking with the driver.

Folding himself out of the back of the limo, he stepped closer, getting Pearson's attention. "We're going to grab something to eat. We'll be back out in a minute. You guys want anything?"
"No, we're good," Pearson said, waving John off. Of course McKay was halfway across the gas station already, making a bee-line for the coffee probably.

Chuckling, John took off at a trot, catching up easily. "So how many snacks do we want? I'm thinking a good variety of salty and sweet—this is going to be a long ride."

"Hmm…what?" Rodney asked, barely listening to John. Coffee was in his sight and he was headed right to it.

Shaking his head, John headed to the snack aisle. "Just don't drink too much—I don't know when they'll let us have another bathroom break."

"That's what the extra cup is for."

"That's just disgusting." John made a face, and started pulling candy bars off the shelf, making sure there were at least two of any he knew Rodney liked.

"I'll make sure I have an extra lid," Rodney said, making sure to raise his voice so John could hear.

It was late, the sun long since set, John noticed as he moved toward the chips, shaking his head at Rodney's comment. The mini-mart was quiet, the limo one of two cars pulled alongside the pumps. It seemed like they were in the middle of nowhere, probably somewhere in Jersey.

It didn't take them long to rendezvous at the register. John dumped his bounty of snacks on the counter, and glanced over to see what Rodney had ended up with.

The scientist was prowling around the coffee area in search of something. John heard an "ah ha!" and then Rodney was brandishing a to-go tray, setting four extra-large coffee cups into the appropriate slots. An empty cup was carefully stacked in the center, lid shoved halfway inside.

John raised an eyebrow. "Are at least one of those for me?"

"Hmm, what?" Rodney asked, looking up at him with wide blue eyes.

"The coffee. Is one of them for me, or do you plan to drink them all? Keep in mind, I got you Snickers."

"Oh. You wanted coffee?"

"You were going to drink four large cups all by yourself?"

Rodney's expression shifted toward sheepish. "Ah…maybe?"

Shaking his head, John chuckled. "Are you willing to give up one in exchange for chocolate?"

"I can…ah…get more," he said gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb.

John though about protesting, but Rodney was a big boy. And besides, with all this caffeine he might still be awake when they got to DC and up for a little sex. "Okay."

As Rodney headed back to the coffee counter, the door chimed as two guys wandered into the mini-mart, one shuffling through his pocket looking for money, while the other one headed back toward the cooler.

John gestured to encompass all the stuff on the counter, including the coffees. "We'll take all this,
and add one more of the large gulps, please."

"I have to wait for your friend to come back before I can check you out," the guy at the counter said, tone slightly surly, slightly annoyed.

John fought the urge to roll his eyes. "That's fine. Can we start ringing up the items? By the time we're ready to finalize everything, he'll be back."

He shrugged. "I have to wait. Company policy."

Well, they weren't really in a hurry anyway. John leaned against the counter, glancing around the store to see if there was anything he might have missed.

The guy fumbling with the papers and money in his pocket, wandered up to the counter next to John, still intent on finding the money to fill up. The other was perusing the cold drinks, but was eyeing the coffee area with increasing interest. Apparently there were several people just like Rodney that needed an IV of the stuff.

Rodney wandered back over and set the fifth cup on the counter. Shaking his head, John gestured to the cashier. "That's it."

"You didn't get chips," Rodney commented, eyeing the pile of crap on the counter. "We need chips."

"We don't need chips. I got cheese puffs."

"Of course we need chips. Salt and vinegar."

Rolling his eyes, John went back and grabbed a bag of chips, tossing it onto the growing pile. "Anything else?"

Rodney was tapping his lip with his finger, eyes grazing over the mini-mart. Pearson probably thought he'd lost the two of them in the store. "Twinkies," he finally said, an odd twinkle in his eyes. "Let me get some Twinkies."

John felt his body starting to respond. He had gotten to know that look well—he didn't know what his lover had planned, but that promised all kinds of very good things. He swallowed. Hard. "Twinkies are always good."

As Rodney headed off again, the guy next to John shoved him slightly, apologizing as he hunted in his pocket.

Shuffling sideways slightly, John smiled slightly, hoping the guy would hunt with a little less gusto.

He wasn't expecting the sharp jab in his hip or the unapologetic smile from the man beside him as he pulled the needle away, the contents already emptied into John's body. The near-instantaneous dizziness was a surprise, too.

"R'ney, run!" He tried to warn his friend, his lover, even as his legs gave out and he started to slip to the floor.

"Don't worry about him, Colonel. We'll take good care of him," the man said quietly, his voice low. John heard the high-pitched squawk from his lover and realized that Rodney had probably been drugged as well.
"F..fu...fuck..."

"Only if you insist," the man taunted, the words sounding like they were coming down a long tunnel.

John wanted to fight, tried to fight it, but the darkness swallowed him whole.

He caught snatches of things; a sensation or image here and there. He swore he'd seen a van. Saw Rodney slumped in a seat, hands bound behind his back. Felt the cool metal of handcuffs on his own wrists. Saw the mini-mart clerk looking down on him, felt the well-worn linoleum under his cheek. He saw glimpses of darkened road and the occasional flash of street lights as they were moved somewhere else. Remembered hearing Pearson's voice, but it had been quiet, hushed, but he could have been mistaken.

When the world finally came back into focus, he had no idea where he was. He was alone, securely tied to a chair, stripped down to his boxers. His head was pounding but he was trying to ignore it. His mouth was clammy, a feeling he was used to from Carson after he'd drugged him for surgery or something.

"Colonel. It's good to see that you've decided to join us again." The voice was deep, coming from somewhere behind him. He turned to look, but no one was there, just wall.

John tried to lick his lips, tried to get some moisture in his mouth. His voice was rough when he finally spoke. "Who are you? What the hell is going on? Where's McKay?"

"I am the man that holds all the strings, Colonel. You're here for my amusement."

He tugged at his bonds, but whoever had tied them knew what they were doing. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Where is McKay? If you've hurt him, I promise you I will kill you."

"He is no longer of your concern, Colonel. And I think you should be worrying more about your own situation, than his."

"McKay is always my concern. What do you want with us?"

"You'll find out soon enough," the man said, humor shading his words. His voice was very cultured, without the hint of any accent to indicate a nationality.

John tugged ineffectively at the ropes holding him down again. "You won't get away with this. There will be people looking for us, and they won't stop until we're found."

"No. No, they won't. It seems as if your limo was in an…accident."

"They won't believe that. When they don't find our bodies, they'll keep looking."

"It was such a tragedy," the man continued. "The news coverage was pretty spectacular. Seems the driver fell asleep at the wheel. He should have gotten some coffee at that mini-mart."

"Fuck you. What happened to him? And Pearson? What did you do with them? And the clerk at the mart, what did you do to him?"

"We didn't do anything to them. The situation only allowed us to take care of some…loose ends. Pearson has many years ahead of him yet."
"Pearson..." John suddenly realized they had been duped. Pearson had to have been working for these guys the whole time. How he had gotten past O'Neill, John had no idea.

"You're beginning to get the picture, aren't you, Colonel?" The man chuckled darkly. "Why don't you just sit back and relax? Enjoy our hospitality."

"That's not the end of it. There will still be people looking for us. They won't believe we died in a crash, and they won't stop searching for us. Whatever it is you think this is going to gain you, it won't."

"Why? There were four bodies in that vehicle. The autopsies already came back from the Virginia Medical Examiner. It's a horrible tragedy."

Not wanting to tip their hand, John kept his mouth shut. This guy didn't need to know that the SGC and Atlantis had very sophisticated DNA samplers. They would know relatively quickly that none of the bodies were John or Rodney, no matter how badly mangled they were.

"You think O'Neill's going to come to the rescue, don't you?"

"I think you're going to be very sorry when you're caught. If you survive that is."

"I have no doubt that I have a long and healthy life in front of me. You, however, that is still up for discussion."

"What do you want from me? And where is McKay? Are you the bastard that tried to grab him before?"

"I don't need anything from you other than your presence."

To John, that confirmed that this was the same group. And he was probably here to make sure he didn't come for Rodney again. Just great. "So what, you're going to keep me tied to a chair until mocking me gets old?"

"I'm sure your scenery will change over the course of the next few days. Much of it depends upon other...factors."

"In the meantime, this rope is chafing. And when are you going to let me eat?"

"When the time is right."

"I'm hungry. And thirsty. And cold, since you decided to strip me down to my underwear. Let me at least get up and move around."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't suit me."

"Getting your rocks off looking at the guy tied to a chair?"

"If you were a woman, perhaps."

John rolled his eyes. "So what now? Because I've had a long couple of weeks, so the whole witty repartee is kind of wearing thin."

"Just sit back and relax, Colonel. You're going to be here a while." John heard the speaker click
off only a moment before a low-humming fan kicked on. He could feel the cool, nearly cold air sliding past his bare feet.

"Shit!" He tried to shift out of the way, his already clammy skin suddenly standing up with goose bumps.

If anything, the fan's motors hummed louder and faster, sending cold air into the small room.

Shivering, John tried to find the vents. When he did, he scooted the chair as best as he could out of their direct path.

Unfortunately it didn't help much. As the temperature continued to drop, John's shivers only increased. He could feel his joints stiffening up a little and knew that even if he had the opportunity to get free, there might not be any way for him to make use of it if his muscles wouldn't cooperate.

Dropping his head, he tried to distract himself from the increasing cold, from the way his whole body was starting to protest violently with pain and numbness.

As the shivers slowly began to trail off, John knew he was in trouble. He was getting sleepy, his body trying to conserve as much heat as possible to keep his core warm.

His breathing was getting harder. If he didn't get warm soon, frostbite was going to set in.

Vaguely he heard the door open, people entering the room. They were silent, their hands hot against his cold skin. They fumbled at his wrists, freeing his arms. He was lifted and then dropped on a thin mattress, a wool blanket draped over him. A tray of food was left on the floor next to him—soup, sandwich, and tea.

The men were gone a few seconds later, taking the chair with them and locking the door behind them. The fans cut off a minute later.

As soon as his body started to get some warmth back, he started shivering violently, everything aching. Involuntarily, he moaned as pain spiked through his body.

Without a watch he had no idea how long it lasted, but eventually the shaking stopped and he began to relax into the warmth afforded by the lone blanket. It wasn't much, but it was better than being open to the air.

Knowing he needed to give his body some fuel, he managed to push himself into a sitting position, picking up the bowl of soup. He ate slowly, feeling better as the now luke-warm liquid spread.

The soup was hearty—vegetables and meat in a flavorful broth—warming him even further.

When he finished, he polished off the sandwich and tea as well. Wrapping the blanket around himself, he got to his feet to start prowling the room, trying to determine its exact dimensions, see if there was anything he could use.

He found the outline of the door, but there wasn't even a handle on his side. There was nothing he could use to break free, nothing he could even grab onto. The edges of the vents were sealed completely and unless he had tools there was no way he would be able to pry off the covers.

Growling, he did the only thing he could—he paced.

"Restless, Colonel?" The voice was back.
"I want to know what you did with my scientist."

"Ah, yes. Your scientist. We certainly know what you've done to him."

"I'm not the one who kidnapped him and is doing god knows what. Where is he? I want to see him."

"You're in no position to demand anything. Especially after how you left him."

"How I left him? What the hell are you talking about?"

The man's voice was dark, all knowing. "Oh, I think you know."

John wanted to hurt him. "No, as a matter of fact I don't. What have you done to McKay?"

"Nothing at all."

"Like I believe that. Why are we here?"

"We require Doctor McKay's undivided attention."

"And you think you'll get that this way. That's a riot. Let us both go now, and maybe he won't blow this place to kingdom come."

"Oh, I'm sure he won't do that."

"Who are you? This game of cryptic shit is getting old fast. Just tell me who you are and what you want."

"You can call me Richard and what I want is really none of your concern. Doctor McKay already knows the stakes."

Growling again, John tried to spot the cameras that had to be in the room. "Well, Richard, since I'm here, and you have my scientist, I think what you want is a major concern of mine."

"No, it's not."

"Yeah, it kind of is. I want to see McKay."

"That is not an option."

"Why not? What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing." The man's voice was casual. "I have you exactly where I want you."

"Half naked and pacing? That's a complete waste of resources. Whatever you do, you must not be very good at it." He knew it was stupid, but John was angry.

"Seeing that you are locked in a small room and your life is dependant upon your attitude and your scientist's cooperation, I think you are perfectly positioned."

John froze. "You're using me to force him to work. You son of a bitch."

"I'll make sure to share your observations with my mother when I speak to her later."

John glared at a random wall. "So for all your talk, my life really isn't in any danger. You know if you kill me, you'll lose his cooperation as well."
"Perhaps. There are always other options. You were simply…convenient."

"It's only a matter of time before I find a way out of here. And then you better watch your back." He was furious.

"Doctor McKay's become closer with his sister, hasn't he?"

Not answering, John started to prowl again. It might be hidden, but he would find the speakers and camera. And when he did, he would use that to rig a vent open.

"His niece is very precocious. Madison. She does well in school, too. She must have some of the McKay genes."

John picked up his spoon. It was metal—he could work with that.

"You're expendable, Colonel. There are several people we can use if we need to."

Right. That was why they were going to all this trouble to keep him here. He didn't know what these guys really wanted, but for now he ignored Richard and took his spoon to the sealed door. He probed it carefully, trying to find a weakness.

"Just remember, Colonel, there are many things we can do to McKay to encourage his cooperation—besides leveraging you. He was rather pale before when we showed him the feed from your cell. You were freezing to death at the time. You can thank him for your food and blanket when you see him next."

"I will kill you for hurting him." John didn't stop his actions. It was just like fucking before. They were supposed to be safe here, were supposed to be recovering from this, not participating in a fucking reenactment.

"I haven't touched a hair on his head."

"Are you trying to make me like you? Because it isn't working."

"I don't care if you like me or not. I'm being honest. I haven't touched your scientist. I haven't even laid a hand on him. That might not be true for some of my other men, however. I can't speak for them."

Growling, John had to close his eyes for a moment. He was supposed to protect Rodney, keep him safe. He felt helpless, useless, and it wasn't a great feeling.

"Would you like to hear his voice? I believe I have a recording from earlier if you're interested."

"What do you want? Just tell me."

"From you? Nothing. I'm just having a conversation."

"No, you're taunting me. What the hell do you want?"

"You said you wanted to talk to Doctor McKay. He's not available right now, so I thought I would offer an alternative. All you had to say was no, Colonel."

The door was fucking impervious. John put his head against it and closed his eyes.

"Very well, Colonel. It seems as if you're not interested in talking. I'll leave you with a snippet of our earlier conversation with Doctor McKay." As the man— their kidnapper—clicked off, the
room was filled with the terror-filled sounds of the scientist. He was begging, pleading with them to stop. His voice sounded desperate, edged with a panic that John only heard when things were bad, when someone was going to die or when something was going to blow up in their faces.

Sliding along the wall, he put his head against his knees. He knew he needed to not give up, but this was too soon, too similar. He shivered a little, swallowing hard. He hoped like hell SG-1 smelled something fishy and came for them. Otherwise, he wasn't sure how long either of them would last.

The clip cycled over and over again, a continuous loop that drilled through him.

He didn't realize he was sobbing softly until it suddenly cut off, leaving only his own labored breathing.

The fan kicked in again, cooling the air around him.

He pulled the blanket around his shoulders. He was flashing back and forth between now and then, until he wasn't sure who had them, what they wanted.

He huddled in under the blanket, pulling his legs close to his chest. The men came back, retrieving the tray from before and leaving another.

He ignored it, lost in his flashbacks, barely aware anyone else was there.

Time passed. Minutes merging into hours. He didn't know, didn't care. Every now and then he'd emerge just enough to eat a little something, before huddling back under his blanket. The room was kept cold, not as bad as before, but enough to keep him lethargic. Going to the bathroom was a nightmare. The small drain in the corner of the room was a necessity and he was only forced out from under the blanket by absolute need.

He had no idea how long he had been there and had stopped paying attention at all to the men who brought food. So it was a complete surprise when someone touched him.

"John?" The voice was quiet, the word whispered, shaky.

He shivered, trying to pull away. He was lost in his own world, but he was pretty sure anyone here would just want to hurt him, taunt him again.

"John, please. I can't stay long."

Slowly opening his eyes, John blinked. Rodney? But Rodney was hurt, tortured. He remembered blood, didn't he? "Dream?"

"I wish…wish it was," he said, his voice catching in the middle of the sentence.

Uncurling a little, he scooted, sighing into the warmth of another body. Rodney's body. It let him shake off the loop he had gotten trapped in. His voice felt raspy. "Hurt you? What's going on?"

"Ow…careful," he whispered as John's hands wrapped around his body. "I…they gave me a little time to see you."

"What do they want from you? What did they do to you?" John carefully skimmed his hands over Rodney's too-slim body. "How long have we been here?"

"I…I don't know. I haven't seen outside since they kidnapped us. You have to do whatever they tell you, okay? Promise me."
"Rodney, what's going on? They wouldn't tell me why we're here. What are they asking you to do?"

"Promise me, John, please," he insisted. He was still whispering, but his voice got a little stronger. Slowly, he nodded. "If I can. But you have to tell me what's going on."

"I...I can't. John, please, don't ask me that."

"Why?" John sat up a little. "Rodney...?"

He pulled back a little, taking a good look at Rodney, noting the bruised look to his face where the dark circles stood out sharply from his too-pale skin. There was a...wildness about him, an edge John didn't like.

"Please," Rodney whispered. "I don't have much time, but they finally agreed to let me see you, talk to you. I didn't...I didn't screw anything up for the past few days."

"Rodney..." John very gently pulled him close, not caring if anyone was watching. "What are they doing to you? God, I'm so sorry..."

"Nothing I didn't deserve," Rodney whispered into John's shoulder, clutching at him.

"Damn it..." John brushed his lips against Rodney's temple. "You don't deserve to be abused for anything, no matter what they tell you. Promise me you'll try not to believe them, Rodney. Please."

"I'll be good," he whispered, almost sounding like a chant. "I promise." Rodney shifted closer, pressing his face in the crease of John's neck and shoulder, apparently not in any way bothered by the odor John was finally noticing.

He closed his eyes and just held on. He knew this was bad in so many ways, but right now, he couldn't do much more than try and offer some support. This, at least, would give him a reason to stay strong, and not let his own issues swamp him again. Softly, he whispered against Rodney's ear. "I love you. I never thought I'd say it, and mean it, but... I do. So take care of yourself. For me, okay?"

Rodney nodded. "I'll be good. I promise."

"No," John leaned back so he could see Rodney's face. "I don't want you to be good. I want you to take care of yourself. Even if that means doing something the people who are hurting you don't like."

"No! Nonono. Don't talk like that!" John could feel Rodney shaking. What had they done to him?

"Shhh. It's okay. Look at me, Rodney. I know it's hard, but I want you to take a deep breath for me, okay?"

"No, please. Just...don't want to argue," Rodney said, his voice rough and low and John vaguely realized that this was the loudest his lover could get. He must have been screaming... Oh god.

Shaking a little himself. John pulled him close again. "Sorry, so sorry, Rodney... I was supposed to protect you..."

Rodney clung to him, snuffing into his shoulder. John held him tightly, running his hands over the scientist's back, trying to get an idea of his injuries without taking off the oversized shirt and pants
their kidnappers had given him.

It didn't feel like there was anything broken or any gaping wounds. So probably beatings and bruising, and god... John hated life right now. "When we get out of here, I'll retire. We'll get a little house somewhere, with a cat, and live peacefully with no more kidnappings or torture or people trying to use us against each other."

"Just...so tired," he whispered.

"I know. Me, too, Rodney. Me, too. And I know it's been worse for you. If I could reverse our situations, I would."

"No," he said, shaking his head, snuggling in closer, maneuvering them so they were lying down on the mattress.

John didn't protest when Rodney worked a leg between his, his body craving the contact. For the first time in what felt like forever, he actually relaxed a little.

"He promised. I've been good," Rodney whispered, relaxing into John.

"Who promised?" John whispered it, not wanting to upset his lover any more.

"Richard."

So the same guy who had been taunting him however many days ago. Sighing, John pulled Rodney a little closer. He hoped like hell someone was still searching for them, getting closer even as they both lost themselves in torture and PTSD and the hopelessness that came from having to deal with this all over again. At least now he understood why they had been forced on leave. Carson and the rest were trying to prevent this kind of meltdown, but none of them had anticipated this situation.

Rodney's breathing eased as he fell into sleep, his hands still clutching John, but losing the desperation he had during consciousness.

John kissed his temple again gently, careful not to wake the other man. "I'm so sorry..."

"Why are you apologizing?" Richard.

John knew he wasn't in the room, so he didn't lift his head or raise his voice. "Because you're killing him, and I can't stop it."

"I'm not doing anything to him. He's doing it all to himself," Richard said evenly. "And he won't wake up for a while."

"You're killing him," John repeated. He nuzzled into Rodney's neck a little. "We were supposed to be on fucking leave recovering from this shit."

"Well, you seemed to have gotten part of that right, didn't you, Colonel?" Richard taunted, chuckling darkly.

At this point, he really didn't care who knew what about them. He closed his eyes, hoping their tormentor would assume he was asleep too, and leave them alone for a while.

"You disappoint me, Colonel. From your file I thought you would react...differently," Richard said after a few moments. "And feel free to talk normally. Doctor McKay will not be joining us for quite some time."
"What would you like me to do? Make you kill me? What good would that do either of us? Just because I know how to pick my battles, and know when to conserve my strength, doesn't mean I'm not doing anything."

"I don't plan on killing you."

"Oh yeah, so all the threats and nearly giving me hypothermia were just a friendly pat on the back."

"Just to keep you under control. I have to ensure the safety of my men, of course."

"Oh, of course. And you're telling me this why?" John glared at the wall—he still hadn't managed to find the camera.

John heard the shift of fabric, could picture the man shrugging nonchalantly. "You interest me, Colonel. And I'm not an evil man. This is simply business."

"Right, because most businessmen kidnap people and threaten them and their friends to force them to work. If you don't think that's evil, I'd hate to see what you did consider to be bad." John ran a hand down Rodney's body. "Not to mention hurting someone to get the results you want. Why are we here? You still haven't even told me that much."

"Doctor McKay knows and that's enough."

"No, actually, it isn't enough. I'm being held prisoner and tortured. I think I at least have the right to know why."

"We require the Doctor's cooperation. Your continued presence ensures that he doesn't do anything that may…prove to be damaging to our interests."

"And yet you're telling me you have no plans to kill me."

"I don't."

"So what? You're going to just keep me here in a little box until Rodney drops from what you're doing to him, and then dump me somewhere?"

"He won't drop. I won't allow it. He's carefully monitored to ensure he's working at peak condition. He'll sleep now for about six hours and then he should be prepared to get back to work."

John growled. "You can't keep this up. He's not a pet you can keep caged and expect it to do your bidding."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one he's a person. And for another this kind of forced work will take its toll. In time all the things that make him special will fade."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not looking for a long-term employee."

"So when you're done with him, what happens next? You just said you didn't plan to kill us, but somehow I doubt you're going to let us walk away with a pension plan."

"I'll go on with my business and so shall you."
"You're going to let us just leave? Just like that?"

"It's a little more complicated and involved than that, of course, but yes."

"Right. It always is. And you'll have to excuse me if I'm a little skeptical. My ideas of how this should end and yours are vastly different I'm guessing." With a silent apology to Rodney, under the guise of continuing to pet his lover, John began to pick his pockets clean. It was a skill not many people realized special-ops trained military had. He didn't know if any of it would be useful, but if he was going to get them out of here, he needed something more than a spoon.

There wasn't much. A crust of bread, a day or so old. A small coiled spring. A barely-sharpened golf pencil.

"It depends. If Doctor McKay continues to perform at acceptable levels there won't be any complications."

"Right, and beating and drugging him, not to mention threatening to kill me if he doesn't do what you want, are conducive to 'performing at acceptable levels.'" John hid the spring and pencil in his blankets and left the bread. In fact, he slipped what was left of his own bread into Rodney's pocket, not wanting the other man to get sick. He had no idea how much or how often they were feeding him.

"If you'd taken the time to look, you would have noticed the injuries were days old and already healing."

"Uh huh. And I should believe you because...? You won't face me in person, you won't tell me who you are or what you want, and you just expect me to blithely trust you. I don't think so, buddy."

"If you see me I would be forced to take actions neither of us wishes. This preserves your future."

John snorted. "Because kidnapping us, and then staging our deaths and forcing him to work while you keep me around for entertainment suggests such a rich and happy future."

"Think whatever you wish. My men will retrieve Doctor McKay in a little over five hours."

"Fuck you." John growled again, tightening his arms around Rodney's body. So they had been here for a few days at least. He hoped like hell the sub-cu transmitters were still working. He didn't want to do anything to draw attention to his arm, but he didn't have a cut, so he knew they hadn't taken it out. After the whole debacle with Rodney, O'Neill had insisted they both get one—just in case. But there was no telling how deep underground they were, or if the damn things were even working.

"Have a good night, Colonel. I'm sure we'll talk again in the morning."

He listened for the faint sound of the microphone cutting off. All right, he had five hours before there would be men coming again. They would have the door open. Probably armed. And he had a spring, a pencil, and a spoon.

He was so fucked.

Rodney was a heavy weight against him—warm and solid. He was drooling a little, too, a small wet spot growing on John's shoulder.

It was... endearing. John laid his cheek against Rodney's head. "Hey, buddy. I'll figure this out, okay? You just have to hang in there. I don't know what yet, but I'll think of something. And then
we are seriously taking a real vacation and not telling anyone where to find us this time."

Rodney continued to breathe easily, regularly, his slumber undisturbed—sleeping like the drugged. If Richard—if that was even his name—said it would last five hours, John didn't doubt it. He probably had the drugs down to a precise science. John just wished he knew more, knew what Rodney was holding back from him. The terror had been real. What had they done to him?

John slipped out from under him, covering him with the blanket. He paced over to the door, tracing its edges again. With Rodney here, where he could keep an eye on him, his thinking was a little clearer. He was hoping he'd find something he might have missed before.

He hadn't been at it long when the fan kicked in again, cold air brushing by his feet. It was a non-too-subtle hint that they wanted him asleep—or non-moving at least.

He knew they wouldn't freeze out their pet scientist. They needed him too much. So John did his best to ignore the chill, and kept searching for something—anything—he could take advantage of.

But when his shivers became violent, he had to admit defeat—at least for now. Even though Rodney was covered and had clothes, John couldn't afford to let him get sick.

He moved back to his lover and slipped under the blanket, curling around him, pulling him close. He pressed a soft kiss to the other man's temple.

Pressed close, John felt his body warming, his eyes starting to droop as his own exhaustion caught up with him.

He wanted to stay awake, wanted to try and come up with a plan to get them free. But actually having Rodney in his arms, hearing him breathing, was too much to fight. He slipped into a deep slumber.

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Rodney woke gradually, warm and comfortable for the first time in days. The cot they had him sleeping on was killing his back and the sad excuse for a blanket was too thin to do much good.

When they let him sleep, that is.

But now. Now was different.

Someone snuffled softly into his neck, shifting closer into his body.

Rodney stiffened. His memories after they'd given him the injection were sparse at best. They told him it would make him sleep, get the rest he needed, but it had made him hyperaware of everything, as if he was standing on the edge of everything all at the same time.

He got an unintelligible mutter from the other person. He knew that sleepy voice. John.

How…how was this possible? Rodney tightened his hold on the other man, trying to reassure himself that it was real and not imagined. In the box, he'd started hallucinating, but this didn't feel like the box, didn't feel like before.

John sighed, cuddling in closer. Rodney could feel mostly skin—the other man was just wearing a pair of boxers. He was wrapped close around Rodney, as if he were trying to soak up warmth.

"J…J…John?" he whispered, his throat still raw from the screaming.
"Mmm? Rodney?" John lifted his head, hazel eyes blinking at him slowly, and then clearing. "Hey there, buddy. How are you feeling?"

"Really you?" They had promised him, Rodney vaguely remembered, promised him if he was good that he'd get to see John.

"Yeah, it's really me." He reached out, tracing a finger down Rodney's face. "I'm here."

"Oh, god," he whispered, pressing close, holding on tight, relief coursing through his body. Watching as they froze John had been horrible, even worse than the box that had followed.

"Shhh, it's okay. They aren't going to kill me. Richard, the bastard, is more interested in keeping me alive. No matter what they tell you, they won't kill me okay? I can take a little roughing up, but I don't want you to worry about me." John hugged him back just as tight.

"Saw you...you were so pale, nearly blue..."

"They were just proving a point, and trying to make me behave. You're in more danger than I am—they want you to work, they're just keeping me here to make sure you do. God, Rodney..." John pressed light kisses all over his face. "So fucking worried about you..."

"I'll be okay," he whispered. A memory returned, a brief glimpse of a room with cattle prods and knives and other horrible things. They'd showed it to him and then left him there, his hands secured above his head with a blindfold on his eyes. He'd gotten just a taste, but it was more than enough to convince him. He had to warn John. "Just...just do whatever they ask of you. Please."

John kissed him softly. "I promise, they won't hurt me. They might threaten you with it, but that's all it is—threats. Can you tell me why the fuck they have us here?"

Rodney shook his head. He couldn't say. They'd know. They'd put him back in that box and they'd torture John.

John sighed. "I won't push it right now, buddy. Just... promise me you'll do whatever you have to, that you'll take care of yourself. And... if the opportunity comes up to get the hell out of here, promise me you'll take it. Don't worry about me."

"Won't leave you behind."

"I know. But if you're free, you can get help and come back for me." John brushed their lips together again lightly. "Please. I don't know what they're doing to you, but I know damn well it's worse than what they're doing to me. I need to know that if you can get free, you will. I'll be all right."

"I can't," Rodney whispered, shaking his head.

John leaned back so he could look Rodney in the eye. "I'm so sorry. Whatever they're doing to you... God, Rodney..."

Reaching up, Rodney let his hand drift along John's face, feeling the growth of hair that was quickly turning into a beard. "I just want you to be safe. I'll do whatever they want."

John closed his eyes, leaning into the touch. "I'll be safe. Whatever they told you—they won't hurt me, Rodney. That's not why I'm here. They just want to use me as leverage to force you to work."

"They already hurt you. You could have died!"
"They froze me a little to ensure I couldn't fight them, but they never had any intention of letting it go further than that."

"You don't know that. I know what I've seen. I know what they can do."

"Hey, it's okay." John pulled him close again. "I'm okay, Rodney. I promise. I'll figure out a way to get us out of here, okay? You just concentrate on staying safe."

"Isn't that touching," a voice said, the familiarity of it making Rodney stiffen immediately.

John glared at the wall. "You do realize I will get out of here eventually, and then you're a dead man, right?"

"I'm not worried, Colonel. It's time for Doctor McKay to get back to work. Are you going to give my men any problems?"

"What do you think the answer to that question is?" John untangled himself from Rodney and put himself between him and the door.

"John, no," Rodney said, immediately climbing to his feet, clutching at John's arm. "Don't do this."

John kept Rodney behind him. "I know damn well I won't be able to stop you from taking him, not right now. But if you think I'm just going to roll over and hand my scientist to you without a fight, you're deranged."

Rodney felt the panic growing. "Please, John. They'll hurt you."

"You should listen to the good Doctor, Colonel. He knows what will happen."

"I know you won't do anything to me other than rough me up. You said yourself, Richard, you have no plans to kill me."

"I will if you make me. There are others I can use."

Others. He knew the others. Had been forced to tell Richard about them, where they lived, what they did. Jeannie and Madison and the English major. "John, please, stop."

John tilted his head toward Rodney without taking his eyes off the door. "I know they're hurting you. I can't let you walk out of here without at least trying to stop it. I'm more concerned with keeping you safe."

"Then let me go. Please."

He could see John's muscles twitching—what he was asking was against everything John believed. "You just want me to step aside and let them hurt you? I can't do that, Rodney. I can't stand here knowing they're abusing you."

"If you don't let me go it will just get worse. Please."

John's expression was torn, and full of what Rodney could only call anguish. He turned, pulling Rodney into his arms. "I can't let you go... God, Rodney..."

"As touching as this is, I've had enough. What will it be, Colonel?"

John didn't even look up. Instead, he leaned in, kissing Rodney right in the middle of the room.
Rodney let himself fall into the kiss, not stepping back until he felt someone tugging him away.

John made a sound of protest as a guard spun him and shoved him against the wall. Rodney could see him struggling to break free.

Rodney watched as the guard punched John in his back, heard his lover's grunt of pain as he tried to hold it in. "Stop, please stop," he said, trying to make himself heard even as they dragged him away. His throat hurt so much, but he didn't want them to do this.

"Rodney!" John tried to break free, tried to get to him.

The guards just started punching harder, driving John to his knees where they could use their booted feet. "No! John, no, stop, please!"

He watched his lover curl into himself, trying to shield himself from the worst of the blows.

Rodney was pulled from the room, struggling against his guards. "Stop, please. Don't do this. He didn't mean to fight. Please stop," Rodney begged.

"Hush, Doctor McKay." Richard's voice. "We won't permanently damage him. For now."

"He didn't mean it. He was just trying to protect me. You can't hold that against him, please. Don't do this." He caught a last glimpse of John on the floor getting kicked before the door to John's cell was closed and locked.

"Don't worry about the Colonel. Right now, you're going to have some breakfast and get back to work. Perhaps, if you accomplish your goals for the day, I will allow you to visit him again."

"Stop hurting him and I'll work."

"Don't work and he'll be seriously hurt."

"You're already hurting him. Please stop and I'll do whatever you want. Please."

"He's merely being reminded of his place here. Come, Doctor McKay. Or would you prefer we move him to...other quarters?" The implied threat was clear.

"No. Please, no," he said shaking his head, still struggling with the guards trying to move him down the hall, past that room and past the room with the box. They walked him past it every chance they got to remind him.

"Then you will eat your meal, and you will work. At the end of the period, I will evaluate what you have accomplished."

He felt his body shudder as they passed the rooms, his mind remembering the small cramped space with too little air.

"I see you understand. Good. Remember, once you have completed the projects I have for you, both you and the Colonel will be released. However, if you—and he—continue to fight, then he will not survive this little vacation, and you will enjoy slightly less spacious accommodations."

"No, please, don't put me back in there."

"Then do as you are told."

"Please stop hurting John. Please," Rodney begged as they finally managed to get him into the space that served as his workroom. He received all his meals in here as well—at least when he
was being fed.

"Colonel Sheppard is no longer your concern at the moment. As I said, accomplish the goals set out for you today, and you may be allowed to visit him again when it is time for you to rest."

"You won't let me rest for days now," Rodney said as he was placed at the table, shoved down into the chair.

"Then you have plenty of time to complete your work. You will have no one but yourself to blame if you are not allowed to see him again." A bowl of the watery oatmeal they fed him, along with a piece of bread and a slice of apple, was placed in front of him.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispered even as he picked up the spoon they'd placed alongside the bowl.

"Because you have the knowledge I need to get what I want. Once I have it, I will no longer need your services and you will be released."

Rodney took a few small bites. He knew the food was drugged, knew that it was only a matter of time until he felt the rush that he could barely contain.

"Everything you need is here. My guards will be watching, and I will check in with you shortly. Enjoy."

He heard the speaker click off as he was dismissed. His guards took up their usual position in the room—silent and watchful. He had too much to do. He was never going to finish what they wanted. It would take him months to get a working prototype with access to the Ancient mainframe. This—with no access to anything except his brain and a non-networked laptop—was going to take years.

But they didn't care, had just thrown him in the box and told him what would happen to John if he didn't produce a miracle.

They had the one Ancient device—working Ancient device, an Ancient personal transportation unit. APT as Zelenka had called it when they'd discovered them a year ago. Why wasn't one good enough?

They wouldn't let him take it apart, so he had to rely on what he could remember from a project he hadn't taken the lead on.

He'd thought about using it, trying to get away, but without any knowledge about where he was he could end up materializing in a wall or something just as solid. But if he escaped, they'd kill John. He couldn't risk it.

It was so tempting, though, to take the device and run until he couldn't run anymore. He'd almost done that two days ago, but then he remembered what would happen. They'd kill John and then track him down again and force him to work while holding Jeannie or Madison over his head.

He was trapped.

He had no choice but to do as they told him to, no choice but to build this device.

He took another few bites of the oatmeal, chasing it with some apple. He just wanted this to end. Was that so much to ask?

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It took John what he guessed was a few days before his ribs didn't ache from where he had been kicked repeatedly when they took Rodney. In that time, they had continued to feed him, but he hadn't heard from 'Richard' again, nor had they brought Rodney back.

He had spent hours ignoring the pain and trying to find a catch, a hook, anything he could use to get out of this damn room. But he had come up empty-handed. If nothing else, these guys had planned well in advance, and knew what they were doing.

He was sitting with his back to the wall, the blanket wrapped around him, eyes closed. He was bored out of his mind, and worried about Rodney and what was going on. He didn't bother to look up when he heard the door scrape open. He had lost track of what time it was and when meals came—and he was pretty sure they varied it to keep him off-track—and he had learned not to try and fight his way out. So he just waited for them to drop the crap they called food and leave.

The hand on his arm as they hauled him to his feet was a surprise. They quickly turned him and snapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists, securing them behind his back.

"What the fuck?" John tried to struggle, but was slammed against the wall, knocking his breath out of him.

"Why did you do it, Colonel?" Richard's voice was hard, with an edge John didn't like.

"Do what? What the fuck is going on?"

"You told him to screw with his work, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about? I've been in this room by myself for who knows how long. I don't know what you think I told who, but I didn't."

"Bring him. I want the Colonel to see the fruits of his labors."

"What are you talking about?" John struggled against the hands that pulled at him. "I seriously don't know what this is about."

"Of course, you do. You know exactly what this is about," Richard said disdainfully as the guards led John out of his cell.

"I don't, damn it!" John moaned as one of the guards got in a sucker punch to one of his still-sore ribs. "Please, at least tell me what the hell you think I did!"

"The guards will show you," Richard said, the dark tone of his voice warning John that this was probably not going to be good. They brought him down a long dark hallway, past several rooms. One door was open and John caught a glimpse of torture equipment—lots of it—before he was tugged further along. Several other rooms looked similar and there were two closed doors.

He was brought into another room toward the end of the hall. There was a table in the middle, parts of an Ancient device spread out on the surface, a laptop sitting serenely to the side, humming quietly. He had a bad feeling about this.

He was shoved down into a wooden chair, and his eyes widened as the guards secured him tightly to it—he didn't have so much as an inch of wiggle room.

"Do you see what he did?"

John looked at the table. "It looks like you have him fixing something."
"Wrong answer," Richard said as a guard stepped up and pressed something to his side. He got a jolt of electricity through his body.

He screamed as the unexpected pain ripped through him. When it ended, what felt like years later, he dropped his head to his chest, panting.

"I don't appreciate any answers which are less than truthful. Let's try this again."

"I don't... don't know what... you want me to tell you. Don't know what... you have him doing..."

"Of course, you do. He told you even though he knew better."

"Didn't... didn't tell me anything. Said he... couldn't tell me... would get in... trouble." John lifted his head.

"Oh, he's in trouble all right. And it's because of what you told him to do."

"I didn't tell him to do anything except what he needed to do to keep from getting hurt any more." John finally caught his breath and glared at the impassive guards. "It looks to me like you have him fixing something Ancient. If that's not it, then I can't help you."

"You know he's not fixing anything."

"I haven't the foggiest clue because no one will fucking tell me anything!"

Another jab to his side ignited every nerve ending in his body. By the time he was able to catch his breath, a guard roughly grasped his head, pulling it up. The screen on the far wall was active, showing this very room. But Rodney was in it.

He watched a somewhat manic McKay, hands shaking, working with an Ancient device John vaguely thought he recognized. "What the hell is wrong with him? What are you giving him to make him like that?"

"It's none of your concern," Richard said. "Watch the screen, Colonel."

Rodney had managed to get several of the pieces off of the device before a guard approached him, tugging it from his hands.

"I need... I need to see inside it so I can do the right blueprints. I can't... I can't remember what this section looked like," Rodney protested, his voice still weak.

It dawned on John what they were doing here. "You want him to reverse-engineer something? From memory? Are you fucking insane?"

"You knew the rules," John heard Richard tell Rodney on the video.

"I didn't break it. I can put it back together again. John told me—"

"I've been watching you since you came back," Richard cut in. "You've been slow and now this."

"I told him to do whatever he needed to do to stay safe! If he needed to see the inside of that gizmo to do whatever you want him to, then he couldn't do it without that!" John struggled, even though he knew by now that the ropes wouldn't give. I told you if you fucking drugged and beat him, you'd never get what you wanted—you can't force someone to be brilliant."

But Richard ignored him, the video continuing on the screen. He watched as Rodney tried to explain, but Richard never let him, only reminding him of the consequences of breaking a rule.
Only when the guards were dragging Rodney—kicking and screaming—out of the room, did the tape finally pause.

"His punishment, Colonel, is on your head," Richard said darkly. "Remember that. You forced him down this road."

"I didn't force him to do anything!" John struggled harder. "What did you do to him? Jesus Christ, can't you see he was fucking drugged out of his mind? He couldn't even hold his hand steady! How do you expect him to do any kind of delicate work that requires focus? I still don't even have a fucking clue what you want him to build!"

The screen became active again and John watched transfixed, watched as Rodney was dragged into another room, a small box in the center. It was even smaller than a coffin.

"No... oh God no..." John felt his breath getting short. "Please, God, no..."

John could hear Rodney screaming, begging for them to stop, for them not to do it, that he was sorry. The guards bound his hands behind his back and tied his feet before lifting him and placing him inside, on his side, curled up.

The sounds from the box once the lid was shut and locked were horrible.

Shaking, John closed his eyes, but he couldn't shut out the screaming. "Rodney, oh god, Rodney... Let him go, please, you have to let him out..."

"That tape was from eight hours ago."

"Oh god..." John knew, without being told, that his lover was probably still in that box. The odds that he was still sane were almost nil if that was the case.

"The feed on the screen is present time," Richard said. It was silent. Completely silent.

"He finally stopped begging about two hours ago."

"Rodney..." John's heart broke. After this... he knew how bad his lover's claustrophobia was. After that long—he was probably comatose, if he hadn't given himself a heart attack. At any rate, the man John called best friend and lover... would he ever see him again? Or, even if they survived this, would he just be an empty shell? John felt tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't care anymore about the guards, or Richard, or what they did to him. They had already taken Rodney. There wasn't anything else they could do.

"I was impressed, actually," Richard said conversationally. "The first time he screamed for four hours before finally falling silent."

So that was why Rodney had been so jittery, so...off. They had already done this once. And now they had done it again, only this time it was probably worse because he hadn't been fed and it had been a lot longer. Not to mention the drugs. John pulled into himself. They could kill him if they wanted—they had already taken away what he valued most.

"Here's what's going to happen now. Are you listening, Colonel?"

John didn't respond, didn't bother. What difference did it make?

"Do you want him in for a double session? I can keep him in there if you'd like."
"He's already dead. You killed him, just kill me and get it over with."

"On the contrary. He's alive. The box is monitored constantly. If the sensors indicate there is an issue, we would have brought him out."

John gave a humorless chuckle. "Alive and well, and alive and comatose and unable to function are two different things. If he ever wakes up, I doubt he'll be sane. Just fucking kill me. We both know you plan to anyway, and I'm tired of playing this game."

"Doctor McKay is very resilient. You know that as well as I do. Are you prepared to listen or are you going to continue to argue? The longer you do the longer he stays in the box. You already got him eight hours. Shall we go for ten or sixteen?"

"I didn't do anything, Fucker. Whatever you may think, I didn't tell him to do shit because he wouldn't tell me what the fuck you had him doing. He was terrified of what would happen if he did."

"This is your last chance, Colonel. Are you going to cooperate or are you going to keep him locked in that box for another eight hours? After sixteen consecutive hours…not even my doctors know what would happen to him, then."

"Whatever." John honestly didn't think anything of Rodney was still there anyway. He was mourning his lover, and he knew he would probably never get out to tell anyone what had happened to them.

"Was that a yes you will cooperate?"

"Whatever."

"I need a yes or no. Would you rather leave him in the box? I can retrieve his sister. I'm sure she would be motivated to continue his work."

John jerked. Jeannie. He couldn't save Rodney, but if he could save her... He sighed. "Fine, yes. Whatever."

"After our doctors check him over, you will have twenty-four hours to ensure that he's prepared to work. If he's not, we'll put him back in the box and repeat this again. If you fight us when we come to retrieve him, we will take him and put him back in the box. If you in any way encourage him to try and escape or to do anything besides complete this project, he will be put back into the box. Am I clear?"

"I can already tell you he won't be ready to work, if he even wakes up." John's voice was dead, without inflection. "And if you put him back, he will be dead."

"That's your issue, not mine."

He still had his spring. For the first time, John seriously considered just ending it when they brought him back. Rodney was gone, and he was fucked anyway. Everything that had happened to them, everything they had been through—he couldn't deal with it anymore. He was done. "Whatever."

Richard's next words were addressed to the guards. "Get McKay out. Bring him to Goldsmith to get him checked. Once he's finished, bring Sheppard to the room."

The guards left John in the chair, the live feed on the screen giving him a front-row seat as they got Rodney out of the box. He was filthy. It looked like he'd lost control of himself when he'd
been locked in the box. The guards untied him and stripped him down to his skin. He wasn't fighting with them, but was responding to any commands issued.

Rodney was...defeated, maybe even broken, but he was walking and obeying the guards.

John closed his eyes—he couldn't, wouldn't, watch any more. He had never felt this lost, this hopeless. He had always had someone he believed would come for them. Now... now he was beginning to realize they were alone, forgotten. What was the point?

Two guards came to get him at some point later, bringing him back down the hallway he'd walked before. One of the closed doors was open now, the stench of shit and fear easing out of the room.

John turned his head, and just let himself sink further away. He recognized his little cell when they arrived, and once the guards had unhooked his hands, he went straight to the blankets, lying down with his back to the room.

The guards left him, locking the door behind him, leaving him in peace and quiet.

A quiet sniffle, though, made him start.

He lifted his head, looking around. In the opposite corner, a shape was huddled, draped in blankets. He licked his lips and crawled closer. "Rodney?"

"No more....please, no more," he whispered so quietly, so broken.

He inched closer. "It's me. John. Hey, buddy..."

John reached out slowly, trying to make sure Rodney saw his every movement. The scientist's eyes were open, but unfocused.

He swallowed hard. He still didn't really believe he would ever get his Rodney back. He put a hand on the other man's arm. "Wanna come lie with me? The pallet isn't very soft, but it's better than the floor."

"Cold," is what he said instead, the body shivering under John's hand.

"Yeah. Come on, buddy." John gently guided him, his heart breaking a little at the mindless way the other man followed him. He got them settled under the blankets, close, but not wanting to crowd or frighten his lover. "God, Rodney, what are we going to do? I'm halfway tempted just to kill us both and spare us this bullshit."

Rodney shook his head, shivering again. "Jeannie. Madison."

He sighed. "I know. Try to sleep if you can. I'll be here. They gave us twenty-four hours before it all starts again."

"Have to protect you," he whispered.

"No, you don't. Take care of yourself, Rodney, if you can. Don't worry about me."

Rodney shook his head and shifted closer to John. His back was pressed to John's chest so he could look out across the room. "Have to stay alive long enough for someone to rescue us."

Moving slow, John wrapped his arms loosely around Rodney, tangling their limbs together. He didn't have the heart to tell his lover he no longer believed they would be rescued, much less that they would get out alive. They had been left behind.
"You taught me that," Rodney whispered a few moments later.

"I did. I'm really proud of you. I know I don't say it, but I am. You were never supposed to have to deal with this kind of thing. But you joined my team, and you learned everything we had to teach you. I'm amazed on a constant basis at just how fucking amazing you are."

"Have to stay alive as long as you can, give your team the biggest window of opportunity to find you."

"Yeah. You're really brave, and you're doing really good. In case I can't later, if I don't get the chance... I... I... I love you. I don't know when it happened, but I do." He buried his nose in Rodney's neck, inhaling his scent.

"You're not going to die," Rodney whispered. "I won't let you."

"I'll keep you alive at all costs. Whatever the cost."

Rodney fell silent, shifting a little closer to John. The pilot had to admit that he was…impressed that Rodney was as coherent as he was, especially after that experience.

He closed his eyes, letting Rodney overwhelm his senses. He had to get it together. Rodney needed him to. He was ready to give up, but... he would do anything for Rodney, including try to hold on a little longer.

The long days, and what they had both been through today, began to drag him down. "Sleep. We can't do anything if we don't rest. We'll worry about surviving when we wake up, okay?"

"Not tired," Rodney said, even though his voice told John otherwise.

John knew it was fear talking. "Okay. You don't have to sleep if you don't want to. I'm going to rest a bit though, all right?" He pulled the blankets closer around them to hold in the warmth, pulling Rodney just a little bit closer when the other man didn't resist or seem upset over having him that near.

He nodded, letting John settle him. Just as John was beginning to drift a little, he felt Rodney take a shaky breath.

"Rodney?" John nuzzled the back of his lover's neck a little. "You okay, buddy?"

"I don't want to go back."

"I know. I'll do whatever I can to make sure you don't. I'll give them anything they want from me."?

"I was just trying to do what he wanted," Rodney said, the whispered words getting thick.

"I know. But he thought I had told you to do something bad. We'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I promise. I'll do whatever I can to make sure you never have to go back there." He whispered it, pressing soft kisses to Rodney's skin between words.

"He wouldn't let me explain," Rodney said, the words a little muffled. Okay. Here was some of the breakdown John had been expecting earlier.

He hugged Rodney tight, and then loosened his grip again almost immediately, not wanting to spook him. "I'm so proud of you. I was so afraid when they told me what they had done. I thought I had lost you."
As soon as John released his grip, Rodney shifted in his arms, turning in toward John and burying his face in John's neck. The wetness was there, warm against John's skin. "Can't do that again. I can't."

"I know. I know. I promise, whatever they want, give it to them. I'll give it to them. We won't give them any reason to put you in there again." He pressed kisses to everything he could reach, trying to comfort Rodney the only way he knew how.

Holding Rodney close, he rocked them a little, back and forth just like Rodney had done for him before, letting Rodney get some of the anguish and fear out of his system. There were military men who could never get to this point, who would never heal because they wouldn't let go, wouldn't trust.

As his lover wound down, John could feel him relaxing a little. It would take a while. He actually started to believe maybe they would get out of here, maybe they would be okay. He found Rodney's lips and kissed him softly.

Rodney whined, the sound pitched high as he opened his mouth to John, deepening the kiss. He tasted like desperation and fear, but the underlying sense of Rodney was still there.

John kissed until they had to breathe, and even then he only backed off slightly, still needing to taste Rodney's air. "Be okay. We'll be okay. I promise..."

The door opened suddenly, several men piling into the room. Instead of the orderliness and precision John had gotten used to, there was a sense of urgency and discord. Two men pulled Rodney from him, settling the weakly-protesting scientist on his feet as three others moved in to John.

He didn't know what was going on, but Richard's warning that any attempts to fight would result in Rodney going back in the box rang in his ears. He went limp, curling into a ball, trying to show them he wasn't fighting. "I thought we had twenty-four hours! You said we had time before he had to work again!"

"There's been a change," one of the guards answered as they hoisted him to his feet, the blankets falling away. His hands were handcuffed behind his back and then he was propelled out the door. Rodney was ahead of him—stark naked and handcuffed—with several guards surrounding him.

They were both shaking as the cold air of the hallway hit them. John bit his lip, but didn't protest. He didn't want to be the reason Rodney was punished again. They were at least being taken somewhere together. That had to count for something.

He watched his scientist stumble a few times, but the guards helped steady him, kept him moving. They turned a corner and there was a well-dressed man accompanied by three other well-armed guards.

"Good," he man said, John recognizing the voice. Richard. "Did they give you any trouble?"

"No, sir," one of the lead guards with Rodney answered as they drew to a stop.

John remembered Richard telling him why he couldn't see their captor. This couldn't be good. He wanted to ask questions, demand answers, but he bit his lip again and leaned as far into Rodney as the guards would let him. He saw how hard his lover was shaking, and wanted to offer what warmth he could. He looked at Richard. "Can I give him my boxers? I don't want him to get sick after everything else..."
"No," Richard said, narrowing his eyes at John. "After what you put him through, a little cold is nothing."

John wanted to argue again that he hadn't told Rodney to do anything, but he knew it wouldn't do any good, and would probably end up hurting them in the long run. So he lowered his head, and bit his tongue to keep from saying anything else.

"There have been breeches on Levels 1, 3, and 7. We're going to plan Alpha-5," Richard said, his gaze moving among the soldiers. "Protect the prisoners at all costs. I will rendezvous with you at the transport bay."

Breeches? John's heart sped up a little. Maybe the SGC had come for them. Hadn't bought the whole car crash scenario. But they couldn't be rescued if they were killed now, and John couldn't take the risk that something would go wrong, and Rodney would be punished later if he tried to alert the invaders to where they were. So he kept his head down, and resigned himself to following whatever orders he was given. He would protect Rodney at all costs.

"And if we're over-run?" One of the guards asked.

Richard didn't even hesitate. "Kill the prisoners."

Rodney whimpered next to him, and John had to admit—his breath hitched. God, they were damned if they did, and damned if they didn't.

"Please…" Rodney whispered. "Don't do this."

"We'll behave." John added his own pleas to his lover's.

Richard simply looked at them, his eyes cold and hard. "I have my own orders to follow."

"Sir," a guard ran up. "They've entered this level."

John swallowed hard. In the distance, he heard the sharp echo of gunfire. "Rodney, down!" As soon as his lover hit the floor, on his knees, John curled as best he could over him, trying to shield him. He softly whispered how much he loved his scientist softly as he waited for the pain of a bullet to rip through him, praying he could at least stop it from getting Rodney.

The guards scattered, taking up positions on either side of the wide hallway. Two guards pulled John and Rodney back to their feet, shoving them further down the hall, following behind Richard and his escort. They hadn't gone more than a few feet when the guard started firing back down the hallway in the direction they'd come.

From up ahead, John could hear the sound of more gunfire. They were surrounded. He once more moved to Rodney as much as the guard holding him and the handcuffs would allow. He was starting to get desperate.

"Get them to the vans. Now!" Richard ordered, drawing his own gun.

They were tugged into what John had assumed was another room, but turned out to be a garage. He was shoved into the back of a van, Rodney right behind him. As soon as the doors shut, he scooted over; their hands were still tied, but at least they could tangle their legs together. "We'll be okay. I promise. I'll protect you."

"We're going to die."

"No, we aren't. I'll figure something out. Don't give up on me." John found Rodney's lips. It was
awkward, but he managed a kiss. "Please, I need you not to give up. We'll get out of this."

Rodney was shaking—from fear and cold most likely. The sound of gun-fire was getting louder. John could make out several different weapons, just from their firing patterns. Their guards had yet to get in the front of the van and with no windows in this section they had no idea what was going on outside.

They were on their sides, facing each other. John licked his lips. "Want to keep you safe..." He found Rodney's mouth again, pressing inside. If he was going to die, he wanted to go kissing his lover, giving and receiving what comfort it offered, even as the sound of gunfire intensified.

Up front, one of the windows of the van shattered as bullets struck the side of the vehicle. John could hear the bullet's lodging in the seats, puffs of upholstery flying in the air. Rodney whimpered, ducking his head, trying to curl smaller.

He let his lover press into his body, and closed his eyes. This was it. Do or die. They would either be rescued or killed—he didn't think there was any in-between anymore.

The weapons-fire continued to intensify, the van getting hit repeatedly, bullets sliding easily through the metal. John prayed they didn't hit the gas tank. The driver's-side door opened and one of the guards attempted to climb inside, but cried out as he was hit with a bullet from behind. He ended up slumped across the driver's seat, the thick smell of copper and sulfur in the air.

And then, suddenly, there was total silence. Both of them were breathing hard, waiting for the bullets that would end this.

The rear doors opened suddenly and then John heard a voice that sounded familiar. It sounded like Lorne, but it couldn't be. Lorne wasn't here. He was on Atlantis. "Oh…god," Lorne said—oh my god, it really was Lorne—before shifting to a more professional tone. "Packages have been located. Re-group on my signal." He clicked off and a few seconds later was climbing inside. "Sir? Doc?"

It was a rush of relief as John heard the rustle of clothing before something was laid on top of Rodney, the edges brushing his legs. Hands—gentle hands—were on his arm. "Sir? Are you injured? I need to know if you're mobile."

John shifted curled over Rodney, protecting him. "Please, you have to get him out of here before they do something else to him. Please."

"Colonel, we're not going to leave either of you here. We've got you. Are you injured?"

"Nothing…nothing major, but Rodney…"

John heard another click and then the man was speaking again. John refused to think it actually was his second. Why would he be on Earth? John had left him in charge of Atlantis. "I need Beckett down here now. I know what we'd decided, but things have changed. Get him down here now."

John heard someone shifting and then there was the rustle of fabric and he found a soft blanket draped over him and Rodney. "Sorry I don't have more, sir. I need to wait for the second group before I can unlock you. I don't have a handcuff key."

John nodded, didn't protest or question. He was too tired, too worn out. Lorne had been the one to find them before, just like this, curled together, protecting and comforting each other. It was only fitting that it was the major yet again, the one always coming to the rescue when he screwed up. He just curled into Rodney again, getting as close as he could, trying to make sure his lover was
okay, to protect him.

Rodney was quiet, his breathing a little erratic, but easier than it had been. John heard the man shift again and then Rodney jumped.

"Shh, it's okay." John tried to soothe him. "No one will hurt you again."

"Doc, you okay?" Lorne was quiet, concerned, but John wasn't sure how much Rodney was really tracking. This had been the worse than the Tellonians and the scientist had had a difficult time then. The two combined...John just hoped the shrinks would be able to help him...them...this time.

Rodney just shifted in closer to John.

"You're safe," Lorne said, his voice pleading and soft in a way John wasn't used to. "Beckett's on his way. We'll get you out of here as soon as we can."

"Beckett's here?"

"Yes. SG-1 made a stink about your supposed death and O'Neill pulled some strings to get us here. Ronon and Teyla are on their way. We're sorry it took us so long to find you."

Slowly, John opened his eyes, peeking out. "Really?"

Lorne was smiling down at him. "Did you actually think they could keep us in Atlantis when there was a chance of you being alive?" Lorne reached out, his hand on John's arm. "Beckett's on his way. Just relax. We've got you." John heard a scrape of something outside the van, starting a little. "It's okay. Just my men," Lorne said immediately, knowing the sound had startled him.

"Team two is one minute away," the soldier said.

"Good. They have Beckett?"

"No. He's with team four. ETA in five."

"Can you take off the handcuffs?" John asked, turning a hopeful eye on his second.

"I don't have a key. I'm sorry. Team two has more supplies with them. We were the advance. We didn't think we'd be the ones to find you actually."

He nodded. That was okay. He turned his attention back to Rodney. When his lover scooted closer, closing what little distance there was between them, John did his best to make room.

"Doc, you doing okay?" Lorne asked again, his voice kind, soft.

John answered for him when Rodney just pushed closer to him. "They...punished him, for what I did. Locked him in a small box for eight hours. He screamed so long... not much voice left now."

"They...fuck," Lorne said quietly. "I saw that room. Others, too."

"Other rooms were for me. What they would do to me if he didn't behave..."

"Sir," one of Lorne's men said, pulling his attention away from John. A few seconds later and Teyla was climbing in the back of the van, her stoic face falling into sadness and comfort as soon as she saw them.

"Oh...John...Rodney." Her hands were kind, soft. She smelled like Atlantis and Athos—earthy
and feminine.

It made him moan softly. Over. It was really over. They were really being rescued.

Rodney just curled in closer to John, huddling in as a second team swarmed the area, two Marines working at getting their handcuffs off.

"Are you injured?" Teyla asked, her hand lingering on his beard.

"Ribs still hurt. Beat me when I tried to protect Rodney." As soon as their arms were free, Rodney wrapped his arms around John, holding on him just like they'd been when they'd been rescued from the Tellonians.

Rodney was shaking and John could feel wetness on his chest where the scientist was pressed close.

"Doctor Beckett will be here shortly and will take care of both of you," Teyla said quietly, stroking his hair as the Marines and Lorne moved out of the van, standing guard, giving them a little privacy. The wool blanket Lorne had thrown over them was itchy, but warm.

He closed his eyes again, pressing his nose into Rodney's hair, trying to hide the wetness on his own cheeks. "Thank you."

"We are sorry we were not here sooner," Teyla said, her voice and hands gentle. "We did not believe you to be dead."

"Wanted to believe, but... I gave up. Rodney...he never did. Knew you would come for us..."

"We would never leave you behind, John. Never."

It made him shake again, more tears leaking out. He buried his face in Rodney, needing the comfort himself, as much as he needed to give it. "We were dead. They were so sure no one would question it. So cold, if I fought they hurt him..."

Teyla's arms enveloped him and Rodney, her familiar scent flooding his senses. "You are safe. We are here. Be at peace."

He let go, something in him breaking. He cried quietly, his tears mingling with Rodney's.

The next little while was a blur mingled with careful touches and comforting voices. Carson's Scottish brogue really brought it home, that they were safe, that they had been rescued. Rodney was silent through everything, clutching onto John, refusing to let go.

He was grateful no one really tried to pull them apart. They needed each other, needed to know the other was safe. At some point someone got his grimy boxers off, and a pair of sweatpants onto him. Rodney got the same treatment and then more blankets were draped over both of them. Warmth, he couldn't remember the last time he had been this warm.

"Okay, sir," Lorne said, after a while. "We're going to use one of the vans here to transport you, but we need to move you. There's a transport elevator which will take us to the surface."

He nodded, too tired to protest anything. He was on auto-pilot at this point, following whatever orders he was given. As long as he could keep Rodney close, he didn't care what they did.

The blankets were removed and John was urged to sit up where someone efficiently tugged a sweatshirt on his body. Rodney, though, was getting agitated from the movement and separation,
not allowing Carson to help him. John saw the edges of panic beginning on the scientist's face.

He immediately turned back to his scientist, putting his hands on his upper arms, holding him steady, looking him square in the face. He had to be strong for Rodney. "Hey, I'm here, not going anywhere without you, I promise." When John finally got a small nod from Rodney, he took the shirt from Carson and gently helped Rodney pull it on.

"John, when's the last time he ate?" Carson's voice held more than one note of concern.

"A while. Locked in the box for eight hours, and then we hadn't been fed dinner yet." He said it distractedly, tracing the lines of Rodney's face with his eyes, wanting to touch, to ease the fear he saw. "Probably gave him a little something when they pulled him out, but not much."

Carson nodded, turning to one of the medics. "I want to start an IV as soon as they're transferred. We need to get McKay's blood sugar up."

John backed out of the van slowly, pulling Rodney along with him. "Come on, buddy. Let's get out of here. I'll be right here."

Carson was supporting Rodney from behind, watching the scientist like a hawk as they eased out of the van, their bare feet hitting the ground. John glanced around quickly but mostly saw SGC uniforms. He could smell the blood and the gunpowder, knew what was behind the wall of bodies shielding them. He could see glimpses every now and then—legs sprawled on the ground, limp hands, bloodstains.

He did his best to shield Rodney, making sure his lover's attention was focused on him. He talked quietly, continuously, backing up and trusting his friends to steer him where they wanted him while he held both of Rodney's hands and led him forward. Carson was doing likewise, keeping up a running dialogue trying to encourage and cajole the scientist to keep moving. He kept a hand on Rodney's back, grounding him to a second person.

But Rodney was Rodney and didn't always do what was best for him. His eyes kept sliding to the side, first one way and then the other. They'd jump back to John just as they caught a glimpse of something.

About halfway through the room, John saw his lover was about to lose it. He stopped and stepped close, pulling him into his arms. "Hey, it's okay. Just stick with me, okay?"

"Dead. All dead," Rodney whispered, shaking.

"Only the ones who were hurting us. They had to kill them, to rescue us."

"Sir, we have to go," Lorne said quietly, his voice coming from John's left side.

He nodded, and started to move backward again, more awkwardly this time as Rodney didn't want to let go, and he wasn't about to make him. He only got a step or two before Ronon spoke, startling him.

"Let me carry him. Be quicker."

Rodney tightened his arms around John.

"Do it," Lorne said quietly.

Seconds later and Rodney was pulled from him and slung over Ronon's shoulder. Rodney was whimpering and reaching back at John, kicking at the hold Ronon had on him. Lorne grabbed...
hold of John and ushered him along behind the Satedan, holding on tightly to John's arm. "I have reports of resistance from the clean-up teams. I'm sorry, but we have to go. Two minutes and you'll be in the van."

John struggled a little, the instinct to get to Rodney to protect him was strong. Really strong. Damn. He'd worked so hard at tuning that part of him down. He'd have to do it all over again now. He had to remind himself that these were the good guys but his mind kept flashing to his captors and the torture and oh god... His breathing started to come faster, he started shaking again, and it was only the hand on his arm that kept him moving at all.

Lorne kept talking to him, supporting him as they moved quickly through the garage. Ronon was already at the van, depositing Rodney in the back, arranging him carefully on the mattresses that had been placed inside.

John didn't hear the words, everything focused on Rodney. As soon as Lorne released his hold on John, he climbed into the van, moving directly to Rodney, hands on the scientist, checking him over, letting Rodney grab hold of him, holding on for dear life. John returned the hug, not quite as desperately, but it was close. Getting past this need for reassurance that Rodney was okay was going to be hard.

Carson, another medic, and Teyla climbed in the back with them, the medic trying to get an IV in Rodney's arm. The scientist was shaking, trembling hard, and sobbing quietly into John's chest.

"Shh, I'm here, I'm here." John shifted them, so he was between Rodney and everyone else, needing to protect, to make sure no one hurt him.

"John…damn it all to hell," Carson swore. "We're tryin' ta help you."

"Minute…need a minute," he finally said, wanting his own heart-beat to slow before he shifted to allow them to work. The doors shut and they were off a few moments later, heading up a very long and winding ramp to the surface. A few minutes in, he finally forced Rodney to loosen his grip, making sure Carson and the medic had access to Rodney's arm.

"Thank you, John," Carson said, laying a hand on John's arm as the medic got the IV inserted into Rodney. Teyla was on the other side, hovering expectantly, her presence calming. The tube led to the plastic bag jury-rigged to the ceiling of the van.

"I'm going to give both of you a mild sedative to take off the edge a little," Carson said quietly, kindly. "I'm not putting you to sleep, just enough to make you a little more comfortable."

John nodded. He knew they were on edge, not themselves. There was a tiny prick in his arm, and then warmth flooded through him, relaxing him. The panic, the fear, faded a bit, leaving him feeling better than he had in weeks.

"There we go. Feel better?"

He nodded again. "Yes, thank you." He felt Teyla's touch on his arm again, her fingers squeezing reassuringly. The silent 'we'll take care of you now' was loud and clear. He started to relax, to trust that someone else could stand guard for a little while.

"Good," Carson said and John could hear his smile in his voice. "I think Rodney is feeling better, too."

Now that adrenaline wasn't coursing through his system, the days of stress and worry and almost no food were starting to catch up to him. He felt himself getting sleepy, eyes starting to droop. "'Kay."
Carson's hands eased him down onto the mattress, making sure the blankets were covering them. "Lorne said it'll be a good three hours before we get to the nearest base. Rest. I'll keep an eye on Rodney for ya."

"Trust... you," he murmured as sleep started to claim him.

"Rest, John. We shall keep watch," Teyla said quietly, her hand brushing his hair as his eyes closed. John stayed awake long enough to feel Rodney relax next to him, and then he followed, the rhythm of the car dragging him into a peaceful slumber. Finally.

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Rodney was warm and for the first time for as long as he could remember, felt safe. John was there. John was alive. That was all that mattered.

There had been people and hands and strange touches. It had been too much, overwhelming him. At one point, they'd pulled him away from John, carried him somewhere—the world spinning around him. He'd seen dead bodies and blood and the smell had made him sick.

But then John was there again.

John would protect him, save him.

"Ah, lad, I see ya moving. Are you awake then?" It was a voice with a burr he knew, recognized. But it couldn't be. It was a trick. Richard would trick them to get their cooperation.

Rodney burrowed in deeper, getting closer to John.

John was obviously sleeping and didn't wake, but he did tighten his arms, instinctively pulling Rodney in, protecting him.

"It's all right, Rodney. I won't be pulling you apart, not right now. We're almost to the base, and I'll need to get you both up and moving for the transfer to the plane."

Rodney remained quiet. Maybe they'd just go away.

"You're safe, lad. You're with friends again. We will'na let anyone else hurt you."

Go away. Go away. Go away. Maybe if he thought hard enough they would.

"Rodney?" A hand touched his arm very gently. "Lad, it's Carson. Teyla, Ronon, and Major Lorne are all here as well."

Rodney tugged his arm away, pressing it close to his chest, tucking it between him and John.

He heard a soft sigh. "All right, lad, I'll leave you be for now. But I will need to wake John up soon, and get you both onto the plane. Once we get on board, I'll want to do a more complete check of you both, to see exactly what those bloody bastards did to ya. If you prefer, and you both agree, I'm okay with allowing you to stay together while I run the tests."

"Go away," he finally whispered. "I'm fine."

"Aye, you will be. You're safe now, lad. You both are."

John shifted against him and Rodney moved, closing the small gap John had made between them.
"Mmmm." His lover hummed, pulling Rodney close.

Rodney heard a soft sigh come from somewhere beyond them, but he didn't care. John would make sure he was safe.

"R'ney?" John's voice was sleepy, warm where it caressed Rodney's skin.

He shifted his hand under the blanket, finding the hem of John's shirt and sliding inside, touching skin.

Someone cleared their throat and John's hand stilled even before it touched skin, but Rodney ignored it, wanting to feel more of John.

"Colonel?" The voice sounded worried.

"Mmmm, ah, wha..?" Rodney felt John pull away a little, listening to the Carson-sound-alike.

"John, do you think you can help me?"

"Yes, what?" John asked, his voice off, still thick with sleep. Rodney felt John shift again.

Rodney glanced up long enough to see the Carson look-alike smile at John before he closed his eyes, not wanting to see, to really think that this was his friend. It had to be a trick, a hallucination of some sort.

"We're going to arrive at the Air Force Base in about five minutes," pseudo-Carson said. "I need your help to transfer Rodney to the plane that will take us back to the SGC. Do you think you can help me?"

Rodney felt John nod. "It's been... a long week? Month? I don't even know...how long have we been gone?"

"Ten days. Aye. It's been a long time."

"Only ten days?" John's hands rubbed along Rodney's arm, comforting him. "Sucked before that, too. We had to go on television."

"Aye we heard. Saw some of the programs," Carson said.

"I told them we were on leave, but they didn't care. Said it was canceled. And then Rodney was kidnapped, but I got him back. And we had to go on tour, all over the country. And then Pearson sold us out, and Richard... he had some sort of Ancient device. I think he wanted Rodney to reverse engineer it."

Rodney trembled at the name, remembering what had been done and said. Remembered the feeling of the walls closing in on him when they'd put him in the box, when Richard had ordered them...

He whimpered a little, but John quickly shushed him, whispering reassurances in his ear as Carson continued to speak, to tell them what they teams had done."

"...two teams took everything they found—computers, notes, equipment, everything. We have everything."

"Good." John said, offering a nod. "It's...this set us back." The words were flat. John knew, Rodney knew, they all knew. They weren't just going to bounce back from this, if they ever did.
There was a long pause before Carson sighed and then continued. "Aye. It did, but we'll be with you the entire time, I promise. We'll help you get better." Carson sounded confident, but it could just be a dream, another hallucination. Rodney had dreamed someone rescued them the first time he was in the box. Maybe this was just another dream.

"We're approaching the plane. I want you to help me get Rodney inside. Are you okay with that?"

"Mmm hmm." John smiled at Rodney, the expression soft.

Carson sighed again. Rodney could feel the van slowing, turning as they arrived. What if they were lying? What if this was a trick, another way for Richard to get to them, to break them down? He could feel the panic beginning again as doubt filtered in. Richard was probably just tricking them with this Carson look-alike and the ones who looked and smelled like Teyla and Ronon. No. He didn't want to get his hopes up, didn't want to be punished again. "No…leave us alone," he whispered into John's neck.

John's arms tightened around him. "Shhh. It's okay."

"Trick…has to be." He felt the van slow and then finally stop, the two front doors opening and closing in rapid succession.

"John…Rodney," Carson said and Rodney felt a hand other than John's land on his back. He jumped, trying to shift away.

John shifted away from the hands, instinctively putting Rodney behind him. He answered for them both. "Yes?"

"Please, John. We're not going to hurt you. We were so worried about you, about what had happened. We're here. Lorne's going to open the back door to the van and then I need you to walk across the tarmac to the plane. Do you think you can do that? Ronon and Teyla are here, too."

John nodded, but his body was tense, prepared to fight if he needed.

"John, you're safe, please believe me." The back doors opened, letting in the fading light of evening—or morning. It was hard to tell. The man who called himself Lorne was standing there with a smile as Teyla—or a woman who looked and smelled like Teyla—slid out, moving across the concrete to the plane.

John would only nod, shifting on the mattress as he shoved the blankets away. He could see the plane, see the bottom of the stairs. It wasn't far. "Come on, Rodney. We'll just go over there, and then we can rest."

Rodney let John shift and move him, let them unhook the IV. He watched the people around them with suspicious eyes, not wanting to believe who they said they were. He'd hallucinated in the box; he knew that. This could be just another hallucination, just like before.

But John was real. He trusted John.

Rodney saw the people's frowns, their looks of pity. He tried to ignore them, but he had to look. There was sky—wide, open sky. He had thought he'd never see it again.

John followed his gaze up, and then made a broken-sounding noise. "Really free...?"

They were standing just outside of the van, the breeze ruffling their greasy hair, caressing their faces. Rodney closed his eyes, letting the sun warm his face.
"Aye, lads, you're really free. You're among friends now." Carson's voice was gentle.

Rodney turned, looking—really looking—at the Scot, his eyes and mind finally letting him see and believe that these people were his friends, his rescuers. Carson was here. Ronon and Lorne and Teyla. They were all real. They were all here. They'd come for them.

Still clutching John's arm with one hand, he reached out with the other, palm turned up. Carson grabbed it, squeezing softly.

"Oh god…really here," he whispered, feeling his body begin to tremble again with emotion and relief. "You're really here."

"I'm really here, lad. We came for you." The doctor's eyes were looking watery.

He lurched forward, nearly toppling the doctor as he latched onto him, dragging John along with him.

Carson hugged him back just as fiercely.

"You came," Rodney whispered. "You really came for us."

"We would never leave you behind, lads. SG-1 and General O'Neill pulled strings to get myself, Major Lorne, and Teyla and Ronon over here as soon as you went missing. It took me a few days to prove the DNA of the bodies they found didn't belong to either of ya, but once I did, we were able to use the full resources of the department to track you down."

"Thank you." It was all he could say. It was getting overwhelming again, too much to take in all at once.

"You're more than welcome." Carson hugged him again tightly before letting go. "Now let's get you both on the plane, where I have supplies to check you a bit more completely. And this time, we'll be making sure no one interrupts your leave. Teyla, Ronon, and myself will be stayin' here with you until I decide you're ready to go home."

Rodney nodded, running his hand over his face. He pulled it away, surprised to find it was wet.

"Good." Smiling, Carson pointed to the corporate jet standing ready nearby. Rodney could see Teyla standing at the door at the top of the stairs. "Let's get going then. I also have food for you both on board—the IVs I gave ya in the van helped, but I'd like to see you get a proper meal in ya."

Rodney glanced back at John, seeing a mixture of emotions on the pilot's face—elation, surprise, relief, exhaustion, among others.

Some time in the hug with Carson, John had dropped his grip on Rodney. "Ready to get the hell out of here?"

He nodded, shifting back toward John, bumping shoulders, before wrapping his hand around the pilot's wrist.

They walked side-by-side with Carson to the plane and up the stairs. Teyla and Ronon ushered them inside while the Marines ensured nothing would go wrong. Before long, they were in the air.

The jet had been set up with medical transport in mind—two beds with equipment surrounding them. A small galley kitchen looked to be stocked with food and Rodney spotted several special supplements to deal with his hypoglycemia if needed.
The plane smelled clean and Rodney had felt…shamed when he’d been settled on the bed. He could smell himself—putrid—his skin crawling a little when he tried to remember the last time he’d taken a shower.

Carson had been so kind, so understanding, his hands gentle as he settled Rodney on the bed.

Even though John was only a few feet away on the other bed, it felt like it was a mile of distance between them. He kept his eyes on his lover, worried he might leave. He wanted—needed—the reassurance John was close. He wished he could be closer.

John kept looking over at him, and from the expression on his face, some of the same thoughts were going through his head. "Can we get clean? Does this plane have a bathroom with a shower?"

"No, I'm sorry," Carson said, shaking his head. "I can give you a quick sponge-bath if you'd like, but anything more will have to wait until we're at the SGC. I'm sorry."

John immediately shook his head. "No, I'll wait, we'll wait. Can I sit on Rodney's bed?"

"While the IV I gave Rodney in the van helped, I need to hook both of you up to IVs after I give you a check-up, so it's probably better for you to stay on your own bed. Honestly, I'd rather get a proper meal into ya, but I'm not sure if you're up for it yet."

"Please?" He was already down and edging over.

"John, I would if I could. I need to be able to work."

"But—"

"No. I'll have Ronon in here to help me enforce it if you keep it up," Carson said, his voice firm. The other medic was also working, setting up several items on a small table next to John's bed.

Rodney could feel the desperation starting up again, the need to touch, to feel that John was close and alive. "Carson, please," he whispered even as the doctor slid a needle into his IV port, sending a dosage of something into the line.

"You're going to rest and that'll take the edge off. It's some of the same stuff I gave you in the van," he said, ignoring Rodney's pleading tones. He settled Rodney on the bed before moving toward John and repeating the process with the pilot.

Whatever Carson had used didn't put him fully under, instead leaving him lethargic and passive. The doctor checked them over thoroughly, before washing them efficiently and tugging them into scrubs. Even though Carson asked him questions, he refused to answer, his eyes on John across the plane.

It looked like John had been more affected by the drugs, or Carson had given him more. His eyes were closed, and he was out cold.

He looked so much younger when he was asleep, the worry line easing, softening.

Finally, Carson sighed and moved out of the room, leaving them alone for a moment.

Rodney managed to roll to his side, his limbs heavy. They didn't want to respond, but he was determined. He wanted John. Needed to touch him, verify that he was alive, breathing, heart beating. He managed to push himself up part of the way, but overcompensated, managing instead to tumble forward, hitting the floor with a thud, his right hand trapped under his body, the IV
ripped out of his arm.

The pain in his hand flared for a minute, but he stayed still, waiting. He held his breath for a long moment, but no one seemed to have heard—no one came running at any rate.

He managed to get his hand free and tried to shove himself up onto his knees. It wasn't far. He could do it.

John moaned softly, a hurt, injured sound, from his bed.

Rodney felt his heart start to climb up into his throat. John was hurt. He had to do something, help him. It was only a little further, Rodney thought, but his eyes threatened to close even as the tried to focus on his lover.

He didn't know Carson had come back until the "Bloody hell!" echoed behind him.

He shifted his weight in order to look over his shoulder and overbalanced again, tumbling back down to the floor. Carson was moving toward him and Rodney whimpered, remembering the feel of hands on him, how they'd grabbed him and shoved him in that box.

"Shh, lad. Let's get you back up on the bed before you hurt yourself." Carson pulled him up, steering him toward the cot.

"John! No…please…need…please…" he begged, trying to twist in Carson's grasp.

"Come on, lad, you'll be able to see him once you both wake up. Right now I need you to lie down so I can get the rest of these fluids in you both."

"Please, no. Need, John, please. Please don't do this, please." He tried to fight, but the drugs made him so tired, so weak. His head was spinning as Carson pushed him toward his cot, black dots swirling in his vision.

"Shhh, I'll take care of you both. Sleep now, my friend. When you wake up, John will be right here."

"Please," he whispered, feeling another prick in his arm.

"When you wake up, we'll be at the SGC. Sleep now. You're safe."

"John…” he whispered, the drugs dragging him under into a restless slumber.

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John moaned softly as the world started to come back into focus. The first thing he noticed was that he was actually warm. The next was that Rodney wasn't next to him.

He shot straight up, wide awake all at once. "Rodney?"

The room around him was grey—concrete—and looked familiar. The room held the single medical bed he was in and various cabinets. A side-table sat next to the bed, a pitcher with water and cup on top.

His breath started to come faster, and he wasn't sure which memories to trust. Was he with friends or enemies? How could he tell the difference? He just knew he needed to find Rodney.

Slipping out of bed quietly, he moved to the single door to the room, checking to see if there were any guards.
The door opened up to a larger room with more medical beds—some with patients, some without. It smelled like Atlantis’ infirmary. But it wasn’t. It was the SGC. He recognized it.

Moving silently, he checked the beds of sleeping people, but didn’t see his lover. He moved to the end where another door was closed. Quietly, slowly, he eased it open.

It held a desk and several file cabinets. It smelled like paper.

There was also no other door. Damn. He closed it and looked around, spotting an entry he had missed before, in the middle of the far wall. It didn’t have a door, so he slipped inside, into another room of beds. He heard someone moving around, so dropped down behind an empty bed, not wanting to get caught.

The person moved past on quiet feet, humming to herself. A nurse or doctor.

Once they were gone, he moved again, systematically checking rooms and beds, hiding any time he heard someone coming. He had no idea how long he had been at it when he heard people starting to shout.

Shouting was never good. He smelled blood and sulfur, the odor permeating the air.

He really needed to find Rodney. He ducked into yet another room, and almost went to his knees with relief—he had found him.

His lover was asleep, hooked to various machines, looking far too still and pale for his liking.

John moved next to the bed, shaking him a little, his hands touching skin, making sure he was warm and alive. "Hey, buddy."

Rodney was slow in waking but his eyes blinked a few times before focusing on John. "Hmm?"

John smiled. A quick glance over his shoulder and then he leaned in, brushing their lips together once, softly. "Hi, there."

It took a moment before Rodney replied, a smile growing on his face when he recognized John. "You're here."

"I said I would be."

"Aye, just where I knew I'd find you," Carson said, rolling his eyes as he walked into Rodney’s room.

"You'd promised—" John started to protest, but Carson quickly cut him off.

"I needed to keep a closer eye on Rodney than you and a few hours ago the bed next to him was occupied by someone else. I would have let you move into the room when I woke you in an hour."

"I'm up."

Carson rolled his eyes. "I've noticed. Now I have to check Rodney over again." There was the sound of movement and the shift of clothing and several people were standing just inside the door. Ronon and Teyla were hovering there. Lorne looked constipated.

He didn't like all the unhappy faces. It made him worry. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing is wrong, John," Teyla said, stepping up next to him. Her voice was kind, her touch on his arm soft. "We just wish you to be well once again so you can come home with us. We are angry at the men who did this to you."

Rodney smiled, but it was weak. He looked tired and pale. "I think we need a vacation."

"We should go to Hawaii. Get a little cottage right on the beach, where we can hear the waves," John immediately suggested.

"That would be nice. No television shows, though."

"Nope. Just us, and the beach, and umbrellas. And citrus-free tropical drinks."

"Laptop?"

"Mmmm, maybe. But only if we can get an Xbox, too."

"No. You'll play GuitarHero for days."

"We could get Rock Band and play together."

"No. I'm not twelve."

"We shall all play it together," Teyla said with a smile. "We shall return again when you are up for visitors. Be well." She moved closer, her movements precise and well telegraphed so John didn't jump when she touched his arms and bent her head toward him.

He touched foreheads with her for a long moment, taking a breath. "Okay. Team vacation."

As Teyla, Ronon, and Lorne filed out—after other well wishes—Carson continued to hover over Rodney checking him over and asking questions, the scientist answering quietly. John watched from his perch at the end of the bed, his eyes remaining on Rodney the entire time.

Carson put a pillow behind Rodney, fussing for a few more minutes before turning to John. "All right then, let's get your check-up done. A blood test is definitely on your list of things I need to do."

John nodded, letting Carson lead him to the other bed in the room. The Scot's hands were gentle, wherever he touched John. He was slow and precise, explaining everything before he did anything, making sure John understood. It didn't take long before he began to relax. The doctor offered a small smile when he noticed. "There you go. Isn't that better? You're not all tense."

John nodded cautiously.

"You're doing fine. This will pinch a bit when I draw your blood. Okay?"

He nodded again. "Okay."

Carson was right. It pinched for a brief moment and then the vials were filling with blood. One after the other. Gauze and a Band-Aid followed a few moments later once he was finished. "All done. Now, let Rodney finish that bag of fluids and then you can go take a shower. When you're ready, press this button," he said, holding up a wire with a button on it. "I'll bring you to the bathroom and make sure you have everything. Ronon and Teyla are right outside the door if you need anything. If there's an emergency or you need me for any reason, press the button. Okay?"

"Can I sit with him while we wait?"
"Yes. But I want you to drink some water and eat something."

"Okay." He wasn't going to argue with Carson if it got him closer to Rodney.

"Good. How about some soup and a turkey sandwich? That should be light enough."

John licked his lips. "Real turkey?" His stomach growled, and he blushed.

"Aye. Real turkey. How about I ask Teyla to go and get it? She knows how you like your sandwich, right?"

He nodded and smiled. "Can she get some for Rodney, too? He got a little more food than I did, but not much."

"I'm giving him some food through his IV. He said his stomach was a little off. Maybe once his sugar levels balance out we can get him one."

"Okay."

Once Carson left, John wandered over to the bedside chair, slumping down into it. Rodney reached for him a few beats later and he let the scientist thread their hands together.

"You okay?"

"I will be," he said quietly. "Better when you're here."

"I know. We're in this together."

"They're going to make us talk to a shrink. Just like on Atlantis."

"Probably. And we'll probably have to do more of those evaluations, and blood checks and stuff." He sighed. "But Teyla said not to worry, and that they would help us and make sure we get home."

"Maybe they can talk to Elizabeth now," Rodney said with a sigh. "She'd look better on television."

"To be honest, I don't care who they put up there, as long as it's not us."

"Hmm. True. Elizabeth would be good. She knows how to be polite under pressure."

"She's a diplomat, while I'm trained to protect, and you're trained to explore."

"I'm really good at sitting on the couch or at a desk."

Chuckling, John leaned forward, and after a quick check, kissed him lightly on the lips. They sat silently for a long while, simply basking in the warmth and safety afforded them of the SGC infirmary. Rodney finally fell back to sleep sometime before Teyla arrived with John's soup and sandwich.

Looking up, John smiled a little tentatively at her. "Hi."

"It is good he sleeps. The rest is good for him—and you," she said with a smile. She pulled the extra visitor chair next to John and sat down, placing his lunch within easy reach on the small table.
He could smell it, and it made his mouth water a little. "He needs the rest. He was locked in the box as punishment."

"We saw. That must have been difficult for both of you, but especially for him because of his fear of small, enclosed spaces."

Swallowing hard, he nodded. "He screamed and screamed... and they wouldn't let him out for eight hours..." Shuddering, John had to fight the flashback threatening to hit him.

Her hand was gentle on his arm. "You are safe, John. You are both safe here."

"My fault... it was my fault... being punished for what I did..."

"Shhhh. You have no reason to fear any longer. You are safe."

With a quiet sob, not wanting to disturb Rodney, he looked at her through his eyelashes. "Are we really? We were supposed to be before, on Earth, on leave. And then we were shot at and kidnapped while under an armed escort... Never safe, not really... it could happen again, and I can't protect him..."

"Ronon and I will not allow it to happen again." Her voice was firm.

He leaned into her touch a little, closing his eyes. "Promise...? I can't... can't do this again."

"I promise, John. You are safe."

Something inside him let go. He bowed his head, trying to hide the tears rolling down his cheeks, to suppress the shaking of his shoulders. Safe. They were really, truly safe.

She gathered him in her arms, holding him close. She was silent and strong, easing some of the pain and fear he was carrying.

He didn't know how long he was like that, only coming back slowly, when he realized there was another hand rubbing his back soothing him.

Hiccupping slightly, he opened his eyes, glancing over to the side where Rodney was half-propped up on an elbow, his other hand on John's back. "S...sorry..."

"Don't have to apologize," Rodney said quietly. "You did the same thing for me."

Sighing, John roughly wiped his face. "Just so tired..."

"Rest, John. I shall keep watch." Teyla gently helped him to his feet, ushering him across the room to the second bed. She settled him down in the cool sheets, pulling the blanket up over him.

He was exhausted—physically and mentally. Swallowing again, he nodded, closing his eyes again. "Safe..."

"Yes, John. You are safe, you're both safe," Teyla said quietly and only a few moments later John tumbled headlong into sleep.

****

The next few weeks were sometimes tougher than the actual torture.

Between the doctors and the flashbacks and the nightmares and the overwhelming need to know where the other person was at all times, John and Rodney found themselves exhausted and
overwhelmed more often than not.

Teyla, Ronon, and Carson remained with them the entire time, Major Lorne finally returning to Atlantis to hold down the fort. Things had been quiet, but that didn't mean it would stay that way. And with SGA-1 out of commission, Lorne's team needed to pick up the pace.

The SGC shrinks finally signed off on them four weeks later, once they were certain John and Rodney could operate as independent entities and withstand the pressures associated with the Pegasus galaxy and Atlantis. The nightmares still lingered, but they were becoming less frequent and milder as each day passed.

They were released on a Tuesday and John immediately made plans to fly to Hawaii. Unfortunately they discovered Rodney's claustrophobia would not handle the long plane ride—unless he was completely unconscious—so instead they ended up renting an SUV and headed to the West Coast. With Ronon and Teyla in the backseat and Rodney more or less pressed to the glass as the scenery whooshed by, they made their way to a small town complete with beach houses and miles and miles of sand. Carson would be joining them in a few days once he finished a special project he had been working on between taking care of John and Rodney.

Between John's hazard pay and Rodney's padded bank accounts—and the help of the SGC for location and security—they rented a large, modern house on the beach. John and Rodney claimed the master bedroom as their own. When they'd first arrived, Rodney had made some long-winded argument about space and the height of the ceiling in the master bedroom compared with the guest rooms until John kissed him, very effectively shutting him up.

Ronon and Teyla had already planned on giving them the largest bedroom—but they hadn't let them know about it until two days into their two-week vacation. After that, it was a final check with the SGC doctors and they'd be headed back to Atlantis.

Rodney woke slowly on Saturday morning, the sun already high in the sky. The bed beside him was empty, the door to the hallway closed. John had probably gone for his run on the beach with Ronon earlier, slipping out of the house when it was still cool and the sand damp. Carson was flying in this afternoon. He'd rent a car and drive the hour down to the beach house.

With a yawn, Rodney stretched, scratching an itch on his thigh before rolling out of the bed and padding naked to the bathroom. He got ready quickly, pulling on shorts and a t-shirt before heading downstairs, the smell of coffee hanging sweetly in the air. He could see Teyla out back, sunning herself in the late-morning light.

After pouring a mug of coffee he wandered out, settling down beside her in the shade of the large umbrella that covered the table.

She glanced over, smiling a bit lazily. "How did you sleep last night?"

He shrugged, taking a sip of his coffee. He vaguely remembered waking at one point, recalled John's soft words and the touch of his hands. "Okay. You?"

"I slept very well. This place is quite relaxing."

"Good good," he said, letting his eyes drift out to the shoreline. He spotted Ronon and John jumping about in the waves, bodysurfing into the beach when there was a good one.

Teyla followed his gaze, and her smile widened. "They are like children, are they not? But it is good to see them both so carefree."

"Yeah." It was nice to see John so relaxed and playful. It certainly made the nights a little more
interesting. "I didn't think either of them knew how to relax."

Teyla chuckled, a throaty, happy sound. "I believe that could be said about us all. However, I agree—they were two of the worst at knowing when to relax."

"I know how to relax," Rodney protested weakly.

She raised an amused eyebrow at him. "It is good to see you taking advantage of this rest period as well."

He frowned. "It's not like I had a choice. I still can't believe they wouldn't let me take my laptop." It was still a sore point with him.

Teyla shook her head. "It is better that you did not have it. I enjoy your company greatly, and I would have been disappointed to have to share it on this vacation."

"I can't even look up restaurants or movie times," he complained, taking another sip of his coffee. John and Ronon had taken to wrestling now, ducking each other in the water.

"While that might have been more convenient, is it not nice to simply walk down the street and stop to eat wherever we are drawn? It is less structured and more relaxing this way." She reached over to squeeze his hand. "Do not fret about it. Simply relax and enjoy."

He snorted into his mug but didn't pull away from her as he normally would. "Yeah, but who wants to eat at the Shrimp Shack every night? I think the owner is trying to kill me."

She chuckled again. "Perhaps we can suggest you choose tonight's restaurant."

"You and I both know that no one is going to argue with Ronon when he wants fried fish."

"He will not argue with me." And it was true. Teyla could kick Ronon's ass.

Rodney snorted again, rolling his eyes when Ronon lifted his lover and tossed him—braying loudly with laughter—into the surf. "They're going to injure themselves."

Teyla looked back out, and smiled, an indulgent parent. "They will not be out there much longer."

"Oh? And you know this how? Some strange mental telepathy?"

"John is beginning to tire, and Ronon will ensure he does not work himself beyond what he should."

"How can you tell that from here?" he asked, leaning forward and squinting toward the shoreline.

"From the way he moves. His reactions begin to slow a bit as he tires. We have sparred together much, so I have learned to recognize his tells."

Rodney huffed, leaning back, taking the last few sips of his first cup of coffee. He examined the bottom of the mug, swirling the few coffee grains with the liquid that was left at the bottom. He wanted more, but that required him to get up.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, John and Ronon wandered back up. They were both soaking wet, and John, grinning, came over and shook water all over Rodney. "Hey, buddy! You're up!"

"Oh for the…would you stop! I was perfectly content until you decided to do your dog impersonation! Do you actually—" Rodney would have continued with his rant, but John leaned down, capturing his mouth in a kiss. The pilot had taken to doing that a lot lately.
His tongue slipped in, swirling around Rodney's mouth, capturing any lingering coffee flavor. When he finally pulled back, he looked a little more breathless. "Morning. Want some more coffee? I'm going in to pour myself a cup."

"Um. Yes. Please." Damn him. He always managed to derail a good rant that way now. He handed John his mug, watching him wander—still dripping—into the house.

Teyla was trying to hide a smile, and Ronon was openly grinning as he dropped into one of the open lounge chairs. "Good waves."

Rodney licked his lips, tasting salt and sand and John. "Ah...good. That's good, right?"

"Yup." Ronon leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

A minute later, John returned, handing Rodney a steaming cup made just the way he liked it. He pulled a chair over for himself and hooked a foot around Rodney's calf.

"Mmm, thank you," he hummed into the mug, taking a sip. "You run?"

"Not yet. There were some killer waves when we got up this morning, so we decided to do that instead. I'll probably go jogging this afternoon."

"What time did you get up? I didn't hear you."

"About two hours ago. You were sleeping hard, so I didn't want to wake you up. I figured you could use the rest." John's foot caressed his leg.

"Thanks," he said, offering John a smile. He reached out with his hand, resting it on his lover's water-cooled arm. The touching was nice and still provided a comfort to him. Rodney knew it was a crutch and would likely remain one for the near future, but the fact that he didn't panic now when John was out of eye-sight was a good thing.

The other man leaned into him slightly, returning the smile. "So what's on the agenda for today? Carson comes in soon, doesn't he?"

"Sometime this afternoon," he said with a nod. "Are we cooking or going out tonight for dinner? Did we ever decide? Either way, we probably need to make a run to the grocery store soon. We're running out of Cheetos."

"We can grab some steaks and barbeque. And we are out of Snickers. We definitely need to go get more of those."

About ten minutes away there was a huge grocery store. They'd stocked when they'd first gotten in and had already made two trips for items they'd forgotten or immediately run out of. Rodney was upset they didn't have any Canadian beers, but what could you expect in California?

After drying off and finding the required footwear, they headed to the store, John sliding into the driver's seat as usual. He hadn't let anyone else drive the monstrosity of a vehicle. Rodney didn't mind, but if he didn't complain then there was something wrong with him. So he complained. Loudly. And often.

Pulling into the parking lot, they more or less fell out of the truck and immediately split up. It was silently agreed that they each had things they wanted, and they would all meet back at the front. John trailed Rodney around, tossing things in their cart. "Ooo, dip. We need more dip."
"Dip? Why dip?" Rodney grabbed two bags of Cheetos and then several cans of Pringles.

"Because I love the French onion on these." He held up a bag of Lay's potato chips before tossing them in the cart.

"I think we need more coffee."

"We always need more coffee. We should get some of the flavored stuff for afternoon brew."

"Are you trying to say that I drink too much coffee?" Rodney asked, scowling at John. "I know you've switched to decaf in the afternoons as is."

His lover rolled his eyes, and after a quick check around, leaned in to place a swift kiss against Rodney's lips. "No. I'm saying I like the flavored stuff, and while I don't really want it first thing in the morning, when we make a pot in the afternoon it would be nice."

"And don't think I haven't noticed what you're doing," Rodney said with a huff as he started pushing the cart down the aisle again.

"What I'm doing?"

"Yes. What. You're. Doing." Rodney tried emphasis to get his point across. He hated when John was thick. He had a brain. He needed to use it more often.

John's hand skirted across Rodney's lower back. "I'm not doing it on purpose, not all the time. I just like kissing you."

"Well, yes. I like it, too, but that's besides the point."

"No, that is the point." John's hand firmed, forcing Rodney to stop and turn around. "I know we can't be this open about being together when we get home, so I have to get in as much now as I can. I like being able to kiss you in public, in front of everyone. I'm trying to save it up for when I have to be more circumspect about it."

"Hmm, yes. And the fact that you enjoy stopping my…comments with a kiss has nothing to do with the point that every time you do that I lose my train of thought."

Smiling, John nodded. "I admit, knowing I'm the one that puts that expression on your face is a check in the plus column."

Rodney scowled, but without the heat from before. "Yes, well, there should be more than just that in the 'pro' column."

"Oh, there is. Want me to list them all? Right here in the grocery store? We could be here a while."

"Mmm," Rodney said reluctant to shift away but already feeling the heat of someone else's gaze on them. "You can remind me later."

John smiled again and then pulled back. "And I will. For now, we need dip and coffee."

"Ah…sure," he said, warmth spreading across his cheeks as John gently ushered him forward. This was weird and different and unexpected.

They ended up with more than they really needed in snacks and breakfast cereals—who knew Ronon would love Lucky Charms. John paid this time and after loading the groceries in the car
they were headed back home, the windows open and some horrible '80s rock playing on the radio.

John was singing along as he drove, and while he wasn't exceptional, at least he wasn't horrible either.

Rodney was just really glad Ronon didn't know the words. Then he'd probably jump out instead of listening to that racket.

Soon they were back, and all the food was put away. Teyla had wandered back out to get more sun, and Ronon was hogging the couch channel surfing—he had developed a bizarre fascination with cooking shows—leaving Rodney and John in the kitchen. John hopped up on the counter, and smiled.

"Okay," Rodney said, leaning against the kitchen island. "That smile worries me."

"Oh why?" John's smirk got more predatory.

"Because I know what it leads to. The nutrition bar I ate on the way to the store is not going to hold me for long, you know. And Carson's coming."

"Just because we have to be quick, doesn't mean we can't be thorough." Jumping down, John took his hand and started tugging him toward the bedroom.

"John, come on. Can't we eat first?" Rodney whined even though he barely put up any resistance at all.

"We can eat later. I don't want to miss our window of opportunity."

"We have a window of opportunity?" he asked as John pulled him up the stairs.

"We do. We have some time, right now, when everyone else is busy, and we can just touch and make each other feel good."

"Oh, can we now? Is that what you had in mind? Touching?"

"Among other things." Still grinning, John pulled him into their room and shut the door.

Seconds later, John was kissing him—thoroughly—hands on Rodney's face, holding him in place as he slowly backed him toward the bed. Any and all complaints vanished as soon as John's mouth descended on his. Rodney's hands were already snaking under John's shirt, loving the feel of his lover's warm skin.

It didn't take them long to strip each other, and then they were on the bed, bodies pressed together, everything rubbing in all the right ways.

Rodney found himself pressed into the mattress, a rather enthusiastic pilot touching him seemingly everywhere. They'd made love last night, slow and easy, exploring each other's bodies, but this was different.

John's mouth went from kissing his mouth to exploring Rodney's body. He was tasting everywhere; Rodney had never met anyone who loved kissing as much as John did.

"John," he moaned as his lover hit an unusually sensitive spot, making him shudder a little. Rodney tried to tug John away with his hands, but the other man wasn't taking any suggestions today.
"Mmmm. One, you're so fucking smart. Two, you're sexy. Three, you make me smile..." as he started listing things, he pressed wet, open-mouthed kisses to Rodney's skin, one for each.

"John, you don't have to—"

"Four, you don't let me get away with playing stupid. Five, you let me protect you, but, six, you protect me, too."

"You don't have to give me a list," Rodney protested, trying to get John to stop.

"I want you to know all the reasons I love you. There's not just one."

"I didn't mean it back there. I wasn't criticizing you."

"I know." Looking up, John traced a finger down Rodney's cheek. "But I don't want there to be any doubt about this."

"Who's doubting? I'm not doubting."

"Good." Wiggling up Rodney's body, John kissed him deeply again.

All conversation stopped for a while as they moved onto a different sort of discussion.

When it was over—a plethora of touching and moaning and intense pleasure—they both lay panting on the bed, sticky and sated and curled together. John nuzzled Rodney's neck happily. "Love you."

"We need to shower," Rodney said quietly, stroking John's back.

"Yeah. Getting messy is only half the fun."

"Yeah," Rodney said quietly, his mind shifting as he thought about Carson's arrival. Anything outside of their group, their team, reminded him of what had happened—the television appearances, the kidnappings. They'd been recognized once—so far—by a busy-bodied old woman at the local grocery store. It's always fun to be cornered by the onions and potatoes by a crazy old woman.

"I can hear you thinking," Pushing up onto an elbow, John smoothed out a worry line between Rodney's eyebrows. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. Forget about it," he said, moving to roll off the bed, but John wasn't ready to let him go.

"No, hey." His lover rolled on top of him, effectively pinning Rodney to the bed. "You can talk to me, buddy. Even if it's just to get something off your chest to a willing ear."

"John, come on…"

"I'll let you up if you really want me to. But I don't want you to worry—if you share whatever's bothering you, even if I can't help, at least I can share the burden."

Rodney sighed, turning his head to the side. "Carson's coming."

"Yes, he is."

"He's coming this afternoon."
John's fingers forced him to look back at his lover. "He's our friend. Do you not want him here?"

"No, it's not that. It's fine. I'm used to his mothering."

"Okay, good. Is it that it reminds you of what happened to us?"

"I didn't say that."

John caressed his cheek. "So why is it bothering you that he's coming today?"

Rodney closed his eyes and let out a long breath. "Because it reminds me of what happened to me…us and that it's not done yet."

John shifted, and Rodney felt him put his head down, unruly hair ticking Rodney's chest. "I can't say that I haven't thought the same thing. But we'll get through it, no matter what 'it' is. We have our team, our family. And Carson, Lorne, Elizabeth, SG-1... We have friends who will be standing beside us."

"But where were they when we needed them?" Rodney asked, feeling some of the lingering anger returning.

"Looking for us. And they found us."

"After we'd been tortured and victimized and traumatized so badly we…" Rodney broke off, taking a breath. John knew all of this.

His lover hugged him tightly. "I know. But they were going as fast as they could. I wish it hadn't happened, but they did find us. And they've helped us get better."

"You call this better?"

John's lips brushed his. "Not completely, no. But we're getting there. Neither of us is as bad as we were when they found us. And we're being allowed to return to Atlantis."

"I won't believe it until we actually step foot in the city. Knowing them they'll find another reason for us to stay here."

"We'll get back. One way or another, we will, I promise."

"If something doesn't happen to us first," Rodney whispered, finally voicing his one fear, the biggest one, the one that had been hovering in the back of his mind as soon as they'd walked out of the SGC.

John's arms tightened around him again, and he rolled them so they were curled together tightly. "I'll protect you, Rodney. I swear... I'll do whatever I have to do to protect you..."

"Next time it will be worse. They know…they know what works."

"There won't be a next time... We have to trust our friends. I know it's not easy, but... we can't live our lives waiting for the next bad thing to happen."

Rodney snorted.

John gave a weak chuckle. "Okay, let me rephrase that. We can worry about things in our control, but for stuff like this... We can't always be jumping at shadows. It will take time, but we will get past this completely."
"I think…" Rodney started slowly. "I think what worries me the most is that the SGC was involved and no one would tell us anything about what they found, about the work they made me do."

"About the thing they were making you work on you mean, and how Pearson was involved?" John lifted his head, to look down. "If you want, before we go home, I can try cornering O'Neill and see what he can tell us."

"And what it was all about. I don't think it's the end of it, either. These people…if they we willing to do what they did to us they're not just going to give up. This could be huge for them in terms of money and prestige."

"We can do some digging when we get back to the SGC. We'll have a few days of lag time between getting back and going through the gate to head home."

"They're not going to tell us anything. They're just going to sweep it under the rug. I've been asking."

"So we'll keep asking. They can't ignore us forever."

"The government's been covering things up for years. The two of us aren't going to make them do anything."

"They made us their spokespeople, and went to a lot of trouble to establish our credibility. We can use that against them if necessary—we know what they aren't telling, and if they aren't going to give us the information we want, we'll just make sure the information they don't want out there gets out."

"And then we go away, very quietly, never to be seen or heard from again. Yeah. That's a wise decision."

"I didn't say we would do it from here. We send databursts to Earth regularly. There's nothing stopping us from sending along something in the burst to the major media outlets. I have every confidence you could come up with a way to hide that, and forward it on automatically."

"Of course there is. The government censors everything. Do you actually think we can do something they don't want us to do? For all we know, what we went through was sanctioned by the government as part of some huge cover-up for another top secret project."

"Rodney." John's fingers and voice were gentle and firm at the same time. "You're the smartest man in two galaxies, backed up by the smartest collection of people Earth has ever produced. I have the loyalty of some of the best soldiers Earth has produced. If we decide to force the issue, it won't be easy, but we can do it."

"No, John, we can't."

His lover sighed. "So tell me what you want to do. Whatever it is, I'll be right beside you."

"I want to build a time machine and go back three months before we went to that stupid planet, before they tortured you to get me to fix their damn generator."

John kissed the tip of Rodney's nose. "If anyone could, it would be you. But to be honest, I don't know if I would go back. I could have done without the torture, but I would also have to lose finding you. And I don't want to give you up."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mister Bigshot, we could have done without the torture."
His lover chuckled softly again. "That's Colonel Bigshot. Or you could just call me John. As in, 'oh, oh John, more, harder, faster...''"

"Oh for..." Rodney sighed and laughed, trying to shove John away, but only ended up squirming under the wiry Colonel's body.

"Or you could try 'John, oh god, oh John, yes, there, there, please...'" His lover was grinning, a hand curled loosely around Rodney's cock.

"This is not fair," he complained, stilling. "You play dirty."

"Only if you mean dirty as it pertains to what I like to do to your body. Otherwise, I'm not dirty, I'm just horny."

"You don't play fair! First, it's the kissing thing and now it's this."

"I can't help that I can't get enough of you. Your taste, the way you feel under my hands, the way you feel when I'm inside you."

Rodney moaned helplessly as John tightened his hand around his hardening cock, as his words turned him on like a horny teenager. "I shouldn't be able to do this now. We just...you know."

"We had some recovery time." John's voice had gone deeper, showing just how aroused he was getting.

"Talking about unpleasant things is not recovery time." Rodney moaned again, arching into John's hand.

"So let's talk about more pleasant things." One finger found its way into Rodney's body.

"You...oh...you know..." Rodney resisted the urge to moan and push back on John's finger. "...know what happens...when...oh god..."

"See, we're getting somewhere now." John's grin was marred by his own panting. "And what happens when what?"

Rodney shifted, giving John easier access to his ass. "When...when you do this," he managed to get out with only one stutter before he moaned again, arching into his lover.

"You mean when I do this?" He quirked a finger deep inside Rodney's body, pressing hard against that special spot.

This time John only got a loud moan in reply as Rodney's brain shorted out for a few minutes.

His lover pressed rhythmically against Rodney's prostate while he slowly stroked his cock. It wasn't enough to push him over the edge—John was deliberately derailing things every time Rodney started to get close.

John had discovered early on that kissing and sex were just about the only things that managed to turn Rodney's brain off completely—and he planned to use that to his advantage. Rodney trembled in his lover's very capable hands, caught in waves of pleasure and desperate need and want.

"Just let go. Let me make you feel good." John whispered it Rodney's ear, his breath adding one more delicious sensation.
Rodney turned his head, clumsily pressing lips to John's, demanding more the only way he knew how.

John kissed him deeply, even while he pressed a second finger in beside the first.

Moaning into the kiss, Rodney shifted again, opening himself up for John. His hands were digging into his back.

A third finger was pressed inside, filling him, touching him, setting off sparks behind his eyelids.

He pulled back from John's mouth, panting heavily. "More…" he managed to get out before he moaned again as John scissored his fingers, stretching him.

"Will... Want to get you... loose. Then I'll... inside you..."

"God…more, John, please, more…"

With a moan, John pulled his fingers free. Rodney didn't know or care where they lube had come from, but then John was lifting his legs onto his shoulders and sliding in, sliding deep inside him, buried to the balls.

Hr groaned loudly, his breath leaving him for a minute as John pressed into him. He swore he could feel him all the way up into his throat. "Oh…John…"

"Rodney... God... so tight... so fucking good..."

It took another few seconds before Rodney's body started to relax again, before John could slide in a little more, settling in so close. Rodney was contorted in some weird position as John leaned down, running his hands up Rodney's arms to his hands where their fingers threaded together. He completed the connection with his mouth, kissing Rodney deeply. Rodney was going to be so sore, but right now, he didn't care.

Slowly at first, John's hips began to move. He pulled out fractions of inches, only to push back up against Rodney's prostate.

Rodney moaned and sobbed into John's mouth. John had him pinned securely to the bed, his grip on Rodney's hands not giving him any chance to move or shift. The sensations, the strength of his lover, his position all pushed him into that place he never…rarely found anymore.

John continued to claim him slowly, in and out, gently. Every movement telegraphed how he felt, how deep his emotions ran for Rodney.

They were connected closer than Rodney had ever allowed another man—or woman for that matter—laid open bare by this man, his lover and friend.

"Rodney..." John's voice held awe and love and arousal and a hundred other things Rodney was too far gone to recognize. With a moan, his lover started to thrust harder, deeper. "Need... love... oh god..."

Squeezing John's hands tightly, Rodney held on, moaning continually now as John hit his prostrate with each and every stroke.

Despite having come earlier, they were both hard on the edge of orgasm. It was only a few more thrusts before Rodney was coming, John right behind him.

When Rodney finally came back, John had already pulled out and was cuddled next to him,
holding him closely, already most of the way asleep. Rodney shifted, moaning quietly as his sore ass and muscles reminded him that he wasn't eighteen anymore.

"Mmmm." John half-heartedly nuzzled Rodney's shoulder.

He poked John. "Broke me."

"S'rry. Didn' mean to."

"Did to." And Rodney was not pouting at all. No. Not at all.

His lover laughed softly. "Maybe."

Rodney huffed into John's shoulder, letting the other man re-adjust his position.

"But you feel better now, right?"

"Maybe."

"I'll take what I can get." John kissed Rodney's forehead softly.

Rodney huffed again. "Okay, yes, fine, yes. Stop with the thumbscrews."

John's amusement was warm and comfortable around Rodney. "Sleeeep. We have time for a quick nap."

"Yes, sir," he whispered, letting out a long, comfortable breath.

****

The rest of that afternoon went pretty lazily. When they woke up, John pulled Rodney into the shower, and they both wandered out damp and relaxed, much to Ronon and Teyla's amusement.

While Rodney went to raid the kitchen, John flopped onto the chair in the living room, glancing over at Ronon. "Anything good on?"

"She's frying fish." He pointed to the television where, sure enough, Paula Dean was cooking some kind of southern deep fried fish.

"Mmmm, fried food. When I was growing up, we had a cook from the south. She made the most amazing stuff. My favorite was always the buttermilk biscuits with sausage gravy." His mouth watered just thinking about it.

"And how did you end up so skinny?" Rodney asked, hovering in the door way, a bag of open Cheetos in hand.

John made gimbly motions with his hands, suddenly starving. "I ran it all off. Clara liked me, so she fed me well, but I was outside doing something from dawn until dusk, pretty much. Riding horses when I was younger, and then things like skateboarding as I got older."

Rodney huffed, but handed over the bag before heading back into the kitchen in search of more food. John swore he heard something very close to "so unfair" as Rodney walked away.

"I just wanted to share!" John hollered at his back. He hadn't wanted to take them away completely...

"He'll be back," Ronon said, still intent on his show. "He a good fuck?"
John felt himself going bright red, and he choked on a Cheeto. "What?"

Ronon shrugged. "The only way you'd put up with him for so long."

Glaring, John threw a Cheeto at his teammate's head. "That's not true. You, of all people, know a lot of that gruff exterior is an act."

"So he's a good fuck, then. Loud ones usually are."

"Ronon!" John knew he was beyond just blushing.

"What?" he asked, finally looking at John.

"You... I... God damnit, you can't just..." He was speechless, and aware he was probably more amusing than anything else right now.

"Why not?"

Putting his head in his hands, John groaned.

He heard Rodney wandering back in. "John…?"

He didn't think he could look Rodney in the eye with Ronon over there smirking. So he kept his head down. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

"I might die of embarrassment, but otherwise, yes."

"What? Why? Ronon, what did you do this time? I thought we'd been through this before."

"Oh, god, you mean he's done this before and is just trying to mess with me?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about since neither of you is making much sense. Conan over there is smirking and you're a shade of red that I didn't think was possible in nature, so I'm assuming this conversation has something to do with sex."

"You are not going to make me repeat what he said." John peeked from between his fingers.

"Of course I am," Rodney said, standing there with two bowls of what looked like potato chips and dip.

With another pitiful moan, John gave in. He knew damn well his lover wouldn't let it drop. "He just asked, out of no where, if you were good in bed, although not quite that... politely. It took me by surprise."

"I'd like to think I'm a good fuck," Rodney said, dropping next to John on the couch. "I told him he'd have to ask you, though."

"Oh my god, you're both conspiring against me." John was never going to be a normal shade ever again. "Okay, yes, he's absolutely amazing in bed. I've never slept with anyone who made me feel the way he does, and I'm not just saying that to be nice."

"He asked me a few days ago. I figured he'd asked you before," Rodney said with a shrug.

"No. I didn't realize there was so much interest in how well either one of us does in bed."
"Yeah. According to Ronon," Rodney said pointing at the Satedan with a potato chip, "homosexual couples are pretty common and in the barracks, anything goes. He was actually surprised we only got together a few weeks ago."

"Um, we do all remember that my career choice does mean we can't actually talk about this outside of the few people who already know, right?" John could just picture the involved conversations in the mess about his technique.

"I told you John'd say that," Rodney said to Ronon. "And that he wouldn't care if his entire military contingent was having a big drunken bisexual orgy. He's a little uptight about it because of his upbringing and his career choice."

John put his head back down into his hands. "I am not uptight."

Rodney patted the back of his neck with greasy, salt-encrusted fingers. "About this, yes you are."

"Just because I don't necessarily want the whole world to know who I'm sleeping with and how good I am in bed doesn't mean I'm uptight... does it?"

"No. You having issues talking about it other than with the person you're sleeping with does."

He was being called a prude. Peeking from between his fingers, John glared at both Ronon and Rodney. "I'm not. Fine. Ask me anything."

"It's okay, John," Rodney said instead, patting his neck. "You have nothing to prove."

Despite himself, and the crumbs, John arched into the touch a little. "I'm not a prude. Come on, ask me anything."

"We didn't say you were a prude, just uptight about discussing sex," Rodney said. Ronon was shifting on the chair, narrowing his eyes at the two of them.

"Which is basically a prude." John felt like he had to at least try to prove he wasn't the twelve-year-old girl Rodney sometimes accused him of being.

Rodney shrugged. "Fine. You're a prude, but it doesn't matter."

"I'm not! Let me prove it." John tried to ignore the fact that he was still blushing fiercely, and made an attempt to look cool and collected.

"What's the best way to get him to shut up?" Ronon asked, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"Hey!" Rodney protested immediately.

John flushed again, but forced himself not to hide his face in his hands again. "Kissing him, or fucking him blind—but if you ever try either one I will kill you."

"Try it now. Paula Dean is coming on."

How did he get himself into these things? John was, by nature, a pretty private person when it came to these things, but he had told them anything... So he leaned over and pulled Rodney into a kiss. It started out tentative, but after one lick of Rodney and potato chip, John forgot Ronon was even in the room, and went deeper, needing more.

Rodney had squeaked in protest as soon as John had grabbed him, but quickly kissed John back with an equal amount of need.
John moved, straddling his lover to get a better angle, moaning into his mouth as his senses were overwhelmed by Rodney.

"Ronon, was that the doorbell?" John vaguely heard from Teyla as she walked into the room.

John hadn't really comprehended the question, and didn't care. On some level he just assumed it was the television as he did his best to get as much of him into Rodney as possible. With one hand, he fumbled at the sweatpants his lover had pulled on, wanting to touch him, feel him.

Rodney protested, obviously hearing Teyla, but John wasn't stopping until he'd reached his goal. And besides, all it took to stop the small complaint from his lover was the touch of his hand around his hardening cock.

John moaned again, loving the way the silky steel felt in his hand. He stroked, and fumbled with his own pants, wanting to push their cocks together, feel them rubbing against each other.

"Yeah. Asked him to stop McKay from talking." Ronon. That was Ronon.

And then they were there, both of them in John's hand. Mewling, loving the way it felt, he pressed closer, kissed deeper. So good. So fucking good...

"No. Didn't think he would. McKay seems to like it."

So close. Despite their earlier activities, John felt his orgasm starting to build, chasing its way down his spine.

"Should have stuck with the talking."

When John felt Rodney starting to spill, hot, between them, that was all he needed. He was coming, hard, moaning into Rodney's mouth as his body convulsed.

His breathing and heart rate finally slowed a few minutes later, his face tucked in close to his lover's neck as they sat, still entangled, on the couch. Where they'd just had sex. In front of their friends.

Oh god.

He could feel the back of his neck getting hot again, but he decided as long as he didn't lift his head and look at them, he could pretend they weren't there.

Rodney was still quiet under him, his breath also leveling off, his body loose and sated.

"So. Where did ye want me ta put me bags?" Carson said into the dead silence of the room.

Oh. God. John decided he was going to stay right here, and never come out from Rodney's neck. Ever.

Rodney whimpered quietly, shifting under John. "So dead," he whispered even as Teyla ushered Carson out of the room.

"Uh huh."

"You made me come in front of Teyla and Carson and Ronon."

"I didn't plan it that way."

"But it happened!" Rodney's whispered outrage was pretty amusing.
"I, um, might have gotten a little carried away?"

"Might have?!"

Mmm, skin. John licked a few times at Rodney's neck. "Maybe."

Rodney whimpered a little, shifting under John. Their cocks still felt so good in his hand. John heard and felt his lover swallow. "You didn't have to prove anything."

"Maybe. But I didn't want you to think I was ashamed of you. If I could, I would tell the whole world how I feel about you."

"You had nothing to prove to Conan over there."

"I wasn't proving it to him." John found Rodney's mouth again, kissing him softly this time.

When they broke, John smiled gently at his lover, tucking them both away. "I guess we should go clean up and say hi to Carson."

Rodney licked his lips, still looking a little dazed. "We, ah, might have already."

"That was the unofficial welcome." Slowly, John rolled back off Rodney's lap. He was feeling loose and relaxed.

Rodney blinked a few times before leaning forward to put the potato chip bowl on the table. He'd managed to hold onto the food the entire time. That was pretty impressive. He shifted again, leaning on John. Here came cuddly Rodney—something John never expected—and something he never turned down. He wrapped his arms around his lover and pulled him close, so they were snuggled together on the couch.

Ronon was still watching television, smirking at them every now and then.

John's blush had faded—all the blood had been elsewhere—so he ignored his teammate for now, focused on holding Rodney, and enjoying the way the other man felt in his arms.

One thing was certain, sex was a sure-fire way to shut Rodney up—as he'd just proven.

They stayed that way for a little while, until someone clearing their throat made John look up. He saw an amused Teyla looking down at him, and he offered her a somewhat embarrassed goofy smile. "Um, hi."

"Carson is cleaning up and then will be down," she said evenly. "Did you wish to go for a late lunch or simply wait for dinner?"

"Um, lunch would be good... And, ah, sorry. I didn't, um, plan to do that... It was kind of a dare, and then I let it get out of hand..."

"No, it seems you had things very well in hand, John," she said, the teasing smile wide.

And there was the blush again. "Rodney is very addictive. I can't help it."

Rodney snorted and poked John in the ribs with a finger. "Horny teenager."

That made him blush harder, and duck his head into his lover's hair. "Maybe I just can't get enough of you."
"Perhaps," Teyla said, her voice louder, "you would like to use this time to clean up and change into something more appropriate."

John nodded. "Um, yeah. Thanks. C'mon Rodney, let's go put on, um, jeans. Yeah..." His brain and body still felt a little disconnected, loose and sated.

Rodney poked him again. "Shower."

"We just took one." John managed to get on his feet without falling. He gave a half-hearted leer. "But we can take another if you want."

"Got come all over me," Rodney said as John helped him to his feet. Yeah, Rodney would stay loose like this for a while. John had discovered that the first day they got here. Enough sex and Rodney was like putty in his hands.

They stumbled up the stairs and managed to get themselves cleaned up and presentable again. They wandered into the kitchen and then out onto their back porch to rejoin the rest of their friends. John went right over to Carson, blushing slightly but giving his friend a hug. "Hi! Sorry about, um, before. That was sort of unplanned."

"Aye. That was a little more than I wanted to see," Carson said as he returned the hug. "But I'm a bit relieved it was only me, what with O'Neill and SG-1 on the way."

John blinked as Carson hugged Rodney as well, and they all sat down, getting comfortable. "O'Neil and SG-1? Why are they coming here?"

"I think the General had a few more questions for you," Carson said. "They're still straightening things out."

John ignored the little twinge in the pit of his stomach. He was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. He knew his behavior when they had been found was... less than acceptable. In fact, he was a little surprised he hadn't already been disciplined for it, if not completely court-martialed. He had managed to hide that fear from his lover and friends, but he couldn't help but wonder if that was still coming. Being confused and a little broken were no excuse for breaking that part of the uniform code, he knew.

Rodney had paled at Carson's words as well. "Richard escaped, didn't he?"

"No lad, he didna escape. He died when we rescued you two. There are just a few more formalities we need to take care of before you're both completely cleared for duty."

"Are they sure it was him?"

"Yes. We had a positive ID at the time, and we've run some DNA analysis since. The gentleman in question was named Richard Williams, and was confirmed dead from gunshot wounds received while resisting arrest."

"He wasn't a US citizen, was he?" Rodney's gaze on Carson was intent, focused.

Carson shook his head. "He was a British citizen actually. I wish I had more for you, but the rest was locked down as classified. I'm sure the general knows, but I wasna told much more about him."

"His English was too perfect. He couldn't have been an American," Rodney said, a frown on his face. "Do they know who he was working for?"
John reached over to pat Rodney on the leg. "We can ask O'Neill when he gets here. He'll know more than they told Carson. The only question will be whether or not he'll tell us."

"After what he did to us we have the right to know," Rodney said tightly, glancing at John. Damn. Whatever tension John had managed to work out of his scientist, had come back in at full-strength as soon as Carson walked in the door.

"I agree with you. But getting upset about it before O'Neill gets here, and before he even refuses to answer any questions won't do us any good."

Rodney scowled, crossing his arms over his chest, falling silent. He'd stew until he got his answers.

"Did you want to wait for the general to arrive before getting a late lunch?" Teyla asked, trying to shift the conversation.

John shot her a grateful look. "What time should they be here? Is it worth it to wait?"

"They were on the military transport," Carson said. "I think there were about two hours behind me. I didna wish to wait."

"I don't blame you. Let's get a light lunch then, and then we can do dinner with them later. Where are they staying?"

"I think Colonel Carter mentioned something about a hotel. I honestly wasna listening."

John smiled. "Not a problem. So what do you want for lunch then? Any requests?"

Ronon's response of "fried fish" was met with a deeper frown from Rodney.

"Ahh, why don't we try something different, Ronon? We've had that every day since we got here."

"Nothing else looks good," he replied.

Rodney simply snorted and shot to his feet. "You go. I'll figure out something here." He vanished into the house a minute later. Carson's hand on John's arm stopped him from following immediately.

"Give him a minute, John."

He was vibrating to go to his lover, but he slowly sank back down with a sigh. He knew Rodney needed to be able to get over stuff like this by himself. "Will we ever stop having these stupid flashbacks and episodes?"

"I think I may have put him off-balance with the news of the general's arrival. I should have called last night."

"It's okay. Things like that shouldn't upset either one of us if we're going to return to Atlantis and be on full, active duty." John rubbed his nose, and took a deep breath. He knew now, when Rodney wasn't here to overreact, but everyone else was here, was probably the best time he had for this. "On that note... if, for any reason, I'm...not allowed to return, you guys have to make sure Rodney does. He won't like it, but the city needs him, and he needs to be there to finish healing."

"We will not leave you behind, John," Teyla said immediately, her words echoed by the others.
"Listen," He leaned forward, making sure to catch everyone's eye. "I don't know what will happen. But... I was in major violation of regulations, in front of a lot of people. Maybe it will get swept under the rug, and maybe it won't, but if it doesn't... just promise me you'll make sure Rodney gets home."

"There's na thing to promise. You'll be there to make sure he's okay," Carson said.

"You don't know that for sure. I could still be brought up on charges, and brought to trial. Discharged. Probably not dishonorably given my position and what I know, but I still wouldn't be allowed to return to Atlantis if that happens."

"Nothing is going to happen. You've both already been cleared to go to Atlantis," Carson said.

John had to admit, that did make him breathe a little easier, and he gave a small smile. "Thanks. I just... needed to make sure, just in case. I don't think I'll really believe it until we're all home safe again."

"I know, lad. I should have begun with that news when I arrived. I'm sorry."

He shrugged. He still didn't want them to know just how sick he was over the whole thing. Not Rodney—never him, and John didn't regret his relationship with the other man for a moment. But... he had let himself get broken again, lost. And forgot where he was and what rules governed him when he shouldn't have.

"I saw a deli on the way in," Carson said, standing. "I could do with a sandwich. Want to get Rodney and head down there? I'm sure the lad needs to eat."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll grab him and meet you guys in the living room." John rose, giving his friends another weak smile before heading inside. He didn't see Rodney in the kitchen, so he headed into the living room. "Rodney?"

The room was empty as well. John sighed and headed upstairs, finding Rodney sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at him as he walked in the door.

"Hey."

"I know I overreacted and I don't need a lecture from you."

"I wasn't going to." John moved inside and sat down next to him. "We're going down to the deli for sandwiches. Come with us?"

"There's a deli?"

"Carson saw one up the street. We can get turkey sandwiches." John smiled softly at his lover, running a finger down his cheek. "Salt and vinegar chips."

Rodney closed his eyes and let out a long shuddering breath before nodding. "I just... no one told us anything. They asked us question after question, but they never told us anything."

"Carson apologized—he said he should have called last night, or told us first thing that we've both been cleared to return to Atlantis already."

Rodney snorted. "Yeah, until they decide at last minute they need us here because of national security or something."

John kissed Rodney's cheek softly. "I can't say I'm not worried about it, too, but making ourselves
sick over something that may or may not happen won't do us any good. Let's go have a nice lunch, and worry about the rest when O'Neill gets here, okay?"

After a long pause, Rodney nodded. "Give me a minute?" He rose and headed into the master bath, closing the door behind him—the first time he'd done that since they'd gotten back.

Sighing again, John leaned back on the bed, running through a set of mental exercises to try and follow his own advice.

"John?" Teyla's voice drifted up the stairs.

"Yeah?" He took a deep breath and sat back up, wandering out. "Rodney's coming, he'll just be a sec."

Teyla was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him. "We did not know if you were still in the house. We shall wait outside. Come when you are prepared."

"We'll be right there. He just needed to freshen up a little." John shot her a smile.

Her expression turned to amused exasperation. "We shall be waiting."

John nodded. "Thanks."

As he turned back into the bedroom, Rodney was headed to the closet, hair damp from where he'd attempted to comb it back into place. He retrieved his shoes, sliding his bare feet in without untangling the laces.

It always caught him by surprise, the way his breath would catch sometimes, the way his heart flipped. How had he missed this for so long? And even with the problems it could cause for his career... how did he ever live without it? "God, Rodney... You're so beautiful..."

"What?" his lover asked, throwing a confused look John's way.

"You're just... I can't believe your mine..." John's eyes wandered over the stocky, powerful body, the thinning hair, the quirky lips. "You're just... perfect."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "And you need you eyes examined. I'm hungry. Can we go?"

"I'm a pilot—perfect vision." John grinned a little, reaching out to take Rodney's hand and pull him closer.

The scientist moved easily toward John's, bumping shoulders with him as their fingers threaded together.

"We'll be okay. I promise. Whatever comes our way, we'll face it together."

"Right now all I'm thinking about is facing a giant BLT on white toast."

"Mmm, tasty. So let's go." John gave him a quick peck on the lips, and then they wandered down the stairs together.

Sure enough, the group was waiting outside for them, just as Teyla said they would. Lunch was easy and fun. Carson was determined to enjoy his vacation and was not going to allow anything to mar it—if he had any control over events. They talked and laughed throughout lunch, before window-shopping on the way back to the beach house. It had been good to see Rodney relax and laugh once again. He was still worried, but John could tell he was trying his best to "put on a
happy face”.

They wandered into a tiny little surf shop—Ronon wanted more Hawaiian shirts—and John had gone back to look at the surf boards while the others poked around. He could hear Rodney and Carson arguing good-naturedly over the merit of neon orange versus blue prints. He found a beautiful board, and ran a hand along it's surface, and wondered if he could somehow convince the SGC if it was a necessary item.

"Will you purchase it?" Teyla asked quietly seemingly materializing beside him out of thin air.

He started, then shot her an ironic smile. "Nah. No way to get it home. It's a gorgeous board though. The detail work is amazing, and someone put a lot of time into getting the lines just right for perfect aerodynamics on the water."

"I am sure Mekel would be able to carve you such a board. He is very skilled with his hands."

"Maybe. I don't really get much time to surf in Atlantis anyway. I wouldn't want him to waste his time on something that won't get used like it should."

"Perhaps you should take the time."

"Maybe." John glanced over. "Maybe I could teach you guys to surf too. We could go out to the beach on the mainland sometimes for team outings."

"I would enjoy that, as would the others." She smiled easily, warmly. "Come, let us stop the doctors from arguing before it comes to blows."

With a last wistful glance at the board, John followed her to the front of the store. "Okay, gentleman, I have to say, neither of you wins this one. Both of those are hideous. What's wrong with a nice basic black?"

"Ronon needs something hideous," Rodney said with a smile.

"If you start a trend and we start seeing these on natives, I'll have to do something horrible to both of you. If that's the case, he needs a traditional red one."

"What's wrong with the fuchsia one?"

"Other than the fact that it burns my eyes?"

"Oh," Rodney said, turning back to the rack. "Maybe it's the yellow and orange flowers that do that. Otherwise, I think it's perfect for Ronon."

It was absolutely hideous. "Well, I guess if you're going for the loudest shirt in the store, that's probably it..."

"It was either this one or the neon yellow and pink one over there," Rodney pointed to a sale rack across the way. "Well, those were my picks. Carson's are tame compared to mine."

John shook his head. "Why not just buy them all?"

Rodney glanced at John. "Because we all have eyes."

Chuckling, John handed over some cash to Ronon, for his purchases. "I can't wait to see him beat the Marines in one of those. That's entertainment."

"If our eyes aren't bleeding," Rodney commented, headed deeper into the store.
"That's part of the fun, and the only use of loud shirts I endorse." John browsed the other surf gear as he waited.

Ronon ended up with four shirts—the ones Carson and Rodney picked out—to the dismay of everyone in the group.

John put on his sunglasses and grinned.

Rodney slid up next to him as they walked back to the house, his hand reaching out for John's. "You're not supposed to encourage him."

John tangled his fingers with Rodney's, and grinned. "I'm bringing popcorn for those training sessions."

"What are you, twelve? You're not supposed to encourage him. You're the military commander. You're supposed to show some…decorum."

"What fun is that?"

Rodney glanced at him, a smirk on his face. "Oh, I think I can come up with something a whole lot more fun."

John's mouth went a little dry. "Mmm, okay, when he's asleep, I'll organize a raid to take the shirts."

"But not with the shirts. Actually, the less clothing the better."

"Mmmm. You won't hear any complaints from me on that point."

Rodney squeezed John's hand before glancing away, his cheeks reddening a little.

Laughing softly, John squeezed back, letting it drop—for now.

Rodney was cute. He was sometimes so open about sex and at other times shyer than John—like now.

When they got back to the cottage, they returned to the porch, still chatting about light, inconsequential things. John actually forgot they had more people coming until he heard them.

Them turned out to be General O'Neill and Daniel Jackson—dresses casually in shorts, t-shirts, and sandals. The rest of SG-1 was surprisingly absent. They wandered into the backyard carting a case of beer and a bag of charcoal.

"Evening, folks. Hope you have steaks," O'Neill said, handing off the beer to John.

John took the beer and quirked an eyebrow over his sunglasses. "As a matter of fact we picked some up at the store this morning."

"Good planning, Sheppard. See, that's why I like you. You plan ahead."

"Just doing my part, sir. We have potato salad, too."

O'Neill pulled up a chair as Daniel carried the coals to the small BBQ. "You picked a good spot, Sheppard. Been enjoying the vacation?"

"Yes sir. I taught Ronon how to body surf. There are some sweet waves out there, but the rental
place had pretty crappy boards, so I decided not to try it. Breaking my neck wasn't on the agenda." John relaxed a little.

"You'll have to give Daniel and me some recommendations."

"On surf shops? I didn't think you surfed." He sat up -- it would be awesome to talk to another surfer, who actually understood the lingo.

"On restaurants and the like. Fishing's more my style."

Darn. He sank back again. "Ahh. Well, if you like fried fish, Ronon found a great place within walking distance."

O'Neill rumbled in approval. "Nothing better than fried food and a beer."

"How long are you staying here for, sir? The view of the beach from this spot at sunset is just spectacular. But if you have time, take a jog out to the east along the coastline. If you time it to get there right at dawn, there's a rocky area a few miles down that's pretty incredible."

"Three days…" O'Neill answered, glancing over at Daniel. "Three days then back to the grind. Well, then back to Washington for me. Danny-boy here heads back on missions."

"I don't know how you do it. I can't even imagine giving up going through the gate for a desk job. No offense, sir." John flushed a little. He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"No choice, Sheppard," he said with a shrug. "Knees won't take it anymore."

John grimaced. "Getting old sucks."

"Preaching to the choir, Sheppard," he said with a smile, watching Daniel as he grabbed his own chair.

"It's good to see you again, Doctor Jackson," John smiled at the scientist as he settled in. "How was the trip over?"

"The usual," he said. "Military transport isn't what it's cracked up to be sometimes. I heard you drove."

"It was a pretty nice drive. Very peaceful. We took a lot of back roads."

"And found every damn pot hole," Rodney grumbled.

"Not my fault some of those roads weren't well maintained." John shrugged.

"The back roads are the best," O'Neill said, grabbing a beer from where John has deposited the box on the table. "You get to actually see people and places, towns."

"Exactly."

"He gets colds, too. I don't want those, either," Rodney said, rolling his eyes and standing. "I'll put the beer in the fridge before it all gets warm."

They all chuckled, and John watched his lover disappear temporarily inside. "So, sir, I didn't know you and your former team were coming out until this morning. Are Colonel Carter and Teal'c joining us later?"

"No. They decided to stay in Colorado," he said without further elaboration. Daniel's face looked
a little...guilty.

John raised an eyebrow and sent a questioning look over at Doctor Jackson.

"Teal'c had tickets to something, bought them months ago." Jackson shrugged.

"Ahh." John nodded, but he really didn't get it. He had no idea why the General was even here, but he figured he would find out soon enough.

The afternoon stretched into evening and O'Neill started cooking at some point. They traded mission stories and generally relaxed, enjoying each other's company. It wasn't until the sun faded into the horizon, that the General begin to quiet down a little.

Teyla noticed it first and began clearing the outside table, urging Carson and Ronon to help with the dishes inside.

John didn't even really put together what was happening until all the sudden he and Rodney were the last ones on the porch with O'Neill and Jackson.

"We need to talk," O'Neill said quietly.

John's stomach dropped, and he felt himself go pale. This was it. He was being discharged, brought up on charges. "Yes, sir?"

Rodney had stilled next to him, his hands clenched together in his lap. O'Neill shifted again, leaning forward, elbows on the table. "This is about as official as I can make it. If you ask about it later, no one will be able to answer. Things have changed again—in the SGC and Washington and with our allies here on Earth. News of Atlantis will be quietly pushed under the radar again as per a new IOA mandate."

John blinked, confused. "Wait a minute, you're going to pretend it doesn't exist again? What about all those interviews, the information? People aren't going to just forget because we tell them to."

"Outwardly, the Atlantis project is being closed."

"O...kay." John shrugged. If they wanted to play it that way, it was fine. He knew O'Neill wouldn't have come all the way out here just for that, so he waited for the rest.

"The public announcement of Atlantis allowed certain...security measures to be tested and problems...discovered."

"Namely, us." John sighed. "So what happens next then?"

"We didn't anticipate the events that occurred. In all honestly, the whole situation was one big FUBAR."

John shot Rodney a look at the snort that earned. "I don't think either one of us will disagree with you, sir. It wasn't exactly fun from our end, either."

"If there was a way I could go back and change things, I would. The issue with Pearson was not identified until it was already too late. The fact that he was being manipulated by another government was completely overlooked by our security measures."

"I was going to ask about that. He said he was directly from you, sir. We had no reason to disbelieve him, given the resources and credentials he had." John still got irritated over that. "What happened to him anyway? I was still too out of it when we were brought back, and then too
involved in all the psyche evals and testing to ask."

"He is currently enjoying the hospitality of the federal government, awaiting his court martial. He's cooperating with the investigation, so he won't be given the death penalty."


"Treason is a serious offense, Sheppard. And that doesn't even begin to cover what he allowed to happen to you and McKay."

John couldn't help the shiver of memory—while they were both a lot better than they had been, he had no illusions—if someone were to grab them again this soon, they would both break in a heartbeat. "Why did he do it?"

O'Neill shrugged and took a long swig of his beer. "Money. Family. Bills. They threatened his family."

As much as he disagreed with what Pearson had done... He could understand trying to protect the ones you love, at all costs. "Is someone making sure they're safe, now that he's been caught?"

"We're keeping a patrol on them, but unfortunately it went a lot further than just Pearson's family. As of right now, we've found twenty within the SGC, who were on another government's payroll."

"Shit..." John shook his head. "Why? What did they hope to gain? How many other governments are involved?"

"One specifically. An Eastern European nation that had broken away from the Soviet Union and had fallen on hard times. They'd gotten wind of the SGC and wanted in, wanted the power, the money, the technology. There were a few companies funding the government's efforts as well."

"How much did they get? I know they had at least one Ancient device because that was why they grabbed Rodney—to force him to try and duplicate it."

"A lot. More than we've found, but we're still investigating."

Blowing out a breath, John looked up at the stars for a minute, letting it all sink in. "With that kind of infiltration, what are the odds of the program being shut down? What does this mean for support for the Atlantis base?"

"We're still looking into it. The President and the IOA want to continue funding the Atlantis outpost. It's good for Earth. But it might come down to what's best for business. Right now, it's still business as usual—with a little extra looking over our shoulder thrown in."

"Do we have any idea if or how many could have infiltrated Atlantis? Or do we think it was confined to the SGC?"

"We're still investigating." O'Neill's tone was flat.

John nodded and took a deep breath. "I guess that just leaves the personal question then. Am I going to be court martialed, sir? Or will I be allowed to return to Atlantis as the head of military operations?"

"You have your orders, Sheppard. Nothing's changed."

John closed his eyes, a little overwhelmed. He knew he sounded watery, but he managed to choke
out a heartfelt "Thank you, sir."

"Nothing to thank me for."

Nodding, John ignored the startled look Rodney had tossed him, followed by narrowed eyes that meant John was in for it later. He took another breath to steady himself, then licked his lips and got the conversation back to what he knew Rodney wanted to know. "What about Richard, sir? I know both of us are curious about him, where he came from, what his real mission was."

Daniel leaned forward as O'Neill took another sip of his beer, draining it. "From what we've been able to piece together, he was working for the three main business entities. He was a facilitator."

"So he was just a tool for someone else, still out there, who could try again." John's voice was flat.

Daniel nodded. "We've been able to backtrack several layers, but most have gone to ground. He's dead, along with most of his agents in Virginia."

Rodney swallowed thickly, but was otherwise silent. John could feel the fear radiating off him.

John shifted a little closer to his lover, wanting to offer as much comfort as he could with a General sitting across from them. "They'll be looking for us."

"Or anyone with knowledge of Ancient technology," O'Neill said. "Carter's going to have a shadow for the foreseeable future."

"Will we have more than Teyla and Ronon? And not for nothing, but what about the next time we come to Earth? Odds are good these guys will just go to ground until our guard drops and another opportunity presents itself."

"Ronon and Teyla should be sufficient—along with the details in the houses next to you. As for the rest, we'll address that when the time comes," O'Neill said.

"Details in the houses next to us...?"

"Jack didn't want to tell you," Jackson said with a roll of his eyes. "Said it would make you paranoid."

"So they've been there the whole damn time?" John peered into the night. Shit.

"Protecting you from people who would want to take you in the middle of the night, yes," O'Neill said. "You've met a few of them already."

Thinking back, John realized the two guys who always happened to be out running at the same time as him and Ronon were probably Marines. And there were a few others... "Well, better that that taken hostage again. That's really gotten old."

"For the shrinks, too. They don't want you back."

"Hey, at least we keep them in business."

"They would like a little less business," O'Neill said, reaching for another beer.

"So, we were just... tools... pawns, to you," Rodney said quietly. "You put us out there to clean up a mess you couldn't find."

O'Neill gave Rodney a hard look. "No. As I said, none of this was anticipated, and if we had even had an inkling of an idea it could happen, you would have been recalled. And for now, I've got
about fifty people in and around this area making damn sure it doesn't happen again, and keeping
the press and other curious people away so you have time to recover in peace."

"You said it yourself, General," Rodney said, shifting in his seat, his voice hardening. "The public
announcement of Atlantis allowed certain security measures to be tested and problems discovered.
You revealed the Atlantis project to clean up your mess—whatever the cost."

Jackson jumped in. "We were forced to reveal part of it because of things that had been leaked,
yes. But we really had no idea how deep that leak went. When it first happened, it was under the
assumption that one, maybe two at most, people had sold out. We didn't even dream it could be as
big of an issue as it is. That's why we let it go ahead. Even when the attempt was made on you,
Rodney, and then the shots in New York, we believed it was the Trust, taking advantage of the
situation. If we had thought it was a new player in the game, you both would have been brought
back to the mountain until we figured things out, and not left out there vulnerable."

"But we were left out there, alone. Forced to do a damn dog and pony show while the vultures
were circling." Rodney's voice was rising with every passing word. "You left us out there like
some kind of fresh meat, dangling in the wind, waiting for something to nibble on the lure. Well,
guess what, General, it worked. You found your moles, your traitors. I should sue your
government because you didn't live up to your end of my contract—to provide security. I'm on
loan from the Canadian government. I'm not one of your lackeys."

John reached over, putting a hand on Rodney's leg, knowing his lover would need that to ground
him.

"You weren't left out there alone, as far as we knew. I had put one of my guys on the case, along
with ten Marines. I had no way of knowing he had been compromised, and there was nothing to
make me suspect he had been until after the fact."

"And look what good that did."

O'Neill sighed, and leaned forward. "And believe me, I've been beating myself up over what
happened. Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all that bullshit. I fucked up, yes. But I promise you, I
will not allow it to happen again."

"You should have just sent us home," Rodney said, deflating. "We'd be out of your hair and you
could wash your hands of the whole situation."

"I don't want to wash my hands of the situation, McKay. I can't go back in time and undo the
mistakes that were made. I can, however, make damn sure you both receive the care you need,
and you both make it back to Atlantis where we need you in one piece."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you sent us to the wolves, General."

"Rodney." John jumped back in -- this was getting a little out of hand. "He had no way of
knowing what would happen. As much as I still have nightmares about what happened... it's not
O'Neill's fault. He did what he could to prevent it, but in the end, it happened. As long as it doesn't
happen again, casting blame isn't getting us anywhere."

"We were sent here because we were damaged, Sheppard," Rodney said turning toward him.
"And what did they do? They forced us back into work and handed us to the enemy. And as for
casting blame... I don't think I've gotten started."

"I know. But blaming people who did what they could to try and help us, instead of the ones who
tossed us to the wolves, as you said, isn't helping. If you want to cast blame, let's focus on the
politicians and governments who started this whole debacle, not the people who did what little they could to try and make it easier for us, despite orders."

"Well," Rodney said, shoving back his chair and standing, "it wasn't enough." He stalked to the edge of the deck and down the stairs to the sand.

John rubbed the bridge of his nose—he was doing that a lot lately. He knew Rodney needed a few minutes to himself, so he didn't immediately go after his lover. "I'm sorry, sir. We're both still a little...bitter about the whole thing. He needed a target, and unfortunately you're the most convenient."

O'Neill shrugged and took a long pull of his new beer. Jackson was squinting in the direction Rodney had gone. "I'm actually surprised he sat so long without saying anything. Compared to his usual nature, that was tame," O'Neill said.

"You were giving him the answers he wanted, he had no reason to interrupt."

"Oh, I'm sure they weren't enough," O'Neill said with a sarcastic twist of his mouth. "Daniel, why don't you make sure our good doctor doesn't have a stroke or something."

John wanted to protest, but knew that right now, it was probably better if Rodney had someone else to vent at. At least it wouldn't end with a chilly silence in bed tonight. John watched Jackson disappear down the beach in the direction Rodney had gone, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't alone, until O'Neill interrupted his thoughts.

"Is this going to be a problem?"

He started. "Is what a problem, sir?"

O'Neill gave him the 'don't be stupid I'm smarter than I look' look.

John flushed a little, glad the night hid most of it. "It shouldn't be, sir. He'll get over it, and once we're back home, it will get a lot better."

"I didn't think this was something either of you were looking to 'get over'."

John's eyes widened. Oh shit, O'Neill meant that... "Um, ah..."

"I'm not asking for details and I'm as sure as hell I don't want you to tell me any, but I also need to know that this isn't going to be a problem."

To say he was surprised was an understatement, but John gathered his wits together. "It won't be. I won't let it be a problem, because it's not a passing fad. Sir."

"Drop the sir."

John raised an eyebrow. He knew O'Neill was relaxed, but even still, he had never had an officer tell him to drop even the token formalities.

"Look, I know how hard it can be to juggle...things," O'Neill said with a grimace. "It can be done, but discretion is needed—even on Atlantis. You need to be smart about it."

The other eyebrow went up to join the first, and John involuntarily looked back out again, toward where Jackson had gone with Rodney. He knew they were close... Huh. He wasn't stupid enough to ask. "I already figured that s—, ah, Jack? Especially given the...circumstances surrounding our return, and the liberties we were able to get away with because of what happened, I had already
assumed that once we were back on duty, there were going to be a lot of eyes on us. Making sure we're fit to serve, of course."

"The doctors say you're fit to serve, John."

"That's never stopped officers before, no offense." He sighed. "I know damn well that if someone decides they really don't like me, they'll take any opportunity to use whatever they can against me. Because of this whole debacle, I had certain protections, but I also know those end now. I don't plan to give anyone any ammunition they can use against me. Or him."

"Good," O'Neill said with a nod, his eyes never leaving John's face. "You team supports your decision. They'll be able to help you."

He was startled again, but then, given how close SG-1 had been, and still was even with O'Neill officially not a member anymore... it really shouldn't surprise him all that much. John had heard more than once the comparisons between his team and SG-1 when O'Neill lead it, which was probably why the General was so unsurprised by this little twist. "My team is my family."

"Good. It can be one of your strengths, but don't let it become your greatest weakness. It's a two-edged sword."

"It always is. But as a great poet once said, 'divided we fall.' I don't intend to fall."

"Just... watch your back," he said, his voice trailing off a few seconds before John heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Thanks." John gave the older man a genuine smile before turning to look at Rodney and Jackson returning. His lover looked a little less irritated, which was always good. "Have a nice walk?"

Rodney rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Fine." He settled back down in the chair next to John as the sliding door opened, the rest of the group spilling out onto the deck with dessert and coffee. Conversation moved to other subjects, but throughout the rest of the evening John could feel O'Neill watching him.

Knowing this was a test, of sorts, John didn't try to hide that he was close to Rodney, but he did his best not to make it overt either.

By the time Jackson and O'Neill left, the beer was gone and John was exhausted. Rodney had wandered into the house a few minutes ago, leaving John to help Teyla with the clean-up.

He was glad there really wasn't much, as he felt drained, in more ways than one. He felt her watching him, though, and glanced over.

She simply smiled and inclined her head toward him.

He raised an eyebrow in question. "So, that went well."

"I believe so. They have many stories."

"They've been doing this a long time. O'Neill is a legend at the SGC."

She smiled and nodded again. "Are you glad they came?"

"Yeah, you know, I think I am." John gave her a tired smile. "And I think the rest of these dishes can wait until tomorrow. Let's go to bed."
"I believe Rodney has already retired for the night," she said, walking inside with John as they carried in the rest of the dishes and trash.

"Yeah, I want to go check on him. I'll see you in the morning." He patted her on the arm before heading upstairs, into their bedroom. He whispered softly, not wanting to disturb his lover if he was already out. "Rodney? Buddy? You still awake?"

There was a single light on in the room, the lamp next to the bed on John's side. The blankets and sheets were turned down, but Rodney was standing by the large window, staring outside.

John moved behind him, wrapping his arms around Rodney's waist, kissing the back of the other man's neck. "Hey."

"Hey," he said quietly, leaning back into John.

John loved the way Rodney smelled, so he closed his eyes and just inhaled, letting the now-familiar aroma relax him completely.

Rodney's hands settled on top of John's as they stood there for several minutes, enjoying the contact and the quiet. "You okay?" he finally asked, meeting John's eyes in the reflection in the window.

Smiling softly, John nodded. "Yeah. I really think I am. You?"

"I think so. I'm still not happy about...well, how it was handled, about what happened, about what they did...Okay. I have some issues. I know that."

Chuckling softly, John kissed Rodney's ear. "Yeah. There will probably be issues for a while. But right now, I'm pretty damn all right."

"Are you now?" Rodney asked, rubbing his ass against John's groin.

Gasping a little, John ground up against him. "Y...yeah. I am."

Rodney chuckled, tightening his hands on John's. "I think I could use a little comforting."

"Mmmm, call me Colonel Comfort."

"Well, then, I think you need to get to work, Colonel."

Humming John obeyed, pulling Rodney toward the bed.

They moved easily together, hands and mouths touching and tasting as they undressed each other.

It lacked the urgency or desperation some of their previous encounters today had been flavored with. This was just sensual, both of them enjoying the connection.

This really was more about comfort and familiarity, about love more than lust or desperation or worry.

When he finally sank into Rodney's body, John moaned softly. He paused, just reveling in the way the other man felt around him, under him.

Rodney was panting, pleasure clearly on his face. The light sheen of sweat almost made him glow in the low light cast by the bedside lamp.

"I love you." John traced a finger down Rodney's cheek. He was awed by just how much he felt.
It was overwhelming, wonderful, exhilarating.

"Love you," he whispered, leaning up to capture John's mouth with his own once again.

Kissing deeply, John started to move, slowly, wanting to show Rodney it wasn't just empty words.

It was almost luxurious like this, so slow and drawn out.

By the time they both went over the edge, within seconds of each other, it was a languid, almost gentle release.

Rodney moaned John's name, groaning as his climax rolled through him in powerful waves. John could feel his lover trembling within its grasp.

Rolling to the side, John pulled Rodney close, just holding him as they basked in the afterglow.

They stayed curled up together, simply being, for a long time before Rodney broke the silence. "Daniel…Daniel told me something when we were…walking earlier."

"Oh?" John caressed Rodney's arm.

"O'Neill authorized two special ops teams to go into Eastern Europe."

Raising his head, John gave his lover a startled glance. That was new. "They found the ring leaders?"

"No. More a search and destroy mission from what Daniel said."

He thought about it for a minute. "Good."

Rodney nodded, tugging John down against him again. "They have to find something."

John kissed him. "They will. If there's anything to find, they will."

"I know. Daniel said he'd let me know what happens. The mission's not exactly sanctioned so…"

"O'Neill is going with the ask forgiveness instead of permission philosophy, eh? From what I know of him, that's his preferred way to operate anyway. In his own way, he is doing as much as he can for us. Him and I talked too, while you were walking." John quirked his lips. "At a guess, he and Jackson are in the same situation as you and I, and he said it can be done, juggling 'things' but that we have to make sure we're discreet, even on Atlantis."

"So he confirmed it, eh?" Rodney's response was way too low key.

"Hmph. No, not in so many words. It was more reading between the lines. And I guess you knew about it already, huh?"

"Rumors. Well, I worked here for a while. You hear things. I'm not as oblivious as I look you know."

Chuckling, John kissed Rodney's nose. "I know you only pretend to be oblivious most of the time. You catch more than most of us, I think. But it was still nice to hear, in a roundabout way, that as long as we stay under the radar and don't let it affect our jobs, no one at the SGC will bother us about it."

"During this administration at least."
"For now, that's all I can worry about. When the political winds change, we'll adjust accordingly."

Rodney snorted. "O'Neill won't be able to help us forever you know.

"He doesn't have to. For now, he got us home, and he's making sure we stay safe. From there, we'll deal with things as they come up. It will be okay."

"We're not home yet."

"We will be soon."

"I think I'd feel safer there."

John kissed his lover softly again. "Soon. Until then, Ronon and Teyla are here with us too—we're as safe as we can get."

Rodney sighed quietly, leaning in to kiss John again.

They cuddled for a little while, and John tried to offer as much comfort as he could. Finally, he couldn't fight the yawns anymore though. "Sleep?"

"Mmm…sure. Too tired to clean up and that'll be your job tomorrow."

"Yeah." John managed to wiggle them both up the bed and under the covers. The last thing he knew before sleep claimed him was the content little puff of air Rodney blew against his shoulder as his lover fell asleep, too.

****

End

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