

CULTURAL EXCHANGE BY LAMARDEUSE

THANKS: To Sihaya, Cate, Kass, The Grrrl, Tex, and Crys for beta assistance and general moral support, and to Chopchica and Unamaga for creating the Happyfic Fest that inspired it.

RATING: NC-17

SPOILERS: Vague for Season Five.

Rodney's relationship with Richard Woolsey was similar to most of Rodney's relationships with the people around him: not terribly important. As a result, he devoted considerably less time to thinking about Woolsey than he did to, say, developing new weaponry to defeat the Wraith, increasing puddlejumper efficiency, or figuring out how to counter Sheppard's alarmingly effective kamikaze tactics in chess. However, this morning's staff meeting only proved that Rodney should have been paying closer attention to his commander-in-chief, for it was now obvious that the man was certifiably *insane*.

"I'm sorry, you want us to what?" Rodney asked, because he must have misheard. It was the only explanation.

"I'd like to implement a new policy to ensure that Atlantis personnel devote some of their free time each week to creative pursuits."

Rodney laced his fingers together to keep him from flapping his hands impatiently. "And by creative pursuits, you mean..."

"Anything. Painting, dancing, sculpture, photography, music – whatever you prefer."

Teyla nodded approvingly. "That is a very interesting idea, Mr. Woolsey."

"What's so interesting about it?" Rodney demanded.

"Creative activity is important to the maintenance of mental health," Jennifer interjected. "Having some kind of expressive outlet improves your outlook and reduces stress levels."

"I'm sorry," Rodney snapped, folding his arms. "I thought we were leading a scientific expedition, not

auditioning for *American Idol*.”

John elbowed him not-so-subtly, and Rodney rounded on him. “What? Don't pretend to tell me you think this is a good idea. Can you see your marines learning ballet or trying their hand at scrapbooking?”

“On Sateda,” Ronon rumbled, “dancing was a fundamental part of military training.”

“I'll bet it was,” Rodney muttered. Louder, he said to John, “Come on, let's hear from you, too.”

John cleared his throat and looked at Woolsey. “How do you plan on – uh, enforcing this?”

“I wasn't thinking of making it a punishable offence not to take part, if that's what you mean,” Woolsey said, arching a brow. “Perhaps a round of exhibitions could be organized for those who wanted to perform or display their work.”

“And if we don't want to demonstrate our baton-twirling ability in front of hundreds of our colleagues like some airheaded Miss America candidate?” Rodney sneered.

Woolsey regarded him for a long moment, and Rodney reflected that while it made no logical sense, there were times when Woolsey's silent stare was even more forbidding than Ronon's.

“I'm sure you'll find it's not as onerous a duty as you think it is, Doctor McKay. In fact, you might actually find yourself having – fun.” The tight-lipped little smile that accompanied the last word was pure evil incarnate, and Rodney had to clench his jaw to keep from snarling in response.

The meeting broke up shortly after that, and Rodney stomped off with John, Ronon and Teyla toward the mess. “Seriously, what does he think we are, Fine Arts majors? This is ridiculous.”

“What's the big deal?” Ronon asked. “You didn't complain this much about the PT regs.”

Rodney glared. “That's only because I so love having the crap kicked out of me by you and Teyla on a regular basis. Don't try to tell me this isn't an imposition for you.”

Ronon shrugged. “Guess I'll have to take up dancing again.”

Rodney stared at him. “You're kidding.”

Ronon stared back at him, then bared his teeth; Rodney decided to consider that the end of their conversation.

“And what about you?” Rodney asked Teyla. “How are you going to fit two more hours into your schedule?”

Teyla smiled. “I imagine I spend at least that much time singing to Torren every week,” she said. “I think, as you say, I am covered.”

“Oh, that's just fine,” Rodney huffed. “So Sheppard and I are left out in the cold.”

“Speak for yourself,” John muttered.

“You know what? I don't imagine that chess and video golf count as cultural activities in Commissar Woolsey's eyes,” Rodney snapped.

“I wasn't talking about that,” John said somewhat petulantly as they reached the mess.

“Then what? What are you going to do?”

John grabbed a tray and a napkin-wrapped set of utensils before answering. “Thought I'd practice my guitar.”

“Your guitar?” Rodney blinked, momentarily at a loss. He'd completely forgotten about the guitar that sat on a stand in a corner of John's room, maybe because he'd never actually seen John play it, and had thus taken to thinking of it more as a decoration than an actual musical instrument. “Oh, of course,” he said. “I didn't – right.”

Sheppard only lifted a shoulder in acknowledgment, and picked up a sandwich and a bowl of salad. Rodney followed along behind him and the rest of his team, alternating between feeling left out and feeling annoyed that he felt left out.

Rodney didn't give much further thought to the whole find-your-inner-folk-singer movement until want ads started showing up on the main Atlantis message board for band members and people interested in forming a contemporary dance troupe. Rodney immediately sent out a terse e-mail to all his staff warning them of swift and terrible retribution if they clogged up the network with trivialities, and by the time he got back from lunch, the messages had been deleted.

There was also an e-mail from Woolsey asking Rodney to stop by and see him.

Rodney aimed a glare at the room, but everyone had their heads bent over their laptops, seemingly fascinated by something on their respective screens. Christ, it was probably streaming video of Ronon doing the rumba with Major Teldy.

Heaving the sigh of the perpetually put-upon, Rodney rose from his chair and headed for Woolsey's office. Better to get his slap on the wrist over with, and in the meantime, he could give Woolsey a piece of his mind.

The door to Sheppard's quarters opened at his touch, and Rodney stepped inside, already in full-blown

rant mode. "I've been instructed to find a hobby," he announced with a snarl. "I think I'll take up knitting just so that I can jam the needles right up Woolsey's –"

Rodney stopped dead when he realized that Sheppard was sitting on his couch with his guitar in his hands. He was wearing jeans and a faded khaki t-shirt whose red lettering had long since faded into gibberish, and his feet were bare. Lifting his gaze from John's bony toes, Rodney saw Sheppard watching him, an amused tilt to his mouth.

"Up Woolsey's what?"

Rodney blinked, then frowned. "I don't really need to finish that sentence, do I?"

"Nah," John said easily, waving at the chair beside him. "Take a load off."

Rodney hesitated. Seeing Sheppard all relaxed and loose-limbed, he suddenly felt as though he was intruding. He shifted his feet and pointed a finger at the door. "Actually, I, uh, I should just –"

"Rodney." Rodney's head snapped up. "Siddown, already."

"All right, just for a few minutes," Rodney said, plunking down in the chair.

John smiled at him approvingly, then turned his attention back to the guitar. His left hand curled around the neck, while his right began strumming softly on the strings. Rodney watched him play, the music dissipating his rage like so much smoke.

"So what are you going to do?" John said after a few minutes.

"Hm?" Rodney shook himself. "About what?"

John's head was bowed over the guitar as his fingers spanned the frets to form a chord. "About your chosen form of artistic expression," he said.

Rodney sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I have no idea."

"Well, I guess I could teach you to play guitar," John said, glancing up at him. "If you want."

Rodney straightened slowly, staring at John, who had gone back to watching his fingerings. "Oh," he managed, completely at a loss. "Uh. That would be – ah –"

John shrugged a shoulder. "If you don't want to, it's okay –"

"No, no, no," Rodney said hastily, "I'd like to, I mean, if you don't mind."

John's face squinched up. "Wouldn't have offered if I minded."

"Right. Yes. That makes sense." Rodney clamped his lips shut to keep himself from babbling further. What the hell was wrong with him? Sheppard had offered to give him music lessons, not asked him to the senior prom. Really, he could stop acting like a tongue-tied adolescent any time now.

“Okay,” John said, nodding and shifting to the end of the couch. “Might as well get started. C'mere.”

“Now?” Rodney squeaked. John only patted the couch cushion beside him impatiently, and after a moment, Rodney obeyed.

“How much do you know about guitars?” John asked.

“About as much as the average person, I suppose,” Rodney hedged, folding his arms.

John surprised him with a curiously open smile. “What?” Rodney snapped.

John shook his head. “Never thought I'd ever hear you admit to being average about anything,” he said. Clearing his throat at Rodney's glare, he said, “Okay, let's start with the names of the strings. This,” he said, plucking the thickest one at the top, “is the E.”

“You're off by a quarter tone,” Rodney said smugly.

John frowned. “What?”

Rodney pointed to his ear. “Perfect pitch.”

“So, not completely average,” John said, the smile still tugging at his lips.

“No, not *completely*,” Rodney answered primly.

“Okay,” John said, thrusting the guitar at Rodney, “then you can start by tuning it.”

Rodney's hand closed around the neck where John had just been holding it. He felt an odd, electric thrill in his fingers when he realized the wood was still warm, then shook his head to clear it as he reached for the tuning peg on the E string.

“Okay, that was good,” John said, “but you're still flubbing the transition to B7.”

“I know,” Rodney gritted, trying to keep his volume at a reasonable level. The truth was, after three weeks of practice sessions like this one, he was just about ready to throw the damn guitar through the window. Only the certainty that John would wring his neck was holding him back. He was used to feeling clumsy and awkward in combat situations, but he was privately quite proud of his manual dexterity. His hands had served him well through countless disasters requiring the swift manipulation of delicate crystals or complex circuitry, and he wasn't used to having them disobey his commands. “I can't make that chord change smoothly, no matter how hard I try.”

John was silent for a few moments, chewing on a thumbnail. “Okay,” he said finally. “Listen, think of it –

like replacing crystals in a DHD.”

“Very funny,” Rodney snapped, to cover his surprise at Sheppard's mind-reading ability.

“I'm serious. I've watched you with machinery; you can move fast.”

“That's only because I've done that kind of thing so many times, it's practically an instinct by now,” Rodney protested. When he looked up, he saw John smirking at him, and felt his face heat. “Oh. All right, I get it, thank you.”

“I'm just trying to point out to you that there are some things even you don't think about.” He tapped the middle of Rodney's forehead with his index finger. “Stop thinking so much and just do it.”

“If you start singing 'feel the music in your soul', I won't be responsible for my actions.”

“Consider me warned,” John said, smiling in that way that Rodney had noticed seemed to be reserved for their practice sessions. They'd fallen almost effortlessly into an easy back-and-forth, with John a surprisingly patient and encouraging teacher. Rodney still wasn't entirely comfortable with the role of pupil – not that he ever truly had been – but if anyone could make it bearable and at times almost enjoyable, Sheppard could.

Still, though, there were times when being with John like this was – well, a little strange. Privately, Rodney acknowledged he was a fairly crappy judge of the subtleties of relationships, but even he could tell that there was a different flavor to their interactions during Rodney's lessons. Rodney noticed that John touched him more freely and more frequently, and in turn Rodney found himself becoming more aware of Sheppard, of the line of his nose or the curve of his jaw, the nearly impossible backbend of his thumb as his fingers splayed over his jeans-clad thigh, tapping out a rhythm. There had also been an insane moment last week when Rodney had stared helplessly at the nape of Sheppard's neck, the skin there shockingly smooth and vulnerable, as John demonstrated a difficult fingering. Luckily, he'd managed to tear his gaze away before John noticed, but it had been a close thing.

“Okay, here goes,” Rodney said, his fingers arching to form the first chord. He began strumming, moving through the changes easily, and then –

“Dammit!” he flared, as his fingers failed to move quickly enough to make the final transition.

“Okay, time for a break,” John said, gently prying the guitar from Rodney's frustrated grip. Rodney slumped against the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling. He felt simultaneously numb and on edge, the whole surface of his skin sensitized to the merest breath of air.

Which is why he nearly leapt up off the couch when John picked up his left hand and started massaging it.

“What are you – ” Rodney began, staring at him. Sheppard's head was bowed over Rodney's hand the way it often was over his guitar when he played, and oh, great, there was that nape again, just when Rodney's grip on his equilibrium was already weak.

“Shhh,” John soothed. The press of his fingers was sure and yet gentle as it loosened stiff tendons and muscle. “Just relax. Remember, this is supposed to be fun.”

Rodney let his head fall back against the couch again. “Things I do well are fun. Things I’m mediocre at are not fun.”

“You’re not mediocre. You’re learning faster than I ever did, and you get better with every session.”

Rodney blinked. “Really?”

John shot a look at him. “I tell you that all the time.”

“Yeah, but I – thought you were just being nice.”

John’s thumb dug into Rodney’s palm as he bent to his task once more. “I wasn’t.”

“Oh.” Finished with his ministrations, John started to pull away, but Rodney caught his hand before he could do it. “I – thank you.”

John looked down at their joined hands, then back up at Rodney, his gaze steady and completely unreadable. “I’m gonna give you the guitar back,” he said quietly, “and this time you’re going to make that transition.”

Rodney shook his head. “No, I think I’d better call it a night – ”

“Listen,” John said, leaning in, “if you quit now, you’re gonna give up on playing.”

“Would that be such a bad idea?” Rodney sighed. “I mean, it can’t exactly be a picnic trying to teach me.”

John’s mouth quirked. “I don’t mind.”

“The thing is,” Rodney said, closing his eyes, “music has never been – my strong suit.” When he opened them again, John was looking at him patiently, waiting for him to continue. Rodney took a deep breath, then heard himself starting to tell a story he’d never shared.

“I played piano when I was a kid. For years. My mother was a symphony cellist before she had me, and I guess she had the idea that I’d continue on in the family tradition. Of course, dad had the idea that I’d continue on in *his* tradition, and so the tug-of-war started.

“I was actually getting pretty good by the time I was ten or eleven – I could play Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Count Basie, you name it. I had a scary ear for melodies – I heard it once and I could play it. When I hit twelve, things – escalated. Mom was pushing me to go professional. I got a new teacher, one of Mom’s old colleagues from the symphony. She was going to prepare me, I was told. You can imagine what Dad thought of that.”

“Let me guess,” John said, his voice tight. “Nobody asked you what you wanted.”

Rodney barked a mirthless laugh. “Believe me, I was just as glad that nobody did ask me. I didn’t want to have to choose between them. But yeah, I ended up resenting the way they used me to – well, to score points off each other, even though I really did love playing – almost as much as I loved astrophysics.” He looked away. “Anyway. All of that came to an abrupt end when Mom’s friend quit two weeks after she started with me. She told my mother I would never be a great musician, because while I had technical

proWess, I had no feeling for the music.”

“She passed judgment on a twelve-year-old?” John's tone was incredulous. “Who the hell does that?”

“People who are grooming said twelve-year-old for a symphony career. At any rate, I quit playing music that day, and maybe I shouldn't have started again.”

John was silent for a few moments, then cocked his head and asked, “Did it ever occur to you that your dad might have bought off your tutor so that he'd win the tug-of-war?”

Rodney stared at him, flabbergasted. And then, suddenly, he felt the laughter start to bubble out of him. He wasn't sure how long he laughed, but by the time he finally giggled to a stop, he was out of breath and his ribs ached.

“I'm guessing that's a no,” John said. When Rodney looked at him, the smile on his face was – well, it was enough to rob his lungs of oxygen all over again.

“That's a no,” Rodney said, wiping at his eyes. “Why didn't I ever think of that?”

“It is kind of surprising,” John drawled, elbowing him. “You're a genius, after all.”

Rodney chuckled. “I'll never know if that was actually what happened, but it's – oddly liberating to consider the possibility.”

“You're not pissed off? After all, you could have been the next Yo-Yo Ma.”

Rodney smirked. “Yo-Yo Ma doesn't get invited to play in another galaxy.”

“True,” John said. He touched Rodney's upper arm lightly, fingertips brushing his skin below the sleeve of his t-shirt. “Do you want to quit?” he asked softly.

Rodney told himself to say yes; it would be easier, certainly. He could tell Woolsey he'd decided to take up weaving, then pay that elderly woman at the market on M3R-446 to make him something he could display with pride at the next show and tell. The two hours a week he was currently wasting on music lessons could be spent on actual productive work, and Sheppard could have his two hours back to do whatever he enjoyed doing.

There was only one problem: he didn't want to say yes. Despite the occasional frustrations, he enjoyed his two hours of time-wasting with John. And John, contrary to all common sense, seemed to enjoy teaching him.

And if he cared to admit it to himself – which he didn't – the truth was that he didn't want to give up the way John looked at him and touched him when they were together like this.

“Give me that guitar,” Rodney said. “I'm going to make that goddamned chord change if it kills me.”

A few weeks later they went on a trading meeting that – incredibly – went off without a hitch. Teyla performed her diplomatic magic, Ronon did his tall and forbidding schtick, Rodney complained about the three-mile hike from the gate, and John alternated between rolling his eyes at Rodney and smiling inanely at the councilwomen, many of whom were ridiculously attractive. So all in all, a good day, if not terribly exciting, though Rodney could easily stand to be bored if it meant he wasn't being shot at.

After they returned and briefed Woolsey, Teyla excused herself to spend time with Torren and Kanaan. They left Ronon behind at the new rehearsal hall near the gym; apparently, he'd started a Satedan Warrior Dance class that was rapidly growing in popularity, especially among the non-US military forces. When Rodney poked his head in, Campbell and Boulanger were already there, and Mulligan and Singh passed them in the corridor.

“What, no Marines?” Rodney enquired, as he and Sheppard headed for their quarters.

John raised his eyebrows. “They're all signing up for Lorne's oil painting classes and Mehta's henna tattooing workshops.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Rodney breathed.

“Nope.”

“What about you? Are you going to be offering a class?”

John shook his head. “I only give private lessons. And right now I've got all the students I can handle.”

Rodney frowned as they entered the transporter. “Wait a minute. How many do you have?”

John hit the map. When they stepped out again, Rodney said, “Well?”

John shot him an unreadable look out of the corner of his eye. “Just one, Rodney.”

Rodney felt his face heating, which made no sense whatsoever. Neither did the fact that he suddenly felt light and almost giddy. “Oh. Well.”

They stopped outside the door to Rodney's quarters. “You going to come by later?” John asked, leaning one shoulder against the wall as he suddenly found a piece of lint on his jacket fascinating.

“Sure. Uh, what time?”

John pursed his lips. “How about seven? I'll grab something from the mess for both of us. We can eat at my place.”

Rodney scratched at the back of his neck. “That sounds good. I'd – like that.”

“Great.” John stood there for another couple of seconds, then blinked and pushed off from the wall.

“Okay, so. Later.”

“Right. Later,” Rodney agreed.

John nodded one last time, then turned and headed down the hall to his own quarters, leaving Rodney feeling like he'd just agreed to go on a first date. Which was bizarre, because they already ate together eighty-five percent of the time, and they hung out in one another's quarters frequently, and there'd never been any awkwardness about that. He might be a genius, but he had no idea why this particular situation was significantly different from any of their other interactions.

At any rate, Rodney wasn't going to solve this puzzle standing in the corridor like an idiot. In the meantime, he only had – he checked his watch – dear God, a little over an hour before he was due to show up at Sheppard's door. Hastily, he palmed the door to his own quarters, then began unzipping his tac vest.

It was two minutes after seven when Rodney made it to Sheppard's place. He'd showered, then noticed that his stubble made him look somewhat scruffy, so he quickly ran his electric razor over his face. Unfortunately, he did it so quickly that he nicked his chin, necessitating a round of cursing, followed by an even hastier first aid session. He'd then spent fifteen minutes picking out something to wear, because as he poked through his closet he found that half of his wardrobe was actually too threadbare or too boring or too tasteless to ever be worn again. He discarded outfit after outfit – god, how did he own a *paisley* shirt? – before finally settling on a charcoal gray V-neck pullover that Jeanie had sent him, which he'd never tried on before. He'd believed that if he started wearing clothes his sister had picked out for him, he might as well give in to the role of middle-aged bachelor and jump right into the Hawaiian shirts, the vinyl belts and the combination of black socks and baggy-assed shorts. However, when he actually looked at himself in the mirror, he had to admit Jeanie had good taste; it was a perfect fit, and the flattering lines of it said 'cool dude' rather than 'old fart', so he figured it would pass muster this evening.

Sheppard's door hissed open, revealing John – well, 'cool' was a good starting descriptor for John, but considering Rodney's descriptions tended to devolve into 'idiotically attractive with hair that really should not be allowed', he didn't try to describe John very often, even in the privacy of his own head. However, before he gave up on the exercise altogether, he couldn't help but notice that John had shaved, too.

Huh.

“You're late,” Sheppard said easily, stepping aside smoothly to let him in.

“Two minutes is not late,” Rodney replied, already surveying the terrain in search of dinner.

“Yeah, it is. I'm gonna have to charge you extra for that, you know.”

Rodney glared at him over his shoulder, and John laughed and clapped him genially on the back, though

it stopped being genial when John's hand lingered and slid over his shoulder blade before letting go. Rodney slowly turned to face him.

John gestured in the general direction of Rodney's torso. "It's – uh. It's a soft sweater."

Rodney suddenly felt every square inch of the sweater clinging to his skin, which had suddenly broken out in a fine sheen of sweat. "Oh. Um. I think it's cashmere."

They stared at one another for a full five seconds, until Sheppard scratched out a question. "Hungry?"

"I'm always hungry," Rodney said, and John laughed again, which was a lot of laughing for John. "So, what's for dinner?"

"S'a surprise," John said, smiling, and Rodney felt that strange tingling feeling again. He took another step into the room, and noticed Sheppard had set up a small wooden table on his balcony, with a matching pair of chairs made out of that rattan-like substance they'd found on P3N-943. There were two dishes with steel covers on them and bottles of beer, already cracked open.

"Oh," Rodney said, intelligently, "that's – really, um." Dear lord, the word *nice* had been on the tip of his tongue. His brain seemed to be malfunctioning; that was the only explanation.

"I wasn't sure if it'd be too cold," John said, tugging at his earlobe, "but you're, uh, wearing that sweater –" he winced "– so, uh –"

"No, I'm sure it'll be fine. This sweater is – it's very, ah, warm. And, well –"

"We should eat," they both chorused in unison. Sheppard gestured Rodney ahead of him, and Rodney obeyed, his legs only slightly rubbery.

After dinner, Rodney was about as keen to practice the guitar – or, in fact, to move – as he was to leap around in one of Ronon's dance classes. John had managed to charm the chef into preparing chicken pot pie, with the peas and cut-up carrots and the really creamy sauce that Rodney loved with an unholy ardor. And then, for dessert, he'd produced a pint of Haagen-Dazs chocolate chunk cookie dough ice cream, and Rodney might have groaned when the first exquisite mouthful overloaded his taste buds with near-orgasmic bliss.

When he opened his eyes again, Sheppard was absorbed in tuning his guitar. There was a rosy tint to his cheeks that hadn't been there before, but Rodney attributed that to the warmth of Sheppard's room after the cooler temperature of the balcony.

"Where did you get this?" Rodney asked, digging his spoon in again. "It's been months since I've had any."

Sheppard shrugged. “Did a little trading,” he said.

“Oh, wow,” Rodney said, another cool, sweet mouthful melting on his tongue, “thank you. This is incredible.”

John glanced at him, then chuckled. “It’s just ice cream, but I’m glad you like it.”

“Just ice cream?” Rodney parroted, incredulous. “You’re kidding, right? This is *Haagen-Dazs*,” he insisted.

Sheppard raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Oh, here,” Rodney huffed, scooping some with the spoon and aiming it at John’s mouth, “try some.”

John recoiled and made a face like he’d just smelled something rotten. “No, thanks. It’s got bits in it.”

Rodney pulled the spoon back. “It’s got – what?”

“Bits in it,” John repeated. “You know, the chocolate and the little doughy balls.”

Rodney stared at him. “Next you’re going to tell me you don’t like Heavenly Hash.”

“I don’t like Heavenly Hash,” John admitted, spreading his hands.

“Oh my god,” Rodney breathed. “You’re a deviant.”

“Hey, I’m a purist,” John sniffed. “Ice cream’s supposed to be smooth, not lumpy.”

“What about butterscotch ripple?”

John rolled his eyes. “That’s not lumpy. It’s all soft.”

“All right, what about – strawberry?” Rodney demanded, pouncing. “Some strawberry ice cream has strawberry chunks in it.”

John appeared to think about it. “Strawberry with strawberry chunks is okay,” he finally hedged.

“How can strawberry with strawberry chunks be okay, Mr. Purist?” Rodney pressed, leaning in. “It’s lumpy.”

“Yeah, but the lumps are the same flavor as the ice cream. That’s gotta count for something.”

“You,” Rodney opined, “are a freak.” John opened his mouth to protest, and Rodney saw this as the perfect opportunity. Before John could speak, Rodney shoved in a spoonful of ice cream.

John’s lips closed around the spoon, and a couple of seconds after that, his eyes closed in bliss. When he wrapped his fingers around Rodney’s to pull the spoon out again, it occurred to Rodney that sharing a spoon with another guy was kind of – well, not something guys tended to do very often. Not if they were – you know, just friends. Good friends, great friends, but still, just – friends.

John’s, Rodney realized, was still wrapped around his, and their faces were – well, close enough for Rodney to be able to see the start of stubble on Sheppard’s chin, and really, it would probably be a good

idea to pull back, and –

He wasn't sure which one of them moved first, but Sheppard's hand released Rodney's abruptly about the same time that Rodney shifted to the opposite end of the sofa. Sheppard looked kind of stunned, but since Rodney didn't imagine his own expression at that moment was any more intelligent, he didn't comment on it.

“So,” John said finally, “that was – that wasn't bad. I mean – for ice cream with bits.”

Rodney only nodded, still too shaken to enjoy his triumph. He placed the lid on the carton and handed it to Sheppard.

“Want to save the rest for later? Sure,” John said, rising and placing it in his fridge's tiny freezer. Turning back to Rodney, he rubbed his hands together briskly. “Ready for your lesson?”

It occurred to Rodney that right then he'd probably rather walk over hot coals. Naked, with all of his former girlfriends watching and offering scathing commentary on his various shortcomings.

“Can't wait,” he said, smiling brightly.

He was doing it. He was playing the guitar.

Granted, he'd never be a Segovia, but being able to strum his way through a couple of dozen songs from memory was surprisingly rewarding. He'd had Jeannie send him some scanned sheet music on the latest Daedalus run, and was taking great pride in parrying John's attempts to convert him to Johnny Cash and Hank Williams with various classics by Joni Mitchell, the Guess Who, Bruce Cockburn and Neil Young.

“If you start playing 'American Woman', I'm taking the guitar away from you,” John warned, when Rodney finished a spirited rendition of 'No Sugar Tonight' in which he'd tried to drag him in on the 'da-uhn-doo-da-dahs'.

“What's wrong with 'American Woman'?” Rodney demanded.

“Nothing, nothing,” John said, holding up his hands as if to ward off an attack. “I love it. It should be the Canadian national anthem.”

Absently, Rodney began strumming the intro to 'Harvest Moon'. “You're insulting my culture.”

John snorted. “Yeah, that's about right. Hating on the good ol' US of A is the cornerstone of Canadian culture, isn't it?”

Rodney looked up, temper flaring. “Oh, that is so not – ” then he saw the mischief in John's eyes and

deflated “ – right, you're baiting me, never mind.”

“I can't resist anything that easy,” John confessed, the corner of his mouth lifting. Rodney flushed and looked away when he felt the ridiculous urge to trace the curve of it with a finger.

“Can I borrow the guitar for a minute?” John asked quietly after a few moments. Rodney raised his gaze again to see Sheppard's expression curiously open and unguarded.

“Oh, um, yes, sure,” he said, passing the guitar to John, who made a great show of fiddling with the tuning for a minute or two, when they both knew it was perfect. Before he started to play, he cleared his throat and looked up, and suddenly Rodney couldn't look away.

Rodney vaguely recognized the opening chords of the song before John began to sing, and when recognition finally struck him between the eyes, he was stunned. While he'd only heard it perhaps a handful of times, he was certain it was a Lightfoot song, and that meant – what did it mean? That John had deliberately taken the time to learn a Canadian song for Rodney? But that made no sense, especially since John had done nothing but bitch – good-naturedly, but still – about Rodney's taste in music being severely compromised by blind patriotism.

John's singing voice was untrained but sincere, and Rodney had been surprised when he'd first heard it, as though John were sharing a secret with him. Watching as John's fingers danced over the strings, Rodney found his effortless skill didn't seem like a challenge; instead, it seemed to invite him in closer, the notes weaving around him and drawing him in.

When John finished the song, Rodney was reluctant to speak first, but finally his curiosity won out. “I'm, uh. I'm kind of surprised you know that one,” he ventured.

John glanced at him and shrugged. “I've always liked his stuff.” He plucked absently at the strings. “And I thought it'd be a good one for teaching you some plucking technique, now that you've got the basic chords.”

“Oh, right,” Rodney blurted, his face heating. Of course John hadn't gone out of his way to learn Lightfoot songs for Rodney's benefit. He was being an idiot. And then John looked up at him, his eyes wary but searching, and Rodney could suddenly see the tension in John's shoulders, the uncertainty, and felt his heart thud against his ribs.

“You want to try it tonight?” John asked, offering the guitar. Or maybe that wasn't all he was offering, Rodney thought; maybe this was one of those moments in relationships where you said one thing but meant something completely different, and Rodney was *lousy* at figuring those out. He always misread them, and was left either apologizing or wondering if he'd missed something really important.

But this was John, and so it had never been more crucial that he not screw it up this time. Time, yes, that was what he needed; he needed some time to think about this, about what it all meant.

“Um,” Rodney said, “maybe – I mean, maybe I'd better not. Because, you know, I feel pretty good about tonight – my playing tonight, I mean – and I don't want to try something new and risk – well. Next time, though, I definitely – yes. That'll be a good one to learn, definitely.” Christ, he was babbling. Clamping his mouth shut, he rose awkwardly to his feet. “I'd better – it's kind of –”

“Late,” John finished for him, the word falling between them like a lead puddlejumper.

“Yes,” Rodney said, nodding and pointing at him. “Late. And I have to be up early, and no doubt you have to be up early. Thank you for dinner, though. That was great, really.”

Setting the guitar down on the couch, John rose to his feet. “Sure,” he said easily, with one of his regular smiles this time, the one he used every day. Rodney's heart sank. He beat as hasty a retreat as was possible, and when he was finally back in his own quarters, he fell into bed without taking off more than his jacket and shoes and lay staring at the ceiling, trying to think about this rationally.

After an hour, he came to an important conclusion: he still had absolutely no idea what was going on.

A couple of weeks later, Woolsey announced Atlantis' first talent show. Rodney decided he would conveniently have a headache that day, but John and Teyla showed up at his quarters before the show and dragged him off to the auditorium that had been set up for the event.

“I still can't believe Ronon is participating in this farce,” Rodney hissed, as they took their seats.

Teyla gave him one of those stern looks that always reminded him unpleasantly of his Grade Five French teacher. “Ronon is rightfully proud of his troupe's accomplishments,” she said icily. “And we are all here to support him, and applaud their achievement.”

“The day Ronon needs support from me is the day I sprout magical wings and fly around the city,” Rodney muttered, but he quickly settled down as the lights dimmed.

The show – all right, it wasn't hideous, Rodney conceded at the intermission. Ronon's group had been one of the best, although seeing Chuck Campbell clad only in a leather jock strap may have scarred him for life. The other acts varied from the passable to the marginally acceptable, so as entertainment it was an improvement on, say, the Chevy Chase film retrospective Sheppard had dragged him to a few months ago. But that didn't mean he had to sit through the rest of the program.

“Come on, we can duck out now!” Rodney whispered, sucking back his third cup of the punch they were serving in the anteroom. “We were supportive. Very supportive. I cheered. I wolf whistled.”

“I've got three troupes of Marines coming up in the second half,” John said, shrugging. “Have to do the CO thing. Sorry.”

“And you will doubtless see many members of your science teams performing,” Teyla said, with that same teacher's voice. “And they will doubtless be pleased to see you in the audience.”

“Oh, god,” Rodney groaned. “Please, no more guilt. I'll stay.”

John grinned at him. “Just think how their little faces will light up when they hear you cheering.”

Rodney ladled himself another cup of punch and swallowed it down in one gulp.

Rodney knew he was in hell when Woolsey stepped in front of the curtain before the finale and announced he would be singing selections from *Rigoletto*.

John blinked. “Wow,” he whispered. “Now that's balls.”

Rodney could only stare in stunned silence, though he wasn't alone; you could have heard a muon drop in the auditorium. Woolsey's enthusiasm clearly dimmed a little, but he forged ahead bravely, gesturing for the curtain to be drawn back.

Which parted to reveal Simpson sitting in front of a piano.

Rodney sucked in a breath. A piano. Not a grand piano, true, but still: a piano. Somehow, Woolsey had managed to get one shipped here on the *Daedalus*, and doubtless there would be a long lineup for practice time. Nevertheless, if Woolsey could get himself preferential treatment by having an eight hundred pound instrument shipped from another galaxy, Rodney, as head of the science department, could find a way to wangle himself a prime time slot.

Rodney turned to John to whisper in his ear. “Tuesdays at eight.”

John turned to him slowly, eyebrow raised in a question, and Rodney realized their faces were quite close because he could see every shade of green and hazel and brown in Sheppard's oddly colored irises. Suddenly, it occurred to him that the little tableau they were making would appear overly intimate to anyone who happened to be glancing their way. He pulled back, trying mightily not to imagine the curious stares of the people seated around them.

“Piano lessons,” Rodney mouthed, feeling John at least deserved some kind of explanation. Both of John's eyebrows went up. He pointed a finger at his own chest, then at Rodney's. Rodney nodded.

John smiled, and oh, wow, it was one of the ones he usually only bestowed on Rodney during his guitar lessons. Rodney could feel his cheeks heating, and suddenly he whipped his head around and caught Zelenka staring at them with frank interest. Although Radek's gaze immediately snapped up to the stage, Rodney continued to glare at him for a few seconds just to ensure he'd made his point.

When he finally turned back to John, Rodney found him also watching the stage, where Woolsey's performance was now in full swing. Sighing, Rodney sat back in his chair and did his best to shut out the music, the audience around him, and most importantly the sensation of Sheppard's arm brushing occasionally against his as he fidgeted in his seat.

Rodney knew something important had changed when his palms started sweating at five minutes to eight. He was in the middle of dreaming up a plausible crisis that would require him to cancel the lesson when Sheppard showed up.

“You're three minutes early!” Rodney exclaimed, stopping John in his tracks. He couldn't help but notice that John was freshly shaven and wearing that deep blue Oxford shirt he wore on special occasions. He was wearing faded, thigh-hugging black jeans that left very little to the imagination. But Rodney had an exceptional imagination, so he could make up a detailed scenario with very little effort.

“You got something against punctuality?” John shot back. He folded his arms, and Rodney's gaze was drawn to his right wrist, which was uncharacteristically devoid of the black sweatband tonight. Instead, he was wearing a bracelet made of what looked like thin strips of woven leather. John's wrists were really astonishingly delicate, and Rodney wondered absently if the bare skin covering his pulse point would be smooth to the touch. When he looked up again, John was watching him, his expression carefully neutral.

Rodney's face grew warm. “It's only that I was going to call you,” he blustered. “I have – there's something I have to do. In the lab.” And all right, that was the most transparent lie ever.

Sheppard didn't seem to pick up on it, though, or if he did, he was too busy looking disappointed, as if Rodney had just told him he couldn't have a puppy for Christmas. “Oh,” John said simply, clearly crestfallen, “well, if you gotta go, you gotta go.”

“I don't gotta go,” Rodney said, then winced. “I mean, it's not – I suppose it can wait,” and hold on, what the hell was coming out of his mouth? Did he actually have any control over his speech centers?

“You sure?” John said, taking a step forward and letting his arms drop to his sides. “I wouldn't want the city to blow up because you were teaching me five-finger exercises.”

Rodney didn't know how Sheppard managed to make 'five-finger exercises' sound like something dirty, but he succeeded beautifully. He opened his mouth, closed it again. “It wasn't anything urgent,” he said finally. “I can do it later.”

Sheppard grinned at him, and Rodney's palms started to sweat all over again. “I should warn you,” Rodney blurted, “I've never actually taught anyone to play the piano before. I tried to teach Jeannie chopsticks once, and she ended up kicking me in the shins.” At John's shocked expression, he added, “She was four.”

John shrugged. “I'd never taught anyone to play the guitar.”

“Yes, but you're a good teacher,” Rodney said. “I don't think I can –”

“You think I'm a good teacher?” John asked. His voice was very close, and Rodney looked up and realized that was because he was close, only a foot or two away. Rodney could reach right out and touch John's chest, not that he'd want to, or that he'd have any kind of excuse except insanity if he did, or even better, he could touch the skin under that bracelet, just brush it with his thumb, that could be passed off as an inadvertent –

“Rodney?”

Rodney shook himself. “Yes, of course I do. Didn't I ever tell you?”

“Nope,” John said pleasantly. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet and his expression began to harden.

“Well, you are,” Rodney said. “You're really good at it, and I'm not.” John opened his mouth to protest, but Rodney halted him with a wave of his hand. “Just agree with me; we both know it's true.”

John cocked his head. “So why did you offer to teach me?”

“Because – well, I suppose it was an impulsive gesture, but because I wanted to give something back, to thank you for everything you've done.” He took a deep breath. “And maybe I wanted to have an excuse to sit down in front of a piano again. To see if I could.”

Rodney was startled when John's hand closed around his upper arm briefly, then slid up to his shoulder and rested there, its solid weight both reassuring and profoundly unsettling. “Hey,” John murmured, “I know you're gonna do fine.”

Rodney closed his eyes briefly, the urge to lean into that touch, into Sheppard himself, nearly overwhelming. “Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he said finally, opening his eyes. “Let's see if it's warranted, shall we?”

John sat beside Rodney on the bench as he flexed his fingers and cracked his knuckles, then tested the function of the pedals. The sustain was a little sticky, but it could probably be fixed with a little –

“Rodney,” John said, startling him out of his reverie.

“What?”

“Play something, will you?”

“All right, what would you suggest?” Rodney snapped.

“Do you remember anything?”

“Nearly everything, thank you.”

John stared at him. “You're kidding.”

“Yes, I am, what do you want from me? I'm a genius, not a freak of nature. I don't remember everything I

played over a quarter century ago, for heaven's sake.”

John rested a hand on his shoulder again; Rodney wanted to tell him the touching was only distracting him, but that wasn't a conversation he was ready to have. “Okay,” John ventured, “then how about chopsticks?”

Rodney snorted. John nudged him with an elbow. “No, really, why not?” John asked. “Show me.”

“All right, all right,” Rodney sighed, complying. As he plinked away, he sped up and increased the volume, then segued without thinking into a boogie-woogie tempo for the chorus, finally ending with a flourish.

When he turned his head, John was staring at him.

“What?” Rodney asked.

John shook his head as though he was waking from a dream. “Nothing.” He turned back to the keyboard, watching it as if it might leap up any second and attack him.

Rodney flushed. “Okay, so you start with G...” He hit the note with a finger, and John copied an octave lower. “Good. Hit it together with the F in the same rhythm, six times.” He demonstrated, and again John copied, and soon they'd made it through the whole song once, then twice. On the third time through, John completed the tune without a single mistake or hesitation. Rodney turned to him, beaming, and John grinned back. This smile was a new one, or maybe the old one from their guitar practices ramped up to supercritical levels, and Rodney wanted to put his mouth over it to see what it tasted like, and Jesus, he was going crazy.

“You know what I've always wanted to learn on the piano?” John asked him, still grinning, voice low and conspiratorial. “The *Peanuts* theme. Do you think we could get the music for that?”

Rodney closed his eyes for a moment, then waggled his fingers in the air over the keys, tracing patterns he would have sworn were long forgotten. Something fierce and young filled his heart in that moment, joy prying itself loose from decades of suppressed memory, and he grinned back at John. Impulsively, he took hold of John's left hand and spread it over the keys from A flat to A flat.

“Think you can manage the bass part if I show you?” he asked.

John's face lit up even more. “Hell, yeah.”

Twenty minutes later, they were playing it through together in perfect synch, Rodney's right hand supplying the melody to John's low rolling rhythm. Rodney had never played many duets as a child, and the ones he could remember weren't anything but a chore; this felt like freedom, like soaring. When they hit the bridge, the two of them pounding the same notes a couple of octaves apart, they both laughed like fools, and the whole thing swiftly derailed into a dogpile of flubbed notes. Rodney didn't mind, though, and neither, it seemed, did John, because they were still giggling like children when they turned to look at one another.

Then John's warm breath huffed against his face, and their laughter died abruptly. Rodney steeled himself, then opened his mouth to praise John's efforts like a good tutor should. He never got the words out, however, because John reached up, took Rodney's face in his hands and kissed him, fast and hard. Pulling back almost immediately, he stared at Rodney, his chest heaving as though he'd just finished a

marathon, his expression confused and shaken and more than a little scared.

“That was crazy, I –” John swallowed. “That was crazy, right?”

“Probably,” Rodney croaked.

“It’s just that –” John gestured between them helplessly, “it’s different, you know? This is different. I mean – we’re different.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Shit. Tell me it’s crazy.”

And that, ironically, was when everything suddenly made sense, not so much because a babbling, incoherent John was strangely hot (though that was nice, certainly), but because John’s confession meant Rodney really *hadn’t* been alone for the last three months.

When John opened his eyes again, Rodney nodded. “That was crazy,” he agreed, leaning forward, “and so is this.”

John made a tiny sound of protest when Rodney’s lips touched his, but it didn’t last long. One of John’s hands caressed Rodney’s cheek before sliding around to cup the back of his neck, and John tilted his head to deepen the kiss. Reaching out blindly, Rodney encircled John’s wrist in a loose grip and found that John’s skin really was as smooth as he’d imagined. John gasped into his mouth as Rodney brushed his thumb over John’s careening pulse, and Rodney took the opportunity to pull back slightly and brush a tentative tongue over John’s lower lip.

This time the sound John made was closer to a growl, and Rodney had just enough time to find that incredibly arousing before John pulled away completely. Rodney blinked, his mouth still half-open, too stunned by sudden uncontrollable lust to realize what had happened. “What? What’s wrong? Are you having second thoughts?”

“I’m having fortieth thoughts,” John muttered, “but right now, I just want to get to someplace where the door locks.” He nodded his head at the entrance to the practice hall, and Rodney flushed when he realized that anyone could have walked in on them.

“Oh, yes, well, of course,” Rodney said, crestfallen. “That makes sense.” He watched as John arose from the bench, then turned back to the piano and scowled at the keyboard. That E flat had seemed a little off – where the hell were they going to find a piano tuner in the Pegasus galaxy?

“Rodney,” John said after a moment. Reluctantly, Rodney looked up to see John looking down at him with what could only be termed fond impatience. “You coming?”

Rodney pointed at him, then at himself. “Oh. You mean – me. And you.”

John nodded; he still looked faintly terrified, but at least he was on his feet. “Behind a locked door. Yeah.”

“Oh,” Rodney said again. “I think – I think I’d like that.”

John grinned again, and his smile this time was the best yet.

By the time they reached John's quarters, Rodney had had plenty of time to entertain some doubts; the problem was that he couldn't seem to find any. That should have been a clue right there that he'd lost what was left of his mind; he should have had a hundred objections, starting with the fact that Rodney had no idea what they were going to do once they got on the other side of that locked door.

John waved his hand a little wildly in front of the locking mechanism; Rodney thought about pointing out that wouldn't make it operate any faster, but then the door opened and John grabbed Rodney by the front of his shirt and hauled him inside. As soon as it closed behind them, John was kissing him again, tongue insistent and talented and really quite dirty, and Rodney completely forgot that he was supposed to have objections here, or at least misgivings, or maybe, oh hell, whatever.

Still, before he surrendered his higher brain functions, there was something Rodney *had* to know. Pulling away from John's wicked mouth with great reluctance, he said, "Wait, wait."

John pulled back immediately; Rodney noticed his eyes were still closed. "Fuck, okay, give me a second here."

"No, look, I don't want to stop, just – I have one question."

John opened his eyes. "A couple of blow jobs in college, and a few hand jobs in Afghanistan."

Rodney stared at him. "Oh, no, not that question, although – um – thank you?"

John frowned. "Then what *was* your question?"

Rodney flinched; after John's confession, it seemed silly. "Never mind."

Sighing and leaning in again, John touched his forehead to Rodney's. "Rodney. What?"

"All right, fine, what I wanted to know is, did you learn that Lightfoot song for me?"

John raised his head to stare at him blankly for a couple of seconds, then flushed and looked away. "Sort of," he mumbled.

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?"

John glanced at him. "I mean, when I started teaching you, I asked Chuck if he had any Canadian music I could listen to, and he lent me his iPod. I thought it – fit."

"You thought it fit..." Rodney prompted.

"You. Me. Us." John actually squirmed. "I – do we have to talk about this? Geez."

Taking pity on him, Rodney moved closer and carefully placed his hands on John's hips. "No, we don't," he murmured.

“Good,” John said, kissing him lightly. “Good.”

“I mean, it's enough to know that the next time we hear it on oldies radio, we'll know it's *our song*,” he drawled, grinning.

“Dick,” John growled, but he was grinning back, and this time he kissed Rodney like he wanted to make him suffer a little, which was actually, oh my, really, really okay. Rodney did his best to pay him back, and pretty soon their kisses turned open-mouthed and sloppy as they fumbled blindly with one another's clothing. John shoved Rodney's shirt off his shoulders while Rodney slid his palms up underneath John's t-shirt, encountering warm, surprisingly soft hair. Impulsively, Rodney scratched his nails through it lightly. The response wasn't quite as he'd hoped: John's breath gusted against Rodney's collarbone in a braying snort as he curled in on himself before twisting away, out of Rodney's reach.

“Quit tickling me!” John exclaimed.

“That was a scratch, not a tickle,” Rodney shot back. “Not even a scratch. A scritch.”

John stared at him. “A *scritch*?”

“Yeah, you know, like you'd give a cat – behind the ears – kind of midway between a scratch and a – tickle.”

“Ha!” John crowed, pointing a triumphant finger. “You admit it!”

“Oh my God, we're hopeless,” Rodney groaned. “You're secretly twelve and I'm a closet scritch. At this rate, we'll never have sex.”

John peeled his shirt off over his head in one swift motion. Rodney gaped.

“What's wrong?” John demanded.

Rodney shook his head. “Nothing. Only I want to touch you – a lot, incidentally – and I'm afraid you'll burst out laughing again.”

John slowly came closer until their chests brushed together whenever one of them inhaled. “I'm willing to risk it if you are,” he murmured, grin turning devilish.

Rodney only thought about it for a split second, and then he reached out and pressed his open palm against the front of John's jeans.

“Better?” he asked sweetly.

John swallowed. “Uh, yeah. Th – that works,” he croaked, his hips jerking minutely. Beneath his fingers, Rodney could feel John's erection growing, and knowing he had that effect on John was a shockingly arousing experience. Laying aside his dim memories of awkward, failed sexual experiments of days past, he leaned in and lapped at a nipple with his tongue, and was rewarded with a moan from John and John's hand gently stroking through his hair.

Surprised that John could be this way with him, that they could be this way with *one another*, Rodney

became a little frantic. Lifting his head, he kissed John hungrily while his fingers made short work of John's jeans buttons without any help or hindrance from John. When his hands slid over John's ass, under the waistband of his shorts, John seemed to recover from his stunned state: he grabbed Rodney's hips and ground their hips together, and this time Rodney could feel the hardness of John's cock against his thigh.

"Jesus," Rodney breathed, "we're really going to do this, aren't we?"

"Don't think you've been paying much attention," John murmured, biting Rodney's neck just enough to make him crazy, "cause in case you haven't noticed, we're *already* doing it." He shoved down Rodney's pants, then eased Rodney's boxers down more carefully, and before Rodney could reciprocate, he'd wrapped a warm hand around Rodney's dick.

"Oh my god, yes," Rodney moaned; it had been so long since someone else had touched his cock that he'd started to forget what it felt like. Obviously, those long-ago hand jobs had paid off, or maybe it was simply thanks to a lifetime of familiarity with the equipment, but John was extremely good at this, his fingers gripping just right, his rhythm perfect. Rodney wanted to reciprocate, he really did, but his hands were currently hanging onto John's shoulders, trying to keep the rest of him upright, and he couldn't have let go if he wanted to.

John didn't seem to mind, because he was eagerly nuzzling and licking Rodney's neck, breath gusting across Rodney's carotid artery and making him shiver, and when Rodney was getting close, John bit his earlobe and whispered, "That's it, c'mon, I got you, Rodney, just –" and Rodney whimpered and stiffened and came all over John's hand.

John eased him through it, and somehow Rodney managed to pry his fingers off John's shoulders – which he was pretty sure now had dents in them – and then he was being maneuvered backwards until the backs of his knees hit John's mattress. He landed with a small bounce and an uncoordinated flailing of numbed limbs. When he managed to make his eyes focus, he could see John looking down at him with a fond expression on his face.

"You gonna survive?" John asked.

"Jury's still out," Rodney said weakly.

John smirked. "You're breathing kind of hard there."

"Yes, you nearly gave me an aneurysm, you're a sex god, now take off your shorts and get down here," Rodney said.

John's smirk brightened as he skinned out of his boxers. "Rodney, you light up my life."

Rodney groaned in pain. "Please, no."

Swinging a leg over Rodney's hips, John propped himself over Rodney's body. "You want something Canadian? I know some Avril Lavigne."

Rodney wrapped his hand around John's dick. "How about some Celine Dion?"

John arched into Rodney's grip and moaned. "Careful what you wish for," he threatened.

With his free hand, Rodney reached up and dragged John down for a kiss. “You know what? I think I'm done being careful.”

Epilogue

The only people usually in the mess early on Sunday mornings were the gateroom night crew taking a few minutes to unwind before going to bed and the team, who usually met for breakfast because Torren could now be counted on to sleep until at least eight. Rodney was often the last to arrive, but this time the latecomer was John, who had overslept thanks to Rodney's later alarm time, but still insisted on going for his morning run.

“Gotta keep in shape,” he'd said with a leer, just before heading out the door. Rodney had staggered to the shower and washed the evidence of last night off his skin.

“Rodney,” Teyla said, frown creasing her brow, “how did you get that bruise?”

“What bruise?” he asked, talking around his mouthful of pancakes.

She reached up and touched a hand to the left side of his neck, near his shoulder. “Right here.” She leaned in. “It looks like – oh.”

Rodney shut his eyes briefly. Okay, so apparently some of the evidence hadn't washed off.

Across the table, Ronon snickered. At least Rodney thought it was a snicker; he'd never heard that particular sound from him before. “Shut up,” he snapped.

“What's he done now?” Rodney looked up to see John approaching them with his tray, looking far too pleased with life.

“S'not what he's done,” Ronon said, smirking. “It's what you've done.”

Teyla choked on her juice and slapped her hand over her mouth.

John shot them a confused look, then sat down and started eating. “So how's the dance troupe going?”

“Pretty good,” Ronon said. “We're gonna do another performance next Tuesday.”

“Will we ever see the two of you performing?” Teyla asked. Ronon snickered again, and Teyla shot him a death glare.

John's eyes widened a little, and he shot a glance at Rodney, who nodded, then tilted his head to reveal the hickey. "I told you not to bite so hard," he muttered.

"Woolsey's coming this way," Ronon murmured into his cup of coffee. Rodney cleared his throat and straightened; John brushed away imaginary crumbs from his shirt and took a sip of his juice.

"Good morning Teyla, Ronon, Rodney, Colonel," Woolsey said. "I must say you're all looking relaxed and refreshed."

"Feelin' pretty relaxed and refreshed," John said, smiling beatifically up at Woolsey. Ronon coughed loudly. Rodney wanted to kick them both under the table.

"Dare I ask whether my creativity initiative might have had something to do with it?" Woolsey asked, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

Ronon was staring at his tray, obviously about five seconds from exploding with laughter; Teyla's cheeks were distinctly rosy, and if Rodney let John say something, he'd probably out himself to his commander. And so it was left to Rodney to do something he swore he'd never do: pay the insufferable little bureaucrat a compliment.

"Richard," Rodney said, meeting his eye, "I can honestly say that your creativity initiative has made my life far richer than I could have ever imagined. I'm grateful to you."

Woolsey looked a little like Rodney had just whacked him in the face with a two-by-four. "Well," he managed finally. "That's – that's very good to hear. Thank you." He nodded at Rodney, then at them all, and hurried off.

Silence reigned until the mess hall doors had closed behind Woolsey, and then Ronon and Teyla both burst into giggles. "Oh, for god's sake," Rodney sighed. "You're all twelve."

Teyla shook her head and placed a hand over his. "I'm sorry, Rodney," she said, sobering. "Believe me, we are very happy for you both."

Rodney risked a glance across the table, and saw that John was giving him a look. It was a look he hadn't quite gotten used to yet, and hoped he never would. The only trouble was that if he sat here much longer with John looking at him like that, he wouldn't be able to get up from the table for another hour. "Well, as much as I hate to cut our Sunday breakfast short, I think it's time for –"

"– another guitar lesson," John finished for him.

"Another guitar lesson?" Rodney squeaked.

John guzzled half his coffee in one gulp, then grabbed his tray and stood up. "Can't think of a better time."

Rodney stared up at him, stunned, then scrambled to his feet. "Yes. All right."

"Have fun," Ronon called.

Rodney wasn't sure how they made it to John's quarters; it seemed like one moment he was clenching his

fists at Ronon's parting comment, and the next he was threading his fingers through John's hair as John pressed him up against the closed door.

"Richer, huh?" John asked, nuzzling Rodney's neck.

"Yes," Rodney gasped, "and also ow, that's the hickey."

"Sorry," John murmured, apologizing further with a gentle lick over the bruise before raising his head and looking into Rodney's eyes. "I just – I didn't expect you to say that. Out loud."

Rodney felt his heart slam against his ribs. "I said it. I meant it, too."

"Cool," John said, grinning and leaning in.

"So I'm guessing you don't think this is crazy any more?" Rodney ventured.

John frowned and pulled back. "We've been doing this for two months, Rodney," he said.

"Yes, so, does that mean no?"

John brushed a thumb over Rodney's lips. "That means no," he said, "you nut."

"Oh, so now *I'm* crazy."

John kissed him slowly. "That's okay. I've heard most musicians are a little crazy."

"I hope you're including yourself in that assessment," Rodney snapped, still somewhat stung.

John took Rodney's face between his hands and shook him, just slightly. "No question," he murmured softly, "no question."

Rodney felt his heart thudding in his chest again, but this time it was for an entirely different reason. "Oh, well," he said, "that's good then."

John tugged him away from the wall. "C'mon," he said, "let's make some noise."

End

A/N: John and Rodney's song is "I'll Tag Along" by Gordon Lightfoot. Get the song [here](#) (right-click and save) and the lyrics and chords [here](#).