Blair's thesis on Sentinels and his career in anthropology are supposed to be behind him, forgotten by everyone. Except, he keeps getting calls—the first from an old friend, Daniel Jackson.

Notes

Timelines were gleefully altered in the making of this AU. Many thanks to Elayna for helping with this (twice!). Any remaining errors are mine and will now be considered features.
If conference participants mistook him for a security guard, Jim Ellison didn't mind. He shifted between his chosen vantage points. First he surveyed a side entrance to the Bay Tech archeology building. Next, he held position in a shadowed doorway across an interior courtyard. It didn't matter that the detective was on vacation and had no jurisdiction in California. He would run his own patrols for as long as Blair remained inside with his newly reacquainted "friend," a friend who just happened to have some undefined connection to the US military. Of course, when Jim shot off his mouth about his suspicions ahead of time, Blair's curiosity bounced right over them. In the end, Jim caved and insisted on accompanying him for this dubious expedition.

Only when Jim saw his black jaguar stalking along the stucco walls of the archeology building did his paranoia fully kick in. He risked increasing his hearing to better locate his Guide, moved inside the mission style building, and scrambled to find a doorway with line of sight on Blair.

The jaguar spirit animal crept ahead.

Jim gritted his teeth at the beast's presumption, but the jaguar seemed to be his best ally in protecting Blair, so Jim followed. Dialing up his Sentinel senses as far as he dared, Jim skipped past the sounds of numerous conversations and the scents of too many people crowded together until he heard Blair's familiar heartbeat. When he saw a taller man in a dark suit advancing on Blair, Jim shifted into the doorway. He could smell Blair's fear.

"Ignore him, Rhonda. Blair Sandburg is a liar and a fraud."

Blair froze, at a rare loss for words, caught in the middle of a poster session, two hours into the first academic conference he'd attended in two years. The insult shouldn't hit him so hard. He'd heard similar slanders many times over the last year, as he packed up his office at Rainier, then trained at the police academy, even shopping in the local grocery store. No matter how hard he tried to move past the humiliation, it struck him like a kick in the gut whenever he wasn't expecting it. Not able to live with his guard up all the time, his emotional life became a police blotter filled with random assaults.

Rhonda Franklin, the junior author of the large research presentation poster exploring the influences of traditional family networks, past and present, in the Congo, stopped mid-sentence. She turned from her previously animated discussion with Blair to focus an arctic glare on the towering man who had interrupted. "Excuse me? Do I know you?"

"Dr. Sebastian Melnoth, I'm a post doc at Cascade University, and honestly I'm disappointed that a conference of this caliber, a conference intended to bridge the gap between anthropology and archeology by building cross-disciplinary professional ties, would admit someone like Sandburg." His voice turned nasal as he continued, "This charlatan was expelled for leaking his sensationalized doctoral thesis to the popular press, embarrassing both himself and the university when he was forced to admit the entire work was a fabrication."

During his diatribe, Sebastian stalked closer and closer to Blair. He spit the words out in a tone that wasn't overly loud but nonetheless captured the attention of everyone within sight of the confrontation. That group included at least two dozen students or professors who would in the next
minute or so decide what they thought about Blair Sandburg.

Blair needed to reply quickly, needed to dissemble, make some glib remark and draw Sebastian aside to talk his way out of trouble. Recasting a situation had always been one of Blair’s talents. Thinking back, Blair remembered the man from Rainer as a bit of a kiss up to the tenured professors and not the most popular lecturer, but not someone who had any personal bad feelings toward Blair. Now Sebastian stopped less than a foot in front of Blair, looming above him, close enough that Blair could smell the other man’s sweat under the trappings of professional dress.

Blair felt himself tremble even as he saw Jim flash in through a door at the far end of the poster room. For a moment Blair caught sight of a dark presence at Jim's side, but then he met the Sentinel's eyes, embarrassed and momentarily angry. Jim had agreed to stay outside, and even if Sebastian threw a punch, Blair would rather defend himself than play the damsel in distress. Jim must have read the emotions from Blair's face or using his heightened senses, because he held his position.

Blair warmed with gratitude and stopped shivering. Seeing Jim's large build across the room put the physical menace of the scrawny but tall anthropology post doc into perspective. This was a situation Blair could handle, whether with words from his academic background or with physical self defense from his police training as needed.

Blair took a step back and said, "Your opinions aside, this is a forum for academic discussion. If you'd like to discuss personal history, perhaps we should move out of everyone else's way." The words didn't meet Blair's usual standards for clever comebacks, but his voice at least came out sounding calm. Only Jim might know how fast Blair's heart was beating or hear him gulp as he swallowed.

"You always were a smooth talker, Sandburg, especially with the ladies." He nodded back toward Rhonda and her poster. "But reputation is everything in academia, and I wanted to warn my colleague before you tarnished hers by association."

Keeping his mouth shut, Blair forced down the urge to confess, to say he agreed about the importance of reputation, no matter how unjust his personal situation. In willingly giving up the respect of his peers, he'd turned his back on academia and his chosen career, which left Blair wondering why he'd risked coming to this conference to meet with Daniel.

Sebastian, perhaps sensing Blair's uncertainty, took another step forward. This time Blair stood his ground. Seeing that Sebastian refused to be appeased, Blair hoped a show of strength would discourage violence. Planting his hands on his hips, Blair tried to look fierce. His inner anthropologist thought about male dominance displays as Sebastian rocked forward on the balls of his feet and Jim flexed his muscles back in the doorway where his tense stance suggested he was barely containing the urge to rescue Blair.

The voice of Daniel Jackson coming from behind and to the right took Blair totally by surprise. "What my colleague is too polite to mention in this public forum is that Rainier University was complicit in publicizing a draft manuscript taken from his computer without his permission and never intended as anything other than fiction. If we extend the spirit of cross-disciplinary understanding to an appreciation of modern literature, we must, no doubt, acknowledge the recent expansion of a journalistic style in which fiction is couched in non-fiction forms, from simulated blog posts to fanciful academic papers."

Blair could almost hear opinions shifting across the unnaturally quiet room. His own ingrained self-assessment wanted to bend under the onslaught of Daniel's words and the insinuations as he stressed certain parts of his speech.
"Dr. Daniel Jackson, is Sandburg your plus one for this conference?" Maybe it was wishful thinking on Blair's part, but Sebastian's nasal twang sounded more defensive than denigrating now. "In matters of reputation, perhaps you're planning to mentor him on defection to a rival field, as you did after destroying your reputation with theories about aliens designing the pyramids."

"I'm flattered that you've studied our curricula vitae so thoroughly. Perhaps you're exploring a sideline in journalism yourself, trying to write an exposé for your local paper?"

Blair saw Jim signal a thumbs-up and heard Jackson laugh. "That's it? Seriously, were you trying to incite an incident during a conference of this caliber to create your own news scoop? Perhaps you should look to your own reputation." Daniel neatly shifted his attention with a dismissive lift of his chin and smiled to say, "Ms. Franklin, if you'll excuse us, I have business of my own to discuss with Mr. Sandburg."

Just like that, Blair found himself leaving the room with Daniel. Sebastian was left standing speechless while amused whispering broke out around the room. A last glance at Jim confirmed the Sentinel was easing back from the other doorway with a small parting smile directed toward Blair.

Blair wasn't sure how he felt about Daniel stepping in to fight his battles for him, but then the man giggled in his ear, "Did you set that up? You couldn't ask for a better chance to ridicule your detractors. Come on. I've found a complementary espresso cart."

Gabi pulled on the orange vest with "SECURITY CADET" stenciled on the back and then switched her two-way radio to the campus security channel. She had a job to do as well as a secret mission to complete on behalf of her robots and herself.

Five hours a week of wandering around campus with a radio and an orange vest fulfilled Gabi's work-study requirement. During her first year, when she wasn't even sixteen yet, Bay Tech had waved that requirement of her free ride to college, but for the most part, Gabi liked the job. It was amazing what an attentive person could hear, and occasionally see or smell, wandering around a campus like Bay Tech. Sometimes, Gabi could far surpass normal attentiveness.

Today she was trying for normal as she took the first part of her loop through the biotech complex (nice fountain, not currently pranked, courtyard empty, DNA art in the tile pattern clearly visible) and down the orange tree walk (too early in the year for blossoms to smell sweet or pollen-ridden). From four buildings away she could hear the archeology mixer and smell cheap beer. She considered her hearing within bounds at the moment but was pretty sure others wouldn't smell the beer from so far away. Archeologists loved their beer and tended to have loud parties, especially just after five o'clock on a Friday. This week, they were hosting an elite African Archeology and Anthropology Synthesis Conference, so they were partying harder than usual.

In her security vest, Gabi had access to every social event on campus. Her plans for today relied on that. While she wasn't an archeology major, she'd passed this building a few weeks back and heard a student asking Dr. Oliver Michaels about a dig he planned for South Africa during summer vacation. It seemed that Michaels planned to take two undergrads and one grad student, and he'd emphasized the dig team would have limited time and not be able to fully explore the designated site, let alone its surroundings. As pieces fit themselves together in Gabi's mind, she'd constructed a plan to test her robots and possibly find her father.

Photos in the front hall of the archeology building had allowed Gabi to scope out what Michaels looked like. Now she spotted him in a far corner of the courtyard, part of a small group chatting under an olive tree. He was about Gabi's height but easily twice her mass, and he wore exactly the
sort of tan pants and tweedy blazer that she'd expect on an archeology professor.

Gabi set her shoulders back, held her head high, and patrolled the perimeter of the courtyard, waiting for her chance. The ratio was about two to one, male to female, better than physics, but not by much. There were fewer guys with really long hair, but a lot who seemed to think shaggy was a fashion statement. One small, wavy-haired man bounced into Gabi as he waved his arms and talked excitedly about ancient religions and closed societies. Gabi froze for a moment when the touch shocked her suddenly oversensitive skin out of all proportion to the brief impact. As she forced herself to keep walking, she caught an apologetic nod from the sandy-haired professor-type with glasses to whom the gesturing man addressed his enthusiasm. The more academic-looking man replied by calmly explaining that he'd given up those theories on pyramids years ago.

Gabi watched and waited for a pause in conversation at the far back corner. Then she seized the moment to introduce herself when most of the chatting group broke away. "Professor Michaels, I'm Gabrielle Hansen, but you can call me Gabi. I wanted to tell you about a robotics project that could help at your dig this summer."

Michaels shook her hand, the picture of polite amusement. "Pleased to meet you, Gabi. This is my wife, Charlene Michaels." Charlene wore a blue knit tunic. She smiled, shaking hands shyly with almost no pressure. Gabi had braced for the required contact, but her sense of touch had reverted to normal, so it wasn't an issue.

She turned more toward the professor. "Next year, I'm finishing dual majors for my bachelor's in engineering and physics simultaneously with a master's in astrophysics. My master's project, with Dr. Nicholson in planetary science, could be useful for surveying a large dig site as well." She pulled out her phone to show pictures. "You see, I've designed this array of microbots that dig into soil, using vibrations to create images of soil density and inclusions accurate to a five millimeter feature size."

She flipped through pictures to show sample images, but Michaels' face didn't display much interest. Her plan relied on convincing him. While Gabi was good at planning for machines and computers, she didn't always know what to try when she had to allow for human variables. "I have scholarship money to cover summer work for everything except travel expenses. I just need to collect test data. At a dig site, I could map one or two potential meter-squares per day, to a depth of five meters, so long as a few of them were then dug up for comparison to my data. It could give you a better chance to target interesting areas while helping me test my microbot array."

"And why aren't you working through your own department?" There was a hard tone in Michaels' voice that sounded more suspicious than Gabi thought reasonable, but she was determined to work in South Africa with this man, no matter what.

"While long-term applications on other planets might map mineral or even exo-biological finds with minimal ecological disruption, that would be years in the future. I need documented test data first."

"And you're an American citizen?"

She wondered where he imagined she was from. Her mixed Dutch and South African ancestry sometimes threw people, but well-traveled adults usually insisted, in a not so flattering way, that her speech and mannerisms pegged her within minutes as someone raised in the States. "I'm American, so no travel hassles. I already have a passport with more than a year before it expires."

"Hmm," was all the professor said. His wife smiled and shrugged.

Before Gabi could think up another social or scientific ploy to try, she felt something nudge her foot and glanced down to see a thin gray snout withdraw.
she identified a worrisome odor. Turning toward the concrete building that housed the archeology offices made the scent stronger, and squatting to sniff low to the ground gave Gabi an almost certain identification of a gas leak.

Crouching on the ground, her fingers suddenly felt colder and wetter than they had a moment before. A quick glance at the professor showed he hadn't noticed if she'd been frozen there half a minute, but his wife was peering down nervously, and Gabi figured she'd just had another absence seizure. The stronger her unpredictable senses became, the more seizures she seemed to have. A few anecdotes Gabi's mom used to tell, suggested that Gabi's father might have been the same, which gave Gabi even more incentive to get to South Africa and search for him before matters escalated. But first, she had to deal with the immediate threat.

Gabi pulled out her radio and pressed to transmit: "Security Cadet Gabi to Captain, over?"

"Yes, Cadet?"

"We have a gas leak at the southwest corner of the archeology courtyard."

"How was this reported, Cadet?"

"I'm here, and I can smell it."

"I'll start Facilities on evacuating the building."

"There's a department and conference mixer in the courtyard right now. Should I suggest they move?"

"Sure, find someone in charge, but don't send anyone inside. We'll have the building clear in three minutes."

"Okay. Over and out." Then she turned to Michaels: "Would you be the one in charge here?"

He looked at her with more interest than he'd shown for her microbots. "Close enough, but I don't know where we'd move everyone."

"The biotech courtyard was empty and looking good a few minutes ago."

"If you want to tell people to move, go ahead."

Gabi heard the note of skepticism in his voice, but this was something Gabi had learned how to handle in three years of being a young female at a prestigious tech college. She stepped up on a chair. Being nearly six feet tall already, that put her head higher than even the tallest men in the crowd. She held her radio up and toggled the control to release a loud screech of static, bracing herself within all her senses in an effort to keep her hearing from overreacting.

"Attention everyone!" She waited a moment for shocked quiet. "I'm from security, and we've identified a gas leak here. We're going to clear the building while Facilities takes care of it, but meanwhile, I need each of you to pick up a chair or a tray of food and walk on over to the biotech courtyard." She pointed the way. Then she spotted two buff-looking grad students by the snack tables and said, "And I'm sure these two gentlemen would be happy to move the cooler with all the beer." She smiled, and sure enough, everyone started moving.

When she stepped down from the chair, Michaels finally looked like he was paying full attention to her. She held out her hand again. "Professor, it was good meeting you. How about I send you an email tomorrow summarizing my proposal?"
He barely nodded, but as she was leaving the courtyard amid a stream of relocating archeologists, her hearing extended enough to hear him tell his wife, "The young lady knows how to get things done, at least."

Then a siren sound sent her expanded hearing thrumming out of control. Gabi could barely force herself across the orange walk to a semi-secluded doorway. Vision graying out, she pressed her hands to her ears and tried to pull herself together. Hiding, appearing normal, those became most important. She focused on the chill of her hands and the smell of her own sweat mixed with her supposedly unscented laundry detergent. Breathing deep and slow, she tried to pull herself together, hoped Michaels hadn't seen, hoped she could get to South Africa and find some answers about her father and whatever was happening to ramp up both her senses and her seizures.

Brett gave in and answered his phone on the third ring as a siren sounded in the distance. Not answering would mean dealing with his father later, yet he knew his father could be useful.

"Hi, Dad."

"Brett, so nice to finally hear your voice."

"It's on my voicemail, too."

"How's Chris?"

Brett glanced over at his current boyfriend, sprawled across Brett's bed with his shoes still on and his shirt off. "My dad asks how you're doing."

Chris raised his eyebrows, trying to look sexy and only managing because Brett was already turned on. "Doing good, and you?"

Brett rolled his eyes, "He says he's good, and you?"

Brett's dad cleared his throat, playtime was over. "Honestly, I'm a little concerned over a form letter I received saying you've changed your major from business to anthropology. Is this perhaps a mistake?"

"I had anthropology as a minor anyway."

"Is business going to be your minor now?"

"Really, I'm thinking of archeology as a minor. What would you think if I joined a dig in South Africa this summer?"

"The AIDS capitol of the world?"

"You're dating yourself, Dad. No one says that now. Anyway, I don't plan to have unsafe sex with anyone, here or there, so you can rest your worried parental mind."

Chris started toeing off his sneakers, rolling his hips suggestively.

"If you think you'll be accepted into an MBA program with a bachelor's in anthropology—"

"I thought maybe I'd go for a doctorate. Wouldn't you like to have a doctor in the family?"

"A doctor of anthropology? What would you do with that?"
"I could teach or write or work in the field." There were things Brett couldn't explain to his Dad, or even to himself. But for the first time in his education, he knew what he wanted to learn. He had his own sense of direction.

"And live off your trust fund."

"Go ahead, disown me. You know you want to." Banter, that's what he needed, not to acknowledge the risk.

"Right, that's why I pay for your college, ask after your boyfriend, and take you to Europe every summer."

"I'd really rather go to South Africa."

"Is Chris going?"

"He's a lit major!"

"Still? So, who's sponsoring the dig, and what can I do to help?"

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A siren went off and Jim Ellison slammed his hands over his ears. Luckily he'd been focused on checking the gas scent as much as tracking Sandburg's conversation, and the scent kept him from losing it over the sudden loud noise. There was definitely a leak, but nothing to suggest criminal activity there.

He moved to the corner of the next building over and watched as a parade of archeology conference participants left for the biotech courtyard. Spotting Sandburg and his friend, Daniel Jackson, Jim dialed his hearing back up to target their conversation.

"Of course, I already had my doctorate before falling out with the academic community," Jackson was saying, "but I wouldn't have been invited to this conference without my affiliation at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey."

"Lucky you can still publish in linguistics. Are you teaching there now?"

"Occasionally."

Jim's hand ghosted instinctively over his side arm. That was as close to an admission of doing classified work for the military as Sandburg was going to get. If he didn't see the trap closing—

"What are you trying to get me into, man?"

There was a pause long enough for Jim to calm himself and acknowledge that Sandburg wasn't any kind of an idiot.

"Come back to my room and talk?"

"That's why you talked me into this conference, I guess."

The two split off from the mass of academics, turning down a broad walkway lined with orange trees. Jim heard a sharp inhale from a nearby doorway and moved instinctively to a defensive position with line of sight on both Sandburg and the doorway. Then he saw it was the security girl in the orange vest, gasping as if she was startled or upset, but she was huddled up in a corner facing away from him and definitely not a threat. In another time and place he might have gone to check on
her, but at the moment he couldn't risk the distraction.

Jim continued to monitor his partner's progress back to the hotel. He thought that if the government was planning to grab or coerce Sandburg, it wouldn't happen until he was out of public view.

When Sandburg finally entered Jackson's room on the seventh floor of the conference hotel, Jim took position in a vending room down the hall. He carefully tuned out the rumblings of the ice machine as he tuned back into his partner's conversation. While Blair had done fine at the police academy (and Simon had somehow convinced them to ignore his hair with an excuse involving ongoing undercover work), Jim knew the kid still struggled every time they worked near a university or ran into faculty or friends who shunned Blair for the work he'd passed off as fraudulent. When the mysterious Jackson re-entered Blair's life with a conference invite and hints about a way to earn his doctorate, it had been the perfect lure. Too perfect, and that made Jim suspicious.

"So what's up, man?" He heard Sandburg slide into his "trust me" voice, and wasn't surprised when Jackson answered in similar tones.

"I still work in archeology, Blair. Most of what I write can't be published. Much of what I read hasn't been published either, and some of it has to do with sociology and anthropology as well as linguistics."

"Which relates to me how?"

"I read something you wrote. I want some advice, off the record. Depending on how things work out, I might be able to set you up with a doctorate on the record, at least enough on the record to ease you back into some anthropology-related field, eventually, if that's still what you want."

There was a long silence, and Jim wished he could see the non-verbals in the room. If Jackson was referring to Sandburg's withdrawn thesis that named Jim as a Sentinel, this could be a trap about to close on them both. Jim extended his hearing to check for movement or heartbeats in surrounding rooms and realized there was someone other than his partner and Jackson in the bedroom area of the suite where they were talking. He couldn't detect anyone else nearby on the seventh floor, but one properly trained agent could be enough of a threat.

Jim drew his gun and crept toward the door Blair had entered. He was almost in position when he heard the person in the bedroom open an interior door and step into the room with Jackson and Sandburg.

"Time's up, Danny," a rough male voice pronounced. "His partner is about to storm the door, and he's armed. Come on in, Captain Ellison. And don't go shooting the geeks or me, okay?"

The voice switched from clearly military to something else on the last sentence. Still, the reference to Jim's military rank confirmed his suspicions. These people could recall him to duty, and if they wanted to test what Sandburg had written about him, he'd be at their mercy. Already out-maneuvered, Jim saw no better choice than to play along. If a doctorate was the perfect bait to draw Blair Sandburg, Blair was the perfect bait to draw Jim Ellison.

Jim pushed on the door, then came around with his gun up. Jackson was the only one who startled at his hostile entrance. Blair knew him too well, and the graying military man in front of the bedroom doorway obviously had some sort of surveillance in place. Surprisingly, the older man who instantly triggered all of Jim's military alarms wasn't visibly armed. He gave a good impression of nonchalance with a slouch and a raised eyebrow, although Jim could hear the man's elevated heartbeat.

Jim could smell that the unknown man and Jackson had been intimately involved in the hotel
bedroom sometime that day. The bed still reeked of it to Jim's Sentinel senses, even if both men had
showered since.

"Ooookay, time to put the gun down and our cards on the table. I'm Colonel Jack O'Neill, and I'll
give you my word that neither of us means either of you any harm."

"And the government?"

"Oh come on, you can't expect me to vouch for the entire government." O'Neill rubbed his brow as
if the mention of politics upset him more than the armed man in front of him. "I'll vouch for Danny
and myself and that we'd rather keep all this unofficial, at least for now."

As Jim lowered his gun, O'Neill continued. "Great, now we're all friends, I'll share my potato chips."
He grabbed an open chip bag that had been sitting on a sofa, moved it to a coffee table between the
sofa and two chairs and motioned for everyone to be seated.

When the others sat, Jim holstered his weapon, but he remained standing, hands on his hips.

"So," Jackson began with a quick glance at Jim and then back to Blair, "Let's jump forward to where
I say I read the supposed work of fiction you wrote about Sentinels and was wondering if you'd be
able to run some of the tests you mentioned developing for these fictional heightened senses."

Sandburg glanced Jim's way, and Jim stared back. "Your call, Chief."

"Exactly who would I be running these tests on?"

"That'd be me," the Colonel raised a finger in a very non-Colonel way.

"I'd think your surveillance of me in the hall would answer enough."

"Wouldn't ya?" O'Neill shook his head, "But Danny here thinks we need numbers and ways to
measure improvement."

Jim started to feel some sympathy for the guy. Sandburg's tests were not a lot of fun. "And then
what?"

Jackson answered. "Depending on the results and how much I can reproduce on my own, I might
ask Blair to consult sometime in the future."

"And about him getting his degree?"

"Can you hand me that coaster?" O'Neill interrupted, pointing Jim toward a small stone disk over by
the television.

Jim reached for it without thinking, then dropped it when it lit up in his hand. He had his gun out and
had jumped back to cover the room before he knew what to think.

"Calm down, man," Blair was saying, reaching a hand toward Jim even though they were too far
apart to touch.

"What is it?" Jim demanded, glaring at O'Neill with his gun still more than half raised.

"To answer that, I'd need you both to sign paperwork, lots and lots of paperwork. For now, let's say
we liberated it from some smugglers who knew less about it than we do. But if Danny's right, it
might be another way to test for Sentinels. Now put the gun away, Ellison. Seriously, you're making
us Sentinels look paranoid."
Jim could barely swallow after the casual phrase "us Sentinels" and the crazy light up disk that was evidently part of some classified project. "Sandburg, I think maybe we need a little break from your friends."

"Keep your cool, big guy." Blair still held a tentative hand extended in Jim's direction as he faced the other two. "Daniel, Colonel, do you think we could finish this later?"

"Blair, don't you want to—"

"Danny, give them some time. I'll order take out and maybe they'll come back for dinner." O'Neill turned to face Jim, and his slouch was replaced by straighter shoulders and a challengingly direct gaze. "Chinese food here in an hour?"

Jim nodded and holstered his gun but kept one hand over it. As Blair stood up and offered whatever socially acceptable babble he deemed necessary, Jim positioned himself between Blair and the other two men until they were safely out the door.

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As soon as he'd shut the door to their own hotel room, Blair said, "Are you okay, man?"

Jim responded by walking the perimeter of the room, cocking his head the way he did with raised hearing, so Blair kept quiet and still. Then Jim finished next to Blair and the door, motionless, eyes closed. Blair moved his hand to the Sentinel's back to help ground him as he focused intensely on whatever he was trying to sense.

Finally, Jim opened his eyes. "Okay, I think it's safe to talk in here." His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Should I be worried? I get that you're feeling protective and maybe blindsided, but are you picking up on any second Sentinel stuff?"

"You mean like with Alex?" Jim shook his head. "No."

Blair's entire body relaxed. He hadn't realized how terrified he'd been that Jim's allegiance would shift to O'Neill in some crazy way. Memories flashed through his mind: how he'd felt being drowned in the fountain at Rainier University, and later, watching Jim kiss the Sentinel who'd drowned him. His body must have signaled his remembered fear and sense of betrayal, because Jim reached out a hand to roughly muss Blair's hair. Blair closed his eyes and clung to the simple reassurance in that touch, until his pride kicked in and he pulled back.

"Shake it off, Sandburg," Jim teased, then he was back to whispering, "I think O'Neill probably is a Sentinel. The way he tracked me in the hall was exactly how I would have done it, and I didn't hear the buzz of any surveillance there or in their room. Also, the way he watched my reaction with that glowing coaster thing, that was a total set up and he was watching me like a hawk. Maybe the weirdness with Alex was all because she was crazy?" Jim gave Blair a hopeful look, and Blair knew he was trying to fix things between them in his inscrutable Jim way. "The danger here isn't a crazy Sentinel; it's one who works for the military."

"And you're afraid he's going to snatch us?"

"Not anymore, they would have done that already. But he mentioned paperwork. You sign anything, and they can find a way to take you legally." "And you?"

"I signed a ton of shit when they dragged me back from Peru. They could recall me to active duty
anytime they wanted."

Blair ran both hands through his hair trying to calm himself. He should never have put Jim's name in his thesis, even if he hadn't intended for anyone to see that draft. He'd been naïve, and all the fears he knew Jim harbored about being used or dissected by the government were one step closer to reality. "So what do you want to do?"

"It's up to you, buddy."

"Really?" Blair could see the strain on Jim's face. Jim hated having others make decisions for him, and if Blair decided to work with the military, that could endanger Jim's privacy, his job, and certainly his comfort, if Blair was going to be away for long stretches of time. He wondered if Jim was just playing it cool because he'd learned Blair always put his Sentinel's needs first.

"They're offering you another research subject and a chance to finish your doctorate."

"Yeah, I never thought my studies would lead to deals with the military. Then again, I never planned to become a cop." Blair sank onto the couch, and Jim was suddenly beside him. Their knees barely touched, but the pressure and warmth reassured Blair. He wondered if it reassured his Sentinel too, if all the little touches over the course of a day were more important than Jim realized.

"Whatever game you want to play with them, I'll try to play it your way, but I'm staying with you," Jim whispered.

Blair looked up and Jim was gazing at him with eyes wide open. "What do you mean?" Blair whispered back, blown away by Jim's offer and wondering if Jim really thought someone would be trying to listen in. Blair was suddenly sure that Jim had his hearing dialed up, listening for anyone coming close enough to hear, even if it was only close as measured by a Sentinel. "You want me to call Jack Kelso before we go back for dinner? I could let him know who we're eating with and set up a time to call him back later."

Jim nodded. "You're going to make a deal with them? You want your degree even with those strings attached?"

"If you're willing to let me work with other Sentinels, how can I not? There's got to be some way we can set this up, some minimum amount of time away from Cascade. I can explain to them about territories and play up how you need to be there."

"And that I need you with me."

Blair's stomach flipped at the declaration, even if Jim probably didn't mean it to sound the way it did. If Jim with all his control issues could say he needed Blair in any way then that meant a lot. As they planned which assurances to ask for and how to back up their position, Blair basked in the rightness of their working together. Less than a year ago, after his mother released his non-anonymized thesis, Blair had worried they'd never build back to this.

Then Jim caught him out of the blue with the comment, "You know they're sleeping together?"

"Huh, who?"

"Your friend, Jackson, and Colonel O'Neill."

"How do you—Why are you telling me this?" Blair didn't think Jim was homophobic exactly, but Jim had so completely avoided the topic in the past, Blair had assumed his time in the military and then the police made Jim, at a minimum, uncomfortable with the subject. It was the main reason Blair
had never, even when things were easier between them, so much as hinted at his own bisexuality or his other feelings toward his Sentinel.

"I just thought you should have all the facts, and if O'Neill is a Sentinel, he should have known I could tell with us meeting right next to their bedroom and all."

"You know 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' is over and done with? They don't have anything to hide?"

"I know." Jim wasn't making eye contact anymore. He didn't look defensive exactly, but his fingers were scratching a little at the couch.

"Does it make you uncomfortable to work with them?"

"No, of course not. You don't think that of me, do you, Chief?" Jim's eyebrows scrunched down, and Blair knew he'd misread something.

"No, Jim. I just don't understand your reaction."

"Nothing. I just thought if you're going to test stuff—and I don't know if Jackson thinks he's O'Neill's Guide or what—I just thought it might make a difference. You have a problem with any of that?"

Now Jim was looking directly at him, and the thoughts racing through Blair's mind were enough to get him into trouble if he didn't set them aside until later. "No problem at all. You're right, whatever personal connection they have could be relevant if Daniel is acting as a Guide. I'll keep it in mind during testing. Now, I'll need to gather some materials from here and from downstairs if we're going to set this up."

After a quick scan when they re-entered O'Neill and Jackson's room, Jim was startled by a buzz that turned out to be Jackson's phone.

"The delivery guy is downstairs, and I need to go down to meet him."

As he left, Blair brought his hands together and rocked to his toes, while Jim braced for a moment of crazy Blair inspiration. "Both of you, come with me. I know what our first test will be."

O'Neill raised an eyebrow but followed. Jim went with them, heading left down the long hallway, but he let his hearing follow Daniel to a bank of elevators to the right. He was able to hear Daniel cross the lobby and identify himself to the delivery man, who did in fact sound like a Chinese restaurant employee. Then Blair was leading them into a stairway at the far end of the hall, and Jim had all he could do to check for potential threats around that echoing, tall space.

Blair only took them down one level and out into an almost identical corridor on the sixth floor. Then he was on his phone, and Jim listened in on both sides of the conversation.

"Hey, Blair. Something up?" Jim recognized the voice as Jackson.

"Yeah, I came up with a good first test involving dinner. You're going to come back to an empty room, and I just need you to open one item, put it on the table, and wait."

"Sounds fun."

Blair left the phone connection open and Jim could hear the elevator ding as Jackson headed back
O'Neill mumbled, "It's all fun and games until we're stuck eating cold Chinese food."

Jim kept quiet, enjoying his role as the less grumpy Sentinel for a change.

As soon as they moved back upstairs, Jim recognized the smell of lemon chicken.

Blair asked O'Neill, "Can you smell the food at all?"

O'Neill's lower lip tightened, but he shook his head.

"I know." Jim offered. The brief flash of pride across Blair's face made Jim want to laugh. O'Neill pretended not to notice.

Blair pulled out a notebook, wrote the time and the room number they stood in front of, then pushed it at Jim. "Write what you think it is and what number you think you needed to be at on your dial to smell that." Then he said to O'Neill, "Move forward slowly until you think you can scent something."

O'Neill rolled his eyes, shoved his hands in his pockets, but started moving forward a few steps at a time. When they were halfway back to the room he said, "I'm not very good at smell?"

"Would it help to have Jackson here?"

The General shrugged in a very unmilitary way. "I do better when he's nearby." He took a few more steps and held up a hand. "Lemon chicken."

Blair wrote down the time and room number in his notebook, then lifted his phone again. "Was it lemon chicken?"

"Got it in one. Shall I open something else?"

"Sure."

Jim had no trouble identifying beef chow mein, one of his favorites, even if it was a more subtle scent. He gave Blair a nod, and when Blair handed over the notebook, Jim wrote down his information.

A few seconds later, without moving forward, O'Neill said, "Beef chow mein. I think now I've locked onto Danny's heartbeat, I'm going to be able to do all of these. How 'bout we quit the party tricks and go eat?"

"Patience," Blair said. "Jim, can you pick up Daniel's heartbeat from here?"

Jim piggybacked hearing on scent and immediately confirmed, "Yeah."

"Great," Blair bounced on his toes a little but kept his voice soft. "What would you say your hearing dial is at?"

"Eight."

Blair made a note. "Okay, just for scientific confirmation. I'll tell you both when to start, then I want you both to silently count Daniel's pulse until I tell you to stop."

O'Neill said, "He can hear you through the phone, and his pulse picked up when you said that."
"You okay?" Blair asked into the phone.

"Yeah, just an involuntary reaction I guess."

"I'm going to hang up now, so they won't be hearing anything through the phone. We'll join you in just a minute or two."

Then Blair hung up and said, "Go."

When he said "stop" they both replied with "thirty-seven."

"Nice," Blair said. Facing O'Neill he asked, "Do you use a dial with numbers? Can you tell me what your hearing is at?"

"Yeah, we got that from your paper. I think it's just all the way up, so ten, but it maybe doesn't need to be. Give me a minute and I'll see how low I can go and still hear it." He looked at the floor for a few long moments and said, "Maybe down to six or so?"

Blair wrote and then asked, "Did you learn about piggybacking your senses like that from what I wrote, or did that occur to you naturally?"

"What you wrote, and Daniel tried to run his own experiments with me. Can we go back to the room to discuss this? I can hear Daniel getting into the egg rolls, and he's not just opening them for us to smell."

Blair laughed, and they all headed back for dinner. Jim tried to remember if he'd ever told Blair how often he listened to his heartbeat. Pretty much any time they were in the loft or bullpen, Jim had some awareness of Blair's pulse, and he'd pick up on fear or other strong scents from his Guide without even meaning to. He knew he could zero in on Blair's heartbeat from farther away than anyone else's, and he could pick it out in a crowd. The next time Blair made him talk, he thought maybe he should mention it. He wondered if it would make Blair nervous or uncomfortable, the way he presumed it had affected Jackson when his heart sped up.

When they walked into the hotel room, O'Neill took a half eaten egg roll right out of Jackson's hand and slid the rest into his own mouth.

"Sensing must be hungry work," Jackson teased.

O'Neil just smiled at him.

Jim was surprised to end up enjoying their evening with Jackson and O'Neill. Mostly, it was a relief to see someone else subjected to all Blair's enthusiastic testing and, if Jim was honest with himself, to see his partner so excited again. Blair produced herbal tea for another smell test, mixed extremely dilute salt and water samples to taste, and worked with items already in the room to measure hearing, sight and touch. Jim didn't even mind acting as a control or saying what number he'd associate with his senses for some tests. It was worth it to hear Jack moan, "I was never good at tests!" and later "What's a rooibo anyway, and why should I know what they smell like?"

After all Blair had been through with the thesis fiasco and rearranging his life to be a cop, it was great to see him back in his element and getting some of the respect and praise he'd been denied. Still, Jim's paranoia snapped back the moment O'Neill brought out a thick pile of paperwork.

"What's the minimum he has to sign?" Jim butted in.

O'Neill and Jackson exchanged a look. "For tonight, just these three pages from both of you that say
"you won't discuss anything you learned or inferred here," Jackson said, then he turned to face Blair. "I think you demonstrated that this is real and worth studying, so if you want to work with us and finish your doctorate, I'm pretty sure I could set it up. But they're going to want more of a background check. Also, there might be related projects that you'd benefit from knowing about. If we can get you clearance for those, you'll be signing dozens of non-disclosures."

"There are other projects related to this?" Blair leaned half out of his seat as he followed Jackson's words.

"Maybe." O'Neill bit off the word and glared at Jackson. "We can't know yet, and we can't tell you any more tonight."

"Take some time to get used to the idea," Jackson said. "I'll be in touch when we're ready to talk details."

"You understand that Jim and I are a package deal, right?" Blair asked, and Jackson nodded. "And that he has a job and some territorial imperatives right?"

"I don't get this territory stuff," O'Neill waved a hand. "I go all over the place, and this senses stuff hasn't changed anything about it."

Daniel smiled. "Well, I guess that's something else we can study."

O'Neill scowled at him. "How about a beer on the balcony before we call it a night?"

Blair stayed quiet on the balcony as Jim and Jack started up some Sentinel version of a pissing contest to see who could read street signs or license plate in the semi-dark of the city. Given how both men ridiculed his tests, Blair found it pretty amusing that they were effectively designing their own.

"The street past that?" Jack asked.

"Roosevelt. The car parked at the corner?" Jim parried.

"STV 753," Jack answered slowly, and Blair's Guide instincts started him watching for signs that Jack might zone out as he strained for the visual stimulus.

"But what about the bumper sticker?" Jim asked without noticing how Jack was freezing up. Just as Blair was about to say something, Daniel slid his palm over the back of Jack's hand where the older man was clutching the railing. As Daniel's thumb stroked the side of Jack's palm, Blair could see the military man relaxing and taking a deep breath, possibly drawing in Daniel's scent.

"It says, 'My other ride is a drone.'"

Jim's eyes glanced sideways, either impressed or annoyed that Jack had managed. Then his eyes flicked to the overlapping hands on the balcony rail and briefly over to Blair as Jack asked, "How about the sign in the shop window one block past there?"

As Jim's annoyance visibly shifted into the concentrating look he got while working cases, Blair raised his hand to Jim's back, just as he would anchor Jim at a complicated crime scene. After all they'd been through, it was gratifying to have Jim relax into the touch and throw out, "We reserve the right to refuse service no matter who you are or how many shares you own. Next sign, orange, two blocks farther." Jim smiled.
Daniel said, "I think they're just showing off now."

"I think you have a Guide's instincts to know when he's about to zone."

Daniel looked down at his hand on top of his Sentinel's and smiled. "I can't seem to resist becoming whatever he needs."

That hit Blair in the gut. He'd wondered more than once if he'd crossed a line between being the Guide Jim needed and adjusting his life to whatever Jim required. Shoving those thoughts aside he asked, "How much experience have you had with pulling him out if he actually zoned?"

"Not much, except in the—" Whatever Daniel had been about to say was cut off by Jack clearing his throat loudly before answering Jim's latest challenge. "Sorry," Daniel said. "You'll have to decide how many non-disclosures you're willing to sign."

Blair was trying to guess what sort of classified projects might trigger zones when he felt Jim tense under his hand. He glanced at his Sentinel's face and saw his unfocused eyes and still features. Jim was partway into a zone and close to losing control. Blair rubbed his hand in a small circle and said, "Jim, I think that's enough for tonight."

Jim finally blinked and said, "I guess he had to do better than me at something."

"If you'd like, I could demonstrate a few other skills where I could kick your butt," Jack said in a sweetly sarcastic tone.

"Really, guys," Blair interrupted, "If we could run just a few quick follow-ups, I could get a baseline for each of you working with a Guide."

Both Sentinels groaned as they trudged back inside.

#

June 4, France / South Africa

Paris Charles de Gaulle international airport had chairs with the texture of human skin. Gabi couldn't stop running her fingers back and forth, around in circles—the softness with slight, slight ridges kept her attention. The surrounding atrium should have been perfect for sleeping between flights. Gabi was tired but knew she wouldn't sleep.

Brett displayed no problems with sleeping sprawled out in the seat across from her, his stupid blond surfer dude hair pointing every which way. Whatever he put on it caught the light, sunbeams from the skylights. Gabi would have worried about the reflections and her heightened awareness of them triggering her seizures, but she was probably too tired to focus that much. Her eyes were half closed as she watched flashes reflect off tufts of Brett's hair, imagining that it clumped that way from salty damp air and wind at a beach, rather than from product applied before their first ten-hour flight. Gabi wondered if Brett's hair would still look artfully tousled when they arrived in Cape Town. Then she realized she could smell whatever he put on it from across the aisle, if she tried. It wasn't a bad scent, something like eucalyptus and aloe overlying Brett's own natural scent. Maybe she even liked it.

Joe, the grad student traveling with them, was on his phone over by the wall, actually talking not texting. Gabi hated speaking on a phone, and felt an echo of that dislike as she watched Joe. His dark curls seemed to absorb rather than reflect, but his face was golden and healthy-looking in the sunlit atrium. Gabi caught herself tuning in to his conversation.

"Neither of their phones have service, but we've set them up for South Africa," Joe said. "They're
both clueless undergrads."

Gabi pulled her hearing back trying not to eavesdrop, realizing she shouldn't be able to hear from across the room, even if Joe was probably talking about her and Brett. Instead, she took out her own phone and swiped the screen, resetting her passive seizure alert and incidentally calling up her microbot demo vid. The tiny bot trails falling down the screen reminded her of raindrops hitting a mostly dry window, each leaving a downward trail of unpredictable jags and variations. She imagined how it would feel to follow gravity down through the soil like a tiny probing robot, carving a trail grain by grain, and she closed her eyes.

#

Brett suspected Joe of being as bored as he was when Gabi stopped again to take pictures, this time of a parked car's bumper sticker. They were all tired and killing time in a Cape Town neighborhood known as Woodstock. Gabi had already stopped to photograph three walls of graffiti, a semicircular metal chair she said she'd like to build herself someday, and a sidewalk sign for "Honest Chocolate" (no sugar or milk added). They'd driven out to see penguins and the Cape of Good Hope first thing after arriving at the airport, and Gabi had taken more pictures of bizarre trivia (like the triangular warning sign that said only "Baboons!") than she had of anything scenic.

Now she was obsessing about a bumper sticker that read "Howl – City Lights Bookstore." Brett understood the reference, since they all attended Bay Tech, which wasn't that far from San Francisco. He could see why Gabi might find it humorous and want to frame a photo where the words were identifiable in the context of South Africa. But she kept stepping into the street, dangerously close to whizzing traffic, then squatting in front of the parked car where someone pulling in might not see her, and generally acting embarrassingly like a tourist.

Joe had turned away with hands on hips to study the window display of an artsy bookstore that was being renovated. Inside people were painting and assembling shelves. A large and muscular man stood in the bookstore doorway, then ducked inside to talk to one of the workmen, after which he came back out and watched Gabi. Everyone at the bookstore, and pretty much everyone in sight other than the three of them from Bay Tech, was fairly dark-skinned black by American standards. It didn't make Brett as uncomfortable as some neighborhoods in Oakland might. He couldn't pretend to understand South African sensibilities yet, but there wasn't the defensive posturing or half-lidded staring that sometimes met him in parts of Oakland. Still, Gabi was sort of toast-colored, Joe was white with a golden tan, and Brett was pale and blue-eyed with dirty blond hair, so he felt they were conspicuous even without Gabi making a spectacle.

"Gabi." Brett intentionally spoke loud enough so the man in the doorway could hear. "I get why the bumper sticker is amusing, but you might be making someone nervous when you photograph the car over and over."

She gave no sign of hearing him.

"Come on, Gabi. You're acting like the stereotypical rude American tourist."

Still focused on the phone she was using as a camera, Gabi said, "Finally, a way in which I can be a stereotypical American." But then she stood up, scrubbing damp waves of dark hair back from her face, and slid her phone into her pouch-style purse. Still standing partly in the street behind the parked car, she visibly scanned her surroundings for the first time.

If anything, the large man in the bookstore doorway looked less welcoming as her gaze crossed his, but Gabi just smiled in a froggy, crooked way and said, "Hey, is this your car? I live near City Lights Bookstore, and I'm a big fan of Allen Ginsberg, so I was amused to see the bumper sticker here."
She pointed.

When the man didn't answer, she stepped up to the sidewalk, adding a couple inches to her height, and with her long, willowy frame, that put her almost at eye level with the much bulkier man. Despite her height, Brett was struck by how young she looked, and suddenly she didn't seem rude at all. "Really, I'm more a techy type usually, but I went through a phase after I read ee cummings and W. H. Auden where I tried to decipher poems like they were puzzles. I'd gone through a cryptography phase before that, and I was only fourteen at the time, so there was a lot of stuff about Ginsberg and the beatniks that I didn't understand. Anyway, now I'm trying out photography, sort of also looking at things like they're puzzles. Seeing this bumper sticker here was like a puzzle piece connecting where I live to where I am now. I wanted the picture to capture that. You see?"

The man tilted his head and raised an eyebrow, but then he smiled. "Howzit? It's my friend's car." He motioned with his head back toward the people working inside the bookstore. "I'll tell him you liked the bumper sticker."

Smiling bigger and bouncing in a surprisingly girlish way, Gabi said, "Thanks," and started walking down the sidewalk as if it were only natural that Brett and Joe would follow her. They did.

Because Joe had wandered a ways ahead, Brett ended up trailing the other two. He watched Gabi with a new appreciation despite himself, amused at how her ridiculous and rambling explanation had charmed the African man in the doorway. He wondered if being female helped with that, because Gabi standing tall or in motion probably counted as reasonably attractive for those who were interested that way. Regardless, Gabi's appearance was intriguing. Brett couldn't begin to guess what her ethnic background was, with her high cheekbones and small nose under skin that was definitely not white or Asian, but not all that dark either. He could imagine her looking like an exotic model if someone intervened with a complete makeover for clothes, hair, and makeup.

Joe on the other hand had a gorgeous ass and romantic dark curls. His expensive but poorly chosen clothing screamed "straight, very straight" and he didn't ping Brett's gaydar at all. In most ways, that was probably for the best. Brett had sworn off sex for the summer, so working an archeology dig where no temptation would arise with his housemates should simplify matters.

As they walked down the street, Joe cast several sideways glances at Gabi in ways that Brett suspected could count as checking her out. That didn't matter to Brett one way or the other, even if Joe was a grad student and looked several years older than Gabi. It was none of Brett's business.

Joe's phone rang, and Brett overheard snatches of, "Sort of a club, isn't it?... Just flew in...Late night...Call back..."

When Joe put his phone away and looked over his shoulder, clearly intending to talk, Brett hurried forward, closing the gap between them.

"That was one of our digmates from the University of South Africa," Joe said. "You know? The ones who brought the van out and left it at the airport for us? They're heading over to get dinner at this club place, and they were wondering if we might want to join them. They promise we don't have to stay too late if we're tired, and you never know..."

Gabi rolled her eyes so far her head tilted back. "Not really my thing, but if you guys want to go, I have an infinite amount of reading on my phone." She patted the black woven bag that hung against her left hip.

"Drinking age here is only eighteen," Joe said, in a way that sounded just like a frat boy trying to talk a girl into more than she wanted.
Raising her wrist toward Joe's face with a queenly wave that made a medic alert bracelet flash, Gabi said, "I don't drink, and those places tend to have flashing lights and lots of noise, also known as seizure triggers."

From the thoughtful look on Joe's face, he already knew about whatever medical condition she referred to, but Brett wished he'd been in the loop. What if Gabi had suffered a seizure during their two long airplane flights, or standing in the street photographing a bumper sticker?

"Well, we could find our own restaurant and then hang out at a coffee shop until the local crowd is ready to head back to the dig," Joe offered with a soft-spoken lack of enthusiasm.

"I don't drink coffee or tea, but I'm happy to do something like that. And seriously, you two shouldn't miss out because of me. I don't need a babysitter."

"Trust me, I don't think you look like a baby." Joe let his arm brush up against Gabi's at that point. Brett would have slipped back again to give them space for what was clearly a two-person discussion, but Gabi's arm tensed and she moved about half a foot away, so Brett kept his position just behind them.

While Joe was still recovering from the obvious sidestep, Gabi pulled out her phone without looking and, using just a glance down and one finger, found something that made her smile. "Here's a place, Rococoa. They specialize in hot chocolate, serve basic meals, and they're in a sort of shopping mall, so probably pretty safe. You can drop me off there, go network or socialize or whatever, and come back for me when you're done. Really, it's close enough that I could walk from here."

"I'm happy to stay with you," Joe said in a voice that meant anything but. "Dr. Michaels told me ahead of time about your condition, and I'm sure he wouldn't want me leaving you alone."

Gabi stopped so suddenly that Brett almost ran into her and did brush up against her sleeve before dodging. She tensed as she had at Joe's touch but held her ground. She had turned to face Joe and said in a clipped tone that wasn't the slightest bit polite, "I have done just fine on my own with my condition since I came to Bay Tech at the age of fifteen. I will be nineteen next year when I graduate with bachelor's degrees in both engineering and physics and a master's in astrophysics. Later, I plan to win a Nobel Prize. I will be fine on my own in a café for a few hours."

When neither Gabi nor Joe looked willing to compromise or even be the next person to speak, Brett decided to take his turn. "Look, no offense to anyone involved, but I'm not really interested in going to a club or meeting new people tonight. I'd be happy to hang out at a chocolate café if Gabi will have me, or I can find something else at the mall. Whatever works."

In the end, Joe went off to meet the local students from the dig, and Brett was allowed to sit with Gabi on the understanding that she intended to ignore him and read articles on her phone. Brett didn't mind much, because the café she'd found with a ten-second search on her phone was awesome. They walked through a chocolate shop to reach the tables, and the whole place was permeated by the smell of chocolate. In addition to a large bittersweet hot chocolate, Brett ordered a chicken salad with cacao nibs and homemade bread that came with butter and a chocolate nut spread. The walls were covered in ads with old-time chocolate slogans that made Brett chuckle: "Baker's Chocolate: A Perfect Food" and "This Cake Belongs to Daddy."

When Gabi set her phone down to lift her hot chocolate with both hands, Brett said, "I like your taste in diners."

"Sure. I bet you have a mug that says, 'Save the Earth. It's the only source of chocolate.'"
"Do I need credentials to compliment the food?"

"You're interrupting my reading and chocolate sipping."

"Shutting up now." He mimed zipping his lips, but couldn't be annoyed because Gabi's rudeness had started to amuse him. He thought about pulling out his own phone to see if he had any messages, but he'd just heard from his father and wasn't sure Chris planned to keep in touch at all. By looking out though the entryway chocolate shop, a small portion of the mall was visible for people-watching. Brett watched two young men load a pallet by a furniture store as he worked his way through his salad. Their body language was different from men working together in the States, whether they'd been black or white, gay or straight. He tried to sort the differences into words but couldn't.

When he next glanced at Gabi, she seemed unusually still. Her eyes were focused on a display of shiny cooking pots rather than on her food or phone, and her eyelashes were vibrating although her eyes were only halfway open. Brett watched for about half a minute, wondering if he should do or say something, until Gabi suddenly came back to herself and caught him staring. She glared at him, then pointedly looked away as she lifted her hot chocolate again.

#

Gabi knew Brett had noticed her seizure. She could smell on him the tang of adrenaline associated with fight or flight, and his heartbeat was fast and loud enough for her to hear, which it shouldn't be for any normal person. She took a sip of her hot chocolate and focused on the comforting smell and taste to prevent another seizure.

Brett looked prepared to ignore it, and Gabi was tempted to let it go. Almost any other time, she would have let it go, but he'd been very patient with her demands for silence through most of their meal. "It's called an absence seizure. How long did it last?"

"Maybe twenty seconds that I noticed. Not long." Brett visibly relaxed back in his chair, but Gabi could tell from his heart rate that his posture was mostly for show.

"That's typical. Most people don't even notice, and there's nothing you can do. Is there more you want to know?"

"Well, if we're going to be working together all summer, is there more I should know? You'd be the one who would know what I should know, if you know what I mean."

He smiled, and it was forced, but the scientist part of Gabi respected the desire for more complete information. "Okay, I prefer the term seizure disorder to epilepsy, although I'd generally prefer not to mention it at all. Usually I have typical absence seizures like that, which last less than a minute and seem like I'm staring into space. Very rarely, I have atypical absence seizures which last longer and may cause me to slump or even slide out of a chair. They may take a little longer to recover from."

"Any way I can help with those?"

The answer to that wouldn't be found in any medical textbook, because Gabi was atypical after all. Still, sitting with her hands wrapped around soothing hot chocolate and feeling relatively safe in the quiet, friendly café she'd chosen, Gabi told him. "Hopefully you won't ever see one, but just in case, you can try talking to me, and if that's not enough, try taking my hand. Just narrate what you're doing, don't stop talking or let go, and don't freak out. There, you now know more than most doctors I've ever met."

"Good, thanks."
That was it. He nodded and picked at the remains of his salad. Gabi felt both scared and furious, as if he'd violated her privacy somehow, even though she'd volunteered all the information. Her heartbeat sped up as his slowed down, but rather than risk talking anymore, she buried her thoughts in the article she'd been reading on her phone.

When they entered the vacation rental and Joe made a beeline for the door off the front of the living room, Brett guessed it was the best room. Joe's maneuvering didn't offend Brett, since he didn't care where he slept, and he didn't object to grad student posturing or someone using their knowledge from previous visits for self-benefit. As it was, he could tell with a glance through open doors that both of the small bedrooms at the back were identical: bed, desk, window. They were like dorm rooms with a shared bathroom in between. Gabi shut herself into the room on the right, and Brett dropped his luggage in the one on the left before going to explore the kitchen section of the common area.

The kitchen was better appointed than he'd expected. There were plenty of pots, pans, casserole dishes, and cookie sheets. The refrigerator was empty, but the cupboards offered flour, sugar, salt, and a few random spices. He found an unopened container of shortening and decided despite the late hour to make cookies. A couple years of sharing space with guys who were even less talented at cooking (or even grocery shopping) than he was had granted Brett the ability to create comfort food from practically nothing. So he mixed up a batch of the world's simplest shortbread cookies.

As the smell permeated their small quarters, Joe emerged from his room and grabbed a TV remote. He sank down on the only sofa as he channel surfed. "Just four stations, and right now it's news or sports."

Brett slid some cookies onto a plate and let the rest sit with the cookie sheet on top of the stove. He took the plate with him as he claimed the opposite end of the sofa from Joe, leaving plenty of room for cookies in between. Joe said, "Thanks," without raising an eyebrow as they both stared at a soccer game between two South African teams.

Having her own room and closing the door filled Gabi with a warm sense of relief. She hung her clothes in the closet, then put socks and underwear in the bottom desk drawer, since there wasn't a real dresser. The wooden drawer stuck and required a little wiggling as she tried to push it back. Gabi put a few other supplies in the top desk drawer, which also stuck a bit, but most of the essentials remained in her purse. Just when she would have plugged her phone in to charge and started getting ready for bed, she heard the television switch on in the main room. It wasn't quite loud enough that she couldn't sleep through it, assuming her hearing stayed under control, but it would be hard to ignore until she knew the place better.

Sitting down on her pleasingly firm, full-sized bed, Gabi closed her eyes and slid through a sort of meditation routine she'd developed when she was ten. Back then, her outlandish senses had offered occasional insights into forbidden areas and had rarely been strong enough or triggered suddenly enough to arouse much suspicion. Her incentive to practice meditation had been her desire, even then, to control the increased input, to turn it on or off at will and without triggering seizures. At the time, it mostly worked, but for the last year as everything ramped up, meditation was a stopgap at best.

As a first step, Gabi took stock of the obvious sounds around her, the television, something rattling in the kitchen, forced air from the vents. Then she went deeper and listened to chirping crickets outside the closed window and traffic whooshing far away on a main road. There were other television and conversation sounds from the converted vacation housing around them. From what she understood,
most people working the dig were staying in this development that catered to tourists during the local
summer. June was the beginning of winter in South Africa, but Gabi doubted the temperature outside
was below sixty, and at the moment she didn't hear any wind.

She opened her eyes, not trying very hard to settle her vision, because her eyes were dry and tired
with a bit of a headache forming behind them. She glanced around the room for anything that might
trigger a seizure or otherwise agitate her, but the room was bland, all tan and white, and lacked
distractions. Cleaning product scents annoyed her nose, and the bedspread was scratchy, but nothing
she wasn't used to. There was also the undeniable scent of cookies coming from their kitchen,
making her mouth water. While it seemed way too late by her internal clock, even for her sweet
tooth, Gabi was drawn like a moth to flame.

As she entered the common room, both Joe and Brett were seated on the couch facing away from
her. They were watching a soccer game, and Gabi worried she would intrude on some male bonding
moment. Eyeing the cookies left on the stove top, Gabi wondered if she had to ask before taking one.

Then Brett looked over his shoulder and said, "Help yourself," and the solution to her uncertainty
was more welcome than the snack.

"But where did you get the eggs?" she asked before she thought better of it.

"The trick to these cookies is they don't use anything perishable."

Gabi decided she'd rather seem cooking clueless than admit she'd made an unappreciated Dr. Who
reference. She took two cookies and stepped out the front door.

Outside softer sounds surrounded her, because the TV inside didn't overwhelm them. Grasses rustled
from a barely existent breeze and a small animal scratched at hard ground behind one of the nearby
buildings. The nature smells—dirt, pollen, a hint of saltwater nearby—predominated even in the tight
cluster of human housing. A bite of cookie melted light and sweet in her mouth.

Plenty of stars lit the sky despite the light contamination. She found the Southern Cross, Centaurus,
Scorpius, and Hercules. She couldn't see the Milky Way this night, but it was still deeply satisfying
to stare at a different set of stars from a different continent in a different hemisphere. Even if her plans
for the summer (winter, she corrected in her head) didn't quite make sense, there was something
amazing about physically seeing a different view of space.

#

June 5, Antarctica

Rodney did not consider himself to be good with people, but it was obvious to him when things were
broken. The new and shiny Major Flyboy they'd dropped into the control chair wasn't working so
well anymore, and Rodney wanted that fixed. Now.

"Hello! Major Chia Pet! Where has that tiny brain of yours gone off to?"

The man sat rigid in the still glowing chair, staring into space. He didn't even blink.

Rodney escalated to a tone known to cower lab minions from seventeen countries. "Major, tell me
about the power supply, or I'm going to force that Ancient-phobic doctor back into this chair and he
will kill us all with squid missiles!"

Beckett's disembodied voice drifted across the open area from a side room where he shouldn't even
have been able to hear as he shouted, "Rodney!" He managed an impressive tone of menace for
someone who was mired in murky non-science and overly fond of sheep, but Rodney would never admit to being impressed.

Rodney bent over his keyboard and muttered to himself, "Seriously, if they could find one decent technician to operate this, I'd have the data to understand the power source and the weapons platform that the colonel wants to play with so badly. But he can't sit still more than two minutes or stay down in this freezing nowhere more than two days. He leaves me a terrified voodoo practitioner and a slouchy flyboy WHO CAN'T REMEMBER TO SPEAK ONCE HE'S IN THE CHAIR!"

After another non-response, Rodney turned to see the spiky haired major in his khaki jacket and camo trousers still staring off into space. "What do you need me to do, hold your hand?"

Rodney had turned back to his computer but his mind's eye conjured memories of Daniel Jackson constantly drifting his hands across Colonel O'Neill's during their brief turns at the control chair. Jackson still didn't have the address he wanted for Atlantis, and Weir was frantic with both him and Rodney—like it was in any way Rodney's fault! Finding the address was Jackson's project. But Jackson did seem to keep the colonel focused when they were searching. He used some combination of constant questions, touches to the top of the hand on the sensor pad, and occasion pokes to the colonel's shoulder. As an experimental hypothesis, Rodney thought what was good for the colonel might be good for the major.

He walked over to the chair, and deliberately set his hand on top of Major Stepford's, or whatever his name was. "Listen, I need you to determine the status of the power supply for this base, anything you can tell me about it, but saying something sooner rather than later would be beneficial."

"Potentia." John said the strange word as if he'd been nothing but responsive the entire time.

"Oookay," Rodney replied. "Care to elaborate?"

"It uses a potentia to operate main systems."

"What, pray tell, is a potential?"

"You don't know either?" The major's eyes flickered open, looking straight at Rodney. It wasn't clear whether they were blue or hazel or maybe blue-gray with green at the center. When Rodney caught himself staring into the man's eyes while still touching his hand, he took a step back and said, "Maybe you could describe it?"

"Oh." The strange eyes blinked several times, and one raised an eyebrow. Then squinting as if he was trying to look closely at something far away, the military man said, "Well, it looks sort of like stained glass, with yellow and red and maybe some green?"

"What shape?"

The major shook his head, as if to clear his vision, and Rodney thought he might have fixed his broken Major. "Sort of like crystals growing down from a base that's almost round with maybe ten sections marked on top like a clock. But then the crystals growing down aren't that regular, and it's glowing inside, so that's probably the power part."

That confirmed they were on the right track, because Rodney was sure the man had never seen the device he was describing, and the description wasn't bad for a military mind. Rodney rushed to find out as much as he could while he had a gene-bearing minion to operate the chair, a minion who was finally accessing the right data and staying focused for at least a few moments. "Can you see what's inside?"
The smoky blue-green eyes squinted until they closed, and the man's face continued to wrinkle up until he resembled a small child holding his breath or trying exceedingly hard to make a wish. Rodney tried to be patient and quiet—not his strong suits at the best of times—until he realized four minutes had passed and remembered his earlier ideas about touch and talking. Resting his hand lightly over the nearest one activating the chair he asked, "Did you find out what's inside? You look like you're concentrating on something, but in case you didn't notice, you've stopped talking again." When nothing happened, Rodney patted awkwardly at the hand beneath his and tried again, "Come on, Major, just tell me what's inside the power source and maybe I can set some of the only mostly useless scientists around here to work on it. Is there anything you can tell me?"

The hand beneath his shivered, and the shiver seemed to travel up the man's arm until his whole body twitched and his eyes opened with the pupils blown wide. Blinking his eyes rapidly the major shot out of the chair and half threw himself across the room, down the nearest hallway, and into a tiny room that they were using as a supply closet.

Rodney followed him questioning, "What happened? What did you see?"

When he opened the door to the supply room, the major threw his arm over his eyes, pulled Rodney to him, and closed the door fast. Then Rodney found himself pushed up against the closed door, with a warm body pressed full against him and pinning him in place. His heart raced. Both their hearts were racing, and Rodney could feel their hearts thumping as the major buried his face in Rodney's neck, breathing hard.

"Right, well I haven't been in this situation since Russia, but really I'm not getting any, so I'm probably up for whatever you want. Just, can you tell me first what you found out about the power source?"

#

John's head was throbbing like ice picks had been jammed through his eyes. For a moment, when he'd opened his eyes in the chair, he'd thought he'd gone blind, except everything was bright white instead of black. As he rushed across the room to get away from it all, he felt like he was navigating by sound or sonar or something, because he really didn't think he could see.

Now, with the scientist's voice and racing heartbeat, with the feel and smell of a warm body pressed close, he was starting to calm down. Blinking in the nearly dark room, he could see the fine hairs on the back of the scientist's, Dr. McKay's, neck. So he wasn't blind; he'd just had a bad reaction to the light. But now McKay was babbling about Russia and, oh god, he thought John wanted to have sex up against the door. John hadn't done anything like that, hadn't had any sort of sex with another person, since the incident in Afghanistan. But here he was, pressed up against another man, and what was he going to say, "I freaked out, and burying my face in your neck was the only way I could calm down?" No, sex in a storage room would be better than admitting to that. Besides, McKay smelled really good, tangy and turned on. John rubbed up against McKay, and surprise, both of them were sporting erections, so maybe this wasn't a bad idea at all.

"Just first, before you forget," McKay was saying, and how could he keep talking, even now, even as his voice reverberated through John's skin, "Can you tell me anything about the inside of the power source?"

John tried to remember, and he kept rubbing against McKay and breathing in his scent, because something told him he'd lose it all over again if he stopped. "There was nothing, like space. And then something really small, smaller than an atom would appear and be destroyed, and then it was empty again. I don't know, something about always being empty meaning it couldn't be emptied. Can I?" He reached for the button on McKay's pants, shiny in the dark.
"Yeah, great, wow. That totally fits my theory. I don't suppose you've studied quantum mechanics?"

John didn't answer. He slid down Rodney's body until he was on his knees, but he kept as much of his chest and forearms in contact with Rodney's legs as possible, even as he opened Rodney's pants and pushed them down with the scientist's boxers. He could see the constellations decorating the black boxers as they slid over milky white legs, and figured he had nothing to worry about with his vision. Then he eyed the mostly erect cock standing out proud in front of his face and took the tip in his mouth. Nothing had ever tasted so good, so complex and raw. John groaned and wondered how he could have gone so long without this warm, smooth glide in his mouth.

"Ooh!" said McKay. "First you dazzle me with science and now, wow, your mouth."

John smiled and licked along the underside, tracing the nerve from base to tip. "Keep talking, about anything, and I'll keep doing this."

"Talking, I can do that. Especially if you keep doing—oh yeah. So, what you were saying, about there being nothing, then something, then nothing, and if I take it as read that you were actually accessing information from Ancient sources and hopefully about the power source as directed, the nothing you described is vacuum. Even at zero point energy, particles would appear spontaneously and be annihilated by antiparticles. In theory, this would be a non-depletable energy source. Of course, in theory, practice is the same as theory. With Ancient technology… Oh god, what you're doing there. That's really—do you still want me to talk about science?"

John didn't care what McKay talked about, but he held onto the breathy voice like a lifeline while his own body went crazy with the feel of skin. The silky, burning cock slid along his tongue, sent vibrations across the roof of his mouth. Where John's hands and arms touched skin, any skin, warm shivers transmitted through to his bones and spread to the rest of his body. Every tiny hair seemed to pick up on its own frequency. It was the best thing ever, but John thought he could get lost in all that skin. Rodney's voice, while not melodic or soothing by anyone's standards, was somehow comforting. It was a lifeline that kept John in his body, kept him sane. It was like MREs after months of living on a foreign base, not necessarily his favorite food, but something safe and reliable and just what he needed then.

He took Rodney deeper, back into his throat, and McKay let out a moan in the middle of some explanation involving subatomic particles. The taste of the scientist's pre-come burst across John's tongue, and he thought physics discussions might be enough to get him hard in the future. The taste and the smell as he pushed his nose down to touch sweaty skin and pubic hair, the flood filling his senses had John hard and straining against his pants. He really didn't want to come in his pants.

He could hear McKay's speech become ragged and his heart speeding up. John moved a hand to press behind the scientist's balls and suddenly his mouth was flooded, and John had to swallow and swallow, which seemed to make McKay come harder and harder. The bitter, overwhelmingly male taste coated John's mouth and throat, became a scent that filled his nose as well.

John unzipped his pants to relieve the pressure as he got his own feet under him and stood beside a dazed and panting McKay. McKay's breathy words no longer dealt with science but had devolved to, "Oh my god, oh that, oh my god."

John was going to jack himself off but McKay reached out a hand to join his and the touch of those strong, blunt fingers sliding between John's, offering just the pressure he needed, had him coming within a couple strokes.

Then they were both panting and tucking themselves back into their clothes. McKay produced a handkerchief, which he shared as they both wiped their hands. John wanted to bury his face back in
the man's neck, but he knew that would be impossible to explain now that he'd worn out the excuse of quick and easy sex.

"I'll leave first," he said. With one deep breath, that unfortunately filled his nose with McKay's scent and didn't do anything for his casual military charade, John stepped out into the hall.

#

June 5, South Africa

Brett was surprised that they could walk to the dig site in the morning. It was less than two miles from their housing, but none of them had quite caught up on sleep, so Brett was glad he didn't have to find it on his own. Joe knew the way from working an adjacent section last vacation session, and Brett and Gabi followed with barely a word.

The site included a basic string grid with a few shallow pits started in some squares. Five tables on the north side under large shade tents held bins and tools for sifting dirt removed from any given square. The south side sported a random collection of picnic tables, card tables, and folding chairs shaded by smaller tents or table umbrellas. The coolers suggested that would be a snack or lunch area.

Brett found his name on a weekly schedule posted by the larger tents where he was assigned to "microfossils" for the morning. From a previous short visit at a dig near Bay Tech, he knew that meant dirt sifting, a lowly but necessary task. Most archeologists dreaded sifting, but Brett was suddenly awake and eager. He didn't expect to make major discoveries on his first real dig, but the reality of being part of a significant excavation in a foreign country made the work matter in a way none of his previous jobs had. He asked around until he was assigned a bin of dirt from grid square nine to sift and sort. It was quiet, simple work, letting him get to know the local soil and observe the other twenty-six people he counted working the dig. Most of them were students, with a couple who might be post docs or young professors. Many looked sleepy. Some carried coffee cups or thermoses. But each took a position and started in on a task, adding to a chorus of scrapes and thumps and conversation that Brett absorbed as the sounds of his first real dig.

Professor Michaels showed up within half an hour. He sought out Joe first, and Brett watched as Joe pointed to where Brett was working and then to Gabi who was by herself out at square fifty.

Brett hadn't figured out what Gabi was doing. She'd assembled a square-framed device that filled most of her string-marked meter-square space. Moving all around it, she adjusted bits on sides and corners, then spent a lot of time peering underneath, laying her head practically on the ground at each side. Brett could see the layer of dust on her dark hair. He watched her fiddle with something on her phone and then re-adjust a knob on one side of the metal device.

He was still watching Gabi when Michaels approached the sifting tent. The old man greeted a female student, who appeared to be a local, with a firm hand rested on her shoulder. She smiled and nodded at whatever he was saying, and Brett figured she had worked a dig with him previously.

When Michaels reached Brett he sat down beside him on the bench and said, "Good to see you, Brett. How was your trip out?"

"Good." Brett tried to match the professor's tone and relaxed body language. The man was in his sixties, and Brett had no idea why he'd accepted Brett for the summer position, unless Brett's dad had greased the wheels. Regardless, Brett intended to stay on the professor's good side. "I thought a full day of air travel might be stressful, but after finals, it was like a forced vacation. I even caught up on some sleep."
"Oh, to be young again," Michaels said. "I see they're starting you out with a lot of microfossil time. Don't feel you have to sit the whole shift. Get to know people. We have some guests coming to share intel on other local digs at lunch, and next week we're arranging a trip to the Kruger Game Park. I know you get class credit for being here, but it shouldn't be like you're still in school."

"Looks pretty different from Bay Tech." Brett gestured to the tent ceiling.

"That's why half of us go into archeology." Michaels smiled and thumped the table. "We need our time with dirt and tents. Nice that we have permanent housing here, though. You kids wouldn't believe the flea-ridden rain forest I slept in on my first dig. Luckily, South Africa's a very civilized country."

Brett nodded his way through most of the conversation. Michaels seemed like a nice guy, or at least like he wanted to come off that way.

When he watched Michaels check in with Gabi, Brett saw him squeeze her shoulder the same way he had with the local young woman. He also saw Gabi stiffen at the touch. If it was enough to be visible across the dig, Brett wondered how Michaels didn't take the hint, but maybe it was how that generation was raised.

A couple hours later, when Brett saw a few people gather at the snack tents, he wandered over to practice his water cooler conversation. He found out the others were all from the University of South Africa and had come to the dig a week earlier when their winter break started. The most exciting discovery so far that morning looked like a potsherd. Otherwise people only reported micro fossils that might turn out to be bits of bone or teeth, much like what Brett had sifted so far. The local students were looking forward to the speakers coming at lunch and were hoping to score invites to other digs.

As everyone wandered back to their assigned jobs, Brett thought about taking a soda out to Gabi. Then he saw Joe was crouched on the dirt beside her and decided to just get back to work.

Over the next half hour, Brett couldn't help watching Joe and Gabi. It was almost comedic seeing Joe shift closer until they were touching, and then moments later Gabi would reach for something or wave her hands while talking and expertly shift away. When they both looked at something on Gabi's phone or the laptop she'd set up, Joe would rest his hand on her shoulder in a strange parody of Michaels' moves. It creeped Brett out to see Joe ignore the way Gabi stiffened each time and took the next chance to shift away, and Brett wished she'd just say something to make Joe stop.

When Joe finally left Gabi to head over to the snack table, he didn't just bring her back a soda. He persuaded another student to help carry the smallest shade tent, which had been covering a currently unused table, to square fifty where Gabi now sat cross-legged typing rapid fire on the laptop. She looked up to thank Joe and the other student without even a break in her typing. When she looked immediately back down at the screen, Joe sort of shrugged to the other guy, and they both walked back to get sodas for themselves.

#

At lunch Gabi had to approach a local woman digging in a nearby square to help carry the little shade canopy back to where people would need it while eating. The woman was nice enough but gave no sign of wanting to sit together at lunch, so Gabi took her food and went to sit next to Brett.

"Hey, Gabi," he said. "I see they had you out on your own all morning."

"When people weren't dropping by to chat forever."
Brett raised an eyebrow, and Gabi guessed he was the type who'd rather chat than get work done. He said, "If you don't like what they say or do, you could tell them."

"Yes, that always goes over so well." She knew from experience that most people eventually stopped bothering her if she just refused to talk about anything but her work, so she was somewhat amused by Brett's next question.

"What were you doing out there anyway?"

"It's a stringbot array. The framework above ground records and transmits data from microrobots that tunnel into the ground trailing tiny vanadium dioxide antennas. The antennas look like strings, hence the nickname stringbots. The way the vibrations travel through the pseudo-strings allows a detailed map of anything in the ground. Because the robots lower themselves by vibrations displacing soil, they won't destroy any fossils. One application would be helping archeologists perceive what's underground before deciding where to dig."

"Then why's it in an already marked square?"

"This one's a test. We'll compare the results when they actually dig to what I map today."

"Cool. How'd you land a plum assignment like that rather than sifting dirt?"

"It's my master's project. I designed the stringbots and programmed the analysis software. I had help fabricating the actual bots and the array framework."

Brett's eyes went gratifyingly wide. Gabi knew her project was cool, even if she felt like a bit of a slacker taking the whole summer off for this archeological field test. Anyway, she had her own reasons for wanting to visit South Africa. It wasn't like they were going to let her test on Mars, so bringing her array to an actual dig site that happened to be where she wanted to go anyway was icing on her cake.

At that point a jeep drove up, and three older adults in typical dig clothes and sunhats piled out. The black man in strikingly white clothing who addressed their group first gave an overview of historical digs in South Africa, focusing on the Blombosfontein region, where they were working, and especially on the Blombos Cave. The mousy man who spoke next discussed several current digs being sponsored by the University of South Africa. The elegant woman with the wide-brimmed straw hat and pale skin who spoke last talked about a special botany project to identify any fynbos species in the area. She passed around samples of a few plants that represented the unique floristic region found nowhere in the world except the southern tip of South Africa. Her research team had recently discovered a few of these rare plants growing in isolated patches of sandstone soil around Blombosfontein, so they were asking all researchers working nearby to keep an eye out and report any sightings.

When Dr. Tasha Matteoli gave her contact info, Gabi entered it into her phone. While holding the phone, she automatically reset her passive seizure alert system. Then she took pictures of the samples as each came by and used her own personally developed techniques to memorize the feel and smell of each. Although she'd never mastered raising an individual sense at will, she knew that stroking her fingers lightly across a textured surface tended to capture her attention, causing her to zoom in on details and lock them into sense memory. Recently, as she had experienced more and more trouble with other senses expanding when she didn't want them to, she'd also had more success in triggering a single heightened sense intentionally, as she did now with smell by waving the plant samples back and forth beneath her nose.

After the lunch presentations, Brett offered to help her move the small shade tent back to her square,
and she let him. He looked at her instruments as if he'd like to stay and chat about them, but when he
didn't ask directly, she didn't offer. Gabi had a lot of sensor readings that had piled up during lunch,
and she wanted to sort through them as soon as possible.

It was great to have some time out actually digging in square nine during the afternoon. The sun was
bright, but given that it was winter in Africa, Brett didn't overheat in the long sleeved shirt he wore
for sun protection. A few drops of sweat tracked down his back, but mostly he felt gritty from dust
collecting over sunscreen. There were a few South African students with skin that might burn as
easily as his, but mostly he thought any skin other than his would be a bonus for archeology.

He couldn't help looking over at Gabi, a lot. He'd heard her telling off Joe and pretty much bragging
about how young she was and how she'd have a master's in addition to two bachelor's degrees next
year. But the fact that she'd designed and was field testing some sort of robotic sensor system while
she was still three years younger than Brett brought home to him how impressive she really was. The
words child prodigy and genius came to mind, and he couldn't help being amused by her bluntness
and bragging.

His new insights and Gabi's comments about people stopping by to chat made Brett uncommonly
annoyed when he saw Joe hanging out under her shade tent for most of an hour that afternoon. He
wasn't touching her as much as earlier, but he hovered just behind her shoulder as she worked on her
computer.

Dr. Michaels had disappeared after lunch, along with the guests and a couple of the more senior
researchers on site. Knowing archeologists, Brett would bet they'd gone off to a bar. Many of the
students were kicking back and socializing. In a week Brett might take advantage of such
opportunities, but this was his first shift actually digging, albeit with a tool barely larger than a
tablespoon. He was enjoying the cool graininess of previously buried dirt on his fingers in addition to
the miniscule chance that he'd come across that next big find. Thinking back to the topics at lunch
and to his class at Bay Tech on early hominids, he carefully scooped dirt from square nine into the
bin that someone in the microfossils tent would sift and sort later.

Then he looked up to see Joe standing behind Gabi with both arms reaching around her. She was
holding a laptop with both her hands as if showing him something, and he was pressed up close
enough behind her that she'd at least feel his body heat if he wasn't actually touching her. He was
pointing at the screen with his left hand and tapping something on the bottom right of the keyboard,
possibly arrow keys, with his right hand. Gabi was frozen rigid, and her eyes were shifting like a
trapped animal.

Without another thought, Brett stepped out of his square and hurried toward them, still carrying the
small digging tool in his hand.

When he came within a couple yards, both Gabi and Joe looked his way, and Joe dropped his right
arm. Gabi took the chance to step away, and that shifted the computer out of Joe's left hand as well.
Brett breathed deeply as if the air had become a little cleaner.

"Hi, Brett," Joe said, as if he had no idea he'd done anything wrong.

Gabi cradled her computer closer and said nothing.

Brett gave Joe his best glare, and Joe just said, "What?"

"Don't you think you were coming on a bit strong there?" Brett asked.
"What?" Joe glanced over to Gabi. "We just got wrapped up in the work."

"She got wrapped up in your arms, and it was very clear she didn't like it." Brett realized he was waving the tool in his hand and stopped. He didn't want to look too ridiculous. Glancing back toward the pits and the tents, he didn't see anyone staring. Presumably no one could hear what was actually going on.

"She's a legal adult. If she doesn't like something, I'm sure she'll let me know."

"She was letting you know. She goes rigid every time you touch her."

Gabi snapped shut the cover of her laptop. "She's standing right here. And yes, I am eighteen," she glared at Brett. "I also have an absolute rule against dating or getting involved with anyone I've known for less than two years. And guess what, I've had extensive self-defense training, so while I was trying not to offend you," she said to Joe, "Take it as read that I'm not interested, and if you surround me like that again, I can hurt you in ways you really don't expect and don't want to know about." She pulled the laptop in tight to her chest in a stance that looked insecure to Brett, but went with a scowl on her face that could recast the pose as fierce. "Now, I have work to do and would like to be left alone."

Brett and Joe both looked at each other and then backed away in different directions. Brett returned to his square feeling like he'd done the right thing, but it had left him unsettled. Even if he found Gabi's prickliness amusing, it dampened his enjoyment of the dig to know she was annoyed with him, and he didn't know why he cared so much about her anyway.

#

When the dig van took the students grocery shopping that evening, Gabi made a point of sitting with a woman from the local university. Gabi answered the woman's questions about Bay Tech and California and in exchange found out the woman was named Martha and that she came from Pretoria.

That night Gabi only left her room to make herself soup and use the bathroom.

#

June 6, USA

"We should work at least another week before asking Simon for more time off." Jim leaned back on the couch in the middle of the loft, trying to pretend the game on TV held more of his attention than this conversation.

"Sure. Daniel doesn't have exact dates to offer yet anyway, although he says we'll be approved any day now. You sure this is okay? And that you want to be there with me the whole time? I'm going to be testing at least two other potential Sentinels, and we don't have much data on how Sentinels react around each other."

"I thought O'Neill said he'd been around both without issues."

"Well yeah, but he denies any territorial imperative, too. Some things could be different between individual Sentinels, or Burton and other researchers could have been misled. Or maybe all military counts as his own tribe to O'Neill and if the other Sentinels we're testing are both military—"

"You think I'm the only one who might freak out."
"No, man. I don't know enough to even speculate."

"You don't want me around your other research subjects."

"No. Stop that. I totally want you around. We just need to think things through." Jim appreciated Blair's words, but his accelerated heartbeat suggested he was still worried about bringing Jim along, even though they'd agreed on that condition from the start.

"What if I asked O'Neill to set up guards?"

"Guards?"

"You're going to be working on some military base. They're bound to have plenty of security forces. We'll design a protocol to separate all Sentinels, including me, if any of us start acting crazy. Well, I mean crazy in ways that aren't spikes or zones and aren't sensing things the grunts think are imaginary—the protocol could mention aggressive or sexual behavior."

Blair took a deep breath and turned to face Jim more directly. "Okay, I'm impressed that you're even discussing this. But seriously, the people working there won't know what Sentinels are. And if you and O'Neill know the protocol, won't you be able to get around it?"

"Is there some safe way to gas everyone in a room without hurting Sentinels? Heck, if they're all as chemically sensitive as I am, you could probably find something that takes us out while barely affecting anyone else, but oh god, do we want to help the military figure that out?"

Blair reached across to Jim's right hand where it rested on the back of the couch and patted it. "I wouldn't be the one to come up with that part anyway. You know the guy already working on this is an M.D., right?"

Blair's hand had stopped moving but still rested on top of Jim's. Jim didn't remember Blair ever touching him that way, but he remembered being jealous when Jackson touched O'Neill's hand to ground his senses on the hotel balcony in California.

Jim realized he must have been silent too long, because when he met Blair's eyes, they were wide and patient and waiting.

"Spit it out," Blair said.

"Ever since—" Jim stuttered to a stop, two words farther into this admission than he'd previously managed.

"Since I became a cop?" Blair asked, after a long pause.

"No." Jim didn't know what he was going to say until the words escaped him, "Since the thing at the fountain—"

Blair froze, and Jim knew why they never talked about this. Blair had died, and then Jim had acted all crazy, in both violent and sexual ways, while pursuing Alex. Jim knew most police partnerships couldn't survive something like that. Also, there'd been the moment when Blair's wolf and Jim's jaguar passed through each other. While Jim hated talking about the spirit plane crap in general, he didn't think he'd ever find words for what happened in that moment. Still, he really wanted to know what Blair thought about it and if he'd experienced it the same way.

The best Jim could finish in words was, "I get the feeling something's bugging you."
Blair didn't know how to react to what Jim was saying. As a Guide, he wanted to be glad that Jim was finally talking about what happened at the fountain. As a person who'd spent the last four years trying to work with Jim Ellison, Blair feared this talk could leave him homeless again far too easily.

"You don't think anything about that day should bug me?"

Jim cringed and looked away, but at least he wasn't getting angry. Blair focused on his own breathing and staying calm. He left his hand where it rested against Jim's, afraid to make any sort of move.

"I think everything about that day should bug you. I don't know why you stuck around from then until the thesis crap. But in most ways, I think we've been doing better since you became a cop."

"So you're asking if there's something that still bothers me, since what happened at the fountain, something that isn't getting better?"

"Yeah." Jim touched a finger to his nose and nodded at Blair as if they'd just achieved successful communication.

Blair really wished he knew how to answer.

Jim's attention gradually drifted back to the Jags game on TV, and after a few minutes, Blair wondered if Jim truly wanted an answer. Sometimes it seemed like Jim forgot conversations in midstream, especially if there were long pauses. It was frustrating when that happened with topics that Blair cared strongly about, but this time Jim had brought it up. Blair couldn't figure out why Jim would broach such a difficult subject and then just leave it hanging. Maybe he'd reached his conversational or emotional quota for the day, or maybe he assumed Blair would answer in his own good time.

Blair's mind was still spinning frantically with possibilities when he felt Jim's hand shift under his. Still seeming to focus on the television, Jim rotated his palm up and wrapped two fingers loosely around Blair's wrist. It wasn't quite like they were holding hands, but Blair was at a loss for anything else to call it.

That night, Jim heard Blair thrashing in his sleep, heard the hard shift one way, then the other, then the writhing. He knew that pattern, but unlike every time before, Jim didn't want to ignore it anymore. He was down the stairs and slipping into Blair's room before the writhing was half way done. He saw Blair's hand grasping above the covers, closing on nothing, and he moved forward to take that hand.

Blair had been whining deep in his throat. In that instant he quieted, tossed his head twice more and then half opened his eyes.


Blair's forehead wrinkled in half-asleep incomprehension, but his eyes closed.

Drifting along, listening as Blair's breathing and heartbeat returned to a comfortable sleep rhythm, Jim wondered how he'd let this go on so long. The Sentinel had heard every nightmare since the fountain, and he'd guessed what Blair was dreaming when he fought and thrashed and then succumbed to stillness each time. There were other times when Blair slept restlessly or even thrashed
and moaned in what must be different nightmares. But this one, the drowning nightmare happened several nights a week, sometimes night after night, sometimes twice in one night. Jim had never told Blair how aware he was of Blair's presence since the fountain, even when they were both asleep. He'd never admitted to hearing Blair's nightmares. Sure there were lots of excuses he could give himself about not wanting to violate Blair's privacy, intrude on his space, startle him in his sleep. But on some level he'd known that it would be like this, that he would be able to comfort Blair, make him feel safe, release him from the nightmare.

The next morning, Jim peeled and sliced one of each kind of fruit they had in the house. He left them all on a cutting board on the table and dug out the recipe for buckwheat crepes. They didn't taste as good as regular crepes or pancakes, but they were the nicest thing Jim could think of that Blair considered acceptable breakfast food.

Blair's face when he stumbled out of his bedroom went past bemused and into shock. "Wow, that's quite the spread, big guy." Blair glanced at his hand as if wondering whether to say anything about the past night, but Jim handed him fresh squeezed tangerine juice and nudged him to sit at the table.

"Eat up," Jim said.

"Sure. Thanks." Blair still looked befuddled even as he gave a small hum of appreciation upon tasting the tangerine juice. "Is there a holiday I forgot about?"

Jim's superior sense of smell allowed him to almost taste the juice before he even poured his own. "Nope, just a regular Sunday with nothing much to do, but I had an idea."

Blair smiled, a smile Jim recognized as his partner's game face. Blair was waiting for the other shoe to drop, expecting Jim to drag him into something Blair wouldn't like. Jim could only sigh. "I was thinking that using my senses might be like building muscles or learning to play the trumpet. Maybe they'd get better if we practiced."

Blair looked up as if he expected a safe to fall on his head, like the universe had changed every rule on him without warning.

"Is this some competitive streak triggered by O'Neill? I mean, I would be very happy to help you with whatever practice you'd like, but I don't want you to feel like he's threatening your position or __""

"Chief, give me some credit. I know I can be a dick, but I can also learn."

Blair just nodded, wide-eyed and uncertain.

"If I can learn to use my senses better, then I should do that, just like you went through training to be a better cop." As he brought the tray of crepes and joined Blair at the table, Jim wished Blair had his Sentinel's ability to read his sincerity.

"Right, that's very logical, and I would be thrilled if you're really interested in embracing all of your Sentinel abilities." Blair nodded as he chewed a large bite of cantaloupe, and Jim noticed the shiny juice gathering at the edges of Blair's lips. "But why now? There's some piece here I'm missing. Did Daniel's offer to help me get my PhD make you feel guilty about me giving that up? Because while that was a bad time for me," Blair hesitated and shook his head, "a very bad time, I choose my path, and most of that wasn't your fault."

"But what happened after the fountain was."

Blair set his jaw and ran his hands back through his hair. "No man, you were out of your mind. I
know you'd never—"

Jim heard Blair's heart speeding up, saw him swallow. Jim reached across the table and for the second time in as many days put his hand on top of Blair's. "Some of that, I was out of control, and I still don't know exactly why. But even after Alex was taken away, I chose not to deal with things, kept you at a distance, ignored your nightmares, left you hurting."

Blair's heart was pounding. His face was pale. It took a while before he spoke, "You couldn't have known what it was like for me."

This was the part where Jim really wanted to run away, the part he'd been avoiding to one degree or another ever since the fountain. "I know more than you think. When our spirit animals merged, didn't it change anything for you?"

Blair stared, then he sniffed, then he swatted at his eyes.

"You tell me I'm repressed, and I guess this is what you mean. In that moment, I knew you trusted me, that you accepted me, and I turned my back on that. Partly I couldn't get over what happened with Alex, but beyond that, I needed to prove I was still in control of myself. I didn't want to need you, and I didn't want you to need me. I made a whole bunch of excuses to myself, because I didn't want to deal with any of that mystical mumbo jumbo."

Perhaps because that was the longest heartfelt speech of Jim's life, Blair managed to pull himself together by the end of it. "Have you been replaced by a pod person, or was the pod person the one I've been living with since the fountain?"

"Take your pick."

"I'll choose you, for sure." Blair smiled, but it only lasted a moment and didn't reach as far as his eyes. "I have some idea how hard it must be for you to say all that, and I'm ashamed I didn't see it coming and wasn't there to help you process—"

"Stop, Chief. If it's okay with you, I'd rather not hear you apologize for anything. Maybe we could just enjoy the breakfast, even if it does involve buckwheat. Then we can set up whatever practice and just act like decent people and get on with our lives. What do you think?"

"I think this is the best breakfast I've ever had." And he dug in like he meant it.

#

Late in the afternoon, after hours and hours of trying to improve Jim's use of his senses, Blair excused himself to meditate in his room. He lit a candle, and sat down in half lotus, trying to relax.

His mind and body were buzzing with all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Jim had initiated a serious conversation. He'd apologized and willingly mentioned spirit animals. Finally, on his own terms, Jim seemed to be embracing being a Sentinel.

A couple of years ago, Blair would have been overjoyed. His enthusiasm to press forward and try anything Jim wanted would have been overwhelming, and well, it might have overwhelmed Jim in a bad way, so maybe it was better that Blair had taken a more professional attitude toward his role as Guide. Only now, he was finding that professional demeanor challenged. Most of Jim's ideas for exercising his skills required Blair to be right there with him, touching him, speaking softly by his ear. Of course, Blair had always done those things when needed. It was part of being Jim's Guide. But from the incident at the fountain until the thesis fiasco, Jim had been mostly hostile to needing any such support from Blair. Even after Blair became a real cop and Jim started to treat him better,
Blair had been careful not to set Jim off. He'd tried to be as professional in his role as Guide as in his role as police detective.

Taking a deep breath, Blair tried to find his center. He'd completely distracted himself from his planned meditation. Whatever conflicts and emotions Jim's declarations had caused, Blair needed to be steady and calm if he was going to properly ground his Sentinel. He sought that inner acceptance and sense of connection that made it possible for him to care for Jim through both good and bad times. It eluded him, and he tried to accept and open himself to whatever he was feeling.

While he could still find the trust and love that Jim had finally acknowledged feeling when he brought Blair back to life at the fountain, that pure sense of himself as Jim's Guide now seemed tattered and stomped down. A sweep of insecurity that Blair had only half acknowledged before now rose up and overwhelmed him. Despite trusting Jim with his life every day, something inside Blair screamed and kicked against the idea of trusting Jim emotionally. He didn't want to believe Jim's words or enjoy his touch, because he was pretty sure Jim could still turn on him the next time he was really angry. Blair had absorbed some truth about Jim as well when their spirit animals merged, and while the core of the man was selfless and good, he had layers of damage and defenses that frankly terrified Blair. Unless Jim had worked through far more of his issues since the fountain than Blair thought likely, there was no way Blair could leave himself vulnerable to that.

It hurt Blair to confront how negative his feelings toward Jim had become over time. Some romantic, optimistic aspect of himself still wanted to believe Jim could heal, that what Jim had shown him this weekend evidenced an amazing personal effort to work through his issues and reach out to Blair. For someone who was usually so closed off and opposed to introspection, it really was a startling achievement. Blair wanted to appreciate Jim's efforts and help him keep building in a positive direction as both a Sentinel and a human being. But Blair also had to respect his own boundaries, if he couldn't honestly feel safe with his Sentinel, then there was only so much he could do. For Blair's own sake, and for the sake of his research, it would be better if he maintained the professional status quo.

#

June 8, South Africa

After three days of Gabi hiding in her room and barely speaking, Brett took a plate of cookies to her bedroom door and knocked. When there wasn't any answer he said through the door, "I made some cookies. These not only include eggs but chocolate, too. They're still warm, and I'm leaving a plate just outside your door."

The next day when Brett was sifting and brushing microfossils, Gabi came and sat next to him.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"So, if you'll show me what you do here, I'd like to help."

Brett showed her how to sift dirt through a screen, catalog anything of note, and dispose of what was left in the backdirt piles. If she didn't seem entirely comfortable, she at least asked reasonable questions. At some point, after a lengthy silence, she said, "Thanks for the cookies."

#

The morning they left for Kruger Reserve, Gabi made a point of sitting with Martha. Joe was
driving, but the van only seated twelve, and Brett ended up just in front of Gabi. They were all part of every conversation in the back of the van, but mostly Gabi tried not to talk.

When the conversation turned to what animals they might see at Kruger, Brett turned to her and asked, "Which animal do you most hope to spot?"

Knowing she'd have to confess sooner or later, she admitted, "I want to see cheetahs, but not at Kruger. I'm continuing on to Pretoria with Martha in the van. In the morning I'll catch a ride to the Cheetah Center that's just outside of town."

"Huh." Brett's eyes fixed on her like his mind was processing more than she'd said. "What do you mean by 'catch a ride'? Why not take the van?"

Gabi gave him her best withering glare. "I don't drive." She caught his quick glance toward her med alert bracelet, and decided to let it slide. The seizures might keep her from driving, but mostly, she'd been busy at college with no one to teach her by the time she reached driving age. "Anyway, there are vans a lot like this one that go between Pretoria and Johannesburg, and the Cheetah Center is right off the main road."

"Like hitch hiking?"

"No, passengers pay, and there is a set of hand signals for rides and destinations. Martha taught me."

Brett looked at Martha, "And it's safe for an American traveling alone?"

Martha and Gabi shared a look, almost rolling their eyes. Then Martha told him, "You sound like my brother, who would rather I not go anywhere alone. It's safe enough. She'll be fine."

Brett smiled and ducked his head at Martha, "And you'd rather go to Pretoria than Kruger?"

"Pretoria's not so much to look at," Martha said with a chuckle and brushed long bushy hair back from her face. "But I grew up there, and my brother lives there. Besides, I've been to Kruger a couple of times."

"And this Cheetah Center?"

"I went with a school fieldtrip once. It's nice, but tiny compared to Kruger. It's mostly rescue and rehabilitation for cheetahs and a few other species."

Brett nodded. "Don't they have cheetahs at Kruger?"

A boy across the aisle, another of the South African students, said, "A few, not likely to see them. Hard enough to find a leopard, or even a lion, but the cheetahs don't go for tourists."

Gabi was happy when the conversation drifted elsewhere, but Brett sought her out when they stopped for lunch. He stood blinking half in and half out of her small patch of shade. It looked uncomfortable for him, but she already felt crowded.

"Would you get pissed at me again if I wanted to tag along to the Cheetah Center?"

"Yes. It's really not a top attraction, and I don't need a babysitter." She ignored the voice in her head that told her to be nice and the clenching in her gut that meant she didn't want any more drama between them. She liked Brett well enough to wish he'd just settle in like wallpaper and not provoke her to push away.
"But what if I really wanted to see the cheetahs?"

"Why?" And why couldn't he stop pushing into her space?

"Why?" He raised his eyebrows and in one breath said, "They're the fastest land animals, with non-retractable claws that work like cleats. They use their tails like rudders and have black patches by their eyes that work like sunglasses. They can purr and make all sorts of unusual sounds, and they kill with a bite to the neck that suffocates prey. They've kind of been my favorite animal since I was a little kid, and I swear I'm not trying to co-opt your idea or act like your babysitter."

Gabi sighed. Brett was cute and had the whole charm thing down pat. She'd like to believe that stuff didn't work on her, and she was pretty sure he was gay anyway, but she just couldn't tell if he was faking his interest in cheetahs or was sincere. "I'll have to ask Martha, because she's letting me stay overnight at her brother's place."

Brett smiled, just a little, with no teeth showing.

By the time they reached the Cheetah Center, Brett was not only excited to be there but very glad Gabi hadn't gone on her own. First off, Brett had seen some of those vans the locals caught rides on, and most of them were overcrowded and a little rough looking. While Brett strongly considered himself a feminist, he'd have to side with Martha's brother on that one. More importantly, the road into the Cheetah Center from the highway had numerous gates, presumably to keep cheetahs and other wild animals in. Brett was pretty sure they didn't expect guests to walk from the main road.

At the front desk, a perky young blond woman with a name tag that read "Sophie" asked if they wanted to see the cheetah run that morning before the regular tour. Brett saw Gabi glance at the price list and start to shake her head. The cheetah run only happened twice a week and cost more on its own than the whole regular tour, but Brett didn't want to miss it.

He said, "Yes, please, two of us for both the cheetah run and tour," and he quickly handed over his credit card.

"You can't pay for me," Gabi whispered. Sophie pretended not to hear as she rang up the purchase.

"I would have missed this place entirely if you hadn't mentioned it," he whispered back.

"You could have been at Kruger," Gabi hissed.

By that point, he had a credit card receipt to sign. "You can buy lunch."

The cheetah run turned out to be more than worth the cost. For cats that might be placed back in the wild, the Center had rigged up a motorized pulley system so the cheetahs ran at least 40 miles per hour to catch their meat. Brett could see marks left by those famous non-retractable claws when the cheetahs pivoted at speed to follow their substitute prey. The visitors stood behind a hide, but the cats were panting and kicking up dust just a few yards in front of them. By the end of the first run, Brett was breathing fast in sympathy with the cheetah. By the end of the last run, his skin and ears buzzed as if he'd spent a night out dancing.

On the way back, they walked by Anatolian shepherd dogs who were being specially trained to chase cheetahs away from livestock (so farmers would be less tempted to shoot the threatened species). Gabi had been keeping her distance from Brett since he'd bought their tickets, but he noticed now that she was asking Sophie, who'd turned out to be their tour guide, lots of questions about working at the Center. At one point Gabi pulled out a piece of paper, but was too far away for
Brett to see what was on it.

For the regular tour, during which they rode in a semi-open cross between a jeep and a bus, Gabi sat beside him. She was quiet and didn't look as excited as he was, but when he smiled at her she said, "Okay, the cheetah run was really cool."

Then they drove past a pack of African wild dogs with pups. It was only when a black man carrying a large stick jumped off the back of the vehicle and started feeding the dogs that Brett realized the man was there. A second later Brett realized how white everyone on the tour was, including the tour guide. Since they'd arrived in South Africa, everyplace they'd gone had been mixed or mostly black except for them, and it made Brett a little uncomfortable to be on a tour that seemed so segregated.

Then he saw Gabi beside him, watching the man feed the dogs. The dogs jumped and made a noise very much like chirping, and he imagined he could see Gabi turn her ears toward the noise. She watched and listened with such intensity that Brett studied her face to make sure it wasn't another seizure, but it looked nothing like that. Gabi was focused on the dogs the way she focused on the stringbots or sometimes her phone, and it made Brett want to see exactly what she was seeing. When he realized she wasn't taking pictures or video, Brett pulled out his phone and collected some of each.

After the next set of fences, the cheetahs fully captured both of their attention. The way they moved, even at a distance, looked mechanically perfect and impossible. When the cheetahs drew in close to the tour vehicle, knowing the black man with the stick would put out food, they seemed to be the lean, majestic version of what other cats aspired to be. Brett would have forgotten to take pictures of the cheetahs if the tour hadn't stayed to watch for over twenty minutes. When he finally pulled out his phone, he realized he probably wouldn't have noticed if Gabi had gone through a seizure there. He did observe that her phone was in her hand now, but she still didn't seem to be taking any pictures.

At the end of the tour, Gabi hung back as the group disembarked. Brett hovered a couple yards away and watched as she tipped the man who'd fed the animals. The man took her money, but kept looking at the ground.

"Thank you. You were amazing with the animals," she said.

"You're welcome," he nodded.

"By the way," she pulled out the paper she'd shown Sophie before, and now Brett could see it was a picture. "Is there anyone here who might know these people? They worked here nineteen years ago. The woman is Amelia, and the man is Thabo."

"No," the man shook his head.

"Do you know who I might ask? Here or in Pretoria or some other town?"

The man just shook his head, keeping his eyes down, and finally Gabi thanked him again and gave up. She walked back into the Center courtyard looking sad, but she made her way to the gift shop where she asked an older woman at the counter similar questions. The woman just shook her head and shrugged. Brett wondered at the quick brush off, but he made his way around the gift shop, pretending not to notice.

He picked up a book on the history of the Cheetah Center and saw that the founder still lived on the grounds and had signed the book. He also read through sponsorship material, and saw the founder occasionally met with those who donated money. Picking up a kids book on African wild dogs as
well as the history, he went to the counter and set out to charm the woman at the register.

"Gabi, let me borrow your picture."

"What?" Gabi looked up from a pair of socks that illustrated two different cheetah coat patterns. She hadn't really been shopping, just killing time while Brett made his purchases. Now she was startled by what he was asking.

"The woman at the register says she'll show it to the founder and see if she remembers the people you're asking about while we get lunch."

Gabi felt her eyes water in some combination of annoyance and appreciation. She gave the picture to Brett and watched him take it to the register. The woman wrote the names Amelia and Thabo on a post it and set that and the picture just to her right.

"What did you do?"

"I just asked."

"But I tried that."

Brett waved the bag with his purchases, and then motioned toward the door. "Come on, there's sandwiches for sale outside."

Over mediocre sandwiches served on hard rolls Brett said, "With all the pictures you took in Cape Town, I was surprised you weren't photographing today."

Gabi was relieved he didn't ask about the picture they'd just left in the shop, and she scrunched up her forehead trying to decide what reply to give. She couldn't say that pictures didn't do justice to the way she tuned her vision to something beautiful, but it seemed like Brett deserved a somewhat real answer. "I guess I think of photography as a sort of art form, even if I don't consider myself artistic. If I think I can frame a photo to capture something interesting that I notice, then it's worth trying. With the animals, I'm not sure any photo could do them justice, but if I wanted to try for that, I know a lot of good photographers with really good cameras already make those sort of pictures available."

"So it's not worth doing if you can't be really good at it?"

"No, it's not worth missing out on the real experience to take photos I'll have no use for."

Gabi watched his eyes get wider and his pulse speed up, and she knew she had his attention, but she needed to know something else. "You're not much into girls, right?"

To his credit, Brett didn't sputter or even show much surprise. He just smiled around his sandwich. "If you're asking if I'm gay or queer, I'm not much into definitions, but yeah."

"I'm all for making my own definitions, but how do you feel about numbers, like the Kinsey Scale."

"5.3"

"You hate definitions but embrace decimals?"

"Started out with a psych minor, but it didn't really suit me. How about you?"

"You already know my majors are phys, mech E, and astrophysics, so if you're asking for a number,
I'd say three but still largely hypothetical. As I said before, I have a two year rule. I just wanted to avoid any misunderstandings, and I'm not quite sure why you're nice to me."

"Wanting to be friends is too clichéd for you?"

"We'd never settle on a definition for that."

"What are you so afraid of?"

He asked it like a joke, and Gabi knew she needed to keep the banter up within a certain time frame or else he'd realize it wasn't a joke to her. She was afraid, almost all the time, especially lately. That was part of why she'd come to South Africa, in some crazy attempt to understand herself better by finding out about her father or her heritage. But she couldn't tell Brett about that, couldn't tell him that her senses were getting out of control and triggering more and more seizures lately. She couldn't admit to how frightened she was on some basic emotional level or any of the reasons why, and she knew she'd let the silence go too long.

Brett let her off the hook with a long, "Okaaay. Well, if it helps, I have no intention of hitting on you or anyone else this summer. I have a boyfriend I'm planning to go back to, and I've had more than enough experience that was not hypothetical to say I'll probably not try sleeping with any woman ever again. I'm not real interested in quickies or one night stands with anyone at this point, and I can't see myself having more than that with a woman. So I like you, and if I could hang around with you some this summer without causing any trouble, that sounds good to me."

Gabi watched his hands on his sandwich, unable to meet his eyes. "Wow, that was really nice. Usually even people who find me interesting don't put up with me like this. And the part with the picture—why would you even care?"

"Well, don't take this the wrong way, but you're eighteen and flashing a picture of a man and a woman from nineteen years ago. I figured it might be important to you."

"Well, don't take this the wrong way, but you're eighteen and flashing a picture of a man and a woman from nineteen years ago. I figured it might be important to you."

It frightened Gabi that he'd paid enough attention and stuck with her long enough to figure even that much out. She'd never intended to tell anyone her real motivation for visiting South Africa, and she hadn't wanted anyone to get close to her right then, even as an undefined friend. At the same time, part of her was amazed and a little embarrassed to be the focus of so much attention, and she hoped Brett couldn't see how he'd slid right through her defenses. "Do you think it's been long enough to check back at the gift shop?"

"Sure," Brett smiled, and it moved muscles that changed his whole face in a beautiful way. They cleaned up their small mess from lunch and went back to find the woman who had Gabi's photograph.

"Sorry," the woman said. "The manager thinks the cheetah in the picture is Overland, one of their first successful re-releases, and she thought the girl might have been one of the students they took from Holland back then. She says the man's name, Thabo, comes from the Tsana tribe, and many of the men who worked here came from that tribe, but she didn't know anything more. Our computer records don't go back that far. Hope you enjoy the book."

Brett didn't expect Gabi to talk in the car. She'd been quiet for most of their sixteen hours on the road the day before and silent this morning, except for helping with directions from her phone. On the drive back to Pretoria, she kept her phone in one hand and the picture in the other.
Then Gabi said, "It's nice to know the cheetah made it back to the wild. My mom had told me his name was Overland, but I think she left while he was still at the Center."

Brett wanted to ask a million questions but decided to wait it out. It seemed like Gabi read his mind.

"So yeah, you probably guessed about right, and Thabo is my father, but they were still dismantling apartheid then. My mother says Thabo told her to go and raise me in the States, where she'd wanted them both to go. She wouldn't have stayed with him anyway. Maybe he knew. She never stayed anywhere or kept in touch with anyone. Now she's living like a hermit off the grid and sometimes she'll reply somehow if I send her email, but I wouldn't be surprised if she stopped checking email someday. She told a few stories about my father, and I think he might have had the same seizure disorder I have, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to try to find him. And there, that's the whole strangers on a plane spiel, except you're not quite a stranger and this is a van rather than a plane."

"You have a minor in psych?"

"No, I just pick stuff up."

"So what are you going to try next?"

"That was the only lead I had."

"You could write to the Tswana tribe."

"All I have is a fairly common first name and a very old photo."

"But what have you got to lose?"

#

Coming back to Martha's brother's house was like coming home. It was a tiny concrete house with a solar panel on top, what Martha called an RDP house, because it was originally provided by some government program after Apartheid. The night before they'd barely been introduced to David, Martha's brother, before Brett was offered the couch and Gabi had followed Martha to her room. They'd slept for six hours, and those six hours seemed a lifetime ago to Gabi, even though they made it back to David's house while dinner was still cooking.

Martha made them all hamburgers with a side of pickled vegetables. Gabi was caught off guard by the complicated tangy smell of the vegetable. It drew her in and when she saw how people had moved without her noticing, she guessed she'd had an absence seizure, but no one else remarked on it. When they sat down to eat, Martha asked Gabi how the trip to the Cheetah Center had gone.

"The cheetahs and wild dogs were amazing, and I guess it's good that Brett came along, because he talked me into seeing the cheetah run, and everyone there liked him better."

Martha exchanged a look with her brother, and he nodded to her and then to Brett. David was a big man, and Gabi couldn't read him at all. She felt like everyone else at the table knew something she didn't, and all she could say was, "What?"

"Were they rude to you?" Martha asked.

"Not exactly, just kind of stand offish." Gabi shrugged. It hadn't surprised her that people liked Brett better, he was more of a people person and really good looking, too.

"Even once they knew you were American?"
"Yeah, I think so. It's not like I had to show my passport, but it seems to be obvious to everyone that I'm not local."

"There's still a lot of bias here, especially outside the cities, against mixed marriage," Martha said.

Gabi gave half a laugh. "I think that's nearly universal. I lived in Georgia, in the U.S., for a winter as a kid, and someone said to my face 'mixed marriages never work' and acted like it should make me feel better about not having a father."

"That's too bad," David said, and he sounded very earnest, as if he'd hoped the rest of the world was better.

Gabi could hear and smell the tension around the table, even from Brett, and somehow it made her want to open up in a way she never did with more than one person at a time. She pulled out the picture and said, "Anyway, my dad was South African. His name was Thabo, and someone at the Cheetah Center said he's probably from the Tswana tribe, but no one knew anything else. Brett thinks I should try writing to the tribe or something."

Martha took the picture and then passed it to David.

"Could I copy this?" David asked. "It probably won't help, but I could show it to a few people, some Tswana. You never know who might come up with something useful."

"Yeah, that would be great," Gabi said.

After dinner, they went to a copy center and made half a dozen color photocopies. Gabi wrote a note on the back of each one that included her father's name and one of Gabi's email addresses, but didn't say the woman in the picture was her mother.

That night, before everyone went to bed, David hugged his sister goodnight. It was a brief hug, but Gabi couldn't help watching and wondering how it would feel to have a brother like that. She could almost touch the warmth and pressure of the hug around her own back and shoulders.

#

June 12, Antarctica

"Try picturing where the Ancients stored extra drones," Rodney said.

"It just doesn't work that way." John felt his thoughts run up against a solid wall when he asked the chair about drones, and he knew his mind shifted a little sideways already to access this Ancient device. Or maybe he was doing it wrong or trying to access the wrong information.

"Will it tell you how to build a drone? Or maybe about the coding to control them? Now that would be interesting, to see how the Ancients…"

John could sort of tell when Rodney was talking solely to make noise. They'd given each other a hand a few more times since their first panicked effort in the storage room. John had continued encouraging Rodney to talk, and Rodney seemed to have taken it to heart even in work situations. That turned out great, because John thought he might be going a little crazy. Like now, he thought he saw a crack at the edge of the ceiling across the room. He imagined he could hear dust scraping from the crack as ice shifted outside. When he seemed to hear ice shifting even farther above their outpost, he reined in his hearing until he was focused on Rodney's grumbling voice again.

"Maybe there's something about the chemical structure of the materials used to make drones…"
A flash of movement caught John's eye. It was like a black bird, possibly a crow, darted through his peripheral vision. This was another reason John thought he might be a little crazier than when the powers that be first sent him to Antarctica. He knew there weren't any crows here, outside or in, but this was the third time he'd thought he saw one. Where his eyes tried to follow the crow, he saw only a tiny crack, too small for him to possibly see even if there were a crack. Then his vision seemed to zoom in, showing the crack like torn skin over a broken arm. A blueprint of the support behind the ceiling sprang into John's mind, and the section behind the crack seemed to be blinking in and out.

"Are you hearing a word I'm saying, Major?"

John felt warmth on his hand and knew Rodney was touching him again. John's skin mapped the warmth in the exact outline of each of Rodney's rough, square-tipped fingers. He wanted more but was also worried how this casual touching might look to others. Don't Ask Don't Tell might be history, but homophobia was alive and well, especially in the U.S. military.

"Speak, now."

"There's a crack," John heard himself say.

"What? In a drone?" The pressure on John's hand increased, as if that might make John communicate more. Perhaps it worked.

"I'm not sure, but the chair is showing me a diagram of the structure behind the ceiling with one part flashing as if it might break." John hedged a bit on the next part, figuring when in doubt, blame the chair. "It's showing me a tiny crack in the ceiling right over there." John pointed with the hand Rodney wasn't touching. He managed to keep his palm resting on the sensor pad, in case disengaging would disconnect his view of the diagram.

"Here. I'm going to slide a pen into your fingers and put paper just beneath. See if you can sketch what you're seeing without fully lifting your hand off the chair."

"You want me to sketch the crack or the diagram?"

"The diagram! I'll get some peon to look for the crack." Then louder and facing away from John, "You, military person, yes you! Get something to stand on and a magnifying glass. I need you to check for a crack in the ceiling."

By the time Rodney had someone in position, who with John's directions had managed to locate the crack, John had made a messy sketch of what hopefully lay behind that patch of ceiling. When Rodney took the top page of the notepad and started to move away, he said to John, "Go ahead and try to draw anything else it shows you."

As soon as John processed the words, the chair started showing him other diagrams. They looked like grids and then tinker toys and then representations of very complex molecules. At first the images changed too fast for John to take in all the parts, let alone make awkward sketches. But when John frantically wished for everything to slow down, the chair complied. It showed each image until John had sketched what he could and flipped to a new page of the notepad.

"John, John, open your eyes."

Rodney's voice sounded impossibly loud. John's hands flew to ears, and he heard the notebook and pen he'd been using crash to the ground louder than all the storm winds and ice shifting sounds from outside.

Then John felt warm hands on top of his, warmth in the shape of Rodney's fingers, just like before,
but touching both hands now. Sitting forward John found his face buried in Rodney's neck again, and while Rodney didn't pull away, John could feel him stiffen. He fell back on his readymade excuse and whispered, "Tonight, I want you to fuck me."

Rodney's stiffness changed to a whole different flavor of physical tension, and somehow John could feel that shift from just Rodney's hands, or maybe it was his smell. John realized he hadn't opened his eyes yet. When he did, red and green after images flashed against the brightness of the room. His body felt feverish everywhere except where cold drops, like cold rain against hot skin, seemed to be pelting him.

Then the sound of the storm outside disappeared as Rodney said, "My room, eleven o'clock." He felt Rodney squeeze his hands before pulling away, and John pretended to stretch his back against the chair for a moment as he waited for his vision and sense of touch to fade back to normal.

#

At ten past eleven Rodney heard a tap on his door. He opened it holding the little notebook from before in his hand and yanked John inside saying, "Finally, I need to know what you were drawing here."

Then he locked the door behind John and walked forward until he had John up against the wall with only an inch between them.

"Good line," John said.

"Yes, but I really would like an answer." Then he let his thigh brush between John's legs as if offering an incentive.

"I have no idea. The structure of something. I think it zoomed in three times on each."

"I saw there were three types of diagrams, repeating, but with no labels they're hard to interpret."

"Sorry."

Rodney snorted in frustration and tossed the notebook on his dresser. Then he pressed the length of his body up against John and pressed his hands on top of John's, pinning him to the wall. John shivered and pushed his hips forward. "I'll figure it out in time. Genius here. Meanwhile, I've figured out something for you. Let me try?"

"I thought you were going to fuck me."

Rodney shivered. "I will, but I can make it better for you if you let me. You do what I say until I say it's over. You can have a safeword or use stoplight colors."

"Stoplight colors?"

"Green for go or good, amber for slow down or unsure, red for stop right now or definitely not."

"Yellow instead of amber—you can't make me talk like a Canadian—and you have to keep talking the whole time."

"Agreed. Take off your clothes."

It would have been easy for Rodney to describe how much he liked John's body as it was gradually uncovered—from the soft brown hair that outlined John's nipples and groin to the long muscles that
shifted and stretched in John's arms and legs—but he was pretty sure John already knew he was good looking, and Rodney liked for praise to mean something when he gave it. So he let his eyes and his growing erection demonstrate his attraction while he talked about the diagrams John had sketched. "I don't know how you managed with your hand curled up like that, but it was obvious your drawings came in sets of three. If I knew what sort of thing they were, I think you captured enough detail to be useful. But I don't even know if they relate to the ceiling problem, now fixed, or drones, or something else in the lab or weapons platform. Any thoughts?" Rodney asked as he reached out an arm but didn't quite touch John.

"None at all." The three words were breathy and slow, as if John were already too turned on to speak. His face was flushed and his eyes half closed.

"Lie down on the bed."

John lay down on his back without seeming to look behind him. Rodney pushed John's hands up to the top of the mattress. "Can you keep them here or do you want me to tie them?"

"I can keep them there."

"Good. I want you to lie there and let me play. You can make whatever noises come out but only talk if I ask you a question or you need to say yellow or red. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Rodney started to stroke from John's wrist down the inside of his arm, and John began to shiver. "I knew you'd be responsive. There's something about you that begs to be touched, but you keep people at a distance." Rodney stroked up to John's ear, traced it, and let his fingers glide back down John's neck. "I was surprised the first time you wanted me, but now I think you were looking for someone who could figure out what you needed. I'm guessing you don't even know. Maybe you've never played this way before." Rodney brought his other hand up and flicked both of John's nipples, making him buck up from the bed, then Rodney traced symmetrical patterns across John's chest without so much as brushing the nipples again. It didn't matter, they stayed hard as pebbles, and John's cock was fully erect and starting to leak. "I've seen other military types who needed to let go, wanted someone else to call the shots for a while, but I wouldn't have guessed that from you right off."

Rodney slid his hands in long light strokes down John's sides, hips, and the outside of his thighs. He paused with his hands on John's knees, watching all the skin he'd touched develop goose bumps. Then he blew across John's crotch, where he hadn't touched at all, and watched John writhe. He was going to keep talking about what tipped him off that John might want this, how John would seem to lose himself in the chair or when they were having sex. But then he saw John's eyelids start to flutter, and instead he said, "Stay with me, John. Look at me. Focus on me."

This was the first time they'd had sex where they could really see each other, where Rodney could watch John and see when he was getting lost in sensation. He knew in that moment that the trick would be keeping John's attention while letting him give up control, pushing him as far as he could go while making him feel safe. "I'm going to take my clothes off now, and I want you to watch. Did you know there are over a thousand nerve ending in an average square inch of skin?"

He kept talking about touch as he slowing pulled off two layers of shirts. Sensing that John would feel better with some parts of their bodies touching, Rodney kept his knee against John's thigh. The only other touch he offered was a faint brush of fabric before he tossed each shirt aside, and he saw John startle and shift fractionally toward the touch each time. John's skin proved more sensitive than the most responsive partners Rodney had ever been with, and he thought he could find ways to make
that really good for John if they kept getting together on a regular basis. He talked to John about silk scarves and ice cubes, and John shivered and twitched in response to every word. Just to see if it mattered, Rodney tried talking dirty as he pulled off his pants. He made a point of brushing up against John as he talked about pushing into John and taking his time until he found the angle that would drive John crazy. John's eyes and attention stayed fixed on Rodney, but it didn't seem to matter whether he talked about sex or skin or science, so Rodney let himself babble about the simulations he was running as he leaned forward over John's body. He wanted to keep his mouth where his lips brushed John's nipple as he spoke, but John bucked up against him so hard he thought the man might come just from that. Some other time, he'd love to see if he could make John come twice in one night, but for now there were enough variables in play.

He reached to his bedside table for lube and a condom and saw that John was glassy eyed. "Are you with me, John? Are you tracking?"

There was a moment when Rodney worried, but then John gasped out, "Yes." Rodney kissed John's nipple and slicked up a finger. He talked about friction and the challenges of modeling it properly as he skated the finger behind John's balls and brushed lightly down and across his hole and then back again to his scrotum. Tremors like an earthquake traveling out from the epicenter spread from John's hole to his inner thighs and abdomen. His cock was so hard and red that it was probably beginning to ache.

Rodney traced around the hole and tried to ignore John's tiny insistent movements until he was ready to let one fingertip slide in. John's body convulsed as if the sensation was electric, and given how the man reacted to other touch, Rodney really wished he could know how it felt for John. The scientist let his free hand rest solidly beside John's nipple, and John's chest pushed into the touch even as his ass tried to push down onto Rodney's finger. That was enough to make Rodney interrupt his discussion of friction to say, "I think you're the hottest thing I've ever seen."

He talked about force and momentum as he worked the first finger all the way in and then added a second. John was very tight, and while Rodney was almost certain that John had done this before, he guessed it must have been a while. He wondered if John had let himself really feel it before. When John broke into quick gasping breaths as Rodney found his prostate, it was clear he'd reached the edge of John's control. Rodney eased away from the sensitive spot and concentrated on scissoring his fingers, adding a third, and stretching.

When Rodney pulled back to put on a condom, John's eyes fixed on him, and while the pupils were blown and John's mouth was open, Rodney could feel John's attention staying with him like a physical force. Rodney was glad to have the condom to hold him back a little or he wouldn't have made it past pushing into John.

He'd planned to have John roll over, but now he knew that the eye contact was going to make it better for both of them. He positioned John's legs carefully and eased his way in. When John let out a long "ooh" sound, Rodney realized his incredibly responsive bedmate had only made breathy sounds and sighs up until then. The "ooh" continued until Rodney was all the way in, and then John's blissed out face broke into a smile. John started to hum, almost the way a cat would purr, and Rodney carefully moved out and in with long slow strokes. John moved just slightly to meet each thrust.

At some point Rodney drifted to talking about math, but his real thoughts were all about John and how peaceful he looked as their bodies moved together. Rodney was more certain than ever that this was what John needed, but he wasn't sure that he understood all of what was going on. There was definitely part of John that needed to give up control, to let someone take care of him for a while. But as they moved together and Rodney felt them both pulling closer and closer toward climax, it felt like
something else was playing across John's body. John's muscles and skin flowed in waves from his up-stretched arms all the way down to his toes. The humming sounds John made somehow reflected that motion, Rodney's continuing monologue, and what they were doing together. Rodney kept to the building rhythm until he knew he couldn't hold on much longer. He wrapped his right hand, still somewhat slick with lube, around John's cock and pulled with intent until John was coming and panting out a sound that was more grunt than music but pushed Rodney right over the edge with him.

Afterward Rodney took care of the condom and used tissues to clean them up without leaving the bed. John was completely limp beside him. When Rodney realized he'd forgotten to speak since they both came, he propped himself up on an elbow and gazed at John's completely relaxed body and face. He whispered, "I hope you don't need me to talk much more, but I'd really like you to stay for a while. Does that work for you? You can do what you want now."

He pulled John's arms down one at a time, sliding his hands along the smooth muscles and chafing the skin a bit. John's hands were warm, so he didn't worry too much about circulation. When John looped those arms around Rodney, it seemed to be answer enough. Rodney reached across to turn off the bedside lamp and let himself doze with his head on John's shoulder.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Rodney woke to find John's face buried in his neck, a position he was starting to find familiar. His skin by John's mouth was damp, whether from a kiss or moist breath, Rodney couldn't tell. John's hands were petting in long strokes down his body, and Rodney wished he could make the purring or humming sound that John had made before.

"I was waiting for you to wake up so you wouldn't think I'd just left, but I should probably go now," John said.

"Like this," Rodney mumbled, wondering if he should wake up more to argue. John's hand was ghosting across Rodney's hip, each fingertip barely making contact.

"Me too, but it's a very small base, and while I won't lie directly, I'd rather keep this private, at least for now."

"For now," Rodney muttered and then thought what that implied. "You'll come again?"

"Oh yeah." John kissed Rodney's neck and buried his face for a moment. "Also, I think the drawings might be crystal structures."

By the time Rodney's sleep and kiss muddled mind realized how the diagrams John made in the chair might represent crystal structures, John was gone. Rodney was left shaking his head and sighing into his pillow.

#

When John crept back to his room, it was easy to hear the men on watch and the few scientists still tapping on computers. He could hear every sound of movement in the Ancient base and casually avoid being seen. Something in his mind wanted to push farther and hear the ice shifting around and above them, but whether that was madness or just too distracting, John restricted his hearing to the already overwhelming sounds within the base. Rodney's heartbeat called out behind him as if Rodney were the most important person in John's little world, but it also reminded John of campfire stories like the tell-tale heart, so even as he listened he tried not to think about it too much.

Safely back in his room, John stripped off his clothes and crawled between his sheets naked. The sheets felt too rough, but his clothes had been even rougher. He ran his hands up and down his body and remembered the way Rodney had touched every inch of him, even inside. Then John had taken
his chance to touch and smell and taste Rodney while the scientist slept. Somehow he'd been sure Rodney wouldn't mind, wouldn't mind in the future if John came to his room almost any time asking to do almost anything. Sex and touch had never been so intense for John before, and he wondered if he was in love with the cranky scientist or if it was all part of going crazy. Whatever it was, he didn't think he could live without it right now.

Lying safely in his own bed, John thought of the nest he'd seen the black bird building on top of the file cabinet in Rodney's room. The nest had crystals woven into it, which clued John in that he'd been drawing crystal structures earlier in the chair. But if the bird hallucination was giving John hints to explain his time in the chair, and if most of the hallucinations and crazy stuff seemed to happen while he was in the chair, that made John wonder if he was really going crazy or if his mind was changing somehow in response to his time in the device. Of course, if seeing and sensing impossible things was a response to using the Ancient technology, that didn't explain the way all of his senses went into overdrive when he had sex with Rodney.

Tonight, after sex and a post coital nap, John had awoken wrapped around Rodney, completely submerged in the smell and taste of his skin and the rhythm of his heart and breathing. He'd been able to see every exposed inch of Rodney's body and the rest of the room as if the room was at least half lit. What's more, he'd clearly seen the bird he'd only glimpsed before, and now he thought it might be a raven not a crow, because close up it seemed so much more impressive than any crows he'd known. Beneath it, building from the base of the file cabinet upward, had been a beaver, which in a world of impossible things was no more impossible than a raven under a mile of ice in the middle of Antarctica. As he finally fell asleep, John wondered if the animals would still be there if he returned to Rodney's room the next night.

#

June 15, South Africa

On Monday morning, Gabi walked away from the dig, out of sight, with Joe and Prof. Michaels and all the equipment for her stringbots. None of them came back for hours, and Brett kept looking in the direction they'd gone. He kept imagining them touching her, not in a seriously bad way, but as if it was okay even when she tensed and pulled away.

He remembered her speech about taking care of herself and having plenty of self-defense training. He also remembered the open longing on her face when David hugged his sister goodnight. Brett had wanted to hug Gabi then, and he didn't think it was some sexist, patriarchal feeling. It just seemed like she needed to be hugged, like she wanted to be touched in a way that wouldn't make her pull back. Brett wasn't sure she'd let anyone do that, or maybe not anyone she'd known for fewer than two years. His growing desire to hold her, to protect her, was hard to explain. He wasn't falling in love. In some ways it was more and in some ways it was less, but Brett was pretty sure he was falling into something.

When Gabi came back for lunch, Brett tried not to hurry too obviously when he went to sit beside her. "So where were you all morning?" His tone wasn't as casual as he'd intended, but Gabi didn't seem to be paying much attention as she lifted the edge of her sandwich and sniffed inside.

"Oh, hi, Brett." She shifted over to make room. "We set up my sensor array in Blombos Cave. Remember, they told us about it that first day, where they found engraved art and composite tools from the middle stone age?"

Brett nodded as he started eating, and Gabi seemed to talk even faster and grow more excited. "Well, I'm not working in a sensitive area right now. It's sort of another test to see how the bots do with the harder ground and whether they can still penetrate a full five meters, but it would be the perfect sort
of place to find small artifacts made of different materials, so the stringbots could map them by the difference in composition."

"That's really cool. I wish I could do what you're doing."

Gabi smiled, looking just a little smug if Brett were honest, but he figured she deserved to be. Then she said in a perfectly humble tone, "There's really not much to do. Once the array is in place, it's best not to touch anything. I can look at the map forming from transmissions in real time, but other than watching for problems, the data could be more efficiently analyzed by waiting until the bots finished and resurfaced."

"But you like monitoring it, right?"

"Sometimes. A lot of the time I do other work on the laptop or my phone. Mostly I want to make sure no one comes by and breaks or takes anything. There's supposedly another group working at sites in the cave, although we didn't see anyone this morning."

"I'd like to see the caves."

Gabi looked around. "Come with me. No one will miss you for a while. It's only another mile or so from here."

They took their sandwiches and drinks with them, and Brett followed Gabi down a dusty path that led mostly straight, with occasional curves around boulders or small hills. The sun poured down brighter and hotter than any other place they'd visited, and Brett was happy to sweat through a more stereotypical African experience. He was surprised when he heard the ocean, even though he'd known they were near the coast. Then they reached a high spot and he saw the cliffs and the water below.

"I had no idea this was such a short walk away."

"Couldn't you smell it?" Gabi asked, and he saw her nose twitch, but he hadn't. He hadn't realized at all.

She led him to a roped off area with a locked grate in the ground, and she pulled out a key. Unlocking a chain, she pulled the grate up, like a door opening into the ground. There was a metal ladder leading down a few feet, and at the bottom was a box of hardhats with lights, as well as several spare electric lanterns and flashlights.

They donned hard hats and left the grate open above them. Then Gabi led him a short ways in to where her metal square was set up, attached to a small black box of outlets that in turn attached to two large rectangular batteries. There was a spare set of batteries behind those. Gabi took off her backpack and pulled out the laptop she'd been using at their original dig site. She plugged it in to the black box and motioned Brett over to view the screen.

"See, this is the map as it is being generated." There was a three dimensional grid outlined in green with wavy lines and a few shaded inclusions throughout. After several seconds a dark line passed across the image from left to right, presumable updating, although Brett couldn't see any difference.

"We can choose a cube to zoom in on." Gabi clicked a cube near the bottom and a new grid appeared. Gabi pointed to one of the dark inclusions. "That's probably just a rock that's denser than the surrounding ground, but the more readings the bots make, the more details we'll have, and we might even be able to tell if there was engraving. More likely, a real artifact wouldn't be smooth and round like that. It would have flat cut faces."
Gabi clicked on the rock, and it became a slightly fuzzy round shape filling the screen. "As the bots descend, the umbilicals that connect them to the frame above ground carry vibrations and detect vibrations from the other strings. Those vibrations are used to update the map the whole time the robots are below."

"And then the robots come back up," Brett asked, "So you can reuse them?"

"Yeah, they follow their strings back up much faster than they went down. It might take hours for them to penetrate ground as hard as this, but they'll retract in minutes when I'm done here."

"And you designed all this for your master's project?"

"Well, other people have used similar microbots. Mostly I came up with the strings and using vibrations for mapping without significantly disturbing the soil. In this application, it would suggest where to dig for regular archeology, but on another planet, it would map layers of different substances, detect micrometeorites, even identify possible biological materials, all in a minimally intrusive way."

"Wow, you really are some kind of genius."

Gabi smiled but looked a little pained at that. Again Brett felt the desire to touch her, to bump her shoulder or clasp her hand as reassurance, but he knew she didn't expect gestures like that.

Instead he asked, "Are you allowed to look at the rest of the cave?"

"I don't know why not. I was told the real dig sites are down this way." She pointed with a flashlight.

They explored farther in and found four roped off dig sites, which they conscientiously avoided, and beyond that the cave was sectioned off with caution tape. Brett could see light and hear the ocean somewhere at the end.

"Are Joe and Dr. Michaels coming back?" Brett asked.

"No, it's my site for the week. I guess they might check in sometimes."

Gabi seemed fine with that and still had her attention fixed toward the warded off end of the cave, but Brett was concerned. "So you'll be in here all alone each day?"

Gabi sighed and pulled her phone from the pouch that seemed permanently fixed at her hip. "I'll have my phone." She squinted at the screen and clicked on a counter he'd seen as her start up page before. "It had reception back where I set up my test." She started walking back and held the phone out to show him three bars when they reached her contraption.

Brett held his tongue on what he really thought of the professor and grad student leaving her alone out here. "Let me give you my number. You can call if you want me to bring out snacks or something."

She rolled her eyes to show he wasn't fooling her at all, but they exchanged numbers. "It's better to text," she said. "I don't like talking on the phone."

After that he headed back to the main dig site, but he made a point of texting every hour or so, sharing a pic of something happening above ground or a quote from whatever people were talking about around him. She wrote back each time, usually with a fair amount of humor, and Brett was really glad they'd had an excuse to exchange numbers.
Gabi was walking back to the cave on Wednesday after lunch when a strong breeze caught her full in the face, and she smelled something slightly familiar. She stopped, looking around, facing into the current of air. She tried to focus and increase her sense of smell. It had always been the sense she found hardest to manage, and for the last three years at college, she'd mostly ignored her senses rather than force any of them, telling herself they were fading to normal as she became more adult. But everything had run amok the last few months. She was constantly assaulted by smells or sounds, sometimes even her other senses would pull at her until she either managed to force her perceptions back into place or slipped into seizures.

Facing the wind near her cave, she tried for focus and control. The smell of water and salt, even dust, was reassuring. Reaching past those newly familiar markers, she found the trace that had startled her. It was one of the plants the botanist had passed around their first day at the dig site. It had a distinctive green tang, and she liked it, even more now when she smelled it fresh.

Following her nose, she left the path and wound behind a rise in the ground to a small drop off. It wasn't like the cliffs facing the ocean, more like a vertical face on a sand dune where half the dune had fallen away. Growing beside that vertical face was a little seam of plants like the ones Gabi had seen and smelled the other day.

She took a deep breath and reached into her pouch for her phone. Her fingers didn't find the phone in its usual inner pocket, and Gabi let her hand scramble blindly as panic rose from behind her ribs up into her throat. There it combined—weaving itself within the scent of the plants until she was left staring—until nothing was left but her panic, the sharp small smell, and the ropy green stems and leaves holding up tufts of orange flowers.

Wednesday was the first time Gabi didn't respond to a text within a few minutes. It was about an hour after lunch and Brett tried again sending, "R U napping?"

After that he tried calling, but that went directly to voicemail, so he got up and started walking. Halfway to the cave he thought maybe he should have told someone that he was going to check on Gabi. His mind conjured images of thugs beating her up in the cave, but he dismissed them. It was much more likely that Gabi had wandered a little farther than usual into the cave or lost cell reception for some other reason.

Only when Brett reached the roped off area and found the grate that covered the cave entrance closed and locked did he begin to panic. He got down on his hands and knees and shouted though the grate, "Gabi!"

Then he stood up and turned around a couple times shouting in all directions, "Gabi! Gabi! Gabi!"

Finally, he pulled out his phone, and started dialing Dr. Michaels' number as he retraced his way along the path to the main dig.

"Hi, Dr. Michaels?"

"Yes?" Michaels answered.

"Hi, this is Brett. I went out to check on Gabi, because she wasn't answering her phone. She's not at the cave, the entrance is still locked, and she doesn't answer when I shout into the cave or out here."

"What? Are you sure? I'll come out immediately. Call the dig site. Maybe someone there will know."
Brett wasn't sure where Dr. Michaels spent his time when he wasn't at the dig. Maybe he was in his housing, near theirs, or maybe he was off at a university someplace. There was no telling how long it would take him to arrive. So Brett called Joe, since his was the only number Brett had for someone at the dig. Brett started out with the same explanation he'd given Dr. Michaels but interrupted himself as he saw footprint leading off the path.

"She didn't answer when I called or shouted—But, hey, there are footprints here that could be hers, going away from the path about halfway between our site and hers. I'm going to follow them. Still, she's not answering her phone, and it's been over an hour since she came this way. You should probably call emergency services or something."

Brett was looking down, following intermittent footprints in shallow dirt as he talked, and he still had the line open to Joe when he saw Gabi lying on the ground. For a moment he couldn't talk. He couldn't breathe. Her backpack was tossed a few feet away. She lay on her side with one arm above her head, and he couldn't tell if she was breathing.

Brett rushed to Gabi's slack body, taking her hand in his free one before he remembered that she didn't like to be touched. Then he thought back to what she'd said in the chocolate shop and started speaking, as quietly and calmly as he could, just assuming Joe would figure out enough over the phone line, even with Brett's phone now lying on the ground.

"Gabi, are you okay? Can you hear me?" Her hand was warm in his, which he thought was good. He slid his thumb down her wrist and pressed until he was sure he felt a pulse. "It's Brett. I want to help but I don't really know what to do." He circled his thumb on her wrist and then her palm. "Can you wake up? Open your eyes?" Her eyes fluttered.

Without letting go of Gabi's hand, he brought his phone back to his mouth, "Joe, are you still there? I think she's waking up. I think it was one of her seizures, maybe. Can you bring her water or something? I'm sending you GPS from my phone, or you can just shout out from the path until I hear you."

At that point Gabi's eyes opened all the way and met Brett's. They were brown and deep, and he wasn't sure if the pupils were larger than they should be. She looked dazed and vulnerable, and he couldn't just leave her lying in the dirt. Setting down his phone again, Brett slid his hand behind Gabi's neck and shoulders and pulled her up to lean against him as he sank lower onto the ground beside her.

"Gabi, are you all right?" He felt himself wanting to speak faster, to say she had scared him, but she'd told him to be calm and quiet. She'd said it might take longer to recover from this sort of seizure. He felt Gabi shift in his arms, but she wasn't pulling away. She moved her head so one side of her face pressed against his chest.

"I'll be okay. Just give me a minute. Don't let them call an ambulance or anything."

"Are you sure?" Brett had to remind himself to keep his voice soft. "It's been over an hour since lunch. If you've been unconscious all that time, shouldn't we have someone check you out?"

Gabi felt safe with her ear pressed close to Brett's heart. She was hot, but she liked the warm press of his chest and arms around her. Talking was still difficult, requiring her to focus on words when she didn't want to, when her mind wanted to drift in more captivating directions, following a tangle of plant, water, salt, and fish smells. She didn't know what they would charge for medical services here, but she knew from long experience that it wouldn't do any good.
“No, please,” she said, “This happens sometimes. There's nothing doctors or EMTs can do.”

Brett spoke to whoever was on his phone, saying Gabi didn't need medical services.

“Water? Food?” Brett asked her.

“Water would be good,” she said, and Brett relayed that into his phone.

“My phone's gone,” she said.

Brett looked at her like she wasn't making sense.

“I found the fynbos,” Gabi pointed. The faint smell expanded to fill her senses now, but she didn't have the energy to focus on it. “I was going to send a picture and GPS to the botanist, but my phone was missing from my pouch. I think someone took it.”

“We'll find it,” Brett said.

He was still holding her and staring at her face. While it felt safe in a way, Gabi was coming to herself enough to know how freakish the whole situation was going to seem in a minute. She shifted to sit on her own and said, "Could you take a picture with GPS and send it to the botanist for me?"

She pointed at the flowers again, and Brett seemed to see them for the first time.

He took a picture, paying more attention to her than to the plants, then showed her the result. She nodded carefully, and his eyes tracked the movement of her head. He looked at her as if he was beginning to catch up with how weird this all was.

“You have her phone and email info, right?”

He shook his head but said, "Yeah. Give me a moment to find it. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Really, I am." She nodded again, which made her head hurt as she knew it would, but she also knew better than to let that show.

By the time Joe came shouting down the path, Brett had sent the picture to the botanist. More importantly, his heartbeat, still loud and clear despite Gabi trying to rein in her senses, had slowed to the calm Brett was only pretending to have before.

#

As Joe came around the ridge, Brett saw Gabi's posture stiffen and her eyebrows pull together, forcing one of her more typical, skeptical expressions onto her face.

Joe had two phones, one in each hand, and he said, "Are you all right? I found your phone on a table."

Gabi reached for it and said, "Was it making any noise?"

As Joe shook his head and handed over the phone, Brett realized the absurdity of the question. He'd never heard Gabi's phone make any sound. Although she fiddled with it and held it in her hand at least half her waking hours, Brett had no idea what ring tones she used and had never even heard the buzz of a phone set to vibrate.

"I hadn't gotten through to emergency services, but are you sure you don't need anything?" Joe asked as he pulled a bottle of water from his pocket and held it out.
He loomed over Gabi and Brett where they sat in the dirt. Gabi moved to stand up, and Brett reached to help her, then thought better of it and only braced himself behind her, in case she needed him.

She stood gracefully enough, looking fully recovered in an instant. "I'm fine. I'd rather get back to work."

They all followed Gabi as she headed back to the path. When she turned toward the caves, Brett knew he couldn't stand to leave her alone for the afternoon, no matter how much she'd resent his protective instincts. "I'll stay with Gabi until Dr. Michaels comes."

"What?" Gabi said.

"You called Michaels?" Joe asked at the same time.

Brett answered Joe, knowing he was on safer ground. "I called Michaels when I saw the cave still locked up. I'll call back and tell him it's not an emergency, but I'm sure he's already on his way."

That seemed to be enough to allow Brett to follow Gabi as Joe headed back to the main dig. Brett called and left a message on Michaels' voice mail as Gabi shot him annoyed looks. Still, she unlocked the cave entrance and passed him a safety helmet without fuss. Brett tried to stay quiet, remembering Gabi's complaints about people chattering and slowing down her work.

Her stringbot square was set up deeper into the cave this time, and Gabi quickly pulled the laptop from her backpack and brought up several graphs as soon as she had everything hooked up. Brett sat a couple feet away and watched, glad to see her awake and studying the screen with typical Gabi focus. He listened to her breathing and the click of computer keys and was surprised when she spoke.

"Thanks for trying to stay calm about it."

"No problem," he said and couldn't help but smile that she wasn't bawling him out for following her back to the cave. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead," she answered with a sigh that said she might well mind but was giving in anyway.

"What kind of noise were you expecting your phone to make?"

Gabi's hand slid down and rubbed across the phone in her pouch as if by reflex. She turned to look Brett right in the eyes and said, "I have a song set up to play louder and louder if I don't touch my phone for fifteen minutes during the day. Sometimes the song might pull me out from a seizure."

"I've never heard any sound from your phone."

"I try to deactivate it before fifteen minutes. Also, I have very good hearing and am usually closer to my phone than anyone else is."

Self-consciously, Brett wanted to know more about Gabi's seizures and how she'd set the system up on her phone. Instead he heard himself ask, "What song?"

She laughed and pointedly looked away from his eyes. "It's a joke, just an old song called 'Touch Me' by a group called A-Ha."

Brett smiled, not knowing the song, but appreciating the humor of the phone singing touch me when that's what she needed someone to do. He noted the irony too, given Gabi's usual aversion to touch.
"If no one touched your phone for an hour, the song should have been pretty loud when Joe found it?"

"And I have never left my phone lying on a table. It's always in my hand or in my bag." She pulled the phone out, searching through screens, and it looked completely natural in her hand, reminding Brett of how often he'd seen it there. He'd never seen her set it down anywhere.

"Everything important is password protected and mostly encrypted. I don't think anyone touched that. I don't see any obvious signs of someone trying to break the security, and I can't imagine someone stealing my phone to listen to my music, but maybe if someone's a klepto? You haven't heard of anything else going missing and then showing up again?"

"Dig tools maybe, but that's pretty normal. Of course, people misplace their keys and phones all the time. In your place, I couldn't have been sure I didn't leave my phone on the table."

"Well, we might notice if it happens again."

"Yeah, I'll watch. You're not freaked about the phone or being unconscious for an hour where we might not have found you?"

She shook her head slowly, "I would have woken up eventually. If I'd come back here on my own, I probably wouldn't have told anyone or thought much of it. This shit has been going on my whole life. It's just acting up lately."

"Doesn't that worry you?"

She shrugged but fixed her gaze back on the computer screen. Brett changed tack before she could shut him out completely. "How did you find the fynbos plants?"

"A shift in the breeze let me smell them."

"I didn't notice their smell at all. Guess you're better than average at both hearing and smell."

He saw her shoulders tense. "And you're a genius who programs tiny robots." That got her to relax some. "Have they found anything here?"

Gabi opened a new window and pulled up an image with a notched blob circled in green with an arrow out saying "possible artifact?" She said, "There may be other items of interest down here." She scrolled to show other green circled marks. "But that top one could be engraved like other key finds at this site were. Unfortunately, the team excavating here apparently won't be back until next week, and then they might not want to change whatever priorities they've already established. I'll show them all the scans from this cave and ask them to document whatever they eventually find for comparison."

"What about our main site?"

"Already started, and I'll do more there next week when these guys are back working their dig. I've already been promised some timely data from our site for my thesis work."

"But you really designed this for space? To look for alien artifacts?"

Gabi smiled big, so most of her teeth showed, and it made Brett relax and release some of the fear he'd held onto without noticing, ever since finding Gabi unconscious.

"Alien artifacts would be beyond amazing, but micrometeorites or other inclusions, let alone fossils
of microbial life, would be more than enough. On Earth, we can dig to see what's under the surface. Off planet, some sort of microbots might be the least intrusive way to scan and map deep underground with minimal disturbance. Not that NASA's likely to try anything like this for quite a while."

"But it's cool to think about."

Gabi smiled, mouth closed, making a sort of goofy face, and Brett stayed with her until Dr. Michaels showed up.

#

When Gabi heard a knock at bedtime that night, she didn't want to open the door. She'd already washed her face and feet to get the grit off, and put on the fuzzy socks and flannel pajamas she found most comforting.

"Yes?" she said without getting up.

"It's me, Brett."

When he didn't continue, she stood and opened the door. Phone in hand he said, "I heard back from Dr. Matteoli, with the botany project. She wants to come visit tomorrow. Should I tell her okay?"

"Sure," Gabi said.

Brett stood in her doorway as he typed the reply. Then he continued standing there, phone dangling idly in one hand.

"Was there something else?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Can I come in for a sec?"

From what Gabi saw through her door, the common area they shared was empty. She could hear Joe occasionally tap at a computer in his room and from the very faint music she heard when she tried harder, she guessed he had ear buds plugged into his laptop. Still, she stepped back, allowing Brett to enter. He glanced back but didn't close the door.

"Look, I don't want to insult your independence or make a big deal out of what happened today, but the way I saw you lying on the ground…” He swallowed. "I thought for a moment, I mean, I guessed right after that it was a longer seizure, and I know these things seem fairly run of the mill for you, but—"

"But you're freaking?" Gabi cut him off, closing her eyes.

"No, really, no, not like that. I just, for a stupid moment I thought you might be dead, and I can't get the image out of my mind."

Gabi took a deep breath. She didn't remember anyone saying that before, and she felt a little guilty for not realizing how differently Brett might have experienced the whole day. Still, she didn't know how to help him.

"Well, what can I say? I'm not dead? I'm sorry it looked like that, even for a moment. You know, freakish as I may be, I don't think I'm more likely to die early than anyone else our age, and I've never had any major lasting effects from my seizures. Does that help?"
"Yeah, a little." He was looking her up and down. "Can I give you a hug goodnight? Just like David hugged his sister? I swear it's nothing else."

Gabi held out her arms, and he reached around her. It was forced at first, like she threw up a force field to protect her from feeling too much. But Brett held on anyway, and Gabi felt his shoulder warm against her jaw and remembered resting her face on his chest earlier. Her body relaxed a bit and suddenly she felt warm and safe and didn't want to let go. She loosened her hold anyway, wanting Brett to know he could pull away when he'd had enough. Still, the hug lasted a while longer, and Gabi was mostly fine with that. Only a couple of rogue strands of thought in her mind objected.

Then Brett pulled back and said, "Goodnight."

He closed her door as he left, and Gabi climbed into bed feeling strangely calm and warm all the way through.

#

Dr. Matteoli arrived around nine the next morning in floppy hat and khakis almost exactly like those she'd worn two weeks before. Brett texted Gabi and led the botanist to meet her by the fynbos.

There was plenty of hand shaking and "Call me Tasha" when they met up. Brett watched Gabi closely, making sure the fynbos didn't somehow trigger another seizure.

Then Tasha asked Gabi, "How did you find these?"

"I smelled them from the path yesterday and followed my nose."

Brett figured he wouldn't mention the seizure if she didn't.

"They don't have that strong of a smell. Most people don't even notice it."

Gabi shrugged and said, "Might have been a trick of the wind, and I made a point of sniffing them when you passed the samples around."

"I think she has better senses of smell and hearing than most of us," Brett put in. Gabi gave him the expected flick of her eyes, but Tasha took a long, openly appraising look at Gabi.

"Have you ever tried to locate something by scent?" Tasha asked.

Gabi shook her head.

"Would you be willing to try?"

"I guess."

"Great." Tasha gave a little clap and started pacing away like she was counting off strides. "Come far enough away that you can't smell that bunch, then just try wandering around and sniffing. If there's one patch of these fynbos—this kind in particular are protea if you're curious—then there could easily be more hidden in cracks and crevices nearby." 

Gabi followed Tasha, and Brett followed Gabi. Then Gabi walked well past where Tasha had stopped, chose a smooth open path, and closed her eyes. She turned slowly in a circle, sniffing and pausing, as if it took time for her to process whatever she smelled. For a moment Brett wished he'd put on cologne or something, but it was early enough in the day he wasn't sweaty at least.
When Gabi opened her eyes and started walking, haltingly, following her nose, Brett moved to her side. He watched resolutely for any sign of fluttering eyelids or change in posture. There was a moment when it looked like her eyes stopped tracking, and instinctively, Brett brushed his hand against Gabi’s.

She twitched a small startle and looked at him. Perhaps what she saw worried her, because she took his hand and held it as she moved forward. A minute later they were standing beside another patch of well-sheltered and therefore well hidden protea.

Tasha pulled an iPad from her purse and started documenting. "This is wonderful. Can you find any more?"

Gabi led Brett away without a word, and her tug on his hand felt strangely confident.

Gabi was caught up in the smells of everything around her. It was as if she’d entered a new country all over again. Somehow, touching Brett’s hand made it easy to extend her sense of smell without risking the strained sort of focus that sometimes preceded her seizures and often indicated that she was too intent on a single sense. Now she placed the smells around her in a map that overlaid the scenery her eyes found. The ocean was a stew of smells that she cataloged and dismissed so she could focus on smells of plants and soil.

Then Brett gave a sudden tug, holding her back, and she smelled his fight or flight response. Her smell map collapsed around her as she studied his face. He was staring at the ground a few feet in front of them, and she followed his gaze to the orange and black snake curled on a rock, sunning itself.

Slowly, she stepped back, and Brett stepped with her, until they were a couple yards away from the sleeping snake.

At that point Tasha caught up with them, and said, "I see you've found a tiger snake. Nothing terrible to worry about, although they can bite and are slightly poisonous."

"How likely are we to stumble across something worse?" Brett asked.

"Out here on the dry open land? Not too likely. South Africa does have several poisonous snakes, but not here, and you spotted this tiger snake just fine."

Gabi squeezed Brett’s hand and carefully led them around the snake. Then she started rebuilding her sense map. They worked their way up the coast and eventually found two more patches of protea.

Tasha was delighted. As they walked back she told Gabi, "If you're interested, I know an anthropologist who collected some stories about people with heightened senses. I think some tribes had a tradition of someone like that finding medicinal plants. She might have mentioned more about other senses and stories, like you mentioned hearing. I'd be happy to put you in touch with her."

"Um," Gabi realized she was still holding Brett’s hand and quickly let go. "I guess you could give her my email and cell number."

"I should get those from you anyway. You know, I only have Brett's."

"I didn't have my phone last time." Gabi felt herself tensing up again as she pulled out her phone. They exchanged information. Brett stood by, a solid, somewhat reassuring presence. Tasha was so happy about the plants that even as Gabi’s mind raced with how openly she’d admitted to and
displayed her freakish senses, it still felt like she fit in, like what she did was useful rather than frightening.

A few hours later, she received an email thank you and an electronic introduction to Lerato Khumalo, the anthropologist.

#

Across the dig, Joe was digging in square twenty. Brett watched Joe with his latest . . . conquest. The word "conquest" didn't seem quite fair, but Brett couldn't bring himself to label her as Joe's "girlfriend" or "lover" even if either term could have passed within current usage. It seemed unlikely that the word "love" had started Brett on his longstanding war against definitions and labels, but "love" certainly caused enough of his doubts. By some usages of the word, he could probably say he'd loved or been in love with any guy he'd been involved with for more than one night. But if he used it that way, then he didn't have a word left for deeper feelings. Also, shallow as his relationships might have been, they hadn't all been the same. What he'd felt for his boyfriends, or what he thought they'd felt for him, had covered quite a range of emotions, even leaving aside the depth of each experience.

None of which helped when he looked at an almost indecipherable microbot image Gabi had sent with the message "bots find their first seashell" and felt a tightness in his chest that extended deeper than what others might call "love." It really needed its own descriptor. If he had to name the parts, the closest he came up with was "connection" and "affection" but there was an overlying sense of "protectiveness." No, "protectiveness" wasn't the right word. He wanted to keep Gabi safe, but he also wanted to be with her because that felt safe to him. He wanted her close and well, but it wasn't because she needed protecting. Brett cared about her on a gut level in a way he hadn't cared about anyone before. Probably it wasn't how most brothers felt about their sisters, especially with how drawn he was to touching her, but he could imagine feeling that way about a sister, especially if she'd been like Gabi, which he knew was circular.

It didn't seem right to forward her microbot news to anyone. Instead, Brett pulled out his phone and sent his dad the picture he'd taken of the fynbos with a quick note about Gabi discovering it in this previously undocumented range and how Brett had helped spot a snake when they were tracking down more samples with a botanist. Brett thought his dad would like Gabi, if they ever met. He felt a pang wishing that Chris would be okay with Gabi hanging around in the fall, but Chris hadn't replied to any of Brett's messages lately and wouldn't appreciate news about Gabi, the fynbos, or the dig. Brett went back to sifting for microfossils and accepted that whatever he felt about Gabi was best labeled as "how I feel about Gabi."

#

June 20, USA

By mid-afternoon the day before they were scheduled to leave, Jim was packed, had the loft in order for their week away, and desperately needed some downtime with Blair. They'd had a frantic two weeks wrapping up a murder investigation and tracking down a jewelry thief and her creative redistribution network. Then there had been piles of paperwork to complete, clarify, or set in order to hand off. Overall, it meant lots of late nights, and while Jim and Blair spent a lot of time together working, Jim needed something else before taking on the strains of the military machine and Blair's new research.

Jim tapped on the French doors to Blair's room and pushed one open. Instead of a hurricane of frantic packing, he found Blair sprawled on his bed reading.
"Everything packed?"

"Yes, Dad," Blair teased without looking up from his journal.

"I was thinking before we ditch Cascade for a week, maybe we could go see that Peruvian art and artifact display you've been talking about, then maybe pick up dinner at the Mexican place near there."

Blair glanced up. "Oh, I stopped by the exhibit last weekend when I was out shopping."

"Oookay. You have any more practice you want me to do or anyplace you want to go for dinner?"

Blair closed his journal but used a finger to keep his page. "I thought you'd want to relax, watch a game on TV or whatever. We can get something delivered if the kitchen is already cleared out."

It felt wrong to Jim, but he didn't know what to say. He was never good at figuring that stuff out. If Blair wanted to veto his suggestions, Jim didn't know how to argue. Instead, he went to the living room and watched TV alone.

#

The first day at Fort Carson, just outside Colorado Springs, energized Blair like the first day at a new school. Daniel met Blair at the entrance to the Veterans' Brain Injury Center while O'Neill took Blair's place in the car with Jim, presumably to show him where they'd be living for the next week and get them settled in. Before Blair knew what hit him he had an ID badge with a scan card hanging from a lanyard around his neck, and he'd been dragged down two halls and through a set of yellow double doors that required his scan card to open.

"Dr. Carson Beckett," Daniel said as a man in traditional white lab coat rose to greet them, "It's my pleasure to introduce you to Blair Sandburg."

"Aye, Mr. Sandburg, pleasure to meet you. I've heard nothing but praise for your work, and I'm looking forward to our collaboration."

As they shook hands, Blair was overcome by the sincere positive attitude focused on him by the smiling doctor. He'd forgotten what that sort of initial, untainted respect felt like, even though it was something he used to take for granted. "Please, call me Blair."

"And I'm Carson."

"Like this fort?"

"No relation." The words rolled with a rich Scottish accent, and the man's smile could probably win over any patient in a minute. "I don't have any papers to show you on my efforts so far, but if you're interested, I've prepared some slides on my computer."

Daniel practically vibrated with suppressed energy as the three of them sat down. Somehow, his archeologist/linguist friend was now Blair's thesis advisor and the third member of the team researching Sentinels, although he promised there would be an actual anthropologist to sit on the thesis committee. It had all happened so fast that Blair was a little unclear on the details.

The three of them pulled their chairs as close as they could to Carson's computer, close enough that Blair could feel the heat of Caron's knee beside his and smell the half full cup of tea sitting by the computer. "All right then," Carson began with a nod to Blair, "My work focuses on individuals who can activate certain artifacts. Daniel tells me you're cleared to know more if you choose to sign
further non-disclosure agreements, but for now, I'll just call these people ATA positive. It was Daniel who brought your work to my attention and suggested there might be some correlation between those who are ATA positive and what you call Sentinels. You already know about Colonel O'Neill, and I'm told the Sentinel discussed in your paper also triggered an ATA test device."

Blair nodded, wondering how much more sense Carson's explanation would make if Blair went ahead and signed the paperwork relevant to the activated devices.

"In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I'm one of the five ATA positive individuals identified so far. From questions Daniel's asked, I don't think I'm really a Sentinel, and the newest person we've identified as ATA positive doesn't seem to be either. However, I'm happy to participate in any tests you develop. The major we recently identified is stationed far away, but we'll bring him here if that seems useful later on."

"What do you mean by 'not really a Sentinel'?" Blair studied the Scottish doctor as if he might see the man squint or cock his head in some meaningful Sentinel way. All Carson did was rub his eyes tiredly.

"Well, I've had a few incidents of seeing microscopic samples that should have been too small without a microscope. And anecdotally, I purchased new sheets before I'd heard any of this from Daniel, because my old ones had seemed scratchy when I had trouble sleeping some nights. But that's about it, no other heightened senses and no control, so it might be hard to test. My ATA expression doesn't seem to be very strong either."

"And the other subject, the major you mentioned?"

Daniel jumped in with, "His ATA abilities may be the strongest we've seen, but when I asked him if he'd ever seemed to have sharper senses than other people, he just shook his head and raised an eyebrow at me."

"So you've met him in person and didn't notice anything unusual?"

Daniel shook his head and shrugged, as if there was more he wanted to say but couldn't without discussing other projects. Blair would have signed papers then and there if he didn't have Jim's privacy and warnings about the military to worry about.

Carson picked up where he'd left off, flipping through screens showing five different protein structures, none of which meant much to Blair. "My focus has been on seeking genetic markers and protein expressions common to our ATA subjects. These are some proteins I'm investigating. I've already started tests for anything expressed through the skin during activation. I am also interested in any physiological or psychological correlates common to ATA subjects, and the veterans' center here has promised us time with their MRI machine. I thought we could use functional MRI both during device activation and whatever Sentinel tests you can set up."

"Wow." Blair felt like a kid in a candy shop: multiple Sentinels and brain scans to work with. He wished he had time to take a course in brain imaging. "The tests I've used so far would be more like field tests than something we could run in an MRI or using earphones or whatever. I'd need to read up on research previously done on sight, hearing, or other senses within an MRI environment."

"Luckily, I already have a few software packages we might customize."

That led to half an hour of Carson demonstrating options while Daniel and Blair chimed in with ideas for grounding and protecting Sentinels in a noisy and vibrating MRI machine that might trigger zone outs or sensory spikes. By the time Jim and Jack joined them in the late afternoon, Blair was
ready to set them both up at separate computers to test their visual and auditory ranges with the software Carson had suggested.

"Just sit right here. Jim, you can start with the headphones and hearing test. Jack, you can do vision."

The two military men glanced at each other blank-faced before taking their respective seats. Blair and Daniel exchanged more animated looks behind their Sentinel's backs.

"We're in trouble if they start ganging up on us," Daniel said.

Blair shivered, "Don't even joke about that."

#

Sorting through his duffel that evening, Jim found the healthy snack foods he'd packed for Blair. They'd been assigned to tiny private rooms next door to each other, so Jim had to go out in the hall to knock at Blair's door.

"Hey, man," Blair answered standing in the doorway. Behind him, Jim could see papers and print outs scattered across Blair's bed.

"Didn't mean to interrupt, but I packed this stuff for you."

Blair took the food with a smile but didn't invite Jim in, so Jim just shrugged and went back to his room. At least they'd given him a TV.

#

By Tuesday, Blair and Carson had good baseline results both in and out of the MRI from tests they'd run on Jack and Jim. When their new subject, Sergeant Markham, showed up, all Blair knew was that the marine was stationed nearby and that Daniel had identified him as both ATA positive and a possible Sentinel.

Blair watched the young Sergeant work through the computerized vision and hearing tests they'd prepared. He looked clean cut and unremarkable, not like Jim and Jack who seemed to exude a sense of authority and control. In a way, it was reassuring to know that wasn't a necessary part of the Sentinel package.

When Markham finished with the computers, Blair brought him to a conference room they had set up with good ventilation to allow for taste and scent tests. A flat of 100 tiny numbered vials was already set out on the table.

"Please, have a seat," Blair said. "For the next test, I'll need you to unseal each vial in order. Tell me if you think you can smell anything and what you think it is. If two vials seem to have the same scent at different intensities, I'd like you to rate them relative to each other, and it is fine if you need to go back and compare. Any questions?"

"No questions, sir."

"You can call me Blair."

The young man's eyebrows rose in what might have been surprise, but he didn't say anything. He just reached for the first vial to begin the test.

By the time they'd finished both smell and taste tests, Blair had given up on getting the Sergeant to
call him anything other than "sir." When he asked Markham to remove his shoes and socks for the
final test, the marine once again raised his eyebrows and for his first question of the day managed,
"Sir?"

Blair tried the smile that had always charmed nervous undergrads back when he was a TA at
Rainier. Markham blinked at him in surprise. "I need to test your sense of touch. Tomorrow we're
going to run you through some of these tests again with you lying still in an MRI machine. So I need
to ask you to identify touches to your feet, because that will be the easiest for us to replicate when
you're in the MRI machine tomorrow."

Markham smiled and shook his head minutely like he couldn't believe the things he was being asked
to do, but he started to unlace his boots without another word.

Blair stood to move an extra chair into place to prop up the sergeant's feet, then he brought his own
chair around so he could sit within reach of the now bare feet. Shaking his head at how bizarre the
next request was going to sound, Blair said, "One more thing, you're going to have to wear a
blindfold and noise cancelling headphones for this, so that I know the results rely only on touch." To
his credit, Markham kept a straight face through that pronouncement. "Just remember you need to tell
me as soon as you feel any touch to your feet, and then do your best to describe the details of what
you feel." Blair handed over the blindfold and headphones and Markham had no problem putting
them in place.

The touch test had been the hardest for Blair to devise, because he wanted results that were as
consistent and quantifiable as possible. He started with a fan set to a very low speed at a fixed
distance from Markham's feet. He'd increased the speed two notches before Markham commented on
feeling air moving, like a faint breeze. Blair continued with a powder released in front of the fan,
plastic and metal probes applied in various numbers and combinations with the fan still running and
then without. He was just finishing up with a feather test and then feather combined with fan when
the door opened and Jim stepped inside.

Jim glanced at Markham, who hadn't noticed his arrival due to the blindfold and headphones, not to
mention the fan which probably camouflaged any shift in air currents from the door opening. Besides
which, Markham's senses didn't seem to be as strong as Jim or Jack's.

Blair saw a flash of something pained cross Jim's face before he raised an eyebrow and said, "His
buddies would never let him live it down if they saw this."

Blair rolled his eyes. "I'm in the middle of a test. Aren't you supposed to be out leading some
exercise with the colonel?"

"I'm doing my job, don't worry. Just thought I'd check in with you."

"You aren't reacting to anything?"

"Huh?"

Blair gestured inadvertently with the feather and his test subject dutifully described the touch,
oblivious to the changed context. "You aren't reacting to me being with another Sentinel or
anything?"

Jim just shook his head and looked Markham over rather thoroughly.

"Jim, you really shouldn't be here. This isn't very professional, and I need to concentrate on my
work."
"Right, Chief, keep working hard then. I'll just get out of your way."

And with that Jim left, and Blair looked up to see a glazed look on Markham's face. It took him just a moment to recognize a probable zone. He wrapped his hand firmly around the foot he'd just been testing, and the Sergeant didn't say a word.

Blair quickly turned off the fan and walked around to remove the noise cancelling headphones and blindfold.

"Sergeant Markham, can you hear me?"

There was no response, and Blair realized that while he usually relied on touch for extra sensory input to pull Jim out of a zone, that probably wouldn't work if Markham had zoned on touch, though he tried chafing the young man's arms as he spoke just in case. He kept talking as he moved Markham's feet off the chair and down to the floor, but as he did so he couldn't help noticing a bulge in Markham's lap. Perhaps the feather test had been arousing and that had been too much for a Sentinel, already deprived of two senses, to keep control. He'd already run the same test on Jim and Jack, but he certainly wasn't going to ask either of them for feedback on that aspect. Maybe he'd just remove the feather from the test protocol.

Unstoppering the scent bottle that he knew had caused the strongest reaction before, he waved it under Markham's nose and asked, "Can you smell the peppermint? Can you hear my voice? I need you to focus on what you're hearing and smelling and try to calm your sense of touch back to normal."

Blair could feel himself edging toward panic, and he was tempted to call Daniel to see if he might do better at pulling this Sentinel out of his zone. But first Blair set aside the peppermint sample and tried prying open Markham's right eye. The sudden light caused Markham to twitch, and Blair started in with a litany of, "There you are. That's good. Open your eyes and take in the sights around you. Listen to my voice. Can you return your sense of touch to a normal level? My hand is on your arm. Use that as a baseline for normal touch."

The sergeant blinked but looked self-consciously away from Blair. "I'm all right now, sir. Sorry about that."

"No problem. That's a normal reaction from trying to tune in too much with one sense. I call it a zone out or zoning. Can you think of any times something like that happened to you before?"

"Um."

"This is all confidential, if that helps. Nothing's going to hurt your job. I might even be able to teach you some tricks that would help you avoid zoning."

"It's never happened on the job, not since the first time."

"First time?"

"Um, shortly after I started working with—with the stuff I'm supposed to activate for the scientists… Anyway, I was on the firing range and all of a sudden it all seemed impossibly loud, and I had to cover my ears. Then the lights seemed too bright so I closed my eyes."

"What happened then?"

"The guy shooting next to me, a buddy of mine, got me to the infirmary. They thought it was a migraine or something at first. Then Dr. Jackson came and asked me about this stuff a couple days
"Did he tell you about spikes and zones?"

"Yeah, sort of. So I guess that first one was a spike?"

"Right, and what happened today was a zone. You implied you might have had other zones, just not while working?"

"Well," the Sergeant looked away again. "There might have been times when I lost a few moments but wasn't sure. Someone calling my name was enough to get my attention back. But one time, another time with touch, I think something like this happened."

"And how did that end."

"Off the record?"

"Sure."

"With a kiss."

"Did the person who kissed you realize what had happened?"

"Not exactly. I think—in was in an intimate situation and maybe my lover sort of panicked and didn't know what else to try. It was embarrassing."

"Did it only happen that once?"

Markham nodded, and he seemed to be calming down now that he'd said what he needed to.

"Do you have any idea why it might have happened that time and not since?"

"I don't close my eyes anymore." With that confession Markham smiled and ducked his head. Blair thought he might be blushing.

"Do you know what a Guide does for a Sentinel?"

"Daniel talked a bit about it when he taught me about dials, and he said he's a Guide for a different Sentinel."

"So aside from actually teaching you how to control your senses, a Guide is someone who can pull you out of a zone more easily, someone whose scent, voice or touch might make it easier to keep control while really extending your senses. Do you think your lover or someone else might be your Guide in that way?"

"I couldn't say."

"It would be really helpful for my research if someone who might act as a Guide with you was willing to come in and see if you did better on any of these tests with that person present."

"I don't think that's possible."

"If it's someone else in the military or someone who might not want whatever relationship you have to be public, I could arrange it so no one else would know."

Markham sighed, and Blair could see him struggling to keep his face neutral. Blair imagined how
Jim and Jack had probably learned to hide their emotions back when they were that young. "Is this like an order or something?"

"No, I won't let anyone make it an order. I'll give you my card with my private cell phone number, too. You can talk to whoever it is, and call me if that person is willing to try under whatever conditions. But if you think it's going to hurt your relationship, I'll understand if we can't test that part. Maybe I can give you some information to share with your lover, just in case anything happens in the future?"

"Yeah, that might be good."

Jim knew he shouldn't have kept listening. He shouldn't have barged in on Blair's work in the first place. Unfortunately, with the airflow from the fan, he'd been able to smell the Sergeant's arousal through the door, and it was only natural to want to make sure his Guide wasn't being forced into some uncomfortable situation. Jim really didn't think he'd behaved unreasonably, even if Blair's questions had sort of implied he had. But Blair had been oblivious to the subtext of the situation. At least at the point when Jim walked in, it was clear Blair didn't realize the other Sentinel was responding to him in a sexual way.

Now Jim was picking his way across Fort Carson, making less effort than before to evade the soldiers who were trying to track him. O'Neill had roped him into a field exercise to test if security on the base could detect and locate an intruder, and the answer was pretty clearly no, at least not if that intruder was a Sentinel. Even staying within the tiny area demarcated for the not even war games, Jim had been eluding his searchers for over five hours and had managed to pick up lunch and stop to use the bathroom then drop in on Blair without any extreme efforts at evasion. Figuring he'd have to make things even easier if he wanted the exercise to ever end, he climbed up on a rooftop, from which he could actually see a pair of the soldiers who were looking for him. For a long while given the hot sun, he just stood there and watched, waiting for one of them to look up.

He thought back to how the other Sentinel had zoned, and Jim wondered if distracting Blair had triggered that. Then the guy had started talking to Blair about his sex life, and it was clear to Jim from the way that both sides of the conversation avoided pronouns that Blair quickly guessed the Sergeant's lover was a guy. Jim was sure Blair had put two and two together then, but it didn't seem to bother Blair that his test subject had been turned on by Blair touching his feet. The way Blair dealt with the whole thing showed the thoughtful consideration and problem solving Jim and all their friends at Cascade PD had come to expect of Blair.

Moreover, none of the issues Jim had experienced around Alex Barnes, had been problems here. Jim couldn't begrudge the other Sentinel whatever help Blair could give him. That was just what Blair did, part of his essential Blairness. Still, Jim felt like there was something more, something in what he overheard that made Jim want more of that Blairness for himself. He just didn't know how to get it.

The soldiers Jim had been allowing to find him went off in a different direction without ever scanning the roofs. It took Jim four more hours of increasingly reckless exposures before a different pair of searchers finally spotted him. He led them on a merry chase then, only partially allowing them to catch him by refusing to use any of his heightened senses. The whole group ate dinner as they debriefed. O'Neill laughed as Jim explained all the times he'd given the soldiers chances to spot him (many of the lessons simplifying to: look up!).

Jim went to bed fairly tired that night. Still, he woke to hear Blair starting the drowning dream next door. Jim was out of bed, both feet on the cold floor, before he realized he'd have to go out in the hallway and knock on Blair's automatically locking door to get to him. There were also guards on
patrol, and the protocol Jim had helped arrange included questioning any curious behavior from him or other Sentinels, not that Jim placed much stock in the security details after their all-day hide and seek adventure. Still, there were cameras in the hall, so whatever he did would be recorded.

Jim could hear Blair thrashing and he moved to press his hands against the wall between them. Blair had seemed accepting of Jim's intervention with his nightmare before, maybe even appreciated it. But things had been very cool between them in the two weeks since. Their last day at home, Blair hadn't wanted anything to do with him, and it had been a long time before that when they'd last gone out together, just for fun. Jim wondered if he'd blown it that badly by ignoring Blair after the fountain and then losing his temper with the whole dissertation fiasco.

He heard his Guide whimpering through bad memories on the other side of the wall, heard his head thrash side to side, and he wished Blair had Sentinel senses so he'd be able to hear if Jim spoke through the wall. He wished he knew what to say to make things better.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his black jaguar walk partway through his door and turn to stare at him accusingly. Jim hung his head in shame, but it was already too late. Jim knew the pattern of Blair's drowning dream, and it was almost over.

When he finally heard Blair go still, Blair's wolf walked through the wall, directly from Blair's room to Jim's. Without a glance in Jim's direction, the wolf curled up with Jim's jaguar. They made a smooth ball of fur, each resting his head on the other's side, eyes closed as they relaxed into each other.

#

June 23, South Africa

The next week Brett was sick. He stayed home from the dig on Tuesday and Gabi found herself texting him every hour, much as he'd texted her when she was off at the cave. By the end of the day, she could barely force herself to stop and wash up before going in to see him.

She knocked tentatively at his door.

"Come in," Brett said. He sounded mostly normal.

She opened the door and went in to stand by his bed. He didn't bother to sit up, just smiled from his pillow.

"Did I miss anything exciting at the dig?"

"No, most boring day ever. Can I get you something?"

"I'm fine."

Gabi rolled her eyes. "Why do people say that? You're sick. That's not fine. Remember when you worried about me? Well, I worry about you, too. Anyway, I've always wanted to take care of someone who was sick."

"Why?"

Gabi could see the wheels turning behind Brett's eyes as he asked, even if the eyes were a little bloodshot and the face around them flushed. He was always trying to figure people out, and it was annoying now, when he was sick, when he should be focusing on what he needed in order to feel better. "I like the idea."
"Has anyone ever taken care of you?"

"If I answer all these questions, will you eventually tell me what you want and let me do it?"

He nodded, hair rustling against the pillow and sticking out in all directions. The skin around his eyes was dark, and his face was greasy, but somehow Gabi's eyes were drawn to him even more than when he was healthy and perfect looking.

"It's just, I never know if I'm sick or just being weird. So I never tell anyone."

There was a long pause while Brett watched her and she watched him. "If I let you take care of me, will you tell me?"

Gabi let out a breath she hadn't meant to be holding, "I'm not even sure I get sick."

"Could you tell me when you feel weird?"

"Maybe. Can I get you water or something now?"

He let her bring water and help him sit up to drink it. Then she made soup and propped up pillows so he could eat in bed. She rearranged the pillows when he lay back down, and it felt like a kids' game to her, where she was pretending to be his mother or something. Her mother had never acted like this, but it fit some cultural stereotype that she'd always wanted to play out. Her brain spun plenty of side comments about co-dependence and sexist stereotypes, but she knew better than to take that part of her thinking too seriously. Taking care of Brett felt useful. He seemed comforted by it, and she was much more relaxed sitting with him than she was trying to focus on her work all day while not knowing how sick he really was.

Finally he said, "I think I might fall asleep now."

"Can I stay and sit here a while? I could read to you."

Brett smiled with his eyes already closed. "I don't think I'd listen very well, but if you want to do your own reading in here, I like having you around."

Gabi smiled, knowing he wasn't watching. She pulled out her phone, where she had a new electronic issue of an astrophysics journal she subscribed to. But sitting beside Brett's bed, she kept being distracted by the urge to look at him or touch him.

Finally, she whispered, "Are you asleep?"

"No," he smiled with his eyes closed again, and she was starting to really like that.

"Would it be okay if I touch you? Just hold your hand or something?"

He smiled and brought an arm out from under his blankets. "Yeah, I'd like that." His eyes opened for a moment, and she felt self-conscious. She took his hand. He closed his eyes.

Gabi stared at their linked hands. His skin was lighter than hers, rougher with larger pores, and traces of hair on the back where she had none. He had tiny, light brown freckles that were only twice the diameter of the largest pores. The tendons and veins in his hands were more obvious than hers, but somehow they fascinated Gabi, like seeing the gears and brake system on a high end bike.

She became aware of his heartbeat and breathing as both started to slow, easing him into sleep. Her gaze shifted to his face and she watched as the little bit of tension remaining there drained away.
There was a tiny bit of fluff on the end of his nose that rose and fell with each breath, and she watched it so intently that she wasn't sure if she had a small absence seizure and lost a few seconds. It didn't really matter, except that she tried to avoid them.

Letting her eyes drift to Brett's tousled, crazy hair, she remembered the first time she watched him sleep in the Paris airport. How distant and anonymous he'd seemed then. Now she was holding his hand and watching him sleep in his bed.

She wanted to reach out and touch his hair, but that seemed like too much. Instead she let herself catalog the faint aloe and eucalyptus scent of whatever he put on his hair. His soap or deodorant or whatever had more of a chemical tang, which she didn't like, but the rest of him smelled amazingly nice for someone who'd been sick in bed all day. She could feel a slight fever from his hand and radiating off his body, but he was not sweating too much, and there was no stress smell to the sweat. His scent was a bit like a sweaty little kid, and she wondered when she'd cataloged that smell, because she didn't consciously remember.

While she wouldn't let herself touch anywhere other than Brett's hand, she let her thumb stroke the back of it. Then she shifted and traced slow circles into his palm. His fingers seemed to relax when she did that, and she hoped he found it comforting, even if he was asleep.

#

While Brett was still home sick the next day, he was well enough to be awake most of the time. He was thoroughly bored and eager to see Gabi by the time she returned from the dig.

She sat down by his bed and said, "You look better."

When he reached for her nearest hand, she shifted to give him her right hand instead. He squeezed and held it, then kept it while his arm rested back on the bed. "How was your day?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Do you need food or water? I could read you astrophysics stuff."

He didn't want her to get up and leave, so he said, "You could read a bit."

She reached into her pouch for her phone and fumbled a bit. Then she rested it on her knee and poked at bits to bring up the article she wanted. Finally she lifted the phone and read aloud an introduction about planetary nebulae, space telescopes, and emissions discrepancies. Brett wanted to share her interest, but when she set the phone down on her knee to slide to the next page, something about the motion wasn't right.

"Why aren't you using your thumb?"

She gave him a deer in headlights look, and then dropped the thumb in question behind her thigh, out of his sight.

"It's hurt."

"How?"

"Joe tried to close the van door on it."

"Did you go someplace today?"

"No, he asked me to help load samples at the end. I think he was annoyed because Dr. Michaels had me talk about my project at lunch."
"Wait. What? You think he closed a door on your thumb deliberately."

Gabi nodded like it was the most normal thing in the world, and Brett got angry when he realized she wasn't angry. "Let me see it."

She held her hand in front of her, so it was a couple of feet from Brett's face. His room was still dim, and he couldn't see well enough. He reached out with his free hand and, after a hesitation, she let him pull the injured hand closer to his eyes. Her body language was incredibly tense, and he wasn't sure if she was reacting to whatever happened to her thumb or to having both of her hands in his. He squeezed her uninjured right hand and slid his grip down to her left wrist as he moved her hand a little to each side so he could see the bruising on her thumb.

He felt her relax. Pulling her right hand up beside her left, he compared the thumbs. The injured one was definitely swollen.

"It's not broken," she said. "I've had broken fingers before, and I can tell."

"Is Joe around?"

"I think he's over at Jen's again."

Brett had noticed that Joe didn't come home after going out with Jen on Saturday night, but he hadn't been sure if Gabi knew. Jen was one of the local students working the dig, and Brett hadn't seen anything between them until they hooked up, but for the time being they seemed pretty attached.

"You think he did this on purpose, because he was jealous?"

"I don't know. He was definitely annoyed with me, but I can't prove anything."

It was probably good that Joe wasn't in the house, because Brett wanted to punch him or at least tell him off, and he wasn't really up to either at the moment.

"Have you put ice on it?"

Gabi tried to pull back, but Brett kept hold of her hand and wrist until she calmed. "I don't like putting ice on things. It's cold."

"We can have hot tea at the same time."

"I don't like tea."

"How about tea without the tea?"

"What?"

"Come on and try it. I need to get out of this room anyway."

Brett pulled back the covers and sat up. He was wearing a tee shirt and sweatpants, but the room felt chilly without his blanket. He let go of Gabi's hands and pulled a sweatshirt over his head. She stood and hovered as if waiting to help him, but he pushed himself up off the bed and walked to the living area.

When he turned toward the kitchen area, Gabi said. "Sit on the couch. I can make tea." He was going to argue, but she said, "I want to, okay?"

He went and sank into a corner of the sofa but said, "Just heat some water in the kettle. Then bring
When she had the kettle on, Gabi came across the room and stared at his feet. "You need socks or slippers."

Brett noticed that Gabi was wearing the fuzzy socks she seemed to change into each night, and he smiled, "Not really my thing."

"You should try it," she said, "since I'm trying your not tea thing."

Brett shook his head as Gabi took off down the hall and returned with a blue pair of her own fuzzy socks bundled up together. "I have socks of my own, and my feet are probably too big for your socks."

"I've worn men's socks. My feet are pretty big for a woman. Anyway, these are good lounging around sock, soft and warm."

Then she knelt down on the floor and rolled socks up his feet from his toes to his ankles. If she'd been a hot guy, it would have been arousing. If she'd been a tiny Asian female, it would have seemed offensive. But it was long limbed geeky Gabi sliding fuzzy blue socks onto his feet, and Brett was too shocked to protest. Besides, the socks really were soft and warm and stretched over his skin in a very pleasant way. "Thanks," he said.

Then Gabi was off setting up a tea tray, and she scrounged up ginger cookies that she must have had hidden somewhere and brought it all to the coffee table just in front of the sofa.

Brett smiled and leaned forward. "When I was little and didn't like tea, my mom would fill a cup partway with hot water," he poured, "then add milk and sugar." He added some. "Try that, and then you can decide if you want more milk and sugar."

She tried a sip, then added more sugar. She sipped again and smiled at him.

"Now go and get some ice or frozen corn or something and a dish towel."

Gabi rolled her eyes at the command but went anyway. Brett made his own tea, then huddled back in his corner of the sofa, tucking his feet up under him. Gabi returned and curled up across from him with ice in one hand and her cup in the other. She kept glancing at her thumb, and despite being almost as tall as Brett, he thought she looked about five at the moment.

"You weren't going to tell me about your thumb?"

"It's stupid," she said.

"Is this like not telling people when you might be sick?"

"It's like not complaining about things that can't be helped."

"Like being sick, but you said you'd tell me about that or feeling weird."

"Which has nothing to do with my thumb."

"Except I think it kind of is the same thing, and I want to know."

"Why do you want to know?"

Brett wasn't really sure what he was seeing, but he knew it had something to do with trust. When he
heard Gabi's question, she sounded like an adult women who didn't trust his motives. When he saw how she held her thumb and curled into the sofa, he saw someone much younger than him who needed to be protected. "I told you I wasn't much into definitions, and I'm an only child, so I never had a sister. But I kind of feel toward you like I might hope to feel for a sister."

"I lived with someone we called my brother for a while," Gabi said, "but we didn’t have enough of a relationship for me to even dislike him strongly. Still, he was annoying."

"Okay, forget what might really go with the word or with a real sibling, but I want to know what's bugging you. I can't help but worry about you even if I know you don't want me to. Still, you seem to want to take care of me, which I'm not used to anyone doing. And you know I have a boyfriend, so it's not like I'm hitting on you."

"Sounds like a very romanticized view of having a sister."

"I have it on good authority that I'm a hopeless romantic." He heard some bitter resignation seeping into his voice and tried to tamp it down.

"Who's authority is that?"

"Chris, my boyfriend." Brett tried not to put any tone of doubt in the statement.

"And you say you're not used to anyone wanting to take care of you?"

"Don't start with it."

She gestured zipping her lips.

"I'll do my best to control my own romanticized notions, and I assure you they'd mostly be about my obligations to you." Brett had no idea where the words came from. Interacting with Gabi was like nothing he'd ever known before.

"I don't want you to feel obligated."

"Words. Definitions." Brett threw up his hands, sloshing the tea in one as his head began to pound. "I feel what I feel and I don't need words for it."

Gabi took longer than usual to answer. "Oh, then you can think of me as your sister if you want, I guess."

Brett smiled. He couldn't help it.

"Can I put the ice away now? I finished my not tea."

Brett took the last sip of his tea and set the cup back on the tray. "Yeah, thanks."

She took away the tea things and ice, and Brett closed his eyes and thought about innocence and trust. He wasn’t really sure Gabi counted as an innocent, but the way she hardly let anyone touch her and the two year rule she'd espoused made Brett worry about taking advantage. He felt very safe with Gabi. He liked being touched by her and sensed that she wanted to be touched back, that maybe she felt safe with him. Maybe she felt safe because he didn't want to seduce her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be playing on her emotions no matter what he did.

Gabi came back to the sofa, curled up at the other end and rubbed his foot though the incredibly soft, clingy socks. It made him want to pull her close and hold her tight, which he might mean in a
brotherly way, but it would still probably be a bad idea.

"Turn around. Let me give you a back rub."

She squinted and lowered her eyebrows at him.

"Don't tell me you've never had a back rub?" He didn't really think it was possible until he watched her face shift from embarrassment to confusion to doubt.

She finally said, "Maybe, kind of, not really. I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

"Turn around," he repeated. He would have had her lie down, but that seemed a bit too intimate. "See if you can make yourself comfortable against that cushion and the arm of the sofa."

She turned and squirmed and adjusted the pillow using only her right hand. She kept her left thumb well away and ended up with her left arm hanging over the end of the sofa while her chin rested on her right forearm. It didn't look comfortable at all, but Brett scooted closer hoping it would all work out in time.

He started rubbing across her back gently, giving her a chance to relax. Her back was completely rigid at first, and then when her shoulders started to slump he could feel how tight the muscles were underneath. He'd given more than a few backrubs to guys over the year, and Gabi's shoulders were as broad as some of theirs, though running into bra straps was a little annoying and bizarre. He vaguely remembered giving a couple of women back rubs when he first came to college, but maybe he hadn't been so used to guys' backs at the time so the bra straps hadn't surprised him.

He worked his way down the sides of Gabi's spine, and when he loosened a knot beneath her shoulder blades she let out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan. He couldn't pretend his body reacted completely platonically to that sound, but he'd admitted to being a fraction of a point away from six on the Kinsey scale. Besides, even a mythical zero or six might well react to a sound like that.

He remembered describing Gabi as his ideal for a sister and did his best for her with the back rub until he was tired again.

#

June 24, Antarctica

"Something is going to break," John finally ground out.

"In the chair, in the ceiling, what is it this time?"

John could have felt guilty when he heard the note of panic in Rodney's voice, but at least he'd finally escaped the line of questioning about weapons systems that the chair clearly didn't want to explain to John. "How about something in my brain?"

"You need to practice using it."

"My brain?"

"Quite possibly, or possibly the chair. Either way, we don't have time to break anything right now."

"Time is not the problem. The chair wants us to ask different questions."

"It's a device. It doesn't want anything, and don't even try suggesting there's some AI in there,
because I've already had that argument with Kavanaugh and his so called reasoning is more flawed than that metaphor about black holes and whirlpools…"

John let Rodney's words wash over him. Now that the scientist wasn't telling John what to search for or think about minute by minute, it was possible for John to flip his mind around to the way the chair approached information. As he thought through the moments when he'd interfaced most successfully, learning about the power source with spontaneously created particles and the crystal structures he'd seen at three different magnifications for each, a larger concept seemed to pull at or in John's mind.

"The sketches of the crystals." John could barely force the words out fast enough as the images he'd drawn over a week ago suddenly flashed and twisted behind his closed eyelids. "Do you still have them, the pages, in order?"

"What, why?"

John had broken through a Rodney rant, and he could hear the tenor of Rodney's voice shift and slow as his attention focused in on John. "If you lay the pages out in a matrix, the first three forming the first column, the next starting from the top in the column beside them, and so on, I think you can twist every other column and the structure will line up at different points."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Um, not sure." John tried to ask the chair. "Maybe so energy can flow in instead of out?"

"Are you saying we can recharge a ZedPM? What's the power source?"

John tried mentally asking about the power source and saw some sort of glowing dog shooting a laser into the first crystal pattern. What looked like a laser from a dog became a line of light that traced through the altered crystal pattern that John finally had clearly focused in his mind's eye. But he didn't want to tell Rodney about the dog any more than he wanted to mention the bird or beaver he'd seen before. Instead, he asked the chair to explain further. Being a most unhelpful and crazy-making device, it showed him an anteater and a cheetah curling up in a puppy pile with the dog. All three glowed together and the laser like beam of power grew brighter without growing wider.

Finally, John heard Rodney asking again and rubbing John's hand in a quick chafing motion that shouldn't have been pleasant, except John got a little turned on anytime Rodney touched him these days. "It's representing the power source with pictures of animals that sort of glow. Then the power siphons into the first crystal and traces through all the rest."

"I'm sure Jackson would say something about animal sacrifices that would be disgusting if it wasn't too boring to listen to. Here, I have the drawings taped up on a whiteboard in front of you. Open your eyes and see if it matches the pattern you're seeing."

John opened and closed his eyes a few times. "Yeah, it matches."

"And the power enters here?"

John nodded as Rodney traced the path John had been seeing in his head.

"Up! Out of the chair. I'm going to remove the ZedPM and see if this means what I think it means." Raising his voice, Rodney shouted, "Zelenka, I'm taking out the ZedPM!"

John removed his hands from the sensors on the chair, and the whole device shifted upright and shut down. John didn't stand immediately, because he'd learned that his eyes and ears sometimes played tricks on him after time in the chair, especially when Rodney didn't stay right beside him. Still
perched on the edge of the chair, John watched as Rodney pressed a corner of the chair platform and something began to rise.

"What is this you are doing?" Zelenka asked as he rushed to Rodney's side.

"We need to scan the ZedPM to see if some crystals match the patterns Major Sheppard drew with the help of the control chair."

"O'Neill threatened to kill anyone who broke the ZPM."

"Not breaking it. We might be able to recharge it."

"Using what?"

"I'll solve that later. Just look at the diagram on the white board. Some of these crystals need to shift around, if we mock up an x-ray for crystallography—"

John's mouth fell open as he saw the giant crystal rise. "That's the power source I told you about."

"Of course it is. Don't interrupt unless you have something useful to contribute, like which crystal goes with which drawing."

John thought he could have asked the chair about that, but now the chair was turned off, and John clearly wasn't needed. He would have liked to drag McKay off to a supply closet, but the scientists were already setting up gadgets, screens and wires to surround the ZPM.

For hours, John managed to play soldier and ignore the increasingly frustrated rants and curses that came from Rodney and others working on the ZPM. He watched from a distance as others added colored lines to his original crystal sketches. He wouldn't admit to understanding the geometry any more than he would admit to the animals he'd seen. But as the guards switched to night shift and Rodney was still muttering over the ZPM, John couldn't keep away any longer. His skin itched with a need to touch Rodney, and while he imagined he could hear the scientist's heartbeat and smell his skin from across the room, John wanted to move close enough for his imaginings to be real.

Armed with a cup of coffee from the only machine Rodney tolerated, John cocked his hip and leaned against the table where Rodney now worked alone.

"Coffee?"

"Yes!" Rodney guzzled the whole cup, then looked sadly at the bottom.

"More?" John asked.

The smile that lit Rodney's face would have had John on his knees in a different situation, and he realized he might have something more going on than a crush and great sex. Taking the cup, John rushed to refill it and gain some control of himself.

Rodney took the second cup of coffee in one hand as he turned the ZPM with his other.

John watched the light glint off of each crystal face, then was caught by the patterns reflecting from small crystals in the base.

The next thing John knew, Rodney's cup was on the table and his still warm hand was covering John's. "What is it, Major?"

"That one." John pointed to a greenish crystal in the base. "That goes with the first set of drawings.
The red one beside it would need to be rotated. I think the rest proceed clockwise around the base.

"Why didn't you say so?"

Rodney's voice sounded too loud, and suddenly John's eyes swam from looking too closely at the crystal. He could hear his own heart pounding and Rodney's beating only a little too fast. If he told Rodney he hadn't known until just now, it would mean the chair was changing John even when he was away from the device and it was powered down.

John wanted to beat a strategic retreat to his bunk, but he reached out to Rodney's shoulder and shook the man instead. The hold made John feel steadier on his feet and let him focus on the scientist's irate face.

"You did that on purpose. You let us waste all day—"

"Calm down. I didn't realize until I saw the crystals on the bottom. I hadn't looked closely at the power source until now."

"But you saw it from the chair. You found out as much about how it worked as we'd been able to derive, and more!"

John shook his head, hand still grasping Rodney's shoulder. "You never told me that."

"I didn't know you were thinking about it after that one day."

"Neither did I," John said.

Rodney took a breath as if to start on another long rant, but his eyes met John's. All of a sudden, it was as if the laser power John imagined from the dog was passing between their eyes and completing the circuit through John's hand. John felt his cock swelling in an uncomfortable position and adjusted himself. He knew Rodney caught the gesture as his eyes flicked briefly to John's crotch.

"I need to work on this," Rodney said. "I have to have it back in place by morning shift."

If he played dirty, John thought he could tempt Rodney away, at least for a little while. But Rodney already looked pretty tired, and John knew how exhausted they'd both be after even a quickie at this hour.

With a final squeeze, he released Rodney's shoulder. "I'll refill your coffee before I go to bed."

#

June 25, South Africa

Thursday Brett came back to the dig. Gabi kept an eye on him as she used her string bots to test areas within sight of the current grid, hoping to find the best way for the dig to progress in future years. Her thumb still hurt, and it was hard to remember not to use it while typing, so she spent a lot of time surfing the net from her phone instead. Part of the time she was really working, but most of it she was trying to learn about massage. It didn't seem fair that Brett had ended up taking care of her when he was sick. And even if he claimed to be well today, she could see the exhaustion in his face from across the dig, if she tried. She wanted to be ready to offer at least a competent massage by that night, and in time she thought she could learn to be pretty good at it. Most of the techniques she researched seemed to rely on understanding anatomy and having good attention to detail and touch. Being a genius and better at controlling her sense of touch than any of her other senses, it seemed like a fine skill for her to master.
That night Gabi took her shower first and then made chicken noodle soup and grilled cheese while Brett was in the shower. Joe came through the kitchen while she was cooking but didn't say anything beyond "hi." When he took a microwaved dinner to his room, Gabi was pleased to see him go.

After dinner, Gabi sat across the table from Brett not knowing what to say.

"Should we see what's on TV?" he asked.

They'd never watched TV together before, and she was pretty sure he was picking up on her nervousness, so she just plunged in. "I want to try giving you a massage."

"Okay," he glanced over at the sofa.

"Everything online says sofas aren't very good for massage. They mostly recommend a blanket on the floor, but the floor here is hard and cold, and the beds aren't very squishy, so I think they'd be fine. Whichever you prefer."

"Okay," Brett said again. It made Gabi uncomfortable, because she could tell he was thinking through a lot more. They cleared the dishes and he said, "I guess my bed will work. I changed the sheets and everything since I was sick."

Gabi followed him into his room and watched him lay down on his stomach. His feet were bare again, and she wondered if he didn't like the socks she'd given him. "You could take off your shirt, if you're comfortable with that. I'm sort of new at this, so it might help if I can see what I'm doing."

He reached both hands backward over his shoulders and across to the opposite sides of his back. Then he quickly gathered up his shirt with his fingers, pulled it over his shoulders and off his head. It was a bizarre move that looked very well practiced, and Gabi smiled wondering if there'd been a time when Brett actually practiced tricks like that.

Then she moved over beside the bed and started with a long stroke down from his neck to his waistband. She slid her hands out and up his sides, coming back under the shoulder blades to follow the spine up to the neck again. It really was easier without a shirt, so she could see where she was moving. Most of the online sites recommended using oil, but she didn't have any and thought it would have been awkward to suggest. She made a couple more long strokes over Brett's back and tuned in to his heartbeat and breathing, which both seemed calm and steady. She began working on smaller circular strokes, carefully keeping her left thumb up and out of the way.

It was amazing how smooth Brett's skin was. He had almost no hair on his back, and while the pores still seemed large to her, the skin wasn't dry or rough anywhere she could see.

When she started kneading a bit with her palms and fingers, she heard Brett's breathing change and felt his muscles soften and relax. From there she mostly followed her instincts trying to get tight places to relax and never moving too fast or removing her hands completely.

"I'm going to try your feet now." Gabi avoided asking a tag question like "okay" so Brett wouldn't feel he had to talk, but he talked anyway as she slid a hand down the side of his body so she wouldn't remove her touch completely as she moved.

"Where did you study this online?"

"Lots of sites, but don't worry. They were very clear about what counts as intimate or erotic. I'll treat you like a brother. Just tell me if something bugs you. Are your feet ticklish?"

"Not usually."
She started with circular motions at his heals. The foot part would have been a lot easier with thumbs, but using only fingers and one thumb forced Gabi to concentrate on Brett's reactions. He didn't make any sound, not even a sigh. But she could follow his heartbeat, and it was easy to feel bits of his feet relax. Working between his toes did produce a bit of a twitch or ticklish reaction, but Gabi just slowed down and pressed a little harder until even Brett's toes relaxed. Then she worked her way up each calf in turn, but decided not to try even the part of thighs and hips that most sites didn't count as erotic.

She had Brett roll over, and he didn't question it. His heart rate was almost to sleep levels, and Gabi thought that meant she was doing well, but it could mean he was still exhausted from having been sick. Whatever the case, she did her best with his upturned calves. Then she slid up his side and worked on his arm. When she reached the hand she couldn't help but remember rubbing little circles when he was sick. Now she felt much better prepared.

After rubbing both arms and a bit of his shoulders again, she moved to sit at the top of his bed and started massaging his scalp though the hair, releasing the tangy eucalyptus smell that was becoming very familiar. Finally, she felt Brett really relax, and she thought he might be falling asleep. She took her time, moving from nape to temples. The smooth coolness of hair between her fingers contrasted with the healthy warmth radiating from his skin beneath. She watched his face relax completely even though she hadn't tried facial massage, and Gabi made a few smooth circles through his hair that reminded her of petting a cat.

Then she whispered "good night" and left, creeping back to her own room. It was only after she'd gone to bed that she realized her hands still smelled like the aloe and eucalyptus of Brett's hair.

#

At the dig the next day, when Brett stopped for a snack, he overheard Joe chatting quietly with another woman. People called her Kag.

Joe was saying, "Can't stand spending too much time with him and his little fag hag."

Kag looked either confused or like she was trying to be diplomatic.

Brett barely thought before saying, "'Fag hag'? Do people still say that? I thought this was the era of 'my gay best friend.'"

He took some juice and left. Kag still looked blank, and Brett didn't think Joe would be scoring with her anytime soon.

When Brett looked far across the dig to where Gabi was testing on the periphery, he could have sworn she was watching and smiling like she'd heard them.

#

June 26, USA/Antarctica

By Friday morning, Blair had finished up the full battery of tests he'd devised for the four subjects he had access to. Tentatively, he wanted to include Carson as a Sentinel, even if he'd never managed to demonstrate a heightened sense of smell, Blair had been able to elicit at least some results with each other sense that fell beyond the normal human range. If anything, Carson lacked control, and neither Blair nor Daniel acting as Guides seemed to make any difference.

Blair was busy at a computer trying to figure out a secure testing protocol for at least hearing and sight that could be self-administered. He thought he could offer that for Markham to try with the
To be honest, other than the one incident where Jim walked in on Markham's testing, everything had gone very smoothly, and Blair had enjoyed the break from living in Jim's pocket day in and day out. He knew Jim had been struggling to make things better between them for weeks, and Blair had been feeling vulnerable and keeping his distance. Now, after a week of positive interactions with colleagues who respected him and work that excited him, Blair was feeling more like his old self. Also, seeing how well Jim held it together in the presence of other Sentinels and in the middle of a military base cut off from his own territory, friends, and work, Blair was wondering if he might have judged his Sentinel too harshly. Maybe it was time to at least talk about their issues.

Then Jim rushed into the lab where Blair and Carson had been working and said, "You need to turn off your smart phones. Daniel thinks he's been hacked, and he doesn't want it to get any further."

Hours passed and it was late in the afternoon when Daniel called a meeting, and Blair was surprised to see Jim and Jack there when he reached the conference room.

Daniel greeted him with, "Have a seat. Carson went to round up our tech specialists."

"Are they part of this base's security force?" Jim asked.

Jack glared at him and said, "No, though I suspect these two would never look up at a rooftop either. They're the best we have to consult on hacking. Daniel owes me big time for pulling strings to get them brought in."

Daniel's hands waved back and forth, "No one here had the clearance. And while I didn't have anything classified on my phone, of course," he paused briefly to give Jack a look that spoke volumes about some past argument, "Certain people might read between the lines based on articles I downloaded or contact information from—"

At that point Daniel's rapid fire diatribe was overrun by a louder, faster-talking man who was herded through the door by a red-face Carson and a silent, athletic-looking man with dark eyes and dark hair who was carrying two computers, a shoulder bag, and a box full of cell phones. "As if anyone should care what soft science over-simplifications you read in your spare time. Still, you were right to call us in, because the worm used to gather and transmit data from your phone was actually quite sophisticated, suggesting foreign government or NID involvement—"

"McKay!" Jack's serious tone somehow stopped the loud, balding man with his mouth open.

Then the man, evidently known as McKay, crossed his arms over his chest and huffed out, "What?"

"This briefing only involves clearances for the Sentinel project. You'll have to watch what you say."

"By what stretch of military intelligence does it make sense to clear someone to work on the Sentinel project without clearing them to know who might be attacking them."

"Anyone might attack anyone, McKay. Think of all of the other things we protect people from knowing about."

"As a Canadian, and the most intelligent person on the planet, I reserve the right to disagree with
many decisions made by your government and by—"

"McKay…"

"Other organizations known by acronyms which I wasn't going to specify. The further point being that we can't know which project the worm in Jackson's phone was targeting because it gathered everything he had downloaded, and it successfully transmitted before being detected. We don't know if the attack had anything to do with this Sentinel project or if those receiving the information will now take an interest in any of Jackson's assorted, and may I say rather obscure and incredibly impractical, downloaded material. Most likely, whoever is trying to read through it will either fall asleep or be baffled as to why anyone would gather such an assortment of research." Without stopping for breath the speaker turned to Daniel and said, "Seriously, Jackson, the fact that you would keep a copy of a twenty page paper on the derivation of words meaning 'grandmother' in Polynesian languages disturbs me more than the military kink porn that I found on the servers at—"

"That's enough, McKay." Jack cut in with amazing ease as Daniel turned an impressive shade of red behind him. "Did you have any results to brief us on?"

"Results you'd understand?" Rodney fixed Jack with a scornful look, then smiled. "We fixed Jackson's phone."

"Is that all?"

"We checked the other phones and computers brought to us and found no further signs of that worm. We vastly improved the security on all devices, although I can't do much about it if idiots insist on using free wifi in coffee shops when everything they even think about is supposed to be classified."

"So you're done, then?"

"My assistant," McKay waved a hand at the man beside him who didn't speak but stiffened, perhaps at being casually dismissed as an assistant, "is still trying to trace the worm, although it's probably too late already. Meanwhile, I was promised coffee and pie when I was so abruptly summoned to play tech support to your anthropology project."

"Why don't we all walk over to the mess, where I had them set aside a pie specifically for us—"

"Us!" McKay squeaked. "Me! I'm the genius being inconvenienced here. That's my pie that I earned."

"What about Dr. Peter Grodin?" Daniel asked in a teasing tone, and Blair bit his lip to hold back a chuckle as he noted it wasn't only Blair's professional standing that Daniel sought to defend.

McKay rolled his eyes, "He is less useless than most and may have helped a bit. Not that I'm even sure if he eats pie, but if there's a whole pie set aside, he can have some. Then after I've had a serving befitting my efforts, perhaps there will be enough for the rest of you hangers on."

"So gracious of you to offer," Daniel replied as one of the phones in Grodin's box started to play "Frosty the Snowman."

"Hey, I thought those were turned off," Jack said. "That's my ringtone for command at, well, where McKay came up from."

Dr. Grodin was already handing the phone in question to Jack as McKay said, "We had to turn them on to check them. Even your limited military mind should be able to realize that without—"
"What now?" Jack said loudly into his phone. "Oh really...Don't panic. I'll get someone down there to help you faster than the next transport."

As soon as Jack hung up, Daniel opened his mouth to speak, but the Colonel silenced him with a raised hand. Instead he turned to Blair, "Your other possible research subject has been unresponsive for over an hour, and it sounds like a zone to me. So the question is, do I send Daniel to try to deal with it, or are you ready to sign the big bad paperwork to learn the rest of the story?"

"Jack, that's not fair," Daniel said.

"The major has been sitting, frozen and silent, in the device for over an hour, Danny-boy. Do you want to risk handling this on your own, or are you going to bring the expert you recruited for your Sentinel project?"

Blair was more than ready to sign anything they offered. He was tired of not knowing what his colleagues knew and requiring them to watch every word they said around him. He turned to Jim, prepared to argue his case, but Jim just nodded and said, "I'm staying with you."

Blair turned back to Jack who said, "Get your go bags and meet us back in the conference room in five minutes."

#

Rodney McKay didn't call himself the smartest man in the galaxy for nothing. He'd put together unresponsive, major, device, and Sentinel project and realized that whatever new clearance he'd been given when called up to fix Jackson's phone might now be important to helping John Sheppard. He turned to Grodin and held out a hand saying, "Briefing material on the Sentinel project."

He sputtered when handed an armful of computers and cell phones instead, but seeing that Grodin was digging in a shoulder bag, presumably for the papers McKay had requested, he turned his ire on O'Neill. "Don't think you're sending me back there without my pie."

"I would never default on a promise of pie." Then turning to Daniel he said, "I'll hit the mess and grab our go bags if you'll herd the rest of them back to the conference room."

By that point McKay was immersed in a rapid scan of the report on Sentinels that he had not bothered to read earlier in the day. By the time they reached the conference room he waved the papers in Jackson's face saying, "You're O'Neill's Guide, aren't you? You talk to him and touch him to keep him from zoning in the control chair. How could you not mention this? You talk almost as much as I do, but the one time you had useful information to impart it didn't occur to you to tell the rest of us who were working with ATA carriers using the chair? No, no, don't bother to explain, just tell me everything you know about being a Guide."

"Are you saying you're Sheppard's Guide?" Jackson's eyes went wide behind his glasses.

"At the moment I have only the flimsiest social science excuse for an understanding of what a Guide, or for that matter a Sentinel, is. I need data, now talk."

#

From several hallways beyond the conference room, Jim tuned in to the sound of Daniel's excited speech as he told all about Sentinels pushing the limits of their senses and about Guides providing a sensory baseline and also encouraging Sentinels to split their focus between senses to avoid zones. He was not at all surprised upon entering the room that Daniel handed both Jim and Blair fat stacks of paper marked with post-its for signatures without pausing in his explanation to McKay.
When Grodin fished in a shoulder bag and handed them pens, Jim thanked him. Grodin's reply of "You're welcome" came in a distinctly British accent. While Jim might not have expected the accent based on the man's vaguely Mediterranean appearance, Jim was more startled that even with his expanded hearing and almost compulsive cataloging of voices, he had not heard the man utter a word since they'd met. Jim had wondered how any Sentinel could stand McKay as a Guide. It was possible the constant talking helped control sensory spikes by splitting senses and made it easier to keep track of the Guide's location and relative well-being. In which case, it wasn't surprising that his Sentinel zoned when McKay was removed from his environs.

By the time Jack returned with two duffel bags and a pie box, Jim and Blair were almost finished signing everything.

"Okay," Jack said, "to bring everyone up to speed, aliens are real and helped us build a cool spaceship that happens to be in orbit at the moment. We're going to beam up, then beam down to an Ancient outpost in Antarctica. Ancient in this case means aliens who brought technology to earth thousands of years ago that people with the ATA, or Ancient Technology Activation gene can use. One of those ATA carriers, Major John Sheppard, has been unresponsive in an Ancient control chair for over an hour, so while Daniel didn't identify him as a Sentinel before, it looks like he might be one after all, and might be in a pretty bad zone. Is everyone ready to go?"

"Umm," Daniel said, "McKay might be Sheppard's Guide."

"What?" Jack scrunched up his nose as if the very idea offended his Sentinel senses. Jim couldn't help but smile.

"He saw how I used hearing and touch to ground you and tried using the same techniques to help Sheppard, even though he didn't know what the problem was."

"And it worked?" Blair asked McKay.

"Well, of course, I'm a genius."

"When I asked Sheppard, he said he hadn't noticed anything unusual about his senses," Jackson muttered.

McKay rolled his eyes toward Carson and said, "Tell them what the major said after a collapsing tunnel dislocated his shoulder and left him buried in snow for half an hour."

Carson chuckled. "He said he was fine, not even cold compared to his chopper."

Jackson tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

McKay nearly shouted. "He's military. He's a very private person. He's trained not to admit to anything. Whatever. Let's go get him out of that chair."

At that, Jack did something on his phone and a sudden bright light and sense of unexpected movement caught Jim off guard.

Jim kept his eyes closed for several seconds as he reset the dials on all his other senses. He noted and tuned out the hum and rattle of a great deal of machinery and many more voices and echoes than had surrounded him in the conference room. After cataloging the flow of cooler air and the smell of ozone and oil, Jim opened his eyes to see the earth surrounded by a dark field of stars.

"Wow," Blair said beside him, "We're in space."
"Worth signing on the dotted line now?" Jack quipped.

No one answered before another burst of whatever transporter beam they were using sent Jim and the rest of their group into a high-ceilinged room filled with patterns carved into gray walls with a massive ornate chair raised up on a dais that glowed with blue light. As the rest of his group rushed to the man frozen in the chair, Jim turned his head taking in all the smells of humans crowded together in an enclosed space with recycled air along with oil and ozone smells similar to the spaceship they'd just left. He wondered if the smell accompanied the transport beam or the other alien-looking machinery, consoles, and view screens scattered around the room. Behind him, there were half a dozen people working. Perhaps they were quiet to avoid interfering with the chaos enveloping the chair, but Jim thought it might be like working in the bullpen: having people beam in and rush to solve a problem might not be that unusual in this work environment. The walls behind him seemed to be partly natural stone, sliced vertically, and John's hearing tuned to tell him he was far underground. Slight shifting sounds and O'Neill's mention of Antarctica made him realize they were under large amounts of ice.

Then Jim saw something truly out of place. His jaguar was pacing by the arch that opened on to an adjacent hall. Jim took a step in that direction and his spirit animal led him several doors down until he stopped and raised a paw as if scratching to be let through the closed door. Jim reached out expecting the door to be locked but it opened for him, and his jaguar went inside and bent his nose to the ground where a small brown animal was wrapped around and rubbing its nose against an unmoving bird. Spotting the wide tail, Jim concluded the furry animal was a beaver, and the size of the black bird suggested it was a raven. The two were encircled by a structure of sticks with symmetrical patterns and points rising up around a file cabinet with an elaborately decorated nest at the top. For a moment Jim wondered if the bird should be lifted back to its nest. Then he shook himself realizing the beaver and bird must be McKay and Sheppard's spirit animals, and belonged curled together the way his jaguar and Blair's wolf did.

Taking a deep breath, Jim smelled that this was McKay's room, and while the scent was faint, from the bed Jim could smell a male lover who he'd just bet was the unconscious Sentinel in the control chair. If he ever earned his way back into Blair's good graces, they definitely needed to talk about what constituted a normal Sentinel-Guide relationship.

Jim nodded to his jaguar as the cat sat between the door and the other animals in a posture that radiated protective instincts. Jim shut the door behind him as he left, certain the animal could walk right through it when not leading him, and he hurried back to get Blair.

Instead, he returned to the sound of McKay's shrill voice intoning, "Out! Everyone out!" as the man in the chair clung to his arm, eyes squeezed shut in a way that could only mean pain.

The men and women who'd been quietly working when they arrived showed no hesitation at fleeing in response to McKay's demands. Only O'Neill and the Sentinel project group were ignoring the determined scientist.

Jim stepped up beside Blair and whispered, "I think the spirit animals want McKay to take his Sentinel back to his room. Can you convince the rest of them to let me help McKay move Sheppard there?"

To Blair's credit, he only gave Jim the big-eyed skeptical look for a moment. Then he announced, "Daniel, Carson, Jack, I think we need to leave. Jim is going to help these two get to where they need to be, and we can sort the rest out later."

Jim wasn't sure why it worked, but the others instantly responded to the authority in his Guide's voice. Even McKay seemed to accept Blair's pronouncement, and as soon as the others were gone he
let Jim help him lift Sheppard out of the chair and take one side as they all but carried the cringing Sentinel to the room with their spirit animals.

Once they laid Sheppard on the bed, Jim asked McKay, "Do you see anything unusual over there?" He gestured to the file cabinet with the three animals and the complex wooden structure.

McKay shook his head. "Who are you?"

"Jim Ellison, another Sentinel. Do me a favor and ask him as soon as he's ready. If he sees anything, tell him to come talk to me. Really, I think you're both going to need to come out and talk as soon as possible."

"We'll come out when he's fully ready, and you can tell the others that if anyone bothers us before then, I will make them pay in insidious and creative ways. Also, no Sentinel snooping. He's a very private person." McKay looked at his Sentinel with such open affection that Jim didn't want to invade their privacy for one moment longer. He let himself out and carefully kept his hearing and other senses to baseline levels.

#

Blair breathed a sigh of relief when Jim returned. He could tell from his Sentinel's face that everything was going to be all right for McKay and Sheppard.

Jack evidently didn't see the same. "What was that? We show you all the cool toys and two minutes later you're ordering us out of the control room and leaving McKay in charge of an injured man?"

"McKay pulled him out of the zone, didn't he?"

"Yes," Blair answered, realizing Jim hadn't been in the room at the time. "It took him less than a minute, but then Sheppard was overwhelmed by having so many people around him."

"So McKay was a Guide taking care of his Sentinel, and I agreed when he told the rest of you to leave."

"And why didn't that ruling apply to you?"

"I left, see? And McKay has threatened some pretty strange vengeance on anyone who disturbs them before they're ready." Then he looked at Jack and added, "Also, no snooping."

"Where are they now?" Carson asked calmly.

"McKay's room, a few doors down the hallway, has a large file cabinet in the corner."

"I understand needing to move a Sentinel to someplace calm, but good medical practice would dictate that a doctor check someone over after a loss of consciousness. Perhaps we need to agree on some procedures for dealing with Sentinels," Carson said.

"I'm sorry, doc, but I think you should defer to the Guide when a Sentinel is involved. I've had some bizarre reactions to stuff, and sometimes I needed Blair to intervene for me."

It warmed Blair to hear Jim express such respect for the role of a Guide and for him in particular, but there were questions he needed to ask Jim that he thought might be better asked in private.

"Listen," Blair said, "We all have a lot to process right now. I don't think McKay and Sheppard are going to be joining the discussion for quite a while. Maybe we could all take some time to regroup,
then meet and share ideas over dinner."

"Or we could eat McKay's pie," Jack suggested

"Don't even think about it," said Daniel, who had ended up holding the pie box. "I wouldn't put it past McKay to turn off heat for anyone who takes his pie, and this place is cold enough already."

Jack visibly sized up his Guide and the box he was protecting. "Well, let's hope they come out before dessert. Day old pie would be such a waste. I'll show Blair and Jim to a spare room. I'm guessing they'll need to stay until at least tomorrow to run tests on our newest Sentinel."

Jack showed them to a simple gray room with two beds and said, "I guess this will have to do."

Then he was gone, and Blair found himself standing in the middle of the room as Jim worked his way around the perimeter, clearly checking for listening devices or cameras. When he finished he turned to Blair and said, "You hungry? I know secrets for finding snack foods, even on the most remote base."

Blair patted his duffle bag. "I still have some of what you packed from my stash at home." He fished out a bag of roasted pumpkin seeds and offered Jim a handful. "What I really want to know is where you went and why you came back ready to help McKay."

Jim lifted a single pumpkin seed to his mouth and nibbled at it. Blair couldn't guess what was happening in his Sentinel's mind right then, but he was growing pretty curious. Then Jim said, "My jaguar led me to McKay and Sheppard's spirit animals."

Blair's mouth fell open to hear Jim speak so forthrightly about mystical matters he usually denied. Then his brain caught up and he said, "How did you know they were their spirit animals and what they wanted you to do?"

Jim smiled a little shy smile, and Blair realized he only saw that expression when he expressed enthusiasm about something Jim did or said. Blair couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it.

"Well, there was a beaver wrapped up around and sort of nuzzling a raven that was lying completely still. Up above them on a tall filing cabinet was a fancy sort of nest, but it was surrounded by a structure that came up from the ground and sort of circled around and directly through the file cabinet. I'm pretty sure that was made by the beaver. So they'd been working together before. The beaver was trying to comfort the raven. My jaguar positioned himself to protect them both, so I thought it was kind of obvious. I could tell by scent that it was McKay's room, and there was another scent I guessed was Sheppard. When I returned to the rest of you, I confirmed that was Sheppard's scent, and he was clinging to McKay. All pretty obvious, and I'm sure my jaguar will come get me if they need us."

"Wow, all of a sudden you're ready to talk about stuff, and you trust your spirit animal to come get you."

Jim's eyebrows arched up, and for a moment he looked really sad, but he didn't say anything further. Blair waited, letting thoughts chase around his mind, wondering if there was something he'd missed.

Then Jim sat down on his bed and started eating his pumpkin seeds more seriously, though still one at a time. Blair realized he hadn't taken any for himself before he put the bag away. He hovered undecided between digging out more seeds and sitting on his own bed, wondering if there was something he'd missed.

"Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?" Blair asked.
Jim kept eating as if he hadn't heard, and Blair lay back on his bed. Staring at the ceiling, he threw an arm over his eyes to block the light. By the time Jim finally spoke, Blair wasn't expecting it anymore.

"Whenever I see your wolf, it's curled up with my jaguar."

The words were like a fist in Blair's gut. He was glad his face was half covered, and he wondered if Jim was more comfortable that way too and that was why he'd waited to speak. Without moving his arm, Blair asked, "How often do you see them?"

"More since, you know. And even more since I've been trying to do better."

"Oh, Jim," Blair's body tensed all over, "I'll try my best to meet you half way, but I'm not very good at reading your mind."

"After the fountain, I felt like they were pushing me, and I wasn't ready. Then as I felt more ready, the jaguar showed up more to lead me, or to let me know when I was screwing up. Then I'd see them curled up together, I guess when one of us needed comfort, even when I didn't know how to—" Jim cut himself off, and Blair could hear the big man shifting around on the military bunk.

"I don't know. I don't know how to comfort you most of the time. And I know you want me to talk, but I don't know what to say. You don't tell me anymore. You used to get on my case or explain things. I think we were supposed to get better after our spirit animals merged, but instead everything got worse, and now I think you've given up on me."

Blair took a deep breath and as calmly as he could said, "Jim, I would never give up on you."

"Are you sure?"

Blair thought about how often he'd chosen to be alone in the last couple years rather than risk arguing with Jim, how often he'd bitten off what he wanted to say, rather than risk a bad reaction. He'd thought Jim was the one who changed. He thought Jim had chased him away, but on some levels he had stopped trying. After Jim said he wasn't ready to take that journey with Blair, Blair had stopped asking Jim to meditate or talk about the spirit plane. Now it sounded like the spirit animals hadn't given up, and eventually, Jim had been ready to follow their lead and believe in them. Maybe Blair needed to learn from their example.

"What do you want me to do, Jim?"

"Give me another chance?"

Part of Blair wanted to run away or fall apart or say he just wasn't strong enough to go through it all again. A month ago, he might have given in to those impulses. Instead he said, "It's not going to be easy. It might take a couple years, not because I'm trying to test you. I just can't know if what you say this month will change by next month, and after years of never knowing when you'd hate me or when you might kick me out, it might take years to really believe that's over."

"I guess that's fair."

The words sounded like a promise to Blair but also sounded like Jim could barely choke them out. Blair heard rustling sounds from Jim's side of the room and, carefully, Blair lifted his arm so he could sneak a glance at Jim. His Sentinel had curled up on his bed facing away from Blair. Somehow the big man looked small and vulnerable. Blair remembered Jim coming to Blair's room to comfort him the last time he'd had the nightmare about drowning when they were still at home. They'd never talked about it, but Blair hadn't had that nightmare again until they were in Colorado.
"Jim, is there something I could do now that would make you feel better?"

There was another very long pause. Blair thought it had been at least five minutes before he heard Jim say, "I might be jealous of how our spirit animals curl up together."

It was hard for Blair to believe that Jim would want to cuddle. The man didn't seem comfortable even hugging another guy. Then again, Jim had cradled Blair in his lap after the fountain, and there must have been some reason why their spirit animals merged and brought Blair back to life.

Pushing himself off his bed, Blair crossed the room to sit on the edge of Jim's bed. Instinctively, Blair wanted to ask permission, but he guessed the words would be harder for Jim to handle than the action. So Blair laid a hand firmly on Jim's shoulder. The Sentinel didn't flinch. If anything he pressed back a little into the touch. Trying not to press too hard or too lightly, Blair stroked Jim's arm from shoulder to wrist and then repeated the motion. The only time Jim tensed at all was when Blair's hand lifted for a moment to move back up to the shoulder. All at once Blair wanted to curl up around his Sentinel. He felt empty and touch starved, and he wondered if Jim's heightened sense of touch made him need physical contact even more. Blair lay down behind the larger man, positioning himself with an arm around Jim's waist so he could press his chest firmly against Jim's back but keep his groin area well below Jim's hips. The way Jim's legs were curled forward, that kept the cuddling fairly innocent.

Jim made a low rumbling sound somewhere between a hum and a sigh, and Blair relaxed. He let himself squirm a little until his lower arm supported the weight of his head while the side of his face pressed against Jim's shirt. The warmth of Jim's body was soothing, and even though it was mid-afternoon, Blair drifted into sleep.

#

Jim could tell when his Guide fell asleep, and that's when he knew he'd truly been given a second chance. His whole body seemed to sing with it. His skin had felt electrified since Blair first touched his shoulder, but when Blair's arm wrapped around him, and especially when Blair's face pressed against his back, it was as if Blairness vibrated all through Jim's body, making him feel molten and warm throughout. He didn't want to fall asleep, didn't want to miss a moment, even if it might take years to win Blair's trust, that seemed fair enough given some of the idiotic crap he'd put Blair through in the past.

Now he needed to learn how to be what Blair needed. Blair had pretty clearly told him to control his temper and never kick Blair out of the loft. That much Jim was sure he could do, but he knew there had to be more. He didn't quite understand why making breakfast for Blair had been good but inviting him out to dinner had been bad. He was deeply pleased that whatever they were doing now and what Jim had done when he came to Blair during his nightmare had been okay. Jim wondered if they could sleep together every night and how he could make the offer in words without messing everything up. He thought maybe if he just stood by Blair's bed that night he'd be invited to curl up for at least a little while. Jim couldn't say why, but he thought that was the next step. It felt right. He wondered if Blair's wolf was curled up with his jaguar as they kept watch over the new Sentinel and Guide. He hoped so.

#

When John came to his senses, he was in Rodney's bed, and Rodney was curled around him, petting him and talking.

"...The very people who should have told me what to expect, told you too, I mean, you're the Sentinel. But you gave some flip answer to Daniel Jackson, and really, how long have these idiots
been dealing with military men? Even if he didn't know you personally, Jackson should have realized that self-response answers are notoriously unreliable. I mean, he's a social scientist. If they don't teach them that in college, what are they teaching? Do you hear me yet?" John heard, but he was too comfortable drifting along on Rodney's voice to answer. "I'm hoping if I keep talking and touching, and I guess you can smell me too, that's supposed to help you reset your senses. At least if we believe Jackson and Carson and whoever the new guys with them are, then you're one of these Sentinel people, and sometimes your senses can reach much farther than other people's. So then you need to renormalize, and usually Sentinels use their Guide as a baseline, and well, I didn't mean to become your Guide, but if that's why you let me close to you and why you seem okay working with me, when well, most people don't really like working with me… Anyway, I'm a genius, so I can probably figure out how to be exceptionally good at this Guide job. I mean, I seem to have figured out enough without Jackson even bothering to tell me about Sentinels until he called me away to fix his pathetic, unencrypted, minimally-secured phone. I wonder how long it would have taken them to tell us if they hadn't screwed things up by snatching me away from here. I mean, maybe we would have handled things so well on our own that they never would have noticed. Still, you must have been aware of something. I'm pretty sure that day you saw the flaw in the ceiling, you saw it with your eyes and then accessed the blueprints via the chair. But if it only happened when you were in the chair, maybe you didn't know you were using your own senses. I wish you'd get better and tell me. I'll talk all day if I have to, but it would be nice to know if you're even hearing me."

"I hear you," John managed, though his voice sounded scratchy and too loud in his own ears.

Rodney's response was to pull him in tight with arms and legs in some sort of octopus hug. It felt great, and neither of them was even hard.

"Did you hear what I said about a baseline for your senses? After you zone, which you did, you need to reset everything. They suggest picturing a dial or slide bar with numbers one through ten. You can use my voice as a baseline for hearing, although they also mention the Guide's heartbeat as grounding. Not that they say what number baseline should be. If your hearing can zoom in like your vision when you saw that crack, then you probably need to use a logarithmic scale. Maybe if my voice was two and my heartbeat was three? Can you actually hear my heartbeat?"

"Yeah, I can." John's voice sounded better. Rodney's heartbeat got faster.

"You'd tell me if there was anything wrong, like arrhythmia or heart murmur or something, right?"

"Of course I would, Rodney."

"Guess being a Guide comes with medical benefits. Have you managed to set your scale for hearing yet?" John pictured a number line and filled in up to three, where he could hear Rodney's heart. Then he slid back to where Rodney's voice sounded normal and labeled that two. Like most things with numbers, it seemed to come easily to John.

"Hearing's all set. What next?"

"How about sight? Have you even opened your eyes? The room is pretty dim at the moment, but I can see fine. So on any relevant scale this would still have to count as normal. I guess that could be two, or maybe one point nine."

John dutifully filled another imaginary number line to one point nine as he studied the mess of coffee cups and powerbar wrappers on Rodney's desk. He tried to ignore the animals no one else could see until Rodney asked, "Do you see anything in the corner by the file cabinet?"

"You see them too?" John heard his own heart accelerate, and visualized how his hearing had slid
"No, but I saw where your eyes moved. Some other Sentinel saw something when we brought you in here. He told me to ask you about it, so this is me asking."

"Oh, cool. The wolf and panther, or whatever it is, must have come with him. They're curled up in front of the door. But the raven and beaver we always have are curled up in the bottom of the nest or wooden model or whatever they've been building in that corner. Your beaver is holding my raven."

"My beaver? What kind of a stereotype is that? Just because one of my doctorates is in engineering and all engineering departments obsess over beavers as mascots—"

"Don't worry, McKay." John wanted McKay to appreciate the animals and structure, even if he couldn't see them. "I think your beaver is a genius, too. You should see what he built. It's like a miniature city, laid out in the shape of a snowflake, with spires and towers and runways."

"Runways? Does it have little tiny fighter jets?"

"Not yet, but I keep hoping."

"How long have you been seeing this?"

"The first time we came back here, the crystals in the raven's nest at the top made me realize I'd been seeing crystal structures, but I'd seen the raven before that."

"Are these the animals you saw feeding the ZedPM?"

"None of these in particular. Those were a dog, a cheetah, and maybe an aardvark, but now that you mention it, it would make more sense for them to be like these rather than real animals."

"And if someone else had asked you about this?"

"They'd have to admit they saw it first."

"But you tell me because I'm your Guide?"

"Whatever." John rolled over on top of Rodney. "What am I supposed to use for a taste baseline?"

Rodney smiled, and John leaned down to kiss him. Even when Rodney hadn't brushed his teeth since morning and had eaten something with onions for lunch, he tasted like Rodney. John slid his tongue along Rodney's and then traced behind his teeth as he set his taste dial to three, not thinking he could have appreciated this as much before he became a Sentinel, or whatever he was.

He breathed in the scent of Rodney, remembering that Rodney had been away earlier in the day as he smelled some sort of antiseptic and dust that came from outside, not like Antarctic dust that was mostly decomposing skin cells or whatever. He gave the scent a three and went back to licking Rodney's mouth.

The longer they kissed, the less he could taste Rodney's lunch and the more he tasted pure Rodney and the two of them together. Now that he knew he really could taste more, John managed to separate out the trace tastes of food, coffee, and toothpaste before exploring the subtle differences between Rodney's tongue and the roof of his mouth. John could smell Rodney's growing arousal, and now that he understood about heightened senses, he thought he could have some fun with them.

He hadn't found a baseline for his sense of touch, but he started rubbing against Rodney, still kissing,
and he pictured his number line for touch with no numbers yet. He imagined drawing a line that went up and up until the feel of Rodney beneath him was almost painful and almost enough to make him come just from rubbing together in their clothes, then he eased the line back down to where he'd need it to keep control.

He ran a hand through Rodney's hair and was pretty sure the tickle of each separate hair was still more than a normal person was supposed to feel. So he traced along Rodney's ear until it felt like just an ear, and he tentatively labeled that two on his number line.

Then Rodney gasped and John leaned over to suck on his earlobe. As Rodney started writhing beneath him, John tried sucking and licking behind Rodney's ear and down his neck. When Rodney whined, "Clothes," John noted that his normally talkative lover hadn't been talking for a while. Unzipping Rodney's orange fleece, John realized he'd always asked Rodney to keep talking before, and probably he had been trying to control his senses by using Rodney's voice as some sort of baseline. As he removed Rodney's fleece and then his tee shirt he said, "I think you're right. We did do pretty well at this Sentinel and Guide thing without anyone telling us."

"We are doing much better than pretty well." Rodney tugged at the bottom of John's shirt and jacket, and John maneuvered himself out of them. When John next rubbed their chests together he felt the friction of every hair, and before he forced his sense of touch down again, he took a moment to appreciate the way Rodney's nipples hardened, their smooth, chilled pressure as they skidded along his skin. When John shifted to lick and blow on one nipple, he felt goose bumps rise around the areola, and he tried licking and blowing on other parts of Rodney's chest to see which patches of skin reacted the most.

"You're playing with your super powers, aren't you?"

"And you like it."

Rodney thrashed in a most gratifying manner. "I'm going to come in my pants if you don't get them off. We should both be naked. Now."

John took care of their clothes while exploring the skin beside Rodney's hip bone and along his inner thigh.

"It's like you're adjusting my sense of touch up. You can't do that can you? This is just sex, right?"

"Just sex with your own personal super hero. Bend your legs up, I want to explore someplace else."

"Oh my god!" Rodney squealed as John licked at his perineum and then sucked at his balls.

"Is it okay if I taste you everywhere?"

"Nugh. When I'm cleaner sometime, okay." Rodney was panting. "Please, let me come. You can do whatever you want after, but I don't have the choice to dial it down, and you're driving me crazy."

John had a lot more he wanted to try, but he could feel the tension in Rodney's body and see the beads of precome on Rodney's cock. John licked up the shaft, and his tongue spread wider to feel the smooth, pulsing skin. He wondered how he'd never realized that his tongue was amazingly sensitive to touch, not just taste. The taste of Rodney's skin was pure Rodney, or maybe Rodney with salt, until John reached the crown of Rodney's cock. Then the taste of Rodney's precome overwhelmed him, and even though John had tasted him before, it was like the first time. Now he knew he was tasting everything at some amazing level. His senses must have already been trained to Rodney in some way, because everything about him tasted and smelled and felt like exactly what John wanted.
In an instant John's senses flipped, and where he'd been mostly aware of Rodney's body before, John was suddenly aware of his own as well. His skin tingled all over, and as he bobbed up on down sucking Rodney into his mouth, John noticed every place where his skin grazed against Rodney's legs. He shifted so Rodney's calf was between his knees and felt his own cock bump against Rodney's leg as his mouth explored each ridge and pulse point on Rodney's cock. John kept part of his focus on the bitter but perfect taste of Rodney's cock and the salty and musky smell that was Rodney sweaty and aroused. He didn't need Rodney to talk like he'd used to, but he basked in the continuous breathy gasps and occasional moans that rose over his Guide's heartbeat. My Guide, mine, John thought, and suddenly he was coming with barely a touch to his own cock, Rodney was screaming and coming down John's throat.

Rodney woke to the feel of rough, wet terrycloth on his chest. The cloth was warm, but the air in the room was cold on damp skin as the cloth moved on.

"What are you doing?" Rodney asked without opening his eyes.

"Washing you. Looking at you. Smelling you. Then I'm going to taste you all over."

Rodney felt his cock harden as John spoke. Then John's hand was resting there, not stroking or squeezing, probably just feeling. Never before had a lover shown such interest in Rodney's body beyond the basics involved in sex. He wasn't ready to open his eyes and see John studying him, but with his eyes closed, he liked the idea. He even liked the wet, warm, then chilled sensation from John washing his skin, now that he knew what it meant.

His thoughts drifted back to the incredible sex they'd had before falling asleep, and Rodney wondered that his body could show interest again so soon. "What time is it?"

"2100."

"We missed dinner?"

"I can smell the stash of food in your footlocker, and I bet you have sealed packages that I can't smell, too."

"Spaghetti MRE."

"Are you placing an order?"

"I'm hypoglycemic. I need to eat."

The hand John was washing him with stopped, and the hand that had seemed to just rest on his cock stilled. "Sorry. I didn't know. Should I try to scrounge up some real food for you?"

"I like spaghetti MREs. That's why I keep them around. Sometimes I work all hours and need to eat without interrupting my train of thought."

"I'll get you one," John said as he tucked the covers up to Rodney's chin.

He must have dosed again, because the next thing Rodney knew John was waking him and pushing him into a sitting position with blankets tucked around them both and an MRE ready for each of them.

As they ate John said, "I guess people probably know we're an item now."
"I have no idea what people think they know. It wouldn't surprise me if Jackson got everyone clearance and is conducting a sensitivity workshop about Sentinels and Guides. It's also possible that half the base still thinks I'm in Colorado. Are you going to freak out?"

"I wouldn't know where to start. Super powers and ghost animals sort of trump keeping our relationship low key and private, I guess."

"There wasn't anything about the animals in the briefing I read. When we leave this room, they're probably going to ask you a ton of questions."

"Do you think we can put it off until tomorrow?"

"I believe I intimidated them sufficiently for that."

"Good. I have a lot more I want to explore with you."

"For this, I'm willing to be your guinea pig."

"Not my beaver?"

"That has other connotations."

"My Guide."

"I'm starting to like the sound of that."

"Me, too. And now, if you're done eating, your Sentinel wants to touch and taste you some more."

"As you wish."

Rodney wasn't sure if John had ever seen *The Princess Bride*, but suddenly they were kissing, and Rodney thought he could admit, at least to himself, that he was in love with his Sentinel and couldn't think of anything better.

Then John pushed Rodney face down on the bed, cleared their MRE containers, and came back with a bowl of warm water and a wash cloth. He washed Rodney's back like he was half flirting and half giving a massage. Rodney let himself moan and gasp as each touch came to him, figuring there was no sense hiding anything from John anyway. Soon Rodney was fully hard against the mattress, and John had washed all the way down to Rodney's feet.

When John kissed his way up Rodney's legs, repositioning and pushing at his knees as he did so, Rodney felt like taffy being pulled and stretched. Then John dribbled warm water from the washcloth down the cleft of Rodney's ass and followed with a terry cloth covered finger. Rodney was rock hard and panting before John's tongue made its first warm slide across his hole. It wasn't something Rodney had experienced before, and he didn't know if the bursts of fireworks behind his eyes went with the erotic act or the talents of his Sentinel lover. Being a genius, he quickly decided it didn't matter. He buried his head in his pillow and screamed as John made quick precise licks all around his hole before pushing his tongue inside and fucking him with his tongue. The sensations were overwhelming, around him, in him, warm, and wet. Rodney was coming, coming hard, before he knew what hit him.

John's hand reaching around to stroke him and pull the orgasm out longer even as John's tongue slid in and out a few more times. Then John was trying to unbend Rodney's knees, but Rodney found his voice to say, "No, I want you in me."
John kept one warm hand on Rodney's ass, but he heard the man rifle through a bedside drawer to find the lube. Then John's fingers stroked inside and Rodney knew he was still loose and relaxed from the orgasm and John's tongue. Entry was easy, and Rodney was floating as John stretched him. Rodney needed more of John inside to keep him from drifting away.

It seemed like John could read his mind, although Rodney realized touch and hearing could probably tell the Sentinel all he needed to know. John pushed into him without causing any burn at all. Then he slid easily in and out until he found an angle that made Rodney shudder even after two amazing orgasms in one day. He didn't know how John did it. He must have been controlling his sense of touch to make it last forever and hit exactly where Rodney wanted him, because Rodney felt like what they were doing should go on forever. He didn't think he could ever make love with someone else after this. At the moment he didn't even care about his work or science. As John stroked and kissed his back, Rodney dissolved as if they were merging into one being, like John wasn't just touching him inside and out but permeating his being on some molecular level.

Finally, when Rodney thought he might lose consciousness soon, John sped up his thrusts. There was a faint whine beneath John's gasping breaths, and Rodney didn't think he could possibly come again, but his body was definitely trying. Then John's hand was on Rodney's cock, a clever finger rubbing in a very sensitive spot just below the head, and Rodney was coming. John was coming with him. It was so overwhelming it almost hurt inside Rodney's head. Everywhere else it was perfect.

Rodney's eyes drifted open when John pulled out of him. He saw the beaver, the raven, the wolf, the jaguar, and the amazing structure made out of sticks. Somehow, he wasn't surprised at all. John curled up around him, and they both fell asleep.

June 27, South Africa

On Saturday, Gabi sat surprisingly happy in the living room while Brett did something with dough and soup in the kitchen. Joe passed in and out of his room in near silence a few times. Gabi kind of wasn't speaking to him, although she didn't think he'd noticed. But she couldn't be angry or sad about him calling her a "fag hag" because she's been too pleased by Brett's quick defense. For anyone else to call Brett her "gay best friend" would have pissed her off, but the way Brett had said it touched something inside her. It made her feel warm, although her sunny spot on the couch might have helped with that, too.

There was a knock at their door.

Gabi wasn't sure anyone had knocked since they'd moved in. Joe was currently in his room, and Brett was sticky with dough, so Gabi answered the door.

The woman on the other side had strappy sandals, a crinkly billowing blue skirt, and a white blouse that set off her deep black skin. She also had dangly metal earrings with little gears that rang against each other in the breeze like wind chimes.

The woman held out her hand, "I'm Lerato, Tasha's friend." When Gabi didn't reply immediately, the woman continued, "I'm an anthropologist who studies, among other things, people with extended senses."

"Oh, come in," Gabi said. "I’m Gabi. This is Brett."

Brett waved a floury hand from across the small kitchen space. Lerato stepped inside saying, "Pleased to meet you, Brett." She had a sparkly white smile that made Gabi a little jealous, but she
loved the way the anthropologist's earrings tinkled and her skirt rustled.

"There's also Joe," Gabi said, as Joe passed through the room, picking up a tote bag as Lerato set down a purse nearly the same size.

Joe stopped with an appraising gaze, even though Lerato was probably twice his age. She was kind of stunning. "Pleased to meet you. Unfortunately, I'm on my way out."

Although she hadn't really been angry with him before, Gabi was pleased to hear Joe was leaving now.

Once Joe was out the door, Brett said over his shoulder to Lerato, "Care to stay for lunch? I'm making chicken and dumplings."

Lerato walked close to where Brett was working, very close so she was peering around his shoulder. Gabi found herself across the room and beside them without really thinking about it.

"Is that American?" Lerato asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Brett said.

Gabi smiled, trying not to hover. "Funny, I always thought of it as Southern, but that doesn't make much sense when we're at the southern tip of a whole other continent now."

There was a pause, then Brett said to Lerato, "Your accent is different from most students at the dig. Are you South African?"

"You mean it's stronger or you're studying dialects?"

Brett shrugged.

"I grew up on the eastern coast, near Swaziland. My ancestry is Zulu, but I spend time with lots of rural groups, so my accent slides around."

"And languages?" Brett asked.

"A little of most things spoken in South Africa, and you?"

"I'm only fluent in a couple of languages, but pick bits up, and I was studying the intersection of psychology and linguistics for a while."

Gabi noticed the moment Lerato looked at her, saw her hovering on Brett's other side. Somehow it was a relief when the other woman took a step back and said, "You're the one who held Gabi's hand when she was sniffing out plants?"

Gabi felt her face flush, but Brett just said, "Yep."

"I'd love to stay for lunch, if neither of you mind."

It was only toward the end of lunch that Brett got Lerato talking about her research. "There are stories from different tribes of people with one or more heightened senses, senses that might only be extended when needed or when requested, or to protect and benefit the tribe. I haven't found a similar story tradition in Europe or North America, but that sort of research isn't really my strong point. I'm mostly trying to documents tribal knowledge here before too much is lost."

"My father was South African," Gabi said. She'd been thinking it since she met Lerato. Part of her
mind thought it was silly to bring it up, but a louder part thought it might help Lerato's research, and maybe she could help Gabi.

"Really, what tribe?"

"His name was Thabo. Someone here told me that was Tswana. I don't know much about him other than this picture." Gabi pulled the picture from her purse, sliding a finger across her phone in passing.

"This is the Cheetah Center up by Pretoria?"

Gabi nodded.

"That would be near Tswana areas. Are you trying to find out more about him? Would you know if he had unusual senses?"

"You and your friend, Dr. Matteoli, are the first people to suspect I have unusual senses, so I'd hardly know that about him. However, some comments from my mother made me think he might have a seizure disorder like my own, with absence seizures, and I've thought sometimes those might be triggered by my senses."

Gabi felt like she'd just flayed herself open. Brett was looking at her a little wide-eyed, as if he understood or maybe wanted to. Lerato took it all in and lifted the picture as if it were her due.

"May I photograph the picture?"

"Okay," Gabi said.

"I must admit you surprise me. Tasha didn't mention your heritage or your seizures at all. I came to share stories with you, but now I'm wondering if you'd sit for a few measurements with me first. It wouldn't take long, and I have everything we'd need in my bag."

Gabi nodded. Brett started to clear the table as Lerato retrieved her large shoulder bag and started unloading little glass bottles numbered one through twenty. She pulled out a stenography pad and said, "If you're willing to smell each of those and tell me what you think, that's the most obvious measure for you."

Gabi opened bottle one and with barely an effort said, "salt water." She recognized some scent with about half the bottles, although one she could only call "floral" and one "fruity, kind of sweet and sour." She wasn't too worried about triggering a seizure while focusing on scents in her own living room, but she didn't push herself as hard as possible either.

Then Lerato asked if Gabi could try the whole set again while touching Brett.

"Why?" Gabi asked as Brett came back to the table and sat down. Gabi suspected he'd just been staying out of the way in the kitchen while taking in the whole experiment. If Gabi were honest, she'd been feeling more than a little nervous and freakish, which somehow made her want to touch or talk to Brett, although it wasn't quite the feeling weird or possibly sick that she'd promised to tell him about.

"Some of the stories that tell about people with extraordinary senses also tell of them having Companions who keep them grounded in this mortal plain. With your talk of seizures and the way you two are together, I thought there might be something like that."

"The way we are together?" Gabi asked.
"You look at him a lot, and he looks at you, but not the way lovers would, unless I miss my guess. Also, when I first stood by him at the stove, you started getting all protective. Then while you were smelling the samples just now, he was too worried to keep his eyes on what he was tidying."

Gabi wondered how true Lerato's observations were. What she said certainly sounded observant, sort of in the way Brett tended to be observant.

"Have you ever thought you might be one of those grounding people?" Gabi asked, and was pleased by Lerato's startled expression. It was the first real slip in composure she'd seen from the older woman. Gabi saw Brett notice it, too, which pleased her again.

"You keep making me revise my estimation of you," Lerato said. "But if you don't mind, I'd really like to know more about you before I bias your replies with my own thoughts. You're scientists. You understand that."

"Confidentiality?"

"Whatever you want. It's not like I'm publishing a formal paper."

"I'm okay with trying. What about you, Brett?"

"I think I've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone, but I'm good with trying. Am I just supposed to sit here?"

"Whatever works for Gabi." The anthropologist opened her notebook again.

"I guess I held your hand last time," Gabi said.

Brett reached across the table and took her hand with a warm squeeze. Gabi felt the touch relax her almost as well as the backrub he'd given her on the couch a few days before.

Then Gabi looked at the first little bottle and realized she couldn't unscrew the top one handed. "Maybe you could hold my wrist so I could still open the bottles."

Brett slid his hand to her wrist, stroking the inside pulse point once and then just resting, and Gabi wondered if Brett had already learned what sort of touch she'd like or if she'd learned to like the way he touched her. Either way, the bizarreness of the situation was replaced by comfort and curiosity as Gabi unscrewed the first bottle.

"You want to try?" she asked Brett.

"Okay."

She held it under his nose, but he just shook his head. Gabi sniffed and said, "Still smells like salt water to me."

As they moved through the twenty samples, Brett denied smelling anything. Gabi was able to smell something from each now, and she still didn't feel like she was pushing herself. It was just easier to smell until she found something when she had Brett holding her wrist.

When they finished Gabi said, "That was weird."

"I think it's cool, like super powers," Brett said.

"That's what's weird though. It's like something that was kind of alienating and potentially dangerous is being recast as an ability that can be controlled and improved. And well, it does seem a lot more
positive, though not much of a super power." Even as she said it, Gabi wondered if she should admit to hearing things she knew others couldn't hear. That was the only part that had ever felt like a super power before, but it was also the part she most worried about keeping secret.

As if she could read her mind, Lerato said, "Tasha also mentioned that someone, maybe Brett, said you had very good hearing. Could we test that?"

Brett looked at her with wide, expectant eyes. It felt disloyal, but Gabi realized she had more to fear from him as far as confidentiality than she probably did from Lerato.

Gabi turned to Lerato, "Can I talk to Brett privately for a moment?"

The anthropologist gave her first obviously fake smile of the day but started to push her chair back saying, "I'll just wait outside."

"No," Gabi stopped her. "You can stay here. Is your hearing mostly normal?"

Lerato nodded, and Gabi stood, shifting her grip so she had Brett by the wrist even as he still held hers. "Come to my room for a minute." She pulled and he followed without pause.

Once her bedroom door was closed behind them, Gabi felt even more unsettled and could barely make herself release Brett's wrist. But she let go and he did, too. She couldn't meet his eyes as she said, "Look, Brett, right now I really like you and want to trust you. But realistically, people tend to like me for two months to two years. Then they lose interest, and sometimes it's bad. I don't think anyone can promise not to lose interest or not to get angry or vengeful even. But do you think you could promise not to ever tell anything about my senses, whatever it is we learn here?"

"I promise," Brett said.

"I need you to really think about it and mean it. This matters a lot to me."

Brett touched her arm and she froze, but he didn't pull his hand away. "Look at me," he said.

She had to force her eyes to meet his, and she was sure he'd know how scared she was with just a glance. "It makes me angry to see how much some other people have hurt you, but heck, I've never had anyone significant stay in my life for even two years, so I get what you mean. I can promise not to tell about whatever this is, and I mean it."

Gabi felt something like love and terror mixed up inside her, and rather than cry she hugged Brett. He hugged back and pressed his head against hers, and they stayed like that for at least a couple minutes. His heartbeat was steady throughout, but Gabi heard her own heart racing and focused on slowing that down as a way to calm herself. That too seemed to be easier while touching Brett.

"Okay," she stepped back, "Let's do this."

When they walked back to the common room and sat at the table, Lerato said, "So were you deciding to mislead me or to be honest?"

"To be honest. Do you see this a lot?"

"Not too often, but you were kind of obvious." Lerato still looked a little unhappy.

"I've known Brett less than a month," Gabi said, "and I've never talked to him or anyone else about any of this."
"Oh." Lerato smiled a more sincere little smile. "That changes my point of view."

With that the anthropologist pulled what looked like an oversized iPod out of her bag and hooked up large padded earphones rather than earbuds. "I need you to put these on and say aloud any words you hear. If it's okay with you, I'll signal Brett partway through, and we'll see if the results change if he holds your hand or wrist or whatever."

"Okay, but this is the sort of thing where if I try too hard I might trigger a seizure. I'm willing to risk that, but when I'm absent, I won't respond to anything, which might mess with your data."

"How long do the seizures last?"

"Usually less than a minute, but the one when I found the fynbos was more like an hour. Brett might be able to bring me out of it with touch or removing the headphones and talking to me."

Lerato was taking notes. "If it matters, the smell of him and his hair when he gets closer might also help bring me out of a seizure."

"My hair?" Brett asked.

"It smells like aloe and eucalyptus." He blushed and Gabi didn't know why, but she wanted to reassure him. "I like the smell, but it's kind of unusual, so it was one of the first things I noticed about you."

"You can't smell it, right?" Brett turned to ask Lerato.

She laughed the way an adult might laugh at a cute kid or puppy. Then she calmed and said, "I hadn't noticed it at all, and Gabi's sense of smell tested as much more acute than normal, even without your help. For the sound test, why don't we have Gabi try as hard as she's comfortable on her own. If she has an absence seizure that lasts more than thirty seconds, we'll see if you touching her ends it. If so, we'll just continue testing with touch. If not, we'll stop the test and you do whatever you need to. Does that sound reasonable?"

Gabi and Brett both nodded. Then Gabi put on the large headphones, closed her eyes and listened. When she heard the words "nu means mouse" she repeated them out loud. They gave her a starting point and she listened as if checking for fainter voices in the background. She recited "cop coon is a way to say thank you." Then somewhere around the fourth or fifth phrase she felt herself in danger of seizing.

She tried to back off from listening, but the next thing she knew was Brett's thumb stroking her wrist, and sure enough, she could smell him and his hair stuff. She couldn't hear his heartbeat, realized that was due to the earphones, and then she heard a faint phrase and repeated, "dee mock means very good."

She knew the test was over when the headphones were lifted from her head. Opening her eyes, Gabi saw Lerato taking the headphones and Brett holding her wrist and smiling.

"Did you know your eyelashes vibrate during your little seizures?" Brett asked.

"No one ever told me that, but it might not be the same all the time."

"It happened at the chocolate shop, too."

"Oh," Gabi didn't know what else to say. It seemed like something she should know, but as usual with such things, it was both pleasant and disturbing to think of Brett paying that much attention to her.
"You didn't recognize the language taught on the recording, did you?" Lerato asked.

"No, what was it?"

"Thai. No one here has recognized it, so I use it for this, but I realize the Thai population is greater in the United States."

"If they'd talked about food I might have had a slim chance, but that's about it."

"That shouldn't be enough to matter. I took down your pronunciation phonetically, since it makes a better test than words you could partially guess. I will say, you didn't show any sense of tone. I'm guessing you haven't studied a tone based language or much music."

"Not really."

Brett said, "I bet I could get the tones if I could only hear it."

Gabi tilted her head to encourage him, and Brett said, "I've studied Mandarin and several string instruments."

"I should learn more about you at some point," Gabi said.

Lerato smiled indulgently again and asked, "You willing to try this for your other senses?"

"At the end will you tell me how I did?"

"I don't really have standardized scoring, but I think it would be only fair for me to answer whatever you want to ask about then."

"Okay, bring it on."

The vision test involved words and symbols hidden within what appeared to be plain black lines in a picture. The touch test used a cotton swab and a regular sewing needle. The taste test came last and Gabi thought all the infused piece of paper tasted awful without any assisting touch from Brett.

"Can I rinse my mouth or brush my teeth or something before we do that again?" Gabi asked.

"Go ahead and brush your teeth or whatever. I don't think that's worth doing again because you identified everything well enough, and I don't have any fainter samples."

Gabi rushed off to the bathroom with relief.

When she came back, Brett asked her if she'd like not tea or hot chocolate.

"You have hot chocolate?" Gabi asked, and Brett just smiled.

"What's 'not tea'?" Lerato asked.

"Just hot water, milk, and sugar," Brett answered.

"You don't like tea?" Lerato asked Gabi.

"Not tea, coffee, or soda. Just hot chocolate, real juice, water, and sometimes milk."

"You seemed strongly reactive to tastes. Is that ever a problem with water or food?"

"Some water is disgusting, but mostly I learn the regional variations, just like the smell of the air, and
I think I tune it out of my senses if I'm around something stinky or loud or whatever for long enough. Milk is probably the riskiest of things I drink. Sometimes it seems a little off or has extra tastes I can't ignore."

"How long have you known that you were more sensitive than most people to such things?"

"Always?" Gabi shrugged. "I've been told I reacted badly to almost all touch as a baby and small child, but now that's the sense that gives me the least trouble. I might startle sometimes, but I don't remember ever having a seizure triggered by touch."

Brett looked over from the stove, looking sort of sad but like he needed permission to speak.

Gabi went over to him and asked, "What?"

"You still seem to mostly hate being touched." He looked very concerned as he said it, so she reached out and squeezed his wrist, a reversal that made him smile.

"I think that's mostly for other reasons," Gabi said, "but I guess it could have roots in my childhood and all this stuff. There was a time when I cut the tags out of all my clothing and couldn't stand to wear jeans or socks."

"But you're never barefoot now!"

Brett's startled indignation made her laugh. "Socks were a whole lot better once I started shaving my legs." Then she held out her foot to wiggle her fuzzy slipper sock, purple today. "And I really like these. They're made with bamboo and lycra."

"You don't mind if I take notes on some of this, do you?" Lerato asked, pad in hand.

"I just don't want any of it connected to me. I consider this all very private."

"No names. I won't even identify you as American."

Soon they all sat down again, this time with hot chocolate.

"This is good chocolate," Gabi said as the taste saturated her tongue.

"Local and organic," Brett smiled.

"You're nearly too good to be true," Gabi said as she sipped.

Brett blushed and said, "You're the one who turned out to have super powers."

After a pause, Lerato said, "I can't prove it, but what you're doing with touch, Brett, may be as unusual as what Gabi does with her senses. It's harder to study and measure."

"Because it's only useful if I have someone like Gabi to assist?" Brett raised an eyebrow and slumped back in his chair, but Gabi thought some of his skepticism was an act. His heart rate speeding up seemed to confirm it, and she wondered if it was an invasion of privacy when she monitored his autonomic reactions that way.

"Earlier Gabi asked if I was like you, like the Companions in stories who keep those with heightened senses grounded in the mortal world. I waited to answer, because this part becomes complicated and differs more between stories or traditions. In the stories that mention Companions, they may be referred to as shaman or witches or healers who see spirits or demons. They may act as Guide to the tribal Guardian both in a spiritual plain and in bringing her or him back to what we call reality. This
is, of course, much harder to study than heightened sensory abilities. So I don't really measure it, but I collect what information I can, and others have suggested I might have some affinity that way as well."

"So there's nothing specific or testable these Companions or shaman can supposedly do?" Brett asked, still sitting back in his chair but missing casual by a mile.

From the bunched-up, close-mouthed smile Lerato gave Brett, Gabi guessed he wasn’t fooling her either.

"Some stories make claims about psychic abilities or transforming into animal forms, but I haven’t met any living person who claimed those abilities in a testable way. A few have claimed they could send their animal spirits to warn others, especially if they were bonded to a Guardian, but then they claim the spirits can't be ordered around lightly, for a test. Of course, any real life situation has too many variables to verify that a message couldn't have been sent or guessed some other way."

"When you say bonded to a Guardian, what does that mean?" Gabi asked.

"I have one good story recording I could leave you for that, and you might even want to visit the storyteller I recorded. He keeps a sort of folk library. But again, the various traditions disagree about bonding, and the meaning is vague and hard to test. In those communities where Guardians are believed to work better with a Companion to ground them, some believe a specific Guardian is born with a bond to a specific Companion. Others believe any suitable person or shaman can be bound to a Guardian, sometimes though ritual, sometime through sex or marriage, sometimes by one saving the life of the other."

"And a Guardian means someone with heightened senses?"

"It's one of the terms used. Such people are often seen as protectors who watch over their people."

"Huh, maybe that's my problem, I don't have any people," Gabi said.

Brett wrinkled his nose. "You were pretty determined to take care of me when I was sick. You said you'd always wanted to take care of someone."

"Yeah, I did." Gabi wondered if she could live up to what Brett saw in her. In some ways he seemed to know her better than she knew herself, but each detail he noticed both pleased and intimidated her.

Lerato jotted another note in her pad. Then when no one spoke for a bit, she pulled out her computer and a flash drive. "Here, I'll copy a couple of stories for you, and the current location of the storyteller with the collection of folk tales. He doesn't have a phone or anything, but if you want to visit, just bring a gift of food or something and try to act respectful. You can tell him I shared his whereabouts and stories. He'll be fine with that. I wish I could give you more answers about your abilities, Gabi. They all tested at least twice as strong with Brett assisting. Your taste without help blew my test away, and your hearing was maxing out the test with Brett's touch."

Gabi nodded and thanked her. Once Gabi had copied the information onto her laptop, they said their goodbyes. When the door was shut and they were alone, Brett held out his arms and Gabi let him hug her.

"I like this hug thing," Gabi said, hugging him back.

"Okay," was all Brett said.

Gabi didn't know whether to be comforted that it was that simple to Brett or to be insecure because it
didn't mean as much to him, while the simple gesture cut deep into her in a way she found more than a little bit frightening. She wondered if rather than being the safest of her senses touch might be the most dangerous after all.

Lerato left. Gabi went to her room and didn't come out for hours. When it was well past their usual dinner time, Brett reheated some chicken and dumplings and went to knock on her door.

"I'm not ready," she called from the other side of the door.

"Ready for what?"

"I'm catching up on my alone time."

"I brought you food."

She opened the door, "It feels like the part of hide and seek where someone yells 'ready or not here I come.'"

"How about if I say 'Olly olly oxen free' and you stop hiding."

She reached for the bowl, and he pulled it back just a bit.

He said, "Either come out to eat or let me come in. Let me at least hear the storyteller recording."

Gabi looked down, and her posture said no, but she walked back into the room, letting him follow her.

She pulled out the chair at her desk, brought forward a folder labeled Lerato, and motioned him to sit.

He handed her the bowl of chicken and dumplings, and she silently took it to her bed. She sat and ate without another word or another look in his direction.

Brett pressed play on the first audio file, and an old man's voice with an almost musical tone filled the room. Despite understanding the words and finding the voice captivating, Brett had trouble relating to the story. It told about a group of young people on a journey to find another young person. The travelers were named after salt and pepper and other spices, and they were sort of mean to one they called stinky. Then at the end of the journey, stinky was the one who was kind to an old man, and thereby learned what was needed to be accepted by the young man they sought. It was a classic morality tale, and it referred to taste and smell indirectly, but none of the characters seemed to have heightened senses. He guessed smelly could be a Guardian first being selected by a Companion. If this were the sort of source material Lerato had to work with, Brett didn't envy her job as an anthropologist.

Brett asked Gabi, "Am I missing something here?"

Gabi just shrugged.

The second story actually used the word Guardian to refer to a boy who warned his hunting party when he heard hyenas, lost himself in the spirit plane, and found his way back with a spirit plane aardvark following the scent of herbs that the village shaman used. Next he warned the village about an elephant stampede using heightened sight, but lost himself and was nearly trampled. This time the shaman held him tight behind a rock and a python led him back through the spirit plane. He warned
of tainted food by smell and poisoned water by taste, being rescued by seeing and hearing the shaman and being guided by a spirit falcon and wild dog respectively.

Brett would have commented on the noises of the wild dog showing up in folk lore, but when he looked at Gabi, she only stared at her bowl.

The final part of the story told how the Guardian felt the earth begin to shake and called children away from a cliff before it crumbled. Then a zebra in the spirit plane guided him back, using its excellent sense of taste to find the best grass for grazing. The Guardian woke to the taste of his shaman's mouth in a deep, drawn out kiss. Then the shaman announced to the tribe that they were bound for life and the Guardian would never be lost where the shaman could not find him.

Both the shaman and Guardian were male, and Brett appreciated the romantic ending and the implied acceptance of the storyteller and the tribe in the story.

He looked over to Gabi who was scowling at her half finished meal, and it pretty much killed the mood. For a moment he resented her negativity and distrust. Then he remembered how boring his summer would be without her and how kind she had been while he was sick. The good and bad of Gabi were too entwined to wish for one part without the other.

Brett went to sit next to her on the bed, and Gabi pulled her bowl close to her as if it were a shield.

"Okay, Gabi, what's wrong?"

Her mouth dropped open, and she looked at him as if he was stupid.

He looked squarely back at her and waited.

Finally she asked, "You're saying that second story didn't freak you out at all?"

"No, I kind of liked it. Not too many folk tales with a boy gets boy ending, you know?"

"But I'm not a boy," Gabi mumbled.

"And you aren't protecting a tribe from wild animals and natural disasters either. It's just a story."

"But both end up with the Guardian and Companion stuck with each other at the end."

Brett thought back to the first story and realized that might be a reasonable conclusion, although he hadn't focused on that part himself. "So you're worried about your independence or you're worried I won't stick around?"

Gabi glared at him and went back to eating her dinner. He watched her eat, and when she finished he set the bowl aside and put an arm across her back. She tensed, and he waited for her to relax, but instead she scrunched her eyes shut such that her whole face tightened up like a fist.

"Okay," he said and removed his arm.

"What does that even mean?" she practically whined.

"What does 'okay' mean? In this case, it means I'm accepting that you don't want to be touched right now."

"And also when I said I liked the hug earlier?"

"I was accepting that you liked the hug then?"
"So you just say 'okay' and accept things and never say how you feel or what you want?"

"This should be funny. Chris gets annoyed at me for saying mushy stuff or being a romantic, and you point out how much I don't say."

"Maybe you're different with him."

"I wish that was it."

Gabi looked up. "So what are you saying? You wish he wanted to hear the sappy, romantic, honest stuff that you wanted to say?"

Brett shrugged, wondering if that was what he wanted and wondering why he was discussing it with Gabi.

"I'm really trying to think well of this guy, Chris, because you clearly care a lot. But sometimes I want to pin him down and tell him off for not appreciating you enough."

Brett did a double take looking at Gabi's strangely fierce expression. He imagined her pinning down Chris, who was a lot beefier and stronger than Brett. Brett wouldn't be able to pin Chris down himself, except as a part of sex when Chris might let him. But imagining a lightweight like Gabi pinning Chris down in a rage made him snort and then laugh out loud.

Finally, when the laughter passed and Gabi just looked at him as if he was crazy, he said, "Thanks."

#

It took Gabi a moment to remember what he was thanking her for. She still had trouble imagining how Chris and Brett related to each other. How could anyone care about Brett and not want him to express himself? How could Chris not want to hear how much Brett cared about him?

"What would be perfect," Gabi said, "is if people could say and do whatever, honestly, and other people would just say if it was a problem."

"Okay."

Gabi ground her teeth together and refrained from growling at him. "What do you mean by 'okay'?"

"Let's try it."

Gabi opened her mouth, but for once she had no words.

"I want you to trust me, and I'm trying to earn your trust. I can't promise I'll always be there for you, but I like the idea of being like a brother and being there for you as much as I can, indefinitely."

"You really are a romantic."

He threw his head back with a smile that looked pained. Gabi wanted to reach out and touch him, but hesitated and then couldn't make her hand move.

"I think it's a good thing," Gabi said. "Hearing you say how you'd like things to work out feels good, like when you touch me, or like just having you there."

Brett tilted his head to meet her eyes again, and she knew she had his full attention. "I kind of hate to play the cynic to your romantic, but we each have one more year at Bay Tech, then we'll probably end up in different parts of the country if not the world. Maybe we'll keep in touch by text or email."
Honestly, I doubt it, since everyone gets bored with me in two years or less, and you said you hadn't had any relationships longer than that. But even if you kept in touch through some brotherly bond or obligation—"

She realized what she'd said and started freaking out all over again.

Brett reached out with one hand taking her wrist and the other on the back of her neck, he pulled her tight against his side, and she felt her panic drain away.

"That's almost creepy. You know just how to touch me, and I calm down whether I want to or not. What if we're already bonded? I could make arguments for every sense but taste. What if you keep in touch with me because there's some weird imperative involved, but it just causes us both problems because we'll have different careers and you at least have a boyfriend."

"What if this works for now? What if I actually want to keep in touch with you and you with me? Maybe the whole bond thing is just a metaphor for having someone you can trust and depend on. Or maybe you'll find someone later who you connect to differently or even better. Lerato said the stories were all different. We can find our own way to work with this."

"For you it's just a game, playing with mythical powers you'd never thought of in your life. For me it's seizures that are getting worse and more frequent, and I don't see any spirit plane with helpful animals to lead me back. I don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone to go back to. Instead you've shown me everything I want but can't expect to have."

"Don't say that." Brett pulled her closer, and she not only let him but seemed to melt into him.
"You'll find someone to love you. What do you mean the seizures are getting worse?"

"Since I was fifteen and got recruited by Bay Tech, I thought I was outgrowing them or learning to control or limit them. But this year they kept getting worse. That's why I took this crazy chance to come to South Africa and try to find my father and maybe learn more. I had so much more studying and research I could have done, and PhD programs I could have researched and visited. Instead, I'm here barely keeping up on the physics journals I get electronically and gathering semi-useful proof of concept data for my master's thesis. And what's scary is when you touch me or bring me food or say I'm like your sister, I fall down the rabbit hole and for those moments I really like it. Then the rest of the time I miss it, and I want to reach out to you, but I don't feel I can."

"But you can. We just agreed to be honest and say and do whatever."

"Part of me wants to fall down the rabbit hole and stay where I'm touching and smelling and hearing and seeing you all the time. I don’t know if I could kiss you, if that taste would release me from wanting so badly or if it would bind me to you such that I wouldn't care about my research or my independence or anything else."

Brett pulled her closer, up against his chest, and stroked her back. "Okay, I'll admit that at some point I worried you'd fall for me and it would be a problem when I couldn't return all your feelings. But I guess you are some kind of genius, because you've come up with a much more creative and involved sort of freak out than I ever imagined."

Gabi sank into the touch and let Brett hold her until she couldn't bear the silence anymore. "Tell me you're going to state some opinion on what comes next and this isn't another 'okay' moment."

Brett ran the hand on her back up into her hair, and while she heard his heart beat faster, she didn't smell any panic or fear. "You can't expect me to have real answers. Maybe I'd like to be a wise shaman, but as you said, I'm really new to all this. I don't think we should jump into anything, and
while I'm not sure I even believe in 'bonding,' we saw that you did better using your senses when I was touching you and I seem to be able to help with the seizures, at least sometimes. So there's something real going on here. I want to find out more along with you, and I'm probably willing to try whatever you ask, but I don't want to risk trapping you somehow or scarring you emotionally."

"I think I'm a little bit in love with you," Gabi knew it was a risky thing to say, but if she didn't she'd just keep thinking it and know she couldn't be honest about anything else.

After a while Brett said, "My first reaction was to say, 'okay,' but you've taught me better already." His teasing tone released some fear she'd barely been aware of, and all of a sudden she could breathe easily and the air tasted clean and sweet.

"What I said about words and definitions before, I still don't like them." He combed fingers along her scalp and she wanted to purr like a cat. "Whatever I feel for you is crazy, like falling in love, given how few days I've known you. Yeah, it's probably more of a brotherly love, but then I would have known you your whole life and not just be falling into it like this. I like touching you and being touched by you. Maybe it doesn't mean as much to me as to you, but I've been skin starved before. I can remember and empathize. I don't think I'd mind you touching me as much as you want, if you can deal with how other people will see it and if you can deal with it not being a sexual thing for me. I don't know about kissing. It wouldn't be a hardship for me, but I'd kind of like you to hold out for someone it could mean more to, someone worthy of all that kiss could be. And yes, that is exactly the sort of sappy, romantic thing I've been trying to teach myself not to ever say out loud, so let's look up where that library is before I die of embarrassment."

Gabi laughed against his chest, then said "okay," then laughed some more.

Brett caught the laughter from her and ended up pulling her over to the computer, where they looked up the storyteller's address and realized they could get there by bus in under an hour. They made plans for the next day, and Gabi kept at least a hand touching Brett as they planned. Everything seemed to be more than okay.

June 27, Antarctica

Rodney woke to a pounding knock on his door. John threw himself off the bed into a protective stance between Rodney and the noise, still completely naked. The beaver and raven both lifted their heads and looked around alertly, while the wolf and jaguar still curled in front of the door barely twitched their ears and half opened their eyes.

Rodney went from deeply awed that he could still see all the animals to deeply annoyed as he heard O'Neill say through the door. "Both you and Sheppard better be in the conference room in ten minutes for a briefing and breakfast, or so help me, I am eating that pie."

As Rodney and John hurried to wash themselves off at the sink, since the showers were shared and usage severely limited in the under ice outpost, the raven flapped up to its nest and the beaver started rushing around the base of its construction, for all the world looking like an engineer checking his work. Rodney suppressed a smile, never having admitted to the charms of certain LOLcats either. He offered John his choice of clean undershirts and shorts, in case the previous days clothes bothered him.

John sniffed the clothes he'd stripped off yesterday and decided they were fine. Since being recruited
to help at the ancient outpost, he'd worn identical black uniform pants and one of the two fleeces he owned every day, so he doubted anyone would notice. Then he remembered what Rodney had said about the other ATA carriers also being Sentinels and realized they might be able to tell quite a lot with heightened smell. He was very glad Don't Ask Don't Tell was, at least officially, a thing of the past.

As he pulled on his boots, he noticed the raven was picking at the crystals lining his nest, and the beaver seemed to be pushing itself into a tight weave of sticks near the floor. As John stood up from the bed, the raven hopped up to grab a perch at the very top and gave one enormous flap of his wings.

The towering snowflake structure lifted smoothly with the beaver securely fastened in at the base, and the raven flew it right through the closed door.

Rodney immediately palmed the door open, chasing the flying structure and muttering, "This would defy several laws of physics if any of this physically existed."

"That take off shouldn't have provided enough lift either." John was relieved and a bit disturbed to know Rodney could see the hallucinatory animals now. Still, he was right on his Guide's heels as they chased the vision down the hall until it passed through a solid wall. He turned to see two men standing behind them. From the way the larger man stared at the dead end, as if he'd seen what just flew through it, and from the way the wolf and jaguar stood beside him and the smaller, long-haired man, John guessed this was the other Sentinel and Guide pair Rodney had mentioned.

Before John could think of anything to say, Rodney sprinted out to the control room and started pounding on control consoles near the chair shouting, "Did any of our instruments pick that up? Are we tracking anything outgoing?"

After a few minutes of scientific hub-bub, O'Neill came through and herded them all to the conference room where there was in fact a whole pie as well as the usual reconstituted eggs and oatmeal. John smirked when no one in the room interrupted as Rodney belabored the inadequacies of Ancient equipment while serving nearly a quarter of the pie onto his plate along with a generous pile of scrambled eggs.

When the rest of the room pounced on the remaining pie, John almost lost a hand before successfully nabbing his own slice. The pie appeared to be apple or maybe apple with peach. Either way, John had to force himself to put other breakfast foods on his plate. Any pie was guaranteed to be better than the usual reconstituted mush served on base. The others seemed to have left him a seat next to Rodney, so John sat down and used his food as an excuse to avoid looking at anyone.

Of course, it only took a few minutes for the others to perform introductions (mostly for his benefit, he gathered) and summarize the emergency call O'Neill had received and their deductions that John was a Sentinel who had zoned and Rodney was his Guide. Then the colonel was asking John, "Now, Major, we'd like to hear your version of the incident in the chair yesterday, this Sentinel-Guide business, and whatever the hell happened this morning."

"Well," John started, "what you all said sounds about right to me."

"Major!"

John sat up straighter before he could stop himself then leaned back into a more controlled slouch. "I guess what happened in the chair could have been a zone. I don't really remember much except it didn't want to show me whatever the other scientists were asking about. Then McKay talked me out of it and taught me the trick with using number to adjust my senses, and that seems to mostly work. If
that's what it means to be a Sentinel and Guide, then okay."

"Are you having any trouble with your senses now?" the smaller man, the wolf Guide, asked.

"Nope."

"Had you been before?"

"Um, maybe in the chair."

"Definitely in the chair," Rodney said and went on to describe how he spoke or touched John's hand to keep him present. Then he gave a long explanation about the crack in the ceiling and John zooming in on his crystal drawings while in the chair.

John was disappointed at the end of it all that O'Neill still remembered the rest of his question.

"And what happened this morning?"

When John hesitated and Rodney opened his mouth instead, O'Neill slid in with a rising tone that brokered no disagreement, "Major?"

"Well, sir," John licked his lips and noticed as Rodney's eyes flicked to his mouth for a moment. It would have amused John under any other circumstances. "It started with this raven, except at first I just caught flashes of black out of the corner of my eye, and obviously there couldn't be a bird down here, so I tried to ignore it."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A few weeks, possibly since the second or third time I sat in the control chair."

"Right. And it didn't occur to you that this might be a problem, something you should talk to a commanding officer or the base shrink about?"

"We have a base shrink?"

O'Neill scowled. "Continue."

"Well, the raven might have been a bit more obvious the day it pointed out the crack in the ceiling, and then it started building a nest on McKay's file cabinet. When I saw the crystals in the nest, that's when I told McKay that the sketches I'd made in sets of three might be crystal structures."

"And did you tell McKay about the raven?"

"No, sir."

"Don't 'no, sir' me. Just tell the whole story."

John definitely didn't think that would be a good idea, regardless of current military policy. "I thought maybe it was just, you know, my mind's way of telling me something I'd figured out myself, like maybe I was tired and daydreaming or something."

"And this morning?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden McKay seemed to see it when the raven flew this giant stick structure out of the room. And he'd told me that another Sentinel had asked what the animals were building in the corner. So, well, they just flew through a door and then a wall."
"They?"

"The raven flew it, the beaver was in some sort of riding harness at the bottom, and the wolf and jaguar who'd been guarding the door seemed to follow along to watch."

There was no way John was going to look at whatever expression was on O'Neill's face or anyone else's. The silence stretched.

"Goddammit," O'Neill muttered. "Can anyone here explain this so I know what to write in my report?"

There was some sort of scuffle under the table, and John was pretty sure one of the new guys had just kicked the other.

"I saw the whole structure and the animals yesterday when I helped McKay with the major. I asked McKay to ask him about it later. From what Blair and a shaman named Incacha have told me, I'd say the jaguar is my spirit animal, the wolf is Blair's, so the other two probably go with McKay and Sheppard."

Jackson, who hadn't spoken all morning, suddenly sat forward saying, "You see spirit animals? Numerous cultures from Africa to the Americas have developed seemingly independent mythos involving spirit animals. How often do you see them, and do they always go with a specific person?"

The other Sentinel, Ellison, was now twirling his fork through the remains of his eggs and pie. John appreciated the gesture as the man answered without looking up, "Mostly I see my jaguar, sometimes with Blair's wolf. There was another Sentinel we met who had a spotted jaguar. That's all I'd seen until last night when I saw the bird and beaver and the huge stick city they built."

Jackson asked, "Blair, did you know about this?"

"Yes, of course."

"Can you see spirit animals, too?"

The Guide shook his head, for all the world as if he was sad about it, or maybe sorry to admit it. John wished he could give the guy his visions. He didn't want to worry about seeing imaginary animals. He couldn't bear to be taken off duty as a pilot.

"Still," Jackson said in a quiet but stern whisper, "This might be relevant to the Sentinel project. Don't you agree?"

"I have no idea how we're going to test for it, and I didn't want to make claims that couldn't be supported with hard evidence."

Jackson nodded to O'Neill and Dr. Beckett. "I don't suppose either of you have caught glimpses of what might be spirit animals?"

Both men shook their heads. O'Neill's posture shifted from commander to schoolboy as he studied Jackson's face. "Don't tell me you're going to make us do more tests."

"We have to try something."

"I told you not to tell me. Anyway," he sat up straighter, "For now you have the major here to run through your whole rigmarole, and I'm sure McKay is itching to get a new Sentinel ATA carrier into the chair. Pie's all gone, dismissed."
No one told Jim the chair was going to light up and move as soon as he sat down. He tried to hide his startle, but Blair reached out to cover his hand, which had been discussed as a new sort of protocol, and Jim was sure his Guide had noticed the involuntary twitch.

McKay's voice cut across the room in his usual bossy tone, so Jim guessed he hadn't noticed at least. "Picture where we are in the universe."

Jim tried to picture it in his mind, but if anything happened with the chair, he wasn't noticing it. "Well, nothing's lighting up above your head, so you'll have to tell us what you see."

Blair squeezed his hand. "Not seeing anything I couldn't picture in my own head."

"Okay, try not to set anything off, but ask the chair for a list of what you can do."

At first there was nothing, and then a fuzzy image formed in front of him. He tried to zoom and focus the same way he controlled his enhanced vision and soon had a bird's eye view of a city.

"If you need me to, I can keep talking," McKay said from somewhere behind Jim. "But it would be much more efficient if you could provide some sort of running commentary on what you're seeing."

"I'm looking down on a city."

"What city?" Now McKay sounds at least a little bit interested. Jim increased his hearing and heard both Blair's and McKay's hearts beating faster.

Jim zoomed in and said, "There's a river, some train tracks… Hey, that's Cascade… If I zoom in I can see the building where we work, but I can't seem to keep it in focus well enough to identify individual people coming and going."

"Great. His first time in the control chair he tries to spy on the people back home."

"He's a Sentinel checking his territory," Blair answered in a tone that had been known to bring hardened criminals up short.

It didn't seem to affect McKay who said, "The first time Sheppard sat in the chair, it displayed our place in the universe above his head."

"Hey," Jim said, "It just showed me Sheppard's bird flying that stick contraption through space with your beaver."

"Really," McKay's voice and heart rate showed he was getting excited again. "Can it tell you where they are or where they're going?"

Jim tried to frame that as a picture in his mind, tried to picture a path that started from Antarctica on the third planet in their solar system and flew outward, but the chair just showed him a glowing ring and a bunch of animals walking up a ramp to follow the raven through it.

"That's weird."

"What?" McKay asked.
Jim sat up and pulled his hands up from the arms of the chair. "I need to ask Sheppard about something."

Blair was caught off guard when Jim jumped out of the control chair to look for Sheppard, but he soon caught up saying, "You can't interrupt. Carson is running his hearing and vision tests."

"I can wait 'til he's done."

"But then they'll need Rodney to stay for the tests with a Guide, and we won't have time to try more in the chair."

"Besides, what can Sheppard answer that I can't?" McKay snapped, catching up to them.

"I need to know more about what spirit animals he saw. Anyway, I don't think the chair wants to work with me."

"Oh no, you're just like that sheep-loving doctor," Rodney complained.

Blair, trying to think like a professional and not be offended that his Sentinel was basically ignoring him said, "Look, Jim, it would be more scientific if you told us whatever you saw before you talk to Sheppard."

Jim stopped at that, and Blair was surprised at the warm burst of respect he felt from just being listened to in that moment.

"Okay, if you want to talk about the spirit animals now, I'm ready to take that trip with you." Jim met Blair's eyes, and Blair knew they were both remembering the day when Jim had said he wasn't ready. It was only McKay's blustery admonitions about how it couldn't really be called science even if they documented everyone's visions of the animals, as he nonetheless produced a pen and paper to take notes, that gave Blair time to recover from the hot and cold feeling Jim's declaration had pulled from him.

The three of them ducked back into the meeting room they'd used earlier and Jim said, "The chair showed me the raven flying through a carved circle that seemed to be filled with water, followed by the beaver and a bunch of other animals I'd never seen before."

"Wait, what did the ring look like?" McKay shot out when Blair was much more interested in asking about the animals. He took a deep, calming breath and waited for Jim to describe the ring.

"Um, I didn't pay that much attention, but it was either metal or very smooth stone with symbols carved around the sides."

"Could you draw any of the symbols?" McKay asked holding out the pad of paper.

"Probably not. Don't you want to hear about the animals?"

"Yes!" Blair answered as McKay gave a reluctant, "Whatever."

"There was a cheetah."

"Not a spotted jaguar?"

"No, definitely a cheetah, and it was standing very close together with a strange sort of bony-looking dog and something that I think was an aardvark. They're the anteaters with sort of rabbit-like ears that
live in Africa, right?"

"Sounds like an aardvark," Blair agreed. "What else?"

"Then there was a prairie dog or groundhog or something walking up the ramp with a mongoose. So there were seven animals if you include the raven."

Blair couldn't believe Jim was now telling him and an almost complete stranger about animal visions with barely a hitch. He remembered how Jim had stood quietly by his bed the night before until Blair invited him to lie down. Jim had curled up behind Blair, the total big spoon with all spoon parts touching. He'd shown no embarrassment but also hadn't tried anything further. Blair thought that in addition to writing up a new thesis, he had a lot of personal understandings to reconsider when they got home. For the time being, he tried to pull his professional act together. "Anything else you can remember?"

"Not really."

"We could go back to the chair and try following whatever it seems inclined to show you," Blair suggested.

"Let me check in with O'Neill first. He might want to be in on this." McKay tapped his pen along the spine of the notepad.

"Why?"

"First, I think you're going to have to sign some more non-disclosures."

#

Jim wasn't thrilled to be pressured back into the chair while Sheppard was still off testing with Carson. He wasn't excited to have O'Neill and Daniel hovering along with McKay and Blair, and he certainly wasn't happy about the pile of paperwork they were now expected to sign because he'd accidentally found out about a Stargate that basically teleported people to other planets. His only consolation was that if he'd already signed off on knowing about spaceships, transporter beams, aliens, and Ancients, it probably didn't make any difference how much more he had to not talk about. He wondered if they were really going to let him and Blair go home tomorrow as planned.

When he sat back in the chair, it took him right to his previous view of Cascade, centered on the police department, except the streets around the building had been cleared now and there was an ambulance and fire truck parked outside.

"Wait, is this real time?" Jim asked aloud.

"Do all of you lose the ability to communicate when you sit in that chair?" McKay's clear whine cut through the other's question of "what" and "where."

"Cascade PD. They've cleared the streets, and there's an ambulance and fire engine standing by."

"The chair probably doesn't want to talk to you because you are so small minded."

"McKay!" Someone shushed him, probably Daniel.

Jim identified the voice as definitely Daniel when he said, "We don't exactly have cell reception here, but I'll ask the communications officer to check in with Cascade PD."
Jim opened his eyes, saw his view of Cascade overlaying the real room around him, and rapidly closed his eyes again.

"Ellison," That was O'Neill's voice, "I know you're concerned for your people, but we can't do anything to help them right now. Can you ask the chair to show you the Stargate again?"

The picture in Jim's mind shifted to show a bear and a glowing jellyfish passing through the ring Jim now knew was the Stargate. "This time it's showing me two different animals going through the Stargate."

"To the same place?" O'Neill prompted.

"How would I know?"

"Ask the chair."

Jim tried but the picture didn't change. "I don't think I can get that."

"What are the animals?"

"A glowing jellyfish and a bear. The bear is brown, but I don't know if that makes it a brown bear or a grizzly or what."

"Does the jellyfish look normal?"

"No, it's like it's made of light. Why do you ask?"

"Just try to remember what it looks like and I'll show you something afterward."

"Jim," that was Blair's voice, "Can you ask the chair who the animals are or for any more information?"

"Huh, I think it wants the bear to sit in the chair."

"So probably the bear is a Sentinel."

"It shows the bear shooting something out of the chair, something that looks like a sea animal, maybe a cuttlefish, but I don't think it's an animal."

"A cuttlefish?" O'Neill's voice sounded distinctly non-military as it rose on that question. "I don't even know the difference between cuttlefish and jellyfish. Bet that's why it wants to show you all the animals. Can it tell you about any of the rest?"

Jim had a sudden, bright flash of the raven perched in a very similar chair, except inside the stick structure. It wasn't made of sticks anymore. It was all clean lines and glass and maybe metal. The next thing he knew there was warm friction on his hand and Blair's voice saying, "Jim, can you hear me? Focus in on my voice Jim."

"I'm back," Jim said, without opening his eyes. He lifted his hands off the chair, sensing it was done talking to him anyway.

"Do you need to reset your dials, Jim?"

"Just give me a minute and let me tell you the last thing I saw. It was John's Raven, sitting on a chair very much like this one, but I think it was a different chair. The chair was inside something huge that looked a lot like what the spirit animals made except it was full of light and looked like a city with
lots of windows and shiny metal spires. I think the chair was trying to tell us that Sheppard is supposed to use that chair. Maybe the bear is supposed to use this one, but I'm pretty sure it's tired of working with me. It thinks I should go home. Any news on that?"

"Not yet," Daniel answered, and Jim opened his eyes to see Daniel had rejoined the group around the chair.

"Did you hear the part about cuttlefish and jellyfish, Danny-boy?"

"Just the tail end. Time for show and tell?"

O'Neill nodded and Daniel led them to a locked storage room. Once inside, he lifted a tarp off a table and there was a truly alien looking device that did look a bit like the cuttlefish, although the tentacles were much more obviously mechanical than what Jim had seen. He reached out to touch it, and O'Neill slapped his hand away with a gruff, "No touching."

"Does it glow when it's activated?"

Both Daniel and O'Neill nodded.

"Then that's probably the cuttlefish thing that I thought wasn't really an animal when I saw the bear shooting it out of the chair."

"Bear in chair shoots drones in air," O'Neill smirked.

"Careful, Bear-boy," Jackson said.

"Who are you calling a bear?"

"Bear in chair shoots drones in air?" Daniel repeated with a knowing lift of his eyebrows.

"It could be showing him the future or ten thousand years ago."

Jackson gave O'Neill a meaningful look that shut the older man up. Then he turned to Jim and asked, "How glowy and how gelatinous was the jellyfish?"

"I guess it wasn't really gelatinous, but I definitely got the impression it was alive, like the other animals, not like the cuttlefish drones."

"Tell me everything you can remember," Jackson prompted.

Jim closed his eyes and felt Blair's hand rest on his back. Thinking back to years ago when Blair tried to teach him meditation techniques to focus on his sense memories, Jim said, "It was like a ball of light with tentacles of light trailing out of it, and it was floating at eye level with the bear. Did I mention the bear was standing on its hind legs? So the jellyfish looked like it was poised so it could talk to that bear, and its tentacles didn't quite reach the ground."

"Oh shit. Are we going to have to print out non-disclosures for that one, too?" O'Neill shoved his hands in his pockets as he deferred to Daniel.

"The way this is going, they're going to have to be cleared for everything the scientists working here sign for, just to let Blair and Carson finish their research, especially with McKay and his demands."

"Hey, we're going home tomorrow," Jim said, thinking he'd rather go back today and see what was happening at the police station. "I don't suppose you could just beam us back to Cascade once Blair finished the tests on Sheppard?"
"I'll see what I can do," Jack promised. "Let's see if communications has any news for you yet."

#

Blair was on his final tests with Sheppard, fan on and Sheppard's eyes and ears covered, when the door eased open. He was already flashing back to the last time Jim interrupted this test and trying to control his anger when Daniel slipped through, and the look on his face was enough to derail Blair's indignation.

"Sorry," Daniel shrugged. "It took this long to get through to Cascade because a bomb went off at the police department, a couple hours after Jim's vision in the chair of the ambulance and fire truck standing by. Anyway, Jack's making arrangements to beam you and Jim back as soon as you're done here."

Blair froze for a moment, thinking how upset Jim must be. He was sure to think he could have saved his city, or at least the PD, if they'd trusted what he saw in the chair. "I can be done," Blair said. He'd just been retesting for consistency, but he knew how anxious Jim would be. He probably had them both packed already, not that Jim had much of his own to pack. "Can you..." Blair started to ask, glancing briefly at Sheppard.

Daniel nodded, "Go."

#

June 28, South Africa

The hairs on the back of Brett's neck prickled. He felt eyes noticing him and Gabi as they waited for the bus and even once they were seated. The looks were strangely familiar from the way people sometimes watched him with another guy in the states when they held hands, leaned against each other, or even bumped shoulders too often. Today Gabi held his hand, but he'd seen far greater public displays of affection since arriving in South Africa, and she was a girl with a guy. It wasn't until he looked at her again, leaning against the bus window, looked at her hand in his that he thought of skin color. In a place where most people were either very dark or else very light skinned like Brett, Gabi was light for her mixed heritage but very obviously mixed. He wasn't sure if she would have drawn looks regardless of who she was with or only because he was so fair. There was no way he would point it out to Gabi if she didn't notice on her own, but it gave him a different perspective on race in South Africa. Overall, he still thought attitudes were better than in many parts of Oakland, but the differences taunted him.

#

June 28, South Africa

Gabi moved toward the concrete RDP house at speed, eager to meet the storyteller, identified as Noko on the recording. Brett's hand was warm and steady, and he seemed happy to let her hold on as long as she wanted. Strangely enough, she found she wanted to hold on.

Then at the door Brett surprised her by greeting the storyteller in another language and dipping his head. The old man showed no surprise but returned the greeting and then switched to English to say, "Welcome, you may call me Noko."

"We're so pleased to meet you. I'm Gabi." She held out her hand, and he shook it while looking her hard in the eye. It made her a little too nervous to keep smiling. Instead she noticed that he was dressed in grey suit pants that matched the color of his hair and beard, and a neat white shirt, making her feel underdressed and possibly too young to be taking up his time.
Brett let go of her hand to offer his to Noko. "I'm Brett, and I made some scones for you." He passed over a white lunch bag and the man looked inside and said "thank you" without any warmth or smile.

"We heard you kept a library that might have tales of Guardians and shamans."

"Shamans appear in several stories, but the only piece I have here that might represent a Guardian is the picture by that door."

Gabi felt a stab of disappointment but tried not to let it show. Instead, she moved toward the picture that seemed to show a tall, lean African man standing beside a black leopard. The lines of the picture stood out as slightly uneven, like yarn glued to a page, and as Gabi approached she made out letters hidden in the lines. Gabi motioned for Brett to join her, "There are words, but not in English. Do you know what this spells: Umqaphi futhi Umholi."

"Sorry, no. The greetings I've heard around town comprise most of my African language knowledge. Maybe we could write it down and look it up later?"

"I regret," Noko said, sounding anything but regretful, "that in deference to a mostly oral tradition, we ask that no one copy by hand or other means what is found here." Gabi was pretty sure her disappointment showed before the man said, "However, I will translate for you this once. The phrase is 'Guardian and Guide.' The fact that you can read it, even without understanding means that I may show you to another room, but first you must tell me your relationship to the young man."

"He's a friend, and well, possibly a Guide, but that's part of what we're still trying to learn about."

"Then he may accompany you. Much of the material is in English, and while I might help with a word or two of translation, I do not have time to offer more. You understand that this is a gift that is not yours to give to others?"

"Yes," Gabi answered quickly.

Brett looked between Gabi and Noko as if he disliked the arrangement, but he answered, "Understood." Gabi noticed Brett's heartbeat and scent were unchanged, and only then realized she'd been monitoring them.

Noko led them through the door by the picture and into a short dark hall where he gestured saying, "This room, on the right, may have what you seek. The room across is the washroom. I will be in front for several hours."

With that they entered a room that could barely have held a queen size bed if it had not lost a foot on each side to bookshelves. Instead, the shelves barely left room for two hard wooden chairs. There was no window, and a dim overhead light provided the only illuminations. A few of the shelves held regular books with titles including, Twelve African Tales and Ould South Africa. An entire bookcase, about four feet across, held portfolios of art, mostly portraits. They were in magazine boxes labeled A to Z, but Gabi only glanced at a couple before moving on. Most of the shelves contained binders or folders or hand written journals. Gabi had no idea where to begin but was finally drawn to a slip bound document of perhaps fifty pages, because it reminded her of a doctoral thesis.

The essay was in English and titled, "The Sentinel" by Blair Sandburg. A penciled in notation read "discarded doctoral thesis." Flipping through, Gabi saw several chapters on a "Sentinel" in the United States who was drawn to careers in law enforcement and the military. The work detailed sensory aptitudes and a territorial desire to protect that the author related to historical accounts of South American tribal Sentinels. Without looking farther, Gabi settled into a hard wood chair and
was soon reading about what the author called "zone outs," triggered by focusing too deeply on a single sense or being surprised by a sudden overwhelming stimulus, especially a loud noise. The zone outs sounded incredibly similar to her absence seizures, and the techniques for ending one were more like what worked to end her seizure than the standard advice she'd been given. Sandburg also mentioned drugs and chemicals which might incapacitate or even kill a Sentinel and suggested mild natural soaps and cleaning products to avoid interfering with elevated senses or causing skin irritation.

Gabi had never had much trouble with rashes or what she'd call skin irritation, but she'd always preferred soft, loose clothing, and as a child she'd cut out labels and hated rough knit sweaters. Now she wondered how much she'd learned to ignore or how lucky she'd been that her sense of touch rarely gave her trouble.

Thinking about touch made her miss holding Brett's hand, and she stirred herself to see what he was reading. He had never sat down, but was browsing documents of no more than a few pages each. Gabi slid up beside him, squeezing the hand that hung free at his side. "Whatcha find?"

"They appear to be transcriptions of folk tales or conversations about Guardians. Most of them amount to 'Guardian gives advance warning and saves lives' but some tell of using scent or heart rate as a sort of polygraph or diagnosing illness in a child too young to speak by a Guardian using smell, hearing, or in one case taste."

Gabi could hear Brett's heart speed with his excitement. She thought about how cynical it might make her if she learned the polygraph trick but how much sharing Brett's excitement pleased her. All she said was, "The Guardian tasted a sick child?"

"Yeah, licked his forehead. Evidently salty meant the child shouldn't eat dairy."

Gabi raised her eyebrows. "Let's remember they're only stories like Paul Bunyan or Johnny Appleseed."

"Johnny Appleseed is largely based on truth."

"And I hope some of these are. For example, this appears to be a doctoral thesis about Guardians in the United States and South America, except the author calls them Sentinels."

"Does it say which university published it?"

"It's not a final published copy, but it mentions the Police Department in Cascade, Washington several times."

"That's where Rainier University is based, I believe."

"Maybe we could search out Blair Sandburg when we get back."

"I wish we could take stuff with us or take photos with our phones." Brett squeezed her hand.

"Me, too. But mostly I'm glad this place exists."

"It still seems strange that something this amazing could stay secret."

Maybe being a Guardian is more common here or more common recently than it was before or elsewhere." She didn't mention the more disturbing idea that Guardians who made their abilities known might be conscripted or killed to suit other's interests, but Brett began to rub circles on her palm, and she wondered if his thoughts were similar.
They spent most of the day browsing, separating and coming back together to compare notes. Then Brett came to her and held out a portrait drawn in charcoal and protected by a plastic slip cover. "Does this image look familiar?"

It was the spitting image of her father in the photo from the cheetah center. When she turned the sketch over to see if there was more information on the back, what she found was a charcoal sketch of a cheetah.

"Where did you find this?" she asked.

"In the 'G' file of pictures."

"You haven't figured out the filing system, have you?"

"Not at all," he said. "Shall we go ask the librarian?"

Gabi thought of the prickly man who'd greeted them before. "I don't think he likes us much."

Brett squeezed her hand, then used it to pull her closer and out the door.

They found the old storyteller sitting in the sun. His eyes were open, but Gabi thought at first he might be dozing anyway.

"Excuse me," Brett said. "We found this picture in the 'G' file and were wondering how to find more information on the man."

Noko took the picture, looked at it front and back, then asked, "Why do you want to know?"

Gabi pulled the photo from her pouch and handed it over silently.

The old man looked her up and down carefully, "Your father?"

She nodded.

"I filed it under 'G' for Gauteng, the region it came to me from. I'd assumed the cheetah was his spirit animal, but perhaps not given the real cheetah in your photo. Why are you asking me about him?"

"I never met him," Gabi said.

The old man looked disapproving again but said, "I might know who passed this on to me and could see if anyone wanted to communicate further, if there is some way they might reach you."

Gabi worried for a moment, remembering her misgivings about someone recruiting or killing off Guardians. But she'd already circulated her phone number and email with the photo, and if someone thought her father was a Guardian they could already connect that to her. She gave the storyteller her contact information and said, "Thank you, and thanks for keeping all these papers here."

"You're welcome," he said, and for the first time Gabi thought Noko might not dislike her too much.

#

Brett felt heavy as they walked from the bus stop back to their housing by the dig. He was a bit tired of holding hands too, but he wasn't tired of Gabi. He didn't think he was ever going to be tired of Gabi, and she could hold his hand twenty-four seven if it made her feel better.

As they approached their building, Gabi hesitated, and Brett noticed their front door was standing
open. Her grip tightened on his hand, and she said, "There are two extra people inside, and they're shifting things about."

"What do you want to do?" Brett asked.

"Do we have any choice?"

"There's a police car," Brett pointed down the street as he looked around for any other clues they'd missed.

"That should mean it's safe to go in, right?"

Gabi's voice was strained, but Brett couldn't think of any way to make it better, other than holding her hand as he already was. They walked forward and through their front door into a scene of chaos. Joe was sitting on a hard dining chair. Every cupboard was open and a South African police officer was searching the sofa with cushions already removed.

Joe didn't greet them but said to the officer, "These are Brett and Gabi."

"Good." The officer turned to them, "I am Sergeant Botha." He pulled out a paper. "We are authorized to search your persons and your dwelling. First you," he motioned to Gabi. "Hold out your arms." He began to pat her down, removing her purse and unzipping her sweater. Gabi did not speak. In fact, she looked completely blank and passive, which triggered a surge of anger in Brett. He clenched his teeth and bit the anger back, for the time being.

Brett tried to keep silent when the officer searched him as well, but when the man reached into his pocket he said, "Hey!" without thinking. He couldn't remember anyone ever reaching into his pocket like that in a non-sexual situation. The officer just pulled out Brett's wallet and set it on the counter with Gabi's purse. Brett's phone followed, but Brett didn't say anything as it was pulled from his other pocket.

"Take a seat," the officer said, apparently to both of them. He held up Gabi's phone with the paper he'd produced earlier and asked, "Could you tell me the number for this phone?"

Gabi gave the number. By this time another officer had come out from searching the bedrooms.

"I am confiscating this phone as specified in our search order." Sergeant Botha said. "I would like to ask you questions in relation to this phone and a smuggling incident. We can record this conversation here or take you in to the station."

Gabi looked to Brett and then Joe, as if seeking guidance, but finding none she said, "Here is fine."

The second officer produced a small, black recording device, started it, and identified himself as Sergeant Naidoo. He obtained permission again for the recording and asked each person in the room to identify themselves. Then the first officer asked Gabi, "Tell us what calls you made a week ago on Wednesday."

Gabi's eyes widened as she looked at him. "Actual calls where you speak on the phone? I haven't made any of those since arriving in South Africa."

"Do you know anything about the following phone number…" He read a number from his paperwork.

"No."
"Do you know someone named Simone Patel?"

"No."

"Did you lend your phone to anyone else on that Wednesday?"

"No, but it was taken from my purse at lunch, and I didn't see it again until Joe returned it after I had a seizure."

"What? I don't remember anything like that," Joe said.

Brett looked first at Joe, not believing what he was hearing. Then he looked at Gabi, whose eyes were fixed on Joe, with a bit of a squint.

Gabi said in a nearly calm voice, "You're lying. Why would you lie about that?"

"I'm not lying," Joe said. "I just don't remember anything about your phone that day."

"But you remember that Brett found me passed out between the two dig sites, called you, and you came out."

"Yes, of course I remember that."

When the two of them fell silent, Sergeant Botha asked Gabi to give her version of events that day, which she did with much detail, including that Brett sent a picture from his phone because hers was missing.

"Is this the phone you alleged he used to send that picture?" Sergeant Botha lifted Brett's phone from the counter.

"Yes," Gabi said, and Brett nodded along with her.

"I will need to confiscate this phone as well. Do you have any additions or correction to make regarding the events of that Wednesday?"

"Everything Gabi said sounded correct."

The officer turned to Joe. "Tell me in detail which portions you disagree with."

Joe sat up straighter and said, "Just the part about the phone. I never saw it or had anything to do with it."

The police then asked both Brett and Joe if they knew anything about Simone Patel or the phone number offered before. They both said no.

Then Sergeant Botha turned back to Gabi and asked, "What do you know about rhinoceros horn?"

#

The room was cold. The mattress was wrapped in plastic, and the sheet between it and Gabi was scratchy. She'd been allowed to keep her clothes, and she hadn't taken any of them off to sleep. She also hadn't slept. Her internal time sense was never too good, and she couldn't know if she'd lost any time to seizures since they left her in the little room, but she'd guess it was midnight or later. At least she was alone. For once she'd played the medical card for all it was worth, explaining all about absence seizures, how she would be completely vulnerable during a seizure if they locked her up with anyone else.
The jail was made of concrete, which helped mute sounds from other rooms if Gabi tried to tune them out, but the concrete seeped cold and damp. The ventilation system wheezed in a way that reminded Gabi of someone old on a respirator.

But the smells were the worst. The mingled body odor of dozens of frightened, unwashed people was forced upon Gabi with the forced air. The room retained scents of feces and blood that Gabi suspected couldn't be cleaned away, since the smell of bleach and a fake lemon scent in the room were enough to make her eyes sting and forehead throb. She'd tried closing her eyes and trying to lower her sense of smell until she couldn't smell even what a normal person would. The thesis she'd read in the library suggested Sentinels could dial a sense down to zero or near nothing, but Gabi couldn't manage it. Focusing on any sense tended to make it stronger.

Instead, she focused on hearing, hoping to distract herself. With effort, she could reach beyond the whine of ventilation and seek out human voices. The first conversation she overheard was two men complaining about and tacitly blaming a rape victim. That turned Gabi's stomach and left her even colder and less able to sleep. She searched farther, past a couple of people speaking in a language she didn't know, and heard someone giving a statement about a robbery. When that turned to a graphic depiction of assault, Gabi felt her own panic response kick in. She tried to decrease her hearing, worrying that she might set herself up for a bad seizure. But the room she was in left her so isolated and worried that she sought human company by extending her hearing again. This time she focused on heartbeats, counting the number of living individuals around her. She'd passed a dozen when she tuned in on one specific heartbeat.

Gabi knew it was Brett's. She would have been hard pressed to explain in words how she could be sure. Brett's heart could beat at different speeds like any other person's. The basic lub-dub noise was universal, and there was no extra sound or off beat that might indicate an identifying disorder. Still, some part of her brain that detailed sounds and not descriptive language, latched onto that heartbeat.

Brett was woken from exhausted sleep, and at first he feared some sort of coercion or interrogation. Then the guard said, "The girl you came in with, you know how to deal with her medical condition?"

"Gabi?" Brett struggled to process as he came abruptly awake and sat up. "What happened?"

"She's unresponsive and nothing we try can wake her. She'd told us not to leave her with anyone but you because of the seizures. Do you know how to fix it?"

"Let me talk to her."

"We can't put the two of you together. It's against regulation."

"But a familiar voice or touch is the best way to stop the seizure. Do you know how long it's been?"

"Not more than four hours. Someone checked at midnight and she was awake."

That told Brett it was around four in the morning, but it didn't tell him anything useful about Gabi's condition.

"I think it's dangerous the longer it goes. The longest I know of before was about an hour, and that took her a while to recover from. Surely you could let me help her if I don't say anything about the case."

Brett did all he could to sound reasonable and non-threatening. The guard left the room without
saying anything but came back in what couldn't have been more than two minutes with another guard and said, "Okay, he'll take you to her."

The new guard pulled out handcuffs, which hadn't been required up to this point, but Brett offered his arms in front of him and allowed himself to be handcuffed and led down the hall.

"Whatever you say, keep it simple, in English, and unrelated to anything."

Brett would have been amused by the last instruction, except it made clear how arbitrary his confinement was. He was still pissed that Joe hadn't been charged and arrested. The lie about Gabi's phone was enough to convince Brett of who was really to blame. Brett had managed to wheedle a call to his parents, asking if they could arrange a lawyer and hopefully bail. He'd pleaded for them to help Gabi too, telling his dad that she was only eighteen, an innocent young girl with a serious medical condition and probably not much money or family support. Brett was pretty sure Gabi would hate being described that way, but he knew what would get through to his father.

Now Brett just had to get through to Gabi. After checking in with two other guards, Brett and his escort were allowed into Gabi's room. She laid mouth open and slack-jawed on her cot, fully-clothed and cocooned in her covers.

There was no hand visible to reach for, so he knelt near Gabi's head and said as calmly as he could, "Gabi, can you hear me? This is Brett. I'm going to touch your cheek."

His eyes flicked up to make sure the guard wouldn't hit him or otherwise object. Then he reached out with his cuffed together hands and touched the back of his fingers to her right cheek as he continued to talk. "Gabi, I don't know how long it's been, but you need to come back to us."

Her eyes opened slowly and she turned her head so her cheek pressed his fingers between her face and the pillow. She closed her eyes again and rasped out, "Don't move or I might throw up."

Brett stayed as still as he could, kneeling on the concrete floor and remembered that Gabi had asked him to keep talking before. Acutely aware of the guard at his side, Brett spoke softly but made sure each word was clear and meaningless. "Okay, just lie there. Let me know if there's anything else that will help. I'll stay as long as they let me and try to make sure you're okay."

Gabi's body was a tightly coiled screaming ball of hurt within a universal storm of attacking hard particles of hurt. Somehow she'd made it to the back seat of the van, and she believed Dr. Michaels was the one driving. It hurt to think about anything that had happened since Brett pulled her out of what must have been a doozey of a seizure that morning. She'd somehow said what was needed in front of a judge. She thought whoever paid bail for Brett had paid hers too, but trying to think that through pushed her nausea to the point where she stopped thinking. She couldn't remember the last time she ate or drank anything, vaguely thought that might help, but also thought there was no way she could manage it.

Brett was seated beside her, carefully not touching. She knew she'd told him to keep away at some point, but she wasn't sure if she'd used words or just growled or something.

After a while he said quietly, "Just tell me, did anyone mistreat you?"

The words swam around her head. She didn't remember anyone mistreating her personally, but she remembered someone joking about a rape victim, someone describing violent assault. She remembered everything hurting, and it still did. Nothing anywhere seemed safe, and she couldn't
stand feeling so vulnerable and out of control. There was a feeling in her skin, like it would rip apart if anyone, even Brett, touched her, and she wished he'd sit farther away to avoid accidents.

"Okay, how about this." He was speaking again, calm despite his rapid heartbeats, too quiet for Dr. Michaels to possibly hear. "Is there any chance you're hurt, were exposed to any diseases, or need medical attention?"

Some part of her finally understood what Brett was asking, and she managed to shake her head. Then she closed her eyes as pain burst behind them at the sideways motion.

"Good. Thanks. I'll back off because that seems to be what you want right now, but when you're ready, I'll do anything you need. Remember all that stuff about being honest and how you promised you'd tell me when you were sick or felt weird? Well, sometime you're going to feel better enough to want something, and I'm asking you now to please come to me then, wake me up if you have to. I won't mind anything."

Then he was quiet, except for his heart, which made it easier to withstand all the hurt.

When Gabi could think clearly again, she was a little sore from sleeping curled up in a ball. Her left hip, the side she was lying on, felt bruised. The bombarding pain that had seemed to immobilize her from within and without earlier had faded to a dull headache.

She was finally warm, with all of her bedding tucked around her preventing even a small draft. It seemed a pity to leave her shelter, but any change in position would disrupt it, and she needed to change positions. She also needed to use the bathroom, and desperately longed to brush her teeth.

Struggling against her blankets, Gabi stretched full length, toes pointed. She forced herself up from her bed and into the hall bathroom as quickly as possible. Then after using the toilet she washed her face and brushed her teeth. A shower would have been nice, and she needed one. But she couldn't stand the idea of taking her clothes off. The slight pressure of cloth on her skin was comforting, and as she felt that, she felt how much she wanted more. She wanted to be held. Even while she hated the vulnerability she remembered from the van and before, she wanted to go to Brett, to trust him to make things better and keep her safe.

She closed the toilet lid and sat for several minutes nerving herself up to seek out Brett or head back to her own room. In the end she went to Brett's room, rushing in and closing the door behind her without knocking or speaking.

He had been lying down in bed, most likely asleep. There was plenty of light in the room, so she knew it wasn't night, but he probably hadn't slept much the night before either.

He said, "Gabi, I'm glad you came." Then he sat up, sitting sideways on the bed and leaning back against the wall. He was wearing a grey tee shirt and she could see the waistband of either sweats or pajama pants. His bedding still covered most of his legs and lap. "You're welcome to sit as close or as far away as you want."

Without moving from the door she asked, "How did you know what to say and that I'd want to be with you later?"

"Been there. I've known my own bits of trauma and can recognize something similar. Make yourself comfortable and I'll listen to whatever you want to talk about."

She went and sat on the edge of his bed, then she snaked a hand back to touch his.

He wound their fingers together, and the comfort flooded through her system. She wanted to curl up
against him and share as much touch as possible, but she didn't move. With a sniff she said, "You took a shower. I should probably clean up."

"If you're worried that I mind, don't. I wouldn't have noticed."

"Nothing really bad happened to me in jail. I just worried and let myself hear too much, but it's not like I never felt that way before."

"But whatever's happened before tells us what to worry about."

"I don't think I've ever had a seizure that bad before."

"You looked like you were in a lot of pain and not really tracking afterward. That's why I worried."

"But you asked something in the van like you thought I'd been raped or something."

"The way you pulled away from touch worried me."

"I think some of my reactions to touch come from bad experiences like that, but I've never been raped."

"It doesn't have to involve intercourse to be rape, you know."

"If you want to know, there were maybe two times that could have turned into rape, but I was serious about the self defense training when I told Joe. And I gave a couple of hand jobs before then that probably counted as coerced but didn't lead to further problems. The people I actually cared about probably hurt me more."

"How so?"

Gabi knew the calm voice was forced, because she could hear his heart racing, which reminded her of the polygraph comment but not in a bad way. It made her want to give Brett truth in return. "Well, I think I may have fallen in love with my freshman roommate. She hooked up with a guy the day after school started, and they never studied. But she was bright, and I could tell she wanted to do well or at least not flunk out of college. So I finally talked her into dumping him and helped her study and catch up in everything. She started collecting pets, and I never objected. Our dorm allowed anything but dogs, and by second term she had rats, hamsters, guinea pigs and a chinchilla. The smell was awful, but she needed something to pet and take care of. I think I kind of wanted her to take care of me. Instead, I took care of her. Sometimes she let me hold her and stroke her hair.

"Then one day she told me my vision and determination were overwhelming her sense of self. She made it sound like a compliment but insisted she needed a normal roommate or friend. A week later she brought home a dog and they forced her to find other housing. I later heard she flamed out and left school, which made me so sad I cried myself to sleep at night.

"The thing is, everyone breaks away from me within two years. Mostly I think they find me too annoying or I bore them after a while. But I think she really cared about me for a while. Maybe she couldn’t keep track of what she really wanted compared to what I offered or thought she wanted. What she said, about overwhelming her, seemed totally honest and as real as any explanation anyone can give."

"And you're saying that put you off touch more than the almost rapes and coerced hand jobs because you both meant well but you both got hurt?"

"Something like that. I think I'll understand better if anything ever works out."
"Is that the best experience you've had with anyone?"

"I think she might be the only person I fell in love with. It was something different, but I don't know what to call it. I had some friends when I was younger that I wanted to be with all the time, and we pretty much lived in each other's pockets until they rejected me. So those could count as better or worse."

"Were you ever the one to end any of your friendships or relationships?"

"Not with anyone I felt close to. After the almost rapes and stupid hand jobs I ended those."

Brett was silent for a while. His body seemed calmer to all her senses, but his fingers kept moving across hers. "What do you want?" she asked.

#

Brett didn't know how to answer Gabi's immediate question or what she'd just told him. He was pretty sure she'd told him her entire relationship history just because he'd expressed worries in the van. The thing was, he'd wanted to know. She'd seemed so innocent in some ways but cynical in others that he'd half convinced himself she'd been raped or abused. Now he believed she had given him the truth, and it wasn't what he expected, but the enormity of her hurt still weighed upon him. It only made sense that her experiences and what she took away from them were as unique as she was.

"Do you want to be held?" he asked.

Her shoulders curved forward in a shift that could have been pulling away but seemed more like needing comfort. Her fingers rubbed against his and she asked, "Do you want to hold me?"

"Only when you want it."

"Yeah." She scooted back beside him. He looped an arm around her back and pulled her close, but it didn't feel satisfying.

"Can I hold you in front of me, or would that be too much?"

"Nothing's going to be too much, but I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

The answer seemed so honestly Gabi that Brett just scooped her sideways so she was sitting between his legs but on top of the blankets. He pressed his chest along her back, wrapped his arms tight, and hugged her close. He could feel her body relax into his and there were a couple of heart wrenchingly vulnerable sounds, but he pretended they were just hitches of breath, knowing vulnerability embarrassed Gabi.

"I didn't mean for this to be one sided," Gabi said. "I can listen to what you want to say and try to give what you need, too."

"Maybe you're better at knowing what you want or giving what I want before I know it."

"That doesn't sound good."

"You completely surprised me in the best possible ways by wanting to take care of me when I was sick and when you taught yourself massage. I like you just being you."

"But you don't trust me to really know you?"

"I don't think that's true. I don't mean for it to be like that."
"You're very good at being helpful and even showing appreciation, but you don't seem comfortable being needy." Gabi twisted her head to hide against his neck after she said it.

"Maybe it's a guy thing."

"You are not going to live down to the American stereotype of guys."

"Gay guys have different standards."

"Like not romanticizing things?"

"I'm not sure if that's a stereotype or an anti-stereotype, but girls who don't want to live in Disney towers shouldn't throw stones."

With a sharp jerk of her head to face him, she stuck out her tongue.

"You've more than half convinced me that Chris was being a jerk when he said that, and honestly, I think he's seeing other people while I'm gone and not missing me much. He never replies to my messages. I guess most gay guys I know wouldn't want to go two months without sex, let alone two years or more like you plan to."

"So what do you want?"

"Eventually, I guess I'd like a boyfriend who would stick around and want me to be myself. In the meantime, I want to find a way to be friends with you for more than two years no matter what sort of boyfriends I have or where each of us goes for grad school."

"You're sure what I want isn't overwhelming you somehow? Because what you said is exactly what I want for you."

"I'm pretty sure I know for myself." He leaned his head forward to rest his chin on her shoulder and the side of his head against hers, then heard her breath catch. "You will tell me if something I do is too intimate or crossing some line, right? I get that you consider yourself bi, and I'm not trying to be a tease."

She giggled, and it wasn't a noise he'd ever expected to hear from her. "If you're being a tease, it's not a matter of being male. I think it may be some Guardian bonding thing, if any of that's even real. If you want to know, I haven't felt any desire to kiss you, but since you moved this close, I keep wanting to lick your neck, or behind your ear, or just under your jaw. How's that for inappropriate?"

"I'm not afraid of that commitment, even if I'm not sure we understand it. If licking me seems right to you and you're ready to take a chance on the whole five senses bonding thing, I think I know my mind well enough to say you aren't pressuring me into anything."

"But will you regret it later?"

"Either of us could regret it either way. You seem to be by far the more cautious of the two of us, so it's your call." He felt her smile with her face next to his as her body curled into him even more. Then very daintily, like a cat, she licked behind his ear.

The sensation jolted him, and he couldn't have sworn that it wasn't erotic on some level. Whatever he felt, it was amazing and electrified his whole body from his hair follicles to his toes. His body instinctively folded more tightly around Gabi, so they were pressed together as much as possible. He never wanted to let her go.
Gabi thought she might have a seizure after she licked Brett. Her body tightened inside and out and then expanded in tiny increments to connect more fully to Brett. The taste of his skin went so far beyond what she'd expected from scent that it overwhelmed rational thought. The texture was delicate enough against her rough tongue that she thought for a moment she had broken the skin. There was something raw, like when she burned her tongue on hot chocolate, except it tasted like he was burned into her. Gabi could have sworn she could taste the blood pulsing beneath Brett's skin, warm and full of oxygen, but maybe a little low on sugar and nutrients. She wondered in a flash if she could tell how long he'd gone since eating, but then her mind was caught by the salt on top of his skin and a tang that wasn't panic but might have been worry a little while ago. Beyond it all was something that made sense with the scent and heartbeat that she already knew was uniquely Brett. She felt like he was hers to know and love, protect and appreciate, and she thought maybe she'd try to live near him forever, because the thought of not sensing him nearby for days or weeks seemed wrong in a way she'd never known before.
Joel was wrapped in bandages. An IV fed into his arm. Oxygen pumped into his nose.

Blair and Simon had insisted Jim leave the hospital and go home. There was nothing left to do. It was Monday morning already, still dark and cold outside. Blair pressed warm against Jim's side, pushing him through the door and into the loft. Jim couldn't remember who'd driven them home. The last time he'd slept they were in Antarctica, and that had been Saturday morning.

"Okay, big guy, I know you're dead on your feet, but you're covered in dirt and who knows what from the blast site, and we can't risk you reacting or tracking that into bed with you." By this point Blair had steered Jim to the kitchen and was taping plastic bags over his hands. "You're not going to be able to wash yourself with your hands like that, and neither of us has the energy for an argument right now. So here's the deal. We're both going into the shower together, and I'm going to wash you. We can keep our shorts on if you want."

Jim stared at his hands, the white gauze wrapped around his palms under the plastic. He remembered grabbing a pipe that instantly burned his skin enough to blister. He should have felt the heat from inches away, but he'd been focused on hearing for hours, using touch and sight only to keep from zoning. Jim had refused Blair's demands to get first aid right away. He'd barely let Blair pour his bottle of drinking water over the burns as he kept walking around the wreckage, listening for voices, even heartbeats underneath.

"Anything you say Blair. I don't care about my boxers."

The next thing Jim knew, he was in a warm shower, his hands held out to the sides to keep them dry. Soapy hands were sliding up and down his back, his sides, his front, carefully avoiding anything too private. Jim was too tired to react anyway, which was lucky because Blair's touch was making his skin hum. Those simple touches made Jim want everything; things he couldn't let himself think about much less speak. It would be enough to stay like this, in this moment, Blair's hands on his body.

Blair had been touching him almost the whole time they searched the collapsed police building. They'd been at the perimeter all night, and it was approaching noon when someone cleared them to go inside a hall. The hall had been on the second story, now it sloped downward from ground level, where the basement and first floor had been bombed out beneath it. Most of major crimes had been evacuated and kept safe, but Joel had been with the bomb squad, thinking they could save the building until a charge they hadn't yet reached went off early, triggering some sort of chain reaction. Jim couldn't listen for Joel in particular, and there was no chance of sniffing him out amidst the smells of destruction.

Simon had assigned a canine and handler to work with Jim and Blair, doing what he could to cover for anything Jim sensed but couldn't explain. So it happened that halfway through the newly opened hallway Jim had pointed. Blair's hand had clenched a little at his back. The dog and handler had eased in beside them.

Jim stepped forward, hand against the door to the stairwell. He cranked his hearing up past what was safe or reasonable and zoomed in on the breathing he thought he'd heard. It was a wet rasp, not healthy, but alive. Jim could only hear one person, and he couldn't know if it was Joel, but the bomb squad should have all been close together.
Whether the dog corroborated the find was debatable, but Blair spun some story and got the engineers in, and somehow they eventually retrieved Joel and his team, all alive. Jim knew Joel had been hurt worse before, with a gunshot that hit his gut and left things touch and go for days. But when they pulled him out after hours under rubble, it was hard for Jim to face the damage. Even if it was mostly scrapes and bruises, Jim could smell Joel's blood caked into mud all over his body, clothes, and matted hair. He could hear something liquid with every breath Joel took.

"Jim, Jim." Blair's voice brought him back to the smell of soap and the press of Blair's hands and warm water.

#

It was hard for Blair to tell if Jim was zoning or just asleep on his feet. Blair didn't know what had kept the guy going through 33 hours of search and rescue with his senses pumped up the whole time. His Sentinel had done it all without a spike or a zone, and if the dog handler they'd been assigned was at all suspicious, he wouldn't have anything specific to gossip about, other than Blair's almost constant touching. As Blair's hands mapped Jim's skin in the shower, trying to stay business-like despite the fantasies he'd harbored, then given up on, and grown confused about lately. He shook his head and tried to keep his own body from reacting to the shower pounding his stiff muscles and the smooth slide of soap and skin, Jim's skin, under his hands. They were both too tired to even consider anything further now.

Blair wished for at least the sixth time that he knew if Jim meant for them to sleep together once they returned home. Strange as it was to start sharing a bed on a military base in the middle of nowhere, that could mean something very different to an inhibited, defensive Sentinel than sharing his own bed once firmly back inside his own safe space.

Whatever they'd been through in the last couple years, Blair just wanted what was best for Jim at the moment. Jim had performed the role of Sentinel as well as any tribal watchman born and raised to it could have hoped. He'd done that after a week away from his territory, after weeks of walking on eggshells around his Guide. Blair had intended for them to talk things through once they were home. Now they'd probably spend their day off, and Simon had made it clear that they were off duty until at least Tuesday, just trying to catch up on sleep and maybe a little food and hydration.

To that end, he tried to either wake or call back from a zone his now washed but unmoving Sentinel.

"Jim, Jim." Blair moved his hands firmly up and down Jim's back until he felt and saw Jim roll his shoulders. "I'm turning off the water, and then I'll dry you off and get you to bed."

"I can do it," Jim said.

"You could, but it wouldn't be good for your hands, and you'll need them for all the paperwork we're going to catch up on tomorrow. For now, let's just get this done." Blair had Jim's towel in hand by the time he finished speaking and he dried the Sentinel quickly, knowing Jim didn't need him to be too gentle with this. Blair tried to be efficient and get Jim mostly dry and wrapped in a towel before another round of protest could form. Then Blair wrapped one towel around himself and one around his hair before removing the plastic bags taped over Jim's hands. Luckily, the EMT who'd finally gotten a hold of Jim had cleaned both hands thoroughly before applying the gauze that was still clean and dry.

"Okay, should I see you to the bottom of the stairs or do you want me to come up with you," Blair asked, trying not to show how much he'd thought about the subject.

"You could come with me, if you want, if you think you could sleep well up there." Jim's eyes were
still closed as he talked, but Blair didn’t need Sentinel sight to see the man's jaw and shoulders tense. Neither of them was fooling the other that this wasn't a big deal.

"Great, let me grab something to sleep in, and up we go."

#

Jim woke in the night to Blair pressed against him from behind. It wasn't a tentative hold like the first time. Now Blair's length was pressed against Jim, knees to shoulders. They were both sleeping in sweatpants and tee shirts, but Jim couldn't help feeling the warm hardness of Blair's erection digging into Jim's ass cheek. It wasn't in his crack, and Jim could tell by Blair's breathing that his Guide was still asleep. Probably Blair woke up hard like that every morning, but Jim's cock didn't seem to care as it twitched and filled in reaction.

Pretty sure he could fake sleep well enough to fool Blair, and guessing that would be the least embarrassing alternative for both of them, Jim lay still, expecting his Guide to wake and pull away at any minute.

Instead, Blair's heart rate picked up a bit and the arm he had around Jim's ribcage tightened. Blair's fingertips bent and flexed a couple times, digging into Jim's chest hair. Jim couldn't remember that ever being a turn on for him before, but already a little aroused, the touch was enough to flood Jim with warmth and whatever chemicals made people feel good during sex. Given Jim's limited experiences over the last few years, the sensations were overwhelming enough that he worried he might zone if he concentrated on touch too much. He brought up his sense of smell and shared his attention with the warm, outdoorsy odor of his Guide and the spicy tang he knew was Blair's arousal. Even if Jim tried not to snoop, Blair seemed to get at least mildly turned on a lot. Blair was a people person, and the number of women he flirted with and used to date showed he was a lot more modern and free about such things than Jim could ever manage. So Jim knew the smell of Blair's arousal, but he wasn't used to having it paired with Blair's hands exploring his chest or Blair's cock beginning to press in small movements against Jim's ass.

Still, Blair's breathing and heartbeat proved he was dreaming. He wasn't trying for the sort of friction that would turn it into a wet dream, and Jim was pretty sure Blair was too old for those anyway. If Jim was lucky, Blair would stay asleep and never realize he'd acted out anything physical while he dreamed. Jim certainly didn't mind. He'd been riding some sort of contact high from all the extra touch Blair had shared with him in Antarctica and even from Blair's constant touch literally demonstrating "I've got your back" as they worked the bombing site yesterday.

The thought of the bombing and Joel in the hospital was enough to mostly kill Jim's erection. Still, the clutching and gentle nudging of his Guide wrapped around him was a comfort, and Jim felt himself keying in to the scent and feel and little mumbled noises his Guide was giving out. He drifted on the welcome affection, wondering if Blair was dreaming about a woman or if he actually felt the body he was rubbing against and dreamed about sex with another man.

Jim had thought Blair might swing both ways, might even be willing to give Jim a try, back when they'd first started working together. Somehow, Jim had never imagined a time when Blair would be so much a part of his life that they could sleep together, spoon or cuddle or whatever they'd been doing, without sex being the point. Jim knew he'd changed a lot, especially since their spirits merged to bring Blair back to life. He wasn't sure how he would have handled sleeping with Blair or sex with Blair before that, and he wasn't inclined to spend too much time trying to understand. Whatever was happening between them now felt right in a way that pulled through Jim from his skin to his muscles to every nerve in his body.

The way Blair had been mumbling into Jim's tee shirt had left a damp patch that warmed when Blair
breathed out and chilled in between breaths. Jim felt the temperature shifts at that spot almost as
acutely as he felt Blair's hips twitch, making Jim past half hard once again. He turned his hearing up
just a bit, wondering if Blair was speaking coherent words in his dream.

The sounds were slurred, in the way of someone whose mouth was too relaxed, either from drinking
or sleep, but Jim made out a rambling sentence. "I wasn't sure, no one writes that part, all of us
wanting to be so professional, but hard not to notice, so beautiful, so amazing, with the Sentinel
thing, and the cop thing, serve and protect and all that…"

It wasn't what Jim had expected. He wouldn't have listened if he'd thought for a moment Blair might
be dreaming about him in particular, at least he wanted to believe he wouldn't have. Knowing now,
he couldn't want to unknow. Even if Blair seemed turned on by almost anyone or anything, it made a
difference that Blair was actually dreaming about Jim as he squirmed against him during what Jim
hoped was a pretty good dream. It felt good from where Jim was lying.

Whatever Blair might need a year or two to work through, Jim felt better at that moment, in the
middle of Blair's dream, than he could remember feeling since the Sentinel experience had started.
When Blair finally fell back asleep, Jim lay awake for several minutes more, appreciating being
home in his own bed with Blair curled up around him, glad to know they both wanted to be there
together, at least for now.

#

When Blair finally forced himself all the way awake, late in the morning, he was a little too warm.
Jim was lying on his back, and Blair had his arm and leg wrapped over the other man, Blair's leg
pressed over Jim's more than half hard cock and Blair's morning erection pressing into Jim's thigh.
Blair tried to ease away nonchalantly.

"It's okay. Nothing to freak out about."

Jim's voice, sounding so much more awake than Blair felt, was more difficult to face in the morning
than anything else. "How long have you been awake?"

"Just a minute or two."

"I was still asleep."

"I know. It's all good."

Blair looked at the evidence of what was good, still somewhat visible despite the sweatpants, sheet,
and thin blanket covering Jim's prone form. He wondered if Jim had actually gotten harder as they
talked. Then he thought about Jim's injured hands and his time in the military and wondered if Jim
was hinting at something.

"Do you need a hand with that?" Blair asked.

"Huh?"

Okay, maybe Jim hadn't expected anything, still, it seemed only fair to offer. "I realize with your
hands bandaged it might be hard for you to take care of that sort of thing for a few days, so it you
needed help, I'd understand."

Blair knew he'd said the wrong thing when Jim's face tightened into its usual expressionless mask.
The way Blair's own body clenched in response surprised him. It seemed likely this would be one of
those conversations that Jim ended by never speaking of it again, but he surprised Blair and said,
"Your leg was more attention than that part of me has had in years, so it won't matter how long my hands take to recover."

Blair rolled the words around in his mind trying on different meanings. It was a lot for Jim to say when he clearly felt uncomfortable, and Blair couldn't help thinking that Jim would have said less or nothing if he hadn't been making a serious effort to open up and communicate lately. However, it was such an unusual tack for Jim to take that Blair didn't have much experience in knowing how to handle a moment like this with Jim. He didn't want to upset Jim with invasive questions, but if he let it go, Jim might not put himself out there to risk saying anything next time.

"Okay, maybe my mind isn't working yet and you're gonna laugh at me, but are you saying you don't jack off? That you only get off if you're with someone else?"

Jim sat up and tossed a pillow in Blair's face. "Don't go making some freaking anthropology question out of this. You know how much trouble I had with my senses, and you heard what that Sergeant said about zoning during sex. I wasn't going to risk someone finding me staring into space with my hand, or anyone else's, on my penis."

"Seriously?" Blair said before he could stop himself.

"No, fine, forget it. Let your imagination run wild. I'll go do whatever I need to do in the shower. Bye."

Jim managed to make his way down the stairs with his usual swagger, and Blair had to give his Sentinel credit for good acting, because there was no way Jim was that nonchalant about the bomb he'd just dropped. Blair felt like maybe he was being managed, since Jim hadn't chosen an excuse designed to give Blair time to collect himself as much as to let Jim escape.

Blair headed downstairs to dress as he tried to force his brain up to speed. Whatever arrangements they eventually came to, Blair was sure Jim wouldn't want Blair still in his bed by the time he returned from the shower today. Also, having just showered the night before, Blair felt clean enough to skip it this morning. He had his pants on before he wondered how Jim was managing with the bandages on his hands.

After pulling on a couple of layers, Blair headed to the kitchen and saw that Jim had taken the plastic bags and tape from the night before. Even if Jim might sometime want Blair with him in the shower, the guy's control issues would never allow him to need it, which was probably how Jim felt about Blair's offer to give him a hand jacking off. Still, the idea that Jim had given up sex, given up any kind of sexual release for over four years because he couldn't risk zoning, sort of freaked Blair out.

Blair had been careful to never jack off anywhere but the shower when Jim was home, mostly thinking Jim might be embarrassed if he couldn't help knowing, or couldn't at least deny knowing. Now Blair wondered if Jim knew anyway, and if it had been a constant reminder of what Jim had given up. Pouring coffee into the machine and cracking eggs into a pan, Blair let his emotions flow through him, everything from feeling sorry for his Sentinel to a pretty shameless arousal that whatever orgasm Jim had next would be his first in a long time and his first with Sentinel senses. By the time Jim had finished his shower and dressed, Blair had concluded that Jim's decision to abstain for several years was a decision made by an experienced adult who had the right to weigh what mattered to him and probably had very different emotional baggage to weigh it against than Blair did.

By some unspoken agreement, they ate breakfast without any real conversation beyond passing items and starting a grocery list.

While washing up Jim said, "Back to the hospital?"
Blair had been waiting for it. "Morning visiting hour are over, so there's no point showing up before two."

"Grocery shopping?"

"You know you're trying to avoid actually talking."

"I have a reputation to live up to."

"So do I."

Jim conceded the point by grabbing a couple beers out of the fridge and motioning toward the couch. Once they were both settled, Blair asked, "So what changed?"

Jim was off the couch and standing by the window as if he'd been shot out of a canon. Blair tried to wait him out, but eventually pulled himself off the couch and brought his beer over to stand beside Jim. When he got a look at Jim's face, he thought it must be a trick of the light, because Jim actually looked pale.

"Okay, let's try something else," Blair said. "I'm trying to find out how we got to this, so just give me a sentence or two on what was going on with you between the mess with Alex and the mess with my dissertation."

"Yeah, okay, I was a total jerk. I don't know why."

"Was it something to do with the spirit animals?"

"Not in particular, I was just in a bad place. But now I'm pretty sure they were trying to tell me when I was screwing up at being a Sentinel, too."

"How did you screw up being a Sentinel?"

If the other questions had seemed too hard for Jim to handle, this one made him raise his eyebrows in confusion. "I screwed things up with you. Being bad to my Guide is being a bad Sentinel. That's what I've been trying to fix."

"Because I'm your Guide?" Blair didn't like the way that made him feel like a tool, something that needed to be maintained in good working order but that didn't have actual feelings. Some of Blair's distaste must have shown, because Jim threw his hands up in frustration.

"No! I promised myself I'd talk when you wanted to, but I can't do it like this. I know I'm bad at words. I know I screwed up, but if you're going to assume I mean something bad here, then I might as well give up now."

Blair stared at Jim, but when the big man shrank into himself rather than building up his anger, Blair felt a little like a bully. "Okay, if that's really how you feel, then I'm sorry, and I guess I may be more to blame in this than I thought. Can we try sitting down again?"

Jim went back to the couch and sucked down his whole beer before sinking as far back as he could into the corner of the couch. It felt a little unfair to Blair, but he knew he'd have to carry the conversation. Maybe that was part of his job as Guide. "When did you promise yourself you'd talk with me?"

"Lots of times." Jim forced a smile. "After you went through the police academy, I thought I should try harder. That's when I first thought I might have another chance. Then a couple months ago,
maybe, before Daniel called about the conference in California, I promised myself I'd do more, try to talk, make food you liked, be more flexible. That's when my jaguar started showing up a lot. I think the spirit animals try to help me more when I try to be a better Sentinel."

"So it had nothing to do with seeing Daniel and Jack together."

"No. Well, that may have changed how I thought about some things, but I was already trying. I went to the conference with you, didn't I?"

"You wouldn't let me go alone." Blair remembered arguing about it at the time.

"I couldn't! What if they'd grabbed you? You have to admit now that I had good reason to worry."

Blair waved his hand in a so-so gesture, but Jim had been more right than him about a lot of things involving Daniel. Of course, neither of them expected it to lead to aliens and spaceships.

"So what now?" Blair asked.

Jim tilted his head. "Now now, professor, or now and from now on?"

Blair smiled, "I could really get to like being called professor."

Jim took a deep breath and closed his eyes, "One of the things I've been trying to find a time to tell you," Jim opened his eyes, "I really am sorry I cost you your career. I'm still pretty pissed at your mother, but I don't blame you for any of that mess, and I didn't deserve what you gave up for me."

Blair felt tears in his eyes, and even knowing it wasn't the sort of thing they did, he pushed forward and hugged Jim, all but sitting in his lap as he pushed him back into the couch. "You can blame me for some of it, but I'm so glad to hear you say that. It hurt so much for so long."

"Does it still hurt?"

"It won't now. Your part won't anymore."

Jim's arms wrapped around Blair's back and didn't let go. Blair realized it was like the cuddling in bed, and maybe this could be the sort of thing they did now.

#

June 30, South Africa

"I am flattered that you think I could orchestrate a smuggling deal within weeks of arriving and without even visiting Kruger Park," Gabi said.

Brett was finally straggling over to the shaded tables for lunch their first day back at the dig, and he could hear the pain behind the banter before he even spotted who Gabi was speaking to. Then he heard Martha, the woman they'd stayed with in Pretoria saying, "It's not just smuggling but poaching too, and it's not like you Americans even need the money."

"Money is irrelevant because the charges are nonsensical."

Brett came up beside Gabi, sliding a hand onto her shoulder. "Besides, if Gabi wanted to be an evil genius, she'd do a good enough job not to get caught."

Martha rolled her eyes and walked away. Gabi took Brett's hand in hers and didn't let go until they'd collected their lunches, which wasn't easy one handed, and found seats in a far corner. Gabi let him
"How was your morning?" he asked.

"I miss my phone. I can interface with the stringbots solely using the laptop, but it's inefficient. Also, there's no wifi here, so I can't access the internet without my phone."

"We could go phone shopping tonight. They kept mine, too, you know."

"Phones are expensive, and they might not keep them long once they realize how stupid this all is."

"Maybe we should ask our lawyer about that. I doubt he'll be optimistic."

"First," Gabi pressed one finger down hard on her sandwich, "how did you end up covering a lawyer and bail for both of us anyway? Second," another finger squished into the sandwich, "isn't there a conflict of interests because the lawyer has more to gain by drawing things out?"

Brett smiled, keeping his sandwich in hand and pointedly not counting with his fingers. "First, neither of us had a lot of options, our defense is mostly the same, and my parents believe in showing their love with money and some pretence of acceptance for my questionable personal choices. Second, my dad probably knows how to choose a lawyer better than either of us, and the lawyer has his reputation to consider, so I suspect that's motivation enough to do what's best for his side."

"Meaning our side."

"See, that's the same point. My friends are your friends. My lawyer is your lawyer."

Gabi lifted the top slice of bread of the sandwich she still wasn't eating and glared at the contents. "And bail?"

"Is irrelevant, because neither of us is going to bail on the other—"

Gabi shushed him and grabbed his free wrist. When he looked at her, she glanced briefly at Joe who was talking on his cell phone on the far side of the dig. Then looked down at the table and after a moment closed her eyes in concentration.

Brett sat quietly, not even bothering to eat with his remaining hand.

Finally Gabi opened her eyes and after a quick squeeze, released his wrist. "I'm as stupid as I accused Martha of being."

"Does that improve your opinion of her as much as it deflates your estimation of your own brilliance?"

"Humans, not a zero sum game." She took a large bite of her sandwich and made him wait.

He went back to eating with a smile.

"So you blamed Joe, too, because he lied about my phone, right?"

Brett nodded.

"I just heard him complaining to Dr. Michaels about making him tell that lie. Not only is Joe too stupid to set up his own smuggling gig and frame me. He's too stupid to realize when someone frames him by telling him to lie."
"He didn't end up in jail," Brett countered.

"But our defense would have focused on him, probably why Dr. Michaels made him steal the phone in the first place. And while I'm thinking about it, doesn't it seem like someone went through a lot of work for a one time shipment of rhino horn? I bet if I pay attention, I'll find signs of something bigger."

"None of which will be admissible in court."

"I'll figure something out. Genius here, remember?"

It's five inches long! Gabi wanted to jump up and down. She wanted to show everyone the image on her screen of a buried artifact, five inches long, with a series of engraved lines forming some sort of symbols. This was the sort of find that could make archeologists excavate where they otherwise would not. It might be enough to request permission for a dig in a previously unexpected area. It would be more than enough to get her master's thesis approved and published.

She wished she could speak to Brett across the dig as easily as she could listen to him. He was sifting dirt today, not talking, and his heartbeat was calm. Most likely he was bored out of his mind, but running over to show him her find when everyone was still treating them like tainted meat would just be embarrassing. She'd show him at lunch.

Preparing all the data exclusively on her laptop was a trifle annoying. Without her phone or wifi, she could only back up data to a flash drive, so rather than saving everything, she had to pick and choose. The artifact was about three feet deep, so even if a square was set up and digging started tomorrow, it would be at least next week before they reached that deep at the careful pace required for documentation.

The data sucked her in and she ended up late to lunch, but Brett had prepared a sandwich for her. She slid in next to him bumping legs and shoulders as she placed her laptop just beyond their plates and said, "Look!"

She'd had time to generate a 3-D rotating image with measurements marked by guy lines. "Three feet deep just east of here, where I was working this morning."

"Cool," Brett said. "What's the next step?"

"I guess I send the data to Dr. Michaels and get that square on the dig plan. Unless Michaels drops by, I'll have to get someone with a smart phone to send it."

"We can ask the lawyer today, but afterward we should probably go phone shopping."

Gabi didn't want to argue with Brett about phone shopping. She didn't want to see a lawyer or communicate with Dr. Michaels. All she wanted was to revel in her microbots' latest discovery and maybe help set up a square to start digging.

Instead she cleaned herself up at the end of the day, and went to meet the lawyer with Brett. The lawyer spit out a huge number of words that amounted to: (1) They wouldn't get their phones back any time soon. (2) They weren't likely to be convicted unless new evidence came to light. (3) The student Gabi had supposedly phoned and then mailed a rhino horn to had turned out not to be anywhere near campus for the summer and had denied knowing Gabi at all.

After that, Gabi allowed Brett to drag her to a mall.
"Do you think they have pay phones here?" she asked as Brett studied a phone display that was exactly like any in the United States or Canada.

"You need a smart phone for internet access." Then Brett did an almost comical double take. "Wait, you said you didn't even make regular phone calls, and that's all a pay phone can do."

"I said I hadn't made any since arriving in South Africa, and I don't usually use them. But there are times in life when I have to call a business for information or reach someone who doesn't use text or email. And there could be other reasons."

Brett tilted his head, trying to guess, and she didn't want to spoil the puzzle by spelling it out. Instead, she asked a store employee, figuring a store that sold phone service must frequently deal with those who'd lost or broken their phones and needed to make a call before completing a replacement set up. When he found out she needed to call the states, he even explained the calling codes and offered to sell her an international calling card, which she paid for with cash.

The pay phone turned out to be in a dead end hallway by the rest rooms. The floors and walls were antiseptic white, the mixed smell of cleaning products and bathrooms truly disgusting. Like the phone store, it could have been anywhere in the world. Somehow, that anonymity made Gabi feel better.

"Should I go or stay?" Brett asked.

"Stay. I'm going to try calling Blair Sandburg."

"Why?"

"He wrote a thesis on Sentinels and law enforcement. Who better to advise us about tricks and traps?"

"The thesis could be a trap. What if he reports us to some authority in the States?"

"I won't tell more than I have to, and we're calling from a pay phone."

Brett shrugged, "It's your call." He smirked, and Gabi poked him in the ribs. Since whatever had happened when she licked him, her need to touch him had settled into something comfortable, and she thought the role of sister might suit her after all.

She picked up the phone and wove her way through directory assistance until she located Blair Sandburg at the Cascade Police Department.

"Hello."

"Mr. Sandburg?"

"Yes."

"Hi, um, don't hang up. You don't know me, but I found a thesis you wrote about Sentinels in public service and the law, and I could really use some advice."

"If I ever wrote something like that, I don't know how you would have gotten a hold of it. But I'm interested in hearing more. Is it possible to meet in person?"

"I'm calling you from another country."

"Fascinating. Would it be too much to ask which country?"
"I have no way of knowing what your ties to law enforcement might be, and I think there must be reasons why people like me keep their abilities hidden."

There was a pause in which Gabi heard Sandburg take a quick breath. Then she heard fingers tapping nearby in a room with plenty of voices and sounds of movement farther away. "Fair enough, but on my side, I'd like to at least know you are what you seem to be claiming. Perhaps you could tell me what you hear in the background here, beyond my voice."

Gabi looked at Brett, then clasped his hand. "I hear finger tapping, probably yours, an old clock ticking, lots of voices and movement, and something dripping, maybe a coffeemaker." When Sandburg didn't say anything she tried harder, knowing this might have triggered a seizure before but feeling safe so long as she had Brett with her now. "I can hear a female voice talking about Peru, about the Aztecs, about management structures?"

"Okay," Sandburg said, "That's pretty good proof. What did you call to ask?"

"My friend and I have been framed for smuggling. I overheard a phone call that confirmed two of the people who framed us, and I think I could find out more in the next couple days. However, I know this would be hearsay, but I'm worried even trying to point our lawyer in the right direction could look suspicious if I know too much. I thought you might know ways around some of this."

She could hear the man on the other end of the line let out a breath and rub something, maybe pushing back his hair.

"I don't know if I can help much. Is the supposed smuggling into the US?"

"Yeah."

"If you want to tell me where, I might have connections on this end who could follow up. But I can't promise anything, and I can't help but figure out who you are once I know what case we're talking about."

"Can I think about it and call you some other time?"

"Sure, I'll even give you my cell number. It's as secure as I could get it."

He gave the number and Gabi wrote it in two separate parts on different scraps of paper in her purse.

"Thanks," Gabi said.

"Good luck to you," Sandburg said. "Let me know if I can help, and I'd really like to hear from you again sometime."

After that, Brett insisted they go to a different mall to buy new phones. He wanted to buy Gabi's for her, but she drew the line at that, even if she couldn't really afford what she ended up paying.

#

Friday night, Joe left as soon as he'd taken a shower. Brett was in the kitchen, trying to decide whether to boil rice or pasta, when Gabi rushed out of her room and looped a proprietary hand around his wrist. When she didn't say anything or look at him, he asked, "Rice or pasta?"

"I'm tracking Joe and Dr. Michaels by hearing. I think I'm going to have to keep hold of you and not talk much to manage it."
Brett felt a moment's irritation at being treated like a device rather than a person. Then the familiarity and trust of the gesture made him smile. He pulled out the rice and began to measure water despite the drag of an extra arm attached to his wrist.

After managing to move chicken, beans and soy sauce to the counter, Brett decided he really couldn't chop with Gabi holding him this way. He thought about what would make it easiest for him to move, thought about trying to discuss options with Gabi, and finally just moved her hand from his wrist to his belt, such that a couple of fingers tucked in to touch skin.

Later, after a very quiet dinner, Brett said to Gabi, "Anything?"

She took a deep breath and said, "I think I'm going to stop listening to Joe and his latest conquest. It seems pretty clear where that's going, and it's not about smuggling."

"Who's his latest conquest?"

"Do you really want to know that from my spying?"

"I think it's our spying, since at least some part of me is involved." He nodded to where Gabi's hand still rested just above his belt, not needing to hold on as tightly since he'd stopped moving around the kitchen.

"Let's clean up, and I'll give you a massage. I don't think Michaels is going to do more than watch TV and putter about, but I need to keep listening in case there's an incriminating phone call or something. You might as well get something for your inconvenience, since you're partly 'involved' as you put it."

"He slices, he dices, he grounds that Guardian."

Brett was disappointed when that was all the conversation they managed for the evening, but once Gabi had him lying down in just his jeans, he realized that remote listening didn't hinder her use of touch nearly as much as her use of speech. If anything, she'd learned from the first massage she'd tried on him. Now her hands pressed firmly and traced each line of stress in his back.

When she dug into his foot, his whole body felt the attention. He considered claims that acupuncture or massage of the feet could treat various physical ailments. Then he stopped thinking so much and let himself float on how good everything felt.

Brett realized he'd fallen asleep only when he woke up to find Gabi leaning against the wall, hand resting gently on his arm.

"Go ahead and sleep," she said. "I'll just stay until Michaels goes to bed."

His body felt heavy in a good way, and his eyes had already drooped closed, so he let himself fall asleep with Gabi sitting there, watching him and touching his arm.

#

July 3, Antarctica

"Dr. McKay."

"Dr. McKay."

A file folder was shoved in front of Rodney's computer screen. He continued typing code for thirty
seconds, but it was the sort of work where even a single character typo could cause insane errors later. Batting the file folder away and glancing over to identify the offender as Daniel Jackson, Rodney continued coding and said, "I don't know why a supposedly paperless office even has file folders for you to taunt me with, but accepting that this program probably couldn't give up paper and file folders even if we ended up in a galaxy that produced neither, I would ask that those capable of understanding the basics of vision and computer screens try to keep the paper from interfering with the line of sight required for important work."

"If it were that important, I wouldn't get more than a single gerund out of you. Now, why did you send a marine to take my phone two hours ago? It's getting late."

"It's fine. You can have your phone back." Rodney waved to the part of his work table where he thought Jackson might find his phone, but the man didn't budge from where he hovered beside the computer monitor.

"Was there another security breech? Is what you're working on related to whomever hacked into my phone a couple weeks ago?"

"No and yes." Rodney kept typing.

"McKay, if you won't update me on issues that concern me, I'll call a meeting right here in this room and you'll have half a dozen other people interrupting your work."

"It is no wonder that academia is a pit of tail biting vipers ensnared in their own red tape." Rodney finished the final bit of his latest countermeasure program, turned his chair away from Daniel, and went to the nearest coffee maker to fortify himself. "There was no security breach today because the security I put on your phone and other accounts is vastly superior to what your hacker can circumvent. That said, whoever is trying to get in took the game up another step, and a trace program that what's his name, Groveling?" Rodney held his hand to indicate the approximate height of their newest international science recruit. "Anyway, his trace program activated. It failed to successfully trace back to our original opponent. However, it traced someone else who was trying to trace the same people we were."

"And now you can tell me who else is involved?"

"Well, no. I could tell you a bit about the programming style, which is a strange mix of naiveté and invention, much less professional than whoever started this, but possibly worth recruiting, especially if it's a kid who's still learning, which is a definite possibility. Young malleable minds, just what your government likes to suck in." Rodney sucked in a breath remembering his own first visit from the US government, right before a science fair he would have otherwise won. "Anyway, for reasons I wouldn't try to explain unless one of your degrees was in some way relevant to the work I've just done, having our original hacker and the shadow programmer to trace let me triangulate in on another phone that our original hacker hit with the same worm that hit yours."

"And?"

"And she's another social scientist, if you can even apply that already objectionable term to someone without so much as a PhD, who's also researching people with exceptional senses."

"So our hacker was trying to find out about the Sentinel program. I should warn Blair. And this other researcher, does she know her phone is compromised? Who is she?"

"Her name is," Rodney topped off his coffee and moved back to his chair, from where he found the relevant file on his computer, "Lerato Kumalo, Bachelor's in anthropology from the University of
Johannesburg. They published her work on a university website as part of some senior thesis program a year ago, and that's it. That's the distinguished company these hackers have placed you in."

"Can you get a copy of her thesis?"

Rodney tapped a few keys. "I sent you a link. Go read it from your computer or even your phone, safe in the knowledge that no one will know what you're reading because your security was set up by a genius. No need to thank me. Just send chocolate."

"What about the shadow hacker who also traced this. Does that person know about Kumalo and me? If it's just a kid, should we worry about whoever started this making trouble or trying to recruit the kid for themselves?"

"Possibly, but we still have no idea who the original hacker is or is working for. I might be able to identify other hacking from the same source as our shadow hacker, because it's strange stuff, but basically, this is natural selection, hacker style. The kid will either take precautions or get into trouble."

"Uh, guys?" Rodney recognized John's feigned indifference from the drawl in just two words. He knew how John would be curved into an improbable slouch in the doorway even before he looked over his shoulder for confirmation.

#

John hesitated at the open door when his raven led him to Rodney. Dr. Jackson was standing beside the physicist's cluttered desk, and at their feet was a mongoose. It occurred to John that he'd heard about an unidentified mongoose that the chair had shown Ellison. The current mongoose was sitting, calm but attentive, and John didn't know why he'd worry about someone else's spirit animal appearing beside his Guide, but it did twist his gut a bit. His hand hovered where a gun would have been if he was stationed almost anywhere else. All he managed to say was, "Uh, guys?"

"Join us, major. Dr. Jackson was threatening to call a meeting here anyway."

"Anything to do with spirit animals?" John asked as his raven perched on Rodney's shoulder without Rodney noticing.

"Are they back?" Jackson asked.

"My raven brought me, and there's a mongoose between your feet and McKay's." They both looked down, and a glowing jellyfish drifted in through the wall to hover above the still-seated mongoose.

"And now the jellyfish tentatively identified as Jackson's is hovering." John could tell by the way both men glanced around inaccurately that they weren't seeing any of the latest menagerie. He pumped his hearing to note Daniel's heartbeat was faster than normal while McKay's had held pretty steady. Maybe the jellyfish had come in response to Jackson's worry. McKay's beaver probably thought it had better things to do, perhaps still improving its part of the stick city, wherever they'd flown that off to.

"Sheppard, could you please close and lock the door."

John did as asked even while he teased, "You know, your jellyfish flew in through the wall."

"I'm not too worried about the spirit animals. Are either of you?" Jackson asked.
Rodney shrugged, and John said, "No. My raven seems fine with the others, too."

"And Rodney," Jackson looked down at the still seated Guide to ask, "You saw the animals the last time they were here, but you're not seeing them now, are you?"

Rodney shook his head.

Jackson looked back to John, "And his beaver isn't here either, right?"

John nodded, sensing they'd drifted into Sentinel-Guide studies, which Jackson appeared to be much more comfortable with given his decelerating heartbeat.

"So I can't really ask this in any professional capacity, but I have a theory that something that happened with you two that night led to McKay being able to see spirit animals. So I thought maybe if you two were to touch or maybe even kiss with the animals here, we could test if that connection makes any sort of difference."

"That makes no sense. I know you and O'Neill have done way more than kiss, and neither of you sees the animals. Of course, that could just be some weirdness with O'Neill. But that other Guide, with the hair, he can't see them either, and I'm pretty sure they've been together for years."

John definitely wasn't going to out Ellison and Sandburg as not having sex, at least not in the time they'd spent on base. It really was nobody else's business, and he hoped his fellow Sentinels would agree with him on what their heightened senses shouldn't be used to reveal. But he'd wondered himself about what allowed Rodney to see the animals, and he liked it better when Rodney could see them, too. "I'm happy to test the theory," John offered, trying for his most glib flyboy tone.

"Oh right," Rodney huffed, "Mr. Privacy is going to volunteer to kiss me in front of Mr. Voyeur in the interest of pseudo-science?"

"That's Major Privacy."

"And Doctor Voyeur."

The pout on Rodney's lips after the teasing was too good for John to resist. "Are you saying you don't want to kiss me? Come on; stand up so I don't have to hunch over your chair."

As John moved a step forward, Rodney stood and shifted to meet him. The raven hopped over to perch on a computer monitor, and John was pretty sure the toe of Rodney's shoe passed right through the mongoose, but he didn't see any point in mentioning either observation. Instead, he rested a hand on Rodney's neck and asked, "See anything yet?"

Rodney glanced down where he presumed the mongoose to be, which was fairly accurate except his eyes were focused just to one side, and shook his head. So John leaned forward and kissed him, gently, with just a trace of tongue brushing Rodney's lips.

"Still nothing," Rodney pulled back enough to say.

John was surprised how just briefly kissing Rodney made his whole body tingle with the desire to get naked together. He carefully visualized his touch number line easing back to two and said, "Jackson said it might be about state of mind. Try paying attention to me when I kiss you without worrying about the animals."

John pulled Rodney in close, determined to fully capture his scientist's attention, and let himself kiss deeply, running his tongue along Rodney's until his Guide's eyes drifted closed and John could see
the warm flush on Rodney's face. He thrust his tongue suggestively until he smelled Rodney's arousal and knew he'd have to dial his own senses down further or risk embarrassment. So he pulled back just enough to break the kiss, but kept himself protectively blocking Jackson's view of the bulge in Rodney's pants.

Rodney opened his eyes and in a rougher voice than usual insisted, "You two should not have been right about this, and you are seriously not writing this in any report."

"I take it you can see them now?" Jackson asked.

"Yes, all three animals. And you are totally getting off on watching us kiss."

"I'm standing quietly out of the way."

John glanced over his shoulder and saw in a moment that while Jackson spoke the truth about where he was standing, his heart rate and scent suggested he was more than a little turned on by their display. John thought that would have bothered him a few weeks ago, now he was just annoyed that he couldn't kiss Rodney anytime he wanted.

A loud beeping from the computer jarred John from his thoughts and sent Rodney scrambling to his computer chair. The mongoose seemed to leap away into the computer before Rodney could accidentally kick through him again, and Jackson's jellyfish followed. John's bird just hopped to the edge of the desk and gave a few curious pecks at the machine before flying away through the ceiling.

"John," Rodney asked quietly as his fingers started pounding at the keyboard. "Did it look to you like two of those animals just leapt into my computer?"

"Yep."

"Well, it happened right after a trace program I discovered today reactivated and triggered a new program I'd just finished when Jackson interrupted."

"And you think there's a connection?" John asked, impressed by how Rodney could type at full speed while carrying on a separate conversation but less pleased by how quickly Rodney shook off his arousal while John was still turned on.

"What if the other spirit animal has something to do with the new hacker?"

"So this isn't the person or group who originally hacked Dr. Jackson's phone?"

"No, this person was snooping on them just like we were but a little more clumsily. I'm guessing it's some self-trained hacker kid or newbie, but the hack locks on well, so the shadow programmer may have information we don't about the target. Do you think the mongoose and jellyfish have gone to help some Guide or Sentinel who's trying to investigate the same things we are?"

"You want me to interpret some logic behind spirit animals?" John asked with a slow stretching of each word to emphasize how ridiculous it was.

"That would be good."

"I'm sorry, Rodney, I'm afraid I can't do that." John said it in his best Hal 9000 impersonation. That made one corner of Rodney's mouth curve down as the other curved up, so John counted it as a win.

"Both of you, go away now." Rodney waved his hand in a shooing motion without looking up from his work. "I'm going to refine my code and check a few conditionals in case something more
happens. Then I'm going to bed."

"Okay, I'll let Blair know what I can."

"Not about the kissing," McKay said offhandedly.

"McKay, it could be important. I'd make it anonymous if I could."

Rodney did pause in his typing then to glance at John.

"Everyone on base already knows," John said.

"Blair's not even mentioning the animals in his thesis, so I could ask him not to put anything in writing for now. He probably wouldn't anyway, until he finds a way to confirm it."

"Oh fine," Rodney said. "I'll leave the privacy decisions up to John. He's the one involved with the still bigoted United States military."

Jackson looked to John for agreement, and left when John nodded and motioned toward the door.

Once Jackson had gone and closed the door behind him, John leaned on the back of Rodney's chair and asked, "You planning to work late?"

"No, really, there's not much I can do with this."

"I could grab us some muffins and go wait in your room."

Rodney leaned his head back so it brushed John's stomach. "Yes, to both food and you, yes. Now let me work."

John couldn't explain why Rodney's hand fluttering in dismissal turned him on, but he went to fetch muffins feeling pretty good about the night ahead.

#

"Best deal ever."

"The muffins are tasty, and free." John bit his blueberry muffin carefully, wiping away any crumbs that fell on the bed. Rodney heedlessly unwrapped the crinkly plastic from his and crammed large bites into his mouth, sitting close enough beside John that their arms constantly brushed as they ate. He wondered if John could taste where the plastic had touched the muffin or if he had everything set to a more or less normal human level to avoid that.

"I know when you're being intentionally obtuse."

"Does it drive you crazy?"

"We have magical invisible animals for that."

"And super powers." John batted his eyelashes, affecting more humor than flirtation. Rodney had finished his muffin, but the way John carefully nipped small bites off his was worth watching. Really, anything John did with his mouth was worth watching.

John spoke. "And we have the best sex and see spirit animals better than the others."

Rodney wondered if John had used his super powers to determine whose sex life was hottest and
whether that would count as using his gifts for good or for evil.

"Of course, because I'm not just a Guide; I'm a genius. Furthermore, I know you don't want to talk much or answer questions, and I don't want to do anything to screw this up. So I've narrowed a hypothesis down to three yes or no questions and after you answer, I'll do whatever you want, no problem." Rodney hesitated, not asking if John accepted this, because he'd promised only three questions, and he wasn't giving John a chance to say "no" to this anyway.

John nodded, with little enough expression that Rodney knew he'd already twinged a nerve. He watched John hide behind the bit of muffin he had left, big military man behind itty bitty remains of baked good, but Rodney couldn't deny his own curiosity and need to confirm his hypotheses.

"So the first time we had sex, or got off together, or whatever terminology you want to apply, I was operating on incomplete information and neither of us had been told about Sentinels. In hindsight, I can deduce that you were reacting to some Sentinel issue and weren't propositioning me the way I thought you were." Rodney couldn't help the sigh that escaped him then. He wasn't trying to lie, and he'd been told his emotions were usually easy to read. Still, he didn't need to be any more pathetic about this than what he had to ask already was. "So first question: when it did turn into sex in the supply closet, did you want it?"

"Yes, Rodney. I'm not a subject from whatever harassment training you've been forced to attend." The first question elicited a smirk and the relaxing of John's shoulders, in addition to alleviating the niggling guilt Rodney had been carrying, partly due to harassment training he had, in fact, been forced to complete. Rodney rubbed a hand up and down John's thigh.

"Second, I get that neither of us chose this Sentinel-Guide situation, but it has enough benefits that I will continue to do the talking and touching and any additional sensory grounding you want. The question is, now that you know what's going on, do you want to keep doing all the stuff we've been doing?"

"That would be a definite yes, and before you ask, I would have been interested in you anyway. I might not have acted on it given our work situation, but now, no refunds or exchanges are required." John ran a hand across Rodney's chest, brushing his nipple, and gliding to a rest at his hip. Then the smirk was back, and Rodney pushed on before John could move too far into distracting him.

"Good, that's very good. I mean, we're good together. The sex is good. You're not nearly the idiot you pretend to be, and oh god, you look and feel good naked. So my next question is, could I try an experiment on you?"

John blinked his eyes with what might have been innocent confusion on someone else's face. Then in a combat worthy maneuver, Rodney found himself pressed flat on his back against the bed with John's hands holding his arms against the mattress and the rest of John's body pinning Rodney to the bed. "Does it involve sex?"

Rodney nodded, then shook his head, then said, "That depends on how you define sex."

"Oh, yeah," John answered, rocking his hips into Rodney. "Tell me about this experiment."

"Well, there was a time when I was a teenager when I came just from someone playing with my nipples, and—"

"Hold that thought," John said. Still holding Rodney's arms loosely pinned to the bed, John swirled his tongue tightly around Rodney's left nipple, wetting the cotton of his shirt until it clung and Rodney groaned and started to squirm. Then John used just the tip of his tongue to deliver quick
short licks first concentrating on one side of the nipple base to tip, then just on the tip, then just on the areola to one side.

Rodney gasped and bucked up against John saying, "You realize it wouldn't be just from my nipples with you straddling me like that."

"Never fear, that was just a teaser before the main attraction. Now I'm ready to hear about your experiment."

John gave him a casual smile as if Rodney wasn't lying beneath him flushed and breathing hard, and Rodney knew the Sentinel was dialing his senses down to keep control while he toyed with his Guide.

"I want a chance to touch without you dialing down. I want to see how crazy I can make you, maybe even make you come, without touching your cock or your hole, maybe not even your nipples. You think you could just lie there and let me try?"

John ground down against Rodney to demonstrate how turned on he already was.

#

Rodney thought it might bias his results to start with John already hard and wanting. Once he had John laid out flat on his back, naked, arms and legs spread wide to give maximum skin access, Rodney pulled the first item he'd prepped for his experiment.

John's cock softened a little just at the sight of the thermos, and Rodney worried. "Negative association with a thermos?"

"I just didn't realize you'd prepped for this ahead of time."

"You don't have to be a Boy Scout to be prepared."

"I always thought that motto meant to carry a condom."

"Of course you did. What number would you say your sense of touch is at now?"

"Two."

"Then you've nothing to fear from an ice cube." Rodney pulled the ice out with his fingertips and displayed it before John like a giant diamond.

"I don't think that's a turn on for me."

"Will you let me experiment? I'll make it good for you by the end. I promise."

"Knock yourself out," John said, but his erection was almost completely gone without the ice even touching him.

"John, look at me," Rodney said. Then once John was looking, Rodney dragged his tongue across the ice cube, trying to make it look suggestive, and trying to engage John's sense of sight while keeping all parts of their bodies separate. Once he had John's attention, Rodney licked the ice until his tongue was cold, then he lifted John hand and ran the cold tongue across John's wrist. John shivered, even though it couldn't have been that cold. Moving slowly Rodney touched the wet ice cube to the skin he'd just licked and then slid it slowly along the underside of John's arm to past the elbow. By then Rodney's tongue was back to body temperature, and he leaned forward to lick the
inside of John's elbow.

John relaxed into the warmth, and Rodney wondered if playing with cold while living in Antarctica was what had turned John off before. As Rodney moved the ice to John's chest, avoiding John's nipples, Rodney was careful to follow with warm licks or warm breath. Alternating warm and cold on John's chest and stomach elicited a few gasps and shivers, but no real interest from John's cock.

When Rodney tried the ice on John's neck, the Sentinel actually flinched and said, "I don't like that."

"Good to know. Let me try one more thing with the ice."

Rodney held carefully to the half melted cube and traced an edge as lightly as he could along John's lower lip. John didn't flinch but he didn't give any positive response either. However, when Rodney leaned in to suck the abused lip into his warm mouth, John pressed his tongue into Rodney's mouth and stroked deep and dirty along Rodney's tongue.

Rodney gave in to the neediness in John's kiss and dropped the ice cube off the side of the bed. He kept the rest of his body separate from John's, but pushed back with his tongue, exploring John's mouth until they both pulled apart to breathe. A quick glance showed him John was hard again, and Rodney's own cock jumped at that realization.

"What number is touch at now?" Rodney asked.

"Four," John said. His eyes were fixed on Rodney's mouth, and Rodney licked his lips in response.

"What would kissing be like at six?"

"I'd have to balance it really carefully with taste or I'd get too confused."

"Confused?"

John's eyebrows drew in and his mouth turned down, which Rodney took to mean either John didn't want to talk about it or wasn't comfortable dealing with it.

"It's okay, I've got a better idea." Rodney reached under the bed for the velour robe he'd hidden there earlier. He managed to drag the dense, soft plush across John's arm before John knew what to expect, and John made the humming purr sound that Rodney knew from previous good experiences with touching John.

"Are you still at four, John?"

"Uh, yeah." John answered slowly, and Rodney wondered if there was such a thing as a partial zone.

"If you look at me and split some of your attention with sight, do you think you can dial touch up to six?"

"I'm game," John said, sounding more solid as he met Rodney's eyes.

Rodney kept the velour robe moving along John's arm and then the side of his ribs. He let the bulk of it rest there as he used a sleeve to lightly pet John's belly. That got John's cock fully erect, and a bead of precome formed at the tip as John said, "That's six."

"And you like it."

John nodded, his lips slightly parted. Rodney wanted to kiss him but knew that would be too much at
the moment.

"See how high you can dial it up without it becoming overwhelming or unpleasant. I'll keep moving the robe along your body."

John's eyes tracked Rodney's movements as the scientist slid the robe down the outer side of John's right leg and then up the inner calf and thigh. Rodney carefully avoided the genitals and even pubic hair as he shifted to the left inner thigh and stroked gentle circles, lingering to watch the reaction as John's skin pebbled in goose bumps and hairs stood on end.

"I think 7.5 is right between the robe feeling soft, or at least interesting, and where it starts being annoying or scratchy. Also, if I shift too quickly on your sheets at this point, they feel really rough, even though I know they're nice sheets."

"Good, 7.5 is the max. What level felt best?"

"Maybe 6.5, but it was still a little," John's eyes darted sideways as if searching for words, "nerve-wracking."

Rodney thought about how the scrape of a torn fingernail or an accidental pinch might feel with touch at those levels, and he realized how vulnerable John was making himself in this experiment.

"Why don't you ease down to six or so. I want to try something different with the robe."

Rodney kept stroking along John's leg, going only the direction that aligned the grain of the velour with the downward direction of the hair on John's left leg. The robe lay all but still across John's right leg, and Rodney was pretty sure that helped John manage the less predictable touch. Part of the problem with the ice might have been that too much of John's skin was exposed without any stimulus at the time.

While John's cock couldn't really get harder, Rodney knew from the way it twitched and John's thighs tightened and relaxed that John's touch was back in a comfortable and intensely pleasant range.

Moving carefully around John and leaving John's body partly covered by the fuzzy robe, Rodney maneuvered the sleeve he'd been using to stroke John's left leg so it could reach to engulf John's right hand. John's fingers trembled and seemed to clutch a bit reflexively, and Rodney thought of all the nerve ending in fingertips and hands. Gently, Rodney tugged from the edges of the sleeve to pull it up John's arm without anything but the fabric touching John's skin. When it was past John's elbow, Rodney asked, "How does that feel?"

"Good. Not exactly arousing, but good in some other way."

"Emotionally, maybe? Some of the non-myelinated nerves attached to touch sensors feed directly into the amygdala."

"Would that mean I'm in touch with my emotions?"

"I'd swat you for that if you didn't have touch dialed up."

John smiled at him, and it wasn't his impish smirk. It might have showed some emotion like trust or appreciation that neither of them was very comfortable discussing.

"What do you feel when I gather the sleeve tighter," Rodney ask as he gradually rolled in the loose cloth on the sleeve to tighten the cocoon swaddling John's arm.
"Huh. There's more—both pressure and number of places I feel it. Then the number of fibers I feel lessens, but it's warmer and more, more good. Whatever that feeling is?"

"Comfort?"

"I don't think I've ever used that word for myself." John's eyes darted away again, and Rodney knew John was only admitting that much because Rodney was his Guide and was trying to understand. "I think of comfort as something I'm supposed to offer when someone else is upset or someone died. Is it weird if I don't have a gut feeling for what it means to be comforted myself?"

Rodney was pretty sure he shouldn't admit to the feeling John's admission stirred in him. He wasn't sure either of them was ready to name it. "Let me try wrapping the belt from the robe around the sleeve to hold it snug like this." As he suited action to words he asked, "Does it still give you the good feeling like this?"

"Kind of." John clenched his hand inside the sleeve so Rodney could see it stretching around John's fingers. At the same time he saw the ripple of muscles up John's arm to his shoulder, and John was breathtakingly gorgeous in that moment as he fisted the blue velour and whatever he was feeling washed across his face. "That makes it stronger."

"Fine then." Rodney wondered if they'd happened upon some association with a childhood comfort object or if they were playing with the edges of bondage or submission. Rodney wasn't an expert on either and didn't really care. He just wanted to know what worked for John, who'd stayed remarkably hard through everything involving the robe, even when he claimed the touch he experienced wasn't particularly sexual. Then again, they were both naked together, which was enough in itself to keep Rodney at least partially aroused. "Would it be better if I tied the belt to the headboard, so there was tension on some of the cloth?"

"I might have some issues with being tied up, but you can try it."

Rodney looked at his perfect, responsive, trusting Sentinel and said, "Maybe another time. Let me try one more type of cloth. I can leave the robe as it is and just explore the other side of your body."

"Explore all you want." John's eyes went half lidded, and Rodney retrieved his favorite thermal undershirt, made from the smoothest silky fabric he owned. First he used it to stroke John from his neck down to his toes, and the Sentinel responded with shivers and faster breathing. "Is touch still at six?"

"I'm letting it slide up. This one doesn't hurt at 7.5 but the warmth of your hand, of each individual finger and especially your palm, comes right through the silk until I barely know the fabric is there."

"You like it?" The way John's eyes wavered closed with each breath said he did even before he nodded and smiled. Rodney whispered, "Let me try lighter."

Angling his hand so his skin was farther from John's and loose fabric trailed behind, Rodney circled the area on John stomach where he'd gotten a sexual reaction before.

John practically bucked off the bed, bumping up against Rodney's cloth draped hand.

"Sorry," John said. He didn't look like he meant it. He looked blissed out, and his eyes were closed.

"Don't zone on me, John."

"You want me to dial down or do you want to keep talking?"
"Sight isn't enough of a distracter anymore?"

"I think I might be able to come from just this."

"Really?"

John nodded, eyes mostly closed, abdominal muscles tightened in an obvious effort to keep himself from pushing up toward Rodney's hand.

Rodney briefly wondered if he could come just from looking at John like this. He kept drifting light touches of the silky undershirt across bits of John's skin. Teasing the sensitive areas on his belly, his thighs, and inside his elbows the most. Rodney used a pseudo-random number formula to guide his motions and keep all the exposed skin on edge while he talked about what required the least thought at the moment.

"If we were back in civilization, I'd get you into one of those big Jacuzzi tubs to experiment with your enjoyment of touch. We could test bubbles and water currents from the jets, try out tiny bits of scent or oils. I was thinking we could start with cocoa butter, which has a very faint scent and shouldn't risk any skin reactions."

He saw John's right hand clenching rhythmically inside its velour wrappings. Trailing the silky undershirt, Rodney mimicked the rhythm with barely a thought. He spoke a little more about oils and scents and water toys they could try, but he could see John was getting close, and it made Rodney desperate for more.

"I want to kiss you John, just lightly on your face. Would that be too much with you like this?"

"Kiss me, Rodney."

With just enough attention to spare for the hand drifting smooth cloth across John's bare abs, Rodney leaned forward and brushed his lips just under John's eye, along the upper edge of his cheekbone, then up to his eyebrow and forehead. Rodney's lips tingled, electrified by the faint touch. He felt again as if his senses had dialed up with his Sentinel's as he noticed where John's face was warmer, damper with sweat, and salty. Rodney's lips brushed back and forth when he reached the smooth shell of John's pointy ear and the chill softness of John's earlobe. He kissed a spot below John's ear and suddenly John was shaking and Rodney felt a warm splatter as John came in spurts that streaked his stomach and chest as well as Rodney's hovering silk-wrapped hand. Rodney let his lips trace John's stubbled chin as the orgasm ran its course. Then just at the end Rodney used the silky cloth to stroke a last shuddering spurt from John's cock and then gently wipe most of the mess away. John trembled and panted throughout, but he rubbed his chin against Rodney's mouth when Rodney stopped kissing, so Rodney slid his lips to gently brush John's. That triggered a moan that had Rodney desperately pressing his erection into John's thigh.

"Rub off on me. Can you?"

"God, yes. I'm so close."

Rodney shifted up to give himself a little leverage and rubbed shamelessly against John. His kisses were reduced to panting against John's mouth, but John panted right along with him. John's thigh shifted to give Rodney a better angle and a little more friction, and just like that Rodney was coming against John's thigh with primitive little grunts. He didn't even bother to open his eyes when he cleaned himself with the same shirt he'd used on John and then tossed the well used cloth to some unknown part of the floor.
Sometime later Rodney woke enough to realize he'd curled around John for warmth with only the velour robe covering either of them. He reached down and hauled up the blankets from the bottom of the bed to cover them both. In so doing, he noticed John's arm still crudely bundled in the upside down sleeve and started feeling for the knot to untie it.

"Lea' it," John said in a sleep muddled rumble. "I feel good."

For just a moment Rodney worried about his Sentinel leaving his sense of touch dialed too high all night. Then he remembered that just two weeks ago John had been living with out of control senses, probably even in Rodney's bed, with no choice in the matter. Carefully, gently, he spooned up behind his Sentinel and stroked the plush robe across John's warming skin.

July 4, South Africa

When Gabi woke on Saturday morning, she discovered that Joe had returned home to sleep. Listening in on soft snores barely required better than normal hearing. She cautiously extended her hearing to the nearby rental where Dr. Michaels what living, and discovered he was sleeping in as well. Brett, on the other hand was awake and busy in the kitchen. While staying in bed was still tempting, Gabi had learned that Brett in the kitchen usually meant good things, some of which were better warm. So she pulled her robe on over her pajamas, and followed her nose to the smell of strawberries and something doughy.

"Smells good," she said before yawning at the edge of the kitchen.

"You still look tired."

"I didn't want to miss anything."

Brett held out his hand, clearly thinking she needed him as a sensory tether.

"It's okay," she said. "They're both still sleeping. What 'cha making?"

"Crepes with strawberries and whipped cream."

"To share?"

"Of course."

"Shouldn't I cook for you sometimes?"

"Is there anything you want to make?"

"Honestly? I'm not much of a cook."

"Want to learn?"

It turned out Brett's love of cooking was infectious. Gabi spent the next half hour learning how to pour the batter just right to start an even, thin crepe. Brett tried to teach her tricks for knowing when to flip it, but for her, it was easier to tell by smell after the first time.

Then they ate, and although the berries had been frozen and then sweetened with sugar, the fresh whipped cream and crepes more than made up for it. Gabi closed her eyes and reveled in the tastes and smells, knowing Brett was there if she somehow seized from giving in to her senses, but she didn't think that was likely to happen anymore.
"Brett?"

"What," a wrinkle formed between his eyebrows like he was worried just because she used his name
as a question. It was a tiny thing, but somehow it made her chest tighten and her heart beat faster.

"Will you let me know if you notice me having any seizures, even little ones? I think they've mostly
gone away, or at least I haven't noticed any in days."

"Cool. I'll try to watch for the absence of an absence seizure and then tell you about the absence or
lack thereof."

Gabi rolled her eyes and took another bite of crepe. Then the part of her hearing that had stayed
lightly trained on Dr. Michaels heard him moving around. She reached a hand out to Brett's wrist and
listened until the professor was in the shower.

"Okay, Michaels is showering now. I should probably go get dressed, before you're stuck with me
holding onto you all day."

Brett whispered back, "What's Joe going to think?"

"I guess we either hang out in one of our bedrooms or just happen to have some bits touching while
we both work on the couch."

Brett shrugged, "I'll gather some stuff, and we can start out on the sofa."

And so began a long morning of Gabi working on her laptop and Brett shifting restlessly between
reading, computer and iPod. Gabi appreciated how quiet the room was as she listened to Joe sleep
and easily kept track of Michaels typing and occasionally moving around his rental.

Around eleven, Gabi heard Michaels open his front door and walk outside. "He's leaving his house.
Get your shoes on in case we need to follow him someplace."

Brett obliged without comment. When the professor stopped moving, Gabi said, "I think he's at the
bus stop. What do we do?"

"I think he'd be pretty suspicious if we follow him onto the bus, but I'm willing if you want to."

"But he's getting away!"

"He's probably going grocery shopping or something. You could wait and listen for when he gets
back, maybe check if he brings anything back with him."

"We should go look now to see if he's carrying anything."

Brett half shrugged. They walked down the road outside, casually holding hands until they could see
the bus stop without being obvious about it. Gabi squatted down as if looking at a small, weedy plant
near the edge of the road. Brett squatted too, quick to understand what she was doing and play along.
While he pointed and pretended to study the plant, Gabi let her eyesight zero in on Michaels, but he
didn't seem to have anything beyond slight bulges in his pockets that were likely just keys and a
wallet.

After the bus came and took Michaels away, they returned home and made grilled cheese
sandwiches together. When Joe finally woke up, they even made him one. Gabi didn't have to keep
in touch with Brett to keep an ear out for Michaels' return and monitor Joe in the house, but it was
still easier once she and Brett settled back on the sofa.
Then Joe started watching sports on TV, and Gabi thought about begging off to her room. However, it was clear Brett was happier watching the soccer game Joe finally settled on. Gabi was happier with Brett than with the quiet of her room, as she kept an ear out for Michaels. But overall, she didn't get much done that afternoon, and it kind of gave her a headache.

Finally, Joe left for another date around dinnertime. Since he was taking the bus into town with yet a different woman than he'd dated before, Gabi wasn't terribly worried about having him out of hearing range. "I guess now I just keep listening for Michaels to return, and it's pretty clear he didn't just go grocery shopping."

"We should check a bus schedule. I don't think it runs very late on weekends."

"He could take a cab home."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"What do you want for dinner?"

"I was going to make canned soup."

Brett wrinkled his nose. "How about stir fry?"

"Can I at least contribute for groceries next time you go shopping?"

"Sure," he said, but Gabi suspected he'd try to get out of it. She'd have to watch for that.

Both cooking and eating dinner was fun, but Brett eyed the sofa with disdain afterward. "How about if I give you a massage tonight?" he offered. "That works as touching, and you can still listen for whatever the prof or Joe do when they get back, right?"

"Yeah, that sounds great, but don't let me fall asleep."

They ended up in Brett's room after putting stuff away and taking turns to shower and brush their teeth. Gabi had decided to just wear her pajama bottoms and a tank top, since she knew her bra had tugged annoyingly during the first back rub. Brett was in sweats and a tee shirt, so it seemed like they were both making themselves comfortable, even though Gabi felt increasingly uncomfortable at the thought of lying down on Brett's bed.

Brett must have seen something in her face, because he smirked and said, "I assure you that my intentions are completely honorable."

Gabi shook her head, trying to make sense of her reactions both good and bad. No part of her questioned the honor of Brett's intentions. But a multitude of parts questioned why he was so kind to her, if whatever bond she felt to him forced some form of reciprocation, or if to some extent he was nice because he felt sorry for her. Regardless, she did feel an almost overwhelming connection to him, which made touch from him feel better and safer than anything she'd ever known. Besides, there was no easy way to back out of the offered massage now, even if she'd wanted to, so she lay down on her stomach on Brett's bed.

The first easy circles he made on her back brought tears to her eyes. She closed them and wondered if letting Brett this close to her would eventually make his leaving that much worse. As the analytical part of her mind tried to generate scenarios and probabilities, another part tuned in to the touch of Brett's hands on her back. Some tiny high pitched sound formed in her throat, and she stifled it
before considering what it meant.

By the time Brett moved to her feet, she'd given up. Her body seemed to have a whole language of little sounds that she'd never known about, all somehow triggered by touch. Brett hadn't said a word or made any noise, and monitoring for Michaels' return was easy in the silence, so she let her awareness float. Every touch Brett gave seemed to connect to points all over Gabi's body, definitely loosening the muscles, but also making her skin fizz with sensitivity. The smell of Brett and his bedding surrounded her in a way she could almost physically feel, like a warm blanket that reached everywhere without annoying gaps or drafts.

Her senses were so satiated with touch and smell and hearing small sounds outside that Gabi was a little startled when Brett asked, "Are you still awake?"

At some point he'd gone from massaging her scalp to more or less petting her hair. He stopped at her small startle, and she said, "I'm awake and still listening. I could probably go back to my own room and just come find you if there's stuff I need to listen to when he comes home."

"Or I could stay awake and listen for any motors passing outside, then wake you up if I hear any."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Not yet, but if he's not home by midnight or one, I might give up."

"Sounds like a plan, if you're sure."

"Yeah, go ahead and sleep. I've got you." He started stroking her hair again and she absorbed all the vibrations that passed through each strand and fell asleep dreaming about her microbots.

When she woke early the next morning, Brett was curled up behind her with his arm tucked snug around her. It felt wonderful, and she let herself bask for a few minutes as she extended her hearing and confirmed that neither Joe nor Michaels had come home yet. The clock on Brett's desk read two o'clock, and Gabi was tempted to let herself sleep some more as she was. But the annoying parts of her brain said she shouldn't get used to having this, and that Brett had been too nice to wake her up and kick her out, but that wasn't the same as really wanting her there. Besides, waking up in the morning was bound to be awkward for both of them. So Gabi carefully slid out of Brett's hold. Once standing, she folded the bedding she'd been sleeping on top of so that it folded back across Brett. He didn't wake up, and she smiled at him as she left.

In her room, she fell asleep immediately and had a most intense dream about vibrations through the earth and experiencing the point of view of her microbots. It started out as a good dream, as if she could partly hear and partly feel grains of soil shifting where her bots had been, above the five inch artifact she'd discovered. Then the shifting became violent. The matrix of soil tipped vertiginously: sideways, over, upside down. Gabi heard the angry chirping sound of an African wild dog, bleating as if it were rushing in to play guard dog with its best attempt at a warning bark. Gabi felt soil rocking like an earthquake around her artifact. For a moment she could feel the artifact being scooped up with the ever-shifting soil. Then other objects were thrown down and there was thumping up above, transmitting vibrations through the earth.

Brett thumbed through a cookbook that had come with their South African kitchen supplies. He'd hoped to find something interesting to make for breakfast, but the book seemed to be published in London, so not very exotic.
Then Gabi came in shuffling her feet with her eyes squinted almost shut. She was still in pajamas with a robe pulled on over, hair amazingly puffy and mussed, and her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"Are you okay?"

She shook her head and stopped a few feet in front of him. He stepped forward and pulled her close in a hug, stroking her back.

"Is there something happening I should know about?"

"No." She winced at her own voice, which was a little strained but no worse than she looked. "Neither Michaels nor Joe came home yet."

"Are you freaking over anything I did?"

She took too long to answer but said, "Not really." She relaxed in his arms. "I hurt?"

"You think you're sick?"

She just shrugged. Her eyes were closed now and he guided her to the sofa, still holding her close as they settled. While he hated to see Gabi hurting, the fact that she'd come to him so simply to admit it felt like an honor and warmed him inside. "Describe whatever you can?"

"My head hurts, behind my eyes, worse when they're open. My skin feels prickly? Rough? Hurt? I don't know. It's sort of how my skin feels when I have a fever, but I'm not sure other people feel fevers like that, and anyway, I don't have a fever."

Brett started to let go, but she said, "Being held doesn't hurt. It might be better."

He still pulled back a bit saying, "Why don't we look at some of the skin that hurts, just to check for rash or sunburn or whatever."

She sat up straighter with a wince but not opening her eyes and dropped the robe from her shoulders to expose her arms and the part of her chest above the tank top she'd slept in the night before. Brett looked and then carefully touched.

"I don't see or feel any rash or roughness."

"Do you think there's something wrong with my senses? Do you think it's because you touched me and everything felt so good last night?"

She looked miserable saying it, and her voice shook as if she might cry. Brett didn't want to believe being a Guardian could be as terrible as that. He lifted her robe back up and gently held her again. "I don’t think so, but let's work through this. I'm taking it you've never been touched that much before?"

She shook her head and ended with her face against his chest. "Did you have your sense of touch more focused or increased or whatever you'd call it?"

"Maybe. I didn't try one way or another."

"But it didn't hurt last night or whenever you left?"

"No."
He couldn't believe the relief that washed through him, to know that at least he hadn't hurt her before and that she still wanted him touching her now. He didn't want to believe whatever was wrong could be blamed on something as innocent as his massage and holding her while she slept, and that brought him to the other possibility. "But you had your hearing cranked up most of yesterday. Was that more than you've ever pushed your senses before?"

She froze in his arms for a moment but then relaxed and said, "Yeah. Almost certainly, but it wasn't bothering me then."

"Are you trying to extend your hearing now?"

"Just like I was yesterday after Michaels left."

"I think you can let that go. I'll hear anything motorized coming in, or you can check every hour, but I don't know that it's even worth worrying about at this point. Let's try to make you feel better. Are you hungry?"

"I'm not sure I could keep even water down."

"Okay." He touched a hand to her forehead and didn't feel any fever, but she'd described a headache behind her eyes. "How does a cool cloth over your forehead or eyes sound?"

"Fine, I guess. Maybe good."

"Would you be better lying down in bed?"

She clung a little tighter for a second, and he added, "I'd stay with you."

"Yeah, with not much light."

"Have you ever had a migraine?" Brett had a vague memory that migraines made people light sensitive and nauseated at the thought of eating.

"I don’t think so. I don’t usually get headaches."

By the time he had Gabi settled in her bed with the lights off and a cool cloth over her eyes, he was running out of ideas but wanted to offer more. "Let me try rubbing your temples and scalp. Tell me if anything I do makes a difference, better or worse."

"Okay." The trust in that single word was almost too much for him. He realized Gabi hadn't just admitted to feeling bad, she trusted him with almost all her defenses down. He sat above her head on her bed and circled his fingers by her temples, adjusting position and pressure until she stopped squinting and wincing.

"It's nice," she said after lying still for a while, "but I'm not sure it really matters to the headache."

Then he tried massaging along her hairline and upward. "It's kind of mixed good and bad, but I like it better than not being touched at all."

Brett had a feeling Gabi might prefer even touch that hurt right now rather than being left alone. He went back to rubbing her temples and said, "We don't have a way to contact Lerato, but I could try calling that professor in Washington, see if he had any advice."

"There's no pay phone here."

"If I was going to worry about someone tapping my phone, I'd have to worry about bugs for
listening to us here as well. Let's hope that's overkill. Anyway, we thought he was affiliated with the anthropology department at Rainier University. I'm currently declared with a minor in anthropology and working a site with potential hominid remains. It wouldn't be much of a stretch for me to consider grad school there in anthropology. He may not buy it, but it gives plausible deniability for calling him. I'll use my phone. Is the number still in your purse?"

"No, I memorized it. Are you sure you want to do this? I'll probably be okay in a while."

"Then what, we have you experiment each day to see what knocks you out the next morning? If you think this guy has information worth sharing, let's see if he'll share it."

Brett pulled out his phone, and Gabi told him the cell number she'd memorized.

"Hello?"

"Uh, Mr. Sandburg?"

"Yes? Who is this?"

"I'm a friend of the girl who called you Thursday?"

"Right, from another country. I'll assume it's a reasonable time there."

"Oh, sorry." He paused but figured ending the call now wouldn't help either of them. "Look, she told me you're a professor of anthropology, so could we just say I'm finishing my final year for a bachelor's in archeology with a minor in anthropology and called to ask you about grad school at Rainier in anthropology?"

"I'm not sure I'm awake enough for this hypothetical."

"Yeah, I really am sorry, but I thought you might need a reason later, since I had to call from my own phone. Anyway, since we're talking, can I ask you an anthropology question? About the sort of people she talked to you about before?"

"Sure, ask away." There were sounds in the background, like Sandburg was moving around, possibly getting out of bed, but he sounded less annoyed than before.

"So do those people ever get headaches, maybe migraines, and their skin feeling prickly or hurt, maybe from overdoing stuff or maybe from being touched more than they're used to?"

"I see. I think I understand what you're asking." Suddenly, the voice on the other end sounded a lot more caring and alert. He also sounded younger and more real. Brett couldn't help starting to like the guy. "Was there any loss of consciousness, any lack of response?"

Brett looked to Gabi, who he assumed was listening even if she shouldn't be extending her hearing even that much. He raised an eyebrow in question, and she shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Huh, you realize I'm going on very little data here? But what you're describing wouldn't surprise me after zoning out for a long time or seeming to be unconscious."

"She did sleep. And before that, she was—she was working for longer than she had before, most of a day, but she didn't feel bad until after a massage and a night's sleep." Brett realized after saying it that he'd given up any pretence of this being an abstract question, but well, they hadn't been trying to fool Sandburg about that, and no one else could prove anything from what he'd said. They hadn't even used the word Sentinel or Guardian in this conversation.
"A whole day? That could wear someone out, but I haven't seen the sort of reaction you're describing. You could try usual remedies like rest in a dark room. Sometimes these individuals have atypical drug reactions, but if she's had large doses of ibuprofen before, you could try the maximum over the counter dose."

Gabi shook her head.

"I think we might have reaction issues."

Sandburg’s sigh was audible over the long distance connection as if he was right there worrying with Brett.

"Does she know how to dial everything down as low as possible?"

"Um, like making it more normal?"

"Or below, if she can. Sometimes it helps to picture a dial labeled zero to ten where maybe two or three is what she's at normally during the day. Then she could try to dial down whatever sense was overused, maybe other senses as well. You know how to keep her grounded? How to bring her back if need be?"

"I think so."

"I'm not sure there's much more I can tell you. Do you want me to follow up on anything else, like what she asked about before?"

"No, not now I don’t think. I appreciate you're trying to help. If I call again, I'll try to adjust for time zones."

"If it's urgent, don't worry about it. And really, I should follow up with you sometime on the grad school idea if you're at all serious. It's more complicated than you might think, though you've both shown a lot of caution so far."

"Thanks. You seem like a good guy."

"You too. Good luck."

They said goodbye, and ended there.

Brett stroked the side of Gabi’s face, around the cool wet cloth. "You shouldn't have been straining to listen."

"Probably not. It hurts more now, but can you blame me?" Gabi's eyes were closed again, and she relaxed into his touch.

"Not really. He seems like a nice person. I want to trust him."

"I hope we can. For now, I'm going to try picturing dials."

"You want me to talk you through it?"

The corners of her mouth curled up in a trace of a smile.

"I would, but I think I should start with hearing, and that would make it hard to listen. I honestly don't think I can take touch all the way out. It's never been like my other senses. If you hear a car or need to tell me something, try tapping at my hand or even shaking me if you need to. Otherwise,
why don't you squeeze my hand twice when it's been an hour. I'll check, and if neither Joe nor Michaels is back, then I'll squeeze twice back, and we'll wait another hour."

"Maybe we should just let this go for today."

"It's really not that bad, and I need to know where Michaels went overnight."

"As you wish." Brett watched Gabi smile faintly again and wondered if she thought of the *Princess Bride* like he did, or if she just heard how he felt in his voice.

#

Gabi held tight to Brett's hand as she imagined a dial controlling her hearing and tried to tune it all the way down. It was hard not to hold on to the sound of Brett's heartbeat, and Gabi wondered if she'd been listening to it continuously, without quite meaning to, at least since she'd come back from jail.

Finally, she made herself give it up, and tried to accept not hearing anything. The lack of exterior sounds made the pain behind hear eyes seem like a scream, and then it seemed like a scream with rhythm, not quite heard but felt throughout her perceptions. It was freaky and made her cold and tense to the point that her muscles hurt.

Then Gabi realized she could feel Brett's pulse where she was holding his hand. She didn't think she was expanding her touch to feel that. Regardless, she couldn't give it up. Instead, she let that rhythm replace the clamor in her head and felt her whole body relax.

Trying to picture a dial for smell just made her more aware of the comforting scents of Brett's skin and hair. Her own bedding smelled like her, but in a stale, stressed way that reminded her how dreaming about the vibrations she'd feel as a microbot had turned into a nightmare last night. The first part had been fine and happy. But then there had been the uneven, increasingly erratic and gigantic vibrations, like an earthquake, although probably on a micro-scale if sensed by a microbot.

Remembering the dream made her head hurt intensely.

Gabi quickly set her imaginary smell dial to near zero, relying more on distraction than control. Then she imagined a dial for just the part of touch that took in vibrations, like a microbot. She saw no reason an imaginary dial couldn't be used for imaginary sensations, or even the memory of dreaming vibrations. It was a struggle to focus on that dial and not think about how crazy this method was, what her dream meant, or what might be happening outside as she played these mind games. But eventually she narrowed her focus to an awareness of Brett's hand, his pulse, and the vibrations dial that she was trying to set to zero. When she pushed that dial down, she felt much better and let herself drift.

A short while later, she felt two squeezes on her hand. It seemed to bring her back from not thinking, and Gabi wondered if she could have fallen asleep or slipped into a long absence seizure. If so, at least she'd come back to Brett's signal, and his pulse was even calmer than before, so she came back feeling secure. In a moment she remembered to check for sounds of Joe or Michaels. Imagining the dial for her sense of hearing she dialed up to four, where she could hear Brett's heartbeat again. Then she shifted her attention to the rest of the house. Hearing nothing, she was pretty sure Joe was still out, but she dialed higher to check, then followed sounds from outside. There was a dripping faucet in the house next door, and a hum from a light or possibly a computer fan in a house across from where Michaels was staying. Without meaning to, she heard Joe's voice, making plans to go into town with a woman whose voice she knew but couldn't quite identify. It sounded like Joe's typical flirting, and Gabi focused on the silence where Michaels’ housing stood. He hadn't come home.
Gabi imagined her dial for hearing must be at eight or nine. She pictured dialing it back down to zero, and found both relief and loneliness in the lack of sound. Still, she liked the simplicity of the imaginary dials. This time she hadn't lost track of the pulse she could feel through Brett's hand, so she didn't panic without her hearing. She gave two squeezes, to let Brett know she'd checked on Joe and Michaels. Then her brain churned through what she'd learned in the last hour, and through reasoning she couldn't quite logically explain, concluded that her dream about hearing vibrations was what triggered her headache and the oversensitivity of her skin. Dialing that down and resting seemed to have helped, and Gabi wondered if she could get up now and be all right.

Before she could decide, a warm flood of relief swamped her, because the pain hadn't had anything to do with Brett touching and holding her. The release of that fear, a fear she'd held too close to even think about directly, left Gabi relaxed like just before or after sleep. She let her hearing rise enough to hear Brett's heartbeat. Then she dialed up smell a couple notches and allowed Brett's scents to permeate her awareness. It felt like home. Part of her wanted to speak and tell him right away, but part of her wanted to stay as she was, where everything finally felt safe.

#

Brett felt better during the second hour, after he signaled Gabi with two squeezes and a couple minutes later she signaled back. Perhaps he just imagined it, but her entire body seemed more relaxed. That made it easier for him to sit still and wait. He watched her breathe and felt her palm begin to sweat against his. Somehow it wasn't boring. He felt a connection, as if he was holding a new baby sister, and she was the most precious thing he'd ever been given.

He knew Gabi would hate that description, then he wondered if he really knew that or was just projecting from how Chris had reacted when Brett shared such goofy, mushy thoughts. He tried to imagine how Chris would react to Gabi spending some time each day with them. Maybe Chris would prefer that Brett met Gabi separately, for lunch or something.

Brett realized that he wouldn't allow Chris or anyone else to insist on that. While Brett missed having a boyfriend, and he certainly missed sex, he didn't really want to go back to Chris. What he really wanted was to find someone like Gabi, or at least someone who could honestly accept his relationship with Gabi, and it would be nice if that person wanted Brett to share the thoughts that passed through his mind, whatever he thought and whoever he thought about. Maybe if he could find that person, they could share a three person apartment, or maybe four if Gabi wanted to bring in someone else.

It still made Brett sad to think that Gabi had never really been kissed, never really had a girlfriend or boyfriend who appreciated her. In a way it seemed impossible. Even without knowing Gabi was a Guardian, she was such a brilliant and aware person. Surely someone would be drawn to her who could love and appreciate her, even if Brett wasn't sure he could find someone like that for himself. He wondered if he should try to convince Gabi to relax her two year rule or if he'd have to pass the two year mark himself to convince her that others might care about her beyond infatuation.

He didn't want to distract Gabi from what she needed to make her better, but his free hand itched to move, to play with her hair or stroke her face. He wished whatever bond they might have formed made him empathic enough to know if she was still in pain or had found a way to make herself better.

Then he heard the bus arriving at the end of the road and knew he should signal. He tapped her hand lightly, and said, "There's the bus," in case she could hear him.

"I hear it," she said softly, "and Michaels is on it. Could you open my bedroom window?"
Brett wanted to ask her to dial back her hearing. Had she been listening for the bus? Would pushing herself to identify Michaels before he even left the bus cause her more pain? His eyes still watched her breathing and what he could see of her face beneath the cloth. Her body didn't display any pain, but she was keeping very still. He kept hold of her hand as he took the single step necessary to open the only window in the room. Trying to argue her out of using her hearing however she wanted seemed unfair. It was her ability and her body after all. Still, he wished he could talk her into taking the rest of the day off, letting herself recover. Instead, he held her hand and wished he could take her pain away.

Brett heard at least two people walk by after exiting the bus. He couldn't actually see them from Gabi's window, but having the window open made listening much easier. He hoped it made listening very easy for Gabi, hoped she wouldn't overextend herself. His hand gripped hers just a little tighter, and he thought he felt a brief squeeze in response. The next few minutes of silent waiting were harder than the whole hour before. He'd just convinced himself to wait five more minutes before interrupting to ask if Gabi really needed to keep at it, when Gabi squeezed his hand and spoke.

"By sound all I know is that he walked home, dropped his keys on a hard wooden surface, then stripped for a shower. By scent, however, I'd say he had sex last night, with a woman, and since then, I think he may have had a baby spit up on him. I can't say I've been around a lot of babies, but there's this weird kind of mouthy, slightly sour, milky drool smell. He also smells a little like bacon grease. I'll need to practice more to know if eating bacon in a diner would leave a smell like that, but I'm picturing him standing in a kitchen holding a baby while someone made bacon."

"You think he has a girlfriend with a baby or he got someone pregnant when he was here last summer?"

"But he's married, right? I met his wife at the conference reception."

"And yet, you're willing to tell me this and not who Joe dates?"

"Joe dates women from the dig, and I'd feel bad gossiping behind their backs. But if Michaels is cheating on his wife and framing me for smuggling, then he deserves what he's got coming. You don't think the woman with the baby was in on any of it, do you?"

"Like knowing that he's cheating on his wife?"

Gabi pulled the washcloth off her forehead and looked at him in the dim light. "Maybe his wife's okay with it? No, she didn't really seem the type. But having an affair is different from smuggling or framing someone. Isn't it? And what about the baby?"

Gabi's eyes were bright, even as she squinted in the dim light from around her window blinds. The small lines around her eyes could express sympathy for a mother and baby, making him think Gabi was mostly recovered and not in pain anymore.

"Gabi, do you really think the woman has anything to do Michaels' schemes here?"

"No, probably not."

"Did listening and smelling him make you feel worse?"

"No, well, not much. I think I could eat toast or something now."

Brett helped her as she pushed to sitting. Her eyes squeezed shut as she came upright, and he reached a spare hand around her back to steady her. "Why don't you lie down and let me go make some toast and bring it here?"
Both sides of her face sank into a frown, but she said "okay" and lay back down.

It was hard to let go, even to make food. "Keep things tuned down while I'm gone, okay?"

Gabi let out a little huff of air, but he thought it was agreement, more or less.

Later, when she'd managed to keep down half a piece of toast and Brett had gobbled down two peanut butter sandwiches, he sat on her bed with Gabi's feet in his lap. He had never wanted so badly to rub someone's feet.

"Should I avoid touching you while you get better?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure touch had nothing to do with overextending myself."

"So you think it was all the listening yesterday?"

"Maybe that was part of it. You know before when you said you didn't like labels or defining things or something like that?"

"Yeah?"

"When I was making imaginary dials for my senses, I realized the way we label five senses might have misled me. I mean, I told you touch always seemed different and never made me seize?"

Brett made an affirmative noise and started rubbing Gabi's feet around the toes.

"That feels good." She spread her toes wider, as if by reflex. "So when I feel your fingers touch my toes, that's my sense of touch, right?" She didn't wait for a response. "But if I feel some sort of twinge higher up my foot or inside my ankle in response to some nerve signal you trigger, is that still my sense of touch feeling that? What about my headache? Do I feel the ache inside my head with my sense of touch? And if not, what sense am I using?"

"A fine argument against labeling things."

"Right, but what if I can't tell you what I think caused my headache and my skin being all sensitive because I need words beyond touch and hearing?"

"Then we invent our own language. I tried that three or four times as a kid."

"Really?" Gabi's eyes were suddenly open wide, and she smiled at him in a way that sent tingles down his arms and made him more attentive to the feet he was rubbing. Gabi's foot pressed into his touch as if she felt the change. "Okay, so what sense are my microrobots using when they send out and pick up vibrations to detect buried objects or changes in the soil?"

"I'm guessing it's not x-rays, sonar or radar?"

"Nope, closest to radar, but those do seem like they should have a group name together, don't they? Maybe we could call it a sense of vibration?"

"Sounds like an earthquake monitor."

"A sense of vibration transmission?"

"Vibe-mission," Brett suggested.

"Sounds like a failed sixties band. How about trans-vibration?"
"Do we need a word for this?"

"I think I made a dial for it."

"And it helped?"

"Yeah. I think before when I pumped up my hearing I also expanded my trans-vibration sense."

"Too long, and it doesn't take an –ing."

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

Brett pushed both thumbs lengthwise down the sole of her foot.

"Amazingly amazing." Then with a less than happy sigh she said, "I had a dream last night as if I were the microrobots, and I think I may have been extending that sense out, I don’t know how far."

"In your sleep?"

"I know. It would be bad if I could do something while sleeping that could make me this miserable the next day. But I think it happened because I'd been extending this other sense along with my hearing all day yesterday and didn't identify it. Now that I have a dial for it, and eventually a name, I think I'll do better. It seems to be more related to hearing than touch, since dialing up hearing does push my headache a bit while dialing up touch doesn't."

"Are you dialing up touch now?"

"Just a little maybe." She met Brett's eyes and gave him a weak smile. "I think I've always done that in response to pleasant touch."

"You're sure it won't make you feel worse?"

"I think it makes me better, but I don't want to take advantage."

"I don't think you have to worry about taking advantage of me."

Gabi's eyes closed at that. "I think I really do. You are way too nice. You keep feeding me, touching me, putting up with me being sick."

"You started by caring when I was sick and learning massage for me."

"Because I wanted to."

"I want to do this." Brett wrapped his hands around her foot in a mini foot hug.

Gabi bit her lips and looked like she might cry for a moment.

"What?"

"If you stop gifting me food, I'll go make or buy some myself. But what will I do if you take away touch and caring?"

"I don't intend to do that."

"I know, but friendships always start this way. People are friendly, they do kind things for someone. Then both people start to depend on, even ask for those kindesses. That's how they know it's a
friendship and not just gifting and being friendly. But I don't know if any friendship lasts forever, certainly none I've ever known has."

Brett took both of Gabi's feet and hugged them close, wanting Gabi to feel warm and wanted. "I like the idea of forever, but I'm not sure how many friendships I've even had that didn't involve sex. I want to believe that what we have is going to be more stable than that. I called you 'sister,' and maybe that's the best way to explain this to other people. But if you're a Guardian or Sentinel and I'm your Guide or Companion or whatever, then that's some sort of relationship. When I want to touch you, it's not a gift for you or a need of my own, it feels like part of that relationship. Maybe you'll find someone else, some boyfriend or girlfriend or a different Guide, and it won't be like this anymore. But I tell you, even if one of my high school boyfriends showed up on my doorstep now, if he sincerely needed my help with something, I'd still want to help him, because I'd still feel some connection. I'm pretty sure I'll still feel a stronger connection than that to you, always."

"You'd still want to be there for any of your ex-boyfriends?"

"Within certain boundaries, and if we're defining our own language, I'm only counting someone as a boyfriend if there wasn't any coercion involved."

Gabi looked at him with wide, unblinking eyes, and Brett realized he was still huddled around her feet. "You want to know about my past relationships?"

"You just told me a lot. Somehow, I didn't think you'd ever been—coerced."

"I think I was a lot luckier than you. My first time was good, fumbling and clueless, but with a friend. The first time I gave someone a blowjob was bad, and I should have said no. I didn't realize until afterward how the memory would come back at later times, times that should have been all good and about someone I was with who I really liked. But I think I've always been good at appreciating what I had. Mostly I let guys choose me, which was flattering and less work. But I chose you, didn't I? You didn't drag me along to hot chocolate or the cheetah place. And yet, you're the first person I've been even this close to who appreciated me for who I was and didn't want to change me. No way I'm adopting anything like your two year rule, but I think I'm going to see relationships of all kinds differently now."

Gabi pushed herself up and hugged him. It was awkward with her feet still across his lap. She ended up sort of wrapped around him, mostly hugging his one shoulder and his back.

After a minute he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I feel so much better."

#

Monday morning back at the dig Gabi froze. She sniffed. The smells of lighter fluid and ash hit first. Tossed dirt, beer and greasy potato chips came next. She wanted to find scents of people, scents of people she could identify. But the air outside that isolated square was full of people smells. If she pushed much harder at the smells down in the square where her microbots had identified an artifact, she might throw herself into a seizure. At that thought something inside her instinctively sought Brett's heartbeat.

She turned toward Brett, meaning to call his name, but before she spoke he looked up, saw something in her face or her stance, and ran over.

When Brett reached her, she grabbed his hand. "Hold on for a sec. I've got to check on the artifact."
"Don't hurt yourself."

"Shh."

Gabi pictured the dial she'd made for vibration transmission. She moved it from zero to five, but felt nothing beyond surface noise. She cranked it up to ten, and when that wasn't enough, she stomped her foot and focused her eyes on the soil beneath the burned garbage and ash in the pit. She couldn't sense the five inch artifact with engraving that she'd come to know so well. Instead, she felt the familiar vibrations from her dream. Her dream had been someone digging up and vandalizing the square with her microbots' first major find. She felt the vibrations of air sucking into her lungs and dialed back all her senses before letting herself scream.

The next thing she knew, everyone who'd made it to the dig that early on Monday morning was gathered around the vandalized square, talking and pointing. "Who could have… Call someone… Police… Adviser… When did this…"

She forced her hearing and vibration sense down and took deep breaths to keep from screaming again. Then she looked from person to person, comparing body language and facial expressions. If there was any sign of insider involvement, she couldn't see it, not even in Joe. She eased her hearing up to catch Joe's heartbeat, trying to compare it to others in the crowd, but the noise was too much. Lots of hearts were beating fast, but with so many different rhythms and speeds, and especially with all the talking, she found it hard to listen. There was no plan she could come up with to use her senses to find out who had done it. A cold, heavy feeling filled her limbs as she realized there was no proof that an artifact had been stolen. Even if she could prove it, she'd probably be accused of staging it herself, since she was already suspected of smuggling and would have had the best of idea of where to dig.

#

Brett waited until five in the evening to call Sandburg again. That should be eight o'clock Monday morning in Washington, but given how badly the rest of the day had gone, Brett was ready to believe he had calculated wrong as well. He sat with his arm around Gabi on the bed in her room, holding his phone to the ear nearest to her, so she wouldn't have to extend her hearing to listen.

"Hello?" Sandburg's normal, awake voice was better than Brett had hoped for.

"Hi. It's me again, prospective anthropology student calling from a dig in South Africa. I think we're ready to tell you a lot more, because you might be the only one who'll listen. But we'd have to trust you to keep stuff confidential, unpublished master's research and a whole lot more. Do you want to deal with us?"

"Man, I offered whatever help I could give when your friend first called. Is she still hurting?"

It spoke to how badly everything had gone recently that Brett had forgotten it was just yesterday Gabi had been sick in bed and that his last call to Sandburg had been for advice on healing a Guardian. "No, she was all better this morning. But the other stuff she called you about, where someone was trying to frame us for smuggling rhino horn? Well now someone's stolen an artifact that she'd identified with the micro-robot grid she built for her master's project. But since it was still in the ground on Friday and whoever tore up its grid square made it look like they were just burning garbage in a pit in the ground, neither the police nor our lawyer here think we have a case."

"Sounds like a really bad day, but you know, I'm not sure how you think I can help."

"We think we know who framed us for the rhino horn, and maybe he's smuggling relics, too. He
may need the money to support a mistress and kid he's got over here. But anyway, wouldn't it be the perfect crime to steal and smuggle out an artifact that hasn't been identified by any technology anyone else is willing to recognize?"

"And you think your suspect will try to send the artifact to the States?"

"Our lawyer says the rhino horn was addressed to a student at Bay Tech who was gone for the summer, and our suspect is a professor there. That isn't going to be a conflict of interest for you is it? If it's an academic, an archeology professor?"

"If the guy's involved in smuggling and everything else you mentioned? No problem at all. But what do you expect me to do?"

"Well, if my friend and I were discussing grad school options with you, then it might make sense to send you information on her microrobot grid and some detailed scanning images it produced, even if the object can't currently be found or even proven to exist. If someone in law enforcement or customs received copies of those scans, that would just seem like a misunderstanding, right?"

"You know, you would either make an excellent research assistant or a truly frightening one. Let me give you my email address and some instructions for encryption…"

#

The cold, heavy feeling that accompanied the loss of the artifact haunted Gabi, even with Brett's arm wrapped around her.

She let him call Sandburg, and she wrote an innocent seeming email explaining her master's research and how someone had chosen to tear around and burn garbage in the pit where she'd tentatively identified an artifact. She attached the specs for her microbots, previous sample readings, and the readings and images with the engraved artifact. Through it all Gabi felt numb, like something, possibly a part of herself, had been removed.

An hour later, she overheard Dr. Michaels receiving a phone call in his home across the way. Gabi used Brett's arm around her back to ground herself as she pumped up her hearing to catch both parts of the conversation.

"Did everything go smoothly?" a woman with a strong South African accent asked.

"Hush, don't mention that," Michaels replied.

"I wouldn't. Just want to know you are well?" The woman sounded like she was pleading, and it made Gabi's stomach clench.

"Don't worry."

"Of course I worry. I would do anything for you." With that, Gabi knew this was the mother of the professor's child, and she tensed waiting for the reply.

"Yes, yes, Thobile. I've got to go." The call ended quickly, but Michaels didn't go anywhere. Gabi listened for minutes and minutes becoming more upset the more certain she was that Michaels had lied to the woman who'd made herself so vulnerable to him.

She shivered in Brett's arms, and he whispered such that the words barely sounded. "What is it? Can I help?"
For a moment, she wanted to pull away from Brett. Thobile’s vulnerability helped Gabi to identify the way she’d been feeling off kilter since learning what she really was. She’d come to rely on Brett. It made Gabi vulnerable in a way no other touch or friendship ever had.

July 5, USA

"I'm done."

Blair didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until he heard a tap at his bedroom door and Jim asking, "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Blair stumbled up from the chair where he'd been sitting far too long and far too often lately, and focused his eyes on parts of the room farther away than his computer screen and desk. He made it to the French doors that separated his room from the rest of the loft and could feel himself smiling like a jack-o-lantern as he opened them to a similarly beaming Jim.

Then Blair was caught up in a full body hug. "I can't believe it," Jim said. Blair couldn't answer immediately as Jim squeezed the air right out of his lungs. "You're amazing."

Blair started to laugh into Jim's shoulder. "I think you're happier than I am. Remember, it's just a draft. Daniel and Carson still need to give feedback. I'll have to defend to the thesis committee they set up."

"You've been writing every spare moment for a week. Send it off, and then I'll take you out to dinner. I could even be happy with sprouts and tofu tonight."

Blair would have been happy to just curl up and fall asleep, preferably with Jim, but he knew what had to happen. "Don't you want to read it before I send it?"

"No." Jim let go of Blair and backed up enough to look him in the eyes. "I don't want to slow you down. That doesn't mean I'm not curious to read it, just that I trust you, and I'm not going to interfere with your work."

Blair pulled him into another hug. He could barely believe they could touch this way, let alone what Jim had just said. Blair focused on his breathing and the warmth of Jim's solid body to keep the tears from welling up. "I'm kind of a mess. I'd need a shower at least."

"No problem. Whenever you're ready."

Blair sent his draft, showered, shaved, and was dressing for dinner when it finally hit him. Jim could read his thesis because he wasn't a subject in Blair's study anymore. Whatever part of his reticence about having sex with Jim had been professional ethics, that wasn't an issue anymore either. While they hadn't been sleeping in the same bed every night, the nights they slept apart were mostly nights Blair worked so late that he barely slept anyway. And when they did share a bed, about the only thing keeping Blair's desire in check was his exhaustion. Part of him didn't want to trust Jim, even if he'd been auditioning for the best boyfriend ever lately. On some level, Blair didn't think it could last, didn't trust Jim not to kick Blair out or reject him the next time Jim got angry, didn't even quite believe that Jim wouldn't have a belated gay freak out. That part was shrinking even as Blair thought about it.

The part of Blair that had trouble keeping his hands to safe skin when they slept together pulled a silky long sleeve shirt from India out of his closet. It had always drawn compliments when Blair wore it on dates. Then he chose a pair of his softest, tightest jeans.
Jim had trouble swallowing his dinner. Blair had chosen Malaysian food, which Jim liked even if most of what they ordered was vegetarian. But every time he watched Blair's shirt slide across his pecs or nipples, every time Jim smelled the scent that was Blair fresh from the shower but also a bit aroused, a lump formed in the Sentinel's throat that was more derailing than his half hard cock. He tried to joke and make entertaining dinner conversation, but when Blair licked his lips or even swallowed, Jim had trouble remembering anything he was saying.

Back at the loft, Jim stood awkwardly in the kitchen with no dishes to wash. Blair took pity on him and said, "I'm not going to have sex with you just because you're officially not my research subject anymore, but if making out on the couch wouldn't make things worse rather than better, I could go for that."

Jim thought he could come from making out on the couch if he wasn't careful, but he could be careful and stick to whatever pace Blair wanted to set. He nodded and watched as Blair pulled two beers from the fridge and headed over to the sofa.

Jim plopped down, and it was all he could do to resist jumping Blair or turning on the TV to distract himself.

As if reading his mind, Blair asked, "Would it be easier for you if the TV was on?"

"I don't want it to be easy."

"So true."

Jim buried the way those flip words cut him like a knife. "You're just hoping to see spirit animals," he tried to tease.

"No, Jim." Blair was suddenly serious. "I don't want us to try anything just because we're Sentinel and Guide. Is that why you want to be with me?"

"No." Jim might not be able to explain it. He'd certainly taken hints from their spirit animals and perceived the rightness of being with Blair as his Sentinel. But now, meeting Blair's startlingly blue eyes and listening to his not quite steady breathing, Jim was certain that he cared more for Blair than he could have ever cared about anyone else, whether he'd learned about Sentinels and Guides or not. He wanted Blair to know, but all he could manage was whatever showed on his face as he felt his eyes tighten and go moist.

Blair reached a hand out to cradle Jim's jaw, to drag a thumb from his lip to just under his jaw bone. Then Blair leaned forward and kissed him, not as lightly as his previous touch, but carefully, brushing dry lips together, then coming back to offer just a flick of his tongue.

Jim shivered all over and dialed touch down to one as his cock filled so fast it hurt.

He gasped into Blair's mouth and kissed him back without finesse, not knowing where he was allowed to put his hands now that they were doing this. Instead, he explored with his tongue, letting it slide alongside Blair's, tasting Blair and feeling the warm press of muscle. It seemed like the same motion pressed on his cock, even though nothing was touching him but the fabric of his clothing.

Jim wanted to dial touch back up so he could memorize the feel of Blair's mouth, but it was almost too much already. He breathed in and concentrated on the scent, a scent he could have identified from across the bullpen as Blair, and tried to ignore the scents of arousal coming from them both.
Blair pulled back, leaving him panting. "Easy big guy, dial it down if you need to."

Jim couldn't tell Blair it was already dialed down. He couldn't find the words. Blair looked a little flushed, and Jim could hear Blair's heart beating almost as fast as his own, but from appearances, Blair was taking this much more in his stride. Jim didn't like feeling wrecked and desperate, except he kind of did. He wanted to offer that control to Blair, hoping it would tell him something Jim didn't know how to say. At the same time, Jim didn't know how often he could handle kissing this way before he'd break. Even as Blair leaned forward and kissed him again, still touching at just the lips and with one hand on Jim's face, Jim felt better than he had in years and could barely stand the pain of wanting more. Much to his horror some high pitched whine sounded in the back of his throat.

Blair brought his other hand first to Jim's face, then stroked down his neck to his back. Blair levered their bodies together until their chests pressed and Jim was caught in strobing flashes of warmth through cloth, wet tongue sliding behind teeth, herbal scent of hair surrounding his face, sweet taste of Blair with just a hint of spices from their dinner. Then Blair moaned deep in his throat, and Jim was suddenly seconds from coming. He dialed everything down and thought about being trapped under snow.

"Hey, are you okay? You just tensed up on me."

"I haven't done this in a while."

"Maybe we should stop for tonight." Blair pulled back to his original spot on the couch. "I'll promise to check on you in twenty minutes if you haven't left the shower by then. I don't want to be the only option you have or to mess with your mind that way."

Jim forced out a huff of something like derision, but he couldn't mean it. He also couldn't do what Blair was suggesting. Jim took off for the shower because Blair wanted him to, but he couldn't jerk off. He turned on cold water and waited for his body to chill all the way through. His first time with Blair, no matter how long he had to wait for it, would be soon enough. He'd gone without sex for months during deployments where he didn't like his other options. Sure it was easier to shut those feelings off when there was no one to touch, to sleep with, to kiss. But after years of abstinence, Jim didn't want to open up that part of himself just to jerk off in the shower.

Blair was surprised by his phone ringing early Monday morning as he threw breakfast together. He was pleased to hear the female sentinel had recovered but was thrown off kilter by the time he hung up—having given the probable Guide, now to be thought of as a potential grad student, instructions for the public key encryption Dr. McKay had set up after Daniel's phone had been hacked and details for sending him files related to a possible theft and smuggling.

Blair was pulling up the master's thesis and artifact pictures on his laptop by the time Jim ambled into the kitchen and took over toasting bagels and pouring coffee.

"I assume you heard the whole call."

"I'm glad the Sentinel kid is feeling better, but I'm not sure we should be getting involved in criminal investigations totally outside our jurisdiction."

Blair studied his Sentinel. Before the phone call, the morning had been mostly silent. They'd both had a restless night. Blair knew he'd had trouble sleeping chastely together after the kisses on the couch that had gone a little farther than Blair intended. Blair had jerked off in the shower and still woken up rock hard at midnight and again in the morning. He was pretty sure Jim hadn't allowed
himself any release at all, and Blair wasn't sure how long either of them could hold out. The chemistry between them had been amazing the night before, and Jim had seemed sincere when he'd said his change of heart wasn't only a Sentinel thing. Whatever was happening between them, Blair wasn't sure he could hold it back much longer.

"However, it might fall within your friend Daniel's jurisdiction." Jim loomed above Blair, staring at his computer screen. Blair refocused his attention, trying to understand. "There were symbols like that in Daniel's office and also in Dr. McKay's notes."

"You're sure they were the same symbols?" Blair asked.

"As close as I can be from that image. Can you ask him about it without throwing those kids to the wolves?"

"Those 'kids' are playing this like a game of cops and robbers. I don't have their names, just initials on this thesis that might not even be initials for the Sentinel's real name. The Guide said he'd open a new email account to communicate with me, but I'm not sure McKay would count anything I sent back as secure, even with encryption."

"Is the thesis work any good?"

"Tell you once I've read it, but given Daniel's other warnings when he called Friday about the hackers going after someone else, the woman who was studying Sentinels and had attended university in South Africa, we may need government resources if there's trouble. Now I'm thinking I should have warned the kid when he called, but South Africa's a big place, and while my phone may be secure now, his probably isn't."

"You've convinced me. Let's send it all to Daniel. Maybe we can tell Simon off the record, too, just in case he hears anything about artifacts or rhino horn in our ports."

Blair was surprised at how easily Jim came around to his point of view, and he couldn't help worrying that it had to do with sex and was only temporary. Then he kicked himself for thinking that way and read through a master's thesis on microbots that he could only half follow.

#

On the way up to the loft that night, Jim couldn't help wondering if there would be more kissing and making out on the couch. Truth be told, he'd thought about it every few minutes all day and was still caught between wanting it and worrying. He wanted Blair to be one hundred percent on board with whatever they did, but he couldn't monitor Blair's reactions well if he had to dial his senses below normal people's to avoid coming like a teenager. Still, if kissing was now something they did, Jim didn't think he'd be able to resist for more than a couple minutes once they were safely inside the loft.

When Jim unlocked and opened the door, his train of thought derailed. Someone had trashed their home.

Pillows had been thrown off the sofa, CDs and DVDs pulled off their racks, and boxes tossed out of the coat closet. Jim held up a hand to keep Blair still and quiet behind him as he extended his hearing to check if anyone or anything unexpected might still be inside. After that he checked by scent, but found only traces of their intruders. "Two males, aqua velva and hair oil. Not sure what they took yet. Call it in to Simon, because I doubt we were targeted at random."

While Blair called, Jim checked the rest of the loft. The first thing he noticed as missing was Blair's laptop.
The second person he asked Blair to call was Daniel.

#

It had been a long night of going over details in the loft and at the bullpen by the time Blair heard back in the wee hours of the morning, not from Daniel but from McKay.

"Sandburg, right?"

"Ah, yes, Dr. McKay. I didn't expect to hear from you."

"I don't know where that flighty archeologist has gone. They're probably all sleeping or something useless, but I had your number from securing your phone, and I have a location. You might as well tell your police."

"So we know who's behind this?"

"No one local. The same web signature associated with hacking Daniel’s phone also arranged for this theft and whoever is trying to hack into your computer, but they're just paying local hacks. Whoever's trying to collect data from your machine will fail, because I'm much smarter than, well, anyone. Also, I set it to destroy your disk if anyone got close. So you may be recovering a heap of slag, but the person doing it is by definition a criminal, so I thought you'd want to arrest him or something. If you're not interested, I have better things to do."

It sounded like the grouchy scientist really didn't care and might hang up on him, so Blair grabbed paper and pen and said, "What have you got?"

McKay gave him an address in a warehouse district near the docks.

"We'll need probable cause for a warrant."

"I'll send you a link for the message board where warehouse boy advertizes his services and the message calling for pick up at your address tonight. It won't link back to the person paying, but we've got the full force of the US government to screw up that investigation if need be, so for now I'll take care of it. Oh, and the mongoose showed up again, but I'm not discussing that now. Good bye."

Blair listened to his dial tone and the echoes of McKay abruptness for a moment before putting gears in motion to get a warrant.

#

Just before dawn on Tuesday, Jim listened to the heartbeat of a single sleeping individual inside the warehouse McKay had fingered and Simon had pushed through warrants to search. It would have been more satisfying to pick the door locks and then surprise the suspect in his sleep, but that wasn't how the law insisted they play it. Jim extended his hearing again to check for bombs or booby traps, then followed with sight and smell.

Finally, he pounded on the door. He heard the person inside stumble closer and shout, "Who is it?"

"Cascade Police. I require you to open this door immediately."

Jim heard locks moving, and then the door opened with a flimsy security chain in place. A young man with pillowcase wrinkles imprinted on his face looked out. "Should you show me your badge or papers or whatever?"
Jim showed his badge and behind him Blair held up the warrant.

"Oh shit," the young man said. "Let me get the chain."

Jim didn't like standing on the porch as the door shut, but he could hear the guy was just moving the chain. Then the door opened wide.

"Go ahead."

Jim located Blair's laptop by scent while Blair was still reading out the official spiel about complying with a search warrant. Jim opened the laptop using evidence gloves, even though his fingerprints were probably all over it already. The screen lit to the current login page McKay had installed.

"You worked on this yet?" Jim asked.

"I tried but couldn't do the job requested."

"Which was?"

"Is that covered by your warrant?"

"This laptop is stolen. We need to know everything you can tell us."

"Fine. I was supposed to clone it onto a back-up drive, but the encryption is non-commercial, nothing I've ever seen before, and set to wipe the machine if accessed in any of the ways I'd usually try. I was going to return it and the deposit. I didn't know it was stolen."

"Who brought it to you?"

"I don't know. Some courier."

"Who's paying for it?"

"No idea. I do a cash business, but that doesn't make it illegal."

"How would you return it?"

"Someone's supposed to pick up the cloned drive at noon."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

"Great. We'll stay with you until then, and you don't do anything that resembles communicating with the outside world."

"Do I have a choice?"

"We could go into the precinct and send someone here to wait for your courier while you spend six hours looking at mug shots or sitting in a holding cell."

"Shit, I'm going back to sleep."

What impressed Jim the most was that the guy actually managed to sleep through most of their stake out. Eventually, Blair fell asleep as well, since Jim insisted Blair's laptop was evidence and neither of them had anything to do after a brief call in to Simon and the backup who'd keep watch from
outside.

Jim stayed awake and alert despite having been up all night. He'd gotten a lot more sleep than Blair in the past week, and Jim couldn't begrudge his partner the chance to rest. Also, it made it easier for Jim to concentrate on inspecting the warehouse, which was full of computer parts and other electronics Jim barely understood, and listen in on activity outside, which was typical of workers and deliveries in such a neighborhood on a weekday morning.

By eleven thirty they were all awake, and Jim had convinced the hacker for hire to substitute a different computer and hard drive for what he was supposed to hand over, rather than admitting his failure.

"But I expect police protection if the customer comes back at me for this."

"Is the customer someone you're afraid of?"

"Not until you guys showed up."

After the hand off, Jim called digital forensics in to see if they could find anything in the warehouse or on the actual computers.

Jim and Blair went back to the bullpen and followed the news as it came in. The hacker was basically clean, though some of his business was dodgy, and someone could probably prosecute for tax evasion if they cared. Jim didn't care. The courier also appeared to be clean, trying to upload the data to an anonymous drop box that even McKay couldn't trace to anyone else. None of their physical leads from the break in led them to anyone specific, but Jim suspected that even with the right contacts he'd only uncover local muscle that knew nothing.

Someone tried to convince him to stay in a safe house that night, but Jim blew them off and drove Blair home.

#

"I'm too tired to deal with this," Jim said as they stood in the middle of their torn up living room.

"Let's ignore it and order pizza," Blair replied, even as he pushed the cushions back onto the sofa and sat down.

"You hate pizza."

"No, I just realize how unhealthy it is. Tonight is about comfort and not health, so pizza."

Jim called for pizza delivery and then collapsed on the sofa next to Blair.

"Come 'ere," Blair said as he pulled Jim sideways so his head landed on Blair's thigh. Blair ran his fingers through the bristles of Jim's hair and the big man immediately curled up so his top leg hid his groin and his top arm grabbed for Blair's knee.

Blair watched his Sentinel as his breathing became quick and shallow and said, "My god, you're horny, aren't you? I thought you'd be exhausted after working all night and annoyed that we didn't find any real leads, but you just went from zero to sixty in half a minute."

"You pulled my face into your lap and ran your fingers through my hair. Seriously Blair, I'm only human. You've got me anytime you want."
Blair's doubts melted a bit more at the words "only human" but he couldn't let it go. "No way. I know how much control matters to you. You spent three years trying to control your senses and wanting to shut them off because you didn't feel totally in control. And I'm not going to try to analyze you, man, but I think we could both agree you had control issues with your father and with your mission in Peru. It affects you in both good and bad ways, but it is part of you. How are you putting up with this?"

"I've put up with losing control around you from the moment we met." Jim closed his eyes and tipped his face farther away, nose pressing into Blair's thigh and probably breathing in Blair's arousal, since he couldn't help but respond. "Not only are you my Guide, but you're a freaking force of nature, Sandburg. Even Simon can't maintain control of situations once the Sandburg factor is in play. But this has nothing to do with that. I want to give it all to you, whatever you want. Even if you think I'm all screwed up, and I'm not saying you're wrong about that, but can't you see I'm in love with you?"

They both froze at the words.

Jim had wanted to say them for a long time. The context could have been better, but he'd known he'd screw it up one way or another, so it was mostly a relief to have gotten them out.

Blair's hand stopped moving but didn't leave Jim's head. Jim took that as a good sign.

"If I wanted you to just lie here and let me touch you, would you let me?"

The question hurt because Jim wanted to reach out so badly, was so tired of holding back. But Jim didn't have time to let those wants get in the way. "I would let you do anything, but I'd rather it was mutual."

"Just let me lead."

"I've been trying."

"I know, just a little longer."

"Okay."

Then Blair slid out from under Jim's head and crawled on top of him, kissing him. Jim's whole body tightened, and he dialed down and tried to think of snow and cold and the pain of chafed skin and fear of losing fingers.

"What are you doing?" Blair asked, pulling back so he was on his hands and knees looking down at Jim with deep blue eyes and dilated pupils.

"I'm trying not to come in my pants."

"I think that would be hot," Blair smiled in an impish amused way.

"Please," Jim couldn't believe how needy he sounded. "Not this time?"

Blair sat back and unfastened Jim's pants. He didn't take his eyes off Jim's face, but he kept it basic and didn't try to fondle or set Jim off. Then he slid Jim's pants all the way down and off and started unbuttoning Jim's shirt.
Jim was in some unknown space. His senses were still dialled below normal, but he dialled up hearing just a bit so he'd know if anyone was approaching the loft. That helped him feel a little safer so he could relax and focus the rest of his attention on Blair who was still fully clothed as he finished stripping Jim naked. Jim knew some people would find that hot, but in the moment, he was very glad when Blair pulled both layers of shirts over his head in one smooth motion.

Blair's hairy chest was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. Blair's nipples poked out as if hiding amongst the chestnut curls.

Jim wanted to reach out and touch. Maybe lick. But he knew this time wasn't about that. Instead, he let the sight of Blair's dark hair on golden skin, marking a trail down his belly and into his jeans, imprint on his vision. When Blair started to unfasten his button fly, Jim couldn't look away, and he could feel his cock leaking precome. Blair wore black boxers underneath, and Jim could see the tip of Blair's cock pushing to get out.

His whole body shivered, and Jim shook his head trying to hold on just a little longer. If Blair had so much as run a finger along Jim's length then, he would have lost it. But Blair removed his own pants and boxers matter of factly. Then he carefully lowered himself on top of Jim. They were touching everywhere but not moving. Jim closed his eyes and let himself feel everyplace their skin met. He kept his sense of touch at two, which he thought was normal for others, and he kept his hearing up a little higher to make him feel less vulnerable and to keep from losing himself in touch. Then Blair's mouth was on him, kissing wet and deliciously Blair. Blair's hair was swaying against the sides of Jim's face, and Jim could smell the natural shampoo but also the tang of Blair's sweat and arousal.

Jim's hips started moving, rubbing up and into Blair. He tried to hold still, to stop them, but Blair only grunted in time as his hand reached between them and wrapped around both their cocks at once. Blair moved with Jim now, the warm smooth skin of Blair's cock contrasting with the tougher skin of Blair's hand and traces of hair that stood out from Blair's stomach. Then Blair swiped a thumb over the tip of Jim's cock and slickly swooped down the side. Jim couldn't help panting, making tiny rasping noises and pushing faster and harder into Blair's hand.

Blair's hand shifted and twisted a little, and Jim felt the head of Blair's cock rub edge to edge with his own, both hot and slick. Jim was coming before he knew what hit him. His body snapped and rolled, and he was so glad for Blair's hand holding them together and Blair's weight pinning Jim down, keeping him present and surrounded with the smells and tastes and sounds of Blair.

Then Blair was coming, and the smell of Blair's release combined with a stuttered moan that would be one of Jim's favorite sounds from that moment on. Jim felt Blair's come spurt between them and imagined what it would taste like when he could do that. He reached his arms around Blair, feeling even more of his sweat damp skin and the way Blair's body hitched and shuddered through his orgasm. He wanted it all. He wanted this. He wanted Blair.

Jim let himself drift on sensations, awed at how relaxed and warm and wanted he felt, wondering how he could survive anything more even as he was pleased not to have zoned, not to have missed a moment. He asked himself how soon they could do it again even as he heard the unmistakable sounds of a pizza warming bag shifting against the box as the delivery man trudged up the stairs.

"Ugh, pizza," Jim said as he opened his eyes.

Blair stood with a smile that dazzled, scooped up his jeans and boxers and rushed away. Jim could only turn his head and stare in appreciation as Blair quickly wiped off in the bathroom and went to answer the door shirtless.

Jim carefully grabbed his pants and made it into the bathroom before the front door opened.
Back at the table, watching Jim devour a floppy slice of pizza without allowing a single drip, Blair could only think well of the man. Whatever doubts he'd harbored before had been blown away by Jim's vulnerable, total gift of himself. What they'd done hadn't been elaborate, hadn't taken more than a few minutes on the couch. As a first time, it wasn’t especially intimate, except it involved Jim. From the spirit animals, to the cuddling, to Jim speaking the three little words, the man had defied Blair's expectations at every turn. Much faster than Blair could have imagined, Jim had wrapped himself tight around Blair's heart and soul. "If you want to start something when we've both rested, I'm okay with you taking the lead next time."

"But—"

"I trust you. As your Guide, if I help you control your senses, that's because you've let me in. Same thing as your lover. You couldn't let go and neither could I if we didn't trust each other. Not that I'm saying it will always work that well or that we'll always want the same things. It wouldn't have worked between us if you always had to be in control. But I promise I won't use sex to make you feel out of control when you don't want to."

Jim stared across the table, mouth slightly open, greasy fingers suspended in mid-air. "Sometimes, when it's just the two of us, I don't mind feeling out of control."

"Oh, give me a chance, big guy. There will be times you more than 'don't mind' giving up control when it's just the two of us. But we can talk about that later."

July 10, South Africa

In the days after the vandalism that only Gabi and Brett believed was a theft, Gabi had kept up with her work, moved the microbots to various locations, scanned and mapped changes in soil and small items embedded underground. She hadn't found any significant artifacts, but she told herself it had only been a few days, and they still had three weeks left at the dig.

At lunch and in the evenings she'd frequently touched Brett's hand, or sometimes his neck or back when he was cooking. It was more than she'd ever touched anyone in her life, and she loved how Brett gave her that, freely and so easily. But more and more it also hurt her to touch him. No touch had ever been free or easy to her. She didn't have it in her to trust that openness, couldn't stand how much she depended on something she could never control. Still, she used the touch to ground herself as she listened for Dr. Michaels when he was in his home or near the dig. She'd heard his phone calls with the woman named Thobile, heard Thobile flirting and trying to impress. Gabi hated Michaels even more than she had, because she was sure he was taking advantage of the new mother's situation when he should have been taking care of her.

On Friday evening she overheard Dr. Michaels tell Thobile, "I'll come on Saturday again. We can meet with them and make sure the payment is all set." That was something totally new, and Gabi had no idea who they were talking about meeting, but she was deeply suspicious.

Thobile responded with, "I'll arrange it, and I'll shop for dinner, steak just that way you like it. Then I'll give you a special dessert."

Gabi wasn't sure if the dessert part was real or innuendo, but it bothered her either way that Thobile was trying so hard to please Michaels when he didn't seem to return her devotion.
Brett didn’t know how he’d let Gabi talk him into it. She’d been ready to follow Michaels to Thobile on her own, and he couldn’t believe how badly that scared him. Gabi had been nervous all week, touching him and pulling back, smiling then frowning, sometimes so fast they tangled into one expression. He knew she was upset about the artifact and about Michaels’ relationship with Thobile, but beyond that, she was like a nervous animal, and he didn’t know how to calm her other than staying nearby and waiting her out.

Now she’d sent him on ahead, to an intersection at the center of all the local bus routes. He was supposed to follow Michaels if he changed buses or walked from there. Brett stood beneath a hotel awning that was decorated in gaudy red and gold but offered a dark shady recess that was the most hidden vantage point on the busy intersection. He people-watched to calm his nerves but grew annoyed at how rarely people walked by in groups that were mixed black and white. Despite telling himself he had even less right to judge people in a foreign country than in the neighborhoods of Oakland near Bay Tech, he wished there were more people with skin the color of Gabi’s here. He wished things had been different for Gabi’s father and mother and thereby, for Gabi.

Brett knew she was waiting at the bus stop one past the dig. She’d come up with a long sleeved dress and headscarf she said she brought in case they needed modest clothing. Her idea of modest made her look Muslim, but that was a passable disguise for a female riding the bus, and probably the only way to hide her unusually lighter than black skin here.

Brett’s disguise was just a hoodie and scarf, but there would be a swarm of people entering any bus at this junction, so Brett shouldn’t merit a second glance. Still, he was nervous and not sure they should be following Michaels at all. But it was impossible to say no to Gabi.

His phone shook, and Brett saw Gabi’s message. She’d made it onto a bus with Michaels. If he didn’t exit before they reached the intersection, Brett would need to watch carefully for that bus. Trying not to look suspicious, he leaned against the cold stone wall, slouching in the manner he thought his disguise deserved.

The fifteen minutes he spent waiting seemed like forever as he watched crowds flow by him and petty interactions in the streets. When the correct bus finally arrived, Brett watched people pile off, but he didn’t see Michaels or Gabi. Thoughts of abduction or accidents flowed through his mind, but when he was sure there was no one else to see, all he could do was text, and wait for long minutes hoping that Gabi was okay.

Gabi sat two seats behind Michaels on the bus. He didn’t talk to anyone or use his phone, and Gabi was glad. This was the first time in weeks she’d been so far from Brett that she couldn’t hear his heartbeat, and she felt totally ungrounded. She was afraid to use her senses even the way she had before meeting Brett, and that fear caused her muscles to tighten and her head to ache. The concealing clothing that hid her from everyone was a comfort and kept in what little warmth her clenched body produced.

Upon boarding the bus, Gabi had pushed her way up against a window, not wanting people accidentally brushing by her or touching her. As the bus became crowded, Gabi felt more and more vulnerable. When a burly man sat down beside her with a nod, she turned her face and huddled closer toward the window. Perhaps her body language or her clothing warned him off, because he kept to his side of the seat without even brushing her arm. A surge of gratitude left her disgusted with herself.
Then suddenly Michaels was leaving the bus, pushing his way through bodies. They hadn't reached downtown, hadn't reached the main junction where Brett was waiting.

Gabi stood and whispered to the man beside her that she needed to get out. He finally moved but the center aisle was crowded with people standing and as she pushed her way toward the front she felt the bus start to move. That and the random press of so many bodies, the sounds of conversations, breathing, even heartbeats pressed in on her. She didn't know if she had a small absence seizure, but by the time she reached the driver at the front, they were going full speed toward town again.

"Please, please. That was where I needed to get off!" She couldn't afford to be quiet anymore. The driver would never hear her, and she was close to panic at leaving Michaels behind. "Please, let me off here. I couldn't get out fast enough, but I need to get back there right away."

She didn't have to fake her tears, and while the driver didn't look to see her mostly shrouded face, he much have heard her panic and foreign accent and taken pity on her. He stopped the bus and let her out at the side of the road. She ran back the way they'd come as fast as her skirt and ballet flats would allow.

By the time she reached the previous stop, Michaels was long gone, with probably a ten or fifteen minute head start. There weren't any footprints to follow, and Gabi was afraid to use her senses on her own, out where she was so exposed. Instead she hurried past a row of shops until she found the sheltered side of a building. Turning toward the wall and pretending to look through her purse, she closed her eyes and opened her hearing, searching for a familiar voice or the sounds of Michaels walking, which she thought she might be able to identify.

The next thing she knew she was sitting on the ground and someone was shouting at her.

"Are you okay? Do you need a doctor? Police?"

Gabi pictured a dial for hearing and brought it down until the person questioning her seemed only loud, not shouting. The faint sound of A-Ha singing from Gabi's phone suggested she'd been absent quite a while. Gabi opened her eyes and saw a heavyset woman in a gray coat carrying an orange mesh shopping bag.

"Can you hear me? Can you see me?"

"Yes, thank you, I'll be all right now," Gabi said.

"Are you sure? There's a doctor just down here." The woman was close enough that Gabi could smell mint toothpaste on her breath, see little lines stretching out from her eyes, down onto her cheeks.

Gabi closed her eyes briefly and stomped on her senses in a way she'd long used when she thought distractions might trigger a second seizure.

With an effort, she managed to smile and open her eyes to the well-meaning woman. "Really, I'll be okay. I'll just text my friend." Gabi pulled out her phone and that seemed to please the woman. What could be more normal, in any part of the world, than a teenager texting a friend?

As the woman walked away, Gabi sat up straighter. She wasn't ready to stand yet, and she didn't know if she'd been out of it long enough for Brett to worry. But she didn't text about what had happened, only where Michaels had left the bus and the street names Gabi could see from where she sat. As her senses settled and Gabi took stock, the dirt and traces of rotten food and animal feces on the sidewalk began to turn her stomach.
Finally, she put her phone away and pushed herself up the wall. When she felt steady enough, she started to walk, choosing a street parallel to the main road, but quieter. Carefully, she extended her hearing enough to pick out conversations in the houses she passed. She listened for voices but tried not to get sucked in by paying attention to words. It helped that many voices spoke languages she couldn't understand.

Keeping her vision at normal levels but focused on landmarks and navigation seemed to help her keep going. The absence of Brett's heartbeat in her range of hearing was almost a physical pain, but by balancing her attention between slightly heightened hearing and trying to set up a logical search pattern in what appeared to be suburbs of RDP housing, Gabi thought she could keep herself from seizing.

As she stumbled into a neighborhood of slightly nicer houses, something resembling middle class tract homes in the States, she heard a voice she thought was Thobile. Not wanting to seize where she might be seen, she ducked behind a hedge in the yard across the street, then edged her hearing up to hear the actual conversation.

"...Do right by my sister."

"If I file for divorce, they'll tie up the money I use to pay the rent here. It could take months, possibly years. Thobile and I discussed it already." That was definitely Michaels' voice.

"My sister is an idiot. Show me you are not. Look at these relics my movers bring me. This is a skull from some ancestor not even considered human, and this is supposedly a stone age shaman's tool." Gabi shifted to peak between branches of her bush and pumped her vision just a little. Through the sheer curtains in the main room across the street, she could see a large man lifting items from a box on a low table, but she couldn't actually see the skull or the tool he referred to. She definitely couldn't see what else was in the box. "With these, I provide for myself and my friends. What do you provide for my sister? A flat stone with a few lines carved in it, not even officially listed as a relic." The item he held out was almost completely hidden in his hand, but Gabi couldn't help wanting to hurt him for insulting what was clearly her artifact.

"I tried to ship your rhino horn," Michaels replied, his voice calm and without guilt, "even though I thought it was a stupid idea to risk that in the US. I was right, by the way."

"Your juvenile shipping scheme was the weak link in that plan. And we lost the merchandise, so now you owe me even more!"

"I don't owe you or your sister a thing. You're manipulative, self-serving criminals."

"No, Oliver, you can't mean that! He only wants what's best for us and our boy." Thobile was pleading again, and Gabi still felt for her. Thobile's brother however, wasn't winning Gabi over. As the argument continued, with mostly Michaels and the brother shouting, although Gabi heard Thobile and at least one other man occasionally, Gabi crouched to text the address to Brett. She saw she'd missed a text from him before that said he'd get there somehow.

Gabi stood quietly in the bushes, listening to the repetitive argument across the street as her mind spun its own repetitive arguments appreciating Brett's kindness to her while abhorring her growing dependence on him. She tried to ignore both in favor of planning how best to use her new information and the possible evidence that was sitting in a box in an average looking home across the street. She needed to prove that Michaels was conspiring to illegally remove and export archeological finds and had framed her for the smuggled rhino horn.

She was caught off guard when a police car pulled directly in front of the bush where she was
hiding. Two officers climbed out and the nearer one said, overwhelmingly loudly to Gabi's ears, "Miss, are you aware that you're trespassing on private property?"

Gabi looked across the street to see if those arguing had noticed the arrival of police. No one seemed to be looking out the window. She couldn't risk trying to listen when she had to carry on a conversation at normal volume, but she tried to adjust her plans and the alternatives she'd been half thinking through. Her body calmed and she was suddenly more confident than she'd been since she'd missed following Michaels off the bus. Adrenaline was more than enough to bounce her through the next few minutes, if she could just find a way to bring the police to her side.

Staying where she was in the bush, she said, "There's a very bad man, named Dr. Oliver Michaels, an archeologist who has gotten involved with smugglers. He's meeting with them right now, across the street, and there's already a police investigation going on because he tried to frame me and another student for smuggling a few weeks ago. If you let me text a friend, I could get you names for the police officers and lawyer already involved. I think there's evidence they need right there in that living room."

The officer in front of her spoke in a voice even more slow and condescending than the one he'd used initially. "That's all very interesting, but we can't enter someone's house and accuse them of smuggling because someone hiding in a bush says so. You'll have to come with us to the station, and then we'll see what we can do."

Gabi took a deep breath. Arguing wouldn't help here. She thought about United States laws regarding search warrants and pursuing a suspect, but honestly, she didn't know if cops in the States would barge into a house to chase someone accused only of trespassing. Her brain seemed to decide before the logical parts of her reasoning could catch up. "Okay, just let me text the person who was meeting me here. Otherwise, if I'm not here when he arrives, he'll think they kidnapped me or something."

In the moment while the police looked uncertain, Gabi stepped forward, phone in hand, keeping as far as she reasonably could from both police officers until she had a clear line between herself and the door across the street. Then she ran.

She didn't pause to see if the police might try to shoot her. She didn't think what she would do if the front door was looked. Instead she pounded up the steps, turned the doorknob, and pushed her way in, heading straight for the box of artifacts she'd seen through the window.

The box was in her arms, pulled tight to her chest and she was halfway back to the front door when one of the black men meeting with Michaels grabbed her, and she shouted out, "Help! Police! These artifacts are stolen and one of them was stolen from me. I want to press charges."

An arm tightened around her neck and a hand much stronger than hers closed on the box by the time the first police officer could see in the door. Gabi had time to wonder if the man holding her was armed before she saw the cop pull his gun.

"What's going on here?" the officer asked, almost as calmly as when he'd first accused her of trespassing.

The man holding Gabi removed his arm from her throat and shifted sideways to pull the box from her hands instead. "This crazy girl just burst in and tried to steal our stuff," he said.

Gabi saw the artifact from her scans lying on top of everything else in the box, and she reached for it before anyone could move. It hummed and started to glow the moment she touched it, but she wasn't sure if people with normal senses could see or hear it, so she just kept talking.
"I found this at a licensed archeological dig." She pressed the artifact tight between her hand and her stomach while she pointed with her free hand. "That man is supposed to be my advisor at the dig. He's arranged to steal my work and frame me and other students. Now will you let me call my lawyer and alert the police already involved in the smuggling case?"

Outside the door she could hear the other officer radioing for back-up and saying something about accusations of smuggling. She heard another car pulling up and saw Brett jumping out of a taxi.

As loudly and clearly as she could she shouted, "Brett, call the lawyer, fast!"

Everyone in the room just stared at her and then out at Brett, who was already dialing his phone.

#

Brett dialed the lawyer, the officer in charge of the rhino horn case, and Blair Sandburg all as a conference call. The police in front of him looked a lot meaner than the ones who had searched their house, and he didn't like the way everyone was staring at Gabi and whatever she was pressing to her stomach. Then he saw the top grooved edge of stone and knew from her protective body language that it was the artifact her microbots had identified. He clicked a photo and held his phone in front of him on the speaker setting as he walked up to the house. "Excuse me officers, I have on the line our lawyer and Sergeant Botha who's already working on this smuggling case."

The cop in the doorway ignored him, but the one in back shouted, "We've already called for back-up. If you're really who this kid says you are, call dispatch and sort it with them. We're busy with a crazy girl who just ran into a house and started accusing people of smuggling."

"Sirs," Brett said, trying to contain his anger, "that young woman is not crazy. She has a medical condition that may cause seizures. However, she is also an American citizen and a student at an American university who is working at an archeological dig with me and Dr. Michaels. Dr. Michaels tried to frame us for smuggling rhino horn, and I believe she followed him here and found him meeting with these smugglers and in possession of an artifact stolen from our dig this week."

"No, it's them trying to frame me," Dr. Michaels yelled, puffing up the way he did when giving a lecture. "This woman, her brother, and his cronies set me up."

"Nooooo!" screamed Thobile. "You are the father of my child. How can you tell lies about me and my brother? You should never have encouraged his crazy schemes. Why am I surrounded by—" she glared in turn at each man in the room and then the officers and Brett on the door step before throwing her hands up in frustration and shouting, "men!"

#

Jim was maneuvering Blair to the stairs, pressed up behind him and wondering if moving from hand jobs to blow jobs would be rushing things when Blair's phone rang. At first Jim was annoyed when Blair glanced at the screen and accepted the call but then he heard the frightened voice on the other end and saw the picture that had been attached. A willowy young woman in headscarf and long skirt was clutching a glowing object to her chest, the stolen artifact Blair had shown him with what turned out to be Stargate symbols.

Blair had the phone on speaker and was typing at his laptop by the time Jim fully processed that the new Sentinel whose migraine they'd worried about a week before was now holding a glowing Ancient artifact while surrounded by men with guns.

Blair plugged his phone onto a computer cord, presumably to share the call and photo with Daniel.
All Jim could do was stand and listen to a kid, a Guide he told himself with a stab of pride, do the best he could to help a Sentinel in a very bad situation.

Then the beam of light transport that upset his vision last time happened again, and before he had his eyes open again Jim could hear Blair saying, "Seriously, you could give five seconds warning."

No one seemed to hear him as McKay and Daniel were busy shouting in the middle of the spaceship's bridge.

"...Unknown alien technology. For all we know it could decimate the planet, and you're arguing post-colonial ethics?" McKay shouted while waving a very familiar looking carved stone in one hand and a laptop computer in the other.

Daniel managed to match McKay's volume without seeming to shout. "Eventually the program will have to go public and everyone at the SGC agreed that while we aren't giving anything back, we need a firm policy going forward of acquiring artifacts legitimately..."

McKay turned to Blair and shoved the artifact with six runes into his hands. "You decide. You're probably the only one she'll trust anyway. At least they know your name and have heard your voice."

"What?" Blair asked.

"I made this facsimile based on the data you forwarded from that child's microrobot device. It should be good enough to fool standard tests. You get her to swap. Once you're holding the real ancient artifact it will probably deactivate, stop glowing, and be safe. Daniel will use his powers of persuasion and the resources of the SGC to obtain the substitute artifact legally, and no one ever needs to know. Oh, and no one blows up the planet."

"Why do you think the real version will blow up the planet?"

"We have no idea what it does, but sometime you should ask O'Neill or Sheppard about the Ancient drone your Sentinel described as a cuttlefish."

"Cuttlefish?" Blair asked, and Jim realized he'd never filled his Guide in on that part of the story.

Then O'Neill snapped, "Silence, children, or I'm not taking any of you to Africa."

There was instant silence on the bridge, another bright flash, and they were all standing in what appeared to be an abandoned building, probably condemned given the way one corner of the roof had fallen in.

"Jackson, Sandburg, and Ellison with me," O'Neill announced. "The rest of you stay out of sight with Sheppard monitoring, and try not to attract too much attention."

#

John did not like being left behind, but despite what some people thought, he knew how to follow orders. He led Rodney and Carson up a parallel street one block over from the more direct route O'Neill had taken. He tried to acclimate to the smells, which seemed too strong, even with his number line filled to two. His idea of normal might have to adjust as a Sentinel in a city, rather than hidden away in the Antarctic.

When Rodney tried to keep working on his laptop while he walked, John gave him one warning and then closed it saying, "Bad scientist, no biscotti."
Rodney gave him a sharp look but tucked the laptop under his arm and proceeded to lecture John and Carson on how biscotti were inferior to most other sweets despite their association with coffee and occasional combination with chocolate, although good chocolate could improve them, as was true of good chocolate and almost anything. Carson smiled and managed to look very much like a tourist despite the large first aid kit slung over his shoulder. The doctor admired the sunshine and suburban houses that wouldn't have counted as scenic in most American cities. John had thought it would be warmer, even if it was winter in Africa. Still he was glad he'd removed his jacket. The temperature was in the seventies and the sun on his skin felt amazing after so long under Antarctic ice.

Then they reached a point where John could hear the commotion one block over and still several blocks ahead. He waved a hand to shush Rodney. When Rodney failed to notice, Carson pressed a hand over Rodney's mouth, and John said, "Someone's crying. I don't think it's our Sentinel girl though," he paused. "I think our girl is explaining that she had self defense training and it's an automatic reflex to kick a guy there if he gropes her breast. Really McKay, I think you'll like her, though you'd better watch out. She's reading them the riot act about not giving up her legitimate archeological find without a receipt and documentation approved by her lawyer, about being called crazy after her colleague explained the medical condition also listed on her medic alert bracelet, and about being sexually harassed the last time they put her in jail and how it could become an international incident if they try that again. She has your knack for speaking without breathing, too."

"Why would I like her? Nobody likes me."

"Och, Rodney, you know that's not true," Carson said, still smiling and putting on a good show for anyone looking out a window.

John bumped against Rodney's side and smirked as he said, "A lawyer seems to be there, translating what the girl said into legalese. We might as well wait in the shade of this tree. I don't think they need us yet."

John continued to listen to multiple parties argue, tentatively labeling voices: cops one, two and three, Guide, Sentinel, professor, girlfriend, girlfriend's brother, and thug. Then a young African man crossed the street and walked straight up to John. In a different context he could have been from neighborhood watch. In worn jeans and a loose soccer shirt, with a fuzz of close cropped hair and very dark skin, he clearly fit in where they did not. A scrappy dog walked beside him, more like a companion than a pet. The odd, bony dog looked vaguely familiar to John, but he couldn't place it. Neither demonstrated any threat as the young man said, "You may call me Shane, short for inkentshane, the Zulu word for the African wild dog." He motioned to the animal beside him.

John knew he was missing something and tried to increase his sense of smell and check the young man’s heart rate while saying, "Excuse me?"

"I guess you could also take Kent from inkentshane, but I prefer Shane. Your raven knows my animal, and I believe they wish us to follow now."

John heard Carson whisper under his breath, "I can't see any animals," just as he was following Shane's gaze to where John's raven had appeared, leading them toward the drama unfolding around the young Sentinel and the smugglers.

"Right, I'm John. This is Rodney and Carson."

“What?!” Rodney sputtered. “Why would we trust him? How do we know he is who he says he is.”

“Not relevant,” John hissed as he smiled at a glaring Rodney. “For now, his dog and my raven are
leading."

They all walked together as if out for a Sunday stroll, but John kept his guard up and a hand near his concealed sidearm as he remembered how a spirit animal, a mongoose, had been associated with one of the hackers and how Jim's vision in the chair had involved some sort of a dog as well as the mongoose.

However, John had finally remembered where he recognized this particular dog from: it had been the one shooting laser-like beams of light to recharge a ZPM.

#

Blair followed behind O'Neill and Jackson with Jim by his side, and in most ways it wasn't so different from being called in as back-up with the police in Cascade. Of course, none of them were in uniform, and Blair had a fake artifact tucked beneath his over shirt. Luckily, it wasn't too hot to be wearing an over shirt, although most of the locals were in short sleeves. Blair was still pretty torn about the ethics of even offering the replica. He wished he'd had more time to learn about both risks and options, as well as wishing that he wasn't the one who would have to decide on the spur of the moment under adverse conditions, even if he was sort of known for improvising in such situations.

The neighborhood they walked through didn't look like Cascade, although to Blair's eyes, the low concrete tract housing wasn't so different from cities he'd know in the US, Mexico, Peru, and elsewhere. Cheap, mass construction bridged the cultural divide. The smells were the only part that struck him as foreign. Maybe if he was a Sentinel he could place which bits were familiar and which were not. Instead, the plant life smelled a little off and the cooking smells weren't so much different in the details as in their combination. He wished there was time to explore and get to know the people and the area better, but already they were approaching the commotion. The houses were a little nicer and hushed neighbors had gathered to watch as a young Sentinel stood in the doorway clutching a rectangular stone to her chest. Luckily, in the sunlight, it was hard to see that the stone was glowing.

O'Neill passed through the gathered neighbors as if it was his right. Daniel said "excuse me" and "sorry" in his wake while Blair and Jim followed in the space they cleared. Then Daniel was showing his passport and spinning a line to a cop about representing a university and the International Archeological Association.

Blair was focused on the young Sentinel. From about two yards away, he could see how she twitched when someone made the slightest move in her direction. Her eyes were squinting as if vision were tuned too high or spiking out of control. That was a Sentinel in distress, and Blair didn't know how she managed to keep ranting with a steady stream of quite effective words, but for the moment she seemed coherent and people were listening.

Only one of the local police had a gun in hand now. He was standing between the girl and the smugglers, with the gun angled toward the smugglers' feet. But an officer on the other side of the young Sentinel was making some kind of hand gesture and glancing at the artifact or possibly the girl's chest.

In an instant Blair saw the hand gesture morph into a lunge and a grab for the artifact just as some chubby long-nosed animal the size of a collie but gray and built lower to the ground seemed to appear out of nowhere. The animal charged until its front feet reached the Sentinel's thighs and its snout angled up and seemed to suck in the stone artifact. As the girl fell back under a sideways impact from the gesturing cop, Blair found himself in motion to catch the girl's shoulders as Jim dove to the ground beneath where she was falling. The animal seemed to pass right through the Sentinel girl and disappear.
"Stop! Hands up where I can see them."

The officer with gun in hand was now pointing at the puppy pile made by Jim, Blair, the girl, and the cop who'd made a grab for her.

#

Gabi saw an aardvark suck the glowing artifact out of her hand then disappear as all hell broke loose. The next thing she knew she was on the floor, squished between a couple of strangers as a cop with a gun yelled, "Stop! Hands up where I can see them."

Whether she'd had an absence seizure or things had simply happened that fast, the wise move seemed to be putting her hands up, which she did.

The cop who'd called her crazy earlier and then either grabbed or pushed her a moment ago said, "Where's the stone thing?" as he pulled himself up from where he'd landed.

Gabi was not going to say anything about seeing an aardvark appear and disappear. It was bad enough covering for her seizures, but the simplest solution to hallucinations would be denial. What she couldn't figure out was where her artifact had gone if the cop who'd been grabbing for it didn't know.

When the silence stretched and the cop with the gun seemed about to open his mouth, the man on top of Gabi said, "If you'll let me move, there's something hard jabbed under my shirt that could be it."

"Stay still," the cop with the gun said. He gestured to his partner, the one who'd caused the puppy pile and said, "He'll check."

As the more annoying cop moved forward Gabi heard the man beneath her whispering so softly that she automatically raised her hearing, "…Don't need to try anything. Blair has a substitute stone thing. We'll talk later about what took the real one."

Gabi tensed and then relaxed as she realized the person talking to her knew she could hear him and might know something about the aardvark and her artifact. Which meant the person he called Blair might be—

"Got it," the cop held her artifact, or at least what appeared to be her artifact, above his head in triumph. Gabi felt her stomach drop as if she'd failed. Then she realized that by holding out until whatever just happened could happen, she might have actually succeeded. She'd have to wait and see.

As the South African police allowed them all to stand, the man on top of her offered his hand and said, "I'm Blair Sandburg by the way. We've come to help."

She let him help pull her up, and actually appreciated the touch of his hand in hers. "Gabi Hansen, very pleased to meet you, Mr. Sandburg."

#

Brett clenched his teeth as the lawyer protested about police brutality but failed to move them any closer to Gabi. He'd been watching and was sure she was close to zoning or crying or something before some cop knocked her down and two people Brett didn't know jumped to her rescue.

The intended rescuers only made things worse, and he knew how Gabi hated even casual touch from anyone but him. He should have been there to help. He pushed forward trying to get closer, even if it
meant leaving the lawyer behind, and was surprised to see Gabi smiling and holding onto the hand of the smaller man. Then the name Blair Sandburg registered and Brett stopped in his tracks. His brain short circuited trying to guess why Sandburg would be in South Africa at all, let alone how he could have reached them so fast.

As he tried to sort that out, Brett found himself standing beside a sandy blond man who was talking to the detective from the rhino horn case, Sergeant Botha, about bringing in the International Archeological Association and a US task force that was joining the investigation. An older man, who looked decidedly military despite the lack of a uniform, loomed to one side, listening to that conversation while watching the main action in the house.

A group of four people approached on the street, looking distinctly out of place as they stood with the growing crowd of nosey neighbors. Three of the four were older white males, but one was Brett's age, good looking, dark skinned, quite possibly local, and staring right at Brett. When he caught Brett's eye, he winked.

For a moment, Brett could not take his eyes off the man who’d winked at him. Whatever that wink might mean in South Africa, no one else had shown Brett that sort of interest.

Brett shook his head and looked at Gabi, standing with Mr. Sandburg and a larger man who Brett could only guess was Sandburg's Sentinel, the police detective. Gabi was calmly answering questions as a local cop took notes. The cop with the gun and another who'd worked on the rhino horn case were questioning Dr. Michaels and the smugglers. Thobile was huddled in the corner with her baby and an older woman who might be Thobile's mother or some other relative. Everything seemed to be calming down, so Brett walked toward the odd group that was watching rather than trying to interfere at the crime scene.

"Do I know you?" Brett asked the odd foursome as he approached.

The attractive younger man stepped forward. "I am Shane. Your Guardian has seen my spirit animal, what you call an African wild dog, trying to help protect that which is hers. We need to meet with these three men," he gestured to the three standing with him, even as their expressions showed they were at least as surprised by this speech as Brett was. "Now we can complete the key to Atlantis. Will you trust me?"

The funny thing was, Brett wanted to trust Shane. It had happened before, that Brett would take to someone against all reason. He used to call it "falling in like." In the case of an attractive guy like Shane, others might call it "falling for" him, but Brett wasn't looking for that at the moment. He held his tongue, because otherwise he would have said "yes."

Shane smiled in a way that looked just a little sad at the corners of his mouth and eyes. It brought out the clean lines of his face, making him look old and young at once, but Brett guessed from the breadth of Shane's shoulders in contrast to his gangly frame that the man was probably younger than Brett and still growing into his build. "Is there someplace we could go to talk?"

"Well, Gabi and I are staying at—"

"Wait," one of the other three said. He was dressed all in black, and his pants looked vaguely military, but his haircut defied military expectations, let alone gravity. "Spirit animals and the A-word is enough to get me interested, but we don't all know each other yet. We need a hotel or somewhere on neutral ground, someplace where no one knows any of us, and we can plausibly enter separately but then meet privately to talk."

"There's a hotel at the end of the bus line here, right where all the bus routes converge." Brett
gestured in the approximate direction. “It has a gaudy red and gold awning and is called Traveler's Sanctuary, or something like that.” He pulled out his phone and saw another member of the foursome, one who was already holding a laptop, pull out his own smart phone as well.

The man with the laptop and thinning hair must have been pretty phone savvy for an older guy, because he found the hotel before Brett could and said, "They don't list conference rooms, but there's a suite available on the top floor, and I can order a catered lunch. When do you think they'll be done here?"

"Last time they dragged us down to the station," Brett said. He didn't know what was going on, but these strangers felt familiar to him. He wanted to talk to them, and he definitely wanted to know Shane better.

The computer guy said, "Maybe if we leave Jackson and O'Neill to handle the official and diplomatic stuff the rest of us can go eat."

"Gabi and I won't leave until we're sure they're going to prosecute Dr. Michaels, the smugglers, and a grad student named Joe who helped frame us."

"I'll text Jackson. For a soft scientist, he's surprisingly good at vengeance."

#

Through suitable application of genius and intimidation, Rodney got himself and John to their passably adequate hotel suite within the hour. The food he'd ordered—sandwich fixings, two types of salad, three types of dessert, and absolutely no citrus—was set up buffet style in the sitting room, and he saw no reason to wait for the others before digging in.

Then his Sentinel stepped between him and the plates.

"You're walking on dangerous ground," Rodney said, trying to scowl, but knowing he failed. "I'm hungry."

"But it's our first time in a hotel room together, our first time off base since we met." Just like that they were kissing, and John's hand slid down Rodney's pants to fondle his ass. Rodney knew John was using Sentinel tricks to read his responses, because there was no way someone should be able to get him that hard that fast with both of them fully dressed.

"What if?" was all the protest Rodney could manage.

"I'll take you in the bedroom if you want, but I'm sure I'll hear them coming early enough to get you dressed." John was running a hand along the seam of Rodney's fly as he spoke, and Rodney couldn't remember all the reasons why it was such a bad idea.

John led him by the dick, literally, to the bedroom. Then John dropped to his knees and shoved Rodney up against the bedroom door to close it. With a warm mouth on his cock and a warm hand cupping his balls, Rodney moaned and gave in to the demanding pace John set. The suction and John's tongue, tracing the vein and swirling at the top, were all Rodney could think about until he was coming hard down John's throat and his knees felt rubbery as John held him up.

Eventually, Rodney remembered to support his own weight and thought, "Oh yeah, that's the bedroom door behind me," just before he said, "You know, there's a bed in here for a reason."

John obligingly threw himself down, spread out on his back on top of the bedspread and unfastened his own pants. His erection stood up huge and dark with wetness at the tip making it shine. Rodney
made himself comfortable, appreciating the firm mattress beneath his knees, and sucked John's cock as deep and wet as he could on the first pass. John gave a little shout before biting his lips and settling into something between a hum and a whimper.

Rodney liked that sound just fine. If this had to be quick, then he was going to make it the best quickie possible. On the next downward suck, he took one of his fingers into his mouth alongside John's cock. John twitched.

Then Rodney used the wet finger to circle John's hole before sliding in to exactly where he knew John's prostate was. John writhed and mewed and didn't hold back a thing, so Rodney stroked and sucked in rhythm until John came in Rodney's mouth, loud and panting.

They both collapsed beside each other on the bed for a while until John said, "Okay, time to zip up."

They even had time to wash their hands and open the windows before Carson and Shane arrived, followed closely by Blair, Jim, and the new Sentinel and Guide. Only Jim gave John and Rodney a knowing and mock scandalized look before heading toward the buffet.

#

Gabi didn't know what to think as she walked into the spacious hotel suite with wall to wall red carpeting and chairs upholstered in gold. There was a buffet set out on shiny platters to one side, and the other six people in the room were all gravitating that way. But Gabi held back, and Brett stayed with her, his hand reaching across her back to pull her to his side.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not going to have a seizure."

"That's not what I meant. It's a lot to take in one day, isn't it?"

"It might actually be easier once someone starts explaining."

"Can you eat?"

"You know me and food. I can always eat."

Brett raised his eyebrows.

"Almost always?" Gabi tried to put some bounce in her step as she went to fill a plate, but she noticed Brett stayed close anyway. She worried events were spiraling beyond either of their control, and maybe she'd missed the point where she could have done something about it. So she made herself a cheese and pickle sandwich and took small portions of both salads and all three desserts. When she sat down she was across the room from some balding guy with a computer who had made himself a more elaborate sandwich, but done the same as her in taking some of everything else. The computer guy didn't notice, but the dark-haired man next to him saw where she was looking and smiled at her when he noticed the nearly identical plates of food.

Then just as everyone was finally seated, a parade of animals walked through the door. Through was literal in this case, because the door remained closed as they entered. The parade included an African wild dog, the aardvark that had snorted her artifact, a cheetah, a raven riding on a beaver, a prairie dog, a wolf, and a jaguar. They all started sniffing around the room, except for the raven, which flew to perch on the shoulder of the man who had smiled at Gabi's lunch selections.

It was clear from seeing how the raven man's eyes tracked that he was watching the animals explore.
Then he nudged the man beside him who was still buried in his laptop.

"What? Oh, where did they all come from?" the computer guy said. "Let me know if you see a mongoose. That tracer program just pinged again, and it looks like the original hacker has located Lerato."

"Lerato Khumalo?" Brett asked. "What's she got to do with this?"

Computer guy scowled at Brett over his laptop for a moment. "Um, that might be classified."

"Are the animals classified?" Gabi asked.

"Not if you can see them," raven man said. "By the way, how many do you see?"

"Eight."

"Me, too. Anyone see a different number?"

When no one answered but everyone had taken food and found a seat, raven man said, "So I think I've figured out who each spirit animal goes with, anyone object to me covering introductions and including the animals?"

"Do I have one? I don't even know what it is," a man with a rolling Scottish accent said.

"Okay, let's start with Dr. Carson Beckett. By process of elimination, I'm pretty sure his is the prairie dog."

Dr. Beckett's face lit up as if he'd always wanted to have a prairie dog. The little animal skittered over and stood on his hind legs to place his forepaws on Beckett's knees. "Aye, little fellow, I can see you now. May I touch you?" The Scotsman held out his hand and the prairie dog pushed his head into it.

When nothing more than petting ensued, raven man asked, "Can you see any of the others?"

Beckett glanced around, shook his head, and went back to greeting his spirit animal.

Raven man shrugged and said, "I'm John Sheppard, and the raven on my shoulder is mine."

"Or you're his," the computer guy said without looking up.

Sheppard whapped him playfully on the shoulder and said, "This is Dr. Rodney McKay, doctorates in physics and engineering, and his critter is a beaver, which he tells me is an engineering cliché."

The beaver looked over at Sheppard and McKay as it was mentioned but then went to sniff around under the lunch table.

"Okay, Shane told me his spirit animal was the African wild dog and what did you call it?"

The striking young black man who hadn't said anything before in Gabi's presence answered with, "Inkentshane in Zulu, which is the shaman name I took after my spirit walk."

"You're a shaman?" Dr. Sandburg asked, eyes wide.

"I walk the shaman's path, as do you. Perhaps you call it something else? Anyone who sees the spirit animals of others has begun the shaman's path, although it is sometimes debated how that applies to Guardians, or Sentinels as I believe you call them in the Americas."
"But I can't see them now," Sandburg said.

"You would if you needed to. You are just shy with so many of us present. Hold close to your Sentinel for a while and you will see if seeing matters to you."

When Sandburg's Sentinel put a hand on the smaller man's knee, the wolf and jaguar walked to them and curled up together on top of their feet.

"Oh!" Sandburg said.

"So that's Blair Sandburg and his wolf with Jim Ellison and his jaguar."

Sandburg looked up sheepishly at that and started to say, "Actually—"

A bear burst through the door then with a strange glowing creature floating beside it, and Gabi jumped even though she knew they must be spirit animals. A moment later there was a knock and McKay shouted, "Just come in already, O'Neill and Jackson, we know it's you."

Two men Gabi had seen at the crime scene came in and were introduced by Sheppard as "Dr. Daniel Jackson with the ascended jellyfish and the big bear of a guy is Jack O'Neill."

"Umm," Daniel said.

"Half the room is seeing twenty of us here instead of ten, so we're doing introductions that include spirit animals. Yours preceded you in."

"Wow," Jackson said. "Could everyone who sees them raise their hands?" Sheppard, McKay, Ellison, Sandburg, and Shane all did, so Gabi raised her hand, too. "And you can all see all of them."

"Yes, Daniel," McKay said without looking up from whatever he was now typing on his computer. "Everyone except Carson, who's busy grooming his and can't be bothered to see any others. Interrogate them later. We need to finish introductions so we can talk about other spirit animals that we've already decided are not classified from people in this room."

Sheppard ducked a shoulder toward McKay, then glanced at Gabi and said, "I'm not sure of your name, but you pretty clearly belong with the aardvark and your Guide has the cheetah."

"I have a cheetah?" Brett asked, looking around wildly.

Gabi put her hand on his knee to see if it would help. The cheetah looked at Brett, but Brett still didn't see it.

"Later," Shane said, "I can help him find the path, but please, could you introduce yourselves. Your spirit animals have visited me for years, and I want to know you, too."

Brett stopped looking around and focused on Shane. "I'm Brett Allendorf."

"I'm Gabi Hansen. I first saw your inkentshane in a dream about a week ago."

"When your piece of the key was stolen." It was a statement, not a question. Shane looked at her with the sort of rapt attention she usually earned only by saying something brilliant or extremely peculiar. But his focus seemed deeper, as if he could see inside her.

Gabi nodded, remembering what a long shitty week it had been, culminating in this messed up day. "So was my aardvark supposed to eat it or is it going to give it back?"
Shane smiled at her as if knowing each other's animals already made them friends. "Ask it."

Gabi looked carefully at her spirit animal for the first time. Truth be told, she'd been a little jealous of Brett's cheetah that he couldn't even see, but as she met her aardvark's eyes she saw something that wasn't an animal at all. Her spirit aardvark had layers of scars on its shoulder and back and met her gaze as if it needed her as much as she needed it. When Gabi held out her hand, the aardvark came over and carefully turned its snout away so Gabi's hand reached the base of its ear.

With that touch, Gabi knew the aardvark was a she, not an it, and that she wanted to give Gabi the key back and had done something very difficult to protect it for Gabi. Gabi stroked carefully up the amazing creature's ear. Then she wrapped her arms around the aardvark and was amazed at how warm and solid and good the contact felt. The next thing she knew, Gabi was holding her glowing carved stone again, along with her aardvark.

"Okay," Jackson said, "So the rest of you saw an aardvark give her that."

"It goes with mine," Shane said, as he pulled a leather pouch on a cord from around his neck. He opened the pouch and displayed a stone with two symbols on it. The stone glowed in his hand.

Jackson's eyes opened as wide as a kid in a Disney commercial. "Wait, you're a Sentinel, too?"

"No," Shane shook his head and raised his eyebrows in a silent question.

"Why does the stone glow when you touch it?"

"It was activated by a Sentinel, by Gabi's father, before he died."

Gabi's throat choked up, and she couldn't speak or move. Warm fingers holding her hand told her Brett was there for her, but her mind spun with overlapping discovery and despair, and all she could do was watch events unfold around her.

Jackson opened his mouth eagerly, but McKay cut him off. "Shane, let me warn you that you are Daniel's new best friend. He will ask you questions continuously until you die of thirst, starvation, or lack of sleep unless you learn one crucial lesson. Ask for payment in advance. I've forced him to arrange deliveries from obscure chocolate factories half a continent away in exchange for answers I could have given him in five minutes. Seriously, if you want a car, a house, a private jet, he's your meal ticket."

As Jackson opened his mouth to object, McKay continued without a breath. "But for now, Jackson is going to wait, because a certain programmer who we thought was helping us by accident appears to be helping us on purpose. I'm 99% sure that whoever belongs with the mongoose that shows up when I work on the tracer code is the same person who wrote the original worm that sabotaged Jackson's phone. As I mentioned to some of you before, those two pieces of code had very distinctive signatures. The original worm was extremely sophisticated, probably two dozen people in the world who could have written it. The fact this programmer then faked a different style to write a tracer program that would appear to leak information the original code was built to hide implies a devious attempt to secretly betray whoever ordered the original code. Whatever is happening now, Lerato had surfaced in Pretoria this morning but seems to have disappeared again, and I wouldn't be surprised if the mongoose tipped her off and is heading for cover, too."

"How do you know she surfaced in Pretoria?" Jackson asked.

"That's definitely classified." McKay tapped on his laptop's touchpad for a moment as if he'd forgotten them all. "Don't you find it interesting that this other drama involving spirit animals and
someone who studies Sentinels is happening in the same country on the same day we're all here, and it involves another animal that Ellison saw in his vision?"

"It is not unexpected," Shane said. Everyone in the room looked at him in silence until he continued. "I too had a vision of six of our animals and the mongoose coming together here. I assume the other two pairs came from related obligations. Mr. Ellison, did you also see the seven of us that would unlock the door to Atlantis?"

"Uh, sort of," Ellison said. "I'm still getting the hang of this spirit plane stuff."

"Yes, I see." Gabi appreciated how Shane's tone implied he was at least an equal to every person in the room, regardless of age or title. The tone also calmed her and resonated somehow with her vibrational sense. The glowing artifact in his hands and the mention of her father, would have been enough to keep her attention, but there was something more tugging all of her senses as if she should already know Shane.

Gabi wanted to ask about her father and if Atlantis was a real place or a spirit plane place, but she didn't want to sound stupid. Her aardvark nudged her where the spirit creature's head rested surprisingly warm against her knee. Brett's cheetah wandered over and lay down beside the aardvark, then looked up at Gabi as if daring her to comment. Finally, the inkentshane pushed at Shane's leg as if encouraging him to get up and do something.

He stood and walked across the room to just in front of Gabi and Brett. Then he dropped to his knees and held out his glowing stone.

"You knew my father?" Gabi asked.

"The shaman who cared for him as he died was my teacher. Neither of us knew why he gave me the key at the time. I only connected you to him and to the aardvark when someone brought me a photo circulated in Pretoria showing your parents and I heard you had met with Lerato Kumalo and then visited our library. All I can really say of your father is that his spirit animal was a cheetah and he died for the tribe he protected."

Gabi felt tears deep behind her eyes, but what Shane said gave her comfort wrapped in with her loss. She reached her larger stone forward to meet his, aligning the two in a way that would make the symbols line up. The two pieces flared so brightly when they touched that Gabi closed her eyes and still felt thrown and overwhelmed until Brett's hand caught the back of her neck and he said, "Turn down sight and just listen to me and feel my touch."

Then it was easy to open her eyes and see how the two stones had merged together, as if they'd always been a single piece.

"Hope we don't have to replace the facsimile," McKay muttered. "And seriously, all you soldier types, they could have just blown up the planet."

"I was worried they'd beam right out to Atlantis when it lit up like that, and hey, isn't that Sentinel-unfriendly technology?" Ellison asked.

"So how will that unlock Atlantis?" Jackson asked.

"I'm not sure," Shane said. The aardvark, cheetah, and inkentshane were all huddled around him now, the aardvark resting its flank against Gabi as well. "I believe Atlantis is on another planet, and this key should let the gatekeepers send the seven of us to lead an expedition."

The reaction in the room was not what Gabi would have expected. There were a couple of smiles or
smirks in Daniel's direction. No one objected or belittled Shane's suggestion. Jackson leaned forward enthusiastically, and O'Neill hauled him back with a hand on his shoulder. The rest of the room mostly looked impressed or at least pleased, but no one said a word.

Gabi turned and whispered to Brett, fully aware that other Sentinels in the room might hear, "I think there's a lot people aren't telling us."

They were all saved from further embarrassment or helpful clarification by a mongoose and a raccoon racing in through the door. The mongoose let out a hiss and the raccoon froze like the classic deer in headlights. Gabi listened as two sets of footsteps hurried up the hall and was amused as much as alarmed when Sheppard and O'Neill each stepped to opposite sides of the door with weapons suddenly in their hands. Whatever part of her might be alarmed was overwhelmed by the rest of her over-the-top day. She sat very still.

The knock when it came was quiet, perhaps even timid. O'Neill opened the door on Lerato and a small Asian woman.

"Please, may we come in?" the smaller woman asked, not looking that surprised to be met by armed men and a room full of people.

By then Gabi saw that Lerato was scratched along her arms and face and possibly developing a black eye. "Lerato!" She jumped up and turned toward the door, but O'Neill held an arm out to block her.

"McKay?" O'Neill asked.

"I'm checking, but yes, they appear to be fine and clear. Shut the door. Seriously, she probably could have tracked us any time with the mongoose." McKay was looking at Lerato as he spoke, but it was the Asian woman who smiled. The mongoose came to stand in front of her and hissed at McKay and the room at large.

"She is very protective." The unimposing Asian woman looked down at the mongoose with wide eyes and a slight smile. "I did not know when we went to help Lerato that we would end up here, but my mongoose was quite insistent. Will you help us?"

"Aye," said Carson. "I'm a medical doctor, and I'd like to think I can at least be of some use. Let me get my kit."

McKay said, "So you're the programmer then. Tell us who you were working for and what your situation is with relation to your previous employer."

The small woman kept her eyes on her mongoose and ignored the guns still pointed at her. The mongoose hissed again at McKay. "Not employer. The King of Swaziland is very rich, very ambitious, and a very bad Sentinel. I am not his Guide or anything else to him, but he did not care."

"You are Miko," Shane said.

The woman nodded.

Shane reached out to calm the mongoose as O'Neill shifted his gun to let Gabi guide Lerato over to sit with her. Dr. Beckett knelt beside them and quietly examined Lerato while Gabi held her hand, hoping to give some comfort to the woman she had only met once before. "What did they do to you? Did this have anything to do with meeting us?"

Lerato managed a broad, toothy smile and shook her head hard enough that her earrings rang like
tiny wind chimes. "Miko warned me, and I ran before anyone could hurt me. If anything I would worry they could track me back to you or the library, but Shane has already found you, and others have re-hidden the library. I guess you and I both know a lot more now."

Shane had been silently petting the mongoose until Jackson turned to him and asked, "What do you know about these people?"

"I have only met Lerato in passing when she came to speak with a Guardian. I have seen the mongoose in distress and heard rumors that the King or Swaziland had kidnapped a Guide named Miko Kusanagi. Until now, I did not know the two were related."

"How do you know such things?"

"The animals come to me on spirit walks. I have trained as a Shaman and studied the lore of what you call Guides and Sentinels. The rumors I hear through private channels. I might tell you more about those later when we've established trust between us."

"And Lerato's raccoon?"

"Raccoon?" Lerato asked.

"Your spirit animal is a raccoon," Miko said. "You are a Guide, but not meant for that bad Sentinel either. That is why your spirit animal fled with mine."

"I really wanted to be a Guide," Lerato began to cry, clearly at the end of her reserves.

Dr. Beckett patted her arm where he was cleaning her scratches and said, "There, there. You'll be a fine Guide for the right Sentinel."

Gabi kept her hand on Lerato, but watched how Miko suddenly looked down at her own feet, which Gabi noticed were in very cute black boots with little silver buckles. The mongoose left Shane and started twining protectively around Miko's boots. With the aardvark, cheetah, and African dog still huddled beside her, Gabi decided spirit animals were the best thing she'd discovered in a very long day that wasn't even close to finished.

Lerato wiped her eyes and asked, "Is there a wolf and jaguar pair here? I interviewed someone who was seeking them."

Without giving anyone a chance to answer, Jackson said, "Perhaps we should take a break. Let people rest and regroup a bit."

"Great, I'll see you all at dinner." McKay picked up his computer and headed into one bedroom of the suite. He glanced over his shoulder at Sheppard and when the man only shrugged back at him, McKay closed the bedroom door.

"I think our two newest guests deserve the other bedroom and proper medical care, if no one objects," Carson said.

O'Neill nodded. "Jackson and I have some details to work through with our respective hierarchies. How about we make this sitting area our base of operations, and maybe Ellison and Sandburg could take the kids out for ice cream or something."

"I'd prefer to go home for a few hours," Gabi said. While she was feeling much better than she had in the morning, after two zone outs and the sensory overload at Thobile's house, she really wanted some time by herself or with just Brett and their spirit animals.
"No," O'Neill said. When Jackson, Sandburg, and Ellison all glared at him, he added, "We don't know who all the bad guys are yet, and it looks like anyone with a spirit animal can find us pretty much anywhere. We need more intel before anyone goes off on their own."

"Fine," Brett said. "What if I arrange for a nearby hotel room? You'll be able to hear anything we say if you want, and you can get to us in seconds."

The four older men glanced at each other and O'Neill said, "I guess we could spring for another room."

"No need," Brett said pulling out a credit card, "My dad always says he'd rather pay for a hotel room than have me be someplace unsafe."

Gabi laughed and saw how both Brett and Shane smiled back at her. "I really doubt this was what your dad had in mind."

"Do I need an escort to go as far as the lobby?" Brett waved his credit card in the air, playing the rich kid in a way she'd never seen before.

"I think I'll see if I can arrange for an extra room as well," Ellison said, and he held the door open for Brett.

As the door shut, Sheppard asked the room at large, "Does it make me old if I think someone's father sounds cool?" When no one answered he said, "I think I'll go check on McKay."

#

McKay was putting the final touches on his master plan when something wet caught him just under the ear. He did not shriek, much.

"Hush," the whispered voice was John's of course, who else would molest him during a moment of brilliance, "They'll think we're even worse than we are."

"What can they think that wouldn't be true? And why aren't we trying it?"

"Nothing, we are doing nothing right now. You were totally oblivious when I walked in and snuck up behind you, so I tried to startle you as part of good defensive training. However, I have no plans to do anything else—at all—with two other Sentinels in this suite."

"Four with the new one, and I need shaman-boy and the mongoose programmer in here now."

"Two, because Ellison and Gabi have taken other rooms, and did you just order me to fetch people for you?"

"I'm plotting the overthrow of the King of Swaziland, and you're complaining that I order you around? I order everyone around."

"Overthrowing the King of Swaziland?"

"Really it's simple. With the mongoose tracer, we can nail him for attack on foreign soil, that would be Blair's apartment, and attempted kidnapping, that woman the kids know. I've also traced his financial records for paying off a judge, human trafficking, and misappropriation of foreign aid. Besides, the man has refused three NGO's offers to run higher education programs in Swaziland, admittedly meaning beyond grade three by first world standards, but still: education! Seriously, this monarch has $200 million of his own but he takes $60 million a year from a country where the
majority of people live in poverty and their average life expectancy is less than fifty years. I don't know why no one ever saw it before, even the lesser geniuses, but I can take out this king and his corrupt judge electronically, with no bloodshed. Most of his money will go back to the people, and as soon as someone sensible lets all the bleeding hearts in to offer some sort of education, Swaziland will only be as badly off as most of the nearby countries. The rest I'll leave as an exercise to other readers."

"And you want Miko and Shane to help you with this, not Jackson and O'Neill?"

"Oh, I'll get O'Neill and Jackson to assure that the SGC and the US government will carry out my plan, but seriously, the guy hacked Daniel's phone. Americans have pissed off much larger countries for less. No, I need to know what sort of Sentinel infiltration Swaziland relies on. If the king kidnapped what's her name and what's his name heard about it, there must be some Sentinel network in place that I need to know about. Now, get them for me?"

John would never admit how hot it was to see Rodney deploy his genius for the greater good. Before he went to find Shane and Miko, he told Rodney, "Okay, but just so you know, the kids' spirit animals are the ones I saw recharging a ZPM, and you owe me dinner out when you're done."

He left Rodney sputtering something that sounded a lot like "ZedPM, ZedPM, ZedPM."

Gabi let hot water from the hotel shower run down the back of her neck. It was almost too hot to bear, but it felt good, like human touch. Every drop of water was a touch that brought comfort if she let herself feel it. She tried to think of nothing but the water running down her neck, back, and arms. The muscles in her shoulders loosened some. But the cacophony of thoughts in her mind would not be silenced.

She concentrated on the feel of warm water, and as she shifted back and forth, forward and backward, she mapped how close the water came to burning on each section of her skin. Her upper back enjoyed the hottest temperature, and overall muscled areas seemed more impervious to heat, though thickness of skin mattered too. When the water pounded on the back of her neck, she felt it right through to the front. With her back the sensation drove in, but did not pound all the way to the front. Gabi mapped the vibrations that passed easily though bones, the collar bone at her neck and the ribs branching out from her spine. But there was more. The heat and pressure passed from her skin to deep inside, and she wondered if other people felt that, or if it was part of the strange vibrational sense that had caused her migraine by over extending to the dig site. Fearing another day stuck in bed, she pictured the vibration dial and brought it almost to zero. She'd have to ask the other Sentinels about extra dials sometime.

Gabi wondered if she could use the touch of water or some other non-human object to ground her and prevent seizures, but somehow, she knew it wouldn't work. The touch of water or wrapping herself in blankets could bring comfort, but it couldn't fix her senses or let her function as a Sentinel. She seemed to be dependent on another person for that, a Guide, and while she liked Brett a lot, it still seemed too much to ask. Losing the sound of his heartbeat, even when she'd only been riding a bus, had hit her too hard. Collapsing on a sidewalk because she couldn't control her senses on her own, made her want to die, a feeling she'd become all too familiar with in the last year. Before, she'd thought her life was tearing apart as the seizures ramped up. Now she understood the seizures and how to prevent them, but she didn't want to depend on someone else that way, even for the time while he was willing. There had to be another option, but for all the thoughts and new information swirling through her mind, Gabi couldn't see it.

#
Brett was worried about Gabi. She'd been in the shower a long time, and while he didn't think he had to worry about her zoning in there, it had been a thoroughly out of control day. Everyone had a breaking point, even if Gabi was tougher than most.

When someone knocked on the door, Brett hopped off the bed. He smiled to see Shane and invited him in. "Maybe you can help me."

Shane smiled and lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

Brett rolled his head to loosen his neck and offered a teasing smile of his own. After weeks of not flirting with anyone, it was comforting to fall into that pattern, even if he wasn't sure of Shane's signals. "Seriously, Gabi's been in the shower all this time. I know she probably hasn't zoned, but if there was a way for the spirit animals to check with each other…"

Shane laughed, "They really don't work that way. We can't send them out to spy or check on people for us. But if her aardvark were worried, she'd probably let us know."

"Let you know, maybe."

All signs of humor dropped from Shane's face and posture. He was suddenly all hard muscle and intense but calm attention. "Her spirit animal is linked to yours as surely as she is to you. And even if you can't see your cheetah, he could nudge you in the right direction. You'd react eventually."

"Are they here now?"

"Right now your cheetah and her aardvark are curled up together in front of the bathroom door, and my inkantshane is sniffing at their feet."

"You were going to help me see them?"

"It will take all three of us, and one or the other of you may not be ready."

"Meaning me, since she can already see them."

"No, the easiest way for a Guide to start on the shaman path is through the bond with a Sentinel. Over time or with increased intimacy, your spirit animals will be able to help each other or even merge to make a difference in your physical plain. Gabi's aardvark used a sort of merge to save the key. Jim's jaguar once merged with Blair's wolf, probably to save Blair's life."

"How do you know?"

"About the jaguar? Difficult moments leave marks in the spirit plane, like scars. Being cut off from the spirit plane can also leave scars, and both Blair's wolf and Gabi's aardvark show those as well. For Blair, it was just a matter of believing he could take the next step on the shaman's path so that he could push past his own scars, but his connection to his Sentinel is amazingly strong, built up over years. You and Gabi are just starting your journey together, and most of the resistance right now comes from her doubts, scars from past wrongs that cut her off from being her true self."

"And what's your part in this? What's your connection to Gabi and me?"

Shane reached out and touched Brett's arm, just below the sleeve where his skin was bare. Brett couldn't deny that his stomach gave a flip and parts lower took notice, but Brett knew they weren't flirting anymore. What he felt was warm and tingly, like some sort of magical connection. Shane's eyes had gone wide and dark, but Brett was more than a little frightened by this latest sign of a shaman's power.
Brett shrugged the shaman's hand off.

Shane looked away from Brett and toward the bathroom door. "Your spirit animals have let mine curl up with them."

Brett pulled away, just a couple inches, and Shane held to where he stood and set his jaw.

"I don't know how we're supposed to handle this part," Shane said, "but since I was fourteen and first saw your spirit animals, I thought the three of us were meant to be together. I know that the Sentinel-Guide bond is sacred, and I don't want to threaten what you have, but you feel it too. In some way, the three of us are connected."

"The water's stopped," Brett said.

"I know, I want Gabi to hear this. I'm hoping she'll join us when she's ready."

"Join us in what?"

"Whatever we all want."

Gabi opened the bathroom door then. She had dried enough to pull on her clothes from earlier, but her hair was still wet and the rest of her looked damp and flushed. Brett thought it would be an arousing site for someone who swung that way, and he studied Shane, trying to gauge his reaction. Shane looked at Gabi as if he cared about her and respected her, but Brett was pretty sure Shane had looked at them both that way from the beginning.

Gabi glanced down and then clearly stepped around their cozy spirit animals.

"Is that what you want from us? Physically?" Gabi asked.

Shane ducked his head and looked young and embarrassed for the first time that day. "I don't know. I have saved myself for the two of you in every way. I want to be what you need from me and for us to be what the spirit plane asks of us. But I've waited five years to meet you. I can wait while you decide what you need."

"No, both of you."

"Gabi shook her head, eyes still averted. "I can't take being dependent on you, and you shouldn't have to deal with my problems."

She rushed toward the door, but Brett got there first. He wanted to touch her so badly, to make sure she was safe, to make himself safe. "Wait, just stay and talk. I may not have super senses or ever be able to understand what that's like for you, but I'm really good with whatever this is we have and whatever part you do or don't want Shane to play in it. Didn't you hear what they were saying in there? You are a Sentinel. I am a Guide. He is a shaman. You're not dependent on anyone. We're all tied into something bigger."

#

Gabi wanted to hug Brett so badly her skin itched with it. He stood blocking the door, arms spread out to the side, but she couldn't give in yet. "I'm becoming dependent on you. I was freaking out on the bus, not hearing your heartbeat. And when I tried to use my senses, I had a major seizure, and some stranger woke me up on the sidewalk."

Brett looked at his hands. "Maybe it gets better. We could practice being apart if you want, sometime when it's safe."
"We only have two weeks left and then it's back to Bay Tech, unless we end up in jail, or this side or the other side or the King of frigging Swaziland makes us disappear."

"If anyone makes you disappear, I will find you," Shane said. "If we depend on each other we share each other's problems. That is my path as a shaman and what I chose."

"And I chose you to be my sister or something I didn't have words for. The Sentinel and Guide part is a bonus, and while I'll help you practice being apart if you want, the Bay Tech campus isn't that big. You might be able to hear my heartbeat anywhere on it."

"What about when you go off campus or home for the holidays?"

"We could go together if we need to, but don't assume the worst. You were in a crazy, stressful situation today after being near me continuously since this whole trip started. Surely the scientist in you wants more data."

"But you didn't sign up for this!" Gabi's fists were clenched and wet strands of hair stuck to her face.

"You didn't sign up to be a Sentinel, and you've had to put up with seizures and all sorts of crap."

"That's the point. I have to deal with this to make my life livable. You can just walk away."

Brett leaned forward, not touching, but waiting until Gabi looked him in the eyes. "I don't want to walk away from this—from whatever it means to be a Guide or from you. Besides, it sounds like we might be going to Atlantis."

Gabi didn't know what to say. Part of her was sure the last five weeks had been the best in her life. Part of her felt pathetic and ashamed, and she never wanted to feel that way again.

"What if you get sick of me or your boyfriend hates me?"

She heard Shane stiffen at that, and realized she was tracking both Shane's and Brett's rapid heartbeats.

"I'm not going back to my last boyfriend," Brett said. "I wanted to believe differently, but he hasn't been answering my texts or calls. He never really cared about me. I knew that even before I came to Africa. Now I don't think I'd want to be with someone like that again, and anyone who didn't appreciate you wouldn't be worth my time either."

"I didn't expect you'd want to see me much once you got back to your real life." Gabi tried not to whine and heard her voice come out flat.

"Idiot. Can I hug you yet?"

Gabi stepped forward into his arms and buried her face in his shoulder. She wanted to sink into his touch and not think anymore, but that quickly passed, and she pulled away feeling torn between gratitude and dependency. Turning to face Shane she said, "I guess it's time to talk, and for the record, I heard the whole conversation while I was in the shower. I've gotten way too used to keeping track of Brett, and I didn't fully trust you. I apologize."

Shane tilted his head and met her eyes. His heartbeat slowed down. "I don't expect you to touch me yet, but if it would help, I could tell you some ways your gifts can help you judge new people."

Gabi wiped the clinging hair back from her face and then spoiled her work by shaking her head. "Great. More to practice. Go ahead."
Shane went to sit on one of the two large beds in the room and motioned for her and Brett to join him. "First, your spirit animals trust mine." He gestured to the three disparate bodies cuddled together on the floor, and Gabi wished it could be that simple between people.

"Second, you can listen for shifts in my heartbeat or breathing and possibly tell by scent if I am nervous or lying."

Gabi nodded.

"Third, if you let me touch your skin, I think you'll feel something of the bond that I sense between us. May I?" He held his hand out toward hers. With the long sleeves and long skirt she'd donned as a disguise that morning, there was little bare skin accessible, but she held out her hand.

He touched her. There was a comfortable recognition, something like when Dr. Sandburg helped her up after substituting the fake artifact. She'd thought that might be her reaction to any Guide, but now she knew Lerato was also a Guide, and touching her was nothing special to Gabi. When Shane brushed his fingers across the back of her hand, she found the touch calming. It made her feel warm and a little tingly. Unfortunately it also made her long for more touch, which triggered a whole cascade of pathetic insecurity.

"It's okay," Shane said. "You've been deprived of touch for years and now you're functioning as a Sentinel and testing your limits at that pretty hard. Your spirit wants to merge more with mine or Brett's, and touch is the only way it knows."

"Are there other ways?"

"Meditation and sex would be the next most common, but each person is different."

"I kind of have a rule about not having sex with someone I've been friends with for less than two years."

"I can be very patient." Shane said with a smile that lit up his face. Then he turned to Brett and asked, "And you?"

"I've taken a vow of celibacy for the summer. Are you planning to seduce both of us?"

"Or possibly be seduced. I've never even kissed anyone, but if I were going to, I'd want it to be one of you, preferably both in time. But for now, what kind of touch would feel safe but let us all relax? I think hugs or cuddling might be a too weighted and serious. How about tickling? Are you both ticklish? Do either of you object to it?"

"I can't remember the last time someone tickled me, probably grade school?" Brett said.

"Me either, I'm not even sure if I am ticklish."

In one fluid movement Shane pushed her back on the bed, going for her underarms and ribs. She was laughing before she even realized that meant she was ticklish. She wasn't sure if she liked the sensation, but the laughter felt good. Her gasping breaths took in the scent of Shane, and something about him smelled like spring and growing things. For a moment she wondered if Shane used some product on his short, tight hair. If so, they might have something in the line that she could use, so she could smell that way too. As the thought turned over in her mind, she realized the scent was better combined with the underlying scent of the shaman who was tickling her, poking right through her defenses without her minding at all. Her skin buzzed with pent up energy finally being released.

Brett grabbed her ankle and started ticking one bare foot. She heard his heartbeat ramp up until it was
precisely aligned with Shane's and her own, and she wondered at that, too. Then she poked back at Shane's ribs to start him laughing and falling to the side. Pretty soon they were all thrashing and making a lot of good noise.

At one point Brett trapped her right hand against the bed, and Gabi felt herself tense and start thinking about how much stronger he was and how scary even a play fight could be. But he let go almost immediately. Perhaps he read her tension. Then he discovered the inside of her elbow was ticklish, and since she was just discovering that too, she let her focus go there. Maybe her sense of touch ramped up a bit. Sometime later Gabi realized there were tears leaking from her eyes, and she was pretty sure it was from laughing hard, but it didn't really matter. She couldn't remember if she'd been thinking anything in minutes and minutes and suspected she could learn to like this version of touching.

The tickling continued until all three of them were panting, and Gabi found herself lying half across Brett's lap while he had both of Shane's feet pinned to his chest. One of Shane's hands was on Gabi's back, seeming to hold her still so that neither of them would start tickling each other again. Her body felt tingly, like the best of being held and getting a workout, and as her muscles relaxed she hoped she'd never have to move again. When she glanced at their spirit animals, still cuddled together on the floor, she finally felt part of something bigger. If other people could magnify their senses, see spirit animals, and seriously consider an expedition to Atlantis, then whatever she had wasn't a disease or a problem all her own anymore. If Shane planned to stay with her and Brett, then maybe they could share responsibilities, and she needn't worry as much about being too needy or not having enough to offer Brett. In literature, triangles might be seen as dangerous, but in physics, they were strong and stable.

Brett held Shane's feet tight to his pounding chest as Gabi breathed hard, lying across his lap. His breathing shifted to match theirs. The connection he'd felt when Shane first touched him sang through his body, and he never wanted to let go. He closed his eyes and basked, finally feeling like he'd found his place and purpose in life.

Jim Ellison knew he'd never win a prize for being empathic or sensitive, but he'd seen the way Blair watched Carson pet his prairie dog, even though Blair couldn't see the animal at the time. It was hard to miss how Blair choked up when he could see his wolf. Still, he'd held himself back in public. Now Jim dragged Blair down onto the floor of their hotel room, spreading his legs apart and pulling Blair in between them. Blair's legs had a little space left between them as well.

Blair started to ask, "What are—"

Then Blair's wolf walked right into the space provided, its front feet both between Blair's knees. For a moment Blair and the wolf just looked at each other. The wolf didn't go so far as to lick Blair's face, but he lowered his head just a little and Blair reached out to stroke the neck and shoulder.

After a moment, the wolf lay down with his head resting on Blair's thigh, wedged securely between Blair's legs. As Blair petted and explored his spirit animal, he relaxed back into Jim. Jim wrapped his arms around his Guide, his lover, and rested his chin on Blair's shoulder.

The jaguar stood watching over them for a while but eventually lay down on one side, the curve of his back touching Jim's thigh. Blair cautiously reached out and petted the jaguar. Even if it took Jim another year or two to fully convince Blair that he'd learned and wouldn't take his temper out on Blair again, Jim knew that he already had everything that truly mattered.
During the long, peaceful time while they sat on the floor, Jim couldn't help but tune into Blair's name when the young shaman spoke of him to Brett. His eyes watered when he heard what the scars on Blair's beautiful gray wolf meant and then again when Shane spoke of their amazingly strong connection. Someday, he'd have to tell Blair what he'd overheard, but for the time being he basked in Blair's appreciation of their spirit animals, and in the journey they were finally managing together.

When someone knocked on the hotel room door, Blair wasn't inclined to answer, even if his butt and his knees had grown sore from sitting on the floor with a wolf holding him in position. It felt like the best kind of meditation, the peace of partially merging with something larger than himself. He felt centered, like he'd found his home and would never lose it. In that instant, he realized he no longer doubted his place with Jim, no longer feared being cast out.

After a second knock, he said, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Daniel, with Jack and McKay and Sheppard, can we come in?"

Blair gave both wolf and jaguar one final pat, and climbed up off the floor. He waited for Jim to join him before he opened the door.

"Congratulations, Dr. Blair Sandburg," Daniel said, "Your thesis committee approved your degree in abstentia and you've been offered an honorary position at the Air Force Academy to go along with your appointment to our new Exo-planetary Research Committee." Daniel held out a piece of paper that was probably as close to a real diploma as could be printed in the hotel business office.

"Is this for real?" Blair asked, trying to keep his tone relaxed.

"Totally real, and you earned it. We just rushed things forward a couple weeks so we could make arrangements for our college-age contingent. Now come on, take the diploma and stop looking so surprised."

Blair took the paper, and Daniel pulled him into a smothering full body hug.

When Daniel released him, Jim pulled him into a monster hug beyond any public display the man had offered before. He left that embrace more dazed than he'd started.

McKay held his computer with his left hand while typing with his right, ignoring them all. Standing behind him, Sheppard shrugged and said, "Congrats, Doc."

Jack raised one eyebrow and pointedly held out his hand, "Congratulations, Doctor."

Blair shook hands and then followed mutely as they tromped across the hall to Brett's room.

When Daniel knocked there, someone called "Come in!" without asking who it was. The five of them walked in to find Gabi, Brett and Shane looking rather rumpled and all sitting on the same bed. The bed looked a little rumpled, too.

Jack fake sighed. "At least they're fully clothed."

Daniel replied, "They're all adults, and we're not their parents."

"Are you interrupting for a reason, or is this your idea of seeing the local wildlife," Brett asked with a lazy smirk.
Sheppard leaned against the wall and said, "I'm checking cheetah, wild dog, and aardvark off on my safari card."

"Actually, we have a proposal," Daniel said. "May we sit down?"

The room didn't have as much seating as McKay's suite, so Blair made himself comfortable on the floor again with Jim next to him. His ass protested, but the wolf and jaguar both curled up beside him, so he couldn't complain. McKay and Daniel pulled the room's two chairs in to form a semicircle with the beds. Sheppard leaned with a hip up on the desk, and Jack lay down on the unused bed and threw an arm over his eyes.

Daniel refrained from rolling his eyes, but just barely, and began. "In addition to addressing certain jurisdiction issues involving governments and universities, the Air Force Academy has decided to offer graduate student positions to Gabi and Brett based on information previously provided to Doctor Sandburg. As graduate students, you could study remotely under the auspices of the newly created Exo-planetary Research Committee, which currently consists of myself, Sandburg, and McKay. Between us we're qualified as advisors for anthropology, linguistics, archeology, physics, or engineering."

"If that's not enough, I'm sure Daniel can drag in anyone else he needs," McKay muttered as his hands tapped frantically at his laptop.

"So I could test my microbot array on another planet?"

"Officially, all our work will be theoretical, but off the record, let's say I'm sure something could be arranged."

"Where would we actually be living?" Brett asked.

"Locations might vary, and might depend on the artifact you found."

"And what about Shane?"

"That's going to take a bit longer to determine," O'Neill grumbled from the other bed without uncovering his eyes.

"I understand," Shane said. "And I'd like to mention that I already hold a valid passport, have nothing in my background that should impede a background check, visa, employment clearance, or medical screening. I believe my experience would be most useful working closely with Gabi and Brett and following up on the key to Atlantis that I helped to restore and explain." He smiled sweetly. "I would also be very happy to spend time discussing topics of interest with Dr. Jackson, once we have this all worked out."

"You should ask for a plane, too," Sheppard put in.

"He doesn't even have a degree," McKay complained.

"You like him. Admit it."

"I certainly do not. I don't like any of them. They're just my new battery chargers for the you-know-what."

"Maybe he can train to maintain the you-know-what."

"But, but, physics!" McKay waved both hands then grabbed to steady his laptop.
Sheppard kicked his foot and said, "There might be as much metaphysics as physics involved in this."

"That's not even a real thing."

"And spirit animals are?"

"With further study of the you-know-what and how it recharges, I'll find a scientific explanation for the spirit animals."

"And until then, Shane can contribute from what he knows."

McKay tapped indignant at his keyboard and waved a hand vaguely in Daniel's direction.

"What about Lerato?" Gabi asked.

"I'll still be working on Sentinel-Guide research regardless of where you all end up, and I'm happy to work with her in whatever arrangement she wants," Blair offered, hoping he sounded confident and professorial.

"Great, now what do I tell my dad?" Brett asked.

"Tell him that a US Air Force major thinks your dad is cool," O'Neill said loud and clear as Sheppard winced. Then the colonel added as if it was an afterthought, "But don't tell anyone anything until we have you sign some paperwork tomorrow."

"I'll write something impressive to show your dad," Daniel offered.

McKay snapped his computer closed. "Fine, that and the smuggling case are as settled as we need for now. I've just deposed the King of Swaziland, although most of the world won't realize for a few hours. Let's go out to dinner someplace where John can get his sightseeing fix."

#

John smiled at how Rodney remembered his ultimatum about going out to dinner, even if this wasn't quite what he'd envisioned. "I'll get the others."

He walked back to the suite and found Lerato in the sitting room writing on hotel stationary. "Dr. Jackson asked me to write some notes."

"Of course he did." John leaned against the table. "Wanna go out to dinner with the rest of us?"

"That should be interesting," she said, looking at him with the tight-eyed speculation Jackson and Carson sometimes displayed when John was their test subject.

John turned away quickly and gave a peremptory knock on the door of Carson's makeshift infirmary; then he opened the door and found Carson on his knees in front of tiny Miko. Carson's shirt was off. Miko was fully clothed, but her fingers were tangled in Carson's hair, pulling him close. The mongoose and prairie dog were curled up together nearby. John took in both human's elevated heartbeats and the scents of male and female arousal and thought "That was fast" and "Carson needed a guide" before he closed the door saying, "Oh, never mind. Carry on."
"Not happening, Chief."

Jim bumped into Blair, disrupting them both, as Jim unfolded his legs and stood. Blair didn't complain. The meditation session was a complete failure. Besides, the floors in the Antarctic outpost were cold, even with a couple of guest parkas folded beneath them. With a frosty huff of air, Blair pushed to his feet as well.

The planned departure to Atlantis was only a week away. Over a hundred people, military and scientists, were waiting to see if the "power issue" could be resolved in time. Most of them didn't know that meant a dozen people trying to meditate on the floor of an Ancient Antarctic research station while the main Ancient power source perched above its usual dais with some crystals scrambled into what they all hoped was a recharging configuration. To be fair, this was the first night they'd called in all the Sentinel pairs. The official excuse was that they might need back up for charging either the ZPM on earth or the one they hoped to find on Atlantis. They'd previously planned for Shane's group to train others after they figured out the procedure, but time was growing short and the governments involved in the Atlantis mission were becoming nervous.

"You're sure the chair didn't have one more set of instructions to cough up?" McKay was a bright burst of color in his orange fleece as he scowled over his laptop at Sheppard, who in all his dark layers practically faded into the shadows of the barely lit stone and metal walls.

Sheppard stepped forward and sniped right back. "Oh, you wanted me to ask the chair about that?"

McKay and Sheppard had been the only ones in the room not trying to meditate in order to channel power to the ZPM through their spirit animals. McKay claimed he needed to monitor the minimal equipment that remained to record data from the experiment while the ZPM and almost everything else in the room was shut down for the night. Sheppard claimed their spirit animals laughed at them when they tried to meditate.

O'Neill had brought his own recliner, claiming he was too old to sit cross legged on the floor. Daniel had happily adapted by achieving a full lotus on the padded footstool with his hands outstretched on his Sentinel's knees. Right now, it looked like O'Neill was asleep and Daniel was off in a world of his own.

Miko and Carson had claimed a spot of floor to one side of the Ancient monitors where Miko had hooked up a laptop and Carson had enough medical emergency supplies to be frankly disturbing. Miko took McKay and Sheppard's banter as her cue to relax her elegant meditation position and hunch over her laptop instead. Carson began gently massaging her shoulders while she worked.

"Are you sure the crystals are aligned correctly?" McKay asked as he bent over the ZPM for the fifth time in an hour.

"You checked all the diagrams and the insertion." Sheppard smiled. "But yes, my Sentinel vision says we're go for launch."

"Ach, please, don't even joke about launching anything with these experiments." Carson's complaint caused Miko to pat his hand on her shoulder even as she kept working with her other hand on her
McKay muttered something under his breath about sheep doctors that made all the Sentinels other than Carson smile.

Markham and his Guide, Stackhouse, had been put on guard at the door to keep anyone from interrupting, not that there was much reason to interrupt during the night shift with most of the equipment shut down. Neither of them had been trained in meditation yet, so this was mostly a chance to ease them into the strangeness that was the Sentinel and Guide Project.

Blair hadn't been called down for any of the earlier attempts, and he couldn't help but smile at the nest of pillows and blankets that Shane had set up for his threesome right by the corner of the dais where the ZPM stuck out. The three of them faced each other in half lotus positions wearing pajama-like fleece and fuzzy socks, and they looked liked kids at a sleepover. While Shane hadn't done any better than Blair as a meditations coach, Blair couldn't knock his dedication to Gabi and Brett. People tended to call Shane a Shaman and Brett a Guide, but it was clear they were both tied to each other as well as to Gabi, and all three had worked tirelessly for the past half year. In addition to the academic lessons that Blair had helped McKay plan for each of them, they'd also been working on meditation and Sentinel skills. Gabi had made more progress than any of the other Sentinels, working to control her senses, zones, and spikes both with a Guide and on her own. Brett had kept meticulous notes on her progress as well as documenting what he could when Shane and Gabi helped him learn to see spirit animals. While Blair had been amused about McKay's enhanced abilities to see spirit animals after kissing Sheppard, Brett had learned to tune in the spirit plane using meditation (although he'd also documented some kissing experiments with Shane).

"I told you this stupid metaphysical mumbo-jumbo couldn't possibly cover the gaps in quantum physics that we need to understand before recharging the ZedPM." McKay flailed his arms at the ancient consoles they'd had to power down for their experiment and then went back to tapping on his laptop.

Sheppard moved to slouch against a console just out of McKay's reach. "Face it, you're only obsessing about the science because we suck at meditating. If you thought we could charge a ZPM by shooting energy out of our spirit animals' eyes, you'd be down on the floor with them in a minute."

"Would not."

Sheppard jerked his chin in a way that clearly meant, "Would, too."

Miko came over to show McKay something on her laptop and Carson beamed with pride from beside his small mountain of medical supplies.

For a moment, Blair wished he was going to Atlantis with them all. Then Jim's arm wrapped around his shoulders, and even if Blair couldn't feel the warmth through all their layers of clothes, the affection warmed him inside.

Gabi unfolded herself and went to loom between McKay and Miko. "Is one of you controlling the drumming sound that was supposed to help us meditate?"

Blair had to pull himself out of observer mode to say, "No, I brought that." He gestured to his phone and the little speakers he'd set up. "Do you want me to turn it off?"

"Please, it's just wrong."
Blair tried not to show his disappointment as he stopped the recording. He didn't feel like much of an expert on Sentinels and Guides anymore. They all had different opinions and had pretty much leaped past everything he'd learned in five years of working with Jim.

Jim seemed to read his mind as he squeezed a hand on Blair's shoulder and said, "You're running the whole international outreach for Sentinels and Guides. Don't take it personally if we can't make it intergalactic."

At that point Daniel and Jack shuffled over with a plain brown bag. Jack opened it enough to show off the donuts inside as Daniel said, "How are efforts going in Swaziland?"

Jim extracted a glazed old fashioned from the bag and broke off half for Blair. Knowing he wouldn't finish his sentence before the scientists noticed the donuts Blair began, "Lerato's tapping into what appears to be a strong local network of Sentinels and Guides in addition to a couple the former king had dragged in."

By the end of that sentence Gabi was smiling at Blair as she extracted a crumb covered donut from the bag. "How's Lerato?"

"Still hoping to find her own Sentinel but frantically documenting stories and abilities before the NGOs rearrange the population too much through employment and education opportunities."

Brett and Shane both had hands in the bag when Blair said, "You'll never guess who's found a place with one of the largest NGOs."

Sticky faces waited for him to continue as Miko and Carson converged on the donut feast from opposite sides of the room. "Charlene Michaels, Professor Michaels soon to be ex-wife."

"Really?" Gabi said with her mouth still partially full. "I had her figured for a doormat and possibly alcoholic."

"No, I saw her in person, she's good. Maybe it helps that her husband got the book thrown at him and she'll probably get almost everything in their divorce settlement, but she's become a real crusader for women and children's rights over there."

Sheppard winked knowingly at them all as McKay continued to pound at his laptop with his back to the rest of the room.

"What about Thobile and the baby?" Gabi asked.

"She and Joe received the lightest sentences, as only accessories to smuggling. They're both doing their time as community service and probation. Thobile's working with refugee children and is able to keep her son with her. Her brother and his friends are all doing hard time in South African prisons."

"Were you able to contact the people I told you about?" Shane asked.

"Yes," Blair couldn't keep all the disappointment out of his voice. "They want to protect their network and don't trust their own government or ours."

Shane tilted his head as if he'd expected as much.

"They let Daniel and I spend a couple days in their library just before they moved it again." Blair sighed as Jim tapped the half donut Blair hadn't eaten, as if that would help. But he took a tiny bite and the sugary sweetness reminded him how lucky he was to be working with half a dozen Sentinels
on a project that didn't exist a year before. "Of course, even if they wouldn't let us take notes or—"

That was when McKay shouted, "Hey, they're eating! In the lab! Those are real donuts!" He swatted John in the same motion that took him out of his chair and left his laptop behind. "You knew and didn't tell me."

Then McKay had a maple donut connecting his hand to his mouth.

Sheppard eased the bag out of O'Neill's hand while he was distracted. "Let me offer some to the Sergeants at the door. You know Markham probably knew the donuts were here for as long as every Sentinel in this room, and Stackhouse deserves some sort of reward for having the whole Sentinel and Guide thing sprung on him just before finding himself in Antarctica."

"Donuts sooth a world of hurts," O'Neill said, "but bring the rest back after they choose."

"Seconds?" Gabi and McKay both said at once.

"You're sure they're not related?" Brett asked John.

"What?" McKay asked. "Never, my little niece understands more about physics that this upstart with her microbots and her sensor array ever—"

"This upstart knows what we're doing wrong with the ZPM."

Aside from whether she was right about the science, Blair was impressed at how Gabi managed to interrupt McKay and silence the whole room.

Sheppard came back with the donut bag saying, "What did I miss?"

Gabi and McKay grabbed blindly to each take another donut even as they started arguing on their way back to the laptops.

"We need to focus on the frequency of the ZPM."

"Particles being destroyed don't have a frequency."

"Both particles and waves, but I mean one level up. That hum in your ZPM data. That's the rhythm we need."

"Whatever you're hearing is just mechanical noise."

"Crystal harmonics. Bring up the readings from before."

"There is no…"

As McKay kept talking, Miko retrieved her laptop and turned up the volume on what Blair had to admit sounded like random machinery hum to him. However, he had long ago learned to trust the hearing of Sentinels over his own. He disconnected the speakers he'd been using with his phone and brought them to Miko to improve the sound quality as much as possible.

"Here," Gabi was pointing to Miko's computer screen. "Filter out these waveforms."

Even McKay grew quiet as he watched Gabi point at a screen showing the mix of sound waves and ask Miko to remove one after another, until even with the top of the line speakers Blair had brought, all that remained was a quiet buzz.
The room grew still as all the Sentinels focused in on the sound.

"It's your vibrational sense, isn't it?" Sheppard whispered, but Gabi appreciated that he kept it loud enough for the Guides to hear.

"Yeah. So you can pick out the rhythm in it, too?" Gabi asked.

"I don't think I could make a separate dial for it, but what you said about something between hearing and touch is starting to make sense."

The ridges of Shane's fingers sliding into Gabi's hand registered before she turned to see him. She adjusted touch and hearing down closer to normal levels and let her vibrational sense carry what she needed to focus for meditation.

Shane guided her back to where she'd left her pillow. She felt Brett tuck a blanket over her lap and knew he'd settled on his own pillow as the scent of eucalyptus and aloe filled the air. As Brett's warm hand enfolded her empty one, she saw his other hand clasp Shane's to complete their circle. The stickiness from the donuts, distracted her for a moment, but then Shane was talking.

"Only the Sentinels can hear the beat or vibration you've found, but if you focus on that, I'll try to guide our meditation to send energy toward the ZPM."

Gabi knew she'd spent more time working on meditation than any of the others had over the last few months. She let herself relax and tethered herself to her Guides even as she let her mind drift to the rhythm of the ZPM.

She couldn't be in the same room with the other Sentinels and Guides without knowing they'd found shortcuts through sex that somehow strengthened their connections to each other and the spirit plane. Sometimes Gabi was jealous. She liked cuddling up with Brett and Shane, and lately she liked being around when the guys kissed or explored with each other. They'd made it clear that she'd never be excluded, and they all thought they'd end up as a threesome at some point in the future. They'd even joked about Gabi's two year rule being ambiguous when they didn't know how long a year would be if they reached Atlantis. But somehow between the three of them, they needed to go slow and know whatever they were doing was right for them. Gabi was still getting used to the idea that anyone accepted her as she was, that they'd wait or adapt to what she wanted, and that she had found not just one but two people she could trust.

Her trust in Shane and Brett, whatever it was that connected them all together, became a tangible force as she let go of herself and drifted to someplace in between. Her aardvark crowded against her shins, and Gabi knew Shane's dog and Brett's cheetah were also gathered within their circle of clasped hands. Or maybe, the spirit animals were still in the other plane and the energy flowing through her was somehow between the two plains or generated when they connected. Either way, Gabi was able to focus in on the familiar rhythm. The vibration or wavelength needed to feed the ZPM.

As the energy around her picked up the beat, Gabi saw their spirit animals start to glow. The energy flowed into Shane's dog until it poured like a laser beam toward the ZPM. The beam sharpened. The ZPM began to glow.

Gabi could sense Shane focusing the energy, the way she'd overlay images from her microbots to produce a single sharper image. She refined her vibrational sense with that in mind and laser-like energy shot from her aardvark to strengthen the stream between the wild dog and the ZPM. Dipping
into the touch end of her sensory spectrum, Gabi felt Brett straining to add to their efforts. Knowing that she was physically connected to him through their hands, Gabi tried to pull the energy while Brett and his cheetah tried to push. When it worked, even more energy poured into the ZPM.

For what could have been moments or hours, Gabi was dazzled by the energy and aware only of her small circle of three people and three animals—touching, vibrating, connected.

Then she saw another strand of energy connect to the ZPM.

Gabi kept the hearing/vibration/touch part of her senses focused on the task at hand. But she let her sight wander up the second strand of light until she saw Sandburg and Ellison, sitting on the floor, hands linked to form a circle with their jaguar and wolf inside. Both animals were glowing and both contributed to the beam of light flowing from them to the ZPM. The sight was dazzling, but beyond that, Gabi was stunned by the beauty of Blair's wolf. Not that she'd thought to judge any of the spirit animals, but Blair's wolf had always looked a bit old and tattered. Gabi believed that reflected the hard path he and Blair had followed. Now the wolf looked healthier, with more meat on his bones and no visible scars. He looked mythic and intently focused on the ZPM they were charging.

Gabi let her gaze drift back to her own circle, carefully keeping enough of her mind on the task at hand and not for a moment doubting her connection to those who held her physically and in the spirit plane. As her eyes slid across her own aardvark, she wondered how her Sentinel vision could have missed the changes so close to home. While her spirit creature still bore several deep scars along her back, the numerous small scars that had laced her legs and shoulder had faded. The aardvark's skin lay smoother, as if there were a little more flesh beneath it. Gabi waited patiently, appreciating her spirit animal, and knew from some echo in the vibrations she tracked that the ZPM was almost full.

The ZPM flared, and then the energy streaming in disappeared.

While McKay and Kusanagi rushed forward with testing equipment and called out "39 minutes" and then "fully charged," Gabi encircled her aardvark with her arms. Brett and Shane released her hands, even as they kept their hands resting on her. She felt them and their spirit animals folded into a sort of group hug or disorganized cuddle. For once she was warm, and she discovered that her aardvark's skin truly was smoother, making her somehow softer than the other two animals with their fur. She felt Brett stroking her and the animals, and Shane was saying, "You see how much better your aardvark is doing? You see and she sees you."

#

Jim noticed as soon as the energy faded that Blair's wolf still shone, its gray fur glossy and smoother than it had ever been before. With Sentinel eyes and sense memory he noted the rounder flesh where bones had been prominent and the scars that had either vanished or faded to no longer disrupt the growth of fur.

"Blair, your wolf is amazing."

But Blair was looking at Jim not the wolf. "How were we able to do that? Why were we the only ones other than the kids who could charge the ZPM?"

"You're hardly more than a kid yourself." Jim reached out and mussed his Guide's hair.

"Hah. And you eat like one. But seriously, do you think you sensed the vibrations better? Is it a sensory skill?"

"I don't think so, Chief. Look at your wolf."
Blair glanced at his wolf and rested a hand on the strong furry shoulder but turned back to face his Sentinel.

Jim shook his head. "Remember when I told you what the little shaman said about the strength of our bond and how your wolf bore scars from your hard journey? Your wolf looks younger and healthier now. The scars are either healed or hidden under the fur. Don't you see and feel the difference?"

Blair finally focused on the wolf, running his fingers deep into the animal's thick fur. Jim heard each brush of fur on skin and knew how soft and thick the fur was. He watched his Guide's posture relax and his eyes widen, a little moist.

The spirit animal rubbed his head against Blair but remained sitting.

"You're right. There's twice as much fur as before. Does he look bigger to you?"

Jim studied his sense memories again. "I think he's put on a couple pounds and is sitting up straighter. That and the fur being fuller probably makes him look bigger. Gabi's aardvark was also looking better before they engulfed it in that puppy pile over there."

"So you think that means Gabi and I are doing better on the spirit plane?"

"I hope you're doing better on this plane as well." Jim slid one hand into the hair above Blair's neck as he reached the other into the thick fur behind the wolf's shoulder. Jim's jaguar moved in closer to both the wolf and Blair. "I also think you and Shane are the best with meditation and all this spirit plane stuff. So that would be my guess as to why you managed it."

"You were right there with me, big guy." Blair's blue eyes were back on Jim, unwavering.

"Anytime, Chief."

Blair reached out a hand to squeeze Jim's thigh, and Jim's body responded right away.

"Now?" Blair asked.

Jim wanted so badly to take Blair to bed and do anything his Guide wanted, but they were trapped in a small base underground with five other Sentinels in residence. Jim looked pointedly around the room, trying to convey his thoughts with just his eyes.

Blair raised both eyebrows and twitched his lower lip in a way Jim could never resist.

Before Jim knew it they were both saying goodnight and walking out of the room. Their spirit animals wandered away through a wall across the room.

When Jim and Blair reached the tight quarters they shared whenever they were in Antarctica, Blair pulled out a white noise generator and a large blue bandana.

As Blair switched on the white noise and lifted the bandana toward his mouth he asked, "Are you game for this?"

"You brought that?" Jim whispered. "You want to be gagged?"

Blair nodded, meeting Jim's eyes very seriously.

"Wait," Jim slid one hand behind Blair's neck and cleared hair out of his face with the other. Then he leaned in and kissed as wet and dirty as he knew how. Blair's lips parted immediately and let Jim in. Their tongues slid around and beside each other. After a quick gasp for breath, they both plunged
back in.

When they pulled apart again, it took most of a minute to catch their breath. Jim leaned forward and whispered as softly as he thought Blair could hear, "I didn't think you'd ever want to be gagged or bound."

Blair dragged a slow finger from behind Jim's ear, down his neck, to his chest. "Just shows that Sentinels don't know everything. There is so much we haven't done yet." The look Blair ran up and down Jim's body was enough to make the Sentinel wish they were already lying down as his brain supplied one possibility after another. Then Blair continued, "For tonight, the challenge is to keep it quiet."

Blair wrapped the bandana over his mouth and turned his back to Jim, presenting the ends as if Jim should tie them behind all that hair. Even if Jim had never tied a gag for the purpose of pleasure before, he knew why he wouldn't want the knot in back. He stroked Blair's hair, dialing up touch so he could feel Blair shiver and curl into his hand when he reached the nape of Blair's neck. Then Jim took the bandana, turned it so the knot would be in front, and used everything he'd learned as a Ranger and a Sentinel to make a comfortable gag to stifle the sounds of his noisy partner. He whispered again, for Blair's ear only, "Normally, I love to hear you, but for tonight it can be a challenge to us both to be silent."

He thought about setting up a hand gesture Blair could use if he didn't like something, but Jim knew his Guide's body well enough to make that superfluous. Whatever Blair might be implying for future scenes, Jim didn't want to test any limits tonight. He wanted to appreciate all that had turned out better than expected for his Guide and for the two of them together. He didn't want to call up the sort of energy they'd used to fill the ZPM, but there was some other energy, something he could almost hear or touch, that sometimes ran between them. Jim wanted to feel that connection and to make Blair feel it with him.

To start, he needed to kiss Blair all over. To do that, he eased them both down onto the bed. Jim covered Blair's face, even on top of the gag, with small, light kisses. He kissed along Blair's hairline, and if Blair thrashed a bit when Jim kissed around and behind Blair's ear, that only encouraged Jim to press against him, holding him mostly still. Blair seemed to melt into the mattress and the smell of his pleasure melted Jim's brain. There was more of a full body ripple than a thrash when Jim kissed his way along the second ear.

Blair's hands ran through Jim's hair the way Blair had finally appreciated his wolf, and Jim felt the powerful connection between them as if it transmitted through the nerves in his scalp. Both men moved in silence, and Jim pumped up his hearing, needing to listen to his Guide's body react if not his voice.

At the base of Blair's neck, Jim kissed along the collar bone and downward as he unfastened four layers of shirts and fleece. The places that tasted of earlier stress and sweat, Jim kissed until they tasted only of what Jim was doing to Blair. Once he pulled the shirts off, Jim kissed random lines along Blair's arms and chest, crossing and re-crossing his nipples several times, but also paying special attention to the inner wrists and elbows and the lower ribs where Jim knew that Blair was sensitive. Blair's heartbeat sped where he'd normally babble or groan. Small hitched noises in his throat telegraphed the usual gasps and squeaks. Focusing on the internal sounds drew Jim into his lover before he could physically squeeze inside.

By the time Jim reached Blair's waist, instead of thrashing or writhing, Blair pressed slowly toward Jim. As Jim unbuttoned and then unzipped, Blair tried to push up. Holding him down, Jim kissed out onto his hip as he removed Blair's long underwear, pants, socks and shoes in one carefully planned
maneuver. Then he tucked Blair beneath the covers and went back to kissing Blair's face as Jim quickly removed all his own clothing.

He slid into bed beside Blair and kissed along Blair's side, tucking himself under the covers as he kissed down to Blair's knee and then up his inner thigh.

Blair went from almost melted complacence to vibrating with need, and Jim knew from a shift in smell that Blair would be thrusting against the blankets soon if Jim didn't give him something else. The smell flipped a switch for Jim as well. He went from the easy, pleasant arousal he'd enjoyed with his clothes on to a leaking need that was hard to postpone.

At the top of Blair's thigh, Jim transitioned from kissing to licking. He licked the groove just inside Blair's thigh, and he made his tongue wet and wide for one long stroke from Blair's balls to the tip of his cock. Jim heard a sound deep in Blair's throat as his heart also started to speed. It was the first real sound Blair had made. Jim was awed by how quiet and compliant Blair had been until that point, and wanting to keep everything as private as possible, Jim reached his arms up and pulled the covers over Blair's head.

Jim felt the increased humidity all over his skin with both of them breathing and finally growing warm and excited enough to sweat inside the tent-like covers. Jim sucked down Blair's cock trying to make it as wet as possible, and Blair bucked up hard and deep for a moment. Then he eased back and let Jim lick and swirl his tongue before sucking down fast and wet. While Blair breathed hard through his nose, Jim got his own hand wet and shifted up the bed so he could align his cock with Blair's and wrap them both in Jim's big, wet hand. Jim started to stroke as slowly as he could stand as he kissed the sensitive spots around Blair's ears again.

Blair's neck and back arched into the twin sensations. His heart raced, and Jim upped his rhythm to give Blair what he needed. When Blair came it shook them both and Jim followed him over the edge, stroking them both for as long as they could stand to draw it out.

Then Jim pulled the covers away from their faces, untied the bandana, and used it to clean them both as gently as a blissed out Sentinel could. Without a sound he curled around Blair who curled into him. Jim's mouth still ghosted tiny kisses against the skin in front of him as he drifted into sleep.

#

January 17, Atlantis

John stepped out of the wormhole feeling great. Gate travel was nothing like the Asgard beaming technology that tried to flash freeze his senses every time. Stepping through a gate, even a gate to another galaxy, was so Sentinel friendly John could barely believe he'd traveled.

He stepped onto a platform in a dark two story room with two Marines at his side and Weir and Rodney right behind him. Training kept his P-90 ready and time pressure kept him moving forward.

Expanding his vision and checking in all directions showed John the elegance of the Gate behind him and the geometrical glass and trim all around him. When the first stair he stepped on lit under his foot, the light was low enough and shifted far enough to the long end of the spectrum that it didn't upset his heightened vision. As he increased hearing, he knew the designers had made this place for Sentinels. No room this size could be so free of distracting echoes without planning. His hearing traced out a long way, hearing nothing that threatened him. Atlantis felt safe, like coming home. Even the stump of a potted shrub on the upper level smelled sweet, like cinnamon or nutmeg.

Rodney said, "Touch this. I think it's a DHD."
The console lit up warm under John's hand with a vibration like the ZPM they'd finally learned how to charge.

After activating the consoles in the control area, John left his Guide in charge of the scientists. All other Guides were to stay with their Sentinels initially, but with Rodney in charge of science and John in charge of the military, they'd agreed on the need to split up. Besides, the Air Force had made John a Lieutenant Colonel to fit his new command, and John was still more pleased than he wanted anyone to know about that development. Leaving Weir in charge of traffic flow through the gate and Beckett in charge of setting up a temporary first aid station in a nearby empty room, John set up patrols to scout the main tower and took charge of one patrol personally.

His first discovery was that they were underwater. John looked out over the vast city of Atlantis, too dark for any without Sentinel vision to fully appreciate.

He tapped the radio on his ear, "McKay, Elizabeth, we've found an exterior window down one level, and it looks like we're underwater. If it's an ocean anything like earth, I'd guess hundreds of feet underwater."

By the time Rodney and Weir came to look out and said they couldn't see much, Rodney was beyond caring because he'd determined there was a force field holding the water out. "I'm going back up to find more information on this field!"

He was gone without even touching John, and John felt the lack but turned to Weir who asked, "Is it beautiful?"

"It's like a snowflake." John would have mentioned the model his spirit animal had flown away, but he wasn't sure how much of the spirit animal part of the Sentinel and Guide project Elizabeth had been briefed on. When she left, John messaged Rodney privately, "Any chance this city flies?"

By the time they'd closed the wormhole and cleared four floors of the tower for move in, John's head was buzzing. He focused on the sound of bubbles in one of the strangely lit greenish pillars but couldn't place the low pitched pounding he heard from much farther away. Not wanting to turn down his hearing, John reduced sight and touch to near normal, and a pressure in his head that he'd barely been aware of receded a bit.

His Guide's voice slammed unpleasantly loud and even more rapid fire than usual through the radio. "Sheppard, we need to stop opening new levels. I've just found information on power supplies, and there's a reason we learned how to charge ZedPMs. We have two completely depleted and the last one's dropping fast. We need to conserve power or we're going to lose the shields holding the water back."

"But we haven't located the ZPMs or a control chair yet."

"Can you send patrols that don't turn on lights wherever they go?"

John issued a command to halt all scouting parties until he could rearrange his troops. Then he heard a call on the Sentinel and Guide only channel saying, "Gabi to Colonel Sheppard or Doctor McKay, over?"

"You don't have to say 'over.' Even the military types get that right," McKay grumbled.

John asked, "What is it, Gabi?"

"Our spirit animals just showed up and want us to follow them downstairs to an area I don't think you've cleared yet."
"Call me if you find a ZedPM. Otherwise, try not to turn anything on," McKay said.

"Wait for me. I'll be with you in a moment." John made short work of reordering his patrols along the way.

#

Brett felt his own heart pounding and knew Gabi heard it when their spirit animals led them into a room with three ZPMs that needed charging. Gabi clasped his hand and gave a squeeze. He wanted to be calm for her but couldn't. He heard Sheppard calling McKay but was too wound up to listen.

This was their job. This was why they'd been brought to another galaxy. Over a hundred lives depended on them recharging those ZPMs.

Dr. Daniel Jackson had come to a special mid-year graduation ceremony at BayTech and spun a sugar-coated story to Brett's dad about hiring Brett for some very hush-hush research site and taking him on as a graduate student at the same time.

Now they were underwater in a ten-thousand year old city in another galaxy. If they couldn't recharge three ZPMs and do it fast, they would all drown with no way to return to earth. But they'd only succeeded that one time on earth. Before that there had been several failed attempts, and Brett knew he was the weak link in their chain. He was the worst at meditation and least able to focus on the spirit plane.

"What are you waiting for? Get to it." Brett heard McKay, but didn't know when he'd entered the room.

"Can I keep looking for the control chair now?" That was Sheppard, already at the door.

"It looks like we'll need it to pilot this city up to air, if we ever get the power on. What are you kids waiting for?"

McKay's face was flushed, and even at the best of times Brett couldn't handle his scolding as well as Gabi did. This wasn't the best of times, and Brett had trouble taking enough air in to breathe.

Gabi squeezed his hand again and tugged him toward the ground. Shane wrapped a warm arm around his shoulders and guided him into meditation position. Then Shane took Brett's hand and Gabi's, completing their little circle, and said, "Close your eyes and breathe with me."

Brett tried. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. He could smell herbal scents from Shane and something with cocoa butter that Gabi used. For a moment he wondered what it would be like to know each person's scent the way Gabi did, but that led him to thoughts about closeness, cuddling, and kissing that probably wouldn't help with his meditation.

As if Gabi read his mind, she shifted around. Without opening his eyes, he felt Gabi release his hand but then wrap both her arms around him. One of her hands still held Shane's, and Brett felt both their hands together pressing against his ribs, holding him almost too tight.

"Just kiss him already," Gabi said.

She must have been talking to Shane, because in a moment Shane's free hand was cradling Brett's face and Shane's warm mouth brushed against him.

"What are you doing?" McKay screeched. "Even minds as young and unformed as yours must grasp that this is hardly the time or place—"
Without raising her voice Gabi broke through McKay's rant. "Look, Shane's great at focusing on the spirit plane in any situation. I can follow him so long as he and Brett are in sync and I know they're safe. Brett's best at focusing on Shane and me through touch, so if you'll just keep quiet, we can get this done."

There was silence.

Gabi wrapped herself warmly around his back, and he knew she'd hear when his heart beat and breathing matched up with Shane's, knew that she'd be right with them even if she wasn't up to kissing anyone yet. She'd keep them safe.

If Gabi was a warm presence all around him, Shane was a burning mouth on his, focusing all of his energy and attention to that one point. Brett was being pulled inside out, feeling a tingling and stroking that seemed to be everywhere and not just Shane's tongue in his mouth. They'd said they were taking it slow, but Brett didn't know what sex between them would be like when Shane could take him apart completely with a kiss.

Brett didn't know where his limbs were, where his skin was. He guessed he'd connected to the spirit plane, but Brett didn't care. Where he'd once had a body, he now felt like a bowl of hot tea or soup. Parts of him were Shane, Gabi, a cheetah, an aardvark, and an African wild dog, but in some way they'd always been part of him. It felt so right. He was floating on sensation in a way he'd only approached through sex before but instead of feeling torn apart, he was held together by parts that were more than himself. He burned, but he didn't want. Whatever he was doing was right, and he didn't have to be the part that understood what it was.

At some point Brett thought he felt arms around him again.

Something told him he had arms of his own, probably at his sides.

Shane's face was pressed beside of his own, no longer kissing him.

Gabi was speaking, "Is that it? Did we fill them all?"

A very strange voice, like McKay was far away or whispering, neither of which seemed possible said, "All three, in less time than one on earth took."

"But something else is wrong."

Brett opened his eyes at the warning in Gabi's voice. He saw her aardvark moving toward the door as the beaver pulled the raven through with careful teeth on the back of its neck. The raven's eyes were closed. Brett's cheetah passed the aardvark and started licking the bird's head, but the raven didn't react.

Brett was trying to find his feet, trying to find his words when the door opened and Sheppard pressed through, ordering over his shoulder for whoever was with him to "Guard the door!" before the door closed and Sheppard slid down the nearest wall. The Colonel's eyes closed tight, and he rested his arms and head forward on his knees as if he might throw up.

"John, what's wrong?" McKay rushed forward.

Sheppard covered his ears at the loud words but leaned into McKay's hand when it reached his shoulder. "Something in my head. It's getting worse, and I'm having trouble with my senses."

McKay lowered his voice. "Are any of your number lines above two, John? Bring them down."
Brett finally found his voice and said very quietly to his own Sentinel, "This looks like what happened to you with the robbery and the vibrations. Can you pick up what's bothering him?"

Gabi held up a finger in a classic request for him to wait a minute. Brett wrapped his hand around her wrist and waited. He kept silent and still even when he saw her eyes scrunch tight as if something were hurting her, too.

"Colonel Sheppard, can you hear me?" Brett could barely hear her, but the Colonel nodded. "Did you ever make a separate control for sensing vibrations? I'm picking up what you are, and it's coming through the water like whale song, but bad whale song, like whales with nails to scrape on a chalkboard. If you need to turn down your hearing and touch until you sort this out, I can monitor for a while before it bothers me. I dealt with this for a whole night once, and I understand it."

McKay used his free hand to tap his earpiece, "Carson, Miko, I need you in the ZPM room, five levels down. Miko, you can access the recon map on your science team laptop, which you better bring with you."

Brett ignored the conversation that ensued while Carson and Miko were in transit. He and Shane tried to comfort Gabi, but she insisted "I have to sense this to figure it out."

When Beckett arrived and went to check Sheppard, Gabi called Dr. Kusanagi over to their group. "I think I know what's going on. The vibrations are coming inward from at least a dozen sources that are circling above us, but still in the water. They're big, maybe as big as whales, and the way they move the water seems more like swimming animals than like submarines. Based on what I can map from the vibrations, I think they're swimming a circle larger than the city, not closing in. I don't know if they're trying to warn us or warn off other animals, but if what they're doing sounds or feels half as annoying to the local marine life as to us, they may have cleared a path above us to raise the city. We'll just need to rise straight up and slowly so we don't throw them off or create an undertow. Do you know of any sensors or other gadgets that might confirm that?"

Kusanagi nodded. "Dr. Zelenka started looking at city sensors when Dr. McKay said the ZPMs were full. Let me check with Zelenka and whatever is coming through from his laptop." Kusanagi tilted her head and looked at Gabi's face. "Are you okay? Do you want to check this out with me?"

Gabi lit up at being asked. "I'd love to, and I know how to reduce my vibrational sense if I need to."

Brett squeezed her wrist and smiled at Shane, thinking maybe they would be needed on Atlantis for more than charging the batteries.

#

McKay knew he was hovering beside John, but he wasn't the only one. Carson had insisted on coming along, even though he had provided nothing more than a cold pack and ibuprofen when John was collapsed on the floor. At least Miko and the three kids had gone away to examine sensor readings with Zelenka.

Meanwhile, one of John's patrols had found the Atlantis control chair. John was insisting he was recovered enough to operate it, even if he still looked pale and tense around the eyes.

"I'm holding all my senses close to normal and my new vibrational number line is as close to zero as I can keep it and still monitor at all," John whispered between messages to and from the patrols he was sending farther out again.

"But you're still in pain."
"Just a headache."

"Sure, Major Migraine."

"Try, Colonel I've-got-a-headache-dear, if you don't let it go."

So their newly minted Colonel led them at a near jog to the control chair as Rodney and Carson followed in his wake. When they arrived, Rodney attached his laptop with the same converters they’d rigged in Antarctica. He stood up just as his Sentinel sat down.

The chair reclined and lit. John stiffened and then his face went blank before Rodney could even touch his hand.

"Hmph! Some Sentinels never learn." Rodney put one hand above John's on the arm of the chair and rubbed the other a little rougher than he meant to on John's cheek. "Talk to me, fly boy, or I'm pulling you out of that chair."

"His respiration and heart rate are higher than I like," Carson said. "This isn't just a zone."

"John. John! I don't need this today."

"Shit," John said.

Rodney breathed a sigh of relief. "You better keep talking. What happened?"

"It was too fast. Too much. Like when the other chair showed me the crystal structures at first, except she wanted to show me blueprints, repair lists, sensor readings."

"Check the sensor readings, and see if there's good reason to stay underwater."

"Can I let her shunt the repair list to your laptop?"

"There might be space issues. I'll check it later, and why are you saying 'she'?"

A broad grin spread across John's face. "She's a ship and she flies. That's a she in the Air Force. Her sensors are picking up the noisy sea animals, too. They're called Flagisallus, and they're giving warning because we powered up. Way too much info on the Flagisallus and why the Ancients sank the city. Looks like now that we're powered up, the water won't do much to hide or protect us. We might as well get to the surface before we annoy the local sea life too much."

"Glad you and the city had this little chat. Now, I know you want to play with your big toy, but are we still supposed to use the shield for defense once we're up there? Is there some checklist to follow first?"

John laughed. "She's making you a checklist, complete with tiny boxes because that's the way I pictured it. God, I'm going to be careful what I ask for."

Zelenka's voice came over Rodney's earpiece. "McKay, a checklist appeared on my screen in control. Is kind of curious. The first item says 'Appease the scientists with a checklist.'"

"You know who's sitting in the control chair. Does the rest of the list say anything useful?"

"Perhaps. 'Secure loose belongings and personnel' and 'retract anchor system' come before 'rise to surface' and 'adjust environmental controls."

"Does it tell you how to do each item?"
"I can do all of it from here except securing loose items." John didn't even pretend he hadn't heard both sides of the conversation.

Rodney realized he still had his hand on John's smiling face, and he patted John's cheek before bringing that hand around to tap his earpiece. He kept his other hand over John's on the chair's sensor. "Elizabeth, we're ready to surface. Can you let us know when everyone is braced and everything is secure? I don't know how bumpy this will be."

"We're going to take it slow and easy," John crooned. Rodney was pretty sure that tone of voice wasn't directed at him, and he wondered if John might be a little too attached to his new submersible/spaceship/city already. Then again, he'd heard John rhapsodize about enough "sweet" planes on earth not to be too jealous.

As soon as Elizabeth gave the word, Rodney felt a shiver and clunk from beneath his feet and then just the slightest sensation of movement, like the world's slowest elevator.

"That's it?" he said.

"Gotta play nice with our new Flaggi friends," John smirked, eyes still turned inward to whatever the city was showing him. His body relaxed and his grin slid into a pleased expression Rodney wasn't sure anyone else should be seeing.

Rodney glanced over at Carson who first looked a little nervous and then nodded to say, "Aye, he's doing fine now, but I'm not leaving while he's still using that chair."

"Finally," John said with a sigh, "the sea screech-ers stopped making that noise."

Rodney rubbed his hand up and down John's forearm. "I'm glad to hear that." The freaky part was how glad Rodney was to hear about the end of an annoying noise he couldn't even hear. He didn't like the idea or someone or something hurting John without Rodney being able to perceive let alone evaluate the threat. Yet even when he couldn't help John, Rodney was glad to be with him rather than up in the control room with most of the other scientists.

Rodney spared a glance at his laptop and flipped through a couple screens of sensor data as John said, "They're clearing away. We're about to break the surface, and any way I do it, there's going to be a ripple."

Rodney felt a slight change in speed or pressure, but his ears didn't even pop.

John squirmed a little in the chair. "Oh, god, that was the best thing ever. I hope I get to fly her in space someday."

Rodney looked at John's relaxed expression and guessed his headache was gone. Then he looked a little lower and realized John was at least half hard. He'd heard his flyboy talk about getting a hard on the first time he flew some plane or another, but he'd thought it was a figure of speech. "Best thing ever, we'll see about that. I learned a ZPM charging trick we'll need to try out sometime."

"Rodney, what are you talking about?" John opened his eyes and lifted his hands from the sensor pads.

As the chair moved upright, Rodney said, "Carson, out!"

"What?"

"You heard me you sheep shearing modern barber medico. Go find your Guide, and I'll take care of
my Sentinel."

Carson shook his head, but as soon as he was out the door, Rodney leaned over and kissed his Sentinel deep and dirty. As soon as John let his tongue in, Rodney used it to stroke every hot spot he knew John had. John licked back, and in a couple minutes they were both breathing hard.

"Jealous?" John asked.

"Not at all."

"Then you want to do it in the control chair?"

Rodney stepped back. "Don't you think you got hard enough this time without adding any further associations or smells? I have less than no desire to instruct my minions on how to clean the control chair to be that Sentinel friendly."

John raised a single eyebrow then said, "It's not exactly built for comfort anyway. However, it just so happens that the city plans I flashed through so quickly showed where we might find a convenient luxury apartment with a large balcony and a larger bed."

"They have beds here? After 10,000 years? I wonder if they use some of the same principals as that stasis pod where SG-1 found the virus-infected Ancient woman."

"Would you rather investigate that or secure accommodations with me?"

Rodney couldn't help but glance longingly at his laptop and think a few conflicted thoughts about the control room overhead.

Then John said simply, "Dibs? Large bed? Horny Sentinel?"

They went exploring.

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