

The Group-W Bench

by Speranza

Why the hell hadn't he gotten out while the going was good? He should have taken that cushy job at MIT, never mind that they weren't cutting edge; he could have had a ginormous research budget and all the grad student blowjobs he could stand. Instead, he was standing on a gray concrete runway under a threatening gray sky, having stumbled out of the C-30 still rumbling behind him. The wind sliced at him.

"Come on, Doc," one of the MPs said, and Rodney ducked his head against the cold and followed him across the slab of tarmac to the cinderblock building. Inside, the dirty white formica counter was manned by a grunt in glasses. "Dr. Rodney McKay," Rodney announced, dropping his bags and letting his satchel slide off his shoulder. "I'm here to—"

The grunt ignored him and looked at the MP, who unsnapped a leather folder and handed over a sheaf of documents. The grunt looked through them slowly, then reached under the counter and pulled out a metal stamping machine. He stamped the top page—chik!—

then flipped a page, stamped. Flipped another two pages, stamped, then tore the last page off. He handed it to the MP. "Have a good one."

"You too," the MP said, turning to go. Rodney yelled, "Wait, what the hell is—" The MP walked out, and Rodney nearly went after him but his two small bags were in a heap on the floor and he didn't want to leave them, so he turned on the grunt at the counter. "Where is this? Where am I going? I demand that you—"

"Sir," the grunt interrupted, "if you'd sit down. This is Spangdahlem; you're here to change planes for Tomsk. We'll get you there as soon as we have an aircraft," and then he turned away, Rodney's paperwork in hand, and disappeared through a door.

Rodney stood there a moment, speechless, hands braced on the counter, and then gave in all at once. He turned, nearly tripping over his bags, and tried to fight down his panic: he was God-knows-where, *Spangdahlem*. There was a bench by the wall near the door; a khaki-clad soldier sat there, staring at the duffle bag that

lay at his feet. Rodney dragged his stuff across the room and fumbled for his laptop. Twenty-three minutes of battery life and this room had no outlets, even presuming his international adaptor featured the correct plug for whatever godforsaken hole this—

Rodney looked at the soldier. "Where is this, Germany?"

The soldier cut his eyes toward him once, warily. "Yeah."

There was, of course, no wireless either, but that at least extended his battery life by 14 minutes. He used the time to work on polishing the letter of protest he intended to send to the SGC brass, who might at least have *consulted* with the technical team at Area 51 before deciding to relocate a talent of his magnitude halfway across the—

The battery warning light came on. Rodney saved and wrote and saved until the screen darkened, and then he sighed and closed the laptop. Beside him, the soldier had hardly

moved; he was still hunched forward, staring down at his laced fingers. His face was stony, and Rodney wondered if the U.S. armed forces deliberately recruited guys like these: human automatons. He put his laptop away; stupidly, he had taken nothing to read, knowing his laptop was full of files and .pdfs.

Rodney looked around for a newspaper, a magazine, something, then took a breath and tried to clear his brain. He had to see this as an opportunity: time for uninterrupted thought. He jammed his hands into his pockets, closed his eyes and thought about the way energy patterns inscribed themselves on gate crystals, and the very beautiful and very wrong Major Carter, which led him to Hammond, and the way the MPs had forcibly escorted him—

He opened his eyes and turned, a little desperately, to the soldier. "Been waiting long?"

The soldier didn't react at first, just kept staring down at the floor. "Yeah," he said finally.

Rodney'd meant it as small talk, except now he wondered just how long these idiots could keep him holed up. Maybe this guy had had all the life sucked out of him by endless military airport delays. "Oh? How long?" Rodney asked. If this were an episode of *Twilight Zone*, he'd be waiting to ship home from the Second World War.

The soldier frowned, then glanced at his watch: a black chronometer strapped to a hairy wrist. "I don't know," he said, and sat up to look at Rodney. His face was still strangely impassive, and his eyes were an odd color—almost a no-color, Rodney thought, like rocks seen through river water.

Great, a weirdo. Rodney looked desperately toward the counter, but there was no one there and no sign of anything happening anytime soon. He turned back to the soldier and asked, without any hope, "I don't suppose you've got anything to read?"

The guy stared at him for long enough that Rodney began to wonder if he were brain

damaged. But then he turned and bent down to root in his tan canvas duffle, body precariously poised half on and half off the bench. It wasn't until he straightened with three books in his hands—a thick nonfiction paperback about Iran, Stephen Hawking's *The Universe in a Nutshell* and *The Brothers Karamazov*—that Rodney realized the guy'd been assessing *him*. "Here," he said. "Have at."

Rodney took the books—he needed both hands to hold them—and stared down at their battered covers and heavily creased spines. The guy hadn't got far with the *Brothers*, but the other two looked like they'd been read pretty thoroughly, and Rodney decided that he'd much rather talk to this surprising person than read Hawking again.

The soldier was already drifting back into reverie. Rodney had assumed this stupor to be a sign of vacancy, but maybe it was the opposite, and he had a lot on his mind.

Rodney cleared his throat. "I'm Dr. Rodney McKay," he said, and extended his hand. The

soldier looked at him but didn't shake it, and Rodney hastily pulled back. "I'm a astrophysicist," he said, and the guy raised an eyebrow. Encouraged, Rodney went on. "I'm Canadian, but I work for the Air Force," and then, getting into the comfortable swing of elucidation, "I'm being sent to supervise the development of—well, it's classified, actually, but it's a very, very important scientific program. In Russia."

"Uh-huh," the soldier said, and his eyes really were fascinating: very pale brown with flecks of green. Rodney waited expectantly for him to introduce himself, and finally, he did. "Major John Sheppard." He didn't offer his hand. "I fucked up and a lot of people died. I'm being sent—well, either home or to Antarctica. I'd prefer Antarctica."

"Oh," Rodney said, and looked away; he didn't know what to say to that.

"Yeah." Sheppard laced his fingers again, then turned them, thoughtfully contemplating their

undersides, the palms of his hands. "Can we not talk anymore?"

"Sure," Rodney said hastily. "Yes."

"Great," Sheppard said.

Rodney stared at the floor, which was made of cracked black and white linoleum tiles. Thirty-three across at the widest part, but of course there was the door jutting in and the U of the counter on the other side—

"I fucked up, too," Rodney blurted, "and someone nearly died. He didn't, though. Somebody else saved him."

Sheppard didn't say anything, but Rodney was still glad he'd said it. It felt good to say, even if he'd broken Sheppard's rule. Thirty-three tiles, times twenty-seven, minus—

"There wasn't anybody else." Sheppard was still staring at his hands.

"I'm sorry," Rodney said, and then, wanting to dispel the heavy silence between them: "It's Siberia, where they're sending me. Tomsk. Not exactly the plum assignment I was hoping for." This wasn't a conversation, and he wasn't expecting Sheppard to answer him. He was just throwing out words, trying to derail the circling horrors, though that was probably exactly what Sheppard was trying to stop him from doing.

But to his surprise, Sheppard did answer. "Tomsk, yeah," he said, fidgeting and scrubbing at his unruly thatch of hair. "I know it. They—make plutonium, right?"

"Yes. Plutonium, uranium, the whole atomic cocktail; a physicist's dream. So it won't be so bad. It's not the gulag or anything. There's an IT industry, universities, even a couple of restaurants. Not to mention," Rodney added, letting his head roll forward, "a truly first-rate international puppet theatre," and for the first time, Sheppard laughed. It was a nice laugh: a little breathy, a little snorty, but nice.

"Oh, so tell the whole story," Sheppard said earnestly. "It was the puppets, right?"

"Yes, yes, all right, you've found me out. I'm a sucker for puppets. I'm a dirty puppet-loving freak. "

"Well, who *isn't*?"

"I know!" Rodney exclaimed. "I can't wait to get there!"

Sheppard turned serious again. "You know it's gonna be a while, right? You're not going anywhere anytime soon. Storm's coming in."

"What?" Rodney gaped at him. "Nobody said anything about—who told you that?"

Sheppard rolled his eyes. "I looked out the window, Doctor. I looked at the *sky*."

Rodney got up off the bench and went to look. The sky had darkened a little, to the color of smoke, but— "Okay, it's dark, but it's not raining

or snowing or—" He looked over his shoulder at Sheppard, who said, "Look northeast," and then jerked his thumb hard to the left when Rodney made it clear he didn't know which way that was. Rodney went to the far right of the window so that he could see as far left as possible, and then he saw it: the thick column of storm stroking downward like a tree-trunk.

"They won't fly in that," Sheppard said. "I wouldn't fly in that unless I had to," and Rodney came back to the bench and asked Sheppard what sort of aircraft he flew. Sheppard told him about Blackhawks and Apaches and sandstorms and hail.

Much later, well after the snow had started, a couple of MPs came over and explained that they were very sorry, but all flights were cancelled due to the weather. However, they were happy to welcome him to Spangdahlem AFB, where he would be set up in guest quarters and where he was of course welcome to use all on-base facilities, including but not limited to their mini-market, commissary, and wine shop.

"Yes, yes, fine, it's about time, I'm starving." Rodney got to his feet and rubbed his hands in anticipation. "Come on, Major," Rodney said, turning to Sheppard. "I'll buy you a—"

"Not you," the MP said, sharply, bringing Rodney up short before he realized the man was addressing himself to Sheppard, who was still slouched on the bench. He flashed a hard, thin-lipped smile. "Not you, sir. I'm sorry," the MP said. "Your access is restricted; I have orders to confine you to quarters." Sheppard jerked a nod.

Rodney looked back and forth between Sheppard and the MP, trying to think of a single good reason to protest. What he felt was raging disappointment: here he was, on his way to *Siberia* of all places and what seemed like his last opportunity to have dinner with a reasonably intelligent person who spoke English had just been snatched away from him. "Dr. McKay," the MP was saying, "if you'd please come with me," and Sheppard, probably trying to make it easy for him, sat up and swung out a hand. "Nice talking to you," Sheppard

said, meeting his eyes directly. Rodney took his hand and shook it, completing the cycle of introduction they'd started hours earlier.

"Same here," Rodney said. He realized that he was still gripping Sheppard's hand, and let go; a moment later he realized that Sheppard hadn't let go either. He slung his satchel over his shoulder, hoisted up his bags and said again, awkwardly, "Same."

The MPs gestured him toward the door that led deeper into the building, and Rodney had already decided that he wasn't going to look back, except he did, just as he passed through. Luckily, Sheppard wasn't looking at him; he'd slumped back against the cinderblock wall and was staring up at the ceiling. It was irrational, there would be English-speakers in Tomsk—and Americans, and probably even Air Force majors, a species to whom he seemed to be improbably and bizarrely attracted—but leaving the waiting room felt more like saying goodbye to his ambitions and dreams than leaving Colorado Springs had. Probably he hadn't really processed it then.

He was brought into an office full of flags and patriotic claptrap—soaring eagles, liberty bells, various phallic-looking American monuments—and introduced to a Colonel Richard E. Braddock, who welcomed him to Spangdahlem AFB and apologized for the delay. Then the MP took him to his room, which was dingy, and handed him a key. Rodney sighed, dropped his bags, and went to wash up. He was drying his face with a scratchy, threadbare face towel he wouldn't have used as a lab rag when he got a good look at himself in the small square of mirror over the sink.

His skin looked blotchy and his hair was too long. He always put off getting a haircut until it was too late, and now, great, he was going to be stuck in Siberia with bad hair. He sighed down at himself: his shirt was hanging off him, his arms looked like noodles, and honestly, seriously, he had no business contemplating what he was contemplating, but Rodney McKay hadn't gotten where he'd gotten—*Siberia*, oh, *God*—by being the kind of guy who didn't at least try to make the most out of every opportunity.

Major Sheppard looked surprised to see him when he opened the door to his quarters. Rodney didn't give him a chance to say anything; people didn't always know what was good for them. "So it's a funny thing about the confinement rules," Rodney said, shifting the weight of the cardboard box he was carrying. "You can't leave your room, but I can come in, so can I come in?" and in case this wasn't clear enough: "I've got food. Sandwiches and french fries and some sort of cole slaw, I think, and beer, did I mention I have beer? Good beer. German," Rodney said, shifting the box again.

Sheppard just stood there, one hand on the door, looking hot in his t-shirt and BDUs. Rodney debated going into additional detail about the sandwiches, except he thought his offer was pretty clear, unless Sheppard was stupid, which Rodney knew he wasn't. He raised his chin and tried to look confident; nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Doctor McKay." Sheppard's mouth curled at the edge as he stepped back from the door, and that lilt in his voice was flirtation, right?

What else could that be but flirtation? Okay, yes, mocking, Sheppard could be mocking him; there was a certain musicality to mocking, he knew that, recognized it, but it was a harder tune: more sing-songy, less pleasant. "Nice to see you again," and okay, yes: flirtation for sure.

"I hate eating alone," Rodney told him, and okay, wow, he'd thought *his* place was a dump, but it was a palace next to the quarters they'd given Sheppard: a tiny room with a twin bed, a small desk, a chair, and one small window, set high up in the wall. There was a metal tray on the desk, Sheppard's as yet uneaten dinner; obviously from the base dining facility and containing the familiar nasty unidentifiables. Behind him, Sheppard shut the door. The whole room seemed to be taken up by the two of them.

"Yeah," Sheppard said softly. "Me too." He took the box from Rodney's arms, grunting a little in surprise at the weight. "Whoa, what are these sandwiches made of, rocks?"

"It's the beer," Rodney said, stepping back to put a little distance between them. This put him next to the bed, so he hastily stepped forward again. "I bought—kind of a lot."

Sheppard put the box down and opened the flaps, smirk blossoming into a full-blooded grin. "I like a man who doesn't skimp on beer," he said, arching an eyebrow, and Rodney's heart kicked in his chest. Flirting, oh, very definitely.

Rodney sat at the foot of the bed. Sheppard turned the desk chair to sit opposite, though the room was so small that their knees touched. They opened two brown bottles of Spaten and unwrapped the sandwiches Rodney had bought. "Sorry about the—" Sheppard said with his mouth full, "—accommodations. They're not sure how to treat me."

"So you're preemptively a criminal?" Rodney asked through his own mouthful.

"Ha." Sheppard's smile turned bitter. "If I were a criminal, Dr. McKay..." and he brought his wrists together, sandwich in one hand, bottle of

beer in the other: mock manacles. "This is pretty respectful, all things considered: privacy, room service..." He shrugged and took a long swig of beer. His long, lean throat worked as he swallowed.

Some part of his brain immediately started working on the problem of convincing Major John Sheppard to have sex with him in the middle of a U.S. Air Force base. Arguments in favor included: a lock on the door, an available soft surface (bed being too generous a designation), the fact that Sheppard was already on the verge of disgrace anyway, and the likely absence of suitable sexual partners in Antarctica. The arguments against were, of course, too many to be enumerated and included committing any number of prohibited consensual sex crimes, so Rodney didn't waste time on those. Stay positive, he thought.

They had just finished their third beer when Rodney decided that it was probably time to start talking about how lonely it would be in Antarctica, how few people would be stationed there and how gossip would almost certainly

make privacy impossible, except then Sheppard leaned in, empty beer bottle dangling from his fingertips, and kissed him. Rodney was so surprised at this—Sheppard made the first move? Rodney always made the first move!—that he nearly pushed Sheppard away.

Thankfully, sanity prevailed and Rodney surged forward into the kiss, hands sliding up over Sheppard's shoulders and clutching at the long, lean muscles of his back.

Somewhere, dimly, he heard the thunk of Sheppard's beer bottle hitting the carpet, and then Sheppard's hands were in his hair, on his face, warm and grasping. Rodney groaned and yanked him closer, and then they were kissing open-mouthed, hot and wet and *oh, hello, John Sheppard's tongue, so nice to meet you.*

Sheppard tasted like beer, slick and wheaty, and Rodney held on tight and made out with him, drunk on the hard warmth of his body, the scratch of rough stubble around his dry lips.

Sheppard crept forward, pushing into Rodney's space, practically climbing into his lap. Rodney toppled, flopping back on the bed with

Sheppard on top of him, heavy and warm and still kissing him. Sheppard's hands slid up under Rodney's shirt, fingers rough against Rodney's sensitized skin. Sheppard caressed his ribs, stretched up toward his chest, trying and failing to reach—then jerked back and sat up, flushed and a little breathless, and began to undo his buttons. Rodney stared up at the man straddling him, stripping him, unbuckling his belt and unzipping his pants with a kind of ruthless efficiency, and tried to remember the last time anybody had wanted him like this. Sheppard reached into Rodney's fly and pulled his cock out through the gap in his boxers, holding it like it was the best toy in the world: a present for him. He pumped it a few times, proprietarily. The world blurred, shimmered like a heat haze on asphalt, but Rodney kept his eyes open. He didn't want to miss this; he didn't want to miss a single goddamned second of this.

"Take," Rodney managed finally; Sheppard was straddling his thighs, Sheppard was still lazily stroking his cock, "—your shirt—" and Sheppard's eyes slid up from Rodney's dick to his face. He smiled, nodded, let go of Rodney's

dick—Rodney manfully suppressed a moan of loss—to grip the hem of his t-shirt and pull it up over his head. His shoulders were strong and well-muscled; his chest was lean and furred with black hair. Rodney impulsively reached up to touch, and Sheppard bent down to let him, his eyes fluttering closed as Rodney found and squeezed a nipple. It went hard under his fingertips, so Rodney played with it until Sheppard said, hoarsely, "Jesus, McKay." He slid back, arms braced on the bed, and dropped to briefly kiss Rodney's hairy belly before going lower and dragging his tongue along the shaft of Rodney's cock. "Oh God," Rodney gasped, "ohgod ohgodohgod," and Sheppard was sucking him hungrily, mouth sliding up and down like cock was the best thing in the entire world.

Rodney held on, fists tightening on the cot's rough blanket, and tried not to come; he wanted to keep feeling the slow drag of Sheppard's lower lip, the tip of his tongue. He squeezed his eyes closed, then sank his fingers into Sheppard's thick hair and stroked a thumb over his scalp, because *thank you thank you thank*

you; God, please don't stop. Sheppard didn't stop; in fact, Sheppard went down harder, taking him deep with a wet gasp, again and again until Rodney was sobbing aloud. Then Sheppard took him deeper still, holding him in the back of his throat while he made muffled, ragged-sounding noises.

Something ticked over in Rodney's brain: choking; suffocation; that sounded like— It was too much, too hard; Sheppard was bruising his throat, deliberately asphyxiating himself on Rodney's cock. Rodney jerked up, pushing Sheppard away with his hand and Jesus, *Jesus*, Sheppard's face had gone red and he was gasping erratically for breath. Before he knew what he was doing, before he had time to think about it, Rodney grabbed Sheppard by the shoulders and gathered him up, hugging him hard. "What are you," Rodney sputtered, "what the hell are you—?" and Christ, why did he always have to fall for the damaged ones?

To his surprise, Sheppard pressed his face to Rodney's neck. His skin was hot. His breath came too fast. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I just, I—"

and then he let out a soft, pained sound. Rodney clutched him tighter, murmuring, "shh, shh," and then, tilting his face up, kissed him. Kissing shut him up as well as anything, and when Sheppard moaned into his mouth, he didn't sound nearly as miserable. He seemed to like it, actually; kissing Rodney. Sheppard pushed him down and came for more.

When Sheppard finally lifted his head, his mouth was glossy and a little swollen. He also looked vaguely chagrined. "You're nice," he said, and it was almost an accusation, except for how Sheppard's fingers were gently stroking along the line of Rodney's jaw.

"I'm not," Rodney said, and that was true.

"Yeah, whatever." Sheppard seemed entirely focused on stroking the bit of jaw just under his ear, where maybe he hadn't shaved all that well. "I'll finish blowing you if you want," he said. "Or you can fuck me. I'll let you fuck me cause you're: So. Nice."

Lust gripped him so hard he nearly groaned aloud: God, yes, he wanted to fuck Sheppard *blind*. But Sheppard had given the words an ironic spin, turning them into curveballs. So. *Nice*. "You—you don't have to," Rodney said uncomfortably.

Sheppard sat back again, shirtless and straddling him, and Jesus, he was just showing it off. "I want to," Sheppard said, and pulled Rodney's hand to his cock; he was still wearing pants, but there was no mistaking that hard-on. Rodney groped him, running his palm over it, squeezing the head with his fingers. Above him, Sheppard shuddered, slowly licked his lips, smiled. "I want to because they don't want me to," he said.

"Oh," Rodney said. He could understand that: it was only natural to want to rebel against rules that stupid. "That's—" and Sheppard was tilting his hips forward, pushing his cock hard against Rodney's hand. Hard, Christ. Hot. Rodney's mouth went dry. He looked up at John Sheppard: so fucking beautiful. "That's not why I want to."

Sheppard's expression changed, softened maybe; all of a sudden he looked young and a little bit lost. "McKay," he said. "Rodney—"

They were interrupted by rapidfire banging at the door. Panic seized Rodney; Jesus, he was flat on his back with his cock hanging out of his pants! Above him, Sheppard just frowned, though he seemed to sit up a little straighter where he was straddling Rodney's thighs.

"Yes?" Sheppard called, and his voice was all business, but he reached out with an apparent and perverse pleasure to hold Rodney's rapidly softening cock. "What is it?"

"Major Sheppard. I have a message for you, sir," and Sheppard looked down at Rodney, shrugged, and then jerked his head to the side significantly. *What?* Rodney mimed his terror and incomprehension, and Sheppard rolled his eyes and practically pushed Rodney onto the floor on the far side of the bed. "One moment!" Sheppard called out, tamping down the air with both hands—stay down, stay down!—before fumbling for his discarded t-shirt. Rodney clung to the floor and worried about his jacket, the

empty bottles of beer—hell, his shoes, where were his shoes?

He heard the door open; he froze. Sheppard said, "Yeah?" and "Thanks," and closed the door again. Suddenly he felt stupid: stupid and very relieved. A moment later, Sheppard's bare feet were in front of him, and Rodney looked up: up and up to Sheppard, who smirked and offered him a hand, so Rodney let Sheppard haul him to his feet.

"I was serious, you know," and Sheppard's hands were on him, Sheppard's hands were all over him, "about you fucking me, or—" The hard look was melting off Sheppard's face again. "Or I'd love to fuck you. I'd be good," Sheppard said, sliding his hands to Rodney's hips and tugging their cocks together, and Rodney wasn't sure if this meant *well-behaved* or *good in bed*. One of Sheppard's hands slid down Rodney's ass, and Rodney sucked in a breath. "Or whatever you want," Sheppard said with sincerity. "I'll do whatever you want, Rodney."

Rodney couldn't remember ever feeling this sick over a decision; it was like having too many flavors of ice cream to choose from. He leaned in to kiss him, and when Sheppard's tongue slid into his mouth, he knew which way it would go. Besides, it was clear that Sheppard was the athlete between them; let him do all the hard work of fucking.

Sheppard's grin when they broke apart told Rodney he'd made the right choice. Sheppard turned out to be surprisingly pushy, all grabby hands and hot, sucking kisses. He peeled Rodney out of his clothes, stripped off his own, and tugged Rodney down onto the bed with a playful flick of his eyebrow; five minutes later, he had Rodney face-down and spread open. "Fuck," Rodney gasped into the pillow at the first, surprising touch of Sheppard's tongue; nobody'd ever done this for him before. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck*." Sheppard held him open, licking and teasing and occasionally turning his head to nip playfully at his ass before suddenly getting serious. Rodney stifled his sobs against the pillow as Sheppard mashed his face into him, going at him with lips and teeth and tongue

before pushing inside him. "Oh, fuck," Rodney groaned, pushing back helplessly; he was drenched with sweat. "Oh, fuck. Sheppard. Shh—*John*," his ass spasming around John Sheppard's tongue. Letting his weight rest on his face, Rodney frantically reached for his cock, because Jesus!—but Sheppard raised his head and intercepted his hand, fingers clamping tight around Rodney's wrist.

Rodney let out a desperate and frustrated moan, and Sheppard kissed the small of his back and murmured, "Shh, okay. Hang on." He straightened, fumbled for a condom, did something else back there, lube, fumbling, Jesus Christ, get on with—and then Sheppard was grabbing his hips and pulling him up onto all fours. Sheppard slid into him slow, steady, easy as anything; he'd never been so wide open before. Rodney sucked for breath and then convulsed, almost involuntarily, around the hard length inside him. Sheppard sucked air between his teeth and tilted up—and that was it, Jesus, his sweet spot, and the world went white before his eyes. Sheppard jerked him upright and clutched him tightly, muscular arms

coming around him, sweat-slick hands sliding over his face, his jaw, his mouth—and Rodney realized that Sheppard was trying to hush him, shush him, smother his too-loud shouts of pleasure against his sticky, grasping hand. Rodney closed his eyes and struggled to breathe against Sheppard's palm, and now that his own sobs had been muffled he could hear Sheppard panting loudly and muttering curses in his ear: "Oh Jesus fuck fuck fuck fuck," and with each fuck, a snap of the hips.

"Rodney," Sheppard said finally, raggedly, lips on his ear, "Rodney, I'm gonna come soon. I'm gonna—" like *that* mattered; Rodney had already come twice, splattering his belly and the bed in front of him, though he thought that if Sheppard would just touch him, if Sheppard would cup his hard-on, he could come again; would come again.

Sheppard did touch him then, groping him roughly, unsteadily, and Rodney did come again, the orgasm washing over him and leaving him with limbs like water. Sheppard said, in a high, breathless voice, "oh shit," and

came too, and then he pitched forward onto the mattress, pushing Rodney down and sprawling onto his back. Sheppard lay there for a moment, heavy and apparently boneless, and then rolled off and lay on his back panting up at the ceiling. "That," he said. "I think that was the best sex I've ever had."

"That was *amazing* sex," Rodney mumbled into the pillow.

"You have an amazing ass." Sheppard sounded really earnest, and Rodney couldn't stop himself from smiling stupidly.

"Thank you."

"Hey. Just calling it as I see it," Sheppard said, and then he was rolling closer and sliding an arm over Rodney's shoulders. Rodney awkwardly inched sideways to get closer. Sheppard was warm, and Rodney huddled close and drowsed for a while.

He woke up with a start, and realized he'd been drooling. "Hey." He swallowed and swiped a hand across his mouth. "What—?"

"Sorry, sorry." Sheppard's voice was gentle, his mouth in Rodney's hair. "I didn't mean to—and God knows I don't want, I don't want you to—"

Rodney lifted his head to look at him. "Oh. Oh. I should go," Rodney said, and Sheppard nodded, looking sad.

"I don't want you to," Sheppard said again. "But—"

"But they shouldn't find me here." Rodney was already pushing up, off the bed. He was sticky, but he could wait until he got back to his own room to shower. He looked around for shirt, pants, underwear. Or maybe not; he wasn't ready to wash this experience off.

"Right." Sheppard sat, naked, at the edge of the bed, head hanging despondently. "An hour or

two, we can justify. We were talking, having a beer, but... "

"But we're past the point of plausible deniability," Rodney said grimly, and pulled up his pants.

Sheppard looked up. "Yeah."

Rodney focused on buttoning his shirt. He changed the subject. "So—what was the message you got? Good news or..."

Sheppard picked a piece of paper off the bedside table. It had been heavily folded. He handed it to Rodney.

STANDARD TRANSFER ORDER

it said.

SHEPPARD, JOHN. 099-337-2342.

ULTIMATE DESTINATION AND

NATURE OF DUTY:

**Report to the Commanding Officer,
USAF 62nd Airlift Wing, McMurdo AFB.**

"Is—" Rodney looked up at Sheppard. "Is this what you wanted?"

"Yeah," Sheppard said. It sounded like he meant it. "It is, actually."

Rodney nodded slowly, handed the paper back. "That's good. That's—Well." Things were suddenly awkward between them. "Good luck, I guess."

"You too." Sheppard stood up then: naked, beautiful, totally unselfconscious. One corner of his mouth tipped into a smile. "Don't let the puppets get you, okay?"

Rodney shuddered. "I won't," he said. "And you, watch out for—whatever it is they have there. Penguins. Loneliness. Various forms of ice-and-snow-induced madness."

"Gotcha." Sheppard nodded solemnly. "I saw *The Shining*, I'll be on my guard."

"There are no penguins in *The Shining*," Rodney said, and then they both cracked up. "Though boy, that would have been a movie, huh?" He kissed Sheppard fast, and left.

He got one postcard from Sheppard, or at least, he assumed it was Sheppard. The postcard was unsigned, and there was no return address. It was addressed simply to

DR. RODNEY MCKAY, USAF, TOMSK,
SIBERIA.

Still, it got to him.

It was a line drawing of the bottom of the globe, outlining the single continent of Antarctica. A dot marked the South Pole. The message was short and to the point, scrawled in rounded capital letters.

I'VE HIT BOTTOM,

it said.

I THINK I LIKE IT HERE.

Speranza

Rodney sent a postcard back, addressed to

MAJOR JOHN SHEPPARD, MCMURDO AFB,
ANTARCTICA.

He figured that if he got Sheppard's, Sheppard was bound to get his.

"CAN'T TALK,"

he wrote.

"PUPPETS WILL EAT ME."

He didn't sign his name either.

Some of the other scientists were muttering as they took their seats on the plane that would take them to New Zealand. "It's a hundred degrees below zero on a good day!" one said. Another nodded and added: "It's the asshole of the earth, McMurdo. Fifty people, all anti-social."

"I think I know somebody there," Rodney said, trying for casual. "An old friend from a couple years—"

Major Joseph Barnes of the SGC abruptly halted beside him in the plane's aisle. "No, you don't, Doctor," Barnes said emphatically. "You don't know anyone at McMurdo; no one's even supposed to know you're here. This mission is classified, understand? I thought we went over this back in Colorado Springs," and Rodney, who had been trying to figure out the best way to get a message to Sheppard once they landed, clenched his jaw and nodded. Understood.

That wasn't the end of it. He got called into a conference room once they landed.

"Seriously, it's nothing important," Rodney said, as haughtily as he could manage; haughtiness was his only way out of this. "Someone I knew, ages ago, back before Area 51; I thought he transferred out here some years ago."

"Oh?" Lieutenant Harris sat back in his chair and smiled at him; he was doodling idly on his pad. "Who, exactly? What's his name?"

Rodney, who had been working for the American military for roughly half his life, gave up the name attached to the first military face that swam into his mind. "Chris Dodgson," he said. "We worked together at NASA," though they hadn't, technically; Rodney remembered Dodgson primarily as a consistent late-night visitor to the Ames Research Center's commissary. Dodgson didn't have much of a life either.

Harris smiled at this and went still, raising a hand to his ear; it was only then that Rodney realized the guy was wearing a radio. "I'm told that Lieutenant Christopher Dodgson is currently employed at the USAF Office of Scientific Research in Virginia."

"Great," Rodney said. "Problem solved; can I go now?" They let him go.

It was inevitable, Rodney supposed, that when he finally saw Sheppard again, he would be sitting in the Ancient command chair, surrounded by a halo of light.

"Who is this?" Dr. Weir demanded, looking around wildly.

General O'Neill rolled his eyes. "I said, 'Don't *touch* anything!'"

"I," Sheppard swallowed. "I just sat down."

Rodney quickly stepped forward, and said, "Major. Think about where we are in the solar system," and Sheppard stared at him, gape-mouthed, as shapes and forms whirled in the air around their heads, a holographic representation of all the planets and stars.

He got only a brief moment with Sheppard; Weir and Beckett were keeping him busy giving him the hard sell about joining the Atlantis

expedition. Still, they found themselves alone for a minute, so Rodney said, awkwardly, "Antarctica been treating you okay?" and Sheppard fidgeted and said, "Yeah, Rodney; thanks," and then: "What about you? Is this—" Sheppard bit his lip, "you know: a step up or a step down from Siberia?" and Rodney hastily said, "Oh, I'm doing much better now. This is a plum assignment, I'm the chief scientific officer of this entire—I mean, for real this time," he said, feeling a little embarrassed, because Sheppard was obviously trying not to smile.

"Hey, I'm happy for you," Sheppard said. "That's—" but then Beckett burst into the room clutching a computer tablet, something about PowerPoint, and the moment was over.

Rodney didn't believe Sheppard would join the expedition, despite O'Neill's cajoling and Weir's insistence and Beckett's incredibly embarrassing PowerPoint presentation about exactly how rare Sheppard's manifestation of the ATA gene was. So he was more surprised

than anybody to see Sheppard milling around the SGC gateroom, pack strapped to his shoulders. "You—you signed on," Rodney said, his throat tight. "For Atlantis."

"Yeah." Sheppard's mouth curled up at the corner. "Turns out I'm a sucker for the middle of nowhere."

"Oh, me too," Rodney said fervently.

"Absolutely." Someone called for him, and he had to rush back to the control room, and the next time he saw Sheppard, they were standing shoulder to shoulder in an alien city, surrounded by other awestruck faces, all staring up.