

Meredith McKay - The Jack O'Neill Version

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Meredith McKay - The Jack O'Neill Version

by [Tarlan](#)

Summary

At ten years of age, Meredith R. McKay was alone and penniless in an unforgiving world.

Notes

This story is based on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

This for the LJ **literal_sga** novel prompt. I've tried to keep as close as I can recall to the actual novel but giving it a modern lift. In this AU, there is no DADT! As I couldn't decide who should be Mr. Rochester, there are TWO VERSIONS of this story--Jack O'Neill and John Sheppard versions.

Also for LJ **fanfic100** prompt 052: Fire.

Kavanagh Hall

At ten years of age, Meredith R. McKay was alone and penniless in an unforgiving world. He had survived the car crash that had killed his parents and baby sister relatively unscathed, apart from a little nerve damage to one side of his face that had left him with a crooked mouth. His parents had not been without some personal wealth but they had bequeathed everything to his Aunt Kavanagh should both of them die together - on condition that she take in Meredith and Jeannie.

Well there was only Meredith and even he was too much for his aunt to cope with, but he couldn't help it if he was far brighter than the Cro-Magnon children spawned from her marriage to a man his father had described as that useless layabout, Lucius Love Kavanagh. Meredith's father had held nothing but contempt for the man, and Meredith was old enough now to understand the violent whispers overheard one night about Rohypnol and date rape. What he didn't understand was why anyone would want to do that sort of thing with girls. Girls were...weird.

Uncle Lucius had died soon after the scandal. He'd gone to bed one night and was dead when they found him the next morning. Of course the rumors were that he'd taken a lethal cocktail of his own drugs. Nobody seemed to care, and certainly not his aunt or his Kavanagh cousins.

Under the circumstances Meredith didn't really care either, except his Uncle's room was dark with the only light bleeding in through the window from the half-full moon that hung low and red in the sky, turning the walls to blood.

He hadn't meant to discredit his older cousin, Peter, in front of his Aunt Kavanagh and her friends but Peter's theory was wrong, wrong, wrong! Admittedly, proving Peter wrong in such a manner that left no doubt as to his cousin's stupidity was probably not the best move he'd ever made. His aunt had been livid, barely remaining civil long enough to see her friends to the door before turning on him.

"A night spent in the room of your late Uncle Lucius might teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head!"

She had shoved him through the door and removed the sole light bulb before locking the door behind him.

Meredith had lost track of time as darkness fell beyond the opened curtains. Now he pushed himself further into the corner of the room, drawing his knees up to his chest as the inky shadows shifted around him. Logically he knew it was just the breeze moving the branches of the tree just outside the window, that there were no such things as ghosts, but Peter, had taken great delight in explaining how people who committed suicide could never ascend; their crime chaining them to the place of their dishonorable death.

When the window swung open suddenly and a gust of cold night air lifted the covers from the bed, Meredith screamed in terror, barely noticing as he slid sideways in a faint.

He moaned softly and opened his eyes cautiously at the sound of voices speaking harshly in whispers close by, recognizing his aunt's voice.

"The child is rude and arrogant. He needed to be taught a lesson."

"Locking a child already traumatized by the death of his parents and sister into a room with the light bulb deliberately removed smacks of child abuse. If anyone were to report this then you could be held up on charges of cruelty, and it might encourage the Police to reopen the case surrounding the apparent suicide of your late husband."

"Lucius was a no-good, womanizing man whose who was facing personal ruin. Dying was the only way he could save his reputation, and good riddance to him."

"I'm not saying he didn't deserve to die, only that you cannot afford for the Police to start digging a little deeper for then it won't be just his reputation that lies in ruins. I implore you to take greater care with the child."

"The child is impossible."

"Then send him away to boarding school. Let another discipline him."

Please, please, please, Meredith thought, already envisaging long days spent in the classroom sucking up as much knowledge as his teachers could provide, and spending the rest of the time in the library poring over books on mathematics and physics. He heard his aunt sigh heavily.

"His parents left a trust fund, but he won't have access to that until he is twenty-one. The rest of the inheritance will barely cover the cost of feeding and clothing him at a state school."

"There is a place called the Dagan Institute, a boarding school for those of a less fortunate financial position."

Meredith heard no more but, one week later, he could barely contain his excitement as the cab pulled up to the front door of his aunt's small estate. Nothing had dampened his spirits this day, not even Peter's nasty words and his other cousin's spiteful comments. However Peter was unwilling to let him go without taking one last chance to insult him.

"You're a nothing, McKay. A nothing and a nobody."

Angered by the insinuation that his parentage was of little worth, Meredith shouted back, "At least my father wasn't a rapist."

"Why you little shit!" Peter made a grab for him but, for once, his Aunt Kavanagh stepped between them.

The reprieve was short lived as she slapped Meredith around the face; not hard enough to mark but certainly enough to shock and sting. Meredith grabbed his cheek and cowered before her in fear as she raised her hand again, taking several small steps back from her anger-filled figure.

"You're a nasty child, Meredith Rodney McKay, with a vicious tongue. I'm glad to be shot of you."

Minutes later, as the cab passed the front gates to the Kavanagh estate, Meredith huddled in on himself and hoped he would never see Kavanagh Hall again.

The Dagan Institute

After many hours of traveling, Meredith was relieved when the driver announced that they were almost there. He sat up tall in his seat, trying to see through the front windscreen as they turned a final corner and pulled up before a set of rusty gates.

The taxi driver opened his window and leaned out, pressing a switch on a communication panel.

"New pupil, Meredith McKay."

Meredith could not make out the response on the tinny system but the rusty gates began to swing open, allowing the car to pass. The road leading onwards was little more than a track full of pot holes and ruts, but Meredith endured the bumpy ride without complaint, hoping to catch his first glimpse of his new home. They rounded a bend and there it was, the Dagan Institute, and Meredith straightened in horror.

The building looked like something out of a Victorian prison novel with its austere brick walls and barred windows. From the side aspect it looked dilapidated, as if it ought to be condemned, and the grounds were overgrown with weeds and thick tangles of roses that had lost any beauty.

The taxi pulled up in front of a set double doors and Meredith decided that the front looked no better with its peeling paint. He stepped out of the cab while the driver unloaded his few belongings, wondering what he should do next. The driver shook his head almost sorrowfully before climbing back behind the wheel and driving off without a backward glance.

Alone again, Meredith hunched in on himself and took a couple of steps towards the main entrance, stopping as one of the large doors creaked opened.

The boy who looked out at him with big eyes was of similar age and just as thin though, perhaps, a little taller but with the same blond curls framing his face. Meredith smiled tentatively and that seemed enough to bolster the other boy's confidence. The boy held out a hand.

"Brendan Gaul."

"Meredith McKay."

"Isn't that a girls' name?"

Meredith bristled because Peter had made the same derogatory comment, calling him a sissy and other names. Brendan, however, looked merely intrigued rather than malicious.

"It was my father's middle name."

"So what's *your* middle name?"

"Rodney."

The boy tapped his chin thoughtfully. "You should introduce yourself as M. Rodney McKay, and I'll call you Rodney. Maybe the older boys won't beat you up so much then."

"Beat me up?" Meredith looked at Brendan aghast. "Why would they beat me up?"

Brendan sighed. "You're find out soon enough... Rodney."

Rodney found out just a few short hours later as he gazed around at the other boys. They were all thin, almost to the point of being emaciated, with close cropped hair and with hungry eyes that followed his progress across the dinner hall.

Taking a seat beside Brendan, Rodney stared down at the bland stew and hard bread that would be his supper. He might have hated living at Kavanagh Hall but at least they had fed him a decent meal three times a day.

"Don't try an Oliver Twist and ask for more," Brendan whispered. "The last boy who did that was given twelve smacks from Woolsey's cane."

"Woolsey?"

"He's in charge of the school. He has this theory that if you ignore the pleasures of the body then it focuses the mind."

"What a pile of crap!"

"Shh!" Brendan looked around warily. His eyes widened. "Gotta go!"

Rodney watched in confusion as Brendan rush away, until he heard a voice just behind him.

"Scrawny thing like you don't need that bread."

Drawing the bread closer, Rodney gazed up at the older boy in horror. The bread might be a few days too old and close to growing its own penicillin colony but it was still Rodney's bread. Plus if Brendan was right then there would be nothing more to eat until morning. His Aunt Kavanagh had not exactly set him off early this morning with a picnic basket to snack upon and he had to think of his hypoglycemia after all. His mother had told him how important it was that he eat regularly.

Obviously the other boy was determined not to take no for an answer and, moments later, Rodney had no bread and a bloodied nose.

As he sniffled in silence, Brendan returned, and Rodney had half a mind to tell him to go away until Brendan broke off half his bread and handed it to Rodney. Rodney knew, at that moment, that they would be friends for life.

What he didn't expect was for that life to be so short for Brendan.

In the months that followed that first meeting, Rodney settled into the harsh regime of the school. Breakfast was a meager repast that barely took the edge off his hunger and the only thing that kept thoughts of starvation away was the hours of studying in the cold library and classrooms, clad only in threadbare clothing. He'd learned early on that Woolsey's convictions of 'starve the body to feed the mind' only extended to the poor, mostly orphaned boys living at the Dagan Institute. In contrast, Woolsey's family lived in luxury with heat, decent food and warm clothes.

Rodney had been just as shocked to learn that this place was a charity-run orphanage. His Aunt had, in effect, stolen part of his inheritance because he was not benefiting at all from the money left to her to pay for his food, clothing and education.

Every day, Rodney was forced to listen to Woolsey's lectures on piety and frugality; lectures given to dull-eyed, half-starved kids like himself. Afterwards the hypocrite would jump into his expensive car and Rodney would grind his teeth in anger as Woolsey's fat cheeked, expensively-dressed son stuck out his tongue from the passenger window.

Almost two years to the day of his arrival, a flu epidemic swept through the institute. Perhaps if the boys had been well-fed and healthy then it might not have been anything more than a nuisance.

The first death brought phone calls from the charity paying for the upkeep of the Institute.

"Rodney? I'm not going to make it."

Rodney pushed a lock of sweaty hair off Brendan's forehead.

"Don't be stupid. It's nothing...once they get you to a doctor you'll be fine."

Brendan laughed softly. "You've changed. You want to be out there, letting them know what Woolsey has done to us in here. You want to fight him, want to protect the rest of us."

"No. I'm where I want to be."

"I don't feel quite so bad anymore."

"Really? Well that's...that's good, isn't it?"

Brendan smiled. "Go save the day, Rodney. Save us all."

Rodney stood up and paced a few steps from the bed, glancing back at the gray-skinned, emaciated boy who looked more like a time-ravaged old man.

"What if Woolsey has convinced them that everything here is fine? If I say anything then Woolsey might send me away... and then who'll look after you?"

He spun on his heel when Brendan said nothing.

"Brendan?" Rodney stepped closer to the bed, wondering what Brendan was staring at, heart in his throat when he realized Brendan's sightless eyes were staring beyond the room and beyond life itself.

The second death, Brendan's, brought the Police and the official inspectors. Woolsey disappeared soon after.

By the time the flu epidemic had taken its toll, fourteen out of the thirty-five boys in the institute were dead and Rodney was alone once more. He watched in silence as his sole friend of the past two years was buried in the local graveyard with no one to mourn him but Rodney.

The eight years that followed were far different. Daniel Jackson, though extremely young to hold such a position, was a vast improvement on Woolsey even if he was more interested in the soft sciences. Still, Rodney learned Ancient, Asgard and Goa'uld under the man's tutelage and that could only benefit Rodney as he studied the various ancient scripts and technologies.

By the time he was eighteen, Rodney had surpassed all of his tutors in knowledge and ability and the student became a teacher in his own right.

Rodney sighed as he stared across the classroom at another group of barely intelligent boys. Once in a while he saw a spark of interest but, for the most part, none of these boys ranked high in the IQ tables with some barely scraping 'moron'.

After two years of teaching at Dagan, Rodney yearned for new experiences. He still had a year to wait before he could access his trust fund and pay for his first doctorate. The charity had already supported him as far as his Masters in Astrophysics, Mathematics and Engineering but he was not their only charity case. The simpletons needed just as much financial assistance, perhaps more because their lot in life was never going to improve substantially due to their abysmal lack of intelligence. In the meantime, those simpletons took up most of his day - and evening - leaving him little time for his own pursuit of knowledge.

Daniel pulled him aside later that day.

"Rodney...Have you considered taking on private tuition?"

"Here?"

"Well, obviously not here at Dagan."

"Leave Dagan?" Rodney look at Daniel in horror. "Why don't you just exile me to Russia while you're at it!"

"Hardly exile to Russia. There are a few rich families looking for someone to tutor their children. You'd have more time to devote to your studies if you only had one or two children to teach each day."

Rodney opened his mouth to utter another retort and then snapped it shut. Why hadn't he considered that before?

That evening, Rodney wrote to fifteen different families that were seeking a home tutor, ignoring the fact that most of them were insisting on a female governess. He figured that once they had seen his resume they'd soon put aside all those sexist tendencies and would be crying out for him to teach their less than stellar offspring.

He waited impatiently for the postman every day for almost two weeks, huffing in annoyance when every position appeared to have already been filled. Finally he opened a letter from Cheyenne Park, grinning at the words offering him the post of tutoring one eleven year old girl called Harmony.

Two days later he had packed his bags and was standing on the steps of the Dagan Institute, waiting for the cab to take him to the airport. He cast one last good look at the institute, his photographic memory contrasting that first day with this last one. The building had been renovated over the past few years and Parrish, one of the other boys of the same age who had stayed on as a gardener, had turned the tangle of thorns and weeds into a beautiful landscaped garden fit for any palace.

The modern Dagan Institute was a far cry from that damp, dilapidated building of a decade ago and Rodney would miss the only home he could truly remember after all these years.

"Don't forget to write," Daniel murmured before drawing him into a manly hug.

"Um...you too," he replied, offering a crooked smile before climbing into the back seat of the cab.

As the cab pulled away, leaving Dagan behind, Rodney glanced back and waved goodbye.

Cheyenne Park

The manor house stood partway up a mountain and even Rodney had to admit that the place looked impressive with the tree line starting not far behind the great house. The drive leading up to the front entrance had curved through part of the forest before opening out into a wide courtyard though Rodney had not been that impressed coming through the forest at dusk, seeing darker shadows moving in the trees that reminded him too much of that terrible night in his Uncle Lucius's room.

He was relieved to step into the entrance hall.

"Mr. McKay, I presume?"

"Yes. Yes." He dropped his suitcase on the floor and reached out a hand to the elegant woman standing before him.

"I'm Miss Weir, but please do call me Elizabeth."

"Oh...erh. Yes...Elizabeth." He snuffed out a nervous laugh, having not expected to be on first name terms with his employer so soon after his arrival but her next words made him realize he had jumped to a wrong conclusion.

"The Colonel is not present at the moment. He travels extensively with the military and is often away for months at a time. I look after the house for him."

"You're just the housekeeper!" Rodney stared at her, eyes widening as hers narrowed. "Not that it's a bad occupation or...or...but I assumed from the correspondence that..."

"The Colonel allows me to keep all his affairs in order, Mr. McKay, including the hiring and dismissal of household staff," she added ominously. "Come, you've had a long flight. I'll show--"

The piercing, maniacal laughter seemed to echo through the cavernous entrance hall, reverberating off the high walls and up the staircase that led deeper into the heart of the house.

"Will you excuse me for a moment." She stepped to the wall and pressed a button partially concealed. Moments later another woman bustled into the hall, her face pinched in concern. "Miss. Brown, please make less noise, and remember your duties."

"Yes, Miss Weir."

The sickly-pale woman with red hair raced away.

"I'm sorry. She means well but is a little unbalanced on occasion. However she does tend to the indoor plants beautifully, creating the most stunning floral arrangements so the Colonel allows her to stay."

"Personally, I don't care much for flowers."

"Oh?"

"Allergies. In fact I should mention now that I'm also deathly allergic to citrus and unless you want to watch me turn blue in the face as I slowly asphyxiate from anaphylactic shock then you might wish to inform the cook--"

"Of course! I'll make sure Cook knows of your allergies." She smiled faintly. "For now, I'll show you to your room and leave you to get settled in. Dinner will be at eight-thirty and, tomorrow after breakfast, I'll introduce you to your student, Miss Harmony."

Rodney followed Elizabeth up the main staircase and along a wide hallway filled with portraits dating back centuries judging by the changing styles of clothing and grooming. His room was situated at the far end and it was far more spacious than any room he had seen before, containing both a sitting area and bedroom as well as a bathroom for his exclusive use. As soon as the door closed behind Elizabeth, leaving him alone in his new room, Rodney grinned and flopped back, spread-eagled across the king-size bed, and he moaned in approval of a mattress that wasn't lumpy for once.

During the month that followed, Rodney settled down to teach Harmony, eternally grateful that he'd already experienced - and survived - the utter lack of intelligence from boys at Dagan or he might have gone mad trying to teach the little miss-know-it-all. He learned that Harmony was not, in fact, the Colonel's natural child. Her real father had been shot down in battle, leaving her orphaned but unlike with Rodney's pathetic life story, the Colonel had taken the child in and lavished every expense upon her, well beyond the point of her becoming a spoiled brat. Today was a rest day though and Rodney took advantage of the chance to escape the house after dinner for once, when normally he would have preferred to stay in his room working on an outline for his thesis. Instead he walked along the wide drive, studying the stars above his head, no longer so afraid of the shadows now he had become accustomed to both the forest and to the insane laughter that sometimes awoke him in the night. He turned off onto a smaller path that led through the trees towards a summer house, knowing he could keep the chill of the wind off his back while still retaining this spectacular view of the night sky.

The roar of a motorbike in the distance caught his attention, the sound muffled by the trees to either side of the path he had taken. He thought he caught a flash of light but ignored it as he was quite a distance from the drive leading up to the house. Suddenly it crashed through the undergrowth directly ahead of him, straight onto the path. Rodney yelled out in shock, the bike swerving at the last possible second, skidding on mud and sliding sideways to a halt, trapping the rider beneath it.

"What the hell!"

It was hard to tell the rider's expression as half his face was covered in a motorbike helmet while the rest was cast in shadow but the tone left little doubt that the man was angry and in pain. The bike's engine had stalled and after the moment of panic had passed, Rodney stepped forward to help pull the bike upright off of the rider. The man limped back a few steps.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm McKay." Rodney straightened his shoulders and stood tall, refusing to be intimidated. "Rodney McKay. And you are?"

"Injured."

"Really? Oh! Well, the house is just...I'll help..."

"I know where the house is, so if you don't mind, I think you've helped enough already."

Rodney bristled at the sarcastic tone, outraged that the man had the gall to blame him for this fiasco. After all, another few inches and Rodney would have been a corpse lying broken on the path beneath the wheels of that monstrosity. The rider straddled the motorbike and pressed the ignition, cursing beneath his breath when it didn't turn over the engine immediately. He grinned when it caught the second time, white teeth flashing in the near-darkness broken only by the moon coming out from behind the clouds at that moment. Then he was gone, zooming off into the darkness and leaving Rodney to trudge back to the house in his trail, his interest in the stars forgotten.

When Rodney reached the house he sought out Elizabeth in the parlor to complain about the incident, and startled when he saw the motorbike helmet resting on the coffee table.

"The Colonel has returned. Unfortunately, he had a little accident in the woods on his way in and sprained his ankle. He's retired for the evening."

"That was the Colonel?"

Unable to sate his curiosity concerning the Colonel, Rodney decided to go back to his room, intending to continue with his studies but his mind was churning with fear, wondering if the Colonel would be firing him tomorrow. He really did need this opportunity to study well into the evenings if he was to pursue his doctorate once he came into his inheritance, and he could not have that at Dagan while handling a class of over thirty rowdy boys who had no interest in mathematics beyond basic numeracy.

Eventually he got dressed for sleep and slipped into his comfortable bed, aware that he would also miss the orthopedic mattress that supported his back so perfectly.

The next day, after lessons were completed, Rodney looked up as Elizabeth entered the room.

"The Colonel has requested your presence for tea in the drawing room, with Miss. Harmony."

"What? Now?"

"If that wouldn't be too much trouble," she responded with a quirk of a smile playing about her lips, and Rodney hoped she hadn't noticed the way he was practically vibrating with the anticipation of finally getting to meet his employer. Rodney had heard Harmony's sharp intake of breath and saw that her eyes had lit up with excitement as she jumped to her feet.

"Rodney! Come on!"

"It's McKay to you, or sir."

"Yeah, whatever! Now, hurry up. I want to see my Uncle Jack," she stated petulantly and Rodney rolled his eyes even as Elizabeth raised an eyebrow in disapproval.

Ten minutes later, after Harmony had insisted that she needed fresh ribbons in her hair, Rodney sat down on the couch in the drawing room next to his student and waited expectantly for the Colonel to arrive. From the portraits in the long gallery, he had anticipated a sour-faced man in his late-thirties with silver streaked hair and penetrating eyes; the man who entered the drawing room did not disappoint, right down to the thin-lipped scowl. The Colonel dredged up a tight smile for his ward, his brown eyes warming slightly as she spoke imperiously of her accomplishments since she had seen him last. Eventually he turned to Rodney, eyes hard and intent.

"And you want to be a...scientist."

"An astrophysicist, to be precise."

"Really?"

Rodney raised his hands, trying to describe with gestures as well as words. "I have a theory regarding wormholes and I believe I can create a stable wormhole connecting two...gates. Of course the mathematics is extremely complex but.." he pointed to his head, "Genius." At the Colonel's blank expression, he continued. "Of course it all sounds like science fiction but I bet they said the same thing about Star Trek's communicators before the advent of the cellphone."

"And these...gates, would be used for what, exactly."

"Oh...um...moving matter from one place to another in minutes." He curled his fingers. "Imagine stepping into a gate in Toronto and exiting, only moments later, in Washington DC, or even on the moon... though someone would have to go there and set up a gate first."

"And you can do the math?"

"Yes...eventually." Rodney wriggled uncomfortably under the Colonel's scrutiny, visibly relieved when the Colonel looked down at his wristwatch.

"I have to go now and do... General things."

"General?"

"Perhaps I should have mentioned my promotion to Brigadier General," he stated nonchalantly as he swaggered to the door.

Rodney watched him leave, unsure what had just happened but happy enough that he hadn't been fired.

"Stop gaping. You look like a fish."

Rodney snarled at Harmony, raising one finger in remonstrance but she merely smiled sweetly and skipped away, leaving Rodney alone with his thoughts.

"So, how was your meeting with the General?" Elizabeth asked a little later.

"Pretty good actually."

"Really?" She tipped her head. "That good, hey?"

Rodney frowned before realizing he was being toyed with. "Oh, very funny." He sighed. "He seemed a little...erh...distant."

"He always takes a few days to thaw out when he gets back."

"Oh...okay."

When Rodney retired to his room later, he sat at his desk and thought about the man that he'd met earlier. General O'Neill was actually quite a handsome man when he wasn't scowling. His eyes were a beautiful warm brown when they weren't intently focused and narrowed in a 'death stare' and he obviously kept in shape, not allowing middle age to soften muscle and plump his figure.

Rodney stood up and stepped over to the full length vanity mirror, eyeing himself critically from the top of his curly blond hair, down his thin frame to his overlarge feet. He still looked like a lanky teenager with his thin face and large nose, as if he had yet to grow into his features, and his mouth had that downward slash on one side that made him look as if he was permanently scowling. The muscles twitched as he straightened his mouth into a crooked smile. He had always been smaller than the other boys and before she died, his mother had promised that he would be a late bloomer, but he was twenty years old now. How much later until he 'bloomed' and gained the muscle and broad shoulders that his father had possessed?

His mother had always called him, 'My little angel', and he had to admit that he had grown to match the almost asexual images of angels seen in her favorite books. Except he wasn't beautiful, not with his big nose and crooked mouth.

He huffed in self-mockery at his vanity - or lack of vanity - wondering if someone like the General would ever desire someone with such a boyish frame. Then he frowned, finally admitting to himself that he had found O'Neill attractive despite the man being at least fifteen years Rodney's senior, and sour-faced at that. There was something about the man though, a strange charisma that drew Rodney in, and intelligence lurking behind the dark eyes.

Pushing aside his growing feelings, he stripped quickly, pulling on the boxers and t-shirt that he preferred to sleep in before climbing into his bed. For once he fell asleep quickly, dreaming of dark, appraising eyes and that grin he had seen in the darkness of the forest.

Insane laughter passing just outside his door brought Rodney awake and he wondered what Katie Brown would be doing in this part of the house so late at night. He sighed and dragged himself from his warm bed, wandering into the hallway. The small plumes of smoke rising up from beneath the door of the master bedroom caught his attention, startling him fully awake as he raced towards the door. It opened easily to his touch, the door swinging inwards to reveal the flames licking up one side of the canopy of the four-poster bed. After yelling for help, Rodney pulled the hem of his t-shirt up to cover his mouth and nostrils and lurched

towards the bed where the General lay too still, overcome by the smoke in his sleep. He grabbed a pitcher of water from the bedside cabinet and threw it over the flames, dousing them enough for him to grab hold of the General's arm and drag him from the bed. Outside the room he could hear shouts, and then someone was next to him, a fire extinguisher suffocating the flames as Rodney continued to drag the General from the burning room. He dropped down beside the gradually awakening man, unable to hold in the coughs that wracked him from inhaling the smoke. Someone thrust a glass of water into his hands and he drank greedily, his eyes meeting the General's before both were drawn to Elizabeth as she knelt down beside them.

Shakily, the General gained his feet and he pointed down to Rodney like he was talking to a dog, his voice roughened by the smoke he had inhaled in his sleep. "Stay here."

Rodney watched as the General walked to the staircase leading up to the third floor where Katie Brown had her room. When he returned ten minutes later, the General stopped for a moment and stared at Rodney before offering his hand and hauling Rodney to his feet.

"What do you know about...?" The General waved his hand around to encompass the house and the burned master bedroom in particular. "The strange laughter and..."

"Um...Katie Brown?"

Both eyebrows rose above the intense brown eyes. "Yes. Miss Brown. She forgets to take her medication sometimes. It's nothing so don't mention it to anyone." He turned to go but glanced back over his shoulder, eyes softening. "And thanks for..." He waved again towards the wreck of the master bedroom, not waiting for a response from Rodney before walking away to spend the rest of the night on the couch in the library.

The following morning, Rodney was surprised when no one mentioned last night's incident and even more concerned when Katie Brown smiled at him as she passed along the corridor, acting as if she hadn't tried to murder the General only a few hours earlier. Elizabeth was in the breakfast room and Rodney sank down beside her.

"So...How's the General?"

She smiled wryly. "He's left Cheyenne Park to attend an event with Miss Carter, and won't be back for a few days."

Rodney did not expect to feel so disappointed at the news but as he stared into the mirror later that day, he had to admit that he could never compete with Miss Samantha Carter, who was both highly intelligent and stunningly beautiful. With a sigh, he pulled his study books closer and pushed all thoughts of General Jack O'Neill from his head.

"She earns how much?"

Rodney was shocked when he overheard the other servants discussing how much Katie Brown earned for potting a few plants and arranging a few flowers. It was even more

irritating as she barely spent any time on those activities, keeping to herself in her room up on the third floor for the most part. Of course there were rumors that the General kept her on the same way he looked after Harmony, honoring a debt to a fallen comrade but even so, it seemed grossly unfair.

The next bombshell dropped was the General's decision not to return to Cheyenne Park, accepting a permanent post at the Pentagon instead, and Rodney felt his stomach twist in anguish at the thought of perhaps never seeing the man again. He knew it was pathetic and that he would abhor seeing that behavior in anyone else but it didn't make the disappointment feel any less real.

Of course, that disappointment was short lived as, not two days later, everything had changed again. Instead of heading up to Washington, the General returned to Cheyenne Park with a large party, and Rodney hated it.

He'd become accustomed to the quiet days spent teaching Harmony and then studying up in his room. Now the hallways were filled with raucous laughter and raised voices. Men in well-fitted uniforms paraded around and various women preened and simpered, trying to attract their attention. Worse still, Rodney was expected to join them every evening, forced to listen to them twitter on about inconsequential matters as they revealed exactly how stupid most of them were in comparison to him.

The exception was Beckett, whom he became friendly with very quickly despite Beckett being a doctor of one of those soft sciences. Though even Beckett's company could not shield him from the way Samantha Carter glared at him from across the room whenever the General stopped beside him to talk, which was pretty frequently.

It was obvious even to Rodney that the woman had a crush on O'Neill and woe betide anyone who got in her way. She took advantage of every opportunity to hang from the man's arm and whisper in his ear, and Rodney half expected them to announce their engagement by the end of the interminable visit. Unfortunately he knew his tenure at Cheyenne Park would end soon after, which would leave him desperately trying to find new work until his trust fund came through.

Rodney refused to consider how much he would miss seeing the General and how often he had been tempted to postpone working towards his doctorate for another year just to stay close to the man.

He sighed as Sam - as she liked to be called - sent a triumphant smile his way as the General walked her from the drawing room once dinner was announced, with her small hand placed possessively on the crook of his elbow. Instead Rodney followed on behind, loathing every minute spent in the company of the majority of these people and yet drawn to remain just so he could see the General.

A man perhaps only five years older than Rodney, slipped into the seat beside him at the dinner table and introduced himself.

"Major Sheppard...John. And you're McKay?"

Rodney accepted the outstretched hand awkwardly, bumping his knee as he turned in his seat. "Yes."

"Hmm."

The man gave him an impenetrable stare and when Rodney glanced along the table to where the General was seated with Sam, he caught O'Neill watching them, eyes darting between him and Sheppard in consternation. Rodney decided then and there that he wasn't going to like Sheppard, especially when the man offered to squeeze lemon all over his fish.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He whispered harshly, and the man lifted both dark eyebrows in confusion.

"Not yet," he drawled.

In the early hours of the morning when the night was at its darkest, a yell echoed around the silent hallways, followed by the insane laughter that Rodney had come to be wary of following the fire incident only ten days earlier. He jumped out of bed and pulled on some clothes before peering out into the now crowded hallway.

"It's okay. One of the staff had a bad dream," the General stated as he ushered all his guests back to their individual rooms, pausing when he reached Rodney. "Are you okay with blood?"

"Blood!"

The thought made Rodney's stomach turn but the General had grasped his arm and was already drawing him along the hallway to the stairs leading upwards. Even his awareness of that old adage about curiosity killing the cat - and the thought of blood - could not stop him from following on behind.

In one of the rooms at the top of the stairs, he found Sheppard slumped against the wall cradling his side, blood dripping from between his fingers.

"Here..." O'Neill grabbed Rodney's hand and pushed it hard against the pressure bandage covering the wound, dragging a guttural moan from Sheppard. "Keep your hand there pressing down hard while I get Beckett." He turned to Sheppard. "You don't say a word to him...and that's a direct order, Major."

Beckett arrived within a few minutes carrying a medical bag, which he set down beside Sheppard and opened quickly to reveal all manner of surgical equipment.

"You're a doctor kind of doctor?"

"If you mean, am I a medical doctor then, yes. I simply chose to specialize in genetics rather than take on general practice."

"So you do know what you're doing?"

Beckett sighed in irritation. "Yes, Rodney. I know what I'm doing." He glanced up at the General. "He needs to go to a hospital. If you can arrange for transportation, I'll accompany him."

"Done."

Between them, they assisted Sheppard down the stairs and helped him into the back seat of the General's staff car, driven by Sergeant Bates. Rodney shivered as the car moved off, turning his head abruptly as two strong hands grasped his arms from behind, drawing him back until he could feel the heat from the General's body against him.

"There was this man who took a wife while stationed abroad and they had a son. The man did something really stupid one day and the boy died." O'Neill turned Rodney to face him. "That man has spent the past few years trying to atone for that serious error in judgment. Do you think, maybe, he's punished himself enough now and should give himself a break?"

Was the General talking about himself or Major Sheppard? And was Rodney really the best person to ask advice from?

"I'm...I'm not exactly good with people and..." he grimaced, "And all those messy emotional problems." He winced. "It's hard enough with Katie Brown looking at me all funny and handing me a prickly cactus that looks like a giant penis, saying she named it after me."

"Well, you are prickly on the outside...and sex on legs," O'Neill murmured so softly that Rodney scrunched up his face, convinced he'd heard that wrong.

"What?"

But O'Neill waved away the comment, releasing Rodney. "It's cold out here, and late."

Rodney shook his head as he followed the General back into the warm house more confused than ever but long before he could ever hope to figure it all out, more tragedy struck.

Kavanagh Hall

The place was in worse shape than he could recall from his photographic memory, right down to the bedraggled bed of petunias in the garden that his Aunt had always favored. In truth he never expected to set foot back in this place but the message from his cousin, Kate, could not be ignored. His older cousin, Peter, had committed the equivalent of professional suicide by publishing an ill-considered theory that had been pulled to shreds by his peers, leaving his reputation as an engineer in ruins. Of course Peter bitched that it was everyone else's fault that they couldn't understand his brilliance but, having read the article in question, Rodney had to agree that it was moronic. Even Daniel's theory that the Ancients, Asgard and Goa'uld had been aliens held more credibility.

He knew Kavanagh would be insufferable, and the total effect had led his aunt to a nervous breakdown from which she might not recover according to Kate, who prided herself on her

psychology skills.

As soon as he saw his aunt lying in her bed looking frail and worn, Rodney knew she needed a doctor of medicine rather than psychology.

"Come to gloat, boy?"

He grimaced. Frail or not she was still the same harpy that had made his life such a miserable affair as a child, and if it had not been such a cryptic letter from Kate mentioning a problem with his trust fund then he might have foregone the dubious pleasure of seeing his aunt one last time.

"We are in ruin!" she wailed. "Your cousin has lost his standing in the science community, his reputation in tatters leaving us with no income." She hauled herself up and stared him hard in the eyes. "You owe me, boy, for taking in your worthless hide after your parents died."

"Owe you?"

"For your education, for the clothes on your back. I raised you as one of my own."

Rodney was flabbergasted. She was obviously senile if she thought for one moment that dumping him on a charity institution that cost her nothing was tantamount to raising him like one of her own. And what of the money his parents had left to feed and clothe him until he was old enough to fend for himself? He'd stayed at Kavanagh Hall for all of five months before she got rid of him, leaving in the same clothes that he had arrived in, with the pants too small and riding up his ankles because he'd had a growth spurt during those months. She hadn't even given him Kavanagh's hand-me-downs.

Probably sold them on eBay, he thought maliciously.

"Grodin has already drawn up the paperwork. All you need to do is sign over your trust fund and then come back to live here under my generosity."

He poured every ounce of disdain into his voice. "You must be joking!"

She went a strange purple color, clasping her hand to her heart, and then collapsed backwards onto the bed unmoving. He stared at her for a moment in horror, believing he had killed her, until she dragged in a harsh, rattling breath; Rodney left the room quickly. Tomorrow he would head back to Cheyenne Park because there truly was nothing for him here except the loss of more of his dreams.

He was awoken just after midnight by footsteps racing in the corridor outside his room, and he got up to investigate. The murmur of hysterical voices drew him towards his aunt's room and he peered in to find his cousins grouped around her bed while a doctor packed up his stethoscope and replaced it in his bag.

"I'm sorry. She's ascended to another plane of existence."

Rodney snorted, drawing attention to himself, and cleared his throat upon seeing the glares aimed in his direction. "I'm...going back to bed now." He'd tried to say he was sorry for their

loss but the words had stuck in his throat because he really was not sorry at all.

Of course nothing was simple and it took several more weeks before he could escape Kavanagh Hall, forced to endure the reading of the will that left him only marginally better off than when he first arrived all those years ago. Peter had inherited most everything of worth, the only stipulation being that he take care of his sister. Rodney hoped Peter made a better job of that than his aunt had made with him, or Kate would have to actually go out and put that psychology degree to work.

Cheyenne Park

Rodney asked the cab driver to let him out at the gates to Cheyenne Park. It was a lovely Spring day and for once, Rodney felt in need of some fresh air. In truth he wanted just a little longer to compose himself before seeing the General. His stomach was already fluttering in that pathetic way just at the mere thought of seeing him again.

"Hey!" Rodney looked up in surprise as the man who had invaded his every waking thought walked towards him with a big grin. "You're back!" The grin faded to a frown. "Where have you been all this time?"

"My aunt died."

"Oh." The General puffed out his cheeks, blowing out a breath. "But you're back now."

"Um...yes. Obviously."

"I bought a new car. You want to see it?"

Rodney blinked at the strange turn in the conversation but he could not resist the excitement dancing in warm, brown eyes, or the hand that wrapped around his shoulders to draw him along the path towards the garages. The General stood back and grinned even wider as he showed off his new acquisition.

"You think Sam will like it?"

"What's not to like," Rodney stated in awe. "She's a beauty." He ran his hand along the sweet curves of the Porsche, already imagining the power throbbing in that engine, waiting to be unleashed. Glancing back, his grin faded at the strange look on the General's face.

"I'm thinking of marrying Sam."

Rodney swallowed hard but braved a smile, though he knew from staring in a mirror that it came out more like a grimace. "I'm...happy for you."

"Of course, I'll find you a good position with another family until..." He waved a hand nonchalantly.

"I don't want to leave you," Rodney blurted out, eyes widening moments later at his appalling outburst, and then he realized that it didn't matter anymore. He would be leaving Cheyenne Park and Jack O'Neill regardless so he truly had nothing left to lose. "I...I think I love you."

"Ya think?"

Rodney straightened. "No. I know I do. Don't worry. I'll--" Before he could offer to call back the cab, Rodney squeaked as strong arms enfolded him, crushing him to the other man.

"I was lying. I don't want Sam. I want you."

Rodney pushed back so he could see Jack's face - because it was Jack now, not the General, not O'Neill. This was Jack holding him in his arms, holding him exactly where he'd wanted to be for so many months now. Keeping his arms around him, Jack drew Rodney back into the house, pausing in the entrance hall to take him more firmly in his arms. He leaned in, lips gliding over Rodney's, the touch vibrating through him, firing through his body and leaving him desperate and hard and wanting. He moaned into the kiss, savoring the taste, the touch and the scent of arousal, unable to resist as Jack pulled him up the stairs towards Rodney's bedroom.

Kisses rained down over his throat and neck as agile fingers pushed the jacket from his shoulders and plucked at the hem of his t-shirt. Non-verbal urgings, reverberating through the kisses, had him raising his arms as the t-shirt was stripped from his body, and Rodney moaned as he was pressed back onto the bed, his body straddled by Jack while those soft lips attacked an exposed nipple, teasing and biting and licking it to a hard nub, sending jolts of pleasure through him. He felt the hand toying with his zipper, sighed in relief as his cock was freed from its prison of denim and stroked. He gasped into the muscled neck as Jack took both of them in hand, squeezing their cocks together, slowly bringing them both off with glorious, torturous strokes, fire curling in his belly and thighs, whiting his senses as he came hard.

As they lay in a tangled heap on the bed, Rodney came back to awareness, to the lethargy of sated limbs and the rapidly cooling semen splattered across his belly and chest. Hard fingers gentled as they circled a too sensitive nipple, spreading the semen over the nub before Jack leaned down to lick it clean. The ghost of his orgasm tingled through him as the rough tongue lapped at him, and all Rodney could do was lie back and grin like an idiot.

Rodney had never been so happy, and that should have clued him into the tragedy about to overtake him because since when had his life ever been easy? Even Elizabeth seemed to disapprove of his relationship with Jack, and he'd always considered her open-minded about homosexuality. Instead, she seemed cold and distant yet looking at him with such longing on occasion that he wished she would just say what the hell was preying on her mind.

It was supposed to be as simple commitment ceremony. Rodney had already written to his newfound friend and colleague at Northeastern, Radek Zelenka, to inform him of his decision to postpone his doctorate indefinitely.

On the night before the ceremony as Rodney lay sleeping alone in his bed for the first time in weeks, following some obscure and completely unnecessary ritual about not seeing each other on the night before their commitment, he awoke abruptly to a strange noise in his room. Blinking sleepily, he caught sight of movement near his closet and watched in horror as the small figure of a woman tore at the clothes bought especially for the commitment ceremony. She ripped the silk tie in half using a wickedly sharp knife and then turned to snarl at him, her features lost in the dark shadows of the room.

"Katie?"

With an bestial cry she sped from the room, and Rodney heard her maniacal laughter as she ran along the darkened hallway. Shaken, he reached for the bedside lamp to dispel the shadows from the room, and walked to the closet; he picked up the ripped tie. Jack had bought it for him, telling him it matched the blue of his eyes.

When morning came he was still awake, and he washed and dressed quickly, determined not to allow the frightening events of the night prevent him from finding happiness with Jack. They met in the breakfast room but Rodney could not offer a fond smile in response, simply waiting until Jack had sat down beside him.

"What's up?"

"Katie was in my room last night. She had a knife and she ripped the...the tie." He frowned. "Except, she didn't look like Katie. She looked like some kind of wild animal."

"Let's just get through today and I promise to tell you everything this time next year."

"Next year? And shouldn't that be a year and a day?"

"Only if you marry me."

Rodney flushed at the seriousness in Jack's voice, suddenly aware that this commitment ceremony was just the first step to a lifetime commitment. He nodded, pushing aside the doubts that filled him, willing to trust Jack implicitly and, together, they walked into the great hall where the ceremony would be performed. A few personal guests had already arrived, murmuring softly among themselves while they waited. Rodney saw Carson near the back and smiled tentatively, frowning when Carson's smile seemed forced in return.

"Jack O'Neill and Meredith Rodney McKay have gathered you all here today to witness their commitment to each other. Although not as legally binding as a marriage, this declaration is made in all seriousness, so if anyone knows of any reason why they should not..."

"I do!" All eyes turned in the direction of the raised voice in a strange accent, revealing a short man with wild hair and blue eyes behind thin-rimmed glasses. "General O'Neill has already made a commitment to another. He has a wife, who is Major Sheppard's sister, Carolyn Lam-Sheppard."

What Rodney could not know when he relayed his plans to Zelenka was that Zelenka had worked with the military before. He had known Jack O'Neill and John Sheppard personally,

and so he knew the terrible secret that Jack had been hiding from Rodney; the existence of Jack's wife. Major Sheppard stepped forward to confirm Zelenka's words.

"My sister is alive and in this house."

"Hardly a wife after all this time!" Jack exclaimed. He looked to Rodney. "We're separated."

"Where is she?" Rodney asked but a growing horror in the pit of his stomach gave him the answer long before Jack glanced upwards.

"Before I show you, I just want everyone to know Rodney knew nothing about all of this."

"We know," stated Zelenka, eyes filled with sorrow as he gazed at Rodney.

Jack led Rodney and the small group of guests up the flights of stairs to the third floor. Katie stepped back in surprise but lowered her eyes as Jack moved to a large wall tapestry and pulled it aside to reveal a hidden doorway. He watched dispassionately as Katie slid the key into the lock and opened the door, revealing darkness beyond.

"I'm sorry, sir. She smashed the light bulbs again."

Entering the room behind Jack, Rodney was appalled when Jack pulled back a curtain covering the window to reveal a woman of similar size to Katie Brown but with dark, matted hair half-concealing her rabid face while the light of insanity shone from her eyes. She snarled and leaped at Jack, sharp fingernails clawing at his face but he grabbed her by the wrists, holding her back as she screamed in fury. Sheppard raced around the other side and grabbed his sister around her slim waist, trying to shush her with soft words that had little or no effect.

"Now do you see? Hardly a wife." He turned his head to Rodney, eyes pleading. "After Charlie died she went insane with grief. I couldn't abandon her to one of those asylums."

Rodney shook his head in horror and backed away. He had to get away. He needed to think, and even the sight of Jack's heart breaking was not enough to hold him in that room, so he turned and ran, feeling betrayed and sick to his stomach.

Elizabeth left a tray of food outside his door but he had no appetite, and by the following morning he knew he could no longer stay at Cheyenne Park. His trust fund would come through in another month. All he had to do was survive on his own until then. At worse he could return to Dagan where Daniel would take him in for a while.

He packed his few belongings but when he opened his door he found Jack slumped in a chair opposite, waiting for him.

"At least allow me to explain."

Rodney sighed and stepped back, allowing Jack to enter; he sat on the edge of the bed that they had made love in so many times, and watched as Jack paced the room.

"This," Jack indicated the house and grounds. "All of this was bequeathed to my older brother, Hank. Me? I was left nothing except for an arranged marriage into a wealthy Southern family... but when I met Carolyn, I fell in love. She was young and beautiful, with so much life in her...and of course she was rich. I was too in love to notice things weren't quite right with her. She grew increasingly violent, her behavior extreme and I thought having a child would settle her down." He swallowed hard. "Charlie was beautiful. He was nine years old when I left him alone with his mother for the first time, without servants to watch over him. She gave him one of my guns to play with and..." Jack drew in a deep shuddering breath. "After Charlie died, what was left of her mind snapped with grief and she went completely insane. Soon after, both my father and brother died in a helicopter crash, leaving only myself to inherit all of this."

He reached out for Rodney, his hand dropping when Rodney made no attempt to grasp it even though Rodney's whole body shuddered with the memory of the pleasure that hand and those fingers had brought to him.

"I considered leaving her down there in an asylum. Maybe she might have been better off there but by the time I got back here, I realized if anyone knew she was still alive... but insane... then I'd never be free to find happiness with another. Better that everyone believed she had died."

He laughed softly. "As you probably guessed by now, Katie is a trained psychiatric nurse. The botany and flower arranging is just a hobby." Jack paused, eyes imploring. "We don't have to get married. We can just carry on as we are and..."

Rodney stared hard at the man he had come to love. "I need time to put things into perspective."

"You know, I liked you from the start. All wide-eyed with fright when I came roaring out of the woods on my bike that night, and the look of outrage when I blamed you for the spill." He looked earnest. "So beautiful in the starlight."

Rodney felt himself weakening, felt his self-respect slipping through his fingers with the desire to simply reach out and take whatever Jack could offer. He swallowed hard against the pain and misery. "I...I have to go."

Without allowing himself to think, he grabbed his bag and raced from the house, wrapping his shredded dignity around him like a tattered cloak. As much as he loved Jack, he needed his self-respect, and staying as the equivalent of a rent boy or gigolo was not going to give him that. Later, he was dismayed when he realized how little money he had brought with him, having left his wallet on the bedside table. The greyhound bus only took him so far before he was dropped in the middle of Nowheresville with nothing left to live on. He stared through the window of the diner at the bus stop, watching people eating until the heavy-set waitress indicated furiously for him to either come in and buy a meal, or move on.

With no money left in his pockets, he had no choice but to walk away from the delicious smells wafting into the street.

Uncertain what to do next but knowing he desperately needed money, he stood on the street corner and begged passers-by for a few dollars but they made a wide berth around him. A cop glanced at him and beckoned him over, and Rodney considered the possibility of spending a night in the cells. Except he'd heard too many tales about how 'pretty boys' were treated in jail cells, even if he didn't think himself especially pretty.

"Get in," the cop ordered, and Rodney knew better than to argue. He expected to be driven to the station but was confused when the cop drove him to the edge of the town. "Now get out and start walking. We don't want your type here."

"My type?"

"Yeah. Your type. Go find some other town to pimp your ass."

"You think I'm a...a prostitute?"

The cop's hand dropped to his gun holster, and Rodney was clued in enough to understand the significance. He hefted his bag and turned away, holding his head high as he gazed along the empty highway that stretched out before him.

Hours later, he was cold and it was dark. Only moonlight guided his steps and eventually he slumped down by the side of the road under some cover, drawing his knees to his chest and slept. He awoke when the beam from a car's headlights passed over him, shivering in the cold night air and berating himself for leaving in such a state that he'd not considered all the alternatives. Admittedly, his mind had felt numb from the events of the day or then panicked by the desire to accept Jack's offer to stay on as his paid fuck buddy, but he was supposed to be a genius. He should have gone to Zelenka, or Carson. Or he could have called Daniel, who would have happily sent him a pre-paid ticket back to Dagan. Instead he was in the middle of nowhere with no money for food or transport, and no warm clothes to keep out the chill of the night.

Dragging himself to his feet, he decided that if he stayed on the ground any longer then he'd probably die of hypothermia by morning. Better to keep walking and hope he came upon civilization before he dropped into a hypoglycemic coma.

By the pre-dawn light, he could barely put one foot in front of the other but his hopes rose when he spotted a farm house in the distance. He staggered up to the door and peered through the window, seeing movement inside, saying a quick thanks to a god he didn't believe in. Knocking hard, he saw the figure straighten, and watched as a dark-haired woman walked cautiously towards the door.

"Hi. Um... Can I use your phone? I got stranded out on the highway and... Um. Could you open the door, please?"

"Sorry, mister, but I can't let you in."

"Look, at least let me have something to eat...some bread, cheese? nothing with citrus though."

"Sorry, but I can't. I promised not to open the door to strangers."

Rodney slid down the outside of the door in dismay, cursing himself for being so stupid as to believe he'd gain help from ignorant farmers.

"You okay there?"

He looked up sharply into the inquisitive eyes of a man with a handsome though slightly pockmarked face, towering over him.

"I'm... I'm cold, tired and I'm hungry," Rodney stated miserably, wrapping his hands around his body. He was confused when a hand was thrust down at him.

"And I'm Michael Kenmore. Pleased to meet you."

After a moment's hesitation, Rodney took the hand, feeling it tighten around his as the man pulled him to his feet with easy strength. Rodney swayed alarmingly.

"Hmm. So you were telling the truth when you said you were cold and tired. Therefore, you must be hungry too. Come on in." Michael led him inside and pushed him down into a seat at the kitchen table. "So, do you have a name"

"Rodney...erh. Rodney Beckett." He hated lying but he was concerned that Jack would find him if he used his true surname.

Rodney spent the next few days in the farm, listening as Michael's sister told Rodney of the tragedy that had befallen her family. Their father had lost everything but the farm they lived on during a failed business venture. Worse still, his business partner had been killed soon after, before he could make good on promises to help out the Kenmore family, and all the money that should have come their way was now locked up in a trust fund to the man's surviving child.

Vala seemed overly friendly with Rodney, draping herself over him at every opportunity, and if he had been interested in women at all then he might have succumbed to her feminine charms. However, her brother was not nearly so friendly. He remained distant and brooding, as if his thoughts were a galaxy away, devoting all his time to studying theology. Rodney could understand his bitterness as, like Rodney, he had expected better from his life, and any hope of making a claim against that trust fund had died with his father a few short months earlier.

Weeks passed, and Rodney knew his birthday had come and gone, aware that he could claim his trust fund and make his way north to start work on his doctorate but he found himself content for the first time in years. Vala was excellent company when she wasn't waitressing at the diner, and the work he found in a bookstore in the nearby town allowed him to bring home enough to pay his way. Michael remained distant and stern but no longer so unfriendly, his mind too focused on his newfound religion, which Rodney had already brushed aside as more mumbo-jumbo.

He watched through the bookstore window as Michael arrived in the town one day, and saw the way his eyes softened fractionally when he bumped into Cameron Mitchell in the street. Cameron was a wealthy rancher and Rodney knew just by looking at the pair of them together, that they loved each other. Yet Michael remained aloof. He questioned Michael later.

"You love Cameron and you know he loves you, so why do you insist on remaining apart?"

Michael stared at Rodney, mouth curving into a semi-sneer.

"I intend to preach the word of Origin, and Cameron...Cameron is too shallow to follow me in such a cause." He looked at Rodney closely. "But you, Rodney. You have an inner strength of character. Come with me. Let us take the world by storm and spread the word of Origin together. You and I."

He leaned in and kissed Rodney hard and deep, taking Rodney by surprise, his teeth scraping over his lower lip and tearing into it. Rodney pulled back, lip stinging from the cut and mouth tasting of blood. Michael licked the spilled blood off his own lips.

"Come with me, Rodney. Share my life and my bed."

"No...I-I...But you don't love me. You love Cameron," he stammered, moaning as Michael took him in another hard kiss, silencing his protests. He pulled away, breathing hard. "I don't think...I need time to think about this."

Michael spent the next week pursuing him relentlessly and Rodney was almost swayed by the power of his speeches, and the desires Michael no longer suppressed. Passionate kisses brought him, quite literally, to his knees, his lips wrapped around a hard cock as Michael fucked his mouth with short, almost brutal thrusts that left him gagging. Yet every time Michael tried to go further, tried to force Rodney to his hands and knees so he could plunder his ass too, Rodney resisted as the memory of Jack's gentle touches flooded his mind.

After one vivid nightmare where Jack called out his name in desperation as flames licked about him, Rodney had to admit, if only to himself, that he still loved Jack with all his heart and wanted him on any terms. He had to go back even if that meant giving up his dream of becoming a doctor of astrophysics and becoming little more than a catamite in return.

Cheyenne Park

He had left in the Spring and now the leaves on the deciduous trees were turning golden, with each breath of a Fall breeze shaking them loose from their branches, leaving them fluttering down to form a russet and gold carpet beneath his feet. Yet all that beauty was lost on Rodney as he gaped at the blackened ruins of what had once been a stately home. Strangely, only one corner of the second floor had survived, the one that had housed his own room. It was as if the flames had refused to touch the place where he and Jack had first made love.

Retracing his steps, he dialed the number for the cab company and asked them to send back the cab. Ten minutes passed too slowly, leaving Rodney with nothing to do except ponder all the ways in which this disaster could have happened but in truth, the most likely cause was Carolyn. She had already tried to burn down the house once before while Jack was in it.

He had his theory confirmed twenty minutes later by the owner of a bar situated less than five miles from the destroyed house.

"It was his mad wife. She torched the whole place. You could see the house burning for miles, and by the time we got the fire engines there it was too late to save it." The man shook his head. "It was a terrible sight."

"What of the General... and the staff. Miss Elizabeth Weir, Katie Brown?"

"The General managed to get all the staff out of the burning house before we got there but then he went back in to save his wife. If we'd arrived sooner then maybe we could have stopped him."

"Did he..." Rodney swallowed hard, not wanting to ask if Jack had died in the fire. "Did he save her?"

"No. She climbed out onto the top window ledge and threw herself off the building. By then some of the guys had managed to get inside and found him trapped under a beam. We managed to pull him out but his hands were burned, one quite badly, and the heat had damaged his eyes leaving him blind."

"Where is he now?"

"There's a cabin deep in the woods at the edge of the pond. He used to go stay there under the pretense of fishing but we all knew he just needed the solitude. There's never been a single fish caught in that pond. Ever."

"Can you give me directions?"

The man stared at him for a moment with a calculating expression before making up his mind. "Better still, I can take you there as I have the weekly order of beer and whiskey to deliver."

Less than an hour later, Rodney stepped out of the truck and stared at the large cabin. He saw Elizabeth's eyes widen when she caught sight of him, a smile radiating across her face as Rodney moved towards the cabin's door. Rodney hugged her briefly before taking the tray from her hands. Jack was just inside, and Rodney faltered for a moment before walking across the room, drinking in the sight of the man he loved. The weight of grief on Jack's face had aged him but though there were a few small patches of burned skin, his face had survived the fire untouched and still as handsome as Rodney recalled. His hands were scarred but not nearly so bad as Rodney had presumed from the description given. If anything, the burns were almost minor in nature for the most part, with slight scarring from second degree burns. His eyes were haunted though, as if permanently fixed on the horror of that night.

"Jack?"

Jack froze, head tilting and eyes widening as hope flooded his face.

"Rodney?" He reached out blindly and this time, Rodney reached back, wrapping his fingers around the slightly damaged hand. "You came back," he whispered before dragging Rodney into his arms and holding him tight. After a moment Jack pulled back, his sightless eyes trying to find Rodney's. "I still want to marry you."

Rodney smiled and kissed Jack softly, knowing that this time there was no reason to refuse.

Epilogue

It was amazing how far medicine had progressed in just a hundred years and Carson had remained as Jack's physician, using all his skills and contacts to look into ways to regenerate the damaged optic nerves. The latest treatment used a regrowth factor called oncomodulin, and so far the results had been positive. Carson had explained that the nerves were not as badly damaged as originally suspected anyway and, though he would never regain twenty-twenty vision, his eyesight would come back eventually.

The first time Jack looked at Rodney and truly saw him, Rodney saw a grin lift Jack's face beyond handsome and into beatific. His fingers traced the curves on Rodney's face, across brow and cheekbone and down the line of his jaw before sweeping across his lips as if he had not done that a hundred times before.

"You grew into your nose at last," he said and Rodney grinned back, aware of how much he had changed physically in the past five years, finally losing the slenderness of youth and broadening out. Unfortunately, his hair had not fared so well, starting to recede in the same male-pattern baldness that had affected Rodney's father, judging by the photographs. Jack didn't seem to care though and Rodney could bet Jack knew Rodney's body as well as he knew his own, knew every curve and line by touch alone, every flex of muscle and even the slight softness around his waist and hips from spending too many hours in the laboratory, having finally gone back to earn his doctorate.

"Even more beautiful than I remember," Jack murmured, fingers trailing beneath his eyes. "So blue."

When they made love that night, Jack followed his fingers closely as if memorizing every visible part of Rodney's body, paying special attention to his ass as he slipped in first one finger and then another, slowly loosening Rodney until he was ready for Jack.

"Want to do this face to face," Jack stated, "Want to see you."

Rodney swallowed hard and turned onto his back without a word, pulling back his legs at the knees and leaving himself open and welcoming. He felt so incredibly vulnerable as Jack's gaze passed down his body to his straining erection, one hand sliding over softly perspiring flesh, fingers tangling in the chest hairs that formed an upside-down triangle from his

shoulders to the center of his chest, leaving the nipples exposed for exploration by finger and tongue.

Jack wriggled closer between Rodney's legs, pressing into his body carefully, his eyes closing in pleasure as he pushed past the slight resistance and sank deep into Rodney. Only then did he look up, locking his gaze with Rodney's as he rocked in and out with a terrible, exquisite slowness that hit just the right spot over and over, slowly drawing Rodney to a climax that melted through him, turning bones to liquid.

Afterwards, they lay together with Jack's head on the pillow next to Rodney, still staring at him as if he would never tear his eyes away ever again. Jack pushed up until he was leaning on his elbow, still looking straight at Rodney.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you but I couldn't because of all that official...red tape...top secret...stuff."

"Oh?" Rodney twisted his wedding ring in concern.

"We found something in Antarctica, and your colleague Daniel Jackson helped us figure out part of it. Jackson called it a Stargate and they want the foremost expert in wormhole physics to head up the research." Jack poked him. "That would be you."

"Really?" Rodney looked stunned for a moment, and then he realized that he couldn't accept the position. He couldn't leave Jack and work in Antarctica.

"Before you start getting all riled up, they brought it to the complex beneath Cheyenne Mountain, and now I'll be able to see again, I've accepted the position as commander of the Stargate Complex.

Rodney reached up and pulled Jack down on top of him, hugging him hard.

At the age of ten he'd had nothing but the clothes on his back. It had taken him sixteen years, but now he had everything he had ever dreamed of but, most of all, he had a future with Jack right beside him.

END

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