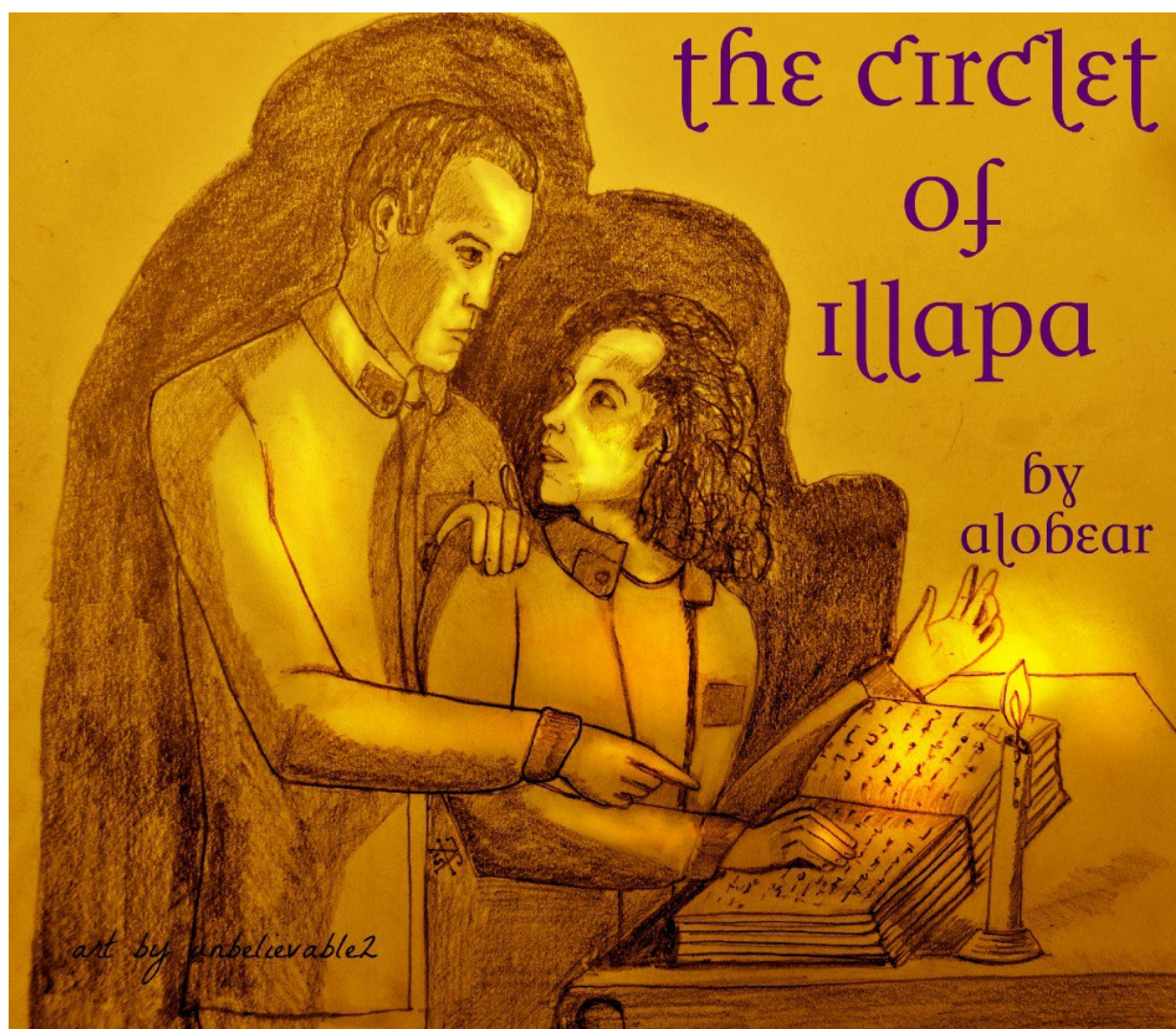


The Circlet of Illapa



Art by unbelievable2

Story by Alobear

1999 – P4Y-835

Dr Blair Sandburg stepped out of the event horizon of the stargate wormhole onto the planet that had been designated P4Y-835. The sky had a hazy pink quality to it, the odd light casting a kind of glow on everything. He squinted slightly and focused on the building that dominated the immediate surroundings. Blair felt a thrill of excitement at seeing the familiar Incan architecture on another planet.

First things first, though. He took two steps forward and reached up to place a hand on the shoulder of Major James Ellison. Squeezing slightly, he asked softly, “What’s your status, Jim?”

Sometimes, gate travel could mess with the sentinel's heightened senses, so it was always Blair's first job on a mission as Jim's guide to check and make sure nothing had gone awry.

"No problems in transit," Jim reported. "This light's a bit of a kicker, though."

Blair left his hand on Jim's shoulder and murmured, "Just dial your sight back a bit until you get used to it." He wished he could do the same.

There was a brief pause, then Blair felt some of the tension leave Jim's body.

"That's better," Jim said. "Thanks, Chief."

Blair briefly wondered if there would ever come a time when he didn't have to remind Jim that he could reduce the efficacy of his senses to deal with situations, as well as enhancing them. It was probably the single most frequent thing he said to the sentinel and somehow it just never seemed to sink in. At least it meant he was still useful, though, so he figured he shouldn't complain.

Jim's mental block on dialling down notwithstanding, they'd come a long way in a relatively short time, and experienced some pretty bizarre situations along the journey. Blair cast his mind back to "life before Jim" as he now thought of it, and found it difficult to imagine what it had been like.

He had just completed his doctorate in anthropology and taken up a full-time teaching position at Rainier University in Cascade, Washington. He was looking forward to a cushy life as a tenured professor, with occasional research expeditions, when he had a visitor who turned his whole existence upside down.

Twelve months earlier – Cascade, Washington

Blair was halfway through an Anthropology 101 lecture for one of his undergraduate classes when he spotted someone coming in through the doors at the back of the lecture hall. At first he just thought one of his students was spectacularly late, but then he noticed the newcomer was decades older than anyone in his class. She seated herself in the back row and proceeded to pay close attention.

When all the students had finished filing out at the end of the lecture, the visitor made her way down to the front, where Blair was packing up his teaching materials.

"Dr Sandburg?" the woman queried, striding up to him and holding her hand out.

Blair shook it, looking at her curiously. "That's right," he said.

"My name's Catherine Langford," she told him. "I'm a consultant for the US military, and I have a favour to ask of you."

"What on earth would the military want with me?" Blair asked, starting to feel more than a little unsettled.

"It has to do with your doctoral thesis," Catherine said, "which makes very interesting reading, I might add."

Blair was even more baffled. “How did you get hold of my doctoral thesis – and why?”

Catherine smiled enigmatically. “Let’s just say paying attention to the fringe theories of current scientific thought has proved useful to me in the past,” she said.

Blair noticed she had only sort-of answered half his question. He got the impression that getting any kind of direct information out of her might be tricky, so he decided to say nothing and see where she went from there. She looked like someone’s grandmother, but he could tell there was a sharp intelligence behind the unassuming exterior.

She regarded him for a long moment, amusement clear in her eyes. Then she said, “I’d like to invite you to come to Colorado Springs with me for a few days. There’s someone there I’m pretty sure you’ll want to meet.”

Blair crossed his arms over his chest, bristling a little at her assumptions. “What makes you say that?” he asked.

Catherine smiled. “We think we have a sentinel.”

1999 – P4Y-835

Jim turned to the other two members of their team. “Madison, Driver, establish a perimeter and keep an eye on the gate. Check in every fifteen minutes. Sandburg and I will check out the building.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Madison confirmed, then beckoned to Driver. “Sergeant, you’re with me.” She and Driver turned without another word and jogged off towards the treeline.

Even after nine months on Jim’s team, Blair still found it difficult to believe he was part of a military operation. Of course, he was still a civilian and therefore not officially part of the chain of command, but the Stargate Program was run by the military, and Jim expected him to follow orders, at least when they were offworld. He was glad he wasn’t allowed to tell his mother what he was doing; she’d probably either disown him completely or storm Cheyenne Mountain in an attempt to rescue him.

Jim was already striding off towards the temple, so Blair hurried to catch up with him. Their team had been selected for this mission because both of them had experience in Peru, and the style of the building suggested some kind of connection to the Incas. Blair was really looking forward to being able to use more of his academic knowledge than just helping with Jim’s senses. He wasn’t aware of the SGC coming across a planet with Peruvian architecture before, so he was more than a little intrigued.

They reached the base of the building before too long, and both stood looking up the long central staircase to the only visible entrance at the very top.

“I hope you’ve been keeping up with your cardio,” Jim quipped, then started up the stairs.

By the time they reached the top, even Jim was sweating a little, and Blair could just hear a slight catch in his breath, despite his own purely mundane hearing. He was too busy, however, trying not to keel over to comment. They took a moment on the platform in front of the entrance, and Blair turned to survey the view. The stargate looked tiny from this distance,

and he could see for miles in all directions, as they were actually above the treeline. There looked to be the remains of some kind of settlement a little way to the east, and he pointed it out to Jim.

The sentinel immediately took on the expression and demeanour that told Blair he was concentrating on one of his senses. He moved a bit closer and laid a hand on Jim's arm, knowing that Jim found it comforting to be able to feel his presence, even if he refused to admit it.

After a moment, Jim spoke, his tone remote. "There's not much there; just the remains of a few huts and some fenced-in enclosures. We could head over there to take a closer look if the temple's a bust, but I don't think we'll find anything of interest."

He closed his eyes and, when he opened them again, his focus was back on his immediate surroundings. Blair released his sleeve and stepped back slightly.

Jim's radio crackled and a voice came through. "Lieutenant Madison to Major Ellison."

"Ellison here, Lieutenant," Jim said, his tone brusque. "Report."

While Jim was rarely particularly warm, it was obvious to Blair that he viewed his guide with more affection than he let on. The nicknames and the softness of tone when he spoke to Blair, in comparison with his no-nonsense attitude towards everyone else, told the anthropologist all he needed to know, and Blair was content with the albeit marginal special treatment.

"Perimeter is clear, sir," Madison said. "No activity."

"Good," Jim said. "Sandburg and I are just about to enter the temple. You and Driver set up a post at the base of the stairs, just in case we run into trouble."

"Roger that, sir. Madison out."

Jim turned back to Blair. "Ready, Chief?" he said, gesturing towards the opening in the stone wall before them.

Blair nodded, and they made their way inside.

Twelve months earlier – Cheyenne Mountain

"His name is Major James Ellison," Catherine told Blair, as they sat in a conference room deep underground.

Blair had had to go through several security checks, and signed both a waiver and a non-disclosure agreement, before he'd even been allowed inside the mountain complex, and it was only now that he was getting any real information about the supposed sentinel that had brought him halfway across the country. There was some kind of metal shutter in place over the conference room's large window, though, so it was pretty clear there were more secrets they were keeping from him.

He'd had plenty of vacation time saved up, so he'd handed everything over to his teaching assistant, and left Cascade with Catherine the day after she'd arrived. Now, she was sitting across the table from him, and tapped a folder that lay on the table in front of her.

"This is a redacted copy of Major Ellison's military record," she said. "A lot of it is classified, so it's probably best if I give you the relevant highlights. Major Ellison was a US Army Ranger when his helicopter went down in the wilds of Peru and he was stranded there for over a year, surviving alone in the jungle. We think his senses first came online during his time in Peru, but that he suppressed them again when he got back to the US."

"And now they're back?" Blair queried, and Catherine nodded.

"He was separated from his team on a recent mission," Catherine said, nodding to the folder, "and spent a week alone in the wilderness before he managed to make it back."

Blair noticed she didn't specify where this had taken place, or what Ellison and his 'team' had been doing at the time. He figured there would be a lot of that kind of obfuscation around here.

"Since then," Catherine continued, "he's been complaining of headaches, problems with bright lights and loud noises. He's been incapacitated a couple of times in situations of high stress, so he's been relieved of active duty for the time being, until we can get this sorted out."

"And I'm here because...?" Blair prompted.

Catherine smiled. "We're hoping your expertise means you'll be able to help him get his senses back under control. He's useless to the military in his current state, but his abilities could be vitally important if they can be used reliably."

"And it's really all five senses?" Blair asked eagerly, his excitement building.

Catherine chuckled. "All five," she confirmed.

Blair grinned. "When can I meet him?"

1999 – P4Y-835

They entered a square, stone chamber. Light came in with them through the entranceway, and also from a skylight above them, but it was still quite murky, and the shadows at the edges of the space were deep. Jim switched on the torch attached to his gun and swept the room, revealing carvings on the wall and a dais at one end. There were sconces along the walls, and Blair approached the nearest one, setting it ablaze with his lighter.

"Let's get some atmosphere going, shall we?" he said with a grin, working his way down the wall.

Soon, the carvings were fairly well illuminated, and he stopped lighting torches in order to examine them more closely.

"What's the story?" Jim asked, after a few moments.

“Give me a minute, man,” Blair replied, a little exasperated. He scanned the wall and his gaze alighted on a central picture of a man, which was much bigger than the surrounding art. “I think that’s Illapa, the Inca god of weather. Legend says he kept the Milky Way in a jug and used it to create rain. He’s generally depicted as a man in shining clothes, carrying a club and a sling.” He pointed out the characteristics in the carving as he spoke.

“And that tells us what, exactly?” Jim wanted to know.

Blair sighed. He was finally getting to use his expertise, and his audience was about as enthusiastic as his students used to be. He had hoped that Jim at least might understand his desire to be respected for his knowledge, but he guessed he must be wrong. His youth and academic success didn’t get him very far at Stargate Command; they already had a wunderkind in the form of Dr Daniel Jackson, and nobody was really interested in Blair as second string to Daniel’s brilliance. He knew that some of the marines referred to him as ‘Ellison’s lapdog’, as long as they were absolutely certain Jim wasn’t in range to hear them.

“Maybe that a Goa’uld set himself up here in the guise of Illapa, with the locals worshipping him and paying tribute to him and stuff?” Blair suggested. “You know, like the Goa’uld seem to do?”

He was still getting used to the idea of a race of parasitic aliens who took over people’s bodies, then stole the culture of humans and used it to establish themselves as gods in the eyes of the populace, whom they turned into their slaves.

He spotted something on top of the large stone platform that rested on the dais and moved towards it for a closer look. It was a huge book, easily six inches deep, with an intricately patterned cover.

“This might tell us more,” he said, stepping up onto the dais and moving around behind the platform.

As Blair reached out to open the book, Jim suddenly called out, “Wait, Sandburg! Don’t touch it!”

But it was too late. Blair had laid his hand down on the book and, at the same instant, there came a grinding noise from above and to the side. A stone slab dropped down to cover the entrance before Jim could move, and another slid across the skylight. Then, all the wall sconces were extinguished at once, plunging them into darkness.

Twelve months earlier – Cheyenne Mountain

They found Major James Ellison down in the infirmary, having his blood pressure checked.

“Catherine, thank god you’re back,” he said as soon as they entered the room. “Will you tell these guys to stop poking me with needles and running tests? It’s obvious by now that nothing they can do is going to help.”

Blair’s first impression was of combined muscle and aggression, and he had to admit to himself that he was a little intimidated. Catherine ushered him before her, though, and he suddenly found himself looking up into hard, blue eyes in a chiselled face.

“Who the hell’s this?” Ellison demanded. “Not another doctor who’s going to hem and haw and come up with bubkis?”

“Doctor, yes,” Catherine said. “But a different kind than the ones you’ve already seen, Jim. This is Dr Blair Sandburg, and he’s the world’s foremost expert in what’s happening to you.”

“This kid?” Ellison scoffed.

Blair decided it was time to speak up for himself. He squared his shoulders and looked Jim right in the eye, trying not to feel incredibly small.

“Actually, yes,” he said. “You just may be the living embodiment of my field of study. If what Catherine tells me is correct, you’re a behavioral throwback to a pre-civilized breed of man...”

He broke off abruptly as Ellison surged off the gurney he had been sitting on and loomed over Blair menacingly. Ellison turned to glare at Catherine.

“Are you out of your mind? You dragged this guy all the way down here to tell me I’m some sort of caveman?”

Caveman was actually precisely what he looked like, standing there, but Blair figured it probably wasn’t a good idea to point this out.

“Get this neo-hippie witch-doctor punk out of my face!” Ellison growled.

Thoroughly unnerved and actually quite annoyed by this less than welcoming reception, Blair backed hastily out into the corridor, Catherine hot on his heels. He started making his way towards the elevator, but she called him back.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said. “Major Ellison is under a lot of strain at the moment and, as you can see, he’s not exactly dealing with it very successfully.”

“That’s all well and good,” Blair said, “but that -“ he stabbed a finger back towards the infirmary “- is not something I can work with. I mean, I’ve dealt with Barbary apes that were better behaved than that guy!”

Catherine held out her hands in a placatory gesture. “I’ll talk to him,” she said. “If you’d be prepared to give him another chance, I really think...”

Her words were drowned out by a sudden siren and an announcement of “Unscheduled offworld activation!” which echoed down the halls. The siren was on the cusp of being deafening to Blair, and the anguished cry that emanated from the infirmary told him that it was more than that to Major Ellison.

Without even thinking about it, Blair pushed past Catherine to see Ellison curled up against the wall, his hands pressed against his ears and an expression of acute agony on his face. Blair rushed over to him and knelt down at his side, laying a hand on each arm.

“Listen to me, man!” he said, urgently, though trying to keep his voice calm. “Look at me. Focus on the feel of my hands on your skin. Lock onto my scent if you can – use any of your other senses but hearing.”

Ellison stared at him, uncomprehending. Blair decided to try another approach.

“Picture five dials in your head,” he said. “One for each of your senses. Now, they’re all set to normal levels, except hearing, which is turned way up right now. Have you got the image in your head?”

Ellison blinked, and then nodded slowly, his eyes still wide.

“Now, focus on the dial for hearing, and start turning it down. Just move it slowly, a bit at a time, not all the way down all at once.” He felt a slight relaxation of Ellison’s arm muscles under his hands. “That’s it, you’re doing great,” he encouraged. “Just keep dialling it down until you get to a comfortable level.”

After a few moments, Ellison’s hands dropped to his sides, and he drew a ragged breath.

“Better?” Blair asked.

Ellison nodded, and then the room was restored to blessed peace once more as the siren shut off.

“Excellent,” Blair said. “Now what the hell is an ‘unscheduled offworld activation’ when it’s at home?”

1999 – P4Y-835

Blair was suddenly blinded by the light on Jim’s gun, and he threw an arm up across his face.

“Not directly at me, man!” he exclaimed, and was relieved when Jim lowered the beam a bit.

Apparently satisfied that Blair was unharmed, Jim reached for his radio.

“Lieutenant Madison, come in.” There was no reply. “Lieutenant Madison, Sergeant Driver, do you copy?”

“The signal probably can’t get through all the rock,” Blair pointed out. “How did you know something wasn’t right?”

Jim shrugged. “I heard something when you stepped up in front of the book,” he said. “Some kind of mechanism.”

Blair huffed out a nervous laugh. “I’m not, um, standing on some kind of bomb or anything, am I?”

“Not as far as I can tell, no,” Jim reassured him. “I think it was probably just designed to trap unwanted intruders. I wouldn’t have thought this Illapa guy would want to damage his own stronghold?”

Blair’s brain was whirring with several ideas at once. “It suggests he had something here that’s worth protecting, though.”

Jim suddenly held one hand up, and cocked his head, as if listening intently.

“Madison and Driver are on their way up the staircase,” he said. “I can hear them running.”

They waited in silence for a couple of minutes and then Blair, too, heard a muffled shout from outside the chamber.

“Major? Dr Sandburg?” It was Madison’s voice, sounding worried and out of breath.

Jim stepped closer to the now blocked entrance and called back. “We’re okay, Lieutenant, just trapped for the time being. You head to the gate and report back to the SGC on our situation. Sandburg and I will see what we can work out from in here. Driver, you stay where you are and act as relay for any messages. If we can’t get out ourselves, we may need to get some explosives up here.”

“Understood, sir,” Madison called back.

“Wait, what?” Blair said. “You want to blow the place up?”

One of the frequent conflicts he came up against, being a member of the Stargate Program, was trying to persuade the military that explosives weren’t the answer to everything. Sure, he had set off a trap that meant he and Jim couldn’t get back to the gate right away, but they weren’t in any immediate danger and they hadn’t even started looking for alternative solutions yet.

Jim turned back to him with a placating gesture. “I don’t *want* to, no,” he said. “But I also don’t want to spend the rest of my natural life stuck in this chamber, so I’m thinking ahead. In the meantime, like I said, we can see what else we can figure out.”

“Right, okay, no problem,” Blair said, setting his mind going again. “Could you bring that light over here, so I can see this book more clearly? There might be something in here we can use.”

Jim moved to stand beside him, stepping carefully and obviously listening for other hidden mechanisms as he went. He stopped at one point, just before he reached Blair.

“The floor’s a bit uneven here,” he said. “It almost feels like there’s a path set into the stone that most people wouldn’t be able to detect. It leads up to the platform, but not in the most direct route.”

He stepped up onto the dais, placing his feet in precise, and slightly odd, places. Then, once he was in position, he aimed his gun down at the book, illuminating it. Blair spotted a candle on the platform nearby and lit it, so he’d have more light and Jim wouldn’t have to keep holding his gun over the book. Then, Blair opened the book gingerly, and started speed reading.

One of the things he’d been working on since finding out about the Stargate was learning to read Goa’uld. He’d always had a knack for languages, and it was fascinating to be able to study one that had evolved on an entirely different planet. He had picked it up quickly, and was now one of the foremost experts within the SGC, though he still couldn’t compete with Daniel.

He scanned a few pages quickly, summarising aloud what he found, as he went along.

"This is interesting stuff," he said. "It refers to Illapa as the planet's Blessed Protector, and says he used his godly powers to defend the inhabitants from invaders." As he read, the inklings of something started forming in his mind, and he started speaking faster. "It says he could see as far as any bird of prey, hear things only the animals of the forest could hear." He broke off and chuckled. "Sounds like BraveStarr." He looked up at Jim's uncomprehending expression. "You know – that space western cartoon from the late 80s, with the Marshall who could call on various spirit animals to give him special powers - 'eyes of hawk, speed of a puma'... No? Oh, okay, whatever. Anyway, do you see what this might mean?"

Jim shook his head impatiently. "No, I don't. Get to the point, Sandburg."

"It sounds to me as if old Illapa might have had a sentinel as a host."

Twelve months earlier – Cheyenne Mountain

"Can't you just switch them off, or something?" Ellison asked, almost plaintively.

Blair was horrified. "Why would you want that?" he asked.

"The last thing I want is to be some kind of lab rat in whatever experiments you've got cooked up, Chief," Ellison grouched. "Besides, they're stopping me from doing my job. Plus, I get the impression that being a freak around here means your life not being your own any more."

Blair sighed. Things had improved somewhat from their inauspicious beginnings after the siren incident, with Ellison much more open to the idea of listening to what Blair had to say. But apparently all he wanted was for the senses to go away. Instead of seeing them as a wonderful gift, he saw them as an annoyance. Ellison was basically the worst test subject ever; usually, when a project involved human participants, they were at least willing to be there, if only because they were being paid.

"They may be stopping you from doing your job right now," Blair reasoned, "but can't you see what an advantage they'll be, once you can control them at will?"

"How do you mean?" Ellison evidently wasn't the brightest bulb in the box, but at least he was listening and asking questions now.

"Think about it," Blair said. "Obviously, I don't know what you actually do around here, but wouldn't heightened senses help in some way? You'd be able to see further than anyone else, hear things from further away. I don't know – detect the approach of the enemy by smelling what they had for lunch?"

"Like the scouts in the Vietcong?" Ellison queried.

"Exactly!" Blair beamed at him. "I actually have a theory about that. It was said that the American soldiers had to change their diet so the Vietcong scouts couldn't detect them by the smell that resulted from what they ate. I figure it's likely the scouts had at least a heightened sense of smell, and maybe other heightened senses, too."

"But you didn't answer my question," Ellison said. "Can you actually just switch them off?"

Blair put his head in his hands and groaned.

1999 – P4Y-835

A week's vacation had turned into a six month sabbatical and finally Blair's resignation from Rainier University in order to take up a full-time position with Stargate Command. When Jim had finally accepted his senses, and it became clear that Blair's expertise was needed for him to be able to use them effectively in the field, Blair had been told all about the Stargate and offered a place on Jim's team. There was no way he could pass up the opportunity to travel to other planets. Of course, things didn't always go according to plan, as evidenced by their current situation.

"Isn't a sentinel host a bit of a reach, given how little information we have?" Jim said.

"Think about it, man," Blair said. "We know the tribes of Peru all had sentinels, and we know the Goa'uld experimented on humans to try and make better hosts for themselves. And here we are in Illapa's temple, and there's a safe route round the booby-traps that only a sentinel could sense. Just think how much easier it would be to present yourself as a god if you could demonstrate heightened senses. Maybe this is where it all started for sentinels."

"So, now you're saying I'm the result of a Goa'uld experiment?" Jim didn't sound any happier about that idea than he had about being called a 'behavioural throwback'. "Anyway, none of that helps us get out of here."

"Maybe it does," Blair said. "If the trap is designed to get anyone who can't find the right path through, maybe you need super senses to figure out how to switch it off."

"So, what do you suggest I do?"

Blair sighed. Jim was being stubborn again; Blair was pretty sure it didn't take a doctorate to figure out the answer to that question, but he answered it anyway.

"Look. Listen. Smell stuff. Run your fingers over the walls," he said, trying not to let his exasperation show. "I don't know exactly – just use your senses to check if there are any other hidden mechanisms that might let us out of here. Check that wall first – there might be some kind of clue in the carvings."

"Okay," Jim said, "but you just stay right where you are. I don't want you inadvertently setting off any more traps."

Blair gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir, Major, sir!"

He watched as Jim made his way carefully across the chamber to stand in front of the wall depicting Illapa. He started scanning the carved stones, while Blair looked on, amazed as always by watching his sentinel at work. After a few minutes, Jim stepped forwards so he was directly beneath the picture of the Goa'uld. He reached up and started running his fingers over the rock.

"There's a slight anomaly in the stonework here," he murmured. "Looks like the edge to some kind of compartment or something."

As he uttered the last few words, he pressed on the stone to the side of Illapa's head, and the section showing a circlet of light around the so-called god's head slid out from the wall. Jim reached up and retrieved a circular band of metal from the hidden tray.

"All right!" Blair exclaimed. "Secret treasure – I told you so!"

Jim turned back to him, the slim metal band in his hands. "How does this help us get out of here, Chief?"

Blair scanned down a few more pages of the book. "Well," he said, pretending to be getting information from the tome while actually speculating wildly, "Illapa is shown in the picture wearing the circlet, and it seems to be emanating a kind of force. Maybe it has some kind of power you can use to open the door. Try it on!"

Jim looked very sceptical. "You want me to put a completely unknown piece of alien technology on my head in the hopes that it magically extricates us from our current predicament?" he said.

Blair shrugged. "You got a better idea? And don't say blowing the place up. I say the unknown alien tech is still a more viable option than that one. Illapa obviously wore the circlet, and his host was a sentinel, so I highly doubt it's designed to do harm to the wearer."

"Of course, this is still just a hypothesis on your part," Jim said, but raised the circlet to rest it on his head.

There was a brief flash of light and, when it faded, Jim was standing with one hand in front of his face, turning it over slowly as if he'd never seen it before.

"Uh, Jim?" Blair asked. "You okay, man?"

"I can see... everything..." Jim breathed, in evident wonder. "And hear..." He pointed to a very dark corner of the room. "There's a spider making a web behind that wall. And Sergeant Driver is whistling the theme tune to The A-Team under his breath." He turned slowly on the spot. "It's amazing... The layers of smells in this room – I can separate out each and every one of them without even trying."

"Uh, that's great, man," Blair said, excitement and concern battling for supremacy in his mind. "Just don't zone out on me or anything, okay?"

Jim visibly pulled his focus back and looked over at Blair. "It's not like that," he said. "It's as if everything is laid out for me to access at will. I can turn the dials up and down in sequence or together and there's no danger of me getting lost in the sensations. No matter how closely I focus on one thing, part of my consciousness is still paying attention to the big picture of what's going on around me. This is incredible!"

The excitement started to win out, as Blair was reassured that the circlet wasn't about to fry Jim's brain or anything. There was still one pressing concern, however.

"But can you use it to open the door?" he asked.

In answer, Jim moved to stand directly in front of the door, reached out with no hesitation and depressed a section of the wall that looked exactly the same as all the others to Blair.

The stone blocking the entranceway immediately slid smoothly up into the ceiling, flooding that part of the chamber with pink light from outside.

Blair stepped out from behind the platform and crossed the chamber to stand next to Jim, who removed the circlet from his head and dropped his hand to dangle it casually at his side. As he did so, a new thought struck Blair and his excitement was replaced by apprehension.

“So, I, uh, guess you won’t need me around any more, then,” Blair said in a small voice.

Jim turned to stare at him, open-mouthed. “What on earth would make you say that?”

“Well, I figure...” Blair fidgeted. “Now you’ve got the circlet, you’ll be able to control your senses yourself, without my help.”

Jim grinned. “Think about how much I need you when I’m just working at normal levels,” he said, “and then imagine how much more trouble I’m going to get into using this thing.” He gestured with the circlet, which caught the light and shone brightly, as it did in the carving. “Besides, don’t you want to help test out what I can do with this baby? I may bitch and moan, and resist you at every turn, but we’re a team, Chief. Don’t ever forget that.”

Blair flushed with pleasure, then struck a subservient pose. “Oh, mighty Blessed Protector,” he intoned. “How may this humble guide serve?”

Jim snorted. “Humble? You? Now, that I would pay good money to see.”

He aimed a mock punch at Blair’s arm, which Blair danced out of the way to avoid, and they were both laughing as they emerged into the pink sunlight of an alien world.

THE END