

## General & Dr Sheppard by Xanthe



Story archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/general-dr-sheppard/>

### Story Notes:

Wonderful title graphic courtesy of **Bluespirit**





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Warning: BDSM lifestyle themes, graphic, loving BDSM sex, dark, possessive sex, and consensual spanking. Please DO NOT READ if those ideas upset or squick you.

Disclaimer: This is a work of erotic fiction. It is not intended to be a how-to guide for BDSM - there are plenty of sites on the net for that. The alternate universe depicted is intended to be hot and fun - it's not a serious attempt to analyse how such a society would really work.

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- 1. Part One: Making History** by Xanthe
- 2. Part Two: Culture Clash** by Xanthe
- 3. Part Three: Awakenings** by Xanthe
- 4. Part Four: Sacrifice** by Xanthe
- 5. Part Five: The Long Night** by Xanthe
- 6. Part Six: Out of Control** by Xanthe

7. **Part Seven: Submission** by Xanthe
8. **Part Eight: Sensory Deprivation** by Xanthe
9. **Part Nine: Double Trouble** by Xanthe
10. **Part Ten: First Date?** by Xanthe
11. **Part Eleven: Three Rodneys** by Xanthe
12. **Part Twelve: Sharing a Plate** by Xanthe
13. **Part Thirteen: Universal Constant** by Xanthe

## Part One: Making History by Xanthe

### Author's Notes:



"So, do you have any idea why we're here?" Elizabeth whispered to John as they both stood watching the scientists rush around Rodney's lab with an air of barely concealed excitement.

"I think it's a geek thing," John whispered back. "Rodney said we'd been invited to watch history being made. He sounded pretty pleased with himself."

"Do we know what kind of history? I mean...will there be loud bangs and should we stand back?" Elizabeth asked.

"I think that's always a wise precaution," John replied and they both took a surreptitious couple of steps away from the general melee.

"Right...I think we're ready. Radek, are we ready?" Rodney asked, in a tone of high octane excitement. Radek peered at the Ancient device he was working on, which looked much like a ZPM only bigger and less colorful, pressed a few buttons and then gave a cautious smile.

"We're ready!" he announced.

"Good. Fine. Great. Yes," Rodney nodded, his fingers clicking excitedly and his feet barely touching the ground as he hopped around the lab. "You two—what are you doing there?" he frowned as he careened into John and Elizabeth. "You can't stand there! That's where it's all going to happen!"

"It is? Then we definitely don't want to stand here," John said, as Rodney shoved them none too gently out of the way and then bent down to tape a large square area on the floor.

"Okay. Then I think we should begin," Rodney said, scrambling to his feet when he'd finished.

"I still think that maybe we should have checked the database again to see if there were more clues there to how it worked," Radek said in a worried tone.

"Oh, for God's sake—it's quite obvious how it works!" Rodney snapped.

"Well, it seems obvious, yes, but supposing it doesn't do what we think it does?" Radek asked.

John turned to Elizabeth with a pained expression on his face. "This doesn't sound good," he murmured. "Shall we edge closer towards the door?"

"Good thinking." She moved a few feet to her left and he went with her.

"Well, of course it does what we think it does, Radek!" Rodney shouted. "What the hell do you think it's going to do? Cook us dinner? It's quite clearly a transportation device."

"Yes, yes...but to transport what—and where?" Radek asked.

"We've been over this a thousand times," Rodney said. "This will completely revolutionize the way we move around, both here and when we're offworld. It'll save lives!"

"It'll save you walking as well," Radek muttered.

"And that!" Rodney beamed cheerfully. "No more long treks to get to where we want to go. We'll be able to beam ourselves straight there."

"This is some kind of transportation device, then?" Elizabeth asked.

Rodney rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes—I've already said that!" he exclaimed, seemingly having forgotten that he hadn't actually said it to her. He waved his hand at the Ancient ZPM-like device excitedly. "This, ladies and gentlemen—and Colonel Sheppard—is a mobile transport device. We can install it anywhere, on a puddle jumper, for example, and then all we'll need is a small interface device the size of a wrist watch—and, hey, presto—we'll be able to transport anywhere within range of the device—and from what we can tell it's got a pretty wide range." He puffed his chest up proudly and gazed around at the assembled audience.

"You're sure about this, Rodney?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, of course I'm sure!" Rodney replied in an irascible tone.

"Well, I have to admit that does sound good," John said, nodding slowly. "We could do with that kind of facility when we go offworld."

"It would mean that if someone got injured, for example, we could transport them straight to the puddle jumper and then gate home. No need for them to endure a half-hour hike with a badly twisted ankle. For example," Rodney said pointedly.

John rolled his eyes. "It was a ten-minute stroll and your ankle wasn't badly twisted. You had a stone in your shoe," he said.

"Whatever. With this," Rodney slapped the device and beamed happily at him, "we won't have to walk anywhere unless we really want to, and with your penchant for parking the puddle jumper miles from where we want to go, that can only be a good thing."

"Okay—so—what's going to happen?" John asked, gazing at the Head of Science expectantly. He wasn't sure it was as exciting as Rodney thought it was—they did already have transport facilities on both the Daedalus and Atlantis—but he supposed this more mobile unit did at least have practical merit and it would certainly be of use to them, particularly in emergency situations.

"Well, I've got it set up so that when I press this button..." Rodney pointed. "An object in my quarters will be transported into this lab—into the vicinity of this taped square to be precise—and we'll be able to see it happening on this." He pointed to his laptop, which displayed a picture of the inside of Rodney's quarters. "See that—that apple?" Rodney pointed at the apple sitting inside a taped square in his quarters. "I'm going to transport that here."

"Well, at least you didn't decide to do the first test on a living object," John commented.

"I'm perfectly happy that it's safe, but yes, it was a wise precaution," Rodney beamed. "Okay everyone...are we ready?"

"Don't milk it, Rodney," John said. "Just press the button."

"Fine. Here goes." Rodney punched in some sort of algorithm and then stood back and pressed the button. Nothing happened for a moment, but then there was a high pitched hum and a whirring sound, and the two noises merged at the exact same time as a massive ball of light burst into being in front of them, twisting and spinning, tightly confined in the exact spot where Rodney had taped his square.

"Rodney?!" John yelled, because he was pretty sure this didn't look or sound right.

"It's fine...it's just a bit more...noisy than I thought it would be," Rodney shouted over the loud whirring sound.

"It seems like a lot of energy just to transport an apple!" John yelled, glancing at the laptop showing the live footage of Rodney's quarters—the apple was still sitting there, unmoving.

"It's okay!" Rodney shouted, but there was a panicked look on his face as the box began to shudder and the whirr became a squeal. "I can fix this!" His hands moved at lightning speed over the keyboard but nothing he did seemed to have any effect. The Ancient device shuddered some more and then John saw a tiny spark of fire emerging from the side of it.

"Get down," he yelled to Elizabeth, throwing her behind a table, and crouching over her. The noise got worse until it was all John could hear and then there was a juddering sound and a belch of smoke before it suddenly cut off completely in mid-shriek and all was quiet once more.

"Thank God," John muttered, getting to his feet. "Rodney, what the hell was...?" Then he saw the expression on Rodney's face and turned to look at where Rodney was staring, in open-mouthed shock. "Oh, shit," John muttered.

Two men were standing within the taped area on the floor, looking confused. As the smoke cleared, one of them reached for his gun, putting a hand out to thrust the other one behind him as he did so, shielding him with his body. John stared at the man with the gun in shock, and the man stared back at him, equally shocked, because they both could have been looking into a mirror. The man they'd transported into the taped square looked just like him—the likeness was unmistakable. His hair was slightly shorter and he wore a single silver earring dangling from one ear. His clothes...well, his clothes were very different. He was wearing a pair of black leather pants that clung to his long legs in a way that John felt was perhaps a little too revealing. John's gaze was drawn to the thick black leather belt around his waist, from which hung an assortment of weaponry—something silver that jangled, a fearsome looking knife, and some kind of leather strap-type weapon that John wasn't familiar with. He was wearing a plain black long-sleeved shirt, and over that a black leather vest. Around his neck was a black thong with an intricate silver pendant on the end, engraved with two intertwined initials—John wasn't close enough to see what they were. Around his wrists were two black leather cuffs with silver lacings and he was wearing some comfortable looking black leather boots. He looked...kind of like a pirate.

"What the hell just happened?" John asked, holding his own gun on the stranger, and

glancing over to Rodney.

"I have no idea!" Rodney said, his fingers frantically scrabbling over the keyboard.

"Why have you brought us here?" the man in the taped square asked, and everyone in the room looked at John and back at the man just to check who'd said that because they both had exactly the same voice.

"I'm sorry—it was a mistake," John said, lowering his weapon cautiously. "Look...I don't know what's happened here but we didn't mean to do this. Rodney!" he yelled, feeling completely out of his depth.

Rodney didn't reply—his gaze was fixed in horror on the second man in the taped square who had stepped out from behind the first.

"Oh, shit—you didn't activate the QDD did you?" the second man said, gazing at Rodney with an expression of some irritation on his face.

John did a double take. If coming face to face with the other John had been unsettling, this was positively freaky. The man who'd just spoken was a doppelganger for Rodney...only... he wasn't. He looked just like Rodney, but, like the other John, he was dressed completely differently. His hair was longer and John noticed in surprise that the extra length made the ends curl, giving his face a softer appearance than Atlantis' Rodney. Like the other John, he was wearing a black leather thong around his neck with a pendant hanging from it, but he was also wearing a slim strip of leather around his throat as well, with a tiny silver buckle at the front. He was dressed in khaki cargo pants and a tight, sleeveless black tee shirt...and, John couldn't help noticing, he looked a lot more buff than their Rodney. The sleeveless tee shirt revealed two toned arms, and it had a slit at the top which revealed a fair amount of chest hair, too. Snaking up his forearm was a long, silver bracelet that pointed directly at a tattoo on his upper arm. It was unlike any tattoo John ever seen—large and elegant, it was an interlinked J and R, etched in black and then filled in with some kind of silver piping.

"QDD? What the hell is that?" Rodney said, taking a step towards his doppelganger.

The new John immediately pointed his gun at him, stopping him in his tracks. "Don't touch him," he warned.

"What... Hang on a moment here," John said stepping in front of the gun and shielding Atlantis' Rodney. "Nobody is going to touch anybody—okay? Now, before we get into all the science gobbledegook, could you please stop waving that gun around? Rodney might have screwed up here, but we really don't want anyone shooting him. At least not before I get the chance," he muttered with a little grimace over his shoulder in Rodney's direction.

The new Rodney gave a little smirk at that, but John's eyes remained fixed on the new John, who seemed like the kind of guy you really didn't want to piss off.

"Perhaps we could all cool down a little," Elizabeth said, stepping forwards. John heaved a

sigh of relief for her diplomatic skills—he figured his own were pretty much worn out by now and he really didn't want anybody shooting anybody else—particularly when they looked so much like him.

The new John bowed his head in her direction. "My lady," he said in a tone of respect. Elizabeth paused and John could see by the expression on her face that she quite liked the title. "My apologies. It's not my intention to harm anyone. I'm just...very confused right now."

The new Rodney leaned against him and talked to him urgently. "It's all right, John. I think what's happened is that this—idiot—here," he cast an annoyed glance in Atlantis' Rodney's direction, "just activated the Quantum Dimension Device without having a clue how it works." New John's hand wavered, and then he finally lowered his gun, much to John's relief.

"A Quantum Dimension Device?" Atlantis' Rodney screwed up his face and then realization flooded in. "Oh, shit. Are you saying...that this thing...?"

"I'm saying that we were in our own universe, minding our own business, when you snapped a switch on that thing and sucked us over," new Rodney said in an irritated tone. "We discovered how it worked about a year ago—without dragging a couple of hapless bystanders across a universe to do it."

"That can't be possible!" Rodney said, his mouth opening and closing in a way that made him resemble a stranded fish, gasping for air.

"You surely understand the principle?" new Rodney asked in a patronizing tone.

"That there are at any one time an infinite number of universes co-existing, some of them virtually identical to our own and some completely different, yes, yes, of course," Rodney said impatiently.

"Well, we're probably from one of the closest universes to this one," new Rodney told him. "And like I said, you've sucked us over here. Where were you aiming at?"

"What? Oh...my quarters." Rodney gestured to the live footage on the laptop which still showed the interior of Rodney's quarters, complete with the untouched apple.

"Well, that explains that. We were in our quarters when the beam went off—which is annoying because if we hadn't been, then it wouldn't have caught us," new Rodney said. "Instead of aiming at your quarters here, you picked us up in the same location in our universe."

"So what you're saying is, that this device...no wait...hang on...back up a second here," Rodney said. "You said our quarters?" He glanced from new Rodney to new John and back again.

"Yes." New John nodded and placed a hand on new Rodney's shoulder. "Our quarters. Why? Does that have any bearing on how we get back?"

Rodney's eyes flickered down to the large tattoo on new Rodney's arm, with the intertwined J and R on it and then his gaze shot up, horrified, in John's direction. John knew how he felt—he was feeling a little freaked out himself.

"Okay," Elizabeth stepped in, clearly trying to ease the tension in the room which had just shot up a distinct notch. "Let's clear any non-essential personnel out of here so we can sort this out." She waved her hand and several people slipped out of the door, all of them casting amazed glances at each other as they went. John suspected that it would take all of three minutes for news of this to travel around the base. "Now, first things first. Rodney—can we get these people back to where they belong?"

"No," said both the Rodneys at the same time and then they glanced at each other in irritation.

"Not immediately, anyway," Atlantis' Rodney said. "You saw the way this machine responded when we activated it—it's shot to pieces at the moment and even if it wasn't, I don't know enough about the way it works to guarantee that we could return them safely to their own universe."

"Perhaps you should have thought about that before you turned the damn thing on," new Rodney muttered.

"Well, perhaps if it had a label on it that said 'quantum sucky thing—do not touch,' then I would have," Rodney snapped at him. "But we didn't know what it did."

"That's true," Radek butted in. "It was clear it was some kind of transport, but there was nothing to indicate that it did anything like this."

"Radek?" New Rodney's face lit up. "Radek—you're alive!"

"What? Yes, certainly, I'm very much alive," Radek said nervously, pushing his glasses further up his face. Then the realization hit. "So...in your universe, I am not?" he asked softly.

"No. Sorry—we lost you a year or so ago during the siege of Atlantis," new John told him. "I have to say that it's pretty damn good to see you again, Radek."

"All right—we can all compare notes on our various universes later, but for now we need to sort a few things out. Do you think you can get the device working again?" Elizabeth asked, turning to the Rodneys. "And I mean both of you—working together? I figure two McKays must equal twice the brainpower."

"Probably," both the Rodneys said together and then they glared at each other again.

"It'll take time, though," Rodney warned.

"How much time?" Elizabeth asked.

The Rodneys shrugged and then gazed at each other and back at the machine. The new Rodney glanced at the new John questioningly and when he nodded, the new Rodney stepped out of the taped area and went to look at the burnt out device.

"Well, it's looking pretty busted right now," new Rodney observed, with a scowl in Rodney's direction. "So if it is repairable, it's not going to be quick. We could be talking weeks."

"Weeks?" Rodney looked alarmed. "Shit, I've just remembered something—we don't have weeks! Entropic Cascade will set in in less than 48 hours unless we can get you out of here before then. Otherwise the effects will be lethal."

"Entropic Cascade?" New Rodney frowned. "Not with the QDD—this is a sophisticated piece of Ancient engineering. They designed it to be an escape route into another universe in the event of the Wraith taking over the city—it's got a built-in filter to nullify the effects of EC, so we don't have that time pressure at least."

"Oh." Rodney actually looked as if he was disappointed by that.

New Rodney glared at Rodney again and then went back to stand beside new John once more.

"All right, if we've got a few weeks, let's work towards that, then," Elizabeth said. "As you're going to be our guests for a little while, we need to arrange some facilities for you. Now..." She hesitated and flushed slightly. "I'm assuming you would prefer to share quarters?"

New John looked at her blankly, and his hand crept up to new Rodney's shoulder again and stayed there, in a protective gesture. "Of course," he said, looking confused. "Wait...you guys..." he glanced at John and Rodney. "You're not together in this universe?"

"No!" Both John and Rodney said together.

"Okaaaay," new John said, exchanging a frown with his Rodney. "So, this is kind of weird," he muttered.

"Uh—hello! Just as weird for us!" Atlantis' Rodney interjected, holding up his hand. "So you two are...what exactly?" He stood there, his arms folded across his chest, looking distinctly unimpressed.

"Oh, God," John sighed. "You had to ask?"

New John grinned. "Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I'm General John Sheppard..."

"General?" John frowned. "Damn." He wasn't sure why that annoyed him, but somehow it

did. You can't possibly be competitive with yourself, he told himself, but the idea that this John outranked him niggled at him.

"Hah—so it seems that the John in their universe has progressed a little further up the career ladder than you, Lieutenant Colonel," Rodney said, stressing John's title pointedly, in a tone of malicious glee, holding his hands behind his back and rocking back and forth on his heels a little in enjoyment of John's discomfort.

"And this is my husband, Dr. Rodney Sheppard," new John added, gesturing towards his Rodney. The look on Atlantis' Rodney's face was so comical that John almost fell about laughing there and then.

"What?" Rodney said, glaring at the new Rodney. "God, what the hell is wrong with you?" he growled. "I mean, if you have to be married to...to...him, then what's wrong with being the Sheppard-McKays, hmm? Or, wait, even better, the McKay-Sheppards. No, wait, wait...why couldn't he be John McKay? Why did you have to take his name?"

Dr. Rodney Sheppard gazed at him blankly. "Why wouldn't I?" he asked. "He's my top—of course I took his name when we got married. Don't you people have the same customs?"

"As a matter of fact..." John started to say, but Rodney got there first.

"No!" he practically shouted. "He's what? Did you say he was your top? What the hell does that mean?"

Elizabeth made a little sound in the back of her throat and John stifled a grimace.

"Uh, Rodney..." he began, looking into Rodney's absolutely outraged blue eyes. "Uh..." He tried to find a way to explain it sensitively, without upsetting Rodney even more, but then realization flooded into Rodney's eyes as he figured it out for himself.

"Oh, my God!" he breathed. "You're, like, what...his sex slave?"

"No!" both General and Dr. Sheppard said in unison. Dr. Sheppard glanced at his husband and grinned.

"He's my husband. I'm his top," General Sheppard said slowly, as if talking to idiots. "You people don't seem real familiar with these pretty basic things so I'm assuming it's done differently here?"

"Kind of," John said. "Look, I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to get to know one another. In the meantime, why don't we show you to some quarters and get you comfortable—then it's protocol that we have Dr. Beckett look you over. After that, if you'd like to join us in the mess hall for something to eat? We're really sorry for having inconvenienced you like this and we'll do everything we can to get you home as soon as possible." He glared at Rodney as he said that and Rodney glared back at him.

"Okay...now...you're going to need some things," Elizabeth added. "John, Rodney—seeing as these men are the same size as you, perhaps you could lend them a change of clothes?"

Rodney gazed at his counterpart with an expression of distaste. "Well, okay...but I don't have anything like what he's wearing," he said.

"And I wouldn't be seen dead in what you're wearing," Dr. Sheppard shot back at him.

"Rodney," the general said sharply, placing a warning hand on his husband's arm. "I think you need to calm down a little." He squeezed the other man's arm and new Rodney took a deep breath and nodded. "We'll take what we're given—thank you. I guess this is going to take a little bit of getting used to," the general added. "For all of us."

"I think you're right," Elizabeth said softly. "Perhaps you'd like to come this way, gentlemen..."

She put out a hand to show them the way and the general unclipped a slim silver chain from his belt, and, to John's complete bemusement and Rodney's barely stifled exclamation of disgust, attached it to the slim leather collar nestled around Dr. Sheppard's throat. Dr. Sheppard made a soft little noise and leaned into his husband and then they both left the room together, following on behind Elizabeth—with Dr. Sheppard shooting another angry look in Rodney's direction as they went.

John gazed after them, still trying to process all this. "So...they seem like nice guys," he said eventually, glancing at Rodney. "Well, if you ignore the whole leash and collar thing."

Rodney gave him a withering look in return, and then turned his back on him and began studying the QDD intently, pointedly ignoring the colonel.

"Okay, then," John said, turning and leaving the room.

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Rodney delayed for as long as possible, but finally, after Elizabeth called him and told him that giving Dr. Sheppard some of his clothes was an order and not a request, he left the lab and went back to his quarters. The apple was still sitting there, in its taped square, and he kicked it savagely with his foot. He still wasn't entirely sure how this had happened, and he hated being made to look an idiot in front of all those people—and, more than anything else, he really hated Dr. Sheppard.

"Stupid curly hair," he muttered, getting some clothes out of his closet and throwing them furiously on the bed. "See—that's why I don't let it grow any longer. Looks stupid like that."

He found a spare jacket and threw that onto the pile. "I wouldn't be seen dead in what you're wearing," he mimicked. "I'd quite happily see you dead," he muttered. "You and your stupid curly hair and that ridiculous tattoo and...excuse me...gay. Gay and tattooed and..." His mind didn't even want to go to the other part, the part with the collar and leash, the part that was frankly too kinky for Rodney to even wrap his brain around, so he just left it there.

He gathered up the little pile of clothes and then walked stiffly along the hallway to the room Elizabeth had allocated to the newcomers.

The general let him in and gave him a grateful smile when he saw the pile of clothes in Rodney's arms. Rodney deposited his gift on the bed, noticing as he did so that the colonel must have already dropped by because there was another pile of clothes sitting there.

Rodney stood up and nodded to the general stiffly, before turning to leave, but as he did so, Dr. Sheppard emerged from the bathroom.

"Looks pretty much the same as back home," he said to the general, before seeing Rodney. "Oh. You're here," he muttered.

"Just dropping off the clothes you don't want to be seen dead in," Rodney told him.

"I just think they'll be a little big on me, that's all," Dr. Sheppard said pointedly. "I'm a few pounds lighter than you. You've kind of let yourself go."

"That's enough, Rodney," the general said firmly. "New universe—same old rules, remember."

Dr. Sheppard glanced at him from under his eyelashes and then sighed. "Okay. I'm just ...really, really mad about this. Imagine how you'd feel," he told Rodney. "One minute you're back in your rooms hoping for a little R&R with the husband who's been offworld for four days without you—so you have a bit of catching up to do—and next thing you know, just as you're about to get down on your knees and show him just how much you really missed him...you're scooped up and thrown into a completely different universe and all because someone was a bit careless about which Ancient devices they stuck their fingers into."

"Some of these things I really don't need to know," Rodney told him stiffly, trying to banish the image of his doppelganger kneeling down in front of the general and reaching for the front of his tight leather pants from his mind. "I'm sorry, though," he muttered contritely. "I really didn't know this would happen. I can see how it would be...an inconvenience."

"And what's really annoying is that if you'd just done it ten minutes earlier, we wouldn't even have been in our quarters," the other Rodney added. "Just ten minutes!"

"We're lucky really, though, Rodney," the general said softly, putting an arm around his husband's chest and pulling him close. His Rodney came to rest easily against him, putting up a hand to touch his husband's arm affectionately.

"Hmm, how so?" he asked, glancing up at his husband.

"Well, if Dr. McKay here had activated the device five minutes earlier, as I recall you were standing on your own in the room right about where we were taken. You'd have just disappeared and I'd have had no way of knowing where you'd gone—and you'd be on your own here right now." The muscles in his arm tightened, visibly, as he said that and the look on the other Rodney's face actually made Rodney feel sorry for him—his blue eyes were frankly devastated as he considered that idea.

"Well...okay, then...pretty lucky, after all," he squeaked.

"Like I said—I'm sorry," Rodney told them both, meaning it. He could imagine how resentful and weird he'd feel if the same thing had happened to him. "If there's anything else you need..."

"There is, as a matter of fact," the general said. "There are some toiletries in the bathroom, but Rodney is right—I've been offworld for four days and there are some things I really need to do to him right now...so, would it be possible for you to supply me with some lube?"

Rodney gazed at him, horrified. "What?" he spluttered at last.

"Lubricant?" the general said, in a surprised tone.

"Well, I don't know why you think I'd have any!" Rodney exclaimed, feeling his cheeks grow hot at the very idea.

The general frowned. "If you don't mind me saying so, you people seem really hung up about anything to do with relationships or sex," he commented. "First you all freaked out when I said Rodney was my husband, then you got really edgy when I said I was his top, and now you look as if you're about to have a stroke because I've said I want some lube so we can make love."

"I'm not having a stroke. My people are really, really cool with the whole gay sex slave thing," Rodney said in a high-pitched kind of voice. "We know all about this stuff and we're completely fine with it," he added.

"Okay—firstly, not a sex slave," the other Rodney said, in a tone of annoyance. "Secondly, I'm not surprised you don't have any lube because it's clear as hell that nobody would want to go near you, let alone make love to you."

Rodney felt his temper rise uncontrollably at that. "Well, thirdly," he snapped back, his voice quavering as it rose an octave, "I don't have any damn lube because I don't need any damn

lube because of being, you know, not—gay," he growled. "I suggest you ask Carson for some when he does your medical."

And with that, he turned on his heel and stomped out of the room.

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Carson Beckett took a sharp intake of breath as the two newcomers entered the infirmary. He'd been warned what to expect, but even so, there was no denying that it was pretty damn weird. These men...they looked so very like the two men he'd been working with for the past couple of years, and yet...the other John was holding a silver lead that was attached to a leather collar around the other Rodney's neck, and the other Rodney was leaning into him affectionately, with a softness in his eyes that Carson didn't think he'd ever seen in their own Rodney's eyes. Their clothing was also strange—it accentuated their bodies more, without being in any way obscene or distasteful. The entire tableau added up to something completely alien while at the same time being eerily familiar and that was precisely what made it so unsettling, Carson thought to himself.

"Hey, Carson," the new John said easily, smiling at him.

"Uh...General Sheppard," Carson nodded his head nervously. This John had a different manner to their John. He seemed very in control, less flippant and laid back, while still having something of their John's easy-going charm about him.

"That's pretty formal. Call me John," the general said with a broad smile. "Back in our universe, you're one of our closest friends. It feels weird to hear you call me General."

"Right. Okay. John." Carson nodded anxiously. "And, uh...Rodney." He nodded at the other man.

"Carson." The new Rodney frowned at him. "I hope this won't take long. I mean, I understand all the tedious protocol stuff, but, you know, it's pretty clear who we are and where we came from, and it isn't as if we invited ourselves—we were more or less kidnapped from our own dimension and the sooner I get started on fixing the QDD, the sooner we can go home. Not that we're not having a great time meeting you guys, but...we'd really like to leave ASAP."

Carson found himself relaxing. This Rodney, like their own, clearly had a smart mouth on him and no intention of letting anyone else get a word in edgeways.

"Aye, Rodney, I understand that—however, I do need to do a full physical on you both, just to make sure you don't have any kind of communicable diseases. I'd also like to do a DNA test to see how you compare to our Sheppard and McKay, if that's okay with you? This is a remarkable event, after all, and we'd like to gather as much data as possible."

"Oh, God. How long will all that take?" Rodney asked in a resentful tone.

John put a hand on his arm. "That'll be fine, Carson," he said calmly. "Let's get started."

Carson nodded. He decided to start with Rodney—the other man was clearly fidgety and it would be a good idea to deal with him before he started climbing the walls. Carson had enough experience of their own Rodney when he was in one of these moods to know how to handle him.

"Rodney, if you'd like to sit down here." He put a hand on Rodney's arm and gestured him to the bed. Rodney stiffened and glanced at John and Carson had the feeling that he'd just done something very wrong. "Uh, if that's okay?" Carson said uncertainly, gazing from one to the other.

John's jaw tightened. "That's fine," he growled. "Just...ask me first before you touch him, okay?"

Carson hesitated; clearly he'd just transgressed some rule he didn't know anything about. Elizabeth had given him some instructions on this subject, and he was under orders to find out whether the new Rodney was a willing participant in this strange relationship and that he wasn't being mistreated, but it was going to be hard finding anything out if the general got this pissed off just because he'd put a hand on Rodney's arm.

"I'm sorry," Carson said softly. "But if I'm going to examine him, then I will need to touch him."

"That's fine. It's just that, in our universe, it's polite to ask first and make your intentions clear," the general told him firmly. "I understand that this isn't our universe and you have different customs, but even so, it's still a shock to us when people behave differently. We're not used to it."

"Okay." Carson took a deep breath, trying to wrap his head around this. "You're right, we don't know your customs. I'm very sorry if we do anything to offend you. Perhaps when it happens you could just point it out to us. It'll be entirely innocent on our part."

The general relaxed a little and nodded. "All right. Go ahead, Doctor," he said, resting his hand on Rodney's neck and stroking him. Rodney leaned back into the embrace, and Carson had a weird moment, watching them being so physically at ease with each other.

"Doctor?" the general queried.

Carson shook his head. "Sorry. Just thinking...that if our John did that to our Rodney, I'd have to put Rodney in restraints and administer a strong sedative," he said with a wry grin.

"Yeah, that man is so uptight," Rodney muttered. "I don't know how you guys can stand having him around."

"Och, he's got a certain charm all of his own," Carson said, feeling oddly defensive of their Rodney. It was one thing for the people on Atlantis to complain about him and tease him, but quite another for these newcomers to say anything against him. He was, after all, their Rodney, and Carson suspected they were all rather fond of the scientist, even if he could be a total pain in the arse.

"He's rude and obnoxious," the new Rodney sniped.

The general's fingers closed around his husband's neck in a little squeeze. "He's not unlike you were when I first met you," he said.

"Oh, please! That's so not true!" Rodney retorted in a voice that sounded so like their own Rodney's that Carson couldn't help but grin.

"I think that's probably why you don't like him," the general added, with a grin of his own. Rodney glared at him, and then glared at Carson as well when he saw his grin.

Carson took some blood from Rodney, and then glanced warily at the general. "If you don't mind, John, I'd like to examine Rodney on his own," he said.

"Why? I'd prefer to be present if you're going to be touching him," John replied.

"It's one of our customs," Carson told him. "We have a thing called doctor/patient confidentiality. There might be something Rodney wants to share with me that he'd feel uncomfortable talking about in front of you."

John gazed at Carson blankly. "Like what?" he asked, in a bemused tone.

"I don't know. Anything," Carson shrugged, glancing at Rodney. Rodney was giving him an equally blank look.

"I can't think of anything," Rodney said. "What could there be that I wouldn't want John to know about?"

"I don't know," Carson said again, feeling that they were totally not on the same wavelength on this, and at a loss as to how to explain it any better than he had already. His orders from Elizabeth weighed on his mind as well. She'd asked him to ensure that this new Rodney was okay—that he wasn't some kind of slave who needed liberating, and Carson didn't know how he could ascertain that if the general hovered over him during his examination. If Rodney was being coerced into this relationship, then he wouldn't be able to talk freely about that in the general's presence if he was afraid of the man—although Carson had to

admit that he didn't seem particularly afraid of him.

"I'm going to have to ask you to take this on trust," Carson said eventually. "Look, why don't you stand in the next room, John? You can leave the door open and if Rodney thinks I'm doing anything he's uncomfortable with, he can call you."

At least that way he'd be able to have a private conversation with Rodney without John hearing. The general glanced at Rodney, who shrugged.

"I don't mind," he said. "If it's one of their customs."

"Okay," John said at last. "Just call me if you need me." He leaned over and deposited a firm kiss on Rodney's mouth and then turned and left. Carson stood there for a moment, trying to process the fact that these two men, who looked so much like his own Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay, had just had a deep smooch. It was...just plain weird.

"Is it okay if I remove this?" Carson asked, turning back to Rodney and touching the collar around his neck, lightly. The collar didn't look uncomfortable, but he wanted to make sure the skin underneath it was healthy—and also to check whether Rodney was allowed to remove it.

"Okay," Rodney shrugged.

Carson unbuckled it and examined it for a moment. It was made of very soft leather, and the inside was lined with some kind of padded material. It hadn't even left a mark on Rodney's neck so it clearly wasn't fastened too tight, or pulled on to cause discomfort.

"Could you take your shirt off?" Carson asked, getting out his stethoscope. He did want to listen to Rodney's heart, but he also wanted to make sure the other man didn't have any marks of abuse on his body.

Rodney did as he was told, stripping off with an air of impatience. His body looked in better shape than their own Rodney's—and there was no sign of any bruising or anything else for that matter, although Carson didn't know what he'd been expecting or even exactly what he was looking for. It was just the collar and lead thing that had thrown them all and led to Elizabeth's concern.

He listened to Rodney's heart, and then took his blood pressure. "Impressive," he murmured. Their Rodney was borderline hypertensive, but this Rodney's heart was clearly in a more healthy state. "Rodney...I wanted to ask you..." he hesitated, unsure how to best approach this difficult issue.

"Is my relationship with General Sheppard consensual?" Rodney supplied for him, rolling his eyes slightly. "Don't think I haven't figured out just how freaked you people are by us. That's what all the doctor/patient confidentiality crap was all about isn't it? And why you wanted me to remove my collar? Do you want to check my ass, Carson, to make sure he doesn't rape me every night? For God's sake! What's wrong with you people? He's my husband!

Why would I be with someone who abused me? I'm not his slave—I'm his partner. We're equals."

"It's just the collar and lead thing," Carson muttered, feeling embarrassed.

"What about it? He's my top—it's like...it's like...I saw two of your people in the hallway on the way here and they were holding hands. It's like that to us. Nothing more. I don't understand why it freaks you out—where I come from it's just normal. Nobody would think anything of it."

"Okay." Carson nodded. "I'm sorry if we've offended you. It's just we were concerned about your welfare, that's all."

"I think you should be more concerned about your own welfare," Rodney snapped. "You people are all so damn locked up in yourselves. Look at you, Carson! My Carson doesn't have that worried frown all the time. He'd be laughing at this if he could see it. You people are all stressed out all the time without even knowing it."

"You could be right," Carson said, in a conciliatory tone.

"I usually am," Rodney said pointedly. "Now, can I put my shirt back on or was there anything else you wanted to see?"

"No. That's fine. Go ahead," Carson sighed. This really hadn't gone very well, although at least he'd be able to report back to Elizabeth that this Rodney was no more a victim than their own was.

Carson called John back in, examined him and took his blood, and then finished up, feeling rather relieved. He was intrigued by what Rodney had said, though—it was strange thinking of another him in another universe leading another life. He wondered what this other Carson was like. Did he wander around in a collar on the end of someone else's lead? Could he possibly be happy with that? Carson didn't think so. Now Carson did at least have a better understanding of what their own John and Rodney must be feeling, being confronted by such a very challenging alternate view of themselves. Carson made a mental note to check up on them and see how they were both handling having their alter egos on the base.

"Just one more thing," the general asked, rolling back his sleeve after Carson had taken his blood. "We need some lubricant. I asked Dr. McKay for some earlier, but he nearly fainted on the spot and said I should ask you."

"Aye, that sounds like Rodney," Carson said, with a wry smile. "Of course I can let you have some. Do you need condoms as well?"

"Why the hell would we need condoms?" Rodney snapped. "Unless.... Oh, God, in this universe men can't have babies, can they?"

"No, Rodney," Carson said, trying hard not to laugh. "No...I was offering the condoms for

safe sex. To avoid sexually transmitted diseases?" he supplied when he saw that both men were still looking blank.

"We're in a monogamous relationship, Doc," John told him. "So that's not really an issue for us. But thanks all the same." He took the tube of lubricant that Carson was holding out for him. "Oh, and one other thing...Dr. McKay keeps calling us something... what was the word, Rodney?" He glanced at his husband.

"Gay," Rodney said sourly. "What does it mean? Is it some kind of insult? I bet it is."

Carson gazed at them for a second, desperately suppressing the urge to laugh once more.

"Uh, no...it's not really an insult. It's an expression we use to denote people of the same gender being in a sexual relationship. It's a kind of colloquial expression for homosexuality. I take it that it isn't a term you use in your universe?"

"Nope." John shook his head. "Never heard of it. Why does it matter whether people of the same gender are in a relationship? Is that important here?"

"Yes," Carson sighed. "It's becoming more accepted, but there are still a lot of taboos against same gender relationships. That's probably partly why Rodney got so freaked out when you asked him for lubricant. People aren't comfortable with the issue."

"Oh, God, you people—you have everything upside down," Rodney growled. "You haven't figured out whether you're tops, bottoms or switches, which—hello! —is much more important than the gender of the people you sleep with, and you scream and run a mile if anyone mentions sex. I have no idea how you even get through the day."

"We do okay," Carson said defensively. "I think we just have very different ideas about interpersonal relationships than your people."

"Well, obviously," Rodney muttered.

"One thing I was wondering..." Carson bit on his lip, unsure whether he wanted to know the answer to this or not. "As we're on the subject of relationships...uh...your Carson...is he in a relationship back in your universe?"

The general grinned at him. "Yeah. He just got married," he said, slapping Carson's arm affectionately.

"Oh, aye? Who to?" Carson hoped his voice didn't come out like a squeak.

"Colonel Caldwell," John told him.

"What?" Carson gazed at him, unsure whether he was horrified or flattered.

"You're not with him here, then?" John asked.

"No...I'm single," Carson replied.

"Well, you're very much taken in our universe. You couldn't take your eyes off the colonel from the moment the Daedalus arrived. At first we just thought you were really concerned for the health of the Daedalus' crew, with all the tests you kept running. Then we realized it was their commanding officer you were actually interested in. You kept it quiet for a while because you both wanted to be sure."

"Oh, God." Carson sat down with a bump. "Colonel Caldwell? Really?" he asked, feeling his chest tighten. "Oh, God," he said again, imagining himself walking around after the tall, imposing colonel, at the end of the other man's lead. Now he really knew how poor Rodney felt having these two men here on Atlantis. It was just...disturbing.

"Does that mean...do I wear a collar like Rodney?" Carson asked, tracing a hand absently over his neck.

John roared with laughter. "No! Idiot! You're the colonel's top!" he said, slapping Carson's arm heartily as if he'd just told a good joke.

"What?" Carson sat there, stunned. "What?" he said again, blankly. He'd found it hard imagining being on the end of Caldwell's lead, but he found it positively impossible to imagine himself attaching a lead to the tall colonel's collar and pulling him around. "Are you sure?" he frowned.

"Of course!" John told him. "I was best man at your wedding. I fastened your belt myself."

"My belt?" Carson spread his arms, feeling confused. John pointed at his own thick, black leather belt, from which dangled various items of equipment.

"Your belt," he repeated. "It's our custom—the best man or woman makes a gift of a belt to the top on their wedding day. That's why we say 'buckling the belt' sometimes when we refer to two people getting married. I take it you don't have the same expression?"

"Uh...no...we say 'tying the knot'," Carson said weakly.

"What knot do you tie?" Rodney asked, poking his fingers curiously into some of the vials that were sitting on the table.

"Oh...it's not a real knot. It's more of a metaphorical knot I think," Carson frowned.

John gazed at him steadily as if he thought this was another thing that was seriously strange about Carson's universe. "Well, ours is a real belt," he shrugged. "The one you gave me when you were best man at our wedding was particularly well supplied, but then you knew Rodney pretty well and clearly thought I needed all the help I could get!" he laughed.

"Supplied?" Carson asked, glancing at the belt.

"Yeah." John fastened his fingers into the loops on his belt. "Clamps, clips, leash, strap," he said, pointing at various dangling items and finishing up with the black leather strap that hung from it. He glanced at Rodney, who grinned back at him.

"I can be a handful sometimes," Rodney said with a shrug.

"He beats you?" Carson asked, in a strangled tone.

"Of course not," Rodney sighed. "He spansks me. Big difference."

"He loves it!" John laughed.

"Well, mostly I love it. Sometimes I don't—when I'm being punished," Rodney added, wrapping an arm around his husband's waist and gazing up at him fondly. "Oh, God, Carson, don't go getting that look again! How do you people punish each other when you screw up?"

"We...uh...d'you mean when we screw up professionally?" Carson asked, confused.

"When you screw up any which way," Rodney shrugged. "Supposing someone stole from someone?"

"Well...we've got a brig," Carson said uncertainly.

"So you'd lock someone up for minor offences?" Rodney frowned. "We only imprison people for really serious stuff. The minor things are all dealt with much more simply."

"How does it work for you, then?" Carson asked, trying to be as non-judgmental as possible as there was obviously a culture gap here that would take quite some time and effort to bridge.

"Well, if Rodney screwed up, I'd punish him," John shrugged. "I'm his top so he's my responsibility."

"You're talking about physical punishment?"

"Of course. The strap isn't just for show," John said with a shrug.

"And supposing you didn't punish him?" Carson asked, genuinely curious. "Supposing he did something—like stealing—and you refused to punish him? Would someone else punish him?"

"No!" John shook his head. "Nobody except me can touch him. If I refused to punish him, then I'd be punished instead," John shrugged. "That's the way it works."

"So who'd punish you?" Carson frowned. "Rodney?"

"No!" Rodney and John both laughed.

"No—the highest status top I reported to would punish me. It happened not so long ago. My Lady Elizabeth punished me." John glanced at Rodney, who had gone strangely still and silent, his head hanging down. "But we'll save that story for later," John said softly. "Come on, Rodney, I think it's time we went back to our quarters and had that reunion, don't you?"

Rodney took a deep breath and then glanced up, with a grin. "Sounds good to me," he said.

"Thanks, Doc. We'll see you later—in the mess hall?" John asked.

"Aye, of course." Carson nodded.

Carson watched them go, thinking what a great couple they made. They looked so easy together, so right. The general had one arm wrapped around his husband's shoulders and Rodney's arm was wrapped around the general's waist, and they were talking in low, conspiratorial voices, and nobody could doubt the genuine and obvious affection they felt for each other. At least Carson felt his mind had been put to rest on that score. He'd have no trouble telling Elizabeth that although this relationship might seem strange to them, it was entirely consensual, and where they came from, their behavior was clearly perfectly normal.

"Colonel Caldwell, though...." Carson sat back in his chair, feeling winded. "Colonel Caldwell?!"

End of Part One

## Part Two: Culture Clash by Xanthe

General Sheppard was relieved when he finally got his husband back to their quarters. It had been a long and difficult day so far and he was glad to finally be alone with someone he didn't have to explain himself to.

"At least the city looks the same," Rodney was saying as they entered the room. "I know these aren't our quarters and we don't have our things, but at least when we're alone we can pretend it's our universe and not theirs. These people are so weird. Are any of them even in relationships? They all seem to be single. Just walking around in their polite little world without..."

John decided he'd heard enough—if you let Rodney go on, then you could quite literally find yourself listening to him all day. He grabbed his husband's arm, pushed him against the wall, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Unnnhhh," Rodney finished, melting into him in that very satisfying way he had. His husband's large hands slid down the back of his leather pants and caressed his butt and John sighed and went back in for another deep kiss. Rodney opened up for him, his mouth

devouring John's hungrily, and John gathered him up in his arms and held him tight. Damn, but it had been a long time! Four days was too long considering how frequently they made love when they were together. John's cock was already rock hard and he couldn't wait to get his husband naked and make love to him. Rodney had his own ideas, though, and when John released him, he sank immediately to his knees and reached eagerly for the front of his husband's leather pants. John grinned, and entwined his hand in Rodney's wavy hair. This would do—in fact, this would do very well. It'd take the edge off his sexual appetite so when he did finally sink himself into Rodney's ass, he'd be able to make love to him for a very long time.

Rodney opened his fly and released John's hard cock and then paused for a moment and gazed up at his husband for permission to suck.

"Oh, yeah—get me off, Rodney," John urged, moving so that he had his back to the wall now and could lean against it. Rodney didn't need any more encouragement than that and he dipped his head and took John's hard cock in his mouth with one expert swallow. John sighed. Rodney really was extraordinarily good at giving head. He stroked Rodney's hair gently as Rodney deep-throated him and it wasn't long before he was coming down Rodney's throat, and then Rodney was cleaning him up with little laps of his tongue, before getting to his feet with a satisfied smile on his face.

"God I missed you," Rodney said, sighing and leaning against him in that way he had, like a cat. It always made John feel good to have Rodney's solid body entwined around him, and he wrapped his arms around his husband and sniffed his hair contentedly.

"Missed you, too," John breathed, reconnecting with the smell and taste and feel of his husband.

"Four days without seeing you and then this had to happen," Rodney sighed.

"Get over it, Rodney," John told him. "It happened—but we're both okay. It's not like either of us died. I know what your problem is. You're coiled like a spring. In fact, when you're this uptight you sound just like Dr. McKay."

"Hey, I just gave you a Rodney Sheppard special blow job and now you're insulting me?" Rodney protested.

"It was a very nice blow job," John grinned, grabbing his husband's head and looking deep into his eyes. "But you are twitchy as hell, you've gone four days without me followed by all these shenanigans, and you need taking down."

Rodney's blue eyes widened appealingly at that and John felt his cock twitch again. He might have only just come, but Rodney could make him hard again in no time at all.

"Is that what you're going to do?" Rodney whispered. "Take me down?"

John smiled affectionately and leaned in for another gentle kiss. "Oh, yeah," he replied.

"Now, get your clothes off and get over to the bed so I can take a good look at you."

He disengaged himself and walked over to the bed, then slowly undid his belt, knowing that Rodney was watching him, those eager eyes of his missing nothing. John put the belt and all the items hanging from it on the nightstand, then removed his vest and boots before sitting down on the bed. Then he leaned back and gazed at Rodney.

"So...clothes?" John raised an eyebrow. "I don't want to have to rip them off you because the only other things you have to wear are what Dr. McKay brought you and somehow I don't think you're going to look as cute in those."

Rodney snorted at that, and quickly tugged his tee shirt over his head. He made short work of his boots, kicked off his pants and socks, and then came to stand by the bed, naked. John gazed at him for a good long time, feasting on the sight of his husband's naked flesh. Dammit, but Rodney turned him on so much. He loved the broad chest and shoulders, the fine covering of chest hair, and the compact hips. But John didn't miss the tense shoulder muscles and the way Rodney was holding his body, stiff and hunched. Rodney was stressed out, and John was going to make sure that he got exactly what he needed. His gaze rested for a long time on Rodney's swollen cock. He knew his husband had to be desperate to get off, but he also knew he had to take his time and make this really work—for both of them.

"Looks pleased to see me," John commented with a nod at Rodney's cock.

"Yeah, like it's never not pleased to see you, General Tightpants," Rodney shot back.

"Shame it's not allowed to come, then," John told him pleasantly.

Rodney sighed. "You're evil," he muttered.

"I know." John grinned at him. "Now turn around—let's see that beautiful ass of yours." He twirled his fingers and Rodney turned, with an insouciant swing of his hips, to reveal his butt. John gave a happy sigh. He loved all of Rodney, but he had a special fondness for his husband's ass. It was just such a nice ass—round and firm and so eminently biteable, spankable and fuckable.

"Mmmm...hold still," John said, grabbing Rodney around the waist and placing a big kiss on his husband's butt. Rodney giggled, and John's heart positively sang at the sound. He hadn't heard Rodney giggle once since they'd arrived in this universe, and it was a sound he'd missed. He kissed Rodney's butt some more, and then sank his teeth gently into it, just enough to leave a little mark because he liked marking Rodney's flesh, and after four days away, all his previous marks had faded. He knew Rodney got off on being marked, too, and his husband gave an excited little gurgle and glanced over his shoulder.

"I might have known it would only take you a few minutes to make sure you put the Sign of John back on me," he commented.

John laughed. "I hate it when there's not something of me here," he said, stroking Rodney's

ass appreciatively. "Your whole body is like a blank canvas—and this ass of yours is a work of art of all by itself so it doesn't need that many enhancements; a nice little bite mark or handprint just sets off the color of your skin perfectly. Now come here."

He reached out and pulled Rodney down on top of him. He liked this—him fully clothed, Rodney butt naked. It felt sexy as hell. He kissed Rodney hard on the lips again and Rodney moaned and rubbed against him.

"Are you sure about the whole not coming thing?" Rodney whimpered when John released him.

"Very sure," John said firmly. He knew that Rodney would hold on because he'd commanded him to and his husband would never disobey him on this, but he also knew that the initial frustration would only add an extra frisson to their lovemaking and Rodney would come all the more explosively when he was allowed to.

"God, I hate you," Rodney sighed, kissing his way along John's jawline and ending up at his mouth again.

"Mmmm...yeah...I'm really getting that whole hating vibe off you right now," John laughed, placing his hands on Rodney's butt and squeezing. "How long has it been since I last spanked you?" he asked, stroking the soft skin affectionately.

"I don't know. A week?" Rodney glanced at him.

"That would explain why you're so mouthy, then," John said. "You really shouldn't go more than a couple of days without being spanked."

"Are you going to spank me first or fuck me first?" Rodney asked, lying contentedly in his husband's arms, his naked body laid out over John's clothed one like a feast.

"Neither—I'm going to play with you first," John said, pushing Rodney up onto his haunches, and then pulling him down again so that his chest was level with John's mouth. "First these..." John closed his mouth around one of Rodney's hard nipples and sucked down on it and Rodney moaned ecstatically. John rested his hands on Rodney's butt as he worked, sucking forcefully. Rodney loved having his nipples played with and could take some quite rough play, but John wasn't in the mood to do more than suck and nibble. Rodney was sighing, and his hands came to rest on John's shoulders. John held him even tighter, and gave a little teasing bite to one of his nipples. Rodney squealed and drew back.

"As you were, Rodney," John told him, pulling him back so that he was close again and going in for another bite. Rodney squealed again, wriggling in John's grasp, but he stayed where he was and let John torment his nipples some more. John bit down gently and then soothed the sore nub with his warm tongue before repeating the action and Rodney was moaning now, begging John to stop, for the torture to end, but sighing in pleasure all the same.

Finally John drew back. "Over my knee," he said throatily, grabbing Rodney and pulling him

down over his knee. Rodney's legs were splayed, revealing just a pucker of asshole, pink and inviting. John reached for the lube, rubbed it liberally over his fingers and then slid one deep into Rodney's waiting ass.

"Oh, shit..." Rodney sighed, opening up under John's questing finger. John kept the finger in place and then slapped Rodney's ass with his other hand. Rodney's buttocks gave a little wobble as they were spanked and John loved the large pink handprint he left in his wake. It soon faded and John slid another finger inside Rodney, as deep as it would go, and slapped his ass again, harder this time. Rodney gave a deep moan of frustration.

"I really need to come!" he cried.

"I know," John said soothingly.

"Can I?" Rodney asked.

"Nope," John replied, spanking him again.

"I'm dying here!" Rodney complained.

"If you come before I say you can, then you'll be sleeping on the floor tonight with a really sore ass and not in the bed with me with a pleasantly glowing one," John told him. Rodney let out a wail of utter sexual frustration and John grinned to himself. This was what he loved about Rodney—his husband was in no way stoic. He wouldn't hold on grimly because he'd been told to—no, he bitched, and whined, and wriggled, and wheedled—and John loved it. His own cock was now hard again, but he ignored it. This ass was too tempting a target for his hand, and besides, he loved fucking Rodney best when his lover had a warm butt. He slid his fingers back and forth inside Rodney's ass, all the time keeping up a firm rhythm with the palm of his other hand, and slowly but surely Rodney's ass turned from a deep creamy color to a beautiful shade of bright pink. John's slaps were firm but erotically so—this was a pleasure spanking and they both knew the difference between this and a punishment spanking. Luckily John didn't usually have to deliver many of those.

Finally John slowed his pace, before stopping altogether, and Rodney lay over his knee, moaning softly. John noted that the tightly bunched muscles in his shoulders were already starting to look looser.

"I think that's taken care of. Now I'm gonna fuck your brains out," John said.

"Promises, promises," Rodney muttered.

John laughed. "When do I ever not keep my promises?" he said, pushing Rodney off his knee only to pounce on him, and kiss him again. Rodney lay there, naked and accepting, while John covered him in kisses. Then, slowly, with a grin of total sexual evil, John slid one finger along the underside of Rodney's erect cock. He could see the goose pimples spring up on Rodney's flesh and the sheen of sweat break out on his face from the effort of not coming.

"Oh, God...evil, cruel, evil, inhuman..." Rodney muttered. "Hate you, hate you, hate you..."

"Still holding on?" John asked, moving his finger rhythmically up and down, up and down the hard shaft.

"Just about...no thanks to you," Rodney wailed. "Really hate you now."

John grinned again and moved his hand away to pinch Rodney's nipples tight.

"Ow!" Rodney cried, but John swallowed the sound with a deep kiss, keeping his squeezing grip on Rodney's nipples throughout, loving the sounds Rodney was making in the back of his throat and the way he was squirming under the fierce caress. Finally John released him and Rodney sank back, his face now nearly the same shade as his ass.

John decided it was time to put him out of his misery. He'd taken him about as far as he could go and he didn't want to push him over the edge. The last thing he wanted was to have the bed to himself later this evening—Rodney would bitch all day tomorrow if he wasn't allowed to sleep in his arms tonight and besides, John hated it when he had to sleep without Rodney beside him.

John pushed Rodney's legs open, got between them, and then slowly teased his husband's anus with his hard cock, just dipping it a little way in and then withdrawing. Rodney let out a strangled moan.

"Please...you've gotta get in me," he muttered.

"Mmm, but it's so much fun just teasing you," John replied. Rodney gazed up at him, his hair disheveled and his eyes needy. John took pity on him, and slid his hands underneath his husband's warm buttocks and pulled them apart. Rodney gave a throaty growl that became a shriek of pure pleasure as John pressed his hard cock against his anus and then slid inside him. Rodney's legs immediately came up and wrapped themselves around John's back.

"Oh, God...that's deep...but need you deeper," Rodney said hoarsely, gazing up at John blearily, his blue eyes dark with arousal.

"Okay...you can come any time you like," John told him, leaning over him, still fully clothed.

"Oh, thank God!" Rodney cried.

"Any time you like after I've come," John clarified.

"Noooo! No! No! No!" Rodney moaned at the caveat, banging his head back on the pillow repeatedly in time to his protests. "You already came once when I sucked you so you'll be ages!"

"I know. I'll be a nice long time," John told him smugly. "Just lie back and enjoy." He patted Rodney's face affectionately, then grabbed his hips and began sliding in and out, with slow,

leisurely thrusts. Rodney's body had lost most of the tension that John had noticed earlier, and now he was almost completely relaxed as he lay there, his arms akimbo on the bed, his erect cock standing out proud from his body as John thrust into him powerfully, taking his time.

Rodney's entire body seemed to unravel a little more with each inward stroke of John's cock and John smiled to himself. It might have been merciless to insist that Rodney couldn't come, but it was that lack of mercy that had turned Rodney into the boneless heap of goo currently quivering under his touch. He paused for a moment, and leaned his fully clothed body over Rodney's naked one and deposited a long, deep kiss on his husband's lips. Rodney opened up eagerly for him, kissing him back, passionately, with total abandon. John loved getting Rodney to this stage, to where he just surrendered, completely and utterly, to whatever John wanted to do to him.

John lowered his face and nuzzled at Rodney's nipples, kissing and sucking them, and Rodney whimpered in pleasure, his hands patting at John's back in a totally incoherent gesture of appreciation. Finally John pulled away again, and started thrusting once more. He looked down on Rodney panting and mewling beneath him and felt a wave of total love for his husband. Rodney looked so damn beautiful here like this. Thank God that beam that had brought them to this universe hadn't separated them because John knew he'd be beside himself with worry if that had happened. At least they were together—and even if they could never find a way home, they'd always have each other.

Rodney was smiling up at him, and John wondered if he was thinking something similar. Rodney's ass was milking his cock, making each thrust even more pleasurable, and John knew he was close. He moved up the pace, pounding into Rodney faster and harder, until he was coming, ejaculating his warm semen deep into Rodney's body. He hung there for a moment, gasping and blinking as his orgasm continued for what felt like a very long and intensely pleasurable time, and then moved his hand to take firm hold of Rodney's cock.

"I'm done, Rodney," he muttered. "So you can come—any time you want." He slid his hand up and down Rodney's hard shaft a couple of times, but that was all it took and then Rodney was coming over his hand and over his own naked stomach, with a cry of absolute sexual pleasure.

John grinned, and rolled over, wanting to avoid getting splattered while he was still dressed. He removed his clothes and then got back into bed and took Rodney in his arms. Rodney nestled against him, in that way he had, melting against John's body, and they lay there for a long time. Every so often, John moved his face and kissed Rodney's hair, or forehead, or lips, and Rodney would reciprocate by stroking John's bottom with those big, clever hands of his.

"What were you thinking, earlier?" John asked. "When you smiled at me?"

"I was wondering why I'd been getting so pissed off with Dr. McKay for bringing us here," Rodney replied. "No, this isn't our universe and we don't belong here—but when you were looking down on me just then, as you made love to me, I just kind of figured that none of that matters because wherever you are is home."

John didn't have a reply for that. He just gathered Rodney up in his arms and kissed him deeply on the lips for a very, very long time.

\* \* \*

Rodney McKay tried turning on the QDD for the 25th time and for the 25th time in a row got a faint flicker of light followed by a noise that sounded like a depressed parrot wailing down a well and then the light disappeared, the noise ended abruptly, and the QDD went black and dead—again.

"Oh, God." Rodney sat down and buried his head in his arms. He'd been working on the device non-stop ever since the accident that had transported their doppelgangers into their universe, apart from his brief sojourn to give the newcomers clothes. Carson had dropped by a couple of times, but had left fairly soon once Rodney started snapping at him. Even Radek had eventually had enough of his foul mood and had disappeared somewhere, but Rodney couldn't stop working. If he could have gotten the device working by sheer force of will alone, then he would have, but in his heart he knew that the other Rodney's prognosis that it might take weeks was probably correct—and he couldn't stand the thought of it. Weeks! Weeks of having to put up with his irritating alter ego and his freaky relationship with the doppelganger John. It made Rodney's palms sweat and itch just thinking about it.

"Hey," a voice said, and Rodney stiffened. Oh, no. Not now. This was the last thing he needed.

"You're still working on this? It's been hours. I thought Dr. Sheppard said it would take weeks to fix. So it doesn't matter how many all-nighters you pull, Rodney, those guys are still going to be hanging around here for a while."

Rodney got up without saying a word, and then, completely ignoring Sheppard, picked up some tools and headed back to the QDD.

"Rodney?" Sheppard sounded bemused behind him. "Look, I know you screwed up and you're feeling responsible for this, but it's not a total disaster. Well, it's a small disaster, but not on the Arcturus scale, for example. No solar systems got wiped out."

Rodney could imagine the colonel had a stupid grin on his face when he said that and that just annoyed him even more. "Hello—ignoring you right now!" he snapped, holding up a hand.

"Ignoring me? Why?" Sheppard asked, sounding genuinely puzzled.

Rodney turned around, feeling utterly exasperated. Was the man completely clueless? "Are we on the same page here?" he exploded. "Those two men are.... The other Rodney is.... Don't tell me you're not seriously freaked out by their relationship!"

"Well...maybe a bit," Sheppard acknowledged. "That's partly why I'm here. Look, don't freeze me out, McKay. You're the only other person around here who understands how weird all this is."

Rodney gazed at him for a moment. He had a point. Nobody else had a clue—not even Carson, for all his bustling attempts to be sympathetic earlier.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm just...finding this really hard to handle," Rodney said miserably, putting his tools down. "They look just like us, Colonel! I mean—nobody should have to know what they look like from behind, or that their hair does that stupid thing at the back, or how they sound when they're talking too fast."

"But they're not us, Rodney—they're them. I guess it's kind of like having a twin brother or something," Sheppard told him.

"A gay twin brother who wears a collar and gets off on being pulled around on the end of a leash by his scary boyfriend," Rodney grouched, sitting down again with a sigh, feeling utterly bone weary.

"You thought the general was scary? I thought he was kind of cool," Sheppard said, sitting down beside him.

"Yeah—and that's another thing. You get the cool doppelganger while I get the irritating one," Rodney replied.

Sheppard turned and gazed at him steadily.

"Oh, don't even say it!" Rodney snapped.

"Say what?" Sheppard said, spreading his arms.

"That they're just like us. That your doppelganger is cool and mine is irritating because you're cool and I'm irritating," Rodney muttered.

"I wasn't going to say that," Sheppard said, although Rodney thought he detected a trace of smugness in his expression. "What I was going to say, Rodney," Sheppard said quietly, "is that this whole thing is strange. Not them, per se, but the fact that this means that there really are an infinite number of different versions of me living out their lives in various different universes. I mean when you think of the scale of it...it's mind blowing. And also...kind of humbling. I always used to think I was unique, but now...well, I guess I'm not."

"You're still unique in this universe," Rodney told him. "We were never supposed to meet our alternate selves—the fabric of space/time isn't constructed that way."

"Yet the Ancients built the QDD and made it possible," the colonel pointed out.

"Yes, but...maybe they never got it to work properly." Rodney bit on his lip.

"Rodney?" Sheppard was looking at him intently, and Rodney examined his hands in some detail. "Rodney?" Sheppard asked again.

"I don't know!" Rodney said finally. "I'm just saying—maybe the drawback is always that you can't send people back. Maybe we can fix it and maybe it'll work, but even if it does—we don't have a clue how to focus it, or make it do what we want it to. We might get it working, but that's no guarantee we'll be able to send them back. Maybe we'll just suck more people over here. Or maybe we won't even get it working and we'll be stuck with these guys forever and I seriously don't think I could stand that. I'd have to ask for a transfer back to Earth."

"It won't come to that," Sheppard said firmly. "Rodney, you have to give these guys a chance. Yes, I know there are some...cultural differences, but none of that is a reflection on you. Their preferences aren't yours. Their relationship doesn't say anything about you."

It all seemed so reasonable. Rodney glanced up, miserably, and looked into Sheppard's hazel eyes. They seemed sincere—he didn't appear to be laughing at Rodney.

"I just... You know, the rest of the base is going to be having a party with this," Rodney muttered wearily. "They'll be laughing at me."

"Hey—you're not the guy whose alter ego wears the tight black leather pants," Sheppard grinned. "If they'll be laughing at anyone, it's me, but, seriously, I don't think they will. Now look, I said we'd meet them in the mess hall around seven. Why don't you come along?"

"I'm not finished here," Rodney said quickly.

"Yes, you are," Sheppard told him firmly. "How long since you ate something, Rodney? You've been locked up in here avoiding everyone since this happened. You can't stay here forever and you can't skulk around hoping to avoid two men who are on the same base. You're going to have to work with Dr. Sheppard—so you might as well at least try to get to know the guy so you can have some kind of a professional rapport with him."

"Dr. Sheppard— I mean, just the name..." Rodney shook his head in disgust. "And he's so arrogant!"

"Yeah, well...that seems to come with the face," the colonel said, getting to his feet.

"Hah! I am not that arrogant!" Rodney protested.

"Sure you are," Sheppard replied. "If the situations were reversed and he'd sucked you into his universe, then you'd be the one making the digs at him—and of course you both know exactly which buttons to press to really wind each other up."

Rodney had to acknowledge that there was some truth in that. He got to his feet, reluctantly.

"Come on," Sheppard said, gesturing with his head in the direction of the door. "It won't be so bad."

Rodney sighed and allowed himself to be persuaded, much against his better judgment.

\* \* \*

The mess hall was crowded when they got there and Rodney seriously suspected that was because everyone wanted to gawk at the newcomers. There was certainly a little crowd around them; Elizabeth, Carson, Ronon, Teyla—even Radek and Major Lorne were gathered around where the two men were sitting. Rodney grabbed some food and then followed Sheppard, frowning at everyone who so much as dared to glance in his general direction.

Rodney dumped his tray on the table and sat down beside Sheppard, grateful at least that he had some moral support in the situation. He noticed that the other Rodney had changed into one of his tee shirts—and it pained him ever so slightly to see that it hung a little more loosely on his doppelganger than it did on him. He also noticed that both men had slightly wet hair and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying hard to banish the mental image of the two of them sharing a shower together.

"I was just saying," Carson told Rodney and Sheppard, "that the results of the DNA test were startling. These two men have identical DNA to you two. There isn't even the slightest variation. You are, to all intents and purposes, exactly the same people."

"Except for them being, you know, them and not us," Rodney said pointedly. "With their customs and ways and freaky lifestyles and not our more sensible arrangements." He glared at the other Rodney, who just grinned at him in return. Rodney frowned. This was different.

"Well, obviously they've had different life experiences and come from a very differently ordered universe, but on a genetic level there is no difference," Carson pressed. This didn't help the way Rodney was feeling. If these men were the same as them, then how did that

explain the difference in their sexual preferences? Rodney took a large mouthful of food and tried to let the conversation wash over him.

"I'm sorry—we should let our guests get something to eat," Elizabeth said. "We got so engrossed in conversation that we got a little sidetracked."

"Great. I'm starving," the other Rodney said, his eyes lighting up. He glanced at the general, who nodded to him, and even that irritated Rodney. Did the other Rodney have to get permission for everything? It was so demeaning! The other Rodney got to his feet and then paused, and looked at him. "So, Dr. McKay—any news on the QDD?" he asked, in a more pleasant tone of voice than Rodney had heard from him all day.

"It's still not working," Rodney told him grumpily between mouthfuls of food.

"I'll report to the lab first thing tomorrow—see what we can do with it," the other Rodney said, turning and almost scampering over to the food trays.

"Yes, because once we have your shining intellect in the lab, I'm sure it'll be fixed in the blink of an eye," Rodney muttered into his dinner.

"Rodney. Play nice," Sheppard whispered to him. "I think he's trying to be friendly."

"How can you tell?" Rodney countered under his breath. Sheppard just glared at him.

The other Rodney returned to the table with an enormous plateful of food and Rodney scowled at him.

"Seriously—even I've never been that hungry," he commented.

"It's for both of us," the general said calmly. "Rodney always gets my food for me."

"Oh, God, no," Rodney groaned, as the other Rodney sat down beside the general. The two men looked very relaxed and at home. They seemed more at ease now than they had been earlier, and Rodney flushed deeply when he realized the probable reason why. He really didn't want any more of these explicit mental images taking up space in his head so he shoveled another large portion of food into his mouth and chewed on it glumly, trying to concentrate on anything other than the idea of these two men having sex with each other.

The general started cutting up some food, took a bite, and then offered a forkful to his husband. The other Rodney took it with a smile at his husband and then the general started making conversation as if all this was a totally normal way of behaving. Rodney swallowed down his own mouthful of food with difficulty, his mouth suddenly having gone dry.

"So, we were talking to Carson earlier about our different customs," the general said. "And..." he glanced around the table speculatively, "judging by the way you're looking at us right now, I'm figuring that we're doing something you don't normally do."

"You could say that," Rodney snapped. "Normally we feed ourselves. We don't need someone else to do it for us. We're all grown men, not babies."

"It's just our way," the general said, flashing an easy and utterly disarming smile in his direction. He gave his husband another forkful of food and then rested his hand gently on the back of the other Rodney's neck and stroked the ends of his wet curly hair affectionately. Rodney didn't know where to look. It was just so...embarrassing somehow. He noticed that he wasn't the only one freaked out by the blatant displays of affection between the two men. Major Lorne looked as if someone had slapped him on the face while Elizabeth had her best diplomat's face on—the one she wore when she was trying to be friendly and non-judgmental even when she was seriously freaked out. Others seemed less bothered by it—Ronon was mainly only interested in his food, and Teyla had that benign look on her face that came from having met a lot of people from a lot of different cultures and being familiar with and unfazed by their different customs. Radek also seemed to have adapted relatively quickly and was more interested in finding out about what had happened to him in the newcomers' universe.

"It was during the siege of Atlantis," the general told him, shaking his head. "God, it feels weird to be talking to you again, Radek. Weird and totally fantastic, of course. To be able to see and talk to someone who has died, it's...well, it's wonderful." He gave a wide and genuine smile, looking utterly delighted. "Anyway, during the siege, you and Rodney and Lewis went to an Ancient orbiting weapons platform and tried to get it working so you could take out some of the hive ships. You got trapped onboard and were killed when it was destroyed. Rodney was really cut up about that when he got back. He missed you in the lab—hell, we all missed you, Radek." He beamed at Radek fondly.

"We had that siege, too—about a year ago?" Sheppard said, nodding slowly. "So the events in our universes are similar, but not quite the same?"

"It would seem so," Elizabeth mused. "We lost Peter Grodin in the way you describe—not Radek."

"Peter?" The other Rodney glanced at her and then at the general. "Our Peter is still very much alive." He looked at Elizabeth and bit on his lip. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth," he said to her.

Elizabeth looked confused. "Why are you sorry for me?"

"Well, in our universe, you and Peter were in a relationship." The other Rodney shrugged. "I can imagine how devastated our Elizabeth would be if she lost Peter. He's totally her right hand man and she relies on him."

"Really?" Elizabeth looked stunned. "Peter? Me and Peter Grodin?"

"They got together after the siege," the general told her. "Obviously that never happened here if Peter died."

"And also there's the fact that you people don't seem to have sex," the other Rodney added.

"So you probably wouldn't have gotten together, anyway."

"Rodney," the general murmured in a low, reproving tone, and that hand he had on his Rodney's neck squeezed warningly.

"Well, that's an interesting observation," Elizabeth said, looking uncomfortable.

"And there, see—every time sex is mentioned, you all go very tense and weird," the other Rodney added, munching heartily on a mouthful of food.

"Did you actually want to go to bed hungry?" the general growled at him. "Because right now I'm not feeling inclined to give you any more food."

Rodney stiffened—the general got to decide what and how much the other Rodney got to eat? That was such a horrible thought that he jammed some of his own meal hurriedly into his mouth almost as a reflex action against the notion of it being forcibly taken away from him.

"I'm sorry." The other Rodney nuzzled against his husband apologetically. "I honestly didn't mean that to be insulting. I just find it curious, that's all. I mean, are you people all single?"

The Atlanteans exchanged glances.

"Well, I guess we are, yes," Elizabeth replied.

"Which would explain the level of stress on this base," the other Rodney commented. "I mean, all that sexual tension!"

"We're not stressed. We're here to do a job, not spend our lives rutting like rabbits!" Rodney snapped, unable to bear it.

"No, you don't seem remotely stressed to me," the other Rodney told him calmly with an ironically raised eyebrow.

"We're getting the impression that your society is a bit more open about sexual relationships than ours," Elizabeth interjected smoothly.

"So—you've been fighting the Wraith, just as we have," Ronon cut in, in that deep, gruff voice of his, clearly uninterested in all the talk about relationships. "Have you found a way of defeating them yet?"

"Unfortunately, no," the general replied with a sigh. "I was wondering if you'd come up with any more effective ways of fighting them than we have. Maybe we could swap notes?"

"I'd be glad to show you our military reports," Sheppard told him. "If there is any knowledge

we could pool, then it would benefit us both. Perhaps we could go through them tomorrow morning?"

"Good. Yes. Thank you, Colonel." The general nodded thoughtfully and Sheppard looked kind of proud and pleased with himself. Rodney could understand that—there was something about General Sheppard; he just made you want to impress him, to be noticed by him, to get a nod of approval from him. He was so effortlessly cool.

"I was wondering—you two seem to have a complex hierarchy when it comes to chains of command and law and order," Carson mused. "Is your entire universe like that?"

"Complex? I don't know about that," the general said. "Your society seems way more complex to me. Ours is relatively straightforward. Once you've figured out your power dynamic and preference, it's relatively easy to fit into our society. Of course, figuring it out isn't always easy. God knows I had my difficult teenage years when I didn't know what I was or what I wanted and I got into a lot of trouble while I figured it out, but eventually you grow into yourself somehow." He glanced at his Rodney and grinned. "Even Rodney figured it out eventually."

"Yeah. With some help from you," the other Rodney said, smiling fondly back at his husband. "Before he came along, I was a basket case. Totally screwed up."

"And that's different to what you're like now how?" Rodney raised an eyebrow of his own back at his nemesis.

The other Rodney refused to rise to the bait, though. He just...giggled. There was no other word for it. He giggled. His face creased up, and he made a little gurgling sound at the back of his throat. All the Atlanteans around the table gazed at him, surprise etched on their faces at such a very un-Rodneylike sound emerging from the other Rodney's mouth. The general grinned, and tickled his Rodney's neck affectionately, then leaned over and kissed his ear.

Rodney wished the earth would open and swallow him whole. Did they really need to be so overt about their relationship? There was just no way you could ignore the fact that these two men were besotted with each other and that made Rodney glance sideways at Sheppard, only to find that Sheppard was glancing uneasily back at him, and they both exchanged discomforted looks.

"It's completely different," the other Rodney said eventually, still giggling a little. Rodney noticed that the giggle appeared to be infectious as Elizabeth, Carson and Radek were all grinning away madly as well. "Before I met John, I couldn't figure myself out at all. Tried to top, tried to bottom, tried to switch. Nothing seemed to work for me. The thing was, I never met a top who was smart enough to handle me until John came along and I knew it. I ran rings around them all. But, John—well, John had me all figured out in that quiet way of his and before I knew it...." The other Rodney shrugged and slapped his hand down hard on the table, making Rodney jump. "Bam. He had me over his knee and eating out of his hand. Literally—in both cases."

"Oh, God. That's way too much information," Rodney growled, struggling to suppress another one of those irritatingly persistent mental images.

"I think it's interesting," Elizabeth said brightly, in a slightly forced tone. "Carson was saying that your whole society is structured around these power relationships?"

"That's right," the general said.

"So what happens—you get to punish Dr. Sheppard when he does something wrong?" the colonel asked.

Rodney clenched his fists tightly around his cutlery and thrust another large forkful of food into his mouth and began chewing savagely on it, more as a way of distracting himself than because he was actually hungry.

"Yeah." The general nodded. "I've given him a few pretty hard spankings when he's been out of line."

Rodney spat out the mouthful of food he was eating, much to everyone's general amusement. "I sincerely hope this isn't giving anyone around here any ideas," he spluttered.

Elizabeth grinned at him and patted one of his hands affectionately. "Don't worry, Rodney," she said with a little laugh. "Nobody is going to spank you."

"Although we've all had our moments of wishing we could," Carson muttered.

Rodney glared at him. "You're supposed to be a doctor and against harming people on principle," he said stiffly.

"I'm just saying, it seems to work okay for these nice people," Carson teased, with a wide grin.

"It's all just...completely crazy," Rodney growled.

"It's how our universe works. Always has," the general shrugged. "I don't actually understand how your universe works. You must need so many rules to govern all your interactions. Things are much simpler where we come from."

At that moment, Colonel Caldwell came over to their table, bearing a tray of food.

"Excuse me—can I join you?" he asked politely, his eyes flickering over the new John and Rodney with a look of fascination.

Rodney sighed. He guessed there wasn't anybody who didn't know about the newcomers by now. He suspected that total strangers could gate in from the furthest reaches of the Pegasus galaxy and know about it within 30 seconds of arriving.

"Of course, Colonel! Good to see you!" the general said. "I was wondering when you were going to show up."

"Uh...I have a meeting...with some other people...back in the...my place...you know...the, uh, infirmary," Carson said hurriedly.

Rodney frowned at him, wondering what the hell his problem was, but Carson was so eager to be gone that he almost knocked over his chair as he scrambled out of the mess hall.

Rodney decided he didn't want to stay for much longer, either. Despite what Colonel Sheppard had said about not pulling an all-nighter, he knew that was exactly what he was going to do. There was no way he was going to allow his doppelganger into his lab tomorrow without having a much better handle on what exactly was wrong with the QDD and how to fix it.

End of Part Two

### Part Three: Awakenings by Xanthe

Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard arrived at his desk a couple of hours early the next day, anxious to have time to prepare for his meeting with the general. He wasn't sure why he was feeling so apprehensive, but he did know that there was something about the idea of spending a few hours in the company of his alter ego that both unnerved and excited him. The truth was, and John was barely able to admit this even to himself, but General Sheppard was exactly the kind of man he'd once wanted to be. He didn't know when he'd lost touch with that ambition, or why, but seeing the general striding around Atlantis, so sure of himself and his place in the universe, whichever universe he happened to be in, had brought some uncomfortable emotions to the surface for John. It was hard to put his finger on it exactly—he just knew that he didn't want the general to find him disappointing. He wondered if everyone felt like that around the man or whether it was just him because they shared the same face and name. Did people look at him like they looked at the general?, John wondered. Did they strive to impress him and do their best to get a word of praise from him the way he wanted praise from the general? Somehow he doubted it. He knew his people liked and respected him, but he also knew that he wasn't in the same league as General Sheppard and he wondered why. What had happened in the general's life that had rendered him so at ease with himself? He looked like the kind of man who'd never made a wrong decision, and even though John doubted that could be entirely true, he envied him the appearance of it all the same.

John disliked paperwork. He got it done, but he was rarely up to date with it so most of his files were a mess—except the ones on the Wraith. Protecting his people motivated John far more than filing equipment inventories, drawing up staffing rotas and conducting personnel appraisals. He was relieved that at least he'd be able to show the general a clean set of military reports, neatly filed and up to date; he just prayed the general wouldn't ask to see anything else and even that surprised him a little. Since when had Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard cared what anyone thought of him?

John spent a couple of hours making his office and his files as respectable as possible, and had them in some kind of shape by the time the general knocked on his door. John called him in and then paused, finding himself seriously fazed because the general was wearing his uniform. His identical uniform. The leather pants, tight tee shirt and vest were gone. He'd still retained those little quirks that were presumably customary in his universe—the pendant around his neck, the silver earring dangling from his ear and the impressive black leather belt around his waist from which hung an assortment of different objects—but apart from that, there was no difference.

"Can I come in?" The general paused in the doorway, looking at John with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Uh...yeah...I... Sorry. Damn, but you look just like me," John said, with a little laugh.

The general grinned. "It's the clothes. Thanks for them, by the way. They fit just fine and it's good to have something clean to put on. I even managed to persuade Rodney to wear those pants of Dr. McKay's this morning."

"Ah. I'm guessing that wasn't easy," John grinned.

"An understatement," the general grinned back. "In the end, I resorted to taking his own clothes down to the laundry while he was in the shower so he had no choice."

"I'm surprised I didn't hear the yell of protest all the way from here when he found out about that," John chuckled.

The general laughed. "Yeah. He wasn't happy," he said, shaking his head.

"Uh...now, perhaps I'm not understanding the rules of your society, but couldn't you have just ordered him to wear them?" John said carefully. He was intrigued by the way things worked in this alternate universe. Everything about it seemed strange to him, and from what the general had said, he found everything equally strange about John's universe.

"Ah, well, yes, I could," the general nodded. "But I prefer to save that kind of thing for when it's really important. There are ways to make things happen without throwing your weight around. At the end of the day, he knows that what I say goes, but there's no point making every single minor issue a battle of wills. It'd be exhausting, apart from anything else, and also...I love him. I don't want to squash him."

John nodded, completely not understanding. Maybe this was just another example of how the general seemed to be so effortlessly at ease with his own authority. He didn't have to assert himself unnecessarily because he was so sure of himself.

"Would you like some coffee?" John offered.

"Yeah, black, one..."

"One sugar, I got it," John grinned. "I figure we both like our coffee the same way." He handed the general a coffee and the other man took it, grinning back at him.

"You figured right, then."

"Anyway, I flicked through some of the mission reports and pulled out the ones that seemed most relevant," John said, gesturing to the general to sit in the chair beside him. "It'll be interesting to see how many things happened the same way in our different universes. Perhaps we could compare notes. You might have done something different to us that worked better than what we did, or vice versa."

"Sure." The general nodded slowly, taking a bunch of files and leaning back in his chair.

John leaned back in his own chair and then they both, simultaneously, swung their long legs up onto the desk. Then, taken aback at the mirroring, they glanced at each other and laughed.

"Damn, but this is weird," John said. "I told Rodney it was kind of like having a twin brother, but it's still weird to acquire one as an adult."

"Damn weird. We even have the same mannerisms," the general said. "I'm glad to hear you spoke to Dr. McKay about this situation we're in," he added thoughtfully. John raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "I understand that you and he are not together in this universe, and Dr. Beckett was kind enough to explain that your people have some taboos about some gender relationships, so I completely appreciate that things are very different for you, but...." He broke off with a shrug. "It's just sad to see him like this, that's all."

"Like what?" John asked, frowning.

"Alone. Lonely."

"Oh, Rodney's fine." John waved his hand around airily. "Yeah, he can be snippy, but he's like that with everyone. That's just him."

"No. It isn't," the general said. "He's like that because he's lonely. I know because that's what my husband was like when I first met him."

"Your Rodney is still pretty snippy," John pointed out, feeling a little stung.

"Only with your Rodney," the general replied sharply. "And I think that's because he really hates being reminded what he was like. And of course he's also pretty stressed out about our current situation, but I think I've taken care of that and he's calmed down now. Your Rodney doesn't have anyone to look out for him, though—there's nobody to calm him down."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with Rodney!" John replied, more forcefully than he'd intended.

"He's not lonely. He's just a workaholic who never gets laid and exists in a state of more or less permanent high stress. That's the way he likes it. Well, apart from the not getting laid thing probably, but he's fine. You make it sound like he's about to have a nervous breakdown or something."

"No...nothing like that. I just wish he was happy," the general said softly. "Tell me, Colonel—John—it seems so weird to me that you and I would look so alike, and have the same mannerisms even down to the way we like to put our feet up on the desk when we're reading—and yet we seem to have very different feelings. Can you honestly tell me that you've never thought about Rodney as a potential—"

"No!" John interrupted firmly, feeling himself flush.

"You have to have noticed how incredibly cute he is. The bright blue eyes, the attitude, the intelligence and, of course, that great ass." The general grinned.

John swallowed hard. In all honesty, he had noticed all those things about Rodney, but never in a focused way. He didn't spend his time sitting around thinking about it, but there were times when he'd looked—and then looked away again, dismissing the thought as idle sexual speculation, not something to be taken seriously. This was Rodney they were talking about, after all, and although John had had plenty of sexual experiences with other men, he'd never had a relationship with one. It was too much hassle and had never been worth it in terms of his career, apart from anything else. He liked women, too, and that was a much easier path to go down. Was that just society's conditioning?, John wondered. Because the general's people seemed to be comfortably bisexual.

"So you have noticed," the general murmured, those hazel eyes of his missing nothing.

"Yes. Okay. I've noticed," John replied in a strangled tone, wishing fervently that they weren't having this conversation. "But this is Rodney we're talking about here. I'd never go there. He'd probably shoot me with my own gun if I even tried. Trust me, we're not as alike as you think, General. Rodney is seriously uncomfortable with the relationship you and Dr. Shepard have. It's not something he wants in his own life."

"Maybe he's uncomfortable because it is," the general said softly.

"No." John shook his head. "Really. No. There is simply no way that's what's going on in Rodney's brain right now. Mainly, what's going on in Rodney's brain is that he's really pissed off that he fucked up and brought you here and he really wants to send you back to where you came from ASAP. There's not a whole lot else going on."

"You know him pretty well, then?" The general smiled.

"Rodney's an open book," John said with a shrug, taking a sip of coffee. "You can pretty much tell everything he's thinking by looking in his eyes...although that's less helpful than it seems, because mostly what he's thinking about is food!" He grinned.

"Oh, yeah. Ain't that the truth." The general grinned back at him. "Or sex, of course," he added, and grinned again when John choked on his coffee at that.

"So, back to business," John said in a bright tone when he'd recovered. "Mission reports."

They worked for a couple of hours, comparing notes as the general read through the reports.

"So in your universe you found a ZPM on Dagan. We searched there, but didn't find anything." The general shook his head.

"Ah, yeah, that was the Indiana Jones mission," John grinned. "Not that finding it did us any good because we didn't get to keep it."

"Of course, your Rodney had the incentive of Acastus Kolya holding you hostage to help motivate him," the general muttered grimly.

"Kolya didn't show up in your universe?" John asked. He'd often thought how much easier that mission would have been without Kolya, but the general was telling him they'd never even have found the ZPM if Kolya hadn't come along and given Rodney an incentive to be more brilliant than usual.

"No, Kolya didn't show up in my universe because Kolya was dead," the general said grimly. "I killed him myself."

"You killed him?" John turned, startled. The general had gone very still, and his body was taut. "When? Why?" John asked.

"Why?" the general said, in a surprised tone, as if it was obvious. "He touched Rodney," he growled. "During the big storm—he took a knife to Rodney's arm and scarred him for life with his mark. He put his mark on my husband. He hit him, held him prisoner away from me, and he hurt him." The general looked absolutely outraged and John was unprepared for the other man's vehemence. "You think I'd let him live after that?" the general growled, in a hard, cold tone that sent shivers up John's spine. "I followed him through the Stargate and killed him with my own hands in a fair fight in front of his people. I think that sent a message to the Genii that nobody hurts anything of mine and lives to boast about it. They haven't troubled us again since."

"Right. Okay." John nodded slowly. Just when he'd been feeling at ease with the guy, the general showed a darker side than John had hitherto glimpsed. He suddenly had the feeling that this man was really not to be messed with—or, perhaps more to the point, Dr. Rodney Sheppard was not to be messed with—because if anything happened to him, John had the feeling that the general would go ballistic, and his revenge would most likely be short, to the point... and fairly brutal.

They flicked through some more mission reports, and then the general paused, deep in thought.

"I'm wondering—as your Rodney found that ZPM—did he also have any luck with the Arcturus weapon, or didn't you encounter that?"

"No, we encountered it all right," John sighed, throwing his counterpart a file. "There you go."

"Man, what a fuck-up that mission was," the general said, flicking open the file.

"For us, too," John told him.

"Ah." The general read through the file, quietly, one finger playing with the pendant around his neck as he did so. When he'd finished, he looked up, shaking his head. "Well, that's pretty much what happened in our universe too," he sighed. "Half a solar system blown away and we were lucky to get out of there in time."

"You agreed to allow your Rodney to work on the weapon, then?" John had always regretted allowing Rodney to talk him into that one, and he was pleased to hear that his counterpart, for all his air of being totally in command of any given situation, had also tripped up on that occasion.

"Yes," the general sighed and then he glanced sharply at John. "But it says here you agreed, too. What did he say to convince you?"

"Some stuff about trust and having faith in his abilities, yada, yada, yada, and then he threw in something about him winning the Nobel prize...and he just looked so kind of...well, you know what Rodney's like. He was like a really determined and over-eager puppy with extremely sharp teeth and he just wouldn't take no for an answer. I suppose on some level, also, I really wanted to be convinced because that weapon sounded really cool, although I'm still kicking myself about that. How about you? Did your conversation with him go the same way?"

"Yeah, pretty much by the sounds of it. Although my Rodney also threw in a truly spectacular blow job for good measure," the general said and then he grinned when John pulled a 'too much information' face. "Your Rodney must be pretty damn persuasive if he managed to convince you without the benefit of a blow job," the general commented.

"Well, you know Rodney," John shrugged, wondering what a truly spectacular blow job from Rodney would be like and then catching himself wondering and shrugging the thought quickly away.

"Anyone would think you had a soft spot for him," the general murmured.

"Nice try, General, but we're not going there," John replied. "And I wish he hadn't damn well persuaded me. That decision still keeps me up at night. How about you?"

"It doesn't give me sleepless nights—although I can't say the same for Rodney," the general

said softly. "My Lady Elizabeth really wasn't happy about that one." He gave a little grimace.

"Yeah, ours wasn't thrilled, either. She gave Rodney a chewing out half the base heard."

The general frowned. "Maybe that's why it still occasionally keeps you awake at night, then," he murmured.

John glanced at him questioningly, trying to figure out what he was getting at.

"Well, you supported Rodney—so surely some of the fallout should have come your way when it all went wrong?"

The general raised an uncompromising eyebrow and John didn't know how to respond to that. He hadn't thought of it that way. He was saved from having to reply by a knock followed by a flurry of activity at the door as the two Rodneys tumbled excitedly into the room. Now that they were dressed identically John had to take a moment to tell them apart—the likeness really was uncanny. His task was made even harder by the fact that neither of them would keep still and they kept finishing each other's sentences.

"We think we know how to fix the QDD!" one of them announced.

"Of course it isn't simple. What happened was that during transport the energy exchange was so great that the internal crystals were obliterated," the other said.

"Completely burnt out," the first one continued.

"Which sounds bad..."

"And in fact is bad..."

"And at first we weren't sure whether we'd be able to repair them or not...."

"We looked at them for hours and then we decided we couldn't repair them...."

"Even two brains working at our level of genius can't repair crystals that damaged...."

"Although if anyone could have repaired them, it would have been us...."

John glanced at the general to find the other man glancing back at him, looking as completely bemused and stupefied as he was feeling. If having one Rodney around was both exhilarating and faintly scary, having two pacing around the room, both of their hands flailing madly as they spoke at top speed, was positively disorienting.

"So we need to find some new crystals...."

"Sounds easy. Isn't..."

"We checked through an inventory of everything we've found on Atlantis since arriving and there aren't any crystals of the exact shape and energy type we need..."

"We could modify some but that would be time consuming..."

"But...then I remembered there was this planet we went to about 5 months ago, PBX-250—"

"Hang on!" the general said, finally managing to get a word in edgeways. "PBX-250—wasn't that the planet with the really unfriendly aliens? The ones who wanted to tie us up and sacrifice us to their gods?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" his Rodney said impatiently—John had identified him by his slightly longer hair and the glimpse of his leather collar beneath his shirt.

"As I recall, we barely got away with our lives last time. What makes you think it would be different in this universe?"

"Maybe they don't worship the same gods in this universe?" the general's Rodney suggested.

"Unlikely," the general snorted. "The colonel and I have just been going through their mission reports. Things seem to happen pretty much the same, with just a few minor details changing."

"Well, it's worth a try!" both Rodneys said at the same time.

"Okay, pipe down here. It's hard enough concentrating on one of you, let alone both of you," the general said. "You—Rodney—sit down and shut up for a second. You—Dr. McKay, could you finish explaining this, please?"

The general's Rodney sat down with a dramatic sigh and a little pout in his husband's direction. The general reached out a lazy arm and cuffed the back of his head affectionately in response. That left their own Rodney taking center stage—something he looked happy about, as usual.

"According to Dr. Sheppard here, Planet PBX-250 used to be some kind of Ancient outpost," Atlantis' Rodney said, puffing up his chest as he held forth. "The people who live there now are primitive—as evidenced by the whole human sacrifice thing—but if we can get around them, then there is Ancient technology just littered around the place. Dr. Sheppard said there was a large chamber, sunk deep into a mountain rockface, where he definitely saw crystals of the kind we need—and all kinds of other stuff. There might even be a ZPM!" he said excitedly. "Not that that would help with the QDD, of course, but..."

John closed his eyes and tried to concentrate—there were far too many acronyms being casually thrown around in this conversation.

"But a ZPM would be very useful for 101 other things on Atlantis!" the other Rodney finished excitedly, clearly unable to keep out of the conversation. The general cuffed him lightly on the back of the head again.

"Shh. It's hard enough following one of you, let alone both," he growled.

The general's Rodney grinned back at his husband. "John—this is do-able!" he exclaimed. "We could gate over there, grab the crystals, gate back, install the crystals in the QDD and be home in a couple of days."

"Is that true?" John said, turning to his own Rodney for confirmation. "Is it that simple?"

"Well, theoretically, yes," Atlantis' Rodney replied. "Although the crazy religious cult people might not be so keen on us stealing their stuff."

"They're not using it!" the other Rodney protested. "They don't even know what it's for! It's just lying around, underfoot!"

"Rodney, last time we went there, they nearly barbecued us," the general pointed out.

"But we do have the advantage of the fact that you've been there before so you know what to expect," John said slowly. "And also we'll have the benefit of surprise—you've been there but we haven't—so they won't know anything about us and they won't be expecting us. If we plan it right..."

"I could draw up some maps and we could talk about how we deployed our team," the general said slowly.

"If we went in prepared, with a clear mission objective and the right equipment..." John continued.

"Hah! And they thought we were confusing when we did that," the general's Rodney said, his eyes gleaming. "So?" He looked at the general expectantly. "Is it a 'yes,' John?"

The general glanced at John who sighed and held up his arms in surrender. "It's the over-eager puppy dog thing, like I said," he muttered.

"Yup. They're just so persuasive. Even without the truly spectacular blo..."

"Uh, yes!" John told the Rodneys, interrupting the general before he could finish that sentence. "We'll need to run it by Elizabeth, of course, but I don't think she'll object, so it's a yes."

"When do we set off? I could be ready in an hour," his Rodney said.

"Tomorrow will be fine, Rodney," John told him, with a roll of his eyes. "I know we want to send these people back home as soon as possible, but we do have some planning to do

before we set off."

"Fine. Okay. Fine. We need to do some preparation, in any case, because the housing was burnt out during the transfer. It'll need ..." The Rodneys continued their discussion as they walked back out of the door.

"Well, at least they seem to be working together okay," John said once the two Rodneys had left.

"Yeah—for now at least. I guess there's nothing like a good intellectual puzzle to keep them both out of mischief, and away from each other's throats. Now, let's get working on that plan," the general said, clearing a space on the table.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, John left his office, rolling his head from side to side and getting a satisfying crack in response. He could feel the usual pre-mission excitement building in the pit of his stomach and was actively looking forward to the following day. First, he had to run a couple of errands, though. He stopped by the practice room first and found Ronon there, as he often was, sparring with a couple of volunteers. John beckoned him over. He and the general had already gone over the mission plan with the big man, but there were some private orders he wanted to give him.

"Listen, tomorrow I want you to stick to Rodney Sheppard like glue," John told him.

Ronon gazed at him dispassionately, assessing that comment.

"Got that?" John asked. "I want you to be his personal bodyguard—make sure that nothing happens to him. I don't want a hair on his head harmed."

"Very well," Ronon nodded, his eyebrow rising ever so slightly in unspoken query. "Just Rodney Sheppard—the other Rodney? Not our own? Not the general?"

"Nope. The general can take care of himself and our Rodney always seems to manage just fine."

"You think that the other Rodney is a weak link?" Ronon frowned.

"No. Not at all. I just know that if anything happens to him, the general will go ballistic and that's a complication we can do without. Understood?"

"Understood." Ronon nodded his head thoughtfully.

\* \* \*

His next port of call was the lab. It was late, but Atlantis' Rodney was still working, as John had known he would be, lying on the floor gazing up at the underside of the QDD. There was no sign of the other Rodney—or, in fact, anyone else—but John wasn't surprised by that. They'd been working in here since the crack of dawn and he doubted Rodney had taken any breaks, save for a couple of minutes to snatch some food which he'd have undoubtedly stuffed down his face while still working. All the others were either too sensible to work such long hours, or less personally invested in the problem.

"McKay, time to turn in," he said.

Rodney glanced out from underneath a pile of burnt-out crystals and various bits of housing, looking befuddled by the interruption. John noticed the dark smudges under his eyes and the weary lines around his mouth.

"Not yet. It's still early," Rodney said.

"It's nearly eleven," John pointed out. "And we're leaving at six tomorrow."

"Eleven? I never usually turn in before one," Rodney said brusquely, returning to his work.

"Well, you will tonight," John told him firmly.

"Oh, I'm sorry—for a moment there I assumed you were the general mistaking me for his slaveboy with all the ordering around that's going on," Rodney snapped.

John felt his eyes narrowing and he gazed at Rodney for a moment. He knew for a fact that the scientist had worked all through the previous night, and he had learned to read Rodney very well since they'd all arrived on Atlantis. The scientist could get by on very little sleep, but when he did he was snappy, and his reaction times were slower, and John didn't want to risk that on the mission the following day—especially if the natives were as unfriendly as he'd been told.

John decided not to take no for an answer. He reached out and waved his hand in front of the light panel, plunging the room into darkness.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rodney demanded.

"Turning off the light so you can get to bed," John replied sweetly. "And..." He thought about it for a moment, heard a satisfying mental click, and then grinned. "I've kind of told the city not to turn it back on again for a few hours," he added. "I doubt you'll be able to over-ride that particular command, Rodney."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Rodney slid out from where he was working and bumped his head on the underside of the housing as he sat up. John winced. "Ow! Dammit, that's your fault and this is ridiculous!" Rodney told him, charging across the room and trying the light switch, anyway. The room remained resolutely dark.

"Sorry." John crossed his arms over his chest and stood there impassively, waiting for the torrent of complaints. He wasn't disappointed.

"I have work to do, Colonel, and I should point out that I'm Head of Science here, not you, and I can work whatever damn hours I want to. I don't tell you how to run the military operation here and I don't expect you to interfere with my work. Now turn the bloody lights back on again!" Rodney ranted.

"Nope." John remained where he was. Rodney was so close to him in the dark room that he could see the angry flash of his eyes as he spoke, but John wasn't going to back down on this one. "I'm sorry, Rodney, but I want you rested before we gate into the arms of these sacrificial cultists tomorrow. It won't be an easy mission and I need you to be alert."

"When have I ever not been alert during an offworld mission?" Rodney snapped.

"Look, Rodney," John said, in a softer voice, leaning in close, "you've been under a lot of strain these past couple of days and you need the rest. Why are you fighting this? You're clearly exhausted—you look like shit—why not just go with it?"

Rodney stood there for a moment, and he was so close John could hear the restless, nervous movements of his hands, hands that John had never known to be still.

"Cute," Rodney muttered at last.

John frowned. "Sorry?"

"Your concern for my wellbeing. Cute. I'm very touched. Now you've done your duty. Turn the lights back on again please, Colonel."

"No." John's voice was harder this time. Rodney stood there for a moment and they were eye to eye, nose to nose, and John had a sudden, surprising impulse to grab Rodney and kiss him, hard, on the mouth, and make him give in. He bit the disquieting impulse back down. Damn, but having the alternate Rodney and John around was giving him the most disturbing thoughts. The moment passed, and Rodney's mouth settled into that hard, crooked line that John was very familiar with.

"Fine," he said, in a quieter tone than John had been expecting. "You win, Colonel." He

grabbed his jacket from the back of a chair, strode over to the door and opened it. "Oh, one last thing," he murmured. "Who is going to be in charge tomorrow?"

"What?" John frowned, wondering what the hell he meant.

"You or the general?" Rodney asked, the sweetness of his tone masking the savagery of his question. "You're just a lieutenant colonel, after all, and he's a general, so he outranks you." It was meant to wound and it did.

"Me," John snapped at him. "I'll be in charge—as usual. You're my people. I know you and what you're capable of. And he didn't earn that rank in this universe, so as far as I'm concerned, he doesn't outrank me. He's just a very useful guest who's coming along with us to help out."

"Does he know that?" Rodney asked sweetly. "Only...he doesn't strike me as the kind of man who likes anyone else to be in charge." And with that he gave John a fierce, triumphant little look and turned on his heel and walked away.

John stood there for a moment, feeling like he'd been punched. Damn McKay for always knowing his weaknesses and where to hit—although John knew that he'd laid down the gauntlet himself by effectively throwing the scientist out of his own lab in the first place. He should have known he wouldn't get away with that without Rodney retaliating in some way. Rodney McKay was no pushover—and John had come to accord the scientist a grudging respect for that.

With a sigh, John decided that his errands weren't yet over for the evening. He took himself off to the room that General and Doctor Sheppard shared and hesitated for a moment outside, wondering what he might be interrupting. He thought of the other Rodney, with that endearing giggle of his, pressing himself into the general's arms, and imagined the other John kissing him, hard, fiercely, passionately, on the mouth, the way John had just wanted to kiss his own Rodney. John shook his head, trying to banish the mental image. These thoughts didn't go anywhere so he'd have to find a better way of handling them. He knocked on the door and a few seconds later the general opened it and squinted at him blearily. He was only wearing a pair of boxer shorts, which he'd clearly hurriedly pulled on as his fingers were still pulling at the waistband as he caught sight of John.

"Sorry to disturb you. I just wanted to make sure we were clear on one thing before tomorrow," John said softly, glancing over the general's shoulder at the mound in the bed which shifted at the sound of his voice and uncurled to reveal Rodney Sheppard. The scientist sat up, his eyes sleepy and his hair looking disheveled and...kind of adorable. John swallowed down hard.

"Is there a problem? Has something happened?" Rodney Sheppard asked, sliding out of the bed. He was completely naked and John felt his dry throat become even dryer. The scientist had a compact body, with firm, pale flesh, and there was something utterly compelling about his naked body. He was unconscious in his sexuality, with the loose, unembarrassed movements of someone both familiar and comfortable with his own nudity. John's eyes

flickered down slowly over the broad firmness of his shoulders, the tattoo on his upper arm, the little red bite mark over one nipple, and the smooth curve of his cock as it swung in a nest of soft brown curls.

"Eyes front and center, Colonel," the general growled in a low, warning tone.

John tore his eyes away.

"Rodney—either get back in bed or put some clothes on," the general snapped over his shoulder. "You're lucky it's you," the general told John. "Anyone else would be lying on their back with my fist mark on their jaw right now for looking at my husband like you just did. If your interest lies there, then you have your own Rodney, remember," the general added softly.

"Sorry...I didn't mean anything. I was just startled," John said quickly. "There's no problem, Dr. Sheppard. I just wanted a word with the general," John directed this comment over the general's shoulder and Dr. Sheppard sighed and slid back into bed, but he remained sitting up, his arms wrapped around his knees, gazing at the door. "I wanted to be clear on one thing tomorrow, General," John told his counterpart. "I just realized it wasn't something we discussed earlier and I think it's important that it's said. I really appreciate your help, but these are my people, and there can only be one person in command."

The general gazed at him for a moment, an assessing look in his eyes.

"I realize you technically outrank me," John began, trying to address the other man's arguments before he made them.

"But not in this universe," the general said, which had been John's exact point from earlier. John wasn't surprised about that—during the course of the day he'd found they thought the same way on a number of issues. "It's all right, Colonel. I wasn't intending to throw my weight around tomorrow. These are your people, however much they might look like my own. Besides ...I'm looking forward to seeing you in action," he said.

John nodded, relieved, and then he thought about that last comment for a moment and felt his stomach clench nervously. He wasn't sure he wanted to be assessed by this man—or, at least, he didn't want to be found wanting by the general of all people.

"Way to pile on the pressure," John grumbled.

The general laughed. "I have every faith in you," he replied, patting John's arm. "You're me, remember?"

"Well. Kind of." John shrugged, glancing over the general's shoulder at Dr. Sheppard again. If he was the general, then he'd have someone that enticing waiting for him when he got back to his quarters and not a cold, empty bed. He wondered what it would feel like to have a naked Rodney wrapped around his body, those restless hands of his running over his skin, teasing and arousing him.

The general cleared his throat warningly.

"Anyway, like I said, I'm sorry to disturb you," John said, tearing his gaze away from Dr. Sheppard again. "Sleep well."

He turned and left, but his footsteps didn't take him back to his own room. Instead he found himself walking towards Rodney's room. He paused outside, wondering what the hell he was doing—or intending to do—and then, finally, he knocked.

Rodney opened the door a few seconds later...looking disappointingly clothed. He gazed at John resentfully.

"Come to make sure I'm actually in bed, Colonel?" he asked. "No, wait, you're probably here to tuck me in yourself. Or maybe you want to handcuff me to the bed just to be sure I don't leave. Having the general around seems to be having a bad effect on you."

"I actually came to apologize for pushing you around earlier, but you know what? Forget it," John told him, snapped out of his mood by Rodney's sarcasm and seriously not wanting to even consider the enticing mental image of Rodney handcuffed to a bed. "If you want to work all night, then go ahead. You're a big boy. But if you screw up on the mission tomorrow because you're worn out, then I promise you that you'll hear it from me, long and loud."

"You've turned the light back on in the lab?" Rodney asked suspiciously.

John concentrated for a moment and then nodded. "Done. But I meant what I said, Rodney."

"Fine." Rodney glowered at him.

"Good." John stood there, wanting more than anything to wrap his arms around Rodney and kiss him hard. The thought of the other Rodney's erotically compelling naked body was still running through his mind, in an endlessly repeating loop, bringing fantasies and emotions to the surface that John had never allowed himself to seriously consider before.

"Great," Rodney said.

They stood there for a moment, both as tense and taut as piano wire, although presumably for different reasons, John thought. He wondered what Rodney's mouth would feel like under his, and whether his body was the same as the other Rodney's. Presumably it was, minus the tattoo and a little softer around the middle maybe. He licked his lips, remembering the other Rodney's cock, smooth, slightly curved, and beautiful, nestled in its bed of light curls. As for the tattoo... John liked the idea of Rodney somehow being marked as his, bearing his initial on his flesh, imprinted there for everyone to see. He could feel himself getting hard just thinking about it...which was ridiculous, because this wasn't going to happen. Whatever the other Rodney and John felt for each other, this Rodney, standing here in front of him, had never given any indication that he was anything other than

straight. He was always bleating on about his thing for blonde women in a way that John often found irritating. Besides, he couldn't just...what, pin the scientist against the wall and kiss him? Rodney would scream loud enough to wake up the entire city and after that John could imagine the questions he'd be subjected to, to say nothing of a possible charge of sexual assault. Rodney might just be vindictive enough to pursue something like that to the nth degree.

John took a deep breath and the highly charged moment passed. "Well, then. You can go back to work. If you want." He nodded in Rodney's direction, and then turned and walked back to his own room as fast as he could. He was barely inside the door when he opened his fly, grabbed his aching cock and rubbed it with a few brisk strokes, which was all it took before he was coming, all the time imagining Rodney McKay, his Rodney, on his knees in front of him, that crooked mouth of his opening wide to suck him.

End of Part Three

#### Part Four: Sacrifice by Xanthe

After all his warnings to Rodney, John thought it was ironic that it was he who didn't get much sleep that night. Between worrying about the mission and whether he'd impress the general or not, and fretting over his disturbing fantasies about Rodney, John tossed and turned for most of the night. His feelings for Rodney weren't new, but they'd never been this sharply in focus before. Up until now, he'd mainly viewed the scientist as an amusing pain in the ass, someone he enjoyed being with, someone he occasionally mentally undressed, but not someone he'd ever seriously move in on, and certainly not someone he'd have a relationship with. His sexual experiences with men had mostly been one-night stands which John had enjoyed well enough, but not to the point where he thought he was exclusively gay or wanted to live with another guy. To be honest, he'd never actually wanted to live with anyone. He'd been a loner for years and that was the way he'd always thought he preferred it, but seeing the general's close relationship with his Rodney had brought up some emotions that John had long kept buried. Maybe having someone waiting for him when he came home would be nice. No, specifically speaking, maybe having Rodney waiting for him at home, naked, willing and compliant would be nice. John sighed as his cock immediately responded to that thought by hardening once more; he could hardly believe he truly wanted to give up his solitary existence for Rodney McKay, of all people, so why couldn't he stop thinking about the scientist?

His rational mind told him that this was just a natural response to the unsettling way the doppelgangers behaved with each other. Not only were they clearly in love, but they made no pretence at hiding it. Their customs were just very different to those in this universe and their ease when discussing sex and their own relationship made everyone on Atlantis uneasy by comparison. No wonder you're having these unsettling thoughts about Rodney McKay, his rational mind told him, but they'll pass. It's just a natural reaction to the situation, just ride it out.

However, his cock wasn't remotely interested in anything his rational mind had to say. His cock didn't want these emotions to pass; it wanted Rodney and seemed to have sprung into a life of its own around the scientist. John jerked himself off three times during the night just thinking about holding Rodney down and sliding into that firm, white ass; about Rodney kneeling in front of him and looking up at him with the same look of adoration that Rodney Sheppard was always giving the general; about Rodney taking him in his mouth, his big hands sliding around John's body to caress his naked bottom.... John gave up trying to rest at around four a.m. and took a long, cold shower, reasoning that his cock couldn't possibly require any more attention for the rest of the night.

By contrast, Rodney McKay looked positively refreshed when they met in the gateroom a couple of hours later. John gazed at him suspiciously, wondering whether he had actually taken his advice and gone to bed early, despite all the scientist's protests on the subject. Either way, he knew better than to ask. Rodney almost certainly wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd done what John had told him to, so there was no point.

The general and his husband had reverted to their own clothes again—John guessed they felt more comfortable in them and he was glad because it would make it easier to identify everyone when out in the field.

The six of them took the puddle jumper through the gate and the general directed John where to land. The two Rodneys kept up a constant stream of nervous chatter in the seats directly behind him, sniping and squabbling with each other like children in the back of a car on a long journey. John grinned and let the sound wash over him. He actually liked the sniping—both the Rodneys had a biting wit and some of their comments made him laugh out loud. He knew that some people—Major Lorne, for example—found their own Rodney to be a royal pain in the ass and couldn't stand his need to provide a running commentary on everything around them when they were on offworld missions, but John liked it. One Rodney was entertaining enough and two made him crease up with laughter on occasion. When he glanced sideways at the general, who was sitting next to him, he got the impression the other man had come to the exact same conclusion and they shared an amused look.

They landed in a field and left the puddle jumper, and John activated the cloak, then looked around.

"So far so much the same as most places we end up," he muttered.

"It's exactly the same as the PBX-250 in our universe," Rodney Sheppard beamed happily. "So that means the chamber we're looking for is..." He twirled around, fingers snapping excitedly, "this way," he said, deciding on a direction and leading them forward.

Ronon quickened his pace a fraction to catch up with him and then loped alongside him easily, ignoring the constant stream of chatter. John gave a quiet smile as he brought up the rear—he knew he could trust Ronon to obey his orders.

They found the chamber set into the side of a hill and the Rodneys spent a couple of hours

fiddling around with various complicated-looking door mechanisms until they finally gained entry.

John glanced around nervously as they stepped inside. "So far, so easy," he muttered to Teyla.

She shook her head. "I agree. It has been very easy," she murmured back.

"This is going great," Rodney Sheppard beamed excitedly. "Last time we were here, it took me almost an entire day to get into the chamber, but this time it was quicker because I knew how. Also, last time someone kept distracting me by asking how long it would take—over and over again." He shot a sour look in his husband's direction. "And someone else went off to shoot something to eat because he'd run out of power bars and that's when the crazy cultist natives were alerted to our presence and showed up," Rodney Sheppard continued, with an equally sour look in Ronon's direction.

The big man remained impassive. "Isn't there another door you should be opening?" he boomed at the Rodneys, deadpan.

John tried to swallow back his yelp of laughter and noticed the general doing the same.

"Plenty," Rodney Sheppard said with a distinct sniff in Ronon's direction. "This way," he announced, sweeping over to a door at the far end of the chamber.

The door soon succumbed to the combined force of both Rodneys and John left Teyla to guard the outer entrance and followed the rest of the team in. They walked for a long way, and then finally came to another door.

"How many more damn doors do we have to work our way through?" John asked.

"That's exactly what he said last time," Rodney Sheppard muttered, gesturing with his head in the general's direction.

"I wouldn't mind if we could just walk through them, but every time we come to one, you two have to spend an hour working on the damn thing," John grouched.

"These doors were built by the Ancients well over 10,000 years ago, Colonel," his own Rodney told him with a reproving look. "They haven't been opened since then. You can hardly expect them to just slide back."

"The doors on Atlantis did when we first arrived," John reminded him.

"These are older and were built for a different purpose, and they have a different mechanism," Rodney snapped at him irritably. "Now, are you going to shut up and let the clever people work?"

John gave a heavy sigh and paced around the small, dark hallway anxiously. He didn't like how cooped up they were down here. If someone attacked them right now, then they were sitting targets. The Rodneys finally got the door open and they all walked into a dark room.

"One of you, touch something—you have the strongest genes," Rodney commanded, nodding at the two Johns.

John slid his hands onto what appeared to be a console and it hummed into life beneath him. The room lit up, revealing a literal junkyard of Ancient technology, scattered all around the place.

"My God!" Rodney McKay breathed, his eyes lighting up as they always did when confronted with this kind of thing.

"It's good, isn't it?" the other Rodney grinned at him. "Now—over here. I think this was where I saw those crystals."

The two of them worked for a while, sorting through various boxes and examining various consoles, but to no avail. John started to feel antsy. This was taking too long.

"How much longer?" he hissed, pacing back to the doorway and looking out.

"Found something!" Rodney McKay waved his arms around excitedly. "Ah. Drawback," he muttered. The other Rodney pushed him out of the way. Rodney shoved him out of the way in return and the two glared at each other.

"Boys, boys," the general said. "Play nice now."

"What's the drawback?" John asked, striding over.

"These are the crystals we want, but they're fixed into a power generator. We'll have to uncouple them from their housing and that could take a while," Rodney McKay told him.

"How long is 'a while'?" John demanded.

"Could be anything from ten minutes to four hours," Rodney replied cheerfully, reaching for his tools.

"Well, hurry," John snapped. "I'm just...getting a bad feeling."

"Hmm. Me, too," the general said, turning to stare at him.

"We haven't heard anything from Teyla for nearly half an hour," John murmured.

"She's on a half-hourly check in," the general shrugged. "No reason why we would hear from her before then."

"No, but..." John touched his radio. "Teyla," he called. There was no reply.

"Okay, now I'm really worried," John said.

"Could just be the radio," Ronon said. "We're a long way down."

"Yeah, but...we really need to go and investigate. McKay, Sheppard—get those crystals out as soon as you can. Ronon, you stay here and guard them. General, you're with me," John told the other man. The general nodded and they both left the room at a run.

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They raced up to the entrance, matching each other stride for stride. It took several minutes and John's anxiety increased as they got closer—and heard the sounds of fighting. He turned to glance at the general, who nodded grimly at him, and both men increased their speed.

They burst through the final door to find Teyla holding her own with a pack of savages—or at least that's what they looked like to John. There were all dirty, smelly and clad in animal skins. One of them had a necklace made entirely of human teeth around his neck. There were also three of them lying on the ground so John guessed this fight had been going on for a little while, and that Teyla had been her usual proficient self. John drew his gun, but the little pack of savages ignored it, clearly not recognizing what it was or what it was capable of. John fired a warning shot into the air, but even that failed to make an impact—and then several of the savages launched themselves at him, knocking the gun out of his hand, and after that it was just a messy hand-to-hand fight.

"Why didn't you call for backup?" John asked Teyla a few minutes later, after they had reduced the savages to a pile of groaning bodies on the floor.

"I tried, Colonel," she replied. "But my radio was broken when they took me by surprise."

"How the hell could they take you by surprise?" John glanced around at the fields below them. There was no way these savages could have crept up on her from behind. She had to have seen them coming.

"They did not come from outside," Teyla told him grimly. "They came from within. There must be another entrance to the complex."

"Damn," the general swore. "That means—"

"Oh, shit," John growled, tapping his radio. "Ronon—both Rodneys—this is Colonel Sheppard—get out of there. You need to run."

"We're nearly there," one of the Rodneys replied in his ear. "We've nearly got the crystals."

"I don't care. Leave the damn crystals. Just get out of there!" John commanded.

"Just a few more minutes, Colonel," the voice said, and John knew it was his own Rodney speaking.

"Rodney Sheppard—get your ass out of there now!" the general growled beside him, and then the two Johns turned to face each other as they heard a rumbling from inside the complex. A few seconds later, another small band of natives emerged and threw themselves on them, screaming and yelling a battle cry.

John glanced around as they fought—the Atlanteans were by far the better fighters, but the savages made up for that in sheer numbers. John wished he could locate his gun because that would have given them the edge they needed, but it was lost somewhere underfoot amidst the scrum of people. He guessed that both Teyla and the general had experienced the same problem—and he could have kicked himself for wasting time on a warning shot first time around.

He was worried about the Rodneys, and kept glancing anxiously towards the door leading into the underground complex. Several minutes of hard fighting later, he heard the booming sound of gunfire and Ronon strode purposefully into the fray. He didn't seem to have any compunction about firing on the unarmed savages and decimated their ranks with several rapid shots from his guns before the savages swarmed over him and his guns went the same way as John's had.

John looked around frantically, trying to locate the Rodneys. He finally caught sight of Rodney Sheppard; Ronon was shielding him from the fight, keeping their assailants away from him and John heaved a sigh of relief that Ronon was obeying his orders. He wondered where their own Rodney was and presumed he was hiding out of sight. He could fight if he absolutely had to, but they all knew he wasn't exactly an expert in hand-to-hand combat.

John was distracted for a few minutes by a man with long white hair who had what looked like several small children's skulls hanging from his belt and who was proving hard to take down. John finally dispatched him and turned again to see how the rest of his team were doing. He was surprised to find that Rodney Sheppard had left the safety of Ronon's side, and was now holding his own, quite successfully, with two opponents. He clearly wasn't as strong a fighter as the rest of them, but, John realized, much to his own surprise, he was pretty damn good! John also noticed that he was working his way towards the general and the general was working his way towards his husband, slowly, purposefully, each of them casting little peripheral glances in the other's direction as they fought.

They were on the verge of winning when John heard a yelp behind him.

"Enough!" a deep voice boomed and the savages fell back. John whipped around to see what the hell was happening. He quickly located the man who had called an end to the fight. He was enormous—bigger even than Ronon—and twice as fat. One side of his face was dyed red with what looked like blood, he wore a necklace of bones around his throat...and he had one big arm wrapped around Rodney Sheppard's chest while with his other hand he was pressing a long, sharp, jagged knife against the side of the scientist's neck.

"Lay down your weapons or I will kill him," the man yelled, in a deep, bone-chilling voice.

John glanced at the general, wondering what the hell the other man would do. He remembered what the general had told him about Kolya and had a sudden vision of the general going ballistic and them all ending up on a sacrificial table somewhere as a result. However, the general seemed to be surprisingly still and calm.

"Let him go now, and I promise you that your death will be quick and painless," the general said, in a low, hard voice. The big man grinned at that and John had to admit he didn't blame him; the general was hardly in any position to bargain, after all.

"I could kill him with a flick of my knife before you got within spitting distance," the big man laughed, digging his knife into Rodney Sheppard's neck to illustrate the point. John saw a large droplet of blood well up into the cut and begin to trickle down Rodney's throat. He glanced at the general again, unsure what to do.

"We should give them our wea..." he began.

"No," the general interrupted him tersely. "If we do that, then they'll just kill us all. Rodney," he called, "close your eyes."

John was surprised when Rodney Sheppard did just that, immediately, without hesitation. "What the hell are you...?" he started to say, but then he saw the flashbang concealed in the general's hand. What happened next was so fast that it was all a blur.

The general threw the flashbang onto the ground, at the same time shouting, "Now, Rodney!"

John turned away to avoid the effects of the stun grenade, but saw Rodney Sheppard lunge forward, covering his eyes, as the flashbang went off, momentarily blinding and deafening everyone taken unawares by it. At that exact same moment, the general threw the knife he had in his other hand directly at the big man's chest, barely a few inches away from Rodney's shoulder. It embedded itself there with a satisfying thunk and the big man went down, with a rattling sound. Rodney tore himself away from the big man's grasp and ran towards John and Ronon at the same time as the general started running in the opposite direction. The general swiftly covered the distance with his long legs, reached the big man's side and pulled his knife from his chest, only to plunge it deeply into his belly—and then he slowly and deliberately twisted it. John winced as the big man howled like an animal.

"You should have opted for the quick death," the general hissed as he pulled his knife out of the man's belly. "Nobody harms what is mine and lives. You were dead the minute you put your knife to his throat."

The other savages, still reeling from the blinding, deafening effects of the flashbang, and surprised to find their leader so effortlessly felled, ran away towards the trees.

Ronon walked over to where the big man was lying and, John couldn't help noticing, he gave the general a look of profound respect when he reached him. "He will take several hours to die," Ronon commented, glancing dispassionately at the man lying groaning on the ground and poking him with the tip of his boot.

"I know," the general replied, wiping his knife on the dying man's ragged hide pants to clean it. "But I did warn him. If he had listened to me, then I would have made his death swift and painless, as I promised." He got up, and then walked purposefully back to where his husband was standing, beside John. He placed a hand under Rodney's chin and lifted it to examine the wound on his neck.

"All right, beloved?" he whispered softly, his eyes raking over Rodney to see if he was injured anywhere else.

"Fine. Just...shaken. I didn't even see him coming, which is irritating because he's the size of a house," Rodney muttered.

"Hmmm," the general said, his eyes coming to rest once more on the blood trickling down his husband's neck. "Hold still while I take care of this."

John watched, astonished, as the general leaned forward, and, instead of wiping the blood away or trying to stem the tide with a cloth, he clamped one hand around the back of Rodney's head and the other on his shoulder, pulled his husband forward, and sucked at the wound with his mouth. Rodney shuddered slightly in his grasp and his hands went around the general's waist to steady himself. John was struck by the look of total trust in Rodney's eyes. He hung there, very quiet and still, while the general pressed his tongue, hard, against his neck, stemming the bleeding.

"Do you think Doctor Beckett is familiar with this method of healing a wound?" Teyla muttered into his ear.

"I don't think any of us are," John whispered back.

They carried on watching, startled, as the two men stood there—and John could have sworn that he heard a faint humming sound. Then the general released his husband and gently moved Rodney's head sideways so that he could examine the cut again. John gazed at it in astonishment—the bleeding had completely stopped, and the cut itself looked smaller—and was clearly well on its way to healing.

"How the hell did you do that?" he asked.

The general didn't move, or take his eyes off his husband. "We are bonded. It's Kaeira," he muttered impatiently.

"What is Kaeira?" Teyla asked and John was glad that she didn't know, either.

The general frowned, but still didn't remove his gaze from his husband. "Energy flow, life-force," he muttered brusquely, as if that explained everything. Then, finally, he seemed satisfied that Rodney was okay, and only then did he draw the other man into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around him and held him tight, every muscle in his body taut.

John could feel the emotion in the embrace and wanted to look away, but he was too transfixed by the sight in front of him. They looked so easy together, so right. Rodney's body seemed to fit with the general's, sliding against him and locking into place with the ease of long habit. John was surprised to find a wave of envy rising up in his chest and he fought with it, trying to push it back down. Dammit, but it was becoming harder and harder to suppress these emotions and he was angry with himself that it should be necessary. The longer the doppelgangers were here, the more John found himself struggling with thoughts and emotions he'd always been able to control before.

"Sorry about getting caught. I thought I was getting better at this. I guess I'm out of practice," Rodney muttered into his husband's shoulder.

The general pushed him back and delivered a heartfelt kiss to the other man's forehead. "Out of practice?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"While you were away last week...I didn't exactly keep up with my practice sessions," Rodney muttered, shame-faced. "I was busy working on that reactor shielding and I guess I got distracted," he sighed.

"Did you run, either?" the general asked.

Rodney flushed and squirmed, shaking his head. "Nope. Sorry. The whole distracted thing applies again there, I suppose."

"Hmmm. We'll take care of it later. Now...come here." The general drew Rodney back into his arms and kissed him firmly on the mouth and John felt another pang of sharp envy. He couldn't help noticing the way Rodney melted against his husband, his hands sliding around the general's body. John was jolted out of his reverie by his sudden realization that their own Rodney was not with them. He glanced around anxiously and tapped his radio urgently.

"Rodney?" There was no reply, just the faint hum of static. "Rodney?" he yelled, turning to look at Ronon. "Where is he? Did he come up with you?"

"No." Ronon shook his head. "He wouldn't leave the crystals, but this one," Ronon nodded in Dr. Sheppard's direction, "he ran out of the chamber when ordered, so I went with him."

"You left Dr. McKay down there?" the general asked, in an incredulous tone, striding towards them.

"I was given my orders," Ronon replied, his voice even deeper than usual, glancing at John.

"Orders? What orders? To leave a man behind? Whose damn orders were those?" the general snapped.

"Mine," John said softly. "I ordered him to stick with your Rodney whatever happened."

"Why?" The general gazed at him blankly.

"Because I was worried about what you'd do if something happened to your Rodney. Rightly, as it turned out." John turned to glance pointedly at the big man lying on the floor, his breathing coming in rattling gasps. John saw a gun lying beneath one of the felled savages and he picked it up and fired it at the big man's head, putting him out of his misery.

The general's expression darkened. "Don't interfere with me or mine again, Colonel," he hissed, standing nose to nose with John. "Rodney Sheppard is my responsibility. He doesn't need any special guarding. I know his capabilities. You should have paid more attention to the safety of your own Rodney; he was your concern."

"Let us not argue on this matter," Teyla interceded. "We should instead find out what has happened to Dr. McKay."

John glanced at the general, still feeling angry, his fear and guilt about Rodney's fate combining in his gut to create a queasy feeling. "You're right. Let's get moving," he hissed, picking up more discarded weaponry from the battlefield and then running full pelt towards the underground chamber again.

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The door to the room with all the Ancient technology in it was open when they got there. John ran full tilt into the room, skidded to a halt and looked around desperately; the room was completely empty.

"McKay!" he yelled. "Where the hell are you? McKay?"

"Colonel. Over here," Teyla said, kneeling down.

John ran over to her and touched the red stain on the ground beside her. His fingers came back coated in blood.

"There's another exit," Ronon said, from the far side of the room, kicking some boxes out of the way and revealing a door.

"They'll have taken him back to the village for sacrifice," the general said grimly, striding over to the second doorway. "Ronon, can you track them?" he asked.

Ronon nodded and wrenched open the door.

John felt his heart thud in his chest at mention of the word 'sacrifice'. This whole thing was turning into a nightmare and the worry in his gut was making it hard for him to think straight. He followed on behind the others, his fingers closing around his gun. He didn't like losing anyone on a mission, but this wasn't anyone—this was Rodney, their Rodney—no, his Rodney. They had to get him back because John wasn't entirely sure he could contemplate what his existence would be like without the scientist in his life.

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"It's getting late," the general said as they emerged from a long, winding corridor into daylight once more. There were long shadows on the ground and overhead the sun was sinking inexorably towards the horizon. "They always perform their sacrifices at sundown so we don't have long. We'll follow their tracks to the village and then figure out what to do next. They do have a very long sacrificial ritual which they'll be preparing for right now, so that might buy us some time. Ronon, lead the way. Rodney, you next where I can see you. Colonel—I want you beside me. Teyla, bring up the rear."

At some point, and he wasn't sure how it had happened, or even when it had happened, the general had assumed command, and John didn't feel calm enough right now to wrest it back from him. Besides, now wasn't the time to argue about that; right now, all John cared about was getting his Rodney back.

Ronon soon located some tracks, and stood there, surveying them grimly for a few seconds. "He's still alive," Ronon murmured. "We know that, at least."

"How?" John asked.

"Well, firstly, why bother transporting him at all if he's dead? But also...there is a trail of fresh blood." Ronon pointed to the droplets of blood on the ground and John found his fingers curling uselessly around his weapon again.

"They staked him," Rodney Sheppard said quietly, glancing at his husband.

"What?" John turned angrily to glare at the general.

His doppelganger sighed. "I'm sorry, John, but Rodney's right. They've tied him to a stake by his hands and feet," the general told him softly. "That's how they're carrying him back."

"How can you possibly know that?" John demanded.

"Because that's what happened to me when we visited this planet in our universe," Rodney Sheppard replied.

John felt a tide of anger rise in his belly. "Wait a minute, you never mentioned this before," he growled, advancing on the general, his hands balling into fists.

"We told you the natives of this planet offered up sacrifices to their gods," the general replied in a firm tone, standing his ground.

"Yes, but you didn't say they caught Rodney—your Rodney. You know how what happens in one universe has an uncanny knack of happening in the other and you knew we hadn't been here. What were the odds that if we did, then Rodney—our Rodney—would end up the same way as yours?" John hissed, invading the general's personal space, standing just inches away from him. It felt strange—disorienting—to be so angry with someone who looked so much like himself.

The general didn't back away—he faced John down. "I'm sorry. We didn't mean to mislead you," he replied. "But we had no idea that this would happen. We assumed that because we'd been here before, we'd know what pitfalls to avoid."

"Well, it might have been useful to give the mission leader that information," John said, his voice rising in anger.

The general sighed. "You're right," he said. "But I don't honestly think it would have made any difference."

"At least, in our universe, John rescued me," Rodney Sheppard interjected, looking from one John to the other with a worried expression on his face. "So there's a good chance it'll happen the same way again."

"Things don't always happen exactly the same way," John reminded him in a snarling tone. "Radek died in your universe, remember?"

"John, blaming us won't get Dr. McKay back," the general told him.

"We're here, on this planet, because of you. We put our lives on the line for you.

Rodney put his life on the line for you. As far as I'm concerned, right now I don't give a damn if you get to go back to your freaky leatherman universe, or if you have to live out the rest of your lives in our universe, but Rodney—my Rodney—wanted to send you home because he feels guilty about bringing you here in the first place," John said, breathing heavily. "And he's sure as hell paying for that. Did you want to go back so badly that you felt it was okay to lie to us?"

The general's expression darkened. "We didn't lie," he growled. "This was a sin of omission if anything, John. It wasn't intentional. We had no idea this would happen. Now, you can stand here and argue with me about it, or we can go and rescue your Rodney before they slit his veins and let him bleed to death all over their sacrificial table—and I, for one, refuse to allow that to happen."

John glared at him for a long moment, breathing deeply, trying to get some control back.

"We'll get him back," the general murmured softly. "I've done it once and I'm pretty damn sure I can do it again. Now, are you with me, Colonel?"

John had no choice—the general was their best hope of getting Rodney back and they both knew it. He gave a disgusted sigh and then nodded at Ronon to get the hell on with tracking where they'd taken Rodney. As they walked, John tried hard not to think about Rodney, injured and alone, being tied to a stake like an animal and carried back to some stinking village to be sacrificed. Somehow, though, it was all he could think about, and his anger boiled in the pit of his stomach, hot and explosive.

The trail led them back to a collection of mud huts which passed for the natives' village and the sun was low on the horizon by the time they arrived. They hid in bushes, watching as the villagers gathered around a large fire. There was some kind of ritual dance going on, and a great deal of what could have been singing, but sounded a lot like wailing. John edged closer to get a better look—and then stiffened. The mud huts were arranged in a loose circle around a massive stone table, and on that table, tightly bound with ropes, was Rodney. John hoped the scientist was unconscious because he could imagine how freaked out he'd be if he wasn't...but then Rodney moved his head, and John bit down on his lip as he saw Rodney blinking, a dazed, shocked expression on his face that twisted into a moan of pain. He was trying to pull on his restraints, but was too tightly bound and one of his arms looked crooked and misshapen. John was half way to his feet when the general pulled him back down.

"Not yet," his doppelganger told him. "Just before the sacrifice, they all gather around the fire to purify their sacrificial knives. They'll leave him alone for a few minutes then—not even a guard because the entire village has to share in the purification ritual. That's when we'll make our move."

"Knives? Plural?" John felt his heart skip a beat as he saw that all the villagers were carrying small knives as they danced and sang. Somehow he'd imagined that there would be a High Priest, and some kind of big sacrificial knife.

"Yes. They take it in turns to stick a knife into their offering," the general said grimly. "Every single villager joins in—even the children. They put their blades into the fire first, and then they line up and each one plunges their knife into the victim as they go by. They sing throughout, and to prolong the whole thing they start with the extremities—feet, hands, arms, legs. They want him to bleed to death slowly during the course of the night, not die with a slit throat within the first couple of minutes."

John honestly thought he might be sick and he doubled over for a second, trying to catch his breath. He felt a hand on his back.

"We won't let it happen," the general told him in a low, hard tone, rubbing reassuring circles on his back. "Okay, here's the plan. When they move over to the fire, I want you, Rodney, to go and free Dr. McKay. You need to get him as far away from here as possible. I doubt you'll get him as far as the puddle jumper—he's not in good enough shape and I don't want you to become too far separated from the rest of us in any case. Take him to that big tree we passed on the way here and wait for us there. Teyla, Ronon, Colonel—wait until they turn back to the sacrifice. When they realize he's gone, make as much noise as possible and do as much damage as possible to distract them so that Rodney can get Dr. McKay as far away as he can. Understood?"

"No," John said flatly. "I want to be the one who cuts him free." He honestly didn't think he could stand by and let anyone else do it—no, it wasn't that—he didn't trust anyone else to do it.

"Come with me," the general said, taking his arm and pulling him away from the rest of the team. "You're the better fighter, John. We need you to be part of the distraction," he explained once they were out of earshot.

"Rodney Sheppard will screw this up. I should do it," John said insistently.

The general put his head on one side and regarded him for a moment. "Rodney won't screw it up. He might bitch and whine, but we both know that when the chips are down, there's nobody else we'd rather have by our side. This isn't about Rodney not being up to the task, this is about you."

"No, it isn't—and I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge of this mission, remember?" John growled.

"Circumstances change, Colonel," the general snapped back. "Listen, John," he said, in a more conciliatory tone, "I understand where you're coming from, believe me, but I've assumed command because, frankly, you're not thinking clearly at the moment."

"Bullshit. You're assuming command because you like being in command," John snarled.

The general gave a little grin. "Well, yes, I do," he nodded. "But that's not what this is about. You've been fighting a war on two fronts ever since Rodney got taken and no military commander is at his best doing that."

"What the hell do you mean, a war on two fronts?" John frowned.

"One with them, the people who took Rodney, and the other with yourself," the general told him. "With how you feel about him."

"Oh, fuck this," John raged. "I've told you before, I'm not you, General. I don't feel anything about him other than that he's a member of my team and he's in trouble right now."

"Bullshit," the general said, echoing John's own phrase back to him in an eerily familiar tone. "Now you can lie to yourself, Colonel, but don't damn well lie to me. You are all over the place right now and you have been since they took Dr. McKay. I know, because I know what that used to feel like, before I made Rodney mine and drummed a few basic rules into him."

That brought John up short and he thought about it for a second. "The crystals..." John shook his head. "You ordered your Rodney out of the chamber and he obeyed while my Rodney stayed...."

"That's right. My Rodney left the chamber immediately because I told him to and he knows that if I make something a direct order, then he obeys it—instantly and without question. And if your Rodney had done the same, we wouldn't be in this mess," the general snapped. "Now, when we get Dr. McKay out of there—and I do mean when, not if—then you can work on that with him, but right now we have a job to do and I need you to follow my orders. I know it doesn't come easy to you because, hell, it doesn't come easy to me, either," the general gave a wry grin, "but we're both military, Colonel, and we both know there can only be one leader in a situation like this. So, what's it to be?"

John gazed at him for a moment as the general's words hit home. The other man hadn't pulled any of his punches and John hated being so easily read, but at the same time he had to acknowledge that the general was talking a lot of sense.

"Okay," he said at last. "But when we get out there, you'd better stand well back because I'm feeling pretty bloodthirsty right now."

"I know," the general shrugged. "They took him, and they hurt him, and he's yours, so that hurts you. I know exactly how you're feeling right now, John. You'll learn to control it—in time—the way I controlled it when my Rodney was threatened earlier, and when we get out of this, I'll be pleased to give you some advice on how to do that, but for now I'm happy to just point you in their direction and let you do your thing."

"Good," John said grimly, turning and stalking back to where the others were standing.

\* \* \*

They watched for several more minutes until the sun was hovering on the horizon, and then the villagers all began to gather around the fire. The noise they were making changed, from a tuneless singing into a sinister humming. John's fists clenched and unclenched uselessly as he stood there, never taking his gaze off Rodney, who was clearly wide awake now, and tugging frantically at his bonds as the humming grew louder and more menacing.

"Hang on in there, Rodney...we're coming, we're coming," John muttered to himself.

Then the general touched his Rodney's arm and John watched, anxiously, as Rodney Sheppard slipped silently out of the bushes and ran across the village circle towards the stone table. The general was right about his husband's abilities—he was quick and efficient in his work and as soon as he reached Rodney McKay's side, he slid a hand over his mouth to keep him quiet, turned his head so that he could see he was being rescued, and then took his knife out and began cutting through the ropes that secured McKay to the table. John watched, itching to get out there and help, every single muscle in his body taut with tension. The general had one eye on what was happening and the other on John, and he put a hand on John's shoulder to calm him. There were a lot of ropes, and it was taking Rodney Sheppard a long time to cut through them all, although John could see he was working as fast as he could.

"One of us should get out there and help him," he muttered to the general.

"No, we'll stick to the plan," the general told him firmly, and John was suddenly grateful that someone was thinking clearly right now, keeping him grounded, because he knew he was hanging on by a thread.

"Now, we need to hold them off for as long as possible to give the Rodneys a chance to escape," the general reminded the team. "But we can't hope to defeat an entire village. So when I give the command, I want you to throw your flashbangs into the melee and then get the hell out of there and rendezvous back at the tree. That should buy us enough time. Understood?"

They all nodded, and John had to admit that it was a good plan, the kind of plan he'd have come up with himself if he wasn't in some weird place in his head right now, where all he wanted to do was grab Rodney and hold him tight while at the same time simultaneously laying waste to the people who had hurt him. He was torn between the two impulses and had never felt this out of control in his life before. It simply wasn't him. He was always the calm, together one—whatever happened, he kept a cool head, and he had no idea how to

deal with these new emotions that were currently rampaging through him.

Rodney Sheppard finally managed to sever the last rope, and then he pulled Rodney McKay up. McKay gave a little cry of pain that John heard from his vantage point, even above the sound of the humming, and one of the villagers turned around...and then all hell broke loose.

"Now!" the general commanded and John leapt into action, throwing himself out of those bushes and towards the fire without even thinking. He was dimly aware of Rodney Sheppard grabbing McKay's arm, slinging it over his shoulder and helping the other scientist away from the village, and then John was surrounded by villagers and he went in all guns blazing, firing at anyone who looked like they wanted to follow the two Rodneys. He could hear Ronon to his left and was grateful for the big man's familiar bulk and solid ability to hold his own in a fight. Teyla was beside Ronon, hair loose and face focused as she fought with her usual skill and grace. The general was side by side with John, fighting for all he was worth, a look of grim determination on his face, and he was good, John noted distantly as he fought. He knew a few moves that John himself hadn't yet mastered, but John made up for that in sheer zeal and he knew that he was roaring at the top of his lungs as he fought, screaming out all the mixed up emotions that were churning him up inside. Ronon kept shooting him little glances of surprise—this wasn't John's normal fighting style. Usually, he was quiet, calm and quick-witted, but now he was like a dervish—fast, furious and loud. Even John himself didn't know what was going on inside him; he just knew that these people had tried to kill Rodney and on some level that made him really, really mad.

It was all he could do to bring himself to obey the general's orders to release the flashbangs. John just wanted to stay there and fight, but the general positioned himself at John's side and just before he gave the order, he cuffed John around the head to get his attention and make sure he was listening. John threw the flashbang reluctantly at the shrieking savages attacking them and then made his retreat, covering his ears with his hands as he ran.

The villagers were clearly seriously freaked out by the flashbangs because they didn't follow them. John ran faster than any of the others and reached the tree first, to find Rodney Sheppard crouched down in front of Rodney McKay, talking to him urgently. John's Rodney was lying with his back against the tree; his skin was pale, and John could see a dark streak of blood on his temple.

"He's hurt," Rodney Sheppard told him. "I'm worried he'll lose consciousness. I've been talking to him, trying to keep him awake, but he can't walk and we need to get him out of here."

"We will," the general said grimly, coming up behind them. "Colonel, you take one arm and I'll take the other. Ronon, lead the way, same formation as before—double-quick-time back to the puddle jumper."

The two Johns pulled the injured Rodney up and he gave a low moan of pain as they began running, carrying him between them, his legs dragging and stumbling as they went. It was a long, hard slog, but they covered the terrain in a surprisingly fast time. John breathed a sigh

of relief as they ran across the field where he'd parked the jumper. He snapped the control to de-cloak it and they staggered inside. Teyla closed the door while the two Johns dumped Rodney at the back on one of the bunks, then John ran for the controls and fired up the jumper, spinning it straight up into the air.

"Dial the gate!" he yelled at the general, but the other man shook his head, an expression of shocked resignation on his face.

"I can't," he said. "You'll have to land again, John. We won't be going anywhere tonight — the Wraith have just dialed in."

"What?!" John's hands faltered on the controls and he gazed at the general in disbelief. "No! Seriously, after all we've just been through, this cannot be happening!" he shouted at nobody in particular.

"Looks like they dialed in about ten minutes ago so I'm guessing they're here to do a culling. They'll keep the gate occupied for most of the night while they feed. There's nothing we can do but land, keep cloaked, and wait them out," the general said.

"Rodney needs a doctor!" John protested.

"I can't change what's happened," the general snapped. "Land the damn jumper. In a few minutes, there'll be Wraith darts crawling all over the place."

John did what he was told, reluctantly, and then slammed his hand onto the console. "Damn," he growled.

"Yeah. Talk about bad luck," Rodney Sheppard said behind him.

"We'll just have to settle down here for the night. Make ourselves comfortable," the general said.

End of Part Four

### Part Five: The Long Night by Xanthe

John unbuckled himself from his console and went to the back of the jumper where Rodney was still lying where they'd left him.

"Are we home yet?" Rodney asked, his eyelids fluttering open.

John took a deep breath and sat down beside him to check over the damage. "Not yet," he murmured. "We've had to make an unscheduled stopover. I'll get you to Carson as soon as I can, Rodney. Now, where does it hurt?"

"Oh, great," Rodney sighed. "First of all, I get skewered by crazy people wearing animal skins and now I get to have you as my personal physician. No offence, Colonel, but you're not exactly Dr. Beckett."

"Well, I'm the best you've got right now," John told him, unzipping Rodney's jacket and sliding it carefully off the other man's crooked arm.

"Ow! No, ow!" Rodney protested and his face went a sickly shade of green. John managed to get the jacket off him and threw it onto the bunk.

"His shoulder is wrenched from where they staked him," Ronon informed them helpfully from behind, where he was watching the proceedings with his usual air of mild disinterest. "It should be strapped up. I could do that."

"No thank you!" Rodney snapped. "I think I'd prefer to wait until we get back and have it done under a full anesthetic."

"Carson probably wouldn't anesthetize you for that," John told him with a grin. If Rodney was complaining, then he couldn't be too badly hurt. He turned his attention to Rodney's face. The scientist had a large bruise on his jaw, and, more worryingly, a deep cut on his forehead which was dripping blood. John took hold of Rodney's face in his hands to examine it and Rodney went still beneath him in a way that felt oddly nice. There was blood running down the side of Rodney's face and John felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to lean in and press his tongue against it to stem the tide, the way he'd seen the general do to his Rodney earlier that day. The impulse was so strong that he felt himself moving, wanting to hold Rodney down and do...some-thing...he wasn't sure what.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rodney protested, placing a hand on John's chest to keep him at bay, and John came to a halt, startled, and realized that his mouth was just inches away from Rodney's forehead.

"Just...looking," John said, unconvincingly.

"Looked more like you were sniffing," Rodney said suspiciously.

John got up quickly and turned to the general. "That cut is pretty deep. Couldn't you—you know, do that thing you did earlier?" he asked. "The Kaeira or whatever you called it."

The general gave him a surprised look. "No. It wouldn't work," he said, shaking his head.

"Why the hell not?" John asked. "It worked on your Rodney."

"That's because we're lifebonded," the general replied, fingering the pendant around his neck. "I can only heal Rodney and he can only heal me—it's the way it works. I can't heal just anyone."

"Could I heal him?" John asked, glancing back at his Rodney, who was looking very pale and

was clearly in shock.

"Not unless you were lifebonded, no," the general said. "And I really don't think Dr. McKay could stand that ritual right now. He's too weak. Apart from anything else, it's not something you can rush into in the heat of the moment. It takes preparation and you have to be in the right mental place. Also...the title means exactly what it says. You'd be bonded for life. He'd be yours and you'd be his and somehow I'm not sure you're ready for that yet."

"What the hell are you all talking about?" Rodney muttered wearily behind him.

"Nothing. Just...exploring an option," John replied, feeling angry again, although this time he didn't even know why. He had no particular wish to bond with Rodney for life, whatever the hell that entailed, but at the same time there was a part of him that liked the thought of Rodney being his, completely and irrevocably. He felt guilty about it because Rodney was injured, but dammit, he'd liked how Rodney had felt under him just now, when he'd held still while John examined him.

"Kaeira may not be exactly what you think it is, in any case," the general told him softly. "I didn't heal Rodney—we just shared the wound between us to lessen its effect. Look." He moved aside the collar of his jacket to reveal a faint red mark on his neck, very similar to the one on Rodney's neck.

John stared at the general, dumbfounded. Just when he thought he understood these men, that he was getting a handle on how it worked between them, he went and discovered something like this—something that showed how very different both they and their universe were.

"We don't have that, whatever it is," John said. "I've never heard of that in this universe."

"Just because you've never heard of it doesn't mean it doesn't exist here," Rodney Sheppard pointed out. "It worked for us, despite the fact we're not supposed to be here. While we're here, we're subject to the laws of your universe, so if Kaeira was unique to our universe, then it shouldn't be possible here, but it was because we did it. Not that I'm suggesting you lifebond with McKay to help him because, frankly, the way things are between you two right now, you'd probably end up killing each other during the bonding ritual, but..."

"Okay, Rodney. I think you've explained that enough," the general cut in.

"Just saying." Rodney Sheppard shrugged.

"Look, I don't care what kind of healing gizmo they've got," Rodney said behind him, "but I'm seriously freaked out by all this talk of lifebonding, so can you all just shut up and let me get some sleep?"

John turned around sharply. "No," he said firmly. "The one thing you can't do right now is sleep, Rodney. You've got a concussion. You've been drifting in and out of consciousness for the past couple of hours and you need to stay lucid. I don't want you to be in a coma by the

time we get you back to Carson."

"I really don't think it's that bad," Rodney said, sitting up straight to glare at John with more intensity...an effect that was ruined when his face went green and he leaned over and retched onto the floor of the jumper.

John winced. "Just sit back and don't move," he said, sitting down beside Rodney and putting a firm hand on his good shoulder, stroking him to calm him down. "Ronon, get me a medical kit. Looks like we'll have to do things the old fashioned way," he sighed.

John managed to make Rodney comfortable and then he examined the contents of the medical kit. "Hold still and try to be a better patient for me than you are for Carson," he admonished, squeezing some antiseptic lotion onto the wound on Rodney's forehead. Rodney grimaced, but held still while John cleaned up the wound and then pressed a bandage onto it and fastened it. The cut was deep and John doubted the bandage would stem the blood flow for the entire night, but it was the best he could do.

Rodney lay back when he was done, and closed his eyes. He didn't look good.

John prodded his leg. "Eyes open, Rodney. You need to stay awake, remember?"

"Then keep me awake!" Rodney snapped.

John gazed around at the assembled company. They were all tired, hungry, disheveled and miserable and wanted nothing more than to get back home, and instead they were stuck here for the night with a wounded team member. Teyla was sitting up front by one of the consoles, her hair all mussed up, while a muddy Ronon was lounging on the floor, his arms loosely wrapped around his knees. The general and his Rodney were seated on the opposite bunk and were the only ones who looked remotely comfortable, John thought. Rodney Sheppard was leaning against his husband's shoulder and the general had an arm wrapped around him and was stroking his neck gently with one long index finger. John sighed and wished he could do that with his own Rodney right now—and not be met by a hissing, snarling handful of outraged scientist. There was no way his Rodney would ever lean into him like that. He noticed his Rodney's eyes drooping and prodded him again, earning an angry glare from the scientist.

"Okay, we need to talk about something," John said. "Anything. Just to keep McKay awake."

"We could talk about what a huge fuck-up this mission was," Rodney Sheppard muttered. "Seriously, was there anyone who didn't fuck up? I got held hostage."

"I did not see the men who attacked us and so was not able to warn you in time," Teyla said with a sigh.

"I omitted to tell the colonel the full details about our own trip to this planet," the general said.

John nodded to him, glad the other man was big enough to own up to that. John realized that he was actually a little bit relieved to find that his counterpart did make mistakes. He'd put him on something of a pedestal and it was good to know that the man was human after all.

"And I gave Ronon some orders which didn't pan out too well in practice," John replied.

The general nodded back at him and they shared a moment of quiet understanding.

"I didn't fuck up," Rodney McKay said.

"Oh, you so did," his counterpart snorted. "The colonel told you to get out of that chamber and you didn't."

"Yeah, well, I noticed how you hot-footed it out of there the minute the general told you to jump, leaving me behind," Rodney scowled.

"And if you'd done the same, then maybe we wouldn't have had to rescue you," John interjected, wondering just how long it had taken the general to drum those 'basic rules' he'd mentioned into his Rodney and whether he'd have similar success if he tried it.

"Oh, great. So this is all my fault now," Rodney griped. "That's fine. Blame the dying guy. He can't fight back."

"You're not dying," John snapped. "And you seem to be doing just fine with the fighting back thing. That head wound isn't slowing you down any when it comes to complaining."

"Right now, I have a lot to complain about," Rodney retorted.

"Yeah well, join the club."

"And what did you mean about giving Ronon some orders that didn't pan out too well in practice?" Rodney asked.

John shifted uneasily. "I told him to stick close to Dr. Sheppard, not to leave him on his own," he muttered.

Rodney gazed at him steadily for a moment, and then realization hit and John was surprised to see a sudden burst of sheer, naked hurt flash into the scientist's eyes.

"Right. Fine," Rodney muttered, gazing at John out of a pair of wounded blue eyes.

John winced, knowing exactly what was going through Rodney's mind right now and how he was convinced that he was bottom on John's list of priorities. The truth was so much the opposite that John felt winded and he gazed helplessly back at Rodney, wishing he could explain that to him.

"Oh, God," Rodney Sheppard said in an undertone to his husband. "Honestly, it's painful to watch sometimes."

"Shh," his husband replied. "They'll figure it out."

"There is absolutely nothing to figure out," Rodney McKay snapped.

Everyone glared at everyone else.

"I didn't screw up," Ronon said. Everyone glared at him. "Well, I didn't," he shrugged.

"He's right," John said. "You get the mission Gold Star, Ronon."

Ronon sat back, looking pleased with himself.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Rodney sat up too quickly, and then swayed, the blood draining away from his face.

John put a hand on his arm. "Steady, Rodney. Take it easy."

"I knew I didn't fuck up—I got the crystals!" Rodney said. "In my jacket pocket." He clicked his fingers impatiently at John and pointed at his jacket. John handed it over to him. Rodney fished around excitedly in the inner pocket and pulled out a handful of crystals...all of them broken. Rodney's face crumpled. "Damn," he muttered. "Must have been smashed when they knocked me out," he said, looking utterly dejected. "Sorry," he murmured to the general and the other Rodney. "Would have been good if they were okay. Could have sent you home within a couple of days."

"You tried, Rodney," John told him, shaking his head.

"And failed," Rodney said bitterly. He lay back down again, the shattered crystals falling from his fingers onto the puddle jumper floor. He looked so utterly miserable that John wished he could put an arm around him and pull him close.

The general leaned forward and gave Rodney a gentle smile.

"It's okay, Dr. McKay. It would have been nice to go home, but we don't mind hanging around a little longer. We'll get the QDD fixed somehow. I have complete faith in both my husband and you. If anyone can sort this out, you two will do it."

"Yeah, because he's so damn perfect," Rodney snapped, scowling at his doppelganger. "He didn't drag anyone out of their universe against their will, and he jumped like a rabbit when ordered out of that chamber, so he didn't get caught, knocked out, tied to a stake and dragged through acres of muddy fields and then strapped down onto a sacrificial table by blood-thirsty aliens."

The general smiled broadly, which John thought was pretty nice of him considering Rodney's

outburst. "He's not perfect. Neither am I. We've both fucked up in our own universe," he told Rodney.

"Really? How? We've got some time on our hands and I'm all ears," Rodney said, wrapping his good arm across his chest and gazing expectantly at the general. "I could do with hearing something entertaining right now."

The general glanced at his husband. "Do you mind me telling this story?" he asked.

Dr. Sheppard chewed on his lip miserably. "I don't like remembering it," he muttered.

"This is sounding more and more appealing," Rodney said in a tone of some glee.

John prodded his leg again. "Be nice," he warned. "This is a very small ship and we've got to spend several hours together."

"Well, they've been so holier-than-thou since they got here!" Rodney exploded. "'In our universe, we don't have any hang ups about freaky, gay, leather sex. In our universe, we don't lock people up. In our universe, we're not sexually repressed like you people,'" he parodied. "'We don't suck people out of their own universes against their will. We're much too clever for that. And in our universe we like to wear collars and leashes and have constant sex with tubloads of lube.'"

"What?" John raised an eyebrow.

Rodney flushed.

"I asked him for some lube the other day. It seemed to freak him out," the general explained. John had to bite back a grin as he imagined how Rodney had reacted to that. "Look, Dr. McKay, I'm sorry if you feel we're throwing our weight around. We don't mean to. It's just that we're used to things being a certain way in our universe and it's just hard to adjust," the general said in a conciliatory tone. "But, trust me, we're not perfect."

"It was Duranda," Rodney Sheppard said unexpectedly. "The Arcturus weapon? That's the story he wants to tell."

"Oh. That." Rodney went strangely quiet.

"I persuaded John to let me go and work on the weapon again. He persuaded my Lady Elizabeth." Rodney Sheppard bit on his lip. "We blew up half the solar system and Lady Elizabeth was really, really mad." Rodney Sheppard winced. "It was a big fuck-up all around."

"Aw, did daddy spank you?" Rodney asked, in a less than kind tone.

"No," Rodney said quietly, gazing at the general. "No, he didn't. I still think he should have, but that's his decision."

"It wasn't his fault," the general said quietly, sitting back and putting an arm around his husband again, pulling him close. "I know what he's like when he gets intellectually excited by something and I knew what was going on with him. I agreed to take his case to Lady Elizabeth. I supported him. It was my responsibility when it failed, not Rodney's."

"So what happened?" John asked, fascinated by this glimpse into how their society worked.

"Lady Elizabeth wanted me to punish him," the general replied. "This was a huge mistake, committed in the public domain, and she thought he should be publicly punished."

"Oh, my God," Rodney breathed. "You people really are sick."

"Do you want to hear the story or not?" Rodney Sheppard snapped.

McKay shrugged and sat back, but he was clearly interested, despite himself.

"It's the way our society works," the general explained. "My Lady Elizabeth felt Rodney deserved a public reprimand. The sentence was 30 swats. As Rodney's top, I was responsible for delivering the penalty. While you have a brig, we have a designated punishment room—and anyone can attend and watch if it's a public disciplinary."

"Oh, God," Rodney breathed again, looking extremely uncomfortable.

"I refused to agree to the penalty," the general said. "Rodney hadn't lied to me. Yes, he was perhaps too eager to go back and work on the weapon, and, yes, he let his intellectual

arrogance overwhelm his better judgment, but I knew all that and still I agreed to support him."

"So...you refused to punish him?" John said slowly.

"Yes." The general nodded.

"Does that mean someone else had to do it?" John asked.

"No! I wouldn't let anyone else touch him!" the general said in a horrified tone.

"So what happens in that situation?"

"What do you think?" the general asked.

It all slotted into place—Rodney Sheppard's evident misery at the thought of this story being told, and what the general had said to him the previous day about John taking some of the blame for their own Arcturus disaster. John flushed.

"You took the punishment for him," he said slowly.

"Yeah," the general nodded. Rodney Sheppard made a little sound in the back of his throat and nestled closer to his husband. The general stroked his arm gently.

"I'm guessing that must have been...kind of humiliating." John made a face.

"It was. I'm the highest-ranking top on the base apart from my Lady Elizabeth," the general said with a sigh. "I also run the military operation and I'm in charge of all the military discipline, so this was a pretty damn humiliating situation to be in. It wasn't an easy decision to make, but I couldn't in all conscience allow Rodney to take all the blame. It wouldn't have been right. I knew I'd allowed myself to be persuaded against my better judgment and that was my fault, not his."

"So what happened?" John asked. "Who punished you? Rodney?"

"No!" The general grinned. "No, that's not the way it works in our universe, John. As I said, Lady Elizabeth is the highest-ranking top, but she rarely administers any punishments herself. She puts Peter in charge of that, the way I put Lorne in charge of it for the military personnel. She and I have enough to do, frankly, without overseeing that as well."

"Peter Grodin?" Rodney McKay asked, frowning. "I thought you said he was her sub?"

"He's a switch," Rodney Sheppard replied. "It works well for him—he gets to sub to Elizabeth in their private relationship and be pretty toppy with the rest of us as part of his job. He seems happy about it, anyway."

"Your entire society is just so hard for us to understand," John told the general, shaking his head.

"Then you'll understand that we feel the same way about yours," the general replied. "My Lady Elizabeth accepted my decision to take the punishment in Rodney's stead. I presented myself in the punishment room at eleven the following morning and it took place." He shrugged.

"Nobody went to watch," Rodney Sheppard added in a proud tone. "They all like and respect him too much. Nobody wanted to see him humiliated. It was just Elizabeth and Peter."

"And they're two of my closest friends, so it wasn't too bad," the general added.

John frowned. "If they're good friends, then I'd have thought it would be even worse," he commented.

"No. Nobody liked it, least of all me, trust me," the general laughed. "But it was done quickly and quietly, with the minimum of fuss, and then I was able to go back to my quarters and Rodney spent the whole day trying to make it up to me in various, extremely inventive ways, so it wasn't all bad." He grinned at his husband affectionately.

"Crazy. Completely insane," Rodney McKay muttered to himself.

"I think it is very romantic," Teyla said. "You must love each other very much."

The general and Dr. Sheppard grinned at her and Rodney sighed heavily.

"Oh, for God's sake, don't encourage them," he muttered, closing his eyes.

John prodded him again to keep him awake. "I think it's a nice story as well," he said.

"Well, I didn't notice you volunteering to take my place in Elizabeth's office after she chewed me out for the same bloody mission in our universe," Rodney snapped at him.

"Well, that's because you and I aren't married and I don't get any blow jobs from you," John retorted, enjoying the look of shock that passed over Rodney's face.

"Ugh. These people are having a bad effect on you, Colonel," Rodney told him primly.

John grinned and then found himself laughing. He couldn't stop himself. The general joined in, and then Ronon, and then they were all laughing—except for Rodney McKay, who sat there with a face like a sour lemon.

\* \* \*

The night wore on, long and weary, and blood began to seep through Rodney's bandage. John could see that the scientist was growing weaker. His face was as pale as a Wraith's right now, and he gradually stopped talking although he was still valiantly trying to remain awake.

"Hey...time to change that bandage," John said gently, nudging him.

"Tired..." Rodney muttered, his eyes rolling backwards.

John caught hold of his head as it clunked to one side. "Stay with us, Rodney," he said in a low, firm tone.

Rodney's eyelids fluttered closed and then, with a great sense of struggle, opened again. "Just a nap?" he asked.

"No," John replied, carefully undoing the soiled bandage and placing another one over the wound.

"Not even a really short one? A catnap?" Rodney requested blurrily.

John held his face firmly between his hands and looked into Rodney's confused blue eyes. "No. Now stay with me, Rodney!"

"Dammit, John, I'm tired," Rodney muttered.

John stared at him. It was the first time Rodney had ever called him by his first name, so he knew the scientist's condition must be serious. Rodney would only let his guard down if he was feeling too ill to notice. "I know, Rodney, I know," he said softly, his thumbs moving gently over Rodney's cheeks. "It won't be much longer. Are you in any pain?"

"Just...feel cold," Rodney said, his good hand coming up to rest on John's wrist.

"Christ, Rodney, you're cold as ice," John said.

"He's in shock," the general said, leaving his bunk and coming over to look at the scientist. "We need blankets." He rifled through the survival gear stored under the bunks and fished out a couple of blankets and handed them to John.

John thought about it for a moment, and then, not caring what Rodney or anyone else thought, he scrambled onto the bunk beside Rodney, pulled him over so that the scientist was resting against his body and tugged the blankets around them both. Rodney was too out of it to do more than murmur a slight whine of complaint, but John thought that was more because the movement hurt his arm than a protest about sharing John's body warmth.

"You'll soon warm up now," John told him, using the cover provided by the blankets to disguise the fact that he had wrapped an arm around Rodney's chest and was holding him tight against him. The back of Rodney's head came to rest on John's shoulder and despite the circumstances, John couldn't help thinking that it felt good there. It felt right, as if it belonged there. He rested his cheek against the side of Rodney's head, fighting all his instincts to kiss the other man's hair. Rodney settled back against him, his body relaxed in John's grasp—although John was sure that was only because he was so sick. If he'd been well, John knew the scientist would have been pushing him away as quickly as he could.

An hour or so passed and the others all fell asleep, leaving just him and Rodney lying there, Rodney's weight warm and solid against John's chest, both of them staring into space. Rodney shivered and whimpered every so often and John felt helpless, knowing there was nothing he could do but stay here and keep Rodney warm until morning. Rodney's eyelids drooped again and John squeezed him.

"Wake up, Rodney."

"Can't. Just let me sleep," Rodney replied, his eyes remaining closed.

John squeezed him more firmly. "No. Eyes open—that's an order," he said.

"I'm not military," Rodney slurred. "Can't order me around."

"Sure I can. I'm in charge of this mission and it isn't over yet, so you have to do what I say." John moved his head and spoke directly into Rodney's ear, softly, in an undertone. "Eyes open, Rodney. Do it for me. Trust me."

Rodney seemed to think about this for a moment and then, with an act of will so great that John could feel it through every single muscle in Rodney's body, the scientist opened his eyes. John gave him another reassuring squeeze and held on tight. He knew he should feel guilty, but this might be the only chance he got to hold Rodney and although he was worried about the scientist's condition, he couldn't help but relish the opportunity to hold him in his arms.

John started whispering stuff in Rodney's ear just to keep him going. He thought Rodney was listening—every so often he gave a little grunt or his eyes widened as if he was following what John was talking about. It wasn't anything particularly interesting—just a mish-mash of facts about his life and any stray thoughts that entered his head.

"Did you know I threw up the first time I went flying?" John said.

Rodney managed a twisted little grin at that. "Flyboy not so tough, huh?" he whispered.

"Nah—wanted to fly something, anything, all through my childhood, and then when I finally got the chance, I threw up. Had to work a long time on overcoming the motion sickness," John said. Rodney was silent again. John searched desperately for a new topic of conversation.

"I always wanted a dog as a kid, but we moved around too much. Dad said it wouldn't be fair. He was right."

"Had a dog. Ran away," Rodney muttered. "Cats simpler."

"Yeah. I like cats, too," John said, remembering Rodney had owned a cat back on Earth. He'd always thought it was strange that someone as prickly as Rodney had owned a pet—and clearly been so attached to it. Now that he thought about it, it struck him that Rodney resembled a cat a bit himself—all sharp claws and hissing—to say nothing of the ruffled fur and wounded dignity whenever he was upset. He wondered if it was possible to tame the scientist, to smooth down that fluffed up fur and coax a purr from him, maybe even get him eating from his hand and twining around his legs. He'd never have thought so if he hadn't seen the way Rodney Sheppard behaved with the general. John glanced over at the opposite bunk and looked at the two of them lying there together, side by side, fast asleep. The general had an arm wrapped around his Rodney's waist and his Rodney was pressed back against him, looking utterly relaxed. The general's chin was resting in the crook of his Rodney's neck, so close that it looked like he was kissing him, and his Rodney looked as happy and contented as a cat as he lay there in his husband's arms. John felt a pang of envy and glanced down at his own Rodney, wishing it could be the same for them.

Rodney managed to stay awake for the rest of the night—more through cussedness than anything else, John thought, although he did wonder whether Rodney had responded, on some level, to the order he'd given him, and his request to trust him; Rodney hadn't tried to sleep since then.

When dawn finally broke, John left Rodney's side for the first time and walked over to the front of the puddle jumper to peer out. Outside there were plumes of smoke and the usual sense of desolation and carnage that accompanied a culling.

"Poor bastards," the general said, coming up behind him, stretching his long, lean body as he walked.

"It's hard to feel that much sympathy with them bearing in mind how they treated us and what they did to Rodney," John muttered.

"Yeah, but look at it from their point of view. It must look to them like their gods are angry with them for not offering up that promised sacrifice when we freed Rodney last night. You can see why a primitive people like this would believe in vengeful gods when the Wraith have this habit of turning up every so often to feed on them."

"I suppose, but right now I have to admit I don't care much about them. I just want to get Rodney back to Carson," John said, glancing over his shoulder to where the scientist was still seated on the back bunk of the jumper. Rodney had stopped talking a long time ago, and although his blue eyes remained open by some act of utter obstinacy on his part, they had long since stopped focusing on anything and were just staring blankly ahead, oblivious to his surroundings.

"The gate's still open," the general observed, glancing at the console.

"Yeah, but most of the darts have left, so it shouldn't be long," John said, buckling himself into his seat. "Hold tight, everyone," he said over his shoulder. "Because we're out of here as soon as that gate becomes free."

"Rodney, sit with Dr. McKay," the general ordered. "Make sure he's secured."

The next few minutes passed as slowly as any that John had ever known, and then suddenly the darts were gone and the gate closed and John slammed his hand onto the console and took the ship straight up into the air. Beside him, the general dialed out and John flew straight for the gate.

"Medical emergency," John yelled as soon as they had a communications link. "We need Dr. Beckett as soon as we're through."

Within minutes, they had landed back in Atlantis, and within seconds, there was bustle everywhere. Carson pushed past him with a medical team and maneuvered Rodney onto a gurney. John was disturbed by the fact that Rodney didn't even cry out when they moved

him and he was about to follow on behind the gurney when Elizabeth intercepted him.

"John, what the hell happened?" she demanded. "What's the matter with Rodney? Why were you gone so long? Why didn't you stay in radio communication with us? Did you get those crystals?"

"I..." John stared at her blankly, realizing she deserved a full briefing, but unable to think about anything else but how Rodney was right now.

"I'll handle the briefing," the general said, stepping up beside him and touching his arm. "Go, John. I'll take care of it."

John nodded gratefully and left the general to it. He ran all the way to the infirmary and got there to find Carson bustling around Rodney's pale, still form.

"How's he doing?" John asked, running up to Rodney's bedside.

"He's lost a lot of blood. We need to get a tube into him," Carson said, sticking a needle into Rodney's arm.

"He's got a badly wrenched shoulder as well," John told him.

"Aye, I can see that."

"I don't know if there are any other injuries," John babbled. "He didn't mention anything, but he was kind of out of it for a lot of the time. I made him stay awake—don't know if that was the right thing, but I thought he might lose consciousness if I let him sleep."

He gazed down on Rodney's white face, willing the scientist to be okay. The dark red bruise on Rodney's jaw stood out, livid against his icy features and he looked half-dead already.

Carson turned away from Rodney and crashed straight into John. "Colonel, you're in the way and it's not helping," Carson told him. "I want the infirmary cleared of all non-medical personnel."

"I'm not leaving," John said firmly.

"Oh, yes, you are," Carson replied, equally firmly.

John frowned at him, surprised. Usually Carson was such a pushover, but then again John had never gotten in his way when he was in full ER mode before, and it seemed this Carson was a different kind of beast altogether.

"Will he make it, Doc?" John asked, backing out of Carson's way.

"If you'll let me get on and do my job, then there's every chance," Carson replied, shoving John backwards out of the door. "I'll call you when there's some news."

John stood outside the closed door, wondering what the hell to do with himself. His legs felt like Jell-O and he was suddenly hit by a wave of some kind of emotion and he doubled over, gasping for air. It took him a few minutes to recover, and then he staggered away, needing fresh air. He made his way to the South West pier, which was his favorite, and held onto the railings as he took great gulps of air.

"What the hell is happening to me?" he wondered out loud, as he tried to calm himself. Where had these feelings come from and how on earth did he deal with them? He'd never felt like this before, about anyone, and he would never have expected to feel like this about Rodney, of all people. Was it just because their doppelgangers were here, with their in-your-face relationship? Would these feelings change or become more manageable once they left? Or was he stuck with them now? If so, he didn't see how he could keep on working with Rodney. It would be a particular kind of torture to see the man every day, to want him and worry about him like this, and not be able to have him.

"Hey," a voice said behind him, and he glanced around to see the general. "I thought I'd find you here. It's where I always come," the general said.

"Yeah. My favorite place on Atlantis," John muttered.

"How's Dr. McKay?"

"I don't know. Carson said he'd tell me when he had some news. He's lost a lot of blood," John said, and then he felt it again, that wave of powerful emotion that had almost floored him before, and he leaned over again and vomited his guts out into the water far below. He felt the general's hand on his shoulder and was grateful for its solid warmth.

"Dammit...what's happening to me?" John hissed, when he finally managed to get himself under some kind of control.

"I can't say for sure, but it looks pretty similar to what happened to me once," the general replied.

John straightened up and looked the other man in the eye. "I can't control it. It keeps hitting me and I can't keep it down, however hard I try. I've never felt like this before."

"I know. You're pretty good at keep everything tucked away inside, not even a ripple showing on that calm, laid-back exterior," the general chuckled. "Don't want anyone to see you're not the cool, easy-going guy, huh?"

"Something like that," John muttered, sliding down to the floor and slumping there, his back against the railings.

The general sat down beside him, those long, leather-clad legs of his stretched out beside John's. "Here," he said, handing John some gum that he'd fished out of his jacket. "Should help take the taste away."

John accepted it gratefully and stuffed the gum into his mouth to banish the unpleasant taste of vomit.

"So, you wanted to watch me in action during the mission. You can't have been too impressed," John said, with a sigh. He'd really wanted to impress this man, too, but somehow it had all gone so very wrong.

"By and large I thought you did a good job," the general said carefully. "Even the best planned missions can go wrong and you can't prepare for every eventuality. But you have a good head on your shoulders, you fight like a warrior and you looked out for your team—with one notable exception."

"Oh, shit." John hung his head and gazed down at his knees, remembering the look of hurt in Rodney's eyes when he'd told him about his orders to Ronon. "I didn't mean to leave Rodney exposed. I had no idea it would pan out that way," he muttered.

"Then you have to tell him that," the general said. "When he's well enough to hear it. He's not a soldier, John, not like you, or Teyla, or Ronon. He deserved your protection."

"I know," John nodded.

"And he'll be blaming himself for the mission turning into such a huge fuck-up," the general added. John turned to gaze at him and found himself meeting two serious hazel eyes that looked disconcertingly like his own.

"That doesn't sound like Rodney," John said with a shrug. "We're talking about Mr. Arrogance here, after all."

"I know." The general gave a wry grin and shook his head. "Took me a while to figure it out, as well, but however arrogant he is, and however petty he can be, he always tends to take his fair share of any blame going around. More than his fair share, sometimes."

John thought about that for a moment and then nodded. Now that he really thought about it, Rodney had never been slow in accepting when he'd screwed up and offering an apology.

"Do you mind me asking you something...how did you get to be a general so young?" John asked, because this was something that had really been bugging him.

"Isn't the question not how I got to be a general, but how come you're so confused about your own ambitions?" the other man replied, with a raised eyebrow. "You tell me, John. Why are you so ambivalent about your career?"

"I have...chain of command issues," John said, making a face.

"Which is another way of saying you don't like taking orders. Well, hell, neither do I," the general grinned. "Shall I tell you what I see?" he asked softly.

John tensed, unsure whether he wanted to hear this, but he didn't want to lose whatever respect the other man might have for him by refusing to listen to his opinion, so he nodded.

"Okay, the way I see it is like this: you're good. You're quick, you care about your people, and you have an excellent military brain," the general said.

John nodded, waiting for the 'but'.

"You're also lazy," the general added.

John nodded again, and sighed. "Yeah. I know," he said.

"I noticed your personnel records and equipment inventories aren't as up to date as they should be," the general said.

"Yeah. I hate doing those things," John shrugged.

"But there's something else. It's not so much that you're lazy as why you're lazy. You see, I think that you don't want anyone to see just how much you care about this stuff. About all of it—about your job, about the people here...about yourself, even. It's as if you stop yourself so they never get to see the real you—this one," the general patted John's chest. "The one that just threw up over the side of the railings. You'll never step up to the next level until you can control your emotions, John, and in order to control them, first you have to feel them."

"I feel plenty," John replied, feeling pretty stung right now.

"Own them, then," the general said, laying it down between them like it was a challenge. "I look at you and see someone who's been avoiding taking responsibility for how he feels for a very long time. I don't know why, but I can see how in your society it might be easier that way. You have all these stupid rules to try and make sure that everyone knows what to do and how to behave towards each other, but if you could just be who you are, who you truly are, and inhabit that space inside you, then you wouldn't need any of that crap. You have a great gut instinct, John—I saw that back in that underground chamber—but it's almost like you fear that part of yourself. You hold back. I felt it and your team must feel it, and until you commit to being who you are and going after what you want, then you'll never make general."

"Are you talking about Rodney here?" John asked suspiciously.

"Among other things, but not just about him," the general said. "He's part of it, though. If you want him, then you have to go after him. That's what I did." He sat back and put his hands behind his head with a wry smile. "He was in all kinds of shit when I first met him. He was unhappy and, boy, did we all have to suffer because of that!" He grinned. "He was getting into trouble and being disciplined the whole time as well—which wasn't nice for him—and I was finding myself more and more drawn to him. Once I figured that out, it was

relatively easy. I stepped in and he pushed me away. We did that a few times before I had to get tough with him and then finally he figured out I was serious about him and not just playing and he let me in. He'd had a shitty life in many ways up until I met him. Nobody had ever loved him before so it's hardly surprising how mistrustful he was of me at first. Once he realized I did love him, and once he actually learned to trust me, he calmed down and stopped getting into trouble. It wasn't all easy or plain sailing, and it wasn't just him who found it hard. At first, I felt pretty much like you do now: my emotions were so strong, they made me feel out of control, so I had to work on that—a lot, because it sure as hell wasn't easy. Now I can control it. You saw me controlling it back there when that bastard was holding him hostage."

"Your Rodney did exactly what you told him," John said, remembering. "That impressed me. My Rodney would never have closed his eyes like that and just trusted me in those circumstances."

"Well, we've worked on that," the general replied. "We've been through a lot of drills and one of them is the 'what you do when an ugly savage holds a knife to your throat' scenario. So, Rodney knew what I expected of him and he did it."

"I really doubt I could convince my Rodney to work on that kind of thing," John sighed.

"Not while you're ambivalent," the general shot back. "You hold back on everything, John. It's almost as if you're afraid to admit that anything is that important to you. Not your career, not Rodney, not anything. Maybe you've got good reasons for that—I don't know where our life experiences differ—but I'm just saying, if you want more, if you want to make general, and have Rodney, and be everything you can be, then you have to start admitting you want it and you have to stop being ashamed of what you feel."

"It's.... Our universe is more complicated, I think," John sighed.

The general nodded. "Well, I won't dispute that," he grinned.

At that moment, Carson's voice sounded on John's radio. "Colonel Sheppard? I have some news about Rodney."

John leapt to his feet. "On my way," he replied and then he nodded at the general. "Thanks for the pep talk," he said.

"You're welcome—and remember to explain about the mission to Rodney," he added.

John frowned. That wasn't exactly going to be easy and he preferred to avoid those sorts of conversations. Even after Duranda, he'd gone out of his way to avoid Rodney and only the scientist's dogged persistence in tracking him down had forced him to have the conversation John really hadn't wanted to have. He supposed this was what the general meant about holding back, and he squared his shoulders and decided that the general was right—it was time to step up to the plate.

\* \* \*

"He's got a concussion so I'll need to keep him in here for 24 hours, but I've sutured the wound and we've replaced a lot of the blood he lost, so he's in much better shape now," Carson told John when he got to the infirmary. He gazed at John searchingly, perhaps surprised by his behavior earlier. "You did a good thing keeping him awake, John," he added softly. "That was the right thing to do in the circumstances."

"Hell, he did that himself," John said with a shrug, remembering the obstinate look in Rodney's blue eyes when he'd been lying shivering in his arms. "I just kept reminding him, that's all. He's the one who held on in there."

"Well, you can see him now. Not for long, just for a couple of minutes."

John nodded and walked over to the bed. "Hey, Rodney," he said. The scientist still looked pale, but his eyes were brighter now and he was at least talking again. His arm was strapped across his chest and there was a clean bandage over his forehead.

"Colonel," Rodney said stiffly, nodding at him.

John sighed, remembering Rodney's sleepy warmth as he'd nestled against him in the puddle jumper and longing to have that intimacy back. He wondered if Rodney was embarrassed about how he'd held him, but he wasn't entirely sure how much the scientist remembered so he didn't bring it up.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine. I have a concussion. And you were right—Carson is just one shade above Ronon on the whole 'strapping up a badly wrenched arm' thing," Rodney sniffed.

John grinned. "No anesthetic, then?"

"No. This place is like being in the dark ages," Rodney complained loudly as Carson walked by.

"Still moaning about your arm, Rodney?" Carson asked, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Ah, yes, Doctor Death here seems to think it's amusing to manhandle seriously injured

people and cause them unnecessary pain and suffering," Rodney snapped.

John smiled and placed a hand on Rodney's arm. "You're sounding much better, anyway," he said.

"Yes, well, no thanks to you," Rodney said, glancing at John and then glancing away again and John saw that same flash of hurt in his eyes that he'd seen earlier.

"You're right. I'd like to apologize about that," he said firmly.

"Really?" Rodney glanced back at him distrustfully.

"Yes. I made a serious error in judgment when I told Ronon to stick close to the other Rodney. I didn't mean to leave you exposed—that's the last thing I intended, trust me." John hoped that his tone conveyed his absolute sincerity and he guessed that it did because the hurt faded from Rodney's blue eyes to be replaced by something that looked very much like...

surprise. "I know you're not military and you need our protection. I think it's just that you always handle yourself so well on missions that I forgot that," John said.

Rodney preened like a cat that had gotten the cream at that. "Well, thank you, Colonel," he said, that jaw of his jutting forward in a familiar way that made John want to grab it and kiss it. "I do think I've mastered the basics very well, even if I do say so myself. Of course it's hardly rocket science, although, frankly, I've always found that pretty easy, but even so...."

"Even so, there are still plenty of things that need working on," John interjected smoothly. "So I think that, when you're better, you'd benefit from some training sessions with me."

"What?" Rodney blinked. This clearly hadn't been where he thought this conversation was going.

"That's right. The general's got Dr. Sheppard trained in some pretty interesting techniques, so..."

"I bet he has," Rodney snorted.

"Military techniques," John stressed. "And he picked them up pretty well, so if he can do it, I see no reason why you can't."

"Oh, God. There was a trap there somewhere and I walked right into it," Rodney groaned. "It must be because I nearly died. My brain's still weak from lack of blood."

"You're doing fine," John grinned, patting his hand. "Carson, when will Rodney be well enough to have his first drill session with me?"

Carson came to stand at the end of the bed and regarded Rodney for a moment.

"It'll probably be months—a serious head injury like this," Rodney said, glaring at Carson meaningfully.

"Och, no, lad," Carson beamed. "You'll only be in here for a couple of days and back to light duties by the end of the week. Give it ten days, Colonel, and he's all yours," Carson said cheerfully. "And if I might say so, it's an excellent idea, Colonel. Rodney could do with some regular work outs. He has a very high heart rate and exercise would de-stress him significantly, I think."

"Traitor," Rodney hissed, but Carson just smiled cheerily at him and disappeared.

John turned back. "Ten days, then," he said to Rodney. "I'll book out the practice room for our sessions. We can start with an hour a day and maybe work up from there."

"An hour?" Rodney looked outraged. "I can't spare an hour every day. I'm a very busy man, Colonel. The science department doesn't run itself, you know!"

"You can get up an hour earlier, then," John told him pleasantly. "We can do it before you start your busy working day."

"But...." Rodney clearly couldn't think of a reply to that and he slumped back down on his pillow. "Oh, just get out," he snapped at John.

John gave him another wide grin and then he leaned in close. "I really am glad you're still with us, Rodney," he whispered, with complete sincerity, directly into Rodney's ear, before turning on his heel and leaving the infirmary. When he glanced back, he noticed that Rodney had just the faintest glimmer of a crooked little smile on his lips.

End of Part Five

## Part Six: Out of Control by Xanthe

Rodney Sheppard let himself into the quarters he shared with his husband and stood there for a moment, rubbing his neck absently. He was stiff, tired and vaguely pissed off that the mission had been such a disaster, but pleased that McKay was going to pull through. Much as the man irritated him, the last thing he wanted was to attend the funeral of someone who bore such a close resemblance to himself—even apart from the fact that he would have been devastated to see Colonel Sheppard's reaction to such a loss.

Rodney cricked his neck from side to side until he got a satisfying click and then went into the bathroom. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and sighed; he looked sweaty, tired, bloodstained and dirty. He decided that a bath was in order, and he started filling the tub. He checked the bathroom closet for some kind of nice oils to throw in, but they seemed to have been provided with only the most basic toiletries. Rodney made a face—these people seemed to lack any kind of sensuality. He finally found some kind of muscle-relaxing bubble bath and threw that in, then sat on the side of the tub and swirled the green liquid absently

with his fingers until it dispersed.

The bath had just finished filling when he heard John return to their quarters so he turned off the water and went into the other room to greet his husband. John looked as beat as Rodney felt right now and they gave each other a wry smile and then Rodney walked into his arms and they just stood there for a moment, holding each other and saying nothing.

"Dr. McKay is going to be okay," John said finally, muttering into Rodney's hair.

"Yeah. I stopped by the infirmary before coming back here," Rodney replied. John was silent but he had buried his nose in Rodney's hair and was sniffing. Rodney drew back and gazed at him—and wasn't surprised to see a familiar dark gleam in his husband's eyes. He wondered how long it would be before John gave into it, because he could see that he'd used up all his control during the mission and was hanging on by a thread right now.

"I drew a bath. Thought we could both use it," Rodney said, watching his husband carefully.

"Good thinking," John nodded, disengaging himself and sitting down on the side of the bed, reaching for his boots. Rodney knelt down between his open knees and brushed his husband's hands away, undoing the boots for him and pulling them off.

John put a hand on his shoulder as he worked, kneading absently. "Thanks," he muttered, when Rodney was done. Rodney put the boots in the closet and then John beckoned him back. "Get undressed, Rodney, I want to examine you," he said.

Rodney shrugged his clothes off quickly, threw the filthy garments into the laundry box and then came to stand in front of his husband, completely naked. He was used to walking around naked when they were alone together—John had always been pretty insistent about getting to look at Rodney in the nude as often as possible. John stood up, and moved Rodney's head to one side so that he could examine the wound on his neck. He gave a little sound in the back of his throat and Rodney tensed, but then the moment passed.

Rodney's fingers reached up and found the corresponding spot on his husband's neck and the Kaeira hummed between them for a moment. "It's healing," Rodney murmured.

"Yeah." John's long fingers moved down across Rodney's skin, ghosting gently over the surface as he checked his husband for any other signs of damage.

Rodney felt fine, but he knew John wouldn't be satisfied until he'd looked him all over himself, so he submitted to the inspection without comment. John turned him around and found a minor scratch on the back of his leg and then his fingers lingered on Rodney's bottom for a moment.

"Bite mark's nearly gone," Rodney observed, glancing back over his shoulder.

"Yeah," John frowned. "Guess I'll have to replace it, then," he said, wrapping an arm around his husband's waist and placing a wet kiss on the back of his neck.

"Mmmm," was Rodney's only reply. He knew that was a given, especially judging by that look of barely leashed control in John's eyes.

"Can't have you walking around unmarked," John continued, his fingers sliding up Rodney's chest and firmly squeezing one nipple.

Rodney sucked in a lungful of air and reached his hands back to caress his husband's still fully-clothed body. He loved fingering the black leather that encased John's long legs and his hands came to rest on his husband's firm ass.

John continued kissing the back of his neck while fondling his nipples with his hands and Rodney leaned back into the caress, loving the sensation of surrender, enjoying his own nakedness as he pressed against the roughness of John's fully clothed body.

"Bath'll get cold," Rodney muttered.

"Are you trying to distract me from enjoying my husband?" John asked, his voice low and dangerous in Rodney's ear.

Rodney grinned. "Never!"

"A bath first would be nice, though," John said, pushing Rodney away with a slap to his buttocks.

"Here. Let me undress you," Rodney said, turning around. He waited until John nodded his permission and then he slid his fingers into the shiny silver buckle on John's belt and undid it. He removed the belt carefully and placed it on the nightstand, his fingers sliding over the thick black strap hanging from it as he did so. He gave a little shiver and John stroked his back with one fingernail, trailing it all the way down to his naked ass.

"Apprehensive, Rodney?" he asked, in that dark, growling voice that always made Rodney's stomach churn.

"Always am when I'm due a session with your strap," Rodney replied with a grimace. "So, are you going to punish me tonight or wait until tomorrow?" He had no doubt that John would punish him. Neither of them had forgotten his admission earlier that he hadn't kept up with either his drill routines or his running program while John had been absent.

"Tonight," John replied and Rodney felt his stomach churn even more. "You'll be antsy if I make you wait until tomorrow."

"Oh, waiting's fine," Rodney said quickly. "I'm a patient man. I can wait."

"You're not a patient man—you're the most ridiculously impatient man I've ever known," John replied. "But I'm going to make you wait a little because first I want that bath."

"Want to warm up your arm muscles, hmm?" Rodney said, undoing his husband's shirt and stripping it off him, then moving his hands down to John's pants.

"Helps the swing," John told him with a grin. "So I can make more of an impression on your disobedient ass."

"Sometimes it's hard for me to remember why I love you," Rodney groused, sliding John's pants down his long legs. John kicked them off his feet and then pulled Rodney close and kissed him firmly on the lips. Rodney melted against him, his arms sliding around John's naked flesh, utterly surrendering to the kiss.

"That's why you love me," John said when he released him.

"Oh, that. Yeah," Rodney replied with a sigh. "Seriously, John. You don't have to punish me. I know you're tired and I didn't do anything really bad..."

"Nice try, Rodney," John said, rolling his eyes. "But I asked you to keep up with your fitness routines while I was gone and I expected you to do just that."

"I was busy with the reactors," Rodney pouted. "It wasn't like I flouted your orders on purpose. I was just so busy with my work that I forgot."

"Really?" John raised an eyebrow. "So, tell me, did Ronon happen to drop by the lab and remind you on each of the four days I was away?"

Rodney screwed up his face thoughtfully, as if trying to remember. "Oh, okay, he did," he sighed at last. "But it was always at the most inconvenient times."

"So you brushed him off," John said, chucking Rodney under the chin with his fingers, an amused but dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Kind of," Rodney shrugged, knowing he was on thin ice here and there really didn't seem to be a viable exit.

"And tell me, if it wasn't for the fact that you let it slip out there, would you have even told me about it?"

Rodney snorted. "Yeah. Right. I have an IQ of genius proportions. Do I look stupid?"

John chuckled. "Yeah, that's what I thought. And that's why you're going to be sleeping with an extremely hot ass tonight, Rodney Sheppard. You know how I feel about lying. I can forgive you not following my orders a hell of a lot more than I can the lie."

"It wasn't a lie. I just didn't tell you straight away. I didn't have time!" Rodney protested. "You'd only just got back and then we were transported here and it went clean out of my head."

"Hmm, well, I agree the circumstances were a little unusual, but we had plenty of time alone together for you to tell me before the mission. You were just hoping I wouldn't find out, although why the hell you thought that Ronon would cover for you I have no idea."

"I bribed him," Rodney replied. "With food and a gun I modified specially for him."

"Honestly. You're incorrigible," John said. "And if you're going to modify guns, shouldn't you modify them for me? I'm your damn husband, remember?"

"I spoil you enough as it is," Rodney replied with a cheeky grin. "What with all the blow jobs and sexual favors."

"You belong to me!" John growled, reaching for him possessively in a way that made Rodney shiver and his cock stand to attention; he loved getting this reaction out of his husband. "So the sexual favors and the blow jobs are my due," John hissed in his ear.

Rodney clung to him, enjoying the way their cocks slid together, rising up to meet each other. To be honest, when John had first proposed marriage, he hadn't been sure. He didn't know that he wanted to give up his independence, take another man's name and effectively belong to him. John was old fashioned as well—there were various kinds of marriages a couple could contract in their universe, but John had wanted the traditional kind, where Rodney became his, body and soul. Of course Rodney could still divorce him if it didn't work out—it wasn't irrevocable—but even so, it was a big commitment.

"I just don't see it working any other way," John had said with a shrug on the day he had proposed. "I know myself, Rodney, and the kind of man I am, the kind of top I am, and the kind of husband I want to be. You'll never be unloved, and you'll always be cherished, but I need to know you're mine. You have to belong to me—otherwise it'll just feel to me as if we're playing at it."

"I do want to marry you, but...I'm not sure I can submit to you at the level you want me to," Rodney had replied, wanting to let go and accept the proposal, but scared of somehow losing himself in such an arrangement.

"And I don't think you could be happy with anything less," John had retorted. "You know what you're like, Rodney. You also know me—you know I won't ride roughshod over you, but I do want to own you. I need that from you. Anything else would just feel like you were holding back on your submission, never truly belonging to me, and you and I both know that's when you'll act out and get into trouble because it won't feel real enough for you."

Rodney had thought about it long and hard. The kind of marriage John was proposing wasn't easy. In fact, he knew the Lady Elizabeth had talked two couples out of committing to each other on such a level and had persuaded them to opt for an easier arrangement instead; yet the very demands of such a marriage were also seductive.

Rodney's past was a wreckage of discarded relationships. For a while he hadn't even known what he was—he'd tried topping, had had a brief, unsatisfying relationship with a sweet

woman during his college years, but he wasn't consistent enough to be a top, and his moods were variable at the best of times, leaving her confused and hurt all too often. He also honestly didn't like having all that responsibility for another human being resting on his shoulders; it irritated and oppressed him, making him even more moody until she'd ended it. Then he'd tried subbing—to a woman first of all. He'd been attracted to the security and certainty of her zero tolerance approach to relationships, but she was inflexible to the point of cruelty and he ended up feeling sullen and resentful around her, unable to breathe or allow his genius to shine. The man he'd fallen into bed with next had been much more easy-going, but he wasn't anywhere near Rodney's intellectual equal and Rodney had run rings around him until the poor guy had told him he was just too much of a handful for him and ended it. After that, there had been a long period of loneliness and unhappiness, punctuated by occasional one-night stands that had, for the most part, gone pretty badly. He'd managed to acquire a reputation for being a difficult and disobedient sub, which he felt was undeserved, and he'd started acting out all over the place, causing Elizabeth to summon him for several public punishment sessions which had humiliated him almost beyond endurance—not least because they were always so well attended by the rest of the base personnel who thoroughly enjoyed witnessing his discomfort.

Then suddenly John had stepped effortlessly into his life and taken control as if by magic, bringing him to heel with love and affection and an underlying strength of character and sternness that Rodney found himself responding to. Nothing in Rodney's life to date had prepared him for falling in love. He'd never known such happiness or such terror, both of them woven together inextricably, cradling him and restraining him at the same time. With John, he learned how to explore his own nature, to really be who he was, in the safe knowledge that someone would catch him if he fell and hold him tight. John was everything to him, but he was asking Rodney to take one final step that would involve a surrender and level of submission he wasn't sure he was capable of. Marriage of this most traditional kind meant that he really would become John's possession. There was no concept of rape or assault within a marriage like this—he would become John's chattel, his body a plaything for his husband to use when and how he liked, and while the idea appealed, the reality scared him. Not that he seriously thought John would ever harm him, but with their marriage Rodney effectively lost the right to say "no" to anything his husband wanted to do to him.

He'd finally agreed, standing in John's room, white-faced, scared beyond belief, his fingers digging anxiously into John's arm—and John's big, bright smile when he heard the words had banished all his fears completely. Of course this was the right thing; to be owned, to be loved by this man, of all people, the one man on Atlantis everyone respected and liked, and the fact that this amazing, handsome, smart man wanted Rodney to be his husband...well, Rodney still couldn't get his head around that. Of course it was right. When they told Elizabeth, Rodney had feared she'd withhold her consent and try and talk them out of it, the way she had with those other couples, but instead she had been warm in her congratulations, and she'd given a heartfelt sigh.

"Thank God you're taking him off my hands," she'd murmured to John. "Not that it hasn't been an experience, Rodney, but I'm glad that from now on you're somebody else's responsibility!"

So they'd gotten married, and even now, a year or two down the line, Rodney knew it was the best decision he'd ever made.

He blinked, returning to the present to find his husband biting on his neck.

"Mine," John was muttering hazily, the way he did when he got into this kind of mood.

Rodney grinned, wondering why the hell that notion had scared him so much back then, when he was considering John's proposal. John's mouth was nipping his neck and it was starting to hurt, so Rodney went very still. He'd learned from experience that when his husband was in this mood, he liked Rodney to surrender, totally and completely, to being marked, or to whatever kind of pain or pleasure he wanted to hand out. Rodney clung on for a few minutes while John completed his marking, and then his husband drew back and slid his finger along the new mark on Rodney's neck, which completely covered the previous knife mark.

"That's better," John growled. "It's the mark I made now—not his."

Rodney felt it with his own fingertips, enjoying the tingle he got out of being owned and possessed in this way. Then he noticed some of the bruises and cuts on his husband's body.

"Hey...looks like you've been in a fight," he joked, pressing his fingers onto a bruise on John's arm.

"Yeah, more than one," John replied, but he wasn't smiling. Instead, there was a dangerous look of intent in his eyes and he was looking at Rodney in much the same way as a wolf looked at a deer. Kaeira buzzed between them, but John brushed Rodney's hand away, breaking the link. "Don't share them," he said, hoarsely. "I don't want to see any marks on your body except the ones I put there. And I aim to put several on you this evening."

"Okay, just let..." Rodney began, but John interrupted him.

"I want you," John said, in a low, guttural tone, pushing Rodney back onto the bed, his movements hard and barely controlled. "Now," John hissed, holding him down.

Rodney shivered at the tone of John's voice. He'd clearly reached the limits of his control and all hell was about to break loose; Rodney knew the signs very well.

John was always like this after Rodney had been hurt, especially if someone had put a mark on his body. He became incredibly possessive. After Kolya had scarred him and John had tracked the Genii leader down and killed him, his husband had returned to their rooms in a mood so fierce that Rodney had, for the first time ever, been genuinely afraid of him. They had stayed holed up in their rooms for several hours while John worked out his emotions on Rodney's willing body. Rodney had never felt in serious danger, but it had been clear that John's emotions were running high and nothing less than Rodney's complete submission would satisfy him. John was clearly feeling the same way right now, and Rodney gave himself up to him immediately, understanding how John's mind worked. His husband could

always control these emotions during the actual crisis, like he had earlier that day when Rodney had been held hostage, but afterwards, when they were alone together, he seemed to feel a need to reclaim Rodney, to make him his again, in the most basic way.

John's hands and mouth were roving over Rodney's body, stopping to suck or bite here and there. Rodney lay still. He knew John didn't want to be caressed in return—he just required that Rodney offer himself up to him and allow him to do whatever he wanted to him. Rodney didn't think he presented a very sexy prospect at the moment. He was dirty and sweaty after the mission, but John didn't seem to notice that. His mouth was warm and fierce on Rodney's body and he covered one of Rodney's nipples with his mouth and bit down. Rodney gave a little squawk of pain and shifted slightly beneath his husband, and John growled like a lion afraid his meal was going to be taken away from him, and held Rodney down with his hands.

"Don't move," he warned, returning to his task, his teeth nibbling down on Rodney's sensitized nipple.

"Ahh..." Rodney squealed as the bite deepened, but he knew John intended to mark him and the bite continued until Rodney wasn't sure he could take it any longer. At the same time, he knew John would make him take it, that John wouldn't let him up until he'd marked him the way he wanted to, and this would be one of many marks his husband would place on his body this evening.

Finally the pressure from John's mouth lessened and he drew back and licked at the red bite mark he'd left on Rodney's chest. Rodney glanced down at it with some pride. He liked the way he always felt bearing John's marks on his skin. Sometimes, when he was in the lab, he'd finger the marks through his uniform, remembering how they were made. They spoke to some need deep within him, and, while it wasn't always comfortable receiving them, the pleasure he got from them for days afterwards more than outweighed the momentary pain of their infliction.

"Turn over," John said roughly, but it wasn't an order.

Rodney knew he had to stay still, and John flipped him over, as if he was a doll, rolling him onto his front. Rodney wrapped his arms around the pillow and lay there, tense, wondering where John would mark him next. John sucked a path down his back, following the line of his spine to his waist and then he paused and Rodney knew what was coming next. He took a mouthful of pillow and waited, and sure enough, next thing he knew John was sucking on one of his buttocks. The suck continued for a long time, and then it gradually deepened into a bite. Rodney bit down hard on the pillow, trying to keep still and not wriggle too much under the fierce caress. Finally, John released him, and Rodney could feel his warm tongue lapping on the mark. Rodney sighed and shifted slightly and John gave a growl, pinned him down to the bed and sank his teeth back into Rodney's other buttock. Rodney gave a startled cry which was muffled by the pillow, but that just seemed to enflame his husband even more and his grip became tighter, his arms holding Rodney fast so he couldn't move.

That bite seemed to go on for hours—John had him in such a tight grip that he was unable

to move at all, and all he could sense was his own submission, thrumming through him, as John's teeth marked his ass. It hurt, but it was a good hurt, making his cock tingle, and enthusing him with the thrill of his own lack of power. He could feel the energy passing between them as he willingly surrendered himself to his husband and John took his surrender as his right, as his due, and that was more of a turn-on than anything else.

Finally, John's grip lessened and he moved his mouth away from Rodney's buttocks. Rodney glanced back over his shoulder to see the two bite marks, one on each buttock, red and proud. He knew these marks would last for several days and that thought made his cock harden even more.

John's face loomed over him, his hazel eyes dark, unrecognizable and full of sexual energy. Rodney shivered.

"On your back. Open your legs," John ordered, but again he didn't wait for Rodney to obey, but flipped him over and shoved his legs open with hard, brutal movements. "You're mine. I'm going to take you," John said, in that same low, dark tone.

Rodney nodded and reached blindly for the lube on the nightstand. Sometimes, when he was like this, John forgot about lube and while Rodney could take a dry fuck if he had to, or if that was what John intended, he preferred not to if he could avoid it. He popped the lid with his thumb, squeezed a liberal amount over his hand and slid a finger into his ass.

John growled again, grabbed his hand and removed the finger. "Mine," he hissed. "Don't touch. All mine."

Rodney nodded, and squeezed the lube onto John's fingers and then lay back, legs open wide and inviting, just hoping John would actually use the lube and not go straight in there. He was relieved a few seconds later to feel John's hard, lubed fingers entering him. John leaned over him again, placed one arm over Rodney's chest to keep him still, pressing him into the bed, and then rammed his finger hard into Rodney's ass. Rodney gasped—it didn't hurt, but it was fast and furious, taking him by surprise. John was gazing down on him, a strange look in his eyes, one of complete dominance, just teetering on the brink of losing control. He had become a predator, a wild animal intent on stamping his ownership on Rodney's flesh, and the darkness in his eyes made Rodney shiver and his cock go into a spasm of need. John scared him when he was like this, but excited him, too, and he knew he couldn't have one without the other.

John slid another finger into him, and then proceeded to finger-fuck him so fast and so hard that Rodney was gasping out loud with every thrust, trying hard not to move, willing himself to submit to his husband's demands, but longing to scream and writhe under the harsh caress. John put his head on one side and gazed at him, their eyes locked as he plundered Rodney's body with his fingers. His eyes raked over Rodney's chest, lingering on the bite mark over his nipple and on his neck, his pupils becoming dilated with arousal as his fingers continued their furious pace. Rodney wanted to come, could feel himself on the brink and he arched up, unable to stop himself moving. John gave another low, guttural growl at the movement, and threw himself across Rodney's body, wrenching his husband's buttocks

open with his hands and sliding his thick cock deep inside him in one fast move.

It took a moment for Rodney to register the change in sensation because it had happened so quickly, and then he felt a familiar warm burn, and a feeling of fullness, and his ass was stretched around John's thick cock and it hurt and felt so good at one and the same time. John was on top of him, looking down, that strange look still in his eyes. He adjusted his position so that he was fully embedded inside Rodney, up to the hilt, making Rodney whimper, and then he rested his body on top of Rodney's and claimed a deep, savage kiss from his husband's mouth.

Rodney opened up immediately, but really it was a one-way process as John ravaged his lips with his own. Finally he drew back, leaving Rodney gasping for breath, his body still adjusting to the sudden intrusion of John's hard cock into his ass. John moved his mouth down and took Rodney's bitten nipple in his mouth and sucked down hard. The nub of flesh was already sensitive and Rodney squealed and tried to wriggle, but John held him completely immobile as he sucked. He finished with that nipple and turned his attention to the other, sucking down hard again. Then he looked up, an utterly feral look in those dark, sex-hungry, hazel eyes, grabbed Rodney's hips, and slid out of his ass and then back in again with a hard thrust. Rodney grunted but lay there, his legs open wide to receive his husband, and John fucked him pitilessly, so fast and so hard that Rodney wondered how he was even managing to stay conscious.

"Nobody touches you," John said, and Rodney remembered an arm across his chest and the stink of that savage as he'd held a knife to his throat and he knew John was remembering it, too, and that this was all about banishing the memory, and his husband reclaiming what was his.

"Nobody but me," John hissed. "You're mine. Mine. Mine. Mine." He said the words in time to each powerful inward thrust, over and over again, like a mantra, and Rodney could feel himself on the verge of coming. He was John's—body and soul. He belonged to his husband, and was happy to offer up his body to him, a willing sacrifice on the altar of John's need to possess him. Rodney came, spurting out over his own belly, and John looked down on him fiercely, triumphantly, and then, without warning, he withdrew, and came, deliberately, on Rodney's neck and chest.

Rodney lay there, utterly winded, feeling John's warm come cool on his body, next to his own. Then John was sliding down on top of him, taking him in his arms, holding him tight and moving against him while making a keening sound in the back of his throat.

"It's okay," Rodney said softly, wrapping his arms around his husband and soothing him with little caresses along his back. "It's okay. I'm safe. He didn't hurt me. You got me back. It's okay."

He had seen the dark side of John's soul—had known it existed when he married him—and was honored that John felt safe enough to share it with him. John managed, by and large, to control his possessive streak, and Rodney guessed that very few people in their universe knew just how deep it went, but when they were alone together, he was able to let go, to

descend into the darkness and surrender himself to it, and Rodney was always there to hold him when it was over.

John was still shuddering, his breathing coming in fast, hard gasps against Rodney's neck.

"Shh," Rodney whispered, holding him tight. "You're okay. I've got you."

Finally his husband's breathing slowed and he looked up at Rodney and Rodney was relieved to see light again in those intense hazel eyes. At least John had recovered more quickly this time than he had that time after he'd killed Kolya. Then Rodney hadn't been sure he'd be able to bring John back from the brink and it had taken several hours.

John winced, and ran a hand over Rodney's bitten neck.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I like it," Rodney replied with a grin.

"So do I," John said in a wry tone. "I'm not sorry about marking you. I'm just sorry for the way it happened—for losing control." He shook his head.

"I don't mind that, either," Rodney told him, caressing him gently with his fingertips. "I can handle you."

"Hmmm. That's good," John murmured.

"Besides, it's nice. I'm usually the one who loses it, not you. Makes me feel like you're human after all," Rodney said.

"Of course I'm human. What else would I be?"

"Well, a minute ago, half-lion, half-wolf, I think," Rodney said, pointing out the come that was drying on his body. "I suppose I should be grateful you didn't actually piss on me."

"It's a thought," John said wryly, and the eager light in his eyes made Rodney think he might not entirely be joking.

"Oh, God." Rodney rolled his eyes. "Well, if you do that, you're the one who explains to these people why we need a new mattress. I couldn't bear to witness another of their horrified reactions."

"You okay?" John asked anxiously, drawing back and tracing a finger over Rodney's skin.

"I'm fine. It was intense, but weirdly sexy. I always come really hard when you're like this, even if I'm also high on, you know, sheer terror," Rodney told him.

John bit down on his lip. "Sorry," he said again. "I just.... The thought of him with his arm

around you, with his knife against your throat. It makes me...." His hands balled uselessly into fists.

"Hush," Rodney said, drawing him back again. "I'm okay. We're both okay. Relax. You can come down now. In fact...I think it's time for that bath. That should relax us both. Come on."

He got up gingerly, feeling like he'd just gone ten rounds with a Wraith, and held out his hand. John took it and Rodney dragged him off the bed and into the bathroom. He topped up the tub with more hot water, and then got in, pulling John between his legs. Rodney lay back, his arms wrapped loosely around his husband and he kissed John's dark hair affectionately as they soaked. John had taken more bruises in the day's fights than Rodney had realized and he ran the soap over his husband's skin, removing the dirt, grime and sweat and bringing John back down again. John sighed, lying back against Rodney's chest, and Rodney smiled, fondling him absently. He loved having his husband cradled in his arms like this. It wasn't often that John would let himself just be held and Rodney liked to make the most of it.

They luxuriated in the bath for a long time, until it started to grow cold, and then John got out and they toweled themselves down. They returned to the bedroom and Rodney walked purposefully towards the bed, wanting nothing more than to throw himself into it and catch up on some sleep, but John paused by the nightstand and gave a heavy sigh.

"Not so fast, Rodney. We have something to take care of," he said.

Rodney turned, wondering what the hell he meant, and then his eyes alighted on the strap. "Oh, God, no. Not now," he moaned. "Honestly, John, can't we leave it? I was a naughty boy and I won't do it again. Can't we let it go at that?"

"No, we can't, and you know that," John told him, a regretful tone in his voice.

Rodney did know that, on some level. Right now neither of them wanted to do this, least of all Rodney, but he also knew that if they didn't, a tiny chink would open up in their relationship. This was one of the fundamentals on which their lives were built—it couldn't be shirked just because neither of them was in the mood.

"How do you want me?" Rodney sighed at last, giving in to the inevitable.

"Against the wall. Hands braced, legs open," John ordered, but Rodney had done this enough times to know how it went. He walked over to the wall, placed his hands flat against it, planted his legs wide and jutted his ass out. Then he watched over his shoulder, his stomach doing several anxious flips, as John unfastened the strap from his discarded belt and prowled back over to him.

"Five for missing the drills, five for not running and ten for not telling me about it," John told him.

Rodney groaned. "Twenty? That seems a lot," he complained.

"All deserved, as you well know," John snorted.

He took up position behind his husband and Rodney faced the wall again, bracing himself. A few seconds later, the first swat fell on his bottom. He felt faintly aggrieved; he'd already been bitten there—twice—this evening, and now this! John's punishments were always hard and to the point. Rodney had never yet mistaken a serious punishment spanking for a pleasurable erotic one and this was no different. There was no warm up, just the snap of the strap and the sting of pain on his ass. John was always fair, but equally firm, and Rodney knew that complaining and pleading didn't work, although that didn't usually stop him trying it, anyway.

He was tired, irritable and seriously pissed off to be in this position and it had been a long, exhausting day. The strap whipped across his buttocks, hard, unrelenting and extremely painful. Rodney rested his face against his hands and began to sob, little whimpering sobs. He was surprised—he didn't often cry so easily—but somehow, at some point during the strapping, he realized he needed this release the way John had needed his own release earlier.

John's arm didn't falter, and the strokes came slowly and steadily, and soon Rodney was crying in earnest. Not so much because it hurt, although it did, but because they both could have died today and instead they were here, alive and together. All the fears and tensions of the day left his body as John's strap made its inexorable marks on his skin, claiming him once more, over and over again, with its searing fire—and he didn't have to be strong for John anymore; he could just let go and accept the punishment he'd earned what felt like a lifetime ago.

Then it was over. He heard John put the strap down on the nightstand, but Rodney didn't move. He just stood there, sobbing softly into the back of his hands. Then he felt John's fingers on his shoulders and he was turned around and pulled into a warm embrace and John was kissing his hair, and sliding his hands down his back, comforting him.

"You're so beautiful when you surrender like that. I love you so much," John whispered, and that just made the lump in his throat even bigger and now he was bawling like a child into John's shoulder. "Cry it out," John whispered, stroking him like he was a cat. Rodney did just that and when finally he'd finished, and his sobs had morphed into whimpers, his breath hitching in his throat, John guided him over to the bed and helped him to get in. Rodney felt his husband slide in behind him, John's groin pressing against his warm, sore buttocks, and then John wrapped his arms around him and they both lay there for a moment, too exhausted to sleep.

"Don't ever leave me," Rodney whispered, putting a hand on his husband's arm where it crossed his chest.

"Never could," John replied, kissing the back of his neck and then, reconnected with each other, the energy flow running easily between them like warm honey, sweet and satisfying, only then did they finally fall asleep.

\* \* \*

Rodney McKay sat in his bed in the infirmary feeling utterly bored. The truth was that he only actually enjoyed being in the infirmary and under Carson's scrutiny when he wasn't actually ill or injured. That was much more fun because he got to be fussed over and indulged on his terms and when he'd had enough, he could just walk out again. Being actually injured was another matter entirely and he hated it. For a start, there was nothing wrong with his brain, so he didn't see why Carson wouldn't at least let him work on his laptop while he was incapacitated. His arm hurt and he had a dull headache most of the time, but he was pretty sure that even with those handicaps, he could still work on the theoretical side of restoring the QDD even if he wasn't allowed back to his lab. Instead he was stuck here, bored witless.

"Carson!" Rodney yelled, for the seventh time that morning. "Carson!"

The doctor emerged from a side room with a wary expression on his face and stood at the end of the bed. "Rodney," he said in a calm, but ever-so-slightly world-weary tone.

"There's no reason for me to be taking up valuable bed space in the infirmary. I could be sitting in my bed in my quarters just as easily," Rodney told him, because at least then he'd be able to use his laptop without any nosy doctor interfering.

"We've been through this, Rodney," Carson said, his voice strained. "Several times. You have a concussion and that means I need to keep an eye on you for 24 hours. If you left the infirmary, I wouldn't be able to see you—and if I can't see you, I won't notice if you faint, or fall over, or start having bad headaches."

"Well, obviously I'll tell you if any of those things happen!" Rodney protested.

"Not if you're unconscious on your bathroom floor, you won't," Carson retorted. "And as for the issue of freeing up an infirmary bed—we're hardly rushed off our feet." He gestured around the empty room.

Rodney thought about it and then let out a heavy sigh.

"I know you're bored, Rodney, but please try to be patient," Carson said with a sympathetic smile.

Rodney sighed again. "Can't I at least have a visitor?" he asked.

"You could, but there doesn't appear to be a queue of people lined up outside the door," Carson replied. Rodney gazed down at the sheet, feeling glum. Carson came around the bed to stand beside him and squeezed his arm gently. "You've already seen Elizabeth, Teyla and Colonel Sheppard this morning," he said. "And people do have work to do. I'm sure more people will drop by later. I know Ronon said he would."

"Great," Rodney sighed. "No offense, but Ronon's hardly the world's greatest conversationalist."

"Then you'll just have to hope he brings you something nice to eat," Carson said and Rodney brightened at that thought. He was already sick of the blue Athosian 'grapes' that Teyla had brought along a couple of hours ago. He'd gorged on them happily enough for ten minutes, but that novelty had long since worn off.

"I'd feel much happier if I could just have some coffee," Rodney said sweetly, glancing up at Carson hopefully.

"Nice try, Rodney, but the answer is the same as it was the previous eight times you asked. No," Carson told him. "Caffeine is a really bad idea for you right now with that head wound."

"Damn it, Carson! I'm sure that's why I have this bloody headache!" Rodney protested. "My body needs a certain amount of caffeine just to get through the day. It's used to it!"

"Well, view this as a good opportunity to break yourself of the habit, then," Carson replied with zero sympathy.

Rodney glared at him. "Oh, go away," he sighed. "You're much more fun when I'm not actually ill."

"I could say the same thing about you," Carson muttered under his breath as he walked away—only to return a couple of seconds later with a broad grin on his face. "You wanted a visitor, Rodney? Well one has just arrived!" he announced in a pleased tone, before scuttling off again.

Rodney sat up, excited, and then slumped back down again when he saw who it was. "Oh. It's you," he muttered, as Rodney Sheppard sauntered up to his bed.

"Nice to see you, too," the other Rodney said, with that stupid grin of his.

Rodney glared at him sourly, thinking how incredibly unfair all this was. Here was he, badly injured and practically at death's door, while his counterpart was fresh as a daisy, that ridiculous curly hair of his looking clean and freshly washed, and he was wearing...he was wearing....

"Is that one of Colonel Sheppard's shirts?" Rodney asked, gazing at the dark purple fabric

suspiciously.

"Yeah. You only gave me uniform stuff. The colonel gave John some casual clothes as well and I liked this, so I thought I'd wear it," the other Rodney said. It fitted him a bit snugly, because he was broader across the shoulders and chest than the colonel, but he looked much more comfortable in it than Rodney knew he would have felt in such a garment.

Rodney gazed at the other Rodney in surprise, wondering why he always looked so comfortable in his own skin, seemingly completely unaware of how stupid he looked. Right now he was also looking incredibly relaxed and there was a goofy little smile playing on the corners of his lips...and...and....

Rodney frowned. "Oh, my God, is that a hickey?" he snapped, seeing the red mark on the side of his counterpart's neck. "Aren't you a bit old to have a hickey?"

"You're never too old and it isn't a hickey—it's a bite mark," the other Rodney told him with a happy smile.

"You let him bite you?" Rodney crossed his arms over his chest, feeling deeply threatened for some reason.

"Sure. Well, to be honest, it would have been hard to stop him, the mood he was in last night, but, yeah. I like it when he bites me. You should try it sometime." Rodney Sheppard gave him another one of those bright smiles.

"No thank you!" Rodney snapped. "Doesn't it hurt?" he asked curiously, still freaked out, although he wasn't sure why.

"Yeah, but it's such a good hurt," his counterpart told him with what could only be described as a lascivious wink.

Rodney gazed at him, appalled by what that expression looked like on his own face. "There, see—just not getting the concept of 'good' and 'hurt' being used in conjunction with each other," he commented.

"Well, maybe that's because you've never tried it," the other Rodney told him. "Are these grapes?" He peered at the bowl on Rodney's nightstand.

"Yes, they are. Well, no, they're not, but they're near enough. Teyla brought them in—for me," Rodney said pointedly.

"Well, I'm you," Rodney Sheppard said cheerfully, helping himself to a handful.

"You so aren't," Rodney snorted.

"Sure I am. We look the same—apart from me being better looking—we talk the same, we walk the same, we're both Head of Science on Atlantis, we both have the same hottest guy

on the base wanting to jump our bones, we both..."

"Hold on!" Rodney held up his hand. "Back up there. Who wants to jump my bones?"

"Colonel Sheppard." The other Rodney rolled his eyes. "You must have noticed."

"Colonel Sheppard is straight. As am I," Rodney replied firmly.

"I have no idea what that means. Is it the same as being gay?"

"No, it's the opposite," Rodney snapped.

"I'd have thought the opposite of 'gay' would be 'sad,' but whatever," the other Rodney shrugged.

"So he is absolutely not interested in me that way," Rodney continued.

"Oh. Okay. So, him being absolutely not interested in you would clearly explain why he was out of his mind with worry about you during the mission, and why my John had to take over command because your John was acting all crazy. It probably also explains why the colonel crept under those blankets with you in the puddle jumper and held you all night. Definitely not interested in you. At all."

"He was trying to keep me awake! And warm!" Rodney protested. He had to admit that he had been touched by the colonel's concern for him—he hadn't expected him to hold him like that, and he'd felt curiously reassured by the way the other man had wrapped his arms around him and whispered in his ear. People never usually cared that much about him and it still surprised him that the colonel, of all people, had been worried about him.

"Oh. Right. Okay," the other Rodney nodded. "Just from where I was sitting, it looked more like he wanted to kiss you."

"He does not want to kiss me!" Rodney remembered the warmth of the colonel's breath against his ear and on his hair and how safe he'd felt lying there with him.

"Ah—but you want to kiss him right?" Rodney Sheppard grinned.

"No!" Rodney shouted. "And if you keep on like this, I'm going to get Carson to throw you out."

"Okay. I hear you." Rodney Sheppard put up his hands in mock surrender. "So what's your problem with it, Rodney? Why does the idea freak you out so much?"

"It doesn't freak me out. It's just not who I am," Rodney snapped. And he was pretty sure it wasn't. Not that he'd had sex with that many people, but they'd all been women. All two of them. Not that it had gone very well, admittedly, but he assumed that was a matter of practice, and if they'd just kept on seeing him, he was sure he'd have gotten better at it.

"So, how are you?" Rodney Sheppard said, ignoring that last comment and stuffing the grapes into his mouth.

"I'm fine. Well, no, I'm very ill, apparently, according to Carson, and people should be nice to me, especially because I'm suffering caffeine withdrawal and my behavior is therefore unpredictable." Rodney paused for a moment, and his counterpart grinned at him again.

"Um...I should probably...you know...thank you or something for the last minute rescue, although really, did you have to cut it so fine?"

"We got you out of there, didn't we?" his counterpart said, leaning on the side of the bed.

"There is a chair." Rodney gestured with his head.

"Yeah...not feeling like sitting down right now." The other Rodney gave a wry grin.

"Oh, God. He spanked, you didn't he?" Rodney could feel his face flush a bright shade of vermillion at that thought.

"Yup," the other Rodney shrugged.

"Why? What did you do?" Rodney asked, horrified and fascinated at one and the same time.

"Didn't do the drills he set for me while he was away. I was an idiot and let it slip to him during the mission." Rodney slapped his hand against his forehead.

"My God, he spansks you for not doing exercise?" Rodney shuddered, remembering that Colonel Sheppard had him down for some drills of his own. In fact, he'd been busy sitting here trying to think up ways of getting out of them, but now he wasn't so sure that was such a good idea. The colonel had been behaving weirdly since these people arrived and Rodney wasn't entirely sure how he'd react to him avoiding the drills. Not that he thought he'd spank him as such, but.... Rodney tried to close down that mental image, but it just sat in his head, tormenting him. "That's just...terrible," he sighed at last, still preoccupied by the thought of Colonel Sheppard throwing him over his knee.

"I know. It sucks. Exercise is for dogs," his counterpart said.

"That's what I always say!" Rodney exclaimed.

"But John wants me mission-fit the whole time, so we do these drills, and I have a running program, too."

"It sounds awful," Rodney sympathized.

"It is," his counterpart agreed in a melancholy tone.

They shared a rare moment of bonding.

"You could just say no," Rodney said eventually. "When he tries to spank you."

"Not really," his counterpart shrugged. "You see, when I married him, I agreed to submit to him in everything. So he owns me and can do pretty much anything he wants to me."

"What?" Rodney exclaimed, aghast. "That's terrible!"

"No—it's fantastic," the other Rodney replied.

"But...but...." Rodney tried to imagine what that would be like and failed. "Are you saying he could really hurt you and you couldn't even charge him with assault?"

"I suppose so, but he wouldn't. That's not the way it works, and besides, he'd get a hard time from the other tops if he was abusive towards me. But I know he never would. It all comes down to trust," the other Rodney said softly. "I trust him. It's that simple."

"I don't understand you." Rodney shook his head.

"No. But then you don't understand yourself, either, so no surprises there."

"Was there a reason why you dropped by to irritate me?" Rodney snapped, the rare moment of bonding clearly well and truly over.

"No, I don't think so.... Oh, yes!" His counterpart gave that stupid little giggle of his and clicked his fingers excitedly. "I came to tell you not to worry about the lab. It's in safe hands."

"What?" Rodney sat up straight with a frown.

"The lab. I've been working there all morning; just thought I'd drop by and reassure you. I've got them all working on the QDD. Man, it's great to be working with Radek again—he's fantastic. Not as brilliant as me, of course, but then who is? But he's a good, solid engineer. Nice to hear that Czech accent again."

"What do you mean you've been working there all morning? Who said you could work in my lab, with my people?" Rodney demanded, throwing the sheets aside, and sliding off the bed.

"Well, there's no point me sitting around waiting for you to get better before starting work modifying those crystals. It'll take weeks as it is, so I thought it made sense to get a head start."

"Where are my clothes?" Rodney demanded, looking around the infirmary helplessly. "Carson! What have you done with my clothes?"

Carson came running out of the side room. "What now?" he demanded and then he saw

Rodney and his eyes widened. "Rodney, what are you doing out of bed?"

"What does it look like? There is no way I'm letting this irritating idiot loose in my lab," Rodney snapped. "Now give me my clothes."

"No," Carson replied, standing in front of him, his blue eyes flashing.

"What? Carson, we don't have time for this. I'm fine. I'm not about to keel over or anything, and while I'm lounging around here, God knows what he is doing in my lab. Anything could be happening!"

"Like what?" the other Rodney asked.

"You could be blowing things up," Rodney growled.

"Or sucking people in from other universes?" His counterpart raised an eyebrow.

"That was an accident! Look, that lab is mine. You are not in charge of it and you do not give my people orders!" Rodney snapped at him.

"I already have. They like me. Apparently, I'm nicer and more laid back than you. I told them that's because I'm getting laid all the time and you aren't." His counterpart grinned at him.

"You...you...!" Rodney lunged towards him across the bed only to find himself restrained by Carson's surprisingly strong arms.

"Now, now, Rodney, calm down," Carson said, his voice sounding suspiciously amused.

"It's my lab," Rodney said desperately, trying to squirm, but Carson had him held fast.

"I know, lad, I know," Carson said softly. "But you're not well enough to be there right now. You lost a lot of blood yesterday and that was a nasty head wound I sutured. You're not well enough to go back to work yet."

"I'm fine." Rodney felt the room swimming, and then there were two Carsons in front of him, and he could feel himself going down. Strong arms caught him and directed him back onto the bed.

"There. See," Carson said grimly. "I told you." He helped Rodney to get under the sheets and then stood there, his arms folded over his chest. "Now, you are not going anywhere. I'll sit here and guard you myself if I have to."

Rodney Sheppard gave a snort of amusement at that.

Carson turned to glare at him. "And you are leaving," he said.

"Okay. On my way," the other Rodney grinned.

"I still don't see why..." Rodney began.

Carson fixed him with an extremely stern stare. "Be quiet, Rodney, or I'll call Colonel Sheppard in here and tell him exactly why he has to detail two of his soldiers to guard you," he said.

Rodney thought about that for a moment. It wasn't a good thought.

"Dammit, Carson, when did you become so bossy?" he complained.

"Tell me about it," the other Rodney said, slapping Rodney's arm. "Him and John between them—always bossing me around. Nice to know you have the same problem."

"Aren't you supposed to have left?" Rodney glowered.

"Get well soon, Rodney." The other Rodney grabbed another handful of his grapes and then, with a cheery wave in Rodney's direction, he left.

"Seriously, Carson, what's going on? Why are you being so mean?" Rodney asked, feeling extremely aggrieved; he'd always been able to push the doctor around quite easily before and he had no idea what had happened to the normally mild-mannered Scot.

Carson had a strange look in those blue eyes of his and he gave an odd little smile. "I found out something that surprised me, that's all," he murmured. "It got me to thinking...."

"Oh, God—it's them again, isn't it?" Rodney sighed, leaning back on his pillows, feeling utterly exhausted after his recent exertion. "First the colonel, now you—they're having this weird effect on everyone."

"It's made me feel much more confident," Carson told him softly.

"I noticed," Rodney sighed.

"Knowing there's a Carson out there who...well, I don't want to go into details, but it's just made me feel a wee bit more sure of myself. You could learn a thing or two from them as well, Rodney."

"Like what—how to wear a collar?" Rodney made a face.

"No, but you have to admit that Rodney Sheppard seems very happy with his life. I'm sure you could take a few lessons from that. Now, hold still. You're looking very pale, lad, and I want to make sure you didn't do yourself any harm as a result of that wee bit of stupidity just now." He put his fingers on Rodney's wrist and took his pulse and then checked his head wound. "No harm done, but I'm going to keep you in here for an extra day or so just to be sure," Carson told him.

"My entire life sucks," Rodney sighed, banging his head back on the pillow.

"Aye," Carson agreed with a smile. "It's not easy being you, Rodney."

Rodney closed his eyes, feeling worn out. He wished Colonel Sheppard would come and visit him again. In fact, he wished he was here right now. It had felt so nice back in the puddle jumper, being close to someone, being touched, being held. He hadn't been close to anyone in a very long time. Generally speaking, nobody was ever that keen on being close to him and he'd stopped yearning for physical contact as a result. No point wanting something you couldn't have. Unless...unless you could? He had another flash of that memory, of the colonel's warm breath ghosting over his ear, of the colonel's hard body underneath his, of those strong arms wrapped around him, keeping him still, keeping him warm, keeping him alive. Rodney relished the memory, replaying it over and over again in his mind, using it as a comfort blanket until he fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

End of Part Six

### Part Seven: Submission by Xanthe

Ten days later, Rodney stumbled sleepily to the door of his quarters and opened it in response to the insistent chiming.

"Good morning, Rodney!" Colonel Sheppard said in an insanely cheerful voice, stepping into his room.

Rodney glowered at him. "What's good about it?" he grunted, walking back to his bed to pull on his boots. He hadn't bothered shaving because he assumed that whatever it was Colonel Sheppard wanted to do to him would require a lot of sweating and generally being uncomfortable to the point of him requiring a long shower when the hour was up. He had managed to put on his pants, but still hadn't changed from his sleep tee-shirt into his workout tee-shirt. He tied his bootlaces very slowly, like a condemned man delaying his own execution. He'd deliberately left the light off, but Sheppard seemed to feel a need for everything to be as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as he was and he turned it on, making Rodney utter a curse and screw up his eyes against the sudden harsh brightness.

"So, you're not a morning person, then?" Sheppard said, leaning against the wall.

"It's six a.m.! I went to bed at one and now you've got me up early just so I can wear myself out with pointless calisthenics," Rodney grumbled, finishing with his bootlaces and getting up with a sigh.

"Not pointless, Rodney, and who the hell uses the word 'calisthenics,' anyway? It's a drill, so I can teach you how to take care of yourself in a fight."

"Why now?" Rodney asked, getting up slowly, his entire body feeling sluggish. "I mean, we've been going on offworld missions for a couple of years and suddenly now you feel I

need a military tutorial? And forgive me if I'm wrong, but isn't the whole point of your job to protect me because as a civilian I'm clearly incapable of doing that myself? How would you like it if I insisted you spent an hour a day in the lab with me learning about astrophysics and mechanical engineering, hmm?"

"I think it'd be great." Sheppard smiled at him pleasantly and Rodney scowled.

"Yes. Well. You still haven't answered my question. Why now?"

"I agree. I must apologize to you," Sheppard said. Rodney screwed up his eyes suspiciously. Sheppard grinned. "I should have suggested it a long time ago. It hasn't been fair on you, and the events of our most recent mission brought home to me just how remiss I've been in taking care of your personal safety."

"What?" Rodney blinked.

"You're invaluable to us, Rodney," Sheppard told him. "Your knowledge and expertise are far too important an asset for us not to take very good care of them. You've always handled yourself pretty well offworld, but you haven't had any formal training and now I'm going to take care of that. A bit late, admittedly, but I promise you I won't fail you again."

"Thanks. I think," Rodney said, wondering how the hell this whole conversation had been turned around so that it looked like he should be grateful about the coming hour of hell he was about to be subjected to.

"Ready?" Sheppard asked.

"Tee-shirt," Rodney muttered, reaching for his clean tee-shirt...and then hesitating. He hated undressing in front of people and he really didn't want to be half-naked in front of Colonel Sheppard of all people.

"Well, hurry up, it's already nearly five past," Sheppard said, glancing at his watch.

Rodney bit on his lip. It seemed incredibly prissy to ask the colonel to turn around, so in the end, he pulled his bed tee-shirt over his head, feeling his face flush as he did so, and quickly pulled on the other tee-shirt, all the time aware of the colonel's eyes upon him. In fact, the colonel's demeanor of casual indifference was disturbing of and by itself, when contrasted with the tautness of his muscles, and the way he was leaning against the wall, never taking his eyes off Rodney. Rodney had the disturbing sensation of there being a panther in the room, poised ready to spring, sleek and powerful. He shivered and brushed the thought aside; it was only Colonel Sheppard.

"Right. I thought we'd go for a little run first, to warm you up. Just a quick jog down to the South West pier. Then we can go to the practice room and start work on some drills. Sound okay?" Sheppard asked.

"No. Sounds horrible. Does that mean I don't have to do it?" Rodney asked. Sheppard

grinned at him, and Rodney had that same sensation of being locked in a room with a dangerous predator.

"You'll be fine," the colonel told him, placing a hand on his shoulder as they exited the room together. It might just have been Rodney's imagination, but that hand felt very warm and oddly affectionate.

They set off at a gentle jog which Rodney was surprised to find he was able to maintain. What also surprised him was that the colonel seemed to have a pathological need to talk while running, which struck him as frankly weird—it was hard enough to breathe as it was without also having to make intelligent conversation.

"Why did you work so late last night when you knew you had to be up early this morning?" the colonel said, and he wasn't even remotely out of breath—not even a hint of sweat on him. Rodney guessed that their current pace was barely a whisker above walking for him.

"There's...a...lot...to...be...done," he replied, between panting breaths. "QDD won't fix itself."

"Yeah, but you have Rodney Sheppard and all your team working on it, right?" the colonel asked.

"You don't understand, there's weeks of work to be done," Rodney said, stopping for a moment to get his breath back, putting his hands on his knees as he panted.

Sheppard circled him, still jogging, in a way that was incredibly annoying. "You can't work at this pace for weeks," he said.

"I can." Rodney jutted out his jaw obstinately.

"You'll be a wreck."

"So?" Rodney shrugged.

"So...I'm just saying... Rodney Sheppard has more personally invested in this than you do because he wants to go home, but I'm betting he wasn't there with you until one last night."

"No, in fact he's totally work-shy," Rodney grumbled, ambling forwards again as Sheppard set off once more. "He never works later than seven."

"Do any of the rest of the team?" Sheppard asked.

Rodney frowned. "I haven't asked them to. I like working on my own, anyway. Fewer people to get in the way."

"Maybe you should give yourself a break, Rodney," Sheppard said softly. "If Rodney Sheppard isn't pushing to get home early, then why the hell should you work yourself into

the ground? I know you feel guilty about bringing them here in the first place, but it won't help anyone if you keel over with exhaustion because of this."

"Your concern is touching, Colonel, but the hours I work really aren't any of your business," Rodney pointed out. "Now, if you don't mind, I need all my breath for this pointless waste of energy, so perhaps you could shut up?"

They jogged to the practice room in silence, and when they arrived there, Rodney flung himself down on a bench, feeling utterly exhausted. He glanced at his watch and was appalled to find it was only twenty past six. He couldn't believe he still had another forty minutes of this.

"Okay, a few stretches and then we'll start," the colonel said, gesturing to Rodney to get up. "First of all, I'm going to teach you how to fall."

"That sounds very helpful," Rodney muttered. "I thought the whole point of this was that I learned how to fight?"

"Yeah, but I confidently predict that in learning how to fight, you're going to be taking a hell of a lot of falls in the next few weeks," the colonel told him with a broad grin. "And I want to teach you how to fall properly, so you don't hurt yourself."

\* \* \*

Rodney had the beginnings of a bad headache ten minutes later, after having been thrown onto the exercise mat more times than he could count. He was pretty sure that he was becoming good at falling, though, and if faced by any hordes of hostile aliens, he felt sure he would be able to impress them by his ability to throw himself to the ground.

"Great. You're doing well," Sheppard said, holding out a sweaty hand to pull him up for the umpteenth time. Rodney groaned, his body aching from all the unaccustomed exercise. "I think we can move on to something more interesting now."

He went over to the side of the room and returned with what Rodney always thought of as 'Teyla's sticks,' although he was sure they had some technical term that he couldn't be bothered to retain in his memory.

"Here." Sheppard tossed them to him and Rodney fumbled the catch, so they clattered onto the floor. Rodney stumbled after them, hating this whole thing. Really, it seemed to him, it

was just a giant excuse to humiliate him, although he had to admit that Sheppard didn't seem to be taking any particular pleasure in his discomfort and had mainly been encouraging throughout.

Sheppard showed him a few moves that looked completely simple in slow motion, but when he came to actually advance on the colonel, somehow he found his hands and legs didn't move at the same pace and Sheppard thwacked him soundly on his arm and the back of his legs.

"Ow and ow," Rodney complained, glowering at him.

"Well, concentrate, then," Sheppard said, grinning back. "I know you can do better than that."

Rodney wasn't entirely sure why he was laboring under that delusion, but he tried to be faster the next time around—with a fairly similar result.

"This really isn't as much fun for me as it is for you," he griped.

Sheppard shook his head. "It takes a while to pick it up, but you're doing well," he replied.

"So...I've been thinking about what you said earlier," Rodney said, trying to twirl one of the sticks and failing miserably. He caught it awkwardly before it spun off out of his reach entirely. "About spending an hour a day in my lab. You're obviously an intelligent man, Colonel—there's the whole MENSA thing apart from anything else—so why did you end up going into the military of all places? You could have done so much more with your life."

"Ouch." Sheppard pulled a face. "But no, this is good. You're trying to psyche me out, to distract me. I get it." He did a perfect flip with one of his sticks and grinned at Rodney again.

Rodney advanced on him determinedly, slightly annoyed that his ploy had been seen through so easily, but still fairly confident that he could distract the colonel, anyway. The other man had his hot buttons and Rodney was pretty sure he knew how to push them.

"I was a fighter pilot, Rodney," John told him, feinting to the left slightly. Rodney hopped back, out of reach. "Did you ever read the entry requirements for becoming a fighter pilot? They expect you to have top grades in every thing. You have to make dozens of fast mental calculations when you're flying at that level."

"Hmm. And yet, you could have taken those same qualifications and gone anywhere, done anything, made a real contribution to the field of human learning...instead of offering yourself up as canon fodder the entire time."

Rodney jumped forward, his stick raised high and managed to land a blow onto the colonel's stick, which the other man easily deflected. They turned and faced off again.

"I wanted to fly," the colonel told him. "Always have, always will. Everything else was worth

the sacrifice."

"But you don't just have entry level qualifications, Colonel," Rodney persisted. "I've worked with you—you've even assisted me on some high level scientific projects and you're good. For a military man, at least."

"Why, thank you, Rodney." Sheppard feinted to the right and landed a blow on Rodney's stick, but Rodney managed to deflect it just in time and hopped back again.

"Usually, I find the military mind to be incredibly stupid," Rodney added, making another lunge forward. The colonel sidestepped him easily and landed a tap on Rodney's ass. Rodney growled and turned, fast, sticks raised again. "I just think it's a waste, that's all," Rodney said. "Maybe you were afraid of failing in a more cerebral arena? Maybe you didn't want to put yourself to the test, Colonel."

"Maybe," Sheppard chuckled, but Rodney thought he might be getting to him. "One thing I was wondering—back in the puddle jumper, when you were out of it, you called me John. It struck me then, you always call me Colonel, or Sheppard—but you've never called me John, before or since," the colonel said, circling him again. Rodney frowned. "You call Carson and Elizabeth by their first names, but not me. Why is that?" Sheppard asked.

Rodney shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. "I've worked with the military for a long time, Colonel," he said, feeling the sweat trickle down the side of his face. "I know how obsessed you all are by your rank." Rodney brushed his arm angrily across his forehead to stop the sweat from dripping into his eyes. Sheppard, by comparison, still looked as fresh as a daisy.

"Not all of us," Sheppard replied, running forward and nearly knocking both Rodney's sticks out of his hands. Rodney turned just as Sheppard struck a glancing blow to his hip.

"That hurt! And, yes, pretty much all of you. Take you, for example, and how annoyed you were when you found out that your counterpart in another universe outranked you. That really upset you."

Rodney lunged in wildly, was caught off balance, and only just managed to escape without being knocked to the floor. He took two hard swats to his ass as Sheppard passed him, though.

"Word of advice, Rodney. Distraction is one thing, but pissing people off can be counter-productive," Sheppard growled.

"And you were ridiculously pleased when you got the promotion to lieutenant colonel," Rodney continued, gathering himself up and moving forwards again, figuring that attack was the best method of defense. Their sticks clashed and then got tangled and they pushed against each other for several seconds. Rodney could feel the colonel overwhelming him with his superior strength and experience and he went down on one knee, their sticks still locked.

"You're right. I liked the promotion," Sheppard said, in a soft, silky tone. "But I don't need to be reminded of it every minute of every day. Call me John."

"No," Rodney hissed, his other knee going so that he was now on both knees, his sticks still locked with Sheppard's, his arms shaking from the effort of trying to hold the other man back.

"Why not?" Sheppard asked, and his face was close—too close—and Rodney was reminded of that panther again, power barely leashed.

Why not? Rodney didn't know why not, just that if he started calling the colonel 'John,' then he'd start thinking of him that way, too, and if he started doing that.... He wasn't sure how that would end.

"It's just a name. It's just the same as how you address Elizabeth, and Carson, and Radek and just about everyone else. It doesn't mean anything," Sheppard said.

Rodney gave in, his arms dropping, and he slumped back on the floor, panting and covered in sweat, defeated. Sheppard loomed over him and held out a hand to help him up.

"That was good," he said, with a little grin. "You're learning, Rodney."

"Thank you," Rodney replied, taking the proffered hand and heaving himself to his feet. He paused for a moment, looking into Sheppard's hazel eyes which were gazing at him expectantly. "Colonel," Rodney added softly.

Sheppard gave a barely perceptible sigh and Rodney turned away, glad the drill session was over. He knew that he couldn't call Sheppard 'John.' Not because it didn't mean anything, but precisely because it did.

\* \* \*

Rodney's life didn't improve over the next couple of weeks. He found the drill sessions with Colonel Sheppard oddly disconcerting. He'd never yet found a way to defeat the other man with those damn sticks, and there was a permanent level of tension between them when they fought which Rodney found both exhilarating and exhausting. It wasn't even as if he disliked the man—he wished that he did—but the truth was that being with Colonel Sheppard, sniping with him, laughing at him and generally exchanging childish insults was fun and they both enjoyed it. All the same, he couldn't shake that feeling that the colonel

was like a panther, all tightly controlled power and as dangerous as any predator, and more and more, he got the strange sensation that he was the colonel's prey. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and yet weirdly exciting at the same time.

The drills were the least of his problems, though. His main headache was his daily life in the lab. Rodney was used to being the emperor of his own little kingdom during his working life. He ruled his lab with a mixture of irascibility and intellectual enthusiasm and he was used to his staff leaping around to accommodate his moods. Only now there were two of him, and they were both used to being in charge in the lab, and neither of them wanted to give an inch.

Rodney found everything about his counterpart irritating, from the way he clicked his fingers when he was excited to his relationship with the general, but most of all he hated the way the other man had barged into his lab and tried to take over. And the worst part of it was that he got the distinct impression that all his staff liked the other Rodney much more than they liked him.

Rodney Sheppard giggled inanely at the most inopportune moments; he stopped everyone for a consolatory donut and coffee break when their work had gone spectacularly wrong, and he generally zoomed around the lab making friends and being nice to people when it wasn't remotely necessary. Rodney hated him. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd been less intelligent than Rodney, but he wasn't—he was on Rodney's exact same level and Rodney realized for the first time in his life just how much he relied upon his genius to make him feel special, in the absence of anything else in his life to feel special about. Now he wasn't even special any more because Rodney Sheppard could do what he could, understand the level of theoretical physics that he understood, and generally keep up with him effortlessly in arguments—which was never a good thing as far as Rodney was concerned.

After a couple of weeks enclosed in the confined space of the lab with him, Rodney was close to boiling point. He watched, sulkily, as his counterpart sauntered into the lab one morning, clapping his hands together and raring to go.

"Okay, people, gather round. I've been thinking of a way to halve the recovery time on the crystals between imaging sessions," he announced.

Rodney glared at him. "Well, that sounds good, but perhaps you should run it past me first," he said. "In case it won't work."

"It'll work," his counterpart said loftily.

"And it might not and this is my lab, so you ask first," Rodney snapped. His staff all shifted uneasily, clearly sensing yet another flare-up between the two men.

"Okay. If you want to waste an hour in pointless explanations, then why not?" the other Rodney snapped back.

"Oh, I'm sorry, are we on the clock here?" Rodney raised an eyebrow. "If so, then perhaps you'd be more concerned about the fact that we've all been here for over an hour already while you just showed up."

"Well, I was busy thinking this through in my quarters because you make it impossible to think at all in here."

"We could have thought it through together if you'd seen fit to bring it to me instead of just announcing it to everyone else first!" Rodney practically shouted.

"Uh, perhaps it is time for a coffee break?" Radek suggested meekly, positioning himself between the two men.

"Fine. Yes. Caffeine always solves everything," Rodney growled, returning to what he'd been doing before he'd been so irritatingly interrupted.

He watched, still glowering, as Radek brought his counterpart some coffee and they chatted easily together. That was another thing he hated about the other Rodney: Rodney had always thought of Radek as in some way his—his to generally boss around and exchange ideas with, and now Radek seemed to be spending most of his time with the other Rodney; it was as if he preferred him. Rodney didn't like that idea so he bent his head again and tried to ignore all these unfamiliar emotions. It was impossible to completely cut Rodney Sheppard's irritating voice out from his consciousness, though. The man seemed to have made it his job to jump up and down on Rodney's nerves until he wasn't sure he could stand it any longer.

The day had got off to a bad start and things didn't get any better as the day wore on, either, as the two Rodneys continued to stoke each other up to boiling point, and by the evening, Rodney McKay was on the verge of hysteria. He watched Rodney Sheppard cozy up to all his team, one by one, during the course of the day, until he was at the end of his tether. Finally his doppelganger moved in on Miko, all guns in his charm offensive blazing, with the sole purpose, or so it seemed to Rodney, of turning all his staff against him.

"Hey, Miko," Rodney Sheppard said, buttonholing the sweet-natured Japanese scientist at her desk. "Are you still coming to dinner tomorrow evening?"

"Yes, sir," Miko bowed, nodding nervously at him.

Rodney bristled—he'd never invited any of his staff to dinner and he really didn't think it was necessary.

"Great. We're having sashimi," his counterpart grinned.

"Sashimi? You know how to make sashimi?" Miko asked, in the breathy tone of pure wonder that she usually saved just for Rodney McKay. Rodney felt a wave of intense jealousy.

"Sure we do, you taught us," his counterpart grinned. "We're always hanging out together."

You make us laugh. Back in my universe, we call you the Dragon Lady."

"What?" Miko's eyes were wide with surprise. "Dragon Lady? Why do you call me this?"

"Because of your reputation," Rodney Sheppard said, with a sly wink. Rodney found himself gripping his tools extra tightly to avoid throwing them somewhere. "Everyone thinks you're so polite and quiet, but you've somehow managed to acquire three subs—which I think we'll agree is a little greedy; two sweet girls from the botany department and one of the military boys who likes to kiss your boots. Nobody knows how you keep them all in order, but John says you rule them with a rod of iron."

Miko was blushing furiously, looking up at Rodney Sheppard through her eyelashes and giggling nervously, yet clearly utterly flattered and beguiled by him at the same time. Rodney McKay had finally had enough and he flung his tools down and marched across the room.

"Just...just shut up," he growled. "And do some goddamn work. You're always drinking coffee and being nice to people. It's disgusting!"

"You're just jealous because they like me more than they like you," Rodney Sheppard told him.

"They don't like you more than me—you're just a novelty factor," Rodney snapped at him. "With your collar and leash and endless obsession with weird sex."

"At least I'm actually having sex," the other Rodney snapped back. "You're always in a bad mood because you're permanently sexually frustrated."

"And you have to run whenever Daddy comes calling. 'Yes, John, No, John,'" he mimicked. "'Where do you want me, John?' You can't think for yourself, or feed yourself, or do anything by yourself."

"And I can think of one thing that you have to do by yourself," the other Rodney said, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Well, at least I don't belong to anyone."

"Nobody would have you!"

"You are petty, arrogant, and a total...a total...loser!" Rodney yelled, searching for the worst insult he could find.

"Look in the mirror sometime!" his counterpart yelled back.

Rodney had had enough. If he stayed here, he thought he might very well do something violent, so he collected as much dignity as he could muster and stalked out of the lab. He wasn't entirely sure where he was going so he was as surprised as anyone when his

footsteps took him to Colonel Sheppard's quarters. He ignored the door chime and hammered loudly on the door until the colonel opened it, a bemused expression on his face.

"Rodney? What the hell is going on? Is there an emergency?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, there is. I'm on the verge of committing murder," Rodney said, pushing the colonel aside and charging into his room.

"Let me guess—Rodney Sheppard," the colonel sighed.

"He is.... He is the most annoying man I've ever met."

"Yeah. I know." The colonel gave a wry grin.

Rodney glared at him. "I am not that irritating!" he protested.

"No...you're not, but neither is he," Sheppard said sensibly. "He's just...you, and for some reason, you really don't like yourself that much."

"I...I...." Rodney didn't have an answer to that. He just stood there, gazing at the colonel helplessly.

"You're looking really wound up. Come with me, I've got an idea for how we can handle this."

"Does it involve sending Rodney Sheppard on a one way trip through the Stargate?" Rodney asked hopefully.

"Nope, but it does involve making you feel better," Sheppard replied with a grin.

"Okay," Rodney sighed. "I guess I'll have to settle for that."

He half walked, half jogged down the hallway with the colonel, gibbering away endlessly about his problems with his counterpart, completely high on his own nervous energy. The colonel listened to him calmly, placing a soothing hand on his shoulder every now and again to guide him in the right direction, and then they finally ended up, much to Rodney's dismay, at the practice room.

"Oh, you cannot be serious! I'm in no mood to get whacked around by those bloody sticks right now!" Rodney fumed.

"No sticks," Sheppard told him. "I have something else in mind."

"Like what?" Rodney asked suspiciously, hopping into the room after the other man.

"Hand-to-hand combat," Sheppard told him with a grin.

"And that's supposed to make me feel better how?" Rodney enquired.

"You'll see. It's just a hunch, but somehow I think this will work. Now come here. Come on...come at me...use all that energy to throw me," the colonel beckoned.

It was absurd, ridiculous...and yet, the way he was feeling right now, it made a strange kind of sense. Rodney didn't need telling twice. He threw himself bodily at the other man and tried to trip him onto the floor. The colonel caught him easily, snuck a boot behind his leg, threw him onto the floor and then leapt on top of him and held him down by lying across his chest.

"Ow...get off..." Rodney panted, trying to free himself, but the colonel wouldn't budge.

"Have to hold you for three seconds—unless you either tap my shoulder or say 'submit'," Sheppard told him. "Those are the rules."

"Yeah, like I'm ever going to say that to you," Rodney retorted.

"I'm happy to just stay here until you do," the colonel said and then, for the first time, Rodney registered how all Sheppard's body weight was on him, pinning him onto the mat, and the other man's hazel eyes seemed very close. Sheppard's body was hard and muscular and Rodney could barely wriggle an inch beneath him.

"One—two—three." Sheppard grinned, finally letting him up.

Rodney glared up at him.

"Want to try again? Come on. You want to get your own back, don't you?" Sheppard taunted. "Just imagine I'm him. Come on...."

Rodney remembered that stupid curly hair and irritating giggle and the way Rodney Sheppard would finger that black leather collar of his dreamily sometimes, when he thought nobody was looking, and how somehow that annoyed Rodney more than anything else, and he got to his feet and threw himself at the colonel. Sheppard was ready for him, though, and he found himself cocooned in a vice-like grip, struggling to get free.

"Harder," Sheppard said, his voice warm and tingly against Rodney's ear. "Come on... fight me, really fight me..."

Rodney struggled even more, using every ounce of his strength, and managed to get himself free, then lunged at the colonel again—and ended up flat on his back with Sheppard lying across his chest once more. He lay there, winded, feeling strangely exhilarated by the whole thing. Sheppard was so close that he could smell the other man's scent, and the colonel had him pinned down so that he couldn't move, and, to be honest, suddenly Rodney wasn't so sure that he wanted to move.

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Rodney Sheppard stormed back to his quarters after his argument with his counterpart, feeling completely outraged. It didn't matter how much he tried, or how many good ideas he brought to their work, Rodney McKay absolutely refused to give him any kind of a break. The man picked arguments where there was no need, and Rodney didn't think he could stand it for much longer. He stormed into his room, threw his laptop down on the table, and kicked a near-by chair.

"Bad day?" a voice said sympathetically from the direction of the bed. Rodney turned, surprised; he hadn't expected John to be back yet. He and the colonel had been over on the mainland all day and Rodney had assumed he'd be late home, but instead he was lying on the bed, gazing at Rodney with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Very bad day," Rodney growled. "I swear if I have to listen to that man trying to patronize me one more time, then I might not be able to control myself." He kicked the chair again to illustrate the point.

John grinned and sat up. "Let me guess—Rodney McKay?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Who else? He's always sniping at me. Little comments here and there, all the time. Dig, dig, dig...mostly about my relationship with you and my sexual preferences...he's obsessed! And he seems to think he understands us when he doesn't. He gets it wrong. He makes it sound like what we have—what we do and what we enjoy—like it's bad or unnatural or something, and that makes me furious and he knows that, so he keeps on doing it until he gets a rise out of me."

"If you could just learn not to react, then he might stop doing it," John said wisely, swinging his long legs over the side of the bed.

"I know, I know! And I try, I honestly do. He has a great team and I love working with them, but it's just him I can't stand."

"I like him," John said, getting up and walking over to him.

Rodney glowered at him. "I have no idea why," he grumbled.

"Because he's kind of like you, and I really like you," John told him, grabbing his chin and bestowing a sweet kiss on his mouth. Rodney sighed and melted against him, trying to allow the kiss to calm him.

"You're back early," he said finally when John released him. "I thought you'd be late."

"Me, too, but we got done earlier than we thought."

"Are we eating in the mess hall tonight or are you cooking?" Rodney asked, leaning against him.

"Mess hall. I'll be cooking tomorrow night because I believe we have guests."

"Oh, yeah. Miko." Rodney had forgotten about Miko. "It's weird. She's kind of like our Miko, but also...just really timid. Our Miko has that whole cool toppy thing going on underneath the quiet exterior."

"Well, this Miko might be like that, too. We'll just have to get to know her better," John said. "I invited Elizabeth over as well. Should be an interesting combination. I was thinking that next week we should invite Colonel Sheppard and Rodney McKay, but I'm guessing that's not such a good idea?"

Rodney pulled back and gazed at him in abject horror. "There is no way I am spending a day in the lab with that man and then feeding him anything other than arsenic!" he growled, disengaging himself from his husband's arms. "He's a monster!" He could feel himself getting wound up again, and he spun around, fists clenching and unclenching.

"Uh-oh. I sense another rant," John said, stepping back.

"It's just that he seems to resent me having any ideas or contributing in any way to our work in anything other than the most menial capacity. It's all 'Dr. Sheppard, do you think you're able to hold my laptop while I get on with the very important and complicated work, or would that be too much for you?'" Rodney gave a growl of frustration and kicked the chair again, only narrowly missing his husband's leg as he did so.

"Okay, you need taking down," John said firmly. "And I think I know just the way to do it."

"Really?" Rodney gazed at him expectantly.

"Oh, yeah. You see...I don't know about you, but I've been missing some of the toys we have back home."

"Oh, yes. Me too," Rodney sighed, thinking of their extensive collection of paddles, floggers, whips, clamps, chains, harnesses, gags, cuffs, butt plugs, dildos and other paraphernalia. They had the items that John wore clipped to his belt, but they were just the basics, and more for formal use than anything else, and Rodney longed for the more erotic items that they had in their closet back home.

"So...over the past few weeks, while you've been working in the lab...I've been making a few trips over to the mainland, doing some trading, offering up my services to help with

anything the Athosians needed in return for them making me a few items... Hell, I even made a couple myself," John grinned.

"What kind of items?" Rodney asked excitedly, barely able to restrain himself from hopping up and down.

"All kinds. Stand still and I'll show you."

Rodney made a conscious effort to clamp down on the high levels of nervous energy currently coursing through his body. Only when he'd stood completely still for a couple of seconds did John nod and go over to their closet. He pulled out a wooden chest which was clearly quite heavy, carried it over to the table, and opened it. Rodney waited for permission to take a peek inside, desperately restraining himself from running straight over there to see what was in it. Finally John beckoned him over and he hopped to his husband's side and then stood there, utterly dumbfounded.

"Oh, God," he said at last. "It's like it's my birthday or something."

John grinned. "Yeah. Let me show you everything, one by one—then I'm gonna take great pleasure in trying them all out on you."

He pulled out a flogger first and Rodney ran his fingers through it in awe. It was soft, its long tails made of some kind of furry animal hide, and Rodney ached to feel it caressing his shoulders. This was an item of serious pleasure.

"This one is the good cop," John told him with a smile. "But this one..." He pulled out another flogger, and this one was made of thinly plaited rope and was a much more unforgiving implement. "This one is the bad cop," John said, a look of anticipation glittering in his hazel eyes.

Next John pulled out a sturdy wooden paddle. "I made this myself," he said proudly, holding it up.

Rodney fingered it, wondering what it would feel like on his ass. He suspected it would be loud and make a thwacking sound, but it wouldn't hurt the way the strap did—John's strap was thick and hard and his husband only ever used it for punishment, not for pleasure.

"I'm impressed," Rodney said, grinning delightedly. "I never knew you could carve wood."

"Jinto taught me," John replied with a grin of his own. "He wasn't sure why I needed a paddle when I don't have any kids, but I told him there would be a very deserving recipient."

Rodney giggled at that and pressed a kiss to the side of his husband's face.

A pair of butter-soft wrist and ankle cuffs were next out of the box. Rodney fingered them thoughtfully. "These are beautiful," he whispered.

"I know. It's the softest hide the Athosians have. Only the best for you," John murmured, his lips moving over the skin of Rodney's neck as he spoke, making Rodney shiver.

"I also got these," John said, pulling out some items of clothing. Rodney sorted through them, his big fingers gently caressing a silk shirt in a dazzling shade of blue. "I thought it would match your eyes," John said. Rodney swallowed hard, feeling a lump rise in his throat. "And these..." John pulled out a pair of black pants that laced up rather than zipped, and some comfortable-looking leather boots. "I know how much you hate the clothes that Dr. McKay gave you. I thought you'd feel more like yourself in this outfit," John told him.

"I love you," Rodney told him, fingering the fabrics, loving the sensual feel of them. One of the things he'd found difficult about being in this universe was the lack of sensuality. He liked his clothes to whisper on his skin, to comfort him, restrict him, or caress him. He liked the way silk felt against his naked flesh, and the snug fit of his pants, the way they accentuated his ass for his husband to enjoy. Rodney McKay's clothes provided none of those sensory experiences and he'd missed them. Rodney turned to his husband and ran his fingers through John's dark hair, loving the feel of that, too.

"Seriously, I love you," he said again, insistently, before pressing a deep, heartfelt kiss to his husband's lips. John's hands went around his waist and slid down the back of his pants.

"That's good," John murmured when the kiss ended. "Because I'm going to spend the next hour or so tormenting you by doing some very slow, very exotic things to your body. And by the time I'm done, you won't even remember who Dr. McKay is because you'll be so boneless with pleasure. It wouldn't matter if he marched right in here and taunted you—you'd just smile and let it all wash over you."

Rodney stiffened under his husband's caress. "I'm not seeing that right now," he admitted. "But I'll take your word for it."

"Good...because I want you to submit to me now, Rodney. I'm going to take you down, and I want you to give everything up to me."

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"Had enough yet?" Colonel John Sheppard asked, gazing at Rodney's red, sweaty face.

The scientist shook his head, grimly.

"Think you can beat me?" John taunted, grinning broadly. "Come on, Rodney, you're a big, solid guy. You've probably got a weight advantage on me. Use that."

Rodney gazed back at him, an intent look on his face, and then he lunged forwards again. John wrapped his arms around him, holding him back, but he was right—Rodney had a pair of broad shoulders on him and if he could learn how to use them to his advantage, he could be a serious opponent. Unfortunately, he lacked a certain killer instinct, which had surprised John when he'd first gotten to know the scientist. In the beginning, he'd assumed Rodney's bite was as bad as his bark, but he'd soon come to realize that Rodney used words to keep people at bay, and while he might say one thing, he often did the complete opposite. When they'd first arrived on Atlantis, John had had Rodney pegged as a complete coward, but he'd soon been disabused of that notion and had since come to view Rodney as one of the bravest men he'd ever known. The scientist had saved a lot of lives, often putting himself at risk to do so. He might bitch and complain about the little things, but when it came to the really big things, John knew he could rely on Rodney completely. Not that he'd ever tell the scientist that, of course. The other man's ego was a curious mixture of superiority and inferiority complexes and you had to be careful about which side of it you fed.

John turned Rodney in his arms, got a hold on the scientist's arm and pinioned it behind his back, then pulled him close, so that his back was against John's chest. Then John wrapped his free arm around Rodney's body, holding him tight.

"Now what?" John whispered in Rodney's ear. "What would you do if this happened offworld? If some badass alien had you like this? How would you escape?"

John could feel the warmth of Rodney's body pressed against his, could feel Rodney's breathing coming in gulps, could feel Rodney's hot cheek pressed against the side of his face. He wished he wasn't enjoying this quite so much, but he couldn't help it. The general had told him that if he wanted Rodney, he should just go for it, but John knew it wasn't as simple in his universe as it was in his counterpart's. For a start, Rodney had never given any indication that he would welcome his advances, so John had decided to take things very slowly. He'd sought out opportunities to spend time with the scientist, often dropping by his lab late at night for a chat while Rodney was working, or seeking him out in the mess hall. John was enjoying his one-sided courtship—and that's what it felt like to him—a courtship. Maybe that was a little old fashioned, but in some ways John viewed himself as an old fashioned kind of guy. He didn't have any objection to playing a long game, either. He'd just hang out with Rodney for long enough to see whether he had any chance at all with the scientist, or whether Rodney was completely and irrevocably straight. John thought that his tactics might be working as well—it was him, after all, who Rodney had come to this evening. He knew that if this had happened just a few weeks ago, Rodney would have gone back to his room to sulk or had a major explosive outburst that would have been heard all around the city. Now, though, he'd learned to trust John enough to at least cautiously sniff at his fingers, even if he was a long way from eating out of his hand yet.

John tightened his arm around Rodney's body, and tried not to become hard as he felt Rodney go still in his arms. He wasn't sure whether Rodney was responding to his own mood, somehow picking up, subconsciously, how best to react when John was overpowering him like this, but John loved it. It turned him on and gave him numerous jerking off fantasies to indulge in when he was alone. Right now he just wanted to push

Rodney down, rip his clothes off, and slide his hard cock into the scientist's ass. He wanted to kiss those crooked lips and make Rodney moan and pant with need, but John knew that would have to wait until he had some sign from Rodney that this was what he wanted, too.

They stood there for a long moment, Rodney limp in John's arms, until finally John whispered to him again.

"Giving up? Or just biding your time?"

An elbow in his ribs answered that question and he released his grip on Rodney, allowing him to escape, only to pull him back and throw him easily onto the floor. Rodney went down with a thump and John threw himself on top of him, holding those broad shoulders against the exercise mat with the weight of his body. He wanted to grab Rodney's arms, to hold them above his head and lower his head and force Rodney's mouth open with his lips, but instead he kept himself tightly controlled, just enjoying the sensation of Rodney's warm body under his own. Rodney struggled, but John held him fast.

"You could always just say the word—if I'm hurting you," Colonel Sheppard said, gazing down on Rodney with a grin.

"You're not hurting me...you're just irritating me," Rodney replied. He'd been growing steadily quieter the longer their session continued as he came down from the agitated state he'd been in when he'd first knocked on John's door.

"Just one word...then I'll let you up sooner," John said silkily, loving the way Rodney's blue eyes were flashing at him.

"Not gonna say it," Rodney panted.

"We'll see." John reluctantly loosened his grip and allowed Rodney up.

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"On your knees," General John Sheppard told his husband, in a low, sibilant tone.

Rodney dropped immediately to his knees, gazing up at him with those bright blue eyes of his, with an expression of total trust.

"Shirt first." John slipped his fingers under Rodney's uniform shirt and then slowly slid it up

his husband's body, revealing Rodney's naked chest.

"Hands behind your back," John ordered and Rodney obeyed immediately again. John fastened the new cuffs to Rodney's wrists, and then clipped them together behind his back.

"Mmm, looks good," he whispered into Rodney's ear, as he ran a fingernail down Rodney's bare back. Rodney shivered and John smiled to himself. He loved doing this to his husband—he'd never had a submissive as satisfying to play with as Rodney. Rodney could be completely hyper, full of high octane nervous energy, but John knew how to bring him down, gradually, slowly, finally quieting that endlessly chatting mouth and stilling the overactive brain, reducing Rodney to a mass of sheer physical sensation. It was so incredibly fulfilling to John as a top, and he relished it. In fact, it was making him hard just thinking about it and he decided to deal with that first so that he could really enjoy working on Rodney for the next hour or so without his own sexual urgency getting in the way. And by the time he was done, he was pretty sure that he'd be ready to come all over again—this time in Rodney's plump ass.

John stroked his fingers over Rodney's torso, gently, softly, just ghosting over the surface of the bare skin with his fingernails, seeing goosebumps rise on Rodney's flesh. He circled him, stroking him the entire time, and he could see that it was all Rodney could do to keep still. Finally, John ended up in front of his husband once more. He undid his fly and released his aching cock, then took hold of Rodney's face in his hands.

"I'm going to use your mouth," he whispered, in that same low, dark tone that he saved for their most erotic encounters. "I don't want you to move. I want you to kneel there, and take me."

This was the first step in getting Rodney to forget all the anxieties and irritations of the day and surrender himself to John's will. It might take a while for them to get there, but after a couple of years together, Rodney was pretty well trained by now—and John knew how best to get the response he wanted. He caressed Rodney's ears for a second, and then slid his hand around and grabbed the hair on the back of his husband's head. He jerked Rodney's head back and his husband opened his mouth automatically. John took advantage of that to slide his hard cock between Rodney's lips, not loosening his hold on Rodney's hair as he did so. John let out a sigh as he slid his cock deeper into Rodney's open mouth, savoring the warmth of Rodney's tongue on his hard length.

"That's good," he whispered. "I'm going to go deep—relax your throat."

Rodney was pretty good at deep-throating him, but it was easier for him to do that when he was moving his head down on John's cock. Now John had him immobile and it was much harder to suppress the gag reflex in those circumstances. Rodney's eyes widened and John could see he was struggling with it, but making him submit to what John wanted was one way they both got off, so John wasn't about to let him get away without trying. He could feel Rodney gulping, swallowing convulsively, and he used his free hand to stroke the side of his husband's face, relaxing and calming him. Rodney responded immediately, making a visible effort to accommodate John's cock, and then John was sliding in further, deep into

Rodney's throat. He slid in and out for a long time, loving the way his cock disappeared so far inside Rodney's mouth. His balls slapped against Rodney's chin with every inward thrust and it felt so good. Finally, he backed up a little.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth hard now," he told Rodney, in a very low voice, barely above a whisper. "I want you to take it. Just kneel there and worship my cock, Rodney."

Rodney gave a little moan and John grinned, seeing by the tenting of Rodney's pants just how turned on he was by this. He released his grip on Rodney's hair, grabbed the sides of his husband's face, and then sank himself into Rodney's mouth again, fast and hard, as he'd promised. His hips were moving like a piston now, in and out, just one shade short of brutal, and Rodney was struggling to stay in position under the onslaught with his hands tied behind his back. Only the pressure of John's hands on the sides of his face was keeping him steady.

John bucked into him over and over again, loving the expression in Rodney's blue eyes, loving the way he was offering himself up to his top, surrendering himself to John's demands. Then John felt himself coming, and he held Rodney's face in a firm grip and ejaculated down his throat. Finally he came to a halt, his fingers stroking Rodney's hair gently. He stood there for a long moment, enjoying the way his softening cock felt, still lying against Rodney's tongue, and the little panting movements of Rodney's breathing around the sensitive organ. Eventually, he withdrew and tucked his cock away again in his pants. Rodney knelt there, a dreamy expression in his eyes.

"Up," John said, helping Rodney to his feet. He undid his husband's pants and then removed the rest of his clothes until he was standing there completely naked. Then John circled around him again, drinking in the sight of him. He loved Rodney's body and even though it was completely familiar to him, he still couldn't get enough of it. John trailed a finger over his husband's broad shoulders, reveling in their strong shape. Rodney's body wasn't hard and lean like his own, but it was nicely toned, and his biceps bulged just the right amount. John pressed his lips against Rodney's shoulders and kissed them.

"I'm going to flog you here later," he whispered. "Nice and long and hard, until these shoulders are red."

Rodney didn't reply. He just stood there, shivering again. John grinned, loving how responsive Rodney was to everything he said to him as well as everything he did. He undid the clip holding Rodney's cuffs together and allowed his hands to go free.

"I made the most of my free time earlier to make some modifications to the room," John said. "Just some hooks in the right places."

Rodney glanced up and caught sight of the hooks John had fastened to the ceiling and walls, and he made a little moaning sound.

"I want you spread-eagled. I'll fasten you to the hooks above and those set in the floor." John nodded downwards. "Then I'm going to spend a long time playing with you," he

promised.

Rodney swallowed, hard, his blue eyes wide with a combination of anticipation, fear and arousal. John loved that look.

"Shh," he whispered, running a finger over Rodney's skin again. "Surrender to me, Rodney. Give it up to me. You can't stop me, anyway. It's going to happen whether you fight it or not, so give it up and let me do what I want to you."

Rodney sighed, as if a huge weight had been lifted from him, and his body was already starting to look less tense. John grinned and began fastening the chains from the wooden chest to the hooks in the ceiling. When he was done, he turned back to Rodney, bearing a plain black blindfold. He bound it tightly around his husband's eyes so that Rodney wouldn't be able to see anything.

"You don't get to be in control," John told him. "You don't get to see anything I'm going to do to you. You just have to accept it. That's all."

Rodney was trembling in earnest now and John grinned, loving the way the power was flowing between them, back and forth, being surrendered and being taken, turning them both on.

"Now the gag," John said, knowing how much Rodney hated not being able to talk or scream. Rodney stiffened. "I don't want you to even think about talking. In fact I don't want you to think at all. I just want you to feel every single thing I'm going to do to you. I want you to concentrate on that and nothing else."

Rodney nodded, his lips trembling slightly. John pushed the leather gag between those lips, and buckled it behind his head, and then he placed a little kiss on each of Rodney's cheeks, running his hands up and down Rodney's body as he did so, until some of the trembling subsided. Finally, John took hold of Rodney's wrists and tied him to the chains above them. Then he knelt down, fastened a cuff on each of Rodney's ankles, and chained him to the hooks in the floor. Rodney was now completely spread-eagled—legs wide apart, arms stretched equally wide above him, naked, blindfolded and gagged. John sighed.

"Oh, that's a good sight," he whispered, stroking Rodney's bare ass with his hands, holding it and squeezing it affectionately. He stood back for a moment, just gazing at Rodney, drinking in the sight of him, bound like this, waiting for his attentions. It turned him on so much that he could feel his cock hardening again, despite the fact that he'd so recently come. It wasn't urgent yet, though—he had time to play with Rodney for a good long while before he needed to slide into that ass and claim him again.

Rodney was tense beneath his gaze, and John shook his head. Rodney was trying to second guess him, his brain working at top speed as he wondered what John would do to him first, and John wanted to stop that. He wanted Rodney to submit, to stop thinking and just

accept.

\* \* \*

Rodney McKay stood in the practice room, his breathing coming in heavy pants.

"Had enough yet?" Colonel Sheppard taunted.

Rodney shook his head grimly, wondering what the hell was wrong with him. Usually, he couldn't get out of the practice room quick enough, but not today. Not right now. Right now, he only wanted to hurl himself on the colonel, to wrestle him to the floor and take him down. He wasn't sure why, or how, but on some level this was working. He could feel himself becoming quieter and calmer by the second. He'd almost forgotten why he'd been so uptight earlier. He wasn't sure why being thrown around and generally sat on by Colonel Sheppard was helping his mood, but somehow it was. He could feel the blood zinging around his body and he had a sensation that he almost never had. It took him a moment to identify it and then he realized that he was simply glad to be alive. This—this was somehow good. He didn't understand it and he knew that intellectually it made no sense at all, but he couldn't deny how his body was feeling right now. And then there was Colonel Sheppard, standing right in front of him with that endless bloody grin on his face, always besting him, forever just a step out of reach, or able to turn Rodney's most adept lunges into an opportunity to throw the scientist down on the floor. It was... annoying, and yet oddly addictive at the same time.

Rodney caught his breath, and then began circling the colonel again. The other man moved as well, lithe and graceful as a panther, and Rodney knew he couldn't match him in that. He didn't have Sheppard's speed or his hand-eye coordination, but Sheppard was right—he did have upper body strength. He just had to find a way to use it to his best advantage. It would feel so good to trap Sheppard beneath him, the way the colonel had been doing to him for the past hour or so. He'd like that. He'd like to be the one holding the colonel down, being victorious over him. In fact, he'd like it so much that he wasn't sure he could give up until it happened, even if they had to stay here all night. Maybe it wasn't the colonel he wanted to beat, a small voice inside told him. Maybe he was just transferring all his competitive feelings towards Rodney Sheppard onto the colonel, but Rodney didn't much care one way or another right now. He moved in, feinted to the left, and then caught the colonel by surprise, lunging at him. He managed to get a firm hold on Sheppard's waist, and used all the power in his shoulders to throw the colonel down onto the mat. Then with a triumphant growl, he threw himself on top of him...only to land with a bump on the exercise mat as the colonel twisted away from under him, and then threw himself on top of Rodney, holding him fast.

"No!" Rodney roared.

"That was good. You did all the hard work for me there," the colonel said, that dark hair of his flopping over one hazel eye.

"Dammit...!" Rodney struggled with all his might and managed to get one arm free, but Sheppard just grabbed the freed arm and thumped it onto the mat above Rodney's head. Rodney got his other arm free, but Sheppard just did the same with that. Now he was kneeling on Rodney's body, both his hands tight around Rodney's wrists, holding his arms above his head, holding him down. Rodney wriggled and writhed, but he was held fast. All he could see were Sheppard's amused hazel eyes and he could smell the other man's sweat; it was all so incredibly raw and basic. Rodney struggled again, giving it everything he could, and then, finally he slumped back, feeling exhausted.

"Submit?" Sheppard asked, his white teeth seeming very close to Rodney's face. Rodney shook his head mutely. The colonel's expression changed, and he slammed Rodney's hands down above his head again. "Got you, Rodney," he hissed. "You're not going anywhere until you say it."

Suddenly the colonel's hazel eyes didn't look so amused any more. They looked dangerous, as if he could kill Rodney without even thinking about it. Just slip a hand around his neck and squeeze, or bite down hard on his jugular with his teeth.... Rodney gazed up at him for a long time, lost in the moment. He felt tired—and all those emotions he'd been feeling about his counterpart seemed to have disappeared. His shoulders felt loose and open, free of the tension that had been in them earlier. He felt...good. In fact, he didn't think he'd ever felt so good before in his life. What did it matter if he said the word? John—Sheppard—had done what he'd promised he would; he'd made Rodney feel better. Besides, Rodney had the feeling that unless he said the word, Sheppard wouldn't release him this time. There was just something about the other man's expression that made him shiver. He could well imagine that they'd just stay here all night, until he said it, before Sheppard would let him go.

Rodney surrendered to the inevitable, allowing his muscles to relax, losing all fight in his body.

"Submit," he said softly.

### Part Eight: Sensory Deprivation by Xanthe

Rodney Sheppard's mouth felt dry as he hung there, naked, exposed and vulnerable. He wondered what John would do to him next and trembled.

"Shh...you have to stop thinking," his husband said, somewhere by his left side, stroking his trembling body calmingly. "Now, first things first...cock ring."

Rodney felt the cold, unforgiving steel of the ring slide onto his semi-erect cock.

"You know the rules—you'll keep nice and hard for me," John said, massaging Rodney's cock into a state of full erection, so that it was straining against the ring. "Nice and hard throughout or I'll punish you," John warned, his finger sliding up and down the underside of Rodney's cock, making it harden still further. "But of course you'll only come on my command," John told him.

Rodney sighed, knowing that was inevitable.

"And I might not let you come at all," John warned. "If you don't submit to me, if you don't fully and freely offer yourself up, then there's no way in hell you'll come today, Rodney. And of course, if you do submit, then you won't mind whether you come or not—it'll be my decision and you'll accept that."

Rodney felt a warm mouth close suddenly and unexpectedly on his left nipple and he let out a startled cry that was muffled by the gag. Rodney hated being gagged. It stifled all his natural responses. He was such a verbal man that it felt like he'd been stripped of his last defense, and John knew that all too well, which was presumably why he liked to gag him. Rodney relaxed into the warm caress on his nipple as John sucked down hard on it. He loved nipple play, and could take quite a lot of rough treatment on his nipples before it got too much for him.

John's hands and mouth seemed to be simultaneously everywhere as he stroked, caressed and sucked Rodney's body, trailing a line of hot kisses down over his belly, and then up to his right nipple, before sucking down hard on that, too. Rodney tensed and then relaxed again. He tried to remember that he was offering himself up to his husband, and that John could do what he liked to him, and his cock ached at that thought. He belonged to John, and if John wanted to suck him, or bite him, or flog him, then he could. Rodney just had to surrender, to allow it to happen, to stop trying to second guess what John would do next.

There was silence for a moment, and John moved away. Rodney longed to feel those warm lips on his body again and missed his touch. Then he let out a shriek that was once again lost in the gag, as something freezing descended on his ass. Where the hell had John been hiding ice cubes? Rodney jack-knifed into his bonds, completely pointlessly, as John slid the ice cube over his buttocks and then dipped it deep into his anus and left it there, cooling his hot flesh. Rodney wanted to shout out a protest, to make some cutting remark, but he couldn't speak, and he bounced against his bonds in annoyance, which only earned a wry chuckle from John's general direction.

"Now, now, temper, temper, Rodney," he said.

Rodney let out a very muffled curse and was rewarded with a hard slap to one of his butt cheeks.

"You're mine, remember, Rodney. I can do what I like to you," John reminded him.

Rodney fought it for a moment, and then hung his head down between his shoulders, with a

sigh.

"Good boy," John murmured, and Rodney could feel his hands caressing his body again. Then he jack-knifed once more as two cold ice cubes landed, one on each of his nipples. John held them there for what felt like an eternity and Rodney was so tightly shackled that he couldn't get away from the freezing torment. "Shh, take it...there's a good boy, Rodney," John was saying, kissing his collarbones as he held those cubes against Rodney's warm flesh, freezing his nipples into hard points.

"Good...good," John said, and one of the ice cubes disappeared to be replaced by John's warm mouth. The change in sensation was so sudden and so acute that Rodney cried out around the gag again. The same thing happened to the other nipple and Rodney was screaming now, jerking pointlessly in his bonds. He could still feel the other ice cube, lodged deep in his ass, melting cool water out of his body.

John continued the ice torture for several long minutes, alternating the cold and hot until Rodney didn't think he could bear it any more...and then, suddenly, it was over. John squeezed the abused nubs of flesh between his fingers and they were now so sensitized that Rodney squirmed.

"Are you still resisting me, Rodney?" John asked in a dangerous voice.

Rodney shook his head frantically.

"I think you are. You tried to flinch away from me just then," John told him. "It's a shame. I thought these," he squeezed Rodney's nipples hard, making Rodney throw his head back, sweat trickling down the side of his face, "had been tortured enough, but now I think we need to punish them some more."

Rodney shook his head frantically again, sure that he couldn't take any more play on the abused nubs of flesh, but next thing he knew, there was a clicking sound and then he felt the head of John's nipple clamps tighten around his right nipple. He knew these clamps very well—they had been on the belt Carson had given his husband on his wedding day and they were adjustable so John could use them to suit the circumstances. John rarely used anything other than his strap for punishment, but on one or two occasions, when Rodney had really screwed up, he had used the clamps on their tightest setting, and Rodney had learned to have a healthy respect for the damn things as a result. Rodney tensed as he heard John tighten the little wheel on the side of the clamp and gradually it started to tighten around his nipple. He gave a little cry as the tightening continued, pinching the nipple hard...and then, thank God, it stopped. Rodney knew, logically, that this was nowhere near the most severe setting, but it felt bad enough. He tensed again as John fastened the other clamp onto his left nipple and began tightening that, too. They hurt on his sensitized skin, and yet he was aroused, too. He loved it when John tortured his nipples, good and long and hard, and he knew that he'd have been disappointed on some level if John had stopped after the ice cube torment, even though he also knew that right now he desperately wanted the torture to stop, and for John to leave his poor nipples alone.

"That's good," John said silkily, his voice sounding somewhere near his left ear. "You look good now, Rodney. All tied and clamped."

Rodney sighed, allowing himself to relax into his bonds. His arms were starting to ache, but he knew he had to endure a lot more before John would free him.

"I like how good you look like this," John said throatily, and now his wet, warm mouth was sliding down Rodney's back, kissing a path down his spine and ending up on his ass. He took hold of Rodney's butt cheeks and Rodney gasped as he felt John's tongue dip inside his anus. It felt strange, to have that cold ice cube and John's warm tongue inside him at the same time and he struggled with it for a moment, and then just surrendered himself. It felt so good—and the more John worked his tongue inside his body, the nicer it felt. Rodney sighed, and felt his shoulders begin to loosen as he hung in his bonds. John rimmed him for a good long time, which felt fantastic, but also meant that Rodney was more and more aware of the ache in his cock and how badly he wanted to relieve it. John had told him he might not get to come at all tonight—which would be cruel, but Rodney knew that it was by no means certain. Sometimes John wouldn't allow him to come, even when he'd submitted totally to his husband's will. It was just another way in which John reinforced the fact that Rodney belonged to him, and even though at the time of being denied orgasm Rodney hated it, he had to admit that there was something about the way John exercised this control over him that appealed to him mentally and kept their relationship fresh and unpredictable.

Finally, John released his hold on Rodney's buttocks.

"Now I'm going to undress," he said. "You'll have to take my word for that, Rodney, seeing as you're blindfolded."

Rodney sighed around the gag, wishing he could watch as his husband undressed, seeing the image in his mind's eye of John sliding out of his clothes, revealing that hard, toned body that Rodney loved so much.

"I'm taking my pants off now," John told him, amid a sound of rustling. "Mmm, my cock is hard again, Rodney. I'd like to take you right now, I'd like to fuck your plump ass while you're all tied up like that and you wouldn't be able to do a thing to stop me," John purred.

Rodney champed around his gag, because he could think of a hundred things he wanted to say in answer to that and the fact that he couldn't say any of them was driving him insane.

"But I can wait. There's some more I want to do to you yet, boy," John hissed. "Okay, I'm done now, but you can't touch me. Not yet."

For one brief moment, John pressed himself against Rodney's body and Rodney could feel the long lines of his husband's naked body and the hardness of his large cock as it poked against Rodney's thigh, but a moment was all John allowed him, and then he pulled back and Rodney groaned in frustration.

"Not yet," John teased. "You'll have to wait for that. Now...how are these doing?" he said, and he took hold of both the nipple clamps and twisted. Rodney cried out, bucking against John's body, but John kept hold of him, twisting for a long time, while Rodney screamed into the gag. Then it was over, and John was soothing him with little kisses on his cheeks and chest.

"Hush, it's okay...hush," John whispered and Rodney moaned and pressed against his husband longingly, seeking out his naked flesh, wanting to be close to him. "Mmmm, your cock isn't as hard as it should be," John told him, sliding his finger along it. Rodney felt it harden again immediately. "Too late," John hissed. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to punish you, Rodney."

Rodney bowed his head, trembling slightly but accepting the idea that he'd be punished. He didn't want to struggle any more. There was silence for a moment, and then a whooshing sound and then Rodney felt the paddle impact on his buttocks. He loved the loud, thwapping sound it made, and loved even more the fact that John had made this implement himself, with his own hands. He could just imagine John bending over the wood, a thoughtful expression on his face, his tongue protruding slightly between his lips the way it did when he was concentrating hard. The paddle thwapped back down again. It stung, but it was a nice sting. The paddle John had made was a light, thin implement, so it didn't pack a lot of weight when it hit home. It was nothing like the strap, which hurt, plain and simple—the paddle just warmed up his ass nicely.

John went slowly, pausing every now and then to rub a hand over Rodney's increasingly hot ass. "Feels good, Rodney. I wish you could see it—it's looking pretty red now," John told him.

Rodney sighed and loosened up his shoulders another notch. He loved it when John toyed with him like this, telling him how he looked and what was happening to him. It turned him on even more and he felt his cock straining harder against the cock ring. After several minutes, John stopped paddling him, and then Rodney felt warm kisses land on his buttocks, followed swiftly by an equally warm tongue.

"Hmmm, you need cooling down," John told him and next thing he knew, some more of those ice cubes were being pressed against his burning ass. Rodney sighed—this felt good. John cooled his buttocks down for a little while and then he moved away again. Rodney didn't even tense this time. He didn't know what was coming next, but there was nothing he could do about it, anyway. He could only accept whatever it was his husband wanted to do to him.

A few seconds later, he felt a soft whumph on his shoulders and sighed deeply around his gag, relaxing even more. This was the new flogger, and it was beautiful. John used it to caress his back and shoulders for what felt like hours and Rodney started to drift off. This was beautiful—so sensuous. Rodney was so relaxed that it came as a shock when the implement changed, and something much harder and more scratchy landed on his shoulders. He recognized the plait of rope that he'd seen in the chest and gave a little sob. This was a flogger with much more bite to it. John increased the tempo and Rodney could

feel his shoulders start to warm and he began to moan, stirring in his bonds.

"Take it, Rodney," John told him. "Take it for me." He continued flogging Rodney relentlessly, until Rodney was grunting hard with each stroke. The flogger covered every square inch of his back and buttocks, not letting up for a second, and now Rodney was crying out loud around his gag, begging and pleading with John for it to stop, knowing that the sound was incoherent and made no sense...and then, suddenly, it did stop. A lubed finger slid into his ass and removed the remnants of the ice cube and then another lubed finger was inside him.

"I'm going to take you, Rodney, in a minute," John told him, his voice sounding right below Rodney's left ear. "I'm going to let you down and then tie you up again, on the bed. I'm going to tie you tight, and then I'm going to fuck this little asshole." His fingers wriggled as he said that and Rodney moaned with pleasure, longing to feel John's hard cock inside him.

A few seconds later, the fingers were removed, and he felt himself being lifted and unclipped from the chains. He dropped into John's arms and his husband held him up, stroking and kissing him, but his respite was brief. John half-led, half-carried him across the room, still blindfolded, and guided him onto the bed. He put Rodney in a kneeling position and tied his ankles to the corners of the bed, fastening them wide apart. Then he placed what felt like pillows under Rodney's belly and chest and pushed him forwards onto them. Finally he took hold of Rodney's hands and tied them behind his back. Rodney angled his head sideways so he could breathe. He felt so exposed like this, his legs stretching his asshole wide open, and he loved that this was how John must be seeing him—naked and utterly wanton, open and ready for him to enter.

A hand slapped his ass again, several times, and then Rodney felt the bed give and he guessed John had knelt on it behind him. His buttocks were seized and he felt the tip of John's cock slide into him. Rodney's own cock was hard as a rock, but he knew he'd have to hold on and he genuinely had no idea whether John would let him come or not.

John pushed himself inside Rodney's ass slowly, up to the hilt, and Rodney felt completely helpless to do anything other than accept the intrusion. Being tied up, being blindfolded and gagged, made him acutely aware of the feel of John inside his body, of that long, blunt cock claiming him, inching its way inside him. There was nothing else except his asshole, and John within him, reminding him who he was and who he belonged to. Now Rodney knew that John was right—he didn't care anymore whether he came or not, as long as his husband was satisfied.

John gripped his buttocks tightly and then began to pound into him with slow, leisurely thrusts. Rodney groaned, his prostate sending messages of molten pleasure to his brain. John's hands slid under his body and he rested them on Rodney's clamped nipples.

"When I remove these, then you can come," he said. "But if you don't come then, you won't get to come at all."

It was a fiendish thing to say. It was precisely when the clamps came off that they hurt most,

and Rodney often lost his erection when that happened. Still, that was what his husband had said, and that was what would happen. Either he'd come then, or he would go without this evening. Rodney accepted that.

John continued to thrust into him, lazily, taking his time.

"Are you enjoying this, Rodney?" he murmured, hands caressing Rodney's back and ass as he rode him. "Because I am. I love seeing you like this...your ass is nice and red and warm...." He grunted in pleasure with each inward thrust. "Nice plump ass...all helpless and open...just sitting here, begging to be fucked."

Rodney groaned around his gag, wanting to come, knowing he could come right now, if only John would give him permission.

"I love your ass, Rodney...and this tight little hole that you save just for me..." John was saying, and he knew how much it turned Rodney on when he talked to him like this. Rodney felt his entire body go into a spasm of need, and he wished he could beg John for permission to come, but the gag was firm around his mouth and all he could do was accept his submission, and take John's beautiful, hard cock into his compliant body and worship it the only way that was available to him right now.

"I'm close, Rodney. When I come, I'm going to take those clamps off you, so you'd better be ready..." John warned him.

Rodney knew he was ready right now...but he also knew that once the pain kicked in, then it might be too late. He had to stay in the moment, stay focused.

"Such a tight little asshole, squeezing me. I love that you can't move, Rodney. You can't wriggle or squirm or do anything except tighten this little hole around my hard cock. I love that," John growled and Rodney whimpered into his gag, barely able to hold on. "You look good when you're tied up, when you're helpless," John added. "When you've been flogged and spanked, when you've submitted to me and given it all up to me...it's such a turn-on."

It was a turn-on for Rodney, too, and he was relieved when he felt John speed up inside him, heard his grunts become more pronounced, and then John was gasping out loud and Rodney knew he was coming. He seemed to take forever, his hands gripping Rodney's thighs hard as he came deep inside him, and Rodney opened up even more, loving the fact that John was leaving his warm come so deep within him. Then there was a moment of silence, followed, a split second later, by a fumble of fingers on his chest, and then the pinching torment in his nipples faded and Rodney tried to make the most of his window of opportunity...but it was already too late. The pain crashed in, the way it always did when his nipples had been released from their cruel prison, and he lost the moment and gave himself up instead to the rolling waves of sensation currently assaulting his sore chest. When that had finally subsided, he realized he'd failed and he sighed into his pillow.

John was undoing his bonds, stroking him gently as he did so. He unbuckled Rodney's gag, then untied his blindfold and rolled him over and Rodney blinked in the dimly lit room. John

had ensured the lights were turned down low so as not to assault his eyes, and Rodney slowly adjusted to visual stimulus, gazing around blearily. The first thing he saw was John, looming over him, dark hair sweaty and flopping into his eyes.

"How are you doing?" John asked him, smoothing Rodney's own sweaty hair away from his face, and planting a kiss on his lips.

"Mmmm," Rodney replied, lying on the bed in a completely relaxed state, incapable of coherent thought. John grinned and picked up one of his wrists and massaged it between his fingers, then repeated the massage with his other wrist. Rodney just lay there and let him work, completely out of it. John moved his hand down further, and slid the cock ring off Rodney's penis.

"So, you didn't manage to come, huh?" John asked, a little grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, as he played with Rodney's cock.

"Mmmm?" Rodney blinked, trying to figure out what the question was and then shook his head weakly. "No... Doesn't matter, though." He smiled up at his husband adoringly. "You're right...doesn't matter at all as long as I can please you."

Rodney was surprised by the look of intense love that flared in John's eyes as he said that. Then his husband bent his head and captured Rodney's lips with his own and kissed him with all his heart. Rodney moaned and opened up. The one problem with wearing a gag was that he had missed the kisses that John usually gave him during sex. This one more than made up for that, though—it was searing and passionate, yet oddly tender, too, and John wrapped his hand gently in Rodney's hair and held him down while he devoured his lips. Then he drew back and smiled down on him.

"You were so good.... I love it when you give yourself up to me like that. It's such a turn-on," he whispered. "Now...I have an idea. How are these?" He ran his fingertips lightly over Rodney's abused nipples and Rodney hissed and jerked up immediately. "Pretty sore huh?" John said. Rodney gave a little whimper of agreement. "Okay..." John glanced at the clock. "I'll play with them for five minutes. Now, you can push me away, if you want—I give you permission—and if you push me away or tell me to stop, then I will. But if you don't, if you let me play for the full five minutes, then I'll let you come."

Rodney gazed at him blearily. His cock was semi-erect again just from that deep kiss, and the feeling of John's skin against his as they lay on the bed. "Okay," he whispered. In truth, his permission didn't really matter—and John was being kind. If he wanted, he could play with Rodney's sore nipples all night and Rodney didn't have the right to stop him, but in reality John didn't force him down that kind of path too often, although he did occasionally, just to remind Rodney who was in charge and who he belonged to.

John grinned at him, kissed him on the mouth again, and then dipped his head down to take one of Rodney's nipples between his lips. Rodney jerked at once at the soft caress, and John glanced up.

"You have to stay still, or I'll stop," he said. "I need you to surrender, to let me do what I want, even though it's hard and it hurts."

Rodney nodded, gazing at his husband in wonderment at how fiendish and brilliant a top he was. John smiled at him and then lowered his head again and took the other nipple gently between his lips. He teased it for a long time, sending sparks of pure red-hot pain through the abused piece of flesh. He wasn't even sucking very hard, but Rodney's nipples were so incredibly sensitized right now that it didn't take much to make them feel like they were on fire. He moaned softly, but didn't move, and allowed John to suck. Then John moved back to the other one, and took it carefully between his teeth and pulled back on it just a little, squeezing the tip. Rodney gave a whimper of pure pain, but he still didn't move. He knew he could—that John would stop if he told him to, and he knew the price of that would be giving up on an orgasm this evening, but that wasn't what was motivating him. Some part of him simply wanted to surrender to John. He loved surrendering to his husband, even when it was hard—no, especially when it was hard, because that was when it was sweetest and when it gave his submission the most meaning.

John's fingers were now caressing his other nipple, gently stroking it, making Rodney shiver, and then his grip tightened and Rodney started to pant, moaning loudly as the nipple was squeezed beyond what he thought he could endure, but still he didn't protest or move away. It took every single ounce of his determination, but Rodney was an extremely obstinate man when he set his mind to it, and he wanted his husband to know just how devoted he was in his submission. John released his bite and smiled at Rodney lovingly, and Rodney knew his husband understood the place he was in in his head right now. In fact, he thought that John was in a similar place in his own head, only while Rodney was concentrating on submission, John was in an incredibly topdy place right now, completely on fire with his own sense of domination. Rodney's submission wouldn't be sweet if John didn't make it mean something, if he didn't take him places he didn't think he could go, if he didn't demand those very things from Rodney that were so hard for Rodney to surrender.

John lowered his head again and this time he sucked down hard on the same nipple he'd just lightly bitten. Rodney squealed, but he didn't move...and John stayed there, his warm mouth sucking down for what felt like hours. Rodney glanced at the clock. Three minutes had passed—he still had two more to endure. It might as well have been hours because each second was agony and Rodney could feel the sweat bead on his brow and drip down his face.

John didn't go easy on him. He moved his head again and took Rodney's other nipple in his mouth and tongued it purposefully, while squeezing its twin with his free hand. Rodney gasped, losing himself completely in his own submission, offering himself up to John for whatever torment his husband wanted to hand out. That pain in his chest seemed to go on forever, but Rodney was lost now, unaware of the time passing. There was just the fiery agony in his nipples, and John's mouth and fingertips, just him and them...just his husband taking and him offering up freely and that was the way it should be, and it made him feel at peace with this strange universe they were in. Then, suddenly, shockingly, it was over.

It took a few moments for Rodney to realize that he'd been released, so absorbed was he in

his own submission, but then he glanced blearily at the clock and realized the five minutes was up...and next thing he knew, John was sliding down his body, and that tormenting mouth was swallowing his cock whole.

"Oh, shit..." Rodney whispered as John's tongue flicked over his entire length, arousing it from its flaccid state immediately. John was as expert at giving head as he was in all the other things he did to Rodney's body, whether painful or pleasurable, but this most definitely fell into the latter category. Rodney's hands clutched at the sheets and he took fistfuls of them, groaning as John sucked down gently on the very tip of his penis. He could feel himself leaking pre-come and knew that he was close, but John was taking his time. He alternated between licking the crown of Rodney's cock and sliding his warm mouth over the whole of the helmet, sucking down hard. He dipped his head and took Rodney's entire cock into his mouth, deep throating him easily, as he'd made Rodney deep throat him earlier. Rodney screamed out loud, bucking his hips up against his husband's face, and John moved his mouth back and forth around his distended cock, milking it, and then he drew back.

"Come for me, Rodney," he whispered, looking handsome and crazy and wild, his dark hair disheveled, his lips sex-swollen, his eyes alight with some toppy energy all of his own. Then he dipped his head again, slid his lips around Rodney's cock once, twice...and then Rodney was coming, and John was holding his hips tight and still sucking, swallowing down his come.

Everything seemed to go white for a while and then Rodney came to and found John lying next to him, cheek resting on the hand of one propped up arm, a loving grin on his lips. His other hand was stroking Rodney's hair gently, long fingers sliding down to caress Rodney's cheek with each stroke.

"So...imagine Dr. McKay was in the room right this minute," he said, in a teasing tone. "How would you feel?"

"Dr. who?" Rodney muttered, never taking his adoring gaze off his handsome husband.

John gave a delighted chuckle. "I told you I could make you forget about him," he said. Rodney gave a little snort of laughter. "Now, next time he's winding you up, just take a deep breath and remember all the things I've just done to you, and zone out. If it's really bad, I'll take care of it again when we're alone together. Yes?"

"Mmm. Yes," Rodney sighed. "Promise. God, that was fantastic. All those toys...all the many cruel ways you tormented me."

"If you weren't so incredibly easy to torment, and so amazingly beautiful when you're being tormented, then I wouldn't want to do it so often," John told him.

"Beautiful?" Rodney snorted.

"But you are. You should see yourself as I see you, when you're tied up, when you're being spanked, when that plump ass of yours is all open and ready to receive me...when I'm

making you surrender...you are beautiful, Rodney."

"Hmm, well, I think of myself more as incredibly handsome in a manly kind of way, but I'll take beautiful, if it pleases you," Rodney said with a dreamy smile.

John laughed out loud, and wrapped his husband in his arms with infinite tenderness, taking care not to jolt Rodney's sore nipples.

"I'm just going to hold you for a while," he murmured in Rodney's ear, planting a kiss on the back of Rodney's neck at the same time and Rodney relaxed back against him contentedly, still lost in the haze of his own submission, completely at peace in his husband's arms.

\* \* \*

The look that flared in Sheppard's eyes when he said the word surprised Rodney. He'd been going to joke about it, say something like, "Happy now?" But instead he just stayed where he was, still pinned down under John's weight, transfixed by the expression on the colonel's face, which gradually creased up as he gave a wide grin. He sat back, allowing Rodney to sit up, that intense expression remaining in those hazel eyes.

Rodney rubbed his wrists where John had been holding him down, and was about to complain about the red marks on them, but somehow, once more, he didn't feel like talking. He just examined the marks intently, wondering why he was so fascinated by them. John got to his feet, and Rodney expected him to make some stupid ass comment about the fact that he'd gotten Rodney to say the 's' word, despite Rodney's protestations that he never would, but John didn't say anything. Instead, he reached down a hand—Rodney thought it was to help him up, but instead he did something extremely weird—he ruffled Rodney's hair. Rodney frowned at this very un-Sheppard-like behavior, but he still felt too relaxed and out of it to say anything. Some small part of him was surprised by his complete lack of conversation—he was never usually at a loss for words. Usually, he could hardly stop himself from spewing forth on any endless number of subjects, although often it was just whatever was going through his overactive brain. For the moment, though, his brain seemed to have slowed down to what he guessed was normal speed for everyone else, and half-speed for him. He felt as if he was doing everything in slow motion, his body loose and lacking the tension that usually made his shoulders feel tight and sore, and he suspected that he might actually be humming, but he was too out of it to be sure.

John was leaning over him again now, and this time he was reaching out a hand to help him up. Rodney accepted it and allowed the other man to pull him to his feet.

"So...did that help?" Sheppard asked.

"Mmm. What?" Rodney glanced at him with a tired smile.

"Your argument with Dr. Sheppard...it had you all jumpy, but now you look like you're sleepwalking so I'm guessing you've calmed down."

"I do feel...." Rodney drifted off, unsure how he felt, and his brain was working too slowly for him to think of the right words to finish the sentence. Usually he wouldn't want to give Sheppard the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten something right, but on this occasion he was surprised to find that he really didn't mind. "Yes...it worked. Thank you, John." He said the name absently, and in fact barely even registered that he'd said it, and he also hardly even noticed the little smile that appeared on the colonel's lips in response to his slip.

"I was thinking...it's about time to eat and the Daedalus docked a few hours ago with new supplies, so there'll be good stuff on the menu tonight. How about we go straight to the mess hall?" Sheppard suggested.

"Mmm. Why not?" Rodney gave a contented little sigh—they always ate really well after the Daedalus returned from Earth.

As they walked towards the door, Sheppard put a hand on his shoulder and normally he'd have shaken it off, but it felt like the most natural thing in the world right now. In fact, it felt really good, warm and solid and sort of...protective. Rodney wasn't even aware of it, but he leaned in, ever so slightly, towards the colonel, so that his upper arm and thigh were touching the colonel's body as they walked.

The mess hall was busy when they got there, but they managed to find a table and sat down together, side by side, bodies still touching. Rodney suddenly realized he was famished and he started to devour his food with his usual gusto.

"Hey, there's the general and Dr. Sheppard," the colonel said, glancing up as the two men entered the room. "There aren't many free spaces. Do you mind if I wave them over, Rodney?"

"Mind?" Rodney glanced at him in surprise as he chewed on a massive mouthful. "Oh. Right. Because of my argument with Dr. Sheppard earlier. Nope. I don't mind."

Sheppard grinned at him. "You could slow down with your food, Rodney. There's no rush."

Rodney grinned back stupidly, thinking that was a very good point and wondering why he was eating so fast. It must just be a reflex action because he was feeling pretty laid back right now. He began chewing more slowly, gazing hazily at the two men who were approaching their table. They both looked kind of damp around the edges, as if they'd just had a shower, and the general was doing that leading his Rodney around on the end of his leash thing that wound Rodney up so much. He felt a small spasm of annoyance about it,

but was feeling too good right now to let the emotion take over. As they came close, Rodney found himself frowning, though.

"What on earth are you wearing?" he couldn't help blurting out as Dr. Sheppard approached, bearing a massive plateful of food.

"Something John got for me," his counterpart replied, shooting a look of sappy adoration at his husband. He was clad in a pair of tight black pants, which laced up provocatively at the crotch, drawing attention to that area of his body, and he had on a dazzlingly blue silk shirt, which clung to his chest and shoulders, accentuating their breadth.

"I think it's neat," Sheppard said, gazing at the other Rodney appreciatively. Rodney gave him a look of disbelief.

"It's kind of...revealing," he muttered. Not that it should matter, but the point was that when his doppelganger wore stuff like this, then people could see what he would look like dressed in the same way and he found that incredibly embarrassing.

"The shirt's cool. Nice color—matches your eyes," Sheppard said.

Rodney glared at him.

"What?" Sheppard shrugged.

"You're a guy. How come you even notice these things?" Rodney protested.

"I'm a guy, I'm not blind," Sheppard said defensively. "The shirt looks good on him."

"Well, thank you, Colonel," the other Rodney said, sitting down very gingerly, a slight wince crossing his features as his ass made contact with the chair.

"Oh, God, not again," Rodney sighed. "What did you do this time?"

"Do?" His counterpart gazed at him blankly. "Oh. Right. Nothing." He grinned at his husband in a conspiratorial kind of way. "I was just feeling...tense...and John took care of it for me."

"That takes care of it?" Rodney screwed up his face. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah." Rodney gave that little giggle of his that always irritated Rodney so much. Rodney gazed at him, not even wanting to admit to himself, let alone anyone else, how much that idea fascinated him. He wondered what it felt like to be held down and spanked — he didn't like being helpless and he still less liked being hurt so why couldn't he stop thinking about what it would be like to willingly go over a pair of strong knees and feel a firm hand on his naked, upturned bottom...?

"So...you two are looking a bit red in the face...and kind of sweaty, if you don't mind me saying so," the general commented, interrupting Rodney's train of thought and wrinkling up

his nose as he took his seat beside his Rodney. He forked up some food and fed it to his husband and Atlantis' Rodney tensed. He always found this feeding thing so weird. He felt his knee start to bounce up and down, the way it did when he was agitated.

"Yeah, just took Rodney through some wrestling moves," Sheppard said casually, and as he did so he put a hand on Rodney's knee to still the restless movement. He left it there for a second until Rodney stopped bouncing. Rodney took a deep breath and tried to recapture the peaceful mood he'd been in.

"Ah. Right," the general said smugly, looking as if he knew some big, important secret that he wasn't going to share with anyone. Rodney glared at him now, but not too much because the truth was, the general kind of scared him.

"The colonel is just trying to give me some lessons that will help me when we go off-world," he said, jutting his chin out combatively.

"Okay. Right." The general nodded pleasantly, but he still had that annoying smug look on his face.

"Sounds good!" his Rodney said cheerfully.

Rodney took another slow mouthful of food and tried to stay in that nice, calm headspace. He sat back and watched his counterpart, noticing how he kept gazing at the general with a dreamy look on his face. The two men had always been close, and had never made any secret of how in love they were, but all the same, Rodney had never seen his counterpart looking like this before. The tense, snappy man he'd shouted at in the lab earlier had completely disappeared to be replaced by this almost Buddha-like incarnation of the man. He had a completely sappy smile on his face throughout the meal, although he barely seemed able to make coherent conversation. He kept saying "What?" and "Mmm?" whenever anyone asked him anything and he never took his eyes off his husband. Rodney felt uncomfortable as he wondered just what the general had done to him to make him so happy and zoned out.

He was in a pretty good mood himself, but he doubted it was anything approaching the level of relaxed ecstasy that his counterpart was currently experiencing. The general seemed to be in an equally good mood. He couldn't keep his hands off his husband, and petted him much more than usual—and Rodney thought that he usually petted him more than was necessary as it was. Now, though, he kept stroking the other Rodney's hair or kissing his cheek as if mesmerized by him. Rodney grew more and more uncomfortable as the meal progressed and kept darting little glances at Sheppard to see if he felt the same way, but the other man seemed oblivious to the embarrassment factor and just smiled back at Rodney, an easy look in his eyes, no hint of discomfort in his body language. When had Sheppard become so at ease with their counterparts' relationship?, Rodney wondered. He knew the other man had been unsettled by it to begin with, just like him, but now the colonel seemed completely unfazed.

The two Johns got to talking about something to do with the Daedalus and some tedious

military chat about the Daedalus' weaponry systems which Rodney allowed to go in one ear and out the other. He was lost in his own headspace, anyway, still trying to cling to his earlier good mood. He noticed that the other Rodney wasn't very talkative, either, which made a change. Usually, he and his counterpart talked endlessly—or bickered might have been a more accurate description—and the two Johns sat back and tried to get a word in edgewise, but this evening neither of the two Rodneys was very talkative.

Rodney was almost at the end of his coffee when his counterpart got up to get some dessert. Rodney watched him walking off, and noticed how relaxed his entire body was, his arms swinging loose. He seemed lost in his own little cloud, humming some kind of happy song under his breath and Rodney was surprised to see a couple of people checking him out as he walked past. He was pretty sure that nobody ever checked him out and his counterpart looked almost exactly the same as he did. The two Johns were still wrapped up in their own conversation and Rodney rested a head on his arm, feeling drowsy. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed someone approaching the other Rodney and he blinked, surprised. Kavanagh. Damn, how could he have forgotten that the other scientist was due back on the Daedalus today? Kavanagh was looking at his counterpart as if he was something out of a zoo.

"My God. What the hell...?" Kavanagh looked Dr. Sheppard up and down.

The other Rodney sighed and glared at him. "Do I know you?" he said.

"Rodney? Oh, no, I get it—you're the other one I've heard about. My God, this is priceless. McKay must love having you around," Kavanagh sneered. "I wish I had my camera. You look...like a rent boy or something." He leaned in close, too close, one hand brushing Rodney Sheppard's silk clad arm, and the other Rodney stiffened.

"Look, I don't know who the hell you are, but back off," he hissed. "Trust me—you really don't want to mess with me."

"Oh, I'm just looking. What's this?" Kavanagh had a slightly too interested look in his eye as he flicked at the pendant around the other Rodney's neck.

Rodney Sheppard snapped out a hand and fastened it—hard—around Kavanagh's wrist. "I'm warning you...you really don't want to mess with me," he said, in a low, hard tone.

Rodney was impressed—his counterpart really knew how to take care of himself. Even as he was busy thinking that, he heard a whizzing sound and next thing he knew, a knife had twanged past Kavanagh's head, narrowly missing his ponytail, and was buried in the wall just behind his right eye. The entire room went silent and the general got slowly to his feet and walked purposefully over to Kavanagh. Rodney almost laughed out loud as the pony-tailed scientist slunk back against the wall like a cornered rat. The general walked right up to him, invading his personal space...and the mess hall inhaled a collective breath, wondering what was going to happen next. Beside him, Rodney saw Sheppard scramble to his feet anxiously, ready to stop a fight, but the general just smiled politely. He reached out a hand and Kavanagh flinched, visibly.

"Excuse me," the general said to Kavanagh. "I seem to have mislaid my knife." He pulled the weapon out of the wall and replaced it in his sheath.

The entire mess hall exhaled en masse.

"I did warn you," Rodney Sheppard said to Kavanagh with a shrug. "Jerk," he added for good measure.

The general leaned in close and whispered something in Kavanagh's ear. Rodney couldn't hear what he was saying, but Kavanagh's face seemed to drain of blood and he went very pale. Then the general smiled at him pleasantly and patted his arm, before putting a hand on his Rodney's shoulder and drawing him back to the table. Kavanagh immediately scuttled out of the room like a scared rabbit.

"You know, we generally don't approve of knives being thrown around in the mess hall," Sheppard said in a conversational tone when their counterparts returned to the table.

"I have a very accurate aim," the general replied, his hand still firmly attached to his husband's shoulder.

"Still. There's a lot of people around," Sheppard pointed out. "Someone could have gotten hurt."

"There was provocation," the general growled. "Nobody touches—"

"What's yours. Sure, I know that," Sheppard nodded. "I think we all pretty much know that by now. I'm just saying. That's all."

There was a long silence and Rodney gazed at the general surreptitiously when he thought the other man wasn't looking. The general had a very dark look in his eyes and it was noticeable that he still hadn't relinquished his hold on the other Rodney's shoulder.

"Uh-oh," John sighed a few seconds later. "Looks like word of your knife-throwing skills has gotten around." They all looked up to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway. The general sighed and put down his napkin, then stood up respectfully as Elizabeth strode towards him, her eyes flashing.

"General, I've had reports of a fight in here," she said, fixing him with her steely eyed gaze, the one she saved for when she was really pissed. Rodney winced; he knew that gaze and it didn't bode well for the general.

"My apologies, my lady," the general said, bowing his head. "The colonel has already explained to me that my actions were not appropriate in your universe."

"There was a knife thrown?" Elizabeth demanded tersely.

"Yes. Nobody was hurt," the general replied.

"That's irrelevant, General!" she rapped out. "We can't have people starting fights in here and we most definitely can't have knives being thrown around—somebody could have been killed!"

"What I did would not have been viewed as unacceptable or even out of the ordinary in our universe," the general murmured. "But I'm sorry to have offended you, my lady. Honestly." He bowed his head again.

"I should throw you in the brig for a couple of days," she told him.

Rodney Sheppard got to his feet anxiously at that, making a strange sound in the back of his throat.

"It's okay, Rodney," the general told him softly. "I will willingly subject myself to whatever discipline you wish to impose, my lady," he told her, standing to attention.

Elizabeth seemed surprised by that and she stood there for a moment, clearly assessing the situation. "I don't want to put you in the brig," she said finally, with a sigh. "I do understand that your ways are different to ours, and you are our guests while you are here, but I must ask you to respect our customs the way we have tried to respect yours."

"You are very kind, my lady." The general bowed his head a third time. "I offer my sincere apologies again."

"Thank you. Then we'll say no more about it," she said, turning to go.

"Why do you tolerate him, my lady?" the general called after her.

She stiffened and turned back. "What do you mean?"

"In our universe, that man never made it to Atlantis. You met him at McMurdo and had a bad feeling about him, so he never made it on the team. You talked it over with me at the time and I agreed with you. Why don't you listen to your gut, Elizabeth? You have a bad feeling about him, too, but you ignore it. You're too interested in being polite. It's the same with the knife—you people don't like to show how you're feeling, whether its love or anger. Your universe is so polite, so constricted."

"These are the rules we've chosen to live by," Elizabeth snapped at him. "Without them, there would be anarchy. Everyone would be at each other's throats!"

"That's not what happens in our universe. Instead, we know where we stand," the general told her.

"We're not in your universe, General!" she told him forcefully. "And I happen to like the rules of my universe just fine."

Sheppard got to his feet cautiously. "I think we have another one of those culture clash issues going on here," he said in a soothing tone. "Nobody's right or wrong—it's just different. Elizabeth's got a point, though, General. You're here, not back home, and to be honest, it's been great learning from you, about all kinds of stuff, and fascinating getting an insight into your culture—but we must ask you to obey our rules while you're here."

The general nodded at both Elizabeth and Sheppard.

"I understand," he said. "I deeply regret that my actions might have embarrassed or offended you. Now...with your permission, my lady, I think we'll retire for the evening."

He glanced at his Rodney, who got immediately to his feet. The general took hold of his husband's leash and the other Rodney wrapped an arm around his waist, and the two men left the mess hall together.

Rodney watched as Sheppard went over to Elizabeth.

"He does have a point you know," he whispered to her. "About Kavanagh?"

"Yeah. I know," she sighed.

"It'd be kind of nice to just ship him back home, wouldn't it?" Sheppard said softly, so that Rodney had to strain to hear him. Elizabeth gave a throaty little chuckle.

"Yes, it would. Especially as he only just arrived," she grinned.

"Maybe something to think about?" Sheppard raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe," she said thoughtfully, and then she left.

The colonel came and sat back down at the table beside Rodney again.

"Wow. Way to go, Elizabeth," Rodney said, sitting back and folding his arms across his chest. "Standing up to the general like that. I'm impressed."

"Yeah. There's the thing," Sheppard sighed.

Rodney frowned and glanced at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Everyone finds him so damn cool," Sheppard muttered, flushing slightly.

"Wait...you're saying you're jealous?" Rodney asked.

Sheppard bit on his lip. "Not jealous exactly, but.... You know, back on that mission to PBX-250, nobody even questioned him when he took command. Ronon and Teyla just did what

he said without even looking at me." Sheppard paused and gazed at Rodney speculatively for a moment.

Rodney realized that usually he'd make a snarky comment around this time, press one of the colonel's buttons and jump up and down on his insecurities about the general, but he didn't want to do that right now. Sheppard had been good to him today. In fact, he'd been pretty nice to him for a while now, and Rodney found that somehow he must have started to trust the man, because instead of saying something sarcastic, he put a hand on Sheppard's arm.

"Go on," he said softly.

"You think he's cool, too, don't you?" Sheppard said. "Everyone does. I mean, I do, too, but I was just wondering...what is it that you like about him particularly? Be honest with me, Rodney. Why did my team follow him so easily back there?"

Rodney thought about it for a moment. Sheppard had asked him to be honest with him and he thought he could do that. Usually, his brand of honesty was pretty brutal, but he didn't want to hand that kind of honesty out to the colonel right now so he chose his words carefully.

"I think...he's just very direct, John," he said, using the first name on purpose this time. "He's very in the moment somehow. You know he means what he says and he'll do what he says. It's not like you hold back on us, just that he's more in your face. I wouldn't beat yourself up about this. We trust you completely when we go offworld and you know that Ronon would do anything for you. I like your leadership style better, to be honest. He's very sure of himself, as we saw just now—" Rodney glanced at the knife mark in the wall, "—but you're more laid back, and, frankly, less scary."

Sheppard grinned at him. "Damn. See, I'd like to be more scary."

"I like you just the way you are," Rodney said, with a shrug. He hadn't meant the comment to sound sappy, but Sheppard actually looked rather touched. "Okay...while we're being honest. What do you like about Rodney Sheppard?" he asked with a sigh. "Go on, just tell me. I can handle it."

"Okaaay..." Sheppard looked unconvinced on that score. "He's funny, he's smart."

"I'm smart!" Rodney pointed out with a pout. "And I can be funny. How come all my staff like him more than they like me?"

"I don't think they do, to be honest. It's just easier for him because ultimately it's not his lab and he doesn't have to take any of that responsibility, so he gets to have more fun around your people. Also, he really is less uptight," Sheppard said with a sigh. "He's.... It's just I find you fun to be around, and he is, too, but he's not climbing the walls every five minutes."

"I don't climb the.... Did you say you find me fun to be around?" Rodney wasn't sure why

that meant so much to him, but it did.

"Sure I do. You must have noticed that we do hang out together quite a lot." Sheppard grinned. "I wouldn't do that if I didn't like you."

"Oh. Right. Great." Rodney felt peculiarly pleased by that thought.

"He's just a bit more laid back, and he has that infectious giggle," Sheppard added.

"Infectious? Seriously? I hate that giggle."

"I can't hear it without wanting to laugh with him. He's also, generally speaking, less likely to bite your head off."

"He's always biting my head off!" Rodney protested.

"Yeah, but I have to say that, nine times out of ten, you do seem to start that," the colonel pointed out.

"No, I don't! If anything, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other!"

"Okay," Sheppard nodded, putting up his hands in mock surrender. "But he's not like that with the rest of us, so it's mainly just you. The pair of you seem to wind each other up."

"Well, he's so insufferably smug!"

"I suppose he does come over that way sometimes – but maybe that's just because he feels so sure of himself," Sheppard grinned. "If it makes you feel better, I'd prefer to hang out with you any day. And I suspect your team feels the same. Like I said, you're wrong about them liking him more. I think he just makes more of an effort to socialize with them than you do."

"Yeah, what's with this whole dinner party thing he and the general have going?" Rodney frowned in distaste, although he was glowing a little inside at finding that Sheppard at least preferred him to his counterpart.

"They're just a boring, old, married couple, I guess," Sheppard grinned. "That's what married couples do."

Rodney nodded thoughtfully, and found himself gazing at Sheppard. They had had a few honest conversations over the past couple of years, but he didn't think they'd ever had such an honest personal conversation without snarking or making some joke to deflect from what they were saying. Rodney never usually trusted other people enough to talk with them on a per-sonal level—he had very low expectations as a result of a long history of being ridiculed—but Sheppard was different. The other man seemed to actually be genuine. He'd been particularly nice of late, frequently seeking Rodney out and dining with him, and Rodney had slowly come to relax and unwind in his company, and he had to admit that it

felt good. Rodney supposed that they'd been kind of thrown together as a result of the unusual situation they were in with their doppelgangers being on Atlantis. No wonder the colonel had started wanting to spend more time with him. They were the only people on the base who understood how weird this whole thing was.

"Hello! Rodney!" Sheppard waved a hand in front of his eyes.

Rodney blinked, realizing he'd gone off into a haze.

"You look shattered."

"It was that bloody wrestling," Rodney griped. "I bet I'll have bruises all over tomorrow."

"Are you going back to the lab or will you turn in now?" the colonel asked, and Rodney noticed he'd gone very tense.

"I should go back and do some more work," Rodney sighed, "but I'm falling asleep here, so I think I'll have an early night."

They left the mess hall together, and Rodney wasn't entirely sure where Sheppard was going, but the colonel walked with him all the way to his quarters, and once again he placed his hand on Rodney's shoulder as they walked. It was getting to be a habit, and Rodney felt uneasy about it. His first thought was to shrug the hand off and make a snarky comment about it, but some other instinct was stopping him, and he didn't have a clue what that was about. This whole situation scared him. In his experience, the minute you started opening up to someone was the minute you exposed yourself to potential ridicule and that made him feel like running a mile in the opposite direction, but at the same time he didn't want to. He liked Sheppard,

dammit!

They stopped outside Rodney's door and Sheppard stood there, gazing at him in that weird, intent way he'd adopted lately.

"Thanks for...you know...whatever, Colonel," Rodney said, unsure whether he was referring to the wrestling or the honest conversation over dinner, or maybe both, and feeling stupid.

"Oh, I enjoyed it," Sheppard replied, with a glint in his eye that made Rodney think he was definitely referring to the wrestling.

"Yeah, any excuse to throw me around," Rodney grumbled. He turned to go, one hand on his door lock, but as he did so, he was sure he saw a strange flash in the other man's eyes.

Rodney shut the door behind him, feeling weird—still spaced out and hazy, but also unsettled and he wasn't sure why. He took a shower and as he soaped himself down, he noticed some little bruises from their wrestling session. He remembered how it had felt being pinned down by Sheppard's strong, lean body, and he traced the bruises idly with his

fingertips. Sheppard's breath had been warm on his cheek as he'd pinned him to the mat and Rodney found his own breathing coming in sharp gasps. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the memory, fingertips ghosting over the bruises. He remembered wriggling, trying to get free, and the sensation of being overpowered...and next thing he knew, his hand had slid southwards and was wrapping itself around his hard cock. His eyes snapped open and he glanced down in horror.

"You cannot be turned on by this," he told himself sternly, trying to focus on his usual jerk-off fantasies, which were mainly about large-breasted women pressing themselves against him. Somehow, though, it failed to work, and his cock softened. Rodney rested his head miserably against the shower wall. He didn't want to think about John holding him down; didn't want to think about how it had felt to have his arms held over his head and John's hazel eyes gazing at him so intently; didn't want to think about how he'd imagined John as a panther, all sleek, dark fur, wild eyes and sharp teeth, gazing at him like he was prey....

"Dammit!" Rodney realized that he was rock hard again, and that thought completely freaked him out so much that he turned on the cold water to teach himself a lesson. "Not gay," he muttered to himself as he stood under the freezing water. "Not gay, not gay, not gay..."

End of Part Eight

### Part Nine: Double Trouble by Xanthe

Rodney McKay surprised himself by sleeping like a log that night and woke up feeling lazy and refreshed. He sort of ached when he moved, but it was a good ache, like all his muscles had been given a good workout. Rodney stretched, trying to remember why he felt so good, and he had a sudden mental flash of Sheppard leaning over him, dark hair disheveled and a wild look in his eyes, and within seconds, he was hard.

Rodney glanced under his sheets with a growl of annoyance. "We are so not having this conversation again," he told his mutinous cock.

He tried jerking off, but his usual masturbatory fantasies failed him yet again. He lay there, struggling with himself, wanting the release, but not at the cost of using the memory of lying under Colonel Sheppard's hard, lean body in order to get off. Eventually, he gave in and took himself off for yet another cold shower rather than have any release, but his good mood was already starting to evaporate. He got dressed and almost ran to his lab, eager to distract himself with his work, a tried and tested Rodney McKay avoidance strategy. To his surprise, he was the last to arrive—he hadn't realized he'd slept for so long. He noticed Kavanagh, standing at the opposite end of the room to his doppelganger and casting malicious glances at the other Rodney every so often.

"Great to have you back," Rodney said to Kavanagh, in an entirely insincere tone. "Did Radek fill you in on the work?"

"Yes. I was wondering why you seem to be devoting virtually our entire team to this laborious task with the crystals," Kavanagh said sourly. "What about all the other projects we've been working on? Have those been shelved just so we can get these...people home?" He looked over at Rodney Sheppard as if he was something he'd just stepped in.

"That's about right, yes," Rodney told him grimly. "Our mistake brought them here; the least we can do is work on sending them back."

"Well, as far as I can see, it was actually your mistake that brought them here," Kavanagh muttered. "If only Dr. Weir had done as I suggested, and limited tinkering with Ancient technology to a properly approved committee of experts...."

"Uh, excuse me, but nobody here is a greater expert on Ancient technology than me," Rodney pointed out.

"Which would be fine if you didn't let your ego run away with you," Kavanagh replied. "That's why a committee would be a better idea. Now we've all had to give up our own projects to bail out one of your mistakes."

"You don't," Rodney said.

Kavanagh blinked.

"No, no, no, you're right. There's no reason to tie everyone up on this and we are a little bit behind on our city maintenance projects," Rodney told him, rocking back on his heels with a brightly malicious smile. "I noticed we had a problem with the sewage system. Things have gotten pretty backed up on the lower levels. You're an engineer. Here." Rodney handed him a lap top and a bag of tools. "Get down there and figure it out. Oh, and don't rush back on our account. It'll probably take the best part of a week to clear it, but we'll manage without you somehow in the meantime." He gave Kavanagh another beaming smile and then turned back to the rest of his team. "Jerk," he muttered under his breath.

The other Rodney seemed oddly subdued and he sought Rodney out when the others had gone to lunch, which was unusual of and by itself because he usually liked to go to lunch with them, and keep them amused by regaling them with a list of TV shows from his universe that sounded almost like those from their own, but with some none too subtle differences. Rodney still shuddered when he recalled the details of the alternate version of Star Trek.

"So, what's up with you?" Rodney asked his counterpart, thrusting a donut into his mouth as he poked his head under the casing of the QDD. "You're being uncharacteristically quiet. Where's all the sexual innuendo and general obsession with all things kinky?"

"What?" the other Rodney queried. "I have no idea what you just said."

Rodney lifted his head out of the casing and removed the donut from his mouth with a sigh.

"You. Quiet. Why?" he asked, before cramming the donut back in.

"Nothing. Just...." The other Rodney actually looked genuinely worried.

Rodney put his donut down with a frown.

"Would Elizabeth really have put John in the brig?" his counterpart asked.

"Oh, is that still bothering you? I have no idea. Maybe."

The other Rodney wrapped his arms miserably around his chest and Rodney rolled his eyes. "Oh, for God's sake—it's not like you're joined at the hip. He's been away from you before. You said that when we brought you here, he'd just gotten back from several days offworld without you. It's not like you can't cope without him or anything."

"No. It's not that." His counterpart bit down on his lip. "It's just the idea of him being locked up, put in some kind of cage, deliberately separated from me and everyone else. I can't believe you people are so casual about that."

"Well, that's how we feel about that whole leash thing and the...that other thing you guys do." Rodney glanced pointedly in the direction of his counterpart's ass.

"Really?" The other Rodney just looked puzzled.

"Really," Rodney said firmly.

They both gazed at each other blankly for a moment.

"John's pretty upset about last night," the other Rodney said finally. "We are trying, you know, McKay, but you must understand that our customs are different. I had to actually work on him to get him to allow me to come here without him this morning. He doesn't trust your people anymore after last night. He's not sure I'll be safe. He doesn't think your people will respect me or my relationship with him."

"What's he frightened of? That someone might—ooh—touch you?" Rodney rolled his eyes. "What's that about, anyway? I saw you yesterday with Kavanagh—and bear in mind this is Kavanagh we're talking about and not someone really scary. The man is a total wuss and you were clearly more than able to handle him. There was no need for the general to start doing his Indiana Jones routine with the knife."

"You don't get it," his counterpart said, shaking his head. "In our universe, what Kavanagh did is...it's like a taboo. Can't you get your head around that?"

"Not really." Rodney shrugged. "So his hand brushed your arm and he flicked at your pendant—big deal. Hey, what are you doing?" he yelled, outraged, as his counterpart suddenly snatched up his donut and took a big bite.

"Annoyed?" The other Rodney raised an eyebrow, munching furiously. "Now multiply that feeling of outrage by a million and that's how John was feeling last night when Kavanagh touched me. It's that simple. In our universe, I'm protected by my status—I'm respected because of my status—and nobody would touch me without asking John's permission first. It's just our way. I know it seems stupid and meaningless to you, but it means a great deal to us."

"That makes you sound like some kind of possession!" Rodney exploded.

"I am!" Rodney shouted back.

"Well, that's what I have a problem with!" Rodney yelled.

"Why? It's my goddamn life, not yours!"

Rodney came up short at that. It was a good point.

"Maybe because I can't understand how someone who looks like me and talks like me, someone with my intellect, could be happy being someone else's property. Why would you want to live in that kind of relationship?"

Rodney Sheppard shrugged helplessly. "It's just our way. It's what we do. It makes me happy. It makes him happy. It's voluntary. I went into it with my eyes open and I can divorce him any time I like if I'm not happy with the arrangement. Where's the problem?"

"Maybe you should try seeing things from our point of view," Rodney said, trying to come at it from a different angle. "You're always banging on about how great things are in your universe. The general was going on last night about how we're so polite, as if it's some kind of offence! Yes, we are polite. If we weren't, then we wouldn't have put up with you two the way we have, or be bending over backwards to help you get home!"

"Well, if we're so damn hard to have around, why the hell don't you just throw us through the Stargate and have done with?" the other Rodney snapped.

"Oh, trust me, it's not as if I haven't suggested it," Rodney replied. "Luckily for you, the colonel is a more tolerant man than me and he vetoed it."

"Well, maybe that's because he actually likes us. It seems to me that you're the only one around here who's freaked out by us and we both know why that is."

"Oh, yeah?" Rodney knew they were both behaving like five-year-olds, but somehow that was how he always felt himself responding to his alter ego.

"Yeah! You've got the hots for the colonel and can't admit it because of this weird 'gay' taboo thing in your universe—although I've been asking around about that and there are some couples on this base in same-gender relationships, so I don't know what the hell your problem is, McKay."

"Oh, just...just shut up," Rodney growled, feeling like someone had stuck a knife into his gut and twisted it. The other Rodney's barbs had always annoyed him, but they'd never actually wounded him until today. Now, because of his recent masturbatory disasters, he was confused and upset and didn't have a clue what to do about it. He just felt locked up in his own little bubble of misery.

\* \* \*

As the days wore on, Rodney's mood didn't improve. This was partly as a result of his refusal to jerk off while thinking about the colonel. He was a highly sexed man and had been jerking off three times a day for most of his adult life and now he was denying himself that release and that was just stoking up his frustration even more. Working with Rodney Sheppard didn't help. It was hard enough struggling with these new fantasies without his counterpart being so easily and obviously in love with the alternate John. That felt like salt being rubbed into a raw wound as far as Rodney was concerned and he just wished he didn't have to see his counterpart on a daily basis in the lab. Rodney didn't even have the release of going to Colonel Sheppard for more wrestling, which had worked so well last time, because now just the thought of it had him running back to his quarters for a cold shower. Rodney suspected he might be cleaner now than he'd ever been in his life as a result of all this freezing cold water and he was heartily sick of being so in thrall to his libido.

He tried to avoid the colonel, but that wasn't easy as the man had a habit of popping up every five minutes, or so it seemed to Rodney. He was always poking his head around the lab door to find out if Rodney was going to the mess hall, or sometimes he'd come into the lab late at night when everyone else had gone to bed and just sit there, keeping Rodney company, those long legs of his stretched out on any available surface, hands behind his head. Sometimes he talked, and sometimes he handed Rodney various tools while he worked and Rodney had to admit it was nice—although it would have been even nicer if he hadn't felt himself growing hard just from having the other man around. It was getting to be embarrassing and Rodney was becoming more and more desperate.

At least work on the QDD was progressing well. Rodney thought they might be able to test it within a week and that meant that their unwelcome visitors might soon return home. He was sure his libido would return to normal once that happened.

They were busy working on a particularly pivotal part of the whole project one afternoon when the general poked his head around the door.

"Rodney—I need you," he said.

The other Rodney immediately put down his tools and Rodney gazed at him in amazement.

"You can't leave now!" he growled. "We are this close to getting the power source re-engaged."

"Well, it'll still be here when I get back," his counterpart said with a grin.

"Oh, for God's sake." Rodney threw his tools down and glared him. "Why do you jump to it whenever he calls? What does he want, anyway?"

His counterpart waggled his eyebrows suggestively and Rodney shook his head in disbelief.

"You're kidding me right? He's calling you out of here when things are getting interesting just so that you and he can...."

"Rodney," the general said impatiently from over by the door.

Rodney Sheppard gave Atlantis' Rodney a cheeky grin and then ran for the door. Rodney stared after him, utterly outraged. He was still outraged when his counterpart returned half an hour or so later, looking relaxed and humming softly to himself.

"Well, I'm glad you're feeling so happy," Rodney commented sourly. "What the hell is wrong with you? Running out like that just when we were close to seeing if the crystals could take the power surge. Don't you two have any self control?"

"He wanted me," the other Rodney shrugged.

"And that's the way it works? He wants you so you just go running?" Rodney exploded. "Supposing you weren't in the mood?"

"Well, then I'd still go running. Although, actually, I don't think I've ever not been in the mood. And that is the way it works, yes. I'm his and he was horny," the other Rodney said patiently, as if explaining something to a moron. "Look, that's just how things are in our universe in the kind of marriage he and I wanted to have. What does it matter to you, anyway? Just because you're uptight and frigid doesn't mean I have to be, too, because we look the same."

"I'm not frig—" Rodney caught himself with great effort. "Let's get back to work," he said through gritted teeth. Only he found that he couldn't. He couldn't stop thinking about the fact that his counterpart was so readily available to take care of his husband's sexual whims...and while his mind was outraged, his cock was reacting with its usual treachery. They worked for a few minutes, but Rodney couldn't concentrate.

"Have you ever refused him?" he asked, annoyed with himself for wanting to know more, but unable to contain his curiosity.

"What? Oh...kind of. Once. I was working on something really exciting in the lab one week and he thought I'd been working too long and too late. He warned me about it, but I was too caught up in what I was doing and forgot to meet him that evening." The other Rodney paused and pushed a piece of wavy hair behind his ear so it wouldn't get in his way while he was working.

"What happened?" Rodney asked, hating himself for his fascination.

"He came to the lab. I told him to hang on because I was just finishing something...." Rodney made a little face. "Next thing I knew, he'd thrown me over the table and was ripping my pants down. Man, that was hot." He grinned at Rodney. "Kind of scary, too. And I could tell he was pissed and wanted me to realize I wasn't taking our wedding vows seriously. He spanked my ass a few times, then took me there and then, over the lab table."

"Oh, God," Rodney breathed, wondering how it would feel if Colonel Sheppard stalked in here one night and instead of sitting down and putting his legs up, pushed Rodney down over one of the tables. Rodney closed his eyes, trying hard not to think of the colonel's warm breath on the back of his neck, or his insistent hands fumbling with the fastenings on Rodney's pants. He couldn't imagine anyone being that full of desire for him that they'd feel a need to take him then and there, but the idea turned him on so much that his cock immediately hardened in his pants.

"I need to...uh, check something out," he said, turning away from his counterpart and running for the door.

He made it back to his quarters and threw himself down on the bed while struggling to get his pants open—and this time he didn't stop himself. He wrapped his hand around his hard cock and imagined being pinned down by Colonel Sheppard, imagined the colonel thrusting into him hard while he writhed, helpless but willing, beneath the other man. Rodney came, harder and more explosively than he could ever remember in his life before and then he groaned and buried his face in the pillow.

He really didn't have any idea what was going on. He had never thought very much about his sexuality before, but he knew that he liked women sexually. It had just never occurred to him that he might like men that way, too. True, he'd never found it easy to persuade women to sleep with him, but he assumed that was mainly because most people tended to dislike him. Although, now he thought about it, there had been some very sweet women in his life, such as Katie Brown, who had seemed genuinely interested in him, but he'd felt so awkward around her that their relationship had never come close to getting off the ground, or into the bedroom, and he'd never really pursued it. He backed off the moment a woman showed any interest in him. Was there a reason for that? Rodney wondered what had been stopping him. Now he looked back, he could see that he'd always enjoyed being around Sheppard. The colonel had never physically intimidated him the way the military boys usually tried to; he laughed with Rodney rather than at him, most of the time, at least, and Rodney had never felt more easy around anyone in his life than he did around Sheppard. Which all added up to what? Rodney had no idea. He just knew that he'd jerked off to thoughts of

being fucked up the ass by his best friend on the base and now he felt utterly humiliated and angry with himself as a result.

In the absence of anyone else to take it out on, Rodney took it out on himself—both versions. He punished himself by becoming even more ferocious with his freezing shower regime, and he punished his counterpart, who looked so much like him, and who was so at ease with the very concept that was so frightening to Rodney, by sneering at him whenever he came within earshot. The relationship between the two men, which had never been good at the best of times, deteriorated rapidly as a result, and Rodney found himself becoming more and more isolated in his own work space as his counterpart gravitated towards the other members of his team—which in turn just made Rodney feel even more jealous of the ease with which he got on with them all, particularly Radek.

\* \* \*

Things came to a head two days later, when they were in the last stages of getting the QDD ready for a test run. Rodney was busy under the casing—he'd taken to spending most of his working day under there simply to avoid his counterpart—but he could still hear the other Rodney chattering on to Radek and Miko and anyone else who would listen, as they all worked on the crystals. Rodney knew that he could be talkative, but at least he usually kept it work related. The other Rodney seemed to hold forth on any topic under the sun.

"So, Will and Grace?" Radek was asking.

Rodney gritted his teeth, hating this particular game and not understanding the appeal it held for the rest of his team.

"Will and...? Ah, right, you mean Will and Jack," the other Rodney said, with that irritating giggle. "Will's a strait-laced accountant, Jack is his naughty roommate just longing to provoke Will into taking charge of him. Jack barely makes it through an episode without someone tanning his hide. All very droll, although, personally, I can't stand the show."

"Desperate Housewives?" someone else asked.

"Desperate Houseslaves," the other Rodney shot back. "A bunch of neurotic submissives hanging around the house waiting for their tops to come home and using the time to think up various schemes for outwitting them. Irritating. They could easily be out at work doing something useful. I can't stand subs who give up any idea of independent thought the minute they find some stupid, dumb top to take care of them."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Rodney said, poking his head out from under the casing. "Because that's

different to the way you act how, exactly?"

His counterpart glared at him. "Well, the fact I'm here, for a start, working on this, and not sitting in our quarters in a thong and some handcuffs, waiting for John to come home."

"Oh, I really didn't need that mental image, thank you very much," Rodney growled.

"Well, shut up and stop interrupting, then," his counterpart said.

The rest of the team all sighed and turned back to their work.

"Don't tell me to shut up in my own lab," Rodney snapped, sliding out from under the casing and getting up.

"Well, stop insulting me, then," the other Rodney said.

"I think we will take a coffee break," Radek said smoothly, gathering up the rest of the team and ushering them out of the door. He'd taken to doing this every time the rows between the two Rodneys got too heated, which was becoming more and more frequent.

"Insulting you? How is that insulting you?" Rodney demanded when he was alone with the other man. "You're the one who drops his pants every time the general beckons."

"You shouldn't talk about things you don't understand," the other Rodney flared.

"Oh, but I do understand. You're his sex slave and you have to do everything he says," Rodney told him with a malicious grin. He knew how much it annoyed the other man to be called a sex slave.

"I'm not a—!" The other Rodney took a deep breath and managed to get control of himself. "You don't get it, McKay, because you're too scared to get it. All you can do is ridicule it because you're frightened that if you don't, you might actually like the idea."

"Yeah. Right. What's to like about being someone's fuck toy?" Rodney snapped.

"That's not what our relationship is about!" the other Rodney retorted angrily. "That's what gets me, you refuse to see it as it is. You have all these stupid misconceptions and you keep on repeating them over and over again."

"I don't see how they're misconceptions," Rodney said, crossing his arms over his chest smugly. "You walked in here, wearing a collar, being dragged around on the end of a leash and you never stop talking about the 101 degrading ways you and he fuck, and..."

"Shut up," his counterpart said, his face looking white and pinched. "It only upsets you because you can't stop thinking about it."

Rodney uncrossed his arms, stung by the comment. "That's not true," he said defensively,

because it pretty much was.

"Yes, it is." His counterpart scented blood and went in for the jugular. "You are the most fucked up man I've ever met, McKay. You want to know what it's like—you're fascinated by it. You've been asking me questions about it non-stop since I arrived, but you keep pretending it's because you're revolted by it, because it disgusts you, but that isn't it at all. You and I look the same, and talk the same, and maybe deep down we want the same things, McKay. Things are just a little more sedate, a little more buttoned up in your universe, but you heard Carson—you and I have exactly the same DNA and that's what's eating you up inside, isn't it? If we're the same, then does that mean that you want what I want? That you'd enjoy what I enjoy? And you're too damn scared to take the journey to find out. You're a coward, McKay."

Those words hit home and Rodney stood there, gaping like a fish. He'd been so busy being freaked out about the idea of being gay that he'd been conveniently suppressing his even greater anxiety that he might actually also be sexually submissive, just like his counterpart. That didn't fit into his world view at all. He was a brilliant, assertive man and the idea of being someone's possession just didn't appeal...except that his counterpart was a brilliant, assertive man as well, and he didn't seem to have a problem with it.

"We may have the same DNA, but there's a reason why our universes are different," he hissed. "We're not like you."

"Or maybe, if you scratch the surface, we're more similar than you're comfortable with," the other Rodney hissed back.

"Yeah, right, because you've seen me whoring myself out the way you do," Rodney growled.

The other Rodney looked as if he'd been slapped. "What did you say?" he asked in a tight voice.

"You heard."

"John is my husband. Since when is sleeping with your husband 'whoring'?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that you told me that you're his possession, that people can't touch you without asking permission. Did you sell yourself out for his protection? Do you feel so scared when you go offworld that you want some kind of bodyguard to keep you safe? Isn't that how it works? You take care of him in the bedroom, he makes sure you stay alive. That's how it looks to me."

The other Rodney gave him a look of total disgust and then turned on his heel.

"Yeah, why don't you just go running off to Daddy," Rodney called after him.

His counterpart paused. "He's not my daddy. He's my husband," he said in a low, hoarse voice, his fists clenching and unclenching.

"It's not a relationship of equals, whichever way you look at it," Rodney said in a superior tone.

He turned away loftily to resume his work and was therefore completely unprepared for what happened next, but suddenly there was a noise behind him and next thing he knew, his shoulder had been pulled around and he was face to face with a grimly angry version of himself. He had a brief, weird moment of thinking that he'd never known he could look so scary or determined, and then the other Rodney lunged at him, landing a punch to his mouth. Rodney reeled from the force of the blow and from shock, and put up a hand to find blood trickling down his jaw. He responded by launching himself at his counterpart, arms flapping wildly as he tried to land a punch of his own. He was surprised by how strong the other Rodney was though—and how well-trained in fighting—and he ended up in a head lock, the other man's arm wrapped around his neck.

"Take it back. All of it," Rodney Sheppard hissed, tightening his grasp.

Rodney elbowed him in the stomach and his grasp weakened enough for Rodney to break away from him and turn to face him once more.

They flapped their arms at each other, both too angry to back down and neither of them exactly fluid or graceful in their fighting style.

Rodney closed his eyes and punched around wildly with his fists, hoping to land a blow. He was dimly aware of a commotion at the doorway and then suddenly someone grabbed him from behind and pulled him off his counterpart.

"Knock it off!" someone yelled at him, but he was still too wound up to think straight and he tried to lunge forward again, only to find that he was held completely immobile in a pair of strong arms. The red mist cleared and he realized it was the colonel who had him held fast, while his counterpart was being similarly restrained by the general.

"What the hell is going on here?" Sheppard demanded angrily. "Radek mentioned something ugly was brewing, which was why we put in an appearance, but I had no idea you two would be stupid enough to finally come to blows."

"It was his fault!" Rodney glared at his panting, disheveled doppelganger. "He went crazy and hit me! Look." He tried to point to his bleeding lip, but it wasn't easy while both his arms were being held behind his back.

"Is that true, Rodney?" the general asked, releasing his grip on his own Rodney and turning the other man around to face him.

"He was asking for it," the other Rodney said mutinously.

"Did you take a swing at him?" the general asked insistently. "Did you throw the first punch?"

The other Rodney said nothing. He just gazed at the floor, all the muscles in his body tense.

"I was walking away!" Rodney said. "He just went ballistic and threw himself at me."

"Rodney?" the general asked in a soft voice. "Is that what happened?"

"Pretty much," the other Rodney said at last, finally looking up to meet his husband's gaze, his blue eyes glittering rebelliously.

"You hit him first? Not in self-defense?" The general rocked back on his heels, still gazing at his husband intently, his lips pursed grimly into a thin line.

"Nope. Not self-defense. I hit him first," the other Rodney muttered, never taking his eyes off his husband.

"You got any explanation?" the general asked.

The other Rodney's gaze flickered over to Rodney bitterly for a moment, as if he was expecting something, and then he sighed. "No," he said finally in a tight voice, looking down again.

"Rodney?" The general put both his hands on the other Rodney's shoulders and tried to make eye contact with him. "Help me out here. What's going on?"

"Nothing. He was being his usual annoying self, so I took a swing at him. I lost it, John. That's what happened," the other Rodney said.

"We talked about this. We agreed on how you would handle these emotions. You promised—"

"I know what I promised, but I screwed up!" the other Rodney snapped. "Okay?"

"No, it's not okay," the general said. He turned to Rodney McKay, a very grim expression on his face, and Rodney was so alarmed that he took a step back and trod on the colonel's toes. Sheppard released his grip on his shoulders, but Rodney hoped he wasn't going anywhere as he didn't want to face the general's wrath alone. The man had thrown a knife at Kavanagh just for brushing his husband's sleeve, so God knew what he intended to do to Rodney. However, the general didn't touch him. Instead he just bowed his head at Rodney, taking him by surprise. "I must apologize for my husband's behavior, Dr. McKay," the general said. "I'm very sorry he assaulted you in this way."

"Oh. Right. Good. Well, that's fine," Rodney said, his voice breaking slightly as he spoke. "So, you're not going to...kill me or anything?"

The general shook his head, frowning. "I don't think the colonel would let me," he said, "but, anyway, I have no intention of killing you, Dr. McKay. It seems clear to me that my husband

was at fault here, and I'll punish him to your satisfaction, I hope."

"Uh...what?" Rodney looked around, shocked, and met Sheppard's equally shocked gaze.

"Rodney," the general said, turning back to his husband. "You know what to do." The general folded his sleeves back to the elbow, and then unhooked his strap from his belt. The other Rodney just stood there, his blue eyes dark and resentful. "Rodney," the general said, in a hard tone. "Don't make me tell you twice."

The other Rodney moved his hands reluctantly to his waist and undid his pants. Rodney watched him in fascinated horror, suddenly understanding where this was going.

"Uh, no!" he said, hopping forwards. "There's no need for this. Really. It was just one of those things."

"Rodney," the general said, ignoring him completely, "Come here, please." He swung a chair around and put his leg up on the lower rung, and then reached out, grabbed his husband's wrist and swung him effortlessly over his knee.

"Please don't do this," Rodney squeaked ineffectually. "It was my fault. I provoked him. I said some stuff.... Look, I'm really not surprised he punched me. I'd have done the same in the circumstances. I deserved it. Honestly!"

The general paused, one hand holding his husband steady over his knee, and gazed at Rodney impassively. "My husband will take responsibility for his own actions," he said firmly. "He knew he had a problem with you and I showed him a way of handling it. He chose not to do as I told him and he'll be punished for that."

He turned back to his husband and pulled his pants down to just below his ass, exposing his buttocks. Rodney's heart did a flip of sheer panic and he turned around frantically, seeking out Sheppard for support.

"Colonel, tell him this isn't the way we do things around here!" he pleaded.

"I don't think there's anything I can say that will stop him right now, and this looks like a private matter between them so I'm reluctant to interfere," Sheppard replied, giving Rodney an extremely dark look.

"What? Oh, come on! It was just a little scuffle!" Rodney protested. "Look, General, I'm sorry! It really was my fault. If you could have heard what I said to him! He doesn't deserve this. Honestly!" He glanced down at his counterpart, but the other Rodney put his head down and grasped onto his husband's legs with his big hands, seemingly completely resigned to his fate and appearing to signal to Rodney that he should be, too.

"Ready, Rodney?" the general asked.

"Yes, John," the other Rodney replied quietly.

The general lifted his strap and brought it down on his husband's exposed ass with a hard thwap.

Rodney gazed, horrified, at the red mark it left in its wake. He didn't know what to do, but the last thing he wanted to do was stand by and watch this happen. He could feel his own hands moving uselessly, frantically, at his sides. He was honest enough to know that this was largely his fault, and he couldn't bear it. Another loud thwap and Rodney winced. He remembered that his counterpart had told him that sometimes being spanked relaxed him and he wondered if maybe this wasn't as bad for him as it looked, but one glance at Rodney Sheppard's face disabused him of that notion. The other man was biting down on his lip, presumably to keep from embarrassing himself by crying out in front of an audience, but his face was flushed and he looked utterly miserable.

Rodney swallowed hard. He didn't want to witness this and he seemed powerless to stop it, so he edged slowly towards the door. He was nearly there when a hard voice rapped out.

"Stay right where you are, Dr. McKay," the general commanded.

Rodney stopped and turned, his heart in his mouth.

"As you said, you provoked this, so you can stay and see it through," the general told him. "This is his punishment—watching it can be yours."

Rodney looked over at Sheppard for help, but the colonel just gazed stonily back at him and gestured with his head that Rodney should stay where he was. Rodney took a deep breath, searching for a way out, but found none and realized he had no choice but to watch as the punishment continued.

The general brought his strap down several times on his husband's ass, leaving a criss-cross pattern of red marks. Rodney winced with each stroke. It seemed to go on forever and Rodney didn't know where to look. He didn't want to look at Sheppard, because he seemed really pissed off with him right now, but he didn't want to look at the general, either, because there was such a darkly determined look on his face as he brought that strap down on his husband's ass that Rodney found it frankly alarming. Looking at his counterpart was even worse. The other Rodney's hands were wrapped around his husband's long legs to hold himself steady, and he gazed at Rodney blankly, his eyes registering the force of each hard stroke. Rodney longed for it to be over, while at the same time finding it horrifyingly, fascinatingly arousing.

Finally, the general stopped. He pulled his husband's pants back over his red ass, and swung him onto his feet again.

"That was the public part of your punishment. Now go back to our quarters, Rodney. I'm not done with you yet. We have some things to take care of in private," the general said.

The other Rodney fastened his pants, gazing at the general's boots the entire time, and

when the general finished talking, he nodded and started walking.

"Wait." The general put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back. He took his husband's head between his hands and bestowed a firm kiss on his forehead, then released him and pushed him towards the door. The other Rodney kept his gaze fixed on the ground as he left. He didn't even look at Rodney as he passed him; he just hurried out of the door. The general fastened the strap back to its hook on his belt and then nodded at Sheppard.

"Colonel, I trust there won't be any need for you to mention this to Elizabeth. You know that Rodney has been punished. He couldn't stand being placed in your brig, even if only for a few days."

"I understand." Sheppard nodded. "I don't think Elizabeth needs to know about this. In fact, I don't think what happened here should leave this room."

"Agreed. Thank you," the general nodded. He turned and walked towards the door and Rodney found himself taking a couple of steps back, seriously scared of the other man right now. The general paused when he got to Rodney and gave him a disdainful look. "I hope my Rodney isn't the only one who learned a lesson here," he said.

Rodney bit on his lip and tasted blood from where it had been split earlier. "Sorry," he muttered again.

"Good," the general said, and then he swept from the room.

Rodney gazed after him, utterly horrified. "Oh, shit," he whispered, turning back to Sheppard. "Man, that was intense. Oh, shit. Oh, God."

Sheppard didn't say a word. He just stalked out of the room, ignoring Rodney completely. Rodney gazed after him for a moment, shocked, and then followed on behind him, running to catch up with him just as the other man reached the transporter.

"Colonel! John!" he cried out.

Sheppard paused, his back to Rodney, every line in his body taut.

"I'm sorry!" Rodney said pathetically when he caught up with him. "I had no idea he'd do that. I mean, how could I?"

Sheppard seemed to take a moment to visibly get control of himself and then he turned, and the expression on his face was so furious that Rodney shrank back, away from him. "Rodney, right now, I really don't care. I suggest you go back to your room, or the lab, or wherever the hell you're headed, and think about your role in that little fiasco."

"My role? I know I provoked him, but I had no idea he'd hit me!" Rodney protested.

"Really? Okay, what did you say to him?" Sheppard asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Rodney flushed when he remembered his accusation about whoring. "Okay, I wasn't very nice, but even so...he hit me! He hit me, remember!" Rodney massaged his sore lip, scraping off some dried blood he found on his chin.

"Rodney, you've been spoiling for a fight with him since he arrived. Now, I don't know what your particular problem is with him, but he's a nice guy so I suggest you sit down and have a good long think about it. Whatever is bothering you— Figure it out, Rodney because I don't want anything like that to happen again. Understood?"

Rodney gazed at him, shocked, and found his mouth had gone completely dry. He wanted to argue and protest, but the expression on Sheppard's face was far too forbidding for him to even think about that, so instead he just nodded dumbly.

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me." And with that Sheppard stepped into the transporter and was gone.

"Since when was he appointed the boss of me?" Rodney grumbled to himself as he walked down the hallway back to the lab. "I'm the Head of Science and this is primarily a civilian expedition. He's just here to protect us."

He went into the lab and slammed the door shut behind him. His heart sank when he surveyed the debris in the lab. Things had been knocked over and broken in the tussle, and despite what the colonel had said about keeping quiet about the events of the past half hour, the room itself told its own story. Rodney set about clearing things up, muttering to himself the entire time. The truth was that he felt desperately guilty about what had happened to his counterpart, and that feeling of guilt wasn't helped by the way Sheppard had just talked to him. Rodney finished clearing up the lab and then decided to head back to his quarters. He couldn't face doing any more work today and he really couldn't face seeing Radek and the rest of his team and putting a brave face on it and pretending nothing had happened—especially as his split lip would make it obvious just how much of a lie that was.

Rodney let himself into his room and went to his bathroom to gaze at himself in the mirror. His hair was askew from where the colonel had restrained him and he had a little red bruise forming around his mouth. His lip was swollen and bleeding a little. Rodney took a handful of water and washed away the worst of the dried blood on his jaw and neck. He considered going to see Carson, but he really didn't want to answer any of the doctor's questions right now and the injury hardly looked serious, so instead he went back and threw himself down on his bed. He was still in a state of shock about what had happened and a dozen images kept rattling around inside his brain in an endless loop; his counterpart's pale, furious face when he'd finally pushed him too far; the way Sheppard had held him back with strong, forceful arms; the other Rodney's mutinous gaze as he glanced up at his husband through his eyelashes, still clearly furious. Then there had been the ease with which his counterpart had gone over the general's knee, without protestation, as if it was something he'd done on hundreds of previous occasions, which, Rodney supposed, he had.

There had been something about the ease of his submission to his husband's authority,

though, that made Rodney tremble. He closed his eyes, trying to squeeze out the memory of that spanking, but it haunted him. He knew he was aroused by it, at the same time as hating himself for that very fact. He felt terrible for the other Rodney, too, and that made him feel even worse for feeling in any way aroused, and he didn't understand his arousal in any case. But the image that stayed most in his mind was the way the general had kissed his husband before sending him back to their rooms. It was clear that despite the fact the other Rodney was in big trouble, and despite the fact the general had warned him that his punishment wasn't yet over—despite all that, the general was still holding out the promise of ultimate forgiveness. There was a big difference between that and the angry way in which things had been left between himself and Sheppard. Rodney stared up at the ceiling, feeling utterly wretched. He thought he'd actually prefer to be going through whatever the other Rodney was going through right now, if at the end of it he got to be forgiven, because at this moment in time, he felt utterly and completely alone with his guilt.

\* \* \*

Rodney Sheppard returned to his room and stood there for a moment, trying to catch his breath. He wondered if he should undress so he was ready for punishment when his husband returned, but John hadn't told him to do that and he was anxious not to do anything right now that would make the situation worse, so instead he just stood there, eyes down, waiting.

He still wasn't sure how he'd gotten into this position. It had been a very long time since John had looked at him the way he just had, or since Rodney had screwed up so publicly and spectacularly. This was like being back at the early days of their relationship, when they hadn't figured each other out, and when Rodney hadn't been sure what the limits were. Now he did know—and that made it worse because he had a full appreciation of just how much shit he was in right now.

The door opened, but Rodney just continued to stand there, eyes down, unmoving. John stepped into the room, locked the door behind him, and then came to stand in front of his husband with a deep sigh. Rodney kept his gaze fixed on the floor.

"If that had happened back in our own universe, then Elizabeth would have ordered you into the punishment room before your feet could touch the ground," John told him in a hard, stern tone.

"I know. I'm sorry," Rodney said in the general direction of his boots.

"Do you know what that means, Rodney? What that really means?" John demanded. "I'd have had to punish you in front of possibly the entire base and you know what I feel about that. All those people...looking at your bare ass," he growled.

"Well, you didn't seem to mind punishing me in front of people who were looking at my bare ass a few minutes ago," Rodney muttered rebelliously.

"Excuse me?" John took hold of his chin and pulled it up so that Rodney was looking at him.

"Nothing," Rodney said sullenly.

"That was damage limitation," John told him, his hazel eyes flashing. "You know their rules. I was trying to make sure you didn't end up in the brig."

Rodney's heart did a little flip and he gazed at his husband anxiously. "What? I.... Would they have done that?" he whispered, appalled.

"I don't know because these people are frankly weird, but it seemed like it was a distinct possibility after what happened in the mess hall the other night."

"I suppose so." Rodney took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "Oh, God," he whispered.

"It's all right. I had a conversation with the colonel after you left and he agreed that nobody would know what happened in there except for the four of us."

"Oh. Right. Good," Rodney said in relief. He was surprised to find that he was shaking just at the thought of the brig and John put his arms around him and held him.

"Okay. It's okay. Shh. It's not going to happen," John told him, his hands soothing reassuring circles down his back. Rodney clung on for a moment, until he felt calmer.

"So, I'm still in trouble I take it?" Rodney asked into John's neck.

"Oh, yeah," John replied, kissing the side of his face affectionately.

"I honestly am sorry. He was just being such a total bastard."

"I know. I guessed that much. If it's worth anything, I will say that he looked really shook up when I left. I felt kind of sorry for him."

"Don't," Rodney growled.

"He's so like you used to be, with all your faults and all your good points, too. He was quick to take the blame and he was genuinely upset about what happened to you. He'd have done anything to save you that punishment."

"Well, perhaps if the colonel would just step up to the plate and tan his hide occasionally,

then things like this wouldn't happen. Plus, he'd be much nicer to be around."

John chuckled. "Maybe, but I have to say that doesn't seem to be the way things work around here." He kissed the side of Rodney's face again and then shifted.

Rodney clung on for as long as was humanly possible.

"You're just delaying the inevitable, Rodney," John told him.

"Hmmm, but I figure the delay is worth it," Rodney replied.

John chuckled again, but then pushed him back, more firmly this time.

Rodney sighed, and gazed at his boots again. "You did already punish me," he reminded his husband.

"Yeah, but this was big, Rodney, you know that," John said. "I haven't seen you like this in a long time and that just tells me I've failed you as a top and as your husband."

"What?" Rodney glanced up in surprise.

"How did it get to this stage, Rodney? I thought I was taking care of it, keeping you grounded, and then I find you brawling?"

"You haven't failed me," Rodney said miserably.

"Look, Rodney, I know we're in a different universe, but as far as I'm concerned, the same old rules apply—and that means that if you act out, I'm responsible. I knew that when we got married and I was happy to shoulder that responsibility in exchange for all the many benefits that also go with being your husband and your top." John gave him a wry grin. "So, if you're getting into fist fights, then I'm doing something wrong."

"No, you're not. It was my fault for letting McKay get under my skin."

"And my fault for not realizing just how big an issue this was for you and dealing with it more thoroughly," John told him. "Now, I didn't enjoy punishing you just now and I sure as hell won't enjoy the punishment I'm going to give you in a moment, so that'll be my retribution for not taking better care of you."

"This sounds bad," Rodney sighed.

"It isn't good," John replied, going over to the closet. "When I was on the mainland a few days ago, I cut myself a switch," he said. Rodney's heart did an anxious flip. "I didn't think I'd actually need to use it, certainly not for real, but now I think I do," John said, opening the closet and retrieving a long, thin, whippy-looking switch.

Rodney took a deep, appalled breath. "Please, John. I'm sorry," he said wretchedly.

"I know you are," John replied with a nod. "And I have already given you a good strapping, but I think you deserve a thorough switching too. Imagine how I'd have felt if they put you in the brig, Rodney. And imagine if we'd been back home. Do you think Elizabeth would have let you get away with less than a thorough caning for this?"

"No.... But...." Rodney caught the flash in John's hazel eyes and bit back that protest. "No," he whispered.

"I really need this message to go home," John told him. "Because I can't keep you safe here, Rodney." He couldn't keep the note of worry out of his voice and Rodney's heart ached for him. "They don't understand us or our ways. People can touch you and apparently I'm supposed to just stand by and be fine with that. You don't get the protection your status should afford you and nobody respects my role in your life. Hell, they don't even understand my role in your life, even after we've explained over and over again."

"I know. That's partly why I threw that punch at McKay," Rodney said softly.

"So I need to keep you as safe as I can, Rodney, and if that means taking care of things so that you don't break any of their rules again, then I'm happy to punish you long and hard until that message goes in."

Rodney nodded. "I understand," he muttered. "I was an idiot back there. There are other ways of dealing with McKay. I, of all people, should know that!"

"You should feel sorry for him rather than rising to his bait," John told him. "He's clearly struggling with some really hard issues right now."

"I know," Rodney said wryly. "Anyone can see that they're completely in love with each other and they're both single, so what's all the denial about? I just wish I could bang their heads together, the pair of 'em," Rodney sighed, exasperated.

"It's not the same for them as it was for us. It's harder in this universe. Hopefully, one day they'll figure it out, but if not—it's not our responsibility, Rodney."

"I know," Rodney nodded.

"Our only responsibilities are to each other—you to me and me to you. That's what this means." John placed a finger on his pendant and Rodney felt the Kaeira flow lovingly between them. "And I'm not going to shirk those responsibilities, Rodney. You mean too much to me," John told him. He removed his finger and Rodney sighed, missing the contact already.

"Get undressed, Rodney," John told him. "Then kneel on all fours at the end of the bed."

Rodney did what he was told, shaking slightly as he got undressed. John had never used a switch on him, but he had caned him before, a long time ago, but only once, and he thought

that had been bad enough. This was worse, far worse, because they were closer now than they'd been back then. A switch, like the cane, was a serious instrument of punishment, and Rodney knew that it would hurt like hell.

When he was naked, he took up the position John had indicated and tried to compose himself. His ass was already sore from the strapping, but he knew he could take more and that John would make him take it in any case. There was a long silence and Rodney kept his gaze fixed on the sheets, trying to clear his mind. Then he felt the touch of the switch on his ass as John rested it there, taking aim, and he closed his eyes. He heard it first, before he felt it, and then a blaze of pain shot through his buttocks as the switch bit into his flesh. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Damn, but that had hurt.

Another silence, another whistling sound and another wave of fire sweeping through his ass cheeks. Rodney gave a startled yelp at just how much it hurt and half rose on his haunch-es, more as a reflex action than anything else. John put a firm hand on his back and pushed him back down again.

"Hold still, Rodney, we're not done yet—not by a long shot," he said in a grim voice.

Rodney lowered his head, accepting. The next stroke elicited a shout of pure pain from him and by the fourth, he was shaking hard with the effort of holding position when he wanted to do anything he could to evade the bite of that switch. John was absolutely implacable, though, as he always was when delivering a punishment, and Rodney knew he wouldn't stop until he was completely satisfied that his husband had learned his lesson.

John delivered three more hard strokes before he was finally done, and by the time he finished, Rodney was trembling in earnest. Then John put a hand on his shoulder and helped him off the bed. Rodney glanced over his shoulder to see seven very distinct and evenly spaced red lines on his already reddened ass.

"Damn thing hurts like hell," he told John as his husband drew him in for a stern but loving kiss.

"I know. You took it well though, Rodney. I'm proud of you," John told him. He drew back and escorted Rodney over to the wall. "Now take some time to think about everything that happened today," John told him. "When you're done, come to bed and I'll hold you."

Rodney nodded, and stood there silently. His bottom stung like crazy, waves of pain radiating out in little circles from the epicenter of each precisely delivered stroke, and he felt utterly miserable. John was right, their situation was precarious; they were stuck in a universe where nobody understood them, where people had a problem even accepting them, and they had to be as careful as possible. Things seemed so familiar here that he'd allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security. They were guests, visitors, and while it wasn't their fault that they were here, they still had to rely on the goodwill of these oddly familiar strangers. He'd been stupid—and self indulgent—in allowing McKay to get to him. He felt a lump rise in his throat at the thought that he might have been thrown into the brig. How would John have felt if that had happened? These people didn't understand how

devastated John would have been by that—to be forcibly separated, to have other people take control of his husband, to have them imprison him against John's will and without his permission...these people didn't have a clue how big a deal that was for them. If it had happened, John would have been distraught—and it would have been Rodney's fault. Rodney rested his hands against the wall and his head on his hands. The tears came slowly, leaking between the cracks in his fingers. He didn't move, or make a sound, just wept silently for a long time, until he was all cried out. He supposed he should go over to the bed as John had instructed, but he knew he didn't deserve to be held after what he'd done so he just stayed there.

Finally, after an hour or more had passed, he felt warm hands on his shoulders.

"That's long enough," John told him firmly, and he was turned around and led back to the bed and pushed beneath the sheets. He lay on his side and felt John slide in beside him and turn off the light, then an arm wrapped itself around his waist and he was pulled back against John's naked body. John kissed the back of his neck repeatedly and finally Rodney felt himself starting to relax.

"I know what'll help," John whispered. Rodney stifled a gasp as John moved, jostling Rodney's sore ass, and then John was back again and Rodney heard the pop of the lube tube.

A few seconds later, John's fingers slid carefully between his smarting butt cheeks. Rodney sighed and opened up to allow better access. He wasn't honestly in the mood to be fucked, but if that was what John wanted, then he was willing enough. John stretched him, slowly and purposefully, without any sense of sexual urgency, then withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his cock. He slid into Rodney carefully, tenderly, inch by inch, and came to rest, embedded deep within Rodney's ass. Then he wrapped his arm around Rodney and kissed the back of his neck again and Rodney realized that a fuck wasn't what John had in mind right now. Rodney floated away hazily. He never enjoyed being punished, but he did always like the place he ended up in his head afterwards. His body felt heavy and drowsy; there were feel-good endorphins whizzing around in his bloodstream, and the familiar, beloved sensation of John's cock embedded in his ass.

"Go to sleep now," John told him, stroking Rodney's stomach gently with his fingertips. "I'll stay inside you."

Rodney closed his eyes with a contented sigh, feeling completely wrapped up in his husband's love. He knew John would be as good as his word. This wasn't about sex right now, it was about comfort, and John didn't intend to come. He was just going to stay inside Rodney until he slept. At some point he'd allow his cock to soften inside Rodney's body and during the night it would probably slip out, but right now, Rodney could feel it filling him, large and reassuring, reminding him that John was there, in him and with him, and that he was safe, and warm, and very, very much loved.

End of Part Nine

### Part Ten: First Date? by Xanthe

Rodney McKay spent a sleepless night tossing and turning. Sheppard had told him to figure out what was bothering him, but he thought he had that pretty much figured out already. It was the solution to it that was eluding him. The truth was that having Rodney Sheppard around had bothered him from the very beginning because he was jealous of him; jealous of his happiness, of his ease around people when Rodney felt so awkward, and, most of all, jealous of his relationship with the general.

Rodney had been in denial about it for a long time, but the previous day's events now forced him to confront the truth—and that truth was that he wanted what Rodney Sheppard had—and he didn't like the idea that he wanted it. More than anything else, he was stunned that he wanted it. This wasn't something he would ever have imagined he desired, in a million years, but he did, and now he had to get used to the idea because it didn't look as if it was going away. What the hell should he do about it, though? Rodney had no idea, and it didn't matter how much he tossed and turned, he couldn't come up with an answer.

Finally he got up, took a shower and got dressed. He looked like shit. There were dark shadows under his eyes and his mouth area was too sore for him to shave, so he left his chin stubbled. Hunger drove him to the mess hall and he entered it, shoulders hunched, mouth set in a crooked line, daring anyone to talk to him. He wanted to eat alone, but his gaze fell on a lone figure pushing his food around his plate and he hesitated, then squared his shoulders and walked over. He wasn't sure what his reception would be, but he knew he had an apology to make.

Rodney Sheppard didn't look so good, either. He was half sitting, half kneeling on the chair, balancing on his leg which was bent underneath him, so that his ass wasn't actually touching the surface of the chair, and his face was pale. He didn't look tired, but he did look washed out, and his eyes were ever so slightly red-rimmed. He actually looked rather young—and kind of vulnerable. Rodney was brought up short by that analysis. He'd never viewed himself in that light before, had never seen himself as others might see him, and he'd never realized that there might be times when he also looked like this. He felt an odd surge of affection for his counterpart and wondered if other people sometimes felt that for him. He would never have thought so before today.

"Hey," he said quietly, coming to stand in front of the other man. "I'll understand if you tell me where to go, but I just wanted to apologize."

The other Rodney glanced up, and, much to Rodney's surprise, gave him a wan smile. "That's okay. Sit down," he said, gesturing with his spoon.

Rodney was even more surprised by that and he took his place opposite his counterpart. "I really am sorry," he said humbly. "I never meant to get you into trouble, and I shouldn't

have said those things to you."

"Thank you," his counterpart said softly. "That means a lot. I'm sorry, too."

Rodney glanced up, eyebrows raised.

The other Rodney nodded his head at Rodney's lip. "Looks like I actually managed to land a decent punch for once," he said with a wry smile.

Rodney grinned, then wished he hadn't as his lip split a little more and he tasted the salty tang of fresh blood. "I thought you were pretty good, actually," he said. "Considering you're, you know, me, and, generally speaking, fisticuffs aren't my thing."

"Me, neither."

"Guess we just both know the right buttons to push to get a reaction," Rodney sighed. "Question is why we want to keep pushing them the whole time."

"I think, in your case, that you just don't like yourself very much," his counterpart said slowly, without any hint of aggression.

"John...Colonel Sheppard said that once, too," Rodney replied. "Which is strange because I always feel I like myself plenty."

The other Rodney snorted. "Yeah. Me too, except...we both have two different sides to our personalities, don't we? And one of them is a lot less self-assured than the other. I'm guessing it was that side that was so freaked out by having me around."

Rodney stared at him blankly. He'd never really thought of himself in such an analytical way before. He generally found other people's emotions and motivations a mystery, and his own were often no clearer to him.

The other Rodney smiled. "Sometimes, after I've been punished, I have these moments of clarity when I can figure everything out and it all makes sense to me," he explained. "John pretty much insists on me spending some quiet time after a severe punishment. It's the only time when my brain slows down enough to see some of the really obvious stuff that's been staring me in the face the whole time."

"What did he do to you?" Rodney asked, biting on his lip and tasting blood again. "Last night, after...." He trailed off.

"He used a switch. Definitely something to be avoided if at all possible," his counterpart told him with a grimace.

"Oh, shit. I'm so sorry," Rodney said again.

"You can stop apologizing, Rodney. I didn't like it, but it did help me figure out a few things

in my head. I'm sorry I allowed you to get to me. I should have realized why I was always rising to your bait. John told me ages ago that the problem was that you remind me of myself, and he's right. I should have recognized that and accepted it. Instead it just kept niggling at me."

"I remind you of yourself?" Rodney wrinkled his forehead, trying desperately not to make that question sound confrontational, but really not seeing it. Their lives and outlook seemed so different.

"Before John. I was a lot like you. I didn't understand myself...I was lonely and angry about a lot of things that I couldn't even put into focus. Being with you just brought it all back, all the negative stuff, and I didn't like it."

"You think I'm lonely and angry?" Rodney gazed at his counterpart in surprise.

"Yes. I do." The other man nodded. "Let's face it, McKay, if your childhood was anything like mine, then it was really fucked up."

Rodney was brought up short by that. Generally speaking, he preferred not to think about his childhood a great deal. It hadn't been terrible—nobody had hit him and there had always been food on the table, but, all the same, he didn't have any particularly good memories of it.

"Parents at each other's throats all the time, being picked on at high school. Being a genius worked great as a way of distracting our parents from tearing each other apart, but it just made the being picked on thing worse," his counterpart muttered.

Rodney felt his muscles tighten. "I don't think about it very often. I'm sure other people have it much worse," he replied.

"Yeah, but it was a lonely childhood and nobody ever helped you out, or took your side, and the anger over the unfairness of it all didn't go anywhere except the pit of your stomach," his counterpart said softly.

There was no point in denying it because the other Rodney knew him as well as he knew himself. Rodney gazed at him with eyes that felt suddenly prickly.

"It's just that nobody was ever that nice to you, so you never got into the habit of being nice back," the other man continued.

"Did we have the same parents?" Rodney asked. "I mean, wouldn't yours have been in a...." He flushed, too embarrassed to even think about it.

"They were both switches," his counterpart said with a nod. "Always fighting over who was in charge and neither would give an inch. Hopelessly mis-matched. I ran off to college the minute I was old enough and fell into some bad relationships. I never expected anyone to love me and that was a good thing because nobody really did until John came along."

"Relationships?" Rodney asked, curious about his counterpart's history.

"Yeah. Some with women, some with men. I even topped. I wasn't bad at it, but sometimes I wasn't so great at it, either," he sighed. "And when I got it wrong, I really got it wrong, and that's a lot of responsibility when you're taking care of another human being. Then there was a whole string of one-night stands," he grimaced. "They really should have been more fun than they were, but I was too fucked up by that point."

"Man, sounds like you've had a whole lot of sex," Rodney commented, feeling vaguely envious.

"Sure." His counterpart shrugged, and then gazed at him questioningly.

"Me, not so much," Rodney said quietly.

"Why not?"

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, people don't like me much and it's hard to get from 'I hate you, you're a pig' to 'okay, but will you sleep with me?' in one easy step. Although that's not to say I didn't try." Rodney forked some food into his mouth and started to munch.

"Right." The other Rodney frowned. "I think you're wrong about people not liking you, though. I think they do, but you never see it. You're so busy keeping people at bay with that sharp tongue of yours that you just assume they all dislike you. They don't. Even I can see that. Carson and Radek have both leapt to your defense when I bad mouthed you to them, and Elizabeth, Teyla and Miko all have a soft spot for you."

"Really?" Rodney was sure he looked as surprised as he felt.

"Really. And that's not even taking the colonel into account," the other Rodney added. "He likes you, too—a lot. I can see how in your universe the whole sex thing must be harder, though. We're a lot more open about sex where I come from. Still, even despite your savagely anti-social tendencies, I'm surprised you've missed out."

"Why?" Rodney frowned.

"Well, you must have noticed how hot we are," his counterpart grinned.

Rodney choked on his food. "What?"

"Hot. We're hot, Rodney. You do know this, right?"

Rodney glanced around the room, worried that they'd been overheard. "Really?" he whispered. "I mean, I kind of always thought so, but when the rest of the world keeps on knocking you back, you have to wonder."

"Oh, no. We're hot," his counterpart told him confidently. "The other night when I was dressed in that outfit John got for me, I could have had half the room, if I'd wanted."

"I did notice you got looked at," Rodney mused.

"You're kind of hot, too—only you don't look comfortable in your own skin and that comes across. You're sort of awkward. Also, the clothes could do with some work."

"There's nothing wrong with my...." Rodney stopped himself and sighed. "Sorry. I don't want to start arguing again."

"Look, while we're not arguing, there are some other things I should apologize for, as well. I knew I was doing some stuff that was winding you up and I kept on doing it. Take Radek, for example." His counterpart made a little face. "I know how you feel about him because I felt the same. He's your right hand man, your little partner in crime—and he's the only person around here who can really keep up with you. I knew you were feeling left out by my friendship with him, but I just kept on doing it. It wasn't just to annoy you, either. I miss him, Rodney."

Rodney glanced up at the note of sincerity in the other man's voice.

"I really miss him," his counterpart said, his blue eyes glittering slightly. "I didn't even realize how much I liked him until he was dead and then.... The lab's never been the same since. The others are fine, but Miko's no substitute and Peter's a good, solid technician, but he's no Radek Zelenka."

"I had no idea." Rodney shook his head. "To be honest, I also had no idea I even liked Radek that much until you started cozying up to him."

"There are a lot of things you have no idea about, McKay," his counterpart said quietly. "That's another thing that's been winding me up, to be honest. Watching you and the colonel...." He shook his head. "I know it's none of my business and I know it shouldn't affect me, but just the thought of me not being with John makes me anxious...so watching you two dance around each other has made me permanently edgy. That's another reason why I've been reacting so badly to you."

"There is nothing going on between me and the colonel," Rodney replied stiffly. "There isn't even the remotest possibility of anything happening between me and the colonel. Whatever you think you see is entirely in your imagination."

His counterpart gazed at him with clear blue eyes and Rodney felt himself wilting under the steady stare. "Rodney—this is me you're talking to, remember?" The other man snorted. "I know you better than anyone else here. Lying to me is like lying to yourself. Oh! That's what you've been doing, isn't it?"

Rodney shook his head, numbly, and gazed blindly at his food.

"Rodney?" his counterpart said softly.

"What I can't figure out..." Rodney said finally, his voice breaking, "is whether I've always felt like this and just been ignoring it, or whether I only started feeling this way after you two arrived."

"Does it matter?"

"Well, yes, obviously, because when you go, I might go back to—"

"Rodney, it's never going to go away," his counterpart interrupted him. "And my guess is that we didn't cause it. You've just been suppressing it for a long time and we brought it right out into the open. I mean, I've watched you, and you two flirt like crazy. I don't believe that only started when we arrived."

"Flirt?" Rodney frowned, puzzled.

His counterpart rolled his eyes. "Like crazy," he confirmed. "When you first sucked us in here, I just assumed you were together because of the vibe you had going on."

"I really don't see that, but, anyway, it doesn't matter. Nothing is going to happen between the colonel and myself. Apart from anything else, you should see the number of women who throw themselves at him, and he hasn't by any means turned all of them down."

"Well, you can't blame the guy! He's not getting any from you, so why shouldn't he take it when it's offered elsewhere?" the other Rodney snorted.

"You're missing my point! It's women he's attracted to, not men, and most definitely not me," Rodney told him firmly.

"How do you know he's not bisexual?"

"Just because everyone in your universe is bisexual doesn't mean everyone in ours is!" Rodney protested.

"Or maybe, because of this weird gay taboo thing you've got going, people just hide it," his counterpart said with a shrug.

"Trust me, the colonel isn't bisexual," Rodney said. "And even if he was, a man like him sure as hell wouldn't be interested in me."

"Why not?" the other Rodney asked curiously.

"I just doubt I'm his type," Rodney shrugged. "I think he'd go for someone more obvious."

"Some brainless, muscle-bound hunk? I don't think you know the colonel that well if you

think that," the other Rodney said, frowning.

"I don't understand why you think he's interested in me," Rodney said, frowning back. "He hasn't done anything, or said anything...he hasn't made a move.... I just don't get what it is that you think you're seeing."

The other Rodney sighed. "I'm trying to be patient because I know how incredibly dense you can be about these things. Okay, let me try to enlighten you. Has the colonel been spending more time with you lately?"

Rodney screwed up his face. "Well, yes, but I figured that was because of this unusual situation—you know, with you two guys being around."

"Okay. Has he been unusually interested in you? Does he look at you differently, and touch you more? Is he more protective? Does he seek you out and escort you back to your quarters after work?" the other Rodney asked.

Rodney hesitated. "Well, yes, but I just thought...."

"He's courting you," the other Rodney said, in a 'told you so' kind of voice, as if the matter had been resolved.

"Courting... That's an incredibly old fashioned kind of word!" Rodney protested.

"I know. He's an old fashioned kind of guy. You'll figure that one out soon enough. My John did the same, kept hanging around until I thought he was stalking me. Eventually I figured that these were his advances and only when I was comfortable with that and relaxed a bit around him did he make his move. Your John will be the same. He won't do anything until you're ready."

"Ready?" Rodney felt his voice quavering slightly.

"Ready to have a relationship with him. He won't be interested in a one-night stand or a fuck buddy. If he wants you, then he'll want all of you, and he won't settle for less. Took me a while to see that and it was painful for a bit, too, until I had it figured out."

"I've never slept with a man before," Rodney muttered, feeling himself flushing. "I don't think I'll ever be ready for that."

"It's great," the other Rodney grinned. "I love it. You will, too, if you give it a chance."

Rodney gazed at him doubtfully. "But even if he is.... Even if, by some miracle, the colonel is interested in me, I really can't see it going anywhere. I mean...it's absurd," he sighed.

"Works for me and John," the other Rodney said.

"Well, that's another thing. If you two are the role model for a relationship between me and

the colonel, then quite frankly that makes it even more absurd...and disturbing."

"Why?"

Rodney took a deep breath. "Look, I don't want to cause any more offense after yesterday, but you and he...it's not exactly a relationship of equals, is it?"

"Yes, it is," his counterpart said earnestly. "You don't see it because you can't get beyond the collar, and the idea of two guys being married, and the concept of submission as anything other than somehow demeaning, but we are equal. We both know our role and responsibility within our marriage—and I'm hardly brow-beaten, am I? I don't cringe and quiver around him. Of course we're equals."

"Then why do you wear the collar? Why are you the one with the mark on your arm—what's that, like a branding? Like you're cattle or something? It's unlike any tattoo I've ever seen," Rodney said, pointing at the elegant etching on his counterpart's upper arm.

"The collar is like a wedding ring—it's kind of old fashioned, but I like wearing it and John likes to see me in it. The tattoo is a technique called latiquing. You use a special liquid that turns silver when it's applied to the skin via a needle. It hurts like hell so it helps to be in the right headspace when you do it. None of this stuff matters, though. You could take it all away and it wouldn't make any difference, because at the end of the day, it's all about trust—and you don't trust anyone, Rodney, not even yourself. Until you do, you'll be trapped inside a misery entirely of your own making and nobody will be able to help you."

"You don't understand. You're asking me to change everything I believed myself to be," Rodney told him helplessly.

"And does everything you believe yourself to be make you happy?" his counterpart asked softly. "Because if not—maybe it needs changing, hmm?"

Rodney had no reply to that, but he didn't need one because at that moment the general strode up to the table. Rodney felt himself flushing as he remembered the events of the previous evening, but the general seemed to be in a good mood and he nodded at him and wished him good morning.

"You two boys okay?" he asked, casting an anxious look at his husband.

"We're fine. Just...burying a few hatchets," the other Rodney said with a smile.

"I'm pleased to hear it," the general beamed. "So, are you ready, Rodney?" he asked his husband.

Rodney Sheppard grinned, and got up, stifling a grimace as he slid his leg off the chair and eased himself cautiously to his feet. "Definitely ready," he said. "Oh, I should have told you—I won't be working in the lab today, McKay. John's taking me to the mainland for some R&R."

"Yeah, that's where I've been, requisitioning a jumper from the colonel. I'm taking Rodney to this great beach we found a week or two back," the general said, putting an arm around his husband and kissing him on the cheek. The other Rodney gave that little giggle of his and somehow Rodney didn't find it so irritating anymore. In fact, there was something endearing about it—and about how sincerely and unashamedly in love these two men were. Usually, Rodney found that kind of stuff unbearably sappy and embarrassing, but maybe he was getting used to it, or maybe they'd just worn him down from being around so long.

"It's a nice day," the other Rodney said. "You should get out more, have more fun, McKay."

"Yeah. Right," Rodney sighed. He had to admit that the idea of a day away from all his problems did sound appealing and he envied them.

"He's been working too hard. I should have done this before now," the general said, squeezing his husband's arm. "Took yesterday's fiasco to make me realize I haven't been spoiling him enough."

"Oh, one thing before we go," the other Rodney said. "Show Dr. McKay your arm, John."

"My arm?" The general looked confused. The other Rodney tapped his left bicep.

"Dr. McKay is struggling to understand our relationship. He seems to think we're not equal. I thought maybe if you showed him...."

"Oh. Right. Yeah." The general grinned and undid his shirt, then peeled the fabric down his shoulder to reveal the top of his left arm. There, etched on his flesh in silver piping, was the same elegant entwined J and R tattoo that Rodney had seen on his counterpart's upper arm, although on his right arm, not his left.

"I did his first, as a matter of fact," Rodney said. "The night we lifebonded. The design was mine, too, and he was nervous in case he got it wrong, so I went first. Then afterwards, he did mine." He glanced down at his own arm. "Opposite arms—it's traditional and they touch when we walk side by side."

"Yeah. I'm crap at design and stuff like that," the general grinned. "Rodney's got a good eye for detail and a steady hand. Luckily, we were deep in the lifebonded headspace when we fatigued each other or I'd have screwed it up and ended up making a mess of it. As it was...hell, I felt like I could do anything that night. That's when we first felt the Kaeira and it blew me away. As for being equal—of course we are." He shrugged, as if that was self-evident. "I mean, Rodney's pretty much the smartest guy on Atlantis, as he keeps reminding us every five minutes." The general grinned at his husband. "And I doubt you could even lifebond with someone if you felt they were beneath you. The ritual wouldn't work."

Rodney gazed at them both, spellbound by this glimpse into their society. He wasn't entirely sure he understood it, but there was something exotic and beautiful about it all the same.

"We gotta go if we're going to make a day of it," the general said, fastening his leash to the other Rodney's collar and wrapping the end of it around his fist. "See you later, Doc. Have a good day."

Rodney watched them go. He wasn't sure he was ever going to entirely wrap his head around their relationship, but he envied them their easy closeness. Despite what had happened the previous day, today they were as besotted with each other as he'd ever seen them.

\* \* \*

Rodney made his way back to the lab, feeling strangely depressed. Not by his conversation with the other Rodney, but by his counterpart's relationship with the general and his own sense of loneliness. He wasn't sure what that was about—he never usually felt this way. He thought he had pretty much gotten used to being a loner, but now he had all these emotions coursing around inside him that had nowhere to go.

His staff gazed at him warily as he entered the lab and he grimaced, feeling their eyes flicker over his stubbled chin and bruised mouth. He refused to enlighten them, though, and just glared at them, daring them to say anything. Needless to say, nobody did, although Radek did give him a sympathetic look and hand him a cup of coffee before scurrying away, clearly worried that some kind of tongue-lashing would be incurred by anyone who lingered too long in Rodney's vicinity.

Rodney had done about half an hour's work under the casing when he realized that the atmosphere in the lab had changed, and everyone had gone rather quiet. He poked his head out and his heart sank as he saw Colonel Sheppard standing in the doorway.

"Dr. McKay. Could I have a word with you, please?" the colonel asked.

Rodney nodded curtly and got to his feet, uncertain where they stood after the previous evening and whether the colonel was still angry with him. He went over to stand in front of the colonel and the other man gazed at him searchingly for a moment, his gaze lingering for a long time on his split lip, an unreadable expression in those hazel eyes.

"How are you doing?" he asked eventually.

"Fine," Rodney replied sharply.

"Good. I want you to finish up here and come with me, then," Sheppard said.

"Why?" Rodney demanded warily.

"Because I want to give you a flying lesson," Sheppard said.

"What?!" Rodney gazed at him, completely floored. Of all the things Sheppard could have said right then, that would have been last on his list.

"Do you want a flying lesson or not?" Sheppard asked.

Rodney thought about it for a moment. He loved the flying lessons Sheppard had given him in the past, but this was so weirdly out of the blue.

"Well.... Now?" he queried. "Why now?"

"Why not now?" Sheppard countered.

"Because...I'm working?" Rodney suggested, waving his hand around the lab. He was suddenly aware that everyone was being studiously quiet as they strained to overhear his conversation with the colonel. He hoped they didn't think Sheppard was offering to take him out on a date or something...and then it occurred to him that might be exactly what the colonel was intending and he flushed bright red.

"You work all the time. You do double the hours your staff do and you need a break. I checked the logs—you haven't taken one day off in four weeks," Sheppard told him. "And you work regular seventeen-hour days." He took hold of Rodney's arm and led him to one side so they wouldn't be overheard. "I told you this would happen. I said you'd be a wreck if you worked at this pace and you are. Just look at you," he whispered.

"I said I'm fine," Rodney hissed.

"Well, you don't look it and you aren't acting it," Sheppard said. "I'm worried about you. I want you to take a break before you end up getting into more fights, or blowing up the city or something."

Rodney gazed at him helplessly. He couldn't honestly remember the last time anyone had cared what hours he worked, or how he looked. Even Carson was happy to hand out the stimulants when Rodney bullied him into it, just so he could keep working. He remembered what the other Rodney had said about Sheppard courting him. Was that what this was? Or was the colonel really just worried about the safety of the city when its Head of Science was so close to breaking point? And if it was the former and not the latter, how did he feel about it?

"Okay," he said suddenly, surprising himself by the obvious answer to his question about how he felt about going on a date with the colonel.

Sheppard blinked. "Really?" He looked surprised, too, as if he thought it would have been harder to convince Rodney.

"Sure. Why not? You're right. These guys should pull their weight more, anyway," Rodney said in a slightly louder voice so they could all hear. "Okay, boys and girls, listen up!" he said. "I'm out of here. Radek—you're in charge."

And with that, he turned on his heel and left, still flushing wildly at the thought that everyone on his staff had just heard Sheppard asking him out on what might, or might not, be a date. As they walked out of the door, Sheppard's hand came to rest on his shoulder, the way it always seemed to when they walked anywhere these days. Rodney tried to relax. If this was a date, then maybe it would give him a chance to figure out whether there was any way in hell that he and Colonel Sheppard could ever have any kind of a relationship.

\* \* \*

"So...flying in a straight line," Sheppard said with a grin as they entered the puddle jumper.

Rodney made a face. "I'm sure I'll get the hang of it one day," he said.

"We'll work on it," Sheppard told him, pushing him towards the flight console and taking up the position next to him.

Rodney buckled himself in and ran his hands over the controls. He actually loved flying, and now that he looked back, he wondered whether that wasn't partly because his flying lessons had given him a chance to spend some one-on-one time with the colonel.

Rodney took them up, in an entirely crooked line, into the air, and then Sheppard took them through some simple maneuvers which Rodney performed with his usual enthusiasm and lack of flair. His inability to fly in a straight line was actually embarrassing him, and the whole date-not-date thing was making him even more flustered to the point where he wasn't sure what he was doing.

"It's okay, calm down," the colonel said after yet another spectacular failure, unbuckling from his seat and coming to stand behind Rodney. "Your problem is that you overthink it. In fact, that's pretty much your problem with everything," he said with a grin.

Rodney opened his mouth to protest at that character slur when Sheppard's hands suddenly descended on his own from behind.

"You need to feel it. Get a feel for her. Just be quiet for a moment, Rodney. Don't talk, don't think...just feel," Sheppard said, his lips so close to Rodney's ear that his breath ticked the side of Rodney's face when he spoke.

Rodney did as instructed, sitting back in his chair and trying to relax, relishing the feel of Sheppard's long, agile fingers on top of his own, and Sheppard's face against his cheek.

"That's it...now...I want you to fly between these two points...but don't look at the screen ...just gently ease her...that's right," Sheppard said encouragingly into his ear.

Rodney gave himself up to the dual pleasures of flying and having Sheppard so close to him. He guided the ship gently along, barely breathing, and was surprised when they reached their destination and Sheppard brought up the star map to show they'd kept to an almost entirely straight line.

"See, I knew you could do it," the colonel said, finally relinquishing his hold on Rodney's hands and going back to his seat.

Rodney sat back with a satisfied smile. Date or not, this whole day was turning out really well!

They flew for a while longer, then Sheppard took the controls again.

"Hungry?" he said, with a grin in Rodney's direction. "Oh, what am I saying? Stupid question. This is Rodney McKay I'm talking to, after all. You're always hungry."

"You brought lunch?" Rodney asked, surprised. He hadn't imagined this would be an all day thing.

"Of course I brought lunch. What kind of a cheap date do you think I am?" Sheppard asked, and Rodney flushed wildly again and examined his fingernails intently. So maybe this was a date? Or was Sheppard just using a figure of speech? Damn it, why was he always so useless at interpreting these complicated social situations?

"Hold on," Sheppard said, and next thing Rodney knew they were flying down—fast, too fast, so fast he was sure they would hit the water...and then they did hit the water.

"John! What the hell do you think—?!" Rodney began, but Sheppard just grinned at him.

"It's okay, Rodney. I thought we'd have lunch with a view that's all," he said, as the jumper started powering down under the surface of the ocean.

"Last time I did this, I nearly died," Rodney reminded him.

"And this time it'll be fine," Sheppard said calmly. "We've tested it, remember? The jumper works just as well as a submersible as it does in the air. And this area is shallow; I've checked

it out. Now, just watch...."

He had a sly grin on his face as he drove the jumper down through the sunlit depths. He was right, the ocean bed wasn't very deep here and they soon settled on the bottom, right in front of a magnificent coral reef, teeming with large, brightly-colored fish in all shapes and sizes, which were magnificently lit by the jumper's lights.

"Oh, my God," Rodney breathed. "This is like...our own personal aquarium or something."

"Isn't it?" Sheppard grinned, unbuckling his belt and going to the back of the jumper. He returned with a basket which he placed on the console between them. "Help yourself," he gestured to Rodney.

Rodney reached into the basket and found an array of some of his favorite foods. He glanced at Sheppard suspiciously. Maybe the other Rodney was right—maybe he was being courted. It was so hard to tell. And if he was—how did he feel about that? This was all so incredibly weird. Sheppard was giving nothing away. He just smiled back innocently at Rodney and Rodney was reminded again of what his counterpart had said about him not making a move until Rodney was ready. That relaxed him a little. He wasn't ready—not yet, and he had no idea whether he ever would be, but in the meantime, he had to admit that it was pretty nice to have someone take some kind of a romantic interest in him. Usually, it was always him doing the chasing, and mostly being knocked back—and he kind of liked the idea of being courted, if that was what was going on here.

The view was fantastic, and Rodney watched, mesmerized, as they ate. Sheppard made conversation, and Rodney found himself responding in kind, and enjoying himself, and the time went all too quickly. Dating—if that's what this was—had never been so easy as far as Rodney was concerned. Usually his dates were disasters of epic proportions, during which he said or did something so hopelessly inept or socially awkward that he scared off his potential partner forever. This was different, though—he wasn't sure why. Maybe because he wasn't sure whether it was a date or not, or maybe because he was with John. Rodney didn't know. He just knew that it was good, and that got him to thinking that maybe being gay wasn't such a big deal, after all. Okay, so it was surprising, but he thought maybe he could get over the shock if it meant that life was this good and he felt this...he wasn't sure what the word was...special? Liked? Happy?

By the time they returned to the city, later that afternoon, Rodney actually found himself humming. He'd even had a nap in the jumper while John had flown them around after lunch, and he was feeling better than he had in days—rested and content, and less edgy and bad-tempered. John walked him back to his quarters and they stood there for a moment. Rodney wondered whether this was where something was supposed to happen and he fidgeted nervously, but John just grinned at him and squeezed his shoulder.

"I hope you enjoyed today," he said.

"Yes...I did...very much," Rodney babbled. "Thank you for...you know...lunch...and...all those fish...and...whatnot." He flushed and gazed at his feet to avoid the colonel's amused gaze.

Oh, God! Date or not, he was crap at it, whatever it was.

"It was cool. We must do it again sometime," John told him.

"Really?" Rodney glanced up, his stomach doing a nervous flip. So, there was a chance of a second date, then? He hadn't just blown it with his amazingly useless attempt at thanking the other man? He never usually got as far as a second date with anyone so he had no idea how to respond.

"Sure," John said easily.

Rodney stared at him for a moment, and John stared back at him, his eyes fixed on Rodney's bruised lip. Rodney wondered if he was going to kiss him, and he had absolutely no idea how he felt about that happening, but instead John reached out a finger and touched the cut.

"You should get Carson to look at that," he murmured.

"It's fine," Rodney said softly, leaning into John ever so slightly.

They stood there for a moment, and then John let out a sigh, and regretfully drew back.

"Okay. Well, then. See you, Rodney," he said.

"Yes. Fine. And, um...thanks again, John," Rodney replied. It was only when he was back in his room that he realized he'd not only started calling the other man 'John,' but he'd started thinking of him that way, too. Somehow, slowly but surely, and he wasn't even sure when it had happened, John had crept past his defenses and wormed his way past all the prickly barriers he put up. Rodney knew it was dangerous, and he felt incredibly vulnerable, but at the same time he couldn't help himself—he had started to trust John, and he had never trusted anyone in his life before.

\* \* \*

The next few days in the lab were a total joy for Rodney McKay. He didn't know why he'd ever had such a problem with his counterpart. At last, finally, he had someone in the lab who worked at the same speed as he did, who understood everything he was trying to do, and who could follow him into even the most complicated areas of scientific discovery—and it was fantastic! They talked non-stop, covering every topic under the sun, each of them

filling in tiny gaps in the other's knowledge, sharing ideas and plans and comparing notes on various projects while they worked on the QDD. It was the most intellectual stimulation Rodney had had in a long time, and he no longer noticed or cared about any of the things about Rodney Sheppard that had previously annoyed him so much.

Within two days, they had the crystals working, and ready for a test run the following day.

Rodney Sheppard was running madly around the lab fixing up some cabling, while Radek and Rodney McKay worked on trying to focus the imaging beam so that they could locate the correct universe. Rodney had sent everyone else away because, quite simply, none of them were bright enough to follow what they were doing and he didn't want anyone getting in the way.

"Please don't send us to the wrong place," the other Rodney was saying, donut in one hand, cabling in the other, a manic grin on his face. "You know, no offense, but it's taken us weeks to get used to you guys. I don't want to have to start all over again in another freaky universe."

"No, no, no," Rodney replied with an answering grin as he tapped out some algorithms. "We'll make sure it's the right one. Now, we have some power going here. All we have to do is retrieve the memory core so we'll be able to trace the exact coordinates of your universe." He punched in some numbers happily, and a second later, something flashed in the faded taped off area on the floor in front of them.

"What was that?" Radek asked excitably.

"Some kind of window...not sure..." Rodney said, trying the code again. "Dammit...it looks like the only way of doing a memory trace is to actually open up windows to various other universes and see if the coordinates match. Hmm, that's a lot more laborious than I thought it would be."

Rodney Sheppard came and looked over his shoulder, donut still in mouth. "Mmm," he said. "Shunn boky if voiweeno."

"In English, please, Rodney," Rodney said briskly.

The other Rodney removed his donut with an apologetic giggle. "Sorry. I said, should be okay, although we might like to avoid going near the windows when they're open, just to be on the safe side." He pointed to the taped off area. "You're not activating the beam so you won't bring anyone through, just opening up various windows to different universes. When you get to the right one, these logarithms should line up," he pointed at the display on Rodney's laptop, "and then...then, my friends, me and my husband will be practically home." He put a hand on Rodney's shoulder and one on Radek's shoulder and beamed at them both enthusiastically.

"But there are hundreds of windows in this section of the QDD! It could take days!" Rodney protested.

"Ah, well. We've been here weeks already. Who cares about a few more days?" The other Rodney shrugged. "Besides, much as we want to go home, we've kind of become fond of you guys, so we're not in any rush." He gave them both another wide grin.

Rodney grinned back at him, wondering why he'd ever found him so annoying. He was, as John had said, a really nice guy.

They worked solidly for the next couple of hours until Rodney was cross-eyed from checking out the various different windows. Each time he opened one up, there was a shimmer of light in the taped-off area of the floor, and they had the eerie sensation of looking into a void. Sometimes Rodney swore he could see shadows moving in the window, just out of his line of vision, and occasionally they all heard noises—just little things; the sound of laughter, the crash of something smashing on the floor that made them all jump, the strained tones of an argument—they couldn't make out what was being said, but they could hear raised, angry voices. It was actually rather sinister, and the whole thing was starting to creep Rodney out. He took a break, handing the controls over to Radek, and went to pour himself some coffee, examining some earlier calculations on his laptop while he sipped.

The other Rodney was still laying out the cabling, trying to work on an interface with the housing that would be strong enough to carry the huge amount of power required to send them home. Rodney vaguely overheard his counterpart say something to Radek about testing the cabling by setting up an experimental beam, just for a couple of seconds, and then Rodney saw a flicker of light and the other Rodney said something in an excited voice and got up and ran across the room...and then there was a sudden flash of light from the QDD, accompanied by a loud wailing sound, followed by a startled gasp from Radek's direction. Rodney looked up sharply—and met Radek's shocked eyes staring back at him. There was no sign of Rodney Sheppard, though—he seemed to have disappeared completely.

"Radek?" Rodney pushed his chair back, his heart pounding in his chest.

"He just.... There was a power surge and he just..." Radek said, trembling slightly as he pointed at the open window in front of them.

"Radek!" Rodney said in a disbelieving tone. "You're not telling me...? But there was no beam!" he shouted. "Even with a window open, it's not possible to go anywhere without the beam!"

"I'm sorry. He told me to set up a test beam. It was only open for a second. I had it contained, but there was the power surge and it broke out of the containment field and he just fell right into it and disappeared," Radek whispered.

"Can we get him back?" Rodney asked, rushing over.

"I...I don't know. I could try activating the beam again and see if it will hold. He said he'd almost finished with the cabling," Radek said desperately.

Rodney ran over to the QDD, shoved Radek out of the way, punched in the activation code and turned on the beam. There was a loud noise and a burst of light, but nobody materialized.

"He isn't in the target area anymore!" Rodney yelled at Radek. "Why doesn't he get back in there?"

"I do not know," Radek said ominously. "Maybe he has been injured?"

Rodney had only a split second to make his decision. "I'm going through," he said grimly.

"What?" Radek was aghast. "Rodney, the beam itself might have injured him. If you go through, then the same thing might happen to you! Rodney, we do not even know if he's still alive!"

"I'm going through," Rodney said again, in a determined voice. "Radek, we mustn't overload the crystals. It took us weeks to get them working. Once I'm through, I want you to turn off the beam and give them time to recharge. Thirty minutes should do it. Then turn on the beam again. I'll try and be in position with Dr. Sheppard at that exact same time."

"And if that doesn't work?" Radek asked, his eyes wide with worry.

"Then get the colonel and general down here," Rodney said grimly. "Brief them on the situation and let them decide what to do next."

"Rodney, I still think it would be better if we shut it down and you waited—" Radek

began.

"No. I'm not leaving him there," Rodney said flatly. "I already screwed up his life once. I'm not doing it again. Just make sure you keep the window between these two universes open, whatever you do. If you close it, then you might never find this one again and we'll be lost there forever. Activate the beam every thirty minutes, but don't keep it on for more than two minutes at a time."

With that, he ran towards the taped-off area, took a deep breath and threw himself into the path of the beam.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard was in the practice room, sparring with his counterpart. He'd learned some good moves from the other man and they each enjoyed sparring with someone whose ability so closely matched his own. John flicked his sticks and grinned, advancing on the general. The other man grinned back, his teeth flashing, and he did a perfect little flick of his sticks in response. John feinted forwards, and the general lunged sideways. John raised his sticks, seeing a slight gap in the other man's defenses and he moved in to take advantage of it...when suddenly the general sank to his knees and let out a blood-curdling howl, clutching at his chest.

"General?" John threw his sticks down and ran over to him.

The other man's face was a picture of agony. His head was flung back and he was gazing sightlessly at the ceiling, veins bulging in his neck, his mouth open in a silent roar.

"General?" John gripped the other man's shoulders urgently.

"Rodney," the general whispered, in a hoarse, anguished tone. "Oh, God...oh, no.... Rodney!" He sank back onto the floor, writhing in pain.

John tapped his radio urgently. "Medical emergency! Carson, I need you in the practice room—now!" he called, and then he turned his attention back to the general. "General, what is it? Are you injured?" John ripped open the other man's shirt, but there was no sign of any injury. He was still clutching his chest, though, and rolling around on the practice mat.

Carson arrived a few seconds later, and ran straight over to them. He pushed John out of the way and knelt down beside the general.

"What is it? Is it his heart?" John asked anxiously. "He was fine one minute and then he just went down. It was like he'd been shot."

"It's not his heart," Carson said, looking up grimly. "That sounds fine—a bit fast, but then he's in a lot of pain."

"Then what is it?" John demanded, gazing at the helplessly contorted face that looked so much like his own.

"To be honest, I have no idea," Carson told him. "We'll get him back to the infirmary and run some tests."

"No!" the general said, trying to roll over and stagger to his feet.

John knelt down beside him and pushed him back. "You're in no shape to go anywhere," he told his counterpart.

"No...don't understand..." the general hissed, his face red, his eyes bulging from pain. He

grabbed hold of John's wrist urgently. "It's Rodney...he's been badly hurt.... Can feel it through the lifebond...."

"Wait a minute," Carson said, shaking his head. "You're saying that you're experiencing Rodney's injury—that this is his pain?"

"Yes," the general whispered hoarsely. "Help him, John. Oh, God." He banged his head back on the floor. "Oh, shit...he's dying. Help him!" He curled into a ball and gave a low, animalistic moan that sent shivers up John's spine.

"Do what you can for him," he told Carson, and then he sprinted out of the door and ran down the hallways to the lab. He burst through the door, to find Radek standing by the QDD, trembling, completely alone.

"Radek?" he demanded, coming to a skidding halt by the QDD. "Where are they? Where did they go?"

"There was an accident," Radek whispered. "Rodney Sheppard...he fell into the beam from the QDD when we were testing it. He went through the window into another universe...." He nodded towards the taped-off area of the room and John saw an eerie gap in the fabric of their reality, full of shadows, and just the hint of sound. "Our Rodney went after him. He told me...he told me to turn off the beam to conserve energy, but to keep the window open so we don't lose contact with the universe they are in. I am to bring the beam on again every thirty minutes and he will try and get himself and the other Rodney into position to be brought back."

"Rodney Sheppard is badly hurt. He's in urgent need of medical treatment," John told him. "We have to open that beam up again now."

"I cannot!" Radek protested. "The crystals will burn out. They need thirty minutes to recharge."

"Thirty minutes might be too late!" John yelled.

"Rodney gave me very specific instructions. If we burn out the crystals, we might not be able to get either of them back," Radek told him in a frightened voice. John stared at him.

"Damn it!" he roared at last, thumping his fist down on the lab table. Radek shrank back against the QDD. "Okay...all right. Keep that damn window open whatever you do. I'm going to get a team together and if they don't come straight back through when you can activate that beam again, then I'm going in to get them," John growled.

He raced back to the infirmary, to find Carson hooking his counterpart up to a monitor.

"Have you been able to help him?" he asked.

Carson shook his head and spread his arms helplessly. "There's nothing wrong with him,

Colonel. I've given him some pain meds, but they aren't helping at all. All I can think of is to give him a sedative and knock him out completely."

"No!" the general rasped, reaching out and clutching at John's arm. "If you do that, I won't be able to help Rodney. I'm all that's keeping him alive right now."

"How d'you work that out?" Carson said, coming to stand beside the general, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"He's been badly injured. I'm giving him my own strength. If you sedate me, I won't be able to help him and he'll die," the general hissed, still clutching his chest. "John...where is he?" he asked, gazing at John in despair. "Why didn't you bring him here for Carson to treat? He's in so much pain right now."

"He's not here, General," John told him. "There was an accident with the QDD. Our own Rodney went in after him, so he's got someone there with him, looking after him. I'm going to assemble a team and we'll go in and get them."

"Go," the general rasped. "Bring them home, John. Bring them both back for us."

"I will," John said softly. "I promise."

End of Part Ten

### Part Eleven: Three Rodneys by Xanthe

Ten minutes later, John returned to the lab with Ronon, Teyla and Major Lorne in tow, all of them armed to the teeth.

"Do we have any idea what's facing us in that universe?" he asked Radek.

The scientist shook his head. "No, but once I activate the beam, you should be able to communicate with Rodney via the radio before going in. You'll have to be quick. I can only keep the beam open for a couple of minutes before the crystals burn out."

"A couple of minutes is long enough to find out what's going on," John said grimly. "Is it time yet?"

Radek glanced at his watch and then nodded, and his fingers moved fast over the QDD interface. The beam flashed into life and John held his breath, his attention fixed on the window into the other universe in the taped-off area of the room, but nobody materialized.

"There's nobody there," Radek said, his face pale.

"Dammit!" John reached up and touched his radio. "Rodney, are you there?" he shouted.

"John? Oh, thank God," came back Rodney's low, breathy whisper. "Rodney Sheppard has been shot."

"I know. We've activated the beam. Get him back into the window and we can—"

"I can't do that," Rodney's voice hissed.

"Why not?"

"Because there are four Genii standing here with their guns on us both right now,"

Rodney said.

"Who is that? Who are you talking to?" a voice said in the background.

"Myself! Look, I told you, he's dying. He needs a doctor. Get Carson up here now!"

"Nobody is going anywhere until Commander Kolya gets back," the voice replied. "But you were talking to someone. Is this an invasion? You're not Dr. McKay—who are you?"

"I've told you who I am! Now, are you going to help him or not?"

"Be quiet...."

There was a sickening crunch, a muffled scream, and then the radio went dead.

"Rodney!" John listened for another second, but there was no reply. "Right, we're going in," he told his team. "There are four armed Genii on the other side of this window, but we have the advantage of surprise. Radek, shut the beam down when we're through and start it up again at thirty minute intervals after that," he ordered. "Let's get moving."

John ran up to the window, his team behind him, and threw himself straight into the path of the beam. He had a brief moment of disorientation as he found himself standing in the same lab he'd just left—only without Radek and the QDD behind him. To his right, he could see Rodney Sheppard, lying on the floor in a pool of blood, with a gaping wound to his chest. His own Rodney was crouching beside him, one arm clutched over his ribs, a trickle of blood running from a gash on the side of his face. John didn't have time to take in any more than that, though, because he saw the Genii soldiers turning, mouths gaping as he seemed to appear from nowhere. John fired on them before they knew what had hit them, and seconds later the others fell as Ronon, Teyla and Lorne joined in the fight. Only when the Genii had been dispatched did John have the chance to look around properly.

The lab was virtually identical to the one he'd just left, only it was in a much worse state of repair. It looked untidy and uncared for.

"John?" a voice said tremulously from the corner of the room, and John spun around to see

a thin figure cowering away from the gunfire.

"Oh, shit," he whispered. The man was another version of Rodney—only this Rodney was a pale, frail-looking creature. His clothes hung off him and he had a haunted look in his blue eyes that sent shivers down John's spine.

"He's not your John, idiot," his own Rodney said behind him. "He's mine."

John turned back and strode over to where his Rodney was crouched beside Dr. Sheppard.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Bad. We need to get Carson up here," Rodney said.

"Are you okay?" John's eyes raked over Rodney's cut face and the awkward way he was holding himself.

"I'm fine. From what I can figure out, we're in a universe where the Genii seized the city during that big storm last year. Kolya is in charge here. He was on the mainland when we came through, but they've called him back. They shot Rodney Sheppard because he took them by surprise when he suddenly appeared in here. It won't be long before Kolya gets back and then we're really in trouble."

"Radek will open up that beam again in thirty minutes," John told him.

"Please...you can't just leave. You have to help us," the new Rodney said.

John took a deep breath. Having two Rodneys around was freaky, but three was positively insane. He stood up and turned to the other man.

"Does Carson Beckett exist in this universe?" he demanded. The new Rodney nodded.

"Good. Then get him up here," he ordered.

"I already radioed for him," new Rodney said. "We'll help your friend, but you must help us in return." He glanced at Rodney Sheppard's still form, a puzzled expression on his face. "I'm guessing this is some kind of inter-dimensional thing, and I'm not saying that normally I wouldn't be jumping up and down in excitement about this, but right now all I'm thinking is that this is too good an opportunity to miss. You must help us." He reached out a hand and grabbed John's arm, and John noticed the livid bruises on his wrists—he could make out actual fingerprints imprinted on the scientist's flesh.

"We will if we can," John told him grimly, wondering what the hell was going on in this reality. "Fill me in."

"The Genii control the city, but they don't have the gene so they can't work anything. We haven't told them it's possible to inject the gene," new Rodney said quickly. "So they've had to keep us here to work things for them. They don't understand the Ancient technology, in

any case, so all the scientists are useful to them. They've got the military locked up."

"Do you know where?" John asked.

"Oh, yes. I know where," new Rodney replied, in a weary tone.

"How far? Can we mount a rescue mission in 25 minutes?" John demanded.

"It's not far—and they won't be expecting anything, so it's worth a try," new Rodney said hopefully, his blue eyes pleading with John.

John didn't have it in him to refuse this thin-faced, bruised, clearly maltreated version of someone he was so much in love with.

At that moment, Carson ran into the lab...and skidded to a halt when he saw John.

"Major? Oh, thank God! How did you get free?" he asked.

John shook his head. "I'm not Major Sheppard. It's a long story, Carson—but there's a man over there who needs your help," he said, nodding at the two Rodneys.

Carson took in the pool of blood and ran straight over to Rodney Sheppard, and then stared from one Rodney to the other...to the other.

"No time to explain!" John's Rodney said briskly. "He's bleeding to death here!"

Carson immediately set to work, but from the grim set of his lips, John guessed the news wasn't good.

"Is he going to be okay?" John's Rodney demanded as Carson worked.

"I have no idea how he's even alive," Carson muttered. "He shouldn't be. These injuries...." He shook his head.

"Do something!" John's Rodney said helplessly.

"I'll try, son, but he's in a bad way," Carson told him. "I need to get him to the infirmary."

"No," John butted in. "He stays here. We have to go back through a window into another dimension in just under thirty minutes and our Carson will take care of him from there. Just keep him alive for that long, Doc."

Carson gave a grim nod and John turned back to the new Rodney.

"All right. Take us to where they're holding Major Sheppard," he commanded, beckoning his team to accompany him. His own Rodney got to his feet. "You stay here," John ordered.

"No," John's Rodney said, his jaw jutting out obstinately. "I can't help Carson. I'll be more use with you. You're going to need all the help you can get if you're going to go through with this insane plan."

"We don't have time to argue about this!" John growled.

"Then you'll have to let me come with you, won't you?" his Rodney retorted, grabbing a gun from Teyla and falling into line behind John.

John saw it was pointless to argue and gave in and they all set off behind new Rodney.

They made it down to the lower reaches of the city without being seen, then new Rodney paused, and beckoned them to hunker down across the hallway from a room. There were two Genii guards stationed outside.

"This is it?" John whispered to new Rodney. "You sure?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure," new Rodney said. "John tried to escape a couple of weeks after the Genii first took the city. Kolya found out about it and stopped it. Then he brought me down here that night and beat me up some in front of John, so he'd know what would happen if he tried to escape again," he whispered.

John winced. That sounded very like the kind of thing Kolya would do. Kolya had once tortured his own Rodney, and John had the sneaking suspicion that the Genii commander had enjoyed it a little too much.

"You're sure they're still here?" he asked. "They haven't been moved anywhere else? We don't have time to get this wrong."

"No." New Rodney shook his head. "That first time amused Kolya so much that he brings me down here most nights now just for fun. If I'm lucky, he just wants to slap me around a little to taunt John. If I'm unlucky.... Well, let's not get into that." His face was pale and taut as he said that, and John had a sudden inkling of what he meant and felt sick at the thought of it. He glanced at his own Rodney and saw that he'd heard it, too, and his blue eyes were wide with shock.

"He does that...in front of Major Sheppard?" John's Rodney asked, in a horrified whisper.

"I think that's the whole point," new Rodney replied, gazing at his own bruised wrists.

"John's locked up—he can't do anything. He just has to watch. Kolya told me that if I wasn't compliant and didn't give every indication of enjoying it, then he'd have John beaten—but John doesn't know that. He probably wonders why I don't put up more of a fight."

John felt a surge of ice-cold anger deep in his belly as he imagined how his counterpart in this universe must feel about that.

"Okay. How many guards are in there?" he asked, feeling the calm of cool resolve settle

around him. They were going to do this, dammit. There was no way they could leave these people here like this. This could have been them if circumstances had panned out just a little differently.

"Two on the door, six inside," new Rodney told him. "They have plenty more all over the city, though, so we have to stop them calling for backup."

"Okay. Here's what we do..." John said, turning back to his team.

A few seconds later, new Rodney walked along the hallway and went straight up to the guards on the door.

"I was told you were having problems with your communications in here," he said, gesturing with his head at the door.

The guards seemed confused, but they let him in, and when they were turning back, John's team made their move. They were fast and outnumbered the two on the door so they were able to dispatch them quickly and quietly. Then they stormed into the room. John just hoped that new Rodney had been able to talk his way into getting close enough to the comms units to disable them, but he didn't have time to check because next thing he knew, he was facing a barrage of gunfire. He ducked, feeling a sharp, burning pain in his arm, and then pivoted and returned fire in one quick move. He saw one of the Genii fall, and then Ronon was striding into the center of the room, gun blazing, and more Genii were going down. There was some frenzied fighting, but John's team was good, and the Genii were soon dispatched. Only then did John get a chance to take a good look around.

They were in a large room, with a big pen at one end surrounded by a forcefield. Inside, John could see a huddle of people with faces he recognized. One of them gave a shout and edged as close to the side of the pen as he could, and John found himself looking into his own face once again. Only this time the cheekbones were sunken and thin, there was a thick, dark beard on his new counterpart's chin, and he was staring into a pair of hollow, desperate eyes.

John tore himself away from his other self and ran over to new Rodney, who was standing by a console, fiddling with some wires.

"Are we safe?" John hissed at him.

"Yes. I disabled the system before they got a call out," new Rodney told him with a grin.

"Now...I just need to.... Done it."

The forcefield surrounding the pen winked off and John raised his gun and shot the door off its hinges. He was about to step forwards when he was nearly knocked off his feet as new Rodney raced past him and threw himself straight at the new John as he emerged from the pen.

John stopped short. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised, but somehow he was.

New John grabbed new Rodney in a tight embrace, then drew back, took hold of his face, and kissed him on the mouth.

John turned to glance at his own Rodney, who gave a deep sigh.

"Are we together in every damn universe?" Rodney muttered, rolling his eyes at the other John and Rodney.

"It's starting to look that way," John replied with a slight grin.

"Are you okay?" Rodney touched his arm and John glanced down, surprised to find that his shirt was stained red, and wet with blood.

"I'm fine," John said tersely, but there was an expression on his Rodney's face that he didn't think he'd ever seen before, and he was brought up short by it.

"You're not fine, dammit, you're injured. Hold on." Rodney reached into John's vest pocket and fished out a field dressing, then took hold of John's arm and tied the fabric hard around the wound to stem the tide of blood. John gazed at him as he worked; Rodney wouldn't look at him, but there was something about the scientist's expression and obvious concern for him that made John's heart do a little leap of hope. Rodney finished tying the makeshift bandage and glanced up, met John's questioning gaze and flushed—then hopped away from him as if he'd been caught doing something illegal.

"I'm sorry," John heard new Rodney whisper to new John. "All those times...he said he'd hurt you if I didn't..."

"I know. I guessed that much." New John's hands caressed the sides of his Rodney's face. "Where is he? I'm going to kill him with my bare hands."

"He's on his way back from the mainland," John told them, throwing his new counterpart a gun. "Get your people armed as best you can." He pointed at the weapons belonging to the fallen Genii. "We don't have much time."

They ran back to the lab, and John was relieved to find that Rodney Sheppard was at least still alive. He had no idea how he would have begun to tell the general that his husband was dead. It just couldn't happen.

"How's he doing?" Rodney asked, running over to Carson.

"He's holding on by a thread. To be honest, I have no idea how he's still alive, but he is," Carson said. "I've given him some medication and basic triage. I've made a note of exactly what I've given him and how I've treated him so your Carson will know when you get him back." He handed the note to Rodney.

"How much time do we have?" John demanded, hearing a disturbance out in the hallway which could only mean one thing—Kolya was here.

"Four minutes," Rodney told him, glancing at his watch.

"Then get the other Rodney into the target area ready for the beam. I'm going to help these guys fight it out until the last possible second," John told him.

Rodney nodded, and between them, he and Carson dragged Rodney Sheppard into the window between the two universes. Then Carson stood up and hesitated for a moment. John saw a grim look settle on the doctor's face, and then he grabbed a Genii gun from one of the fallen guards and joined the rest of them, ready to fight to free their city.

A second later, Kolya burst through the door. He had a contingent of armed Genii with him, but the Atlanteans had the element of surprise on their side. Kolya gave an angry growl when he saw the released prisoners, but his eyes widened, startled, when he took in the fact that there were two Johns fighting him.

Not that John got much of a look at his enemy. His counterpart had been spoiling for this fight for too long, and had endured too much at Kolya's hands, and his anger was white hot; John could almost feel it boiling out of him. He was in poor physical condition—he was reed thin and had clearly been badly treated in captivity—but his rage was sustaining him as he threw himself on Kolya.

Ronon was an asset of and by himself, taking out several of the Genii in one go with his blaster, and John's heart did a flip as he caught sight of Aiden Ford, fighting side by side with Major Sheppard. At least one good thing had come out of the events in this universe.

The fight was scrappy and uneven, but the Atlanteans had the fire of revenge burning in their bellies and eventually the Genii started to drop back. John turned to see Major Sheppard standing over Kolya, his hands around the other man's throat, literally squeezing the life out of him. Then it was done, and he dropped Kolya's corpse to the ground and stood up, a wild, blood-hungry look in his eyes, seeking out someone else to fight.

"We have to go," John told him, grabbing the major by the arm and leading him away from the fray. "Good luck, not that I think you'll need it. You've pretty much got them beat."

"I have no idea where you came from or who you are, except...well, except for the obvious fact that you appear to be me," Major Sheppard told him. "But thank you."

"You're welcome," John told him. "Tell me, before we go...are you and he married?" He nodded his head in new Rodney's direction. The scientist was busy collecting Genii weapons from the fallen enemy and handing them out to any Atlantean that had run out of ammunition.

"Not yet," new John grinned. "But once we kick these Genii out of the city, I plan on taking care of that."

"And you two being in a relationship—that's not a problem here?" John asked.

"No," the other John said blankly. "What kind of problem?"

"Nothing," John sighed. He noticed a distinct lack of any kind of leashes, collars or tattoos, so he guessed this wasn't that kind of universe, but there had been something he'd recognized all too well in that fierce embrace this John had given his Rodney back when they'd released him from that pen.

"John!" his own Rodney said frantically, beckoning him over.

John nodded, and saw a white beam opening up in the window. He called his team together and they ran back towards the window between the universes.

New Rodney ran up, grabbed his hand and shook it enthusiastically. "Thank you!" he beamed ecstatically. "I mean, I have absolutely no idea where you came from, or what the hell you were doing here, but thank you!"

John grinned back at him. "My pleasure, Rodney," he said, and then he gave the scientist a little salute and ran backwards into the beam.

\* \* \*

Carson was waiting with a full medical team on the other side and he whisked Rodney Sheppard away for immediate surgery. John trailed back to the infirmary after them, Rodney by his side.

"What's the general doing here?" Rodney asked when they got there. The general was lying on his side, eyes closed, arms wrapped around his own body. "I wondered why he wasn't with you, but what's wrong with him?"

"He's what's been keeping Rodney Sheppard alive," John told him grimly. "I'm not sure how it works, but it's something to do with that lifebond thing they keep talking about."

"Are you talking about the Kaeira?" Rodney wrinkled up his forehead. "If that's the case, shouldn't he have a big wound on his chest right now, if they're doing that weird sharing thing?"

"He didn't mention Kaeira, just said it was the lifebond. I don't think he's healing Rodney exactly. It seemed to be more that he was giving him some of his energy or something. Kind

of like when the Wraith suck life from people, only the exact opposite, I suppose—he was giving it back?" John floundered, realizing he knew nothing at all about this lifebond, but curious about it all the same, and how, if at all, it related to the Kaeira.

One of the other doctors on Carson's team came up to them and sat John down on one of the beds. He removed the makeshift bandage Rodney had tied around John's arm and began examining the wound.

"How is he?" Rodney asked, peering at the wound over the doctor's shoulder. "Is it bad? It looks kind of messy. It'll need stitches."

"He's the doctor, Rodney—let him work," John told him.

Rodney moved away reluctantly. "I suppose I should, you know, get back and make sure Radek hasn't ruined weeks of work on those damn crystals," he said.

"Not so fast, Rodney," John told him, placing a hand on his arm as he made to leave. "Doc, when you've finished with me, Rodney here has a couple of either badly bruised or possibly broken ribs."

"I do?" Rodney looked startled.

"Yes, you do," John told him. "You've been holding yourself strangely ever since that Genii guard thumped you for talking to me on the radio. You also need to get that cut on your face cleaned up."

"Man, how could I have forgotten about that?" Rodney asked, in a tone of utter wonderment at his own lack of hypochondria. John snorted. Rodney sat down beside him on the bed with a sigh. "Do you think Dr. Sheppard is going to make it?" he asked John quietly.

John turned his head, surprised by the anxiety in Rodney's voice, and found that those blue eyes were nearer than he'd been expecting, and that Rodney was pressed a little closer than John had realized. He knew just how much Rodney hated it when people were injured or killed—he'd seen the scientist deal with that enough times to know how much it devastated him whenever it happened—but Rodney's eyes were now oddly vulnerable, in a naked way that John wasn't sure he'd ever seen before. He suddenly realized that he was only seeing that now because Rodney had started letting his guard down around him, and John felt an overwhelming urge to put his arm around the scientist and kiss him. He resisted it. He was sure that Rodney was learning to trust him, was maybe even starting to have some feelings towards him, but he'd played a slow game so far and didn't want to scare the other man away irrevocably by moving too fast.

"I don't know," John replied softly. "But he's got the best MD in two galaxies operating on him, and he's got him on his side." He nodded at the still form of the general in the next bed over. "So I'd say he has a better chance than most."

When the doctor had finished with John, he moved onto Rodney. He wanted to examine Rodney's ribs and asked him to remove his shirt and Rodney flushed.

"Don't you think an infirmary should have more privacy?" he asked, gazing around the bare and somewhat makeshift room.

John rolled his eyes, amused. "There's only us here, Rodney," he pointed out.

Rodney thought about it for a moment, and then removed his shirt and stood there, arms semi-crossed over his chest, looking profoundly awkward.

John knew he shouldn't, but the truth was he liked getting a glimpse of any Rodney flesh that was on view and he made the most of the opportunity to gaze at the other man's bare chest. He wondered why the hell Rodney was always so paranoid about people catching a glimpse of him in any state of undress; he had a nice chest, with some good definition, and the flesh was stretched tautly over his broad shoulders in a way that John found very appealing. John wished he could get Rodney to be as happy and confident in his own skin as his counterpart was. Rodney was even looking in pretty good shape; presumably the exercise routines they'd been doing had tightened him up a little. John was right, though—there was a massive, dark, ugly bruise on his ribs, which the doctor examined carefully, before coming to the conclusion that they weren't broken.

Elizabeth arrived a few seconds later and John took her to one side so he could give her a proper briefing.

"The Genii?" She shook her head after he'd finished. "That all happened well over a year ago—those poor people, to have been held in captivity for that long."

"They were in a pretty bad way," John agreed, nodding, remembering how thin his own counterpart had been and the bruises on the other Rodney's wrists. It didn't take a great deal of imagination to figure out how he'd come by them, or who'd put them there.

"John, I wish Rodney had never found that damn QDD," she hissed, shaking her head. "It's been nothing but trouble."

"On the other hand, if he hadn't, we wouldn't have gone through and rescued our other selves from the Genii," John told her with a shrug. "So maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. And having the general and Dr. Sheppard around in our universe has certainly been a learning experience if nothing else!" He grinned at her and she grinned back.

"That's a diplomatic way of putting it," she replied. "But seeing as we're on that subject ...this other John and Rodney you found—you say that they were, uh, involved, too?" She put her hand up to touch her neck, clearly embarrassed by the topic.

"Yeah," John sighed. "It's starting to become a theme. Wherever we go, we just end up bumping into versions of ourselves kissing each other's brains out."

"And how do you feel about that?" Elizabeth asked him. He gazed at her for a moment. "Ever think the universe is trying to tell you something?" she asked, a little grin tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You could say that," he agreed, grinning back. He found his gaze flickering over her shoulder towards Rodney, who was complaining vociferously about how much it hurt having the wound on his face cleaned.

"John?" The questioning tone in her voice brought him back to her and he found her gaze fixed searchingly on him. "Seriously?" she said.

"Yeah. Seriously," he replied, tensing his shoulders as he gauged her reaction, but she just nodded thoughtfully, not looking remotely shocked or outraged. "The only thing that's ever held me back was how damn hard it is for something like that to work in this universe. These other people we've encountered don't seem to have the same issues we do."

"I suppose I should be surprised, but I'm not—maybe as a result of having had the general and his husband around for the past few weeks. Where's Rodney on all this?" she asked him softly.

"He's not quite there yet," John told her. "But I'm working on it."

She gave a little laugh. "Well, good luck with that. But, John...I want you to know one thing: for as long as I'm the leader of this expedition, I will fight tooth and nail to keep you as my military chief. You have my full support and you always will. The small matter of who you fall in love with isn't going to change that."

He gave her a broad, relieved smile, and then his gaze flickered over to Rodney again, who was now jerking his head away from the doctor and complaining loudly about his lack of bedside manner.

"But you weren't going to let it hold you back in any case, were you?" Elizabeth said softly.

"What?" He turned back to her. "No, not really," he said, shaking his head. "Having the general around made it easier. He said you had to be who you are and go after what you want. Well, I've figured both those things out and I'm following that advice to the letter. If that means I screw up my career, then I'll handle it. At least I'll be living life on my own terms and not anyone else's."

"Well, I'm impressed." Elizabeth rocked back on her heels and surveyed him intently. "John, you've changed. I've never known you talk like this before—or look so serious about something before."

"Well, I never realized how much I wanted this before," he told her with a wry smile.

"Then go for it," she told him calmly, patting him on the arm. "I mean it, John. Life's too short. If you've found someone you think you can love for the rest of your life, then you

have to go for it, even if it is...you know...Rodney."

They both gazed at the scientist, who was now flapping his hands at the doctor and threatening to sue him for medical malpractice.

"Yeah," John sighed ruefully. "That over there is the love of my life," and they both burst out laughing. She patted his arm again and then left. John continued to gaze at Rodney, shaking his head. "Just have to wait for him to figure that out, too," he sighed to himself.

\* \* \*

Rodney McKay spent a sleepless night fretting about a myriad of different things. First and foremost, he was worried about Rodney Sheppard. Carson had finished operating on his counterpart sometime in the early hours of the morning, but when he'd emerged, he'd just spread his arms helplessly, said he'd done his best and that they'd have to wait and see. Then there was the other universe they'd just visited. Every time he closed his eyes, Rodney saw that other Rodney, with those bruises on his wrists, telling them about how Kolya raped him in front of his Sheppard—and then there was the obvious love between that Rodney and his Major Sheppard. Rodney had never been someone who believed in destiny, but he was now coming to the distinct conclusion that destiny was ganging up on him, forcing him to open his eyes to a truth about himself that he'd been denying for a very long time. Which brought him onto John....

Rodney wasn't sure what it was he'd felt when he'd realized John had been injured, but he recalled a sensation of actual physical pain inside his chest. It had only been momentary, but his reaction had taken him totally by surprise. It was one thing to fantasize about having sex with the colonel, but now he knew that something much deeper was involved and that scared him.

It was all very well admitting the depth of his emotions to himself, though, in the privacy of his own room, but another to allow them to be publicly on display. Rodney was an extremely private person—he couldn't imagine being as open and comfortable with his feelings for the colonel as either of the two counterparts he'd met, and he envied them their easy kisses and open displays of affection. Rodney shriveled up inside at the thought of anyone on Atlantis knowing he was head over heels in love with Colonel Sheppard. He was sure they'd laugh at him, take him less seriously, maybe even be disgusted by such a relationship—and he didn't think he could bear that. It was hard enough coming to terms with the idea that he might be gay, without also outing himself as well.

Rodney finally gave up trying to sleep and got up and went to the infirmary. He found a bleary-eyed Carson sitting in his office, gazing at a computer screen.

"So, how is he?" Rodney asked, leaning against the doorway.

"Well, he's still with us. He's sleeping now. The next few hours will be critical," Carson said.

"Can I see him?" Rodney asked quietly. Despite their differences, he had developed a strong bond with the other Rodney, and it had devastated him to find his counterpart with that big hole in his chest, blood pouring from the wound.

"I don't see why not. I was just going to look in on him myself," Carson said, stretching. "He shouldn't really be alive. Those injuries should have killed him, but...." He shook his head. "Whatever it is the general was doing for him saved his life, kept him going until I was able to repair the damage. That other Carson did all the right things, too, so that helped. You know, it was weird reading that note you gave me; it was my own handwriting, and he'd done the exact same things I would have done in the circumstances. It's just so bloody spooky. But I don't need to tell you that, Rodney." Carson patted Rodney's arm absently as they walked towards the post-op. "You've been living with these guys for weeks now. You must be used to how spooky it is."

"Yeah. Kind of." Rodney gave a wry smile, thinking that Carson didn't know the half of it.

Carson opened the door to the post op and then gave a startled gasp. Rodney looked over his shoulder and snorted. Rodney Sheppard was lying there, pale-faced, attached to a dozen different monitors, and beside him, huddled awkwardly on the small bed, was the general, his arms clasped gently around the other Rodney's still, frail form.

"Do you normally allow spouses to climb into bed with each other after major surgery, Dr. Beckett?" Rodney enquired.

"No...I had no idea. He wasn't here when I last looked in. General?" Carson walked over to the bed to wake the general and then paused and glanced at the monitors, frowning.

The general raised his head and Rodney thought he looked as pale and wan as his husband. "Sorry, Doc," he muttered. "Is there a problem with me being here?"

"No," Carson said suddenly. Then he turned, walked purposefully to the door and called one of his staff. "Get me another bed in here," he ordered, before turning back. "We can make you more comfortable than this, General," he said, as the new bed was wheeled in and placed alongside the one containing Rodney Sheppard. "Here." He helped the general onto the new bed, where he was able to stretch out his long limbs more comfortably.

"Thanks, Doc," the general murmured, reaching out so that he was still able to hold his Rodney again, very gently, in his arms. "I just had this...need to be able to touch him."

"You must continue to do that," Carson said, taking a reading from the monitors, his fingers

scrambling excitedly over the keyboard. "He's.... This is remarkable. What time did you come in here?"

"I don't know, about 15 minutes ago," the general shrugged.

"That's when his readings started to improve. I don't know why, or how, whatever it is between the two of you works, but he's making the most amazing recovery. I've never seen anything like this before."

"It's the lifebond," the general said. "It was hurting when I wasn't physically in contact with him. It's much easier when I can actually feel him under my fingertips." He brushed his fingers gently over the skin on his Rodney's arm and it was such a tender gesture that Rodney found himself swallowing down a lump in his throat, and at that moment a warm hand came to rest upon his shoulder and he looked around to find John standing behind them.

"I just came to check up on Dr. Sheppard," John said softly. He didn't move his hand from Rodney's shoulder and Rodney couldn't stop himself from leaning back into the other man ever so slightly. He felt stupid doing it, and hoped nobody would notice; he found himself wishing that John would wrap his arm around his chest and pull him back against him, even though he knew that if he did, he'd probably push him away.

"So, does this mean we're going to be okay?" the general asked Carson.

"We?" Carson frowned, still checking the monitors.

"Well, if he dies, then I do, too," the general told him. "You did figure that out, right?"

"No, I had no idea," Carson replied. "Is this because of the lifebond thing you keep talking about?"

"Yeah. That's what it means to lifebond," the general said in a tired tone. "We got lifebonded about six months after we married. It was Rodney who first suggested it. I got myself badly injured one day, and he said he'd hated standing by, watching me suffer. He pointed out that if we were lifebonded, he could have helped me. You've pretty much seen how it works—my life energy was able to keep him alive despite the severity of his injuries."

"But if one of you dies, the other one dies, too, even if he's not injured," John said softly.

"Yeah." The general gave a wry smile. "But we figured we didn't either of us have much of a future if the other one was dead, so that was a price we were prepared to pay."

"I can't imagine loving someone so much that you'd want to give up your own life if they died," Rodney murmured, because until recently he couldn't imagine trusting anyone enough to allow himself to love them at all.

"I can," John said behind him, and that hand tightened around his shoulder.

Rodney was surprised by the heartfelt tone in John's voice and he wanted turn and look at him, but he didn't dare. Was John talking about him? His heart missed a beat. Was that what was going on here—or was John just talking in the abstract?

"What happens if you got divorced?" Carson asked, leaning over to examine Rodney Sheppard.

The general pulled a face. "Ah, well, the lifebond is exactly that—for life. So you have to think really carefully before making that kind of commitment. Rodney and I talked about it for weeks, but we were both really sure it was what we wanted. We could still get divorced, but we'll remain lifebonded until the day we die. And we will both die on the same day."

"And how does the Kaeira fit into that?" Rodney asked, intrigued. "Is it the same thing?"

"No." The general shook his head, and pressed a little kiss onto his Rodney's unconscious form. "The lifebond is always there—it just is. Kaeira is a healing energy that can pass back and forth along the lifebond. Without the lifebond, we wouldn't be able to use Kaeira. I don't have enough strength to use it now while the lifebond is draining so much out of me, but maybe when he's well enough, it'll help him get better more quickly."

"Can anyone perform this lifebond ritual?" Carson asked. "I'm trying to get my head around how it works from a medical point of view. It's not like anything I've ever encountered before."

"If you genuinely love someone and intend to spend the rest of your life with them, then, yes," the general replied with a shrug. "There are people in my universe who can help you perform the ritual, help you through it. The Teyla in our universe is an expert on it. She gave us a lot of advice, but we planned and performed it ourselves. One of the best nights of my life," the general added. Then he gave a weary sigh, clearly worn out by so much talking, and laid his head very gently on his Rodney's belly and closed his eyes.

"They need rest. I think we should leave," Carson said, ushering them out of the room and closing the door. "Not so fast, you two. Before you run off, I heard you sustained some injuries yesterday that one of my team took care of. If you don't mind, I'd like to just check you over myself, make sure you're both okay and the job was done to my satisfaction." He gave them a broad grin and gestured to them to his office. Once inside, he poured them each a cup of coffee before sitting down to check Rodney's cut face. "I gather you gave poor Dr. Kowalski a hard time yesterday, Rodney," he said, his fingers gently spidering over the wound.

"The man is a fumble-fingered numbskull," Rodney replied. "And, by the way, what you're doing right now? Ow."

"Oh, you know Rodney," John grinned. "He doesn't like being treated by any doctor except you, Carson. You should take it as a back-handed compliment whenever he harasses any of your team."

"Aye, I'll bear that in mind." Carson grinned. "Well, that looks fine." He took a look at Rodney's ribs and checked John over, and then they sat back and sipped on their coffee. "So, I hear you encountered yet another version of yourselves yesterday," Carson said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. It's starting to become a habit," John replied, grinning.

"And according to what I've heard, they were just as close as those two." Carson nodded his head in the direction of the post-op.

"Yes, all right, Carson. There are endless universes containing endless different versions of ourselves who are all endlessly kissing. It's very amusing. Ha-ha. Enough with the teasing," Rodney said stiffly.

"Och, I wasn't teasing you, Rodney," Carson replied, shaking his head. "I think you make a lovely couple—in any universe," he said.

"What?" Rodney stared at him.

"Aye, son," Carson said softly. "I've loved having the general and Dr. Sheppard around and they've had a big effect on the city as a whole. We do have a few same sex couples in Atlantis, you know, and having those two around has made them feel much more relaxed and open about their relationships. Kate says that it's really helped morale generally as well. Those two guys are very popular and people have enjoyed talking to them. They're very social, too—always holding little dinner parties and generally encouraging people to mix and be friendly. I didn't realize how reserved we are until they came along. They've really shaken us up and it's been a good thing all around. I'll be sorry to see them leave."

"Me, too," John said, with a sigh.

Rodney gazed at them both, frowning. "Really, Carson?" he said, confused. "I mean, the idea of the colonel and me in...a relationship—are you seriously telling me that doesn't freak you out?"

"Well, it did at first," Carson agreed with a nod, "but since then, it's come to feel like the most natural thing in the world. In fact it makes a lot of sense. Those two work so well together. They just really seem to fit. Their personalities complement each other and they're clearly madly in love. You two should think about giving it a try." He gave a little grin and Rodney wasn't sure if he was teasing or not.

John smiled. "Don't spook him, Doc. Well, I've gotta be going. See you later, Rodney. Carson."

Rodney gazed after him as he left, wondering whether he was the only person left on Atlantis who was bothered by the idea of him and the colonel being in a relationship. Carson didn't just seem comfortable with it—he was practically matchmaking them.

"Rodney?" Carson said softly. "I think maybe you think people would be more shocked by it than they would be."

Rodney swallowed hard, and then got up. "Well, thank you, Carson," he said in a strangled tone. "I must...go and do some work."

He stumbled out of the infirmary, trying to think this through. So, Carson seemed to think they'd make a good couple, apparently half the city seemed to be outing themselves, John seemed to be—possibly—courting him.... Was it possible that the only person who was actually standing in the way of this was himself?

\* \* \*

When Rodney returned the following day, the other Rodney was conscious. He looked pale and tired, but he managed to wave feebly when Rodney entered the room. The general was still lying beside him, one hand resting protectively on his arm.

"Here. Seeing as you like them so much." Rodney dumped a bag of Athosian grapes on the nightstand.

"Thanks," the other Rodney croaked.

"You look terrible," Rodney told him.

"Yeah. Nearly died, remember?"

There was a long silence. Rodney gazed at the other man, surprised by the genuine concern he felt for him. The other Rodney gave him a feeble grin and the general just lay there, watching them, a faintly amused expression on his face.

"Yes. Well. I just came to see if you were okay," Rodney said at last. "The lab feels weird without you. Obviously, I'm getting much more work done and nobody is arguing with me."

The other Rodney gave a wry gurgle and then grimaced and the general sat up a little, looking concerned.

"Um. I can see I should go. Just, you know, thought you'd like the grapes," Rodney said,

turning.

"Thank you," the other Rodney said faintly. "And, uh, I heard that you came through the window after me and kept me alive for half an hour before the cavalry showed up. Thanks for that, too, Rodney."

Rodney half turned back, and gave a pleased little smile. "Well, you know, like I said, I was getting used to having you around," he muttered, and then he walked off, humming to himself.

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Rodney Sheppard's remarkably swift recovery took everyone by surprise except his husband. General Sheppard spent every hour of every day in the infirmary with his husband during that time, rarely out of reach of his Rodney. Each day he could feel them both growing stronger, as Rodney drew on less and less of his energy via the lifebond. But as the week drew on, Rodney's recovery started to slow down, and John realized that there was something else he needed to do to complete the healing process.

"I think he's well enough for me to take him back to our rooms now," he told Carson.

"Aye, he's certainly made excellent progress, but I'm not sure I'm ready to release him just yet," the doctor told him, his forehead creasing up into a worried frown. "This past day or two, he's made less progress and—"

"Trust me, I really need to get him alone," John interrupted.

Realization flooded into Carson's eyes. "Now, look, he may have made a remarkable recovery so far, but he's in no way ready for—"

"You don't understand," John told him, shaking his head. "We'll be very careful, but I can heal him much better, much faster this way. Trust me. I have...an instinct about this."

Carson stared at him helplessly. "Well...I don't deny that those instincts of yours have been right so far, but.... All right. Just take care, won't you?"

"I will, Doc. Thanks. For everything." John gripped Carson by the arm and squeezed. Carson nodded, a little smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

John went over to where Rodney was lying on the infirmary bed. He was still pale and as weak as a kitten, but he was busy devouring Athosian grapes and moaning about being cooped up for so long, so he was definitely on the road to recovery.

"Hey, we're going home," John told him.

Rodney's face lit up. "Really? Home home? Are the crystals ready? Oh, I see—you mean back to our rooms. Well, that's not bad I suppose. Better than nothing, because, frankly, I am sick to death of the inside of this room. No offence, Carson, but you're really not set up for long-term patients around here, are you?"

Rodney lay back against the pillow, exhausted by the long speech.

John rolled his eyes at him. "You talk too much," he said.

"I know," Rodney grinned. "I thought that was one of the reasons you fell in love with me."

"Really? You thought that?" John wrinkled up his forehead in disbelief and Rodney gave a snort of laughter and then grimaced.

"Oh, shit—don't make me laugh," he groaned, clutching at his chest.

"As for going home home," John smiled, "Rodney McKay reports that he's found the window back into our universe—and we know the beam works. So, we can return as soon as you're well enough to make the journey."

"Not before, though," Carson said, hovering nearby. "I know you've been through it a few times already, but there's no telling what kind of strain that energy beam places on the body. I'm not having you beaming through some inter-dimensional, space-time vortex until you're completely better, so don't even think about it, son."

"Ah, there, see?" Rodney said. "He's starting to sound just like our Carson. Bossy as all hell."

Carson actually looked quite pleased about that and John laughed out loud.

"He's got a point, Doc," he said. "The longer we hang around, the more like our Carson you're sounding. Come on, you—time to go," John said, turning his attention back to his husband and fastening Rodney's leash to his collar. He helped his husband off the bed, and into a bathrobe and slippers, and then Rodney slid a hand around his waist and John escorted him towards the door. Rodney had been walking around for the past couple of days. He was still slow, but John knew he'd be able to make the trip back to their rooms without any problem.

"Any problems at all, call me," Carson said, watching them anxiously.

"Sure, Doc, and thanks again," John said. He let go of Rodney's leash for a second and took hold of the other man's hand and shook it. "I mean it," he said, in a low, sincere tone.

"Yes, thank you, Carson," Rodney said. "Not that I'm not pleased to finally be out of this place, but you've been great."

John took hold of his husband's leash again and wrapped it tightly in his fist, his lips brushing Rodney's forehead as he did so. They walked slowly back to their rooms and then John unfastened the leash, and sat Rodney down on the side of the bed.

"I'm going to undress you," he said. "Being in the infirmary was fine, but we couldn't be close enough. We need as much skin-on-skin contact as possible."

Rodney gazed at him with that expression of total trust in his eyes that turned John on so much, and John leaned forward and brushed the wavy hair out of his husband's eyes.

"Hair's gotten long," John murmured. "I kind of like it. Makes you look like a teenager."

"Ah, those days are long gone, I fear," Rodney grinned.

"Bet you were cute, though," John replied, undoing Rodney's bathrobe and easing it off his husband's shoulders.

"I was, yes," Rodney agreed. John laughed and rolled his eyes. "I had this floppy, blond-haired thing going on. Looked like an idiot—a preppy idiot. I used to wear a suit and tie half the time. I so missed out on that whole teen rebellion thing."

"You didn't miss out, exactly. You just did it in your thirties instead," John told him, slowly helping him out of his pajamas.

"Yeah, and you had to take the brunt of it. Poor John," Rodney sighed, running a hand down the side of his husband's face.

John caught the hand and kissed it firmly. "Come on, lie down," he said.

He helped Rodney into the bed and then took off his own clothes and lay down beside his husband, face to face. He could feel Rodney's exhaustion, and he sent as much energy as he could his way via the lifebond, and the pair of them lay there for a while, the lifebond zinging between them. John slid his hands over Rodney's naked body, relishing the feel of it. It felt like weeks since he'd been lying here like this, with a naked Rodney beside him, and he'd missed it so much. He kissed Rodney's eyelids gently.

"Go to sleep," he ordered.

Rodney relaxed into his arms and did just that, and John pressed his own body as close to him as he could. This felt so good. Rodney's body was so incredibly familiar to him—the weight of it, the scent of his skin, and the feel of that firm flesh against him. John held him close, lost in the sheer joy of having Rodney back again, in his arms, where he belonged, and then finally he fell asleep, too.

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They slept like that for twelve hours solid, wrapped up in each other's arms, and when Rodney woke, he had some color in his cheeks for the first time since he'd been shot.

"Feeling better?" John asked as Rodney's eyes fixed blearily upon him.

"What? Hmmm. Much better," Rodney sighed, stretching beside him like a cat.

"Good...because there's something else I need to do. I just needed you to be strong enough," John said, reaching out a finger to trace a line down Rodney's face.

"I'm fine. What did you have in mind?"

"Roll onto your back," John told him. Rodney did as he was told, and John got up and rolled the sheets back and then leaned over and retrieved the lube from the nightstand. Rodney raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

"It's okay—trust me," John told him

"Always," Rodney replied simply.

"Good. Now let me know if you're having any problems or if anything hurts." John straddled Rodney's body and then reached down and swept his fingers gently over Rodney's chest and Rodney sighed and relaxed into the mattress. Then John carefully removed the dressing over the wound on Rodney's chest. Rodney glanced down at it and grimaced.

"It's kind of ugly," he muttered.

"Shh." John lowered his head and pressed dozens of slow, tender kisses to Rodney's flesh and Rodney sighed again, offering himself up to his husband, as beautifully submissive as ever. John felt himself harden, but he ignored it and traveled lower, his hands and mouth questing endlessly over Rodney's naked flesh. He shifted back and slid his fingers along Rodney's cock, and slowly, very slowly, felt it harden. Usually Rodney could go from soft to rock hard within seconds when John was touching him, but John didn't expect that of him right now, after he'd been so ill. He played with Rodney for a long time, just gently arousing him, trying not to create a sense of sexual urgency.

"You've gotta keep relaxed for me, Rodney," John whispered as Rodney started to move underneath him. "No thrusting, no pushing, no tensing...just let me play."

Rodney took a deep breath and visibly tried to relax and obey his husband. John grinned. Rodney was always so determined to achieve submission that he would try his best, whatever John suggested, and however hard it was. John didn't think this was too hard though—all he was doing was gently stroking Rodney's body with his fingers, and anointing him with tender little kisses. John could feel the lifebond opening up even more, and more and more energy flowing back and forth between them. John rose up a little, reluctantly removed his hands from Rodney's body, and squeezed lube onto his fingers. Then he slid one of his fingers inside his own anus, pushing up to stretch himself.

"What are you...?" Rodney asked, his eyes widening.

"Shh," John said again. "Submit, Rodney. Just lie there and submit."

Rodney nodded, but those blue eyes remained wide as John continued to stretch himself. Finally he was ready, and he removed his fingers from his own body and stroked Rodney's cock until it was hard again.

"Now tell me if you experience any problems at all," he warned Rodney, before positioning himself over his husband's hard cock and sliding himself over the tip. Rodney gave a little gasp as John impaled himself on him, oh, so slowly, and John smiled down on him. He had allowed Rodney to penetrate him before, but not often, and it wasn't their preferred kind of lovemaking. However, on this occasion, John knew it was the only position that Rodney could cope with, and that would work with what he had in mind. He slid down on Rodney's cock until it was embedded deep inside him, and then John paused and allowed himself to adjust to it. Rodney's cock was warm and it filled him completely, stretching out his body, and he savored the sensation for a moment. Then he looked down on Rodney and their eyes met.

"Don't fight me," John warned him, and Rodney's eyes widened as he realized at last what John intended to do.

"No...no...there's no need..." Rodney said.

"Shh. I want to," John said, leaning forwards and placing his hands on Rodney's wound.

"No," Rodney whimpered.

"You're mine, Rodney," John reminded him. "Submit to me."

Rodney shuddered beneath him, but John refused to release him. He opened up his mind and allowed the Kaeira to hum between them. It started to flow...and then stopped, blocked.

John frowned and gazed down on his husband. "I mean it—submit," he said. "This is my

choice, not yours. My decision, not yours."

"I don't want you to do this," Rodney told him. "I'm getting better!"

"You'll get better twice as fast if we share it," John told him.

"You'll be scarred for life," Rodney whispered, gazing up at him, his blue eyes shocked.

"Well, so are you," John replied. "Rodney, you're my husband. Remember those vows you made.... Submit to me, Rodney."

Rodney shook his head, and John leaned forward, took his face in his hands, and kissed him deeply on the mouth. Rodney trembled and opened up under his questing mouth and John kissed him for a very long time, kissed all the fight out of him, kissed him to remind him who he was and what his husband demanded of him, and when he finally released him, Rodney gazed up at him helplessly from those intense blue eyes of his, and the Kaeira started to flow again.

"Thank you," John said, stroking Rodney's face lovingly with his fingertips. "Just go with it, Rodney. Come whenever you like."

He leaned forward again and pressed his lips to the wound on Rodney's chest and the Kaeira hummed around them. John flung his head back, jolted by something that felt like a surge of electricity, and felt himself flying through a window between two universes. A man in a uniform looked up, and, startled by his sudden appearance, raised his gun and fired. John felt the skin rip on his chest and a wave of pure fire slice through his body. He gasped out loud, and tried to ground himself on Rodney's hard cock, still pressed deep inside him. He felt Rodney's hands come up to rest on his hips, caressing and comforting him, and that helped. John began to ride Rodney in earnest now, up and down, the Kaeira so deep and hot that it was almost overwhelming, and he could see the scar on Rodney's chest looking less angry with each inward thrust.

John rose and fell, up and down, up and down, lost in the healing, in the sharing, in the sex...and then he placed the palm of his hand on Rodney's scar, and wrapped the other around his own cock and rode Rodney harder, milking him until he could feel Rodney tensing beneath him and then he felt Rodney come and he came in tandem, spilling out onto Rodney's belly.

Finally, he came to a halt, sweat dripping down his face, and found himself looking into his husband's adoring blue eyes. His own chest hurt, and he looked down to see the new scar there, the same size and length as that on Rodney's chest. Both of the scars were puckered, but much further along in the healing process than Rodney's had been before the Kaeira. John felt battered, his body weaker than it had been, and the wound on his chest hurt when he moved, but it had been worth it. He slid off Rodney's softening cock and fell down onto the bed beside him, and Rodney took him in his arms and brushed his dark hair away from his sweaty face and kissed him fiercely, passionately, on the lips.

"Thank you," he whispered and John could feel through the lifebond that he was much stronger now, no longer the frail invalid of a few hours ago. Now they had shared the wound between them, taken it onto both their bodies, and it was half as bad as it had been when Rodney had borne it alone.

"I love you," Rodney said, his lips insistent on John's face. John turned in his husband's arms and ran his fingertips weakly through the curly tips of his hair.

"I know," he replied, and he could feel it, could feel their love burning and pulsing through the lifebond, a warm, tangible thing. He allowed Rodney to hold him in his arms, stroking him gently and whispering little words of adoration and affection in his ear until they both fell into another deep, healing sleep.

End of Part Eleven

## Part Twelve: Sharing a Plate by Xanthe

### **Author's Notes:**

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Title graphic for this chapter by Yosemite

"I hate parties," Rodney McKay was saying through the closed bathroom door.

"I know," John replied, leaning against the wall in Rodney's quarters and playing with his PDA. "That's why I'm here—to remind you that there will be food. Really nice food. Party food."

"That's the only reason why I ever go to parties," Rodney told him.

"And that's another reason why you never get laid," John pointed out, and then he paused, head cocked, waiting for the inevitable torrent of protests.

"That's not true! And how would you know how often I get laid, anyway?" came back the blustering reply. John grinned and rolled his eyes at the bathroom door.

"Oh, I have a pretty good idea," he replied. "Besides, you'll like this party. This party is special. We have to send the general and Dr. Sheppard off in good style, don't we? Don't want them going home tomorrow and telling all those leather people they live with that we don't know how to throw a good party."

There was no reply. John sighed and put his PDA away. It had been a couple of weeks since Rodney Sheppard had been shot, but he'd made an excellent recovery—which, John suspected, was due in no small part to the general. Now they were well enough to return to their own universe, and Elizabeth had decreed that a big party should be held in their honor in the big hall.

"Are you coming out any time soon?" John asked. "Because all the good food will be gone before we get there."

The door opened almost immediately at that, as John had suspected it would, and Rodney stood there, looking, actually, endearingly shy. John didn't think he'd ever seen this particular expression on Rodney's face before, but over the past couple of weeks he'd become used to seeing these new expressions as Rodney had started trusting him enough to lower his guard with him. John didn't linger too much on Rodney's face, though...because he couldn't help his gaze traveling up and down Rodney's body—and, man, Rodney looked hot. He was wearing a pair of black chinos and a loose, pale blue denim shirt. His clothes weren't exactly anything extraordinary, but they were so unlike anything John had seen Rodney in before that he took a moment to enjoy it. The shirt went well with Rodney's blue eyes, and it hung pleasingly on the other man's toned arms and shoulders. The pants fitted around his ass in a snug way, clinging in just the right places to make John's cock stir in his pants, and...he'd done something with his hair. John wasn't entirely sure what, maybe some gel because it was sort of spiky, but it looked good. In fact, Rodney actually looked...kind of cool, which, for someone as geeky as Rodney, was saying something.

"You look...really hot," John told him.

Rodney flushed. "Thank you, Colonel," he said primly.

John noticed he always reverted to calling him 'Colonel' whenever he thought things were getting too personal. Somehow Rodney didn't seem to have noticed that they were actually dating, but John intended to enlighten him on that topic tonight. He figured he'd waited long enough, and although Rodney wasn't quite eating out of his hand yet, he was definitely twining around his ankles and wrapping his tail around John's leg.

"And you...uh, look okay, too," Rodney added, glancing at John's jeans and dark olive-green shirt ensemble. His gaze lingered just a bit too long when it reached John's ass, and John grinned to himself. Oh, yeah, Rodney was so nearly there. Tonight was going to be very interesting.

"So—ready?" John asked.

Rodney nodded and they set off to the big hall. John swung into step beside Rodney and rested his hand on the scientist's shoulder, noticing as he did so how Rodney adjusted his stride, almost imperceptibly, to match his own, and how his body leaned in towards his. John longed for the day when he could slide his arm around Rodney's waist as they walked, or wrap his arm around Rodney's shoulders and across his chest, or allow his hand to rest on Rodney's enticing ass, but for now, he would settle just for being able to rest his hand lightly on Rodney's shoulder.

"You have to admit you're going to miss these guys," John said as they walked. "I mean, I know we've had our differences with them, but I'll be sorry to see them go."

"I have become...accustomed to having them around," Rodney admitted.

"Oh, come on. You and Rodney Sheppard have been inseparable these past couple of weeks," John chided. "I know you didn't get on with him to start with, but now you finish each other's sentences all the time and nobody knows what the hell you're talking about when you get going on the science gobbledegook."

"It has been nice to finally have someone around here that's my intellectual equal and can actually conduct an intelligent conversation," Rodney commented, with a sly grin in John's direction. John pinched his shoulder for that and Rodney giggled. John stopped short in his tracks.

"What?" Rodney said, looking back at John.

"You.... That sound you just made. Do it again."

"What sound? I didn't make any sound!" Rodney protested.

"Yes, you did. You giggled, Rodney."

"I most certainly did not," Rodney refuted.

"Oh, yeah. You giggled. I'm going to listen out for it and next time you do it, you are so busted."

"There won't be a next time because there wasn't a first time," Rodney said loftily. "I didn't giggle—I was clearing my throat. Now, are we going to this damn party or not?"

They stepped into the big hall a few seconds later to find the party already in full swing. There were balloons everywhere, and a massive banner saying "GOODBYE!" strung across one end of the hall. The entire room—and it was a big room—was heaving with people.

"Is everyone in the entire city here?" Rodney asked, wrinkling up his nose.

"They're popular guys—and it's not just the city. We've been ferrying over Athosians all afternoon," John told him. "The general made quite a few friends over there. Don't worry, Rodney, I'm sure there'll be enough food for everyone."

Rodney looked relieved on that score and went running off to find it.

John watched him go, a wry smile on his lips, enjoying the sight of Rodney's ass in those chinos he was wearing. He wondered what was going on in Rodney's head right now. The other man was certainly much more relaxed around him these days – he confided in John in a way he never had before, and sometimes John would look up to find Rodney gazing at him, as if trying to decide something. Finding that other universe where they were also a couple seemed to have changed him in some way; it was as if he'd stopped resisting the idea of them being together, and was now seriously playing with the thought of it, even if he wasn't yet ready to take the plunge. It had given John a lot to think about as well. He knew he wanted Rodney – wanted him fiercely and passionately, and he suspected that every John in every universe felt pretty much the same way, however they expressed it. The brief glimpse he'd had of Major Sheppard in the other universe had convinced John that he felt as strongly and possessively about \*his\* Rodney as John and the general felt about their own respective Rodneys. That didn't mean they all had to have the same kind of relationship though - John was pretty sure that he didn't want exactly what the general had with his Rodney, but he also didn't think that he and the general or that other John were too dissimilar either. John wanted to love his Rodney and to protect him, wanted to make him \*his\*, but he didn't need leashes and straps, and he didn't need Rodney to swear undying submission to him either. At the same time he knew he definitely had sexually dominant feelings towards the scientist; he wanted the thrill of having someone that smart and with that much attitude surrender to him sexually; he wanted to feel Rodney go still beneath him and offer himself up to him. He longed to hold the scientist down and look into those wide blue eyes as he slowly showed Rodney just how good sex with another man could be. He had absolutely no doubt at all that Rodney was a virgin – at least as far as men were concerned, and he longed to be the first – and last – man in Rodney's life, and in Rodney's bed. He also suspected his Rodney would respond to what he could offer; he had seen it in Rodney's eyes that time when they were wrestling, when Rodney had offered him his

submission. Rodney longed to be claimed – he had just never trusted anyone enough to give himself up to them before. John had been patient though, and even though he wanted desperately to claim his prize he'd wait until Rodney was ready, because somehow he had a feeling that this was a prize well worth waiting for.

Rodney was now long out of sight, lost in the thronging crowd, and John turned—to find the general striding towards him.

"John! I've been looking for you!" The general grabbed him by the arm and steered him out onto the balcony. "Look, I don't know how much time we'll have in the morning and...well, I don't know how long I'm going to be sober this evening," he held up a bottle of beer with a grin, "so I wanted to say goodbye now."

"I hate goodbyes," John muttered, resting his hands on the balustrade and looking out on the dark Atlantean night.

"Me, too," the general said with a grin. "Obviously. But...I just wanted to say that it's been a pleasure and an honor meeting you, John. You're a good man and you've done a fantastic job here."

John gazed sideways at the other man, feeling a warm glow deep inside. He knew he wasn't alone in his hero worship of the general—he suspected that most of the people in this city would throw themselves into the dark ocean beneath them right now if the general said it was necessary—but it meant a lot to him that he had the general's good opinion.

"Any lessons you could give me on, you know, being cool before you leave?" John asked with a wry grin.

"Oh, I think you've got that pretty much covered," the general replied, grinning back. They gazed at each other for a moment, and then the general shifted. "I mean it," he said. "I've spent a lot of time talking to your people and not one of them had a bad word to say about you. Well, except that Kavanagh guy, but I figure he has a bad word to say about everyone, right?"

John snorted. "That sounds about right, yes," he agreed.

"But the rest of them think that as far as you're concerned, the sun shines out of the proverbial...." The general shrugged and grinned again. "But you knew that, anyway—didn't you?"

John thought about it for a moment, and then he gave a little nod. "Yeah. I knew it. They're a great bunch of people," he said softly.

"Now...there's one thing I need to know before we leave," the general said, a little grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

John sighed. "I'm working on it!" he said.

"Good. Because some things are different in our universes, like Radek being alive here, but there are some things that seem to be universal constants and I'm sure you wouldn't want to be the odd universe out. Any advice I can give you?"

"No, I think I can take care of it, thanks." John made a face.

"Okay, but you know I'm going to, anyway, right? Always be honest with him. He can see through bullshit a mile away and he won't trust you if you lie to him—and his trust is important, as I'm sure you've figured out. It takes forever to win it, but once you've got it...it's a feeling like nothing else. He'll make you feel special in a 101 ways every single day and you'll wonder why on earth someone so incredibly smart would be interested in you—and then he'll do something amazingly stupid and you'll remember exactly why he needs you. Be firm with him, never allow him to retreat or push you away—and just love him, fiercely, with all your heart. He responds to that best of all."

"I'll try to remember all that," John said, shaking his head ruefully.

"Do more than try. You're too good a man to be lonely, John. I want to leave here knowing that you've got someone special in your life; someone loyal and loving who'll take care of you."

"This is Rodney we're talking about here," John commented, with a little quirk of his mouth.

"Just you wait—he'll surprise you. He surprises me every day," the general said. "He takes some taming, but once you've got him eating out of your hand, you won't find anyone more loyal or, frankly, more fun to have around. And as for the sex..."

John grinned and rolled his eyes. "You know, one thing I'm not going to miss about you guys is the way you talk about sex so much in casual conversation. Call us old-fashioned—"

"Or hopelessly repressed," the general grinned.

"—Or hopelessly repressed, but we just don't talk like that."

The general laughed out loud at that. "Well, our ways may not entirely be yours, but I think in some ways you and I are pretty similar—and we've both learned a lot from each other."

"Really? You learned something from us?" John asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sure. Things are different here and I'm not denying I've found them strange and complicated, but it's been an amazing experience, and one I wouldn't have changed for anything, despite its downside. You people are kind—kinder than we are, I think. You're also extremely generous and although I've found your politeness irksome at times, I've since come to realize it's just a sign of your fundamental decency and sense of honor. You're less

fierce than we are, but not less passionate, I think. You just keep the passion more hidden, whereas with us, it tends to be more on display."

"Yeah. We had kind of noticed," John grinned.

The general grinned back and then his expression changed, and became thoughtful and serious. "Most of all, though, I wouldn't change meeting you, John," he said. "That's what's made this whole experience worthwhile. Now, this might be my last chance to say this, so...it's been an honor, Colonel." And with that, the general stood to attention, raised his hand stiffly to his forehead, and saluted.

John gazed at him, a tiny lump forming in his throat. "Thank you," he said softly.

\* \* \*

Rodney McKay pushed his way over to the food, found a plate, and began piling it high with goodies from the table. Then he turned and edged away with his laden plate.

"Out of my way! Coming through!" he called impatiently to the throng of people blocking his way.

"Hey," a voice said, and he turned to find Rodney Sheppard standing there with a plate also piled high with food. He was dressed in that blue silk shirt and his curly hair was longer than ever. The other Rodney looked him up and down and then gave a little whistle. "Wow. I never thought I'd say this, but you actually look pretty hot," he said.

Rodney rolled his eyes, squirming inside, but peculiarly pleased by the compliment all the same. "Thanks. That's what John just said."

"Heh. How's that going?" The other Rodney gave him an alarmingly lascivious wink and Rodney blinked.

"Fine. I think. In fact, I think we might be on some kind of a date tonight, but I'm not sure."

The other Rodney grinned. "See, I told you," he said, in a tone of some glee. "You two will be sharing a plate before we know it."

"Sharing a plate?" Rodney frowned, as they walked over to the balcony together to find the two Johns.

"It's a euphemism we use in our universe for when a couple get together," the other Rodney explained. "You see, when a couple gets serious, often the first thing they'll do is start sharing a plate of food at the dinner table. Sometimes it can be a real performance doing it for the first time. It means you're sleeping together and you've figured out whether you're topping, or bottoming, or switching in this particular relationship, and that you're serious about each other and you want everyone else to know that. You have no idea how many stupid romantic comedies have been made about couples sharing a plate, or sharing the wrong plate, or not sharing a plate but wanting to, or seeing people they're married to sharing a plate with someone else by accident and coming to the wrong conclusions."

"Oookay," Rodney said, faintly alarmed by the explanation. "Well, I think I can safely say that the colonel and I will never share a plate. I don't care how much I like the guy, my food is my food and I don't do sharing."

They reached the Johns and the other Rodney handed the general his plate while Rodney's John gazed at him with a little pout.

"You didn't get me any?" he said.

Rodney sighed and shoved the plate at him. "Here, have mine," he said. "I'll go and get some more."

"No need—you've got enough here to feed an army! Hey, aren't these those meat roll things you like so much?" John picked one up and held it out and Rodney found himself opening his mouth and taking a bite, and then he groaned as he saw the expression on the other Rodney's face.

"You were saying?" The other Rodney raised an eyebrow.

"This is not that...that thing we were just talking about," Rodney hissed around a mouthful of food.

"Okay. If you say so. It's just that it looks like the exact same thing," the other Rodney said, with that little giggle of his.

Rodney decided not to bother protesting.

"I was just explaining to him about the origins of the phrase 'sharing a plate'," the other Rodney explained to the general, who was looking at them both with a raised eyebrow.

"Ah, I see. Did he explain to you about the phrase 'buckling the belt' as well?" the general asked.

"Nope, never heard of that one," John said.

"I told Carson a while back, when we first arrived. See this belt...." The general pointed at

the frankly impressive black leather belt with the large silver buckle he was wearing. "This is my wedding belt. Carson was my best man, so he buckled it for me the first time. He also made sure it was well stocked with all the kinds of paraphernalia I'd need to handle my husband—and it's a good thing he did, because when we arrived here, we only had the clothes we stood up in. Thank God I had my strap and all the other things I need to keep Rodney here in order."

The other Rodney snorted out loud at that. "Yeah, because I'm such a difficult sub," he groused.

"You have your moments," the general replied with a grin. "Half the stuff on this belt is business and half is for pleasure," he told them. "And sometimes the line between those two concepts is a little bit blurred. So that's why we sometimes say 'buckling the belt' when two people get married."

"Supposing they're both switches?" Rodney asked, feeling rather pleased with himself for getting to grips with the strange ways of this other universe.

"Then they both get a belt," the other Rodney said. "As it was, I got a collar—which John put on me—and he got the belt. It's all just customs, really, like your wedding rings."

"And the pendants? Were they a wedding thing?" Rodney asked, gazing at the pendants around their counterparts' necks, both of which were engraved with the same entwined J and R that was tattooed on their arms.

"Nope, we gave each other these the night we lifebonded," the general replied, fingering his gently and smiling at his husband. He put his arm around the other Rodney and deposited a kiss on his forehead. "Hey, don't you think this party needs some music?"

"I think Radek is setting something up." Rodney gestured with his head across the hall at where Radek was fiddling with some kind of sound system.

"How about some live music in the meantime?" the general suggested. "I got Colonel Caldwell to bring something back on his last trip. Rodney played it for me while we were recuperating—music always calms him down and I love listening to him play."

"Really?" John looked intrigued by this although Rodney had a suspicion he knew what it would be, and his heart sank when he saw he was right as the general led them across the room to a small baby grand piano.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" the other Rodney said, scrambling to sit down at the instrument. "I have no idea what John had to bribe Steven with to get him to bring her back, but I made sure he knew just how grateful I was." He winked at his husband and Rodney found himself flushing again, although really he thought he should be used to this by now.

"Wait...he plays?" John asked, surprised.

"Like an angel...or sometimes like a demon," the general said, with a little wink of his own.

The other Rodney paused for a moment, his hands poised dramatically over the keyboard, and then he brought them down on the ivories and his fingers began moving fast, like a dervish whirling its way across the board. Rodney closed his eyes, hating the way his own fingers were twitching.

"My God," he heard John breathe beside him. "He's fantastic."

"He could have played at concert level, but some idiot piano teacher dented his confidence when he was just a kid," the general growled. "If I could get my hands on that guy, I'd pound some sense into him. No, of course he didn't play with a whole lot of soul when he was twelve years old—he didn't have many life experiences to draw on back then! But he was technically brilliant and he still is, and I'd defy anyone to say he doesn't pour his heart into his music when he plays. Sometimes, when he's playing just for me...it can bring tears to my eyes."

"He's that good?" John said, in a surprised tone.

"Oh, yeah. He's that good."

"Well, I guess that's something that's different to our universe, huh, Rodney?" John said, turning to glance at Rodney.

Rodney opened his eyes, his entire body convulsing with longing to be part of the sound emanating from that piano. He'd always vowed he'd never touch a piano again, but the look of pure rapture on his counterpart's face was a siren's song he just couldn't resist.

"Not so much, no," he replied softly, and then he found himself walking over to the piano, and sitting down beside the other Rodney, who looked up briefly, then grinned and budged up to make room for him.

It had been over 25 years since he'd last played, but Rodney's fingers still knew all the notes. He could sometimes hear the sounds in his head at night and would find his fingers sliding over imaginary keys, searching for the tune, and now it was as if he'd never stopped playing. He brought his fingers down on the keys, caressing them, teasing out a tune with his counterpart, and the music began to flow effortlessly between them. Rodney lost himself in the sound—it had been so long since he'd enjoyed this particular pleasure and he'd forgotten just how much he'd once loved it. Playing the piano had been a good way of avoiding his parents, and if he played long enough and loud enough, he had been able to drown out the sounds of their many arguments. As a child, he'd always been fascinated by both music and math, by how they brought order and harmony to what was, for him, a pretty chaotic world, and he'd perhaps been overly absorbed by the technical side of playing the piano, at the expense of the emotional side of making music. When his teacher had told him he'd never make it as a concert pianist because of the lack of feeling in his music, he'd turned his back on it irrevocably and thrown himself into science instead, with the same degree of dedication. But now...now it felt so good to be caressing those beautiful sounds

out of the instrument in front of him. He turned and grinned at Rodney Sheppard, who grinned back excitedly, and they played together, their fingers tripping in tandem over the keys.

A little crowd gathered around them as they played and when finally they stopped, the room burst into a spontaneous round of applause.

"Well, aren't you the dark horse," John murmured as Rodney got up, feeling flustered by all the unaccustomed attention. "Seriously—that was amazing. I had no idea you could play like that."

"There are a lot of things about me that you have no idea about, Colonel," Rodney replied, and an unreadable expression flickered across John's face and the atmosphere between them became suddenly tense with all kinds of unspoken thoughts.

A sudden loud blaring of disco music broke into the tension, and they both looked across the room to find Radek hopping up and down excitedly, waving his hands around. Elizabeth came up, a wide grin on her face.

"Looks like it's time to dance!" she announced.

"Rodney?" the general said, holding out his hand to his husband. His Rodney took it and they began moving in time to the beat in a way that Rodney found frankly embarrassing.

"Oh, God," he sighed. "It's like watching your parents dance or something. If your parents were gay, that is."

"Don't be an idiot, Rodney," Elizabeth said. "There are plenty of same sex couples dancing—these two have set quite a trend while they've been here." She nodded her head in the direction of the sound system, where a throng of couples were now gyrating. Rodney made out Miko with her arms around one of the female scientists from the botany department whose name he didn't know, and a couple of male scientists—the ones who always played chess together—whose names he also didn't know, along with the usual multitude of heterosexual couples. "And as this is a party for our guests, I think we should all dance with someone of our own gender in honor of their relationship," Elizabeth said, with an infectious little giggle that led Rodney to suspect that she'd had far too much to drink. "Teyla—would you do me the honor?"

"I would be delighted, Elizabeth," Teyla said, with a gracious inclination of her head.

Rodney groaned. "Honestly, it's excruciating."

John turned to him, a wide smile on his face.

"What?" Rodney gazed at him, and then realization hit home. "Oh, no. No, no, no," he said hurriedly, putting his hands up.

"Everyone's doing it, Rodney," John told him, advancing on him.

"That's no reason for us to do it!" Rodney protested.

"You're just playing hard to get," John teased, grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him over to where everyone was dancing.

"We'll never live this down," Rodney told him.

"Rodney, this entire city has just spent several weeks watching two people who look and talk just like us kissing and fondling each other every five minutes. I really doubt the sight of you and me dancing will have them raising an eyebrow."

"Yes, but...."

"Shh," John said, and then he wrapped his fingers around Rodney's hand and swung him backwards. "And don't say you don't have any rhythm because I just heard you play the piano and you were never once off beat," John told him.

Rodney sighed and began to do some cautious swaying. He hated dancing, but more because he hated making any kind of public exhibition of himself. His counterpart seemed to have no such qualms and was busy leaping around the dance floor excitedly, throwing himself around and singing along loudly. The general was more restrained—even while dancing he didn't quite manage to lose that sense of cool. Rodney was relieved when the tune changed into a slow one, giving him an excuse to sidle away from John, but just as he was about to make a bid for freedom, John reached out and pulled him back.

"No. This is...definitely not..." Rodney protested, but then John pulled him close, so he was pressed right against his chest, and the colonel's hands slid around his back and Rodney found that he was being...kind of held. "Oh, God," he hissed into John's chest.

"Just relax and go with it, Rodney," John said, and those hazel eyes of his were warm and amused, fixed intently on Rodney's mouth.

Rodney closed his own eyes and gave in to the sensation. It wasn't bad. In fact, it was pretty good. The colonel's body was hard against his, and his hands were stroking his back... and moving southwards.... Rodney jerked his eyes open.

"Oh, God," he whispered again.

"Problem?" John asked.

"No, just...this is a date, isn't it?" Rodney said. "I'm only asking because otherwise, what you're doing with your hands...seems wildly inappropriate, Colonel."

"Yes, Rodney, this is a date," John told him, smiling.

"Okay. I needed to check because I haven't been sure and it's been confusing me. And, uh, that time on the puddle jumper with all the fish—that was a date as well, wasn't it?" Rodney asked, because he thought it would be nice to clear that one up while they were at it.

"Yes, Rodney. That was a date, too," John told him, still smiling.

"I knew it!" Rodney said, pleased with himself.

"And how do you feel about that?" John asked him, his hazel eyes watchful.

"Um. Surprised?" Rodney suggested. "I've never actually considered myself to be gay, but then again I never actually considered you to be gay, but you seem to be...well, not entirely straight, anyway...so I thought the least I could do was figure out whether that was true for me as well, and then—"

"Rodney?" John broke into the flustered monologue, a lazy smile on his lips.

"Mm?"

"Shhh," John told him, pulling him close.

"Oh. Right. Okay."

Rodney nodded and closed his eyes again, willing himself to relax, and leaned into John a little, just testing out how it felt...and discovered that it felt good. Duly encouraged, he rested his head against the colonel's shoulder and slid his own hands around the other man's body and rested them on his ass. He liked what he could feel of it—it was firm and felt good under his fingertips. Rodney sighed and allowed himself to relax even further. So, this was a date, which meant that the colonel was actually interested in him, which, yes, he supposed he'd known on one level, but it wasn't always easy being sure. And now he knew he could...what? Rodney had no idea, but decided not to think about it because he was enjoying himself far too much right now. He felt John's lips brush against his hair and that felt so good that he found himself making a little mewling sound at the back of his throat, and then John's arms were tight around his body and they were pressed as close together as two people could be and Rodney didn't think he'd ever felt so content in his life before.

\* \* \*

Several hours flew by, although Rodney wasn't entirely aware of them passing; he was

having too much of a good time. He thought he'd probably drunk too much, which wasn't like him, but he didn't care because it was such a great evening. Then there seemed to be fewer and fewer people around, and then he saw the general staggering off with a singing other Rodney under one arm, and then there was just him and a few other stragglers. He wasn't sure where John was, but he thought the colonel had said something about going onto the balcony for some air. Rodney sat down at the piano and began to play a little song, teasing out the notes with his fingers. The music seemed to flow from his fingertips and he bent over the piano and just allowed the music to pour out of him. He felt as if something had been unblocked—as if he was letting go of a whole load of crap, just letting it free, sending it out with all the notes into the night air.

"Hey," a voice said, and John sat down next to him.

"I think..." Rodney said, plonking his fingers insistently on the keyboard, "that I'm probably very, very drunk."

"You are," John told him.

Rodney nodded solemnly. "I thought so," he said.

"It's late," John told him. "Time for bed."

"No. I want to stay here...want to play," Rodney said, fingertips fondling the keys like he was making love to them. Making love.... "Oh. You didn't want to.... I...uh...I'm not...." Rodney stammered, looking up into a pair of intense hazel eyes.

"No. Do I look like the kind of guy who takes advantage of someone when they're drunk?" John asked with a raised eyebrow.

Rodney giggled. "No. Such a gentleman. Gentleman John," he murmured. "With the slow dancing, and the slow courting, and all the sloow, slooow, sloooooow...." He lost his train of thought and gazed at the piano keyboard vacantly.

"Rodney." John took hold of his face between his hands, and his eyes were suddenly very serious. Rodney swallowed hard. "You must have figured out by now that I'm not playing a game here," he said. Rodney's eyes widened, wondering what was coming next. "I want you, Rodney," John whispered intently, and Rodney felt an odd thrill course through his veins at that. "I mean it. I want you. All of you—not just for fun, or to try it out, or for a quick fuck. I want you, Rodney. Now, I'm a patient man, I've shown you that, and the next move is up to you. I'll wait for you to be ready, but when you are, you have to be sure—and I mean you have to be really sure—because once you give me a sign that you're ready, then there's no turning back."

"A sign...?" Rodney bit on his lip.

John caressed his cheeks with his thumbs, his hands hot and heavy on the sides of Rodney's head. "Once you let me know you're ready, then I'm going to be in your life—and we are

going to spend a long time really getting to know each other—in all kinds of different ways," John told him, and as he said that, he moved one of his hands down and gently brushed the side of Rodney's arm, and Rodney felt a flare of pure heat run from where John had touched him straight to his groin, and he had no doubt at all what John meant by that.

"Okay?" John asked, and Rodney nodded, numbly. "Okay, then," John said, getting up.

He looked as if he was about to go, but then he changed his mind, and leaned down, took hold of Rodney's face again, and kissed him on the mouth. It was a gentle kiss. He didn't open Rodney's mouth with his tongue, just kissed him on the lips, firmly and lovingly, but all the same, the touch of John's lips against his own made Rodney's entire body quiver and burn. This wasn't simply a kiss—it was a statement of intent—and he had no doubt at all that John meant it as such. With this one kiss, John had claimed him for his own, imprinting himself on Rodney's soul. There was no going back now—John had finally come out into the open and declared his intentions and now he would wait, and the next move would be Rodney's, and if it never came, then nothing would ever happen between them, but now it was up to Rodney to figure out for himself, once and for all, what he really wanted. The kiss ended, and Rodney gave a little moan as John moved away from him.

"I mean it, Rodney," John said softly. "Once you give me that sign, I'll make you mine, so be very sure."

He caressed Rodney's cheek with the tip of one finger, and then, with a reluctant smile, he left.

Rodney sat there, his fingers numbly picking out a sweet, plaintive tune on the piano. "I'll make you mine"—the words reverberated around in his skull, teasing and arousing him.

"I'll make you mine," he sang under his breath in time to the little song he was composing. "I'll make you mine, make you mine, make you mine...and all I have to do is say the word, give a sign, give a sign, give a sign...."

\* \* \*

They gathered in the lab at eleven a.m. the next day, all of them looking somewhat the worse for wear. Rodney wasn't used to drinking and had one hell of a headache, which normally would have made him irascible, but today just made him morose. He had never thought he would actually be sorry to see the general and his husband leave, but he was. He'd gotten used to having them around, and once they were gone, things would get back

to normal...and he'd have to make a decision about what happened next with John and right now that was the last thing he wanted to face. It wasn't that he didn't want the colonel—he knew that he did by the way his entire body seemed to quiver and zing whenever the other man was around—but he had no frame of reference for someone loving him and wanting him this fiercely. He felt as if he was standing in front of a window to another universe, and before him, just out of reach, he could imagine many good things, but in order to get them, he had to step into the unknown, and it was safer to remain put, where he knew where things were and how they worked, where things were comfortable, and mundane, and...safe.

Rodney pushed these concerns aside and set to work making one final check on the QDD. He'd been over it a hundred times already, but he wanted to be sure. He couldn't risk anything going wrong this time. He cared about these two men too much to want to send them off into the ether without being completely sure that he knew where they were going.

"Rodney, just to be clear," Elizabeth said, "once the transfer is complete, you are shutting down the QDD, taking it down to the lower reaches of the city, sealing it in a room and putting a big sign on it saying DO NOT TOUCH. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Elizabeth. Very clear," Rodney sighed. It would have been interesting to have played with it for a bit longer, especially now that they knew how it worked, but he had to concede that she had a point.

The general snorted, and came over to Elizabeth to wrap her in a bear hug and say goodbye. The other Rodney was saying his own goodbyes. Rodney saw him grab a startled Radek and hold him tight.

"I never got a chance to say goodbye properly before, but now I do," the other Rodney said fiercely. "You're so fantastic, Radek. From now on, it's not going to be like you're dead in my universe because I'll know you're here. It'll be like you've gone on a posting or something. I'll always remember you."

"Why, thank you, Rodney," Radek said, and Rodney could tell by the tone of his voice that he was touched. "We will miss you, too. You have been most fun to have around."

"Yeah. Sometimes me and him were like the floor show, I think," the other Rodney said with a wince, gesturing with his head in Rodney's direction. "You'll miss all the fireworks."

"It was...inspirational," Radek said diplomatically and the other Rodney snorted in amusement at that.

The general had moved onto Ronon and Teyla and was busy shaking hands and giving hugs. Rodney finished with the QDD and waited his turn, and when the general arrived at him, he held out his hand, a little shakily; he'd never really got over his fear of the general and still found John's counterpart scary. The general looked at the proffered hand, then at Rodney, and rolled his eyes. He brushed the hand aside and enveloped Rodney in a warm hug, squeezing him tight.

"Take care, Dr. McKay," the general whispered. "And take care of him for me, too—all right?"

"What? Yes...whatever," Rodney squeaked, because you didn't ever say no to the general.

The general drew back and grinned at him. "You know, I think you've got it almost figured out," he said. "Take a chance, Doc. You won't ever regret it."

Then he moved on to say a final goodbye to John. Rodney turned...and found himself face to face with his own counterpart.

"So." The other Rodney stood there.

"So." Rodney gazed at him helplessly. "Do you think we could skip the sappy bit because I don't think either of us is any good at that," Rodney said.

The other Rodney grinned. "My thoughts exactly. I just want you to know I forgive you for sucking us over here."

"Well. Great. Good. And I forgive you for...you know, being a bit of a jerk."

"Ditto." The other Rodney nodded.

"I think that's everything, then," Rodney beamed.

"Yeah. So long." They shook hands and the other Rodney scampered off to join his husband in the taped-off area of the room.

"Okay. Are we ready?" Rodney asked, going back to the QDD and checking the readings for the millionth time.

"Oh! One last thing. I almost forgot!" Rodney Sheppard hopped back over to where Rodney was standing, grabbed him, and gave him a tight hug...and as he did so, he pressed a small parcel into Rodney's hand. "I made them," he whispered into Rodney's ear. "You'll know what to do with them. Oh, and I've left a box of stuff for you in our room. We've got plenty of our own back home, so we don't need it. Don't let me down, Rodney, or I'll be forced to come back and irritate the hell out of you."

"Yeah. Right," Rodney snorted. "You heard Elizabeth—she's making me shut down the QDD straight after you leave."

"Ah, but you're forgetting I have a QDD of my own," the other Rodney said, taking a step back and grinning at him. "It might take me a few days to get it up and running, but just so you know, we could pop up again at any time."

"Oh, God," Rodney sighed.

The other Rodney grinned and patted his arm. "You'll miss me, really," he said and then he turned and ran back to his husband again.

Rodney slipped the little parcel into his pocket to look at later, and then he turned for one final glance at the two men. They were standing side by side, and the general had his hand wrapped firmly in his Rodney's leash, and the other Rodney had his arm around the general's waist, and they were both grinning like crazy...and that was his last image of them.

Rodney pressed the button and the beam flared into life. It caught them both and they took a step backwards and disappeared through the window.

"General?" John stepped forwards, tapping his radio while Rodney kept the beam open. "Did it work? Are you home?"

"John? It worked. Thank Dr. McKay for us. We're home, right back in our quarters where we were when you found us. Rodney's just gone out into the hallway and is yelling to everyone who can hear that we're back...and, uh, now the room is starting to fill up with people!"

Rodney grinned. He could hear the noise through the window—it sounded like a horde of people were gathered around the returning men, welcoming them home and bombarding them with questions.

"Great. We have to close the beam now," John said, in a tight little voice. Rodney turned to look at him in surprise. "Goodbye—and thanks."

"You, too," the general said, and John nodded to Rodney, and he cut the beam and then, finally, closed the window between the two universes.

They all stood there. Now that the moment was over, Rodney felt lost and empty. He stood and gazed at the spot where they'd been, and suddenly longed for them to be back.

"So. I guess that's it, then," John said, taking a deep breath.

"I guess it is," Elizabeth said softly. "Rodney, remember what I said about the QDD."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "I'll do it, don't worry," he told her.

"Good. Then perhaps things can get back to normal around here," she said. "Whatever normal is," she muttered as she exited the room.

"You okay?" John asked, glancing at Rodney.

"Fine." Rodney gazed at the other man for a moment, wanting to talk to him, but having no idea what to say.

"Just so you know, that thing we were talking about last night...I'm going to give you some

space to think about it," John told him. "I don't want you to feel under any pressure."

"Right. Okay." Rodney flushed, deeply uncomfortable with having this conversation while Radek was standing beside him, even though the colonel was being very discreet. John gazed at him for a moment, his hazel eyes unreadable. Rodney gazed back helplessly, unsure what to do or say.

"Okay, then," John nodded.

"Fine. Um...I have dozens of different projects I put on hold while we were working on this. I've got a massive backlog to get through, so if you'll excuse me, Colonel."

Rodney turned away, and when he looked around again, he saw John leaving the room, his shoulders low and dejected. Rodney considered running after him, but his legs wouldn't move, and, in the end, he decided to do what he did best when avoiding anything he didn't want to think about—he threw himself into his work.

Radek was like a quiet shadow by his side all day, bringing him cups of coffee while he worked, and the occasional donut. Rodney was surprised by how solicitous he was being, but he wasn't in the mood to talk. He just got his head down and worked. It took them all afternoon to pack up the QDD, and then they carried it together down to one of the storage rooms on the lower levels. Rodney fixed the appropriate DO NOT TOUCH sign to it and then stood back with a sigh.

"It is a shame, yes?" Radek said. "It is such an amazing device."

"Yeah.... But Elizabeth's right, it's too dangerous to have around," Rodney said, still staring at it. "Ah, well, we'd better get back to work."

They turned and began walking back up to the lab.

"I suppose you'll miss having Dr. Sheppard around?" Rodney said as they went. "You and he seemed to get along well." Rodney bit back his own jealousy as he said that. Radek gave a little shrug.

"He was a nice man, but I am pleased to have our universe back as it was," Radek said, with a little grin. "With everyone in their proper place again. I am more comfortable this way."

"Really?" Rodney was surprised to find himself a little heartened by that reaction.

Radek pushed his glasses a little further up his face and turned his head to look Rodney in the eye. "Really," he said, and it wasn't a big deal, but there was just something about the way he said it that made Rodney feel happy.

They returned to the lab and Rodney worked for several long hours. He hadn't been lying to John earlier—there was a backlog of work to do. When he finally returned to his rooms, he threw himself down on his bed wearily, longing for the respite of sleep so that he wouldn't

have to think about how lonely the city felt without their counterparts around...or what he was going to do about John. Something dug into his hip, and he fished around in his pocket to find out what it was, and drew out the little parcel Rodney Sheppard had slipped to him as he was leaving. He opened it up, gingerly, wondering what the hell his counterpart could have made for him...and there, nestled inside the tissue paper, were two pendants, each bearing an entwined J and R. They weren't the same as the ones the other men had been wearing, but they were similar, and Rodney recognized the other Rodney's familiar flair for design. He turned the pendants over and touched the initials with his fingertips. The J and R were so elegant, and they looked just right together, the new design working perfectly. Rodney remembered that his counterpart had said that he'd made them and he felt touched that the other Rodney would have done something like that for him. What the hell was he supposed to do with them, though? He knew what he should do with them, knew what some part of him longed to do with them, but he wasn't brave enough, so he wrapped them up again and put them under his pillow. He'd think about it again in the morning.

\* \* \*

The morning didn't bring any answers, though. Rodney had spent a restless night worrying about those pendants under his pillow, and by the morning he was still none the wiser as to what to do with them. He took them out, and examined them again for the hundredth time, his fingers caressing the black leather thongs, and shiny glass pendants. Then he took a deep breath and fastened one of the pendants around his neck. He examined himself in the mirror and felt a little thrill when he saw the pendant nestled against his skin; he knew it was ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. He pulled his uniform shirt on quickly over the top and made sure the zip was fastened all the way up, hiding the pendant from view, and then he gazed at himself again. He felt like he was nurturing some guilty secret, but now that he was wearing the pendant, he didn't want to remove it.

Rodney wore the pendant around his neck for the next few days. It gave him a little thrill when he was working to trace it idly with his fingertips. He knew it didn't solve anything, knew he still had to make a decision, but he liked having it there, against his skin.

John kept his distance. In fact, he looked a bit like a lost soul, roaming the city without the general's leather-clad presence at his side. There were dark shadows under his eyes so Rodney guessed that he wasn't sleeping any better than he himself was right now. He was true to his word, though—he didn't seek Rodney out at mealtimes, or drop by his lab late at night to chat. He didn't escort Rodney back to his rooms in the evening, or put his hand on Rodney's shoulder. He didn't look at Rodney with that intent, purposeful gaze, either, and Rodney found he missed him; this was what life used to be like, before their counterparts

had arrived in the city, and he didn't like it. He didn't want this lonely existence back. He'd become used to hanging out with the colonel, and had forgotten just what his life had been like in the old days. This wasn't what he wanted—but the alternative was so irrevocable and life-changing that it freaked him out.

About a week after their counterparts had left, Rodney remembered what his doppelganger had said about there being a box in their rooms and he went along to check it out. It felt strange being in here, in this place which had been so much their place. Rodney glanced around the room—it had been left neat and tidy, but somehow their presence still lingered. He saw a box on the table, and supposed this must be what his counterpart had been referring to. He went over to it and found a note attached to the outside. He opened it—it was in his own handwriting although he knew that he hadn't written it.

Dear Rodney,

Hope you get as much pleasure from these as I did. Everything's been cleaned.

That sounded ominous.

Just remember to relax and go with it — you'll love it once you get the hang of it.

Love, Rodney

Rodney opened the box, and gazed at the contents with wide eyes.

On top was Rodney Sheppard's blue silk shirt. There was another note attached:

This is for you, Rodney. Should fit — you've dropped a few pounds and are now almost as good looking as me. I've got dozens of things like this back home and, God knows, your wardrobe needs all the help it can get.

Rodney rolled his eyes. God, that idiot still had the power to be annoying, even when he was in another universe. Rodney put the shirt to one side and pulled out the black pants that his counterpart had worn with it. He fingered the lace up crotch, wondering if he'd ever dare to wear something this revealing.

Give them a try. John will enjoy seeing that ass of yours in these,

the note said. Rodney flung the pants on top of the shirt and then he looked back in the box and his mouth formed a wordless "O" as he saw what was inside. He reached in and pulled out a soft, hide flogger, with another note attached.

You have to get John to use this on you. It's like being caressed with a pillow — so soft!

Rodney let the long, velvety strands slide through his fingers. It did feel nice, he had to admit, although he wasn't at all sure about anyone using it on him. He had a sudden image of Rodney Sheppard, naked, being stroked with this implement, and he felt himself harden involuntarily.

Next out of the box was a much harder flogger, made of plaited rope.

This one's kind of a companion to the other one, only this one bites where the other one kisses. They work well together in the right hands (and we both know whose hands those would be). The dual sensations are.... Well, try it and find out.

Rodney put that on one side and went back into the box. He pulled out a paddle.

I almost insisted we took this one with us because John made it for me, but he said he could make me another one when we got back and we'd look stupid carrying this through the beam. He knows what you guys are like about this kind of stuff.

"He was right about that," Rodney snorted, slapping the paddle lightly against the palm of his hand. It made a thwapping sound, but it was quite light. Rodney put it to one side and looked in the box again. He was near the end now, but towards the bottom of the box were two pairs of soft cuffs and a couple of clips to tie them together.

The colonel will probably need to use these to keep you still because I expect you'll be crap at that to start with. You have such trust issues. Learn to relax and you'll see how good it can be,

was the written instruction. Rodney rolled his eyes at that one and tossed the cuffs onto the other pile. Finally, he pulled out a blindfold and a leather gag.

I expect the colonel will want to use this gag on you — can't blame him. I know I've wanted to.

Rodney actually couldn't stop himself laughing out loud at that, despite himself.

As for the blindfold, it'll help you with your pathological need to always be in control. Sometimes it's nice to just give it all up. I know you won't believe me, which is why you need to try it for yourself.

Rodney was about to put everything back in the box and then paused, catching sight of another note, right at the very bottom of the box, nestled against some strong, lightweight chains. Rodney opened it.

Okay — there's something else. It's in the closet. Don't leave it there in case the colonel finds it! Take it somewhere and burn it! Trust me on this. You never, ever want him to get his hands on it.

Intrigued, Rodney went over to the closet and opened it. It was empty, save for a long, whippy switch. Rodney reached out and picked it up, then swung it experimentally through the air. It made a whizzing sound and moved through the air so fast that he had no doubt how much damage it could do. Rodney winced, remembering the awkward way his counterpart had sat in his chair in the mess hall, ass resting gingerly on one crossed leg, the day after being on the receiving end of this particular implement. He put the switch back in the closet and shut the door, making a mental note to dispose of it later.

Rodney put everything back into the box and closed the lid, then took another glance around. His gaze settled on some hooks in the ceiling and when he glanced down, he saw their counterparts in the floor. He shivered, imagining the scenes that had taken place in this room. He could see the general, striding around the room, those long legs of his encased in those tight leather pants, wielding one of the floggers. He could see the other Rodney, tied up and blindfolded, and the image made him harden immediately. Was this really what he wanted? He had to admit that it didn't sound bad. Rodney's handwriting and his cheery, sarcastic notes, made it all sound so very normal, and even...enticing?

Rodney picked up the box and walked over to the door. Then he paused, took one last look around, and left. He went back to his own room, and put the box down on the table there, then opened it again and removed the ice blue shirt. He took off his own shirt, and pulled the silky garment on. He had to admit it felt good against his skin—soft and sheer, caressing him with the softest of whispering touches. Rodney went over to the mirror, and gazed at himself. He hadn't realized that his hair had grown so much in the past few weeks. He'd been too busy to think about getting it cut, and it had started to curl at the ends. The pendant was visible through the shirt's open neck and...the strange thing was that he should have looked like Rodney Sheppard, but he didn't. He looked like himself, only his face looked a little softer, and his eyes a little brighter than usual and there was something about the way the shirt made him feel that loosened up his shoulders and made him think of sex. Rodney liked the way the shirt skimmed his nipples, making them harden into little points. His nipples were always fairly prominent, anyway—they were incredibly sensitive and stood to attention at the least stimulus. Rodney caressed them through the silk shirt, amazed by how sensuous the cool fabric felt against his warm skin.

What would it be like to be tied up, he wondered, to be tied up and to have John's warm mouth slide across his naked, vulnerable body? Would he squirm and whimper and beg for release at the same time as begging for more? He moaned, aching with need, his cock rock hard. What would it be like to be exposed, overpowered, made to submit...? He remembered lying under John's hard body, remembered saying the 's' word, remembered how good it had felt to have his arms held above his head by John's strong hands and the warmth of his breath on his face....

Rodney fingered the pendant around his neck. "I'll make you mine...." The words danced in his memory. Did he want to belong to someone? Did he want to be claimed? To be held down, and kissed, and fucked, and...loved...?

"Yes!" a voice in his head said, and he found himself walking over to the bed. He grabbed the remaining pendant from under the pillow, felt it warm up in his hot, scared hand, and then he was running out into the hallway. He ran along to John's office, but he wasn't there. Then he ran along to the practice room, to find Ronon sparring with some Athosian man he

didn't know—but there was no sign of Colonel Sheppard. Rodney left without saying a word, and ran along to the puddle jumper bay. He was so intent on finding the colonel that he didn't realize that he didn't have a clue what he was actually going to say to him when he did.

His heart did a somersault of relief and fear when he saw John, standing in one of the puddle jumpers, examining the console. Rodney hesitated, his hand closing even tighter around the pendant, but now was not the time to pause. If he stopped now, then he might never do this. Rodney ran up the ramp, into the puddle jumper, and John turned, a surprised look on his face.

"Rodney? What the...?" John stopped, and looked at Rodney's silk shirt in surprise, then he caught sight of the pendant around his neck and his eyes widened. "Rodney?" he said

quietly, gazing at him so intently that Rodney found that his mouth had suddenly gone completely dry. He didn't know what to say—and didn't trust himself to speak, anyway, so he just grabbed the colonel's hand, placed the pendant in it, and closed the other man's fist around it. Then, suddenly appalled by the enormity of what he'd done, he turned and fled.

End of Part Twelve

### Part Thirteen: Universal Constant by Xanthe

Rodney made it back to his quarters, his entire body shaking, his legs feeling weak underneath him. He couldn't believe what he'd just done—but he couldn't bring himself to wish it undone, either.

"Idiot," he berated himself. "Oh god, you behaved like a stupid girl with a crush...running away for god's sake...he'll think you're insane. God, even I think you're insane and I'm you. Oh shit..." Rodney paced the room, gnawing on his fingernails, unsure what was going to happen next. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Rodney came to a sudden standstill and stood there, transfixed, unsure what to do.

"Rodney?" John's voice, low and questioning.

"Obviously that was a stupid thing to do," Rodney said, trying to sound calm and rational. "I clearly made a mistake," he said through the closed door.

"Why don't you open the door and we can talk about it?" John suggested in an eminently reasonable tone.

That didn't sound too bad. Rodney thought he could do that. He found his feet going over to the door, and his trembling hands opening it...and John was standing there, an intent, fierce look in those hazel eyes of his. Rodney's gaze was drawn to the pendant around the other man's neck, the mirror of his own.

"Ah - about that..." he began, but he didn't get a chance to say anything else because John swept forward, grabbed hold of his face, pushed him back against the wall, and captured his lips hard with his own.

Time seemed to stand still for several seconds while Rodney struggled to figure out what the hell was going on. John's hands were firm and warm on the side of his face and the wall was hard and unyielding behind him, giving him nowhere to go. John's lips were utterly insistent, offering him no choice at all but to surrender as they worked his own open, and then John's tongue was in his mouth, devouring him, possessing him, claiming him...Rodney groaned and felt his entire body suddenly go into freefall. He had never been kissed like this before and his mind cried out in surprise at the same time as his body surrendered completely. He felt as if he was flying through space, and John was all that was holding him up, and it felt so good, so right that he knew it hadn't been a mistake. This could never be a mistake. This was where his whole life had been leading and the universe was slotting into place around him, finally ending up where it needed to be, where it had to be, where it had always been heading if he'd only had the sense to see it.

Rodney found himself returning the kiss with a passion he hardly knew he possessed, opening up wide, every nerve in his body zinging with charged sexual energy. All he was aware of was John's body was pressed close to his, John's knee between his open legs, and John's thighs pressed against his own groin, so close that he could feel the hardness of the other man's erection digging into him. Rodney fumbled to place his hands on John's hips, just to keep himself upright, as John continued to kiss him as if his life depended on it, weeks of pent-up emotions finally spilling out. They kissed until Rodney thought he might pass out, and then John finally drew back for air. Rodney caught a glimpse of wild hazel eyes, and then John grabbed his hands, pushed them over his head, and held them there, pinning Rodney against the wall.

"Still want to talk about it?" John asked, in a voice throaty with arousal.

"No...I, uh...think that cleared a few things up," Rodney replied softly, his eyes transfixed by the sight of John's wet, slightly swollen lips.

"Good. Oh, God, I've wanted to do this for so long," John whispered, his warm breath sending shivers down Rodney's spine. "I've wanted you for so long. Thank God...oh, thank God...."

He kissed his way down the side of Rodney's exposed neck and then swooped back in to claim another fierce, hungry kiss from Rodney's lips and Rodney moaned and went limp in his arms. This was intoxicating and overwhelming at one and the same time; Rodney had never been swept away by any kind of physical passion before. His relationships had always been so short and awkward, and he'd never wanted anyone with this level of desire before, either—or had them want him like this in return. He hung there, helpless in the other man's grasp, as John kissed him into the wall. Finally John drew back and released his hold on Rodney's wrists, only to grab him around the waist and pull him close, their bodies pressed tightly against each other, John's hands roaming restlessly over Rodney's back and ass.

"I want you," he whispered into Rodney's neck. "I want you so much," and his voice was hoarse with need. Rodney understood the feeling. He was sure that if he didn't have John soon, then he'd explode with frustration.

"Want you, too," he whispered.

"Now," John said insistently, and Rodney nodded, and grabbed John's face between his hands and kissed him again, needing to feel the other man's lips on his body. John grinned, and grabbed Rodney up and pushed him over to the bed, their lips still pressed together, and

Rodney had the sudden realization that this thing that he'd been fantasizing about for so long was now real, and about to happen, and he found himself scared and aroused at one and the same time.

"I've, uh, never...with a man," Rodney stumbled to explain.

John grinned at him and pushed him down on the bed, leaning over him to steal another kiss. "I kind of figured that one," he said. "It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

"You mean you've done this before?" Rodney asked, astonished.

John wrapped his hand carefully in Rodney's hair and drew his head back slowly, then kissed him several times on the throat, from his chin to his Adam's apple.

"Sure," he said when he reached Rodney's collar bones. "A few times."

Keeping one hand in Rodney's hair, he traced the line of Rodney's collar bone with his index finger, trailing a line of pure fire in his wake. Rodney whimpered and pushed up against him and John grinned and pulled Rodney's head right back, exposing his throat, and then went in for another kiss on his mouth. Rodney hung there, utterly helpless and unable to move while John claimed him once more with his lips, momentarily removing any power of coherent thought from Rodney's brain.

Then John released him, but only so that he could push him back onto the bed, so he was lying there on his back, gazing up at John, feeling like a rabbit about to be eaten by a wolf. John knelt on the bed, straddling him.

"Don't worry, Rodney," John told him, fingers ghosting down the side of Rodney's face, caressing him gently with tightly leashed sexual energy. "I'll take it really slow. You'll be begging to feel me inside you by the time I'm done."

"What? Uh...why do you assume...? Why am I...?" Rodney faltered.

"I top, Rodney," John told him, his teeth flashing a startling white as he gave another one of those sexual grins and he dipped his head and kissed Rodney's throat again.

"How do you know I don't top?" Rodney countered.

"Do you?" John asked, working his way up to Rodney's jaw.

Rodney sighed. "Oh, I have absolutely no idea," he muttered.

"You bottom. Trust me on this," John told him, ending up at Rodney's mouth and kissing him again. He pressed his weight forward, holding Rodney down with his own body, and kept him there while he kissed him into the mattress until Rodney thought he might have stopped breathing. It was strange, one part of his brain observed, how kissing a man could feel so good. It should have felt awkward, feeling a stubbled face against his own, and a hard erection digging into his thigh, but instead it just felt intoxicating.

"You're thinking too much," John told him. "I don't want you to think at all, Rodney. It's like flying the puddle jumper—I just want you to feel."

He grabbed Rodney's arms and pinned them over his head and Rodney was reminded of that wrestling session and how John wouldn't let him up until he'd submitted. Now he knew that something similar was being asked of him, and he went limp in John's arms, and allowed the other man to pin him down and keep him in place.

John grinned. "Oh, that's good," he purred into Rodney's ear, his voice dripping sex. "Oh, that's so good. I like it when you do that. Give it up to me, Rodney. Let me take it...let me take you...."

His mouth wandered down the side of Rodney's face, roved down over his silk shirt and located a nipple through the sheer fabric. Rodney gave a squawk as John covered the silky nipple with his mouth and warmed it through his shirt. Then John transferred his attention to the other nipple, capturing it through the silk and worrying at it with his tongue. Rodney gave a strangled sob, twisting up, and John pushed him back down.

"Keep still for me, Rodney," he whispered, and Rodney fell back again, writhing with pleasure as John tongued him again through the silk. It felt so good, so arousing, so intense... and Rodney found himself sighing with pleasure. This was so different to any of his experiences with women. He had usually been the one making all the moves then, and this whole concept of submission, of offering himself up to John, was at the same time unfamiliar and yet instinctively what he wanted to do.

John sat up, still straddling Rodney's body, and leaned forward again to look in Rodney's eyes. Rodney noticed his pendant, hanging down from around his neck and John grinned, seeing where his gaze was directed.

"Thought you'd never do it," he said. "Knew you wanted it...wanted it so bad...but was beginning to think I'd have to wait forever...and then...oh, God...I need this so much. I need you so much, Rodney. I have to have you...it's been killing me keeping it inside." His fingers gently touched the side of Rodney's face, and Rodney was surprised to see that they were trembling. "But you're mine now," John said softly. "I told you I'd make you mine, Rodney. Will you let me do that now?"

Rodney gazed at him, transfixed by the fierce, loving look in the other man's eyes. He nodded dumbly, wanting this with every single fiber of his being, and John's face creased

into a smile.

"Good," he whispered. "There are so many things I want to do to you...."

He sat up, settled his weight on Rodney's waist and then started to unbutton the silk shirt. Rodney put out a hand to grab John's wrist, stopping him.

"Uh...shouldn't we turn the light off or something?" he suggested.

John's smile widened into a laugh. "Oh, no, you don't," he said. "I've been waiting for weeks to get to see you naked. There is no way, no way that you are going to hide from me anymore, Rodney McKay. You've been doing enough of that as it is."

"I don't.... I'm not comfortable...." Rodney wriggled and John grabbed hold of his arms again and pushed them back over his head, then leaned forward and held him there.

"You're mine now," he said, his warm breath trailing a path of fire over Rodney's flesh. "And I want to see you."

Rodney saw a look of total sexual longing in John's eyes and he knew he was powerless to resist. He knew John would take him places he was scared to go, but he also knew that he needed to go there, and would never really be happy if he didn't. "Okay," he whispered numbly.

John smiled down at him, and rewarded him with a sweet kiss on his lips. Then he released his hands and moved back to Rodney's shirt.

He took his time, his tongue protruding through his mouth as he worked, wetting his lips and making him look like some demented sex god. Rodney lay there, gazing up at him as he worked on the buttons, torn between his usual embarrassment and a need—no, a longing—to offer himself up and allow John to do whatever he wanted to him. Finally, John finished, and then he ran his hands up along the edges of the silk shirt and slowly, very slowly, slid the two halves off Rodney's chest. John's breathing grew heavier as he revealed Rodney's naked body beneath the shirt, and Rodney was transfixed by the way the other man was looking down on him. John's eyes were heavy-lidded with lust and he paused and ran his index finger gently down Rodney's bare chest, making Rodney shiver.

"Oh, God...I can't tell you how long I've wanted to touch you here," he whispered. "It's been all I could do to hold it back. That time when we were wrestling, I wanted to tear your clothes off and get my hands on your naked skin. I knew you weren't ready, though...took every single ounce of self control I had to allow you up when I just wanted to fuck you so damn badly, wanted to hold you down and make love to you until you screamed with pleasure. You have no idea what it did to me hearing you say that word. Say it for me again now...say it, Rodney."

Rodney was spellbound; he had no idea that John's passions had run so deep, for so long. Now he appreciated just how self-controlled the other man had been with his long, slow

courtship, waiting so patiently until Rodney finally woke up to what he wanted.

"Submit," he whispered. "I do...submit...to you, John."

Hearing the word again seemed to galvanize John into action. He lowered his head and pressed a little kiss to one of Rodney's nipples and Rodney gasped and reached out his arms blindly to grab John's head. "Mmm...feels good?" John said, with another of those frankly sexual grins.

"God, yes!" Rodney wasn't sure anyone had ever kissed him in this particular spot before. Mainly, when he'd slept with women, it had been him doing most of the touching and they hadn't shown all that much interest in his nipples.

"Shhh...relax..." John soothed, and then he dipped his head again and sucked down hard on the nipple he'd just kissed. Rodney nearly jumped off the bed as a jolt of pure pleasure zinged throughout his entire body.

"Oh, shit," he whimpered. John sucked down even harder and Rodney felt himself moaning and thrashing around.

John looked up. "Keep still or I might have to tie you up," he said in a throaty voice of pure sexual promise. Rodney swallowed hard. "Ah...you like that idea," John murmured.

"I don't know," Rodney replied, feeling himself flush. John smiled at him.

"It's okay. We can find out," he said, in a surprisingly gentle tone.

"I'm not him, John," Rodney said, feeling anxious.

"I'm not the general either," John told him. "I don't want to punish you, or tell you what to do and what to wear and what to eat. I do want to be in control though, Rodney - here, in the bedroom, when we're alone together, and I think you want that too - yes?"

Rodney nodded, helplessly. Yes, he wanted that. He'd wanted that, on some level, ever since he'd met the other man, even if he had never admitted it to himself.

"Then that's fine. We both want the same thing," John said softly, and he brushed his fingers gently down the side of Rodney's face, his fingers searing lines of yearning on Rodney's skin.

"So - these are pretty sensitive, huh?" John said, moving back down to Rodney's nipples. He sucked on them again and Rodney answered him by giving a whimper of pleasure. "Let me play, Rodney," John told him, lifting his head again. "I want to play with you."

Rodney groaned and bucked up again as John dipped his head once more and sucked on his other nipple. After a while, Rodney grew accustomed to the sensation—and then he found he liked it so much that his cock was practically digging an escape tunnel out of his pants.

Finally, John finished playing and went back in for another deep kiss on Rodney's mouth.

Afterwards, he drew back and sat up. "I need you completely naked now," John told him. "Take that shirt off," he commanded, and Rodney shrugged the opened garment off his shoulders, at the same time as John began unfastening Rodney's pants.

"I'm looking forward to this bit," John told him with a grin. "Now lift your ass."

Rodney did as he was told and John yanked off Rodney's shoes, then pulled his pants and boxer shorts down in one fluid motion and threw them onto the floor, pausing lastly only to pull off his socks. Then he knelt on the bed and surveyed Rodney, his gaze sweeping over his newly naked body. "Oh, yeah...this is what I've wanted to see," he said breathlessly. "Wanted to get my hands on this beautiful cock for so long...." He reached out and wrapped a hand around Rodney's rock hard cock and Rodney gasped and sat up. John pushed him back down again, not releasing his hold on Rodney's cock. "How long since you last had a blow job?" he asked.

Rodney shook his head, beyond speech.

"That long, huh?" John grinned. "Well, just relax and let me work. I want you to come for me, Rodney. Don't hold back. I want to taste you."

Rodney closed his eyes and, a second later, he felt something warm wrap itself around his cock and he gave a startled shout of pleasure. "Oh, God," he whimpered, as John sucked the tip of his cock, and then slid his mouth over the entire crown. "Oh, shit..."

John sucked him for only a few seconds before Rodney could feel himself about to come. John had told him not to hold back, but it seemed such a disgracefully swift orgasm that he tried to stop himself. It was no use, though—John's mouth was too warm and arousing, wrapped around his hard cock, and eventually he couldn't contain it anymore and he found himself coming. John held his hips and swallowed his come, and then he licked Rodney's sated penis before sliding back up Rodney's body with another of those sexual grins on his face.

"You really needed that," he commented.

"I know," Rodney sighed, feeling his entire body relax in a post-orgasmic haze.

"Don't relax too much because I'm going to get you hard again in just a minute," John told him without any hint of doubt at all.

"I might be horny, but I'm not eighteen!" Rodney protested.

John just shook his head. "You'll get hard for me, Rodney, if I ask you to," he murmured and Rodney shivered, his mind definitely aroused by those words, even if his cock was still soft.

John got off the bed and undressed, slowly, taking his time, and Rodney licked his lips and rolled over onto his side to get a better view, propping up his head on his hand. John's body was lean and toned, his shoulders and chest well defined, and Rodney found himself

fascinated by the play of muscles under the skin. His gaze traveled down over John's washboard stomach and came to rest on his cock. Rodney had never had any appreciation for the male physique before, but his entire body quivered when he gazed at John's cock, clearly responding on some basic level. John's cock was thick, hard and pulsing with a blunt head, and Rodney wanted to suck that cock, to hold it, run his fingers over it; and to take it into his body and make love to it every which way he could.

John retrieved something from his pant pocket and placed it on the nightstand.

"I stopped off for some lube on my way here," John told him, climbing back onto the bed. "I figured there was no way you'd be that prepared. Now...turn over, Rodney, because if I don't see your ass soon, I swear I'll go insane."

"My ass?" Rodney said, surprised.

"Your ass. I've been thinking about nothing but your ass for weeks. I must have it, Rodney. Now. I want to stroke it, and kiss it, and bite it, and get inside it. It's been driving me crazy."

Rodney found it astounding that anyone would feel that way about his ass, but he rolled onto his stomach and then glanced back over his shoulder. John pushed his shoulders down so he was flat on the bed, and then gazed at Rodney's ass, his face just a few inches away from it. Rodney saw John's breathing becoming heavier again and saw his pupils turn dark with arousal.

"Oh, shit," John whispered. "This is beautiful. I knew it would be...." He kept Rodney's shoulders pinned down with one hand and stroked his other hand gently over Rodney's ass, just fondling the skin with the lightest of touches. Rodney sighed—it felt so good.

"Oh, you like that, don't you?" John said. "You like being petted, being stroked...I can almost hear you purr, Rodney."

"Mmmmm!" was the sound that emanated from Rodney's throat, sounding exactly like a purr.

"That's good. I'm glad you like this, because I am going to be touching this ass the whole time from now on. This ass is mine now, Rodney, and I'm going to play with it every day."

Rodney wasn't sure what he was enjoying the most, the stroking or the way John was talking to him, and he felt a twitch in his cock which should have been sated, but clearly was eager for more.

John trailed his fingers lazily over Rodney's ass for what felt like hours, and then his hands strayed closer and closer towards the crack between the cheeks, and then suddenly Rodney felt his buttocks being parted and he gave a cry of surprise as he felt John's tongue slide inside him.

"Oh, shit!" he cried out, grabbing fistfuls of sheets. He'd never been rimmed before, and it

felt exquisite. John's tongue slid in deep, back and forth, making him hard all over again, just as John had predicted. Then John was licking his buttocks, and then nibbling just a little, and then he pressed his teeth down harder and Rodney glanced back, with a little cry of surprise, to see a faint bite mark imprinted on his flesh.

"I had to do it," John told him. "Your ass is so plump, so soft, so sweet...I just need to bite it. I'd like to bite deeper next time," John growled huskily. "Will you let me do that, Rodney?"

Rodney swallowed hard and then nodded. He liked the mark on his ass, liked the way John was looking at his ass, and he wanted to feel the other man's teeth on his body again. John smiled, and soothed a hand over Rodney's buttocks, fondling them.

"Such an amazing ass," he murmured. "Now, hold still for me. Don't move. Let me mark you." He lowered his head again, pinned Rodney's body to the mattress with his hands, and then started licking at his buttocks once more. Rodney relaxed, enjoying the insistent lapping, and then suddenly he felt John's teeth and he gave a strangled cry. It felt strange...it hurt ...but it also made his cock ache with need. Was this what Rodney Sheppard had meant by a "good hurt"?

Those teeth seemed to stay in his flesh for a long time, sinking into him for what felt like an eternity and Rodney loved it. He loved offering up his body for his lover to tease and torment, and most of all he loved the idea that John was putting his mark on him. His buttock started to ache and he took a mouthful of pillow and tried to stop himself squirming. He was already getting used to the fact that John didn't like him to wriggle when he was playing with him. He wanted Rodney to surrender and capitulate—that was what turned him on and it turned Rodney on, too, although he'd never have believed that if he'd been told so a few weeks ago.

Finally, the bite came to an end and John sat back and surveyed his handiwork.

"Beautiful," he whispered, running his fingertips over the bite. "Now you're really mine," he said fiercely, proudly. "Turn over, Rodney. I want to look in your eyes when I enter you for the first time."

Rodney swallowed hard, trembling ever so slightly at the idea of being entered by that thick, blunt cock. John looked big—bigger than Rodney was sure he could take, and he had no idea what it would feel like.

"Shhh," John said, stroking his thigh softly and helping him turn onto his back again. "This will be good. Trust me."

Rodney was beyond speech, and he just nodded, still trembling. John grabbed a pillow and placed it under Rodney's ass, then reached for the lube and slathered some over his long fingers. Rodney gazed at him, finding the look of intent on John's face unbearably erotic.

"Open your legs for me...wide," John said. "I'm going to stretch this little hole. Make you ready for me. I want you to just relax and open up for me...that's all, just relax and let me

in."

Rodney lay back, and John took up position between his open thighs. He gently tickled his fingers around Rodney's anus, teasing the hole, and then slowly inserted one of them, just a little way in. Rodney took a deep breath.

"I said relax," John grinned. "That's an order, Rodney. I expect you to at least try to obey."

Rodney wasn't sure why the thought of obeying John in the bedroom was such a turn-on, but it was, and he wanted to do it, dammit! He wanted to make John proud of him, and give himself up to the other man, body and soul. He made a conscious effort to relax and John slid the finger all the way in and then slowly slid it out again, and then in, back and forth. It felt good, and Rodney found himself relaxing and opening up, wanting more, loving the sensation. John continued the easy thrusting for a few minutes and then inserted a second finger. Rodney tensed and it took him a few moments to get used to the extra width, but then he relaxed again.

John smiled down on him. "See—this feels good, doesn't it?" he said. "You should see what I see...I love the way you're opening up to me..." He paused for a moment and then Rodney tensed again as he felt three fingers slide inside him. This was more of a challenge, and he found it harder to relax. "Shhh," John said again, leaning forwards to press a kiss on Rodney's lips.

Rodney sighed into John's mouth and John kissed him solidly, all the time sinking those three fingers deeper and deeper into Rodney's body. Rodney couldn't keep track of the fingers when John was distracting him with the kiss, and then he realized that he had relaxed and was enjoying the sensation of those fingers pushing into him, slowly, back and forth, back and forth.

John drew back and smiled down on him. He used his free hand to brush the hair away from Rodney's forehead. "I'm going to fuck you in a moment, Rodney," he said. "I'm going to slide into this tight little hole and fuck you until you beg for mercy. I'm going to put my hard cock inside you and make you mine once and for all."

Rodney didn't have an answer. He just grabbed John's free hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. He had wanted this for so long, and now that the moment had come, he couldn't wait for it to happen. He was still scared, but he needed this, dammit.

"Trust me?" John asked, his dark hair slick with sweat.

Rodney thought about it for a moment. This was a big deal for him—he simply never trusted people and never had, but this was John. This was John, who had courted him so assiduously for so long. This was John, who had taken the time and trouble to figure Rodney out, and wait for him to be ready. This was John, who had held back until Rodney gave him a sign. This was John, who he was completely, totally and ridiculously in love with.

"Yes," Rodney whispered.

A grin split John's face in two and he pressed another loving kiss to Rodney's mouth, and then he drew back, removed his fingers, and reached for the lube once more. Rodney watched him slather lube thickly on his hard, magnificent cock, and then he positioned himself between Rodney's thighs again. He took hold of Rodney's buttocks and parted them gently.

"Just let go, Rodney...let me have you...let me have all of you," John told him, and Rodney could feel the colonel's cock pressing against his anus. John pushed against him, just a little, getting Rodney used to the feel of him, and then he took hold of Rodney more forcefully, and snubbed the tip of his cock into Rodney's opening. Rodney gasped. This felt nothing at all like John's fingers! He had been right to worry about John's size—he just didn't see how he could take something this big.

"Relax—it'll burn at first, while I get inside you, but after that you'll get used to it," John told him, and Rodney tried to let go and keep his muscles slack, but it was so hard. "See...this tight little hole will stretch to take me..." John told him, sliding in another fraction.

Rodney gave a hoarse cry and grabbed the sheets with his hands as it burned him unbearably. "Oh, shit...I can't!" he said hoarsely.

"Take it, Rodney...just a little more," John said, inching his way in, and then he was buried up to the hilt in Rodney's ass.

Rodney felt a rising tide of panic. He couldn't take this! He couldn't...it hurt...and he felt so full...! And then something amazing happened.

As John rested there, Rodney felt himself becoming accustomed to the sensation, felt his body relaxing around the large intruder, and then it didn't hurt anymore. It just felt...so satisfying.

John knelt there, giving Rodney time to adjust, gazing down on him with a look of total love and affection in his eyes. "Oh, God...you feel so...amazing...so tight...so warm..."

John flung his head back and Rodney thought he looked like some beautiful sexual demon, poised above him, his firm, naked chest covered in a fine sheen of sweat, his dark hair tousled.

"I'm going to move now," John warned and Rodney hissed out loud as he shifted his position, sending shockwaves through Rodney's body. "I'm going to fuck you now," John promised, grinning down on him. "I'm going to pound into you until you scream and beg and I'm not going to stop until I shoot my load deep inside you."

Rodney felt his own semi-erect cock become rock hard at that and John laughed and wrapped his hand around it.

"I told you I'd make you hard again," he said, and then he moved his hips back and Rodney

felt that warm fullness disappear—and then John thrust back in again and Rodney moaned out loud, every single nerve ending in his body vibrating. John got into a rhythm, thrusting in and out, in and out, faster and faster, his hand moving on Rodney's cock in time to his thrusts. Now Rodney was a mass of sensation—John's cock felt so good inside his body, and he welcomed it deep within him, worshipping it...and then John adjusted his position and Rodney cried out loud as he hit some sweet spot deep inside him. He could hear himself whimpering as every thrust thereafter hit that same spot, sending him spinning off into ecstasy.

"Oh, yeah—you are so a bottom," John said, hips moving endlessly, sending Rodney even higher with every inward thrust. Rodney was incoherent now, gibbering nonsense, and John was everywhere—his big cock inside him, riding him hard, his hand sliding back and forth on his own cock. "You're mine now, Rodney," John said, hips still moving, faster and faster now, so fast Rodney couldn't keep up with all the sensations in his body. "You're mine," John said. "Mine, mine, mine...!"

And then Rodney was coming, and the room was spinning and John was still thrusting, inexorably, claiming him, taking him, making him his. Rodney was dimly aware of John convulsing, and then he felt his come seeping out from his ass. John knelt there, between his open thighs, panting, gazing down on Rodney with a look of such fierce devotion that it took Rodney's breath away.

"Mine," he said softly, and then he slid out of Rodney, rolled onto the bed beside him, took him in his arms and kissed him on the mouth. "Mine," he whispered, with a look of total surprise on his face, as if he hadn't expected that he'd feel it so deeply. "You do understand that, Rodney, don't you?" he said, his hands warm and tight on Rodney's body. "You belong to me now. I just made you mine."

Rodney nodded numbly, thinking that this whole concept seemed really important to John, and then he felt a flood of warmth, of love, of belonging—of being wanted—and he realized it was important to him, too, and he buried his face wordlessly in John's neck and allowed the other man to hold him close.

As he lay there, in John's arms, he wondered why he'd ever had such a problem with this whole concept. Finally, it made sense to him why his relationships with women had always been such a disaster. This was what he was and it was so good that he was relieved he'd been brave enough to embrace it. What he'd just done with John was the most physically fantastic thing he'd ever done in his life, and what he felt now, lying with John, both of them naked, sweaty and sated, was a feeling like nothing he'd ever experienced before. His entire body seemed to have come alive, and he felt totally cherished and loved—and that feeling was a revelation to him. Rodney held on tight, convulsing in John's arms as he realized how close he'd come to not having this. If that accident with the QDD hadn't brought their alternate selves here...if the colonel had moved in too fast and scared him away...if he hadn't taken that one final step and finally given John the sign he'd asked for....

"Hey." John's hands brushed his arms gently, soothing him. "Shh. I've got you now," John told him, his lips brushing Rodney's hair. "I've got you now and I'll always have you from

now on. Shh, shh, shh."

\* \* \*

The first thing John saw when he woke the next day was Rodney lying beside him, curled up next to him, head on his shoulder, hair disheveled. John felt a surge of happiness, and an odd sensation of protectiveness. He remembered the way the general had looked at his own Rodney and now he thought he totally understood that sense of wanting to take care of someone, to look out for them and keep them safe. He'd dreamed of having Rodney for so many weeks now, but the reality had more than exceeded the expectations. He was glad he hadn't forced the pace, or demanded more of Rodney than the scientist would have been able to give before he was ready. Seeing the expression of total trust in Rodney's eyes the previous evening when he'd claimed him had blown John away; Rodney had been worth the wait.

John traced a finger down Rodney's face and along his shoulder and Rodney came to, and gazed at him with bleary blue eyes.

"Hey," John whispered, pressing a kiss to Rodney's cheek.

"Hey," Rodney replied lazily, and for a moment John braced himself, half expecting to see an expression of shock in Rodney's eyes as he realized what they'd done the previous night, but the expression never materialized. Instead, Rodney gave a shy little smile, yet another expression John would never have expected to see on Rodney's usually guarded face.

"How are you feeling?" John asked, brushing his fingertips over Rodney's naked skin, loving the way Rodney shivered beneath his touch. Damn, but Rodney was so incredibly responsive—it was beautiful to watch and it turned him on so much.

"Fine. A little sore," Rodney grimaced.

"I'll kiss it all better," John grinned.

"I'm pretty sure that's what led to it becoming sore in the first place," Rodney replied, in such a Rodney-like tone that John laughed out loud.

"Lie on your front," he said, and Rodney gazed at him, wide-eyed. "It's okay. I just want to play with your ass," John told him and Rodney did as he was told, rolling onto his front and placing his head on the pillow, totally trusting. John rolled back the sheet and then

examined Rodney's ass. It was as beautiful as it had been the previous evening and John sighed. He had a total thing for Rodney's ass—it turned him on so much. John slid down the bed and positioned himself beside Rodney's bottom and then prodded his finger into it, loving the way Rodney's skin dimpled around it. He bent his head and licked the bite mark he'd made the previous evening, sucking on it, loving that Rodney bore his mark on his skin. Rodney made a little whimpering sound and John felt that urge to hold him down, and keep him still. He placed a warning hand on Rodney's back and Rodney subsided, and that just turned John on even more. He found Rodney's submission so completely intoxicating that his cock was now rock hard. John placed a hand on Rodney's butt and fondled it, and then raised his hand and brought it down, loving the way Rodney's flesh wobbled around the little slap. He tried it again, a little harder, and Rodney glanced over his shoulder and gave him a questioning look.

"I know what you want to do," Rodney murmured, and John thought the way he was blushing was the most endearing thing he'd ever seen.

"Will you let me?" John asked, sliding his hand over Rodney's bottom again. "Do it properly, I mean? I'd like to, but only if you want me to."

Rodney's face was now bright pink and he squirmed and muttered something into his arms.

"I didn't hear that, Rodney," John said, depositing another little slap on Rodney's ass.

"Yes," Rodney said, lifting his head from his hands. "Do it.... I want you to do it."

John grinned and sat up, his back against the wall, and grabbed a pillow and put it on his lap. He took hold of Rodney's face and kissed him on the lips and Rodney melted against him, the way Rodney Sheppard had always melted against the general—something that had always made John extremely envious. John released him and, looking down, saw that Rodney's cock was hard again.

"So, tell me," he asked, "that time the general spanked his Rodney in front of us...just how hard were you?"

Rodney squirmed against him, his face still flushing furiously.

"Rodney?" John demanded.

"Oh, okay—I was rock hard," Rodney admitted. John grinned.

"Me, too," he said and he laughed out loud when Rodney's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, don't get me wrong—I was still really mad with you, and I felt pretty sorry for Rodney Sheppard, but it was just so hot," John said. "Partly the spanking but partly...just that Rodney Sheppard gave himself up so obediently, so trustingly – even though he knew what was coming. Something about that was such a turn-on."

"I liked the way the general rolled up his sleeves and seemed so sure of himself," Rodney confided, still flushing. John grinned, feeling like he was getting a good handle on the kinds

of things that turned Rodney on. He doubted that Rodney would always be this shy and quiet in the bedroom – in fact he suspected that once Rodney got used to their new relationship he'd be as mouthy and self-assured in the bedroom as he was in his own lab, but for now he was enjoying seeing the usually smart-mouthed scientist looking so adorably unconfident.

"Come here - over my knee," he ordered, noticing the way Rodney's eyes darkened with arousal at the words and the tone he used when saying them. John swung Rodney down over the pillow, and then caressed his bottom again and Rodney sighed and relaxed, his legs widening. "First, I'm going to spank you and then, if you want me to, I'm going to fuck you again," John promised and Rodney turned his head to gaze at him with a look of total adoration in his eyes.

"I suppose it's too soon to tell you that I love you?" he murmured.

John grinned again. "No, it damn well isn't," he said. "I've waited long enough. And, Rodney? I love you, too."

Then he raised his hand and brought it down lightly on Rodney's bare bottom with a little smacking sound. Rodney gave a little whimper and John stroked the red handprint he'd just left behind and then deposited another light spank on Rodney's ass. Rodney started to make a little mewling sound of pleasure in the back of his throat and John smiled delightedly. Oh, God, this was good! A naked Rodney draped over his knee, his bottom laid out in front of him so enticing-ly while John spanked him—this was fantastic. He loved the feel of Rodney's firm but wobbly butt cheeks under his hand and the way they pinked up so easily. He spanked Rodney slowly, leisurely, stroking him between each spank, loving the way Rodney sighed and gasped and occasionally wriggled. John spanked him until Rodney's bottom was a beautiful shade of warm pink and Rodney was wriggling in earnest, and then, unbearably aroused by the sight of that ass squirming so irresistibly in front of him, John squeezed lube onto his fingers and slid them into Rodney's asshole. It opened up for him easily, still stretched from the previous night, and John examined the entrance carefully to make sure there wasn't any tearing, but it was fine. He finger-fucked Rodney for several minutes, then rolled him onto his side, slid down the bed behind him, firmly pulled those warm buttocks apart and pressed his hard cock into him.

Rodney hissed as John entered him, so John guessed he was still a little sore, and he just rocked into him gently for a while, easing him in, and when Rodney had relaxed, he started pushing back and forth. It was a slow fuck, without the previous night's urgency, just lazy, gentle thrusts and John delighted in the way Rodney's warm bottom felt against his balls and thighs as he rode him, and the sounds Rodney was making in the back of his throat. He loved that he could make Rodney make these sounds—who knew the scientist was even capable of such beautiful, erotic sounds?

"Oh, yeah...milk me, Rodney," John whispered, because he loved talking dirty to Rodney, and loved the effect it had on Rodney when he spoke to him like this. "Take me.... I'm big and hard for you...mmmm." He reached a hand around and found that Rodney already had his own hand wrapped around his cock. John slapped it away.

"This is mine now," he whispered, and he felt Rodney tremble with arousal as he said the words. "I'm going to make you come.... Come for me, Rodney. That's it...oh, god you feel so good. I'm going to come...come with me...oh, yeah..." And he felt himself ejaculate deep inside Rodney's warm, willing body and felt Rodney spurt out over his hand at almost the very same time. Then they just lay there—John felt as if he belonged here, as if this was his home, and he rested his chin on Rodney's shoulder and closed his eyes, totally at one with his universe.

John stayed inside Rodney, loving the way his softened cock felt, still inside Rodney's warm body, and the feel of holding Rodney in his arms. It had taken a long time to tame him, but now there was no sign at all of the scientist's sharp claws and teeth; Rodney was like a warm bundle of loving fur, pressed up against him, utterly trusting. They dozed for a while, and then Rodney shifted slightly.

"How long?" Rodney asked and John knew what he was asking.

"From the day I first met you," John told him simply.

"What?" Rodney glanced over his shoulder in surprise.

"Yeah. I had the strongest reaction to you. The minute I met you, I just itched to touch you. I found myself undressing you with my eyes, wondering what you'd look like with your head thrown back, screaming out loud as you came with my cock in your ass. I just suppressed it because it seemed so complicated and difficult, and because you didn't seem interested. Then they came along, the general and Dr. Sheppard, and suddenly I couldn't suppress it any more. I just knew I wanted you."

"That long? You've wanted me for that long?" Rodney sounded utterly shocked.

"Yes, Rodney—I've wanted you for that long." John nibbled a little on Rodney's shoulder. "I thought maybe you felt something. We were always sparking off each other, and I thought maybe it was about sex, but you never gave me any sign and I didn't want to make an idiot of myself. And then the more I got to know you, the more I didn't want to screw things up between us by making some half-assed move on you. I liked you too much."

"You did?"

John sank his teeth playfully into Rodney's neck. "You really are the most clueless man I've ever met," he growled. Rodney gave a little laugh. "Seriously," John said, kissing the little bite mark he'd just made. "How long did you keep me waiting?"

"You were very patient," Rodney agreed, glancing at him over his shoulder again.

"Didn't want to spook you," John told him.

"How will this work?" Rodney asked. "Out there—how can it possibly work, John?"

"We'll take it as it comes," John told him. "But I'm not hiding, Rodney. You and me—we're for life. You know that, don't you?"

Rodney went very still in his arms, and John could have sworn that he felt him tremble.

"Before he went, I spoke to the general about how to do that lifebonding ritual. I'm not saying it would work, or even that we should try it, but one day...we might want to think about it," John said.

He felt Rodney relax completely in his arms when he said that, and those big hands of his came up to touch John's hands where they were clasped around Rodney's waist, and Rodney rested his hands there, those restless fingers finally still, and that was all the answer John needed.

They dozed for a little while longer, and then John dragged Rodney into the shower. He enjoyed lathering the scientist all over, and the shower took forever because John kept pushing Rodney against the wall and kissing him every few seconds. Finally, clean and happy, they returned to the other room. Rodney put on a bathrobe and John wrapped a towel around his waist. He saw a box on the table and frowned.

"What's this?" he asked, going over to it and opening it.

"Uh, nothing..." Rodney said, looking at him with that endearingly shy expression that John thought he was going to have to get used to.

"Nothing?" John pulled out a paddle and gazed at it meaningfully.

"Just some stuff Rodney Sheppard left me," Rodney sighed. "That's where I got the shirt from."

"Oh, I love that shirt," John told him with a grin. "Looks better on you than it did on him, though." Rodney preened slightly at that. "Maybe because you're you, and you're the one I'm horny for," John added. Rodney preened even more. "Mmmm, this stuff looks pretty interesting." John extracted the soft flogger and ran his fingers through it.

"Really?" There was a definite squeak in Rodney's voice.

"Rodney..." John went over to him, and took hold of his face between his hands. "Like we said - we aren't them. We don't have to do the same things they do. This is our universe and we're the people we are here. There are definite similarities, but we're never going to be exactly the same. These toys are fun, but we don't have to use them. You do it for me without any of this stuff. I'm happy to use it one day, but only if it's what you want, too—and only when you're ready. Okay?"

Rodney nodded. "I did think the cuffs were kind of hot," he admitted. "I like the idea of you tying me up...of being helpless...powerless...."

John smiled at him, thinking how incredibly adorable he looked right now. He knew just how much it had taken the notoriously distrustful scientist to admit that he wanted to be powerless for John. He knew there was absolutely nobody else in this world that Rodney would have admitted that to, and he also knew just how much it had cost Rodney to admit it. He was seeing a whole different side to Rodney now that they were lovers, a side that was shy and endearing and not at all like the prickly scientist he'd known and worked with for so long.

"I'd like that, too," he said, kissing Rodney's lips gently. "We'll try it out—in our own time. We'll give you a safe word. You know I'll always take good care of you, don't you?"

"Mmm," Rodney sighed, nestling against him in that fantastic way he had of making John feel totally special.

John wrapped his arms around him and gazed at him in wonder. Rodney looked different. His face seemed younger, his eyes brighter. He'd lost those tense lines around his mouth and that guarded expression from his eyes, and his whole body was loose and relaxed. Beneath that sarcastic exterior, John realized there had been a lonely man, longing to be loved, and he was very happy to take on that particular task.

There was a sudden flash of light and they both looked around, confused.

"What the hell was that?" John asked.

"I have no idea. ...No, wait." Rodney disengaged himself and walked over to the other side of the room, to where he'd once put tape on the floor and never bothered removing it. There, inside the little square, was a parcel.

"What is it?" John asked.

Rodney turned it over cautiously, and then his face broke into a crooked little grin as he read the note attached to it.

"It's from them," he said, handing it over. John grinned back at him, and they both sat down on the bed and Rodney read the note out loud.

Hey, guys. Took me a few days, but I finally got our QDD up and running. Here's a present from us to thank you for your hospitality. It's good to be home, but we miss you guys and your weird universe. Anyway, we thought you two might be about ready for this. Congratulations!

And then there was a scrawled Rodney in the same handwriting, followed by a much less

flamboyant John beside it.

John grinned and slid his fingers under the brown paper wrapper. He opened the parcel and something fell out onto the bed.

"What is it?" Rodney asked, moving the paper aside so he could get a proper look at it. John took one look and laughed out loud. There on the bed was a thick, black, leather belt, with a buckle in the shape of a puddle jumper, and hanging from the belt were various items, including a hard leather strap. Beside the belt was a slim, silver collar, with a shiny little lock on the front. They were very different to the belt and collar their alternate selves had worn, but John and Rodney both understood the symbolism immediately.

"Oh, God," Rodney sighed.

"So...if we put these on, does that mean we're married?" John grinned.

"Not in this universe!" Rodney replied. "And by the way, that strap? There is no way it goes near my ass."

John laughed out loud. "That's fine by me. I'll just keep it for show," he grinned. "Although maybe one day...?" He gave Rodney a sly look and the scientist blushed.

"We'll see," he replied, and John smiled, because he thought that Rodney might have needs he could barely admit to himself yet, but they'd see where their journey led them.

"I think you'd look cute in the collar, though," John told him. "Maybe occasionally you could wear it in here, when we're alone, just as a turn-on? You gotta admit, you were fascinated by it from the minute they arrived."

"Was not!" Rodney protested.

"You so were! You complaining endlessly about Rodney Sheppard's collar—nobody makes that much fuss about something unless they're secretly intrigued by it." He picked up the collar and held it up.

Rodney gazed at him for a moment, and then sighed. "Oh, go ahead. Just don't ever tell anyone," he said.

John grinned, and slid the silver collar around Rodney's neck and snapped it shut. "Oh, God, yes—that looks so hot," he said, surveying Rodney appreciatively.

He slid his fingers over the collar and then tickled Rodney's neck. Rodney squirmed and John pushed him back onto the bed, still tickling him, and now Rodney started to giggle. John paused, his head cocked.

"Is that a giggle, Rodney?" he asked.

"Most certainly not!" Rodney replied. John tickled him again and Rodney doubled up against him, still giggling.

"Oh, I think it's a giggle," John said. "Admit it!" He straddled Rodney's body and held his hands above his head, pinning him to the bed and Rodney gazed up at him from wide blue eyes, and the expression of total love and surrender in them turned John on. "Definitely a giggle," John whispered, lowering his head to catch Rodney's lips with his own. Rodney melted against him, completely trusting, and John sighed. He drew back and gently caressed the side of Rodney's face with his fingertips.

"Mine now," John whispered, stroking Rodney gently.

"Yes," Rodney agreed happily. "Yours."

And everything in the universe felt as if it was in exactly the right place.

**The End**

**Friendly feedback adored**

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