

**SENTINEL**  
**MINI BANG**  
**2012**

## CONTENTS

### [THE SENSIBLE CHOICE BY KATEF WITH ARTWORK BY LYN](#)



Genre: Pre-slash, AU, angst, H/C

Rating: Mature themes

Warnings: Violence, bigotry

Summary: Troubled by increasingly painful sensory spikes, Detective Jim Ellison is about to leave the PD for a quieter occupation when he is asked to investigate a last case involving a spate of hate-bashings. He finds that the most recent victim has something he needs....

### [WORDS WITH FRIENDS BY SWELLISON WITH ARTWORK BY LYN](#)



Genre: Gen, missing scenes, angst

Rating: K

Warnings: None

Summary: Blair's thoughts and actions during Night Shift. Did he really hear what Jim was saying in the garage?

Author's Notes: In the on-air years of *The Sentinel*, certain episodes just naturally had a lot of fanfic written about and around them, such as *Cypher*, *Blind Man's Bluff*, *Sentinel, Too* and *The Sentinel* by Blair Sandburg. *Night Shift* hasn't generated that level of fictional attention, but it is a special episode to me because it was the episode being filmed when the first TS convention, *Sentinel Con* was held in Vancouver. I attended the convention with a few fan-friends and we decided to make it a true vacation, staying for the week, culminating with the Convention. While out sightseeing, we stumbled upon TS's filming location and spent a day on-set, quietly observing everything. Now, many years later, I finally have a *Night Shift* triptych: watched the episode being filmed, watched the episode, and wrote a *Night Shift* story.

Huge, huge thanks to magician113 for being an awesome cheerleader, beta and sounding board! This story benefits greatly from her input. Many thanks to alynt for the fabulous artwork, full of *Sentinel* colors, and for a last-minute beta job. I also found Becky's transcripts and Starfox's Gallery very helpful when I was too lazy—er, pressed for time, to go back and watch the episode, for the umpteenth time, for details;-)

## [RISK ASSESSMENT BY XANATERIA WITH ARTWORK BY STONEYGIRL77](#)



Genre: Slash

Rating: NC17

Warnings: This is rated adult for sexual content between consenting adults.

Art Warning: Nudity and NC-17

Summary: As hard as it is, sometimes you have to accept that a relationship isn't going to happen no matter how much you want it. When Blair gets an invitation to an exclusive club, he decides fate has given him the perfect opportunity move forward with life. But, if he decides to accept the invitation, he must live with the consequences.

Author's Notes: Thanks to annieb1955 for her fabulously thorough beta read. Any remaining mistakes should be blamed on grammar and punctuation gremlins. [Click here for more Pantheon stories.](#)

## [ONE OF THE GUYS BY PATT WITH ARTWORK BY LUNA\\_61](#)



Genre: Mild slash

Rating: R

Warnings: angst

Summary: Connor has become a detective in Major Crimes, has become a citizen and now feels like she fits in with the rest of the group. But there always has to be a reason why things don't work out as planned.

## [THE HUNT BY FLITTER WITH ARTWORK BY PATT](#)



Genre: Slash

Rating: R

Warnings: Attempted Non-Con

Summary: The gong rang loud in the still air. All at once, the waiting empaths jerked and then began to run.

## [ANAHATA BY MAB WITH ARTWORK BY BANBURY](#)



Genre: Gen  
Rating: suitable for young teens and up  
Warnings: None

Summary: After the events of the series end, Blair and Jim take a break at the Burning Man festival.

Author's Notes: I recently found out about Burning Man, and I immediately connected it with Blair. I chose the Burning Man 2000 festival as my inspiration for this story as the connection of themes and ideas was convenient, even though the time frame doesn't fit canon. Although all the events and displays described were real, I think it's best to describe this as loosely inspired by the actual Burning Man 2000 Project, since there is only so much the internet can do for you from a distance of twelve years and 8,000 miles.

Burning Man assumes that every attendee is a participant and as such expects them to provide their own shelter, water and food. Burning Man organises the tent city and provides toilets, ice and coffee.

The words on the poster that Jim reads come direct from [this Wikipedia entry](#). All my knowledge of Anahata is via Wikipedia also, and I apologise for any misinterpretations.

Thank you to EE for the lookover.

## [A VERY DELIGHTFUL FRIDAY IN CASCADE BY SILVERSHADOWS99 WITH ARTWORK BY ANNIEB](#)



Genre: slash (J/B), crack  
Rating: R-rated  
Warnings: bad language; annoying post-it notes

Summary: Everyone in Major Crimes eventually finds something to be delighted about.

Author's Notes: I need to thank my wonderful cheerleader Patt for all the encouragement, the awesome Bluewolf and Annie for beta'ing at lightning speed on very short notice, and Annie for the story art.

## [HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF BY PSYCHGIRL WITH ARTWORK BY ANNIEB](#)



Genre: Slash, PWP.  
Rating: NC-17  
Warnings: none

Summary: When Jim gets exposed to an organic fertilizer, the side effects are beyond anything he could imagine.

Author's Notes: Thank you to Magician, T Verano, and T.W. Lewis for the beta. All mistakes herein are my own.

This is sort of a companion piece to my story [Animal Natures](#). But you don't have to have read that story to understand this one.

## [WILLIAM'S FAMILY BY PATT WITH ARTWORK BY FLITTER](#)



Genre: Slash  
Rating: R  
Warnings: Language, angst, slash, established couple.

Summary: A look into the life of William Ellison after his heart attack. Will he be even closer to his sons?

Author's Notes: This story is a sequel to [William's Boys](#). They don't need to be read together, they stand alone on their own.

## [REPERCUSSIONS BY BLUEWOLF WITH ARTWORK BY PATT](#)



Genre: Gen, crossover  
Rating: All Audiences  
Warnings: None

Summary: Post TSbyBS, Blair gets an unexpected phone call that changes his life - and Jim's.

## [THE WAY TO A MAN'S HEART BY FRANSCATS WITH ARTWORK BY BETH](#)



Genre: Romantic comedy, pre-slash  
Rating: PG  
Warnings: none

Summary: Blair, in love with Jim, decides to seduce the sentinel by wining and dining him. Of course, things do not always go as planned and both colleagues and criminals get in Blair's way. The story takes place at Christmas, a time when there is a little extra magic in the air.

## [THE WORLD IS ALL AT OUR FEET BY BANBURY WITH ARTWORK BY SNAILBONES](#)



Genre: slash  
Rating: g (teen)  
Warnings: not betaed :(

Summary: Doctoral student Blair met police officer Jim. And they lived happily ever after. Only that they can't have their Happily Ever After without some bumps along the road in any Universe. Another AU first meeting.

## [BEEP BEEP BY LAURIE WITH ARTWORK BY BETH](#)



Genre: Slash. AU: Jim and Blair meet before Jim finishes the Police Academy.  
Rating: Teen  
Warnings: None

Summary: Jim Ellison does a favor for his father and ends up in charge of one over-sexed, grunge loving, mop-haired anthropology grad student.

Author's Notes: Beta'ed by Bluewolf. She's a star.

This story was inspired by me thinking about the old Road Runner cartoons. Remember how hard Wile E. Coyote worked to catch the Road Runner, and how he always got it wrong and his schemes backfired on him? Well, think of Jim as the coyote, out to teach that pesky roadrunner, Blair, some lessons about life.

No actual coyotes, roadrunners, or cartoons are mentioned in the story.

## THE SENSIBLE CHOICE



BY KATEF

ARTWORK BY LYN

### RAINIER UNIVERSITY CAMPUS, CASCADE, WA:

Blair Sandburg literally didn't know what hit him. One moment he was running across the parking lot, splashing through puddles, clutching his backpack, and struggling with his car keys, and the next he was downed by a stunning blow to the back of his head. Collapsing barely feet away from the potential shelter of his old car, he instinctively curled up around his pack, wrapping his arms around his head in an attempt to protect himself from the kicks and blows that began to rain down on him.

Dazed from the first blow to his head, and sobbing with fear and pain as the silent attack continued, his last conscious thought was that he was going to die, and that he was never going to see his Mom again. As he greyed out, a violent stamp on his leg crushed and broke his ankle, and he screamed in agony as he fainted, never hearing the blaring of a car horn and the angry shouting as grey faded to black.

It was purely by chance that Mike Somersby had to deliver a package to the Anthropology Department in Hargrove Hall that evening, and he had been sorely tempted to put it off until the next morning because the early Fall rain storm was so fierce. However, he had decided to go ahead and complete his day's schedule anyway, so entered the parking lot in time to see three hooded and shadowy figures apparently kicking the hell out of another person on the ground.

Now Mike was a big man, ex-Marine corps, and he wasn't about to watch some street punks get away with what could literally be murder. He immediately blasted his horn, and revved the delivery truck's engine as he closed the distance between him and the action, yelling obscenities as he bore down on the anonymous thugs.

He wasn't in the least surprised when they broke off the attack and ran for it through the gloom of the wet evening, high on adrenaline, and laughing at their actions. He wasted little time in jumping down from his truck to check on the small, soaked figure curled up on the pavement.

Bending to check for signs of life, he was gratified to find a strong, steady pulse in spite of the young man's pallor and ragged breathing. He fetched a tarp from the back of his truck to cover and protect the saturated body while he called for police and medical assistance, climbing back into his cab to shelter while he awaited their arrival.

He wished he could have pulled the poor little guy into the truck also, but having noted the severity of the young man's injuries, he knew better than to move him. He set himself to wait, trying to remember everything he could about what he had seen, although he realised that it would probably be too vague to be of much help.

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#### MAJOR CRIMES UNIT BULLPEN, CASCADE PD, LATER THAT NIGHT:

Staring balefully at his computer screen, Detective Jim Ellison ground his teeth in frustration as he cursed the infernal machine to eternal hell and damnation. He hated computers with a passion, only using them as necessary for his job, and never progressing beyond the basics. It was hardly surprising then that he frequently lost files or crashed the machine, and his 'hunt and peck' typing style meant that he limited his reports to the bare facts. Yet even so, the pile of paperwork on his desk never seemed to diminish, and his antipathy towards that aspect of police work was exacerbated on days like this when his headache threatened to blow up into full-scale migraine proportions.

Reaching over for his mug to take a gulp of dubious break room coffee, he almost spat it straight back out again as his taste buds rebelled against its bitterness, and he slammed the mug back down again with a savage oath.

Oh great! So now his sense of taste was acting up also. He was already wearing his earplugs - the type of moulded electronic plugs that shooters often wore, which allowed them to hear conversation while blocking loud noises - because his sense of hearing had been spiking on and off all day. And not only that, but he had been continually scratching and rubbing at the itching beneath his sweater sleeves, so he knew without a doubt that he would find his skin covered with hives by the time he got home tonight.

At least his sight and sense of smell were still behaving at the moment, so he was grudgingly aware that he should be thankful for small mercies.

Due to a natural genetic variation, Jim's senses were enhanced to a remarkable degree. Unfortunately, in current medical opinion, although the condition was recognised, it was



little understood. Some practitioners assumed it to be an extreme form of PTSD brought on by excessive anxiety, danger or perhaps even a mental disorder. However, less charitable physicians and colleagues alike implied that such individuals might even be hypochondriacs, or bucking for medical discharge, so Jim didn't expect or receive much sympathy from those quarters.

It had grown so bad recently, following a particularly difficult case involving a serial bomber, that Jim had reluctantly applied for and been accepted into the Forest Ranger Service; urban police work no longer holding any appeal for him under the circumstances.

So now he was biding his time, working out his last few days' notice, and hoping that a new job in the secluded environment of Cascade National Forest would allow him some sort of peace and respite from the overwhelming sights, sounds and smells of the city.

Just then, a bellow from the Captain's office drew his attention, and he looked up to see Simon Banks' frowning face peering around the doorframe.

"Ellison! My office, now!" and the other man disappeared back inside without waiting for a response, knowing that Jim didn't need to be told twice.

Sure enough, his detective quickly entered the room, standing automatically at parade rest as he stood before Simon's desk, awaiting his Captain's orders.

Eyeing the impressive man before him, noting the signs of stress on the handsome face, Simon's own gaze softened as he said more reasonably, "Another bad day, Jim? You seemed to be OK this morning. Any idea why everything's acting up again?"

Grateful for his Captain's bluff sympathy, Jim responded, "No, Captain. There's no particular reason I can think of. It's just getting more and more erratic, so much so that the danger from zoning is increasing daily.

"I've got to say that it's a good thing I'll be leaving soon, before I get someone killed while I'm off in la-la land" he added despondently.

"I guess you have a point, Jim. I mean, these zones of yours. To the rest of us, you just seem to go into some sort of coma, don't you? What pulled you out of it yesterday?"

Reliving the incident with no little embarrassment, Jim replied, "Well, I remember entering the drug store with Megan, and seeing that crazy bastard waving his gun around. Guess he panicked when he saw us, and knocked over the perfume display. Jeez, Simon – the smell! It really knocked me out.

"Anyhow, from what she told me afterwards, Megan approached the guy, expecting me to back her up, and he took a shot at her. It was the sound of the shot that snapped me out of it, but if she hadn't have moved so fast, he would have hit her.

"Christ, Simon, I was so ashamed..." and he tailed off, head hanging in self-condemnation.

Although the forthright Australian exchange officer had let it go, saying, "No worries, mate. I ducked in time!" Jim's guilt nearly crushed him, and he had apologised profusely.

Nodding sympathetically, Simon said, "I know it's getting late, Jim, and you should be on your way home by now, but there's been another attack at Rainier, which looks very like the latest in the recent spate of hate bashings. This time, the vic survived, thanks to the intervention of a delivery truck driver who interrupted them and drove them off.

"The victim's name is Blair Sandburg, and he's a grad student and TA in the Anthropology Department. Apparently on his way to his car, he was jumped crossing the parking lot. I'm thinking that it was the severe weather conditions that contributed to the attack in what you'd otherwise think was a fairly safe and open location. Perps probably thought that they wouldn't be disturbed, and they almost got away with it.

"Thing is, Sandburg's Jewish, as you'd expect with a name like that, and he's also shall we say, a bit unconventional-looking, according to the officers first on the scene. I wouldn't be surprised if the perps think he's gay also, which is another reason for targeting him.

"Anyway, since I don't have any other people to send, will you go to the hospital and see if you can interview the vic? I want to shut down this gang, and the sooner the better."

Expression grim, Jim nodded quickly.

"No problem, I'll get right over there. I can't stand that sort of hate crime, and it'd be good to work on something useful as possibly my last case." And even as Simon inclined his head in dismissal, he was exiting the office and striding across the bullpen, snagging his waterproof jacket as he hurried off to the hospital, the discomfort from his wayward senses temporarily banished in his determination to pursue the investigation.

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#### CASCADE GENERAL HOSPITAL, SAME NIGHT:

An hour later found Jim gazing down at the still form of Blair Sandburg, a perplexed frown on his face. On arrival at Cascade General, he had been informed that the young attack victim had been admitted for observation as his head injury was more serious than it first appeared; the first blow causing a hairline fracture to the back of his skull.

Since he was a material witness and potential target for his thwarted attackers, he had been placed in a private room with a uniformed guard until such time as he regained consciousness and was able to be discharged.

Jim knew that in all likelihood, once he had given whatever statement he could, he would probably be moved to a safe house until such time as the gang were caught and convicted, or it was deemed unlikely that he would be attacked again. Or until the DA and PD decide they can't afford the expense of protecting him any longer, Jim thought cynically.

Normally, Jim would have returned later to take Sandburg's statement, once he was conscious enough to interview, but for some reason, Jim found that he didn't want to leave the young man's bedside.

As soon as he had entered the room, he had experienced an overwhelming need to watch over and protect the injured man far beyond anything he had previously felt towards an assault victim. And not only that, but he suddenly became aware that his senses had all settled down, and were sharper than at any time since his affliction manifested itself.

Completely bemused, but not about to question the phenomenon, he utilised the opportunity to scan the small body, noting and memorising every detail.

Despite the heavy bandage covering the back of Sandburg's head, the sleeping face had remained relatively unscathed, thanks to the victim's efforts in protecting himself. Jim noted the wide brow and high cheekbones, neat nose and lush lips, desperately needing the young man to open his eyes, knowing instinctively that they would be beautiful, in keeping with the rest of the features. Long, dark auburn curls had been tied out of the way high up on his head, and Jim found himself hoping that Sandburg hadn't lost too many to the doctor who had sutured the wound on his scalp.

Continuing his scan, Jim saw that both Sandburg's right wrist and forearm and right leg from knee to toe were in plaster. When he held out his hand, hovering just above the thin bedcovers, he could discern even without seeing the deep bruising and heated flesh from contusions beneath the young man's hospital gown.

Grinding his teeth in fury at the extent of the other man's injuries, he knew he ought to be grateful that at least Sandburg had survived the assault, unlike two less fortunate victims, but it didn't make him feel any better right now.

Just then, minute changes in heartbeat and respiration warned Jim that Sandburg was waking up, even without the telltale beeps from the various monitors attached to the small body, and he was able to catch his first glimpse of deep blue, pain-filled eyes.

His concentration was broken by the entrance of a nurse, responding to her patient's monitors, who bustled in, snapping at Jim with barely a glance in his direction.

"You'll need to leave now, Detective. I need to check Mr Sandburg's vitals, and the doctor will be coming shortly. Please wait outside" and she brushed past him to do what was required, assuming he would comply with her orders.

However, Jim was reluctant to leave the room, and stepped back out of the way instead, intending to remain as long as possible.

Just then, a harried-looking middle-aged physician arrived, glancing down at his notes, and approaching the bed, saying, "So, he's just woken, Helen? Good, good! Can you hear me, Mr Sandburg? Can you tell me what you remember?" Then, spotting Jim hovering near the door, he frowned and said crossly, "You can't stay in here, Detective! I have to see to my patient. Please wait outside!"

Knowing that now was not the time to argue, Jim nodded stiffly and stepped out, but remained close by, fully intending to confront the doctor on his exit and inform him that, as Sandburg was a protected witness, he intended to stay with him at all times.

And what Simon Banks would say to that, he had no idea.

Two hours later found Jim still seated at Blair's bedside, having received Simon's somewhat reluctant permission to remain with the victim, watching carefully for any signs that Sandburg was waking up again. At least the young man was now sleeping naturally, having been dosed with painkillers after his first distressed return to consciousness, but Jim was impatient to actually speak to him, anxious to hear as much as he could remember about the attack. And, truth be told, simply to reassure himself that Sandburg hadn't been brain-damaged.

Just as he was contemplating making a quick bathroom break and coffee run, Jim looked up to see two rather hazy, slightly unfocused but undeniably beautiful deep blue eyes gazing at him.

"Hey, you're awake!" he murmured, a gentle smile lighting his face. "I'm Detective Jim Ellison. Are you able to talk to me, or should I get the nurse?"

When Sandburg looked a little puzzled, but shook his head minutely, licking dry lips, Jim reached for the jug of iced water on the nightstand and filled a paper cup, unwrapping and adding a straw. He raised the head of the bed slightly and leaned forward, carefully placing the straw between the other man's lips.

After taking a few grateful sips, Blair relaxed back again, and coughed before speaking, voice still somewhat rusty-sounding, but music to Jim's ears.

"How long have I been here? Do you know when I can go home?"

"You've been here since early afternoon, Chief, and it's just gone midnight. Do you remember what happened to you?"

"Um, it's pretty fuzzy, but I remember running to my car. The rain was so heavy; I could hardly see where I was going. Then something hit me from behind" he continued, distress evident in his eyes and elevated heart rate.

"I fell down, and they kept kicking me. Gods, I thought I was going to die!" and Jim leaned forward to pat his shoulder soothingly.

"Sshhh, it's OK, Chief. You're safe now. I'll make sure of it!" he promised, projecting as much sincerity and concern as he could in voice and expression.

"Did you see your attackers at all? Anything?"

"I'm sorry, man. I didn't see anything. I don't even know how many there were, except that there was definitely more than one. They didn't say anything, either – just kept kicking me...." and he tailed off miserably.

"I don't understand, man. Why would they do that to me? I mean, OK, I'm Jewish, and I've always been the class nerd, so I've always had to put up with a certain amount of bullying, but this sort of attack – it's just too much."

"If it's any consolation, Chief, I don't think it's truly personal. There've been several other attacks before you, and the only common factors were that the victims were perceived to be different –

Jewish, gay, coloured, Native American, whatever. Anything that mindless skinhead types would see as a threat to their beliefs. You just fit in with their criteria.”

“Yeah, I know” replied Blair quietly. “I’m an anthropologist after all. I know these things go on. Just didn’t expect to be on the receiving end, you know? Not on campus, anyway. I’m sorry, man. I haven’t been much help, have I?”

“Don’t worry about it now, Mr Sandburg. I’m not giving up on this case. It’s probably my last, so I want to make it count!”

Blair sent him a quizzical look, but then his face suddenly creased in pain, and he gasped as a bolt of agony shot through his head.

“S s s sorry, man....hurts...!” he whimpered, and fell back on his pillows even as Jim pushed the call button for the nurse.

The following morning, Simon Banks strode down the corridor to see a rumped-looking Jim emerge from Sandburg’s room, on his way to grab yet another cup of stale coffee from the nurses’ station.

Nodding a greeting at the uniformed officer seated outside, Simon grasped his detective’s arm saying, “Come on, Jim. You need to get some decent coffee, and something to eat. You might consider a shower also” he added, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

“Hey, Simon, since when did you have enhanced senses?” Jim joked tiredly. “I didn’t think I was that bad!”

“Well, you’re not standing where I am!” snarked his boss. “Murray here will make sure no one gets into Sandburg’s room, so you can spare an hour or so to eat and freshen up, no arguments!”

Realising Simon wasn’t about to take ‘no’ for an answer, Jim nodded and allowed himself to be led down to the cafeteria, where he wolfed down a good portion of eggs and toast while filling Simon in with Blair’s progress.

“Well, apart from the hairline skull fracture, he has a broken ankle and wrist, and some pretty nasty deep bruising. The doc’s concerned that he took some good kicks to the kidneys and lower back, but there’s no blood in his urine, so hopefully there’s no serious damage. He has a mild concussion, but his memory’s OK and there’s no sign of any dangerous swelling of the brain. But he didn’t see or hear anything useful. Thing is, when he’s discharged, he’s going to need a lot of care, so I was thinking I could take him back to the loft...”

“Why would you do that, Jim? I thought you liked to keep yourself to yourself! How come you want a complete stranger move in, even for a short while?”

At that, Jim gazed at his Captain for long moments as he formulated his response, needing to recount what he had concluded during his night’s vigil at Blair’s bedside.

“Well, to be honest, Captain, I can’t really explain it, not so’s you’d understand easily. See, it’s an instinctive reaction. I feel incredibly protective of him – and my senses feel so settled – so right –

when I'm near him. It's like a connection or something. And anyway" he added hopefully, "he's probably going to be sent to a safe house, so where would be safer than the loft, with me to watch him?"

Holding his breath and praying that Simon wouldn't think he'd completely lost it, he sighed in relief when Banks shook his head in mock exasperation before replying, "Anyone but you, Jim, and I'd be sending for the men in white coats, I swear! But for some reason, I believe you. Or believe that you believe it!

"OK. Say I agree, when do you think he'll be discharged?"

"Well, I get the impression that it'll only be a couple of days, especially as he's going to be in good hands – so I still have time to do some following up if there's any leads..." and the two men made their way back to Sandburg's room, deep in discussion.

As they approached the room, they were aware of an altercation going on between Officer Murray and an agitated young woman, who was obviously intent on entering Blair's room.

"But I know him! I work with him! Look, here's my driver's licence – I just want to know if he's OK!" she was saying, pushing her pocket book in Murray's face.

"I'm sorry, miss, I can't let you in!" the frustrated man replied, relieved when Banks interrupted.

"Captain Banks and Detective Ellison, Cascade PD. What can I do for you, miss...?"

"Davis. Emily Davis" replied the young woman, turning gratefully to Simon and Jim.

"I'm Blair's student helper. I heard about the attack, and I want to know how he is. And he" - indicating Officer Murray – "says I can't go in. And the nurses won't tell me how badly Blair's hurt!"

"Look, Miss Davis, why don't we go sit in the waiting room, and I'll tell you what I can. It's true that you can't see Mr Sandburg, because he's under police protection until the criminals are caught, but I can tell you that I understand his injuries to be severe but not life-threatening."

Allowing herself to be escorted down to the waiting area, Emily sat down, and fixed the two cops with a worried but determined gaze.

"Um, if you're sure he's going to be alright" she began uncertainly, "I think I know who did this. Well, not the actual culprits, but the group they belong to. It's so wrong to attack Blair, because he's such a sweet guy, but I can see why they would have done it, the bastards!" she ended, pure venom in her tone.

"And who would they be?" demanded Jim, like Simon, leaning towards her in eager anticipation. "We need to know everything you can tell us."

And Emily nodded, happy to cooperate for the sake of her favourite teacher.

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### SIMON BANKS' OFFICE, MCU LATER THAT MORNING:

A freshly showered Jim took his seat next to his fellow detectives Joel Taggart and Megan Connor, listening while Simon brought the others up to speed on what they had learned about the hate crime case.

"So, this student helper of Sandburg's says that there's been some covert recruiting happening on campus" muttered Joel, his normally genial face wearing an expression both hard and angry.

"That's right, Joel. She says she doesn't know them personally, but several of her friends have overheard things in the student's coffee bars and local clubs. Seems that not a few disaffected kids have latched onto this self-proclaimed white supremacy group as a way to get their own back for poor academic performance, targeting anyone they think who are usurping their 'rightful places'.

"It's a pathetic excuse for laziness and stupidity on their part, but it's disastrous for their innocent victims. Fascism at its worst!"

Shooting her partner a sympathetic glance, Megan added, "So do we have a plan, Captain? Because I for one can't wait to get my hands on those bloody drongos!"

Jim looked from the Captain to Megan, not surprised that her disgusted expression mirrored Joel's.

"Well, with the knowledge we now have, I'm suggesting some sort of set up to draw them out" Simon began.

"Once Mr Sandburg is discharged from hospital, Jim has suggested that he stays at the loft where he can be protected."

Ignoring the incredulous expressions crossing Joel and Megan's faces, he continued, "I suggest that we let it be known that he wasn't as badly hurt as previously thought, and that he will be returning to campus to do some sort of necessary work in his office, and to pick up his car. Except that it won't be Sandburg, but a ringer. Detective Jameson from Vice has long hair, and is a similar build to Sandburg, so if he wears some of Sandburg's clothes and some fake bandages and plaster, from a distance I'm certain he'll be mistaken for the teacher. And when those bastards come back to finish the job, as I'm certain they will, we'll get them.

"I've already OK'd it with Captain Sullivan in Vice, so as soon as Sandburg is safely ensconced in the loft; we can set up the sting."

As all three detectives nodded in approval, Jim said, "Just one thing, Captain. I'd like to be in on the arrest, but need to look out for Blair also...."

"Don't worry, Jim. I'm sure we can sort something out. I wouldn't want to stop you from making your last arrest in MCU" replied Simon, chuckling grimly.

"OK, then, people. While Jim gets back to the hospital, which I know he's itching to do, you two can do a little nosing around at Rainier, see if you can't come up with a bit more information..." and Simon dismissed them, already concentrating on the next item on his busy agenda.

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## BLAIR SANDBURG'S ROOM, CASCADE GENERAL, EARLY AFTERNOON:

When Jim entered Blair's room he was pleased to see that the patient was much more alert this time, although still obviously in pain.

"Hey, Chief! You OK? How's the headache?"

"Oh, man, I'm sorry, but I still can't help you with your enquiries. I really didn't see anything..."

"It's OK, Mr Sandburg. I'm not here to pump you for information you don't have. It's just part of the service as far as I'm concerned, to keep you protected until the perps are apprehended. And thanks to your student helper, we may have some useful leads..."

"Em? She's not involved, is she? Hey, Detective, she's a really good kid, you know? One of the best helpers I've ever had, and really smart. She's OK, isn't she?"

"She's just fine Mr Sandburg" soothed Jim. "Very worried about you, but not in any danger. It's just that she told us what she's picked up from her friends regarding the so-called 'white supremacists' who've been recruiting on campus, and we now have a plan to trap the bastards in the act." He proceeded to explain Simon's scheme to the worried young man.

A short while later, a somewhat bemused Blair responded, saying "Well, it certainly sounds like a plan, Detective, if this Detective Jameson is happy to stand in for me. But what am I going to be doing meanwhile? I mean, you said I'd be put in protective custody once I'm discharged, but where, man? Because I don't think I'll be able to do much for myself for a while" he admitted, looking shamefaced. "I mean, there's Mom, I suppose, but that's if I can contact her – she travels a lot, you see..."

"Don't sweat it, Chief" Jim broke in with a grin. "As long as you're OK with it, I'm taking you home with me. I've had medical training, and who better than to protect you but your own personal detective?"

"Um, that's really good of you, Detective Ellison, but why would you do this for me? Or do you make a habit of offering shelter to assault victims?"

"Well, to be honest, Mr Sandburg, I do have my reasons, because you're right. I don't normally get involved to such an extent. But I need to explain a few things, Blair – can I call you Blair?" At Blair's nod, he continued, "Well, please call me Jim. And what I'm about to tell you might change your mind, although I'm hoping not..." and, gathering all his courage, he proceeded to describe his 'condition', and Blair's effects on him and his senses.

Long minutes later, Jim finally wound up his recitation, and gazed quizzically at his listener, who had followed every word with rapt attention.

"Um, so there you have it, Chief. And it's up to you what you make of it..." he tailed off, more than a little embarrassed by Blair's direct and wide-eyed stare.

Well, at least he can't run away screaming in his condition! Jim thought, but I feel as if I've made a complete ass of myself. What if I've scared him off?



Blair's face suddenly broke out in a huge, excited grin as he responded eagerly, "Oh, man! This is so...so...amazing! I mean, hey, this is so up there with Naomi's Karmic, pre-destined stuff! It's almost too good to be true! Oh, man, I'm so excited!"

When Jim frowned in consternation, Blair visibly attempted to control his exuberance, although his pleased grin remained in place as he explained in his turn.

"See, man, this could really be called Fate, Karma, what you will! You know I'm an anthropologist, right?" and at Jim's guarded nod, he continued.

"OK, well, my doctoral studies are all centred on amazing people – people who had genetically enhanced senses – and who filled the role of watchmen and guardians for pre-civilised societies...."

At that, Jim bristled in anger, knowing that his initial instinct to such a comment would have been to throw this irritating kid up against the nearest wall if said kid wasn't already laid up in bed.

"Are you calling me a caveman throwback?" he snarled, suddenly furious that he had revealed his secrets to Sandburg, and viciously pleased to note the hurt and fear that flashed across Blair's face.

"Oh no, man! That's not it at all!" the younger man replied earnestly, holding up his uninjured hand in supplication.

"I'm sorry if it sounded like I was belittling you, Jim. But it wasn't what I meant at all! I mean, these guys – these Sentinels were fantastic, man! Revered by their tribes as protectors and so much more! And I've been studying them for as long as I can remember, man. I've wanted to find out if they still existed in modern society because you're so special, OK? And I want to help... I can help!" Blair trailed off, desperately worried that he'd frightened off his potential Holy Grail – the first living proof that his beloved Sentinels still survived he had encountered thus far.

Jim stared at the other man for a long moment, carefully scanning his physical reactions and open and honest expression, before finally deciding that Blair was telling the truth. And it wasn't as if he didn't want what Sandburg was offering in expertise after all. There could hardly be two such experts in the field of – what did he say? – Ah yes, Sentinels – so Jim really didn't have much choice.

"OK, Chief. Sorry I flew off the handle there. I guess I'm so used to having people not believe me that I'm way too oversensitive – and definitely no pun intended there!" he added sardonically.

"Anyhow, if you're still willing to trust me, will you agree to come back to the loft with me? Because I can swear right now that I won't ever hurt you, Blair. I don't think it's possible."

And he was almost overwhelmed with relief when Blair's smile widened to light his whole face as he said "Oh yes, please, Jim! I'd be really grateful to spend a few days with you. But I'll try to be out of your hair as soon as I can, promise!"

And Jim suddenly realised that he might well prefer the arrangement to be permanent...

Although Blair still tired easily, Jim had spent as much time visiting with him as possible, and the two men had talked companionably on both Sentinel and personal matters, discovering that they

actually had quite a lot in common, such as a love of camping and fishing, Jags basketball games and similar tastes in popular movies. They also found that they genuinely enjoyed each other's company, and a growing attraction that seemed to be more than just a 'Sentinel and Guide' thing.

Blair had been very forthcoming on the topic of Sentinels, and had already suggested ways in which Jim could learn to control and therefore live with his senses, although he was too unassuming to suggest that he was Jim's true Guide.

On the other hand, Jim was sure that the young man was definitely meant to be his; his to cherish and protect, and, hopefully to convince that they belonged together. And for the time being at least, he refused to contemplate any obstacles which could be thrown in their path, and simply concentrated on winning Blair over to his way of thinking.

After all, he was pretty certain he wasn't misreading the occasional hint of arousal he could pick up from the younger man, and he had caught more than one speculative and wistful glance cast in his direction when Blair thought he wasn't being observed.

It was another three days before Blair was finally discharged, released into Jim's protective custody on the proviso that he should return immediately should there be any deterioration in his condition.

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#### THE LOFT, 852 PROSPECT, EARLY EVENING:

"Well, here we are, Chief – home sweet home!" Jim remarked cheerfully as he steered Blair in his borrowed wheelchair into #307. Taking in the loft's high ceilings and light, spotless interior, Blair murmured, "Oh man, this is really cool, Jim! And the balcony! Even from here I can tell you must have a great view down to the waterfront. Perfectly in keeping with a Sentinel's natural desire to look over his territory," he added with a sly grin.

"Yeah, yeah!" responded Jim with a wry smile. "Whatever you say, Darwin! Meanwhile, let's get you settled on the sofa, huh? You're still looking pale, Chief, and I think your headache's back, am I right?"

Knowing that he couldn't fool a Sentinel, Blair nodded a little abashedly, saying, "Yeah, a bit, man, but not too bad. I'll be OK after I've rested awhile, honest!"

"No problem, Chief, but I want you to take one of the painkillers the doc prescribed. Yes, I know you said you don't like prescription drugs, Blair, but the journey here will have stressed you, so do me a favour and take your medicine, OK? And while you're resting up, I'll prepare dinner. Pasta OK with you?"

And he was more than pleased when Blair acquiesced with no further complaint, simply smiling at the older man in happy anticipation of Jim's cooking and allowing himself to be settled comfortably on the sofa, tucked up in a warm afghan and with several pillows propping up his injured limbs.

A short while later, both men had eaten their fill, and Blair complimented the chef.

“That was great, man. It was really good of you to prepare lasagne, because at least I could manage to eat with one hand – I was a bit worried in case you might have had to feed me!” he continued, blushing shyly. “And I know I’m going to be a nuisance to you, Jim. I’m so sorry. I just hope it won’t be too long until I can cope well enough to go back to my place.”

“Ah, well, as to that” Jim began, seizing the offered opening, “I really don’t mind looking after you, Chief. It feels kind of right, somehow. And about your place... I hope you don’t mind, but I checked it out yesterday before visiting you. That warehouse is awful, Blair! The block’s one of the roughest in the dockside area, and I’m sure I could hear rats running around inside. I don’t want you going back there, Chief. I’d be worried all the time...”

“Oh man, look, I appreciate your concern, but I can’t afford anything better. All the decent apartments are snapped up real fast at the beginning of the academic year, and I was just too late getting back from my last expedition. I’d had to let my other place go because I couldn’t afford to pay the rent while I wasn’t living there. And I’ve got lots of traps...” he tailed off in embarrassment.

“I understand, Chief. I really do. But I have a proposition for you which I hope you’ll like, and it’ll make me feel much better too. I’d like you to move in here with me, Blair. That room under the stairs could be yours permanently if you want, and I don’t expect you to pay much rent – just help out with the upkeep and groceries, and when you’re fit again you can do your share of the cooking and the chores.

“After all, I’m hoping you’ll be working with me, helping me to get a handle on these senses, so it seems only logical that you stay close by. What do you say? We can go fetch your stuff as soon as you’re up to it, and once the operation’s gone down, whatever the outcome. Just think about it, OK?” and he settled Blair once more on the sofa, not wanting to pressure the other man too much, but hoping that Blair would accept his offer.

The following morning, it was a much quieter and more introspective Blair who munched half-heartedly on the toast and bagels Jim had procured for breakfast, trying to eat more than he really wanted simply because he didn’t want to appear to throw Jim’s hospitality back in his face.

Aware that Jim was probably somewhat concerned – and confused – at his demeanour, yet he still hesitated to open up and explain how he was feeling.

The previous evening, he had had a lot to think about following Jim’s proposition, and he had felt increasingly shy and awkward at the amount of help he had required to perform basic ablutions and get to bed in the small room Jim had readied for him. Eventually he had come to the uncomfortable conclusion that he wasn’t at all happy to be such a burden on the big detective.

For now, however, Jim had had enough, and was prepared to broach the subject, if only to clear the air and find out where Blair was coming from.

Having cleared away the breakfast dishes, he plopped down opposite Blair, who was sipping a final cup of coffee and had every appearance of a condemned man awaiting his sentence.

“OK, Chief. Enough’s enough. I know you’re worried, and I’m assuming that a lot of it’s to do with what I said last night. I didn’t intend to upset you. If it’s so reprehensible a proposition, then you should feel free to tell me. I’m a big boy, and I can take it, even if I won’t like it. I just want you to open up and explain what’s gone so very wrong between us!”

Looking up guiltily, stricken with wide-eyed anxiety, Blair responded quickly, not wanting Jim to misunderstand.

“I’m sorry, Jim! I didn’t mean to upset you, I swear! It’s just that I’m having trouble processing everything that’s happened to me recently.

“I really appreciate your help, man, and your invitation to stay just blows me away! But, um, see – I’ve never had to rely on anyone to help me before. I mean, I’ve always been independent. Had to be, because I’ve always pretty much had to care for myself.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, my mom Naomi loves me, but she was never big on the nurturing, maternal thing, know what I mean? So I had to grow up fast and rely on myself. Started at Rainier at sixteen, and have hardly seen her since then, except for flying visits.

“And it’s really hard for me to accept your help for basic stuff like using the bathroom, dressing and bed” and he blushed deep red from neck to hairline. “How can you do it, man? And you’ve barely known me a week?”

Relieved that at least it wasn’t the offer to move in in itself that posed the problem, Jim tried to find the right words to reassure his Guide and persuade him to stay.

“Well, for starters, Blair, it’s really no problem looking out for you. Army medical training, remember? I can assure you I’ve had to do far worse, and for guys I didn’t even like all that much, so you can stop worrying about that aspect. I seem to have this instinctive urge to keep you safe, Chief, and if that means taking you to the bathroom, then no problem, OK?

“And you can quit worrying that you’re an unwelcome guest, Blair. I don’t make offers lightly, and I want you to know that I really want you to stay. I need to keep you close, and I hate the idea of you living alone in that rat-infested warehouse.

“And it’s not all unselfish, Chief. For the first time since these senses kicked in, I have someone who truly believes me – believes in me! And not only that, who can help me also! When you’re near me, everything becomes easy – natural – and I feel good. So good, in fact, that I almost want to withdraw my resignation from the PD and carry on working as a cop.

“So I’m asking again, Blair. Will you move in with me? I won’t pressure you into any type of deeper relationship that might make you uncomfortable. Just be here with me, friends and roomies if that’s as far as you want to take it. What do you say?”

And there was only one answer Blair could make. Sure, he wasn’t naive enough to imagine that everything was likely to be as simple as Jim made out, but the Sentinel’s conviction was absolute, so he schooled himself to make a leap of faith.

“OK, Jim, and thank you. I can’t promise that I’ll be the perfect ‘roomie’, because no one’s ever put up with me for long before. I guess I talk too much, and I’m not very tidy. But if you really want me, I’ll stay. But I don’t want to outstay my welcome, man” he added, self-doubt rearing its ugly head again. “If you want me out, just tell me, OK?”

And Jim’s answer was to reach for him, carefully pulling him close while mindful of all the smaller man’s injuries, tucking the curly head gently into his neck.

“I want you in, Chief. That I can promise you. And if you ever feel you need to go, all I ask is that you talk to me first, because I have a strong suspicion that I’ll want to go with you!”

And Blair nodded against Jim’s chest, relaxing into the warm embrace and feeling like at last he’d come home.

Later that morning, Simon Banks called from the MCU to advise Jim and Blair that the operation was going ahead that evening. Detective Jameson had made quite the show of being ‘discharged’ from the hospital a few hours after Blair’s own surreptitious departure, for all the world as if he was being escorted back to his warehouse home, accompanied by a couple of uniformed officers for protection. Wearing Blair’s clothes, and sporting a few well-placed, concealing bandages plus a fake plaster cast on his leg; Simon assured the two men that Jameson looked very much like the real Sandburg, but a more mobile and less damaged version.

Later that afternoon, the cops would drive him to Hargrove Hall, where he would go to Blair’s office ostensibly to ‘work’ for a while. To add a little realism, Simon had sought and received Emily Davis’ full cooperation, and she assured him that she would be there to greet the fake ‘Blair’ on his arrival, after which she would meet up with some friends and go to a tutorial, thus keeping out of harm’s way.

Later still, ‘Blair’ would return to his car across the deserted night-time lot to drive back to the warehouse, but crucially without his police escort. They would apparently receive an urgent call and would leave the campus, lights and sirens on as if going to an emergency. And after that, it was up to the thugs to take the bait.

“So, Jim. That’s the plan. Bill Jameson’s waiting in Mr Sandburg’s...um, accommodation, and as soon as Joel, Megan and a couple more unmarked units are in place in and around Hargrove Hall, he’ll be good to go.

“Now I know you said you wanted to be in on the capture, so I’m sending a unit to watch your place, and Officer Murray has volunteered to stay at the loft with Mr Sandburg. I’m not expecting any trouble, because I don’t believe those guys will have noticed the switch, but I want to play it safe anyway.”

“Thanks, Captain. I think you’re right, and we’ve managed to fool them so far. I just hope they feel strongly enough about being disturbed mid-attack to want to finish what they started. I want them to pay for Blair’s suffering, and those other poor victims!”

Just then he looked over at Blair, who was watching him, wide-eyed and worried from his position on the sofa, chewing his lower lip in distress.

“Can you hold on a minute, please, Simon? I just want to clear things with Blair...” and Jim put the handset down for a moment as he crouched down in front of the smaller man, gazing earnestly into the troubled blue depths.

“You OK with this, babe? You’ll be safe, I promise! And you already know Murray as a trustworthy guy. He’ll take good care of you!” and he squeezed Blair’s thigh comfortingly.

“Oh no, Jim, it’s not that, honestly! I’m not worried for myself, and I really like Sam Murray. I’m just concerned for you and the other officers. I mean, I know you guys are all trained and everything, but I don’t want those crazies hurting any of you, or any innocent bystanders. And I need to know you’ll be OK with your senses.

“But I know they have to be stopped...” he tailed off, voice soft and expressive face displaying his conflicting emotions: the gentle pacifist within him warring with the realist who knew that the likely outcome of a successful operation would almost certainly entail a degree of violence.

Understanding and sympathising with his new Guide, Jim was warmed and gratified by his concern, but wanted to reassure Blair that everything would be OK.

“We’ll be fine, Chief. We’ve done this sort of thing many times before, and understand the dangers.

“And as for the senses” he continued quietly, “Now I understand them better – thanks to you – I promise I’ll only use them sparingly. No trying to show off without you, babe, trust me?”

And Blair had to be satisfied with that.

The hours following Jim’s departure to take his position in the stakeout at Rainier were hard on Blair. The wait for news seemed interminable, and the young man’s anxiety levels seemed to ratchet impossibly higher as the afternoon and evening wore on. If it hadn’t been for the company of Officer Sam Murray, Blair was sure he would have been a gibbering wreck long before. As it was, Sam kept him supplied with conversation, endless pots of coffee, and dealt with any needs the injured man had with good natured competence and a down-to-earth attitude for which Blair was extremely grateful.

He still had plenty of time for introspection, however, and some of his thoughts were both surprising and troubling.

Although he had no problem with the concept of being attracted to another man, since his free-wheeling Mom had always taught him that it was the person, not the package that was important, he had little self-esteem. It seemed incomprehensible to him that a gorgeous hunk like Jim could actually want him. But that seemed to be the case, however improbable, and his heart swelled with joy at the notion. He was definitely very fond of Jim, the connection between them already strong, and even if he was not yet in love with the man, he had no doubt that he soon could be.

But how much of their relationship was determined by the needs of Sentinel and Guide? Could he see himself working alongside Jim for the rest of his life, giving up the greater part of his own independence and ambitions for the good of the tribe? That was something they would have to talk about in depth.

But for now, his nervousness overrode his ability to dwell on such potentially life-changing decisions, and all he wanted was for Jim to return to him unharmed, and soon....

As it turned out, in the end the operation went like clockwork.

Just as Simon and his team had hoped, the attackers had indeed wanted to 'finish the job', spurred on by other gang members and their escalating blood-lust; arrogantly believing that they could get away with it as easily as they had before.

After 'Blair' had been dropped outside Hargrove Hall, to be greeted enthusiastically by Emily, the undercover cops in one of the unmarked vehicles in the parking lot reported three suspicious-looking characters loitering around the area, covertly watching the scene as they pretended to chat amongst themselves.

Once their descriptions had been relayed to the other watchers, the whole team were able to track the thugs' progress as they meandered around the vicinity awaiting the opportunity to ambush their victim again.

For Jim, who had carefully studied and recorded every detail of their appearance, the wait seemed excruciatingly long, but eventually the team's patience paid off.

As planned, the unit supposedly 'protecting' the victim roared out of the campus on its way to the fake 'emergency'. As night fell and the campus grew steadily more deserted, 'Blair' limped out of Hargrove Hall and slowly made his way across to where the real Blair's car was still parked at the far side of the lot. Even as he neared his destination, the thugs moved in quietly behind him, pulling up their concealing hoods as the ringleader withdrew a vicious-looking club from inside his jacket.

However, forewarned via the transmitter hidden beneath his clothing, Jameson 'Blair' whipped round to face them, gun in hand and an unholy grin on his face as he snapped out "Cascade PD! Freeze!" – a command that was echoed by Jim, Joel and Megan as they surrounded the three. Caught completely unawares, like most bullies, the thugs turned out to be cowards at heart, surrendering immediately much to Jim's irritation, since he had been really looking forward to giving them a taste of their own medicine for resisting arrest.

As Joel read them their rights before handing them over to the uniforms waiting to take them downtown for booking, Simon's sedan drew up and he approached the group, cigar gripped between his teeth as he grinned wickedly.

"Good work, people! I do like it when a plan comes together, and I'm sure these jokers can give us plenty of useful information, given the right encouragement" and he chuckled at his own dark humour.

"And now I think you'd better get back home, Jim. I know you'd like to do a little of the 'encouraging' yourself, but I think it's probably more important that you go and put young Sandburg's mind at rest. From what I understand, Murray's had to darned near sit on him to keep him still these last few hours!"

And Jim just had to agree with him, and turned to run to his truck, wanting to get back to his new Guide as quickly as possible; his colleagues' cheers and well-wishes ringing in his ears.

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#### EPILOGUE: THREE MONTHS LATER:

If Blair could have bounced into the loft, he would have, but he had to be contented with a steady limp as his heavily braced right ankle still needed the support of crutches despite his cast having been removed just that afternoon. In the three months since his assault, his head injury had healed well, the most recent CT scan showing that the hairline fracture had knitted satisfactorily, and the debilitating headaches had become more infrequent as time went on. As far as his wrist was concerned, he was continuing with his PT exercises, but although he still needed to wear a brace at night for protection, he could now manage to do most things for himself, and he was typing again, albeit a little slower than he was accustomed to. It was more than enough to help Jim plough through his reports, though, for which the older man was extremely grateful.

Unfortunately, his ankle injury had been much more serious, what with the crushing and compound fracture caused by one of his attackers jumping on it. But at least now he was able to walk, if not drive, relying on Jim to ferry him around for the time being. Nevertheless, he was both relieved and excited at the results from his latest check up, and Jim was equally thrilled at seeing the proof of his Guide's improving health.

"Hey, babe! Looking good there! But I have to say, you still need to take it easy, 'cause the doc warned you about overdoing it..."

"I know, Jim, really! And I promise to take it easy, honest! It's just so good being finally free of the cast. I can take a shower without wrapping myself in saran film like a sandwich!" and Blair grinned happily at his Sentinel, basking in Jim's overt love and concern for him.

Just then, Jim noticed the flashing light on their answer machine, so he checked the number and called back, saying over his shoulder, "It's Simon, babe. He says he has the latest on the hate-crime trial results. Let me talk to him, and I'll fill you in OK?"

Nodding worriedly, but sitting down to wait with no little impatience, Blair gazed at his big roommate, eyes wide and anxious, because he really didn't want to be called to the witness stand, knowing that he could add little to the evidence against the gang.

Long minutes later, still nervous since all he had been able to pick up were the fairly non-committal 'ah has' and 'yeahs' from Jim, he was almost thrumming with tension when Jim finally hung up and turned to him.



"Well, Chief, looks like it's all over. DA's cut a deal so those three get their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. They'll escape the death penalty because of all the information they gave the FBI. Turns out the Cascade cell was only part of a nationwide neo-fascist group. Unfortunately, the ringleaders have already managed to evade capture so far, although all their local members and student recruits have been picked up.

"The ones who attacked you were all athletes who'd been kicked off their respective teams for failing grades. Two footballers and one wrestler. Only one of them had actually been in your class, Chief, and it was only one of several he failed, but again, I think you provided them with a legitimate target. In their eyes you're a Jew and a teacher. And one of them said you were a fag anyway, so you deserved it."

"Shit, Jim! I find it so hard to understand how anyone could be so crass! It's so sickening that extremists like them take it on themselves to judge others and find them wanting, just because they don't hold the same beliefs! I know it happens all the time, but it doesn't make it any easier for me to accept. And this time I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, I guess" he tailed off sadly.

Hugging the smaller man to him, Jim murmured, "S'OK, babe. At least it's done now, and we can get on with our lives together."

And as Blair nodded and snuggled against him, he considered how their lives had changed for the better.

With their mutual attraction growing daily, they had decided that Blair should finish his dissertation on modern-day Sentinels, so that others like Jim could benefit from his knowledge, and would be released finally from the mis-diagnosis of PTSD. With Simon's blessing, Jim had withdrawn his resignation. Once fully fit, Blair would join him as a partner and consultant, dividing his time between Rainier and the PD, thus enabling Jim to utilise his senses to the full with his Guide's grounding support.

They also hoped that recognition of the importance of Guides would encourage those with the appropriate talent to come forward, so that Sentinel and Guide pairs would once more work together to the benefit of society as a whole.

On a personal level, they had indulged in plenty of kissing and cuddling, but until now Blair had remained in the small bedroom downstairs, since his casts and injuries had made it too uncomfortable for him to sleep upstairs with Jim.

Now, however, his leg cast was gone, so Jim hoped that Blair would join him upstairs that night.

"Hey babe. Are you up to moving to a comfortable bed with me tonight? We'll still take it easy, I promise, because you're not fully healed yet. But I don't want to wait any longer to hold you and make love to you Chief. What do you say?"

And Blair gazed up at him with eyes brimming with love, as he murmured, "Do we have to wait 'til tonight, Big Guy? 'Cause I have to say I'd rather not wait any longer!"

Jim responded eagerly with a huge smile.

Kissing Blair gently, he wrapped an arm around Blair's waist to help him climb the steps as he said, "I love you, Blair. I want to cement our bond forever. You chose to stay with me, help me so I could remain a cop, and now I choose you as my companion for always. It's the sensible choice after all!"

And grinning happily up at him, Blair couldn't agree more.



BY SWELLISON

ARTWORK BY LYN

Blair Sandburg reached across Jim's desk to grab the ringing phone. "Major Crimes, Det. Ellison's desk."

"Oh." The answering female seemed disconcerted. "I was given this number to contact Blair Sandburg?"

"Yes, that's me." Blair didn't think the woman sounded like someone that he'd given one of his business cards with the precinct's number to impress, so that left... "Are you with the Sisters of Hope, ma'am?"

"Yes. I've got the van with the food down by the police station, but I'm not sure where to go. Your entrance appears to be boarded up, and a news van just took the last parking space on the street."

"Okay, you can park in the police garage and I'll meet you down there." Blair gave directions to the garage. "I'll see you in a few minutes. Good-bye."

"Good-bye and thank you."

Blair hung up, and then made his way out of the bullpen. Once beyond Major Crimes' doorway, the wide corridor became crowded with the homeless people that the police station was temporarily hosting. Only a few of their unexpected crowd of visitors had ventured into the bullpen itself, the majority content to walk the corridors, or stand or sit along the walls, talking and resting. Blair was sure the street people would appreciate a meal, and he was glad they'd be provided one soon. He stepped into the elevator, hit the button for the garage and waited for the elevator to reach his destination, tapping his foot. Not that he was impatient, just excited and full of anticipation. He only

needed to make a handful of corrections to his dissertation introduction, print off a clean copy and it was ready for peer review, the first step in his major undertaking of documenting modern-day sentinels—well, technically one sentinel. Blair firmly believed that there were other sentinels out there, though; in a population of billions, Jim couldn't be the only living sentinel.

Exiting the elevator, Blair entered the garage. His goal was easy to spot: an immaculate white van with a yellow sun and the words "Sisters of Hope" painted on the side paneling in big silver letters, outlined in red. As he approached the van, the driver's door opened and a woman in her early thirties stepped out. Dressed in blue jeans and a navy car coat with a white sweater showing above the coat's V-necked lapels, she didn't look like a nun. Perhaps she was a volunteer. "Hi, I'm Blair Sandburg."

"Sister Charity." They shook hands, the nun continuing her explanation. "Actually, I'm Sister Catherine Charisma. I work with children a lot. They dubbed me Sister Charity and the name stuck." She smiled as she slid open the van's side door. "It resonates well with our order's name; helping to spread the Good Word."

Blair looked inside the van. The customary second row of seats had been removed, leaving a large cargo space, currently filled to the ceiling with boxes labeled tuna, ham, and turkey sandwiches, two huge silver urns, and a convention-sized coffee urn. Bags of Styrofoam bowls, cups, paper plates and plastic ware were also crammed into the space, wedged between the two bucket seats at the front of the van.

"Wow, this is an awesome amount of food, Sister Charity. Thank you!"

"I've worked with Social Services before, so I had a pretty good idea of how much food to bring," Sister Charity said. "Unfortunately, a lot of people are struggling nowadays. We do what we can to help."

"You do a lot, Sister. Please wait here; I'll get the large dolly from Evidence to cart the food upstairs. I'll be back in a few." Blair turned and strode determinedly toward the garage's access doors into the station.

He hustled to the evidence lockup, spotting Rafe and H unloading a table from the back of a van. "Hey guys, you're not using the dolly, are you? I wanna borrow it to take some donated food up to the break room for our homeless guests."

"Help yourself, Sandburg." Henri motioned towards the large dolly, parked against the far wall.

Blair waved his thanks, retrieved the industrial-sized dolly and made his way back to the garage. Working as a team, he and Sister Charity had the food and serving essentials transferred from the van to the dolly in neatly balanced stacks in under ten minutes. Then they trekked up to the break room on the sixth floor and Sister Charity helped Blair rearrange the tables and set up the soup and coffee urns to get their makeshift cafeteria up and running.

Blair surveyed the finished room. Wiping his hands on his khaki pants, he extended a hand. "I can't thank you enough, Sister. Your karma must be through the roof!"

"You did a lot of the work, too. Let me know if you need any more food. I hope and pray that the mayor and the striking workers resolve their issues soon." They shook hands. "You're a good man, Blair Sandburg."

Blair blushed slightly then escorted Sister Charity to the elevator. He returned to the break room to find his first customer waiting, a silver-haired elderly woman with a small dog at her heels. Blair crossed the room, stepping over to the other side of the serving table. "Hello, ma'am. Would you like a sandwich or some soup?"

The petite woman nodded, grabbing a saran-wrapped turkey sandwich from the first tray on the table. Taking a quick glance at Blair, she unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. Making a face, she swallowed it down.

"Is the sandwich all right?"

"It's... okay." The old woman said, doubt evident in her tone. She stooped down, opened the sandwich up and offered it to her dog. The dog, which looked like a cross between a Chihuahua and a beagle, sniffed the proffered food, then stepped back, leaving it uneaten. The woman rose slowly, re-wrapped the sandwich and stuffed it in a pocket of her coat. "Waste not, want not. Ah, could I have some soup, instead?"

Sandburg got her a bowl of soup—chicken noodle, he noticed as he ladled it out—and handed it to her.

"Thank you," the woman said quietly, and then she and her dog walked out of the break room. A couple of men entered as she left and Sandburg greeted them. "Hey, gentlemen. What can I get you?"

"I call it a violation of friendship and trust." Jim Ellison ended their discussion by turning and leaving.

Blair watched, dumb-founded as Jim strode over to the elevator and stabbed the UP button. He took a deep breath and hustled across the evidence garage's concrete floor. He reached the elevator just in time for the doors to snap closed right in front of his face. Knowing Jim was inside, he waited a few seconds for the doors to reopen, but that didn't happen. "Dick!" he said to the departed elevator, and then he turned to take the stairs. Propelled by anger, he climbed quickly. At the sixth floor, he strode over to the elevator and leaned against the wall next to it. When Jim emerged from the elevator a few seconds later, Blair couldn't resist a quick jibe as Jim walked past him. "Hey, you've also got a fear of courtesy."

Luckily, Simon Banks appeared a few seconds later. "Hey, Sandburg, got a positive ID on your 'angel.'" He handed Blair a file and Blair tried to focus on more immediate concerns. "According to records, his name is Harold Blake. He taught a semester of ancient history at Fordham."

"Ah, guess that would explain him knowing Aramaic." Blair scanned the file while they walked. "Unmarried, no family. His employers reported him missing two years ago. Never heard from again."

They walked into the bullpen, Blair making an effort to keep up with Simon's longer stride. "That is, of course, until now. You sure this thing's right?"

"Fingerprints don't lie," Simon said as they approached his office door. "I do wonder how he ended up in an alley living out of a cardboard box." Simon went into his office before Blair could say anything further.

Blair stared at Simon's closed door for a moment. He'd been that close to challenging the captain's assertion that fingerprints don't lie, ready to rattle off statistics about the Innocence Project, and sloppy police forensics departments... He snapped the file on Harold Blake closed and turned around. Noting in passing that Jim's desk was empty, Blair left the bullpen. As he stepped down the corridor, he glanced towards the break room. Through the open slats of the break room window shades, he spotted Ricardo doling out food to a line of people. Good, Ricardo was holding down the fort. Blair headed for the stairway. Opening the door, he slipped inside, heading up the stairwell instead of down. He needed to cool off before facing Jim again, and the rooftop would afford him the opportunity to do that, literally and figuratively.

Blair opened the door and stepped out to the roof. The night air was definitely nippy, and he lay the folder down on the ground before zipping up his heavy-duty blue windbreaker. Why did Jim have to be so stubborn about the diss? Surely he realized how important it was not to compromise the research?

This wasn't helping; he was just getting angry again at Jim, and the man—Sentinel—wasn't even here.

Blair tried to calm down. Deep breaths, Sandburg, he reminded himself, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. His hands rose to above his head as he breathed in, hearing Naomi's voice, from when she first taught him meditation techniques. He held his breath for almost a minute, and then let it out slowly as he brought his hands back to his sides. He repeated the calming breaths four times before opening his eyes. Jim was way off base in his interpretation of Blair's words, why couldn't he see that? And what was up with him reading the intro in the first place, anyway? As roommates, they'd had clear boundaries on what was and wasn't off-limits for years now.

Oh great, he was getting riled up again. Blair closed his eyes and took another deep breath. Naomi's words accompanied him again, but they were different this time: I hear that. Only she didn't, because she wasn't here. No, wait, he was being too literal-minded, again. Blair half-smiled. Occupational hazard, for an academic. Of course, "I hear that" had a different meaning for Naomi, anyway. Mom meant that she would listen to and accept what was said without judgment.

Not that Jim would ever do that.

Okay, maybe he was being a bit harsh, there. Jim was an actions-speak-louder-than-words type of guy, and Blair knew that. And when he did speak, Jim used the most detached, professional words he could. So, what had Jim really said, in the garage?

"After I let you stay at my place. I get you a job at the department."

Sandburg easily translated that bit of Jim-speak. "After I let you into my life, totally and completely." And he had: Jim had lied to Captain Banks to get Sandburg's observer credentials, and then his one-week offer of shelter after Sandburg's warehouse digs blew up had morphed into an unlimited roommate situation at the loft. Tupperware coding and stereo restrictions aside, Blair had the best living quarters of any research fellow at Rainier, and he knew it.

"What does my sex life got to do with your project?"

Well, Jim was hardly the first man to confuse sex and intimacy. Add to it the abandonment issues that Carolyn had mentioned, and Blair could see how a man like Jim would get all defensive and huffy about that.

His talks with Carolyn had been informative about Jim's adult life, but she didn't know very much more than Blair about Jim's upbringing. Until he'd met Steven Ellison at the race track, Blair hadn't even known Jim had a brother. And it was only while they were reinvestigating the Country Club Strangler case that Blair had learned that Jim's father was alive and well and living in Cascade.

But the real bombshell about that old case was the revelation that Jim had had his heightened senses as a child. Blair understood how discovering Bud Heydash's body in the woods and William Ellison's lack of support would cause Jim's senses to go dormant. But what had activated young Jim's senses in the first place, and how old was Jim when he first acquired his senses?

All of Blair's research, plus Jim's experiences in the jungles of Peru, pointed to hypersensitivity being a combination of genetics and environment—the old nature vs. nurture argument. Hyperactive senses had to be a rare genetic mutation, born out of primitive tribesmen's constant fear of living in the extremely hostile jungle environment of the rain forests. Tribal members possessing augmented senses would naturally develop a high level of the fight-or-flight instinct, and might be outwardly perceived as cowards, reacting to and/or running away from invisible threats. Eventually, the tribal leaders saw that certain tribal members always knew ahead of time when danger was coming, or how the weather was changing, and sentinels became valuable assets to the tribe. Over generations, the native tribes tamed their environments and ceased to live in constant fear. Hyperactive senses became largely dormant, only triggered by a combination of genes, isolation and the adrenaline spike caused by fear. Blair surmised that the tribes' sometimes brutal coming of age rituals for their young warriors had been designed to trigger fear and create or expose sentinels. He had wanted to discuss this with Incacha, but the Chopec Shaman had died before they'd had time for a serious discussion.

"Threatened by you? I don't think so, Chief."

Okay, that one was harder to take, because the almost-sneer in Jim's voice had hurt. Blair knew that he was shorter and physically weaker than Jim—than most of the men on the force, not to mention Megan—but there was a deeper meaning here, too. Who had the power in the Sentinel/Guide relationship? The Guide. It was the most startling conclusion of his research, and it wasn't even mentioned in the introductory chapters, because Blair hadn't decided how to present that surprising result, or even if he should.

It had been difficult to wrap his head around the concept of Sentinel and Guide; Jim had accepted his role as Guide long before Blair himself had, but the incidents had mounted up until Incacha's appearance had cemented it. Blair was Jim's Guide, no two ways about it. And if that made Jim feel

threatened—"territorially threatened to the point of paranoia"—well, Jim had a reason to feel like that. Blair could walk away from this Sentinel thing, find another area of anthropology or archaeology to explore, and lead a normal, healthy life. Jim couldn't—and that gave Blair the power in their relationship. Not that Blair ever would leave, and Jim must know that.

"I call it a violation of friendship and trust."

...or maybe not.

"You're a good man, Blair Sandburg," Sister Charity had said, earlier tonight.

But his best friend, his Sentinel, didn't agree with that assessment. He needed to talk to Jim, and fix this. He badly needed Jim to ask, "Are we okay, here, Chief?" in that easy-does-it-everything's-fine voice that Jim used to settle matters on calls and fractious interviews. Blair took a deep breath, then reached down to retrieve the file on Gabe—er, on Harold Blake. He would mull over what to say to Jim, but first he needed to communicate with Gabe.

Blair dropped the Harold Blake file on his desk, staring at the folder and reflecting bitterly that if he'd taken the time to lock up his dissertation and not leave it carelessly lying on his desk, perhaps he wouldn't be in this pickle. On the other hand, a locked desk drawer would hardly be a deterrent to a determined sentinel. And Jim was nothing if not determined. Maybe, if he hadn't tantalized Jim with that humorous bit in the truck, Jim wouldn't have gotten the itch to read Blair's introductory chapters.

"And pigs would fly," Blair muttered. He stepped away from his desk and out of Major Crimes. Walking down the still-crowded corridor to the break room, Blair found a small line of people waiting patiently for their food. Ricardo had the makeshift cafeteria well in hand, so Blair grabbed a wrapped sandwich—tuna, not turkey—and caught Ricardo's eye. "I'll be back in a little while. I need to talk to a witness."

"Sure, Sandburg, take all the time you need," Ricardo answered, then turned to fetch a bowl of soup for the next person in line. Blair stopped to pour a small cup of coffee, and then left the break room. He wasn't sure exactly where Gabe was, but the professor-cum-angel had to be somewhere among the milling throngs in the hallways. Blair rounded a corner and found Gabe seated in front of him, leaning slightly against the wood paneling underneath the windowed wall of Major Crimes.

Balancing the sandwich and coffee in one hand, Blair smoothly settled down next to Gabe, who had obviously been to the break room and was currently eating soup from a paper plate, three unopened packets of crackers balanced precariously on the hopefully-sturdy paper plate.

"Hey." Blair searched for the best way to start this conversation.

Gabe tapped his spoon against the plastic soup bowl. "The Lord said, 'Look, and I will send down food from Heaven for you. Gather what you need.'" Gabe paused to take a sip of his chicken noodle soup.



Blair recognized the simple but eloquent words and sought to get Gabe's attention. "Ah...that's from Exodus, right?" At least Gabe stopped eating his soup; Blair hastily continued, unconsciously pointing his sandwich at Gabe. "Y'know, Harold Blake would know that quote, because he taught Biblical studies in his course."

"He was gathered up," Gabe whispered, like he was telling a secret. "I use his body to walk amongst men." The timbre of his voice switched. "For He made His Angels spirits and His ministers' words were flaming fire." He turned towards Blair, voice dropping back to that confiding whisper and smiled. "I'm here to work a miracle." Then Gabe's face turned away from Blair and he concentrated on his food, stirring it before taking another sip of soup.

Blair floundered, trying to keep the conversation rolling. "Ah...do you need help with it? Your miracle?" Maybe if Gabe told him what he was planning, he could help out.

Gabe stopped eating and his restless hands stopped twitching. He turned to face Blair again. "My friend, there are troubled waters ahead for you. But hold fast to this: the light of the soul can never be wholly consumed from without."

Blair met Gabe's scrutiny uneasily. Those words sounded almost prophetic...Uncertain how to respond to that, Blair's gaze fell on his watch. "Wow, I need to get back to the break room, now."

He rose to his feet, still holding the uneaten sandwich and almost-full coffee cup. "I'll see you late—"

But he was talking to empty air. In the short time that Blair had gotten to his feet, Gabe had vanished.

After his unsuccessful attempt to get through to Gabe, Blair returned to the break room. He resumed his role as food supervisor, noting that the pile of sandwiches had shrunk considerably in his absence. He checked the soup and coffee—both still hot. Jim walked in a few minutes later.

Blair watched as Jim picked up a tray, then grabbed a turkey sandwich. A Guide's job was to protect his Sentinel from all threats, big and little, right? "Uh...I'd probably stick to the tuna if I were you," he advised Jim.

Jim put the turkey sandwich down and picked up two tuna sandwiches from the next tray. "All right. Look, Chief, uh...you know, uh, I...maybe I...maybe I overreacted."

"Maybe?" Blair's eye widened, he couldn't help himself. Talk about understatement.

"I know I shouldn't have read your dissertation, and I'm sorry for any transgressions but I'm...you know, I thought we were friends."

"Right."

"It doesn't read that way to me."

Could he explain to Jim that the fear concept included so much more than bodily harm and physical prowess? "Jim, I said that most of your life choices are fear-based. It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Are you kidding me? It makes me sound like a coward."

"Well, that's the way you read it." Blair didn't think Jim caught his subtle emphasis on 'you,' though. Nor did he understand the complex, intricate relationship between genetics, environmental factors and fear necessary to create a fully-functional sentinel. That major point would take at least a third of the dissertation to delineate and analyze properly, how could he convey all that to Jim in a few sentences? But he had to try. "Come here." He lowered his voice as Jim approached. "You chose to be a sentinel. And the way that you deal with your fears, all of them, is based on that choice. Fear can be one of your greatest allies. Now, you can choose to bottle it up inside or we can work on it." Like the old days, just you and me figuring out another wrinkle in this Sentinel thing.

"After this?"

Jim's voice was full of skepticism and Blair started to realize how hard it would be for Jim to get past this. "So, what do you want to do? Just call it quits?"

Jim looked away, unable to meet his eyes.

So much for talking this through like reasonable adults. "Ah, maybe you're right. Maybe I've, uh...lost my objectivity. I'll tell you what—I'd rather just be friends." That way, he could still keep an eye on his Sentinel, and win back his trust. If Jim needed further proof..."So why don't I go destroy my notes? How about that?"

Blair wasn't waiting around to hear Jim say "Yes, destroy them all!" He couldn't bear the thought of Jim rejoicing as years of his blood, sweat and tears—his research—went up in smoke. Blair strode out the door. The ball was in Jim's court, now.



BY XANATERIA

ARTWORK BY STONEYGIRL77

“No one knows if Pantheon is real or not. Supposedly, there's a branch in nearly every city in the world. It's a very exclusive sex club, that caters to every flavour of kink. You have to be invited by a member, but you don't always know who it is, or why they sent you an invite. It's not free, but the fees, like everything else about it, are shrouded in mystery. If you go, and they accept you, you're in. It's a pretty big if, but it's worth it. Anything you want, they can make it happen. Any desire you might have - even the ones you can't admit - becomes a reality when you walk through the door.”

- Entry taken from ShouldBeReal.com

They really shouldn't call it spring. Spring was supposed to mean lush green grass and sunshine to carry hints of all the growing things.

In Cascade, all spring meant was enough rain that they ought to issue monsoon alerts. Blair had been through monsoon season in other parts of the world, so there was plenty of basis for comparison. The downpour he could see out the window didn't come in drops, it pounded down in sheets, and showed no signs it would let up any time soon.

Still, he had things on the agenda for the day, so there was no way to avoid it. He'd have to get wet. Obviously, mother nature had no respect for how long it took hair like his to dry, or how much he hated cold, especially when it came with an extra helping of squelchy and waterlogged.

Dressed and perched on a kitchen chair while the coffee burred its way to done, Blair reminded himself he was a grown man who wouldn't melt, especially not with a giant cup of his own special cinnamon blend of dark roast coffee to take with him. He doctored his coffee the way he liked it, then fixed one for Jim, grabbed his backpack and raincoat, and headed out.

It occurred to him that the rain might keep people at home for the day. The idea that there might be slightly less chaos to deal with made him smile a little, even as he shivered. Unfortunately only a few minutes into his drive, the number of fender benders he'd seen shot his theory to hell. By the time

he made it to the station, his knuckles were white around the wheel and his determined cheer had faded.

The phone was glued to his ear and the furrow between his eyebrows that meant his temper was already strained, but Jim smiled when the go mug clinked down on his desk, and Blair dropped into his usual rickety chair.

"I thought you'd sleep longer, given the weather."

"I tried, man. But, I figured with the court appearance and the small mountain of paperwork you have to catch up on before Simon exiles you to Siberia, or at least the basement, you need all the help you could get. Besides, my coffee is an excellent morale booster."

"It is," Jim agreed. "But so is the fact that you just volunteered to help me out of paperwork hell. In fact, I am so generous that as a thank you, I'll let you clear the current mail for both of us while I fight with the reports Simon insists need to be revised."

"Gee, what a shock," Blair told him, just before he scooped the mail up and dumped it onto the desk Jim had cleared off next to his.

To save time and frustration, Blair worked out a system, oldest stuff that might have been important got read first. It wasn't as bad as he expected: inter-departmental memos that he knew perfectly well no one except him read in a timely fashion, requisitions requests that needed to be backdated and filed, records that would be returned once he put them in the proper internal mail envelopes.

By midmorning, Jim's mail had all been sent on its merry way. That left only his own much smaller stack: the journals he subscribed to that he'd had sent to the station in hopes that would up his chances of actually being able to read them, a few miscellaneous bits of random junk mail, and the expense reports. Technically, half of them should have been Jim's problem. It reduced the headaches for both of them if Blair dealt with it. He had much more patience for red tape.

At the bottom of his stack, Blair found a plain envelope, more cream than white, with more weight to it than he expected. He'd tackled his oldest stuff first as well, so that meant the envelope had come today. There was no return address, just his name in care of the station and a local postmark. For a moment, he worried something might be about to go wrong. He wasn't called trouble magnet for nothing. Then common sense reminded him the letter would have to pass the station security screening. More importantly, it had been close enough to Jim that he'd have sensed anything wrong with it long before now.

He opened it carefully, since he had no idea what might be damaged if he didn't. A sheet of paper and a card slid onto the desk. The logo on the card raised his eyebrows immediately. Stylized glossy black letters spelled out Pantheon. The first letter was bracketed by the line silhouette of a man and a woman.

Unleash your senses and give in to your inner god, the logo demanded underneath, in smaller letters.

After a moment to re-read, Blair felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. He'd heard whispers of a place with the same name on the Internet, but it was just an urban myth, like the guy who woke up in a bathtub without his kidneys.

Dear Blair,

The enclosed card will admit you to our facility, free of charge, for consideration as a member. Pantheon is a private club that strives to meet the most intimate, and passionate, needs of each of its members. We pride ourselves on our ability to create memorable experiences with the utmost discretion.

If you are not interested, simply do nothing. No one from the club will ever contact you again, and there are no consequences should you choose not to attend.

I cannot tell you who submitted your name for membership consideration or why. But, I can tell you that our club is a place for those who have felt they didn't quite fit anywhere else to find a haven from the pressures of everyday life, and people who can help you explore your needs – whatever they might be. If you have ever felt like something was missing in your most intimate relationships, Pantheon is the perfect place to explore why.

It would be impossible to answer all of your questions in a short letter, but I invite you to join us and ask them in person. If you choose to attend, you've been matched with an experienced member to help you through the discoveries that await you."

There was no signature, but the tone of the letter only made him more curious. Who were these people, to know so much about him, and how he related to the world? Oh, they hadn't come right out and said so, but he was as good at reading between the lines as the next guy, thank you very much.

The card that came with the letter was no help. It had only his name, and some brief instructions. Prospective members were asked to dress up, though not required to wear suits or tuxedos. For the preliminary visit, transportation would be provided. Below that, a date and time, two nights from tonight. The same logo was stamped at the bottom.

As he considered the possibilities, Blair knew his heart rate had accelerated enough that his Sentinel would want to know why. It bothered him to lie, even by omission, but he slid the letter and card back into the envelope before they could be seen. When his partner asked if everything was alright, he shrugged off his reaction as too much caffeine. The explanation was thin, but he knew Jim would accept it at face value for now. He refused to let his gifts compromise things as important as personal privacy, except in an emergency.

Once he had a bit of breathing room, so to speak, Blair leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and evened out his breathing. He'd preached to Jim and his colleagues so often about meditation that no one would think twice at his position, even in the middle of the controlled chaos of the station house.

If he set aside his initial disbelief that a place like Pantheon could exist in such obscurity, he was still left with an uncomfortable choice: go or not? He had no particular issue with a club with such sexual

overtones. Naomi may have let him down in some ways, but she had taught him from an early age to be comfortable with his body, and the physical expression of affection, regardless of such petty concerns as race, age, or gender.

That's not to say Blair made an issue of his bisexuality. Age and experience brought some measure of discretion, and so did a wide streak of self preservation. It wasn't safe to buck the cultural norms for males in a predominantly alpha male environment, unless you could defend yourself. More to the point, he had no desire to lose his position as Jim's partner, even in an unofficial capacity, or to do anything that could cause problems for him at work. As a whole, cops weren't always the most tolerant bunch, regardless of how open minded individuals could be.

Small wonder the idea of a safe place to explore the more sensual side of life appealed to him so much. The idea of a place you could go and be openly, totally yourself, without judgement or fear would intoxicate anyone.

A few years ago, he would have accepted an invitation like this in a heartbeat. Now, it couldn't be that easy. If he chose to go to Pantheon, he would have to let go of the idea he rarely even let himself think about – a romantic relationship with the one person who knew him better than anyone in the whole world, who just happened to be his best – and completely uninterested – male friend.

There were times over the last few years that it seemed Jim did appreciate men, as more than just friends. The hints never went anywhere, and he only dated women, but still, every now and again, Blair would catch what looked like more than platonic interest in a guy. A trained observer, especially one who genuinely enjoyed people, noticed these things. Trouble was, he'd never had the guts to ask Jim outright about his orientation.

Late at night Blair gave himself many lectures about misplaced affection and the many different kinds of love and appreciating what was given. It didn't matter. The closeness between the two of them deepened, and despite the unwanted direction his heart – and if he was honest, his hormones – wanted to go, he wouldn't change that for anything in the world.

He also knew himself well enough to know it would be impossible to enjoy whatever might be offered at Pantheon if he went into things with his heart and mind still insisting they belonged to Jim. It wouldn't be fair, to himself or the other members.

On the other hand, nothing he'd tried on his own had persuaded him to completely give up on the idea. Maybe if he went to Pantheon, he would find something or someone else that could convince him it was possible.

He opened his eyes to study Jim as his partner attempted to get his computer to cooperate. It wasn't a particularly successful effort, but that wasn't new. Still, the sight of that familiar body that he wished he knew so much better sent a pang through him.

But who was he kidding? If there was one thing Blair knew he couldn't resist, it was a mystery. And personal growth was good for the soul, no matter how painful it might be. The invitation to Pantheon offered him the chance for both, and no matter difficult some aspects of the process might be, he knew somehow he would be sorry if he didn't go.

By the time the specified night rolled around, Blair had himself so keyed up, he couldn't sit still. When Jim teased him about a hot date, he only smiled and nodded. One last check in the mirror, and he was ready. The outfit wasn't new, but the charcoal dress pants and blue silk shirt were a good look on him, so that was one worry off his mind.

At seven o'clock on the nose, he walked out the door, just as a black town car with tinted windows rolled smoothly to the curb. He tried to look as if he got into cars like that all the time, and climbed into the back seat. For a moment, he wondered what Jim would make of the car, then put all thoughts of the other man out of his mind. Tonight was about doing something for himself, and moving forward with all aspects of his life.

Blair made himself reasonably comfortable in the back seat, afraid to breathe for fear he would accidentally break something. If he did, no way would he be able to pay to replace it on his pitiful salary. Before his nerves made him fidget, the glass partition came down with a barely audible hum and the driver, immaculate in a well tailored suit, handed him a folded strip of cloth.

"Prospective members are not permitted to know our location, sir. That is why your transportation this evening has been prearranged. In the event you are accepted as a member, you will make your own arrangements, but until then, if you'll put on the blindfold, we can be on our way."

With a smile for the cloak and dagger routine, Blair complied. He already assumed that was the reason his transportation was arranged in advance. Pleased to be proven right, he covered his eyes and did his best to stay calm and centered as they drove. After about twenty minutes, the car stopped and the driver led him into a building, careful to warn him of any terrain changes and obstacles.

Once the blindfold was off, the driver wished him a good evening and left. The tastefully decorated lobby wasn't high on the list of possible options he'd concocted in his head to pass time on the drive. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought he was checking in for a stay at an upscale hotel.

While he blinked to adjust his vision, an automatic door on the far wall whooshed open, and a tall, broad shouldered blond in another impeccably tailored suit bustled over to shake hands.

"Hello, Blair. I'm so glad you could join us. I'm Clint. I've been assigned to help you with any questions you might have while we get the preliminaries out of the way."

Struck with how odd it felt to meet someone who probably already knew all about him, Blair waited to see what would happen next. "Pleased to meet you."

"Why don't you come with me to one of our conference rooms. I'd like to explain a bit about how Pantheon works, and what we can offer our members. I'm sure you have questions. We'll just wait for somewhere a bit more private before I answer them."

While Clint led the way down a hall with carpet so plush it almost completely muffled the sound of their passing, Blair reminded himself that curiosity didn't make it any more polite to stare. Under the layers of polish and sophistication supplied by an excellent interior decorator, the subtle signs of high level security were there if you knew where to look: key card readers, cameras, keypads, and

other components he couldn't identify. It made sense, and jibed with what he'd heard about the club's discretion.

Rather the bland, impersonal box Blair expected in a conference room, they ended up in a spacious room with a table just big enough for the two of them, and chairs padded well enough to sink into.

"You'll review the policies and the code of conduct before you fill out your screening," Clint explained. "But let me sum up the highlights."

He waited for a nod of understanding and then continued. "Each of your visits here constitutes a single engagement, regardless of length. Most times, we don't have a time limit, so long as you are within twenty four hours of arrival. Engagements longer than twenty-four hours are not generally available to new members, but you can request that from your counsellor, if you feel you need it. In your case, that would be me, in case you hadn't made the connection."

"I figured," Blair told him, which earned a smile.

"Each engagement can involve any number of participants, of the gender of your choice. We have spaces for public engagements, and for private ones as well. If you choose the private option, you and any members you choose to have with you interact in a private room, and cannot be observed. If you end up a member, you will have the option of advance arrangements. For tonight though, after you finish with the paperwork and the screening, we'll talk and then I'll take you to the area I feel best suits your needs. Does that make sense?"

Though he must have gone through the whole spiel quite often, Clint radiated such enthusiasm he practically vibrated.

Even as he agreed that it all seemed straightforward, Blair watched the easy affability slide away, replaced with an intensity that made it clear whatever came next, he had better pay attention.

"I also need to impress upon you how seriously we take our code of conduct. There is no such thing as a minor infraction. Any incidence of rule breaking can, and very often will, be grounds for immediate expulsion, as well as other consequences meted out by our directors. Nothing seen in the building can be discussed off the premises, even if you have the permission of those involved. No one can be forced to do anything they truly don't want to do. Any participant has the right to change their mind about any engagement at any time. All activities must be within the bounds of safety and consent as discussed by all participants. All engagements can be stopped at the request of qualified staff members."

Startled by the abruptly serious tone, Blair nodded. "I understand."

"Good," Clint replied. "Remember the rules exist to protect all our members, which I hope will include you."

Once they covered the highlights, he went on to explain that all copies of the paperwork had to stay in the building, and were not available via email. However, they were available for review at any time, by request.



The sunny exterior belied the strength and control beneath the surface when it came to his counsellor, but that was alright. Blair had no intention of rule breaking, for once. He didn't even know if he would be offered a membership, but he had a feeling if he was, it wasn't something he would willingly give up.

Once everything was properly signed, Clint put the forms into a folder, and left him alone to complete his intake screening.

For his part, Blair expected the screening to consist primarily of things he had considered. The document proved conclusively that he wasn't as worldly as thought. There were a number of things he ticked off as not applicable, but also a number he checked off as would like to try. Questionnaires of this type were designed to engage the imagination, in order to better draw out repressed desires. Even though he knew that, the number of things he responded to surprised him. The fact he had a dominant streak wasn't anything new, but the more submissive side, well, that just wasn't something he thought about. If you let yourself want the impossible for too long, it changed you. But maybe here he could find someone he felt comfortable letting go with. There had to be more than one person in the whole world who could make him feel safe.

That idea made his stomach drop, and it felt like the temperature in the room dropped, but he ignored the discomfort. No one ever said moving forward with your life was easy. Truth be told, most of the time he wouldn't want it to be. With an effort, he finished up with his final form, and looked up at Clint.

"Can you tell me why I'm up for consideration as a member?"

"Every member of Pantheon, worldwide, is submitted for consideration by a senior member. Seniority is based on length of membership, club conduct records and other contributions. We have mentor programs, and several other options there, but you'll learn about that later. If this visit leads to preliminary membership, you receive notification about that within two weeks."

He continued before Blair could ask his next question.

"When a member chooses to pursue sponsorship, they choose whether that includes disclosure. In this case, I am sorry, but they opted not to do so, though they have the option to do so later."

That seemed reasonable, even if it was a disappointment. Excitement had replaced most of the nerves. Blair drummed his fingers against his knee and resisted the urge to stand up and pace.

"Now what?" he asked instead.

"Now, we get you added you to the building security guest logs for the evening. While you are doing that, I'll review the information and come back to show you to the room you will use."

"Just like that? I thought I would get a chance to meet some of my prospective partners."

"It does work like that at times. In your case, I'm quite certain we will match you with someone. If you like them, then you will proceed. If you don't, then we can pursue other options."

The intensity was back, and Blair found he couldn't look away as the other man continued.

"I know how important your intellect is to you, but part of why you are here is because something isn't working. It might go against your nature to not have input in the pros and cons of selection, but I'm very good at my job, and so is every other counsellor here. Let me try and help you. Trust me, at least enough to try. I don't think you'll be disappointed."

Even as he wondered exactly how much psychology training a job at Pantheon required, Blair nodded. "Alright. We'll try it your way."

Blair expected a rather utilitarian room, despite what he'd already seen. There had to be dozens, even hundreds of engagement rooms after all. As he stepped through the door that Clint indicated, he realized he would have to adjust his expectations. To begin with, it wasn't a single room, but a suite. He noted the art on the walls, originals, not prints, as he walked through the entrance area into a living room. The light was dim, only a single lamp pooled a golden glow in the far corner, but he could see enough to note the custom made furniture: dark wood pieces that blended with the greens and light browns of the earth toned color scheme.

The masculine feel of the rooms made him wonder if those who ran Pantheon always segregated by gender so obviously. That could have been why it took him a minute to realize he wasn't alone in the room. In an instant, it got hard to breathe and Blair felt his mouth go dry. Even in the dim light, he'd have to be struck deaf and blind to not recognize the man who stood facing away from him as he walked closer to the sofa that faced a fireplace at the far end of the room.

"Jim?" Anticipation and the unexpected thrill of where he was faded to confusion and uncertainty. If it were anyone else, he would have suspected some kind of cruel joke.

"Come sit down," Jim told him as he turned around, his tone warm, but guarded like he weighed each individual word before he let it come out.

Part of him wanted to turn and walk back out the way he'd come. The whole point to coming to Pantheon had been to make things less complicated with his sentinel. Even without any explanation, Blair knew things were about to get anything but simple.

He didn't even shift his weight to take a step. He could no more turn his back on Jim, than he could cut off his arm. His joints felt rusty, and he nearly stumbled, but he seated himself on the sofa and waited until Jim sat next to him.

"I don't understand," he admitted, while he tried not to be distracted by his body's usual reaction to Jim. Even under these circumstances, that was just another thing he couldn't change.

"I know this all probably comes as a shock to you. I'm sorry. I've wanted to tell you so many things, needed to open up to you more times than you can imagine. I could never take that step though, because there needed to be a way to do it that guaranteed no consequences to our lives no matter how it plays out. The things I need to tell you are no one's business but yours and mine. When this club promises discretion, they mean it. Not only are we safe here, but so are our secrets."

"That's good to know, Jim. But, it's not exactly what I meant. What are you doing here? More importantly, what am I doing here?"

"I've been a Pantheon member for a number of years. An old friend recommended me for membership when I came back from Peru. He thought I might have a better time adjusting if I had an outlet. I guess he was right. But, I haven't had an engagement at any of the club's venues since just after I met you." There was a pause, and when Jim continued, his voice was softer, the struggle to get the words out clear on his face.

"It didn't seem right to come here and have something that was just about the moment, even with no strings, when I knew it would be you I thought about, no matter who I was in the bed with."

Blair barely noticed the pause that came then, the sound of his own heartbeat was so loud in his ears. If this were a movie, or a fairy tale, right about now would be the perfect time for the heartfelt declarations of love and the happily ever after.

Back in the real world, Jim's declaration raised more questions than it answered, despite the wild hope he wanted to let run away with his good sense.

"What exactly are you trying to tell me here, man?"

"The truth is, I don't know exactly how to explain everything that I feel for you. I'm not sure I have the words for it. That's your department. All I know is that what I feel for you goes way beyond friendship. I want a chance to find out what it really is and how good it can be, without excuses or half truths or any of the other crap in the way."

For the first time since he started talking, Jim moved. Slow enough that his guide had more than enough time to move backward if he wanted, he leaned forward and reached out to grasp his arm. The point of contact flashed heat through both of them, though the room was a bit cool.

"Like I said, I know this probably comes out of nowhere, and maybe I read things wrong. But I hope not. I'm tired of fighting with myself, trying to find reasons why we would be better off as friends. I don't want just that part of you. I want all of you, and I don't want to share."

Under other circumstances, the possessive growl might have been off putting. Here and now, Blair couldn't help but smile. At least he hadn't been the only one who'd needed lessons in self control.

As satisfying as it was to know that, he couldn't manage to silence the little voice of doubt in the back of his mind.

"I know you, Jim. You aren't into men that way. Maybe it's just wanting what you can't have." He tried to keep his voice level, but it shook a little by the end. Just because he hated the idea, didn't make it any less valid.

"I suppose that could be true," Jim agreed. "But that's another reason why I decided to tell you here. Because here, I can do this." And then he leaned over and kissed him.

Every doubt, every question, pretty much every thought, vanished for Blair as soon as the kiss began. Of all the things he had expected, this hadn't made the list. Shock gave way under the sheer pleasure. He reached out to hold on, and distantly noted the strength in the muscles beneath his hands. Then the kiss deepened and he remembered he knew how to do this.

When Jim eased back reluctantly a few moments later, they both had to take a second to catch their breath.

"Well, I know I liked it," Jim murmured. "So much for that objection, partner. As for not liking men, well, I'll give you that. I usually don't. But you aren't the first man I've been attracted to; you're just the first one in a long time who made me care enough to want to do something about it."

The hell with objectivity and logic, Blair told himself. Not like he could find them with need and want tangled together to demand he stop thinking and take what was offered. But curiosity wouldn't be denied.

"Have you got any other bombshells you're waiting to drop? 'Cause I gotta tell ya, I can't help but wonder what else I don't know about you."

"Fair enough. I'll tell you what, ask me anything you want, and I promise to answer honestly no matter how uncomfortable I might be.

Blair's eyes widened. "Who are you and what have you done with Jim Ellison?" he asked. The Jim he knew would never leave himself so vulnerable.

"What can I say? You're a better influence than you thought. And I know how your mind works. If I want to have a shot at proving how much you matter to me, you need to be able to understand why before you can believe me. Besides, you already know me better than anybody." There was a pause, while Jim crossed to light the fire, then came back to the sofa. Once he was seated, he put his arm around Blair's shoulders, and looked at him.

"So, go ahead. I know you want to. Ask me about my past, the Sentinel stuff, my career, my exes; whatever you want." Jim leaned back and stayed quiet, though the tense set of his shoulders showed he wasn't quite as calm as he tried to appear.

All the times Blair had imagined getting Jim to talk, and now that it finally happened, his brain couldn't quite keep up. It didn't help that he was still hyperaware of Jim's body so close beside him, the light but distinctive smell of his cologne, and the taste of him that lingered even now.

"I can't decide what to ask. I keep thinking about how much I want to kiss you again." Blair hadn't meant to say that out loud, but his mouth liked to run away with him at the best of times.

"I like how you think," Jim agreed with a low chuckle. "And I can't believe I'm saying this, but we need to talk first."

A small part of him was still amused at the role reversal, but Blair nodded in agreement, while he fought to control his body which definitely didn't want him to just talk, not when Jim smelled so good, with the heat of his body so tantalizingly close.

After a few seconds to sort through the questions crowding his brain, he went with the most obvious.

"When did you know?"

Jim didn't bother to ask for clarification. Even with what had already been said, Blair half expected he would temporize, but he smiled, just a little, and then began to speak.

"That's not the right question, actually. If I'm being honest, I think I knew the first day I laid eyes on you. For a moment, it was like you were the only person in the world, even I didn't matter. Nothing did, except you. But, as you know, I'm the master of denial," he admitted self deprecatingly.

"I refused to let myself think about it much, because it scared the hell out of me. I don't have the best track record when it comes to the people in my life that I really need. It got to be easier to convince myself that no matter how much I might care for someone, I didn't really need them."

He shrugged and looked down at his hands, and when he continued, Jim's voice was rougher, the lines around his eyes and mouth deepened, but he continued.

"I hated what the problems with my senses did to me, being so overwhelmed and out of control, so it got easier to keep my focus on that. But I couldn't tell myself the same thing, because I do need you. Even now, things are better, but that hasn't changed. It never will. But, I never intended to let you get so close."

The rueful tone surprised a laugh out of Blair. "I have that effect on people," he admitted, without a trace of apology. "But you aren't the only one who got nailed by way more feelings than he was expecting." If Jim could put aside his upbringing and his training enough to be honest, he deserved reciprocity.

The admission drew another smile from Jim. One deep breath, then another, and he spoke again. "Even after I came out of denial, little by little, I agreed with what you said, about how it's about friendship. And I didn't want to screw that up. Hell, I still don't. But, the close calls just keep getting closer, Blair. Either one of us could be gone tomorrow and there's not a hell of a lot we could do about it. That whole disaster with Golden could happen anytime a new designer drug hits the street. Losing my sight scared me, but the thought that I might lose you was so much worse. I tried not to think about it, of course.

Then, you were in that damned elevator, and I thought you might actually be gone, it hit me what that would actually mean for me. Not as a sentinel missing his guide, but just for me. Nothing like a dose of reality to yank a guy out of denial, I guess. I have enough regrets. I don't want anything to do with you added to that list."

While he fought to keep his jaw off the floor, Blair wished he wasn't prone to over-analyzing. There were so many good things in what he'd just been told. And yet, the next question spilled out before he could stop it.

"How do you know this isn't just some Sentinel and Guide thing? If that's all there is between us, I'm sorry, but it's not enough." Deliberately, he ignored the lump in his throat and the tightness banded across his chest. Just because he didn't want to say it, didn't want it to be true, didn't change anything.

The flash of anger was only there for a moment, as Jim's hands tightened into fists in his lap, but he had to pause for a moment before he could answer. "Do you really think so little of yourself, Blair?"

I'll admit that part of our relationship adds some layers here, and I think we will need to explore that, for both our sakes.

But, this isn't about just one part of me. Every part of me knows that this is the right thing, that you are the only one I want."

In that instant, Blair felt his hands go cold and he actually felt the breath catch in his chest. Don't live your life out of fear. He'd lost track of the number of times Naomi had told him that. But how could he risk taking such a huge step? He was shit at relationships; they never worked for him. And none of the people he'd ever been involved with had come close to being as important to him as Jim was.

"It's okay." Even though there was no way he could have missed the obvious signs of fear, Jim's face was calm. "I understand. When I realized what I wanted, I didn't sleep for three days, could barely eat. The trick is, don't think about all the relationships that didn't work. That only proves they weren't the right one for you."

Blair sat still for a long moment, uncertain how he was supposed to understand the tangle of emotions that bubbled within him. Then again, maybe he didn't need to name them all. The need he'd tried so hard to ignore, to bury so deep he wouldn't feel it, screamed through him now. That he could want wasn't new. The urge to claim was though, as was the powerful urge to let Jim do the same to him.

"Kiss me again." His voice was quiet and the note of command was a surprise but Jim smiled and moved closer without comment. This time, the kiss was deeper and wetter, and Blair took his time exploring every inch he could reach, then indulged himself and bit down very gently on Jim's lower lip.

He didn't seem to mind, if the low moan of reaction was anything to go by, and Blair pressed even closer, all but draping himself over Jim's lap, but that was alright, since it allowed them to rub against each other with even more points of contact.

They kissed again, longer this time while Blair let his hands roam where they would. "Off," he muttered, hand caught on the hem of shirt that kept him from sliding his palms over bare skin. "We can talk more later."

Jim considered that for a moment then nodded. "How about we both lose some layers here?" he suggested, his voice lower than normal. That was the only sign he wasn't as in control as he looked but the tone curled heat up Blair's spine and he had to pause before he could think.

There was a slight delay, while both of them stripped off their shirts, but even that was too long and he fought not to whimper at the loss of contact. But skin to skin was better, so much so that he exhaled on a soft moan. They kissed again, and tangled their tongues together over and over. It was so good but it wasn't enough. He needed to be closer, needed more.

The urgency surprised him, might even have scared him, if he thought about it. He'd never felt need like this, the drive to see more, taste more, and touch more almost a pain, because he couldn't get enough.

He let Jim trail kisses down his neck, over his collarbone and all but purred when he licked his way lower, then paused to bite gently at a nipple. Before he could go any lower, Blair shifted his weight back, not enough to create space between them he didn't want, but enough to make it known he had something to say.

"Let's move this to the bed." It wasn't a question, but he couldn't stop the thread of uncertainty.

The smile Jim gave him made all the doubts fade away. "Not that I object to relocating," he murmured, "but are you sure? I don't want to move things faster than you're comfortable with."

"You won't." Here at least was solid ground. Jim would never hurt him, or push him farther than he could go. He knew that like he knew his own name, or that the sky was blue. It was a constant of nature.

They turned back the blankets together and laid down facing each other. Both of them reached out at almost the same time then they were kissing again. They changed position a few times, experimenting with what felt the best, and ended up with Blair half on top, so he could discover whether Jim's nipples were as sensitive as his own.

Without thinking, he reached up to change the angle of his position, then shifted his weight to pin Jim to the bed a bit more. He liked the extra contact even with clothes in the way. He expected Jim to flip them back over immediately, but instead he made a sound of pure need, like he couldn't help himself, as he arched upward just hard enough to enjoy the friction.

As reactions went, it was small, but he made a habit of knowing how to read people. Even with his brain only partially at the party, Blair realized he might be guilty of some assumptions.

"You said I could ask you anything," he reminded his lover quietly.

They locked eyes, and Jim nodded. "Yes."

"We've spent time talking about what I need to know, what I want. But, we kinda glossed over what you want."

"I want whatever you want to give me."

It was true, Blair could see that much. It was humbled him, to see Jim make such an effort not to put up walls, but it reminded him that he wasn't the only one outside his comfort zone.

"I want...need, to know what you need. What have you thought about, when you imagined this? Because I get the feeling I'm missing something important here."

Jim tensed, and tried to draw back but Blair tightened his grip and waited.

"I've been dreaming about you," Jim admitted, his voice soft. "That's part of what helped with the denial too, I guess. Every time I had a dream, there would be more and more things that we tried. That's part of what scared me, not just that it was you, but that I want things from you that I've never wanted from anyone else, and I am not as inexperienced as you think."

The smile was gone, and Blair could see fear and traces of confusion.

"I think we've established it's okay for both of us to want. As for the rest we'll figure it out as we go. No judgement, okay? Just tell me. If it doesn't work for me, we'll figure out a compromise. But you can always ask. Two way street, okay?" he promised.

For the first time, the implications of what they were doing, and that it would be long term didn't bring a flutter of fear. The warmth and satisfaction he did feel were usually reserved for when he solved a problem, but in a way, he'd done just that.

Beneath him, Jim nodded, and this time Blair pulled back but only far enough to shimmy out of his pants and boxers and help Jim do the same. Once they were both naked, he resumed his previous position and claimed another kiss.

Where the certainty came from, he couldn't have said, but he knew he was right before he spoke again. "It's okay that you want me to take you," he promised, his mouth close enough to Jim's ear to raise goose bumps with his breath as he spoke.

As if the words released it, Jim moaned, caught in a full body shudder. "God, I can't think when you do that."

"Good," Blair replied, as he trailed his hand down Jim's chest then shifted down to follow the same path with his tongue.

That made Jim let go of him, and clench his hands in the sheets, but that was alright. Though he had some experience with men, it had been long enough that he wanted a chance to explore without distractions. He'd always loved blowjobs, so much so that some of his past lovers had accused him of oral fixation. Any of his previous attempts paled though, when he listened to the sounds Jim made as he took him in his mouth, and felt the light sheen of sweat on his skin as he fought to keep still.

It came back quickly, the rhythms, how to use his hands, his tongue and just a touch of teeth in concert to maximize the pleasure. After a few minutes, Jim touched his shoulder, and he looked up.

"S'good. But I need more. I need you," he managed to say, the hunger in his eyes sending a thrill of heat directly to Blair's groin.

"I know." The heat between them spiraled up, but Blair could feel it too, the pressure he saw reflected in the taut lines of the body beneath him. His own pulse beat in his ears, as he fought against the urge to simply take, as part of him demanded. That would mean pain, and that was unacceptable.

His hands shook as he reached for the thankfully close supplies, and his vision went a little hazy around the edges, but he hung on to his control. He knew without having to ask that they needed to face each other, so he used the pillows to prop Jim up more comfortably, then played a finger over his entrance. Once his body relaxed, he replaced his finger with his tongue, unable to stop the pleased little sounds in the back of his throat as he explored the most intimate part of his lover.

After several tries, Jim spoke. "Blair, please." He tried to say more, beyond caring that he begged, but his voice wouldn't work.



"It's alright. I've got you," he soothed. They weren't quite there, not yet, but he could tell Jim was close to getting overwhelmed by all the sensations, too overwhelmed with need to have anything close to control.

Blair warmed the lube for a minute then stroked one finger in, slowly, so slowly he felt himself start to shake with the effort. Long minutes later, another finger, then a pause to kiss him, sucking on his tongue while he added a third finger and swallowed the strangled cry.

They stayed like that until Jim bucked helplessly against Blair, his breath caught on a sob. "So good." Mixed with the pleasure there was almost shock, and a slight hesitation.

And then it clicked. Jim hesitated because he was scared to let go of the last of his control, not only because of the risk of a zone out, but because he didn't know what to do with the intensity of the input.

"It's okay. I'm right here. I won't let anything happen to you that you don't want," he told him. "Stop fighting it. Whatever you need is okay," he finished just before he was caught in a kiss so hard he thought his lips might be bruised. It went on, and on, and Jim's fingers tangled in his hair to hold him in place when he shifted slightly. He felt Jim smile against his mouth in approval of the sound that dragged from him.

When he crooked his fingers, to change the angle of the stretch, it was his turn to smile as Jim moaned his name.

Who knew the sounds of his own name could be so sexy on someone else's lips? When he reached for the condom, Jim clamped a hand on his wrist. "No. I'm clean, we don't need it."

About to launch into his usual spiel about safe sex, Blair paused. He got tested regularly, and knew he was clean. More to the point, he trusted Jim's word that he was too. The certainty from earlier was back, and this time, instead of his pulse in his ears, he could swear he heard drums – deep, resonant echoes that timed with his heartbeat, overlaid with a faint but unmistakable howl of triumph from a wolf.

Alright," he agreed, and shook his head to clear it. With only the briefest pause to slick himself up, since he wasn't sure he could keep from coming if he did anything else, he aligned his body in the proper position. Mine. Mine. Mine. He chanted it over and over in his head as he slid in a little at a time. Lost in the tight heat that enveloped him, he somehow wasn't surprised when Jim spoke, his voice tight.

"Yes. Yours."

Between one breath and the next he thrust upward to take Blair all the way in and they both gasped.

"Move."

The tone made it clear it wasn't a request, but that was okay, since there was nothing in the world he wanted more at that moment.

No matter how much Blair wanted it to last, it wasn't very much later when he lost his smooth pace, and felt his body strain toward what promised to be a spectacular orgasm. Still, he couldn't let go. Together. The merest whisper through his mind, but then he understood.

Carefully, he reached down and took hold of himself hard enough to bring himself back from the edge.

Jim's eyes snapped open when he stopped moving, and he made small noise of disappointment.

"Hang on," Blair managed, as he adjusted his angle slightly, and rested Jim's legs so they went over his shoulders. It wasn't the most comfortable position, but it let him go just a little bit deeper, and the instant he did, Jim hummed with approval.

"Oh yeah."

"Glad you approve. But I can make it even better." It was a tight fit, but he got his arm down at an angle that allowed him to take Jim's cock in his hand. He gave himself a moment to appreciate the hard length, then began to stroke in time with his thrusts.

When Jim started to writhe, Blair put his other hand on the curve of his hip. "If you keep moving like that, I'll stop." Truthfully, he didn't know if he could, but his lover responded to the unspoken command and stilled beneath him.

"Much better," he approved warmly. But that was the last coherent word he could manage. Jim thrust up against him in earnest, an endless stream of syllables that almost formed words falling from his lips. For just an instant he arched upward and went still, then came with a shout that sounded almost like pain.

Somehow, Blair managed to hold off until he could see that Jim wasn't zoned, just boneless in the aftermath of pleasure that he could feel the echoes of. Then, the wanting crested within him, and he could only plunge as deep as he could, his hands locked on the shoulders below him hard enough he knew there would be bruises. When he felt himself start to come, he let go, but there was so much more to the feelings that he caught his breath on a scream.

When he was completely aware of himself again, he was draped over Jim like a blanket. As gently as he could, he disengaged himself and reached out for a kiss.

"If I'd known it would be like that, I'd have done this years ago," Jim told him, voice still lower than he was used to.

"Ditto," Blair answered, pleased when the answer made Jim shift closer to hold him close against his chest. The earlier urgency had faded, though he could feel sparks of it still inside him as he felt the rough slide of leg against leg.

They lay in the silence for a while, and eventually he turned so he could listen to Jim's heartbeat beneath his ear.

The fire popped and made him jump, but he still caught the slight wince his Sentinel couldn't hide. "Careful, man. You're bound to be oversensitive for a while."

The grin Jim gave him in answer was wicked enough to wash heat over his skin, and he forced himself to swallow, hard. His libido obviously had delusions of grandeur. Just because his best friend in the world was looking at him like he was edible, did not mean anything for right now. They had plenty of time.

He closed his eyes to take a deep breath, then jerked upward when Jim licked the shell of his ear, then nibbled his earlobe.

"We decided we could both ask, remember?" So fast, he made it look effortless, Jim caught him around the waist and this time he did roll them until he was on top. "Don't ask me how, but I know not all the need I feel is mine. Now I know how you knew what I needed." He stopped to crush their mouths together in a kiss then pulled back slightly. The intensity in his gaze let Blair know he had at least one sense dialed up, but before he could say anything as a caution, Jim shifted so their groins rubbed together.

"Time for me to return the favour."

And then there was no talking, because Blair's impressive vocabulary deserted him under the relentless onslaught of a Sentinel determined to learn him with all of his senses. He would have begged if he could, but he couldn't manage anything beyond a moan. He arched backward helplessly when Jim prepared him with the same thoroughness he now knew could drive a man completely insane with impatience.

Somehow, it was exactly right to feel Jim pressing inside him, even as the rest of his weight made him feel safe and protected. He kept his thrusts shallow at first, until Blair could accept all of him. Something made him shift up to his hands and knees, and he stayed there, then grasped the headboard and thrust backward in demand.

He felt the rush of heat from Jim's release an instant before the other man moaned his name, but it still wasn't enough. Desperate, but uncertain as to what he more he could need, he dropped down slightly, that pushed his shoulder back.

He felt movement, as Jim shifted. Then his hand stroked down, and he bit, just at the top of the curve of Blair's left shoulder. It wasn't the pain, not really, since the bite wasn't hard. But he had a flash of the mark it would leave on his skin, and that was it. He came with a rush that greyed out his vision and left him shaking while he wondered exactly why his throat was sore.

Later, when the fire Jim lit had burned down to coals, they lay in the oversized bed, and tried to stop getting distracted from drying each other off. They managed to shower without it turning into round three, but it was a near thing. Only the fact they needed sleep after their exertions and the emotional rollercoaster of a day had stopped things from getting out of hand.

"I booked the full twenty four hours with an option to extend if we want to," Jim remarked, as he trailed his fingers over all the skin he'd so recently explored.

Blair couldn't have stopped his wide grin if he tried. "Have I mentioned how much I admire that you're so good at planning ahead?"





BY PATT

ARTWORK BY LUNA\_61

Megan Connor was on a mission that day. After studying for weeks, she finally got up the nerve to take the test to become an American citizen. She had found an attorney to help her with the cause and he was a gem. She had wanted to ask Sandy to help her study, but was so afraid of failing that she didn't want anyone to know. But there were some people that she did tell and that were her mum, dad and her brothers. They were all expecting her to come back to Australia and marry the man they had basically chosen for her to be with for the rest of her life.

Her family was wonderful and she loved them dearly, but they still believed in a lot of old ways. Megan wasn't going to marry a man she didn't love. The family wouldn't have made her marry him, but still. The family also expected her to give up being a police inspector so that she could raise a family. No, this was the best thing Megan could do for this time in her life. She wanted to meet someone here in the States that she could fall in love with the old-fashioned way and if they wanted a family down the road, she could do both. Her parents were disappointed in her decision, but said they understood. Megan really hoped they did. She knew one thing and that was her parents and her brothers loved her unconditionally.

She had to do a lot of checking on the US and Australian citizenship before she made up her mind. Megan knew she wanted to be able to call both places home and the US and Australia would let her do just that. She had to get a new passport to go along with her original one. Being from two countries did make for some problems while traveling, but nothing to complain about.

As she took the test, she found it odd that they asked such hard questions and she also wondered if the people she worked with would be able to pass this test. She thought about Henri Brown and Brian Rafe and almost chuckled aloud. They were such kidders; she couldn't imagine them taking

anything so seriously. Then again, what did she know? As she got close to finishing, she was feeling good about it. She had remembered almost all of the questions and thought she was doing well. Time would tell. They told her that after the test, she could wait and they would tell her the results. She handed in the test and sat down and waited for her results.

Megan had her green card for the last five years and wanted more than that. You had to stay in the United States for 30 months out of the last 60. Megan was so excited about actually being able to discuss politics and vote for something she believed in. Her mind wandered to all sorts of things while she waited. She was grateful that she didn't tell Sandy about this, because if she failed, it would be too much to handle.

Suddenly, she heard her name called and walked up to the desk. The woman behind it told her that she had passed and would be taking her into a room with a lot of others that would be sworn in. Megan was having a hard time controlling her tears. She couldn't believe she had done it. Megan Connor wasn't just an Aussie anymore. The bullpen gang were going to be so pleased, Megan knew that much. She followed the woman into the room and saw that many people were crying and wiping their eyes as she was. This was a very proud moment and now she wished Sandy was there to share it with her. As she raised her hand up and took the oath, there were more tears and then she was done. They gave her the paperwork she needed and that was that. When they had gotten to a certain part, Megan felt a little bit upset but her attorney had told her about this oath and she was somewhat prepared. She repeated the words quietly and quickly. "I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen." Megan knew that America allowed dual citizenship, so she stopped worrying.

The entire drive to her house, she wondered if anyone could tell her news just by looking at her. She felt so different. She was very proud and couldn't wait to share the news. Then she realized that she could take the detective first grade test now that she was a citizen. Maybe she would do that first, before she told anyone about becoming a citizen. She drove to the main office and asked who she would see about taking the test.

"Come with me," a short, very friendly guy said.

Megan followed him and wondered if she could pass the test. She had been studying, but could she pass it today? With all that had already gone on, she wasn't sure.

"Here you are, you just go in and tell them you're here to take the test. Do you have your birth certificate with you?" he asked.

"Yes, I have everything I could possibly need for this day. Now I just need to pass the test," Megan said. "Thank you for the escort."

"You are very welcome and good luck with the test," he said as he walked down the hallway.

Megan walked in, told the woman in charge what she was there for and she gave her the test to take right away. It was a timed test, so she had to do it quickly. She asked for all of her paperwork and once they got that all settled, she told her where to sit and take the test. She was the only one in the

room and Megan found that somewhat comforting. She sure didn't want twenty other people there when they told her she failed.

"Once you're done, give the test to me and then you will be contacted in the next four to six days. Good luck," the woman in charge said kindly. .

"Thank you," Megan answered and sat down and began her timed test. She had no time for thinking of anything but the test. It was much harder than she had anticipated and hoped she would remember this the next time she had to take it. She had discovered that she could go from Inspector from Australia to Detective First Grade if she passed the test. If she passed the written test, then there was an oral one and then of course the shooting scores.

Megan got through the test before they called her time up, so she was pleased with that. She walked up to the woman and handed her the completed test. Megan wished with all of her heart that she could find out today.

"Follow me and I'll take you to do the marksmanship test. You have to get a passing grade on that too, not just the written. Come on, you're going to do just fine," the woman assured Megan.

"I hope so. I don't want to let my mates down," Megan almost whispered.

They set her up for the next test and the man in charge was really impressed with how well she could shoot. She shot up many, many paper body cutouts and she felt good about this part of the test. Jimbo always told her that she did a fine job shooting, so she wasn't concerned about that.

"I'll put all of the results with your other test and now we can head on over to the oral exam. Let me call Sgt. Michaels. He's on call for it today. I'm Randy Bradman, by the way."

"Thank you for all of your help, Randy. I'm a little nervous about the oral exam. I hope I don't choke," Megan admitted.

Randy took her to the room and told her to sit down until her name was called. Megan sat down and followed orders, quickly. After about twenty minutes her name was called by a Captain Robins. Megan knew him from a robbery case she and Jimbo had worked on one time. This might not be so bad. At least she knew the man. He always seemed like a good bloke and she hoped that he would give her a fair shake.

"Inspector Connor, it's good to see you again. We haven't seen each other in almost a year, have we?" Robins asked

"Yes, it's been at least a year since we talked. Are you the Captain giving the oral exam today?" Megan inquired.

Robins smiled. He knew she was nervous. "Connor, don't worry about anything, you'll do just fine. Now sit down here across from my desk and we'll begin the exam. Just remember to be yourself and act like you usually do. Not how you think I want you to act."

Megan cleared her throat and readied herself for the oral exam. She was excited and nervous at the same time. She felt like she might just be able to do this.

Captain Robins asked all of his questions and she answered every single one as she thought they should be answered. Captain Robins couldn't help but smile and said, "You aced it, Connor."

"Thank you for telling me that much. I'm going to be a wreck waiting for the results on everything else that went on today," Megan confessed.

"Don't worry. It shouldn't be more than three or four days at the most. Go relax and take it easy. Congratulations on becoming a citizen of the United States," Robins stated.

Megan left the building feeling like she had done a good job and the news would be good. But until she heard differently, she wasn't even going to speak of any of this. Once the news came through, she would tell everyone in the bullpen and put in for a job in Major Crimes.

Megan drove home and got ready for some heavy duty relaxing. She was going to watch Lethal Weapon all night long. She loved Mel Gibson for some reason. She called and ordered some deli food to have delivered to the house. Tonight was going to be great. Relaxing, eating and just thinking about things as she watched the movie.

Megan looked around the room and realized she had made this rental home just that, a great home. She loved having her own place and now that she was a citizen she could buy one and would think about asking her landlord if he would like to sell this place. It was a perfect house. She had spare bedrooms and an office for working. She was going to call her landlord as soon as possible. Yes, things were looking up and she was ready for the changes.

The next four days were a blur. Megan didn't say anything to anyone about becoming a citizen because she wanted to make the announcements at one time.

That night when she got home and got the mail, she was nervous seeing Cascade Police Department on the envelope. The wait was over and now she just needed enough nerve to open the letter and read it. Megan's fingers were trembling as she opened the letter and sat down to read it. She was really glad she was sitting down, because she passed. She made Detective First Grade on the first try. She received a commendation for her marksmanship scores and she had all of the paperwork that would be needed for Simon Banks. Megan knew she wasn't going to sleep very much that night at all. She was just too damned excited.

Megan called Simon Banks at home.

"Banks," he barked into the phone.

"Sir, it's Megan Connor. I was wondering if you could come by my house, I have something to discuss with you at your earliest convenience."

"I could come over right now, will that do?" Simon asked.

"Now would be perfect, Captain. Thank you for giving me some time."



"I'll see you in a few minutes. Talk to you then," Simon said before he hung up the phone.

Megan was a wreck. What if Banks didn't want her in Major Crimes? What if she only wanted it that bad and didn't take his thoughts into consideration at all? She began pacing until she heard the knock at the door.

She opened up and smiled at Simon and tried not to look nervous.

"Great house, Connor. The last time I saw it, you were just moving in. That was about three years ago, I think. You've made it into a beautiful home," Simon stated.

"Thank you. Come in and sit down, Captain. Would you like a beer or iced tea?"

"A beer would taste good, but only if you join me," Simon suggested.

Megan grabbed two beers and opened them and handed one to Simon. "Come and sit down, I have some things to tell you."

"I figured as much. What's going on?"

Megan brought all of the paperwork over to the coffee table and laid it out before Simon. "I've been a little busy for the last four weeks or so and this is what I have to show for it."

Simon looked at the paperwork for her citizenship and the Detective First Grade testing grades. To say he was surprised was an understatement.

"Why didn't you tell any of us, Connor?"

"I didn't want to jinx any of it until I knew that I passed the exam for the police department. Now that I have that, I feel like I can move on and put in for a permanent job in Major Crimes. Do you have an opening?"

"We do. Someone just left tonight. Her name is Megan Conner. We'll need to replace her as soon as possible. Can I tell everyone at Major Crimes tomorrow?" Simon was smiling and trying not to get tears in his eyes. "I'm so proud of you, Connor. I can't believe you did all of this all by yourself without anyone's help. I hope you know that Sandburg is going to have a fit that you didn't tell him first."

"Thank you, sir. I'm quite proud of myself, too. Sandy will get over being mad once he learns that I'm staying in the US. I still keep wondering if this is all a big dream. I'm so excited for everyone to hear about this news tomorrow."

"I see you have dual citizenship. That was a really good idea. I will tell everyone tomorrow morning," Simon said.

"I can't wait for you to tell everyone. I'm so excited," Megan answered.

The two of them finished their beers discussing what was going to happen the next day.

Simon looked out into his bullpen and realized it had been five years since Inspector Megan Connor had become part of the team. Now, she was even more a part. She had passed her test for Detective First Grade. She had already filled out all of the papers and would be a permanent member of Major Crime as of that morning. Simon was going to make the announcement when Megan got there. At that moment, Megan walked into the bullpen, all smiles and looking very happy.

Simon opened up his door and growled, "Connor, my office."

Jim stood up and said, "Don't worry, Connor, he doesn't really sound mad at all. He probably just wants to tell you what a good job you're doing."

"Or, he's mad as hell and we're keeping her out here instead of in there," Blair teased.

"You two... I don't know what I would do without both of you," Megan said happily as she smiled all the way into Simon's office.

She walked in, shut the door and smiled at her Captain and said, "Let's do it. I'm ready to let them all know the news."

"Connor, I'm going to make an announcement about you becoming a detective in just a moment. So get ready for hugs and kisses from the gang," Simon joked again. "Do you mind if I tell them about you becoming a citizen at the same time?"

"Oh that would be nice," Megan agreed happily.

Simon smiled, opened up his door and walked out into the bullpen. "Could Ellison, Sandburg, Taggart, Brown and Rafe come into my office for a moment?"

The ones mentioned all got up and walked into Simon's office and Simon then shut the door.

"This is a very proud moment in my life and in Megan Connor's life. We wanted to share the news with you and invite you to a special dinner tonight at 7:00 at Saccony's, my treat. Connor has passed the exam for Detective First Grade and she also passed her exam to become a United States citizen."

"Oh, man, this is awesome news," Blair said as he rushed up to give her a huge hug.

"Congratulations, Detective," Jim said, smiling quite proudly. Then he gave her a quick hug to let her know he was behind her all the way.

"Thank you, blokes. You have no idea how much this all means to me. I'm going to try and buy my rental house. I can finally set down roots. I know I'll be staying now. Thank you all for being so good to me through the years. This past five years have passed by so quickly, that sometimes I feel like it was just yesterday that I got here. I love Saccony's, Simon, so thank you for inviting us all to dinner."

"It's the least I could do. I wanted to show my support and happiness for you," Simon remarked.

"Now, let's go out into the bullpen and tell everyone else the good news. But dinner will just be us tonight. I didn't think you'd want that many people around you all evening long."

"Thank you again, Captain. I'm just so excited, I can hardly see straight," Megan admitted.

Simon stood in the middle of the bullpen and said, "Could I have your attention, please?"

He then informed everyone of the good news.

Everyone else in the bullpen then went up and hugged and congratulated Megan on a job well done. Before long, they all went back to doing their jobs and Megan realized she needed to do the same. She smiled once more at Simon and walked over to her desk and sat down. She had tears in her eyes that were tears of joy. She was one of the luckiest people alive to have this many friends, a great job and boss. She started doing her paperwork and all of the noises in the bullpen started up as usual.

Simon walked into his office for some peace and quiet and a good strong cup of coffee. He sat down at his desk to put a file together for Detective Megan Connor.

This was indeed a great day. Simon knew that he was proud of her, but he had a feeling that the rest of the gang was just as proud as he was.

Simon went home at 5:00, changed his clothes and drove to Saccony's at 7:00. He was really looking forward to this evening. He gave them his name when he walked in the door and they sat him in a separate room with a large table in it. He expected Jim and Blair to be one of the first ones there. Megan would be right after them because she was very punctual also.

In walked Jim and Blair, both smiling like crazy. "Hi Simon," Blair called out.

"Hello, Sandburg, nice to see you here on time," Simon joked.

"I'm always on time when I ride with Jim, you know that."

Jim laughed and said, "Where is the woman of the hour?"

"She'll be here in a few minutes. I knew you two would be first and she'll be here next," Simon said.

Megan walked through the doorway and smiled at all three men. "Where is everyone else?"

"They'll be here, Connor. They're not as punctual as the three of you are. Sit down and tell us more about your day," Simon ordered.

"Sandy, I wanted you to be with me for the test for citizenship so bad, but I was too afraid of not passing it. I knew that you would make it all right, but I didn't want to be embarrassed. I missed having you to tell while I waited for the results from the test for my detective first grade. You have no idea how badly I wanted to talk to you. But I knew I had to wait to tell everyone at the same time. Except for Simon. I had to talk to him about a job and all."

"I wish you could have come to me, too," Blair replied.

Brown, Joel and Rafe walked in at that moment and Simon said, "Thank God, we're starving."

The waitress followed the three men into the room and said, "Will this be the entire party?"

Simon answered, "Yes, we're ready to order drinks and look at menus."

Joel smiled over at Megan and said, "We're all so proud of you, Megan. You accomplished a lot in a week's time. How does it feel being an American citizen?"

"So far, so good. My parents took the news quite well and know that they can come to visit anytime they'd like to. And I can go and see them often too. My brothers were quite proud of everything I did and knowing I did it all by myself made them extra proud. The part I'm happiest about is becoming a permanent member of Major Crime and not just an outsider."

Brown said, "You were never an outsider, Megan. Okay, maybe the first few weeks, but after that, you blended right into our gang."

"Thank you, Henri."

Rafe didn't want to be outdone by his partner, so he said, "I can't believe you kept this secret all to yourself for so long. Usually women are blabbermouths."

All the men laughed and then Megan did too. She loved these men; they were very dear to her heart.

"Brian, is that your way of saying you're proud of me?" Megan asked.

"Of course it is," Rafe answered, laughing.

The waitress-Cindy- took their order for drinks and appetizers and left the room. Once she brought the drinks in, she found all of them talking like crazy and had a hard time getting their orders down. Cindy really liked this group of people. They were funny and friendly. Cindy finally got everything she needed for their meals to be prepared and left the room.

"Did you all notice how Rafe was flirting with the waitress?" Jim asked.

"Her name is Cindy, Jim. Don't call her the waitress. And yes, we all saw him flirting like mad," Blair kidded.

"Can't blame a guy for trying, can you?" Rafe asked.

Everyone laughed again.

Once the meals were brought in, the discussion slowed down, because everyone was busy eating.

After finishing his dinner, Simon decided to tell Megan a few things. "Connor, you need to fill out some papers tomorrow for me. They're for insurance, vacation pay and sick time. We need to get them all filled out and into your file. Would you like to come a little early tomorrow to do that?"

"Sure. I'm still in shock that this is going to be my new life. Thank you all for being my friends and family."

"Connor, you're brand new on the job and he's already calling you in early. Seems unfair to me," Jim kidded.

"Not to me. I'm thrilled to have this job and can't wait to get started. Captain, could I take a long lunch tomorrow to change my license and everything else I need to get done?"

"What else do you need to do?" Simon wondered.

"I'm going to ask my landlord, who loves me to death, if he'll sell the house to me. I love that place and I don't want to move for anything," Megan said.

"Good luck, Megan," Blair said.

"Thank you, Sandy."

"I wish you a lot of luck, too, Connor," Jim added.

"Thanks, Jimbo."

"Jim and I are looking at houses right now too. We'd love to be in the same area as you are. That's a great place to live," Blair said.

"Good luck to all of you," Joel said.

"Thank you, Joel," they all said at the same time.

Before long, Megan yawned and everyone smiled. She was going to sleep like a log tonight, they all knew that much.

Joel, Brown and Rafe stood up. "It's time for us to take our leave," Joel said.

"Goodnight, mates," Megan called out.

As soon as they left, everyone else stood because it was getting late. Simon, for one, felt like he should definitely be in bed.

"Congratulations again, Connor. We're all very proud of you and don't forget to come in early tomorrow," Simon stated.

"I won't. Thank you again, Simon. It was fun watching you and Jimbo argue over who was paying the tip. Jimbo doesn't like losing. Thank you for coming."

Megan gave all of them hugs and then walked out the door. She was quickly followed by the three men, who were tired and needed to get home.

A few weeks earlier, Jim and Blair had decided to look for a house, which was not as fun as they thought it might be. They had been looking for weeks and still nothing. First of all, they knew that Henri and his girlfriend, Hope were getting married soon and offered the loft to them at a reduced rate. Henri was very excited about it. He had always loved the loft, so they would keep it in the family more or less. So once that was done with, Jim and Blair had extra money to work with.

Their real estate agent was called Barb. She called first thing Saturday morning which happened to be their day off.

"Ellison," Jim grumbled into the phone.

"Hi Jim, its Barb. I have a perfect house for you and Blair to see. Large but not too large, plenty of bedrooms and office space and in the neighborhood you were looking to buy into. Do you want to see it today?"

"What time?" Jim asked.

"How about in two hours. That gives you both plenty of time to get ready for seeing your perfect house," Barb teased.

"I'm glad you think it might be it for us. To tell you the truth, we're a little tired of looking," Jim said.

"I know that Jim. Now get ready and be here in two hours. Oh, this is the address," Barb rattled off the address and Jim wrote it down as quickly as he could.

"Bye, Jim."

"Bye, Barb."

Blair looked over his shoulder and said, "This is it, huh?"

"She called it the perfect house for us. Keep good thoughts going about it and maybe we'll have a house at the end of the day."

Both men got up, got showered and were off in plenty of time. They honestly couldn't wait to see what type of house she had to show them.

When they arrived, it was love at first sight. The house was much bigger than they had thought it would be, but it was beautiful.

Barb stood on the sidewalk smiling and she waited for the men to walk up to her. "Did I tell you how perfect it was or what?"

"We'll wait until we see the inside first," Blair said, smiling.

They followed Barb in and started looking at the house. The living room was very large and warm, the kitchen was huge and a dream come true for both men. It had four bedrooms which one could be used as an office and then the dining room was spacious. Yes, Barb was right. This house was perfect.

"Can we make an offer?" Jim asked.

"Of course you can. Let's write it up right now and I can fax it from my office. I'll call you from there and let you know what they say," Barb answered.

The guys went home for the afternoon and waited to hear from Barb. Finally at about 3:00, the phone rang. Blair made a mad dash and answered it.

"Sandburg."

"Hi Blair, this is Barb. You got it. They agreed to everything and you'll have the inspection next week and we'll call the pest control of your choice so we can get a clean bill of health on the house. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Barb. I'll tell Jim. Orkin is a good place to call for pest control. We like them."

"Talk to you later, Blair."

"Bye, Barb."

Blair got off the phone and jumped into Jim's lap. "We have a house and we'll be moved within a month."

Jim pulled Blair into a very nice kiss and then hugged him. He almost whispered, "We have a house."

Jim and Blair were unpacking things in their new home and discussing where they would go out to eat that night when there was a knock at the door. Jim knew it was Connor. He could hear her spiked heartbeat and he smelled fear in the air.

He opened the door quickly and said, "Come on in. Tell us what's wrong."

"There is no fooling a Sentinel, is there?" Megan asked.

Jim pushed her onto the sofa and Blair sat next to her. "Now tell us what's wrong."

"I found a lump in my left breast and went to have a mammogram. They said that something didn't look exactly right and they needed to do a biopsy. They told me that I need about two hours for it tomorrow and someone to drive me home afterwards. I was hoping I could count on one of you to go with me and help me through this," Megan asked, pleadingly.

Blair got closer on the sofa, throwing his arm around her and said, "Consider it done. I'll take you, stay with you and take you home afterwards. Jim won't mind doing all the paperwork at the station, am I right, Jim?"

"You're right about taking her and staying with her. I hate the paperwork, but for Connor, I'll put on a happy face and try to hold down the fort," Jim said.

Megan got up from the sofa and hugged Jim very hard. "Do you think you could feel the lump and tell me if I have anything to worry about?"

"Megan, I know nothing about lumps in the breast or biopsies. Blair will stay with you and keep you calm, don't worry about a thing. I do know that our neighbor had something like this happen once and everything turned out all right. Don't worry until they give you something to worry about," Jim advised.

"Thank you so much for being good friends. You have no idea how much I appreciate it."

"Megan, are you alright with me telling Simon about this tomorrow, or do you just want to take a few vacation days?" Jim asked.

"I would appreciate if you told him what was going on, because it will save me having to tell him. Thank you for offering to take care of it. He'll have to know that I'm taking the time off. May as well tell him why, don't you agree?" Megan inquired.

"I agree. I'll tell him first thing in the morning, but that's where it ends," Jim explained.

"Thank you, Jim."

They sat and talked for the next two hours about lumps and the scare they put into a person. When Megan left, she was somewhat relieved to know that Sandy would be picking her up the following day for her tests. This seemed to give her more courage than she had before.

Once Jim walked Megan safely to her car, he walked back to the house, locked the front door and said, "God, I hate to hear the word cancer."

"Let's hope it's not cancer, Jim."

"You can say that again," Jim agreed with Blair.

The following day, Jim went to the station house and explained everything to Simon. He hated telling personal things about Connor to anyone, but Simon was her boss. Now Simon was officially worried about Connor too. She had made a great many friends in the station, including him.

Jim went to his desk and tried to keep busy as to not worry. He knew that worrying would do no one any good.

Blair picked Megan up and took her to the doctor's office to have the biopsy. While in the car Megan asked, "Sandy will you stay with me while I have the procedure?"

"Megan, I think that's something very personal and private. I don't feel like I should be in there with you. You'll do great. "

"Sandy, please. Don't make me beg. I have no one else to ask. My family is all in Australia. You don't have to look at anything, I just need to see your face and hold your hand," Megan pleaded.

"Okay...Whatever will make it easier on you is what we'll do. I'm here for you."

"Thank you, Sandy."

"You are most welcome. Did I mention how much it helped us to have you unpack the bedroom with us the other night? You're a good friend, and we're very happy to have you in our lives," Blair said.

"Oh, I was happy to do that for and with you guys. I love your new house and it's great having you so close to my house. Do you know that Mitchell in Traffic asked the other day if I knew you guys were gay? I laughed all the way to the elevator and got on. I looked at his stupid face and laughed harder."

"Megan, you don't have to defend us, you know?"



"Sandy, I didn't say a word. Mitchell is a moron. It was like he thought I wouldn't know without him telling me the newsflash."

Both Megan and Blair had a small laugh over this and then Blair pulled into the parking lot and parked. Megan held his hand and said, "I'm more scared about this than anything. Being a cop is nothing compared to this."

"You're going to be fine. Now let's get in there, kick butt and take names," Blair answered.

Megan took strength from Blair and got out of the SUV. She was never so grateful to have someone on her side. And Sandy was a perfect someone.

They walked in, Megan filled out all the forms and they sat and waited for Megan's name to be called.

The door opened and a nurse stood there and said, "Megan Connor?"

Megan stood up and grabbed Sandy's hand and held it so hard, Blair knew that he wasn't going to have feeling in that hand when this was done with. The two of them walked into the procedure room and the nurse said, "This is your boy friend, Ms Connor?"

"No, just a good friend, but... well... having him here..."

"If you're sure. I need you to take off your blouse, your bra and then put this gown on, opening in the front. The doctor will be here in just a moment. Try and relax."

Blair turned around while Megan disrobed and then sat down in one of the two chairs and Megan sat in the other.

"I've always hated these stupid gowns. They don't cover up much, do they?" Megan asked, trying to make small talk.

"So Megan, tell me how much you love your house."

"Oh boy, I do love the house. It's perfect for me. I was so thrilled when my landlord agreed to sell it to me. I couldn't have asked for a better house. You like it don't you?" Megan wondered.

"I love your house. It's so comfortable and homey inside and out. I think you should start hosting the poker parties half of the time. Then everyone could see how great your house is too. What do you think of that?"

"Sandy, I think you're a fantastic friend that is trying to keep my mind off of the needle, but it's not working," Megan admitted.

At that moment, the nurse walked in and said, "Please take this pill, Ms. Connor. It will help relax you a lot."

"Thank you," Megan replied. She swallowed the pill and hoped it wouldn't take long to take effect. She didn't have that long to wait. It wasn't ten minutes and she was loopy.

"Sandy, do you and Jim have anyone you would like me to meet? I'm lonely."

"We'll talk about that when the time comes, Megan. For now, just lean back, close your eyes and relax. It'll all be over soon enough."

The doctor walked in and asked Megan to have a seat on the examining table. She did, but she didn't let go of Blair's hand once. Blair knew she was scared to death. The doctor then leaned her back onto the table and began the procedure.

The doctor gave her three shots in her breast to keep the pain at bay. When she was numb, he explained everything he was doing. He did an ultrasound to determine where to put the needle, and then extracted the proper fluid. He then closed it all with steri-strips and a bandage that covered half of her breast.

The entire time, Blair stood on the opposite side of her, holding her hand. She was doing very well as far as Blair knew.

Then again, what do I know?

The doctor explained that she needed to take two days off from work and rest. She wasn't to lift anything for a week, change the dressing on the wound every day, sometimes twice a day and call the doctor if she had pain, swelling or anything out of the ordinary. She had little ice packs to put inside her bra to keep the pain to a minimum. Once he was done he left the room, telling her that he would have the results within four days.

The nurse said, "Let's sit up and get your clothing back on."

Again, Blair turned around when she got dressed, even though he had just seen both of her breasts while they did the biopsy.

When he turned around, Megan was ready to go. Blair helped her out to the SUV and got her buckled in. Then he got in the driver's side and started the vehicle up. Blair was never so happy to have this all done with.

Blair then drove her to her home, got her settled in bed and left her with instructions to call him if anything went wrong. She was sound asleep within moments of being laid in the bed.

When Blair arrived at the station, he never wanted to hug Jim so badly in his life. But they kept their private life out of the station. Home was safe, work was not.

"Hey Chief, how did it go?"

"Hey Jim, it went great. No problems whatsoever. She's sleeping off the drug they gave her to relax her and doing well. She's not going to know the results for at least four days. I need to tell Simon that she can only be on desk duty for a week when she comes back and she has to have the first two days off, all together."

"I'm wishing her well," Jim confessed.

"Tell me about it," Blair agreed.

Blair walked over to Simon's door and knocked.

"What?" Simon bellowed.

Blair opened the door and walked in and sat down in front of Simon's desk.

"How is Megan, Blair?"

"She needs two days off, starting tomorrow, and then has to be on desk duty with no lifting for the rest of the week. She would have called, but she was totally out of it from the drug they gave her. You should call her tonight and see how she's doing, she would like that very much," Blair said.

"I'll do that," Simon promised, "now get back to work. Your partner has been crazed without you to help with the paperwork."

"Yes, sir," Blair saluted and walked out smiling, even though he wasn't too happy at that moment. He was too busy being worried.

Blair joined Jim in the bullpen and began to get caught up on paperwork. Neither of them mentioned Megan again for the rest of the day. No one in the bullpen asked any questions because Simon had her down as being on vacation time.

That night, Megan was making a small salad for dinner when there was a knock at the door. She looked out the peep hole and saw it was Simon. She opened up the door, quickly and said, "Come on in."

"Good evening, Connor. I wanted to stop by and tell you that you have the next two days off and the rest of the week is desk duty with no lifting," Simon stated.

"Thank you, sir. I was going to call you tonight. I take it Blair filled you in on what was going on?"

"Yes, he's kept me apprised of the news so far."

"Simon, did you put me in for vacation time?"

"Yes, you are officially off for two more days and then you can tell everyone you pulled a muscle in your back and can't lift anything. It's no one else's business, Megan," Simon remarked.

"Thank you, Simon."

"How are you feeling tonight?" Simon asked.

Megan sighed loudly and answered, "I'll be fine. I don't want anyone treating me any differently. I want to be treated like one of the guys."

"With a breast biopsy, I don't think that's going to happen," Simon said.

"Men get breast cancer, did you know that?"

"Men? I've never heard of such a thing," Simon replied.

"Yes, no one is safe from breast cancer. It attacks men, just not as often as women. But I refuse to believe that after all I did to stay in this wonderful city and country, I would lose a battle to cancer."

"Connor, no one said you were going to lose anything. Now keep upbeat thoughts and keep me informed of the results. I wish you the best," Simon stated gently.

"Thank you for stopping by, Simon. It was good of you to do that."

Simon walked out the door and Megan watched him get into his car and drive off before she shut the door.

She had felt like crying all day long and this visit from Simon made her feel even worse. They were all expecting the worst case scenario. It was getting harder to keep her chin up.

All day long, she had thought about how tough she was in her job as a cop, but now with this she found out she wasn't that tough at all. All she knew was she wasn't going to let this get her down. She had come too far to let something stop her.

Megan picked out a movie to watch and grabbed a beer. She was going to relax, if it was the last thing she did tonight.

Two days later, Jim was in the bullpen when Megan called him.

"Ellison..."

"Hi Jimbo, it's me. They called me from the hospital with great news. It was benign. They said I have to get it checked every six months for the next two years, but other than that, they gave me a clean bill of health. Could you please tell Sandy?"

"Connor, that's fantastic news. Blair is going to be so pleased about it. He's in the break room getting us coffee. I'll talk to you tonight. Thank God, things are going to be all right," Jim said happily.

"Talk to you later," Megan answered.

Jim hung up the phone and walked cheerfully into the break room. Rafe, Brown, Joel and Blair were all standing there talking and Jim cleared his throat. "Blair, could I talk to you for a moment?"

"What?" Blair asked worriedly as he joined Jim in the hall.

"It's benign. She's got a clean bill of health. Now, I need to go and tell Simon. Jim hugged Blair, he didn't care about those rules that they had made for work. Blair held on tight and was very happy.

Jim walked up to Simon's office and knocked.

"Come on in, Jim."

"Sir, I have news about Connor. I figured you would want to hear as soon as she got the results."

"So tell me," Simon ordered.

"It's benign. They gave her a clean bill of health. She'll be back tomorrow for desk duty and couldn't be happier about it."

Simon grabbed Jim and hugged him and then stepped back. "This could have been so bad. Thank God, we got good news for a change. Bailey in Traffic got lung cancer and he was gone in a month. I was really worried."

"We all were, Simon."

"Thank you for the news. Get back to work," Simon said gladly.

They all worked their cases and Jim and Blair were looking forward to Connor coming in the next day. She had better be ready for hugs.

Blair called Megan from the SUV on the way home. Jim was driving, so it left Blair free to make calls and talk with his friend.

"Connor..."

"Hi, we were wondering if you wanted to go out to eat tonight and celebrate. I think this is the best news we're heard in a long, long while. Do you feel up to dinner at Claim Jumper?"

"Oh, Sandy, you are so thoughtful. Thank you. I would love to go for dinner. You can invite the entire gang if you want. We could meet at 7:00 if that's all right with you guys."

"It'll just be the three of us. There is no need to handle anyone at work. They think you pulled a muscle in your back. We'll pick you up," Blair suggested.

"Okay, I'll be ready at 7:00. Thanks again, Sandy."

Blair closed his cell and smiled at Jim.

"Thanks, for asking her, Chief."

"No problem, Megan is a good friend and hope to have her around for a good long while. I know you like her too," Blair said.

"Except when she calls me Jimbo. I hate that name," Jim grumbled.

"It's a term of endearment, Jim. Get a grip," Blair joked.

"I'll be on my best behavior tonight. It could have easily gone the other way and I would have been devastated," Jim confessed.

"Wow, that's the first time, you've ever admitted how much you like her. I'm glad to hear it. Don't be too nice because she'll think she's getting special treatment. Treat her like one of the guys, okay?" Blair asked.

"Let's get home, get ready and go treat her like one of the guys. I'll slug her in the arm and see if that works," Jim teased.

Blair laughed but knew that Jim was only teasing.

Life was good for all of them.



BY FLITTER

WITH ART BY PATT

It was dusk, the forest covered by twilight hues as the sun was covered by the tree-line. Around him, others shifted nervously. For his part, Blair tried to calm his racing heart. They were all anxious and normally it would be a disaster to have so many empaths, so many potential Guides, collected together in such strenuous circumstances.

But on this night it was expected.

Blair fiddled briefly with his metal cuff, the harsh coolness a reminder of its binding power. He wouldn't be able to read another's emotions tonight if he tried his hardest. And that was, perhaps, the scariest part.

Still, he'd known when he'd come forward as an empath that this would be his eventual fate. Though his mother had warned him from a young age, urging him to keep his abilities under wraps, to never tell anyone... though she'd nearly disowned him when he'd made the choice at sixteen to let the world know who he really was... well Blair did not yet regret it.

Perhaps he would. It would depend on who caught him if he was caught at all.

And that, Blair reasoned, was all he could hope for. If he could last the whole hunt, until dawn, without being caught. Claimed. Then he'd be free to continue on with his life.

He ignored the fact that few empaths ever made it all the way through the hunt. After all, where most empaths grew up sheltered, living cushioned lives in their family homes, Blair Sandburg had grown up traveling from country to country fending for himself in terrain sometimes much harsher than the dark forest that surrounded them.

Blair raised his face to the sky, breathing out through his nose. His hair had been pulled back so as to be out of the way and though his clothes had been mandated, cotton pants and a bare chest with only thin sandals as shoes, he felt as prepared as he could be. After all, he'd put off accepting his invitation for the annual Guide Hunt until his very last eligible year.

Twenty-nine years old and not yet bonded. Blair didn't care that most of the others in the e far younger than him, one girl maybe even just legal. What he cared most about was his work and he'd finally been given his doctorate in anthropology. He wasn't going to throw away his whole future for a Sentinel who may or may not let him ever leave the house again.

He would win this hunt. And then they would have to let him continue on, a free empath in a world of bonded Guides.

The gong rang loud in the still air. All at once, the waiting empaths jerked and then began to run.

Blair took off through the woods at a sprint. The empaths were all given a few minutes head start on the unbonded Sentinels, but while the empaths had suppression cuffs to block their gifts, the Sentinels still had their heightened senses. He would need every last second to get as far away from the rest as possible. Hopefully the Sentinels would decide to go for the easier prey.

He ignored, too, the fact that there were at least double the numbers of Sentinels as there were empaths. For some, he knew, this was their second, third, fourth hunt. It wasn't uncommon for another Sentinel to tear into a rival and though they were all carefully being watched so that no serious injuries could occur, Sentinels had been and would continue to be knocked unconscious for the duration of a hunt only to wake up and be told they could try again next year.

It bothered Blair, somewhat, because he knew the bond was much more important for the Sentinel than it would be for him. For the Sentinel, the bond was control and balance and peace and while a bonded Guide would be secure, training and meditation could bring them just as much control as a bond could.

Of course, not many empaths bothered to learn control. They all accepted that they would be claimed and bonded.

Not Blair.

He was far into the woods now, the trees dense and dark around him. Blair crossed his arms, feeling goose bumps rising over his bare chest. He'd been shaved as part of the preparation for the hunt and he missed his chest hair. At the very least it could have helped keep him warm though the night.

There was a snap suddenly to his right and Blair took off. He didn't dare look back to see if the sound had been caused by human or animal, he couldn't risk it. The darkness was now a big hindrance to him and several times he tripped over shrubs and tree roots, but every time he got back up and kept running.

The forest was deadly silent, so much so that Blair thought he could hear his own footsteps echoing.

No, there was no echo. Someone was following him.



Blair pushed himself harder, sprinting through the trees. His arms and chest scraped against bark and branches and he knew that by morning he would be a crisscross network of scrapes, but for now he had to keep running.

Blair gasped as out of nowhere a hand materialized in the dusk and yanked him by the arm. He fell, his momentum catching with that of his captor's. They both went down on the leaf-covered ground.

In moments, Blair was scrambling to his feet, but before he could begin sprinting away again he was being pinned by sharp nails in his arm. Blair cried out against the pain.

"Shush little pup," a soft, female voice whispered in his ear. "I've got you. You're mine now, aren't you? My little Guide."

Blair shook his head. "No, let me go."

"I don't think so," the female laughed. She had twisted Blair's arm behind him, such that he could neither move nor see her. "Such a pretty one, aren't you?"

Blair shied away from his captor, but she was not deterred. A hot tongue licked his neck. "I don't want you," Blair said strongly.

"You will," the Sentinel hissed. Her free hand grasped at the front of Blair's pants. He winced, his cock soft and uninterested even as she attempted to work him beneath the cotton fabric.

"Please stop," he begged. Tears were brimming in the corners of his eyes, but he ground his teeth so as not to let them fall. "Let me go."

"Get off of him, Barnes," another voice said. It was male, strong, and belonged to a large man that stepped up out of the shadows to challenge the female Sentinel.

Blair held his breath, his heart pounding in his chest so hard that he could hear it, never mind the two Sentinels.

Barnes, as the female Sentinel must be, growled low, but when she spoke her voice was sickeningly sweet. "Jim, darling, can't you see I'm busy? This sweetheart has a bit of fire, you see. Needs a taming hand."

"If he does it won't be yours," the male Sentinel, Jim, said. His eyes were bright blue, visible even in the rapidly growing darkness. "Step away from him."

Barnes pushed Blair down and he went, his arm protesting the strain. He felt her shift, her nails detaching from his flesh. He tried to push himself up, but her foot was solid weight on his back.

Blair settled against the ground, getting ready for the chance to sprint away. He got it moments later as the male Sentinel growled and ran forward, dragging Barnes away from him. Blair was up in a flash, risking a quick glance behind him. He saw the two Sentinels rolling on the ground, but before a victor came out of the tussle he was off running.

The darkness was heavy and though his eyes had adjusted slightly, it wasn't enough. Sentinels could easily see in full darkness and whoever won would be tracking him. He couldn't afford to have a disadvantage.

Blair knew what he had to do. He stopped in a clearing, searching wildly around for the most suitable specimen. There, a large oak stretched high, with branches that thinned considerably as it reached towards the moon. Blair grabbed onto the lowest branch and pulled himself up.

As he climbed, he was reminded of the Korowai people with whom he studied with just a few years prior. They were a remarkable civilization of around three thousand people that lived in the forest of eastern Indonesia. Depending on an individual's status in society, they would dwell in their tree homes either closer to or farther from the forest floor.

They had a few Sentinel and Guide airs whom dwelled at the very top branches, where they could survey all, and that was where Blair climbed now.

It was only when he his hands broke through a particularly small branch that he figured he'd climbed high enough. The Korowai people had taught him how to keep stable on even unstable tree limbs and so were any Sentinel to follow him he doubted they would make it so high up.

Blair settled with his back to the tree trunk and his eyes on the forest floor below. The tree was large enough to block the growth of other trees in its immediately vicinity and so Blair had a clear view of the ground, illuminated by the moon above.

A soft rustle was his only warning before the male Sentinel from before stepped from the bushes to the base of the tree and looked up at him with those clear blue eyes. "You're safe."

Blair paused and then nodded, knowing the Sentinel would be able to clearly see him. "Barnes?" he asked.

"Incapacitated," the Sentinel, Jim he reminded himself, growled. "I would have her never participate in the Hunt again, but the handlers say that everyone gets their chance."

"Why don't you like her?" Blair asked, his scientific curiosity making its way through the small stab of panic that had spread the minute he'd seen the Sentinel approach. After all, Jim had yet to start climbing and he was large enough that he wouldn't be able to get anywhere near where Blair perched.

"Alex Barnes has claimed four empaths during the Hunts," Jim stated, his eyes now fixed off in the distance. Distaste was clear on his face, even from Blair's height. "None have survived in her care."

Blair gulped, his eyes closing of their own accord as he shivered. "Then I'm grateful," he murmured. "To you for fighting her off." After all, he would have had no recourse against the bond had she succeeded. Such was the way of Sentinels and Guides.

It was not a way Blair approved of, even if it did sometimes fascinate him from a purely observational standpoint.

Jim leaned against the base of the tree, his posture protective. He seemed at the ready to attack, and Blair frowned. "What are you doing?"

The Sentinel glanced at him briefly, and then turned his gaze back to the surroundings as if watching for danger. "You have nothing to fear from me," he said clearly. "I would never take an unwilling empath. Nor do I like it when other Sentinels try to."

"So you, what? You've done this before?" Blair asked.

Jim nodded slowly. "I've been a participant of the Hunt for ten years. I've seen... I'm a cop, usually, and some of things I see go on in these woods are worse than some of my cases. No one should be forced into this. It doesn't make for healthy bonds, healthy relationships. I've seen empaths beaten and raped and Sentinels grown mad from their Guide's distress but it's as if they can't make themselves stop."

The Sentinel cut his flow of speech and Blair could tell from the tenseness of his posture that speaking so freely wasn't common for him. His throat felt tight. "There's always room for change," he whispered.

"The handlers and bonded Sentinels won't listen to me," Jim said. "I'm not bonded. I tried once, to my ex-wife, but it didn't stick. She wasn't empathic enough."

"I'm sorry," Blair said honestly.

Jim shrugged. "It was for the best, anyway. But the others, they say that nothing can compare to a bond. That the Hunt is necessary."

"Not the way it is," Blair argued. "There's... there has to be another way."

"That's what I said," Jim laughed dryly. "But until I'm bonded my words fall on deaf ears."

"So why don't you?" Blair asked. "You said ten years, man, that's a really long time to go without a bond."

Jim sighed loudly. "I said I wouldn't force a bond, and I won't. But even though there have been some who have been willing... my Hunt nights are spent usually protecting those that aren't. I can't not. I can't just bond to someone, all the while listening to someone else screaming for help."

Blair felt stunned by the conviction and sadness in the Sentinel's voice. Suddenly he had the overwhelming urge to get closer, to comfort this man. He dropped down a couple of branches carefully, so at least he could see Jim better. Jim didn't make a move towards him and he felt more emboldened by it.

"So you protect them?" Blair prodded. "Until the night is over?"

"Not always," Jim admitted. "Sometimes they want to bond, they just ran into the wrong Sentinel. I try to herd them towards others better suited. But a few just want their freedom." He looked up at Blair. "I think you do."

Blair huffed. "It's not that I don't want a true bond," he admitted. "I just don't want to lose my life. I just got my doctorate in anthropology. I know the stereotype for Guides and while I hate to stereotype, I do believe that they are sometimes based in fact. I couldn't just stay at home all day waiting for my Sentinel to return."

Jim's face showed exactly what he thought of that idea. "While I appreciate the idea of keeping one's Guide safe," he began. "Having an empath by you in the middle of the field is just as important. You can't protect your Guide if you're dead."

He sounded like he'd said just that before to pig-headed Sentinels and Blair felt a sort of kinship to the man. He didn't quite know how to express that, though, so he settled for, "That's admirable."

"Not really," Jim disagreed. "And I'm not the first, but there should be more of us."

The silence stretched between them for a moment, until Blair felt obliged to ask. "And you're never tempted? By the empaths you rescue, I mean."

Jim's eyes met his, the blue so striking that Blair found himself holding his breath. "Not usually," the Sentinel murmured.

"But now?" Blair prodded, feeling daring.

Jim's lips quirked and he lifted his chin. "You smell..." he turned away. "I was perhaps more selfish in getting you away from other Sentinels this time than I have been with empaths in the past."

Blair let out an unsteady breath, his heartbeat racing. "Oh."

"You don't have to be frightened," Jim assured. "I still would never force you, not even if you... call to me."

Blair wondered if that call was always a two-way street. "So you're a cop," he said, to move the conversation along. Or maybe because he was just curious. "Where?"

"Cascade PD," Jim answered.

"No shit, man!" Blair nearly fell from the tree he flailed so hard. "I work at Rainier."

Jim looked at him, surprise on his face. "Really? Is that where you just graduated from?"

Blair nodded. "Well, my thesis was on a tribe in Peru, so I wasn't in Cascade for most of the year, but yeah."

"What tribe?" Jim asked. "I spent some time with the Chopec when I first came online."

"That's the way to do it," Blair nodded. "Too many Sentinels never venture into the wild for training. But no I was studying the Bora." He waved his hands. "They're really fascinating. Unlike a lot of tribes, they don't have one specific shaman. Instead, everyone can see the spiritual world. It's all around them, see. So I was studying their genetic empathic abilities and everyone in the tribe is somewhat empathic. I was shocked when the lab tests came back. But there are no Sentinels. They learn to practice their gifts through mediation and the like."

"Slow down Chief," Jim laughed.

Blair felt himself blush and he shut his mouth. "Sorry. I get kind of talkative."

"I don't mind," Jim said. "I like your voice, but at some point I'd like to be able to distinguish what you're saying."

"Really?" Blair asked. "I figured it'd bore you."

Jim shook his head. "Like I said, I lived in Peru. The Chopec were friends with sectors of the Bora. It's interesting to me."

"Huh." Blair dropped down another branch, so that he was within touching distance of Jim. Jim shifted so that they were facing each other, but he kept a reasonable distance between them. "So not just a mindless cop."

Jim chuckled. "Not quite. I'm not saying I know much about the scientific mumbojumbo of your job, but if I can follow it I like it."

"Cool," Blair grinned. "I'm Blair, by the way. Dr. Blair Sandburg." And didn't that just feel good to say.

By the smile playing at Jim's lips, he caught Blair's simple joy. "Detective Jim Ellison."

"Nice to meet you, Jim," Blair said, holding out his hand.

Jim looked at it and winced. "You might not want to do that, Chief. My control is good, but not that good."

"Oh," Blair considered pulling his hand back, but something in him, the same part of him that came to front as he explored culture after culture, eating strange foods and climbing hundred-foot trees, and letting fire ants crawl over his body, and every other crazy thing he'd ever done, that part of him was saying take this leap of faith.

So he did. He jumped down to stand on the ground. "It's okay," he said.

Jim's nostril's flared and up close he was a hell of a lot bigger than Blair might have expected. It was... actually pretty arousing to think that this man, this Sentinel, could pick him up and throw him over his shoulder and not even break a sweat.

Jim was probably smelling his arousal. Blair wondered if he should be more embarrassed, but then the Sentinel reached forward and clasped one of his large hands over Blair and a full-body shiver ran through his body.

"Are you sure, Chief?" Jim asked softly.

"There are studies that suggest Sentinels and empaths both can sense higher compatibility," Blair told him. "I trust my senses."

Jim smiled. "Me too."

"Just," Blair hesitated, though he didn't try to pull his hand back. "No matter what the government says, I won't be a housewife or pet or whatever. I can't."

"I wouldn't want you to be," Jim stated. "We can figure it out, Blair, everything. I'm not unreasonable and you're not the kind to roll over, I don't think."

"No," Blair chuckled. "I'm not."

Jim's eyes crinkled in the corners. "Good." He tugged Blair forward and Blair went, colliding softly with Jim's chest.

Blair tilted his head up and then they were kissing. Blair's hands came to grasp Jim's shirt and one of Jim's arms wrapped around him, landing with a hand to the middle of Blair's back that pushed him closer and Blair was only too happy to go. The space between them was nonexistent and nothing else in the world mattered except that moment, that spark that said they were alive together.

Jim's hand was on his cock and it was nothing like Barnes. It had his hips stuttering and his mind whirling and Blair whined into Jim's mouth. Jim softened the kiss, his hand working in Blair's pants for skin-on-skin contact.

The anthropological part of Blair's mind was fascinated. The first stage of bonding was easier to solidify with orgasms, he knew, but already it was like he could feel Jim in the back of his mind... as if the hand that was now working him into oblivion was an effect of the bond, not a cause for it.

Blair reached down, cupping Jim's cock to return the favor, but Jim growled at him and he let go. The Sentinel lowered them both to the leaf-covered ground. Blair squirmed, a stick poking his back.

"Okay?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, yeah, give me a sec," Blair shifted and the stick left. He breathed out. "I'm good."

Jim smiled down at him and then they were kissing again, but it was less rushed, like they had time. He pulled back. "I want to do so many things with you."

"Yeah," Blair murmured. "Me too."

Jim closed his eyes. "Not here," he said. "Not where... I don't want them to win, Blair. I want to take you on dates. Cheesy movies and romantic dinners. I want to make out on the couch like we're teenagers."

"We can," Blair agreed. His heart was pounding in his chest and his erection continued to push up against his thin cotton shorts. "I'd really like that."

"I want to take my time," Jim stated lowly. "I wanted to bond when I can be sure we both really mean it."

Blair opened his mouth to argue the point, except he realized he had no argument. Instead he nodded wordlessly.

Jim's eyes were a bit sad. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah," Blair said. He reached forward and pulled Jim down for one more kiss, before sitting up. Jim let him go. "It's almost the end, isn't it?"

Jim inclined his head.

Blair let out a quick breath. "Can you remember a number?"

"Yes," Jim said.

Blair recited his phone number quickly. "When it's all done, call me."

"I will," Jim promised.

And then the horn was sounding loudly all around them and Jim was closing his eyes against the pain and the handlers were coming with tranquilizers, because it was never easy to separate newly bonded Sentinels and Guides.

Blair wanted to tell them that it didn't matter, that they weren't really bonded yet, but before he could even open his mouth he was falling unconscious to the ground. His last image was of Jim reaching for him, his blue eyes so bright against the dawning sky.

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### THREE WEEKS LATER

Blair scribbled a quick note on one of his student's papers. Billy had some interesting ideas, but he needed to do quite a bit more research to support some of the things he claimed. Blair suggested office hours so they could talk about it, and then set the paper aside.

Being a full-time professor was a lot more tiring than he'd expected. Blair wondered if he could ever go back to teaching only part-time, but then he'd need to have a study going on and he hadn't been interested in anything since the Hunt.

Most of his colleagues assumed by his silence that something tragic had happened in that forest, but their assumptions were likely far from the truth.

The truth was, Jim had never called. Blair had ever gone so far as to look him up and call the head of his department, but Captain Banks said that Jim was taking a short leave of absence and wouldn't give Blair any more information.

Blair had to wonder if the connection he'd felt between them, the thing he'd thought was the start of a true bond, was just his own feelings getting in the way of logic.

There was a knock on his office door. "Come in," Blair called. He looked up, expecting a student, only to see Jim standing in the door.

Blair blinked several times, the old saying speak of the devil and he shall appear popping into his head.

Jim cleared his throat, looking oddly nervous. "Hey."

"Hey," Blair said back. "Come in."

Jim did, closing the door behind him. He sat in the chair in front of Blair's desk, his massive form a contrast to the usual wily freshman that took up that seat. "I'm sorry I didn't call."

"You don't have to apologize," Blair said quickly, though his heart warmed a little anyway. "I understand if you... I mean it was the heat of the moment. You can't be expected to have to follow up on it, if you don't- that is-"

"Blair," Jim cut him off. "I wanted to call. But for the first week or so the handlers kept me in lock up. It's not often a Sentinel goes a decade without a bond. And then after that there was a case that..." he sighed. "Alex Barnes was a criminal. I've suspected for a while, but I didn't know the extent by which she ran her trafficking."

"Trafficking?" Blair asked, suddenly anxious.

"Empath trafficking," Jim nodded. "I didn't want you to get caught up in it, so I avoided you until we'd got her, but..." he smiled a bit bitterly. "She's been behind bars for a few days and I almost called except I figured you wouldn't appreciate it, so late."

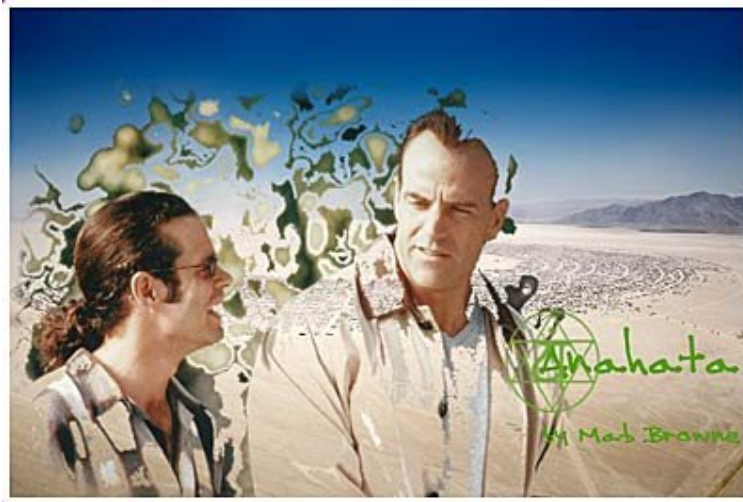
"Thank you for telling me," Blair whispered. "I wanted you to call. A lot. So..."

Jim stood and came around the side of the desk before kneeling next to Blair's chair. Blair watched him with wide eyes. "What do you say, Chief?" he asked. "Wanna go on a date with me. So I can make it up to you."

"Only if you let me buy the popcorn," Blair said, only half joking.

Jim's smile then was as bright as his eyes. "Deal."





BY MAB

ART BY BANBURY

There was a long line of traffic ahead of them, a long line behind, snaking down the desert road. Blair had one foot lifted to rest on the dash, his index finger tapping gently at his knee now and again. He eyed the traffic in front and then twisted to look out the back window.

“Looks like we got ourselves a con-voy,” he drawled.

“Looks like we do. Just don’t start singing,” Jim said, flicking on his turn signal, and wondering why he was bothering as the traffic kept turning in an automobillian conga line. If anyone was here on this flat ribbon of road they were obviously all going the same place as Jim and the multitude of vehicles around him

“That’s a ten-four, rubber duck,” Blair said, and got himself cuffed over the head. “Although, I could probably get away with it, you know. Singing I mean. Burning Man is all about the self-expression and the participation.”

They slowed to a crawl, and Jim indulged a mock shudder. “Chief, all the things that you’ve told me about this, and the one thing guaranteed to make me turn around right now is you threatening to sing.”

“Dick,” Blair said with no particular heat. “You’ve heard me sing before.”

“In the shower. And that’s why I’m begging you now - don’t sing.”

Blair shook his head and laughed. “Oh, man. That is like, throwing down a gauntlet. I have a good memory, I have a lot of songs tucked up in here.” He tapped the side of his head.

“Well, that’ll certainly give me something to look forward to,” Jim muttered.

There were dust clouds billowing along the playa in the distance, blowing parallel to the rows of parked cars and RVs and trucks. The walls of the tent that Jim had just put up flapped like sails in the wind.

"That'll be noisy tonight," Blair said. He'd tied a blue and white bandanna around his head in an effort to keep the worst of the dust out of his hair, having abandoned his fishing hat in the wind (or was it more that his hat had tried to abandon him, several times?). Jim simply jammed his Jags cap on more firmly.

"If it's noisy it's noisy," Jim said, shrugging. "If you can't sleep, there'll be enough night life to keep you from getting bored."

Blair nodded, his eyes squinting as he reviewed the long rows of vehicles and people. The bandanna and the narrow eyes made him look foreign to Jim for a moment. Blair, square-set in his shirt and jeans and bandanna looked frankly like a dead ringer for any number of men of bad repute that Jim had seen in his work, stocky, unshaven, dealing in drugs and stolen cigarettes. And then Blair grinned at him and became himself again.

"This is going to be so cool." It was enthusiastic, maybe too much so, and Jim nodded. A whole tent city of neo-hippie witch doctor punks? Cool. Absolutely. Way cooler than the courses that Blair would be taking on their return to Cascade, to help set him up in the PD consultancy that Simon had wrangled him after Blair had protested that there was no way he could be a cop. There was music in the air as well as dust, heavy with a bass note, and not loud here, but at its source – loud and distorted.

Blair saw his glance towards the centre of this weird little city. "If it gets too much, it's okay with me if you bow out. Hell, you could go wander Nevada if you wanted to, and just come and collect me on Sunday. Or else I could hitch to Gerlach or Nixon and join you. I bet I could get a ride no trouble."

Jim shook his head. "Where would I stay? Easier to just camp out in the tent. We've done it before and I can probably ignore noise better than you can. What was the point of you teaching me the tricks of the trade if I don't use them?"

Gratification soothed some of the trouble in Blair's frown. "True." He stuffed a water bottle into his backpack. "Wanna go for a walk?"

"Lead on," Jim said, his hand gesturing towards the tented area in the distance, and they set off together into the playa twilight.

There was a young woman, dressed in what might have passed as bondage gear from a fantasy planet, fire-dancing in an open air arena created by the frame of a geodesic dome, her flaming baton leaving light trails in its wake. Blair and Jim watched for a while, Blair's smile dreamily appreciative, before they moved on, Blair indefatigable in his wanderings. Occasionally he would look at Jim, checking on him, Jim realised, like Jim was a cranky kid who wouldn't deal so well with over-stimulation.

"I'm not going to faint like some maiden aunt seeing tits in public for the first time," Jim said eventually. Although if he had been a maiden aunt type, he would have hit the ground several times by now. Nudity taboos were imposed only by the temperature of the air. "Now why don't you explain the deeper meaning of this to a poor philistine cop?" 'This' was a huge, pink ring flanked by sculpted legs, clearly a representation of an anus. Blair looked at the 'art', then at Jim's carefully deadpan face before he burst out guffawing.

"We drove over six hundred miles so that I can explain an asshole to you?"

Jim crossed his arms across his chest. "Absolutely, Sandburg. Educate me as to the deeper meaning of it all. Plumb the depths of the metaphor. Take me down the chute of intellectual exploration."

"Oh, you are on." Blair pushed his palm gently but inexorably into the small of Jim's back. "Come on. Let's get up close and personal with the metaphor here." Blair's smile was wide and anticipatory and Jim decided that describing it as shit-eating to his friend's face would only lose Jim the intellectual high ground.

They spent some of the small hours of the night in the big central tent, its panels noisy in the wind. Jim lay down on the ground, the bill of his cap shading his eyes, and let all the noise surrounding them flow past his awareness. The whistle of wind, the flap of the tent panels, the rattle of the nearby generators, the cacophonies of competing music, the rise and fall of human voices – Jim didn't have to pay any attention to it, so he didn't. One nearly middle-aged guy dozing on the ground was the least of things in the freak show around them.

He caught Blair's voice, animated and bright, telling a young woman with a pronounced New York accent about how he'd attended the first Burning Man at Baker's Beach with his mother. Jim had already heard this story, explanation for the single ticket that Naomi had gifted her son in an agenda that hadn't fooled Jim and he was certain hadn't fooled Blair either. He turned onto his side, his back against Blair's hip and felt Blair's hand rest upon his shoulder. He took a slow, steadying breath, catching Blair's distinctive body odour despite all the distractions of the mass of people around them. The sense of rest and sleepiness was gone, and Jim pushed up onto his elbow before sitting upright.

The young woman that Blair had been talking to had plum-coloured hair, and wore jeans and a brightly coloured jacket opened nearly all the way down the front to show tanned, heavy breasts. The spaciness of recent sleep made the sight more startling than it would otherwise have been, and Jim flicked his gaze away, determined that he wouldn't act like some perv. God. No wonder Blair treated this place like the best amusement park ever.

Blair smiled. "Waking up again, hey, old guy?"

"Not everyone is the Energiser bunny. You want to get some coffee?" Jim straightened out his rumpled sweater, and took off his cap to rub at his scalp. Miss Manners he wasn't, but then this wasn't that sort of place, and this wasn't the sort of girl he'd try to impress anyway; she was way too young for Jim, and too young for Sandburg if it came to that. "Hi, I'm Jim," he said to her.

"Hi Jim, I'm Nita." Her gaze was speculative as she watched the two of them and Jim wondered if she thought they were gay, or was just figuring how best to cut Blair out from the herd. "I wouldn't mind some coffee myself."

Jim rose smoothly to his feet (old guy my ass, he thought) and the three of them wandered towards the coffee stall, Blair and Nita chatting away like old friends. Jim half expected Blair to smilingly make his excuses and leave with Nita, but by some social alchemy Nita went her own way, and Blair and Jim walked together into the desert darkness.

"It's kind of ironic given that I've just downed a cup of coffee but I figure I could sleep now," Blair said.

"Even you have to do it sometime," Jim replied, while Blair rummaged through his backpack for his flashlight, which had apparently worked its way to the very bottom. "And as far as I can tell you have caffeine instead of red blood cells anyway."

"You drink more of it than I do," Blair muttered, before triumphantly exclaiming, "Got it!" The flashlight was dragged out of the backpack, and switched on, a guide for the route and a ward against the other night-owls walking and biking in the dark. "Worked up to your lifetime's quota of weird shit, yet?" Blair asked, taking a moment to orient himself in the row upon row of vehicles and tents.

"I'm surprised at you being so judgemental about the counter-culture, Sandburg." This got Jim lightly whacked on the upper arm with the flashlight.

"I can read you like a book, Ellison, and your pages are printed with, 'what a bunch of weirdoes, what the fuck am I doing here?'" Blair said.

"And yet here I am," Jim said.

"Yeah," Blair said quietly. "Here you are."

"Is that a problem? Because I'd hate to think that I was cutting you out of your chance at some action." It came out snidely, and Jim's heart jumped in irritation – with himself, not Blair, because Jim was here, walking the streets of this ephemeral city with his friend and he couldn't keep his goddamn mouth out of trouble. Blair was here with Jim, not with Naomi or with exhibitionist pretty girls with crazy hair, so why couldn't Jim just enjoy the moment instead of implying that he was some sort of impediment?

Blair's brow creased in an offended frown that sentinel sight easily noted in the dark. "If I'd wanted 'action' then I wouldn't have asked you to come with me."

"It'd take what, fifteen minutes tops?" Jim said. "You could leave me on my own for that long."

"God, you're an asshole sometimes," Blair told him. Jim stopped short, surprised, because Blair wasn't often that pissy, while Blair picked up his pace, making his way briskly along the makeshift road

Jim caught him up and put his hand on Blair's shoulder. Blair wasn't often that pissy, but then Jim wasn't often that petty a jerk. "Hey. Hey, Chief. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just tired."

"Then it's a good thing we're headed back to the tent, isn't it?" Blair said evenly.

It was an odd mix of strange and familiar walking back to their tent. How many times had Blair and Jim walked companionably together, although the street wasn't usually desert pan, and the lights above were generally sodium orange rather than astral pale. Jim walked the tiny perimeter of truck and tent, unconvinced that their gear had been left alone, but nothing bothered him except his own sense of being a jackass.

Blair was cocooned in his sleeping bag when Jim entered the tent. "Here," Blair said, putting the flashlight between the two sets of bedding. "I left it on, I know you don't need it, but it's easier."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"You want to stay for the burn tomorrow night?"

Jim shucked his sweater and his jeans and climbed into his sleeping bag in just his shorts and t-shirt. "I thought that was the point. Watching the burn?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll stay," Jim said brusquely. He tried to soften his tone. "Kind of stupid to come all this way and not stay for the big event."

"It's not really your thing, though, is it." Blair rolled onto his stomach, cheek resting on his folded arms while he watched as Jim settled on the thin hiking pad. Blair's arms were tanned after only a day or so in the sun, and the braid that he'd plaited his hair into against the ever present wind and dust curled neatly against the nape of his neck.

Jim shrugged. "It's your thing, and you asked. I'll survive getting a little culture, even if it's not exactly the Boston Philharmonic."

"Jim..." Blair's voice roughened. "It doesn't have to be quid pro quo. Any of this. Just because I start at the Academy soon..."

Jim turned off the flashlight. "Nobody said anything about quid pro quo, Sandburg. A guy can go on a break with a friend if he wants to. Go to sleep."

Jim waited in the pitch-black for Blair to push the issue – but all that Blair said was, "Fine. Going to sleep now."

Jim slept too, and woke to find that he'd looped his arm over Blair in the night, a habit that had started with him and Stevie when they were very young and that Jim had never managed to break, except with great effort and attention in the army. Somehow, if he had company in the bed or within hugging distance, he naturally gravitated towards it. He stealthily lifted his hand, but Blair turned and looked into his eyes with affectionate mockery. This had happened before when they shared close quarters. "Too late, man. Busted. Once a snuggler always a snuggler." There was sleep in the

corner of Blair's eyes, and he was growing distinctly whiskery, and Jim knew a moment's glowing epiphany that he'd be more than happy to be teased by Blair every morning for the rest of his life.

This realisation clearly didn't show in his expression, because Blair stretched his arms out of the sleeping bag and then wriggled and kicked his way free of it. "Do you think it would be disgusting to use one of our grey water bottles as an emergency latrine?" His smile broadened at whatever crossed Jim's face. "And the answer is 'yes, Sandburg, that would indeed be disgusting.' Okay, the long trek to the porta-potties it is then." He grabbed his jeans and dragged them on. "Okay." He deepened his voice portentously as he exited the little tent. "I may be gone some time."

Jim flipped him off, and stretched out in the empty space, before he frowned, and got out of the sleeping bag to find his own jeans, and a half empty water bottle. Fluids in, fluids out.

He caught up with Blair at the queues. Not even the clear light of an early desert morning could soften the starkness of a latrine row, and the smell of them made Jim's nose twitch. Blair lifted one eyebrow. "So much for the military bladder," he said.

Jim gave Blair a head-tilted 'not as funny as you think you are' look, but otherwise restrained himself. "Here," he said, and offered the water bottle.

Blair looked at the water, at the row of porta-pottie shacks, and then at the playa beyond. "It is a desert out here," he conceded, and chugged the water.

Blair stared appreciatively at the simple sun shelter and circle of chairs, and men and women drumming. "Oh, now that is beautiful," Blair sighed.

Jim nodded. "If you say so. Although beautifully loud is more like it."

He kept his voice easy, the sarcasm joking, and was rewarded with an equally easy, joking smile from Blair, who leaned close into Jim's space and growled, "Dial it down, man. Or else just give in to it."

Jim looked at the circle of drummers. None of them was expert, but there was unity of rhythm there. "Always did want to be in a band," he teased, and Blair grinned and found them a couple of chairs, with the cheap drums sitting on top of them. Blair started first, his hands steady, and Jim followed his lead, trying to keep his concentration in the overlapping layers of sound. It would be easy to zone on this, he thought, on the thud of hands against stretched leather and plastic, on the regular thump and tingle of his own hands against the drum, and he was half-startled when Blair began to speak in an intimate conversational tone that would be drowned in the drumming – unless you had sentinel senses.

"The heart chakra is called anahata, and I won't bore you with the whole background, but one of the things it's associated with is the action of the hands, and the sound of the celestial realm, which is why this such an amazing symbolism. So just take my word for it that this is something more than a bunch of people making a noise, okay?"

Jim nodded. Blair wouldn't hear him unless he came close to shouting, but he wanted Blair to know that he was paying attention. They drummed for a while, then Blair said, "Chakras are part of the

subtle body, beyond physicality but affecting it, and the idea of the subtle body is developed in any number of belief systems. Understand the subtle body and you control the physical body." He grinned, smug suddenly. "Some people visualise chakras, some people visualise dials."

They were in unison with their rhythm, Jim realised, and in unison with their mood, which was affectionate and amused. Blair banged out something that was more in counterpoint to the larger group, and Jim followed that for a while, enjoying the simple physical energy of strike and impact, like a two year old discovering his body. They drummed for maybe half an hour, sweating in the warm desert air, before Jim stopped, his hands thrumming. He put his drum down.

Blair smiled at him. "Go wander," he said, in that same low tone. "I think I need a little while longer at this. It's a meditation."

Jim made a small, token wave of farewell, before wandering to the edge of the drummers' space. There were posters pinned to the wall of the makeshift tent, printed in brightly lurid colours. The heart chakra, they informed him, was associated with 'complex emotions, compassion, tenderness, unconditional love, equilibrium, rejection and well-being'. Jim's gaze moved to Blair, who sat with his eyes shut now, immersed in the noise and rhythm of the drumming, and struggled a moment for his own equilibrium. Complex emotions? He and Blair, he thought, had plenty of those.

Fire incited emotion – flame could comfort, could destroy. Could excite, and certainly this crowd was excited, on edge with expectation and a wild energy as the burning man finally fulfilled its destiny. Heat radiated – that was basic physics back to Jim's days at Cascade West middle school, but sentinel senses made it so much more than just a simple wall of heat. There were thermals; the way that the currents of warmth flowed around and over the crowd; the flicker of the light counterpointed by other, smaller fires; the roaring rush of fuel consumed.

"I think that the word is primal," Blair said, his skin flushed with excitement and the warmth of the fire, even though they stood a fair distance back. It seemed that every man and woman present, in their thousands, was gathered around.

"Primal would fit," Jim replied, fascinated and happy in his fascination. He knew that there was symbolism in the figure and its destruction, but the simple spectacle of it all drew him. The air was full of stimulus – heat and wind, the scent of burning and the ripeness of thousands of people together.

"Hey," Blair said, "I want to go check out the other fires. I'll meet you back at the tent – or else you can always track me down, right?"

"I can find you if I want you," Jim told him. In this crowd it might take a while, but Jim knew he could do it, and so did Blair. Easy as falling off a log.

"That's what I figured," Blair said, and slipped away to investigate the smaller fires. Jim watched the burning man a while until it diminished into a smaller fire rising out of a bed of scorching embers, and then decided to go in search of Blair. He checked his watch, thinking that he might tell Blair how long it took to find him if the numbers seemed impressive in any way, and turned to scan the crowd,

looking for one man, listening, scenting, and eventually deciding that screw the senses, Blair, with his appreciation of the primal might be at the next largest fire, and set out.

His instinct proved good, as he caught sight of Blair, silhouetted against flames. He was throwing something into the fire, Jim realised, and sight focused on it automatically. A heavy bundle of paper, letter sized, too thick to be rolled into a proper cylinder or tube. Just a rough 'U', bundled together with a row of rubber bands, it barrelled through the air with all the force of Blair's good throwing arm behind it, to land in the middle of the fire. Blair watched it begin to char and burn with eyes narrowed against the glare and temperature, before he nodded, like something was settled, and turned away. Jim was still some distance away – close enough that he could see Blair, not close enough that Blair could see him, until he drew closer, waving and calling to get Blair's attention.

"Fire-bugged yourself out?" Jim asked. He had an odd, hollow feeling in his stomach. He'd have bet a year's pay that it was a copy of Blair's dissertation that was sent to the fire, and he scanned Blair with casual ease. There was no evidence of distress except in Jim himself; an unsettled, anxious curiosity sat in his gut.

"Maybe. The vibe – it's amazing, but it's the whole point of burning everything – it's a hell of a way of saying that everything has to end, you know?"

"Everything?"

Blair gestured with widespread hands. "Everything in its time. Some things are just for a few days, some are for years." He sounded relaxed, and Jim tried to relax in his turn. Blair examined ritual and symbolism, he understood it, his reasons for expressing himself through it didn't necessarily relate to how he felt about Jim.

Jim pointed a thumb to the fire. "So what's coming to an end over there?"

Blair turned his head to look into the flames. "The temple of the mind."

"Jesus." It came out in a low, involuntary mutter, and Blair shook his head.

"You saw me, huh? Don't worry, man. I'm not crying into my coffee here, it was just a good opportunity to say something to myself. It was only a copy. The information, the knowledge is still there, and one day there'll be a time for it." He put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "One day is fine."

Jim took a deep breath through his nose, because his mouth was pressed shut against words. Either way he reckoned he'd lose. He'd come out with something whiny and remind Blair that he'd given up the work of half his life for some stupid shit-heel; or he'd come out with something noble and self-sacrificing, and Blair would take him at his word and go. In lieu of words, he turned like a wind-up doll and pulled Blair into his arms.

Blair smelled of sweat and ashes and coffee, and his grip around Jim's shoulders was surprisingly tight, as if he worried that Jim might be the one to walk away. He was the one to let go first, and he thumped a fist across the front of Jim's left shoulder. "I'm glad you came with me, Jim. Okay?"

Jim nodded. If Blair still sought his company, if Blair still liked him, then he thought that they could deal together with that rough, obligated love forged in front of fountains and tv cameras.



Blair was driving the first leg of the trip back home, the truck caught in the vehicular current away from Black Rock. He'd started singing softly, after a quick, impish look at Jim, occasionally slightly off the note but not unpleasantly so. "If there's a bustle in your hedgerow, don't be alarmed now, it's just a spring clean for the May Queen..." He broke off to mutter, "That asshole up ahead hasn't tied his load down properly. He's going to be dumping garbage all over Nevada. So much for leave no trace."

"Want me to ignore the fact that I'm out of my jurisdiction?" Jim asked.

Blair grinned ruefully. "Oh, don't think that I'm not tempted to open a can of Jim Ellison whoop-ass on him. But like you said. Jurisdiction. And he hasn't actually lost any of his load. Yet." Traffic slowed for a junction road up ahead, and Blair changed down, handling Jim's truck with sure, careful hands.

It had taken Jim time to accept that – that Blair could be sure, and could be careful with Jim, and with Jim's life. When everything had started, it had seemed to Jim that Blair didn't always take Jim seriously. The sentinel? Sure; the sentinel was deadly serious business. But Jim, despite his years of seniority, his marriage (and divorce), the fact that he could and had killed people with every intention of ending them, had sometimes felt like a sulky boy under Blair's hands, alternately coddled and ridiculed. That perception had softened with time and familiarity, but it had stayed on, an unwelcome guest.

Now, the two of them had no choice at all but to take each other seriously. Blair had started singing again; no rock god this, just a man whose wrists were a little narrow for the breadth and strength of his hands on the steering wheel, following the traffic heading out of Nevada's wide and arid spaces.

Jim slouched down along the truck's seat and, in a break in the concert recital, said. "Nevada's impressive but I think I'll be glad to see Washington again."

Blair nodded. "It's greener in Washington. That's been one of the great things about this trip – seeing the vistas, being reminded that this is the continental United States." Led Zeppelin was abandoned for Woodie Guthrie. "This land is your land, this land is my land..."

Jim held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Chief, I hate to say this, but if you plan to sing the whole way back to Cascade, then I'm going to have to shoot you."

Blair turned his head, the smile on his face the smile of someone who knew he'd been pushing the boundaries. "You won't shoot me. You love me, man."

"I may love you, but I don't have to love your singing voice." Blair pouted in a display of small boy pique that was about eighty per cent tongue-in-cheek, and Jim shook his head and pulled the bill of his cap over his eyes, as if to shield himself. "Oh, for.... Go ahead, Mr Counter-Culture. Express yourself."

Maybe Blair did know the words to a lot of songs, but he proved only that he knew all the words to 'This Land', surprisingly gracious (and quiet) in victory. Maybe his mind was turning to the serious

business waiting on them in Cascade. That was a victory of a sort – Blair working with him, Blair willing to work with him, just as he'd been willing to spend this time with Jim. Jim was prepared to be gracious, humble even, in that victory.

“Since we're still on vacation, I'm thinking something involving cheeseburgers and onion rings for lunch.”

“One day you're going to keel over, and when they do the autopsy they'll find 'junk food killed me' carved into your heart.”

Jim took that as agreement. Yeah. Victory was sweet.

## A VERY DELIGHTFUL FRIDAY IN CASCADE



BY SILVERSHADOWS99

ART BY ANNIEB

Bleary-eyed, Jim Ellison reached to open the door to leave the loft apartment, intending to head into work early again today, when a fluorescent bright pink post-it note appeared right in front of his face, deliberately stuck onto the door so he would be sure to see it.

Jim plz make sure I am up, need to go to Uni early

'Goddammit, doesn't Sandburg know how much I hate these damn brightly-colored annoying sticky notes of his?'

Jim loved Blair, he really did, but those damn sticky annoying things of Blair's he could definitely do without. He closed his eyes, trying to block out the bright pink (thanks, Sandburg, now I am seeing bright pink even with my eyes closed) and used his Sentinel hearing to listen for his roommate and partner, picking up slow even breaths and a heartbeat thumping in the steady rhythm of a sleeping Blair.

Jim smiled at the thought of Blair all curled up under his blankets sleeping; damn, he wished he could summon up the nerve to tell Blair how he really felt about him. Blair was so many things to him: his best friend, roommate, police partner (or "police observer," Blair's official title in the department, but hell, everyone at work knew he was really Jim's "unofficial" partner), and guide to Jim and all his weird Sentinel shit.

Jim knew he would be locked up in some loony house if Blair hadn't come along and somehow managed to flow and meld himself into almost every part of Jim's life. And still Jim wanted even more of Blair in his life. Jim just didn't know how to voice his feelings to him and so many times when Blair was near Jim wanted to just lean over a little bit more and kiss him on the cheek; just a

quick kiss to gauge his reaction and determine if their close friendship could possibly evolve into something more. Jim hoped (and prayed) that somehow fate would just step up to the plate and intervene somehow since he was just too terrified to take that step. He wanted Blair in his bed all cuddled up with him, kissing him, touching him with a lover's touch, whispering sweet—

Gah, a bright yellow flash demanded Jim's attention on the fridge in the kitchen. Another one of Blair's damn brightly-colored annoying sticky notes. Moving into the kitchen and looking around, Jim noted that it looked like Blair hadn't even bothered to eat anything the night before, at least not here in the loft; the kitchen was way too clean. Jim's sensitive sense of smell could detect no lingering food odors. Ha, given some of the weird shit Sandburg ate, no one needed enhanced senses to detect any lingering odors from his usually heavily garlic-laced food (which oddly enough Jim had somehow developed a taste for), and the trash bin was still spotless and empty of all trash, just sporting the brand new trash bag Jim had put in it last night.

Feeling his Blessed Protector mode shift into gear, Jim sighed and decided he should make sure Blair at least ate breakfast, and hearing Blair's concerned guide voice in his head knew that maybe he should eat breakfast too and not just grab a quick coffee and donut at the station. Yep, he really had it bad for Blair, could even hear his sweet melodic voice in his head— 'Whoa, getting distracted again.' Jim smiled, thinking of how he had this need to look after Blair, to protect Blair and keep him safe.

Jim made his way over to the bright yellow sticky note attached to the fridge. It was basically doing the job of a magnet, with "TRY THIS!" written on it by Blair. Jim sighed and found that note was attached to a coupon for a new push cart vendor located at the corner intersection of Prospect Avenue and Bayview Drive, a brief walk only two blocks away from the loft.

Buy one get one free, we have breakfast, lunch, and dinner fresh and ready to go in your own environmentally friendly brown bag, with recyclable environmentally friendly brown napkins! Come try our delicious food at Juanita's Hot Dog Cart!

'Okay, I guess Blair would appreciate breakfast, and from an environmentally friendly place at that.' Jim was really liking the idea of breakfast from a hot dog stand -breakfast dogs with eggs on a bun maybe, with some ketchup, hmm... Might not be Wonderburger but hey, it's worth giving this Juanita's a try.'

Jim yanked the coupon out from under the sticky note and turned to go, not noticing that the sticky note had unattached itself completely from the fridge and fluttered down onto his shirt back and then slowly rolled down and down and then somehow found a good sticking place right on his left butt cheek. Deciding not to wake Blair until he returned with breakfast, Jim headed out of the loft to walk to Juanita's.

The loft door clicked closed, semi-waking Blair from his sleep. A click...a soft click... 'The alarm clock makes that sound a minute before it gets ready to ring the alarm, the alarm then wakes Jim...'. Sleepily Blair grabbed his dollar-store-special alarm clock and slid the button off so the alarm would not sound because 'it is never a good idea to wake my Sentinel with a screeching buzzing alarm clock. Ruins Jim's mood for at least the morning if not the entire day and of course when Jim shows up at work in a mood, his coworkers all think it is somehow my fault.'

Blair, still not quite awake, his brain trying hard to crank up but still lost in thoughts of 'don't wake Jim and maybe I should get up and get ready for the day and wasn't there something I needed to get, um I forget, need to remember...' and Blair slipped off back to sleep still holding his alarm clock.

As he did Blair thought he heard Jim's voice speaking softly; was he whispering words of love to Blair?

"Chief, wake up I got us the 'it's not Kosher' bagel special from Juanita's hot dog cart: the garlic bagel with chive cream cheese, lox, and bacon. For a vendor push cart you would not believe the stuff she offers there," Jim was saying with a laugh.

Blair suddenly awoke, accidentally smacked himself in the head with the clock he was holding, shook his head in confusion, and looked at Jim. Wow, what a dream he was having - Jim all buff and naked and climbing into the shower, holding out his hand for Blair to come join him, saying, "Something you need, Chief," as the shower turned on and out came a whirlwind of colorful post-it notes swirling all around Jim and sticking to his very fine naked body; next Jim was covered in the post-it notes except for his head and he turned to Blair and said, "Chief, help me out here please?" Blair reached out and slowly began peeling off a post-it note from Jim's chest, drooling a bit, and oh yeah, so very nice...

"Chief, wake up."

Damn, Blair was looking at a fully clothed (double damn) Ellison waving a paper bag in his face. What the hell? Oh, breakfast, Jim was handing him breakfast in a paper bag. Umm, okay, what the fuck was up with that?

"Chief, your note said to wake you up, want to eat here or..."

Jim left it an open question and waited, hopefully, for Blair to answer that of course he was going to sit down and eat with Jim there in the loft this morning.

Blair, looked up at Jim and was more than a tad annoyed at how Jim had gone from post-it note covered to fully dressed, hence absolutely ruining his plans to slowly peel off the post-it notes and then lick each exposed square of sensitive flesh. He suddenly realized he was confusing his dream-lover Jim with his flesh and blood - 'damn not my lover but wouldn't it be so fucking fantastic if it were true' - roommate, partner, and best friend. 'But oh, how I want so much more from you, Jim.'

"Thanks, Jim, for packing my breakfast" 'again what the fuck was up with that?' Blair was entirely missing the fact that it was actually takeout and their usual routine with any kind of takeout was to sit down at the table, eat, chat, and just enjoy each other's company but he was now recalling the fact that he was running low on his post-it notes and should buy more ASAP.

"Sorry, Jim, I really need to get to the university and grade the test exams so I know what I need to review with my students in the next few classes for the final exam in a couple of weeks. I'll be lucky if I get done before midnight tonight."

Jim was disappointed but shrugged and said, "Okay, Chief, good luck with that, I should be getting home around six tonight and will start on the laundry. I also have a new assignment. It's some crap protection-security duty to some posh event the Mayor is having tomorrow. I really hate those

assignments but the Mayor always requests me personally, for some reason, and Simon, of course, thinks it's good press for interdepartmental cooperation if he just gives in and lets the Mayor have me."

"Jim, he requests you because he wants the best and you, my friend, are the best," Blair said with a smirky grin. "So I guess I'll see you when I see you. Thanks for breakfast."

Jim turned to go as he said, "No problem, Chief."

Um wait, was that a yellow sticky note on Jim's ass? 'Quick, think of something, Blair!' Blair jumped up out of bed and stopped Jim. "Um, Jim, isn't the Jags playoff game tomorrow?"

Ha! Good, distraction talk while he snuck his hand slowly behind Jim and tried to snatch the post-it note off of Jim's ass without the Sentinel noticing. Jim had made it perfectly clear how he disliked those post-it notes everywhere, and if he even suspected one was sticking on his...um...finest asset...then, yeah... Blair managed to snatch it off of Jim's butt.

"Yes, they play tomorrow night. I was hoping to catch the game and even hoping more so that the 50 inch HDTV we picked out and bought from that electronic store Daryl works in arrived before then, but I guess it was just not meant to be." 'Wait, was Blair reaching behind me and feeling my ass?'

Blair smiled and sympathy-patted Jim between the shoulders with his closed fist. 'Whew, post-it note safely procured!'

"You bought it, Jim, you bought it. Not to mention the Blu-Ray DVD player."

"Ah, but Chief, you helped pick them out - smart-tv-internet-enabled-app-download-marketplace whatever gizmo-maze. I just want to watch the Jags on a big screen." 'And, ahem, preferably while cuddling with you on the couch' but of course Jim didn't voice that opinion out loud.

As Jim looked around the Major Crimes bullpen, he was proud to note that his desk was the only one completely cleared of paperwork. All that was visible on top of his desk were the in-and-out baskets, his very favorite pen (a genuine Fisher Astronaut Space Pen, a gift from Blair), and those damn brightly-colored annoying post-it note squares of Sandburg's. Jim found the stupid overly-bright sticky things too small for him to actually write anything useful on. They always managed to stick anywhere and everywhere you didn't want them. Jim just couldn't fathom why Sandburg loved them so much. Blair used them constantly, writing little notes to himself or comments on who-knew-what and then stuck them on his folders or in his notebooks or on various papers he was working on. Hell, he even used them when he was helping Jim write his official police reports. Fuck, one, no, two even had showed up in his face at the loft that morning. It had to be some kind of academic skill set needed to use them because Sandburg never seemed to have them stick to his shirt sleeves, or pants, or fingers.

"Ellison!"

Jim failed to hear Simon calling him, his mind drifting off on thoughts of Blair while staring at those damn brightly-colored annoying sticky notes on his desk. Wasn't Blair just telling him the other day how therapeutic it could be for people to write down their problems in a few words and get it out of their system? Yeah, right. Well, if Blair wanted him to write down problems that he wasn't able to vocalize, here it was. Jim grabbed his pen and wrote, I love you, just give me one simple kiss if you feel the same. Ha! He wrote very small and managed to fit the entire sentence on one side of an annoying bright orange note.

Jim imagined giving that note to Blair. 'Bet Sandburg would be shocked, or would he? Hmm, kissing Blair, wonder what it would be like, wonder what he would taste like, these enhanced senses would probably just soak it all up and it would just be absolutely delightful—'

"Ellison!" Simon bellowed.

Startled out of his daydream, Jim looked up at his captain, Simon Banks

"DA wants to see you up in her office ASAP."

"Okay, Simon, on my way." Jim sighed as he stood up and glancing at that top bright orange sticky note he'd written on, peeled it off, and the thing immediately curled up and stuck itself to his shirt sleeve. Grabbing it off himself with his left hand, he tossed it toward the trashcan while walking to the door. Of course, damn sticky little annoying thing that it was, it fluttered down and attached itself to the side of Jim's desk instead of falling properly into the trashcan.

Brian Rafe was vaguely aware of Jim leaving, busy drifting off into his own daydream. He wondered just how many dates a couple could go on before they are actually considered a couple? His new girlfriend Melissa was really something special. She was so cheerful and sweet and such a delight to be around, and that evening would be their tenth date. He was extremely hopeful that the evening dinner planned that night would also finally lead to breakfast together.

Brian realized that he might score major points if he could obtain some orders from his coworkers for that new "Edible Bouquets" business Melissa's two sisters had just opened together and that Melissa loved to keep talking about. She was so proud of her sisters trying to get a business going and really wanted them to succeed. He had several printouts from the website of some of the most popular selling fruit bouquet arrangements.

Megan had expressed some interest earlier in possibly placing an order, and Joel was someone that could probably be persuaded to place an order as well. Oh, and when Sandburg was in Tuesday and the whole subject came up about fruit and flowers and... How the hell did Blair manage to get folks into these strange-ass conversations anyway... he mentioned that a few of his students at Rainier University talked about how wonderful it was to receive such a delightful gift. Ellison had some choice words regarding "sucking up" to girlfriends through family, etc. but Brian dropped a flyer on Jim's too-neat desk anyway in hopes that Jim would hand it off to Blair to pass around to a few colleagues at Rainier. Seeing the pad of sticky notes there on Jim's desk, Brian grabbed one and wrote "Sandburg, Rainier Univ." just in case Jim was tempted to toss the flyer out. With Sandburg's name on it, Jim might actually hand it off to Blair.

Joel Taggart was walking on cloud nine; tomorrow was going to be just fantastic! Earlier that day Simon had given him a ticket, VIP, mind you, seat right up in front, to the first basketball game playoff of the Jags on Saturday. Simon already had plans to go on a fishing trip and could not use the ticket. Simon explained it was a reward earned from the Mayor's office, given to the department with the highest crime-solve rate in the city, as determined from statistics covering the entire last year. Joel felt the Mayor should have sprung for more than one ticket, the cheapass, and to think he'd voted for him, hmph! When Joel asked why Simon didn't just give the ticket to Jim (after all, Jim made no secret of his love for the Jags, and basketball in general, and Jim was a large part of the reason that the department did have the highest crime-solve rate), Simon looked at him and scowling replied, "It is only one ticket, Jim wouldn't want to go without Sandburg there to ground him from the noise and smells and—"

Frankly Joel didn't know what the hell Simon was talking about and it clearly showed on his face. Simon seemed to realize he was starting to ramble on and quickly snapped, "Never mind about Ellison, I am offering you the ticket, Taggart. You want it?"

Joel's face lit up with delight as he gladly accepted the ticket from Simon. Simon's phone rang and Joel politely left the office and closed his door to give him privacy. Now Joel realized he'd never properly thanked Simon and he was heading back there to do just that but when he got there he found Simon's office empty. Maybe he would just leave a note and... Ha! He spotted the colorful sticky notes that Blair always seemed so fond of sitting on Jim's desk. Surely they wouldn't mind if he used one?

Well, Joel was pretty sure Blair wouldn't mind but Jim might be another story. Ellison just hated people touching anything on his desk – well, apart from Blair, Jim more than tolerated it when he did. Joel chuckled to himself. The dance those two did, so fucking obvious sometimes yet weird how they both seem so clueless. He peeled off the top bright blue blank note, picked up the pen on the desk and tried to write Simon a proper thank you note, space allowing.

"I want to express my thanks to you, I don't think you" – damn, out of room on this side. He drew a small arrow and flipped the sticky thing over, pulled it off his thumb 'damn, that is annoying when it sticks to your body', and tried to continue writing his note – "have any idea the happiness and delight you have given me."

Well, Joel wasn't much for words but hopefully Simon would understand. As he headed out for the day, he kept thinking he'd forgotten something. Oh wait, had he signed the note? 'Ah, Simon will know who it is from if I didn't, right?'

The bright blue note that Joel was sure was securely fixed to Simon's desk ever so slowly rolled itself loose with the very so-slight breeze produced by Joel exiting the office, then slowly rolled off the desk and onto the floor and the damn sticky little annoying thing managed to wedge itself between the bottom of the door and the lower door hinge on Simon's office door.



Rhonda was in a hurry, her team was participating in the ladies bowling tournament tonight and she was sure that they had a really good chance of winning the top prize. She was also sure no one here at Cascade PD even had the slightest inkling how good a bowler she really was, and hopefully the other ladies on the team would put forth their very best effort tonight and make it happen! Oh, she smiled with delight imagining winning the small cash prize and a trophy for coming in at first place. She was going to give it her all. She just needed to drop off a few more forms onto Simon's desk then she was done for the day, having asked Simon in advance for a half day off to attend to "personal matters" so the team could get in a little practice before the big event tonight.

Hurrying out she heard a phone ring and being the efficient public servant that she was she immediately picked up the phone on Jim Ellison's desk. Dear Lord, why did it have to be Ellison's phone and what was she thinking stopping to answer it? Didn't they all have voice mail here in Major Crimes? And yet she promptly answered, "Hello, Major Crimes how may we—"

And was hurriedly greeted with, "Rhonda? Is that you? Listen, this is Blair, is Jim there? I really need to ask a favor of him and I wouldn't normally do this except you know I'm so busy and I was supposed to get a ride from Matt and Matt didn't show up yet and I'm afraid I will be late for the faculty meeting—"

"Jim's not here at the moment, Blair. Do you want me to take a message?"

"Um, ok, yeah, message, good idea. I can leave Jim a message. You will make sure he gets it, right? It's real important and I'd hate if the bookstore didn't hold the book for me until I got there to pick it up before closing. They're closing early today to prepare for the 'amazing ladies come out and shop for romance novel special Saturday sale' because the Jags made the playoff—"

"What is the message, Blair?" Rhonda asked as she grabbed Jim's pen and the pad of post-it notes on the desk and started to write. "Blair, delivery —"

"Okay, right, um, the address is 1072 South —"

As Rhonda continued to write: 1072 S, Blair interrupted her.

"Oh, wait, Matt's here, never mind the message, Rhonda, thanks so much. I got to run, enjoy your night!"

Blair quickly hung up the phone, ending their conversation. Sigh. There was no one else that could talk a mile a minute quite like Blair Sandburg. She looked at the little piece of paper, peeled it off, and tossed it towards the trash. Sticky notes being what they were, damn sticky little annoying things that avoided trash bins at all possible cost, this one managed to flutter outside the bin and stick to the inside part of Ellison's desk leg, unseen by Rhonda, who was now getting onto the elevator and heading out to get ready for her exciting evening of tossing the bowling ball into the triangle of pins hoping to knock down all ten with every throw.

Simon's son, Daryl Banks, strolled into Major Crimes with several purposes in mind for his trip here to the Cascade Police Department – first, to try once again to weasel out of some lame-ass fishing trip his Dad was insisting he go on tomorrow with some other police Captain and his kid. And

dammit, he was not some fucking kid. How many times does he need to remind his father of that? He was going to graduate high school in less than two months, had recently obtained a part-time salesman job, and had been accepted to Rainier University for the fall semester. His Dad seemed to conveniently forget that time in Peru a few years ago when they ran into drug smugglers. If Jim and Blair hadn't come looking for them... Anyway, he was no "kid" then and he certainly was not now!

Second, he was here to drop off money for Jim Ellison and Blair, and damn, didn't they make just the cutest couple, and why his Dad - their boss - totally denied it, he just couldn't figure out, pretty fucking obvious those two. Daryl looked around, located Jim's desk. 'Hmm, bullpen seems awful quiet today, hope there is not some major asshole terrorist loose in the city trying to blow it up,' and walked over to leave the money, already secured in an envelope, on Jim and Blair's desk.

Looking around for something to write a brief note on, he stared at the colorful post-it notes on the desk, obviously Blair's, Daryl concluded, and much too small to write a note on anyway. Looking around some more, he spotted the office printer, walked over there and grabbed a blank sheet of paper and wrote the note:

Jim, since your order last week a new model came out, with better features and overall cheaper once you factor in the sale price and my employee discount. Hope you don't mind I returned the older model and got your refund in cash, then used the cash to pay for the newer Blu-Ray player plus as a bonus you received the free Blu-Ray movies Starship Troopers 2 and Demon Under Glass. Your change is in the envelope. Dad said you are busy but gave me his spare apartment key to your place so I can help deliver the HDTV and Blu-Ray to your loft.

On the one hand, Daryl was just delighted he was able to save Jim 80 bucks, and make his first sale, with a very nice commission to boot, but on the other, he was pissed that he'd failed to get out of the fishing trip the next day. Maybe he could snag a beer when his Dad and Captain Teachmep weren't looking... Jeez, no fucking way would he be able to get away with that. And to be forced to hang about and be polite with not only one stranger, but his son, too... Would they have anything in common besides cop dads? He was really so not interested.

Daryl headed out the Major Crimes door and towards the elevator, not noticing that the breeze created from his quick exit caused his carefully written note to hastily fall off Ellison's desk and land dead on target into the trashcan. The elevator doors opened and Daryl walked in and saw one of the most hottest-looking babes ever standing next to a very intimidating-looking man. The man looked at him then asked "Daryl Banks? Simon's son?"

"Um, yes," Daryl answered tentatively, hoping he didn't just inherit Blair's bad luck somehow and was about to be abducted. Well, okay, the hot babe could abduct him anytime but...

"I'm Captain Carl Teachmep, you and your Dad are coming fishing with me and Mike tomorrow on my boat," the man replied then he gave Daryl a friendly smile. "Daryl, this is my daughter, Mike. She loves boating even if she doesn't care too much for fishing."

Mike extended her very beautiful hand, attached to her very beautiful arm, attached to her extremely fabulous body. "Michaela actually, but Dad just calls me Mike, and really, I don't mind."

Wow, him on a boat with this beautiful creature all to himself. Well the "Dads" would be busy fishing and trading BS stories – bullshit ones, not Blair ones, although who the hell knew maybe they would trade Blair stories. Daryl's Saturday was really looking up. Really, truly, oh yeah.

Megan Connor was in the "Thank God it's Friday" frame of mind. Her good friend Julie, along with Julie's eight year old daughter Jenny, were going to meet her here at work around quitting time and they planned a fun girls night out which included pizza and arcade games. Megan was delighted to be able to snag a My Little Pony toy figurine of AppleJack in the latest McDonald's happy meal girl toy offer. She was sure almost no one in the department knew about her tendency to order the kids' happy meal box for lunch on occasion; hey, it was a great deal - the burger, fries, apple slices, and a toy to boot, good for bribing little ones and for emergency gifts, maybe a gag gift in some cases, plus a drink, all included for a few dollars.

She suspected Ellison was aware of her secret a few times, and maybe he let Blair in on his suspicions, but Blair, kind soul that he was, had never said anything to her about it yet so she just ignored it, and figured her secret was still safe at the moment.

Almost her quitting time now and she looked up to see Simon and Henri both heading into Simon's office. Hmm, poor Henri, Simon had assigned him to work with Ellison on the Mayor's political thingamajig Saturday. Neither Ellison nor Henri was happy about losing their Saturday off. After all, they'd worked a terrible murder case this week, along with Sandburg, of course, because, well, working with Ellison without Sandburg along was just plain asking for a pissed off, bitchy, grumbly detective. Of course, any other detective trying to work with Blair and his unique perspective views and unending facts of who-the-hell-cares chatter without Ellison nearby soon found themselves massively confused or with a splitting headache from Blair's nonstop chatter and wavy hand gestures. Oh! Julie and Jenny had arrived, and Megan greeted both with hugs and cheek kisses. Little Jenny was beaming and told Megan she was learning all about reporting in school and knew how to be a newspaper lady and write down stuff people said. Megan just smiled at the little darling and patted her head. "Well, isn't that nice?"

Julie noted that the blouse Megan was wearing today was fabulous and asked if it was new?

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I just bought it last week on a great sale at—"

Jenny's eyes glazed over. Ugh, Mommy and her friends and stupid conversations about boring clothes, really? She looked around the office and spotted the colorful paper on the desk across the way. Oh, she could play reporter while mom and her friend talked about truly boring things. She snatched the entire pad of paper up along with the pen. Seeing the men in the little office across the way she crept closer to the door to listen in and maybe spy on them and do some proper reporting.

Simon was telling Henri Brown about his planned fishing trip this weekend with Captain Carl Teachmep, head of Vice. Teachmep had recently purchased a 40 foot cabin cruiser and claimed to have the latest fish-finding radar equipment known to man on board. Simon would much rather do the fishing thing on land but, hey, he was open to new things and fishing from the boat might prove

to be a fun and relaxing time. If he and Captain Teachmep hit it off it could be a great recurring weekend activity to pass the time in a relaxing way and a chance to develop a new friendship.

Jenny listened very carefully and heard one of the men say, "I am so holding out hope that this weekend will be the start of something that lasts forever."

Simon joked with Henri, and Jenny carefully wrote that little tidbit down ' 'cause that's what good reporting is,' she told herself. A glance towards her Mom and her mom's friend still showed them deep in conversation, looking at each other's shoes now, her mom pointing at something on her friend's heel. 'Whatever, grownups.' Tuning her attention back to the office, she spotted a stickee stuck on the door bottom, almost slipped completely under with a tiny bit of edge sticking out; she grabbed it and stuck it on her arm. She took the other stickee, her reporter stickee, and stuck that on her arm too. Then she went back to listening so she could do more good reporting. She heard something along the lines of "Mayor cancelled, weekend off—"

It was all sort of muffled, then loud and clear someone said "I am so glad to finally have the weekend off. I just want to spend the entire weekend in bed!"

'Whoa - long sentence, might need two stickees to cover all the reporting.' Jenny looked down at the post-it note pad and scrunched her face at the fact there was a bright green stickee on top. It reminded her of the yucky salads and vegetables her mom always tried to get her to eat. Her mom even tried to bribe her by putting some kind of cream sauce, or "dressing", as she called it, on them, but Jenny was no fool; that stuff was all yucky. She grabbed her pen, thoroughly distracted now from her reporting duties and wrote "no dressing allowed" on the green stickee note. She then peeled it off and stuck it on her arm. 'Ah - much better - a nice bright orange color note was next, much more acceptable to do reporting on. What did that man say that I was going to write down? Oh right, I remember now, something about weekend and bed'

"I am so glad to have the weekend off; I just want to spend the entire weekend in bed."

Jenny was so proud; 'I am the best reporter ever!'

Actually now that he thought about it, what Henri told Simon about spending the entire weekend in bed was so not true. Sure, a lot of sleeping, a bit of slacking off, and time to just walk around his apartment in his favorite Pink Panther boxers would be wonderful, but he had just managed to perfect his "Cascade City Honey-Wheat-Apple Bread" recipe for entry into the "Healthy Breads for our Senior Citizens" contest bake off at his aunt's nursing home on Saturday.

When Simon told him earlier in the week he was expected to work with Ellison at some political thing of the Mayor's this Saturday, he sadly gave up any hope of entering the contest and had to let his aunt know that most likely he would not be able to participate in the bake off because of work. His aunt was actually the one who'd got him into fresh bread baking many years ago when he first bought one of those bread machines that were all the rage. His aunt scoffed at that bread machine when she was visiting him. She had only been in the nursing home these past few months, but she still had her feisty attitude and her wits about her even if her mobility was strictly limited now. She showed him how to bake real fresh bread in the oven. It was amazing really and now he had been

experimenting with new recipes and bread flavors as a hobby and as his small amount of free time allowed.

One great thing about the precinct was how he could slip his “test” loaf into the break room and gauge the reaction of how good his test recipes were by the reaction and comments of his coworkers. These guys apparently would eat anything; even the ladies here gave it a look, a sniff, and then a nibble, except Megan who just seemed to swallow it down.

He didn’t think anyone knew he actually baked the bread, except Sandburg, and if he was caught placing it on the table he just said his sister or latest girlfriend gave it to him and he wanted to share. It was weird but Henri seemed to value Ellison’s opinion on the bread flavors the highest, ever since he’d overheard Ellison name every ingredient to Sandburg one day in some bizarre game of “can you identify what’s in the bread, Jim” that they seemed to be playing.

Shortly after that Blair asked me if I was the one who baked the bread, and I freely admitted it to him. Then we proceeded to have a long-ass conversation about how I could sneak a bit more healthy ingredients into the bread and he made several suggestions such as add some tofu in, use almond milk to replace the regular milk, add applesauce instead of eggs, and his real secret - puree a small amount of spinach to add in. Damn, Sandburg was right, if you added the spinach into the whole wheat mixture the dark color of the loaf totally covered the fact that there is fucking spinach in there.

When I slipped the banana nut loaf made with his suggestions into the break room, Blair was onto me and played his little game with Ellison and, fuck, Ellison totally missed the whole tofu and spinach ingredients, but he picked up on the applesauce and almond milk switch. Sandburg smiled and confessed to me with a wide grin that Jim has real sensitive taste buds but “there are a few things he still even now hasn’t managed to identify yet. Some days it’s a real pain to try to get him to eat healthy; if left to his own devices, I think Jim would even consider breakfast at a hot dog vendor to be a healthy meal.”

Okay, no idea what goes on between those two, and believe me I don’t really want to know, but Sandburg is an okay guy in my book, which brings me back to the fact I can now enter my original “Cascade City Honey-Wheat-Apple Bread” recipe in the bake off tomorrow. And the prize the winner can look forward to? Well, it is not much money but auntie would have bragging rights there for a long time, how goddamn delightful would that be?

Damn my mind drifted away a bit here with Simon, but is he showing me pictures of fish?

“Simon? Um, sorry, I think I zoned out for a minute here, what’s with the fish picture?” Henri asked.

Simon stood up suddenly from his chair, almost in a state of panic. “Zoned?! Not you too... Oh, you mean it as a figure of speech, not literal like Jim... Oh, never mind, this here picture is of a Lingcod, I’m hoping to land one on this trip.”

“Obsessing a little over fish now, Simon?” Henri asked.

They both laughed, looking forward to good things that weekend.

Laughter was coming from the men in the room but so far nothing else seemed relevant to report on and next thing Jenny knew Megan came over and said, "Come on, Jenny; oh, you have Blair's post-it notes, better put them back on the desk where they belong."

Jenny dutifully went and put the paper back on the desk along with the pen and – 'oh right, stickee paper, my teacher always sticks the pieces to a longer piece of paper,' and here is one right here on the desk with one stickee already on it. She took her two proper journalist's reporting notes and randomly slapped them down on the longer paper along with the yucky green-colored one and the one she found stuck on the door bottom. Then she spotted some more escapee stickees, one on the desk leg and one sticking to the desk above the trash bin. Jenny, always willing to be helpful, retrieved both pieces and slapped them down too on the longer paper. Nice, seven stickees stuck on the long paper piece. Jenny was so delighted that one could almost not see the long paper anymore; it was probably some stinky test that the poor desk person didn't really want to take anyways.

When Melissa showed up looking for her boyfriend Brian Rafe, the lady detective he worked with and some other woman along with a child looked like they were leaving.

Megan smiled at her. "Brian should be right back, Melissa, he had to go deliver something downstairs to evidence – I think it was one of your sisters' fruit brochure forms. Oh, the baskets sound lovely by the way but I don't really have the occasion to order one right now, sorry, wish your sisters well for me in their business." And with that Megan and company left.

Melissa looked around and spotted what looked like one of her sisters' flyers with a bunch of post-it notes attached. She went over to the desk and glanced down, the top post-it note read "Sandburg, Rainier U" and the one right beside it read "Blair, delivery 1072 S." Oh nice, that is the order number for the new chocolate-covered strawberries and heart-shaped pineapple fruit basket. There were five other post-it notes that Melissa gathered was the message Brian's coworker wanted on the card. Melissa quickly calculated the cost in her head, and figured that the size small edible bouquet would cost \$80.00 with tax and delivery charges. She picked the form up and spotted an envelope. Looking in the envelope she found exactly \$80. 'Wow, her sisters would be so very happy!'

Vera dropped in and asked Melissa if Simon was still here or if he'd left for the day. Melissa smiled and said she really didn't know, she was waiting for Brian Rafe and did Vera know whose desk this was?

Vera smirked. "Oh yes, that is Detective James Ellison's desk."

"Oh, and does he know a Blair?" Melissa asked, just to be sure she was reading the post-it notes correctly and had a genuine order in her hands.

"Blair? Blair Sandburg. Yes, Jim sure does know Blair."

"Who works at Rainier University?"

Vera smiled and informed Melissa that Blair could be found working in an office at Rainier University when not working with Jim.

"Oh, so Detective James Ellison is the famous Jim here that Brian talks about, correct?"

"You got that right, dear."

Just then Rafe came back in and was simply delighted to see Melissa.

"Hey there, beautiful!"

"Oh Brian, one of your coworkers is placing an order for his girlfriend, looks like he even left the money, but my, he has real trouble expressing himself! He needed to use several post-it notes to write out his message in full," she said, laughing.

Huh, Brian thought for sure Jim would be the last person on earth to place an order to help him score points with his girlfriend, but, hey, guess you never really knew a guy.

Melissa carefully folded the order with the post-it notes and slipped the money inside and placed it into an envelope with several other orders she'd managed to drum up for her sisters' new business. "I need to drop this off at the store so these orders can be filled." 'And this poor Jim Ellison's girlfriend can receive the heart-shaped fruit gift from him and hopefully give the obviously smitten detective the loving he needs since he is so flustered he can't even write a coherent note on a single piece of paper!'

Vera just watched them go and wished them well. She also had other things on her mind: big plans this weekend as her little AD&D gaming group was going to enter the AD&D tournament at the Norwescon Science Fiction Convention meeting in Cascade this weekend. She had her purple velvet dice pouch all ready with her various assortments of brightly-colored many-sided dice. The blood-red twenty-sided one was her very favorite, and each year she tried to add a new die to her collection. Her black eight-sided die was getting a bit worn so maybe she could pick up a new one at the dealers' room during the convention.

She really had her heart set on playing a Half-Elf mage, but she was not at all opposed to playing a Human or Gnome fighter if the party needed one. Tonight, however, she had to go home and decide what costume she was going to wear to the convention. She had quite a few to choose from that she'd managed to assemble over the years: Catwoman, Xena, Elvira, and even Princess Lili in her infamous black wedding dress from the movie Legends, which was secretly Vera's favorite. Perhaps she would just dress modestly and keep it really simple and go as Security Chief Tasha Yar from Star Trek: TNG. She always found it delightful to try on all her outfits even if she was pretty set on which one she wanted to wear, because each one brought with it such wonderful memories.

Blair was just exhausted, the faculty meeting was long and boring, he missed lunch and his throat was dry and itchy from that damn stuffy room. He was hoping Jim would be able to get this weekend off but with police work one never knew exactly when emergencies would arise. And damn, Jim was working tomorrow on the Mayor thing. Jim had seemed anxious lately and Blair found once again when he tried to get Jim to talk he had hit a stone wall, but something was up, he just knew it. He told Jim time and again that some people found it easier to communicate in writing and perhaps Jim

would like to write down what was bothering him. Jim gave his usual response and just glared at him like he was crazy... "Yeah, Sandburg, I'll do that and send you the note ASAP," he replied, his voice laced with sarcasm.

Blair walked back to his office, sat at his cluttered-filled desk and was drinking his water when someone walked in and announced, "Delivery for Blair Sandburg."

"That's me!" Blair replied excitedly, popping up out of his chair, wondering what the delivery might possibly be. An ancient artifact someone wanted his opinion on, some great find from his mom that she'd sent his way, a jar of deadly poisonous spiders from some psycho killer; okay, he really had no idea. He opened up the box and – wow – to his absolute delight he saw a gift of fruit and chocolate-covered strawberries! Heart-shaped pineapple... 'Oh, so cool, who is my admirer? Man, you so still got it.' Blair immediately dug right in. Oh, the pineapple tasted so sweet and juicy, the chocolate-covered strawberries just called to him, mmm, so good, the fresh fruit was just so delightful and hit the right spot! Who would send him such a wonderful gift? Perhaps Peggy to make up for keeping him late the other night helping her with research; no, not hearts, he really was pretty sure she was not interested in him like that. 'There is usually a card or note with these things...ah ha!'

Blair,

I want to express my thanks to you, I don't think you have any idea the happiness and delight you have given me. I am so holding out hope that this weekend will be the start of something that lasts forever. I am so glad to have the weekend off; I just want to spend the entire weekend in bed. No dressing allowed. I love you, just give me one simple kiss if you feel the same.

Jim

Jim? Whoa. He read it and thought, 'wow.' He knew Jim had trouble expressing himself in speech, but his writing was just as bad! 'Goddamn, no wonder Simon is so happy when I do Jim's paperwork. Wait, this is a love note, I think.' Blair read it again, and then again, then turned beet red, hoping no one passing by his opened door noticed his sudden need to be the hell out of this office now. 'Jim loves me, wants me home with no clothes on, in bed for the entire weekend? Jim appears to be asking for a kiss as a sign of my affection, hot damn!' Looking at the clock, he knew Jim would hopefully get home at 6 pm tonight, and as it was a few minutes past six now, Blair hurriedly packed his backpack and rushed for his car. 'Oh my,' he thought, grabbing the notecard up in his hands, 'I just don't believe this, I just don't. No, I really do believe it, Jim loves me, loves me, and sent me a goddamn heart-shaped fruit and chocolate basket to show it!'

Jim heard Blair's car pull up and he could hear Sandburg running up the stairs, his heart beating rapidly as a scared rabbit's or something. Jim, worried that something was horribly wrong, pulled the door open to see Blair arrive from the staircase, face flushed but also all lit up with joy.

"Jim, Jim I...we... I... of course..." Blair stuttered.

What the hell was the matter with Blair? He was not only breathless from running up the stairs but he was now speechless?



Blair just walked forward, wrapped his arms around Jim and kissed him right on the mouth, hoping and trying his best to express all the love he had for Jim in that kiss, right there in the hallway.

"Yes, yes, yes, Jim!" Blair managed to say, trying to catch his breath again after breaking from the kiss.

"Um, Blair," stuttered a shocked but extremely happy Jim, then Blair kissed him again - deeply, passionately - and Jim became blissfully lost in the taste of pineapple and strawberries and, 'was that a hint of chocolate?' along with Blair's very own delicious, spicy taste.

Jim pulled Blair into the apartment, closed and locked the door, secured the bolt chain lock, and somehow knew that this was definitely going to be a very delightful Friday evening for them both.

## HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF



BY PSYCHGIRL

ARTWORK BY ANNIEB

"Halt! Cascade Police!"

Of course the guy didn't stop. They never did. Jim sighed as he pelted down the street after the fleeing man. He was starting to gain on his quarry when the man juked to his right and vaulted over a low stone wall into somebody's yard. Jim followed suit, heading down a manicured stretch of grass, bordered on both sides by glossy rosebushes laden with dark red blooms.

An older man stood in the middle of the yard, wearing overalls and with a tank strapped to his back. He held a long copper rod in his hand which he was using to spray the contents of the tank over the rosebushes.

Without breaking stride, Jim's fugitive grabbed the man and flung him into Jim's path. Jim tried his best to put the brakes on, but he was going too fast. He collided with the gardener; getting a direct hit of whatever was in that tank.

The scent rolled over him in a wave, and he dropped to his hands and knees, gasping for breath. Pungent and cloying, it reminded him of overripe figs and sharp cheese. There was something musky-smelling about it, and it left a sour taste in his mouth. His eyes burned, and he fought the impulse to rub them.

"Jim!" He could hear the edge of panic in Blair's voice as he ran up. "What happened?"

He was still coughing too hard to speak, but he sat back on his heels and tried to wave Blair off. If this shit was poisonous, he didn't want Blair anywhere near it.

His efforts were useless, of course. Blair evaded his hand and sank down to the ground in front of him, gripping Jim's shoulders. "Okay, look, just... just relax. Try to... try to take some deep breaths."

No problem, Sandburg, I'll get right on that. The glare he gave Blair would have been much more effective, he was sure, if his eyes hadn't been watering so much. As it was, whatever expression he did manage to make must have looked pretty bad, because Blair turned his head to shout at someone.

"What the hell is in that shit?"

"It's... nothing! It's a fertilizer, an organic fertilizer...." Thanks to his streaming eyes, the gardener was just a denim-blue blob on the lawn in front of Jim. He was glad to hear the ma's voice, though. At least he hadn't been hurt in the collision.

"Organic doesn't mean safe," Blair snarled, and, despite the amount of discomfort he was in, Jim filed that phrase in the back of his brain to use the next time Blair wanted to spring for the double-the-price organic chicken at the grocery store. "Leastways, not for a sentinel," Blair finished, under his breath.

He cupped Blair's elbow, trying to be reassuring, although now that he was starting to catch his breath, all he could think about was some of the chemical agents he'd seen used in the Army, and their side effects. A shiver passed through him, and his heart thumped hard against his ribs.

"Get me some bottled water," Blair snapped to the gardener. As the man clambered to his feet and moved off, he rubbed his hands up and down Jim's upper arms. "It's going to be okay, Jim," he said. "You're going to be okay. Just try to relax."

He nodded. He could hear someone coming up the lawn, breathing heavily; a tall dark shape with distinctively-colored trim on her jacket. "Connor" he managed to force out through his raw throat, "did you get him?"

"Sorry, Jimbo." Her voice vibrated with disappointment. "He went over the fence and got into the woods. We've got men in there looking, but...."

"You're sure it was Hardison?" Blair asked.

"We're sure," Connor said.

Someone else hurried up; the gardener from the color. A moment later, Blair pressed a cold plastic bottle into his hand. He unscrewed the top and took a swig, swishing it around his mouth and then spitting it out on the lawn. He did that two more times and then took a drink. Better, although he could still detect a hint of sourness at the back of his throat. But the cool water felt soothing.

"Try to keep your eyes open as best you can," Blair told him. "But don't stop blinking." He did as bid, and after a moment felt water flow from the top of his head over his face and down his neck. The burning in his eyes lessened slightly and despite his anxiety, he smiled. That was his partner, always resourceful.

"What happened?" Connor asked.

"He got a face full of whatever that crap is that's being sprayed on the roses," Blair grumbled in response.

"I brought the contact information for the manufacturer," the gardener said.

"Megan, can you hang onto that for me? Jim, this time, keep your eyes closed." More water spilled down Jim's face. It reminded him of standing under a tropical waterfall. Except for the chill of the water and the whole potentially-been-exposed-to-poison thing. "Three of these should do it, at least until you can get into the shower at the station," Blair murmured. "Unless you think we need to go to the hospital?"

He shook his head. He could still smell the fertilizer, but he actually felt okay. Although he'd probably have to get rid of these clothes. No doubt that stuff had soaked in good; better than any laundry could remove, at least to his nose.

"Okay," Blair said, "now try and open your eyes."

His face was still wet, and without think started to lift his arm to wipe it off. Blair's hand stopped him.

"Wait, wait," Blair said. He could hear rustling, and then a soft cloth brushed over his face. He inhaled and caught the familiar smell of Blair's herbal shampoo, along with the slightly sweet, slightly smoky odor that was his partner's unique scent. "Okay, now try."

He raised his eyelids slowly, blinking several times to clear his vision. His eyes felt sore and a little swollen, but he could see. Blair was shrugging his flannel shirt back on, and Connor was peering anxiously at him, the gardener looking nervous behind her. He grinned; lightheaded with relief. The memory of opening his eyes and seeing nothing after being exposed to Golden faded into the background.

Blair grinned back at him, but then quickly sobered. "We still need to get you back to the station ASAP," he said. "There's no telling what that stuff might do to your skin. You need to take a shower." He stood up and offered Jim a hand. "I'll drive."

Back at the station, he spent a long time under the spray in the station locker room, set as hot as he could stand. The steam helped clear the residual scent of the stuff out of the back of his throat, too. Once he'd dried himself off and pulled on a sweatshirt and an old pair of running shorts that he'd had in his locker, he felt almost back to normal.

He ran into Connor as he was heading back to the bullpen. "Have you seen Sandy?" she asked him.

"Not since we got here."

Connor sighed and looked at her watch. "I've got to go question a suspect in that electronics smuggling ring, I can't wait around for him." She handed him a piece of paper. "Here, give him that when you see him. I called the company and got the ingredient list for that fertilizer you got hit with. He seemed pretty interested in it."

"Yeah, well, he probably wants to make sure there isn't anything in it that'll give me weird side effects or something." He started to unfold the paper.

"You probably don't want to take a look at that, mate." Connor grinned at him, one eyebrow raised. "There's some strange stuff in there."

"Like what?" A knot of tension twisted in his belly.

"Like wolf urine. Female wolf urine." The look on his face must have been priceless, because Connor guffawed. "Supposedly keeps deer away – they smell it and assume there are male wolves around."

Great. He'd gotten a face full of wolf pee. Although he supposed it beat a face full of DDT.

Connor was still chuckling as she headed for the elevator. "Don't feel too bad, Jimbo. Could have happened to any of us."

"But it didn't," he muttered to himself as he stalked into the bullpen. It had to happen to the guy with the enhanced senses.

Oh, well, it was over now, and he was none the worse for wear, apparently. Whatever lingering traces of the scent remained would fade with time, and the whole episode could be forgotten.

The bullpen was quiet. He could see Simon talking on the phone in his office, the door closed. But otherwise he was the only one there. He glanced at the clock. It was after five already. Time to go home. And speaking of that, where the hell was Sandburg?

He exhaled in irritation and dropped the ingredient list in his inbox to give to Blair when he showed up. Sitting down at his desk, he started up his computer. As long as he was waiting for his partner, he might as well start writing up the incident while it was fresh in his mind.

Something slid, slowly and lightly, up the outside of his legs.

He lurched upwards, banging his thighs against the underside of his desk so hard it brought tears to his eyes.

A familiar giggle wafted out from underneath his desk.

"Sandburg?" he hissed. "What the hell—"

"Jim!" Simon had thrown open the door to his office and was marching towards him, coffee cup in hand. "Want to tell me how our well-planned stakeout failed to catch Hardison?"

"Uh, yes, sir." Heart pounding, he moved his chair in closer, hoping that Blair would hear Simon's voice and stay put. "We saw Hardison return to his apartment, as we'd planned, but..."

One of Blair's hands stroked the back of his calf with a feathery touch, and teeth nipped playfully just inside his knee. A shiver of desire ran down Jim's spine. He swallowed and tried to remember where he'd been in the story. "... but, uh, somehow he'd made us. By the time we got to the front door, he was heading out the back."

With his other hand, Blair reached up and loosened the tie at Jim's waist. The shorts were old and worn and the elastic was shot; Jim felt it give as Blair tugged on it.

He ground his teeth in frustration – both with the antics of his partner and because of them – and his hands balled into fists on top of his desk. He heard Blair giggle again, this time pitched low for sentinel ears.

"Don't feel bad, Jim." Simon's look was sympathetic. "Hardison is a pro. I'm not surprised he made you; I'm sure he learned a lot in prison."

"We still could have caught him. I was right on his tail until..." The air abruptly left Jim's lungs as Blair's warm breath ghosted over his crotch. His shorts were gaping open at the waist, and the only thing between him and Blair's mouth was his underwear.

"Are you all right?" Simon asked, brows pulling together.

"I..." Blair was nuzzling and mouthing at his dick, which was responding in predictable, if inconvenient fashion. It didn't help that Blair's hair was spread across the tops of his thighs, tickling his legs with light, silken fingers. Between that and the moist pressure of Blair's lips against the thin cotton of his boxers, it was all Jim could do to keep focused. With a massive effort, he wrenched his mind back to Simon standing in front of him. "I've been trying to tell you. I nearly had him, but he ran into someone's yard and I ended up tangling with the gardener and getting a face full of rose fertilizer."

Simon frowned. "That doesn't sound good. You okay?"

"Ye—" In a flash, Jim saw his way out. "No. I took a shower, but I'm still feeling pretty funky. Smell seems out of whack, touch a little bit, too." He unclenched one to rub at his eyes. "My eyes don't feel great, either."

"Did Sandburg check you out?"

"No." Blair grazed his teeth lightly over the head of Jim's dick, and Jim swallowed a whimper. "He... uh, he had to go back to the loft. Um, tutoring, or something."

Simon regarded him gravely. "Well, maybe you'd better go home and have him run you through some tests or whatever it is that he does. After all, that's what I don't pay him for."

"Good idea. I'll do that."

He waited until Simon was well out and around the corner from the bullpen, then reached down and grabbed Blair by the collar, dragging him out from under the desk. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

Blair's face was flushed and his eyes were dark and gleaming, pupils wide. He grinned and ran his tongue slowly over his lips, and Jim's irritation evaporated in a wave of lust. He groaned, letting go of Blair long enough to jerk his shorts back up and tie them. Then he grabbed Blair's arm and hustled him towards the exit. "I'd better get you out of here before you do something really embarrassing."

He towed Blair, who was giggling again, to the elevators, but stopped, struck by the vision of being trapped, even for a few short minutes, in a small metal box with his suddenly inexplicably horny partner.

Not that the vision wasn't a nice one. Just not one he wanted to have happen in the PD. Time for the stairs.

As he dragged Blair towards the exit door, he cast desperately about in his mind for some clue about what the hell was going on. Blair was inventive, sure, and willing to try anything when it came to sex; he wasn't usually so exhibitionistic, nor so excited by the possibility of being found out. In fact, he'd been pretty careful, since they'd started sleeping together, not to be too demonstrative at the PD, for fear of how discovery would affect Jim's relationships with his co-workers.

Walking eight flights down didn't cool Blair's ardor one bit, and Jim's decision to avoid the elevator was proven wise, as Blair tried to get his hands on Jim on every landing. It was hard work, keeping enough hold of Blair to keep him moving, but also trying to avoid Blair's talented fingers. The near misses had him aching. It didn't help that his own libido was increasingly lobbying for Blair's solution to the problem.

They reached the garage and he manhandled Blair over to the passenger-side door of the truck. But he fumbled the keys as he pulled them out of his pocket, and they dropped to the ground. Distracted, he glanced down, and Blair shoved him up against the side of the truck, yanked his shorts back down around his ankles, and was crouching in front of him eyeing his tented boxers with the sort of hunger that he usually reserved for the deluxe lamb vindaloo at Sitar House.

He grabbed Blair's head with both hands to keep it immobile, and duck-walked them over to the rear of the truck, which he was relatively sure was out of the range of the garage cameras. If there was one thing he earned in the Army, it was that sometimes you just had to shut up and go along with the program.

Settling back against the tailgate, he softened his grip and smiled at Blair, stroking his thumb lightly over his cheekbone in tacit permission. The look that Blair gave him back as he worked Jim's boxers down made his heart stutter for a moment. Blair licked his lips again, taking in the sight of Jim's stiff dick, took a deep breath, and closed his mouth around Jim.

Oh, Christ, he's so good at this, Jim thought, as his head tilted back and his eyes tried to roll back in his head. He sank his fingers into Blair's hair, dialing his sense of touch up so he could fully appreciate the soft, tender brush of the strands against his skin. Blair's mouth was perfect; hot and moist, lips tight against him, tongue stroking that sweet spot right underneath the head that he knew drove Jim crazy.

He rolled his hips forward experimentally. Blair made a pleased murmuring sound and shifted slightly, slid his hands up Jim's thighs to grip his hips, signaling his readiness. With a shaky exhale, Jim cupped Blair's head gently in his hands and started fucking his mouth in earnest. Within moments the combination of heat, slickness, and friction had brought him to the edge.

One of Blair's hands traced lightly down the crease where hip joined thigh and stroked Jim's balls, rolling them gently in his palm. Then those clever fingers sought out the tender spot of skin behind

and pressed gently. Jim clenched his jaw down on a cry as white bursts of light bloomed behind his eyes and he came helplessly into Blair's mouth.

When his limbs would obey him again, he grabbed the front of Blair's shirt and hauled him up into a kiss, relishing the depths of that luscious mouth, tasting the bitter hint of his come on Blair's tongue.

Blair whimpered and pressed against him, rocking his hips slightly. Jim took the hint and shifted so that his leg was pushed forward between Blair's. He could feel Blair's length hard against him, encased in denim, as Blair grunted and humped himself against Jim's thigh.

Jim drank in the sight of him. Hair in a wild tangle around his face, eyes closed, teeth pressed against his bottom lip, he looked debauched and inexpressibly beautiful. He slipped a hand under the layers of flannel and cotton and ran it down Blair's back, sliding underneath the waistband of his jeans and stroking lightly across his ass. Blair pressed closer, the rocking of his hips redoubled, and Jim parted his cheeks and slid a finger across his opening. Blair shuddered and came, muffling his exclamation against Jim's shoulder.

Jim waited patiently, stroking slow circles over Blair's back, until Blair's breathing had returned to a regular rhythm. "So, Chief, what was that all about?"

"I... don't know," Blair said. He tilted his head to look up at Jim, a drowsy smile curving his mouth. "All of a sudden, I just... I wanted you."

"You've wanted me before."

"Yeah, this was... this was different. More intense. I couldn't stop thinking about it."

Jim smiled in return, rubbing his thumb lightly over the indentations in Blair's bottom lip. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Except you might wait for a more appropriate location, next time."

Blair's cheeks flushed. "I don't know what came over me. It was like I was drugged or something." He snuggled up against Jim. "Pheromones in overdrive."

He nodded. "I get that. After all, I tried to have sex in a coat check closet because of pheromones." He thought back to Laura and that dizzying, desperate feeling of attraction and need.

The realization hit him like a lightning bolt. Pheromones. He sucked in a breath and held it, then burst out laughing.

"What?" Blair was looking at him with a wary smile.

"Pheromones," he managed to get out, between gasps of laughter. It didn't help, because Blair still had that faintly puzzled but still amused look.

When he caught his breath he grinned widely at Blair. "I know what happened to you." Then he told Blair what Connor had found out about the fertilizer ingredients.

Blair's eyes widened in shock and his mouth dropped open. "No way! No fucking way! Wolf urine? Wolf urine got me hot and bothered?"



"Female wolf urine," Jim reminded him. "It is your spirit animal, after all."

"But... but..." Blair shook his head. "I didn't even get hit with the stuff."

"You wiped my face off with your shirt. And you were touching me. I guess that was enough exposure. After all, you've seen what a little catnip does to me."

Blair spluttered, but the corner of his mouth crooked up in a smile at the mention of his research on cat toys and their effect on Jim. He hadn't seen Blair rendered speechless in quite some time. He should enjoy it while it lasted, because in a minute that wicked brain was going to start running double-time again.

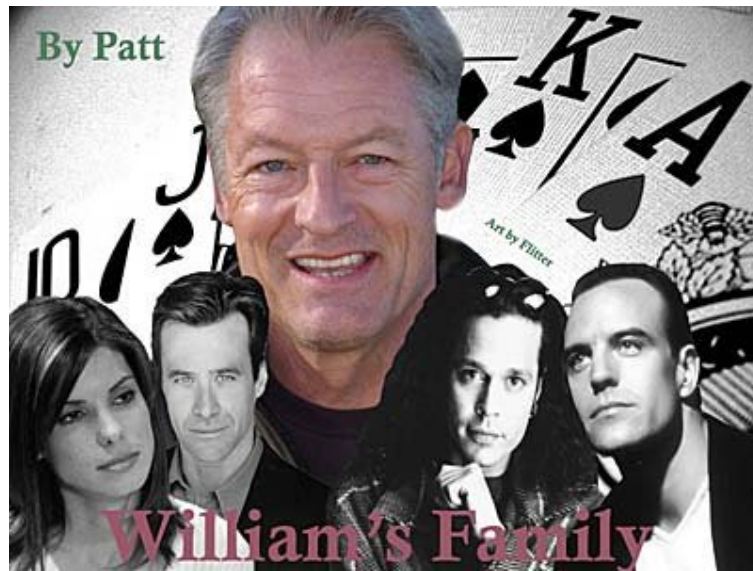
He suppressed a shiver of pleasure at the thought, and tugged Blair's face close to kiss him. "Come on, Chief, let's go home and get cleaned up and get something to eat."

As he pulled up his shorts, he gave the two of them an once-over. He looked all right, if a bit disheveled, but there was no hiding the damp spot on Blair's jeans. Hopefully they had something in the fridge, because there was no way they were going grocery shopping looking like that. He retrieved his keys and unlocked the truck.

They were heading out of the garage when Blair spoke. "Actually, can we make a stop before we head for the loft?"

"Sure," Jim replied. "You want to hit a drive-through somewhere?"

"Nah." Blair gave him a sly grin. "I want to stop at Cascade Garden Center. I think we need some rosebushes for the loft balcony."



BY PATT

ARTWORK BY FLITTER

William Ellison got out of the hospital five days after surgery on his heart and was feeling just fine. Now, one month later, he had a new lease on life. He was going to watch what he ate and take better care of himself. That meant walking. He needed to stay around a few years more and control those boys of his. Besides, it looked like Steven was going to be getting married and that Jim was thinking about getting a house with Blair. Or at least that's what the boys had told him. It all gave William a wonderful way to look at his world. He had lots to do and should be around for a long while to do it.

He was sitting in his house, wondering what he could do in the garden when there was a knock at the door. William looked out the peephole that Jim put in for him and saw it was Jim and Blair. He opened up the door with a huge smile on his face and said, "Come in-come in."

"Dad, you're supposed to be resting. You have your gardening clothing on. You can't resume everything for another two weeks. Didn't you listen to what the doctor said?" Jim asked, sounding somewhat annoyed.

"I was bored, Jimmy. I don't have anything to do. I did my exercises that the hospital told me to do, and then that left the entire afternoon. What am I supposed to do for the rest of the day?" His father tried to look as stern as he could, but it was hard when he was still in some pain and arguing just made it worse.

Blair noticed the look of pain on William's face and said, "Sit down we want to talk to you."

William let Blair lead him to the living room and he sat down in his recliner. William had to admit it did feel nice just to relax a little bit in his favorite chair.

"Okay, I'm sitting where is the talking?" William teased.

Blair snickered as he and Jim sat down side by side on the sofa across from William.

Blair then smiled at William. "We know you're going to get bored, so we've been looking up things for you to do that will keep you busy and also have you interact with other people your own age. Do you mind us giving some suggestions?"

"No, Blair, I would love it. I am bored out of my mind."

"Okay, first of all, we checked into a senior citizen meal site that is about six blocks from here. You could walk there each day and spend the day with some of these people. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday they play bingo, starting at 9:00 in the morning and, play until lunch, and then start again after lunch until 2:00. They look for volunteers to help get the tables ready for lunch, so you could help out if you wanted to do something meaningful. Most of the people there are in their 70s and 80s. So you would blend well with them. What do you think of that idea?" Blair asked.

"I've never played bingo in my life. I don't see myself starting now. I think I'm past the trying something new stage, don't you agree, Jimmy?" William asked.

"No, I don't agree, dad. We checked this place out and the people there have been going for years and they have all become very good friends. You're missing that in your life. I want you to think about this idea. We put a lot of thought into everything we came up with. At least think about it more than two minutes before you shoot Blair's ideas down. Okay, dad?"

"Okay, I will give it some thought. But I feel funny about going to a place where everyone knows everyone else and I would know no one."

"That's why we would go the first three times with you and get you used to it. If you don't like it, you don't have to continue going. But I think it would work out well. A lot of the folks bring their sons or daughters with them to the meal site, so it wouldn't look at all strange if we went along. Jim would go on the first Monday, I would go on Wednesday and Steven could go on Friday until you get used to it. What do you think?" Blair asked.

"I think it's very nice that you boys are willing to put so much work into it, but it still boils down to the fact that I don't think bingo sounds fun," William said.

"What do you think of Texas Hold'em Poker, dad?"

"They play poker?" William asked, suddenly much more interested than he was before.

"Yes, they play poker all three days at a special table. Some of the men just don't like bingo. So they started the poker game. I asked them if it was too late for you to join in, and they said there was always room for another person at their table. There are only five of them playing, and they play for nickels. A nickel a game doesn't sound too bad to me," Jim joked.

"Yes, I would consider this idea. I could walk there if it's only six blocks. And I wouldn't need you boys to go with me except to get me started the first day. I'll be a little bit nervous, you know?" William said.

Jim smiled. "Yes, we understand that, dad. So I'll come with you on Monday and we'll walk together there and spend the day. I love poker, so it sounds fun to me, too."

"You'd stay the entire day with me?" William asked, sounding very surprised.

"You bet I would. Dad, I would do anything to make your life a little bit easier and a lot more fun," Jim admitted.

"Thank you, Jimmy and Blair. I don't know what I would do without you two. Okay, without you four. I love Frances so much and she has really made Steven a better person, if you ask me," William said.

"I couldn't agree with you more, dad."

"We both love Frances too, William. But we love Steven also. Do you want to hear the latest news about them?" Blair asked.

"What? Something great, I hope," William replied.

"I'll let Jim tell you all about it."

On cue, Jim said, "Steven asked me to be his best man and Blair to be one of his groomsmen. The wedding is only a month away, so we're going to have to go shopping soon for our tuxes and get more prepared. Steven wants to go this weekend. We'll all stop over and say hello to you when we're done shopping."

"That's nice that Blair was asked. I think that Blair is one of Steven's favorite people now. You can sure turn a person, young man," William said laughing.

"Not everyone, William. Frances has a couple of brothers that think we're sick and twisted. Or was it twisted and perverted? Jim, which one of these are we again?" Blair laughed.

Jim laughed along with Blair and said, "It doesn't matter. Steven and Frances ignore them, so we do too. Not everything can be rosy, you know?"

"Now what other ideas did you have for me to keep me busy?" William asked.

"Blair checked with the library four blocks away and they need a children's story teller twice a week. On Tuesday and Thursday from 10:00 to noon, you would read to preschoolers and kindergartners. What do you think of that idea?" Jim asked.

"That's a wonderful idea. I'm not going to get any grandchildren anytime soon, so I guess I could spend time with other people's children. This sounds doable. How do I see about this, Blair?"

"It's already in the works. I was hoping you would like the idea and I set it up for tomorrow. The librarian's name is Stella Wilson and she's going to be ready to take you under her wing tomorrow at 10:00. Good luck, William," Blair said.

"The library is only four blocks away? That's a shame that I didn't know that," William said.

"It's okay, dad. We all do this in our lives. When you have to change things is when you become more aware. Blair and I are going to be cooking nothing but good meals on Sundays from now on. You're going to keep those arteries unclogged, if we have anything to say about it."

"Thank you, Jimmy. You and Blair are both so good to me. I could never thank you enough. Well, that gives me five days of things to do. That's more than I ever dreamed would happen. I can't wait."

Jim beamed with joy over his dad liking him and Blair, both. "You'll have the rest of the week to rest up a little bit before we start the meal site on next Monday. It's going to be great, dad. But you take it easy today and the rest of the week."

"Okay, you boys go have a nice rest of the day off," William said as he started to get out of his chair.

"We thought you might want to go shopping with us for the tuxes, dad. Steven told us where to get them and what to get, but you can tell us if they look good or not," Jim said.

"I would love to go, thank you for asking me. I'll be right down. I want to get something better on for shopping," William said, happily.

"Dad, we've both got jeans on. Your jeans are fine. Where is Sally?" Jim asked.

"She's off today, so I was a little bored. She usually keeps me company since I got home, but today was her day off and she had plans. Thank you, boys, for picking up the slack," William said smiling.

The three men walked out to Jim's new SUV and Blair opened the door for William to sit in the front seat.

"Blair, I would just as soon sit in back. I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"There will be trouble, sir, if Jim sees you in the back seat," Blair said.

William nodded and got into the front seat and smiled at his son. "Again, thank you for thinking of me on your day off."

"You're welcome... Everyone buckled up?" Jim called out as he pulled away from the curb.

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#### THE FOLLOWING DAY:

Frances Miller, fiancée to Steven Ellison, was fairly upset. That morning, three of her brothers and one of her sisters informed her that they wouldn't be part of the wedding ceremony because there were going to be two fags in it. They didn't want anything to do with Frances's wedding from that day forth. She had cried all morning after she got the phone calls, but now she was past that and was just downright pissed off.

She picked up the phone, dialed Steven's number and said, "How do you feel about a civil ceremony?"

Steven was right in the middle of a meeting with a client and said, "I'll call you back in a moment."

Frances hung up the phone and got depressed again. She always thought that her family was very open minded, but come to find out they were closet bigots just like a lot of the world. Now she just had to see if Steven would marry her at the court house. She had always dreamed of a huge wedding, but dreams weren't everything. In fact, they were usually ruined by someone or something. She paced the living room until the phone rang.

"Hello?" She answered.

"What happened?" Steven asked, quickly.

"Three of my brothers and one of my sisters won't have anything to do with the wedding as long as Jim and Blair are in it. They don't want to be associated with fags. That's what they called them, Steven. I don't even know where to turn. I want to have a civil ceremony as quickly as possible and I'm not even telling them."

"Calm down, Fran. You know you want your family to be a part of our wedding, so we're going to have to work something out. Do you have any other ideas?"

"Steven, why won't you marry me in front of a judge? I'm sure Jim and Blair would stand up for us and we can have a reception afterwards and if my family wants to come they can, if they don't want to come, they can lose out on it all," Frances said almost crying.

"We'll discuss this more when I get home tonight. I don't want your dream wedding to be at the courthouse. It won't work, Fran."

"Okay, we'll talk when you get home. I'm so upset I don't know what I'm going to do."

"What if we ask Jim to be my best man, but not Blair as my groomsman? We could have him doing something else, would that work?" Steven suggested.

"But honey, he was so excited about being a part of our wedding. Remember when he said, he had never been in a wedding before?" Frances asked.

"Yes, but he would want your family there and would totally understand, I'm sure," Steven said as calmly as he could.

"I guess we could talk to them and see what they say. I'll talk to you tonight, sweetheart," Frances said, before she hung the phone up.

She paced some more and finally picked up the phone and called the loft to see if Jim or Blair were home. She was thrilled when Blair answered.

"Hello?"

"Blair, I need to talk to you as soon as possible. It's important. If Jim is home, he can come over too. Oh, I'm home by the way," Frances pointed out.

"I'll be right over. Jim got called into work, but I still have the day off for a change. What about lunch?" Blair asked.

"Lunch would be wonderful, thank you," Frances replied and hung up after she said goodbye.

Jim was at the station house when Steven called him on his cell phone.

"Ellison."

"This is the other Ellison. Could we meet for lunch?" Steven asked.

"Sure, I'll meet you at Olive Garden in about twenty minutes, how does that sound?" Jim inquired.

"That would be perfect, Jim. See you then."

Jim went over to Simon's office and knocked on the door and entered when he heard Simon's gruff, 'what do you want, now?'

"Simon, I'm going to lunch and just wanted to tell you I'll be gone for about an hour or more. Is that okay with you?"

"That's fine, Jim. Now leave me alone so I can get this paperwork done for the commissioner. This is turning out to be a piss poor day, let me tell you."

Jim smiled and walked out of the room before Simon changed his mind. He really wanted to know what was going on with Steven. He could hear worry in Steven's voice when he had called.

Jim went down to the parking garage, got into his SUV and took off for Olive Garden. At least he was going to get a good meal out of it. One really nice thing about his senses was that once he got into the parking lot at Olive Garden, he was instantly aware of all of the scents. He loved these senses sometimes.

Blair arrived at Frances's house carrying chef salads for both of them. He knew she loved salads as much as he did and would be thrilled with his choice.

She opened the door and said, "Oh wow, this is what I was thinking about ordering if we went out for lunch. You're good, Blair."

"I knew something was wrong and figured that it might be easier to talk here at the house than at a restaurant. So let's wash up and eat and you can tell me what's on your mind."

Frances began to fill Blair in on what had transpired and got tears in her eyes as she was telling him. She ended up with saying, "I told Steven I wanted to get married in front of a judge and he refused. I don't know what to do now."

"If I pull out of the Groomsman role that might make them happy enough to let the wedding go on as planned. And really I don't mind at all, Frances. I was excited about being part of it, but I can sit with William and be just as excited. How does that sound?"

"Blair, I feel so terrible about all of this. It's just so shitty, you know what I mean?"

"It's called life, Frances. Don't worry about it. Now throw that your family's way and see if that doesn't make them happy, okay?" Blair never mentioned once that he had already gotten a tux the day before while shopping with William and Jim. Blair would live, he knew that much.

Frances got up and hugged Blair in his chair. "You are such a loving and giving man, I still feel horrible about all of this."

"Don't fret over it, Frances. Now call Steven and tell him the good news. That'll make him worry less and everything will be fine."

Frances did indeed call Steven and filled him in on what was said between her and Blair. Steven sounded a little relieved, but knew he was going to have to break it to his brother next.

Frances got off the phone and asked if Blair felt like shopping for a wedding dress with her. "I have my dress picked out, but I want to be sure it's 'the' dress, you know what I mean?"

"Sure, I'll go with you. But wouldn't your mom like to go?" Blair asked.

"Blair, let me be angry at my family for a little while. Now let's go shopping," Frances said smiling and grabbing Blair's arm in hers.

Jim met Steven and could see the worry and sadness on Steven's face. Jim walked up to him smiling and said, "Do you have a table yet?"

"Five more minutes, Jim."

Jim leaned against the wall, just as Steven was, with his hands in his front pockets with not a care in the world. Nothing Steven could say would ruin his day.

They got called to the table and placed their order.

"All right, Steven, you've gotten my attention. What's going on?"

Steven explained what had happened with Frances's family and what Blair had offered to do. When he was done he just sat waiting for Mount Ellison to erupt. He didn't have long to wait.

"Steven, I don't mean this against Frances, but we won't be coming to the wedding. We don't have to be included where we won't be wanted. We take enough crap as it is, I'm sure not going to add this to the list. And Blair always wants to make everyone's life easier, even if it breaks his heart. Do you know that we already bought tuxes? I'm just saying this isn't going to work."

"Jim, you have to be there. You're my best man. Jesus, this is getting so ridiculous. Let's talk about this," Steven said.

"No talking about it. We aren't going and that's that."

"I'll tell Frances what you said. I'm really disappointed, Jim."

"Like I'm not?" Jim asked.



Their lunch came, but neither of the men ate much. Jim picked up the tab and they left an hour later. Jim hugged his brother goodbye and left in his SUV.

Steven watched the sad man walk to his vehicle and wondered how in the world he could fix this. He and Frances were going to have to think up something.

Blair went home, not knowing that anything was up. Steven also went home, but he knew that something was up. He walked in the front door and Frances said immediately, "Oh no, bad news?"

Steven looked as if he wanted to cry. "I talked to Jim about what Blair said and he said they won't be coming to the wedding. He feels that if 'they' think this way, he wouldn't be welcome anyway, so he backed out and said he and Blair would be staying home."

"Oh no. This is horrible news. I'm so angry at my brothers and my sister about this. If they could have just kept their opinions to themselves we would still be having a happy wedding. I don't know about you, Steven, but I don't even want to have a wedding now."

Steven pulled Frances into his arms and said, "Let's talk to dad about it, before we make any rash decisions. Okay?"

"Okay. Why don't you call him and ask him to come over for dinner?" Frances asked sweetly.

Steven called his dad, filled him in on what was going on and William said he would be over in an hour. Steven could tell that William was upset about Jim not being in the wedding. Hell, they all were. Why did Jim have to be so fucking difficult and stubborn?

Blair made a nice meal for Jim, knowing he probably didn't eat as well as he should have during the day, no matter where he went to lunch. When Jim came walking through the front door, he looked like he had lost his best friend.

"Hey, man, what's wrong?"

"We'll discuss it in a moment. I'd like to get my jacket and gun hung up if you don't mind," Jim snapped.

"Fuck you, I don't need to know what's wrong with you. Figure it out yourself," Blair snarled as he went back into the kitchen and finished dinner up.

"Let me start over again, Chief. Hi there, the house smells great. I love when you make meatloaf. I had a really shitty day, but it's no excuse to take it out on you. Sorry, Blair. Anything new happen today?"

"Apology accepted, now tell me what's really wrong?"

"We're not going to Steven's wedding. In fact, I signed us up for special duty that day at work," Jim said.

"Jim, you know damn well we can't 'not' go to the wedding. This is your brother, damn it. He's asked you to be his best man for God's sake. Now tell me what's really bothering you?"

Jim sighed deeply and said, "I hate it that her family hates us before they even meet us. They've decided already that we're sick and twisted and they don't want to be around that. They sure don't want their kids to be around it. I think it's best that we do what they want. This is Frances's big day and we don't want to upset her family."

Blair started pacing and glared at Jim. "Are you afraid of her bigoted family and what they might say or do?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone. I just don't think a wedding is a place to have a shouting match between family members and in-laws. It just sucks and I won't put us through it. I decided it was in our best interest to work that day. It'll keep our minds off of it and we'll do just fine, Chief."

"You didn't ask me, Jim, and I would have told you the opposite. I'm going with your dad. You can work if you want, but I'm going to the wedding. You're being an immature asshole," Blair said, angrily and then walked into the office and slammed the door.

Before Jim went and knocked on the door, he listened with his senses to see how Blair was doing. He could hear the sadness in Blair's breathing and that was enough for Jim. He finally knocked. "I have a counter offer."

Blair walked out and looked into Jim's sad eyes and said, "What?"

"We both bow out of the wedding party and we'll both sit with my dad in the pew. What do you think of that?"

"I like that. That way we won't miss their big day. Call Steven and tell him right now, because he's probably having a nervous breakdown," Blair ordered.

Jim picked up the phone and dialed while Blair set the table.

"Ellison," Steven said.

"Steven, we talked it over and this is what we think is best for everyone. We don't want to miss your wedding, but I don't want to have to deal with her brothers and sister, so we'll sit in the church with dad and record the wedding and you can ask one of her brothers to be your best man. How does that sound?"

"I don't like it, Jim. You're supposed to stand up for me. You shouldn't care what anyone says or thinks. This is between you and me. Please think about it some more and then let me know. I'll tell Frances what you said about the wedding and I'll see what she thinks about it. I'll talk to you later, Jim. Dad's here and I need to talk to him."

Steven didn't even say goodbye, he just hung up the phone. Jim knew he was upset.

Blair said, "What did he think of your idea?"

"He thinks I'm a coward."

"He said that?" Blair asked, incredulously.

"No, but it was in his tone. He thinks I should still be his best man and tough up. He asked me to think about it for a couple of days."

"Then let's think on it for a couple of days. He's probably only going to have one wedding, Jim. Let's at least give it some time for thought."

"All right...Could we eat now? I'm hungry, believe it or not," Jim said shoving Blair into the kitchen area.

Steven told his dad and Frances about what Jim and Blair had decided on and left it at that. He said that Jim was going to think on it a couple of days.

William could feel the tension in the air and the bitterness coming from Frances towards her family. William didn't want to be witnessing the couple's first argument and felt uncomfortable being there.

Frances was steamed up and wasn't going to calm down any time soon. "I really hate the way they, my family, have taken control of our wedding out of our hands. This is supposed to be one of the happiest times of my life and yet they are making everything impossible to deal with. I understand why Jim wanted to not come to the wedding. I don't want to go to the wedding at this point in time. I still think that a civil ceremony would be the best thing around. Steven, will you please think about it?"

"I'll tell you what will happen if we get married at the justice of the peace. Your family will think that my family got their way and they will be pissed off at both you and me. They might not forgive you too easily either. Also you have to think about me fitting in some day," Steven said.

"Okay, this is what I'm going to do. I'm having a big family meeting and telling everyone that Jim is the best man, Blair is the groomsman and we aren't changing it. If they want to stay away from our wedding, it's their choice. I've made my decision, Steven."

Steven didn't agree with her at all, but he knew better than to argue with a lawyer, even if she was going to be his wife soon.

Frances turned to William and asked, "So what do you think about this?"

"I think that Blair was very hurt about not being the groomsman and wished he could change things, but you also know that he tries to make everything work. So I wasn't surprised at his first idea. But I think I agree with you, Frances. If they don't like it, they get to make the choice to not come, not be in the pictures and not see their baby sister marry her true love. It would be their loss and I think they will realize it as soon as you give them the new ultimatum. Jim and Blair don't want trouble, but they also don't want to be treated badly at what is supposed to be the best day of your life. We'll see what they have to say about all of it." William hugged Frances because she looked like she needed one. She gladly accepted it.

"William, I want to thank you for having two wonderful sons. I'm so happy to have both of them in my life, but especially Steven," she teased.

Steven snickered and said, "Well, I would hope you picked me over Jim. There are going to be days you'll wonder why you picked me."

"No days will be that bad, Steven. I promise, we're going to make the effort to make this work."

William stood up and said, "I know you both will. Now it's time for me to take my leave."

"Dad, you don't have to leave already. We haven't even offered you anything to drink yet," Steven said.

"I'm fine. I feel better than when I first got here, so things are looking up. If you need any help with anything, let me know," William stated as he went to hug both of them.

Steven and Frances returned the hugs and walked him to the front door.

William stopped by Jim and Blair's on his way home. He thought he would fill them in on what was going on. He already knew that Blair would be worried about Frances. Jim would probably just be irritated, for the sake of irritation, but they would probably be relieved to hear the news.

He knocked on the door and Jim opened it up wearing a smile. "I thought you were going over to Steven's house tonight."

"I did. And now I'm here to tell you the latest of news, from Frances's lips to your ears. She's telling her family that you and Blair are both still in the wedding party and that's how life is going to be. She figures some might not come, but someday they will regret it and be sorry for it too. So, Jimmy, you are the best man and Blair, you are the groomsman. What do you think of that?"

Jim was first to speak. "I think she's making a big, big mistake. Someday she'll have to make amends with her family. It's such a mess. I'm so sorry we caused all of this."

Blair hugged Jim quickly and then looked him in the eyes and said, "Jim, we didn't cause anything. They did. What if you were married to a black woman and they didn't like blacks, would you have backed down from that?"

"I guess not. Now you're saying that we should just keep things the way they are?" Jim asked.

Blair smiled. "I just needed to hear that Frances felt all right with us being in the wedding. She's never really said too much to us about the whole gay issue, but I was hoping she didn't mind."

William asked, "You wanted to be in the wedding the entire time?"

"Hell yes. I've never had any family but my mom and I was hoping I could use Jim's to have a fun life. I've never been in a wedding before, so I was really excited about it. Weren't you, Jim?" Blair questioned.

Jim smiled. "Yes, I wanted to be my brother's best man more than anything."

"I think everything will work out fine, boys. Just think, someday we're going to have a child in the family. Are you both looking forward to that?" William asked.

"Yes and no." Jim answered.

"What do you mean, no, Jim?" Blair asked.

"It reminds me that you and I will never have a family of our own," Jim confessed to a shocked Blair Sandburg.

"They will be like your own, Jimmy and Blair. I promise. I love Rucker like he was one of my very own. Still do. He's coming to the wedding, by the way," William said.

"It's not the same, dad. I thought about us adopting, but we're too old now."

"Who are you calling old, Jim?" Blair asked, looking for a fight, but wearing a smile at the same time.

"I'm going to be forty soon and I think that's a little old to start your family," Jim said.

"I don't agree, Jimmy. I was 35 when you were born. Even older when Steven was born. So I don't want to hear about how old you are from this point on. If you want to think about adopting you'll have to think up more than that for an excuse."

"Why am I just hearing about you wanting a family now? I had no idea you wanted children," Blair said.

"We can discuss this privately, Blair." Jim answered quickly.

"And don't think we won't, Jim."

William cleared his throat and said, "Time for me to leave. Don't forget about Rucker and Andy staying at my house. You and Blair can take them out a couple of times while they're here. Now, no arguing and have a good night together."

Jim said, "We're not going to argue, dad. There are too many other things to discuss, no time for arguing. Drive carefully going home." Jim hugged his dad at the door and stepped back.

Blair hugged William next and said, "Thank you for everything you always do for us, William."

William smiled, opened the door, walked out and said, "My pleasure."

Jim shut the door and locked it and then watched from the balcony to be sure his dad got to his car all right. William waved at his son from the parking lot. Jim waved back and smiled. Then once his dad drove out of the parking lot, he turned to Blair and said, "I'm all yours."

Blair locked up the entire loft and said, "Let's talk upstairs where we are most comfortable."

Jim knew by the look on Blair's face that it was going to be a very long night. "Maybe it could hold for tomorrow night. I'd like to sleep sometime tonight."

"No, it won't hold for tomorrow. I would like to know when you first decided you wanted children. You've never said word one to me about it."

"Blair, you didn't seem that interested, so I didn't want to ruin a good thing."

Blair looked confused and then sort of angry. "Don't you think it's something we should have discussed before we started dating?"

"Second thoughts, already?" Jim asked, sarcastically.

"Oh fuck you. You know I have no second thoughts when it comes to you and me. But I would have liked to know there was a chance of a family in this arrangement. You should have told me."

"You want a family too?" Jim almost whispered.

"I adore children, especially ones that can't find good homes. We would be excellent parents to older children too. We'll start Frances on the hunt to help us as soon as she's done with the wedding," Blair said, smiling.

"Sounds good to me, Chief. We'll just take our time. It's going to be just fine," Jim said happily.

Blair started stripping out of his clothing and Jim followed suit as quickly as he could. Jim knew damn well he was going to get fucking lucky tonight and that worked for him.

They crawled into the clean sheets and smiled at each other. Jim reached over to turn the lamp off, but Blair stopped him.

"Not tonight, man, I want to see exactly what I'm doing and seeing. I love you, Jim."

"I love you, Blair." Jim pulled Blair on top of him and they began to make out like crazy. They felt like it was the first time. Both of the men were right on the edge of coming and Jim said, "Stop."

"Why?" Blair asked.

"I'm losing control of myself and I don't want to come while we're just making out."

Blair went back to what he had been doing and Jim realized that now it was like a quest for Blair to make Jim come as quickly as he could. Jim decided there were worse things in life and went with his good feelings and came so hard, he thought his head was going to explode, throwing his head back and whispering, 'Blair' for only Blair to hear.

Blair pushed into Jim's hip a few times and came all over Jim.

They lay there quietly for about five minutes and then Jim said, "Let me up, Chief. I'm going to clean us up."

Blair moved and let Jim go downstairs to get the warm washcloth. He liked the chance to see Jim's ass any chance he could. God the man was built so beautifully. Sometimes it bothered Blair that he wasn't as cut as Jim was, but Jim didn't seem to mind, so Blair got over it.

Jim came back with wet wash cloths and a glass of water for each of them. They both needed it, too. Jim cleaned them all up and they got under the covers and Jim turned off the lamp, this time with no objection from Blair. It wasn't long and all that could be heard in the loft were soft little snoring sounds from both men.

Frances woke up in a very good mood. Steven always made her feel so good with sex that anyone would wake up in a good mood. Steven was already gone to work and that left her half a day to plan the big meeting with her family. She wasn't going to let anyone push her around. It was as simple as that. She called her mom and asked her to call half of the family so they could all meet for dinner. Frances was kicking ass and taking names. Her mom asked what was going on and Frances said, "You'll see tonight, mom."

Once that was taken care of, Frances went to her office and dove into her work pile. There were so many kids that needed help, that sometimes Frances felt a little overwhelmed. But this was the life she chose.

Blair called William to see how the day before had gone at the library. With all of the commotion that was going on, he had forgotten all about it. Jim was driving them to work when Blair heard, "Ellison."

"I have one of you Ellison's too."

"Good morning, Blair. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine but I wanted to ask how the library reading went yesterday. I forgot to ask, I can't believe I let that slide right by me," Blair said.

"It was fantastic. The children told me I had a nice voice and they seemed happy with my choice of books for the day. I get to choose them every Tuesday and Thursday. I really enjoyed it and it gave me something to do besides work family problems out. Thank you for setting it up for me, Blair."

"You are most welcome, William. I just knew you would make a great reader. You do have a terrific voice for it," Blair said, smiling.

"Thank you and tell that son of mine I said thank you, too."

"He just said he heard you and you're welcome," Blair said.

"Are you on your way to work?" William wondered.

"Yes, just wanted to check in with you and see how the library went. Talk to you soon," Blair said before he closed his cell.

"Thanks for calling him, Chief."

"You're welcome. I aim to serve," Blair answered laughing. Jim joined in on the laughter all the way to work.

The day seemed to fly for everyone except Steven and Frances. They were dreading the evening coming up. At first she was going to tackle her family alone, but Steven insisted on being part of it, since he was part of the package now.

When 5:00 finally rolled around, both of them left their jobs and met each other at home. Then Steven drove Frances in his SUV and they were off to meet the family at Joe's Crab Shack. They wanted somewhere loud, so the arguing wouldn't be so noticed. Joe's Crab Shack was always busy and booming with noise, music and laughter.

When they arrived they got the table and waited for her family to get there. One by one, they came in with their husbands and wives and Steven felt a little out of place since he wasn't actually a husband yet. But right now, Frances was all that mattered.

Everyone sat down and ordered except for Frances and Steven. They didn't plan on staying.

"Why didn't you order, sis?" Mike asked.

Mike was Frances's oldest brother and he was one of the ones that was raising hell. She cleared her throat, stood up and said, "I have something important to tell all of you and I'd like to be able to say it without interruption and then you can all discuss it when we leave. I've decided that this is my big day. It's 'my' wedding and I want to ask the people I want to be in it. We've asked Jim and Blair to be in it and if you can't accept that, then you'll have to miss your sister's wedding. I've never missed one of yours. You never asked me about the person you were marrying or their families. I just went to the wedding and wished you well, each and every time. This is what I expect in return. No one will say anything about this, because the decision has been made. Now, we will leave you to discuss it on your own."

Frances and Steven started leaving and Mike said, "So you're picking a fag over your brothers?"

"Yes, I am, Mike. And I'm glad to do it. They're kind and would never call you names. They are good men and you've never even met either of them. But yet you are quick to call them horrible names. If you don't want to come to my wedding, I'll have to learn to accept that. Now, talk about it and make your decisions. I need to know who is coming by this week. If one of you could call me, that would be most kind," Frances said.

Her family all started ranting and raving at once and Frances took Steven out of the restaurant. "I hate them when they are like this. I had forgotten how close minded they were. There is a chance that I might have to ask your dad to walk me down the aisle."

"Fran, he would gladly do it, but I think your family is going to come around when they see you mean business. You didn't fold under Mike's evil glare and that was good."

"I can't stand Mike. He's such a jerk. He was when I was young and he stayed that way. I couldn't care less if he comes or not, and I mean that seriously."

"At least we got this out of the way and they can make their decision," Steven said.

On the drive home, her cell phone rang and she answered, seeing it was her mom's number. "Hi mom."



"Hello, Frances. I just wanted to let you know that only ten of us are coming. Mike turned a lot of them against you tonight. I'm sorry, sweetheart. But your dad and I will be there, if that makes you feel better," Mrs. Miller said.

Frances had tears rolling down her face as she said, "Thank you, mom. I was so afraid that dad would say no."

"And miss walking his youngest down the aisle? Never. They all might come around, sweetie. Give them time," Mrs. Miller said.

"I will mom, thank you for calling and letting me know. I love you," Frances said. She shut the cell off and moved over closer to Steven and started to cry.

"I knew this would happen and you would end up crying. That's just what happened. I'm sorry, babe."

"It's tears of joy, Steven. Mom and dad are going to come. That's all that really mattered. I wanted my dad to walk me down the aisle. In three weeks, we're going to have a beautiful wedding and it's going to be a happy one, damn it."

Steven hugged her and when they came to a red light, he kissed her soundly. "I love you, Frances."

"I love you, Steven."

On the way home after work the next day, Jim asked Blair, "How would you feel about getting a real estate agent and looking at some houses? If we ever plan on adopting or whatever, we need to get a real home with a yard."

"That would be great. I have a great agent picked out already. I told her that we would want to look at three or four bedroom homes and she said that she's got some really nice ones to look at," Blair answered.

"How do you know her?"

"From Steven, she was a client of his and asked if anyone was looking for houses. He thought of us. I forgot to tell you about it. She called last week while you were in court. I'm sorry, Jim. I wasn't thinking."

Jim smiled. "That's fine, Blair. What is her name?"

"Rita Murphy and she's a really nice woman. Let me call her really fast and see if she's got anything to show us tonight," Blair said as he brought her number up on his cell phone.

The phone rang and Rita picked her line up. "Hello?"

"Rita, this is Blair Sandburg, we spoke last week about a four bedroom house."

"Oh yes, I was hoping you would call back. I have about nine with great potential to show you. They are in super school districts and fantastic neighbourhoods. You'll love all of them. Prices are lower at this time, so you can get a good deal on a house. It's a buyers' market, for sure," Rita said, happily.

"When could we look?" Blair asked.

"When is your next day off?" Rita wondered.

"Saturday..."

"I'll have them all lined up by then. We'll start at 9:00 in the morning, if that's all right with you," Rita said.

"That's perfect. Do we meet at your office?" Blair inquired.

"That would be wonderful. Do you know where I'm located?"

"At 9579 Kolb Road, suite 200?" Blair asked.

"That's it. We'll see you on Saturday at nine," Rita said.

"Thanks for everything, Rita. See you then." As Blair shut down the phone he realized he didn't know if she knew they were gay or not. He should have asked. He called her right back and she answered just as quickly.

"Hello?"

"Rita, I never mentioned that I have a domestic partner, or life partner, whatever it's called now. I just wanted you to know that up front," Blair said.

"Oh, I knew. Steven told me all about you boys. Don't worry about a thing." Rita hung up her phone and smiled. Blair seemed like a very nice young man.

"Why did you have to tell her that?" Jim asked when Blair closed his cell phone.

"We've had enough misunderstandings about us being gay already. I didn't want another one to happen. It would have ruined looking at houses."

"You're right, Chief. She should know anyhow," Jim admitted.

Blair beamed with happiness because, for a change, Jim was admitting that he was right. "Saturday it is. We're officially looking at houses."

"It's going to be great, Chief. Don't you worry about a thing. Then if you don't mind, we could rent the loft out to Daryl while he's in college," Jim suggested.

"Only if he keeps his GPA up. That will have to be a stipulation. We'll rent it to him cheap, so Simon won't have to help him." Blair said, thoughtfully.

"It's your turn to make dinner, Chief," Jim said as they pulled into the parking lot in front of the loft.

"It is not," Blair said, sternly.

"It is, too."

"Fine, you baby. I'll make tomato soup and grill cheese sandwiches, how does that sound?" Blair asked.

The evening went well. Comfort food always seemed to do the trick for whatever ailed them.

"I'm going to go with my dad tomorrow to the Senior Meal Site and get him set up, so he has something to do. I'll be late for work. You'll have to drive your car,"

"Good idea, Jim. Now how about some making out?"

Jim liked that idea.

The next day in the bullpen, Connor walked up to Blair and said, "Sandy, where is Jimbo? Not that I'm missing him or anything, but you look lost without him."

"Very funny, Connor. Will you please stop calling him Jimbo? It drives him nuts," Blair explained.

"I know it does, but that's why it's fun. Now where is he?"

"He had some errands to run with his dad today and he'll be a little late," Blair said.

"How is his dad doing since the surgery?"

"He's doing great. You would never know he just had his chest cracked open six weeks ago. He's doing fantastically. I'll tell him you asked about him. He'll like that."

"I better get busy. Simon's giving me the evil eye from his doorway. Talk to you later, Sandy," Connor said as she hurried off to finish her report before she got yelled at about it.

At ten, the elevator opened and Jim walked out. Everyone greeted him as he walked towards his desk. "Hey Chief, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine now. You're doing some of this paperwork. There is a ton of it and I'm not doing it all," Blair joked.

"Sounds fair. Hand my share over." Jim took the pile from Blair and started working on the first file.

Connor walked over and said, "Jimbo, would you and Sandy like to have lunch with me?"

"His name is Sandburg or Blair. Not Sandy," Jim snarled.

"It's no use, man. I've tried to talk sense into her. It doesn't work," Blair said as he snickered.

"Why do you want to have lunch with us?" Jim asked.

Megan Connor frowned and said, "I need a reason?"

"I guess not," Blair replied and added, "we'll meet you at the elevator at 1:00. How does that sound?"

They all continued to work at their desks, since it was a slow, slow day and then met at the elevator at 1:00. Jim had told Simon where they were all going.

"I'll drive," Jim said as they stepped into the garage.

Connor burst out laughing and said, "Like there was any room for doubt."

They got into Jim's SUV and took off for the diner down the street. It had fantastic food and they had decided on that.

"So what's up, Connor?" Blair asked.

"Nothing. I mean, absolutely nothing. I just felt like hearing about the wedding that's coming up. You haven't talked about it in the last week so I wondered how things were going."

Jim was the first to answer, "Everything is great, Connor. Her family hates me and Blair but Frances insists on having the wedding anyhow. Isn't this going to be fun?"

Connor burst out laughing and said, "There is never a dull moment with you two. I'm sure everything will work out fine. I really like Frances. She helped that young man that I had to arrest the other day who I felt so bad about. She got him placed in a terrific foster home and he's doing really well, now."

"What's his name?" Blair asked.

"Mitchell Librock. He's only 12 years old, but has been in like ten foster homes. But he's in a good one now and he's doing great in school and at his home. It's nice when something turns out well."

They got out of the SUV when Jim parked and walked into the diner.

"I'm really glad it worked out for Mitchell. It doesn't always," Blair said.

They sat down, ordered, got their drinks and talked about the wedding and the upcoming house hunting. Jim was a little irritated that Blair had told her about the house hunting, but then realized, it wasn't like it was a surprise or anything.

By the time lunch was done, Jim was exhausted from listening to Blair and Connor yap on about anything and everything. The drive back to the station was much quieter. Connor and Blair both sensed that Jim had a headache.

When they got back, Blair said, "Are you mad about me telling Connor about the house hunting?"

"No, I'm just tired. The two of you wear me out. I'm old," Jim joked.

Before long it was time for the old man and Blair to take off for the day. They both said goodbye to everyone, including Simon and left. They were off the next day and were going to find a house. Blair could just feel it in his bones.

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SATURDAY MORNING:

Jim and Blair met Rita Murphy at her office and they drove in her car. Jim wasn't happy about that, but he knew he had to put up with it for one day. He could make it one day without driving and being in charge, couldn't he?

They looked at one house after another until Jim saw one that looked promising. He glanced over at Blair and saw Blair's eyes lighting up and knew this might be the house. It was a brick home, all on one floor, four bedrooms, three baths, a den, an office and a finished basement that had a pool table already in it. They looked through the house and Jim was in love. The floors were all wood and beautifully taken care of. Every room was really nice and large. It was a big house at 3000 square feet. Jim wasn't sure what it would cost, but he was sure they couldn't afford it. "Rita, how much is this one?"

"The family is going into default on the loan, so they only want what they owe. It's less than you're willing to spend. Here is the paperwork with the price and the info."

She was right; it was lower than what they had planned on spending. Jim couldn't believe his luck. Or their luck. "What do you think of this place, Blair?"

"I think we found our new home," Blair answered.

"We would like to put in an offer," Jim said quickly.

"But Jim, this is only the fifth house you've seen. Don't you want to see if there is anything even better?" Rita asked.

"I love the neighborhood, the schools rock here and Blair likes it. It's perfect. We'll offer what they are asking, so they'll deal with us," Jim said.

Blair hugged him and said, "Oh my God, I can't believe we're going to own our own home. This is the happiest day of my life, besides meeting and falling in love with you."

Jim leaned down and kissed him. He didn't care if Rita was in the room or not.

They drove down to the office and she put the offer in and told them to sit tight while they waited for an answer. "If they don't get back to us in an hour, then it might take a day or so. But usually if you offer what they're asking, they give you exactly what you want."

Jim and Blair both had a cup of coffee and waited as patiently as they could. The phone rang and Rita answered it. Blair watched Jim's face because he knew that Jim was listening in. When he saw the smile on Jim's face, he knew they got it. Blair gave Jim a big hug and kissed him.

Jim said, "We should probably let her tell us the news before we get all excited."

"I told you those senses would come in handy some day," Blair teased.

Rita came out of her office and said, "They not only accepted, but they'll close in two weeks and the house will be yours then. Congratulations, Jim and Blair. You're now home owners. We need the inspection and a few other things, but I don't foresee any problems."

Rita told them what they had to do next, since this was all new to them and they got busy as soon as they got home. They were so excited that they kept hugging and kissing each other.

Jim called his dad and Steven and told them the news. Blair would have called Naomi, but she was in India right then.

"Jim, I loved the address, so much."

Jim pulled the paper out again and looked and smiled. "Yes, I like it too."

"Who would have thought we'd ever own a home on 'Joshua Tree Lane'? It's so perfect, man. I love it."

They talked about all of the furniture they would have to buy and some of the excitement wore off a little bit. They weren't expecting to buy so much furniture, but thus was life.

The phone rang and Blair answered it, "Sandburg."

"Hi Blair, this is William. I want you boys to know that I've already taken money out of savings and put it in a special account for your house. It's for furniture. You'll have enough to worry about with the house. It's my gift to you boys. Just call it a wedding present, okay?"

"Thank you, William. We will accept it and love every bit of the furniture that it buys. Here is Jim."

Jim grabbed the phone and said, "Thank you, dad. We were just saying how it was going to be tight getting all of the furniture that we need. We'll buy all used, so it'll make the money stretch further."

"Jimmy, you will buy new. There is plenty of money in your account, so I don't want to hear about it again. Now enjoy. I'll talk to you later."

"Thank you, dad. You're the best," Jim said before they hung up.

"Wow, I can't believe we're getting a house and all of the furniture is going to be given to us by your dad. This has been a kick ass day, hasn't it?"

"It sure has. Now how would you like to celebrate upstairs, in our bed, naked and doing fun things to each other?" Jim asked.

"Race ya!"

Jim let Blair win.

William sat down at the kitchen table with Sally and told her what was going on. He was so happy. His youngest son was going to be married soon, his oldest was already married and now everyone was going to have their own house. The wedding might have a problem or two, but they would all be able to handle it in the end. Yes, he had wonderful sons, but now he had an entire family, with Blair and Frances, too. William's family made him very happy, indeed.



BY BLUEWOLF

WITH ARTWORK BY PATT

"My thesis 'The Sentinel' is a fraud. While my paper does quote ancient source material, the documentation proving that James Ellison... actually possesses hyper-senses is fraudulent. Looking back, I can say that it's a good piece of fiction."

Why couldn't Jim have trusted him, believed that he hadn't sent his dissertation to Sid Graham? Why couldn't Jim have understood that since it had been sent to a publisher there was no way he could present the document now as a doctoral dissertation? That he would have had to do something on another topic to submit to Rainier? Sending the Sentinel manuscript to a publisher would have been totally counterproductive.

Whatever the theme of his dissertation, his mother's well-meaning interference - since dear old Sid hadn't listened to him and had been oh-so-effusive about the quality of Blair's writing and how much he wanted to publish it - had destroyed his chances of getting his PhD from it. A dissertation was meant to be submitted in the first instance to his doctoral committee, not a professional publisher, dammit!

But in a way Blair wasn't totally surprised by Jim's reaction. Their friendship had never quite recovered from the damage done to it by their encounter with Alex Barnes. Everything between them seemed fine... on the surface; but Blair, at least, knew that it was not. In a sense he had been treading a wary path between hoping that things would work out all right, and waiting for another accusation of betrayal. The wait had been quite nerve-wracking.

It was almost a relief when, despite his care, he had managed to slip off that narrow path... or might it be more accurate to say he had been pushed off it?

Of course, he should never have left Jim's name on the document. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to think of any way to do that without compromising the documentation, because if - when - it had ever been submitted for publication, he would have needed to take his name off it too. Too many people knew that if Blair Sandburg was writing about a sentinel, riding along with a sentinel, that sentinel had to be Jim Ellison, no matter what name he put in the document.

So he had no choice but to deny it, claim he had faked the results.

The offer of a badge came as a surprise, and he gave serious thought to accepting it. Jim certainly seemed happy at the idea of having him as a 'permanent, official partner', but Blair was well aware that his claim of having 'faked his evidence' would follow him, make it very difficult for him ever to give evidence in court.

And then, two days after he destroyed his academic credibility, he received a not totally unexpected phone call, though the direction it took was unexpected.

When the phone rang, Jim, who was nearer it, answered - in any case he had been monitoring all their calls for those two days.

"Ellison... Who's speaking?... Hold on a moment." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Chief - you know a Daniel Jackson?"

"Daniel? Yes."

"Is he likely to be... well, hostile?"

"No. In any case, he knows what it's like to be shafted by academia. Thanks." Jim handed the phone over to him. "Daniel?"

'Hi, Blair. I... I saw your press conference. You were protecting your sentinel, weren't you.' It wasn't a question.

Blair took a deep breath, knowing that Jim was listening, ready to snatch the phone back and snarl if he wasn't happy with what he heard.

"It wasn't even the diss I was going to submit to Rainier," Blair said.

'You think I wouldn't guess that? A doctoral dissertation, as presented, isn't the stuff a publisher like Berkshire is going to consider worth the cost of printing. What are you meaning to do now?'

"I've been offered a job with the police - "

'You sound doubtful.' Daniel's voice was very gentle.

"I'm not sure what would happen the first time I had to give evidence in court. In hindsight, I should have worded my little speech a bit differently. And if I stay here, working with Jim, people are going to start wondering..."



'Probably. Anyway, I'm in a position where I can offer you - and Jim - a job, and neither of you would have to worry about any repercussions that might arise from Jim being outed like that. It would mean reactivating his army commission - with a promotion - but you could remain a civilian just as I have.'

Blair glanced at Jim. "How much can you tell me about it?"

'Over the phone - nothing; most of what I do is classified, you know that. But it's a very valuable job and it would let you use the skills and training you have - both of you - and give you complete protection from any organization that might see your friend as a lab rat.'

That had always been one of his - and Jim's - biggest worries, and Blair could see a reluctant interest on Jim's face.

"It does sound... useful to us." He knew Daniel would be able to read between the lines of his comment.

'Be at Cascade Airport at 0900 tomorrow. I'll come for you myself so you know the transport that'll be laid on is legit. Ellison will still be covered by the non-disclosure document he signed years ago; you'll have to sign one before we can tell you anything... but Blair, I can assure you that what we're doing here doesn't go against any of our beliefs.'

"You don't need to tell me that. You'd have had to rebel pretty seriously before you got involved in anything too far removed from Naomi's teaching... and you were too grateful to her to become that much of a rebel."

'Okay. 0900 tomorrow, and come prepared to stay for two or three days.'

"Okay."

"Be good to see you again.'

"Yeah. It's been too long."

As Blair put the phone down, Jim said, "You trust this guy?"

"Completely."

"Who is he?"

"Dr. Daniel Jackson. He's my... third cousin, I think it is. My grandfather and his grandmother were first cousins. So that would make Naomi and Claire second cousins. Claire married an archaeologist, and when Daniel was about eight his parents were both killed in an accident while they were setting up an exhibition in a museum in New York."

"Tough," Jim said.

"By then our grandmothers were all dead," Blair continued. "His maternal grandfather was an archaeologist too, and Daniel knew him quite well - he'd have been the obvious person to take Daniel, who by then had been to several digs with his parents, and knew how they worked - but old

man Ballard didn't want to know. Didn't want the responsibility - the tie. Naomi was out of the country when it happened, and Daniel had a couple of years in foster care before she came back to America and discovered where he was. She swept in, insisting that if his grandfather didn't want him, she - his cousin - did, and it would do both him and me - I was barely six at the time - good to grow up with a 'brother'."

He smiled a little ruefully and went on. "You think I'm smart? Rainier at sixteen, Masters before I was twenty? I'm totally intellectually challenged compared to Daniel. I know - at least well enough to get by - half a dozen languages. He knows about twenty - fluently. He chose to study archaeology, leaning towards specializing in ancient Egypt - which given that his parents were Egyptologists isn't surprising - with a minor in anthropology. When it was my turn to go to university, I decided to concentrate on anthropology, though we did cover some archaeology as well. And of course my interest was more Meso- and South American.

"I don't know all the details, but a few years ago he presented a paper that claimed the Pyramids were built by aliens - of course, Von Daniken's 'Chariots of the Gods' had come out a fair number of years earlier, and if it hadn't, Daniel's theories might have been taken more seriously. As it was, he was... well, laughed out of academia because of it. Not long after that, he dropped completely out of sight for the best part of a year, and when he surfaced again he'd taken a job as a civilian working with the Air Force. He lives in Colorado Springs, and works at the Cheyenne Mountain Complex. All he's ever said about his work is that it's classified, but I'd think at least part of what he does has to involve his knowledge of languages.

"Even if we decide against whatever he's offering, though, it's worth at least hearing what it is."

"If it's giving us some kind of protection from being grabbed and studied... yes," Jim said. "Definitely worth considering."

Because of his leg injury, Jim was still off work so he was free to make the trip to Colorado Springs without having to worry about getting time off at such short notice.

They decided to take a cab to the airport, since they didn't know how long they'd be away. 'Two or three days', Daniel had said, but knowing Daniel Blair had suggested they go prepared to stay for at least a week. Even so, they packed lightly.

Dropped off at the main entrance to the airport buildings, they headed inside, and had barely entered when - "Blair!"

Blair swung around, and the only reason he didn't drop his luggage was that it was slung securely over his shoulder. "Daniel!"

The two men hugged for a full minute before drawing apart to look at each other. "God, it's good to see you!" Daniel said.

Blair nodded. "And you. You're looking good."

"The result of clean living, cuz. You look tired, but that doesn't surprise me. Reporters been hassling you?"

"Not really - I was lucky, a minor political scandal surfaced locally the day after I gave that press conference, and the sharks mostly forgot about me - an unknown - and went after Councilman Barrett. In any case Jim was monitoring all the phone calls and discouraging the intrusive ones." He turned. "This is Jim. Jim Ellison - Daniel Jackson."

Daniel stuck his hand out. "Hi, Jim. Blair's told me a little about you - ex-army, now a cop - "

Jim shook the offered hand. "I'm afraid you have an advantage over me. Until your phone call yesterday, he hadn't mentioned you at all."

"That's Blair for you. Never says anything about himself or his family unless it's completely inconsequential." He glanced around, and an older man with greying hair stepped forward. "This is Jack O'Neill. Jack, my cousin Blair Sandburg - " Jack offered his hand and Blair shook it - "and his friend Jim Ellison." As Jim and Jack shook hands Daniel went on, "Jack's air force. I work with him. He insisted on coming with me - I think he had visions of me deciding to spend the day exploring Cascade with you instead of heading straight back."

He sounded as if he was joking, but Jack - Jim noted - didn't deny what Jim could only describe as 'an affectionate tease'.

When they reached the air force jet, Blair and Daniel settled down together, heads close as they talked. Jim and Jack looked at them, looked at each other, grinned and sat together.

"I understand you were Special Ops," Jack said.

Jim nodded. "Can't say much about it, though."

"Classified."

"Yeah. I understand from Blair that what you and Dr. Jackson do is also classified."

"Yes."

"I have to tell you - I'm not sure I want to re-up and go back into the kind of work I did back then. But I owe it to Blair to at least listen to what Daniel's offering."

"I can tell you this - what we do isn't remotely the same as anything you did in the army. A lot of it is exploratory, strange as that may seem. We work in teams, and every team includes at least one civilian - usually an archaeologist or anthropologist. As well as being in the initial exploratory team, Daniel is in charge of the civilian unit. He's been responsible for the hiring of a lot of them, and I know he's wanted Blair on board for a long time; but Blair had found his own... center of interest, and Daniel loves him too much to try to tempt him away from it."

Slightly uncomfortable with the way the conversation was going, Jim decided to change the subject. "Blair says Daniel speaks at least twenty languages?"

"Those are the ones he's fluent in. He can get by in at least twenty more, and he can pick up a new language, or a fairly obscure dialect of a language he knows, really fast. And that's a very useful ability."

Jim nodded. "Yes. When I was stuck in Peru, I sometimes met people from neighboring tribes, some of them very, very small tribes where everyone was related to everyone else, who didn't speak basic Quechua. Usually at least one of the tribesmen I was with could communicate with them but, especially in the early days when my Quechua was very limited, I sometimes wondered how much more I could have learned from them if I'd been able to speak directly to them."

"Communication is always a problem," Jack agreed. He grinned. "I assume you've met Naomi? No, silly question - of course you have, she was the one who sent Blair's dissertation to that publisher. Do you find it easy to communicate with her?"

"Not always," Jim admitted. "She still speaks the language of the hippie sixties, at least some of the time. Sometimes I suspected it was deliberate - she never could quite get past the cop thing."

"She can't really get past the air force thing either," Jack said, "but at least Daniel is just her cousin, even though she sort of brought him up. I can only imagine how much worse it was for Blair."

"She never seemed to realize..." Jim sighed. "It was always what she thought was best for Blair, never accepting that he was doing what he wanted to do. This last couple of days, I've been wondering..."

"If she had an ulterior motive in sending Blair's dissertation to her publisher friend?"

"Yeah - though as far as I know she didn't know what it was about. Blair doesn't think she knew - but I can't help but wonder... He trusted her, but that wasn't the first time she'd been left alone with his laptop, and he hadn't thought to password protect it, because he never took it out of the loft. So I wonder if that wasn't the first time she'd... well, broken into it, nosied into what he had on it. I suspect she hoped I'd react badly... and I did... but then Blair held that press conference and showed me what he'd do for me... I think Naomi realized then what a monumental mistake she'd made, but I wouldn't take any bets on it."

They fell silent as the plane sped on towards Colorado Springs.

If Jim felt somewhat nervous as the elevator took them to lower and lower levels in Cheyenne Mountain, none of his companions - not even Blair, who knew him so well - could be sure of it. Blair himself wasn't too happy as the elevator dropped lower and lower. When it finally stopped, Blair asked, "Just how many levels down are we?"

"You don't want to know," Daniel told him.

"Hey, it's heights I have a problem with," Blair protested weakly. Daniel didn't need to know that - although it wasn't actually a phobia - some three years previously he had developed a dislike of elevators too.

"Well, if you will fall out of trees," Daniel retorted.

"It wasn't my fault that branch was rotten."

"And we don't have any rotten branches down here," Daniel said.

"You sound as if you've both said all that before now," Jim said.

Blair grinned. "If not that, exactly, something like it. He accepts I'm afraid of heights, but doesn't quite understand it, so he teases me about it."

"We've fixed up a room for you along here," Daniel said. "You don't mind being together, I hope?"

"I think that we'll both be happier if we are," Blair told him.

Daniel led the way along a corridor, with Jack bringing up the rear, almost at Jim's side but half a pace behind. "There'll be a guard on your door," Jack said. "Nothing personal, it's routine while you're just visiting."

"I understand that," Jim said, his tone making it clear that he also understood the significance of Jack's position that half-pace to the rear... as well as the private who was following three or four yards behind them.

Daniel stopped at a door. "Here you are," he said. "General Hammond will see you as soon as he can, but it might be an hour or so. Get yourselves settled in, and Blair, I'll see you later."

The last thing Blair noticed as they went into the room was the private who had been following them taking up a position just outside the door.

In fact it was less than half an hour before there was a knock at the door; when Blair opened it, the private said, "I'm to take you to see General Hammond now, sir."

They followed him, Blair at least convinced within a very few seconds that if they did accept Daniel's job offer they would need a guide for the first two or three weeks if their remains, mummifying in the dry heat of the place, weren't to be discovered months later in some obscure corridor that led only to seldom accessed store rooms.

Finally their guide stopped at a door, knocked and opened it. They went in, and the private closed the door behind them.

There were four people waiting for them; Daniel, Jack, a woman, and an older man who had to be General Hammond.

Blair grinned cheerfully at them; beside him, Jim remained alert for a possible trap. Just because Blair trusted Daniel, just because he quite liked Jack, it didn't mean he could trust anyone else here.

Daniel said, "Hello again. This is General Hammond and Major Sam Carter. General, my cousin Blair Sandburg and ex-Ranger Captain Jim Ellison."

"Hello, gentlemen. Have a seat." He waited until they sat before continuing, "Captain, the non-disclosure statement you signed years ago still holds; you, Mr. Sandburg, as I'm sure Dr. Jackson has told you, will have to sign one."

Daniel pushed a paper and a pen over to Blair, who picked the paper up and read it. As he did, Daniel repeated what he had said earlier. "What we do here is top secret, but it doesn't go against the values Naomi taught us to respect and follow."

Blair finished reading, looked at Daniel who nodded reassuringly, picked up the pen and scrawled his signature. He pushed the paper back to Daniel, who passed it on to Hammond.

"Carry on, Doctor," Hammond said, but before Daniel could say anything a big dark-skinned man with an emblem - not a tattoo - attached somehow to his forehead entered the room through a different door. Almost instantly Jim stiffened, staring at the man suspiciously.

"This is Teal'c," Daniel said quietly. "He's the living proof of what I'm about to tell you. He's not from Earth - his native planet is called Chulak."

He swung into what Blair was to realize later was a 'Stargate for Dummies' explanation of what the Stargate was, what the people working on the Stargate project did.

Daniel looked at his cousin as he started speaking. "Part of what I was doing, Blair, that year I was completely out of touch, was learning what planets are in the Stargate system from the records held on one of those other planets. The Abydos cartouche proved invaluable for giving us the addresses for other planets in the system. It's like... you can only travel by train to stations served by the railway system, and you need to know which towns have stations.

"Our remit is to visit other planets, make contact with their inhabitants, establish friendly contact if we can. We - " he gestured around the table - "are the first contact team. If you accept the job offer, you'll be in one of the follow-up teams. The opportunity for anthropological study is tremendous, though obviously you can't publish anything just yet; but you can write papers and have them dated and stored against the day when knowledge of the Stargate is made public - which it will be, eventually. And while Jim's abilities would be of considerable value in first contact, they'd also be extremely valuable in the follow-up work."

Jim and Blair looked at each other, each knowing that the other was interested.

"I'll be honest, it's not totally safe. There's danger to Earth - indeed, to much of the galaxy - from an inimical race of parasites called Goa'uld. They look rather like snakes, but snakes with teeth. As juveniles, they're symbiotic," Daniel explained. "The juveniles can, and do, live... well, wild, in some places, but once they mature they force themselves on a host as parasites, lock onto the host's nervous system and take over the body.

"The Goa'uld raided Earth several thousand years ago and set themselves up as gods in Egypt; but they also kidnapped groups from other places on Earth, moved them to other planets and left them there as... well, colonists. Many of those 'colonies' are still living the way their forefathers did, hundreds - even thousands - of years ago.

"The whole purpose of 'seeding' planets with humans was so that they could 'harvest' them for hosts, always selecting young, strong, good-looking victims. They're still doing that in some places - as a host ages, the parasite abandons that body and takes over a new one. If he's unlucky, the host will live on for a while, racked by the memories of what the Goa'uld used his body to do. If he's lucky, he'll die quickly."

"If these Goa'uld look like snakes... how can they identify 'good-looking' in a human?" Blair asked.

Daniel looked at him for a moment in silence, as if the question had left him at a loss for words. "I suppose that at first they didn't, but they have access to their hosts' minds, so over time they'd begin to recognize what humans consider good-looking," he said, and swung back into his 'recruiting blurb'. "We're not sure just what an adult Goa'uld's lifespan is, but there's some evidence that at least some of the ones that were active in Egypt several thousand years ago are still alive today. And we know that mature Goa'uld will kill young ones before they can take a host, to prevent... well, competition. They don't want too many ambitious youngsters around."

"Sometimes the Goa'uld were active on a planet for a while, but then moved on and left it to its own devices, and you'd be surprised how much many of those tribes have forgotten - except that the gods might one day return through the chapa'ai - that's what pretty well everyone out there calls the Stargate. And just occasionally one of the System Lords does remember about a planet that's been ignored for several centuries, and pays it a visit. We've had a few run-ins with them."

There was a note in his voice that made Blair say, "Not all of them ended well?"

"Not all of them ended well," Daniel agreed. "We do have allies out there, though - there are one or two very advanced races in the galaxy. We've got a pretty good relationship with the Asgard, for example."

"Even for follow-up teams it can be dangerous. Wouldn't be the first time a follow-up team has run into difficulties because they weren't expecting trouble. You'll need to be armed - "

He was interrupted by the ringing of a cell phone.

Blair slapped his hand against his pocket, pulled out his phone and checked the caller display.

"Sorry," he muttered, and looked at Jim before glancing at Hammond. "It's Simon - Jim's boss. I'd better answer."

Hammond nodded, and Blair raised the phone to his ear. "Sandburg."

'Thank goodness,' Simon said. 'You and Jim camping or something?'

"Or something. We're visiting my cousin. Is there a problem?"

'Yeah. I've just had a visit from a pretty high-ranking army officer, wanting to know where Jim is. He admitted he'd already been to the loft, only you weren't there. Sounded as if he didn't believe your press conference. I think... I think the pair of you would be better not coming back.'

"You're on your cell phone, of course?"

'Yes.'

"One of us will call you back in a few minutes." He clicked the phone off, and looked at Hammond.  
"Daniel said that if we joined you, we'd be protected?"

"We answer directly to the President," Hammond said. "You work for us, it becomes treason for anyone to interfere with you."

"What's wrong?" Daniel asked.

"The army just turned up in Cascade looking for me - and that probably means for both of us," Jim said.

"They didn't believe the press conference either?" Daniel showed no surprise at Jim's tacit admission that he'd heard the Cascade end of the conversation.

"Looks that way," Jim said. "Coincidences do happen, but... "

Jim and Blair looked at each other for a moment again, then Blair nodded, and turned to Hammond.  
"You've got yourself a sentinel-guide pair, General. It's not just because of... " He waved the phone.  
"We were already very interested. This just gave us the final push to reach a decision quickly."

"We work for you, we're with the air force?" Jim asked.

"We're actually a combined unit, with personnel from all branches of the service, plus civilians," Hammond said, "but yes, you can tell your boss that you'll be with the air force."

"Can I say Cheyenne Mountain?"

"Yes."

Jim pulled out his own cell phone, and hit the speed dial for Simon. The call was answered on the first ring.

'Banks.'

"Hi, Simon, it's Jim. If the army comes calling again, you can tell them that we've accepted a job with the air force, based in Cheyenne Mountain."

'Blair as well?'

"Yes."

'He said you were visiting his cousin... '

"Yes - his cousin works here." Jim could practically see Simon shaking his head at that. "Simon, can I ask you to take charge of the loft? Get a removal firm to pack everything up, and find an estate agent to sell it. I'll contact you once we know where we'll be staying - "

'I think Rafe and Connor might be interested in buying it,' Simon said. 'They announced their engagement this morning.'

"Pass on our congratulations," Jim said. "Okay, if they're interested - get a valuation, and if they're happy with that, it's theirs."



"We'll be in touch later, but we're pretty tied up at the moment - "

'You are satisfied that you haven't jumped into the fire?'

"Yes. I can't tell you anything about the job - "

'If it's in Cheyenne Mountain, it's classified, right?'

"Right. But from what we've been told, it's a valuable job, and I'll be able to use my... talents openly. And Simon - thanks - from both of us." He hung up. He turned his attention back to Hammond.

"Sorry about that, sir, but Simon - Captain Banks - has been a good friend and he was understandably concerned."

"He knew about your senses?" Hammond asked.

"Pretty well from the beginning," Jim admitted.

"Anyone else?"

"One of the other detectives we worked with realized when we were on a case together, and maybe three others had an idea but didn't actually know for certain; for two or three reasons we gave the Chief of Police and the DA a modified admission, a couple of days ago, playing down the level of my abilities. My father knew. Apart from them... nobody. It was safer to keep it a secret."

"Brackett," Blair said.

"I'd forgotten about him," Jim muttered. "An ex-CIA agent. He's currently in Leavenworth for trying to steal a top-secret plane. It's possible he told the army that my sentinel abilities are genuine, hoping to get a reduction in his sentence."

"It doesn't necessarily work that way," Hammond said. "I know we're a covert group, but that's mainly because... Can you imagine the widespread panic there would be if the world knew about the Goa'uld? Thousands of years ago, people accepted what they could do as magic, and bowed obediently before the gods because they had no way of escaping; today, people almost everywhere at least know that technology exists; one look and they'd be screaming about weapons of mass destruction and rushing for the nearest car, train or plane to take them away from the invaders. Quite apart from direct casualties, millions would die in the panic."

Jack nodded his agreement. "Ideally we need to find some way to negate the Goa'uld threat permanently," he said, "but the advanced races of the Galaxy haven't been able to find any way to do that - "

"And one of those races is kin to the Goa'uld," Daniel added. "The Tokra share their hosts' bodies and from everything we've been able to discover from the one or two we know well, the symbiotic nature of the juvenile is totally retained, and the two work in harmony. With the Goa'uld, as soon as they hit adulthood they... well... "

"Develop delusions of grandeur?" Blair suggested.

"You could put it that way," Daniel agreed.

"Some of the covert agencies, though," Hammond said, "might promise your Brackett a beach front property on Venus if he spilled some beans, and then totally fail to make good on it - they'd leave him exactly where he is."

"If he's credulous enough to believe in a beach front property on Venus he deserves to be left exactly where he is," Blair muttered, knowing that only Jim would hear him, "but I do know what Hammond means." He was rewarded by a slight twitch of Jim's lips.

"You'll both need a short training period to establish your level of fitness as well as learn about the weapons we use," Hammond went on briskly with a quick glance at Blair. "Don't take this the wrong way, son, but... In Detective Ellison's case it's probably not necessary, but we've never found that the... er... well... "

"The geek squad," Jack said. "We've hardly ever found that the geeks are fit enough when they arrive, and in most cases they're not much use with guns either."

"Sandburg's fit enough," Jim said. "And he's lethal with things like vending machines, fire hoses and baseballs. Not sure about guns, though."

"Who needs guns when you've got a fire hose or a handy vending machine?" Blair asked.

"I don't think I've seen either on any of the planets we've visited." Somehow Daniel managed to keep his face straight.

"So we just make sure he has half a dozen baseballs in his pack," Jim said, even as he noticed Carter leaning towards Teal'c, who had a slightly bemused expression on his face, murmuring something, but out of politeness he chose not to listen.

"Seriously, though, Blair," Daniel went on, "you'll need to be armed, but we have an alternative to a gun. A zat just stuns - at least, one shot stuns. A second one kills - and if you're facing a Goa'uld or a Jaffa - those are the people who make up the Goa'ulds' armies - take that second shot. You wouldn't hesitate to kill... oh, a mosquito, would you? It's much the same thing, even though it looks like a person. The host would beg you to give him that mercy, if he could. And the Jaffa would mostly do anything their 'god' orders them to."

"That sounds like a weapon that'd be very useful for the cops," Blair said. "How long between shots before the second shot counts as just a stun?"

"We've never had much reason to find out," Carter, having finished whatever she had been explaining to Teal'c, commented.

"If they are still unconscious when they are hit again, they will die," Teal'c said. "If they have regained consciousness, they will simply be stunned again."

Blair nodded. "Makes sense," he muttered.

"But even if a zat is your weapon of choice, you still need to be trained in the use of conventional weapons," Hammond said.

Blair sighed, knowing that if he had decided to go to the Academy, he would have been in exactly the same position, but without the alternative of a weapon that merely stunned.

Their training period was actually quite short. In Jim's case it was a complete formality, as everyone had known it would be. In Blair's case, it proved to be more of a formality than even Jim had expected. He had known that Blair was fit. He had known that Blair's aim - when he threw something - was totally accurate. He hadn't realized that Blair's aim with a gun was as good as it turned out to be. Even Daniel expressed some surprise at Blair's accuracy with a gun.

Blair grinned. "Daniel, I never said I didn't know how to shoot," he said. "All of your expeditions were to Egypt, where the most dangerous animal you were likely to encounter was a scorpion - and no, I'm not minimizing the danger from them, but it's not practical to try to shoot one. Some of the expeditions I was on - you're talking wilderness, not quite uncharted jungle, but close to it. There are often dangerous animals, and I'm not talking about the obvious predators. A wild pig can be lethal."

"A pig?" Jack said.

Jim nodded. "Blair's right - when I was with the Chopek, I saw a hunter injured by a wild pig. The rest of us managed to kill it before Chimalli was hurt too badly, but there was no way that animal was anything but completely aggressive."

"So I learned how to shoot straight as defense against..." Blair grinned suddenly, and glanced at Jim. "Against the pigs." He was well aware of Jim's silent groan, and knew from Daniel's matching grin that his cousin had recognized the reference, though it was obvious that all the others had taken the comment at face value.

New personnel were temporarily attached to a team to give them experience before getting their permanent position, but never more than one per team. But because of what they were, Jim and Blair had to be assigned together. And whatever team they were assigned to would have to be told exactly why Ellison and Sandburg had to be together... and while it wasn't necessary to keep Ellison's abilities secret, it was something that was probably best left at 'need to know'.

Hammond thought about it for several minutes, before deciding to assign the two to SG1. It made sense - the members of SG1 already knew about Ellison's abilities, and O'Neill was a man who didn't take long to assess just how good someone would be in the field; though Hammond had no doubt that Ellison, as an ex-army ranger, was good. He was a little less sure about Sandburg, although Ellison seemed confident enough of him. And while Jackson also seemed confident that Sandburg could do whatever was asked of him, Hammond wasn't about to forget that the two were cousins. It was unlikely, but Jackson could be seeing what he wanted to see.

The five men and one woman gathered in the gateroom several minutes ahead of their scheduled departure time; even Daniel, who normally arrived at pretty well the last minute, was there well ahead of time, escorting the two new men.

While they waited, Jim and Blair stood close together, Blair murmuring something too quietly for the others to hear.

"Remember to keep everything dialed down to normal, or even a little below normal," he was saying. "Nothing about the wormhole is natural. Even Teal'c said it feels weird at first, though you do get used to it. But people have reacted badly on their first few trips through it. You don't want to arrive feeling disoriented or nauseated."

Jim nodded as Jack said, "Right, then, campers, let's go!"

Sam and Teal'c went first; Jack indicated that Jim and Blair should follow them, and he and Daniel brought up the rear.

As they arrived at the other end of the wormhole, Blair was wishing that he could dial down his senses; he swallowed and took a deep breath of air that somehow didn't smell quite right, before glancing at Jim.

Jim seemed to have come through the experience without any great problem. "Okay?" Blair murmured.

"Yeah, but I'm glad I had everything dialed down," Jim replied.

Blair took another deep breath, trying to identify just what the air smelled like. None of the seasoned members of the team made any comment; it was Jim who said, "Problem, Chief?"

"The air... it doesn't smell the same... "

"You've been on expeditions to jungle regions - does the air smell the same there as it does in Cascade?"

"Of course!" Blair said. "It's \*fresh\* air, not tainted with the smell of gas... "

"All planets smell slightly different anyway," Daniel said. "Something to do with the different plants growing on them, different levels of trace elements in the soil... It's nothing to worry about."

"Okay," Blair said. "Now what?"

"There's the ruins of a settlement a mile or so that way - " Daniel glanced at the Stargate to orient himself, and gestured towards the left. "It seems to have been pretty standard practice to have people living close to the Stargate so that visitors could be checked out, provided with an escort if necessary. If there are no longer people living nearby - and I don't see any paths - either the planet hasn't been visited by the Goa'uld for quite some time, the people were moved elsewhere, or else they've just died out."

"Died out?" Blair asked.

"Disease, famine... These were never large communities to start with, so there would inevitably have been inbreeding; and some kinds of congenital weakness... well, inside a few generations there mightn't be enough healthy adults for the colony to survive."

"But we've sometimes found valuable info in towns on deserted planets, so it's still worth checking the place."

"Right, you two," Jack said. "Stay with Daniel - "

"Isn't that a waste of Jim's abilities?" Blair asked mildly.

Jack looked at him. "Right," he said. "I forgot about that. All right, Ellison - what can you tell us?"

Blair reached out and laid his hand on Jim's shoulder. Jim concentrated for a minute, then relaxed. "I can't detect any sign of people, or even animals of any size. I'd say it's totally safe."

"Then let's head off."

The woodland surrounding the Stargate was very open, and they set off at a fairly brisk pace, Teal'c dropping slightly behind, despite Jim's assurance that it was safe, to guard their rear.

The settlement - if it could even be dignified with the name because it looked more like a fairly large farm - was indeed a ruin.

It consisted of only three or four one-story buildings which were - or had been - solidly constructed out of stone. They had undoubtedly been built to last, but time and weather had combined with neglect to leave all but one with collapsing walls and roofs. If there had ever been more buildings, time had totally destroyed them.

The party paused on the edge of the 'village', studying it. Finally Daniel said, "The ruined ones were abandoned first, as people died or moved away, while the one in the center was probably still occupied for quite some time." It was quite a big building, the only one that was still completely intact.

"But..." Blair said.

"But?" Jack asked.

Blair moved a few yards away from the others, to look at the buildings from a slightly different angle. "The big building looks as if it was built - or more likely reinforced - for defense; a lot of the windows are blocked. I don't think it was occupied, in this form, for more than a few years - relatively speaking - after the other ones were abandoned. I'm wondering if something attacked the place, and the people all moved into the central house, maybe because it could be better defended. Maybe even robbed out part of the other houses to get the material to block the windows."

"If this place was seeded by the Goa'uld, the people might have been afraid of them, but they wouldn't have tried to defend themselves against their gods," Daniel said.

"You said yourself that sometimes the Goa'uld forgot about a planet," Blair replied. "Maybe they forgot this one, and this was an enemy that arrived... later. I was going to say unexpectedly, but the people had time to build defenses."

"Or maybe the weather changed, and the defense was against really bad weather?" Sam suggested.

"I'd guess the weather was never all that good," Jim said. "When wood is plentiful, people don't go to the effort to build in stone unless the weather - at least in the winter - is pretty foul."

Daniel nodded his agreement. "Wattle and daub, mud bricks or their equivalent, were the regular building materials for most of the general population in most of the groups that were taken from Earth. Even though the trees are fairly sparse, it's possible they cleared a wide strip around where they planned to build for farming, and that wood would have been available to them for building."

"And thatched roofs," Blair added. "Splitting stone for tiles - far too labor intensive if there's a simpler alternative. And the ground is pretty flat. How far would they have had to go to get stone?"

"Well, they obviously felt it was worth it. Now let's see what's inside it," Jack said. He strode over to the door, and tried to open it. It wouldn't move. "Seems to be wedged closed," he muttered. "Teal'c -"

He stepped back, and Teal'c moved forwards a little, raised his staff weapon and fired it at the door.

Blair looked at the resulting hole. "Thorough," he said.

Jack moved forward, Jim and Teal'c close behind him. Blair glanced at Daniel, shrugged, and then, with Sam close behind them, they followed the others.

They found themselves in a small room. The daylight coming in from the doorway was sufficient to show two doors leading from it. Jack moved forward again and tried one of them; it opened to reveal another small room. Inside, they could just make out a table with a bench on each side.

"I'd guess the room here was some kind of guardroom," Jim said. "There would be one, maybe two, sentries. The rest of their squad would be in there, as backup in case of trouble." Jack nodded his agreement.

As Jack closed the door, Jim moved to the other one. It opened onto what appeared to be a corridor running the length of the building, but the light from the doorway wasn't enough to show more than a few yards of it. Blair reached into his pack and took out a small flashlight that, when he switched it on, proved to be more powerful than its size suggested. He shone it down the corridor.

It was typical of any corridor anywhere; several doors on each side, and at its end, one more door.

The first two doors on each side opened onto small, empty rooms; they carried on down the corridor. The third door on the left opened into a relatively large room... full of skeletons, many of them partly covered by the remains of clothing.

"Ssss..." Jack couldn't prevent his hiss of surprise. "Now this is odd. They can't have been prisoners - not with the door unlocked."

As Daniel moved forward, Blair at his heels, he said, "I think they were hiding in here, just waiting to die."

"Ya think?" Jack asked.

"Look at the way they're lying," Blair said. He indicated a group of three, one noticeably smaller than the other two. "Look at them. They've got their arms around each other. I'd guess this was a husband and wife and their kid - as if they were trying to comfort each other. And there, and there, and there - " He indicated other groups. "They fastened the outside door, so I'd guess there was something out there they were terrified of, then they just gathered in here in family groups and waited, knowing they were going to starve to death. Probably some of the other rooms are the same."

"But... " Sam began.

"I think Blair's right," Daniel said. "They weren't afraid of dying, but there was something outside they didn't want to face."

"It is unlikely to have been the Goa'uld," Teal'c said, echoing Daniel's earlier comment. "They may have feared their gods, but they would know that when they visited, the 'gods' would select a few of their number to take away, then leave the rest of the population unharmed. Those left would know that the 'gods' would not return for possibly another generation."

"Then what?" Jim asked. "I couldn't detect any large animals - "

"How would you know?" Jack asked.

"Heartbeats," Jim said. "I'm aware of the sound of heartbeats, usually just as a dull background noise unless I concentrate. The bigger the animal, the slower the heartbeat. We've never been able to establish my exact range, but here, with no other sounds getting in the way, I'd say that there's nothing bigger than a rabbit for at least half a mile in all directions."

"You can hear that far?" Sam gasped.

"No traffic noise, anything like that," Blair said. "No people other than us. Back home, Jim has to concentrate hard to hear easily further than... oh, maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty yards. Normally, he has to be careful not to concentrate that hard. Think about it - you're standing waiting to cross the road, there's steady traffic noise - and then suddenly someone thinks another driver has cut him off, blasts his horn - "

"Completely deafens him?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Heightened senses are a great help - sometimes. Other times they're a terrible disadvantage. It took me a while to realize that," Blair added softly.

"And once you did? Those dials were a great idea," Jim said.

Blair flushed a little; almost embarrassed by Jim's open admission. "Thanks," he muttered.

They left that room and tried the next. It was the same; skeletons gathered in small groups, in positions that suggested comforting hugs.

"They gave up," Daniel murmured. "What would make them give up, and just wait like that to die?"

"Not weather," Blair said. "They wouldn't have needed to secure the outside door against weather."

"It's possible there were big animals here at one time," Jim suggested, "but they've either died out or moved away."

They carried on checking the building, finding two more rooms containing skeletons. The rest of the rooms were completely empty.

"Well, there's nothing here," Jack said as they went back towards the doorway. "Nothing worth salvaging - and I'm not sure there's anything you could use either, Danny."

Daniel sighed. "I think you're right," he said, and glanced at Blair. "Sorry," he went on. "I'd hoped that this first planet would give you a better idea of what we do."

"Negative results are still results," Blair said.

They went back to the outside door, looked around the ruins one last time and started off in the direction of the Stargate.

Although there didn't seem to be any great reason to hurry, the group walked briskly, all anxious to leave the mystery of this world as quickly as possible. They had covered roughly half of the distance when Jim raised his head sharply and swung around to look back the way they had come - but also up towards the sky.

"Take shelter!" he yelled. "Get close to a tree - now!" He grabbed Blair's arm and began running for the nearest tree. The others - used to sudden danger - reacted immediately, also heading for nearby trees, although none of them were sure why Jim had called the warning.

And then they saw it - plunging out of the sky, wings swept backwards, claws reaching forwards, was a massive bird. There was no doubting that this was a major predator.

With its potential prey sheltering, it opened its wings to swoop upwards again. Teal'c swung his staff weapon up, and fired. The bird crashed to the ground.

They moved cautiously towards it. "Wow!" Blair said.

The curved beak, over a foot in length, was well designed to tear meat from a carcass. The talons were almost as long. Any animal they grasped would die very quickly.

"I think we know now what the natives were hiding from," Jim said. "Death from starvation was probably better than becoming prey for those things."

"But why would the Goa'uld plant a colony on a world with a predator like this?" Sam wondered.

"Stargate," Jack said firmly. "Now. We can discuss this once we're safe. Jim, you heard this thing coming?"

"Yes."

"Keep listening. Where there's one, there are bound to be others."

They set off again at a steady jog.



The Stargate stood in a fairly large clearing, the DHD, as usual, a few yards from it. As they reached it, Jack said, "Anything?"

"I think there's another one coming, but it's still a fair distance away."

"Teal'c - "

The big Jaffa nodded, standing ready with his staff weapon. Sam moved forward and punched in the chevrons to take them home.

As the event horizon steadied, Jim said urgently, "It's coming - starting to dive... "

"Move!" Jack snapped.

The six bundled through the gate. Teal'c remained standing on guard until the others were through, then stepped quickly through himself as the bird swooped down, barely missing him.

Back in the gateroom, Hammond met the returning travelers.

"That didn't take you long," he said.

"There was nothing there except a lot of bodies," Jack said, "and some oversized budgies."

"I see. Debriefing in half an hour," Hammond told them.

Teal'c headed for his quarters, while the remaining five went to the mess for a quick coffee to fill the time before the debriefing - in any case, all felt the need for some kind of pick-me-up, and caffeine fitted the bill nicely. Although they spoke only of inconsequentials, all were thinking about the puzzle of P9X-173.

"All right," Hammond said as he looked from one to the other of the group sitting around the table. "Report."

"Like I said," Jack replied. "Bodies and - "

"We went to the settlement detected by the MALP," Daniel interrupted. "It was a ruin, though there was one building still intact. Inside it we found a lot of skeletons - how many would you say, Blair? Three hundred?"

"Mmm... I'd have said over three hundred," Blair said, "but possibly not as many as four."

"The way they were lying, it appeared that the people had gathered in the building and just waited to die. There was nothing to indicate why, but when we were on our way back to the Stargate we were attacked by a very big bird of prey. Teal'c killed it and we carried on; just as we were leaving the planet we were attacked by another one."

"When you say 'very big' - ?" Hammond asked.

"It was big enough to have carried any one of us away," Sam said. "There's supposed to be a limit on how big birds can be and still fly; this was far, far bigger than the biggest flying bird you'd find on Earth. Think eagle multiplied by about ten."

"And the birds were probably why the natives shut themselves into a building and just waited to die," Daniel finished. "They'd probably lost a few of their number to the birds, knew there was no way they could defend themselves, and chose the more peaceful death of starvation."

"Though thirst would have taken them much quicker," Blair said.

"But the buildings were of stone," Jack said. "Somehow they'd managed to build stone houses - "

"If a System Lord, or even a minor Goa'uld, had lived there, he would have had the stone buildings constructed for himself and his Jaffa, while his subjects lived in wooden huts," Teal'c said. "He would not have cared how difficult it was to collect stone to build his palace and the outlying buildings for his army of Jaffa. His slaves would have lived in rough wood-built huts. After he left - probably some years after he left - they probably risked moving into the houses built for the Jaffa."

"Then what happened to the Goa'uld and his Jaffa? You proved that a staff weapon could kill one of those things - "

"There are several possibilities," Teal'c said. "First, the Goa'uld discovered that the planet had too few resources to exploit, and his Jaffa were having to devote too much time to defending the people from attack, and abandoned it. Second, the Goa'uld was himself attacked by one more powerful and defeated, but the planet, with few resources and a small population of humans, held nothing that the victor wanted, and so he ignored it. Without the protection of their god, the people then had no defense against the birds. Third, punishment. If a community - or even a handful of the people in it - displeased their 'god', he would find some way to punish them all. In many cases that meant killing, not only the ones considered to be troublemakers, but also their entire families, and sometimes some unrelated individuals as well. Some Goa'uld were quite... imaginative in how they went about that. This world could have been used by one of those.

"Possibly the birds were not native to the planet; the people had for some reason angered the Goa'uld, and to punish them he had some of the birds taken there, whichever world they originally came from, then he and his Jaffa left. For a few years, until the numbers of the birds multiplied, there would be no real problem for the people, but once they did... And the people would know it was possible to pass through the chapa'ai, but they would not have known how to operate it; an additional punishment in the form of mental torture - knowing there was a way to escape, but one they were unable to use."

"Well, okay, but we've never come across a world with anything like those birds," Jack said.

"There are many worlds that do not have a chapa'ai, and can only be visited by ships," Teal'c said.

"That makes sense," Blair said. "Big predators need relatively large prey, and Jim said there weren't any big animals on P-whatever, at least where we were. Of course the birds'd go for man as the biggest prey around. And birds of prey have fantastic eyesight. They probably spotted us from miles

away, and thought 'Yippee!' A nice juicy man would make a big change from constantly hunting small prey."

"All that is speculation," Hammond said. He looked at Jack. "Your conclusions?"

"I'd say we lock this planet out of the system. There didn't seem to be any resources in the immediate vicinity of the Stargate that we could use, and the birds mean it's not a good idea to make further exploration by any follow-up teams."

Hammond nodded acceptance of Jack's opinion.

As Jim and Blair got ready for bed that night, Blair asked, "Think we made the right choice?"

"I don't think there was any other choice we could have made," Jim replied. "But I'm quite glad we'll be in a follow-up team once our training period with SG1 is over. I know you'll probably worry a bit about Daniel - "

"Yeah, I will," Blair agreed. "I didn't realize, when they were telling us about things, just how dangerous it could be, especially for the first contact team. I know now."

"Yes," Jim agreed. "It could be dangerous - but it certainly won't be boring."



BY FRANSCATS

ARTWORK BY BETH

Blair glanced across the Major Crimes Police Department bullpen and sighed. Detective Jim Ellison was sitting there, studying his computer screen, and methodically writing up his notes from his most recent case. It was a bizarre case that involved a man trying to ship his best friend overseas, in a crate! Unfortunately, neither the friend nor the shipped man seemed to understand: that crates are inspected before leaving the country, that shipping someone through customs without a passport to some island in the south pacific so he could have a vacation was illegal, and that almost air tight crates don't leave enough oxygen to breathe. Equally unfortunate was the fact that Jim was at the airport dropping off Naomi (she had spent a week with them celebrating the upcoming solstice, Blair didn't want to consider what Jim thought of that) when the crate was brought to the curb. Jim, with his highly sensitive sentinel nose, could smell what everyone else couldn't; the dead body inside. As the officer on the scene, and since the crate had not yet made it into the airport where federal authorities would be in charge of the package, Jim was handed the case. Of course the friend, in near panic, had taken off and Jim took three days to track him down at his girlfriend's house and bring him in. He was charged with a bevy of crimes and Jim was just finishing up the paperwork.

Sighing again, Blair considered the man in front of him. He wanted Jim! There was no other way to put it. He was in love with his roommate and had been at least since their return from Peru after saving Simon Banks, Jim's friend and Captain, and Simon's son, Daryl. Watching Jim in the jungle, seeing him dressed as a warrior - hot, sweaty, dirty and dangerous - had done something to Blair's libido. Since then, Jim had become the star of all of Blair's late-night fantasies. Others noticed that since Peru Blair was not dating much - Rafe had even commented on it - but they chalked it up to the grad student being busy with work and the end-of-semester crunch. Jim didn't comment at all, and sometimes Blair wondered if he even noticed.

Considering the police department's own version of Adonis thoughtfully, Blair decided it was time to methodically seduce the man. After all, Blair was a master of seduction and Jim was not homophobic. Blair was 99% certain that Jim wouldn't be outraged by a male lover. Blair had drawn this conclusion after some careful, if somewhat covert, testing. He had initially noticed Jim didn't have any gay friends (that he was aware of anyway) and thought Jim might have some problems with the gay lifestyle which would squash any potential relationship Blair could initiate. On the other hand, Jim's careers first as an army ranger and then as a cop weren't the most likely places to find people living alternate lifestyles, so the lack of gay friends might be more an environmental factor than anything else. To test the waters, Blair had introduced Jim to friends who were in a committed relationship. It hadn't bothered Jim at all that they were homosexual. He acted no differently when the pair came to dinner and later, when Blair had asked Jim about his opinion, Jim had replied that it was no big deal and what happened between consenting adults was none of his business as long as it didn't involve anything illegal. Taking Jim at his word, Blair decided it was time to seduce the detective and, as Jim was a sentinel with five heightened senses, Blair knew he could bombard the detective's senses and get reactions that he couldn't from anyone else. And, if anyone knew how to bombard...

There was an old adage that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach and Blair decided he would start there. Jim was super sensitive to foods but he was also super responsive to foods and so Blair picked some that he knew were considered aphrodisiacs: oysters, garlic, almonds, chocolate and honey. Of course, he couldn't serve them all at once; people would think he's nuts. He would have to be far more subtle and build the momentum as he went along. That was why he showed up at Major Crimes on a late Friday afternoon three days before Christmas, and the last day before Jim's vacation, carrying a bowl of honey roasted almonds and a tray of homemade Italian struffoli (a dessert of small balls coated in honey and colorful sprinkles). Putting both sweet confections on Jim's desk, he smiled at his partner as several of the detectives looked over with envy in their eyes and moved closer to Jim's desk, eyeing the tray and bowl.

"Hey Jim, I have these recipes that I got years ago for Christmas treats and thought you might like some to get you through your last day before vacation."

"Thanks, Chief," Jim smiled at Blair, reaching for a few of the almonds before turning back to his work. He downed the nuts, not really paying attention, and then rose, paperwork in hand, to deliver the forms to the DA's mailbox. "I'll be back in a few," he informed Blair who watched Jim's retreating figure before turning and making a beeline for the break room to get some coffee.

Twenty minutes later, Jim poked his head in the break room door where Blair was sipping some coffee. It had taken Blair ten minutes to find the coffee and then another five to wash the pot and run the coffee through it, so he was just sipping his first cup when Jim came next to him and reached for the pot. "Hey, how did you like the struffoli?" he asked, as Jim poured some coffee and milk into his cup.

"Haven't tried it yet. I just got back from the DA. I needed some coffee to try it with," he smiled as he took the cup and headed for his desk, Blair following. In the bullpen everyone was deeply absorbed in their work, eyes shying away, when Jim strode to his desk and looked down at ... the empty tray and bowl before glancing around. Blair behind him stared down in equal shock.

"What?" he asked Jim.

Jim shook his head with a slight, good-natured chuckle and looked to Joel, his nostrils flaring for a moment. "How was the struffoli?" he asked. The large Bomb Squad Captain smiled back, patting his stomach, with some embarrassment.

"Really good," he admitted. "Ah, thanks," he offered before turning to Blair. "If you make stuff like this all the time you can come and live with me and my wife, Blair." Blair gave a tight smile back as Rafe and H seconded Joel's comment and Jim sat back down, pushing the empty tray and bowl away somewhat dispiritedly as he continued his work.

Looking over his partner, Blair shook his head. The honey and almonds hadn't worked unless he wanted to go live with Joel. Still he had other foods for Jim.

That night, Jim walked into the loft very late and dropped onto the couch with a sigh of relief, the grad student following. It had been a long week for Jim, culminating in a sixteen hour shift today. Jim had spent the week working late to close cases and spending evenings getting a lot of paperwork finished up while dodging most office Christmas parties. The work needed to be done because Jim was scheduled for a vacation from December 23rd till the Monday following New Year's and he didn't want to have to think about paperwork during the break.

And Blair wanted to make the time off into a little romantic vacation for them - not Jim and some long legged, redheaded, criminal-bimbo. Turning to the fridge, Blair retrieved two beers and walking over handed one to his partner who rested his head back against the couch, closing his eyes, relieved that he was now officially on vacation.

"I know you're tired, I'll make dinner tonight," Blair offered with a glance at the time. Could it really be ten o'clock?

"Thanks but why don't we just order in, my treat."

Blair thought about the oysters, garlic butter and decadent chocolate dessert he had waiting in the wings, and then looked over at Jim. He could do the dinner tomorrow night. Jim didn't have any plans that he was aware of and, yes, he did keep Jim's social calendar. Since seducing someone who would fall asleep in the middle of the seduction was not the best way to get results, he nodded his agreement.

"Fine but don't make plans for tomorrow night. I have some oysters in the fridge and thought I'd make Oysters Rockefeller."

"What's the occasion?" Jim asked, opening one eye and looking over his partner.

Blair smiled, trying to deflect the question. "Just trying to get in the holiday mood," he obfuscated. Jim nodded as Blair glanced around. "And I thought I'd do a little decorating if that's okay."

Jim waved his hand, "Feel free as long as I don't have to help." He rested his head back against the couch again, closing his eyes as Blair called for a pizza.

Saturday morning, Blair left breakfast warming in the oven and slipped out of the loft, heading down to the market to get some supplies. He stopped to pick up wreaths, a mix of non-scented and lightly scented holiday candles for atmosphere, and some mistletoe (just in case the food didn't work) before shopping for some last minute food items. After all, he couldn't just serve oysters and cake. He needed a couple of good bottles of wine with the meal; enough wine to mellow his overextended sentinel and some special flavored coffee to compliment the chocolate dessert. Next he headed to the bakery, buying some good crusty bread before returning home.

Jim was in the kitchen, newspaper open to the sports page, when Blair bounced in carrying the supplies. "Hey Chief, thanks for the pancakes," Jim said from the table as Blair placed the groceries on the counter.

"No problem Jim. Did you get enough rest?"

Jim snorted. "I could probably sleep another few hours but I'd get nothing done."

"You're on vacation man; you're not supposed to get anything done. Get some more sleep." Jim just smiled and turned his attention to the bags watching, as Blair put away the various things he had bought.

"What's with the wine?" Jim asked pointing at the two bottles with a fork.

"I thought we might have some with dinner," Blair answered.

Jim glanced at Blair. "If this is some kind of bribe to get your present early," he warned, "you can forget it."

Blair smiled back, thinking of his gifts to Jim. He couldn't wait to see what Jim thought of them. "We could open presents tomorrow night; a lot of people open presents on Christmas Eve," he said as he opened a second, much larger, bag and held up some red and green candles, showing them to Jim. Moving to the coffee table, he placed them on coasters, all too aware of the watchful eye of his obsessively neat roommate. Next, he pulled out the three small wreaths. They were identical, decorated in red and gold berries and bells, and he hung the wreaths on the balcony doors. Finally, he held up a small ball, eyeing it. "Mistletoe," he informed Jim as he looked at the ceiling. As much as he wanted to, there was no way he could hang the small ball in the living room over the sofa; the ceiling was too high to reach without a ladder. Glancing around, he looked at the kitchen island, noting the hanging pots and started forward.

"Sandburg, do you really think anyone is going to lean across the stove to kiss someone?" Jim asked with amusement.

Blair didn't answer the question, mostly because he could think of one person who would be more than willing to reach over the stove to kiss a sentinel smack on the lips. "Where would you hang it?" Blair countered, and watched Jim glance around.

"I'd hang it from the light over the dining room table," he suggested, standing and straightening. Blair couldn't help but follow the lines of his body up as Jim stood. "Hand it over and I'll hang it for you, Shorty."

Blair shook his head, his curls twirling around his face. "I'll do it. After living with you for two years, I know you aren't into decorating for Christmas," or anything else, he thought but didn't add. Seventy-five percent of the decorations in the loft were from Blair's travels. In the back of his mind, Blair acknowledged that at one time Jim had been right in not decorating. As an untrained sentinel, his senses uncontrolled, Jim would need to be somewhat of a minimalist to survive. But those days were past.

"I like taking you to the hospital after you take a fall and break something even less," Jim answered, holding out his hand and Blair relinquished the prize with a big smile.

He watched as Jim removed his shoes before standing on the chair to hook the mistletoe ball to the lamp. Now, he would have to just do a little rearranging so the ball wasn't directly over the table. Or maybe, not. Having Jim lean over to serve food would put him directly under the mistletoe.

Jim finished and climbed down wiping his hands together. "I didn't realize how dusty that fixture is," he stated. "Maybe, I should get a ladder and do some cleaning."

"Do I need to remind you again that you are on vacation? Relax, let the dust be." Blair watched Jim glance up, intrigued, as Jim's eyes dilated focusing on the light and following the chain up to the ceiling. Jim's sentinel abilities always amazed him and gave him an admittedly vicarious thrill; but using them to explore dust bunnies when he could be using them to explore Blair's erogenous zones was nothing short of frustrating. Smacking Jim lightly on the arm to bring his attention back down to earth, he commanded, "Leave it."

"For now, Sandburg," Jim agreed and turned back to the table where his coffee was cooling and his newspaper was unfinished.

"Anal sentinels and their obsessive cleaning," Blair grumbled quietly.

"I heard that," Jim called opening the paper.

"I'd be worried if you didn't!" Blair mock complained, hiding his smile, before turning back to the kitchen and turning on the tea kettle. "So, Jim, any plans for the holidays?"

Jim glanced over the top of his newspaper. "I thought I might re-grout the bathroom." His eyes went back to the mistletoe ball and Blair could swear he was focusing on the dust. He was sure he would see the ladder out, and Jim cleaning the ceiling fixtures before the end of the day. "Maybe, do some cleaning and rearranging of the cabinets."

"Okay, but it's not exactly what I was asking. Any hot dates, you know skiing weekends, with jewel thieves?"

"You're real funny, Chief. Nope, no plans."

Blair nodded, a little relieved and turned back to finish making his tea. He wanted to share Jim with friends and family on Christmas day, specifically for dinner, but he didn't want Jim to disappear on him as he had other plans for Jim that involved just the two of them. "Is there anyone you would want to invite over? I mean for dinner on Christmas? I can cook a traditional dinner." Blair had met



Jim's brother recently and he knew Jim's father was still alive, though Jim never spoke about the man.

"If you mean Steven, he's spending Christmas in Acapulco and Simon's spending Christmas with his family. It's just us, Sandburg."

Blair nodded his understanding, saddened by the fact that Jim didn't even consider inviting his father. He would have liked to have Jim's family over for dinner but a romantic candlelit dinner would be quite nice. "I'll plan a dinner for two then."

Jim glanced up at him from the newspaper. "It's Christmas, no tofu," he warned, and then frowned. "I thought you were Jewish."

"As an anthropologist, I understand the importance of religious rituals," Blair countered. "And I have spent some holidays with friends who celebrate, not to mention the solstice celebrations with Naomi." Blair smiled at Jim's face as he brought up the recent visit. Naomi had whirled in much like a tornado, with presents for both men, and, since she knew Jim was allergic to sage, frankincense to burn in the apartment in an effort to clear out the negative energy. The frankincense hadn't worked out too well; certainly no better than the sage. Neither had the suggestion that they all go down to the bay at dawn and hold hands, greeting the sunrise. "Anyway, I cook better than you do."

Jim sniffed in response but didn't deny Blair's claim. Putting down his newspaper he looked at his roommate and then, with a sigh, pulled out his wallet and dropped a bunch of twenties on the table. "If you are going to do the work, I should at least foot the bill for the meal," he stated. "Get what you need for Christmas dinner."

Blair smiled, looking at the money with some relief. Expenses were always tight for the student, but at this time of year they were especially so after buying gifts for Jim, Naomi, his Chris Cringle at Rainier, and his Secret Santa at Major Crimes. "I should pay for part of it," he protested, but Jim shook his head.

"No, Chief. It's a relief not to have to deal with the markets, the sounds, the lights, and the fake smells. This way I feel like I'm doing my share."

Blair frowned, immediately stepping into guide mode. "Jim, are you having problems with your senses?"

Jim shook his head, "The dials just require a little more work at this time of year, with all the lights and things."

Blair considered this thoughtfully. Last year, Jim had spent Christmas away, skiing, where there would be an abundance of fresh air with little, or no, Christmas trappings. Blair had been disappointed that his roommate was gone last Christmas but had dismissed it; he had only moved in a couple of months before and they were still getting used to one another and setting up their own boundaries.

"Okay, but if it gets to be too much, you have to tell me."

Jim smiled and stood. "While you're at the market, I'll do some cleaning."

Blair nodded, sure, as soon as he was gone, the ladder would make an appearance and the dust would disappear. "I'll run to the market and buy what we need for a traditional Christmas dinner."

"What would that entail?" Jim asked, taking his plate and cup to the sink.

Blair smiled hearing a note of caution in the detective's voice. He thought about listing some absurd ingredients, but knew Jim would see right through it. "A small turkey for stuffing, maybe a small roast beef, potatoes, cranberries, vegetables, salad, and pie. It's the usual fare in Western tradition. I mean I could do up an Eastern meal..."

"Just go get the food."

"Right," Blair grabbed his coat and started for the door but then turned. "Hey do you want me to get a bulb for the ceiling lamp so you can replace it while you have the ladder up?"

"No, I have..." Jim stopped and Blair smiled his "gotcha" smile. "Just go."

Blair laughed, aware that Jim could hear him, as he headed out the door to the market.

The shopping required a visit to three different stores and took several hours, not just because of the crowds, though that would have been cause enough, but because Blair took his time picking through the foods. He knew this would either be the first Christmas meal he shared with his new lover, or the last Christmas meal at the loft. Intuitively, he knew if this seduction didn't work, he would need to leave. He couldn't stay if rejected, not with Jim knowing how he felt. Finally, having gathered the foods, he turned for home, hoping it would continue to be home.

The ladder was nowhere in sight when he walked in the door, but that did not fool Blair. Glancing at Jim who was rearranging the spice cabinet, he chuckled. "You can't fool me man, you went and cleaned the lights."

Jim turned and Blair started handing him things to put away. "Do you have some problem with cleaning?" Jim asked. "I mean, I've seen that room of yours, and it is a wreck but-"

"My room is not a wreck," Blair cut him off. "I'll have you know, I know where everything in that room is."

"Yeah, on your floor."

Blair ignored the comment, not wanting to admit its accuracy. Instead, he began drawing up the list of things he would need to do for Christmas dinner and specific time frames for cooking. When he finished, he glanced at Jim.

"I'll make the apple pie today and heat it after dinner on Christmas. Which means, my friend, you don't get to touch it once it's made. We'll have it with ice cream." Blair could hear Jim grumble good-naturedly but, he said nothing as he went back to organizing the spice cabinet.

Blair watched him, stretching up to organize spices on the top shelf and admired the sleek, long lines of Jim's body, considering what he would want to do with said body, his libido taking full rein of his imagination.

Jim turned to him frowning. "You okay, Chief? Your heart beat just jumped."

"You hear my heartbeat?"

"Yeah," to Blair's ears, Jim sounded a bit uncomfortable. "I...um...I...", he paused and then added "monitor it to keep you out of trouble." Blair was sure Jim meant to say something else, but before he could challenge Jim, the sentinel asked, "What made it speed up?"

It wouldn't do to admit he was thinking about Jim's body so Blair smiled, casting about for an excuse before eyeing the spices. "I was thinking one of those spice jars was going to fall and if you breathed in all that spice at once," he shook his head. "It would make Naomi's sage and frankincense seem like nothing."

Jim shuddered and Blair turned back to his Christmas list as he continued. "So, I have a special dinner for Christmas and some oysters in the fridge for tonight. What about Christmas Eve?"

Jim turned back to the spice rack. "Eggnog?" he asked.

Blair smiled and nodded. Last year, he had made eggnog heavily laced with rum just before Christmas and Jim had tried it before heading out to his little skiing tryst, and loved it.

"Sure man, I got all the ingredients while I was out."

"Great," Jim made a sandwich and moved out of the kitchen. "I'll just get out of your way, so you can get to work."

Blair watched him a moment and then shook his head in bemused exasperation, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled down some flour.

Two hours later, the loft had the incredible smell of warm baked apples as Blair pulled a large pie out of the oven and placed it on the stove burner to cool. Jim, seeing Blair put the pie down, came over to stand by the cooking island and took a look at it, licking his lips. "Hot apple pie," he glanced at Blair. "Sally used to make apple pies for Thanksgiving and for Christmas."

"Sally?"

"Our housekeeper. She took care of us when we were growing up."

Blair considered the information. He knew Jim and his brother Steven had been raised by their father. He also knew a single parent needed support and he should have expected that Jim's father would get someone to take care of the boys. "Well, this recipe came from my aunt."

"Sally's had cinnamon," Jim stated, an eye on the pie.

"So does this one," Blair answered, rolling his eyes.

Sally's had nutmeg."

"So does this one," Blair repeated, his voice just hinting at exasperation.

"Sally's had raisins."

Blair paused and took a breath. "Okay, I'll serve you the pie with a bowl of raisins on the side," he muttered.

"Maybe, I should try it," Jim suggested.

"Yeah, you should ... on Christmas," Blair answered before turning off the oven. "That's when we are having this pie."

With a "humph," Jim turned back to the living room where he was dusting every shelf.

Blair watched him go with affection and then turned back to the fridge to start the Oysters Rockefeller. Tonight he would ply his sentinel with oysters, wine and a decadent chocolate raspberry cake and then get Jim to lean over the table, under the mistletoe.

Blair was just putting the finishing touches on his meal. The oysters were ready to come out of the oven, the bread cut, the wine uncorked, and he was getting ready to set the table when there was a knock at the door.

He looked at the oven and back at the door and then turned as Jim extricated himself from his closet where he was rearranging some boxes and came to the top of the stairs.

Opening the door, Blair smiled at his neighbor, Miss Murphy. Miss Murphy was an 86 year-old lady who lived one floor down. Never married, she had no children, and people in the building had a tendency to watch out for her. They would carry her groceries in and take them out of her shopping cart, take out her garbage, change light bulbs, and fix things. She was partially deaf and her sight was not much better, but her mind was still active even if she did tend to repeat herself. Several people had her nephew Patrick's phone number and he came by every Sunday to take care of things for her.

"Hello Miss Murphy," Blair said loudly, then smiled at the woman even as his brain screamed that dinner was ready. The smile was replaced very quickly by a frown as he realized she was trembling

"Hello Blair, is Jim home?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Right here Ma'am," Jim walked down the stairs and came to the front door, a hand closing on her elbow as he guided her into the apartment and a seat.

"Jim, someone's broken into my apartment." She glanced up her lip trembling. "I thought I'd best come and get you."

"How do you know someone broke in?"

"I always leave a potted plant over the door mat, to hide the extra key. It's been moved."

Jim nodded and then glanced over at Blair and shrugged. Blair realized dinner would just have to wait a few more minutes. "I'll just go check it out. Can I have your key?" Jim asked, and received the set of keys before moving toward the door where he picked up his gun and his cell phone. "You stay here Miss Murphy."

"Be careful, Jim," Miss Murphy said, her eyes wide and Blair nodded, seconding that thought.

"I'll just go with Jim," he patted her arm. "Relax. Whatever is going on, we'll take care of it."

Following Jim down the stairs to the second floor, Blair placed himself right behind Jim as the detective neared the door. He watched as Jim tilted his head for a moment and then Blair reached out, a hand on Jim's arm to ground the sentinel, knowing Jim was focusing his senses and listening for sounds in the apartment. After a moment, Jim straightened. "There are two men in there," he whispered. "She's right; they're gloating about the key being under the mat." He handed Blair the cellphone. "Call for backup and wait here."

Blair took the phone as Jim pulled out his gun before quietly sliding Miss Murphy's key into the lock, unlocking and opening the door.

Blair watched Jim slide into the dark apartment and then quickly called 911 before completely disobeying Jim's order and cautiously following him in, quietly closing the door. Ducking down, Blair moved to the right so he was hidden behind the oven before poking his head over the top of the stove. The living room was mostly dark, except for a small bit of light coming through the blinds on the balcony doors, but Blair could see two beams from flashlights in the bedroom. Glancing around as his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness; he could make out Jim's silhouette as he moved near the bedroom door, inching along the wall.

Needing a weapon, Blair grabbed a frying pan, holding it tight, just as the two burglars came out of the bedroom and Jim stepped behind them, gun drawn.

"Cascade Police," Jim stated. "Kneel with hands on your heads."

The two men caught unawares jumped and started to spin around, the flashlight beam bouncing with their movements as Jim repeated, "I said hands on your heads, now!" It was a barked out command and Blair hoped it was one they would obey.

Before the intruders could react (whether to obey or not), two patrolmen opened the door, their guns drawn. Light flooded the room from the hall, illuminating Jim standing behind the burglars, his legs spread apart to hold his position as his gun pointed at them.

The patrolmen also announcing they were "Cascade Police," repeated Jim's order and everyone stilled for a moment as they assessed the situation. Then, one of the patrolmen turned on a light and looked first at Jim and then at Blair, standing by the stove, holding a frying pan at the ready. Blair could see the recognition in the patrolman's eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as the burglars, outmanned with the arrival of two more cops, did as Jim commanded, kneeling with their hands on their heads. The patrolmen, came over, and handcuffed them as Jim stepped back, lowering his weapon, and Blair returned the frying pan to the stove.

"Detective Ellison," one of the patrolmen nodded. "We were around the corner when we got the call. What's been going on here?"

Jim nodded, indicating the burglars. "They decided to break in to my neighbor's apartment. They picked the wrong building."

"Is your neighbor okay?"

"Yeah, she's up in my apartment. Luckily for her, she realized someone was in her apartment. At the very least, these two would have given her a heart attack. Charge them with Breaking and Entering."

"Will do, but she'll need to come in and make a statement." Jim nodded as Blair came to stand next to Jim, listening as one of the patrolmen pulled out his Miranda card, reading the two men their rights and the other took Jim's and Blair's statements.

"Can you radio for another car to pick her up and take her to the precinct?" Jim asked. "I'm on vacation and don't want to go in to the PD. And I think she should probably spend the night with a relative."

"No problem. We'll have a car pick her up as soon as we get rid of these two." The patrolmen pulled the burglars to their feet and escorted them out as Jim and Blair followed to make sure the patrolmen didn't have any problems.

Once the patrol car pulled away, Jim and Blair headed back to the loft where Miss Murphy was waiting. As they climbed the stairs, Jim sniffed. "Something's burning Chief," he announced and Blair remembered his oysters.

"The dinner !" he squeaked and bounded up the stairs, opening the apartment door to find Miss Murphy pulling a smoking tray from the oven.

She looked up at the two men, fear and relief evident, as she placed the tray on the stove top and fanned the smoke with the oven mitt. Blair looked down at his ruined dinner with a dismal sigh and then back at Miss Murphy, forcing a smile as Jim went to the balcony and opened a door to air out the room.

"The police have the burglars in custody, Ma'am," Jim said politely as he eased the woman around the kitchen island and into the living room where she could sit comfortably. "But you shouldn't leave a key under the mat. It's the first place burglars look."

Miss Murphy nodded as she wiped tearful eyes and Blair produced a box of tissues. "In the meantime, a patrol car is coming to take you to the station and get your statement. Then they'll bring you to one of your relatives."

"Do you want me to call your nephew?" Blair asked, taking her hand. She nodded.

Fifteen minutes later, Miss Murphy was being escorted to the PD, where her nephew Patrick would meet her and take her to his home. Blair, watching the police help the elderly lady out, turned to Jim. "Her nephew said he'll have her stay through Christmas." Jim nodded hanging up his gun as Blair walked over to the stove and looked down at his ruined oysters. So much for his romantic dinner. "These can't be salvaged Jim." He shook his head and wondered if the fates were trying to tell him something.

Jim nodded, joining him to look at the blackened, shriveled oysters. "I'll order Chinese."

Blair agreed as he dumped the oysters in the garbage before putting the tray in the sink to soak. "I should have turned off the oven," Blair muttered dejectedly.

"You were distracted," Jim answered, hanging up the phone.

Blair nodded, looking over the dried-out bread before dumping it in the garbage too. "Sorry." He waved his arm at the mess, his voice full of disappointment.

"Not your fault Chief. And it's just a burnt meal."

"Yeah, just a burnt meal," Blair said despondently, before heading back to the sink and washing off the tray.

"We can still eat that chocolate cake," Jim suggested and Blair turned back, letting go of his disappointment as a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

Okay, Blair decided it would be wine, Chinese food, chocolate cake, and mistletoe. "You are right," Blair agreed. "And I opened the wine." He picked up the glasses from the table and filled them, handing one to Jim. "To Christmas," he toasted and clinked his glass with his sentinel's.

"To Christmas," Jim agreed.

They were on their second glass of wine, neither drunk but both feeling the effects of alcohol on their empty stomachs, when the Chinese food arrived. Grabbing plates before Jim could, to make sure that they were strategically placed, Blair set out the food as Jim carried in the bottle of wine and refilled both their glasses.

Chopsticks in hand, Blair was just waiting for Jim to serve the first morsel of food when Jim turned towards the door. "Simon's here," he announced, and stood walking over and opening the door before a knock could be heard.

Simon stood on the threshold, hand raised about to knock, a scowl on his face. Blair knew Simon disliked thinking about all things sentinel. Whenever anything came up about Jim's senses, Simon's first words were, "You deal with this, Sandburg." So, Jim aware of Simon's presence before he could knock, always unnerved the Captain.

"Hi Simon, come on in," Jim invited. "We're about to have Chinese food; want to join us?"

Blair watched Simon glance at the food with a sinking heart. He liked Simon, would be more than happy to share food with him at any other time, but he couldn't do anything with the mistletoe in front of Simon.

"You sure you have enough?"

"Plenty," Jim answered and Simon took off his coat, hanging it on one of the pegs near the door.

"I heard you stopped a burglary in progress and thought I'd check on you," Simon explained, taking a seat as Blair brought over another plate.

"Wine?" he asked Simon.

"Got a beer maybe?" he answered and Blair nodded, glad he could save the other bottle for dessert, if Simon left.

The three men ate the meal, Jim and Blair relating the details of the earlier incident. "So that's why Patrolman Patterson was talking about Sandburg's frying pan," Simon stated when they finished.

"What?" Blair asked, his voice an octave higher than usual as he spun to regard Simon.

"Yeah, talk around the station is you wield a mean frying pan. They're calling you 'Short Order Cook Sandburg.' As a matter of fact, there was talk of getting you a few cooking utensils, but no one is stupid enough to leave things like that on Ellison's desk."

Blair groaned, shaking his head and both Simon and Jim smiled. "Don't worry Chief, we won't be back for another week and by then no one will even remember it." Blair just shook his head and Jim reached over (under the mistletoe Blair noted dismally) to pat him on the back. "Come on Blair, they may tease you but they see you as brave. You were standing up against burglars who could have been armed."

"Were armed," Simon cut in. "They had twelve inch blades in their bags."

Jim nodded, correcting himself. "Were armed, with a frying pan."

"Jim's right, Sandburg. The fact that you are willing to walk into a dangerous situation to back up Jim, with no weapon, impresses them."

Blair glanced from one man to the other, running a hand through his long curls as he realized how Simon considered him. He always knew Jim thought he was brave, but it was kind of nice hearing it from Simon. He gave a tentative smile, feeling good despite all the setbacks, as Jim pushed back his plate and glanced at the fridge. "How about that chocolate cake? It will make a perfect dessert."

"Chocolate cake?" Simon echoed, a smile lighting his face. Jim nodded as Blair felt his heart drop. This was the last piece of food in his little seduction scheme. "I picked the right night to stop by." Blair didn't want to answer that statement so, without a word, feeling completely frustrated as his plans were again foiled, Blair went to the fridge and pulled out the cake. Coming back to the table he put it down with a bit more force than necessary before going to get small dishes.

"Come on Sandburg," Simon said with some amusement. "The guys are just letting off steam, calling you Short Order Cook. By the time you're back at the PD, they'll have moved on to some other thing," Simon stated, misinterpreting Blair's annoyance.

Blair paused, his back to Simon while he took a deep breath, glad Simon thought he was upset at the nickname. It wouldn't do to have Simon know he had interrupted a carefully orchestrated seduction. Taking another breath, he turned and smiled. "You're right," he agreed as he came back, plates in hand, and took a seat.

The three men ate dessert talking about Simon's plans for Christmas, and then the Police Captain wished them good night and left, carrying an extra slice of cake. Jim got up and brought the dishes to the sink, where he started washing the plates as Blair came over to join him picking up a towel to dry.

"Chief, you're not really upset about the nickname are you?"



"No," Blair answered with a sigh. "What Simon said was true; no one will remember when we get back." He glanced at Jim's hands, covered in soapy water, and considered what he could do to salvage his plans. He could, he supposed, just come out and admit what he had been trying to do, but he didn't want to give Jim time to think. He just wanted Jim to react. Blair knew he would get a far more honest response and more likely a positive one that way, and could gauge his future with Jim by it.

He still had another bottle of wine in the offing and Jim would be home on Christmas Eve. Deciding he would either succeed on Christmas Eve or give up, he finished wiping the dishes before putting them away.

"Our dinner got ruined today, how about I take you out to dinner tomorrow?" Jim asked. "We could get reservations for Mario's and come back and drink your eggnog afterward."

"That would be nice," Blair agreed. Mario's was a small Italian restaurant just two blocks away. The only problem Blair could foresee with the plan was how to move the couch under the mistletoe. Jim would think he was crazy if he switched the table and the couch. He'd have to think of another way to get Jim under it or, if he dared, just grab the back of Jim's neck and yank him down to kiss him somewhere else in the loft.

Finishing the dishes, Blair went to the drawer and dug out the number for Mario's and made early evening reservations, before heading into the living room to review his syllabus for the coming term. Tomorrow, he decided, with nervous butterflies fluttering around in his stomach, was either do or die.

Later that night, while Jim cleaned his gun, something he did religiously once a week, vacation or not, Blair fantasized about how the next evening's encounter would go. They would come back from Mario's, slightly tipsy, and Blair would reach out and slide both his hands up Jim's face in a sensual caress while looking into Jim's clear blue eyes. He would see Jim's acceptance in the sentinel's eyes and slide his body against Jim's, feeling Jim's arousal. As much as he might like to, he couldn't envision himself sweeping Jim up into his arms and carrying him up to the loft bed. Physically, he just wasn't up to the task. But he could see himself kissing Jim, passionately, and moving to the sofa. Jim's senses would be overwhelmed and he would swoon, falling back onto the cushions like some incredible feast before declaring his undying love for Blair. The two would spend the rest of Christmas Eve in each other's arms before a crackling fire. It was a great fantasy as far as it went, but tomorrow Blair would have to find a way to turn it into reality.

Blair was still considering how to turn the fantasy into reality when Jim wished him good night and headed up to bed. Blair watched him go, thinking if things went right tomorrow night he would be sleeping in a bigger bed with someone who would keep him warm physically and emotionally.

Those thoughts lulled Blair to sleep, on the couch, and he woke early the next morning with a start. It was ridiculously early, six in the morning, but deciding this day was going to be special, he donned his coat and headed down to Collette's bakery to get some fresh pastries to start the day. Jim had a tendency to rise early; Blair figured it was probably a habit developed during his stint in the army, so he set the coffee pot before going downstairs.

Collette's was surprisingly busy despite the hour and Blair waited on line for ten minutes before buying some rich buttery cinnamon Danish and a few bagels for Christmas morning. Wishing the staff a Merry Christmas, he headed back up to the loft and had just plated the Danish when Jim came down the stairs, buttoning his shirt. Blair couldn't help but look at the wide expanse of chest thinking "this will be mine," before smiling and greeting Jim.

The sentinel looked at the food and smiled as he grabbed a cup of coffee. "Danish, Chief? I thought you frowned on pastries."

"You know Jim, I am not a fanatic. It's Christmas Eve man; enjoy."

Blair watched as Jim bit into the pastry, his eyes following the food up to Jim's mouth. He could see Jim close his eyes; letting his taste buds have free reign. It wasn't something he saw often; Jim usually kept tight control over his senses. After the first bite, Jim took in a deep breath and opened his eyes to look at Blair. "Thanks. I don't just mean for the pastry, Blair. I wouldn't dare let my senses go if I didn't know you were here."

Blair smiled, his face lighting with joy. "Thanks, Jim," he said quietly before looking back down into his coffee cup to hide how much the compliment had affected him. "I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"I guess I don't say thank you enough," Jim answered, reaching for his own coffee cup. "But I do appreciate everything you've done for me."

Blair nodded, thinking he wanted to do so much more. "You're my sentinel," he said at last. "Every sentinel had a companion, someone to watch his back. That's my job."

"I wouldn't want anyone else at my back, Sandburg," Jim said quietly, and Blair could hear the hesitancy in the statement. He knew Jim wasn't good at admitting his feelings, so this confession was (in Blair's mind) almost a declaration of love.

Lifting his cup, Blair held it out. "To us, watchman and companion?"

"To us," Jim responded. "Sentinel, and what was it Brackett called you, Guide?"

"Sentinel and Guide," Blair agreed, clinking their cups, feeling far more confident about this evening's plans.

The day passed quickly despite the fact that neither man had much to do. Blair, deciding to set the stage, made a batch of eggnog heavily laced with rum and got the fireplace ready for the evening, while Jim relaxed reading a mystery novel. Just before leaving for Mario's, Jim brought three carefully wrapped, brightly-colored boxes down from his closet, placing them near the fireplace. Blair, seeing the gifts, brought out his own boxes to sit beside them.

They walked to Mario's; Jim's eyes looking speculatively at the clouds overhead. "I know the weatherman said rain but it might end up being a white Christmas," he told Blair, who looked up. "There's a storm brewing and the temperature is dropping."

Blair didn't have to ask how Jim knew this, having worked with Jim to develop his awareness of climate, temperature and barometric pressure. These were all survival skills needed by tribes and fundamental abilities of a sentinel. Instead, he smiled at the idea. While it didn't snow often in December in the Pacific Northwest, rain was more likely, they did upon occasion get snow. "That would be cool," Blair answered and Jim chuckled.

"I thought you didn't like the cold?"

"It's Christmas," Blair answered quietly. "It's special, magical."

Mario's was packed, but because they had reservations Jim and Blair were shown to a quiet table in the corner. They opted for the Christmas Eve, Special; plates loaded with various kinds of fish and pasta, and drank down two bottles of wine with dinner, making them mellow and relaxed. The clouds had turned ominous by the time they left the restaurant and the first snowflakes were starting to fall. Blair could hear people greeting each other and talking about a white Christmas, most with a degree of excitement, some even singing the song as the snow landed on Blair's hair. "Jim," he stopped his friend. "What do you see when you look at a snowflake?" It was a strange question, one Blair would not normally ask. But the beauty of the moment, the snowfall, Christmas Eve, their day together, the possibility of a lifetime, and the wine loosened his tongue.

Jim stopped, his hand reaching up to hold a few strands of Blair's hair where several snowflakes were resting. "If I dial up I can see the whole flake; its symmetry, its design. This little bit right here," Jim indicated the small spot on Blair's hair, "is made up of at least 20 different patterns and so many different colors. It would be very easy to zone looking at snowflakes in your hair," he admitted, his voice low.

Blair smiled nervously, finding Jim holding the few tendrils of hair so enticing. They were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, a block from home, and Jim was holding his hair, looking down at him with intense concentration.

Realizing that the food, the seductions and the mistletoe didn't matter, that this was the magical moment, Blair looked up into Jim's face and stepped closer. "Jim, I..." he paused for one moment scared, and then moved even closer. "I love you." His heart was beating so fast, his stomach doing flip flops and the seconds seemed to stretch on forever. And then Jim leaned forward, closer.

"I love you too," he answered and Blair didn't know if he had moved forward to capture Jim's lips or Jim had moved forward to capture his. It didn't matter. What mattered was suddenly they were kissing, Blair's arms around Jim's waist as Jim gently cupped the back of Blair's head, holding him close.

For Blair, it was a magical moment but also an epiphany. In the end it wasn't about seduction, it was all about love. Finally, needing air, they separated. "Maybe, we should go back to the loft," Jim's voice sounded husky as he let his hand slide down Blair's face, tenderly caressing it.

Blair nodded his agreement and reached for Jim's hand, their fingers entwining. "I had this whole seduction planned," Blair whispered, knowing Jim would hear him. "Food, wine, mistletoe, and none of it mattered."

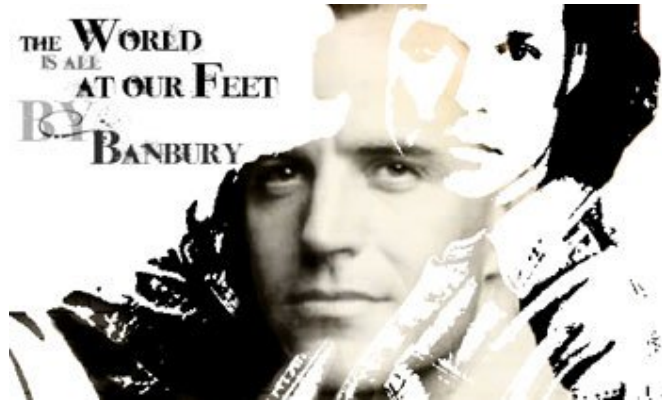
Chuckling, Jim glanced at his partner. "Chief, think. Why did I choose this week to take off?" and Blair after a moment realized what Jim meant.

"You took this week because you knew I'd be off from school and home." They started walking again. "But you didn't know what my schedule might be?" Blair questioned.

"No I didn't," Jim agreed. "But I also know you haven't dated anyone in a while, and well, with you bringing in food, wine and mistletoe, I just hoped."

Blair smiled remembering his fantasy, the two in each other's arms on the sofa before a crackling fire. It looked indeed like his fantasy was going to come true. Gently squeezing the hand he was holding, he turned towards home, feeling both anxious to get there and reluctant to move from this special place.

But finally, smiling, the two continued on their way to the loft as Christmas snow fell.



BY BANBURY

ARTWORK BY SNAILBONES

Blair did his best to breathe slowly through his mouth. He was taken aback at how this place still got to him given that last time he was there he was five years younger and lot more naive. He believed then in people being generally good and world - positive and didn't know how much of a flower-child Naomi raised him to be he was despite all.

He sat on the quite uncomfortable chair in the waiting area and the only thing he could think of apart from Jim was that next time he'd listen to his inner voice better. He knew he just fucking knew all along that it was bad idea to return to Cascade. Even with this conference he wanted to go to, even with Jim's insistence Blair needed it, he had had to listen to his inner voice.

That was bad idea.

Blair didn't know what it was with this city that every good thing eventually turned bad here. University, for example, was so what he wanted to do, but all the bullying, constant money problems, ignorant people around - if not for his scientific interests it was not worth it. With all this anxiety, he developed allergies that landed him in that particular hospital on the regular basis. He just ha...

No. That wasn't entirely right. If not for this hospital Blair wouldn't meet Jim...

'Mr. Sandburg?'

Blair startled. The nurse was looking at him a bit funny. 'Doctor Musgrove will be with you shortly.' Blair nodded. He knew these people - conservative, narrow-minded, black-and-white kind of people. Somehow they usually end up being in command and that when all the problems began. At least for Blair.

The doctor came and gone. He shrugged off all Blair's questions saying they have to perform more tests on Jim, but there's nothing wrong with him so far. He strongly suggested talking to a psychiatrist. Blair nearly lost it and told the doctor that he had a degree in psychiatry himself and well qualified to perform any tests on his husband.

Blair watched with hawk eyes as doctor stiffened and nodded before speeding out.

Why did it have to happen here, in Cascade of all places? Blair rubbed at his eyes and went to the ward.

Jim was lying here utterly still with his eyes closed. There were black circles around his eyes and sharp unhappy lines in the corners of his mouth. He has become a bit thinner lately but with all his work out Blair just liked how he looked - tanned, beefy, and happy.

Not so much right now.

Blair sighed and touched Jim's arm very-very carefully. Jim sighed.

'How're you, man?' Blair nearly whispered leaning closer to Jim. He learned hard way for the last couple of days not to talk loud or bounce around the place in his usual manner. Every sound or unexpected movement around Jim hurt him.

'Same.'

Blair wanted nothing more than to lay down beside his man, hug him and close his eyes. He felt restless.

'Go do something,' Jim opened his eyes a fraction, 'you think too loud.' He smiled the bleak version of his usual smile. 'Sleep in a real bed for a change.' Jim made little inhaling sounds after each word, and Blair did the same unthinkingly.

He waited until Jim fell asleep. His chest hurt a little and Blair reached out uncertainly, afraid to touch Jim.

Blair woke up abruptly.

He's dreamed of green and wind and scent of something fresh and citrus, and laid now in the dark trying to decipher these dreams.

Blair was good at subconscious symbolism, though it was tricky to uncover all these layers, and he was never sure whether he managed to do it right. Sometimes these symbols were pretty straightforward and other times - not.

Blair stared at the dark ceiling unseeingly. The green and scent indicated woods.

He didn't like woods.

He didn't know why he always felt so claustrophobic there.

Not that he didn't like trees, or flowers, or the green color. On the contrary, he was the original tree-hugger. However, it was something entirely different when he found himself surrounded by a big number of trees. He found it intimidating. Like he was being observed or judged.

Ridiculous.

But none the less intimidating.

He closed his eyes and tried to lure sleep back.

Blair woke up abruptly.

He opened his eyes. The grayish light filtered in through the half-closed curtains.

Blair didn't know why on earth, he dreamed their first meeting this time. Unlike the previous dream, it was so clear.

He was quite unfortunate that time - on top of his usual allergies he'd gotten in a fight with the other student over some rights movement. Rather unsuccessful fight. Blair suffered bleeding nose, cracked ribs, dizziness, intense headache and quite low blood pressure. He had to come to the hospital that time because he quite literally couldn't lift a head from his pillow without being sick.

There was a constant shouting from the ward down. It gave Blair headache upon headache, and finally he just had to crawl from his room to the other to find out what's going on.

There were doctor, two nurses, a big black man with the air of authority about him. They stayed around the bed. Blair didn't see who was on the bed; he only heard almost inhuman keening sounds.

'Can't you do something about it?' Four pairs of eyes turned to him and Blair felt his headache spiked for a second, but then something settled - headache went down and this awful keening sound from the bed became less intense.

Blair was somehow uncertain what happened next. There was flurried of activity, and he found himself being moved to the other ward and there was that man in the bed next to him - big, buff, very pale, his forehead marred with deep wrinkles and mouth drawn to a thin stressed line.

There was something off about him.

This morning three days ago when Blair woke up in the dark to the painfully familiar keening sound from the Jim's side of the bed was like reliving that experience of seven years ago. Blair felt there was something he had to remember, something similar...

He was out of his wit.

Blair sat beside Jim's bed motionless. He was thinking. He went through all the events of the last two weeks - the same comfortable routine of planning, packing, driving... Nothing's out of ordinary.

They decided to take a trip down here from Montreal; they liked to travel every fall to new and untrodden places, and after five years Cascade seemed quite new to them both.

Jim was excited. He wanted to visit Steven and nephews he was yet to see; he hasn't seen any of the fellow detectives in a long time; even city itself... Blair wasn't sure what he felt about it. They (and he thought of it as a relatively broad definition) didn't part on good terms.

Seven years ago, Blair was ready to fuck out of here for good. He didn't even care much where. Somewhere warmer, friendlier, opener... And look where he landed in the end - one can't exactly call Montreal a 'weather friendly', though it fulfilled other expectations. The only thing he still was grateful for of Cascade, other than education, was meeting Jim.

Seven years ago, Blair's life turned upside down in more ways than he could imagine before. Five years ago, he found home. And now he knew he had to face his old demons to find soul's equanimity at last.

Seven years ago, Simon Banks saw Blair a godsend when Jim began to regain his human composure around the younger man. He welcomed their friendship to the point he allowed Blair to come to the precinct to help Jim.

No one knew what was happening with him, Blair tried to look into it then, but he was so busy with his doctoral at that point that he just took into account that Jim was better when he was around and Blair himself felt better being around Jim. He noticed at some point that his allergies almost didn't bother him anymore.

They were good together.

Until they became too attached. They began to finish each other sentences; they knew what to order for one another; they went to double-dates and had a lot more fun together observing other people, than their dates. Jim even gave Blair the keys from his loft and allowed him to crash in the spare room any time.

Naturally, it was Simon, who first saw in it something that wasn't supposed to be. He began with some offhand remarks about Blair. Jim wasn't thrilled, and Simon shut up for some time. He regained this attitude when he found Blair sleeping with his head on Jim's thigh during one stakeout.

Jim and Simon had some heated arguments. And then some more. And then Simon used this word for the first time.

'You turned queer on me? Don't tell me you...'

Jim looked at Simon with dark unreadable eyes, turned and left precinct.

Neither Simon nor Blair knew what did he do for the remainder of the day, nobody hadn't been able to find him nor call him, as his phone was switched off. Blair began to worry when Jim came to his tiny rented room and told him to pack his things.

'What for? Jim, you're scaring me a bit here.' Blair looked up at his friend from his chair - Jim looked big, scary even, but he smiled this tiny shy smile, and Blair couldn't do any better than to smile back.

'I just thought that I have that room with your name on it, and it will be easier for you to live there and not pay for this hell-hole, seeing as we spend almost whole days together anyway.'

Blair nodded thoughtfully, and the question was closed.



He moved in with Jim, but it was another half year before they looked at each other with the eyes of something more than mere friendship. It was so natural transition; they almost didn't realize it themselves - smooth constant movement from health co-dependency to genuine love.

Simon didn't like it. He made it known to both of them to the point that Blair began to feel not welcomed in the precinct anymore, though, in fact it was mostly Simon and not fellow detectives, who had a problem with their relationship. They didn't flaunt it in people's faces. Very few people even know they lived in the same apartment.

And then Blair had his doctorate in anthropology.

The first job offer was from Canada, University of Montreal of all - one of Blair's professors worked there and suggested his name to the department. Jim said, 'We go.'

'But...'

'I don't like it here anymore. I'd rather be kept man with you somewhere friendly.' He smiled crookedly at Blair's bewildered expression, and the chapter of their lives in Cascade was closed. Jim gave his notification to the precinct and for the next five years they didn't exchange a word with Simon.

Until today.

Blair still remembered where to find detectives from the squad at the lunch time. They were steady in their habits.

There were Simon, Rafe and Megan at the table, a couple of the unknown faces. Blair spied Brown at the bar talking to some woman. He made his way to the group.

'Simon.'

They stopped talking and looked at him a bit puzzled.

'Oh my God, Blair!' Megan was the first to recognize him. 'You... Blair, you've changed!'

He changed indeed. He cut his hair to more Jim-like almost buzz-cut; he filled out after all this jogging and hiking with Jim; he could afford clothes better than from the thrift shop - Blair knew he looks like professor nowadays. He actually liked to look good for Jim. Not that they both paid too much attention to it.

'Blair.' Simon's gaze was unexpectedly warm and hand-shake firm and unwavering. 'Good to see you. What brought you here? Anthropology conference at the University?'

To say that Blair was surprised would be an understatement. 'Yes... I didn't... Actually yes. I'm presenting my new book tomorrow, though I didn't have much time to catch with the conference.' He hesitated. 'Jim turned sick on me and landed at the hospital...'

'Oh, my!' Megan put a hand over her mouth.

'What happened?' Simon rose from his seat and brought the chair for Blair to sit with them. 'Do you need help? Where he is? What happened?'

'I don't know.' Blair almost collapsed on the chair, feeling as tension leaked out for the first time since last week. 'It's the same as the time we've met...'

Simon shook his head. 'Damn. What happened?'

'I don't know, right!' Blair felt like struggling twenty-six TA with uncertain future all over again. 'We came here from Montreal; we had some time and went by car, spent a day in the Olympia national Park hiking. It was as usual... And the first night here I woke to that awful sound... You remember, Simon.'

Blair closed his eyes and felt big calloused hand closed over his.

'It was the first time since...'

'Yes.'

Blair felt as Simon squeezed his hand tight and saw it as an unspoken apology. He knew it would be hard for Simon actually to say the words; he was that type of men who was terrible in expressing his feelings while being ashamed of something. However, his gesture told it all - he wasn't afraid of them being different; he'd just been confused at that time and didn't share friends well... or something like that. And Blair was grateful for this support - a day short, dollar cheap, but still...

'We'll think of something...'

'I feel so desperate... Can't even research as a qualified scientist I supposed to be - just keep looking into dozen different themes at once and...'

Blair shrugged helplessly. He was sitting across Simon in his new big 'Chief of the Central Precinct' office and watched as an old friend emptied cardboard box labeled "Notes '90 - '95" and methodically scanned one notepad after another looking for God knows what.

Blair got up and wandered around the room absently touching photos on the walls and books on the shelves. He felt strange need to justify himself, to tell Simon he wasn't usually this bad in finding answers. Only the one thought that's on his mind right now was 'why is that we never talked with Jim about it, about this strange state he went into on that case that he ended up in the hospital'.

They talked about Jim's military experience and Blair's journeys; about their habits and passions; expectations and interests; about their triumphs and failures; favorite food and music, books and sports; friends, families, teachers and lovers...

They never once talked about their first meeting.

At first, it was because no one wanted to trigger something unknown while Jim was recovering. Then they wanted to put some distance between everyday life and painful memories. After that they just never returned to that experience.

Blair sighed. Some scientist he turned out to be, he supposed to take an interest in anything inexplicable.

Some noise from behind turned his attention back to Simon.

'I'm not sure...' Simon beckoned Blair closer. 'Take a look.'

Blair found himself looking at three standard issued police notepads filled with Simon's small handwriting. 'What am I looking for?'

'These are my notes from Jim's cases.' Simon gestured towards the other notebooks in the box. 'I always took my own notes on every case, to have my finger on the pulse, so to say. There are some side notes apart from regular ones on these cases. Two from 1990 and the third one not long before you've met him.'

Simon nodded Blair to read marked parts.

The notes weren't revealing.

'Jim complains about his eyes, problems with sight.' A week later, 'Jim has problems with his sight and hearing.' Simon's thoughts in brackets, 'Ear infection?'

Two months later. 'Jim has problems with hearing and smell.' Simon's reaction - 'Odd'.

Blair returned earlier. It was fascinating. One or two words - 'Jim went on a stakeout third night in a raw alone' - and Blair saw a picture before his eyes, and it all made up a bigger picture.

'Look, Simon...' Blair silently prized himself for quick thinking - it became clearer and clearer what caused sensory spikes... 'Damn, Jim was almost in solitude on the way here. I had to put down notes for my presentation, so we talked very little and Jim was by himself. And then - hiking, and woods, and nobody else around. And the first day here...'

Blair shook his head in frustration. No! It was wrong somehow - all these only explained 'when', not 'whys'. It was clear that all these sensory spikes were caused by some sort of isolation - the longer the severe spikes were. But 'why'?!

'The first day here I went to the library, and Jim went to the place he used to play at when he was a kid. Park or...'

Simon nodded. 'I know the place. But, why...?'

'Yes! Why?' Blair put down the notes and rubbed his forehead. There was something familiar in all this; he just couldn't put a finger...

'How are you, sunshine?' Blair bent over Jim to hear clearer.

'Better, a lil' bit...' Jim slurred a little and his breath was still labored, but he did look better - not so pale anymore and stressed lines not so deep. 'Did you go out?' There was uncertainty in his words and Blair nodded vigorously.

'I was out of my mind yesterday and went to see Simon and guys. Is it... okay?' Blair was worried what Jim would think of it, but his lover smiled faintly.

'That's good. Why did you go to him?'

'I thought he might think of something I don't remember or know from those days. He went through his notes, and we found a pattern, strange one, but definitely a good reason..., there still this other question...' Blair finished seeing as Jim's breathe evened and he fell asleep. He sat by the bed going through all they discovered. Something was definitely missing...

Blair woke up abruptly. He heart was pounding.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to settle down.

It was a strange sensation... he was still hearing that eerie voice from his dream, 'Open your inner eye, guide. Your sentinel needs you...' and something about destiny and spirit...

Blair shook his head. He still felt somebody's stare at his back, quite unpleasant sensation, the one he never liked - the one reason why he never liked his 'forest dreams', in particular.

Blair cautiously looked around, but the room was mostly gray in pre-dawn light. Grey and empty, except for Jim sleeping soundly in his bed.

Blair touched his hand lightly. Jim smiled suddenly and exhaled almost inaudible, but comforting 'Chief'.

Blair closed his eyes again. As much as he didn't want to see this 'forest dream' there was something vaguely familiar in it. It reminded him of his year in the retreat in Peru that his mom took him with her to. Strange year full of talks with old women about spirits and dream walks and guiding people...

It was too long ago to remember details, but in his dream, he was sure he almost remembered...

... The green around was lighter and somehow friendlier. Sun rays filtered through dense foliage and cast warm spots on the ground. This time Blair was ready, and as soon as he felt that stare on his back he turned sharply around.

He saw the eyes across the clearing first. It was difficult to make out the figure as it was painted with lines and circles and blended with the vegetation. They watched each other vary for some time and then the other one stepped out.

It was tall man with light skin and military air about him. He was dressed in camouflage pants and paint on his skin seemed more distracting than threatening. The most distinguished feature of his was eyes - so blue and clear, almost like...

'Jim?!'

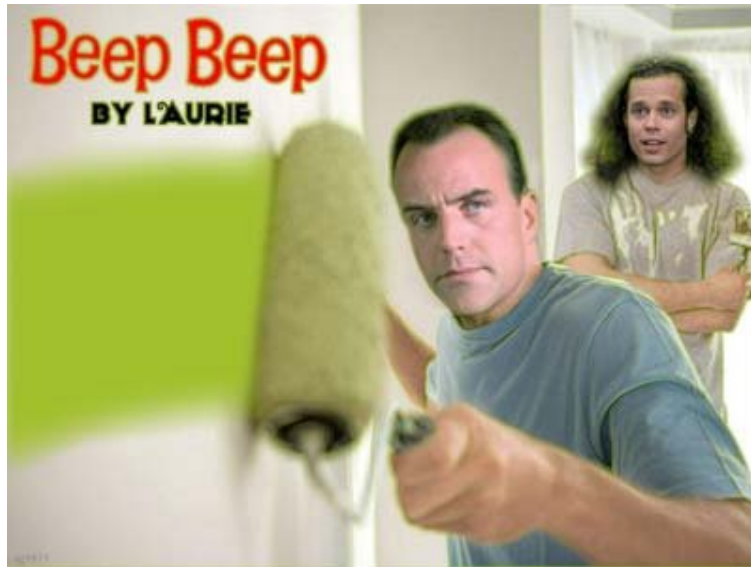
'Hello, Chief, fancy meeting you here...' DreamJim smiled the same smile as real one. He beckoned Blair closer. He stepped forward and noticed another pair of eyes behind Jim's shoulder - black and

intense and a bit scary. But this time Blair wasn't afraid; he wasn't alone, and somehow he knew that everything will make sense. This time.

This time he wasn't alone.

Seven years ago, Blair found his soul mate. Five years ago, he found lover and husband and content.

Now, he found the other half of the soul he didn't know was missing. He felt as if two hearts were beating in his chest simultaneously. He knew he would always be warm inside and never be alone again.



BY LAURIE

ARTWORK BY BETH

“Thanks, Jimmy. I wouldn’t have asked, but-”

Jim walked towards his truck and momentarily tuned his father out while he mentally kissed goodbye the pleasant evening he had daydreamed about for the last hour before Wang had dismissed class. The Police Academy instructor had droned on and on and on about the importance of paperwork. Jim excelled in writing terse, quick reports, a style he’d perfected as Captain Ellison. He figured writing reports as a cop would use the same skill-set he used in the army, so he’d barely listened.

Tonight, all he’d wanted was a few beers and a good spy novel, maybe catch some ESPN.

But maybe his plans weren’t a total loss.

He interrupted his father. “Dad, I’m through with classes for the day, and I’ll swing by the house. See you in a few.”

He stabbed at the cell phone’s buttons to turn it off, fished his keys out of his pocket, and trotted towards his vehicle at the far end of the parking lot.

He’d bought the older truck to lower his insurance rates – he and the insurance company had not seen eye to eye over his last two accidents – but he’d grown to love his Sweetheart on her own merits.

Yeah. Take care of Dad’s little problem, and then it was home-sweet-loft.

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose and fought down the irritability that was threatening to overtake him, much like the Hulk would overtake Bruce Banner.

He knew how to be patient. Hell, he'd been a Ranger just a few months ago and he'd been good at waiting for the right moment to strike.

That moment wasn't now.

His dad had picked a lousy time to come down with the flu. By rights, Jim should be far away from the racket currently assaulting his ears from the amateur musicians playing on a rickety stage, and Dad should be here at Rainier, hobnobbing with the university's upper echelon in that "I'm an Important Businessman" way of his and waving his checkbook around. Instead, there was a ten thousand dollar check tucked into Jim's wallet. And Jim didn't do hobnobbing.

Not to mention that he really wouldn't be doing his father, or their tentative reconciliation, any favors by glaring or snarking at these two idiots sitting in the information booth at the fund-raising auction. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, these children were a couple of clueless minions who couldn't manage to accept a simple donation ahead of schedule. No, they didn't have the right forms to do that. They kept insisting that Jim would have to bid for something listed for the auction.

He suspected they were grad students and stuck manning the table while professors and deans mingled with the wealthy patrons who would bring in the real bucks for Rainier.

Gritting his teeth at having to waste his time longer this evening, he gave the minions a tight smile and took his leave, intending to hand over his dad's money to the first booth he could find.

He wasn't successful. He'd come a bit too early. Nothing started for at least a half hour, and people were snacking at various food booths or, according to the talk he overheard, had opted for a fancy dinner at five hundred dollars a plate.

He was slowly marinating in his annoyance, wanting to go home and sit on his balcony and drink beer. He had one more week at the Police Academy, and while he didn't find the courses or workouts taxing, he was ready for his weekend break.

Actually, he was still getting used to living back in the States, in a busy, smelly, noisy place with streets, not trails, and houses, not simple huts, after spending eighteen months in the Peruvian rainforest.

His head ached a lot from the never-ending sounds of this city. The wails of sirens, the blare of horns, the people yelling and talk, talk, talking. Sometimes he wanted everybody and everything to Just. Shut. Up.

It was only his stubborn insistence on becoming a cop that was keeping him in Cascade. He had something to prove to himself and to his father. Dad had lobbied hard for him to come into the family business, and while Jim was willing to compromise on some things so he and his old man wouldn't tick each other off again and not speak for another decade or so, becoming his dad's protege wasn't one of those things.

They'd kill each other if they had to work together. Just. No. Jim was terrible at ass-kissing, or as his father had worded it, diplomacy.

He could do cranky as a cop, though. He could turn the Ellison Death Glare on perps and have them falling over themselves to confess to their crimes.

He felt like practicing that Death Glare right now. There was this yakkity, yakkity, yak drawing his attention, an annoying mosquito buzzing closer and closer.

He located the source of the annoying blather. Some fresh-faced kid, all curls and grunge, and the guy was making eyes at a pretty girl while throwing this blitz of words at her, using what he must have thought of as a seductive tone of voice. Jim thought he sounded about as smooth as a fourteen-year-old.

"Just think, you'd have me as, well not exactly your slave, because that's so not PC, but in effect I'd be yours to do whatever you wanted me to do for the whole day. Or, if you bid on me for the entire weekend, that would be extra cool. You know I've got skills, and they'd be yours to use."

The walking mop-top wagged his eyebrows at the sweet young thing, and she giggled.

"Oh, Blair. You're so funny."

Jim mimicked her in a hushed falsetto to himself. "Oh, Blair, you're such a player," and walked away from Don Juan before he was forced to listen to any more bullshit. He'd spotted a booth that was selling beer, and he had a half hour to kill.

Jim didn't believe in fate, predestination, written-in-the-stars kind of crap. He and Incacha had argued about it often enough by the campfire late into the night, though, Incacha insisting that Jim's destiny would find him once he returned to his homeland. Jim always rejected the notion, and Incacha would finally mutter about stubborn watchmen and brew tea to treat the headache he'd say was Jim's fault.

So it had to be a coincidence, and not fate, that no matter where he went to wait for the auction to get started, Curly-locks would show up.

Jim wished he had that headache tea right now, and it didn't have anything to do with the three beers he'd chugged down.

No. It was because short of sticking his fingers in his ears, he couldn't seem to stop overhearing Mr. Suave convincing people to bid for his "services" for the auction.

It made Jim feel... itchy to listen to Curly-locks. And he wanted to scratch that itch. Scratch it till it was soothed and the irritation was gone. No. He wanted to gag the guy. Shut him up.

And was no place sacred from the kid's spiel? Jim flushed the toilet and opened the stall door and walked quickly to the row of sinks. He brushed by the kid and an athletic-looking man, who was wasting water as his tap gushed forgotten. The guy stared at Curly-locks, mouth hanging open.



Yep. The kid's sale pitch was going over like gangbusters. The other man moved closer to Curly-locks, invading his personal space. Jim wanted to snort. The guy was definitely excited about what the kid was selling, according to Jim's quick sidelong glance at the guy's pants. The kid rattled on, and Jim squeezed soap from the dispenser, eager to make an escape.

"Coach, you know how badly some of your soccer players need me to give them a hand. And for that many guys, the price is practically a steal." The kid kept throwing come-hither looks at his victim, and Jim washed up and got out of there before Mr. Hand-job gave away a free sample.

Not that Jim had a respite for very long, since he kept stumbling over Curly-locks and his wayward tactics.

The kid wowed them with fast talk and that brilliant smile. His hands – long-fingered and talented according to Marci, who said she'd love to have Curly-locks be the entertainment for her upcoming party – wove spells in the air, and hypnotized his would-be bidders into slack-jawed agreement with whatever he said.

Jim couldn't take more than a few words before moving away.

His annoyance was morphing into anger, that this kid was selling his body when the point of the auction was to swap your labor for a donation. That was the way they'd done it when he'd been in college. Jim had painted some old guy's garage to raise money for the Big Brothers' program, not offered to suck his cock.

Somebody should teach that kid that he shouldn't trade himself for whatever it was his group was trying to raise money to do. Rainier's reputation could be jeopardized. All right. So he didn't care that much about Rainier's reputation. In fact, he didn't give a rat's ass about Rainier's reputation. It was the nerve of this kid that was getting to him. Okay, Curly-locks was selling what people wanted, but so what? That didn't make it right. Jim would concede that the kid was attractive. He had full lips and wide blue eyes and hair that probably had its own fan club. He was short, with broad shoulders, and it was a good look on him. Terrible taste in clothes, though.

Not that he'd have them on for very long, once he showed up at his Master's or Mistress' home for the day.

Tonight he was wearing ratty jeans, a dark blue long-sleeved shirt that had a frayed collar, a green checked flannel shirt with most of the buttons missing, and red sneakers that had seen better days. His wrists were covered in bracelets. Miniature wind chimes dangled from one ear, and he wore a peace sign necklace. He looked like a colorful rag-bag time-traveler from the sixties.

Once again, the kid had managed to wander into Jim's territory, a bench Jim had staked out in an alcove along the paved path that rambled around the outskirts of Campus Center, amidst all the money-making booths. He wasn't alone.

"You're right, Blair. I could use you for that road trip I have to take. You'd be perfect." A woman around Jim's height, a stunning blonde in her late forties, was telling the kid, who had his eyes firmly fixed on her boobs, as they walked right past Jim.

That kid had pestered five people of both sexes so far, and he practically had promised to give them their heart's desire, for a total of five weekends, if they'd fork over the dough.

Jim had had enough. He was almost a cop, and he was going to apprehend this, this, love-perp and put him on probation. With Jim. He could fucking paint Jim's living room instead of painting this woman's body with his tongue.

Jim got up and headed to where the auction was about to begin, past people milling around and chatting.

He smiled, his headache temporarily forgotten as he pictured the look on this Blair's face when he found out he wouldn't be passed around like a party tray to the soccer team, wouldn't be the evening entertainment at Marci's gathering, or be going on any road trip to help occupy Mrs. Robinson's time, or using his boasted about skills on anybody else. Not for the next five weekends, anyway.

His ass would be Jim's, and as tempted as Jim was right now to swat it a few good licks, he'd be handing over a chore list a mile long instead.

Let Curly-locks see how he liked them apples.

Apparently, he liked them apples just fine. Jim had been looking forward to seeing disappointment on Curly-locks' face when his plans to have sex instead of doing honest labor were blown to smithereens by Jim's bid. Instead, Jim was the one who'd been disappointed. Blair Sandburg had practically swooned with joy when Jim had interrupted the auctioneer's spiel extolling Sandburg's virtues in order to bid ten thousand dollars for the entire offer of five weekends of labor. The auctioneer had stumbled to a halt, mouth hanging open, until he'd recovered his professional demeanor. Stunned, he'd asked if there were any other bids, and when no one spoke up, he closed the bidding on one Blair Sandburg, graduate Anthropology student.

Sandburg, beaming, jumped off the small stage and practically ran to Jim's side.

"Oh, man, you are the greatest. Anything you want me to do, I'm there. I was hoping to maybe raise a thousand, maybe, if I was really lucky, I thought -- two thousand -- but I never dreamed anybody would donate so much. Thank you, thank you. Man, I could kiss you, you know that?" The kid actually puckered up, but Jim held up his hand.

"You can cool it on the kisses, Romeo. And while you're at it, you can tell Marci you won't be around to be her party favor, and for that matter, the coach and his team will have to get along without you giving anybody hand jobs. I've shelled out, well, my father has shelled out, a lot of money for your butt and I expect you to not go behind my back and do those other deals you've been peddling to anybody who'll give you the time of day. Not until your five weekends are over, anyway."

Sandburg wasn't listening. The kid practically had dollar signs shining in his eyes and was off somewhere in his head, daydreaming about how that money was going to be spent. Jim sighed, already wondering if maybe he'd made a mistake. But, hell, he was committed now. He got out his wallet and handed Sandburg his dad's check.

"Here, Chief. Your first of many jobs. Take this up to the payment desk, and then come back here so we can make some plans."

Blair grinned at him again and took the check from Jim's hand.

"You bet, Boss-man."

Blair Sandburg had a mouth on him. Ever since he'd shown up way too early at Jim's place Saturday morning, he'd been running it. He'd talked nonstop about his gratitude, his classes, being a teaching assistant, and the expedition to Peru the auction was funding while he'd inspected Jim's larder and made Jim and himself omelets, hash browns, and toast. Jim could even hear him making a monologue to himself while Jim showered. It was kind of gratifying to hear that the kid thought the loft was cool. Being fed had made Jim feel a little more charitable, too. Or maybe it was because at the moment, the kid couldn't flirt with anybody but Jim. Wait, a small, logical voice stated in his head. You meant that Sandburg couldn't flirt with anybody because Jim wouldn't put up with it and they were alone here. Absolutely that was what he'd meant.

Being served a delicious breakfast was not flirting. This was not courtship behavior, it was "slave for a day" behavior. There would be no flirting. Period. Sandburg's natural tendency to shamelessly flirt, which Jim had witnessed in abundance at the auction, was not going to be indulged in when he was with Jim. No siree. If the kid started up, Jim would set him straight.

He'd washed the dishes while Jim got dressed, all the time pitching his voice so Jim could hear him up in his bedroom. Jim occasionally grunted something back, and the kid would go on. And on. It was odd, but Jim was starting to find the sound of that voice soothing. Still, if the kid got on his nerves, he'd make him shut up. For the time being, though, he was entertaining.

He had a lot to learn about properly cleaning a kitchen, Jim discovered when he came downstairs and eyed Sandburg's handiwork. He'd left the dishes in the strainer, the counter and table hadn't been properly wiped off and the floor had crumbs on it.

Jim told him to watch, and then proceeded to really give the kitchen a good going over. He even polished the appliances and scrubbed the stove top.

Sandburg made admiring comments on Jim's cleaning ability and Jim felt a sense of satisfaction that the kid recognized a job well done. He dried his hands, hung up his apron, and laid out the plans for the day.

"Look, Chief. Do it like this," and Jim showed Sandburg again the proper way to wax his truck. His dad had said he could use his hose and driveway for this project, so Jim had told Sandburg to get in the truck after breakfast and they'd cruised over to his dad's expensive neighborhood.

"Sure, Boss-man, whatever you say." And then he swiped the rag around, mostly smearing the wax in aimless patterns, a dull residue left instead of a hard shine.

"You're killing me, Sandburg. Here. Give me your rag and go fetch some beers out of my dad's refrigerator."

"Okay, man, whatever you say. You're the boss," Sandburg said, and slapped the rag into Jim's palm, his warm hand touching Jim for a shade longer than was necessary.

Jim narrowed his eyes and followed the kid's movements as he trotted over to the kitchen door. Had that been deliberate, that little caress against Jim's fingers? Was that a patented Blair Sandburg flirtation move?

Had he worn those tight jeans today so that Jim's eyes would naturally be drawn to his fine ass? Especially jogging away from Jim like that?

Jim decided he'd better keep a closer eye on the kid. So far, there wasn't enough evidence to make a collar on the flirting charges. For a moment the anger and annoyance he'd felt at the auction returned, and he resolved to not let Sandburg get away with using his body to gain favors.

Somebody needed to keep this kid on the straight and narrow, and hell, he'd been a mentor before. He'd joined Big Brothers to lend a hand to kids who needed the right kind of guidance.

He didn't feel brotherly towards this kid, but even so, he was willing to teach him a lesson or two about appropriate behavior. Later, the kid would thank him for saving him from a reputation of only getting ahead because he was a good lay. He had five weekends to set the kid straight.

The door opened and the kid came out with a small cooler and a tape player Sally kept in the kitchen. He hustled over to where Jim was polishing his baby and doing it right, doing it with care, and doing it with painstaking attention to detail. Mentors modeled appropriate behavior, after all.

"Umm... Jim? Do you want to be alone with your truck? I mean, you look like--"

"Button it, Chief. I'm treating my sweetheart with the respect that you didn't manage. Look at that shine. She's going to gleam when I'm done. You can watch. Maybe, just maybe, you'll learn something. And hand me a beer."

Sandburg obliged, but instead of sitting his ass down on the edge of the planter that bordered the driveway, he opened the truck door and stuck half his body inside.

Jim sighed. Bent over that way, right under Jim's nose, wiggling his ass, he was begging for it. He probably thought he was seducing Jim into wanting to fuck him, but Jim would put a stop to that kind of teasing. He leaned one arm against the truck, still holding his beer, right next to where Sandburg was stretching now, raising up on his toes, reaching for something evidently out of range on the seat – well, the kid was pretty short – and with his other hand Jim took aim and fired. Sandburg's jean clad butt was firm and round and the sound of Jim smacking that derriere was sooo satisfying.

"Oh!" A strangled, almost needy sound, flew from the kid's mouth, and he twisted a little to look at Jim wide-eyed.

Oh? Maybe he needed another swat to get the message. Jim tested that theory and watched the kid's eyes dilate even further before he slithered out of the truck, one hand holding a box of tapes, and faced Jim, rubbing his butt.

"Ow. Okay, okay, I get that I presented a target there, but Jim, I gotta warn you. I'm a big believer in Karma and you know what they say, what goes around, comes around. So, just remember that when I get you back."

He grinned at Jim, and made a show out of rubbing the sting from his rear-end. He took his sweet time, and Jim decided that, yes, the little shit was flirting. Sandburg was incorrigible. Jim really had his work cut out for him with this one.

"All right, Junior, bring it on. Did I tell you I was covert ops? And since you dragged out my tape box, find some Santana to play." Jim drank the rest of his beer and returned to polishing the hood of his truck while the heavy beat of Jungle Strut provided a Latin cadence to his work.

Sandburg twisted the cap off his own beer, and Jim bet the kid was carded at every bar he trawled through. He was over twenty-one, although not by much but he looked younger with those curls and his pretty, pretty face. From what Jim remembered of the Art Appreciation class he'd had to take in college, if Sandburg wore the right clothes, he'd look like an escapee from a Renaissance painting. Jim watched him with mostly peripheral vision as Sandburg swallowed a hefty slug of his beer, his throat working, cheeks hollowing.

Jim had a sudden vision of how that throat, that mouth, would look sucking cock, taking it in deep, and the look of concentration the kid would have while he sent some lucky bastard to heaven.

Sandburg caught him looking, though, and gave him another one of those mischievous grins.

"What do you want me to do, Jim? I'm yours for the day, remember? So tell me what you want, and I'll do it."

"Pay attention and watch the master at work for now. There will be a quiz later. And I could use another beer."

The kid scrambled to get Jim his beer and then took up a position just a shade into Jim's personal space.

Jim thought about moving a little, to maintain a bit more distance between them, but didn't want to be seen as being the one to back away. It wasn't in his nature to back away from anything, and certainly not from the pipsqueak here. So instead, he moved more into Sandburg's personal space. Let him be the one to create more room between them in this game of chicken.

Sandburg didn't budge an inch. He was watching Jim making slow and deliberate circles with the rag and swaying to Santana's fine rhythms.

Jim drank his beer, polished his truck, and listened to Sandburg humming along with the music. The sun was out today, something to always be grateful for in Cascade, and he felt... good. Relaxed. He could smell the scent of the kid's body soap that wafted towards Jim in the afternoon heat, and it was pleasant.

They were at a stalemate in their subtle game of personal space chicken, but that was okay. Still, he was almost through with this section and he needed to move. Maybe it was time to test Sandburg on what he'd learned.

He shoved the rag towards him and pointed at the one spot left on the truck that still needed some loving attention.

Sandburg gave it a try but he still wasn't getting it right. Jim shook his head. "Here, Chief," he murmured, and stepped behind the kid, letting his body almost drape over the kid's shorter frame, and covered the kid's hand with his own. "Let me do the driving, so you can feel the rhythm and how hard I'm pushing."

He continued giving step-by-step instructions, and the kid's hand – so warm – was pliant and cooperative.

Hell, maybe Sandburg had never done this before. Maybe he was a virgin to polishing a vehicle. Most people went to a car wash or paid pros to do this. But Jim was a little old-fashioned – so what? There was a lot of satisfaction for him in doing it himself. Maybe one thing Sandburg would take away from their time together would be a new respect for doing something carefully and correctly. Maybe the kid would also find a sense of satisfaction from that and realize he didn't need to peddle his personal assets to get a sense of self-worth.

Jim was kind of proud of himself for that insight. Yeah, teaching the kid to have some standards when it came to his actions would surely be good for his character.

Sandburg was curled up on his side on Jim's couch, deeply asleep, and Jim covered him with the afghan. He smiled at the sight and dropped onto the nearby love seat. The afternoon and evening had been fun. The kid was amusing to be with, and Jim grinned, thinking about how the day had gone.

Karma had backfired on the kid, when he'd decided to hose Jim off after they'd finished with the truck and his father's two sleek vehicles. He'd gotten Jim damp, but Jim had been an Army Ranger and turning the tables on the kid had been dead easy. He'd wrestled the hose away from Sandburg before he'd barely been sprayed and then proceeded to hold him tightly, Sandburg squirming against him, while he'd doused the kid's hair and then shoved the end of the hose down the kid's shirt and let it totally soak the kid's clothes.

Sandburg had been giggling and yelling a lot of things that were music to Jim's ears: "Ohmygod, that's cold," and "Jimmmm," while Jim had laughed at him. He hadn't laughed like that in years, and when he finally took pity on the kid, because those full lips were turning blue, he'd thrown the hose onto the grass and half carried Sandburg over to the open garage.

The kid was stuttering, but grinning and he gave Jim a half-hearted shove. "Ellison, you're a d-d-dick."

"And who started the water fight, Chief? What'd you say earlier, something about Karma?"

Sandburg gave him the finger, still grinning, and Jim quit fooling around because now that the horse-play was over, he saw that Sandburg was shivering hard.

"Stay put, Chief. I'll get you a towel and some dry clothes."

He'd gone in the house and changed his own clothes, glad for the extra shirts and jeans that he'd accidentally left here from time to time, and then grabbed an extra outfit and a couple of towels and headed back to the garage.

The kid had only managed to get his shoes off and was still fumbling with shirt buttons, fingers clumsy with cold, so Jim stripped him efficiently until the dripping clothes were puddled in a heap on the floor and Sandburg was naked, still shaking hard, an indignant look on his face.

"J-J-Jim, the ga-ga-garage--"

"Yeah, I know it's open. Nobody's around but us. Relax, Chief." He wrapped the kid's dripping hair in one towel and swaddled him in the other, glad that his dad's taste ran to expensive large bath sheets.

He drew the kid against him to share some body heat, and ran his hands up and down the kid's body to warm him up. Sandburg's arms were trapped by the towel, but he wasn't fighting Jim. He leaned back against him and let Jim take control and do what he wanted.

"Somebody could have walked by, Jim, and called the cops on me for public indecency."

Jim snorted. "You can't tell me that you care that much about being naked. I bet you've gone skinny dipping lots of times. And I told you, nobody was nearby."

"What are you, Superman? Did you use your X-Ray vision to know that?"

"Yep. Do you think your fingers are working now, or do I have to dress you?"

"I think I can manage, if you turn me loose. So what now?" Jim unwrapped the towel and pointed to where he'd dropped the spare clothes on the top of a nearby workbench.

Uh-huh. He'd been right. Sandburg wasn't trying to hide anything as he walked over to the clothes and started pulling them on. The sweatpants and T-shirt were too big on him, but at least he seemed warmer. His lips were pink and he'd stopped shuddering. Shoes were going to be a problem. He couldn't wear anything of Jim's or his dad's; his feet were small.

"What size shoes do you wear?"

"Eight. Jeez, mine are soaking wet. I guess I'll have to go barefoot."

"I think I can find you something."

He rummaged around and found an old pair of flip-flops Sally used to do gardening and handed them over.

They fitted, so they cleaned up and left. Jim decided that Sandburg could help him do the grocery shopping and then fix dinner for him. He'd bragged about his cooking ability this morning and Jim wasn't that fond of making meals.

Sandburg had argued about some of his food choices, and had flat-out refused to let Jim keep the bag of pork rinds he'd tossed in the cart, but the lasagna, wine, salad, and bread he'd fixed had been wonderful.

Jim decided that cooking was going to be something Sandburg did for him the rest of the weekends he was Jim's minion.

He glanced back over at his minion, all tucked up and safe on the couch. After Jim had cleaned up the kitchen, they'd watched a movie and when Sandburg's eyes kept sliding shut, his body slumping against Jim's, he had talked the kid into staying for the night.

Earlier, throughout the late afternoon and evening, Sandburg had continued with his attempts at flirting. He'd smiled at Jim, finding ways to touch him. Jim hadn't called him on his behavior, just hadn't reacted to him. After the kid figured out Jim wasn't going to flirt back, then he'd have a little chat with him about his flirting ways in general.

He decided to go to bed, but before he headed to the bathroom he stopped and ran his hand through Sandburg's curls, petting him almost. It didn't matter, the kid was asleep, and Jim had been wanting to touch that silky mop all day. The kid gave a sigh of contentment, and Jim smiled to hear it.

He seemed like a good kid, really. Jim found that he was looking forward to spending time with him tomorrow.

Sunday was spent washing the loft from ceiling to floor. Literally. Jim was going to have Sandburg paint it next weekend. But afterwards, Jim decided that they could use a break – and no, he was not influenced by the wistful looks on the kid's face when Jim caught him staring out the balcony sliding doors, or by the heavy sighs, or by the comments about what a nice, sunny day it was for early April.

So they went to the park and played basketball till it was past dark, and they were sweaty and laughing and Jim's ribs had been poked by Sandburg's sharp elbows multiple times. Then they sat at a picnic table and talked about everything under the sun.

They stopped for sub sandwiches on the way home, and Jim paid for them. The kid was a student and, reading between the lines, Jim knew that Sandburg was straddling the poverty line. His reward for feeding the kid was a smile that made Jim swallow hard. They parted ways on the street outside Jim's building, and Jim couldn't resist tousling Sandburg's hair before he went upstairs into his clean, but too quiet, loft.



"Chief, you're hopeless. You got more paint on you than you did the walls." Jim smirked at the kid, because, really, he wasn't exaggerating that much. Sandburg was freckled with light green paint on every bit of his exposed skin.

"I know. What I don't get, though, is how come you aren't covered in paint too. It's not fair. And you painted three times faster than I did. Is this another one of your superpowers?" Sandburg's bottom lip was pushing out, and Jim kept smirking at him, because that emerging pout was kind of cute.

The kid looked at the paintbrush he still held in his hand and then at Jim.

"Karma, remember, Sandburg? You try it and guess who'll be singing, "It's Not Easy Being Green."

That bottom lip emerged into a full-blown pout for one long moment, and then Sandburg shook his head, and laughed. "Oh, man. Okay." He shut his eyes and intoned in a low voice, calmly, "I'm letting this go, I'm letting this go, I'm letting this go." He repeated his little code phrase several more times, and then took in deep breaths and pursed his lips to exhale slowly, as if he were blowing invisible bubbles.

Jim watched, fascinated, like he was observing a nature special on TV describing the rituals of the Washington Area Hippie.

Sandburg opened his eyes again and looked ruefully at Jim, and then down at his own hands. "Good thing this paint cleans up with soap and water. Uh, who's cleaning up the brushes, me or you?"

"You. I'm going out on the balcony and drink a beer. You can have one when you're done."

"Sir, yes, sir."

"If you want to play drill sergeant and private, you can drop and give me twenty," Jim said, mildly.

"Uh, no thanks, man. Could you see me in the Army?"

"Maybe. You're smart and you're in reasonably good shape. How do you feel about following orders?"

"Well, according to my department head, I have a talent for creatively not following departmental policies. But I only uh, get creative when they're stupid policies. Let's just say I follow the spirit and not the letter of the law."

"The Army is pretty fond of the letter part of the law, Chief."

"Guess I'll just stay a grad student and keep bamboozling my department, then."

"Clean up, Private. Inspection is coming up."

"I'll get right on that." He grinned at Jim, and sloppily saluted him. Jim rolled his eyes, but decided he could wait for that beer and helped Blair gather the rollers and brushes and paint pans to take down to the utility sink in the basement.

It wouldn't hurt him to give the kid a hand.

The pounding on his door sounded like some huge gong was being struck over and over in his head, and Jim was motivated enough to stop it that he staggered his way out of bed and down the stairs.

He yanked the door open and Sandburg stepped inside.

"Whoah. What happened to you?"

Jim just grunted. The kid reached out his hand to touch Jim's bare chest and Jim shivered from the contact.

"Hey, maybe you'd better go and sit down. Your eyes..."

Jim felt his skin warming in the cool morning air where the kid was still touching him. It felt good, but remembering the no-flirting zone he was trying to establish here, he reluctantly stepped back a few feet.

"Jim, man, your eyes, they're halfway swollen shut. What happened? Allergic reaction to something?"

Jim shrugged. He'd been fine when he'd gone to bed last night. The last time he'd had such harsh reactions to something had been in Peru, before Incacha had straightened him out.

"It's the paint, isn't it? I knew I shouldn't have let you stay here last night. Man, you should have gone to sleep at your dad's house, or I should have offered you my couch to crash on. Ah, you've got a rash on your arms and hands, too. You gotta get out of here, Jim."

Sandburg pushed past him and darted over to the balcony doors, flipped the lock, and slid them all the way open. "We need to air out this place while you go camp somewhere else for a couple of days."

Jim's mind, despite feeling a kinship to scrambled eggs, latched onto the word "camp." Yeah. That sounded good.

"Okay." He turned and headed toward the bathroom, deciding that a cool shower might help. Sandburg trotted over and got in his way, halting Jim. Right. Once again, the kid took over Jim's personal space, which his dick liked a lot, but Jim squashed that idea because, hello, he was only in his boxers.

"Okay? Jim, hang on. Where should I take you, because you are so not getting behind the wheel of your truck when your eyes are stuck at half mast, so where are we going?"

"Camping. Mountains. You're coming, too. I've got enough gear and you can borrow some of my clothes again. Stuff's in the basement. Don't forget the fishing poles. You pack the truck."

"Uh, don't you have to go to the Academy tomorrow?"

"Nope. I'm done. Let's go camping for a couple of days, Chief."

"I have to be back Wednesday night. It's Marci's birthday and I promised--"

"To be the entertainment at her party. I remember. Look. Just come... and don't talk about your other plans to me. I don't want to think about you doing that stuff." Jim stepped around the kid. His skin felt prickly and he wanted that shower right now.

"I'm not a pro or anything, but I've been told I'm pretty good. You might like what I can do."

Jim turned at the bathroom door and said, roughly, "I paid for your ass for ten days, and when I tell you I don't want to hear you talking about what you get up to with your 'friends,' I mean it. So keep your lips zipped and pack us up." He stepped inside and started the shower, but even over the sound of the water he heard Sandburg's muttered, "Sir, yes, sir."

Things were a bit strained between them as Sandburg drove them out of Cascade, but the kid's good nature re-surfaced in plenty of time to make the drive up to the mountains fun. The kid was actually a decent driver and Jim decided this was an opportunity to build the kid's self-esteem about a skill he had that didn't involve him peddling his sweet little butt.

"You're a pretty good driver, Chief. Guy can make an honest living with this kind of talent." Jim's eyes were much better now and he was enjoying the scenic view. If things kept improving he could take over driving. Sure, the kid was doing a fine job, but it was Jim's truck.

"I've got a CDL, Jim. I've been driving big rigs since I was eighteen. Of course, I had to stay in-state till I was twenty-one, but me and my uncle team-drive sometimes across the country. Last Christmas break, I spent all of it on the road."

"Doesn't sound like much of a vacation."

"School is expensive, man. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've had to do to pay my tuition."

Jim was having no trouble imagining those things. They all involved this poor kid taking off his clothes.

"Don't you get help with school, student loans or grants?"

"Yeah, somewhat. I'm a teaching assistant, but it's still expensive. Still, a guy's got to do what a guy's got to do to make ends meet. Although my rent is cheap. I stay in a warehouse, and I get a good deal, plus I sublet areas of it to other students for storage. But even cheap rent is hard to pay here on the West coast. I can't say I'm real happy about some things I've done to make rent money, but them's the breaks."

Jim didn't want to ask, didn't want to ask, didn't want to ask. He asked.

"Like what?"

"Well, there's this place where I can usually pick up work, and yeah, I know you're going to be a cop someday, and you will totally be awesome at it, because you've got natural talent at the law and order thing, but I get paid under the table. Don't turn me in, okay copper? Anyway, I get sent out and I have to be in costume and I have to do these things when the client lets me in the house." Blair shrugged, and Jim felt his heart break, just a little.

This was worse than he thought. He'd see if he couldn't find the kid some other line of work. Maybe his dad needed a bright guy to work part-time, or his dad could arrange a part-time job driving a delivery truck with one of his business cronies. Blair didn't have to ever again don bondage gear or a puppy suit or any other fetish type costumes. Harem Boy, maybe. Cabin Boy was probably pretty popular, too. Or wear an old-fashioned boy's school uniform and bring a paddle with him. Maybe some of those pervert clients wanted him to dress up as stripper and he'd have to do his own private dance for them.

"Hey, Jim, are you feeling okay? You're starting to look pretty flushed. Man, I knew I shouldn't have let you stay in the loft after we painted," Blair lamented.

"Just drive, Junior. And we'll finish the rest of this conversation when I drop you off at your place. I think I want to see where you live, Chief."

"No, Chief, not like that. Here, let me show you how." Jim heaved himself up from his comfortable camping chair and strode over to where Sandburg was currently making a mess out of setting up the tent.

"Jim, you don't have to help. You brought me along to do the work, remember? And are you feeling okay? Really okay? The way your face turned pink while we were in the truck was suspicious. What if you keep having more late symptoms show up? And what about that rash, is it gone?"

Sandburg was kneeling on the ground, sorting out tent pegs and poles, and Jim came to a stop directly in front of him, nudging a peg or two out of the way. The kid looked up at him, and Jim liked that picture. Sandburg's mouth wouldn't have far to reach for Jim's dick this way, and he bet the kid knew all kinds of tricks, probably how to pull down Jim's zipper with his teeth.

Of course, Jim would never take advantage of him like that. He could enjoy the view, though. Maybe later, in his fantasies, he could really enjoy the view. It was very scenic, that view. Long curly hair spilling over Sandburg's shoulders, that pouty mouth, those sweet lips, that wide-eyed look he was giving Jim and those long, long lashes.

The kid was beautiful.

The kid was frowning.

"Jim, take off your shirt. I want to check that rash, see if you need more ointment." Sandburg had insisted on stopping at some little hole in the wall place on the way out of town that he claimed had homeopathic remedies, and he had slathered some creamy stuff on Jim's arms and hands.

Jim smirked. He knew what Sandburg was up to. It was the old, "remove your clothes so I can provide medical care, which is a total cover-up for getting my hands on your hot body" ploy.

He didn't mind playing along, but the kid would only get to look, not touch. There was such a thing as boundaries, and Sandburg needed to learn what that meant. So looking, but not touching. It would be good for the kid's character.

Jim slowly stepped back and took off his shirt and tossed it on top of his backpack that was sprawled on the ground along with the rest of their equipment and sleeping bags. He held his arms and hands down at an angle so Sandburg could see them.

"Rash is gone, Chief."

Sandburg reached out a finger to touch Jim's arm, but he was a bit too far back to reach. He tilted forward and overbalanced, and grabbed at Jim's legs to catch himself.

Oh, score one for Sandburg. The kid had managed to faceplant right into Jim's crotch. Jim needed to be more alert about Sandburg's tricks. He decided to do a little tit-for-tat.

He made sure that Blair Sandburg's body was treated to the whole Jim Ellison muscle experience as he slowly dragged the kid up against him until he was standing on his own two feet again. Jim took some satisfaction from the dazed look on the kid.

Jim pointed to the camping chair. "You sit your butt down and watch and learn, Chief."

The kid looked puzzled. "You don't want me to help, just watch you set up camp?"

Jim was two steps ahead of this kid. "That's what I want, and I paid the bucks to do it my way."

There would be no more clumsiness on Sandburg's part that resulted in groping Jim. Boundaries. They were important to learn. Going shirtless and making the kid watch him, with no touching, would be a great lesson.

He made a gesture with his thumb. "Park it, kid. That's an order."

Sandburg kept trying all his best moves the entire time they spent up in the Cascades. Jim was particularly fond of the three times Sandburg had fallen in the small, icy cold stream while fishing and managed to get totally soaked and land himself mildly hypothermic. April was chilly up in the mountains.

You had to admire dedication like that, but Jim wasn't about to let the kid actually hurt himself in his quest to get into Jim's pants.

First aid was called for, so each time he helped strip the clothes off the kid, towed him dry, and stuffed him naked into the double sleeping bag Jim had devised from the single ones. Then he'd undressed himself, (Sandburg watched, Jim could see him peeking out from under his eyelashes.) and slid in behind the kid. He'd plaster himself against the kid's cold back but he held Sandburg's hands in his own and pinned his legs, too, for good measure. No squirming and getting himself off was happening here. This was strictly medicinal. The moans the kid made as he warmed back up were music to his ears, though.

Sandburg had tried to protest being held that way, but Jim made it an order that be still and keep his mouth shut. In a way, the kid's behavior was Jim's fault. He'd evidently made it too much fun when he'd shoved that hose down the kid's clothes and had stripped him the first time.

Sandburg would fall asleep as his body temp returned to normal but Jim would keep his hands around the kid's wrists anyway. Once the kid was snoozing Jim would bury his head in the tempting neck next to him. He really had to watch himself, because Sandburg was tempting. Very Tempting. It was only the discipline that Jim had learned from the Army that kept him from taking advantage here.

He was a mentor, and Sandburg was his responsibility. If he slept with the kid, he'd never get him to understand how wrong it was for him to use his body to get what he wanted out of life.

Jim and Sandburg talked about their childhoods on the way back to Cascade. And not just the fun stuff, like Jim being an eagle scout and Sandburg's travels with his mother around the world. Jim told him about Bud's death and mom's bailing out on Dad, Stevie, and him. Sandburg had talked about always being the new kid at school and how being both younger and smaller than your classmates by several years had meant learning to do re-con like any soldier taking point so that the bullies wouldn't be able to take enemy action against him. Well, Sandburg hadn't phrased it that way, but Jim knew what he meant.

The good mood lasted until Sandburg directed Jim to a shabby industrial neighborhood by the docks.

"Chief. This part of town has a lot of street crime."

"Don't I know it. I've done my citizen duty a few times and called the cops when I saw shit going down. A robbery once, and another time a couple of dudes shooting at each other."

Jim didn't say a word when Blair had him park in a deserted lot with broken pavement. The warehouse was decrepit, most of the windows were boarded up and some of the upper ones were broken. Blair hopped out and came around to Jim's window.

He was smiling and looked innocent and young and Jim didn't want to leave him here.

"Hey, want to come in and have a beer? Marci's party doesn't start until seven-thirty."

He never wanted a beer less in his life, but he badly wanted to see if the inside of this palace matched the outside.

He put on his best poker face as Sandburg gave him a tour around the stacks of crap that belonged to the owners of the warehouse, and the other stacks of crap that belonged to people who had paid Blair to keep it there. The stuff that was in totes might survive the experience of being in this damp, moldy hell-hole, but he didn't hold out much hope for the various couches and stuffed chairs he'd seen in their taped off sections.

Sandburg's living quarters were pitiful. Just pitiful. And to think he paid eight hundred dollars a month for the privilege of living in this dump.

"Chief, this is--"

The kid's eyes flashed for the first time with something like anger.

"This is my home. I know it's crappy; you don't have to point it out. I'm a grad student, Jim. I've been supporting myself and going to college since I was sixteen. This is what I can afford. It won't be like this forever. And I'm okay with it. I've actually lived in worse places."

That did not make Jim feel any better.

"Well, you've still got a few days on my ticket, Chief. And until your time is up, you're going to stay with me on the weekends I paid for, okay? It'll save you bus fare or gas money."

Jim waited for Sandburg to object, but instead the kid gave him a long thoughtful stare.

Are you sure about that, Jim? I mean, you won't have as much privacy."

"Sandburg, we've slept together naked, so I think the privacy issue is moot."

The kid grinned mischievously. "Yeah, there is that. We need to talk about that and some other things I've been noticing."

"Not here, Chief. Too many eavesdroppers. We'll do it at my place."

"On Saturday? Okay. And what eavesdroppers?"

"Kid, you've got lots of company in this rat-hole. And I meant that literally."

"Oh, you mean the Rodents Of Unusual Size. Yeah, they're not exactly Disney cute. More like mutant rats. Big. Very Big Teeth. I've got a perimeter set with traps, though, and they've learned to respect it."

Just then there was a snap sound and a squeal.

Blair drew his finger down in the air. "Score one for my side."

He nudged Jim. "Hey, ready for that beer? I've got some movies here we can watch until I leave for the party."

Sandburg left, but Jim stayed because he wanted to see the end of the movie. It was a classic Gary Cooper movie, High Noon, and Jim hadn't watched it since he was a kid. He'd insisted on walking Sandburg to his car, though. The kid didn't bother asking why.

He'd just turned off the TV, prepared to fight his way back through the Rodent's territory to the exit, when he heard cars and trucks arriving on the other side of the building.

Jim didn't think often about his enhanced senses. They came in handy sometimes, and so far he hadn't had a return of those awful spikes and frozen states Incacha had helped him to master. He deliberately turned them up now, because something was fishy.

Of course, the gun fire that erupted proved that point without the need to keep his hearing zoomed up.

He called it in.

Jim had Marci's address. He'd made Sandburg give it to him before he left, under the guise that he might stop by, since the kid had invited him as his guest.

He hadn't really planned on going because seeing Sandburg entertaining the crowd – Jim had decided he must be doing a stripper routine, and giving lap dances – wasn't on his dance card.

Except maybe showing up there was. He wanted to storm in, grab Sandburg off the small stage he'd mentioned he'd be performing on, and throw him over his shoulder and take him home to his cave. Loft. And that's why he decided he wouldn't go, because he was not a caveman, dammit.

But with the bust that had gone down on the other side of the walled off warehouse, and the fact that the place now reeked of meth and the chemicals used to make it, there was no way Blair could stay there. So when Jim was done giving his statement, (he'd tackled and subdued a couple of punks who were trying to leave the mess behind), he'd gone to tell Sandburg what had happened and to take him home with him. He'd grabbed some of the kid's clothes, and his laptop and books.

Actually, he'd discovered that the party was being held in the complex's recreation center. Jim supposed people were drifting back and forth, and Blair was surely in the apartment, doing his thing. Marci had also hired a band for her shindig, and the guitar player was more than decent. He was damn good and if Jim had been in a different mood, he would have enjoyed listening to the music.

He was three steps up the stairwell to the girl's apartment when he heard Blair's voice. He stopped, puzzled. Sandburg was telling a story about his guitar, said it was a gift to his mother from Jimi Hendrix and that his mom had given it to him when he'd turned thirteen.

Jim did a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and headed back to the rec center. He heard the distinctive sounds of one of Jimi's most famous songs.

The kid was there all right. On stage. But he wasn't doing lap dances or shimmying around a pole.

Jim watched, mouth falling open, as Blair Sandburg belted out the words to All Along the Watchtower, his talented fingers flying up and down the neck of an electric guitar.

“Sandburg?”

“Yeah, Jim?”

They were back at the loft, Sandburg having taken it pretty well about his place being a crime scene. Kid rolled with the news like a rolling stone. He'd said it wasn't the first time he'd had to bail out of a place.

Jim had done a lot of thinking while Sandburg did his sets, rocking the house. He thought maybe there were some questions that needed to be asked.

He suspected the answer to the main one, “Is James Joseph Ellison an idiot who jumped to conclusions?” was a big fat yes.



"I may have overheard some things when we met, and owe you an apology. Short answers only, okay Chief? I'm going to need some time to do that thing you mention sometimes, uh, processing."

"Okay. I'll try." Blair sat down on the couch and Jim joined him.

"The soccer team. If you weren't offering hand jobs if they bid on you, what were you offering?"

Blair's eyes widened and a tiny, tiny smile started to grow at the corner of his mouth. "Oh, this is going to be good. No, no hand jobs. Tutoring, man. I have those guys in my anthro classes and believe me most of them need the help."

"Did you and the soccer coach have sex in the bathroom the day of the auction?"

"He propositioned me, I said no thanks. I like him but he's married."

"What about that tall blonde with the boobs you couldn't keep your eyes off of that day?"

"She's a professor and needed a driver for a moving van when she transfers to Idaho State. Was I looking at her breasts? Guilty. But in my defense, they are nice and they were in my line of sight. She's got a serious girlfriend. We weren't discussing sex."

"So you know all about boundaries, you don't sell your body, and you don't make extra money by dressing up as a Cabin Boy or a stripper?"

"Boundaries, got that down pat. Jim, I know I was up for sale at the auction but that wasn't for sex. I'm not a prostitute. I'm also not a virgin. Sex should be something both or more people want to do and it should be done with respect for the other partner. Partners. And I'm seeing a trend here with these questions. That job I mentioned where I have to dress up? It's a singing telegram company. Mostly I dress up as a clown, and sing happy birthday to kids, or as a cowboy. Those sorts of costumes. It's legit, even if they pay me under the table."

The kid turned on the couch and settled himself on Jim's lap, legs astride Jim's hips.

"Okay, I've been getting mixed messages from you since we met. Why did you bid on me, Jim?"

Time to tell the truth.

"I thought you needed to learn you shouldn't do sex to get what you wanted. I thought I could, uh, mentor you. Teach you some better values."

Sandburg grinned. "That's really sweet, Jim. I've wanted to go to bed with you since that first day."

He kissed Jim, slow and soft and almost chaste.

"So what do you want, Jim? A. Date me. B. Let me move in with you. C. Do the wild thing up in bed. D. Be my exclusive sexual partner."

Jim said, heat in his voice, "All of the above," and kissed the kid until he was flushed and they both were hard as nails.

"Jim?" Sandburg looked mischievous again. Jim thought he'd be seeing that look for a long time. Maybe till he was ninety years old. "I actually wouldn't mind playing Cabin Boy and Pirate Captain sometime."

Jim started unbuttoning Sandburg's shirt. The kid's expression changed. "Hey, when we go upstairs and make love I want you to do something for me, okay."

Jim kissed the kid's hands. "Anything."

"Call me Blair."

"I can do that, Blair."

## NOTES

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