Stage I: The Good Earth

by Trinket2018

Summary

Zeds (two-gendered humans) have always been persecuted. When Dr. Spencer Reid’s gender status is outed, in a disastrous and horrifically public way, he needs to get off the planet for his own safety. Dr. Daniel Jackson has just the job for him. If he’ll take it…

Notes


Yeah, Spencer is whumped, badly, off-stage, right at the start. But, seriously, I’m not *nearly* as bad as the Criminal Minds writers! After the back half of Criminal Minds season 12, particularly 12-22-‘Red Light’, and 13-1-‘Wheels Up’, I *sooo* want to see Reid get a little light in his life (although I back up to go AU from 11-11-Entropy, because I don’t want to deal with Morgan or Hotch leaving, Mr. Scratch, or prison: the whole Reid-behind-bars story line had holes big enough to drive a Wraith Hive ship through…). The only problem is, who to pair him with?

DISCLAIMERS: Criminal Minds belongs to Mark Gordon Productions, CBS Television Studios, & ABC Studios; goes AU after 11-11-Entropy (Diana’s early onset dementia is revealed, Hotch, Morgan and Tara are on the team, JJ is back from maternity leave). Stargate SG-1, the characters and universe are the property of Kawoosh Productions,
Showtime/Viacom, Sony/MGM/UA, Double Secret Productions, Gekko Productions and the Sci-Fi Channel; spoilers for anything, post series, (the Ori are gone and the last Baal clone executed); Stargate Atlantis post series end, Atlantis back in Pegasus. NCIS belongs to Belisarius Productions, goes AU after 8-5-Dead Air. The Sentinel, owned by Visual Entertainment, post series end, no one dead. No copyright infringement is intended. I have absolutely no right to be playing with them or their universes. I just gotta. I promise to get nothing out of it but personal satisfaction.
Prologue: Gatekeeper

*~ Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing. ~ Helen Keller*

Dr. Daniel Jackson, archeologist, linguist, intergalactic explorer and first contact specialist for the super-secret Stargate Program, was taking a break from the interminable and crushingly boring rounds of congressional and oversight meetings at the nation’s capitol. He had arranged to meet an old friend for coffee at a park near the National Mall. Her usual stomping grounds was in Boston, but, by chance, she was giving a series of lectures at Georgetown this month. It was a pleasant coincidence, and Daniel was looking forward to catching up.

“Alex! You’re looking fabulous,” he greeted and stood to meet her on the park walkway in front of the bench he had claimed. She did look good, too, an attractive, almost fifty year old woman who could easily be taken for a good decade younger, dark brunette hair styled short and bouncy, slender, but hale and fit. Once or twice upon a time she had been an FBI agent, and still looked ready to pass any field-work fitness test FLETC might devise, dark intelligent eyes still with that profiler shrewdness that watched and noted and analyzed every little twitch in the people around her. They shared a brief hug and kiss on the cheek before settling down with their coffee-of-choice drinks.

“Daniel. You just keep looking younger. How do you do that?”

He might have given a joking off-the-cuff answer, about spending an inordinate amount of time either dead or in some kind of limbo, which served to cut at least a decade off his true age of forty-something (it was getting really hard to keep track of his real age, considering the afore mentioned deaths and limbo, not to mention time loops and trips down alternate universes…), but this was a public spot, and, especially in DC, you had to assume someone was always listening.

“I’d say clean living, but you know me too well... Alex? Something wrong?”

After their initial greeting, it wasn’t hard for Daniel to catch the glimmering of concern from his old friend. He and Dr. Alex Blake, foremost authority on psycho-linguistics, now a full time professor at Harvard, had shared many a class together in their youths. Even now, Daniel made time to do an annual guest lecture for her advanced students. Some of his best hires over the years had been Alex’s referrals. So he knew when she was troubled, however the former profiler might try to hide it.

“I was glad to get your call, Daniel, of course, but… I have to admit, it came at the best possible time. I need a favor. I warn you, it’s a big one.”

“Just ask, Alex. You know I’ll help if I can.”

“You remember that I spent two years working with the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, before I went back to teaching full time at Harvard?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve met one member of your old team at your classes… Dr. Spencer Reid. Fascinating guy. Absolutely brilliant. Closest thing to a renaissance man I’ve ever come across… Why?” With every word, Alex had seemed more drawn, until now she was on the verge of tears.
Alex had been read into the Stargate Program for the past few years, to help with recruitment, and to do the odd consult. Her past work with the FBI, DoJ, Homeland and CIA had resulted in a high security rating, high enough to justify Daniel calling her in on occasion.

“Well, um, no, no time for TV. I’ve been buried in meetings on the Hill for the past few days… what is it?”

“Spencer’s in trouble. A lot of trouble. It’s been all over the national news… international, even… complete with video… You see, although his superiors and teammates at the FBI knew, he kept it under the radar, but… Spencer is zed.”

“And with his intelligence and skills, his gender status didn’t matter,” Daniel nodded.

Alex knew he wouldn’t have a problem with dual-gendered so-called ‘zeds’… she knew his mother had been one. Like Alex herself, like one in ten otherwise perfectly normal single-gendered Americans who carried a latent ‘Z’ chromosome, Daniel bore the circle brand on the inside of his right wrist. A brilliant ‘woman’, Claire Ballard (birth-name Cortland, until puberty, when her more female phenotype emerged) had hidden her gender status, passing as female in the days before the required testing, registration and branding. And she still had to work twice as hard as her male XY counterparts in the ruthless and misogynistic old-boys networks of academia in the 80’s to get even a measure of respect and acceptance. If she’d been ‘outed’ as a zed, even that much wouldn’t have been remotely possible, considering the widespread and extreme intolerance they faced. None of it had mattered to his father, though, who had always treated her as a full partner in their life and careers, and insisted on her getting full credit for her work on every paper they co-wrote.

Daniel was born in Egypt on one of their digs and raised there, so had escaped the mandatory blood tests, until his parents returned to the States, when he was eight. He had been duly tested then, and found to have the Z chromosome, though he was not dual-gendered himself, not a ‘zed’, merely a ‘Z positive’ carrier. He still remembered the fear and pain of having the circle branded into his wrist… he absently rubbed the old mark now.

“Considering how prejudiced law enforcement circles can be, the team never revealed Spencer’s status to any locals,” Alex continued. “But they caught a case in Arkansas. I have no idea how, but while they were working the case, word got out that Spencer was zed…”

“Oh hell… What happened? Is he alive?”

“Yes, although he was beaten pretty badly before his team arrived. But, Daniel… it’s been everywhere. It was all caught on security tapes. Clips of the attack are still being played, nation-wide. It’s being used as some kind of political card to bring the issue of trans-gender and zed discrimination to the public, along with the case… Willful and deliberate negligence on the part of the local LEOs.”

“My God… and Dr. Reid?”

“He wants to go back to work. He says he doesn’t want the ignorance and bigotry of a few bullies to defeat him. But you know as well as I do, with the high profile media attention this is getting, the inevitable back-lash… the next time they have to go out on a case…”

“He’ll never be safe again.”

“No. He won’t. We’ve all tried to talk to him about it, his team, his superiors, his friends… We support him, we really do, but this could mean his life. And… oh, Daniel… the last case I worked
with them on the team… he saved my life. We were called to a gun battle with a suspect, and he pushed me to safety, and took a bullet to the neck himself… Daniel, I’m so worried about him.”

Daniel nodded, frowning as he considered. “You want to get him somewhere safe… well, safe-er. You want me to offer him a job.”

“He can’t bring himself to quit the FBI, because he would see it as being defeated, giving up, letting the bullies win. That just isn’t who he is. But if you offer him a job, saving the… planet…” she whispered the last word, glancing cautiously around. “He’s such a geek… offer him a berth on the Enterprise and he’ll have to say yes, in spite of himself. I know your superiors don’t like it, but with all the civilians in the program, the tolerance you have to have toward… well, let’s just say, ‘out-of-towners’, you do have some zeds in the Program… probably not a lot, considering how closely you have to work with the military, and if anything, they’re worse than law enforcement in their phobic attitudes and incidents of violent harassment, but… That last memo you sent, with the list of openings, there was one I think might suit him down to the ground. Someone with law enforcement experience and field qualifications, to back up your NCIS agent afloat…”

Daniel nodded, considering. “I’ve had that request open for months. The problem is, the NCIS agent would have seniority and team lead status, and no one qualified we’ve talked to is willing to be his subordinate, or even partner him.”

“Why not?”

Daniel grinned at Alex. “Because he’s zed. Send me Dr. Reid’s contact information. I’m going to see Jack this afternoon.”

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Spencer paced his apartment like a caged cat, struggling to talk himself out of the nausea he felt. It was far too early for him to be experiencing such symptoms, and he knew it was just a psychosomatic reaction to the stress he was under, the mental conflict he was experiencing toward his condition. But, in this instance, the rigorous use of logic was doing nothing to convince his body that it was actually not feeling sick. Or claustrophobic. Or trapped and threatened.

He had to tell his team, and soon. He knew this. He didn’t have any concerns that they would shun him, or think less of him… it had to have occurred to at least some of them that this was an all too likely result of his most recent… difficulty. But he felt like he had been enough of a problem to them over the years… all the exceptions that had to be made when he entered the FBI Academy for him even to qualify as an FBI agent, regardless of his gender status. Too young, too physically awkward and weak, not proficient enough in firearms to pass the minimum qualifications… Jason Gideon had used all of his considerable clout to bulldoze through all the objections, and land him on the prestigious BAU unit at the unheard-of age of twenty two.

But even though he had worked hard over the years on his field quals and to correct other real deficiencies, there had been other serious problems. Like the fall out from the Hankel case (his way to avoid admitting out loud his drug addiction, still a carefully hidden secret, the lingering need he felt still rearing its ugly head from time to time and sending him running to the nearest NA meeting). Like the over-protectiveness his team exercised around him, for a variety of reasons, because of his age, his gender status, whatever, that sometimes interfered with cases… and which he was forced to admit had been fully justified, considering what he had just been through. He often felt like a drag on the team. Everyone, from Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner on down, rushed to reassure him that the benefits he brought more than made up for any of his perceived disadvantages… still, he couldn’t help but think this might be the last straw.

He felt like he had been dodging bullets thrown out by his genetics his whole life.

He was zed. Technically, that meant he possessed a form of natural trisomy, meaning he had a 47th chromosome, a third so-called ‘Z’ chromosome attached to the 23rd pair, scientifically defined as 47,XYZ or 47,XXZ karyotypes. In his case, 47,XYZ. This meant he presented a male phenotype, in most respects. 47,XXZ presented as female, mostly, once they reached puberty. 1 in 10 people were ‘Z positive’, often called ‘carriers’, but they were born single-gendered, apparently normal, unless you checked their DNA. Only 1 in 10 of those with the ‘Z’ chromosome were actually dual-gendered, like himself, and possessed functional reproductive organs of both sexes. Although there were a lot of more or less plausible theories as to why some expressed dual genders and most did not, no one really knew. Or, Spencer suspected, cared very much, as long as they were one of the lucky ones who won the genetic lottery, and escaped the stigma of being ‘zed’.

Being a zed, in itself, wasn’t a problem for him. It was just a physical fact, like his brown eyes and his occasionally annoying fly-away chestnut hair. It was the social implication that was the problem. His XYZ dual-gender status, all too obvious when he bore the hated brand, the ‘Z’ inside a circle on the inside of his right wrist, that put a neon-lit ‘kick me’ target on his back all through his childhood, was just the start of it, although certainly challenging enough.

There was also his mother’s schizophrenia, which might have a genetic component. And now the rising specter of early onset dementia had to be added to the list. He’d dodged the schizophrenia, so far, and his research seemed to indicate that zeds were resistant to many health ailments, so maybe he
could dodge the senility too. Other determining factors, such as health and diet, sociability, keeping his mind active, were controllable. Exercise was not an issue. His team made sure of that. Morgan in particular took great pleasure in getting him down to the gym regularly, although he got more out of the lessons JJ, Elle, Prentiss and Kate had given him, in their times, pregnancies notwithstanding. One of the more critical indicators, concussion, wasn’t something he could do anything about, considering his profession, but maybe it wasn’t such a looming factor if he could limit the rest. There had never been a truly scientific study of why zeds were so much less likely, statistically, to suffer from many cancers and other chronic illnesses, and no studies at all on whether this extended to various age-related issues, like dementia. Which was frustrating, but not surprising. Like other amazing or alarming statistics about zeds, no one else, it seemed, really cared enough to pay attention or look deeper.

And speaking of, he had to admit that it was his own damn fault he was in this mess. He had been the one to bring the case to the team in the first place. Hotch had gone to the Captain of the Barbarossa County State Police detachment to get an invite to investigate, which was more than they would usually do. But Spencer had made a good case that this was required, and he knew he was right about that.

Since beginning college at age twelve, he had been looking at statistical numbers for a variety of issues related to zeds in the population, focusing on the US. How many government, public health and social programs were far less likely to offer services to zeds. The far lower rate of higher education, virtually shut out from any scholarships or grants offered. How few jobs zeds were able to secure. Of those they did get, how much lower the average pay rate was, and how many fewer benefits they received. The higher than national average number of zeds incarcerated for minor crimes, mostly assaults, and others related to drug issues, like addiction, trafficking, minor theft, all of which received far stiffer sentences than ‘norms’ and were far less likely to be offered either rehab, bail or early parole. Most didn’t survive long enough in the system to be released. How many crimes were far more likely to involve zeds as victims. All situations that showed a distinct, sometimes overwhelming imbalance between the percentage of identified zeds in the population, about 1%, or three million in real numbers, and the overall per capita norm. The imbalance contributed substantially to the public perception of zeds as perverted, weak, and either criminal or immoral, or both.

Spencer even did comparative studies on the patterns of historical discrimination, against blacks from the Civil War and Emancipation up to the sixties, and against Jews in Europe throughout history, and showed that even there, the bias against zeds was far more pronounced and devastating. Although records had been difficult to find, or non-existent, in India and Asiatic countries, it seemed clear that zeds were invisible, lumped in with other transgender conditions, treated with the same off-handed disdain and prejudice, and ignored otherwise.

In more modern times, the anti-zed discrimination hit an appalling low in Nazi-held Europe and Stalinist Russia. The census numbers from 1930 put the world-wide zed population at 0.8% of the total, with an estimated 0.2-0.5% adjustment higher for those hiding their gender status and passing as ‘normal’, making it roughly 1 in 100. This ratio seemed to hold for every continent and every race of humans. By the 1950 census, with the advent of blood testing available world-wide (developed, no one liked to admit, in Nazi labs) and legally mandated in many countries, the total was barely 0.2%, or 1 in 500 individuals. Zeds had been almost entirely wiped out from every country that had been occupied by Germany, and every Iron Curtain country, including the People’s Republic of China and much of politically volatile south east Asia. The only zed survivors from Europe were those born afterwards to seemingly ‘normal’ carrier parents, or who had escaped to the Americas, where their welcome had been… mixed. But what really shocked everyone was the fact that, while those possessing the physical traits of zed dual genders represented 1% if live births, those carrying the 47th Z chromosome made up 10% of the total population. Everywhere.
There had been a brief respite for zeds in the post-war US... until the negative social attitudes only grew worse with the influx of refugees. Possessing what most considered genetic mutations and birth 'defects', combined with the stigma of 'aberrant' sexual preference, not to mention homophobic and misogynistic tendencies which were also applied to them, zeds were blamed for everything from unemployment, overpopulation, to new strains of influenza and STDs (which was just plain ridiculous, because zeds rarely suffered from either flu or STDs). With their dual-sex phenotype, super-fertility (implying that they must also be sexually promiscuous and manipulative) and persistent rumors of them having paranormal attributes, mental 'powers' to ensnare men, they became even more feared and targeted. They were widely stigmatized as rampant sex addicts and 'breeders', prostitutes, gold-diggers or fortune-hunters seducing their sexual partners into undesirable relationships. Hence the animosity shown in movies and TV and slanted media reporting. In the socially volatile 60’s and 70’s, when most other minorities were claiming their civil rights, and winning, and through to the 80’s, when other members of the LGBT communities were coming out of their closets and also demanding fair treatment, zeds remained the voiceless lost people, the last acceptable target for unreasoning resentment and abuse.

It all culminated in 1986 with the US Federal Government passing the Z Registration Laws, requiring blood tests for every birth, and registration and brands for every Z positive individual identified; a circle for carriers, a circle with a ‘Z’ inside for those displaying the zed dual-gender phenotype. This required a physical examination of the genitals, to find the additional vaginal opening between penis and anus, because the tell-tale purple mottling around the genital area didn’t emerge in a zed until puberty, along with any secondary sexual characteristics – breasts for XXZ, a lowered voice and facial hair for XYZ.

Other countries soon followed suit with similar requirements for testing and brands. It wasn’t hard for Spencer to draw a parallel between the registration laws and the terrifyingly similar tattooing of zeds by the Nazis, just as they had with Jews and other targeted populations, like gypsies and homosexuals. Moreover, since the advent of pre-natal blood testing, the incidence of Z positive pregnancies being deliberately terminated had sky-rocketed everywhere, and even among right-to-life proponents and religions, were often accepted as justified, if not actively encouraged. This, in spite of the fact that, although amniocentesis could identify the presence of a ‘Z’ chromosome, ultrasound could only determine if a fetus had a penis, and therefore only the 47,XXZ would be certainly identified as dual-gendered before birth.

Spencer’s research indicated that the post-war situation for zeds was marginally better in Israel and British Commonwealth countries, where even a hint of instituting Nazi-like genocidal programs were anathema. This was determined to include blood testing at birth, registration and branding of any kind, not to mention preventing zeds from marriage by making it illegal for them. In these countries it was possible for a zed to pass as normal in their daily lives, avoiding the more brutal forms of casual discrimination prevalent elsewhere. Even in these counties, zed testing was required in order to obtain a marriage license, on the basis of fully disclosing gender status to a potential partner, which rather offensively assumed the zed themselves had attempted to keep it a secret. And Spencer wasn’t sure that driving zeds underground, denying their gender status in order to have a decent ordinary life, was much of an improvement over harsher but more open bigotry.

Spencer concluded that such rampant and extreme unfounded bias was all down to an unrealistic social construct of what was perceived as ‘normal’. Any deviation or variation from that automatically became ‘abnormal’, and by definition something negative, to be discouraged, feared, hated. But that was no more than a xenophobic herd fear of the different. Current theories on bio-diversity seemed to indicate that a certain amount of variation in a population was both healthy and desirable, vital for species adaptability and survival.

Lumping zeds in with the LGBT community implied zeds were all lesbian, gay or bi, but gender
identity and sexual preference were two entirely different things. Zeds did qualify as a subset of ‘transgender’, a group currently termed ‘intersex’ for ‘ambiguous sexual differentiation’ because they could not be categorized as either male or female. They used to be called ‘hermaphrodites’, until such terminology was protested as inaccurate, imprecise, pejorative, and too often used by members of the medical profession in the past to ‘intervene’ surgically to ‘correct’ the condition, to make sex less ‘ambiguous’. And yes, that meant castration. But ‘intersex’ included a lot of different conditions, causes and phenotype states under its umbrella. Some were other genetic anomalies in the 23rd chromosome pair, like various other kinds of trisomy, some were developmental issues at the time of conception, or in later zygote and embryo growth, and others were pathological conditions due to disease or drug interaction while in the womb. Z positive trisomy was different from all of these in that the 47th Z chromosome was an inherited trait, and seemed to be a perfectly natural feature in some human beings. At 1 in 10 carriers and 1 in 100 zeds, they were also far more common than other intersex births.

Student Spencer had written a number of papers on the subject of zed discrimination, none of which any of his professors had been prepared to allow, or offer to vet. No academic publications had been willing to accept them, either. In frustration, he had sent his work to various media outlets, mostly magazines and newspapers in southern California, known for their liberal and libertarian views, and had at least found an audience there. Even if the letters to the editors after his articles were printed showed a definite anti-zed sentiment.

But it was these articles which had brought Jason Gideon to his door.

Of particular interest to the veteran profiler and founding member of the BAU, was Spencer’s article on zeds as the victims of various crimes in modern-day America. In sheer numbers, serial killers vastly preferred zeds, even to prostitutes, runaways and the homeless, as their victim of choice. And the percentages of such cases which ever saw trial were hugely fewer than any pro-rated national average. But what Spencer had also discovered, was that any killer, rapist or pedophile who first satisfied their bloodthirsty or sexual urges on zeds, eventually expanded to the norm population, so desensitized to the pain of others and indulged by getting away with it, now with valuable experience, that they soon gave up caring what the gender status of their victims was, or grew too lazy to bother seeking out the rare 1-in-100 zeds. Over 83% of serial killers in the US from the past fifty years had started out by killing zeds, but had not stopped there. This trend was especially true of child molesters, who, in over 97% of cases, began by abducting zed children as a safer and more assured easy target, always a visible minority with their circle-Z brands, but, in every case, eventually going after any kid who crossed their path.

When Jason had brought these alarming facts to the FBI, they had been reluctant to believe it… until Spencer produced real numbers and verifiable mean averages. It wasn’t (necessarily) that the FBI executive were anti-zed. They were, mostly, dedicated and responsible officers of the law, and it was no less disturbing to them than to him that such statistical anomalies had been allowed to pass unnoticed, or disregarded. It meant that when Gideon stated the need for at least one zed to be hired by the FBI, specifically by the BAU, to keep an eye on such horrendous issues, they were more willing to consider Spencer, and make whatever allowances Gideon demanded to get him in.

He was rather shocked to find that all of his team-mates at the BAU were ‘circles’… Z positive carriers. It seemed a little anomalous… but it certainly explained why they so easily accepted him within their ranks.

With encouragement from both Gideon and Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner, Spencer had continued his statistical review of zeds involved in the crimes which crossed their desks or were entered in the various law enforcement databases. It was practically his mandate, and none of his team disputed his right to do so, any more than they would one of his female colleagues from tracking women as
victims, Morgan for being militant about black rights, or Gideon for tracking anti-Semitism in its more violent forms. He also continued to produce research papers on zeds from his analyses. One of the most potentially controversial (even in a subject which was itself wildly controversial) was the extremely low percentage of all zeds who were actually responsible for committing any major crimes themselves. Higher than average in assaults, but when Spencer looked more closely, almost all were cases of self-defense against blatant bullying, where the bully almost always got off scot free, while the zed was prosecuted and punished to the fullest extent.

And then Spencer had come across the statistical anomaly from the city of Sulfur Springs in Barbarossa County, Arkansas.

Barbarossa County already had a far lower than the national average of identified zeds living there, and, in the past ten years, they had been dying of ‘other than natural’ causes at an extremely high rate, by any objective standard. Some were listed as accidental, when even the most cursory glance at the medical reports showed no such thing. A handful were called suicide, even though one had a gun-shot to the back of the head from a distance of several feet, and the rest were hangings out in public places, like parks or wilderness areas, or their own front lawns. Lynchings, more like. Every other violent death, too blatant to be hidden otherwise (since no suicide was able to dismember themselves post-mortem), was marked as a cold case, almost as soon as the body was found, with no attempt whatsoever to investigate. Those case files contained almost nothing more than the ME report. The crime scenes hadn’t been scanned by any CSIs, and no evidence had been collected. Half a dozen case files were even missing such basic information as the location where the body had been found.

With such a horrendous and damning record when it came to cases with an actual physical body attached, it came as no surprise to Spencer that in over twenty five years, not a single zed, of any age, had been declared missing. Although there was an exponential increase in ‘norm’ disappearances for that county. Also not surprising. At least, not to Spencer.

After just an hour or two reviewing the list he had made, he had identified fifty seven cases of probable murder over ten years, including children. None of which had been properly investigated, and all of which had been grossly mis-handled by the local police force of Sulfur Springs. From the evidence he had gathered, Spencer fully expected the real number of victims to be much higher, doubled, or even tripled, and already there was indications that the unsubs had begun branching out to the norm population for their victim pool. Although a few cases might be put down to random acts of fatal harassment, he had found at least three distinct unsub signatures, and a fourth, a child molester who was a preferential pedophile and murdered his victims. In the ten year period he was looking at, not one crime against zeds had ever resulted in an arrest or trial. Not even one charge had been laid, from assault, robbery, domestic violence, abduction and sexual abuse, to murder. But of the estimated one thousand zeds in Barbarossa County, to have more than seventy the victims of violent death in a ten year period, eleven of them children, with not one charge leveled, was a truly terrifying percentage.

After Spencer presented his findings to the team, Hotch and the others hadn’t actually been that hard to convince to go to the State Police. And with their suspicions of more than one prolific serial killer at work, and a local police force that was either colluding, virulently prejudiced and willfully negligent, or totally incompetent, if not all three, they soon got their invitation to investigate.

And so the BAU team had gone to Sulfur Springs, Arkansas.

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The team had never advertised Spencer’s gender status when in the field, for obvious reasons. He
was always careful to wear long-sleeved shirts, and wore his watch over his cuff on the right wrist to hide his brand. Such precautions were even more vital in this case, with their suspicions of the Sulfur Springs LEOs being extremely anti-zed. While their base of operations would be the State Police office in town, the county seat for Barbarossa County, some of the team, at least, would have to work from the SSPD station, to interview any officers they could about cases with such minimal information provided, and most of that incomplete or erroneous. Spencer chafed at being kept at the State Police office to build the geographic profiles and liaise with Garcia over the internet, but understood Hotch’s concerns all too well. Citizens in this county enjoyed harassing zeds, to the extent of killing them outright, with every expectation of getting away with their crimes.

Because of the manner in which every case had been botched, and with most being cold so long, the team decided to concentrate on the most recent cases, sixteen in the past year, a definite and not unexpected escalation in rate. They had two separate distinct signatures for these.

When any of the team joined Spencer in their assigned conference room, or for meals, or back at their hotel, it didn’t take an experienced profiler to tell his team-mates were absolutely furious. It had taken them two days to impress upon the staff at the State HQ that people with the Z-chromosome dual-gender characteristics were not to be referred to as ‘Berdache’ or ‘Berds’, both extremely derogatory terms, much less the absolutely humiliating ‘Hermie’, or hermaphrodite. ‘Berdache’ was a French term for younger partners in male homosexual relationships, catamites or male prostitutes, originally applied in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by French explorers, traders, and missionaries, to Native Americans they encountered who could be classified neither as men nor women. Berdache, in turn, derived from the Persian *barda*, meaning "captive", "prisoner of war", "slave". For over four centuries, those had been the common terms applied to zeds in Western culture, and reflected the prevailing attitudes, misinformation and disrespect of society. There were, of course, even worse names out there… including ‘effem’ – not for any perceived effeminate features, but referring to the fact that zeds could, presumably, ‘go fuck themselves’, so they were ‘fuck ‘ems’ or FMs. The more clinically derived ‘zed’, for the Z chromosome, was less misleading and a less offensive term than any of the others.

Whatever waves Hotch was making over the phone with higher and higher political figures, at County, State and even Federal levels, or back to FBI headquarters, he was doing it out of Spencer’s hearing, and the young man knew why. Yes, he had brought the situation to light, but action would have to be taken by those not so personally invested. But by the end of the week, even the Staties were feeling the heat from above for not noticing (or not caring) about the gross and blatant persecution being displayed by their brethren law enforcement officers.

It had only taken two days to identify one lot of unsubs, a gang of five so called ‘normal’ XY men. Three were white and two black, one a garage mechanic, one a barber, one a lawyer, one a grocery store owner, one an accountant, all of whom were known to drink and play pool together at a local bar in town, then go roaming with baseball bats to hunt down any effems they had identified from their various places of work. They’d been operating in complete and utter freedom for over five years, killing at least a dozen of their victims and maiming two dozens more. Many victims had actually identified their assailants by name, for all the notice that was taken. All five of them had such an air of entitlement and righteous justification for their prejudice, that they made absolutely no effort to hide their crimes. They were of the opinion that the LEOs knew very well who they all were and what they were doing, and approved. It had taken less than an hour in the State Police interrogation rooms for the BAU team to get the whole story, signed confessions, and, to the utter shock of the five men charged, arrests that would be processed well out of Sulfur Springs’ municipal jurisdiction.

The Captain of the State Police had watched, shocked and, at the end, physically sickened by what he heard. They’d all heard rumors, all heard loose talk from everyone around them, at bars and restaurants, in ballpark stands, parks, playgrounds and the streets, in their own homes even… but… it
was all just talk. Harmless. Just berd-baiting, and that was something everyone did, to some degree, wasn’t it? Just look at films, TV… when political correctness and social pressures had removed target after target from the list of acceptable subjects to vent your spleen, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, women, gays… there were still hermies. The last of the marginalised, the last of the vilified. Even ahead of Muslims or A-rabs and other towel-heads with an automatic ‘terrorist’ stigma on them, deserved or not.

After that, the entire State force was far more willing to assist the BAU to catch their other subs. JJ was the one to brief the local media of the first case and the arrests, and the whole story swiftly made it to the national networks. Although no one was outright saying that it was the incompetence or collusion of the SSPD that allowed these horrific acts to take place, that was definitely implied.

Problem was, the Mayor of Sulfur Springs was the brother-in-law of the SSPD Police Chief, and both shared the same attitudes, and were fighting a bitter battle to protect their jobs from the accusations now being leveled on all sides, from the State Attorney General, the media, and, as the political heat grew ever more far reaching, the Federal Attorney General was also considering weighing in. Not to mention more and more civil rights groups, who were suddenly realizing that they had missed one significant sector of the population who had been suffering various forms of discrimination, both in benign neglect and overt and legally sanctioned persecution, for years.

Spencer himself found it strange that, suddenly, the issue of zed rights had become a national debate, when it never had before. Even many of his old papers had been resurrected and reprinted, eagerly snapped up by many media outlets, happily participating in the latest fad in national scandals, and this one had all the juicy extras (and proven ratings draws) of political and police corruption, serial killers, along with the spice of kinky sex, grisly violence and messy crime scenes. Well, he knew for a fact that he was one of the very few with real academic credentials who had written anything at all about zeds.

That, he figured in retrospect, must have been the nail in his coffin. Dr. Spencer Reid’s name was all over those zed-friendly papers. So when, at last, he had been required to join his team at the SSPD station (the one among them best able to quickly and efficiently comb through the mountains of hard-copy reports from the past ten years), and he had been introduced, there had been the light of recognition and repressed fury in not a few eyes. Here, then, was a hated effem. Here was a member of the FBI team who was giving them all so much grief, and might yet result in the entire force being canned, at the very least, if not actually charged with a variety of crimes themselves. They were all of them looking at the distinct chance of jail time, and it was all down to this one effem.

The next unsub wasn’t all that hard to identify, either. Although what the team didn’t know was that the LEOs had also sussed out his identity, long before they arrived.

So when they had a name and address, and the team, all but Reid and Rossi, had raced to make an arrest, coordinating to meet the State Police at the home of their unsub, someone at the SSPD station had immediately called ahead to the man to warn him. And, oh, by the way, the effem who had brought all this heat on them all and spoiled their decade-long field day, was here at the station, and if he cared to visit, there would be a route left clear.

They either didn’t remember, or didn’t care, that all calls were monitored and recorded, and all their surveillance cameras were left running.

A young officer, racing in to shout out a message that Rossi was urgently needed in the interrogation rooms, had the veteran profiler out the door without a thought… until he hit the hall and was sand-bagged by several other officers, and dragged to their drunk tank and locked in for the duration.

Then every person in the building, from the Chief to the lowliest patrolman, filing clerk or janitor,
simply left.

Spencer had been so engrossed in going through the boxes of paper records where the station hid all the evidence they had ignored or suppressed over the years, that he never realized how quiet it had got. He never thought to wonder where Rossi had gone. Bathroom, coffee break, it just never occurred to him that something more sinister was going on. And fifteen minutes after his team-mate had disappeared, the door opened to a man in civvies with a taser, among other implements required for his righteous work.

Spencer was on a Skype window with Garcia, supplying new search parameters for an additional unsub in a third set of signatures he had identified, this one for an all-too active child molester and murderer, and didn’t hear the footsteps behind him. It was only when Garcia screamed out a warning that Spencer turned… only to catch the taser leads in the face. He fell like a stone.

Garcia immediately alerted the team and put out 911 calls to the LEOs and the State police, but the team was too far away, at the unsub’s residence, just about to bust in… and find an abruptly abandoned house.

The fifteen minutes it took for the State police to arrive, to find a cordon of LEOs guarding the entrances and exits, the half hour it took the team to get back to the station, to find a gun battle going on, the half an hour more it took to break the line and gain entry…

That was an hour far too long.

It was all on surveillance. Most of it was on Garcia’s Skype window, until her shrill screams, threats, tearful pleadings and general noise annoyed the unsub enough to smash the laptop with his baseball bat and shut her up. She then hacked her way into the station cameras because, horrifying as it all was, she couldn’t not try to catch as much as she could, recorded for evidence, if nothing else. And though she had to shut her eyes, half blind with angry, terrified tears, it felt like not to do so was abandoning her precious Boy Wonder. And all of it, play by awful play, it was all relayed to the team, helplessly kept at bay outside.

This was the unsub who abducted, tortured, raped and then slaughtered zeds like pigs, then left them in pieces in dumpsters all over town. His mother had been a hermie, inflicted with the then brutally primitive medical procedure for amputating the hermie penis to make her ‘female’. In the days before brands were required, she was able to ‘pass’ as female… until she wanted to marry. The new and required blood test revealed her status and stopped the formal ceremony from going forward. When her fiancé discovered the truth, he was livid, so why he still brought her into his home to live as man and common-law wife was unclear, but perhaps she was already pregnant with their son. From that day she was the victim of increasingly extreme domestic abuse, abated only slightly during her pregnancy. After giving birth to a ‘normal’ (meaning single-gendered) XYZ son, her ‘husband’ was only briefly mollified enough to leave her alone. But the son, Z positive and therefore branded with a circle, found himself harassed, and was encouraged by his father to blame his mother for it. She was finally beaten to death, with her then six-year-old son gleefully assisting. And another serial killer is born.

Even as Spencer dazedly registered his own savage beatings, still half out of it from the taser, his daft memory tossed up a line often repeated from some of his fannish friends with a fondness for Attila the Hun-style fantasies… ‘rape, pillage, THEN burn! Get the order right!’

This unsub had plenty enough experience to have learned that lesson.

Luckily, if you could call it that, the killer needed more than the hour he had to finish the job to his own exacting standards. So when the BAU team finally broke in, Spencer was still alive to be
rescued. The unsub, realizing he had been interrupted, attempted to cut short his torture and go straight to the slaughter. But several bullets, from several guns, prevented that.

By that time, however, in most of the ways that counted, Dr. Spencer Reid’s life, as he knew it, was over.
As far as the BAU was concerned, they were done in Barbarossa County. They weren’t really needed for the clean-up. There was enough media attention, nationally and even internationally, that the State Police wouldn’t dare fuck up or do less than their best to clear up the mess. And the BAU had injured members to take care of. Rossi had a concussion, and Reid…

The Arkansas State Police continued to investigate and hunt down more Barbarossa County unsubs on their own, soon catching the third Reid had been working on… identifying and catching any of them hadn’t even been very hard. All anyone in law enforcement had needed to do was care enough to pay attention to what was really going on. Between the three separate cases, the fate of at least forty zed victims had been resolved. Which left at least forty more still awaiting justice. And, a fact which really ratcheted up public horror, in just days, at least fifty Barbarossa County ‘norms’, reported as missing persons or found along with zeds in the various dumping grounds and mass graves, had been added to the victim count of those suspects already apprehended.

No one knew who had leaked the surveillance tapes to the press. All of them: all the tapes, sent to all the outlets. Depending on the network, only highly edited sections were actually shown to the viewing public, but… there was no part of that hour, hour-and-a-half that wasn’t damning, to the local police, the unsub, or the victim.

The resulting fire-storm of publicity ensured that Spencer would never again be able to walk down any street, visit any public place, without being recognized as ‘that zed’. He knew this probably meant the end of his ability to go into the field. No matter how hard they tried, his team would never be able to guarantee his safety out there. The backlash from anti-zeds of all stripes, whether politically or officially aligned or just ordinary prejudiced jerks, would rain down on his head. It might all blow over, given time, but how much time? And there would always be someone with a long memory who wouldn’t let it go. Every time there was a high-profile crime even tangentially related to zeds, his name and the whole sordid Sulfur Springs incident would be brought up again, newly relevant, again.

So, sure, he had taken one for the team, so to speak, in bringing zed discrimination to the fore. And yes, there were changes to federal law even now that would make things better for zeds. For one, the loathsome Registration Laws had at least been amended in emergency sessions, if not repealed, so brands were now a thing of the past. Although they were permanent on the thousands born in the past thirty years. At least now it was legal to get them removed… leaving a scar, no doubt, that would be just as damning. Regardless, Spencer didn’t regret any of the more positive results. Maybe it had even been worth it, losing his field status. Working cases with Garcia from the relative safety of the FBI Quantico offices wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe. He’d got used to such protocols after the numerous times he had been assigned desk duty due to injuries. It wasn’t as efficient or as effective as actually being on the scene, getting a chance to walk the crime scenes, talk to the locals, participate in interrogations, get a feel for the case from right there with his team… but…

Did he really want to risk being caught like that again?

Soon he would be benched anyway. They let Kate work right up until the day before her labor began, and JJ had worked up until a week of her due date with Michael, and had actually been at work when the first labor pains struck for Henry… he had been a tad early, as is common enough for
a first child.

But him? A zed? In many ways, as far as the media and the FBI were concerned, THE Zed? Fat chance.

He had known when he awoke in the hospital in Sulfur Springs what had happened. As his team argued and fought it out with the hospital staff to get him even minimal treatment for his wounds (unsurprisingly, local medical staff were just as prejudiced against zeds, and therefore every bit as deliberately negligent, as their LEOs), he silently debated with himself over his limited choices. It wasn’t until they dragged him out of there on a gurney for the plane and flew him home to Quantico and proper medical treatment, that he realized how much worse, and public, the situation had got. There had been a crowd of press on the airfield as they landed, getting in the way as they loaded him into the ambulance, all shouting out questions that were agonizingly intrusive and personal.

How did it feel to be assaulted? Was he going to lose his job? What did he think about the shooting of his attacker? Now that he was outing as a zed, what would he do? Did he dare go back to work? Were his friends, co-workers and family going to turn on him?

The only thing no one seemed aware of was the tiny life growing inside him. Child of rape. Child of zed biology that made unprotected sex with any man almost guaranteed to produce a fetus. He was desperate to keep that a secret from everyone, no matter how impossible that would be, all too soon. With his gangly and slender frame, he would start to show in two months, maybe less. He shuddered, just thinking what the rabid press would make of that, since the timing couldn’t be more obvious, even if no one would ever know he had been a virgin (with any gender, not just men) until the attack…

He kept it all to himself as he was admitted to Bethesda, with armed FBI guards on his room day and night. He kept it to himself as he was treated, for numerous knife slashes in various places (as his clothes had been cut from him), bruises from the baseball bat that had been used to beat him (and why was it the Barbarossa County offenders preferred baseball bats for their crimes?), the broken ribs, internal bleeding in his abdomen that required surgery to repair (and was all too close to his tiny secret life, too tiny yet for even the most competent and ethical medical professionals to recognize), not to mention the concussion (that was a known high risk factor for later development of Alzheimer’s, like he needed another), and the resulting return of his migraines. And, oh yes, of course they had to run a rape kit, take samples, and he needed stitches for the severe tearing to his…

He kept it all to himself as his team made daily, practically hourly, visits to his hospital room in the meantime, trying to talk to him about his future. What future, he wanted to ask. Even former teammates Kate Callahan, Emily Prentiss and Alex Blake appeared to visit him, trying to get him to listen to all the logical, rational reasons he should face up to the facts, sooner rather than later. And yes, Emily confirmed, the Sulfur Springs serial cases were now getting international attention, and spurring international debate on the appalling treatment of zeds, for no more justification than an accident of biology.

The only thing he would commit to was that he wasn’t quitting. He wasn’t a quitter. He wasn’t going to give in to the bullies. He never had before, and he wasn’t going to start now. That was his line in the sand. What would it say about zeds to all those watching eyes (and the tiny eyes inside that weren’t actually eyes yet), if he turned and ran now? How could he ever stop running if he did so now? How could he ever stand up to the injustice, ever again, if he didn’t do it now? How could he make anyone respect zeds, respect him, if he didn’t earn it now?

(And more important than his teammates, his friends, his co-workers, or the faceless hordes of the
public, over whom he had absolutely no control, and whose opinions he had never cared for anyway, was the opinion of one potential little life who might one day call him daddy, and needed to know there was absolutely nothing wrong with being a zed, that one could still be a good and righteous person, still be a parent any kid could be proud of.)

He kept it all to himself for the days it took to be medically stable enough for release, so he could go home and cry himself to sleep for the unfairness of it all.

Thus, it was with some sense of relief that he shut the door on all his well-meaning friends, so he could, at last, be alone with his thoughts, his reactions, his grief and ongoing internal conflict, and let down all the masks he had worn to hide his vulnerability.

And so here he was, pacing, nauseous for no logical reason, dithering about a past that couldn’t be undone, waffling about an uncertain future that was nothing but question marks.

And, with a heavy sigh, he realized that he had to make a phone call.

It was long overdue. Dr. Norman at Bennington had assured him that patient Diana Reid had been kept far from the damning news reports, but that didn’t necessarily mean that she was unaware of the situation with her beloved son. Spencer knew he had been putting it off, and how cowardly it was, but… he just needed to stew for a while before facing his mother.

But it couldn’t be put it off any longer. Right now, he needed his mom. He really, really needed his mom. He could only pray that this was one of her good days, and she was lucid enough to offer her own brand of warm wisdom.

He made the call, and sweated out the wait until she was brought to the phone.

“Spencer? Sweetheart? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, mom. I suppose you know… you’ve heard…”

“A mother always knows. And… Maude leant me her ipad, with ZNN access. I know everything, Spencer. I saw it all. My poor baby… I’m glad they gunned that monster down. I’m glad! Are you really all right?”

“I was in the hospital for a few days, I needed some surgery… but I’m expected to make a full recovery, and be back to work, at least for light duty, maybe two weeks from now.”

“Oh dear… is that even going to be possible?”

Ignoring that this was the refrain he had been hearing from all his teammates, past and present, he focused on the facts. “I’ve got a medical eval in two weeks, and I have no doubt I’ll be ready by then. As for the psych eval I’ll have at the same time... since I was one of the people who set those psych evals in the first place, I know exactly what they’re going to say. I’ll need to undergo mandated counseling, as any agent would need after an assault like that, but I can still be allowed to do desk duty in the mean time. I’ve already discussed this with Hotch, and he’s a little doubtful about me working in the field, until we know how things are going to fall out, but I can at least go back to the office as soon as I get medical clearance.”

There was a moment of thoughtful considering silence on the other end of the line before Diana offered, tentatively, “You haven’t told anyone about the baby yet, I take it? Why, Spencer?”

He deflated in his chair like a punctured balloon, tears stinging his eyes. He pulled his knees up to his chest and curled up, entirely miserable, in the chair.
“Because I’m not sure what to do about it yet, mom. That’s… why I called. I can’t seem to think straight. I can’t separate my… condition, from the assault that caused it, the fact that my work career might be essentially over and what I’m going to do about that, the additional risks I’m going to have to face no matter what happens, not to mention the media chaos that’s going on right now… and I honestly don’t know what to do about any of it. I fully realize that I have no control over my security and have no idea what measures I’ll need to take in the future, and as far as work goes, it’s kinda out of my hands too… but the pregnancy… I don’t know what to do, mom. I don’t know what to do.”

“What options have you considered?” she asked, with some trepidation, so he knew she realized what his first one would be.

“It would be easiest… most practical, given all the circumstances… certainly make my future less in doubt, if I just… requested an abortion. Approval would pretty much be automatic in the case of rape.”

He heard the resigned sigh from the other end. “I was afraid you’d say that. And I’ll only say this, Spencer. It’s your body. It’s your choice. Absolutely. And I will support you, fully, if that is what you chose to do.”

“But you don’t want me to.”

“Your body, your choice.”

“But you don’t want me to,” Spencer also repeated, trying to get Diana to weigh in.

Instead she said, “What other options are you considering?”

“I… I… I can’t seem to get past this one decision,” Spencer confessed, feeling the start of sobs crowding his throat that he would never allow anyone else to witness. “I know it was rape, I know I have no obligation… but… it’s a life, mom! It’s a life inside me, and doesn’t it have rights too? Does it deserve to be punished, executed, for the faults of its biological father? But can I give it life, a chance, and be able to forget what happened, not let it overshadow everything else? What if I carry to term, what then? Do I give it up to strangers, even if that means giving it the clean slate it really needs? I’ve seen too many victims of the foster care and adoption systems to want to do that. It’s too much like playing Russian Roulette with an innocent life, of totally abnegating my own responsibility. It would feel like I had born that baby just to hand it over to the wolves, or exposing it on a hillside like the ancient Greeks. Mom, I never ever intended on having a child, not with the genetic disadvantages I already carry, for being Z positive, for schizophrenia, now for early onset dementia… That’s just too much negative input to potentially pass on to my offspring, and I just would never chose to do it. But this… this poor innocent being growing inside me already has all that to weigh it down, in addition to the terrible personal history we both now share. And, okay, I checked, and the issues the unsub had were all environmental, a culture of zed hatred in his community and family, plus a circle brand and the trauma of a mother’s abuse and murder to spur him on, so none of what turned him into a serial killer was genetic. I know every possible statistic on the children of serial killers, in the absence of inherited disorders or similar traumas, repeating their parents’ offences, and it is extremely low, the vast majority turning the other way, into law enforcement or social service of some kind in an attempt to atone for perceived but unearned guilt for a parent’s crimes…”

It all came out in a flood, punctuated by sobs, until he just couldn’t stem the flow of tears, and he broke off, hiccupping even as he cried into the phone.

Understandable, of course, given the emotional weight of the situation you’re in.

“First of all, the first decision you need to make. Abortion or giving birth. It sounds like you have moral objections to abortion, which I admit surprises me a little, since we’re both of us humanists, and rationalists, not religious. Practically speaking, in medical terms, an embryo, which it is right now, is no more than a benign growth, barely a collection of a few hundred cells, not an independent being. So any rights it may or may not have are not legal or medical, merely moral and ethical. Which, I will admit, are strong factors, but intensely personal to you alone. Only you can pass judgment on them, one way or another.

“This situation you’re in wasn’t your choice. And yes, the same might be said for any accidental pregnancy, but your case is absolutely and undeniably different. That monster forced this on you to torture you, with no consideration whatsoever for your well-being, or the potential child he was creating. Since he fully intended to kill you right then and there, he was obviously disregarding any possibility of a child anyway. Wanting to reverse the damage he caused you is no reflection on you. Believe that, Spencer.

“I happen to know that the statistics on zed mortality from labor is fairly low, and you are a strong and healthy young zed in his prime, so your survival is not really in question, and we can eliminate that from the factors to consider. But, as I said, your body, your decision, and no one else’s. So. When we eliminate medical and legal factors, both for you and the baby, the question is, do you want an abortion?”

“No!” It was a cry from his soul, molten and instinctive, almost feral in intensity, even as he sat curled up and sniffling, his hands on his belly, already aching for that small life turning his own upside down. “No, Momma! It’s mine. It’s a life. I can’t… I won’t… I can’t do that.”

“Okay, okay, baby. I understand.” His mother’s voice was a soothing coo, and brought back memories of the better days from his childhood, when his mom was having one of her good spells, reading to him, curled up in bed together. “So that’s one decision made, yes?”

“Yes, mom. Thank you.” It was so much clearer now, that he had made that one vital decision.

“So now the really tough ones. But you realize, you’ve got at least nine months to think about this, right?”

He sighed. “Right. But let’s get it out on the table anyway. Because… I need this, mom. I need your help and wisdom.”

“Baby, I know only too well. The next decision, of course, is whether you want to keep it or not. And in this case, you’ve got it easier than a lot of zeds, because you won’t have to worry about paternal rights. Or… oh god. Will you? Did that horrible man have any relatives who might try to over-ride my rights in this

“His father is alive, but has already been arrested for the murder of his zed common-law wife. There’s no statute of limitations on murder, and he confessed to it already. Like almost everyone else we arrested in Barbarossa County, he seemed to feel he was totally entitled to kill a zed, especially since she lied to him about her status when they first met. He displayed absolutely no remorse. There may be more distant family relations, but I can’t imagine them wanting custody, and even if they do, any court allowing it. Considering the rampant persecution we uncovered in that town, the culture of zed-hatred, and I have no doubt prevalent in all members of the unsub’s family for it to be so pervasive and extreme… There’s no telling at this point whether my baby will manifest the zed phenotype, although with both parents Z positive… but in any event… with the media uproar, I sort of feel sorry for any member of that family who makes any attempt to over-ride my rights in this
matter. All I’d have to do is play even a portion of the surveillance tape to deny paternal rights.”

“Okay, fair enough. So that leaves keeping it or adopting it out. I realize that if it turns out to be zed, adoption becomes problematic…”

“If it’s not Z positive and born healthy, a white newborn in this country is one hundred percent guaranteed to be adopted within hours of birth. There will no doubt be a long list of potential parents, I would probably be permitted to do background research on all or any of them and decide which ones, and it can all be done privately, so no one would need to know the history until the child is of age. I could perhaps make a stipulation that I be allowed to talk with the child when, and if, it is informed of the sealed details… I wouldn’t want them to think I hated them. Or held them responsible… I’d want to explain… I’d… I can just see so much potential for them to develop debilitating guilt, or disgust, or… psychological trauma… over the bare details…”

“Okay, that sounds like you have a viable action plan to ensure the best for an XX or XY adoption. What about a Z positive, whether or not they’re zed? Zed children are difficult to adopt out, aren’t they?”

“Very. I’m not sure if that will change when prospective parents know they won’t be branded, but… I don’t know. With both parents Z positive, the chances my child won’t be at least a carrier is… nonexistent. If it’s just a carrier… Maybe it doesn’t really matter. If it’s zed, I think I would have to keep it, no matter what. There’s just no other way to ensure its future safety if it’s not with me.”

“Hm… I don’t know if I should point this out, Spencer, dear. But you realize you’re perilously close to reverse discrimination here? Judging whether or not to keep your child based solely on its gender status?”

“Oh… um… okay, I hadn’t realized… oh. But it’s not really reverse discrimination, is it? The consideration is solely about their welfare. A normal single-gendered kid would be safe in the adoption system, where a zed would not.”

“Safe is a relative term, Spencer. And there’s a quote by Helen Keller that I’ve always thought applies especially well to you. ‘Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.’ It seems to me that you’ve lived your life under this truth. How can you think it won’t apply to your child, whatever its gender status? And research and vet as you will, if you give your child to others to raise, you may give up the right to determine their future, but not the ultimate responsibility for it.”

With a hiccupping chuckle, still rather too thick with tears, Spencer could almost smile, for the first time, it felt, in weeks. Certainly, since the single most monumental experience of his life. And considering what that included, that was telling. “Gee, mom… I know I asked for your opinion, and you started out by not wanting to give it, but I kinda think you gave yourself away there. You want me to keep it, right?”

Diana gave a growl. “I’m trying to be supportive here, Spencer, but you’re making it very difficult. I will say it one more time. I only want what you want, what will make you happy, and that’s all I’ve ever wanted for you. But you have to decide, all by yourself, what that something is. But know this, my beloved boy, even if you decide, whatever way you go, and then you later come to regret that decision, I will always be by your side, supporting you as best I can, and reminding you that you made the best decision you could at the time, not out of any selfishness, but an honest and sincere wish for the best future for your child. And that’s all you’re going to get out of me on that subject.”

Spencer nodded, knowing his mother would sense, even if she couldn’t see, his reaction. But he
grew pensive, as he wondered if it was time to talk about the elephant in their lives, one that had only grown larger and more in the way the past few cataclysmic days.

“And your decision, mom? To give birth to me? To keep me? Did you ever regret that?”

“Oh Spencer… Never, ever, for one moment of one glorious day did I ever regret having you in my life. I may have regretted a lot of other things, my illness, my failure to properly take care of or protect you as you grew… and you pretty much raised yourself, I know. You were so alone, baby… that I will regret to the last. But having you in my life? No. Never.”

“But…”

“No buts. Not one.”

“I know you had an amniocentesis done. I found the results in the den after Dad left. It was with all the other legal, financial and medical papers when I went through it all to try and figure out where we stood and how I could possibly keep us afloat, keep us from being separated and thrown into some marginal state institutions. So you knew I was Z positive before I was born. You could have aborted me then. Then and now, the law allows for the abortion of Z positive fetuses right up until the actual birth, and the later ultra-sound I found in that file clearly identified me as at least male. So… did you not even consider that? Not even for a moment?”

“Oh baby… have you been wondering about that all this time? You should have said something! Sweetheart, I confess… we did discuss it, your father and I. Once. I told him no. Categorically, absolutely, no. It was never even an issue for me. I just wouldn’t have it. His arguments… well, he kept at it for about an hour. Until I called him on his hypocrisy. His own brother was a zed, he himself was a Z positive carrier… he should have known better. It was the branding of our child that really freaked him out. It freaked a lot of people. It freaked me too, to have such a punitive, prejudicial and permanent mark put on my innocent blameless baby, only because of the random rolling of the DNA dice. Your father said his brother went through hell, and eventually couldn’t take it. He ended up in a homeless shelter before he finally took an overdose of drugs. Bill fought too hard, even as a circle, watched the fall of too many zeds who were outed, one way or another, to want it for his own child. He couldn’t even imagine what challenges a child with the circle-Z mark would face, and he was unwilling to risk it. I’m not sure if that was for his sake or yours, and I never asked. The stigma of a zed child was… well, you know. About as bad as the stigma of a schizophrenic wife or mother. To tell the truth, I wasn’t all that surprised when he finally cut and ran out on us. He took it as long as he could, but… The thing with Riley Jenkins was just the last straw for him. He was never the same after. He started looking up statistics on the number of zed children victimized by pedophiles and child molesters, which is high, and the percentage of charges laid, which is low.”

“Yeah. I know all about those kinds of statistics. I’ve written papers about a lot of them.”

“Your father had a lot of stress over it all, and… well. I guess you’ll have to at least consider that yourself, Spencer. Are you strong enough to raise a zed? To know that it may be inevitable that they will go through what you did, or worse, as they struggle, harder than is just, to make their way in the world? Because a zed has a higher than average chance of producing a zed themselves. And I think you already told me that, if this hadn’t happened, you would never have considered becoming a parent at all. Which makes me unutterably sad, my baby.”

“I know, mom. I know. I’m sorry I said all that, but…”

“No, no. It was the truth. You aren’t permitted to apologize for stating a simple truth. That was one of the reasons I was so glad your test came back Z positive, why I wouldn’t allow your father’s
arguments to hold sway with me. Because I knew, no matter how screwed up my own genetics might be, yours would be clean.”

“Mom, there’s no substantive scientific proof that Z positives are free from other genetic… I don’t want to say defects, because I never saw myself as a defect, no matter what anyone else says, but… let’s say rather other genetic anomalies. Believe me, I’d know. I’ve made an exhaustive study of this subject in my work. There’s no proven link between the Z chromosome and resistance or even immunity to genetic forms of mental illness of any flavor.”

“No? Maybe not. But, you know, there is anecdotal evidence. And logical inference. The X chromosome holds far more genetic information than the Y, which has been deteriorating over hundreds of thousands of years. Supposedly, this is related to the physical traits and processes required for reproduction. It takes far more to grow and hatch a baby than to produce a couple million sperm. But I know you’ve learned that the Z chromosome holds far more genetic information than even the X. And, for some reason, the incidence of mistakes in the splitting of cells is far lower in Z positives. Somehow, the mechanisms for making copies of XXZ or XYZ cells are far more efficient and accurate than for XX or XY. This may explain why your chances of contracting any form of cancer is far lower than a ‘normal’, so low as to be almost non-existent. Your immune system is far more robust, and I thank my stars for that.”

Spencer did too, especially after his little run-in with anthrax, an incident that was still under a secrecy seal he wasn’t allowed to break, even for his mom. He didn’t think he could have possibly survived the full-on dose he got of the modified anthrax virus, when miniscule and wind-diluted doses killed so many exposed in the park, if not for his healthy immune system.

“So, baby, what I’m saying here is that, if scientists could just look at the evidence with an objective eye, they would see that if the Z chromosome is a mistake, it’s an amazing and miraculous one. You are an improvement on the species, not a mistake. And the ease with which zeds reproduce bears this out. You’re designed for survival, Spencer, and passing on your heritage, to a greater extent than any of the rest of us.”

When his mom put it like that… yeah, everything she said about Z positive biology was true. He had never heard it put together just that way before, but… yeah. Mom was right about that.

He took another, easier breath. It was a relief to have a logical, rational, scientific reason for some kind of hope.

For another half hour or so he basked in his mother’s reassurance, so that, when he reluctantly hung up, he felt only the weight of exhaustion drawing him to sleep.

Å

Spencer sat in a jungle glade. It was night, but there was a faint blue glow, as if from a moon he couldn’t see. The smells of lush verdant vegetation, and the distant sounds of animal cries, the rustle of leaves and branches brushed by the wind, filled the air. It was peaceful, safe, comforting. But he was waiting. For what, he didn’t know. But for the moment, waiting felt like a meditation.

Slowly, he became aware of life, all around him. Well, it *was* a jungle… the very definition of a place filled, almost strangled, with densely-packed life. But one denizen, at least, was aware and looking back at him. Then another… and another… Eyes peered from every shadow, the reflected light glimmering brightly in them, turning them into pale gold lamps. Intent, focused, it wasn’t predatory interest, but curiosity he felt. He knew this, seemed to sense it, without opening his own eyes.
Then, suddenly, without seeming to have moved at all, she was just… there, standing before him, delicately sniffing the air, sniffing Spencer.

Smiling, Spencer opened his eyes, and stared back at the creature. She seemed intelligent beyond her species, the light in her gold eyes dimming only slightly as she studied him. She seemed to be a domestic short hair cat, *Felis silvestris catus*, her coat tabby grey marked with black in spots, swirls and stripes, in a startling and distinctive pattern Spencer was only too familiar with… because it was exactly like the patterning on his own skin, around his genitals, the pink and purple mottling that appeared on any zed at puberty. It was this mottling that truly marked a zed, far more than the artificial brand on his wrist.

The animal took one silent padding step nearer, then another… it was as if they were drawn to each other, in this sacred glade. Spencer reached out, and slowly, deliberately, patted the creature, rubbing behind her alert, pointed ears. She suddenly gave a purr, and collapsed in his lap, turning up her belly for a sensual rub, opening her mouth, letting her tongue loll over sharp teeth, closing her eyes, and purring, gave herself up to bliss.

Spencer grinned, lavishing attention on his new friend.

Then he became aware of another approaching.

This one was human, in shape at least. Tall, slender and loose-limbed, naked, hairless, its skin covered, all over, head to toe, in a mottling of pink and purple in a distinctive pattern of dots, swirls and stripes that was all too familiar…

Suddenly thinking to check himself, Spencer looked down and… yes, he was naked as well. Lucky his feline friend was positioned to protect his modesty. But his belly did reveal a slight bulge that he knew he couldn’t be showing yet, although the tell-tale mottling was already spreading across his lower abdomen. By the time he was ready to give birth, the pattern would cover his swollen and distended belly, covering every square inch of his pregnancy.

The not-quite-human being smiled at him. Around his shoulders curled another cat, though this one must not have been pure *Felis silvestris catus*, as it was larger, had tufts on its ears and a shorter tail. It was hard to tell in the blueish light, which somewhat distorted color, but Spencer thought it might be green tabby, with the zed mottling pattern, and seemed to have no trouble balancing on its companion’s shoulders as he – it? – walked.

The alien was soon joined by three others, more human in appearance in their unashamed naked state, obviously zeds like himself. One must be XXZ, for she had breasts, the other two XYZ, and one of those was round-bellied and mottled with advanced pregnancy. Each one of them were accompanied by a feline companion, all with the same mottled coat pattern, but only one was recognizably the size and species of house cat, the orange tabby that accompanied the pregnant zed, who grinned widely at him and gave a wave.

But it was the alien who spoke.

“Hail the Furalin. Greetings, my child. Fear not, Spencer, to step out among the stars, for here you will find your destiny. I eagerly await your arrival among us… for on that day, your training may begin.”

Over the tops of the trees a moon swung into view… but not the smiling face he had always known. And then a second, smaller moon joined the first. And behind them, a panoply of stars swept into an arc, a celestial map unlike any Spencer had ever studied in his astronomy classes, or seen in the night skies of… of Earth.
Then the cat on the alien’s shoulder began to shift shape into a bird. It was large, colorful, with a large and dangerous-looking beak, something like a parrot or toucan, but not either. In fact, Spencer couldn’t identify the species at all, and that was somewhat surprising because, as Jason Gideon’s protégé, he thought he could identify any bird species on Earth. Which, after seeing the second moon in the sky above, was somewhat unsurprising. The bird gave a loud raucous cry, its wings out-spread and flapping for balance as the alien turned to leave. His three companions also turned to go, their own feline familiars changing shape. Spencer couldn’t identify two of the creatures, any more than he could the bird, but the pregnant zed’s pet was clearly a coyote, tall, long-legged and with a ragged-seeming grey-brown pelt, and mouth open in a doggy grin, tongue lolling over predator teeth.

“Wait!” Spencer begged. “I don’t understand. Who are you? How do I find you?”

The alien turned to look over his shoulder – the one without the bird – and smiled. “Patience, child. You will soon have your answers. Trust your instincts, and follow your spirit.”

The pregnant zed chuckled, shaking his head, even as the alien faded to nothing, and the other two disappeared into the jungle. “Oh, that was so bad. See you soon, probie.”

Spencer waved back at the jaunty salute the last visitor gave him before he, too, faded away with his coyote. Spencer looked down at his cat, which hopped out of his lap, stretched languidly and then grew and changed into a cougar. She looked back at him with gold eyes seeming to glow from within, and nodded. Then she, too, left him in the blue jungle glade.

One by one, the glimmering watching eyes lurking in the undergrowth winked out, and he was alone.

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Spencer awoke, calm, settled as he could never remember being before. He had never had such a dream, or such a reaction, and certainly hadn’t expected anything of the kind after the trauma he had suffered so recently. He had no idea why he had it now. But he had been warned, once, by someone he trusted, to pay attention to any jungle dreams he might have. And asked if he had ever noticed any cats, paying special attention to him.

It never even occurred to Spencer to wonder if the dream was real or not. He sort of took it as read that it was real, in some sense. Someone had used the dream to speak to him… even if it was only his own subconscious. What it meant beyond that… he had no way to tell. But, luckily, he did have someone to ask.

He resolved to call Blair Sandburg that evening.

Å
The Job

Lieutenant General Jonathan ‘Jack’ O’Neill (two ‘L’s) only had to take one glance at Dr. Daniel Jackson to recognize his best friend and bête noir was on the warpath.

When Daniel had come to him a few days ago, wanting to hire the current cause célèbre of media everywhere, Jack had advised him to talk to Major General Landry about it. As far as Jack was concerned, that should have been the end of it. He should have known better.

He and Landry had been friends for a long time, trained together, went on missions together, fought side by side in some pretty dicey situations, and he certainly trusted him to lead the SGC, and lead it well, following the honored tradition of General Hammond and even, to a lesser degree, Jack himself. Protect the planet, protect the geeks, and never leave a man behind. But they all had their… little quirks, their human flaws and frailties. It was no skin off Jack’s nose, really, if Landry wanted to make the Mountain a berd-free zone. Hank would hardly be alone in that desire.

A few decades back, another man might have turned up his nose at women, blacks, Hispanics or Jews. Even a few years back, another man might have declared all homosexuals persona non grata, and kicked them off the Mountain. In these (hopefully) more enlightened times, any number of other possible COs for the Stargate Project might have wanted to veto all civilians, or at the very least, keep them out of the field. There were certainly enough folks at the Pentagon with stars on their shoulders who figured that was the only sensible way to go, and that had been true from day one of the Project to the present. Heaven only knew, there were days when Jack might even agree, especially when he caught a glimpse of Daniel bearing down on him like the very Wrath of God itself. Flaming sword and all.

But, yeah, no, they needed their civilian cohorts. The geeks had saved the whole damned planet, times out of mind, certainly more often than even the most dedicated Marine team, or even all the SGC Marines combined. Jack was the first to admit that. And of all their geeks, maddening as it was to any number of people to admit, their most valuable player, bar none, edging out even the hard-science super brains like Colonel Dr. Samantha Carter, or (in second place) Dr. Meredith Rodney McKay (smartest person in two galaxies? Yeah, no), was Dr. Daniel Jackson. Linguist, archeologist, all-round bright guy, with a bleeding heart as big as his brain, and either one was the size of a planet.

Jack should have just caved the first time Daniel came to him, all huffy about Landry refusing to hire any of the zed candidates he had put forward the past few years. He should have bitten the bullet and gone to have a private talk with Landry, get him to back off, and for God’s sake, don’t let even one of the berds get so much as a hang-nail on his watch. But Landry had never appreciated Daniel, never recognized his value, seeing him as nothing but a pinko tree-hugger type. Jack figured Landry had seen Daniel’s circle brand, and stopped paying attention. Lord knew, the man never read past the second line of any berd job application, where they ticked the gender box, ‘other’. The man certainly didn’t realize how dangerous a truly pissed-off Daniel could be. Ask any number of dead false gods, or, hey, if you can find even one Milky Way Replicator, or all-hallowed Ori in any galaxy, ask them.

There had been enough unpleasant recriminations when Daniel had waited for Landry to be on extended holiday with his newly reconciled ex-wife, to hire half a dozen berds, to put them to work in the anthro-arch department on translations, testing and cataloguing. And yes, a few uniformed brain-dead specimens at the Mountain had attempted some hazing, only to be caught by Daniel, and treated to an epic dressing down that scared all the other military straight. After that, nobody was stupid enough to do more than look cross-eyed at any berd in the Mountain. But when Landry had
One of Daniel’s new berd guys (the only one with tech skills) had almost immediately been sent to Atlantis, while the others were exiled to either Area 51 or the Ancient Outpost. And that far out, Pegasus, Nevada or Antarctica, Daniel had no immediate control over military with prejudice issues. Two of the berds had quit within a month, and from the bruises Jack had seen on their faces, no other explanation was really necessary. Daniel had been livid, and jetted to Nevada for three days of unremitting temper tantrum. When General Morley had called him, begging him to call off his geek, Jack did have a brief but furious word with the Area 51 CO.

Daniel was right. Daniel had the full support of the Director of HomeWorld Security, the umbrella agency that paid Morley. If he wanted any promotions ever again, or even to remain employed at all in the Program, where every single geek was worth their weight in weapons-grade naquadah, who the hell cared about their race, religion, creed, sexual orientation or gender status, then he had better damn well clean up his act, and see that ALL civilians within his command were protected. They had to deal with aliens day in and day out, for crying out loud, and they couldn't cope with a little variation in their own species? Fucking hell!

With the hazers identified and arrested for assault, the message was sent to all HWS military personnel, with an unequivocal hands-off policy. They had managed to keep the other three berds employed, or there would have been hell to pay, and Jack would have had no problem siccing Daniel on them again.

As for the kid they sent to Atlantis… well. The one hazing incident reported had resulted in a slightly dented Marine being returned to the SGC in disgrace after being schooled Pegasus-style, which apparently included ‘training’ with AR-1’s two resident aliens. Knowing Teyla’s skill-set all too well (he still had the bruises to prove it from their last sparring session, before Atlantis left Earth to return to the Pegasus galaxy) and having heard about the big barbarian Sheppard called Chewy (Teal’c LIKED the guy… go figure), Jack had to restrain his chuckles, with some difficulty, and see the offending Marine got a one-way ticket out of the Program. In spite of getting the evil eye from Daniel for the slap on the wrist punishment, Jack had no other recourse. There were no laws against hazing a berd (and in this case it apparently hadn’t got past verbal abuse before ‘Chewy’ had caught him at it and freaked). In fact, in most commands it was actively encouraged. Just not anywhere under Jack O’Neill’s (and Dr. Jackson’s) command. But still, after another month or so, as soon as Atlantis moored outside San Francisco harbor, the berd took the opportunity to jump ship, twitchy as all hell. At first he wanted to quit the SGC altogether and return home to Canada, land of hockey, beer, and marginally less discrimination against berds. The Great White North required no registration or brands, for one thing, and no mandatory blood testing, allowing Z positives to be an invisible minority, to live their lives in peace, and marriage was legal for them there (although with a blood test… for STDs and Z, because those were both things a partner had the right to know).

Daniel managed to talk the berd down from leaving, offering a transfer to Area 51 instead. Jack hadn’t asked what that was all about, content to let Daniel handle it, whatever the issue was. But Daniel had been quietly contemplative on the subject ever since, and that was worry enough as far as Jack was concerned.

Then Tom Morrow, assistant director of their sister-department, Homeland Security, and the Judge Advocate General of the Navy, Vice Admiral A.J. Chegwidden, had both jumped on Jack, and insisted he hire an out-of-favor black-listed NCIS agent who just happened to be a zed passing as male, and… well, it seemed like overnight, all the rules had changed. Atlantis got her Agent Afloat, in spite of not a little animosity and controversy about the seemingly arbitrary posting, and accusations of favoritism. But they managed to ship the problem, and the potential scandal, out of the galaxy. The city of the Ancients launched to fly back to the Pegasus Galaxy, Atlantis veteran leader Richard Woolsey sharing command with Sam Carter (now a full-bird Colonel and looking for a base
to run so she could qualify for her stars), leaving Colonel John Sheppard in control of the military side, and Dr. M. Rodney McKay still the Chief Sciences Officer… That should have been the end of it.

No such luck. Jack was still wondering what the hell was going on in Pegasus, because none of the creatively vague reports he was getting back from Woolsey, Sam, Caldwell, Sheppard, McKay, or anyone else, made a damn bit of sense.

But he hadn’t missed the addition of a few… unusual items in the last supply requisition from Dr. Keller, the Atlantis CMO. Someone on the city was pregnant, and it wasn’t Teyla, this time. Since maternity clothing had also been requested, for a male-identified zed… Evidently, their damn Agent Afloat had got himself knocked up.

He would have raised a ruckus about that, but it was all too obvious the NCIS agent was doing his job… and doing it well. Since his arrival, no fewer than eight moles had been ferreted out and kicked off the city in handcuffs. Five were from Pegasus, four Genii spies and one a Wraith-worshipper. The other three were from the Milky Way, one Trust hold-out with a Goa’uld symbiote, one Lucian Alliance ringer, and one garden variety mercenary traitor, selling secrets and alien tech to the highest bidders. All stopped cold in their tracks thanks to their new Agent Afloat.

And since no one was dying, they were reporting significant inroads against the Wraith, nothing but success with unlocking the secrets of Atlantis… well, if there’s nothing but blue skies, you can’t complain about the rain. Much as you suspect your subordinates are blowing sunshine up your ass.

He blamed NCIS Very Special Agent Afloat (and closet berd) Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. A man—or whatever he really was— he hadn’t even met. It was easy. All too easy, maybe, and that was a problem.

So, here he was, with an absolutely furious Daniel on his hands, and if Jack had three guesses why, he wouldn’t need two of them. He was already planning a vicious paperwork bomb for Landry to pay him back for not warning him what was headed his way. A full-blown budget review with two days prep time. That ought to do it, the bastard prick.

“Daniel. So nice to see you back in DC, and so soon. Let me guess. Landry said no to your new hire.”

Yeah, it had been a few years, but he still had the knack of taking the wind out of Daniel’s sails. The secret was a good solid pre-emptive strike.

“That ass hole! That unmitigated prick! It’s not even like I’m going to set Dr. Reid up at the Mountain. He’s going to Atlantis, if I can talk him into it.”

“Yeah. I know. I signed off on the personnel request months ago for someone to assist our Agent Afloat on Atlantis, and I’ve seen the polite ‘no thank you’s from every qualified candidate we’ve tried to dig up, inside and outside the Program. I also heard you the first time, when you suggested Dr. Reid would be perfect for the post. And I agreed. Didn’t I agree? Only thing is, by coming to me first, you jumped the chain of command, which is not a good thing. Why don’t you know this by now? You’ve been working for the military how long? You should have gone to Landry in the first place. But now that you have, and he’s given his rubber stamp ‘no berds allowed’, now I am justified in stepping in and telling him to suck it up and hold his nose till we get Dr. Reid to his new post. Right?”

Daniel, collapsing into the visitor’s chair, huffed out a huge breath. “I hate it when you do this. I had a perfectly good lecture all rehearsed and ready to go. Could have gone thirty minutes, easy. I even
had a Power Point to underline it all.”

“I would expect no less from you, Daniel. And I just find it easier to agree with you from the get go. I’m too old to fight all the time. Not that I don’t enjoy winding you up occasionally, but… hell. Not about this. I’ve seen the videos. Davis got me the unexpurgated versions of the Sulfur Springs surveillance tapes. That poor kid never had a chance. And since I’ve also seen his unexpurgated personnel file and records from Director Skinner at the FBI… IQ, PhDs, memory and speed reading abilities aside, the kid is a hero. No question. He’s taken bullets for team-mates, saved any number of victims, talked down any number of unsubs who wanted to commit suicide by cop, and been captured, tortured and forced into addiction, then got himself clean, all in the line of duty. And he still comes back to do his job.”

Daniel could only nod. Both of them had suffered torture and forced addictions while on the job. Once upon a special ops career, Jack had been captured by the Iraqis during Desert Storm, jailed, tortured, and forced into a heroin addiction. Daniel’s drug of force had been repeated spin cycles in a sarcophagus, and then an alien device in a (nearly) deserted Goa’uld pleasure palace. So they knew only too well what strength it took to come back from that and return to the job, clean. They had only respect for what Dr. Reid had managed to make of his life.

What neither of them mentioned was the fact that Reid’s only known romantic link was to a woman he had never even seen, before the day she died, killed by a mad stalker right before his appalled eyes, unable to save the woman he loved. Daniel could certainly relate to that kind of devastating loss.

“Yes, well, you’re just lucky I didn’t bring Vala along. She wanted to come. She’s fascinated by the concept of zeds, and can’t understand the prevailing attitude toward them.”

“Yeah,” Jack admitted guiltily. “About that. I admit, I didn’t really give a damn before now, whether we hired berds or didn’t. As far as I’m concerned, they’re no different than any other minority. I don’t give a flying fuck who or what you are, where you come from, who you love… you have to earn your right to a seat at my table. Ability, skill set and dedication… that’s all I care about. Frankly, I never had a vested interest in whether or not any berds earned their way into the Program. But this Sulfur Springs deal… I gotta tell you, Daniel, it made me feel dirty. It made me remember every uncharitable thought I ever had about a berd, every patently untrue cliché I bought into, and feel like I had aided and abetted that monster and all his damn pals, agreeing with their hatred of berds. And that’s not me. Not anymore.”

“Yeah, well you can make a start by not calling them ‘berds’, Jack. It’s dual-gender, Z positive, carrier, or zed. Right?”

“Right. No problem. Fine me a quarter when I forget, okay? You and me, we’re going to go talk to your Dr. Reid, and convince him that we need him, and can keep him safe. And all three of us are going to Cheyenne Mountain to rain fire on Landry until he sees things our way, and stops getting in the way of our mission with his anti-berd bullshit. Oops, that’s one quarter… anti-zed bullshit. And we’re going to make sure every single person under the Home World Security umbrella, no matter where they are or who they are, knows that open season on zeds is over. No ifs, ands, or buts, and there is now a zero tolerance policy on any and all hazing. Of anyone. Get physical and you go to jail for assault. Anything less, and you’re out on your ear, only because we have no legal grounds to do more.

“And then, boyo, you and me are going to take Dr. Reid to Atlantis, personally. You can even tell Vala she can come along if she wants. Because I am done wondering what the hell is going on out there, because it sure the fuck isn’t in any of the bullshit reports they’ve been sending me lately.”
It was only then that he noted the considering expression on Daniel’s face. That, frankly, adorable frown he got when mulling over a particularly knotty translation problem. And Jack smelled a dorky geeky science-twin rat.

“Or, has Sam been telling you more than she tells me?”

Daniel blinked at him in false innocence. Oh yeah, those two had been colluding against him, again.

“Okay. Out with it.”

Daniel grew pensive, again. “You remember Dr. Thibideau? The Canadian zed tech expert we sent to Atlantis, who bailed as soon as the city landed on Earth?”

“Oh yeah. I remember. Vividly. He’s still employed with us, right? He’s happy at Area 51?”

“Hm? Oh sure. I talked to him yesterday. He’s fine. He and the others are relieved the crap bullying has stopped. I mention him because he had an odd story to tell when he came back from Pegasus. He requested to be transferred because he felt uncomfortable.”

“What? I thought Sheppard and his wookie took care of all that.”

“Oh, they did. And then Teyla and Ronon started trying to talk to him about his zed status. From what Thibideau said, they have something similar to zeds on a lot of Pegasus planets. They’re highly honored there, as teachers and shamans.”

“Wow. Different. Zeds in Pegasus, hunh? I don’t suppose ours are hold-overs from the Atlanteans returning to Pegasus, hunh?”

“I think it highly likely. It would make sense, given that the fossil record offers absolutely no evidence that zeds spontaneously evolved here, or existed at all before about ten thousand years ago… timing that is pretty suspicious to begin with. And of the zeds we’ve brought into the program, all of them have natural ATA genes, and strong expressions at that.”

“What?” Jack demanded, suddenly sitting up straight and paying attention. “Nobody told me that. You didn’t tell me that! Was it in any reports?”

“Probably not. Landry wasn’t going to let me hire any more, no matter what. You’ll have to ask him if he’s been burying it in his reports.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. The explanation was all too likely, but Jack wouldn’t put it past Daniel to throw a red herring in his lap to get Hank into trouble. No love lost between those two, and the situation was getting worse. Jack might have to do something about it soon. But if Hank really was fudging about berds with ATAs… Oh, there would be hell to pay.

“Thing is,” Daniel continued blithely, “with Thibideau, both Teyla and Ronon were highly offended by the way we treat zeds, and were trying to… I don’t know, treat him the way they thought he should be treated. It made him uncomfortable. He confessed to me that it was too odd… He’d always had to face bullies and haters, he was used to it. But the all-out unvarnished adulation… it made his flesh crawl. He simply couldn’t cope, so he left the city.”

“So… he could deal with the hazing… but the anti-hazing was too much for him? Hunh.”

“He didn’t want to say anything to either Teyla or Ronon, not when they were being so nice to him, but… Yeah. I asked him to send me everything he knew about zeds in Pegasus. There was nothing in the Atlantis database that he could find, but we all know what a byzantine mess that is. The only
other detail Ronon let slip at one point was that the Wraith seemed to target zeds as their meal of choice... but with indifferent success. There are rumors that their zeds can fight off a Wraith, somehow, but details are sketchy. So when the Wraith find a population with zeds, any at all, they just bomb the hell out of them from orbit.”

“It’s the only way to be sure,” Jack finished the movie quote whimsically, with a thoughtful hmmm.

“Yes, well, considering how they’re venerated, it’s sort of like the Nazis trying to burn down Paris in World War II. It would be a blow to the heart of a people. That’s apparently the biggest reason why Sateda was destroyed so aggressively. And it means that there might not be a whole lot of them left in Pegasus.”

Jack began to entertain certain suspicions... “Then we sent DiNozzo out there as Agent Afloat... and they had a Wraith Worshipper on board at one point. The Wraith were already hot to find Earth and all the billions of free eats... do they know we have berds, now?”

“No idea. But that’s fifty cents you owe me.”

Jack winced. “Yeah, right. And I’m gonna have to meet this DiNozzo guy. If only to make sure his getting shanghaied off to Pegasus is okay by him. Right?”

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His first day back to work, Spencer elected to take the subway. It was a mistake. He got the expected glances of excited recognition, true, but some turned dark, and he heard whispers that sounded like ‘berd’, and even the demeaning ‘hermie’. He was leaving one train when someone knocked into him. He almost fell. Then another knocked into him, and another... He struggled until he could get his back to a wall, and faced his faceless attackers, but the crowd dissolved like mist, leaving him alone.

He was a lot more cautious after that, to keep his back to a wall, to not let people get around him, flank him. There were some who smiled at him, true, some who congratulated and thanked him. But always, on the outskirts of any crowd, were the dark, disgusted and angry looks, alight with the possibility of violence, and a certain oily sheen that Spencer couldn’t help but recognize from Sulfur Springs.

He resolved that he would never take public transit again.

And then, as he walked from the subway station, he felt other eyes on him.

These were almond shaped, green, gold, a few bright unlikely blue, some from shadows glowing with refracted light like lamps, but all of them focused on him, peering out at him from alleyways, under bushes, in the leafy cover of trees...

He honestly had no idea before this that there were so many cats in the city.

Some, sitting on apartment window sills or front stoops, sunning themselves or napping, woke, sat up and turned their heads to stare at him as he passed.

Yeah, that wasn’t creepy, *at all*.

Morgan asked about the disheveled clothing, looking worried, and Spencer was pretty sure that even with his vague, non-committal reply, the other profiler knew exactly what had happened.

Given the indication he already had that his life, as he knew it, was pretty much gone, replaced by
some kind of, as yet, unspecified new normal, he confessed to his team at their Monday morning conference that he was pregnant. That he was going to do his best to carry the baby to term, and that his current intention was to keep the baby. In the silence of their shocked faces, he explained himself. He thanked his mother in the privacy of his own thoughts for enabling him to think it out clearly and logically, for a Spencer-given of clear and logical.

Slowly, he received the congratulations and heart-felt best wishes of his team, although he recognized the reservations on most of their faces, along with the unspoken phrases; ‘the child of rape’, ‘the child of a serial killer’, and ‘a serial killer of zeds’.

JJ and Garcia, however, gave him hugs of unadulterated joy and congratulations, and for that he was eternally grateful. Which seemed to remind the others to put their doubts away. It wasn’t as if they didn’t think he was bright enough to have already considered all the negatives, or could read it in every little tell he had. He totally had considered every issue they could come up with, and more. It was just, that when all was said and done, this was his child, and he would love it, cherish it, and protect and teach it to the best of his ability.

“I have to admit, just taking the subway this morning was a head’s up that my life has been irrevocably changed, and there will be no going back. I’m still resolved not to quit, not to let the bullies and haters win. But I have to agree with all of you that precautions will need to be taken in future to ensure my own safety, not to mention my baby’s. Maybe a lot of precautions. I only hope they won’t prove to be prohibitive.”

Hotch looked especially grim as he said, “We’ll just have to take it as it comes, Reid. One day at a time. Whatever we need to do to keep you on, and keep you safe, we’ll do.”

“Thank you,” Spencer almost choked. “Thank all of you, so much.”

Once he got out of the cab in front of his apartment building, there was a very familiar grey tabby waiting for him at the front door. She was a domestic short-hair with highly distinctive markings. Swirls, spots and stripes, exactly like a zed’s genital markings. Gold eyes stared back at him as he slowed and then stopped, considering her.

“I’ve never had a pet,” he told her seriously. “I’m not sure I’d be any good at it.”

She didn’t seem to find this an adequate excuse.

“I don’t have any cat food, or a litter box, or anything.”

No, he hadn’t expected this to weight with her, either.

With a sigh, he gave it up. “Come on,” he invited. “Let me get my car keys, and we’ll go do some shopping. Do you have a preference of wet food over dry? I know Garcia’s Sergio prefers can food, but with the amount of time I have to spend at work, that doesn’t seem practical to me…”

He continued to converse with her, as if to a human, the entire evening. She wasn’t much of a conversationalist herself, but she was a very good listener, and very good company. She sat in his lap as he booted up his personal laptop and did a little research on the internet, before calling Garcia, and then Emily, still in town, for advice on cat ownership. Or as Garcia, chuckling, corrected him, cat servitude.

That seemed about right.
It wasn’t until he was in bed, a comforting weight on his chest purring contentedly, that he remembered he meant to call Blair Sandburg. Oh well… it could wait.

He had assumed that, at least in the FBI offices of the Quantico facility, he would be relatively safe. He might have expected a certain amount of verbal abuse, in the form of insults, jokes, both to his face and behind his back. But he had assumed they would all be too professional to let it get physical, much less life threatening.

He had been oh so wrong.

It was his second day back, just his second day, and he found himself on an elevator with three agents he didn’t know, all men. He smiled pleasantly at them, and received glares in return. When the doors opened on a floor before his own, they rushed him, caused him to drop the full cup of coffee he had been fetching, forced him out, and although he shouted for help and struggled, they quickly grabbed him by the throat to silence him and shoved him into a supply closet. Then followed ten minutes of unrelenting pain as they beat him to a pulp, and left him unconscious on the floor. And not once had any of them spoken a word.

It was Morgan who first realized Spencer was taking longer than usual to get back from a coffee run to the lobby concession stand. In alarm, he phoned Garcia and barked out an order for her to trace Reid, now! He had been half expecting something like this… There had been too many ugly whispers, abruptly stifled when he approached, over the weeks of Spencer’s medical leave. The others reported the same, and it made all of them jumpy and anxious about their young genius.

It only took Garcia seconds to find the surveillance footage. How those three agents hadn’t bothered to do anything about it, or seemed to care greatly… well, that was a mystery. But Morgan, racing down to the supply cupboard, found Spencer unconscious.

A panicked call to the EMTs, a trip to Emergency, a brand new concussion with associated migraine, and overnight for observation. After a word from Morgan, there was also a brief examination and confirmation that, no, the fetus seemed unharmed by the physical trauma. Morgan wasn’t sure whether or not to be glad of that last, but if Reid wanted the kid, he should have it. Like Diana, all he wanted was for his Pretty Boy to be happy. Whatever it took.

Unusual state of affairs, to have Derek Morgan, designated door-kicker of the team, to be comforting his friend, while the rest of them rounded up three rogue agents to arrest their sorry asses and see they paid, with suspensions without pay until an inquiry would see them fired to hell and back, blacklisted from ever being in law enforcement again, and oh, by the way, in jail for assault, and, if they could swing it, attempted murder.

Which is why, when Dr. Daniel Jackson and General Jonathan ‘Jack’ O’Neill (with two ‘L’s) came looking, they found a bruised and battered Dr. Spencer Reid in a hospital room. Again.

Daniel took the recently vacated seat by the bed to look over the young agent. He was a mass of colorful bruises, all over his face, and too much skin exposed by the short-sleeved hospital gown he wore. He shook his head.

“This isn’t from Sulfur Springs, I take it,” he offered with a rueful smile.

Dr. Reid sighed. “No. I was cornered by some agents at Quantico. I’d never seen any of them
before. My team is dealing with them now. Doctor Jackson, isn’t it? You’re an old friend of Alex Blake. I recall we had a very interesting discussion of various linguistic influences as evidence of cultural cross-pollination in various ancient societies. You, I don’t think I’ve ever met,” he told his second, so far unidentified, visitor, “And I feel confident answering your questions, that you’re not members of the media or the general public, because otherwise you would have never got as far as my door. I’ve got guards on me twenty-four seven, for my protection. I just hope I don’t need a watcher for the watchers. That would truly suck.”

Leaning against the wall next to the door, ankles crossed casually, Jack O’Neill chuckled softly. “It would at that, kid. I’m Jack O’Neill, Lieutenant General, USAF. Also the Director of something vaguely titled Home World Security. Which, weird as it may seem, is just what it sounds like. This is Dr. Daniel Jackson, archeologist, linguist, diplomat, part time soldier, honorary jar head, full time gad fly and pain in my mikta. Also, the head geek of one of the divisions within my purview. He wants to hire you for a job we have open. I’m here to help him convince you it’s a good idea.”

Dr. Reid nodded. There was something speculative in his eyes, as if he were matching clues against evidence. “Home World Security implies… other Worlds that aren’t Home, which present some kind of external threat we need security for.”

“Yes. Yes I suppose it does,” Jack agreed. “And anything else I may have to say will have to wait until you sign a shit-load of non-disclosure agreements. You already have all the security clearance needed to be read into our mission, but… My superiors don’t really feel comfortable with civilians unless they’re committed by signed legal contracts, to keep their mouths shut about what we do.”

“Hm. Yes, well… I do have a job, currently. I seem to be having issues getting back to it, one step forward two steps back, but…”

“There are security issues for you since the Sulfur Springs case. We… know,” Daniel acknowledged with as much tact as he could drum up.

Reid snorted inelegantly. “That’s one way to put it. Another would be that I was forcibly outed, to the entire world, in glorious Technicolor and surround-sound Ultravison. It put a target on my back that exceeds in size the total area of the District of Columbia. And much as I am loathe to quit in the face of blatant bullying or threats from people who have absolutely no right or business meddling in my affairs, I am also quite concerned about my continued survival. It’s a dilemma I am currently failing to resolve.”

Daniel smiled sadly. “And that brings us back to the job offer. We have a base… secret of course, location and mission both, where we have an international expeditionary force made up of military, civilian and local experts. Six months ago, we… acquired the services of an NCIS Agent Afloat. NCIS is—“

“Naval Criminal Investigative Service. I am familiar. I’ve never worked with them myself, but I’ve often heard one of our Special Agents in Charge, Tobias Fornell, ranting about them stealing jurisdiction from the FBI on various cases involving naval or marine personnel. He allows it, or used to, because they get results. Their closure rates used to be equal to our own at the BAU, or even a little better. Lately, their numbers have taken a considerable hit. I believe NCIS agents assigned to military bases or ships are called Agents Afloat.”

Daniel smirked at Jack, who was blinking at the young man on the bed. “Yes, Jack, he knows a lot of stuff. So, Dr. Reid, we stole Senior Field Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. from the NCIS MCRT as our Agent Afloat. He’s been highly successful in his role… but he needs a second. Someone with law enforcement and investigative experience, someone certified for field work, familiar with forensic procedures and evidence gathering… all the skill sets for an Agent Afloat. Someone to
partner him and watch his back. You would be ideal, or, if anything, over-qualified for the position. I admit, I never would have thought of you, until Alex Blake came to me a week ago.”

Reid sighed. “She wants to protect me. But I fail to see how your Agent Afloat position is any improvement on Quantico. A military base, super secret or not, is a hell of a lot more dangerous for zeds. Even if they’ve been totally cut off from all media the past month, and I could possibly pass as normal male for a while, it would only be a matter of time before the secret got out, and I was back behind the eight-ball again. You see… you watched all of the surveillance tapes from the SSPD station, I presume?”

“Yeah, kid, we did,” Jack acknowledged gently.

“Then you know… he didn’t use a condom. Therefore, given zed biology…”

“Oh god,” Daniel gulped. “You’re pregnant?” Reid nodded. He pushed down his sheet and pulled up the edge of his hospital gown to reveal his belly, still flat, but with a purple and pink mottling creeping up from his groin to cover the skin around his navel. “And you intend to keep it?” Another nod, as he covered himself back up. “Well… I’m not sure what to say about that. If you want it, then I suppose congratulations are in order. And you won’t be alone on this mission. You see, Agent DiNozzo is also a zed, and he’s also… expecting. That’s one of the reasons he’ll need a second-in-charge, sooner rather than later, and his gender status is why we’re finding it difficult to get someone qualified who’s willing to take the job.”

“A zed, in NCIS? How…”

Jack cut in, “He was passing as male. Didn’t tell anyone his gender status. Didn’t have a brand… Not sure how he managed it… but he ran into some trouble, his Director found out he was zed, and… Vance was going to transfer him to an Agent Afloat position on a destroyer… apparently not his first such posting, but this time, he objected.”

“I’ll bet! I can’t imagine a worse spot for any zed to be in! Trapped on a ship with a boat-load of military alpha XYs? He’d make enough enemies simply by being the sole representative of the law… but if his gender status ever got out… did his director insist he be branded?” When Jack nodded gravely, the young zed shuddered. “Then that assignment might as well have been a death sentence for him. But, see, is a distant, secret and presumably isolated military base like yours any better for us? Branded or not, pregnancy isn’t something you can hide. The military alpha XYs will hate us on sight, the civilians will shun us or keep their distances… I really don’t see what guarantees you can offer for my safety, that I should trade my current situation for another, potentially worse, where I would also be cut off from my current support network – my friends and team-mates.”

“There really are no guarantees, it’s true,” Daniel agreed freely, “and the mission itself is fraught with dangers. It’s a front line base with a significant scientific presence… somewhat dangerous science at that. And the locals are a mixed bag of friends and allies, enemies, some who are both, or neither, switching at the drop of a hat. But those in command are dedicated, and tolerant in the extreme. They have to be, all things considered. And the locals have an entirely different attitude toward zeds than any you’ve ever encountered. In that region, the Veralin are venerated.”

“Furalin,” Reid whispered, shocked at hearing the word that should have been unknown to him. Clearly, from his reaction, it was not. “The word you want is Furalin.”

Daniel froze, then briefly glanced at Jack, who had stood from the wall, his posture suddenly alert and serious.

“How do you know that?” Daniel wondered with forced casualness.
“I’ve been having a dream… of sitting in a jungle glade. I’m met by an alien, who says… Hail the Furalin.”

Reid almost chanted the words, as if half in a trance. And Daniel felt all the hairs on the back of his neck bristle as he shivered.

“Dreams teach,” Daniel acknowledged, only to hear Jack groan, recognizing the reference.

“Maybe,” Reid prevaricated. “I feel as if someone, or something, is attempting to communicate with me through this dream, but communicate what… I’m not sure. Psychoanalytical dream analysis strongly indicates that my subconscious is attempting to work through my recent spate of… traumas, although I’m not sure how. You don’t think I’m crazy. You recognize at least part of what I’ve said. How? Why? Do you know what this dream means?”

Daniel sighed, glancing at Jack, who merely shrugged. “I know some… not all, but some. I do know that Veralin is the name given to zeds by some people who… are reachable from our base. And there’s a local who has stated, quite clearly, that he will personally protect every Veralin… sorry, did you say it should be Furalin? we send him. And take it from me, Ronon is well up to the task. Our military on site respect the hell out of him, and have a very lively fear of getting on his bad side. So, there you go. For me to be able to tell you more, you’d need to sign our non-disclosure agreements.”

“And if I sign the NDAs, and you brief me on your top-secret mission… Can I still say no to your job offer?”

“Once you hear about our mission, I’m hoping you won’t even consider saying no. One more thing I can say, it’s the adventure of a life-time, and the most important endeavor in the history of mankind.”

Reid sighed. “Then I guess you’d better produce those NDAs. It shouldn’t take me long to read through them.”

“I dunno,” Jack warned. “They’re a couple of inches thick.”

“And I’m clocked at reading 20,000 words a minute and have an eidetic memory.”

“And an IQ of 187. Yeah, so I’ve heard. Okay then, kid, let me call in Colonel Davis with the paperwork.”

The Lt. Colonel in the starched up Air Force uniform, as if he had come fresh from the Pentagon, as he probably had, was resolutely stone-faced as he entered the hospital room. His every tell screamed to Spencer that he was unhappy about this situation, as he handed O’Neill a satchel full of spiral bound documents.

Dr. Jackson, looking up, clucked his tongue reprovingly. “Come on, Paul. It isn’t the same situation at all, and even in DiNozzo’s case, there were extenuating circumstances. If all you know about zeds are the clichés, you’re doing everyone a disservice.”

Davis sighed and shrugged, letting his stone mask slip a little. “Sorry, Daniel. But honestly… that agent contravened the law by avoiding proper registration and branding. He flat out lied. Then, after he was caught out, he pulled strings he shouldn’t have, to save him from a job he didn’t like. How is that different from some movie berd getting herself pregnant so her victim will have to take her in and support her? Just another kind of gold-digger.”

“And how does that apply to me?” Spencer demanded. “You imagine I wanted to be brutalized by a
serial killer, or FBI agents I had never met before in my life, who should have been protecting me, not beating me senseless and leaving me for dead in a supply closet? And I didn’t go looking for your bosses, they came looking for me. I don’t know if I even want the job or not. I certainly don’t deserve your disdain. You don’t know me, nor I you. And perhaps we should just leave it at that.”

Spencer was bristling with offended ire. “You know what, General O’Neill? If this is typical of everyone in your command, I think I can say no to your offer right now. So go away, all of you, and let me rest. At least my team respects me and the job I do.”

“Paul!” Dr. Jackson snapped.

Sighing, Davis offered, with every appearance of sincerity, “I apologize, Dr. Reid. I didn’t mean to offend you. You’re right, I don’t know you, although I, like most of the world, are aware of your… circumstances, and no blame attaches to you for any of it. All I know about zeds are what most see on TV or in the movies… not at all a fair, or even accurate, depiction, I know. And, I confess, I did not have a good first impression of agent DiNozzo, though I know he’s done an outstanding job out… out there. So I apologize. I hope you can bring yourself to cut me some slack while I struggle to adjust to a whole new world-view.”

Spencer sighed and unbent a little. “You and me both,” he offered. “Much as I’ve been victimized by bullies all my life, I’ve never felt like a victim until now. It feels like the eyes of everyone I meet is on me the whole time, judging me for my genetics, and nothing else, and not even merely finding me wanting, or odd, but finding me hateful. And I just don’t understand. Why should people who don’t know me hate me on sight, no matter what my gender status might be? On the basis of a brand on my wrist? Why should they even care about it? What business is it of theirs? I just… the injustice of it is… it’s too much. I don’t understand it.”

Davis winced and unbent even further. “Yeah, I can see that. I’d be mad as hell, myself.”

“And so I am. But I’m also trying to be realistic about it. It’s not like any of this is new to me. I’ve been zed my whole life, marked for the world to see my whole life, bullied and oppressed my whole life… It’s just never… Until I was twelve and graduated out of the public school system, it was just as extreme, in violent attacks, pandemic, because it wasn’t just my classmates, but the teaching staff who refused to support, protect, or assist me, and the focus narrow – a twelve-year-old prodigy in the public high school system was certainly bad enough, but it was my gender status and brand that made me a true target, for everyone. When I got to college, though, I thought I had put it behind me. I wore long sleeves, covered up my wrist with a wide-band watch, was careful not to use public showers. I could pass as normal. My professors, and later my team, accepted me, appreciated me for my actual talents, not my birth. I thought I had put the hatred and bigotry behind me. To have been attacked so violently, twice in a short period of time… To have my entire life turned upside down like this… But it serves no purpose to rail against unkind fate. I… I have to find some way to cope. I won’t for one moment apologize for any seeming over-reaction, though. Just expecting to be insulted and vilified by every person I meet and accepting it… that just doesn’t seem reasonable. I at least have to protest.”

“Of course. I was a dick-head and you called me on it. I think a thank you is in order, so I don’t repeat the mistake with the next berd I meet.” Diplomat and aspiring politician that he was, Paul tried on one of his most charming and ingratiating smiles, if only to appease Daniel. Only to get an extremely skeptical look from a person who was a far better profiler than he expected. And even he realized how stupid that was of him.

“Yes, well… see that you don’t and we’ll start over. Start by referring to us as zeds. Berd isn’t the worst thing I’ve been called, but it’s still demeaning and wildly inaccurate. And, before you say another word about Agent DiNozzo’s situation, I think you should know a few things.
“Since the Second World War, the numbers of zeds applying to the US armed forces has been around 2% of our total population, in line with the numbers of normal men and women seeking to serve their country out of a sense of duty. But the numbers of zeds who have been reported to suffer extreme physical abuse, not from the enemy but from their own comrades, has been placed at something like 97% of the total, or above. The degree of abuse ranges from 31% of them being fatal beatings, 22% permanent crippling injuries which should have resulted in medical discharge and instead were listed overwhelmingly as ‘other than honorable’, and the last 47% ending in more dishonorable discharges, almost all with jail terms for assault, as the zeds, acting in self-defense, were blamed for the physical altercation in the first place. Of those jailed, 71% failed to live long enough to be released. Of those *very* few zeds who survived their attempt to do their duty, none, absolutely zero, received any kind of assistance or benefits from the Veterans Administration, in the form of medical treatment, rehab, educational or retraining scholarships or pensions. All were disqualified. The numbers for law enforcement are slightly better, only because civilian authorities are prohibited from discriminating by the same laws that, ironically, protect blacks, women and homosexuals. I am certain that these appalling facts were no mystery to Agent DiNozzo when he received his Director’s orders, and being himself in law enforcement, has no doubt many times seen personally the aftermath of zed intolerance on an autopsy slab. What would you have done, Colonel Davis, in his shoes?

“Luckily,” Reid continued, still staring down the uncomfortable Colonel, now with every appearance of good cheer, “we zeds learn from our mistakes. Very few of us even *think* about applying for military service or law enforcement any longer. Which makes Agent DiNozzo and myself extremely rare and stupid, or else ‘uppity’ and brazenly ignorant of our proper place, don’t you think? Almost a *hermie* cliché right there.”

Colonel Paul Davis held his hands up, his face red with embarrassment, and with difficulty suppressing the urge to throw up over the unrelenting and brutal parade of horrifying facts. He didn’t know, he hadn’t guessed… he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe…

Daniel said quietly from his chair at the side of Dr. Reid’s bed, “I’ve seen the numbers myself, Paul. He’s quite right. I’ll even email you the reports.”

Gulping, Davis could only nod, surrendering to the truth he had been determined to ignore. “I’m sorry, Dr. Reid. I apologize. For my ignorance and insensitivity. I don’t find your reaction out of line at all, given the facts.”

Reid studied him a moment longer, before nodding. “Very well. Now. Do you have documents for me to read and sign, Lt. Colonel Davis?”

Davis smiled, wanly. “As a matter of fact I do, Dr. Reid.”

Â
Once more released from his latest hospital stay, Spencer found himself lost in the miasma of wonder… aliens, spaceships, a flying city-ship in another galaxy, the honest-to-god Atlantis, the lost city found, risen from the bottom of an alien ocean…

And he wanted it. He wanted it so bad…

Every dream of his childhood, reaching for the stars… not just reaching, but grasping them in his hands…

From what Daniel had told him of Agent DiNozzo’s experiences, it was reasonable to assume, military base notwithstanding, that he would indeed be far safer there than anywhere on the planet of his birth. There, he would be surrounded by a native culture that revered zeds, whatever they were called there. Why that should be so was unclear, unless his recent dreams had been far closer to the truth than he had believed.

But what about his mom? He had planned to research her most recently diagnosed condition, was already hip deep in reports from clinical studies and drug trials, had sent out a butt-load of emails to see if any of them would take her on… only to get an equal number of resounding ‘no’s. Because of her pre-existing schizophrenia, any tests they might run on her would only invalidate their results.

She was getting worse day by day. Her increasingly violent outbursts would soon make it difficult to find an appropriate place for her. Already, Bennington was making noises about needing increased security and control – for which Spencer read straight-jackets and bars on all the doors and windows. At a minimum, in order for them to be able to continue caring for her, they were recommending to increase her thorazine, and all that would accomplish was put her in a waking coma for much of the day. But all too soon, Spencer might not have much choice, other than to bring her home with him to DC, and try to care for her on his own.

He was now so desperate, he was attempting to contact anyone even tangentially related to the medical profession, inside or outside US borders, to find any treatment that might slow, if not stop, the progression of her dementia. He was even considering a variety of homeopathic treatments offered, with less than satisfying scientific proof of efficacy. The least suspect of the lot was a doctor in Mexico who hadn’t even attempted to get FDA approval for her herbal cocktails, and so could only supply him with the drugs if he met with her across the border. That seemed an iffy proposition at best, and a legal grey area as far as bringing anything back was concerned, much less administering it to his mother.

So, how could he go to the Pegasus Galaxy? How could he even think of leaving her now, knowing that every lucid moment she had, remembering him and their lives together, was precious to them both? If he left for Atlantis, and failed to return within six months, she might not be able to remember him at all. And if he left, who was there who would care for her, who had her own best interests at heart?

He was as honest about these issues as he could be, telling Daniel and the General flat out that some provision would have to be made for his mother, and he was now awaiting what they might come up with. He wasn’t holding his breath, though. How badly could they possibly want a zed law enforcement officer, to make the extraordinary allowances for him he would need? At a bare minimum, some guarantee that someone trusted would look out for her in his absence.
She was more important to him than his own safety, more important than childhood dreams, or the wonder of a job among the stars…

Daniel asked that he give them a chance, and in the meantime, do whatever due diligence he needed to do in other areas, in order to make his decision. So, reluctantly, Spencer agreed.

“Hell, kid, you didn’t come down here on your own, did you?” SAC Tobias Fornell demanded in alarm. He stood up from his desk, his office in the downtown DC Hoover Building, rather than the Quantico facility.

Spencer sighed, taking the offered visitor’s chair. “So you think I still need protection, even here, in the heart of the FBI?”

“Hate to break it to ya, kid, but a week ago I would have sworn you would never need it in the first place, no matter what your gender status. And look how wrong I was. Someone I trust is going to escort you back to BAU land as soon as we’re done, and no arguments. Right?”

Spencer could only nod. “Then I guess it’s a good thing that I’m considering a job with another government agency.”

Fornell winced, shaking his head in sorrow. “I’m damn sorry about that, Dr. Reid. You’re an invaluable asset, no matter where you land… it’s our loss if we can’t do what is needed to keep you. So what agency we talking about, here?”

“Home World Security.” Spencer watched carefully, and could tell by the tick in the Special Agent in Charge’s eye that he had at least heard of it. “You know it?”

“I know it’s half and half civilian and military. You sure about this? How will it be any better than here?”

“I asked that. It’s classified, and I signed about two inches of NDAs even to be briefed on it, but I’m satisfied that they’ll at least be able to let me do my job.”

“I never heard anything to indicate they did law enforcement, or geographic profiling… is that what you’ll be doing? Just tell me they won’t have you doing black ops, or anything like that!”

“Oh, no. They’ve got a base, apparently pretty remote… they’ve got an NCIS agent afloat working alone who needs backup. I’d be going as that backup.”

Fornell’s eyes widened. “Well I’ll be damned. The name of the guy wouldn’t be Very Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr., would it?”

“As a matter of fact, sir… you’ve probably already guessed that’s what brought me down here. If you can, I’d like you to brief me on someone who might be my new superior.”

Fornell began laughing, and then didn’t seem to know how to stop. But it seemed heavily laced with relief. When he could catch his breath, he grinned and shook his head. “Well thank God for that, anyway. When he seemed to disappear off the face of the planet six months ago, I couldn’t find anyone who knew where the hell he landed. At least he’s okay…?”

“As far as I can tell, he is. But from what I gather, he’s the victim of his own success. He’s been so good at keeping the peace and upholding the law that he needs help. And, if I can settle a few personal issues, mostly around my mother’s care and well-being, I guess that would be me. So what
“Well, the kid is a helluva good investigator. Puts clues together like no one else I’ve ever seen. Outstanding at interrogations, if a little… eccentric in his methods. Thinks so far outside the box I’m not sure he even knows where the box is. I’ve never seen anyone so good at undercover, either. In fact, I think it’s a problem for him, the way he wears masks… they’re so foolproof and deeply ingrained, even he forgets when he’s doing it sometimes. His happy-go-lucky womanizing frat-boy shtick sure fooled everyone over at NCIS, for years. If you ask him, though, he won’t admit to being good at any of that… he sees himself as the Wild Card. The guy no one expects to pull the end out. He’ll talk a blue streak about trivialities, movie plots mostly, and you won’t realize until later that he’s sucked you dry of all the information he wants, and told you nothing in return, certainly nothing personal about himself. His mom died when he was young, his father is a con man and an asshole, and both of them were lushes, so he had a pretty awful childhood. Shipped off to military school full time by senior’s second wife, left behind in Hawaii at the age of twelve, when his father took him on business and forgot he was there…”

“Ouch.”

“No kidding. Senior is a piece of work, all right. Legally disinherited his kid at some point, not sure exactly when, I suspect to try and get into the kid’s trust funds from his mother’s side. But I guess it was all good early training, both for building undercover personas, and surviving in truly fucked-up situations. After all, DiNutso worked with Leroy Jethro Gibbs, second ‘B’ for Bastard, for years, when no one else could stick it out for much more than a few months without running screaming, or developing ulcers. He’s the secret to their pretty awesome closure rate, though you won’t get anyone at NCIS to admit it. But these past six months without him, their rate has dropped like a stone, so there’s that. The kid was a pain in my butt, but I liked him. Liked him a lot. I hated what Gibbs and not one but two asshole Directors were doing to him, first Shepherd, then Vance… tried to talk him into coming over to us, to the dark side as he’d call it, but he was too loyal to leave Gibbs. If he accepted an assignment with these Home World Security folks, it can only mean Director Vance and Gibbs fucked up big time.”

Spencer slowly nodded, thinking over all he’d heard. “I couldn’t help but wonder… you’ve arrested him for murder, twice. Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is an enemy action.”

Fornell barked out a laugh. “That’s from Goldfinger, right? That’s a very DiNozzo thing to say.”

Fornell chuckled, shaking his head. “You’ve heard the term Trouble Magnet? Well, DiNutso is a living breathing example.”

“People have said the same about me.”

“Hunh. Well, among other things, DiNutso is very good at pissing people off. I suspect he developed it as a secret weapon in his investigator arsenal. Back in his Baltimore cop days, he solved a case that ruined the career of one guy who carried a grudge and framed him for a murder that didn’t actually happen in the first place. The second murder charge was… well, the daughter of an international arms dealer was targeted in an undercover sting to get the goods on her father. The father ended up dead, and she blamed DiNozzo for it. Blamed, and then lied to us to get us to arrest him. It wasn’t DiNozzo, and we were able to prove it. So no, DiNutso isn’t one of your unsubs, Dr. Reid.

“Not sure this is such a good thing, though… two TMs inhabiting one space might not be very good at all. But… There’s no one I’d rather have on my six, kid. He’ll take good care of you.”

Spencer eyed the veteran agent and ventured, “Even though I’m a zed? I could always trust my team to watch my back, and they always knew what I am, and respected me for what I could do, not an accident of my birth. Will Agent DiNozzo be able to do that?”
Fornell eyed him back. Between them passed the acknowledgement that it was bad etiquette to ‘out’ a friend who was passing under the radar… as straight or as a normal, if they weren’t. Especially if they were military or in law enforcement. And he knew the agent had managed, somehow, to avoid the blood tests and branding, and pass as ‘XY’ male. At least until his Director discovered the deception, and threatened to force him out.

Fornell gave a small smile. “You have no worries about that, Dr. Reid. DiNozzo isn’t the kind of man to give a damn about anything but how well you do your job. If you’re on his team, he’ll look out for you, son. Just… don’t abuse his trust, okay? He’ll give you a fair shake, more than, but don’t let him down.”

“I wouldn’t,” Spencer assured the other man. “Thank you, SAC Fornell.”

“Listen, Dr. Reid, if you do decide to take this job, give DiNutso a message when you see him, will you? Tell him I said hi, and wish he’d come to me first. I would have done my best to make it work for him, over here on the dark side. If he ever needs it, that offer is still open, any time he needs it. Oh, and, just a head’s up, take him a stack of movies, and he’ll love you forever.”

Spencer nodded and stood up, and, surprising even himself, reached out to shake hands with the Special Agent in Charge. It was a promise and a pledge to honor the Badge, no matter where it might take him. True to his word, Fornell called in his 2IC, a bubbly young woman with a circle brand, who gushed, all the way back to Quantico and the BAU bullpen, equal parts sympathy for his ordeal and congratulations to him for the excellent work in closing the Barbarossa County cases.

The tentative knock on his door didn’t really sound like anyone Spencer knew. His new partner, Bast, was not impressed to be dropped to the sofa as her other half went to answer the summons. With a huff, she retreated to the bedroom, and the cushion she sometimes used as a bed, when the preferred lap was unavailable.

When Spencer checked the peep hole, he didn’t recognize the young man standing there, nervously checking up and down the hall and then consulting his watch even more nervously. Dressed in nice jeans, a white button down long sleeve shirt with the sleeves pushed up to the elbow, he wore his watch on the left wrist, leaving the right one ostentatiously bare, and clear of any zed brand… Ah. The young male-identified person was too nervous, but standing his ground. He had a mission. Therefore, this must be Dr. Thibideau, the engineer Daniel had told him to expect.

Spencer opened the door. “Doctor Thibideau? Please come in. Would you like a coffee, perhaps?”

Thibideau was understandably startled to be recognized and addressed by name, his mouth falling open, then closing again. He fumbled in his pocket to bring out his ID to confirm his identity. Spencer began to regret his little profiler game with the other man.

“Dr. Jackson warned me you would be coming to speak to me,” he explained, leading the other zed to his sitting room. “Something to drink, perhaps?”

Thibideau took a deep breath. “Water, please? And yes, Dr. Jackson told me you were considering a place on Atlantis, and might like to talk with someone who had been there. He sent me because… well, like you, I’m zed. I’m sure he intended me to give you some kind of sales pitch… you’ll want to know how bad the harassment might be, that sort of thing…”

“That would certainly be helpful to know, yes,” Spencer replied. The young man seemed even more nervous, his eyes twitching down to Spencer’s waist, then back up quickly, looking guilty, as if
hoping he hadn’t got caught checking Spencer out.

“Well, um, I wasn’t there very long… I managed to pass for male the first month or so… I’m Canadian and I don’t have the brand,” he raised his right arm to display the smooth unmarked inside of his wrist, “but there are times, when you come back from away missions, that sort of thing, when you can’t avoid using the team communal showers…”

“And they saw the mottling.”

“Yeah. After that… well, the Expedition is half and half civilian scientists and military, and it’s an international mission. The civilians mostly ignored me, which was fine, even those who had started to warm up to me and might almost have become friends, eventually, maybe… they all kept their distance after word got around. Which was also okay and certainly better than I expected… And some of the soldiers were worse than others… then Ronon caught one of them giving me a hard time… just a little hazing, pushed against the wall, shouted insults, you know, but he kind of freaked.”

“Ronon Dex? The Satedan Runner?”

“Oh, they told you about him? He’s this giant half-feral guy… kinda intimidating. Most of the civilians avoid him if they can. But you know, I have to say, he was really nice to me, even before that. Well, Pegasus, I thought they didn’t know anything about zeds, no reason to be on my case, I’d just be another Earth geek to them, which is why I figured it was okay to go in the first place… But no one’s ever ‘come to my rescue’ like that before. I didn’t really know what to make of it. But it became clear later that it was the first time he realized just what a zed really was. He was mad enough when he thought that soldier was just harassing a regular civilian. Took the guy down to the training rooms and beat the shit out of him. Colonel Sheppard, he’s in charge of the military on Atlantis, he freaked too. Between them, they made it clear I was off limits. And that mostly worked. There’s always some asshole, you know, who’ll try to get a dig in when he thinks no one will be able to tell… somehow, Sheppard and Ronon always knew. So even the little things, tripping me as I passed, bum checks into the boards, spitting into my food, that sort of thing, it all stopped. Which was good.”

Spencer nodded. “But?”

“But. Yeah, but. There’s a few buts.

“Atlantis is an amazing place. Truly. Absolutely awesome, the adventure of a lifetime. No question. Thrills, chills, excitement… if that’s your deal, Atlantis is definitely the place for you. And since you’re in law enforcement, even though you’re zed, I gotta think you are into that adrenaline rush, right? So maybe it won’t be so bad for you. But, for me… well, maybe it was just a bit too exciting. And that has absolutely nothing to do with anybody’s race, creed, color, religion or gender. Out in Pegasus, if we’re living, breathing, and human, we’re food.

“There’s the Wraith, these Marilyn Manson vampire alien guys who suck out your life. And there’s the Genii, these fascist kinda guys who are always trying to think up ways of taking Atlantis from us. That’s a lotta no fun. And the city itself… well, we have to be real careful whenever we clear a new tower, floor or lab… the Ancients left a lot of really crazed experiments in some of them, and after ten thousand years of no maintenance, even otherwise harmless labs can be like booby-traps, ready to blow on you. So it’s not like life is all sunshine and daisies there, even if you aren’t zed.

“The people… it’s not like anywhere else. It’s a small community, cut off, everyone knows everyone’s business, like a small town, and the mission is so important, so… so amazing, the people are all dedicated, focused… and most of them, the Tau’ri anyway, have been with the SGC a long
time, dealing with aliens all the time, so they’ve just grown to be tolerant of other people’s
differences. Got to be, to do that job. So almost all of them… they don’t really care about gender
status, you know? That was really good. All anyone cared about was the mission, getting the job
done. Staying alive out there. And we all had a job to do.

“Dr. McKay, he’s the Chief Science Officer, he can be kinda loud and mean if you fuck something
up… and kinda dismissive and insulting even if you don’t. He seems to like to make his scientists,
minions he calls them, cry. Or maybe he doesn’t even notice us much. I can’t really tell. The good
thing about him is that he honestly and truly doesn’t care about anything but how you do your job.
He doesn’t even seem to notice, or care about gender status, any more than he does about what
country you come from. Well, except at Stanley Cup time, when he and I had running bets on the
Leafs over the Habs… Yeah, like that was ever going to happen… I guess he’s kinda like Dr.
Jackson in the way he honestly and truly doesn’t care about who or what you are, just what you can
do. Good to work for when you’re a zed, because you know you’ll get a fair shake, or at least be
treated like everyone else. And Sheppard really and honestly doesn’t want his soldiers to abuse
anyone, no matter who or what they are. So there’s that.”

Thibideau took a gulp of his water, and Spencer nodded understanding, to prod him to continue.

“Actually, it was one of the best postings I’ve ever had. Certainly the most fair. It was like going to a
large city where no one knows you, you can pass for norm, you get treated just like everyone else.
And the science was pretty damn exciting. But then things got… weird.”

“ Weird how?”

“Well… don’t get me wrong, Ronon is a great guy, I really appreciated him chasing the bullies off
the way he did… nobody bothered me after he took that one guy apart. And Teyla, she’s great, like
everyone’s mother… But as soon as they figured out that zeds were the same as these Veralin people
they have out there… they got all weird on me. They wanted to talk to me about it… they started
treating me like I was made of glass or something… Teyla kept saying Earthers had no business
 treating us Veralin the way they did, and she went a bit overboard the other way, being all respectful
and stuff. And then she kept asking me about… about dreams. If I had any dreams.”

Spencer frowned. “And did you?”

Thibideau held tight to his glass, as if afraid his hand shaking might spill the water. “Of course not.
It… it was power of suggestion. Teyla asks me if I dream, so of course, after that, I did have these
weird dreams. Power of suggestion, right? Doesn’t mean I’m crazy, or… or under alien influence or
anything. No need to tell anyone about that, no need to get myself a psych eval over it.”

Spencer didn’t need his profiling skills to read the lie there. He nodded his understanding. “There’s
no reason to volunteer for a psych eval,” he agreed.

“No kidding!” Thibideau blurted, relieved. “Dreams about blue jungles, and naked hairless guys
with zed mottling all over them… that’s just crazy talk, right? And… there’s enough weirdness on
Atlantis that I just didn’t want to get involved in any more. But aliens… well, they’re alien, right? No
telling what’s really going on with them… It just… made me uncomfortable, the way Teyla and
Ronon hung around me like they did. I mean… I appreciated it, really, and I know it sounds weird,
that the more friendly they got, the more fuss they made over me, the more I freaked… and it wasn’t
them, they’re great, really, but…”

Spencer nodded. “They still weren’t treating you like everyone else. You were still being marked
out. Different.”
“Yes! Yes, that’s it exactly. Marked, like the brands or the zed mottling. People, norms, think you’d be happy to have people like you, pay attention to you. They don’t understand, what zeds really want, more than anything… is to just be ignored, like normal people ignore other normal people, because they don’t care, one way or another. No love, no hate, just… indifference. Left alone to mind our own business and live our own lives, and not to have to wonder when some total stranger will butt themselves in and take it upon themselves to punish us for just being… zed, like it’s their right, or mission, or something.”

Spencer sighed. “Yes, you’re right about that.”

“I guess it’s just hard to trust other people’s motives. I really don’t trust anyone who’s not zed. They don’t understand what it’s like, how hard it is. Dr. Jackson is great, of course, he’s worked hard to make sure we get a fair shake in the Program, he’s a good guy… he’s Z positive, and his mother was zed, you know, so he comes closer than most to understanding what it’s really like. But it’s real hard to trust the motives of anyone else. Anyone not zed.”

Spencer frowned. “I trust my team. They know exactly who and what I am, always have, and they’ve always treated me with decency and respect. Just like any other member of the team.”

“Wow. Then you’re luckier than most.”

“Yeah, I guess I am… And I trust them to take care of me, keep me safe… as far as they can. It’s just that… with all that’s happened… they can’t possibly watch me all the time. I don’t think I’ll ever be safe again, if I stay on Earth.”

Thibideau nodded. “So you’re going?”

“I don’t know… I’m worried about my mom. She’s sick and… I need to be there for her, no matter what my personal situation.”

Thibideau frowned, his leg bouncing nervously. “I… I sometimes think I should have stayed out there… There were lots of good things about Atlantis, and I know Sheppard and Ronon between them will insist people leave you alone, and if they don’t get the point across, Teyla sure as hell will, but… I… I just couldn’t…”

There was shame written on Thibideau’s face, and fear. “The thing is… Well… The city… some things no one talks about, because… well, psych evals are no fun, right? And no one wants to admit… the city. It’s alive. I’m almost sure Sheppard knows… he gets this listening face on every so often… that’s kind of a giveaway that he can hear her… the city. Talking to you in your head. I’m not sure how many others hear her. But… But aliens… well, they’re alien, right? No telling what’s really going on with them… and whatever else she is, Atlantis is as alien as it gets. So with the voices in my head, the weird dreams, aliens being weird and everyday Pegasus shit with Wraith and Genii and weird science… well, I just couldn’t stay.”

Spencer nodded thoughtfully. He was rather glad Thibideau mentioned about the voices in his head… That could have been a nasty shock for him, considering his possible genetic predilection for schizophrenia.

“Shit. Dr. Jackson is going to kill me. I’m supposed to be giving you a pep talk for saying yes to the Atlantis job, and here I am…”

“It’s okay, Dr. Thibideau. I appreciate the honesty. It’s all stuff I needed to know, and nothing you’ve said has discouraged me from saying yes. You’ve actually set my mind at rest about a couple of things.”
“Really? Well, okay then. You really did need to know the truth. And after what you went through in Arkansas, getting justice for all those zeds… I figured I owed you the truth. Um…” Once again, he glanced at Spencer’s middle, probably thinking of all the questions he wanted to ask, but didn’t really have the nerve to.

“Yes,” Spencer acknowledged. “I am pregnant. And I’m keeping it.”

Thibideau winced. “I didn’t like to ask… It’s not really my business… but… I don’t think I could make that decision. I wish you all the best, Dr. Reid, wherever you end up.”

“Thank you.”

The young man stood, preparing to leave, and as Spencer ushered him to the door, he paused, seeming to deliberate on one more thing. “Um… have you seen any… cats?”

Spencer frowned, looking around for Bast, and thinking of the mottled tabby that turned into a cougar in his blue-tinged dreams. “Cats?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure I ever noticed them before, but there are a lot of cats around. You know? And… not that I need a psych eval or anything, but… they watch me, you know? They’ve got them in Pegasus, too. All kinds of cats, not just the regular kind. And some have got on the city, don’t know how. I just wondered… you’re zed, so I just wondered if you noticed cats around… you know, paying attention.”

Spencer considered the matter seriously. And was not a bit surprised when Bast walked out of his bedroom, to sit in front of Thibideau and stare at him. “As a matter of fact, I noticed the same thing myself, just this week. There *are* a lot cats around. And they *do* pay attention. It’s kind of… creepy. But Bast found me a few days ago, and decided she needed to stay.”

Thibideau nodded. “I think mine is a tortoiseshell. He hasn’t found me yet, but… I’m keeping my eyes open.” The other man reached as if to try and pet the cat, but then changed his mind, and almost cringed away. And suddenly, he couldn’t even look at the cat any more. He abruptly stood, put down his empty water glass, and collected himself. “Okay. Well. Thanks for the water. And, you know… good luck and everything.”

Jennifer ‘JJ’ Jareau came to him next day.

“You’re going to take the job, Spence.”

“You’re so sure? I don’t know, JJ. My mom…”
“No, you misunderstand me. As your friend, hell, your sister in everything but blood, I’m telling you, to take the job. I’ve talked to a few people, my old contacts at the State Department, and they all have glowing things to say about HWS. O’Neill is a straight shooter, and half a dozen people have told me Dr. Jackson is going to be recognized, some day, as one of the ten most important men in human history. If that had come from one person, even two, I might chalk it up to hyperbole, but… well, I gotta wonder. And much as I have to confess that scares me a little, I can’t help being a little bit… intrigued? No one would admit to knowing just what’s happening over there in HWS, but it’s good work, important. Every bit as important as the BAU, if not more. They’ve got the ear of the President, and the leaders of a dozen other countries.”

Spencer nodded, not surprised, by any of it.

“O’Neill can protect you, Spence. We can’t, much as it hurts me to say it. You need to take the job.”

“And my mom?”

JJ passed over a brochure. It was for a sanitarium and treatment care centre in DC, specializing in age-related and mental behavioral issues. Even Spencer had heard of it.

“I promise you, Spence, I will visit her every week. I will remind her of who you are, talk about you every time I’m there. You continue sending her your daily letters, Penelope and I will both help you there, just like always, keep a stack on hand in case you have to be out of touch for a while, and with my visits… I’ll make sure she has the best of care. I know you’ll continue researching every possible treatment option, from wherever you are, and whatever you come up with, I’ll see it done. I promise. But you have to take this job. Diana would be the first to tell you the same thing, you know this.”

Tears in his eyes, Spencer nodded, unable to get words past the lump in his throat. JJ took him in her arms and held him tight.

“Take the damn job, Spence.”

“Okay… okay. I will.”

“Good. Now. What do you have in the way of maternity clothes?”

“Um… nothing?”

“This is a remote base, right? There might be supply difficulties?”

“Yes, actually. They’ve been cut off for months at a time, apparently.”

“They do have medical help on base, though?”

“Oh yes. I won’t have to deliver my own baby. But there might be issues supplying clothing, diapers, formula if I can’t breast feed for some reason…”

“Right. Okay then. Let me just make a call…” JJ pulled out her phone, hit a number on her speed-dial, and texted a simple message: ‘Operation Outfitters is a go.’

Spencer eyed her warily. “JJ? What did you just do?”

JJ smiled at him. “Arranged for a lot of expertise to meet us at the nearest Mall. Come on, Spence. Time to get you supplied.”

JJ had called Penelope Garcia, and Garcia called in Tara Lewis, Emily Prentiss (who had not yet
flown back to London, lingering to see how this all shook out), Alex Blake (also finding reason to extend her lectures at Georgetown), Kate Callahan, and Elle Greenaway (who appeared out of the blue one day, to the relieved and welcoming surprise of all, and had appointed herself Spencer’s unofficial bodyguard).

After a call to Daniel to let him know he was accepting the job offer, Daniel had also suggested that supplies of coffee, chocolate and other preferential necessities might be useful, both for personal use and… ahem… trade. For which Spencer easily inferred a lively black market in hard-to-stock, supposedly non-essential ‘luxury’ items. The ladies dragged Spencer out on a shopping expedition that might yet match Scott’s trek to the Antarctic in size and epic scope.

After meeting and cooing over Bast, experts Garcia and Emily also had suggestions of items he needed to stock to take the cat with him, including a good quality carrier. Emily had studied the animal thoughtfully and mentioned, “Her tabby pattern… it, uh, seems familiar. Does it remind you of something?”

“Oh yes,” Spencer had agreed, unequivocally, with a nod.

It took two solid days to amass the collection of maternity clothes and other pregnancy-related items the ladies deemed necessary, as well as the other things on his list. But once they were done, then the rest of the BAU appeared, along with Will, Henry and Michael, Savanna, Jack, Kate’s husband and kids, Dave’s (ex-?) wife, and even section chief Matt Cruz. Everyone helped with packing over soft drinks, coffee, beer and pizza.

It was, as far as Spencer was concerned, the best possible goodbye party.

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Spencer had been doing a mental countdown to his thirtieth birthday, as soon as he realized his mother’s schizophrenia likely had a genetic component to it. At that point, the odds of his falling to a psychotic break would become significantly reduced, without some serious stressor. But until then, he watched himself like a hawk for any tell-tale symptoms. Especially after his run-in with Tobias Hankel, and subsequent addiction to dilaudid. Drug addiction was a definite contributing factor to later development of schizophrenia. He’d been so *stupid* to allow himself to… but no. He’d got clean, by himself, as soon as he could. He wouldn’t beat himself up over that now. But it did mean that when, some years later, at the critical age of twenty nine, he’d begun to suffer from debilitating migraines, and none of the *many* doctors he’d consulted could find a physical, medical reason… that was a huge red flag. And with his history, he was prohibited from taking many of the opioid medications commonly prescribed for such extreme headaches.

Then the team had gone to Miami, and a case involving practitioners of a version of Santeria. Spencer’s migraines had abruptly grown worse, accompanied by hallucinations… as he had struggled to deny growing evidence of psychosis in himself, he not only experienced visions related to the crimes they were investigating, but began to hear…

“*Shaman*,” they whispered. People in the street markets. People in the soup kitchens. People at the community centre. People at the Santeria rituals. Always just at the edge of his hearing. Spencer had thought they meant Julio, their priest and healer. Until one old, wrinkled woman had gazed at him with jet-black eyes, holding a jet black cat in her lap, both staring at him. Staring with unnerving focus, on a case that was already freaking him out in *oh* so many ways.

But then the cat had blinked, folded itself up, and gone to sleep in his mistress’ lap. The old woman smiled at him, and shook her head. “Not yet,” she told him. “Soon, maybe, but not yet.”

With Julio’s warnings of ghosts in his head, with no help in sight from the world of medicine and rational science… with all the evidence piling up of an imminent psychotic break charging down the tracks, straight at him… He had been desperate to clutch at any life-line that offered.

He found it on a web-site devoted to medical research. Under a privacy-protected pseudonym, he submitted his case studies, with his brain-scans, description of his symptoms, and full disclosure of not only his past addiction, family history of schizophrenia, but also his gender status. As a zed, he wondered if any of the researchers participating in the web-site would even bother with him… Until he was contacted by a geneticist calling herself QueenofConnacht.

She (he presumed it was a she, and the pseudonym seemed to indicate her name was probably Maeve) told him there was probably a stress-related cause of his headaches. She suggested various non-addictive drugs and dietary changes to ease his symptoms. He was surprised, and relieved, to find they worked. He hadn’t had any more hallucinations since the team finished the Miami case. Spencer didn’t want to speculate why that might be. Take it and run, he thought.

He continued his online correspondence with Maeve (yes, it was her name), finding it not just instructive, but… oddly fulfilling. Like it was plugging a hole in his life he had been totally unaware of before. She was a circle, a Z carrier, herself, and was fascinated, rather than put off, by his gender status.

Through Maeve, he began exchanges with others she knew who were particularly interested in zed
biological and genetic issues. This was so astoundingly unexpected, that Spencer couldn’t help but be intrigued. He found one of Maeve’s contacts, BlairS852, to be particularly interesting. His take on zeds was more from an anthropological stand-point, and Spencer had revealed his identity so he could point Blair at his own statistical analysis papers. In turn, Blair had revealed that he was Dr. Blair Sandburg, doctor of anthropology, a part-time professor at Rainier College in Cascade, Washington, and part-time consultant for their local police.

That had seemed a very odd combination to Spencer. He couldn’t help but dig a little deeper… to find Blair’s doctoral thesis had involved the use of anthropological tools in the investigation of various crimes. Okay, that made perfect sense to Spencer. He’d even read a few of Sandburg’s works, he realized, and had found them highly original, useful, and recommended them to the team.

Then Spencer’s google search turned up the embarrassing situation involving Blair’s stolen fictional work on Sentinels. His mother, apparently, had mistaken it for his original thesis, and thought to have it published for him… without it going through any peer review, without even his knowledge or approval. Really, both his mother and the publisher should have known better. The subsequent lawsuit, which Blair had won handily, certainly taught them that lesson. The Sentinel thing had been a mere ‘wouldn’t it be cool if…’ foray into anthropological fantasy.

Supposedly.

Spencer might even have bought it, if it weren’t for the rumors you encountered everywhere in military and law enforcement circles, that Sentinels, people with one or more highly advanced senses, actually did exist. Snipers with almost supernatural eyesight. Jet pilots with uncanny hand-eye coordination. Perfumers and chefs with taste and scent capabilities that definitely seemed more than human. Hunters, military special ops, cops… Most seemed drawn to careers designed to serve and protect. But along with these rumors, were also indications that none of these exceptionally endowed people were particularly stable. They experienced high percentages of burn-out, PTSD, hyper-vigilance, agoraphobia. Finding it impossible to deal with their heightened abilities long term, they fled to remote areas, turned to drugs to blunt their senses, or ended up in psych wards. Spencer had even heard of a few extreme cases where the subject had ended in some kind of medically inexplicable coma.

Curious, Spencer had asked Garcia to see if she could dig up a copy of *"The Sentinel"* by Blair Sandburg. And boy, hadn’t that made for interesting reading.

Building on a paper by Sir Richard Burton, the nineteenth century explorer, Blair had speculated that the Sentinels, if they did exist, had a genetic advantage, rooted in humanity’s hunter-gatherer past, enabling them to protect the tribe by means of their enhanced senses: to hear an enemy in the dark, to scent the coming of a storm, to taste toxins or disease in food or water, to smell the spoor of game, or see their tracks on stone. A tribe with a Sentinel to protect and lead them was far more likely to survive the dangers of a nomadic existence. But with heightened senses came certain dangers. Sentinels could lose themselves in their focus, become overwhelmed by sensory input, what Blair termed a ‘zone’, if they didn’t have a helper, someone to assist them, to safely focus their abilities, or even extend them further. In a tribal setting, this would be the duty of a shaman.

With the development of agriculture, larger and larger groups of settled humans in villages, towns, cities, heightened attributes like senses became less necessary to survival, and even detrimental to the Sentinel. Ancient tribal wisdom was lost, discredited or disdained. Shamans could turn their talents to spiritual pursuits, or healing. Sentinels turned to guard and military functions. But the divide between the two career paths made it increasingly difficult for a sentinel to find the guide he needed to help manage his abilities. And so Sentinels dwindled in number, until, in the modern world, they were incredibly rare, and incredibly at risk, from any number of hazards. From their own senses primarily,
but also from a sufficiently ruthless enemy who feared facing them, or official (and not so official) organizations seeking to capture, experiment on and exploit them.

Spencer had had some discussions with Blair on the topic of Sentinels, but the anthropologist had been cagey. What Spencer tried to subtly hint at, was his interest in the concept of shamans.

Blair had been silent a moment, once Spencer had come right out and asked him what signs to look for in a shaman. “You’re zed, Spencer. All zeds are extraordinary in one way or another. Society refuses to recognize this, teaches us that we’re sub-human, rather than the opposite.” The single pronoun dropped was Spencer’s first hint that Blair was, himself, zed… but he’d already begun to suspect this was so. Blair continued, “Often zeds are unable to realize their potential, don’t, or can’t, find their birthright… And you, as fundamentally a man of science, have a pretty heavy bias to get past already, before you can accept the ineffable. Do you have dreams, Spencer, of being in a jungle? A rain forest all in shades of blue?”

“Um… not that I can recall.”

“What about cats?”

“Cats?” That had puzzled him… until he remembered a black cat, staring at him with unblinking gold eyes. “There was one old woman… on a case… with a black cat. They both stared at me… it was kinda creepy. But then the cat lost interest. The woman said ‘Not yet. Soon, maybe, but not yet.’”

“Okay, then. Ask me again when what I’ve mentioned makes sense to you.”

But, as ever, cases, and life, got in the way. So did death. After a protracted online relationship – romance, even - Maeve was, horrifically, murdered by a stalker, right in front of him… before they’d even had a chance to kiss… before he’d been able to hold her in his arms. It had devastated him. Blair’s support during that trying time, along with that of his team, had helped Spencer keep from falling further into depression, or hurling himself headlong back into addiction. His correspondence with the anthropologist had continued unabated over the years, made of letters, emails, online chat rooms, and phone calls.

So now that Spencer was having dreams of a blue jungle, and cats were staring at him everywhere he went, while Bast had made herself at home in his life…

At such a momentous juncture, with such a difficult and vital decision to make on his future career, there was one more person he felt he needed to consult. He had avoided it until now… for… well, the reasons that had driven Dr. Thibideau back to Earth and kept him here, afraid to touch any cats he met.

“Hey, Blair? It’s Spencer.”

“Spence! Man! How are you? Are you okay? No, scratch that, only somebody who’d been living under a rock would say something that dumb to you… I know you’re not okay, you couldn’t be, but… are you okay?”

Spence grinned at the sound of his friend’s voice. “I’m… well, I can’t really say I’m doing okay, because… oh god, Blair. I am so screwed.”

“I know, man. I know. Is the FBI going to cut you loose?”
“No. But I think I have to leave anyway. Look, Blair… you remember talking about dreams, once? You asked if… I had dreams? Of a blue jungle.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. “Ye-ah. And you said if you ever did, you would ignore them, because you’d think they were a sign of incipient schizophrenia.”

“Yes, well, I don’t think that any more. You also asked if I had noticed… any cats hanging around.”

Another long silence. “A cat with zed-type markings.”

“Yeah. A grey patterned tabby showed up on my doorstep a few days ago. I call her Bast. She seems to approve.”

Blair chuckled. “Bast, hunh? And the dreams?”

“You’ve heard the term… Furalin?”

“Oh man. The timing sucks. Or maybe the trauma is what broke it open for you. What does Bast become in the jungle?”

“A cougar.”

“Wow. An apex predator. Pretty high up there on the hierarchy, then.”

“There’s a hierarchy?” Spencer squeaked out, alarmed. He hadn’t expected that.

“Don’t sweat it, man. They seem to know these things. I don’t think they can get it wrong.”

“You have a cat, too?”

“She’s a tortoise shell. I call her Ruth.”

“Whither thou goest?”

“That’s the ref, yeah. She’s a grey wolf… in another life.”

“Do you know anyone… with a coyote?”

“Not personally… I hear they’re the tricksters, the wild cards. Wicked sense of humor. If you’re seeing one, you’ll meet them soon.”

“And the naked man with the zed patterns all over?”

“Shit, Spencer… I was five years into shaman training before I saw him. But then, you always were ahead of the curve. Look, I know you’ve never been into the woo-woo stuff… but don’t let that scare you off. If cats are paying attention, and one has found you, it means you need training. You’re going to get hit and hit hard, if you’re a cougar. You need all the help you can get. I don’t suppose you could take a wander up to Cascade for a while? Might be a good idea if you need to lay low, let things cool down some…?”

“I… I don’t think so. I think I’m being steered in another direction. But my mom… she’s been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, Blair. If I do what I think I have to do, it will mean leaving her. I’m not sure… I don’t want to do that.”

“I don’t think you have a choice, man. As I said, the timing absolutely sucks. If you’re seeing the zed man, and you’ve been hailed Furalin, you have to go where it takes you. You have to, Spencer. You
know that painting of a horse charging down a railway track at dusk, full tilt at an oncoming train? That’s you right now, kiddo. Destiny is charging down that track right at you, and you’re just going to have to suck it up and meet it.”

“Destiny…” sighed Spencer. “Yeah, I was afraid of that. What can you tell me?”

“Now that you’re on the path? A lot. I’ll send you a few articles… read them. Since it’s you, it shouldn’t take long. You’ll have questions, so call me, any time, day or night. But all things considered, I think we’ll probably be seeing each other in that jungle glade before long. And Spencer… I know you’re careful, not to let people see any sign of psychosis in you… this shaman stuff… best not to spread it around, okay, buddy? The general rule of thumb is, wait till someone is ready to acknowledge both the blue jungle, and the interest of cats. That’s a pretty good indicator that they’re ready to accept being a shaman themselves. No one else needs to know. None of their business, really.”

“Yeah, okay. As someone I met recently told me, no need to volunteer for a psych eval.”

Blair chuckled down the line. “There is that. Talk to you soon, buddy.”

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Detective Jim Ellison, ex Army Ranger and now a (somewhat reluctant) Sentinel of the Great City, listened with half an ear to the telephone conversation while he pretended to pay attention to the football game on TV. But since he *was* a Sentinel, that meant that he caught every word of both sides. He pretended not to notice that Ruth, Blair’s tortoise shell, patterned in stripes, dots and swirls, was sitting staring at her human, with a big black jaguar wrapped around her, also paying close attention, but probably not nearly as solid as either of the felines looked.

Yeah, this was trouble, no doubt about it. The jaguar had been haunting the loft the past few months, but since the story from Arkansas broke, he’d practically taken up residence. And Jim had been seeing the cougar the past few days, wandering the spooky blue jungle, whenever Jim tried to meditate. Jim hated mediating at the best of times. He hated all the woo-woo new age crap Blair made him try, from sushi and tofu to “communing with his spirit guide”. The fact that it all worked so well to keep the worst of the side effects at bay from dealing with his heightened senses, was just… adding insult to injury.

Once Blair hung up the phone, the bonded pair looked at each other.

Jim sighed. “Yeah. It’s trouble. It’s big, it’s coming our way, not soon but it’s coming, and that kid is right square in the middle of it.”

Blair relaxed back into the sofa, and leaned into his best friend, partner, sentinel, bond-mate and occasional bête-noir. “Thank the little gods you already know. It’s always so much easier when you get there yourself, without my trying to talk you into believing. So what tipped you off?”

Jim bobbed his chin toward the cats.

“Oh, yeah.”

“I’ve seen the cougar. And the coyote. They come and ‘commune’ with us in the spirit plane. Along with a bunch of others. Some… I don’t think they’re from this planet, Blair. But there’s also a bald eagle, a polar bear, a big stag… it’s like a Harry Potter patronus convention, all these wispy blue creatures wandering around. Still no skinny guy with zed patterns all over him.”

“Hm. Maybe because you’re a sentinel, not a zed, guide or shaman.”
“Thank god. Bad enough when the creatures I do see are all anxious and hyper-alert. And… the last
couple of times…”

Jim hesitated, and Blair blinked at him, waiting. It was always hard for the big guy to buy into the
spirit plane stuff. A sentinel was grounded, almost by definition, in hard-core reality. Other planes of
existence just did not make them comfortable.

“They don’t come near me, or any of the creatures, don’t dare enter the glade. The one time one of
them did, I guess she wanted to come and have a discussion with me, the whole menagerie
practically attacked her.”

“‘She’?”

“Yeah. They look like people, but I’m not so sure they’re human. All of ‘em white, dressed in simple
shimmery white tunic, or maybe silver. They’re all pretty nervous, uptight, and they keep circling
the glade, like they’re watching. I chased them away once… they annoy the hell out of me. Lurking
around like that but not actually doing anything… creeps me out, for some reason. And then
yesterday… someone else chased them off. This big feral aboriginal caveman guy, in furs, leathers,
kinda cool dread-locks with, like, a dozen blades woven into his hair… he doesn’t like the uptight
guys any more than I do. Less. He didn’t seem to see me there, at first… but… my jag went up and
faced him. He patted its head, nodded, then glanced at me, and gave me a nod, too. Then he left.”

Blair blinked. “Another sentinel, you think?”

“Don’t know. Thought he might be some ancestor or something. You know, like that Buffy show
you like. First slayer, father of all the sentinels. Something like that. Why, you think he’s real?”

“Hm. Maybe. Try talking to him next time he drops by.”

Jim shrugged. “I dunno if we’ll have much to say to each other… That’s your area, not mine,
Darwin. You got any clue what any of this is about?”

Blair lifted his legs to fold under him, lotus style. “I’ve caught sight of the guys in silver tunic
uniforms, too. You’re right, they are kinda creepy, lurking just outside the circle, watching but not
getting involved. They’re even more careful to avoid Zed-Man. To me, they almost feel… ashamed,
maybe?”

Jim considered that a moment, then shrugged. “I don’t get a read on anything the same way when
I’m there, so I wouldn’t know. But if they’re the ones responsible for whatever’s coming… I’d like
to know about it. Hopefully in time for it to help us. I think we’re gonna need all the help we can
get.”

It didn’t take Spencer long to read the entire directory of articles Blair had written on the subject of
zeds. It was helpfully divided into separate files, based, Spencer guessed, on audience.

The first set was obviously intended for the scientific community at large, although Spencer couldn’t
imagine anyone daring to submit them for peer review, let alone publish them. And he had thought
his dry, statistical analyses were potential dynamite! He had nothing on the daring conclusions Blair
had drawn, from every scientifically justified and verified fact he had dug up.

The very first zeds, according to the fossil record, appeared nearly ten thousand years ago. There was
some suggestion they originated in and around the Mediterranean and spread out from there, but the
evidence was not conclusive. Mainly because the distribution seemed to have been world-wide, in an
extremely short period of time, maybe as little as a dozen generations. If the Z chromosome was a mistake, a simple mutation, it would never have spread that far that quickly. Blair offered no suggestions as to the mechanism of the spread, just that it had happened. He also pointed out that today (discounting those countries that had made it their business to drive out, slaughter them or enforce abortions since blood tests became widely available), there were very few populations without the 10% distribution of Z positives. The only exceptions seemed to be populations that had been separated and isolated for more than ten thousand years, such as a very few Australian aboriginal tribes, some (but by no means all) Pacific islanders, a few remote Himalayan or Amazonian communities, and the like. Even Inuit tribes carried the 10% ratio of Z positives, and the 1% of zed births. It was hard to justify this kind of distribution as a ‘mistake’.

And, yes, Blair had written several papers on the same theme, using figures and research from Spencer’s own work. If the Z chromosome was a random and undesirable mutation, its benefits in health, longevity (in the absence of outside forces of abuse and persecution) and successful proliferation, were astounding.

And then there was one article that Spencer was sure would never go to press. In it, Blair noted that several other events seemed to be concurrent with the ten thousand year time frame for the emergence of the Z chromosome. Blair didn’t insist that there was cause and effect, just presented it as an interesting set of coincidences.

For instance, the first agricultural communities formed at about the same time as zeds first appeared in the population, in and around the Mediterranean and the Golden Triangle of the Middle East, when nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes discovered how to cultivate a variety of crops, and settled down in permanent locations. The invention of granaries for storing crops, and the resulting plague of rodents, also apparently resulted in the arrival of the domestic cat. Deliberately tamed and trained to protect the stores by the brand-new farmers, or deciding that co-habiting with humans was to their advantage, cats stayed. Where zeds spread to every corner of the planet (save only barren Antarctica and the remotest areas in the world) within a few hundred years, it took maybe five thousand for domestic cats to be exported all over the ‘old’ world, Asia and Europe. On the other hand, various species of wild cats, evolving ten to fifteen million years ago, had already spread everywhere but Antarctica and Australia.

Blair had discovered a scholarly paper by one Dr. Daniel Jackson (which made Spencer perk up) that indicated Egyptian writing (and therefore culture) had been incorrectly dated, and offered a compelling argument that it was ten thousand years old, rather than the more accepted four to five thousand years. While Dr. Jackson’s theories had not enjoyed widespread acceptance (well, no, Spencer acknowledged, Daniel had said he was laughed right out of academia for them) Blair had checked his evidence, and could find no flaws in it, or his conclusions. Which meant that a society deifying the cat had arisen around the same time as agriculture and domesticated cats. And, yes, zeds among us.

Spencer wasn’t exactly sure where Blair intended to go with that line of research… the links between zeds and the rise of civilization, zeds and cats, the speed of Z chromosome dispersal… Spencer was a little uneasy, wondering what Blair actually thought had happened, way back then. He thought Daniel needed to see some of these articles, and emailed the relevant ones – including, with a bit of a grin, the one that referenced his own work. There was nothing there that specifically mentioned shamans, or sentinels, so Spencer felt it was safe enough.

The second set of Blair’s documents were no doubt intended for the zed community. Well… if there were such a thing as a zed community. Which, to Spencer’s certain knowledge, there wasn’t. Zeds didn’t join. They didn’t congregate. They possessed no sense of kinship as far as race, religion, nation of origin was concerned. True men formed clubs, societies, teams, at the drop of a hat.
Women had a sisterhood they all seemed to acknowledge, and unlike XYs, alpha or not, did not specifically exclude female-identified zeds. In many ways hidden, even with their brands, zeds did not generally have this inclination to seek out or inherently trust their like. They lived insular and isolated lives as far under the radar of a disdainful society as they possibly could, and most accepted the stigma of their brands as their due. And that was the theme of these documents. Blair was attempting to tell zeds that they were special, gifted, and in no way deserving of the treatment they got from everyone, everywhere. It was an offer of support and encouragement, a plea that they open their minds to greater possibilities within themselves, and not let the prejudices of others hinder them.

Spencer thought Dr. Thibideau ought to read a few of these… but then he remembered Blair’s rule of thumb. Was Thibideau ready for this? Would he be open to it if he did read it? And with a sigh, Spencer acknowledged, probably not. Still, he forwarded a couple of the more insightful ones anyway.

Then there were the third set of documents. And as he read through them, Spencer suddenly realized how the second built upon the groundwork of the first, and the third on the second. It was a progression, intended to bring someone like himself to the inevitable conclusions.

All zeds were extraordinary. Most hid from that, feared it, ignored it, rejected and denied it, conditioned by society and experience to think of themselves as mistakes, aberrations, less than human. Those few brave (or lucky) enough to break through those mental bonds, to open their minds to a wider world, a greater potential, found themselves… changing. Becoming.

Becoming what, depended on the individual. Some were attuned to the auras of others, sensitive to energy fields around places and living beings, some were even able to manipulate these various fields. They could be healers, empaths, some could even be shamans. And some could seek out other humans with need of their special abilities. Although Blair didn’t spell it out, Spencer, having read his anthropological ‘fantasy’, could guess Blair was talking about Sentinels here. Yes, people with painfully acute senses would need someone to temper, buffer, help focus such abilities, to prevent their being overwhelmed or ‘zoning’.

Those myths about zeds able to control and manipulate others with their minds? Not so imaginary, according to Blair. Like many myths, there was a grain of truth there. Such mental abilities, to reach inside another person and soothe or heal, might also have the potential for misuse. Certainly, humans without such abilities would come to fear that very thing. Even if just used in self-defense, to make someone fear you and turn away, or forget you altogether, a zed could be viewed as a weapon. It was the Force all over again, Spencer thought. Jedi mind tricks, or dark-side sorcerer’s ways. Great if you have them, or know how to protect yourself from them. Scary in the wrong hands, or even the right ones, if used against you.

And, as Spencer read on, in someone just awakening to their powers, who used them without being trained… dangerous to themselves and everyone around them. Yeah, Spencer could well see that. And it wouldn’t take too many cases like that to give all zeds a bad name, make them feared and shunned in any community they lived in. As if zeds needed more negativity.

But. Getting to the end of the documents sent, Spencer still found them frustratingly vague. No reflection on Blair, of course, but on Spencer himself. If he was becoming something, someone… more. But what, exactly, was he becoming? Blair wouldn’t know, any more than he did, not till he had ‘ripened’ a little more. And if Bast knew, she couldn’t tell him.

Thing was, there was one more danger to reading Blair’s more fanciful works. If there was even a tiny bit of a hypochondriac in you, you would see yourself in every line of every page. Not exactly useful, if you wanted definite answers.
The very last document was specifically for shamans. It was full of information that sounded more like magic than anything else. The spirit plane, spirit guides, visions, the attention of cats… what was he supposed to make of it? How was he supposed to reconcile this kind of experience with the scientist he had always prided himself he was?

Maybe he wasn’t as ready for all of this as Blair thought he was. And until he was… well, it was a long journey to Atlantis. Hopefully, he would have enough time to think it all through before he arrived, headlong, into the next daring adventure.
Won't Get Fooled Again

Jack cheated, and had Abe Ellis on the orbiting *Apollo* beam him direct from DC to the Mountain for this little meeting. The original plan was for him to bring Daniel along and let his geek tear strips off Landry, but his better side prevailed. The last thing he wanted was for either Daniel or their new hire to hear any bit of this conversation. Their hold on Dr. Reid was wobbly at best, and they didn’t need another hitch, like Colonel Davis and his inappropriate knee-jerk reaction, to rock an already leaky boat.

So he left Daniel in DC, helping Dr. Reid, along with a couple of trusted SFs, to pack up his apartment into the shipping containers provided. One container full of nothing but books and Dr. Who DVDs, a second with all his other worldly possessions, and a third for the mountain of stuff Dr. Reid’s friends decided he needed for his cat, his pregnancy and eventual parenthood.

Jack’s meeting with Dr. Reid had been an eye-opener, that was for sure, and that was in spite of the fact that he had already read all the unedited files, even got a few of the un-redacted ones the CIA tried to hog, and had seen all the unexpurgated surveillance tapes, which had blasted away any preconceived notions he might have had about what a zed was. He also got Daniel to send him a few of the kid’s papers, including the stats report on zeds in the US military. And wasn’t that a kick to the gut. But it was one thing to read reports, papers, review tapes… Another to meet a real human being in person and get a true measure of him.

To Jack, now, awe-inspiring intelligence aside, the kid was just that, a gangly gawky kid, no different than any of the thousands of other geeks pulled by some sort of osmosis-slash-gravitational force into the open arms of the Stargate Project. A little shy, a little awkward, a lot verbose about all the trivial-seeming shit that all geeks got excited about, but his social skills (which the kid certainly seemed to think he lacked, who the hell knew why) were considerably better than, oh, McKay’s, for example. And his eagerness to share every single little factoid he knew, in a rush of words that were guaranteed to go over Jack’s uninterested head, was certainly no different than Daniel’s, or Carter’s, and Jack did just fine coping with that, had for years.

A significant point in the kid’s favor, in fact, was that he was far easier to shut down than either Daniel or Sam had ever been. All it took was a slight humorous lift to his eyebrow, and the kid paused mid-word, and waited until motioned to continue. Oh yeah, gotta love a geek so easy to wrangle, in briefings, anyway. From the reports, he was every bit as much of a Trouble Magnet as his own personal pain-in-the-mikta, and Jack was already stressing over who he could trust enough to partner the kid and keep him from jumping feet first into every shit-storm there is. Because he would certainly need his own. Sheppard’s wookie, having glommed onto their Agent Afloat almost from the moment he arrived on the city, would be too busy with his own TM to devote the necessary full time attention to Reid. And considering Jack was sending the kid to Pegasus, where, God knew, they had more than their fair share of shit-storms on a good day…

And then there was the kid’s team. Not just the present ones, but past team-mates as well, had all shown up to support Reid. That little spit-fire Elle Greenaway had actually scared him a little (enough that he was even now having one of his guys offer her a job). Every one of them, furious over the disaster that had befallen their youngest, already grieving over his loss, because they fully recognized they couldn’t even pretend to be able to protect him in the face of the anti-berd back-lash, and desperate over his future safety. They had taken Jack to task, individually and as a group, with threats and warnings that nothing less than kid gloves and total respect would be considered
acceptable treatment.

And none of this, not one thing, had anything to do with that Z chromosome the kid carried. Reid was exactly like hundreds, thousands of kids he had encountered and commanded in his career; earnest, idealistic, dedicated to public service, no different, whatever his gender. Okay, that genetic quirk added a level of totally unwarranted bullshit he would have to expect from the intolerant, ignorant and bigoted, but that was all.

Jack sighed, having to admit, for the billionth fucking time, that Daniel had been right, all along. There was no fucking reason to lock zeds out of the Program, and, apparently, every fucking reason in the world to open the doors wide to them.

In the hours he had spent earlier that day with the IOA, justifying his hiring Dr. Reid, Jack had explained his turn-around to the clearly resistant international panel of dumb-ass short-sighted politicians and lame-ass bureaucrats, by telling them Daniel’s suspicions about Alteran meddling. It seemed pretty damned obvious, now, that the Ancients had brought zeds to Earth from Pegasus in the first place, and the bombshell that, unless Daniel missed his guess, and when had he ever, it was entirely possible that *all* zeds carried the coveted ATA gene... Oh yeah, that had shut up their nattering. The Canadian and Brit reps, smirking smugly at the others, underlined that establishing hiring policies for the Program was clearly under Jack’s purview as HWS Director, and they saw no reason to interfere at this late date. Yeah, having Commonwealth countries vote as a block was certainly working in Jack’s favor at this point.

But in order to get the majority of the IOA members to back off on their anti-berd stance, Jack had been forced to make a few… concessions. Even to the Brits. They were ones the whole IOA had been trying to maneuver him into for some time, and he had known he was fighting a losing battle there… and they *did* need to get more international personnel out there to Atlantis. And taking a bunch of loony Brit archeologists wasn’t much of a hardship, he’d just sic Danny onto them. But… did it *have* to be the Russians? *And* the Israelis? Yeah, like those two groups jammed up in the close quarters of a deep space carrier for a whole month was going to make for international harmony.

And put them together with a zed… There were very few countries as rabidly anti-berd as Russia. Their human rights record was absolutely appalling where zeds were concerned… Under the Stalinist regime, the pogroms of the fifties had seen not only every zed either executed for more or less flimsy excuses, or permanently ‘disappeared’ into the gulags… but almost every Z carrier as well, once blood tests were available. Abortions of fetuses were highly encouraged, if they carried the Z chromosome, zed or merely a carrier. The only survivors were the allies or relatives of highly-placed party officials. The percentage of Z-positives in their population was now the lowest in the world. And wasn’t that just another kick in the teeth for a wilfully blind bastard like himself?

So Jack was just going to have to suck it up, take Daniel to dinner to offer his mea culpas, and change his fucking ways. And, oh, by the way, make it crystal clear that anyone, *anyone*, in the Home World Security organization, no matter who they were or how much IOA support they had, would just have to get with the new pro-zed program. They could either like it, cope with it and deal like the professional, open-minded adults they needed to be when they had to deal with aliens day in and day out, or get booted out the door.

And that was going to start right now.

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Hank wasn’t there when he arrived, so he made himself at home in the big chair. Yeah, sure, it was a juvenile and obvious power move, taking over Hank’s chair (not the really nice one Jack wished
Hammond had left behind for him, not even as nice as Jack’s replacement, which meant Hank had done something to really piss off Walter). He didn’t have long to wait, though. He heard the rant getting louder, and more full of expletives by the minute, until Hank himself hove into sight, with that smarmy Kavanagh guy stuck to his side like a damn remora.

“—then keep the fucking idiot out of the fucking lab, he screws up so much! You’re the fucking head of the hard sciences in the Mountain, aren’t you? Then fucking act like it! Now get out of my fucking sight, and clean up your own fucking mess!”

Kavanagh took that as permission to scoot, and did so. Hank, meanwhile, his brows beetling heavily with ire, was so irritated he failed to even notice Jack until he had almost cleared the desk, when he jumped and swore again.

“Jack! What the fucking hell? And that’s my chair.”

Jack lifted an eyebrow of his own and merely tapped his shoulder, where his three stars were lined up, all nice and shiny. Hank colored, and took a deep breath, struggling to cool his temper way down. Then he took the visitor chair, and began to look wary.

“You don’t visit all that often these days, Jack. What brings you down today?”

“No! No, of course not. Just a little mishap in the astrophysics section.”

Jack shuddered eloquently. “Yeah, not as reassuring as it sounds like it should be, there, Hank. Little mishaps in astrophysics tend to involve black holes and exploding suns. Remember, I used to live here. You put Kavanagh in charge of the labs? Seriously? He’s been kicked off Atlantis, out of Area 51, all three private sector labs we sent him to where they have outsource contracts for us, and after Midway crashed and burned, even Bill Lee won’t work with him… so sending him anywhere near Antarctica is out. Only reason we sent him here was because we were running out of places he wouldn’t blow up whatever planet, station or ship he happened to be on.”

Hank scowled. “Yeah, thanks for that, Jack. And thanks for transferring out anyone with more alien tech experience I could promote instead. Anyone coming back trained from Area 51 or the Antarctic Outpost heads straight for Atlantis, one of the ships, or Icarus Base.”

Jack considered this. “I could always bring Thibideau back from Area 51.”

Oh yeah, his old pal was going to pop a blood vessel soon. “That fucking effem! No way. I’ll be fine with Kavanagh… all we do here anymore is catalogue stuff as it comes in, anyway, before we ship it to Nevada. So… not that it isn’t good to see you, buddy, but what are you really here for?”

Jack tilted back as he studied his old friend.

“When were you going to pass along the report on zeds having the ATA gene, Hank?”

The ‘deer in the headlights’ look wasn’t a good one for a veteran soldier like Hank Landry. “How the hell… Jackson told you.”

“Should have come from you, Hank. Why didn’t it?”

There was a long stretch of silence, before Hank finally admitted, “You know why.”
“Because you’ve got some kind of bee up your ass about zeds. Sure. Figured that one. Was it always this bad, and I just never noticed? Or has it got worse over the years? And I never knew the reason why. Because this is more than just common or garden prejudice. This is personal.”

Hank looked away, working his jaw.

“Come on, Hank. Talk to me. Because times they are a changing, and you are either going to change with them, or you risk losing this chair for more than one little meeting. Because you must know what my next decision is going to be. To open the doors wide to any berd with the qualifications we need, for any department we have. And anyone who can’t fucking grow up and treat them like decent human beings is going to be out. You’ve already crossed a line by hiding information that could very well be mission-critical, and how dumb-ass stupid was that? You thought you could keep it secret forever, I wouldn’t eventually notice? You know how bad we need people with a natural ATA, and it looks very much like all zeds have it. DiNozzo has it in spades, so does Thibideau, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the Reid kid does, too. So talk to me. Tell me what your fucking problem is.”

“Because an effem was fucking my wife, Jack!” Hank shouted angrily. “Okay? Happy now? The bastards are sex freaks and the moment I left for Desert Storm, the fucking fuck’em made a move on my wife!”

Astonished, Jack could only stare. “Mei? Mei cheated on you? No fucking way! Wait a minute... she kicked you out of the house before you left for Iraq, the papers were served before you even left... so she wasn’t exactly your wife at that point. But Mei... that whole summer, right until she and Caro moved to her folks in Los Angeles, she spent almost every night at our house, crying on Sarah’s shoulder, eating mocha ice cream and complaining, loudly, about what shits men are. Is that the real reason she left you, Hank? You were accusing her of cheating? Did you even ask her about it?”

His stubborn scowl was enough of an answer.

“And when you got back together this year, did you ask her about it then? What was really going on?”

“We didn’t talk about that at all. I didn’t want to risk rocking the boat, when she was giving me a second chance.”

“No fucking kidding. But if you think Mei was cheating, you’re fucked in the head, Hank. How do you even know?”

“I was told.”

“Who by?” There was more stubborn silence, and Jack narrowed his eyes. “Wait a minute. It wasn’t that oh-so-helpful Captain Burkhart, was it?”

Hank’s eyes opened wide and his bushy eyebrows vaulted to his hairline. “How did you...”

“Fuck a duck. This is a page out of fucking Othello, only with fewer bodies at the end. You actually believed that shit-stain Burkhart? Since when? Wasn’t it you got him written up at least a half dozen times for hazing the junior officers? The blacks and women? Equal opportunity bigot, that one. And suddenly you’re buying into his fucking shit? Well let me just fill in a few blanks for you, my friend. The real reason Mei took Caro and moved back to Los Angeles to be with her parents, was because Burkhart was stalking her. The second you left on deployment, he came sniffing around Mei, and wouldn’t leave her alone. I tried to intervene, but she told me not to, and she picked up and left for her mother’s. Oh man, Hank. You were played, buddy. Who was she supposed to be having an
affair with, just out of curiosity?"

"The effem who was working for the landscaping company on base."

Jack frowned, then a horrible suspicion began to grow. "You mean that Peter kid? The one who was mugged out behind the BX? Hank, tell me you didn’t have anything to do with that! Someone beat that kid into a coma, supposedly for a couple of dollars in his pocket!"

"I didn’t have anything to do with it."

"Okay... now make me fucking believe it!"

"It wasn’t me! Happened while I was out of the country, you can check that. It was Burkhart. He told me he did it for me. For all the married service men who had to leave wives behind, and didn’t want those sex freaks messing with them."

"Which is utter and total bullshit. Burkhart was the snake in the grass the whole time, not that poor kid Peter. But you wanted to believe the lies, didn’t you? Your bullshit suspicion drove Mei away, and you needed to believe there was a reason that made it not your own fucking fault. And then that poor kid got the shit kicked out of him, and you had to believe he deserved it, right? When he didn’t. You believed that bastard Burkhart before your own wife. But it was easy, right? It wasn’t your suspicions poisoning your marriage, it was some berd. It wasn’t you hurting a woman who loved you with your accusations about betrayal, refusing to listen or believe her when you obviously believed that bastard Burkhart, no, it was all that berd. And when you forced your wife and daughter to kick you out on your ear, it wasn’t all your own damned fault, it was a berd. Sure. So much easier that way. What a sorry fucker that makes you. Straight out of fucking Othello. Is that all of it, Hank? You haven’t been stalking zeds and beating up on them ever since, right?"

"No! Fucking hell, Jack, what do you think I am?"

"Right now? I don’t have a fucking clue. You’re a man who listened to Burkhart’s lies over your own wife, and that’s bad enough. You keep in touch with the bastard?"

"No. He got deployed to Guam and I never heard from him again."

"Well, I sure as hell will be checking on where he ended up, and what he’s been up to all this time. I better not find out he’s been stalking people’s wives and beating up on berds all this time, that’s all I can say. And what about Daniel, Hank? What’s this bullshit between you and him? It can’t be just that his mom was zed, right?"

Hank turned away, looking shifty.

"You fucker. That’s it, isn’t it? For crying out loud, Hank! In what possible way could Daniel even be *considered* a sex freak who steals people’s wives? To my certain knowledge, he’s had consensual sex with exactly two people in his whole entire fucking life, and one of them was his own goddamned wife! Every other time it was rape."

"He’s a circle! And he flirts with every woman on this base, including my daughter!"

"You mean Caro? My goddaughter Caro? Who is thirty two years old and can make her own god-damned decisions about who she wants to date? Which, I happen to know, they haven’t. Yeah, no, Hank. Get your fucking head out of your ass, for crying out loud! What you call flirting, is just Daniel being interested in every damned person he meets. And when he does it off planet, it’s his fucking job description, to get people to like him. Not fuck him, just like him! So they don’t, oh, for instance, slaughter his whole team the second they come through the gate!"
But Landry, fighting all the way, as he took one hard fall after another from Jack’s unrelenting revelations, had one more punch to throw.

“He’s a goddamned fuck-up, and a dangerous one. His latest being the Ori. That was him, first to last. Fucking pinko bleeding heart circle liberal. Hundreds of thousands died over that shit, Jack, whole planets wiped out, some are still stuck worshipping the all-hallowed Ori, and the rest of this galaxy sure as hell blames us for calling those fuckers down on us. And that was him, all the way. Him and Vala.”

“Oh, yeah, no. Did you miss the part of your orientation meeting where we’re explorers? That it’s our job to explore? And like Bill Lee said in his report, sometimes you just got to turn shit on to find out what it does. That’s not on Daniel and never was. Even if he himself thought it was. The real reason he wanted to use those damned stones was because he thought they would take him to Atlantis, which was in deep shit at the time, if you recall, cut off and drowning in Wraith. And he sure as hell paid with his life, heart and soul to fix that shit. Let an Ancient possess him. Turned himself into a prior. Committed fucking genocide when he built and activated the Sangreal. So much for a pinko bleeding heart circle liberal! You don’t think that shit cost him?

Fuck, Hank. I didn’t think I’d have to say this, I just assumed you’d get it, same as I have, without being told… and it sure as hell isn’t going in any report, or to be repeated outside these walls… you get me?”

Landry reluctantly nodded. Much as Jack was deeply disappointed with the man, and really, *really* wanted to send him to the training mats with Teal’c for a few hard lessons in not being such a damned gullible schmuck in future… he did trust the man to keep his word.

“Okay. This all seems painfully obvious to me, but maybe that’s because I can see the forest for the god-damned trees, and find my ass without a fucking rear-view mirror and a road-map. Unlike others in this office right now. But here’s the 411 on the Stargate.

“We’ve all of us, every one of us, been played, from the moment Professor Emile Langford dug up that sideways flusher in 1928. We’re all of us pawns on a board the Ancients have been setting up from that very moment, and probably long before. Took them decades to get us all lined up right… me with suicidal urges, ready to drop a bomb on the first alien planet I could find. And Dr. Daniel Jackson, laughed out of academia for telling the fucking truth, nothing but a couple of suitcases full of books to his name, so he had no choice but take a little translation job for the Air Force, where he could correct a few lines of copy on a cover stone and figure out how to turn on an alien device he hadn’t even *seen* yet.

“Those fucking, more ascended-than-thou, glowy squid people on their little clouds, claiming non-interference, have done nothing but meddle with us from the first. Their favorite go-to patsy is Daniel, but they aren’t above shoving any of us into one mess after another. And all to correct the countless cluster-fucks they left behind when they shuffled off this mortal coil. Their biggest screw-ups? The Goa’uld, the Replicators, half-ascended Anubis, the Wraith, the Ori. And, compulsive litterers that they are, there were plenty of fun little toys they left behind, ready to blow up in the faces of the first schmucks to trip over them, like that time-loop device, the download head-sucker, the extermination machine on Dakkara, Harry Mayborne’s time-ship, Doranda in Pegasus, etcetera, etcetera, ad nauseum, not to mention dozens of others I can name right off the top of my head. Hell, Atlantis is full of their fun little surprises. You following me so far, Hank?”

Eyes wide open, mouth a tight line with his jaw working slowly behind, Landry nodded. Jack nodded too, satisfied he might finally be getting through that thick skull. He used to think Hank was a bright guy, but to miss clues this big, he had seriously let his bigotry get in the way.
“Stupid me, I thought after they finished shoving Daniel at the Ori, that they’d let up, that we’d dealt with the worst of their cluster-fucks. But that was just wishful thinking on my part, because if I don’t miss my guess, and I don’t think I do, the next fucking mess we have to clean up for them is whatever the fuck they did to turn zeds into pariahs.”

Hank gulped. “Okay, I was following you up to then… but fuck’ems? What the fuck do they have to do with anything? What are you talking about, Jack?”

Jack scowled. “You just ignored every fucking report that even mentioned zeds, right, Hank? Well smarten the fuck up! And you will start by never, *ever* referring to them as effems or fuck’ems, ever again, even in your own fucking head!

“The Z chromosome didn’t evolve here on Earth. We always knew that, but people just assumed it was some kind of bizarre mutant genetic mistake. Some mistake, when Z positive biology is more stable, less prone to disease, more resilient and persists down the genetic lines, breeding true better than any recessive trait we know of. So, apparently not a mistake after all. But those of us in the Program, at least, should have seen the Ancient writing on that wall as soon as we knew about aliens. And yes, zeds were brought here, from Pegasus, when the Alterans sank Atlantis to the bottom of the sea and they escaped back here ten thousand years ago. Whether the Alterans originated the Z chromosome themselves, by natural evolution or cooked it up in their labs, or found it somewhere in their travels, who the hell knows. They saw something in it they wanted for themselves. God knows what. But, obviously, it included linking to the ATA genes. Whatever else they did with it… We don’t know much more than that right now, which is why I’m going to Atlantis with Daniel and Dr. Reid. I want to have a word with Ronon Dex and Teyla Emmagen myself, see what zeds are doing in Pegasus, and why they’re honoured there, while we here on Earth are doing our level best to exterminate every last one of them. But I’m willing to bet the farm that the Alterans are responsible for turning an innocent and genetically advanced people into hated and hunted scapegoats for every asshole on this planet who decides it’s more fun to play the blame-game and hold a grudge than to fucking man up and take responsibility for their own screw-ups.”

Hank could only hold his hands up in surrender at that, even as he sank lower in his chair.

Jack shook his head, already fed up with this conversation.

“Okay, you know what? You’ve got some thinking to do, and you’re going to do it off base, were you can’t screw up this Program any more than you already have. You are relieved of duty, General Landry, until such time as you can convince me that the surgical procedure to de-fuck your head from your ass is a complete success. As a start, I want you to look into Leonard Burkhart’s entire life history, and find out if there’s anything we can arrest him on, because I *sooo* want to arrest his bigoted lying ass, and I haven’t got time to look into it myself. I should think you’d be plenty motivated to do it yourself, since, apparently, he destroyed your fucking marriage so he could have a shot at your wife himself. And if you don’t want to take my word for that, like you took his, ask Mei about that summer he made her life a fucking misery.

“Now get the fuck out of here. I’m calling in Colonel Davis to take over for you, until I can get someone else. I’m thinking AJ Chegwidden is in the mood to shake up the establishment over the zed thing. If I can talk him into shifting over here, he’ll be the one you have to convince that you can be trusted not to fuck up our entire planet with your bigoted bull-shit. And in the mean time, I’m going to have him drag Thibideau back from Area 51 to take over as CSO from that fuck-up Kavanagh. Then he’ll review the job applications for every zed you ever denied, and pull as many as he can into the Program. As many as we can convince we can keep them safe. And Hank, believe me, we will keep every single fucking one of them safe, and treat them with fucking human decency and respect, or heads will roll, starting with your own.”
Reluctantly, silently, Hank stood, hesitated only a moment, then saluted, turned and strode out. Jack shook his head, not at all sure that come-to-Jesus talk had worked. Hopefully, after talking to his ex-wife, and doing a little snooping into that fucker Burkhart’s files, Hank would see that he’d allowed himself to be led by the nose by a bastard who had the perfect ready-made scapegoats in the entire zed community.

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It was a week or two before Fornell found the right excuse, but then the NCIS MCRT team got tangled up with a murdered petty officer who was also an FBI informant.

Fornell sauntered into the damn orange bullpen with Sacks behind him, and stopped to stare.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked the strange guy at the first desk, the one that used to be DiNozzo’s. The guy had a severe military crew-cut, all kinds of muscles on a line-backer frame, but his skin was pasty, he had dark bags under his eyes, and was twitchy as all hell, with a roll of antacid lozenges on his desk in front of him. Fornell glanced over to Gibbs. “I thought you had Burley come back to be your SFA?”

Vance, sauntering down the steps from his mezzanine office, was looking vastly unimpressed with his MCRT team. “That was three SFAs ago, Agent Fornell. I assume you’re here about the Fleming case? If you’d like to come up to my office to discuss jurisdiction…”

Fornell could only shake his head at his old friend-slash-enemy. “Four? You’ve gone through four in as many months?”

“Five,” Vance corrected. “Epstein didn’t survive his probation. Literally didn’t survive.”

Gibbs had been pretending not to hear either one of the other men, but at this he was spurred into barking out, “Not my fault, Leon.”

Fornell checked out the other two desks, Ziva David and… “Whoa! Where’s McGee?”

Vance once again filled in the FBI Special Agent in Charge, “Agent McGee begged me to transfer him to another team. But there’s not a single team lead in the entire agency willing to take him into the field. So I gave him a choice. Stay, or go back down to Cyber. I think he made the right call. He had the same ulcers Burley ended up with. And I understand the stuttering has almost stopped.”

“Jeez, Gibbs. What the hell are you doing to them?”

“My question exactly,” Vance agreed. “Now, Agent, Gibbs, care to join me for that jurisdiction discussion? Somewhere with sound-proof walls, so no one can hear the shouting?”

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Finally, the dust settled on the whole Fleming mess, and hadn’t that been a kick in the teeth, seeing such a half-assed performance from what had once been the best team in the alphabet agencies. When Sacks had been the one to break the case and make the arrests, well… how would the pride of NCIS take that? The rumors Tobias had heard while working with their rivals, never spoken around Agent David or Team Lead Gibbs, he couldn’t help but notice… well. They matched a few things he already knew from the inter-agency grape-vine, and they did *not* show NCIS in a very good light. Even worse after the Arkansas scandal broke, and everyone started re-evaluating their prejudices.

Tobias made his way through Jethro’s house to the stairs and down to the basement. The ex-Marine
had already poured out a second jam jar of bourbon, and pushed it his way, then went back to his sanding. But even this Gibbsonian meditation ritual seemed to be failing to keep the man calm and even-tempered.

“Say what you’re going to say, Tobias.”

“And what am I going to say?”

“DiNozzo.”

“Yeah. I was warned by three different people the past couple days not to mention his name around you. But it’s okay for you?”

Yeah, Jethro slammed his fists down on the bare ribs of the boat he was building, and struggled to slow his breathing.

“I asked Ducky, and Abby… neither one of them are buying the shit you’re selling, Jethro. Not that you’re selling much. Don’t know, don’t care? No wonder DiNutso calls you a functional mute. He sure called that one right. But they’re not eager to make themselves your target, either. And as for your little Mossad princess… she didn’t say two words this whole case. At least, not in my hearing. Abby thinks she’s about one week away from jumping ship and going home to Daddy David for good. What the hell, Jethro?”

The ex-marine could only shake his head.

Fornell’s eyes narrowed. “You and DiNozzo used to be close, Jethro. Partners. The two of you together? Unbeatable. Then you brought Todd and McGee on board… but that was okay, because Tony made it work for you, didn’t he? But something happened… it started after you lost Todd… got worse when you lost your memory, and your mind, down a bottle of tequila in Mexico with Franks. You forgot him, didn’t you? Took you a while, a long while, to even remember who any of us were.”

At a particularly low point, while Jethro was off on his siesta and the kid was running on caffeine and fumes, Tobias had come across Tony in a bar, drowning his sorrows. Tobias had sidled up next to him, got the kid to a back booth, private enough for those formidable walls to finally come down, and confess one or two things… including missing Jethro like hell, that he might, maybe, possibly, be in love with his boss… but that he would never do anything about it because the risk was too great. What risk? Tony had let it slip then… contrary to popular belief, frat-boy womanizer Tony was actually extremely cautious about his sexual partners. He’d flirt with anyone with a pulse, sure, and he could talk a good game next day, but take them to bed? No. He had to trust them absolutely first. He couldn’t afford to have anyone ‘out’ him after they saw what he was hiding. The damning purple and pink mottling at the groin that betrayed his zed gender status.

Jethro gave Tobias a fulminating glance. “You were around when I… retired to Mexico. You didn’t see the crap he was pulling while he was in charge?”

Okay, that made no sense. “Who, DiNozzo? What crap are you talking about? And that was years ago… All I saw was a kid pulling one hundred thirty hour weeks when his so-called ‘team’ barely put in fifty hours between them, and fought him on every order he gave. He was doing team lead paperwork, SFA paperwork that McGee refused to do, and junior agent paperwork that kept coming back in Hebrew, with a second probie so new she squeaked and turned out to be a damn mole, if I recall correctly… and all the while, DiNutzio was also working that damned unsanctioned undercover op for Jenny in every hour God gave, and getting nothing but flack from everyone around him. So what crap are you talking about?”
“Ziver! He was banging Ziver!”

Fornell almost laughed. “Tony DiNozzo? DiNozzo, touch the Mossad princess with a barge pole?”

“More than touched her, damn it.”

“What the hell are you drinking these days, Jethro? Because obviously, it’s rotting your brain. In case you hadn’t noticed, your precious little Ziver hates DiNozzo’s guts. Always has, always will, she just has more reason these days. Sure, she’ll play the minx to try and get him hooked, standard honey-pot operation, and he plays at falling for it, but… He never has and never will trust her with anything. Why would she give him the time of day?’”

“She told me her goddammed self!”

“Ah.”

“What the fuck do you mean, ah?”

Tobias lifted an eyebrow. “I think they call it divide and conquer in the Mossad hand book. She wanted DiNozzo out, has from day one, and… oh, look. He’s so far out, no one has a clue where he is, like he disappeared off the fucking planet six months ago, and no one seems to give a shit. Not even Vance knows where he is. I know, because I asked.”

“Ziva wouldn’t…”

“Sure she would. Why is this a surprise to you? What about your famous gut? It’s been going on since the very beginning, her first month on the team. I heard about the dinner party she threw, everybody on the team but him. No, he did not tell me, everyone else at that party did. Including you. And laughed about it. Some joke. And then, when the guy almost gets killed a couple of times over the very next day because of David’s fuck ups, gets a bullet in his arm for his trouble, all anybody can do is rub his nose in it, that he’s the odd man out, not wanted, and that includes you, too. Nice one, Gibbs. Nice way to treat your loyal St. Bernard. Oh, wait, no, you actually wouldn’t treat a dog like that, would you? You like dogs.”

“I… it’s not…”

“Yeah, your brain is rotting, all right. Can’t form complete sentences. Like you said, Jethro, I was here while you were on your Mexican siesta. I saw exactly what the princess put DiNozzo through. How she wound up McGee, got her hooks into that green-as-grass kid to be her willing accomplice. They were both so damn jealous of Tony, and you always encouraged them to go for his throat. And Jenny, God rest her ruthless soul, was doing fuck all to support the kid when he tried to put those assholes on report, scrapping every formal reprimand he tried to file, keeping him off-base, exhausted and strung-out enough not to question her own motives. Plus, DiNozzo was dating the Frog’s daughter whenever he wasn’t in the office, and from what I know, half in love with her from the first. When would he even have a second to spare for a woman who hated his guts, was doing her level best to edge him right out of the agency, and showed him every hour of every day how much she despised him? And I could go on. How many times has that woman almost got your senior field agent killed the past few years? I can think of a good half-dozen without straining my brain at all.”

Gibbs frowned at his old sometime-friend, but it wasn’t in anger. It was puzzled, if anything, and confusion did not sit well on the man.

“How come you know all this? I never told you.”

“No. Tony did.”
“Bullshit. Tony never talks about personal stuff. Not to anyone but me, and mostly not even me.”

“You know him well enough to say that, but not to know how he deals when things get really bad for him? First he comes down here, for advice, sympathy, support, bourbon… maybe just companionship, who knows. And when he walks away and all he’s managed to get is bourbon, he heads to a DiNozzo friendly bar near his home so he won’t have to drive after, one with Sinatra and Tony Bennett on the juke box, finds a quiet booth, and drinks himself into oblivion. A couple of times I’ve found him that way. Not sure if he even remembers I was there, next day. So, yeah, I know a lot more than you think I do. For instance, I know he never trusted your poor helpless innocent Mossad princess, not from day one.”

Gibbs shook his head, shoulders tightening, jaw clenching, behind a wall of denial so strong and so high he must have been working at it for years. “He seduced her, practically the day she arrived on our team, was banging her whenever he found it convenient, was threatening her to get her into his bed… and then he wouldn’t back her up when she needed it! When Jenny died on their watch, he hung her out to dry. Vance broke up the team and sent her back to Israel… got himself a nice relaxing cruise on the *Reagan* while Ziver was stuck doing Eli’s dirty work for him…”

Tobias shook his head. “That’s a pretty fancy piece of historical re-construction, there, Gibbs. I bet you didn’t come up with that on your own, did you? Shit, Jethro, if he was going to break your precious Rule 12 with anyone, it sure as hell wouldn’t be Ziva fucking David. It would have been you…”

The grimace on the ex-marine’s face was all Tobias needed. Jethro was usually a better poker player than that… “Well, shit. When did this happen?”

Gibbs swallowed heavily, not looking up. “After Jenny’s funeral… he came to me. He was a mess. Blamed himself. Maybe I did too… Vance sure as hell seemed to. He and Ziva were supposed to be her protection detail, but Jenny ordered them to stand down. And they did… That’s not on either of them. She set it all up herself, to go out like a hero in a blaze of glory, instead of wasting away, a terminal patient in a cancer ward. So I got him drunk. And we…”

“Aw hell. So that’s when you found out…”

“He’s zed? Yeah. He was born in England, they don’t have any registration laws. When his parents brought him home to Long Island, his father had enough money, and enough pull, to fake his blood tests, so he never got a brand. Don’t know what he’s done so he could pass since then… But he’s always been good at undercover, at masks. How do you know about it?”

“None of your damn business.” Tobias did the math in his head. “So let me get this straight. This is the night before Vance sent him Agent Afloat on the *Reagan*, right? Tough enough assignment, but he had to know the added risk if he was outed as zed somehow… Did he ask you to help him get out of it? This was just after you fucked him and sent him home, right? Probably already regretting breaking your Rule 12. Maybe afraid you were already in too deep with a subordinate? Or did you just decide a fucking hermie wasn’t worth your time, beyond that one roll in the hay? Or, sorry, no, must have been down here on the cement floor, right? Jesus, Gibbs. You must have been pretty fucking glad Vance was getting him out of your hair for a while. So you just let it happen. Nice one. And when he came back, he knew better than to even think of you giving him another chance, right? Or did you have to add a cuff to the head and the cold-shoulder, egging on the junior agents to be even more insubordinate to him? Oh yeah. Hunh. I guess you really are that bad at relationships.”

Tobias shook his head, and continued, “So Jenny took a dive… Vance stepped in as Director and had to piss all over your team to make it his… And even when you got them all back, DiNozzo, McGee and David, it wasn’t the same. You weren’t the same.”
“I got her back, yes, and DiNozzo’s so damn jealous of her new love interest he shoots the guy.”

“Shoots the guy… are you talking about Rivkin? The foreign agent on US soil she was passing classified intel to? The Kidon assassin who murdered an ICE agent? The one your girl was handling, aiding and abetting, by the way, and trying to extract out from under us all? The guy who half beat DiNozzo to death when he tried to arrest him? On your damn orders! And how the kid managed to get the drop on him, with a dislocated shoulder… and shot in self-defense? That the guy you’re talking about?”

“Yeah, well, it also opened the door for DiNozzo to start up his dirty games with her again. Or he would have if she hadn’t stayed behind in Tel Aviv. To avoid being anywhere near him! She told me part of it then… how he killed Rivkin in cold blood out of jealousy… She asked me then, to chose. Him or her. I made the wrong damn call. As it was, he had to wait till she came back from Somalia to start up with her again.”

“Shit,” Tobias breathed, astounded and appalled at the stupidity of it all. “And who exactly is jealous of whom, here, Gibbs? You sure it isn’t you? That Tony didn’t just roll over and die of a broken heart because you wouldn’t touch his zed ass even one more time? If Tony DiNozzo were ever going to out himself, simply by dropping his pants, it wouldn’t be the mark on an undercover op, like Jeanne Benoit, no matter how much he loved her. And never a Mossad assassin he knew was at least partly responsible for Kate Todd’s death.”

“It wasn’t… she didn’t… it was Ari killed Kate.”

“Sure it was. Daddy David wanted a hole on the MCRT for his own agent to fill, and he wanted rid of his unstable bastard son. So he got Ari’s handler to profile which member of your team would hurt you the most, put you most off your game and make you most susceptible, if you lost them. That was a no-brainer. Always a sucker for the women. And once Ari made that hole, the handler arranged it so she could kill Ari and make it look good to you. Like she was defending you. At the cost of her own half-brother. At least, that’s how DiNozzo had it figured. He just didn’t know how deep in the plan Shepherd was, or why, since their only real entry to NCIS was through her, and she pushed, hard, for the liaison position on your team, no matter how little sense it made.”

Gibbs could only stare, struggling to assimilate all of this. Struggling to fight back more than five years of accepted history, re-writing itself in his brain.

“Of course,” Tobias continued blithely, rather enjoying this new opportunity to lord it over his best frenemy, “Tony got his answer when he was roped into the Benoit case. Shepherd needed intel on the guy she blamed for her father’s death, and the Davids now owed her one. Owed her a couple. But by then, you had already stopped listening to a single fucking word he said, shut him down hard. So all he could do was keep his mouth shut, and try to watch your back, and all of NCIS, as best he could. Thankless goddamned job if you ask me, for all the appreciation anyone ever showed him for his loyalty and dedication.”

Tobias shook his head over it, even as Gibbs pulled in his head, like a turtle into the shell of his own self-deception, and the FBI SAC would never have thought it of the ex-Marine gunnery sergeant.

“Sounds to me like the princess played you like a violin, Jethro. Not like you weren’t warned enough times. I know DiNozzo tried to tell you his suspicions, and Ducky never warmed to her… Then the whole Rivkin mess… I never did understand why you went to so much effort, to get Ziva back from Somalia. But of course, if that’s what you wanted, DiNozzo would bend over backward to make sure you got it. Never mind she was Mossad through and through and fucking proved it with how she handled that whole Rivkin clusterfuck… She deserved to be sent back to Israel. She deserved to have lost your trust, too, and I don’t have a clue why you went for her, even so.”
“It was her own father sent her on that Somalia op. And he just… left her there. I was the one to go after her, I was the one to save her ass.”

“Oh, ho… I see it now. You thought you bought her loyalty, right? She’d write off Mossad, Daddy David, Israel… all for her knight in shining armor, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Hunh… But even so… Bring her back on your team? What the fuck, Jethro? She was still crazy-mad at DiNozzo, blamed him not just for her boyfriend’s death, but her little vacation in Israel and Somalia, too. Not to mention, when push came to shove, Daddy-bear Gibbs chose Tony, not her. You didn’t see that? How was that supposed to work, the two of them on the same team? It’s been a nightmare for DiNozzo. There wasn’t a second where he could let up his guard, with her just looking to take him down. How’s he even supposed to trust her? And I’m not even talking about in the bedroom, though god knows how anyone would trust that woman not to knife them in the back while cooing in their ears… but in the field, to have his back?”

Gibbs winced, grimaced even, his poker face shot to hell. “That’s… we had a case. You remember the Military at Home case? DiNozzo’s last with the team. He was taking voice prints in Royal Woods, to match our domestic terrorist’s voice. Suspect had murdered three people, we suspected he might have a plan for bombing a military base… Ziva and McGee were his back-up, running the recording equipment and surveillance in a car nearby. Supposed to be… DiNozzo claimed they… he said they turned off their comms.”

Tobias reared back. “Shit. I knew there was something going on, something with those two that would make them unfit for service. Is that what they… What the hell!”

“DiNozzo came back, mad as hell, wanted to file reprimands on them both. Came to me first… I figured it was just some kind of joke they were playing on him. Wanted to handle it my way. But DiNozzo wouldn’t have it, said letting them disrespect him was my choice in the first place. I had a hell of a time, just talking him down… Finally got him to the point where he could think clearly, but he still wanted them on report. We both went to the Director. Vance refused to reprimand the junior agents. Said there was no evidence, and even if there was some… irregularity… it served him right, for being so unprofessional in the office, he got what he deserved, payback for the pranks he pulled.”

Tobias could only blink, words failing him.

“So DiNozzo said he’d file a grievance with HR. Vance asked what grounds. He was gonna claim prejudice, that Vance was allowing the protocol violation because he’s zed.”

Tobias sucked in a horrified breath. “He said that? He hasn’t got a brand. Did Vance know before that?”

“He claims not. Not sure I buy it, not when he hated DiNozzo like poison from the start, for no reason I could see. But he sure put on a good show. Hit the roof. Checked the records, saw it listed DiNozzo ‘male’, no brand… demanded he get tested and branded properly or face immediate censure and dismissal. Gave him twenty-four hours to get it done. Wrote up transfer orders, then and there. Agent Afloat, *USS Dwight D Eisenhower*.”

Tobias shut his eyes tight. “Shit. Christ on a cracker… An aircraft carrier full of XY military alpha males? That’s a death sentence for a branded zed. And he knew what was waiting for him. How many berd bodies have you both seen down on Ducky’s slabs? Dead for no better reason than they were zed and had the fucking audacity to want to serve their country, just like anyone else. So what happened when Vance tried to send him, a branded zed, onto a fucking ship full of thousands of military guys?”

“He told Vance he wasn’t going to get the brand if getting shipped out on the *Eisenhower* was his
only option. He’d quit NCIS altogether first.”

“Of course he would. Shit. Vance would black-ball him, though, wouldn’t he? Make sure everyone in law enforcement knew he was a zed. His career was over anyway. Where the hell were you in all this?”

When Gibbs winced at that, Tobias made another educated guess, based on that last night he’d seen Tony in his favourite local bar, crying over a life blown to hell and back.

“Oh man. That night, when he came to you for support, and you ‘talked him down’… Tell me you didn’t seduce him again, one for the road. To get him to give your poor helpless Mossad assassin a pass, the partner he supposedly seduced, on and off over the years, who hung him out to dry when he was hunting a terrorist… aw hell. Of course you did. Did you even ask him about this grand, albeit abusive, affair he had with the princess? No. Of course not. You swallowed it whole, believed her every word, didn’t bother confronting DiNozzo. Wouldn’t have believed him if he did deny it… What, you thought a little sex would make him forget he could never trust his partners in the field, ever again?”

Gibbs wouldn’t look Tobias in the eye. No bloody wonder.

“Oh hell. I don’t know which betrayal is worse. The probie he raised from a pup, the partner he took on only to please you, who he *knew* was out to see him dead, the Director looking for the first excuse to ship him out, or the man he loved, worshipped even, manipulating him into a box he couldn’t get out of… So what in hell makes you so god-damned certain he ever had anything to do with your little Mossad assassin? That he would *ever* take the chance of exposing his biggest secret to her?”

Jethro frowned at the bare ribs of his boat, trying to work it out. “She told me! Part of it on the tarmac in Tel Aviv... the rest after Tony left, when she came to see me. I confronted her about cutting comms. That’s not on, no matter what, and if those two broke protocol that bad, I wanted to know… wanted to do *something* about it… She said it was all lies, DiNozzo was lying because she had refused to crawl back into his bed again. She said… she told me the whole story then, what she wouldn’t say in Tel Aviv, how he seduced her, way back at the beginning, used her then dropped her cold. Kept coming back to her, when he wanted something from her, or when he was jealous of her making a life with someone else… he’d lie, cheat, steal… she was sure he’d killed Rivkin in cold blood… claimed he loved her then left her cold…”

“And you bought that? Did you ask McGee, about the comms? That kid can’t lie to save his soul, not to you.”

Gibbs was shaking his head, still clinging to denial. “He said it was just for a few minutes, just at the end, when Tony was coming back…”

“And was he telling the truth?”

“Son of a bitch!” Gibbs roared, and whipped his own jam jar against the far wall of the basement, spattering bourbon and glass shards everywhere. “It was all a lie, wasn’t it? If Tony did… what she said, she’d have to know he was hermie. He doesn’t have a brand, but he has the damned purple mottling, so it’s not like you can’t tell even without the brand. And she hates hermies with a passion. I know, we’ve talked about it. She practically foams at the mouth… I thought… I thought it was because of DiNozzo… But she complained he wouldn’t marry her, give her a green card… but she knows zeds can’t get a marriage license in the States… she doesn’t know, about him. She doesn’t know!”
“So, fast forward to six months ago,” Tobias prompted. “Another agent afloat posting you’re not gonna help him avoid, because you were picking sides, like a school-yard bully, and Ziva was making it easier for you to chose her. With the kid in the bind he was, looking at months at sea with thousands of XY military alpha macho pricks who were pretty much guaranteed to beat him to death first chance they got, or having to quit and never be able to get a job in law enforcement again, with or without the brand… you dropped him like a hot potato. Well, looks like the kid didn’t need your piss-poor help, after all. You know he’s not on the *Eisenhower*, right? I don’t know how he managed it, but he got himself assigned Agent Afloat somewhere else.”

Gibbs gave him a dirty look, and glanced at his bourbon bottle, considering drinking straight from it, with his mug in a couple thousand pieces.

Gibbs swallowed, grinding his teeth. “Tom Morrow. DiNozzo stormed into Leon’s office next morning while Morrow and I were both there. The kid was fucking furious, at Vance and me both, with a head of steam… had his resignation letter in hand. No way was he getting a fucking brand, or letting Vance get him killed in the line of duty, either by sanctioning his back-up to cut comms any time they damn well felt like it, or dropping him branded on a carrier. I think Morrow must have known about his gender status too. Grabbed DiNozzo and dragged him out of there. Next I knew, DiNozzo was seconded god knows where… Where is he, Fornell?”

“What do you care?” There was nothing but silence from the Gibbs corner. “No, really, Jethro, why would you care? You made your choice, didn’t you? Chose your manipulative, lying Mossad spy assassin over the most loyal second you’ll ever have in your life? A guy who happens to have the piss poor taste to be in love with you?”

“He’s a fucking hermaphrodite!”

“So fucking what!”

“He… they… you can’t trust them. None of them. They’re all gold diggers and sex fiends. They’ve got no loyalty or morality in them, not when there’s a good shag to be had.”

“Whoa! Where the hell is that coming from? I thought you were smarter than that, Gibbs! That frat-boy image of his was just that, an image, nothing but a mask he put on to get everyone to underestimate him, let him work around them, and oh, by the way, hide his gender status. You used to know that. Which is a fucking joke, because it would be okay for a ‘real man’ to be promiscuous and hit anything in a skirt with a pulse, but not a fucking hermie, right? And what the hell… No loyalty? No morality? DiNozzo has had your six from day one. Even when you didn’t have the sense to watch it your fucking self. And he’s a cop through and through. I should fucking head-slap you into next week, you thick headed jarine. Where the hell is that garbage coming from, anyway? More lies from the princess?”

The other man was going to grind those teeth to the jawbone at this rate. “My dad. Mom wasn’t even cold in the ground when he took up with a… with a… hermie.”

“Okay, you’ve got issues. And you need to sort them out. But I’m pretty damn sure that your father is of sufficient age to manage his own love life. It’s not like you’re all that innocent in the horn-dog department, you and your three ex-wives. And in case you’ve had your head buried in the sand the past few weeks, the tide is turning where prejudice against zeds is concerned. I know DiNozzo, and I know Dr. Reid, and they’re both men I’m proud to know.”

“Men, Tobias?” Gibbs spat out snidely.

“Go fuck yourself, Gibbs. Either one of them makes a far better human being than you do, especially
right now. In fact, you’re pretty fucking close to making me ashamed I ever called you friend.”

He set his empty jam jar on the work-bench and started for the stairs.

“Tobias.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but was that just a hint of contrition in that grudging voice? He hesitated, one foot on the bottom step.

“Where is he? Is he…”

“Vance hasn’t told you?”

“Vance hasn’t told me shit. He’s furious with me. First the fuck up with Ziva and McGee… it was all around the office once Tony left… Abby had a screaming fit at McGee over it, so it didn’t take long to make its way around the agency grapevine… The junior agents left him hanging on an op, hunting for domestic terrorists who had already killed three people. Sure, it was a shock that he was zed… but to be hung out to dry by his team-mates when they should have had his back… that was worse. Vance thinks I’m the one who told everyone, and that’s bad enough, but then the team falling apart… He won’t tell me shit.”

Tobias nodded. Yeah, let the stiff-necked old jar-head suffer in the mess of his own damn creation. But… Tony wouldn’t like it. “He still logs Agent Afloat reports, all but the date line and signature redacted above Vance’s pay grade. Probably above SecNav’s, too, considering he’s the one had to sign off on the reassignment.”

Tobias had taken the opportunity to talk to Vance over the past few days. ‘The Toothpick’, as DiNozzo had irreverently named him, was still smarting from the ass-chewing he was getting from SecNav over mismanaging the MCRT. Their closure rate had dropped like a stone, they couldn’t keep anyone but David on the team for more than a few weeks (and most not that long), and even the team paperwork was suffering badly; late, incomplete, full of errors and missing data. And yes, occasionally in Hebrew. Twice they had missed case-related court appearances, three of the arrests they had been able to make had been thrown out because of mis-managed or insufficient evidence, and JAG was furious. Vance confessed that former NCIS Director Tom Morrow had been laughing up his sleeve and delivering ‘I told you so’s over the mess, since apparently he had warned Vance when he took over that Very Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. was the lynch pin holding MCRT together, and not to underestimate the kid, no matter what he looked like on paper. And since Morrow was Director of Homeland Security, he did happen to know what was in some of those redacted reports.

Tobias could only shake his head at the idiocy of some people, determined to hang onto their prejudices at all costs, and, yes, Vance had known about DiNozzo being zed before the fit hit the shan. It was in the background on the Philly undercover with the Macaluso Mafia family… Tony had gone in as a zed. No one in their right mind would suspect a zed of being a cop, undercover or not. The Don’s sister had been zed, so he was understandably soft on them… hence Tony’s ability to work his way so far in. His value as an undercover asset was why successive bosses had turned a blind eye, kept his secret to themselves, allowed him to remain unbranded, ‘passing’ as male.

Tobias had felt obliged to tell Vance, “Or you could have asked me, and I would have told you the DiNutso kid is worth his weight in gold, in any organization smart enough not to force him out.” At which Vance’s face had turned sour, the toothpick in his mouth snapped in two, and Tobias had recognised as good an exit line as he was going to get.

“You know he never made it to the *Eisenhower*, like Vance wanted,” Tobias offered.
“That much I do know.”

“Missing him, hunh? Like the song says, ‘You don’t know what you got till it’s gone’? Good. Wherever he is, he’s doing the job, his way. And he’s doing good.”

“You know where he is?”

“Nope. Above my pay grade too.”

“But you’re in touch? You can get a message to him?”

“Maybe. Depends. What do you want me to say?”

“I… Tell him to get his ass back to his desk.”

“That’s it? That’s what you want to say to him after all you’ve done to fuck up? Oh hell no.”

“I want to make it right. But I can’t until he comes back.”

“Yeah, no. Not happening. You’re not going to get him back, Gibbs. That ship has sailed, and I gotta say, it’s your own fucking fault.”

With that, Tobias continued up the steps. He was just exiting through to the kitchen when he heard the faint whisper behind him.

“I know.”

Over the next week, Tobias kept his ear peeled for the fall out of their little discussion, and was totally unsurprised to find that Mossad officer Ziva David was sent packing back to Israel. Seems she got caught with her fingers in more than one classified cookie jar. Even after the censures over the Rivkin affair, she had still been running illegal and unauthorized Mossad operations out of her apartment as handler, using NCIS resources and classified information. Several Mossad agents illegally in the US and acting under her orders, were sent home with her. What Mossad thought of that was the stuff of intelligence circles legend, the most obvious result being that Director Eli David got his ass handed to him, and canned out of the organization, along with his daughter and a mitt-full of others letting personal loyalty to Eli trump common sense or duty to their nation.

While the Director of Home World Security had access to alien tech that made commuting between DC and Colorado Springs easy-peasy, Dr. Daniel Jackson and his new-hire, FBI consultant Dr. Spencer Reid, had to take more conventional transportation. At least all they needed to travel with was their carry-on, and the cat carrier for Bast, who, it turned out, was perfectly happy sleeping in her carrier. Luckily.

Daniel made sure Reid was in his sight the whole way, taking one military transport after another, and deliberately running interference between the young zed and any potential trouble.

There was surprisingly little of it, actually. The careful, side-long glances the FBI profiler got, once he was recognized as ‘THAT zed’, were mostly speculation, re-assessment… confusion, and grudging respect.

Behind them in Washington DC, three shipping crates were beamed out, furniture was moved to a
secure storage facility, the keys and access codes passed along to JJ Jareau, and stone-faced lawyers saw that the lease on the apartment was settled and the keys handed back to the landlord. Dr. Diana Reid was re-located with very little fuss to her new accommodation at the Alexandria Sanitarium, where the staff made her feel welcome and secure. JJ was there to greet her, along with their administrator and the head physician, whom Spencer had met and approved before he left.

It was a long and tiring trip, and Spencer had plenty of time with his own thoughts… time for regrets, doubts… and, slow to catch fire but then quickly fanned as they proceeded west… anticipation.

*~As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.~ Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln Letters*

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