Dark, Still Water
by LitGal

Summary

When one of Daniel Jackson's friends goes snooping into the wrong computer, the SG-1 team comes to Cascade to find her before the NID can. But the local detective assigned to assist them--and his very strange anthropologist partner--complicate things. Teal'c isn't sure what the relationship is between Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg, but he knows it isn't healthy, and he knows that he would like to help. He also knows that there is something very unusual about the young Blair Sandburg, something which reminds Teal'c of old Jaffa stories of men with mystical powers.
Part One

1. Chapter One

AN: This is set during season four of Sentinel after Alex Barnes drove a wedge between the guys, specifically during the episode Murder 101 when Jim is NOT a particularly nice person. Stargate is set near the end of season three when the original team is still acting like the original team.

Teal'c walked behind his teammates, watching the growing exasperation evident in every line of Daniel's body.

"This is not my fault."

"Yeah, sure," O'Neill responded. Daniel turned to Carter, clearly looking for some sort of support. Carter gave a small smile and shrugged.

Sometimes, he still had difficulty not thinking of Daniel as cha'til, a young man before his first battle. He'd never before met someone who could walk through the sorrows of war and retain so little of the horrors. His grief tore at him, but when the pain passed, Daniel was again whole. His enthusiasm and conviction that people were essentially good just never wavered. Teal'c himself could not claim to have remained unscathed by the horrors he had witnessed. Sometimes, in kelno'reem, he did not know himself. As a young man, he had been convinced of his own power, determined to challenge an unfair universe and bring it to its knees. These days, he sometimes wondered whether he made any difference at all.

Teal'c pushed that thought aside as he scanned the room into which O'Neill had led them. Perhaps O'Neill's recent deception had created this sense of discord within him. When O'Neill had fled Earth, pretending to turn against his own team in order to infiltrate the NID, Teal'c had been disturbed at both the reactions of his team and his own thoughts. But now was the time for attentiveness.

Daniel had often chastised him for approaching every situation as though some great danger approached, but this room seemed to warrant suspicion. Enforcers—police officers and detectives—wandered the room, some with individuals who were restrained by metal cuffs. Teal'c quickly spotted the man with whom they wished to speak—Detective James Ellison. He was leaning over a desk talking with a younger man who had long hair pulled back into a ponytail. Teal'c had questioned such hair when he had first come to Earth, but these people thought nothing of providing an enemy with an advantage in hand-to-hand combat.

"I know. Where else can we look?" the young man asked as he jabbed at the computer with great frustration.

"I don't know, but, uh... anyplace other than right here." Detective Ellison pushed the younger man out of his way, physically shoving him to one side before pulling up a chair to take over the computer station. Teal'c limited himself to raising an eyebrow. He thought he might have misunderstood the interaction, but O'Neill and Daniel exchanged an equally concerned look.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" The young one demanded, obviously upset, and yet no one in the room responded. Perhaps Ellison was in charge of the young one's training, but if that were the case, he did not deserve the title of tec'ma-te. The young one would be better choosing another for his teacher.
"Look, Chief, what would you like me to do? Kid's got no charge. I got names to run in a murder case. I'd love to help you out, but my hands are tied with nothing else to go on. It's just the law."

Ellison turned his back on the young one, but now Teal'c was even more confused. "Chief" was a term indicating authority, but yet Ellison dismissed the other from his presence by focusing all his attention on the computer. If he insulted Teal'c in such a manner, he would have found himself paying for his insult with a lesson in humility and manners. The young one only stared at Ellison with a lost expression that Teal'c rarely saw on adults. It was an expression of loss and pain that Daniel would sometimes wear, which was one reason why Teal'c still sometimes thought of his friend as cha'til rather than fellow warrior.

"Maybe this is a bad time, sir," Carter said softly.

They had not taken more than a few steps into the crowded room, and based on what he had seen so far, Teal'c agreed with Carter's assessment. If Ellison were having difficulties, they should seek his assistance later or perhaps just avoid him altogether.

"It's just the law?" The young one demanded incredulously; however, Ellison had already looked up from his computer, not toward his outraged companion but toward them. His eyes narrowed. O'Neill moved forward, immediately sliding into that casual façade that had deceived so many into believing that he was not a threat.

"Hey, you're Ellison, aren't you?" O'Neill said as he cheerfully offered his hand in greeting. Standing quickly, Ellison took the offered hand suspiciously.

"Do I know you?" Ellison asked. As soon as possible, he withdrew his hand, and Teal'c noticed that the young one immediately moved to Ellison's side. Whatever the conflict between them, the young one did not lack loyalty to his teacher.

"Colonel O'Neill?" Ellison asked, his eyes focusing on Teal'c for a long minute. The young one was now pressed closely to Ellison's side looking very much like a kal'ma who had found himself in the middle of fighting adults. Certainly O'Neill had said nothing to create such alarm.

O'Neill smiled and turned to give Daniel a smug look. "I told you this was a good idea, Danny. He remembers me, but then how could anyone forget me?"

"I never said it wasn't," Daniel quickly shot right back.

"Ah, but you implied," O'Neill chastised him. "Ellison, this is a friend of mine, Dr. Daniel Jackson, and this is Samantha Carter and Murray." Teal'c nodded at the appropriate time, but Ellison actually looked more aggravated after the introductions. The young one at his side shifted his weight, and Ellison managed to bump into him in such a way to push him back. Teal'c wondered if the gesture were one of protectiveness or annoyance.

O'Neill, however, pushed on. "We have a little problem. One of Daniel's friends called him because she's in a little trouble. It seems like she was digging around in some computer files where she shouldn't have been... which is not surprising for one of Daniel's friends. Anyway, she riled up the wrong people, and we can't seem to find her." O'Neill laid the problem out so simply. The reality was far more complex involving computer security breaches of both SGC and the NID. A former friend of Daniel had become obsessed with the belief that the government had acted maliciously toward him, perhaps kidnapping him. In her search for evidence, she had unearthed far more secrets
than it was safe for her to possess. Teal'c had no doubt that the NID would eliminate her given the chance, and Colonel O'Neill and General Hammond both agreed that the woman needed protection, assuming, of course, that she had not already been assassinated or kidnapped by others.

Ellison cocked his head to the side, clearly still uneasy with their presence. This time O'Neill and Carter exchanged a confused look.

"Elizabeth would not have just disappeared," Daniel jumped in, obviously sensing the growing unease in the room and attempting to resolve it with his smile and enthusiasm. Teal'c often watched children do the same in their parents' homes—charming adults into forgetting disputes. This was a skill at which Daniel excelled. "I haven't been around much lately, but we talked three days ago, and she was supposed to meet me today. I'm really worried."

Unlike most of the universe, Ellison did not seem charmed by Daniel. "Missing persons? There's a good detective on the second floor. I'll—" Ellison started to say.

"Ah, proper channels," O'Neill nodded wisely. "I'm not good with proper channels... or proper channels aren't good with me, one or the other." He shrugged dismissively. "But Daniel's friend is in a good deal of trouble, and I was hoping you could give me a hand, one old soldier to another."

"Jim?" the young one asked. He had been sick recently, severely enough that he still had the lingering effects of a hard fatigue clinging to him.

"I'm sorry," Ellison said. He was shaking his head and still ignoring his companion. "I'm really quite busy, but I'll call down to missing persons." Ellison reached for the phone on his desk, and Teal'c noticed that the companion's hand was actually reaching for him, fisting his shirt. Ellison gave him an unpleasant look, and he withdrew his hand and physically backed up a step.

"Ellison!" a loud voice commanded from across the room. Ellison tensed. A large man approached them, one who clearly expected and had earned respect. The eyes of all those in the room followed him, men checking their commander to see if his orders were for them. But this new man walked directly toward their group, his gaze for Ellison. O'Neill shifted his focus from Ellison to this new man.

"You're already here," the new man sighed. "I'm Captain Banks. The commissioner said you needed some help finding someone." Banks shook O'Neill's hand with far more warmth than Ellison had. "Is this your team?"

"Sam Carter, Daniel Jackson, and Murray," O'Neill quickly introduced them. "I'm really concerned that we could have a problem, so I appreciate your department giving us a hand."

Banks tensed slightly at that. "Yes, well it seems that you have some friends in high places."

O'Neill did not bother to deny that charge, and Banks turned toward Ellison. "Jim, you're on the case."

Rather than follow that order, Ellison glared at his commander. "Simon, I'm on the Chung murder."

"Put it on hold," Banks ordered, his voice a clear warning. The young one shifted uncomfortably, his eyes going from one male to the other, but he remained silent.

"But—"

"That's an order straight from the top, Jim. Colonel O'Neill, we do have a lot of work around here. I assume that your business won't tie up my best detective for too long."
"If he's your best, hopefully not. Our goal is to get out of town as fast as we can," O'Neill agreed cheerfully.

"Oh man, not fast enough." The young man barely breathed the words. Teal'c had much better hearing than the others, and yet he had to struggle to make out what the young one had said. Ellison, however, immediately turned a disgusted glare to the other. Banks did not seem to notice.

"He is my best. Jim, just get this wrapped up so you can get back to the Chung murder. Joel can handle it on his own until you get this cleared." Having delivered the unwelcome news, Banks retreated across the crowded room. Many of the detectives were now watching with thinly disguised interested, not even bothering to avert their eyes as Teal'c looked around the room.

"Blair Sandburg," the young one offered, moving around Ellison to offer his hand to them without being introduced. "I'm an observer with the department, and I guess Jim just sort of adopted me along the way. They couldn't get any of the other guys to put up with me." The words were pleasant, joking even, but the tone was wrong.

"An observer?" O'Neill clearly did not like the idea, and Ellison moved forward, his hand landing on Blair's shoulder, stilling the nervous movement as Blair shifted from foot to foot.

"He's getting a doctorate in anthropology," Ellison offered.

"Anthropology? Really?" Daniel's voice brimmed with enthusiasm.

"Awww, ya had to go and use a geek word, didn't you?" O'Neill complained, his tone far more indulgent that his words would imply. Daniel just glared at him for a second.

"I have a doctorate in archeology, I specialized in Egypt," Daniel said after offering O'Neill that malevolent glare.

"Oh man, no way. I did some travelling in Egypt but the best archeological sites were totally verboten," Blair's face lighted like a child who has seen a parent return from war.

"I was on digs in Hierakonpolis and Abusir." Daniel's face was equally enthusiastic.

"Cool!" Blair again bounced, and O'Neill rolled his eyes at both of the young scientists.

"What's your area of specialization?" Daniel asked, and both Ellison and Blair immediately stilled. Ellison's hand tightened on the young man's shoulder, and the energy and vibrancy appeared to drain from Blair, leaving behind the tired shell of the man he had been only seconds before. O'Neill stiffened, clearly unhappy with the reaction and the threat Ellison appeared to pose to the young scientist, emotionally if not physically.

Blair's voice had grown quiet, and he shrugged as he offered an answer. "Biological anthropology with some dabbling in socio-cultural... the mythology of South America mostly. But I'm working on the police culture... the whole in-group dynamic and thin blue line. You know."

"Social identity theory," Daniel agreed after a long pause. He appeared as confused as the rest of them about this sudden shift in tone. "That's a little more on the sociology end of things, isn't it?"

"It's a little cross-curricular, but I'm into the culture supported by the individuals, not the actual psychology or sociology of members of the group. The individuals are totally not the focus. It's the group as a whole. Everyone." Blair gestured toward the whole room, and now he had started to color, pink leeching into his face.
"Maybe you two could be geeky later," O'Neill said, stepping into the void when both Daniel and Blair appeared to unexpectedly abandon their conversation. "I'm looking for Elizabeth Canarsee."

O'Neill set his briefcase down on the corner of Ellison's desk and retrieved a file. "She's a computer expert. She went to school with Danny at the University of Chicago and then obviously lost her mind."

"Jack," Daniel immediately protested.

"Danny, she decided that if you took a government position, that must mean you were kidnapped. She's a fruitcake."

"She just..." Daniel paused, obviously struggling to make a counterargument. "She's just a little anti-government."

Ellison pulled Blair back, and stepped in front. "So, what is an archeologist doing working for the government?" The suspicion was clear in the tone.

Daniel gave a sheepish grin. "Trying to make a living doing archeology is not easy, especially when you've burned a few bridges. I had to fall back on my PhD in linguistics, and I do cryptology and translation." Ellison did not appear placated.

O'Neill again attempted to move them back to the task at hand. "Look, Danny and his inability to play nice with others is not the issue. Ms. Canarsee finally reached him three days ago, nearly hysterical because of her wacky belief that he had vanished and because she believed that she had breached security at a few fairly secure sites."

"You want to arrest her," Ellison said flatly as he finally took the file.

"Not particularly," O'Neill answered. That made Ellison tilt his head and study O'Neill in a way that was most unusual. O'Neill shrugged. "I actually have a job offer for her. She's good. And if she breached the security of the people I believe she might have... she's going to need a job with some very good fringe benefits in the way of armed security details."

"NID, NSA or CIA?" Ellison flipped through the file without even looking up.

"Shit. No way, the spook brigade?" Blair asked. That earned him another withering look from Ellison.

"Look Darwin, maybe you'd better stay here."

"But—" Blair started to protest.

"Besides, don't you have a big, bad cheater to track down?" Jim asked. While the words meant little to Teal'c, he could see the way that Blair took them as though being hit in the gut. The young man backed up until he stood near the chair where he had been sitting when they had first come. Slowly, he sank into it, watching the rest of them as might a child who has been exiled from an adult conversation. O'Neill grabbed the edge of the desk, and Daniel moved to his side, obviously able to sense that the Colonel was about to say or do something highly undiplomatic.

This time Carter leapt into the awkward silence. "Detective, if you have a computer forensics department, I could use a terminal to try and track her on-line. We know she hasn't been using her computer, but she might be leaving traces in one of the systems we know she's hacked."

For a long time, Ellison studied her, but then his gaze slid slowly back to Teal'c. The man was excessively suspicious, especially since Teal'c had offered no word to inspire it. Then again, Daniel
had suggested that his silence was sometimes very prominent.

"I shall accompany you, Major Carter," Teal'c offered graciously. Ellison's eyes widened a bit.

O'Neill sighed. "Ya, you two do that. Meanwhile, maybe Detective Ellison could show me some of his infamous tracking skills. After all, a guy doesn't get to be cop of the year without having a few tricks up his sleeve, does he?" O'Neill had that tone of voice that he would so often use to goad Goa'uld, but it was clearly just as effective on humans. Detective Ellison turned a darker shade, his face reddening with anger, but Blair appeared to lose all color entirely. "Danny, maybe you could just sit tight until one of us gets a lead," O'Neill suggested, his eyes on Ellison as he practically dared the man to contradict him.

For a second, Teal'c thought Ellison might issue a challenge right there. Blair looked from Ellison to O'Neill and back with obvious panic, and even Carter moved unobtrusively into a better position for covering them in a fight. Teal'c remained impassive. He had already positioned himself to cover the room when he walked in, and if something happened, he had no doubt that he would be equal to any who might attack.

"Detective?" O'Neill asked. "Where would you start a missing person's investigation?"

Ellison's jaw was tight and his fists clenched, but he appeared to consciously relax both. "We should probably check out her home. If she went to ground, she may have left behind some clues, and if she was taken, there'll be some trace." Ellison glanced over at Blair. "Stay here, Chief." His words were sharper than needed, and Blair appeared so pale that Teal'c feared he might be ill. Instead he just nodded.

Stiffly, Ellison walked out of the room. Teal'c waited as O'Neill and Carter followed, watching as Daniel moved closer to Blair before he turned to follow Carter. They may have come to Cascade to rescue Daniel Jackson's friend, but clearly there was more here than a missing computer hacker.

2. Chapter Two

Teal'c stepped into the hall, checking either direction before Major Carter joined him. She had not found any trace of their target, and he could feel her frustration like a palpable beast that stalked her. He wished he had words that could assure her of his faith in her abilities, but the concepts that he might share with a fellow Jaffa did not translate into English. He might offer her his assurance that she was ral tora ke'na ma... one whose skills and dedication force the universe to bend to their will so that all circumstances yield to their greatest desire. After seeing the systems lords fall one after another, Teal'c could well believe she had that power. But only Daniel would understand his words, and the translation of 'lucky' seemed wholly inadequate.

"Hey, Teal'c," Carter offered him. He tilted his head in her direction as they both headed back toward Major Crimes where they hoped to find Daniel waiting with young Blair. Carter kept her own counsel as they passed guard until they were finally alone in the elevator. "Does Ellison seem a little abrasive or is it just me?"

"Blair Sandburg would be wise to choose another teacher," Teal'c said, unwilling to comment more on the sacred relationship between a young man and his chosen teacher.

"I take that as a yes." She sighed and studied the blank doors of the elevator. He could almost hear
her brain began to sift through information. "I don't like the way he physically intimidates someone sixty pounds lighter and a foot shorter than he is. And I bet Sandburg is a good ten years younger than he is." Carter fell silent, a distant expression on her face. She and Daniel were so very much alike, which is one reason for O'Neill's insistence that they never share a tent. They were both able and competent. Teal'c certainly respected Carter as a warrior; however, both were too likely to lose themselves in their own thoughts. And right now, her thoughts were clearly not charitable when it came to Ellison.

The elevator doors opened and for a second she stared down the wide hall without moving. The doors started sliding shut before she got off and started down the hall with a new determination in her step. Right now, Teal'c did not envy Ellison's position as the center of the major's ire. Carter hit the doors of Major Crimes, and her posture changed so quickly, that Teal'c's hand fell to his zat'nik'tel hidden within his clothing.

She turned to him. "They're gone." The anger Carter had reserved for Ellison now turned on Daniel. "Dammit, he was supposed to stay put."

Somehow Teal'c doubted Daniel or Blair had been kidnapped from a guard station, not even with Daniel's luck, so that meant they had willingly left.

"We need to get to the car." Carter turned and rushed by him back toward the elevator, and he followed. At times like this, Teal'c did miss commanding his own team. While he accepted that his judgment in following the false god, Apophis, was so flawed as to preclude him taking a leadership role again, he could still engage in some fantasy about Daniel and a little Jaffa discipline.

"The colonel is going to kill us if we lose him again," Carter muttered in the elevator. A prisoner gave her a salacious look, but when he caught Teal'c expression, the man quickly turned back to face the front of the elevator. "I can't believe him," Carter continued muttering, probably not even noticing the unwanted attention.

"Daniel Jackson shall be fine," Teal'c offered, but given Daniel's rather spectacular history with abductions, Teal'c could admit to feeling some apprehension. From the look Carter gave him, she felt the same way. The moment the elevator opened onto the garage, Carter was almost running to the car.

A police officer stopped to watch Carter hurry by, either because of her odd behavior or her attractiveness. So often Teal'c could not tell in this culture. Certainly he found Carter eminently suitable as a potential partner and he would have made an approach to her long ago if Daniel had not explained certain cultural expectations regarding team members abstaining. On the other hand according to Carter, most men found her skills unappealing. Earth males were not logical. This officer, however, seemed most interested.

She unlocked the trunk of her car, and the officer's hand moved toward his weapon. Ah, so the interest was professional.

"We shall be able to track Daniel Jackson and Blair Sandburg and discover where they have gone, correct?" Teal'c asked loud enough for the officer to hear.

"We should. Just as long as Daniel hasn't found the bug in his tape recorder, I'll be able to get a location on them in just a second," she assured him as she pulled out an oversized case and began to turn on the electronic equipment she had brought. Rather than leave, as Teal'c expected the officer to do, the man came closer.

"Did you say that Sandburg is missing?" he asked. Teal'c was surprised; most people avoided him.
"Indeed. We left our friend in the company of Blair Sandburg, and they have vanished."

"Fuck. Ellison's going to go on the warpath for sure," the officer swore with an exaggerated flinch.

"James Ellison?" Teal'c asked. Often times, many generations of family would serve in the same guard station, and many individuals within each generation would serve, so perhaps another Ellison was protective of young Blair Sandburg. If both James Ellison and Blair Sandburg were sworn to the same tec'ma-te, it might explain the way Blair endured Ellison's poor manners.

"Big guy with a huge attitude? Yeah, that's the one and only Ellison. The last time Sandburg got grabbed, he was a real bastard about it."

"The last time?" Carter asked, her hands pausing as she turned a concerned expression toward the officer.

"Sandburg's got a reputation around here. I mean, he's a stand-up guy... a lot more reliable then you might think what with the hair. He even holds his own in a crisis. But when he gets kidnapped, Ellison is a real dick about it. Last time it was Martin Smallwood. Ellison punched him out and nearly fed him to a crocodile. Before that was Mark Cantor and before that it was Vincent Lazar and then a druggie with some flower name and David Lash and the list goes on. It never ends well for whoever grabs the kid, but when we joke about him being a trouble magnet, we're not actually joking."

Teal'c exchanged a concerned look with Carter.

"If Sandburg's in trouble, I'm not telling Ellison, not with the mood he's been in lately," the officer continued. Holding up his hands as though ready to surrender at the thought of confronting Ellison, the officer backed away.

Carter cleared her throat. "I'm sure they just wandered off somewhere. Daniel and Blair are both into anthropology and archeology. They're probably just having coffee somewhere and talking about dirt." Teal'c had known Major Carter long enough to know that her tone of voice suggested that she did not believe her own words.

"Yeah, well for your sake, I hope so. When Ellison is in one of his moods, he is not the nicest person." With that, the officer turned and left. Teal'c looked at Carter who had the electronics case balanced on the bumper of the car.

"It's never easy, is it?" She asked with a sigh. "Okay, let's track down our trouble magnet before their trouble magnet gives our trouble magnet an even bigger case of bad luck."

"Were bad luck contagious, would we not already be contaminated?" Teal'c asked as he moved to the passenger side of the car.

"You think we aren't? We just can't afford another strain of the virus," Carter said with a small laugh. Once she got in the car, she turned on the small devise in the case she had taken from the trunk. The machinery hissed for a second, and then the sound of car traffic, the steady thrumming roll of engines and tires against asphalt, came through the small speaker.

"We have audio," Carter said cheerfully. "I really should have bugged him a long time ago. I can think of more than one planet where it would have saved us a lot of time."

"Indeed. Except Daniel Jackson does often lose his equipment while getting kidnapped," Teal'c pointed out. For years, he had shared a tent with Carter, and he shared a closeness with her that approximated the closeness Jaffa normally shared with each other within a command. She turned to
him with a smile.

"Ah, if I put the bug in his weapon or his supplies, he'd lose it. I put it in his tape recorder."

Teal'c nodded. "Daniel Jackson will not easily part with his tape recorder or notes," he agreed, remembering the one time that O'Neil had suggested using the pages of a notebook for kindling when they had found themselves in an unexpected snowstorm. The two men had nearly come to blows over the paper and only the dried bark Teal'c had found ended the feud.

A voice came over the radio.

"Hey!" Blair Sandburg shouted. Teal'c stiffened at the implied threat. "Geez, learn to drive, idiot!" he shouted a second later.

"I don't think there's any hurry," Daniel's voice came through the speaker as Carter started the car.

"They're heading west," Carter said as she guided their vehicle toward the exit.

"Jack has class this afternoon. If your friend went to her, we need enough time to talk him into believing you're a good guy and not one of those spook types out to get her," Blair answered.

Teal'c truly resented the way humans all seemed to name their children using the same names. Obviously, Blair did not speak of O'Neil, yet the name was the same. Even more aggravating, he did not use a complete name which would allow them to identify the destination Blair and Daniel had chosen. Teal'c looked at Carter, but she didn't seem to know the name 'Jack' either. She frowned as she headed into traffic.

Daniel gave a weak laugh. "Just... let's not get killed driving there."

"Oh man, that's rich. You should see Jim drive. His insurance guy hates him. Seriously hates. I am an old lady driver compared to him." This happy and ebullient young man did not sound like the same scientist they had met in the squad room.

Whatever Blair Sandburg had promised, Daniel sounded hopeful that it would provide useful information. "Do you really think your friend can help us?" Daniel asked, and from the tone, he sought reassurance, not information.

"If she knows anything about spooks, and if she thought she'd seen too much—"

"She did," Daniel interrupted.

"Well then, she would have gone to Jack Kelso. He is the only one with the connections to know what's going on and the moral center to avoid getting sucked into the spookland power grab. Man, I hate people who think they're above the law and play these fucking power games."

"Are we still talking about the NID? Not that I have a problem hating the NID, but it sounds like you have something else on your mind."

"That obvious, huh?" Blair sounded almost embarrassed. Teal'c wondered why a man would need to feel shame about disliking those who abused their power. Most humans were a bit of a mystery to him with their strange morality and odd rules, but Blair Sandburg seemed more odd than most.

Daniel seemed to understand Blair far better than Teal'c did. "It just seems like you're having a shitty day."
"Politics, man. It's all about the politics."

"I think politicians were the eleventh plague of Egypt."

"Totally. Man, if the flies and boils and locusts didn't make the Pharaoh give up, politicians sure would have."

"Yeah, but Yahweh turned politicians loose on the world, and like cockroaches, letting them in is easier than getting rid of them." Daniel joked. He sounded happy and playful. Until his moment, Teal'c didn't realize just how rarely he had heard that particular tone from Daniel any more. O'Neill's deception and abandonment had hit Daniel hard, but no harder than having lost O'Neill for months, unsure of whether or not he survived—no harder than his own near death at the hands of Linea or their imprisonment on Ne'tu. Perhaps their difficulties were finally beginning to dull Daniel's enthusiasm. However, the sharp and sardonic tone he could hear though the speaker now was the Daniel he had first met.

"Step on one, and a dozen more come scurrying out," Blair agreed.

"So, what's your cockroach's name?"

"Which one? Man, right now, my world is just cockroaches." Blair's voice lost its enthusiasm. "The university is giving me shit. A student plagiarized his paper and when I called him on it, he actually threatened me. Man, I have no respect for people who don't take care of their own business. And then..." Blair's voice grew angry. "Then the university just wants to whitewash the whole affair. Dr. Sidney Oldham tells me that I'm too black and white. He says to just give Ventriss a C... Give him a C! Man, he cheated. This Ventriss threatened me and he raped one of the girls on campus, but his daddy has more money than God. So, hey, we should just brush the rest under the carpet."

"What did you tell them?"

"I basically said a polite version of screw you. Man, if I don't find some sort of proof that Ventriss is the one in the wrong, my goose is well and cooked. Shit."

"I would have done the same thing," Daniel said so quietly that the road noise almost drowned the soft words that came through the speaker. Carter had closed the distance so that Teal'c could see the back of the two men's heads. Sandburg was driving, and he was exceeding the posted speed limits. Daniel laughed, and now Teal'c could see him turn to Blair as the microphone relayed his words. "But then again, considering how unpopular I am in scientific circles, I might not be the best role model."

"I'd rather be unpopular than an accomplice to academic fraud. But then I'd rather be an accomplice than out on my ass. Man, if I don't have my dissertation, I'm just not sure what I do have... not anymore. And without that teaching fellowship, the money for tuition dries up."

"You can't get a part time job?"

Blair didn't answer right away. "There are complications," he finally admitted. Teal'c could hear the deception through the speaker. "I'd rather try to keep things like they are, but it's like I'm doing a balancing act, and I'm starting to lose my balance. They want me to pass Ventriss, just send him wandering out into the world with a degree that means nothing. I just don't think I can do that. Teaching underclassmen really sucks. Sucks monkey balls." This time, Blair's laughter sounded pained.

Teal'c could see Daniel reach out to touch Blair's shoulder. Something about Blair's statements
seemed untruthful, but Daniel still seemed to trust the younger man. Then again, sometimes Daniel was too quick to trust.

"Don't assume it's all underclassmen who pull this," he told Blair. "Did you see anything about this huge lawsuit with the University of Chicago and the Egyptian government getting a court order for the return of some artifacts?"

"Totally. The university tried to claim that they needed something like six months to examine the artifacts before returning them. Man, I am totally on Egypt's side on that one. The university had no business trying to set up their own timelines and just arbitrarily tell the Egyptians when they could get their own treasures back."

"Maybe." Daniel did not sound convinced. "Anyway, I went back to the University of Chicago a week ago, and I found a piece of evidence that could have been land breaking in archeology. It would have rewritten the textbooks." Daniel laughed. "Of course, it later turned out the lab had contaminated the sample and I had a plain old funereal urn, but my point is that another archeologist stole the lab results and tried to take credit for the find."

"No fucking way!"

" Fucking way," Daniel countered. "Even better, he and I worked together under Dr. Jordan at Chicago. He was our mentor and Steven and I came through the doctoral program together. I can't claim I always have the moral highroad here, but his ethics crumbled in the face of a little profit and fame."

"Asshole," Blair quickly declared. "I hope he got what he deserved."

Daniel took several moments to answer. "Maybe a little too much."

"Oh?"

"I tracked him to a small pyramid in Egypt where he was trying to screw me out of my discovery. The roof caved in, and he was badly injured."

Blair stopped at a red light, and when he turned to face Daniel, he appeared genuinely concerned. "Oh man. Karma's a bitch."

"More than you know. He has nominal aphasia. His career had been taking off, and now he's on disability."

"Whoa, hey, you're talking about Steven Rayner."

"You know him?"

"No way. But I read his book, and it was drivel. The conclusions were derivative at best, and he included some pretty questionable work just because it was sensational. No way did that deserve to be on the bestseller's list."

"Obviously, most people didn't agree." Daniel's voice sounded brittle. "I just... I felt guilty that I wanted a rock to fall on his head and it did."

"Yeah, I hear you. Karma is not usually that efficient. But, man, you know you're not to blame, right?"

Daniel nodded, but the traffic was moving again, so Teal'c could not see his face. "My head knows."
Blair's curls bobbed as he nodded at that. "I definitely hear that. Getting the head and the heart to agree... not always the easiest thing in the world."

"As irrational as it sounds, sometimes I feel like my work on that artifact or my hatred and jealousy are somehow to blame for the current situation. People were hurt. It's like the worst part of my life now spilled out onto the people I used to care about."

"I hear that. I totally hear that," Blair agreed softly.

Carter shook her head and hit the accelerator hard enough that Teal'c could well imagine O'Neill was driving. "I can't believe he feels guilty about that mess. Steven and Sarah were not his fault."

Teal'c did not answer, but he had no right to judge another man's guilt. He carried enough of his own to know that a man had to come to terms with his own heart.

The two scientists in the next car were quiet, but Carter appeared more distressed than Teal'c would have expected. "I can't believe he never talked to us about this," she said grimly.

Teal'c did not answer that either, but he could understand quite well. Daniel had not caused the events of that day. His lover had been taken as a host, and it was the goa'uld Osiris and Steven's own greed which had led to the confrontation. However, guilt need not be logical, and Daniel clearly did not want the illogic of his thoughts brought to light. Even more, he would never complain to any of them. Teal'c and O'Neill had both killed more than they could account for. Major Carter, while not as often in position to use deadly force, had often killed, both during and before she joined the Stargate program. How could Daniel complain to them about his own soiled hands when theirs were so much more tainted?

"Has he ever come to you with this?" Carter asked.

"He has not," Teal'c informed her. He wasn't sure if she was upset or comforted by that information. Daniel Jackson was far more likely to confide in O'Neill than the rest of them, but from the sound of his guilt, he had not shared this with anyone. Carter fell silent.

Daniel was the first to interrupt the silence in either car. "So, what are you doing to do with your problem?"

"Who knows. I'm sure as hell not giving him a grade, but that doesn't mean they won't go over my head. Seriously, it's not that hard to go over my head in academia or basketball." Blair laughed, and Daniel appeared to take that as a sign that the conversation had grown too serious.

"There are cultures that revere shortness."

"Says the man who has a good five inches on me. Oh, and then there's the part where you made that up."

"I don't have more than four inches on you," Daniel teased.

"Jerk."

Daniel just laughed.

Their car grew quiet again as they passed a series of crosswalks where students walked lazily through the traffic, forcing the cars to slow.

"Some days, I just wish I was out of academia," Blair said wearily. "I mean, you did it. You walked
away from the grants and the politics and the fucking backstabbing each other over rubber chicken. Are you glad you did?"

Daniel took his time before he answered. "Most days, yes."

"Maybe I'm just having a bad day here, but there are times that I'm just searching for an excuse to just say 'fuck it'. And I know there are people on that campus who just want to find a way to tell me to fuck off. There are too many people ready to tell me that." Blair's voice was weary.

"Have you thought of looking for other work? Surely you could finish up your dissertation and just move on." Daniel didn't go as far as to make an offer, but his desire to help was palpable, even through the microphone.

Carter turned and gave Teal'c an incredulous look. "He's trying to recruit. The colonel is going to kill him."

While he didn't approve of actually killing Daniel, the attempt to recruit the Blair did seem precipitous. Of course, Daniel was not well known for his reticent nature or cautious decisions. However, Teal'c suspicious mind saw patterns in both the coincidence of finding another scientist in such dire straits and the timing. Not more than seven months ago, Daniel had recruited the scientist Nyan from a world where he was in danger. And now here was another intimidated scientist with the skills the program needed in a place where Daniel was sure to meet and work with him. It conjured thoughts of conspiracies and infiltrators and NID plans.

Blair, however, did not seem quick to press his advantage. "It's not that simple."

"It's never simple. But if you need a change, there are opportunities out there."

Carter gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. "Daniel... don't go there," Carter whispered to herself.

"If you change your mind, give me a call."

"Shit," Carter sighed, sounding more resigned than angry. Teal'c could understand her frustration. Colonel O'Neill would want to know that Daniel had made even this tentative approach, particularly since they had no background information on Blair Sandburg.

Blair appeared pleased by the offer. "Thanks man. Sometimes it's just good to know that there's an out."

"Any time."

The car reached the university and pulled into a student lot, forcing Carter to circle around to a public lot that appeared to charge an unreasonable fee for simply parking a car.

"Let's go get our archeologist before he decides to adopt this guy," Carter said as she put the car into park and flipped off the tracking equipment braced on the console between their seats. Teal'c got out and looked across the vast wasteland of cars to where Daniel and Blair were walking across the concrete. Daniel did appear to have taken Blair into his trust. The two walked so closely together that Daniel would not be able to counter any attempt to disable him, and yet he appeared entirely at ease. Either Blair was a young man in great distress or the NID had devised a particularly effective trap to ensnare Daniel Jackson's trust.
"Daniel!" Carter called, waving across the campus.

"Sam! I was going to call you," Daniel quickly offered with a sheepish grin.

"You're just lucky the colonel isn't here," she pointed out. Normally Carter was indulgent with Daniel Jackson's failings, but this time her voice was sharp. Teal'c chose to not add anything to the reprimand since Daniel was already looking suitably chastised.

"Whoa, and I thought Jim was a mother hen," Blair laughed. "We're only a couple of miles from the station."

Daniel ducked his head and looked at Sam out of the side of his eyes, an expression that usually earned him forgiveness, although it did seem to occasionally anger O'Neill more than placate him. "Sam, Blair thinks he knows where Elizabeth might have gone. I was going to call you just as soon as we found anything out."

Blair appeared confused as he looked from Daniel to Carter and back with growing concern. "It was only a couple of miles," he said, suddenly uncertain.

Were Teal'c forward enough to comment on another's demeanor, he would suggest that Blair had been criticized too often. A little criticism would inspire a warrior to improve poor performance, but this young man had reached the point where even the suggestion of criticism caused him distress and withdrawal. If Ellison had caused this reaction, then he should be stripped of the title of te'rm'a-te and never allowed to work with a cha'til again. But humans had odd notions of proper, and given the disinterest of the guards at the station, it appeared that the mishandling of a young one was not a priority. He doubted that O'Neill would approve of any attempt on Teal'c part to challenge James Ellison and publicly strip him of the cha'til's loyalty. Teal'c, however, would not allow Ellison near Daniel Jackson.

Carter reacted to that tone, Blair Sandburg's distress clearly causing her to reconsider her anger for Daniel. "I know it isn't far, but with Elizabeth on the run, some pretty aggressive people may be looking for her. You could catch the wrong people's attention," Carter pointed out.

"Sam's right," Daniel said as he gave Blair a reassuring pat on the arm. "I should have told them we were leaving." He turned to Carter. "I was hoping you were having luck with the computer trace, and I didn't want to pull you away."

"I could have accompanied you," Teal'c pointed out.

"I wanted to catch Jack before his afternoon class," Blair said apologetically.

"Jack?" Carter questioned.

Blair frowned. "Jack Kelso. He was CIA, but after he retired, he wrote a big expose. If she was looking for help, he would have been at the top of her list," Blair's tone was reserved, as though expecting to be berated.

"Good idea," Carter smiled. Teal'c did not believe that Daniel Jackson was the only one to feel an almost avuncular attitude toward Blair. "Why don't we go all see him?" she suggested.

Blair was already nodding, the frown clearing the moment Carter agreed to his suggestion. "He's
always out getting his coffee before class, and he's way less suspicious about meeting new people in
the open, at least when the people involved are connected to the government. Paranoia isn't actually
paranoid when they're really out to get you," he laughed. But the sound was strained and ended in a
harsh cough that made Carter frown with worry.

"He sounds wise," Teal'c agreed. Blair gave him a small smile between coughs before he finally got
control of his breathing. He was clearly not well.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked.

"Fine. You know how it goes, you get all worn down by the end of the semester."

"Is this not the beginning of the semester?" Teal'c asked, confused by what he had believed to be the
instructional cycle for those pursuing advanced training.

"To-mA-to, to-maa-to." Blair shrugged, and Teal'c raised an eyebrow, signaling his confusion to the
others. However, it was Blair who responded to his tacit request for information. "It's a saying
meaning that different people say things different ways, and they're all right. People from one region
pronounce the word to-mA-to and those from another will say to-maa-to. It's all good, man." Blair
turned and headed for the campus, leaving Teal'c wondering if the others noted how Blair had failed
to explain his poor health.

"Softie," Carter whispered with a smile in Teal'c direction before she followed. Daniel's smile was
equally conspiratorial. Teal'c could only sigh as he followed. His desire to try and undo the damage
inflicted by an incompetent tec'ma-te did not signal an unwillingness to kill this Blair Sandburg or a
blindness to any potential threat he posed. He still worried that this young man's vulnerability could
be no more than an effective trap to catch Daniel's attention.

"So, Murray, what tribe are you from?" Blair asked. He turned and walked backwards several steps,
a bounce in his walk that lasted only moments before another round of coughing forced him to adopt
a more sedate pace.

Teal'c looked to Daniel for the answer to this question.

"I mean," Blair went on, not even waiting for a response, "the fact that you aren't familiar with
colloquial English pretty much means you're not American, but your language and cadence is so
very proper. Totally colonial."

"Murray's from a rural area," Daniel said, largely ignoring the actual question. Blair gave him an
incredulous look that made it clear that he had detected the obfuscation.

"Top secret?" Blair guessed with a smile.

"Indeed," Teal'c offered quickly. The young man was astute enough that Daniel Jackson's attempts
to avoid the situation would, no doubt, simply inspire more curiosity.

"That's cool. Man, there are some very unstable regions, so I bet there are governments that would
not want it known they have people training with the US military." Blair appeared confident in his
interpretation of the situation, and Teal'c felt no need to correct his assumptions. "There he is," Blair
said as he pointed to a man in a wheelchair who was sitting near the edge of a communal gathering
area.

"Jack!" Blair called out, and then he was trotting over to the man.

"Geez, it's like watching Daniel hopped up on crack," Sam joked.
"Very funny," Daniel answered dryly before he increased his pace. Blair was pointing at them, talking far more quickly than most humans. This Jack Kelso watched suspiciously, and Teal'c would not have been surprised to learn that he had a weapon secreted within his wheelchair. The man had the demeanor of a warrior. Teal'c looked again, and realized that he knew the man's face.

When Teal'c had first received clearance to access cultural artifacts from earth, nonfiction descriptions of government agencies had been his first priority. Long before the NID had attempted to undermine the SGC, these books had educated Teal'c on the nature of governments and their lack of integrity. Jack Kelso had written a particularly scathing book outlining the ways in which honorable soldiers were coopted to serve corrupt and manipulative masters. This truly was a man of honor and a warrior who Teal'c trusted to assist them in their quest.

"Jack, this is Sam Carter and Daniel Jackson and Murray." Blair gestured toward each of them.
"Guys, this is Jack Kelso, the man most likely to piss off covert agents here in Cascade. If there are spooks around, Jack knows it."

This Jack Kelso gave Blair an indulgent look. "I think the point of being a spy is to prevent people from knowing you're around."

"Whatever," Blair shrugged. "You are the best. Daniel here has a friend who's in trouble, so I thought you might be able to help."

Blair looked over toward Daniel, and once again, Daniel told his carefully edited tale that included only vague references to nefarious persons wishing to silence the woman. Jack Kelso, however, watched sharply, and Teal'c could well imagine that he knew more than he revealed.

"So, you were in Colorado when your friend was trying to prove the government was holding you captive?" he asked in a friendly tone that did not fool Teal'c.

Daniel nodded. "It was a stupid misunderstanding. I didn't get back to her quick enough, and she just figured if I wasn't calling her back it was because I couldn't. She overreacts sometimes."

Jack Kelso did not respond, but Sam turned to give Teal'c a concerned look, so Teal'c knew he was not the only one who had noticed this man's demeanor. "I can see where she's concerned," Kelso said slowly. "You disappear in the middle of the night and don't surface for over a year. Not a single credit card transaction." Teal'c hand shifted closer to his zat'ni'katel. Clearly this Kelso had investigated Elizabeth Canarsee's story, which meant he did have information. Daniel, however, continued on as though he didn't notice the man's unexpected knowledge about the situation. Much like O'Neill, Daniel was remarkably effective at feigning a certain level of obliviousness. Unlike O'Neill, Daniel could sometimes simply be oblivious.

"After what I said at that last conference, I thought it was in my best interests to give people time to forget," Daniel offered with a self-deprecating laugh.

"What did you say?" Blair asked. Kelso definitely looked interested in the answer to that.

"Just something stupid." Daniel shrugged the question off. "But Elizabeth is way off base, and if she's hacked information from the wrong people, she is not going to be able to fix this on her own."

"I wish I could help you," Kelso said, his eyes drifting to a spot on the far side of Carter. Teal'c angled his body slightly, and he could see O'Neill and James Ellison striding across the campus. Both men carried themselves as warriors ready to fly into battle, anger radiating from every step.

"She's a friend. I'm really worried about her. Look, I even have a picture of us together," Daniel said,
reaching for his wallet. Teal'c noted that Kelso stiffened, and that Daniel moved with deliberate care, his body telegraphing the fact that he was not going for a weapon. Clearly Daniel had identified Kelso as a potential threat, even if his speech and mannerisms feigned ignorance.

"Hey, kids, whatcha doing?" O'Neill called out as he closed the distance.

"Colonel!" Carter appeared surprised. "Blair suggested that Mr. Kelso might be able to help us."

O'Neill and Ellison had reached the small group, and anger clouded Ellison's features. If Teal'c respected the man enough to offer advice, he would tell him that such strong emotion interfered with a warrior's ability to react to his surroundings. Teal'c offered nothing. Ellison quickly cut through the center of the group and took a position near young Blair.

"I thought you were going to stay at the station, Chief," he said, his voice tight, but a hand reached out and touched Blair's shoulder as though to reassure either himself or Blair.

Blair grinned sheepishly. "I thought that if Daniel and I could talk to Jack without all you military types around, he might be less likely to think that we're up to something sneaky."

Teal'c watched with amusement as O'Neill gave Daniel a withering look.

"We followed, sir," Carter quickly offered, pointing out that she had not been part of the plan where Daniel went with an individual who had not been cleared during an investigation including NID operatives.

Now Daniel gave Carter a look equally as withering. As much as Teal'c did not understand command structures and power within human units, he did enjoy watching the posturing and tacit communication between the members of his team. O'Neill looked to him for some sort of support, and Teal'c raised an eyebrow, silently asking what O'Neill expected him to do. O'Neill sighed.

"Yeah, well Ellison here had the same idea after he struck out over at the apartment. So, since we're all here, whatda know?" O'Neill asked Kelso. Teal'c was struck by how much Kelso had actually relaxed.

"Jack Kelso, this is Jack O'Neill," Blair introduced them.

"Yes, I know," Kelso said. "Jack and I have worked on a few projects together. I thought you gave up the business. You claimed your knees were too old for it."

"They work better than yours," O'Neill answered. Carter gasped, so Teal'c was guessing that O'Neill had broken some custom, but one that Teal'c did not fully understand. To comment on such a disastrous injury as Kelso had suffered was to comment on his strength in surviving it. Clearly Kelso felt the same. He laughed.

"But my aim is still better than yours, not to mention my ability to play well with others."

"Ya sure, but are you as handsome as I am?" O'Neill shot right back. Obviously, these two had worked together many times.

"Maybe we should ask Ilsa Beganovitch that question," Kelso suggested with a salacious expression.

O'Neill laughed. "You old war horse. I can't believe you've settled in for the boring life."

"Says the man who spends every vacation fishing in a lake with no fish and staring at the stars."
O'Neill shrugged, but he did not attempt to defend his odd choice in recreational activities. After one attempt to engage in fishing, Teal'c did not believe there was a defense for such a pointless exercise. In over one hundred years, he had found no voluntary activity that he disliked as much as standing still and allowing small insects to feast on his blood as he held a fishing pole.

Teal'c looked, and Blair was watching the exchange with the sort of fascination Daniel often displayed when finding new ruins. Ellison, however, appeared increasingly agitated.

"So, you can follow this lead up on your own," Ellison interjected with very little concern for politeness. He put a hand on Blair's back and began urging him back toward the parking lot.

"Um, hey, nice to meet you guys," Blair hurried to offer before Ellison had shoved him away.

Once they were far enough away to shield them from human eavesdropping, Ellison leaned over to whisper roughly in Blair's ear, "What the hell are you thinking, going somewhere with a member of the military?"

"He's an archeologist," Blair answered sharply.

"So he says."

"I think I know enough about archeology to spot a fake. Back off, Jim." Blair started to walk ahead, but Ellison reached out and yanked him back to his side. However, they were far enough away that Teal'c could no longer hear their conversation. He turned to look at O'Neill, but he shrugged, clearly indicating that Blair's business was his own and Teal'c was not to interfere.

"So, Jack, what are you really doing here?" Kelso asked long after Jim and Blair had left.

"Trying to find a girl."

"That's the story of your life," Kelso teased, but then his eyes grew serious. "Are you sure the girl wants to be found?"

"Oh, I'm sure she doesn't," O'Neill quickly answered. "But she can't live off grid forever, and the others who are looking for her are a lot more dangerous than I am."

Kelso leaned forward and studied O'Neill. "Don't forget, I know how far you'll go to get what you want," Kelso said softly. Daniel shifted uncomfortably, but then he rarely liked to be reminded that their leader had his own dark past. "What do you want from her?" Kelso demanded.

"We want to help," Daniel quickly offered, but O'Neill held up a hand.

"She's good, Jack. My boss is willing to offer her a position, something that she would probably enjoy since she likes trying to take down the bad guys in our own government."

Kelso sat back, obviously surprised. "Counter-intelligence? I thought you were out of the nasty end of the feeding frenzy."

"I am." O'Neill studied the crowd as though supremely uninterested in the conversation, but Teal'c did not believe that for a moment. "My work attracts some people with questionable ethics, and if I have to take action to stop them, I will."

"Questionable ethics?" Kelso laughed. "Who's been trying to teach you to be diplomatic?"

O'Neill smirked in Daniel's general direction.
"Oh no," Daniel answered the silent comment in that look. "You can be as undiplomatic as you want to the NID. I'm just trying to teach you to be nice to people who deserve respect."

O'Neill shrugged, clearly suggesting that he found the whole exercise in diplomacy to be a waste of time, and Daniel only shook his head. There was a day when this would have caused a vociferous and heated exchange between the two, but it was only after listening to the conversation Daniel had shared with Blair that Teal'c realized just how subdued their friend had become.

"We want to hire her, but even if she doesn't want the job, she's going to need protection," O'Neill told Kelso.

"And Jim and Blair?" Kelso's question appeared to throw O'Neill.

"What about them?"

"You come to Cascade, and you immediately go to a man with a history in covert ops and wetwork? I don't think Ellison has ever shared his whole background with Blair, but you and I know what he's done. Why would you use him to find her? What are you expecting him to do once you do find her?"

Teal'c watched Carter and Daniel stiffen at the implication that they would do harm to Daniel's friend. While Teal'c did not believe O'Neill intended any such action, he did understand the strategic value in destroying one who could not be controlled. Apophis had ordered him to destroy an entire planet once. He had stood on the ha'tak and pressed the crystal that had obliterated their cities from space. The memory of huge brown eyes pleading with him pulled him into another memory.

The child had been remarkable. By the age of eight, he would argue mathematics with the priests of the temple. He had unlocked a puzzle of the gatebuilders by nine, and Apophis had targeted the child as a host. The boy had run at eleven, and when Teal'c had caught up to him in the marsh woods of Tareen, he had begged Teal'c to not allow the goa'uld to have him, to instead destroy him. O'Neill often made fun of the staff weapons, calling them tools of intimidation rather than war, and he was correct. The staff weapon was designed to do no more harm than a sarcophagus could repair. But the boy had pleaded to be destroyed rather than to allow a god to take his form. Teal'c had aimed for the boy's head. His first shot had vaporized the boy's eye and seared that remarkable brain.

The sarcophagus had reanimated the boy but not his mind. Teal'c had destroyed the boy to prevent Apophis from using him. Teal'c certainly could understand destroying an asset before allowing the enemy to make use of it.

"We don't hurt people," Daniel angrily insisted. "And we certainly aren't planning anything with Ellison or Elizabeth, tell him, Jack," Daniel demanded.

"Calm down, Danny."

"I'll calm down when you tell him how wrong he is," Daniel said angrily.

O'Neill shook his head. "Danny, you know we aren't going to hurt anyone. Jack, Elizabeth's in trouble. If I'd been sent to eliminate her... first, I wouldn't. I didn't go along with that shit when I was younger, and now that I'm old and cranky, I really don't go along with that shit. Second, I wouldn't use Ellison. The man is an ass. However, the intel says he's the best ass to find a missing person in Cascade. When we find Daniel's friend, my only suggestion for him is that he not let the door hit him in the ass on the way out."

O'Neill stepped closer, and sat on the edge of the low wall next to Kelso's chair. "What aren't you
telling me about Ellison?"

For long seconds, Kelso studied O'Neill. "Nothing I plan to tell you in the near future," Kelso said with a casual shrug that did not match the tightness around his mouth and eyes.

"I'm not interested him," O'Neill repeated.

"I'm less interested in him than Blair," Kelso said seriously. "Blair's a friend, and he doesn't need to get pulled into the middle of this, not now."

"Oh, for crying out loud. When did you start assuming that I was the bad guy? I'm not trying to drag Sandburg into anything."

"Um, Jack," Daniel said in that uncertain tone of voice that Daniel intended to use to defuse any anger. Unfortunately, that tone always managed to made O'Neill tense up even more. "I told Blair that there were options out there if life got to be too much, I suggested he could call me."

"You what?" O'Neill was up and standing inches from Daniel within seconds.

"Sir, he did not reveal anything classified," Carter quickly assured him.

With narrowed eyes, Daniel turned on her. "Of course I didn't, but how would you know that?" Carter didn't answer immediately. "Are you bugging Blair?" Daniel demanded.

"Indeed not. We have bugged you," Teal'c informed Daniel to prevent the coming fight. Daniel's mouth fell open and he looked from Carter to O'Neill.

"Hey, if you'd stop getting yourself in trouble, we wouldn't have to," O'Neill said without apology. "But back to you offering Blair a job..."

"I didn't exactly offer. I implied. The way a person might imply that they didn't trust a person by bugging them."

O'Neill threw an arm around Daniel's shoulders. "Oh, I trust you. It's just the rest of the universe I don't trust as far as I can throw."

"Not to interrupt," Kelso interrupted, "but I mean it, you need to leave Blair out of whatever you have going on. Weeks ago, he was laying on campus dead."

"Dead?" Carter sounded alarmed, and now the entire team appeared to be on alert. If someone had a sarcophagus in the area, that indicated Goa'uld involvement or perhaps that the NID had more resources than Stargate Command believed.

Kelso studied them for a second, evidently confused by their reactions. "He was drowned by a woman named Alex Barnes who had stolen highly toxic nerve gas. The paramedics declared him dead before he started breathing again for some bizarre reason. Then he checked himself out of a hospital when he still had pneumonia to go running down to South America to back up Ellison."

"Sounds like someone I know," O'Neill said with a sigh as he glared at the whole team. Teal'c simply looked back at their leader. While all of them had gone against Dr. Frazier's advice, her advice was often inappropriate when it came to Teal'c. His symbiote was far more effective than the doctor or O'Neill seemed willing to believe, and both would order Teal'c to stand down when he was battle-ready.

"Then try this on for size," Kelso said. "I'm dating one of the colleagues from the department, and
she said that once they were down there, Ellison started showing a lot of interest in Alex Barnes. He compromised their position and brought live fire down on them in order to cover her retreat.” Kelso crossed his arms and dared O’Neill to make light of that fact.

O'Neill frowned, clearly confused. "Were Barnes and Ellison partners? Was Ellison in on the theft?"

"No," Kelso said the word so definitively that Teal'c had no doubt that his intel was sufficient to support his conclusion. "No, he had no interest in her at all until he was down there. Then he left Blair kneeling on a stone floor, still tied up from where terrorists had taken him captive, and instead he comforted Alex who had overdosed on something. If Megan hadn't been tied up, she would have shot Ellison on the spot."

"Megan?" O'Neill asked.

Kelso shrugged. "I'm in a wheelchair, I'm not dead. And if I can get a beautiful woman who knows how to shoot a gun to take a little interest, I'm not going to apologize."

Daniel spoke before Jack could. "He left Blair tied up? When Blair had pneumonia?" Daniel turned to O'Neill. "Jack?"

"Daniel, no!" O'Neill did not even ask what Daniel wanted, but then it was fairly obvious.

"Jack!"

"No. We don't know him."

"We can do a background check."

Kelso watched the exchange with a sharp-eyed interest. "If you're thinking of pulling him into our world, don't," he said firmly. "Blair is always going to follow his heart, and in this business, that will get you killed."

O'Neill looked at Daniel who had learned that lesson entirely too many times. Teal'c sometimes despaired at his inability to keep Daniel safe, and he knew that O'Neill felt the same.

Eventually, O'Neill turned his attention back to Jack Kelso. "We are here to find Elizabeth Canarsee and either hire her or offer her protection. You and I both know that she can't stay off the grid long enough shake these people."

"Daniel Jackson here did."

O'Neill glanced over. "I helped him disappear from the grid, and if that's what she wants to do, I can make that happen. But we can't afford to let the NID stick her in a room with a computer and force her to do their dirty work."

"She wouldn't help them," Daniel said stubbornly, but then he and O'Neill had been having that disagreement for two days now.

"Danny, when they finished with her, she would do whatever they wanted her to," O'Neill said firmly. Teal'c tended to agree, but his relationship was not sufficiently close to Daniel for him to offer such suggestions without appearing to condescend to the man, so he held his tongue.

"Jack's right," Kelso agreed. "If the NID is after her, she's in real trouble." He pulled a small notebook and pen out of his pocket, and started writing. "I just hope you aren't lying about your motives because if something happens to her, I will come looking for you. Don't forget
Johannesburg," Kelso warned O'Neill, jabbing the end of his pen in his direction.

"I still limp when it rains," O'Neill said, his words a clear promise to the man. Kelso handed the paper over.

"This is everything I have."

"If you hear anything..."

"I'll call," Kelso said. "I still have your cell number."

O'Neill nodded and then turned and started walking away without any of the convoluted pleasantries that humans often engaged in.

"Thanks," Daniel offered awkwardly before he turned to hurry after O'Neill. Carter offered a smile, and Teal'c inclined his head--one warrior to another.

Kelso watched them go, his eyes never straying, not even when Teal'c finally turned to follow the team, walking the rear to cover their position. The more Teal'c learned of Ellison and Blair, the more concerned he was becoming. He simply could not determine whether his concern stemmed from the fact that Ellison was abusive or that Blair appeared to be a well-designed decoy to attract Daniel's attention. Without enough evidence to judge or a strong enough understanding of human nature to intuit the correct solution to the puzzle of Blair Sandburg, Teal'c resolved to follow O'Neill's lead. If O'Neill permitted it, Teal'c would, however, be more than willing to teach Ellison the error of his ways. He would enjoy teaching that man a lesson that would last long after the bones healed.

4. Chapter Four

"Well?" Daniel demanded when they reached the car.

"Well what?" O'Neill asked, even though Teal'c had no doubt that O'Neill was fully aware of the subject to which Daniel referred.

"What did he give you?"

"A cracked kneecap. We were in this bar in Johannesburg and we had this little misunderstanding..." From the way O'Neill exaggerated his facial expressions, clearly the misunderstanding was not little.

"Jack!" Daniel cut him off as he got in the passenger side and immediately pulled his seat up so that Teal'c would have room in the back. Daniel Jackson was like that, often thinking of others' needs with a casual automaticity.

"Relax, Daniel. You really need to cut back on the caffeine, you know." O'Neill smiled over at Daniel. "I got a name. If I know Jack, it's the name he gave her to use when he helped her go off the grid. He always was a softy for the totally insane girls."

"So we can track her?" Daniel leaned forward, totally ignoring the way O'Neill impugned his friend's sanity.

"You betcha." Jack handed over the slip of paper with the woman's new identity and Daniel reached for it greedily.
Carter spoke up. "I should use my own setup, sir. The police system isn't as fast, and their databases didn't have any matching information."

"Which means Jack Kelso made sure she wasn't too easy to find," O'Neill mused. "Hopefully this means that we don't need Ellison anymore, so let's get back to the hotel and find Daniel's kooky friend." This time the insult earned O'Neill a disagreeable look from Daniel.

"Just promise me that you'll look into the situation with Blair?" Daniel asked. "He's not NID."

O'Neill snorted. "Danny, you like him. In my book that means there's a better than average chance he's evil."

"Very funny," Daniel complained as he sat back, but Teal'c knew that O'Neill would take Daniel's request into consideration. While O'Neill was quickest to react to children in need, he did have a tendency to react to any individual facing unfair odds, and young Blair appeared to be in that situation. If O'Neill were aware that his employers were placing pressure on him to act unethically in the case of the cheating student, Teal'c had no doubt O'Neill would move quickly. However, that did not mean that Blair Sandburg could be trusted.

Teal'c mused on his own thoughts as O'Neill navigated through the rows of personal transports. Either Blair was in a grave situation or he was a most impressive agent who had caught the attention of Daniel Jackson. Daniel was in some ways their strongest teammate, but he was also their most vulnerable. Teal'c would not hesitate to kill Blair Sandburg should he turn out to be an NID agent, and if not--then Teal'c would like an opportunity to have a private discussion with James Ellison and his treatment of those whom have turned to him for leadership.

"Perhaps I should watch Blair Sandburg and James Ellison," Teal'c suggested mildly. O'Neill rarely responded to more overt pleas, and unlike Daniel Jackson, Teal'c did not intended to force O'Neill into taking action by simply ignoring their leader's wishes and explicit orders. For one thing, Teal'c no longer believed his judgment was sound enough to warrant such insubordination.

O'Neill was silently considering him in the rear view mirror, no doubt weighing the various facts. "Kelso did seem interested in them," O'Neill said thoughtfully.

"Jack, Blair is not some superspy," Daniel sighed disgustedly.

"Daniel, how many anthropologists who aren't mixed up in some funny business hang out with members of covert ops?"

Daniel gave O'Neill a smug smile as he raised his hand. Even Carter smiled at that.

"He has you there, sir," she offered, earning herself a glare in the rearview mirror.

"For crying out loud, you are mixed up in funny business, Daniel. Sandburg is supposedly just this small city student, but he's friends with two guys who have body counts on their records. Doesn't that make you wonder what he's studying?"

"He's doing a longitudinal study of police interactions," Daniel said, but even he sounded a little unsure at this point.

"Yeah, sure. So, he's doing a study by only hanging out with one guy and assuming that one guy represents the whole department? If he's as brilliant as you say, I think he would have spotted the flaw in that plan."

For long seconds, the car was silent. Clearly, Daniel did not want to think of Blair Sandburg as a
threat, but the facts were just as clearly not adding up. Daniel was not a stupid man, and he would not ignore the reality of a very questionable situation.

"Daniel, he might not even know he's caught in the middle of something," Carter offered. Her suggestion was not logical since Blair was choosing to remain close to James Ellison, but Carter often offered compromises that allowed the two men to overcome their habit of entrenching themselves in some belief and refusing to move from it. "Jack Kelso did say that he wasn't sure that Blair even knew about Ellison's background, and he seemed pretty concerned about protecting him from Ellison."

Daniel turned around in the seat and studied Carter. "But if Ellison was dangerous, Blair would be sharp enough to pick that up. I talked to him for hours--he's brilliant. That's why I wanted to invite him into my department. We just don't have enough anthropologists, not ones who can make connections and look past the theories to seeing new applications."

"Daniel," Carter sighed, "he may have an unhealthy relationship with Ellison. Police officers are in high-stress jobs, and sometimes they don't handle that stress well."

No one commented, but Teal'c knew they were all thinking of Lieutenant Meyers of SG-5. After the police were called to his home for dishonorable conduct, he had pleaded guilty in court of domestic abuse. Teal'c had only wished they were still under Jaffa law because he would have enforced the rule of respecting others, particularly those to whom you have pledged your loyalty and protection. Daniel had discussed the situation with him and emphasized the unhealthy nature of some humans' reactions to stress, but even Daniel could not hide his disgust for what Meyers had done, even as he insisted that Teal'c could not take action against the soldier. However, if Blair were in a similar situation, Teal'c would not be convinced to restrain himself again. And none of this conjecture negated the possibility that the NID had created a clever decoy in order to plant a spy deep within the SGC itself.

O'Neill didn't comment as the car fell silent. He finally sighed. "Carter, I need you tracking down the name. Danny knows her, so he may have some insight on where she would have run. Teal'c and I are going to check out Ellison and Sandburg."

"Jack," Daniel immediately said.

"Daniel," Jack shot right back. Despite the fact that all four of them worked together in very close quarters, it was O'Neill and Daniel who had developed the personal communication that so often passed between fellow warriors. When Teal'c fought with Bra'tac, a single raised eyebrow or sidelong look might carry an entire conversation or reference a shared past or communicate a concern. Here, Teal'c had no doubt that Daniel's concerns were for Blair Sandburg.

"Just... be careful," Daniel settled for saying. Daniel Jackson was a warrior. He understood the necessity of acting in defense of the team, no matter how much he might loathe the reality. And after O'Neill's own deception where he feigned his own defection from SGC, Daniel had to understand the reality of Earth politics. Sometimes Teal'c believed that the manipulation of the Tok'ra had been inherited from their human hosts. Jaffa were born and bred to be somewhat more direct in their actions.

O'Neill smiled at him. "Now that's amusing. I should be more worried about you and Carter. Carter," O'Neill called, "don't let Danny get archeologist-nabbed or dragged off by any beautiful women."

"Very funny," Daniel complained, but Teal'c could tell from the tightness in O'Neill's shoulders that he was not joking.
"Yes, sir," Carter agreed with a conspiratorial smile for Daniel who only rolled his eyes. O'Neill pulled into their hotel, his eyes going to the various places from which the door to their rooms might be covered by a sniper. Carter and Daniel did not check such convenient places for ambush but instead engaged in a short round of mutual teasing.

Satisfied, O'Neill put the car into park, which disengaged the automatic locks. "Okay, kids, you stay close to home and don't make me ground your asses when I get back." His tone was light and easy, but O'Neill looked longest at Carter.

"Yes, sir," she agreed. Just as O'Neill and Daniel could communicate through nothing more than the saying of names, O'Neill and Carter could pass a hundred thoughts through a single glance. She knew that their commander was not joking as much as he might seem. Daniel just gave a derisive snort as he got out of the car. O'Neill watched him get out with great concern in his expression, and Teal'c wondered if O'Neill was as ignorant to Daniel's difficulties as he and Carter had been.

Silently, Teal'c moved into the front seat with O'Neill, not commenting when the man immediately pulled back into traffic with a destination in mind.

"So," O'Neill asked, "what's your assessment of Sandburg?"

Teal'c considered his answer. The evidence was confusing. "He is either a young man in need of assistance or a very capable agent."

"Ellison's not so capable." O'Neill made a very disagreeable noise. "Did you catch the way he was checking you out?"

"I did," Teal'c agreed.

"He knows more than he's saying, but he isn't even trying to hide his suspicions, so either he's really bad at covert work or he's sending a pretty unsubtle message about us getting the hell off his territory."

Teal'c considered that for a moment. "Does his record suggest incompetence?"

"Not even close. But his police records have holes that left Carter scratching her head. The man has dropped his weapon more often than Danny's gotten captured, which is not SOP for someone with his level of training. He's also been involved with some questionable shootings, including one where a mental patient ended up with six holes in his body. Sandburg was in the middle of that, too. This guy kidnapped Sandburg and Ellison took him down."

Teal'c refrained from pointing out that O'Neill was equally as aggressive in defense of Daniel and Carter.

"I don't like any of this, and I like this around Daniel even less. Whatever secrets Ellison and Kelso are keeping, I want to know what the hell's going on. And since those two live together, it's going to make it easy." O'Neill stopped at a red light. "The kid seemed to have his laptop with him, so we're going to be looking for any kind of physical evidence. I can talk to Carter about hacking Sandburg's laptop when Daniel isn't around."

"If Ellison and Sandburg return?" Teal'c asked, not sure how much force he had permission to use. The zat'nik'tel would effectively prevent questions from being asked, but the general would not want that technology used without extreme provocation.

"Sandburg is so hopped up on caffeine we'll hear him a mile away." O'Neill took out a small hand held monitoring device. "And I took the liberty of bugging Ellison." The smile he had on his face
was not even remotely pleasant.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow, but O'Neill didn't elaborate as he pulled onto Prospect road. O'Neill parked and started striding purposefully toward a bakery, and Teal'c followed. The area was not desirable as he understood human property values, so if Ellison was on the NID's payroll, he was not being paid well.

Opening the door for an elderly woman, O'Neill smiled at her and then ducked inside where a set of stairs went up behind the bakery. Despite using all his skills, Teal'c could identify nothing unusual in the way of surveillance or more deadly ambushes. On the third floor, O'Neill pulled out gloves and ran his hand over the door, feeling for traps before he quickly picked the lock.

Based on the man's personality, Teal'c had expected more security, but they were quickly inside a rather modest apartment. A small messy bedroom was tucked under some stairs that led to a larger bedroom area on a partial second floor. Either Sandburg and Ellison were not sexual partners or they continued to maintain separate sleeping spaces. After being away at war for long periods of time, warriors often found it difficult to sleep in the same bed with their partners. Teal'c himself, as a young man, sometimes had trouble sleeping next to his wife.

O'Neill immediately headed upstairs, and Teal'c walked carefully through the piles of papers and books littering what must be Blair Sandburg's personal space. If he were anything like Daniel, the man would know if a single paper was out of order, so Teal'c moved methodically, carefully studying a stack before shifting a single item. It was slow work, made even slower by the fact that Blair's notes were as nearly indecipherable as Daniel Jackson's. There were many references to concepts Teal'c did not understand, and Teal'c could only commit the phrases to memory for later repeating. The light lengthened as bars of it fell through the living room windows, but he concentrated on simply gathering data, trusting O'Neill to warn him if young Blair or James Ellison approached.

"Anything?" O'Neill asked as he stood at the door to Blair's room.

"Many references to sentinels and testing."

"Sentinels?" O'Neill stepped into the room, and put out a hand as if he were going to simply take a random book.

"I would not," Teal'c advised him.

He paused, his hand just short of touching a stack. "You think he's another Daniel, likely to have a heart attack if someone moves one little stinking rock?"

"Most likely," Teal'c agreed. He handed over a paper which had testing data regarding sight and hearing that indicated a level of sensory awareness that was greater than even a Jaffa. "He writes of men who have senses far more powerful than a human's. They may hear a conversation from a mile away."

"These guys get headaches and check out for lala land often?" O'Neill asked, suddenly looking far less interested even though he took the paper and quickly scanned it.

"I am unaware--"

"Lala land, their body is there but their brain checks out."

Teal'c nodded. "Indeed. Blair Sandburg calls them zones, I believe."
O'Neill shrugged. "He can call them whatever he wants. It's a kind of seizure. The medical records from right before Ellison's discharge say that he was suffering from Post Combat Hypersensitivity Disorder."

"Blair Sandburg writes of this as a great gift." Teal'c had never heard of this condition, but from what Blair had written, Ellison's abilities appeared quite impressive. He never referred to them as any sort of disorder.

"They're a giant pain in the ass," O'Neill said with a twist of his mouth that suggested he had an intimate knowledge of such matters. "It's a flight or fight thing. The brain starts ramping up and hearing and seeing and smelling everything for miles around until you go a little batshit crazy, but when you get back, the hospital plays a little soft music, turns the lights on dim, and the senses gradually fade.

"Do you have this condition?" Teal'c considered O'Neill curiously.

"No. You come down with P-chad and they pull your covert ops card. A member of my team came down with it and just about got us all killed before we could get him back to the medics. But that would explain why Ellison got out in the middle of a tour. He couldn't qualify for covert ops anymore, and you don't exactly take a soldier at that level and assign him to climatological technical service and let him predict how much it's going to rain."

"I have never heard of such..." O'Neill's snort cut him off before he could finish, and Teal'c raised an eyebrow, inviting O'Neill to explain why the statement was amusing.

"They don't exactly want to advertise that soldiers go nuts and can then be disabled by flashing lights or dog whistles. P-chad is definitely hush-hush, but if Ellison reported his symptoms to a hospital, the minute a doctor typed in a medical search for any likely conditions, the Army would have been down here to take him into custody and get the damn seizures to stop. The human brain is not wired to have that much data flooding the circuits."

Teal'c frowned. Blair Sandburg wrote of this condition as a great honor, a position of strength and duty as a warrior committed himself to a group of people--a tribe. Teal'c's own people had stories of Jaffa with similar gifts being persecuted by false gods before the true god chose them as heir. But none of these legends matched O'Neill's clear dismissal of the condition. "Perhaps this is only a related condition."

O'Neill did not answer immediately. "Maybe. Why, what does Sandburg say?"

"He speaks of the many ways Ellison's senses have been of use during investigations. He also speaks of Ellison as having emotional distress relating to abandonment and fear," Teal'c said as he remembered the small notebook buried deep within one of the piles. Teal'c finished took the few papers spread over the top of a bookcase and carefully replaced them in the seeming disorder of Blair's piles.

"Wait. He still has the senses?" O'Neill frowned, and Teal'c recognized the expression as one of deep thought. Not wanting to interrupt, he considered the piles he had recreated and shifted one slightly so that the lean of the papers was closer to what he had first found in the room. "Sandburg's studying the senses," O'Neill said slowly. "That's why he's sticking with Ellison."

"He would be wise to chose one with more worthy traits."
"Teal'c, did you just call Ellison an ass?"

"Indeed," he answered, and O'Neill laughed and raised the monitoring device in his hand.

"Yeah, well that ass is around the block. Whadda say we go see what he's up to?"

Teal'c inclined his head in agreement before taking back the paper in O'Neill's hand.

They left quickly and hopefully without leaving a trace, but if Ellison's senses were as extraordinary as Blair Sandburg's notes suggested, Teal'c did not believe their deception would go unnoticed. However, since he had no suggestion, he followed O'Neill down the stairs and out to the street. Traffic had become more congested, but O'Neill turned his back on their vehicle and started down an alley behind the building.

Brakes squealed, and Teal'c hand fell to his zat'nik'tel, but O'Neill had pulled his firearm and pressed himself to the wall.

"Hey, make it hurt," Teal'c heard a man say, and then he was running after O'Neill in what was obviously a parking area. O'Neill held out his hand and Teal'c stopped, his eyes scanning the area. There were too many hiding places, and Teal'c could hear the dull thud of fist against flesh. Then it stopped.

"Four perps, armed..." O'Neill started.

"Enough! Let's go!" a man called.

O'Neill poked his thumb, and Teal'c took up position watching as three men retreated into a dark car driven by a young man. O'Neill circled around, his weapon out, and Teal'c pulled out his zat'nik'tel. The car sped past, and Teal'c committed the faces of those inside to memory, still not sure what had happened.

"Chief, you all right? Let me see. Let me see. All right, let's get you cleaned up. Come on." Teal'c pulled back into the shadows and watched as Ellison pulled Blair forward. Blair walked with a pained limp that suggested he had been the target of the attack, and concern was etched into Ellison's face. This was the first time Ellison had shown the sort of concern that a tec'ma'te should. Ellison's fingers skimmed over Blair's face, hovering over one cheek.

But then Ellison's face closed down and he turned away from Blair and retrieved something from a bag on the ground, throwing it at Blair.

"Peas?" From the tone, Blair Sandburg appeared weary, but Ellison's concern of just a moment ago had vanished in a way Teal'c found most perplexing.

"Yeah, it was the only thing I had that was frozen. Maybe it'll help cool off your love life."

Teal'c frowned. Such a callous disregard for the seriousness of an attack involving armed men was not reasonable. However, Blair Sandburg was not reacting as might one who had been worn down by the abuse of a trusted advisor or lover.

"Cool off my life?! What are you talking about? This wasn't a jealous boyfriend, Jim. It wasn't even a mugger. It was that Brad Ventriss. He saw me talking to Jill yesterday -- the girl that he raped."

It did not escape Teal'c notice that even now Blair was concerned for others. But Ellison was not acting as the protective warrior Blair described in his papers. When he had written of Ellison, he had suggested the man had an almost pathological need to protect others and bring justice to his chosen
territory, but that was not an accurate description of the man Teal'c now saw face off against Blair.

"We have nothing to go on. You know that. You've just got to back off."

Teal'c cocked his head at that. Perhaps Ellison was concerned for Blair Sandburg's welfare. But were that the case, surely he would show some concern for the man's poor health and obvious distress. He showed no concern that his words had left Blair in the sort of manic desperation into which O'Neill occasionally drove Daniel Jackson.

"What do you mean "back off"? When have you ever backed off?" he demanded angrily, and again, Teal'c wondered at James Ellison's motivation because now he appeared to be the one weary through to his soul.

"If I had I backed off on certain things in my life, they would have gone down a lot easier."

O'Neill reappeared and Teal'c yielded his position so that he might see them more easily. "Either the NID is getting more creative with their covers, or Ellison's name is going right next to Simmons in my book. His partner gets jumped by armed thugs, and he accuses the kid of bringing it down on himself." O'Neill did not appear to be directly addressing him, so he waited, concealing his zat'nik'tel within his outfit.

"He is ill-tempered."

O'Neill looked over with a thin smile. "I don't think I've met many people who've made you so vocal in your dislike."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow as he considered that. It was within the nature of a warrior to dislike those who abused the cha't'il who had pledged themselves. Sometimes Teal'c still felt a warrior's protectiveness toward Daniel, despite the fact he was no longer a child. By Jaffa reckoning, he had earned his status when he fought and killed next to them when they invaded Apophis' ship, but truly he had not been a true cha't'il since Hathor... since his innocence had been stripped from him. But Teal'c somehow doubted that Blair had killed yet, and in Jaffa beliefs, that gave him a certain status: one that made Ellison's actions highly objectionable. Perhaps Teal'c felt this way because his work with the SGC prevented him from interacting with his own son or with the young men who had once looked up to him as tec'ma'te. It was not useful to examine such feelings; Teal'c only knew that he felt them.

"Either he's NID or he's not, but there's only one way to find out," O'Neill said as he stepped out into the alley.

"Sandburg, what the hell did you do to yourself?" O'Neill asked loudly. Teal'c followed, not sure what plan O'Neill had, but no doubt, it would... it would either work or prove remarkably dangerous and nearly cause their death. With O'Neill's plans, one could never judge until after the last warrior had retreated from the field.

5. Chapter Five

Blair groaned as he saw the two military guys closing in. Great. His karma just sucked. He liked Daniel. In fact, he'd missed having academic friends he could talk to that easily but between the fact that the administration hated him and the fact that he refused to talk about his dissertation work, many of his university friends had drifted away to safer relationships. He'd forgotten how much he missed
that part of his life until he and Daniel had really gotten going, arguing about the merit of the homophily principle.

But no way did he want to deal with the military. Not now. Between Ventris and Jim's raging paranoia about everything from the military to Blair's love life, Blair was not going to make it through the week without killing someone.

"Geez, Sandburg, you really look like shit," O'Neill offered in a tone that suggested a familiarity that truly did not exist. Blair could practically feel Jim go on full alert.

"Good. If I'm going to feel like shit, I should at least look like it so I get a little sympathy," Blair shot back, but his glare was all for Jim. An armed assault really should get him more than a snide comment about his love life--especially when he didn't have one anymore.

"Colonel, what can I do for you?" Jim demanded, stepping forward so that Blair, once again, had a nice view of Jim's back. He'd been seeing a lot of that today, but at least when he was looking at Jim's back, he could convince himself that there was still a partnership to save. If Jim cared enough to act like a fucking mother hen, then there was some sort of emotion there. Quite frankly, Blair was on the edge of going home and packing all his shit up because all too often these days it felt like all the emotions and friendship had leeched out of their relationship when he lay dead in that fountain.

"Since you're assigned to help us, I thought I might give you a chance to be helpful," O'Neill answered with way more snotty in his voice than a grown man should use. Jim's back stiffened.

"If you have a lead, I'll look into it, but I do have actual crimes to investigate." O'Neill let his words trail off into a sarcastic silence. Maybe it was Blair's imagination, but he could practically hear Jim's teeth grind.

"I really should go arrest a jaywalker now. I'm behind in my quotas," Jim answered with just as much sarcasm. It was like watching pit bulls pee on each other. Blair rolled his eyes at the drama, even if no one could see him from his spot behind Jim.

"I thought you might be taking your partner to the clinic." O'Neill made the words sound so matter-of-fact, that it took the briefest second for Jim to react, and then he took a step back, physically crowding Blair.

"Sandburg can survive a black eye without coddling." Jim was cold now, his physical proximity about the only thing connecting them. In the past, Blair had survived Jim's hands all over him, checking for injuries, feeling for a fever, patting and touching a dozen ways. Now, the spot where Jim's back pressed against his arm was the most contact they'd had in days. Yeah, he'd survive the black eye, but he missed the old, easy relationship they'd shared. He missed trying to fight his way free of Jim's coddling, like after Lash when Jim had hovered with a beer in one hand and a pillow in the other as he kept trying to push one or the other off onto Blair.

"And that ankle?" O'Neill asked.

"Man, my ankle is fine," Blair interjected, trying to push himself forward only to get shoved back again. Jim's hand on his arm was a bitter reminder of times when Jim might have rested a palm against his shoulder as a friendlier gesture, but now it was all about control. Jim wanted him to stay put, so Jim tried to make him. Well, Blair was never really one for going along with the plan. He shoved Jim's hand away and glared at the man.

O'Neill said something before Jim could get his pissy going. "You're limping. Fine implies not
limping, Sandburg." O'Neill was clearly not ready to let this drop and Mount St. Ellison was about to 
blow. Blair was just so fucking sick of dealing with all these alpha dogs with their alpha rules. The 
Chancellor and Ventriss and even Jim and Simon and now O'Neill. They were all so fucking ready 
to set up territory and Blair was sick of being the territory that other people kept trying to piss on.

"I just need some ice," Blair snapped at all of them as he turned toward the loft and started walking 
slowly, gathering the shreds of his dignity. He tried to not limp, but his ankle actually did ache. He'd 
just strained it a little, so a little gentle walking would work it out, but he didn't need to have Ellison 
and O'Neill fighting over it.

Jim reached for him, and Blair surged forward to avoid the touch and the not-so-subtle ownership 
Jim was trying to display. But the move sent him stumbling to the side with an ankle that now 
screeched with pain. His arms windmilled as he lost his balance, and then Blair found an unfamiliar 
hand at his elbow--Murray. The large man tilted his head, a question forming in his eyes.

Before Blair could even thank the man, Jim was there again, shoving between them and putting his 
hands on Blair's arms. For one second, hot anger flared through Blair--anger about Jim's attitude, his 
assumption that he owned Blair, his fucking carelessness because now the ankle hurt even more. But 
the anger flashed and then died, like a forest fire spluttering out when it hit the charred remains left 
behind by an old fire. That's what Blair felt like--an old burnt-out mountainside full of charred 
remains and ash.

"I wished only to assist him," Murray said as he backed away. Jim was practically snarling in anger, 
and Blair studied him cautiously. This was not anywhere near a normal reaction. This was more like 
some instinctive behavior like with Laura or Alex. Turning to the military guys, Blair studied the 
black man whose name was anything but Murray. If he was a Sentinel and Jim's instincts were going 
nuts again, Blair might as well go home and start packing now. Hell, maybe this Sentinel wanted to 
kill him, too. The way Blair's karma was going lately, that was entirely too possible. It terrified Blair 
just how little that thought bothered him.

"We don't need assistance," Jim snapped as he started hurrying Blair down the alley. Blair really was 
limping now, but it was so not worth arguing with Jim once he got going, so he just tried to keep up.

"Ellison!" O'Neill called.

"What?" Jim shifted so that, once again, Blair had a view of Jim's back as O'Neill closed the distance 
between them.

"I'm trying to cut you some slack because the military has done enough to justify a little suspicion on 
your part," O'Neill started, and Blair could have told him that was exactly the wrong tact to take. It 
combined two things that were both guaranteed to make Jim twitchy: the military and pity. "But I'm 
starting to think you're just an old-fashioned asshole."

"I've been called worse," Jim said, his voice as tight as his body. Blair leaned against a dumpster and 
rolled his eyes at the male posturing. He'd never seen this much testosterone outside of a boxing ring.

"I'm not surprised. But your partner just got assaulted and has injuries. So, are you going to take him 
to the hospital, or am I?" O'Neill asked calmly enough, but Blair could feel a growing fear gnaw at 
him. Jim had already blown up once about Blair going off alone with one of them, and now Blair 
wasn't sure if he was afraid of getting trapped into going somewhere with O'Neill or just Jim's 
reaction.

Jim inched closer, and Blair rested a hand against Jim's back, a reassurance that he wasn't going 
anywhere--not that he could with his ankle throbbing. "You may call the shots on your team, but we
aren't Air Force, Colonel. Around here, my badge is worth a lot more than your rank."

"You really think so?"

Blair held his breath as the two alpha dogs just stared at each other. God, if someone ever came up with the cure for excess testosterone, Blair was going to slip it into Jim's Wonderburger. Between his bad habit of drooling over criminally insane women and getting in pissing matches with other men, it was a real miracle that he didn't get shot more often.

A cell phone beeped with three familiar numbers--911. Blair had called them often enough to recognize the tones, and then O'Neill's voice was reporting an assault and requesting an ambulance.

"Oh no, no way. No fucking way!" Blair objected as he tried to detour around Mount Ellison, but Jim shoved him back, and Blair was left clutching the dumpster just to keep from falling on his ass. Then, without warning, Jim was gone. Blair spun around in time to watch in horror as Jim careened across the alley and hit the rear end of a parked car, stomach first. He rebounded and had his hand half-way to his gun when he froze. Blair looked over to find that O'Neill already had his weapon drawn.

"Murray, check Sandburg," O'Neill ordered, and Blair froze.

"This is assaulting a police officer," Jim said as he carefully raised his empty hands.

"From where I'm standing, this is a citizen's arrest for domestic assault," O'Neill said with a nasty tone. Blair could only hold onto the garbage and watch in mute horror as Murray closed in on him.

"Man, I am so not armed," Blair hurried to say, holding up one hand in surrender. He'd hold up both, but he didn't think falling on the ground was the best idea right now.

Murray cocked his head and frowned. "I am more concerned for your injury, but I shall remember that you are unarmed," he promised Blair in that same formal tone. He went to one knee in front of Blair, his hands reaching for the injured ankle. One gentle poke, and Blair hissed in pain.

"The ankle requires attention," Murray offered.

"Hey, it's fine," Blair argued. In the distance, sirens sounded. The cavalry was coming.

"Leave him alone," Jim ordered, but considering that he had a gun on him, that was not a very effective communication strategy.

"Funny thing. When I see a civilian getting physically assaulted by a police officer with covert ops training, I get a little cranky, don't I Murray?"

"Indeed," Murray agreed as he stood up. "You should not attempt to balance on one foot and the refuse container is unhealthy for one whose immune system is already compromised. You should sit farther away," Murray told Blair. Blair really couldn't gather enough brain cells to even answer for a second. If this was some sort of CIA play to get to Jim, this was seriously not what Blair had expected. Murray slipped a hand around Blair's waist and gently urged him away from the garbage.

"Man, you guys have it all wrong. Jim would never hurt me," Blair insisted. Murray's pull was just firm enough to make him let go of the garbage, and he clung to Murray's shoulder instead. Jim was so tight and coiled that Blair was surprised the man didn't burst a blood vessel or have a heart attack or something. "This is all some misunderstanding," Blair insisted as Murray helped him toward a parked car. The ankle hurt enough that he was left hopping on one foot, but Murray actually supported most of his weight.
"I don't think they care about the truth, Chief," Jim said with a dark expression. "So, how is this going down, Colonel? Are you trying to get Blair's allegiance? Are you working on some psych profile that says I'll be more cooperative if you have Sandburg on your side?"

Blair froze as he considered the implications of Jim's comment. Jim had always warned him that the military might come back for him. He even had paperwork to transfer the loft to Blair's name just in case Jim mysteriously disappeared one night, but Blair had put all that into some corner of his mind labeled "Jim's paranoia." He certainly never expected to get caught up in the middle of it. Since he wasn't hopping anymore, Murray just lifted him and carried him the last couple of feet before carefully setting him on the trunk of a car.

"Ellison, I have no idea what you're talking about," O'Neill said, "but you're one cold son of a bitch." A police car came around the corner, and O'Neill stepped closer to the middle of the alley, his gun still trained on Jim. Blair watched, his eyes going from Jim and O'Neill to the patrol car that screeched to a halt, the two uniforms tumbling out with guns drawn.

"Put the gun down! Now! Face down on the pavement, all of you!" The officer yelled. O'Neill immediately pointed his gun up in the air and held up his left hand in surrender as he knelt down to put the gun on the ground.

"I'm Detective Ellison." Jim started reaching for his badge, and the second officer turned a gun toward him.

"Hands up! Do it!"

These guys were obviously new, and Blair did not want to be around when Simon ripped them new assholes, but for now Jim put his hands in the air even as he glared death at the officers.

"We have an injured man," O'Neill called out. He backed away from his gun. "I'm Colonel O'Neill, United States Air Force. I found Detective Ellison here assaulting his civilian consultant and I called 911. My phone is in my jacket pocket, you can check the last call made." O'Neill sounded downright calm and friendly as he slowly went to his knees in the middle of the alley, his hands on top of his head. Jim was still standing and glaring.

"On the ground!" one officer barked at the same time the other offered a soft, "Oh fuck. That's Ellison."

Jim focused on the officer who had recognized him. "Call Simon Banks right now. I want Colonel O'Neill and Murray over there arrested for assaulting a police officer and unlawful detention."

"Whoa, hey, let's just calm down," Blair urged everyone. He started sliding off the car so he could try and talk some sense into everyone, but Murray put a hand on his leg, holding him in place.

"Get your hand off my partner," Jim snapped as he took a step forward. A new patrol car pulled up and more cops came, weapons drawn.

"Blair Sandburg requires medical attention," Murray said, and again, Blair was very impressed with the calm. When he had guns pointing at his face, he usually didn't have that much calm going on.

"Blair is fine." Jim crossed the alley and physically shoved at Murray. Blair was used to Jim being physically intimidating. Hell, Blair felt intimidated any time the man had his shirt off, and Jim wasn't even angry with him. But Murray seemed immune to the power of Jim and Jim shoving. He didn't even move an inch. "Let him go," Jim ordered tersely.

"I will not. His attempt to stand shall damage his ankle further," Murray simply stated. For a second,
Blair really thought that Jim was going to take a swing at Murray, and he wasn't sure what he thought about that. On one hand, it was completely emasculating to get shoved around like a bone between two junkyard dogs, but on the other, this was the most interest Jim had shown in their friendship since Mexico... since Blair had betrayed Jim's trust by working with another Sentinel. And somewhere in the back of his mind was the fear that Murray was another Sentinel. It made sense. Jim was clearly enraged by his presence, Murray had an interest in Blair's well-being, and tribal areas in Africa were more likely to have Sentinels. This time, Blair was not making the same mistake again.

"I won't stand up, but Jim's right, man. You so need to let go," Blair said in his firmest voice. Surprisingly, Murray complied, stepping back with another of those odd tilts of his head. Blair reached out for Jim, but Jim turned his back and focused on the cops. An ambulance appeared at the end of the alley. This was so getting out of hand.

"I want him arrested," Jim ordered with a poke of his thumb in Murray's direction.

"Jim," Blair tried saying.

"Save it, Darwin. I was the one he sent flying across the alley."

"I removed you from Blair Sandburg's vicinity," Murray said calmly.

"Can I get up now without having someone shoot me? My knees are not that young anymore, and technically, I was the one who called for police backup," O'Neill complained. The officer who had picked up O'Neill's gun was left looking from O'Neill to Jim, obviously lost. Blair couldn't blame him. This was not exactly in the manual. Citizens were not normally the ones trying to arrest the police. "And if I'm arrested, I want Ellison arrested for domestic abuse."

"Whoa, hey, no way," Blair objected. Jim turned and glared at O'Neill. Obviously the officer realized he was so out of his league because he backed away and O'Neill got up from the ground. "I am not making any complaints here!"

"It doesn't require a victim to press charges if the attack is witnessed," O'Neill answered, but he kept his eyes on Jim. The two of them faced off, and right now, Blair was almost sorry that Jim was armed because the man was not firing on all mental cylinders. Yeah, he'd been off his game since Mexico, since he'd been a fucking dick chasing after Alex, but these military guys were poking buttons that were making him a real ass. Asshole and armed went together about as well as drunk and armed, and never before had Blair ever worried about Jim, but he was worried now.

"Is someone injured?" a paramedic asked, and Blair's head started to softly throb. He needed a dance card to keep up with the wrong that just kept multiplying.

"Blair Sandburg," Murray answered, gesturing toward Blair.

Blair glared at the man. "So not cool. I'm fine."

"You are not," Murray answered without any trace of annoyance. "His left ankle is swelling."

Before Blair could complain or threaten or escape, the paramedic was pulling his shoe off and poking at his sore foot. "Hey!" Blair complained when the man hit a particularly sensitive spot.

"This is going to need some x-rays," the paramedic announced. Murray managed to look a little smug without even changing his expression. Blair could see the officers start to form their own opinions, and the tide was not going in favor of Jim.

"I just stumbled. Come on. I stumble all the time. I'm an expert at it," Blair said as he gave the
paramedic his best smile. Unfortunately, that led to a flinch as his swollen eye twinged. Before he knew it, he had a little flashlight shining in his face. "Come on," Blair complained as he tried to bat the paramedic away.

"You should also check his ribs on the left side," Murray said, and again, that almost sounded smug even without changing the tone even a little. Murray had some talent, Blair had to give him that.

"I'm fine," Blair complained as he fought to keep the paramedic's hands away from the spot where one of Ventriss' goons had gotten in a good hit. This was so not how he had planned his day.

"Chief? Are you hurt?" Jim asked, hovering just behind the handsy paramedic.

"I'm fine," Blair insisted again, but the other cops were looking at Jim with varying degrees of suspicion and O'Neill had an obnoxiously smug look on his face. "And Jim didn't hit me!" Blair shouted to the half dozen cops who had gathered on scene.

"Of course I didn't hit you," Jim said with more than a little aggravation. A familiar car pulled up, and Blair would have jumped down off the car and gone over to kiss Simon if he didn't have the paramedic trying to get overly friendly with his ribs.

"Man, back off."

"I have to check for injuries," the guy said, holding his hands up in surrender for only a second before him and his latex gloves started groping again. Blair hissed as the guy found the sore spot just above his hip.

"Chief, let them check you out," Jim said almost absent-mindedly before he walked over to Simon. The sergeant in charge of the scene was already over there, and from the look on Simon's face, things were not going well.

"So, am I going to get my weapon back? There's a crapload of paperwork that goes with surrendering a weapon, and I do not do paperwork," O'Neill was complaining to the officer who had confiscated his gun, but the man retreated to behind Simon. With a dramatic sigh, O'Neill came over to stand near Murray. If these guys were trying to take Jim into government custody or trap him, Blair really didn't see what they got out of this public mess. Yeah, he wasn't exactly clued into the whole espionage game, but this seemed like the antithesis of effective espionage.

"You okay, Sandburg?" O'Neill asked as if he really cared. Blair glared.

"Man, you are so out of line. You are not even on the same field with the fucking line."

"Hey, you just got the shit knocked out of you, Ellison is refusing to get you treatment, he further injures your ankle by yanking you around, and then he shoves you face first into a dumpster. That's looking like abuse to me."

Blair stared at the man in horror. "Oh no. No way are you telling Simon that story," he hissed. "Even try it and I'll swear out a statement against you."

"For what?" O'Neill asked with an exaggerated innocence that was seriously annoying the shit out of Blair. Maybe his aggravation showed on his face because O'Neill sighed and rolled his eyes. "Look, kid. Ellison is a trained soldier. He has no business treating you like that, and at this point, I'm not convinced that you're safe." O'Neill looked over to where Jim and Simon were arguing in low voices, both their faces tight with anger. "Ellison's dangerous."

"And I'm chopped liver?" Blair demanded.
O'Neill gave him a look that fell somewhere between pity and amusement. "Compared to Ellison you're a babe in the woods, kid." O'Neill looked like he was about to say something else, but then Simon started walking toward them.

"Colonel O'Neill," Simon said in that tone of voice he saved for people he really hated like terrorists and the police commissioner.

"Simon, this is bullshit. Jim was just trying to protect me from these two," Blair blurted out.

Simon looked at him for a brief second before scowling at O'Neill. "Had they threatened you?" Simon's face made it pretty clear that he was itching for a reason to arrest Colonel O'Neill.

"Not exactly," Blair admitted.

"Shown a weapon, done something that might have been considered a threat?"

"Well, no. But Murray caught me by the arm, and Jim was trying to keep him from touching me."

"I attempted to prevent Blair Sandburg from falling," Murray offered without any emotion. Simon looked over at him, and Blair could read the worry in Simon's frown.

"So you had already hurt your ankle?" Simon asked.

"I hurt it when Ventriss' goons jumped me. That's when I got the black eye," Blair explained. He shoved at the paramedic who finally relented with a much put-upon sigh and stepped to the side.

"Someone attacked you?" Now Simon looked interested. "Someone you know?"

"I didn't exactly know them, but I know Brad Ventriss sent them. One had a baseball bat, and another one pulled a gun after Jim came riding to the rescue, but Jim chased them off just a few minutes before O'Neill and Murray showed up."

"And Jim called the attack in?" Simon asked with even more enthusiasm. Blair looked over toward Jim looking for some sort of help, but Jim was leaning against a cop car with his arms crossed as he looked off in the other direction. It didn't even look like he was listening to their conversation.

"Well, no," Blair admitted.

Simon closed his eyes for a second, frustration clear in every line in his face. "So, you're attacked by random strangers who are armed, but Ellison didn't call it in?"

"Simon, it isn't like—"

"Did Jim hit you?"

"No!" Blair tried to slide down off the car and make his point more emphatically, but the paramedic grabbed one of his arms and Murray grabbed the other.

"He just shoved you face first into a dumpster. That looked like assault to me, but maybe the police are going to cover for one of their own," O'Neill suggested. From the expression on Simon's face, he didn't like O'Neill's tone any more than Blair did.

Blair would have seriously considered shooting O'Neill himself if he was armed. "No way. That was an accident!"

"Stop!" Simon said as he held up a hand.
"You know Jim—"

"Sandburg! I mean it, stop right there. This is an official investigation, and as Ellison's supervisor, I cannot question anyone involved."

"But Simon—"

"No!" Simon took a deep breath before he started again in a quieter voice—the one he usually saved for victims. "Sandburg, go to the hospital, let them check you out, go home, and when the IA officer calls, try to not piss them off too much."

"IA?" Blair was glad he was sitting because his legs were suddenly weak. Oh fuck. Fuck and more fuck. Jim was going to give birth to radioactive, rainbow-colored kittens over this one.

"Yes, Sandburg, IA. Colonel O'Neill, they will want to speak with you, so if you would follow me..." Simon gestured toward his car.

"Right. We'll just leave the victim surrounded by cops. That sound smart to you, Murray?" O'Neill asked sweetly.

"Do not go there," Blair ordered, poking a finger toward O'Neill. "I am not some fucking damsel in distress, and you did not fucking rescue me. Man, if I had two working legs right now, I would so kick your ass." Oddly, the man actually smiled at that.

"You're welcome to try Sandburg. I'm not promising that you'll get far, but you can try if you'd like."

"I could offer instruction," Murray said. Blair looked in confusion from O'Neill to Murray and back before he finally looked over to Simon for some help. Maybe this was some sort of odd military or alpha-dog sniffing ritual, but he was so not understanding the interpersonal dynamics here. Unfortunately, Simon looked just as confused as he felt.

"Colonel," Simon said sharply, "since you're the one filing the complaint, you will need to make a statement to a member of IA downtown."

"I don't suppose you'd mind if Murray went along and made sure Sandburg didn't run into any more accidents on the way to the hospital."

Simon sighed. "No one is going to hurt Sandburg. It would be a waste of manpower."

"If I am accompanying Blair Sandburg, I do not believe my time is wasted," Murray suggested.

"Yeah, what he said." O'Neill turned and started walking quickly toward Jim, leaving Simon to either argue about it with Murray or chase after him to keep him and Jim from killing each other. Blair had to give O'Neill credit for being good. The man could manipulate with the best, and Simon ended up chasing after him. He didn't get there before Jim was off the patrol car and shouting in O'Neill's face.

"Can we go now? You are not the only injured person in the city," the paramedic complained. "Hey, Kent, bring the stretcher," he called across the length of the alley. All conversation ended, and Blair felt himself blush dark red as a dozen cops looked at him with expressions that ranged from pity to anger. Yep, some of these guys were definitely not happy with him bringing IA down on Jim's head, and others were ready to convict Jim right here, no trial needed. This was so incredibly screwed up that Blair couldn't even figure out how they were supposed to get out of this one.

"I'm not getting on a fucking stretcher," he snapped as he shoved the paramedic's hands away.
Around them, officers started talking again, and Blair didn't even want to think about the rumors that were starting in this alley. Jim was watching from the far side of the ambulance, and now Simon was in his face, pushing him backwards as Jim said something, his face intense.

"You cannot walk on that injury," Murray said, his grip on Blair's arm firm enough that Blair couldn't push him away.

"Fuck that. This wouldn't even be a problem if you and your buddy hadn't screwed things up," Blair lashed out. Yeah, it wasn't exactly fair because Ventriss got most of the blame, with the hired goons coming in a close second, and Jim and his need for an attitude transplant at a distant third, but he wasn't feeling like being fair right now. He felt like throwing an old-fashioned hissy fit, and as bad as his fucking day had gone, he was entitled.

"I do not wish for you to injure yourself. What compromise do you suggest?" Murray asked. He loosened his grip on Blair's arm, and Blair looked at him suspiciously. Murray gave another strange tilt of the head and took a step backwards, tucking his hands behind him military style.

"I'm not riding a stretcher and taking an ambulance to the hospital for a sprained ankle," Blair insisted. Murray just continued to watch him, offering no comment. The lack of verbal or non-verbal backchannel communication was actually a little disturbing. Wherever Murray was from, he seriously did not have access to contact with the outside world very often.

"Maybe one of the officers can give me a ride since Jim can't," Blair offered as a compromise. Murray tilted his head in agreement.

"Are you using the bus or not? I can't stand here all day," the paramedic complained.

"I'm not," Blair said firmly. "Just give me the release forms, and I'll get my own ride to the hospital." He didn't add that this was stupid and that Jim's bag of frozen peas would probably help as much as a doctor. The paramedic handed over a clipboard with the release paper, and Blair filled it out as fast as he could—fast enough that Simon wouldn't catch him. He just couldn't afford the emergency room bill, not considering the fact that he was holding onto his job by a thread and from the look on Jim's face, homelessness was a very real possibility.

The paramedic took the filled out paper and turned to Murray. "That ankle might have a fracture. Do not let him ignore it."

"I shall not," Murray agreed.

"Fucking mother hens," Blair complained softly, searching the patrol officers' faces for a friendly one. "Hey, Carlson!" he called, waving to an officer on the far side of the sea of cop cars that were now parked in the small alley behind the loft. Damn. Every cop in the fucking precinct was out here watching the cop of the year get busted for beating up his partner. Blair flinched at the idea of coming home to Jim tonight. He was going to be so very pissed. Blair figured there was a better than fifty-fifty chance that he was going to be homeless by the end of the night, and he started mentally figuring which friends would let him crash on the couch. The list was depressingly short.

"Are you okay, Sandburg?" Carlson asked as he came over. He was a young guy, with marks on his ear where he'd only recently given up wearing a half-dozen earrings at once. The other guys ribbed him a lot.

"Yeah, I'm fine. This is all one big misunderstanding. Look, do you think you could give me a ride over to the student clinic at Rainier?"
Carlson looked over to where Simon and Jim were still arguing with these tightly controlled, jerky hand gestures. "Aren't you going to ride with Ellison?"

"No way. By the time Banks gets done with him, I don't want to be anywhere near either of them," Blair joked lightly. Murray's eyebrow rose, and Blair could see his confusion over Blair's obfuscation, but if Carlson hadn't heard the rumors yet, Blair so did not want to get into it. He just wanted to get a clean bill of health and then find a quiet corner to hide until the fallout actually finished falling out.

"I can see why. I need to okay it with my sergeant."

"Could you ask?" Blair gave the man his best pleading expression, and Carlson smiled.

"Yeah, just a second." Carlson turned and trotted toward an older man in a uniform.

"You did not inform him that Ellison is suspected of causing your injury." From anyone else, that statement would have been an accusation, but Murray said the words as a mere statement of fact. Blair narrowed his eyes and truly studied the man. Had O'Neill arranged this so that the Air Force's Sentinel could get close to him? But the behaviors Blair was seeing just didn't seem to add up to Sentinel. Murray wasn't struggling with his senses or angry. If anything, Blair would call him unusually calm—someone who would fit in at one of his mother's retreats more than with the Air Force.

"Man, I do not want to get into that explanation. I do not have the energy to try and explain this again," Blair snorted. "With my luck, I'll just stick my foot in my mouth and say the wrong thing anyway."

Murray tipped his head, but he didn't comment at Carlson came back, giving Blair a thumbs-up gesture. Great, one problem down and only about a million more to try and figure out.

6. Chapter Six

"It's not broken," Darla said with a smile as she walked in with a smile and a Styrofoam cup full of steaming coffee in each hand. "You look like you need some." She offered Blair a cup.

"Bless you and three generations of your children," Blair said as he closed his hands around the cup. It was the first decent thing to happen to him today.

"Would you like some?" She offered the second cup to Blair's large and silent shadow.

"No, thank you," Murray said with that tilt of his head that Blair was coming to associate with politeness or perhaps just a recognition of the other person's good intentions. His body language was fascinating, almost more tribal than industrial or even pre-industrial, and very few places in Africa were remote enough to qualify for that distinction. Blair shoved the thought to the side for now because he had way more immediate concerns. Darla set the second cup on the small counter.

She leaned over with a conspiratorial smile, and for a half second, Blair thought he was about to get propositioned. He and Darla had certainly been sexually compatible during their short-lived relationship, so it wasn't all that impossible. "Your partner tracked you down and wants to talk," she
said as she pressed a cell phone into his hand. "You are such a cutie, even if you do look like an extra in a prison show right now," she offered in a slightly louder voice, her fingers lingering over his cheek. "I'll get you a brace and some crutches, and you can go get washed up in the bathroom." Darla busied herself with Blair's ankle, and Blair was left hiding the open phone in his lap. He had no idea why he had to hide the fact that he was getting a call from Jim.

"Oh man, the bathroom sounds great," Blair said as he slipped the phone into his shirt and prayed that he didn't accidentally switch it off. As much trouble as he and Jim were having, Blair didn't think hanging up on him would go into the good column.

"You just need to not do anything stupid for a while," Darla told him as she sat on a stool at his feet and started strapping his ankle into a heavy brace. "Of course, that may be difficult for you."

"Har, har," Blair said with a roll of his eyes.

"You need a keeper. Seriously, Blair, do not go and screw your ankle up. You know, a serious sprain can require surgery, and you hate surgery. So take care of this."

"I hear you," Blair nodded.

Darla glared up at him. "Oh no, that's the tone you use when you plan on ignoring everything I've just said, Blair Sandburg."

Blair blinked down at her in surprise.

"And that's the look that is supposed to make me forget that you never listen to anything I say, and that look works better without the black eye." Darla crossed her arms and pinned him with an unhappy look. Funny, even though she was sitting on the stool at his feet, he still had the impression she was glaring down at him.

Blair held his hands up in surrender. "I'll take care of it. Promise," he offered. He and Darla had dated for about three days, and even in that time, he had learned that she really wasn't one to cross... not unless you really enjoyed extreme sports like skiing down black flag rated slopes and dodging teapots thrown at your head at near-lethal speeds. He'd never seen that side of her, but he'd heard some stories.

"I shall ensure that he cares for his physical needs if you will entrust any instructions to me," Murray offered. Blair rolled his eyes again. Despite his hair and his lack of height, he was a grown man and he truly didn't need to be taken care of. He hadn't since he was sixteen. And yet, he was nearly thirty and he had more mother hens in his life than he could shake a stick at. He had some seriously baggage a past life, that's for sure.

Not surprisingly, Darla smiled at Murray. "Keep the walking to a minimum, make sure the brace is on anytime he's out of bed, but it shouldn't be tight enough to leave marks on the skin. At home, keep the leg elevated and an ice pack will help with the swelling. I can write a prescription for anti-inflammatory medicine if you think you can get him to take it."

"I can." Murray tilted his head, and Darla gave him a conspiratorial smile.

"I can take care of myself," Blair complained softly.

"Of course you can," Darla agreed as she pressed the last Velcro strap over the brace and stood up. "Now let me help steady you on the crutches," she said as she reached over to the wall and grabbed a pair of silver crutches. Blair snatched from her, but when he stood, only her hands on his waist kept him upright as he struggled for balance.
"Whoa. This was so easier last time I did it."

"Were you just recovering from pneumonia last time?" Darla asked sweetly. The only problem was that Darla didn't do sweet.

"Nag, nag," Blair said softly as he navigated toward the door out to the hall. Unfortunately, Murray moved with him. If Jim was trying to hide their contact, he couldn't exactly go pulling the phone out in front of Murray.

"Hey, do you mind going out and finding some food? Something that isn't the crap you find in the vending machines here. Something that I can still recognize as having grown in the actual ground. No way can they call a sandwich sealed in plastic actual food. That's more like torture for the stomach."

"There's a shop just on the other side of Harper Hall," Darla said, gesturing toward the north. Murray tilted his head at them.

"I can pay," Blair said, reaching for his wallet, which led to Darla grabbing for him as he fumbled with one of his crutches.

"I do not require currency." Murray took a step backwards, and for one second, Blair was afraid that he wasn't going to take the bait. "I shall return quickly." He turned and walked down the hall without any other comment.

"Tall, dark, and laconic." Darla gave a little huff of laughter.

"No joke. He is totally not into idiomatic English and non-verbal communication," Blair agreed as he reached for the phone. "Jim?"

"Chief, are you okay?"

Blair smiled at the concern in Jim's voice, but Darla plucked the phone out of his hand before he could answer. "Blair will be with you as soon as he sits his ass on a chair before he falls on it," she told Jim even as she gave Blair a firm stare.

"You would make one hell of an Amazon," Blair complained, but he limped his way two feet to a chair sitting in the middle of the hall and then held his hand out, demanding the phone. She gave it to him and then headed down the hall so he had a little privacy.

"Nurse Ratched is gone now," Blair said into the phone.

"Chief, are you okay?" Jim repeated.

"Man, I'm fine. I just twisted my ankle. When IA calls, I'm going to..."

"Blair!" Jim cut him off with the barked word, but Blair could hear a scuffling on the far end of the phone.

"Jim? Jim?!"

"Hey, how ya doing, Sandy?" Megan's voice came over the phone, sounding concerned.

"Megan? I'm fine. Where's Jim?"

"He's right here, and he's fine. Well, he's as fine as he usually is, but I'm more worried about you, mate."
"Seriously, I'm fine. Look, Megan, I appreciate the concern, but I really need to talk to Jim."

Blair heard another shuffling, but this time, Megan's voice came through like a faint ghost. Blair was guessing she had her hand over the mouthpiece. "Play nice or I'll make you sorrier than IA could dream of, Ellison." Blair waited for the explosion, but Jim didn't answer.

"Blair, when IA calls, just keep to the facts. Blowing up isn't going to help anything," Jim said. Blair frowned at the weariness he could hear in Jim's voice.

"Oh man, how bad is it?" Blair asked softly. Jim's sigh was all the answer he needed. "Fuck. I'm going to kill O'Neill," Blair vowed. It might not be good on his karma, but right now, killing the guy seemed like a pretty good idea.

"Blair, I have no idea whether O'Neill is acting in good faith or not—"

"Good faith?" Blair nearly squeaked. "I can answer that. He's a manipulative, son-of-a bitch who needs a good swift kick in the ass."

"Blair." Jim stopped, and the silence that followed weirded Blair out about as bad as anything else on this truly crappy day. "Blair, I was out of line."

"You've been a dick lately, but it's not like I've been a joy to be around," Blair agreed.

"Sandburg, just shut up and listen for two seconds." Jim's words were cut off by more scuffling on the far end of the phone, and Blair could just imagine Megan giving him shit. The phone went dead for a second, and then Jim was back. "Blair, please let me say this. I might have been out of line back there. From the colonel's point of view, things might have looked bad. We can't assume he has other motives."

Blair narrowed his eyes and wished that Jim was here so Blair could look him in the eye. Jim had been the one assuming that O'Neill was playing some sort of covert ops game, and now he was definitely singing a different tune. Blair was all in favor of change. He was the quintessence of change. But Jim... Jim did not change. Once he made up his mind, he was more the sort who just closed his eyes and pushed his way straight through the middle. "So, you think he's just stupid and arrogant?" Blair asked.

That made Jim snort his amusement. "Maybe." Then the silence returned. "Blair, from his point of view, you were badly hurt, and I was the only one in that alley."

"Brad Ventriss—"

"We don't have evidence against him, Blair. Let's not borrow trouble here."

"Oh, so just because the Ventriss family has money, we're going to bend over backwards to—"

"Yes, we are," Jim snapped. "Try it and I'll be taking you to the hospital with broken fingers," Jim snarled, and for a half-second, Blair thought Jim was threatening him. The angry retort he could barely hear on the other end of the phone suggested that Megan had been the target of that threat, though. "Blair, things are difficult right now. If IA believes O'Neill, I'm guilty of domestic abuse. If they believe me, I'm guilty of malfeasance or possibly just stupidity. A civilian was attacked by someone using a deadly weapon, and I didn't call it in."

"Oh fuck," Blair breathed as he realized just how much shit Jim was in. He could lose his job over this, even if Blair told the truth. "You would have called it in if we hadn't been interrupted by O'Neill," Blair quickly added as he tried to think his way through this problem.
"Would I?" Jim asked, and instead of sounding challenging or angry, Jim just sounded weary.

"Totally. Man, I know you. You would have filled out the report the second we got back to the station," Blair said firmly. And again, that silence crept into the corners of the conversation.

"Maybe," Jim finally admitted. "It doesn't matter now. Look, I can't have contact with you right now, and I don't think Megan is going to volunteer her cell phone again anytime soon..."

Blair could hear her saying something in response to that, but all he could hear was the general tone, and she didn't sound happy.

"I wanted to say that I didn't mean for you to get hurt," Jim said quickly, but Blair could just imagine how much it bothered Jim to spit out that apology.

"No harm no foul," Blair quickly assured him. He then flinched as he looked at his ankle wrapped in the large, bulky brace. Okay, minimal harm.

"If O'Neill is on the up and up, he's going to try and get me booted from the force. At best, I'm looking at a suspension. But if he's not on the up and up..." Jim stopped for a second, and Blair could hear muffled sounds as Jim and Megan exchanged words. He hated not being there. He needed to see their faces to judge what they were really thinking, and a phone was a sorry substitute for true communication. After several seconds, Jim returned, his voice low and serious. "Chief, if O'Neill takes you into custody, don't fight him. Just tell him to contact me. I won't make trouble."

"Jim?"

"Just... Chief, just don't get your mouth running when you don't have the ability to back it up, okay?"

"So, you think I'm a wimp?" Blair demanded.

"I think Colonel O'Neill has worked out of the Defense Intelligence Center in Langley. The information I have is sketchy, but from the stories I've been able to put together, he was a Lieutenant Colonel working Special Operations when he survived enemy capture and escaped on his own. He specialized as a Master Parachutist who worked behind enemy lines and has awards for courage under fire and completing a mission after being wounded. Even after calling in every military favor I have left, nearly his entire record is blacked out. I do know he has a Master's degree in Military Strategic Studies, and he's worked in satellite command, covert ops, and surveillance. His name set off red flags all over the system, and Kelso won't even talk about him except to tell me that I need to not get on his bad side, and I think it's a little too late for that. Chief, O'Neill is not a pencil pusher and I think *I'm* out of my league going up against him. I won't have you hurt getting between him and whatever the hell he's in Cascade to get."

"Oh fuck." Blair could feel his guts clench up as he tried to reconcile that resume against the gray-haired man with the dry sense of humor. They were so incredibly and totally screwed.

"What if he just wants to find his friend's friend?"

"Then we keep our heads down and survive this storm," Jim said seriously. "Chief, IA is going to figure out which hospital you went to soon enough. We really shouldn't be on the phone when they show up. Simon's ass is in a sling already because he refused to put me in an interrogation room while they tracked down witnesses. We can't make it worse for him."

Blair swallowed. "An interrogation room?"

"Let me handle this, Chief. I'll be fine."
That was a blatant lie. Blair could hear the stress in Jim's voice, but there was precious little he could do about it from here. If Blair had to guess, he would say that Jim was already on administrative leave, meaning Simon had taken his gun and badge. If they were talking about keeping in an interrogation room, that meant IA wanted him booked. They might have already forced Simon to book Jim and he was just out on his own recognizance. Maybe he was calling from jail. Fuck and fuck. Jim used the job to channel his frustrations, and this was so not the time for the fucking IA department to take that away from him. "Try the meditation routine. My candles are behind the chair."

"I'll be fine, Sandburg," Jim said, and some of the cranky was back. God forbid Blair suggest that Jim wasn't a fucking Superman. Blair sighed, and he knew Jim would hear that too.

"Call if something happens."

"I'll find a way to," Jim promised. "Take care, Chief." Before Blair could answer, the phone went dead, and Blair was left sitting in the clinic hallway wondering just what the hell he was supposed to do now. IA was coming to talk to him, and he had no idea what exactly Jim had told them on his end. Blair scrubbed his face with both hands before leaning over so his elbows rested on his knees and his face rested on his hands. Life just kept getting better. After the whole getting dead business, he had expected some sort of euphoria, a period of extreme joy as every pleasure reminded him that he hadn't actually died in that fountain with Alex's hands around his neck. Instead, he just found himself more and more weary.

"You ready to try to make it to the bathroom?" Blair looked up and Darla was standing there with a compassionate look.

"Totally," Blair agreed. He held up the phone and she silently took it.

"Babe, you have looked better. I hope that Murray plans to take care of you a little better than Ellison has been. I'm betting you didn't even take the full course of medicine."

"I took the antibiotics," Blair told her as he got his one good foot under him and used his crutches to pull himself up.

"And the pain pills? The muscle relaxers to help with the cough that was keeping you up, the pills to help you sleep?"

"A glass of warm milk works just as well." Blair could have talked all about tryptophan and melatonin and healthy sleep, he was just too tired.

She snorted. "Then why do you look like the walking dead?"

"Because a guy with a baseball bat kicked my ass," Blair quickly answered. Darla didn't look convinced, but she didn't argue as she helped him into the clinic bathroom. Blair felt scummy after clinging to the dumpster, so when Darla moved a chair to right in front of the sink, he happily sat and focused on cleaning up his hands and face instead of worrying about what he was supposed to do with the rest of his life.

7. Chapter Seven

"Mr. Sandburg?" a man asked from the door to the exam room where Darla had shoved him. Blair
looked up from the narrow plastic chair and found a middle-aged man with a paunchy stomach and suit with pant legs shiny from age. IA.

"That's me," Blair said, pasting a smile on his face as he tried to figure out exactly what he was supposed to say now. A dozen plans darted through his mind, but a good half ended up with Jim kicked off the force and/or looking for a lawyer, and the really shitty thing was that a little voice in Blair's head whispered that he deserved it. Blair had died. Blair had laid in the fucking water and died, and Jim had the nerve to bring him back and then leave him floundering like a fish—although fish might not be the best metaphor under the circumstances.

"I need to ask you a couple of things about this afternoon," the dweeb said with a smile that was meant to put Blair at ease. He held his hand out. "I'm Detective Laurencin. Bruce."

Blair shook Bruce's hand and tried to not look like he was panicking. Sometimes he could pull off obfuscations that would make the Great Pretender look like an amateur, but other times... not so much. "You already know I'm Blair. I'm actually just waiting for my ride to show up, so ask away, man." Blair tried for a casual sort of air, but Bruce gave him a sharp look before he schooled his features into something more friendly. Blair wasn't sure how he did it, but he was fairly sure Simon had gotten the most incompetent boob in IA assigned to the case.

"Your ride? Detective Ellison?" Bruce's voice had that overly-casual tone that meant something big was up. Shit. Jim probably was in a cell. Yeah, he'd been a first-class dick, but no way was Blair going to give these assholes any ammunition against Jim. Bruce was about to go down in flames without so much as a hint of glory.

"After this afternoon? No way." Blair shook his head with a look of exaggerated horror. "Whatever issues Ellison and O'Neill have, I plan to stay far, far away. I thought archeologists were nasty with their feuds, but these covert ops guys take grudges way too far, if you know what I mean," Blair snorted. Stretching, he reached for the Kleenex on the small counter. He couldn't quite make it without standing up, so Bruce quickly came into the room and grabbed the box, offering one to Blair.

"Thanks, man." Blair blew his nose and waited for the seeds of doubt to do their work.

"So, O'Neill and Ellison have a history?" Bruce leaned against the counter and tried to look non-threatening.

"How the hell would I know? You'd have to pull both their military records to figure that out because no one is telling me anything. I'm doing my dissertation on closed communities, and I would love it if Jim gave me something on military culture and communities, but any time I mention his time in the Rangers, he goes mute on me. But when O'Neill showed up..." Blair whistled to indicate just how explosive that had been.

"At the station? They were in a confrontation in Major Crimes?" Bruce was scribbling in his little notebook.

"Oh man, I thought Jim was going to explode when he had to help O'Neill, and O'Neill kept making all these little references about how they'd worked together and how cops are nothing more than glorified meter maids." Blair paused, and sure enough, Bruce's gaze came up at that. Yep, all cops had two buttons guaranteed to cause total emotional meltdown: donut references and suggestions they were meter maids. Blair snorted again. "Jim and this O'Neill were in a pissing match from the first time I saw them, but does Ellison tell me shit? Oh no. No, he's going to handle O'Neill all on his own. I just get an order to steer clear, and then Ellison is off growling at O'Neill in private. Man, either they have history, or those are the two crankiest men on the face of the fucking planet."
Blair paused for a second. He knew for a fact that he couldn't defend Jim. If he did, everything he said would be tainted by the assumption that he was covering. "Then again, Ellison is one of the crankiest men on the planet, so... who knows." Blair shrugged and blew his nose again. Sadly, he wasn't even obfuscating on that front. Jim used to have this wicked, sarcastic sense of humor that would make Blair just about bust a gut laughing, but lately, the man had turned into this weird, serious, asshole version of himself. If Blair had met this current version of Jim Ellison first, dissertation or not, he would have told the guy to go fuck himself. He then would have been arrested for jaywalking or something because Jim version 2.0 did not have patience or a sense of humor.

Blair coughed, and that set off a long string of heavy coughing that brought Darla to the door. "Blair? Did you take that pill?" She crossed her arms.

"Yes, I took the pill. Geez, it's just a cough," Blair said with an eyeroll.

"I'm going to see if someone can cover for me so I can drive you home now," she said firmly before turning around and disappearing.

"Darla! You don't have to do that!" Blair sighed when he didn't get any answer.

"She's driving you home?" Bruce asked.

"Man, you sleep with a woman once, and she suddenly thinks she has a right to tell you what pills to take." Blair closed his eyes and leaned back. He hated not being able to see how his words affected Bruce, but this was delicate lying here. He had to debunk O'Neill's story without looking like he cared about O'Neill's story. And that meant that he had to look like he didn't care what Bruce thought of his heterosexuality. At least, Bruce would assume that Darla was proof of heterosexuality because people just did not want to recognize bisexuality or asexuality as legitimate orientations. They just divided the world into straight and gay, and Blair needed Bruce to make certain assumptions.

Bruce cleared his throat. "So, how long ago did you and Darla date?"

"Three or four months." Blair opened one eye and looked at Bruce. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Obviously, Bruce was buying Blair's stupid act. "Just curiosity." He smiled at Blair.

"Man, unless you have insurance, just do not go there," Blair advised him. "She's dangerous and has access to a large number of sharp implements."

"Is there bad blood between you?"

"No way. I have heard Darla's reputation, so I was a paragon of faithfulness when we dated. Actually, she reminds me a whole lot of Sam, you know in forensics?"

"At the station?" Bruce frowned.

"Totally. Now that is a dangerous woman. I forgot her birthday once... just once... she nearly took my eyebrows off with one of her experiments. 'Blair, just bend a little closer here,'" he mimicked her voice. "She is freaky scary. But you know, looking at my dating life, I have a pattern of scary women. A psychologist would probably call it an Oedipal complex or something because my mom, Naomi—now that is a woman who does not take shit from anyone. Even Simon begs me to keep her out of the squad room because she is seriously scary. She steps on toes all over the place, if you know what I mean." Blair nodded, and he was more than a little pleased to notice that Bruce looked ready to run for the hills. Yep, the very mention of Oedipus pretty much sent men running.
"So, this afternoon," Bruce quickly changed the subject.

A shadow appeared in the door of the exam room, and Bruce quickly shifted his focus toward the newest person in the room.

"Murray, how goes the mighty hunt for snacks?" Blair called out. Murray's eyebrow rose, but he simply held out a plastic grocery sack with a fern-like, bright green top sticking out of the top.

"It went well."

"Cool." Blair opened the sack and looked at the contents. Two apples, two oranges, a potato, a tomato, and a fennel root. Fennel root. Who the hell bought potatoes and fennel when they were asked to pick up snacks? Okay, some of Naomi's friends might, but Murray did not look like he was the kind to talk about the magical healing properties of root vegetables.

"That's a snack?" Bruce asked as he leaned over and tried to look in the bag.

Bruce was now looking from one to the other curiously, and Blair silently cursed as he tried to figure out how to bend this to fit into the picture he was trying to paint for the man. Murray being here didn't exactly fit the whole image of O'Neill having a grudge against Jim. Murray and fennel root was a combination he really didn't quite know how to weave into the lie he was building here.

"Man, fennel root is full of vitamins. Nurse Ratched out there may want me to take pills, but a few root vegetables can do way more good for a person than all the pills in the world," Blair said cheerfully as he pulled off a bunch of the lacy greens and shoved them in his mouth. Murray didn't look surprised at all, but Bruce... Bruce looked like he was either grossed out or considering calling in the folks with the white coats. Blair smiled and pulled off more fennel before popping it in his mouth, and Bruce decided to focus on Murray.

"I'm Detective Bruce Laurencin. Are you a friend of Blair's?"

Murray blinked without answering. Then again, the world 'friend' had a whole lot of connotations that were difficult to translate culturally, so the man might not know how to answer.

"O'Neill sent him along, and I'm pretty sure he's just hanging out here to annoy the shit out of Jim if he shows up here," Blair answered for him.

"O'Neill? You're a friend of O'Neill?"

Murray tilted his head for a second. "I am."

"Wait, you're the fourth witness. Murray Small, right?" Bruce flipped through his little notebook.

Small? Blair mouthed the name to Murray, a questioning look on his face, but Murray was busy having absolutely no facial expression at all. The man had a poker face that would make Jim jealous.

"I'll need to interview you later, so I'm going to have to ask that you wait outside." Bruce finally looked up from his notebook.

"I must decline." Murray took a position at the side of the door and crossed his arms. Blair hid a smile behind his fennel because Bruce obviously hadn't been expecting that answer.

"This is police business," Bruce said sharply. Murray continued to just gaze at the man. This was better than cable. Bruce glared at Murray, but the big guy was definitely not picking up on the non-verbal signals. Well, either that or Murray seriously did not care that he was pissing off the cop.
"You cannot stand there during my interview."

"On the contrary, I find standing quite easy," Murray offered, and Blair choked on a laugh that he almost didn't catch in time. Bruce spared him a quick and nasty look before he focused on Murray again.

"I'm going to have to ask you to wait outside. Since you were present at the conflict this afternoon, I'll need to interview you later."

"No."

Blair watched as Bruce just about twitched. Of course, Jim would have been twitching and slamming Murray into the nearest wall by this time, so Bruce was actually doing pretty well, all things considered.

"You will leave." Bruce stepped forward and grabbed Murray's arm, yanking so hard that Blair thought he might lose his balance. And the really amusing thing was that Murray didn't even move an inch. It was like watching a Chihuahua try to play tug of war with a St. Bernard. "Sir, if you do not leave, I will arrest you for interfering in an official investigation." Bruce backed off a couple of steps, but Blair could almost feel the aggression swirling around the room.

"Whoa, hey, no need to tank any careers here," Blair quickly said. He just wished he could get up and get between them, but he kept coughing, and coughing plus crutches was so not the best combination. Bruce totally ignored him. Murray at least glanced over with that one-eyebrow twitch that requested more information. "I mean, come on. You can't seriously think his name is Murray Small. He isn't even American, and do the words 'diplomatic immunity' mean anything to you? How about the words 'flushing' and 'career' or the phrase 'pissed off commissioner'? Seriously, do not go there."

"Diplomatic immunity?" Bruce backed off so that he could keep his eyes on Murray while sparing Blair a confused look. "He told you he has diplomatic immunity?"

"No fucking way," Blair quickly answered. "I mean, he's one of O'Neill's buddies, and O'Neill isn't saying shit. But O'Neill is some big covert ops type, Murray here is from Africa, and neither one of them want anyone to know Murray's real name. As a trained anthropologist, I make observations and draw conclusions. In my professional opinion, O'Neill has a pretty big interest in making sure that no one even knows Murray is here. Man, alarm bells should be going off. I can name a dozen African countries on the verge of civil war and some of those governments would not be amused to know that the U.S. military is offering training to people more friendly to U.S interests, if you catch my drift. And that means O'Neill is going to protect Murray's identity, even if he has to ruin your reputation to do it. O'Neill is..." Blair held up his hands to show that he would not tangle with O'Neill.

Bruce was now looking fairly panicked. Blair hated giving the guy a heart attack—he was only doing his job. However, Blair was ninety percent sure he wasn't lying about Murray, and the rest... well, that was between him and Jim. He sure as hell didn't need rescuing.

"So, Murray, if Bruce arrested you, how long would it be before the State Department pulled you out?" Blair asked. Yeah, Murray would deny it, but that would just play into Blair's hand.

"I do not believe the State Department would retrieve me. I believe that either the Secretary of the Air Force or the President would." Murray tilted his head forward, and that was almost a smile on his lips. Almost. Blair looked at the man, wondering if he was playing along.
"The President?" Bruce cleared his throat. "I don't care who you are, you cannot be present when I am interviewing a witness."

Blair gave the man credit for having balls. He almost sounded like he meant that, but Blair figured the guy would take any out he could get at this point.

"Man, there's nothing to interview me about. I got attacked. Before Jim could call it in, O'Neill shows up and makes a crack about Jim needing to write more parking tickets. So not cool. O'Neill is an asshole, and two assholes cannot occupy the same space at the same time, so Jim starts getting pissy right back. Jim tried to get us out of the alley and into a more public space, and I do not even want to guess why. Man, if he doesn't trust O'Neill enough to be alone with him, then I am right there with him. We tried to leave, my ankle gave out, O'Neill got even pissier, Jim got even pissier than O'Neill, and the next thing I know, Murray here tossed Jim aside, and O'Neill had a weapon on him before he could recover. Interview over."

"So, O'Neill instigated the confrontation?" Bruce asked. Yep, the man was ready to run for the hills.

"I think O'Neill and Jim pretty much instigated each other. But the way O'Neill kept accusing Jim of being the one who hit me after all the vague references to their past? Man, I was so not surprised when Jim blew. And the shitty thing is that he's not going to tell me squat about what's really going on because it's all this covert crap he never talks about. He's a decorated officer, but he hasn't kept a single medal or reminder of his military days. He doesn't keep in touch with any of his army buddies, and when O'Neill started talking about some fort where they were stationed together, I really thought Jim was going to punch someone, right there in the middle of the station." Blair didn't mention that it was Murray Jim seemed more likely to punch.

"So, you think this is personal?" Bruce was already eyeing the door. He'd probably be edging toward it if Murray wasn't standing there like some sort of bodyguard... or some sort of statue. It was freaky how still the man could be—almost like he was meditating, even though he was watching the conversation intensely.

"Think about it," Blair held up a finger. "Colonel O'Neill is this big muckity muck in covert ops, and he has his own team to track down leads. But the first thing he does in Cascade is track down Jim, who just happens to be retired covert ops. Stop number two is Jack Kelso, former CIA. Man, maybe I'm just way too into conspiracy theories, but my Spidey sense is tingling. I don't know what this is, and good luck getting anyone to talk. Actually, they may talk lots, but good luck figuring out the truth from the lies," Blair added after a second of thought. He took another bite of fennel greens. They actually weren't bad. A little sweet, but not bad.

"And do you have anything to add?" Bruce asked Murray. Blair knew police procedure well enough to know that anything Murray said now was next-to-useless. He'd sat in on another witness' statement, and that tainted anything he said. On the other hand, Blair almost sympathized with Bruce, who was trying to save some face.

"I do not," Murray said with a smile that actually looked a little creepy, like he was about to snarl or something. Bruce snapped his notebook shut and headed out the door without even leaving a card behind. Yep, the guy was freaked.

Blair sighed. One disaster averted... probably. The room was silent, and Blair seriously hoped that Darla found someone to cover for her because he felt like a limp dishrag. His dissertation, his job, his work at the station, his friendship with Jim... it all felt like it was on the verge of going up in flames, and he didn't know how long he could keep everything together. He was just so tired.

"You implied untruths," Murray commented eventually, his low voice so soft it barely disturbed the
"Well, yeah," Blair answered. "People look for reasons, for motive. Man, you can have all the evidence in the world, but the human mind wants a story that makes all the pieces fit. I just gave Bruce a story that the piece might fit into."

"By suggesting a history of animosity between O'Neill and Ellison."

"Yep," Blair agreed. "Two guys holding a grudge, now that's a familiar story. Way more familiar and believable than whatever we have going on here."

Murray tilted his head to the side. "What do we have going on here?"

Blair pushed himself up a bit on the chair and studied Murray. "I'll be damned if I know. Man, I'm getting a headache just trying to figure out what kind of shit is hitting the fan with all this. I don't even know what direction to duck in any more." Blair closed his eyes and tried to will away the gathering headache. He almost wished Bruce was back because that gave him something to focus on. Weaving half-truths for the IA detective didn't leave him enough time to worry about whatever shit was going on for real.

"O'Neill holds no animosity toward you," Murray offered. Blair opened his eyes to find that he'd taken a step closer.

"I'm just collateral damage, got it," Blair agreed. Murray tilted his head to the side, and looked like he was struggling to construct a response to that. English definitely wasn't his first language. "Man, it's fine. I get it. I signed up for this shit when I started tagging along with Jim."

"One does not consent to abuse," Murray said softly.

"Oh man, do not start. Jim did not hit me. Seriously."

"He did not take your injuries seriously. He implied that your own sexual choices precipitated and warranted such violence." Murray said the words softly and in such a matter-of-fact tone that Blair's tired mind didn't make the connection right away. Jim had said that he thought Blair's love life had inspired the attack.

Blair sat up straight. "You saw the attack. You saw those three guys."

"There were four men."

"Four? Oh man. Please tell me one was really young, nineteen or twenty, a skinny runt with a narrow face."

"He was," Murray agreed.

"Yes!" Blair jumped up on his good leg and might have lost his balance except Murray darted forward pretty damn fast for such a big man and caught him around the waist. "Thanks, man. I mean, seriously, thank you. We can nail that little bastard for assault with a deadly weapon, even if we can't get him on rape. This... this makes the ankle so worth it."

Murray stared down at him, and Blair felt the joy slowly drain as he looked at Murray's impassive face. "No. No, you can't just let him get away with this," Blair said slowly. "No." Murray still didn't respond, and Blair shoved at the man's arms. "What? Is it because he has money? So, if a person has money, it's okay if they rape some girl and then frighten her into not talking? It's okay for them to blackmail someone?"
"It is not," Murray said firmly. Blair shoved at him again, and Murray slowly backed away.

"I'll have the DA subpoena you." Even as he made the threat, Blair knew that it wasn't going to work, but his other option was to take this lying down. Okay, so he had to sit because his good leg was feeling a little wobbly, but he didn't lie down for anyone.

"You are correct in surmising that your government would not allow me to testify," Murray said, and Blair started calculating the distance his crutch might reach. He had no illusions about actually hurting Murray, but hitting him would feel really, really good right about now. Blair closed his eyes and tried to find some sort of calm. Naomi always said that things happened for a reason, but right now he was having trouble just seeing past his own anger and helplessness, so universal reasons were way past him.

"I do not wish for my actions to cause you additional pain."

"Too fucking late," Blair snapped. "Can you see if Darla is ready to go, because I cannot take any more of this bullshit today."

"I have informed her that you no longer need a ride."

Blair opened his eyes and studied Murray, but the man didn't look like he was joking. "And why would you say that?"

"I shall return you to your housing."

"*You* don't have a car. You rode here with me in the patrol car."

"O'Neill has called. He will be here shortly," Murray informed him.

Blair stared at the man, remembering what Jim had said. Fuck. Fuck and fuck. So, O'Neill was coming, and was probably going to take him into custody. And with Murray standing at the door, Blair did not have much chance of slipping out the back. Hell, after Jim's speech about O'Neill's background, Blair was starting to think they hadn't had a chance since the colonel and his team hit Cascade. God, the universe really hated him. Blair grabbed his fennel and took another bite before he could say something really stupid.

8. Chapter Eight

"Sandburg, why are you eating a fern?"

Blair looked up to find Colonel O'Neill standing in the open door to the exam room. "Because Murray bought it for me," he returned, holding up the fennel. O'Neill looked over at Murray for a second.

"He requested food he could recognize as having grown. I recognized that plant."

"Oh." O'Neill left it at that, but Blair started trying to figure out which parts of Africa grew fennel. It wasn't a subject that had ever crossed his mind, but if he could get access to the Internet, maybe he could track down enough information to force O'Neill's hand. "So, kids, who's ready to hit the road?" O'Neill clapped his hands and rubbed them together like a kid getting ready to take off for summer vacation. It seriously did not match the description Jim had given him of a man who had
more covert ops training than any ten soldiers should. Blair sighed and grabbed his crutches.

"Let's just get this over with," he said as he struggled up. For a second, confusion flashed across O'Neill's face and he traded looks with Murray, but Blair was not up to trying to decipher their shit. He just swung himself between the crutches and really tried to land one crutch on O'Neill's foot. Unfortunately, the man scrambled backwards to avoid a broken toe. Pity.

"Who pissed in your cornflakes?" O'Neill asked as Blair passed.

"You," Blair answered succinctly. Jim had told him to go along, but Blair sure as hell wasn't going to be nice about it. He navigated into the hallway and headed for the front. These guys weren't exactly the type to slip out the back door, and if they tried, Darla would probably try to stop them. Actually, Blair would give Darla fifty-fifty odds against O'Neill.

"Your friends showed up?" Darla asked, appearing around the corner as though summoned by Blair's thoughts. Yeah, he was sliding off into illogic-land, but the pain pills probably had something to do with that.

"Friends? Not really, but they showed up." Blair leaned his butt against the wall and pushed his crutches in front of him.

"Blair?" Darla took a step toward him with scary look on her face.

"Don't start. Look, Jim knows I'm going with them, so you can just back off the Mother Hen impression. I am a full grown man you know. Coddling is not required."

"I didn't—" she stopped. "Blair, I'm just worried about you, and with your history of trouble, it's not like I don't have a good reason for worry." She stepped close, and for a half second, Blair wondered why he'd broken up with her. He missed her. He missed Sam. He missed having a partner in his bed and having someone to verbally spar with. He missed touching. He reached out and let his fingers trace her shoulder.

"Why didn't we make it?"

"Because you love that job of yours more than me," she answered quickly, but she didn't sound particularly angry about it. She caught his hand in hers. "And because you're a good enough man to not fake it when it's really important. Blair, are you okay?"

"Nope. My ankle hurts, my head is fuzzy, and I'm pissed at so many people I need a dance card to keep them all straight." He looked up and Darla was watching him with dark eyes that searched his face.

"Maybe I should take you home after all."

"No. No, you stay here and intimidate more sick people. Colonel O'Neill will get me... home." Blair waved a vague hand toward the exam room where O'Neill and Murray were still doing whatever the hell they were doing. Planning his kidnapping, probably. And Jim had told him to go along with them. Even crazier, he was going to go along with it just because Jim told him to. He needed to have his head examined.

"I should—"

"Stay here. I can get a ride home without getting beat up again. Seriously, Jim knows I'm going with them, and do you really think Jim would let me go with anyone who didn't pass his Mother Hen test?" Blair asked with a smile that didn't reach any farther than his mouth. He knew he was faking it
badly, but he was just too tired.

Darla made an unhappy noise. "His Mother Hen test needs updating," she said. She glanced over, and O'Neill stuck his head out into the hallway, his eyes going to Blair.

"Then how about respecting my choices," Blair suggested as he pushed away from the hall and started swinging his way toward the front doors, using his crutches a little too enthusiastically. Yep, he was going to fall on his ass if he didn't slow down, but he just seriously needed to get away. Darla let him go, but then maybe she was going back to give O'Neill and Murray a good tongue lashing. That would be justice.

By the time he got out to the parking lot, he was alone, so Blair just sat on the hood of one of the cars and tried controlling his breathing. Slow clouds crawled across the gray sky, and Blair wondered why he didn't just up and move to somewhere with the brilliant blue skies he remembered loving when he was young. He and Naomi had stopped in New Mexico for five or six months when he was about ten, and he remembered those blue skies against the red cliffs. He used to pretend he was a native out on a spirit walk. He never found his spirit. Jim had, but then Blair was getting used to coming in second to Jim.

Looking at the doors to the clinic, he willed Murray and O'Neill to just show up so they could get this over with. It was almost insulting. They didn't even think they had to keep an eye on him. Yeah, he couldn't go far on crutches, but if it were Jim, they'd at least respect him enough to think he might escape or pose some sort of threat. Instead, he was left to just stew. Eventually O'Neill came out of the clinic, Murray right behind.

"So, I hear I got cast as the big, bad commander come back to get revenge for some old grudge," O'Neill commented as he passed. The asshole actually looked amused.

"I call 'em like I see 'em."

Murray stopped near him, clearly wanting to offer some sort of help, so Blair got his crutches under him on his own and limped after O'Neill. "It really is your fault I got hurt so I don't feel even a little bit bad about siccing IA on you."

O'Neill looked over with that same amused look, and Blair started calculating distances and wondering if he could get one hit with a crutch in before O'Neill knocked him on his ass. Hanging out with these people was doing serious damage to his calm.

"Sic IA on me if you want." O'Neill shrugged before he pointed at Blair's ankle. "But that is still Ellison's fault."

"Don't even go there. Murray told me you saw the attack, so I'm not buying the bullshit." Blair stopped at the car as O'Neill unlocked the driver's side.

"He did, huh?" O'Neill gave Murray a look, but Murray was the king of poker faces.

Blair snorted. "Yeah, for all the good it does. You people suck, and I do not mean in any sort of sexually amusing way."

Blair had the satisfaction of watching O'Neill fumble with the car door for a second, his surprised eyes on Blair. Well, if O'Neill was that easy to throw, Blair had all kinds of ammunition he could use.

"Get in the car, Sandburg," O'Neill ordered, sliding behind the wheel himself. Blair stood with his hand on the passenger side back door and considered his options for half a second, but he didn't
really have any. With an uncharitable thought for O'Neill and a quick wish for the man to come down with a nasty case of sexually transmitted skin rot, Blair pulled the door open.

"I shall hold your crutches," Murray offered, holding out a hand, and Blair handed them over before sliding into the backseat.

"The least you could do is help put Brad Ventriss in jail where he belongs. Unless you're so busy with your own secrets that you don't care about rape and assault. I suppose when you get to be a big, bad colonel, you don't have to give a shit about all the little people you walk on, huh?" Blair took the crutches Murray handed him and propped them on the seat next to him.

"Geez, Sandburg, are you always this annoying?"

"Yes, get used to it," Blair snapped. "So, now that we've established that we both have serious personality issues, why don't we get honest here?" Blair crossed his arms and just dared O'Neill to lie to him. He was in the car, isolated, alone with two armed members of the military, even if he didn't know which military Murray belonged to. They'd even left Sam and Daniel behind, so there wouldn't be anyone to discuss the ethical implications of kidnapping an American citizen.

"What the hell are you talking about, Sandburg? I saw Ellison yanking you around on an injured ankle, and I stepped in to stop him. That's as honest as I get." O'Neill started the car, but Blair could see the way he had adjusted the mirror to keep an eye on the backseat instead of on the road.

"Funny enough, that probably *is* as honest as you get, but we both know that in any sort of objective measure, that's not very honest."

"What is your problem?"

"Short answer—you. Long answer—you." Blair crossed his arms and glared murder at the rearview mirror. He could see O'Neill's jaw tighten, and Blair knew he was about to either get seriously hurt or finally get some truth. It was worth the risk.

At a red light, O'Neill took a deep breath and looked over at Murray for a second before twisting around to look at Blair. "Look, I've met terrorists I've liked more than you, but I'm trying to be polite and make up for the fact that you got hurt because Ellison and I were in a pissing match. So, do you think maybe you could shut up until we get to your apartment?"

Blair narrowed his eyes and looked at the street O'Neill had just turned onto. "And how are you planning on getting to Prospect from thirty-ninth?"

"For crying out loud. We have to make a quick stop unless that offends you so much that you'd rather we make two trips."

"I don't really have any illusions about my preferences mattering," Blair said in the sweetest tone of voice he could manage. Jim hated that. Obviously, O'Neill did too because his hands tightened on the wheel, and he just stared forward, even when the light turned green. The car behind them honked, and O'Neill hit the accelerator hard enough that Blair's crutches thunked into the window before he could catch them. Driving even worse than Jim, O'Neill slammed into a parking lot, and threw the car into park so fast that Blair was thrown forward against the back of Murray's seat. Even Murray had to slap the dash to keep from flying forward, but he didn't comment as O'Neill turned the car off and turned around in his seat.

Blair crossed his arms and braced himself for whatever was going to happen. Yeah, Jim had said to not make trouble, but Blair didn't know any other way to get a little truth out of these two.
"What, exactly, is your problem, Sandburg?" O'Neill demanded.

"You," Blair shot back, using his best 'no duh' voice. Yep, O'Neill was so going to crack under the Sandburg method. O'Neill's jaw was tight, and he exchanged another look with Murray—and from the look, he pretty much wanted to kill Blair.

O'Neill took a deep breath. "Look, Sandburg, you and Ellison have done nothing but give us grief since we've shown up. But since your tip with Kelso paid off, I feel like I owe you something. I've saved your sorry ass from Ellison, I put Ellison on notice at work, and I'm driving you home. So, once we get you home, let's just pretend that we never met and this was all a very unpleasant dream, never to be repeated. Deal?"

"We just go our separate ways?" Blair looked from Murray to O'Neill suspiciously. "I'll never hear from the Air Force again?" Murray didn't let anything show on his face, but O'Neill didn't have nearly as good of a poker face. He flinched. Blair poked his finger at the colonel. "Oh man, I knew it. Yeah, you drop me off and then someone else picks me up, is that the game we're playing? No way. No fucking way. Whatever is going on, I want the cards on the table right now."

"You're a suspicious little shit, aren't you?" O'Neill asked. "Have you ever known such a suspicious little shit?" he asked Murray.

"I believe you are equally suspicious, although I do not have any information on your bodily functions."

Blair laughed and then tried to smother it because this was not a funny situation. "Suspicious or not, you are planning on sending someone after me, so I would rather get the waiting out of the way."

O'Neill stared at him for long seconds, and Blair wasn't sure what was going to happen. A dark little voice in the back of his head whispered that he might have just made things a whole lot worse. Jim had warned him to play nice with these guys, and this did not even approach nice. Maybe the medicine was making him stupid. Then again, maybe he was just fed up with playing nice.

"Your dissertation work is on a classified subject. When I get back to base, I will report that you have unauthorized data. If you're lucky, you'll pass the background check, and an Air Force scientist will approach you about comparing your data to the information already gathered in classified studies. If you don't pass the background check, the Air Force is going to try very hard to pretend you don't exist."

Blair stopped breathing. Of all the answers he'd expected, that one wasn't even on his radar. "My research is classified?"

O'Neill got a look on his face that was a strange cross between disinterest and pure smug. "Heightened senses? You cover story needs work, kid. It didn't take much digging to figure out what you were really doing."

"My cover story?" Blair could feel anger and indignation rise up because it was so much safer to feel that than the terror he felt at the idea that the military had seen through him so easily. "This from the man with the story about Murray Small, the average man." Blair snorted. "Not even."

O'Neill shrugged and turned around to start the car again. "Yeah, well Murray here isn't usually in a position to need a cover story. You, on the other hand, are playing a dangerous game. After listening to Daniel, I thought you were smart enough to cover your tracks better. A bedroom is not a secure area for confidential records."
"You asshole," Blair reached forward and might have hit O'Neill in the back of the head, except Murray caught his wrist in a firm grip.

"You are injured. If you wish to challenge O'Neill, I will teach you moves which he has yet to successfully counter when sparring with me," Murray said calmly, and Blair looked from one to the other in confusion. Was Murray on his side? Hell, at this point, he didn't even know if Jim was on his side, so trying to figure his way out of the interpersonal relationships in this new team was way past his abilities. And the pain pills were making his brain dull.

O'Neill looked at him in the rearview mirror. "I don't hit injured civilians. I don't go shoving them around, either. You may be trying to cast me as the monster here, and maybe that's what has Ellison acting like an ass, but I'm not the bad guy. Ellison, on the other hand, seems to be running for office."

Blair yanked his hand back from Murray. "Look, I know Jim hasn't been the nicest guy lately—"

"Ya think?!" O'Neill interrupted. "If you can't see how far out of line he is, you need to do some reassessing. The cops only took my statement because it was true. Ellison had no right to dismiss your injury and then aggravate it by yanking you around."

"Which he wouldn't have done if you hadn't been there. You and Murray have been setting him off."

"Oh," O'Neill paused. "So, he doesn't ignore you or refuse to investigate potential rapists when we aren't around?" O'Neill gave Blair a sweet smile in the rear view mirror, and Blair could feel all the fire drain out of his arguments. Jim had been doing exactly that when the Air Force guys had shown up. Hell, Jim had left him coughing and cold and tied up on a stone floor while he comforted Alex Barnes. There was nothing like seeing your best friend pick your killer over you. That had actually hurt way more than watching Jim kiss Alex. Of course, it came in second behind watching Jim's slow reaction and lethargy when Alex had pointed a gun at him. For a second, he really thought that Jim was going to let her kill him again.

"Whatever," Blair said wearily. He was too tired and doped up on pain pills to think this whole thing through. He coughed and his stomach protested and threatened to bring up everything he'd eaten in the last day... which meant one algae shake and a bunch of fennel. Now that would make an interesting mess in O'Neill's car.

"I have promised the healer that I will ensure Blair Sandburg takes his medication and rests his foot," Murray said.

"Ya did, huh? Murray, you have a heart too big for your...." He stopped mid-sentence. "If Danny manages to set up a meet to have Elizabeth Canarsee come in, you should be free for babysitting."

"Fuck you," Blair offered from the backseat. Apathy was leeching his anger, though, so it didn't come out with any heat.

"So, Sandburg, do you think you'll pass a background check?" O'Neill asked. Blair eyed the back of the man's head and wondered why no one was mentioning Jim. No way would Blair be the first to bring him into this very bizarre conversation, but he still felt like he was swimming in quicksand.

"No way, man. I've been on more protests than you have missions."

Murray turned and gave him another raised eyebrow.

"My mom and I would protest when the government did something really shitty. We'd walk around with signs telling everyone what fucked up thing the government had done and we tried to embarrass..."
them into not doing it again,” Blair clarified.

Murray's eyebrows went up. "You are hi'ato'te?"

Blair mentally filed that word away. Given a word, he should be able to back track Murray's tribe. From the look O'Neill shot Murray, that wasn't lost on the colonel.

"I don't know." Blair shrugged as if he hadn't noticed the importance of the word. "I don't know that word."

Murray tilted his head. "It is one who attempts to get another to walk past a bad choice. It may apply to a mother guiding a child, or in some cases, to individuals attempting to alter the path or decisions of leaders."

"Yeah, I guess so. But man, the government is so not fond of protestors, so whatever background check you're going to do, I'll fail with flying colors. So, once I fail this background check of yours...." Blair studied O'Neill.

"At least I won't have to put up with you and Danny overdosing on geek-speak," O'Neill shrugged. "You aren't the target here. You or Ellison. I came here to find Daniel's crazy friend and go home before anything bad could happen. I obviously hadn't planned for meeting you or Ellison." O'Neill stared in the rearview mirror, and maybe it was the drugs or the weariness or the worry, but Blair found himself wanting to believe the colonel. "If Ellison ever wants to get those senses turned off, that I can help with. Other than that, I'll leave you two alone to live your dysfunctional lives."

"Whatever. Man, we were not dysfunctional until you showed up."

"And here I thought you were some sort of master liar," O'Neill said sarcastically. "You don't even sound like you believe that one."

Blair held up his middle finger as his answer and he leaned back against the seat.

9. Chapter Nine

"What are we doing here?" Blair asked suspiciously as they stopped in front of Questscape. Brad's father ran this place.

"We have a little time to kill and I need to do a quick job for the Air Force. You know, walk on some little people," O'Neill answered with a smug grin. Blair glared at him, but the colonel didn't seem to care as he pulled into visitor parking. "You coming?" O'Neill turned around in his seat, and Blair could tell that something was up. The man looked way too amused.

"Yes," Blair said, grabbing his crutches. Distant thunder cracked, so hopefully they wouldn't be in there too long. With Blair's luck, it'd rain, he'd slip, and then he'd end up in a full body cast. Then again, in a full body cast, he'd have a good excuse to just hibernate until all this shit had managed to pass. That might be worth it.

"Well, this will be fun," O'Neill said, and he had that child-like look of glee in his face that made Blair wonder if the man wasn't slightly unhinged. Then again, anyone with as much combat experience as Jim had described probably was a little unhinged.
"Blair should not stress his injury," Murray said with a hint of disapproval, but he got out and held the door open for Blair.

"Oh, this will be worth it, T, trust me," O'Neill said. Walking around the car, he slapped Murray's arm. "He's going to enjoy this."

"What am I going to enjoy?" Blair demanded as he got the crutches under him. His better judgment told him he'd be better off staying in the car, but dying of curiosity didn't seem like a good solution.

"Wait and see," O'Neill said as he set off for the front door. Blair followed, Murray at his side. By the time they got inside, O'Neill had already talked his way past the secretary, and he was standing next to an open elevator, a security guard standing at his side. "This way, kids. So, what do you say that after this we go out for ice cream?" O'Neill sounded so damn cheerful that Blair was starting to wonder if the man planned to throw him off the roof of the building or something. Blair watched suspiciously as their escort pressed the button for the top floor.

The elevator didn't stop until it dinged open on the top floor. An older man with graying hair and the same long nose as Brad Ventriss met them in the hall.

"Mr. Ventriss?" O'Neill stepped forward and offered his hand.

"At your service. Colonel O'Neill?" Norman Ventriss smiled at O'Neill, but Blair could see the confusion. O'Neill had on cargo pants and a long sleeved shirt that was a truly obnoxious shade of green. He wasn't looking very authoritative. But then the way he stepped forward and clapped Ventriss on the arm made it very clear that he was in charge here.

"That's what the dog tags say," O'Neill answered cheerfully. Blair had to give the man credit—he was a master of body language. Ventriss' smile turned a little strained, but he lost his smile altogether when he glanced over at Blair. Murray took a half step forward and stepped between them, leaving Blair to wonder if his first assumption about Murray being a Sentinel wasn't right. Either that, or Blair just attracted a frightening number of Mother Hens.

"Colonel. I was surprised to hear someone from the Air Force was visiting. We can use the conference room," Norman Ventriss had all the charm his son didn't, but Blair actually found himself disliking the father even more than the son, and that was really saying something.

They made a strange parade as they all headed into a plush board room with leather chair. Blair aimed for the closest one and sank down. Between the pain pills, the fuzzy head, and the sore arm pits, Blair was already hating his ankle. Murray took a spot right behind him and simply stood.

"What can I do for you?" Ventriss asked as he gestured toward a chair, inviting O'Neill to sit. O'Neill perched on the edge of the table instead. This was definitely not what Blair had expected from a military colonel. Instead of spit and polish, O'Neill was radiating a sort of bored curiosity. He studied the art on the wall for a second as though expecting them to whisper secrets. The only thing they were whispering to Blair was that either they were reproductions or Ventriss just had way too much fucking money.

"You've done a lot of work for the military." O'Neill's voice sounded casual, but the way he suddenly focused on Ventriss totally felt like some sort of trap. Blair squirmed a little just watching it.

"I've always appreciated the work the government has provided. And I look forward to years of mutually beneficial contracts," Ventriss agreed quickly, but he also grabbed the back of one of the chairs. Oh yeah, he knew something was up.
O'Neill returned to studying the walls, and the silence grew tortuous. Finally he looked over at Ventriss with a resigned expression. "I'm afraid that's not going to be possible. The paperwork will follow in the next day or two, but I'm here to inform you in person that your security clearance has been revoked, both personally and the clearance of your company in general."

"What?!" Norman Ventriss lost every bit of color out of his face. "You can't—"

"Ah, but we can. We're the government, and the government pretty much does what it wants," O'Neill said, and that same childlike cheerfulness from earlier was back. Blair made a mental note to tread softly around O'Neill any time he seemed cheerful. He was scary when he was cheerful.

"Does this have something to do with Mr. Sandburg?" He looked fiercely toward Blair, and Blair sat up straight, suddenly a whole lot less tired. "Don't look so surprised that I know who you are. You're that teaching assistant who has a vendetta against my son. Don't think I'm going to take this lying down."

"I don't care how you take it," O'Neill said, and that was definitely a smirk. "And while this may have started with Mr. Sandburg, the federal government does not act on one man's word."

"I was never given any notice of a problem," Ventriss started, but he shut up when O'Neill stood up and took a step toward him.

"You should have known there was a problem," O'Neill said softly. "When you were notified that Mr. Sandburg was filing a complaint against your son, you hired a $500 an hour law firm to handle a case of plagiarism and threatened to pull university funding within earshot of at least three witnesses." That really made Blair sit up. Fuck. No way would the Chancellor stand up to that kind of pressure. His goose was so thoroughly cooked.

"I have a right to defend my family from the slanderous lies of..." Ventriss cut himself off, but his glare left very little to the imagination. Blair just wondered if Ventriss planned to finish that off with bastard, Jew, or fag. Blair knew full well how many irrational reasons people had for hating him.

"So, you believe Mr. Sandburg lied about the plagiarism?" O'Neill asked calmly. "Did he also lie about your son coordinating an attack against him, one that left him in the hospital?"

Ventriss looked like he might throw a blood clot for a second he turned so red. "Of course. My son is a responsible young man, unlike some people who cannot even make it to work on a regular basis. I have already filed a complaint about your rate of absenteeism," Norman Ventriss shouted, poking a finger in Blair's direction. Blair barely contained a groan. Oh yeah, he was so dead at work.

"Blair is working on highly confidential material. I think his word is worth something given his advances in a sensitive field that impacts the lives of front line soldiers." O'Neill crossed his arms and just considered Ventriss. The businessman looked from Blair to O'Neill and back, confusion written all over his face.

"But he's an anthropologist."

"One with a very unique perspective. However, he is only one man. The fact that I witnessed your son driving the men who assaulted Blair is another issue. Now, Blair is angry that I cannot testify in open court given the sensitive nature of my job and my inability to make court dates. However, your son is clearly a significant security threat. More significantly, he's a security threat that you are clearly unwilling to deal with. When your son is willing to commit felonies, I have to ask, what are you willing to sacrifice to cover up for that? At this point, I'm almost ready to believe... " O'Neill shook his head in exaggerated frustration. "What was that woman's name, Murray?"
"Connie Roberts," Murray answered, even though Blair had absolutely no doubt that O'Neill knew the name already.

"Ah yes. I'm ready to believe Mrs. Roberts who says that your son sent her and her family to Argentina for the express purpose of interfering with a police investigation. That your son used your money and your jet to send her to Argentina. The access you have given him is a clear threat to Air Force security. So, with the evidence I've gathered in less than a day, I have enough conclusive proof to pull your security clearance. That means that you are in default on the last two years of the current contract, and you'll need to contact the Secretary of State to arrange the repayment of any advances."

Norman Ventriss' mouth opened and closed several times, like a beached fish, and now Blair really couldn't keep the grin off his face. Oh man, he didn't even care if he got fired because this... this was so totally worth it.

"You have a nice day now," O'Neill said cheerfully as he turned and headed for the door so fast that Blair scrambled to get his crutches under him and follow. Okay, that was a shock. That was more than a shock. That was... that was what Blair had expected Jim to do, only Jim would have created havoc by arresting people instead of yanking government contracts. And this still left Brad on the streets, but it was going to be a whole lot harder for him to be a predator if his father cut him off from the money and power. A whole lot. And now Norman Ventriss was going to have a whole lot less money and power. Damn, too bad he couldn't short sell a few stocks of Questscape. Now if Jim would just follow through on his end and arrest the little shit, all would be perfect with Blair's world.

"Oh man. That... that was a thing of beauty," Blair said quietly once the three of them were safely inside the elevator.

O'Neill smiled. "There are some little people who I really enjoy stepping on. However, I don't make a habit out of stepping on people who don't deserve it."

"Indeed. That man does not deserve the trust others have placed in him," Murray agreed.

"You sing it, brother," Blair agreed enthusiastically. Murray looked down at him with a raised eyebrow. "I'll explain when my head isn't fuzzy with pain pills," Blair promised.

"You must rest yourself."

"Normally, I would argue, but I'm about out of steam here. I'm not even going to complain about you making things difficult at school."

"Geez, Sandburg. Does nothing make you happy?" O'Neill asked as the elevator opened onto the lobby.

"World peace, a really good piece of tongue, and seeing Brad Ventriss in jail for something serious enough to keep him there a while," Blair quickly answered. "But telling Ventriss I'm doing important confidential work for the Air Force? So not cool. Chancellor Edwards is going to be all over me on that one."

"Technically, it's true," O'Neill pointed out. Blair sighed and stopped for a second, rested his bruised underarms as he considered the three steps just outside Questscape's doors.

"Man, do not try to obfuscate with an obfuscator."

"I'm still hoping that you're going to pass that background check."

"Man, so not going to happen, O'Neill. But why would you even want that?"
O'Neill gave him a strange look. "You can call me Jack. And I looked at some of that work you had in your room."

Blair paused on the top step and glared murder at him. The man didn't even have the decency to look embarrassed about his breaking and entering.

"I've been on mission with men whose senses went out of control. If you can find a way to help a soldier in the field control a potentially life-threatening condition, you've got my backing, Sandburg." Suddenly O'Neill didn't look childlike or gleeful.

"You know Sentinels?" Blair rushed down the last two steps as he hurried after O'Neill.

"I know men who've had their sense go out of control. It's not pretty, and it's not safe," O'Neill countered.

"Well, if they don't have someone to guide them through it, of course it isn't. It's like a blind person suddenly being able to see. They'd flinch at every movement because they aren't used to it. Same thing."

"No, it's not the same thing," O'Neill stopped and held a hand up to stop Blair. "We are not having this discussion in the open, but just take my word for it. In the field, these senses are dangerous."

"Jim..."

"Ellison is not typical, and quite frankly, that makes me happy. I wouldn't want too many like him around." O'Neill got a sour look on his face before he turned and started heading back to the car.

"You're a riot, O'Neill. Jim's a good cop and a good man."

"He does not appear to be either," Murray contradicted him, and Blair glared at him.

"You are supposed to be on my side, here," Blair hissed. That made Murray tilt his head to the side in obvious confusion. Hobbling after O'Neill, Blair left Murray standing in the parking lot. This was a small victory, and he still had so many battles to fight that he didn't know where to start, but Blair could feel a little spark of hope for the first time in a long time. Oh yeah, Ventris senior had gone for his throat, and he got gutted instead. Now that was justice.

"You look like you're in a better mood," O'Neill commented.

"One asshole dealt with and only about a dozen more to deal with," Blair said with a saccharine smile that made it pretty clear that he still considered O'Neill one of them.

"You're dangling your preposition," O'Neill commented with exaggerated horror and a sarcastic smile before he got in the front seat of the car. The man was officially strange.

10. Chapter Ten

Teal'c sat on the floor across from Ellison's couch staring at three candles that flickered in the dark. He sought kelnoreem. The young man in the next room was finally sleeping, his breathing raspy and wet. In some ways, the man reminded him of Daniel—his intelligence and his ability to understand others. In other ways, he was much like Colonel O'Neill—irascible and manipulative. Both he and
his work would be an asset at the SGC.

And yet both O'Neill and Blair Sandburg seemed to believe that he would not be allowed to join their cause because of his actions as hi'ato'te—a protestor. That disturbed Teal'c.

He was used to entire planets or systems of planets uniting under one lord. Sometimes world united in opposition to a lord. Worlds spoke with one voice, and those who publicly voiced dissent were silenced. Teal'c had silenced many of them with his own hand. The staff weapon was designed to burn and kill slowly, so Teal'c had often forgone the weapon in favor of breaking the necks of those who spoke out against Apophis. He had expected no less when he had finally decided to risk death rather than continue to serve false gods.

But then he had come to earth. Teal'c had seen the way in which General Hammond had respected those who spoke words that he did not want to hear. Even though Teal'c had expected a quick death after accompanying O'Neill back through the Chaapa'ai, O'Neill had defended him. And even when General Hammond had doubted Teal'c, he had listened to O'Neill's words of dissent. After years of serving the goa'uld, that had won Teal'c's respect. He had believed that he found a world where opposition was respected. The court system, the political system, everything Teal'c had researched about his new country had led him to believe that to disagree was a right.

But now O'Neill believed that Blair Sandburg would be denied access to information because he had acted against authority, something O'Neill did with great regularity. Sometimes Teal'c truly did not understand human thought, no matter how long he lived on Earth. Then again, perhaps Goa'uld were not the only ones to detest dissention. Perhaps that was the normal state, and those like General Hammond and Colonel O'Neill who respected divergent opinions were the exception. He had seen so little of Earth culture that perhaps he was deceived by their literature, perhaps the stories reflected not their true behaviors but the way they wished to see themselves.

He tried to ignore these thoughts so he could find the peace of kelnoreem. The young cha'til would sleep for a while if the healer spoke truth about the medicine. Slowing his breathing, he freed his mind from the current dilemma. His thoughts wandered back to events of several months ago, the sight of Amaunet pointing a weapon at Daniel Jackson. At first, Teal'c tried to push the image aside, but it persisted. Allowing the familiar events drift through his mind, Teal'c remembered firing the weapon that had taken the life of Daniel's wife along with the symbiote she harbored. He had not shown her the mercy of a broken neck, but instead had used his staff weapon to burn her death into her.

Even knowing that he had acted to save the life of young Daniel, Teal'c could feel the sorrow gathering because he knew how this would change his relationship with Daniel Jackson. The man no long sought out Teal'c's companionship. He distanced himself from both Teal'c and the team. After listening to Daniel speak of his pain to Blair, Teal'c had more reason for wishing that Blair Sandburg would join the program. He had never meant to cause such damage to Daniel, but Daniel had found a friend in Blair Sandburg.

Then Colonel O'Neill had injured Daniel by going undercover and not informing him. Daniel's reaction was not something Teal'c understood. He had struck out at Colonel O'Neill, made cutting comments about how he had not wished to seek out the older man and how he had not minded the team being led by another. It was most confusing. Teal'c understood Jaffa. Had these conflicts come up within a unit he commanded in Apophis' name, he would have a solution. Had he not known how to handle something, he could have turned to Bra'tac. Yet here he did not feel free to take his concerns to the rest of the team. O'Neill could certainly see that Daniel was floundering, and yet he chose not to act. Teal'c could only trust that judgment.
"Man, I would not have pegged you for the meditating type." Blair wandered out of his room, hobbling on one crutch. Teal'c considered retrieving the man's other crutch, but he did not appear to be putting weight on the injured joint. He did, however, cough several times before heading into the small kitchen and pouring himself water. "Then again, you do seem like someone Naomi would hang with." Blair walked over and dropped onto the large chair beside Teal'c, pulling a red blanket around him as he stared at the candles. "Naomi is my mom, and she's very into meditating and being her own person," Blair added.

"I find it restful," Teal'c offered.

"Totally," Blair nodded.

"You should sleep."

"Yeah, but I can't." Blair tucked his feet under him and stared at the candle flame.

"Perhaps another pill..."

"No way," Blair quickly cut him off. "Pills are not going to change the fact that I can't get my own brain straight here. I mean, you're here and Jim is over at Simon's place sleeping on the couch. So not right."

"Perhaps I should leave," Teal'c leaned over to blow the candles out, but Blair put a hand on his shoulder.

"It wouldn't change anything. Jim still wouldn't be here." Blair left his hand on Teal'c shoulder for a second before he pulled it back under the blanket.

"You show him great loyalty." Teal'c was surprised when Blair made a small noise that clearly indicated disgust. Given what he had seen of Blair Sandburg, the man had more loyalty than even a young Jaffa to his tec'ma'te. Teal'c simply waited for clarification because Blair's reaction did not appear rational.

"Man, I betrayed him, and he is not getting over it." Blair said the words with great sadness and in a tone that made it clear that he believed them. Teal'c thought of his own staff weapon ending the life of Daniel's wife.

"Sometimes betrayals are necessitated by life."

"Sometimes they're just a sign that someone is really fucking stupid. So, before I do anything else stupid, I just have to know. Are you a Sentinel?"

Teal'c tilted his head, surprised by the question. "A human with advanced senses? No. I have more acute hearing than most, but I have no behavioral imperatives and my taste and sense of touch are normal."

Blair nodded slowly. His hair was tangled, and dark circles under his eyes made him appear quite unhealthy. "So, no territorial imperative to keep me safe or get between me and Jim?"

Teal'c considered his answer carefully. "I would like to see you removed from Jim Ellison's influence. He is not as careful with your needs as you are with his."

Blair stared at the candles. "Yeah, I think I know that. It wasn't always that way, you know? He took me in after my apartment blew up."
"Blew up?" Teal'c frowned. He had not believed Cascade to be the center of any significant fighting, nor would he expect Blair to be in the middle of any conflict which did break out.

"Drug dealers set up shop next door, and boom!" Blair raised his arms to show the size of the explosion. "Oh man, I lost almost everything in that blast. I would have been homeless if Jim hadn't taken me in and given me a home. Three years. He's put up with my hair in the drains and weird food in the kitchen for three years."

"Is that a hardship?" Teal'c asked. He lived in a facility with hundreds of men, so he could not see how having two men in the apartment would cause difficulties. Before he'd been First Prime of Apophis, he had lived in a dorm in the belly of a Ha'tak. Two hundred and ten men had shared one room and seventy beds. While the Goa'uld lived lavishly, the slaves who served them could only aspire to eventually have a bed of their own on the ship and a small home with a wife who would wait as they spent years in the service of their god. By both counts, Teal'c had been successful. He had slept in a small room off Apophis' own quarters and Drey'auc had spent most of her life waiting for him to return from a war.

"Sometimes I think it is," Blair said softly. "You know, if you were a Sentinel, this would make a lot more sense."

"What would?"

"Your sudden interest in my well-being."

Teal'c frowned at that. "Should I not be concerned about one who has a good heart and suffers?"

"It's just not normal. But then again, maybe in your part of the world, people aren't quite as... you know." Blair shrugged, but Teal'c clearly did not know because Blair Sandburg's words were distressing.

"Shall I call Jim Ellison and request that he return?" If the young one wanted his teacher, Teal'c would request that the man return. Teal'c did not have to approve of Blair Sandburg's choice. As long as Ellison could command Blair's loyalty, he would have a place in Blair's life.

"No way. IA would have a cow if he came back here before getting cleared." Blair sighed. "Maybe I should have gone to a hotel. This is his loft, and it's not fair for him to get locked out."

"You could return with me to our hotel," Teal'c quickly offered. The solution would be ideal. Daniel and O'Neill had made contact with Elizabeth Canarsee, but she refused to meet them until tomorrow. If he could convince Blair to return with him, he could guard their rooms with Sam without failing in his promise to tend to Blair's injury.

"No way. Murray, I actually like you, but I'm just getting to the point where I don't hate O'Neill. Let's not push things, okay?"

Teal'c nodded his agreement. O'Neill had been aggressive with Jim Ellison, and it spoke well of young Blair that he remained firm in his allegiances. Blair settled back in a corner of the couch, and Teal'c waited for him to continue their conversation, but after another round of coughing, Blair just tucked the blanket around him and drank his water.

With no indication that Blair wished to talk, Teal'c turned his attention to the candles and tried, again, to quiet his mind. As before, the image of Amaunet rose in his memory. Teal'c jerked back as though recoiling from the memory.

"Bad trip, huh?" Blair asked softly. Teal'c stared at the candle and tried to calm his own symbiote.
The creature could feel the unease, even without understanding the cause. Blair continued without waiting for a response from Teal'c. "A bad trip usually happens when you take drugs and your subconscious pulls up images that scare the shit out of you. Sometimes, though, I find that I have a bad trip when I'm meditating. The brain... sometimes it goes exactly where you don't want to go. You know what I mean?"

"I do," Teal'c agreed. He certainly did not wish to relive that moment. He had acted to save Daniel, but he had also destroyed some piece of the man with that same shot.

"I think I gave up meditating after my near-death with drowning. The paramedics actually called off the CPR. Technically, I think I was dead." Blair coughed again and set his glass down on the table. "Ever since then, when I meditate, the images are so not pretty. I can't face it, you know?"

"Your death?" Teal'c asked curiously. Humans had such fear of death. In the last one hundred years, Teal'c had faced certain death so many times that he could no longer gather more than a general regret when life led him to that edge again. He feared slavery and failure much more than death.

"I don't know," Blair said with a laugh. "I mean, yeah, death is not on my list of places to visit. I just feel like things weren't that bad on the other side. I remember being an animal, of searching for and finding something really important. But once I came back..." Blair shrugged again, a gesture most humans used to dismiss the trivial, but Teal'c could see the pain in the way his muscles were tightly knotted and the line of his mouth.

"Tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah," Teal'c said softly. They were ancient words. Blair leaned his chin on his knees and looked at Teal'c, the worry and fatigue and curiosity all laying exposed on his features. "Tec'ma'te can mean one's master—one's teacher. But it also means to greet one as an honored member of the group."

Blair nodded. "A greeting to indicate respect as well as a title of respect."

"Yes," Teal'c agreed. "Tao qua is death, the state of being beyond this life. Cal mah is sanctuary." O'Neill would not approve of Teal'c sharing this knowledge, but the young one was clearly lost, and Teal'c would not leave him to struggle through such a difficult rite alone.

Blair frowned for a second. "Something about greeting death and seeking sanctuary in it? Oh man, do you think I'm looking to die? Because no way. No fucking way."

"I believe you misunderstand," Teal'c said as he struggled to put words to this sacred rite. "The belief is that some can greet death and will find sanctuary. They may then find both life and death open to them, although I do not believe those who are so inclined seek any final death."

"So, a person who faces death and shows it respect, and in return death respects them? That's a shaman."

"You have such people?" Teal'c was surprised. He had seen nothing but fear of death in all that he had read, with the exception of the Bible. And the Bible did not speak of men who stood between life and death, earning knowledge from both—not unless one counted Jesus Christ, and from Teal'c's research, he had assumed Christ's journey to be unique.

"Not in mainstream culture, but yeah. They face death and earn magical powers from the experience," Blair agreed. "Man, that is so not me. Trust me, there was not a lot of respect shown between me and death."

"You found nothing to fear in death, but you struggle with living," Teal'c observed. From the way
Blair frowned at him, Teal'c knew that he was right. "My people have a great respect for death. When one has lost all direction the rites of mal sharran involve denying oneself sustenance until the truth is rediscovered."

Teal'c had expected objection to that. The Tau'ri valued life, even beyond reason in many cases. Instead, Blair nodded in agreement. "Lots of Native Peoples do the same thing. Young men fast and then go out looking for their spirit guide. I tried that myself when I was ten, but I didn't get far."

"Is ten considered a man?" Teal'c asked curiously. He had not thought Tau'ri grew as quickly as that. Blair laughed, and it was nice to see the pain and fatigue fall from him for just a moment. "No, but I was always a little old for my age. Mom says I have an old soul. Jim just says..." Blair fell silent again.

"Among my people, one who is tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah is special. He may have insights beyond that of others. They say these people can see past the needs of their body because they understand that they will go to a world where their body no longer has needs." What he didn't say was that the village would often have to tend the man carefully because he would often forget his own needs. Sometimes Teal'c believed Daniel was one such. That was why he tried to care for him, but that had ended with a staff blast through his wife's body. "Their advice is much sought," Teal'c finished.

That made Blair laugh, but it was a dark and bitter sound. Teal'c frowned at the despair he could see in Blair. "Man, no one seeks my advice. No one." He held his palms up as through surrendering, and Teal'c tilted his head in confusion.

"O'Neill would seek your advice on these men you call Sentinels."

"Yeah, well O'Neill has issues, and we both know that background check is going to sound FBI alarms so loud we'll be able to hear them from here."

"Do you not give advice to those enrolled at your university?"

"When they listen." Blair pushed the blanket down and stretched. "They don't listen all that often and I get tired of saying the same things over and over when it doesn't feel like it makes any difference. I am not into masochism, you know?"

"I do," Teal'c agreed. He wondered if the young man was failing to embrace life as much as he had embraced death. It was not unheard of among the tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah for them to lose the balance between life and death. Teal'c knew so little of their journey that he wished Master Bra'tac were present to provide more effective guidance. "What in life holds you as firmly as the peace you found in death?" Teal'c asked.

Blair jerked and stared at Teal'c with wide eyes. Teal'c sat still, waiting for the shock to pass. His words should not have triggered such fear... not unless he was right about Blair yearning for the sanctuary of death.

"I have a lot to live for. A lot. No way would I consider suicide. That is seriously bad for the karma." Blair got up and grabbed his crutch, hobbling toward this bedroom, but he hit the end table, and his glass clattered to the floor and shattered with a tinkle of glass on the wooden floors.

"Do not move," Teal'c ordered the young man, and Blair froze in place, his bare foot surrounded by glass.

"Oh man, one foot out of commission is quite enough. This is me not moving."
Teal'c went to the end of the couch and quickly put his boots on before he returned to Blair, shards of glass resting against the top of Blair's foot as he leaned against the couch.

"Man, my karma sucks."

Teal'c picked him up easily and carried him to the dining room table where he set him down. "Where would I find materials for cleaning?" Teal'c asked, and Blair pointed at a cabinet.

"It is a huge cultural taboo to have guests clean, you know."

That caused Teal'c to pause for a second. He did not wish to offend, but the physical needs outweighed the risk of offense. "I offer apologies for violating a taboo, but I will not allow you to clean this."

"No way, the dishonor is all on me. I'm the one allowing a guest to clean."

"I am not a guest. I am here on instructions from the healer."

"True. So I can just blame the broken taboo on her. That works." Blair gave a short laugh. "She is totally okay with breaking taboos. That's one reason we actually managed to get to a fourth date because her ability to break taboos is a beautiful sight, Murray."

Teal'c used a hand broom and dust pan to sweep up the glass and deposit it in the receptacle Blair pointed to. One of the candles had blown out, and Teal'c considered it, trying to decide whether to continue in his attempts to kelnoreem.

"Maybe I could meditate with you," Blair said softly. Teal'c turned and considered the young man.

"I would very much like that, Blair Sandburg," Teal'c returned to the table and gathered the man in his arms.

"This is totally emasculating, you know," Blair sighed.

"I have often been carried when injured."

"Oh wow. I so do not want to meet the dude big enough to carry you," Blair said with a laugh.

"He is impressive," Teal'c admitted as he thought of Master Bra'tac. It had been too long since he had a mentor to turn to or a student to share his own wisdom with. Perhaps that dormant need was drawing him close to Blair Sandburg. If so, Teal'c vowed to police his own thoughts and actions because this one already had too many people pulling at him. Teal'c carefully settled Blair on the couch and then pulled the blanket off the chair, offering it to him. Blair pulled it close around him as though cold.

"I think I want to be on the floor with you," Blair insisted when Teal'c walked around the table and returned to his own spot on the floor. Blair slid off the couch and landed between the coffee table and couch. Carefully settling his injured ankle, Blair pulled the blanket around his shoulders and focused on the candles.

"Do you require anything?" Teal'c asked. Blair looked up at him with serious eyes.

"No. I'm good." He swallowed, his expression looking more like a man prepared to go into battle than one preparing for kelnoreem. Teal'c simply inclined his head and trusted that if Blair needed something else, he would speak of his needs. For now, he focused on clearing his mind and allowing his body and mind to finally rest. Across the table, Blair Sandburg's breathing slowed as he sought...
rest or answers from his own journey.

11. Chapter Eleven

"Oh man, I feel like I got hit by a truck, or maybe two." Blair stuck his head out from under the blanket and blinked.

Teal'c did not answer, but he was not surprised at the comment. For him, kelnoreem was all the rest he required, but humans required actual sleep. Blair had not fallen asleep until long after the city had grown quiet. He had slept no more than a few hours, and the healer had clearly indicated that he needed more. Perhaps Teal'c should have carried the man to bed, but he had stirred restlessly during even the short time required to move him to the couch. Teal'c walked over to him and offered Blair the coffee he had prepared along with a variety of medicines prescribed by the healer. If Blair was anything like Daniel, he would not be pleasant or rational until he had coffee.

"May your mocassins make happy tracks," Blair said happily, taking the cup. While Teal'c understood each word individually, that combination was unique. But then young Blair Sandburg was rather unique.

He brought the cup to his mouth and immediately started choking. Teal'c pulled the cup from his hand before he could burn himself. "Oh man. Shit. Damn, that is strong coffee. Did you remember to put water in it?" Blair finally spluttered.

"That is how Daniel Jackson prepares coffee."

Blair blinked up at him. "Whoa. He has way more hair on his chest than me. Is there any chance you could pour about a quarter of that out and put water in?"

"Of course." Teal'c returned to the sink and added water to the beverage. "You should return to your rest. You slept little."

"I slept more than I usually do," Blair countered. "And I have class this morning. Man, I have class in about five minutes. Fuck." Blair pushed back the blanket and ignored both the cup Teal'c offered again and the pills.

Teal'c put a hand on Blair's shoulder and pushed him back down before handing him the coffee. "A call came in this morning," Teal'c assured Blair. "A woman advised that she would have your classes covered until an event she called an administrative review."

Blair turned a startling shade of white and sagged back against the couch. "Shit."

"Are you ill or in need of food?" Teal'c asked. That was not a healthy hue for a human face. When he'd lifted Blair from the floor to place him on the couch, his body had been lighter than Teal'c had expected.

"No. I'm fine. Man, that is just a little harsh, waking up to news like that."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow, unsure what news he had delivered.

"An administrative review is a nice way of saying you're unofficially fired until they can get enough administrators together to look at your file and officially fire you. I knew it was coming, but still..."
Blair made an unpleasant face. "I seriously hope Jim is in a good mood when he comes back because I will so not be paying the rent this month. With my ankle out of commission, I'm not even going to be able to look for work until I can walk. Damn it."

Teal'c watched the shock transition to anger before it faded to a weariness that was more familiar on Blair's face. Blair rubbed his hand over his face and pushed his hair back. "I should call Simon, you know, find out if things are still just as screwed up on that front." When Teal'c did not remove his hand, Blair reached for the pills and scooped them up, swallowing them along with half the cup of coffee. "Murray, you're starting to make me doubt you on the behavioral imperatives front."

Teal'c considered that for a moment. "I have given my word that you will take your medicine," Teal'c pointed out. "Until Jim Ellison can return and I can discuss with him the serious nature of your injury, I will not relinquish the task." Blair looked up and gave him an almost amused expression.

"Yeah, yeah, call it what you want. Mother henning is mother henning no matter what name you call it. And cultural references that link a man to feminine traits are so not a compliment."

"Why not?" Teal'c asked. Certainly women had different tasks from men in Jaffa culture, but to call a man womanly was confusing but not offensive. And were someone to call him as loyal or intelligent as Sam Carter, Teal'c would find great honor in the comment.

Even though Teal'c had removed his hand from Blair's shoulder, the question stopped Blair for a moment. He thought about it for a second before shrugging. "Because our society sucks in a totally misogynistic and chauvinistic sort of way." He grabbed his one crutch and pushed himself up, but Teal'c had to reach out to steady him as he wavered. "I will miss the money, but I'm actually kinda glad I'm not teaching today. Two or three hours sleep is normal for me, but two or three hours of sleep full of weird-ass dreams does not make for a happy Blair."

Teal'c remembered dreams from the days before his prim'ta when he had received his first larval Goa'uld, but that had been almost ninety years ago. The images of kelnoreem were not as disjointed or frightening as the dreams he remembered from childhood, and he did not want to consider what dreams could haunt one who was tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah.

Blair moved stiffly across the room and finally propped his crutch against the table and sat, phone in hand. His first call obviously did not reach Simon Banks because he engaged in conversation that Teal'c would have expected from two who were considering sexual relations. Blair's face lit with a mischievousness that Teal'c rarely saw on an adult human. O'Neill sometimes got that expression shortly before doing something that would make Daniel threaten him in many languages, but Blair did not appear to be verbally torturing anyone. That conversation continued for a few minutes until Blair went silent. Eventually, he called out Simon Banks' name with obvious joy and relief.

"Simon! You said you'd know something this morning."

Whatever the answer on the other end was, it obviously did not please Blair. He frowned, and Teal'c busied himself searching for food that he recognized as having grown. Since Blair shared this space with Jim Ellison, that was the only guideline he could use to determine which foods belonged to Blair.

"I'm not calling him, I'm calling you."

Teal'c frowned at the defensiveness he heard in the voice, but he tried to focus on his search. The apple, orange and onion were all easily identified, so Teal'c pulled them out and put them on a plate with a knife.
"Hey, this is me being cooperative. If O'Neill and Murray aren't playing by IA rules, that is so not my fault or Jim's fault."

Recognizing a traditional morning food, Teal'c added a bagel to the plate and returned to the refrigerator for something that would function as a spread.

"I didn't ask to have anyone stay here. Man, this is... Look, I'm just trying to..." Blair paused. "I know that! Do you think I don't know that, Simon? I'm trying to keep IA off his back."

Teal'c frowned and pulled butter and jam and cream cheese from the refrigerator. Under no circumstances could Blair be blamed for what had happened. Jim Ellison bore the majority of the blame in Teal'c estimation. O'Neill had aggravated the situation, and Teal'c suspected that his own presence was aggravating Ellison. If his senses were as acute as Blair claimed, the man might sense the larval Goa'uld residing within him. However, Blair had not initiated any conflict and had gone out of his way to defuse the situation. Obviously, the man on the other end of the phone did not agree. Blair listened in silence, his back growing stiffer by the second. He was radiating great anger.

"Man, my job at the university has nothing to do with this. He's a plagiarist, and as a teaching assistant, I have clear ethical standards I follow on plagiarism. That has absolutely nothing to do with the department or the investigation!"

Blair listened again.

"I didn't even know there was a connection to a murder, Simon," he shouted into the phone. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not in there to hear what's going on."

The next pause was longer, and Teal'c delivered the plate of food to the table where Blair could easily reach it. Blair frowned at the plate for a moment, or perhaps he was frowning at the words from the other end of the phone.

"Trust me, I will. I was fired from the university today, so you don't have to worry about me saying anything at all to him. Brad Ventriss and his high-priced lawyer can do whatever they want. I may have a few suggestions for things they can do to themselves, but since I'm not at the station or the university, I'm out of it. Look, just have Jim call when he can." Blair hung up the phone so quickly that Teal'c suspected that he was attempting to be rude to Simon Banks.

Sighing, Blair pressed his hands to his face for a long second before looking through his fingers. "Murray, my man, we have to talk about your food choices."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow and wondered whether he should point out that his food choices were far less significant than the conflict between Blair Sandburg and Simon Banks.

"Onions and fennel are used in foods, not as food themselves. Apples and oranges are good choices, though," Blair said as he started peeling the orange. "You don't get out much, do you?"

"Indeed not," Teal'c agreed. He sat at the table next to Blair and watched the young man slowly and methodically pull the peel off the orange.

"You want?" Blair asked, offering the apple.

"I am not currently hungry," Teal'c said, choosing to not mention the rule that the team not eat food that has been within the control of others unless absolutely necessary. After the events on Argos where O'Neill was drugged and accidentally infected with nanites which aged him to near-death, the prohibition was reasonable, even if it pained Teal'c to refuse to share food with young Blair.
"Your loss," Blair shrugged without taking offense. By choosing the orange, Blair did have a lot of work before he finally reached the fruit, and even then, he concentrated on pulling of small bits of white mesocarp. "What does your culture say about dreams?" Blair finally pulled as section of orange away from the others and popped it in his mouth.

Teal'c considered his answer carefully. Those who carried a Goa'uld could not dream, but that was not an answer he could give the young one. "We do not discuss dreams," he finally offered.

He was afraid that his answer would offend Blair Sandburg, but he simply nodded as if he understood perfectly. "I hear you."

"I have no objection to listening to anything you may wish to share," Teal'c offered.

Blair stopped nodding and carefully searched Teal'c with his gaze. "My mom always says that you have to trust your judgment with people... that if you wait to get to know someone before trusting them, that you'll never trust the right people at the right time. Then again, considering how quickly my mom moves on from one person to another, if she didn't trust quickly, she'd be pretty screwed. Every couple of months she got the urge to get up and move, you know what I mean?"

Teal'c certainly did understand such wisdom. "I trusted O'Neill within minutes of meeting him."

"Man, I so need to introduce you to my mom. She'd love you."

Teal'c inclined his head, accepting that compliment and waiting to see if his answer was enough to convince Blair Sandburg to trust him.

Blair used a thumbnail to force a seed out of an orange section, staring at it with great thoughtfulness. Finally, he looked up. "Do I let people push me around?"

Teal'c tilted his head and reflected upon possible answers. O'Neill and Daniel had both cautioned him against speaking the truth, even when others asked for it. Sam Carter insisted that both men were manipulative in their own ways and that truth was always to be valued. "You did not allow Colonel O'Neill to... push you around."

"So, that would be a nicely worded 'yes'," Blair said with a sigh. He pushed himself up from the table even though he had eaten less than half his orange.

"You should continue to eat."

"Later. Right now, I'm so dirty that I can't stand myself. Shower and then food. You've got to have priorities," Blair said with a smile, but it was not an expression that conveyed any sort of happiness. After a quick trip to his room for his second crutch and a change of clothes, Blair disappeared down the short hall and into the bathroom. Teal'c only hoped that his words had not damaged a young man who was already suffering.

Pulling out his cell phone, Teal'c dialed O'Neill's number.

"Yep," O'Neill answered his phone.

"I am reporting in."

"Everything okay with the kid?" O'Neill asked. Despite the fact that he had not apologized, Teal'c knew the warrior regretted his part in Blair's injury.

"He is physically exhausted and apparently the university no longer wishes for him to work there."

"Aw crap. The kid has luck about like Danny, doesn't he?"

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed. There was an old Jaffa saying: The universe gave great burdens only to those willing to bear them. Daniel and Blair both appeared to fit that. Of course, O'Neill and Sam Carter were equally willing to bear great burdens. Not even he could claim to have avoided increasing his own difficulties in life. Another saying said that the burdens one chose always felt lighter than the ones chosen for you, and Teal'c had chosen his burdens. He could only hope Blair would chose his own burdens rather than continue to bear what Jim Ellison, O'Neill, and others placed upon him.

"Well, he wasn't kidding about his past. The State Department is having hairballs at the thought of him getting clearance. Apparently he's a significant risk and his mother is a monumental risk. Hell, after reading the report the general faxed over, I want to meet this woman. Hammond's still working on them, but it's not looking pretty. I hate to say this, but if the State Department won't budge, we're going to need to get copies of his research. Do you think he'd share if we asked nicely?" O'Neill did not have to add that if Blair did not share, he would steal the research. Teal'c could tell that from the tone he used.

"I believe he will."

"I hope you're right, T. So, Daniel and I are going to go pick up his loony friend..." O'Neill paused, probably because Daniel was loudly protesting O'Neill's characterization of Elizabeth Canarsee. "She's meeting us a little after 2pm."

"Do you require my assistance?"

"No, this should be a simple meet. Sam says we don't have any company in town and Kelso thinks the same. Even if the NID is sniffing around, they won't be able to get ahead of us, and we don't have any watchers here. So, we're going for unobtrusive. Or as unobtrusive as you can get when you're meeting a crazy woman who thinks the whole government is out to get her." Again, O'Neill's words caused Daniel to complain. "Yeah, well I'd be a lot happier if she agreed to actually come with us. The government is not actually evil, just parts of it. And trust me, she is not important enough for the whole government to be after her."

Teal'c listened to Daniel and O'Neill trade words on the probability of Elizabeth Canarsee's willingness to accept their assistance and her relative sanity. Despite the fact that Daniel was clearly on the verge of losing his temper, O'Neill continued to make derogatory comments.

Daniel finally resorted to Goa'uld to make a very unlikely suggestion about where O'Neill should place his head.

O'Neill chuckled. "I take it he's not offering me a chocolate chip cookie recipe?" O'Neill asked with clear amusement.

"He is not," Teal'c agreed.

"Cheer up, Daniel. At least we are planning to save her, if she'll let herself be saved. But I think we'd better do this without you Teal'c. No offense, but one look at you, and she's going to have uncharitable thoughts about the government again."

"I take no offense," Teal'c assured O'Neill. "I shall wait here until you return."

"Ellison isn't planning on coming back any time soon, is he?"

"I do not believe so. His people continue to investigate him."
“Good. The man needs some investigating.” Teal’c did not answer even though O’Neill had nothing more to say for several seconds. “See if Blair won’t agree to send us a few files. If he’s out of work, we may be able to offer some compensation as an independent contractor even if the State Department has its collective head up its ass.”

“I shall speak with him,” Teal’c agreed. If Tau’ri soldiers needed Blair Sandburg’s research, the young man would share, Teal’c had no doubt of that.

“Stay safe,” O’Neill said in way of a farewell.

“I shall. Lek tol, O’Neill.” The phone clicked off, and Teal’c closed his own cell phone and put it in his pocket. If O’Neill’s plan worked, the team and Daniel Jackson’s friend would shortly return to the SGC, and Blair would again be left in the care of Jim Ellison. If he was tao qua ta tec’ma’te i cal mah, he would continue to struggle with the balance between life and death. Teal’c would simply need to impress upon Jim Ellison the need to care for Blair Sandburg with more honor. Once he had determined to speak to Ellison at the first opportunity, Teal’c found he felt much better about their trip to Cascade. Walking to the glass doors, he looked out over the gray city and waited for Blair to complete his shower. The young man would return to his bed, and the rest would wait until he had rested.

12. Chapter Twelve

“Murray, I really appreciate you hanging out here. I was so not in a good place last night.” Blair leaned forward on his crutches and then shifted back again, rocking as though nervous.

“I am pleased to have been of assistance.” Teal’c did not mention that he had already entered Jim Ellison’s phone number into his cell phone, and he would be arranging a discussion with the man before leaving Cascade. To act so dishonorably toward one who had given his loyalty was unforgivable, but the failure of others to correct Jim Ellison’s behavior was even more egregious. Teal’c would not be another who found it expedient to ignore the young man’s distress.

“Man, you put a lot of trust in me, sharing your beliefs, and I want you to know that I’m not even going to try to look up your tribe. Whatever secrets you have, you have a right to them.” Blair rocked back and forth a little faster. It was uncomfortable because Blair moved in and out of Teal’c line of sight to the road where O’Neill would be coming.

“I regret that you are unable to join us and share our secret.”

“Ooh man, me too. I mean, just the hints that O’Neill has dropped… I’m burning up with curiosity. Totally. I just hope that someone can actually use the stuff I’m sending with you.” Blair glanced down at the notebook he had braced between the crutch and his forearm.

Teal’c tilted his head. “I am sure they will find your insights most useful.”

Blair smiled at the praise, his rocking picking up pace a bit.

Teal’c just hoped that O’Neill could arrange payment because his understanding of American culture suggested that Blair Sandburg would be most uncomfortable if he had no source of income. Teal’c still did not understand the assignment of money and honor in this culture, but if Blair’s work saved the lives of warriors in the field of battle, he should be rewarded far more than the men who competed with the ball in the wooden arena. Throwing a ball into a basket might be an interesting
training technique, but the assignment of great accolades and wealth to such individuals was a mystery that neither Daniel nor Sam Carter had successfully explained to him.

A brown sedan pulled out of traffic and slowed until it stopped next to the curb, and O'Neill got out immediately. "Murray, thank god. You have to save me from the nerd talk." Sam got out of the front seat, an amused look on her face.

"We were only discussing the possibility of building a commercial system with 768 cores to allow data centers to consolidate applications, sir," Sam Carter said with exaggerated innocence as she stepped out of the car. "Hey Murray."

Teal'c inclined his head toward his team, grateful to see them return in good spirits. A woman with dark hair and skin got out of the back seat, her eyes carefully studying them. Clearly this was Daniel Jackson's friend. She walked as one who had never fought, but her eyes danced nervously around as though expecting an attack. She might have chosen to join them, but she still carried her fears for all to see. Daniel had gotten out and circled around the back of the car to stand by her side.

"Elizabeth, this is... uh, Murray." Daniel cleared his throat nervously.

"Sweet, Daniel. If Sandburg hadn't already figured it out, that wouldn't have given it away, not at all," Jack pointed out sarcastically.

"Oh yeah, like you were the king of subtle," Blair said, his voice equally as sarcastic.

O'Neill crossed his arms. "Hey, I can do subtle."

"When you're asleep," Daniel said softly.

Teal'c noticed that Elizabeth Canarsee relaxed as the men insulted each other. O'Neill stepped closer to Blair, and Blair held out the thin notebook he'd carried with him.

"Is this...?" O'Neill took it and opened it.

"It's not everything," Blair said almost apologetically, but given his willingness to share, he had nothing for which to apologize. "The individual tests aren't just mine. I can't give that away, not without permission. But if you're looking to control the senses short term, this should give you a head start."

O'Neill pursed his lips. "I'm still working on getting the Air Force to pay you for this," he offered, raising the notebook.

"No problem. The whole goal was to help people, you know?" Blair asked, shrugging awkwardly with his crutches.

O'Neill opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Teal'c was distracted by the sound of fast acceleration from the parking area behind the building. He started to turn, and he could hear O'Neill fall silent. By the time the white hood of a van appeared at the entrance to the alley, Teal'c had pulled his zat'n'ktel and had it concealed next to his side. However, he did not immediately fire, waiting for O'Neill's order or opening shots. Daniel shouted, a mere sound rather than words, and O'Neill called for someone to take cover. Teal'c had no cover immediately available from the fast-moving vehicle, but he did have a good line of fire if the van's erratic behavior turned dangerous.

The van turned the corner slammed to a halt right in front of O'Neill's car, the side already open, and Teal'c targeted it. Men in black jumped out and O'Neill's gun barked sharply. Teal'c immediately fired, his zat'n'ktel hitting one man so that his arms flew open and his body slumped to the ground,
but more people spilled from the open van. The hum of other zat'n'ktel and the sharp snap of pistols filled the air, and Teal'c dropped to the ground, his own weapon still firing even though his leg burned with the heat of a wound.

New enemy were firing now firing from the building, and Teal'c could see O'Neill turn to answer the new threat, but Teal'c could not see how many there were. He could only continue to fire at the van. The concrete next to him sizzled as a zat'n'ktel discharged close enough to his hand that he could feel the tingle like a hundred pins prickling down his arm, but that was no more distracting than the hot bullet wound slowly seeping blood from his leg.

"No!" a woman screamed. Teal'c could see one of the enemy pull Elizabeth Canarsee to her feet by her braid, blocking any incoming fire by keeping her body in front of his own. Daniel had an acceptable angle for attack, but he did not fire, so either he mistrusted his aim or he had no remaining ammunition. Teal'c raised up on one knee to take better aim. If he hit Elizabeth Canarsee, he would not permanently damage her, an advantage O'Neill did not have.

O'Neill flashed a handsign indicating he was in significant trouble holding his side, and Sam Carter shifted to aid him. A zat'n'ktel flashed, and s he fell forward with a cry. Teal'c could see the electricity course through her body. Ignoring his fallen comrade, Teal'c targeted Elizabeth Canarsee and watched as the shot from his zat'n'ktel flickered between her and her attacker, the blue and yellow aura shining against the black fabric for a brief second before both fell to the ground moaning softly and still moving. A single shot was not designed to incapacitate two people, but both Elizabeth Canarsee and her attacker were moving slowly and painfully.

Dropping back down to the sidewalk, Teal'c focused on the van, firing several shots into the metal frame, hoping to either incapacitate or kill whoever was inside. A man stumbled out, and Teal'c raised his gun to fire, only to have the edge of a blast from a zat'n'ktel skitter across his outstretched arm so that it lost all feeling. Teal'c fell back, his heart racing, and his nerves screaming in pain as his brain mistakenly thought his arm was on fire. Two men rushed O'Neill's position, and from the lack of returning fire, Teal'c could only assume O'Neill had fallen.

Ignoring the pain, Teal'c reached for his zat'n'ktel, but could not force his stiff and trembling fingers to bend enough to grasp the weapon. One of the men from the building grabbed Elizabeth Canarsee by her arm, and suddenly Blair Sandburg was there, swinging his crutch like a man attempting to hit a baseball with a bat. His paltry weapon connected with the first man's back, and a bellow of pain answered.

The man Teal'c had incapacitated when he had held Elizabeth Canarsee hostage flung himself forward and tackled Blair so that both fell to the ground. With his heart still pounding painfully enough to send sharp jolts through his body with every beat, Teal'c pushed himself up and stumbled forward.

"Grab them! Grab them!" a voice called from the van. A siren sounded in the distance, but Teal'c found himself falling to the side, his left side still unable to bear his weight with the electrical charge making his limbs stiff and spastic. One of the enemy grabbed Daniel Jackson, dragging his unconscious body from behind the car while a second pulled a dazed and uncoordinated Elizabeth Canarsee. The man who had taken Blair Sandburg to the ground rose, but Blair used his second crutch to target the man's legs, swinging so hard that the man slammed into the side of O'Neill's car before he hit the ground again.

"They're coming!" the voice from the van screamed. Elizabeth Canarsee was struggling weakly and the man Blair had hit was crawling toward the van. Hopping on one leg, Blair nearly tripped over the crawling enemy as he grabbed for Elizabeth. He fell forward, but caught her leg on the way down,
holding on desperately.

Another man came out from the building, and Teal'c forced himself upright, throwing his body to the side to take out this new enemy. They both fell to the ground, but the other man quickly recovered while Teal'c could not. His body still trembling from the zat'n'ktel charge, Teal'c could only watch as the enemy warriors grabbed Elizabeth Canarsee and Blair Sandburg, depositing them in the back of the van.

"Man, you are so going to regret this. You are going to—" Blair's voice was cut off as the van door slammed closed before the van accelerated wildly into the Cascade traffic, which had not even slowed for the gunfire.

Blue, gray, and yellow police cars pulled around the corner, but rather than pursue the van, all three stopped next to O'Neill's car, the guards pointing their weapons at Teal'c and O'Neill. O'Neill was not yet moving, and Teal'c did not think he warranted such attention when he was clearly unable to control his own body, but he could hardly tell them such as they yelled for him to show his hands.

While he feared that the enemy would escape before he could communicate his information, Teal'c decided that these guards were frightened and unlikely to listen to anything until they had assured themselves that they were not in danger themselves. Teal'c had no respect for such weak individuals, but he showed his hands and laid on his stomach as ordered, hoping to get someone to listen to him before the missing member of his team and the two innocents had been taken too far away.

The reality was far worse than Teal'c had anticipated. He lay on the ground, restrained, while O'Neill finally groaned his way to life and found himself at the end of a police weapon.

"For crying out loud. Haven't I done this once already? I really hate Cascade," O'Neill complained loudly as he held his hands up. "Teal'c? Carter? Danny?"

"I am here," Teal'c offered. He had lost his bandana around his head, and the guards continually stared, but that was the least of the current difficulties. "Carter is still unconscious and the attackers have taken Daniel Jackson."

"Fuck," O'Neill breathed softly. "We just can't take him anywhere." The guards pulled O'Neill upright and put him stomach down on the hood of a police car before restraining him with the metal cuffs they had also used on Teal'c. "Who's in charge here?" O'Neill called out loudly. The guard behind him continued to ritualistically speak words which were familiar to Teal'c from the various police shows he watched. They had already read Teal'c his rights. An ambulance pulled up, but the guard restraining O'Neill did not pause in his recitation as others directed medics to Major Carter.

"Damn it, I don't want a lawyer, I want my archeologist back!" O'Neill snapped. "Dr. Daniel Jackson has been kidnapped, so put an APB out for a white panel van, no markings, license plates started with 879." The guard continued to recite the rights, pausing after each to ask O'Neill if he understood each one. "I want to speak with Captain Banks of Major Crimes," O'Neill yelled for the third time.

"I have already requested his assistance," Teal'c offered, but the words did not calm O'Neill down. The guard stepped back, allowing O'Neill to stand and face him, and for a moment, Teal'c wondered if O'Neill would attack. He was certainly angry enough.

"My identification is in my pocket. I am Colonel Jack O'Neill, United States Air Force." His body was tight with anger. "The civilian consultant to—"
"And you just felt like shooting up the city?" the officer cut him off. If asked to offer an opinion, Teal'c would have said that O'Neill was going to take the guard down—even restrained the guard would be no match for him. However, a new car appeared.

"Captain Banks has arrived," Teal'c offered, hoping to forestall any further violence.

When a brown sedan pulled up, Teal'c's was unsurprised that Jim Ellison jumped from the passenger side, his hand hovering near his weapon even though there were clearly no enemy left. Captain Banks was slower to leave the vehicle, but he looked no friendlier than did Jim Ellison.

"Where's Blair?" Jim Ellison demanded of Colonel O'Neill, getting well within what Daniel Jackson referred to as personal space.

"Not in my pocket, Ellison," O'Neill snapped. "Eight armed suspects, five from a white panel van and three hiding in your building took Daniel and probably Canaresee and Sandburg as well."

"They did, indeed," Teal'c agreed, and Ellison turned to face him, fury etched into his face. Although Teal'c was still seated on the cold ground with his injured leg in front of him, he was not particularly impressed with such hot anger. A man was most dangerous when his anger was cold. The way Jim Ellison approached, Teal'c could easily disable or kill him with a single kick.

"What happened to Blair?" Jim Ellison demanded.

Teal'c lifted an eyebrow. "As I have informed the guards, Blair Sandburg, Elizabeth Canarsee and Daniel Jackson were taken by several individuals driving a white van."

O'Neill spoke up. "A white panel van with a license plate that started 879. Maybe you could get one of your people to put out an APB before they dump it and move our people. An even better suggestion would be getting me and my team out of cuffs so we can contact our superiors and start tracking these people... unless you'd like to waste more time." O'Neill took a step forward so that now he moved aggressively into Jim Ellison's personal space, but the detective ignored O'Neill and turned to his captain.

"Simon?" Jim Ellison asked, and Simon Banks nodded and offered a quick, "I've got it," before he returned to his car. Teal'c could hear him use the radio to alert others of the need to find the van.

For a second, Jim Ellison focused on Captain Banks, his hands curled into tight fists that he pressed against his legs. Jerking around, he challenged O'Neill. "If anything happens to Blair..."

"What? You'll drag him around until he breaks his other ankle?" O'Neill demanded with a derisive noise. Ellison's body jerked as though struck, and his fists tightened. However, he also reached into his pocket with stiff motions and pulled out keys. "About time," O'Neill complained as he turned to allow Ellison to remove them.

One of the medics came over to Teal'c, but Teal'c ignored him, standing on his own and offering his own restraints to be released. Jim Ellison did so quickly and without taking his eyes off O'Neill.

"What happened?" O'Neill asked for a report before picking up the bandana from the ground and offered it to Teal'c.

The healer was making comments about Teal'c needing medical assistance for his leg, but Teal'c ignored the man. "The attackers targeted Elizabeth Canarsee, pulling her toward the van first. I disabled the first attacker, but more came. Daniel Jackson was disabled and unconscious when they pulled him into the van. Blair Sandburg attacked using his crutch as a weapon."
"That sounds like Blair." Jim Ellison sounded weary.

"A crutch?" O'Neill sounded shocked.

"Indeed. He disabled one attacker with a swing, but there were too many. He was pulled in while trying to pull Elizabeth Canarsee away from another attacker."

"Kid has more balls than brains," O'Neill said softly. Jim Ellison did not respond, but he lost much of the color in his face. While the man had an unethical relationship with Blair Sandburg, he obviously did care. O'Neill gave the detective a sympathetic look before returning to the more immediate concerns. "Did Daniel look injured?"

Teal'c glanced over to where his confiscated zat'n'ktel lay on the back of a guard vehicle. He could only hope that O'Neill would understand the gesture. "He did not appear harmed." Teal'c looked back, and O'Neill gave him a nod. Message received. The enemy were using both human weapons and zat'n'ktel, so they were clearly connected to the Stargate program. The NID were the most likely to have access to the weaponry used, especially given their recent off-world operations. However, other groups may have traded for off-world weapons.

"Sir?" Sam Carter groaned and then pushed herself up on an elbow.

"Carter." O'Neill immediately headed for stretcher on which the medics had placed her.

"Sir, where's Daniel?" she immediately asked, her eyes scanning the swarm of guards and technicians who now crowded into the area.

"You know what happens any time we try and take him out for a nice little jaunt, Carter." O'Neill's face was grim. He walked to the back of the car and retrieved his the team's cell phones and weapons, his glare daring the closest guard to try and stop him.

"Oh no. Sir, tell me Daniel didn't get kidnapped."

O'Neill looked over at Carter, and the woman knew. "Next time, I'm putting a leash on him," O'Neill said with a sigh.

"Whatever you've put Sandburg in the middle of—" Ellison started, his anger stopping his words before he could even finish.

He might have continued, but Captain Banks returned, resting his hand on Jim Ellison's arm. "Jim, the kid gets in plenty of trouble without someone else putting him in the middle. I need a full report on what happened. We have all ports and major highways under surveillance, but this would be a whole lot easier if we knew who we were looking for." From the look Captain Banks focused on O'Neill, the man was not going to be easily distracted.

"This is a need-to know-situation," O'Neill said tightly. He pulled his car keys from his pocket and tossed them to Carter.

"And I need to know!" Captain Banks' responded in anger.

"No, you don't." O'Neill turned his back and started dialing out on his cell phone. Carter pushed herself up from the stretcher, ignoring the medic who tried to stop her. Teal'c walked to the back of their car and took a position near enough to stop the medic from interfering with her.

"Captain Banks, this woman had an irregular heartbeat just a few minutes ago, she can't just get up," the smaller medic complained loudly.
"Watch me," Carter said with a warrior's fierceness. She had already opened the trunk and started pulling out equipment.

"I can arrest you for interfering with a police investigation, and I will," Captain Banks warned.

"Only if you want to be arrested for interfering with a federal investigation," O'Neill snapped back. "Walter?" he called into the phone, shifting his body so that he again had his back to Simon Banks. "We have a Situation Yangtze, Cascade, Dr. Jackson plus two civilians. I need units on standby and see if we can't find out which slimy corner of the universe has stuck its head above ground so I can cut it off. Check with Mayborne. He knows a lot of slime." O'Neill listened for a second. "Keep an eye out for less common modes of transportation," he suggested. He gave Walter only enough time to agree before he hung up the phone.

"Sir, I have them," Carter said softly as she watched the tracking equipment.

"Okay, kids, time to go. Banks, get your cars the hell out of my way."

Simon Banks stepped closer. "Colonel, you are not leaving. You will give full statements and cooperate with this investigation."

Despite Captain Banks' clear frustration, Teal'c was more interested in Jim Ellison who was swallowing and staring down the road in the direction which the van had taken. "Situation Yangtze?" Jim Ellison asked, turning to face them.

O'Neill nodded sharply in Sam Carter's direction, and she moved the tracking equipment up to the front seat. Then he looked at Ellison for a second. O'Neill occasionally feigned ignorance of others' feelings and often did not care to address the emotions of others, but Teal'c knew that O'Neill recognized the extreme distress in Ellison's every move. His body was tight with anxiety and his eyes had dilated widely. "Look, Ellison, Just stay out of our way, and I'll get both our geeks back—all three of them. I don't like it when people steal my geeks."

"Situation Yangtze?" Ellison repeated. "The Yangtze as in the river that goes past Shanghai. You think someone took Canarsee or Jackson to get work out of them. Blair is caught in the middle of that, and you think I'm going to stand by?"

"I think it's their best chance." O'Neill turned his back and started for the driver's door. Teal'c backed quickly toward the closest rear door, watching Ellison and Banks. Neither man looked ready to compromise, and the guards' vehicles still blocked the street. O'Neill opened his door and looked at them over his open door.

"I will ram your cars. I'll even enjoy doing it," O'Neill warned.

"I'm going with you," Jim Ellison walked quickly to the rear door opposite Teal'c. Teal'c exchanged a curious look with O'Neill, but no one moved to unlock the door in question.

"Captain Ellison, there is no way in hell you're going with us."

"You aren't getting out of here unless I'm in the car, and I'm not letting you look for Blair without me."

"Damn it!" O'Neill slapped his hand down on the top of the car. "I don't have time to worry about your guilt, Ellison."

"Sir..." Ellison forced that word past tight lips. "Sir, I have ways of finding Blair."
"So do I. It's called a tracking devise," O'Neill pointed out.

Jim Ellison's jaw tightened, but he kept his gaze firmly locked onto O'Neill. "If they drop Blair somewhere, if they figure out he's not worth Shanghaiking, I can find him. I can—" Ellison stopped. For a second, he drew a deep breath. "I have access to information you do not, Colonel. I'm willing to let you take lead here, but I will not wait here while you look for Blair."

O'Neill looked over at him, and Teal'c considered Ellison. If Blair's notes were accurate, Ellison would have access to an incalculable amount of information once they located a facility or area. "He could prove valuable," Teal'c suggested. O'Neill sighed loudly as though frustrated with that answer, but he hit the button to unlock all the doors.

"Ellison, if you fuck up, your skin is going to be hanging from my office wall," he threatened, but Ellison didn't even bother to answer. Simon Banks was already shouting for the guards to move their vehicles and Teal'c got into the vehicle, trying his best to appear non-threatening as Ellison tensed and looked quickly down toward Teal'c's stomach. The man clearly knew that something was there, even if he did not understand what.

"It will not harm anyone," Teal'c assured him as he leaned back and tried to appear relaxed. Ellison looked up at Teal'c's face with undisguised shock at having gotten that response, but Teal'c focused on the front of the car.

"How good is that signal?" O'Neill asked, starting the car.

"We're at the limits of the range, and they're moving fast. We have to get going now, sir. North," Carter said. O'Neill didn't answer, but he did accelerate with extreme aggression, the tires screaming against the concrete as they took off in pursuit of their missing team member.

13. Chapter Thirteen

The car remained silent, the hum of Carter's machine and her brief instructions for O'Neill to turn right or left occasionally interrupting the silence. Jim Ellison continued to stare at the back of Carter's head, his hands fisted on his knees. Teal'c did not doubt that Ellison counted them among his enemies, so his willingness to accompany them spoke well of his bravery, even if the man still was not honorable in his dealings with Blair Sandburg.

"Ellison, when we catch up with them, you will take my command or I'll have Teal'c handcuff you to the car, do you understand?" While O'Neill's voice was firm and the tone did not betray any emotion, the fact that he had used Teal'c's real name certainly suggested that O'Neill was feeling great anxiety over Daniel's disappearance. On Earth, their resources were limited by the need for secrecy. O'Neill often commented that he felt more trepidation allowing Daniel on one of his rare dates than he did having Daniel attend a fertility ritual on some distant planet.

"I know how to take orders," Ellison answered. His voice was tight and angry.

"Then you need to stay behind us. I want you at the rear."

"No. No, I'm not hanging back. Your first priority is Jackson, so I'm going in for Sandburg," Ellison immediately objected. Teal'c knew that Ellison was correct that Colonel O'Neill would seek Daniel Jackson first, but he also knew that O'Neill would never endanger others because of his commitment to his team. Just as Teal'c had endangered the lives of his wife and son by turning against the false
gods, O'Neill would endanger Daniel Jackson or the rest of them to complete a mission and follow his conscience, and to suggest that O'Neill did not have the judgment to act ethically was not prudent.

"Teal'c, do you have those cuffs?" O'Neill immediately asked.

"I do," Teal'c agreed, and Ellison's face reddened.

"I've been in more than one rescue operation, Colonel, both during and after the army." Ellison sounded more conciliatory now, but his face was still as obdurate as ever. Teal'c wondered if he was this stubborn because of O'Neill's involvement in Blair's injury or if this was his normal personality. If it was the second, Teal'c might be better off trying to convince Blair Sandburg to choose another tec'ma'te.

"With those senses of yours?" O'Neill demanded. Carter glanced over her shoulder toward Teal'c. She was clearly worried about O'Neill's usual lack of tact when dealing in issues which others wished to keep secret. When O'Neill had been as blithely inconsiderate of Daniel's wish to throw Carter a surprise birthday party, both Daniel Jackson and Dr. Frazier had spent weeks angry at O'Neill. However, Ellison might do something more dangerous than replace all O'Neill's MRE's with lasagna or schedule him for a series of vaccinations.

Ellison didn't immediately answer, but his fingers clutched at his knees until the knuckles turned white. "Yes," Ellison offered, and now his voice carried a wariness that made Teal'c wonder if the man truly might do something foolish. Trapped men sometimes did.

O'Neill made a derisive sound. "You sure as hell didn't go on active duty with a case of Post Combat Hypersensitivity Disorder. I don't know what historical crap Sandburg dug up..."

"Blair told you about this?" Ellison's voice slid from wary to furious.

"No!" O'Neill snapped. "After you acted like a dick, I had to wonder what you were trying to hide. I broke into your apartment and looked through his notes. Or Murray looked through his notes; I mostly went through your underwear." O'Neill smiled into the rearview mirror, a most unpleasant expression.

Ellison's jaw bulged. He turned to face Teal'c, but Teal'c only gazed back impassively.

"What exactly do you want here?" Ellison asked, his fingers still digging into his own knees. "Did someone really take Sandburg or is this your not-so-subtle way of reactivating my commission?"

"Your commission?" O'Neill was stopped at a red light, and that gave him time to turn and actually look at Ellison with shock. "What the fuck makes you think the military wants you back, Captain Ellison? Captains are a dime a dozen, and I have hundreds who've applied at my command. You wouldn't even make the first cut."

"Good," Ellison quickly snapped right back. "I sure as hell wouldn't want to work in any command under you. I've had my share of arrogant, manipulative, tyrannical officers."

"Tyrannical? If you want tyrannical, Ellison, I can introduce you to tyrannical!"

"Sir!" Carter interrupted. Both men fell silent. The light turned green, and O'Neill accelerated until the engine made a whining noise that a car did not normally make.

"Ellison," O'Neill started again, his voice slightly softer, "Sandburg seems to think your senses are useful, which is why I'm letting you tag along. But let's get something clear right now. I've been on a
mission with a man suffering from P-Chad. If you go into one of your seizures or have a zone or whatever the hell you want to call it, you're on your own. The civilians have priority over you."

"Agreed," Ellison quickly answered. "But whatever this Post-Combat shit is, don't assume that's what I have."

O'Neill took a turn so fast that Carter scrambled to keep the equipment in her lap and Ellison grabbed at the seat in front of him. O'Neill just accelerated more. "I know that's what you have, Ellison. You and Sandburg can dress it up in pretty colors and maybe it's even useful to you, but you're here to play bloodhound if we lose the trail. That's it. Don't assume that I have any interest in you beyond getting my geeks back and getting the hell out of your backwater town."

"And I'll be happy to see you leave," Ellison responded.

"Sir, it's about two miles north-northeast." Carter pointed, and Teal'c studied the area. The buildings were warehouses and old shops with cracked parking areas—a mixture of peeling wooden structures and rust-streaked metal buildings. There were far too many places from which to observe or stage an ambush. Teal'c rarely saw such poorly kept areas on Earth. Chain link fences were mended with twisted wire and reinforced with cracking boards.

"Moving or stable?" O'Neill asked. He pulled onto a side road that led to the backs of several warehouses. Huge gates interrupted the fencing, most locked with heavy chains.

"Stable for several minutes now." Carter pointed. Just the other side of that building.

"Okay, we're going in." O'Neill stopped the car beside a dumpster and for a long second he sat looking in the mirror. Ellison still had his hands on his knees, and his eyes focused on the back of Carter's seat, not reacting to the awkward silence. Carter looked back at Teal'c, and he simply gazed back. Ellison very well might prove useless as backup. Even Blair Sandburg theorized that Ellison struggled with tactile sense during high-stress situations, leading to a number of incidences where he lost his weapon.

Logically, O'Neill should partner Teal'c with Ellison since Teal'c had the most extensive experience fighting without assistance. When he had first begun to work with the humans, he had struggled to train his instincts away from killing anyone who approached his back. As the Prime of Apophis, he had fought from ships and machines. When the rare mission required a more precise strike, Teal'c had gone alone. The goa'uld prepared defenses for armies, not for individual invaders. Teal'c had helped Apophis defeat many enemies that way. He had the skills required to function alone if Ellison proved unreliable.

"Teal'c, you and Carter head north. Ellison and I will take west. Priority one is getting inside and getting eyes on our people." O'Neill got out of the car and pulled out his weapon, holding it close to his leg as he trotted toward the alley that led to the target building. Ellison was out and following immediately, his own weapon held down to his side as he ran.

Teal'c quickly took point, his hand on his zat'nik'tel where it rested under his jacket. Carter followed, her face grim. "Let's hope they don't kill each other," Sam Carter said softly as she watched the other men vanish behind the building.

"They shall not." Teal'c considered that answer. "Not until we recover Daniel Jackson and Blair Sandburg."

Carter grinned at him. "I really hope that's a joke, Teal'c."
"As do I," Teal'c assured her as they moved into their standard positions for entering hostile territory. Unlike Jaffa, humans would be prepared for a small rescue team, and Teal'c moved silently once they reached the target building. A window provided an access point, but he could not reach it. Looking around, he could see a crate of sufficient size. Without even waiting for a request, Carter went to the crate and waited for him. He lifted his side with one hand, keeping his weapon pointed toward the building as they carried the crate into position below the window.

Carter took position crouching with her back between the building and the crate, and Teal'c leaped up onto it and peered through the dirty glass. The inside was dark. While keeping an interior dim was an excellent deterrent against invaders who would have to allow their eyes to adjust to the dark, Teal'c found that few humans chose the strategy. Daniel Jackson had suggested that fear motivated humans to turn lights on even when darkness provided a strategic advantage.

Teal'c gave the hand signal for Carter to stay in position and then he carefully pushed at the glass in the window. The glass was thick, and Teal'c pressed against a corner in order to force the glass out of the frame. However, the glass broke with a sharp crack. Teal'c ducked below the level of the window and listened for any sort of response. Carter was on one knee, her weapon trained on the edge of the building.

After a few seconds, she silently signaled, asking if he heard anything, and Teal'c shook his head and returned to the window, trusting Carter would warn him if the enemy came. Pressing against one side of the cracked glass, he pushed until he could get his gloved fingers around the smaller piece. It shattered at his pull, and he extracted the three largest fragments, handing them to Carter who put them carefully out of the way.

The larger piece came out all at once, and then Teal'c slipped through the window and into the dark building. Carter followed, and Teal'c led them past dusty offices, opening doors and quietly checking each. Nowhere did they find evidence of enemy or their missing people. At the end of the hall, an open door led to the main storage area. This main room was divided into squares by weak bars of light allowed in by dirty windows, and Teal'c focused on the two figures in the middle of the room. Almost immediately, he recognized O'Neil. From the way he was standing with his back stiff, he was angry. Teal'c moved out of the hallway and into the room.

"Sir? No Daniel?" Carter asked as she hurried around Teal'c.

"No, no Daniel, but if there had been a Daniel, Captain Nitwit here would have gotten Daniel and himself killed."

"I knew no one was in the building," Ellison practically snarled as he knelt next to a pile. Teal'c could see a familiar plaid shirt of Blair Sandburg's as well as the jeans and blue shirt Daniel Jackson had been wearing, and even Elizabeth Canarsee's clothing "Why the hell would they make them strip?" Ellison was fisting Blair's plaid shirt.

"To get rid of this," Carter said, holding up the recorder the tracking equipment had targeted.

"Damn it. Next time, shove that tracking chip somewhere that he can't lose it," O'Neill suggested with great vehemence.

"Yes, sir," Carter acknowledged. Her eyes scanned the building, and Teal'c stepped to the side and watched the exits. Carter would identify any clues far faster than he would. He did not know what to find in a place like this, so he would be unable to spot any anomalies. Ellison also seemed to be searching for clues. He stood and slowly walked a circle around the abandoned pile of clothing and equipment.
With one eye on those two, O'Neill pulled out his phone and called Walter, checking on the availability of more people to help in the search. Ellison continued to circle. He knelt down, and Carter was immediately at his side.

"Do you see something?" she asked. Ellison ignored her and crouched lower to the ground, his nose flaring widely.

"If you have a seizure, I'm not stopping to coddle you, Ellison," O'Neill warned, and from his tone, he was serious. He closed the phone without warning, but Teal'c had no doubt that Walter had long ago grown used to O'Neill's idiosyncrasies.

"An SUV drove through here," Ellison said, ignoring O'Neill.

"Can you tell how long ago?" Carter asked. She crouched next to him, her hand on his back. For a half second, his back rippled, and Teal'c thought that Ellison might shove her away, but then he focused on the floor again. Bending down until his face was nearly on the concrete, he crept across the surface of the floor.

"There's no dust on the tracks." Ellison stood up, and Teal'c watched as O'Neill's frustration slowly turned to curiosity. He watched as Ellison followed some invisible line on the floor, Carter right behind him. Ellison stopped again, and crouched next to a spot. Reaching down, he picked something up in his fingers and brought it up to his nose.

"His crime scene techs must hate him," O'Neill commented softly to Teal'c.

Teal'c turned a questioning look toward O'Neill, but O'Neill was resting his hand on his gun and watching as Ellison stared off into space.

"Detective Ellison?" Carter asked softly. He didn't respond.

"Great. That is why soldiers with P-chad aren't allowed on active duty," O'Neill commented, and the curiosity had vanished under more frustration. "Call an ambulance for coma boy, and let's get moving. The commander at Fairchild Air Force Base is coordinating with McChord to get a team out here, and we're going to meet them at Cascade PD.

"Blair Sandburg's notes suggest that if Jim Ellison is lost in one sense he may need another sense stimulated in order to break his concentration," Teal'c commented. Carter nodded and pulled out a small penlight she often used when looking inside various machines.

"Got it," she said, flashing the light across Ellison's eyes. "Detective, you really need to wake up now. If you've found something, we need to know before these guys get our people out of the state."

O'Neill made a derisive noise. "Out of the state is not exactly the worst-case scenario, here. I swear, I'm going to chain Daniel to a bed in the mountain. Sadly, I still think he'd manage to get himself in trouble."

Teal'c understood this need to recall the former troubles of their team member. Given the number of times Daniel had been targeted, the man had proved unexpectedly resilient. They all needed reminding of that fact. "Linea, Hathor and even the Ashrak assassin all targeted Daniel within Stargate Command," Teal'c pointed out.

O'Neill sighed and looked at him. "You just had to remind me, didn't you?"

Carter continued to flash the light in Ellison's eyes, and now she rested a hand against his cheek and stroked her thumb across his lower lip. The gesture was oddly sensual, but Teal'c understood her
approach. The lips had a higher number of nerve endings than other skin, so the tactile connection should break his concentration on his sense of smell.

"Two minutes, Carter," O'Neill warned.

"Yes, sir," Carter agreed, still flashing the light back and forth. "Detective Ellison, Jim, we need you to stop focusing on the smell. We need whatever information you've found."

"Assuming he's found something and hasn't just gone into a seizure," O'Neill said softly. Then he stepped closer to them.

"I think he's responding, sir. His pupils are beginning to react to the light," Carter offered. Teal'c waited to see if O'Neill would still order them to leave Ellison. The man was not in danger, and his own people would likely offer better medical support if this was a seizure.

"Report, Captain," O'Neill barked so loudly that Carter dropped her light and it clattered against the floor. Ellison bolted up, his body going stiff as he went into a pose that the soldiers on base called 'at attention.' Almost immediately, he took a step back and looked around, scowling at O'Neill.

"Colonel," Ellison said, his voice tight with anger.

"So, did you find something, or were you just bored with our company?" O'Neill asked, but Teal'c could tell from the way the man leaned forward that he was hoping Ellison had something for them to work with.

"I smelled fish," Ellison offered. He brought a hand up and scrubbed it across his face in a gesture of great weariness.

"Fish?" O'Neill asked, and his tone was openly mocking. "This is Washington. The whole state stinks of fish."

Ellison lowered his hand and glared at O'Neill. "I smell fish waste."

"Excrement?" Carter asked, but Ellison shook his head.

"No, the remains from processing fish—internal organs, ground parts."

"You got that from dirt?" O'Neill asked.

"Yes, I got that from dirt. The senses are very useful. Blair always says they're better than a crime lab." For a half-second, Ellison got a fond expression on his face, but then he hid all emotions behind a mask of indifference.

"Okay, so we start looking at fish processing plants. That only narrows it down to about a hundred sites," O'Neill sighed as he pulled out his phone again. This time, he told Walter that the enemy was most likely going to use a boat to try and escape with the three captives. Teal'c knew that General Hammond would have the full force of the American military on the ocean, but he did not understand local geography or politics well enough to know if they were likely to be successful.

Meanwhile, Ellison had returned to his search of the floor and again knelt. Carter followed him, her hand resting on his arm this time. She asked him questions about what he saw and heard and felt, most of which he generally ignored as he reached out and picked up another small piece of dirt. This time when he smelled it, Carter kept up a running commentary about the receptor cells of the olfactory epithelium. When Carter had first learned of Ellison's condition, Carter had been fascinated with the possibilities, and listened with unabashed curiosity as Teal'c had described as much of
Blair's research as he could remember. She was clearly attempting to keep him from concentrating too much on one sense.

"Peat." Ellison said before he brushed his hands off on his knees and stood up.

"Pete?" O'Neill asked, lowering his phone.

"Peat, like peat moss. But there aren't any marshlands in this area."

O'Neill's face grew thoughtful. "Could they have carried the peat with them, maybe driven in from a marshy area?"

Ellison was already shaking his head. "It smelled fresh... wet. We haven't had any rain lately so any dirt caught in the tread should be dry."

"They could have just gone through a car wash. I would have in order to keep the car from transferring any trace evidence." O'Neill might play the fool in front of goa'uld, but his intelligence equaled Daniel's or Carter's.

"Filtered water would smell different. There's no soap, no chlorine from the city purification system. This is fresh peat."

O'Neill put the phone to his ear again. "Walter, give me a reason why someone would have peat in the middle of the city." He listened for a second. "It might," he said slowly. He turned to Ellison. "Is the fish smell in with the peat or are they separate?"

Ellison tilted his head his eyes falling half closed for a second, and Teal'c could see Carter tighten her grip on his arm. "The smells are together. The peat smells faintly of fish parts," Ellison finally offered.

"They're most likely at the same place," O'Neill told Walter over the phone. O'Neill listened in silence, his face obscured by shadow. "Thanks Walter." He closed the phone and turned to them. "We're looking for a fish composting plant. There are two south of the city, so that's where we're going. The Cascade PD and the Air Force team can follow up on any other leads until we get back." O'Neill started walking toward the door, leaving the rest of them to follow.

Ellison shook his head. "I should have been there."

"While you would have fought well, you would have been unable to prevent these people from taking Blair Sandburg," Teal'c offered Ellison as they did follow.

Ellison glanced down toward Teal'c's leg. The pant leg was torn open just enough to see the deep hole in his dark skin, and blood stained the front of the leg. "I know you did your best..."

"It will heal," Teal'c assured the man. He had suffered far greater wounds, and while it was true that the leg would be vulnerable for a time, it would not bother him the way it would a human without a goa'uld larva to assist in the healing.

"I would have heard something. I would have known they were in the building," Ellison said, clearly blaming himself. Teal'c exchanged a look with Carter. Guilt was not a safe emotion when one had a task at hand.

"You can't have your senses turned up all the time," Carter said slowly.

"When Blair's around, I do," Ellison said, his jaw tight. And with that, he lengthened his stride,
hurrying to catch up with O'Neill and making it very clear that he did not intend to discuss the subject any farther.

"Touchy," Carter said softly.

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed. Privately, he thought that the word applied equally to O'Neill and Ellison right now. Hopefully they would find their missing members before either man reached the end of his patience.

14. Chapter Fourteen

Blair ended up in the corner of the van stuffed between Elizabeth and the back of the driver's seat. Daniel was laying in the middle of the van; he started stirring, his hands twitching, and one of the kidnappers kicked at him.

"Hey, so not cool," Blair complained, wishing he still had a crutch to hit the guy. Before he could say anything else, a gloved hand grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hauled him to his feet... or to his one foot anyway. His injured ankle had pretty much given up any last attempt to hold his weight. The kidnapper's dull, black gun pressed into Blair's chest, which convinced him that he probably didn't want to complain right now.

"Listen, we were sent for Canarsee and Jackson. You're just some bystander who we're probably going to kill as soon as we get confirmation that you aren't important, so you don't want to piss me off. Understand?" The man had cold eyes that looked gray in the dim light of the back of the van. He moved his gun so that he pressed the barrel of it up against the bottom of Blair's jaw, and Blair was actually pretty proud that he managed to not piss his pants.

"Yeah, I understand." With every word, the gun pressed harder against his jawbone.

"Good." The kidnapper shoved the barrel of the gun into the soft part just under his chin hard enough to make Blair press back into the side of the van.

Daniel cleared his throat. "Jack's trying to get him clearance so he can join my scientific team. He's an anthropologist the SGC wants to recruit." Daniel was awake and sounding way too calm for a man who'd been knocked unconscious and kidnapped. Then again, if his life with O'Neill was even half as exciting as Blair's life with Jim, this probably wasn't his first time playing hostage.

The guy took the gun out of Blair's neck and aimed it in Daniel's direction. "Another geek, and not one with a skill that's useful when he's locked in a small cell." The bad guy sounded way too amused by that, but Daniel just glared as he pushed himself up so he was sitting on the floor.

"Take it easy. If O'Neill wants him, he may be useful," one of the others commented. He and the last kidnapper held onto a rail that went along the top of the van as they took a corner. Elizabeth groaned and pulled her hands up to cradle her head, and the guy with the gun pressed on Blair's shoulder.

Despite Jim and Simon's teasing, Blair did know how to shut up, and so he just slid to the floor without comment. His whole leg was throbbing now, but that didn't seem nearly as important as the threats about small cells and death.

"Jack is going to find you, and you're going to be looking at the inside of a prison cell for the rest of your miserable lives," Daniel commented calmly. None of the kidnappers seemed all that impressed
by the threat.

Elizabeth moaned and rolled to her side and pulled her legs up. A few bleary blinks around the van, and she let her head thunk back down to the floor of the van. "Aw crap. I told you, Danny. But no, you're all 'the government isn't like that'. You and naive are best friends."

"The government isn't like this," Daniel said firmly.

"Um, Danny, these guys have government black ops soldiers written all over them. If you want to convince me that the government is not dangerous, I think you blew your chance." She laughed, but it was an almost hysterical sound. The laughter continued long past any dark humor, and her dark eyes shone with tears. Daniel reached over and rested a hand on her knee as she sat up.

"They aren't part of the government." Daniel looked up at the three armed men who loomed over them. Blair wasn't exactly the expert, but these guys were looking a lot like soldiers to him. He snorted.

"Nice, you two are ganging up on me, now," Daniel said with exaggerated weariness.

"Will... will Colonel O'Neill..." Elizabeth started, but then she stopped and caught her lower lip between her teeth. Blair remembered the terror from that first time he'd been kidnapped. Lash had grabbed him, and after seeing the bodies of Lash's victims, Blair lay in chains imagining himself dead in a bathtub, his hair floating around his face. God, he'd been so scared, but all he could think about was that he just had to hold on until Jim came. He'd had this absolute blind faith that Jim wouldn't stop until he came bursting through the door and saved him. What did Elizabeth have? She could only hope that someone else had a blessed protector big enough and scary enough to come to the rescue, and she'd get caught up in it.

"He's going to come charging in like the Hyksos army coming down on Dudimose I. Just you wait and see," Daniel promised her.

"God you're such a history geek," she said, her voice vanishing into a soft sob.

"Hey, he's right," Blair offered. "I mean, my roommate told me that O'Neill is the kind of guy who makes Rambo feel incompetent."

"Jim Ellison said that?" Daniel asked.

Blair shifted so that his injured leg was straight out in front of him. "Yep. He did some snooping and said O'Neill has this badass reputation. That he's not a man that you mess with if you like all your body parts attached to your body in the same order as when you were born." Blair glared at the kidnapper who seemed to be in charge. The guy had a square jaw and looked like the poster-boy for the marines.

He looked down and shoved his gun into a holster before pulling out a weird-looking s-shaped thing and holding it like a gun. "I think O'Neill won't find us until long after Canarsee and Jackson are safely stowed away. We'll have to see what my superiors want to do with you."

Blair refused to break eye contact. It wasn't like this was the first time he'd been threatened. Hell, it wasn't even the first time this week. Unfortunately the little voice in the back of his head kept whispering warnings about the fact that Jim just hadn't been at his best lately. He hadn't heard Ventriss' goons coming after him in the alley until it was almost too late. And no matter how much Blair tried to get him to talk or fixed lasagna so they could share a home-cooked meal... and then stare at each other silently over the plates. No matter how much he tried, Jim wasn't opening up. Jim
had shut down like a nuclear plant about to blow, and that never led to good things with his senses.

"They wouldn't... Daniel?" Elizabeth really sounded panicked now.

"Hey, it's not like it'd be the first time I ended up dead," Blair shrugged. He was feeling too damn close to hysteric himself, but it was coming out a whole lot more cynical than Blair would have expected. Daniel stared at him in obvious concern, but Blair just stared at the knees of the kidnapper in front of him. He could kick the guy with his one good leg, but they had the weird s-shaped things that Blair was fairly sure were guns, and there were five of them. He didn't give himself good odds.

"They aren't going to kill anyone," Daniel said firmly.

"We'll just have to see what the big bosses say about that," the head-kidnapper said. The van jerked to a stop and the driver pushed aside the curtain that separated the front from the back.

"They're meeting us with the extra clothes. ETA, two minutes," he said.

The first kidnapper pointed the s-gun at them. "Strip."

Blair's brain went blank. Yeah, he intellectually understood the power of stripping a prisoner, but he had so totally never expected to face the cold reality of having it done to him. His hands clutched at his shirt instead of taking it off.

"No, nonononono," Elizabeth chanted softly. Her hands were wrapped around Daniel's arm so tightly that Blair could see islands of white where she was pressing into his flesh.

"You can't ask her to strip in front of all of us," Daniel said, and the confrontational tone from earlier was gone. Now Daniel sounded so reasonable and conciliatory.

"Yeah, yeah, I can." The guy raised the s-gun, and Daniel raised his hands in surrender, Elizabeth still clinging to one of his arms.

"I can do it," she whispered.

"You want us cooperative. Blair and I will cooperate, but that means you have to show us that there are rewards for cooperating. Just let her change by herself in the van. It doesn't make any difference to you, but it will make us a lot more willing to follow orders."

"I think you'll follow orders now," the guy said as he pointed the weird gun at Blair's face. The cold from the van was sinking though Blair's shirt and he stared up at the guy.

"Man, you've already told me I'm dead."

"Blair, it's not—" Daniel started.

"Whoa, hey," Blair interrupted him. "You don't need to start lying to me now. See, I figure you're the linguist and she's the computer genius. They'll keep you around long enough for Jack to find you and shoot them in the back of the head. Me? I'm an anthropologist. I'm not useful unless you have some really way-out tribe you want to understand or unless you're trying to track the changes in behavior patterns caused by urbanization. I tend to specialize in the tribal stuff myself." Blair crossed his arms and found himself suddenly very calm in the face of the cold, brutal truth. Jim was emotionally disabled right now, which meant he probably couldn't track them, and Blair just didn't have the right skill set to be of any earthy value to these people.

"I'm dead." Blair said the words, but he couldn't feel anything. He just didn't have the energy to care.
"I'm dead because I'm only useful if I'm working with people, and you can't let a prisoner go off on an expedition. So, you can wave that gun around all you want, but the only reason I'm going to follow any order is if I'm getting something I want."

"Blair, this is not the time to get melodramatic." Daniel was already untying his tennis shoes.

"I'll get undressed. It's okay," Elizabeth reached for the buttons on her blouse with hands that visibly trembled. The main kidnapper looked from Blair to the others and back, not even trying to hide his confusion. Yeah, Blair wasn't exactly the typical hostage. All the people who had ever kidnapped him could probably get together and complain about his inability to just follow orders. Hell, Jim and Simon would join in on that conversation.

"You can both stop, because I'm going with the first plan. Either they let Elizabeth have the van to herself, or I'm just going to sit here until they kill me or physically pull my clothes off." He uncrossed his arms and then crossed them again when he couldn't figure out anything else to do with them.

"Strip."

Blair studied the end of the gun now pointed at him. It was weirdly cigar shaped on the end, and it didn't have a hole for a bullet to come out. During the fight, there had been strange electrical discharges, so he was guessing this was some weird-ass high-tech weapon that wasn't technically supposed to exist.

"Yeah, yeah, threaten, bully, kill. I've been here before, and I let the bad guy kill me last time, too," Blair offered with a shrug.

"Maybe we should..." one of the other kidnappers started to say.

"Shut up," the main one snapped. Outside the van, the silence was broken by the sound of a car engine. The main kidnapper opened the sliding door and got out. Two of the remaining kidnappers pulled out their own weird s-guns and stood guard over them. Jim would probably say this was the best chance to escape, but then Jim would have a plan that didn't involve flailing and running, and right now that's all Blair could think of. With no weapons and a hurt leg, it wasn't a good plan.

"Seriously." Blair said to Elizabeth who had stopped at the first button of her shirt and was now pulling off her socks. "If you get undressed, I'm pretty much going to just sit here, so at least give them a chance to do the right thing before I get myself killed out of stubbornness." Blair gave her a weak smile, but she turned to Daniel.

Daniel frowned at him for a second. "Blair...."

"I'm dead either way. Hey, at least this way I get feel a little less worthless before someone shoots me in the back of the head." Blair noticed that two of the remaining four kidnappers looked at each other with more than a little concern. Right, so obviously some of them had not signed up for the 'execute the civilian' plan. If they didn't execute him in the next five minutes, he might be able to get one of them to help. Maybe. It was a long-shot, but it was better than nothing.

The main kidnapper returned to the open van door. "Jackson, you." He jabbed a finger in Blair's direction. "Strip. I want everything."

Blair looked at the guy suspiciously.

"We're letting your girlfriend have the van after we make sure you aren't bugged," the guy snapped.

"So I don't have to—" Elizabeth stopped, but that might have had something to do with the fact that
Daniel was pulling off his shirt. He had way more muscle and far more scars than Blair would have expected from a linguist. Elizabeth stared at Daniel in shock, and then blinked into motion as he reached for his belt. "I'll be over here." She turned to face the corner of the van.

"Get moving." The main kidnapper raised his weapon in Blair's direction. "I really wouldn't mind having an excuse to shoot you."

"Yeah, yeah," Blair said as he pulled off two layers of shirts at once. "I have that effect on all my kidnappers." Blair threw the shirts at the guy. Blair worked on his pants, squirming awkwardly with his injured leg. Daniel had already managed to hand over all his clothes, and he sat cross legged on the floor of the van with his arms curled around his stomach.

"Glasses," the man said as he held out a gloved hand. Daniel hesitated for a second and then handed them over. The guy threw them to the side and jabbed his gun in Blair's direction. "And you, hurry up."

"Hey, injured here. If you want me to hurry, grab that pant leg and pull," Blair said as he used his hands and one good leg to lift himself. He held his injured leg out toward the guy. For a second, the kidnapper just stared at Blair like he had grown a new head or something. Then, with far more force than he needed, he grabbed the cuff of Blair's pants and ripped them off. Now that Blair had a good look at his injured leg, he was so not surprised that it hurt. The skin above his wrapped ankle was puffy and white and his knee had swollen to nearly twice its normal size. And on the very center of the kneecap was a deep purple mark. Blair vaguely remembered falling on the street, but it hadn't hurt all that much until he'd seen it. Now it really hurt.

"You really banged that up," Daniel offered.

"Gotta love that Sandburg luck," Blair agreed. He really couldn't do much about the leg now, so he got a hand under the waistband of his boxers and started squirming free.

"Wilson, frisk Jackson and get him dressed," the main guy said. He reached forward and grabbed Daniel's arm and pulled him out.

"Yes, sir." One of the two sympathetic guards jumped down.

"We can't have him slowing us down." A new man appeared next to the main kidnapper. This one had a narrow face and a three piece suit the screamed either politician or insurance salesman. Blair stopped, his underwear around his knees. Great. They were going to shoot him like this, and wouldn't that just make for a pretty picture when Jim finally found him? They'd found a guy who'd been in his apartment for three days once. Blair tried to imagine what that guy would have looked like naked. Not pretty. An hysterical bubble rose and Blair couldn't fight back a bit of a giggle. He was about to get killed and he was worried about what Jim would think. Yep, he'd lost it.

"Look, if you're going to shoot me here, just fucking get it over with because I'm tired," Blair said as he raised his hands in an exaggerated shrug. The first time he'd died, he struggled so hard. The whole way down to the fountain he'd been talking to Alex, telling her that she had other choices, trying to get her to see that he didn't have to kill him. He'd even offered to go with her, but like she said, he would have just been waiting for a chance to betray her to the cops.

He'd struggled when she'd held him face down in the water, too. His knuckles had been bruised from trying to fight his way free. He'd hit the fountain more often than anything else. And then he'd been dead, only he'd felt Jim's spirit pulling at him, needing him. It'd been the last time Jim had needed him for anything at all. Blair had fought for life.
Now, though, he was telling these guys the truth. He was just too tired to fight when life seemed to just get harder with each passing day. He'd been walking upstream against a killer current, and he was just ready to fucking go under. He was just sorry that he wasn't good enough to take a couple of them with him—to give Daniel and Elizabeth better odds.

"Get the hand device," the one in the suit ordered. Blair watched in weariness as the main kidnapper turned away and went to get something that did not sound at all good.

"That won't work," Daniel said. Wilson must have finished with him because he was pulling on grey sweat pants.

"Sure it will," the kidnapper said as he came back with a really ugly gold and jeweled thing on his hand. "It runs on naquadah."

The politician/insurance salesman took the s-gun from the kidnapper, and then the kidnapper was reaching for Blair's injured leg. He held his hand over Blair's injuries, and the thing started to glow. Whatever else it did, it generated heat that sank deep into Blair's leg, relaxing the muscles.

"How? You have a symbiote?" Daniel demanded. Now that was a new word. And from Daniel's tone of voice, Blair was guessing that was not a good word, despite the Latin root.

The man in the suit gave Daniel a disgusted look. "Dr. Jackson, one only has to administer a little naquadah and a whole new world of technological possibilities opens up."

Blair listened, struggling to put together any sort of hypothesis that would make sense of the facts he had. The weirdest fact was the way the bruising and swelling around his knee was fading like magic.

"You injected your men with naquadah?" Now Daniel sounded furious. "That's a heavy metal. It's poison."

"In doses too large, yes. But all medicine is poisonous in large doses, Dr. Jackson, and the benefits..."

"I've had naquadah poisoning. You have no idea the danger involved in exposing your men to this sort of material. The government sees lead poisoning as a major danger, and you're putting naquadah into people's bodies?! Doesn't that tell you just how crazy you've become?"

"And what would you suggest, Dr. Jackson?" The guy in the suit was sounding pretty angry himself. "Should we stand around and discuss the ethics of naquadah treatments while the goa'uld attack from space?"

And that was so not what Blair had been expecting to hear. Daniel shot him a concerned look before turning back to the suited guy.

"If we destroy ourselves first, it won't matter what the goa'uld do. But if you want to talk about planetary security, exactly how do you plan to control the situation when the naquadah drives your best men to paranoia and violence? How are you going to cover it up when they're standing on a street corner blasting everything that moves with alien technology? That's what naquadah does."

"In large doses." The guy with the suit was sounding more and more frustrated. "We need to protect this planet."

"Our ancestors defeated the goa'uld with hand tools—with axes and spears. You don't have to do this for us to win." Daniel pulled a sweatshirt over his head and then glared at the man.
"Get him in the car." The man turned his back on Daniel, and a kidnapper in black grabbed Daniel by the arm and pulled him away from the van so that Blair couldn't see him. Damn. Okay, Blair had been prepared for all sorts of secrets, but aliens and the potential for invasions had not even been a faint possibility in his mind. Either Blair had just fallen into the middle of the biggest governmental conspiracy in history, or all these people were insane. Right now, he didn't have enough evidence to prove or disprove either hypothesis.

Then again, Murray's behavior hadn't been even close to normal and Jim had totally focused on the other man. Blair found himself wishing he had a computer so he could look up some of those terms he promised Murray he wouldn't. He suddenly suspected that he might not be able to find any of the terms Blair had so carefully memorized in any of the linguistic databases.

"Is he ready to go?" the guy in the suit asked.

"He should be." The head kidnapper unwrapped Blair's ankle, and Blair could see that the swelling had vanished. He turned his ankle right and left without even a twinge.

"Get him cleared and in the car. We can't lose any more time."

Blair didn't comment as the kidnapper threw the ace bandage and then his underwear onto the growing pile of clothes. "Out," he ordered, and Blair scooted out, stepping carefully onto a leg that had been badly sprained just minutes ago. He hadn't even had time to finish being amazed before the kidnapper shoved him into the side of the van and frisked him and then checked places that Blair never would have thought to check.

"Man, don't I get dinner and a movie before you do that?" he asked, that same hysterical bubble threatening to rise up and strip him of any common sense he might still have. Things were just moving too damn fast for him.

"He's clean."

One of the other kidnappers shoved sweats at him, and Blair hurried to pull them on.

"Wilson, you check Canarsee and bring her to the car when you're finished," the guy in the suit ordered, and then Blair found himself between suit-guy and the kidnapper as they pulled him toward a limousine. Blair got shoved inside and sat next to a very grumpy-looking Daniel who was squinting.

"Aliens?" Blair whispered. Daniel looked at him with an expression that might have been pity or sorrow or maybe he was just really blind as a bat without his glasses. It was hard to tell.

"So, what now?" Daniel asked, his arms still around his stomach.

"Now we wait for your friend, and then we go back to our local base of operations and wait to find out what our superiors want to do. As you know, Dr. Jackson, we recently lost a number of our key people, and we need replacements."

"I won't help you translate anything," Daniel said firmly.

"Oh, I'm sure you will." The man gave a shark's smile. "Eventually. Once we get you to our permanent base, I assure you that Colonel O'Neill will not be able to track you. It will only be a matter of time, Dr. Jackson."

Blair leaned back in his seat and considered the possibility that he might be the lucky one. He was just facing a quick death. Blair seriously would not want to live knowing that he would eventually
give in and help people like this. Oh, Daniel would hold out as long as he could, but Blair had been in Amnesty International. He'd read about what foreign governments did to people when they needed cooperation. Blair just had no idea that his own government was still involved in this type of illegal activity. From the way the guy in the suit was talking, he was part of the government, just a part that Blair had never, ever wanted to meet.

The limo door opened and Elizabeth got in. She was in the same sweats they were, and they had taken her hair clips so that her thick black hair hung to the middle of her back. She looked ashen. Blair scooted down on the long bench seat and she quickly sat between him and Daniel.

"Assholes," Blair said softly. Daniel flashed him a small smile. Elizabeth just looked like she might start throwing up. The car started out the double doors of an empty warehouse, the white van behind it. That's all Blair saw before the windows turned suddenly opaque and he found himself staring at solid black. Yep, he was so not going to get out of this on his own. These people were scary.

Blair thought about Jim, about how he had fought with Lash, the gun blasts shaking the old windows in the ancient building. He thought about Murray, who was big enough to intimidate anyone. He thought about O'Neill and his scary-ass military record. All Blair could do was hope one of them got a lead fast.

15. Chapter Fifteen

Blair followed the head kidnapper, his arm around Elizabeth from one side while Daniel supported her on the other. She still didn't have her color back, so she was almost as gray as the sweats they all wore. There were enough armed men around them that Blair didn't think they had a chance. From the sharp look Daniel had given him, he was thinking the same thing.

"Man, soldiers go into the service to do the whole protect and serve thing. How fucked up do you guys have to be? I mean, you've twisted protect and serve into terrorizing civilians. Totally uncool." Blair watched the guard to their right. Sure enough, the man flinched. Even though the flinching guard had the same military bearing that the rest all had, this one was so not happy about this mission. He had some Native People or Hispanic blood in him, and Blair was guessing that he knew what it meant to be picked on, to be targeted. If he could build up a little sympathy, he might... Okay, he might have a whole lot of nothing, but he couldn't just die without doing something. Oh, he could and probably would die, but he had to give it some sort of last ditch effort. "From soldier to murderer," Blair snorted.

"Shut up," the asshole in front ordered without looking back. They turned a corner and walked through a large garage-door sized opening in the middle of the warehouse wall. The smell inside was even worse than the smell outside, which was really saying something. This whole place smelled cat food and wet feet—it wasn't pleasant and it probably wasn't helping settle Elizabeth's stomach.

"Oh yeah, because you really have anything to threaten me with. Man, you're just waiting for permission to kill me. Exactly what leverage do you think you have?"

The guy whirled around, his face a mask of pure fury. "Just keep pushing it," he demanded. He struck so fast that Blair didn't even see the fist before it pounded into his stomach. His whole body radiated pain and he dropped to his knees. "We protect you candy-ass liberals. What do you do to protect this country? What do you do to protect this world? You fucking piece of shit."
Blair would have answered, except that he couldn't convince his lungs to actually suck air in, which made it difficult for him to talk back. Warm hands rested against his shoulders, urging him to stay down.

"You don't want to do this," Daniel was saying in that hyper-calm voice Jim always used on people who were about to jump off a building. Blair had heard him use that voice twice, and both times the guys still tried to kill themselves. One succeeded. Hopefully Daniel did better with that voice than Jim ever did.

"Oh, I really do," the kidnapper snarled right before Blair felt something hard poke the top of his head.

"We can't kill him here," another kidnapper said, and he sounded desperate. Blair's inability to breathe interfered with his attempts to laugh. The second kidnapper sounded way more panicked than Blair, and Blair was the one who was about to be dead... again. Unfortunately, he didn't see himself coming back from dead this time. Jim wasn't here to call him back, to breathe life into drowning lungs, to need him.

"This is the danger of naquadah poisoning. You're not being rational here. Blair's not a threat to you, and you haven't been given permission to hurt him. Your bosses will put you in the cell next to mine if you pull that trigger." Daniel was sounding pretty damn convincing, but a glance up toward the kidnapper told Blair that he wasn't really being convinced. The man gripped his pistol so tightly that Blair expected it to go off at any second, which would be pretty much fatal because he had it pointed at Blair's head.

"He's right." The kidnapper who Blair had identified as the soft touch stepped close. "Captain, you can't shoot him."

Captain Kidnapper backhanded the other guy, his gun hand flying in a large arc before he slammed it into the side of his head. The one who had tried to come to Blair's aid stumbled back, and the captain pursued him, screaming so incoherently that Blair was only catching every other word.

Daniel dropped to one knee beside him, resting a hand on Blair's back. "Blair, the naquadah causes paranoia and violence. Antagonizing him is just stupid," Daniel whispered, his eyes focused on the fight between the two kidnappers. It really wasn't much of a fight. The captain was punching at the other guy, while the other guy retreated as fast as he could and a third soldier clung to the captain's belt trying to hold him back.

Blair sat back on his heels and tried to stretch his stomach muscles. Fuck. That guy hit hard because even now, every breath caused throbs and twinges all the way down his body. He poked at his stomach a little, and from the pain that nearly blinded him, Blair was guessing that he was hurt a little worse than he should be for just a punch. He just didn't have time to worry about it. The open door was right behind them, and most of the guards were distracted. "Run," Blair whispered. He looked at Daniel in desperation when Daniel only tightened his fingers around Blair's arm. "Run." He pushed Daniel's hand away. Daniel glanced over at Elizabeth who had her arms crossed over her stomach in a pose that reminded Blair eerily of Daniel.

"You're hurt," Daniel replied as if that explained anything. The other soldiers were now dividing their attention between the prisoners and the odd fight that was going on with their fellow soldiers. One guard had his eyes steadily on them, his weapon trained on Daniel, but they could deal with one guard.

"I'll be right behind you," Blair insisted. He wouldn't be able to run fast or long, but he'd rather go down trying to get away than he would just lay down for these assholes. A half dozen shots in the
back was way better than letting someone put a gun to his head.

Daniel leaned in. "You're hurt. He had brass knuckles on, so you may be hurt worse than you know. I'm half-blind, and Elizabeth is so terrified that she can't walk straight, so we aren't doing that much better than you are. We aren't running."

"It's our best chance," Blair said, but he said it just a little too loud, or maybe it was just his tone of voice, but the two guards who had been watching the scuffle turned their attention back to the prisoners.

"Let's get them to the cells. Captain Lewis can catch up with us later," the tallest of the men said, jerking his head toward the corner of the warehouse. Daniel got a hand under Blair's arm and pulled him up. Sure enough, Captain Lewis was still intent on beating the shit out of the friendliest of the kidnappers, but it didn't look like he was going to get his way. Two soldiers had gotten him to the ground and were basically sitting on him.

"Punch him in the kidneys for me!" Blair shouted to them. The two guys on Captain Lewis didn't react, but Lewis bucked into motion, struggling against the hands that held him.

"Shut up," one of the guards snapped, and he shoved Blair hard enough to send him stumbling forward just for good measure. Luckily, Daniel still had his arm, and that kept Blair from falling to the ground again. All this falling was so not good on his knees. And a little part of him worried that the alien device might not have totally fixed his injured leg, so he really wanted to avoid getting slammed around for a little bit.

"Let me," Elizabeth said, slipping her hand around Blair's waist. She actually gave him a weak smile before glaring at one of the guards.

"Oh man, give it up," Blair told her when she opened her mouth as if to complain to their kidnappers. Apparently she was one of those people who reacted way stronger when other people got hurt than she did when she got hurt. She glanced over at him, and Blair looked around at the men who were holding them captive. "If they had souls, they wouldn't be attacking civilians. I mean, forcing civilians to work for you, that's like the plot of some bad Cold War era novel with the evil Soviets enslaving scientists." Blair noticed that a couple of the kidnappers flinched from the description. Oh yeah, when all else failed, fuck with people's personal mythologies. Everyone wanted to be the hero, and figuring out that you'd taken the role as the villain in life's little dramas... that was hard on the ego.

"Blair," Daniel warned again.

"Oh please. I'm going to be dead, so that gives me the right to tell them that they're soulless bastards, that they make their government look like a cheap copy of a Soviet-style gulag. I'm getting marched
off to my death here."

"Oh Blair." Elizabeth whispered the words, horror making her hold onto his arm. "I won't do anything for them if they hurt you. They can go fuck themselves. They can fuck each other. I'm not helping murderers," she said firmly. Then she tightened her hold on Blair's arm and smiled at him. "Daniel and I are not going to just let them kill you."

Blair looked past Elizabeth to Daniel, but the man had a look on his face like he had just bitten into a rotten egg. Yeah, Elizabeth didn't see it, but Blair and Daniel did. These people were holding the power, and they were not about to let Elizabeth manipulate them. The only reason it had worked when Blair pulled his stunt in the van was because the big, head honcho wasn't around. The minute these guys got the okay, they were going to pull Blair out of the cell and shoot him.

"Jack will be here before we have to worry about it," Daniel said firmly. The guard in front stopped and pulled open a large sliding door like you'd find in a barn, and inside was a large room with a cell taking up about a third of the room. The other part had bunks, and a small sitting area with a television so Blair was guessing that the guards were going to be bunking in with them. That would make it easier for him to work on the guards, but it didn't give them much privacy. With a toilet and sink inside the cage, he was guessing that they weren't going to be getting field trips to a bathroom, either.

"Inside," one of the kidnappers ordered as he opened the cell door and stood to the side. Daniel went in silently, casting an unhappy look in the man's direction as he passed, Elizabeth and Blair following. Blair would love to say something else that made the guard strike out, that made the others question the ethics of how their bosses were treating prisoners. Unfortunately his brain failed him. He just crossed his arms over his chest and glared as the kidnapper locked the cell door.

"Jack is going to find us," Daniel said firmly. The very certainty in his voice made Blair miss the days when he felt that way about Jim. He had no doubt that Jim would turn the city upside-down looking for him, but the man was so emotionally shut-down, that Blair wasn't giving him good odds. "Blair, I am so sorry you got caught up in this." Daniel scrunched up his face.

"Hey, you are not to blame for this," Blair said as he sat on one of the two narrow bunks. "So, it looks like you and I are going to be bunkies," he pointed out to Daniel. Someone was probably going to end up on the floor eventually. He pulled on the mattress to see if it would lift off the frame. It would be safer that way. But the thing was bolted down.

Daniel shook his head and sat on the bunk next to Blair. "It's like the drama of my life just keeps spilling out onto anyone who even comes near." Daniel sounded so tired that Blair looked at him. They only had room for one fatally depressed hostage, and Blair had already filled the position.

Elizabeth sat on the other bunk and pushed her hair back, hooking it behind her ears. "Hey, I'm the one who went and hacked your bosses' computer. Of course, at the time I thought I hadn't gotten through. I thought they'd shunted my attack off into some secondary computer system they'd filled with all this fake intel about aliens and invasion and this weird version of Daniel Jackson who ran around saving the world. I never really thought you were the 'save the world' sort, Danny."

Daniel shrugged. Blair could almost feel the guilt rolling from him like a fog. Then again, Daniel had already admitted to feeling guilty over Steven Rayner's accident and Elizabeth's involvement, so it wasn't really a hard stretch to assume the man was way better at guilt than he probably should be.

"Man, no one gets to feel guilty about me, except for those assholes out there."

Daniel gave him a disbelieving look.
"Hey, I was getting myself kidnapped way before you showed up," Blair pointed out.

"And I went poking around on my own," Elizabeth added. "But when the boss shows up, I'm telling him that I won't do any work for them unless I see proof that you're free, Blair."

Blair didn't argue, but he didn't really think that was going to work either.

"I think the best bet is to work on two of the soldiers," Blair said. Daniel frowned, clearly not following the logic in that statement. "Oh man, did you not catch that two of the kidnappers are not nearly as good with this plan as the others?" Blair asked.

Elizabeth made a little amused sound. "Danny's not really all that good with people." She paused for a second. "Then again, neither am I. I think that's why we were friends in our undergrad days. We used to lie and tell people we were dating because neither one of us wanted to waste time on people when we could be poking around something really interesting—like a history book or a computer circuit board." She gave a weak and strained laugh.

"I wasn't that bad," Daniel defended himself, but he didn't sound like he was even convinced of that himself.

"Well, let me tell you," Blair said softly, "the guy who looks like he has some Native People or Hispanic heritage... he is so not okay with what these guys are doing."

"That's why he tried to stand up for you," Daniel interrupted.

"Totally," Blair agreed with a smile. "And the guy with the hair that's starting to turn gray is right there with him. They are so not into being the bad guys. Which means—"

"Someone convinced them they were the good guys," Daniel finished for him. "The NID is always saying that Stargate Command isn't aggressive enough. Infecting their own people with naquadah is pure NID. Morons."

Blair smiled at the evidence that Daniel was getting with the plan. Oh yeah, don't count the geeks out yet. "If we can get the others to pick on me a little more, those two may break away from their asshole buddies."

"That plan is going to get you hurt," Elizabeth said with a frown.

"It's the best plan we have," Blair pointed out. From the silence that followed, the other two agreed.

16. Chapter Sixteen

Teal'c reached out and grabbed for Ellison's arm, catching him a scant second before the man shoved Carter aside in favor of storming toward the warehouse they were observing. Ellison strained.

"Damn it, Chief. Just for once, keep your head down," he snarled.

"I do not believe Blair Sandburg can hear you," Teal'c offered, hoping to help calm Ellison. Carter was on his other side, her fingers stroking over his arm in an attempt to keep him from being lost in a zone. Ellison shook his arm, clearly trying to dislodge her, and Teal'c wondered if the man wished to zone. It did not seem reasonable, but then Teal'c had learned to not expect logic from those around
"And he wonders why I don't trust him," O'Neill sighed with exaggerated sadness. "So, are you planning on sharing what set you off this time, or should I just assume you're off your rocker?"

"Sir," Carter said, her voice heavy with disapproval.

Jim jerked, pulling his arm away from Carter, but Teal'c just tightened his grip. Only once Ellison discovered that he could not pull free did he stop. His gaze, which had been focused on the distant warehouse, now turned to the team.

"They hit him," Ellison said, and from his tone, he clearly expected that the words would inspire O'Neill to some action.

"Yeah, I figured they would. They're bad guys, Ellison. I didn't think they wanted to invite our geeks to tea." O'Neill gave Ellison a look that communicated very clearly his disapproval and his distrust. Ellison narrowed his eyes, and for a second, Teal'c wondered if the man would physically attack O'Neill. If he did, it did not bode well for his self-control. However, after a second of cold glares, Ellison looked back toward the warehouse.

"They need permission to kill Blair; he wasn't in their original plan," Ellison said tightly.

O'Neill nodded. The local base was already sending reinforcements, and the wise course of action suggested that they wait for such backup. On Earth, there were many civilians in the field of action, and the need for safety and secrecy made operations difficult. Obviously, Ellison did not approve of O'Neill's strategy.

"How long do we wait, Sir?" Ellison asked, and his tone made the term of respect sound profoundly disrespectful.

For not the first time, Teal'c wondered why Blair would choose this one to teach him of the warrior's path. As a tec'ma'te, Ellison was questionable. However, his temperament was not such that Teal'c would ever suggest that the man work with a tao qua tec'ma'te i cal mah—a shaman. He would not wish for him to work with Blair Sandburg in particular. Blair believed that he had failed Ellison, but Ellison had given no sign of displeasure. To the contrary, he had acted in a way that indicated a deep bond. It was most confusing, and Teal'c wondered how confused the young shaman must be.

When Teal'c displeased Bra'tac as a young warrior, Bra'tac had been quick to voice or show his disapproval, and through that, Teal'c knew he had to make amends. However, when a student found himself struggling to understand the tec'ma'te, then he worried constantly about whether his master was displeased or not. Either Blair had failed to see that Jim Ellison was not displeased with him, which indicated a dangerous breakdown in communication, or Jim Ellison was displeased and was hiding it, which indicated a dangerous failure to provide guidance.

"We wait for backup." O'Neill's words were curt, and he too stared at the distant building. Even if O'Neill did not voice his concerns, Teal'c understood just how much he was worried about their own missing member.

"What's naquadah?" Ellison asked.

The three members of SG1 all stiffened. Teal'c watched O'Neill to see how the man might react to this breach in security.

"Wow. You know, I thought you were lying about being able to hear that far. Guess not." O'Neill shrugged.
"So, what is it?" Ellison asked again. He had stopped fighting Teal'c's grip, but he turned to look down at the hand on his arm. Teal'c looked over to O'Neill for permission, and O'Neill nodded his head. Teal'c took a step back but stayed close enough to intercept Jim Ellison if he attempted to go to the warehouse again.

"What are they saying?" Carter asked.

Jim looked over at her, and from his expression, he clearly didn't want to give them any more information than he had to.

"For crying out loud. We aren't the enemy here, Ellison."

"You could have fooled me," Ellison quickly answered. In truth, they had made Ellison's life difficult in any number of ways, but Teal'c could not find it in his heart to regret any of them. Ellison's treatment of Blair justified their actions.

"Naquadah is associated with a number of weapons that don't legally exist," Carter told him as she reached up to rest her hand against his arm again. Just once, Ellison shivered as though cold. "It really is important that we know what they're saying about it. Please."

Ellison clenched his jaw. It was clear that he did not approve of any of them. "At least one of the kidnappers has naquadah poisoning. He's suffering delusions."

Teal'c looked at O'Neill in alarm. After seeing the results of naquadah on even the peaceful Daniel Jackson, the thought of NID warriors suffering from such delusions and paranoia did not bode well. O'Neill and Carter appeared equally disturbed.

"Well, fuck. Isn't that just special?" O'Neill said with great sarcasm.

"Sir, this is a dangerous situation," Carter said softly.

"Ya think?" O'Neill snapped. He stopped and stared at the distant building for a second. "Let's just hope Danny keeps his head down until we can get there."

"It's not Daniel I'm worried about," Ellison said with great emotion. For a moment, Teal'c thought the man might again attempt to run for the warehouse. "Blair is antagonizing them. Damn it, Chief, stop being an idiot."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. In his time with Blair, he had never questioned the man's intelligence. He had a great many questions regarding his self-preservation, but that was to be expected in a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah. "I do not believe Blair would do so without reason."

"You think he has a plan?" O'Neill frowned, and Teal'c understood that the man disliked the idea of Blair Sandburg trying to execute an escape plan from inside.

If Blair's plans were analogous to Daniel's, this was a thing to fear. Daniel's plans had included trying to stay behind on PB2-908, a planet that had been ravished by storms, simply to study a book. He had allowed Nem to scan his brain despite the danger of permanent damage, he had been nearly strangled on the world of Linea, he had imprisoned and starved the rest of the team while addicted to naquadah himself, and he had convinced O'Neill to allow him to try and disprove the divinity of the local leaders on a world where a Goa'uld in the body of an Unas had set himself up as a demon. Teal'c had been nearly killed during that plan. Knowing the quality of Daniel's plans, Teal'c had to hope that the similarities between Blair and Daniel did not extend to their abilities to plan.

"He has a stupid plan." Ellison turned his back on the warehouse as though no longer able to look at
it without taking some action. "He has a plan that's going to get him killed. If anything, it sounds like
Jackson is trying to put the brakes on it."

"Well that doesn't sound very Danielish." O'Neill gave a dark laugh.

"No, sir," Carter quickly agreed. "But if Blair's plan is too dangerous, Daniel will try to stop him.
He'll know we're coming for him."

Pain flashed across Ellison's face so strongly that Teal'c believed, for just a moment, that he had
injured himself. "He just keeps insulting these guys," Ellison said warily. "He's calling them evil
and soulless and comparing them to the KGB."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow at that. From his study of the culture, that would appear to be a major insult.
Even O'Neill, who was normally a level-headed and circumspect leader, reacted badly to Russians.
"Perhaps he sees some weakness that he is attempting to exploit," Teal'c offered.

"You think?" It was O'Neill who showed signs of hope. Ellison merely glared as though Teal'c had
offered some particularly unpleasant news.

"He is... a shaman," Teal'c finished, not willing to offer the more sacred term in front of Ellison. It
was an old superstition, one that Teal'c had never before subscribed to, but the elders spoke of how a
tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah should never be identified to those who knew his name, and his name
should never be given to those who knew he was tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah. Those who had both
pieces of information could call to his soul.

"A shaman?" Carter's eyebrows raised.

"Okay, I didn't see that one coming." O'Neill was looking at him as though he had just said
something particularly odd.

"That way of the shaman crap is just that... crap," Ellison snapped. But Teal'c noticed that the man
did not deny knowledge of Blair's title.

"Among my people, those who are... shamans... are revered for their ability to see hidden truths and
understand people. Some say that luck walks with them."

"Bad luck," Ellison said with a snort. O'Neill nodded.

"Look, T, no offense, but that's just stupid."

"No offense taken," Teal'c assured his leader.

"Wait. Wait, the idiot has a plan. Oh Chief, that is the worst plan I've ever heard."

"What?" Carter moved a little closer, her hand still resting against him. Ellison closed his eyes,
pressing them tightly together until wrinkles gathered at the edge.

"He's going to try and get some of the bullying guards to pick on him."

"Why?" O'Neill demanded. "Is he brain damaged?"

"He thinks he can make two of the guards sympathetic, that they're starting to question whether
they're on the right side here."

"Turning operatives... that's a gargantuan task," O'Neill said, clearly agreeing with Ellison that the
plan was not well thought out. "And if he's anything like Danny, he's probably trying to turn the
"Blair Sandburg is most observant of people. I do not believe he would prove as poor a judge of character as Daniel Jackson," Teal'c said. In fact, Blair had been able to read his body language, interpret his facial expressions, and built rapport with Teal'c faster than Teal'c would have believed possible. O'Neill had gone out of his way to target both Ventriss and Ellison in defense of Blair, and Carter had been enthralled by his reports. While he and Daniel Jackson had similarities, their ability to form connections with others did not appear similar at all. From the stories Teal'c had heard, O'Neill had questioned Daniel's abilities and personal dedication when they had first met. He had actively disliked him and had learned to trust him only when Daniel chose to risk his own life rather than turn against the three surviving soldiers whom Ra had captured.

"It'd be hard for him to be worse than Danny," O'Neill sighed. "Hopefully our backup will get here soon because I don't think I want to test Sandburg's people skills."

"He doesn't have any, and he inevitably falls for the most dangerous woman within five miles, so his judge of character is not that good," Ellison confirmed. Teal'c did not pursue the argument, but he wondered how he and Ellison could have such very different views of the young man.

"What's he saying now?" Carter asked. She had a curious expression on her face, and Teal'c suspected that only her concern for Daniel prevented her from asking many questions about Ellison's senses and their reliability.

"He thinks the soldier who's part Indian or Hispanic is the most likely to turn. There's a second guy, older, hair starting to turn gray, he thinks that would be the best secondary target."

"What are they planning to do with this?" O'Neill asked.

Ellison stretched his neck and then grimaced as if in pain. "They're in a cell in the same room with the soldiers. They plan to piss the soldiers off until one of them beats the shit out of Blair. And if they don't beat the shit out of him, I will when I get my hands on him. This is the stupidest plan I have ever heard, and trust me, I've heard stupid plans. You should meet Sandburg's mother. She's the queen of stupid plans."

"Sir, with the soldiers having naquadah poisoning..." Carter allowed her words to trail off, but Teal'c could certainly follow her logic. A beating would likely lead to murder under such circumstances.

"Crap." O'Neill reached under his jacket and pulled out his weapon, checking it before replacing it. "If the geeks are starting to plot, we'd better get down there. Teal'c, you have point. Take Ellison with you and if he does anything like fall into a trance, leave him," O'Neill ordered.

"I'm not going to zone."

"I hope not, because these people will shoot you, and I don't have time to worry about our geeks and you at the same time." O'Neill gave Ellison a hard stare. "If there's any chance you can't handle this, you need to wait at the car because I will not compromise the safety of my team member because of your condition."

"My condition got us here." Ellison crossed his arms, his body screaming a challenge to O'Neill, and for a moment, O'Neill did not respond. Teal'c knew that the man had been surprised by Ellison's effectiveness, but that did not mean that he trusted Ellison. Sometimes it surprised Teal'c just how distrustful O'Neill could be, especially since the man chose to trust Teal'c, even knowing just how much harm Teal'c had inflicted on the universe as the First Prime of Apophis.
"Just don't fuck up now that you're this close," O'Neill suggested with very little emotion.

Teal'c turned toward the warehouse and ducked down, taking advantage of parked vehicles to close in on the structure. It took Ellison a couple of seconds to realize he had been left behind, and then he ran after Teal'c, keeping his body low and well within the shadows and cover provided. He moved like a warrior.

Teal'c approached from the south, the smell of the fertilizer making his nose itch, and he spared a thought for how Ellison was dealing with the scent. If he was having difficulties, he did not allow it to show as he knelt next to Teal'c. He tilted his head to the side and signaled to indicate enemy to the west. Teal'c inclined his head and drew his zat'nik'tel.

Ellison pulled out his own weapon and watched the area to the east while Teal'c silently crept forward. A man stood leaning against a metal fence, a cigarette hanging from one hand. The metal would conduct the zat'nik'tel charge, potentially lessening the impact and giving the man a chance to cry out a warning before he went down. This was not acceptable.

Teal'c studied the terrain, signaling for Ellison to remain in position as he slipped into the shadow of a white car. There was very little cover between him and the enemy warrior, and Teal'c watched, waiting for the man to turn his back. The end of the guard's cigarette glowed brightly as he drew air through it, holding it for a moment before blowing out the smoke. Then he dropped it to the ground and crushed it under his foot. The man shifted restlessly, turning his back for just a moment, and Teal'c darted out and grabbed the man by the head, wrenching his head to the side sharply so that he heard a loud crack.

Silently, the man fell to the ground, and Teal'c stepped over the body to check for any others who might have a line of sight to this guard. Seeing none, Teal'c grabbed the man by one arm and started dragging his body to a less obvious place.

"Let me," Ellison whispered as he appeared, grabbing the body and taking over the job of hiding it. "You're injured."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. His leg was not so injured as to prevent him from his duties, but he would not argue that point now. Teal'c moved forward, pressing himself to the side of the building while Ellison moved the body to a spot behind the white car. It would not remain hidden for long, but hopefully they would be finished quickly.

Teal'c watched Carter and O'Neill slip around to the far side of the building. The first priority was finding the hostages. Teal'c moved toward the warehouse door, resting his fingertips on the handle as he tried to listen for any movement within.

Ellison appeared at his side, and his head was tilted to the side in a way that was most disconcerting. He was obviously focused elsewhere.

"It's clear," Ellison finally said with a nod. Teal'c had a choice to either trust the man's senses or not. Gripping his zat'nik'tel, he turned the knob and pulled the door open, moving quickly through the door and sweeping the room with his weapon. It was silent.

This was the main room, and dirty skylights allowed bars of light to illuminate dusty shelves and a stained concrete floor. Ellison came in behind him and slid the door closed. "There are several people in that direction, and there's some sort of mechanical whine I can't identify." Ellison gestured toward the back of the warehouse. "I can hear Blair over there." Ellison pointed toward the corner nearest the main doors. O'Neill and Carter should be approaching from that direction, but they would have to search room by room. Teal'c decided to trust Ellison's assessment of the situation. If he proved
unreliable, Teal'c would just have to trust his own skills as a warrior to outmatch any enemy he met.

Teal'c crept through the shadows, focusing on the two hallways created by a series of offices. He stopped at the entrance of the first hall and looked back at Ellison, but the man shook his head. Teal'c moved to the next hall and this time Ellison nodded. However, before Teal'c could move forward, Jim raised his hand, signaling for enemy and quickly following with the sign for two. Teal'c nodded and settled against the thin wall, waiting for the enemy to come down the hallway.

Ellison stood behind him and to the side, not close enough to make himself a target, but close enough to use the knife he had in his hand. Despite O'Neill's fears, he was clearly a warrior. Two men came out of the hallway, walking side by side. Teal'c targeted the nearest one, firing the zat'nik'tel so that the charge flared around the man's body for a second. Before he could drop, Ellison had moved in, grabbing the second in a choke hold rather than using the knife. The man struggled with Ellison, his fists beating Ellison's sides, but he couldn't yell out a warning with Ellison effectively blocking his airway. Teal'c stepped forward and grabbed the man, pressing into him so that his flailing was trapped between Ellison and himself.

The movement ended, but Ellison did not release the man for several seconds. Finally he nodded and took his arm off the man's throat. "He was faking it at first," Ellison commented as he dropped the unconscious body next to his buddy.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. To attempt a chokehold instead of slitting the man's throat was unnecessary and dangerous, and yet Ellison had. And he had proved his skill as a warrior even as he had put his judgment into question. Teal'c opened the door to the closest office, studying the undisturbed dust for less than a second before he gestured for Ellison to pull the bodies into the room. When Ellison dragged the second warrior past him, it occurred to Teal'c that the fallen enemy appeared to be of Hispanic or Native American descent. Did Ellison have so much faith in Blair's assessment that he would risk his own life to avoid killing someone who Blair Sandburg identified as a potential ally? And if that was true, why had he dismissed Blair's observations so completely? Jim Ellison was a mystery which Teal'c clearly did not have the tools to understand.

Ellison gestured for two more enemy coming from the main area. Teal'c quick positioned himself inside the dusty office, and Ellison followed, silently taking a position where he could back Teal'c up if the enemy came in. While the position was logical and Ellison was clearly a warrior of some skill, Teal'c wished that he had Carter beside him. He knew her moves, her strengths and weaknesses. He could trust not only that she was a noble warrior, but that he understood her. While he was beginning to believe Ellison was a warrior of some note, Teal'c had no faith in his own understanding of the man.

"It's O'Neill," Ellison said, nodding toward the door. Teal'c tilted his head and slowly eased the door open a crack. If it was not O'Neill, he would have little time to disable or kill any enemy. Samantha Carter was standing with her back against the wall, covering while O'Neill opened another of the office doors.

"Carter," Teal'c offered softly. Her weapon was pointed in his direction, and they did not need an accident.

"Teal'c."

O'Neill closed the door of the other office and looked at them. "So, whatcha doing here? I thought you'd check out the other end."

"Ellison says that the hostages are down this hall," Teal'c explained as he stepped out into the hall. O'Neill gave him an odd look, one that made it perfectly clear that he was questioning Teal'c's sanity.
in trusting Ellison, but he wasn't going to publicly voice any condemnation.

"Right, so let's find the geeks and go home before the cavalry gets here and starts playing target practice with the NID folks or the geeks try to get themselves out," O'Neill suggested. "After you." He waved a hand, inviting Ellison and Teal'c to take point. Teal'c looked at Ellison, waiting for him. Ellison frowned at him for a half second, but then he started moving quickly down the hall, not bothering to clear any of the offices as he headed toward the far end.

"This has the possibility to be so very, very ugly," O'Neill said softly to Carter. She replied with a simple, "Yes, sir," but they both continued to take rear guard positions behind them. One sharp crack, and the whine of a bullet past them, and Teal'c dropped to one knee and pressed himself against the door of an empty office where he had some cover.

"Incoming!" O'Neill called. He had thrown an office door open and was providing answering fire as Carter scrambled. Apparently the first door she had tried had been locked, and now she was moving backwards, trying to find an open door that still gave her crossfire coverage that complimented O'Neill's position. Teal'c sent several zat'nik'tel blasts down the hall, catching the edge of the hall with the electrical blast. If enemy were resting against the wall close to the edge, that would give them a shock, enough to make them uncomfortable.

Movement behind him caught his attention, and Teal'c turned in time to see Ellison break for the far end of the hallway, his back precariously undefended. Enemy gunfire peppered the wall and sent white dust flying into the air.

"Cover!" Teal'c called. O'Neill cursed colorfully, but he fired off several rounds, forcing the enemy away from the end of the hall.

"Ellison!" O'Neill bellowed. It did no good, Ellison was down the hall. "Teal'c!"

It took no more than that single word, and Teal'c understood the order. He ran close to the wall as he hurried after Ellison. If Ellison had found Daniel, Blair, and Canarsee, he would need backup. If he was chasing some random scent and their friends were still lost within the maze of this building, Teal'c would not want to be in Ellison's skin when O'Neill found him.

Only one door was open, and Teal'c positioned himself outside, listening to the voices within between rounds of live fire from O'Neill and Carter and the enemy they had engaged.

"Put it down!" That was Ellison.

"It's his fault!"

"This is your fault, now put it down, or I will fire."

"You can't kill me!"

"Oh man, he is so going to kill you if you don't put that down," Blair offered. "Seriously, you do not want to be dead."

"Shut up! Shut up! You, you drop your gun!"

Teal'c slid to the edge of the open door. Blair stood within a barred enclosure. Daniel was holding Elizabeth off to the side within the same enclosure. A large man held a human gun pointed at Blair, and Ellison had his gun pointed at the man.

"Cascade PD! Drop your weapon and put your hands on your head," Ellison barked. Even though
the hallway was dangerous, Teal'c remained out of sight. The soldier with the gun pointed at Blair Sandburg was sweating, his eyes darting around the room even though his weapon remained steadily pointed at Blair.

"It's his fault. It's your fault!" The man turned to Blair, and the echoing blasts of weapons being fired in a small, enclosed space filled the air.
Blair stumbled back against the wall, and Daniel darted to his side, leaving Elizabeth Canarsee clinging to the bars of their cell and looking ill. The enemy warrior stumbled backwards, firing rounds into the ceiling. Ellison fired several more shots, clustered around the man's heart and head, and by the time the man fell to the ground dead, Teal'c would not have been able to identify him from the small area of his face that remained.

"Chief?! Blair! How bad is it?" Jim rushed to the cage, not even bothering to cover the door or check the room for other enemy warriors. Teal'c did not know if the man had seen Teal'c there providing cover or if he was simply a great fool. "Chief?"

"Hey, no problem. I've been shot way worse... remember when Dawson Quinn shot me? That hurt way worse." Blair sounded oddly cheerful, but Teal'c could see the expression on Daniel's face, and it did not support Blair's story.

"Just lay down," Daniel urged him, helping get him settled to the ground. Blair slid to the floor, and on the wall behind him, he left a long red smear of his own blood. Ellison pulled madly at the locked door.

"Chief. Chief, just hold on." Ellison put his weapon away and went to search the fallen warrior, no doubt looking for a key.

"Elizabeth, get me the pillows from the beds and pull the pillow cases off. Put the pillows under his feet and fold up the blankets and put them under there too. Hand me the cases." Daniel sounded so calm, but Teal'c could see his hands trembling as he took the while pillow case and pressed it to the wound in Blair's stomach.

Ellison failed to find keys on the dead body. "Jackson, where are the keys?"

"I don't know. One of the other guards had them." Daniel kept his voice soft, and he never looked away from Blair.

Teal'c did not like leaving the door unguarded, but in the current situation, he did not trust Ellison to be an effective guard, either. Teal'c had only seen this level of irrational behavior once. That had been Daniel when he had been near Sha're. The irrational and overpowering love Daniel had held for his wife appeared to be very similar to what Ellison was feeling now. Leaving the door temporarily unguarded, Teal'c went to the cage and pulled out a small amount of explosive he normally carried for this purpose. The team suffered incarceration far more often than Teal'c liked to admit.

"Stand back," he suggested as he pressed the clay-like substance into the space between the lock and the bars and then pushed a small priming device into it. Teal'c returned to the door and pressed the button. The explosive flared and popped. Ellison was there instantly. The lock did not immediately open, but after three or four massive pulls, Ellison ripped the door open, the burned pieces of metal clattering to the concrete floor as he hurried into the cell.

"You're going to be okay, Chief." Ellison pulled his jacket off and draped it over Blair as he sat on the floor.
"Ellison, give your weapon to Daniel Jackson," Teal'c ordered. Ellison did not even seem to hear. He had his head tilted toward Blair, and his fingers ran across Blair's chest and down to his stomach. Blair smiled up at him, reaching up to capture Ellison's hand for a second before he released it. Ellison's hand then continued on its path down to the wound, applying pressure to the rough bandage Daniel had applied. Daniel pulled his hand back, and it was covered in Blair's blood.

"Teal'c?" Daniel asked.

"We do not have control of the facility. Backup is coming, but the NID have many warriors. You need to arm yourself and help secure this area."

"Jack? Sam?" Daniel did not even attempt to hide his concern.

"They have secured the hallway."

Daniel's relief flashed across his face. No matter what difficulties had arisen in the team recently, the ties between them were still as strong as ever. Daniel turned to Ellison. "Ellison, you either need to back up Teal'c, or you need to give me your gun so I can," he said in a tone of voice that Teal'c most often heard when O'Neill was talking to children. Ellison did not respond. "Jim?" Daniel called.

"Oh man, now is so not the time to zone. Come on, Jim," Blair said, and he raised his hand to rest it on Ellison's shoulder. Ellison shivered, and then nodded. Pulling out his weapon, he handed it over to Daniel before surrendering an extra clip.

"Thank you," Daniel said. He removed the clip and checked on the ammunition before sliding it back into the gun and coming over to Teal'c.

"Chief, just breathe slow. Slow and easy. What is it with you? I leave you for one night, and you get yourself kidnapped and shot? Simon is going to have a fit. You're just trying to get out of grading, aren't you?" Ellison's words sounded humorous, but his tone was nothing but serious.

"It's bad," Daniel said softly, for Teal'c's ears only, but Teal'c suspected Ellison could still hear. "We have to get him medical help now."

Teal'c inclined his head in agreement, but until the area was secured, there was no way to secure any medical assistance for Blair. Daniel understood that.

"How long until backup?" Daniel asked. Teal'c noticed that Ellison lifted his gaze to them at that question.

"At least twenty to thirty minutes," Teal'c admitted. Daniel flinched and looked over at Blair and Ellison on the ground. Elizabeth had edged her way out of the cell and stood near Daniel, tears slipping down her dark face.

"Will he...?"

"He's a fighter. He'll be fine," Ellison answered her whispered question. "Chief, you're going to be fine. You still have to grade those papers, so you focus on that."

Blair gave a weak laugh. "No way, man. The university fired me, so the Chancellor can grade the papers herself or shove them up her ass. Can't say I care."

"Fired you?" Ellison looked over at them for some sort of explanation.

"They have placed him on leave pending an administrative review," Teal'c confirmed without taking
his eyes off the hall. The gunfire had died down, but that likely meant that the NID was gathering resources for some sort of coordinated attack.

"Yep, what you told me about the Ventriss case just making my life hard? I guess you were right, man," Blair let his head fall back against the concrete.

"You like your life hard. You put up with me, don't you?" Ellison asked, and from the tone of his voice, Teal'c suspected the man was very close to crying. "You just hold on, and all this shit with Ventriss will work itself out. Joel is on the case, and he knows about Ventriss attacking you and the rape case. You know how Joel feels about bullies, so he's not going to rest until he takes Ventriss down."

"Good," Blair said, but his voice sounded distant.

"You have to stay awake for me, Blair. Come on, lecture me about the tribal customs of gang members or something."

"You hate lectures."

"No, I just like complaining about lectures more than I like the actual lectures. In fact, I enjoy my complaining quite a lot."

"Knew it," Blair whispered.

"Yeah, well you just focus on how much you're going to lecture me and how much I'm going to complain."

"Trying, man. I miss us, you know?" Blair's voice had a thready quality that Teal'c associated with a warrior in grave distress. Perhaps Ellison knew the same thing because he held Blair's hand tightly.

"Jack, it's time for you to pull out a miracle," Daniel whispered.

"Hey, we're both still here, there's nothing to miss." Ellison reached up to brush the hair back from Blair's face, but his fingers dragged blood across the young man's forehead, and he stared at it for so long that Teal'c feared Ellison may have had a zone.

Blair reached up and tried to grab Jim's arm, but his fingers brushed over Jim's sleeve before they fell limply to the ground again. "Nah. Haven't been together for a long time. I screwed up with Alex."

The words seemed to force Jim out of his trance. "That was my fault, Chief." Blair did not answer.

Teal'c had to relinquish his observation of Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg when there was activity in the hallway. "Colonel O'Neill, is that you?" a voice called from afar.

"In the flesh. So, what slimy piece of flesh am I talking to?" O'Neill called back.

"It doesn't matter. I have a deal for you." The words echoed down the hallway.

"Should I tell you where you can put your deal, or just let you guess?" O'Neill called back.

"We only came for Canarsee. She's a problem for you anyway. After what she's seen, you can't let her go telling the world. We'll make sure that doesn't happen, so we have the same goals here, Colonel."

Daniel reached over and patted Elizabeth on the arm. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and she appeared to be a woman struggling between two courses of action: crying or striking out. Teal'c
shifted so that he could better keep an eye on her since emotion rarely led to rational decisions in the midst of a fight.

O'Neill yelled back down the hall. "No, no we really don't. She's an American citizen with rights. You've heard of those, haven't you? They're the things that real soldiers fight to protect. Like a person's right to not get kidnapped and shoved around by morons who don't know what they're messing with."

"We are well aware of the stakes, more than you." The voice sounded angry now.

"Obviously not. You're the ones who pissed off our strongest allies."

"Allies who will do nothing to help defend us against the Goa'uld threat."

"Allies who put this planet under the protection of a treaty. Allies who can just as easily withdraw that protection. You're playing with fire, and you've already been burned. Makepeace is sitting in a jail cell with most of your off-world operatives. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're just kinda screwed." O'Neill sounded positively amused by that.

The enemy went silent for long minutes, and Teal'c checked on Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison. Ellison was bent low over his partner, whispering, his hand pressing the blood-soaked cloth against the wound. Even if he stopped the external bleeding, Blair would still be bleeding internally. However, Teal'c did not have any solution to offer him.

"Elizabeth, you know that hand thing the kidnapper had?" Daniel asked.

"With the red stone and the part that goes over the hand?" she asked.

Daniel nodded. "See if you can find it."

"On it," Elizabeth said, and she sounded grateful to have something to do. Hurrying over to the soldier's bunks, she started systematically searching through shelves and drawers, tossing clothing aside in her quest for the healing device.

"If we can find one, Sam might be able to help," Daniel said. Teal'c nodded. It was a good plan, if they could find a device and provide sufficient cover for Sam to reach the room. Blair coughed. It was a wet sound, wet and weak.

"Just lay still, Chief." For a second, it sounded like Blair tried to say something, but the sounds he made were not intelligible words.

Teal'c turned his attention to the situation where he could be of some help. There was a sound of a motor running in the main room, and Teal'c pressed Daniel Jackson back away from the door where he strained to see what was going on. "Colonel, if you don't send out Canarsee, I'll order my men to open fire."

"That's funny," O'Neill called back, "I thought they were trying to shoot us already. Of course, if they are, they're doing a piss-poor job of it."

The engine in the main room revved up. "This is your last chance, Colonel."

"Yeah, yeah. Bite me. I swear, what is it with you guys and ultimatums? Here's a newsflash: they never work."

Elizabeth looked up at that, clearly shocked at O'Neill's nonchalance, but after being threatened by
Goa'uld, the NID had very little with which to threaten them. "He will defeat them," Teal'c offered her his reassurance.

"You hear that, Chief? They're kicking the kidnappers' asses. You just hold on. You're always telling me to listen to your voice, so you listen to me now. You stay with me." Ellison looked up. "Teal'c, you tell O'Neill to get a medic in here or I'm going out there and clearing the area for 911 personnel, you got that?" Ellison gave every indication that he was not joking, but even more distressing, Blair did not react to his partner's offer to embark on what was essentially a suicide mission. That suggested that Blair was either not understanding Ellison's words or he was too weak to protest.

"Jack," Daniel yelled.

"Keep your head down, Daniel," Jack yelled back.

"Jaaack!" Daniel responded. There was no answer from O'Neill, and Teal'c suspected the colonel realized that they had a significant problem.

The engine gunned in the main room, tires screaming against the concrete and then fading as the sound retreated. "Um, guys, what's going on?" Elizabeth whispered. She was on her knees in front of a military-style trunk, black clothes in either hand as she searched for a hand device.

"I do not yet know."

"Teal'c, we can't wait too much longer," Daniel said, looking back toward Ellison and Blair. Blair was motionless, his complexion white, and a large pool of blood had gathered below him.

New engine sounds approached, lower and heavier. The engine stopped and doors slammed. Yet another voice shouted. "Spread out in delta formation, we have friendlies in the field, so identify any hostiles." Boots pounded against the concrete.

"Identify yourselves," O'Neill called, and the pounding of boots paused.

"Captain Waterton out of McChord. Who am I talking to?"

"Colonel O'Neill, Cheyenne Mountain, authorization code Lima Niner Niner Whiskey Zulu."

The other voice quickly offered a code of its own. Clearly, the division out of McChord e had driven significantly faster than the law allowed.

"We're clear, people," O'Neill called, and Daniel was out the door and in the hall before Teal'c could stop him or advise caution.

"Jack, Blair's shot. It's bad. We need someone back here now. Right now!"

Teal'c stood back against the wall and listened to the calls--for a medic, for a stretcher, for intravenous fluids. O'Neill came into the room just ahead of medics with equipment. The moment O'Neill saw Blair, he retreated to the wall next to Teal'c and watched. There was no doubting that Blair was in serious danger. For a second, Teal'c thought that Ellison might interfere with the treatment because he did not wish to relinquish Blair's hand, even when the second medic attempted to move in, but then he leaned back against the bunk. But he remained on his knees, staring as they worked on Blair. His hands were streaked with Blair's blood, and blood splattered his clothing with dull red spots.

"I can't find one. I'm so sorry, I can't find one," Elizabeth said. She was still on her knees, piles of clothing and random personal items strewn about her. "I can't find one of those hand devices." Teal'c
had no words of comfort to offer her, so he could only watch as a medic pushed Ellison farther back, attaching lines to Blair's arms before lifting him onto a stretcher. Ellison rose as the medics started carrying Blair toward the door. Teal'c stepped aside to give them room to remove Blair, his face slack and pale. Ellison was close behind them.

"Ellison, let them work," O'Neill said, reaching out to put his hand on Ellison's arm. Ellison's jaw tightened. "We can follow, but Blair needs them more than he needs you right now."

"No offense, Colonel," Ellison said slowly, "but you don't know shit."

"I know you're not getting in the back of that transport with Sandburg, Detective," O'Neill answered. "Carter's gone to get the car, and we'll follow them wherever they go."

"I have to..." Ellison started pulling toward the door, and Teal'c stepped into the man's path.

"You will not go with Blair Sandburg." Teal'c fully expected Ellison to strike out at him, but right now Blair needed medical assistance and Teal'c would ensure that Ellison did not interfere with that.

"Move," Ellison said quietly, but Teal'c could hear the danger in his voice.

"I shall not."

For a second, Teal'c was certain that Ellison was about to attack him. While he had no doubt that he could disable the man, he did not wish to harm him. While Ellison might be a very poor tec'ma'te, he clearly cared about Blair. However, after that moment of barely contained fury, Ellison appeared to simply give up.

"Fine, they've taken Blair. He's gone. Now, are we going to get the car and follow or am I going to have to shoot you?" Ellison demanded. Teal'c recognized the tone as sarcastic.

"Um, I actually have your weapon," Daniel pointed out.

"I'll improvise."

"Let's go figure out where they're taking him. Come on Ellison, this mission isn't complete until we get all the geeks back on their feet." O'Neill slapped Ellison on the shoulder. "Elizabeth, I assume you're still with us."

"After that, I plan to hide behind you for as long as you let me," she said as she got up from the floor. "Is Blair going to be okay?"

"We've got the best working for us," O'Neill said without making any promises.

"And I am the best person to know if he's stable, if he has a bleed, if there's anything going on internally. I know Blair's body better than a doctor—better than Blair himself. Colonel, we need to get to Blair now," Ellison said, and then he physically shoved past Teal'c. Obviously he would not tolerate being separated from Blair for long.

"You heard him, let's go find Blair," O'Neill ordered.

18. Chapter Eighteen
O'Neill sat sprawled across two chairs in the small waiting room in Fort Lewis' Madigan Army Medical Center. Daniel and Elizabeth had finally retreated after every attempt to offer kindness had led Ellison to become increasingly aggressive. Carter had followed.

"You're going to wear out the floor, Ellison," O'Neill said wearily, but then he'd said the same thing at least four times already. Teal'c was unsure why he bothered to repeat himself because Ellison clearly had no intention of stopping. The nurse looked up from his computer for a second, no doubt wondering if Ellison and O'Neill were going to have another round of mutual insults and accusations. However, Ellison's phone rang, precluding any further argument.

"Ellison." The anger on Ellison's face softened to grief as he listened to the other end of the conversation

"He's still in surgery, Simon. The last we heard he was holding his own." Ellison looked over and glared at O'Neill, no doubt reacting to something his superior had said.

"Yeah, well I don't think O'Neill is trying too hard to get you clearance, Simon."

O'Neill looked toward Ellison, no apology in his eyes, before he returned to staring at the ceiling tiles.

"We're close enough for me to hear him, so I'm good." Ellison paused. "It's not like they don't know already. If they're planning on something other than annoying the piss out of me, I can't do much about it now."

"Get over yourself, Ellison," O'Neill suggested.

Ellison did not answer. "I just plan to stay with Sandburg." Another pause. "Consider this a request for leave then, Simon. I can't leave Blair here." Another pause. "You already know what I think of IA. And they can put their requests right up their..."

"Oh for crying out loud. You're worse at politics than I am," O'Neill said as he exploded up out of his chair. "Give me the phone." Ellison was clearly shocked, and did not respond when O'Neill plucked the phone from his hand.

"Captain Banks, this is Colonel O'Neill. Look, Sandburg's in bad shape, and if I have to, I'll find an excuse to order Ellison to stay here. So tell your IA department they have just been outranked by an Air Force Colonel who is requiring Ellison's assistance after the man stumbled into classified information. If that doesn't make them happy, tell them that they can either go along with it or I can have the mayor, the governor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs or the President call them and chew their asses out. It's really up to them." O'Neill didn't wait for an answer; he turned the phone off and tossed it at Ellison.

"Simon's not going to be happy," Ellison said, but he put his phone away without trying to call his commander back.

"Yeah, but he has someone to blame other than you. That's the trick with commanders—give them someone else to blame... unless you're like me and everyone just naturally loves you." O'Neill collapsed back into a chair.

"So, I stumbled into classified information?"

O'Neill didn't answer, but he raised an eyebrow at Ellison.

Ellison moved closer, his voice so low as to almost be a whisper. "Like information on the NID
attempting to run a second shadow operation against the alien Goa'uld threat?" Ellison sounded calm, but his body was poised for a fight.

O'Neill shifted in his chair. "Is this a new shadow operation or just them reliving the glory days of their old one, which we took down several weeks ago?"

Ellison frowned for a second, clearly confused by O'Neill's response. Teal'c was confused about why Ellison would reveal this information, but then he had no illusion about being able to understand anything Ellison did. Either the man had motives entirely unseen or he was a great fool. Teal'c had no definitive evidence to support either conjecture.

"It sounded like they were in the early stages of gathering resources. They don't think Major Carter will ever work for them, and their second choice for someone to work computers is a man named McKay, but they seemed to think he is too high maintenance. So, Elizabeth Canarsee was going to be the center of a new team." Ellison sat on a chair across from O'Neill. His back was now to Teal'c, and Teal'c was not sure whether Ellison was testing them or simply no longer calculating danger or escape routes with Blair Sandburg in such immediate danger of dying.

"Awww, and we took her away. You have to feel bad for the NID, every plan they try, we just fuck it up for them," O'Neill said with a not-nice grin.

"You aren't surprised."

O'Neill shrugged. "If you were as good as Sandburg claimed, I figured there was a chance."

"So, does this change my status here?" Ellison asked. Finally Teal'c understood. Like any warrior, Ellison desired to know where the battle lay. Were Teal'c the tec'ma'te, he would have recommended greater caution and patience, but patience was not a trait he associated with Ellison.

"Do you still have seizures where you lose track of everything around you?" O'Neill asked, and all of the customary joking had vanished.

"If I try to use the senses too much, or if I'm under too much stress, yes, I zone."

"Then you aren't eligible for active duty, Ellison. A few men and women develop P-chad every year, and as far as the service is concerned, you're just one more. The only thing your government might offer you is a bed in a top-rate facility with doctors trained to help you turn the senses off."

"Even though they're useful?"

O'Neill stared at Ellison for long seconds, and Teal'c wondered why Ellison felt the need to push this particular argument.

"A lot of traits are useful, Ellison. A manic depressive has a lot of energy during their manic phase. Put naquadah in a man, and he's all kinds of useful until he goes insane. Not even the NID is going to want a soldier with that big of a liability waiting to cancel out any advantage. That being said, I can see where the senses would be useful in civilian life. If you zone, backup is a 911 call away. The frontlines we fight on... that's just not true." Ellison nodded, his body finally losing some of the tension it had carried since the first time Teal'c had seen him. "You'll need to sign confidentiality agreements, but after reading your file, I suspect you know how to keep a secret. I'm not sure your bosses at the police or Blair would trust you nearly as much if they knew how many bodies you have on you."

Teal'c watched Ellison lose the color from his face, but he did not respond. Sometimes Teal'c wondered how humans saw him because his own body count dwarfed Ellison's. Ellison had
assassinated individuals when he had followed the orders of his commanders, and in Peru he had targeted entire groups for termination in accordance with his own interpretation of his mission. Teal'c had targeted entire planets. And yet, Teal'c appeared far less bothered by his past than did Ellison. Teal'c accepted those deaths as inevitable. From the way Ellison now studied the lines in the tiles on the floor, he did not have the same ability to accept his past actions.

"Danny still wants to recruit your partner. We need scientists who can keep calm in a crisis situation. The State Department wasn't going to give Sandburg clearance, but I don't think that's going to be an option now." O'Neill laughed. "They're going to accuse me of getting Sandburg kidnapped just so I could get my way despite their very vocal protests."

Ellison looked up long enough to glare at O'Neill.

"Geez, give it a rest. I wouldn't have done that." O'Neill stopped and glanced over toward Teal'c. "Okay, I might have put him somewhere where he could overhear, but I would never have put him in danger. He's a good kid."

"Yes, he is," Ellison said softly, and then he was up and pacing again. He paused, tilting his head and staring at the wall behind the nurse's station. Somewhere back there, doctors were attempting to repair internal damage from two bullets, and Teal'c wondered whether Ellison was listening to the operation. After a second, Ellison shook his head and then resumed his pacing.

"You know, you could do one thing to help him," O'Neill offered. Ellison stopped mid-pace. "Sandburg gave us some background material on Sentinels, but he refused to share most of it without your permission. The stuff we... liberated... from your apartment won't go to any of our medical personnel without the permission of the author and the research subject. We covert ops people have one set of ethics focused on saving the most number of innocent lives, but these scientists and doctors insist on the silliest things—like informed consent and privacy."

O'Neill's voice sounded dismissive, but Teal'c knew that he had supported Daniel and his quest for ethical standards within the SGC more than once. He rarely did so without complaining about the cost in efficiency, but in the end, he always supported Daniel. In the field of battle, Daniel might act the part of an unblooded child, a cha'til; he had a childlike belief in the goodness of others. However off the battlefield, the man was persuasive and held sway over O'Neill more often than not.

Ellison stepped toward O'Neill, confusion and aggression warring in his face. "You want me to talk him into releasing his research?"

"No, Sandburg already gave us permission. He just told us that we had to wait until we had your permission. So, I'm asking your permission to send his research over to some of our Air Force geeks."

"Why?" Ellison crossed his arms over his chest.

O'Neill stared at Ellison for several seconds, and Teal'c could tell that the man was struggling with a need to say something sarcastic that would probably ruin any chance of his cooperation.

Teal'c took a step forward. In the absence of Daniel or Carter, he felt it necessary to blunt O'Neill's less diplomatic skills himself. "Am I correct in assuming that Blair Sandburg must share his research with others before he may earn the title he seeks?" Teal'c had done research on various titles after being confronted with the issue of rank and honorifics and names early in his stay with the SGC. The assignment of doctorates was far less confusing that the habit of humans to give all their children the same name, like Jack or John, or the confusion over surnames and marriage and hyphenations.
"Yes...." Ellison still sounded suspicious.

"He must share his research with others, yet he fears to reveal your name to anyone. Would it not be more rational for him to reveal your name to those who are already aware of the condition?" Ellison's jaw tightened. "The university has fired him, so perhaps this is the best time for him to seek other masters to whom he can appeal to for his proper titles."

"I don't think—"

"Teal'c's right," O'Neill interrupted. It was clear that Ellison was still planning to reject their offer, and Teal'c did not know what more the man would require in order to be convinced, so he stepped back to allow O'Neill a direct line of sight to Ellison. A woman in uniform walked into the waiting room, took one look at the two men glaring at each other, and hurried back out through a door near the nurse's station.

"This is private," Ellison insisted curtly.

"This is Sandburg's life. The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences at Bethesda will take his research and award him a doctorate without ever compromising your identity, Ellison. They know the names of hundreds of soldiers with P-chad, and you'd just be one more."

"So, I don't have a right to privacy because I'm not unique?" Ellison demanded. The aggression levels were clearly rising.

"You'll get your privacy. But this way, Sandburg gets his degree. And this way, Sandburg can save the lives of good men and women. I was on mission with a man who developed these senses. He just about got himself and the rest of the team killed because he was screaming in pain from a fucking cut on his arm. I laid on his body and half-suffocated him trying to keep him quiet as a patrol passed us. I just about killed a man who I served with... a man who I liked... because I didn't know how to handle the situation." O'Neill stopped and suddenly stood up, turning his back to Ellison. "I almost killed him to save the unit, and according to Sandburg, I could have talked him off the spike in minutes if I'd known what to do. Is your privacy worth that, Ellison? Is your privacy worth the young lives that have ended in the field because the current assumption is that P-chad is uncontrollable?" O'Neill continued to stare at the wall where prints of trees were lined up against the white wall.

Ellison collapsed into the nearest chair and rubbed his hand over his face. For long seconds, both men were silent, and Teal'c waited, not sure how to help in O'Neill's cause.

"I'll sign any releases you need," Ellison finally said. O'Neill nodded without turning around.

Teal'c retreated to the wall and watched as the two men worked on ignoring each other. The nurse behind the desk gave Teal'c a look he could only describe as sympathetic, as though he was to be pitied for working with these two. Minutes dragged into hours as the operation continued. Daniel came and attempted some conversation with Ellison, only to be glared into silence. Carter reported that she had gathered Blair's notes and contacted the director of the Center for Informatics in Medicine Biomedical Informatics. He was interested in, but wary of, such research. Teal'c could only hope that Blair Sandburg survived to defend his conclusions.

The sun was just beginning to light the morning sky when a doctor walked into the room, his face fully of weariness.

"Colonel O'Neill?" he asked. O'Neill was half-asleep, his head resting on his arm, but he jerked awake. He was up a half second after Ellison.
"How is he?" Ellison demanded. The doctor looked at Ellison in shock before turning his attention to O'Neill.

"Colonel?"

"Captain Ellison is the head of Sandburg's protection detail," O'Neill lied. Teal'c did not understand the purpose of the lie, but the doctor immediately nodded in understanding.

"Ah. Well, he is out of surgery. Things went reasonably well, and we have repaired as much of the internal damage as well. Right now we have him on antibiotics for the septicemia, but an operation of this complexity rarely comes without some complications. His lungs are already scarred and he has a mild case of pneumonia unrelated to the shooting."

"He still has the pneumonia?" Ellison interrupted.

"Um, a mild case, yes. We have him on heavy doses of antibiotics, but that poses a risk of drug-induced liver injury, so he's not out of danger, yet."

O'Neill nodded. "How soon can he be moved?"

"Moved?" The doctor appeared shocked at the very thought.

"Yes, moved. We have some of the best doctors and surgeons waiting for him in Colorado, but we won't move him until he's stable." O'Neill crossed his arms and gave the doctor and implacable glare.

"His friends are here," Ellison countered, and he was looking equally implacable. "Or they would be if you gave them clearance to visit."

The doctor looked from one to the other, clearly surprised at the argument. "Well, he's not going anywhere for a few days at the very least. He's in intensive care right now."

"I need to see him." Ellison started for the door that led into the surgical suite and intensive care unit.

"Oh no. He needs rest. You can visit him for a short time later if he wakes," the doctor said, physically putting a hand on Ellison's chest to stop him.

Ellison looked about ready to punch the doctor, and maybe the doctor sensed that because he snatched his hand back.

"Doctor." O'Neill stepped forward and rested his own hand on Ellison's arm. "Mr. Sandburg is privy to some very classified material. Until he is fully aware of whatever is falling out of his mouth, a member of my team will be in the room with him at all times. So, you need to set up a second cot for Captain Ellison. He'll remain on duty until I return from escorting another scientist back to Colorado."

"This isn't..." the doctor started with a frown.

"This isn't open for debate. I will take it up with the base commander if I need to," O'Neill said firmly.

The doctor looked from one man to the other. The doctor stiffened and Teal'c thought he might be on the verge of saluting. "Yes, sir. I'll need a few minutes with the nurses to get him moved into a larger room. But whoever is in there will have to yield for medical personnel. Mr. Sandburg is critically ill."

"I have medic training," Ellison said softly. "If nothing else, I know how to stay out of your way."

The doctor sighed in defeat. "I'll talk to the nurses." He turned and left the room. O'Neill continued
to stand for a moment with his hand on Ellison's arm, and Teal'c could not decide if the gesture was one of control or reassurance. Before Teal'c could decide, O'Neill dropped his arm and turned away.

"Thank you," Ellison offered.

"Just don't let me catch you shoving him into any more dumpsters," O'Neill warned. He turned and poked a finger in Ellison's direction. Ellison didn't answer, but he flushed deep red before giving a nod. Considering that O'Neill had treated Daniel poorly on more than one occasion, Teal'c was ready to give Ellison a second chance, just as the team had given O'Neill his second chance with them. Whatever conflict they might have, Ellison had given permission for Blair's research to go to Bethesda, and after talking to Blair, Teal'c had been left with the impression that the man would never do that. Now the only question was why Blair was so convinced that Ellison would never put his research ahead of his own privacy.

"Captain Ellison?" A new nurse stood in the doorway to the surgical area. "If you'll follow me...?"
She turned and Ellison followed.

"Come on, Teal'c, we've got another geek to deal with. Maybe we can catch a few hours' sleep on the jet back to Colorado."

19. Chapter Nineteen

Teal'c stepped into Dr. Frasier's infirmary. Blair lay, pale and gaunt, on the white sheets, but he still breathed. Next to him sat Jim Ellison reading a book. The man had claimed the bed next to Blair, and after some negotiating between Dr. Frasier and O'Neill, he had been allowed to remain in the infirmary. "How is he?" Teal'c asked.

Ellison looked up from his book. "His temperature is two degrees higher than it should be, and every time he wakes up, he asks me the same questions."

Teal'c tipped his head and studied Blair Sandburg's prone form. Dr. Fraiser believed the young man would make a full recovery. Knowing that Blair was likely to recover, Teal'c felt a responsibility to address his concerns with Ellison. While the man had proven quite solicitous while Blair was unconscious, going so far as to demonstrate his Sentinel abilities to a small group of doctors who had been chosen to preview Blair's research, Teal'c did not trust the man to remain equally as solicitous once Blair awoke. And as the oldest warrior on base, Teal'c felt the need to act as dis'tra'ju, the master who oversaw the interpersonal relations within the unit. After he had become First Prime to Apophis, Master Bra'tac had taken the role of dis'tra'ju. Teal'c often mused that the older man had taken the more difficult role. At one hundred, Teal'c certainly did not feel old enough or experienced enough to handle this situation. Even Daniel admitted that Jim Ellison's behavior confused him.

"Did you need something?" Ellison asked, putting his book down on the edge of the bed.

"He has faced death before," Teal'c said. While he intended the words only as a general observation, Ellison sat up stiffly, clearly taking them as a prelude to conflict. "Among my people, that gives him a unique view on the world."

Ellison didn't answer right away. Instead, he shifted around on the narrow chair and carefully closed his book, setting it on the edge of the table beside Blair's bed. "So, you believe in that shamanic crap?"
Teal'c considered his answer carefully. Once Blair Sandburg had provided the correct term, Teal'c found a wealth of information on shamanic rites. "I do," Teal'c agreed. "He has sought the spirit realms since he was ten, does that not imply that he feels a connection?" Teal'c could immediately tell that this information was new to Ellison; he frowned at the sleeping figure of Blair.

"He's never had a vision." Ellison sounded defensive.

"When dead, did he not envision himself as an animal, searching the next realm for something which he still lacks?" Teal'c walked around to the far side of Blair's bed, and Ellison visibly tensed.

"The doctor said that oxygen deprivation makes people see things. He nearly drowned."

Teal'c considered Ellison's words, but they sounded untruthful. They sounded afraid. "Do you not wish for Blair Sandburg to be a shaman?" Teal'c could not imagine why a warrior would attempt to stop someone from taking such an honorable path, but then Teal'c could not imagine many things which humans had proved possible. Sometimes he wondered if he should remove himself from Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison's lives and allow Bra'tac to address the problem when he arrived. However, despite the fact that Teal'c had sent for his former master nearly a week earlier, word had not yet returned. If Blair Sandburg recovered before Bra'tac returned to Earth, Teal'c could not allow the young man to remain in danger. He had attempted to explain the danger to the others, but not even Daniel could seem to fully grasp the risks when a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah no longer held ties to the world of the living. Too many of Blair's ties had been severed.

Ellison still did not answer, but he stared at Teal'c with great anger. Since Teal'c could not fathom the psychology of such behavior, he decided to focus on the behavior itself.

"Your willingness to allow Blair Sandburg to suffer is dishonorable."

Immediately, Ellison was on his feet, his fists clenched. He strode to the end of Blair's bed, his body language screaming of his desire to physically strike out. "I would never let Blair suffer. I put up with O'Neill and his machinations, I put up with the doctors, and the fucking secret base and the confidentially agreements and threats. I'm doing that because I don't want Blair to suffer."

"And yet, you did nothing to attempt to help him with his difficulties at school."

"Blair's a big boy. He doesn't need me to babysit him."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. Blair had clearly described Jim as a mother hen when he had spoken to the healer when he had first injured his ankle. This was not behavior Teal'c associated with such a description.

"Does he not need you to defend him from an attacker with a baseball bat?" Teal'c asked. Ellison's reaction was a mass of contradictions: he blushed, but his fists tightened; his shoulders dropped in shame, but he took an aggressive step forward.

"I would—" Ellison stopped and took a deep breath. "I've made mistakes."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow, inviting Ellison to continue, but he fell silent. Teal'c had very little experience with diplomacy, and he doubted that General Hammond would approve of a more physical confrontation, so Teal'c resorted to the truth.

"Your fellow officers believe you capable of abusing Blair." Teal'c watched as the words struck Ellison. They only seemed to fuel his anger, so obviously Teal'c had not achieved his goal. An angry Ellison would be more of a danger to both Blair Sandburg and others. "Both Jack Kelso and the woman with whom he is intimate believe that your behavior is questionable."
"The woman? Who?" Ellison demanded.

"A woman detective within your department," Teal'c said. Ellison's anger grew even deeper.

"She's a busybody. She doesn't even know us," he snapped.

"She knows that you chose to give aid to an enemy before assisting Blair Sandburg," Teal'c pointed out. "I witnessed you blaming Blair for the attack against him, and you were ready to believe that he would have betrayed you by revealing your secret willingly."

Ellison's face turned an alarming shade that Teal'c associated with battle or extreme heat. "Don't pretend you know us. If you want something, just spit it out." Ellison crossed his arms and glared threateningly, not that Teal'c felt threatened. One such as Ellison would have to train for many years or be armed with rather impressive weapons before Teal'c would feel threatened.

"I wish only to prevent the death of a young man who is a shaman. Among my people, to fail to protect one on such an honorable path is a dishonor."

Teal'c spoke truth. His people had many legends of those who journeyed in order for their calak to find the path to the next life. Most found that path only once the primta died. It was said that the goa'uld whispered lies when one sought the next life, but those without larval goa'uld did sometimes learn to travel the path and guide others.

"So, this is just nobility on your part?" Ellison asked with great irreverence. Teal'c chose to ignore the insult.

"A tribe lucky enough to be blessed with the presence of a shaman would die—down to the last warrior—before allowing the shaman to suffer. Your tribe has not honored Blair Sandburg."

"So, this is all because you think Blair is a shaman?" Ellison smiled and shook his head. "You don't know what you're talking about. Sure, Blair talks the talk with all that holistic shit, but he isn't a shaman. I knew a shaman, and trust me, Blair isn't one."

"He knew which enemy warrior would return to our side in the fight," Teal'c pointed out. The NID soldier Blair had identified had, within days, revealed all he knew of his superiors. Knowledge of another's heart was the mark of a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah. And Teal'c's trust in Blair Sandburg's judgment was the only reason Teal'c insisted on believing that Jim Ellison could be taught better manners.

Ellison did not have an immediate answer for that. "He's been around police work for a long time. He's learned to read people," he finally said tightly, and then Ellison turned his back and focused his eyes on Blair's still form. The machinery created a mechanical rhythm. Ellison cocked his head as though listening, and Teal'c wondered if he listened to Blair's body, some distant conversation, or the rhythm of those machines.

"You shall kill him," Teal'c announced. Ellison did not turn around. He reached out and rested a hand on top of the blanket where Blair's leg lay. "He needs a connection to this world, and you offer him shame and guilt. He believes he has hurt you, and you do not correct this assumption. Either he did hurt you, and you treat him so because you wish revenge, or he did not hurt you, and you allow him to suffer guilt needlessly."

"You have no idea what happened." Ellison's voice was tight with emotion.

"I know that he worked with another Sentinel. I know that she drowned him, and that even ill, he chose to follow you. I know that you did not return his loyalty. Is that not correct?" Teal'c had
received parts of the story from Blair Sandburg, parts from Jack Kelso, and parts from Daniel's research in the local newspapers, so he could not definitively know the truth.

"My senses were out of control." Ellison fisted the blanket so that the edge pulled down far enough to reveal the mass of tubes that drained the wounds Blair had suffered.

"You were not able to exercise good judgment?" Teal'c asked. Sometimes such things did happen in battle.

"This is..." Ellison simply stopped.

Teal'c could understand the shame. After Rya'c had been drugged into pledging loyalty to Apophis and nearly destroying Earth, he had shown great reluctance to speak of it. Daniel Jackson and O'Neill still refused to discuss Hathor and the way she had confused them into following her. As warriors, their honor suffered under such attacks. Even before joining the Tau'ri, Teal'c had seen cases where fatigue or drugs or just an unusual situation created such despair or confusion that even strong warriors lost their true path. That was when one had to rely upon fellow-warriors. Teal'c had seen Daniel turn to O'Neill when poisoned by the sarcophagus, and Teal'c was often grateful for Carter's presence at his side on missions. Being First Prime of Apophis had not given him the diplomatic skills required for missions, so when he encountered new situations where his warrior's knowledge failed him, he relied on her to guide him safely through the confusion.

"A warrior is not always in control of his actions," Teal'c admitted, not sure how to reach Ellison. "However, confusion should have led you to hold to Blair Sandburg, and yet you pushed him away. If you had been manipulated, you should have repaired the schism between you. You act to keep him close, but you then treat him with disrespect."

Teal'c did not wait for an answer. As long as he remained in the room, Ellison was focusing on his hatred of Teal'c and not his own behavior. At this point, only time could force some truths into Ellison. Teal'c passed the guard at the door with a nod and then exited into the hallway.

"So, any luck?" Carter asked. She had been leaning against the hallway, but she stood when he exited the room.

"I do not believe so," Teal'c admitted. He hoped that Bra'tac would respond to his message soon. Teal'c was not skilled enough to be dis'tra'ju.

"He seems to like Blair, but he treats him like a puppy that peed on his carpet. I don't get it," Carter sighed.

Teal'c thought about Ellison and his unwillingness to respect the shaman. "My mother used to tell the story of Tri'kepa, a young warrior who possessed a magical weapon," Teal'c started.

"That story is not going to end well, is it?" Carter asked with a wry smile. She started walking toward the elevator, and Teal'c followed.

"Indeed," he agreed. "The blade could kill all enemies, but he allowed the weapon to rust. When his mother asked him to go into the woods and return with firewood, he took his weapon rather than take the time to sharpen an ax."

"And he broke it," Carter guessed.

"Shattered it," Teal'c corrected her with a tilt of his head.

"It's a little like the story of the Golden Goose. And Ellison really is about to kill the Golden Goose. I
was talking to Janet, and she said that Blair's lungs have scarring. But the records at the police station show that he was still down there every day that Ellison was. On top of teaching and trying to go to classes, he had no time to recover from pneumonia." Carter punched the button for the elevator with far more energy than actually required.

"Shall General Hammond allow Ellison to take Blair Sandburg back to Cascade?" Teal'c asked.

Carter's face twisted in disgust, much like it had on the world with the giant herbivores who had left droppings on the only source of naquadah. She had been most displeased at having to remove the offending material before collecting samples. "It's not up to us, Teal'c. If Blair wants to go back with Ellison, he can."

"Even if Ellison is endangering him?" Teal'c asked. The elevator opened.

"Yep," Carter agreed. Then she smiled as she got in the elevator. "Of course, that doesn't keep us from giving him some pretty damn attractive choices. I called General Greenburg at the academy, and he is very interested in anyone who can help soldiers with Post Combat Hypersensitivity Disorder. He'll make Blair a good offer."

Teal'c felt better knowing that Carter was doing her best to protect Blair Sandburg. He expected that she would have far greater success than he would.

"I really hate that man," Carter said as soon as the elevator started rising.

"Ellison?" Teal'c asked.

"Oh yeah. Being a woman in science and in the military, I always felt like I had something to prove."

Teal'c inclined his head toward her, not understanding the relationship between her statement and her hatred of Ellison.

She shook her head and looked up at the ceiling for a second. "I watched plenty of women, smart women, tear themselves apart because they were always trying to prove themselves to men who never gave them the time of day."

For a moment, Teal'c thought he might have misunderstood a colloquialism. "Why would they be dismissive of good work?"

"Because it came from a woman," Carter said with far more anger than she normally used. "Those assholes thought that women should be home making brownies and babies. Janet's ex-husband even told her she was nuts for going into the Air Force because military service was for men."

Teal'c frowned in confusion, both over why someone would believe such patent foolishness and why their conversation had taken such a turn. Being confused, he simply waited for Carter to say something that would clarify things.

"I see the same thing in Blair. His notes are incredible. He's documented Ellison's senses under a huge range of conditions, sometimes controlled, and sometimes while people were shooting guns at him. He's outlined dozens and dozens of tests and exercises that he developed to make sure Ellison didn't lose control, but did you see Ellison when those doctors came to test him?"

"I did not." Teal'c followed Carter as she exited the elevator with great speed and jerky steps that signaled her great distress.

"He said that what Blair did was 'no big deal.' He actually said that." Carter stopped at the
intersection between the cafeteria and the training room. She looked one way and then the other before she looked over her shoulder at him. "Do you want to spar?" she asked. It had been many months since she had requested him as a sparring partner, since Dr. Carter from the alternate reality had come through the quantum mirror.

"I do," Teal'c agreed, and then followed her toward the training room.

"He's a real ass. He lets Blair spend all that time on all that research, and then he has the nerve to call it 'no big deal.' It'd be a big deal if he was sitting in a corner of the room screaming with his arms wrapped around his head. He'd call it a big deal then." Carter muttered the words, and from the way several men detoured out of their path, Teal'c did not think he was alone in noting Carter's bad mood. However, lately it felt as though the team was suffering through these moods individually, so Teal'c was very grateful that she had requested his assistance.

She headed into the training room, and the science officers from SG 14 and SG 12 were using half the room to practice throws. Neither man was particularly proficient, but it spoke well of their dedication that they were willing to practice. Teal'c removed his jacket and shoes and studied the weapons on the wall while Carter stretched.

"It's too bad that he's such a good cop because I really don't want to respect that man for anything," she said as she placed her hands flat against the ground and arched her back.

"His senses are impressive," Teal'c pointed out. When searching for their missing members, Ellison had provided a tactical advantage that had most likely prevented the NID from moving Daniel and Canarsee to a more secure location.

Carter glared up at him. "We're supposed to be bonding over hating him," she pointed out.

Teal'c nodded. He had not known that. Certainly, a common enemy could unite allies, but he had not felt the need to reinforce his alliance with Carter. She stood up and stretched her neck one way and then the other.

"I'm the one who tried to keep him from zoning during the mission, and it was not fun. He was constantly shoving at me. He even put an elbow in my stomach."

Teal'c had not known that either. He raised an eyebrow and wondered whether Ellison had been rejecting Carter, rejecting any guidance other than Blair, or if he was that disagreeable with everyone who attempted to help him.

Carter stepped onto the mat without any weapon, and Teal'c followed her. She raised her hands defensively, and the other men stopped sparring. Teal'c moved in cautiously. Right now, Carter showed so much emotion that she might make a precipitous attack that could lead to injury.

"I had a friend at the academy who spent an entire semester trying to write a paper that would get an A from this misogynistic ass." She darted forward, and Teal'c countered her strike. She twirled and struck at his ankles, and he retreated several steps. She followed up with a series of strikes, and Teal'c blocked them for a minute before landing a blow on her breastbone.

She gasped loudly and fell back several steps, but she kept her hands up, deflecting several follow up blows that Teal'c aimed at her head.

"Did your friend ever earn the grade she sought?" Teal'c asked when they both fell back to more defensive positions.

"No. And she spent so much time on that damn class that her other classwork suffered." Carter
circled warily, sweat forming at her brow. "She could never let it go."

"You did," Teal'c guessed.

"My only B," Carter confirmed before kicking at his knee. Teal'c moved to block, and she caught him on the shoulder with a punch that he had not expected. He rolled to one side and regained his feet, catching her arm as she tried to strike him again. He yanked her hard enough to pull her off balance and then tossed her behind him. She ran several steps to avoid falling before spinning back around to face him again.

"You were wise," Teal'c said. Now he circled her.

"Yeah, but that's only because I grew up with a father who I pretty much fought with from the first day I was old enough to talk. I get the feeling Blair is not that good with conflict." Carter shifted to keep him in sight.

"Do you believe he lacks the ability to defend himself?" Teal'c asked.

Carter dropped her hands to her sides, and Teal'c took a step back, acknowledging that she had ended the match. "Teal'c, Danny had to take care of himself from the time his parents died. You grew up in the middle of a war, I had my father, and the colonel." She stopped. "I have no idea what his background is, but I'm willing to bet that he grew up having to scramble for respect."

Teal'c tilted his head. The State Department had provided full backgrounds on both men. "But did Blair Sandburg not live on his own from an early age?" Teal'c asked.

Carter shrugged. "Yeah, but he had a mother who taught him to not get in conflicts."

"She had great conflicts with the government," Teal'c objected.

Carter was already shaking her head. "Teal'c, think about when we went back in time. Michael and Jenny?"

Teal'c did remember the two people who had helped them when they had been trapped in the past. Michael had been most obsessed with having Teal'c sit up front.

"They fought the government, but can you see those two getting in a fight with a person? Can you see them telling someone to go fuck themselves, even someone who needed to get told that?"

"I see." Teal'c had not considered that before, but if Blair had been raised to negotiate in all situations, that might explain his inability to defend himself.

"Yeah, I see, too. That doesn't mean I like it," Carter said. Then she dropped back into an aggressive stance, and Teal'c returned his attention to their fight. Unfortunately, he still had no answers.

20. Chapter Twenty

Blair itched. He really itched. But when he tried to reach down and scratch his stomach, something caught his hand and pressed it back against the mattress. For a second, Blair thought he could smell jungle rot, the musk of water held trapped within leaves and of layers of fallen debris rotting underfoot. Maybe the Kombai tree people had found him and were about to shoot him with a dart.
He remembered that. He remembered falling face down in tree litter and scrambling up, leaves caught in his short curls. He remembered them laughing.

The memory was familiar, but it didn't seem to fit. Blair blinked and found himself staring at white tiles. "Wha...?" He tried, but he couldn't manage to get more out.

"Hey, Chief. Do you want some ice?" Jim was there. The old Jim, the Jim who looked at him with worry when he came home late from a date, the Jim who ruffled his hair. Blair wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. Recent Jim had the same face, the same sharp blue eyes and wide shoulders, but he had a hardness to him that was missing now. Blair nodded.

Jim held fingers to his lips, feeding him a small ice chip. The cold was a shock against Blair's tongue, but the few scant drops of water soothed a sore throat. Blair swallowed and realized he had a feeding tube down his nose, which was one reason why his throat hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

"We're in Colorado," Jim said without prompting. He also offered a second ice chip. "This is O'Neill's base. You were injured—shot—but the doctor says you're going to be just fine." Jim smiled at him sadly. "What am I going to do with you, Chief? You get yourself in a lot of trouble."

Blair tried to wave Jim's comments off dismissively, but his arm was weak and he didn't manage more than a twitch. That's the first time he realized he couldn't feel his body.

"My legs?" Blair asked, panic starting to clear the fuzz from the edges of his thoughts.

"What about them? Do you have an itch?" Jim looked at him with honest confusion and concern.

"Mr. Sandburg?" a new voice called. A short woman in a white coat appeared, her eyes studying the machines that beeped around him before she finally looked at him and smiled. "Before you go back to sleep, I just need to check a couple of things." She pulled out a small light and shone it right into his eyes.

Blair made a little noise of protest, but that didn't get him more than a reassuring pat on the arm from Jim.

"He seems a little more alert this time," the woman said to Jim before she smiled down at him. "You're a fighter; you'll recover just fine."

"What?" Blair managed an entire word this time, but he couldn't get more out. He needed to cough, but he didn't feel strong enough to do it.

"You had some serious internal damage. The bullets perforated the liver, nicked the pancreas, and tore the peritoneal envelope, but you seem to be recovering well. Do you feel any pain?" The woman moved her hand down, and Blair watched as she poked around his side and then his legs. At least he knew for sure that he still had legs.

"Nothing at all," Blair managed to croak out. He sounded like an old man who'd been smoking for about eighty years. Jim offered him another ice chip, and Blair smiled at him uneasily. It was nice to have the old Jim back, but it left Blair feeling edgy, like he wasn't sure when Dr. Jekyll was going to turn into Mr. Hyde.

The woman smiled at him. "Pain can be a problem with this type of injury, so we have you on some pretty serious pain killers."

"Don't like drugs," Blair managed to say. It made him sound petulant, but he didn't have the energy for a long conversation about the overuse of pharmaceuticals in modern medicine.
"Oh, honey, if you didn't have drugs in you, you'd be begging for them," the doctor told him with a tone of voice that almost made Blair believe her. "On the street, it'd cost you about a thousand dollars to get stuff this good, and without it, you'd be in so much pain your heart rate would go right off the charts. But we'll get you off them just as soon as we can safely. I don't lose patients in here."

She meant the words to reassure him, but Blair suddenly realized that he was in a semi-private room with a doctor that appeared like magic the second he woke up. That took money. That took a whole lot of money that he didn't have. Hell, he didn't have next month's rent. Blair's mind darted off to the hospital where he'd been after Alex had drowned him, the beeping of the machine that monitored his breathing and Jim joking about not letting him go because of back rent or something. Blair'd been fuzzy.

"Mr. Sandburg? Blair?" The woman was in his face. Blair opened his mouth to get more air, and he couldn't. He was drowning. Alex's hands were holding him down, and the dark water was rising up, filling his chest and pressing against his heart until he could feel it stop. He could feel his body just stop.

"Chief? Just calm down, Chief. Deep breaths." That was Jim. The woman called for something, but cold was flowing into Blair, pressing against him, and now he had to fight even harder for every breath.

"Blair, it's okay. You're safe," Jim promised him. He looked so worried. Blair opened his mouth, he tried to tell Jim that he shouldn't worry, but a mask slipped over his face, and the darkness pressed up and into Blair until only the darkness existed and Blair slipped away.

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Flickers of light slid through the darkness, and Blair moved quietly. Alex was somewhere in the dark, her fingers reaching for him, ready to press him into the quiet waters. Recent Jim was here too, scowling at him for something that Blair couldn't ever understand. Kombai warriors and the man Naomi had dated when he was ten and Incacha, his fingers red with his own blood, they were all here. And a woman whose hair flowed with light. She was the source of the flickers that Blair dodged. He tried to make himself small as a mouse so he could scramble away. All of them were hunting him. Alex's fingers brushed against his arm, and Blair shrank from her touch.

"Blair?" Recent Jim was trying to tempt him to come close, but Blair's ankle throbbed in warning. Recent Jim wasn't to be trusted. "Blair?"

He turned away from the calling spirit and tried to escape the flickering light. He could hide better in the dark.

"Blair?"

"His vitals are strong." A woman spoke, and Blair thought he should know that voice. It wasn't one of the ones hunting him, but it still followed him.

"He's awake. He's just being stubborn." Jim sounded unhappy. "Come on, Chief. Wake up for me."

Blair couldn't ignore the direct request. He opened his eyes and stared blearily at the white tiles.

"Wha...?"

"There you are," Jim said with a smile, but it wasn't Recent Jim, it was Old Jim, Friendly Jim. He held an ice chip up. Blair nodded and Jim placed the chip between his lips. It tasted of salt and winter and Blair sucked at it as he tried to focus on the familiar-looking woman in the white coat.
"Where are we?" Blair asked. This didn't look like any hospital he knew.

"We're in Colorado," Jim answered. "Cheyenne Mountain, home of Colonel O'Neill."

Blair frowned. They didn't like O'Neill. Why would they follow him to Colorado? "Um, why?"

"You got yourself shot again, Chief. But you're getting the best care here."

Blair looked over at the woman and searched memories that floated like bits of trash on the sea after a storm. "Dr. Fraiser?" he asked, not sure if he had found the right memory.

She turned and gave him a huge smile. "That's right. That's the first time you've remembered that on your own. You keep this up, and we'll have you up and out of here in no time." She patted him on the leg, but Blair felt numb, like he'd been frozen and hadn't yet totally thawed. "I need you to tell me if you feel anything," she said as she pulled the blanket back. Blair flinched at the sight of his own body emaciated and pale.

"How long?" he asked weakly.

"Three weeks. You've been in and out of consciousness, but you were really starting to worry us," Dr. Fraiser answered. "People in my infirmary are not allowed to die or slip into comas, so you just keep that in mind," she threatened him with a sharp finger, but she also smiled. Blair smiled back.

"Chief, are you feeling okay?" Jim asked. He looked tired, and Blair could see the bed next to his with Jim's pillow and quilt from home draped over it. Fuck. So they were both here. Jim wouldn't have left in the middle of an IA investigation unless O'Neill had issued something stronger than an invitation. Damn that man.

Rather than curse out the colonel publicly, Blair just nodded.

"Can you feel that?" the doctor asked as she poked something into his foot.

"Yeah," Blair said weakly. Jim offered him another ice chip as Dr. Fraiser moved up on his legs, prickling him and then waiting for a nod from Blair. "I can't feel much," Blair complained as she finally finished and pulled the blanket over him.

"You're on some powerful pain killers," she told him. Blair frowned, but she cut him off before he could say anything. "And you're going to stay on them until you have a chance to recover. Pancreas damage can lead to some fairly severe pain and that can raise blood pressure and heart rate. So, until you can stand up and walk to the bathroom on your own without falling on your nose, you're staying on the drugs."

Blair blinked fast, surprised at the sudden steel in her tone.

"You've given her some grief, Chief," Jim said, and he almost sounded amused. "Just say 'yes' to the nice doctor and let her get to her other patients."

"Um, okay," Blair said. A memory bobbed to the surface. He'd been trying to pull at his IV and explain the benefits of homeopathic pain remedies.

The doctor crossed her arms and looked at him for a second as though trying to judge whether or not she could trust him.

"She's not buying it, Blair," Daniel said from the far side of the room. Blair looked over and smiled, and Daniel stood up straight, shock on his face.
"Oh man, I guess I look bad, huh?" Blair guessed. Jim had raised his bed some, so Blair could see just how stick-like he'd become. Of course, he'd lost a lot of weight even before getting shot, but now he'd lost a whole lot. He could start a whole new diet craze with his current body because he was just about model-thin.

"Yeah, you do, hon," Dr. Fraiser agreed. "I have a lot of degrees that say I know what I'm doing, and I don't have anything against your natural remedies once we have the major internal damage healed, but Chinese herbs are no match for a high-velocity projectile through the liver."

Blair nodded his agreement.

"Blair?" Daniel called. "You can see me?"

Blair looked around. "Um yeah. Do I have something wrong with my eyes?"

"Chief?" Jim asked, and he was right there, his nose an inch from Blair's own.

"Do you see any damage?" the doctor asked, and then she was there with her little light. Oh yeah, Blair remembered hating having her shine that thing into his eyes. She'd done that a lot.

"No, no damage that I can see," Jim said.

"Well, you're more likely to see something than I am, but I don't see anything either. Blair, why do you think something is wrong with your eyes?" Dr. Fraiser asked.

"Um, I don't. Daniel just acted surprised," Blair said with a weak wave toward Daniel.

Dr. Fraiser and Jim exchanged odd looks. "He's still confused. His brain is still trying to fully wake up," Dr. Fraiser offered.

"What is wrong with you two?" Blair asked, wrinkling his nose in annoyance at the feeding tube jammed down it. "Daniel acted weird that I could see him, so I just thought I might have something wrong with my eyes."

"Don't get upset, Chief," Jim shushed him, and Blair glared at the man.

"Could I get a sedative?" Dr. Fraiser asked someone on the other side of a curtain.

"No!" Blair and Daniel said at the same time.

"Blair," Daniel said with a desperate edge to his voice, "I'll explain all this later, but right now, you can't let them give you a sedative, which means you can't get upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm okay," Blair said, holding his hand up to stop Dr. Fraiser from giving him anything. Jim caught his hand between his own palms and held it. "I'm okay," Blair insisted a little louder.

"But you see Jackson?" Jim asked.

"No, tell him I'm a dream. I'll explain later, but no one can see me." Daniel took a step closer. Blair looked from Daniel to Jim, caught between wanting to help one and not wanting to lie to the other.

"Hypnopompic hallucinations aren't unheard of during recovery," Dr. Fraiser said kindly.

"He's really here," Blair insisted.
"It was an accident on P7X-377. The team was hit by radiation that came from a crystal skull," Daniel said, the words tumbling out faster than Blair had ever heard the man talk. It suddenly occurred to Blair that Daniel wasn't joking. He'd been on another fucking planet and had turned invisible. Blair had thought his life was strange, but the Kombai people of New Guinea had nothing on this.

"Calm down, Chief," Jim soothed him, resting a hand on Blair's chest.

"I'm calm," Blair insisted as he fought to control his racing heart. "But Jim, Daniel really is here. There was an accident..." Blair blinked as the world went out of focus. "Really." He struggled to come up with the name of the planet. That would convince them to listen to him. "P... P3PO..." Blair blinked at Dr. Fraiser who was pulling a needle out of one of the tubes attached to his arm.

"Damn it," Daniel said softly. "I'll be here when you wake up. You can ask for Jack then," Daniel said, but Blair couldn't answer. He could only blink as the dark rose up and he was lost in a land of darkness and flickering lights.

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Blair sat, small and quiet, within a flicker of light. It was like he was inside the flame of the meditation candle. The darkness swirled around him, angry and needy faces, but Blair filtered them out as he found an island of quiet in his soul.

"Turning your back on others is no better than being part of the oppressive system yourself."
Naomi's voice echoed in his memory, and the flicker of light around him dimmed, swirls of darkness crowding against him. Part of Blair wanted the darkness, and part wanted to stay in the light. A face appeared in front of him, and it shifted between the image of the Virgin Mary and Naomi, two women who really could not have been more different. The dichotomy amused Blair. He smiled, and the flickers of light around the woman's face intensified.

A voice called to him, searching for him. For a second, Blair felt himself pulled toward the darkness, toward the voice that called him. But then the light intensified, and Blair found such peace that he couldn't find the energy to respond to that distant voice. He couldn't go out into that darkness; he really couldn't do it alone. He settled back in the light and closed his eyes, reaching something that came close to perfect silence as he listened to the sound of his own heart thumping in his chest.

"Blair?" a new voice came from the darkness. Blair could feel the dark tendrils slip into the light and tug at him. The woman was gone, but her light still flickered around him like embers. Blair knew if he just blew on one, he could find the flame again. He wanted to.

"Blair?" the voice called again.

"I didn't give him this much sedative. Maybe we should run another MRI test."

"Blair?"

Blair blinked. Jim's face was like a fun house mirror, all unfamiliar curves and distortions until he blinked again. "Jim?" He looked around, and for a second, the flickering lights of his dreams were superimposed over the white curtain and medical equipment, Dr. Fraiser and her white coat, and Jim and his black t-shirt and fatigue pants. "Why are you in fatigues?" Blair asked as he looked at Jim's military issue pants. The obvious answer was that Jim had been pulled back into the military, but Blair was hoping for a miracle.

Jim blinked at him for a second. "Well, that's a new question, at least," he said, and he sounded
amused. Jim never sounded amused anymore, not since Alex and Mexico and Blair's major fuck-up followed by Jim's major fuck-up.

"Do you know where you are?" Dr. Fraiser asked.

"Colorado?" Blair asked, only 90% sure that he was right. Dr. Fraiser smiled at him. "Cheyenne Mountain," he added.

"I knew it took more than a couple bullets to scramble that brain of yours, Chief," Jim said, and then he reached up and ruffled Blair's hair, a familiar gesture that always sent Blair scrambling to defend his head. Despite the tangles and the indignity, that gesture, more than any other, made Blair feel close to Jim. Jim would slap another man on the back, and even hug another man, but Jim never ruffled anyone else's hair. It was an intimate gesture. Blair smiled, not even trying to push Jim away like he usually did.

"So, why are you in fatigues?" Blair repeated as he looked around for Daniel. No Daniel in sight, so maybe he had dreamed that part.

"Because the base won't wash civilian clothes and I don't feel like driving an hour to the nearest laundromat," Jim said, his eyes crinkled with amusement. "Is that okay with you?"

"You're not...?" Blair stopped and looked over at Dr. Fraiser. He shouldn't have asked in front of someone from base.

"Have I been drafted?" Jim asked. The minute he asked, Blair knew the answer. If Jim had been forced back into the military, he wouldn't sound amused about it.

"So, no?"

"No. I'm here because I have a friend who got himself shot. You do that a little too much, Chief."

"I try to duck. My superspeed must be on the fritz," Blair joked, weirdly feeling like he'd fallen back into the early days of their partnership.

"You seem a whole lot better," Dr. Fraiser said as she shined a light in his eyes... again. He was learning to hate that thing.

"Is that a medical opinion, Dr. Fraiser?" Blair asked. "Like maybe you can start backing off the drugs?"

"He sounds like Sandburg again," Jim said with another ruffle of Blair's hair. He held an ice chip to Blair's lips, and Blair gratefully sucked it in.

"Let's give it a little time. Oh, and now that you're aware enough to actually understand that I'm threatening you, if you try to pull those IV lines out again, you're going to be in restraints, got it?" she asked.

"I'm guessing I wasn't the best patient," Blair said with an embarrassed smile.

Dr. Fraiser shook her head. "Trying to keep up with you and Colonel O'Neill at the same time was interesting. Of course, I could do without that much interesting in my life."

"Colonel O'Neill?" Blair remembered something, something about him having to ask for Jack.

"He's gone. You don't have to deal with him," Jim reassured him with a pat on the arm. For a
second, Blair just let himself close his eyes and pretend that Ventriss hadn't happened, that the incident at the dumpster and in Mexico and with Alex... that none of it had happened and he and Jim were still best friends. It was a nice fantasy.

"I'll give you two some time," Dr. Fraiser said before she gave Blair a pat on the leg and then left, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

Blair looked up at Jim, hoping for an explanation. His throat still hurt, and he didn't want to have to play twenty questions with a silent and stoic Jim, but this looked like his old friend Jim, so maybe he wouldn't have to.

"So?" Blair prompted him.

"You're really back this time, huh? No more checking out for days at a time?" Jim asked, and Blair could hear the fear in Jim's words. He frowned, but then Jim reached over and ruffled his hair. "So, it looks like O'Neill knows all about Sentinels or people with P-chad, whichever you want to call it. He sent some of your work over to Bethesda, and you stirred up a hornet's nest over there. Dr. Dubois was ready to write you off as a quack, but he came here, and I showed him a couple of tricks. I think he was impressed."

Blair stopped breathing. Jim had not only talked to someone, but demonstrated his abilities? Okay, this was not Jim. This was an impostor and Blair needed to find the pod before the aliens took over the rest of the world.

"It isn't that surprising," Jim said gruffly, as though he had read Blair's mind. "Okay, so I didn't like them poking around, but I would rather have them poke around me than call you a quack." Jim's mouth twisted in disgust. "That was actually the nicest word Dr. Dubois used."

Daniel appeared at the curtain, or through the curtain, rather. Blair's eyes went wide, but Daniel held up a finger to his lips to quiet him. "Blair, don't react to me or they'll sedate you again. Just nod if you still see me."

Blair nodded.

"Doing the tests for Dubois wasn't as bad as doing your tests," Jim mused. "At least he didn't make me drink sour milk."

"I didn't--" Blair stopped, distracted by the sight of Daniel walking through Jim to reach a spot near Blair's head. "Jim, I'm really tired of being hooked up to all this," Blair said, raising his left arm. It was strapped to a board with a dozen different lines coming off it. On top of that, he had sensors on his chest and head and a tube down his nose.

"No, Chief. You are not taking that stuff off," Jim said, his voice making it very clear that he was on Fraiser's side in this battle.

"I totally get that," Blair hurried to say. "Just, maybe you could talk her into letting me eat on my own. Maybe some Jello or pudding? I really want something in my stomach, you know?" Blair hated lying to Jim. Actually, he wasn't lying as much as he wasn't mentioning the ghost in the room, but it didn't feel good.

Jim stared at him strangely for several seconds, "Please?" Blair pleaded. "Come on, man. Use your powers of persuasion on her. Charm her. She looks scary, and you're good with scary women."

Jim still didn't look convinced, but Blair gave him the best puppy expression he could manage. For a second, Blair thought it wasn't going to work, but then Jim sighed and shook his head. "I'll try. No
promises, though," he said as he headed out after Fraiser. Blair waited until Jim was gone and then he looked right at Daniel, waving his right hand to try and get Daniel talking.

"Oh, he'll hear if you talk, won't he?" Daniel asked after a few long seconds of staring at Blair's hand like it was spastic or something. Blair glared. "And he'll get Janet back in here." Daniel walked to the end of his bed. "Got it. God, how do you live with someone who can hear everything you do?"

Blair thought about that for a second and then shrugged. It wasn't like he really worried about it most of the time. Right now, he was more interested in other things. He poked a finger toward Daniel.

"My invisible problem," Daniel said, nodding his head. "The team was on P7X-377 when I found a crystal skull." Blair's eyebrows went up. Crystal skulls were German artifacts used to trick collectors in the 1800's into believing they were buying mystical Mayan artifacts. Why would one be on another planet? And sadly, he couldn't even ask because Jim would be all over him if he started talking to the air. "There was a burst of radiation, and now no one seems to be able to see me. Well, that's not technically true," Daniel said with a frown. "You can see me, and Teal'c knew I was near, but I couldn't communicate with him."

Blair had no answer for that at all. Jim accused him of having a Sandburg zone, but this was... this was too weird even for him.

"The skull was a perfect copy of the Ballard skull, which is a little odd since Nicholas Ballard is my grandfather. So, the team went to find him since as far as they're concerned, I vanished into thin air. And considering that he's in a psychiatric hospital, I'm not expecting much on that front. I was hoping you could talk to Jack for me, tell him that I'm here." Daniel looked at Blair hopefully. Hopefully Jim had been gone long enough to get out of range, so Blair took a chance and whispered softly to Daniel, "What do you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him I think I'm out of phase or in another dimension or something. Tell him that asking Robert Rothman to try and figure out how the skull works is one of the stupidest plans he's ever tried, and that includes the time he blew up the ships we were riding on. Robert. Like Robert could figure out how a crystal skull could make a person vanish." Daniel made a very unhappy noise.

"He's no good?" Blair guessed.

"He's not imaginative," Daniel said with frustration.

"Oh. Not good," Blair agreed. People who weren't imaginative made great research assistants, and they were probably better at the long, grinding work of replication studies, but they weren't going to ever break new ground scientifically.

"To say the least," Daniel agreed with a sigh as he sank into the seat Jim had vacated. "If he wants an archeologist from my team to look at the artifact, he should ask Nyan. At least he has a little imagination."

Blair tried to place the nationality of such an unusual name. Japanese maybe. "Nyan?"

"He emigrated here from another planet. Jack's... just a little xenophobic," Daniel said with a shrug. "But at least Nyan would have remembered the first rule of archeology."

"Study the artifact in its original position?" Blair guessed. He hadn't specialized in archeology, but he'd taken enough of the classes during his undergrad years to at least know the rules that, when broken, caused archeologists to cringe and swear in multiple languages. He'd even broken that rule at a dig site when he was nineteen, and he could still remember every name the dig supervisor had
called him. He'd learned a few new curse words that day. Some good ones, too.

Daniel surged up from the chair and threw his hands in the air. "Exactly! See! That is not a hard rule to figure out, but Robert is in there staring at the skull by itself. Artifacts out of context do not tell us anything. Well, not as much, anyway."

"I'm guessing that it was with other artifacts."

"An altar."

Blair cringed. "Oh man, the altar has to be at least as important as the skull."

"Which is what I would like to tell Jack. If I could talk to him. If he didn't just head home instead of pulling an all-nighter trying to save me." Daniel was pacing, his arms across his stomach.

Blair frowned. Maybe it was the drugs, but that last part didn't make a whole lot of sense to him. "I thought you couldn't talk to him."

"I can't," Daniel said. He sank back down into the chair, and Blair suddenly wondered why Daniel could sit in a seat but he went right through a curtain. Obviously the Jackson zone was stranger than the Sandburg zone.

"So, you need an archeologist to solve the problem, and Jack can't hear you, but he's supposed to... do what exactly?" Blair asked.

"Sit around and worry, that'd be a nice start," Daniel said wearily, and Blair suddenly understood. Daniel wanted some sort of evidence that his absence bothered the team. Blair got that. Actually, he got that way too much. When he was in the hospital after Alex had tried to kill him... after she *had* killed him... he had just wanted to be with Jim. The fact that Jim could go off on a mission—the fact that Jim didn't even need Blair, that hurt more than the pain of water filling his lungs.

"I hear you," Blair said wearily. "Sometimes having these big bad soldier types around is tough on the ego." Blair wanted so much to feel like Jim needed him, but waking up to have a nurse give him a message had pretty much destroyed his illusions. Jim was the soldier, the cop, the Sentinel. Blair was the sidekick. And everyone knows that Batman kept right on fighting crime after Robin got killed.

"Ignore me, I'm just having a really shitty week." Daniel gave him a sheepish grin.

"Yeah, me too. I think. I wasn't awake for most of it," Blair offered with a shrug. Daniel laughed.

"Your week was better than Ellison's. I hear Teal'c and Sam have been taking turns glaring at him. At least, they were until I disappeared."

"Oh man. He's going to..." Blair stopped. "Wait, he's not in a bad mood. Usually when people get in his face, he turns a little cranky."

"A little? If he's anything like Jack, he's more than a little cranky. Entire planets avoid Jack after he has to play nice with the Tok'ra."

"You should see Jim clear out the bullpen." Blair thought about that for a second. "Okay, compared to planets running in fear, clearing out a bullpen doesn't seem all that impressive."

"They're asses." Daniel stared out into space.
"Yeah, kinda," Blair agreed. "But Jim's still here living in a hospital bed for me." He poked a thumb toward the second bed where Jim had set up camp. "Of course, when I was in the hospital after my little bout of getting dead, he went running off to Mexico. I don't think I’m helping," Blair finally admitted.

"Neither one of them makes a lot of sense," Daniel agreed.

"Yeah, but at least yours is off talking to your crazy grandfather. It's a stupid plan, but he's doing something. That has to count."

"Probably." Daniel didn't sound all that convincing. "No, you're right, it does." Daniel stretched his legs out in front of him. "Of course, I need him here since I finally found a way to communicate with the rest of the world, but since when does Jack ever care about where I need him to be? Which is, again, unfair."

"Man, it sounds like you just need to unload."

"I'm not usually this neurotic. That's more Nick's end of the family." Daniel stared down at the floor, and Blair wished he could reach out and touch him, offer a pat on the shoulder or a quick slap on the back. He couldn't.

"Man, you are not sounding neurotic, just tired. I totally understand that."

Daniel looked up, a grin twisting the edges of his mouth. "Yeah, I heard about that—working full time at the police department and at the university and doing your research, all when you had pneumonia. When we had our briefing over your P-chad research, everyone from General Hammond on down were glaring death at Ellison. At least when I work eighteen hour days, I'm getting paid for it. A consultant with a PhD makes a pretty good living in the military."

"Whatever," Blair dismissed the whole conversation. Money really wasn't a topic that he wanted to discuss right now. He was still trying to figure out how he was going to pay for medical care and rent.

"Blair?" Jim stood next to the curtain, one hand still fisted around the white fabric, and the other holding a dish of blue Jello. "Chief, are you feeling alright?"

"Jim." Blair looked from Jim to Daniel. "Um, I can explain this," he hurried to say. He figured he'd better talk fast because Jim was looking at him like Blair had just lost his mind.

21. Chapter Twenty-one

Jim was sitting in the chair again, and Blair could see the doubt and the hesitation crawling over Jim's features like bugs, but instead of striking out and calling Blair insane, he just tightened his jaw more and listened as Blair finished his story.

"I'm not imagining this," Blair said firmly. Part of him wanted to just curl up and pretend to be asleep, pretend that Daniel was a drug-induced hallucination, but he knew better. Daniel needed him, and no matter how hard it was, Blair was not leaving the man hanging. Or in his case floating might be the better word.

"He's invisible?"
"And Teal'c has an alien in his stomach," Blair shot back, perfectly willing to match sarcasm for sarcasm. The only reaction in Jim was a tightening of his jaw. Blair could practically feel the man struggle to control a less-than-supportive reaction.

"Okay." Jim stopped, like he didn't know what else to say. But then he'd already run out of nicely worded suggestions that Blair might be reacting to the medicine or having more of those weird hallucinations where his brain hadn't woken up with his body, so he was pretty much out of explanations that he *wanted* to be true. Reaching up, he scrubbed his hand over his face. "Okay," he repeated, but this time, it actually sounded like Jim was buying it.

"We need to talk to O'Neill," Blair said, fully expecting an explosion at that name. If anything, Jim loosened up.

Daniel must have noticed, too, because he offered an explanation. "Jack's the only one who hasn't given Ellison grief. He seems to think that Ellison is an ass, but he's just a normal ass trying to survive a difficult situation. Sam and Teal'c aren't buying it, though." Daniel shrugged as though it didn't matter to him what people thought of Jim.

"What do you mean giving him grief?" Blair asked. Jim flinched when, from his point of view, Blair started talking to the air.

"I think the phrase ya'mat'te'ra korami comes closest to what they've been giving him." Daniel almost looked pleased at that, and Blair glared at him. Jim had a hard enough time with his senses and now with IA breathing down his neck; he didn't need any more grief.

"Giving who grief?" Jim asked. It was a reasonable enough question since he was only hearing half the conversation.

"Which means?" Blair asked, totally ignoring Jim despite the fact that Jim's jaw was getting dangerously tight.

"Teal'c and Sam have both told him in blunt terms that he's an ass and that the way he treats you and everyone else borders on abusive."

"Whoa!" Blair practically yelled, and Jim startled in his seat.

"It's true!" Daniel said, holding his hands up defensively. "I understand that he's your friend, and I see why you're defending him because I've defended Jack even when he's done some pretty stupid and shitty stuff. However, you can't claim you haven't noticed."

"He's not perfect," Blair admitted. Jim's head swiveled as he obviously dialed up on hearing.

"Not perfect?" Daniel asked incredulously. "I've heard the Sierra Verde stories. Jack and Kelso have been talking ever since you got shot, and I have heard more than I wanted to know about that little trip to Sierra Verde."

"We both made mistakes with Alex Barnes." Blair growled the words, and Jim's back went iron stiff.

"What about Alex?" Jim demanded. "Jackson, if you plan on becoming corporeal again, drop it."

Blair wasn't sure if it was a step forward or back that Jim was threatening Daniel. At least it implied that Jim actually did believe that Daniel was there.

"What mistakes did you make?" Daniel asked Blair, ignoring Jim totally.
"I didn't tell Jim that there was another Sentinel in town. We could have handled this if I'd told him."

"But what about your ethical requirement to keep Barnes' test result confidential?" Daniel demanded. "As much as Jim deserved confidentiality from her, she deserved confidentiality from him. You had an obligation to both your test subjects." Blair flinched because that had entered his thoughts at the time. But he'd already decided that Jim's friendship was worth more than Alex's confidentiality, at least until he came home and found Jim shoving a gun in his face and freaking out. At that point, a good healthy dose of self-preservation had made him just keep his mouth shut. Wasn't that ironic? He thought that he could keep Jim from freaking out any more than he already was by keeping Alex away from him, and it turned out that Alex was the source of all the freaking out.

"Jim is my primary obligation," Blair said slowly, careful to make sure that Daniel and Jim both heard him clearly. "I should have told him."

Daniel raised his eyebrows. "So, if you didn't, that makes you responsible for his bizarre behavior? Blair, that doesn't sound healthy."

"Oh, and you're just a paragon of mental health," Blair struck back. The second he said it, he wished he hadn't. Daniel's expression just closed down, no emotion at all leaked from around the blank mask that was his face. His arms closed around his stomach, as though trying to physically protect himself from the words. Blair flinched from the guilt that immediately rose up.

"I have issues," Daniel said softly. "It hurts like hell that I've given everything to this program and Jack still doesn't trust me to keep a secret when he goes undercover. He doesn't even trust my assessment of my own team. He gives the skull to Robert." Daniel made a disgusted noise. "But the fact that I have issues doesn't change the fact that you do, too."

"Chief?" Jim reached over and caught Blair's hand, rubbing it between his palms. "It's okay. The second O'Neill is back on base, I'll get him for you," he promised.

Blair closed his eyes and for a half second, he just wanted to give up. Sleep called to him, promised him a peace of mind that he couldn't find when he was awake anymore, but that was the trap. Every time he meditated, he could feel that trap closing around him. Sleep... meditation... death... they were creeping closer every time he closed his eyes. And part of him didn't care. He could feel that woman with the lights pulling at him, promising a peace that he had lost years ago. The bigger part of him, though, thought he was just being a coward for trying to avoid his problems.

"It wasn't like Jim didn't have a reason to be cranky, but I do know that he was..." Blair stopped and glanced over at Jim. He didn't want to say too much; he didn't want to bring back the less-friendly version of Jim that he'd learned to tiptoe around.

Jim caught one of his hands, holding it tightly. "I was an ass, Chief. No one down at the station was willing to say it, but trust me, I've heard it enough in the last three weeks to get the point. Fuck, I read my own report from after that incident with Ventriss and O'Neill, and I want to slap the shit out of myself." Jim sounded so damn serious, and Blair hated the guilt he could feel clinging to Jim's words.

"Oh man, I did plenty of shit to help inspire the assholiness," Blair quickly assured Jim. Jim did not handle failure well, and the last thing Blair needed was for Jim to go off into a guilt-inspired funk.

"You are not responsible for his inability to be human," Daniel insisted mulishly.

"You are seriously getting on my last nerve," Blair warned Daniel.
"He should have already worn it out," Daniel shot right back, poking a finger toward Jim.

"You mean the way O'Neill has worn yours out?" Blair demanded. Daniel gave him a look that would have withered iron.

The fight might have kept going, except Dr. Fraiser stuck her head in through the curtain. "Blair, are you alright?"

"Fine," Blair snapped. He was too tired to get this angry, and he could feel the fury draining him. But he still couldn't let it go. It was like he'd lost his balance and no matter how much he flailed his arms, he couldn't find it again.

Both her eyebrows went up. "Would that be why your blood pressure is spiking?" she demanded. Shoving the white curtain back, she pinned Blair with a sharp look that dared him to just try and lie to her again.

"He's seeing Dr. Jackson," Jim said.

"Traitor," Blair hissed in his direction.

"Chief, if this is real, you shouldn't mind her knowing, and if this is a hallucination, Janet needs to know."

Blair settled for glaring at Jim. The return of the old Jim obviously meant the return of the Mother Hen traits as well. For all his aggravation, Blair had to admit that he was a little relieved.

"You're seeing Daniel?" Dr. Fraiser asked. Blair nodded wearily, fully expecting to get subjected to a wide range of brain scans. "Ask him who the newest hire in his department is," she asked instead.

"Nyan," Daniel immediately answered.

"The guy from the other planet? The archeologist?" Blair asked.

"Yep. From P2X-416," Daniel answered with a nod.

"Cool. But man, don't they have their own name for their planet, something that doesn't involve P's and X's? I mean, I know you archeologists love your numerical designations, but seriously, it's their home."

Daniel had the grace to blush. "Nyan's people call their country Bedrosia."

"Bedrosia," Blair said, rolling the name in his mouth. He looked up and Dr. Fraiser was staring at him with wide eyes, her eyebrows raised high.

"Daniel?" she asked, now looking around the room, her eyes searching the corners and shadows. "I need to go inform the general. Daniel, wait right here," Dr. Fraiser said, and then she was gone, her footsteps clicking sharply against the tile. Jim had stood up the moment Dr. Fraiser came in and now he had a wide-eyed look of shock on his face.

"Chief, this is a general who's coming. Just... just don't piss him off, okay?" Jim asked, and Blair couldn't contain a snort. He wasn't generally the one who pissed people off. For half a second, Jim frowned at him, and then his face was again carefully neutral. That bothered Blair. If Jim were totally back to the old him, he would have retaliated with a few snarky comments of his own, but obviously things weren't all that right between them yet.
"Ignore Ellison," Daniel said. He moved to the far side of the room where a soldier stood next to the door to the hall. "General Hammond's a good man, and if he puts up with Jack, he's a patient one. Just tell him that I want Nyan working on the crystal skull."

"Nyan, crystal skull, check," Blair agreed before yawning so widely that it actually made his eyes water.

"Oh, and if you notice, Janet's reaction—that's how your partner should have reacted. Skepticism is one thing, but he practically made you beg him to believe you," Daniel said, but his voice was so soft that Blair wasn't sure if Daniel meant for him to hear them.

"Whatever." Blair dismissed the whole mess. Yeah, Jim had spent a lot of time trying to find an explanation that sounded more reasonable than invisible people, but he hadn't denied anything.


"Bite me," Blair suggested. It wasn't the most mature response, but he was seriously sick of listening to Daniel rip on Jim. Yeah, Jim might have a few issues, but he was a good man who deserved better than having people give him shit as if everything was his fault.

"Don't let him get to you, Chief," Jim suggested. He patted Blair's leg.

"He has no right to suggest that you..." Blair stopped and looked up at Jim. He so did not want to cause trouble between Jim and Daniel.

"That I was acting like an ass? I told you, Chief, I already figured that one out on my own."

"No way," Blair said sharply. "Man, your instincts were all over the place, and then O'Neill came in and started playing alpha dog games, so you are not taking the blame for all this. Oh shit. Ventriss. What happened to Ventriss?" Blair asked. The second he asked, he knew the answer. Jim's face just shut down. "Fuck. He got away, didn't he?"

"Not for long, Chief. His father cut him off from the money, and he's not used to living on a Wal-Mart budget. We'll get him."

Blair closed his eyes and silently cursed the universe. It hated him. That was the only explanation. Jim tightened his fingers around Blair's leg, a silent reassurance that he was still there, while Blair struggled with his own frustration and anger. His karma was getting to be a scary thing because he so wanted to see Ventriss flayed alive and left for the ants. Jerk.

"Mr. Sandburg?" a deep voice asked. Blair opened his eyes and found an older, bald man looking down at him curiously.

"General," Jim said respectfully. He was standing stiffly at Blair's side, and for half a second, Blair thought he might salute the older man.

"Detective Ellison," the general said, nodding his head in Jim's direction. "So, Mr. Sandburg, I hear you've found our missing archeologist."

"Not missing as much as... um... invisible." Blair waited for the look of disbelief, but General Hammond actually looked relieved.

"Is he here now?"

"Right by the door," Blair confirmed.
"Blair, tell him I want Nyan on the case. And tell him that the context the skull was found in is at least as significant as the skull itself."

"Is he alright?" General Hammond asked, his eyes going to the door.

"He's fine," Blair answered quickly. "But he doesn't want Robert studying the skull. He says Nyan is his best archeologist."

"Nyan?" The general turned and looked at Blair in surprise.

"He would have known in a second that the area where the skull was found was just as important as the skull. Apparently Robert is a little on the... um... unimaginative... side with his research. Nyan is his best archeologist." Blair yawned.

"Chief, maybe you should worry about all this later," Jim said softly.

Blair waved Jim off. He was tired, but he needed to say this. "O'Neill is an untrusting, xenophobic ass who doesn't trust Daniel's judgment."

Daniel exploded. "What! No. No, you did not just say that. When I get my body back I'm going to..." he spluttered for a second. "I'm going to dump all your notes into one big pile. You'll be spending months trying to sort the data."

"Yeah, yeah, threat, threat," Blair said, holding up a hand and doing the 'talk-talk' thing with his fingers.

"Dr. Jackson is threatening you?" General Hammond asked, and he was starting to look more than a little concerned.

"He's threatening my research notes. Man, he's willing to tell me all about Jim's faults, but let someone point out that O'Neill is treating him like an idiot who doesn't know his own staff, and he just gets all red in the face and splutters."

Daniel wasn't spluttering now. He was saying all sorts of things that Blair didn't understand, but from the tone of voice, he was guessing that Daniel was cursing out many generations of his family.

"And he swears in weird languages," Blair added.

"That he does, son," General Hammond agreed. Blair was getting sleepy, but he was almost willing to swear that the general was smiling.

Dr. Fraiser stepped close to Blair's bed. "Sir, Blair is still under the influence of medication."

"I had noticed, doctor," General Hammond agreed, and now Blair was totally sure that the man was smiling at him... or laughing at him.

"Jack should trust Daniel's judgment, but he didn't give the crystal skull to Nyan, and Nyan would have known to look at the skull and the altar together," Blair explained. He closed his eyes. He was just so tired all of a sudden. "And Jack should have told Daniel that he was going undercover. They've been together longer than anyone else on the team, and Jack owed him that. Daniel proved himself. But Jack still doesn't trust him when he says he knows how to handle things like crazy women with killer viruses."

"It sounds like Daniel has been quite talkative," Hammond commented.
"I wasn't that talkative," Daniel objected, but Blair didn't really care to keep up with the rest of the conversation from there because he was watching the lady with the light dancing around her face.

"Her path is only one choice," Incacha said, and either Blair had suddenly learned Quechan or Incacha had suddenly learned English. He supposed it didn't matter in your dreams—dreams weren't supposed to make sense.

22. Chapter Twenty-two

Blair blinked. He was so sick of waking up in this hospital bed. Jim was stretched out on his own bed, one knee bent to support a book.

"Hey, Chief. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Blair admitted with a frown.

"That's what you get for asking me to lower the drug dosages as quickly as possible." Dr. Fraiser appeared like magic, shoving back the curtain.

"Sadist," Blair teased. She smiled brightly.

"Oh hon, now shouldn't you get to know me a little better before commenting on my sexual proclivities?" She smiled even brighter, but her eyes scanned the various machines and tubes that surrounded Blair. "Now, are you in too much pain?"

Blair stopped and did a self-assessment. His stomach ached and his head throbbed, but it wasn't too bad. "Nothing a little willow bark tea wouldn't solve," Blair said hopefully.

"I think we'll stick with morphine for a while, yet," Dr. Fraiser said. "But we've lowered the dosage so that you'll be a little more clear-headed. Not that we weren't all amused by you on morphine. It was about time someone told Colonel O'Neill a few truths."

Blair flinched as that memory returned. Oh yeah, he'd opened his big, fat mouth way too wide. "Daniel?" Blair asked, looking around.

"It looks like you aren't the only one who sees invisible people." Jim dropped his book on the bed and came to Blair's side. "O'Neill brought Daniel's grandfather back from the institution, and apparently he sees invisible people, too."

"He does?" Blair frowned. That didn't make a lot of sense to him. Okay, if he was being totally honest with himself, he was feeling a little jealous of Daniel's grandfather. For once, he'd been the one with the special power, only now, not so much. And when he started feeling jealous of the guy from the nut house, he really did need to do a little cleaning out of the karma closets.

"Yep. He'd seen them before or something. So, O'Neill and the team took the old guy through, and apparently the aliens who had turned Daniel invisible turned him back to normal."

Dr. Fraiser stopped playing with Blair's tubes and wires. "You hear a lot for a man who doesn't leave the infirmary. And here I thought Blair was exaggerating your range."

Jim didn't answer, but then Blair didn't expect him to. Jim might have shown off a few Sentinel tricks
to make the Bethesda doctors happy, but the man was so not ready to take out any billboards.

"So, Daniel's grandfather played translator. That's good." Blair ran a thumb across his blanket. These people had to have the most interesting military reports on the face of the earth. On the face of any planet, actually. Blair was still having a little trouble wrapping his brain around that one.

"He actually ended up staying on the planet. But if I know O'Neill, he would've had a lot of trouble believing Nick if you hadn't already seen Daniel," Dr. Fraiser offered.

"So, any chance I can do something really exciting today like pee on my own or eat or get pushed around in a wheelchair?" Blair asked hopefully.

Dr. Fraiser gave him an indulgent look. "I'm starting to think you don't like my company."

"Oh man, no way. I never turn down the company of a beautiful woman. But absence makes the heart grow fonder," Blair said with a smile. Dr. Fraiser shook her head.

"Give it up, Chief. She makes that Nurse Ratched you dated look like an absolute pushover." Jim sat on the edge of Blair's bed, and Blair had to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing Jim's leg. He had a weird feeling like this old version of Jim was going to vanish at any time.

"Oh, I don't know. I have a secret escape route or two I might share," a new voice offered. Blair looked up to see O'Neill leaning against the door. With a nod, he sent the guard out into the hallway.

"Colonel," Dr. Fraiser said with all the friendliness of a tarantula. "If you encourage him to get out of bed, I'm going to find an entire series of vaccinations that you need to have redone. And I have the needle waiting with your name on it."

"Chocolate pudding is as deviant as I plan on being," O'Neill told her, holding up a dish of pudding. Dr. Fraiser stood there with her arms crossed for a second before she shook her head.

"Food, give it," Blair demanded. The feeding tube was gone, so logically the doctor did plan on letting him eat again, but he wanted food now, before she could change her mind and decide he was too sick—or before he could fall asleep. He was so totally sick of being asleep.

"Pushy little shit, isn't he?" O'Neill asked with a smile as he offered the dish.

"Yes," Jim immediately agreed. "So, what can we do for you colonel?"

"What? I can't just visit?" O'Neill leaned against the end of the bed and watched as Blair shoved a spoonful of chocolate in his mouth.

"If you bring food or escape routes, yes," Blair said just as soon as he swallowed. Heaven. "But that doesn't change the fact that you are so on the shit list." Blair poked the plastic spoon at O'Neill before he dug in for another bite.

"I'm on the shit list?" O'Neill demanded with more than a little amusement. "I'm not the one who got someone else's geek all worked up. Besides, you owe me for keeping Daniel away from your research notes. You should know better than to piss off an archeologist, Sandburg. The man has the patience to make revenge really work for him."
For half a second, Blair considered apologizing, but he was fairly sure he hadn't said anything that wasn't true. Oh, he'd said lots of stuff he shouldn't have, but he was almost positive it was true stuff. But then the best defense was a good offense; he'd learned that from Jim. Blair poked his spoon at O'Neill again. "Oh man. You take the cake. You're the one who's pissed all over that relationship, so if someone has to worry about Daniel and revenge, that would so be you."

"Yeah, but my paperwork is so disorganized, I wouldn't know if he raided it." O'Neill stopped and tilted his head as though thinking. "Actually, he may have already tried. It would explain why my personnel evaluations vanished." O'Neill shrugged.

"Colonel, what are you doing here?" Jim asked, and this time, he sounded not even a little amused.

For a second, O'Neill just looked at him. "Okay, let's play this straight. Sandburg, how did you find out about the undercover mission where I didn't tell Daniel about my cover?"

Blair felt the sudden chill in the room. "Um... I don't know. The guys in the warehouse might have talked about it."

"And the incident with Linea?" This time O'Neill crossed his arms, and Blair definitely felt the chill. Jim did too because he stood up at Blair's side, his hands clenched in fists.

"Who?"

O'Neill looked at him for a second as though trying to decide if Blair was just playing stupid. "The crazy lady with the virus. The one who I didn't trust Daniel to handle." It took Blair a second to remember those were his words from the last time he'd been awake.

"You're interrogating him?" Jim stepped up so that he was chest to chest with O'Neill, and if someone didn't do something, Blair was fully expecting to see fists flying. Unfortunately, the doc was gone and Blair did not think he was up for throwing himself between two alpha dogs trying to metaphorically pee on each other. "He's lying in a hospital bed because you pulled him into this crazy world of yours, and you're interrogating him?"

"I'm asking him, Detective. If I were interrogating him, you both would know the difference. I'm asking a friendly question." O'Neill held his palms up in a placating gesture, but Jim was so not into being placated.

"Friendly?" Jim sounded ready to break something.... probably O'Neill.

"Friendly," O'Neill repeated. "Look, I like Sandburg. He's got guts that I wish most of the scientists around here had. Sandburg and Daniel are a rarity, so I'm not looking to give him grief. Now you? I wouldn't mind ordering you to do eighty or ninety pushups."

"Whoa, hey, but there will be no ordering around, right?" Blair could hear his heart monitor suddenly ping along at a pretty fast clip.

"For crying out loud. I'm not the bad guy," O'Neill almost yelled. "I'm not interrogating you; I'm not trying to bully Ellison." He paused. "Okay, I might be trying to bully Ellison, but that's because I had a problem with his behavior in Cascade. It doesn't mean that I'm going to try and get his commission reactivated. I couldn't even if I wanted to..."

"Because he's a Sentinel." Blair watched as O'Neill rolled his eyes.

"Because he has P-chad. But you know, you and the Bethesda geeks can argue over that one. I don't care what you call it; the condition is too dangerous on the front lines where we work. I'm more
interested in the source of our little info leak when it comes to my relationship with Daniel." O'Neill took a couple of steps back, and Blair could see Jim inch forward as though he wanted to get back in the colonel's face. Instead, Jim retreated to Blair's side.

"It doesn't take a Sentinel to tell that Daniel's near a breaking point with you," Jim said, and he sounded entirely too smug.

"You mean, like the breaking point Sandburg was near with you? Of course, you tried to help that along by just about breaking his ankle, didn't you?" And O'Neill did smug just as good as Jim. It was a little creepy, actually.

"Man, I thought you two were getting along," Blair said with a frown.

Jim patted his arm. "Oh Chief, this one is giving me less grief than anyone else in this place. Even the lunch lady glares at me."

"Oh man." Blair didn't even know what else to say to that.

O'Neill wasn't going to get distracted, though. "I still need an answer, Sandburg. The general doesn't want anyone else in here, including the Bethesda egghead who came to talk dissertation, until we figure out where you've gotten your information on Daniel. Daniel insists that he didn't tell you most of what you managed to blurt out while stoned on morphine, so we have a leak somewhere."

"So, you'll keep him prisoner?" Jim demanded, and that was not a good tone of voice. O'Neill and Jim glared at each other for several seconds.

"I need to find out where he got the information. Blair—" O'Neill turned away from Jim and focused right on him. "How did you know that Daniel had been angry about me ignoring Nyan?"

"Easy, Daniel called you xenophobic," Blair pointed out. O'Neill made a face, but he didn't try to deny it.

"Okay, but where did you hear about my undercover mission?"

Blair frowned as he tried to remember. "Um, someone at the warehouse?" he guessed. O'Neill didn't look convinced.

"How did you know about Linea and her virus?" O'Neill looked at him with great expectation.

Blair opened his mouth, but then he closed it. How did he know? Looking up at Jim, he found Jim staring at him strangely.

"Chief?"

Blair struggled to retrieve a memory. Nothing. He just knew about her. "Oh man, I can't remember."

"Someone must have mentioned it to him. The NID were leaking classified material all over the place," Jim quickly interjected.

But Blair was already shaking his head. He couldn't remember a name or a face, but he remembered a presence standing beside him. He remembered a moment when he went from not knowing to understanding Daniel's frustration. He couldn't remember words, but he remembered that presence.

"It was a woman."

"A woman?" O'Neill demanded. "Who?"
Blair could almost hear a voice, but he couldn't find a name or a face or even a location to put with it. "She thinks you hurt Daniel," he said slowly and carefully, struggling to pull the memory out. "Sha're needed him. He should let go of need." Blair frowned, his memory like an itch at the back of his head. O'Neill was staring at him.

O'Neill took a step closer. "Who, Sandburg?"

Blair shook his head. "I don't know."

O'Neill stared at him for a second, and then rubbed a hand over his face. "Shit. You couldn't make this easy, could you?"

"Colonel?" Jim asked. The tone made the hairs at the back of Blair's neck stand on end.

"Ellison, there's something going on here. I'm not saying that anyone's at fault, but we need to figure out who's talking out of school."

"And until then, you're going to keep him isolated?"

"He's supposed to be sleeping anyway."

"He could be working with the doctor from Bethesda to get his dissertation together or calling his mother or checking in with his friends back home. He has a life." Jim's voice was sharp with anger.

"And I'll get him back to that life as soon as we can. The morphine is probably just clouding his memory."

"Guys," Blair said, but Jim and O'Neill were both pretty much ignoring him.

Jim took an aggressive step forward. "You're trying to convince us that you aren't the bad guy, but then you put Blair under orders to keep him isolated."

"Oh, not just him. I pretty much assume that anything he knows, he's told you, so both of you are under orders to stay away from all phones and outside contact." And that was O'Neill's smug voice.

"Guys..."

"You're a real asshole," Jim snarled.

"You know, if I weren't a mature person, I might say something like, 'It takes one to know one.' But I do understand your position, Ellison. I'm not trying to make this harder."

"Is anyone planning on listening to me at all?" Blair nearly shouted.

"Chief?" Jim finally turned to him.

"To get my dissertation together?" Blair asked. His brain had pretty much stopped at that part of the conversation.

Jim and O'Neill both looked at him oddly.

"The Bethesda doctors saw your research, Chief. That's why they came out to test me. Actually, they came out here to prove you were full of shit, but I think I convinced them to reconsider that." And now Jim sounded way more smug than O'Neill had. Blair was almost sorry he'd missed that show.

"But they're willing to take my research? I mean, I'm not even enrolled there."
"Sure you are," O'Neill said cheerfully. "The senses are classified material, you have top clearance, and you will be defending your dissertation at a military school where the material will remain classified. We need good people working on P-chad, Sandburg. You're the best, and even Daniel is impressed by your documentation, and this is coming from a man who would record how many steps it took to walk from the Stargate to the equator on every planet if I let him. The doctor from Bethesda just wants to talk about you adding a section where you compare Ellison to the more traditional P-chad patients and finalizing the formatting, and it looks like you're going to have a 'doctor' in front of your name faster than you thought. Of course one or two of those eggheads might hate you for poking holes in their theories, but they'll be hating Dr. Sandburg."

Jim smiled at Blair. "You deserve it, Chief. I should have encouraged you to publish before... but..."

Blair held up a hand to stop Jim. "Oh man, I hear you. You didn't want your privacy destroyed, and you so had a right to worry about that." Blair could feel hope like a bright light pulling at him. His dissertation. If he was being totally honest with himself, he'd just about given up on it. Alex had been his last chance to prove that Jim wasn't a fluke, and his relationship with Jim was so close that he had totally blown any objectivity if he wanted to do a single-subject dissertation. Years of work had pretty much gone out the window when he wasn't paying attention, and now he was getting it all back.

Jim smiled at him for a second before looking over at O'Neill. His smile quickly turned to a scowl. "I'm not worried about anything right now except O'Neill here keeping you from finishing."

"Oh for Pete's sake. He's in a hospital bed. Fraiser is an unforgiving ice queen when it comes to overworking patients, so she's not going to let you do the work here, anyway. This is not open for negotiation, Ellison. Teal'c agreed to sit in for a while, but until Sandburg remembers where he heard classified information, we need to keep an eye on him."

"Why?" Blair asked. "I mean, if I'm not talking to the outside world, then why would you have to keep an eye on me?"

"Good question." Jim crossed his arms and got that look on his face that usually made Simon pull him out of an interrogation room before he could hit someone.

"You were able to see Daniel when no one else could, right?" O'Neill asked. Blair frowned, but he nodded in agreement. "We already know there are races like the Re'tu that have other types of technology to hide their existence."

Blair hissed in a breath. "You think I saw someone else. You think someone was here, but no one else saw her." Blair looked over, and that possibility even made Jim look a little concerned.

O'Neill shrugged. "I think something strange is going on. We've swept the base, but until I know what brand of strangeness you're in the middle of, I think we need to keep a close eye on you and see if you start talking to other invisible people."

"Oh man. Okay, this is weird, even for me." Blair reached up to push his hair back from his face, trailing tubes as he moved.

"Welcome to the Stargate program, kid. Teal'c is going to keep you company for a while. Play nice, people." O'Neill backed up to the door and pulled it open. Teal'c was standing on the other side. He tilted his head to acknowledge those within, and Blair could hear Jim sigh in frustration. Unfortunately, there was no way they were going to win this fight. Besides, if Blair were perfectly honest, he didn't mind getting to spend a little time with... Blair tilted his head.
"Teal'c? That's your real name?"

"It is," the man Blair had known as Murray agreed. "It means strength."

"In alien," Jim added softly.

"Whoa. Oh yeah, the next time Jim accuses me of having a Sandburg zone just because I talk fast or get kidnapped a lot, I am so pointing out that there are stranger things in the universe," Blair said firmly. Teal'c almost smiled. Jim didn't.

23. Chapter Twenty-three

Teal'c was grateful to see that Blair Sandburg was both awake and happy to have his company. People sometimes reacted strongly to deception, and after seeing the recent conflict between Daniel and O'Neill, he had feared that his own deceit with Blair would lead to difficulties. O'Neill touched his arm briefly and then left the room.

Teal'c would have approached; however, Ellison still appeared agitated. Teal'c settled for walking to a spot near the curtain and waiting for Ellison to make some overture.

"Oh man, did it just get cold in here or is it me?" Blair asked.

"I can request additional bedding," Teal'c suggested.

"He's talking about the lack of love between us," Ellison said before he sat on the edge of his own bed. Teal'c did not understand why Ellison felt the need to point out that there was a lack of amorous feelings because, as far as he knew, no one had ever suspected or suggested there were.

"Man, is this you playing nice?" Blair asked his partner.

"Yes," Ellison quickly answered. "I haven't shot him for suggesting that I haven't taken care of my partner."

Teal'c noticed that Blair's hands fluttered as if he were disturbed by Ellison even mentioning the past. "Oh man, this is so not the time."

"Time is about all we do have," Ellison said with a sigh. A guard came into the room and took up position inside the door and Ellison went to the curtain and pulled it closed, allowing the three of them privacy. He then glared at Teal'c long enough to make it known that he wished for Teal'c to leave.

"Shit. Simon has to be climbing the wall by now," Blair sighed. It did not escape Teal'c's notice that Blair focused only on Ellison's problems. Blair had very successfully caused conflict and a clearing of the air between Daniel and O'Neill, but he appeared unwilling or unable to do the same for himself. Part of him wished to provide equally insightful truths for Blair to deal with. However, Teal'c was not certain that Blair would hear them from him. When Blair had spoken to General Hammond, the general had the authority to make O'Neill understand the depth of his fault. Teal'c did not have similar authority with Blair or Ellison.

"Until today, I was making daily reports, so he was handling it. IA is giving birth to kittens, but that wouldn't change if I were there," Ellison shrugged. "The only difference is that the military is
stonewalling them so I don't have sit in an interview room and stonewall them personally."

"That is so not helping." Blair glared at Ellison, but Ellison reached over and ruffled Blair's hair as though he had said something endearing. It was a gesture Teal'c had seen O'Neill use on Daniel, and one he had used on his own son. The relationship between Blair and Ellison had clearly shifted. When Bra'tac had left without speaking to Blair Sandburg about his shamanic path or Jim Ellison and his duty on the warrior's path, Teal'c had worried. Hopefully, his worry was misplaced.

"It's not hurting. I'm probably going to end up with a suspension, so I'd rather they just get it over. That way I could be using up suspension days instead of my leave."

"At least Simon won't be nagging you to take your leave this year," Blair said with a half-smile.

"At least I won't have you dragging me off to a monastery," Ellison countered. Teal'c was not surprised that a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah would seek the comfort of a place of reflection and religious contemplation, but he was surprised Ellison had accompanied the man. Blair smiled.

"Do you plan on just standing there all day?" Ellison asked. He turned to Teal'c, and the friendliness vanished from his tone and expression.

"Unless Blair begins speaking to a person or persons unknown, yes," Teal'c confirmed. Ellison stood, his arms tight against his body as though Teal'c had said something offensive.

"Chill. It's not like he has a choice, any more than we do," Blair said quietly. Jim stared at Teal'c for a second longer before slowly settling back onto the bed. Interesting. When Teal'c had seen them in Cascade, Ellison had appeared unwilling to take any action Blair requested, but now he appeared willing to even forgo his animosity. "Are you going to sit, because I don't mind telling you that it's feeling a little creepy having you look down on us," Blair suggested.

Visitors' chairs sat next to every bed, and Teal'c chose the one closest to Ellison's, assuming that the man would not want Teal'c near Blair. He still could not determine if his larval goa'uld disturbed Ellison or if the man simply disliked Teal'c. Teal'c had noticed that humans often developed an irrational dislike for anyone associated with an action which they found objectionable. Daniel still railed against all politicians even though it had been only Robert Kinsey who had attempted to shut down the program.

"So, you're from another planet?" Blair asked. Ellison tightened his lips into a thin line.

"I am," Teal'c agreed.

"Whoa. Seriously freaky. So, is there a significance to the tattoo?" Blair turned slightly onto his side, and Ellison got up and immediately helped to rearrange pillows and covers.

"It marks me as the First Prime, the head slave, to Apophis."

Teal'c was prepared for the wide-eyed stare from Blair. Humans often reacted so to news of Teal'c slavery.

"You were a slave?" Ellison asked, and for the first time, Teal'c noted that the man did not seem to direct anger toward him.

"I was. My people are used to incubate the immature goa'uld larva." Teal'c made no move toward his own primta, but Ellison's eyes went immediately to Teal'c's stomach.

"That's what I smell... what I hear moving around? An alien?" Ellison moved into a defensive
position in front of Blair, and Teal'c was grateful that he had chosen a chair far from Blair. Blair reached out and wrapped fingers around Jim's arm.

"It cannot hurt you."

For long seconds, the room was silent, all three frozen in place. Teal'c watched Ellison for signs of a coming attack, but Ellison seemed most concerned with remaining in position between Teal'c and Blair.

"Oh man, that must suck," Blair said softly, breaking the spell that had fallen over the three of them. "All that stuff about your people... they're slave to these aliens?"

"They are," Teal'c agreed. "My own tec'ma'te was here weeks ago, but he was unable to stay and discuss the path of the tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah because Apophis had attacked and caused great damage both among those who would follow him and those who would oppose him."

Teal'c watched as Blair tightened his fingers around Ellison's arm. Ellison reached over and placed his own palm on Blair's hand.

"That is... that is hard to wrap the mind around, you know?" Blair asked.

Teal'c considered that. He did not know why humans had difficulty understanding the concept of a world in slavery, but he knew that he often had trouble understanding a world that assumed the right of a person to be free. There were free worlds within the System Lord's realms, but these were worlds too worn down or too poor to bother with. And these free worlds lived under the shadow of slavery and oppression, aware that they could fall to a System Lord at any time. But in America, even sharing a planet with those who enslaved their fellow humans, the people often could not fathom a reality where slavery was far more common than freedom. Teal'c still was not sure if this self-delusion was a source of strength or weakness. It certainly gave many warriors a sense of inevitable victory, despite the fact that the System Lord and Jaffa armies outmatched them in both technology and numbers.

"Man, I guess you wouldn't know, huh?" Blair asked before Teal'c could frame a proper answer. "So, the tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah—alien shamans?"

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed, pleased to enter a conversation which he felt more sure of his answers. "My people believe that one must remove the primta, the goa'uld larva before attempting the shamanic path because the goa'uld will poison the unguarded mind, but the old or those who have not yet received their first goa'uld have travelled that path."

"The goa'uld, it's a snake," Ellison said, tilting his head and squinting at Teal'c. "But it has the same poison in it that the man I shot did. Is that the naquadah they were talking about?" he asked.

Teal'c nodded.

"So it's poisoned? Why not kill it?" Ellison asked.

Teal'c measured his answer, wishing to respect Ellison's request for information since this was the first time he had engaged in conversation that was not confrontational. "I have considered it, but as I have no immune system without the primta, I would have little time to complete any work I deemed worthy of my attention. Since I wish to see my people free and the false gods destroyed, I have decided not to."

"You'd die?" Blair asked, his voice small.

"I would."
"That's whole new levels of karma," he whispered.

"It's sick," Ellison disagreed. Teal'c could not disagree with either judgment. "And now we have that thing in here until you can remember where you heard that woman talking." Ellison looked toward Teal'c, but Teal'c noticed that the man's glare was reserved for Teal'c's stomach, and no longer appeared to encompass Teal'c himself. Blair's awakening appeared to have changed something significant. Either that or one of the others had spoken words harsh enough to reach Ellison as Blair Sandburg's words had reached O'Neill through the general.

"This might take a while," Blair said, great weariness in his voice.

"You have no idea from where this information came?"

"None. I would so say if I did because the not being able to call friends is going to drive Jim up a wall." Blair gave Ellison a sympathetic look, once more ignoring any discomfort to himself.

"And what of you?" Teal'c asked. He kept his gaze on Ellison, making it clear that Ellison should have been concerned about Blair, even if Blair showed no concern for himself. Surprisingly, Ellison returned his look with none of the aggression Teal'c had expected.

Blair gave a disbelieving snort. "Right now, I'm not sure how many I have. As long as the Chancellor is out to hang my hide on the wall, most of my friends are going to avoid me just out of a healthy sense of self-preservation. I guess since I'm transferring, it doesn't really matter, but..." he shrugged, and Teal'c could tell that it did matter.

"I'm sure that's not true, Chief," Ellison hurried to say. He moved to lean against Blair's bed once again.

"Oh, it totally is. Starving students learn to be practical."

Teal'c tried to understand that logic, but when one was most vulnerable, one had to rely most on alliance and friendship. While he was willing to respect Blair's judgment in most things, on this issue, Blair appeared to be confused. "To turn your back on a friend is not practical," Teal'c said firmly.

"When it means you keep the job that allows you to eat and pay tuition, it's more practical than you think. It's not cool, but it's practical." Blair sighed.

"We'll be fine, Chief," Jim said softly. Blair let his fingers tangle with Ellison's in a touch Teal'c would have thought romantic on another, but he did not know the path of the shaman well enough to make such judgments. Ellison was an anchor to this world, a point which prevented Blair from vanishing into the void where the shaman walked. Such a relationship was not to be defined by the relationships of those who sought a connection only in the visible world.

Blair turned to him with a smile. "Where you're from, it's a lot more important to have someone watch your back, isn't it?"

"It is," Teal'c agreed.

"You need that here, too." Ellison quickly added.

"Then why did you jeopardize your claim to Blair Sandburg's loyalty?" Teal'c asked curiously. If the animosity and confrontation had vanished, perhaps Ellison could explain this phenomenon which Teal'c could not understand. However, Ellison simply stared at him, his face void of any emotion at all.
"Man, total taboo territory," Blair said softly. Teal'c's realized that it was Blair who had taken offense, and then he nodded his head, accepting that Blair had placed such topics off limits.

"God I'm going to get glad to get out of this madhouse," Ellison offered.

"Oh man, yeah, but our lives are pretty fucked up right now," Blair answered. Teal'c frowned, not understanding how their lives were damaged in any way. Blair would get recognition for his work and Ellison was no longer acting like a ha'shak.

"Just get some sleep, Chief. We'll worry about this when you're more rested." Ellison rested his hand on Blair's shoulder, and it gave Teal'c great comfort that whatever anger Ellison might have, he was no longer making Blair the target for his ire. After reading Daniel's report on how Blair reacted during the kidnapping, Teal'c was greatly concerned that the young man still needed an anchor to his world or he would get lost in his own seeking.

Blair yawned, but he also argued against sleep. "That's all I've been doing... sleeping."

Teal'c thought about Blair's words for a minute. Even when Blair had been awake, as when General Hammond had visited, he had remained more in sleep than in wakefulness. O'Neill insisted that Daniel could not carry out his threat against Blair's research notes because Blair had been drugged and half-asleep and was, therefore, not responsible for his actions or his words. Personally, Teal'c suspected that O'Neill would have found another excuse to protect Blair's notes if the young man had not been so ill out of gratitude for opening a discussion that O'Neill had failed to elicit from Daniel earlier. Neither he nor O'Neill would have guessed that Daniel wished to be treated less like a warrior. For Teal'c being a warrior and being respected were largely related, but Daniel wished to walk his own path where he was not warrior or shaman, but had respect while still remaining within a status that came closest to what Teal'c thought of a cha'til. A respected cha'til. The logic was confusing, but at least now Daniel and O'Neill were talking to one another without the anger that had laced their words recently. However, if Blair had been sleeping for most of his time, could he not have come across the information while asleep?

Ellison was standing over Blair, watching him with some great emotion in his eyes that Teal'c could not fully understand. He cleared his throat, waiting until Ellison looked over at him. "My people believe that a shaman may gain knowledge through dreams and meditation. Could you have learned this information while sleeping or meditating?" he asked Blair.

"While sleeping?" Jim interrupted.

Blair made a little snort. "You and spiritual things are really not on good terms," he said with a tone that suggested fondness for another's shortcomings. "But I have to agree with Jim on this one. Dreams are the brain's way of rehearsing behavior learned during the day. No way could I just make up classified information. Trust me, after seeing the weird shit you guys have around here, my imagination is not that good."

"Dreams involve neural activity," Teal'c said calmly.

"They're dreams," Ellison said curtly, his temper clearly fraying.

"Precisely," Teal'c said, intentionally misunderstanding Ellison to avoid conflict with him. Let the man wonder how to explain a truth that Teal'c already understood. Teal'c focused on Blair, standing up so that he might make eye contact with the man. However, Blair was not paying attention. Blair's eyes had lost their focus, and the machine that measured his heart steadily speeded up.

"Blair?" Jim asked, grabbing Blair's hand.
A nurse appeared at the curtain. "Is there a problem?"

"It was a woman," Blair said slowly. The nurse looked at Blair with great confusion.

"Call O'Neill," Teal'c said quietly, not wishing to disturb Blair's returning memory. The nurse turned and vanished.

Jim was now sitting on the edge of Blair's bed. "Who? You're not making sense, Chief."

"She told me that Daniel was unhappy. She wanted to teach him to be happier, but the aliens interrupted them."

"Who?" Ellison repeated. "Teal'c, is any of this making sense to you?"

"I have sent for O'Neill." Teal'c was unwilling to say more, especially since he did not understand her motivation for seeking contact with Blair. While Daniel believed in the inherent goodness of all they met, including Oma Desala, Teal'c found himself concerned with the more practical and cynical realities of meeting new beings. Bra'tac had believed her to be the great tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah of Jaffa legend, but Teal'c still found himself wondering why the woman had taken Sha're's child and why she had shown such interest in Daniel. If he were O'Neill, he might even comment on the inherent foolishness of believing in the goodness of any woman who showed interest in Daniel. The man did attract women who would make the gods themselves quake in fear.

Blair was shaking his head slowly, a look of great confusion on his face. "This woman who had light all around her, she was in my dreams." Teal'c straightened up, not sure what he could do to protect Blair Sandburg from such a powerful creature.

Ellison, however, still did not believe. "Chief, morphine was in your dreams."

"Oh man, don't I know it. And I'm writing off the talking soda bottle as total morphine-induced weirdness, but the woman was there."

"Maybe you heard some nurses talking when you were asleep. The brain could have created a fantasy around that, but O'Neill needs to know which nurses have loose lips." Jim looked at Blair, clearly begging the man to accept that as the most reasonable explanation. Teal'c frowned at the evidence that Ellison still did not understand the nature of those who walked the path of the shaman.

Shaking his head, Blair turned away from them.

"Chief?" Ellison walked to the other side of the bed so that he would, again, be in Blair's sight, but Blair was staring off at nothing, his breathing slowing.

The door to the infirmary opened. "That was fast. What'da we have, kids?" O'Neill asked cheerfully.

"I believe Oma Desala has spoken to Blair," Teal'c offered without waiting for Ellison or Blair to explain the young man's great distress. O'Neill stopped mid-stride, his face registering first shock and then a weary resignation.

"Who is that?" Ellison demanded. Teal'c noted that for all Ellison's anger, his hand was resting on Blair's arm, making it very clear that while he was unhappy, he would stand by Blair.

"Aw, crap." O'Neill ran his hand over his short hair. "You can't just overhear some chatter, no, you have to talk to an ascended spirit from another fucking plane of existence. Sandburg, heal fast. Between you and Danny, I'm turning gray way faster than I should. I'm starting to think you two should be separated by at least ten miles at all times."
"Colonel?" Jim asked. He left Blair's side to stand at the end of the bed, right between O'Neill and Blair. Teal'c remembered how Blair had once described Ellison as a Mother Hen and had discussed his overdeveloped sense of protectiveness in his papers. At the time, Teal'c believed Blair Sandburg had written what he wished to be true rather than the truth. However, right now, Ellison appeared ready to enter battle with anyone in order to defend Blair.

O'Neill sighed. "She's a being who helps people ascend. This is Daniel's shtick, not mine. Personally, the only part I care about is that these ascended beings can burn a man to a crisp without a weapon."

Blair flinched when Ellison grabbed Blair's ankle. Teal'c stepped forward to remind Ellison to show greater caution, but Ellison's fingers immediately loosened. "How do we stop her?" he asked, emotion buried under a need to act. It was a familiar emotion to Teal'c, one that he had seen on O'Neill's face a great many times. It did not denote the lack of emotion that one might assume from a cursory examination, but an overpowering emotion hidden behind the need to act.

"Good question. If I figure that out, I'll let you know," O'Neill said. His words caused Ellison to tense up even more. "Danny insists she's one of the good guys—that she would never hurt anyone because she's ascended into some plane of higher happiness where all the good little hippies go when they die."

Blair opened his mouth to say something unhappy, but Ellison tightened his hand on Blair's leg.

"However, she's not supposed to be on this planet at all. I'll need to tell the general," O'Neill finished.

"She contacted Blair Sandburg through a dream. A shaman may travel without his body in dreams, so she is not necessarily on this planet." Jim and O'Neill both stared at Teal'c as if he had just suggested that the world should rotate backwards. However, Teal'c knew that his words were the truth. "Is that not true, Blair Sandburg?"

Blair stared at him, his mouth open and his face slowly darkening with a blush as Ellison and O'Neill turned to look at him.

"Sir?" a new voice asked. Teal'c looked over to see Major Carter and Daniel standing just inside the door. "Did Blair remember something?" Carter asked.

"Oh man, I'm so sorry, Daniel," Blair quickly offered, his blush deepening. Daniel blushed himself, ducking his head. He shrugged as though Blair's words had meant nothing, but half the base had been able to hear the fight between Daniel and O'Neill that had followed General Hammond's briefing. "I'm so not even going to blame you if you screw with my research."

"I wouldn't do that," Daniel quickly interrupted, despite the fact that he had been ready to do just that when O'Neill had stopped him in the hall. Daniel's anger had turned from Blair to O'Neill in a flurry of emotions that Teal'c still did not fully understand. However, O'Neill had agreed to no longer assume Daniel was a warrior or that he was part of any command structure other than O'Neill and
General Hammond--Daniel did not care what diplomats or politicians wanted. He wished for their friendship to take precedence over another's preference that he remain in ignorance. Teal'c suspected that the fight might have ended sooner had O'Neill not attempted to defend his actions during the NID investigation. In the end, O'Neill's inability to give any reasons for keeping his mission secret other than he had been given orders had caused much anger. A warrior received orders and followed them. However, as Daniel had said in a surprisingly loud voice, he was not a warrior and he would not accept such explanations. By the end of the fight, even O'Neill had been reconsidering the wisdom of following that order. Perhaps that was why he had agreed to listen more to Daniel's words. He had not agreed to act on them; in fact, he had called himself many names, including xenophobic and old, but he had agreed to listen more often.

"You were telling the truth," Daniel said, and Teal'c could tell that it hurt for him to say that.

"All well and good, and I'm glad that we aren't going to have another geek war like when Fraiser and MacKenzie were butting heads, but I'm wondering just why you think Oma Desala is poking around Sandburg's head." O'Neill looked around the room, looking for someone to explain the situation.

"Oma Desala?" Daniel asked, stepped forward so that he was at O'Neill's side. The unconscious positioning made Teal'c believe that things might be mended between them yet. The stories of his youth suggested that a shaman had great healing powers, and the evidence of that was growing.

"I don't know that I saw this woman. I know I saw a woman with lights all around her head."

"Sounds like good old Oma," O'Neill pointed out.

"Did you see a baby?" Daniel asked hopefully. Teal'c noted that O'Neill shied from that question, no doubt feeling his own failure in the fact that he had been unable to bring home either Daniel's wife or her child. Teal'c could feel his own guilt. He would give much to retrieve Sha're from death or return her child to Daniel, but he did not believe he would have a chance to do either.

"Um, no baby." Blair studied Daniel, obviously confused about why Daniel would ask, so Oma Desala was limiting the information she passed to Blair. Blair shook his head before continuing. "She was telling me about you, telling me that you were unhappy, that she wanted another chance to teach you happiness."

Daniel took a step backwards, and O'Neill's hand found his back.

"Forget it, Danny. She can't have my geek." O'Neill reached out and swiped his hand over Daniel's head, ruffling his hair.

"Knock it off, and she's probably just pissed with you for getting her temple shot up." Daniel said, retaliating with a shove. Teal'c smiled at the evidence that their old competitiveness had returned. Carter caught his eye, and she was smiling widely and not even trying to hide her happiness as she watched Daniel and O'Neill tease each other.

Jack held up his hands in mock surrender. "Me? Hey, it wasn't me that took the kid to her planet or shot up her temple."

"How about you?" O'Neill asked teasingly.

Daniel rolled his eyes, before turning back to Blair. "What else did she say?"

Blair appeared distracted for a second. "Um, nothing. She was there, but then Incacha was, too."

Ellison turned around to face him. "Incacha? That had to have been a dream." Ellison was starting to look a little pissed, and Teal'c could see Blair squirm in response to his partner's mood.
"Maybe," Blair admitted. "It was all pretty dreamlike. Incacha was speaking English, and unless they have language classes in the afterlife, that doesn't make a lot of sense." Blair stopped, clearly unwilling to say more, and Ellison, even though his hand still rested on his partner's leg, was clearly unhappy. Teal'c turned to look, and the others were just as concerned. Daniel appeared openly angry.

"Incacha was the shaman from Peru," Teal'c said calmly in case O'Neill had not had time to read the file.

"Another shaman?" Daniel asked. "If becoming a shaman is a process similar to ascending, they might be accessing some other form of communication."

"An alternate dimension," Carter said. She stepped to O'Neill's other side. "We know there are many dimensions that we can't see, so it makes sense that there could be one that's accessible if humans could develop a sensory awareness of it."

Blair opened his mouth, but he said nothing before he again closed it.

"There are stories of shamanic rites in most cultures and on most planets," Daniel supplied.

Carter was nodding. "But what makes a person a shaman? On the planet, we know that Oma Desala was helping people ascend, so she might have exposed them to some sort of energy field, but Blair hasn't ever been exposed to her. Why could she contact him and not you directly?" she asked Daniel. That one seemed to stump Daniel.

Ellison didn't seem to care for Carter's explanation. "How do we get her to stop contacting Blair?"

"Good luck getting her to do anything," O'Neill snorted.

"Oh man," Blair breathed. When he noticed that people were looking at him, he took a deep breath. Teal'c noticed that he deliberately avoided Ellison's gaze. "Incacha passed the way of the shaman to me. I thought it was a load of crap because being a shaman takes years of study and apprenticeship, but...."

"It *was* a load of crap. I shouldn't have even translated it," Jim insisted firmly.

"What happened when Incacha passed the way to you? How did you meet him?" Carter asked. Teal'c could almost feel her curiosity like a living creature.

"He was a Peruvian shaman who taught Jim how to handle his senses," Blair cleared his throat, and Teal'c wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that Ellison's hand had withdrawn. "Incacha passed the way of the shaman to me. I thought it was a load of crap because being a shaman takes years of study and apprenticeship, but...."

"He had no business telling you stories like that. I was an idiot for translating his stupidity," Ellison said, his voice quiet, but heavy with condemnation. Humans never failed to confuse Teal'c.

"So, this Incacha might be another ascended. If he touched Blair, that would explain it."

"It could be something blood-borne or an energy field," Carter agreed, her tone already distant as she considered the options.

Daniel was clearly just as lost in thought as Carter. "A lot of shamanic rites include an exchange of blood. It's common for the new shaman to offer his blood or his flesh."

Ellison stepped to the end of Blair's bed. "He wasn't an alien or ascended or whatever you want to
call it." Ellison sounded angry now.

It was O'Neill who answered. "Ah, but how do you know?"

"I met his mother."

"Really? Did you get DNA testing on that?" O'Neill's question might have been valid, but even Teal'c could hear the sarcasm, and Ellison narrowed his eyes at the challenge. His body language screamed his desire to strike out, but at least he had Blair at his back, safely away from the direction of his anger. It just concerned Teal'c that Blair had grown so silent. The absence of Dr. Fraiser suggested that his vitals remained steady, but Teal'c was unsure that the young man's emotions were equally steady.

"Look, Ellison, Oma Desala went crawling around in your partner's brain," O'Neill said, and Teal'c noticed the shiver go through Blair. Obviously Ellison did too because he stepped back to Blair's side, and rested his hand against Blair's shoulder, close enough to Blair's face that his fingers tangled with his curls. O'Neill continued, "Why him? Who knows? But the idea that this Incacha guy might have altered Blair's energy to allow him to see something we can't... it makes sense. It makes more sense than anything else, and things that make sense make superior officers and oversight committees happy. You want them happy because they have the ultimate say about what happens around here."

"So, we go along with you or you keep us prisoner." Ellison didn't look at O'Neill. He had his eyes focused somewhere around Blair's knees.

"For the love of god! Daniel, you explain this. If I talk to him anymore, I'm going to shoot him." O'Neill threw his hands up in the air and turned his back. For a second, Daniel just blinked in shock at having the responsibility thrown to him.

"Whoa, hey, let's play nice here," Blair said before Daniel could say anything. "Man, and that's the one you get along with?" Blair demanded of Ellison.

For a second, Teal'c thought Ellison would hold onto his anger, but then the man sighed. "I told you I wasn't exactly popular around here."

"Blair, Jim," Daniel started in his most diplomatic tone, "Jack's being an ass, but he's right. We don't know how, but Blair did see me when alien energy had turned me invisible. It makes sense that he can see other beings, like Oma Desala."

"How do we turn this off?" Blair asked. Teal'c frowned at that question. A shaman did not simply turn his powers off; however, Ellison smiled at Blair as though relieved by the other's words.

Daniel looked over at Carter, but she shrugged. "I have no idea. I could do some tests and look for energy sources."

"You want to turn this off?" Daniel just sounded confused. "People spend years in meditation just trying to take the first step toward ascension."

"Do your tests," Jim answered for Blair. Blair closed his eyes and sank back into the pillow, his face even more pale than when he had first awoken.

"Will this prevent him from working with the Bethesda doctors or getting released?" Jim's voice was tight with fear.

Daniel turned around and looked at O'Neill who was now standing near the doorway. O'Neill was not pleased with how this conversation had gone. "We need to figure out if she's here or if Blair is
visiting la-la land in his sleep. Teal'c, keep watch. Carter, get some equipment in here and run some scans."

"Yes, sir. I'll get a Transphase Eradication Rod set up, and I have a couple of TER's I've modified to scan for different signatures." O'Neill gave a nod, indicating his permission for her to leave. She hurried from the room. Ellison finally looked up from his examination of Blair's knees and stared at O'Neill, his body finally losing some of the stiffness that had carried it through the whole conversation, but Teal'c guessed that had more to do with resignation and weariness than acceptance. Blair's hand was clinging to Ellison's arm, so Teal'c imagined that Blair could see his partner's distress just as easily.

"The first goal is to make sure she isn't here. If she's not, he'll have to sign an agreement that he won't reveal anything she says," O'Neill said slowly, "but he already has clearance, and he'll be working with the P-chad program which is also highly classified, so I don't see that this makes any difference. Just... keep the kid away from any good drugs because his lips are entirely too loose when he's stoned."

"No problem," Blair answered before Ellison could. "Oh man, I am so not ready to be locked up for talking to my hallucinations, so no problem at all."

"It's no fun," Daniel seconded him. Blair looked at Daniel in confusion, but the other man just shrugged without offering any other explanation. O'Neill walked over and slapped Daniel on the back, a brief contact that indicated his support. A warrior would not need such reassurance. Were O'Neill to reassure Teal'c in such a way, Teal'c would be insulted at the suggestion that he needed such gestures or concerned that O'Neill did not trust his emotional strength; however, O'Neill had agreed to stop treating Daniel as a warrior, and from the grateful look Daniel gave O'Neill, he was far more comfortable with this return to an older pattern of behavior.

"Man, no offense, but I'm exhausted," Blair told them all. "If you don't let me get some sleep, I'm siccing Dr. Fraiser on all of you."

"I'm leaving." Daniel immediately raised his hands in surrender and headed for the exit.

"Coward," O'Neill accused him.

"Yes," Daniel agreed quickly, "which is why she uses the small needle on me."

O'Neill didn't answer, but he did follow Daniel out of the room. Teal'c retreated to the far side of the room and watched. Blair's eyes were closed, but his hand still clutched Ellison's arm, and Ellison was watching Blair with confusion and affection and concern. Teal'c could understand the confusion. The rest he did not understand nearly as well.

24. Twenty-four

Fatigue pulled on Teal'c. The Eurondsans and their belief in genetic purity had led him to read a number of books Daniel and Blair had recommended, and Teal'c found himself emotionally wearied by the knowledge. The people of Earth were inexplicable to him on most days, but the depth of the human capacity for cruelty had gone beyond what Teal'c had expected. The Jewish Shoah of the Nazi period was understandable, as was the Eurondan belief that they should eliminate the breeders. While Teal'c condemned both actions as deplorable, they were no different from System Lords who
would destroy entire planets in order to prevent a physical trait or mutation from spreading.

Humans outside of Earth and the other protected planets were largely bred for an appearance that pleased the Goa'uld, so such things were repugnant, but not shocking or even particularly unusual to Teal'c. Apophis had once decimated an entire city because the number of albinos had grown large and people had started whispering that Ra had walked among them, touching the women and making them give birth to children whose skin was as bleached as the white robes the people would hang in the sun. At the time, Teal'c had been a warrior still learning under the tutelage of Bra'tac, so it had been Bra'tac's hand and not his own that had ended tens of thousands of lives, but had Teal'c been promoted earlier, it would have been his hand on the control crystals.

Teal'c was far too used to the idea of maintaining genetic purity. However Daniel and Blair had confronted him with dozens of other examples from Rwanda to Cambodia, Darfur to Haiti, Armenia to the Native Peoples of America. The shear numbers and the vast range of excuses had shocked Teal'c. He often wondered how a people who carried such evil could also carry such good, but he rarely shared that thought. Teal'c had found that humans rarely appreciated being reminded that their own species could be as evil as the Goa'uld.

Siler walked by, offering a smile, and Teal'c inclined his head toward the other man. And yet, despite the great potential for evil, humans were equally as capable of good, a trait which could not be said of Goa'uld. Siler and others on this base had forgiven him the most heinous of crimes. Many times, the warriors of Earth had chosen human rights and dignity over tactical positioning. And yet again, his thoughts circled back to the Eurondans.

O'Neill had wanted the technology the Eurondans offered. He had wanted it badly, and yet he had placed the value of the breeders' lives above the strategic advantage the technology offered. The technology carried the taint of the Eurondans' sins, and yet O'Neill never hesitated to claim that Teal'c himself carried no taint. Humans were inexplicable. Teal'c wondered if O'Neill would still have made that choice had he and Daniel not reconciled. Daniel had certainly been the first to reject the spoils of such a corrupt society.

"Teal'c," Carter offered as she sat down next to him. "Long day?"

"The number of minutes remains the same," Teal'c said, not smiling. She opened her mouth to explain and then closed it again, jabbing him in the side with her elbow to let him know that she did not appreciate his humor. Teal'c enjoyed feigning ignorance with Carter because her attempts to explain often proved far more humorous than one might expect. Daniel and Blair were far more facile with words, but Carter was more amusing.

"I saw that huge reading list Daniel and Blair dropped on you."

"It was daunting," Teal'c agreed.

"It was enough to drive a sane person to anti-depressants. I need to take you on a Disney movie binge next time the colonel and Daniel have one of their nights featuring beer-drinking and arguing over stupid science fiction movies."

"I preferred Star Wars over Bambi." He had actually enjoyed Star Wars significantly more. He found himself both bored and strangely disturbed by the storyline of Bambi.

Carter shrugged. "I'll watch anything, just as long as it does not involve hundreds of dead bodies. I get enough of that at work." Carter fell silent, but Teal'c knew she was thinking of the man whom O'Neill had essentially ordered killed by having the iris closed. The Euronden leader had been evil, and the NID would, no doubt, have found in him a likely ally if he had come through. Teal'c did not
question O'Neill's decision, but he suspected that Daniel and Carter did. Rather, he had suspicions in the case of Carter. Daniel had been quite vocal in his objections. It was strange, but the more Daniel and O'Neill fought, the stronger their relationship became.

"I really hope you skipped some of those books," Carter said as she plunged her fork into the lasagna.

"I did not."

"Some days, Teal'c." She shook her head sadly. "Some days I really think you're a masochist."

Teal'c considered that. "Pain does not lead to my sexual stimulation or completion," he assured her.

She looked at him strangely for several seconds, chewing her food before swallowing. "Um, good to know." She shoved an even larger bite of food into her mouth, and Teal'c wondered if he had transgressed another taboo. He would ask Blair later.

After having the shaman around for over a month, Teal'c had found that he had grown quite used to having someone even more adept at explaining human behavior than Daniel. Daniel understood Jaffa culture better, even if Blair was quickly learning, but Blair could explain human culture in a way that Daniel could not. Blair insisted that his unconventional upbringing and anthropological training had prepared him better than an archeologist, but Teal'c did wonder if the shamanic powers of a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah did not also influence him. However, that was a subject Blair did not wish to discuss. He claimed that he had had no more dreams, and he had even turned down Teal'c's offer to meditate with him.

Teal'c did wonder if Ellison's discomfort with the subject didn't exert undue influence on the young man's choice to not actively pursue the path of the shaman. However, that was not a path Teal'c walked, and he had no advice to offer.

"Look who's here," Carter said softly.

Teal'c watched Jim Ellison walk across the cafeteria, his eyes studying the room for a safe place to sit. That probably meant that Blair was, once again, working with the doctor from Bethesda. When Ellison's eyes met his, Teal'c inclined his head in an invitation that he did not expect Ellison to take.

"Don't..." Carter started saying, but she cut herself off when Ellison surprised them both by heading over to their table.

Walking over, he set his tray down before sinking into the chair with a weary sigh. "I promised myself that I wouldn't ever get used to military food again."

"It's not that bad," Carter said in a tone of voice that suggested she planned on disagreeing with anything Ellison said. Ellison simply pursed his lips.

Teal'c recognized small talk, and even understood Daniel's logic regarding the necessity to form connections and bonds, no matter how fleeting. However, he had no idea how to respond. On most worlds, a feast such as this would be cause for great celebration, so Daniel's suggestion that Teal'c simply agree with the person who was attempting to make small talk felt disrespectful--as though he was belittling those starving worlds and their needs. Teal'c could not do so. And while he did not wish to join Carter by shunning the man because of the stress that placed on Blair, he did not want to convey any sort of approval either. He just remained silent.

"I should go... fix something... somewhere else," Carter said, not even attempting to make her excuse sound plausible. Most of her food was untouched, but, without waiting for any sort of
acknowledgment, she took the tray and dumped most of the food in the garbage before leaving.

"So, are you as pissed at me as Carter?" Ellison asked, stabbing several vegetables with considerable force.

"I am not."

"Does that mean you're even more pissed, up near Daniel-levels, or that you haven't caught this most recent case of Ellison-hatred that seems to have swept the base?"

Teal'c blinked at the metaphor of hatred as a disease. It suggested that Ellison blamed something outside himself for others' negative reactions rather than acknowledging the true source. In the weeks following Blair's injury, Ellison had admitted that his behavior was hurtful and cruel, but now he seemed blind to the more subtle forms of abuse that still defined his relationship with Blair.

"Daniel really is a mean little shit when he decides to hold a grudge," Ellison observed.

Teal'c found it amusing that Daniel had gone from pure rage at Blair for revealing his inner feelings to some sort of united kinship where Daniel felt a need to defend Blair—particularly from Jim Ellison. Of course, Teal'c did not think it wise to share that amusement, so he did not. He ate his potatoes.

"I can't wait until Blair gets discharged because this place... this is not a comfortable place to live," Ellison settled for saying. Teal'c looked around the room. Most of the personnel in here did not know or care about Ellison. The ones who had seen him with Blair tended to admire the great fondness the men had for one another, and the few who knew of Bethesda hated Ellison. The number who hated him was very small, but it was a group dedicated and united in their dislike. Teal'c frowned as it occurred to him that Ellison did not usually talk this much to anyone other than Blair or the men to whom he placed calls. Either Ellison was feeling particularly isolated and in need of making a connection, or he was trying to gain information.

"The animosity is significant," Teal'c agreed, watching Ellison's reaction. The Sentinel stopped with his fork half-way to his mouth.

"Thank you." The tone actually sounded sincere.

"For what do you owe me gratitude?" Teal'c asked curiously.

"You said something honest. I keep asking Daniel why he's acting like such a shit, and he won't say two words. He was in that hospital bed next to Blair for a week with that appendicitis of his, so I thought he'd warm up at some point."

Teal'c considered that. During his recovery, Daniel had started making complimentary comments about Ellison. When Teal'c and O'Neill had visited him after his appendectomy, Daniel had made pointed suggestions about how O'Neill would serve him as Ellison did Blair if they were real friends. O'Neill had thrown a Nerf ball at Daniel's head. However, he would expect Daniel's animosity to deepen and harden with more recent events.

"Daniel is most unhappy with you," Teal'c agreed, believing that the concessions Ellison had made to Blair's physical wellbeing deserved that much honesty.

Ellison ate in silence for several minutes, but Teal'c could read discomfort in the man's every gesture.

"So, why is it that Jackson so pissed with me?" he finally asked.

Teal'c was not sure how to answer the question without causing strife. Quite frankly, Teal'c agreed
with Daniel's dislike for Ellison. Blair was entirely too willing to put his own needs aside for those of his partner, and Ellison did not appear to honor that sacrifice. And now that Teal'c knew them better, that confused him even more. Ellison was not Blair's tec'ma'te. He was not Blair's lover or co-parent, he was not a blood-brother or one to whom Blair had sworn allegiance. And yet, Blair would give up his own goals in order to assist Ellison in achieving his own. Were Blair to show such loyalty to Teal'c, Teal'c would focus all his energy to making sure that Blair did not neglect his own needs in his desire to serve another. Ellison's focus on Blair appeared limited to his attention to Blair's physical well being. Apparently Blair and Ellison both believed their relationship was intimately tied to their roles as Sentinel and guide, but Blair's description of the purpose of a guide had led to a very unfortunate discussion of slavery which had upset Blair to such an extent that Teal'c had dropped the subject.

Ellison sighed and thunked his elbow on the table. "Normally I don't really give a shit what people think about me, but would you like to explain why in the last week, everyone has decided, again, that I'm an ass?" Ellison carefully placed his fork on the tray with the exaggerated caution of a man who wanted to throw it.

Teal'c knew that Daniel had promised Blair that he would say nothing, but Teal'c had not given that vow. "I believe everyone thinks Blair should go to Bethesda."

Ellison frowned. "Those eggheads are giving him shit. Why should he go if he doesn't want to?"

Either Ellison was very foolish or he had elevated self-deception to godhood. "I do not believe his desire is in question," Teal'c said. Blair had attempted to tell Teal'c that he was just tired of schooling, but Teal'c had quickly decided that Blair was a very poor liar.

"What?" Ellison leaned forward, and Teal'c decided that it was Ellison's intelligence that was in question because he very obviously did not know what Teal'c meant.

"I believe Blair does wish to go. Daniel informs me that the school has enrollment and research requirements that would require his presence for at least one semester, and Blair is unwilling to leave your side."

Ellison sat up straight so fast that Teal'c could not prevent himself from searching for an enemy worthy of such an extreme reaction. "No. No, he wouldn't throw away this chance just because he'd have to do one semester somewhere." Ellison said the words, but from his tone, he did not even believe the words himself. Teal'c just looked at the man, watching as Ellison's shock slowly turned to a narrow-eyed anger. "He wouldn't. He won't." Ellison shoved his tray back and was up and out of the room so fast that several airmen had to scramble to get out of his way.

Leaving his remaining food, Teal'c followed, not sure how Ellison would react. While he had been nothing but solicitous with Blair's health since arriving in Colorado, Teal'c could not forget the casual cruelty Ellison had shown in Cascade. If Ellison returned to his old patterns of behaviors, Teal'c would not allow him to harm Blair again.

"Teal'c?" Sergeant Collins asked as he plastered himself to the side of the hallway, attempting to not get struck by Ellison and his precipitous flight through the halls.

"Request that O'Neill come to Sandburg's quarters," Teal'c asked as he hurried after Ellison. By the time Ellison reached the visitor's quarters adjacent to the infirmary, he was showing signs of great anger. He pushed the door to Blair's room open so hard that it hit the wall and rebounded.

"Chief, what the hell are you thinking?" Ellison demanded loudly.
"Jim." Blair had been sitting at a table littered with books and reports, the gray-haired doctor from Bethesda sitting across from him, but now Blair stood up and clung to the back of his chair. "Hey, man. I thought you were going for lunch."

"When did you plan to tell me?" Ellison demanded loudly.

Blair blushed and looked around the room, his eyes lingering on Teal'c and the doctor. "Probably not the time, man," Blair said. His hands reached up as if to brush away his hair, a nervous gesture Teal'c had noted many times, but this time Blair had pulled back his hair, so his hands simply fluttered for a moment before returning to clutch the chair.

"We need to talk," Ellison said. He stepped forward, but instead of physically crowding Blair, he closed in on the doctor from Bethesda, looming over the older man. "If you'll excuse us." Ellison's voice was tightly controlled, but even the gray-haired doctor who walked as though he had never faced an enemy in his life recognized the danger.

"I should... yes, there are many... um... documents..." he started stammering.

"Oh man, so not cool. Back off, Jim," Blair snapped. And Ellison did; he backed away several steps, but his anger was still coiled beneath his skin, so strongly that Teal'c feared to leave Blair alone with him. Blair might be mending, but he was not fully healed yet.

"No, I really should go. I shouldn't push so hard when you're... um... yes, I'll go." The doctor grabbed several papers and fled past Teal'c.

"What the fuck is your problem, Ellison?" Blair demanded, his own anger flaring.

"My problem? You think I have a problem?" Ellison spoke each word with great deliberation. "You need to have your head examined."

"Pot and kettle," Blair sing-songed back at the man, and Teal'c watched as Ellison fought back an urge to yell. Had Daniel shown such sarcasm and disrespect for O'Neill, there would have already been much yelling. However, while shouting at Daniel caused him to shout back, Blair's reaction to such aggressive communication tended to vary widely. Teal'c had seen him explode in rage and withdraw in great pain. And as of yet, Teal'c had not determined the pattern for the reactions; however, Ellison's control did suggest that he was mindful of his partner. Even more, Ellison's actions suggested that it was not he who had encouraged Blair to turn down the offer from Bethesda.

"You turned down Bethesda because of me." Ellison physically backed up a step, his hands still tightly clenched, but Blair ignored the warning signs.

"Get over yourself. Man, you are not the center of the universe. Did it occur to you that I might have my own reasons? Oh wait, I told you my reasons, but hey, if you want to fucking ignore me, go right ahead." Blair flung an arm out, his palm facing Ellison. "You're the fucking expert on ignoring what I say."

Ellison had already physically withdrawn, and now Teal'c watched as the man emotionally retreated. His face became a careful mask of indifference that poorly hid the strong emotions beneath.

"Chief, tell me you didn't turn them down because they wanted to you move to Maryland for one fucking semester." Ellison chose words to express great anger, but his tone was oddly unemotional.

"I didn't turn them down because they wanted me to move to Maryland," Blair echoed sarcastically, but his words only reinforced Teal'c's conclusion that Blair was a poor liar. "Teal'c, maybe you could give us some privacy?" Blair asked, turning to Teal'c with a pleading expression.
For a half-second, Teal'c considered the request, but the situation was volatile, and to retreat leaving Ellison and Blair alone seemed foolish. "I am awaiting O'Neill's arrival," Teal'c said, tacitly refusing the request.

Anger flashed across Blair's face. "Fuck. Save me from alpha dogs and their fucking alpha dog games. God forbid someone have an opinion that doesn't match theirs." Blair attempted to head for the door, and Teal'c watched in confusion as Ellison's face contorted with pain for a brief second.

Sidestepping, Teal'c blocked the doorway.

"Chief, we need to talk," Ellison said firmly, taking advantage of the fact that Blair could not pass.

"Man, no we don't. I told you. I am sick of academic games. Ventriss is the tip of a huge, fucking iceberg and I don't feel like putting up with it anymore. Do you want me to write up my statement and have it notarized?"

Clearly this time Blair had chosen fury and counter-attack as his response, but Teal'c frowned at the path he chose. The mention of Ventriss caused Ellison great shame; it was a subject Blair normally went to great lengths to avoid. However, he now brandished the name as a weapon. Likewise, the accusation that Ellison did not listen seemed to have struck Ellison far deeper than a random comment should. Teal'c studied Blair—the way he faced Ellison with his lips pressed tightly together. Blair was attacking. This was more than random anger; he was targeting Ellison's most vulnerable spots.

"So, this doesn't have anything to do with you spending a semester away from Cascade?" Ellison's back was stiff with tension, but Teal'c watched another shift as Blair now retreated. The angry glare and tight mouth softened into something more uncertain.

"You need to get back to work." Blair said no more, but the tone of the conversation changed so dramatically that Teal'c wondered what he was not hearing. Clearly these two had the same sort of abbreviated communication Teal'c had once enjoyed with Bra'tac, but that sort of verbal intimacy left others stranded when trying to understand.

"Yes, I do," Ellison agreed. "I'm about out of leave, but that doesn't mean you can't go to Bethesda."

"You want us to split up." Blair said the words with great anger, but his body spoke of fear and pain.

"For a semester, if we have to," Ellison agreed.

"Fine." Blair spoke the word and turned his back on Ellison to concentrate on the table and the assorted reports. "I'll go."

O'Neill approached from the far end of the hall, his face registering confusion as he caught the end of their conversation. "So, what's up?" O'Neill asked with a casual tone that hid something far sharper. He looked around the room. Teal'c knew what O'Neill would take note of. Ellison stood against the far wall, his arms crossed over his chest in anger. Blair leaned against the table, his body stiff with anger, and the two men were not looking at each other. Blair studied the notes; Ellison stared at a blank wall with great intensity.

"You okay, Sandburg?" O'Neill asked when both men ignored his first question.

"Fine," Blair barked in the worst lie Teal'c had heard yet. O'Neill looked over at him, and Teal'c could only raise an eyebrow to indicate that he also questioned the honesty of such a statement.

"Ellison?" O'Neill asked.
"Just have a problem with a partner who's an idiot," Ellison answered.

That made O'Neill frown in surprise. "Sandburg's a pain in the ass and almost as much of a trouble magnet as Danny, but idiot isn't the first word that comes to mind."

"He's not going to Bethesda because he thinks I need babysitting," Ellison glared at Sandburg as if daring him to disagree, but Blair kept his eyes focused on the data the Bethesda doctor had brought on others who had suffered from periods of heightened senses.

"Oh no, I'm going," Blair said without turning around. "You are so on your own, man."

Daniel appeared, hurrying down the hall. Clearly the story of Ellison's anger had reached him because he was moving far more quickly than usual. Usually Daniel walked and read a book at the same time, which had caused some interesting moments when he had lost track of his position within the base and walked into the wrong room. The women never would have believed anyone else who had walked into the women's locker room supposedly by accident, but Daniel was so well known for his habit of walking and reading that no one had questioned him. This time, however, he was walking with strides as purposeful as if the alarms were sounding.

"Blair?" Daniel asked as soon as he reached the door. Blair's shoulders sagged. "What's going on?"

Ellison stepped forward. "Did Blair tell you that he was giving up the Bethesda offer because he wouldn't leave me?"

Daniel ducked his head in guilt. Rather than reassure his friend, Blair scowled at Daniel and mouthed the word 'traitor' at him.

"Hey, let's not go throwing around words that will make us all want to kill each other again," O'Neill hurried to say. He also moved a step closer to Daniel, touching the man's arm lightly. "I've actually gotten used to thinking of everyone in this room as a decent human being. Besides, I'm way too old and cranky to have to change my mind again."

"This is my life." Blair turned his back on the table and faced the room.

"It's your life you're throwing away, you mean," Ellison said. The presence of others seemed to embolden him and he stepped forward. "You've worked years for your doctorate. Are you really going to throw it away because you don't think I can handle myself for six months?"

"Wait," Daniel interrupted before Blair could answer. "You want him to go?" he demanded of Ellison. Ellison gave him a withering look that left Daniel clearly confused. In one way, Teal'c found the confusion comforting. His inability to understand Ellison and Blair was clearly not because of his own incomplete knowledge of human culture and language. On the other hand, he wished Daniel understood well enough to offer advice. However right now, neither O'Neill nor Daniel looked capable of offering advice.

"Of course I want him to go," Ellison answered.

"But... then why wouldn't you go?" Daniel asked Blair directly. It was a valid question.

"This is so not your business," Blair snapped.

"No, but it's mine," Ellison jumped in. "Damn it, Blair, you come wading in after me when you should be taking care of yourself. You pull yourself out of a hospital bed to come traipsing around Mexico, and it almost killed you. That gunshot nearly killed you because you didn't let yourself recover from the pneumonia. And now you're throwing away over a decade of work because you
"Think you have to be glued to my side?" Ellison took another step forward so that he was almost chest to chest with Blair.

"I thought you needed backup, that you needed a partner," Blair said, but instead of retaliating with anger, now he was withdrawing. Some switch had been flipped, and now Ellison pressed his advantage.

"I do need a partner, but I need a permanent partner, not someone who can ride with me only as long as Simon can find excuses to keep the paperwork going."

"Oh, so I haven't done enough to make myself available to you?" Blair asked, the sarcasm surging back.

"Damn it," Ellison swore and then rubbed his short hair. "Guys, maybe you could give us a little privacy?" Ellison asked as he looked at Teal'c and Daniel and O'Neill. They had all crowded in, and given the small size of Sandburg's room, it was an uncomfortable fit.

"Oh, I don't think so," O'Neill said, so clearly not trusting these two in a room alone.

"I'm out of here," Blair said, and he darted between Daniel and O'Neill with far more agility than Teal'c expected from one still recovering from an operation. However, Blair did not move nearly fast enough to get around Teal'c and out of the room. "Oh, come on, man. I am not a prisoner here."

Teal'c looked at O'Neill for direction. O'Neill looked to Daniel, and Daniel just looked confused.

"Look, let's just sit down and talk this out," O'Neill finally suggested.

"Nothing to talk about," Blair said as he turned to face the room. "Jim has made up my mind for me."

"That wasn't what I was trying to do, Chief. I just don't want you giving up something this important." Ellison took a step forward, lifting his arm to reach for Blair before aborting the gesture.

"Hey, call me a selfish bastard for not putting the Sandburg and Ellison show at the top of my priority list, but is anyone thinking about the hundreds of men whose lives are at risk because of these damn senses?" O'Neill asked, neatly avoiding the difficult topic of power and how it lay between Ellison and Blair. "You give up this research, and people will die," he added, shamelessly appealing to Blair's more altruistic nature. Teal'c could tell from the way Blair flinched back that the attack had hit home.

"No way. I'm giving Dr. Nichols all my research," Blair quickly defended himself, his hands held up in surrender.

Now Daniel joined in, following O'Neill's lead, once again working in a partnership that Teal'c had not seen since the death of Daniel's wife. "Blair, as long as you're ABD, they're going to ignore everything you say. You don't have the status to challenge the people at the top, but if you defend your dissertation, that's when you'll earn the right to redefine these senses."

"Like you convinced people that aliens built pyramids?" Blair asked in the most blatant attack Teal'c had seen him use against anyone other than Ellison. "I so don't need that kind of grief." O'Neill reached out and touched Daniel's arm, but Daniel was already laughing.

"Okay, one or two doctorates do not give you the ability to change the world or convince people that aliens are real. That's true. But the right people listened. If I hadn't gotten that doctorate in archeology, do you think the Stargate program would have looked at me twice? Blair, I had a chance
to walk into an alternate reality. I saw what happened when I wasn't here to change the course of history, and that was a future I would not want for this world. If you walk away from this, do you know what kind of future you're creating?"

"I do," O'Neill offered. "Without you to teach covert ops commanders how to deal with this, some stupid kid is going to have his senses go haywire, and he's going to reveal his team's position. Men will be tortured. Men will die," O'Neill said with great quietness and intensity. "Some team leader is going to make a mistake and end up killing a teammate while trying to keep him from scratching his own skin off and screaming. That's the future you're creating by not finishing."

Teal'c watched as Blair folded in on himself, seeming to lose inches as he retreated from this. Ellison stepped forward, his hand going to the small of Blair's back.

"That is not Blair's responsibility." Ellison sounded most angry with O'Neill. Teal'c raised an eyebrow in confusion. O'Neill had been attempting to reinforce Ellison's own position, but now Ellison had apparently changed positions.

"No, he's right," Blair said. Teal'c raised his other eyebrow. "When I started this research, I wanted to help people, but Jim..." Blair stopped and pulled the tie out of his hair so that long curls fell around his face only to have him push the hair back nervously. "They want me to work with Sentinels."

"Oh," Ellison sounded calm, but the hand he had placed against Blair's back slowly curled until he was fisting Blair's sweatshirt.

"And, but... so?" O'Neill asked in exasperation.

"Jack," Daniel said softly, warning the colonel away from the conversation.

"Daniel?" O'Neill asked.

Daniel glared at him and, in return, O'Neill gave him an inquisitive look. Clearly the man had not read the briefing notes Daniel had prepared on the conflicts between Alex Barnes and Blair Sandburg.

"What?" O'Neill demanded, ignoring Daniel's warning. Ellison slipped his arm around Blair's shoulders, but Blair simply stood up straighter.

"Man, last time I worked with a Sentinel who wasn't Jim, I ended up dead. So not cool. And I do not plan on doing that ever again, at least not until I'm about a hundred and three and too arthritic to care."

"Am I missing something?" O'Neill asked, looking around the room. "This was the crazy woman with the prison record, right?"

Perhaps Teal'c was wrong. O'Neill did seem to have read Daniel's report.

"Oh yeah," Blair said softly while Ellison gave a terse, "Yes."

"So... you think soldiers are going to go criminally insane at the sight of you and try to shove your head in a fountain?"

"Jack!" Daniel snapped with such fury that O'Neill looked away from Blair and looked at Daniel. "That was not worded well," Daniel said, giving O'Neill a look that would, as the old saying went, frighten a man out of completing his urination. While Daniel might not wish for his teammates to think of him as a warrior, he was no cha'til to stand by and allow the elders to act.
Daniel took a step forward. "Blair, I can understand that you might be wary..."

"Chief, just tell them that you won't work with any affected soldiers," Ellison interrupted. Daniel glared at him.

"Oh man, I wish I could, but I have to replicate the level of initial control you showed in order to prove that Sentinels can bring their senses down to tolerable levels. So not cool. I mean, I could just explain it, but even Dr. Nichols is like way too suspicious of all this to get involved... not until I've proven my theories."

"So, you aren't just afraid to leave me on my own for a few months?" Ellison asked, and Teal'c could not tell if that tone was hopeful or disappointed. Ellison was skilled at hiding his emotions.

Blair shrugged. "There are way too many reasons to not go."

Teal'c did not understand humans or Sentinels or the shamanic path, but he did know many stories of those who were tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah. He took a step forward. "Blair Sandburg," Teal'c began formally, "what path does your heart tell you is the correct one?"

Blair stared at him with wide eyes that blinked with such rapidity that Teal'c was certain that Blair hid something. He tilted his head, inviting Blair to confide in the group who had assembled.

"I..." Blair looked over at Ellison.

"Chief, I don't want you to give up your dreams. Remember that conversation you had with Teal'c the other day? You talked about dedicating your life to this Sentinel stuff, and he asked you the difference between being a guide and being a slave. That's..." Ellison stopped, the muscle on the side of his jaw bulging for a second. "Chief, that's not a good feeling for me. I feel like—"

"No way. No fucking way. That is not how it is," Blair cut him off. He turned and rested his palm against Ellison's stomach. Ellison laid his own hand on top of Blair's trapping it.

"Blair," Daniel said softly, "it would be one or two semesters. The way you tear through work, probably one. And after that, you can make some choices. You could train officers out of McChord or take research assistants of your own and train them in how to deal with Sentinels while you walked away from the military."

Teal'c watched, but he had no doubt which path Blair Sandburg would take. Ellison reached around Blair, hugging him closely to his chest in a display of affection. Teal'c averted his eyes, allowing Ellison and Blair some privacy. However, O'Neill and Daniel did not do the same. They watched.

O'Neill's face was full of calculating curiosity, but in Daniel's eyes, Teal'c could read the loneliness and pain. Humans were so odd. They required much more privacy than a Jaffa would ever dream of, and yet they allowed so little privacy to others in their daily lives. Clearing his throat, Teal'c turned his body to allow Ellison and Blair more privacy.

Daniel looked over and caught his eye. For the first time in many months, Daniel graced Teal'c with a small smile, just enough to let Teal'c know that Daniel did understand what Teal'c was thinking, just enough to suggest that maybe Daniel might still find a way to forgive Teal'c for the death of Sha're. "Come on, Jack," Daniel said, shoving at O'Neill's arm to get his attention. "You were going to annoy me with fish stories as I tried to translate the hieroglyphs on the altar from P3X-491."

Daniel herded O'Neill from the room, and O'Neill allowed himself to be herded. Teal'c followed, closing the door to Blair's quarters behind him. He could only hope that the young shaman was making the right choice. It bothered Teal'c that he was following the path of science since shamanism
and science were rarely associated in American culture, but a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah's heart would not lead him astray. If Blair's heart told him that he had to walk this path, Teal'c would trust that.

25. Twenty-five

Teal'c watched as O'Neill circled the village in what might appear to be a random pattern generated by his own boredom. However, his random path intersected each shadowed corner or possible cover in the dusty square where Daniel was sitting cross-legged in the dust talking to Lianch of the Tol people.

Daniel explained the Tau'ri war against the Goa'uld, and as usual, the villager's eyes went to Teal'c. This world was poor, a collection of stone huts huddled around a communal fire pit, but even here they knew of the Jaffa who served the gods. Teal'c stood very still and tried to appear non-threatening as Daniel started on that oft-used explanation. After weeks of not working as the others were weaned from the light on P4X-347, the familiar words were a comfort. With SG1 unable to leave the world where they had grown addicted to the light, Teal'c had spent time with Bra'tac, following his former master to the rebel world where he was training new warriors to fight the rebellion Teal'c had started. When Teal'c had followed O'Neill's lead on that day years ago, when he had turned against Apophis, he had never expected that others, including his own former master, would follow him onto his path. To know that others had followed you onto your path was far more daunting than the quick death Teal'c had expected.

The thought of paths brought Teal'c's musings back to the other person he had spent time with. Blair Sandburg had happily taken on the establishment, sweeping away decades of research and redefining Hyperactive Sensory Awareness. The term was less spiritual than Sentinel, and Teal'c still did not know if that meant the young shaman was on the right path. His small room in Bethesda was thick with books and charts and printouts, but Teal'c had seen not a single candle. It was most unsettling. Only the knowledge that Blair continued daily communication with Jim Ellison gave him hope that the young shaman would eventually seek out his true path. Only a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah would feel such need for an anchor. And now, his work with military personnel with HSA had become a second anchor.

However, despite his desire to encourage Blair's spiritual quest, Teal'c had resolved to follow Master Bra'tac's advice. One might be assisted in finding the path, but once that path was opened, one must choose to walk it alone. Teal'c could help in this no more than Ellison could.

"So, the mining rights?" O'Neill prompted from the far side of the nearly-empty square, his arm resting on the end of his weapon.

"Working on it," Daniel said in a tone that warned O'Neill to not push at this juncture. O'Neill subsided, returning to his previous task of patrolling the area. Carter shifted, her eyes scanning the village, either watching for enemy or searching for evidence that the people of this planet used the rare iridium alloy her samples had yielded. The heavy rocks that made the foundations of the buildings had veins that gleamed dimly, but they did not appear to mine or work the metal and the Goa'uld did not use this alloy although Carter had been most excited by her tests.

"Your people are great indeed if they fight the untrue gods," Lianch suggested slowly, his long grey-white hair catching the bright sun as he nodded. He looked over at Teal'c, and Teal'c simply looked back.
"My people are only as great as the allies who assist them," Daniel offered carefully. "This metal in your ground would help us stand up against the Goa'uld."

Lianch leaned back on his heels and picked up a stick to poke the fire that burned in the huge central cooking hearth that dominated the center of the village square. "To ally ourselves with you is to stand up against the Goa'uld," he said slowly. Teal'c could tell from Lianch's body language that the man had fears regarding taking such a step. Clearly, Daniel saw the same thing.

"We could offer you help building defenses, additional resources in the way of food or technology. My people have a plow that never needs sharpening. You could till your fields in half the time."

Daniel leaned forward, stopping just short of touching Lianch's knee.

Lianch was nodding. "The offer seems fair since we have no need of rocks." He smiled. "I often have need of fewer rocks in my fields. However, to take such an action that would affect the village is a matter of importance to everyone."

Daniel was nodding in perfect time with Lianch. "I understand. I'm only asking for a chance to make our case in front of everyone."

Lianch frowned at him. "Are you Bermiddlt that you would speak with everyone?"

The ones who had built the Stargate built into it technology that eased the communication between peoples and cultures; however, the word Bermiddlt defeated their technology, suggesting that the word had cultural ties which did not allow it to translate directly from one language to another. Teal'c had noted the same phenomenon with "kree" which was never translated. In fact, when Daniel had attempted to explain "kree," he had used many different words, because the cultural meaning did not exist in English.

Daniel leaned back. "I don't know that word."

Lianch looked immediately disturbed.

"We may use another word for it," Daniel hurried to explain. The circles in which O'Neill wandered grew tighter as the colonel closed the distance between himself and Daniel. "Can you explain what the word means?" Daniel looked at the leader of the Tol people with wide eyes and empty hands.

Lianch tilted his head and leaned all the way back on his heels as though so surprised that he couldn't quite catch his balance. "A Bermiddlt speaks to all."

Daniel nodded, but didn't say anything as he looked at Lianch expectantly. Lianch opened his mouth, as though confounded by the need to explain such an obvious term.

"He speaks of a shaman," Teal'c offered. He now remembered having heard his term for tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah in the distant past.

Daniel looked over to Teal'c in surprise, but Lianch was nodding, clearly relieved that the Tau'ri knew of the idea even if the word was different.

"Do you know one?" the old man asked.

"Yes," Teal'c offered at exactly the same time O'Neill offered a curt, "No."

O'Neill glared at him, and Teal'c amended his original answer. "No."

Unsurprisingly, Lianch was staring at them all as if they had turned into men driven mad by the sun.
"We don't generally talk about our shaman," Daniel tried to ease Lianch's fears, telling a version of the truth that he could accept. Teal'c doubted the man would appreciate the whole truth--that the Tau'ri did not talk about their shaman because, for the most part, they believed such men and women to be insincere or insane. Perhaps that was why Blair Sandburg was so reluctant to walk the path open to him. Teal'c did not believe that Blair cared that much for the good opinion of others, but perhaps the good opinion of Jim Ellison was enough for him to abdicate his position as a shaman.

"It is a wise people who hold their bermiddlt close," Lianch agreed, obviously comforted by the answer. "But to make this agreement would require all the tribe's approval, the living and the dead. We share a bermiddlt with a great many villages, so it would be many seasons before ours could return, but if you have one with such talents, we would be glad to share the Bermid'cate."

"No need to wait, we can go to this Bermuda thing right now. Daniel's good with talking to people," O'Neill said with forced cheerfulness. O'Neill understood the tactical value of deception, but on the issue of the soul and those who spoke to the soul, deception came with such danger that Teal'c could not allow his friends to walk such a treacherous path out of ignorance.

"You are a bermiddlt?" Lianch asked Daniel, awe in his voice.

"No," Teal'c said firmly while O'Neill said, "Yes." This time Teal'c did not amend his answer.

Daniel looked at O'Neill for a moment in desperation before he turned back to Lianch. "I have talked to shamans and have been offered the path, but I'm not actually a shaman myself," Daniel said slowly. "I haven't gotten any farther than speaking to a person who..." Daniel stopped, and Teal'c suspected that he was struggling with a way to define "ascended" to these simple people. The translation the Stargate technology provided could cause confusion with such complex terms.

"Exists in another reality?" Lianch provided.

Daniel smiled. "Exactly. But if that is acceptable, I would be happy to speak to the others in the Bermid'cate."

Lianch had dropped his stick earlier, and now he picked it up and resumed his stirring of the embers of the communal fire. "The Bermid'cate is a place of great danger for those who walk the path. I would not wish to risk a new friend on such a perilous journey."

"Dangerous?" O'Neill abandoned all pretense at boredom. "How is it dangerous?"

With a shrug, Lianch stirred the embers to life. "It is no danger to those of us not touched by the path of the bermiddlt. I do not pretend to understand the dangers posed to those who walk the shadowed paths of life."

O'Neill frowned, and Teal'c could almost feel the frustration radiating from him like heat from the summer sun. "Would you mind us checking it out, you know, just to make sure that we understand any possible dangers?"

"We don't want to offend your ancestors or break any taboos," Daniel hurried to offer before Lianch could speak, "but if you want us to trust one of our bermiddlt, you have to understand our concerns."

"I do, and it speaks well of your people that you show such concern." Lianch tipped his head so that his long, white braid fell off his shoulder and swung free. A young boy with bare feet came darting out of a low building. "Tehsee will show you to the place, but I would ask that Daniel not go." Lianch jabbed his stick into the fire, allowing the flames to capture it. "If your feet have been shown the path but you do not walk it, you should not go to this place."
"That's okay, Danny's going to stay here with me." O'Neill walked over and dropped a hand onto Daniel's shoulder, his knee pressed to Daniel's arm. "Teal'c, you and Carter check out this place and make sure that whatever shaman we bring these people, he isn't going to get lead poisoning."

"Yes, sir," Carter answered. She smiled at the boy Tehsee, and Teal'c could tell that the boy was smitten by her smile. He was verging on manhood, and Carter would be featuring prominently in his dreams for many weeks judging by his flush. He scrambled, tripped over the end of a piece of firework, and then used the momentum to dart forward.

Carter smiled, and Teal'c had difficulty restraining a smile himself. It would not honor the young man to make jest of his awkwardness, but Teal'c remembered the day when Carter would have had the power to make him trip over his own feet. Amused by the boy and worried about the danger this Bermid'cate posed, Teal'c followed far enough behind to provide adequate cover as he escorted Carter to this sacred place.

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"Well, sir, it looks like we just need to pony up one shaman, and we can have that iridium contract," O'Neill opened the debriefing. The general was not fully seated before O'Neill made his announcement, and for a second, General Hammond hovered an inch above his seat.

"One... shaman, colonel?" General Hammond pushed aside the folder with the technical information on P3X-116.

"One tiny, little shaman. We don't even have to give him away, we just need to loan him to the Tol long enough for the Tol's dead ancestors to give us the okay on the mining rights."

"Jack," Daniel warned with the deliberate pronunciation of just his name. O'Neill smiled smugly at Daniel. An expression that would have provoked rage in most people just caused Daniel to roll his eyes.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Daniel started to explain.

"Not really. Actually, we could have already gotten the approval only Teal'c had to go and ruin it when I tried passing Daniel off as our local bone, rattle and drum guy."

Teal'c raised his eyebrow at such an incomplete description.

"I'm not a shaman," Daniel pointed out.

"Ah, but you're as close to one as we get. I mean, the quality of geeks around this place does not inspire confidence. We are low on any sort of geeky type who can understand people. We have geeks for gadgets and rocks, but precious few we can pass off as a shaman. Felger would suck, and Nyan doesn't exactly have the whole lying thing down. He's never going to get laid if he doesn't learn to..."

"Colonel!" General Hammond interrupted. He took a deep breath. "Do I understand that you agreed to have our shaman contact their afterlife to ask permission to mine the iridium?"

"It makes you miss the good old days when we just wanted to bomb the Russians, doesn't it, sir?" O'Neill raised his coffee mug and stared at it morosely for a second before drinking.

General Hammond didn't answer, but from his sigh, Teal'c assumed that the man would agree if he politically could. In many ways, enemies such as the Goa'uld were to be preferred over those, like the NID, who acted out of good intentions and stupidity. The loss of Makepeace had particularly...
bothered Teal'c. A warrior who had followed O'Neill into battle and risked his life many times had been tempted into cooperating with an enemy because he had believed their lies, and Teal'c had no doubt that Makepeace had believed the NID lies only because the NID themselves did.

"I thought we might ask Dr. Coombs..." Daniel started. Surprisingly it was Carter who interrupted him with a derisive laugh which she quickly cut off.

"I'm sorry, sirs," she offered, "but Simon Coombs? He's..."

"He's good with math and he could do it... probably." Daniel's mouth twisted into an expression which did not communicate confidence.

"He'd start talking about Romulans or warp drives." Carter turned her attention from Daniel to the general. "Sir, I don't think Coombs can handle this. After Daniel, Nyan is our best with first contact."

"No, Nyan is the best with hieroglyphs," Daniel argued.

"He did handle his own with the Gamali," O'Neill mused.

"Because he had to. He's not trained," Daniel insisted, his tone making it clear he did not want to discuss this farther. The linguists and social scientists were, ultimately, under Daniel's leadership, and O'Neill nodded, accepting Daniel's decision. Teal'c had to agree that Nyan was, after Daniel, most skilled in first contact, perhaps because he did move so slowly and carefully when working with others. However, Daniel was loath to allow the young man too far into dangerous territory.

"He's better than Coombs," O'Neill slipped in, but by doing so after acknowledging Daniel's domain, he received only an annoyed look in return. "But since we actually do have a shaman on the payroll, I say we bring in Sandburg. He is on the payroll now, right?"

"You want to pull Blair into this?" Daniel said with a laugh. "Ellison will gut you and hang your body out for the crows if you even suggest taking Blair through the Stargate."

General Hammond ignored the outburst. "Colonel, I don't see why we need to bring in outside personnel for this. What exactly do the Tol want out of this shaman?"

"They want him to go to a sacred spot and shake a little rattle, say a few words, ask the ancestors for permission to dig," O'Neill answered. "And frankly, after the mess with the Salish, I'm voting that we actually do check in with the ancestors first. I don't expect the ancestors to talk back, but you just never know, sir. SG11 has never quite been the same after getting zapped on PXY-887."

General Hammond leaned back in his chair, silent for a moment. "Colonel, is there any chance that, like the Salish, the Tol might be hosting a more powerful species?"

O'Neill made an exaggerated shrug and turned to Carter, inviting her to give her opinion on the question. She made a face that clearly indicated her own ignorance on the issue. "There were no signs of advanced metalwork or power sources, and the sacred Bermid'cate is really just a lake with heavy concentrations of carbon and a dense dinoflagellate population that causes it to be almost black."

"Is it dangerous?" General Hammond opened the planetary file, his pen jotting notes now that they were not discussing shamanism. It remained a mystery to Teal'c how a leader as wise as Hammond could discount the power of shamanism.

"I wouldn't drink it, sir," Carter said, opening her own file and studying the test results from the samples she had taken. "Long term exposure would probably cause a rash or mild respiratory
problems if you breathed in the organisms, but its concentrations are only slightly higher than on Earth when we have red or black tides in the coastal regions. So, no sir, it's not dangerous."

"See? It's safe. So I say we 'gate in, introduce them to Sandburg, have Sandburg beat a drum or something, and then pop back home. All good."

"We don't even know if Mr. Sandburg is available," General Hammond pointed out.

"He was finishing up his dissertation when I talked to him last week," Daniel offered. "Knowing Blair, it's already done and perfect, and he's stressing over the placement of captions on his tables."

"Blair?" O'Neill gave Daniel an incredulous look. "I saw his quarters. The kid leaves his shit everywhere, so I'm guessing he's not exactly the type to stress out over captions."

"You have no idea." Daniel reached over and patted O'Neill on the arm as though reassuring a particularly young or stupid child. "This is his research, his life's work. He wants to change the world with this. He's stressing over every period."

Teal'c frowned. "But has he not already caused great change?"

"Some," Daniel agreed. "Not as much as he'd like."

Teal'c nodded in understanding. He was in much the same situation. He had changed much for the Jaffa, but having the task of overthrowing the System Lords only half-done, he had left the world most disordered and dangerous. He wondered if Blair felt the same. "But we should also consider that Lianch claims that this place is dangerous for those who are true shaman. If we take Blair Sandburg, we should also take Jim Ellison."

"Oh no, that is just a bad idea," O'Neill said surprisingly quickly. Teal'c raised an eyebrow in a tacit request for an explanation. "I don't care if you call it Post-Combat Hypersensitive Disorder or Hyperactive Sensory Awareness, it comes down to the same thing—he's not reliable in the field."

"I have to agree with the colonel," the general added. "If we invite Mr. Sandburg in, that does not change military policy on having those with P... HSA in active combat. Detective Ellison is not eligible to go through the gate."

"Sir," Carter cleared her throat, "I hate to point this out, but Blair was able to see Daniel after he was shifted out of our dimension, and he clearly contacted Oma Desala at least once. It could be that the Tol are talking about a danger that is in an adjacent dimension that only a shaman would be able to perceive."

"Aw, crap. You just had to go and bring up the shamanic powers, didn't you, Carter?"

"Yes, sir," Carter answered without even an attempt to look apologetic for O'Neill. "We should have some TER's on hand in case there is something more than just a lake there."

O'Neill got a thoughtful look on his face. "Would a TER really stop someone like Oma?"

"No." Daniel said the word firmly, and no one at the table contradicted him.

"Dr. Jackson," the general interrupted the silence that followed Daniel's answer, "could I get a report on any in-house personnel you think might be able to handle this situation? I don't want to bring in Mr. Sandburg unless we need to."

Daniel nodded. "I'll get that together by five."
Teal'c listened as the remainder of the debriefing covered mineral deposits and logistical realities on a world with very little rain but rare thunderstorms and floods that swept the land clear of all but the hardiest structures. He did not doubt that Hammond would call in Blair Sandburg. Teal'c did not approve of impersonating a shaman, but even if General Hammond decided to perpetuate such a fraud, Teal'c did not believe that anyone at the SGC could, realistically, convince the Tol people. O'Neill had not lied about Nyan's unfortunate inability to lie well, and most of the scientists were not used to interacting with living cultures. Ann Foster might do well, but with her pregnancy, she was banned from gate travel.

No, Blair was clearly the right choice if the Tau'ri wanted the mineral rights. Teal'c was simply not as convinced that it was the right choice for Blair. Unfortunately, Teal'c had no other alternative to offer.

26. Twenty-six

"Oh man, this is... whoa." Blair bounced as he threw his hands up.

Teal'c had seen many reactions to the Stargate, but he had never seen one who was so childlike in his delight. O'Neill looked at Blair oddly. But then, O'Neill had not seen Blair since he had left Dr. Fraiser's care. In Cascade, and even during recovery, Blair had been quiet and given to difficult moods, but when Teal'c had visited the young man in Bethesda, he had noted a definite change in behavior. The sheer energy Blair Sandburg generated had concerned Teal'c enough for him to call Jim Ellison to request his advice. According to Ellison, this Blair who could not physically stand still was the true Blair Sandburg. While he had been surprised at first, Teal'c found himself drawn to this energetic version of the man whom he had met. However, faced with this new incarnation of Blair, O'Neill appeared to be having less charitable thoughts.

"This isn't a game," O'Neill said, leaning an arm on the butt of his weapon before catching Blair's arm.

"Totally. I get that." Blair nodded his head so enthusiastically that his ponytail bobbed. Since Blair was going to represent Earth as a shaman, General Hammond had encouraged him to wear clothing that would be appropriate for that role. His vest was as bright as the tapestries the women wove to honor fallen warriors, and his shirt was a deep blue. Bone and wood beads strung on leather lay against the hollow of his neck, and woven red string encircled one wrist.

"We need this agreement," O'Neill said as the fourth chevron locked in place.

"Chill, man. I get it. I worked with the police, so I know that sometimes you have to get a little creative with the truth to serve the greater good. Just as long as you don't ask me to lie outright, I will obfuscate their socks off. The Goa'uld are so not cool, and we need the mine. Got it."

Teal'c watched as Carter bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Daniel didn't bother. "Oh yeah, great plan Jack. You're right, Blair is so much more stable and controllable than Coombs."

"Whoa. He said I was controllable?" Blair asked, a look in his eye that made Teal'c vow to check the food supplies when they stopped. If O'Neill were not careful, he would have Tabasco in his dinner.

"I said you weren't an idiot like Coombs is," O'Neill disagreed. Blair smiled and bounced on his toes. From O'Neill's expression, he was starting to second-guess his own judgment.

"Blair, are you sure you want to do this?" Daniel asked again, although he had already voiced his
concerns several times. However, Teal'c could not fault Daniel because Blair did not seem to be taking the danger seriously.

"Totally sure. How often am I going to get an offer to visit another world... another people... a whole different way of life? This is an anthropologist's wet dream. I mean, I know you archeologists are all over ruins, and they're good and all, but this is... this is people, man." He looked over and smiled at Daniel. "Of course, I might be a little biased. Hey, I wonder if they have stories about Sentinels." Blair's eyes got a distant look but then the last chevron locked in place and Blair jumped as the field rushed out toward them.

"Whoa. Wild ride." Blair was nodding again. "Man, Jim is going to be so jealous. After he gets over wanting to kill me for doing this," Blair added with a shrug that made it pretty clear that he was not concerned about Ellison's anger. At least Teal'c no longer worried about Blair's penchant for yielding to Ellison in all things. However, it did disturb Teal'c that he was not more concerned. Teal'c would have preferred to have Ellison with them, if only to function as an anchor for Blair. But he had voiced his concerns and the others had not understood his logic.

"You ready for this?" O'Neill said over the sound of the Stargate. It did not escape Teal'c's notice that O'Neill looked more hesitant than Blair.

"Oh yeah!" Blair said as he started up the ramp. O'Neill reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"Teal'c, take point."

Teal'c nodded at their leader and walked up the ramp, entering the Stargate and stepping out under the bright sun of the Tol homeworld. Lianch was waiting, a huge hat shading his face as he squatted beside a large rock. Two other elders stood beside him.

"Does your... shaman come?" the woman asked. Her hair was only just now turning white, a mark of great distinction in this culture.

"He does," Teal'c agreed, tilting his head to them in respect, and just then O'Neill and Blair appeared through the gate.

"Oh man. That was... whoa." Blair looked around in awe.

"You might want to step forward before Carter and Daniel flatten you," O'Neill suggested as he headed down the stone steps.

"Oh, yeah." Blair laughed and darted down the steps, past O'Neill and to Teal'c's side. Teal'c took great honor in the fact that Blair had chosen to stand by him as he looked at the Tol elders.

"Oh wow. Um, hi."

O'Neill did not even hide his derisive snort. Teal'c suspected that Blair had impressed O'Neill more when he had been depressed, but Teal'c preferred this less inhibited version.

Lianch lowered his head in respect. "Greetings, I am Lianch of the Tol, and these are Urgat and Alatia." He gestured toward the man and then the woman who stood with him.

Blair lowered his own head. "Greetings. I am Blair of the Tau'ri. I am friends with Teal'c and O'Neill and Carter and Daniel."

Carter and Daniel had come through the gate and it shimmered for a second before the field
vanished. Daniel pulled on his sunglasses and watched.

"They are honorable people," Lianch stated as he stood up straight again.

"Very honorable," Blair agreed. He stood up and then bounced on his toes. "As are your people." He looked across the land at the stunted trees and deep furrows created by the intermittent floods. "Your people have grown strong enough to consider challenging the false gods even though this world is a difficult home."

"Difficulty breeds strengths," Lianch countered, but Teal'c could see the way the man's body relaxed and the way the other two exchanged smiles. These people recognized Blair as a bermiddlt.

"And your people have survived great difficulties," Blair said, and then he was moving forward, away from the sphere of Teal'c's protection. "Is that hand carved?" he asked, his eyes on Lianch's necklace.

Teal'c moved forward, unwilling to let Blair get too far from him even though Lianch showed no sign of aggression.

"It is," he agreed. "My grandfather spent many years on it."

"Oh man, that is a work of art."

"Here," Lianch went to remove the string that held the carved disk to his neck.

"Whoa, no. I just want to look at it."

Lianch frowned for a second. The woman whispered a word.

"Oh man, I just totally offended someone. I'm really sorry. I didn't want to touch it because if I broke that, I would never forgive myself. That is art, man. Total art. I've never seen anyone work with the grain of the wood like that."

Lianch smiled and spoke an unfamiliar word back to the woman. "Among my people, it is luck for a bermiddlt to touch a personal talisman."

"Oh." Blair nodded. "I would never want to deny someone luck," Blair said as he stepped forward. He did not take the wooden disk from Lianch's hand, but he ran a finger over the curve of it reverently. For a second, the nervous energy drained from him as he studied the wood.

Teal'c had not noticed the decoration, but it was obviously of great value to Lianch. Looking at the others, Teal'c realized that each had a smaller but similar talisman hanging from various parts of their clothing. The woman wore it from a leather cord that held her thick hair back in a ponytail streaked brown and white. The other man had a wooden triangle hanging from his belt.

"Oh man, beautiful," Blair said as he finally backed up a step. "Some of the same designs are in that one," he said as he looked at the woman's talisman. "May I?"

"Please, bermiddlt," she answered, tilting her head toward him. Blair moved slowly toward her, his fingers coming up to lift the wooden disk away from her hair. He ran his thumb over the designs.

"The same swirl twisted to the right," Blair said softly.

"The world was created by great beings, but the evil ones flooded it, and like when the water reached the cliff face or when the women pour water into bowls, the world was spun until all reality-
truth and lies—were mixed together," Lianch offered.

Daniel stepped forward. "Our people also have stories of the great flood."

"Do you?" Lianch looked surprised. "We are truly brothers."

"Yep, and brothers share," O'Neill offered with more cynicism than either Daniel or Blair.

Daniel took a moment to glare at him, but Blair moved to the last man, his fingers reaching for the triangle-shaped fetish hanging from his belt. "But this is all about straight lines," Blair said, clearly confused. Blair looked up at the man. "You plan to be a shaman."

Teal'c noticed that everyone appeared to be quite shocked at that revelation. O'Neill and Daniel exchanged concerned looks, Carter looked to him in shock, and the three Tol all traded alarmed looks.

"I had not planned it," the man said slowly. "My aunt was a bermiddlt. It was she who made the talisman."

"My bad," Blair offered as he pulled his hand back. "I would love to see where you live, how these are made..."

"Which is why it's really too bad that we don't have time for that," O'Neill interrupted with a sharp look in Blair's direction.

Lianch laughed. "It is always so with the bermiddlt. They do not listen to the seasons, and would starve before remembering to take in the grain. It is why I could not promise you that our own bermiddlt would return in time to speak with the spirits."

"Hey, I'm not that bad," Blair objected, but Teal'c could tell from his smile that he was not offended.

"Of course not, bermiddlt," Lianch said, but his voice carried no tones of apology, and the look he gave O'Neill was one of sympathetic understanding.

"Maybe we could go to the Bermid'cate before dark," Daniel suggested although night was still many hours away.

"We shall," Lianch agreed.

"Lianch, I think I must remain behind," the elder standing to his right said, his eyes on Blair. For a moment, Teal'c feared that Blair had somehow offended him, but Lianch smiled warmly.

"It is a great thing to be touched by a bermiddlt, but to have one's feet put on the path is dangerous as well, friend. Stay here. I would not risk you at the Bermid'cate." The man nodded and turned to walk the opposite direction.

The elder woman reached out, her palm pressed against his chest. "Walk well," she said.

"Firm footing and solid land," he agreed. She withdrew her hand and he started walking toward a distant line of ragged trees.

Blair watched, his eyes darting from one person to another, but then O'Neill started to walk, and he reached out and caught Blair's arm, pulling him along. "Come on, professor. You need to go talk to some spirits."

"Hey, that's Dr. Professor to you, bub," Blair teased. "And you so owe me a celebratory drink when
we get back, but I will overlook your rudeness if you can find a way to lose me here for a few weeks, you know, just long enough to look around and see the sights."

Lianch smiled. O'Neill did not.

"Don't even think about it, Sandburg."

Blair gave O'Neill a pleading look. "Come on, man. Think of the research possibilities here."

Daniel gave a dark laugh. "Give it up, Blair. Trying to get a purely research-based mission approved through these guys is next to impossible."

"Hey, just find a way to pay for it, and the Stargate is all yours, Danny-boy," O'Neill fired back.

"That might be a little difficult given the inherent cost of trying to power our Stargate without a DHD," Carter added. "But if it makes you feel any better, Blair, I can't get approval for my large-scale research on the various radiation levels present of different worlds due to the variety of star types and distances from the relative sun."

"The radiation will wait. Jack won't even get the general to approve a mission to retrieve hieroglyphic rocks that are being washed out to sea with every tide on P3X-901." Daniel sounded most aggrieved.

"There's a little thing called a war, people," O'Neill said.

Lianch laughed. "It appears that you have more than one member of your team who would forget to bring in the grain, Colonel O'Neill."

"You have no idea," O'Neill answered, but his look focused on Daniel. Daniel crossed his arms and glared.

"Our people say that a tribe cannot thrive without hands to gather the grain and eyes to see beyond the field," the woman offered. "It is a great gift if you have put Urgat's feet on the path that leads beyond the field." She looked at Blair.

Blair threw his hands up in the air. "Oh man, I am not passing the way of the shaman to anyone. I just thought I understood the whole swirls and lines symbolism, and I so should not have jumped to that conclusion. Bad science." Blair grimaced, and the woman looked at Lianch in confusion.

"You do not wish to pass on the gift?" Lianch asked.

Blair stopped walking in the middle of the path, and since O'Neill still had him by the arm, O'Neill stopped as well, and he gave Blair a most unpleasant look.

"It's not that I wouldn't want to pass it on..." Blair stopped and looked around. For a second he looked confused. "Man, that is something you have to decide for yourself. Just because a shaman touches you, that is no reason to call yourself a shaman." The energy fell from Blair, and for a second, he was, once again, the quiet and withdrawn person Teal'c had met in Cascade. Weariness clung to him. Even O'Neill, who had been disturbed at the new Blair, was clearly bothered by this return of his old self. O'Neill looked at Daniel in confusion, his expression clearly demanding that Daniel do something to fix this.

Daniel stepped to Blair's side. "Hey, I bet you could get the command to listen to you if you got Carter to put all the shamanistic ideas into her science-talk. You should have read her report on Oma Desala."

"Give it up, Blair. Trying to get a purely research-based mission approved through these guys is next to impossible."
"It was all scientifically valid," Carter defended herself. "A little... fanciful maybe, but possible within the rules of physics." She smiled. "Some of the messes we get into do make me glad I took a creative writing course during my undergrad years."

Blair shook his head as though shaking off the bad mood like it was water. "Man, I bet." He looked at the two Tol elders. "Oma Desala is the bermiddlt who touched Daniel. She could do some wild stuff that not even bermiddlt are supposed to be able to do. Totally unbelievable stuff." Blair nodded, and then he was walking again, rushing down the trail leaving the rest of them to get in position around him. O'Neill growled his frustration and nodded for Teal'c to take point. Teal'c had to trot to get ahead of Blair, but at least the heaviness had left the young man.

"Our people have stories of great bermiddlt who walked the other world more than this one. They could wield terrible powers."

"Oh, that's Oma," Daniel said softly. O'Neill cleared his throat loudly, and Teal'c could just imagine how O'Neill was going to yell at both Daniel and Blair for revealing classified information.

"Man, that is so not something I want to discuss," Blair said, holding his hands up. "I mean, some power is just better left laying right where you found it. Walk on by, my friend, walk on by."

"Would that not put the power at your undefended back?" Teal'c asked over his shoulder.

"Way to take a metaphor way too literally," Blair snorted.

"Wait," Lianch stopped them when they reached a small and twisted tree whose roots clung to the edges of an outcropping of red rock. "This is the border of the Bermid'cate. Daniel should go no farther."

Teal'c turned and looked back at the group. O'Neill was frowning. "I know you think there's a danger..."

"Prodigious danger," Lianch corrected him. "We cannot allow him to face this danger."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll look out for Danny," O'Neill said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Jack," Daniel warned.

"Daniel," O'Neill shot back. Daniel's glare did not abate. "We are not splitting up," O'Neill said firmly.

"You can't ignore the customs of anyone who doesn't agree with you."

"Sir," Carter interrupted before they could get fighting. "There may be energy levels that affect Daniel differently because of his exposure to Oma Desala. I could wait here with him." Carter was essentially offering the same explanation that Lianch had, but her words reached O'Neill, making him frown. Teal'c wished to point out that any energies that posed a danger to Daniel would also pose a danger to Blair, but he had no new arguments to add to the ones he had already spoken.

"You two wait here. We'll just be a minute," Blair said as he started down the path. O'Neill reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him back. "Geez, enough with the manhandling. I feel like I'm hanging out with Jim again."

"I'm starting to understand Ellison a lot better," O'Neill countered. Blair crossed his arms over his chest and gave an exaggerated sigh. Teal'c noticed that neither Lianch nor Alatia seem surprised by the exchange. In the stories Teal'c knew, tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah were great men and women
who guided the path of warriors and worlds. Had Teal'c seen this version of Blair first, he would have doubted to put such a powerful name on one who had such childlike joy in life. However Lianch and Alatia appeared to have a very different expectation of a shaman. It occurred to Teal'c that these people had real experiences with those touched by the spiritual world while Teal'c had only stories.

Teal'c waited as O'Neill looked around, his face calculating. "Carter, you and Daniel wait here."

"Yes, sir," Carter agreed. She shifted her pack and dropped it to the ground next to the rock.

"How far is it?" O'Neill asked.

Teal'c stood at the bend in the path where the scraggly trees opened to show the first hint of black water. "It is a hundred yards from where I stand," he offered. O'Neill's body language screamed of his discomfort.

"Keep open radio contact. Sandburg, if you wander more than two inches from my side, I'm going to cuff you and drag you back through the Stargate. Got it?"

Blair rolled his eyes and held up a hand which he used to mimic the opening and closing of a mouth.

"Listen--" O'Neill began angrily.

"Stay with you, got it. Geez, you're worse than Jim."

"Oh yeah, I'm really starting to have a lot more sympathy for Ellison," O'Neill said, his hand still on Blair's shoulder. "Just remember we're on another world here."

Blair snorted. "Man, so far this world is looking way safer than ours. I live in D.C. right now if you remember, and that isn't nearly as bad as Cascade when all the crazies come out of the woodwork. Remind me to tell you about the time these far-right wack-jobs took over the police station. Although, let's be honest, the cops who fell for the emergency evac were not exactly on the bright side. Man, when you convince people that following orders is more important than common sense, that is one serious-ass problem in the making, ya know?"

O'Neill did not look reassured. However, he tightened his hold on Blair and escorted him down the path, past the twisted tree and jutting rock. It reassured Teal'c that O'Neill was finally recognizing the danger.

Blair was, once again, bouncing with energy, his eyes studying the land ahead of him. Lianch and Alatia fell in behind O'Neill, no doubt offering him a position of honor, but Teal'c knew O'Neill well enough to know that the man would be annoyed by having those he did not trust at his back. Between Blair's energy and the frustration of having people at his back, O'Neill was not going to be in a good mood tonight.

Teal'c led the group to the shore of the dark lake. The water was still, a slight lapping of tiny waves against the pebbled beach. Teal'c took a position near a tall, ragged rock and watched as Blair walked into the clearing. His bounce stopped immediately, and he got that same look of concentration as when he had touched the talisman of the Lianch.

"Oh wow. Okay, the landscape is slightly alien, but this... this is..." Blair simply allowed his words to trail off.

"My people believe this is the place of a great battle fought between the gods. The world was blasted in their fury."
"Trust me, getting blasted by fury is better than having these snakehead crawling all over your planet," O'Neill offered with his normal pragmatism. This world had so little to offer other than the alloy the Tau'ri wanted that no System Lord since Anubis had claimed it. Teal'c had to agree with O'Neill, though. To live a hard life where one battled the land was far more honorable than to live in slavery to false gods. Teal'c would happily lay down his own staff weapon in favor of a plow, were he to be given the choice. However, as long as there were Jaffa enslaved to ignorance, he would not dishonor his name or the name of his fallen father or master Bra'tac by turning his back on the fight.

"Oh man, it's beautiful," Blair said reverently.

"It's dirty water, Sandburg."

"O'Neill, you must just drive Daniel insane. You, my friend, need to open up your inner eye and see the beauty around you," Blair counseled. This time it was O'Neill who rolled his eyes.

"Bermiddlt are... unique," Lianch offered with some humor.

"Yeah, that's one word for it," O'Neill commented in a dry tone. "I could come up with one or two others." O'Neill allowed Blair to pull him closer to the water.

Looking at the mirrored surface, Teal'c could see the light reflecting, catching glimmers of red and purple beneath the surface. He had found other worlds more restful, more aesthetically pleasing, but he could understand why Blair would call this place beautiful. The shores were lined by twisted trees and tall grasses, but this beach that led in from the path was only pebble and rock. Blair moved forward until the edge of his boots touched the water.

A shudder went through his frame, and Teal'c took a step closer, alarmed by his physical reaction to the water.

"Whoa, someone just walked over my grave, you know?"

Teal'c did not know; however, the metaphor was disturbing.

"Chill," Blair said as he looked over to Teal'c. "It just means I got a shiver that I couldn't control. People used to believe that when that happened, it meant that someone had just walked over the place where you were, one day, going to be buried."

"Is that true?" Alatia asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

"No way. People like making up all kinds of weird shit," Blair said with a smile and a shrug.

"Imagine that," O'Neill said with considerably less amusement.

"Look, do you mind if I bend down here, or are you planning on handcuffing yourself to me?" Blair asked as he looked down to where O'Neill was holding onto his arm.

"Knock yourself out," O'Neill said as he released Blair. "Just make sure you do it within two inches of me."

"Whatever." Blair bent down and let his fingers trail in the water. He created ripples and watched them and fingered pebbles and generally just stared at the water as Daniel might an ancient hieroglyph. Teal'c watched O'Neill shift weight nervously, his hand gripping his gun as he watched the treeline for danger. Since O'Neill watched the perimeter, Teal'c watched the water, and watched Blair as he moved his hand through the water. Rya'c would do that as a child. Teal'c remembered the day when he had come home and found Drey'auc behind their house, laughing as their child
pounded his fists in the water and then watched with wide eyes while the rings traveled the surface of the pond.

"So, are you going to make the speech?" O'Neill demanded. The plan had been for Blair to formally present the offer for mining rights, but Blair was totally ignoring the mission in favor of staring at the dark water. "Sandburg?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't get your panties in a wad," Blair said, his voice disturbingly distant.

"It is always the same with the bermiddlt," Lianch said softly. "The waters call to them."

O'Neill looked up at Teal'c, his eyes warning that he no longer considered this danger to be only hypothetical. "Carter," O'Neill said into his radio. Teal'c's coming back your way to sit on Daniel. As soon as he gets there, I need you to run some energy readings on this water. Double time."

Teal'c nodded and turned to hurry back to Daniel Jackson's position, but then a flash of light and a shockwave rose from the lake in a bubble of white energy that threw everyone to the ground. Everyone except Blair. Blair stood, now knee deep in water—either it had risen or he had walked into the water, but his legs vanished into the darkness, and his hair was blowing free.

"Sandburg!" O'Neill screamed over the wind which now tore through the small clearing.

"Colonel?!" Carter called through the radio.

"Keep Daniel back!" O'Neill yelled at her. "Sandburg, get your ass back here now! Teal'c! Grab him!" O'Neill had scrambled up to his knees, but each time he tried to stand, his footing slipped in the loose rock.

Teal'c struggled to move forward, choosing to remain on hands and knees as he fought against the wind. Dust stung his eyes, and the wind grew stronger as he approached the lake, but he fought his way to the edge. However, the moment Teal'c touched the water, he flew backwards, over O'Neill's head and landed in a short, squat tree. His symbiote screamed in pain, and for a few seconds, Teal'c could do nothing but clutch his stomach as the creature writhed.

"Get to the trees," O'Neill called, his weapon clutched in one hand as he scrambled, one hand on the ground as he awkwardly retreated. Teal'c pulled himself out of the branches of the tree. His staff weapon still lay near the shore, but he did not believe he could easily recover it. Teal'c looked over, and O'Neill was taking a position behind a low hill.

The wind rose, lifting a veil of dirt and sand between them and Blair, but the surface of the lake itself was a dark, still mirror that reflected a bright sun and doubled Blair's presence. Teal'c moved toward O'Neill, and the two Tol leaders had joined him behind the hill, each clutching their loose clothing to themselves lest they be stripped by the wind.

"Was this expected?" Teal'c asked Lianch.

The Tol man shook his head. "Storms sometimes come up when our bermiddlt is here. The village is braced for a flood, but I've never seen anything like this."

Teal'c looked to O'Neill for direction. "Get back to the gate. Request SG3 and 11, and haul Danny back to Earth even if you have to zat him to do it!" O'Neill yelled. Teal'c could hear Daniel protesting that order over the radio, but given the Bermid'cate's reaction to the presence of Blair Sandburg, Teal'c did not want to know how it would react to yet another potential shaman. With a nod to O'Neill, Teal'c worked his way back toward the path, his head hung low to protect his eyes from the blowing dust.
Teal'c had believed this mission to be dangerous, but he had no idea that time would prove him so correct. Once he was within the safety of the trees, Teal'c risked a look back. Blair had moved farther into the lake, and his head was tilted to the side as though listening. Teal'c did not like to think of what he might be listening to. When he got to Earth, he would make another argument to General Hammond regarding the inclusion of Jim Ellison. However first, he had to reach the gate. Teal'c set off at a steady run.

27. Twenty-seven

Carter and Daniel stood near the same tree, and the moment Teal'c turned the bend, he could see that Carter was standing with her body between Daniel and the path to the Bermid'cate. The woman was far too wise to trust Daniel to keep himself out of harm's way when others' lives might be in danger.

"Let us go," Teal'c called, gesturing for Daniel to proceed him on the trail. They had to return to the Stargate as soon as possible. So far, the storm was limited to the Bermid'cate and showed no sign of causing death or destruction. Teal'c did not trust that it would remain so.

"We can't just leave them," Daniel protested when Teal'c reached him. Carter looked from Teal'c to Daniel with concern. Teal'c knew that rational discussion or debate would not ever convince Daniel to leave a man behind. Bending slightly, he caught Daniel in the stomach and tossed him over a shoulder and continued running.

"Teal'c!" Daniel yelled.

"Colonel, I'm on my way!" Carter called into her radio, leaving Teal'c to deal with Daniel and his ire.

"I do not have time to discuss this," Teal'c said, reminding himself that Daniel did not wish to be treated as a warrior. He wished to be treated as a cha'til... with respect. One would scoop up a cha'til and remove them from danger. Teal'c was not sure how the respect fit in with that. The sun made him squint as it glared off the rocks, but even more disturbing, a wind now stirred the dust. He could not tell if this was a side-effect of the storm at the Bermid'cate or was unrelated. The Tol elders had said that the weather was often affected by the shaman visiting the holy place, so it was not unreasonable to expect this great disturbance to reach beyond the Bermid'cate itself.

"Put me down!" Daniel yelled, adding a few choice phrases in a language Teal'c did not recognize. Teal'c reached a turn in the path and eyed the slight incline. He would be slower carrying his burden. Stopping, Teal'c bent over and placed Daniel back on his feet.

"I'm not leaving Jack and Blair," Daniel said, crossing his arms over his chest in defiance. He did not attempt to push past Teal'c, but then he had to know that he would not be allowed to pass. Teal'c struggled for a moment with words. He knew what to say to a warrior and what to say to a cha'til, but he was unsure what to say to Daniel.

"Your presence may worsen this energy field," Teal'c began. He could tell by the stubborn look on Daniel's face that it was not enough. "Your argument slows me down in my mission to summon others for assistance," Teal'c added, and that did work.

"This argument isn't over," Daniel warned as he started up the slight hill at a steady run. Teal'c ran at his side.

"Your presence worries O'Neill; you would be safer on Earth," Teal'c said as they jogged to the top
of the hill. The Stargate was visible in the distance—a round circle that cast a short shadow in the midday sun.

"Tough. Jack will live. I'm not staying on Earth," Daniel said, but he kept up his running pace.

"You have many skills, but they do not extend to this. You should not be at risk when there is no need," Teal'c countered. Daniel was starting to breathe heavy, so he did not answer immediately. Even Teal'c could feel the dust choking him with every breath, and Daniel had far more breathing problems than he did.

"I'll interview the people then," Daniel wheezed, and Teal'c did not continue the conversation because it seemed unfair to talk when Daniel could not easily use words. The trip to the Bermid'cate had been downhill and the stroll had seemed significantly shorter than this return trip. The sky slowly turned a soft shade of pink as the dust gathered. When he glanced over his shoulder, Teal'c could see a column of dust rising from behind them.

"Colonel O'Neill, does the phenomenon grow worse?" Teal'c called over the radio.

"Not so much, but it's not getting any better, either," O'Neill answered, and Teal'c could hear the howls of the wind through the trees behind him. Teal'c would much prefer to be there still, his weapon trained on any potential threats, but that had not been the mission to which O'Neill had assigned him.

"Conditions out there?"

"A mild dust storm appears to approach," Teal'c said, looking at the gathering clouds in the distance.

"Lianch says to be prepared for flooding. Avoid any areas with cliffs because the water can undercut the ground so it goes out from under you."

"Understood," Teal'c agreed.

"How's Blair?" Daniel called in his radio despite his obvious difficulty breathing.

"He's acting like he's in a trance, but it looks like the center of this thing is the safest place to be," O'Neill answered. Teal'c doubted very much that O'Neill even believed that, but at least the dangers Blair faced were not to be compounded with physical injury as well.

"We are at the Stargate," Teal'c radioed as they finally reached the Stargate. O'Neill did not answer, and Teal'c hurried to the device to dial home. Daniel stumbled, and Teal'c offered a hand, but Daniel waved off his offer and sank to his knees. Daniel might not see himself as a warrior, but his willingness to push himself past physical pain had earned him the respect of one even if he did not want the title.

Teal'c dialed.

"Jack, I'm going through with Teal'c, and then I'm returning to interview the villagers for any historical references to anything like this," Daniel gasped into the radio. Teal'c finished dialing and the Stargate flashed to life; however, he waited until Daniel and O'Neill settled the matter of Daniel's return. For a second, the radio was silent on the matter. Then the signal opened, the roaring of the wind coming through just before Colonel O'Neill's voice.

"Danny, you get caught in this whirl-wind, and I'm going to..." O'Neill's voice petered out, no doubt because he could not think of a threat dire enough.
"I'll keep clear!" Daniel agreed, not allowing O'Neill to finish his threat.

Teal'c hurried to Daniel's side, getting a hand under the man's arm to help him the last few steps. He would not offer a warrior such assistance when the other could clearly manage on his own but, like O'Neill, Teal'c had been trying hard to not judge Daniel by the standards of a warrior. Daniel's breathing was rough from the dust in the air and a cha'til who suffered such would always be assisted. It occurred to Teal'c that he would offer similar help to a tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah.

"Thanks," Daniel offered him a smile, not even protesting the assistance. Teal'c smiled back and the two of them entered the wormhole.

"Unscheduled return for SG-1," the loudspeaker announced as they stepped through. Warriors had their weapons trained on the gate, and Teal'c moved down the ramp with deliberate speed.

"We must speak with General Hammond," he offered the new commander of SG-3.

The door to the Gateroom opened and General Hammond stepped in. "Report."

"Blair Sandburg entered the waters of the Bermid'cate and triggered some sort of energy field. O'Neill requests SG3 and 11," Teal'c offered. SG3 was a military unit, but SG11 were engineering and scientific personnel. Teal'c hoped that they did not need to turn to Tau'ri engineering to retrieve Blair from the waters of the Bermid'cate because he did not believe it would actually work.

"That explains it," General Hammond said.

"General?" Daniel stepped forward and removed his hat, hitting it against his leg so that dust rose like a cloud.

"I just got off the phone with Detective Ellison. I don't know how he found out anything, but he is threatening to go public with the entire program if we don't return Blair to him immediately. According to him, he has collected evidence which would interest the mainstream press. He says that even if no one buys the alien conspiracy story, they're going to get documentation on money, personnel and energy disappearing into the mountain."

"Kelso," Daniel said softly.

"Probably, but right now we don't have time to worry about who helped him collect information, assuming he actually does have something," the general answered.

"But he signed that agreement."

"I don't think he cares about the agreement or the possibility of a jail sentence right now, and he's promising to have a friend take everything public immediately if he disappears."

"Disappears?" Daniel said the word dismissively, but his incredulous smile slowly faded. "General?"

"If I thought he was bluffing, I would order him picked up until he calmed down enough to discuss this, but right now, I don't think he's bluffing." General Hammond turned to the leader of SG3. "Colonel, you have thirty minutes to prepare your team. Have SG11 recalled, they are to be on deck in one hour."

"Yes, sir," Colonel Reynolds answered with a sharp salute that the general returned.

General Hammond turned to head back out of the departure room, and Teal'c followed. Daniel was cleaning his glasses, wiping them against his dirty shirt as he tried to follow, and Teal'c allowed him
to go first so that he might keep an eye on Daniel to ensure that he did not walk into any doors.

"I need to head back with SG3," Daniel told the general.

"What does Colonel O'Neill think?" General Hammond asked. He stopped near the stairs to turn and study Daniel.

"That I need to interview the villagers and stay far away from the Bermid'cate."

General Hammond glanced over to Teal'c, but he remained silent, waiting for Hammond to make his decision on this issue so that he could bring up his own concerns.

"Get new gear," the general said with a sigh. Teal'c suspected that he would rather keep Daniel on Earth, but the general rarely contradicted O'Neill's orders.

"I believe we should send Jim Ellison as well." Teal'c watched the shock on General Hammond's face.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

Teal'c had to admit that he knew less about Bermid'cate than he did about tao qua ca tec'ma te' i cal mah, but he could no longer ignore his gut-level belief that Blair Sandburg needed his partner. However, discussion of spirituality did not impress the people of the Tau'ri. Teal'c had always turned to Carter to guide him when he was lost, and so he followed her lead this time. "The stories of my people say that those who are influenced by the energies of beings from other dimensions may be pulled into those dimensions."

"Like when Oma Desala helped the monk at her temple to ascend," Daniel hurried to say. "The Tol people think that if a shaman touches you and invites you to become a shaman, the Bermid'cate is dangerous, so it might be a matter of shifting someone just a little out of phase. If the Bermid'cate represents some sort of weakening of the dimensional borders, it would make sense that a person who had already been affected might be affected even more."

The general looked from one of them to the other. "Shifting a person out of phase?"

"Not enough to cause invisibility," Teal'c admitted. The explanation sounded oddly plausible. "The Jaffa stories say that one who has started this shift to another dimension must be called back by someone familiar to them."

Daniel was already nodding in agreement. "Which is not surprising. Most cultures have the concept of a talisman. When a person meditates, this object, usually something that's significant to them and worn all the time, gives them a focus so that they can find themselves again. If a person doesn't have an object which is important enough for them to recognize, even if they're partially phased out of this reality, it may take a familiar person to help them find their way back."

"Jim Ellison is certainly one to whom Blair feels very close," Teal'c finished. He watched as General Hammond frowned in confusion before his expression cleared.

"Have you cleared any of this through Colonel O'Neill?"

"I didn't even think of it until now," Daniel said with a hopeful expression.

"I'm not sure that adding an angry detective to this will improve the situation."

"Sir." Daniel reached out and stopped General Hammond from continuing up the stairs. "Ellison
already knew something was wrong with Blair. He was there when Incacha touched Blair, and he lived with Incacha in Peru before either of them met Blair. If Incacha was like Oma Desala, an ascended being, there's a good chance that whatever energy is affecting Blair on that planet, it's also affecting Ellison here."

"Which could pose a security risk if not an actual conduit by which this energy could find its way back to Earth," General Hammond said slowly. "It's possible. You call Ellison and use this act you have to convince him to get to McChord, and I'll get him on a plane. We can have him here in two hours." General Hammond turned and headed up the stairs much more quickly than normal.

"Do you have his number?" Teal'c asked.

"I do," Daniel said before he turned and raced down the hall toward the nearest office area. An airman flattened himself against the wall to allow Daniel to pass, and Teal'c hurried after him.

"Need the phone," Daniel said in way of an apology as he rushed the office of a young, uniformed woman Teal'c did not recognize. Daniel practically lay on her desk and grabbed for her phone.

"Sir?" she asked as she stood up.

Daniel ignored her and dialed. "Come on, pick up Ellison." He punched the speakerphone, and Teal'c could hear the ringing.

"Ellison," an unhappy voice snapped on the other end.

"It's Daniel Jackson from the mountain. I need to talk to you."

"Where's Blair?" Ellison demanded.

Daniel traded a look with Teal'c. To discuss the Stargate over an unsecured line was a security breach that the general would not be able to ignore.

"He is walking the path of the tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah," Teal'c answered, hoping that Blair had discussed such matters with his partner.

"The what?" Ellison demanded.

Daniel sighed. "He decided to take a little trip to see Incacha," Daniel tried. Ellison sucked in his breath. "And we would like to take you to him, but that means you have to get here as fast as you can."

"He's there? In Colorado?" Ellison didn't sound convinced.

"Sort of," Daniel said. "We can get you to him in the blink of an eye from here." Daniel cringed, an action which Teal'c did not understand until he heard Ellison's response.

"You sons of bitches. When I get my hands on O'Neill I'm going to strangle him with his own intestines. Is he there? If Blair isn't alright..."

"He is not alright," Teal'c interrupted before this could go further. "He believed that he was in no danger despite the warnings he was offered. But the path he is walking poses a great danger, and he requires an anchor, someone to show him how to return to himself."

"Fuck," Ellison breathed. "I thought you were going to try to keep him out of trouble." Ellison now sounded more weary than angry.
"I did attempt. He is hard to contain." The rough laugh from Ellison's end of the phone sounded almost like a sob.

"Ellison," Daniel interrupted. "We need you here. If you can get to McChord, we have a plane waiting."

"So, I should throw myself on your mercy? Your brass is going to want me to disappear after that call I just finished making. My captain is about ready to put me in a safe house just to make sure I don't mysteriously vanish, and you want me to turn myself over to the nearest military base?"

"Blair needs it," Teal'c said quietly.

"We aren't trying to trick you. We need you here," Daniel added.

The phone was silent for several minutes. The woman whose office they had commandeered watched in confusion, and Teal'c could understand. He often felt the same. Six months ago, he would have said with great confidence that Ellison did not value Blair Sandburg enough to risk his freedom. Now, Teal'c believed he would. The confusion lay in the fact that Teal'c still did not understand their relationship.

"I'll be at the base in twenty minutes, full sirens running. You get me a pass at that gate or I'll run the fucking thing over with my truck." Ellison hung up on them.

"He's in a good mood," Daniel said sarcastically as he punched the button to disconnect the speakerphone. "Sorry about that," he offered the woman as he sat up and attempted to replace the papers and files he had disarranged on her desk.

"It's fine, sir," she said as she moved forward to rescue the remaining piles. "I had been warned to expect the unexpected."

Teal'c nodded in approval at her calm. "I shall inform the general that Ellison will be joining us while you request new gear," Teal'c told Daniel. Daniel smiled at him and gave him a thumbs up. Hopefully Ellison would arrive in time to help Blair Sandburg.

28. Twenty-eight

Blair watched the colors slide across the surface of the lake like oil—reds and blues and greens so vivid that Blair had to reach out and touch them. But each time his finger touched the water, the color wisped away and Blair had to follow it deeper into the water.

The air had grown strangely still, and the water was a mirror, undisturbed by even the smallest ripple except where Blair's fingers broke the surface. Then rings would grow and spread and then slowly vanish into the mirror.

"Oh man, this is... this is so totally cool."

"The beauty of the universe is deeper than we see," a woman's voice offered. Blair looked over at a nice-looking woman in her forties who was studying him. She was standing with the bottom of her white dress floating on the dark water.

"White?" Blair asked. "So, should I assume you're using the western symbolism of white as purity or
the Chinese meaning of white—death?"

"Is there a difference?" she asked, a small smile on her lips. Blair could feel a deep sense of peacefulness drift over him, and he had to shake his head just to avoid falling asleep as his body relaxed.

He cleared his throat and struggled to focus his thoughts. Symbolism, that's what they had been talking about. "Oh man, totally. I remember dead. It wasn't all that pure. Actually, it smelled a lot like chlorine."

"It can be," she said as she looked around. Blair couldn't seem to look away from her. "If you immediately know the candlelight is fire, then the meal was cooked a long time ago."

Blair nodded at her words. "Totally. Truth is found in confusion because life is an illusion, so anything that seems to make sense doesn't." That concept was fairly well established in a number of philosophies going back hundreds of years, but the woman turned and smiled at him as though Blair had just found the cure for cancer. "So, you're Oma Desala," Blair guessed. "You know, I was supposed to be meeting the Tol ancestors. I don't think I actually expected anything other than a trip to a new world, but I really didn't expect to see you here."

"How deep is the river if you cannot see the bottom?"

"Deep enough to fucking drown in," Blair shot right back. The answer seemed to amuse her. She turned to face him.

"I am a Tol ancestor."

Blair narrowed his eyes. "Okay, I'm a big fan of synergy and the universe having meaning, but that would be a little too much coincidence," Blair said with a snort.

"There is more out there. When the mind is enlightened, the body matters not."

Blair backed up a step, and the ripples rose and grew until they surrounded them both in towering walls of black, and when those walls finally dropped, Blair found himself in the New Mexico desert, the distant mountains defining the edge of the desert and gray-green plants dotting the rock landscape.

"I know this place," Blair frowned as he studied a lightning-struck tree.

"To rise above this is to know a new universe, to explore worlds you do not know." Oma stepped forward, her dress blowing in the soft desert breeze.

Blair's chest hurt. He reached up and rubbed his breastbone, aware of a dull aching in his lungs that called to him. The light flashed, as if the sun were a lightbulb flickering and threatening to burn out, and then it turned blue. It stained the desert with blue light, turning the distant mountains a surreal purple.

"Can you let go of that which traps you on this earth?"

A mirage of Jim wavered in the heat and then solidified. "It's not like I need you glued to my side. Sandburg, idiot! It's just getting a little too claustrophobic around here for me, Chief. I don't know if I'm ready to take that trip with you. Perfect for another train wreck in the ongoing disaster that is your love life. Why don't you try using your head for something other than a punching bag, all right? You neo-hippie witch doctor punk, I could slap you right now with larceny and false impersonation. Why did I let you drag me down here?" With each word, Jim stepped closer, his face becoming a mask of
anger. Blair backed away, his guts clenching in the face of Jim's obvious wrath.

"Whoa, hey, let's just talk about this," he said, his hands held up in surrender. Blair stumbled back against a rock, and nearly fell on his ass. The rock in question turned and then started standing, and Blair scrambled to get away. Then the rock turned, and Blair realized that it was actually Incacha.

"He carries many wounds," Incacha said, his eyes on Jim. From the floor of the desert, an oasis rose, tall trees and the smell of leaf rot and rain soaked the air even though Blair was still standing on the dry rock of the New Mexico desert. Jim stood for a second, and then he turned and began circling. His civilian clothes morphed into military fatigues, and a red stain appeared on his arm. Blair gasped as bodies appeared on the ground, the smoking skeleton of a wrecked helicopter shimmering into reality.

Jim dropped to his knees and pressed his hand against another man's chest.

"Damn it, Sarris, you do not have permission to die. You hold on, understand?" Jim asked. His voice was rough, and his eyes darted around the jungle. Sarris made a strangled, gurgling noise.

"Cap, Cap," another voice called.

"I'm right here, Peters. We just need to hold on for the rescue team."

"Cap, there's something crawling on my leg," the voice called more desperate now. "Jim pulled his hand back from Sarris' chest and the blood flowed. Sarris made a desperate gurgle, but Jim turned and hurried to the far side of the clearing.

"Fuck. Don't move," Jim said as he pulled his handgun.

"Cap!"

"Damn it, Peters, just don't move. Jim waited a second, and then he fired the gun. Peters gave a short scream, and then Jim was moving forward, pulling a huge snake off and throwing its headless body closer to the helicopter. "Look at it this way, soldier, fresh meat," Jim offered weakly before he moved back to Sarris. But even Blair could tell the man was dead. So this was Veronica Sarris' father, the man who Veronica believed Jim had allowed to die. Blair watched as Jim's face contorted with pain. He rubbed his hand over his features and the expression vanished.

"Cap, is he okay?" Peters called.

"He'll be fine, Peters. His breathing has evened out and the bleeding has slowed," Jim lied. He walked over and pulled the blanket out from under Sarris' feet and spread it out over the man, leaving his head uncovered and pressing his head to the side so that the empty eyes faced away from Peters.

"Oh Jim," Blair breathed.

The oasis vanished under a flare of brilliant white light. Oma was standing there, her white dress billowing as the wind picked up. "Pain is an illusion, a trap with teeth to gnaw the bones of the unwary."

"But Jim..." Blair frowned. It suddenly occurred to him that everything the mirage had just said were words Jim had spoken to him. "It's not like that."

Oma tilted her head to one side, either questioning him or trying to understand him, Blair wasn't sure which.
The world shimmered for just a moment, but it was long enough for Blair to catch the outline of the temple of the Sentinels. Jim had to go there alone. Blair looked over at Incacha, waiting for him to explain that, but Incacha only watched him with this expectant look that Blair didn't understand.

"Man, help me out here," Blair asked Incacha. "Why did he leave me behind? Why wouldn't he take that trip with me?" Blair could hear a distant wolf howl, but other than that, it was silent. The wind stilled, and the world slowed to a full-stop. Incacha just watched him silently.

From a distance, Blair could hear laughter. An older man with jowls and a suit that screamed 'middle management' stepped out of nowhere. "This one is interesting," he commented with a look that made Blair bristle and want to defend himself.

"Go away," Oma Desala said sharply.

"Name's Jim, funny enough." The man offered his hand, and Blair took it without thinking. The moment his hand touched, the man's face shimmered and a black jackal's head appeared. Blair backed away from the man as fast as he could.

"You shouldn't be here," Oma said as she stepped into the new man's path.

He looked at her, smiled, and gave a half shrug. "It's not against the rules. Besides, he found his own way here, so it's not like you have any prior claim. So, Sandburg, how are you liking your trip to the higher realms?"

"Not higher, just different," Blair disagreed as he watched the interplay between Oma and the not-Jim. This was familiar. The two eyed each other as adversaries. Not-Jim had the smug confidence of a criminal who knew that the police wouldn't find any evidence; he was Ventriss, only older and somehow more powerful. Oma tried harder to hide her feelings, but Blair could sense the frustration.

"Not higher," Oma agreed as she turned her back on Not-Jim. "But more powerful, less limited by the flesh. Lightning flashes, sparked showers, in one blink of an eye, you have missed seeing."

"Whoa, I'm not missing anything here. Okay, maybe it's time for me to wake up because this is way more than I bargained for. Seriously, this was supposed to be a fun little side trip. Someone slipped me acid somewhere along the way," Blair gave a rough laugh as he backed slowly away from Not-Jim and Oma and Incacha who still watched silently. Oma silently followed, her form sliding though Incacha's, but that seemed fair since Incacha was dead. Then again, Oma was probably dead, too. Blair's head throbbed.

"O'Neill? Feel free to drag me back through the Stargate now," Blair called, but no matter what direction he looked, he could only see the empty landscape of the New Mexico desert.

"Young Blair," a new voice greeted him. Blair turned to find Roland Atole watching him, his dark hair pulled back into a traditional braid. He'd been a friend of the man Naomi had dated when they lived in New Mexico. "It took you a while, didn't it?" he asked with a smile. "I told you that ten was just too young, but you never did listen well. I didn't think it would take you this long to figure out how to get back here, though."

"What?" Blair was fairly sure someone had slipped him a whole lot of acid. Roland smiled at him, brilliant white teeth with one prominently missing.

"I told Naomi that you had more than a touch of the spirits in you. But these two... they aren't telling the whole truth."

"The flesh is a lie, dooming you to walk the path of dust," Oma said seriously, and Blair didn't doubt
that she believed that. Roland, however, didn't seem to be buying the company line.

"Some of us like the flesh and the dust." He crouched down and ran his fingers over the desert floor. "Remember when I taught you to spot a snake track?" he asked.

Blair smiled, suddenly feeling ten years old and so proud at finding his first winding trail in the dirt. "Oh man, totally."

Not-Jim gave a mean laugh. "Come on? A snake trail? That's what gets you excited? Oma has picked some real losers, but you take the cake, kid. Then again, she didn't really pick you. You found your way here by yourself, which is a bit of a problem because it means you can't just follow her back. I have better things to do with my time." With that, he vanished.

Roland shook his head sadly. "Did I ever tell you of Child of the Water?" he asked. Blair shook his head and moved closer to the man, crouching down in the dust next to him. "His mother hid him under a fire, afraid that Giant would eat him as he had eaten her other children, as he ate all the deer that Killer of Enemies hunted. She hid him until one day he demanded to go out hunting with his older brother, Killer of Enemies. His mother did not want him to go."

"She thought he'd get killed," Blair said, vaguely remembering the story. Roland nodded.

"He was safe under her fire. But as long as he stayed there, he could not change the world."

"So he went hunting with his brother," Blair said, still uncertain, but hearing the words like an echo in his memory. Roland smiled and nodded. "And when he and his brother had hunted a deer, the giant appeared and took it away from them."

"He did," Roland agreed. Reaching out he wiped out the winding snake trail with his hand. "And the giant insulted Child of Water by asking to see his arrows and then wiping them on his butt."

Blair laughed. "I remember that part."

"You would," Roland said as he reached over and shoved at Blair's shoulder. Blair smiled at him. "So Child of Water challenged him."

Oma stepped forward, her dress once again billowing in the wind. "Though the river tells no lies, the dishonest standing on the shore, still hears them."

Roland slapped his hands on his jeans to clear the dust. "A story is not a lie, and Blair isn't foolish enough to think he's hearing one. I might speak in metaphor, but truth is not as simple or as complicated as you think," he said. Blair looked from one to the other, and all of a sudden Roland aged. Now he wasn't as Blair remembered him, a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark skin and sharp eyes. He was old and withered, his skin faded and his white hair cut short.

Oma stepped forward, offering her hands to Roland. "The path you walk could be stained with stars."

Roland struggled to stand, and Blair stepped to his side, offering the old man his hand. Roland smiled. "This is my land and my people. I don't want to walk the stars. That's not the only path; it's just the only one open to you."

"Oh man, that's it," Blair said as he looked at Oma. "You're trying to convince people to walk your path. You want Daniel and me with you, but what if that's not what we want?"

"You have to make the choice for yourself, I only offer the path."
"Well then, that would be a 'no' vote from me. And man, if you even go asking Daniel, Jack is going to have your head on a platter, and I'm not so sure that's a metaphor.

"You would rather die?" she asked, clearly confused. Actually, it felt good to confuse her for a change.

"I would rather stay home, whatever that brings," Blair said.

Oma vanished in a flare of light. "Okay, my quota for weird is officially full for the day. Where is the exit sign?" Blair asked.

Roland frowned at him. "You are a shaman; it is your task to divide the vision from the reality."

"Man, I am a doctor of anthropology."

"And a shaman," Roland said. "From the time you first appeared on the reservation, those of us with the sight could feel you. Have you so lost yourself to white-man's science that you can no longer walk your path?"

"He has," Incacha said as he stepped forward. "And time runs short, young shaman."

"Okay, that's not sounding good," Blair said, his stomach knotting in that familiar twist he'd felt when he was on that oil rig watching the time tick down on the bomb.

"It is not."

"So, why not show me the exit?" Blair asked. Roland and Incacha just looked at him. "Okay, you two are losing points on the helpfulness scale," Blair said as he looked around at the landscape. The mountains looked equally far in any direction, and there was an odd lack of human structures—no telephone poles or electric lines or handy highways with some helpful trucker passing through.

"When lost, stay put and wait for rescue. When lost in the spirit plane... what? Wait until you sober up?" Blair tried joking. Neither Roland nor Incacha looked amused. "Okay, fine, I get it. I need to stop with the denial," Blair said, holding his hands up in surrender. "Never say you have to hit me more than six or seven times with a really big stick to get me to understand. So, I'm a shaman, and as a real-life shaman, visiting this Bermid'cate was slightly, monumentally stupid. Got it. So, some help please?"

"How does a shaman prepare for a journey?" Roland asked. Blair was a big fan of the Socratic method, but right now, he was about as frustrated as his students got with him when he used it. He silently made a vow to never again torture students with pointless questions. However, Roland and Incacha did not look like they were going to just blurt out an answer for him.

"Fine," Blair sighed. "It often starts with a repetitive sound like a drum or rattle or didgeridoo. The shaman listens to the sound of the tribe, letting the world slowly fall away. Then again, a lot of shamans use peyote, salvia divinorum, psilocybin mushrooms or other hallucinogens, so letting go of the real world is not really that hard. They focus on a goal or a destination and slowly move into a world that isn't all that real." Blair looked around. "Man, I have the imagining the unreal world part down."

"It's not unreal," Roland corrected him, and once again he was the strong man of Blair's memories. "It's just not quite what others see."

"Right," Blair said. "Okay, so at the end of your journey, you return to your starting point, thank the spirits for their help and visualize an exit. I can do that."
Blair walked to the spot where he thought he'd been standing when the wall of water had washed away the real world and he'd ended up in New Mexico. "Roland, seriously man, thank you. Not just for today, either. You were the first person to ever treat me like a human being and not just Naomi's kid."

"You're a good soul. If you and your Sentinel ever want to leave your city, the tribe would be glad to have a Watchman return to them."

"You know Sentinels?" Blair asked.

Roland shook his head. "Aren't you supposed to be focusing on something, young pup?"

Blair blushed. "Oh, right. Incacha, thank you for taking care of Jim."

Incacha nodded. "The night he left you to walk into the temple alone...."

"Whoa, hey, you do not have to explain to me," Blair hurried to say. He held a hand up to stop Incacha because that was one wound that did not need reopening.

"I do, young wolf," Incacha said. "Enquiri is a Sentinel of the tribe, he must see farther and hear more than any other member, but to guide him, you must also see and hear. A guide who cannot follow his Sentinel part of the way on the path of the senses cannot guide."

"I can see that," Blair agreed. He did need to be able to see something in order to tell that Jim had zoned because he had seen details or distances that weren't possible for Blair.

"But Enquiri also had to see. You are the Shaman of the tribe, you just walk farther into worlds which do not exist for others, so to guide you, he must know how to walk those worlds. He will never have the power here that you do, but he must walk part of the way on your path to guide you."

"So, you wanted Jim on a vision quest?" Blair asked, not really sure that made any sense. Then again, he was only 80% sure any of this was real, so there was still a possibility that his brain was clutching at straws and trying to explain away the most painful part of his history with Jim. Incacha nodded.

"Okay," Blair said with a sigh. "On with the thanking of spirits. Oma, thank you for the offer, and please don't take offense that it slightly creeps me out. Guy who is not-Jim, um..." Blair struggled to find anything to thank that guy for. "Thanks for stopping by," he settled for. "and Spirit-Jim, thank you for sharing your memories of the crash, and I totally forgive you for saying all that shitty stuff because, man, you really do have some issues." Blair finished and then closed his eyes and tried to visualize an exit. He imagined the emergency exit at a movie theater with the panic bar on the door and the glowing red sign above it. He opened his eyes and found himself still staring at nothing but desert.

"I have issues?" Jim asked as he appeared next to Blair.

"Yes, you have issues," Blair answered. "Serious issues."

Jim crossed his arms over his chest. "At least I know that the more powerful a shaman, the more he needs to use a talisman so that if he gets lost in the next world, he can find his way home."

Blair rolled his eyes. "Man, you don't even believe in shamanism, so don't start in with the lecture, Ellison."

Jim looked away with a slight blush on his face. "Chief, I don't believe in witchcraft."
"No shit," Blair answered. Yeah, it might not be the politically correct answer to give a spirit in a vision, but that's just the mood he was in. Jim's biases against the supernatural were pretty well documented.

"I don't believe in it, so if you want to get a wand and start waving it around, I don't care," Jim snapped. "Hell, I'll carve you the wand as long as you don't care that I'm then going to laugh at you. I hate this shamanic crap because I know it's real."

"You... what?" Blair crossed his arms and faced off against Jim.

Jim sighed and rubbed his hand over his face, a gesture that looked so much like when he had rubbed his face in that memory of Sarris' death, that Blair couldn't help it, he reached out and rested his hand against Jim's arm. "Chief, I lived with the tribe, with Incacha. I watched him return from the spirit world with cuts on his arms, so exhausted that he couldn't walk. And all I could do was sit by him and call him home when he was ready. I couldn't protect him." Jim closed his mouth, and his jaw bulged as though the emotions trapped within sought escape only to have Jim swallow them again.

"Oh man, fuck," Blair breathed as he realized what that would do to Jim. "You didn't want me to be a shaman."

"Fuck no. I wanted you safe. I didn't want you here," Jim waved a hand at the desert, and Blair realized that Incacha and Roland had vanished.

"Jim?" Blair reached up and cupped Jim's face. His eyes were shadowed and deep, and he had lost weight. "Jim, are the senses okay?"

Jim gave a rough laugh and then reached up and pressed his own hand against Blair's, trapping it. "My senses are fine. I told you that they're slowly losing strength, but they'll come back when you do."

"Then what?" Blair asked. He studied Jim's face, but the man had shut down. "What?" Blair demanded even louder, but Jim just took a shuddering breath. Blair yanked his hand back and threw his arms wide. "What?!" Thunder cracked overhead and a hawk went screaming into the air.

"You don't get it," Jim said tightly. "Incacha, this isn't fair. This isn't his path."

"It would be if you would stop blocking him," Incacha said as he rose from the ground. Around him jungle plants started growing in the middle of the desert.

"He's a scientist." Jim crossed his arms over his chest, and Blair looked from one to the other. He recognized the echoes of his own words.

"I'm a scientist and a shaman," Blair said as he closed the distance and rested his hand on Jim's back. Jim shivered, but didn't push him away.

"If you are a shaman, then this is your world, not Enquiri's," Incacha told him. Blair frowned in confusion, but the wind came up and Incacha just blew away like dust.

"Whoa, seriously freaky imagery," Blair said with a shiver.

"Blair, let's go home," Jim said, reaching out for Blair. "Just follow me back, Chief."

"No," Blair said slowly. "No, this is my world. You can't keep me under the fire just because you think the giant is going to eat me," he said firmly. He backed away.
"Giant? Chief, do you feel alright?" Jim asked. He honestly looked worried.

"Not really," Blair admitted. He hadn't felt alright for a while now. Jim quickly stepped to his side and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

"I'm not leaving," Blair said firmly.

"Fine, you're not leaving," Jim sighed. "Shit, why do you have to be so stubborn, Sandburg?"

"Because I am," Blair said. "Why are you so worn? What's wrong?"

Jim's jaw tightened, but the landscape started to fade until the familiar outlines of the loft appeared like a ghost image against the desert. A ghostly Jim was up and pacing, rubbing his neck and looking tired enough to collapse. A black panther screamed, and he turned to glare up at the cat. It peered over the railing and screamed again. Jim walked to the kitchen and turned the coffee maker on even though the morning light wasn't even a twinkle in the windows.

"Why is the cat bothering you?" Blair asked. He looked up at the Jim who had his arm around Blair's shoulders.

Ghost Jim answered. "I never thought I'd miss Sandburg's meditation music." He poked a finger at the cat on the second story. "When Sandburg gets back, you're getting banished to the farthest corner of the spirit world I can find. Go haunt someone else." Ghost Jim sat at the table, and the floor turned to water. Rather than look surprised he let his forehead fall to the table. "I hate this shit."

Blair cocked his head and frowned at the scene. "Oh man, seriously? You're seeing thing?"

"I'm not seeing things," Jim said, and Blair could hear just how close Jim was to exploding with anger. Blair fought to clear any hint of an amused smile from his face. But after all those years of Jim doing the whole avoiding of the weird, it was a little amusing. "I can't control the visions."

"Whoa. I can," Blair said softly.

Jim rolled his eyes and looked disgusted, so Blair figured he had the right answer.

"Oh man, you don't need me for the senses, you need me for the visions."

"I need you for both," Jim admitted, and from the tone, he was not happy making that admission. "Unless I turn off the Sentinel abilities, I need you to guide me back if I lose control of the senses, but I just need you around to control the spirit world."

"So, the guide isn't just the idiot who stands behind the Sentinel randomly saying, 'dial it down' for all eternity?" Blair asked. Okay, that felt good. Truth be told, he was starting to feel like a little bit of an idiot because repeating what Jim already knew was seriously less than helpful. And the very fact that Jim's senses hadn't gone on overload in a semester apart was making Blair question all sorts of things, like why he kept trying to insist Jim needed him.

"Says the guy who's standing neck deep in polluted water about ten minutes away from drowning to death," Jim pointed out dryly.

"What? I'm... oh shit," Blair cursed. "Man, I do not want to drown again. Jim, you've got to get us out of here."

"That's what I'm here for," Jim said with a smug smile.
Blair narrowed his eyes and really studied Jim. "Wait, you really are here, aren't you? You know about me going through the Stargate?"

For a second, Jim just glared at him. "Yeah, I know. And just as soon as I know you're safe, I'm kicking your ass for that one. I may need you to control the spirit world, but you need me to keep control of the physical one while you go spirit walking all over creation. And you need me to come after you when you have your version of a metaphysical zone. Chief, the next time you take off without telling me, I'm handcuffing you and telling Simon to drop you in a holding cell and lose the paperwork."

"O'Neill may help you," Blair said as he realized that going back meant facing the other man.

"O'Neill's not going to be in any shape to help anyone," Jim said viciously.

"Is he okay?"

"For now." From the tone, Jim made it pretty clear that he wasn't going to be okay for long.

"Geez, the return of the Mother Hen," Blair complained softly, but he smiled at Jim. Yep, Jim was overbearing, but Blair wouldn't have it any other way.

"As much trouble as you get in, I have to be," Jim pointed out. "You couldn't even limit the Sandburg zone to one planet, could you?" he asked, taking Blair's hand and pulling him forward.

Blair closed his eyes and just focused on his hand in Jim's. Jim felt warm. "Nope. Man, there are other worlds, other cultures, other myths out there. Do you have any idea how many worlds may have Sentinels?"

"I can't say I care," Jim said dryly. Blair started to shiver, and Jim caught him by the arm, pulling him forward on unsteady feet.

"I bet they aren't as fucked up as the poor souls the military has been screwing up with all their gloom and doom." Blair thought about the two men he'd worked with. By the time Blair had reached them, each had been told that they couldn't control their senses, and both were suffering horribly through the process to turn the senses off. Blair had given them a limited control, but neither one had half the control of Jim.

"The military is good at fucking things up," Jim said, and Blair had the feeling that Jim was talking to someone else.

"Man, I am really cold," Blair complained as he really started trembling. He opened his eyes, and he was back at the Bermid'cate. Tree branches were strewn across the land and several trees had toppled, their roots sticking up toward the sky.

"Just hold on, Chief. Let's get you out of this water," Jim said. Blair blinked as the world shimmered in and out of focus for a second. The sun was dim, a faint red that suggested light more than illuminating the dark, but a dozen floodlights lit the lake. Teal'c and O'Neill were standing on the lake shore, their weapons in hand and the Tol elders were there, a dozen more Tol people behind them. Then again, the military people seemed to have multiplied too. Blair didn't remember nearly this many soldiers being around when he went into the lake.

"The whole point of a Sentinel is to have someone with a strong enough sensory link to this dimension that they don't get lost," Jim said smugly. Blair turned his head and saw Sam Carter sitting on a box with a large machine in front of her. Two more strangers with arm patches that said SG-11 stood near her.
"Blair, are you alright?" Carter asked, standing up.

"He'll be fine," Jim said. However, Blair couldn't feel his legs and Jim ended up getting an arm around Blair's waist and half-carrying him out of the water. "However, he's never coming back to this place. Whatever happened here, it's dangerous for someone like Blair. I don't even want him on this planet again, got it?" Jim demanded as he turned to O'Neill.

"Ellison, I don't want either one of you leaving Earth again."

"Good," Jim said. Blair finally stumbled onto the rock shore. He leaned into Jim's warmth, his wet hair clinging to him, and his vest weighing him down. Teal'c stepped forward and wrapped a thermal blanket around his shoulders, and Jim tucked it around him before pulling Blair close to his side again.

"Ber mittl dt, are you well?" Lianch asked, stepping forward and picking his way over the fallen branches and drifts of sand and dirt that seemed to have randomly appeared since Blair went into the lake.

"Oh man, that was one serious trip."

"Apparently more than even we knew. We would not have exposed you to such danger, ber mittl dt. Lianch turned to O'Neill. "You have our apologies that our holy waters have endangered your ber mittl dt in such a way."

"No problem, man. It was just..."

"It was necessary," Jim finished quietly. "Which does not change that I hate this shit and you are going to pay for going off without me," Jim threatened him.

O'Neill gave a snort of laughter. "And here I thought Ellison was out of line. It turns out he has every reason to be cranky." O'Neill was giving Blair a look that would have made even Simon proud. But Blair did not back down to evil looks from cranky alpha males. He glared back until O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Let's get packed up and get Sandburg out of here before something else happens," he called. The soldiers all jumped to their tasks. Some started unstringing cables from trees, others started packing equipment, and two even started disassembling what looked like a machine gun.

"Oh man, how long was I out there?"

"About seven hours, Chief."

"Whoa, seven hours and I never got around to talking to the Tol ancestors... well, except for Oma Desala, and I am so not sure she tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Were our ancestors unhappy with the proposal, they would have made their voices heard, ber mittl dt," Lianch assured him. "We are most happy to invite your people to come to motorcycle the rocks."

"We appreciate that," O'Neill said. "Right now, I think we need to get our people home."

"Agreed. Our apologies, again," Lianch assured them before backing away and rejoining his people.

"Chief, is something still here?" Jim asked. His hand had been rubbing up and down on Blair's arm, generating warmth, but now he stopped.

"Something like?" Blair asked. He noticed that O'Neill and Teal'c both tightened their hold on their
weapons and retreated from the lake a step.

"Air pressure change," Jim said quietly, as though an enemy might be near enough to hear. Then he grabbed Blair and ran for the trees. Others didn't wait for orders, they scrambled for cover, weapons drawn. Lianch and his people fled into the trees, and Blair could only cling to Jim, trying not to throw up. He was obviously not feeling one hundred percent yet.

A light exploded from the lake, tentacles reaching out from a body, but the light shifted, and then turned so black that the light around it seemed to vanish into it like a black hole. The thing flew at the shore, and Jim laid his body on top of Blair. Gunfire erupted, and Blair covered his head. The familiar laugh made Blair look up, and for a second, the jackal head appeared in the black mass. A man screamed, and Blair scrambled to get out from under Jim.

For a second, Jim held on, but Blair shoved at him, throwing him off before Blair stepped out from behind a tree. "NO!" Blair yelled. Distant thunder rang, and lightning came down, only to vanish into the black center of the being. Blair felt Jim grab his waist, but Jim didn't try to pull him down, he just held on. The black mass turned toward them, accelerating toward their position, and a machine gun rattled.

Blair felt his feet tingle, and he braced as the mass came down on him. "No!" he repeated, throwing his hands up. He felt the darkness slide around him, oil slipping through the cracks in his defenses, and that image inspired Blair to visualize fire. Thunder cracked open the night, lightning flashed so close that Blair could feel the heat of it, and then the night was silent. The Jackal-man who had challenged Oma was gone—not defeated, but gone from the battle.

Blair collapsed to his knees, his body falling on Jim who caught him in the cradle of his arms.

"Medic!" Jim called loudly. Voices shouted and hands pulled at Blair.

"Just let me keep contact with him," Jim was saying. Reality floated like water around him.

"Who calls lightning down on their own position, Ellison? Is he insane? Better yet, how did he do that? Carter?"

"I have no idea, sir. Give me some time, and I'll make up something plausible."

"Medic unit, full and immediate retreat. Logistics, vital equipment only. Tactical, cover and take rear." Reality started bobbing and swaying in a way that really made Blair think he was going to vomit. However, Jim held onto his arm, and Blair clung to that as a lifeline. He wondered if this was how Jim felt when he was zoning and struggling to follow Blair's voice back to reality. If so, Blair so owed Jim about a million apologies because as bad as this felt, if Jim felt anywhere near as bad, he deserved to be cranky about it. But he'd worry about that later. Right now he just desperately didn't want to vomit on himself.

Blair blinked his eyes and found himself staring up at Janet Fraiser. "You know, in some states, this could constitute stalking," she said with a smile.

He couldn't quite descramble his brains fast enough to answer, so he ended up just sort of staring at her owlishly. How had he ended up in SGC again?
"That's my little guppy, always being inappropriate with the women... or the table legs," Jim teased.

"Yeah, yeah, says the man who finds his girlfriends on the most wanted list," Blair retaliated. His throat was raw, and he started coughing. Jim helped him up, sitting on the edge of the bed and urging Blair to lean back against him as he offered a glass of water. Water, shamanic vision, weirdness all around. Oh yeah, he was never living down this. Strangely, Jim wasn't yelling at him... yet.

"At least my women only try to get me put in prison," Jim said dryly. Blair frowned up at him. "Nevermind, I'll fill you in later when you have enough voice to yell at me for not telling you at the time." Jim held the glass against Blair's lips, and Blair brought his hands up over Jim's to steady the glass.

"So, is he going to be okay?" O'Neill asked. Blair opened his eyes and found the colonel standing across the room with a spectacular black eye.

"You didn't..." Blair frowned at Jim, but the man had on his cat that ate the canary expression.

O'Neill gave a huff. "Yeah, you betcha. Of course, on the report I walked into the Stargate because I'm not going to let it be known that a Ranger got a hit in."

"After the stunt with Blair, you're lucky I used a fist. I considered using brass knuckles," Jim threatened. Instead of getting angry, O'Neill shrugged.

"I can't say I'd take it well if someone just about got Danny killed, but I mean it, Ellison. We left our issues on the planet, agreed?"

"Agreed," Jim said, and he actually sounded weirdly okay with that. Blair looked up at Jim suspiciously, wondering what he had planned. A pissed off Ellison could do anything from request an IRS audit to scramble drivers' license information. It might not be exactly legal, but the guys at the station didn't call him Hurricane Ellison because he had a sweet nature.

Blair was still trying to figure out what was going on when he noticed Jim's arm. "Oh man. Shit." Jim's whole arm was streaked red with rough patches of dry, white skin flaking off. "Where are the dials?"

"I have them set low, so it doesn't hurt," Jim assured him, which was not really reassuring.

"No way is that healthy. If you're dialed down, you might not notice how much damage was done."

"No, but I would." Dr. Fraiser stepped closer and held up an IV that Blair just now noticed was taped to Jim's arm. "And before you go off about drugs and holistic medicine, I am using the Sandburg method for irritation in those with Hyperactive Sensory Awareness. Aloe based lotion, low-dose antihistamines to prevent additional irritation and good old-fashioned time."

"She's not a half-bad doctor," Jim said. Blair squirmed around to try and see how far the damage went, but Jim just held on tighter so that Blair was trapped with his upper body mostly leaning back into Jim.

"Why thank you, sir," Dr. Fraiser said with a southern drawl. "But if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have people who are actually sick. An HSA patient with a rash does not warrant medical attention, and I have that from the very latest update of the medical standards and procedures manual."

"My dissertation," Blair breathed. Janet smiled at him and gave him a quick wink before heading out the door. Blair had put that recommendation in his dissertation after one of the HSA patients had overreacted to aggressive medical treatment and nearly died. The historical data showed that it was a
much-too-common phenomenon.

"Looks like you're famous, kid," O'Neill offered from his spot against the wall. Blair was afraid that he might be staying away because of some sort of aggression between him and Jim, but Jim seemed pretty relaxed, and considering that Blair was all but laying on the man, he should know.

"So, is this party open to anyone?" Sam asked from the door. She smiled at Blair. "I thought about bringing you some flowers, but I thought you might like this a little more." She held up a small, wooden carving shaped like a fish. Swirls filled the stomach area with straight lines radiating out to his tail and head.

"Oh man, is that...?" Blair held his hand out.

Teal'c and Daniel followed her into the room. "Indeed it is," Teal'c answered for her. "The Tol people regret your injury, but they wished to send this as a token of their respect for the Tau'ri bermiddlt."

"It's stunning. I couldn't." Blair ran his fingers across the finely carved design.

Daniel leaned forward to look. "It's been a long time since anyone on that planet has seen a fish. I wonder how old that is."

"No way," Blair said, closing his hand around it. "You archeologists do things like chip part off to do carbon dating. So not happening."

"I didn't say anything about testing it!" Daniel defended himself.

"Oh, you were thinking it," O'Neill said. "You're always thinking something archeological."

Daniel rolled his eyes.

"And talking about the need to have a story that doesn't sound insane, I thought we might discuss what happened on the Tol world," O'Neill suggested randomly, either that or Blair wasn't tracking the conversation as well as he should. "And let's get the story straight before we have to have one version for the general."

Blair noticed that Sam looked particularly uncomfortable. "Oh man, you have the job that really sucks, huh?" he asked her.

She looked at him in surprise. "I love my job."

"But you have to make really unscientific things seem scientific, and all this stuff with shamanism?" Blair cringed at how they were going to explain this.

She walked over to the bed Jim had been using before and sat down. "Oh, I don't know. We took some equipment in after you walked into the lake, so I can tell you a few things about the scientific data. I detected an unusual number of Kaluza-Klein gravitons when you were in the lake, and the numbers dropped the moment you came out."

"Meaning..." O'Neill prompted her.

"Sir, normally KK gravitons are produced in particle accelerators when atoms crash into each other. They're produced to create a halo effect so that scientists can study the shape of dimensions predicted by string theory."
Blair sat up. "Really? Whoa, I had no idea that kind of research is going on."

Right away, Sam turned pink and cleared her throat. "Well, it isn't exactly officially going on... yet. But the presence of the gravitons and altered hadrons with valence quarks that I can't even explain given the intrinsic parity and the charge conjugation, I can scientifically prove that something happened out there, and it most likely included and interaction with an alternate dimension as predicted by string theory." She sounded really excited.

Blair blinked at her. He didn't even know half the words she had used. Looking over at Daniel, he found the man had an amused look on his face. Daniel shrugged. "We learn to smile and nod and assume that whatever she says is true," Daniel offered.

"Yep," O'Neill agreed.

"Indeed," Teal'c offered. Blair could almost feel the amusement in the room. Jim tugged at him, and Blair let himself be pulled back to the warmth of Jim's chest.

"So," Jim said once Blair had settled back in place, "you know that you had at least a few visitors there?"

"Visitors? How many?" O'Neill demanded, and the casual body language vanished.

"Oma?" Daniel asked.

"Ask Blair, he's the shaman," Jim offered. Blair turned and glared at the man for throwing him to the wolves. Blair had no idea how to explain this without sounding crazy, and Jim had way more experience with actually being around this whole spiritual world. That was odd. Jim had more experience with the spiritual, even though he loved to hate visions and pretend they didn't exist. But if Jim knew about visions....

"Jim, I need to ask you something. Guys, do you think you could give us a second?" he asked the team. O'Neill and Daniel traded concerned looks.

"Chief, does this have something to do with yesterday?"

Blair considered the answer. "Um, sort of. It has to do with Peru... with Sarris." Blair waited for Jim to push him away and stalk off. Jim did stiffen, his body reacting to the words, but he didn't move off Blair's bed.

"It's okay, Chief. Everyone here is in covert ops, and I guess that includes you now. Ask what you need to ask."

"But you hate..."

"I hate talking about it with people who can't understand what it means to do what I've done," Jim cut him off. That surprised Blair because Jim wouldn't even talk about his covert ops days to Simon, and he'd always thought of Jim and Simon as being about as close as guys got. Jim sighed. "You're my partner, and everyone else here... my guess is that they've had to make some choices they pretty much hate."

"We have," O'Neill said softly. "And we'll have to make more in the future." The tone of the room became suddenly somber.

Blair frowned, not sure if he wanted to do this in front of the SG1 team, but he needed to know how much of the vision had been real before the real Jim had shown up. "After your helicopter went
down.” Blair stopped, hating that he could feel the pain in Jim. "Did Sarris and Peters survive the crash?"

Jim nodded, his body still stiff.

"Sarris, he was bleeding, but you had to shoot a snake that had climbed on Peters, and by the time you got back, Sarris was dead.” Blair remembered the scene so vividly. "And you lied to Peters, told him that Sarris was fine and turned Sarris' head so that Peters wouldn't see he was dead." Blair stopped, concerned by the way the color had gone out of Jim's face.

"I did,” Jim said firmly. "I thought the rescue 'copter would get there before Peters knew any better. It didn't. The bugs got to Sarris before the fever took Peters.” The room was silent. "You had a vision,” Jim said softly, no emotion in his voice, and Blair wasn't sure if that was an improvement over anger or not. But Jim was still clutching Blair close to his chest, so Blair imagined there was some sort of emotion registering behind Jim's stoic façade.

Blair nodded. "Incacha showed me."

Jim closed his eyes for a second and then nodded. "Yeah, he would.” Jim didn't say any more, but knowing it had happened, Blair could put the pieces together pretty easily. Jim never wanted to do that again, he never wanted to see someone he cared about die, to sit with them when they slowly slid away. And every time Blair wandered too far into a vision, that's what he was asking Jim to do, to sit and watch him—guard him—not knowing for sure if Blair would come back.

"Oma wanted me to drown," Blair suddenly realized. Jim's arms tightened around him.

"Oma Desala tried to kill you?” Daniel asked, clearly shocked.

Blair shook his head. "She wanted to help me find a way to ascend."

"Which would kill you," O'Neill pointed in a tone of voice that made his lack of respect for Oma Desala pretty damn clear.

"Jack," Daniel warned.

"Danny, she brainwashes you trying to convince you that you're evil, and she tries to kill Blair. I think that puts her on the morally questionable list."

"Jack!"

"Which, given her interest in you, is not really surprising."

"Don't even—" Daniel started to say.

"And I'm pretty sure that was her trying to fry us at the end, and if it wasn't for Blair and his sudden and weirdly effective control over lightning, we all would have been bug splats on the windshield of the universe."

"Whoa, hey, NO!” Blair interrupted. He had been afraid Daniel and O'Neill were really getting angry with each other, but they both looked at him with curious expressions that didn't show any sign of aggravation at all.

"Blair?” Sam asked. "What is it?"

"That wasn't Oma at the end. Couldn't you see the jackal head?” Blair looked around and everyone,
including Jim, was looking at him like he was just a little bit crazy.

"Jackal head?" O'Neill's tone was a little disbelieving, and Jim's arms tightened a bit, offering a tacit reassurance. "On a jackal or just floating in the white energy person?"

Blair took a second to glare at O'Neill. "Yes, a jackal head. There was someone else there, someone like Oma, who kept popping into my shamanic vision," Blair reined in his temper by trying to pretend that O'Neill was one of the idiotic freshman students he used to teach at Rainier.

"Teal'c?" O'Neill asked.

Blair looked over, and Teal'c had a concerned look on his face. "The jackal represented Anubis, but he was defeated and executed by the System Lords many centuries ago when he became too powerful for any of them to coexist with him."

"Aw, crap. Anyone want to guess what power Annuby went for?" O'Neill asked. "I miss the days when dead meant dead."

"I don't," Jim said softly. He shifted a bit, and Blair had to shift to keep from putting all his weight on one of Jim's arms. It still concerned him that Jim had such a bad rash, but Jim didn't act like he wanted Blair to get off him any time soon. And the truth was that Blair was more than a little comforted by the physical closeness. Once the shamanic vision had passed and Blair realized that he was nearly submerged in water, he had been really bothered by the fact that he had lost all touch with reality. Now he didn't want to let Jim go. He was just lucky that Jim was fairly touchy-feely under normal circumstances and he had his extra-special Mother Hen version of touchy-feeling going right now.

"But Blair." Sam leaned forward, a confused look on her face. "If you didn't ascend, how did you stop Oma or Anubis or whoever it was that went after you at the end? Lieutenant Anderson was badly burned, and you didn't have anything more serious than an electrolyte imbalance."

"No, let's just get the story from the beginning," O'Neill interrupted. Blair looked over his shoulder at Jim. He had a slightly sour expression on his face, but Blair figured that was because he hated shamanistic powers, not because he didn't believe in them. Jim also didn't look like he was going to jump in and do any explaining for Blair. So, Blair started when he first followed the colors into the lake and ended when he'd felt the oil of Anubis sliding over his defenses and he'd imagined fire coming to ignite the oil. By the time he finished, Jim was holding him almost painfully tight and Teal'c was the only member of the SG1 team who didn't look seriously freaked out. When you freaked out people who considered aliens, conspiracies, and alternate realities normal, you really, seriously had issues. The room went silent for several seconds after Blair finished.

"Carter?" O'Neill finally asked.

"Sir?"

"Would you like to translate what he just said into something that isn't going to get us all put on a psych review?"

"Ah..." Carter looked at Blair, took a deep breath, and seemed to brace herself. "Given that we know alternate dimensions were accessed?" she asked weakly. "Okay. String theory postulates that anywhere from six to twenty-six dimensions intersect this one at any given time. Assuming that Oma Desala and this new male you tentatively identified as Anubis are manipulating energy by existing in one of these alternate dimensions, that means it is possible that Incacha and Roland Atole are accessing a separate dimension or set of dimensions. The rules of physics would be different for
each, which might explain why Oma identified her form of ascending as being related to the stars while Roland associated his with the planet."

"Then why did Oma need to use a Stargate on Kheb?" O'Neill asked.

"I have no idea, sir." Carter shook her head. "But if I'm right, these other dimensions intersect with and therefore interact with this dimension. Pure energy, like lightning, would probably be one of the easier elements of this dimension to manipulate if you had access to another set of physics rules as sting theory postulates may exist in other dimensions. Maybe. Honestly, I'm making this up as I go, sir."

Teal'c took a small step forward. "Does Roland Atole still live?" he asked.

"Whoa." Blair blinked for a second. "You know, I have no idea. I hadn't thought about him in years, but he'd be pretty old by now." Blair thought about Roland as he had aged in the vision, smiling out of a wrinkled face. "I think he might be."

"If he lives, he may provide answers," Teal'c pointed out.

"Way to go for the obvious answer the rest of us are so totally missing," Blair said. He started pushing himself up to get out of bed only to have Jim pull him back.

"Oh no. You are going to stay here until your heart rate and body temperature are normal," Jim said firmly.

"Okay, the Mother Hen routine is amusing, but seriously Jim, I'm fine."

"Seriously, Sandburg, you're not," Jim said without letting go. "I saw all the signs--the forgotten meals, you setting an alarm to remind you to go to bed, the way you completely ignored injuries and illnesses and just ended up aggravating them--and I just thought that if I could get you to stay as far away from me as possible that you'd somehow be fine."

"What? Oh man, that is the stupidest piece of logic I've ever heard," Blair said, not even caring that the others were there to hear. Jim's manhandling of him was doing serious damage to his male ego. He squirmed again to get loose, and Jim just threw a leg over his thighs and really pinned him down.

"Forget it, Darwin. Incacha used to do the same thing, and now that you're fully on the path, I'm not about to let you ignore your own body's needs."

"Ellison, do you mind explaining why you're restraining your partner?" O'Neill asked, with just an edge of warning in his voice.

Teal'c nodded. "The tao qua ca tec'ma'te i cal mah cares for others better than himself," he said quietly.

"There's a lot of documented history on that," Daniel nodded. "Some have even been known to starve themselves to death by accident or to just forget to keep breathing."

"Exactly," Jim said. "I may need Blair around to control the spiritual side of things, but it's my job to make sure that he doesn't forget the physical."

"Oh man, you cannot be serious," Blair said as he glared at his partner.

"I don't know, he looks serious to me," O'Neill said. "Actually, if you were in my command, I would be thinking very hard about not asking and reminding you to not tell. Ellison, you might want to
consider how that looks.” O'Neill made a gesture toward the bed where Jim and Blair were. Blair blushed as he realized what it must look like with Octopus Ellison wrapped around him.

"Oh man. Okay, I do not need humiliating here," he hissed.

"Then promise me you'll stay in bed until your vitals are back to normal," Jim said with that thoughtful look on his face, like when he was negotiating with a perp.

"You wouldn't," Blair warned.

"O'Neill, would you have a pair of handcuffs I could borrow?" Jim asked with a smug grin.

"Oh yeah," O'Neill answered. "You betcha."

"Okay, fine, I'll stay in bed," Blair relented. He sagged back onto Jim's chest and at least Jim moved his leg so they only looked mildly inappropriate. Of course, Jim also had a very pleased look on his face. Blair put an elbow in Jim's stomach.

"You have fun kids," O'Neill suggested. "A lieutenant will be around in a couple of hours to take your statement, and let's try to limit ourselves to discussions of energy and ascended beings and dimensions, okay?" He looked at them hopefully.

Jim nodded. "On one condition, Colonel. You need to realize that if you ever take Blair somewhere without me again, I'm going to be a lot less friendly about it than I was this time."

"Hey, you got in a lucky shot," O'Neill said, reaching up to touch his bruised eye. "I'll take you down next time." O'Neill shifted so that he was facing off against Jim, and Blair could feel Jim's body tense in return. Daniel stood, moving quickly to O'Neill's side, but not even that calmed the sudden tension.

"I give you my word as a warrior that I shall inform you if Blair's skills are required," Teal'c offered before Jim could say anything in return. Blair watched as Teal'c, Jim, and O'Neill traded looks in some sort of alpha male way that Blair still didn't have the secret decoder ring for. He guessed that everyone was allotted one power base in life, and his was not ever going to be the sort of physical dominance these three had.

"Thank you," Jim finally offered Teal'c. "And Colonel, you still don't know shit about being a Sentinel. I can see your skin cells contract a fraction of a second before your muscle reacts. I can track the movement of your eye as you search for a vulnerability, and I can smell the shift in the hormones in your sweat a second before you decide to go on the offensive. The senses may pose some... difficulties, but you have no idea what they're capable of doing, and in hand-to-hand combat, you will never win."

For a second, Blair thought they were going to have a confrontation. O'Neill stared at Jim, and not even Daniel's hand on his arm distracted him, but then he shook his head.

"Ya, you betcha, just keep telling yourself that," O'Neill said, passing the comment off as a joke before he turned and headed out of the room, Daniel close behind. At the door, Daniel turned and offered a quick smile and 'bye' before he was gone.

Sam stood up. "You know, detective, this really is all scientifically explainable, everything from your senses to Blair's ability to interact with dimensions most of us can't see."

"Yeah, it's just not science I ever want to explain to my captain at work," Jim said firmly. "So, we are going to keep the strange stuff to a minimum in Cascade.... assuming...” Jim stopped, but Blair
could hear the rest of the question pretty easily.

"Of course I'm coming back. I might do some work out of McChord, but man, I am done with Bethesda. They so do not like me just because I poked a few holes in their theories and totally enjoyed it."

Sam laughed. "The enjoying it part tends to annoy people."

"Doesn't it, though?" Blair asked with a smile. Truthfully, he'd been pretty miserable in D.C., and he'd kept fluctuating between believing he needed to get back to Jim and being afraid that Jim would just rather he not come back at all. It wasn't going down as the happiest period of his life. "But man, when you guys called and said you had a top secret mission for me that you needed me for within forty-eight hours... I have never seen a dissertation committee move that fast."

Sam shrugged. "I think the general gave them the idea that we needed you to retrieve information from confidential sources, and he wanted the paperwork signed by someone with 'doctor' in front of their name, but you earned the degree, fair and square. Janet was really impressed by your work, and it's not often that someone who isn't a world-class surgeon or medical researcher impresses Janet. Anyway, I should let you get some rest before your partner chases me out." She reached over and patted Blair on the leg, and Blair smiled at the gesture.

"The lieutenant who was burned..." Blair asked right as Sam reached the door.

"He'll be fine," Sam said with a smile. "You distracted the attacker."

Blair let his head fall back against Jim's shoulder.

"So, Teal'c, I guess next time you visit me, you'll get to see the great state of Washington," Blair said with a smile for the last member of SG1 in the room.

Teal'c inclined his head, accepting the offer. "I shall." Then he turned his eyes to Jim. "And I wish to offer my apologies. My people have stories of those who walk Blair Sandburg's path, but I gravely underestimated the danger to him and overestimated my ability to protect him. I do not believe O'Neill is solely responsible for the decision which placed Blair in harm's way."

"Yeah, but he's the one I'd beat in a fight," Jim said with a shrug.

Teal'c watched Jim for several seconds before inclining his head again and turning to walk out the door without any other words.

"Man, I am tired," Blair said, the fatigue hitting him as the others left.

"No shit, Sherlock. You were feeding off their energy to hype yourself up. You don't have any reserves of your own because you need sleep."

"I... really?" Blair asked, twisting around so that he was more on his side.

"Yeah, really. I hoped that if you weren't around me, you'd stop doing that." Jim sighed. "I don't think it worked. From what I hear, you were the Energizer Bunny of Bethesda. Apparently a couple of the doctors were ready to admit you for bipolar disorder."

"You were keeping track of me," Blair smiled as he settled his cheek against Jim's arm and closed his eyes.

"I always will, Chief. Go to sleep, we still have a mess to sort out when you're feeling better."
"Man, so not the way to inspire pleasant dreams," Blair complained, but he was warm and comfortable, and he could hear Jim's heartbeat and that was enough. The rest of the world would wait.

Epilogue

"Hairboy!" Henri Brown called happily when Blair walked into the bullpen. Blair felt the wave of acceptance and honest joy and he went bounding into the room to exchange a nice manly hug with Henri, complete with arm slapping and shoving. "I guess it's Dr. Hairboy now, huh? Good job, short stuff." Henri shoulder-butted him, and Rafe rolled his eyes at his partner's antics.

"Congratulations, Blair." Rafe offered his hand, and Blair smiled and shook it.

"Thanks, man. It's wild. I mean, I've been chasing that degree forever, and now I have it. Totally wild."

"So, are you back to stay?" Rafe asked, sitting on the edge of his desk.

Blair chewed his lip, and Jim's arm landed on his shoulders. "We hope so," Jim said. "The military picked up Blair's dissertation, something about redesigning units and the personal relationships within them, although it looks like the specifics of Darwin's brain are now classified, but the brass is working on something with McChord." Jim ruffled his hair, and Blair swung his arms around, smacking Jim's hands away and trying to save his hair.

"Man, do you know how hard it is to get knots out of curls? Back off." Blair looked at Jim who now had his arms crossed over his chest and he was smirking. "At least I have hair," Blair said with a look at Jim's receding hairline.

"Ouch," Henri said with a laugh. "Oh yeah, our Hairboy is back. So, if your brain is now classified, does that mean that you can't entertain us with stories of tribal circumcisions anymore?"

"We aren't that lucky," Jim said, but he gave Blair a smile that made it very clear that his Sentinel was teasing him. Blair punched him in the stomach. Unfortunately, Jim saw it coming and tensed his muscle, so it didn't do much good. Henri and Rafe both laughed.

"It's been boring around here without you, well, except for the time Aldo tried to frame Jim for stealing drugs and then his ex set him up for murder."

Blair glared at Jim good for that one. He had been just a little pissed that Jim had gone through all that and hadn't even talked to him. He punched Jim in the gut again, and this time got an "oomph" when Jim didn't see it coming fast enough. "Yeah, I heard about that."

Henri laughed. Rafe hit him on the arm. "You're supposed to tell your partner when you're in trouble, idiot," Rafe said, and from the tone, something was going on with those two.

"Oh man, what's up?" Blair asked.

"Ellison, Sandburg!" Simon called from the office.

"I'll catch you two later," Blair said, but that's all he had time to say because Jim was pulling him toward Simon's office. Since getting back from Colorado, Jim had been at his touchy-feely finest,
even in front of the McChord general, which had caused a few eyebrows to go up.

"Sandburg," Simon said as they walked in. "Good to see you in one piece. I hope you know that when you do things as stupid as taking off and disappearing into a military machine without telling anyone, you make your partner do even stupider things." Simon leaned back in his chair and pinned Blair with a very unhappy look. Oh yeah, life was back to normal.

"George said Jim was a little on the out of control and cranky side," Blair nodded as he dropped into a seat. A flash of confusion crossed Simon's face.

"General George Hammond, commander of the Cheyenne Mountain facility," Jim filled in as he settled into place leaning against the wall. Simon's eyebrows went up.

"So, Simon, are they going to approve my application to work here?" Blair leaned forward, his guts tense as he waited for the answer. He knew that Jim could do the day to day work without him as long as Blair was around at night or in case of a zone, but he didn't want Jim out there doing it alone. They were partners.

Simon shook his head, and Blair's guts rolled into another knot. "They wouldn't have, except you have some friends that pulled some pretty big strings."

Blair let out a breath that he didn't realize he'd been holding. "So, I'm hired?"

"The CPD will be paying one-quarter of your rather considerable salary with the Department of Defense covering the other three-quarters, but that means that we agree to give you six weeks off a year at their discretion, and apparently they don't feel the need to give any advance warning about when they might need you."

Blair nodded. "Cool."

"Cool?" Simon leaned forward, his face tight with anger. "What the hell have you done, Sandburg? What have you dragged Jim into?"

Blair jumped, surprised, but Jim was already there, standing in front of Blair and leaning over Simon's desk. "That's enough, Simon," he said sharply, and Simon leaned back, surprise on his face. "Blair has already helped two soldiers through the hell of having their senses go online. He's not going to let some nineteen-year-old kid die, screaming in pain, when he can help."

"But your privacy?" Simon asked, and the anger had drained from him. Blair reached out and rested his hand on Jim's back. He didn't want Jim to ruin this friendship, not when these two were so close. Simon had stood up for Jim when no other department wanted him because he still had his attitude in high gear. Simon had broken the rules and backed Jim during the Veronica disaster when Blair hadn't been there to help.

Jim stood up and shook his head. Blair could practically feel him trying to shake off his anger like water. "They've always known, Simon. They put a note in my records, and if the doctors I went to when I first started having trouble had entered my information into a database search, the Army would have shown up to help me turn the senses off. There's no conspiracy."

Simon looked from Jim to Blair in confusion.

"Instead, I found Blair, or Blair found me," Jim shrugged. "For the military, these senses are a disability no different from a bomb blast partially deafening a soldier. Apparently the large severance package I got from the Army included a pay line that is used to compensate for disabilities related to combat, but I didn't really pay attention to what they handed me. I knew it was bigger than my
missing paychecks, and I just deposited it."

"Oh man, they have it so wrong. Simon, they leave these guys in pain while they try to turn off one sense at a time, or even worse, they put them in a chemically induced coma. Way too many of them never wake up out of that. I don't even want to think what would have happened if they'd found out Jim came online." Blair looked up, and Jim moved to his side, resting a hand on Blair shoulder. "My dissertation changed the medical procedures, but there are still lots of old-guard doctors out there who aren't going to listen."

Simon closed his eyes for a second before he started nodding. "So, when a soldier comes in with these senses..."

"I need to go wherever he is and help him," Blair finished. "And I'll be working days off over at McChord—training commanders on how to recognize the signs and help men in the field if they can't immediately evacuate someone who shows signs of hyperactive sensory awareness."

"How are you doing with the idea of Blair working with other Sentinels?" Simon asked Jim. It was a fair question given that he'd been around to see the whole Alex fiasco. However, the two men Blair had worked with hadn't shown any signs of trying to shove his head in a toilet and drown him, and Jim hadn't lost it back in Cascade. The more Blair thought about it, the more he realized that Jim had gone off the rails with Alex because of his visions. It wasn't the Sentinel's job to control the visions, it was the Shaman's. Of course, that didn't let Jim totally off the hook because Blair might have found control over his own powers a whole lot sooner if Jim hadn't been trying to keep him away from it.

Jim didn't answer. Then again, he never did when it came to Alex. Blair figured that he carried that guilt right next to the guilt of having watched Frank Sarris die and the guilt of not protecting Incacha from the real world of Cascade. "Man, I was only seeing half the picture," Blair started. Jim's fingers tightened on his shoulder. Blair reached up and patted Jim's arm reassuringly. "Yeah, Jim did his own share of screwing up by trying to keep me clear of the spiritual shit, but I was supposed to be doing half the work in this relationship, and I was trailing behind him saying 'dial it down' when he so already knew he was supposed to be dialing down." Blair rolled his eyes at his own stupidity.

"I wasn't letting you do your job, Chief," Jim said, his guilt showing up right on schedule. Simon frowned at both of them.

"Spiritual shit?"

Blair couldn't help it; he started grinning. He looked up, and Jim was fighting with a smug grin of his own.

"Spiritual shit?" Simon repeated a little louder.

"Oh man, I could do a vision quest for Ventriss. No way is that little shit going to know how to defend against that kind of trace." Blair bounced in his seat at the very idea.

"Vision quest?" This time Simon's voice was so very soft.

"You'd find him in no time, Chief. Do you want to try tonight?"

"I just have to find my drum music in my boxes," Blair said with a huge grin. Ventriss was so going down.

"That may take a while. You brought back entire trees of paper, Chief."

Blair waved Jim away. "Oh, and I can use the fish fetish as a focus."
"I'd feel safer if you just used me like you're supposed to," Jim said, and the joking was gone from his voice. Blair looked up and smiled.

"No problem man, you're in charge of this half of the trip."

"The trip?" Simon stood up. "No, I don't want to know."

"Simon," Blair said playfully as he saw the alarm on the captain's face. Blair stood up and started edging toward the door because Simon was so primed to blow.

"No, get out, Sandburg, and take your partner with you. I do not want to hear any of this."

Jim laughed. "Come on, Chief, let's leave Simon alone before we turn the last of his hair gray."

"Too late. I have to dye it because of you two," Simon complained, but Blair noticed he didn't look particularly angry. "Just..." Simon held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Just, whatever you do, find some excuse that at least looks possible on paper." He frowned. "And let me believe that excuse, got it?"

"Yes, sir," Jim answered with a smile. He pulled at Blair's arm, and they both headed back for their desks sitting in the middle of the bull pen. Rafe and Henri were working at their desks, and Conner walked in the door. "Sandy!" she shouted happily as she hurried over. Jim's expression wasn't nearly as happy. Yep, all the pieces were back in their proper place.

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Ficlet

Still a Little Off

"Jim woke, his body instantly on alert. Casting out his hearing, he found Blair's heartbeat. He wasn't in his room, though. The pre-dawn air was still and dim; gray light filtered in through the windows. Clearly, Blair should still be in bed safely snoring and drooling on his pillow. With his guts tightening with worry, Jim trotted down the stairs.

Ever since Blair had embraced his role as guide and shaman, he had become more and more likely to lose himself in visions and dreams where Jim couldn't follow him... couldn't protect him. And a little part of Jim felt guilty because he liked the fact that the visions that had plagued him had vanished—had migrated over to Blair, official guide and shaman. The balcony doors were open, and as the sunrise just started to stain the sky with pink, Blair stood staring out over the city, his curls blowing in a gentle wind.

"Blair?" Jim grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and padded out onto the balcony. He could dial down the chilly morning air so that he didn't feel the ache of it in his bones; Blair couldn't. "Shit, Chief, your arms are covered in goose pimples." Jim slung the blanket around Blair's shoulders and then pulled his guide close, hoping to warm him. But Blair's eyes remained fixed on some distant spot of sky even as he leaned back into Jim's frame. Jim's Sentinel vision couldn't see anything, but
then Blair had a way of seeing things that not even Jim could see. For a second, Blair remained utterly focused, his body stiff in Jim's arms as he stared out into the sky, the purplish blue of which reminded Jim of a healing bruise.

Rubbing his hands up and down Blair's arms, Jim could only wait as Blair wandered the spiritual world. A shiver went through Blair's frame, and then another, and then his teeth started chattering.

"Jim?" Blair asked, his voice confused.

"Shit, Chief, you really need to tell me if you're going to go off on some vision quest. For that matter, staying in the heat might be a good idea, too." Jim pulled Blair backwards into the loft, kicking the door closed with his foot so that he didn't have to let go of Blair.

"Oh man. Damn, that's cold."

"No shit, Sherlock," Jim said, but he carefully guided Blair to the couch, and then pulled Blair down as he sat. For a second, Blair was stiff, and then he curled towards Jim's heat, his hands reaching around Jim's waist, probably trying to defrost. "Blair, you have to tell me if you're going to go do your thing."

"My thing?" Blair sounded amused.

"You know, where you see dead people and shit that I don't even want to think about?" Jim tightened his arms, and Blair made a little huffing noise as he squirmed around a little. The fact was that Jim was grateful that the visits from Incacha and the visions of spirit guides and even the blue dreams had faded. True, he didn't like that Blair was now on the supernatural front lines, but after Blair had left to finish his PhD, Jim had nearly gone mad as the visions spiraled out of control. He'd wake up to find illusionary water flowing through the living room or his black jaguar spirit guide chewing on the furniture. Blair's absence had made the task of keeping the visions at bay impossible. He couldn't control visions any more than Blair could control his body temperature. And sometimes —just sometimes—Jim felt a little guilty that he now got to have a life that came a whole lot closer to normal only because he had passed all that shit over to Blair. "Chief, I'm not going to stop you from doing whatever vision walk crap you need to do, but you need to tell me so that I can be here to look after you."

Blair laughed. "Oh man, do you have any idea what that sounds like?" He shifted around again so that his head rested against Jim's chest, the shivering finally vanishing.

"What?"

"You sound like me... like the old me when I was always nagging the shit out of you to not try and do everything yourself."

"Chief," Jim warned, his tone making it pretty clear that the two things were not the same. He got a poke in the ribs.

"It is the same damn thing... only not. Man, I did not mean to do a vision walk. I was just..." Blair pulled a hand out from under the blanket to wave it at the universe in general. Then he quickly pulled it back under again. "Damn, it's cold. Anyway, you used to go charging off without me, so you were like intentionally obstreperous. I was just...." Blair shrugged.

Jim frowned. This sort of confusion wasn't normal for Blair. In fact, it was a little disconcerting how quickly and easily Blair took to his spiritual duties as shaman, but now he sounded lost... confused. "Blair?" Jim asked. Just days ago, Blair had tried to use a vision quest to track down Ventriss. Since
Blair and Jim had been busy in the SGC at the time of the Ventriss investigation, the little shit had given Joel the slip and disappeared. But Blair's quest had been neatly repelled, so maybe that had thrown him.

"I know, I know," Blair said wearily. "I'm not nearly as thick as you are, though. I would have come to you if I knew I was going on a vision quest. Unlike some people, I don't have some god complex that makes me think I can do this by myself."

"I thought I had a guilt complex," Jim teased. Blair raised his head long enough to glare at him. Jim couldn't keep from smiling just a little.

"Dick."

Jim didn't disagree with that. "What happened, Chief?"

Blair shrugged and then went still for long minutes, but Jim remained silent, waiting for some sort of answer. With a small noise, Blair tried to pull away, but Jim just tightened his arms around Blair. Blair was in charge of the spiritual world and all the shit that entailed, but this was the physical world, and this was Jim's territory.

"I can't protect you if you don't talk to me, Chief."

"There's nothing to protect me from. If anything, I'm the one who needs to protect you." This time, Blair did shove him away, scooting to the far side of the couch where he clutched the blanket that Jim had put around his shoulders and stared, wild-eyed, at the room.

"Blair?" Jim leaned forward. If there were some sort of spiritual problem, it would be Blair's job to protect both of them, but after watching Blair channel lightning, Jim had no doubt that Blair could. He just hated the feeling that there were enemies around that he couldn't see or fight. A huge part of him wanted to protect his guide. "Blair, talk to me," Jim asked.

Blair finally looked over at him, his blue eyes troubled. Then Blair dropped his eyes to the floor and scrubbed his face with a hand. "I don't know. I mean, I know there's something wrong, but I don't just don't know what."

Even though Blair had just pulled away, Jim reached over and tugged on Blair, urging him back. Without even a token resistance, Blair leaned heavily into Jim, his head resting against Jim's shoulder.

"Did you ask Roland?" Jim asked. In real life, the old man was an invalid with Alzheimer's so severe that he couldn't tell you his own name, but on the spirit plane, he had become the mentor who guided Blair through the intricacies of understanding his powers. Sometimes Jim wondered who Blair would have become if Naomi had stayed in New Mexico and allowed Roland to teach a young Blair to embrace his powers from the start.

"He told me that I'm being stupid." 

"He called you stupid?" Jim frowned. That didn't sound right.

Blair snorted. "He told me that everyone with eyes could see the truth, but the man who stares at the truth can't see anything." Blair's arms slipped around Jim again, and Jim settled back into the couch so that he was half-lying down, Blair on top of him. The sunrise was starting to send stripes of light through the blinds on the windows, and Jim could see every mote of dust floating in the air, each a tiny world filled with tiny landscapes and mountains and valleys. Blair's heart beat slightly out of time with Jim's heart so that the two created a complex rhythm that filled the air.
"Is there danger?" Jim asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so, but I can feel things... I feel like everything is just a half an inch off... like someone snuck into my office and moved the books over just far enough to make everything feel alien." Blair's arms tightened around him, and Jim held Blair close. Whatever was coming, they would deal with it together. Never again would Jim allow their friendship to be destroyed by fear or some misguided attempt to keep Blair clear of trouble.

"You could have woken me," Jim said softly.

For heavy seconds, Blair didn't answer. "I just thought I was going to watch the sunrise. I totally did not expect to get pulled into that conversation. Man, it is too damn early in the morning to have someone call me stupid."

"Next time wake me up. Otherwise, I'm going to start sleeping on the couch just so that I don't have to worry about you. Keeping your body in one piece and free of pneumonia is my job," Jim pointed out. Besides, Blair hated the military doctors at McChord and if he took Blair back to the student health clinic, Nurse Ratched was going to gut him with a spoon. The woman knew how to hold a grudge, and she just could not get over Jim's case of temporary assholedom a few months back.

Blair didn't answer, but he yawned so wide that Jim could swear he could hear the man's jaw muscles popping.

"Do you want to go back to bed?" Jim asked. It was still early for Blair, especially since he usually didn't get to bed until well after midnight. Instead of answering, Blair's body stiffened for a brief second, and then he was pushing himself away.

"Yeah, I probably should. I totally need the sleep. Man, I have to deal with Colonel Pissy tomorrow, and if that man does not stop making stupid comments about Sentinels, I'm going to have to kill him and hide the body."

"Hold on, there," Jim said, reaching out to catch Blair's wrist just as Blair was ready to make a run for it. "Blair, what's going on?"

"Nothing." Blair tried to put on his best innocent face, but Jim wasn't nearly as naïve as the guys on poker night who bought the innocent look from Blair every single time.

"Don't do this, Blair," Jim warned.

A frown darted across Blair's face, and his gaze flicked to the open door to his room.

"Chief, is there something wrong with your room?"

"What? No. No way. Everything's fine; I'm just tired." Blair tried to retreat, but Jim held onto his wrist.

"Don't shut me out, Chief." It went against every instinct Jim owned, but he let the fear and the dismay show through in his face. Immediately, Blair moved closer and sat on the edge of the couch.

"No way would I ever shut you out, Jim. That's not ever going to happen, and this is really embarrassing, so could you maybe just let it drop?"

Jim studied Blair's face from the way his cheeks were slightly pinked to the capillaries in his eyes contracting so that the tiny red webs in the white of his eye thinned. In the morning light, the blue of his eyes was brighter than normal, and the black was so dark that Jim could see the reflection of the
window in it. His curls were a wind-blown mess, and one stray hair was caught in the eyelashes of
his left eye. Jim reached up and used his thumb to trace the outer edge of Blair's brow, pulling the
hair loose as he went.

"Chief, you've seen me at my worst, emotionally and physically. You never made me feel anything
but safe admitting some pretty fucked up shit. Please trust me enough to do the same for you." Jim
whispered the words, but they hit Blair hard enough that the black of his eyes widened with emotion.

"I do. I totally trust you, Jim."

"Tell me what you're thinking, then."

Blair sighed and looked away for a half second before meeting Jim's gaze. "I can't sleep. This feeling
that something is slightly out of step gets worse the longer I lay there. I try to not think about it, but
that's not happening."

"Is there something I can do to help?" Blair's face turned much pinker almost immediately.

Jim leaned forward and caught Blair's second hand so that he held both. "Blair?"

Closing his eyes, Blair whispered, "This is so stupid."

"Chief?" Jim knew he'd won when Blair's shouldered sagged and he took a deep breath, letting it out
with a huge sigh.

"It's better when we're close. Could I maybe..." Blair bit his lip, but Jim wasn't a stupid man. He
sometimes acted like an idiot, but he wasn't stupid.

"Come on, Chief, let's go to bed," Jim suggested as he stood. From the grateful smile Blair gave him,
Jim had guessed right. Jim held Blair's wrist and led the way up to his bedroom. If Jim were perfectly
honest, he felt better having Blair a little closer. Sliding into bed, Jim pulled Blair in after him, not
giving his guide a chance to freak out and panic over having to ask for this.

When he first slid under the sheet, Blair was stiff and Jim could smell the distress. "I'm not some kid
who has to climb into bed with a parent during a thunderstorm," Blair finally announced.

Reaching over, Jim put his arm around Blair's waist and tugged on him until Blair lay close. "First,
I'm not your father, Chief. I'm your Sentinel, and you're my guide, so let's leave any father issues out
of this because we couldn't afford the mutual therapy bills. And second, I've seen you call down
lightning on our position while doing battle with an alien. Trust me, you don't have to defend your
manhood with me, Sandburg."

Blair didn't answer, but he did turn and curl towards Jim's heat, his arm slipping around Jim's waist.
Jim didn't have time to do more than smile before Blair's breathing deepened as he slipped into a
deep sleep. "Good night, Chief," Jim whispered, stroking a few stray curls of hair as he settled in for
a late morning.

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