

ATLANTIS
-- a linked drabble --

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He is your world.

When the sea breeze rustles your hair, you feel his hands touch you in the night. His eyes hold you with wonder greater than the stars of the sky, your name on his voice swirls the ocean against the city walls, his heart in your ears beats a cypher you'll spend the rest of your life to solve.

Without him, the world is lightless, with him gone, the air turns dark. When the flickering dot blinks off the screen, nothing is left.

You walk to the balcony, and see the sun rising from the sea.

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"Hey," his hushed breath whispers across your neck. "We made it."

You clench your grimy dirt-crusting hands tight around the rail, and tell yourself the tremors shaking through your bones are from desperate hours crawling in narrow dark places, racing the twist of wires and crystals. You turn, smack into the bright adoration of his smug self-assured grin, and feel the answering irritation and euphoria ripple through the deepest depth of your guts and out your helplessly crooked lips.

"Was there ever any doubt?"

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Was there ever any doubt?

No, not really. Not if you are honest.

Too many them. Too few us. Dwindling supplies, dwindling spirits. No helpful friends, no allies to be trusted.

It could only end badly. There never was any doubt.

Just one more day, one more hour. Hoping against hope this will matter. That another minute can be made to count. And you try to think of Earth, the billions back home living their blissful ignorance; but it's him you see in your mind, him for whom you pray this last second counts.

One more minute.

"One more minute!" Rodney yells, pulling one device from his pack while shoving in another. Scowling at the equipment piled around, he eyes the remaining space, fingers tallying through his mental list.

"You said that. Five minutes ago."

"Thinking! Don't disturb. Oh, and hand me that."

"Remind me why I put up with you?"

"You need to ask?"

John sighs and settles himself onto a handy crate. With one last shove, Rodney snaps the pack closed and heaves it onto his back.

"Well? Waiting for something? Let's go."

Swinging to his feet, John follows.

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The guard moves with casual ease, heels clicking steadily down the hollow corridor. John is a soundless shadow in the wall, a merciless grip sliding unseen out of the night. A flash of silver, and the man sinks gracelessly into a splash of red, head rolling at a queer angle over the hard unyielding floor.

John's hands fly cool and fast over the body. Blank eyes stare from a face too young to shave, as John's hand tightens around a bloodstained key. Shifting, he checks the life-sign detector.

Two life signs.

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Two life signs. In Rodney's quarters. Again.

Matching people to life signs is no simple matter. But this is Rodney.

His eyes slide to Elizabeth's quarters and its solitary dot. Beckett is in the infirmary tonight, tending to a critical patient. The colonel could be anywhere. That lone soul on a distant balcony, or one of the multiple dots in other rooms. That dot in the gym, or that one in the mess, maybe even the one in that physics lab.

Radek doesn't know when this began. Peter, perhaps, had known. No matter.

He keeps his vigil.

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He keeps his vigil, ever watchful and alert. The fever of the enzyme pulses a razor-thin hunger in his veins, an unfettered strength he never in his wildest dreams sought to control.

The ones untouched by the enzyme, they do not understand. Power like this, once possessed, cannot be denied. Mad they may think him, but might will endure. He'll show them, they'll see, they will. They'll laugh at him no longer, he'll earn their respect, just watch him, he will.

In the empty room that John never reassigned, Rodney lights a candle, for innocence fallen.

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For innocence fallen her people have paid the price, yet it is one she does not begrudge.

In the flickering firelight under a new moon, Beckett soothes the newest-born infant in his arms, while the colonel smiles in easy delight, and Rodney looks on with unguarded awe.

The wine flows freely; the dancing grows more frenzied as the night wears on. Rodney flails alongside Jinto as the boy shows him the steps, until Sheppard grabs his arms and pulls him into a spin. Rodney's sputtering complaints float above the cheers and laughter, but John just spins ever faster.

John just spins ever faster, dodging Darts with desperate precision. Rodney picks himself up from where he's fallen against the bulkhead. With grim determination he crawls back to the open conduit.

"McKay, DHD. Now."

"I could do this faster if you would, oh, fly straight!"

"Rodney."

"Not yet. You should have weapons, though. Now."

As the Darts dissolve in fiery explosions, Rodney sags to the floor. When John crouches over him, he blinks.

"So. How long to fix the DHD?"

"You know, a 'thank you' would be nice."

John presses a bandage to Rodney's bleeding head.

"Next time, you fly."

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Next time, you fly through the air of an uncharted planet, him sitting beside you, firing one sarcastic barb after another, and you duck, parry, and get back with pointed thrusts of your own, and you bask, enjoying this as you don't ever remember doing, and you know he's loving this as much as you, because there's warmth in his voice the most scathing irony can't mask, tenderness deep in his eyes you won't deny, and you'll give your life for anybody, but for him, you want to live.

But that, you are never going to tell.

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But that, you are never going to tell, for time is running out, and everyone is listening. And it's better this way, really, because it wouldn't do to spoil your reputation, even after you're dead. Especially after you're dead.

This is how you want to be remembered, because this is, after all, how you lived. You never could stand idiots, or not speak your mind just to make nice. And you'd have liked to finish the Unified Theory, but it'll be done someday, just maybe, oh, a few hundred years later.

But yes, you love them. Every single one.

Every single one is precious, tokens of trust given and returned. It was John who began the custom, quietly bringing gifts on birthdays, or anniversaries of days they'd met new friends; but Rodney just couldn't do quiet, even when he tried.

Now that the Daedalus makes its rounds, the gifts are more varied and elaborate. But it's the simple, rustic ones from that first year she treasures most, many from those now gone. And the plain flat stone Ronon pressed into her hand, saying simply, "It's from Sateda."

Tokens of trust and respect, for her to hold in trust.

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For her to hold in trust in the depth of the ocean, to wait through the years for the coming of someone to receive, the knowledge and wisdom of a race long gone, the hopes and fears for a future worth the fight.

As lights turn on through her corridors, as footsteps once again fill her halls, as she rises to meet the sunlight, a rare jewel shining in the sea, wonder and awe fill those who watch, a new people come to claim her for their own.

Entranced, Rodney follows the Major as the city comes to life.

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As the city comes to life, so the hunger gnaws their soul, driving them across the stars to seek this plentiful new feeding ground, to quash the ancient scourge returned to their midst.

Their numbers gather, their strength rises. As does the hunger, ever greater, ever consuming.

Their arrogance, their supreme confidence in their overwhelming might, is their pitfall. Their prey, puny and defenseless, stays one step out of their crushing grasp, always dancing yet never falling over the sharp edge of doom.

True might lies not in might, they fail to see.

It's a mistake Sheppard would not make.

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It's a mistake Sheppard would not make, so this report must have been prepared by Lorne. It's what reports don't say that's always telling, and this one's no exception.

Jack imagines Sheppard lying in an infirmary bed, McKay plastered next to him. The cocky but laid-back pilot, the arrogant and over-bearing scientist. He can hear Lorne sigh as he types the report.

The tale is there for those with eyes to see, etched deep and clear in the white surrounding the ink. With a quiet smile, Jack tosses the report onto the pile to be filed.

The rest is silence.

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The rest is silence.

In ocean, in sky, in earth, in your soul, you search, but find nothing.
In dark, in light, in joy, in despair, when you are not looking, they are there.

In the mess, eating unidentifiable food; in the labs, bent over the latest experiment;
in the armory, checking inventory; in the infirmary, drawing their last breath.

Those are the lucky ones. Or again, perhaps not.

Their deaths, their lives, their absence fill you wherever you go.
You ask why, but nothing answers; you knock, but no doors open.

With your every breath, you ask why.

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You ask why, and he says, not now. You ask how, and he says, are you insane?

You pretend to be annoyed, and he puffs in exasperation. You ask how he's doing, and now he's annoyed.

You place a hand on his shoulder, and he jumps like a skittish colt. You touch a finger to his lip, and he falls still as the softest snow. The hitch of his breath cuts to your heart as you lower your lips to his, and in the halting touch of his tongue you taste the radiance of his soul.

He is your world.