What Sentinels Hear and Don't Hear

by Seaward

Summary

Science and trouble charge forward hand in hand, whether on Earth, Atlantis, or other planets. McKay struggles to understand things no one else does, and amidst the general confusion, a new culture and community emerge.

Notes

Once again, this is pretty much completely AU, although some mentions of events could be taken as spoilers if you twist your mind and squint a bit. There are some discussions of consent issues, a flashback, and an attempt that might possibly be triggering. This part probably won't make sense if you haven't read the first two parts of the series. Many thanks to Elayna for helping with this (again!). Any remaining errors are mine and will now be considered features.
Dr. Kusanagi hunched over Gabi's souped up vibration and energy sensor system as they checked that everything was set to record full spectrum. Gabi kept her eyes on their work and tried not to bounce with excitement over what they were about to do.

Drs. McKay and Zelenka were arguing at the end of her table as they checked over connections on the new personal shield generator. Zelenka beamed like a proud father as he said, "Is ridiculous to blame science for what is self-imposed military stalling tactic."

Gabi agreed. It was unreasonable to prevent her new team from going off world until they could supply all Guides and Sentinels with personal shields. Brett and Shane suffered the most, because they'd already targeted several planets to visit. Gabi was just as happy working on the shields and her other energy projects. Today both her Guides as well as Dr. Beckett, Kusanagi's Sentinel, had come to the ZPM room to watch them test the new shield device. Gabi shimmied with another thrill of triumph that no one even questioned holding this trial in the ZPM room, tacitly acknowledging the space Gabi has claimed as her office and that the new shield had started as her project.

"This can hardly be described as science." McKay waved a hand at the new personal shield and then pulled the original from his pants pocket. "It's reverse engineering, suitable for sweatshops or well trained chimpanzees."

"You say that only because you personally fail to interpret underlying Ancient physics." Zelenka turned his back and brought the new shield to Kusanagi.

McKay waved his arms and raised his voice as he trailed along. "Your teenage co-conspirator has people charge these crystals by kissing! Science has left the building."

"Only you and Colonel Sheppard have to kiss to channel energy," Gabi replied without looking up from a computer display she was opening. "The rest of us have learned to use meditation to achieve identical results."

"Not quite identical," Shane whispered in Brett's ear. Only Brett and the Sentinels could hear him, and Gabi refused to worry if her Guides made Dr. Beckett blush.

"As if I'd waste my precious time and brain on meditation when it is also completely non-scientific!" Zelenka pointedly ignored McKay's outburst as he quietly asked, "Are you ready, Dr. Kusanagi?"

"I will stand over here and attempt to think the device on." She moved to stand alone across the room. "My Sentinel should know immediately if we succeed. Gabi will monitor for unexpected energy readings."

"Perhaps then Dr. McKay will test by throwing crumpled pages from his attempts to decipher physics of device." Zelenka smiled as he spoke. Gabi shook her head and stuck close to her equipment.

Kusanagi bowed her head toward McKay in mock respect and presumably thought "on" at the device as she placed it on her chest.

Then she screamed.

Gabi stiffened at the sound, but her energy monitor and the computer that networked into Atlantis' systems showed nothing.

Dr. Beckett called out, "Turn it off."
Kusanagi's eyes were wide behind her glasses, and she stood rigid with her head and shoulders thrown back. Her scream modulated and turned into pained gasps.

Beckett sprang forward with his hands out as if to pull the device off or perhaps catch her if she fell. Gabi saw his hands jerk back when they brushed the shield.


"Hurts," was all Kusanagi cried out before her eyes rolled back and she crumpled to the ground.

Carson reached for her reflexively and jumped back as the shield hurt him in turn.

McKay jumped forward, slapping his shield to his chest and reached out in time to catch Kusanagi's head. The two shields shone like green static between her head and his hands for a moment, but it didn't seem to hurt McKay or break through Kusanagi's shield.

Carson tapped his radio. "Medical team with crash cart to ZPM room."

Gabi scooped up the portable part of her monitoring device and moved beside the unconscious scientist to see if she could gather any useful readings. She held wire leads out to contact the shield. The leads appeared to physically touch Kusanagi's uniform before Gabi felt counter pressure and saw readings scroll across her data pad.

Movement caused Gabi to look up and see a mongoose, Kusanagi's spirit animal, fall from a couple feet in the air to land on the scientist's chest. The creature's back arched like a mad cat, and Gabi's energy readings went crazy for a moment before dropping to zero.

The mongoose fell to the side, panting.

Kusanagi's eyes fluttered open.

Beckett moved forward and reached a hand to the pulse point in her neck. Even Gabi knew that was redundant. Gabi realized that she'd been listening to Kusanagi's heartbeat throughout, and now it was loud and clear without the muting of the personal shield.

Shane crept to one side and reached a tentative hand to steady the mongoose, thereby sheltering it with his body as a medical crew rushed in with a gurney.

Gabi stepped back and found herself standing next to Dr. McKay as the medical team took over and then hurried out. McKay's rapidly pounding heart was muted, and Gabi realized his shield was still active. She held out the wire leads in her hands and asked, "Can I take a quick reading, for comparison?"

"Now? Why didn't you think of that before?" He began to bluster and wave his arms, so Gabi poked the leads to his side, which was relatively still. "You gather all this data on bonding, kissing, meditating, putting useless people in the control chair, but it didn't occur to you to run every possible check on an active shield field before reconstructing one? You have my Sentinel and Ford trusting in pet rocks. Spirit animals lead us around by the nose and pop up in midair to help us out. This is not how grad school is supposed to work. This is not how physics is supposed to work."

"Yeah, thanks for the extra readings. I'll try to figure out what went wrong." Gabi didn't have the energy to argue with her advisor. She went back to the table that served as her desk, and started the programs she'd made to analyze the vibration and energy readings she collected.

"And you!" McKay turned his wrath on Zelenka. Gabi was relieved when the two of them
scrambled back to their own lab.

That left just Gabi and her Guides in the ZPM room. Brett was kneeling beside Shane and the mongoose saying, "I don't suppose a crystal would help heal a spirit animal?"

"I don't think so, and I think the only one Kusanagi helped charge is in the device that went with her."

"No," Gabi said, "I have one they charged by meditation, for comparison. It's identical to my tests." Gabi pulled the correct crystal from her file box and handed it to Shane.

Shane held it out for the spirit animal to see or sniff. Then he touched it to the scratch that ran from the mongoose's shoulder to her tail. Nothing appeared to change. Shane scratched behind the animal's ears, and she closed her previously half-lidded eyes.

Gabi was glad her Guides were watching over the spirit mongoose. But she couldn't calm down to sit with them, and the processes analyzing her data would take several minutes to run. Guilt and embarrassment over whatever had gone wrong with the shield started to build alongside Gabi's more scientific impatience. "I'm going to see if I can get Kusanagi's shield back to run more tests."

She left for the infirmary before either of her Guides could say anything.

Once she was standing in front of the infirmary, Gabi couldn't force herself to enter. She skulked by a wall, listening to Kusanagi's heartbeat and breathing. It sounded like she was asleep. A great number of monitors surrounded her. Some hummed. Some beeped.

Rapid steps paced between her bed and Ford's. Ford was on the same side of the infirmary and also sounded asleep most of the time. He clutched a crystal that vibrated with the bonding energy from Gabi's Guides. Usually she found that vibration calming, but the anxiety in the pacing made that crystal seem like a failure, too. None of them knew how to help Ford any further. Kusanagi's spirit animal had helped her, but Gabi had no idea what had gone wrong in the first place. She hadn't even guessed the shield could hurt someone that way. Maybe she'd been overconfident. Maybe she'd felt too safe for the first time in her life.

Gabi wished she'd been hurt rather than Kusanagi, but she also knew it was her responsibility to analyze the results and fix the new shield. Carefully, she crept around the edge of the door.

"What are you doing here?" The pacing stopped, and Beckett glared from across the wide infirmary.

A lump in Gabi's throat practically kept her from speaking. Instead of crumpling to the floor and crying, Gabi stood straight and said, "I need the shield to find out what went wrong."

"Is that all you care about?" Beckett's voice was rising. He didn't sound like himself at all. "Get out of my infirmary!"

#

"Ellison! Sandburg! My office, now!" Simon's bellow cut through the bullpen, and Jim eased his hearing down a notch before moving toward the source. Blair followed close enough behind that Jim could feel the heat from his Guide's body.

As soon as they were in the office with the door closed, Simon said, "I've had a none too pleasant call from some Air Force General who says they need Sandburg for an emergency, soldier's life depends on his immediate help, Ellison can come if he wants. They're sending a car to your place in an hour, and they can't tell me how long you'll be away and out of communication."
Blair shook his head, stray hairs from his ponytail bobbing in the artificial breeze. "Shoot. Talk about bad timing. We were all set to move on the Rockwell case tonight."

Simon leaned forward, elbows on his desk, eyes fixed on Blair. "Look, I know we planned for some emergency calls when we agreed to share you with the Air Force, but is there any chance Ellison could stay back or catch up with you later on this one? You guys have three major open cases."

"I'm sure we could work something—"

"No," Jim cut in. Much as he wanted to be there to bust Rockwell and the others, Blair as his Guide and lover had to be his top priority. Besides, they'd both been uneasy with pressures put on the Sentinel and Guide Project since over half the known Sentinel-Guide pairs left for Atlantis. "I'll brief our back up team for tonight personally. The rest is all documented and ready to hand off."

Simon said, "You know whoever I send can't infiltrate that meeting the way you would."

Jim snorted, "No one's irreplaceable."

"The Air Force sure thinks Sandburg is, and frankly, police detective isn't something to do as a hobby."

Blair spoke faster than Jim could reply, "I promise, I'm working to train others who can do what I do. Just give us a few more months."

Simon snorted. "You keep telling yourself that. Like the Air Force has any chance of replicating the Sandburg factor. You two better get going."

#

Blair had no intention of admitting how sore he was ten hours later—after the car that picked them up took them to a military aircraft that took them to a helicopter that landed them on an island in the middle of nowhere.

"So we just hike in the direction of the blip on that screen?" Blair asked.

"Noooo." Jim didn't sound like he was at his best either. They'd each been given a backpack with basic survival gear to which they'd added a few pieces of clothing. Then they'd headed out to track what might be a Sentinel who might have been in a zone for at least twelve hours now. The helicopter pilot had landed them as close as he could and promised to wait. "The screen shows a topo map, and we try to follow the best route to the blip on the screen."

"Is this some special ops rite or possibly a hazing ritual to send soldiers off alone on deserted islands? And who would choose a location with such rough terrain that a helicopter can't get within a mile to rescue them?"

"It's less than a mile as the helicopter flies. There's just a bit of up and down to get to where he's at."

Blair wiped sweat off his forehead and rolled up his sleeves as he followed Jim. They headed downhill on an animal track, probably leading to a creek given the density of vegetation. Knee high grass and bromeliads dragged at Blair's feet. "I'm guessing from the time difference and the vegetation that we're west of Hawaii, maybe out as far as Guam."

"Best not to think about things they don't want us to know." Jim moved almost silently through the grasping vegetation.
"But doesn't it seem odd that they have this guy out all alone, he stops moving, and instead of assuming he's dead or injured, they decide he's zoned and send for us?"

"They said he'd tested positive for the gene Beckett identified. And they may have satellite or drone intel they didn't want to share with us."

"But even if the guy is sitting there staring into space and something in his file says he was recently tested for this ATA gene the military is suddenly interested in, what sort of military intelligence puts that together and it equals sending the two of us out in a rush this way?"

Jim stopped and turned so abruptly that Blair almost ran into him. "I really wasn't being overprotective when I insisted on coming with you. As an Army Ranger, I saw more than one situation that didn't make sense any way I looked at it. One of them led to my first stint as a Sentinel, with Incacha. For now, we're here. We might as well see if the blip on this screen is someone we can help. You going to make it, Chief?"

"Sure, big guy. I'll follow you anywhere."

"Careful. That's the sort of thinking that got me here." Jim was forging ahead before Blair could decide if that was a complaint or a compliment.

Jim held up a hand to stop Blair. The person they'd been sent to help was close, maybe twenty yards ahead. The heartbeat was steady. No sounds of motion.

Jim crept forward. He kept a hand over his gun just in case.

Stopping behind a large monkeypod tree, he took stock. A young man, maybe nineteen, in jungle camo gear. From the smell, he hadn't washed more than his face in days. He sat on a large rock, gazing down along a creek. His face sported several bug bites and there seemed to be a rash around his collar. Jim threw a pebble to skitter down the creek. The man didn't react. No change in breathing or heart rate.

Jim moved closer, motioning for Blair to stay hidden. Blair glared but waited.

Waving a hand in the soldier's face provoked no reaction. Jim's hand was close enough to determine there was no fever. "Okay, military intelligence might be right this time."

Blair moved in to make his own assessment, immediately starting with the patter. "We're here to help. If you can hear my voice, focus on that as normal volume. I'm going to touch your shoulder, to give you a baseline." Blair crouched and did as he said. "If you're having some sort of problem, even if it might seem crazy to you, I need you to let me know."

"Can't see. Head hurts." The young man shivered but otherwise didn't move. His heart started beating louder and faster.

"Good, it's good that you can tell us that." Blair put his free hand in front of the soldier's eyes. "My hand is shading your eyes now. It's okay if you can't see it." Blair's voice sounded so calming that Jim took a deep breath and relaxed even as he heard both Blair's and the other man's hearts slowing. "Can you close your eyes? Just for now. This is just temporary."

The young man's eyes closed as he managed a faint nod.

"Good, you're doing really well. Now that your eyes are closed, you'll be able to picture a dial, like
on a radio or heater. Pretend that ten on that dial is the worst pain you've ever felt. What would you say your pain level is now?"

"Five."

"And where does it hurt?"

"My head. My skin."

"What about where my hand is touching your shoulder?" Blair didn't move at all, not even a twitch of his fingers. All of his attention was on the young man who might be a Sentinel.

Jim was tense. When they'd accepted Jackson and O'Neill's offer, Blair had agreed to be called in for emergencies like this. Jim knew Blair had worried about a potential freak out if Jim was confronted with another Sentinel responding to his Guide. This was the first time they'd been put to the test with an emergency in the field, not in a med center or in the lab where Blair and the other researchers tested the Sentinels they'd found. Jim shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't happy with how they'd been brought in or how little tactical or medical support his Guide had. Jim swept the area continuously, using hearing and smell to check for threats.

Surprisingly, what Jim noticed most was a sense of relief. He was glad Blair hadn't been called into a combat situation. He was glad the young Sentinel hadn't zoned where bullets were flying or bombs exploding.

"Stay with me," Blair was saying in a warm, soft tone. "Can you feel my hand on your shoulder, and if so does it feel normal or painful?"

"Not painful. Skin around it hurts."

"Okay, I want you to picture the dial in your head as currently set to five. I want you to turn it down to four so that the pain from your skin and head goes down but you can still feel my hand."

The soldier's eyes, already closed, scrunched tighter. "I can't."

"You can. There's an Army Ranger here with me, and he learned to do this, so I know you can too."

"Gee, thanks," Jim mumbled. "Maybe he should just try taking it down to one. It might be easier to fine tune it later."

"That's a good idea." Blair's gaze was still fixed on the young man whose eyes were shut tight. "Just turn down the pain, and when it works you can tell me where the dial ended up."

The soldier shivered and panted, then suddenly his whole body relaxed. "It worked. It's at one. Oh God, thank you."

"Happy to help, and I'm going to help with your vision and the rest as well. But first, we haven't been introduced. I'm Dr. Blair Sandburg, not a medical doctor, but my specialty relates to the trouble you're having."

"Constructionman Apprentice Philip Woo."

When Blair looked uncharacteristically blank, Jim decided to help him out. "Guess you can tell us later how a Navy Seabee ended up all alone in the middle of this island. I'm Captain Jim Ellison, Army Rangers, officially retired."
"I go where they tell me to, sir."

"You can skip the sir and call me Ellison, everyone else does."

"Seriously, I think first names would do in this situation. Call me Blair. May I call you Phillip, or do you go by Phil?"

"Philip. Were you two sent to find me? What happened?"

Blair glanced at Jim for the first time since they'd found the kid. Jim smiled before he could even think. Blair sounded like he was finally relaxing as he answered, "There's a long explanation, but the key is that your senses are misbehaving. You have a rash and your sense of touch was overreacting. Your head probably hurts in reaction to that or whatever shut off your vision. Let's see if we can get your eyes working for now. Try opening your eyes and tell me if you can see anything at all."

Philip opened his eyes and blinked a couple times. He turned his head right and left, and he moved an arm out to compensate. "Oh, shoot, pins and needles. How long have I been sitting here?" He shook out first one hand and then the other as he shifted each leg just an inch or two. "I'm still pretty much blind, but there are some lighter shapes when I look to my right."

"It is lighter to your right," Blair said. "Imagine another dial. This one is dedicated to vision and right now it's set at one. Let's see if you can bring it up to around normal."

Philip blinked some more and then jerked back suddenly. Blair's hand kept him from falling off the rock where he sat. "Wow, for a moment it was super bright and I swear I was staring into a water drop on a leaf."

"That's good, Philip. What would you say your vision dial is set at now?"

"Five."

"Okay, why don't you try dialing it up a bit and zoom in on a leaf or a drop of water. Just go ahead and do that, but keep listening to my voice. I want you to nod when you can tell that you're seeing better than usual." Philip nodded. "Good, now remember what number your vision dial is at but bring yourself back to five or wherever you feel comfortable."

"That was strange," Philip said. "I shouldn't be able to do that. What's going on?"

He looked at Blair with enough paranoia that Jim readied himself to pounce if needed.

Blair calmed the Seabee just by talking. "It's a gift, man. At least some of your senses are better than normal. We'll help you learn to control them and tell you all about it later. For now, it's getting late, and we have a helicopter that will be easier to reach before it's too dark."

"Late? Dawn was just—" Philip looked to his right, where the sun was low. It could have been early or late if you didn't know the area. Philip looked left and then pulled back a sleeve to study his watch, which Jim saw was set to 24-hour military time.

"Don't worry, Philip. What happened to you is normal for someone coming online with stronger senses. We call it 'a zone' or 'zoning out.' When I told you to keep listening to my voice while you dialed up vision, you learned the most important lesson for avoiding zone outs. Don't let yourself go too deep with just one sense. Now, do you think you can stand up?"

Philip swallowed and nodded. He started to stand and his legs buckled beneath him. Blair shifted to support the side where he'd kept a hand on the sailor's shoulder. Jim caught the other side, and Philip
really looked at Jim for the first time. Philip stomped his feet to get his blood circulating again and asked, "Why would they send an Army Ranger out here?"

"I still don't know why they sent you out here."

"It's what he was talking about, I guess. They said we had some gene and the Navy wanted to see if it improved our performance at wilderness survival. Or something like that."

"Since when do Seabees practice solitary wilderness survival?" Jim asked.

At the same time, Blair said, "Wait, there were more of you?"

"Three. The other two weren't Seabees, and they were older. We were all given a different direction to go and told to stay apart and someone would come for us in two to six weeks."

Jim could hear Blair's heartbeat race, but his voice was calm. "How long ago was that?"

"Ten days, assuming I wasn't out here overnight. I have a little pack of stuff up the slope at my camp where I've been marking the days. Are you sure I'm supposed to go back to a helicopter with you?"

Philip started walking, presumably toward his camp. Blair held out the locator device. "They gave us this to find you. The helicopter pilot promised he'd wait. It's less than two miles, if you think you're up to it."

"Sounds fun." Philip's camp was little more than a lean to and a ditty bag. All three of them were on their way back to the helicopter within minutes.

They made good time and were over halfway back to the helicopter when Jim heard the distinctive whir of rotors starting up.

"Something's wrong. The copter's starting up. Double time, now." Jim was pleased at how fast both his anthropologist and the sailor moved, but the copter was gone by the time they reached the clearing.

#

John walked into his office to find Lorne sitting in the visitor chair tapping away at a data pad. "Did you put a meeting on my calendar I didn't know about?"

"No, sir," his XO shook his head. "I stopped by to discuss patrol schedules and figured I might as well work here in case you showed up."

"Is there something wrong with the patrol schedules we're using now?"

"No, sir." Lorne barely glanced up from his data pad.

John sat down and looked in his desk drawer for anything paper he might want to throw away. Folding airplanes and aiming them at the wastebasket could fill plenty of dead time in meetings when there was nothing to discuss. Unfortunately his office, while not paperless, was currently waste paperless.

"So," John slouched back into his unbending Ancient desk chair, "We could agree to continue the same patrol schedule for the next section down and adjourn until next week."

"Yes, sir. We could. Of course, we'll be starting from scratch then when the anthropologists and other scientists come with their demands."
John stared at the wall refusing to acknowledge that he'd been played. "We just added a scientist to each patrol."

"Over a week ago, and you authorized only physical science or engineering specialists who could evaluate architectural safety concerns. The rest of the scientists are impatient with living in an alien city in an alien galaxy and not being allowed to experiment or explore."

"We need to secure the area."

"I agree." Lorne looked up and met John's gaze. "So we preemptively offer to let mixed patrols follow up in areas already cleared by our military patrols and everyone's happy."

"Did your Guide put you up to this?"

Lorne didn't hesitate or lower his eyes, but his cheeks turned a little pink. "I know they suffered a setback with the personal shield generator, but such patrols could be good practice for future off world teams. Think of it as a peacekeeping gesture."

John shook his head wondering if he'd ever master the diplomatic aspects of his position. "I was thinking we'd offer Jumper lessons to all Sentinels and Guides."

"Excellent idea. Should we set up a schedule for that as well as firearms training for those who haven't had it?"

"Sure. Also, I'm thinking of keeping my personal schedule in the grounding station at the far end of the east pier."

Lorne kept a straight face as he said, "Wouldn't that be a bit inconvenient? That's over half a mile from the nearest transporter."

"I could check it when I run each morning."

"Your Guide hacked your calendar again, didn't he?"

"I wonder what Markham has to put up with?"

"He doesn't get a room in officer country."

"He doesn't have meetings or a calendar either."

"I'm guessing you don't want a meeting to present our new mixed patrols plan?"

Rodney slashed red lines through his own work on the white board. He couldn't prove the physics for the new shield wasn't at fault for the accident, because even his genius brain couldn't fully grasp how the Ancients made it work. He'd yelled at Gabi about reverse engineering, but that was more or less what they'd all been doing since reaching Atlantis. No matter what they discovered or how far it advanced human understanding, they were all merely scratching the surface.

The lab was empty around Rodney. Even Zelenka had left in a huff. Maybe he'd commiserate with Gabi, tell her McKay yelled at everyone today. And Gabi had two Guides, between them they should make up for any personal shortcomings of her advisor. It wasn't as if anyone chose to work with him for his manners or personal charm. If he had those he might be able to get the failed shield back from Carson. Instead, the Sentinel practically growled at him when they passed in the hall.
Rodney was reaching the point of bashing his head against the whiteboard when John called over the radio. "Dinner, McKay?"

"Busy," Rodney grated out. Then he forced himself away from the whiteboard and started dismantling the main console in the lab. It didn't perform as fast as the one in the command center, and Rodney saw no reason to put up with that for one day longer.

At some point, a tray of food appeared beside him. Rodney ate as he put the console back together.

When he distractedly reached out calling, "Multimeter!" he was surprised by the familiar long fingers that handed it to him. After he tested the circuit, he looked over to see his Sentinel slouching on the side of the console Rodney had been repairing. "Run out of military commander things to do?"

"Thought I'd check on the chief scientist. He was all alone in his lab, and reports said he hadn't eaten dinner."

"Huh, what time is it?"

"Time to wash the red marker off your hands and get some sleep?" John stroked gently across the red marks on Rodney's hands and forearms. Evidently his cheek was marked, too, all the way to the corner of his mouth.

"How about dessert?" Rodney flicked his tongue out to catch the edge of John's fingertip.

John licked his own lips in response. "That might be arranged."

#

Gabi filled a tray with soup, pasta, cheesy bread, custard, and chocolate cake. She missed the times in Africa when Brett cooked for her, but shut the thought down when it made her stomach flip. Instead, she moved to the coffee and tea station where instead of making the hot chocolate she'd usually find comforting, she made Brett's not tea: hot water, milk, and sugar. Then she carried the heavy tray to an out of the way table behind a dead potted plant. Someone had decorated the twiggy plant remains in a knitted cozy. It had to have been custom knitted for the plant, and Gabi wondered who had the time. It was striped like one of the fourth Doctor's oversized scarves. The association was comforting, much like her food selections.

As soon as she sat, her thoughts scattered to all the bad moments piling up that day… Kusanagi stuck in the infirmary, although it appeared any damage was temporary. Beckett furious and not allowing Gabi or McKay anywhere near Kusanagi or the failed shield. McKay shouting at her in the ZPM room about not checking enough readings from his active shield as part of her preparations. Comparing readings from his shield and the new one and finding no difference beyond the unique energy signature of each Sentinel and Guide. Studying the energy reading from the mongoose rescuing Kusanagi. Watching Brett and Shane from across the room as they comforted the injured spirit animal.

Needing to get out of her mind, Gabi let all of her sensory controls drift upward. The greasy feel and salty flavor of the cheese bread saturated her mouth. Beyond that, she could smell and feel the sweet steam from her not tea. Conversations all around bombarded her ears as she chewed and the mild tastes, textures and scents of her chosen foods almost overwhelmed her physically.

"Adjusted the plumbing to work for the rest of us…"

Warm tomato broth with onion.
"But his ass in those shorts…"

Pasta with parmesan, the parmesan gritty rather than flaky.

"Ancient recordings of marine life compared to ours now…"

Warm tomato broth and chickpea.

"Bet those Sentinels would make great interrogators."

Gabi recoiled and soup went up her nose, like paint thinner on an open wound. Her traitorous hearing tuned back to the same voice.

"That brown girl's probably a dominatrix keeping her two Guides in line..."

Her eyes started to water. An arm hitting her back made her jerk forward, bumping the table. Every dish on her tray rattled.

#

Brett left the food line as soon as he spotted Gabi. She was all alone behind some knitted contraption. Her eyes were wide and watery as if she were choking silently.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Gabi jumped away, into the table. His Sentinel was shaking, but he could see her breathing as well. At least she wasn't choking to death.

Shane rushed to meet them, and Brett gestured him to the far side of the table.

Brett kept his focus on Gabi and asked, "What's happening? Is it your senses?"

Gabi flinched. Her head shook slightly, but it was almost lost in her full body trembling.

"What number is hearing at?"

"Five."

"Dial it down, Gabi."

"Don't want to."

"Why?"

Lines of pain seemed to pass down Gabi's face from forehead to chin. Then she took a deep breath. "Fine, it's at two now. I'm not out of control."

Brett didn't know what to say to that. He knew Gabi cared a lot about maintaining control and not being dependent on her Guides. But she hadn't told him why her hearing was up so high or why she was shivering.

Shane asked, "What's touch at?"

Gabi took another deep breath, "Fine, I'll set it lower. Give me a moment, and I'll reset all the rest."

Both Guides waited quietly. After a minute, Gabi had mostly stopped trembling.

"There, I'm all fine and normal now." She set down the empty spoon that she'd been clutching since Brett arrived. "I think I'll just go to bed."
"What about your dinner?" Brett asked.

"And dessert?" Shane added.

"You can have them. I'm not hungry anymore."

She got up to leave, and Brett picked up the mostly full tray. Seeing the not tea gave him a moment's pause. "I'll bring this, in case you're hungry later, and maybe Shane can pick up dinner for us, to go."

Shane nodded with a sad smile.

"I don't need you to comfort me."

"Maybe we need to be with you to comfort ourselves."

"I'm not sure I'm up to this."

"We'll find something safe for all of us."

Gabi walked out of the mess as if nothing at all was bothering her. As Brett followed, he noticed Ronon standing near the wall where he would have had a clear line of sight on their table. Ronon didn't try to hide it as he watched them leave.

Back in their rooms, Gabi kicked off her shoes. She burrowed under the covers on her side of the triple bed still fully dressed.

Brett set her dinner tray aside on Shane's always tidy desk. He removed his own shoes and uniform and changed to sweats and a tee shirt. Then he sat on the center mattress, leaving Gabi plenty of space, and waited.

Soon Shane arrived carrying a tray with more food. He set it in front of Brett and changed into similar clothing for lounging around. Then he sat across from Brett at the opposite side of the tray. He said to the mound of bedding beside them, "Gabi, we're going to go ahead and eat. We'll wait for you to tell us if you want anything or to share anything you're up for talking about."

Then they ate a long silent dinner. Brett wished he was a Sentinel so he could hear Gabi breathing inside her fortress. Instead, he trusted the spirit animals would at least warn Shane if Gabi were suffocating.

When they finished, Brett moved the empty tray up by Gabi's mostly full one. Then he returned to sit on the bed, knowing Gabi could easily track him by sound if she wanted to. His hands threatened to reach out and touch his Sentinel without his volition, so he sat on them. Shane reached out and rubbed Brett's knee reassuringly.

"Gabi," Brett said as calmly as he could, "I'd like to cuddle up beside you, or climb under there with you, or give you a backrub, or at least see your face. Would any of those feel good and safe to you?"

After a long silence there was rustling and movement beneath Gabi's blankets. Then her voice came from underneath, but clearly facing toward her Guides and near where they sat. "I let my senses ramp up because my brain was too busy and noisy. Now that it's quiet, it's upsetting me again. And I don't really want you to touch me directly right now, but you can touch the blankets around me if you want."

Brett slowly stood and walked around behind Gabi, making plenty of noise in case she'd kept her hearing to normal levels. Once she'd started speaking, he'd been able to deduce that she was curled in...
a ball, lying on her side. He moved to sit behind her so the right side of his right thigh pressed solidly against her back and his right arm rested along her side. "Is that okay?"

"Yes." The voice from under the blankets sounded a little less certain. Brett decided to trust his instincts and stayed still while forcing himself to relax.

"If you'd like," Shane said facing the area of blankets where Gabi's voice came from, "I could try to distract you with legends and stories from when I was a shaman's apprentice. Many of them I haven't had a chance to tell anyone yet."

"I'd like that a lot," Gabi said.

Brett's insides warmed with reassurance. Gabi was with them and communicating. Shane knew what Gabi needed, and it sounded like he'd been waiting for a chance to share more stories.

Shane started with a convoluted tale about a girl losing her only lwemali, which seemed to be some kind of coin, into an ichibi, which appeared to be a marshy pond or lake. The tribe's Sentinel heard the girl crying and slogging through the water at the edge of the ichibi and came to help. He eventually coaxed the whole story from the girl and tried to use his Sentinel senses to help, but he couldn't find the coin. Finally, news of the very sad girl and now equally sad Sentinel spread through an elaborate gossip network until all the women and children of the tribe came to the ichibi and crept shoulder to shoulder into the water, running their fingers through the mud until someone finally found the girl's lost coin.

As the story ended, Brett gave a little hug where his arm rested on his blanket wrapped Sentinel.

"Did you make that up?" Gabi asked from inside.

"No, but I wouldn't be surprised if some shaman or storyteller before me did. Do you want to hear more?"

"Anything you want to tell," came the muffled reply.

Shane told two more stories that could have happened anytime or never. Then he told another long one that started with the Rwandan genocide but focused on dozens of misguided groups that grew out of the conflict. Many seemed to target particular tribal, religious, or refugee groups. Shane described some as genocidal and some as opportunistic. He also told of a group targeting albinos and a group targeting Sentinels. He described how those groups flew under the radar as they researched and targeted individuals. Brett grew cold as he listened and hunched a little closer into Gabi's warm bedding.

At the end of that story Gabi sat up in her pile of blankets and said, "I'm sorry Shane. I should have spent more time listening to you before now." She met Shane's eyes for a long moment then glanced over to check on Brett. "Also, Ronon is either standing guard or listening from outside our door. I think we should invite him in."

Brett shrugged. Shane nodded. The door opened.

Ronon turned to face them through the open door but did not come in.

"Did you want to hear Shane's stories or was it something else?" Gabi spoke the way she did to McKay, without any trace of deference or social tact.

"Checking everyone. Stopped for stories."
Gabi tilted her head, sniffed, and squinted at him. "Fine. Come on in and sit on the bed."

Ronon crossed his arms without stepping in. "Not sure if there were rules."

"For Earth people or just us?" Gabi asked.

Ronon raised his eyebrows a bit.

"In here, you can just deal with us. The basic rules are: don't do anything you don't want to, try to say what you want and what you mean, keep it a safe space for everyone."

He stepped in and glanced at the trays on the desk. "You gonna eat that?"

Gabi turned to see her forgotten food. "Pass me the custard and you can have anything else you want."

Once they were settled with Gabi eating custard and Ronon eating everything else, Shane told a story about the King of Swaziland that included Miko the notorious hacker Guide and McKay who dethroned the King.

When Ronon opened his mouth at the end, Brett expected a question about computer hacking or Earth politics. Instead Ronon asked, "Why do you call Miko by her personal name and McKay by his family name?"

"I'm the wrong one to ask." Shane raised his hands and shrugged. "When I worked within the African network of Sentinels, Guides, and shamans, almost everyone was referred to by their first name. So in my story I say 'Miko' although addressing her now I'd say 'Kusanagi' or 'Dr. Kusanagi.' By the time McKay came into the story I was with people who addressed each other mostly by last name, as they also do here, so I use his last name."

Ronon didn't reply. Brett would have spoken, but Shane met his eyes and kept him silent. When Ronon spoke he continued as if there'd been no unusual delay. Brett couldn't guess if that was a cultural difference or came from being alone for seven years.

"I understand most people using family names here where there are few who share family and name. I understand friends and lovers using personal names. But why does everyone call the three of you and me and usually Teyla by our personal names?"

Brett thought that was an excellent question. He was happy to sit back and let Shane handle it.

"I asked to be called Shane from the start. As a shaman I have no family name, and Shane is short for the spirit animal I am called by, Inkentshane. Those in charge of the mission may also see Brett and Gabi, and perhaps me, as students or youngsters. I do not know how old you are or how they perceive you. I had assumed you and Teyla had asked to be addressed by first name, but I am happy to use whatever name or title you prefer."

Ronon finished the food on his tray. "I think I would be twenty-four in my planet's years. You three are welcome to call me Ronon. You think I should ask the others to call me Dex or Specialist Dex?"

Gabi smiled, the first time Brett had seen her smile since the accident with the shield. "I'm a lousy person to ask for advice on this, but personally, I'd love to see the soldiers have to call you Specialist Dex."

"I will tell them when we spar tomorrow." Ronon's lips twitched with the briefest hint of a smile at Gabi. Then he turned to Shane and said, "You have more stories?"
Jim, Blair, and Philip were all breathing hard as they reached the clearing the helicopter had just left. Blair's and Jim's bags had been left beside a red first aid duffle labeled with a white cross. A note tucked into the zipper said, "Called away. Back in a few days tops."

"A few days?" Blair questioned. He unzipped the bag, confirming it was a well stocked first aid kit with some additions he'd specified in his protocols for Sentinel care. "What kind of an emergency might leave us stranded here for a few days?" Blair crossed to rest a hand on Jim's back. "Do you sense any indications of earthquake or storm fronts?"

Jim closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. Philip froze, still and silent as a statue beside them. Blair met and held Philip's eyes and could almost see the pieces fall into place as the young man realized Jim was using heightened senses.

"Nothing," Jim said. "But the pilot may not have known much more than his orders. A few days might be a cautious estimate."

"What senses were you using?" Philip asked.

"Smell and touch to check for storm. Touch can give you humidity and pressure to predict weather." Jim glanced around the clearing, and Blair knew he was checking for nearer threats. "I could probably feel tremors from an earthquake faraway, but I don't have much practice with that. Hearing is my fall back for any problem. If there had been more aircraft or humans or animals panicking, that would have indicated a more local problem. I'm guessing whatever it is won't affect us directly. Someone just needed the chopper."

"And I'll be able to do that, too?" Philip asked.

"Sure, kid."

Blair looked out into the near dark and realized the sun had completely set. "For those of us without enhanced vision, it's getting too dark to hike around. Should we make camp here?"

Jim pointed to one side. "There's a sheltered area and creek that way. Let's hope the first aid kit includes chemicals to purify the water."

"I have a kit that cleans a liter in a minute with a hand pump," Philip volunteered.

"That's in the protocols for Sentinel care I drew up. Good to know someone read them." At Philip's blank look, Blair said, "We call people with all senses heightened Sentinels. We can do some tests in the morning to see where you're at and help you set dials for each."

Philip only nodded.

"Let's set up camp." Jim led them a few hundred yards to the location he'd selected. Then he worked with Philip to rig the tarp for shelter, set up a fire, and heat some filtered water for dehydrated food they found in the first aid kit.

Once they were all settled and eating, Philip asked Jim, "So you're a Sentinel and he's a Sentinel trainer?"

Blair gave Jim a playful shove when he kept eating and left Blair to answer. "I'm a Sentinel trainer and Jim's Guide. A Sentinel can use his senses more completely and with less risk of zoning if he finds a compatible Guide. That Guide will be better than anyone else at pulling the Sentinel out of a
zone, probably because the Sentinel uses his Guide's heartbeat, voice, scent and so on as baselines to ground his senses. I recently completed my doctoral work studying Sentinels, and now I'm advising the military and trying to help any Sentinels we identify."

"But what if I don't have a Guide?"

"Is there anyone you've felt a connection to? A sense of safety or calm? It could be a friend, lover, someone in your unit?"

Philip shook his head. "Not really. I had friends in high school, but no girlfriend. I wasn't very successful at school or anything. My older sisters both got into good colleges, but I didn't get in anywhere. Joining the Navy was sort of a last ditch solution, but I like building stuff, and in the Seabees I can earn a degree with mostly hands on learning. I wanted to go on a submarine, but so far I've mostly done relief work and things on land. Then they called me away for this, and I wasn't doing so well. I've seen a strange crab-like creature a couple times. It's brightly colored, with claws, and I thought it might bite or be poisonous. I tried sleeping up in a tree one night, tying myself so I wouldn't fall. But I couldn't really sleep. Maybe I zoned all day because I haven't slept much? But I guess whatever it is didn't hurt me while I was out of it."

"You must be exhausted," Blair said.

The kid didn't deny it.

"Jim and I can keep watch."

"Does it make any distinctive sounds?" Jim asked.

"Um, I didn't know about the heightened senses. It seemed pretty silent."

"What color?"

"Blues and greens. Pointy head. Big claws."

"I'll keep watch. You and Blair go ahead and sleep."

"Wake me in a few hours, and I'll be fine to take a shift," Philip said.

"I could to," Blair said, "It's not like any of us have early morning commitments."

Jim nodded. Blair knew his Sentinel would take more than his share of the watch. There was no point trying to argue. It would only make them both look unprofessional in front of Philip.

Lying down to sleep with just a mylar emergency blanket was unpleasant. It made strange crinkly noises and offered none of the weight or reassurance of regular bedding. Blair wasn't cold or particularly worried about their surroundings. But everything about the day's events felt off. Not sleeping with Jim now that he'd gotten used to it put one more piece out of place.

Blair rolled to his back and began a simple meditation. If he couldn't sleep, at least he could relax. After that, he'd either sleep or take over the watch.

#

Jim listened to the hard rasping sounds of the emergency blankets as Blair and Philip tried to find comfortable positions on the ground. If Blair was in charge of Sentinel friendly supply lists, those blankets should definitely be taken off the lists. Jim gritted his teeth and kept his hearing high. He
tried to tune out the annoying blankets as he cataloged the air patterns, rustling vegetation, and a few small animals around them. None of the animals sounded like crustaceans with claws or hard carapaces.

When Blair finally stilled, Jim could tell his Guide was meditating rather than sleeping. He knew the distinctive heartbeat and breathing. At least it kept Blair's blanket quiet. After a few minutes, Philip's breathing evened out into sleep. Jim wanted to like the kid, but something about him made Jim nervous. It didn't seem to be a Sentinel instinct or anything Jim could pin down with his senses. Maybe it was just Philip's discomfort with his perceived failures and all he'd had thrown at him this day. Philip had been tense and stank of fear and adrenaline since they met him. Now that the Seabee was asleep, those smells faded. The boy's face relaxed and he looked really young, very much the kid overshadowed by his sisters' college success and still unsure about his place in the Navy.

Blair didn't look young when he was meditating. He looked powerful. Maybe Jim read into it, because he knew the sort of spirit plane forces his Guide dealt with. But Blair's chin held stronger when he was still. His hair fanned around him like a force of nature. Jim loved watching his Guide like this. To be honest with himself, Jim loved watching his Guide. He could barely believe that Blair had forgiven him for all the times he was a jerk and beyond that, let Jim into his heart and bed.

When Blair finished his meditation, his eyes flicked open and met Jim's. In a moment he'd be offering to take the watch, and Jim knew his Guide needed the sleep more. Moving as quietly as he could, because Blair lay just a few feet from the still sleeping Philip, Jim shifted to take Blair's head in his lap. He placed a quieting finger to his own lips, then to his lover's.

Blair rolled his eyes and made some brief crinkly adjustments to lie more comfortably.

Jim stroked his fingers through Blair's hair. With his hearing extended to monitor their surrounding, it was easy to notice which touches calmed his Guide's pulse and breathing. Small circles along his nape and separated fingers across his crown seemed to do the trick. When Blair fell asleep, the relaxed weight and warmth of his head on Jim's thigh brought Jim a comfort that was close enough to sleep to tide him over.

When John dropped by the main physics lab, Rodney was waving a hand with a blue dry erase marker as he berated one of his minions. One hand wave out of three left a blue mark someplace on the nearest whiteboard.

"You think we'd send a gardener to explore a dungeon? At least you have all the dead decorative plants from the corridors to dissect. The marine biologist can't even access an underwater window or camera yet." A blue slash decorated the lower corner of the whiteboard. "They've sent me dozens of proposals more thought out that this, and they have degrees from schools best known for beach access. Now, you question if I understood your report on the importance of mold and mildew control?" The dry erase marker stabbed a dot very near the focus of someone's hastily sketched parabola. "I have at least a dozen allergies and at least as many physicians who think I'm a hypochondriac. I could make your argument for you, while asleep and counting a geometric progression of electric sheep, and out argue your pathetic excuse for a research proposal. Moreover, when the high and mighty military types decide to allow science teams into the newly explored areas, this particular proposal will lose out to the anthropologists as well as our lone cultural psychologist because at least they found logical arguments for why they needed to be in the field to do their research."

The marker would have hit John's arm with the last dramatic swing, but John dodged. Rodney's eyes took notice of his Sentinel briefly. But he didn't miss a beat in his rant. "If you're tired of studying the
database and can't come up with any other botanical research to do, rather than waste your time and
mine on proposals that I will soon stop reading, as you fear, find someone to tutor you in the
scientific method and on how to write a research proposal."

Rodney capped his marker and threw it in the direction of the white board. He turned his back on the
stunned botanist he'd been lecturing and said to John, "It must be time for dinner, right?"

Rodney rushed out the door, and John followed.

In the transporter, John punched a location near the gym. Rodney sputtered, "I thought we were
going to eat."

"Nice thought. But I came to tell you the high and mighty military types have decided to allow two
mixed science and military patrols into any area that's passed the initial military inspection. I figure
Lorne and Teyla's proposed team will be one of those patrols and you can decide the other. Ronon
and Teyla are currently teaching hand to hand in the main gym, so I thought we'd stop and tell them
the good news."

John led the way out of the transporter as Rodney sputtered, "But—Wait—I was going to propose
—"

In that moment, they reached the gym. John smiled with renewed respect for his XO's idea to stay
one step ahead of the scientists' demands.

In the next moment, he was awed by the speed and coordination of his alien hand to hand instructors.
Teyla and Ronon stood back to back in the center of the room as one Marine after another stepped
forward to fight them. Ronon took his opponents down fast and some landed at the very edge of the
mat covered work out space. Teyla took longer with each, letting them try out a few moves as she
dodged and blocked. But each ended up on the floor, and Teyla never fell lower than one knee.

When each Marine in the training had been defeated by one or both, Teyla clapped her hands
together once and they lined up along the side of the mat.

"Thank you all for coming today," she said. "I hope to see many of you again tomorrow when we
begin work with sticks." The smile on Teyla's face could only be described as evil.

Ronon said, "Dismissed."

The Marines in unison said, "Yes, sir, Specialist Dex," Teyla clapped again and they recited, "Thank
you, Ambassador Emmagen." The dozen plus men nodded toward Teyla and she dipped her head in
response.

Rodney sputtered, quietly for him, "What did they call them?"

John took a deep breath and realized the significance of names and titles to respect. He wondered if
this was another of Lorne's inspirations or exactly who had brought it to the aliens' attention.

As the Marines filed out, John walked over to where Teyla and Ronon were gathering their things.

"Colonel Sheppard," Teyla said.

"Please, call me John." He smiled, and Teyla smiled back.
Rodney held his data pad out to John as they walked to the mess hall. "I call dibs on the room marked in red. It's some sort of a science lab and has one or two pieces of high voltage equipment. There's a nursery or something across the hall that the squishy research types might like."

John studied the data pad, and called Lorne on his radio before they reached the mess hall. By the time they all had food and were seated, Lorne had caught up with a tray of his own. John passed his XO the data pad with Rodney's proposed location and after a few words and finger jabs, John said, "Okay, Lorne's team will take the side of the hall with the nursery. We can schedule for sometime this week."

"How about tomorrow?"

John raised an eyebrow. "I'd expected a lecture on how busy you are."

"We're at a dead end on the personal shield. Parts of the underlying Ancient physics don't add up. Carson won't give the prototype back. I'm certain my minions could fix it, but he claims any further testing is unsafe, like that's somehow a medical call." In truth, Rodney had plenty of other projects to work on and the issues with the shield were probably more Gabi or Zelenka's to solve, regardless of the physics. But he wasn't ready to admit how much he wanted to go exploring.

"Perhaps you and Dr. Beckett could work together to improve the safety of the item in question." Teyla spoke calmly between bites.

Rodney snorted. "Fat chance, he won't even talk to me." When John bumped his shoulder from the side, Rodney knew it was meant as comfort, but it didn't help. Instead, he stuffed his face with mashed potatoes.

"Won't talk to Gabi either," Ronon said.

Rodney stared at the big warrior who was eating meatloaf with his fingers. "Since when do you talk to my minions?"

"Invited me last night. Said it was their rules." Ronon used a roll to scoop up mashed potatoes.

"What rules?"

Ronon stared blankly at Rodney as if he wasn't going to answer, possibly hadn't heard the question or perhaps had been deaf for a while and just hadn't let on.

Then Teyla said, "Please, Ronon, I'm curious to know."

Ronon held up three fingers and answered as if by rote: "Don't do anything you don't want to, try to say what you want and what you mean, keep it a safe space for everyone."

"This was when Shane shared more of his shamanic stories from Earth?"

Ronon nodded. Then he chugged an entire glass of juice and faced Rodney again, "Do you think I'm a kid?"

Rodney sputtered into his coffee, "What?"

John started coughing and when he finished all eyes were on him he said, "That's why the Marine's are calling you Specialist Ronon Dex now."

Teyla asked calmly, "Have we misunderstood the use of titles and terms of respect in your society?"
He introduced himself that way in a context where the Marines were students and we were their teachers."

As he dug into his jello, Rodney wondered why this would be a big deal to the aliens or to anyone. He knew plenty of idiots who insisted on the use of "doctor" before their names. It didn't make Rodney think any better of them.

His Sentinel somehow kept a straight face as he said, "I will make an effort to introduce you properly, but when we're not in a military or classroom context, are we all okay on a first name basis?"

Teyla smiled, "Of course, John. Although my Sentinel has informed me that he might as well not have a first name, because he forgets most times to answer to it."

Rodney thought that was just as well, as his brain did not have storage allocated for anything as unimportant as Lorne's first name.

#

Ronon knocked on their door, and Gabi opened it with a thought. She was glad that the new Sentinel seemed to like their company, but she wondered what it would be like if he came by every night.

"Hey, Ronon." Brett looked up from where he'd been selecting a movie on his computer. "Want to join us for a movie?"

Ronon glanced at Brett and the computer and then at Gabi and Shane seated on the bed. "Like stories?"

"Yeah, though what we're watching is just for fun. It's called Star Wars."

Shane's eyes flicked up from a large bowl of popcorn as Ronon let out a noncommittal grunt. "It's not about real wars. This is something made up by Earth people who didn't know about real space travel or life on other planets. They got a bunch of actors to pretend to fly space ships and use pretend magical weapons. Then they saved a recording on a computer and added special effects to make it look like there were aliens and other planets. It's a sort of fantasy adventure meant to entertain."

"Not to educate?" Ronon asked.

"Most people wouldn't call it educational," Shane agreed. "But the way I was brought up, having people think about possibilities beyond their experience, and giving them a story they can share and discuss, is also a form of education."

By that point Brett had the movie queued. He took his place on one side of Shane and patted the section of bed between himself and the door. "Join us. We have popcorn." He held up a popped kernel.

Ronon lowered himself to the bed with surprising grace.

Brett started the movie and read the introduction in a deep melodramatic voice..

Gabi found herself watching with new eyes, trying to imagine how an alien who'd seen many societies with varied technologies would interpret the Hollywood science fiction classic.

Ronon didn't show much reaction.
By the time the droids reached Tatooine, Brett couldn't help noticing two things. First, Ronon kept a careful two inches of space between himself and Brett. If Brett shifted a tiny bit, Ronon compensated. And Brett would bet the alien Sentinel was aware of Brett's body heat, pulse and breathing as well. Second, every time Ronon reached for popcorn, his bare arm brushed Sentinel soft against the bare skin of Brett's forearm. It didn't strike Brett as a sexual thing, although he had to remember he was dealing with an actual alien. Still, he remembered how desperate Gabi had been for any form of safe touch when they met. Ronon had been on the run for seven years. Whether as a Sentinel, a person, or an alien, he probably needed and was hyperaware of touch.

Brett lifted the popcorn bowl out of Shane's hands and placed it on Ronon's farther thigh. Ronon steadied it with his outside hand instinctively. Then Brett shifted Ronon's nearer arm onto a pillow and slid his back comfortably along Ronon's side, so Ronon's arm just brushed his shoulders.

"Is this okay?" Brett whispered to Ronon.

"Good." Ronon smiled for a moment.

Shane repositioned himself to use Brett as a lounge chair and propped his legs across Gabi's lap. Gabi smiled at all three of them and started to rub Shane's feet.

Ronon shifted the popcorn to a more stable and accessible position on his lap, and all of them went back to watching the movie.

By the credits, Shane had somehow ended up with his head in Gabi's lap, his butt in Brett's lap, and his feet in Ronon's lap. The popcorn was long gone, and Ronon was rubbing Shane's feet with one hand as his other arm held Brett comfortably close.

Gabi thought the whole scene was cute. Shane's relaxed manner and her position stroking his head and neck kept her calm during the movie. But when it ended, Gabi's brain started to whir with questions and uncertainties.

"I'm making you uncomfortable." Ronon spoke directly to Gabi. She didn't like that he could sense that from her autonomic reactions and wondered how others could put up with her knowing their physical reactions that way.

"More uncertain, I think. What happens now?"

"I could go," Ronon offered.

Without moving from his sprawl Shane said, "It's probably better to talk it out now, if you're comfortable with that. We have an agreement among the three of us to try to say what we want as far as touch, comfort, sex, affection. It sort of fits with the rules Gabi listed last night." He wiggled his toes in Ronon's hand. "A lot of people from Earth would probably have trouble being that direct. I have no idea what taboos might apply on your planet or if you even know what you want. But we all seem to like you, and I think we can promise not to get offended at anything you say, however things work out."

Ronon's big hand closed around Shane's foot and shook it playfully. "It's good. Almost as much as I can take for now, but I like this." He ran a thumb along Shane's arch and squeezed Brett's shoulder. Then he looked at Gabi. "I don't understand the energy you look for, but close like this, I can feel that they are Guides. I can sense their bond to you. I feel good with them, but if I wanted sex, I
wouldn't want someone else's Guide. Is that what you study?"

All at once Gabi was hit with simultaneous emotional relief and scientific curiosity. There was a rush of blood to her head and her heart pounded. Ronon raised an eyebrow, and she wondered what he concluded from her body's reaction. "I'd have to do more research, but that's fascinating. Can you describe how Guides feel good or how you feel their bond to me? Can you feel their bond to each other?"

Ronon flexed his muscles, stroking Shane's foot and Brett's arm. "When we touch, there's a buzz to it. I haven't had much contact with people in a long time. Before my senses changed, there were times when touch was tingly, like with the girl I hoped to marry. And there were times touch seemed like more, like a wall around me or a shelter, especially after war came to my people. With Brett and Shane and Teyla there is a buzz. I think it helps my senses. The opposite of pain."

Brett wrapped his arms around Ronon at that confession, and Ronon lowered his face to just above Brett's curls.

Gabi waited until Ronon looked us to repeat, "And their bond to me? To each other?"

He shrugged. "I could tell Teyla was bonded to someone. Can tell these two are bonded to someone else, but the same as each other. Not sure if their bond is part of that."

"Could you identify an unbonded Guide by touch?"

When Ronon shrugged again, Brett was pressed in tightly enough that he moved with the larger man. Brett looked up and smiled, first at Ronon, then at Gabi.

Gabi looked to her lap and saw Shane smiling up at her, too. "Any more questions?" he asked.

When Gabi shook her head, Ronon asked, "At the end of the Star Wars story, why did only the humans get awards?"

#

Blair watched the two Sentinels splash around in the stream. They were supposedly setting a snare to catch fish. Jim trailed his fingers in the water and pulled Philip's hand to the same place to argue about the currents.

Philip stared at his hand, turning it back and forth as he smiled at the sensation. Then he smiled and said, "The snares I've been using work. You don't always have to build a better mousetrap."

"But you can feel the currents better now." Jim started moving the sticks and string as he preferred. "What's the point of being a Sentinel if you don't use it?"

"What if the fish don't like the main current? Or what if it moves the snare? I'll gladly use my senses to help my country, but that doesn't mean I know everything."

Blair smiled. Philip had been remarkably cooperative with testing and training his senses all day. "And we thought it was a Sentinel instinct to think you know better than everyone else."

"Hey," Jim hit the water with the side of his hand and splashed all the way to where Blair sat on the rocks. "He's saying he knows better than me."

"No, I didn't mean it that way." Philip shook his head and looked at Jim with big eyes.
Jim met him with a cold scowl. Then just as Philip was about to start babbling an apology, Jim surprised him with a huge one-armed splash.

Philip wiped his face with his arm. When he saw the older Sentinel's wide smile, he splashed back. Blair took that cue to get off his butt and scampers back from the water.

Behind him he heard shouts and splashes, then sudden quiet followed by Jim's bellow, "Come back, Chief. He zoned."

Blair hesitated then picked his way back. Once he could see Jim and the unmoving Philip, Blair called out, "This better not be a trick to get me soaked in your game."

"Would I do that?" Jim raised his eyebrows in exaggerated innocence.

Blair let his head jut forward with his own version of arched eyebrows.

"Okay, might have." Jim shrugged. "But not this time. Come and get him while I fix the snare."

As Jim collected the snare materials the two Sentinels had tangled in their splash fight, Blair removed his boots and socks. He waded in to stand in front of Philip and rested his hands on the young Seabee's shoulders. "Philip, listen to my voice. Feel my hands on your shoulders, cold water at your feet. I'm not sure what you zoned on, but I'm guessing it involves sight with all the water and light effects here. I'm going to keep talking and rubbing at your shoulders until you come back to me."

Philip finally blinked. "I saw a bird, a little one. It felt so good to zoom in on it. My eyes could just track it, not like binoculars where it would go out of focus as it moved fast away."

"You might have had enough for one day," Blair said. "You've been amplifying one or more senses for tests or practice almost full time."

"Is that a problem? I assumed I could do it all the time now." Phillip turned to face downstream. His finger spread and his head tilted. Blair would bet he was pushing several senses far beyond their baselines.

When Blair didn't answer, Jim said, "You might set your baselines a little above normal." He'd finished setting the snare in the optimal path of the current. With a wave, he motioned for them all to leave the stream.

Philip turned reluctantly from whatever he'd been studying. Blair rested a hand on Philip's shoulder until they made it to their shoes. Jim told himself he wasn't the slightest bit jealous.

"It must be tempting to zoom in on one sense or another all the time," Philip said.

"Not really. You start to realize how poorly most people wash and how bad most coffee is. Sudden loud sounds hurt and can knock you on your ass. Sight and touch are too easy to get lost in."

"Okay, so you focus on at least two. I get that." Philip had his shoes tied and his kit packed up. He stood and wandered the small clearing touching and looking at each leaf and twig. "But it feels so good to dial up. It's like flirting. It's fun even if it's not going anywhere."

Jim stood abruptly and stomped his foot. "I wouldn't describe any part of it as fun, just useful sometimes." There was no way he'd comment on the flirting remark. Flirting to Jim had been a necessary evil. He'd flirted to get into a girls' pants when he was younger and to charm secretaries
and waitresses as he got older. It wasn't supposed to be fun.

"Maybe you take it for granted, but every time I zoom in on something I get a rush. Like touching something soft or tasting something sweet. It's like getting your head in the game." Philip was practically bouncing back to camp.

Blair was shooting sideways glances at Jim.

"I don't get it." Jim shrugged at his Guide. "It was never like that for me."

#

In the middle of the night, past when Jim should have traded the watch, Philip sat up suddenly. The rattle of his mylar blanket was loud enough to wake Blair, who sat up rubbing his eyes.

"What happened?" Blair asked, his voice rougher with sleep than he'd expected.

"I had a dream with the blue green crab thing, except I was the crab thing. It was so real." Philip waved an arm and then pushed his blanket back when it crinkled loudly.

Blair found himself suddenly awake and fully back in teacher mode as he said, "Tell me everything you can remember."

"I was this crab thing, eating bugs. And this wolf and panther were with me, following and guarding me. It started out looking like the American river near Sacramento, where I grew up. But we followed the bugs through this giant upright ring in the middle of the river. On the other side, there were swarms of the bugs crawling all over burnt and barren ground. Then all these other crab things and some other animals joined us. And all of us crabs and whatever else that could eat bugs kept eating them until we were full. Then something exploded. It was like a flash of light or loud noise, except it wasn't any sense I know. But it was big and sudden. There was another crab thing and we went back to eating bugs. It seemed really important at the time."

Blair nodded, reaching for his glasses and digging out a notebook. "So you were the animal you thought you saw while you were alone out here discovering you senses?"

"Yeah."

Blair brushed hair back from his face. It sounded like Philip had connected to his spirit animal, and that spirit animal sounded a lot like something Brett had described as showing up in the Pegasus Galaxy. "And you'd never seen that animal before, even in pictures?"

"No."

"And the upright ring in the river, can you describe it better?" Blair didn't breathe as Philip's first words confirmed, at least in Blair's mind, that Philip had made his way to the spirit plane and seen something important.

"Stone. Old. Maybe twelve or fifteen feet high. Symbols around an inner ring. The outer edge has some sort of decorative pattern carved into it and then evenly spaced glowing triangles. When the animals passed through, it was like they came out on another planet."

#

Vibration. Gabi knew her world through a string of energy. She shook with it, absorbing the excess into...something. Someone else, another string over, moved in parallel. The vibrations from that
string were familiar but incomplete. The strings around her sang their patterns. Some strings held others. She could tell by the damping of their signals.

The energy signatures were distinct but unknown to her. Other than her own, most were incomplete, but one other sounded complete and familiar. All of them were taking in extra energy, storing it, just as she did. A threshold was reached and the…something…what they had been feeding extra energy into, reached a threshold. A capacitor. The something was like a capacitor storing the energy until it burst forth in one strong pulse.

There was another person. Another string of energy shifted its vibrations as a new entity damped its previous vibration. The new vibration sounded incomplete. But the new being joined the rest of them in absorbing the excess energy. They collected it carefully, safely. Gabi knew what would happen again as soon as they collected enough.

#

Gabi woke with a whine. She crawled over Shane who mumbled, "What's wrong?"

Brett had been pressed loosely against Shane's side. Gabi slid between then, and Brett took her in his arms. He was so warm. "Gabi?" he asked.

Shane rolled behind her until his whole body held her from behind. "We've got you Gabi. We're both her for you, just say if we're holding you too tightly." Shane's upper arm wrapped around both her and Brett then. He was sleep-warmed, too.

Gabi realized she was cold. Shaking. "I dreamed I was in the vibrating place again, like my stringbots."

"Your view of the spirit plane?" Shane asked.

"Maybe."

"Gabi, what's your sense of vibration set at now? Remember how bad you felt last time?"

That's what Gabi needed Brett for, to tell her what she knew once she started thinking in words and feeling like she had a body. Her muscles were all tensed up, and her sense of vibrations coming through the floor and air around her was up at six point five.

Deep breaths. She brought it down to two. Touch she left at three. Hearing she left at three so both her Guides' heartbeats were strong beside her. Smell spiked for a moment with aloe and spring and sex and the smells that were distinctly her Guides and their bed. She brought it down to two. Her eyes and mouth were closed and not bothering her, so she didn't worry about those senses.

She shivered hard as her body warmed up fast. "I'm okay now."

"Did you check your other sense, too?"

She swatted Brett on the chest where her hand had come to rest. With less than an inch to move her hand, it was more a pat than a swat, but Brett relaxed at the gesture. "Yeah, we need to wash our sheets again."

"We always need to wash our sheets," Brett said.

Gabi burrowed her face into his neck.
"Why is your face so cold? Why were you so cold?" Brett asked.

"I think my muscles tensed up. That makes me cold."

Shane shimmied against her back and kissed her shoulder. "Did something bad happen?"

"I don't know. Something good happened, I think. A new person or energy pulse was created and found a place on an empty string. But I think the situation overall was bad. There was extra energy we all had to collect and feed into a capacitor until it made a new one of us. But I don't think it's supposed to work that way."

"Maybe you should start at the beginning," Shane said.

"Later," Gabi said. "It's too early to be awake, and putting it into words makes it harder to understand. Can I sleep here?"

"Any time," Brett said.

"Just tell us what you need," Shane said.

"Just this." In a moment Gabi fell asleep.

#

"Wait here while we sweep the room." John motioned Rodney and Dr. Ng to the wall while Markham and Stackhouse made a quick pass through the lab. Rodney had selected the location for their first mixed team exploration without delay. John knew his scientist expected the large machines in the room to do something cool, and he hoped his Guide wouldn't be disappointed. As the military commander, John wanted to set a clear precedent for safe procedures to follow for mixed science and military exploration teams. So he kept watch in the doorway until Markham indicated the room was unchanged since the first military patrol cleared it.

"McKay, ready to make the first sensor sweep?"

"Yes, yes. Just keep your military grabby hands off everything while I walk a circle with a life signs detector that could scan just as well from any point in the room."

The room was gray and plain compared to most parts of Atlantis. Rather than bubbling lava lamp pillars, the ceiling was supported by gray pillars with narrow horizontal lights. Markham and Stackhouse had each taken position by pillars on opposite sides of the room.

A little bit of natural light entered through four small, oddly shaped skylights on one side. Rodney started walking that way, eyes on his LSD. As Rodney passed what might have been a synthesizer keyboard hooked up to a large honeycombed speaker system he said, "Independent energy source, not large, not currently powered up." He passed under what might be a larger skylight in the middle of the room that remained dark as if covered, and John was sure another room's floor was directly above it. "Surprisingly large power source behind the fixture in the ceiling, possibly also powers this screen." He ran the detector over a screen on the far wall. "The main terminal in the center of the room has its own power source. Both seem to be in a standby mode, so minimally powered." At the other end of the room Rodney walked around an empty tank large enough to hold a dolphin with lots of gray hoses and conduit running up from the base. "Independent energy source, not currently powered. Mineral residues inside the tank would suggest this wasn't filled with sea water or filtered water from Atlantis' desalinization tanks. Make a chemist's day, you," Rodney waved at Markham without looking up, "Scrape a sample of the deposits inside."
Markham looked to John.
"You have sample bags in your tac vest, Sergeant?"
"Yes, sir."
"Scrape a sample off without touching it. McKay, I assume it's okay for him to touch the outside walls and rim of the tank?"

Rodney waved a hand in a large circle, "It's not powered. The scanner doesn't flag anything as dangerous. The rest I leave as an exercise to you Sentinels. I'm ready to power up the main console now."

"Patience, McKay. Might as well take the sample before we start turning things on."

Rodney rolled his eyes.

John turned to find Dr. Ng hovering just inside the doorway. "You see any reason not to power the main console once the sample is taken?"

Ng shook her head. "Is it acceptable to take photos now?"

"Go ahead."

The chief anthropologist proceeded to photograph every facet of the room as if it were an exquisite Ancient cathedral.

"It will take centuries to explore Atlantis at this rate, let alone an entire galaxy," Rodney muttered, running his scanner over the main console.

"Safety first, McKay."

"I haven't blown anything up in weeks."

Stackhouse coughed in a way that sounded suspiciously like he was covering a chuckle.

"Finished," Markham announced as he stepped back from the empty tank.

"Finally," Rodney huffed and hit a button without further consultation. Lights came on all over the console, and Rodney hit several as the wall screen lit up with columns of data John couldn't read.

Ng turned to photograph the screen and console just as a whooshing sound had John and the Marines raising their weapons. The room lights went out as the fixture in the ceiling lit up. A blue beam of light shot down and wrapped around Rodney in a spiral before spiraling back up in the opposite direction.

John's first instinct was to grab his Guide. His second was to shoot the fake skylight. He did neither.

A flash from Ng's camera whited out John's eyesight. He dialed down vision as he heard his Guide's heartbeat race. His eyes reopened to flashing bursts of sparks from something shorting out in the ceiling.

The room went dark. The only light came from the four small skylights and the open doorway.

John reached his Guide in two long steps. He pulled Rodney away from the console and flat against his chest, but he held on to his military mindset despite the urge to bury his nose in Rodney's neck.
"Markham, check the hall and our other team." Rodney relaxed against John's chest. "Stackhouse, cover Dr. Ng and move to the hall." Rodney's breathing and pulse started to slow. "McKay, what happened?" His Guide smelled sharply of sweat and fear.

"

"Well, that could have gone better." Rodney heard his voice waver. His arms and legs felt tingly, as if he'd slept on them funny, but he wasn't going to admit to anything more than his Sentinel could already detect. The future of science exploration on Atlantis was more important than the hypochondriac voices in Rodney's mind whining about Ancient energy pulses and possible mutations.

The room lights came back on.

Rodney let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "I'll need to take another set of readings to see if a crystal cracked or something in the wiring shorted out."

"Not until we determine it's safe." His Sentinel squeezed him tighter.

Rodney relaxed into the embrace for a long moment before he said, "Whose job do you think it is to determine what went wrong and make it safe?"

He felt his Sentinel duck his head and inhale deeply from behind Rodney's ear before saying, "You said you could scan the whole room just as well from where we're standing, right?"

"

Brett couldn't stop smiling as he waited in the hall. He was finally getting to do cool anthropology. A non-stop stream of complaints about military procedure poured from Dr. McKay who'd already pushed into the room down the hall. Brett didn't mind waiting a few extra minutes while Lorne, Ronon, and Teyla did a quick sweep. He didn't care if McKay had assigned their new team to study a nursery. Finding a kid's picture book might tell them more about the Ancients' daily life than they'd gleaned so far from weeks of database research. The initial military patrol cited the room as not empty. That was good enough for Brett.

Lorne popped his head out the door. "Your turn. Just remember the safety protocols."

Shane and Gabi motioned for Brett to go ahead of them. He went. They'd both had chances to work with newly discovered Ancient tech. Brett was ready for his turn. He carefully walked a lap of the pale blue room. Light reflected in through mirrored skylights like those in the Anthro library, suggesting some reason to avoid direct light in the room. An object that might be Siamese twin harps dominated one corner. A long shelf above cabinets on the back wall contained what might be knitting needles or drumsticks and several boxes of polished black stones. Then there was a standard console for accessing the Ancient database. Beside it stood a terminal with larger controls and an attached chair. It reminded Brett of Out Run, a driving game he'd played too much as a kid at his local arcade. He itched to sit in the chair and boot it up, but he stuck to the exploration protocols they'd spent all morning discussing.

"Any energy anomalies?" he asked Gabi.

She was waving her customized life signs detector in between the two wings of the Siamese twin harp contraption. "Nothing active or leaking. This has a huge power source for a kids' toy though."

"This room is so not a nursery." Brett stifled a laugh.
"Should we try activating the main console?" Shane asked.

Lorne raised a hand. "One sec. Why do you say it's not a nursery, Brett?"

"Scale. The built in chair device," he waved to what he hoped was a video game, "and the harp contraption," he waved to where Gabi was still scanning obsessively, "are built to adult scale. The items on the shelf could be tools as easily as toys, and they're kept up high above cupboards. There's nothing here to suggest a nursery."

"It's light blue," Lorne said.

"Which is associated with babies in the United States starting in the nineteenth century, but a black, white and red motif would make more sense for nursery decorations, assuming Ancient physiology and cognition were much like humans'."

Lorne stared at Brett as if he'd grown a second head.

Teyla, who had been carefully examining the apparently empty cupboards threw over her shoulder, "Athosians would use bright colors along with black or white designs for baby weavings and clothes."

Ronon said from the doorway, "Speckled." The room was silent until Ronon added, "To hide any stains."

"Right." Lorne smiled. "We won't be hindered by jumping to conclusions. That said, anyone care to guess what the room was used for?"

"Could be a music room," Gabi suggested.

"Or a rec room, even if Gabi turns out to be studying a mutant electric harp, the rest could be game or craft items." Brett went over to the shelf with the boxes of stones thinking he'd once played a board game called "Go" with pieces that shape. But for the game, only half the stones were black.

"Anyone see cause to wait on starting the main console?" Lorne asked.

When no one objected, he told Shane, "Go ahead."

Brett moved to watch over Shane's shoulder. Shane deftly flipped through screens until his third try brought up pictures of the items they'd found along with many other. "No way," both Brett and Shane said in tandem.

Lorne was with them in an instant. "Problem?"

"Not at all," Brett said. "It has a directory with pictures. If the Ancients set up anything half this user friendly elsewhere, we could save so much time."

"Maybe it is meant for kids," Shane said, "or teenagers or young adults."

"If Ancient culture even thought of those as something other than adults. Press the picture of this thing with the chair." Brett put his arm around Shane's waist as they both crowded in front of the terminal and scanned the page of Ancient text that Shane's tap triggered. "Training simulations. I thought it looked like an arcade driving game. One of the simulations seems to be medical. A lot of other words I don't know."

"Me either," Shane put in.
"You think it's safe to power it up?" he asked.

When they both nodded Lorne turned to Gabi who was now scanning the harp shapes from behind their shared spine. "You scanned it?" He pointed at the training simulator.

"Yes, power-wise it's boring. Same power source as the console they're already using. Can we check out this thing next?" Gabi asked.

At a nod from Lorne, Brett powered up the training simulator. Gabi trotted over to scan during the start up process and as Brett first touched the controls. For safety sake he reached for the knob-like controls from as far to the side as possible rather than sitting in the chair.

"In sip affect-y," a warm female voice intoned.

"Spoken Ancient?" Brett tapped a dark rectangle hoping there was a text option. His extremely limited knowledge of written Ancient was far better than his nonexistent knowledge of spoken Ancient. The scene obligingly displayed the word for "start" and beneath it a word Brett didn't know. "You think it's okay for me to sit down and play with it a while?"

"Sure," Gabi said, heading back to her corner. Her attention refocused on her LSD and the strange harp device.

Lorne glared as she walked by. Then he turned to Brett and said, "Go ahead."

Brett smiled and sat down. The simulator showed him a video clip of an old man dressed all in white against a white background. As the darker face reacted to something off screen, Brett felt the moment of startled. The facial expression might have clued him in with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. But the mouth was pursed and the hands came together in a triangle Brett wouldn't have expected with the emotion he felt. He tapped the screen to see if another video would give him further clues. Instead he felt a sense of calm that wasn't accompanied by any other words of images.

Tapping the screen again didn't help, so Brett pulled on a knob that reminded him of a joystick. As he pulled the knob toward him a clip played of the same old man becoming sad. This time the frown and the drooping eyebrows were as Brett expected, and he could believe his own feeling of sadness was sympathetic. When he tapped the screen he was hit with the same sense of calm as before, and that was not a reaction he expect to have after seeing someone's sorrow. He stepped out of the chair and turned to Shane and Lorne who'd been watching him. "I think we might want some sort of brain scanner on hand before I experiment further. I don't know how it chose the simulation, but I think the word I didn't know might mean 'emotion' and that machine might trigger emotions by more than just showing videos."

Lorne pulled a data pad from his vest. "I'll make a note to check with Dr. Beckett."

Shane looked at the machine with wide eyed interest but nodded at Brett and Lorne's decision. "Should we go ahead with Gabi's device?"

"Everything go for the next device?" Lorne asked the room at large.

Markham appeared in the doorway. "Sergeant?" Lorne asked.

"The Colonel asked me to check on your team, sir."

"Problem with the radios, Sergeant?"
"We ran into an electrical problem down the hall, sir." Brett could see both Lorne and Ronon focus on Markham as if something more was passing silently between the Sentinels. Gabi didn't look up from whatever she was analyzing on her LSD.

"No problems here. We'll check in as scheduled unless we hear otherwise."

"Yes, sir." There was a hesitation before Markham left. Brett noticed Ronon splitting his attention between their room and the rest of the hall after that.

#

John held his scientist unapologetically as they both scanned the room. Rodney using his LSD and John using his senses. He heard Markham return from down the hall and take position outside the door. He had no doubt the other Sentinel was on alert as well. Faint clicking noises from Dr. Ng suggested she was reviewing her photos of the room and whatever had happened.

"The problem seems to be in a power conduit that runs through the wall by the door." Rodney's voice was even now, but John could feel the tension in his Guide's muscles that he was trying to hide. "It's sort of a bottleneck. But given how many years this city sat underwater, the damage could have been much worse. If you're ready to let go of me, I could open a panel and probably fix it in just a few minutes."

John held on a moment longer, grounding himself in the solid feel and slightly sweaty scent of his Guide before letting go. He squared his shoulder and called Markham in to report.

"No problems with the other team, sir."

"Good. Anything else you've noticed that I should be aware of?"

Markham hesitated and his eyes flicked over to where Rodney had opened a panel in the wall.

John waited the man out without looking away.

"I'm unsure of procedure for when a team member should be sent to the infirmary and when a team would halt an exploratory mission, sir."

"Within the city? I might send a team member to the infirmary after something like that. Of course, I'd consult my team scientist about the risks of what happened and about getting someone out to evaluate and repair any damage. In this case, our head of science seems to think he's fine and can fix it in just a few minutes. As soon as he's done and the other team finishes down the hall, we'll all head back to the infirmary for a post mission check."

"Yes, sir."

John thought he'd shown good leadership in that moment, but Dr. Ng was suddenly pushing in the doorway. Stackhouse managed to step in front and stop her before she was fully in the room.

Ng glared at the Sergeant but lifted her chin with a professional smile when she addressed John. "Before we leave, I'd suggest we investigate the machine under the skylights. Dr. McKay said it had an independent power source, and anything we learn might help us better understand the overall purpose of this room."

"McKay, how independent is the device under the skylights?"

Rodney ignored them while he probed connections and studied his LSD.
"McKay?"

"Yes, its power runs through this same wall, but it is independent. It should be no greater risk now than if nothing had happened in this room."

"Which means?"

"Which word didn't you understand? Independent probabilities. If you were going to let her power it up before, none of the relevant factors have changed." Rodney stepped back and closed the panel.

John thought the state of the first device and seeing his Guide surrounded by an unexpected light show might be reason enough to reevaluate exploratory missions all together. But he knew that was his Sentinel side talking and probably not what was best for the diplomatic part of his role as commander.

"Are there any other cables or whatnot you should check before she powers it up?"

"Well, there's another access panel over there."

McKay had it open and was probing connections before John could have voiced an order. He wondered again about going into the field with scientists, especially his headstrong Guide, but he was determined to be the best leader he could. In Atlantis, he knew he'd have to balance his need to protect with the scientists' needs to explore.

"It looks good," McKay said to Ng, who was watching over his shoulder. "You want to push the button this time?"

Rodney gestured to a large rectangular button where even John could recognize the Ancient symbol for a power switch.

Ng pressed and stooped over the keyboard as words started scrolling above the keys. "I believe it is a training device for meditation and bodily control, perhaps with biofeedback. I could test it myself or observe as someone else tries it."

"Not me," said Rodney.

As Stackhouse started to step forward, his Sentinel moved a step in from the door. John glared, and Markham resumed his position.

"I'm not sure having a Guide as the test subject is the best solution," John tried to sound confident as his mind raced through alternatives. "I'd be happy to volunteer as a test subject or to watch for difficulties in a test subject."

"A Sentinel as a test subject makes even less sense than a Guide," Rodney snapped. "Hello, biofeedback. That means hooky lights and sounds and whatnot that could play havoc with enhanced senses."

"Someone really should study the dynamics of running a joint military-scientific mission with this many Sentinels and Guides in the command structure and on teams." Ng scrutinized the other four members of the team as she spoke.

John rubbed a hand on the back of his neck. "Markham and Stackhouse will have their own team later. I consider this a training run for them while Lieutenant Ford is on medical leave."

Ng smiled at him, but the tension in her neck and shoulders said she was less than impressed. Even
the brief thought of Ford left John less than impressed with his leadership so far, but he forced his thoughts back into command mode. He would do his best with the resources and abilities he had. "I'd be happy to see what such a study said, of course."

"Of course." She ghosted her fingers over the keyboard without quite touching. "So if you're worried a Sentinel would overreact while monitoring his Guide in a potentially dangerous situation, don't you worry that mundane members of this expedition might start to feel like cannon fodder?"

John's mouth was opening on the word "What?" before McKay cut him off.

"Are you stupid or just trying to provoke a reaction for whatever Sentinel leadership study you've predetermined will show Sentinels and Guides as unfit for command? Anyone with half a brain could observe that my Sentinel had no problem with me activating the main console and did not overreact when something went wrong." Rodney waved his arms between them as he spoke, and John wondered if his Guide believed he'd really had "no problem" with the earlier situation.

Ng neither cowered nor tried to interrupt, so Rodney continued ranting and began to pace. "If he's objecting to a Guide as a test subject, it's presumably due to the nature of this device. Just as Sentinels may have atypical reactions to biofeedback in the form or noise of flashing lights, Guides might react atypically due to their training to deal with Sentinels or the affinity most seem to have for meditation. Would you assign a tone deaf crew member to test a stereo system? As far as being cannon fodder, they train these military types to stand between bullets and us. He assigned Stackhouse to protect you after that electrical mishap earlier. If you have some sort of issues with Sentinels, Guides, or the military or command structures here, you're welcome to resign from my science staff and this mission. But if you're going to stay here as a scientist, act like one."

"Excellent," Ng said, and Rodney seemed as surprised by the reaction as John was. "As a scientist, I'd like to test this device now. I seem to be the logical test subject, and I'm happy to accept the Colonel's offer to watch for difficulties."

With that the anthropologist started pressing buttons on the device. She scooped two small black stones from a container on the left and pressed them to her temples. The honeycomb structure above the controls turned out to be a set of multiple small speakers that produced sounds. They seemed random to John but didn't offend his Sentinel hearing in any way. Where the words had previously appeared at the top of the keyboard, a series of numbers and a line graph now charted Dr. Ng's efforts. The numbers appeared to mostly be going down. John had no idea if that was good or not.

He trained his senses on Ng and determined her heart rate and respiration were slowing down as well. He thought that might relate to the decreasing numbers, but none of the line graphs seemed affected by her pulse. Rodney crouched to connect a wire from his data pad to the keyboard, and John assumed he was recording results for later analysis. John decided being bored while scientists collected obscure data was a fine end to their first mixed scientific and military mission. He kept quiet and waited for the other team to finish up down the hall, so he could herd them all back to the infirmary at once and not appear to be an over-protective Sentinel.

#

Gabi stood back and recorded energy readings as the harp-like metal and wire contraption came online. Without even touching she could pick up faint vibrations from the vertical wires, and she wished she'd brought her full vibration and energy monitoring system. She'd have to leave that for later, perhaps when Brett came back with whatever brain scanning device.

"You hear that?" Ronon asked.
Gabi nodded, intent on her readings.

"What?" Lorne asked.

"The strings are already vibrating. That much is like a harp. But at least one of us should keep hearing dialed way down. This thing has more than enough power for outdoor concert level amplification. Can I go ahead and touch a string?"

"Easy does it," Lorne said.

Gabi had hearing, touch, and vibration senses set to three or four. They were all at levels she worked with in the ZPM room, so normal enough for her but higher than human norms. She reached a single finger to where she could feel the wire's vibrations like the heat off a human body. The feeling grew stronger until she was sure she was actually touching one string. She slid her finger up an inch and the vibration shifted but made almost no noise. A tap produced a very faint musical tone. A soft pluck produced a sound pleasant in both tone and volume, although it sounded more like a slide whistle than a harp to Gabi.

She carefully plucked the strings from front to back of the side where she stood. The tones moved from low to high but not as she would have expected. "Either this is out of tune or it's based on scales I'm not familiar with from a couple of years playing violin and then guitar."

"You play guitar?" Brett asked.

"It's tuned right for Satedan music," Ronon said.

Teyla took Ronon's place at the door. As Ronon headed toward the instrument Gabi started to move across to test the other set of strings. As she passed between the two wing shapes, she felt and then heard a hum that grew unbearably loud.

A hard yank to her arm pulled her away. The sound stopped, and for a moment Gabi's head rang with it. She had just placed why she recognized the final, receding vibrations when Ronon said, "It's the sound of your Guides and you."

"Is that what you sensed last night?"

Ronon nodded, then raised an eyebrow. "Basically."

Gabi tentatively stretched an arm forward. When it passed between the two pseudo-harps, the vibration she knew as her Guides' and her signature evolved into a sound like whirring or buzzing combined with the slide whistle notes from the wires on each side.

When she pulled her hand back, Ronon reached in. His pattern sounded off to her, like the incomplete rhythms she'd felt in her dream. She wasn't sure, but she thought she had heard his specific pattern in her dream, even though she hadn't been aware that she knew it before.

"Teyla, would you try?" Gabi asked.

Lorne shifted to the door. Ronon lowered his arm. Gabi remembered to take readings on her LSD as Teyla reached her arm in. Sure enough, hers was the familiar pattern that had sounded complete in Gabi's dream. "Shoot, this is weird."

As Teyla removed her hand Ronon asked, "Should I try to play music on the string part?"

When no one objected Lorne said from the door, "Might as well."
Ronon tested the strings himself as Gabi had and then plucked out something eerie that might be an alien version of chopsticks. He stepped well away from the noise producing center of the device and tested the tones of the second set of strings. Despite the wires looking the same, they sounded like an actual stringed instrument rather than a slide whistle. Perhaps they weren't much like any specific string instrument on Earth, but Ronon seemed pleased with them. After a minute or two, he was playing something that Gabi would have guessed as Chinese if she hadn't known it was Satedan.

When Ronon stopped playing, the room was silent for a long while.

Shane finally broke the silence when he looked up from the room's main console to say, "The sticks on the shelf can be used with the music machine or without. They're meant to be some sort of aid to meditation. The boxes of stones, too. There's a detailed description on how to tune the stones for people to use themselves, with other people, or with some biofeedback device. And the term ascension shows up several times as well. I think this room was meant to help Ancients improve themselves and prepare for ascension."

#

It was the afternoon of their third day on the island when Jim heard a gunshot. The sudden jerk of Philip's head in the same direction proved he heard it, too.

By their fire, Blair went right on cleaning fish. Jim wished he didn't have to tell his Guide. On such a small island and with no real predators, gunfire couldn't mean anything good.

Blair looked up, met Jim's eyes and then glanced at Philip. "I may not have Sentinel senses guys, but when you both go silent and still like that, I can guess that something happened."

"Gunshot," Jim said. "Small caliber, sounded like it hit something."

Blair's face paled, and Jim could practically see the gears turning behind his eyes. Then Blair turned to Philip. "You said there were three of you on this island. Did you bring weapons with you?"

"I didn't. I was pulled from construction relief work and didn't have one issued to me at the time. I can't remember what the other guys had, but it wouldn't surprise me."

Blair hastily placed the fish on the fire. "Could be a confused Sentinel shooting at his spirit animal."

"Or a confused sailor with flashbacks," Jim countered.

"How far?" Blair asked.

Jim shook his head. "At least three miles. We might not make it before dark depending on terrain and how hard it is to find anyone or anything once we get there."

Blair held up fishy hands. "Think you guys can keep the fish from burning while you pack up camp and write a note for the helicopter pilot? I need to go wash."

Jim pushed his hearing higher. He didn't trust whatever was happening on the other side of their island.

#

Blair woke to a voice he didn't recognize. It took a moment to remember they'd hiked until dark after hearing the gunshot but finally had to give in and set up a new camp for the night. "Hands on your head. Don't anyone move." Blair's hands were in his hair before his eyes opened to almost complete
darkness. He could vaguely make out two shapes in front of him, a larger man holding a smaller man in front of him. Jim was to Blair's right, where he'd been sleeping while Philip had watch. His hands were on his head, but he was at least sitting up.

"Identify yourselves, and don't try anything, or I'll shoot the kid."

"Captain Jim Ellison, Army Ranger, retired."

"Dr. Blair Sandburg. Mind if I sit up?"

"Keep your hands on your head."

Blair had to shift his legs a bit, but he'd never been so glad for physical training and crunches. "So, I just woke up and I can't really see, but is there some reason why you're threatening to shoot Philip?"

"Only a fool would leave a Seabee on watch against a Navy SEAL."

"Well, we didn't know we were against anyone, just maybe snakes or something. I'm sure we could all talk this out if you put the gun down."

"I want answers."

"Don't we all," Jim cut in. "Heard a gunshot earlier today. You know anything about that?"

"Are you nuts?" Blair had to agree with the SEAL's sentiment. He wished that Jim would stay quiet and let Blair talk them out of the situation. The gunman pulled Philip back a couple steps. "I want to know what the two of you are doing here and what's really going on. Are we part of some test?"

"I've been wondering that, too," Blair answered honestly. "We were sent to help Philip, and our helicopter pilot abandoned us here."

"Help him with what?"

Blair put together the concern in the SEAL's voice and his supposition that they were part of some test. He wondered what symptoms the man had been experiencing. "Philip was staring into space for a few hours. It's what we call a "zone out." Have you had any problems like that?"

"Why would I?"

"Philip says the three of you were sent here for wilderness training after testing positive for an ATA genetic marker. I swear to you I knew nothing about this operation until three days ago when I was sent to help Philip, but I did some of the research on the ATA gene. I'm happy to help you as well, if you'll put down the gun."

"Why should I trust you?"

Blair tried to think of what might convince a paranoid Navy SEAL who'd been left alone on a deserted island for two weeks to deal with emerging senses that he had no logical way to understand. Pretty much everything he was worried about was true, except that Blair hadn't been consulted in the set up and the explanation was stranger than whatever he imagined.

Jim quietly said, "You don't have to trust us. You have the only gun in the vicinity, and I'd bet money that it hasn't been fired today." Blair would bet Jim could tell by smell, but he didn't need to say anything. Even in the dark, Blair could tell the gunman was finally listening. "I'd also bet that you have ways of your own to confirm that I'm telling the truth that there aren't any other guns here.
"If it makes you feel better, you can tie me up, but we both know a single soldier can't reasonably hold three of us at gunpoint for three days."

"What makes you think I won't shoot you?"

"We're not at war? I'm sworn to protect the same people you are. Blair's an American civilian. Philip is part of your own Navy. Killing us would be murder. While you and I may both have killed people, neither of us is a murderer."

"Shit." The man with the gun suddenly sounded tired. "Seabee, you at least know your knots. You got some rope to tie his hands?"

"Uh, yes, sir?" Philip sounded terrified, but he managed to get some rope from his kit and tie Jim's hands at gunpoint. Jim let him tie them behind his back and sat still while the SEAL inspected the knots.

"Fine," the big man grunted. "I'll sit over here with my gun beside me. The three of you stay where you are and start talking. Doc, how about you start?"

"Well," Blair said, "I'm guessing from the way you checked those knots in the dark that you already know your vision is better than most people's…"

Back in their room, Brett pulled out the box of stones they'd found in the room that definitely wasn't a nursery. They lay innocently in his palm like flattened black marbles. After some discussion, they were the only artifacts deemed safe to remove from the room they'd explored. Brett wasn't sure anyone other than he and Shane had read the full description of the stones' uses.

"You still want to try this?" he asked Shane.

"Definitely." Shane knelt down on the bed.

"Should I take vibration and energy readings?" Gabi asked. Brett didn't miss that she was hovering in the doorway that connected their shared sleeping room to what was officially Gabi's own room.

"Whatever you want," Brett sat down beside Shane. "You are okay with this, right?"

"Yeah, but I'd feel better taking readings." Gabi quickly set up equipment. Then she joined them on the bed.

"Start with your palms?" Brett asked.

Shane nodded silently, and Gabi barely nodded at all. The stones were simple enough for one person to activate, and that person mentally controlled the vibrations of the entire set. Brett reached into his box and mentally triggered the faintest noticeable vibration. Then he touched a finger to one stone, willing it to stick.

Brett's skin thrummed happily when touching the stones, and he could easily believe they'd improve his meditation technique, although that wasn’t really his goal at the moment. He touched the first stone to the palm of Shane's hand and ordered it to stick there.

Shane kept his eyes on the stone throughout the transfer. He was still staring at the stone on his palm when Brett leaned forward and kissed him. As Shane's lips parted to let Brett in, Brett increased the stone's vibration. The shaman let out a breath through his nose and relaxed. Brett knew what Shane
wanted tonight, but he pulled away to ask anyway.

"Still up for experimenting with the stones during sex?"

Shane hummed and nodded. His fingers wrapped around the stone attached to his hand.

"And you, Gabi?" Brett asked.

"Just my palm for now, okay?" She held out her hand, palm bent back from the wrist.

"As much or as little as you want." Brett pressed a stone, tuned down to a gentle vibration, to her hand and kissed her. Gabi kissed back eagerly. Her mouth was closed, but it wasn't a completely innocent kiss. She still seemed a little nervous, and Brett worried the stones were reminding her too much of the mishap with the new personal shield. Gabi had said it wasn't a problem. She'd even washed the set he'd brought home in preparation for tonight's use. But Brett understood if Gabi needed time to ease into what Shane was practically begging for.

"Less clothes," Brett said.

Shane squirmed out of his tee shirt and sweats and spread himself out in the middle of the bed with his eyes closed. Brett stripped and then stroked both hands along Shane's shoulders and chest. He watched the muscles press into his touch and then relax. In his peripheral vision he saw Gabi stack her pajamas to one side of the bed and then sit so her legs were under the covers.

Shane's hand with the stone now lay open in front of Gabi. She traced his stone with her thumb and then moved so the stone on her palm circled around Shane's stone on his palm. Brett wondered if Gabi was thinking of a moon or planet in orbit. That's how her motions struck Brett.

He left Gabi to her own explorations as he traced fingers across Shane's nipples. "I bet you'd like having those vibrating stones by your nipples."

Shane's eyes blinked open at that, but he didn't move. Brett leaned down to circle each nipple with his tongue.

"I think I'll save that for another night." Instead Brett reached down and pressed one of the flattened marbles just behind Shane's sack. "This is one of the spots the Ancients suggested in their diagram." Brett had kept the stones to a low vibration for this part but he pulsed it up for a moment. Shane shivered and breathed deeply enough for Brett to hear the air move and see Shane's chest rise.

"With the right vibration and no other distractions, it might work as a focus for meditation." Shane's eyes blinked twice and closed. Brett knew Shane wasn't interested in talking tonight, but he thought Gabi needed to hear something. "Should I try out different vibrations?" Brett thought the stones to a faster buzz. The muscles in Shane's legs tensed. Faster still and Shane's cock twitched and began to fill.

"You're gorgeous like this." Shane ran his finger around the stone behind Shane's balls.

"That doesn't look so meditative," Gabi said.

"Some people find it easier to center themselves when in a slightly altered state of consciousness." Brett stroked a finger lightly from balls to the tip of Shane's half erect cock. "Is this what shamans mean by slightly altered states?"

Shane gasped and twitched his head slightly. He was already starting to sweat.
"You can just lie there and focus on what you feel as I experiment a bit," Brett said.

"The stone on his hand is just a distraction now," Gabi said as she traced it. "If I could move them, I'd take this one and move it to you, so you can feel what we feel."

"Show me where you'd want it."

Gabi leaned forward and circled a finger around Brett's bellybutton. Brett couldn't help reacting to her touch with a shiver. He moved the stone from Shane's palm to his own navel. The vibrations ran straight through him. "Makes me reconsider navel piercing."

Gabi brushed her fingers over the stone and across his abdomen. Then she repeated the motion silently on Shane.

Shane spread his arms and legs wider as he relaxed into the mattress, the picture of submission. Brett traced a hand lightly up and down beside Shane's knee and thought different patterns of vibration into the strange squished marbles they all wore now. He knew what he wanted to try with Shane, but he hadn't anticipated how well Shane would react to that one point of vibration on his perineum. Shane's eyes had drifted closed again as his cock continued to swell. All his concentration seemed to center on that single point.

Gabi watched the vibrations travel across Shane's skin. She smelled his arousal ramp up with a musk and saltiness she'd come to know well. Imagining the vibrations passing through his flesh and deep inside made her damp and warm.

"Can I…" Brett looked at her, but Gabi didn't know what she was asking.

Brett shifted so the hand not petting Shane's knees reached out to cradle Gabi's shoulder. "Do you want to touch Shane, or do you want me to place another stone on you so you can feel what he does?"

"Another stone, if it won't mess up your experiment." She smiled as if asking for that wasn't a big deal. The effort brought her back from the edge of whatever she'd been feeling. Only then did she realize how empathically physical her imaginings had been. She'd become aroused watching Brett and Shane before, but this was the first time she'd imagined what one of them felt as if it was actually happening to her.

Brett placed another stone on his finger, already vibrating in time with the stone behind Shane's balls and the others. This was what she was asking. To feel what Shane felt as he felt it. To feel the vibrations Brett was imagining and share in whatever he had planned for Shane.

"Lay down beside him," Brett instructed softly. "Rest your head on his arm but lie on your back the same way he is."

Brett still had one hand stroking Shane. It had moved slightly higher up Shane's thigh, and Gabi could see Shane strain slightly in reaction even as his body seemed to relax into the touch and vibrations.

Gabi lay back with her head on Shane's arm near his shoulder. Her body was close enough to feel the waves of heat Shane sent out but not to touch in most places. His head tilted slightly toward her. A barely open slit showing wide pupil and thin brown iris acknowledged her, but he was truly in an altered state. To Gabi he looked almost as meditative as aroused when he let himself fall away like that.
Along with her own arousal and empathy, Gabi's fear spiked for a moment. What she was asking tied her more directly into Brett and Shane's lovemaking. It also put Brett more directly in control of both of them at once. Gabi wanted that experience even as she was afraid of it.

She looked up at Brett. His eyes were waiting for her as if he read her desire and her doubts. He nodded and ran his fingertips lightly down her ribs. His first pass swept from her sternum to her belly button. His index finger was attached to the vibrating stone, but in amongst the touch of his other fingers, it seemed natural. He moved his hand slowly across the bottom of her ribs and up her side. He traced her clavicle and then circled her breast.

The vibrations from the smooth flat marble passed through her breast to make her nipple instantly hard. Brett flicked the taut nipple with his thumb, and Gabi's whole body tensed. She could smell her own arousal spike. Brett teased one breast and then the other until Gabi's whole body sang with touch and vibration, with want and being loved.

Then Brett's hand drifted down until he held the vibrating stone just below her clit. It pulsed through every nerve in her body. Her eyes closed. She dialed touch and vibration down to normal human levels to keep from screaming.

Her body felt liquid. A puddle of vibration just on the edge of orgasm. She forced her eyes open enough to see Brett staring at her. His face and chest were pink. His lips parted. He smelled of sweat and musk, his own unique scent, and the aloe and eucalyptus she'd come to expect.

Brett lifted his hand away, leaving the source of vibrations right where he'd pressed it beneath her clit. Gabi didn't want him to pull away. But she couldn't move.

"Hush," Brett said, even though she hadn't made a sound.

Brett moved to sit cross legged between Gabi and Shane, resting her left leg and Shane's right on opposite sides of his torso. He stroked the insides of their thighs in his lap as he drove the vibrations higher and lower. Gabi knew Brett was watching their reactions, playing their bodies for effect but having to adjust both together. It felt right and Gabi gave herself over to him. She closed her eyes and drifted on sensation, using only her Guides' rapid heart rates, beating in time, to keep from zoning.

Brett watched Gabi relax and let him take over. The look in her eyes when they started had shown she was making this choice. Still he wondered how well she understood what she wanted, what they were experimenting with. The power she and Shane gave him, especially with the stones involved, was a bit overwhelming. At the same time, it turned Brett on to take control this way.

He thought the stones to a faster vibration and saw the muscles in Shane's ass spasm involuntarily. Shane was so far gone, Brett knew he'd be fine with anything Brett did.

Gabi was more of a challenge. Brett slowed the vibration gradually. It took all the control he had, and Brett was sure it counted as some sort of mental exercise if not quite meditation on his part. When the muscles around Gabi's entrance began to pulse, Brett couldn't help but watch. He'd never found that part of female anatomy attractive before. Now it was strangely fascinating. If not arousing in its own right, Brett could tell Gabi found the stimulation arousing. He could see the smooth flesh where no hair grew swell and dampen. He heard Gabi panting. Then he shifted the vibrations higher until Gabi's whole body seemed to vibrate in time and she tensed and moaned in orgasm.

It was hot to watch. Whatever parts Gabi had, Brett had grown hard watching her. He wanted to
make her feel this again and again.

For the time being, he slowed the vibrations to a pulse that made Shane clench and unclench. Brett reached for the pile of slightly flattened marbles. He strung them together, mentally commanding the edges to attach to each other and stay that way until he had a somewhat flexible string of something like beads that vibrated in his hand.

"Look, Gabi."

She opened her eyes, and her pupils were huge.

"I'm going to put this inside of Shane. I'm going to attach the top bead over his prostate."

Shane started panting at the description. He hadn't opened his eyes or given any other sign that he knew what was going on, but his cock suddenly glistened with precome.

"You can see how much he likes the idea." Brett smiled as Gabi's eyes drifted over to see the state Shane was in. He wondered if she could smell his increased arousal, hear his heart and breathing speed up. "The question is, should I make something like this to go inside of you, too?"

Gabi's eyes widened, but then her face closed down. Worry lines formed between her eyes. Brett knew he'd misjudged, pushed too far or said something wrong. He was trying to guess how to help her when Gabi surprised him by speaking directly in the midst of it all.

"I thought you found touching inside me gross."

Brett wanted to cry out at that, but he tried not to show it. Probably futile with a Sentinel, but he took a calming breath and leaned forward to kiss her hip.

"No part of you is gross to me. I'd rather see Shane's cock inside you than try that myself." Shane's cock jerked at that, and Brett couldn't help but smile. "But if you want something like this inside you, I'm pretty sure it will turn me on to put it there. At the very least, I love your reactions and the feel of your leg across my lap."

Gabi bit her lower lip. "Promise you won't do anything you don't want to?"

Brett nodded. "Promise."

Gabi closed her eyes and breathed deeply through her nose, not nearly as relaxed as she'd been a moment before, but he'd had to ask her. "I want to try it."

If she'd only said she wanted it, Brett might have questioned further. He could see the tension in her shoulders, arms and neck. But she'd been honest at a time when it was probably hard for her to say what she wanted. He leaned forward and kissed everywhere he could reach on her. Then he kissed the adjacent bits of Shane until both of them were a provocative mixture of relaxed and twitchy.

"I'm going to place yours first, Gabi." She barely nodded in response, but Brett knew her brain was still very much online and processing. It was hard to keep Gabi from thinking a million thoughts a second, and she'd probably already thought through sanitary concerns and the implications of one partner easily experiencing multiple orgasms from the same stimuli. Brett hoped he could make her feel enough to shut down the thinking for a while, but he'd settle for making her feel good and keeping her safe.
When Brett slid his chain of stones inside Gabi she bit down on panic. She wanted to try this. The stone vibrating beneath her clit felt amazing. But even having Shane touch inside still made her nervous. Brett placing Ancient stones inside her seemed insane and brilliant and everything in between.

She was turned on enough that wherever he moved the vibrations felt good. Like everyone else, she'd known about vibrators on Earth, but she'd been unimpressed the one time she'd improvised an experiment. The stones and Brett's finger were slippery with lube. The stones were smooth and almost frictionless, alien in every way. Brett's finger was warm and she could feel the wrinkles of his second knuckle as it pressed into her. Her sense of touch slid up to memorize the feeling. He was important to her, and she wanted to know everything about him.

Then the top stone found a spot that pulled every thought apart. The stones inside seemed to connect to the stone by her clit and whatever flesh and bone stood between them was resonating. Gabi had never wanted to come so badly in her life. Muscles inside that she'd never noticed before pushed into the sensation. Nerves stretching as far as her hands and feet cried out for more. Muscles vibrated in time. Gabi lost track. It could have been seconds or hours. She didn't even know what she was feeling.

Sudden relief like water pounded her from all sides. Muscles relaxed and tensed again. Burst of joy. Not knowing how to open her eyes. Not wanting to move but feeling amazing. Feeling safe and wanted and relaxed.

An arm pressed her flesh, her leg, into other flesh, a leg and hip. Brett. The pressure felt good, but when a hand brushed across skin, she almost kicked out. The arm pressing down held her leg. More feelings of safe and wanted and relaxed passed through her.

But there was more. The Ancient stones that had connected through her pelvis were still buzzing slightly. If Brett wanted, he could make that all happen again. Part of Gabi wanted to tell him no. It might be too much. Part of her wanted it to happen over and over, to see if it could be like that again or what would happen next time. The whole debate seemed buried deep in her brain, a tiny bit of discord compared to her usual thoughts. The rest of her didn't care to move, was content to feel.

Brett wished he was a Sentinel as he watched Gabi come. He'd never watched someone the way he watched her. It was consuming, more real to him than many of his own orgasms in past relationships. He felt her long balance between desperation and pleasure before she came hard. He could see the pulsing where a guy would spurt over and over. Then the relaxing of muscles across her body spoke of post-orgasmic brain chemicals and the sappy emotions that came with them.

He hugged her leg to him. When his hand brushed too lightly on over-sensitized skin, he held back her instinctive kick.

Then her muscles twitched in a different way. She was feeling the vibrations again, realizing that Brett had tethered the stones to that most sensitive spot and left them inside. Her brow wrinkled and then relaxed. A warm rush filled Brett's chest and groin. She was his. Whatever happened, Gabi was along for the ride.

Brett kept a tight hold on Gabi's leg as he traced a muscle up Shane's thigh to his groin. Shane had been hard and leaking throughout Gabi's experience. Brett could have made him come with a touch, but Shane like to wait. Brett wanted to lean down and suck Shane's cock deep into his throat. But there was no way Shane could hold off coming from that. Brett could almost come from thinking about it, and neither of the legs in his lap was even touching his cock.
Brett strung a set of stones together for Shane, keeping the vibrations very low to give all of them a chance. Then he lubed them up and used the top stone to tease around Shane's entrance.

Shane keened softly. The ring of muscles flexed and relaxed. Brett pushed gently and the first stone popped through. Brett's hole practically spasmed. With one stone in and the next waiting at the entrance, Shane's body seemed determined to pull them all in as fast as possible.

Brett let the second stone push in just to pull it out and hear Shane keen again.

Gabi made a noise, more like a whine than a keen. Brett looked to see why and saw her squirming a bit. Where her head rested on Shane's arm she nudged with her cheek, like a cat. Brett wasn't sure if she meant to seek or give Shane comfort.

Brett ran a hand down Gabi's thigh, and she pushed into the touch, raising her hips in a wanton way he wasn't expecting from her.

He pushed the second stone back into Shane. Shane keened a little louder, but Gabi wiggled her hips. She had to be reacting to Shane's arousal. Something in his scent, sounds, or touch was driving her crazy with barely a touch.

Brett increased the vibration of all the stones as he pushed a third one into Shane. Shane grunted. Brett let out a sound of his own as the stone in his naval that he'd almost grown used to seemed to connect straight to his cock. Gabi convulsed in orgasm, and Brett held her leg and stroked her inner thigh as she quivered and then relaxed.

Brett was so close to the edge he considered jacking off. Instead, he reduced the vibrations of the Ancient pseudo-marbles.

He pushed a forth and then a fifth slick marble into Shane and used those still outside to stir around until he tagged Shane's prostate. Shane's hips bucked and Brett lost contact. So he stirred again until Brett's panted moan told him where to stroke for a bit.

When Shane's moans were nearly constant, Brett slicked up his left fingers and eased one and then another in beside his makeshift vibrator. Shane pushed onto Brett's fingers, wiggled and moaned. Brett was sure Shane had no idea what he was doing anymore, and he couldn't wait much longer. Brett managed to attach the top bead so it would vibrate against Shane's prostate. Then he worked with his fingers above and beside the beads as Shane writhed and panted.

Gabi threw her arms around Shane and pressed her face into his shoulder. She clung to him as both their bodies began to shake.

Brett used his right hand to slick his own cock. He knelt forward, shifting and pressing the thighs from his lap together until he could thrust between them. He wiped the remaining slick onto Gabi's hand and guided it to Shane's cock. She came as soon as her fingers wrapped around Shane. Her loose grip combined with what Brett was doing inside sent Shane screaming over the edge. Brett didn't need many thrusts between his lovers' thighs to come himself. The vibrations adjusted to lengthen his orgasm until all of them were wiped out. He shut the stones off and collapsed partially on top of Gabi and Shane.

#

It couldn't have been more than an hour later when a knee nudged Brett and fingers rubbed through his hair. He realized he was sleeping across two different legs and with his face in Shane's belly.

"Sorry," he whispered, sitting up.
"No, sorry. But those things are still in me, and I'm really horny," Gabi said. "Do it again and then take them out."

Again? Brett knew women could have more orgasms in any given time period than a guy. But if he was exhausted, Brett couldn't imagine that Gabi wasn't. And since when did she become a pushy bottom, or whatever he was supposed to call it. Brett fell back on his distrust of words and labels and tried to wake up enough to think.

Gabi was clinging to Shane about the way she had been when they fell asleep. Her hand was lightly stroking Shane's cock, and Shane was hard again.

Looking up to meet Shane's lust dilated eyes, Brett said, "You want to go again, too?"

Shane nodded solemnly and said, "If you want to push in beside the stones, I'd really like you in me."

Brett's cock stirred at that. The idea of pushing in beside the vibrating stones and what that might feel like for him as well—"Okay, seriously hot, but let's save that for when I can think clearly. I don't want to hurt you."

"Then come in my mouth this time. All you have to do is play with the marbles."

Brett thought them on and his cock swelled to the vibrations in his navel and the moans from his lovers.

Gabi looked like she was moments away from orgasm. But she managed to squirm down Shane's body until she could wrap her legs around one of Shane's and wrap a wet hand around his cock.

Shane shivered but stared at Brett and opened his mouth.

Brett crawled around until he could kneel with his cock poised just in front of Shane's mouth. Shane sucked him in without warning, and Brett was suddenly hard and desperate. He pumped up the vibrations and ran his palms over Shane's short damp hair. Shane's arms had been above his head, but he brought them in to play with Brett's nipples. Then one stroked down to fondle and press the stone in Brett's naval. It sent vibrations racing through Brett's body, and he came fast and hard in Shane's mouth.

By the time he eased out, he could see Shane and Gabi were spent and relaxed again. He eased the vibrations down to nothing, and went to thoroughly wash his hands before coming back to clean his lovers and remove the Ancient stones. There was no protest from Gabi when he reached inside her this time, and he kissed her palm when he removed the stone there. Shane was a thoroughly debauched mess who pushed into every touch and moaned obscenely even as he was falling asleep. Brett kissed his lips gently before covering them all with blankets and finally falling asleep.

#

He woke feeling too big for his skin. His muscles tightened as wet warmth engulfed his cock. He bucked up with a gasp, and strong hands pushed his hips back down.

That was John waking him with a blow job.

Rodney couldn't open his eyes. His Sentinel kept one hand firmly holding Rodney's hip as the other traced across the sensitive spot on his side, a nipple, the soft skin by his hip bone that drove Rodney crazy.
With a moan Rodney's eyes flicked open and confirmed it was barely after midnight. There were plenty of nights when they didn't hit the bed until this late. There were mornings when John had woken him with sex. But Rodney couldn't remember being woken this way at this hour.

He wasn't objecting. His body was fully onboard, and endorphins were rapidly flooding his brain. John was sucking slowly now. One hand still traced and teased Rodney's hot spots. It was hard to think.

One part of Rodney's brain couldn't help but wonder why though. Then he heard the moans from another room. Deep moans from a male throat. Someone nearby was loud. Atlantis' walls were practically soundproof. Could someone be at it that hot and heavy in the hallway? No wonder his Sentinel woke up horny. The noises coming through the wall almost sent Rodney over the edge.

But John was taking his time. John liked slow, sleepy sex.

Rodney was still sleep warm and loose. But he started to squirm. Even with John partially holding him still, Rodney's body grew greedy. Especially with those sounds!

As the moans from outside grew louder, Rodney could hear words. A woman's voice he couldn't at first place said, "So good, you are perfect, so strong, so flexible."

The woman's voice was sultry and low. No one could talk that way and be loud enough to hear through the walls of Atlantis.

His brain spun back to dinner. He'd overheard two of his mentally addled scientists laughing about how much their head of science shoveled down to "feed his ego". He'd turned to shout them down only to discover they were sitting across the mess. At the time, he'd blamed bizarre acoustics.

But Rodney knew his room. He knew the city's construction and resonances. When he'd tested for stability, he'd been impressed by the sound proofing as well. Perhaps a Sentinel could hear through the walls, but Rodney wasn't a Sentinel. Nothing he'd read suggested a Guide could become a Sentinel or developed a heightened sense.

His hearing zeroed in on John's heartbeat. Fast, strong. Oh god, the sucking sounds around Rodney's cock. That was hot. Did Sentinels hear every suck, every touch, everyone making out in nearby rooms?

Rodney wanted to ask John. But not now. John's mouth was busy. Busy doing wonderful things.

For a moment Rodney lost himself in the sound and feel of John's mouth on his cock. The slight scratching sounds and almost pain along over sensitized skin as John stroked inner thigh and perineum.

Then Rodney heard the woman panting, "More, more, faster," as her partner grunted with effort. He would have been embarrassed when he recognized the voice as Teyla's and the grunts as Lorne's, but he had no time to think about it.

John sped up and sucked hard. Rodney came hard, and John sucked out every last drop.

Even as his body relaxed into post-orgasmic stupor, a stubborn process in his brain brought forward memories of debriefing. Memories of Brett saying the other room might be an ascension training space. Ng had grown excited and said the screenshots from the machine that zapped McKay said something about accelerated ascension. She said the biofeedback device and what she thought was a sensory deprivation tank might also be aimed at helping people ascend. Elizabeth had spoken worshipfully of her own recent research on ascension. Rodney tried not to listen, not needing to clog
his brain with distorted interpretations and pseudo-religious thinking, but she'd said something about heightened mental and sensory abilities on the path to ascension.

Rodney didn't want to believe a stray zap from an alien machine could alter his DNA or brain processes. Carson had checked him over thoroughly, run half a dozen scans, and found no effect.

Rodney heard Teyla saying, "I love you. You are the best thing in my life. Come here. Let me show you." Then Lorne was moaning again.

John moaned and rubbed against Rodney's calf.

Rodney reached a hand down to John's spiky, sweaty hair. "Come up here, you. What do you want?"

"Anything. Touch me." John's face nuzzled into Rodney's belly.

Rodney ignored the scratchy stubble as he heard John's heart pounding. Small mewling sounds behind John's panting made him sound needy. But what did he really need?

Rodney rubbed around John's ears and hairline and felt his Sentinel shudder. He tugged a little below John's jaw to encourage him to slide up the bed, but John just nuzzled his face into Rodney's navel.

He rubbed John's hair like he'd massage a cat, and John pushed into the touch. Rodney thought about the moans and words of praise that might have gotten his Sentinel wound up in the first place.

"You're amazing, you know that? What you did to me just now? No one could be a better lover."

John pushed up a little in response to the praise, pressing himself tight along the side of Rodney's body. Arms and legs wrapped around Rodney as John's cock rocked tightly against his thigh. Rodney kept stoking hair and neck as his free hand caressed every inch of skin from neck to nipple that he could reach. "I love the way you touch me. I love the way your body feels against me."

John didn't stop nuzzling and rocking, but his head shifted to a listening pose. He wanted to hear the words. It seemed ironic, because Rodney was the last person anyone would turn to for praise. John certainly wasn't the type to talk about feelings. But maybe he needed to hear it.

Rodney rolled sideways and shifted in his lover's tight grip until John's head reached Rodney's chest and Rodney could stroke John's belly and straining erection. John pushed into his hand the same way he'd pushed against his thigh. But he didn't rush, didn't try to get off. The Sentinel's eyes were closed. He made no effort to lick or sniff. His skin moved against Rodney's wherever they touched except for John's head. One ear held still over Rodney's heart. The other ear seemed to be waiting, waiting to hear what Rodney would say next.

"You are better than anything I thought I wanted. It still sometimes seems impossible that I have you. That we have this. That I get to keep you. I don't think the words can say enough, but more than anything in my life, I love you."

The words seemed to bring John to a boil. He was all over Rodney. Rubbing. Hot. Slick with sweat. They clung together hard even as they moved. Rodney's hand was trapped between them, still wrapped around John's cock. At some point in the pressing and squirming, John came in spurts, panting, moaning, and finally collapsing in loose limbs all around Rodney.

After a few minutes, Rodney realized he couldn't let them fall asleep like that. He tried to pull away and John's arms around him tightened. "Let me fetch a washcloth."
When John's grip relaxed, Rodney quickly went to clean himself and bring back a warm washcloth. As he cleaned John's belly, the Sentinel relaxed and let out a long sigh. So Rodney stroked all the sweaty and sticky skin he could easily reach. Then he tossed the cloth toward the bathroom and pulled his lover close.

It was hours later than usual when Gabi woke up. She was sore in muscles she'd barely thought about before, and the room smelled so indecent she wondered if the Ancients had a way to clean mattresses. But Brett was wrapped around Shane like a koala hugging eucalyptus. The curls practically plastered to Brett's head showed how hard he'd worked last night, and it was clear he'd cleaned them up and tucked them in after their midnight reprise as well.

Gabi crept away as quietly as she could and went to the shower in her own room. Back to technology she could control with her own mind, she set the water to hard and hot and tried to pound out some of the aches all over her body. By the time she emerged she was half scalded, starving, and felt like she could float away.

Sex was not supposed to be like that. Or maybe it was. Maybe that was why some people acted obsessed with it. Gabi was honest enough to admit she hadn't experimented extensively before. But somehow, she was sure it only worked that way for her with Shane and Brett.

Brett. Her mind flashed through memories. It was going to take her a while to adjust her thinking to what he seemed more than willing to do with her. He'd said before he could get off on watching her with Shane. She'd known a bit about the dominance and submission games he played with Shane. But what she'd wanted last night, how she'd given him so much power over her body and given herself up to everything they tried. It would have totally freaked her out with anyone else. With Brett and Shane—

"Did you leave us any hot water?" Brett called from the middle room.

"Infinite hot water would be my favorite thing about Atlantis if it wasn't stuffed full of all the things my geek girl heart can love." Gabi finished toweling her hair and turned to find clothes.

"Including us," Shane mumbled. He wasn't uncertain, just barely awake.

"How about I grab us all food before breakfast is put away. I'll be back by the time you guys shower and strip the beds."

"Coffee," Shane said as Gabi finished dressing.

"Yeah, I guessed. Be back soon."

Gabi hurried to the mess wondering if her Guide's would even make it out of bed by the time she returned.

Regardless, she piled a tray high with pancakes, sausage and fruit for three. As she was pouring juice and coffee she heard someone say, "Both Gabi and Miko, you give a woman superpowers and she uses her feminine wiles twice as hard."

Gabi almost spilled the coffee. The voice was different than the one that called her a dominatrix before, and a sideways glance showed two men in science blue gossiping at the table behind the plant with the custom knitted cover.

"The alien had her too, probably with her Guides watching. I bet that super sense of smell makes her
respond to any guy who wants her. Sentinels must be just like dogs in heat."

Gabi thought about telling the men how offensive they were and how stupid, to talk like that with Sentinels around. She could picture herself casually walking by and shaming them loudly enough for everyone remaining in the room to hear. Several parts of her thought that was the right thing to do. If nothing else, she owed it to Kusanagi who didn't have the hearing or the timing to defend herself on this.

Instead, Gabi steadied all the beverages and crept away with her heavy tray. Her walk back to their room was slow. The gossiping men had spoiled her good mood, but she didn't want to bring that back to Shane and Brett. Letting Brett take control during sex didn't make her any less of a protector, whether because she was a Sentinel or because she'd always had to be strong. She wasn't going to worry about other people's opinions or the labels they tried to pin on her. She would take care of her Guides. And sometimes she would let her Guides take care of her.

#

By morning, Philip had fallen asleep and Blair was close to losing his voice. He didn't know what was keeping the Navy SEAL going, but he knew that man's name was Tom. He'd had some experiences with his senses activating during the Gulf War, but he'd learned his own tricks to manage them then, and they'd fallen dormant until he'd been stranded on the island. In the early morning light, Blair could see Tom was well over six feet tall with a larger build than Captain Banks. His hair was buzz cut, black with gray at the temples, and his features showed Hispanic decent. At least one head wound had left a jagged scar across Tom's forehead, but he was still a good looking man. Blair thought he could like him if he'd just untie Jim.

"You know, Sentinels seem drawn to jobs as protectors, even when they don't know about their senses." Blair had covered most of the basic information hours ago and thought he'd work towards a sense of shared purpose and community. "From what we know so far, Guides choose all sorts of careers, many of them helping people, but that can include science, medical, or social science research as well as counseling, teaching, and so on. So far almost every Sentinel we've found is military or law enforcement, or the equivalent in some tribal system. We know of one doctor, who was already working with the US military, and one scientist, who was working her way through college as a security cadet."

"You saying Sentinels are always the good guys?"

"Well, the other side in a war might not think so, and we met one who'd gone crazy and might have become a terrorist. But overall, Sentinels seem to share certain protective instincts."

"And the one who went crazy?"

Blair couldn't suppress his shudder at the memory.

Jim stiffened beside him and said, "She tried to kill him."

"And she stole nerve gas to sell to a drug lord," Blair managed to add.

"You think the senses drove her nuts?" Tom asked, and Blair heard an edge in his voice.

"Maybe. That's part of why I do research and am trying to help train Sentinels to manage their senses."

"You sure you didn't have anything to do with sending us out here?"
Blair threw his head back and let out an annoyed huff. "I would have argued my head off against this if I'd known." He thought about the warning he'd tried to send to Brett, and wondered if he should have dug deeper and argued harder when he first suspected that research from the Sentinel and Guide Project might be making its way to those who would misuse it. But he'd had no proof.

"That, I can imagine. You promise your Sentinel and the Seabee don't mean me any harm?"

"I promise. Man, you gotta believe me. I don't know when they'll come back for us or who it will be, but we've got a lot better chance of working this out together."

"Guess I better show you who shot that gun off yesterday."

#

Tom had woken Philip and let the kid untie Jim before leading them through the forest. None of them had eaten breakfast, but Jim thought that was for the best as his sense of smell told him what was ahead. Working around the unpleasant scent, Jim scanned the area for any sign of other people or possible dangers. Nothing. He knew Blair wouldn't want to be coddled, so he spoke to Philip instead. "You got your dials under control?"

"Yes, sir," Philip answered quickly.

"No need for that, and if you smell something you don't like, remember you can dial it down."

"Subtle, Jim," Blair said. Jim could only shrug. There was a tension in all of them, as if they'd all guessed by this point what lay ahead.

Coming out into a clearing, they saw the third potential Sentinel who'd been left on the island. He sat slumped against a tree, wearing green camo that blended well with the vegetation behind him. His gun lay loosely gripped by a hand in his lap. His mouth hung open. The top of his head had been blown away.

#

Gabi hurried down the hall to the main physics lab. The briefest hint of male arousal and someone shifting in an alcove up ahead had Gabi dialing down hearing and scent. A couple times already she'd passed when McKay and Sheppard were making out there. There were several such nooks around Atlantis, and they seemed to magnetically attract the chief scientist and his Sentinel. Gabi tried not to know too much, but the older pair's insatiability made her smile.

An arm struck out as she passed and pulled her into the nook. Large fingers bruised her arm. It didn't take heightened senses to know that wasn't McKay or Sheppard.

Crew cut. Bare forearms, lightly tanned and hairy. Muscles. Hands pushing her against the wall. A palm pressing on each side by her neck and shoulder. A body her height but broader shifting, about to flatten her.

Her arm and knee moved by instinct.

The voice that had called her a dominatrix whispered, "Bet you've never had a real man run the show."

Her palm impacted his nose. Shoving up. Something snapped.

Her knee hit tender flesh then bone between his legs. The recoil slammed her foot into his ankle.
"Fuck!" He curled forward.

Gabi jumped back. The coppery scent of blood overlapped previous smells of male arousal.

For a moment she was pushed up against a rougher wall, in the dark, by her high school. Her own blood leaked into her mouth. The body pressing her to the wall was her height but so much heavier. His hand had forced hers into his sweaty shorts. Wrapped her fingers around his cock.

She couldn't breathe.

But it wasn't dark here.

The man in front of her had fallen to the ground. Gabi moved across the hall to where she could see and be seen. Tapping her radio she said, "Medical needed, hall by main physics lab." Her voice was so quiet. She backed away farther, needing a door she could run behind if the man came after her.

Someone moved up ahead in the doorway of the physics lab.

The transporter opened behind her, and she pressed herself against the wall as Beckett and a nurse rushed up.

"What's wrong?" Beckett asked, eyes all over her.

Gabi looked at the floor and pointed to the recess in the wall where she could hear the man's heart like thunder. His smell of sweat and adrenaline overpowered the tang of blood in the air.

Carson and the nurse moved on.

McKay was suddenly in the hall shouting, "What happened here?"

Sheppard came out of the transporter just as Shane rounded a corner at the other end of the hall. They jogged past each other as Sheppard went to stand between McKay and what the medical team was doing. Shane reached out to Gabi's shoulder, and she jerked away.

#

Brett stepped out of the transporter in time to see Gabi flinch at Shane's touch. Past them a crowd of scientists was forming behind Sheppard, all staring into a nook with a first aid bag propped to one side. For a moment, Brett sighed in relief. Gabi appeared to be a witness, not the one who needed medical help. Her head was bowed, hair hiding her face, so whatever it was must be bad.

When Brett drew close, he spotted blood on Gabi's hand and grabbed her wrist without thinking. She pulled away to arm's length, practically the other side of the hall. Brett let go and knelt down, trying to catch her eyes from beneath her hair.

Ronon rushed out of the transporter at that moment, and Gabi practically threw herself back to the wall behind her Guides. It might have been anyone else's reaction to a running Ronon, but not Gabi's. Brett shifted instinctively to keep himself between Gabi and Ronon. The large man stopped abruptly and held up his hands.

Then Brett heard loud footsteps from the other side. Sheppard was in front of Gabi in two long strides saying, "Someone needs to tell me what happened here."

Gabi held her hands palm out in front of her. The blood on the right palm was clearly visible, but there was no cut or scrape. "Self defense."
Shane shifted as close as he could on his side without touching Gabi. He placed himself between her and Sheppard the same way Brett had instinctively moved in front of Ronon. Sheppard stepped forward rather than holding his ground.

Gabi didn’t speak. Instead Ronon glared at Sheppard and said only, "Listen."

Sheppard paused, shook his head, and raised an eyebrow at Ronon.

"Step back," Ronon whispered, and Brett guessed both Sentinels had their hearing turned up.

Sheppard stepped back. Then he took another step back and slouched against the wall. After a moment he said, "I need to know what happened."

Even Brett could hear Gabi take a deep breath. In that moment, he wanted to rescue her. He wanted to take her away or tell the Colonel to give her more time. But he remembered Gabi when they first met, fiercely defending her independence and ability to take care of herself. Their relationship might have changed a great deal, but Brett didn't think that part of Gabi had changed.

In a surprisingly strong voice Gabi said, "He grabbed me and said something."

#

John shifted weight forward to the balls of his feet. He wanted to hit something or argue with someone. But Ronon had already as good at told him to back off. Gabi’s heartbeat had raced when John came close and only slowed when he moved away. The fact she managed to answer in a full sentence and fake a reasonable tone of voice surprised the military man. But he needed answers, and he didn't have the skill set for questioning a young woman about what might be a sexual assault. If he could have asked Teyla, or even Lorne to take over, he would have. But the only other option at the moment was Beckett, and he was busy and known to be annoyed with both Gabi and Rodney over the shield incident.

"What did he say?"

Gabi shook her head then finally looked up with fury in every line of her face. "That I needed a real man to run the show."

Suddenly John was facing a pissed off woman rather than a hurt girl. "What did he do?"

"He pulled me by the arm. Forced me against the wall. As he pressed closer, my self-defense training kicked in. I hit him in the nose, kneed him in the groin, and stomped down toward his instep."

"But he didn't actually hurt you."

Gabi glared at him and he stood up from his slouch. "I'm not judging your reaction, but I'm going to need facts for my report. Right now it's his word against yours."

"Ask his buddies." Gabi stared like she didn't really see him. "He described me as a 'brown dominatrix' in the mess the other day."

John rubbed a hand behind his neck. It would not be easy to get Marines to repeat that sort of thing or believe they shouldn't say it.

Ronon surprised him by saying, "I heard him say that. And worse."
John looked at Ronon and then at Gabi, "Do you two go around listening in on purpose?"

Gabi shook her head.

Ronon said, "Can't let your guard down with a potential threat."

Gabi's heart raced at that, and John felt bad for her. He could discipline the Marine involved, but Gabi had stopped the attack before there was much evidence to charge him with sexual assault. A witness to rude remarks made ahead of time could only carry the case so far. "If there are bruises or anything later, get someone in the infirmary to document it. I'll file a report, but probably his busted nose will discourage anything else like this."

"Can I go now?" Gabi asked.

John nodded, and she left with her Guides trailing behind.

The loud voice of his own Guide cut in to John's thoughts before the transporter doors had even closed. "What kind of Marine moron talks about a Sentinel behind her back? And attacking her in my hallway? In my nook? I want him banned from the entire hall. And you better have minions disinfect that area. There's blood all over the walls and floor in there. It's unsanitary!"

John wondered how many of the scientists listening knew that was one of Rodney's favorite make out spots. He'd guess quite a few of them.

Mind already on other things, John was surprised to hear Ronon growl from down the hall behind him. "He won't be a problem again."

The whispering among the scientists rose in pitch, and John didn't have to listen in to be sure Ronon's declaration would be known across Atlantis by dinner. John knew he'd look stronger if he seized control in that moment. But he'd seen too many similar cases where American military justice fell short. He would wait to remind the Satedan later about what forms of justice could and could not be allowed under his command.

#

Back in his office, Rodney buried his face in a fresh cup of coffee. He'd heard the whole thing.

"Bet you've never had a real man run the show." A thump. A snap. A scuffle. By the time he heard the man groan out "Fuck!" Rodney was out of his chair and moving to the hall. If Gabi had needed help, he would have been there. He knew he really would have.

But it was over. Her radio call had been answered almost instantly. He'd done nothing.

Rodney couldn't ignore the evidence of his heightened hearing any longer. He'd been trying to pretend nothing had changed, but this morning—It was more than just the hearing. Something about his thinking was sharper. It would take time and more data to prove if he was actually growing smarter in some way. He'd passed the limit of standardization for any IQ test he knew, but he could run comparisons to his past results. Or he could just get to work being even more brilliant. Solving harder problems. Solving them faster.

If he had to, he could prove the enhanced hearing. He could testify on Gabi's behalf if needed. But to do that, he would have to tell his Sentinel that the safest science mission they could devise might not have been so safe after all.

#
Brett went to the mess for hot water, milk and sugar. Gabi had been shivering by the time they reached their rooms. Still flinching away from touch, the best they could suggest was a hot shower and not tea.

Ronon found Brett and dumped a handful of mini candy bars on the tray. "I'll stay away until one of you tells me otherwise."

"You know it's nothing personal?" Brett said.

"I've seen it with warriors before."

Brett set the tray down. "What?"

Ronon stood still and silent in a way that would have looked belligerent if Brett hadn't known the man. "Caught by old memories."

It was Brett's turn to stand quietly, trying to figure out what Ronon meant. "Flashbacks? You think Gabi reacted partly to a memory triggered by what happened today?"

"She wasn't herself when I came. Her heart and fear scent overreacted to me and Sheppard."

Then Brett remembered Ronon confirming comments Gabi had overheard. "You could have told me what people were saying before."

"Not mine to tell."

"But you keep your senses high a lot, don't you? You don't trust us."

Ronon shrugged. "Sheppard said I should report any threats to him. He also said: 'try not to listen.'" The big man put his hands on his hips and ostentatiously looked around the room, as if daring anyone to tell him when to use his senses.

"Right then. I'll let Gabi know the candy's from you."

Ronon walked off without another word. Brett carried the tray back to his room.

#

Gabi usually loved warm water. After what had happened, she couldn't stand being naked and confined in the shower stall, but she had to get clean. Focusing only on the task at hand, she scrubbed herself under seriously hot water until the chill and her top layer of skin were gone. Then she quickly dried and pulled on the sweats and socks she'd brought with her to the bathroom. After that she went to her own room and pulled on an extra sweatshirt, another pair of socks, and her bathrobe. Then she sat on her bed and tried to pick the tangles out of her hair.

After a few minutes, Shane hovered in the open doorway between their rooms. He watched her and let out a sigh she probably wasn't meant to hear. She dialed her hearing down a notch. "I'm guessing you don't want to be touched yet."

Gabi shook her head and tried to smile. Her face felt stiff. She was sure the smile looked forced, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

"Can I be in the same room? Whichever room you like."

Shane was the least threatening guy Gabi knew. Maybe their spirit animals connecting before they ever met played into that. But she'd bet most people accepted him as non-threatening most of the
time. Maybe shaman vibrations did that to people. Or maybe it was how his eyes never looked fully open, and she'd never seen his muscles really knotted with long-term tension. He didn't slouch around the way Colonel Sheppard did, but somehow Shane looked more sincerely relaxed, even when she could read the worry in the lines beside his eyes as he watched her.

Toweling the ends of her hair dry one more time, Gabi hung the towel back in her bathroom and led Shane across their little suite to Brett's bed. It was set up like a couch with lots of pillows lining the wall. Gabi curled up in a corner at her usual end. Shane turned on some music she'd once said she liked, and then came to sit near her, but not touching. The music excused them from any need to talk. Voices rose and dipped with the song, but they were singing in Zulu or some language Gabi didn't know at all, so they were just another instrument to her.

Brett returned and served them all not tea. Gabi was pretty sure he didn't want the drink himself. It was his way of trying to warm and comfort her when she was being way more defensive and distant than she'd been in a while.

"The candy bars are from Ronon." Brett dumped half a dozen mini-Snickers and Mounds bars in front of her.

"If either of you like Mounds bars, I don't want them."

After they divided up the candy, the silence felt awkward to Gabi, despite the music. "It's not a big deal. I just need a little time," she said.

"I'm patient," Shane said.

At the same instant Brett blurted, "Did you have a flashback?"

Gabi set her cup down on the table beside the couch. Suddenly she was freezing again. "How did you guess that?"

"Ronon recognized the effects, said he'd seen it with warriors before."

Gabi huffed. "Mine was just stupid high school bullying. Nothing compared to what he's seen, I'm sure."

"Will you tell us?" Brett asked.

"Why?" Gabi had never told anyone and didn't see why they'd want to know.

"It might help us avoid triggers," Brett said. "Might take some of the power away from the memory if you tell it."

"I don't want you to see me that way." Gabi pulled her knees closer and saw Shane rubbing his hands together in his lap. She wondered if he was struggling not to touch or wrestling with his own demons.

"Gabi, by the time I first gave you a backrub, I could not see you as anything less than a survivor. I am seriously pissed at every person who ever hurt you, and I can't understand why no one loved you or comforted you for so long. But nothing you say could make me think less of you, and I still really want to understand when you're hurting."

Shane reached out and squeezed Brett's hand. His other hand rested on the side of his thigh nearest to Gabi, and his eyes said he'd reach out to her as soon as she let him.
Gabi took a breath and looked down at her knees. "It was late, after an awards night. I was in a stupid long sleeved dress. My mom hadn't shown up." Gabi felt her pulse rising throughout her body. Her words rushed together, but once she'd started, she just wanted to get it over with. "I didn't even know the guy. Some jock out running and all sweaty. He was roughly the same size and shape as the Marine today, but not as strong. I could have gotten away if I tried, but I just froze. He pushed up against me and forced my hand around his cock. I had never even seen that part of a guy let alone touched it. He just pulled my hand the way he wanted it to go. It was over fast, and I think maybe—I must have seized or zoned or whatever, because I really don't remember him leaving. I was just standing there against a cold rough wall and my hand was covered with his semen."

By the time Gabi finished she was freezing and shivering.

She looked at her right hand, where the semen had been then, where the blood had been today. It was clean. There was no illusory image or feeling of anything else.

Gabi held her hand out to Shane. He wrapped warm fingers around hers. The warmth traveled up her arm, and it helped.

"Did you see the guy again after that?" Brett asked.

"Yeah. He wasn't in my classes. We never talked."

"You never told anyone?"

"I never even thought about telling anyone." Brett's eyes were wet, and Gabi was pretty sure it was for the wrong reasons. "I didn't tell anyone anything—about my mom, the seizures, bullying, what people whispered, what teachers said to me. I wasn't sure if I was bi or non-sexual, but it didn't matter to me. I wanted to learn and get to college. And I did. I got away, and college was much better."

"But still sucked." Brett clenched his jaw like he planned to take on the world, well maybe Earth and Atlantis, on her behalf.

Gabi laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh. It was just so impossible to explain to Brett or anyone. "It was the best part of my life up to that point. The science and math and robots—it was more than I ever expected. So long as I was busy doing stuff I loved, I could ignore any problems with people or my seizures. I thought I was dying, but I thought I was finally happy. It wasn't until I met you that I even knew what I'd been missing. And now Atlantis and Ancient tech and both of you—It's like I keep discovering levels of happiness I didn't think were possible."

Brett stared at her. His eyes were wide. The eyebrows scrunched together like he was worried. But his lips were slightly parted as if he wanted to kiss someone. Gabi couldn't understand him any better than he probably understood her.

Shane squeezed her hand. "Thank you for saying that. The impossible feeling, I get that too. And I knew I was looking for both of you and for Atlantis."

Gabi thought there was more to what Shane said. His face was wiped of any emotion, but his hand was still so warm. All she wanted was to hold on, and the silence didn't seem uncomfortable at all.

#

The next day, Dr. Beckett called Gabi on the radio shortly after lunch. "Report to the infirmary."

It was a measure of how flustered Gabi was that she answered him, "Yes, sir."
When she arrived he waved her to a table with a curtain around it. Ford's bed was at the opposite end of the infirmary, but Gabi could hear him shifting, not asleep. She couldn't help but glance that way and turn up her vibrational sense, making sure he still held one of the crystals her Guides had charged to comfort him.

Beckett followed her gaze and looked displeased. "Change into the gown on the bed."

She froze but managed to say, "Do I get to know why?"

"The Colonel asked for a full report on you and Sergeant Linden."

"Can I refuse? Do I have rights?"

Beckett rubbed his forehead. "Aye, lass. I'm going to have to write a report either way. Let me start an exam, and you can refuse any part you want. Or you may ask for another doctor at any point if that's an issue."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"What?" He looked up with pale blue eyes, and Gabi wondered how he seemed to look up at her when they were basically the same height. It must be the bags beneath his eyes or the heavy eyebrows. "Ach, no, I meant if you wanted a female doctor. I was never mad at you. Miko was hurt. I was upset, I admit, but I would ne'er let anything personal affect the doctor-patient relationship. You have to know that. I'm the chief medical officer and a Sentinel. I will do my best to take care of you, always."

"Okay." Gabi knew she should say something more, but her throat clogged up. Willingly taking off her clothes and letting someone touch her was the best she could offer. She stepped behind the curtain and changed.

When Carson came back she tried not to react, but her heart raced, and she knew Carson could hear it.

"Normally, I would need to palpate areas to check for bruising or injury. But you're a Sentinel. If you'll be honest with me, you can tell me where I might find something."

"Just here," Gabi pulled the sleeve away that covered her left shoulder and part of her arm. There were barely visible bruise marks from three fingers. "It would show more on lighter skin, but if you hover your hand over it, you can feel the warmth."

"Oh, I can do one better. Let me bring an infrared scanner."

He was gone and back before Gabi could move. She knew the look in his eyes as he positioned the ancient scanner around her arm. That was the look all science geeks got when playing with Ancient technology.

Afterward, he showed her a picture on his data pad. They wouldn't get fingerprints, but the size and shape of the fingers were better evidence than Gabi had expected.

Beckett smiled and looked her in the eye. "Anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"Nope, the only other place he touched was by my shoulders and neck." She pointed as she spoke. "You can see there's no mark. It was over in seconds."

"I believe you, and that's all I need for my report."
Gabi relaxed at last. She'd gotten through the whole exam without even being touched.

Then Beckett set down his data pad and said, "Now confidentially, the way you reacted, I think you should talk to me or Heightmeyer about something."

Gabi tensed and scowled. "I was pinned to a wall by a bully in high school. My pesky Guides got the whole story out of me last night. I don't need therapy."

Beckett held his hands up in mock surrender. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with you. But lots of people want to help. I know Miko and Ronon were worried for you, too."

Beckett's hands went to his hips and he squinted at her. Something in Gabi's reaction had given her away. She really didn't know how other people tolerated living around Sentinels. "What else?"

"Some other people were gossiping about me in the mess yesterday, before the attack, and they said stuff about Kusanagi and Ronon, too. And I'm not telling you that as a doctor but as a Sentinel, especially since Dr. Kusanagi's your Guide."

"I see." Beckett brushed hair off his face calmly, but Gabi could hear his heart beat faster and smell his fight or flight response kick in. "Do you listen in on people a lot?"

Gabi shook her head. "Seriously not. I think anyone could have heard the scientists gossiping yesterday morning. This place is worse than high school. But Ronon says it only makes sense to use our senses where people might be hostile, and as Sentinels, I think we should consider his point. Even if you aren't worried for yourself, wouldn't you want to know if someone was plotting against Dr. Kusanagi?"

Carson squinted at her again. He lifted an arm as if he might touch her then let it fall back to his side. "You know, Ronon hasn't been living anyplace safe for quite a while?"

"You know, one in five women faces sexual assault while in college. What do you think the statistic will be after four year in Atlantis?"

Carson opened his mouth then closed it. "I'll think about your perspective as well as Ronon's."

Gabi smiled. It suddenly made a lot more sense why Kusanagi liked the guy, and that reminded her of what she hadn't said early. "Thanks, for that and for what you said at the start. And while I'm glad you're not angry at me personally, I really am sorry Dr. Kusanagi was hurt, and I will learn from it."

When Beckett looked like he'd say something awkward, Gabi preempted him. "Can I get dressed and go now?"

"Of course." He nodded and left through the privacy curtain.

Gabi couldn't make herself work after her chat with Dr. Beckett. She ended up at the very end of Atlantis' east pier. The weather wasn't exactly warm, but the sun felt great on her face. The breeze was salty and alien, which was comforting and exciting. Gabi lay back and let her feet dangle over the edge.

She heard and identified her Guides' footsteps before they made it halfway down the pier. When they sat beside her she asked, "Who ratted me out?"

"Ronon thought we should know you were out here alone." Brett said. "He would have checked on
you himself, but he thinks you'll still react with alarm if he approaches you."

"I'd like to say he's wrong. I could fake it if he wasn't a Sentinel."

"Do you have to 'fake it' around us?" Shane asked.

"Only if you touch me, which you haven't been, so we're cool."

"So what brings you out on the pier?" Brett asked.

"Sea and sun? A visit to Dr. Beckett? He says he's not mad at me, and he did his best to listen and not touch me, so it really wasn't as bad as I expected."

"Bad enough to send you way out here." Brett lay back next to her but kept a careful two inches between them. With the warm sun on her skin, Gabi couldn't even feel his body heat. She settled for his scent and heartbeat, and Shane's too.

"Not really. Just once I'm distracted from work my mind starts spinning on other things."

"Such as?" Shane asked, still sitting cross legged on her other side.

"I hear people talking about me and Kusanagi, and sometimes Ronon, and I can't know how much is about skin color, Sentinel and Guide stuff, or something else. It's especially weird to be targeted and lumped together with Kusanagi largely because we're female. I mean, we're neither of us especially feminine, and I don't think I've ever used any feminine wiles. How does what's under my clothes matter so much to people who are never, ever going to see me naked? How can they react like that?"

"Most guys aren't like that," Brett said. "Mostly the Atlantis contingent isn't so bad, but the American military is male dominated and known for being rather sexist. And homophobic. And maybe racist."

"Sometimes I don't want to be female. Maybe we'll find some Ancient sex change machine and I'll become male."

"Do you want to be male?" Brett pushed up on one elbow to look at her.

"Surprisingly, I hadn't thought about it before, but I'm not in any way attached to being female. It would be better for you, wouldn't matter to Shane, and the rest of being female is just a hassle."

Brett didn't have to be a Sentinel to know Gabi was completely honest and at ease as she talked about a sex change as if it wouldn't matter as much to her as it would to him. Part of him thought that was pretty cool. Sometimes Gabi was way outside the box on open mindedness and living without labeling herself. Brett tried to avoid labels, but the thought of a sex change freaked him out. He was very attached to being male. He could lust after Gabi without challenging his gay identity, but Gabi seemed to color across the lines without even seeing them.

"Have you thought about giving birth, nursing a child, being a mother?" Shane asked. Something in his soft tone made Brett shift to catch Shane's eye. Shane looked at him with love softening his expression, and Brett knew it was for both him and Gabi.

"I never planned to have kids. I thought I had a seizure disorder and sensory problems. A year ago I wasn't sure I'd live this long."

Brett's stomach clenched. He wanted to touch Gabi so badly when she said things like that. He
settled for watching her breathe, lying safe between him and Shane on the open pier with her eyes closed to the sun.

"And now?" Shane pressed the issue.

"Why? Would you want the whole pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing hassle?"

"It would be amazing to bring life into the world, to have that bodily experience."

Brett shivered. Did Shane say that from some shaman vantage point or was he as fluid about gender as Gabi seemed to be? "Fine, if we find an ancient sex change machine, you can both swap," Brett suggested. "Then Shane can have Gabi's babies. I'll help with bedtime stories and endless 'why' questions."

When they both smiled, Brett was no longer surprised.

"If I couldn't swap back, I'd have to think about it. While I'd like to experience sex as a woman, I really enjoy sex as a man." Shane looked over at Brett a bit too seriously. "I wouldn't swap without asking you, and if I were going to have babies, I'd like to have one with you as well, even if you couldn't do the deed directly."

Brett fell back and threw an arm over his eyes. "Do the deed? This is the weirdest 'do we want kids' discussion ever. And how did I end up the old fuddy duddy in the relationship?"

"Well, you are older than both of us," Shane said. Brett could hear the smile as Shane shaped the words.

Gabi added in a matter of fact tone, "I think you two would have really cute kids together."

#

It was evening on their second day with Tom, fifth day on the island, when Jim heard a helicopter. They'd moved back to the camp near where Blair and Jim had originally been dropped off. They figured it was better to have the element of surprise then to make anyone come looking for them. It turned out Navy SEALs and Army Rangers could agree on many aspects of setting up an ambush. Jim had taken the dead Sentinel's gun. He'd also set traps all around the landing area. Now he hid behind a blind on one side of the clearing while Tom and Philip were positioned at a right angle, so they wouldn't have to worry about hitting each other with their limited supply of bullets. Jim had prepped some Chopec-style Darts as well.

The helicopter landed, but no one seemed in a hurry to disembark. The rotors took forever to slow and finally stop. Then Jim heard a familiar voice. "This is Colonel Jack O'Neill, and I'm just hoping one of the people listening is Captain Jim Ellison. I'm counting four of you and two guns, so I'm just gonna say, the SGA and the Air Force had nothing to do with this situation. I think the Navy brass involved were probably bamboozled by a covert group as well. And that better be enough to satisfy you all, because I am tired of talking to thin air."

"Yeah, O'Neill, I hear you. I'm willing to vouch for you and Jackson, and I can ID you as two of the three people in that helicopter. How well can you vouch for your pilot? Because our new friends here have some cause to be paranoid."

"I brought him from the mountain. He's cleared for your Sentinel and Guide project already, and Danny lived with him for months in Antarctica and says he's okay. Besides, I think I know who set this up, and I'm already steering clear of anyone who might be associated. I had a tip from one of Blair's friends in South Africa. So whatcha say we fly you away from this tropical vacation you've
been indulging in and talk someplace a little safer."

"You got someplace safer in mind?" Jim asked.

"How about my mountain?"

Rodney typed with one hand as he shoveled down breakfast with the other. He heard someone comment on the "bitch's lapdog." A quick glance over his shoulder identified the voice as a Marine across the room. Having Sentinel-sharp hearing didn't surprise Rodney anymore. He waved Brett over before he even picked up a tray.

"You, I need translating the file I sent you to be top priority this morning."

"Umm." Brett slouched like he was taking lessons from John. "What file?"

"The one I just sent. It's everything I have on the machine that zapped me yesterday that involves translating Ancient rather than math and schematics."

"Ookay." The kid seemed to be reacting in slow motion. Why was everyone so slow? "I'll have to check what Dr. Ng has me scheduled for today."

"Ng works for me. I'm head of science, and I'm saying this is top priority, rush, get me answers before I have to track you down and numb my mind waiting for you to catch up to what should be a simple instruction even for your limited adolescent social science mind."

When the kid stared at him in silence, Rodney asked, "Understood?"

Brett nodded, and Rodney waved him away already typing a new idea for fixing the personal shields. He almost had a solution when he heard, "You ask me, them Sentinels are fancy tools designed by the Ancients and the Guides are there to guide them around by their dicks, which even the female Sentinels seem to have somehow."

Rodney was out of his seat before he thought about how he could have heard the latest voice. This time it was one of his scientists speaking, an engineer. "I hope no one ever asks you anything if your brain is full of hyperbole like that." Rodney only had to raise his voice a little bit to cut into the conversation from across the room as he stomped and waved his data pad. "You're supposed to be an engineer, capable of logical thought, and you dismiss Sentinels as tools? Admittedly, many hand tools are probably smarter than you." He reached the table with the glaring engineer and leaned forward. "You must realize that if I could hear you demeaning half of the command staff that way, then any Sentinel in the mess or the hallway outside could hear it, too. I can only conclude that you've realized you can't cut it here. Are you hoping to be sent back to Earth for being psychologically unfit before your technical incompetence gets you killed or has you begging for a transfer to some more suitable job in a cattle slaughterhouse or sewage treatment plant back on Earth?" The entire room was silent and Rodney noticed peripherally that Ronon stood, arms crossed, in the main doorway. "Sentinels and Guides, along with a few scientists more competent than you, are the ones keeping you alive. They found the ZedPMs, recharged them, and raised the city on the day we arrived. What were you doing? Cowering in a corner not even capable of finding a city map. What have you done for us since? I'm still waiting for your report on the repairs needed for extreme weather mitigation. The bottom line is this: If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate Sentinels and Guides."

Rodney huffed when the scientist just stared at his tray and refused to meet Rodney's eyes.
Within half an hour, Atlantis was abuzz with varying tales of McKay's rant. All ended with the line, "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate Sentinels and Guides."

When Specialist Dex and Ambassador Emmagan flattened most of the military in their hand to hand combat class that morning, one of the Marines muttered, "They can't really expect us to learn this from a woman."

Lieutenant Cadman stood from where she'd collapsed on the floor after her last round with Teyla. She put her hands on her hips and announced: "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate strong women."

The next time a certain loudmouthed Marine referred to Brett and Shane as "that bitch's lapdogs and pansies to boot," the Marine next to him calmly replied, "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate alternative lifestyles."

The loudmouth shut up. He couldn't help thinking that he'd like to personally appreciate alternative lifestyles. Maybe with the Marine next to him. Maybe he was finally living someplace where he could admit to that part of himself and stop being such a jerk.

By lunchtime, someone had posted a wiki on the Atlantis staff server titled: "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate…" It included a fairly comprehensive list of suggestions and was growing by the hour.

Gabi was happily dissecting the ancient equivalent of a roomba when her aardvark showed up and nuzzled at her knee. "You aren't here about the flashback, are you? I've already got my Guides, Ronon and Beckett trying to baby me over that."

The aardvark gave Gabi a snout swat to the back of the knee and started heading for the door. "Oh, it's follow the leader time? Is someone in trouble?"

Gabi hurried after her aardvark. They walked over a mile to reach the end of the east pier. It would have been quicker to start with a transporter ride, but Gabi's spirit animal couldn't tell her what destination to press.

There was no one else at the end of the pier. Gabi looked around in confusion.

Her aardvark moved to the outer edge and waved her snout down toward the water.

Gabi stared down and then out a bit. Something large was circling, swimming laps the way a person might pace. Gabi knelt with her hands on the edge of the pier and opened her vibrational sense. The flagisallus sound wasn't as annoying as the screeching when they first arrived, but Gabi didn't think the big marine creature was happy.

She patted her aardvark. "Okay, I see there's a problem, but I'm not sure what you want me to do."
The aardvark jerked its head toward the water. When Gabi didn't react the aardvark moved behind her and started to nudge at her back, or really her ass given how she was crouched. Gabi had already learned on the spirit plane that her spirit animal had no modesty with regard to that area.

Gabi steadied herself and said, "You want me to go in the water?"

The aardvark stopped pushing and nuzzled happily against Gabi's wrist. It tickled.

"Now? Just like that?"

Gabi's aardvark nuzzled more enthusiastically. The flagisallus kept circling.

Gabi took off her shoes, socks, radio, and the pouch with her phone. After a moment's hesitation, she took off her uniform pants and jacket. Her tee shirt and under things covered more than her swimsuit would, and she hadn't thought to bring a swimsuit through the gate anyway. Hopefully this would be quick and no one would see.

Before she could steel herself to jump into an alien ocean, Gabi noticed handles attached to a support beam leading down from the pier. Gabi swung herself over and climbed down to the water.

When she looked up, her aardvark was gazing down at her. "You're not joining me for a swim?"

The flagisallus came within fifty feet of the pier and paused in an almost vertical position. Its tail stirred currents as if treading water and the flagi turned to stare at her with an eye as big as Gabi's head.

"Hi there," Gabi said. After talking to her aardvark, it didn't seem strange to talk to the giant beast. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

A sharp squealing vibration forced Gabi to squeeze her eyes shut and tune down her vibrational sense a bit. For the first time it occurred to Gabi how dangerous it would be to zone while in deep water.

The flagisallus pushed forward into the water and swam out in the circular pattern it had been using before.

Gabi looked up at her aardvark, still watching from the pier. "Any suggestions?"

The spirit animal made a pushing gesture with her snout.

"You want me to swim out there?" Gabi was a decent swimmer and could certainly float or tread water for a long time if she needed to, but it worried her a bit when the aardvark motioned for her to get going.

As a matter of trust, Gabi started swimming.

When the flagi surfaced beneath her, Gabi breathed in water and choked a bit. Her eyes teared. She coughed.

By the time Gabi pulled herself together she was lying on the back of a flagisallus. More accurately, she was lying on the upper spine right behind the eyes. The flagi's skin was rough and wrinkled with
a pattern that made it easy to hold onto, more like tiles than scales. The whole creature was vibrating, and Gabi didn't need enhanced senses to feel it.

She clung to the rough gray skin and felt good. Even if the beast was nearly as cold as the ocean, something in the solid flesh or internal vibrations felt soothing and right to Gabi. Then the flagi started swimming, creating a wake as it kept its eyes and Gabi above the waterline.

It occurred to Gabi that she probably should have radioed in before hitching a ride with an alien life form. Looking back at the east pier, Gabi estimated their course as fifteen degrees to the right, or south if the pier were defined as pointing due east. At least she'd be able to tell people which way she went. That might be relevant depending on what the flagisallus wanted from her.

There was no question in Gabi's mind that the flagi had come specifically for Gabi and communicated with Gabi's spirit animal. That raised a million further questions, and she figured she might as well try asking. "How did you communicate with my spirit animal?"

The vibrations beneath her changed. Gabi realized there was a new secondary vibration that matched the unique frequency Brett, Shane, and she produced when bonding. So the flagi could sense that somehow.

"You're not a spirit animal, are you?"

The hum beneath her returned to what it had been before.

Before Gabi could ask another question, her ride started circling a new spot.

"So there's something underwater here that you want me to know about?"

The flagi's vibrations grew stronger for a moment and then settled. It felt like a "yes" to Gabi.

"But you have no way to take me down there, because I'm not a big impressive sea creature like yourself."

Another hum of "yes."

"Do you have an idea for how I'm going to get there?"

The flagi hummed "yes" and then made a second vibration that Gabi thought she should recognize. It didn't feel like a flagi noise or at all like the bonding pattern reproduced before. But Gabi was sure the creature was reproducing a vibration it remembered, an energy signature overlapped with something loud and almost mechanical.

"A Jumper! One of the spaceships the Ancients used. Can they go underwater?"

A happy "yes" hum and the cessation of the Jumper pattern made Gabi hug tight to the flagi. It felt good to communicate this way. Somehow it reminded Gabi of her dreams, of what Shane said was her access to the spirit plane. Without meaning to, Gabi slipped into a landscape where she travelled downward on a vibrating chord. Around her was the vibration of many flagisallus, a Jumper, and something else even larger and much more rattling than a Jumper. If Atlantis was a jumbo jet, the new vibration was like a quadcopter, tiny but noisy for its size. Taking in the more subtle vibrations around her, Gabi felt ocean currents and water pushed away by the Jumper. The noisy new thing was stationary and just below Gabi now. There was something else there. Something unhappy, like the sonics the flagsallus had bombarded them with their first day in Atlantis. But the unhappiness now was small and more like Gabi's bonding vibration than like the base vibration of the flagi.
Gabi didn't know what to make of it, and it left her sad as she opened her eyes. "Can we go back to Atlantis now?"

The flagi headed back.

#

Rodney filled a whiteboard with his latest insights on Ancient physics and collided with someone when he stepped back.

"What?" He windmilled his arms and determined the human obstruction was Brett. "What are you doing in a physics lab? Don't we have a special library or something for people like you to fiddle with words and commune with the incoherence of the Ancient archives?"

"I finished the project you told me was urgent."

"You know how to send a report electronically, don't you? I know you do. I've seen files you sent to Sandburg and Jackson with our weekly transmissions. Why are you in my lab disrupting my genius?"

"The device you triggered, it's meant to force ascension. It rearranges DNA, triggers latent mental powers, accelerates processes I'm not sure we even have words for."

"Yes, yes." Rodney waved a marker at the boy while heading toward another whiteboard that deserved to be erased. "I figured most of that out before I sent you the files. You didn't need to interrupt."

"But it was only a prototype. It didn't work most of the time. If subjects didn't ascend at the peak of their accelerated development, they all died."

Brett was standing rigid with hands clenched at his sides. Kusanagi and a couple of other scientists farther back in the lab had fallen silent, even to the point of not typing. Rodney needed to get everyone back to work. "Didn't you come up with some other research showing Sentinels and Guides don't ascend? In all the information I sent you, was there anything about using the device on Sentinels or Guides?"

"I don't think they tried that."

"So I'll be fine. Either it just won't be a problem, or I'll figure it out and find a solution. I'm getting smarter all the time. By tomorrow, I'm pretty sure I'll understand the physics behind ZedPMs."

Brett's mouth was open to argue when an abrupt call came over the Sentinel and Guide radio channel. "Ronon here. Gabi is riding away from the east pier on a sea monster."

Rodney was back to sputtering, "What?" as Brett raced out the door. Rodney snapped to Kusanagi, "Photo that board," and rushed out to catch the transporter with Brett. While moving he radioed Zelenka, "Are you still in the gate room, Zelenka?"

"Yes, Rodney, and I'm in the middle of something delicate."

"Get to the short range sensors, and see if you can track a large sea creature heading away from the east pier."

"I do not have time to help with your whale watching right now."
"It has Gabi."

There was a rattle and thump. "On it." By the time Rodney followed Brett out onto the east pier, Zelenka was reporting back, "I am tracking object moving East by Southeast, currently two kilometers from city."

When they reached the end of the pier, Shane and Ronon were standing over a pile of Gabi's clothes and belongings.

#

Gabi saw a small crowd waiting on the pier as she returned. She pressed her face into the cool rough flagi skin and wished she didn't have to go back. The flagi started to turn, and Gabi said, "No, I have to face the music."

The flagi seemed to understand. Probably it was hearing her thoughts without words anyway, but she wanted to believe the phrase would amuse an animal that communicated though vibrations much like music. When they were close enough to the pier, the flagi tilted until Gabi's legs touched the water and she could easily push off.

Gabi said "thanks" and made her way to the handholds leading up to the pier.

When she pulled up onto the deck, Shane and Brett rushed forward. Ronon hung back. McKay covered his eyes and half turned his back. "Put some clothes on."

At that point a Jumper landed in the middle of the pier. Sheppard stepped out, and Gabi guessed that he'd been heading out to rescue her if needed. Beckett came rushing down the pier followed by two assistants and a gurney.

"Shoot," Gabi said.

"Are you okay?" Brett asked.

"I'm good." Gabi pulled her wet tee shirt out from her wet body. Knowing he was listening anyway, she asked, "Dr. Beckett, did you by chance bring a towel?"

Gabi ended up explaining, or maybe it was debriefing, back in the infirmary wrapped in a blanket.

"Medically, I can't find anything wrong with her," Beckett said.

"So swimming with the sea monsters," McKay muttered while mostly focused on his data pad, "Can only be blamed on her own recklessness and innate stupidity."

"My spirit animal sent me. And the flagisallus can communicate with the spirit animals and us. This one knew the energy signature specific to Brett, Shane, and me. It can also imitate Jumper vibrations pretty well."

Sheppard perked up at that.

"Did you know the Jumpers can fly underwater?"

Sheppard rolled to the balls of his feet.

"I think the flagi wants us to take one to some other mechanical construction under the water out there. We were about fifteen degrees south from the pier."
"We tracked it," McKay contributed, again without looking up from his work.

"Anyway, whatever is out there, it's making something—maybe a spirit animal, maybe a real animal—pretty unhappy."

"I could fly a Jumper out to check on that," Sheppard volunteered.

"It asked Gabi. Our team can handle it," Ronon said.

"Maybe it only knew their pattern because they charged the ZPMs," Sheppard sounded like he was going to pull rank. "Your team isn't trained for this, and we still don't have the personal shields."

"I solved the shield problem this morning." After a long pause McKay looked up to find all eyes turned to him. "It was simple, just a matter of attuning the base to the potential frequencies of the crystal."

"Dr. McKay," Brett began.

"Not now." McKay scowled.

Sheppard gave a long drawn out, "Whaaat?"

Brett let McKay glare him down, but Sheppard glared back at his Guide without blinking. McKay finally spit out, "So the machine that zapped me is pushing me toward ascension, which means my hearing and thinking have improved."

"Whaaat?" Beckett's way of drawing out the word sounded entirely different from the Colonel's.

"I was going to come to you for DNA tests as soon as I reached a good stopping point."

Brett stepped a little close to Gabi and said, "They didn't try it on Guides, but when Ancients who used the machine failed to ascend in time, they died."

"In the scanner, Rodney, now." Beckett pointed, and McKay set down his data pad and went.

"That mean our team can go?" Ronon asked.

#

John was one pissed off Sentinel. Guides weren't supposed to blindside Sentinels with stuff like that. He was sure only his Guide would pull such a stunt.

Meanwhile, he'd tried to be a good military commander. If Rodney really had solved the personal shield issue, then Gabi and Ronon's team were the logical choice for the mission. Lorne could fly the Jumper (underwater!), and all of them had crystals charged that could be fitted into personal shields.

John nodded to Ronon. "Gather your team and brief Elizabeth. If she agrees, I'll give you a go."

They took off right away, Gabi still wrapped in an infirmary blanket.

John hurried to where Rodney was lying down in the big scanner. "How long did you know?"

"Brett brought me his translations just before Ronon called about a sea monster abduction."

John heard his Guide's heartbeat race as he averted his eyes. "You're a terrible liar, Rodney."
"I'm saying I didn't know." Now Rodney just sounded miserable. "I noticed some anomalies starting last night. For example, I heard every word between Gabi and that Neanderthal Marine, so once this is verified, I can testify on her behalf. For the record, I asked Brett to prioritize the translations on the device first thing this morning."

"Before or after you solved the shield problem?"

"Before!" Rodney flailed his arms. "Well, sort of during. I am quite capable of thinking about multiple topics at once even with my normal level of brilliance."

"Hold still," Becket said as Rodney continued to talk with his arms.

"Why work on the shields rather than fixing what happened to you?"

"You don't understand. I'm on the verge of recreating Ancient physics—the physics behind those shields, ZedPMs, stargates..."

"But Guides don't ascend, and you can't let yourself die."

Rodney looked at John with big blue eyes and a crooked smile. "I'm getting smarter by the minute, and face it, that's saying something. I'll figure it out before it becomes a problem."

John didn't know whether to shout at his impossible Guide or kiss him.

#

Gabi's hair was still wet when she tracked down Zelenka. She shouldn't have been surprised to find Kusanagi beside him, already studying McKay's shield revisions as Zelenka assembled a new prototype. But Gabi hadn't talked to Kusanagi since the first shield test failed. Gabi hesitated in the doorway of the main physics lab, uncertain of her welcome.

Kusanagi looked up and caught her eye. Then the Guide was rushing across the room to Gabi and holding out her hands. Gabi reached forward reflexively and was surprised when Kusanagi caught both hands in her own and squeezed. "I'm sorry you've had such a bad week. Are you okay?"

Gabi blinked. "Um, what? I need to apologize to you."

Kusanagi laughed, a delicate nuanced sound that somehow reminded Gabi of the scientist's leather and lace oxfords. "I helped design the shield and was at least as responsible for the test failing as you. But I haven't seen you since the attack in the hall, and the next thing I hear you're dragged out to sea by a flagisallus. I was worried."

"It wasn't like that, I mean today." Gabi became very aware that she and Kusanagi were standing in a physics lab holding hands. She didn't want to pull away or offend Kusanagi, but her mind spun from the rumors it might generate and the million other things she ought to tell her—It suddenly occurred to Gabi that she thought of Dr. Kusanagi as a friend, but she didn't know how to handle that or anything else in this conversation. She fell back on science. "I should have realized from the awful vibration-noise the flagisallus used as a warning when we first raised the city. They can communicate outside their species using sounds and vibrations. But more than that, they can communicate with spirit animals, identify bonding vibrations, recreate sounds from memory, even machine sounds."

Kusanagi smiled and squeezed Gabi's hands, "We should tell the marine biologists. They'll be so happy to have something to study. But tell me, are you really okay? Was that kind of communication hard to take as a Sentinel when you were out there alone with the flagisallus?"
"No, the opposite. I realized the parts of touch I used to pull away from aren't about touch at all. The flagi wasn't self-conscious or controlling. It didn't add any of that human baggage to its touch, just the flagi's own vibration pattern, its physical presence, and what it wanted to communicate. It felt good and safe."

Kusanagi's face lit up, and Gabi was sure they were both remembering Gabi's previous words about wanting to be safe. In that moment, Gabi was pretty sure Kusanagi considered herself Gabi's friend.

"I'm glad," the older woman said solemnly. "You know, there are rumors that Weir and Sheppard are both pursuing separate campaigns to see the Marine who assaulted you court-martialed and punished. Of course, the opinions expressed on the life in Atlantis wiki say even more. Is there anything else that would help?"

"What life in Atlantis wiki?" Gabi realized she'd been off in her own little world for a couple of days, and she had no idea what had happened to Sergeant Linden nor about any wiki related to that.

Kusanagi released Gabi's hands and led her to a computer across the room. She brought up a page with over two dozen conclusions to the line, "If you want to live in Atlantis…" Gabi was amazed to see how something that started with a defense of Sentinels and Guides had expanded to defend gays, geeks, women, and even exercise fanatics. Kusanagi highlighted two lines:

"If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to keep your paws off Ronon's friends."

"If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate personal boundaries (or fear the scientists who control your climate and water controls)."

"But," Gabi wanted to be amused, but the mean words she'd heard in the mess hall echoed in her head, "what if they go after you?"

Kusanagi showed no reaction. Her heart rate didn't even increase, so Gabi guessed her Sentinel had already passed on Gabi's warning. "Don't you see? This is our new community defining itself. Even if some other idiot tries something, that will only generate further backlash. I hate that someone would lay a hand on you after what I suspect you've been through, but this Atlantis meme, this wiki, is bringing people together—from scientists to military to Sentinels and Guides."

Gabi could only blink at the excitement radiating from her friend.

Once his Guide checked out as healthy, or "better than ever" in Rodney's words, John was left at loose ends. He'd spent a few minutes visiting Ford, but the Lieutenant was delirious again. The crystal Shane and Brett had charged was still the only thing standing between the young officer and screaming agony. Sometimes John wondered if the spirit energy was an addiction in itself, and possibly Sentinels and Guides were also addicts. If so, he suspected it was no more curable than every human's addiction to oxygen.

From the way Beckett watched John as he stood at Ford's bedside, John knew the doctor felt just as helpless and guilty as John did. He left the infirmary to allow Beckett to get back to his work, trying to find solutions for both Ford and Rodney.

As he approached the main physics lab he heard someone, Kusanagi he realized, explaining how the attack on Gabi and the resulting list of "if you want to live in Atlantis" quotes were bringing their community together. It was the most positive thing he'd heard all day.

He smiled at Kusanagi, and at Gabi who turned out to be the person she was speaking to, as he
headed across the lab to Zelenka. "I want to volunteer to test the new personal shield."

Zelenka answered without looking up from something he was soldering under a magnifying lens, "I assure you we have no shortage of volunteers."

"Great, I expect each member of the team heading out to test each shield in front of you before it leaves this lab. But as military commander, I'm going to go first. Let me know when you're ready."

"If you already argue this with McKay and are working around, we might as well forfeit all chocolate reserves now." The scientist finished what looked like a base for a personal shield and shifted another onto the magnifying stand.

"No tricks. My Guide is off in theoretical ascended physics land. I'm assuming as soon as you're done with those shields you'll find some way to secure him this side of ascension."

"Ah," Zelenka glanced up for the first time in their talk, "You know then and ascension argument happened somewhere other than lab. That is good. Please tell me you do not want shield because you expect McKay to explode Atlantis very soon."

"You don't trust his enhanced intelligence?" John realized he hadn't thought to worry about his Guide being endangered by that part of the ascension process.

Zelenka tapped his soldering iron on a sponge at the edge of his workspace. "His modifications to the shield are solid. No complaint. But with great genius comes great responsibility, and often some explosions."

John wondered if he would be a better leader for taking in all the different perspectives in Atlantis, including some like Kusanagi's and Zelenka's, or if it would drive him crazy sooner rather than later.

#

Gabi's mind hummed to the rhythm of the Jumper. She still appreciated her Guides' steady heartbeats behind her. The sounds of their voices and others, small human movements, and soft mechanical rattles surrounded her. But the Jumper had its own distinct vibration, its own energy signature, as unique as that of Atlantis or each Sentinel and Guide bond. She wondered if each Jumper's signature was unique. They soared out of the Jumper Bay into bright afternoon sky and Gabi felt alive as all her senses tuned up a notch.

She sat in the co-pilot seat beside Lorne who was piloting and supposedly giving Gabi her first Jumper lesson. Some part of Gabi's mind processed his words about cloaks and shields, atmosphere and space, straight lines and smooth landings. Part of her was calling up navigation and scanner information that the Jumper was practically panting to provide, despite their destination being preset from Zelenka's records of tracking Gabi and the flagisallus earlier.

The Jumper dived underwater, slowing as it showed Gabi moving sea life and fixed hazards on a newly projected display. Gabi matched her perception of vibration with the higher viscosity of water and the motion of a flagisallus far to the northeast. Gabi's excitement in the moment was layered with the sensations and discoveries of her earlier ride on a flagisallus. Two adventures and McKay's miraculous breakthrough with the personal shields left Gabi more excited than she could remember ever being before.

#

Brett sat in back with Ronon. Teyla had claimed the seat behind Lorne. Brett had nudged Shane to sit behind Gabi when he saw how his lovers stared at the Jumper window before they even took off.
It was hard to remember that a year before, Shane had never even flown in an airplane.

"Ronon," Brett said after the distraction of take off and soaring out over the water, "I have a personal shield for you. The Colonel called all the rest of us to the physics lab to test ours. But Gabi and Radek made an extra with a crystal Shane and I charged. In theory, it should adjust to whichever Sentinel or Guide first activates it, like the original device McKay found. Gabi had lots of crystals we'd charged in case Ford needed them, and she thinks we might be like universal donors the way things worked with Ford."

"Someone else might need it more," Ronon shrugged.

Brett held the shiny green crystal with its simple but correctly tuned base out to Ronon. "We each have one in a tac vest pocket. You should, too. And I'd like to know you'd tested it, unless you don't trust it to work for you. You could hold it first and see if it feels right in your hand."

Ronon met Brett's eyes and nodded solemnly as he managed to wrap his hand completely around Brett's before taking the device. For a while, the big man just held it and stared ahead. Then he blinked and a flash of green shown momentarily.

Knowing he'd be zapped if it worked, Brett reached across to touch Ronon.

A flash, a sting, and Brett's hand jerked back.

Faster than Brett could process, Ronon said "off" as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he reached his empty hand to catch Brett's. "Thanks," Ronon said and rubbed his thumb across Brett's smarting fingers.

Gabi's first view of their destination was disappointing. Compared to the sea, the sky, or Atlantis, the gray underwater structure looked clunky, like something Earth engineers might have built. Then the Jumper screen identified it as a mobile drilling station. Lorne asked about docking procedures, and suddenly spotlights shown outward in a manner that made no sense to Gabi, but it looked kind of cool. For the Ancients, that might have been reason enough.

The Jumper seemed to dock almost automatically. Gabi figured she'd be glad for features like that when it came her turn to pilot. Still, their arrival had been rather anti-climactic.

After performing every scan she could imagine (and it was pretty amazing to have a spaceship read her mind and offer its best approximations of what she wanted) Gabi had no idea why the flagisallus wanted her there. But she remembered the noises the creature had shared, sounds of the station operating noisily and of something else producing unpleasant vibrations just on the edge of audible sound. She wasn't sure if what she'd heard would be the edge of her own human hearing or only that of a flagisallus, but Gabi figured that if she couldn't hear it she should at least register the vibration.

Brett followed Ronon down another identical gray hallway. Ronon kept his blaster ready and peered around each corner silently before moving forward. At first the motion made Brett nervous. Despite the mandatory weapons and hand-to-hand training he'd completed to join the team, he didn't think of himself as a soldier. Standing beside, or rather behind, Ronon made it even harder to see himself that way.

After a dozen or so empty hallways connecting empty rooms, Brett started thinking like an anthropologist. If this station was made by the Ancients, as Gabi insisted from the files she and
Shane were downloading in the control room, why did they make it so gray and dreary. It was the antithesis of Atlantis. The lights and some terminals responded to their DNA and thought commands, but that made Brett wonder why the Ancients didn't just think power into ZPMs rather than drilling for a geothermal alternative. Of course, it was possible the drilling station was older than ZPMs, or maybe they didn't always have Sentinel-Guide pairs who could recharge them. Brett had assumed it was lack of practice or not having enough Ancient DNA that prevented some of their current Sentinels and Guides from managing the ZPM recharge, but as an anthropologist, he knew he should be careful of assumptions.

Ronon stopped suddenly. Brett was proud of himself for not running into him.

Ronon motioned Brett to stay behind the wall at the corner as Ronon circled the new room. Brett knew the procedure but couldn't help peeking after he caught a glimpse of person-sized glass containers. When Ronon allowed Brett in, the first area Brett scanned was over by those containers. They scanned as connected to power but currently inactive. Brett noticed that each featured a green crystal, much like their personal shield crystals, next to what looked like a door handle. Brett snapped some pictures and video then continued around the room. All energy readings seemed to indicate the lab could be powered up at will. Brett was pretty sure it was a lab, and not the sort set up to study minerals or do a geothermal survey. All of the containers were empty at present, but Brett was pretty sure he was looking at stasis pods.

At a nod from Ronon, Brett radioed the rest of the team. "Ronon and I have completed a basic safety survey of what appears to be a lab with vertical glass containers that look like stasis pods, currently empty. I'd like to bring the main console online to check for more information."

Lorne answered, "What else is in the room? Could it be a medical bay?"

"I don't see anything like an operating table, unless it folds out from the walls or something. Just three vertical person-sized clear tanks, some shelves with empty storage containers, a main console and two minor terminals."

Lorne spoke, "Gabi, what's the power situation and do you know anything about the room Brett and Ronon are in?"

Gabi answered, "Power and sensors are up everywhere. I think it would take a little work to start up mining operations again, but otherwise it looks like I can monitor everything from here. I can see life signs readings for all six of us, so I know where Brett and Ronon are. But the rooms and sections aren't labeled on the map except for the Jumper bay and the drill rooms."

"Okay," Lorne replied, "Brett, go ahead and check the console in that lab. Ronon will keep watch there while Gabi and Shane monitor from the control room. Teyla and I are heading back to the Jumper and will want updates from all of you before we check in with Atlantis."

Brett didn't need to be told twice. He powered up the main console and searched for information on the stasis pods and what they were used for. "Oh shoot," he said.

Just then Teyla's voice came over their radios asking, "Does anyone else sense a Wraith?"

Then the lights and the power to Brett's console cut out.

"Gabi, report," Lorne asked.

"We just lost power and sensors in 40% of the station. I didn't see any extra life signs before. I'm trying to—Shields just came up on the edges of the powered down area. We're cut off from the rest
of you, but we have power. Shane and I didn't personally sense any Wraith or anything unusual, but we weren't around them before."

"Uh, Lorne, Major?"

"That you Brett? Report."

"What I was reading just before we lost power—The Ancients were studying a Wraith Queen here, keeping her in stasis between tests. They were worried she might be able to do something to a ZPM, so they were working down here for the alternate power source and to keep her from signaling the other Wraith telepathically, I think. We lost power before I finished reading."

Lorne replied, "I want everyone to activate personal shields now. Teyla and I are almost to the Jumper and will notify Atlantis of our situation. Ronon and Brett, rendezvous at the Jumper. Gabi and Shane, restore power and sensors if you can, but don't take down those shields until we determine if there's a Wraith lose in this section. Your first priority is to keep yourselves safe until we can all regroup."

#

John just happened to be walking by Rodney's lab for the fifth time when Chuck's voice on his radio said, "Colonel, Major Lorne is calling from his Jumper. Shall I patch him through to you?"

"Yes, thanks." John leaned against a hallway wall where he had a clear view of his Guide writing frantically on a whiteboard.

"Colonel?"

"Major, go ahead."

"We have located a mobile drilling station in good condition, but I wanted to advise you that my Guide may have sensed a Wraith, and it appears the Ancients were studying a Wraith Queen here and keeping her in stasis between tests."

"Do you need back up?"

"Not at this time, sir."

"I'll have another team and Jumper prepped. Call if needed or check in one hour from now."

"Yes, sir."

John strode into the lab. "I need another Jumper prepped for underwater, fast."

Rodney ignored him, but Zelenka looked up. "Is Lorne's team in trouble?"

"Not sure yet. They may have had a Wraith Queen in stasis down there."

Zelenka paled dramatically in John's only slightly heightened sight. "Surely you are not—even in stasis—it could not be viable still, no?"

"Not sure yet. Teyla thought she sensed something, so I want a second team on standby. Could you ready a Jumper for us?"

"Certainly." Zelenka hurried out of the lab, evidently seeing to it himself.
Rodney wrote small and fast with his blue marker. There was no sign he'd even heard John’s conversation with Zelenka. It troubled John, but he didn't interrupt.

John tapped his radio, "Sheppard to Markham."

"Markham here, sir."

"Ready a team of six marines for a possible rescue mission on two minutes notice. Be prepared for Wraith or to blow up a drilling station."

"Yes, sir."

Rodney still had his back to John, so John settled both hands on his shoulders.

"Working."

"I see that, but we may have a Wraith Queen on a newly discovered mobile drilling station. I thought I might need my head of science and my Guide."

"Inefficient. Zelenka can handle the science. I'm cracking the fundamental laws behind Ancient physics here."

"Which is awesome," John dragged out the last syllable, hoping to get a rise out of his Guide with the drawl. It didn't work. "So you want me to take Zelenka if we have to face off with a Wraith Queen in an entirely unexplored Ancient station?"

"What? No. You already have Gabi there. You don't need another scientist."

"She might not be in a position to help us."

"The odds are too low, and what I'm working on is too important." There wasn't even a pause in Rodney's writing as he spoke.

"And as my Guide, you don't think you should be there with me?"

"Zelenka prepared personal shields for you and the other Sentinels and Guides. They're on his desk somewhere." That didn't sound like Rodney. Absorbed as he might become in his work, he usually met John halfway. He always cared about John. At least he always had before.

John thought about ascension and what it might take for someone to leave their physical existence behind. Could forced ascension change who a person was and who they cared about?

Shaking his head, John pushed the thought aside. He went to Zelenka's desk and quickly found the shield devices for Markham, Stackhouse, and himself.

#

Brett followed Ronon again, this time by the light of his scanner. They both had their personal shields up, but Brett didn't feel very safe. Then Ronon started running and all Brett could do was run after him.

They reached the Jumper in time to hear the rear hatch lower.

Lorne yelled, "You said the Wraith wasn't out there!"

An eerie, out of sync voice replied, "Arrogant humans. I control her mind." A skeletal figure in black
gloves and a black dress stalked up the Jumper ramp. Her face looked green and scarred, though it might have been a trick of the light. "You will fly me out of here or I will drain her life and her mind."

"No." Lorne drew his gun and started shooting.

The woman, who actually was green with slits in her cheeks and who Brett now thought must be the Wraith Queen, moved faster than Brett could see to slap a hand onto Lorne's chest. She shouted "no!" as the personal shield hit back. Then she pounced on Teyla who sat motionless on the floor with her legs crossed. Encountering the shield again the Wraith growled, "I will make her lower it for me."

In that moment there was a flash of white light. Brett realized he was alone and that Ronon had fired on the Wraith from just outside the Jumper. But the Wraith seemed to vanish as a wave of water crashed through the wall and across both the Jumper and Brett.

When Brett opened his eyes, he was in the hall outside the drilling station's Jumper Bay and the Wraith Queen lay unconscious right next to him. He jumped to his feet without thinking and pulled his gun. He was sopping wet and not sure if the gun would work, but he kept it and his eyes fixed on the Wraith as he tapped his radio.

"Ronon, anyone, I'm in the hall with a possibly unconscious Wraith Queen."

The Wraith's eyes flashed open. Brett felt a voice in his mind. "You can't hurt me. You can't move. Must free me."

He couldn't move. At the same time, he heard an incredibly high pitched scream that echoed in his mind as pain. He stared at the downed Wraith, unable to shift his eyes, and a second shape formed in his vision. It was black or very dark blue, with red eyes, four stick-thin legs, and a tail like a scorpion. It appeared to be leashed to the Wraith's ankle with a glowing cord. It was screaming in pain.

There was a bright flash.

The next thing he knew, Lorne was on top of him, pressing him into the floor with his whole weight. "Are you okay?"

" Seriously? Ouch."

"Wiggle your fingers," Lorne ordered.

Brett wiggled his fingertips. That's when he noticed he no longer held a gun. "Did I miss something?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"The Wraith told me I couldn't move. And her spirit animal was screaming in pain." Brett looked at the Wraith lying motionless on the floor with Ronon's blaster pointing down at her. He couldn't see the screaming insect chained to her leg anymore. "I don't suppose either of you saw a giant black scorpion chained to her leg by a chord of light?"

"Wraith cause hallucinations," Lorne said. "You see it now?"

"No. How can you test whether something was an hallucination?"
Lorne started to move off him.

Ronon said, "We should tie him like Teyla."

"We have no proof they're more susceptible than us." Lorne answered with his hands still pinning Brett's arms.

"Did she make me do something I don't remember?"

Ronon tilted his head and stared at Lorne.

A lump the size of a walnut seemed to form in Brett's throat. "Go ahead and tie me up, but tell me what happened to me and to Teyla."

Lorne tied Brett's hands behind his back using something like a zip tie that he pulled from his tac vest. Brett wondered if those were standard military issue for this purpose. Then Lorne clicked his radio. "Gabi, report."

With Lorne still crouched beside him, Brett could hear the reply. "Good to hear from you. A warning went off saying a wall was breached in the Jumper Bay. I was gradually rerouting power to the areas that were out, so the system slapped up a priority shield and the water should drain. Are you all okay?"

"We're fine. You and Shane are both okay? Nothing unusual?"

"Uh, no?" Brett could picture Gabi's forehead wrinkling in confusion and then worry, just from the tone of her voice.

"Shane, report."

"Nothing unusual. What should we be looking for?"

Brett said quickly, "Ask him if he's seen something like a scorpion, but with four legs and no claws, possibly a spirit animal."

Lorne gave him a look and then said, "Brett wants to know if you've seen something like a scorpion, but with four legs and no claws, possibly a spirit animal."

"Um, no," Shane answered. "But if it's a spirit animal I might be able to find it on a spirit walk."

At that point Teyla called out, and Brett saw that she was wet and bedraggled, sitting farther down the hall with her hands tied behind her back. "I also saw what appeared to be an iratus bug tied to the Wraith Queen's ankle by a beam of light. It was not like other Wraith inspired hallucinations, which I am generally gifted at seeing through. It was not unlike a spirit animal."

Lorne looked at her seriously and then repeated the information to Gabi and Shane.

"Did Teyla and Brett lose their radios?" Gabi asked. Her voice was steady, but the worry she couldn't hide made Brett ache to comfort her.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Lorne said, "but the Wraith Queen seems to have taken over each of their minds briefly. For the moment she's out cold, and everyone seems to be fine, but I've tied Teyla and Brett's hands behind their backs just to be safe."

"Tell her you had my permission," Brett said, but Lorne ignored him. Brett hoped his Sentinel heard anyway.
"We're going to try moving the Wraith Queen to the lab with the stasis chambers," Lorne said.
"Keep the shields between us and you up for now. Shane, you can try your spirit walk if you think it's safe. Gabi, keep watch and report anything suspicious to me."

Gabi monitored the five life signs, her teammates and the Wraith Queen, as they made their way back to the lab Brett and Ronon had found. Shane positioned himself cross legged on the floor and closed his eyes to meditate. Gabi's eyes flicked between him and the sensor readouts until a scary black creature appeared practically in Shane's lap.

She hit her radio, "The iratus bug has appeared with Shane. Do those things sting?"

"Real ones suck life force like the Wraith." Gabi heard Teyla's remark in the distance before Lorne repeated it.

The bug was straining toward Shane. As Brett had said, it didn't have huge pinchers like a scorpion, but there were two fanglike protrusions beside its head. Gabi also saw the leash, like a glowing cord wrapped around the bug's body between its two sets of legs. The other end of the cord trailed off into nothing as far as Gabi could see, but still it held the creature back from Shane.

Shane reached a hand forward as if to pet or hold it, but the glowing chord pulled the bug out of reach.

That was when Gabi noticed the noise, or maybe it wasn't entirely audible, but it was the scream she'd heard when the flagisallus brought her out the first time. The iratus bug was screaming.

There was another vibration underlying the scream. Gabi tuned it in even as it made the screeching noise almost unbearable. To keep from zoning, Gabi rubbed her hand on the edge of the console and breathed in her Guide's scent, like grass and cocoa butter. The comforting scent helped her deal with the pain she was hearing. Beneath it all she felt the vibrations of a bond gone wrong. It wasn't like what she felt from Ronon who was unbonded, or even what she felt when Brett briefly died and their spirit animals had to rescue him. This was discordant, two parts out of phase but sounding together over and over.

The vibrations cut off suddenly. The bug disappeared. Shane's eyes popped open as he hit his radio. "What happened?"

"We put the Wraith in stasis," Lorne replied.

Back in the Jumper, Gabi waved Teyla to the copilot seat. Ronon and Brett were seated across from each other on the bench seats in the back. Gabi squished in next to Brett. It was only when he didn't reach out to touch her that she remembered the events of the last couple days on Atlantis.

Gabi put her arm around Brett. Shane sat down on Brett's other side and took his hand. "I'm over the flashback and not wanting to be touched thing. I realized when I was out with the flagi that some touch, like both of yours, I could always trust. The flashback was just a flashback, and I needed a little time for my mind to reset. We rushed into this mission, and I didn't have time to tell you."

Gabi squished in closer to Brett so their sides were pressed together. His clothes were still a little damp from the flooding earlier, but the Jumper was dry inside if perhaps a little gritty from sea water. They were lucky the Jumper hadn't been damaged by the sudden deluge, and it seemed to be immune to Ronon's blaster, unlike the hull of the drilling platform.
Ronon scanned the three of them and started to stand.

"You don't have to leave on our account," Brett said. "Or are you upset about something I did that I can't remember?"

Ronon grunted and sat back down. "Wraith Queen tried to make you shoot me. Didn't work."

Lorne called out from the front, "Then she figured out he was a runner and thought you were his mate. That seems to be how they talk about Sentinels and Guides. But she couldn't get Brett to shoot me either, which confused her. While she was trying to figure it out, Ronon shot her unconscious, and I tackled Brett. No hard feelings?"

"You explain the bruises to Beckett."

Gabi had noticed the marks on Brett's wrists from being tied, but while she'd been focused on downloading data and checking the Jumper, she'd missed that her Guide was hurt. Now she ghosted both hands everywhere she could reach, checking for the warmth of bruises forming.

"You'd know if I was really hurt, but feel free to pet anyway," Brett whispered as he leaned into her touch.

Gabi heard Lorne swallow a laugh. But Ronon watched intently as if he needed to know Brett was okay by Sentinel senses as well.

"Did you want to check him yourself?" Gabi asked Ronon.

Ronon shook his head.

"You don't have to keep your distance from him or me," Gabi said.

Ronon nodded, but he didn't move.

Brett reached his foot across the aisle to give Ronon's boot a friendly kick.

#

"Rodney," John didn't waste time trying to get his Guide's attention. He grabbed his shoulders and spun the man around to face him.

"Are you back already?" Rodney looked over his shoulder at his whiteboard.

"Rescue wasn't needed. You're supposed to be in Weir's office now for the debrief."

"Someone will send me a report with the important bits later. I know you can't comprehend what I'm working on, but try to understand, my time like this is much too valuable to waste on meetings."

Rodney was already turning back to his work. John left.

#

Brett was feeling better by the time they met with Sheppard and Weir. He'd taken time to shower and change clothes. Gabi brought a tray full of muffins and fruit for everyone to share at the meeting. Gabi and Shane still sat on each side of him, and while he didn't need it, he appreciated their concern.

After Lorne gave a general run down of events, Sheppard said, "So the main issue is we have a
Wraith Queen in stasis underwater, pretty much at our backdoor."

Gabi was launching some sort of graph on her computer, when Shane cut in, "I think we have a bigger problem to deal with."

All eyes turned to him, and Brett watched the way his lover calmed himself and sat straighter under the scrutiny. "The being chained to the Wraith Queen is in pain. Teyla called it an iratus bug. I plan to research the life cycle of the physical animal. This one was partially transparent in my representation of the spirit plane. I will need to research what that means. Perhaps Teyla could meditate with me to see if her spirit animal fully manifests in my conception of the spirit plane."

Teyla nodded, "Of course."

"For now, I can tell you that something very like a spirit animal is in pain. I believe the flagisallus and Gabi's aardvark sought Gabi's help for this reason. The iratus bug showed me images that I believe were a plea for help. Our spirit animals come to our aid when we need them. Perhaps for this they need our help. I for one feel obligated to do whatever I can in response."

Weir looked like she'd bit into something sour. Sheppard and Lorne exchanged a look with no readable facial expressions.

Teyla asked, "What did the iratus bug show you?"

Shane turned his head and gave her his full attention. "Something like a cocoon, but the size of a human or a Wraith. Then a flying insect. There was nothing for scale, but I don't think it could fly at human size. I don't know if the Wraith Queen was previously in the stasis chamber or in some other sort of cocoon, but I think the spirit animal expected wings and freedom afterward. It's chained to her somehow, even on the spirit plane. I didn't know that was possible, and it feels incredibly wrong. I think the bug was in enormous pain the whole time until the Wraith Queen was put in stasis."

"So when we put the Wraith in stasis, the iratus bug disappeared from the spirit plane?" Lorne asked.

"Yes," Shane answered. "At least from the part of the spirit plane that I could see or hear. But I don't know that the being is not in pain even now, someplace we can't see or hear it."

Brett reached out to squeeze Shane's knee under the table.

Gabi stomach tightened with guilt. What if her aardvark were the one tied and in pain? She was the one who'd been called in to fix this. "What happens to spirit animals when people die?"

Shane turned to face her. "Sometimes a spirit animal seems to pass almost directly from one Sentinel or Guide or shaman to another, often an apprentice or tribe member. Some say the same spirit may appear as a different animal to suit the needs of a new bondmate or possibly a new situation in the spirit world or ours. But I have never seen a spirit animal chained or prevented from visiting other people or places at will. I would not have expected one to disappear if its bondmate was placed in stasis."

"We have stasis chambers here," Gabi said. "We could test that."

"Should I assume that the three of you," Weir looked at Gabi and her Guides, "will look into the problem of the iratus bug and report back to your team leader, the head of science, and me within the next day or two?"
Gabi nodded, happy to take responsibility for the research but uncomfortable leading what might be a rescue mission.

Weir turned to the Colonel and waited.

Sheppard turned to Lorne, "Major, meet me tomorrow at 0900 to discuss security issues concerning the Wraith Queen."

"Yes, sir."

Sheppard shifted his gaze to Teyla and Ronon in turn. "If either of you would like to join us, I'd appreciate any tactical insights you have."

Ronon grunted.

"I'd be happy to," Teyla smiled and lifted her chin.

#

"So the main issue is," Jim paused to assess the tired faces around the table, from the island and the rest of SG-1, "we probably have a spin off group from the NID trying to locate and control as many Sentinels and Guides as possible, and they've infiltrated parts of the Navy and possibly the IOA and some foreign governments." Jim glared at Jack across the conference table.

Jack shrugged, nodded, and grabbed a donut from the middle of the table.

"What we just saw," Blair said, "could be playing out in remote locations across the planet." Instead of glaring at anyone else, Blair was strangling a pencil. Jim could practically hear his Guide blaming himself for the whole fiasco. He glared at Jack some more.

Teal'c broke the silence, "Indeed."

"The intel from your friend in South Africa said they were planning to grab you in particular," Jack pointed his donut at Blair. "Whatever they had planned went wrong on so many levels, I doubt they'll rush into something similar elsewhere."

"Doubt?" Blair's voice squeaked. "I should call Lerato. It's a reasonable hour there. She might know more, and I should at least let her know I'm all right." Blair was up and out of his chair. He turned his back on them all and dialed.

"What else have they tried?" Jim asked.

"We're tracing their contacts in the Navy," Jack said, "But there's not much we can do internationally."

Daniel smiled tiredly and rested a hand on Jack's forearm. "I have friends checking up on the British and Chinese representatives to the IOA, to find out if they've been approached—"

"Daniel!" Blair was hovering by Daniel's shoulder holding out his phone. When Daniel immediately took the phone to his ear, Jim flushed with jealousy for a moment. He knew Daniel and Blair worked closely now and had been friends for a long time, but Blair looked upset. Jim dialed up hearing to catch a standard number disconnected message.

He raised an eyebrow but waited for Daniel to respond. "You don't think she just switched phone service."
"Without telling me? I've checked, no messages anywhere."

"But even if she was in trouble or someone had smashed her phone, you'd get an out of service message, not this." Daniel nodded as he switched off the phone.

"Then she did it on purpose, to warn us. Maybe they'd taken her phone."

Jim turned to Jack, "How did she warn you Blair was in danger?"

"She called my office, half an hour before we located you and left to get you."

Samantha Carter stood up, "I'll see what records I can find on that call."

"Meanwhile, I think you'd be safer, far far away from here," Jack said.

"Like on another planet?" Philip asked. He then immediately ducked his head and said, "Sorry, sir."

"What have you been telling them?" Jack growled at Jim.

Blair volunteered, "He saw the stargate in a dream. I took notes. He described the chevrons and everything. In his dream, the wolf and jaguar left with him from a river in Sacramento and ended up on another planet. Did I mention, his spirit animal appears to be from Pegasus?"

Jack picked up his phone. "Chuck, those clearance papers you were stacking up for the two new Sentinels, add in everything Ellison and Sandburg are cleared for."

Jack looked over at their other new Sentinel. Navy Lieutenant Tomas Diaz was looking around nervously. "You want to add anything?"

"No, sir. I do not wish to discuss my stupid dreams about puddles in stone circles, wolves, jaguars or alien lobsters at all."

Jack pulled the plate of remaining donuts to right in front of his chair. "Blair, Daniel, I'm trusting one of you will explain this to me when we're through here. Start talking, sailor."

Tom sat up ramrod straight, and Jim felt sympathy pains for a man being ordered to talk about spirit plane stuff. "On the island, before meeting anyone here, I had what I thought was a dream or hallucination about animals storming a castle and then escaping through a vertical puddle framed by a stone circle, sir."

"Can you remember which animals," Daniel asked.

"A wolf, a large black cat that might be a jaguar, a blue alien lobster thing, a glowing jellyfish—so maybe also alien—and two bears, one brown and one black, go into a castle. Another alien lobster thing, a raccoon, a lion, and a fox come with them out of the castle. The wolf, jaguar, and lobster things go through the vertical puddle. The raccoon, lion, fox and black bear stay to guard the castle. The brown bear and jellyfish go off to guard something else." By the time Tomas finished he was staring intently at the wall behind Daniel's head, and Jim could tell he'd starting to shake or shiver.

"You're doing great with the details." Blair used his Guide voice, and Jim quashed his jealousy because it was enough to stop Tom's trembling instantly. "I need you to give me as much detail as you can about the castle. You're a Sentinel, so you should be able to zoom in and notice details if you need to. It's okay to ground yourself on my heartbeat or reach across the table for my hand if trying to remember what you saw pushes you toward a zone."
Tom swallowed and reached out. Blair met him halfway, and they clasped hands before Tom even closed his eyes. "Three stories, all in whites and grays, balconies at the front of each room a large central balcony extends forward from the second story in the center and a driveway loops under it." Daniel had set a small recorder on the table and was sketching in his notebook.

Blair asked, "What makes it look like a palace to you?"

"Domes on both ends with vertical ridges, probably eight if they go all around, and a circular window between each set of ridges. Also, there's a coat of arms or something above the central balcony."

"Tell me about the coat of arms," Blair said. When stress lines formed by Tom's eyes Blair stroked his thumb across the back of Tom's hand and said, "Concentrate on touch and sight as you focus in on the crest."

"It's a shield, blue, between a lion and an elephant, each sideways, facing in toward the shield. There's plants or feathers at the top and a word at the bottom."

Daniel sketched frantically. Jack studied a donut. Philip stared at Tom. Blair rubbed Tom's hand with his thumb. Jim noticed the moment Tom's muscles stopped twitching and his heart slowed down, "He's zoning."

"Come back to me, Tom." Blair still used the Guide voice. It would definitely make Jim come back. He wanted to wrap himself around his Guide but clung to his chair instead. "Tomas Diaz, follow my voice back. You've done your job as a Sentinel and a Navy SEAL, now report back."


The look on Daniel's face as he jotted it down was classic. The genius linguist was emphatically stumped for long seconds before he pulled out his cell phone, typed, and exclaimed, "The motto on the coat of arms for Swaziland, wouldn't you know." Then he turned to Jack and said, "I assume we're following up on this?"

"That's the country where McKay deposed the king, right? You sure we have to go there?"

Daniel stared over his glasses.

Jack picked up the phone again. "Chuck, how soon is the Daedalus due back?"

Chuck appeared in the room while Jack was still holding the phone. "The Daedalus can be here in 24 hours. Here's a copy of the message you asked for." He handed Jack a laptop with a large playback arrow in a circle on the screen. "And here are the confidentiality papers for the new recruits." He set a stack of papers, each two inches tall, in front of Tom and Philip. Then with a final flourish Chuck placed a pen atop each stack of papers and left.

Jack pushed play on his laptop and they heard, "Tell Jack or Daniel someone is planning to grab Blair after his work for the Navy. Nothing else." The caller hung up.

"That's Lerato all right." Blair pushed back the bits of hair that had escaped his ponytail. "'Nothing else' is what we agreed to say if the other person shouldn't speak or try to call back, so she probably knew she was in some danger. She'd been hinting at forces trying to collect and control Sentinels and Guides but was too paranoid to name any suspects."

"Visions and mysterious phone calls that say nothing," Jack grumbled. "I'm sure we can get a rescue
mission and transport arranged based on that." Jack stood from the table. "Tomorrow, Daniel will tell us where that building is, and who knows what the rest of you will dream up. Now, dismissed."

#

Blair pressed Jim against the wall as soon as they shut and locked the door for their assigned room. "You didn't like it when Tomas held my hand." He felt his Sentinel tense.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't say anything on the island either when I helped Tom or Philip. Was it hard for you?" Blair thrust his hips against Jim.

His Sentinel groaned and stiffened in response. "Can't help it."

"I can see that." Blair took a conspicuous look down their bodies but kept his voice level. "I wanted to tell you—" he let his Sentinel worry a moment, "I appreciate it." Then he was sliding down Jim's body, arms and hands trailing across nipples. Blair's body from his groin to his mouth slid over Jim's filling cock. Blair nuzzled through the cloth covering.

"Please. Can't wait." Blair looked up while keeping his mouth busy. His Sentinel was vibrating, hands clasping at air, eyes mostly closed. He looked wrecked already.

Blair unfastened Jim's pants and pulled clothes down only far enough to reveal Jim's red straining cock pointing straight at Blair's mouth. "Oh man." Blair salivated at the sight. He slid a hand up to cradle Jim's balls as his mouth enveloped him whole.

Jim practically pushed off the wall, but Blair used his free hand and all the weight he could to press back.

"Yours—anything—for—you," Jim panted. Blair's cock surged to full hardness and pressed uncomfortably in his pants. But the weight in his mouth was more urgent, leaking with Jim's need. So hot. Blair sucked deep and hard wanting to pull as much as he could into him. In an instant Jim was coming. Spurting almost faster than Blair could swallow. Shaking apart under Blair's mouth and hands. It was all Blair could do to slow the big guy as he slid down the wall and ended up kneeling, knees still trapped in his shoved down pants.

He collapsed with his arms around Blair and pulled the smaller man in tight. Blair's fully clothed body pressed against the part of Jim that was spent and naked. Blair whined far back in his throat, and clever Sentinel fingers instantly brushed across Blair's ass and cock, making his skin burn through the cloth. Jim's fingers opening button and zip one handed were almost too much for the Guide. He pushed forward even though it made his Sentinel's job more difficult. Jim managed to push the pants and briefs down anyway, then his fingers stroked and explored the hard shaft and along Blair's sweaty crack until Blair was seconds from coming. His Sentinel must have known because he slowed his motions, gentling Blair back from the edge, kissing his jaw and neck.

"Don't make me wait," Blair begged, "Please."

Jim licked his way into Blair's mouth, wet sloppy kisses. Then the big man licked his hand and wrapped it back around Blair's needy cock. Blair thrust rapidly, losing himself in the slick hold and hot mouth sucking on his tongue. Without warning he was coming, screaming into his Sentinel's mouth as his Sentinel devoured his tongue.

They slumped together on the floor, both exhausted, filthy, and too tired to move. Finally, Jim all but carried Blair into the shower. Blair leaned back against a broad smooth chest as Jim's fingers
carefully washed his hair, then his chest hair, then down the path to his groin. Nothing could get Blair hard again until he slept some. But every nerve sang at the attention, as if he was the Sentinel. When Jim's hands slid back up to rinse and condition Blair's hair, the shaman entered a trance-like state. He saw his Sentinel carrying his limp body, and for a moment he was afraid, but trust overwhelmed him and he let his Sentinel's body support him, both in the shower and in his vision.

Brett had buried himself in the Ancient database for most of the night and come back to the anthropology library after only a few hours sleep. He had found a few references to Wraith being forced to connect to another dimension for energy. There were parts that might refer to spirit animals, but as with his research into Sentinels and Guides, most of the key words had been removed. He had only the placeholders showing when each term was deleted to suggest which references connected to the same word.

Then he found a reference to training what he called "deletion G" because he thought it represented a blanket term for all Guides or possibly all shamans. The entry described a machine that trained each "deletion G" in their specialty, and one of the training program for what Brett called "deletion G2" involved showing the facial expressions of a "deletion G2" while projecting "emotions." It sounded exactly like the program Brett had tried out in the room that was not a nursery. Not only was Brett still aching to learn more about that machine and the room they'd explored on their first team mission, but he thought it might tell them something about the Wraith Queen's connection to the iratus bug, given the overlapping terms that had been deleted in each case.

Brett was out of his seat and heading for the door when he realized he couldn't just run back to explore the machine on his own. He hit the Sentinel-Guide band on his radio as he rushed to the transporter. "This is Brett. I think the machine I tried in the room that turned out not to be a nursery might have answers I need for my report on the iratus bug spirit animal and may be important to decoding other parts of the Ancient database. I need at least one more Guide to try the machine, we'd talked before about having someone medical set up a brain scanner, and since that area is technically off limits I'm guessing I need a military escort. Anyone free to help with this?"

Lorne replied, "Should we meet in my office first?"

"Meeting afterward would make more sense. I just told you everything I know, and five minutes with the machine would tell me a lot more."

"Teyla and I will meet you in front of the armory in ten minutes. Carson, are you hearing this? Do you want to send someone to set up a brain scan?"

"Aye, I'll come myself," Beckett answered, "although I'd like to know why this requires a stop by the armory."

"Standard procedure, although a scientist would probably be a better safety precaution," Lorne answered in a calm, almost bored, tone.

"Shane and I will take that as an invitation," Gabi cut in, "We were done testing the stasis pods anyway. Not a problem for our spirit animals."

By the time they met in front of the armory, Kusanagi and Ronon had joined in, giving them a total of eight participants for what Brett intended as a quick test. He whispered to Shane, "I hope this doesn't turn out to be a big waste of time."

"I just want a turn at your video game," Shane replied.
Brett tried to ignore the amused looks on all the Sentinel's faces.

After many delays due to military procedure, Gabi setting up her vibrational energy sensors, and Beckett setting up and testing a portable brain scanner that looked like a crown connected to a tripod, Shane cheerfully volunteered to be the first test subject. He sat in the chair and placed a hand near the joystick device for all the world as if he was going to play a race car game in a video arcade. Beckett set the brain monitor on his head, and Brett thought of an arcade birthday party when he was eight that included a birthday crown.

Then Shane pushed the start button and the screen showed the inkentshane, or African wild dog, that was Shane's spirit animal.

"I don't think the Ancient's pre-programmed that," Gabi said, staring at her data pad.

Brett took a picture of the screen. Ronon glanced over from the door. Lorne looked to Beckett.

Beckett said, "I read prefrontal cortex activity, nothing unusual."

"The machine has a signal almost identical to the device Carson is using," Gabi announced. "Probably it's scanning Shane as well."

"So I can try the controls?" Shane asked.

"Go ahead," Lorne said.

Shane moved the joystick and a screen of Ancient text appeared. "Um, I can't read most of this," Shane said.

Brett leaned over his shoulder. "A couple of those words were on the edges of the previous screen. This term," he pointed, "refers to the dimension we access to power the ZPM and personal shields. It might be associated with what we call the spirit plane. No clue what the numbers mean, but we can take pictures of whatever screens you get and sort it out later."

"Right," Shane sounded a little disappointed, "let's try something else."

He pushed a button and an aardvark appeared.

Gabi gasped, "That's mine."

Brett knew she was looking at the scars, including the long one down the shoulder from bringing Brett back to life. Not knowing what else to say he asked, "Any change in readings from the machine?"

Both Gabi and Beckett answered, "No".

Brett took a picture. When Shane used his joystick to bring up the corresponding page of text, Brett photographed that as well.

"I'm going to try a different button," Shane said. When he did, the screen changed to a pattern of dots connected by solid or dotted lines. Most of the dots were white, but the solid lines connected a triangle of dots in the center with one white, one red, and one bluish-green. Shane used the joystick to point a sort of spotlight on the red dot. A small picture of Gabi's aardvark with a couple of words in Ancient appeared at the edge of the screen where the spotlight effect originated. Shane moved to the bluish-green dot and his dog replaced Gabi's aardvark. Brett wasn't surprised when the white dot in the triangle connected to a picture of his cheetah.
He kept snapping pictures as Shane worked his way through every dot on the screen. All the other spirit animals on Atlantis formed a cluster connected to Shane by a dotted line and to each other by an asterisk-shaped design between them. A longer dotted line to the left led to Sandburg's wolf and Ellison's jaguar. An even longer dotted line in that direction reached O'Neill's bear and Jackson's jellyfish. Another set of dotted lines, to the upper left corner, connected to Lerato's raccoon and half a dozen other spirit animals, including another cheetah.

"You know all these spirit animals?" Brett asked.

"Yes," Shane pointed to the distant cheetah, "this one was Gabi's father who gave me part of the key to Atlantis."

After a rather long pause, Teyla asked, "What about this one?" She pointed to a faint dot all alone in the bottom right corner of the screen.

When Brett selected it, a picture of the iratus bug emerged.

"Can you get more information on it?" Brett asked.

Shane pushed a button and an information page like the ones before appeared. Brett couldn't read any of it, but at a glance he could see there was less to read than on the other scenes. Then he stopped where he'd expected to find one familiar word.

"What is it?" Gabi asked. Brett's heartbeat or something must have signaled his shock.

"The other two screens showed a word I knew here," he pointed. "It represented an alternate universe that's involved with charging power crystals and is either what we call the spirit plane or something otherwise connected to our spirit animals. The iratus bug has a different word in that location. Maybe that's why Shane saw it as translucent in his version of the spirit plane."

"Shall I bring up data sheets on all the other spirit animals to see if all the rest are the same?"

"Definitely." Brett leaned against the chair and took pictures from behind Shane as he navigated page to page.

When they finished, Teyla asked, "Is that all you need, or did you want to test other Guides with this device."

"If you're willing, I'm happy to collect as much data as possible," Brett said.

"Me, too." Gabi smiled from behind her equipment. Brett wondered if she was gathering any useful data from this or if she was busy with something else on her data pad.

"I'm already set up and happy to stay a while. It all seems safe enough," Beckett added.

Lorne nodded, and Teyla took Brett's place in the device.

The screen that appeared was full of moving lines around one bright dot. Gabi said, "It's a maze," just as Teyla started maneuvering through it.

Then chaos broke out as Beckett and Gabi both spoke at the same time about emissions coming from the device. A barely visible flickering figure appeared near Teyla's dot on the screen and Teyla's face grew very serious as she moved her dot away. Brett, still leaned up against the chair to take pictures, felt a momentary burst of fear and static in his brain. Shane jumped forward and pressed a button that shut the machine off.
"What happened?" Brett asked in a rush.

Teyla answered calmly, "I believe it meant to teach me how detect and avoid the Wraith."

"It was projecting something, and your amygdale reacted. Did you possibly feel emotions or reactions that didn't make sense?" Doctor Beckett asked.

"I felt a fainter version of the way I sense Wraith," Teyla said. "It did not trouble me. In the same way Athosian children sometimes wear masks and play at escaping from Wraith, I believe this is a game meant to teach those skills. I would be happy to test it further to see if I might learn something new."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with a machine that manipulates the emotion centers of the brain," Beckett said.

"I felt it, too," Brett admitted, "maybe because I was touching the chair. It surprised me, but I've watched horror movies that triggered my emotion centers a lot harder."

Beckett didn't look impressed.

Brett volunteered, "The program it ran for me before seemed to be projecting emotions to go with facial expressions. I could see if it selects the same program for me again, and you could test out those readings for comparison."

After some negotiation, Teyla took over photography duties and Brett sat down. The device immediately showed him the same Ancient dressed on white with a white background. This time the first emotion was joy. Brett wasn't surprised by the projection of calm before moving on to some sort of sadness, perhaps grief or loss. After a set of eight emotions, the screen switched to text. Brett knew enough to read the word results and recognize numbers in several categories below that.

Shane chuckled behind him, "I think it's rating your empathy."

"Cool," Brett removed the crown device and stood up, "combined with the other screenshots, I can learn about the Ancient's emotional vocabulary while also learning about myself."

"Well, I guess that's enough for one day," Beckett said.

"Carson," Kusanagi said.

Brett looked around. "If another Guide wants a turn, extra data can only help."

Beckett and Kusanagi gazed at each other for an intense moment. Brett figured Kusanagi won when she sat down in the chair. Beckett placed the crown on her head himself. It turned out she was given the same training program as Brett had run, but with a different set of eight emotions. Brett didn't know how to interpret the scores at the end, but at a glance, he thought his were higher, whatever that meant.

Then Teyla insisted she wanted to finish her game, and Beckett grudgingly allowed it. As far as Brett could tell, her program was the most like a real arcade game. By the end she seemed to have rescued seven little green dots, dodged dozens of Wraith or shadow Wraith, and done something to destroy one Wraith.

#

As soon as Teyla left the machine, Gabi blurted out, "How did you kill the Wraith that disappeared?"
"I am not sure what the game is meant to teach for real life, but I did it with my mind. I shifted into a state like meditation and merged with my spirit animal. Then my infari sucked the life force from the Wraith the same way its physical counterpart would devour insects."

Gabi's brain spun with thoughts about her anteater and the dream where she and others seemed to be gobbling up energy in her version of the spirit plane. When Gabi just stared blankly for too long, Teyla asked, "Gabi, does this mean something to you?"

"Have you already done your spirit walk with Shane, so he could see if your spirit animal might be translucent or whatever?" Gabi could not look away from Teyla, from what she might have stumbled upon. The room went almost silent around them. The others even breathed quietly.

"We had planned to meet after lunch to test that. Would you like to join us?"

Gabi nodded then looked to Shane. "Do you think you could help Teyla reach my visualization of the spirit plane, too?"

"Sure, Gabi, we can at least try." Shane moved in close and took Gabi's hand. "Can you tell me why?"

"It's a better experiment if I wait until after to explain."

"Okay," Shane nodded and squeezed her hand. Teyla nodded.

From the door Ronon asked, "Want one more?"

Gabi couldn't help but nod and smile.

#

After lunch, Gabi followed Shane and the others to the room they used for self defense training. It had a large mat covering most of the floor and smelled of sweat and a few less pleasant things. Gabi turned her sense of smell down and chose a spot on the floor next to Shane. Shane motioned Teyla to his other side and Brett took the spot on the other side of Gabi. Ronon sat across from Shane who had just opened his mouth to speak when the door opened again, unexpectedly.

Colonel Sheppard slouched in and started to kick off his shoes just inside the door. "You mind if I join you? I'm probably not up to spirit walking or whatever, but I could use whatever practice I can get at all this meditation and mental stuff."

"Sure, take a seat," Shane said.

Sheppard settled in cross legged between Teyla and Ronon, closing the gap so they were all forming a sort of haphazard circle. Gabi wondered if the Colonel was looking for his own solutions to keep McKay from ascending or dying. He couldn't strike out any worse than the scientists had so far. Gabi felt a sort of Sentinel kinship in their worry for McKay that bridged the gaps between scientists and military, ages, or any other circumstances.

Shane looked around to meet each set of eyes before he spoke. "There are no hard and fast rules for meditation or visiting the spirit plane. Most people find it helps to close their eyes, relax, and focus on their breathing. Gabi, Teyla and I are motivated to visit first my conceptualization of the spirit plane and then Gabi's. Our spirit animals share some of our motivations, so they might show up to help. If it works for you to follow your own spirit animal or another, that is usually an easy and secure way to transit. Sentinels sometimes find the way by focusing on a Guide or shaman's heart beat or respiration, and I offer myself if that is useful." Gabi was already halfway to a meditative state from
riding the rhythms of Shane's body and his voice. Her vibrational sense was running high and she could sense the pattern of their bond as she let Shane's soothing voice flow through her. "We are all familiar with each other's spirit animals, and I can tell you that my spirit plane is dry, almost a desert, but generally calm and comfortable. Gabi's is non-visual with vibrations passing along cables. The vibrations carry enough information to identify objects and movement on the strings around you, but you need to keep yourself calm as you adjust to the absence of other senses. I will go back for anyone who makes it to the spirit plane but doesn't follow us back out, so all you need to do is allow your own thoughts or the spirit animals to guide you where they will. I'll offer my narration for those trying to follow me, but everyone should feel free to approach this their own way."

Shane closed his eyes and said, "I'm closing my eyes and focusing on my breathing. I breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth."

Gabi slid into Shane's spirit plane the way she slid into sleep when she was extremely tired. Her aardvark ambled up to her, looking at home on the red ground with scant patches of green and yellow grass scattered around. A ways behind her aardvark, Gabi saw an enormous anthill and hoped her aardvark had been enjoying herself here. Her spirit animal lay down beside Gabi and rested her snout on one of Gabi's legs, still crossed in her meditation position.

Gabi stroked the top of the snout and between her aardvark's eyes and ears.

When Teyla appeared she stretched and stood up. Turning full circle, Teyla smiled out at her surroundings, silently taking it all in. Soon a green and aqua creature with a hard outer layer came scuttling over, also from the direction of the anthill. Gabi had heard descriptions of the infari, but she was surprised by its beauty. The colorful creature danced around Teyla's feet and then shuffled sideways to Gabi's aardvark until it was curled by the larger animal's side.

The aardvark glanced at the shiny small creature and returned her snout for Gabi to stroke.

"Our spirit animals seem quite comfortable with each other," Teyla said.

"They probably shared a feast over at that anthill," Gabi pointed with her free hand.

"Oh, we have insects that build homes similar to that but smaller."

"On my part of Earth, the anthills are much smaller as well. But in Africa, the part of Earth where aardvarks come from and on which Shane's spirit plane is based, the ants practically build skyscrapers."

Teyla looked up toward the sky.

The inkentshane and cheetah loped in to meet them just before Shane and Brett appeared.

Shane gave a lopsided smile and said, "Glad you all could make it."

"The animals all look pretty solid to me," Gabi said.

"Yes," Shane replied, "and I suspect the iratus bug can't join us while still bound into stasis. Shall we try to follow up on to your part now?"

"What should I do?" Gabi asked.

At that her aardvark stood and started walking away.

"Quite possibly, we can all just follow your aardvark," Shane said.
Gabi stood and walked. The next thing she knew vibrations flowed through her body and across her skin. She pulled up a little higher on her cable, trying to triangulate the motions and entities around her. To one side, she sensed Ronon's incomplete but unmistakable pattern. Although he hadn't been with them in Shane's landscape, he seemed the first to arrive here and was busily moving up and down his cable cleaning up small bits of energy that seemed to be scattered and gumming up the works.

Then Gabi felt the combined pattern of Teyla and Lorne, although she assumed only Teyla was with them. Brett and Shane were close beside her. Gabi hummed along with their shared vibration as she naturally moved to absorb stray bits of energy. At some point she remembered that they'd come here so she could ask Teyla if this was like her experience in the Ancient training device. But there really was no way to ask while in Gabi’s spirit plane, so Gabi did what came naturally and enjoyed the overlapping patterns of vibration that told her she was part of something larger.

Then there was a crashing. A discordance. Globs of loose energy flew everywhere. Gabi felt those around her scramble to contain it all, even as she wondered where it came from and what it meant. She wondered as she worked, but the stray energy just kept coming. In her dream the collected energy formed one new being. This time, four new beings were created and joined in the work before the storm calmed.

Gabi felt her questions about what had happened and where amplified between herself, her Guides, Teyla, and Ronon.

In a moment, they had eyes, bodies, and separate spirit animals again. They were beside a tall narrow waterfall, or perhaps two waterfalls, one above the other, splashing down a black and gray striped cliff.

A moment later Gabi felt the gym mat rough beneath her hands. She dialed back touch. Feeling the currents beneath Atlantis vibrating through the floor, Gabi turned down vibration. Then she grounded her other senses in the heartbeats and scents of her two Guides, the taste of Atlantis air, and finally opening her eyes to see other eyes opening around her.

"You all made it to the spirit plane, didn't you?" Sheppard asked the room at large.

"We did," Teyla answered, "and I experienced something very similar to draining the power from a Wraith as I had in the Ancients' teaching game. I fear there has been a culling on the planet of Osu. I believe our team is being called there to help."

"Called by the spirit animals?" Sheppard rubbed the back of his head as if to reassure himself about that idea.

"Or perhaps by the spirit plane or through something to do with our actions on the spirit plane. I do not fully understand, but we were shown the great waterfall on Osu, and I feel strongly we must go."

"Look, that's an off world mission, and you're saying they've already been culled?" John waited and Teyla nodded. "I'll call a meeting to discuss it, but you can't just go rushing off. For all we know this could be some new psychological trick of the Wraith."

"It is nothing like that," Teyla answered, "but I respect your concern. I will wait while you arrange the meeting."

Gabi was pretty sure Teyla could out-maneuver Sheppard if she wanted to. But Gabi was content to let the two of them resolve it. She tried to sort out what had happened in her spirit plane. Had they been eating Wraith energy? Why was the energy scattered as if from an explosion? What were the
four entities they'd helped assemble? Gabi hoped they hadn't put new Wraith back together from exploded Wraith bits. She was pretty sure her spirit animal was part of her in her spirit plane, perhaps the part that stored what they collected until there was enough to make something new. If so, she trusted her aardvark to always steer her right. If that meant going to a planet called Osu next, Gabi was fine with that as well.

Rodney tried to wrestle his grand unifying theory of Ancient and human physics down to fit on the screen of his laptop. It would be simpler in Ancient, but evolving toward ascension did not imbue him with fluency in that language. Anyway, he was trying hard to put it in terms someone else from Earth might understand in time. Knowing what he did of even his minions' general lack of intelligence, that goal seemed impossible. It was hard now for Rodney to think down to his own previous level of genius. He wasn't sure he could slow his thinking enough to explain his new theory to even his old self.

Then John ordered him to attend this meeting. Rodney had tried to argue that as chief scientist he was not in John's chain of command and could not be compelled. Where John the military commander couldn't win, John the Sentinel had only to glare and promise his Guide coffee. Despite the expanded hearing, intelligence, and possible brushes of something like telepathy, as a Guide Rodney still felt as connected to his Sentinel as ever. He wouldn't tell John, but it was a comfort as his mind chased equations faster than human fingers could type. The discussion around the meeting table was banal and Rodney couldn't be bothered to listen. But the warmth of his Sentinel by his side kept Rodney in his seat.

Then Teyla said, "It would be unwise to fly through their gate in a space ship when Wraith Darts are probably fresh in any survivors' memories."

Lorne said, "A cloaked Jumper could offer back up and medical assistance or transport."

"And take energy readings," Gabi said.

"Rodney and I will see if Carson wants to join us or select one of his people." John spoke for both of them with military calm.

"What!" Rodney squawked. "I am in the middle of work that could change two galaxies."

John settled deeper into his chair, showing Rodney his mind was made up. "You never know, maybe this mission will, too."

Brett stepped through the wormhole and walked onto an alien planet. Atlantis might float on the sea of an alien planet, but Brett had never been to the mainland. For the first time, the earth beneath Brett's feet wasn't Earth. The ground was brown and dusty. The grass and small plants he could see were mostly brown and dusty. Farther out he saw dense groves or trees, and they were green. They looked a lot like evergreen trees on Earth.

He took a few steps to the side of the gate. Gravity felt about the same. He took a deep breath. His lungs filled and didn't protest any lack. From what he could remember of camping trips, the air even smelled the same as in less urban parts of Earth. Above him, he saw blue sky and a sun too bright to look at long enough to tell any difference.

There was a big Ancient stargate in the middle of the clearing. That was pretty alien. On Earth and
Atlantis, he’d only seen stargates indoors. The incongruity of the gate in such a natural setting made Brett smile. Turning to Gabi he asked, "Anything weird to your senses?"

"Nothing too unexpected." She grabbed his hand as they started walking.

#

The new planet beckoned Gabi to open her senses. The breeze against her face brought smells that were almost like a coniferous forest on Earth, but the soil smelled a little off, not quite like sulfur or rust, but something in between. The sunlight bothered Gabi until she realized it was a little bluer, making the ground look a little less red than it might if she brought some soil back to Earth or Atlantis. The blue shift might also mean UV levels were higher. Gabi used the hand not holding Brett's to pull out her life signs detector. The UV registered as a little high, but everything was in a safe range. She sensed the air displacement when the cloaked Jumper passed through the gate behind them. The tac vest and BDUs she'd been forced to wear chafed, and Gabi shifted touch down a notch even as she took comfort in the warmth of Brett's hand in hers.

Shane caught up to them on Brett's other side. His eyes were wide, and his hand rested on a knife he'd attached with a sheath at his belt. They all had guns strapped to their thighs. Firearm and hand to hand training had been required for anyone hoping to go off world. While Gabi doubted she could shoot except in self defense, she appreciated having her own gun and tac vest. As with the reflective vest and two way radio she’d carried as a college security cadet, they marked her as qualified and part of a group effort.

Lorne and Teyla both carried submachine guns and led the group. Gabi was planning to earn certification on the P90 eventually, but seriously hoped to never need one. They all had new versions of the Ancient personal shields now, and Gabi took some pride in her work on that, but she still felt a little responsible for the initial failure and for Kusanagi's injury. The lump in her tac vest pocket stirred mixed feelings, but she was very glad to have it.

Ronon brought up the rear, his hand on his blaster in the same position as Shane's covering his knife. Gabi appreciated how quietly both of them walked and the calm way each kept glancing around. In the moment, Shane's body language was much more like Ronon's than either's was like Teyla or anyone else on the team. It seemed fitting that on an Ancient planet that could have passed for Earth, it would have been hard to tell at a glance which members of their party came from Earth.

Ronon stood out. While he'd passed the tests for the standard Earth weapons, he'd insisted on keeping his own clothes and weapons. His one concession was the personal shield Brett and Shane had charged for him. That seemed to please him and he kept it secure in a pocket of his coat.

Gabi heard Ronon take an audible sniff behind her and she dialed up smell and checked as well. The wind had shifted and brought with it a scent of decay or something old. It wasn't a scent Gabi was familiar with, but she didn't like it.

Ronon tapped his radio, and Lorne looked back. Ronon sniffed again, flaring his nostrils. Lorne took a less ostentatious sniff then tapped his ear and shrugged. Ronon shook his head once, and they all kept walking.

#

Brett had followed the exchange between the Sentinels and knew they had scented something ahead. That didn't prepare him for the silent, empty village they found at the edge of the trees. Log cabins stood in rows like tinker toy towns he'd constructed as a child.
In front of them lay a row of bodies, dried out husks, some of them children.

Brett's eyes closed, and he froze in place. His skin flashed cold and hot. With his mouth clamped shut, he took a deep breath through his nose and tried not to throw up. He could not force his eyes to open.

Gabi squeezed Brett's hand tighter when she felt him go rigid. His heart was racing and his eyes shut tight, but Gabi understood.

The sight of all the villagers' bodies sucked dry and lined up was horrible. Part of Gabi's mind railed at the injustice, but she was able to push the emotional outcry back. Protecting her Guides and her team came first. Her senses swept the village. The town was preternaturally quiet. No animals larger than insects moved within its cleared area. Brett's touch grounded her even as she hoped their clasped hands gave him some small comfort. She opened herself to vibrations and scents. The odd smell of the soil rose up, overlaid with the muted scent of decay she now identified as Wraith kills.

Gabi rubbed her thumb in circles on the back of Brett's hand, and his heart rate started to slow. She looked over at Shane and saw he'd taken Brett's other hand in his left. Shane's right hand was still ready on the hilt of his knife. His eyes still scanned calmly. Shane's and Ronon's heartbeats were the closest to normal, and Gabi wondered at what sort of experiences they had in common as she looked back at the bodies. Their skin was dried out beyond the normal look of extreme old age. They were like husks, and it was hard to imagine what their faces had been like or even their skin color. Most wore fastened vests on top, some with an extra layer of loose shirt underneath. Men, women and children wore pants made by wrapping a single piece of cloth, and Gabi thought she might have seen pictures of something similar worn by men in India.

Lorne signaled with a flat hand for Teyla to stay with Gabi and her Guides. He spoke Sentinel soft to Ronon, dividing up a search of the perimeter and a recon of the village. He asked Gabi to listen for anyone coming from the gate, so she focused her hearing back that way as she waited and stroked Brett's hand.

By the time Ronon and Lorne returned, Brett had opened his eyes. His jaw stayed tightly shut.

Lorne whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "It seems safe to look around for a few minutes, but I don't want to stay long. Ronon will stay here and keep watch."

Shane glanced to Brett and then to Gabi before he let go of Brett's hand. Gabi watched Shane quickly move along the periphery of the camp, looking into each cabin in turn. Brett pulled out a camera and walked to the center of town with a deliberate stride. Gabi stayed with him, using her senses to check for anything he might miss.

In the first house they visited, clean wooden bowls sat at each place on a low wooden table. A pot hung over a dead fire, and Gabi could smell that it contained something like chili but without meat. There were mats with blankets rolled inside them but no beds or other furniture.

After a couple of similar dwellings, Brett found what seemed to be a school or meeting hall. His movements became twice as fast, and he took ten times as many pictures. There were a few books on a shelf beside many blank pieces of something like slate. Brett was opening the top book when Gabi heard Shane's voice asking Sentinel soft, "Major Lorne, I have found a bag of materials that are familiar to me, and I would like to perform a brief death rite."

Gabi could hear Lorne and Teyla making their way toward Shane. She told Brett what was going on
and he scooped up the books and motioned for her to lead.

Shane had found what he believed was the dwelling of a shaman at one corner of the village. In the shaman's bag were wooden disks with skulls carved into them. The leather bag hung from Shane's shoulder as he explained, "If I found a similar village in Africa, I would place a coin in the hand of each dead person and say words to guide their passage to the afterlife."

"Very few people here use coins at all, and I have never heard of this rite," said Teyla.

"Have you seen anything like this?" Shane held a wooden disk out to Teyla. She examined it and shook her head. Shane whispered soft but fast. "I would not want to impose outside beliefs on anyone's culture. But spirit animals connected us to this place. We know the Ancients connected this galaxy with ours and with shamans, Guides, and Sentinels. Perhaps this is what we were brought here to do."

Lorne's eyes met Teyla's then Gabi's and Brett's as each of them nodded. Lorne whispered, "Ronon, do you have any objection?"

"No," the Sentinels all heard.

Lorne turned to Shane. "Go ahead, but keep it as brief and quiet as possible."

Shane moved to the line of bodies in front of the village. Gabi wanted to watch, but Brett headed back to the building he'd been exploring. So Gabi followed Brett as he inventoried the possible school and several more dwelling. But she listed to Shane as he whispered words in a language she didn't know. With each recitation there came the repeated sound of a few steps and then shuffling against the ground. Gabi imagined the shaman kneeling to place a coin in a desiccated hand. His voice and heartbeat remained calm throughout. After the last shuffling noise, Shane fell silent.

Gabi heard Lorne whisper an almost silent, "Amen," before he whispered a little louder, "Time to regroup and head back."

Gabi passed the message along to Brett who still clutched the books he'd found in one hand. He followed her out, but before they reached the line of bodies, Shane and his spirit animal walked past them toward the edge of the woods. The shaman's bag still hung from his shoulder, and his right hand still rested on his knife. Lorne and Teyla were close behind him.

Gabi looked to the edge of the forest where they were headed and saw a blue and green shelled creature that looked much like Teyla's spirit animal, an infari. This one's shell was marked with scratches and chips, some of which looked weathered at the edges, suggesting they were old wounds. At first Gabi couldn't tell if it was a spirit animal or stray wildlife. Then she picked up the vibration of an incomplete bond, and the particular vibrations felt familiar.

"That's one of the entities we put together on my spirit plane," Gabi whispered.

Lorne and Teyla's eyebrows lowered in confusion. Shane and Brett's rose in surprise. Ronon said, "I agree."

"What does that mean?" Lorne asked the group, but his eyes ended on Gabi.

"Not quite sure," she answered, "but we should probably follow it."

The infari had already moved farther into the forest, but Gabi could hear it pausing to wait for them.

Lorne tapped his radio, "Colonel, this is Lorne, do you read?"
"Go ahead, Major."

"We seem to have met a spirit animal Gabi and Ronon recognize from the spirit walk that led us to this planet. Requesting permission to follow it, sir."

"You're in charge of this op, Major. We'll follow you with sensors as far as we can while still watching the gate."

"Yes, sir."

#

"Rodney—"

"Still no sign of Wraith or gate activation." Rodney waved his left hand wide enough that he brushed John's shoulder in the pilot seat. "Even limited to my previous level of genius, I could probably have told you without being asked if any such readings appeared. No need to keep interrupting my work now."

"Monitoring the planet is your work right now," John replied.

Behind them, Carson let out a sigh too loud for even Rodney to ignore.

"Right," Rodney replied while his hands finished typing his last on-subject thought. "That's plenty of work for some minor neural network that runs mostly autonomously while I continue my real work—despite the limitations of this primitive laptop and being forced along on this pointless mission."

"Didn't you hear?" John pointed to his ear as if Rodney might not know which sense he meant. "They found a spirit animal they recognize from the spirit plane. We are here at the request of energy beings from a higher plane of existence."

"Higher plane has no meaning." Rodney spoke quickly and added a note to his theory about indeterminate position. "Energy plane apparently does. Those M-theory people talking about eleven dimensions were idiots not to realize what they were glimpsing. The reason Earthlings could never construct a unified theory was that they failed to run the equations through the necessary sixteen dimensions, each with its own physical laws. I'm this close," Rodney's voice rose and he pinched the air with his fingers, "to wrapping up discrepancies in dark matter and dark energy while describing complimentary particles we've been looking for in the wrong dimensions the entire time!"

"The entire time being a couple decades?"

"It's fundamental to everything. And by the way, time isn't linear in several of those dimensions."

"Rodney," John leaned across the aisle with exaggerated delight. "Are you going to build me a time machine?"

Rodney swatted at the deranged mop of hair practically resting on his shoulder. "No, no, no, no! Wash all those images of Deloreans and police call boxes from your mind." John blew a raspberry at him. Carson chuckled from behind. Rodney could practically hear his increased mental productivity grinding to a relative halt. "I'm talking about sixteen energy dimensions with exotic particles and fundamentally different laws of physics. You might be able to send an encoded message through time as an energy pattern, but there'd have to be someone to access and decode it whenever else."

John blurted eagerly, "But couldn't you transmit a person as energy—"
"Only for those ready to Ascend. Even then, I have no idea if they'd remember or care or be able to work out how to de-ascend into a matter and energy plane."

"Like ours?" John asked.

"Ours or any of an infinite number or alternate dimensions, but I'm not working on that right now. My unified theory only requires the energy dimensions. I'm close to learning how to recharge a ZedPM."

"But we can already do that. Will your theory show how to build one?"

"That's an engineering issue. And knowing how to meditate or kiss your way into the correct energy plane does not count as knowing how to recharge a ZedPM. I'm going to unravel the physics."

"Like you unraveled the physics for the personal shields?" Carson leaned forward to ask.

"My thinking has improved considerably since then."

Carson leaned forward even farther and asked in somewhat clipped tones, "But you're sure the shields are safe now? I don't have the personnel along to deal with an entire team incapacitated by failed shields."

"Are you still harping about that?" Rodney waved both hands then grabbed his slipping laptop. "That was a failure in the casing, the on/off switch if you will. Everyone tested that before we left."

John leaned sideways forcing Carson to sit back a bit. "So is the ZPM charging plane where the spirit animals come from?"

"That's a philosophical issue, and logically there is no ZedPM charging plane. It's a matter of determining a safe stage at which to access the energy from the multi-dimensional energy system."

John stared wide-eyed and silent at the light and dark green plant life below their cloaked Jumper. Rodney embraced the opportunity to work through the constraints on the twelfth dimension in his theory.

"But if the Wraith spirit animal is in another one of the sixteen energy dimensions, would that explain why she appeared translucent in our dimension?"

Rodney didn't process the words until John poked a finger in his shoulder. "What? What would I care about translucent spirit animals?"

"Might affect your theory." John drawled the last word, sounding beyond idiotic. "Maybe it means the energy is unstable between two dimensions or something. Maybe it relates to finding a safe stage at which to charge a ZPM."

"That may be the most ridiculous thing you've ever said." Rodney huffed without looking up from his computer.

"Aw, now you're sweet talking." When Rodney hummed and tried to ignore him, John said, "Would the Ascended be in a plane with our spirit animals? Or do you think there are Ascended Wraith on the Wraith plane?"

Rodney rolled his eyes and blinked at his annoying Sentinel. "Listen, don't worry your slightly above average human brain about it. If anyone can figure out how to control ascension, I have the best brain and the best motivation. There's no point in anyone else even trying."
John thought his motivation might be stronger than his Guide's. Rodney seemed more interested in physics than saving himself. That wasn't exactly surprising, but it left John trying to plan for the potential rescue of his Guide from an energy plane that his merely human brain quite possibly wasn't prepared to comprehend.

Like every other American, John had heard the word "codependent." He'd never paid much attention to conversations or magazine articles involving the word, but he thought he knew what it meant. Listening to Rodney's easy dismissal of John's concerns, John began to wonder if he was codependent. After all, he was trying to learn to meditate just in case Rodney ascended, because he didn't want to be left behind by his egotistical scientist no matter what. Then again, it might be a Sentinel thing. As a Sentinel, there were times when he couldn't help but be dependent on his Guide.

Suddenly John realized that while he was dependent on Rodney, it didn't seem like Rodney was dependent on him. Being dependent sounded a lot worse than being codependent. He'd hoped that keeping his Guide close and involving him in a mission with other people might pull him away from ascension or whatever changes the machine had initiated. Others might see Rodney as aloof and uncaring all the time, but John could feel his Guide's increasing distance like a pull against all his senses. But if Rodney valued his new insights over his connections to John or other humans, maybe it was selfish to try to hold him back.

Rather than turn himself inside out with anxiety, John focused completely on flying. How much cooler could it get than being a pilot in a Puddle Jumper—a Sentinel Puddle Jumper pilot and the military commander of the lost city of Atlantis in the Pegasus Galaxy?

"Do you realize, Rodney," Carson's voice was soft but still startled John, "that if we reach a point where you have to ascend or die, it will be my job to do everything in my power to help you ascend? John as well, if that's what he wants."

John felt relief like a warm tide beneath his skin. Maybe he wasn't dependent or codependent after all.

"What?" Rodney didn't stop typing. "Why would John want to ascend? There'd be no flying or fighting or sparring with Marines."

John opened his mouth to argue, but when no words came, Carson took over for him. "He's your Sentinel, lad. Your life partner. I'm not sure even his duty to his command could override that." With a slight turn of his head Carson said to John, "Of course, I'd support whatever decision you made."

"No, I've been practicing meditation just in case," John said.

"That's absurd," Rodney's heart sped up as did his typing. "If there's a way out of this, we'll find it through science. And what do you mean you've been practicing meditation?" Rodney's eyes flicked toward John for a moment, and John's own hear rate increased at the momentary attention.

"With the team down below. I was there when they found out about this planet, but I couldn't make it to the spirit plane with them."

"Well, if you're that desperate, I can help you work with some scientific meditation aids the Ancients left, but I assure you, I have no intention of ascending."

"Truly, Rodney? You feel no temptation to upgrade your mind into some energy plane?" Carson asked.
"They don't give Nobel prizes to glowing squid." Rodney's hand waved such that it brushed against John again, and this time he was pretty sure it wasn't random.

#

Brett wanted to take pictures when they spotted the waterfall from the spirit walk, the landmark that had led them to the planet of Osu. He was pulling his camera out when a young man threw himself belly down on the trail in front of them.

Instantly, Teyla, Lorne, and Ronon aimed guns at the sudden movement. Shane had drawn a knife and held it at shoulder height.

With a voice that sounded sure and strong compared to their whispering so far, the man on the ground said, "You come to me from my shaman." In the way that a word came out stronger when the gate translation was the same as the spoken language, the word "shaman" hung in the air.

Shane lowered his knife and answered in a language Brett recognized as Zulu. Then he repeated the same words in English, "I was brought to you by the animal spirits. Tell me of your need."

The battered infari that had been guiding them moved to the side of the young man's head where it would be visible from his prone position. The man on the ground looked pretty battered himself. His back was bare and covered with scratches and a painful weeping rash. He wore the same dhoti-style pants as the corpses in the village, but his were torn and covered with bits from prickly plants. His eyes opened wide and his head lifted a little at the sight of the spirit animal. "That is my shaman's spirit, but I don't understand. He was drained by a Wraith Drone and his spirit sundered. I am only an apprentice, and could not perform the rites to hold his spirit together."

Shane stepped forward, forcing Teyla and Lorne to either let him through or physically block his way. They parted before him, but Brett noticed Lorne used the shift to press a hand to his radio, allowing the Colonel to listen in. Brett took it to mean that Lorne was somewhat worried, which was reassuring, because Brett selfishly wanted to pull Shane back away from the stranger and take at least a day to assess the situation.

Shane knelt in front of the prone man. "I am a shaman from a distant people. If you will recognize me and my spirit, I will assist you if I can." Brett noticed the use of "spirit" in place of "spirit animal" and made a mental note to see if that was the preferred usage on Osu or elsewhere in Pegasus as well.

"I am Anin, apprentice to Sonin. You are too young to have taken the rites in the temple before my time. Have you died the true death?"

"I have. When I was eight, I found my spirit that day and became known as Inkentshane. Can you see him?" Shane motioned to where his African wild dog came to stand behind the infari. Brett's stomach dropped as he wondered what happened when Shane was eight and why he'd never told them, but he knew he'd have to wait to ask.

"I do not know that animal, but I recognize your bond and will accept you as my shaman if you'll have me."

Shane placed a hand on Anin's head. "My people's ways may be different from yours, but I will do what I can for you. Please come up off the ground."

As Anin stood, the three weapons still pointed at him stayed pointing low but still drawn. When standing, Anin was Shane's height and just growing into his adult bulk. They looked about the same
age. Shane said, "I introduce these to you as my family and tribe: Teyla, Lorne, Gabi, Brett, Ronon." Shane motioned to each of them as he said their names. It seemed that Shane had decided to use one word names in response to Anin's simple introduction of himself. As an anthropologist, Brett wondered if that was the right tradition here or if titles would have improved their status. He wondered how much Shane was drawing on parallels to some African culture. "Will you accept them and offer them no harm?"

"I promise." Anin ducked his head low in a sort of half bow.

"You can put away the weapons," Shane said.

There was a hesitation, but the three fighters did as Shane suggested.

"You said there were rites you needed help to perform? I have already performed a death rite as my people would when I found the wooden tokens in your shaman's bag." Shane patted the bag on his shoulder.

"Thank you." Anin turned and motioned into the woods. "I should take you to the temple. Three who would be Guides are hidden there."

The word that translated as Guide was different in Anin's language, but Brett took notice, because none of the words used by Teyla's people had translated that way. Shane caught it too and asked, "Do you have a word for someone of special abilities who works with a Guide?"

The word Anin used translated as "Sentinel."

"Did your village have a Sentinel before the attack?"

Anin's face folded in total despair. "I am an emerging Sentinel and was to bond with my Guide during my rites as Shaman. I failed my people."

Shane reached out to clasp Anin's bare shoulder. Brett saw how the Sentinel eased at the touch and how Shane didn't let go as he spoke. "You did not fail. The spirits would not have brought us to help you if you had done wrong." Brett wished he knew more about Shane's shamanic training. He wondered how much Shane had heard before and how much he was improvising. Anin seemed to hang on every word.

"But you must have saved Sonin's spirit, or else he would have been absorbed into Wraith drones and not have been able to lead you."

A tear tracked down Anin's face and Shane used his free hand to wipe it away and then cradle Anin's jaw. Brett couldn't feel jealous. Despite their similar ages, Brett felt deep respect at the sight of his shaman comforting the apprentice. "I may have helped," Shane replied, "but you have knowledge my people do not. We were brought together for a reason and must move forward together in this part of our journeys."

Anin nodded and led them through the woods. He moved so silently and so fast even with Shane, Teyla, and Lorne behind him that Brett had trouble following. Gabi took his hand and guided him as Ronon once again took up the rear.

They emerged at a temple built into a hill. Perfectly carved stone steps led up to a wide door with a large eye carved into it. Brett recognized the carving and the temple from Sandburg's pictures of Peru, but this version in Pegasus was better preserved and better hidden. From above or probably any other side, it looked like a just a hill.
"The Temple of Light," Shane said.

Anin nodded, "You know it."

"I have heard stories, but I'm sure you have much you can teach us here."

As they reached the top of the stairs, Anin pressed his hand to the giant eye and the massive stone door swung inward without a sound. Brett wondered at the Ancient engineering and whether the ATA gene was required to open that door. He knew the counterpart of this temple on earth was dedicated to Sentinels and Guides, but there was no telltale glow to suggest such technology.

Gabi pulled out her customized life signs detector, and Brett wondered if she was thinking along similar lines.

"Ronon, guard the entrance," Lorne said. "Check in every half hour. If the radios don't work, try opening the door and giving a regular shout." Lorne listened to something over his radio then, and Brett figured Sheppard might be giving extra instructions of his own.

Ronon nodded as the others headed in the door and down another flight of stone stairs.

#

Gabi shivered as vibrations and echoes from the room ahead passed over her skin. She was starting to feel like the odd one out. Her Guides studied anthropology, and they both seemed to know something about this temple. Shane had named it, and Brett had nodded at the name. Now Brett was asking permission to photograph the wall carvings to compare to something back home.

Ronon was on watch outside. Teyla and Lorne kept their hands close to their guns as they approached three more heartbeats in the strange echoing room up ahead. Gabi was afraid to open her senses too wide in this environment with neither of her Guides nearby. Instead she scanned and recorded whatever she could on her life signs detector.

Her hearing was still extended enough to hear shifting in the room ahead and the three new heartbeats speeding up as they approached. Anin must have heard something as well because he spoke facing forward, "I bring friends. Sonin's spirit brought them to help us."

Gabi heard a stifled sob.

Then they stepped into a room with two raised pools larger than hot tubs, a high ceiling, rectangular open doorways, and carvings all over the place. It was no wonder that sound distorted with such architecture. The only solutions for a Sentinel were to ease hearing down or spend a great deal of time sorting out the angles and reverberations all around. Gabi wanted to reach for one of her Guides, but Shane was the center of attention in a discussion of shamanic rituals and Brett was busy photographing every carving from every angle.

Gabi went to sit on the edge of one of the pools. She let her fingers drift into the water and instantly felt better. Her representation of the spirit plane seemed to overlay the complex architecture of the room, and her vibrational sense sorted out all the echoes. Then the spirit animals of everyone in the room became visible, and Gabi had to ask, "Is everyone seeing five infari now, or is it just me?"

"She's touching the water!" one of the new women practically squealed. The three new women were all dressed in identical cloth wraps that might once have been tan but were now smelly and disgusting. Gabi reduced her sense of smell to almost nothing. One woman had puffy eyes and a streaked face, making her look younger than the others, but they were all teens or early twenties at the oldest. The one who'd spoken was the cleanest, despite whatever issue she had about touching
"She is a full and bonded Sentinel, Isa," Anin said. "Still, if her Guide is present…" Anin let his words trail off.

"Both Brett and I are Gabi's Guides." She felt Shane's arm around her shoulders as he finished his sentence. "Can you tell us about the water?"

"The grotto is where one becomes a full shaman, Guide, or Sentinel. If the person's bonding partner is known, they enter the pools at the same time to complete their bond. Isa is my bonding partner. We have known for some time." The relatively tidy woman came to stand beside Anin as he spoke of her. "For those who cannot access the spirit planes, there are instructions for a beverage to drink before entering the pools for a spirit quest." Anin spoke quickly, gesturing to something carved on the walls. "For those already familiar with the water, especially Sentinels, a touch may calm the senses or facilitate visions."

"Would you know why more spirits might appear to me after she touched the water and announced them?"

Anin smiled and shook his head, "Perhaps because you are her bonded? Or perhaps she made them want to be seen. I only see yours and mine. Are there really more infari?"

"Teyla's spirit is an infari. Then there is the one who guided us and three that are shiny and unmarked."

"And you did not gather them?" Anin tilted his head and stared intently at Shane, who still stood with his arm around Gabi.

Suddenly Gabi understood. "It's what we were doing in my spirit plane. We gathered together four entities and they sent us to this waterfall. But how?"

Anin looked at Gabi for the first time. "Do none of the rest of you have infari spirits?"

"Most of us have spirits you would not recognize here," Gabi answered, at ease now with the touch of Shane and the water.

"But what do you do when the Wraith Drones sunder spirits?"

"We didn't have Wraith where we came from." Four wide-eyed faces stared at Gabi, but she was feeling unnaturally calm with her fingers still dangling in the water. "But Ronon's and my spirit are based on insectivores from our own planets, and we seem to achieve the same thing in my spirit plane. We just didn't know what we were achieving. Did your previous shaman do that all by himself?"

Anin spoke softly, "Sonin said there had been more and more spirits coming to help. Just before the attack he visited the spirit plane trying to find out if the greater numbers meant we were overcoming the Wraith or only that more spirits were being sundered recently. When Sonin left us to clean the temple, he did not speak of what he'd learned on his spirit walk. He said only that he needed to rest before determining a date for our rites to become full Sentinels and Guides." Anin blinked his eyes as if it was hard to keep them open, but he continued. "We do not know how the Wraith took him and our people by surprise. We were here and safe but unable to help. Isa and I considered entering the grottos to try to save Sonin's spirit but did not know what would happen if we became lost without a shaman watching over us in the sundering."

"Tell me, Anin," Shane waited until Anin met his eyes, "If Sonin were here now, do you think he
would advise me to perform those rites with you today?"

"I am sure that is why his spirit brought you."

"Is there anything I should study or words I need to learn for what I must do?"

"I can say the words. You need only watch to make sure we find our spirits, but if you can already see them here, that part should be simple for you."

"Do we need to worry about Wraith or sundering?"

"The Wraith cannot find us in the temple."

"Shall we begin?" Shane asked.

"Wait a minute," Lorne spoke for the first time since entering the temple. "My radio doesn't work in here. I'm going to go topside and check in before we start anything. Can you estimate how long these rites will take?"

Anin and Isa were gazing into each other's eyes like the young lovers they probably were. Anin answered without looking away, "Minutes, hours, time in the spirit plane flows in its own way."

"Right," Lorne smiled a forced, all American smile. "Just talk among yourselves, but don't start anything until I'm back."

He was halfway to the door with his hummingbird buzzing along when Shane asked, "Could you send Ronon down while you check in?"

Lorne turned and opened his mouth to argue, but Teyla said, "I think that might be wise."

Lorne agreed, and a remarkably short time later Ronon entered the room accompanied by his shoff. The black furred animal spirit immediately stalked forward to sniff around the four quiet infari who huddled in the middle of the room. Ronon grunted, crossed his arms, and stood on one side of the large rectangular doorway. When his spirit animal returned to him, he shook his head.

"Sorry, Ronon," Gabi said. It would have been nice to find a Guide for Ronon so easily, but she couldn't actually imagine him with either of the young women who had neither spoken nor been introduced.

Ronon shrugged. "That all?"

Gabi and Teyla nodded, and he left.

"Are you sure?" Shane barely mouthed the words, but Gabi's senses had risen up as she played with the water. She heard him easily and nodded.

He spoke loudly enough for the others to hear when he asked, "Has touching the water done anything more than revealing all the spirit animals for you."

Gabi started to say "no" before she realized. "I feel the echo of what Sonin learned. We're building up to something. He felt vibrations from the future, or alternate futures, in the water. I know the vibrations that he did not."

She could feel Shane's arm tighten around her. Brett came closer and sat behind her, resting a hand above Shane's on her shoulder. Teyla stayed by the door, but Gabi could feel her and the four Osu tense and waiting. "I feel vibrations from our whole team, like at our last meditation. But Sheppard
and McKay are in it, too. Not with us, but connected somehow to Sandburg and Ellison. And we have to take these four back to Atlantis and wait for something."

Gabi pulled her hand out of the water. "I'm tired now." The calm from the water shifted into a calm before sleep. Her Guides led her to where all three of them could sit together leaning against the wall. She dozed, but didn't really sleep. She knew what was said and where people moved around her, but she could not say what she heard or saw versus what she felt on her skin or through vibrations in the stone around her. Something was building. Brett stayed close and warm through it all.

Shane stood when the hummingbird returned. He was one with his African wild dog as he moved to stand between the two raised pools. Anin and Isa spoke vows and then submerged themselves fully clothed. In the space between their last breath and when they emerged, Gabi felt them bond with their spirit animals and with each other. They seemed to move up and down on strings across the room from her before finally emerging dripping from the pools. The scarred infari bonded with Anin, but Gabi had known that all along.

Then each of the other women took a turn in the Guide pool where Isa had been. Gabi's life signs detector buzzed reassuringly in her pocket throughout all the rites. Some small part of Gabi grew louder and louder about wanting to see the readings, but another part was too wrapped up in the vibrations and energy passing through her and the entire building. By the time everyone was out of the water, Gabi returned to sensing the world in what was for her a normal manner overlaid with the strange vibrations she felt in the air and stones around her. She heard every heartbeat and movement in the room as she looked at the patterns of bonding energy recorded in her LSD. She scanned through data with the feeling she was missing something and was just narrowing in on a pervasive anomaly when—

The walls around them began to shake hard enough that Gabi could hear grinding at the joins between walls and ceiling.

"Shields on," Lorne called out. "Move out together." He and Teyla started motioning people toward the stairs. "Shane and Teyla lead. I'll cover our six. If the building comes down, I need the locals to curl on the floor so—"

Lorne hadn't finished his sentence when Gabi heard the ceiling crack loudly. She reached a shielded hand to cover Anin's head and another to cover Isa's, because they were closest. Both bumped into her hands, still moving to escape, and shouted at the slap of the shield. She hadn't meant it to happen that way, but they began to crouch. "Down!" Gabi shouted. Then she pulled Brett along with her despite the unpleasant buzz as their shields touched.

Gabi tried to brace her hands and feet to support her body like a table above Isa. Brett did the same bracing against a step beside her, trying to shelter Anin. Each of the Osu exclaimed a couple times as they jostled into shields that they didn't understand. Gabi did her best, but something huge and heavy came down on her back. Gabi collapsed and Isa screamed beneath her.

#

A new screen flashed in front of John just as one of Rodney's scans beeped. "Oh no," Rodney said. "We've got to land as close to that temple as we can." The readings showed an earthquake centered right on the temple. "But not where a tree will fall on us," Rodney added as he reviewed seismographic data from before the earthquake. There was no actual ground motion, but something on the energy scans looked peculiar. He followed a flag to the experimental monitoring system Gabi had set up. "What did those incompetents trigger with their kissing nonsense now?"

"Anything useful to tell me, McKay?" John asked as he piloted low over the forest.
"Not a natural build up to an earthquake, and it's centered right on the temple after several bursts of what Gabi's program identifies as bonding energy."

"So someone's spirit animal made like Godzilla?"

"Who knows? It could have nothing to do with the energy readings and some cognitive reprobate carelessly touched the big red Ancient building collapse button."

"Can you read life signs through the rubble," Carson asked from the back.

"No, but I have energy readings on six personal shields," Rodney answered while flipping through screens on both his laptop and the Jumper.

"Six?" John asked just as a deep voice cut in over the radio.

"Colonel, building collapsed, going in."

"Specialist Dex, wait for orders. Do you have a personal shield activated?"

"Yes, sir."

John paused, then decided to be glad there was one more shield than he'd known about rather than one less. "Can you hear survivors?"

"One. Screaming. Now."

"Okay, Dex. Try to rescue that one, but be careful of bringing more of the building down. We'll be landing in thirty seconds."

Brett couldn't breathe. His nose and mouth were full of dust. The air was thick with it. Anin shifted beneath him, bumped against the shield around Brett's leg and shouted again.

"What is it?" Anin panted.

Brett thought Anin meant the shield. But he might mean what had happened. How could Anin talk? Brett had no words. His lungs wanted air. His legs wanted to collapse. His back hurt so much it no longer felt like part of him. The muscles were a strained web of hurt. He was supporting large chunks of stone building on his back.

Brett managed to work his lips and spit. He could breathe. It didn't matter if he'd just spit gray muck onto Anin. Anin had been able to breathe the whole time. He could deal with being spit on. Brett took two long deep breaths, but couldn't catch his breath enough to call for help. "Keep shouting," Brett managed to pant. "I can't hold this up much longer."

Anin screamed rather than shouting. He sounded terrified. Maybe he understood the situation well enough.

Brett tried to shift his eyes to look for Gabi. She'd been right beside him, pushed him into position to shelter Anin. She'd been trying to shield Isa on the floor at the foot of the stairs. Brett had been in a better position. He'd been able to brace his arms and head three steps up with his feet still on the floor. He'd only had to form one wall and a roof to shelter Anin. Gabi had been trying to form two walls and roof. There was nothing that tall beside him now. Brett couldn't hear any sounds or movement from Gabi or Isa.
"Quiet!" The voice was Ronon's and Brett almost crumpled in relief. Ronon might be strong enough to lift the stones crushing down on Brett's back.

When Anin was silent, Ronon called out, "Anyone above you on the stairs."

"No, I don't think so," Anin sounded instantly calmer. That helped Brett, too.

Brett could hear grunts and rock shifting above him, where the stairs had previously led outside. He tensed the muscles in his legs to make sure he still felt them. If they went all the way numb, Brett was worried he'd fall on Anin. With the shield and the weight of the rocks above them, Brett couldn't let that happen.

Finally, he felt a weight lifted from his shoulders, literally. One large stone shifted, then another.

"You hear me, Brett?" Ronon sounded impossibly calm.

Brett managed to grunt, "Yeah."

"Stand slowly. Don't jerk even if rocks slide."

Brett tried to stand and couldn't straighten his back. "Umm, I can't stand, but my legs are ready to give out."

"Can two shields touch?"

"Yeah, but Gabi doesn't like how it feels."

Ronon grunted and slowly pulled Brett up by his shoulders. Brett's back cracked painfully but then felt a lot better. A chunk of rock started to fall from one side and Ronon blocked it with one hand while the other supported Brett. Anin moved as if to stand, and Ronon growled.

Ronon met Brett's eyes and seemed to be waiting.

"You can let go. I can stand. Gabi and Isa were right there." He pointed to his left, "Can you hear them?"

Ronon's face went blank for a moment, one hand still on Brett's shoulder. "They're alive."

Brett let out a breath and every muscle in his body tried to turn to water. But he'd said he could stand, and he wasn't going to take any more of Ronon's time now.

Ronon let go of Brett's shoulder. He used both hands to lift aside the rock he'd been stabilizing with one. "Stand." Anin did. With a flicker of green light, Ronon turned off his shield. "Go up three steps." Anin was not shy about touching Ronon as he carefully shifted around him and up three semi-cleared stairs without bumping the larger rubble Ronon had clearly shifted to reach them.

Ronon spoke more quietly when he turned to Brett. "Shield off so we can help you."

Brett had to try three times and take a couple deep breaths before he released his shield. Ronon reached out and pulled Brett tight to his body, supporting him and practically lifting him around to where Anin stood on the stairs. Brett took his first easy breath. "Help him," Ronon practically pushed Brett into Anin, who lifted his arms reflexively. "Doctor coming up top."

Only then did Brett remember the cloaked shuttle with Dr. Beckett, the Colonel, and McKay. Anin shifted so his shoulder was under Brett's left arm and very slowly they made their way up the steps and then down the other side.
Rodney followed John over the mostly broken stairs. "How am I supposed to triangulate the personal shield readings on my scanner while climbing through chunks of rubble as big as my head? And what sort of uneducated stone cutter builds a staircase leading up followed by one leading down. It's wasteful and inefficient. It didn't fall apart at all the right way for a temple made of natural stone either. Look how the pieces are all roughly the same size and shape. It's like Ancient safety glass."

Rodney looked up from his scanner and the rubble he was climbing across when he heard John grunting. There was a scraping sound as John set down the chunk of rock he was hefting and turned to lift another. He grunted again. Beside him Ronon was moving the same pile of rocks without any of the sounds effects. "Yes, one of the shields is under there with two life signs."

"Thank you, Rodney, as Sentinels we'd never have heard their heartbeats or the annoying muffling sound of the shield." The sarcasm in John's tone increased to compensate for the lack of anyplace to slouch. "Come help?"

Rodney hated the sort of manual labor that could tear up his hands. People had no idea how much dexterity and fine motor control some of the Ancient crystal and wiring interfaces required. But he knew Carson was already busy helping Brett, and the longer the others stayed buried, the worse their chances became. He set his pack, laptop, and scanner on what looked like a stable pile of rock. Just as he was reaching for a heavy lump of skin damaging rubble, Rodney remembered his own personal shield. He thought it on.

John let out a startled, "Hey."

"Hand protection." Rodney waggled his fingers. "As well as hard hat, safety boots—You Sentinels really should think of these things." He was pretty sure he saw both John and Ronon's shields turn on as he lifted his first rock. A couple feet down, he could see one team member's tac vest, but he couldn't tell whose.

"We'll have to clear her whole body," John said as he moved another rock. "She was using her shield to protect one of the Osu, and they're both unconscious."

Rodney was going to ask if "she" was Gabi or Teyla, but he saw black wavy hair as he moved his next stone, and knew it was his advisee. While he wasn't the best advisor, he thought fixing the shield that saved an advisee's life should count for something.

The next stone he moved came from the other end. He gasped, and his Sentinel had a hand on his shoulder before Rodney let the breath out. A pulverized bloody leg stuck out from beneath Gabi, still mostly covered by rubble.

Then John was on his radio. "Dr. Beckett, we're going to need you out here." Turning the radio off, he said to Rodney and Ronon, "Let's uncover the rest first. Something pressing on that leg may be keeping her from bleeding out."

Rodney could imagine how Gabi had tried to cover the unshielded woman as the roof fell, but Gabi's shield was molded tight to her body, and at least one limb had been left uncovered. As he cleared more rocks, he wondered if they could pull the young Sentinel away before she saw.

Then Beckett and the young local who'd been helping Brett were picking their way down the treacherous stairs, and John said, "We've got them all uncovered except the one leg. Do you need to place a tourniquet or something before we pull the last rocks off and try to move her?"
"Aye, poor lass. No, no tourniquet." Carson always sounded most Scottish when emotional.

"But she'll live?" the young man said.

"All but the leg are under the shield. If there's nothing poking under her, Gabi's shield should have diffused any other impacts. Not sure what prolonged pressing against the shield might do." Carson sighed. "We don't have time to send back for a trauma team. Let me set saline and a few other items to hand. Then I'll need someone with a shield on to lift Gabi away quickly." As Carson unsealed a tray and set out supplies he said, "Ronon, when I give the word, you'll need to lift Gabi straight up. Take her out to solid ground, and monitor her pulse and breathing. You can leave her with Brett so long as her vitals are steady. Otherwise, call me."

"What can I do?" the local man was asking.

"If she starts to wake, you'll have to keep her calm and still. And son," Carson paused before pulling on gloves to touch the young man's shoulder. "If she wakes, she'll be in pain. You're a newly bonded Sentinel, and it won't do her any good if you panic or let yourself zone on her."

"I have trained to manage my senses in a Wraith attack. I will not let her down in this."

Carson nodded as he pulled the last glove on. Rodney felt something strange surround his hands and bent his head to stare at them.

"Now, Ronon." Carson moved toward the crushed leg even as Ronon was lifting Gabi away.

Rodney's brain popped with insights as his hands began to glow. He thought his shield off with a flash of green, but this glow was something different. "Carson—"

"Not now, Rodney."

"Carson—" When the doctor didn't move from where he hovered above the upper leg, Rodney shouldered his way in and reached for the shattered calf.

"Rodney!" Both John and Carson shouted at once, but when Rodney's hands made contact he knew what to do. Power flowed through him. He suddenly knew the frequency for charging ZPMs. His beaver appeared between Rodney's hands, and they were funneling power from the spirit animals' energy dimension in the same way they could safely charge ZPMs. The beaver filled with the correct vibrations, and then the leg was whole and the girl was waking up.

"Anin?" The young Sentinel hovered over his Guide in an instant.

Rodney fell back as his beaver shuddered, glowed, then disappeared. John caught Rodney's shoulders, his shield evidently switched off. "What was that?"

"I may be closer to ascending than I thought."

John wrapped an arm across Rodney's chest and another more or less around his head. "You can't. I haven't learned to meditate yet."

#

John knew he sounded like an idiot. And he didn't have time to cling to his Guide with five people still buried under rubble, but hell, Rodney had healed someone by the laying on of hands. For all John knew, his Guide might ascend and be gone forever if John turned his back to help rescue the others. He shifted his grip to pull Rodney carefully across the rocks toward where he heard the
remaining five heartbeats and three shields.

He was so focused on listening for heartbeats and watching for secure footing that he had to look up when Rodney said, "Isn't that Gabi's spirit animal?"

Sure enough, there was an aardvark waiting about where John heard the heartbeats.

"But Gabi's out already," Rodney complained.

"Still not smart enough to see the obvious." John gave a tug to keep Rodney moving as he added, "One of her Guides is down there."

"It's not like you need help to find them. And a spirit animal can't move any rocks."

John hoped the aardvark didn't mean that someone, possibly Shane, would need to be healed or brought back to life by laws of physics or shamanism beyond John's understanding. He declined to mention those thoughts to Rodney.

"It looks like it's sniffing for ants. Maybe it's showing us the best way in. Yes, look at the fall of the rocks. I bet there's a supporting wall to work with there." With that McKay had his shield on and was moving rocks from beside the aardvark. John hadn't really expected to give any orders once it was just him and Rodney.

Ronon snuck in and started digging before John had a chance to call him either. Rodney and the aardvark must have been onto something, because it took them only a few minutes to create a hole at least ten feet deep.

"Colonel," John heard from his left through the rocks.

"Lorne, what's your status."

"We have two civilian sheltered between two raised pools with our three shielded bodies braced above them."

"And injuries?"

"Nothing major yet, but we appreciate the timely rescue."

"Carrying the weight of the world on your back, Major?"

"Something like that, sir."

"Shane, any idea why Gabi's aardvark is assisting out here?"

"She led us to shelter between the grottos, and..."

"And what?"

"I think she wants me to pull something out of the Sentinel grotto."

John moved a rock and saw the face of a woman he didn't know. "Why, hello there."

"Colonel John Sheppard, meet Utha and right behind her is Otha. They're both Guides, evidently not Ronon's." Shane sounded only a little strained. John couldn't see him at all, though he identified Major Lorne as the first body holding rocks off the civilians.
"Pleased to meet you." John felt ridiculous, but he turned off his shield and extended a hand to help Utha through the opening they'd created. He wasn't sure he'd be able to tell her apart from Otha who clambered out right behind her. They both smiled at him, so he did his best to smile back. "Ronon, could you see these two make it to safe ground?"

Ronon grunted and led Utha and Otha away.

"Can any of you get out without more excavation?" John asked.

The aardvark ran past him into the hole, and John heard Shane answer immediately, "I'm on the far side and could duck under Teyla and Lorne. Then I think I need to turn my shield off and reach an arm between them into the pool."

"What makes you think that?" John was sure he wouldn't like the answer.

"Aardvark pantomime?" Shane replied.

At that point Rodney shoved his scanner in front of John's face and babbled something incomprehensible about Gabi's pet power readings and energy dimensions.

"But is it safe?" John asked his Guide.

The scientist shrugged and flipped through readings muttering about fluctuations and minions needing better documentation.

"If I'm understanding my scientist, he's in favor of Shane trying. What do you think, Lorne? Teyla?"

"I can hold a few more minutes," Lorne said.

"It is the least we can do to repay Gabi's spirit animal." Teyla didn't even sound out of breath.

"Make sure everything is stable before you lower your shield, Shane."

There was shuffling and a sound of rocks shifting. "Report," John said.

"A few rocks closed in where Shane was, but it looks okay now. He's turning off his shield and reaching into the water. Brushing up against our shields but the aardvark is guiding him. Aardvarks don't appear to like water in the snout. Huh, what's that? Looks like Shane has some sort of crystal and Gabi's spirit animal is ready to lead him out."

Then Shane emerged from the hole, tucking a shiny red stone into his tac vest right by a sopping wet sleeve. The aardvark rubbed against his calves and poked a snout up to Shane's hand. They both looked very pleased.

"I think she wants to take me back to Gabi," Shane said.

"Put your shield up, in case anything shifts."

Shane's shield activated instantly. It didn't seem to bother the aardvark at all as the spirit animal practically herded Shane out of the rubble by touch.

"Okay, Lorne, Teyla. Would it help for me to push in there with my shield on, or do you have a better solution."

"If you stand back a few feet," Lorne replied, "I think Teyla can duck under me and then I'll just dive out before this pocket collapses."
"With plans like that, I'm glad we have shields," John muttered.

"Yes, sir," Lorne replied.

A moment later, John, Teyla, and Lorne were pressed against the far side of the access John had helped dig. The space where five people had safely sheltered filled in with a roar of rock.

Beckett called over the radio, "Any injuries?"

"Everyone here is still standing," John replied.

"The rest of us are waiting beside the Jumper. Would it help to send Ronon back to you?"

"Nah, he's done enough. Be with you in ten minutes."

Gabi was awake and tracing the patterns of heat on Brett's back as she listened in and repeated everything said in the final rescue. She didn't like all the bruises she could feel forming on her Guide, but she was pleased to hear everyone was alive and mostly unhurt. It seemed almost impossible that they'd all survived the building collapse, even with the story she'd heard of McKay's nearly ascended healing of Isa.

Her aardvark had just led Shane out of the rubble when rocks crashed sending spikes of pain through Gabi's hearing. The next thing she knew Brett was petting her hair, and Shane and the aardvark were running to her. She couldn't hear, but she saw Brett's lips moving. Staring at his mouth, she tried to focus in on the words. Hearing snapped into place. "They're okay. Carson says they're all okay."

Gabi nodded. "I'm fine now. Should have pulled back my hearing when Lorne said it would collapse behind him." Shane and the aardvark crowded in, and Gabi found herself the center of a group hug or cuddle. When she looked up, Ronon was hovering just to one side.

"You can join us, if you want," Gabi said. "I never really got to explain everything I put together after my ride with the flagi, but I realized I knew the flagi was safe the same way I always knew Brett was safe. There's something like that with Shane, Blair, and you, though I didn't understand before. I think it's something in the vibrations that I picked up subconsciously even before I knew about the senses. I avoided touch most of my life, so I guess those instincts didn't do me much good, except to shut everyone out."

Ronon nodded and sank to the ground just in front of Gabi. Her aardvark shifted to nuzzle only one of Gabi's feet, and Ronon wrapped his large warm hand around her other ankle. "Not easy. Always heard lies people spoke."

"Even before you knew you were a Sentinel?" Gabi asked.

Ronon squeezed her ankle and nodded.

"Do you feel anything from this?" Shane asked as he pulled a large red crystal from his breast pocket.

Anin and Isa came close as the crystal caught the light, and Beckett followed behind them. Gabi reached out a hand and when her fingers brushed the crystal a simple vibration traveled up her arm. She couldn't place it at first.

"Let me take some sensor readings." Gabi reached into a pocket of her vest for her modified scanner
and realized the screen was cracked and broken. For a moment she wanted to cry. Then three hands and a snout stroked and squeezed her. Gabi couldn't help but smile. "Maybe the memory crystal will still work in another scanner. Let me try again with just my senses and memory. Something about that crystal's resonance is familiar."

Gabi traced a single finger down the red crystal. The vibration was known to her and yet struck her as off somehow. It reminded her of other vibrations that didn't sit well in her bones. Then she had it. "Wraith."

Anin and Isa stepped back and collided with Beckett who calmly asked, "Now?"

"No, sorry." Ronon let out a breath at the same time as the Osu. "It's the Wraith carrier frequency. It's the consistent component in readings I've taken from their weapons and their ships."

"It will guide them home," Anin said. "You must have called it from the spirit grotto. I could have helped with a ceremony, but I was distracted." He glanced guiltily toward Isa.

Shane stood and stepped beside them. "You'd only just bonded. I was acting as your shaman, and I did not know about that ceremony. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive." Anin looked like he might kneel, but Shane caught him by the elbow. "We each follow the shaman's path in our own way. I believe Sonin would want you to have this now." Shane gravely handed over the bag he'd taken from the shaman's room in town. It had survived clean and intact within Shane's shield.

Anin looked at Shane with more than a little hero worship. Gabi had to blink her eyes a few times and couldn't tell whether she was on the verge of laughing or crying. It didn't seem to matter much.

The moment ended as Lorne, Teyla and Sheppard approached quietly. From behind them McKay called out, "My Sentinel says you've identified the Wraith carrier signal in your gewgaw. Well guess what, he also proposed earlier that among the sixteen energy dimension in my Grand Unified Theory, one is associated with our spirit animals and another with the Wraith. So hop to it. We have a lot more research to do."

#

John left the physics lab where his scientist was alternately typing, writing on multiple white boards, and berating geniuses for not understanding his solution now that they finally had it. John had spent enough time walking and sensing his city in the past weeks to know Shane would be with Brett in the anthropology library, since he wasn't with Gabi and the physicists.

Sure enough, he found Brett and Shane whispering and pointing at a screen full of Ancient writing while Dr. Ng sent them scathing looks from the far corner. "Hey, is there someplace we can talk?"

Brett and Shane looked at each other before either of them looked up. Then Brett said, "There's a balcony." He gestured the way, and they all walked out together.

The sun had mostly set and a cold breeze was picking up, but John loved the clean smell. They wouldn't stay out long enough to get cold. "So, you know this plan to send all the Wraith to their native energy dimension?"

"I've heard McKay's theory," Shane said. "I know we were asked to help an iratus bug spirit that's chained to the Wraith Queen in stasis, and that Gabi and McKay think this could start a cascade effect to draw all the Wraith except Drones into an energy dimension where they possibly belonged in the first place. Energy from our spirit plane that's currently trapped in Wraith Drones should then
Sheppard nodded along, his own emotions held tight for the conversation they needed to get through. "Have you thought about what will be left of the Wraith if we succeed?"

Brett hadn't thought about it, but Sheppard wasn't asking him. He suddenly understood why the Colonel had dragged Shane out to a balcony to talk.

Shane didn't hesitate. "Dead Wraith bodies. Everywhere."

"Are you worried I'd challenge your military decisions?" Shane asked with his hands open wide.

"I honestly want your opinion. It's been pointed out that you may have unique insights in this area." Sheppard's hands were in his pockets.

"You want to know if I consider it genocide?" Shane stepped back to lean on the railing. Brett moved beside him wondering what else this could be about. Sheppard slouched against the other side of the balcony and waited.

"If Dr. McKay is right," Shane said, "then the Wraith were never meant to exist as both energy and matter. By his understanding, we are not killing the Wraith, just sending them back where they belong and leaving appropriated matter behind. If he and Gabi are correct, the Drones were never really alive at all: matter with no consciousness animated through a Wraith hive mind using stolen bits of spirit animals sundered from their prey."

Brett shivered at the brutal description and realized how cold and dark the balcony had become.

Shane continued in a level voice, "By his own admission, no one but McKay has a chance of understanding his reasoning anytime soon, so we have to take it on faith. Do you trust your Guide?"

Sheppard jolted out of his slouch. It was the strongest reaction Brett had seen from the Sentinel, ever. "How can I help it? He's my Guide and the best scientist we have. But even Zelenka felt a need to remind me that anyone is fallible."

"Meanwhile, the Wraith could wipe out another population if we delay. Are you asking me if genocide is acceptable if it turns out we are destroying a race? A species?"

Sheppard rubbed at the back of his neck. "I'm not asking for absolution. I think a good leader needs to understand as many points of view as possible. So I'm trying to understand. If you're the Shaman of Atlantis, don't you think you should at least consult on this?"

Shane looked down for the first time in the conversation. Brett moved closer and slid an arm behind him on the railing. "This is probably the time I least want to be reminded of my position," Shane said.

"Me, too," Sheppard answered immediately. Shane looked up to meet the Colonel's eyes, and Brett could almost feel something pass between them.

"I wish I could offer you the absolution you say you're not seeking." Shane seemed to draw power from somewhere as he spoke. He stepped into being a shaman the way their spirit animal sometimes
stepped into each of them. "I do not think your faith in your Guide is misplaced. I have a similar faith in my Sentinel whose spirit animal directed me to the crystal that provides the basis for what they hope to achieve. Between the scientists, the spirits, and the carnage in this galaxy, I think our feet are firmly placed on this path."

Brett wished he could say he'd thought it all through ahead of time, but he knew he'd have trusted Shane and Gabi regardless. Instead of looking reassured, Sheppard raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms.

"Now you're going to point out the downside, aren't you?" Sheppard sniffed and went back to his slouch.

"Even if most of Pegasus is happy to exterminate the Wraith by any means necessary, you know some factions on Earth, and at least a few here, will see this as genocide regardless. You know there are those who will later seek to kill or control all Sentinels and Guides, perhaps all those who walk the shaman's path. But those people have in the past and would in the future find reasons anyway: worrying that we steal soul energy from them, reckoning we can more or less read their minds, assuming we'll corrupt their youth with our deviant lifestyles." Shane managed a distinctly non-shamanic leer in Brett's direction at that. "The real question is how we will feel about ourselves. If we succeed, we can never truly know whether we sent the Wraith home and saved a galaxy or orchestrated the greatest genocide ever."

"You don't think I can pawn it off as the best military decision given the circumstances?" Sheppard sounded strong, but even Brett saw past it. He couldn't believe he was standing on a balcony watching Shane have this conversation with the military commander of Atlantis.

Then Shane reached out an arm and Sheppard stepped forward so Shane's hand could rest on his shoulder. Suddenly it was more than clear that both Brett and Sheppard could hardly believe they were standing on this balcony with the Shaman of Atlantis. Brett clung to the back of Shane's shirt, and Shane held the Colonel's shoulder firmly as he said, "The military decision is correct if it works. If any of us could shrug off the rest, I don't think our spirit animals would have chosen us."

When they finally made it back to their room that night, Shane threw himself down, face first in the middle of their bed. He was sprawled to mostly cover the center mattress, but Gabi needed to be near him. She kicked off her shoes and burrowed in on one side, tangling around one of Shane's legs and burying her face practically in his armpit. Instead of minding the strong smell of his sweat, she opened herself to catalog the strange ferric sulfurous scent of alien soil, the body odor of Shane's new apprentice, unexpected traces from Colonel Sheppard, and the remnants of Shane's own stress responses. Then she smelled the musty overtones of Wraith kills and started to shiver. Instead of pulling away, she burrowed closer, pushing herself partway under Shane.

She could hear Brett's breath catch, then his hand pressed firmly against her back. From the angle and the little sounds of cloth rubbing on cloth, she knew he was lying on the far side of Shane but wrapping an arm around both of them. Gabi didn't need to see. Her eyes remained buried under Shane.

"We need to talk," Brett said. "And if neither of you objects, I'm going to remove all of our clothes while we do so."

Gabi liked the idea of removing clothes. Washing sounded like too much work, but removing clothes would eliminate some bad smells and let her burrow closer. The zipper on Shane's jacket was practically under her fingers. She traced her way to the zipper pull and unzipped. As soon as she
finished she heard Brett murmuring to Shane, "That's it, just lie there and let me clear these off you.”

Shane relaxed as Brett eased the jacket off each of his arms. Gabi unzipped her own jacket and started to squirm out. Every movement also shifted Shane because of the way she'd cuddled up under him. But Shane was like a big heavy blanket, letting himself be moved in the manner of a boneless inanimate object.

Brett helped with Gabi's jacket. Then he rolled Shane's shirt up and off, and Shane moaned. Gabi nuzzled and kissed and gloried in the soft skin of her Guide's chest and shoulder. He was so warm, his skin so smooth and soft where she was. Most of the alien smells left with Shane's clothing and she could smell some cocoa butter hair product and something she associated with spring and plants even though she knew it was Shane's scent. She licked his skin and tasted that spring-ness but also salt and stress and how tiring the day had been as a shaman. It was almost like she could taste energies he'd drawn or passed through himself from other dimensions. Although Shane had never physically touched the water in the grotto, Gabi could taste something of that water on him. She found his nipple and lapped and sucked.

Shane groaned. Brett pulled them both closer and said, "Gabi, what are you reacting to?"

Whatever Brett was trying to ask, Gabi wasn't very interested in it. The taste and feel and sound of Shane were what she needed.

Brett's hand ran up and down Gabi's back. "Gabi, we've all had a long, emotional ride today. And you pretty much went from being attacked to withdrawing to an undersea adventure followed by today's visit to a destroyed village and a remarkably intact temple with its acolytes. You and Shane both probably know better than I do what went on when you touched the water there, but before anyone seduces anyone here, I need to figure out what everyone wants and if you're both fully in a place to consent."

Brett's words and the long stokes of his hand along her back made Gabi think. She was feeling overwhelmed and trying to escape thinking. But her Guides had both been through a lot today, too. She needed to think.

Pulling away from Shane and Brett's touch, Gabi sat up. She opened her eyes and blinked at Brett. He'd shifted up on one elbow but was still lying beside Shane. One of his arms still reached across Shane's bare back to where Gabi had been a moment before. His forehead was wrinkled with worry.

"I may not be firing on all cylinders, but I'm fully capable of giving consent. It seems kind of desperate and inappropriate, but I think I'm about as horny as I get. I don't want to be all separate, but I also wasn't really thinking." Gabi moved to Brett's side of the bed and started unzipping his jacket. He'd said he wanted their clothes off, and it seemed unfair that his clothes were all still on. "I remember what Shane said today about dying when he was eight. From how your body reacted, I think you freaked out as much as I did." Both Brett's and Shane's hearts raced at her calm reminder. They really needed to talk, but she went ahead and removed Brett's shirt as they did. "I think the part at the village was harder on you than on either of us. Then when we finally got back here and I escaped McKay's latest project, I just threw myself under Shane and left you to be the responsible one. I'm sorry."

Gabi pulled her shirt and bra off and wrapped herself around Brett, letting her arm line up under his where he was also holding Shane. They were all covered with bruises. Shane was still boneless and unmoving, but his heart thumped very close to Gabi's hand. The trust and closeness between the three of them almost choked her for a moment. How had she come to this in just a few months? How had she ever been given this?
Brett relaxed between Gabi and Shane. He'd almost thrown up when he saw the row of drained bodies at the edge of the village. He'd buried himself in the role of anthropologist to avoid dealing with the reality of dead bodies, and he'd clung to that façade and his role as Guide throughout the temple collapse and after returning to Atlantis. Now he thought of how Gabi had tried to bury herself under Shane when they came home, how she said she didn't want to be separate. Maybe it was too soon to talk about it, but Brett didn't feel right subsuming it all into touch and sex.

"What I saw today—" Brett swallowed and tried to make his voice stronger. "The corpses in that village were by far the most terrible thing I've ever seen. It made me angry and sick and I should probably talk to the psychologist at some point. But what bothers me more right now is that I'm pretty sure that wasn't the worst thing you or Shane had ever seen. It certainly wasn't as big of a deal for either of you. And yes, I want to ask Shane about what happened when he was eight, but I'll wait for an answer if I have to."

"You don't have to wait if you want to know." Shane didn't move from where he lay naked and limp in Brett and Gabi's arms. "We don't have Wraith in Africa, but I have seen massacres. I came home one day to find my village burned. I saw my parents and my sister dead, and I ran." Shane's voice sounded stronger than Brett's had. The shaman didn't move from his place on the bed, but he had clearly told this story before. "I remember it the way a child remembers. I thought I'd be safe if I crossed the river. The river was full of hippos. As I child, we were warned about hippos. They are nasty, vicious beasts. If they attack you, you will die. And they were everywhere, so I'd never learned to swim. On some level, maybe I knew I was meant to be killed by a hippo in that river. Somehow, I ended up on the other side with Inkentshane. A shaman I had never met before cleaned my wounds and explained to me that those who survived their first death and found their spirit animals traveled the shaman's path. I became his apprentice. I saw several ruined villages that first year. A band of raiders was seeking out communities that still followed the old ways of shamans, Sentinels, and Guides. They were targeting albinos, too. We never found out why. The raiders slaughtered and then burned. We spread information and warnings and the first modern network of shamans, Sentinels, and Guides in South Africa grew in response to that threat. Our Sentinels eventually identified and killed every last one of those raiders."

There was a long silence. Brett stroked Shane's hair.

Gabi said, "Mine."

Shane sounded fond and amused when he replied, "Yours."

"I wish you'd told us," was all Brett managed when he finally spoke.

Shane sighed loudly. "You wouldn't have understood before."

Brett wondered if Shane meant only Brett or also Gabi. Brett wasn't sure if it was something about Sentinels or something about Gabi, but he was certain that if they'd found Wraith or raiders in the process of destroying the village today, Gabi would have fought without hesitation. At the same time, he had trouble imagining her holding a gun on anyone. A couple days before, she'd disabled a Marine before he could leave more than a single bruise on her, but she hadn't confronted anyone about what she'd heard ahead of time. "Maybe you both need to stop protecting me from your experiences."

Gabi pulled in tighter, her bare chest pressing his back, her face buried in his neck and hair.

Shane said, "No one should accept another person's sorrows in whole."
"Don't go all shaman on me." Brett regretted the words as soon as they were out. "I mean, I love you. You should be able to tell me anything."

Shane moaned, "Anything, love, but not everything at once. I don't even want to think about it all at once."

Gabi squeezed them all tighter together with her strong, long arms. Brett remembered what she'd said before about not wanting to be separate and about being horny. Shane didn't want to be in charge, but he was pretty much always horny.

"I have an idea," Brett said.

"Okay," Gabi nuzzled his neck as if it was settled.

Shane made a contented humming sound.

Brett decided that was enough. He pulled out from between them and went to the dresser for the bag of Ancient vibrating stones.

Gabi glanced at him once and then pulled herself close to and partly under Shane. That suited his plans fine. He gathered a long Ace bandage he'd used for strained ankles and sore knees in the past, and set to work removing the remaining clothes from all three of them. Then he said, "Gabi, my idea involved you controlling the vibration of the stones. You can do whatever you like, but Shane and I would probably prefer to enjoy ourselves as long as possible before we come. What do you think?"

All she said was "okay," but Brett could see her start squirming more against Shane, and he was pretty sure the thought turned her on. So he placed one hand on Gabi and one on Shane and started stroking lightly along any skin he could reach. They were both such tactile people that he hardly needed to seek out sensitive spots. He put his love of them both into worshipping their skin. By the time he tucked a stone behind Shane's balls and one just under Gabi's clit, they were both already moaning. Gabi activated the vibrating stones immediately and they both shivered together.

Brett had a third stone in his hand. He was already half hard from petting and watching his lovers together. The vibrations of the stone in his palm seemed to travel through his whole body. He gingerly pressed the stone behind his own sack wondering how long he could last.

After a few deep breaths, Brett moved to the foot of the bed and started massaging, kissing, and licking his way up his lovers' legs. At the top of their thighs, he pushed his way between them so he could finger Gabi and lick Shane's balls. The two of them writhed and kissed above him. Brett shifted so he could wrap his mouth around Shane's mostly hard cock. He sucked all the way down and Shane's body jolted with pleasure. Brett sucked and licked until Shane was sloppy and wet. Then he rolled a condom on with his mouth and got him wet all over again. Gabi was wet and moaning by then. As Brett lifted his head and body up, it was easy to guide Shane's erection into her. The stones stopped vibrating for half a minute, and Brett wondered if Gabi had been that distracted or she'd sensed Shane was that close to coming. Either seemed possible from the way they were panting into each other's mouths. Shane undulated rhythmically on top of Gabi, and soon the stones were vibrating in what might have been a harmony to his movements. For long moments Brett knelt above them watching and not even touching himself.

When he leaned over them again, he continued with the touching, kissing and licking he'd started at their feet. Now he began at their hips and moved up Brett's back and Gabi's side. When he'd thoroughly explore both necks he whispered, 'I'm going to wrap your hips together and then I want to fuck Shane hard enough that Gabi can feel it. Gabi can tell me to stop or she can make us come
with the stones at any time if she wants."

Shane whimpered, and when the stones' vibrations faded to almost nothing, Brett was pretty sure it was to keep Shane from coming at just the thought.

Brett wrapped the Ace bandage so it mostly tucked under Gabi's ass and over the top of Shane's. It worked surprisingly well for keeping Shane deep inside of Gabi. Shane stopped thrusting and let himself go loose and pliant with only the smallest rhythmic rocking. Brett realized Gabi was devouring Shane's mouth in a very erotic kiss, and Brett knew Shane was deep in a non-verbal space of experiencing his body.

Grabbing lube and a condom, Brett opened Shane easily. He was so relaxed and eager. It didn't take long to have Shane stretched and slick. Brett slid in with one long glide then gave everyone a moment to adjust. His next thrust was hard and both Shane and Gabi gasped. Brett worried for a moment about Gabi being on the bottom for this, but she was very strong, and he trusted her to say if they needed to change positions. It took a few tries to find an angle and rhythm that worked for all three of them. Once he had it, they were all breathless and wanting. Brett challenged himself to keep it steady and draw it out for as long as possible. Gabi varied the rhythm for the stones a few times, and Brett wasn't sure who she was targeting each time, but it was all good. When Brett finally couldn't hold off any longer, Gabi matched his faster, desperate thrusts with a crazy intense vibration. Brett's whole body seemed to shake apart as he came and came and felt Shane contracting and coming and gasping and grunting.

At the end Brett pulled them all sideways, but it was Gabi who unwrapped the Ace bandage and then brought a cloth to wash them all off.

Jim didn't like the overarching smell of Lobamba, Swaziland. Garbage rotting in the sun he could isolate and ignore, but too many people smelled sick in various ways. It abraded his Sentinel instincts.

The Daedalus had beamed their team, the four of them from the island, directly into the target building. It had indeed been a palace for one of the Swazi queens and was supposedly being converted to house higher education and work programs. Jim heard surprisingly little chatter inside, only a few people moving quietly in offices and halls. The room they'd landed in was an unadorned but clean bedroom in the eastern wing, white walls, white desk, white bedcover. Through the open window Jim could hear wind chimes tinkling hypnotically, and instinct led him to mark and tune out that sound immediately. He saw Blair nudge Philip and tap his ear, probably warning him away from a partial zone on the chimes. Philip was a bit pale, his Sentinel senses still recovering from the Daedalus beaming system. The chimes hung from a ring of multicolored glass that probably projected distracting colors into the bare room at sunrise. Not a good environment for a Sentinel, especially with the room being so plain otherwise.

Once he'd dialed down smell, Jim studied the view beyond the balcony. Fields of reeds stretched in one direction. A little round hut sported a collapsing roof made from reeds supported by the remains of an old tire. Blair had explained something about Lobamba being the cultural center of Swaziland and hosting a coming of age reed ceremony. A quick visual inspection of nearby small dwellings showed reeds were still popular as roofing material. A donkey grazed on reeds beside a lone tree where two young mothers sat tending babies and chatting. By the way Blair's eyes darted around and his heart sped up, Jim could tell his anthropologist was excited to be visiting a new country, no matter what the reason.

Jim listened for SG-1. They were supposed to beam into the far western end of the building, one
floor down at ground level, closer to what should be a public area. Jim couldn't hear them, but took the silence as a positive sign that their arrival had passed undetected. What disturbed him most was that there seemed to be only a dozen people working in what should have been a busy development center.

"All quiet," Jim whispered, "Too quiet."

"Any sign of Lerato?" Blair asked.

Jim shook his head. He moved to the room's only interior door, cracked it open, and peeked out into an empty hallway.

He heard a distant voice with a sing song delivery at odds with the words say, "Please, if you care about Lerato stay still and don't make it obvious you're listening. There are cameras everywhere."

Jim stiffened at the unfamiliar voice speaking as if he knew a Sentinel was listening. There were no nearby heartbeats and no visible cameras. Jim held his position and motioned for the others to stay back, trying to look casual, as if wanting them to wait while he surveyed their surroundings. He wasn't sure at first if Philip and Tom had their hearing extended, but an increase in both their heartbeats suggested they we listening. Jim wished there was a way to tell his Guide without giving anything away. Then he felt Blair's hand rest against his back and wondered at how well the man knew him and could read his body language.

"There are white noise generators and sirens that can be switched on remotely. Everyone left in the building is armed at least with pepper spray, and some of us would be forced to fight you to protect others. My name is Sambulo. I am Lerato's Sentinel, as you would say it. The only other Sentinel here before you came has been in a coma for months and is hidden in the basement, so it is safe for us to talk. If you can take out Queen LaMatsebula, I will help you convince the others not to fight. But the Queen is a shaman and knows by your animal spirits that at least six of you are here. She has Lerato and four armed guards in an office at the center of the ground floor. They are surrounded by white noise generators in the belief that at least one of you may be a Sentinel."

Jim hesitated, knowing it could be a set up, not wanting to confirm that there was a Sentinel present and listening. Then he heard Jack respond, "Where are you and how will we know you?"

"I am guarding the east approach, but if the Queen sees by camera that I don't defend her, she'll cut off Lerato's fingers or worse until I obey. Words are all the help I can give you unless you free Lerato and defeat the Queen. My animal spirit is a lion, but they have shaved my head brutally in ritual. You may know me by my lack of hair and many scars."

Jim wanted to pass that last information to Blair. He wanted to ask Jack if they were changing plans. Or he wanted to be in charge of the mission so he could take matters into his own hand.

Jack asked, "What do you want us to do, teleport in and surprise the Queen? How would we even find the right room?"

Jim was sure Jack emphasized the word teleport as if giving a command or trying to signal Jim. Now he just needed to gather enough information and trip his team's emergency recall to the Daedalus.

"I can only hope you have a way to help my Guide and stop what is happening here. I have tried and failed. The room you want is exactly centered in the ground floor of the building. You can triangulate from the corners if you have blueprints. It sits directly in front of the main east-west hallway but only has one door onto a small eastern side hallway and a trapdoor leading to a basement room."
"If I approach along the main hallway from the west, how many guards will I have to disable?" Jack asked.

"She'll see you on cameras in any of the halls. There's one armed sentry watching the hall that way, but the Queen might send other staff to intercept. They aren't trained for this, but they are prepared with white noise generators, pepper spray, and probably things hidden from me as well. I would also be in sight to shoot you before you turned into the hall approaching her room."

"What about the basement or ducts between floors?" Jack continued.

"The basement halls have cameras, too. I don't know of any ducts large enough. Also, I think she must have picked you up on camera already. I hear a couple of people trying to move quietly in the west wing. Please don't kill them if you can help it. These people are barely more than slaves."

Jim decided he'd heard enough. Jack's team was known and about to provide a distraction whether they wanted to or not. Other than their spirit animals, Jim's team might be undetected, and Jack had basically suggested they could teleport into the central room.

Jim triggered his recall device. A moment later his team stood on the bridge of the Daedalus. Philip was covering his ears in dismay, and Blair moved to help him. Jim ignored the ringing in his own ears and turned to Caldwell, "Colonel, my team needs to beam immediately back to an occupied room on the ground floor at the exact center of the target building, triangulating from the corners. Colonel O'Neill's team has been spotted and should be providing a distraction. We expect to encounter a shaman who is in charge and is referred to as Queen LaMatsebula, four guards, and Lerato as a hostage. The shaman knows about Sentinels and is prepared. She can see spirit animal and counted our six. The only active Sentinel in the building seems willing to switch sides if we can rescue Lerato."

Caldwell tapped a button and said, "Novak, you hear that?"

"I've triangulated the room. Standard procedure would be to beam down a percussive grenade first to assure we weren't beaming the team into other people or objects—"

"Negative, we have a hostage," Caldwell interrupted.

"Which was why I was going to suggest we send a CO2 stun grenade two seconds before beaming the team down in a tight back to back formation," Novak finished in a small but relatively calm voice. Jim wondered if the scientists with SGA were hired to be calm under pressure or if they'd all survived so many end of world scenarios that other missions seemed like small potatoes by comparison.

"Sir, someone might fire on the hostage when startled," Tom said.

"Which could happen with us beaming into the room anyway," Jim said. "We don't have time for debate. Colonel, request beam down after the CO2 grenade as suggested."

At Caldwell's nod he ordered his team into a tight square back to back with Blair between himself and Philip. Blair said, "Dial down, guys. We don't know what we're going to—"

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Blair was cut off mid-sentence as they beamed into a small dark office. A cloud of particles hung in the air from the CO2 grenade or whatever it had encountered. Blair had just enough time to hear safeties clicking off guns all around before Jim leapt into Lerato’s lap where she was tied to a chair. He managed to capture the knife hand of the guard beside her, twist it behind the man's back, and
force the man to his knees forming a sort of human shield. Tom tightened their defensive square into a triangle, and suddenly there was silence.

Aside from Lerato, Jim, and the guard he’d grabbed, there were three armed men surrounding a woman in a long yellow gown with hair pulled up in an elegant bun. "You’re the Queen, I presume?" Blair hoped against hope he could talk them through the situation without anyone being hurt.

She smiled coldly. "Dr. Blair Sandburg. How nice of you to deliver yourself to my palace."

At that a piercing whistle sounded and a sprinkler in the room dropped something acidic that burned on Blair's skin and caused him to momentarily close his eyes. His next instinct was to assist the Sentinels who were probably hurting much worse than he was. In that instant, he heard a shot, felt a large hand grab his shoulder and a gun press his head from the other side.

Blair opened his eyes to find himself held hostage by one guard. Jim held onto the guard he'd originally grabbed, but his Sentinel's eyes were tight with pain. Another guard lay flat on the floor bleeding. The remaining guard stood in front of the Queen with his gun covering Tom and Philip, who pointed guns back at him in return.

"Sentinels are so protective of their Guides," the Queen said in deep, almost seductive tones. "I could probably convince yours to give up Lerato for you."

Blair and Jim locked eyes and silently agreed that was not an option.

"What people overlook," the Queen snapped her fingers to demand Blair's attention, "is how protective Guides are of Sentinels, and not only their own. You, especially, are reputed to have a gift for reaching out to other Sentinels. I have a Sentinel who has been in a coma for months now. Do I even need to threaten these others to secure your help?"

"If that's what you want, you could have just asked for my help." Blair tried to look toward Jim for any hint of a plan, but the hand on his shoulder moved to one side of his head, bracing him firmly against the gun on the other side.

"I am the Queen Mother. I do not ask the likes of you for favors. Now, you will come with me, and my Guards will not harm these Sentinels in your absence. You have made things much easier for me by bringing only Sentinels to protect you."

Blair jerked his head enough to see the guard who was kneeling in front of Jim and Lerato shift forward and start to stand. Jim sat frozen, the pained expression from before still on his face. Philip and Tom were like statues. All three still held their guns, but something seemed to have sent them all deep into a zone. Blair focused his usual patter mostly on Jim. "Come on, big guy. Follow my voice. This is a really bad time to zone out on me."

"Oh, it is not what you think," the Queen spoke carefully, a slow smile spreading across her face. "In addition to irritating Sentinel skin, our emergency sprinklers contain a mild paralytic, too weak for anyone but a Sentinel to respond to. They can still hear and see everything, although their eyes are probably starting to hurt. I'll have one of my men drag them someplace less prone to whatever transport you used to ambush us. If you don't want any of them damaged in transit, you will come with me. Now." Her voice was commanding, and Blair was ready to play along until he found a better opportunity.

Then a shot fired from Jim's side of the room. Blair instinctively ducked and kicked back to trip the guard holding a gun to his head. The guard went down and Blair grabbed the man's gun and
crouched on his back, staying low as more shots fired above him.

The next words Blair heard were unexpected. "We're safe now." Over the ringing in his ears and his head, it took Blair a moment to identify the voice and what must have happened.

"Lerato?" he asked.

"I shot them. They're all down, but I can't check them because this Sentinel of yours weighs a ton." He could easily recognize Lerato's voice from their occasional phone conversations and the one time before when they'd met in person, but she'd never sounded so solemn, so old. He looked around and started using the zip ties that came standard in his tac vest to secure the guard he was sitting on.

"I didn't know you could shoot." Blair said as he zip tied the Queen and the guard beside her.

"It would be stupid not to, but I'd never killed anyone before."

Blair moved to the guard Tom had shot before and finally the one just in front of Jim and Lerato. "I'm still not sure you have. Can you hold it together for a few minutes more?" Blair asked.

"After the last week, what could a few minutes matter," she sounded better, younger again, and Blair hoped the Queen and the two guards she'd shot would survive, just to ease her conscience.

Blair fished the recall device from Jim's pocket and pushed a side button for communications. If anyone nearby had the technology to listen in, which Blair doubted, he hoped they were like Lerato's Sentinel and eager to switch sides with the Queen out of the picture. "Colonel, this is Blair." He decided it was better not to use last names. "The other three members of my party are paralyzed. I think it's temporary. Lerato and I are fine, but the Queen and her guards are wounded. The spot we came down in is clear if you want to send a med team or reinforcements."

#

By the time Jim could move again, the mission was successfully completed. Jack's team had finished securing the building. Lerato had been reunited with her Sentinel. Jim sat on the chair where his paralyzed form had embarrassingly trapped Lerato for several minutes. At least, she'd made good use of his gun.

His Guide stood behind him massaging his shoulders. "Don't try to stand yet. Give your muscles time to recover and your system time to flush out the toxins." Jim would have been embarrassed at the attention, but Tom and Philip had medics pointlessly testing their reflexes and vital signs. It was hard not to feel smug with his Guide totally focused on and touching only him. He decided to assume it was a Sentinel thing and didn't mean he was an asshole for feeling that way.

Then Jack pushed open the door, trailed by the rest of SG-1. Jim sprang to his feet before even Blair could form words to protest.

"Looks like there really is a Sentinel in a coma downstairs," Jack said without preamble. "The guy taking care of him says he's a Guide but not the right Guide. He seems to have picked up from Queen whatshername that Blair might be able to help?"

"I don't know," Blair said.

"Can't hurt to try, Chief." Jim turned to pull Blair forward with a firm hand on his shoulder, partially reversing their position from just moments before while keeping himself steady. Blair shook his head and smiled as they followed SG-1 out the door. Tom and Philip seemed to take it as permission to stand and follow as well, although they were obviously a little off balance still.
In a basement area set up like a hospital room, they found an unconscious Sentinel hooked up to a feeding tube and IVs. He was clearly African, but his skin was as pale as Blair's and in a very unhealthy way. The man was emaciated but still had more muscle tone that Jim would expect of someone who'd been in a coma for months. At a guess, Jim would say the man was in his twenties, had been in good shape before, and received excellent physical therapy while he was unconscious.

On the far side of the bed stood a wiry dark skinned man in green scrubs, probably in his thirties, looking very strong and smelling very healthy for someone living in such an impoverished country.

"Are you the primary person caring for this man?" Jim asked.

"Yes," the man in scrubs answered.

"You have training as a doctor, nurse, medic, what?"

"I am a Guide and was apprenticed to a shaman before coming to Lobamba. I studied medicine on my own after being pressed into service here."

"And how hard were you pressed to keep a Sentinel in a state like this?"

"Jim," Blair pushed in front of his Sentinel and asked the African Guide, "I'm sorry. My name is Blair Sandburg. Could you tell me your name and what you know about this man?" He gestured to the unconscious man between them.

"You may call me Iqili." Iqili addressed himself solely to Blair but kept glancing at Tom who stood to the far right. "The Sentinel introduced himself to me as Mike. He came for the reed festival seven months ago. I was not his Guide, and he did not find one at the festival. He was placed in a room upstairs favored for encouraging Sentinels to zone." Jim's whole body tensed as he realized the chimes and colored glass ornament upstairs were a deliberate trap. "Then he was brought down here. I have not been able to bring him out of his zone since. He has not reacted to any other Guides here." Jim's fists clenched as he wondered what sort of scheme this man had been involved with. "I have kept him clean and nourished and moved his limbs in accordance with standards for coma patients that I read about and documented in my notes."

"And you think that's enough?" Jim asked, practically growling at the indignity of it all.

"It was the best I could do."

"You kept him a prisoner here in secret. Did you even try to consult a doctor? A shaman? A Sentinel?" Jim glared at Iqili, but the man's gaze only darted between Blair and Tom.

"Once Sambulo arrived, he came regularly to check on Mike. The only shaman I have seen other than the Queen is Lerato, who like myself is an apprentice. None of us have been allowed to leave this compound since we arrived."

"Sambulo and Lerato were hostage for each other. What keeps you here if Mike is not your Sentinel?" Jim asked.

Finally the man looked directly at Jim. "You are no better than the King and all the foreign powers he connived with and brought through here. You think because you are a Sentinel you know best and can order everyone else around. I don't have to tell you why I did what I did. Have you thought what would have happened to this man if I had been killed or removed?"

By the end of the outburst, Tom had worked his way around the bed and reached out a cautious hand to Iqiri's shoulder. "Hey, don't go painting Sentinels with a broad brush. Jim just wants to
protect people, including this guy you've been taking care of. I don't know what your story is, but no
one's going to blame you for any of this."

Jim was about to protest when Blair raised a flat hand in a gesture for silence.

Tom and Iqiri were staring at each other like they were the only ones in the room. Tom's hand
hovered a few inches short of touching, and Iqiri reached out to clasp it. Iqiri smiled. Tom
swallowed hard and said, "Does this mean…"

"I am meant to be your Guide, if you will have me."

Tom started to shake, just slightly, in a way only a Sentinel or someone watching for it would notice.
He nodded, and Iqiri stepped forward, pressing their bodies together and resting his head on Tom's
shoulder.

In the back of the room, Jack cleared his throat. "Danny, you think you could—whatever, just move
them out of here?"

"Wait," Iqiri clasped his Sentinel's arm firmly, but stepped several inches away. "I need to know how
you will help Mike. Even if you remove the Queen, Sentinels and Guides will be drawn to the
festivals here. Those who don't bond may fall into deep zones this way, and nothing I know will
help."

Iqiri was gazing at Blair again, naked hope written across his face. Jim wondered how he could have
judged the man so harshly, even if he still wished he knew the full story. He hoped Tom or Iqiri
might tell him later, but for the time being, his Guide was staring intently at the man in the bed. "I
don't have a magic cure, but I can try."

Blair reached out a hand and touched the unconscious Sentinel's arm. "Mike, I need you to listen.
There are people here who want to help, want to find your Guide and make you well again." Blair
was stroking the Sentinel's arm tenderly, uncovering a bit more as he pushed the blanket back to
Mike's shoulder. He rubbed Mike's arm harder and faster for a moment, warming the skin. "Can you
feel my touch on your arm? Can you feel the warmth? I need you to wake up and tell me what you
need."

At that, a blue and green crustacean with sharp claws and a pointy head appeared between Mike's
feet looking a little dried out and unhealthy.

"Hey," Philip said, "that looks like my spirit animal, but not as shiny."

"I think it must be Mike's," Blair said with a smile. Then he looked up at Iqiri. "Is your spirit animal a
fox by any chance?"


"If you were a shaman's apprentice, I'm guessing you won't mind hearing about a vision your
Sentinel had a few days ago," Blair said, still stoking the unconscious Sentinel's arm.

Iqiri's attention focused back on Tom, and while the two men kept their feet where they were, their
heads and torsos leaned towards each other as if magnetized. "You had a vision?"

"I saw us finding a fox, a raccoon, a lion and this weird lobster thing."

Iqiri smiled.
Blair prompted, "Who did the crustacean leave with at the end of your vision?"

"With you and Jim and Philip." Tom said the words like he wasn't even listening to himself.

"I think we're meant to take Mike with us. If I can't bring him out of this zone, maybe we'll find his Guide or some way to help him where we're going. But Tom didn't see himself going with us, so I think this is where we part ways. Does that sound right to both of you?"

Iqiri and Tom both nodded.

"Then I guess we should let you two go now?"

The new Sentinel and Guide pair smiled, and Iqiri practically dragged Tom from the room. Daniel bravely followed them, and Jim heard him giving a desperate talk about heath precautions and checking in with the appropriate SGC and military representatives.

Blair looked at Jack, "So we have pretty clear instructions from a vision and you heard what he said about foreign visitors, meaning it may still not be too safe for me on Earth."

Jack snorted. "I'll never hear the end of it from Daniel with both you and Carson on Atlantis."

"We plan to come back," Jim said quickly. "Maybe you two can visit next."

Jack shook his hand in the Hawaiian sign for party and called the Daedalus.

#

John ran into the gate room, just as Elizabeth said, "Lower the shield." He had his hand on his sidearm and was pleased to see the gate guards all had weapons ready as well when the first person stepped through.

Blair Sandburg pulling the front of a wheeled gurney was not what John expected, but he was trained to adapt fast. He tapped his radio and said, "Medical team to the gate room."

John didn't recognize the man on the gurney or the man pushing the other end. But Jim Ellison followed, pulling a wheeled pallet of supplies. The gate shut down behind him.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Atlantis," Elizabeth managed. "I'm guessing from the lack of prior notice, that you have something of a story to tell."

Sandburg smiled as he turned full circle taking in the beauty of Atlantis, "What a long, strange trip it's been."

#

Jim was glad to see his Guide smiling and to have a big, heavy pallet of supplies to lean on. With everything they'd been through, he hadn't stopped to think about going to Atlantis. He didn't mind the travel by wormhole. It left his muscles tense and his skin cold, but it was very Sentinel friendly compared to the Asgard beaming device. Now he was surrounded by an alien city that seemed to hone in on all his sensory preferences. The light streaming in the stained glass windows blended perfectly. The air was clear and smelled salty and fresh without the usual hints of mildew and decay from places unseen. Footsteps and voices sounded clearly but without annoying echoes. John didn't want to know what he'd feel if he touched something here. The whole place was one big Ancient device.
Blair was happily filling Sheppard and Weir in on recent events, and Jim knew he had to be here with his Guide, at least until O'Neill sorted out the threats on Earth. It should have been a perfect Sentinel vacation. Except Jim didn't want a vacation. He needed to be back in Cascade, or at least back on Earth. Clashing sounds, flickering lights, and lingering unpleasant smells were his home and his work. Atlantis might suit his senses, but as Blair would say, Jim needed to protect his territory and his tribe. Other than Blair, this wasn't it.

The medical team rushing in was almost a relief. Even with perfect acoustics, the sounds of rushing feet and beeping instruments were annoyingly familiar. Then someone called out, unscheduled off world activation. Jim's pallet was pulled away from the base of the ramp. Jim moved to put himself between Blair and whatever might come through the gate.

He was more than a bit surprised when two animals, one furry and one a now familiar crustacean ran out of the Ancient puddle just as half a dozen other animals poured into the gate room through a side door.

#

Brett and Shane had been giving the Osu a more in depth tour of Atlantis now that they'd all had a chance to sleep and recover. They were heading toward a greenhouse when suddenly all six of their spirit animals appeared and paraded down the hall in the opposite direction.

Brett turned to follow even before Shane could ask, "Is everyone seeing the spirits now?"

The four Osu all nodded with big eyes and clasped hands.

Shane motioned for everyone to follow, which was a little strange when the animals walked through some people in the halls who couldn't see them. Overall though, it wasn't so different from the semi-random tour they'd been leading. Shane took Brett's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I don't suppose you know where or why they're leading us?" Brett asked.

Shane shook his head but kept a hold of Brett's hand until they entered the gate room to find two new spirit animals, one infari and one shoff coming down the ramp from the gate.

Shane's African wild dog moved forward as if he knew what was going on. He touched noses with the shoff, which was basically a shaggy Pegasus dog or wolf or something. The only one they'd seen before was Ronon's, which was larger and a bit mangier.

Shane said, "Lower the shield. We need to let their bondmates though."

"What?" Weir asked.

At the same time Sheppard said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

McKay called out from behind Brett and the Osu, "Out of my way! What is this the Ontario Science Center? How am I supposed to work when the gate room is clogged with useless gaping tourists?"

"Pleasure to see you again too, McKay."

Brett identified the sarcastic voice as Jim Ellison and made an effort to see past Shane, a medical team tending someone on a gurney, and the buff cop-Sentinel to spot his research advisor, Blair Sandburg, who hadn't sent him any communications after a cryptic warning to keep some of his Sentinel and Guide findings to himself. Brett wanted to ask what was going on and what brought Sandburg to Atlantis, but unfortunately McKay was right about the gate room being too crowded to
Then a somewhat worn infari was jumping off the gurney to join Shane's dog and the visiting animals on the gate ramp.

McKay had somehow made it up the stairs to the level above the gate and was shoving someone out of the way. "I don't have time to explain to you the energy readings Gabi and I picked up when the gate activated this time, but there's bonding energy involved, and I have competed my Grand Unifying Theory and know how to use that bonding energy to solve the Wraith problem. The physics is completely beyond everyone in this room, or on Earth, so you'll just have to take my word for it."

As soon as the shield disengaged, a man and woman dressed in leather clothes and what might be alligator boots rushed through the gate.

"We seek help," the woman said.

"We have found a Wraith hive and the Wraith are waking."

"No, no, no," McKay ranted as he closed the gate. The new arrivals glared up at him, and Brett was glad they weren't too close. "The first step to defeating the Wraith is to channel bonding energy into a bridge to guide our trapped Wraith Queen to the Wraith Energy Dimension."

"Trademark!" Sheppard called out playfully despite the gun in his hand.

McKay ignored his Sentinel, and Brett didn't know what to make of any of it. Then his own Sentinel was shouting across the room at McKay.

"Look at the readings in this room, McKay. We need bonding energy and the spirit animals provide." Gabi was waving her tablet in front of her as she tried to clear a path to the stairs. Brett moved to help her, but she slipped between people and pushed until she closed the distance to her advisor.

Sheppard just smiled, and Brett knew they were both amused at how Gabi and McKay could be so alike in both physical and mental determination. As the two scientists started arguing and pointing at read outs, Shane stepped up on the ramp. In a calm but serious voice that somehow made everyone but the arguing scientists fall silent, he said, "As the Shaman of Atlantis, I believe we approach a turning point in the war against the Wraith. If there are unbonded Sentinels and Guides among you who feel drawn to someone in this room, please seek that person out. But I ask that you go no further in your bond than holding hands until we understand what the spirits and scientists have planned for today."

Then there were people in motion. It was like a dance. Brett felt isolated with both Gabi and Shane absorbed in important tasks, so he used the easy shifting of people around the room to wind his way around to Sandburg.

In somewhat hushed tones Sandburg greeted him, "Good to see you, Brett. Sorry about the obscure warnings and lack of communication. Any chance you could fill us in on who all these people are?"

Ellison stared expectantly as if he'd asked the question.

Brett put his own questions on hold and explained about the four Osu they'd rescued the day before while pointing them out. "I don't know who that is holding hands with both Utha and Otha, but it looks like the disapproving military types might have another threesome to complain about. You think they'll be happier that it's one guy with two women?"
Blair snorted. "Whoever would guess that the choice of bondmates would be harder for society to accept than enhanced Sentinel senses?"

"I guess Philip's more accepting of a harem than of the whole gay thing," Ellison said. Brett saw Sheppard smirk, and he was pretty sure Weir also heard but was trying to hide any reaction.

"He's young and adaptable." Blair waved a hand as if wiping away misconceptions. "We need to keep our assumptions out of this as well. Remember, he grew up with two sisters. Who's that?"

Brett looked where Blair was pointing. "That's Ronon. He's an awesome fighter who spent seven years running from the Wraith. I felt bad when neither Utha nor Otha turned out to be his Guide, but that warrior guy looks much more his type."

Ronon and the man who'd come through the gate last weren't touching but were unashamedly checking each other out. Their animal spirits, both furry black shoff, were eagerly smelling each other in very doggy places.

Brett looked for the woman with the leather clothes and alligator boots and wasn't surprised to find her leaning over the bedridden man whose less than healthy looking infari spirit bumped enthusiastically against the new woman's infari. "What's his story?" Brett asked.

Blair shook his head sadly. "Held prisoner for months in a massive zone out set up by the former Queen Mother of Swaziland. Turns out Swaziland may be tied into some international conspiracy to capture and control Sentinels and Guides." Weir and Sheppard turned toward Sandburg, no longer hiding their eavesdropping as Blair shifted to more political news. "Part of why we were sent here was to get me away after the US Navy was lured into a plan to kidnap me that also involved mistreating Philip and a couple of other ATA positive sailors to get them to activate as Sentinels."

Brett wondered to himself if that was before or after Sandburg tried to warn him about identity and security issues, but aloud he asked, "Is it going to be a problem if he bonds with two Pegasus natives?"

Blair looked up at Weir and said, "I'm hoping we can come up with ways to avoid a whole host of problems as Sentinels and Guides become known here and on Earth. O'Neill and Jackson are pulling what strings they can back home, but I'm thinking with your diplomatic expertise, Dr. Weir, and the unique situation out here, we might form a proposal of our own."

"An intriguing challenge," Weir answered calmly. Then she raised her face to where McKay and Gabi were approaching the railing, "But we may have to deal with a more immediate situation first."

"Listen up," McKay called from above, "I don't have time to dumb this down anymore. The Wraith as you know them are the aftermath of a failed experiment about the nature of ascension. Whether or not they were ever meant to have a physical existence, all the Queens and probably the more intelligent soldiers are basically caged energy beings who were supposed to move to an energy plane after their hibernation state. By this time they've all hibernated at least once, so I'm going to fix the bridge to that dimension that the Ancients broke. The first time is going to require a broad source of bonding energy and would work best in a controlled environment. So Sheppard and I are taking the new threesome down to the underwater mining station. I need Miko, Carson, Sandburg and Ellison, too. Get ready. Chop, chop."

McKay clapped his hands and turned away as the room exploded in questions. Gabi stepped forward and silently glared down at the room until everyone finally gave up and quieted down. "Okay, I can tell you the rest of our plan and answer some questions. But basically, McKay is much smarter than us, and his group is going to be limited by travel time to the mining platform and, well," Gabi's eyes
shifted to confirm McKay had already left the room, "Some other personal stuff that he may not be able to do much longer."

At that Sheppard was shoving his way out of the room.

"What?" Sandburg whispered to Brett.

Fully aware that Ellison could hear every word he whispered back, Brett said, "McKay got caught in an ascension machine. He's been getting smarter by the hour and also seems to have super hearing and some healing powers. Sometimes he glows a bit. He says he'll be smart enough not to ascend, but Sheppard tried to learn meditation so he could try to ascend with him if need be, and honestly, Sheppard couldn't find his center if you drew an arrow to his chakra. Yesterday, Gabi's aardvark helped Shane retrieve a red crystal that Gabi claims has some vibration pattern essential to Wraith technology. McKay says it identifies one of sixteen dimensions in some theory he developed to explain all of Earth and Ancient physics."

"So why does he want me and Ellison along?" Sandburg didn't seem quite so grown up as he said it, and Brett realized their relationship had changed over the weeks they'd been separated by the Atlantis mission. They'd both gone through a lot. Or maybe Sandburg had never really seen himself as the older and all knowing shaman and Sentinel-Guide expert that others made him out to be. Maybe Brett had boggled as Sandburg's vast accomplishments and life experience before. Now they weren't exactly equal, but Brett understood a lot more than he had before coming to Atlantis. Sandburg was still Brett's advisor, but at the moment they were all dealing with a new and unexplored phenomenon.

"Honestly, I think it bothers McKay that Shane, Gabi, and I are younger and students. He's not really comfortable with the shamanic and spirit plane side of things, but when you get the Wraith Queen out of stasis, you'll see there's a miserable spirit animal tied to her. It wants our help but can only partially manifest, sort of translucent, in this reality. Shane was able to comfort it some on our spirit plane, but I guess you're going along to sort out whatever the science can't completely control in getting it and the Wraith Queen to some other plane or dimension."

Blair surprised Brett by pulling him into a hug. "Thanks for bringing me up to speed. I hope we have a chance to talk later."

Brett tried to smile at Ellison who was looking a bit shell shocked and clearly wanted to grab his Guide away. "Sure, good luck," he whispered to both of them.

As they left, Blair tuned back in to what Gabi was saying. "So, Stackhouse, Markham, and Ronon will take a team to the planet with the hive ship. They'll try to limit damage and get the lay of the land, but ideally it should go in this order: McKay's team builds the bridge to the Wraith dimension and sends the local Wraith Queen through. Our team here stabilizes the bridge and filters out any spirit bits from Wraith drones or," and she paused but went on with a steady voice, "other casualties, so at least they can be put back together on our spirit plane. Then, when it's all ready, Ronon's team can help the rest of that hive along if the bridge doesn't just suck them in." Gabi looked down and caught first Shane's and then Brett's eyes. Brett didn't know what he was looking for, but he held her gaze and tried to show how willing he was to do whatever she needed. "Okay, the group working from here will reconvene in the exercise room near the infirmary. We need to clear the gate room so the Jumper can leave for the mining station and then the team going to the planet can form up."

#

John pushed into the office off the physics lab where Rodney was throwing equipment into a box. He expected an argument but barely had his mouth open when Rodney pinned him to the wall and
shoved a hand down his pants.

"I know you're worried I'm going to ascend. I don't have time to talk you out of it or explain more. But this is one of the Ancient meditation devices I mentioned." Rodney pressed something smooth and round behind John's sack and rolled his balls once, gently, before withdrawing his hand. John was too shocked to even get hard. "I'll put one of the stones in my navel." Suiting actions to words, Rodney positioned a small black stone on himself. "I can make them vibrate like this." The stone started vibrating, and this time John's body reacted fast. He was half hard when Rodney stopped the vibration. "Now listen to me, John Sheppard," Rodney caught John's chin in his palm and held him so their eyes met from only a few inches apart. "You're my Sentinel. You're perfect to me, and I will never leave you. If somehow I started to ascend, I'd send the energy signature for where I was going through the stones and you would follow me. It doesn't matter if you're lousy at meditation, I know you're stubborn enough to pull it off if you need to. Which you won't. Now go do your work and let me do mine."

Rodney practically pushed John out the door just as both of their radios announced that their team was ready.

#

The Wraith Queen in stasis was disturbing. Blair liked to think of himself as an open-minded guy, but he was more than a little ashamed when he muttered the phrase "catfish kink" under his breath and both Jim and Sheppard chuckled. Blair glanced over at Carson, the other Sentinel in their group, and concluded the doctor wasn't listening. The man had brought a crash cart with a small medical center worth of supplies. Blair was pretty sure Carson wasn't that worried about the Wraith. While Sheppard was covering with humor, Carson and Miko were unashamedly watching McKay's every move.

"You," McKay pointed to Miko, "monitor energy readings from there." He pointed to an existing console, and Miko quickly set up two alternative monitoring devices beside it. Carson decamped his medical supplies beside her without being told. "You," McKay handed Blair the red Wraith crystal and motioned toward Philip, Utha, and Otha, "help them bond and then focus the energy along that crystal's frequency. Your Sentinel should be able to hear it and share that with you. I'm thinking you're more the meditation type and we can keep this bonding within everyone's comfort zone since, hey, who really wants to have sex in front of a Wraith?" He glanced at Sheppard who gave an exaggerated shoulder shrug and come hither look. McKay snorted and waved his hands in the air, "Also, keep my Sentinel from doing anything stupid with the Wraith Queen or accidentally stumbling into any of the energy dimensions."

"What?" Blair and Sheppard both asked in unison.

"The point of this exercise is to open a way for Wraith to cross to an energy dimension without any of us getting stuck there. If John stays here, I know I won't ascend, but I'm going to have to go all glowy and show the Wraith Queen how it's done. He needs to not freak out and try to kill the Wraith Queen or try to follow me in between dimensions or whatever the hair in his brain tells him to do this week."

McKay turned to the stasis pod to hook up two Ancient devices and a mess of wires that looked like the guts from cheap Earth speakers. Sheppard had lost any pretence of being cool or amused and slipped into stone faced soldier mode. Blair recognized the signs and was prepared to bring Sheppard back on track when Jim stepped in instead. "Lucky you, you get to be a rock today."

It wasn't quite the opening Blair would have used, but his Sentinel had the situation in hand. Blair started unpacking the blanket he'd brought on which to gather his little meditation and bonding
ceremonial circle.

John didn't want to be a rock. Or an island. He'd rather have sex in front of a Wraith, so long as it stayed in stasis. He glanced at the stasis chamber and realized even he might not be able to get it up in front of that. At least Sandburg was setting up his blanket in a corner that didn't have a clear view of what they were about to do.

Rodney was connecting wires from his head to some device that also connected to the stasis pod. John didn't like the looks of that.

"Hey, Sheppard, you hearing me?" John looked at Ellison and wondered if the man had said anything after the rock comment. Ellison chided, "Maybe you should choose a position outside the Wraith's line of sight, just in case."

"Sure." John knew the man was trying to help. Still, John couldn't avoid wishing that if they had to do this they could have brought Shane, Gabi, and Brett who already knew about the frequencies, crystals, Wraith, and this underwater station. But from a tactical standpoint, John could see why Gabi and Rodney had to be with separate groups. They were lucky another shaman had shown up right when needed so Shane could stay with his Sentinel. Of course, it wasn't really luck if the spirit animals set it up. John wondered if the spirit animals would help him keep McKay. John's raven showed up then, riding on the back of Rodney's beaver. It was almost like they came when called for once. John tried to take it as a good sign and not an omen that even the spirit animals were worried.

He looked around the room and saw Ellison had joined his Guide and the new triad. They were all cross legged with eyes closed listening to Sandburg chant something. John was tempted to listen but tuned Sandburg out of his hearing instead. If his only job was to stay out of the spirit plane, he didn't want to take any chances.

At that moment the stasis pod cycled off. Rodney pressed his eye closed until wrinkles radiated out around his face. John glanced to Carson and Miko to make sure everything was okay, but they were both busy flipping through readouts on their gadgets. He wasn't sure either of them noticed Rodney's pained expression. John started to step toward his guide and almost tripped over the raccoon. His raven flew up to his shoulder. It didn't do anything silly like pecking or pressing up against his head. The spirit raven sat on John's shoulder and watched Rodney without blinking. That helped.

John sniffed the air and could tell his Guide wasn't particularly frightened or stressed. He smelled like a busy, hardworking Rodney who hadn't showered since morning and had dripped coffee someplace on his person, but his sweat didn't smell sour like when a needed system was failing. His Guide's heartbeat, which John couldn't help but listen to and therefore hadn't consciously noticed, was even and slow as well. John compared Rodney's pulse and respiration to those meditating and found Rodney was currently the calmest person in the room. That led him to notice a bit too much about the scents and heart rates of the new triad forming. All three were fully clothed and merely holding hands, but the Sentinel's fingers were circling and stroking his Guides' hands, and he was breathing deeply as the young women responded.

Then suddenly a huge, translucent screaming black insect appeared in front of the stasis pod, and every heartbeat in the room spiked, except for Rodney's.

Gabi had settled into the rhythm of gathering energy and lumping it together. She felt her Guides within her rhythm and Teyla and Lorne completely together on a nearby string that moved in time
with her own. She missed Ronon's presence in her spirit plane, but she felt the new Guide, not yet bonded to her Sentinel, but holding him tight in his hospital bed. She kept rhythm with the process naturally, and Gabi could just make out the counterpoint that would add into her bonded vibration pattern soon. Then something terrible happened, a ripping sensation that tore the energy they gathered into tiny particles that would take forever to collect. Someone was torn away. At first Gabi thought a string had broken, but then she realized Shane was missing.

Gabi recreated the vibrational pattern of herself and her two Guides. She tried to hear someplace where he could have landed, in a different pattern or by himself.

A sudden motion, like being launched from a catapult sent Gabi sailing into a hot dark place filled with sound, vibration, and a very bad smells. It was still pitch black. Gabi dialed down smell without taking time to fine tune anything. The ripping sensation she'd felt before hit her ears as an eternal high pitched scream. Gabi tuned the scream way down in her hearing. Only then could she hear the words. Her Guide was speaking. Both of her Guides were speaking.

"It's okay. Calm down," Shane said.

"It hurts. Where are we?" Brett sounded like it hurt lot.

"It's not your pain Brett. Think about healing it, or let it go. We need to help this girl learn to fly."

"Is that the Wraith's spirit animal?" Brett still sounded hurt, and Gabi moved closer.

"More like the Wraith is her physical anchor. This being was never meant to be bound to our plane, certainly not for so long. It's like she's scarred and traumatized from fighting against her leash for so long." Then Shane was clearly talking to the energy creature again. "Calm down. Remember me? You calmed down before. We can fix this now. Let us help."

As John, and everyone in the stasis pod room except Rodney, stared at the loud black alien, two spirit animals appeared beside it, a cheetah and African wild dog. John barely had time to wonder about Gabi when the aardvark started sniffing its way closer from across the room. Then the three crustaceans from the newly bonding triad followed their pointed heads forward as if they were sniffing for food. Soon there were six spirit animal sniffing and huddling around the loud black thing. Finally it quieted down.

Then the African wild dog started pawing at the floor, pulling at a strand of light that connected the black insectoid to the Wraith Queen. The cheetah pulled sharp claws across the cord. It frayed but didn't break. The Wraith Queen opened her eyes and in a rough two-toned voice shouted, "No!"

The Wraith Queen tried to leave the stasis pod. An invisible force seemed to hold her back. Rodney's heartbeat slowed. Jim tried to step forward but the raccoon sat on his feet and the raven clawed into his shoulder. "No!" John shouted back.

Jim noticed the drop in McKay's heart rate right before Sheppard shouted. He thought it might be part of whatever nearly ascending required, but he whispered the change to Blair just in case. They'd all been a bit distracted by the spirit animal floor show, so Blair started chanting, "Focus on each other."

Jim's jaguar, which had been cuddling with Blair's wolf through most of the meditation, stalked toward the Wraith Queen. Jim went on high alert. It didn't ease his mind much when his jaguar
stopped where the spirit animals were piled all together and started pulling one of the blue crustaceans away by the tail. The creature snapped its claws toward the jaguar's nose, but only succeeded in clipping one whisker. The jaguar seized the moment to bat the creature back to the meditation circle with a single swipe of his paw. The other two crustaceans looked around then, and the jaguar herded them back where they belonged. As soon as his jaguar settled back by Blair's wolf, Jim found himself in the blue jungle.

The crustaceans had settled into a burrow under some tree roots together. Philip was holding his two Guides as they leaned against the base of the tree. In this plane, the three had their hands all over each other, but they were still clothed and relatively chaste.

Jim wanted to curl up and neck with his Guide, but Blair was for some reason sitting up in a tree with the red crystal dangling from a string like a solo wind chime. The wolf and jaguar came charging into the clearing, looking expectantly up at Blair who said, "Now everyone, it's time. Jim, tap the crystal."

For a jungle vision, it was surprisingly straight forward. Jim tapped the crystal and a very high pitched sound spread on the breeze. The threesome started kissing, and Jim jumped jaguar-style up to the branch where he could kiss his Guide.

John saw the black creature become more and more translucent. The cheetah kept clawing at the cord until it didn't look like even a beam of light still connected. Jim's vision adjusted until he couldn't find the faintest smudge of the being that had been tied to the Wraith Queen.

The cheetah, dog, and aardvark vanished instantly rather than fading away.

The Wraith Queen seemed to collapse in on herself, not like an aged corpse, but more like an empty balloon. Rodney remained, still as a statue beside her.

The five members of the meditation circle were perfectly still, fingers no longer even rubbing across palms. The three crustaceans were piled tightly together. The wolf and jaguar formed a yin yang symbol.

Miko said, "My readings correspond to a bridge forming along the correct wavelength. Power levels seem to be adequate from bonding and ascension."

"Aye, Rodney hasn't stabilized yet. Did he leave a back-up plan in case he didn't come out on his own?"

Miko shook her head and looked at John.

John tried again to move toward his Guide, and again the beaver and raven held him back. He thought about the black meditation stones, but Rodney had only talked about sending a signal to John, and only to send John the frequency to ascend. Shoving his hands into his pockets in frustration, John felt the personal shield he'd brought along just in case. Stroking a finger along the crystal, he could faintly hear the vibration unique to his bond with his Guide.

"Something's changing, improving," Carson said.

Miko's eyes flicked between her read outs and John, as if she had guessed what he was doing.

John tried focusing in on Rodney's breath, heartbeat, and scent—all the reassurances he sought when grounding himself. He tried to tie them to the vibration he pulled out of his crystal.
"Och, no, changing for the worse again," Carson muttered.

John felt his own heart pound in panic. That gave him an idea. He focused on his own heartbeat and breathing. He zeroed in on his own scent, something he almost instinctively tuned out. Then he layered all that onto the feel of his thumb stroking vibrations from the crystal he and Rodney had charged together, by kissing, much as Rodney insulted the process.

John was so caught up in his efforts that he almost missed Rodney's shuddering deep breath. But some part of his brain was always attuned to Rodney. John looked up in time to see Rodney's eyes flutter open. This time, the spirit animals surged forward with him.

Rodney accepted John's hug and the spirit animals' brief touches but muttered, "I told you my genius was more than capable of inventing an all encompassing theory of physics, channeling it to remove the Wraith, and keeping myself from ascending. Do none of you listen, or are the words I'm using still too big?"

Gabi felt a new vibration and somehow knew it was the bridge to the Wraith dimension opening up. Her Guides were back in tune with her, and they'd returned to the task of gathering tiny specks of spirit, and the occasional larger bits that indicated the Wraith were still killing or being killed somewhere. Of course, that could be in the past, since she wasn't sure how time and spirit matter flowed through her spirit plane.

Then she felt a three part vibration on a string far away from her own. It made her happy to know the other triad had bonded. The complicated harmony of their bond was beautiful, but something made it come at her from two separate directions. Gabi reanalyzed all the data coming in from the bounce patterns and trajectories of the many tiny particles and vibrating off many strings parallel to her own. The new bridge ran parallel to the strings, but blocked off a wide section like a tunnel, so none of the energy they were collecting could flow in. Still Gabi could feel the flow inside the tunnel, very slow, but perceptible. And she could feel that the new triad's string was on exactly the opposite side from her own.

Then Gabi noticed something odd. If the new tunnel was the center of a clock and her string passed through twelve with the new triad's string at six, then the strings nearest to the tunnel at three and nine were incomplete patterns but known to her. Three was where Ronon had shown up before. The other, at nine, held the new warrior woman who was working with them while comforting her recovering Sentinel in his hospital bed. If each of those strings vibrated harder right beside the new tunnel, Gabi was almost certain the energy passing through the tunnel would move fast enough to pull other Wraith toward their energy dimension.

Unfortunately, Gabi didn't know how to communicate that across her spirit plane, and she thought it might be time critical for the planet where Ronon was helping fight a wakening Wraith hive.

Gabi pulled back out of her spirit plane, remembering to dial down vibration and check her other levels. For a moment she was proud of herself for pulling out so easily. Then she realized how tired she was and wondered if she'd be able to get back. Shane and Brett both squeezed her hands simultaneously, and she took that as them promising to hold her place.

Reluctantly, she let go of her Guides and pulled up to her feet. She was wearing the fuzzy socks she sometimes slept in and still liked for meditation. Putting on shoes seemed like too much work, so she padded down the hall to the infirmary to talk to a Sentinel she barely knew about bonding.

When she neared his bed, the gaunt man opened his eyes. Gabi wondered if this might be asking too
much, but the vibrations still thrumming through Gabi from her spirit walk said it was necessary.

"Hello, I'm Gabi Hansen." She spoke quietly so as not to disturb the Guide who appeared to be asleep beside the man, but who Gabi knew was also actively at work on the spirit plane.

"I am Mike Sall," the man rasped out. Gabi saw a glass of water with a straw on the tray by his bed and held it out for him to drink. "Thanks."

At that point his Guide woke up and glared at Gabi. "Sure, look, I'm sorry to bother you, but maybe you know we're making a bridge to take the Wraith back to the energy dimension where they belong?"

Mike blinked slowly as if he needed time to think. His Guide nodded, "We know."

"Well, the bridge is up, and it works, but it's not moving energy fast enough to create a vacuum that would suck the rest of the Wraith in."


"Okay, so this is hard to explain, but in my representation of the spirit plane I can sense vibrations sent out when people bond. And if the two of you feel at all up to bonding, any way you can do it—anchoring all five senses, or meditation, or anything—that energy would get things moving through the bridge faster and we might be able to save more people in the current battle with the Wraith."

Both Sentinel and Guide blinked at her and said nothing.

"Really, I'm not crazy. Do you want me to get the Shaman of Atlantis to come explain it or help you with some kind of meditation bonding ritual?"

The Guide's lips twitched up at the corners. Gabi didn't mind. She knew her social skills amused people, but that worked in her favor as often as not. Right now, she'd take anything she could get.

"Your spirit animal," the Guide said, "she is sand colored, with a furry middle but a long tail, nose, and ears that are not so furry?"

"Yes, that's her," Gabi said with pride.

"She is not so pretty, but she is very good at cleaning up the spirit plane. I cannot see the new bridge well, but I will take your word. If you pull the curtain and ask the people here not to interrupt, we can complete a gentle bonding."

Gabi knew she was smiling too big as she pulled the curtain. Gabi passed on the request for privacy without telling any of the infirmary staff that she'd asked the new pair to move ahead with bonding. Instead, she ran all the way to the control room.

Weir listened politely to Gabi's request to contact Ronon and told her Lorne was acting military commander until Sheppard returned, so Gabi would have to ask him. Gabi hurried back to the meditation room so fast that she was practically skated in her socks. Something told her time was running short.

Back in the meditation room Gabi struggled to calm her breathing. She knew Teyla could easily maintain what she was doing in the spirit plane without Lorne. The trick was pulling the Sentinel out of the circle without disturbing everyone else. When she couldn't come up with any more clever strategy, Gabi tried whispering his name.
Lorne's eyes opened immediately, and Gabi knew he had kept his senses up even while meditating with them. When Gabi motioned that she wanted him outside the room to talk, he squeezed Teyla's hand and unfolded himself from the floor more gracefully than Gabi expected for a man of his build.

Once outside the door Gabi explained the situation, and Lorne glared at her.

"You want me to call Specialist Dex in a combat situation and ask him to bond with his new Guide because we need the power in the spirit plane?" Lorne asked.

Gabi shrugged and said, "It's for the war effort."

Lorne did not seem to find her unique social skills amusing. After a while, he agreed to take care of it anyway.

#

Blair slumped back in the Jumper, tired but unsatisfied. Their trip to Pegasus had been as much for his protection as to help in whatever the spirit plane required. Still, Blair felt there was more he could contribute as a shaman and Guide. Philip's Guides came from a culture that expected a shaman to watch over their bonding, and Blair was pleased to have been accepted in that role and to have learned a little about another culture. With his Sentinel, he'd helped channel their bonding energy to the frequency McKay needed. But the spirit associated with the Wraith had clearly cried out to Shane's triad, and even then the new triad's Pegasus-based spirit animals had run off to help and Jim's jaguar had been the one to chase them back.

In a way, Blair was sorry he couldn't publish a paper on the whole experience. There were some interesting factors to consider with the crossover between galaxies of the infari spirit representations and the role of triads with their seemingly more complex energy signatures. As Blair tried to interpret the meaning behind what he had learned, he slid into a dark, quiet place. Only at the last moment did he recognize it as some alternate representation of the spirit plane. Shamanic lore warned against falling into the spirit plane without intent, the risks of losing one's way or becoming untethered. In the hope his intentions still connected to his physical body, Blair reached out and grasped his Sentinel's hand. He hoped Jim would understand that he needed grounding without distraction, but Blair was beyond talking by that point. He wasn't even sure he physically connected as he felt a squeeze to his other hand, which didn't make any sense.

A bright form shot up through the darkness. The direction was only up in that the light started below where Blair assumed his feet were and rocketed away past where he watched with what might be his eyes. Afterward, he saw the darkness as even more complete. The vastness threatened to overwhelm him.

Blair sought his center. His breathing calmed as he took air in through his nose and out through his mouth. The simplicity of the exercise seemed to balance the emptiness around him.

Gradually, straight in front of him he saw glowing eyes at what he defined as his eye level. The eyes let out just enough light to recognize a bony dog, the African wild dog or Inkentshane from which Shane took his name. The eyes bore into Blair, and he realized that he and the other Shaman were in balance, and that their eyes were level because Blair had merged with his spirit form, his wolf.

Then an infari appeared silently between Blair's paws. It was glowing and warm, like a red coal with claws and blinking eyes. Its scarring made it recognizable as Anin, the new Shaman of Osu who had briefly been Shane's apprentice. Why Anin's spirit animal would stand with Blair rather than Shane was a mystery, but Blair was sure it had something to do with balance. Anin wasn't strong enough to balance Shane's power, at least not yet. Blair stood with his wolf body literally covering the infari. It
didn't have to make sense. It was necessary.

A bright shape popped into being to Blair's left and equidistant from both Shane and Blair. This was another infari, with scars Blair did not recognize, so not Utha or Otha. The creature buried its pointed head beneath its claws in a gesture more like a mammal than a crustacean. Then again, what did Blair know about the natural behaviors of Pegasus wildlife? The spirit animal did not open eyes to see the rest of them, but she glowed like a star, too bright to look at in more than brief glances. Blair soon stopped trying to look, as the glow seemed to intensify, becoming painful. Instead, Blair focused on the shaman across from him. Shane's glowing canine eyes stared back.

Another loud pop and a glowing furry shape appeared to Blair's right, again equidistant from both him and Shane. This creature was larger than the infari across from it, but fell to his belly with eyes covered in the same pose. Their eyes would have been level if opened, but Blair sensed these were not shaman. They balanced each other with new power, but they needed the shamans to channel that power.

The moment Blair remembered the red crystal in his pocket, the crystal his Sentinel had stroked earlier during their mediation, a vibration seemed to permeate the darkness. The place in front of him where he had first seen a bright form shooting upward became a tunnel of light. Bright forms followed each other one by one and then faster and faster. Blair struggled to keep his eyes open and focus on the vibrations from the red crystal. Instants became forever until the energy shooting upward was a constant beam of light with no perceptible motion and no detectable forms.

Shane came to him pushing the infari from his left to stand between them, eyes still closed. When both wolf and dog leaned their noses down, the infari disappeared. Then Shane's spirit form backed away. Blair knew Shane would retrace all the way around to Blair's other side, but Blair with Anon beneath him, must remain to anchor the circle.

When Shane returned, he was pushing the glowing furry spirit forward, nudging to keep the large animal blindly on course. Blair and Shane leaned their noses down again and the spirit disappeared.

The stream of light in front of Blair held stable, and Blair knew it would remain so. He and Blair met Anin's eyes and the new shaman disappeared. With a final look, Shane disappeared, leaving Blair alone in the no longer dark space. Staring into the light filled Blair and made him satisfied. He was content to gaze into the light, but he felt something tugging at his forepaws. The infari he'd sheltered before was gone. The other shamans and spirit animals were gone. It took Blair a while to remember he had hands on a body somewhere else. He was feeling sharp tugs to both hands. He fell away from both the darkness and the light.

When Blair opened his eyes back in the shuttle, Anin released his hand and said, "Thank you."

Jim kept hold of Blair's other hand, and Blair realized he was cradled in his Sentinel's lap. His Sentinel's arms reached under his shoulders and legs, as if carrying a small child, and Blair remembered a brief vision the night before of Jim carrying him. He couldn't muster any embarrassment at the situation. Instead he said, "Thank you," meaning it to include both Jim and Anin, but not up to explaining that yet. His Sentinel cradled him close. Blair relaxed against his lover's larger body and for a moment, closing his eyes.

#

When the Jumper landed, Rodney trotted down the ramp hoping for a hero's welcome, or at least a few clichéd words from Elizabeth. The Jumper Bay was completely empty.

Philip staggered out after him with his arms wrapped around both Utha and Otha and with a great
big grin on his face.

Sandburg and Ellison came next, bumping into each other as Sandburg babbled about some experience with light and the spirit plane. His Sentinel was half supporting the smaller man, but neither seemed to notice.

Carson and Miko followed, pushing the crash cart they hadn't needed, with all of Carson's extra medical supplies and Miko's extra science equipment. Both of them smiled and said, "Goodnight, Rodney."

Rodney kept his complaining low volume as he grumbled about ingrates and no one really caring if the greatest scientific mind of their generation, or really, ever, succeeded and survived. They would all be sorry when the Nobel committee recognized his Grand Unified Theory. At the same time, something itched at the back of his mind—and maybe under his skin—as if there was something small he'd forgotten, something he needed to do before returning to his base state.

John patted the Jumper affectionately before he closed her up and said, "At least they can't accuse you of not having guts, or at least gut."

"I am sure even at my nearly ascended level of genius, I would still have had no idea what you're talking about."

"G-U-T, gut, Grand Unified Theory." John smiled. Rodney felt a corner of his mouth twitch in response, even if he didn't want it to.

"Come on, we can see what they're still serving in the mess hall," John tugged on Rodney's shoulder.

Food sounded good, but Rodney wasn't ready to sit down again. There was that unrelenting itch. "I'll catch up in a minute. I need to swing by the labs first."

"Well, I guess if you're not starving, I could handle a slight detour to the labs." John could distract him from the itch. It was tempting.

"Go on ahead," Rodney said, "I'll just be a minute. You can save me some pudding."

John rubbed the back of his neck, "Do I even want to know what you're up to?"

"It's nothing, really. Go ahead."

#

John could hear all the way from the Jumper Bay that there was a party warming up in the mess hall. But he knew better than to rush his Guide into social situations. Besides, Rodney would probably be more surprised if he arrived on his own.

As he grew nearer, John avoided a hallway where Dr. Ng was expounding about the culmination of her pivotal work on Sentinels and Guides reinventing civic and military leadership. At least she didn't seem to be campaigning for their removal. He skirted around large groups and was surprised by some of the new catchphrases he heard making the rounds. "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate the power of a threesome," wasn't too unexpected, since many people knew before their Jumper left how Philip, Utha, and Otha would be contributing to their Wraith solution. But he didn't think that was what his Marines were snorting at when they said, "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate orders to suck face in the middle of combat." When he heard, "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate boinking in the infirmary to support the laws of physics," he could only hope that all the other Sentinels had gotten as lucky today as the
rumor mill claimed. He couldn't even find it in himself to mind that spirit animals had spent much of the day preventing him from going near his Guide or that his Guide had been too busy revolutionizing physics to pay John much attention before that. His Guide was alive and not ascended. That was more than enough.

John fended his way through the boisterous mess hall and dozens of kind words and pats on the back. He filled a tray with his and Rodney's favorites, including plenty of pudding. Then he sat in the last free spot with a good view of the door.

He wasn't at all surprised to hear Rodney as soon as he stepped out of the transporter. The chief scientist was eagerly explaining his Wraith solution to someone who clearly couldn't get a word in edgewise. The sound of a wheel tread in the hall gave him just a moment's warning before Rodney came through the wide doorway with Kusanagi on one side and Beckett on the other pushing a wheelchair. The person in the wheelchair was the big surprise. Ford was sitting tall and proud, no restraints, no jet black eye. A spontaneous cheer greeted the group. For a moment John thought the Wraith being sucked to another dimension might have cured the Lieutenant. Then he took a closer look at his tired Guide and remembered how eager Rodney had been to detour before dinner.

When Rodney sat down beside him, John couldn't help but pull his scientist in for a long, deep kiss. A couple of nurses at the next table whistled, but most of the room was too caught up in their own celebrations to notice.

"You're just hoping I'll forget that GUT joke," Rodney muttered.

"Nope," John pecked Rodney's cheek unable to stop himself. "It's not for being the genius who saved us all again either."

Rodney looked at him funny and reached across for a plate of food.

"It's for rushing off to help Ford with the last bit of your almost ascended gifts."

Rodney rolled his eyes, "If you understood my GUT, you'd see that is much more impressive. Now pass the pudding." As John did, Rodney kept right on talking, "And now that you've accepted that the last risk of ascension has passed, there's an alternate use of Ancient technology I'd like to explore." Rodney licked pudding off his spoon as the stone he'd placed behind John's balls began to vibrate.

John's ass clenched in surprise as a very intimate pleasure stalled his brain. Rodney continued to lick his spoon clean. Then the vibrations increased as he said, "Have I told you how greatly impressed I am by your composure in social situations?"

Brett was lying on his back on the floor of the gym they used for self defense training. The ceiling was very boring, but the mat covering the floor was thick and only a little rough, not a bad place to relax. Gabi had fallen asleep with her head resting on his chest. He stroked her side and watched her fuzzy sock-covered toes twitch as she dreamed. Shane's head rested on his thigh such that Brett could barely run his fingers through Shane's hair. Both shaman and Sentinel had opted to cuddle rather than leave the room when their work on the spirit plane was finished and everyone else had left. Once they'd conked out, Brett had been afraid to move for fear of waking them. The situation reminded him of living with cats.

His cheetah appeared by walking through the room's door and stalked forward to nose at the sleeping humans and Brett. The cheetah, despite being the only cat present, did not lie down for a nap.
Instead, he reached the back of his paw into Gabi's face until her nose wrinkled up. She sneezed and opened her eyes.

As the cheetah walked around to try a similar procedure on Shane, Gabi rubbed her eyes and mock grumpily said, "Your cat woke me up."

When Gabi managed to sit, so did Brett. He'd half lifted a waking Shane to a sitting position just as the African wild dog and aardvark walked through the door. Brett stroked his cheetah once as he said, "They make you do all the work, huh?"

Then the three humans followed their spirit animals down the hall to find Lieutenant Ford sitting up in bed for the first time since he'd entered the infirmary. "You're better!" Gabi exclaimed, rushing forward.

Brett's cheetah leapt up on Ford's bed. "I remember you," Ford said as he stroked the big cat. The dog and aardvark stayed on the floor, but Ford looked down and said, "That dog, too. They kept me safe."

A loud "Humph!" was the first sign Brett noticed of McKay, Beckett and Kusanagi whispering frantically to each other on the far side of the infirmary. Then McKay continued loudly with a pointed look toward Ford, "Well, I'm going to the mess hall. You can join me or not."

"Let me go, doc," Ford begged cheerfully. "I don't care if what he did was magic, I'm all better. I promise."

The spirit animals all looked pointedly toward the door.

Beckett hurried back to Ford's bedside to try, ineffectively, to shoo Brett's cheetah off the narrow bed. "The tests agree you're fine now, but you've been in bed for weeks."

Brett put together Ford's mention of magic and Beckett's mention of tests and wondered if Gabi would soon have readings on nearly ascended healing energy to study. Gabi caught his eye, smiling even bigger than before, and he was pretty sure she thought so, too.

"Look," Ford sat up using his hands under the cheetah's shoulders to reposition the big cat, "I'm strong and healthy and hungry."

Kusanagi managed to move around behind Beckett and discreetly place an arm on his elbow. Beckett sighed. "You will promise to stay in a wheelchair and to come back to sleep in the infirmary tonight, or else you're staying here and I'll send a nurse for a tray."

"Wheelchair it is, doc." Ford smiled.

Brett had forgotten how much the man smiled. "What happened?" Brett asked.

McKay launched into the story of how he'd channeled his near ascension into defeating the Wraith and saving Ford. The explanation lasted the entire walk, with a wheelchair and three spirit animals, to the mess hall.

The mess was noisy and crowded. Their group's arrival elicited cheers, but it was unclear to Brett whether the cheers were for Ford's recovery or McKay, Gabi, or Shane's parts in defeating the Wraith. What surprised most him was that their spirit animals instantly broke away from Ford and headed over to Weir. The commander looked surprised as well when the animals brushed against her calves, but she didn't pull away.
Weir bent to touch each of their animals carefully behind the ears. Brett took his lovers by the hands, and as they made their way to Weir he asked Shane, "Since when can Ford and Weir see spirit animals?"

Shane didn't have a chance to answer before Weir greeted them. "I'm glad the three of you could join the party, but I have to admit I'm a bit surprised to see these three." She motioned to the spirit animals sitting politely at her feet, all facing her.

Shane reached out to touch each animal in turn himself and said, "They seem to have extended a bond to Ford and to you. It happens sometimes with those close to Sentinels and Guides. With Ford I assume it grew from the healing. With you, I'm not sure. Perhaps they're acknowledging you as an ally and leader? You are basically in charge of Sheppard, McKay and Beckett, not to mention Atlantis."

Weir looked at the animals again and then back up to Shane. In a deep voice that sounded very sincere to Brett, she said, "In that case, I am honored."

Even with Blair's explanation as they landed, Jim wasn't exactly sure what had happened in the Jumper earlier. He'd understood enough to know that Blair and the new Pegasus shaman, along with Shane and others, had done something on the spirit plane to send the rest of the Wraith on their way. The new shaman had come back happy. Jim's Guide had come back tired. By the time they reached Atlantis, Blair had fallen back into his role as teacher, entertainer, and diplomat. He'd worked the party with an enthusiasm that drew others to him like moths to a flame. But his Sentinel knew that Blair needed a chance to recharge and let go afterward.

Jim followed Blair out to the balcony of their assigned room. Atlantis spread before them like a sea urchin glistening in the moonlight, beautiful but alien. Every scent and vibration told Jim that Atlantis was perfect for Sentinels. But Jim wasn't one of the Sentinels of Atlantis. He needed to go home as soon as O'Neill cleared the way. Until then, he wanted to bury himself in his Guide, to protect and love the person who mattered more to him than any territorial imperative, even more than being a Sentinel.

Pressing up behind his Guide, Jim wrapped his arms around Blair's waist and buried his nose in springy chestnut curls. The scents of Blair's herbal shampoo and soap wrapped around the deep Blair scent underneath. As Jim nuzzled into the nape of his Guide's neck, the spicy smell of Blair's arousal made Jim instantly hard. With a moan, he pressed his erection firmly against Blair's lower back. The curve of Blair's ass pressed back to meet Jim's balls.

"Too much clothing," Jim breathed beside his lover's ear. "Let me find the white noise generator." Blair pulled away.

Jim wanted to say it didn't matter who heard them here. There was a lot of celebrating going on, and Jim could hear many other couples if he tried. But there were things he needed to say to Blair, hoped he could say, and he knew he'd prefer more privacy for that.

Jim heard the white noise generator start and sighed at losing the sounds of his Guide's footsteps and heartbeat. When Blair returned to the balcony naked, it was a shock. Blair was golden in the moonlight, a different moon from Earth, brighter, but at the moment, perfect. Jim moved by instinct to block his Guide from the view of anyone watching the balcony. Then Jim couldn't help stroking his hands over the shining shoulders and muscled arms. He stroked dark curls down Blair's chest to a place on Blair's ribs that made his Guide shiver with want.

"I know," Blair said.

"I need you," Jim said.

Blair's hands rose to carefully surround Jim's face. His Guide kissed him so gently that Jim zeroed in on his lips, wanting to savor each faint caress. Blair's tongue traced gently on his lower lip, and Jim relaxed his mouth open. The tongue lapped inside tenderly, small light licks that became long involved tracings. Jim learned the surfaces in his mouth anew, a canvas covered in a brand new painting. He could have lost himself in the sensations, but the taste kept his attention by changing from something raw and human to something musky and primal.

When Blair eased back, Jim followed him, needing to keep at least the breath from Blair's mouth caressing his lips.

"Are you tracking, big guy?"

"Hmm," Jim tried to answer, "don't want to. Want to give you everything."

"I know." Blair sounded serious. Jim tried to pull himself back together in case Blair needed more from him. "It didn't take even a year, did it?"

"What?" Jim asked, his voice cracking with what he thought Blair meant.

"I thought it would take at least a couple years to trust you fully, to move past what happened between the fountain and Antarctica, or even before all that. It should take as long to return as to get lost, shouldn't it?"

"I don't know. Anything you say, I'll do to make it better."

"You don't have to." Blair was naked and petting his hair even as Jim's lips hovered within the reach of Blair's breath. "I believe you. It's time for us both to move forward."

Jim pressed his body fully against Blair's. He wanted to merge, to wrap himself entirely in Blair, but he didn't know how. He knew Blair needed words from him. "Take me."

Blair shivered and Jim cursed his clothing, needing all that skin up against him. "Jim, you've never—Do you mean now?"

Jim nodded into Blair's shoulder, feeling as helpless as their first time when Blair asked Jim to let him lead. Now he needed Blair to lead, to bring them both completely together. He couldn't find the words. Jim realized his eyes were closed and his arms were wrapped tightly around his lover. He couldn't move his hands to remove his own clothes even though he desperately wanted them off. The Sentinel needed to give up control to the Guide. Jim needed Blair to love him unconditionally.

When Blair's hands snuck in to undo Jim's buttons, Jim sighed in relief and covered Blair's mouth with his own. While Blair's hands were busy, his mouth was relaxed. The kiss drifted with damp lips sliding over each other in smooth friction. Blair set the pace when he opened his mouth and teased Jim's tongue inward. Then he encouraged Jim's tongue to explore with soft moans and occasional whines deep in his throat.

Jim felt the cool sea air when his pants were unfastened and pushed down. He stepped clear of the
last of his clothing and followed his Guide to bed.

Blair pulled Jim down. Kisses and caresses moved across Jim's body and moved each limb where Blair wanted it. "Did you bring supplies for this?" Blair asked.

"Left for us, in the nightstand." Jim was amazed he managed the words. His face heated as he remembered discovering how thoroughly the room had been prepared with a Sentinel and Guide in mind.

Blair hesitated at Jim's reaction. His hand stroked Jim's side calmly as he asked, "Are you sure this is what you want, Jim?"

"Yes." That word came easily. Jim wanted this. He needed Blair to do this, and he wasn't at all ashamed of needing Blair anymore. As Blair held the unopened tube of lubricant in his hand trying to check the ingredients, Jim feathered his fingers across Blair's forearm. For some reason, that always made Blair close his eyes and sigh. It also went straight to Blair's cock. Jim did it again, loving the reaction.

"I'm checking the ingredients," Blair forced out. But he didn't pull his arm away.

"It's fine, so fine." Jim shifted to lie across Blair's lap and lick cat quick at a nipple, still stroking Blair's forearm.

"Not going to make it if you do that." When Jim didn't stop immediately Blair said, "Please, I want to do this right if you're sure about it."

"Beyond sure." It was true. Jim didn't know or care why, but his whole body was desperate for Blair to finally take him, to physically make them one as they already were in spirit. Jim lay back on the bed, trying to arrange his limbs the way Blair had left him.

After listening to Blair take deep breaths that didn't calm his heart rate or decrease the scent of his musk at all, Jim opened his eyes to find Blair looking at him. Big blue eyes traced each muscle. The Sentinel felt the gaze like a physical touch and moaned. That brought Blair forward on hands and knees to lick and kiss the lines his eyes had traced.

Jim lifted off the bed as he tensed in pleasure. His shoulders and spread apart feet were his only support until Blair tongued at his navel and Jim collapsed, shaking and desperate.

Jim would have begged if he wasn't completely beyond words. When Blair pushed one of Jim's knees up to his chest, Jim held it in place without thinking. His body nearly exploded when a slick finger traced his opening at the same moment Blair's tongue traced his cock. Jim was panting, trying to thrust, writhing uncontrollably until his Guide said, "Relax. If you come while I'm getting you ready, that will make the rest even better."

Then Blair's mouth started working Jim, bringing him higher and higher. A finger alternately brushed and pressed at Jim's opening, but it didn't push inside until Jim thrust back onto it. Jim had never had this, never thought of it in his life before Blair. Now he rocked between Blair's mouth and finger and couldn't imagine anything better.

Blair added another finger and it brushed someplace electric. Jim was coming hard and screaming. Blair's fingers and mouth seemed to milk the scream and the orgasm out of him until he was warm and loose and his eyes had somehow closed again without him noticing.

"One more time, Jim," the voice that sank through his skin asked, "Do you want me to keep going?"
"Yes." That single word was easy, but Jim fought to give his lover more. "Want you inside me."

Kisses covered Jim's sweaty body and another finger slipped easily inside him. The fingers twisted and stretched. When they brushed what had to be his prostate, pleasure flashed through Jim, even though he'd just come. He rocked back onto the fingers naturally, as if he'd always known this.

Then the fingers were gone and something cold and fluffy was being propped beneath his ass. Jim bucked up, wanting fingers, needing more, barely comprehending.

Blair drank in the sight of his wanton lover. He had never imagined Jim's first time might be so uninhibited, but he should have. When Jim gave himself, he gave himself completely. From when they first cuddled in Antarctica, Jim had abandoned his usual restraint and accepted any touch Blair would give him. Now Blair had him prepped and ready. He positioned himself carefully and let his slicked cock slide across Jim's glistening hole.

Jim spasmed and tried to press blindly toward him. Blair caressed his lover's ass cheeks with both hands. He controlled the motion as he pressed the tip of his cock past the tight ring of muscle.

The warmth and pull of Jim all around him was almost too much, but Blair held on, panting.

He glanced at Jim's half hard cock, expecting to see it deflate at this first intrusion. Instead, he watched Jim gradually grow harder as Blair just held in place, giving both himself and his Sentinel time to adjust.

When Jim started panting in quick shallow breaths and tossing his head from side to side, Blair eased himself forward, trying for one long smooth stroke. He meant to back up at the first sign of resistance, but while Jim was very tight, there was no resistance. He seemed to pull Blair forward with his body and short high pitched moans.

Once he was deep in his lover, Blair stroked as far as he could reach, up Jim's abdomen and chest, until Jim started to shake. Then Blair set a strong, slow rhythm. Jim moaned desperately but didn't speak or force the pace.

Jim's cock was full and leaking again, bouncing in time to Blair's thrusts. Blair lost himself to the rhythm. The moaning noises Jim made became a song to which they danced. The smell of sweat and Jim's come from before mixed thickly with the damp sea air. Blair leaned forward to lick at the come that had splattered Jim's chest, and Jim's cock where it brushed against Blair was like fire. Jim's moaning rose in pitch. Blair realized his own grunts and muttering provided a counterpoint as their skin slid together inside and out, faster and faster. Jim's channel pulsed, and they were coming together. Blair lost himself in colored lights exploding behind his eyes, even as he felt his hand wrap around Jim's slick cock, drawing out his lover's second orgasm of the night.

The scent of sex blended with the deep wet mulch of jungle leaves. Blair found himself entwined with Jim in jungle vines as bird calls embellished the music the two of them had made together. It should have been too warm, too wet, too confining. But Blair was bound together with his Sentinel in the best way possible, welcomed into what he knew was Jim's blue jungle. He was part of the jungle, no longer a visitor. He was part of Jim.

The meeting the next morning was called by Weir, but even Rodney could tell she hadn't planned it alone. First, they were gathering on the east pier in a space marked out by exercise mats and piles of
mostly Athosian blankets and pillows. Second, the meeting appeared to include Weir, Ford, every Sentinel and Guide in the city (twenty-two, Rodney counted), and no one else. Third, the smell of the coffee being served was better than anything Rodney had smelled since arriving in Atlantis.

"Where did this come from?" Rodney asked the crowd in general as he rushed forward to fill his very large, well-insulated travel mug.

Ellison shrugged with completely fake nonchalance. "O'Neill had a care package ready to come through with us. He may have said something about being the Sentinel who discovered the best coffee in two galaxies."

Rodney rounded on John who was backing away. "You knew! You must have known as soon as they came through the gate!"

John held his hands out and spoke softly. "Easy, Rodney, we were a bit busy at the time. But I put a guard on it, right from the start."

Rodney huffed, and would have argued more, but the coffee deserved his undivided appreciation. Rodney refilled his mug and glared Markham and Stackhouse into surrendering the seats closest to the coffee. They crowded together on a nearby pillow looking entirely too comfortable for Marines.

"Now that's settled," Sandburg's cheerful voice rang out loud and clear to gather his audience, "we have much to discuss. Let's start with introductions."

Rodney was only interested in Mike, the Sentinel who'd been brought to Atlantis unconscious, and his Guide, Pak, because they seemed to have been given the most comfortable cushions. But from the way Mike was half reclining and Carson was seated on his far side, Rodney deduced it had been a requirement for letting him out of the infirmary.

Ronon's new Guide was apparently named Ran, which struck McKay as funny given that Ronon had been a runner before he met Ran.

As soon as introductions were completed, Teyla stood and nodded to the entire crowd. "We have reports of hive ships falling, apparently dead, no Wraith coming out. Also, one culling ended abruptly, with reports of Wraith collapsing in place. Many people are suspicious after so many generations of suffering under the Wraith, but the Athosians are spreading the news of our Lantean ally's success. There will be many celebrations. My people are fully restored on Athos, and Lorne and I are preparing to act as ambassadors from both our peoples to many other worlds." Rodney lifted his coffee and pressed closer to John as he brought the cup down. Having his XO double as an ambassador would make John's job more interesting to say the least. It made Rodney glad that Zelenka was neither a Sentinel nor a Guide nor had any desire to ever leave Atlantis.

"Meanwhile, to catch people up on Earth developments," Sandburg began, "A tip from Lerato and the African Sentinel and Guide network let us root out part of an international conspiracy involving the Queen of Swaziland and the US Navy. Jackson and O'Neill are still chasing down connections in Europe and Asia. As the news about Sentinels and Guides spreads, there are those who will try to capture, control, and experiment on them."

Rodney puffed up his chest, "I recently completed a Grand Unified Theory which explains both Ancient and Earth physics using a set of parameters spanning sixteen energy dimensions. While it is presently beyond the understanding of anyone here and will probably take decades for the lesser so-called geniuses on Earth to comprehend, the renewable energy applications alone—which I'm sure private enterprise will exploit based on reviews by engineers who don't even care that they don't understand the theoretical underpinnings—should be enough to handily win me the Nobel prize and
change daily life as we know it." When no one commented and Rodney saw most of his audience either looking glazed or impatient he spelled out what he'd thought was obvious, "We can use access to my theory to barter with the IOC and UN, etcetera, for protections for Sentinels and Guides."

"Well," Weir smiled with a stretch of lips that was hardly appreciative, "I suppose that's a nice idea, but in the realms of political power involving large organizations and assorted minor players, we're going to need international unity and enforceable deterrents."

Rodney opened his mouth and stretched his arms to argue, but his Sentinel gently pulled him back by the hips. John didn't usually manhandle him in public, but there was such tenderness in the touch and in John's wide open eyes that Rodney hesitated for a moment, and that allowed Blair to take over. Rodney couldn't really mind with his Sentinel's hands warming his hips and what might actually be the best coffee in two galaxies warming his hands.

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Jim watched the tenderness Sheppard displayed and wondered how fast society would adapt to such PDAs once they realized the package of abilities and limitations that came with Sentinel and Guide pairs. He wished he could pull Blair close, but settled for watching his Guide throw himself into lecture mode. "The African network of shamans, Guides, and Sentinels is adamant about forming its own structure of prides that operate independent of tribal and regional governments. Lerato and her Sentinel, Sambulo, expect to become Alpha Sentinel and Guide in Swaziland. Lerato has proved a solid contact and warned O'Neill and Jackson when I was threatened, but her network refused to have any official association with the US, the IOA, or other international powers. Meanwhile, Alphas already exist for South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Egypt, and probably other places that we don't know about. They have a cell system of contacts between prides to provide secrecy, and they swear they will do whatever they have to in order to dissuade their enemies."

Jim couldn't endorse a structure so similar to a terrorist organization. "Didn't look like they were doing so well in Swaziland."

"While I like Lerato and appreciate her friendly warning," Blair spared a glance toward Shane's triad as he replied, "I also respect her enough to assume she anticipated US intervention if she disappeared after calling."

"So we're their backup?" Lorne put in.

"We're all each other's backup." Blair looked around and met individual pairs of eyes in the gathering. "What's more, we seem to have backup from the spirit plane. Doctor Weir and Lieutenant Ford are now spirit bonded in a way I've barely heard rumors of before, and usually only in the direct families of Sentinels and Guides. There seem to have been several interventions recently involving dreams and visions to bring Sentinels and Guides to where they needed to be, even one whale-like Pegasus animal that appears to bridge communications with the spirit plane somehow. I'd love to organize some research—"

"Sandburg," Jim put in, using the excuse to playfully shove his Guide.

"Right, but we need to learn from what happened with the spirit animals responding to a larger threat here. Brett pointed out that more animal spirits may have taken insectivore forms to counteract the Wraith shredding and absorbing spirit plane energy as they fed, not to mention guiding us to a crystal with the frequency for the Wraith Energy Dimension."

Beckett climbed quietly to his feet, and Blair waved a hand to redirect attention to the quiet doctor. Then Blair settled onto a large yellow pillow, and Jim sank down next to him, shoulder to shoulder.
He relaxed into the simple comfort of his Guide's solid body and familiar smell.

"I cannot deny the spirit animals have provided some remarkable help in times of need, sometimes saving lives I could not." His eyes drifted to Brett, and Jim remembered hearing about a run in with an energy creature that had reminded him far too much of Blair drowning in the fountain. Beckett also glanced at his Guide and at a young Marine beside him, Lieutenant Ford according to his uniform, and Jim wondered what the stories were there. Beckett continued, "I'll even concede that they've been proactive against the Wraith here. But I don't see how we can consider them as allies or backup when we have no way to negotiate or make plans with them. Relying on something you cannae understand or predict is not healthy, in any sense of the word."

When a silence stretched after Beckett sat down, one of the new Guides, Ran, finally stood, and Ronon stood beside him. Ran began, "Pak and I grew up with elders who told of sanctuaries for shamans who sought to become one with the spirits and of sanctuaries for people such as us who seek to find our bondmates or a safe place to rest. Some sanctuaries are simple retreats established by others like ourselves or those who appreciate our presence in their villages. Some, like this place, were created by the Ancestors. Ronon tells me this great city of Atlantis was empty and hidden until Earth Sentinels and Guides recovered it less than two moons ago. Now my spirit has brought me here. I have found my Sentinel. With the spirits' help, we have banished the Wraith. It is true we cannot barter with or control the spirits, but I believe they protect those who are spirit bonded. If you hold Atlantis, they will help Sentinels and Guides in need of sanctuary to find it here."

John was alarmed by the talk of sanctuary. He remembered the man who mentioned sanctuary to him after they returned the pregnant women to a town beset by Wraith worshippers. "Even if Atlantis was set up as some sort of sanctuary," John didn't bother to stand, just stretched his long legs in front of him as he spoke, "that doesn't mean we're equipped to be one now."

Ronon, who was still standing with a possessive hand on his Guide's back, said flatly, "Look at the leaders you brought."

John looked to his Guide, Sentinel Beckett, and Weir, who had evidently been adopted by a spirit animal or something. He had to concede that point. "But what about security? Are we going to lower the shield every time a spirit animal pops through?"

Shane pushed to his feet. "Ever since I began on the shaman's path, spirit animals have sought me out to help certain individuals. Spirit animals brought me part of the key to Atlantis and then brought me to Gabi and all of you for this expedition. When Pak and Ran's spirits passed through the gate, my spirit rushed to welcome them. If the spirits brought us to Atlantis for this, if we worry even now about Sentinels and Guides being hunted or hurt in our own galaxy, how can we shirk this responsibility?"

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy here." John rose to his feet, and he was glad when Rodney stood with him. Rodney then turned it into a chance to refill his coffee, but John couldn't object. If anything, the predictability of McKay's actions calmed everyone around them. "But how many people are we talking about? What if some don't understand what's going on and try to attack us?"

Shane spoke again, "Caution is good. But these are problems faced every day by refugee centers on Earth. We might do better to worry about contagious diseases and parasites."

Rodney responded with his coffee in one hand, a muffin in the other, and a bite of muffin already in his mouth. "The gate has safeties, and Atlantis has automated quarantine procedures. One of my minions can customize more if needed." He waved his arm, flinging muffin crumbs onto Stackhouse.
Markham brushed them away without raising an eyebrow.

John nodded to himself, feeling better about the task ahead. He'd never been directly involved with refugees in Afghanistan, but he knew Atlantis was in a better position than most such efforts on Earth. He could find an officer with relief work experience and set up a strategy team with Shane and one or more of the Pegasus natives. Maybe the Seabee and his Guides would want to help with that. "Okaaay," he drew the word out as he glanced at Weir for a nod of approval, "I'll start a team working on procedures to handle Pegasus Sentinels and Guides seeking sanctuary."

Brett said, low enough that perhaps not every non-Sentinel heard, "If you want to live in Atlantis, you will learn to appreciate the importance of sanctuary."

"Might not be only Pegasus Sentinels and Guides," Ellison cut in, pushing quickly to his feet. "Woo dreamed about the stargate and coming here with us when he was just a Seabee stranded on an island with no clearance to know the gate existed. We'll have to work out protocols with Earth in case someone with a spirit animal shows up at the mountain or otherwise acts unknowingly on classified information. Also, dreams and spirit animals won't intimidate the sort of people we were dealing with in Swaziland."

Weir cleared her throat and stood. "I'm sure O'Neill and Jackson are already working with Earth on such concerns. While those two can be more politically astute than most suspect, I plan to meet with Dr. Sandburg and any other shamans or Pegasus natives who might be interested. If we build correctly on the apparent interest and near omniscience of spirit animals in recent events, we can back whatever play O'Neill and Jackson are working toward."

Still standing by his precious coffee, Rodney said, "My theory can explain it all in terms of energy dimensions. The same scientists who won't admit how little they understand about zero point energy will be even more confounded by the new laws of physics involving sixteen energy dimensions. It will take them decades to figure out what is and isn't possible once the spirit animals get involved."

John cut in before Weir could with the light comment, "And those who don't freak about spirit animals will probably fear the scientists."

Anin stood hesitantly while John was talking. John motioned for the young man to speak. "From the dreams you've mentioned and the sharing of spirit animals and bondmates, it would seem your planet and ours are all connected as far as the spirits are concerned. Here we have rituals to find those in need of shamanic aid, sometimes beyond the shaman's own planet. Surely powerful shamans such as Shane or Blair could ask the spirits to check on those in need."

Shane asked from the ground where he was deeply planted in a cushion like a giant beanbag with Gabi and Brett, "Is this something all shamans here can do?"

Anin whispered, "No, not all shamans."

"What makes you think Blair and I could?"

Anin looked at him as if the answer should be obvious.

#

Brett sat up straight from his side of the beanbag, suddenly realizing he'd missed something obvious. "Wait, I think we have a translation problem. Anin, your word for shaman is the same as ours, but the word you just used for Shane and Blair, it translated as shaman for us. What did you actually say?"
"Thata," Anin said, even as the gate translation changed the word to "shaman" again.

"And do you have words for any other type of shaman?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"Not exactly, but the Ancients left some files, and there is a machine that responds differently to different Guides. For Shane it showed connected dots that represented different people. For me it showed facial expressions related to emotions."

"Emtha," Anin said, and now it was easy to hear when the translation changed the word to "shaman."

"Slow down a minute," Lorne said in a deceptively mild tone. "Whatever the words mean, are we planning to set up some sort of shamanic search and rescue? And how would that even work?"

Brett caught Anin's eye and gestured between the two of them, hoping to convey that he would follow up later. Anin nodded slowly and smiled as Brett was already translating in his mind what he'd designated "deletion G2" to "Emtha" and "deletion G4" to "Thata."

Beside him Shane, his shaman, his Thata said, "Haven't we already? We found the Osu through a vision of a waterfall. If Sandburg had a vision of a young Sentinel being tortured in a hotel by Niagara Falls, can you imagine he'd sit home and shrug it off? What Anin is suggesting is a procedure to control the visions and seek out those in need."

Ellison cut in, "Word of a few successful raids might get around, deter other efforts to mistreat Sentinels or Guides. Add that piece to the spirit animals' own expressed interests or McKay's Grand Unified whatsit being dangled like a carrot, and we might have the international clout and enforcement mechanism we need."

"Even if we find them," Gabi spoke from deep in the center of the three person beanbag, "This still won't fix things for kids who feel like freaks in families and communities that know nothing of Sentinels and Guides. Will they be trusted to keep state secrets if they want to stay at home? Is their only choice a hospital or military base?"

Shane pulled Gabi close, and Brett felt the comfort as if it was offered to him. He wondered if that was what it meant to be "Emtha." Shane spoke to everyone as he answered Gabi, "No system is perfect. If Sentinels or Guides face trouble, we have to start by helping as many as we can in whatever ways we can. I'm pretty sure Sandburg isn't eager to hand Sentinel kids over to the military or a hospital if he can help it. Maybe some of the people he finds will set up sanctuaries, like they have here." Suddenly, Shane looked hopeful and Brett thought that hope projected beyond just Brett. "Maybe the government would give the Sentinel and Guide Project funding to set up sanctuaries, because then the spirit animals could bring people someplace safer rather than to the stargate or rather than waiting for some risky and expensive search and rescue effort when it's not needed."

"Of course," Blair echoed Shane's excitement, "even if we can't go public, we can set up sanctuaries in different countries and the spirit animals will know."

Brett relaxed back beside Gabi and Shane in the beanbag. "If they want Sentinels and Guides to remain on Earth, they will learn to appreciate the importance of sanctuary."

#

John was shaking his head at how fast young people adapted catchphrases when something like a sea lion appeared in the middle of the pier. The Colonel's hand landed on his sidearm as he
wondered if Atlantis sea creatures could teleport. A sea lion should not have made it to the middle of their gathering without a Sentinel noticing.

Then a bright red bird and a furry bat flew in and landed on Sandburg's shoulders. Ellison was off the ground and pulling his Guide away as Sandburg, Shane, and Anin all cried out in unison, "Wait."

"Stand down," John said, as he noticed Lorne, Markham, Stackhouse, and even Ford were on their feet. "Spirit animals, right? Anyone's we know?"

Sandburg's wolf appeared then and turned to head up the pier. "Definitely spirit animals," Blair answered. "How about I get back to you on the rest after I see where my wolf is leading?"

John shook his head and assigned military as needed to secure the pier, just in case, while a small contingent escorted Weir back to the command center and Beckett and his charges to the infirmary. John personally followed Ellison, who kept a hand on Blair's back as the menagerie escorted them slowly down the pier. Whether the spirit sea lion was based on the Earth animal or some Pegasus variant, it didn't move very fast on land. It waddled. It was hard to perceive anything that waddled as a threat, so John didn't protest when his Guide and some of the others followed along to see what would happen.

Halfway down the pier, the three new animals disappeared, and the wolf started leading them at a trot. Within moments John heard through his radio, "Unscheduled off world activation." He rushed to a transporter frustrated that he hadn't yet had time to consider refugee protocols. The wolf and his groupies crowded into the transporter with John before he could even select the gate room as his destination.

They piled into the gate room in time for Weir to say, "We have a priority call coming through from Earth, Colonel, it you'd care to join me?"

No refugees. This wasn't what John had been expecting, but he bounded up the stairs to join Weir as O'Neill appeared on the communications screen. "Weir, Sheppard, bet you can't guess who just crashed a meeting here? As in, we were having a nice quiet meeting discussing safety measures for all Sentinel and Guides and three highly unusual guests landed right in the middle of our meeting table?"

"Why Colonel O'Neill," Weir cheerfully replied. "Good to hear from you. Would you happen to have found the seal, bird and bat that recently dropped in on us?"

"More like a sea lion," John couldn't help but correct. "It could walk on land." He used his hands to illustrate flappy sea lion footsteps.

"Lucky it," O'Neill replied flatly.

O'Neill delivering his stern grandfather look always made John want to talk back, so he tossed in, "The bat looks like a fruit bat and the bird could be Hawaiian."

"Anything useful to report, Colonel?" O'Neill demanded.

"No, sir," John was happy to reply.

"Wait a second," Jackson pushed up beside his Sentinel with a notebook just in front of his glasses, "What about that Navy SEAL who called you about starting some sort of search and rescue?" He flipped a page. "Yes, here it is, Lieutenant Commander Steve McGarrett working with a representative of Ka-Po, a native Hawaiian group. They wanted to contact you about a search and
rescue effort involving individuals similar to the sailors we rescued from Pagan Island. You were worried about a security breech and refused to talk to him."

"Is that what the Navy calls that Island Sandburg was on?" O'Neill ignored the rest and stood looking baffled, what seemed to be a common expression when dealing with his Guide. "What does this have to do with the animals crashing our meeting?"

"Well," Jackson said, "At least one of the animals looks Hawaiian, and if birds prefer pilots, it makes sense a sea lion might choose a Navy SEAL. I'm not sure about the fruit bat."

"Shoot." O'Neill threw his head back. "Chuck, get Captain Banks from Cascade PD on speaker phone. Sheppard, you think Ellison and Sandburg are ready to come back?"

#

Jim stepped forward at the mention of his name. "We'd be happy to come back if you think the situation there is under control."

Weir cut in, "We'd been planning to contact you to discuss new information and how to make the most of our relative positions."

"Peachy," O'Neill practically snarled.

Off screen Chuck called out, "Captain Banks is on the line now, sir."

"Colonel O'Neill," Banks deep voice cut in, "to what do I finally owe the pleasure of this returned call?" Ellison cringed at the way beyond grumpy tone in the familiar voice. "Are my men coming back to work anytime soon?"

"We miss you too, Simon," Blair sang out before Jim could respond.

"Sandburg!" Jim could hear Banks pound his desk as he practically bellowed. "Can you tell me why some cop from LA has settled in at your desk and spends all day peeling fruit while he spouts Zen nonsense in my bullpen?"

"Um, no idea," Blair answered, "but can you ask him if he's ever seen a fruit bat trying to lead him someplace or otherwise behaving in an unusual manner?"

Banks voice was decidedly cool as he asked, "Colonel O'Neill, this isn't why you finally called back, is it?"

O'Neill looked far too pleased as he faced the speaker phone to say, "Well, I assumed it must be important since you called to tell me about the fruit guy, so if you could just ask him—"

"Detective Crews, my office!" Banks' bellow cut across O'Neill's words and was followed by a door closing and Banks saying, "Sandburg and some other people are on speaker phone asking if you've seen a fruit bat around."

"Of course." The new voice, presumably Detective Crews, sounded light and offered nothing extra.

"Care to elaborate," Banks growled.

"The universe speaks to us in many ways."

Sandburg cut in quickly, "Hi, this is Blair Sandburg. Do you have any idea what the universe meant to tell you with the fruit bat?"
"I was thinking of starting a sanctuary in my orange orchard, and the fruit bat led me to your police department and your desk in Cascade, Washington. You weren't here, so I decided to wait."

"Why do you think a bat would lead you to Cascade in order to start some sanctuary in LA?" Banks asked.

"I can't answer that. I'm trying to stay in the moment. Bad things can happen if we don't stay in the moment."

"Am I missing something here?" O'Neill asked, looking at Jackson, who was frantically writing in his notepad.

Sandburg called out, "One more question, please, Detective Crews. What sort of a sanctuary do you plan to make?"

"One for people like me."

"What sort of person are you?" Blair asked.

"I would hardly be the one to know."

"Ooookay," O'Neill cut in. "This has been fun. Talk to you later, Banks and fruit bat person." He swatted rather enthusiastically at the button to terminate the phone call. "Sandburg, I think you have some explaining to do."

Weir reclaimed her place front and center to answer, "We'd be delighted to come through to discuss ideas for sanctuaries and search and rescue, among other mutually advantageous arrangements. How soon can you gather the relevant people on your end?"

O'Neill waved a hand vaguely. "They're already here, clogging up my mountain, so you might as well join us. But I'm not inviting that fruit guy. Oh, and bring Sergeant Linden in custody. The IOA is ready to concede to all your demands about him."

"We'll contact you as soon as we're packed and have our papers in order," Weir said.

Jim's senses reached out, longing for Earth, even as the call terminated and the gate shut down. They were going home. The alien sea air bothered Jim less already.

"Come on, big guy." Blair's hand settled warmly in the small of Jim's back. "Let's get ready."

#

A week later, a new catchphrase went viral on Earth's internet. No one agreed on what it meant. Most adults thought it was a teen thing. Most teens didn't care. Most conspiracy theorists blamed it on a secret government program. A very few people found it helpful. In its original version it read: "If you want to find sanctuary, you will learn to appreciate your spirit animal."

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